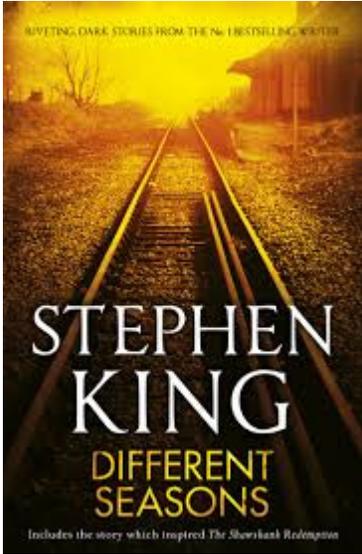


HAUNTING, DARK STORIES FROM THE #1 BESTSELLING WRITER

# STEPHEN KING

## DIFFERENT SEASONS

Includes the story which inspired *The Shawshank Redemption*



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The Stand  
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Rose Red  
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# DIFFERENT SEASONS

By  
**Stephen King**



A SIGNET BOOK



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***It is the tale, not he who tells it.***

“Dirty deeds done dirt cheap.”

—AC/DC

“I heard it through the grapevine.”

—Norman Whitfield

*Tout s'en va, tout passe, l'eau coule, et le coeur oublie.*

—Flaubert

# **HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL**

*For Russ and Florence Dorr*

## Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption

There's a guy like me in every state and federal prison in America, I guess—I'm the guy who can get it for you. Tailormade cigarettes, a bag of reefer if you're partial to that, a bottle of brandy to celebrate your son or daughter's high school graduation, or almost anything else ... within reason, that is. It wasn't always that way.

I came to Shawshank when I was just twenty, and I am one of the few people in our happy little family willing to own up to what they did. I committed murder. I put a large insurance policy on my wife, who was three years older than I was, and then I fixed the brakes of the Chevrolet coupe her father had given us as a wedding present. It worked out exactly as I had planned, except I hadn't planned on her stopping to pick up the neighbor woman and the neighbor woman's infant son on their way down Castle Hill and into town. The brakes let go and the car crashed through the bushes at the edge of the town common, gathering speed. Bystanders said it must have been doing fifty or better when it hit the base of the Civil War statue and burst into flames.

I also hadn't planned on getting caught, but caught I was. I got a season's pass into this place. Maine has no death-penalty, but the District Attorney saw to it that I was tried for all three deaths and given three life sentences, to run one after the other. That fixed up any chance of parole I might have for a long, long time. The judge called what I had done "a hideous, heinous crime," and it was, but it is also in the past now. You can look it up in the yellowing files of the Castle Rock Call, where the big headlines announcing my conviction look sort of funny and antique next to the news of Hitler and Mussolini and FDR's alphabet soup agencies.

Have I rehabilitated myself, you ask? I don't even know what that word means, at least as far as prisons and corrections go. I think it's a politician's word. It may have some other meaning, and it may be that I will have a chance to find out, but that is the future ...

something cons teach themselves not to think about. I was young, good-looking, and from the poor side of town. I knocked up a pretty, sulky, headstrong girl who lived in one of the fine old houses on Carbine Street. Her father was agreeable to the marriage if I would take a job in the optical company he owned and “work my way up.” I found out that what he really had in mind was keeping me in his house and under his thumb, like a disagreeable pet that has not quite been housebroken and which may bite. Enough hate eventually piled up to cause me to do what I did. Given a second chance I would not do it again, but I’m not sure that means I am rehabilitated.

Anyway, it’s not me I want to tell you about; I want to tell you about a guy named Andy Dufresne. But before I can tell you about Andy, I have to explain a few other things about myself. It won’t take long.

As I said, I’ve been the guy who can get it for you here at Shawshank for damn near forty years. And that doesn’t just mean contraband items like extra cigarettes or booze, although those items always top the list. But I’ve gotten thousands of other items for men doing time here, some of them perfectly legal yet hard to come by in a place where you’ve supposedly been brought to be punished. There was one fellow who was in for raping a little girl and exposing himself to dozens of others; I got him three pieces of pink Vermont marble and he did three lovely sculptures out of them—a baby, a boy of about twelve, and a bearded young man. He called them *The Three Ages of Jesus*, and those pieces of sculpture are now in the parlor of a man who used to be governor of this state.

Or here’s a name you may remember if you grew up north of Massachusetts—Robert Alan Cote. In 1951 he tried to rob the First Mercantile Bank of Mechanic Falls, and the holdup turned into a bloodbath—six dead in the end, two of them members of the gang, three of them hostages, one of them a young state cop who put his head up at the wrong time and got a bullet in the eye. Cote had a penny collection. Naturally they weren’t going to let him have it in here, but with a little help from his mother and a middleman who used to drive a laundry truck, I was able to get it for him. I told him, Bobby, you must be crazy, wanting to have a coin collection in a

stone hotel full of thieves. He looked at me and smiled and said, I know where to keep them. They'll be safe enough. Don't you worry. And he was right. Bobby Cote died of a brain tumor in 1967, but that coin collection has never turned up.

I've gotten men chocolates on Valentine's Day; I got three of those green milkshakes they serve at McDonald's around St. Paddy's Day for a crazy Irishman named O'Malley; I even arranged for a midnight showing of *Deep Throat* and *The Devil in Miss Jones* for a party of twenty men who had pooled their resources to rent the films ... although I ended up doing a week in solitary for that little escapade. It's the risk you run when you're the guy who can get it.

I've gotten reference books and fuck-books, joke novelties like handbuzzers and itching powder, and on more than one occasion I've seen that a long-timer has gotten a pair of panties from his wife or his girlfriend... and I guess you'll know what guys in here do with such items during the long nights when time draws out like a blade. I don't get all those things gratis, and for some items the price comes high. But I don't do it *just* for the money; what good is money to me? I'm never going to own a Cadillac car or fly off to Jamaica for two weeks in February. I do it for the same reason that a good butcher will only sell you fresh meat: I got a reputation and I want to keep it. The only two things I refuse to handle are guns and heavy drugs. I won't help anyone kill himself or anyone else. I have enough killing on my mind to last me a lifetime.

Yeah, I'm a regular Neiman-Marcus. And so when Andy Dufresne came to me in 1949 and asked if I could smuggle Rita Hayworth into the prison for him, I said it would be no problem at all. And it wasn't.

When Andy came to Shawshank in 1948, he was thirty years old. He was a short, neat little man with sandy hair and small, clever hands. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles. His fingernails were always clipped, and they were always clean. That's a funny thing to remember about a man, I suppose, but it seems to sum Andy up for me. He always looked as if he should have been wearing a tie. On the outside he had been a vice-president in the trust department of a

large Portland bank. Good work for a man as young as he was especially when you consider how conservative most banks are ... and you have to multiply that conservatism by ten when you get up into New England, where folks don't like to trust a man with their money unless he's bald, limping, and constantly plucking at his pants to get his truss around straight. Andy was in for murdering his wife and her lover.

As I believe I have said, everyone in prison is an innocent man. Oh, they read that scripture the way those holy rollers on TV read the Book of Revelation. They were the victims of judges with hearts of stone and balls to match, or incompetent lawyers, or police frame-ups, or bad luck. They read the scripture, but you can see a different scripture in their faces. Most cons are a low sort, no good to themselves or anyone else, and their worst luck was that their mothers carried them to term.

In all my years at Shawshank, there have been less than ten men whom I believed when they told me they were innocent. Andy Dufresne was one of them, although I only became convinced of his innocence over a period of years. If I had been on that jury that heard his case in Portland Superior Court over six stormy weeks in 1947-48, I would have voted to convict, too.

It was one hell of a case, all right; one of those juicy ones with all the right elements. There was a beautiful girl with society connections (dead), a local sports figure (also dead), and a prominent young businessman in the dock. There was this, plus all the scandal the newspapers could hint at. The prosecution had an open-and-shut case. The trial only lasted as long as it did because the DA was planning to run for the U.S. House of Representatives and he wanted John Q. Public to get a good long look at his phiz. It was a crackerjack legal circus, with spectators getting in line at four in the morning, despite the subzero temperatures, to assure themselves of a seat.

The facts of the prosecution's case that Andy never contested were these: that he had a wife, Linda Collins Dufresne; that in June of 1947 she had expressed an interest in learning the game of golf at the Falmouth Hills Country Club; that she did indeed take lessons for

four months; that her instructor was the Falmouth Hills golf pro, Glenn Quentin; that in late August of 1947 Andy learned that Quentin and his wife had become lovers; that Andy and Linda Dufresne argued bitterly on the afternoon of September 10th, 1947; that the subject of their argument was her infidelity.

He testified that Linda professed to be glad he knew; the sneaking around, she said, was distressing. She told Andy that she planned to obtain a Reno divorce. Andy told her he would see her in hell before he would see her in Reno. She went off to spend the night with Quentin in Quentin's rented bungalow not far from the golf course. The next morning his cleaning woman found both of them dead in bed. Each had been shot four times.

It was that last fact that militated more against Andy than any of the others. The DA with the political aspirations made a great deal of it in his opening statement and his closing summation. Andrew Dufresne, he said, was not a wronged husband seeking a hot-blooded revenge against his cheating wife; that, the DA said, could be understood, if not condoned. But this revenge had been of a much colder type. Consider! the DA thundered at the jury. Four and four! Not six shots, but eight! *He had fired the gun empty ... and then stopped to reload so he could shoot each of them again!* FOUR FOR HIM AND FOUR FOR HER, the *Portland Sun* blared. The *Boston Register* dubbed him The Even-Steven Killer.

A clerk from the Wise Pawnshop in Lewiston testified that he had sold a six-shot .38 Police Special to Andrew Dufresne just two days before the double murder. A bartender from the country club bar testified that Andy had come in around seven o'clock on the evening of September 10th, had tossed off three straight whiskeys in a twenty-minute period—when he got up from the bar-stool he told the bartender that he was going up to Glenn Quentin's house and he, the bartender, could "read about the rest of it in the papers." Another clerk, this one from the Handy-Pik store a mile or so from Quentin's house, told the court that Dufresne had come in around quarter to nine on that same night. He purchased cigarettes, three quarts of beer, and some dishtowels. The county medical examiner testified that Quentin and the Dufresne woman had been killed between

11:00 P.M. and 2:00 A.M. on the night of September 10th-11th. The detective from the Attorney General's office who had been in charge of the case testified that there was a turnout less than seventy yards from the bungalow, and that on the afternoon of September 11th, three pieces of evidence had been removed from that turnout: first item, two empty quart bottles of Narragansett Beer (with the defendant's fingerprints on them); second item, twelve cigarette ends (all Kools, the defendant's brand); third item, a plaster moulage of a set of tire tracks (exactly matching the tread-and-wear pattern of the tires on the defendant's 1947 Plymouth).

In the living room of Quentin's bungalow, four dishtowels had been found lying on the sofa. There were bullet-holes through them and powder-burns on them. The detective theorized (over the agonized objections of Andy's lawyer) that the murderer had wrapped the towels around the muzzle of the murder-weapon to muffle the sound of the gunshots.

Andy Dufresne took the stand in his own defense and told his story calmly, coolly, and dispassionately. He said he had begun to hear distressing rumors about his wife and Glenn Quentin as early as the last week in July. In late August he had become distressed enough to investigate a bit. On an evening when Linda was supposed to have gone shopping in Portland after her golf lesson, Andy had followed her and Quentin to Quentin's one-story rented house (inevitably dubbed "the love-nest" by the papers). He had parked in the turnout until Quentin drove her back to the country club where her car was parked, about three hours later.

"Do you mean to tell this court that you followed your wife in your brand-new Plymouth sedan?" the DA asked him on cross-examination.

"I swapped cars for the evening with a friend," Andy said, and this cool admission of how well-planned his investigation had been did him no good at all in the eyes of the jury.

After returning the friend's car and picking up his own, he had gone home. Linda had been in bed, reading a book. He asked her how her trip to Portland had been. She replied that it had been fun, but she hadn't seen anything she liked well enough to buy. "That's

when I knew for sure,” Andy told the breathless spectators. He spoke in the same calm, remote voice in which he delivered almost all of his testimony.

“What was your frame of mind in the seventeen days between then and the night your wife was murdered?” Andy’s lawyer asked him.

“I was in great distress,” Andy said calmly, coldly. Like a man reciting a shopping list he said that he had considered suicide, and had even gone so far as to purchase a gun in Lewiston on September 8th.

His lawyer then invited him to tell the jury what had happened after his wife left to meet Glenn Quentin on the night of the murders. Andy told them ... and the impression he made was the worst possible.

I knew him for close to thirty years, and I can tell you he was the most self-possessed man I’ve ever known. What was right with him he’d only give you a little at a time. What was wrong with him he kept bottled up inside. If he ever had a dark night of the soul, as some writer or other has called it, you would never know. He was the type of man who, if he had decided to commit suicide, would do it without leaving a note but not until his affairs had been put neatly in order. If he had cried on the witness stand, or if his voice had thickened and grown hesitant, even if he had started yelling at that Washington-bound District Attorney, I don’t believe he would have gotten the life sentence he wound up with. Even if he had’ve, he would have been out on parole by 1954. But he told his story like a recording machine, seeming to say to the jury: This is it. Take it or leave it. They left it.

He said he was drunk that night, that he’d been more or less drunk since August 24th, and that he was a man who didn’t handle his liquor very well. Of course that by itself would have been hard for any jury to swallow. They just couldn’t see this coldly self-possessed young man in the neat double-breasted three-piece woollen suit ever getting falling-down drunk over his wife’s sleazy little affair with some small-town golf pro. I believed it because I had a chance to watch Andy that those six men and six women didn’t have.

Andy Dufresne took just four drinks a year all the time I knew him. He would meet me in the exercise yard every year about a week

before his birthday and then again about two weeks before Christmas. On each occasion he would arrange for a bottle of Jack Daniel's. He bought it the way most cons arrange to buy their stuff—the slave's wages they pay in here, plus a little of his own. Up until 1965 what you got for your time was a dime an hour. In '65 they raised it all the way up to a quarter. My commission on liquor was and is ten per cent, and when you add on that surcharge to the price of a fine sippin whiskey like the Black Jack, you get an idea of how many hours of Andy Dufresne's sweat in the prison laundry was going to buy his four drinks a year.

On the morning of his birthday, September 20th, he would have himself a big knock, and then he'd have another that night after lights-out. The following day he'd give the rest of the bottle back to me, and I would share it around. As for the other bottle, he dealt himself one drink Christmas night and another on New Year's Eve. Then that bottle would also come to me with instructions to pass it on. Four drinks a year—and that is the behavior of a man who has been bitten hard by the bottle. Hard enough to draw blood.

He told the jury that on the night of the tenth he had been so drunk he could only remember what had happened in little isolated snatches. He had gotten drunk that afternoon—"I took on a double helping of Dutch courage" is how he put it—before taking on Linda.

After she left to meet Quentin, he remembered deciding to confront them. On the way to Quentin's bungalow, he swung into the country club for a couple of quick ones. He could not, he said, remember telling the bartender he could "read about the rest of it in the papers," or saying anything to him at all. He remembered buying beer in the Handy-Pik, but not the dishtowels. "Why would I want dishtowels?" he asked, and one of the papers reported that three of the lady jurors shuddered.

Later, much later, he speculated to me about the clerk who had testified on the subject of those dishtowels, and I think it's worth jotting down what he said. "Suppose that, during their canvass for witnesses," Andy said one day in the exercise yard, "they stumble on this fellow who sold me the beer that night. By then three days have gone by. The facts of the case have been broadsided in all the

papers. Maybe they ganged up on the guy, five or six cops, plus the dick from the Attorney General's office, plus the DA's assistant. Memory is a pretty subjective thing, Red. They could have started out with 'Isn't it possible that he purchased four or five dishtowels?' and worked their way up from there. If enough people want you to remember something, that can be a pretty powerful persuader."

I agreed that it could.

"But there's one even more powerful," Andy went on in that musing way of his. "I think it's at least possible that he convinced himself. It was the limelight. Reporters asking him questions, his picture in the papers ... all topped, of course, by his star turn in court. I'm not saying that he deliberately falsified his story, or perjured himself. I think it's possible that he could have passed a lie detector test with flying colors, or sworn on his mother's sacred name that I bought those dishtowels. But still ... memory is such a goddam subjective thing.

"I know this much: even though my own lawyer thought I had to be lying about half my story, he never bought that business about the dishtowels. It's crazy on the face of it. I was pig-drunk, too drunk to have been thinking about muffling the gunshots. If I'd done it, I just would have let them rip."

He went up to the turnout and parked there. He drank beer and smoked cigarettes. He watched the lights downstairs in Quentin's place go out. He watched a single light go on upstairs ... and fifteen minutes later he watched that one go out. He said he could guess the rest.

"Mr. Dufresne, did you then go up to Glenn Quentin's house and kill the two of them?" his lawyer thundered.

"No, I did not," Andy answered. By midnight, he said, he was sobering up. He was also feeling the first signs of a bad hangover. He decided to go home and sleep it off and think about the whole thing in a more adult fashion the next day. "At that time, as I drove home, I was beginning to think that the wisest course would be to simply let her go to Reno and get her divorce."

"Thank you, Mr. Dufresne."

The DA popped up.

“You divorced her in the quickest way you could think of, didn’t you? You divorced her with a .38 revolver wrapped in dishtowels, didn’t you?”

“No, sir, I did not,” Andy said calmly.

“And then you shot her lover.”

“No, sir.”

“You mean you shot Quentin first?”

“I mean I didn’t shoot either one of them. I drank two quarts of beer and smoked however many cigarettes the police found at the turnout. Then I drove home and went to bed.”

“You told the jury that between August twenty-fourth and September tenth you were feeling suicidal.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Suicidal enough to buy a revolver.”

“Yes.”

“Would it bother you overmuch, Mr. Dufresne, if I told you that you do not seem to me to be the suicidal type?”

“No,” Andy said, “but you don’t impress me as being terribly sensitive, and I doubt very much that, if I were feeling suicidal, I would take my problem to you.”

There was a slight tense titter in the courtroom at this, but it won him no points with the jury.

“Did you take your thirty-eight with you on the night of September tenth?”

“No; as I’ve already testified—”

“Oh, yes!” The DA smiled sarcastically. “You threw it into the river, didn’t you? The Royal River. On the afternoon of September ninth.”

“Yes, sir.”

“One day before the murders.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s convenient, isn’t it?”

“It’s neither convenient nor inconvenient. Only the truth.”

“I believe you heard Lieutenant Mincher’s testimony?” Mincher had been in charge of the party which had dragged the stretch of the Royal near Pond Road Bridge, from which Andy had testified he had thrown the gun. The police had not found it.

“Yes, sir. You know I heard it.”

“Then you heard him tell the court that they found no gun, although they dragged for three days. That was rather convenient, too, wasn’t it?”

“Convenience aside, it’s a fact that they didn’t find the gun,” Andy responded calmly. “But I should like to point out to both you and the jury that the Pond Road Bridge is very close to where the Royal River empties into the Bay of Yarmouth. The current is strong. The gun may have been carried out into the bay itself.”

“And so no comparison can be made between the riflings on the bullets taken from the bloodstained corpses of your wife and Mr. Glenn Quentin and the riflings on the barrel of your gun. That’s correct, isn’t it, Mr. Dufresne?”

“Yes.”

“That’s also rather convenient, isn’t it?”

At that, according to the papers, Andy displayed one of the few slight emotional reactions he allowed himself during the entire six-week period of the trial. A slight, bitter smile crossed his face.

“Since I am innocent of this crime, sir, and since I am telling the truth about throwing my gun into the river the day before the crime took place, then it seems to me decidedly inconvenient that the gun was never found.”

The DA hammered at him for two days. He re-read the Handy-Pik clerk’s testimony about the dishtowels to Andy. Andy repeated that he could not recall buying them, but admitted that he also couldn’t remember not buying them.

Was it true that Andy and Linda Dufresne had taken out a joint insurance policy in early 1947? Yes, that was true. And if acquitted, wasn’t it true that Andy stood to gain fifty thousand dollars in benefits? True. And wasn’t it true that he had gone up to Glenn Quentin’s house with murder in his heart, and wasn’t it *also* true that he had indeed committed murder twice over? No, it was not true. Then what did he think had happened, since there had been no signs of robbery?

“I have no way of knowing that, sir,” Andy said quietly.

The case went to the jury at 1:00 P.M. on a snowy Wednesday afternoon. The twelve jurors and -women came back in at 3:30. The bailiff said they would have been back earlier, but they had held off in order to enjoy a nice chicken dinner from Bentley's Restaurant at the county's expense. They found him guilty, and brother, if Maine had the death-penalty, he would have done the airdance before that spring's crocuses poked their heads out of the snow.

The DA had asked him what he thought had happened, and Andy slipped the question—but he did have an idea, and I got it out of him late one evening in 1955. It had taken those seven years for us to progress from nodding acquaintances to fairly close friends—but I never felt really close to Andy until 1960 or so, and I believe I was the only one who ever did get really close to him. Both being long-timers, we were in the same cellblock from beginning to end, although I was halfway down the corridor from him.

“What do I think?” He laughed—but there was no humor in the sound. “I think there was a lot of bad luck floating around that night. More than could ever get together in the same short span of time again. I think it must have been some stranger, just passing through. Maybe someone who had a flat tire on that road after I went home. Maybe a burglar. Maybe a psychopath. He killed them, that's all. And I'm here.”

As simple as that. And he was condemned to spend the rest of his life in Shawshank—or the part of it that mattered. Five years later he began to have parole hearings, and he was turned down just as regular as clockwork in spite of being a model prisoner. Getting a pass out of Shawshank when you've got *murder* stamped on your admittance-slip is slow work, as slow as a river eroding a rock. Seven men sit on the board, two more than at most state prisons, and every one of those seven has an ass as hard as the water drawn up from a mineral-spring well. You can't buy those guys, you can't sweet-talk them, you can't cry for them. As far as the board in here is concerned, money don't talk, and *nobody* walks. There were

other reasons in Andy's case as well ... but that belongs a little further along in my story.

There was a trusty, name of Kendricks, who was into me for some pretty heavy money back in the fifties, and it was four years before he got it all paid off. Most of the interest he paid me was information—in my line of work, you're dead if you can't find ways of keeping your ear to the ground. This Kendricks, for instance, had access to records I was never going to see running a stamper down in the goddam plate-shop.

Kendricks told me that the parole board vote was 7—0 against Andy Dufresne through 1957, 6—1 in '58; 7—0 again in '59, and 5—2 in '60. After that I don't know, but I do know that sixteen years later he was still in Cell 14 of Cellblock 5. By then, 1975, he was fifty-seven. They probably would have gotten big-hearted and let him out around 1983. They give you life, and that's what they take—all of it that counts, anyway. Maybe they set you loose someday, but ... well, listen: I knew this guy, Sherwood Bolton, his name was, and he had this pigeon in his cell. From 1945 until 1953, when they let him out, he had that pigeon. He wasn't any Birdman of Alcatraz; he just had this pigeon. Jake, he called him. He set Jake free a day before he, Sherwood, that is, was to walk, and Jake flew away just as pretty as you could want. But about a week after Sherwood Bolton left our happy little family, a friend of mine called me over to the west corner of the exercise yard, where Sherwood used to hang out. A bird was lying there like a very small pile of dirty bedlinen. It looked starved. My friend said: "Isn't that Jake, Red?" It was. That pigeon was just as dead as a turd.

I remember the first time Andy Dufresne got in touch with me for something; I remember like it was yesterday. That wasn't the time he wanted Rita Hayworth, though. That came later. In the summer of 1948 he came around for something else.

Most of my deals are done right there in the exercise yard, and that's where this one went down. Our yard is big, much bigger than most. It's a perfect square, ninety yards on a side. The north side is

the outer wall, with a guard-tower at either end. The guards up there are armed with binoculars and riot guns. The main gate is in that north side. The truck loading-bays are on the south side of the yard. There are five of them. Shawshank is a busy place during the work-week—deliveries in, deliveries out. We have the license-plate factory, and a big industrial laundry that does all the prison wetwash, plus that of Kittery Receiving Hospital and the Eliot Nursing Home. There's also a big automotive garage where mechanic inmates fix prison, state, and municipal vehicles—not to mention the private cars of the screws, the administration offices ... and, on more than one occasion, those of the parole board.

The east side is a thick stone wall full of tiny slit windows. Cellblock 5 is on the other side of that wall. The west side is Administration and the infirmary. Shawshank has never been as overcrowded as most prisons, and back in '48 it was only filled to something like two-thirds capacity, but at any given time there might be eighty to a hundred and twenty cons on the yard—playing toss with a football or baseball, shooting craps, jawing at each other, making deals. On Sunday the place was even more crowded; on Sunday the place would have looked like a country holiday ... if there had been any women.

It was on a Sunday that Andy first came to me. I had just finished talking to Elmore Armitage, a fellow who often came in handy to me, about a radio when Andy walked up. I knew who he was, of course; he had a reputation for being a snob and a cold fish. People were saying he was marked for trouble already. One of the people saying so was Bogs Diamond, a bad man to have on your case. Andy had no cellmate, and I'd heard that was just the way he wanted it, although people were already saying he thought his shit smelled sweeter than the ordinary. But I don't have to listen to rumors about a man when I can judge him for myself.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Andy Dufresne." He offered his hand and I shook it. He wasn't a man to waste time being social; he got right to the point. "I understand that you're a man who knows how to get things."

I agreed that I was able to locate certain items from time to time.

“How do you do that?” Andy asked.

“Sometimes,” I said, “things just seem to come into my hand. I can’t explain it. Unless it’s because I’m Irish.”

He smiled a little at that. “I wonder if you could get me a rock-hammer.”

“What would that be, and why would you want it?”

Andy looked surprised. “Do you make motivations a part of your business?” With words like those I could understand how he had gotten a reputation for being the snobby sort, the kind of guy who likes to put on airs—but I sensed a tiny thread of humor in his question.

“I’ll tell you,” I said. “If you wanted a toothbrush, I wouldn’t ask questions. I’d just quote you a price. Because a toothbrush, you see, is a non-lethal sort of an object.”

“You have strong feelings about lethal objects?”

“I do.”

An old friction-taped baseball flew toward us and he turned, cat-quick, and picked it out of the air. It was a move Frank Malzone would have been proud of. Andy flicked the ball back to where it had come from—just a quick and easy-looking flick of the wrist, but that throw had some mustard on it, just the same. I could see a lot of people were watching us with one eye as they went about their business. Probably the guards in the tower were watching, too. I won’t gild the lily; there are cons that swing weight in any prison, maybe four or five in a small one, maybe two or three dozen in a big one. At Shawshank I was one of those with some weight, and what I thought of Andy Dufresne would have a lot to do with how his time went. He probably knew it, too, but he wasn’t kowtowing or sucking up to me, and I respected him for that.

“Fair enough. I’ll tell you what it is and why I want it. A rock-hammer looks like a miniature pickaxe—about so long.” He held his hands about a foot apart, and that was when I first noticed how neatly kept his nails were. “It’s got a small sharp pick on one end and a flat, blunt hammerhead on the other. I want it because I like rocks.”

“Rocks,” I said.

“Squat down here a minute,” he said.

I humored him. We hunkered down on our haunches like Indians.

Andy took a handful of exercise yard dirt and began to sift it between his neat hands, so it emerged in a fine cloud. Small pebbles were left over, one or two sparkly, the rest dull and plain. One of the dull ones was quartz, but it was only dull until you'd rubbed it clean. Then it had a nice milky glow. Andy did the cleaning and then tossed it to me. I caught it and named it.

"Quartz, sure," he said. "And look. Mica. Shale. Silted granite. Here's a piece of graded limestone, from when they cut this place out of the side of the hill." He tossed them away and dusted his hands. "I'm a rockhound. At least ... I was a rockhound. In my old life. I'd like to be one again, on a limited scale."

"Sunday expeditions in the exercise yard?" I asked, standing up. It was a silly idea, and yet ... seeing that little piece of quartz had given my heart a funny tweak. I don't know exactly why; just an association with the outside world, I suppose. You didn't think of such things in terms of the yard. Quartz was something you picked out of a small, quick-running stream.

"Better to have Sunday expeditions here than no Sunday expeditions at all," he said.

"You could plant an item like that rock-hammer in somebody's skull," I remarked.

"I have no enemies here," he said quietly.

"No?" I smiled. "Wait awhile."

"If there's trouble, I can handle it without using a rock-hammer."

"Maybe you want to try an escape? Going under the wall? Because if you do—"

He laughed politely. When I saw the rock-hammer three weeks later, I understood why.

"You know," I said, "if anyone sees you with it, they'll take it away. If they saw you with a spoon, they'd take it away. What are you going to do, just sit down here in the yard and start bangin away?"

"Oh, I believe I can do a lot better than that."

I nodded. That part of it really wasn't my business, anyway. A man engages my services to get him something. Whether he can keep it or not after I get it is his business.

“How much would an item like that go for?” I asked. I was beginning to enjoy his quiet, low-key style. When you’ve spent ten years in stir, as I had then, you can get awfully tired of the bellowers and the braggarts and the loud-mouths. Yes, I think it would be fair to say I liked Andy from the first.

“Eight dollars in any rock-and-gem shop,” he said, “but I realize that in a business like yours you work on a cost-plus basis—”

“Cost plus ten per cent is my going rate, but I have to go up some on a dangerous item. For something like the gadget you’re talking about, it takes a little more goose-grease to get the wheels turning. Let’s say ten dollars.”

“Ten it is.”

I looked at him, smiling a little. “Have you *got* ten dollars?”

“I do,” he said quietly.

A long time after, I discovered that he had better than five hundred. He had brought it in with him. When they check you in at this hotel, one of the bellhops is obliged to bend you over and take a look up your works—but there are a lot of works, and, not to put too fine a point on it, a man who is really determined can get a fairly large item quite a ways up them—far enough to be out of sight, unless the bellhop you happen to draw is in the mood to pull on a rubber glove and go prospecting.

“That’s fine,” I said. “You ought to know what I expect if you get caught with what I get you.”

“I suppose I should,” he said, and I could tell by the slight change in his gray eyes that he knew exactly what I was going to say. It was a slight lightening, a gleam of his special ironic humor.

“If you get caught, you’ll say you found it. That’s about the long and short of it. They’ll put you in solitary for three or four weeks ... plus, of course, you’ll lose your toy and you’ll get a black mark on your record. If you give them my name, you and I will never do business again. Not for so much as a pair of shoelaces or a bag of Bugler. And I’ll send some fellows around to lump you up. I don’t like violence, but you’ll understand my position. I can’t allow it to get around that I can’t handle myself. That would surely finish me.”

“Yes. I suppose it would. I understand, and you don’t need to worry.”

“I never worry,” I said. “In a place like this there’s no percentage in it.”

He nodded and walked away. Three days later he walked up beside me in the exercise yard during the laundry’s morning break. He didn’t speak or even look my way, but pressed a picture of the Hon. Alexander Hamilton into my hand as neatly as a good magician does a card-trick. He was a man who adapted fast. I got him his rock-hammer. I had it in my cell for one night, and it was just as he described it. It was no tool for escape (it would have taken a man just about six hundred years to tunnel under the wall using that rock-hammer, I figured), but I still felt some misgivings. If you planted that pickaxe end in a man’s head, he would surely never listen to *Fibber McGee and Molly* on the radio again. And Andy had already begun having trouble with the sisters. I hoped it wasn’t them he was wanting the rock-hammer for.

In the end, I trusted my judgment. Early the next morning, twenty minutes before the wake-up horn went off, I slipped the rock-hammer and a package of Camels to Ernie, the old trusty who swept the Cellblock 5 corridors until he was let free in 1956. He slipped it into his tunic without a word, and I didn’t see the rock-hammer again for nineteen years, and by then it was damned near worn away to nothing.

The following Sunday Andy walked over to me in the exercise yard again. He was nothing to look at that day, I can tell you. His lower lip was swelled up so big it looked like a summer sausage, his right eye was swollen half-shut, and there was an ugly washboard scrape across one cheek. He was having his troubles with the sisters, all right, but he never mentioned them. “Thanks for the tool,” he said, and walked away.

I watched him curiously. He walked a few steps, saw something in the dirt, bent over, and picked it up. It was a small rock. Prison fatigues, except for those worn by mechanics when they’re on the job, have no pockets. But there are ways to get around that. The little pebble disappeared up Andy’s sleeve and didn’t come down. I

admired that ... and I admired him. In spite of the problems he was having, he was going on with his life. There are thousands who don't or won't or can't, and plenty of them aren't in prison, either. And I noticed that, although his face looked as if a twister had happened to it, his hands were still neat and clean, the nails well-kept.

I didn't see much of him over the next six months; Andy spent a lot of that time in solitary.

\* \* \*

A few words about the sisters.

In a lot of pens they are known as bull queers or jailhouse susies—just lately the term in fashion is “killer queens.” But in Shawshank they were always the sisters. I don't know why, but other than the name I guess there was no difference.

It comes as no surprise to most these days that there's a lot of buggery going on inside the wats—except to some of the new fish, maybe, who have the misfortune to be young, slim, good-looking, and unwary—but homosexuality, like straight sex, comes in a hundred different shapes and forms. There are men who can't stand to be without sex of some kind and turn to another man to keep from going crazy. Usually what follows is an arrangement between two fundamentally heterosexual men, although I've sometimes wondered if they are quite as heterosexual as they thought they were going to be when they get back to their wives or their girlfriends.

There are also men who get “turned” in prison. In the current parlance they “go gay,” or “come out of the closet.” Mostly (but not always) they play the female, and their favors are competed for fiercely.

And then there are the sisters.

They are to prison society what the rapist is to the society outside the walls. They're usually long-timers, doing hard bullets for brutal crimes. Their prey is the young, the weak, and the inexperienced ... or, as in the case of Andy Dufresne, the weak-looking. Their hunting

grounds are the showers, the cramped, tunnel-like areaway behind the industrial washers in the laundry, sometimes the infirmary. On more than one occasion rape has occurred in the closet-sized projection booth behind the auditorium. Most often what the sisters take by force they could have had for free, if they wanted it that way; those who have been turned always seem to have “crushes” on one sister or another, like teenage girls with their Sinatras, Presleys, or Redfords. But for the sisters, the joy has always been in taking it by force ... and I guess it always will be.

Because of his small size and fair good looks (and maybe also because of that very quality of self-possession I had admired), the sisters were after Andy from the day he walked in. If this was some kind of fairy story, I'd tell you that Andy fought the good fight until they left him alone. I wish I could say that, but I can't. Prison is no fairy-tale world.

The first time for him was in the shower less than three days after he joined our happy Shawshank family. Just a lot of slap and tickle that time, I understand. They like to size you up before they make their real move, like jackals finding out if the prey is as weak and hamstrung as it looks.

Andy punched back and bloodied the lip of a big, hulking sister named Bogs Diamond—gone these many years since to who knows where. A guard broke it up before it could go any further, but Bogs promised to get him—and Bogs did.

The second time was behind the washers in the laundry. A lot has gone on in that long, dusty, and narrow space over the years; the guards know about it and just let it be. It's dim and littered with bags of washing and bleaching compound, drums of Hexlite catalyst, as harmless as salt if your hands are dry, murderous as battery acid if they're wet. The guards don't like to go back there. There's no room to maneuver, and one of the first things they teach them when they come to work in a place like this is to never let the cons get you in a place where you can't back up.

Bogs wasn't there that day, but Henley Backus, who had been washroom foreman down there since 1922, told me that four of his friends were. Andy held them at bay for awhile with a scoop of

Hexlite, threatening to throw it in their eyes if they came any closer, but he tripped trying to back around one of the big Washex four-pockets. That was all it took. They were on him.

I guess the phrase gang-rape is one that doesn't change much from one generation to the next. That's what they did to him, those four sisters. They bent him over a gear-box and one of them held a Phillips screwdriver to his temple while they gave him the business. It rips you up some, but not bad—am I speaking from personal experience, you ask?—I only wish I weren't. You bleed for awhile. If you don't want some clown asking you if you just started your period, you wad up a bunch of toilet paper and keep it down the back of your underwear until it stops. The bleeding really is like a menstrual flow; it keeps up for two, maybe three days, a slow trickle. Then it stops. No harm done, unless they've done something even more unnatural to you. No physical harm done—but rape is rape, and eventually you have to look at your face in the mirror again and decide what to make of yourself.

Andy went through that alone, the way he went through everything alone in those days. He must have come to the conclusion that others before him had come to, namely, that there are only two ways to deal with the sisters: fight them and get taken, or just get taken.

He decided to fight. When Bogs and two of his buddies came after him a week or so after the laundry incident (“I heard ya got broke in,” Bogs said, according to Ernie, who was around at the time), Andy slugged it out with them. He broke the nose of a fellow named Rooster MacBride, a heavy-gutted farmer who was in for beating his stepdaughter to death. Rooster died in here, I'm happy to add.

They took him, all three of them. When it was done, Rooster and the other egg—it might have been Pete Verness, but I'm not completely sure—forced Andy down to his knees. Bogs Diamond stepped in front of him. He had a pearl-handled razor in those days with the words *Diamond Pearl* engraved on both sides of the grip. He opened it and said, “I'm gonna open my fly now, mister man, and you're going to swallow what I give you to swallow. And when you done swallowed mine, you're gonna swallow Rooster's. I guess you

done broke his nose and I think he ought to have something to pay for it.”

Andy said, “Anything of yours that you stick in my mouth, you’re going to lose it.”

Bogs looked at Andy like he was crazy, Ernie said.

“No,” he told Andy, talking to him slowly, like Andy was a stupid kid. “You didn’t understand what I said. You do anything like that and I’ll put all eight inches of this steel into your ear. Get it?”

“I understood what you said. I don’t think you understood *me*. I’m going to bite whatever you stick into my mouth. You can put that razor into my brain, I guess, but you should know that a sudden serious brain injury causes the victim to simultaneously urinate, defecate ... and bite down.”

He looked up at Bogs smiling that little smile of his, old Ernie said, as if the three of them had been discussing stocks and bonds with him instead of throwing it to him just as hard as they could. Just as if he was wearing one of his three-piece bankers’ suits instead of kneeling on a dirty broom-closet floor with his pants around his ankles and blood trickling down the insides of his thighs.

“In fact,” he went on, “I understand that the bite-reflex is sometimes so strong that the victim’s jaws have to be pried open with a crowbar or a jackhandle.”

Bogs didn’t put anything in Andy’s mouth that night in late February of 1948, and neither did Rooster MacBride, and so far as I know, no one else ever did, either. What the three of them did was to beat Andy within an inch of his life, and all four of them ended up doing a jolt in solitary. Andy and Rooster MacBride went by way of the infirmary.

How many times did that particular crew have at him? I don’t know. I think Rooster lost his taste fairly early on—being in nose-splints for a month can do that to a fellow—and Bogs Diamond left off that summer, all at once.

That was a strange thing. Bogs was found in his cell, badly beaten, one morning in early June, when he didn’t show up in the breakfast nose-count. He wouldn’t say who had done it, or how they had gotten to him, but being in my business, I know that a screw can

be bribed to do almost anything except get a gun for an inmate. They didn't make big salaries then, and they don't now. And in those days there was no electronic locking system, no closed-circuit TV, no master-switches which controlled whole areas of the prison. Back in 1948, each cellblock had its own turnkey. A guard could have been bribed real easy to let someone—maybe two or three someones—into the block, and, yes, even into Diamond's cell.

Of course a job like that would have cost a lot of money. Not by outside standards, no. Prison economics are on a smaller scale. When you've been in here awhile, a dollar bill in your hand looks like a twenty did outside. My guess is that, if Bogs was done, it cost someone a serious piece of change—fifteen bucks, we'll say, for the turnkey, and two or three apiece for each of the lump-up guys.

I'm not saying it was Andy Dufresne, but I do know that he brought in five hundred dollars when he came, and he was a banker in the straight world—a man who understands better than the rest of us the ways in which money can become power.

And I know this: after the beating—the three broken ribs, the hemorrhaged eye, the sprained back, and the dislocated hip—Bogs Diamond left Andy alone. In fact, after that he left everyone pretty much alone. He got to be like a high wind in the summertime, all bluster and no bite. You could say, in fact, that he turned into a “weak sister.”

That was the end of Bogs Diamond, a man who might eventually have killed Andy if Andy hadn't taken steps to prevent it (if it was him who took the steps). But it wasn't the end of Andy's troubles with the sisters. There was a little hiatus, and then it began again, although not so hard or so often. Jackals like easy prey, and there were easier pickings around than Andy Dufresne.

He always fought them, that's what I remember. He knew, I guess, that if you let them have at you even once without fighting, it got that much easier to let them have their way without fighting next time. So Andy would turn up with bruises on his face every once in awhile, and there was the matter of the two broken fingers six or eight

months after Diamond's beating. Oh yes—and sometime in late 1949, the man landed in the infirmary with a broken cheekbone that was probably the result of someone swinging a nice chunk of pipe with the business-end wrapped in flannel. He always fought back, and as a result, he did his time in solitary. But I don't think solitary was the hardship for Andy that it was for some men. He got along with himself.

The sisters was something he adjusted himself to—and then, in 1950, it stopped almost completely. That is a part of my story that I'll get to in due time.

In the fall of 1948, Andy met me one morning in the exercise yard and asked me if I could get him half a dozen rock-blankets.

“What the hell are those?” I asked.

He told me that was just what rockhounds called them; they were polishing cloths about the size of dishtowels. They were heavily padded, with a smooth side and a rough side—the smooth side like fine-grained sandpaper, the rough side almost as abrasive as industrial steel wool (Andy also kept a box of that in his cell, although he didn't get it from me—I imagine he kited it from the prison laundry).

I told him I thought we could do business on those, and I ended up getting them from the very same rock-and-gem shop where I'd arranged to get the rock-hammer. This time I charged Andy my usual ten per cent and not a penny more. I didn't see anything lethal or even dangerous in a dozen 7" x 7" squares of padded cloth. Rock-blankets, indeed.

It was about five months later that Andy asked if I could get him Rita Hayworth. That conversation took place in the auditorium, during a movie-show. Nowadays we get the movie-shows once or twice a week, but back then the shows were a monthly event. Usually the movies we got had a morally uplifting message to them, and this one, *The Lost Weekend*, was no different. The moral was

that it's dangerous to drink. It was a moral we could take some comfort in.

Andy maneuvered to get next to me, and about halfway through the show he leaned a little closer and asked if I could get him Rita Hayworth. I'll tell you the truth, it kind of tickled me. He was usually cool, calm, and collected, but that night he was jumpy as hell, almost embarrassed, as if he was asking me to get him a load of Trojans or one of those sheepskin-lined gadgets that are supposed to "enhance your solitary pleasure," as the magazines put it. He seemed overcharged, a man on the verge of blowing his radiator.

"I can get her," I said. "No sweat, calm down. You want the big one or the little one?" At that time Rita was my best girl (a few years before it had been Betty Grable) and she came in two sizes. For a buck you could get the little Rita. For two-fifty you could have the big Rita, four feet high and all woman.

"The big one," he said, not looking at me. I tell you, he was a hot sketch that night. He was blushing just like a kid trying to get into a kootch show with his big brother's draftcard. "Can you do it?"

"Take it easy, sure I can. Does a bear shit in the woods?" The audience was applauding and catcalling as the bugs came out of the walls to get Ray Milland, who was having a bad case of the DT's.

"How soon?"

"A week. Maybe less."

"Okay." But he sounded disappointed, as if he had been hoping I had one stuffed down my pants right then. "How much?"

I quoted him the wholesale price. I could afford to give him this one at cost; he'd been a good customer, what with his rock-hammer and his rock-blankets. Furthermore, he'd been a good boy—on more than one night when he was having his problems with Bogs, Rooster, and the rest, I wondered how long it would be before he used the rock-hammer to crack someone's head open.

Posters are a big part of my business, just behind the booze and cigarettes, usually half a step ahead of the reefer. In the sixties the business exploded in every direction, with a lot of people wanting funky hang-ups like Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, that *Easy Rider* poster. But mostly it's girls; one pin-up queen after another.

A few days after Andy spoke to me, a laundry driver I did business with back then brought in better than sixty posters, most of them Rita Hayworths. You may even remember the picture; I sure do. Rita is dressed—sort of—in a bathing suit, one hand behind her head, her eyes half-closed, those full, sulky red lips parted. They called it Rita Hayworth, but they might as well have called it Woman in Heat.

The prison administration knows about the black market, in case you were wondering. Sure they do. They probably know almost as much about my business as I do myself. They live with it because they know that a prison is like a big pressure-cooker, and there have to be vents somewhere to let off some steam. They make the occasional bust, and I've done time in solitary a time or three over the years, but when it's something like posters, they wink. Live and let live. And when a big Rita Hayworth went up in some fishie's cell, the assumption was that it came in the mail from a friend or a relative. Of course all the care-packages from friends and relatives are opened and the contents inventoried, but who goes back and re-checks the inventory sheets for something as harmless as a Rita Hayworth or an Ava Gardner pin-up? When you're in a pressure-cooker you learn to live and let live or somebody will carve you a brand-new mouth just above the Adam's apple. You learn to make allowances.

It was Ernie again who took the poster up to Andy's cell, 14, from my own, 6. And it was Ernie who brought back the note, written in Andy's careful hand, just one word: "Thanks."

A little while later, as they filed us out for morning chow, I glanced into his cell and saw Rita over his bunk in all her swimsuited glory, one hand behind her head, her eyes half-closed, those soft, satiny lips parted. It was over his bunk where he could look at her nights, after lights-out, in the glow of the arc sodiums in the exercise yard.

But in the bright morning sunlight, there were dark slashes across her face—the shadow of the bars on his single slit window.

Now I'm going to tell you what happened in mid-May of 1950 that finally ended Andy's three-year series of skirmishes with the sisters.

It was also the incident which eventually got him out of the laundry and into the library, where he filled out his work-time until he left our happy little family earlier this year.

You may have noticed how much of what I've told you already is hearsay—someone saw something and told me and I told you. Well, in some cases I've simplified it even more than it really was, and have repeated (or will repeat) fourth-or fifth-hand information. That's the way it is here. The grapevine is very real, and you have to use it if you're going to stay ahead. Also, of course, you have to know how to pick out the grains of truth from the chaff of lies, rumors, and wish-it-had-beens.

You may also have gotten the idea that I'm describing someone who's more legend than man, and I would have to agree that there's some truth to that. To us long-timers who knew Andy over a space of years, there was an element of fantasy to him, a sense, almost, of myth-magic, if you get what I mean. That story I passed on about Andy refusing to give Bogs Diamond a head-job is part of that myth, and how he kept on fighting the sisters is part of it, and how he got the library job is part of it, too ... but with one important difference: I was there and I saw what happened, and I swear on my mother's name that it's all true. The oath of a convicted murderer may not be worth much, but believe this: I don't lie.

Andy and I were on fair speaking terms by then. The guy fascinated me. Looking back to the poster episode, I see there's one thing I neglected to tell you, and maybe I should. Five weeks after he hung Rita up (I'd forgotten all about it by then, and had gone on to other deals), Ernie passed a small white box through the bars of my cell.

"From Dufresne," he said, low, and never missed a stroke with his push-broom.

"Thanks, Ernie," I said, and slipped him half a pack of Camels.

Now what the hell was this, I was wondering as I slipped the cover from the box. There was a lot of white cotton inside, and below that

...

I looked for a long time. For a few minutes it was like I didn't even dare touch them, they were so pretty. There's a crying shortage of

pretty things in the slam, and the real pity of it is that a lot of men don't even seem to miss them.

There were two pieces of quartz in that box, both of them carefully polished. They had been chipped into driftwood shapes. There were little sparkles of iron pyrites in them like flecks of gold. If they hadn't been so heavy, they would have served as a fine pair of men's cufflinks—they were that close to being a matched set.

How much work went into creating those two pieces? Hours and hours after lights-out, I knew that. First the chipping and shaping, and then the almost endless polishing and finishing with those rock-blankets. Looking at them, I felt the warmth that any man or woman feels when he or she is looking at something pretty, something that has been *worked* and *made*—that's the thing that really separates us from the animals, I think—and I felt something else, too. A sense of awe for the man's brute persistence. But I never knew just how persistent Andy Dufresne could be until much later.

In May of 1950, the powers that be decided that the roof of the license-plate factory ought to be re-surfaced with roofing tar. They wanted it done before it got too hot up there, and they asked for volunteers for the work, which was planned to take about a week. More than seventy men spoke up, because it was outside work and May is one damn fine month for outside work. Nine or ten names were drawn out of a hat, and two of them happened to be Andy's and my own.

For the next week we'd be marched out to the exercise yard after breakfast, with two guards up front and two more behind ... plus all the guards in the towers keeping a weather eye on the proceedings through their field-glasses for good measure.

Four of us would be carrying a big extension ladder on those morning marches—I always got a kick out of the way Dickie Betts, who was on that job, called that sort of ladder an extensible—and we'd put it up against the side of that low, flat building. Then we'd start bucket-brigading hot buckets of tar up to the roof. Spill that shit on you and you'd jitterbug all the way to the infirmary.

There were six guards on the project, all of them picked on the basis of seniority. It was almost as good as a week's vacation,

because instead of sweating it out in the laundry or the plate-shop or standing over a bunch of cons cutting pulp or brush somewhere out in the willywags, they were having a regular May holiday in the sun, just sitting there with their backs up against the low parapet, shooting the bull back and forth.

They didn't even have to keep more than half an eye on us, because the south wall sentry post was close enough so that the fellows up there could have spit their chews on us, if they'd wanted to. If anyone on the roof-sealing party had made one funny move, it would take four seconds to cut him smack in two with .45-caliber machine-gun bullets. So those screws just sat there and took their ease. All they needed was a couple of six-packs buried in crushed ice, and they would have been the lords of all creation.

One of them was a fellow named Byron Hadley, and in that year of 1950, he'd been at Shawshank longer than I had. Longer than the last two wardens put together, as a matter of fact. The fellow running the show in 1950 was a prissy-looking downeast Yankee named George Dunahy. He had a degree in penal administration. No one liked him, as far as I could tell, except the people who had gotten him his appointment. I heard that he was only interested in three things: compiling statistics for a book (which was later published by a small New England outfit called Light Side Press, where he probably had to pay to have it done), which team won the intramural baseball championship each September, and getting a death-penalty law passed in Maine. A regular bear for the death-penalty was George Dunahy. He was fired off the job in 1953, when it came out he was running a discount auto-repair service down in the prison garage and splitting the profits with Byron Hadley and Greg Stammers. Hadley and Stammers came out of that one okay—they were old hands at keeping their asses covered—but Dunahy took a walk. No one was sorry to see him go, but nobody was exactly pleased to see Greg Stammers step into his shoes, either. He was a short man with a tight, hard gut and the coldest brown eyes you ever saw. He always had a painful, pursed little grin on his face, as if he had to go to the bathroom and couldn't quite manage it. During Stammers's tenure as warden there was a lot of brutality at Shawshank, and although I

have no proof, I believe there were maybe half a dozen moonlight burials in the stand of scrub forest that lies east of the prison. Dunahy was bad, but Greg Stamma was a cruel, wretched, cold-hearted man.

He and Byron Hadley were good friends. As warden, George Dunahy was nothing but a posturing figurehead; it was Stamma, and through him, Hadley, who actually administered the prison.

Hadley was a tall, shambling man with thinning red hair. He sunburned easily and he talked loud and if you didn't move fast enough to suit him, he'd clout you with his stick. On that day, our third on the roof, he was talking to another guard named Mert Entwistle.

Hadley had gotten some amazingly good news, so he was griping about it. That was his style—he was a thankless man with not a good word for anyone, a man who was convinced that the whole world was against him. The world had cheated him out of the best years of his life, and the world would be more than happy to cheat him out of the rest. I have seen some screws that I thought were almost saintly, and I think I know why that happens—they are able to see the difference between their own lives, poor and struggling as they might be, and the lives of the men they are paid by the State to watch over. These guards are able to formulate a comparison concerning pain. Others can't, or won't.

For Byron Hadley there was no basis of comparison. He could sit there, cool and at his ease under the warm May sun, and find the gall to mourn his own good luck while less than ten feet away a bunch of men were working and sweating and burning their hands on great big buckets filled with bubbling tar, men who had to work so hard in their ordinary round of days that this looked like a *respite*. You may remember the old question, the one that's supposed to define your outlook on life when you answer it. For Byron Hadley the answer would always be *half empty, the glass is half empty*. Forever and ever, amen. If you gave him a cool drink of apple cider, he'd think about vinegar. If you told him his wife had always been faithful to him, he'd tell you it was because she was so damn ugly.

So there he sat, talking to Mert Entwhistle loud enough for all of us to hear, his broad white forehead already starting to redden with the sun. He had one hand thrown back over the low parapet surrounding the roof. The other was on the butt of his .38.

We all got the story along with Mert. It seemed that Hadley's older brother had gone off to Texas some fourteen years ago and the rest of the family hadn't heard from the son of a bitch since. They had all assumed he was dead, and good riddance. Then, a week and a half ago, a lawyer had called them long-distance from Austin. It seemed that Hadley's brother had died four months ago, and a rich man at that ("It's frigging incredible how lucky some assholes can get," this paragon of gratitude on the plate-shop roof said). The money had come as a result of oil and oil-leases, and there was close to a million dollars.

No, Hadley wasn't a millionaire—that might have made even him happy, at least for awhile—but the brother had left a pretty damned decent bequest of thirty-five thousand dollars to each surviving member of his family back in Maine, if they could be found. Not bad. Like getting lucky and winning a sweepstakes.

But to Byron Hadley the glass was always half empty. He spent most of the morning bitching to Mert about the bite that the goddam government was going to take out of his windfall. "They'll leave me about enough to buy a new car with," he allowed, "and then what happens? You have to pay the damn taxes on the car, and the repairs and maintenance, you got your goddam kids pestering you to take 'em for a ride with the top down—"

"And to drive it, if they're old enough," Mert said. Old Mert Entwhistle knew which side his bread was buttered on, and he didn't say what must have been as obvious to him as to the rest of us: If that money's worrying you so bad, Byron old kid old sock, I'll just take it off your hands. After all, what are friends for?

"That's right, wanting to drive it, wanting to *learn* to drive on it, for Chrissake," Byron said with a shudder. "Then what happens at the end of the year? If you figured the tax wrong and you don't have enough left over to pay the overdraft, you got to pay out of your own pocket, or maybe even borrow it from one of those kikey loan

agencies. And they audit you anyway, you know. It don't matter. And when the government audits you, they always take more. Who can fight Uncle Sam? He puts his hand inside your shirt and squeezes your tit until it's purple, and you end up getting the short end. Christ."

He lapsed into a morose silence, thinking of what terrible bad luck he'd had to inherit that thirty-five thousand dollars. Andy Dufresne had been spreading tar with a big Padd brush less than fifteen feet away and now he tossed it into his pail and walked over to where Mert and Hadley were sitting.

We all tightened up, and I saw one of the other screws, Tim Youngblood, drag his hand down to where his pistol was holstered. One of the fellows in the sentry tower struck his partner on the arm and they both turned, too. For one moment I thought Andy was going to get shot, or clubbed, or both.

Then he said, very softly, to Hadley: "Do you trust your wife?"

Hadley just stared at him. He was starting to get red in the face, and I knew that was a bad sign. In about three seconds he was going to pull his billy and give Andy the butt end of it right in the solar plexus, where that big bundle of nerves is. A hard enough hit there can kill you, but they always go for it. If it doesn't kill you it will paralyze you long enough to forget whatever cute move it was that you had planned.

"Boy," Hadley said, "I'll give you just one chance to pick up that Padd. And then you're goin off this roof on your head."

Andy just looked at him, very calm and still. His eyes were like ice. It was as if he hadn't heard. And I found myself wanting to tell him how it was, to give him the crash course. The crash course is you *never* let on that you hear the guards talking, you never try to horn in on their conversation unless you're asked (and then you always tell them just what they want to hear and shut up again). Black man, white man, red man, yellow man, in prison it doesn't matter because we've got our own brand of equality. In prison every con's a nigger and you have to get used to the idea if you intend to survive men like Hadley and Greg Stammers, who really would kill you just as soon as look at you. When you're in stir you belong to the State and if you forget it, woe is you. I've known men who've lost eyes, men who've

lost toes and fingers; I knew one man who lost the tip of his penis and counted himself lucky that was all he lost. I wanted to tell Andy that it was already too late. He could go back and pick up his brush and there would still be some big lug waiting for him in the showers that night, ready to charley-horse both of his legs and leave him writhing on the cement. You could buy a lug like that for a pack of cigarettes or three Baby Ruths. Most of all, I wanted to tell him not to make it any worse than it already was.

What I did was to keep on running tar out onto the roof as if nothing at all was happening. Like everyone else, I look after my own ass first. I have to. It's cracked already, and in Shawshank there have always been Hadleys willing to finish the job of breaking it.

Andy said, "Maybe I put it wrong. Whether you trust her or not is immaterial. The problem is whether or not you believe she would ever go behind your back, try to hamstring you."

Hadley got up. Mert got up. Tim Youngblood got up. Hadley's face was as red as the side of a firebarn. "Your only problem," he said, "is going to be how many bones you still got unbroken. You can count them in the infirmary. Come on, Mert. We're throwing this sucker over the side."

Tim Youngblood drew his gun. The rest of us kept tarring like mad. The sun beat down. They were going to do it; Hadley and Mert were simply going to pitch him over the side. Terrible accident. Dufresne, prisoner 81433-SHINK, was taking a couple of empties down and slipped on the ladder. Too bad.

They laid hold of him, Mert on the right arm, Hadley on the left. Andy didn't resist. His eyes never left Hadley's red, horsey face.

"If you've got your thumb on her, Mr. Hadley," he said in that same calm, composed voice, "there's not a reason why you shouldn't have every cent of that money. Final score, Mr. Byron Hadley thirty-five thousand, Uncle Sam zip."

Mert started to drag him toward the edge. Hadley just stood there. For a moment Andy was like a rope between them in a tug-of-war game. Then Hadley said, "Hold on one second, Mert. What do you mean, boy?"

“I mean, if you’ve got your thumb on your wife, you can give it to her,” Andy said.

“You better start making sense, boy, or you’re going over.”

“The IRS allows you a one-time-only gift to your spouse,” Andy said. “It’s good up to sixty thousand dollars.”

Hadley was now looking at Andy as if he had been poleaxed. “Naw, that ain’t right,” he said. “Tax *free*?”

“Tax free,” Andy said. “IRS can’t touch one cent.”

“How would you know a thing like that?”

Tim Youngblood said: “He used to be a banker, Byron. I s’pose he might—”

“Shut ya head, Trout,” Hadley said without looking at him. Tim Youngblood flushed and shut up. Some of the guards called him Trout because of his thick lips and buggy eyes. Hadley kept looking at Andy. “You’re the smart banker who shot his wife. Why should I believe a smart banker like you? So I can wind up in here breaking rocks right alongside you? You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Andy said quietly: “If you went to jail for tax evasion, you’d go to a federal penitentiary, not Shawshank. But you won’t. The tax-free gift to the spouse is a perfectly legal loophole. I’ve done dozens ... no, hundreds of them. It’s meant primarily for people with small businesses to pass on, for people who come into one-time-only windfalls. Like yourself.”

“I think you’re lying,” Hadley said, but he didn’t—you could see he didn’t. There was an emotion dawning on his face, something that was grotesque overlying that long, ugly countenance and that receding, sunburned brow. An almost obscene emotion when seen on the features of Byron Hadley. It was hope.

“No, I’m not lying. There’s no reason why you should take my word for it, either. Engage a lawyer—”

“Ambulance-chasing highway-robbing cocksuckers!” Hadley cried.

Andy shrugged. “Then go to the IRS. They’ll tell you the same thing for free. Actually, you don’t need me to tell you at all. You would have investigated the matter for yourself.”

“You’re fucking-A. I don’t need any smart wife-killing banker to show me where the bear shit in the buckwheat.”

“You’ll need a tax lawyer or a banker to set up the gift for you and that will cost you something,” Andy said. “Or ... if you were interested, I’d be glad to set it up for you nearly free of charge. The price would be three beers apiece for my co-workers—”

“Co-workers,” Mert said, and let out a rusty guffaw. He slapped his knee. A real knee-slapper was old Mert, and I hope he died of intestinal cancer in a part of the world where morphine is as of yet undiscovered. “Co-workers, ain’t that cute? Co-workers? You ain’t got any—”

“Shut your friggin trap,” Hadley growled, and Mert shut. Hadley looked at Andy again. “What was you sayin?”

“I was saying that I’d only ask three beers apiece for my co-workers, if that seems fair,” Andy said. “I think a man feels more like a man when he’s working out of doors in the springtime if he can have a bottle of suds. That’s only my opinion. It would go down smooth, and I’m sure you’d have their gratitude.”

I have talked to some of the other men who were up there that day—Rennie Martin, Logan St. Pierre, and Paul Bonsaint were three of them—and we all saw the same thing then ... felt the same thing. Suddenly it was Andy who had the upper hand. It was Hadley who had the gun on his hip and the billy in his hand, Hadley who had his friend Greg Stamma behind him and the whole prison administration behind Stamma, the whole power of the State behind *that*, but all at once in that golden sunshine it didn’t matter, and I felt my heart leap up in my chest as it never had since the truck drove me and four others through the gate back in 1938 and I stepped out into the exercise yard.

Andy was looking at Hadley with those cold, clear, calm eyes, and it wasn’t just the thirty-five thousand then, we all agreed on that. I’ve played it over and over in my mind and I know. It was man against man, and Andy simply forced him, the way a strong man can force a weaker man’s wrist to the table in a game of Indian rasseling. There was no reason, you see, why Hadley couldn’t’ve given Mert the nod at that very minute, pitched Andy overside onto his head, and still taken Andy’s advice.

No reason. *But he didn’t.*

“I could get you all a couple of beers if I wanted to,” Hadley said. “A beer does taste good while you’re workin.” The colossal prick even managed to sound magnanimous.

“I’d just give you one piece of advice the IRS wouldn’t bother with,” Andy said. His eyes were fixed unwinkingly on Hadley’s. “Make this gift to your wife if you’re *sure*. If you think there’s even a chance she might double-cross you or backshoot you, we could work out something else—”

“Double-cross me?” Hadley asked harshly. “Double-cross *me*? Mr. Hotshot Banker, if she ate her way through a boxcar of Ex-Lax, she wouldn’t dare fart unless I gave her the nod.”

Mert, Youngblood, and the other screws yucked it up dutifully. Andy never cracked a smile.

“I’ll write down the forms you need,” he said. “You can get them at the post office, and I’ll fill them out for your signature.”

That sounded suitably important, and Hadley’s chest swelled. Then he glared around at the rest of us and hollered,

“What are you jimmies starin at? Move your asses, goddammit!” He looked back at Andy. “You come over here with me, hotshot. And listen to me well: if you’re jewing me somehow, you’re gonna find yourself chasing your own head around Shower C before the week’s out.”

“Yes, I understand that,” Andy said softly.

And he did understand it. The way it turned out, he understood a lot more than I did—more than any of us did.

That’s how, on the second-to-last day of the job, the convict crew that tarred the plate-factory roof in 1950 ended up sitting in a row at ten o’clock on a spring morning, drinking Black Label beer supplied by the hardest screw that ever walked a turn at Shawshank State Prison. That beer was pisswarm, but it was still the best I ever had in my life. We sat and drank it and felt the sun on our shoulders, and not even the expression of half-amusement, half-contempt on Hadley’s face—as if he were watching apes drink beer instead of men—could spoil it. It lasted twenty minutes, that beer-break, and for

those twenty minutes we felt like free men. We could have been drinking beer and tarring the roof of one of our own houses.

Only Andy didn't drink. I already told you about his drinking habit. He sat hunkered down in the shade, hands dangling between his knees, watching us and smiling a little. It's amazing how many men remember him that way, and amazing how many men were on that work-crew when Andy Dufresne faced down Byron Hadley. I thought there were nine or ten of us, but by 1955 there must have been two hundred of us, maybe more ... if you believed what you heard.

So yeah—if you asked me to give you a flat-out answer to the question of whether I'm trying to tell you about a man or a legend that got made up around the man, like a pearl around a little piece of grit—I'd have to say that the answer lies somewhere in between. All I know for sure is that Andy Dufresne wasn't much like me or anyone else I ever knew since I came inside. He brought in five hundred dollars jammed up his back porch, but somehow that graymeat son of a bitch managed to bring in something else as well. A sense of his own worth, maybe, or a feeling that he would be the winner in the end ... or maybe it was only a sense of freedom, even inside these goddamned gray walls. It was a kind of inner light he carried around with him. I only knew him to lose that light once, and that is also a part of this story.

By World Series time of 1950—this was the year the Philadelphia Whiz Kids dropped four straight, you will remember—Andy was having no more trouble from the sisters. Stamma and Hadley had passed the word. If Andy Dufresne came to either of them, or any of the other screws that formed a part of their coterie, and showed so much as a single drop of blood in his underpants, every sister in Shawshank would go to bed that night with a headache. They didn't fight it. As I have pointed out, there was always an eighteen-year-old car thief or a firebug or some guy who'd gotten his kicks handling little children. After the day on the plate-shop roof, Andy went his way and the sisters went theirs.

He was working in the library then, under a tough old con named Brooks Hatlen. Hatlen had gotten the job back in the late twenties because he had a college education. Brooksie's degree was in animal husbandry, true enough, but college educations in institutes of lower learning like The Shank are so rare that it's a case of beggars not being able to be choosers.

In 1952 Brooksie, who had killed his wife and daughter after a losing streak at poker back when Coolidge was President, was paroled. As usual, the State in all its wisdom had let him go long after any chance he might have had to become a useful part of society was gone. He was sixty-eight and arthritic when he tottered out of the main gate in his Polish suit and his French shoes, his parole papers in one hand and a Greyhound bus ticket in the other. He was crying when he left. Shawshank was his world. What lay beyond its walls was as terrible to Brooks as the Western Seas had been to superstitious fifteenth-century sailors. In prison, Brooksie had been a person of some importance. He was the librarian, an educated man. If he went to the Kittery library and asked for a job, they wouldn't even give him a library card. I heard he died in a home for indigent old folks up Freeport way in 1953, and at that he lasted about six months longer than I thought he would. Yeah, I guess the State got its own back on Brooksie, all right. They trained him to like it inside the shithouse and then they threw him out.

Andy succeeded to Brooksie's job, and he was librarian for twenty-three years. He used the same force of will I'd seen him use on Byron Hadley to get what he wanted for the library, and I saw him gradually turn one small room (which still smelled of turpentine because it had been a paint closet until 1922 and had never been properly aired) lined with Reader's Digest Condensed Books and *National Geographics* into the best prison library in New England.

He did it a step at a time. He put a suggestion box by the door and patiently weeded out such attempts at humor as *More Fuk-Boox Pleeze* and *Excape in 10 EZ Lesions*. He got hold of the things the prisoners seemed serious about. He wrote to the major book clubs in New York and got two of them, The Literary Guild and The Book-of-the-Month Club, to send editions of all their major selections to us at

a special cheap rate. He discovered a hunger for information on such small hobbies as soap-carving, woodworking, sleight of hand, and card solitaire. He got all the books he could on such subjects. And those two jailhouse staples, Erle Stanley Gardner and Louis L'Amour. Cons never seem to get enough of the courtroom or the open range. And yes, he did keep a box of fairly spicy paperbacks under the checkout desk, loaning them out carefully and making sure they always got back. Even so, each new acquisition of that type was quickly read to tatters.

He began to write to the State Senate in Augusta in 1954. Stamma was warden by then, and he used to pretend Andy was some sort of mascot. He was always in the library, shooting the bull with Andy, and sometimes he'd even throw a paternal arm around Andy's shoulders or give him a goose. He didn't fool anybody. Andy Dufresne was no one's mascot.

He told Andy that maybe he'd been a banker on the outside, but that part of his life was receding rapidly into his past and he had better get a hold on the facts of prison life. As far as that bunch of jumped-up Republican Rotarians in Augusta was concerned, there were only three viable expenditures of the taxpayers' money in the field of prisons and corrections. Number one was more walls, number two was more bars, and number three was more guards. As far as the State Senate was concerned, Stamma explained, the folks in Thomaston and Shawshank and Pittsfield and South Portland were the scum of the earth. They were there to do hard time, and by God and Sonny Jesus, it was hard time they were going to do. And if there were a few weevils in the bread, wasn't that just too fucking bad?

Andy smiled his small, composed smile and asked Stamma what would happen to a block of concrete if a drop of water fell on it once every year for a million years. Stamma laughed and clapped Andy on the back. "You got no million years, old horse, but if you did, I bleeve you'd do it with that same little grin on your face. You go on and write your letters. I'll even mail them for you if you pay for the stamps."

Which Andy did. And he had the last laugh, although Stamma and Hadley weren't around to see it. Andy's requests for library funds were routinely turned down until 1960, when he received a check for two hundred dollars—the Senate probably appropriated it in hopes that he would shut up and go away. Vain hope. Andy felt that he had finally gotten one foot in the door and he simply redoubled his efforts; two letters a week instead of one. In 1962 he got four hundred dollars, and for the rest of the decade the library received seven hundred dollars a year like clockwork. By 1971 that had risen to an even thousand. Not much stacked up against what your average small-town library receives, I guess, but a thousand bucks can buy a lot of recycled Perry Mason stories and Jake Logan Westerns. By the time Andy left, you could go into the library (expanded from its original paint-locker to three rooms), and find just about anything you'd want. And if you couldn't find it, chances were good that Andy could get it for you.

Now you're asking yourself if all this came about just because Andy told Byron Hadley how to save the taxes on his windfall inheritance. The answer is yes ... and no. You can probably figure out what happened for yourself.

Word got around that Shawshank was housing its very own pet financial wizard. In the late spring and the summer of 1950, Andy set up two trust funds for guards who wanted to assure a college education for their kids, he advised a couple of others who wanted to take small fliers in common stock (and they did pretty damn well, as things turned out; one of them did so well he was able to take an early retirement two years later), and I'll be damned if he didn't advise the warden himself, old Lemon Lips George Dunahy, on how to go about setting up a tax-shelter for himself. That was just before Dunahy got the bum's rush, and I believe he must have been dreaming about all the millions his book was going to make him. By April of 1951, Andy was doing the tax returns for half the screws at Shawshank, and by 1952, he was doing almost all of them. He was paid in what may be a prison's most valuable coin: simple good will.

Later on, after Greg Stamma took over the warden's office, Andy became even more important—but if I tried to tell you the specifics of

just how, I'd be guessing. There are some things I know about and others I can only guess at. I know that there were some prisoners who received all sorts of special considerations—radios in their cells, extraordinary visiting privileges, things like that—and there were people on the outside who were paying for them to have those privileges. Such people are known as “angels” by the prisoners. All at once some fellow would be excused from working in the plate-shop on Saturday forenoons, and you'd know that fellow had an angel out there who'd coughed up a chunk of dough to make sure it happened. The way it usually works is that the angel will pay the bribe to some middle-level screw, and the screw will spread the grease both up and down the administrative ladder.

Then there was the discount auto-repair service that laid Warden Dunahy low. It went underground for awhile and then emerged stronger than ever in the late fifties. And some of the contractors that worked at the prison from time to time were paying kickbacks to the top administration officials, I'm pretty sure, and the same was almost certainly true of the companies whose equipment was bought and installed in the laundry and the license-plate shop and the stamping-mill that was built in 1963.

By the late sixties there was also a booming trade in pills, and the same administrative crowd was involved in turning a buck on that. All of it added up to a pretty good-sized river of illicit income. Not like the pile of clandestine bucks that must fly around a really big prison like Attica or San Quentin, but not peanuts, either. And money itself becomes a problem after awhile. You can't just stuff it into your wallet and then shell out a bunch of crumpled twenties and dog-eared tens when you want a pool built in your back yard or an addition put on your house. Once you get past a certain point, you have to explain where that money came from ... and if your explanations aren't convincing enough, you're apt to wind up wearing a number yourself.

So there was a need for Andy's services. They took him out of the laundry and installed him in the library, but if you wanted to look at it another way, they never took him out of the laundry at all. They just set him to work washing dirty money instead of dirty sheets. He funnelled it into stocks, bonds, tax-free municipals, you name it.

He told me once about ten years after that day on the plate-shop roof that his feelings about what he was doing were pretty clear, and that his conscience was relatively untroubled. The rackets would have gone on with him or without him. He had not asked to be sent to Shawshank, he went on; he was an innocent man who had been victimized by colossal bad luck, not a missionary or a do-gooder.

“Besides, Red,” he told me with that same half-grin, “what I’m doing in here isn’t all *that* different from what I was doing outside. I’ll hand you a pretty cynical axiom: the amount of expert financial help an individual or company needs rises in direct proportion to how many people that person or business is screwing.

“The people who run this place are stupid, brutal monsters for the most part. The people who run the straight world are brutal and monstrous, but they happen not to be quite as stupid, because the standard of competence out there is a little higher. Not much, but a little.”

“But the pills,” I said. “I don’t want to tell you your business, but they make me nervous. Reds, uppers, downers, Nembutals—now they’ve got these things they call Phase Fours. I won’t get anything like that. Never have.”

“No,” Andy said. “I don’t like the pills, either. Never have. But I’m not much of a one for cigarettes or booze, either. But I don’t push the pills. I don’t bring them in, and I don’t sell them once they are in. Mostly it’s the screws who do that.”

“But—”

“Yeah, I know. There’s a fine line there. What it comes down to, Red, is some people refuse to get their hands dirty at all. That’s called sainthood, and the pigeons land on your shoulders and crap all over your shirt. The other extreme is to take a bath in the dirt and deal any goddamned thing that will turn a dollar—guns, switchblades, big H, what the hell. You ever have a con come up to you and offer you a contract?”

I nodded. It’s happened a lot of times over the years. You are, after all, the man who can get it. And they figure if you can get them batteries for their transistor radios or cartons of Luckies or lids of reefer, you can put them in touch with a guy who’ll use a knife.

“Sure you have,” Andy agreed. “But you don’t do it. Because guys like us, Red, we know there’s a third choice. An alternative to staying simon-pure or bathing in the filth and the slime. It’s the alternative that grown-ups all over the world pick. You balance off your walk through the hog-wallow against what it gains you. You choose the lesser of two evils and try to keep your good intentions in front of you. And I guess you judge how well you’re doing by how well you sleep at night... and what your dreams are like.”

“Good intentions,” I said, and laughed. “I know all about that, Andy. A fellow can toddle right off to hell on that road.”

“Don’t you believe it,” he said, growing somber. “This is hell right here. Right here in The Shank. They sell pills and I tell them what to do with the money. But I’ve also got the library, and I know of over two dozen guys who have used the books in there to help them pass their high school equivalency tests. Maybe when they get out of here they’ll be able to crawl off the shitheap. When we needed that second room back in 1957, I got it. Because they want to keep me happy. I work cheap. That’s the trade-off.”

“And you’ve got your own private quarters.”

“Sure. That’s the way I like it.”

The prison population had risen slowly all through the fifties, and it damn near exploded in the sixties, what with every college-kid in America wanting to try dope and the perfectly ridiculous penalties for the use of a little reefer. But in all that time Andy never had a cellmate, except for a big, silent Indian named Normaden (like all Indians in The Shank, he was called Chief), and Normaden didn’t last long. A lot of the other long-timers thought Andy was crazy, but Andy just smiled. He lived alone and he liked it that way... and as he’d said, they liked to keep him happy. He worked cheap.

Prison time is slow time, sometimes you’d swear it’s stoptime, but it passes. It passes. George Dunahy departed the scene in a welter of newspaper headlines shouting SCANDAL and NEST-FEATHERING. Stamma succeeded him, and for the next six years Shawshank was a kind of living hell. During the reign of Greg

Stammas, the beds in the infirmary and the cells in the Solitary Wing were always full.

One day in 1958 I looked at myself in a small shaving mirror I kept in my cell and saw a forty-year-old man looking back at me. A kid had come in back in 1938, a kid with a big mop of carrot red hair, half-crazy with remorse, thinking about suicide. That kid was gone. The red hair was going gray and starting to recede. There were crow's tracks around the eyes. On that day I could see an old man inside, waiting his time to come out. It scared me. Nobody wants to grow old in stir.

Stammas went early in 1959. There had been several investigative reporters sniffing around, and one of them even did four months under an assumed name, for a crime made up out of whole cloth. They were getting ready to drag out SCANDAL and NEST-FEATHERING again, but before they could bring the hammer down on him, Stammas ran. I can understand that; boy, can I ever. If he had been tried and convicted, he could have ended up right in here. If so, he might have lasted all of five hours. Byron Hadley had gone two years earlier. The sucker had a heart attack and took an early retirement.

Andy never got touched by the Stammas affair. In early 1959 a new warden was appointed, and a new assistant warden, and a new chief of guards. For the next eight months or so, Andy was just another con again. It was during that period that Normaden, the big half-breed Passamaquoddy, shared Andy's cell with him. Then everything just started up again. Normaden was moved out, and Andy was living in solitary splendor again. The names at the top change, but the rackets never do.

I talked to Normaden once about Andy. "Nice fella," Normaden said. It was hard to make out anything he said because he had a harelip and a cleft palate; his words all came out in a slush. "I liked it there. He never made fun. But he didn't want me there. I could tell." Big shrug. "I was glad to go, me. Bad draft in that cell. All the time cold. He don't let nobody touch his things. That's okay. Nice man, never made fun. But big draft."

Rita Hayworth hung in Andy's cell until 1955, if I remember right. Then it was Marilyn Monroe, that picture from *The Seven-Year Itch* where she's standing over a subway grating and the warm air is flipping her skirt up. Marilyn lasted until 1960, and she was considerably tattered about the edges when Andy replaced her with Jayne Mansfield. Jayne was, you should pardon the expression, a bust. After only a year or so she was replaced with an English actress—might have been Hazel Court, but I'm not sure. In 1966 that one came down and Raquel Welch went up for a record-breaking six-year engagement in Andy's cell. The last poster to hang there was a pretty country-rock singer whose name was Linda Ronstadt.

I asked him once what the posters meant to him, and he gave me a peculiar, surprised sort of look. "Why, they mean the same thing to me as they do to most cons, I guess," he said. "Freedom. You look at those pretty women and you feel like you could almost . . . not quite but *almost*... step right through and be beside them. Be free. I guess that's why I always liked Raquel Welch the best. It wasn't just her; it was that beach she was standing on. Looked like she was down in Mexico somewhere. Someplace quiet, where a man would be able to hear himself think. Didn't you ever feel that way about a picture, Red? That you could almost step right through it?"

I said I'd never really thought of it that way.

"Maybe someday you'll see what I mean," he said, and he was right. Years later I saw exactly what he meant . . . and when I did, the first thing I thought of was Normaden, and about how he'd said it was always cold in Andy's cell.

A terrible thing happened to Andy in late March or early April of 1963. I have told you that he had something that most of the other prisoners, myself included, seemed to lack. Call it a sense of equanimity, or a feeling of inner peace, maybe even a constant and unwavering faith that someday the long nightmare would end. Whatever you want to call it, Andy Dufresne always seemed to have his act together. There was none of that sullen desperation about

him that seems to afflict most lifers after awhile; you could never smell hopelessness on him. Until that late winter of '63.

We had another warden by then, a man named Samuel Norton. The Mathers, Cotton and Increase, would have felt right at home with Sam Norton. So far as I know, no one had ever seen him so much as crack a smile. He had a thirty-year pin from the Baptist Advent Church of Eliot. His major innovation as the head of our happy family was to make sure that each incoming prisoner had a New Testament. He had a small plaque on his desk, gold letters inlaid in teakwood, which said CHRIST IS MY SAVIOR. A sampler on the wall, made by his wife, read: HIS JUDGMENT COMETH AND THAT RIGHT EARLY. This latter sentiment cut zero ice with most of us. We felt that the judgment had already occurred, and we would be willing to testify with the best of them that the rock would not hide us nor the dead tree give us shelter. He had a Bible quote for every occasion, did Mr. Sam Norton, and whenever you meet a man like that, my best advice to you would be to grin big and cover up your balls with both hands.

There were less infirmity cases than in the days of Greg Stamma, and so far as I know the moonlight burials ceased altogether, but this is not to say that Norton was not a believer in punishment. Solitary was always well populated. Men lost their teeth not from beatings but from bread and water diets. It began to be called grain and drain, as in "I'm on the Sam Norton grain and drain train, boys."

The man was the foulest hypocrite that I ever saw in a high position. The rackets I told you about earlier continued to flourish, but Sam Norton added his own new wrinkles. Andy knew about them all, and because we had gotten to be pretty good friends by that time, he let me in on some of them. When Andy talked about them, an expression of amused, disgusted wonder would come over his face, as if he were telling me about some ugly, predatory species of bug that was, by its very ugliness and greed, somehow more comic than terrible.

It was Warden Norton who instituted the "Inside-Out" program you may have read about some sixteen or seventeen years back; it was

even written up in Newsweek. In the press it sounded like a real advance in practical corrections and rehabilitation. There were prisoners out cutting pulpwood, prisoners repairing bridges and causeways, prisoners constructing potato cellars. Norton called it “Inside-Out” and was invited to explain it to damn near every Rotary and Kiwanis club in New England, especially after he got his picture in Newsweek. The prisoners called it “road-ganging,” but so far as I know, none of them were ever invited to express their views to the Kiwanians or the Loyal Order of Moose.

Norton was right in there on every operation, thirty-year church-pin and all; from cutting pulp to digging storm-drains to laying new culverts under state highways, there was Norton, skimming off the top. There were a hundred ways to do it—men, materials, you name it. But he had it coming another way, as well. The construction businesses in the area were deathly afraid of Norton’s Inside-Out program, because prison labor is slave labor, and you can’t compete with that. So Sam Norton, he of the Testaments and the thirty-year church-pin, was passed a good many thick envelopes under the table during his sixteen-year tenure as Shawshank’s warden. And when an envelope was passed, he would either overbid the project, not bid at all, or claim that all his Inside-Outers were committed elsewhere. It has always been something of a wonder to me that Norton was never found in the trunk of a Thunderbird parked off a highway somewhere down in Massachusetts with his hands tied behind his back and half a dozen bullets in his head.

Anyway, as the old barrelhouse song says, My God, how the money rolled in. Norton must have subscribed to the old Puritan notion that the best way to figure out which folks God favors is by checking their bank accounts.

Andy Dufresne was his right hand in all of this, his silent partner. The prison library was Andy’s hostage to fortune. Norton knew it, and Norton used it. Andy told me that one of Norton’s favorite aphorisms was *One hand washes the other*. So Andy gave good advice and made useful suggestions. I can’t say for sure that he hand-tooled Norton’s Inside-Out program, but I’m damned sure he processed the money for the Jesus-shouting son of a whore. He

gave good advice, made useful suggestions, the money got spread around, and ... son of a bitch! The library would get a new set of automotive repair manuals, a fresh set of Grolier Encyclopedias, books on how to prepare for the Scholastic Achievement Tests. And, of course, more Erle Stanley Gardners and more Louis L'Amours.

And I'm convinced that what happened happened because Norton just didn't want to lose his good right hand. I'll go further: it happened because he was scared of what might happen—what Andy might say against him—if Andy ever got clear of Shawshank State Prison.

I got the story a chunk here and a chunk there over a space of seven years, some of it from Andy—but not all. He never wanted to talk about that part of his life, and I don't blame him. I got parts of it from maybe half a dozen different sources. I've said once that prisoners are nothing but slaves, but they have that slave habit of looking dumb and keeping their ears open. I got it backwards and forwards and in the middle, but I'll give it to you from point A to point Z, and maybe you'll understand why the man spent about ten months in a bleak, depressed daze. See, I don't think he knew the truth until 1963, fifteen years after he came into this sweet little hell-hole. Until he met Tommy Williams, I don't think he knew how bad it could get.

Tommy Williams joined our happy little Shawshank family in November of 1962. Tommy thought of himself as a native of Massachusetts, but he wasn't proud; in his twenty-seven years he'd done time all over New England. He was a professional thief, and as you may have guessed, my own feeling was that he should have picked another profession.

He was a married man, and his wife came to visit each and every week. She had an idea that things might go better with Tommy—and consequently better with their three-year-old son and herself—if he got his high school degree. She talked him into it, and so Tommy Williams started visiting the library on a regular basis.

For Andy, this was an old routine by then. He saw that Tommy got a series of high school equivalency tests. Tommy would brush up on

the subjects he had passed in high school—there weren't many—and then take the test. Andy also saw that he was enrolled in a number of correspondence courses covering the subjects he had failed in school or just missed by dropping out.

He probably wasn't the best student Andy ever took over the jumps, and I don't know if he ever did get his high school diploma, but that forms no part of my story. The important thing was that he came to like Andy Dufresne very much, as most people did after awhile.

On a couple of occasions he asked Andy "what a smart guy like you is doing in the joint"—a question which is the rough equivalent of that one that goes "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" But Andy wasn't the type to tell him; he would only smile and turn the conversation into some other channel. Quite normally, Tommy asked someone else, and when he finally got the story, I guess he also got the shock of his young life.

The person he asked was his partner on the laundry's steam ironer and folder. The inmates call this device the mangler, because that's exactly what it will do to you if you aren't paying attention and get your bad self caught in it. His partner was Charlie Lathrop, who had been in for about twelve years on a murder charge. He was more than glad to reheat the details of the Dufresne murder trial for Tommy; it broke the monotony of pulling freshly pressed bedsheets out of the machine and tucking them into the basket. He was just getting to the jury waiting until after lunch to bring in their guilty verdict when the trouble whistle went off and the mangle grated to a stop. They had been feeding in freshly washed sheets from the Eliot Nursing Home at the far end; these were spat out dry and neatly pressed at Tommy's and Charlie's end at the rate of one every five seconds. Their job was to grab them, fold them, and slap them into the cart, which had already been lined with clean brown paper.

But Tommy Williams was just standing there, staring at Charlie Lathrop, his mouth unhinged all the way to his chest. He was standing in a drift of sheets that had come through clean and which were now sopping up all the wet muck on the floor—and in a laundry wetwash, there's plenty of muck.

So the head bull that day, Homer Jessup, comes rushing over, bellowing his head off and on the prod for trouble. Tommy took no notice of him. He spoke to Charlie as if old Homer, who had busted more heads than he could probably count, hadn't been there.

"What did you say that golf pro's name was?"

"Quentin," Charlie answered back, all confused and upset by now. He later said that the kid was as white as a truce flag. "Glenn Quentin, I think. Something like that, anyway—"

"Here now, here now," Homer Jessup roared, his neck as red as a rooster's comb. "Get them sheets in cold water! Get quick! Get quick, by Jesus, you—"

"Glenn Quentin, oh my God," Tommy Williams said, and that was all he got to say because Homer Jessup, that least peaceable of men, brought his billy down behind his ear. Tommy hit the floor so hard he broke off three of his front teeth. When he woke up he was in solitary, and confined to same for a week, riding a boxcar on Sam Norton's famous grain and drain train. Plus a black mark on his report card.

That was in early February of 1963, and Tommy Williams went around to six or seven other long-timers after he got out of solitary and got pretty much the same story. I know; I was one of them. But when I asked him why he wanted it, he just clammed up.

Then one day he went to the library and spilled one helluva big budget of information to Andy Dufresne. And for the first and last time, at least since he had approached me about the Rita Hayworth poster like a kid buying his first pack of Trojans, Andy lost his cool... only this time he blew it entirely.

I saw him later that day, and he looked like a man who has stepped on the business end of a rake and given himself a good one, whap between the eyes. His hands were trembling, and when I spoke to him, he didn't answer. Before that afternoon was out he had caught up with Billy Hanlon, who was the head screw, and set up an appointment with Warden Norton for the following day. He told me later that he didn't sleep a wink all that night; he just listened to a

cold winter wind howling outside, watched the searchlights go around and around, putting long, moving shadows on the cement walls of the cage he had called home since Harry Truman was President, and tried to think it all out. He said it was as if Tommy had produced a key which fit a cage in the back of his mind, a cage like his own cell. Only instead of holding a man, that cage held a tiger, and that tiger's name was Hope. Williams had produced the key that unlocked the cage and the tiger was out, willy-nilly, to roam his brain.

Four years before, Tommy Williams had been arrested in Rhode Island, driving a stolen car that was full of stolen merchandise. Tommy turned in his accomplice, the DA played ball, and he got a lighter sentence ... two to four, with time served. Eleven months after beginning his term, his old cellmate got a ticket out and Tommy got a new one, a man named Elwood Blatch. Blatch had been busted for burglary with a weapon and was serving six to twelve.

"I never seen such a high-strung guy," Tommy told me. "A man like that should never want to be a burglar, specially not with a gun. The slightest little noise, he'd go three feet into the air ... and come down shooting, more likely than not. One night he almost strangled me because some guy down the hall was whopping on his cell bars with a tin cup.

"I did seven months with him, until they let me walk free. I got time served and time off, you understand. I can't say we talked because you didn't, you know, exactly hold a conversation with El Blatch. He held a conversation with you. He talked all the time. Never shut up. If you tried to get a word in, he'd shake his fist at you and roll his eyes. It gave me the cold chills whenever he done that. Big tall guy he was, mostly bald, with these green eyes set way down deep in the sockets. Jeez, I hope I never see him again.

"It was like a talkin jag every night. Where he grew up, the orphanages he run away from, the jobs he done, the women he fucked, the crap games he cleaned out. I just let him run on. My face ain't much, but I didn't want it, you know, rearranged for me.

"According to him, he'd burgled over two hundred joints. It was hard for me to believe, a guy like him who went off like a firecracker every time someone cut a loud fart, but he swore it was true. Now ...

listen to me, Red. I know guys sometimes make things up after they know a thing, but even before I knew about this golf pro guy, Quentin, I remember thinking that if El Blatch ever burgled *my* house, and I found out about it later, I'd have to count myself just about the luckiest motherfucker going still to be alive. Can you imagine him in some lady's bedroom, sifting through her jool'ry box, and she coughs in her sleep or turns over quick? It gives me the cold chills just to think of something like that, I swear on my mother's name it does.

"He said he'd killed people, too. People that gave him shit. At least that's what he said. And I believed him. He sure looked like a man that could do some killing. He was just so fucking high-strung! Like a pistol with a sawed-off firing pin. I knew a guy who had a Smith and Wesson Police Special with a sawed-off firing pin. It wasn't no good for nothing, except maybe for something to jaw about. The pull on that gun was so light that it would fire if this guy, Johnny Callahan, his name was, if he turned his record-player on full volume and put it on top of one of the speakers. That's how El Blatch was. I can't explain it any better. I just never doubted that he had greased some people.

"So one night, just for something to say, I go: 'Who'd you kill?' Like a joke, you know. So he laughs and says: 'There's one guy doing time up-Maine for these two people I killed. It was this guy and the wife of the slob who's doing the time. I was creeping their place and the guy started to give me some shit.'

"I can't remember if he ever told me the woman's name or not," Tommy went on. "Maybe he did. But in New England, Dufresne's like Smith or Jones in the rest of the country, because there's so many Frogs up here. Dufresne, Lavesque, Ouelette, Poulin, who can remember Frog names? But he told me the guy's name. He said the guy was Glenn Quentin and he was a prick, a big rich prick, a golf pro. El said he thought the guy might have cash in the house, maybe as much as five thousand dollars. That was a lot of money back then, he says to me. So I go: 'When was that?' And he goes: 'After the war. Just after the war.'

“So he went in and he did the joint and they woke up and the guy gave him some trouble. That’s what *EI* said. Maybe the guy just started to snore, that’s what *I* say. Anyway, *EI* said Quentin was in the sack with some hotshot lawyer’s wife and they sent the lawyer up to Shawshank State Prison. Then he laughs this big laugh. Holy Christ, I was never so glad of anything as I was when I got my walking papers from that place.”

I guess you can see why Andy went a little wonky when Tommy told him that story, and why he wanted to see the warden right away. Elwood Blatch had been serving a six-to-twelve rap when Tommy knew him four years before. By the time Andy heard all of this, in 1963, he might be on the verge of getting out... or already out. So those were the two prongs of the spit Andy was roasting on—the idea that Blatch might still be in on one hand, and the very real possibility that he might be gone like the wind on the other.

There were inconsistencies in Tommy’s story, but aren’t there always in real life? Blatch told Tommy the man who got sent up was a hotshot lawyer, and Andy was a banker, but those are two professions that people who aren’t very educated could easily get mixed up. And don’t forget that twelve years had gone by between the time Blatch was reading the clippings about the trial and the time he told the tale to Tommy Williams. He also told Tommy he got better than a thousand dollars from a footlocker Quentin had in his closet, but the police said at Andy’s trial that there had been no sign of burglary. I have a few ideas about that. First, if you take the cash and the man it belonged to is dead, how are you going to know anything was stolen, unless someone else can tell you it was there to start with? Second, who’s to say Blatch wasn’t lying about that part of it? Maybe he didn’t want to admit killing two people for nothing. Third, maybe there were signs of burglary and the cops either overlooked them—cops can be pretty dumb—or deliberately covered them up so they wouldn’t screw the DA’s case. The guy was running for public office, remember, and he needed a conviction to run on. An unsolved burglary-murder would have done him no good at all.

But of the three, I like the middle one best. I’ve known a few Elwood Blatches in my time at Shawshank—the triggerpullers with

the crazy eyes. Such fellows want you to think they got away with the equivalent of the Hope Diamond on every caper, even if they got caught with a two-dollar Timex and nine bucks on the one they're doing time for.

And there was one thing in Tommy's story that convinced Andy beyond a shadow of a doubt. Blatch hadn't hit Quentin at random. He had called Quentin "a big rich prick," and he had known Quentin was a golf pro. Well, Andy and his wife had been going out to that country club for drinks and dinner once or twice a week for a couple of years, and Andy had done a considerable amount of drinking there once he found out about his wife's affair. There was a marina with the country club, and for awhile in 1947 there had been a part-time grease-and-gas jockey working there who matched Tommy's description of Elwood Blatch. A big tall man, mostly bald, with deep-set green eyes. A man who had an unpleasant way of looking at you, as though he was sizing you up. He wasn't there long, Andy said. Either he quit or Briggs, the fellow in charge of the marina, fired him. But he wasn't a man you forgot. He was too striking for that.

So Andy went to see Warden Norton on a rainy, windy day with big gray clouds scudding across the sky above the gray walls, a day when the last of the snow was starting to melt away and show lifeless patches of last year's grass in the fields beyond the prison.

The warden has a good-sized office in the Administration Wing, and behind the warden's desk there's a door which connects with the assistant warden's office. The assistant warden was out that day, but a trusty was there. He was a half-lame fellow whose real name I have forgotten; all the inmates, me included, called him Chester, after Marshal Dillon's sidekick. Chester was supposed to be watering the plants and waxing the floor. My guess is that the plants went thirsty that day and the only waxing that was done happened because of Chester's dirty ear polishing the keyhole plate of that connecting door.

He heard the warden's main door open and close and then Norton saying: "Good morning, Dufresne, how can I help you?"

“Warden,” Andy began, and old Chester told us that he could hardly recognize Andy’s voice it was so changed. “Warden... there’s something... something’s happened to me that’s ... that’s so ... so ... I hardly know where to begin.”

“Well, why don’t you just begin at the beginning?” the warden said, probably in his sweetest let’s-all-turn-to-the-Twenty-third-Psalm-and-read-in-unison voice. “That usually works the best.”

And so Andy did. He began by refreshing Norton on the details of the crime he had been imprisoned for. Then he told the warden exactly what Tommy Williams had told him. He also gave out Tommy’s name, which you may think wasn’t so wise in light of later developments, but I’d just ask you what else he could have done, if his story was to have any credibility at all.

When he had finished, Norton was completely silent for some time. I can just see him, probably tipped back in his office chair under the picture of Governor Reed hanging on the wall, his fingers steepled, his liver lips pursed, his brow wrinkled into ladder rungs halfway to the crown of his head, his thirty-year pin gleaming mellowly.

“Yes,” he said finally. “That’s the damndest story I ever heard. But I’ll tell you what surprises me most about it, Dufresne.”

“What’s that, sir?”

“That you were taken in by it.”

“Sir? I don’t understand what you mean.” And Chester said that Andy Dufresne, who had faced down Byron Hadley on the plate-shop roof thirteen years before, was almost floundering for words.

“Wellnow,” Norton said. “It’s pretty obvious to me that this young fellow Williams is impressed with you. Quite taken with you, as a matter of fact. He hears your tale of woe, and it’s quite natural of him to want to ... cheer you up, let’s say. Quite natural. He’s a young man, not terribly bright. Not surprising he didn’t realize what a state it would put you into. Now what I suggest is—”

“Don’t you think I thought of that?” Andy asked. “But I’d never told Tommy about the man working down at the marina. I never told anyone that—it never even crossed my mind! But Tommy’s description of his cellmate and that man

... they're *identical!*" "Well now, you may be indulging in a little selective perception there," Norton said with a chuckle. Phrases like that, selective perception, are required learning for people in the penology and corrections business, and they use them all they can.

"That's not it all. Sir."

"That's your slant on it," Norton said, "but mine differs. And let's remember that I have only your word that there was such a man working at the Falmouth Hills Country Club back then."

"No, sir," Andy broke in again. "No, that isn't true. Because—"

"Anyway," Norton overrode him, expansive and loud, "let's just look at it from the other end of the telescope, shall we? Suppose—just suppose, now—that there really was a fellow named Elwood Blotch."

"Blotch," Andy said tightly.

"Blotch, by all means. And let's say he was Thomas Williams's cellmate in Rhode Island. The chances are excellent that he has been released by now. *Excellent*. Why, we don't even know how much time he might have done there before he ended up with Williams, do we? Only that he was doing a six-to-twelve."

"No. We don't know how much time he'd done. But Tommy said he was a bad actor, a cut-up. I think there's a fair chance that he may still be in. Even if he's been released, the prison will have a record of his last known address, the names of his relatives—"

"And both would almost certainly be dead ends."

Andy was silent for a moment, and then he burst out:

"Well, it's a *chance*, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course it is. So just for a moment, Dufresne, let's assume that Blotch exists and that he is still ensconced in the Rhode Island State Penitentiary. Now what is he going to say if we bring this kettle of fish to him in a bucket? Is he going to fall down on his knees, roll his eyes, and say: 'I did it! I did it! By all means add a life term onto my charge!'"

"How can you be so obtuse?" Andy said, so low that Chester could barely hear. But he heard the warden just fine.

"What? What did you call me?"

"*Obtuse!*" Andy cried. "Is it deliberate?"

“Dufresne, you’ve taken five minutes of my time—no, seven—and I have a very busy schedule today. So I believe we’ll just declare this little meeting closed and—”

“The country club will have all the old time-cards, don’t you realize that?” Andy shouted. “They’ll have tax-forms and W-twos and unemployment compensation forms, all with his name on them! There will be employees there now that were there then, maybe Briggs himself! It’s been fifteen years, not forever! They’ll remember him! *They will remember Blatch!* If I’ve got Tommy to testify to what Blatch told him, and Briggs to testify that Blatch was there, actually *working* at the country club, I can get a new trial! I can—”

“Guard! *Guard!* Take this man away!”

“What’s the *matter* with you?” Andy said, and Chester told me he was very nearly screaming by then. “It’s my life, my chance to get out, don’t you see that? And you won’t make a single long-distance call to at least verify Tommy’s story? Listen, I’ll pay for the call! I’ll pay for—”

Then there was a sound of thrashing as the guards grabbed him and started to drag him out.

“Solitary,” Warden Norton said dryly. He was probably fingering his thirty-year pin as he said it. “Bread and water.”

And so they dragged Andy away, totally out of control now, still screaming at the warden; Chester said you could hear him even after the door was shut: “*It’s my life! It’s my life, don’t you understand it’s my life?*”

Twenty days on the grain and drain train for Andy down there in solitary. It was his second jolt in solitary, and his dust-up with Norton was his first real black mark since he had joined our happy family.

I’ll tell you a little bit about Shawshank’s solitary while we’re on the subject. It’s something of a throwback to those hardy pioneer days of the early to mid-1700s in Maine. In those days no one wasted much time with such things as “penology” and “rehabilitation” and “selective perception.” In those days, you were taken care of in terms of absolute black and white. You were either guilty or innocent. If you

were guilty, you were either hung or put in gaol. And if you were sentenced to gaol, you did not go to an institution. No, you dug your own gaol with a spade provided by the Province of Maine. You dug it as wide and as deep as you could during the period between sunup and sundown. Then they gave you a couple of skins and a bucket, and down you went. Once down, the gaoler would bar the top of your hole, throw down some grain or maybe a piece of maggoty meat once or twice a week, and maybe there would be a dipperful of barley soup on Sunday night. You pissed in the bucket, and you held up the same bucket for water when the gaoler came around at six in the morning. When it rained, you used the bucket to bail out your gaol-cell... unless, that is, you wanted to drown like a rat in a rainbarrel.

No one spent a long time “in the hole” as it was called; thirty months was an unusually long term, and so far as I’ve been able to tell, the longest term ever spent from which an inmate actually emerged alive was served by the so-called “Durham Boy,” a fourteen-year-old psychopath who castrated a schoolmate with a piece of rusty metal. He did seven years, but of course he went in young and strong.

You have to remember that for a crime that was more serious than petty theft or blasphemy or forgetting to put a snotrag in your pocket when out of doors on the Sabbath, you were hung. For low crimes such as those just mentioned and for others like them, you’d do your three or six or nine months in the hole and come out fishbelly white, cringing from the wide-open spaces, your eyes half-blind, your teeth more than likely rocking and rolling in their sockets from the scurvy, your feet crawling with fungus. Jolly old Province of Maine. Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum.

Shawshank’s Solitary Wing was nowhere as bad as that... I guess. Things come in three major degrees in the human experience, I think. There’s good, bad, and terrible. And as you go down into progressive darkness toward terrible, it gets harder and harder to make subdivisions.

To get to Solitary Wing you were led down twenty-three steps to a basement level where the only sound was the drip of water. The only

light was supplied by a series of dangling sixty-watt bulbs. The cells were keg-shaped, like those wall-safes rich people sometimes hide behind a picture. Like a safe, the round doorways were hinged, and solid instead of barred. You got ventilation from above, but no light except for your own sixty-watt bulb, which was turned off from a master-switch promptly at 8:00 P.M., an hour before lights-out in the rest of the prison. The lightbulb wasn't in a wire mesh cage or anything like that. The feeling was that if you wanted to exist down there in the dark, you were welcome to it. Not many did ... but after eight, of course, you had no choice. You had a bunk bolted to the wall and a can with no toilet seat. You had three ways to spend your time: sitting, shitting, or sleeping. Big choice. Twenty days could get to seem like a year. Thirty days could seem like two, and forty days like ten. Sometimes you could hear rats in the ventilation system. In a situation like that, subdivisions of terrible tend to get lost.

If anything at all can be said in favor of solitary, it's just that you get time to think. Andy had twenty days in which to think while he enjoyed his grain and drain, and when he got out he requested another meeting with the warden. Request denied. Such a meeting, the warden told him, would be "counter-productive." That's another of those phrases you have to master before you can go to work in the prisons and corrections field.

Patiently, Andy renewed his request. And renewed it. And renewed it. He had changed, had Andy Dufresne. Suddenly, as that spring of 1963 bloomed around us, there were lines in his face and sprigs of gray showing in his hair. He had lost that little trace of a smile that always seemed to linger around his mouth. His eyes stared out into space more often, and you get to know that when a man stares that way, he is counting up the years served, the months, the weeks, the days.

He renewed his request and renewed it. He was patient. He had nothing but time. It got to be summer. In Washington, President Kennedy was promising a fresh assault on poverty and on civil rights inequalities, not knowing he had only half a year to live. In Liverpool,

a musical group called The Beatles was emerging as a force to be reckoned with in British music, but I guess that no one Stateside had yet heard of them. The Boston Red Sox, still four years away from what New England folks call The Miracle of '67, were languishing in the cellar of the American League. All of those things were going on out in a larger world where people walked free.

Norton saw him near the end of June, and this conversation I heard about from Andy himself some seven years later.

"If it's the squeeze, you don't have to worry," Andy told Norton in a low voice. "Do you think I'd talk that up? I'd be cutting my own throat. I'd be just as indictable as—"

"That's enough," Norton interrupted. His face was as long and cold as a slate gravestone. He leaned back in his office chair until the back of his head almost touched the sampler reading HIS JUDGMENT COMETH AND THAT RIGHT EARLY.

"But—"

"Don't you ever mention money to me again," Norton said. "Not in this office, not anywhere. Not unless you want to see that library turned back into a storage room and paint-locker again. Do you understand?"

"I was trying to set your mind at ease, that's all."

"Wellnow, when I need a sorry son of a bitch like you to set my mind at ease, I'll retire. I agreed to this appointment because I got tired of being pestered, Dufresne. I want it to stop. If you want to buy this particular Brooklyn Bridge, that's your affair. Don't make it mine. I could hear crazy stories like yours twice a week if I wanted to lay myself open to them. Every sinner in this place would be using me for a crying towel. I had more respect for you. But this is the end. The end. Have we got an understanding?"

"Yes," Andy said. "But I'll be hiring a lawyer, you know."

"What's in God's name for?"

"I think we can put it together," Andy said. "With Tommy Williams and with my testimony and corroborative testimony from records and employees at the country club, I think we can put it together."

"Tommy Williams is no longer an inmate of this facility."

"*What?*"

“He’s been transferred.”

“Transferred *where*?”

“Cashman.”

At that, Andy fell silent. He was an intelligent man, but it would have taken an extraordinarily stupid man not to smell *deal* all over that. Cashman was a minimum-security prison far up north in Aroostook County. The inmates pick a lot of potatoes, and that’s hard work, but they are paid a decent wage for their labor and they can attend classes at CVI, a pretty decent vocational-technical institute, if they so desire. More important to a fellow like Tommy, a fellow with a young wife and a child, Cashman had a furlough program... which meant a chance to live like a normal man, at least on the weekends. A chance to build a model plane with his kid, have sex with his wife, maybe go on a picnic.

Norton had almost surely dangled all of that under Tommy’s nose with only one string attached: not one more word about Elwood Blatch, not now, not ever. Or you’ll end up doing hard time in Thomaston down there on scenic Route 1 with the real hard guys, and instead of having sex with your wife you’ll be having it with some old bull queer.

“But why?” Andy said. “Why would—”

“As a favor to you,” Norton said calmly, “I checked with Rhode Island. They did have an inmate named Elwood Blatch. He was given what they call a PP—provisional parole, another one of these crazy liberal programs to put criminals out on the streets. He’s since disappeared.”

Andy said: “The warden down there... is he a friend of yours?”

Sam Norton gave Andy a smile as cold as a deacon’s watchchain. “We are acquainted,” he said.

“*Why*?” Andy repeated. “Can’t you tell me why you did it? You knew I wasn’t going to talk about... about anything you might have had going. You knew that. So *why*?”

“Because people like you make me sick,” Norton said deliberately. “I like you right where you are, Mr. Dufresne, and as long as I am warden here at Shawshank, you are going to be right here. You see, you used to think that you were better than anyone else. I have

gotten pretty good at seeing that on a man's face. I marked it on yours the first time I walked into the library. It might as well have been written on your forehead in capital letters. That look is gone now, and I like that just fine. It is not just that you are a useful vessel, never think that. It is simply that men like you need to learn humility. Why, you used to walk around that exercise yard as if it was a living room and you were at one of those cocktail parties where the hellbound walk around coveting each others' wives and husbands and getting swinishly drunk. But you don't walk around that way anymore. And I'll be watching to see if you should start to walk that way again. Over a period of years, I'll be watching you with great pleasure. Now get the hell out of here."

"Okay. But all the extracurricular activities stop now, Norton. The investment counseling, the scams, the free tax advice. It all stops. Get H and R Block to tell you how to declare your income."

Warden Norton's face first went brick-red... and then all the color fell out of it. "You're going back into solitary for that. Thirty days. Bread and water. Another black mark. And while you're in, think about this: if *anything* that's been going on should stop, the library goes. I will make it my personal business to see that it goes back to what it was before you came here. And I will make your life... very hard. Very difficult. You'll do the hardest time it's possible to do. You'll lose that one-bunk Hilton down in Cellblock Five, for starters, and you'll lose those rocks on the windowsill, and you'll lose any protection the guards have given you against the sodomites. You will ... lose everything. Clear?"

I guess it was clear enough.

Time continued to pass—the oldest trick in the world, and maybe the only one that really is magic. But Andy Dufresne had changed. He had grown harder. That's the only way I can think of to put it. He went on doing Warden Norton's dirty work and he held onto the library, so outwardly things were about the same. He continued to have his birthday drinks and his year-end holiday drinks; he continued to share out the rest of each bottle. I got him fresh rock-

polishing cloths from time to time, and in 1967 I got him a new rock-hammer—the one I'd gotten him nineteen years ago had, as I told you, plumb worn out. *Nineteen years!* When you say it sudden like that, those three syllables sound like the thud and double-locking of a tomb door. The rock-hammer, which had been a ten-dollar item back then, went for twenty-two by '67. He and I had a sad little grin over that.

Andy continued to shape and polish the rocks he found in the exercise yard, but the yard was smaller by then; half of what had been there in 1950 had been asphalted over in 1962. Nonetheless, he found enough to keep him occupied, I guess. When he had finished with each rock he would put it carefully on his window ledge, which faced east. He told me he liked to look at them in the sun, the pieces of the planet he had taken up from the dirt and shaped. Schists, quartzes, granites. Funny little mica-sculptures that were held together with airplane glue. Various sedimentary conglomerates that were polished and cut in such a way that you could see why Andy called them "millennium sandwiches"—the layers of different material that had built up over a period of decades and centuries.

Andy would give his stones and his rock-sculptures away from time to time in order to make room for new ones. He gave me the greatest number, I think—counting the stones that looked like matched cufflinks, I had five. There was one of the mica-sculptures I told you about, carefully crafted to look like a man throwing a javelin, and two of the sedimentary conglomerates, all the levels showing in smoothly polished cross-section. I've still got them, and I take them down every so often and think about what a man can do, if he has time enough and the will to use it, a drop at a time.

So, on the outside, at least, things were about the same. If Norton had wanted to break Andy as badly as he had said, he would have had to look below the surface to see the change. But if he had seen how different Andy had become, I think Norton would have been well-satisfied with the four years following his clash with Andy.

He had told Andy that Andy walked around the exercise yard as if he were at a cocktail party. That isn't the way I would have put it, but I know what he meant. It goes back to what I said about Andy wearing his freedom like an invisible coat, about how he never really developed a prison mentality. His eyes never got that dull look. He never developed the walk that men get when the day is over and they are going back to their cells for another endless night—that flat-footed, hump-shouldered walk. Andy walked with his shoulders squared, and his step was always light, as if he were heading home to a good home-cooked meal and a good woman instead of to a tasteless mess of soggy vegetables, lumpy mashed potato, and a slice or two of that fatty, gristly stuff most of the cons called mystery meat... that, and a picture of Raquel Welch on the wall.

But for those four years, although he never became *exactly* like the others, he did become silent, introspective, and brooding. Who could blame him? So maybe it was Warden Norton who was pleased... at least, for awhile.

His dark mood broke around the time of the 1967 World Series. That was the dream year, the year the Red Sox won the pennant instead of placing ninth, as the Las Vegas bookies had predicted. When it happened—when they won the American League pennant—a kind of ebullience engulfed the whole prison. There was a goofy sort of feeling that if the Dead Sox could come to life, then maybe *anybody* could do it. I can't explain that feeling now, any more than an ex-Beatlemaniac could explain *that* madness, I suppose. But it was real. Every radio in the place was tuned to the games as the Red Sox pounded down the stretch. There was gloom when the Sox dropped a pair in Cleveland near the end, and a nearly riotous joy when Rico Petrocelli put away the pop fly that clinched it. And then there was the gloom that came when Lonborg was beaten in the seventh game of the Series to end the dream just short of complete fruition. It probably pleased Norton to no end, the son of a bitch. He liked his prison wearing sackcloth and ashes.

But for Andy, there was no tumble back down into gloom. He wasn't much of a baseball fan anyway, and maybe that was why. Nevertheless, he seemed to have caught the current of good feeling, and for him it didn't peter out again after the last game of the Series. He had taken that invisible coat out of the closet and put it on again.

I remember one bright-gold fall day in very late October, a couple of weeks after the World Series had ended. It must have been a Sunday, because the exercise yard was full of men "walking off the week"—tossing a Frisbee or two, passing around a football, bartering what they had to barter. Others would be at the long table in the Visitors' Hall, under the watchful eyes of the screws, talking with their relatives, smoking cigarettes, telling sincere lies, receiving their picked-over care-packages.

Andy was squatting Indian fashion against the wall, chunking two small rocks together in his hands, his face turned up into the sunlight. It was surprisingly warm, that sun, for a day so late in the year.

"Hello, Red," he called. "Come on and sit a spell."

I did.

"You want this?" he asked, and handed me one of the two carefully polished "millennium sandwiches" I just told you about.

"I sure do," I said. "It's very pretty. Thank you."

He shrugged and changed the subject. "Big anniversary coming up for you next year."

I nodded. Next year would make me a thirty-year man. Sixty per cent of my life spent in Shawshank State Prison.

"Think you'll ever get out?"

"Sure. When I have a long white beard and just about three marbles left rolling around upstairs."

He smiled a little and then turned his face up into the sun again, his eyes closed. "Feels good."

"I think it always does when you know the damn winter's almost right on top of you."

He nodded, and we were silent for awhile.

"When I get out of here," Andy said finally, "I'm going where it's warm all the time." He spoke with such calm assurance you would

have thought he had only a month or so left to serve. "You know where I'm goin, Red?"

"Nope."

"Zihuatanejo," he said, rolling the word softly from his tongue like music. "Down in Mexico. It's a little place maybe twenty miles from Playa Azul and Mexico Highway Thirty-seven. It's a hundred miles northwest of Acapulco on the Pacific Ocean. You know what the Mexicans say about the Pacific?"

I told him I didn't.

"They say it has no memory. And that's where I want to finish out my life, Red. In a warm place that has no memory."

He had picked up a handful of pebbles as he spoke; now he tossed them, one by one, and watched them bounce and roll across the baseball diamond's dirt infield, which would be under a foot of snow before long.

"Zihuatanejo. I'm going to have a little hotel down there. Six cabanas along the beach, and six more set further back, for the highway trade. I'll have a guy who'll take my guests out charter-fishing. There'll be a trophy for the guy who catches the biggest marlin of the season, and I'll put his picture up in the lobby. It won't be a family place. It'll be a place for people on their honeymoons... first or second varieties."

"And where are you going to get the money to buy this fabulous place?" I asked. "Your stock account?"

He looked at me and smiled. "That's not so far wrong," he said. "Sometimes you startle me, Red."

"What are you talking about?"

"There are really only two types of men in the world when it comes to bad trouble," Andy said, cupping a match between his hands and lighting a cigarette. "Suppose there was a house full of rare paintings and sculptures and fine old antiques, Red? And suppose the guy who owned the house heard that there was a monster of a hurricane headed right at it? One of those two kinds of men just hopes for the best. The hurricane will change course, he says to himself. No right-thinking hurricane would ever dare wipe out all these Rembrandts, my two Degas horses, my Grant Woods, and my Bentons.

Furthermore, God wouldn't allow it. And if worse comes to worst, they're insured. That's one sort of man. The other sort just assumes that hurricane is going to tear right through the middle of his house. If the weather bureau says the hurricane just changed course, this guy assumes it'll change back in order to put his house on ground-zero again. This second type of guy knows there's no harm in hoping for the best as long as you're prepared for the worst."

I lit a cigarette of my own. "Are you saying you prepared for the eventuality?"

"Yes. I prepared for the *hurricane*. I knew how bad it looked. I didn't have much time, but in the time I had, I operated. I had a friend—just about the only person who stood by me—who worked for an investment company in Portland. He died about six years ago."

"Sorry."

"Yeah." Andy tossed his butt away. "Linda and I had about fourteen thousand dollars. Not a big bundle, but hell, we were young. We had our whole lives ahead of us." He grimaced a little, then laughed. "When the shit hit the fan, I started lugging my Rembrandts out of the path of the hurricane. I sold my stocks and paid the capital gains tax just like a good little boy. Declared everything. Didn't cut any corners."

"Didn't they freeze your estate?"

"I was charged with murder, Red, not dead! You can't freeze the assets of an innocent man—thank God. And it was awhile before they even got brave enough to charge me with the crime. Jim—my friend—and I, we had some time. I got hit pretty good, just dumping everything like that. Got my nose skinned. But at the time I had worse things to worry about than a small skinning on the stock market."

"Yeah, I'd say you did."

"But when I came to Shawshank it was all safe. It's still safe. Outside these walls, Red, there's a man that no living soul has ever seen face to face. He has a Social Security card and a Maine driver's license. He's got a birth certificate. Name of Peter Stevens. Nice, anonymous name, huh?"

“Who is he?” I asked. I thought I knew what he was going to say, but I couldn’t believe it.

“Me.”

“You’re not going to tell me that you had time to set up a false identity while the bulls were sweating you,” I said, “or that you finished the job while you were on trial for—”

“No, I’m not going to tell you that. My friend Jim was the one who set up the false identity. He started after my appeal was turned down, and the major pieces of identification were in his hands by the spring of 1950.”

“He must have been a pretty close friend,” I said. I was not sure how much of this I believed—a little, a lot, or none. But the day was warm and the sun was out, and it was one hell of a good story. “All of that’s one hundred per cent illegal, setting up a false ID like that.”

“He was a close friend,” Andy said. “We were in the war together. France, Germany, the occupation. He was a good friend. He knew it was illegal, but he also knew that setting up a false identity in this country is very easy and very safe. He took my money—my money with all the taxes on it paid so the IRS wouldn’t get too interested—and invested it for Peter Stevens. He did that in 1950 and 1951. Today it amounts to three hundred and seventy thousand dollars, plus change.”

I guess my jaw made a thump when it dropped against my chest, because he smiled.

“Think of all the things people wish they’d invested in since 1950 or so, and two or three of them will be things Peter Stevens was into. If I hadn’t ended up in here, I’d probably be worth seven or eight million bucks by now. I’d have a Rolls... and probably an ulcer as big as a portable radio.”

His hands went to the dirt and began sifting out more pebbles. They moved gracefully, restlessly.

“It was hoping for the best and expecting the worst—nothing but that. The false name was just to keep what little capital I had untainted. It was lugging the paintings out of the path of the hurricane. But I had no idea that the hurricane... that it could go on as long as it has.”

I didn't say anything for awhile. I guess I was trying to absorb the idea that this small, spare man in prison gray next to me could be worth more money than Warden Norton would make in the rest of his miserable life, even with the scams thrown in.

"When you said you could get a lawyer, you sure weren't kidding," I said at last. "For that kind of dough you could have hired Clarence Darrow, or whoever's passing for him these days. Why didn't you, Andy? Christ! You could have been out of here like a rocket."

He smiled. It was the same smile that had been on his face when he'd told me he and his wife had had their whole lives ahead of them. "No," he said.

"A good lawyer would have sprung the Williams kid from Cashman whether he wanted to go or not," I said. I was getting carried away now. "You could have gotten your new trial, hired private detectives to look for that guy Blatch, and blown Norton out of the water to boot. Why not, Andy?"

"Because I outsmarted myself. If I ever try to put my hands on Peter Stevens's money from inside here, I'll lose every cent of it. My friend Jim could have arranged it, but Jim's dead. You see the problem?"

I saw it. For all the good that money could do Andy, it might as well have really belonged to another person. In a way, it did. And if the stuff it was invested in suddenly turned bad, all Andy could do would be to watch the plunge, to trace it day after day on the stocks-and-bonds page of the *Press-Herald*. It's a tough life if you don't weaken, I guess.

"I'll tell you how it is, Red. There's a big hayfield in the town of Buxton. You know where Buxton is at, don't you?"

I said I did. It lies right next door to Scarborough.

"That's right. And at the north end of this particular hayfield there's a rock wall, right out of a Robert Frost poem. And somewhere along the base of that wall is a rock that has no business in a Maine hayfield. It's a piece of volcanic glass, and until 1947 it was a paperweight on my office desk. My friend Jim put it in that wall. There's a key underneath it. The key opens a safe deposit box in the Portland branch of the Casco Bank."

“I guess you’re in a peck of trouble,” I said. “When your friend Jim died, the IRS must have opened all of his safe deposit boxes. Along with the executor of his will, of course.”

Andy smiled and tapped the side of my head. “Not bad. There’s more up there than marshmallows, I guess. But we took care of the possibility that Jim might die while I was in the slam. The box is in the Peter Stevens name, and once a year the firm of lawyers that served as Jim’s executors sends a check to the Casco to cover the rental of the Stevens box.

“Peter Stevens is inside that box, just waiting to get out. His birth certificate, his Social Security card, and his driver’s license. The license is six years out of date because Jim died six years ago, true, but it’s still perfectly renewable for a five-dollar fee. His stock certificates are there, the tax-free municipals, and about eighteen bearer bonds in the amount of ten thousand dollars each:”

I whistled.

“Peter Stevens is locked in a safe deposit box at the Casco Bank in Portland and Andy Dufresne is locked in a safe deposit box at Shawshank,” he said. “Tit for tat. And the key that unlocks the box and the money and the new life is under a hunk of black glass in a Buxton hayfield. Told you this much, so I’ll tell you something else, Red—for the last twenty years, give or take, I have been watching the papers with a more than usual interest for news of any construction project in Buxton. I keep thinking that someday soon I’m going to read that they’re putting a highway through there, or erecting a new community hospital, or building a shopping center. Burying my new life under ten feet of concrete, or spitting it into a swamp somewhere with a big load of fill.”

I blurted, “Jesus Christ, Andy, if all of this is true, how do you keep from going crazy?”

He smiled. “So far, all quiet on the Western front.”

“But it could be years—”

“It will be. But maybe not as many as the State and Warden Norton think it’s going to be. I just can’t afford to wait that long. I keep thinking about Zihuatanejo and that small hotel. That’s all I want from my life now, Red, and I don’t think that’s too much to want. I didn’t kill

Glenn Quentin and I didn't kill my wife, and that hotel... it's not too much to want. To swim and get a tan and sleep in a room with open windows and *space*... that's not too much to want."

He slung the stones away.

"You know, Red," he said in an offhand voice. "A place like that... I'd have to have a man who knows how to get things."

I thought about it for a long time. And the biggest drawback in my mind wasn't even that we were talking pipedreams in a shitty little prison exercise yard with armed guards looking down at us from their sentry posts. "I couldn't do it," I said. "I couldn't get along on the outside. I'm what they call an institutional man now. In here I'm the man who can get it for you, yeah. But out there, anyone can get it for you. Out there, if you want posters or rock-hammers or one particular record or a boat-in-a-bottle model kit, you can use the fucking Yellow Pages. In here, I'm the fucking Yellow Pages. I wouldn't know how to begin. Or where."

"You underestimate yourself," he said. "You're a self-educated man, a self-made man. A rather remarkable man, I think."

"Hell, I don't even have a high school diploma."

"I know that," he said. "But it isn't just a piece of paper that makes a man. And it isn't just prison that breaks one, either."

"I couldn't hack it outside, Andy. I know that."

He got up. "You think it over," he said casually, just as the inside whistle blew. And he strolled off, as if he were a free man who had just made another free man a proposition. And for awhile just that was enough to make me *feel* free. Andy could do that. He could make me forget for a time that we were both lifers, at the mercy of a hard-ass parole board and a psalm-singing warden who liked Andy Dufresne right where he was. After all, Andy was a lap-dog who could do tax-returns. What a wonderful animal!

But by that night in my cell I felt like a prisoner again. The whole idea seemed absurd, and that mental image of blue water and white beaches seemed more cruel than foolish—it dragged at my brain like a fishhook. I just couldn't wear that invisible coat the way Andy did. I fell asleep that night and dreamed of a great glassy black stone in the middle of a hayfield; a stone shaped like a giant blacksmith's

anvil. I was trying to rock the stone up so I could get the key that was underneath. It wouldn't budge; it was just too damned big.

And in the background, but getting closer, I could hear the baying of bloodhounds.

Which leads us, I guess, to the subject of jailbreaks. Sure, they happen from time to time in our happy little family. You don't go over the wall, though, not at Shawshank, not if you're smart. The searchlight beams go all night, probing long white fingers across the open fields that surround the prison on three sides and the stinking marshland on the fourth. Cons do go over the wall from time to time, and the searchlights almost always catch them. If not, they get picked up trying to thumb a ride on Highway 6 or Highway 99. If they try to cut across country, some farmer sees them and just phones the location in to the prison. Cons who go over the wall are stupid cons. Shawshank is no Canon City, but in a rural area a man humping his ass across country in a gray pajama suit sticks out like a cockroach on a wedding cake.

Over the years, the guys who have done the best—maybe oddly, maybe not so oddly—are the guys who did it on the spur of the moment. Some of them have gone out in the middle of a cartful of sheets; a convict sandwich on white, you could say. There was a lot of that when I first came in here, but over the years they have more or less closed that loophole.

Warden Norton's famous "Inside-Out" program produced its share of escapees, too. They were the guys who decided they liked what lay to the right of the hyphen better than what lay to the left. And again, in most cases it was a very casual kind of thing. Drop your blueberry rake and stroll into the bushes while one of the screws is having a glass of water at the truck or when a couple of them get too involved in arguing over yards passing or rushing on the old Boston Patriots.

In 1969, the Inside-Outers were picking potatoes in Sabbatus. It was the third of November and the work was almost done. There was a guard named Henry Pugh—and he is no longer a member of

our happy little family, believe me—sitting on the back bumper of one of the potato trucks and having his lunch with his carbine across his knees when a beautiful (or so it was told to me, but sometimes these things get exaggerated) ten-point buck strolled out of the cold early afternoon mist. Pugh went after it with visions of just how that trophy would look mounted in his rec room, and while he was doing it, three of his charges just walked away. Two were recaptured in a Lisbon Falls pinball parlor. The third has not been found to this day.

I suppose the most famous case of all was that of Sid Nedeau. This goes back to 1958, and I guess it will never be topped. Sid was out lining the ballfield for a Saturday intramural baseball game when the three o'clock inside whistle blew, signalling the shift-change for the guards. The parking lot is just beyond the exercise yard, on the other side of the electrically operated main gate. At three the gate opens and the guards coming on duty and those going off mingle. There's a lot of back-slapping and bullyragging, comparison of league bowling scores and the usual number of tired old ethnic jokes.

Sid just trundled his lining machine right out through the gate, leaving a three-inch baseline all the way from home plate in the exercise yard to the ditch on the far side of Route 6, where they found the machine overturned in a pile of lime. Don't ask me how he did it. He was dressed in his prison uniform, he stood six-feet-two, and he was billowing clouds of lime-dust behind him. All I can figure is that, it being Friday afternoon and all, the guards going off were so happy to be going off, and the guards coming on were so downhearted to be coming on, that the members of the former group never got their heads out of the clouds and those in the latter never got their noses off their shoetops ... and old Sid Nedeau just sort of slipped out between the two.

So far as I know, Sid is still at large. Over the years, Andy Dufresne and I had a good many laughs over Sid Nedeau's great escape, and when we heard about that airline hijacking for ransom, the one where the guy parachuted from the back door of the airplane, Andy swore up and down that D. B. Cooper's real name was Sid Nedeau.

“And he probably had a pocketful of baseline lime in his pocket for good luck,” Andy said. “That lucky son of a bitch.”

But you should understand that a case like Sid Nedeau, or the fellow who got away clean from the Sabbatus potato-field crew, guys like that are winning the prison version of the Irish Sweepstakes. Purely a case of six different kinds of luck somehow jelling together all at the same moment. A stiff like Andy could wait ninety years and not get a similar break.

Maybe you remember, a ways back, I mentioned a guy named Henley Backus, the washroom foreman in the laundry. He came to Shawshank in 1922 and died in the prison infirmary thirty-one years later. Escapes and escape attempts were a hobby of his, maybe because he never quite dared to take the plunge himself. He could tell you a hundred different schemes, all of them crackpot, and all of them had been tried in The Shank at one time or another. My favorite was the tale of Beaver Morrison, a b&e convict who tried to build a glider from scratch in the plate-factory basement. The plans he was working from were in a circa-1900 book called *The Modern Boy's Guide to Fun and Adventure*. Beaver got it built without being discovered, or so the story goes, only to discover there was no door from the basement big enough to get the damned thing out. When Henley told that story, you could bust a gut laughing, and he knew a dozen—no, two dozen—almost as funny.

When it came to detailing Shawshank bust-outs, Henley had it down chapter and verse. He told me once that during his time there had been better than four hundred escape attempts *that he knew of*. Really think about that for a moment before you just nod your head and read on. Four *hundred* escape attempts! That comes out to 12.9 escape attempts for every year Henley Backus was in Shawshank and keeping track of them. The Escape-Attempt-of-the-Month Club. Of course most of them were pretty slipshod affairs, the sort of thing that ends up with a guard grabbing some poor, sidling slob's arm and growling, “Where do you think *you're* going, you happy asshole?”

Henley said he'd class maybe sixty of them as more serious attempts, and he included the "prison break" of 1937, the year before I arrived at The Shank. The new Administration Wing was under construction then and fourteen cons got out, using construction equipment in a poorly locked shed. The whole of southern Maine got into a panic over those fourteen "hardened criminals," most of whom were scared to death and had no more idea of where they should go than a jackrabbit does when it's headlight-pinned to the highway with a big truck bearing down on it. Not one of those fourteen got away. Two of them were shot dead—by civilians, not police officers or prison personnel—but none got away.

How many *had* gotten away between 1938, when I came here, and that day in October when Andy first mentioned Zihuatanejo to me? Putting my information and Henley's together, I'd say ten. Ten that got away clean. And although it isn't the kind of thing you can know for sure, I'd guess that at least half of those ten are doing time in other institutions of lower learning like The Shank. Because you *do* get institutionalized. When you take away a man's freedom and teach him to live in a cell, he seems to lose his ability to think in dimensions. He's like that jackrabbit I mentioned, frozen in the oncoming lights of the truck that is bound to kill it. More often than not a con who's just out will pull some dumb job that hasn't a chance in hell of succeeding... and why? Because it'll get him back inside. Back where he understands how things work.

Andy wasn't that way, but I was. The idea of seeing the Pacific *sounded* good, but I was afraid that actually being there would scare me to death—the bigness of it.

Anyhow, the day of that conversation about Mexico, and about Mr. Peter Stevens... that was the day I began to believe that Andy had some idea of doing a disappearing act. I hoped to God he would be careful if he did, and still, I wouldn't have bet money on his chances of succeeding. Warden Norton, you see, was watching Andy with a special close eye. Andy wasn't just another deadhead with a number to Norton; they had a working relationship, you might say. Also, Andy had brains and he had heart. Norton was determined to use the one and crush the other.

As there are honest politicians on the outside—ones who stay bought—there are honest prison guards, and if you are a good judge of character and if you have some loot to spread around, I suppose it's possible that you could buy enough look-the-other-way to make a break. I'm not the man to tell you such a thing has never been done, but Andy Dufresne wasn't the man who could do it. Because, as I've said, Norton was watching. Andy knew it, and the screws knew it, too.

Nobody was going to nominate Andy for the Inside-Out program, not as long as Warden Norton was evaluating the nominations. And Andy was not the kind of man to try a casual Sid Nedeau type of escape.

If I had been him, the thought of that key would have tormented me endlessly. I would have been lucky to get two hours' worth of honest shut-eye a night. Buxton was less than thirty miles from Shawshank. So near and yet so far.

I still thought his best chance was to engage a lawyer and try for the retrial. Anything to get out from under Norton's thumb. Maybe Tommy Williams could be shut up by nothing more than a cushy furlough program, but I wasn't entirely sure. Maybe a good old Mississippi hard-ass lawyer could crack him ... and maybe that lawyer wouldn't even have to work that hard. Williams had honestly liked Andy. Every now and then I'd bring these points up to Andy, who would only smile, his eyes far away, and say he was thinking about it.

Apparently he'd been thinking about a lot of other things, as well.

In 1975, Andy Dufresne escaped from Shawshank. He hasn't been recaptured, and I don't think he ever will be. In fact, I don't think Andy Dufresne even exists anymore. But I think there's a man down in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, named Peter Stevens. Probably running a very new small hotel in this year of our Lord 1976.

I'll tell you what I know and what I think; that's about all I can do, isn't it?

On March 12th, 1975, the cell doors in Cellblock 5 opened at 6:30 A.M., as they do every morning around here except Sunday. And as they do every day except Sunday, the inmates of those cells stepped forward into the corridor and formed two lines as the cell doors slammed shut behind them. They walked up to the main cellblock gate, where they were counted off by two guards before being sent on down to the cafeteria for a breakfast of oatmeal, scrambled eggs, and fatty bacon.

All of this went according to routine until the count at the cellblock gate. There should have been twenty-seven. Instead, there were twenty-six. After a call to the Captain of the Guards, Cellblock 5 was allowed to go to breakfast.

The Captain of the Guards, a not half-bad fellow named Richard Gonyar, and his assistant, a jolly prick named Dave Burkes, came down to Cellblock 5 right away. Gonyar reopened the cell doors and he and Burkes went down the corridor together, dragging their sticks over the bars, their guns out. In a case like that what you usually have is someone who has been taken sick in the night, so sick he can't even step out of his cell in the morning. More rarely, someone has died... or committed suicide.

But this time, they found a mystery instead of a sick man or a dead man. They found no man at all. There were fourteen cells in Cellblock 5, seven to a side, all fairly neat—restriction of visiting privileges is the penalty for a sloppy cell at Shawshank—and all very empty.

Gonyar's first assumption was that there had been a miscount or a practical joke. So instead of going off to work after breakfast, the inmates of Cellblock 5 were sent back to their cells, joking and happy. Any break in the routine was always welcome.

Cell doors opened; prisoners stepped in; cell doors closed. Some clown shouting, "I want my lawyer, I want my lawyer, you guys run this place just like a frigging prison."

Burkes: "Shut up in there, or I'll rank you."

The clown: "I ranked your wife, Burkie."

Gonyar: "Shut up, all of you, or you'll spend the day in there."

He and Burkes went up the line again, counting noses. They didn't have to go far.

"Who belongs in this cell?" Gonyar asked the rightside night guard.

"Andrew Dufresne," the rightside answered, and that was all it took. Everything stopped being routine right then. The balloon went up.

In all the prison movies I've seen, this wailing horn goes off when there's been a break. That never happens at Shawshank. The first thing Gonyar did was to get in touch with the warden. The second thing was to get a search of the prison going. The third was to alert the state police in Scarborough to the possibility of a breakout.

That was the routine. It didn't call for them to search the suspected escapee's cell, and so no one did. Not then. Why would they? It was a case of what you see is what you get. It was a small square room, bars on the window and bars on the sliding door. There was a toilet and an empty cot. Some pretty rocks on the windowsill.

And the poster, of course. It was Linda Ronstadt by then. The poster was right over his bunk. There had been a poster there, in that exact same place, for twenty-six years. And when someone—it was Warden Norton himself, as it turned out, poetic justice if there ever was any—looked behind it, they got one hell of a shock.

But that didn't happen until six-thirty that night, almost twelve hours after Andy had been reported missing, probably twenty hours after he had actually made his escape.

Norton hit the roof.

I have it on good authority—Chester, the trusty, who was waxing the hall floor in the Admin Wing that day. He didn't have to polish any keyplates with his ear that day; he said you could hear the warden clear down to Records & Files as he chewed on Rich Gonyar's ass.

"What do you mean, you're 'satisfied he's not on the prison grounds'? What does that mean? It means you didn't find him! You better find him! You better! Because I want him! Do you hear me? I want him!"

Gonyar said something.

“Didn’t happen on your shift? That’s what *you* say. So far as *I* can tell, no one knows *when* it happened. Or how. Or if it really did. Now, I want him in my office by three o’clock this afternoon, or some heads are going to roll. I can promise you that, and I *always* keep my promises.”

Something else from Gonyar, something that seemed to provoke Norton to even greater rage.

“No? Then look at this! *Look at this!* You recognize it? Last night’s tally for Cellblock Five. Every prisoner accounted for! Dufresne was locked up last night at nine and it is impossible for him to be gone now! *It is impossible! Now you find him!*”

But at three that afternoon Andy was still among the missing. Norton himself stormed down to Cellblock 5 a few hours later, where the rest of us had been locked up all of that day. Had we been questioned? We had spent most of that long day being questioned by harried screws who were feeling the breath of the dragon on the backs of their necks. We all said the same thing: we had seen nothing, heard nothing. And so far as I know, we were all telling the truth. I know that I was. All we could say was that Andy had indeed been in his cell at the time of the lock-in, and at lights-out an hour later.

One wit suggested that Andy had poured himself out through the keyhole. The suggestion earned the guy four days in solitary. They were uptight.

So Norton came down—stalked down—glaring at us with blue eyes nearly hot enough to strike sparks from the tempered steel bars of our cages. He looked at us as if he believed we were all in on it. Probably he did believe it.

He went into Andy’s cell and looked around. It was just as Andy had left it, the sheets on his bunk turned back but without looking slept-in. Rocks on the windowsill... but not all of them. The ones he liked best he took with him.

“Rocks,” Norton hissed, and swept them off the window ledge with a clatter. Gonyar, who was now on overtime, winced but said

nothing.

Norton's eyes fell on the Linda Ronstadt poster. Linda was looking back over her shoulder, her hands tucked into the back pockets of a very tight pair of fawn-colored slacks. She was wearing a halter and she had a deep California tan. It must have offended the hell out of Norton's Baptist sensibilities, that poster. Watching him glare at it, I remembered what Andy had once said about feeling he could almost step through the picture and be with the girl.

In a very real way, that was exactly what he did—as Norton was only seconds from discovering.

"Wretched thing!" he grunted, and ripped the poster from the wall with a single swipe of his hand.

And revealed the gaping, crumbled hole in the concrete behind it.

Gonyar wouldn't go in.

Norton ordered him—God, they must have heard Norton ordering Rich Gonyar to go in there all over the prison—and Gonyar just refused him, point blank.

"I'll have your job for this!" Norton screamed. He was as hysterical as a woman having a hot-flash. He had utterly blown his cool. His neck had turned a rich, dark red, and two veins stood out, throbbing, on his forehead. "You can count on it, you... you Frenchman! I'll have your job and I'll see to it that you never get another one in any prison system in New England!"

Gonyar silently held out his service pistol to Norton, butt first. He'd had enough. He was then two hours overtime, going on three, and he'd just had enough. It was as if Andy's defection from our happy little family had driven Norton right over the edge of some private irrationality that had been there for a long time... certainly he was crazy that night.

I don't know what that private irrationality might have been, of course. But I do know that there were twenty-six cons listening to Norton's little dust-up with Rich Gonyar that evening as the last of the light faded from a dull late-winter sky, all of us hard-timers and long-line riders who had seen the administrators come and go, the

hard-asses and the candy-asses alike, and we all knew that Warden Samuel Norton had just passed what the engineers like to call “the breaking strain.”

And by God, it almost seemed to me that somewhere I could hear Andy Dufresne laughing.

Norton finally got a skinny drink of water on the night shift to go into the hole that had been behind Andy’s poster of Linda Ronstadt. The skinny guard’s name was Rory Tremont, and he was not exactly a ball of fire in the brains department. Maybe he thought he was going to win a Bronze Star or something. As it turned out, it was fortunate that Norton got someone of Andy’s approximate height and build to go in there; if they had sent a big-assed fellow—as most prison guards seem to be—the guy would have stuck in there as sure as God made green grass... and he might be there still.

Tremont went in with a nylon filament rope, which someone had found in the trunk of his car, tied around his waist and a big six-battery flashlight in one hand. By then Gonyar, who had changed his mind about quitting and who seemed to be the only one there still able to think clearly, had dug out a set of blueprints. I knew well enough what they showed him—a wall which looked, in cross-section, like a sandwich. The entire wall was ten feet thick. The inner and outer sections were each about four feet thick. In the center was two feet of pipe-space, and you want to believe that was the meat of the thing... in more ways than one.

Tremont’s voice came out of the hole, sounding hollow and dead. “Something smells awful in here, Warden.”

“Never mind that! Keep going.”

Tremont’s lower legs disappeared into the hole. A moment later his feet were gone, too. His light flashed dimly back and forth.

“Warden, it smells pretty damn bad.”

“Never mind, I said!” Norton cried.

Dolorously, Tremont’s voice floated back: “Smells like shit. Oh God, that’s what it is, it’s *shit*, oh my God lemme outta here I’m gonna blow my groceries oh shit it’s shit oh my *Gawwwwwd*—” And

then came the unmistakable sound of Rory Tremont losing his last couple of meals.

Well, that was it for me. I couldn't help myself. The whole day—hell no, the last thirty *years*—all came up on me at once and I started laughing fit to split, a laugh such as I'd never had since I was a free man, the kind of laugh I never expected to have inside these gray walls. And oh dear God didn't it feel good!

"Get that man out of here!" Warden Norton was screaming, and I was laughing so hard I didn't know if he meant me or Tremont. I just went on laughing and kicking my feet and holding onto my belly. I couldn't have stopped if Norton had threatened to shoot me dead-bang on the spot. "*Get him OUT!*"

Well, friends and neighbors, I was the one who went. Straight down to solitary, and there I stayed for fifteen days. A long shot. But every now and then I'd think about poor old not-too-bright Rory Tremont bellowing *oh shit it's shit*, and then I'd think about Andy Dufresne heading south in his own car, dressed in a nice suit, and I'd just have to laugh. I did that fifteen days in solitary practically standing on my head. Maybe because half of me was with Andy Dufresne, Andy Dufresne who had waded in shit and came out clean on the other side, Andy Dufresne, headed for the Pacific.

I heard the rest of what went on that night from half a dozen sources. There wasn't all that much, anyway. I guess that Rory Tremont decided he didn't have much left to lose after he'd lost his lunch and dinner, because he did go on. There was no danger of falling down the pipe-shaft between the inner and outer segments of the cellblock wall; it was so narrow that Tremont actually had to wedge himself down. He said later that he could only take half-breaths and that he knew what it would be like to be buried alive.

What he found at the bottom of the shaft was a master sewer-pipe which served the fourteen toilets in Cellblock 5, a porcelain pipe that had been laid thirty-three years before. It had been broken into. Beside the jagged hole in the pipe, Tremont found Andy's rock-hammer.

Andy had gotten free, but it hadn't been easy.

The pipe was even narrower than the shaft Tremont had just descended. Rory Tremont didn't go in, and so far as I know, no one else did, either. It must have been damn near unspeakable. A rat jumped out of the pipe as Tremont was examining the hole and the rock-hammer, and he swore later that it was nearly as big as a cocker spaniel pup. He went back up the crawlspace to Andy's cell like a monkey on a stick.

Andy had gone into that pipe. Maybe he knew that it emptied into a stream five hundred yards beyond the prison on the marshy western side. I think he did. The prison blueprints were around, and Andy would have found a way to look at them. He was a methodical cuss. He would have known or found out that the sewer-pipe running out of Cellblock 5 was the last one in Shawshank not hooked into the new waste-treatment plant, and he would have known it was do it by mid-1975 or do it never, because in August they were going to switch us over to the new waste-treatment plant, too.

Five hundred yards. The length of five football fields. Just shy of half a mile. He crawled that distance, maybe with one of those small Penlites in his hand, maybe with nothing but a couple of books of matches. He crawled through foulness that I either can't imagine or don't want to imagine. Maybe the rats scattered in front of him, or maybe they went for him the way such animals sometimes will when they've had a chance to grow bold in the dark. He must have had just enough clearance at the shoulders to keep moving, and he probably had to shove himself through the places where the lengths of pipe were joined. If it had been me, the claustrophobia would have driven me mad a dozen times over. But he did it.

At the far end of the pipe they found a set of muddy footprints leading out of the sluggish, polluted creek the pipe fed into. Two miles from there a search party found his prison uniform—that was a day later.

The story broke big in the papers, as you might guess, but no one within a fifteen-mile radius of the prison stepped forward to report a stolen car, stolen clothes, or a naked man in the moonlight. There

was not so much as a barking dog in a farmyard. He came out of the sewer-pipe and he disappeared like smoke.

But I am betting he disappeared in the direction of Buxton.

Three months after that memorable day, Warden Norton resigned. He was a broken man, it gives me great pleasure to report. The spring was gone from his step. On his last day he shuffled out with his head down like an old con shuffling down to the infirmary for his codeine pills. It was Gonyar who took over, and to Norton that must have seemed like the unkindest cut of all. For all I know, Sam Norton is down there in Eliot now, attending services at the Baptist church every Sunday, and wondering how the hell Andy Dufresne ever could have gotten the better of him.

I could have told him; the answer to the question is simplicity itself. Some have got it, Sam. And some don't, and never will.

That's what I know; now I'm going to tell you what I think. I may have it wrong on some of the specifics, but I'd be willing to bet my watch and chain that I've got the general outline down pretty well. Because, with Andy being the sort of man that he was, there's only one or two ways that it could have been. And every now and then, when I think it out, I think of Normaden, that half-crazy Indian. "Nice fella," Normaden had said after celling with Andy for eight months. "I was glad to go, me. Bad draft in that cell. All the time cold. He don't let nobody touch his things. That's okay. Nice man, never made fun. But big draft." Poor crazy Normaden. He knew more than all the rest of us, and he knew it sooner. And it was eight long months before Andy could get him out of there and have the cell to himself again. If it hadn't been for the eight months Normaden had spent with him after Warden Norton first came in, I do believe that Andy would have been free before Nixon resigned.

I believe now that it began in 1949, way back then—not with the rock-hammer, but with the Rita Hayworth poster. I told you how nervous he seemed when he asked for that, nervous and filled with

suppressed excitement. At the time I thought it was just embarrassment, that Andy was the sort of guy who'd never want someone else to know that he had feet of clay and wanted a woman... especially if it was a fantasy-woman. But I think now that I was wrong. I think now that Andy's excitement came from something else altogether.

What was responsible for the hole that Warden Norton eventually found behind the poster of a girl that hadn't even been born when that photo of Rita Hayworth was taken? Andy Dufresne's perseverance and hard work, yeah—I don't take any of that away from him. But there were two other elements in the equation: a lot of luck, and WPA concrete.

You don't need me to explain the luck, I guess. The WPA concrete I checked out for myself. I invested some time and a couple of stamps and wrote first to the University of Maine History Department and then to a fellow whose address they were able to give me. This fellow had been foreman of the WPA project that built the Shawshank Max Security Wing.

The wing, which contains Cellblocks 3, 4, and 5, was built in the years 1934-37. Now, most people don't think of cement and concrete as "technological developments," the way we think of cars and old furnaces and rocket-ships, but they really are. There was no modern cement until 1870 or so, and no modern concrete until after the turn of the century. Mixing concrete is as delicate a business as making bread. You can get it too watery or not watery enough. You can get the sand-mix too thick or too thin, and the same is true of the gravel-mix. And back in 1934, the science of mixing the stuff was a lot less sophisticated than it is today.

The walls of Cellblock 5 were solid enough, but they weren't exactly dry and toasty. As a matter of fact, they were and are pretty damned dank. After a long wet spell they would sweat and sometimes even drip. Cracks had a way of appearing, some an inch deep. They were routinely mortared over.

Now here comes Andy Dufresne into Cellblock 5. He's a man who graduated from the University of Maine's school of business, but he's also a man who took two or three geology courses along the way.

Geology had, in fact, become his chief hobby. I imagine it appealed to his patient, meticulous nature. A ten-thousand-year ice age here. A million years of mountain-building there. Plates of bedrock grinding against each other deep under the earth's skin over the millennia. *Pressure*. Andy told me once that all of geology is the study of pressure.

And time, of course.

He had time to study those walls. Plenty of time. When the cell door slams and the lights go out, there's nothing else to look at.

First-timers usually have a hard time adjusting to the confinement of prison life. They get screw-fever. Sometimes they have to be hauled down to the infirmary and sedated a couple of times before they get on the beam. It's not unusual to hear some new member of our happy little family banging on the bars of his cell and screaming to be let out... and before the cries have gone on for long, the chant starts up along the cellblock: "Fresh *fish*, hey little fishie, fresh *fish*, fresh *fish*, got fresh fish today!"

Andy didn't flip out like that when he came to The Shank in 1948, but that's not to say that he didn't feel many of the same things. He may have come close to madness; some do, and some go sailing right over the edge. Old life blown away in the wink of an eye, indeterminate nightmare stretching out ahead, a long season in hell.

So what did he do, I ask you? He searched almost desperately for something to divert his restless mind. Oh, there are all sorts of ways to divert yourself, even in prison; it seems like the human mind is full of an infinite number of possibilities when it comes to diversion. I told you about the sculptor and his *Three Ages of Jesus*. There were coin collectors who were always losing their collections to thieves, stamp collectors, one fellow who had postcards from thirty-five different countries—and let me tell you, he would have turned out your lights if he'd caught you diddling with his postcards.

Andy got interested in rocks. And the walls of his cell.

I think that his initial intention might have been to do no more than to carve his initials into the wall where the poster of Rita Hayworth would soon be hanging. His initials, or maybe a few lines from some poem. Instead, what he found was that interestingly weak concrete.

Maybe he started to carve his initials and a big chunk of the wall just fell out. I can see him, lying there on his bunk, looking at that broken chunk of concrete, turning it over in his hands. Never mind the wreck of your whole life, never mind that you got railroaded into this place by a whole trainload of bad luck. Let's forget all that and look at this piece of concrete.

Some months further along he might have decided it would be fun to see how much of that wall he could take out. But you can't just start digging into your wall and then, when the weekly inspection (or one of the surprise inspections that are always turning up interesting caches of booze, drugs, dirty pictures, and weapons) comes around, say to the guard:

"This? Just excavating a little hole in my cell wall. Not to worry, my good man."

No, he couldn't have that. So he came to me and asked if I could get him a Rita Hayworth poster. Not a little one but a big one.

And, of course, he had the rock-hammer. I remember thinking when I got him that gadget back in '48 that it would take a man six hundred years to burrow through the wall with it. True enough. But Andy only had to go through *half* the wall—and even with the soft concrete, it took him two rock-hammers and twenty-seven years to do it.

Of course he lost most of one of those years to Normaden, and he could only work at night, preferably late at night, when almost everybody is asleep—including the guards who work the night shift. But I suspect the thing which slowed him down the most was getting rid of the wall as he took it out. He could muffle the sound of his work by wrapping the head of his hammer in rock-polishing cloths, but what to do with the pulverized concrete and the occasional chunks that came out whole?

I think he must have broken up the chunks into pebbles and ...

I remember the Sunday after I had gotten him the rock-hammer. I remember watching him walk across the exercise yard, his face puffy from his latest go-round with the sisters. I saw him stoop, pick up a pebble... and it disappeared up his sleeve. That inside sleeve-pocket is an old prison trick. Up your sleeve or just inside the cuff of your

pants. And I have another memory, very strong but unfocused, maybe something I saw more than once. This memory is of Andy Dufresne walking across the exercise yard on a hot summer day when the air was utterly still. Still, yeah ... except for the little breeze that seemed to be blowing sand around Andy Dufresne's feet.

So maybe he had a couple of cheaters in his pants below the knees. You loaded the cheaters up with fill and then just strolled around, your hands in your pockets, and when you felt safe and unobserved, you gave the pockets a little twitch. The pockets, of course, are attached by string or strong thread to the cheaters. The fill goes cascading out of your pantslegs as you walk. The World War II POWs who were trying to tunnel out used the dodge.

The years went past and Andy brought his wall out to the exercise yard cupful by cupful. He played the game with administrator after administrator, and they thought it was because he wanted to keep the library growing. I have no doubt that was part of it, but the main thing Andy wanted was to keep Cell 14 in Cellblock 5 a single occupancy.

I doubt if he had any real plans or hopes of breaking out, at least not at first. He probably assumed the wall was ten feet of solid concrete, and that if he succeeded in boring all the way through it, he'd come out thirty feet over the exercise yard. But like I say, I don't think he was worried overmuch about breaking through. His assumption could have run this way: I'm only making a foot of progress every seven years or so; therefore, it would take me seventy years to break through; that would make me one hundred and one years old.

Here's a second assumption I would have made, had I been Andy: that eventually I would be caught and get a lot of solitary time, not to mention a very large black mark on my record. After all, there was the regular weekly inspection and a surprise toss—which usually came at night—every second week or so. He must have decided that things couldn't go on for long. Sooner or later, some screw was going to peek behind Rita Hayworth just to make sure Andy didn't have a sharpened spoon-handle or some marijuana reefers Scotch-taped to the wall.

And his response to that second assumption must have been *To hell with it*. Maybe he even made a game out of it. How far in can I get before they find out? Prison is a goddam boring place, and the chance of being surprised by an unscheduled inspection in the middle of the night while he had his poster unstuck probably added some spice to his life during the early years.

And I do believe it would have been impossible for him to get away with it just on dumb luck. Not for twenty-seven years. Nevertheless, I have to believe that for the first two years—until mid-May of 1950, when he helped Byron Hadley get around the tax on his windfall inheritance—that's exactly what he did get by on.

Or maybe he had something more than dumb luck going for him even back then. He had money, and he might have been slipping someone a little squeeze every week to take it easy on him. Most guards will go along with that if the price is right; it's money in their pockets and the prisoner gets to keep his whack-off pictures or his tailormade cigarettes. Also, Andy was a model prisoner—quiet, well-spoken, respectful, non-violent. It's the crazies and the stampededers that get their cells turned upside-down at least once every six months, their mattresses unzipped, their pillows taken away and cut open, the outflow pipe from their toilets carefully probed.

Then, in 1950, Andy became something more than a model prisoner. In 1950, he became a valuable commodity, a murderer who did tax-returns better than H & R Block. He gave gratis estate-planning advice, set up tax-shelters, filled out loan applications (sometimes creatively). I can remember him sitting behind his desk in the library, patiently going over a car-loan agreement paragraph by paragraph with a screwhead who wanted to buy a used DeSoto, telling the guy what was good about the agreement and what was bad about it, explaining to him that it was possible to shop for a loan and not get hit quite so bad, steering him away from the finance companies, which in those days were sometimes little better than legal loan-sharks. When he'd finished, the screwhead started to put out his hand... and then drew it back to himself quickly. He'd forgotten for a moment, you see, that he was dealing with a mascot, not a man.

Andy kept up on the tax laws and the changes in the stock market, and so his usefulness didn't end after he'd been in cold storage for awhile, as it might have done. He began to get his library money, his running war with the sisters had ended, and nobody tossed his cell very hard. He was a good nigger.

Then one day, very late in the going—perhaps around October of 1967—the long-time hobby suddenly turned into something else. One night while he was in the hole up to his waist with Raquel Welch hanging down over his ass, the pick end of his rock-hammer must have suddenly sunk into concrete past the hilt.

He would have dragged some chunks of concrete back, but maybe he heard others falling down into that shaft, bouncing back and forth, clinking off that standpipe. Did he know by then that he was going to come upon that shaft, or was he totally surprised? I don't know. He might have seen the prison blueprints by then or he might not have. If not, you can be damned sure he found a way to look at them not long after.

All at once he must have realized that, instead of just playing a game, he was playing for high stakes... in terms of his own life and his own future, the highest. Even then he couldn't have known for sure, but he must have had a pretty good idea because it was right around then that he talked to me about Zihuatanejo for the first time. All of a sudden, instead of just being a toy, that stupid hole in the wall became his master—if he knew about the sewer-pipe at the bottom, and that it led under the outer wall, it did, anyway.

He'd had the key under the rock in Buxton to worry about for years. Now he had to worry that some eager-beaver new guard would look behind his poster and expose the whole thing, or that he would get another cellmate, or that he would, after all those years, suddenly be transferred. He had all those things on his mind for the next eight years. All I can say is that he must have been one of the coolest men who ever lived. I would have gone completely nuts after awhile, living with all that uncertainty. But Andy just went on playing the game.

He had to carry the possibility of discovery for another eight years—the *probability* of it, you might say, because no matter how carefully he stacked the cards in his favor, as an inmate of a state prison, he just didn't have that many to stack ... and the gods had been kind to him for a very long time; some nineteen years.

The most ghastly irony I can think of would have been if he had been offered a parole. Can you imagine it? Three days before the parolee is actually released, he is transferred into the light security wing to undergo a complete physical and a battery of vocational tests. While he's there, his old cell is completely cleaned out. Instead of getting his parole, Andy would have gotten a long turn downstairs in solitary, followed by some more time upstairs ... but in a different cell.

If he broke into the shaft in 1967, how come he didn't escape until 1975?

I don't know for sure—but I can advance some pretty good guesses.

First, he would have become more careful than ever. He was too smart to just push ahead at flank speed and try to get out in eight months, or even in eighteen. He must have gone on widening the opening on the crawlspace a little at a time. A hole as big as a teacup by the time he took his New Year's

Eve drink that year. A hole as big as a dinner-plate by the time he took his birthday drink in 1968. As big as a serving-tray by the time the 1969 baseball season opened.

For a time I thought it should have gone much faster than it apparently did—after he broke through, I mean. It seemed to me that, instead of having to pulverize the crap and take it out of his cell in the cheater gadgets I have described, he could simply let it drop down the shaft. The length of time he took makes me believe that he didn't dare do that. He might have decided that the noise would arouse someone's suspicions. Or, if he knew about the sewer-pipe, as I believe he must have, he would have been afraid that a falling chunk of concrete would break it before he was ready, screwing up the cellblock sewage system and leading to an investigation. And an investigation, needless to say, would lead to ruin.

Still and all, I'd guess that, by the time Nixon was sworn in for his second term, the hole would have been wide enough for him to wriggle through... and probably sooner than that. Andy was a small guy.

Why didn't he go then?

That's where my educated guesses run out, folks; from this point they become progressively wilder. One possibility is that the crawlspace itself was clogged with crap and he had to clear it out. But that wouldn't account for all the time. So what was it?

I think that maybe Andy got scared.

I've told you as well as I can how it is to be an institutional man. At first you can't stand those four walls, then you get so you can abide them, then you get so you accept them... and then, as your body and your mind and your spirit adjust to live on an HO scale, you get to love them. You are told when to eat, when you can write letters, when you can smoke. If you're at work in the laundry or the plate-shop, you're assigned five minutes of each hour when you can go to the bathroom. For thirty-five years, my time was twenty-five minutes after the hour, and after thirty-five years, that's the only time I ever felt the need to take a piss or have a crap; twenty-five minutes past the hour. And if for some reason I couldn't go, the need would pass at thirty after, and come back at twenty-five past the next hour.

I think Andy may have been wrestling with that tiger—that institutional syndrome—and also with the bulking fears that all of it might have been for nothing.

How many nights must he have lain awake under his poster, thinking about that sewer line, knowing that the one chance was all he'd ever get? The blueprints might have told him how big the pipe's bore was, but a blueprint couldn't tell him what it would be like inside that pipe—if he would be able to breathe without choking, if the rats were big enough and mean enough to fight instead of retreating... and a blueprint couldn't've told him what he'd find at the end of the pipe, when and if he got there. Here's a joke even funnier than the parole would have been: Andy breaks into the sewer line, crawls through five hundred yards of choking, shit-smelling darkness, and

comes up against a heavy-gauge mesh screen at the end of it. Ha, ha, very funny.

That would have been on his mind. And if the long shot actually came in and he was able to get out, would he be able to get some civilian clothes and get away from the vicinity of the prison undetected? Last of all, suppose he got out of the pipe, got away from Shawshank before the alarm was raised, got to Buxton, overturned the right rock... and found nothing beneath? Not necessarily something so dramatic as arriving at the right field and discovering that a highrise apartment building had been erected on the spot, or that it had been turned into a supermarket parking lot. It could have been that some little kid who liked rocks noticed that piece of volcanic glass, turned it over, saw the deposit-box key, and took both it and the rock back to his room as souvenirs. Maybe a November hunter kicked the rock, left the key exposed, and a squirrel or a crow with a liking for bright shiny things had taken it away. Maybe there had been spring floods one year, breaching the wall, washing the key away. Maybe anything.

So I think—wild guess or not—that Andy just froze in place for awhile. After all, you can't lose if you don't bet. What did he have to lose, you ask? His library, for one thing. The poison peace of institutional life, for another. Any future chance to grab his safe identity.

But he finally did it, just as I have told you. He tried ... and, my! Didn't he succeed in spectacular fashion? You tell me!

\* \* \*

But *did* he get away, you ask? What happened after? What happened when he got to that meadow and turned over that rock ... always assuming the rock was still there?

I can't describe that scene for you, because this institutional man is still in this institution, and expects to be for years to come.

But I'll tell you this. Very late in the summer of 1975, on September 15th, to be exact, I got a postcard which had been mailed from the tiny town of McNary, Texas. That town is on the American side of the border, directly across from El Porvenir. The message side of the card was totally blank. But I know. I know it in my heart as surely as I know that we're all going to die someday.

McNary was where he crossed. McNary, Texas.

So that's my story, Jack. I never believed how long it would take to write it all down, or how many pages it would take. I started writing just after I got that postcard, and here I am finishing up on January 14th, 1976. I've used three pencils right down to knuckle-stubs, and a whole tablet of paper. I've kept the pages carefully hidden ... not that many could read my hen-tracks, anyway.

It stirred up more memories than I ever would have believed. Writing about yourself seems to be a lot like sticking a branch into clear river-water and roiling up the muddy bottom.

*Well, you weren't writing about yourself,* I hear someone in the peanut-gallery saying. You were writing about *Andy Dufresne. You're nothing but a minor character in your own story.* But you know, that's just not so. It's all about me, every damned word of it. Andy was the part of me they could never lock up, the part of me that will rejoice when the gates finally open for me and I walk out in my cheap suit with my twenty dollars of mad-money in my pocket. That part of me will rejoice no matter how old and broken and scared the rest of me is. I guess it's just that Andy had more of that part than me, and used it better.

There are others here like me, others who remember Andy. We're glad he's gone, but a little sad, too. Some birds are not meant to be caged, that's all. Their feathers are too bright, their songs too sweet and wild. So you let them go, or when you open the cage to feed them they somehow fly out past you. And the part of you that knows it was wrong to imprison them in the first place rejoices, but still, the place where you live is that much more drab and empty for their departure.

That's the story and I'm glad I told it, even if it is a bit inconclusive and even though some of the memories the pencil prodded up (like that branch poking up the river-mud) made me feel a little sad and even older than I am. Thank you for listening. And Andy, if you're really down there, as I believe you are, look at the stars for me just after sunset, and touch the sand, and wade in the water, and feel free.

I never expected to take up this narrative again, but here I am with the dog-eared, folded pages open on the desk in front of me. Here I am adding another three or four pages, writing in a brand-new tablet. A tablet I bought in a store—I just walked into a store on Portland's Congress Street and bought it.

I thought I had put finish to my story in a Shawshank prison cell on a bleak January day in 1976. Now it's May of 1977 and I am sitting in a small, cheap room of the Brewster Hotel in Portland, adding to it.

The window is open, and the sound of the traffic floating in seems huge, exciting, and intimidating. I have to look constantly over at the window and reassure myself that there are no bars on it. I sleep poorly at night because the bed in this room, as cheap as the room is, seems much too big and luxurious. I snap awake every morning promptly at six-thirty, feeling disoriented and frightened. My dreams are bad. I have a crazy feeling of free fall. The sensation is as terrifying as it is exhilarating.

What has happened in my life? Can't you guess? I was paroled. After thirty-eight years of routine hearings and routine denials (in the course of those thirty-eight years, three lawyers died on me), my parole was granted. I suppose they decided that, at the age of fifty-eight, I was finally used up enough to be deemed safe.

I came very close to burning the document you have just read. They search outgoing parolees almost as carefully as they search incoming "new fish." And beyond containing enough dynamite to assure me of a quick turnaround and another six or eight years inside, my "memoirs" contained something else: the name of the

town where I believe Andy Dufresne to be. Mexican police gladly cooperate with the American police, and I didn't want my freedom—or my unwillingness to give up the story I'd worked so long and hard to write—to cost Andy his.

Then I remembered how Andy had brought in his five hundred dollars back in 1948, and I took out my story of him the same way. Just to be on the safe side, I carefully rewrote each page which mentioned Zihuatanejo. If the papers had been found during my “outside search,” as they call it at The Shank, I would have gone back in on turnaround... but the cops would have been looking for Andy in a Peruvian seacoast town named Las Intrudres.

The Parole Committee got me a job as a “stock-room assistant” at the big FoodWay Market at the Spruce Mall in South Portland—which means I became just one more ageing bag-boy. There's only two kinds of bag-boys, you know; the old ones and the young ones. No one ever looks at either kind. If you shop at the Spruce Mall FoodWay, I may have even taken your groceries out to your car ... but you'd have had to have shopped there between March and April of 1977, because that's as long as I worked there.

At first I didn't think I was going to be able to make it on the outside at all. I've described prison society as a scaled-down model of your outside world, but I had no idea of how *fast* things moved on the outside; the *raw speed* people move at. They even talk faster. And louder.

It was the toughest adjustment I've ever had to make, and I haven't finished making it yet... not by a long way. Women, for instance. After hardly knowing that they were half of the human race for forty years, I was suddenly working in a store filled with them. Old women, pregnant women wearing tee-shirts with arrows pointing downward and a printed motto reading BABY HERE, skinny women with their nipples poking out at their shirts—a woman wearing something like that when I went in would have gotten arrested and then had a sanity hearing—women of every shape and size. I found myself going around with a semi-hard almost all the time and cursing myself for being a dirty old man.

Going to the bathroom, that was another thing. When I had to go (and the urge always came on me at twenty-five past the hour), I had to fight the almost overwhelming need to check it with my boss. Knowing that was something I could just go and do in this too-bright outside world was one thing; adjusting my inner self to that knowledge after all those years of checking it with the nearest screwhead or facing two days in solitary for the oversight... that was something else.

My boss didn't like me. He was a young guy, twenty-six or -seven, and I could see that I sort of disgusted him, the way a cringing, servile old dog that crawls up to you on its belly to be petted will disgust a man. Christ, I disgusted myself. But... I couldn't make myself stop. I wanted to tell him: *That's what a whole life in prison does for you, young man. It turns everyone in a position of authority into a master, and you into every master's dog. Maybe you know you've become a dog, even in prison, but since everyone else in gray is a dog, too, it doesn't seem to matter so much. Outside, it does.* But I couldn't tell a young guy like him. He would never understand. Neither would my PO, a big, bluff ex-Navy man with a huge red beard and a large stock of Polish jokes. He saw me for about five minutes every week. "Are you staying out of the bars, Red?" he'd ask when he'd run out of Polish jokes. I'd say yeah, and that would be the end of it until next week.

Music on the radio. When I went in, the big bands were just getting up a good head of steam. Now every song sounds like it's about fucking. So many cars. At first I felt like I was taking my life into my hands every time I crossed the street.

There was more—*everything* was strange and frightening—but maybe you get the idea, or can at least grasp a corner of it. I began to think about doing something to get back in. When you're on parole, almost anything will serve. I'm ashamed to say it, but I began to think about stealing some money or shoplifting stuff from the FoodWay, anything, to get back in where it was quiet and you knew everything that was going to come up in the course of the day.

If I had never known Andy, I probably would have done that. But I kept thinking of him, spending all those years chipping patiently

away at the cement with his rock-hammer so he could be free. I thought of that and it made me ashamed and I'd drop the idea again. Oh, you can say he had more reason to be free than I did—he had a new identity and a lot of money. But that's not really true, you know. Because he didn't know for sure that the new identity was still there, and without the new identity, the money would always be out of reach. No, what he needed was just to be free, and if I kicked away what I had, it would be like spitting in the face of everything he had worked so hard to win back.

So what I started to do on my time off was to hitchhike rides down to the little town of Buxton. This was in the early April of 1977, the snow just starting to melt off the fields, the air just beginning to be warm, the baseball teams coming north to start a new season playing the only game I'm sure God approves of. When I went on these trips, I carried a Silva compass in my pocket.

*There's a big hayfield in Buxton, Andy had said, and at the north end of that hayfield there's a rock wall, right out of a Robert Frost poem. And somewhere along the base of that wall is a rock that has no earthly business in a Maine hayfield.*

A fool's errand, you say. How many hayfields are there in a small rural town like Buxton? Fifty? A hundred? Speaking from personal experience, I'd put it at even higher than that, if you add in the fields now cultivated which might have been haygrass when Andy went in. And if I did find the right one, I might never know it. Because I might overlook that black piece of volcanic glass, or, much more likely, Andy put it into his pocket and took it with him.

So I'd agree with you. A fool's errand, no doubt about it. Worse, a dangerous one for a man on parole, because some of those fields were clearly marked with NO TRESPASSING signs. And, as I've said, they're more than happy to slam your ass back inside if you get out of line. A fool's errand . . . but so is chipping at a blank concrete wall for twenty-seven years. And when you're no longer the man who can get it for you and just an old bag-boy, it's nice to have a hobby to take your mind off your new life. My hobby was looking for Andy's rock.

So I'd hitchhike to Buxton and walk the roads. I'd listen to the birds, to the spring runoff in the culverts, examine the bottles the retreating snows had revealed—all useless non-returnables, I am sorry to say; the world seems to have gotten awfully spendthrift since I went into the slam—and looking for hayfields.

Most of them could be eliminated right off. No rock walls. Others had rock walls, but my compass told me they were facing the wrong direction. I walked these wrong ones anyway. It was a comfortable thing to be doing, and on those outings I really *felt* free, at peace. An old dog walked with me one Saturday. And one day I saw a winter-skinny deer.

Then came April 23rd, a day I'll not forget even if I live another fifty-eight years. It was a balmy Saturday afternoon, and I was walking up what a little boy fishing from a bridge told me was called The Old Smith Road. I had taken a lunch in a brown FoodWay bag, and had eaten it sitting on a rock by the road. When I was done I carefully buried my leavings, as my dad taught me before he died, when I was a sprat no older than the fisherman who had named the road for me.

Around two o'clock I came to a big field on my left. There was a stone wall at the far end of it, running roughly northwest. I walked back to it, squelching over the wet ground, and began to walk the wall. A squirrel scolded me from an oak tree.

Three-quarters of the way to the end, I saw the rock. No mistake. Black glass and as smooth as silk. A rock with no earthly business in a Maine hayfield. For a long time I just looked at it, feeling that I might cry, for whatever reason. The squirrel had followed me, and it was still chattering away. My heart was beating madly.

When I felt I had myself under control, I went to the rock, squatted beside it—the joints in my knees went off like a double-barrelled shotgun—and let my hand touch it. It was real. I didn't pick it up because I thought there would be anything under it; I could just as easily have walked away without finding what was beneath. I certainly had no plans to take it away with me, because I didn't feel it was mine to take—I had a feeling that taking that rock from the field would have been the worst kind of theft. No, I only picked it up to feel

it better, to get the heft of the thing, and, I suppose, to prove its reality by feeling its satiny texture against my skin.

I had to look at what was underneath for a long time. My eyes saw it, but it took awhile for my mind to catch up. It was an envelope, carefully wrapped in a plastic bag to keep away the damp. My name was written across the front in Andy's clear script.

I took the envelope and left the rock where Andy had left it, and Andy's friend before him.

Dear Red,

If you're reading this, then you're out. One way or another, you're out. And if you've followed along this far, you might be willing to come a little further. I think you remember the name of the town, don't you? I could use a good man to help me get my project on wheels.

Meantime, have a drink on me—and do think it over. I will be keeping an eye out for you. Remember that hope is a good thing, Red, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well.

Your friend,  
Peter Stevens

I didn't read that letter in the field. A kind of terror had come over me, a need to get away from there before I was seen. To make what may be an appropriate pun, I was in terror of being apprehended.

I went back to my room and read it there, with the smell of old men's dinners drifting up the stairwell to me—Beefaroni, Rice-a-Roni, Noodle Roni. You can bet that whatever the old folks of America, the ones on fixed incomes, are eating tonight, it almost certainly ends in *roni*.

I opened the envelope and read the letter and then I put my head in my arms and cried. With the letter there were twenty new fifty-dollar bills.

And here I am in the Brewster Hotel, technically a fugitive from justice again—parole violation is my crime. No one's going to throw up any roadblocks to catch a criminal wanted on that charge, I guess—wondering what I should do now.

I have this manuscript. I have a small piece of luggage about the size of a doctor's bag that holds everything I own. I have nineteen fifties, four tens, a five, three ones, and assorted change. I broke one of the fifties to buy this tablet of paper and a deck of smokes.

Wondering what I should do.

But there's really no question. It always comes down to just two choices. Get busy living or get busy dying.

First I'm going to put this manuscript back in my bag. Then I'm going to buckle it up, grab my coat, go downstairs, and check out of this fleabag. Then I'm going to walk uptown to a bar and put that five-dollar bill down in front of the bartender and ask him to bring me two straight shots of Jack Daniel's—one for me and one for Andy Dufresne. Other than a beer or two, they'll be the first drinks I've taken as a free man since 1938. Then I am going to tip the bartender a dollar and thank him kindly. I will leave the bar and walk up Spring Street to the Greyhound terminal there and buy a bus ticket to El Paso by way of New York City. When I get to El Paso, I'm going to buy a ticket to McNary. And when I get to McNary, I guess I'll have a chance to find out if an old crook like me can find a way to float across the border and into Mexico.

Sure I remember the name. Zihuatanejo. A name like that is just too pretty to forget.

I find I am excited, so excited I can hardly hold the pencil in my trembling hand. I think it is the excitement that only a free man can feel, a free man starting a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain.

I hope Andy is down there.

I hope I can make it across the border.

I hope to see my friend and shake his hand.

I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams.

I *hope*.

# **SUMMER OF CORRUPTION**

*For Elaine Koster and Herbert Schnall*

# Apt Pupil

## 1

He looked like the total all-American kid as he pedaled his twenty-six-inch Schwinn with the apehanger handlebars up the residential suburban street, and that's just what he was: Todd Bowden, thirteen years old, five-feet-eight and a healthy one hundred and forty pounds, hair the color of ripe corn, blue eyes, white even teeth, lightly tanned skin marred by not even the first shadow of adolescent acne.

He was smiling a summer vacation smile as he pedaled through the sun and shade not too far from his own house. He looked like the kind of kid who might have a paper route, and as a matter of fact, he did—he delivered the Santo Donato *Clarion*. He also looked like the kind of kid who might sell greeting cards for premiums, and he had done that, too. They were the kind that come with your name printed inside—JACK AND MARY BURKE, or DON AND SALLY, or THE MURCHISONS. He looked like the sort of boy who might whistle while he worked, and he often did so. He whistled quite prettily, in fact. His dad was an architectural engineer who made forty thousand dollars a year. His mom had majored in French in college and had met Todd's father when he desperately needed a tutor. She typed manuscripts in her spare time. She had kept all of Todd's old school report cards in a folder. Her favorite was his final fourth-grade card, on which Mrs. Upshaw had scratched: "Todd is an extremely apt pupil." He was, too. Straight A's and B's all the way up the line. If he'd done any better—straight A's, for example—his friends might have begun to think he was weird.

Now he brought his bike to a halt in front of 963 Claremont Street and stepped off it. The house was a small bungalow set discreetly back on its lot. It was white with green shutters and green trim. A

hedge ran around the front. The hedge was well-watered and well-clipped.

Todd brushed his blonde hair out of his eyes and walked the Schwinn up the cement path to the steps. He was still smiling, and his smile was open and expectant and beautiful. He pushed down the bike's kickstand with the toe of one Nike running-shoe and then picked the folded newspaper off the bottom step. It *wasn't the Clarion*; it was the *L.A. Times*. He put it under his arm and mounted the steps. At the top was a heavy wooden door with no window inside of a latched screen door. There was a doorbell on the right-hand door-frame, and below the bell were two small signs, each neatly screwed into the wood and covered with protective plastic so they wouldn't yellow or waterspot. German efficiency, Todd thought, and his smile widened a little. It was an adult thought, and he always mentally congratulated himself when he had one of those.

The top sign said ARTHUR DENKER.

The bottom one said NO SOLICITORS, NO PEDDLERS, NO SALESMEN.

Smiling still, Todd rang the bell.

He could barely hear its muted burring, somewhere far off inside the small house. He took his finger off the bell and cocked his head a little, listening for footsteps. There were none. He looked at his Timex watch (one of the premiums he had gotten for selling personalized greeting cards) and saw that it was twelve past ten. The guy should be up by now. Todd himself was always up by seven-thirty at the latest, even during summer vacation. The early bird catches the worm.

He listened for another thirty seconds and when the house remained silent he leaned on the bell, watching the sweep second hand on his Timex as he did so. He had been pressing the doorbell for exactly seventy-one seconds when he finally heard shuffling footsteps. Slippers, he deduced from the soft wish-wish sound. Todd was into. deductions. His current ambition was to become a private detective when he grew up.

"All right! All right!" the man who was pretending to be Arthur Denker called querulously. "I'm coming! Let it go! I'm coming!"

Todd stopped pushing the doorbell button.

A chain and bolt rattled on the far side of the windowless inner door. Then it was pulled open.

An old man, hunched inside a bathrobe, stood looking out through the screen. A cigarette smouldered between his fingers. Todd thought the man looked like a cross between Albert Einstein and Boris Karloff. His hair was long and white but beginning to yellow in an unpleasant way that was more nicotine than ivory. His face was wrinkled and pouched and puffy with sleep, and Todd saw with some distaste that he hadn't bothered shaving for the last couple of days. Todd's father was fond of saying, "A shave puts a shine on the morning." Todd's father shaved every day, whether he had to work or not.

The eyes looking out at Todd were watchful but deeply sunken, laced with snaps of red. Todd felt an instant of deep disappointment. The guy *did* look a little bit like Albert Einstein, and he *did* look a little bit like Boris Karloff, but what he looked like more than anything else was one of the seedy old winos that hung around down by the railroad yard.

But of course, Todd reminded himself, the man had just gotten up. Todd had seen Denker many times before today (although he had been very careful to make sure that Denker hadn't seen *him*, no way, José), and on his public occasions, Denker looked very natty, every inch an officer in retirement, you might say, even though he was seventy-six if the articles Todd had read at the library had his birth-date right. On the days when Todd had shadowed him to the Shoprite where Denker did his shopping or to one of the three movie theaters on the bus line—Denker had no car—he was always dressed in one of three neatly kept suits, no matter how warm the weather. If the weather looked threatening he carried a furled umbrella under one arm like a swagger stick. He sometimes wore a trilby hat. And on the occasions when Denker went out, he was always neatly shaved and his white moustache (worn to conceal an imperfectly corrected harelip) was carefully trimmed.

"A boy," he said now. His voice was thick and sleepy. Todd saw with new disappointment that his robe was faded and tacky. One

rounded collar point stood up at a drunken angle to poke at his wattled neck. There was a splotch of something that might have been chili or possibly A-1 Steak Sauce on the left lapel, and he smelled of cigarettes and stale booze.

“A boy,” he repeated. “I don’t need anything, boy. Read the sign. You can read, can’t you? Of course you can. All American boys can read. Don’t be a nuisance, boy. Good day.”

The door began to close.

He might have dropped it right there, Todd thought much later on one of the nights when sleep was hard to find. His disappointment at seeing the man for the first time at close range, seeing him with his street-face put away—hanging in the closet, you might say, along with his umbrella and his trilby—might have done it. It could have ended in that moment, the tiny, unimportant snicking sound of the latch cutting off everything that happened later as neatly as a pair of shears. But, as the man himself had observed, he was an American boy, and he had been taught that persistence is a virtue.

“Don’t forget your paper, Mr. Dussander,” Todd said, holding the *Times* out politely.

The door stopped dead in its swing, still inches from the jamb. A tight and watchful expression flitted across Kurt Dussander’s face and was gone at once. There might have been fear in that expression. It was good, the way he had made that expression disappear, but Todd was disappointed for the third time. He hadn’t expected Dussander to be good; he had expected Dussander to be *great*.

*Boy*, Todd thought with real disgust. *Boy oh boy*.

He pulled the door open again. One hand, bunched with arthritis, unlatched the screen door. The hand pushed the screen door open just enough to wriggle through like a spider and close over the edge of the paper Todd was holding out. The boy saw with distaste that the old man’s fingernails were long and yellow and horny. It was a hand that had spent most of its waking hours holding one cigarette after another. Todd thought smoking was a filthy dangerous habit, one he himself would never take up. It really was a wonder that Dussander had lived as long as he had.

The old man tugged. "Give me my paper."

"Sure thing, Mr. Dussander." Todd released his hold on the paper. The spider-hand yanked it inside. The screen closed.

"My name is Denker," the old man said. "Not this Doo-Zander. Apparently you cannot read. What a pity. Good day."

The door started to close again. Todd spoke rapidly into the narrowing gap. "Bergen-Belsen, January 1943 to June 1943. Auschwitz, June 1943 to June of 1944, *Unterkommandant*. Patin—"

The door stopped again. The old man's pouched and pallid face hung in the gap like a wrinkled, half-deflated balloon. Todd smiled.

"You left Patin just ahead of the Russians. You got to Buenos Aires. Some people say you got rich there, investing the gold you took out of Germany in the drug trade. Whatever, you were in Mexico City from 1950 to 1952. Then—"

"Boy, you are crazy like a cuckoo bird." One of the arthritic fingers twirled circles around a misshapen ear. But the toothless mouth was quivering in an infirm, panicky way.

"From 1952 until 1958, I don't know," Todd said, smiling more widely still. "No one does, I guess, or at least they're not telling. But an Israeli agent spotted you in Cuba, working as the concierge in a big hotel just before Castro took over. They lost you when the rebels came into Havana. You popped up in West Berlin in 1965. They almost got you." He pronounced the last two words as one: *gotcha*. At the same time he squeezed all of his fingers together into one large, wriggling fist. Dussander's eyes dropped to those well-made and well-nourished American hands, hands that were made for building soapbox racers and Aurora models. Todd had done both. In fact, the year before, he and his dad had built a model of the *Titanic*. It had taken almost four months, and Todd's father kept it in his office.

"I don't know what you are talking about," Dussander said. Without his false teeth, his words had a mushy sound Todd didn't like. It didn't sound... well, authentic. Colonel Klink on *Hogan's Heroes* sounded more like a Nazi than Dussander did. But in his time he must have been a real whiz. In an article on the death-camps in

*Men's Action*, the writer had called him The Blood-Fiend of Patin. "Get out of here, boy. Before I call the police."

"Gee, I guess you better call them, Mr. Dussander. Or Herr Dussander, if you like that better." He continued to smile, showing perfect teeth that had been fluoridated since the beginning of his life and bathed thrice a day in Crest toothpaste for almost as long. "After 1965, no one saw you again . . . until I did, two months ago, on the downtown bus."

"You're insane."

"So if you want to call the police," Todd said, smiling, "you go right ahead. I'll wait on the stoop. But if you don't want to call them right away, why don't I come in? We'll talk."

There was a long moment while the old man looked at the smiling boy. Birds twitted in the trees. On the next block a power mower was running, and far off, on busier streets, horns honked out their own rhythm of life and commerce.

In spite of everything, Todd felt the onset of doubt. He couldn't be wrong, could he? Was there some mistake on his part? He didn't think so, but this was no schoolroom exercise. It was real life. So he felt a surge of relief (*mild* relief, he assured himself later) when Dussander said: "You may come in for a moment, if you like. But only because I do not wish to make trouble for you, you understand?"

"Sure, Mr. Dussander," Todd said. He opened the screen and came into the hall. Dussander closed the door behind them, shutting off the morning.

The house smelled stale and slightly malty. It smelled the way Todd's own house smelled sometimes the morning after his folks had thrown a party and before his mother had had a chance to air it out. But this smell was worse. It was lived-in and ground-in. It was liquor, fried food, sweat, old clothes, and some stinky medicinal smell like Vick's or Mentholatum. It was dark in the hallway, and Dussander was standing too close, his head hunched into the collar of his robe like the head of a vulture waiting for some hurt animal to give up the ghost. In that instant, despite the stubble and the loosely hanging flesh, Todd could see the man who had stood inside the black SS uniform more clearly than he had ever seen him on the street. And

he felt a sudden lancet of fear slide into his belly. *Mild* fear, he amended later.

“I should tell you that if anything happens to me—” he began, and then Dussander shuffled past him and into the living room, his slippers *wish-wishing* on the floor. He flapped a contemptuous hand at Todd, and Todd felt a flush of hot blood mount into his throat and cheeks.

Todd followed him, his smile wavering for the first time. He had not pictured it happening quite like this. But it would work out. Things would come into focus. Of course they would. Things always did. He began to smile again as he stepped into the living room.

It was another disappointment—and how!—but one he supposed he should have been prepared for. There was of course no oil portrait of Hitler with his forelock dangling and eyes that followed you. No medals in cases, no ceremonial sword mounted on the wall, no Luger or PPK Walther on the mantel (there was, in fact, no mantel). Of course, Todd told himself, the guy would have to be crazy to put any of those things out where people could see them. Still, it was hard to put everything you saw in the movies or on TV out of your head. It looked like the living room of any old man living alone on a slightly frayed pension. The fake fireplace was faced with fake bricks. A Westclox hung over it. There was a black and white Motorola TV on a stand; the tips of the rabbit ears had been wrapped in aluminum foil to improve reception. The floor was covered with a gray rug; its nap was balding. The magazine rack by the sofa held copies of *National Geographic*, *Reader's Digest*, and the *L.A. Times*. Instead of Hitler or a ceremonial sword hung on the wall, there was a framed certificate of citizenship and a picture of a woman in a funny hat. Dussander later told him that sort of hat was called a cloche, and they had been popular in the twenties and thirties.

“My wife,” Dussander said sentimentally. “She died in 1955 of a lung disease. At that time I was working at the Menschler Motor Works in Essen. I was heartbroken.”

Todd continued to smile. He crossed the room as if to get a better look at the woman in the picture. Instead of looking at the picture, he fingered the shade on a small table-lamp.

*“Stop that!”* Dussander barked harshly. Todd jumped back a little.

“That was good,” he said sincerely. “Really commanding. It was Use Koch who had the lampshades made out of human skin, wasn’t it? And she was the one who had the trick with the little glass tubes.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dussander said. There was a package of Kools, the kind with no filter, on top of the TV. He offered them to Todd. “Cigarette?” he asked, and grinned. His grin was hideous.

“No. They give you lung cancer. My dad used to smoke, but he gave it up. He went to Smokenders.”

“Did he.” Dussander produced a wooden match from the pocket of his robe and scratched it indifferently on the plastic case of the Motorola. Puffing, he said: “Can you give me one reason why I shouldn’t call the police and tell them of the monstrous accusations you’ve just made? One reason? Speak quickly, boy. The telephone is just down the hall. Your father would spank you, I think. You would sit for dinner on a cushion for a week or so, eh?”

“My parents don’t believe in spanking. Corporal punishment causes more problems than it cures.” Todd’s eyes suddenly gleamed. “Did you spank any of them? The women? Did you take off their clothes and—”

With a muffled exclamation, Dussander started for the phone.

Todd said coldly: “You better not do that.”

Dussander turned. In measured tones that were spoiled only slightly by the fact that his false teeth were not in, he said: “I tell you this once, boy, and once only. My name is Arthur Denker. It has never been anything else; it has not even been Americanized. I was in fact named Arthur by my father, who greatly admired the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle. It has never been Doo-Zander, or Himmler, or Father Christmas. I was a reserve lieutenant in the war. I never joined the Nazi party. In the battle of Berlin I fought for three weeks. I will admit that in the late thirties, when I was first married, I supported Hitler. He ended the depression and returned some of the pride we had lost in the aftermath of the sickening and unfair Treaty of Versailles. I suppose I supported him mostly because I got a job and there was tobacco again, and I didn’t need to hunt through the

gutters when I needed to smoke. I thought, in the late thirties, that he was a great man. In his own way, perhaps he was. But at the end he was mad, directing phantom armies at the whim of an astrologer. He even gave Blondi, his dog, a death-capsule. The act of a madman; by the end they were all madmen, singing the 'Horst Wessel Song' as they fed poison to their children. On May 2nd, 1945, my regiment gave up to the Americans. I remember that a private soldier named Hackermeyer gave me a chocolate bar. I wept. There was no reason to fight on; the war was over, and really had been since February. I was interned at Essen and was treated very well. We listened to the Nuremberg trials on the radio, and when Goering committed suicide, I traded fourteen American cigarettes for half a bottle of *Schnaps* and got drunk. When I was released, I put wheels on cars at the Essen Motor Works until 1963, when I retired. Later I emigrated to the United States. To come here was a lifelong ambition. In 1967 I became a citizen. I am an American. I vote. No Buenos Aires. No drug dealing. No Berlin. No Cuba." He pronounced it *Koo-ba*. "And now, unless you leave, I make my telephone call."

He watched Todd do nothing. Then he went down the hall and picked up the telephone. Still Todd stood in the living room, beside the table with the small lamp on it.

Dussander began to dial. Todd watched him, his heart speeding up until it was drumming in his chest. After the fourth number, Dussander turned and looked at him. His shoulders sagged. He put the phone down.

"A boy," he breathed, "A boy."

Todd smiled widely but rather modestly.

"How did you find out?"

"One piece of luck and a lot of hard work," Todd said. "There's this friend of mine, Harold Pegler his name is, only all the kids call him Foxy. He plays second base for our team. His dad's got all these magazines out in his garage. Great big stacks of them. War magazines. They're old. I looked for some new ones, but the guy who runs the newsstand across from the school says most of them went out of business. In most of them there's pictures of krauts—German soldiers, I mean—and Japs torturing these women. And

articles about the concentration camps. I really groove on all that concentration camp stuff.”

“You . . . groove on it.” Dussander was staring at him, one hand rubbing up and down on his cheek, producing a very small sandpapery sound.

“Groove. You know. I get off on it. I’m interested.”

He remembered that day in Foxy’s garage as clearly as anything in his life—more clearly, he suspected. He remembered in the fifth grade, before Careers Day, how Mrs. Anderson (all the kids called her Bugs because of her big front teeth) had talked to them about what she called finding YOUR GREAT INTEREST.

“It comes all at once,” Bugs Anderson had rhapsodized. “You see something for the first time, and right away you know you have found YOUR GREAT INTEREST. It’s like a key turning in a lock. Or falling in love for the first time. That’s why Careers Day is so important, children—it may be the day on which you find YOUR GREAT INTEREST.” And she had gone on to tell them about her own GREAT INTEREST, which turned out not to be teaching the fifth grade but collecting nineteenth-century postcards.

Todd had thought Mrs. Anderson was full of bullspit at the time, but that day in Foxy’s garage, he remembered what she had said and wondered if maybe she hadn’t been right after all.

The Santa Anas had been blowing that day, and to the east there were brush-fires. He remembered the smell of burning, hot and greasy. He remembered Foxy’s crewcut, and the flakes of Butch Wax clinging to the front of it. He remembered *everything*.

“I know there’s comics here someplace,” Foxy had said. His mother had a hangover and had kicked them out of the house for making too much noise. “Neat ones. They’re Westerns, mostly, but there’s some *Turok*, *Son of Stone* and—”

“What are those?” Todd asked, pointing at the bulging cardboard cartons under the stairs.

“Ah, they’re no good,” Foxy said. “True war stories, mostly. Boring.”

“Can I look at some?”

“Sure. I’ll find the comics.”

But by the time fat Foxy Pegler found them, Todd no longer wanted to read comics. He was lost. Utterly lost.

*It's like a key turning in a lock. Or falling in love for the first time.*

It *had* been like that. He had known about the war, of course—not the stupid one going on now, where the Americans had gotten the shit kicked out of them by a bunch of gooks in black pajamas—but World War II. He knew that the Americans wore round helmets with net on them and the krauts wore sort of square ones. He knew that the Americans won most of the battles and that the Germans had invented rockets near the end and shot them from Germany onto London. He had even known something about the concentration camps.

The difference between all of that and what he found in the magazines under the stairs in Foxy's garage was like the difference between being told about germs and then actually *seeing* them in a microscope, squirming around and alive.

Here was Ilse Koch. Here were crematoriums with their doors standing open on their soot-clotted hinges. Here were officers in SS uniforms and prisoners in striped uniforms. The smell of the old pulp magazines was like the smell of the brush-fires burning out of control on the east of Santo Donato, and he could feel the old paper crumbling against the pads of his fingers, and he turned the pages, no longer in Foxy's garage but caught somewhere crosswise in time, trying to cope with the idea that *they had really done those things*, that *somebody had really done those things*, and that *somebody had let them do those things*, and his head began to ache with a mixture of revulsion and excitement, and his eyes were hot and strained, but he read on, and from a column of print beneath a picture of tangled bodies at a place called Dachau, this figure jumped out at him:

6,000,000

And he thought: *Somebody goofed there, somebody added a zero or two, that's twice as many people as there are in L.A.!* But then, in another magazine (the cover of this one showed a woman chained

to a wall while a guy in a Nazi uniform approached her with a poker in his hand and a grin on his face), he saw it again:

6,000,000.

His headache got worse. His mouth went dry. Dimly, from some distance, he heard Foxy saying he had to go in for supper. Todd asked Foxy if he could stay here in the garage and read while Foxy ate. Foxy gave him a look of mild puzzlement, shrugged, and said sure. And Todd read, hunched over the boxes of the old true war magazines, until his mother called and asked if he was ever going to go home.

*Like a key turning in a lock.*

All the magazines said it was bad, what had happened. But all the stories were continued at the back of the book, and when you turned to those pages, the words saying it was bad were surrounded by ads, and these ads sold German knives and belts and helmets as well as Magic Trusses and Guaranteed Hair Restorer. These ads sold German flags emblazoned with swastikas and Nazi Lugers and a game called Panzer Attack as well as correspondence lessons and offers to make you rich selling elevator shoes to short men. They said it was bad, but it seemed like a lot of people must not mind.

*Like falling in love.*

Oh yes, he remembered that day very well. He remembered everything about it—a yellowing pin-up calendar for a defunct year on the back wall, the oil-stain on the cement floor, the way the magazines had been tied together with orange twine. He remembered how his headache had gotten a little worse each time he thought of that incredible number,

6,000,000.

He remembered thinking: *I want to know about everything that happened in those places. Everything. And I want to know which is*

*more true—the words, or the ads they put beside the words.*

He remembered Bugs Anderson as he at last pushed the boxes back under the stairs and thought: *She was right. I've found my GREAT INTEREST.*

Dussander looked at Todd for a long time. Then he crossed the living room and sat down heavily in a rocking chair. He looked at Todd again, unable to analyze the slightly dreamy, slightly nostalgic expression on the boy's face.

"Yeah. It was the magazines that got me interested, but I figured a lot of what they said was just, you know, bullshit. So I went to the library and found out a lot more stuff. Some of it was even neater. At first the crummy librarian didn't want me to look at any of it because it was in the adult section of the library, but I told her it was for school. If it's for school they have to let you have it. She called my dad, though." Todd's eyes turned up scornfully. "Like she thought Dad didn't know what I was doing, if you can dig that."

"He did know?"

"Sure. My dad thinks kids should find out about life as soon as they can—the bad as well as the good. Then they'll be ready for it. He says life is a tiger you have to grab by the tail, and if you don't know the nature of the beast it will eat you up."

"Mmmm," Dussander said.

"My mom thinks the same way."

"Mmmmm." Dussander looked dazed, not quite sure where he was.

"Anyhow," Todd said, "the library stuff was real good. They must have had a hundred books with stuff in them about the Nazi concentration camps, just here in the Santo Donato library. A *lot* of people must like to read about that stuff. There weren't as many pictures as in Foxy's dad's magazines, but the other stuff was real gooshy. Chairs with spikes sticking up through the seats. Pulling out gold teeth with pliers. Poison gas that came out of the showers." Todd shook his head. "You guys just went overboard, you know that? You really did."

“Gooshy,” Dussander said heavily.

“I really *did* do a research paper, and you know what I got on it? An A-plus. Of course I had to be careful. You have to write that stuff in a certain way. You got to be careful.”

“Do you?” Dussander asked. He took another cigarette with a hand that trembled.

“Oh yeah. All those library books, they read a certain way. Like the guys who wrote them got puking sick over what they were writing about.” Todd was frowning, wrestling with the thought, trying to bring it out. The fact that *tone*, as that word is applied to writing, wasn’t yet in his vocabulary, made it more difficult. “They all write like they lost a lot of sleep over it. How we’ve got to be careful so nothing like that ever happens again. I made my paper like that, and I guess the teacher gave me an A just cause I read the source material without losing my lunch.” Once more, Todd smiled winningly.

Dussander dragged heavily on his unfiltered Kool. The tip trembled slightly. As he feathered smoke out of his nostrils, he coughed an old man’s dank, hollow cough. “I can hardly believe this conversation is taking place,” he said. He leaned forward and peered closely at Todd. “Boy, do you know the word ‘existentialism’?”

Todd ignored the question. “Did you ever meet Ilse Koch?”

“Ilse Koch?” Almost inaudibly, Dussander said: “Yes, I met her.”

“Was she beautiful?” Todd asked eagerly. “I mean . . .” His hands described an hourglass in the air.

“Surely you have seen her photograph?” Dussander asked. “An aficionado such as yourself?”

“What’s an af ... aff...”

“An aficionado,” Dussander said, “is one who grooves. One who... gets off on something.”

“Yeah? Cool.” Todd’s grin, puzzled and weak for a moment, shone out triumphantly again. “Sure, I’ve seen her picture. But you know how they are in those books.” He spoke as if Dussander had them all. “Black and white, fuzzy . . . just snapshots. None of those guys knew they were taking pictures for, you know, *history*. Was she really stacked?”

“She was fat and dumpy and she had bad skin,” Dussander said shortly. He crushed his cigarette out half-smoked in a Table Talk pie-dish filled with dead butts.

“Oh. Golly.” Todd’s face fell.

“Just luck,” Dussander mused, looking at Todd. “You saw my picture in a war-adventures magazine and happened to ride next to me on the bus. *Tcha!*” He brought a fist down on the arm of his chair, but without much force.

“No sir, Mr. Dussander. There was more to it than that. A *lot*,” Todd added earnestly, leaning forward.

“Oh? Really?” The bushy eyebrows rose, signalling polite disbelief.

“Sure. I mean, the pictures of you in my scrapbook were all thirty years old, at least. I mean, it is 1974.”

“You keep a ... a scrapbook?”

“Oh, yes, sir! It’s a good one. Hundreds of pictures. I’ll show it to you sometime. You’ll go ape.”

Dussander’s face pulled into a revolted grimace, but he said nothing.

“The first couple of times I saw you, I wasn’t sure at all. And then you got on the bus one day when it was raining, and you had this shiny black slicker on—”

“That,” Dussander breathed.

“Sure. There was a picture of you in a coat like that in one of the magazines out in Foxy’s garage. Also, a photo of you in your SS greatcoat in one of the library books. And when I saw you that day, I just said to myself, ‘It’s for sure. That’s Kurt Dussander.’ So I started to shadow you—”

“You did *what*?”

“Shadow you. Follow you. My ambition is to be a private detective like Sam Spade in the books, or Mannix on TV. Anyway, I was super careful. I didn’t want you to get wise. Want to look at some pictures?”

Todd took a folded-over manila envelope from his back pocket. Sweat had stuck the flap down. He peeled it back carefully. His eyes were sparkling like a boy thinking about his birthday, or Christmas, or the firecrackers he will shoot off on the Fourth of July.

“*You took pictures of me?*”

“Oh, you bet. I got this little camera. A Kodak. It’s thin and flat and fits right into your hand. Once you get the hang of it, you can take pictures of the subject just by holding the camera in your hand and spreading your fingers enough to let the lens peek through. Then you hit the button with your thumb.” Todd laughed modestly. “I got the hang of it, but I took a lot of pictures of my fingers while I did. I hung right in there, though. I think a person can do anything if they try hard enough, you know it? It’s corny but true.”

Kurt Dussander had begun to look white and ill, shrunken inside his robe. “Did you have these pictures finished by a commercial developer, boy?”

“Huh?” Todd looked shocked and startled, then contemptuous. “No! What do you think I am, stupid? My dad’s got a darkroom. I’ve been developing my own pictures since I was nine.”

Dussander said nothing, but he relaxed a little and some color came back into his face.

Todd handed him several glossy prints, the rough edges confirming that they had been home-developed. Dussander went through them, silently grim. Here he was sitting erect in a window seat of the downtown bus, with a copy of the latest James Michener, *Centennial*, in his hands. Here he was at the Devon Avenue bus stop, his umbrella under his arm and his head cocked back at an angle which suggested De Gaulle at his most imperial. Here he was standing on line just under the marquee of the Majestic Theater, erect and silent, conspicuous among the leaning teenagers and blank-faced housewives in curlers by his height and his bearing. Finally, here he was peering into his own mailbox.

“I was scared you might see me on that one,” Todd said. “It was a calculated risk. I was right across the street. Boy oh boy, I wish I could afford a Minolta with a telephoto lens. Someday ...” Todd looked wistful.

“No doubt you had a story ready, just in case.”

“I was going to ask you if you’d seen my dog. Anyway, after I developed the pix, I compared them to these.”

He handed Dussander three Xeroxed photographs. He had seen them all before, many times. The first showed him in his office at the

Patin resettlement camp; it had been cropped so nothing showed but him and the Nazi flag on its stand by his desk. The second was a picture that had been taken on the day of his enlistment. The last showed him shaking hands with Heinrich Gluecks, who had been subordinate only to Himmler himself.

“I was pretty sure then, but I couldn’t see if you had the harelip because of your goshdamn moustache. But I had to be sure, so I got this.”

He handed over the last sheet from his envelope. It had been folded over many times. Dirt was grimed into the creases. The corners were lopped and milled—the way papers get when they spend a long time in the pockets of young boys who have no shortage of things to do and places to go. It was a copy of the Israeli want-sheet on Kurt Dussander. Holding it in his hands, Dussander reflected on corpses that were unquiet and refused to stay buried.

“I took your fingerprints,” Todd said, smiling. “And then I did the compares to the one on the sheet.”

Dussander gaped at him and then uttered the German word for shit. “You did not!”

“Sure I did. My mom and dad gave me a fingerprint set for Christmas last year. A real one, not just a toy. It had the powder and three brushes for three different surfaces and special paper for lifting them. My folks know I want to be a PI when I grow up. Of course, they think I’ll grow out of it.” He dismissed this idea with a disinterested lift and drop of his shoulders. “The book explained all about whorls and lands and points of similarity. They’re called *compares*. You need eight compares for a fingerprint to get accepted in court.

“So anyway, one day when you were at the movies, I came here and dusted your mailbox and doorknob and lifted all the prints I could. Pretty smart, huh?”

Dussander said nothing. He was clutching the arms of his chair, and his toothless, deflated mouth was trembling. Todd didn’t like that. It made him look like he was on the verge of tears. That, of course, was ridiculous. The Blood-Fiend of Patin in tears? You might as well

expect Chevrolet to go bankrupt or McDonald's to give up burgers and start selling caviar and truffles.

"I got two sets of prints," Todd said. "One of them didn't look anything like the ones on the wanted poster. I figured those were the postman's. The rest were yours. I found more than eight compares. I found fourteen good ones." He grinned. "And that's how I did it."

"You are a little *bastard*," Dussander said, and for a moment his eyes shone dangerously. Todd felt a tingling little thrill, as he had in the hall. Then Dussander slumped back again.

"Whom have you told?"

"No one."

"Not even this friend? This Cony Pegler?"

"Foxy. Foxy Pegler. Nah, he's a blabbermouth. I haven't told anybody. There's nobody I trust that much."

"What do you want? Money? There is none, I'm afraid. In South America there was, although it was nothing as romantic or dangerous as the drug trade. There is—there was—a kind of 'old boy network' in Brazil and Paraguay and Santo Domingo. Fugitives from the war. I became part of their circle and did modestly well in minerals and ores—tin, copper, bauxite, Then the changes came. Nationalism, anti-Americanism. I might have ridden out the changes, but then Wiesenthal's men caught my scent. Bad luck follows bad luck, boy, like dogs after a bitch in heat. Twice they almost had me; once I heard the Jew-bastards in the next room.

"They hanged Eichmann," he whispered. One hand went to his neck, and his eyes had become as round as the eyes of a child listening to the darkest passage of a scary tale—"Hansel and Gretel," perhaps, or "Bluebeard." "He was an old man, of no danger to anyone. He was apolitical. Still, they hanged him."

Todd nodded.

"At last, I went to the only people who could help me. They had helped others, and I could run no more."

"You went to the Odessa?" Todd asked eagerly.

"To the Sicilians," Dussander said dryly, and Todd's face fell again. "It was arranged. False papers, false past. Would you care for a drink, boy?"

“Sure. You got a Coke?”

“No Coke.” He pronounced it *Kök*.

“Milk?”

“Milk.” Dussander went through the archway and into the kitchen. A fluorescent bar buzzed into life. “I live now on stock dividends,” his voice came back. “Stocks I picked up after the war under yet another name. Through a bank in the State of Maine, if you please. The banker who bought them for me went to jail for murdering his wife a year after I bought them... life is sometimes strange, boy, *hein?*”

A refrigerator door opened and closed.

“The Sicilian jackals didn’t know about those stocks,” he said. “Today the Sicilians are everywhere, but in those days, Boston was as far north as they could be found. If they had known, they would have had those as well. They would have picked me clean and sent me to America to starve on welfare and food stamps.”

Todd heard a cupboard door opened; he heard liquid poured into a glass.

“A little General Motors, a little American Telephone and Telegraph, a hundred and fifty shares of Revlon. All this banker’s choices. Dufresne, his name was—I remember, because it sounds a little like mine. It seems he was not so smart at wife-killing as he was at picking growth stocks. The *crime passionel*, boy. It only proves that all men are donkeys who can read.”

He came back into the room, slippers whispering. He held two green plastic glasses that looked like the premiums they sometimes gave out at gas station openings. When you filled your tank, you got a free glass. Dussander thrust a glass at Todd.

“I lived adequately on the stock portfolio this Dufresne had set up for me for the first five years I was here. But then I sold my Diamond Match stock in order to buy this house and a small cottage not far from Big Sur. Then, inflation. Recession. I sold the cottage and one by one I sold the stocks, many of them at fantastic profits. I wish to God I had bought more. But I thought I was well-protected in other directions; the stocks were, as you Americans say, a ‘flier...’ ” He made a toothless hissing sound and snapped his fingers.

Todd was bored. He had not come here to listen to Dussander whine about his money or mutter about his stocks. The thought of blackmailing Dussander had never even crossed Todd's mind. Money? What would he do with it? He had his allowance; he had his paper route. If his monetary needs went higher than what these could provide during any given week, there was always someone who needed his lawn mowed.

Todd lifted his milk to his lips and then hesitated. His smile shone out again... an admiring smile. He extended the gas station premium glass to Dussander.

"*You* have some of it," he said slyly.

Dussander stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending, and then rolled his bloodshot eyes. "*Grüss Gott!*" He took the glass, swallowed twice, and handed it back. "No gasping for breath. No clawing at the t'roat. No smell of bitter almonds. It is milk, boy. *Milk*. From the Dairylea Farms. On the carton is a picture of a smiling cow."

Todd watched him warily for a moment, then took a small sip. Yes, it tasted like milk, sure did, but somehow he didn't feel very thirsty anymore. He put the glass down. Dussander shrugged, raised his own glass, and took a swallow. He smacked his lips over it.

"*Schnaps?*" Todd asked.

"Bourbon. Ancient Age. Very nice. And cheap."

Todd fiddled his fingers along the seams of his jeans.

"So," Dussander said, "if you have decided to have a 'flier' of your own, you should be aware that you have picked a worthless stock."

"Huh?"

"Blackmail," Dussander said. "Isn't that what they call it on *Mannix* and *Hawaii Five-O* and *Barnaby Jones*? Extortion. If that was what —"

But Todd was laughing—hearty, boyish laughter. He shook his head, tried to speak, could not, and went on laughing.

"No," Dussander said, and suddenly he looked gray and more frightened than he had since he and Todd had begun to speak. He took another large swallow of his drink, grimaced, and shuddered. "I see that is not it ... at least, not the extortion of money. But, though

you laugh, I smell extortion in it somewhere. What is it? Why do you come here and disturb an old man? Perhaps, as you say, I was once a Nazi. SS, even. Now I am only old, and to have a bowel movement I have to use a suppository. So what do you want?"

Todd had sobered again. He stared at Dussander with an open and appealing frankness. "Why . . . I want to hear about it. That's all. That's all I want. Really."

"Hear about it?" Dussander echoed. He looked utterly perplexed.

Todd leaned forward, tanned elbows on bluejeaned knees. "Sure. The firing squads. The gas chambers. The ovens. The guys who had to dig their own graves and then stand on the ends so they'd fall into them. The ..." His tongue came out and wetted his lips. "The examinations. The experiments. Everything. All the gooshy stuff."

Dussander stared at him with a certain amazed detachment, the way a veterinarian might stare at a cat who was giving birth to a succession of two-headed kittens. "You are a monster," he said softly.

Todd sniffed. "According to the books I read for my report, you're the monster, Mr. Dussander. Not me. You sent them to the ovens, not me. Two thousand a day at Patin before you came, three thousand after, thirty-five hundred before the Russians came and made you stop. Himmler called you an efficiency expert and gave you a medal. So you call me a monster. Oh *boy*."

"All of that is a filthy American lie," Dussander said, stung. He set his glass down with a bang, slopping bourbon onto his hand and the table. "The problem was not of my making, nor was the solution. I was given orders and directives, which I followed."

Todd's smile widened; it was now almost a smirk.

"Oh, I know how the Americans have distorted that," Dussander muttered. "But your own politicians make our Dr. Goebbels look like a child playing with picture books in a kindergarten. They speak of morality while they douse screaming children and old women in burning napalm. Your draft-resisters are called cowards and 'peaceniks.' For refusing to follow orders they are either put in jails or scourged from the country. Those who demonstrate against this country's unfortunate Asian adventure are clubbed down in the

streets. The GI soldiers who kill the innocent are decorated by Presidents, welcomed home from the bayoneting of children and the burning of hospitals with parades and bunting. They are given dinners, Keys to the City, free tickets to pro football games.” He toasted his glass in Todd’s direction. “Only those who lose are tried as war criminals for following orders and directives.” He drank and then had a coughing fit that brought thin color to his cheeks.

Through most of this Todd fidgeted the way he did when his parents discussed whatever had been on the news that night—good old Walter Klondike, his dad called him. He didn’t care about Dussander’s politics any more than he cared about Dussander’s stocks. His idea was that people made up politics so they could do things. Like when he wanted to feel around under Sharon Ackerman’s dress last year. Sharon said it was bad for him to want to do that, even though he could tell from her tone of voice that the idea sort of excited her. So he told her he wanted to be a doctor when he grew up and then she let him. That was politics. He wanted to hear about German doctors trying to mate women with dogs, putting identical twins into refrigerators to see whether they would die at the same time or if one of them would last longer, and electroshock therapy, and operations without anesthetic, and German soldiers raping all the women they wanted. The rest was just so much tired bullshit to cover up the gooshy stuff after someone came along and put a stop to it.

“If I hadn’t followed orders, I would have been dead.” Dussander was breathing hard, his upper body rocking back and forth in the chair, making the springs squeak. A little cloud of liquor-smell hung around him. “There was always the Russian front, *nicht wahr?* Our leaders were madmen, granted, but does one argue with madmen... especially when the maddest of them all has the luck of Satan. He escaped a brilliant assassination attempt by inches. Those who conspired were strangled with piano-wire, strangled slowly. Their death-agonies were filmed for the edification of the elite—”

“Yeah! Neat!” Todd cried impulsively. “Did you see that movie?”

“Yes. I saw. We all saw what happened to those unwilling or unable to run before the wind and wait for the storm to end. What we

did then was the right thing. For that time and that place, it was the right thing. I would do it again. But . . .”

His eyes dropped to his glass. It was empty.

“... but I don’t wish to speak of it, or even think of it. What we did was motivated only by survival, and nothing about survival is pretty. I had dreams . . .” He slowly took a cigarette from the box on the TV. “Yes. For years I had them. Blackness, and sounds in the blackness. Tractor engines. Bulldozer engines. Gunbutts thudding against what might have been frozen earth, or human skulls. Whistles, sirens, pistol-shots, screams. The doors of cattle-cars rumbling open on cold winter afternoons.

“Then, in my dreams, all sounds would stop—and eyes would open in the dark, gleaming like the eyes of animals in a rainforest. For many years I lived on the edge of the jungle, and I suppose that is why it is always the jungle I smelled and felt in those dreams. When I woke from them I would be drenched with sweat, my heart thundering in my chest, my hand stuffed into my mouth to stifle the screams. And I would think: *The dream is the truth*. Brazil, Paraguay, Cuba... those places are the dream. In the reality I am still at Patin. The Russians are closer today than yesterday. Some of them are remembering that in 1943 they had to eat frozen German corpses to stay alive. Now they long to drink hot German blood. There were rumors, boy, that some of them did just that when they crossed into Germany: cut the t’roats of some prisoners and drank their blood out of a boot. I would wake up and think: *The work must go on, if only so there is no evidence of what we did here, or so little that the world, which doesn’t want to believe it, won’t have to*. I would think: *The work must go on if we are to survive.*”

Todd listened to this with close attention and great interest. This was pretty good, but he was sure there would be better stuff in the days ahead. All Dussander needed was a little prodding. Heck, he was lucky. Lots of men his age were senile.

Dussander dragged deeply on his cigarette. “Later, after the dreams went away, there were days when I would think I had seen someone from Patin. Never guards or fellow officers, always inmates. I remember one afternoon in West Germany, ten years ago.

There was an accident on the Autobahn. Traffic was frozen in every lane. I sat in my Morris, listening to the radio, waiting for the traffic to move. I looked to my right. There was a very old Simca in the next lane, and the man behind the wheel was looking at me. He was perhaps fifty, and he looked ill. There was a scar on his cheek. His hair was white, short, cut badly. I looked away. The minutes passed and still the traffic didn't move. I began snatching glances at the man in the Simca. Every time I did, he was looking at me, his face as still as death, his eyes sunken in their sockets. I became convinced he had been at Patin. He had been there and he had recognized me."

Dussander wiped a hand across his eyes.

"It was winter. The man was wearing an overcoat. But I was convinced that if I got out of my car and went to him, made him take off his coat and push up his shirtsleeves, I would see the number on his arm.

"At last the traffic began to move again. I pulled away from the Simca. If the jam had lasted another ten minutes, I believe I would have gotten out of my car and pulled the old man out of his. I would have beaten him, number or no number. I would have beaten him for looking at me that way.

"Shortly after that, I left Germany forever."

"Lucky for you," Todd said.

Dussander shrugged. "It was the same everywhere. Havana, Mexico City, Rome. I was in Rome for three years, you know. I would see a man looking at me over his *cappuccino* in a café ... a woman in a hotel lobby who seemed more interested in me than in her magazine... a waiter in a restaurant who would keep glancing at me no matter whom he was serving. I would become convinced that these people were studying me, and that night the dream would come—the sounds, the jungle, the eyes.

"But when I came to America I put it out of my mind. I go to movies. I eat out once a week, always at one of those fast-food places that are so clean and so well-lighted by fluorescent bars. Here at my house I do jigsaw puzzles and I read novels—most of them bad ones—and watch TV. At night I drink until I'm sleepy. The dreams don't come anymore. When I see someone looking at me in

the supermarket or the library or the tobacconist's, I think it must be because I look like their grandfather... or an old teacher... or a neighbor in a town they left some years ago." He shook his head at Todd. "Whatever happened at Patin, it happened to another man. Not to me."

"Great!" Todd said. "I want to hear all about it."

Dussander's eyes squeezed closed, and then opened slowly. "You don't understand. I do not wish to speak of it."

"You will, though. If you don't, I'll tell everyone who you are."

Dussander stared at him, gray-faced. "I knew," he said, "that I would find the extortion sooner or later."

"Today I want to hear about the gas ovens," Todd said. "How you baked them after they were dead." His smile beamed out, rich and radiant. "But put your teeth in before you start. You look better with your teeth in."

Dussander did as he was told. He talked to Todd about the gas ovens until Todd had to go home for lunch. Every time he tried to slip over into generalities, Todd would frown severely and ask him specific questions to get him back on the track. Dussander drank a great deal as he talked. He didn't smile. Todd smiled. Todd smiled enough for both of them.

## 2

August, 1974.

They sat on Dussander's back porch under a cloudless, smiling sky. Todd was wearing jeans, Keds, and his Little League shirt. Dussander was wearing a baggy gray shirt and shapeless khaki pants held up with suspenders—wino-pants, Todd thought with private contempt; they looked like they had come straight from a box in the back of the Salvation Army store downtown. He was really going to have to do something about the way Dussander dressed when he was at home. It spoiled some of the fun.

The two of them were eating Big Macs that Todd had brought in his bike-basket, pedaling fast so they wouldn't get cold. Todd was sipping a Coke through a plastic straw. Dussander had a glass of bourbon.

His old man's voice rose and fell, papery, hesitant, sometimes nearly inaudible. His faded blue eyes, threaded with the usual snaps of red, were never still. An observer might have thought them grandfather and grandson, the latter perhaps attending some rite of passage, a handing down.

"And that's all I remember," Dussander finished presently, and took a large bite of his sandwich. McDonald's Secret Sauce dribbled down his chin.

"You can do better than that," Todd said softly.

Dussander took a large swallow from his glass. "The uniforms were made of paper," he said finally, almost snarling.

"When one inmate died, the uniform was passed on if it could still be worn. Sometimes one paper uniform could dress as many as forty inmates. I received high marks for my frugality."

"From Gluecks?"

"From Himmler."

"But there was a clothing factory in Patin. You told me that just last week. Why didn't you have the uniforms made there? The inmates themselves could have made them."

"The job of the factory in Patin was to make uniforms for German soldiers. And as for us ..." Dussander's voice faltered for a moment, and then he forced himself to go on. "We were not in the business of rehabilitation," he finished.

Todd smiled his broad smile.

"Enough for today? Please? My throat is sore."

"You shouldn't smoke so much, then," Todd said, continuing to smile. "Tell me some more about the uniforms."

"Which? Inmate or SS?" Dussander's voice was resigned.

Smiling, Todd said: "Both."

September, 1974.

Todd was in the kitchen of his house, making himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. You got to the kitchen by going up half a dozen redwood steps to a raised area that gleamed with chrome and stainless steel. His mother's electric typewriter had been going steadily ever since Todd had gotten home from school. She was typing a master's thesis for a grad student. The grad student had short hair, wore thick glasses, and looked like a creature from outer space, in Todd's humble opinion. The thesis was on the effect of fruit-flies in the Salinas Valley after World War II, or some good shit like that. Now her typewriter stopped and she came out of her office.

"Todd-baby," she greeted him.

"Monica-baby," he hailed back, amiably enough.

His mother wasn't a bad-looking chick for thirty-six, Todd thought; blonde hair that was streaked ash in a couple of places, tall, shapely, now dressed in dark red shorts and a sheer blouse of a warm whiskey color—the blouse was casually knotted below her breasts, putting her flat, unlined midriff on show. A typewriter eraser was tucked into her hair, which had been pinned carelessly back with a turquoise clip.

"So how's school?" she asked him, coming up the steps into the kitchen. She brushed his lips casually with hers and then slid onto one of the stools in front of the breakfast counter.

"School's cool."

"Going to be on the honor roll again?"

"Sure." Actually, he thought his grades might slip a notch this first quarter. He had been spending a lot of time with Dussander, and when he wasn't actually with the old kraut, he was thinking about the things Dussander had told him. Once or twice he had dreamed about the things Dussander had told him. But it was nothing he couldn't handle.

"Apt pupil," she said, ruffling his shaggy blonde hair. "How's that sandwich?"

“Good,” he said.

“Would you make me one and bring it into my office?”

“Can’t,” he said, getting up. “I promised Mr. Denker I’d come over and read to him for an hour or so.”

“Are you still on *Robinson Crusoe*?”

“Nope.” He showed her the spine of a thick book he had bought in a junkshop for twenty cents. “*Tom Jones*.”

“Ye gods and little fishes! It’ll take you the whole school-year to get through that, Toddy-baby. Couldn’t you at least find an abridged edition, like with *Crusoe*?”

“Probably, but he wanted to hear all of this one. He said so.”

“Oh.” She looked at him for a moment, then hugged him. It was rare for her to be so demonstrative, and it made Todd a little uneasy. “You’re a peach to be taking so much of your spare time to read to him. Your father and I think it’s just . . . just exceptional.”

Todd cast his eyes down modestly.

“And to not want to tell anybody,” she said. “Hiding your light under a bushel.”

“Oh, the kids I hang around with—they’d probably think I was some kind of weirdo,” Todd said, smiling modestly down at the floor. “All that good shit.”

“Don’t say that,” she admonished absently. Then: “Do you think Mr. Denker would like to come over and have dinner with us some night?”

“Maybe,” Todd said vaguely. “Listen, I gotta put an egg in my shoe and beat it.”

“Okay. Supper at six-thirty. Don’t forget.”

“I won’t.”

“Your father’s got to work late so it’ll just be me and thee again, okay?”

“Crazy, baby.”

She watched him go with a fond smile, hoping there was nothing in *Tom Jones* he shouldn’t be reading; he was only thirteen. She didn’t suppose there was. He was growing up in a society where magazines like *Penthouse* were available to anyone with a dollar and a quarter, or to any kid who could reach up to the top shelf of the

magazine rack and grab a quick peek before the clerk could shout for him to put that up and get lost. In a society that seemed to believe most of all in the creed of hump thy neighbor, she didn't think there could be much in a book two hundred years old to screw up Todd's head—although she supposed the old man might get off on it a little. And as Richard liked to say, for a kid the whole world's a laboratory. You have to let them poke around in it. And if the kid in question has a healthy home life and loving parents, he'll be all the stronger for having knocked around a few strange corners.

And there went the healthiest kid she knew, pedaling up the street on his Schwinn. *We did okay by the lad*, she thought, turning to make her sandwich. *Damned if we didn't do okay.*

## 4

October, 1974.

Dussander had lost weight. They sat in the kitchen, the shopworn copy of *Tom Jones* between them on the oilcloth-covered table (Todd, who tried never to miss a trick, had purchased the Cliff's Notes on the book with part of his allowance and had carefully read the entire summary against the possibility that his mother or father might ask him questions about the plot). Todd was eating a Ring Ding he had bought at the market. He had bought one for Dussander, but Dussander hadn't touched it. He only looked at it morosely from time to time as he drank his bourbon. Todd hated to see anything as tasty as Ring Dings go to waste. If he didn't eat it pretty quick, Todd was going to ask him if he could have it.

"So how did the stuff get to Patin?" he asked Dussander.

"In railroad cars," Dussander said. "In railroad cars labelled MEDICAL SUPPLIES. It came in long crates that looked like coffins. Fitting, I suppose. The inmates off-loaded the crates and stacked them in the infirmary. Later, our own men stacked them in the

storage sheds. They did it at night. The storage sheds were behind the showers.”

“Was it always Zyklon-B?”

“No, from time to time we would be sent something else. Experimental gases. The High Command was always interested in improving efficiency. Once they sent us a gas code-named PEGASUS. A nerve-gas. Thank God they never sent it again. It—” Dussander saw Todd lean forward, saw those eyes sharpen, and he suddenly stopped and gestured casually with his gas station premium glass. “It didn’t work very well,” he said. “It was... quite boring.”

But Todd was not fooled, not in the least. “What did it do?”

“It killed them—what did you think it did, made them walk on water? It killed them, that’s all.”

“Tell me.”

“No,” Dussander said, now unable to hide the horror he felt. He hadn’t thought of PEGASUS in ... how long? Ten years? Twenty? “I won’t tell you! I refuse!”

“Tell me,” Todd repeated, licking chocolate icing from his fingers. “Tell me or you know what.”

Yes, Dussander thought. *I know what. Indeed I do, you putrid little monster.*

“It made them dance,” he said reluctantly.

“Dance?”

“Like the Zyklon-B, it came in through the shower-heads. And they... they began to leap about. Some were screaming. Most of them were laughing. They began to vomit, and to ... to defecate helplessly.”

“Wow,” Todd said. “Shit themselves, huh?” He pointed at the Ring Ding on Dussander’s plate. He had finished his own.

“You going to eat that?”

Dussander didn’t reply. His eyes were hazed with memory. His face was far away and cold, like the dark side of a planet which does not rotate. Inside his mind he felt the *queerest* combination of revulsion and—could it be?—*nostalgia*?

“They began to twitch all over and to make high, strange sounds in their throats. My men... they called PEGASUS the Yodeling Gas. At last they all collapsed and just lay there on the floor in their own filth, they lay there, yes, they lay there on the concrete, screaming and yodeling, with bloody noses. But I lied, boy. The gas didn’t kill them, either because it wasn’t strong enough or because we couldn’t bring ourselves to wait long enough. I suppose it was that. Men and women like that could not have lived long. Finally I sent in five men with rifles to end their agonies. It would have looked bad on my record if it had shown up, I’ve no doubt of that—it would have looked like a waste of cartridges at a time when the Fuehrer had declared every cartridge a national resource. But those five men I trusted. There were times, boy, when I thought I would never forget the sound they made. The yodeling sound. The laughing.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Todd said. He finished Dussander’s Ring Ding in two bites. Waste not, want not, Todd’s mother said on the rare occasions when Todd complained about left-overs. “That was a good story, Mr. Dussander. You always tell them good. Once I get you going.”

Todd smiled at him. And incredibly—certainly not because he wanted to—Dussander found himself smiling back.

## 5

November, 1974.

Dick Bowden, Todd’s father, looked remarkably like a movie and TV actor named Lloyd Bochner. He—Bowden. not Bochner—was thirty-eight. He was a thin, narrow man who liked to dress in Ivy League-style shirts and solid-color suits, usually dark. When he was on a construction site, he wore khakis and a hard-hat that was a souvenir of his Peace Corps days, when he had helped to design and build two dams in Africa. When he was working in his study at home, he wore half-glasses that had a way of slipping down to the end of his nose and making him look like a college dean. He was

wearing these glasses now as he tapped his son's first-quarter report card against his desk's gleaming glass top.

"One B. Four C's. One D. A *D*, for Christ's sake! Todd, your mother's not showing it, but she's really upset."

Todd dropped his eyes. He didn't smile. When his dad swore, that wasn't exactly the best of news.

"My God, you've *never* gotten a report like this. A D in Beginning Algebra? What is this?"

"I don't know, Dad." He looked humbly at his knees.

"Your mother and I think that maybe you've been spending a little too much time with Mr. Denker. Not hitting the books enough. We think you ought to cut it down to weekends, slugger. At least until we see where you're going academically . . ."

Todd looked up, and for a single second Bowden thought he saw a wild, pallid anger in his son's eyes. His own eyes widened, his fingers clenched on Todd's buff-colored report card... and then it was just Todd, looking at him openly if rather unhappily. Had that anger really been there? Surely not. But the moment had unsettled him, made it hard for him to know exactly how to proceed. Todd hadn't been mad, and Dick Bowden didn't want to *make* him mad. He and his son were friends, always had been friends, and Dick wanted things to stay that way. They had no secrets from each other, none at all (except for the fact that Dick Bowden was sometimes unfaithful with his secretary, but that wasn't exactly the sort of thing you told your thirteen-year-old son, was it? ... and besides, that had absolutely no bearing on his home life, his *family* life). That was the way it was supposed to be, the way it *had* to be in a cockamamie world where murderers went unpunished, high school kids skin-popped heroin, and junior high schoolers—kids Todd's age—turned up with VD.

"No, Dad, please don't do that. I mean, don't punish Mr. Denker for something that's my fault. I mean, he'd be lost without me. I'll do better. Really. That algebra... it just threw me to start with. But I went over to Ben Tremaine's, and after we studied together for a few days, I started to get it. I just . . . I dunno, I sorta choked at first."

“I think you’re spending too much time with him,” Bowden said, but he was weakening. It was hard to refuse Todd, hard to disappoint him, and what he said about punishing the old man for Todd’s falling-off... goddammit, it made sense. The old man looked forward to his visits so much.

“That Mr. Storrman, the algebra teacher, is really hard,” Todd said. “Lots of kids got D’s. Three or four got F’s.”

Bowden nodded thoughtfully.

“I won’t go Wednesdays anymore. Not until I bring my grades up.” He had read his father’s eyes. “And instead of going out for anything at school, I’ll stay after every day and study. I promise.”

“You really like the old guy that much?”

“He’s really neat,” Todd said sincerely.

“Well . . . okay. We’ll try it your way, slugger. But I want to see a big improvement in your marks come January, you understand me? I’m thinking of your future. You may think junior high’s too soon to start thinking about that, but it’s not. Not by a long chalk.” As his mother liked to say *Waste not, want not*, so Dick Bowden liked to say *Not by a long chalk*.

“I understand, Dad,” Todd said gravely. Man-to-man stuff.

“Get out of here and give those books a workout then.” He pushed his half-glasses up on his nose and clapped Todd on the shoulder.

Todd’s smile, broad and bright, broke across his face. “Right on, Dad!”

Bowden watched Todd go with a prideful smile of his own. One in a million. And that hadn’t been anger on Todd’s face. For sure. Pique, maybe... but not that high-voltage emotion he had at first thought he’d seen there. If Todd was that mad, he would have known; he could read his son like a book. It had always been that way.

Whistling, his fatherly duty discharged, Dick Bowden unrolled a blueprint and bent over it.

December, 1974.

The face that came in answer to Todd's insistent finger on the bell was haggard and yellowed. The hair, which had been lush in July, had now begun to recede from the bony brow; it looked lusterless and brittle. Dussander's body, thin to begin with, was now gaunt... although, Todd thought, he was nowhere near as gaunt as the inmates who had once been delivered into his hands.

Todd's left hand had been behind his back when Dussander came to the door. Now he brought it out and handed a wrapped package to Dussander. "Merry Christmas!" he yelled.

Dussander had cringed from the box; now he took it with no expression of pleasure or surprise. He handled it gingerly, as if it might contain explosive. Beyond the porch, it was raining. It had been raining off and on for almost a week, and Todd had carried the box inside his coat. It was wrapped in gay foil and ribbon.

"What is it?" Dussander asked without enthusiasm as they went to the kitchen.

"Open it and see."

Todd took a can of Coke from his jacket pocket and put it on the red and white checked oilcloth that covered the kitchen table. "Better pull down the shades," he said confidentially.

Distrust immediately leaked onto Dussander's face. "Oh? Why?"

"Well . . . you can never tell who's lookin'," Todd said, smiling. "Isn't that how you got along all those years? By seeing the people who might be lookin before they saw you?"

Dussander pulled down the kitchen shades. Then he poured himself a glass of bourbon. Then he pulled the bow off the package. Todd had wrapped it the way boys so often wrap Christmas packages—boys who have more important things on their minds, things like football and street hockey and the Friday Nite Creature Feature you'll watch with a friend who's sleeping over, the two of you wrapped in a blanket and crammed together on one end of the couch, laughing. There were a lot of ragged corners, a lot of uneven seams, a lot of Scotch tape. It spoke of impatience with such a womanly thing.

Dussander was a little touched in spite of himself. And later, when the horror had receded a little, he thought: *I should have known.*

It was a uniform. An SS uniform. Complete with jackboots. He looked numbly from the contents of the box to its cardboard cover: PETER'S QUALITY COSTUME CLOTHIERS—AT THE SAME LOCATION SINCE 1951!

"No," he said softly. "I won't put it on. This is where it ends, boy. I'll die before I put it on."

"Remember what they did to Eichmann," Todd said solemnly. "He was an old man and he had no politics. Isn't that what you said? Besides, I saved the whole fall for it. It cost over eighty bucks, with the boots thrown in. You didn't mind wearing it in 1944, either. Not at all."

"You little *bastard!*" Dussander raised one fist over his head. Todd didn't flinch at all. He stood his ground, eyes shining.

"Yeah," he said softly. "Go ahead and touch me. You just touch me *once.*"

Dussander lowered the hand. His lips were quivering. "You are a fiend from hell," he muttered.

"Put it on," Todd invited.

Dussander's hands went to the tie of his robe and paused there. His eyes, sheeplike and begging, looked into Todd's. "Please," he said. "I am an old man. No more."

Todd shook his head slowly but firmly. His eyes were still shining. He liked it when Dussander begged. The way they must have begged him once. The inmates at Patin.

Dussander let the robe fall to the floor and stood naked except for his slippers and his boxer shorts. His chest was sunken, his belly slightly bloated. His arms were scrawny old man's arms. But the uniform, Todd thought. The uniform will make a difference.

Slowly, Dussander took the tunic out of the box and began to put it on.

Ten minutes later he stood fully dressed in the SS uniform. The Cap was slightly askew, the shoulders slumped, but still the death's-

head insignia stood out clearly. Dussander had a dark dignity—at least in Todd’s eyes—that he had not possessed earlier. In spite of his slump, in spite of the cockeyed angle of his feet, Todd was pleased. For the first time Dussander looked to Todd as Todd believed he should look. Older, yes. Defeated, certainly. But in uniform again. Not an old man spinning away his sunset years watching Lawrence Welk on a cruddy black and white TV with tinfoil on the rabbit ears, but Kurt Dussander, The Blood-Fiend of Patin.

As for Dussander, he felt disgust, discomfort... and a mild, sneaking sense of relief. He partly despised this latter emotion, recognizing it as the truest indicator yet of the psychological domination the boy had established over him. He was the boy’s prisoner, and every time he found he could live through yet another indignity, every time he felt that mild relief, the boy’s power grew. And yet he *was* relieved. It was only cloth and buttons and snaps . . . and it was a sham at that. The fly was a zipper; it should have been buttons. The marks of rank were wrong, the tailoring sloppy, the boots a cheap grade of imitation leather. It was only a trumpery uniform after all, and it wasn’t exactly *killing* him, was it? No. It—

“Straighten your cap!” Todd said loudly.

Dussander blinked at him, startled.

*“Straighten your cap, soldier!”*

Dussander did so, unconsciously giving it that final small insolent twist that had been the trademark of his *Oberleutnants* —and, sadly wrong as it was, this was an *Oberleutnant’s* uniform.

“Get those feet together!”

He did so, bringing the heels together with a smart rap, doing the correct thing with hardly a thought, doing it as if the intervening years had slipped off along with his bathrobe.

*“Achtung!”*

He snapped to attention, and for a moment Todd was scared—really scared. He felt like the sorcerer’s apprentice, who had brought the brooms to life but who had not possessed enough wit to stop them once they got started. The old man living in genteel poverty was gone. Dussander was here.

Then his fear was replaced by a tingling sense of power.

*“About face!”*

Dussander pivoted neatly, the bourbon forgotten, the torment of the last four months forgotten. He heard his heels click together again as he faced the grease-splattered stove. Beyond it, he could see the dusty parade ground of the military academy where he had learned his soldier’s trade.

*“About face!”*

He whirled again, this time not executing the order as well, losing his balance a little. Once it would have been ten demerits and the butt of a swagger stick in his belly, sending his breath out in a hot and agonized gust. Inwardly he smiled a little. The boy didn’t know all the tricks. No indeed.

*“Now march!”* Todd cried. His eyes were hot, glowing.

The iron went out of Dussander’s shoulders; he slumped forward again. “No,” he said. “Please—”

*“March! March! March, I said!”*

With a strangled sound, Dussander began to goose-step across the faded linoleum of his kitchen floor. He right-faced to avoid the table, right-faced again as he approached the wall. His face was uptilted slightly, expressionless. His legs rammed out before him, then crashed down, making the cheap china rattle in the cabinet over the sink. His arms moved in short arcs.

The image of the walking brooms recurred to Todd, and his fright recurred with it. It suddenly struck him that he didn’t want Dussander to be enjoying any part of this, and that perhaps—just perhaps—he had wanted to make Dussander appear ludicrous even more than he had wanted to make him appear authentic. But somehow, despite the man’s age and the cheap dime-store furnishings of the kitchen, he didn’t look ludicrous in the least. He looked frightening. For the first time the corpses in the ditches and the crematoriums seemed to take on their own reality for Todd. The photographs of the tangled arms and legs and torsos, fishbelly white in the cold spring rains of Germany, were not something staged like a scene in a horror film—a pile of bodies created from department-store dummies, say, to be picked up by the grips and propmen when the scene was done—but simply a real fact, stupendous and inexplicable and evil. For a

moment it seemed to him that he could smell the bland and slightly smoky odor of decomposition.

Terror gathered him in.

“Stop!” he shouted.

Dussander continued to goose-step, his eyes blank and far away. His head had come up even more, pulling the scrawny chicken-tendons of his throat tight, tilting his chin at an arrogant angle. His nose, blade-thin, jutted obscenely.

Todd felt sweat in his armpits. “*Halt!*” he cried out.

Dussander halted, right foot forward, left coming up and then down beside the right with a single pistonlike stamp. For a moment the cold lack of expression held on his face—robotic, mindless—and then it was replaced by confusion. Confusion was followed by defeat. He slumped.

Todd let out a silent breath of relief and for a moment he was furious with himself. *Who’s in charge here, anyway?* Then his self-confidence flooded back in. *I am, that’s who. And he better not forget it.*

He began to smile again. “Pretty good. But with a little practice, I think you’ll be a lot better.”

Dussander stood mute, panting, his head hanging.

“You can take it off now,” Todd added generously... and couldn’t help wondering if he really wanted Dussander to put it on again. For a few seconds there—

## 7

January, 1975.

Todd left school by himself after the last bell, got his bike, and pedaled down to the park. He found a deserted bench, set his Schwinn up on its kickstand, and took his report card out of his hip pocket. He took a look around to see if there was anyone in the area he knew, but the only other people in sight were two high school kids

making out by the pond and a pair of gross-looking winos passing a paper bag back and forth. Dirty fucking winos, he thought, but it wasn't the winos that had upset him. He opened his card.

English: C. American History: C. Earth Science: D. Your Community and You: B. Primary French: F. Beginning Algebra: F.

He stared at the grades, unbelieving. He had known it was going to be bad, but this was disaster.

*Maybe that's best, an inner voice spoke up suddenly. Maybe you even did it on purpose, because a part of you wants it to end. Needs for it to end. Before something bad happens.*

He shoved the thought roughly aside. Nothing bad was going to happen. Dussander was under his thumb. Totally under his thumb. The old man thought one of Todd's friends had a letter, but he didn't know which friend. If anything happened to Todd—*anything*—that letter would go to the police. Once he supposed Dussander might have tried it anyway. Now he was too old to run, even with a head start.

"He's under control, dammit," Todd whispered, and then pounded his thigh hard enough to make the muscle knot. Talking to yourself was bad shit—crazy people talked to themselves. He had picked up the habit over the last six weeks or so, and didn't seem able to break it. He'd caught several people looking at him strangely because of it. A couple of them had been teachers. And that asshole Bernie Everson had come right out and asked him if he was going fruitcrackers. Todd had come very, very close to punching the little pansy in the mouth, and that sort of stuff—brawls, scuffles, punch-outs—was no good. That sort of stuff got you noticed in all the wrong ways. Talking to yourself was bad, right, okay, but—

"The dreams are bad, too," he whispered. He didn't catch himself that time.

Just lately the dreams had been very bad. In the dreams he was always in uniform, although the type varied. Sometimes it was a paper uniform and he was standing in line with hundreds of gaunt men; the smell of burning was in the air and he could hear the choppy roar of bulldozer engines. Then Dussander would come up the line, pointing out this one or that one. They were left. The others

were marched away toward the crematoriums. Some of them kicked and struggled, but most were too undernourished, too exhausted. Then Dussander was standing in front of Todd. Their eyes met for a long, paralyzing moment, and then Dussander levelled a faded umbrella at Todd.

“Take this one to the laboratories,” Dussander said in the dream. His lip curled back to reveal his false teeth. “Take this American boy.”

In another dream he wore an SS uniform. His jackboots were shined to a mirrorlike reflecting surface: The death’s-head insignia and the lightning-bolts glittered. But he was standing in the middle of Santo Donato Boulevard and everyone was looking at him. They began to point. Some of them began to laugh. Others looked shocked, angry, or revolted. In this dream an old car came to a squalling, creaky halt and Dussander peered out at him, a Dussander who looked two hundred years old and nearly mummified, his skin a yellowed scroll.

“I know you!” the dream-Dussander proclaimed shrilly. He looked around at the spectators and then back to Todd. “You were in charge at Patin! Look, everybody! This is The Blood-Fiend of Patin! Himmler’s ‘Efficiency Expert’! I denounce you, murderer! I denounce you, butcher! I denounce you, killer of infants! I denounce you!”

In yet another dream he wore a striped convict’s uniform and was being led down a stone-walled corridor by two guards who looked like his parents. Both wore conspicuous yellow armbands with the Star of David on them. Walking behind them was a minister, reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. Todd looked back over his shoulder and saw that the minister was Dussander, and he was wearing the black tunic of an SS officer.

At the end of the stone corridor, double doors opened on an octagonal room with glass walls. There was a scaffold in the center of it. Behind the glass walls stood ranks of emaciated men and women, all naked, all watching with the same dark, flat expression. On each arm was a blue number.

“It’s all right,” Todd whispered to himself. “It’s okay, really, everything’s under control.”

The couple that had been making out glanced over at him. Todd stared at them fiercely, daring them to say anything. At last they looked back the other way. Had the boy been grinning ?

Todd got up, jammed his report card into his hip pocket, and mounted his bike. He pedaled down to a drugstore two blocks away. There he bought a bottle of ink eradicator and a fine-point pen that dispensed blue ink. He went back to the park (the make-out couple was gone, but the winos were still there, stinking the place up) and changed his English grade to a B, American History to A, Earth Science to B, Primary French to C, and Beginning Algebra to B. You he eradicated and then simply wrote in again, so the card would have a uniform look.

*Uniforms, right.*

“Never mind,” he whispered to himself. “That’ll hold them. That’ll hold them, all right.”

One night late in the month, sometime after two o’clock, Kurt Dussander awoke struggling with the bedclothes, gasping and moaning, into a darkness that seemed close and terrifying. He felt half-suffocated, paralyzed with fear. It was as if a heavy stone lay on his chest, and he wondered if he could be having a heart attack. He clawed in the darkness for the bedside lamp and almost knocked it off the nightstand turning it on.

I’m in my own room, he thought, my own bedroom, here in Santo Donato, here in California, here in America. See, the same brown drapes pulled across the same window, the same bookshelves filled with dime paperbacks from the bookshop on Soren Street, same gray rug, same blue wallpaper. No heart attack. No jungle. No eyes.

But the terror still clung to him like a stinking pelt, and his heart went on racing. The dream had come back. He had known that it would, sooner or later, if the boy kept on. The cursed boy. He thought the boy’s letter of protection was only a bluff, and not a very good one at that; something he had picked up from the TV detective programs. What friend would the boy trust not to open such a momentous letter? No friend, that was who. Or so he thought. If he

could be *sure*—His hands closed with an arthritic, painful snap and then opened slowly.

He took the packet of cigarettes from the table and lit one, scratching the wooden match on the bedpost. The clock's hands stood at 2:41. There would be no more sleep for him this night. He inhaled smoke and then coughed it out in a series of racking spasms. No more sleep unless he wanted to go downstairs and have a drink or two. Or three. And there had been altogether too much drinking over the last six weeks or so. He was no longer a young man who could toss them off one after the other, the way he had when he had been an officer on leave in Berlin in '39, when the scent of victory had been in the air and everywhere you heard the Fuehrer's voice, saw his blazing, commanding eyes—

*The boy . . . the cursed boy!*

“Be honest,” he said aloud, and the sound of his own voice in the quiet room made him jump a little. He was not in the habit of talking to himself, but neither was it the first time he had ever done so. He remembered doing it off and on during the last few weeks at Patin, when everything had come down around their ears and in the east the sound of Russian thunder grew louder first every day and then every hour. It had been natural enough to talk to himself then. He had been under stress, and people under stress often do strange things—cup their testicles through the pockets of their pants, click their teeth together . . . Wolff had been a great teeth-clicker. He grinned as he did it. Huffmann had been a finger-snapper and a thigh-patter, creating fast, intricate rhythms that he seemed utterly unaware of. He, Kurt Dussander, had sometimes talked to himself. But now—

“You are under stress again,” he said aloud. He was aware that he had spoken in German this time. He hadn't spoken German in many years, but the language now seemed warm and comfortable. It lulled him, eased him. It was sweet and dark.

“Yes. You are under stress. Because of the boy. But be honest with yourself. It is too early in the morning to tell lies. You have not entirely regretted talking. At first you were terrified that the boy could not or would not keep his secret. He would have to tell a friend, who

would tell another friend, and that friend would tell two. But if he has kept it this long, he will keep it longer. If I am taken away, he loses his . . . his talking book. Is that what I am to him? I think so.”

He fell silent, but his thoughts went on. He had been lonely—no one would ever know just how lonely. There had been times when he thought almost seriously of suicide. He made a bad hermit. The voices he heard came from the radio. The only people who visited were on the other side of a dirty glass square. He was an old man, and although he was afraid of death, he was more afraid of being an old man who is alone.

His bladder sometimes tricked him. He would be halfway to the bathroom when a dark stain spread on his pants. In wet weather his joints would first throb and then begin to cry out, and there had been days when he had chewed an entire tin of Arthritis Pain Formula between sunrise and sunset . . . and still the aspirin only subdued the aches. Even such acts as taking a book from the shelf or switching the TV channel became an essay in pain. His eyes were bad; sometimes he knocked things over, barked his shins, bumped his head. He lived in fear of breaking a bone and not being able to get to the telephone, and he lived in fear of getting there and having some doctor uncover his real past as he became suspicious of Mr. Denker’s nonexistent medical history.

The boy had alleviated some of those things. When the boy was here, he could call back the old days. His memory of those days was perversely clear; he spilled out a seemingly endless catalogue of names and events, even the weather of such and such a day. He remembered Private Henreid, who manned a machine-gun in the northeast tower and the wen Private Henreid had had between his eyes. Some of the men called him Three-Eyes, or Old Cyclops. He remembered Kessel, who had a picture of his girlfriend naked, lying on a sofa with her hands behind her head. Kessel charged the men to look at it. He remembered the names of the doctors and their experiments—thresholds of pain, the brainwaves of dying men and women, physiological retardation, effects of different sorts of radiation, dozens more. *Hundreds* more.

He supposed he talked to the boy as all old men talk, but he guessed he was luckier than most old men, who had impatience, disinterest, or outright rudeness for an audience. His audience was endlessly fascinated.

Were a few bad dreams too high a price to pay?

He crushed out his cigarette, lay looking at the ceiling for a moment, and then swung his feet out onto the floor. He and the boy were loathsome, he supposed, feeding off each other ... eating each other. If his own belly was sometimes sour with the dark but rich food they partook of in his afternoon kitchen, what was the boy's like? Did he sleep well? Perhaps not. Lately Dussander thought the boy looked rather pale, and thinner than when he had first come into Dussander's life.

He walked across the bedroom and opened the closet door. He brushed hangers to the right, reached into the shadows, and brought out the sham uniform. It hung from his hand like a vulture-skin. He touched it with his other hand. Touched it ... and then stroked it.

After a very long time he took it down and put it on, dressing slowly, not looking into the mirror until the uniform was completely buttoned and belted (and the sham fly zipped).

He looked at himself in the mirror, then, and nodded.

He went back to bed, lay down, and smoked another cigarette. When it was finished, he felt sleepy again. He turned off the bedlamp, not believing it, that it could be this easy. But he was asleep, five minutes later, and this time his sleep was dreamless.

## 8

February, 1975.

After dinner, Dick Bowden produced a cognac that Dussander privately thought dreadful. But of course he smiled broadly and complimented it extravagantly. Bowden's wife served the boy a

chocolate malted. The boy had been unusually quiet all through the meal. Uneasy? Yes. For some reason the boy seemed very uneasy.

Dussander had charmed Dick and Monica Bowden from the moment he and the boy had arrived. The boy had told his parents that Mr. Denker's vision was much worse than it actually was (which made poor old Mr. Denker in need of a Seeing Eye Dog, Dussander thought dryly), because that explained all the reading the boy had supposedly been doing. Dussander had been very careful about that, and he thought there had been no slips.

He was dressed in his best suit, and although the evening was damp, his arthritis had been remarkably mellow—nothing but an occasional twinge. For some absurd reason the boy had wanted him to leave his umbrella home, but Dussander had insisted. All in all, he had had a pleasant and rather exciting evening. Dreadful cognac or no, he had not been out to dinner in nine years.

During the meal he had discussed the Essen Motor Works, the rebuilding of postwar Germany—Bowden had asked several intelligent questions about that, and had seemed impressed by Dussander's answers—and German writers. Monica Bowden had asked him how he had happened to come to America so late in life and Dussander, adopting the proper expression of myopic sorrow, had explained about the death of his fictitious wife. Monica Bowden was meltingly sympathetic.

And now, over the absurd cognac, Dick Bowden said: "If this is too personal, Mr. Denker, please don't answer . . . but I couldn't help wondering what you did in the war."

The boy stiffened ever so slightly.

Dussander smiled and felt for his cigarettes. He could see them perfectly well, but it was important to make not the tiniest slip. Monica put them in his hand.

"Thank you, dear lady. The meal was superb. You are a fine cook. My own wife never did better."

Monica thanked him and looked flustered. Todd gave her an irritated look.

"Not personal at all," Dussander said, lighting his cigarette and turning to Bowden. "I was in the reserves from 1943 on, as were all

able-bodied men too old to be in the active services. By then the handwriting was on the wall for the Third Reich, and for the madmen who created it. One madman in particular, of course.”

He blew out his match and looked solemn.

“There was great relief when the tide turned against Hitler. Great relief. Of course,” and here he looked at Bowden disarmingly, as man to man, “one was careful not to express such a sentiment. Not aloud.”

“I suppose not,” Dick Bowden said respectfully.

“No,” Dussander said gravely. “Not aloud. I remember one evening when four or five of us, all friends, stopped at a local *Ratskeller* after work for a drink—by then there was not always *Schnaps*. or even beer, but it so happened that night there were both. We had all known each other for upwards of twenty years. One of our number, Hans Hassler, mentioned in passing that perhaps the Fuehrer had been ill-advised to open a second front against the Russians. I said, ‘Hans, God in Heaven, watch what you say!’ Poor Hans went pale and changed the subject entirely. Yet three days later he was gone. I never saw him again, nor, as far as I know, did anyone else who was sitting at our table that night.”

“How awful!” Monica said breathlessly. “More cognac, Mr. Denker?”

“No thank you.” He smiled at her. “My wife had a saying from her mother: ‘One must never overdo the sublime.’ ”

Todd’s small, troubled frown deepened slightly.

“Do you think he was sent to one of the camps?” Dick asked. “Your friend Hessler?”

“*Hassler*, Dussander corrected gently. He grew grave. “Many were. The camps . . . they will be the shame of the German people for a thousand years to come. They are Hitler’s real legacy.”

“Oh, I think that’s too harsh,” Bowden said, lighting his pipe and puffing out a choking cloud of Cherry Blend. “According to what I’ve read, the majority of the German people had no idea of what was going on. The locals around Auschwitz thought it was a sausage plant.”

“Ugh, how *terrible*,” Monica said, and pulled a grimacing that’s-enough-of-that expression at her husband. Then she turned to Dussander and smiled. “I just love the smell of a pipe, Mr. Denker, don’t you?”

“Indeed I do, madam,” Dussander said. He had just gotten an almost insurmountable urge to sneeze under control.

Bowden suddenly reached across the table and clapped his son on the shoulder. Todd jumped. “You’re awfully quiet tonight, son. Feeling all right?”

Todd offered a peculiar smile that seemed divided between his father and Dussander. “I feel okay. I’ve heard most of these stories before, remember.”

“Todd!” Monica said. “That’s hardly—”

“The boy is only being honest,” Dussander said. “A privilege of boys which men often have to give up. Yes, Mr. Bowden?”

Dick laughed and nodded.

“Perhaps I could get Todd to walk back to mine house with me now,” Dussander said. “I’m sure he has his studies.”

“Todd is a very apt pupil,” Monica said, but she spoke almost automatically, looking at Todd in a puzzled sort of way. “All A’s and B’s, usually. He got a C this last quarter, but he’s promised to bring his French up to snuff on his March report. Right, Todd-baby?”

Todd offered the peculiar smile again and nodded.

“No need for you to walk,” Dick said. “I’ll be glad to run you back to your place.”

“I walk for the air and the exercise,” Dussander said. “Really, I must insist ... unless Todd prefers not to.”

“Oh, no, I’d like a walk,” Todd said, and his mother and father beamed at him.

They were almost to Dussander’s corner when Dussander broke the silence. It was drizzling, and he hoisted his umbrella over both of them. And yet still his arthritis lay quiet, dozing. It was amazing.

“You are like my arthritis,” he said.

Todd’s head came up. “Huh?”

“Neither of you have had much to say tonight. What’s got your tongue, boy? Cat or cormorant?”

“Nothing,” Todd muttered. They turned down Dussander’s street.

“Perhaps I could guess,” Dussander said, not without a touch of malice. “When you came to get me, you were afraid I might make a slip ... ‘let the cat out of the bag,’ you say here. Yet you were determined to go through with the dinner because you had run out of excuses to put your parents off. Now you are disconcerted that all went well. Is that not the truth?”

“Who cares?” Todd said, and shrugged sullenly.

“Why shouldn’t it go well?” Dussander demanded. “I was dissembling before you were born. You keep a secret well enough, I give you that. I give it to you most graciously. But did you see me tonight? I charmed them. *Charmed* them!”

Todd suddenly burst out: “You didn’t have to do that!” Dussander came to a complete stop, staring at Todd.

“Not do it? Not? I thought that was what you wanted, boy! Certainly they will offer no objections if you continue to come over and ‘read’ to me.”

“You’re sure taking a lot for granted!” Todd said hotly. “Maybe I’ve got all I want from you. Do you think there’s anybody *forcing* me to come over to your scuzzy house and watch you slop up booze like those old wino pusbags that hang around the old trainyards? Is that what you think?” His voice had risen and taken on a thin, wavering, hysterical note. “Because there’s nobody forcing me. If I want to come, I’ll come, and if I don’t, I won’t ”

“Lower your voice. People will hear.”

“Who cares?” Todd said, but he began to walk again. This time he deliberately walked outside the umbrella’s span.

“No, nobody forces you to come,” Dussander said. And then he took a calculated shot in the dark: “In fact, you are welcome to stay away. Believe me, boy, I have no scruples about drinking alone. None at all.”

Todd looked at him scornfully. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Dussander only smiled noncommittally.

“Well, don’t count on it.” They had reached the concrete walk leading up to Dussander’s stoop. Dussander fumbled in his pocket for his latchkey. The arthritis flared a dim red in the joints of his fingers and then subsided, waiting. Now Dussander thought he understood what it was waiting for: for him to be alone again. Then it could come out.

“I’ll tell you something,” Todd said. He sounded oddly breathless. “If they knew what you were, if I ever told them, they’d spit on you and then kick you out on your skinny old ass.”

Dussander looked at Todd closely in the drizzling dark. The boy’s face was turned defiantly up to his, but the skin was pallid, the sockets under the eyes dark and slightly hollowed—the skin-tones of someone who has brooded long while others are asleep.

“I am sure they would have nothing but revulsion for me,” Dussander said, although he privately thought that the elder Bowden might stay his revulsion long enough to ask many of the questions his son had asked already. “Nothing but revulsion. But what would they feel for you, boy, when I told them you had known about me for eight months . . . and said nothing?”

Todd stared at him wordlessly in the dark.

“Come and see me if you please,” Dussander said indifferently, “and stay home if you don’t. Goodnight, boy.”

He went up the walk to his front door, leaving Todd standing in the drizzle and looking after him with his mouth slightly ajar.

\* \* \*

The next morning at breakfast, Monica said: “Your dad liked Mr. Denker a lot, Todd. He said he reminded him of your grandfather.”

Todd muttered something unintelligible around his toast. Monica looked at her son and wondered if he had been sleeping well. He looked pale. And his grades had taken that inexplicable dip. Todd *never* got C’s.

“You feeling okay these days, Todd?”

He looked at her blankly for a moment, and then that radiant smile spread over his face, charming her ... comforting her. There was a dab of strawberry preserves on his chin.

“Sure,” he said. “Four-oh.”

“Todd-baby,” she said.

“Monica-baby,” he responded, and they both started to laugh.

March, 1975.

“Kitty-kitty,” Dussander said. “*Heeere*, kitty-kitty. Puss-puss? Puss-puss?”

He was sitting on his back stoop, a pink plastic bowl by his right foot. The bowl was full of milk. It was one-thirty in the afternoon; the day was hazy and hot. Brush-fires far to the west tinged the air with an autumnal smell that jagged oddly against the calendar. If the boy was coming, he would be here in another hour. But the boy didn’t always come now. Instead of seven days a week he came sometimes only four times, or five. An intuition had grown in him, little by little, and his intuition told him that the boy was having troubles of his own.

“Kitty-kitty,” Dussander coaxed. The stray cat was at the far end of the yard, sitting in the ragged verge of weeds by Dussander’s fence. It was a tom, and every bit as ragged as the weeds it sat in. Every time he spoke, the cat’s ears cocked forward. Its eyes never left the pink bowl filled with milk.

Perhaps, Dussander thought, the boy was having troubles with his studies. Or bad dreams. Or both.

That last made him smile.

“Kitty-kitty,” he called softly. The cat’s ears cocked forward again. It didn’t move, not yet, but it continued to study the milk.

Dussander had certainly been afflicted with problems of his own. For three weeks or so he had worn the SS uniform to bed like grotesque pajamas, and the uniform had warded off the insomnia and the bad dreams. His sleep had been—at first—as sound as a lumberjack’s. Then the dreams had returned, not little by little, but all at once, and worse than ever before. Dreams of running as well as the dreams of the eyes. Running through a wet, unseen jungle where heavy leaves and damp fronds struck his face, leaving trickles

that felt like sap . . . or blood. Running and running, the luminous eyes always around him, peering soullessly at him, until he broke into a clearing. In the darkness he sensed rather than saw the steep rise that began on the clearing's far side. At the top of that rise was Patin, its low cement buildings and yards surrounded by barbed wire and electrified wire, its sentry towers standing like Martian dreadnoughts straight out of *War of the Worlds*. And in the middle, huge stacks billowed smoke against the sky, and below these brick columns were the furnaces, stoked and ready to go, glowing in the night like the eyes of fierce demons. They had told the inhabitants of the area that the Patin inmates made clothes and candles, and of course the locals had believed that no more than the locals around Auschwitz had believed that the camp was a sausage factory. It didn't matter.

Looking back over his shoulder in the dream, he would at last see *them* coming out of hiding, the restless dead, the *Juden*, shambling toward him with blue numbers glaring from the livid flesh of their outstretched arms, their hands hooked into talons, their faces no longer expressionless but animated with hate, lively with vengeance, vivacious with murder. Toddlers ran beside their mothers and grandfathers were borne up by their middle-aged children. And the dominant expression on all their faces was desperation.

Desperation? Yes. Because in the dreams he knew (and so did they) that if he could climb the hill, he would be safe. Down here in these wet and swampy lowlands, in this jungle where the night-flowering plants extruded blood instead of sap, he was a hunted animal . . . prey. But up there, he was in command. If this was a jungle, then the camp at the top of the hill was a zoo, all the wild animals safely in cages, he the head keeper whose job it was to decide which would be fed, which would live, which would be handed over to the vivisectionists, which would be taken to the knacker's in the remover's van.

He would begin to run up the hill, running in all the slowness of nightmare. He would feel the first skeletal hands close about his neck, feel their cold and stinking breath, smell their decay, hear their

birdlike cries of triumph as they pulled him down with salvation not only in sight but almost at hand—

“Kitty-kitty,” Dussander called. “Milk. Nice milk.”

The cat came at last. It crossed half of the back yard and then sat again, but lightly, its tail twitching with worry. It didn’t trust him; no. But Dussander knew the cat could smell the milk and so he was sanguine. Sooner or later it would come.

At Patin there had never been a contraband problem. Some of the prisoners came in with their valuables poked far up their asses in small chamois bags (and how often their valuables turned out not to be valuable at all—photographs, locks of hair, fake jewelry), often pushed up with sticks until they were past the point where even the long fingers of the trusty they had called Stinky-Thumbs could reach. One woman, he remembered, had had a small diamond, flawed, it turned out, really not valuable at all—but it had been in her family for six generations, passed from mother to eldest daughter (or so she said, but of course she was a Jew and all of them lied). She swallowed it before entering Patin. When it came out in her waste, she swallowed it again. She kept doing this, although eventually the diamond began to cut her insides and she bled.

There had been other ruses, although most only involved petty items such as a hoard of tobacco or a hair-ribbon or two. It didn’t matter. In the room Dussander used for prisoner interrogations there was a hot plate and a homely kitchen table covered with a red checked cloth much like the one in his own kitchen. There was always a pot of lamb stew bubbling mellowly away on that hotplate. When contraband was suspected (and when was it not?) a member of the suspected clique would be brought to that room. Dussander would stand them by the hotplate, where the rich fumes from the stew wafted. Gently, he would ask them *Who*. Who is hiding gold? Who is hiding jewelry? Who has tobacco? Who gave the Givenet woman the pill for her baby? Who? The stew was never specifically promised; but always the aroma eventually loosened their tongues. Of course, a truncheon would have done the same, or a gun-barrel jammed into their filthy crotches, but the stew was ... was *elegant*. Yes.

“Kitty-kitty,” Dussander called. The cat’s ears cocked forward. It half-rose, then half-remembered some long-ago kick, or perhaps a match that had burned its whiskers, and it settled back on its haunches. But soon it would move.

He had found a way of propitiating his nightmare. It was, in a way, no more than wearing the SS uniform . . . but raised to a greater power. Dussander was pleased with himself, only sorry that he had never thought of it before. He supposed he had the boy to thank for this new method of quieting himself, for showing him that the key to the past’s terrors was not in rejection but in contemplation and even something like a friend’s embrace. It was true that before the boy’s unexpected arrival last summer he hadn’t had any bad dreams for a long time, but he believed now that he had come to a coward’s terms with his past. He had been forced to give up a part of himself. Now he had reclaimed it.

“Kitty-kitty,” called Dussander, and a smile broke on his face, a kindly smile, a reassuring smile, the smile of all old men who have somehow come through the cruel courses of life to a safe place, still relatively intact, and with at least some wisdom.

The tom rose from its haunches, hesitated only a moment longer, and then trotted across the remainder of the back yard with lithe grace. It mounted the steps, gave Dussander a final mistrustful look, laying back its chewed and scabby ears; then it began to drink the milk.

“*Nice* milk,” Dussander said, pulling on the Playtex rubber gloves that had lain in his lap all the while. “*Nice* milk for a nice kitty.” He had bought these gloves in the supermarket. He had stood in the express lane, and older women had looked at him approvingly, even speculatively. The gloves were advertised on TV. They had cuffs. They were so flexible you could pick up a dime while you were wearing them.

He stroked the cat’s back with one green finger and talked to it soothingly. Its back began to arch with the rhythm of his strokes.

Just before the bowl was empty, he seized the cat.

It came electrically alive in his clenching hands, twisting and jerking, clawing at the rubber. Its body lashed limberly back and

forth, and Dussander had no doubt that if its teeth or claws got into him, it would come off the winner. It was an old campaigner. It takes one to know one, Dussander thought, grinning.

Holding the cat prudently away from his body, the painful grin stamped on his face, Dussander pushed the back door open with his foot and went into the kitchen. The cat yowled and twisted and ripped at the rubber gloves. Its feral, triangular head flashed down and fastened on one green thumb.

“Nasty kitty,” Dussander said reproachfully.

The oven door stood open. Dussander threw the cat inside. Its claws made a ripping, prickly sound as they disengaged from the gloves. Dussander slammed the oven door shut with one knee, provoking a painful twinge from his arthritis. Yet he continued to grin. Breathing hard, nearly panting, he propped himself against the stove for a moment, his head hanging down. It was a gas stove. He rarely used it for anything fancier than TV dinners and killing stray cats.

Faintly, rising up through the gas burners, he could hear the cat scratching and yowling to be let out.

Dussander twisted the oven dial over to 500°. There was an audible *pop!* as the oven pilot-light lit two double rows of hissing gas. The cat stopped yowling and began to scream. It sounded . . . yes . . . almost like a young boy. A young boy in terrible pain. The thought made Dussander smile even more broadly. His heart thundered in his chest. The cat scratched and whirled madly in the oven, still screaming. Soon, a hot, furry, burning smell began to seep out of the oven and into the room.

He scraped the remains of the cat out of the oven half an hour later, using a barbecue fork he had acquired for two dollars and ninety-eight cents at the Grant’s in the shopping center a mile away.

The cat’s roasted carcass went into an empty flour sack. He took the sack down cellar. The cellar floor had never been cemented. Shortly, Dussander came back up. He sprayed the kitchen with Glade until it reeked of artificial pine scent. He opened all the windows. He washed the barbecue fork and hung it up on the

pegboard. Then he sat down to wait and see if the boy would come. He smiled and smiled.

Todd did come, about five minutes after Dussander had given up on him for the afternoon. He was wearing a warm-up jacket with his school colors on it; he was also wearing a San Diego Padres baseball cap. He carried his schoolbooks under his arm.

“Yucka-ducka,” he said, coming into the kitchen and wrinkling his nose. “What’s that smell? It’s awful.”

“I tried the oven,” Dussander said, lighting a cigarette. “I’m afraid I burned my supper. I had to throw it out.”

One day later that month the boy came much earlier than usual, long before school usually let out. Dussander was sitting in the kitchen, drinking Ancient Age bourbon from a chipped and discolored cup that had the words HERE’S YER CAWFEE MAW, HAW! HAW! HAW! written around the rim. He had his rocker out in the kitchen now and he was just drinking and rocking, rocking and drinking, bumping his slippers on the faded linoleum. He was pleasantly high. There had been no more bad dreams at all until just last night. Not since the tomcat with the chewed ears. Last night’s had been particularly horrible, though. That could not be denied. *They* had dragged him down after he had gotten halfway up the hill, and *they* had begun to do unspeakable things to him before he was able to wake himself up. Yet, after his initial thrashing return to the world of real things, he had been confident. He could end the dreams whenever he wished. Perhaps a cat would not be enough this time. But there was always the dog pound. Yes. Always the pound.

Todd came abruptly into the kitchen, his face pale and shiny and strained. He had lost weight, all right, Dussander thought. And there was a queer white look in his eyes that Dussander did not like at all.

“You’re going to help me,” Todd said suddenly and defiantly.

“Really?” Dussander said mildly, but sudden apprehension leaped inside of him. He didn’t let his face change as Todd slammed his books down on the table with a sudden, vicious overhand stroke.

One of them spun-skated across the oilcloth and landed in a tent on the floor by Dussander's foot.

"Yes, you're fucking-A right!" Todd said shrilly. "You better believe it! Because this is your fault! All your fault!" Hectic spots of red mounted into his cheeks. "But you're going to have to help me get out of it, because I've got the goods on you! *I've got you right where I want you!*"

"I'll help you in any way I can," Dussander said quietly. He saw that he had folded his hands neatly in front of himself without even thinking about it—just as he had once done. He leaned forward in the rocker until his chin was directly over his folded hands—as he had once done. His face was calm and friendly and enquiring; none of his growing apprehension showed. Sitting just so, he could almost imagine a pot of lamb stew simmering on the stove behind him. "Tell me what the trouble is."

"This is the fucking *trouble*," Todd said viciously, and threw a folder at Dussander. It bounced off his chest and landed in his lap, and he was momentarily surprised by the heat of the anger which leaped up in him; the urge to rise and backhand the boy smartly. Instead, he kept the mild expression on his face. It was the boy's school-card, he saw, although the school seemed to be at ridiculous pains to hide the fact. Instead of a school-card, or a Grade Report, it was called a "Quarterly Progress Report." He grunted at that, and opened the card.

A typed half-sheet of paper fell out. Dussander put it aside for later examination and turned his attention to the boy's grades first.

"You seem to have fallen on the rocks, my boy," Dussander said, not without some pleasure. The boy had passed only English and American History. Every other grade was an F.

"It's not my fault," Todd hissed venomously. "It's *your* fault. All those *stories*. I have nightmares about them, do you know that? I sit down and open my books and I start thinking about whatever you told me that day and the next thing I know, my mother's telling me it's time to go to bed. Well, that's not my fault! *It isn't! You hear me? It isn't!*"

“I hear you very well,” Dussander said, and read the typed note that had been tucked into Todd’s card.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Bowden,

This note is to suggest that we have a group conference concerning Todd’s second- and third-quarter grades. In light of Todd’s previous good work in this school, his current grades suggest a specific problem which may be affecting his academic performance in a deleterious way. Such a problem can often be solved by a frank and open discussion.

I should point out that although Todd has passed the half-year, his final grades may be failing in some cases unless his work improves radically in the fourth quarter. Failing grades would entail summer school to avoid being kept back and causing a major scheduling problem.

I must also note that Todd is in the college division, and that his work so far this year is far below college acceptance levels. It is also below the level of academic ability assumed by the SAT tests.

Please be assured that I am ready to work out a mutually convenient time for us to meet. In a case such as this, earlier is usually better.

Sincerely yours, Edward French

“Who is this Edward French?” Dussander asked, slipping the note back inside the card (part of him still marvelled at the American love of jargon; such a rolling missive to inform the parents that their son was flunking out!) and then refolding his hands. His premonition of disaster was stronger than ever, but he refused to give in to it. A year before, he would have done; a year ago he had been ready for disaster. Now he was not, but it seemed that the cursed boy had brought it to him anyway. “Is he your headmaster?”

“Rubber Ed? Hell, no. He’s the guidance counsellor.”

“*Guidance* counsellor? What is that?”

“You can figure it out,” Todd said. He was nearly hysterical. “You read the goddam note!” He walked rapidly around the room, shooting sharp, quick glances at Dussander. “Well, I’m not going to let any of

this shit go down. I'm just not. I'm not going to any summer school. My dad and mom are going to Hawaii this summer and I'm going with them." He pointed at the card on the table. "Do you know what my dad will do if he sees that?"

Dussander shook his head.

"He'll get everything out of me. *Everything*. He'll know it was you. It couldn't be anything else, because nothing else has changed. He'll poke and pry and he'll get it all out of me. And then ... then I'll ... I'll be in dutch."

He stared at Dussander resentfully.

"They'll watch me. Hell, they might make me see a doctor, I don't know. How should I know? But I'm not getting in dutch. And I'm not going to any fucking summer school."

"Or to the reformatory," Dussander said. He said it very quietly.

Todd stopped circling the room. His face became very still. His cheeks and forehead, already pale, became even whiter. He stared at Dussander, and had to try twice before he could speak. "*What? What* did you just say?"

"My dear boy," Dussander said, assuming an air of great patience, "for the last five minutes I have listened to you pule and whine, and what all your puling and whining comes down to is this. *You* are in trouble. *You* might be found out. *You* might find yourself in adverse circumstances." Seeing that he had the boy's complete attention—at last—Dussander sipped reflectively from his cup.

"My boy," he went on, "that is a very dangerous attitude for you to have. And dangerous for me. The potential harm is much greater for me. You worry about your school-card. Pah! *This* for your school-card."

He flicked it off the table and onto the floor with one yellow finger.

"I am worried about my *life!*"

Todd did not reply; he simply went on looking at Dussander with that white-eyed, slightly crazed stare.

"The Israelis will not scruple at the fact that I am seventy-six. The death-penalty is still very much in favor over there, you know, especially when the man in the dock is a Nazi war criminal associated with the camps."

“You’re a U.S. citizen,” Todd said. “America wouldn’t let them take you. I read up on that. I—”

“You read, but you don’t *listen!* I am *not* a U.S. citizen! My papers came from *la cosa nostra*. I would be deported, and Mossad agents would be waiting for me wherever I deplaned.”

“I wish they *would* hang you,” Todd muttered, curling his hands into fists and staring down at them. “I was crazy to get mixed up with you in the first place.”

“No doubt,” Dussander said, and smiled thinly. “But you are mixed up with me. We must live in the present, boy, not in the past of ‘I-should-have-nevers.’ You must realize that your fate and my own are now inextricably entwined. If you ‘blow the horn on me,’ as your saying goes, do you think I will hesitate to blow the horn on you? Seven hundred thousand died at Patin. To the world at large I am a criminal, a monster, even the butcher your scandal-rags would have me. You are an accessory to all of that, my boy. You have criminal knowledge of an illegal alien, but you have not reported it. And if I am caught, I will tell the world all about you. When the reporters put their microphones in my face, it will be your name I’ll repeat over and over again. ‘Todd Bowden, yes, that is his name . . . how long? Almost a year. He wanted to know everything ... all the gooshy parts. That’s how he put it, yes: “All the gooshy parts.” ’ ”

Todd’s breath had stopped. His skin appeared transparent. Dussander smiled at him. He sipped bourbon.

“I think they will put you in jail. They may call it a reformatory, or a correctional facility—there may be a fancy name for it, like this ‘Quarterly Progress Report’ ”—his lip curled—“but no matter what they call it, there will be bars on the windows.”

Todd wet his lips. “I’d call you a liar. I’d tell them I just found out. They’d believe me, not you. You just better remember that.”

Dussander’s thin smile remained. “I thought you told me your father would get it all out of you.”

Todd spoke slowly, as a person speaks when realization and verbalization occur simultaneously. “Maybe not. Maybe not this time. This isn’t just breaking a window with a rock.”

Dussander winced inwardly. He suspected that the boy's judgment was right—with so much at stake, he might indeed be able to convince his father. After all, when faced with such an unpleasant truth, what parent would not want to be convinced ?

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. But how are you going to explain all those books you had to read to me because poor Mr. Denker is half-blind? My eyes are not what they were, but I can still read fine print with my spectacles. I can prove it.”

“I'd say you fooled me!”

“Will you? And what reason will you be able to give for my fooling?”

“For ... for friendship. Because you were lonely.”

That, Dussander reflected, was just close enough to the truth to be believable. And once, in the beginning, the boy might have been able to bring it off. But now he was ragged; now he was coming apart in strings like a coat that has reached the end of its useful service. If a child shot off his cap pistol across the street, this boy would jump into the air and scream like a girl.

“Your school-card will also support my side of it,” Dussander said. “It was not *Robinson Crusoe* that caused your grades to fall down so badly, my boy, was it?”

“Shut up, why don't you? Just shut up about it!”

“No,” Dussander said. “I won't shut up about it.” He lit a cigarette, scratching the wooden match alight on the gas oven door. “Not until I make you see the simple truth. We are in this together, sink or swim.” He looked at Todd through the raftering smoke, not smiling, his old, lined face reptilian. “I will drag you down, boy. I promise you that. If anything comes out, *everything* will come out. That is my promise to you.”

Todd stared at him sullenly and didn't reply.

“Now,” Dussander said briskly, with the air of a man who has put a necessary unpleasantness behind him, “the question is, what are we going to do about this situation? Have you any ideas?”

“This will fix the report card,” Todd said, and took a new bottle of ink eradicator from his jacket pocket. “About that fucking letter, I don't know.”

Dussander looked at the ink eradicator approvingly. He had falsified a few reports of his own in his time. When the quotas had gone up to the point of fantasy . . . and far, far beyond. And . . . more like the situation they were now in—there had been the matter of the invoices . . . those which enumerated the spoils of war. Each week he would check the boxes of valuables, all of them to be sent back to Berlin in special train-cars that were like big safes on wheels. On the side of each box was a manila envelope, and inside the envelope there had been a verified invoice of that box's contents. So many rings, necklaces, chokers, so many grams of gold. Dussander, however, had had his own box of valuables—not very valuable valuables, but not insignificant, either. Jades. Tourmalines. Opals. A few flawed pearls. Industrial diamonds. And when he saw an item invoiced for Berlin that caught his eye or seemed a good investment, he would remove it, replace it with an item from his own box, and use ink eradicator on the invoice, changing their item for his. He had developed into a fairly expert forger . . . a talent that had come in handy more than once after the war was over.

“Good,” he told Todd. “As for this other matter . . .” Dussander began to rock again, sipping from his cup. Todd pulled a chair up to the table and began to go to work on his report card, which he had picked up from the floor without a word. Dussander's outward calm had had its effect on him and now he worked silently, his head bent studiously over the card, like any American boy who has set out to do the best by God job he can, whether that job be planting corn, pitching a no-hitter in the Little League World Series, or forging grades on his report card.

Dussander looked at the nape of his neck, lightly tanned and cleanly exposed between the fall of his hair and the round neck of his tee-shirt. His eyes drifted from there to the top counter drawer where he kept the butcher knives. One quick thrust—he knew where to put it—and the boy's spinal cord would be severed. His lips would be sealed forever. Dussander smiled regretfully. There would be questions asked if the boy disappeared. Too many of them. Some directed at him. Even if there was no letter with a friend, close scrutiny was something he could not afford. Too bad.

“This man French,” he said, tapping the letter. “Does he know your parents in a social way?”

“Him?” Todd edged the word with contempt. “My mom and dad don’t go anywhere that he could even get in.”

“Has he ever met them in his professional capacity? Has he ever had conferences with them before?”

“No. I’ve always been near the top of my classes. Until now.”

“So what does he know about them?” Dussander said, looking dreamily into his cup, which was now nearly empty. “Oh, he knows about *you*. He no doubt has all the records on you that he can use. Back to the fights you had in the kindergarten play yard. But what does he know about *them*?”

Todd put his pen and the small bottle of ink eradicator away. “Well, he knows their names. Of course. And their ages. He knows we’re all Methodists. You don’t have to fill that line out, but my folks always do. We don’t go much, but he’d know that’s what we are. He must know what my dad does for a living; that’s on the forms, too. All that stuff they have to fill out every year. And I’m pretty sure that’s all.”

“Would he know if your parents were having troubles at home?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dussander tossed off the last of the bourbon in his cup. “Squabbles. Fights. Your father sleeping on the couch. Your mother drinking too much.” His eyes gleamed. “A divorce brewing.”

Indignantly, Todd said: “There’s nothing like that going on! No way!”

“I never said there was. But just think, boy. Suppose that things at your house were ‘going to hell in a streetcar,’ as the saying is.”

Todd only looked at him, frowning.

“You would be worried about them,” Dussander said.

“Very worried. You would lose your appetite. You would sleep poorly. Saddest of all, your schoolwork would suffer. True? Very sad for the children, when there are troubles in the home.”

Understanding dawned in the boy’s eyes—understanding and something like dumb gratitude. Dussander was gratified.

“Yes, it is an unhappy situation when a family totters on the edge of destruction,” Dussander said grandly, pouring more bourbon. He

was getting quite drunk. “The daytime television dramas, they make this absolutely clear. There is acrimony. Backbiting and lies. Most of all, there is pain. Pain, my boy. You have no idea of the hell your parents are going through. They are so swallowed up by their own troubles that they have little time for the problems of their own son. His problems seem minor compared to theirs, *hein?* Someday, when the scars have begun to heal, they will no doubt take a fuller interest in him once again. But now the only concession they can make is to send the boy’s kindly grandfather to Mr. French.”

Todd’s eyes had been gradually brightening to a glow that was nearly fervid. “Might work,” he was muttering. “Might, yeah, might work, might—” He broke off suddenly. His eyes darkened again. “No, it won’t. You don’t look like me, not even a little bit. Rubber Ed will never believe it.”

“*Himmel! Gott im Himmel!*” Dussander cried, getting to his feet, crossing the kitchen (a bit unsteadily), opening the cellar door, and pulling out a fresh bottle of Ancient Age. He spun off the cap and poured liberally. “For a smart boy, you are such a *Dummkopf*. When do grandfathers ever look like their grandsons? Huh? I got white hair. Do you have white hair?”

Approaching the table again, he reached out with surprising quickness, snatched an abundant handful of Todd’s blonde hair, and pulled briskly.

“Cut it out!” Todd snapped, but he smiled a little.

“Besides,” Dussander said, settling back into his rocker,

“you have yellow hair and blue eyes. My eyes are blue, and before my hair turned white, it was yellow. You can tell me your whole family history. Your aunts and uncles. The people your father works with. Your mother’s little hobbies. I will remember. I will study and remember. Two days later it will all be forgotten again—these days my memory is like a cloth bag filled with water—but I will remember for long enough.” He smiled grimly. “In my time I have stayed ahead of Wiesenthal and pulled the wool over the eyes of Himmler himself. If I cannot fool one American public school teacher, I will pull my winding-shroud around me and crawl down into my grave.”

“Maybe,” Todd said slowly, and Dussander could see he had already accepted it. His eyes were luminous with relief.

“No—*surely!*” Dussander cried.

He began to cackle with laughter, the rocking chair squeaking back and forth. Todd looked at him, puzzled and a little frightened, but after a bit he began to laugh, too. In Dussander’s kitchen they laughed and laughed, Dussander by the open window where the warm California breeze wafted in, and Todd rocked back on the rear legs of his kitchen chair, so that its back rested against the oven door, the white enamel of which was crisscrossed by the dark, charred-looking streaks made by Dussander’s wooden matches as he struck them alight.

Rubber Ed French (his nickname, Todd had explained to Dussander, referred to the rubbers he always wore over his sneakers during wet weather) was a slight man who made an affectation of always wearing Keds to school. It was a touch of informality which he thought would endear him to the one hundred and six children between the ages of twelve and fourteen who made up his counselling load. He had five pairs of Keds, ranging in color from Fast Track Blue to Screaming Yellow Zonkers, totally unaware that behind his back he was known not only as Rubber Ed but as Sneaker Pete and The Ked Man, as in The Ked Man Cometh. He had been known as Pucker in college, and he would have been most humiliated of all to learn that even that shameful fact had somehow gotten out.

He rarely wore ties, preferring turtleneck sweaters. He had been wearing these ever since the mid-sixties, when David McCallum had popularized them in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* In his college days his classmates had been known to spy him crossing the quad and remark, “Here comes Pucker in his U.N.C.L.E. sweater.” He had majored in Educational Psychology, and he privately considered himself to be the only good guidance counsellor he had ever met. He had real *rapport* with his kids. He could get *right down to it* with them; he could rap with them and be silently sympathetic if they had to do

some shouting and *kick out the jams*. He could *get into their hangups* because he understood what a *bummer* it was to be thirteen when someone was *doing a number on your head* and you couldn't *get your shit together*.

The thing was, he had a damned hard time remembering what it had been like to be thirteen himself. He supposed that was the ultimate price you had to pay for growing up in the fifties. That, and travelling into the brave new world of the sixties nicknamed Pucker.

Now, as Todd Bowden's grandfather came into his office, closing the pebbled-glass door firmly behind him, Rubber Ed stood up respectfully but was careful not to come around his desk to greet the old man. He was aware of his sneakers. Sometimes the old-timers didn't understand that the sneakers were a psychological aid with kids who had teacher hangups—which was to say that some of the older folks couldn't *get behind* a guidance counsellor in Keds.

This is one fine-looking dude, Rubber Ed thought. His white hair was carefully brushed back. His three-piece suit was spotlessly clean. His dove-gray tie was impeccably knotted. In his left hand he held a furled black umbrella (outside, a light drizzle had been falling since the weekend) in a manner that was almost military. A few years ago Rubber Ed and his wife had gone on a Dorothy Sayers jag, reading everything by that estimable lady that they could lay their hands upon. It occurred to him now that this was her brainchild, Lord Peter Wimsey, to the life. It was Wimsey at seventy-five, years after both Bunter and Harriet Vane had passed on to their rewards. He made a mental note to tell Sondra about this when he got home.

"Mr. Bowden," he said respectfully, and offered his hand.

"A pleasure," Bowden said, and shook it. Rubber Ed was careful not to put on the firm and uncompromising pressure he applied to the hands of the fathers he saw; it was obvious from the gingerly way the old boy offered it that he had arthritis.

"A pleasure, Mr. French," Bowden repeated, and took a seat, carefully pulling up the knees of his trousers. He propped the umbrella between his feet and leaned on it, looking like an elderly, extremely urbane vulture that had come in to roost in Rubber Ed French's office. He had the slightest touch of an accent, Rubber Ed

thought, but it wasn't the clipped intonation of the British upper class, as Wimsey's would have been; it was broader, more European. Anyway, the resemblance to Todd was quite striking. Especially through the nose and eyes.

"I'm glad you could come," Rubber Ed told him, resuming his own seat, "although in these cases the student's mother or father—"

This was the opening gambit, of course. Almost ten years of experience in the counselling business had convinced him that when an aunt or an uncle or a grandparent showed up for a conference, it usually meant trouble at home—the sort of trouble that invariably turned out to be the root of the problem. To Rubber Ed, this came as a relief. Domestic problems were bad, but for a boy of Todd's intelligence, *a heavy drug trip* would have been much, much worse.

"Yes, of course," Bowden said, managing to look both sorrowful and angry at the same time. "My son and his wife asked me if I could come and talk this sorry business over with you, Mr. French. Todd is a good boy, believe me. This trouble with his school marks is only temporary."

"Well, we all hope so, don't we, Mr. Bowden? Smoke if you like. It's supposed to be off-limits on school property, but I'll never tell."

"Thank you."

Mr. Bowden took a half-crushed package of Camel cigarettes from his inner pocket, put one of the last two zigzagging smokes in his mouth, found a Diamond Blue-Tip match, scratched it on the heel of one black shoe, and lit up. He coughed an old man's dank cough over the first drag, shook the match out, and put the blackened stump into the ashtray Rubber Ed had produced. Rubber Ed watched this ritual, which seemed almost as formal as the old man's shoes, with frank fascination.

"Where to begin," Bowden said, his distressed face looking at Rubber Ed through a swirling raft of cigarette smoke.

"Well," Rubber Ed said kindly, "the very fact that you're here instead of Todd's parents tells me something, you know."

"Yes, I suppose it does. Very well." He folded his hands. The Camel protruded from between the second and third fingers of his right. He straightened his back and lifted his chin. There was

something almost Prussian in his mental coming to terms, Rubber Ed thought, something that made him think of all those war movies he'd seen as a kid.

"My son and my daughter-in-law are having troubles in their home," Bowden said, biting off each word precisely. "Rather bad troubles, I should think." His eyes, old but amazingly bright, watched as Rubber Ed opened the folder centered in front of him on the desk blotter. There were sheets of paper inside, but not many.

"And you feel that these troubles are affecting Todd's academic performance?"

Bowden leaned forward perhaps six inches. His blue eyes never left Rubber Ed's brown ones. There was a heavily charged pause, and then Bowden said: "The mother drinks."

He resumed his former ramrod-straight position.

"Oh," Rubber Ed said.

"Yes," Bowden replied, nodding grimly. "The boy has told me that he has come home on two occasions and has found her sprawled out on the kitchen table. He knows how my son feels about her drinking problem, and so the boy has put dinner in the oven himself on these occasions, and has gotten her to drink enough black coffee so she will at least be awake when Richard comes home."

"That's bad," Rubber Ed said, although he had heard worse—mothers with heroin habits, fathers who had abruptly taken it into their heads to start banging their daughters . . . or their sons. "Has Mrs. Bowden thought about getting professional help for her problem?"

"The boy has tried to persuade her that would be the best course. She is much ashamed, I think. If she was given a little time . . ." He made a gesture with his cigarette that left a dissolving smoke-ring in the air. "You understand?"

"Yes, of course." Rubber Ed nodded, privately admiring the gesture that had produced the smoke-ring. "Your son . . . Todd's father . . ."

"He is not without blame," Bowden said harshly. "The hours he works, the meals he has missed, the nights when he must leave suddenly . . . I tell you, Mr. French, he is more married to his job than

he is to Monica. I was raised to believe that a man's family came before everything. Was it not the same for you?"

"It sure was," Rubber Ed responded heartily. His father had been a night watchman for a large Los Angeles department store and he had really only seen his pop on weekends and vacations.

"That is another side of the problem," Bowden said.

Rubber Ed nodded and thought for a moment. "What about your other son, Mr. Bowden? Uh ..." He looked down at the folder. "Harold. Todd's uncle."

"Harry and Deborah are in Minnesota now," Bowden said, quite truthfully. "He has a position there at the University medical school. It would be quite difficult for him to leave, and very unfair to ask him." His face took on a righteous cast. "Harry and his wife are quite happily married."

"I see." Rubber Ed looked at the file again for a moment and then closed it. "Mr. Bowden, I appreciate your frankness. I'll be just as frank with you."

"Thank you," Bowden said stiffly.

"We can't do as much for our students in the counselling area as we would like. There are six counsellors here, and we're each carrying a load of over a hundred students. My newest colleague, Hepburn, has a hundred and fifteen. At this age, in our society, all children need help."

"Of course." Bowden mashed his cigarette brutally into the ashtray and folded his hands once more.

"Sometimes bad problems get by us. Home environment and drugs are the two most common. At least Todd isn't mixed up with speed or mescaline or PCP."

"God forbid."

"Sometimes," Rubber Ed went on, "there's simply nothing we can do. It's depressing, but it's a fact of life. Usually the ones that are first to get spit out of the machine we're running here are the class troublemakers, the sullen, uncommunicative kids, the ones who refuse to even try. They are simply warm bodies waiting for the system to buck them up through the grades or waiting to get old enough so they can quit without their parents' permission and join

the Army or get a job at the Speedy-Boy Carwash or marry their boyfriends. You understand? I'm being blunt. Our system is, as they say, not all it's cracked up to be."

"I appreciate your frankness."

"But it hurts when you see the machine starting to mash up someone like Todd. He ran out a ninety-two average for last year's work, and that puts him in the ninety-fifth percentile. His English averages are even better. He shows a flair for writing, and that's something special in a generation of kids that think culture begins in front of the TV and ends in the neighborhood movie theater. I was talking to the woman who had Todd in Comp last year. She said Todd passed in the finest term-paper she'd seen in twenty years of teaching. It was on the German death-camps during World War Two. She gave him the only A-plus she's ever given a composition student."

"I have read it," Bowden said. "It is very fine."

"He has also demonstrated above-average ability in the life sciences and social sciences, and while he's not going to be one of the great math whizzes of the century, all the notes I have indicate that he's given it the good old college try ... until this year. Until this year. That's the whole story, in a nut-shell."

"Yes."

"I hate like *hell* to see Todd go down the tubes this way, Mr. Bowden. And summer school . . . well, I said I'd be frank. Summer school often does a boy like Todd more harm than good. Your usual junior high school summer session is a zoo. All the monkeys and the laughing hyenas are in attendance, plus a full complement of dodo birds. Bad company for a boy like Todd."

"Certainly."

"So let's get to the bottom line, shall we? I suggest a series of appointments for Mr. and Mrs. Bowden at the Counselling Center downtown. Everything in confidence, of course. The man in charge down there, Harry Ackerman, is a good friend of mine. And I don't think Todd should go to them with the idea; I think you should." Rubber Ed smiled widely. "Maybe we can get everybody back on track by June. It's not impossible."

But Bowden looked positively alarmed by this idea.

"I believe they might resent the boy if I took that proposal to them now," he said. "Things are very delicate. They could go either way. The boy has promised me he will work harder in his studies. He is very alarmed at this drop in his marks." He smiled thinly, a smile Ed French could not quite interpret. "More alarmed than you know."

"But—"

"And they would resent *me*," Bowden pressed on quickly. "God knows they would. Monica already regards me as something of a meddler. I try not to be, but you see the situation. I feel that things are best left alone . . . for now."

"I've had a great deal of experience in these matters," Rubber Ed told Bowden. He folded his hands on Todd's file and looked at the old man earnestly. "I really think counselling is in order here. You'll understand that my interest in the marital problems your son and daughter-in-law are having begins and ends with the effect they're having on Todd . . . and right now, they're having quite an effect."

"Let me make a counter-proposal," Bowden said. "You have, I believe, a system of warning parents of poor grades?"

"Yes," Rubber Ed agreed cautiously. "Interpretation of Progress cards—IOP cards. The kids, of course, call them Flunk Cards. They only get them if their grade in a given course falls below seventy-eight. In other words, we give out IOP cards to kids who are pulling a D or an F in a given course."

"Very good," Bowden said. "Then what I suggest is this: if the boy gets one of those cards . . . even *one*"—he held up one gnarled finger—"I will approach my son and his wife about your counselling. I will go further." He pronounced it *furdah*. "If the boy receives one of your Flunk Cards in April—"

"We give them out in May, actually."

"Yes? If he receives one then, I guarantee that they will accept the counselling proposal. They are worried about their son, Mr. French. But now they are so wrapped up in their own problem that . . ." He shrugged.

"I understand."

“So let us give them that long to solve their own problems. Pulling one’s self up by one’s own shoelaces . . . that is the American way, is it not?”

“Yes, I guess it is,” Rubber Ed told him after a moment’s thought . . . and after a quick glance at the clock, which told him he had another appointment in five minutes. “I’ll accept that.”

He stood, and Bowden stood with him. They shook hands again, Rubber Ed being carefully mindful of the old party’s arthritis.

“But in all fairness, I ought to tell you that very few students can pull out of an eighteen-week tailspin in just four weeks of classes. There’s a huge amount of ground to be made up—a *huge* amount. I suspect you’ll have to come through on your guarantee, Mr. Bowden.”

Bowden offered his thin, disconcerting smile again. “Do you?” was all he said.

Something had troubled Rubber Ed through the entire interview, and he put his finger on it during lunch in the cafeteria, more than an hour after “Lord Peter” had left, umbrella once again neatly tucked under his arm.

He and Todd’s grandfather had talked for fifteen minutes at least, probably closer to twenty, and Ed didn’t think the old man had once referred to his grandson by name.

Todd pedaled breathlessly up Dussander’s walk and parked his bike on its kickstand. School had let out only fifteen minutes before. He took the front steps at one jump, used his doorkey, and hurried down the hall to the sunlit kitchen. His face was a mixture of hopeful sunshine and gloomy clouds. He stood in the kitchen doorway for a moment, his stomach and his vocal cords knotted, watching Dussander as he rocked with his cupful of bourbon in his lap. He was still dressed in his best, although he had pulled his tie down two inches and loosened the top button of his shirt. He looked at Todd expressionlessly, his lizardlike eyes at half-mast.

“Well?” Todd finally managed.

Dussander left him hanging a moment longer, a moment that seemed at least ten years long to Todd. Then, deliberately, Dussander set his cup on the table next to his bottle of Ancient Age and said:

“The fool believed everything.”

Todd let out his pent-up breath in a whooping gust of relief.

Before he could draw another breath in, Dussander added: “He wanted your poor, troubled parents to attend counselling sessions downtown with a friend of his. He was really quite insistent.”

“Jesus! Did you . . . what did you . . . how did you handle it?”

“I thought quickly,” Dussander replied. “Like the little girl in the Saki story, invention on short notice is one of my strong points. I promised him your parents would go in for such counselling if you received even one Flunk Card when they are given in May.”

The blood fell out of Todd’s face.

“You did *what?*” he nearly screamed. “I’ve already flunked two algebra quizzes and a history test since the marking period started!” He advanced into the room, his pale face now growing shiny with breaking sweat. “There was a French quiz this afternoon and I flunked that, too ... I know I did. All I could think about was that goddamned Rubber Ed and whether or not you were taking care of him. You took care of him, all right,” he finished bitterly. “Not get one Flunk Card? I’ll probably get five or six.”

“It was the best I could do without arousing suspicions,” Dussander said. “This French, fool that he is, is only doing his job. Now you will do yours.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Todd’s face was ugly and thunderous, his voice truculent.

“You will work. In the next four weeks you will work harder than you have ever worked in your life. Furthermore, on Monday you will go to each of your instructors and apologize to them for your poor showing thus far. You will—”

“It’s impossible,” Todd said. “You don’t get it, man. It’s *impossible*. I’m at least five weeks behind in science and history. In algebra it’s more like ten.”

“Nevertheless,” Dussander said. He poured more bourbon.

“You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?” Todd shouted at him. “Well, I don’t take orders from you. The days when you gave orders are long over. *Do you get it?*” He lowered his voice abruptly. “The most lethal thing you’ve got around the house these days is a Shell No-Pest Strip. You’re nothing but a broken-down old man who farts rotten eggs if he eats a taco. I bet you even pee in your bed.”

“Listen to me, snotnose,” Dussander said quietly.

Todd’s head jerked angrily around at that.

“Before today,” Dussander said carefully, “it was possible, *just barely* possible, that you could have denounced me and come out clean yourself. I don’t believe you would have been up to the job with your nerves in their present state, but never mind that. It would have been technically possible. But now things have changed. Today I impersonated your grandfather, one Victor Bowden. No one can have the slightest doubt that I did it with . . . how is the word? . . . your connivance. If it comes out now, boy, you will look blacker than ever. And you will have no defense. I took care of that today.”

“I wish—”

“You *wish!* You *wish!*” Dussander roared. “Never mind your wishes, your wishes make me sick, your wishes are no more than little piles of dogshit in the gutter! *All I want from you is to know if you understand the situation we are in!*”

“I understand it,” Todd muttered. His fists had been tightly clenched while Dussander shouted at him—he was not used to being shouted at. Now he opened his hands and dully observed that he had dug bleeding half-moons into his palms. The cuts would have been worse, he supposed, but in the last four months or so he had taken up biting his nails.

“Good. Then you will make your sweet apologies, and you will study. In your free time at school you will study. During your lunch hours you will study. After school you will come here and study, and on your weekends you will come here and do more of the same.”

“Not here,” Todd said quickly. “At home.”

“No. At home you will dawdle and daydream as you have all along. If you are here I can stand over you if I have to and watch you. I can

protect my own interests in this matter. I can quiz you. I can listen to your lessons.”

“If I don’t want to come here, you can’t make me.” Dussander drank. “That is true. Things will then go on as they have. You will fail. This guidance person, French, will expect me to make good on my promise. When I don’t, he will call your parents. They will find out that kindly Mr. Denker impersonated your grandfather at your request. They will find out about the altered grades. They—”

“Oh, shut up. I’ll come.”

“You’re already here. Begin with algebra.”

“No way! It’s Friday afternoon!”

“You study every afternoon now,” Dussander said softly. “Begin with algebra.”

Todd stared at him—only for a moment before dropping his eyes and fumbling his algebra text out of his bookbag—and Dussander saw murder in the boy’s eyes. Not figurative murder; literal murder. It had been years since he had seen that dark, burning, speculative glance, but one never forgot it. He supposed he would have seen it in his own eyes if there had been a mirror at hand on the day he had looked at the white and defenseless nape of the boy’s neck.

*I must protect myself*, he thought with some amazement. *One underestimates at one’s own risk.*

He drank his bourbon and rocked and watched the boy study.

It was nearly five o’clock when Todd biked home. He felt washed out, hot-eyed, drained, impotently angry. Every time his eyes had wandered from the printed page—from the maddening, incomprehensible, fucking *stupid* world of sets, subsets, ordered pairs, and Cartesian co-ordinates-Dussander’s sharp old man’s voice had spoken. Otherwise he had remained completely silent . . . except for the maddening bump of his slippers on the floor and the squeak of the rocker. He sat there like a vulture waiting for its prey to expire. Why had he ever gotten into this? *How* had he gotten into it? This was a mess, a terrible mess. He had picked up some ground this afternoon—some of the set theory that had stumped him so

badly just before the Christmas break had fallen into place with an almost audible click—but it was impossible to think he could pick up enough to scrape through next week’s algebra test with even a D.

It was four weeks until the end of the world.

On the corner he saw a bluejay lying on the sidewalk, its beak slowly opening and closing. It was trying vainly to get onto its birdy-feet and hop away. One of its wings had been crushed, and Todd supposed a passing car had hit it and flipped it up onto the sidewalk like a tiddlywink. One of its beady eyes stared up at him.

Todd looked at it for a long time, holding the grips of his bike’s apehanger handlebars lightly. Some of the warmth had gone out of the day and the air felt almost chilly. He supposed his friends had spent the afternoon goofing off down at the Babe Ruth diamond on Walnut Street, maybe playing a little scrub, more likely playing pepper or three-flies-six-grounders or roly-bat. It was the time of year when you started working your way up to baseball. There was some talk about getting up their own sandlot team this year to compete in the informal city league; there were dads enough willing to shlepp them around to games. Todd, of course, would pitch. He had been a Little League pitching star until he had grown out of the Senior Little League division last year. *Would have pitched.*

So what? He’d just have to tell them no. He’d just have to tell them: *Guys, I got mixed up with this war criminal. I got him right by the balls, and then—ha-ha, this’ll killya, guys—then I found out he was holding my balls as tight as I was holding his. I started having funny dreams and the cold sweats. My grades went to hell and I changed them on my report card so my folks wouldn’t find out and now I’ve got to hit the books really hard for the first time in my life. I’m not afraid of getting grounded, though. I’m afraid of going to the reformatory. And that’s why I can’t play any sandlot with you guys this year. You see how it is, guys.*

A thin smile, much like Dussander’s and not at all like his former broad grin, touched his lips. There was no sunshine in it; it was a shady smile. There was no fun in it; no confidence. It merely said: *You see how it is, guys.*

He rolled his bike forward over the jay with exquisite slowness, hearing the newspaper crackle of its feathers and the crunch of its small hollow bones as they fractured inside it. He reversed, rolling over it again. It was still twitching. He rolled over it again, a single bloody feather stuck to his front tire, revolving up and down, up and down. By then the bird had stopped moving, the bird had kicked the bucket, the bird had punched out, the bird had gone to that great aviary in the sky, but Todd kept going forwards and backwards across its mashed body just the same. He did it for almost five minutes, and that thin smile never left his face. You see how it is, guys.

## 10

April, 1975.

The old man stood halfway down the compound's aisle, smiling broadly, as Dave Klingerman walked up to meet him. The frenzied barking that filled the air didn't seem to bother him in the slightest, or the smells of fur and urine, or the hundred different strays yapping and howling in their cages, dashing back and forth, leaping against the mesh. Klingerman pegged the old guy as a dog-lover right off the bat. His smile was sweet and pleasant. He offered Dave a swollen, arthritis-bunched hand carefully, and Klingerman shook it in the same spirit.

"Hello, sir!" he said, speaking up. "Noisy as hell, isn't it?"

"I don't mind," the old man said. "Not at all. My name is Arthur Denker."

"Klingerman. Dave Klingerman."

"I am pleased to meet you, sir. I read in the paper—I could not believe it—that you *give* dogs away here. Perhaps I misunderstood. In fact I think I must have misunderstood."

"No, we give em away, all right," Dave said. "If we can't, we have to destroy em. Sixty days, that's what the State gives us. Shame.

Come on in the office here. Quieter. Smells better, too.”

In the office, Dave heard a story that was familiar (but nonetheless affecting): Arthur Denker was in his seventies. He had come to California when his wife died. He was not rich, but he tended what he did have with great care. He was lonely. His only friend was the boy who sometimes came to his house and read to him. In Germany he had owned a beautiful Saint Bernard. Now, in Santo Donato, he had a house with a good-sized back yard. The yard was fenced. And he had read in the paper . . . would it be possible that he could . . .

“Well, we don’t have any Bernards,” Dave said. “They go fast because they’re so good with kids—”

“Oh, I understand. I didn’t mean that—”

“—but I do have a half-grown shepherd pup. How would that be?”

Mr. Denker’s eyes grew bright, as if he might be on the verge of tears. “Perfect,” he said. “That would be perfect.”

“The dog itself is free, but there are a few other charges. Distemper and rabies shots. A city dog license. All of it goes about twenty-five bucks for most people, but the State pays half if you’re over sixty-five-part of the California Golden Ager program.”

“Golden Ager . . . is that what I am?” Mr. Denker said, and laughed. For just a moment—it was silly—Dave felt a kind of chill.

“Uh ... I guess so, sir.”

“It is very reasonable.”

“Sure, we think so. The same dog would cost you a hundred and twenty-five dollars in a pet shop. But people go to those places instead of here. They are paying for a set of papers, of course, not the dog.” Dave shook his head. “If they only understood how many fine animals are abandoned every year.”

“And if you can’t find a suitable home for them within sixty days, they are destroyed?”

“We put them to sleep, yes.”

“Put them to . . . ? I’m sorry, my English—”

“It’s a city ordinance,” Dave said. “Can’t have dog-packs running the streets.”

“You shoot them.”

“No, we give them gas. It’s very humane. They don’t feel a thing.”

“No,” Mr. Denker said. “I am sure they don’t.”

\* \* \*

Todd’s seat in Beginning Algebra was four desks down in the second row. He sat there, trying to keep his face expressionless, as Mr. Storrman passed back the exams. But his ragged fingernails were digging into his palms again, and his entire body seemed to be running with a slow and caustic sweat.

*Don’t get your hopes up. Don’t be such a goddam chump. There’s no way you could have passed. You know you didn’t pass.*

Nevertheless, he could not completely squash the foolish hope. It had been the first algebra exam in weeks that looked as if it had been written in something other than Greek. He was sure that in his nervousness (nervousness? no, call it what it had really been: outright terror) he had not done that well, but maybe . . . well, if it had been anyone else but Storrman, who had a Yale padlock for a heart .

. . .

STOP IT! he commanded himself, and for a moment, a coldly horrible moment, he was positive he had screamed those two words aloud in the classroom. *You flunked, you know you did, not a thing in the world is going to change it.*

Storrman handed him his paper expressionlessly and moved on. Todd laid it face down on his initial-scarred desk. For a moment he didn’t think he possessed sufficient will to even turn it over and know. At last he flipped it with such convulsive suddenness that the exam sheet tore. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as he stared at it. His heart seemed to stop for a moment.

The number 83 was written in a circle at the top of the sheet. Below it was a letter-grade: C+. Below the letter-grade was a brief notation: *Good improvement! I think I’m twice as relieved as you should be. Check errors carefully At least three of them are arithmetical rather than conceptual.*

His heartbeat began again, at triple-time. Relief washed over him, but it was not cool—it was hot and complicated and strange. He closed his eyes, not hearing the class as it buzzed over the exam and began the pre-ordained fight for an extra point here or there. Todd saw redness behind his eyes. It pulsed like flowing blood with the rhythm of his heartbeat. In that instant he hated Dussander more than he ever had before. His hands snapped shut into fists and he only wished, wished, wished, that Dussander's scrawny chicken neck could have been between them.

\* \* \*

Dick and Monica Bowden had twin beds, separated by a nightstand with a pretty imitation Tiffany lamp standing on it. Their room was done in genuine redwood, and the walls were comfortably lined with books. Across the room, nestled between two ivory bookends (bull elephants on their hind legs) was a round Sony TV. Dick was watching Johnny Carson with the earplug in while Monica read the new Michael Crichton that had come from the book club that day.

"Dick?" She put a bookmark (THIS IS WHERE I FELL ASLEEP, it said) into the Crichton and closed it.

On the TV, Buddy Hackett had just broken everyone up. Dick smiled.

"Dick?" she said more loudly.

He pulled the earplug out. "What?"

"Do you think Todd's all right?"

He looked at her for a moment, frowning, then shook his head a little. "*Je ne comprends pas, chérie.*" His limping French was a joke between them. His father had sent him an extra two hundred dollars to hire a tutor when he was flunking French. He had gotten Monica Darrow, picking her name at random from the cards tacked up on the Union bulletin board. By Christmas she had been wearing his pin . . . and he had managed a C in French.

“Well . . . he’s lost weight.”

“He looks a little scrawny, sure,” Dick said. He put the TV earplug in his lap, where it emitted tiny squawking sounds.

“He’s growing up, Monica.”

“So soon?” she asked uneasily.

He laughed. “So soon. I shot up seven inches as a teenager—from a five-foot-six shrimp at twelve to the beautiful six-foot-one mass of muscle you see before you today. My mother said that when I was fourteen you could hear me growing in the night ”

“Good thing not all of you grew that much.”

“It’s all in how you use it.”

“Want to use it tonight?”

“The wench grows bold,” Dick Bowden said, and threw the earplug across the room.

After, as he was drifting off to sleep:

“Dick, he’s having bad dreams, too.”

“Nightmares?” he muttered.

“Nightmares. I’ve heard him moaning in his sleep two or three times when I’ve gone down to use the bathroom in the night. I didn’t want to wake him up. It’s silly, but my grandmother used to say you could drive a person insane if you woke them up in the middle of a bad dream.”

“She was the Polack, wasn’t she?”

“The Polack, yeah, the Polack. Nice talk!”

“You know what I mean. Why don’t you just use the upstairs john?”  
He had put it in himself two years ago.

“You know the flush always wakes you up,” she said.

“So don’t flush it.”

“Dick, that’s nasty.”

He sighed.

“Sometimes when I go in, he’s sweating. And the sheets are damp.”

He grinned in the dark. “I bet.”

“What’s *that* . . . oh.” She slapped him lightly. “That’s nasty, too. Besides, he’s only thirteen.”

“Fourteen next month. He’s not too young. A little precocious, maybe, but not too young.”

“How old were you?”

“Fourteen or fifteen. I don’t remember exactly. But I remember I woke up thinking I’d died and gone to heaven.”

“But you were older than Todd is now.”

“All that stuff’s happening younger. It must be the milk . . . or the fluoride. Do you know they have sanitary napkin dispensers in all the girls’ rooms of the school we built in Jackson Park last year? And that’s a *grammar school*. Now your average sixth-grader is only eleven. How old were you when you started?”

“I don’t remember,” she said. “All I know is Todd’s dreams don’t sound like . . . like he died and went to heaven.”

“Have you asked him about them?”

“Once. About six weeks ago. You were off playing golf with that horrible Ernie Jacobs.”

“That horrible Ernie Jacobs is going to make me a full partner by 1977, if he doesn’t screw himself to death with that high-yellow secretary of his before then. Besides, he always pays the greens fees. What did Todd say?”

“That he didn’t remember. But a sort of ... shadow crossed his face. I think he *did* remember.”

“Monica, I don’t remember everything from my dear dead youth, but one thing I do remember is that wet dreams are not always pleasant. In fact, they can be downright unpleasant.”

“How can that be?”

“Guilt. All kinds of guilt. Some of it maybe all the way from babyhood, when it was made very clear to him that wetting the bed was wrong. Then there’s the sex thing. Who knows what brings a wet dream on? Copping a feel on the bus? Looking up a girl’s skirt in study hall? I don’t know. The only one I can really remember was going off the high board at the YMCA pool on co-ed day and losing my trunks when I hit the water.”

“You got off on that?” she asked, giggling a little.

“Yeah. So if the kid doesn’t want to talk to you about his John Thomas problems, don’t force him.”

“We did our damn best to raise him without all those needless guilts.”

“You can’t escape them. He brings them home from school like the colds he used to pick up in the first grade. From his friends, or the way his teachers mince around certain subjects. He probably got it from my dad, too. ‘Don’t touch it in the night, Todd, or your hands’ll grow hair and you’ll go blind and you’ll start to lose your memory, and after awhile your thing will turn black and rot off. So be careful, Todd.’ ”

“Dick Bowden! Your dad would never—”

“He wouldn’t. Hell, he *did*. Just like your Polack grandmother told you that waking somebody up in the middle of a nightmare might drive them nuts. He also told me to always wipe off the ring of a public toilet before I sat on it so I wouldn’t get ‘other people’s germs.’ I guess that was his way of saying syphilis. I bet your grandmother laid that one on you, too.”

“No, my mother,” she said absently. “And she told me to always flush. Which is why I go downstairs.”

“It still wakes me up,” Dick mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

This time he had actually drifted halfway over the threshold of sleep when she spoke his name again.

“*What?*” he asked, a little impatiently.

“You don’t suppose . . . oh, never mind. Go back to sleep.”

“No, go on, finish. I’m awake again. I don’t suppose what?”

“That old man. Mr. Denker. You don’t think Todd’s seeing too much of him, do you? Maybe he’s . . . oh, I don’t know ... filling Todd up with a lot of stories.”

“The real heavy horrors,” Dick said. “The day the Essen Motor Works dropped below quota.” He snickered.

“It was just an idea,” she said, a little stiffly. The covers rustled as she turned over on her side. “Sorry I bothered you.”

He put a hand on her bare shoulder. "I'll tell you something, babe," he said, and stopped for a moment, thinking carefully, choosing his words. "I've been worried about Todd, too, sometimes. Not the same things you've been worried about, but worried is worried, right?"

She turned back to him. "About what?"

"Well, I grew up a lot different than he's growing up. My dad had the store. Vic the Grocer, everyone called him. He had a book where he kept the names of the people who owed him, and how much they owed. You know what he called it?"

"No." Dick rarely talked about his boyhood; she had always thought it was because he hadn't enjoyed it. She listened carefully now.

"He called it the Left Hand Book. He said the right hand was business, but the right hand should never know what the left hand was doing. He said if the right hand *did* know, it would probably grab a meat-cleaver and chop the left hand right off."

"You never told me that."

"Well, I didn't like the old man very much when we first got married, and the truth is I still spend a lot of time not liking him. I couldn't understand why I had to wear pants from the Goodwill box while Mrs. Mazursky could get a ham on credit with that same old story about how her husband was going back to work next week. The only work that fucking wino Bill Mazursky ever had was holding onto a twelve-cent bottle of musky so it wouldn't fly away.

"All I ever wanted in those days was to get out of the neighborhood and away from my old man's life. So I made grades and played sports I didn't really like and got a scholarship at UCLA. And I made damn sure I stayed in the top ten per cent of my classes because the only Left Hand Book the colleges kept in those days was for the GIs that fought the war. My dad sent me money for my textbooks, but the only other money I ever took from him was the time I wrote home in a panic because I was flunking funnybook French. I met you. And I found out later from Mr. Halleck down the block that my dad put a lien on his car to scare up that two hundred bucks.

“And now I’ve got you, and we’ve got Todd. I’ve always thought he was a damned fine boy, and I’ve tried to make sure he’s always had everything he ever needed . . . anything that would help him grow into a fine man. I used to laugh at that old wheeze about a man wanting his son to be better than he was, but as I get older it seems less funny and more true. I never want Todd to have to wear pants from a Goodwill box because some wino’s wife got a ham on credit. You understand?”

“Yes, of course I do,” she said quietly.

“Then, about ten years ago, just before my old man finally got tired of fighting off the urban renewal guys and retired, he had a minor stroke. He was in the hospital for ten days. And the people from the neighborhood, the guineas and the krauts, even some of the jigs that started to move in around 1955 or so ... they paid his bill. Every fucking cent. I couldn’t believe it. They kept the store open, too. Fiona Castellano got four or five of her friends who were out of work to come in on shifts. When my old man got back, the books balanced out to the cent.”

“Wow,” she said, very softly.

“You know what he said to me? My old man? That he’d always been afraid of getting old—of being scared and hurting and all by himself. Of having to go into the hospital and not being able to make ends meet anymore. Of dying. He said that after the stroke he wasn’t scared anymore. He said he thought he could die well. ‘You mean die happy, Pap?’ I asked him. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I don’t think anyone dies happy, Dickie.’ He always called me Dickie, still does, and that’s another thing I guess I’ll never be able to like. He said he didn’t think anyone died happy, but you could die well. That impressed me.”

He was silent for a long, thoughtful time.

“The last five or six years I’ve been able to get some perspective on my old man. Maybe because he’s down there in San Remo and out of my hair. I started thinking that maybe the Left Hand Book wasn’t such a bad idea. That was when I started to worry about Todd. I kept wanting to tell him about how there was maybe something more to life than me being able to take all of you to Hawaii for a month or being able to buy Todd pants that don’t smell

like the mothballs they used to put in the Goodwill box. I could never figure out how to tell him those things. But I think maybe he knows. And it takes a load off my mind.”

“Reading to Mr. Denker, you mean?”

“Yes. He’s not getting anything for that. Denker can’t pay him. Here’s this old guy, thousands of miles from any friends or relatives that might still be living, here’s this guy that’s everything my father was afraid of. And there’s Todd.”

“I never thought of it just like that.”

“Have you noticed the way Todd gets when you talk to him about that old man?”

“He gets very quiet.”

“Sure. He gets tongue-tied and embarrassed, like he was doing something nasty. Just like my pop used to when someone tried to thank him for laying some credit on them. We’re Todd’s right hand, that’s all. You and me and all the rest—the house, the ski-trips to Tahoe, the Thunderbird in the garage, his color TV. All his right hand. And he doesn’t want us to see what his left hand is up to.”

“You don’t think he’s seeing too much of Denker, then?”

“Honey, look at his grades! If they were falling off, I’d be the first one to say Hey, enough is enough, already, don’t go overboard. His grades are the first place trouble would show up. And how have they been?”

“As good as ever, after that first slip.”

“So what are we talking about? Listen, I’ve got a conference at nine, babe. If I don’t get some sleep, I’m going to be sloppy.”

“Sure, go to sleep,” she said indulgently, and as he turned over, she kissed him lightly on one shoulderblade. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” he said comfortably, and closed his eyes. “Everything’s fine, Monica. You worry too much.”

“I know I do. Goodnight.”

They slept.

“Stop looking out the window,” Dussander said. “There is nothing out there to interest you.”

Todd looked at him sullenly. His history text was open on the table, showing a color plate of Teddy Roosevelt cresting San Juan Hill. Helpless Cubans were falling away from the hooves of Teddy's horse. Teddy was grinning a wide American grin, the grin of a man who knew that God was in His heaven and everything was bully. Todd Bowden was not grinning.

"You like being a slave-driver, don't you?" he asked.

"I like being a free man," Dussander said. "Study."

"Suck my cock."

"As a boy," Dussander said, "I would have had my mouth washed out with lye soap for saying such a thing."

"Times change."

"Do they?" Dussander sipped his bourbon. "Study." Todd stared at Dussander. "You're nothing but a goddamned rummy. You know that?"

"Study."

"*Shut up!*" Todd slammed his book shut. It made a riflecrack sound in Dussander's kitchen. "I can never catch up, anyway. Not in time for the test. There's fifty pages of this shit left, all the way up to World War One. I'll make a crib in Study Hall Two tomorrow."

Harshly, Dussander said: "You will do no such thing!"

"Why not? Who's going to stop me? You?"

"Boy, you are still having a hard time comprehending the stakes we play for. Do you think I enjoy keeping your snivelling brat nose in your books?" His voice rose, whipsawing, demanding, commanding. "Do you think I enjoy listening to your tantrums, your kindergarten swears? 'Suck my cock,' " Dussander mimicked savagely in a high, falsetto voice that made Todd flush darkly. " 'Suck my cock, so what, who cares, I'll do it tomorrow, suck my cock!'"

"Well, you *like* it!" Todd shouted back. "Yeah, you *like* it! The only time you don't feel like a zombie is when you're on my back! So give me a fucking break!"

"If you are caught with one of these cribbing papers, what do you think will happen? Who will be told first?"

Todd looked at his hands with their ragged, bitten fingernails and said nothing.

“Who?”

“Jesus, you know. Rubber Ed. Then my folks, I guess.”

Dussander nodded. “Me, I guess that too. Study. Put your cribbing paper in your head, where it belongs.”

“I hate you,” Todd said dully. “I really do.” But he opened his book again and Teddy Roosevelt grinned up at him, Teddy galloping into the twentieth century with his saber in his hand, Cubans falling back in disarray before him—possibly before the force of his fierce American grin.

Dussander began to rock again. He held his teacup of bourbon in his hands. “That’s a good boy,” he said, almost tenderly.

Todd had his first wet dream on the last night of April, and he awoke to the sound of rain whispering secretly through the leaves and branches of the tree outside his window.

In the dream, he had been in one of the Patin laboratories. He was standing at the end of a long, low table. A lush young girl of amazing beauty had been secured to this table with clamps. Dussander was assisting him. Dussander wore a white butcher’s apron and nothing else. When he pivoted to turn on the monitoring equipment, Todd could see Dussander’s scrawny buttocks grinding at each other like misshapen white stones.

He handed something to Todd, something he recognized immediately, although he had never actually seen one. It was a dildo. The tip of it was polished metal, winking in the light of the overhead fluorescents like heartless chrome. The dildo was hollow. Snaking out of it was a black electrical cord that ended in a red rubber bulb.

“Go ahead,” Dussander said. “The Fuehrer says it’s all right. He says it’s your reward for studying.”

Todd looked down at himself and saw that he was naked. His small penis was fully erect, jutting plumply up at an angle from the thin peachdown of his pubic hair. He slipped the dildo on. The fit was tight but there was some sort of lubricant in there. The friction was pleasant. No; it was more than pleasant. It was delightful.

He looked down at the girl and felt a strange shift in his thoughts ... as if they had slipped into a perfect groove. Suddenly all things seemed right. Doors had been opened. He would go through them. He took the red rubber bulb in his left hand, put his knees on the table, and paused for just a moment, gauging the angle while his Norseman's prick made its own angle up and out from his slight boy's body.

Dimly, far off, he could hear Dussander reciting: "Test run eighty-four. Electricity, sexual stimulus, metabolism. Based on the Thyssen theories of negative reinforcement. Subject is a young Jewish girl, approximately sixteen years of age, no scars, no identifying marks, no known disabilities—"

She cried out when the tip of the dildo touched her. Todd found the cry pleasant, as he did her fruitless struggles to free herself, or, lacking that, to at least bring her legs together.

*This is what they can't show in those magazines about the war, he thought, but it's there, just the same.*

He thrust forward suddenly, parting her with no grace. She shrieked like a fireball.

After her initial thrashings and efforts to expel him, she lay perfectly still, enduring. The lubricated interior of the dildo pulled and slid against Todd's engorgement. Delightful. Heavenly. His ringers toyed with the rubber bulb in his left hand.

Far away, Dussander recited pulse, blood pressure, respiration, alpha waves, beta waves, stroke count.

As the climax began to build inside him, Todd became perfectly still and squeezed the bulb. Her eyes, which had been closed, flew open, bulging. Her tongue fluttered in the pink cavity of her mouth. Her arms and legs thrummed. But the real action was in her torso, rising and falling, vibrating, every muscle

(oh every muscle every muscle moves tightens closes every)  
every muscle and the sensation at climax was

(ecstasy)

oh it was, it was

(the end of the world thundering outside)

He woke to that sound and the sound of rain. He was huddled on his side in a dark ball, his heart beating at a sprinter's pace. His lower belly was covered with a warm, sticky liquid. There was an instant of panicky horror when he feared he might be bleeding to death . . . and then he realized what it *really* was, and he felt a fainting, nauseated revulsion. Semen. Come. Jizz. Jungle-juice. Words from fences and locker rooms and the walls of gas station bathrooms. There was nothing here he wanted.

His hands balled helplessly into fists. His dream-climax recurred to him, pallid now, senseless, frightening. But nerve-endings still tingled, retreating slowly from their spike-point. That final scene, fading now, was disgusting and yet somehow compulsive, like an unsuspecting bite into a piece of tropical fruit which, you realized (a second too late), had only tasted so amazingly sweet because it was rotten.

It came to him then. What he would have to do.

There was only one way he could get himself back again. He would have to kill Dussander. It was the only way. Games were done; storytime was over. This was survival.

"Kill him and it's all over," he whispered in the darkness, with the rain in the tree outside and semen drying on his belly. Whispering it made it seem real-Dussander always kept three or four fifths of Ancient Age on a shelf over the steep cellar stairs. He would go to the door, open it (half-crooked already, more often than not), and go down two steps. Then he would lean out, put one hand on the shelf, and grip the fresh bottle by the neck with his other hand. The cellar floor was not paved, but the dirt was hard-packed and Dussander, with a machinelike efficiency that Todd now thought of as Prussian rather than German, oiled it once every two months to keep bugs from breeding in the dirt. Cement or no cement, old bones break easily. And old men have accidents. The post-mortem would show that "Mr. Denker" had had a skinful of booze when he "fell."

*What happened, Todd?*

*He didn't answer the door so I used the key he gave me. Sometimeshe falls asleep. I went into the kitchen and saw the cellar*

*door was open. I went down the stairs and he ... he...*

Then, of course, tears.

It would work.

He would have himself back again.

For a long time Todd lay awake in the dark, listening to the thunder retreat westward, out over the Pacific, listening to the secret sound of the rain. He thought he would stay awake the rest of the night, going over it and over it. But he fell asleep only moments later and slept dreamlessly with one fist curled under his chin. He woke on the first of May fully rested for the first time in months.

## 11

May, 1975.

For Todd, that Friday was the longest of his life. He sat in class after class, hearing nothing, waiting only for the last five minutes, when the instructor would take out his or her small pile of Flunk Cards and distribute them. Each time an instructor approached Todd's desk with that pile of cards, he grew cold. Each time he or she passed him without stopping, he felt waves of dizziness and semi-hysteria.

Algebra was the worst. Storrmann approached... hesitated ... and just as Todd became convinced he was going to pass on, he laid a Flunk Card face down on Todd's desk. Todd looked at it coldly, with no feelings at all. Now that it had happened, he was only cold. *Well, that's it, he thought. Point, game, set, and match. Unless Dussander can think of something else. And I have my doubts.*

Without much interest, he turned the Flunk Card over to see by how much he had missed his C. It must have been close, but trust old Stony Storrmann not to give anyone a break. He saw that the grade-spaces were utterly blank—both the letter-grade space and the numerical-grade space. Written in the COMMENTS section was

this message: *I'm sure glad I don't have to give you one of these for REAL! Chas. Storrman.*

The dizziness came again, more savagely this time, roaring through his head, making it feel like a balloon filled with helium. He gripped the sides of his desk as hard as he could, holding one thought with total obsessive tightness: *You will not faint, not faint, not faint.* Little by little the waves of dizziness passed, and then he had to control an urge to run up the aisle after Storrman, turn him around, and poke his eyes out with the freshly sharpened pencil he held in his hand. And through it all his face remained carefully blank. The only sign that anything at all was going on inside was a mild tic in one eyelid.

School let out for the week fifteen minutes later. Todd walked slowly around the building to the bike-racks, his head down, his hands shoved into his pockets, his books tucked into the crook of his right arm, oblivious of the running, shouting students. He tossed the books into his bike-basket, unlocked the Schwinn, and pedaled away. Toward Dussander's house.

*Today, he thought. Today is your day, old man.*

"And so," Dussander said, pouring bourbon into his cup as Todd entered the kitchen, "the accused returns from the dock. How said they, prisoner?" He was wearing his bathrobe and a pair of hairy wool socks that climbed halfway up his shins. Socks like that, Todd thought, would be easy to slip in. He glanced at the bottle of Ancient Age Dussanger was currently working. It was down to the last three fingers.

"No D's, no F's, no Flunk Cards," Todd said. "I'll still have to change some of my grades in June, but maybe just the averages. I'll be getting all A's and B's this quarter if I keep up my work."

"Oh, you'll keep it up, all right," Dussander said. "We will see to it." He drank and then tipped more bourbon into his cup. "This calls for a celebration." His speech was slightly blurred—hardly enough to be noticeable, but Todd knew the old fuck was as drunk as he ever got. Yes, today. It would have to be today.

But he was cool.

“Celebrate pigshit,” he told Dussander.

“I’m afraid the delivery boy hasn’t arrived with the beluga and the truffles yet,” Dussander said, ignoring him. “Help is so unreliable these days. What about a few Ritz crackers and some Velveeta while we wait?”

“Okay,” Todd said. “What the hell.”

Dussander stood up (one knee banged the table, making him wince) and crossed to the refrigerator. He got out the cheese, took a knife from the drawer and a plate from the cupboard, and a box of Ritz crackers from the breadbox.

“All carefully injected with prussic acid,” he told Todd as he set the cheese and crackers down on the table. He grinned, and Todd saw that he had left out his false teeth again today. Nevertheless, Todd smiled back.

“So quiet today!” Dussander exclaimed. “I would have expected you to turn handsprings all the way up the hall.” He emptied the last of the bourbon into his cup, sipped, smacked his lips.

“I guess I’m still numb,” Todd said. He bit into a cracker. He had stopped refusing Dussander’s food a long time ago. Dussander thought there was a letter with one of Todd’s friends—there was not, of course; he had friends, but none he trusted *that* much. He supposed Dussander had guessed that long ago, but he knew Dussander didn’t quite dare put his guess to such an extreme test as murder.

“What shall we talk about today?” Dussander enquired, tossing off the last shot. “I give you the day off from studying, how’s that? Uh? Uh?” When he drank, his accent became thicker. It was an accent Todd had come to hate. Now he felt okay about the accent; he felt okay about everything. He felt very cool all over. He looked at his hands, the hands which would give the push, and they looked just as they always did. They were not trembling; they were cool.

“I don’t care,” he said. “Anything you want.”

“Shall I tell you about the special soap we made? Our experiments with enforced homosexuality? Or perhaps you would like to hear how I escaped Berlin after I had been foolish enough to go back. That

was a close one, I can tell you.” He pantomimed shaving one stubby cheek and laughed.

“Anything,” Todd said. “Really.” He watched Dussander examine the empty bottle and then get up with it in one hand. Dussander took it to the wastebasket and dropped it in.

“No, none of those, I think,” Dussander said. “You don’t seem to be in the mood.” He stood reflectively by the wastebasket for a moment and then crossed the kitchen to the cellar door. His wool socks whispered on the hilly linoleum. “I think today I will instead tell you the story of an old man who was afraid.”

Dussander opened the cellar door. His back was now to the table. Todd stood up quietly.

“He was afraid,” Dussander went on, “of a certain young boy who was, in a queer way, his friend. A smart boy. His mother called this boy ‘apt pupil,’ and the old man had already discovered he was an apt pupil... although perhaps not in the way his mother thought.”

Dussander fumbled with the old-fashioned electrical switch on the wall, trying to turn it with his bunched and clumsy fingers. Todd walked—almost glided—across the linoleum, not stepping on any of the places where it squeaked or creaked. He knew this kitchen as well as his own, now. Maybe better.

“At first, the boy was not the old man’s friend,” Dussander said. He managed to turn the switch at last. He descended the first step with a veteran drunk’s care. “At first the old man disliked the boy a great deal. Then he grew to ... to enjoy his company, although there was still a strong element of dislike there.” He was looking at the shelf now but still holding the railing. Todd, cool—no, now he was *cold*—stepped behind him and calculated the chances of one strong push dislodging Dussander’s hold on the railing. He decided to wait until Dussander leaned forward.

“Part of the old man’s enjoyment came from a feeling of equality,” Dussander went on thoughtfully. “You see, the boy and the old man had each other in mutual deathgrips. Each knew something the other wanted kept secret. And then... ah, then it became apparent to the old man that things were changing. Yes. He was losing his hold—some of it or all of it, depending on how desperate the boy might be,

and how clever. It occurred to this old man on one long and sleepless night that it might be well for him to acquire a new hold on the boy. For his own safety.”

Now Dussander let go of the railing and leaned out over the steep cellar stairs, but Todd remained perfectly still. The bone-deep cold was melting out of him, being replaced by a rosy flush of anger and confusion. As Dussander grasped his fresh bottle, Todd thought viciously that the old man had the stinkiest cellar in town, oil or no oil. It smelled as if something had died down there.

“So the old man got out of his bed right then. What is sleep to an old man? Very little. And he sat at his small desk, thinking about how cleverly he had enmeshed the boy in the very crimes the boy was holding over his own head. He sat thinking about how hard the boy had worked, how very hard, to bring his school marks back up. And how, when they *were* back up, he would have no further need for the old man alive. And if the old man were dead, the boy could be free.”

He turned around now, holding the fresh bottle of Ancient Age by the neck.

“I heard you, you know,” he said, almost gently. “From the moment you pushed your chair back and stood up. You are not as quiet as you imagine, boy. At least not yet.”

Todd said nothing.

“So!” Dussander exclaimed, stepping back into the kitchen and closing the cellar door firmly behind him. “The old man wrote everything down, *nicht wahr?* From first word to last he wrote it down. When he was finally finished it was almost dawn and his hand was singing from the arthritis—the *verdammt* arthritis—but he felt good for the first times in weeks. He felt *safe*. He got back into his bed and slept until mid-afternoon. In fact, if he had slept any longer, he would have missed his favorite—*General Hospital*.”

He had regained his rocker now. He sat down, produced a worn jackknife with a yellow ivory handle, and began to cut painstakingly around the seal covering the top of the bourbon bottle.

“On the following day the old man dressed in his best suit and went down to the bank where he kept his little checking and savings accounts. He spoke to one of the bank officers, who was able to

answer all the old man's questions most satisfactorily. He rented a safety deposit box. The bank officer explained to the old man that he would have a key and the bank would have a key. To open the box, both keys would be needed. No one but the old man could use the old man's key without a signed, notarized letter of permission from the old man himself. With one exception."

Dussander smiled toothlessly into Todd Bowden's white, set face.

"That exception is made in the event of the box-holder's death," he said. Still looking at Todd, still smiling, Dussander put his jackknife back into the pocket of his robe, unscrewed the cap of the bourbon bottle, and poured a fresh jolt into his cup.

"What happens then?" Todd asked hoarsely.

"Then the box is opened in the presence of a bank official and a representative of the Internal Revenue Service. The contents of the box are inventoried. In this case they will find only a twelve-page document. Non-taxable... but highly interesting."

The fingers of Todd's hands crept toward each other and locked tightly. "You can't do that," he said in a stunned and unbelieving voice. It was the voice of a person who observes another person walking on the ceiling. "You can't... can't do that."

"My boy," Dussander said kindly, "I have."

"But . . . I ... you . . ." His voice suddenly rose to an agonized howl. "You're *old!* Don't you know that you're *old?* You could die! *You could die anytime!*"

Dussander got up. He went to one of the kitchen cabinets and took down a small glass. This glass had once held jelly. Cartoon characters danced around the rim. Todd recognized them all—Fred and Wilma Flintstone, Barney and Betty Rubble, Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm. He had grown up with them. He watched as Dussander wiped this jelly-glass almost ceremonially with a dishtowel. He watched as Dussander set it in front of him. He watched as Dussander poured a finger of bourbon into it.

"What's that for?" Todd muttered. "I don't drink. Drinking's for cheap stewbums like you."

"Lift your glass, boy. It is a special occasion. Today you drink."

Todd looked at him for a long moment, then picked up the glass. Dussander clicked his cheap ceramic cup smartly against it.

“I make a toast, boy—long life! Long life to both of us! *Prosit!*” He tossed his bourbon off at a gulp and then began to laugh. He rocked back and forth, stockinged feet hitting the linoleum, laughing, and Todd thought he had never looked so much like a vulture, a vulture in a bathrobe, a noisome beast of carrion.

“I hate you,” he whispered, and then Dussander began to choke on his own laughter. His face turned a dull brick color; it sounded as if he were coughing, laughing, and strangling, all at the same time. Todd, scared, got up quickly and clapped him on the back until the coughing fit had passed.

“*Danke schön,*” he said. “Drink your drink. It will do you good.”

Todd drank it. It tasted like very bad cold-medicine and lit a fire in his gut.

“I can’t believe you drink this shit all day,” he said, putting the glass back on the table and shuddering. “You ought to quit it. Quit drinking *and* smoking.”

“Your concern for my health is touching,” Dussander said. He produced a crumpled pack of cigarettes from the same bathrobe pocket into which the jackknife had disappeared.

“And I am equally solicitous of your own welfare, boy. Almost every day I read in the paper where a cyclist has been killed at a busy intersection. You should give it up. You should walk. Or ride the bus, like me.”

“Why don’t you go fuck yourself?” Todd burst out.

“My boy,” Dussander said, pouring more bourbon and beginning to laugh again, “we are fucking each other—didn’t you know that?”

One day about a week later, Todd was sitting on a disused mail platform down in the old trainyard. He chucked cinders out across the rusty, weed-infested tracks one at a time.

*Why shouldn’t I kill him anyway?*

Because he was a logical boy, the logical answer came first. No reason at all. Sooner or later Dussander was going to die, and given

Dussander's habits, it would probably be sooner. Whether he killed the old man or whether Dussander died of a heart attack in his bathtub, it was all going to come out. At least he could have the pleasure of wringing the old vulture's neck.

Sooner or later—that phrase defied logic.

*Maybe it'll be later,* Todd thought. *Cigarettes or not, booze or not, he's a tough old bastard. He's lasted this long, so ... so maybe it'll be later.*

From beneath him came a fuzzy snort.

Todd jumped to his feet, dropping a handful of cinders he had been holding. That snorting sound came again.

He paused, on the verge of running, but the snort didn't recur. Nine hundred yards away, an eight-lane freeway swept across the horizon above this weed- and junk-strewn cul-desac with its deserted buildings, rusty Cyclone fences, and splintery, warped platforms. The cars up on the freeway glistened in the sun like exotic hard-shelled beetles. Eight lanes of traffic up there, nothing down here but Todd, a few birds ... and whatever had snorted.

Cautiously, he bent down with his hands on his knees and peered under the mail platform. There was a wino lying up in there among the yellow weeds and empty cans and dusty old bottles. It was impossible to tell his age; Todd put him at somewhere between thirty and four hundred. He was wearing a strappy tee-shirt that was caked with dried vomit, green pants that were far too big for him, and gray leather workshoes cracked in a hundred places. The cracks gaped like agonized mouths. Todd thought he smelled like Dussander's cellar.

The wino's red-laced eyes opened slowly and stared at Todd with a bleary lack of wonder. As they did, Todd thought of the Swiss Army knife in his pocket, the Angler model. He had purchased it at a sporting goods store in Redondo Beach almost a year ago. He could hear the clerk that had waited on him in his mind: *You couldn't pick a better knife than that one, son—a knife like that could save your life someday. We sell fifteen hundred Swiss knives every damn year.*

Fifteen hundred a year.

He put his hand in his pocket and gripped the knife. In his mind's eye he saw Dussander's jackknife working slowly around the neck of the bourbon bottle, slitting the seal. A moment later he became aware that he had an erection.

Cold terror stole into him.

The wino swiped a hand over his cracked lips and then licked them with a tongue which nicotine had turned a permanent dismal yellow. "Got a dime, kid?"

Todd looked at him expressionlessly.

"Gotta get to L.A. Need another dime for the bus. I got a pointment, me. Got a job offertunity. Nice kid like you must have a dime. Maybe you got a quarter."

*Yessir, you could clean out a damn bluegill with a knife like that... hell, you could clean out a damn marlin with it if you had to. We sell fifteen hundred of those a year. Every sporting goods store and Army-Navy Surplus in America sells them, and if you decided to use this one to clean out some dirty, shitty old wino, nobody could trace it back to you, absolutely NOBODY.*

The wino's voice dropped; it became a confidential, tenebrous whisper. "For a buck I'd do you a blowjob, you never had a better. You'd come your brains out, kid, you'd—"

Todd pulled his hand out of his pocket. He wasn't sure what was in it until he opened it. Two quarters. Two nickles. A dime. Some pennies. He threw them at the wino and fled.

## 12

June, 1975.

Todd Bowden, now fourteen, came biking up Dussander's walk and parked his bike on the kickstand. The L.A. *Times* was on the bottom step; he picked it up. He looked at the bell, below which the neat legends ARTHURDENKER and NO SOLICITORS, NO

PEDDLERS, NO SALESMEN still kept their places. He didn't bother with the bell now, of course; he had his key.

Somewhere close by was the popping, burping sound of a Lawn-Boy. He looked at Dussander's grass and saw it could use a cutting; he would have to tell the old man to find a boy with a mower. Dussander forgot little things like that more often now. Maybe it was senility; maybe it was just the pickling influence of Ancient Age on his brains. That was an adult thought for a boy of fourteen to have, but such thoughts no longer struck Todd as singular. He had many adult thoughts these days. Most of them were not so great.

He let himself in.

He had his usual instant of cold terror as he entered the kitchen and saw Dussander slumped slightly sideways in his rocker, the cup on the table, a half-empty bottle of bourbon beside it. A cigarette had burned its entire length down to lacy gray ash in a mayonnaise cover where several other butts had been mashed out. Dussander's mouth hung open. His face was yellow. His big hands dangled limply over the rocker's arms. He didn't seem to be breathing.

"Dussander," he said, a little too harshly. "Rise and shine, Dussander."

He felt a wave of relief as the old man twitched, blinked, and finally sat up.

"Is it you? And so early?"

"They let us out early on the last day of school," Todd said. He pointed to the remains of the cigarette in the mayonnaise cover. "Someday you'll burn down the house doing that."

"Maybe," Dussander said indifferently. He fumbled out his cigarettes, shot one from the pack (it almost rolled off the edge of the table before Dussander was able to catch it), and at last got it going. A protracted fit of coughing followed, and Todd winced in disgust. When the old man really got going, Todd half-expected him to start spitting out grayish-black chunks of lung-tissue onto the table... and he'd probably grin as he did it.

At last the coughing eased enough for Dussander to say, "What have you got there?"

"Report card."

Dussander took it, opened it, and held it away from him at arm's length so he could read it. "English . . . A. American History... A. Earth Science... B-plus. Your Community and You... A. Primary French... B-minus. Beginning Algebra... B." He put it down. "Very good. What is the slang? We have saved your bacon, boy. Will you have to change any of these averages in the last column?"

"French and algebra, but no more than eight or nine points in all. I don't think any of this is ever going to come out. And I guess I owe that to you. I'm not proud of it, but it's the truth. So, thanks."

"What a touching speech," Dussander said, and began to cough again.

"I guess I won't be seeing you around too much from now on," Todd said, and Dussander abruptly stopped coughing.

"No?" he said, politely enough.

"No," Todd said. "We're going to Hawaii for a month starting on June twenty-fifth. In September I'll be going to school across town. It's this bussing thing."

"Oh yes, the *Schwarzen*," Dussander said, idly watching a fly as it trundled across the red and white check of the oilcloth. "For twenty years this country has worried and whined about the *Schwarzen*. But we know the solution . . . don't we, boy?" He smiled toothlessly at Todd and Todd looked down, feeling the old sickening lift and drop in his stomach. Terror, hate, and a desire to do something so awful it could only be fully contemplated in his dreams.

"Look, I plan to go to college, in case you didn't know," Todd said. "I know that's a long time off, but I think about it. I even know what I want to major in. History."

"Admirable. He who will not learn from the past is—"

"Oh, shut up," Todd said.

Dussander did so, amiably enough. He knew the boy wasn't done... not yet. He sat with his hands folded, watching him.

"I could get my letter back from my friend," Todd suddenly blurted. "You know that? I could let you read it, and then you could watch me burn it. If—"

"—if I would remove a certain document from my safety deposit box."

“Well . . . yeah.”

Dussander uttered a long, windy, rueful sigh. “My boy,” he said. “Still you do not understand the situation. You never have, right from the beginning. Partly because you are only a boy, but not entirely... even in the beginning, you were a very *old* boy. No, the real villain was and is your absurd American self-confidence that never allowed you to consider the possible consequences of what you were doing . . . which does not allow it even now.”

Todd began to speak and Dussander raised his hand adamantly, suddenly the world’s oldest traffic cop.

“No, don’t contradict me. It’s true. Go on if you like. Leave the house, get out of here, never come back. Can I stop you? No. Of course I can’t. Enjoy yourself in Hawaii while I sit in this hot, grease-smelling kitchen and wait to see if the *Schwarzen* in Watts will decide to start killing policemen and burning their shitty tenements again this year. I can’t stop you any more than I can stop getting older a day at a time.”

He looked at Todd fixedly, so fixedly that Todd looked away.

“Down deep inside, I don’t like you. Nothing could make me like you. You forced yourself on me. You are an unbidden guest in my house. You have made me open crypts perhaps better left shut, because I have discovered that some of the corpses were buried alive, and that a few of those *still* have some wind left in them.

“You yourself have become enmeshed, but do I pity you because of that? Gott im Himmel! You have made your bed; should I pity you if you sleep badly in it? No ... I don’t pity you, and I don’t like you, but I have come to respect you a little bit. So don’t try my patience by asking me to explain this twice. We could obtain our documents and destroy them here in my kitchen. And still it would not be over. We would, in fact, be no better off than we are at this minute.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“No, because you have never studied the consequences of what you have set in motion. But attend me, boy. If we burned our letters here, in this jar cover, how would I know you hadn’t made a copy? Or two? Or three? Down at the library they have a Xerox machine, for a nickle anyone can make a photocopy. For a dollar, you could post a

copy of my death-warrant on every streetcorner for twenty blocks. Two miles of death-warrants, boy! Think of it! Can you tell me how I would know you hadn't done such a thing?"

"I ... well, I ... I ..." Todd realized he was floundering and forced himself to shut his mouth. All of a sudden his skin felt too warm, and for no reason at all he found himself remembering something that had happened when he was seven or eight. He and a friend of his had been crawling through a culvert which ran beneath the old Freight Bypass Road just out of town. The friend, skinnier than Todd, had had no problem ... but Todd had gotten stuck. He had become suddenly aware of the feet of rock and earth over his head, all that dark weight, and when an L.A.-bound semi passed above, shaking the earth and making the corrugated pipe vibrate with a low, tuneless, and somehow sinister note, he had begun to cry and to struggle witlessly, throwing himself forward, pistoning with his legs, yelling for help. At last he had gotten moving again, and when he finally struggled out of the pipe, he had fainted.

Dussander had just outlined a piece of duplicity so fundamental that it had never even crossed his mind. He could feel his skin getting hotter, and he thought: *I won't cry.*

"And how would you know I hadn't made two copies for my safety deposit box ... that I had burned one and left the other there?"

*Trapped. I'm trapped just like in the pipe that time and who are you going to yell for now?*

His heart speeded up in his chest. He felt sweat break on the backs of his hands and the nape of his neck. He remembered how it had been in that pipe, the smell of old water, the feel of the cool, ribbed metal, the way everything shook when the truck passed overhead. He remembered how hot and desperate the tears had been.

"Even if there were some impartial third party we could go to, always there would be doubts. The problem is insoluble, boy. Believe it."

*Trapped. Trapped in the pipe. No way out of this one.*

He felt the world go gray. *Won't cry. Won't faint.* He forced himself to come back.

Dussander took a deep drink from his cup and looked at Todd over the rim.

“Now I tell you two more things. First, that if your part in this matter came out, your punishment would be quite small. It is even possible—no, more than that, *likely*—that it would never come out in the papers at all. I frightened you with reform school once, when I was badly afraid you might crack and tell everything. But do I believe that? No—I used it the way a father will use the ‘boogerman’ to frighten a child into coming home before dark. I don’t believe that they would send you there, not in this country where they spank killers on the wrist and send them out onto the streets to kill again after two years of watching color TV in a penitentiary.

“But it might well ruin your life all the same. There are records . . . and people talk. Always, they talk. Such a juicy scandal is not allowed to wither; it is bottled, like wine. And, of course, as the years pass, your culpability will grow with you. Your silence will grow more damning. If the truth came out today, people would say, ‘But he is just a child!’ ... not knowing, as I do, what an *old* child you are. But what would they say, boy, if the truth about me, coupled with the fact that you knew about me as early as 1974 *but kept silent*, came out while you are in high school? That would be bad. For it to come out while you are in college would be disaster. As a young man just starting out in business... Armageddon. You understand this first thing?”

Todd was silent, but Dussander seemed satisfied. He nodded.

Still nodding, he said: “Second, I don’t believe you *have* a letter.”

Todd strove to keep a poker face, but he was terribly afraid his eyes had widened in shock. Dussander was studying him avidly, and Todd was suddenly, nakedly aware that this old man had interrogated hundreds, perhaps *thousands* of people. He was an expert. Todd felt that his skull had turned to window-glass and all things were flashing inside in large letters.

“I asked myself whom you would trust so much. Who are your friends... whom do you run with? Whom does this boy, this self-sufficient, coldly controlled little *boy*, go to with his loyalty? The answer is, nobody.”

Dussander's eyes gleamed yellowly.

"Many times I have studied you and calculated the odds. I know you, and I know much of your character—no, not all, because one human being can never know everything that is in another human being's heart—but I know so little about what you do and whom you see outside of this house. So I think, 'Dussander, there is a chance that you are wrong. After all these years, do you want to be captured and maybe killed because you misjudged a boy?' Maybe when I was younger I would have taken the chance—the odds are good odds, and the chance is a small chance. It is very strange to me, you know—the older one becomes, the less one has to lose in matters of life and death... and yet, one becomes more and more conservative."

He looked hard into Todd's face.

"I have one more thing to say, and then you can go when you want. What I have to say is that, while I doubt the existence of your letter, never doubt the existence of mine. *The document I have described to you exists.* If I die today ... tomorrow... everything will come out. *Everything.*"

"Then there's nothing for me," Todd said. He uttered a dazed little laugh. "Don't you see that?"

"But there is. Years will go by. As they pass, your hold on me will become worth less and less, because no matter how important my life and liberty remain to me, the Americans and—yes, even the Israelis—will have less and less interest in taking them away."

"Yeah? Then why don't they let that guy Hess go?"

"If the Americans had sole custody of him—the Americans who let killers out with a spank on the wrist—they *would* have let him go," Dussander said. "Are the Americans going to allow the Israelis to extradite an eighty-year-old man so they can hang him as they hanged Eichmann? I think not. Not in a country where they put photographs of firemen rescuing kittens from trees on the front pages of city newspapers.

"No, your hold over me will weaken even as mine over you grows stronger. No situation is static. And there will come a time—if I live long enough—when I will decide what you know no longer matters. Then I will destroy the document."

“But so many things could happen to you in between! Accidents, sickness, disease—”

Dussander shrugged. “ ‘There will be water if God wills it, and we will find it if God wills it, and we will drink it if God wills it.’ What happens is not up to us.”

Todd looked at the old man for a long time—for a very long time. There were flaws in Dussander’s arguments—there had to be. A way out, an escape hatch either for both of them or for Todd alone. A way to cry it off—times, guys, I hurt my foot, allee-allee-in-free. A black knowledge of the years ahead trembled somewhere behind his eyes; he could feel it there, waiting to be born as conscious thought. Everywhere he went, everything he did—

He thought of a cartoon character with an anvil suspended over its head. By the time he graduated from high school, Dussander would be eighty-one, and that would not be the end; by the time he collected his B.A., Dussander would be eighty-five and he would still feel that he wasn’t old enough, he would finish his master’s thesis and graduate school the year Dussander turned eighty-seven ... and Dussander still might not feel safe.

“No,” Todd said thickly. “What you’re saying ... I can’t face that.”

“My boy,” Dussander said gently, and Todd heard for the first time and with dawning horror the slight accent the old man had put on the first word. “My boy ... you must.”

Todd stared at him, his tongue swelling and thickening in his mouth until it seemed it must fill his throat and choke him. Then he wheeled and blundered out of the house.

Dussander watched all of this with no expression at all, and when the door had slammed shut and the boy’s running footsteps stopped, meaning that he had mounted his bike, he lit a cigarette. There was, of course, no safe deposit box, no document. But the boy believed those things existed; he had believed utterly. He was safe. It was ended.

But it was not ended.

\* \* \*

That night they both dreamed of murder, and both of them awoke in mingled terror and exhilaration.

Todd awoke with the now familiar stickiness of his lower belly. Dussander, too old for such things, put on the SS uniform and then lay down again, waiting for his racing heart to slow. The uniform was cheaply made and already beginning to fray.

In Dussander's dream he had finally reached the camp at the top of the hill. The wide gate slid open for him and then rumbled shut on its steel track once he was inside. Both the gate and the fence surrounding the camp were electrified. His scrawny, naked pursuers threw themselves against the fence in wave after wave; Dussander had laughed at them and he had strutted back and forth, his chest thrown out, his cap cocked at exactly the right angle. The high, winey smell of burning flesh filled the black air, and he had awakened in southern California thinking of jack-o'-lanterns and the night when vampires seek the blue flame.

Two days before the Bowdens were scheduled to fly to Hawaii, Todd went back to the abandoned trainyard where folks had once boarded trains for San Francisco, Seattle, and Las Vegas; where other, older folks had once boarded the trolley for Los Angeles.

It was nearly dusk when he got there. On the curve of freeway nine hundred yards away, most of the cars were now showing their parking lights. Although it was warm, Todd was wearing a light jacket. Tucked into his belt under it was a butcher knife wrapped in an old hand-towel. He had purchased the knife in a discount department store, one of the big ones surrounded by acres of parking lot.

He looked under the platform where the wino had been the month before. His mind turned and turned, but it turned on nothing; everything inside him at that moment was shades of black on black.

What he found was the same wino or possibly another; they all looked pretty much the same.

“Hey!” Todd said. “Hey! You want some money?”

The wino turned over, blinking. He saw Todd’s wide, sunny grin and began to grin back. A moment later the butcher knife descended, all whicker-snicker and chrome-white, slicker-slicing through the stubbly right cheek. Blood sprayed. Todd could see the blade in the wino’s opening mouth... and then its tip caught for a moment in the left corner of the wino’s lips, pulling his mouth into an insanely cockeyed grin. Then it was the knife that was making the grin; he was carving the wino like a Halloween pumpkin.

He stabbed the wino thirty-seven times. He kept count. Thirty-seven, counting the first strike, which went through the wino’s cheek and then turned his tentative smile into a great grisly grin. The wino stopped trying to scream after the fourth stroke. He stopped trying to scramble away from Todd after the sixth. Todd then crawled all the way under the platform and finished the job.

On his way home he threw the knife into the river. His pants were bloodstained. He tossed them into the washing machine and set it to wash cold. There were still faint stains on the pants when they came out, but they didn’t concern Todd. They would fade in time. He found the next day that he could barely lift his right arm to the level of his shoulder. He told his father he must have strained it throwing pepper with some of the guys in the park.

“It’ll get better in Hawaii,” Dick Bowden said, ruffling Todd’s hair, and it did; by the time they came home, it was as good as new.

## 13

It was July again.

Dussander, carefully dressed in one of his three suits (not his best), was standing at the bus stop and waiting for the last local of the day to take him home. It was 10:45 P.M. He had been to a film, a

light and frothy comedy that he had enjoyed a great deal. He had been in a fine mood ever since the morning mail. There had been a postcard from the boy, a glossy color photo of Waikiki Beach with bone-white highrise hotels standing in the background. There was a brief message on the reverse.

Dear Mr. Denker,

Boy this sure is some place. I've been swimming every day. My dad caught a big fish and my mom is catching up on her reading (joke). Tomorrow we're going to a volcano. I'll try not to fall in! Hope you're okay.

Stay healthy, Todd

He was still smiling faintly at the significance of that last when a hand touched his elbow.

"Mister?"

"Yes?"

He turned, on his guard—even in Santo Donato, muggers were not unknown—and then winced at the aroma. It seemed to be a combination of beer, halitosis, dried sweat, and possibly Musterole. It was a bum in baggy pants. He—*it*—wore a flannel shirt and very old loafers that were currently being held together with dirty bands of adhesive tape. The face looming above this motley costume looked like the death of God.

"You got an extra dime, mister? I gotta get to L.A., me. Got a job offertunity. I need just a dime more for the express bus. I wudn't ask if it wadn't a big chance for me."

Dussander had begun to frown, but now his smile reasserted itself.

"Is it really a bus ride you wish?"

The wino smiled sickly, not understanding.

"Suppose you ride the bus home with me," Dussander proposed. "I can offer you a drink, a meal, a bath, and a bed. All I ask in return is a little conversation. I am an old man. I live alone. Company is sometimes very welcome."

The drunk's smile abruptly grew more healthy as the situation clarified itself. Here was a well-to-do old faggot with a taste for slumming.

“All by yourself! Bitch, innit?”

Dussander answered the broad, insinuating grin with a polite smile. “I only ask that you sit away from me on the bus. You smell rather strongly.”

“Maybe you don’t want me stinking up your place, then,” the drunk said with sudden, tipsy dignity.

“Come, the bus will be here in a minute. Get off one stop after I do and then walk back two blocks. I’ll wait for you on the corner. In the morning I will see what I can spare. Perhaps two dollars.”

“Maybe even five,” the drunk said brightly. His dignity, tipsy or otherwise, had been forgotten.

“Perhaps, perhaps,” Dussander said impatiently. He could now hear the low diesel drone of the approaching bus. He pressed a quarter, the correct bus fare, into the bum’s grimy hand and strolled a few paces away without looking back.

The bum stood undecided as the headlights of the local swept over the rise. He was still standing and frowning down at the quarter when the old faggot got on the bus without looking back. The bum began to walk away and then—at the last second—he reversed direction and boarded the bus just before the doors folded closed. He put the quarter into the fare-box with the expression of a man putting a hundred dollars down on a long shot. He passed Dussander without doing more than glancing at him and sat at the back of the bus. He dozed off a little, and when he woke up, the rich old faggot was gone. He got off at the next stop, not knowing if it was the right one or not, and not really caring.

He walked back two blocks and saw a dim shape under the streetlight. It was the old faggot, all right. The faggot was watching him approach, and he was standing as if at attention.

For just a moment the bum felt a chill of apprehension, an urge to just turn away and forget the whole thing.

Then the old man was gripping him by the arm ... and his grip was surprisingly firm.

“Good,” the old man said. “I’m very glad you came. My house is down here. It’s not far.”

“Maybe even ten,” the bum said, allowing himself to be led.

“Maybe even ten,” the old faggot agreed, and then laughed. “Who knows?”

## 14

The Bi-Centennial year arrived.

Todd came by to see Dussander half a dozen times between his return from Hawaii in the summer of 1975 and the trip he and his parents took to Rome just as all the drum-thumping, flag-waving, and Tall Ships-watching was approaching its climax.

These visits to Dussander were low-key and in no way unpleasant ; the two of them found they could pass the time civilly enough. They spoke more in silences than they did in words, and their actual conversations would have put an FBI agent to sleep. Todd told the old man that he had been seeing a girl named Angela Farrow off and on. He wasn't nuts about her, but she was the daughter of one of his mother's friends. The old man told Todd he had taken up braiding rugs because he had read such an activity was good for arthritis. He showed Todd several samples of his work, and Todd dutifully admired them.

The boy had grown quite a bit, had he not? (Well, two inches.) Had Dussander given up smoking? (No, but he had been forced to cut down; they made him cough too much now.) How had his schoolwork been? (Challenging but exciting ; he had made all A's and B's, had gone to the state finals with his Science Fair project on solar power, and was now thinking of majoring in anthropology instead of history when he got to college.) Who was mowing Dussander's lawn this year? (Randy Chambers from just down the street—a good boy, but rather fat and slow.)

During that year Dussander had put an end to three winos in his kitchen. He had been approached at the downtown bus stop some twenty times, had made the drink-dinner-bath-and-bed offer seven times. He had been turned down twice, and on two other occasions

the winos had simply walked off with the quarters Dussander gave them for the fare-box. After some thought, he had worked out a way around this; he simply bought a book of coupons. They were two dollars and fifty cents, good for fifteen rides, and non-negotiable at the local liquor stores.

On very warm days just lately, Dussander had noticed an unpleasant smell drifting up from his cellar. He kept his doors and windows firmly shut on these days.

Todd Bowden had found a wino sleeping it off in an abandoned drainage culvert behind a vacant lot on Cienaga Way—this had been in December, during the Christmas vacation. He had stood there for some time, hands stuffed into his pockets, looking at the wino and trembling. He had returned to the lot six times over a period of five weeks, always wearing his light jacket, zipped halfway up to conceal the Craftsman hammer tucked into his belt. At last he had come upon the wino again—that one or some other, and who really gave a fuck—on the first day of March. He had begun with the hammer end of the tool, and then at some point (he didn't really remember when; everything had been swimming in a red haze) he had switched to the claw end, obliterating the wino's face.

For Kurt Dussander, the winos were a half-cynical propitiation of gods he had finally recognized ... or re-recognized. And the winos were fun. They made him feel alive. He was beginning to feel that the years he had spent in Santo Donate—the years before the boy had turned up on his door-step with his big blue eyes and his wide American grin—had been years spent being old before his time. He had been just past his mid-sixties when he came here. And he felt much younger than that now.

The idea of propitiating gods would have startled Todd at first—but it might have gained eventual acceptance. After stabbing the wino under the train platform, he had expected his nightmares to intensify—to perhaps even drive him crazy. He had expected waves of paralyzing guilt that might well end with a blurted confession or the taking of his own life.

Instead of any of those things, he had gone to Hawaii with his parents and enjoyed the best vacation of his life.

He had begun high school last September feeling oddly new and refreshed, as if a different person had jumped into his Todd Bowden skin. Things that had made no particular impression on him since earliest childhood—the sunlight just after dawn, the look of the ocean off the Fish Pier, the sight of people hurrying on a downtown street at just that moment of dusk when the streetlights come on—these things now imprinted themselves on his mind again in a series of bright cameos, in images so clear they seemed electroplated. He tasted life on his tongue like a draught of wine straight from the bottle.

After he had seen the stewbum in the culvert, but before he killed him, the nightmares had begun again.

The most common one involved the wino he had stabbed to death in the abandoned trainyard. Home from school, he burst into the house, a cheery *Hi, Monica-baby!* on his lips. It died there as he saw the dead wino in the raised breakfast nook. He was sitting slumped over their butcher-block table in his puke-smelling shirt and pants. Blood had streaked across the bright tiled floor; it was drying on the stainless steel counters. There were bloody handprints on the natural pine cupboards.

Clipped to the note-board by the fridge was a message from his mother: *Todd—Goneto the store. Back by 3:30.* The hands of the stylish sunburst clock over the Jenn-Air range stood at 3:20 and the drunk was sprawled dead up there in the nook like some horrid oozing relic from the subcellar of a junkshop and there was blood everywhere, and Todd began trying to clean it up, wiping every exposed surface, all the time screaming at the dead wino that he had to *go*, had to leave him *alone*, and the wino just lolled there and stayed dead, grinning up at the ceiling, and freshets of blood kept pouring from the stab-wounds in his dirty skin. Todd grabbed the O Cedar mop from the closet and began to slide it madly back and forth across the floor, aware that he was not really getting the blood up, only diluting it, spreading it around, but unable to stop. And just as he heard his mother's Town and Country wagon turn into the driveway, he realized the wino was Dussander. He woke from these

dreams sweating and gasping, clutching double handfuls of the bedclothes.

But after he finally found the wino in the culvert again—that wino or some other—and used the hammer on him, these dreams went away. He supposed he might have to kill again, and maybe more than once. It was too bad, but of course their time of usefulness as human creatures was over. Except their usefulness to Todd, of course. And Todd, like everyone else he knew, was only tailoring his lifestyle to fit his own particular needs as he grew older. Really, he was no different than anybody. You had to make your own way in the world; if you were going to get along, you had to do it by yourself.

## 15

In the fall of his junior year, Todd played varsity tailback for the Santo Donato Cougars and was named All-Conference. And in the second quarter of that year, the quarter which ended in late January of 1977, he won the American Legion Patriotic Essay Contest. This contest was open to all city high school students who were taking American history courses. Todd's piece was called "An American's Responsibility." During the baseball season that year he was the school's star pitcher, winning four and losing none. His batting average was .361. At the awards assembly in June he was named Athlete of the Year and given a plaque by Coach Haines (Coach Haines, who had once taken him aside and told him to keep practicing his curve "because none of these niggers can hit a curve-ball, Bowden, not one of them"). Monica Bowden burst into tears when Todd called her from school and told her he was going to get the award. Dick Bowden strutted around his office for two weeks following the ceremony, trying not to boast. That summer they rented a cabin in Big Sur and stayed there for two weeks and Todd snorkled his brains out. During that same year Todd killed four derelicts. He stabbed two of them and bludgeoned two of them. He had taken to

wearing two pairs of pants on what he now acknowledged to be hunting expeditions. Sometimes he rode the city busses, looking for likely spots. The best two, he found, were the Santo Donato Mission for the Indigent on Douglas Street, and around the corner from the Salvation Army on Euclid. He would walk slowly through both of these neighborhoods, waiting to be panhandled. When a wino approached him, Todd would tell him that he, Todd, wanted a bottle of whiskey, and if the wino would buy it, Todd would share the bottle. He knew a place, he said, where they could go. It was a different place every time, of course. He resisted a strong urge to go back either to the trainyard or to the culvert behind the vacant lot on Cienaga Way. Revisiting the scene of a previous crime would have been unwise.

During the same year Dussander smoked sparingly, drank Ancient Age bourbon, and watched TV. Todd came by once in awhile, but their conversations became increasingly arid. They were growing apart. Dussander celebrated his seventy-ninth birthday that year, which was also the year Todd turned sixteen. Dussander remarked that sixteen was the best year of a young man's life, forty-one the best year of a middle-aged man's, and seventy-nine the best of an old man's. Todd nodded politely. Dussander had been quite drunk, and cackled in a way that made Todd distinctly uneasy.

Dussander had dispatched two winos during Todd's academic year of 1976-77. The second had been livelier than he looked; even after Dussander had gotten the man soddenly drunk he had tottered around the kitchen with the haft of a steak-knife jutting from the base of his neck, gushing blood down the front of his shirt and onto the floor. The wino had re-discovered the front hall after two staggering circuits of the kitchen and had almost escaped the house.

Dussander had stood in the kitchen, eyes wide with shocked unbelief, watching the wino grunt and puff his way toward the door, rebounding from one side of the hall to the other and knocking cheap Currier & Ives reproductions to the floor. His paralysis had not broken until the wino was actually groping for the doorknob. Then Dussander had bolted across the room, jerked open the utility

drawer, and pulled out his meat-fork. He ran down the hall with the meat-fork held out in front of him and drove it into the wino's back.

Dussander had stood over him, panting, his old heart racing in a frightening way . . . racing like that of a heart-attack victim on that Saturday night TV program he enjoyed, *Emergency* ! But at last it had slowed back into a normal rhythm and he knew he was going to be all right.

There had been a great deal of blood to clean up.

That had been four months ago, and since then he had not made his offer at the downtown bus stop. He was frightened of the way he had almost bungled the last one... but when he remembered the way he had handled things at the last moment, pride rose in his heart. In the end the wino had never made it out the door, and that was the important thing.

## 16

In the fall of 1977, during the first quarter of his senior year, Todd joined the Rifle Club. By June of 1978 he had qualified as a marksman. He made All-Conference in football again, won five and lost one during the baseball season (the loss coming as the result of two errors and one unearned run), and made the third highest Merit Scholarship score in the school's history. He applied to Berkeley and was promptly accepted. By April he knew he would either be valedictorian or salutatorian on graduation night. He very badly wanted to be valedictorian.

During the latter half of his senior year, an odd impulse came on him—one which was as frightening to Todd as it was irrational. He seemed to be clearly and firmly in control of it, and *that* at least was comforting, but that such a thought should have occurred at all was scary. He had made an arrangement with life. He had worked things out. His life was much like his mother's bright and sunshiny kitchen, where all the surfaces were dressed in chrome, Formica, or stainless

steel—a place where everything worked when you pressed the buttons. There were deep and dark cupboards in this kitchen, of course, but many things could be stored in them and their doors still be closed.

This new impulse reminded him of the dream in which he had come home to discover the dead and bleeding wino in his mother's clean, well-lighted place. It was as if, in the bright and careful arrangement he had made, in that a-place-for-everything-and-everything-in-its-place kitchen of his mind, a dark and bloody intruder now lurched and shambled, looking for a place to die conspicuously

...

A quarter of a mile from the Bowden house was the freeway, running eight lanes wide. A steep and brushy bank led down to it. There was plenty of good cover on the bank. His father had given him a Winchester .30-.30 for Christmas, and it had a removable telescopic sight. During rush hour, when all eight lanes were jammed, he could pick a spot on that bank and ... why, he could easily...

Do what?

Commit suicide?

Destroy everything he had worked for these last four years? Say *what?*

No *sir*, no *ma'am*, no *way*.

It is, as they say, to laugh.

Sure it was ... but the impulse remained.

One Saturday a few weeks before his high school graduation, Todd cased the .30-.30 after carefully emptying the magazine. He put the rifle in the back seat of his father's new toy—a used Porsche. He drove to the spot where the brushy slope dropped steeply down to the freeway. His mother and father had taken the station wagon and had driven to L.A. for the weekend. Dick, now a full partner, would be holding discussions with the Hyatt people about a new Reno hotel.

Todd's heart bumped in his chest and his mouth was full of sour, electric spit as he worked his way down the grade with the cased rifle in his arms. He came to a fallen tree and sat cross-legged behind it. He uncased the rifle and laid it on the dead tree's smooth trunk. A branch jutting off at an angle made a nice rest for the barrel. He snugged the buttplate into the hollow of his right shoulder and peered into the telescopic sight.

*Stupid!* his mind screamed at him. *Boy, this is really stupid! If someone sees you, it's not going to matter if the gun's loaded or not! You'll get in plenty of trouble, maybe even end up with some Chippie shooting at you!*

It was mid-morning and the Saturday traffic was light. He settled the crosshairs on a woman behind the wheel of a blue Toyota. The woman's window was half-open and the round collar of her sleeveless blouse was fluttering. Todd centered the crosshairs on her temple and dry-fired. It was bad for the firing-pin, but what the fuck.

"Pow," he whispered as the Toyota disappeared beneath the underpass half a mile up from the slope where Todd sat. He swallowed around a lump that tasted like a stuck-together mass of pennies.

Here came a man behind the wheel of a Subaru Brat pickup truck. This man had a scuzzy-looking gray beard and was wearing a San Diego Padres baseball hat.

"You're . . . you're a dirty rat... the dirty rat that shot my bruddah," Todd whispered, giggling a little, and dry-fired the .30-.30 again.

He shot at five others, the impotent snap of the hammer spoiling the illusion at the end of each "kill." Then he cased the rifle again. He carried it back up the slope, bending low to keep from being seen. He put it into the back of the Porsche. There was a dry hot pounding in his temples. He drove home. Went up to his room. Masturbated.

The stewbum was wearing a ragged, unravelling reindeer sweater that looked so startling it almost seemed surreal here in southern California. He also wore seaman's issue bluejeans which were out at the knees, showing white, hairy flesh and a number of peeling scabs. He raised the jelly-glass—Fred and Wilma, Barney and Betty dancing around the rim in what might have been some grotesque fertility rite—and tossed off the knock of Ancient Age at a gulp. He smacked his lips for the last time in this world.

“Mister, that hits the old spot. I don't mind saying so.”

“I always enjoy a drink in the evening,” Dussander agreed from behind him, and then rammed the butcher knife into the stewbum's neck. There was the sound of ripping gristle, a sound like a drumstick being torn enthusiastically from a freshly roasted chicken. The jelly-glass fell from the stewbum's hand and onto the table. It rolled toward the edge, its movement enhancing the illusion that the cartoon characters on it were dancing.

The stewbum threw his head back and tried to scream. Nothing came out but a hideous whistling sound. His eyes widened, widened . . . and then his head thumped soggily onto the red and white oilcloth check that covered Dussander's kitchen table. The stewbum's upper plate slithered halfway out of his mouth like a semi-detachable grin.

Dussander yanked the knife free—he had to use both hands to do it—and crossed to the kitchen sink. It was filled with hot water, Lemon Fresh Joy, and dirty supper dishes. The knife disappeared into a billow of citrus-smelling suds like a very small fighter plane diving into a cloud.

He crossed to the table again and paused there, resting one hand on the dead stewbum's shoulder while a spasm of coughing rattled through him. He took his handkerchief from his back pocket and spat yellowish-brown phlegm into it. He had been smoking too much lately. He always did when he was making up his mind to do another one. But this one had gone smoothly; really very smoothly. He had been afraid after the mess he had made with the last one that he might be tempting fate sorely to try it again.

Now, if he hurried, he would still be able to watch the second half of *Lawrence Welk*.

He hustled across the kitchen, opened the cellar door, and turned on the light switch. He went back to the sink and got the package of green plastic garbage bags from the cupboard beneath. He shook one out as he walked back to the slumped wino. Blood had run across the oilcloth in all directions. It had puddled in the wino's lap and on the hilly, faded linoleum. It would be on the chair, too, but all of those things would clean up.

Dussander grabbed the stewbum by the hair and yanked his head up. It came with boneless ease, and a moment later the wino was lolling backwards, like a man about to get a pre-haircut shampoo. Dussander pulled the garbage bag down over the wino's head, over his shoulders, and down his arms to the elbows. That was as far as it would go. He unbuckled his late guest's belt and pulled it free of the fraying belt-loops. He wrapped the belt around the garbage bag two or three inches above the elbows and buckled it tight. Plastic rustled. Dussander began to hum under his breath.

The wino's feet were clad in scuffed and dirty Hush Puppies. They made a limp V on the floor as Dussander seized the belt and dragged the corpse toward the cellar door. Something white tumbled out of the plastic bag and clicked on the floor. It was the stewbum's upper plate, Dussander saw. He picked it up and stuffed it into one of the wino's front pockets.

He laid the wino down in the cellar doorway with his head now lolling backward onto the second stair-level. Dussander climbed around the body and gave it three healthy kicks. The body moved slightly on the first two, and the third sent it slithering bonelessly

down the stairs. Halfway down, the feet flew up over the head and the body executed an acrobatic roll. It belly-whopped onto the packed dirt of the cellar floor with a solid thud. One Hush Puppy flew off, and Dussander made a mental note to pick it up.

He went down the stairs, skirted the body, and approached his toolbench. To the left of the bench a spade, a rake, and a hoe leaned against the wall in a neat rank. Dussander selected the spade. A little exercise was good for an old man. A little exercise could make you feel young.

The smell down here was not good, but it didn't bother him much. He limed the place once a month (once every three days after he had "done" one of his winos) and he had gotten a fan which he ran upstairs to keep the smell from permeating the house on very warm still days. Josef Kramer, he remembered, had been fond of saying that the dead speak, but we hear them with our noses.

Dussander picked a spot in the cellar's north corner and went to work. The dimensions of the grave were two and a half feet by six feet. He had gotten to a depth of two feet, half deep enough, when the first paralyzing pain struck him in the chest like a shotgun blast. He straightened up, eyes flaring wide. Then the pain rolled down his arm ... unbelievable pain, as if an invisible hand had seized all the blood-vessels in there and was now pulling them. He watched the spade tumble sideways and felt his knees buckle. For one horrible moment he felt sure that he was going to fall into the grave himself.

Somehow he staggered backwards three paces and sat down on his workbench with a plop. There was an expression of stupid surprise on his face—he could feel it—and he thought he must look like one of those silent movie comedians after he'd been hit by the swinging door or stepped in the cow patty. He put his head down between his knees and gasped.

Fifteen minutes crawled by. The pain had begun to abate somewhat, but he did not believe he would be able to stand. For the first time he understood all the truths of old age which he had been spared until now. He was terrified almost to the point of whimpering. Death had brushed by him in this dank, smelly cellar; it had touched

Dussander with the hem of its robe. It might be back for him yet. But he would not die down here; not if he could help it.

He got up, hands still crossed on his chest, as if to hold the fragile machinery together. He staggered across the open space between the workbench and the stairs. His left foot tripped over the dead wino's outstretched leg and he went to his knees with a small cry. There was a sullen flare of pain in his chest. He looked up the stairs—the steep, steep stairs. Twelve of them. The square of light at the top was mockingly distant.

*“Ein, ”* Kurt Dussander said, and pulled himself grimly up onto the first stair-level. *“Zwei, Drei, Vier.”*

It took him twenty minutes to reach the linoleum floor of the kitchen. Twice, on the stairs, the pain had threatened to come back, and both times Dussander had waited with his eyes closed to see what would happen, perfectly aware that if it came back as strongly as it had come upon him down there, he would probably die. Both times the pain had faded away again.

He crawled across the kitchen floor to the table, avoiding the pools and streaks of blood, which were now congealing. He got the bottle of Ancient Age, took a swallow, and closed his eyes. Something that had been cinched tight in his chest seemed to loosen a little. The pain faded a bit more. After another five minutes he began to work his way slowly down the hall. His telephone sat on a small table halfway down.

It was quarter past nine when the phone rang in the Bowden house. Todd was sitting cross-legged on the couch, going over his notes for the trig final. Trig was a bitch for him, as all maths were and probably always would be. His father was seated across the room, going through the checkbook stubs with a portable calculator on his lap and a mildly disbelieving expression on his face. Monica, closest to the phone, was watching the James Bond movie Todd had taped off HBO two evenings before.

“Hello?” She listened. A faint frown touched her face and she held the handset out to Todd. “It’s Mr. Denker. He sounds excited about

something. Or upset.”

Todd’s heart leaped into his throat, but his expression hardly changed. “Really?” He went to the phone and took it from her. “Hi, Mr. Denker.”

Dussander’s voice was hoarse and short. “Come over right away, boy. I’ve had a heart attack. Quite a bad one, I think.”

“Gee,” Todd said, trying to collect his flying thoughts, to see around the fear that now bulked huge in his own mind.

“That’s interesting, all right, but it’s pretty late and I was studying —”

“I understand that you cannot talk,” Dussander said in that harsh, almost barking voice. “But you can listen. I cannot call an ambulance or dial two-two-two, boy ... at least not yet. There is a mess here. I need help... and that means *you* need help.”

“Well . . . if you put it that way . . .” Todd’s heartbeat had reached a hundred and twenty beats a minute, but his face was calm, almost serene. Hadn’t he known all along that a night like this would come? Yes, of course he had.

“Tell your parents I’ve had a letter,” Dussander said. “An important letter. You understand?”

“Yeah, okay,” Todd said.

“Now we see, boy. We see what you are made of.”

“Sure,” Todd said. He suddenly became aware that his mother was watching him instead of the movie, and he forced a stiff grin onto his face. “Bye.”

Dussander was saying something else now, but Todd hung up on it.

“I’m going over to Mr. Denker’s for awhile,” he said, speaking to both of them but looking at his mother—that faint expression of concern was still on her face. “Can I pick up anything for either of you at the store?”

“Pipe cleaners for me and a small package of fiscal responsibility for your mother,” Dick said.

“Very funny,” Monica said. “Todd, is Mr. Denker—”

“What in the name of *God* did you get at Fielding’s?” Dick interrupted.

“That knick-knack shelf in the closet. I told you that. There’s nothing wrong with Mr. Denker, is there, Todd? He sounded a little strange.”

“There really *are* such things as knick-knack shelves? I thought those crazy women who write British mysteries made them up so there would always be a place where the killer could find a blunt instrument.”

“Dick, can I get a word in edgeways?”

“Sure. Be my guest. But for the *closet*?”

“He’s okay, I guess,” Todd said. He put on his letter jacket and zipped it up. “But he *was* excited. He got a letter from a nephew of his in Hamburg or Düsseldorf or someplace. He hasn’t heard from any of his people in years, and now he’s got this letter and his eyes aren’t good enough for him to read it.”

“Well isn’t that a *bitch*,” Dick said. “Go on, Todd. Get over there and ease the man’s mind.”

“I thought he had someone to read to him,” Monica said. “A new boy.”

“He does,” Todd said, suddenly hating his mother, hating the half-informed intuition he saw swimming in her eyes.

“Maybe he wasn’t home, or maybe he couldn’t come over this late.”

“Oh. Well ... go on, then. But be careful.”

“I will. You don’t need anything at the store?”

“No. How’s your studying for that calculus final going?”

“It’s trig,” Todd said. “Okay, I guess. I was just getting ready to call it a night.” This was a rather large lie.

“You want to take the Porsche?” Dick asked.

“No, I’ll ride my bike.” He wanted the extra five minutes to collect his thoughts and get his emotions under control—to try, at least. And in his present state, he would probably drive the Porsche into a telephone pole.

“Strap your reflector-patch on your knee,” Monica said, “and tell Mr. Denker hello for us.”

“Okay.”

That doubt was still in his mother's eyes but it was less evident now. He blew her a kiss and then went out to the garage where his bike—a racing-style Italian bike rather than a Schwinn now—was parked. His heart was still racing in his chest, and he felt a mad urge to take the .30-.30 back into the house and shoot both of his parents and then go down to the slope overlooking the freeway. No more worrying about Dussander. No more bad dreams, no more winos. He would shoot and shoot and shoot, only saving one bullet back for the end.

Then reason came back to him and he rode away toward Dussander's, his reflector-patch revolving up and down just above his knee, his long blonde hair streaming back from his brow.

“Holy *Christ!*” Todd nearly screamed.

He was standing in the kitchen door. Dussander was slumped on his elbows, his china cup between them. Large drops of sweat stood out on his forehead. But it was not Dussander Todd was looking at. It was the blood. There seemed to be blood everywhere—it was puddled on the table, on the empty kitchen chair, on the floor.

“Where are you bleeding?” Todd shouted, at last getting his frozen feet to move again—it seemed to him that he had been standing in the doorway for at least a thousand years. *This is the end*, he was thinking, *this is the absolute end of everything. The balloon is going up high, baby, all the way to the sky, baby, and it's toot-toot-tootsie, goodbye.* All the same, he was careful not to step in any of the blood. “I thought you said you had a fucking heart attack!”

“It's not my blood,” Dussander muttered.

“What?” Todd stopped. “What did you say?”

“Go downstairs. You will see what has to be done.”

“What the hell *is* this?” Todd asked. A sudden terrible idea had come into his head.

“Don't waste our time, boy. I think you will not be too surprised at what you find downstairs. I think you have had experience in such matters as the one in my cellar. First-hand experience.”

Todd looked at him, unbelieving, for another moment, and then he plunged down the cellar stairs two by two. His first look in the feeble yellow glow of the basement's only light made him think that Dussander had pushed a bag of garbage down here. Then he saw the protruding legs, and the dirty hands held down at the sides by the cinched belt.

"Holy Christ," he repeated, but this time the words had no force at all—they emerged in a slight, skeletal whisper.

He pressed the back of his right hand against lips that were as dry as sandpaper. He closed his eyes for a moment... and when he opened them again, he felt in control of himself at last.

Todd started moving.

He saw the spade-handle protruding from a shallow hole in the far corner and understood at once what Dussander had been doing when his ticker had seized up. A moment later he became fully aware of the cellar's fetid aroma—a smell like rotting tomatoes. He had smelled it before, but upstairs it was much fainter—and, of course, he hadn't been here very often over the past couple of years. Now he understood *exactly* what that smell meant and for several moments he had to struggle with his gorge. A series of choked gagging sounds, muffled by the hand he had clapped over his mouth and nose, came from him.

Little by little he got control of himself again.

He seized the wino's legs and dragged him across to the edge of the hole. He dropped them, skidded sweat from his forehead with the heel of his left hand, and stood absolutely still for a moment, thinking harder than he ever had in his life.

Then he seized the spade and began to deepen the hole. When it was five feet deep, he got out and shoved the derelict's body in with his foot. Todd stood at the edge of the grave, looking down. Tattered bluejeans. Filthy, scab-encrusted hands. It was a stewbum, all right. The irony was almost funny. So funny a person could scream with laughter.

He ran back upstairs.

"How are you?" he asked Dussander.

"I'll be all right. Have you taken care of it?"

“I’m doing it, okay?”

“Be quick. There’s still up here.”

“I’d like to find some pigs and feed you to them,” Todd said, and went back down cellar before Dussander could reply.

He had almost completely covered the wino when he began to think there was something wrong. He stared into the grave, grasping the spade’s handle with one hand. The wino’s legs stuck partway out of the mound of dirt, as did the tips of his feet—one old shoe, possibly a Hush Puppy, and one filthy athletic sock that might actually have been white around the time that Taft was President.

*One Hush Puppy? One?*

Todd half-ran back around the furnace to the foot of the stairs. He glanced around wildly. A headache was beginning to thud against his temples, dull drillbits trying to work their way out. He spotted the old shoe five feet away, overturned in the shadow of some abandoned shelving. Todd grabbed it, ran back to the grave with it, and threw it in. Then he started to shovel again. He covered the shoe, the legs, everything.

When all the dirt was back in the hole, he slammed the spade down repeatedly to tamp it. Then he grabbed the rake and ran it back and forth, trying to disguise the fact the earth here had been recently turned. Not much use; without good camouflage, a hole that has been recently dug and then filled in always looks like a hole that has been recently dug and then filled in. Still, no one would have any occasion to come down here, would they? He and Dussander would damn well have to hope not.

Todd ran back upstairs. He was starting to pant.

Dussander’s elbows had spread wide and his head had sagged down to the table. His eyes were closed, the lids a shiny purple—the color of asters.

“Dussander!” Todd shouted. There was a hot, juicy taste in his mouth—the taste of fear mixed with adrenaline and pulsing hot blood. “Don’t you *dare* die on me, you old fuck!”

“Keep your voice down,” Dussander said without opening his eyes. “You’ll have everyone on the block over here.”

“Where’s your cleaner? Lestoil ... Top Job ... something like that. And rags. I need rags.”

“All that is under the sink.”

A lot of the blood had now dried on. Dussander raised his head and watched as Todd crawled across the floor, scrubbing first at the puddle on the linoleum and then at the drips that had straggled down the legs of the chair the wino had been sitting in. The boy was biting compulsively at his lips, champing at them, almost, like a horse at a bit. At last the job was finished. The astringent smell of cleaner filled the room.

“There is a box of old rags under the stairs,” Dussander said. “Put those bloody ones on the bottom. Don’t forget to wash your hands.”

“I don’t need your advice. You got me into this.”

“Did I? I must say you took hold well.” For a moment the old mockery was in Dussander’s voice, and then a bitter grimace pulled his face into a new shape. “Hurry.”

Todd took care of the rags, then hurried up the cellar stairs for the last time. He looked nervously down the stairs for a moment, then snapped off the light and closed the door. He went to the sink, rolled up his sleeves, and washed in the hottest water he could stand. He plunged his hands into the suds ... and came up holding the butcher knife Dussander had used.

“I’d like to cut your throat with this,” Todd said grimly.

“Yes, and then feed me to the pigs. I have no doubt of it.”

Todd rinsed the knife, dried it, and put it away. He did the rest of the dishes quickly, let the water out, and rinsed the sink. He looked at the clock as he dried his hands and saw it was twenty minutes after ten.

He went to the phone in the hallway, picked up the receiver, and looked at it thoughtfully. The idea that he had forgotten something—something as potentially damning as the wino’s shoe—nagged unpleasantly at his mind. What? He didn’t know. If not for the headache, he might be able to get it. The triple-damned headache. It wasn’t like him to forget things, and it was scary.

He dialed 222 and after a single ring, a voice answered:

“This is Santo Donato MED-Q. Do you have a medical problem?”

“My name is Todd Bowden. I’m at 963 Claremont Street. I need an ambulance.”

“What’s the problem, son?”

“It’s my friend, Mr. D—” He bit down on his lip so hard that it squirted blood, and for a moment he was lost, drowning in the pulses of pain from his head. *Dussander*. He had almost given this anonymous MED-Q voice Dussander’s real name.

“Calm down, son,” the voice said. “Take it slow and you’ll be fine.”

“My friend Mr. Denker,” Todd said. “I think he’s had a heart attack.”

“His symptoms?”

Todd began to give them, but the voice had heard enough as soon as Todd described the chest pain that had migrated to the left arm. He told Todd the ambulance would arrive in ten to twenty minutes, depending on the traffic. Todd hung up and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes.

“Did you get it?” Dussander called weakly.

“Yes!” Todd screamed. “Yes, *I got it! Yes goddammit yes! Yes yes yes! Just shut up!*”

He pressed his hands even harder against his eyes, creating first senseless starflashes of light and then a bright field of red. *Get hold of yourself, Todd-baby. Get down, get funky, get cool. Dig it.*

He opened his eyes and picked up the telephone again. Now the hard part. Now it was time to call home.

“Hello?” Monica’s soft, cultured voice in his ear. For a moment—just a moment—he saw himself slamming the muzzle of the .30-.30 into her nose and pulling the trigger into the first flow of blood.

“It’s Todd, Mommy. Let me talk to Dad, quick.”

He didn’t call her mommy anymore. He knew she would get that signal quicker than anything else, and she did. “What’s the matter? Is something wrong, Todd?”

“Just let me talk to him!”

“But what—”

The phone rattled and clunked. He heard his mother saying something to his father. Todd got ready.

“It’s Mr. Denker, Daddy. He ... it’s a heart attack, I think. I’m pretty sure it is.”

“Jesus!” His father’s voice lagged away for a moment and Todd heard him repeating the information to his wife. Then he was back. “He’s still alive? As far as you can tell?”

“He’s alive. Conscious.”

“All right, thank God for that. Call an ambulance.”

“I just did.”

“Two-two-two?”

“Yes.”

“Good boy. How bad is he, can you tell?”

“I don’t know, Dad. They said the ambulance would be here soon, but... I’m sorta scared. Can you come over and wait with me?”

“You bet. Give me four minutes.”

Todd could hear his mother saying something else as his father hung up, breaking the connection. Todd replaced the receiver on his end.

*Four minutes.*

Four minutes to do anything that had been left undone. Four minutes to remember whatever it was that had been forgotten. Or had he forgotten anything? Maybe it was just nerves. God, he wished he hadn’t had to call his father. But it was the natural thing to do, wasn’t it? Sure. Was there some natural thing that he *hadn’t* done? Something—?

“Oh, you shit-for-brains!” he suddenly moaned, and bolted back into the kitchen. Dussander’s head lay on the table, his eyes half-open, sluggish.

“Dussander!” Todd cried. He shook Dussander roughly, and the old man groaned. “Wake up! Wake up, you stinking old bastard!”

“What? Is it the ambulance?”

“The letter! My father is coming over, he’ll be here in no time. *Where’s the fucking letter?*”

“What . . . what letter?”

“You told me to tell them you got an important letter. I said ...” His heart sank. “I said it came from overseas ... from Germany. Christ!” Todd ran his hands through his hair.

“A letter.” Dussander raised his head with slow difficulty. His seamed cheeks were an unhealthy yellowish-white, his lips blue.

“From Willi, I think. Willi Frankel. Dear ... dear Willi.”

Todd looked at his watch and saw that already two minutes had passed since he had hung up the phone. His father would not, *could* not make it from their house to Dussander’s in four minutes, but he could do it damn fast in the Porsche. Fast, that was it. Everything was moving too fast. And there was still something wrong here; he *felt* it. But there was no time to stop and hunt around for the loophole.

“Yes, okay, I was reading it to you, and you got excited and had this heart attack. Good. Where is it?”

Dussander looked at him blankly.

“The letter! Where is it?”

“What letter?” Dussander asked vacantly, and Todd’s hands itched to throttle the drunken old monster.

“The one I was reading to you! The one from Willi What’s-his-face! Where is it?”

They both looked at the table, as if expecting to see the letter materialize there.

“Upstairs,” Dussander said finally. “Look in my dresser. The third drawer. There is a small wooden box in the bottom of that drawer. You will have to break it open. I lost the key a long time ago. There are some very old letters from a friend of mine. None signed. None dated. All in German. A page or two will serve for window-fittings, as you would say. If you hurry—”

“Are you *crazy*?” Todd raged. “I don’t understand German! How could I read you a letter written in German, you numb fuck?”

“Why would Willi write me in English?” Dussander countered wearily. “If you read me the letter in German, *I* would understand it even if *you* did not. Of course your pronunciation would be butchery, but still, I could—”

Dussander was right—right again, and Todd didn’t wait to hear more. Even after a heart attack the old man was a step ahead. Todd raced down the hall to the stairs, pausing just long enough by the front door to make sure his father’s Porsche wasn’t pulling up even now. It wasn’t, but Todd’s watch told him just how tight things were getting; it had been five minutes now.

He took the stairs two at a time and burst into Dussander's bedroom. He had never been up here before, hadn't even been curious, and for a moment he only looked wildly around at the unfamiliar territory. Then he saw the dresser, a cheap item done in the style his father called Discount Store Modern. He fell on his knees in front of it and yanked at the third drawer. It came halfway out, then jiggled sideways in its slot and stuck firmly.

"Goddam you," he whispered at it. His face was dead pale except for the spots of dark, bloody color flaring at each cheek and his blue eyes, which looked as dark as Atlantic storm-clouds. "Goddam you fucking thing come *out!*"

He yanked so hard that the entire dresser tottered forward and almost fell on him before deciding to settle back. The drawer shot all the way out and landed in Todd's lap. Dussander's socks and underwear and handkerchiefs spilled out all around him. He pawed through the stuff that was still in the drawer and came out with a wooden box about nine inches long and three inches deep. He tried to pull up the lid. Nothing happened. It was locked, just as Dussander had said. Nothing was free tonight.

He stuffed the spilled clothes back into the drawer and then rammed the drawer back into its oblong slot. It stuck again. Todd worked to free it, wiggling it back and forth, sweat running freely down his face. At last he was able to slam it shut. He got up with the box. How much time had passed now?

Dussander's bed was the type with posts at the foot and Todd brought the lock side of the box down on one of these posts as hard as he could, grinning at the shock of pain that vibrated in his hands and travelled all the way up to his elbows. He looked at the lock. The lock looked a bit dented, but it was intact. He brought it down on the post again, even harder this time, heedless of the pain. This time a chunk of wood flew off the bedpost, but the lock still didn't give. Todd uttered a little shriek of laughter and took the box to the other end of the bed. He raised it high over his head this time and brought it down with all his strength. This time the lock splintered.

As he flipped the lid up, headlights splashed across Dussander's window.

He pawed wildly through the box. Postcards. A locket. A much-folded picture of a woman wearing frilly black garters and nothing else. An old billfold. Several sets of ID. An empty leather passport folder. At the bottom, letters.

The lights grew brighter, and now he heard the distinctive beat of the Porsche's engine. It grew louder... and then cut off.

Todd grabbed three sheets of airmail-type stationery, closely written in German on both sides of each sheet, and ran out of the room again. He had almost gotten to the stairs when he realized he had left the forced box lying on Dussander's bed. He ran back, grabbed it, and opened the third dresser drawer.

It stuck again, this time with a firm shriek of wood against wood.

Out front, he heard the ratchet of the Porsche's emergency brake, the opening of the driver's side door, the slam shut.

Faintly, Todd could hear himself moaning. He put the box in the askew drawer, stood up, and lashed out at it with his foot. The drawer closed neatly. He stood blinking at it for a moment and then fled back down the hall. He raced down the stairs. Halfway down them, he heard the rapid rattle of his father's shoes on Dussander's walk. Todd vaulted over the bannister, landed lightly, and ran into the kitchen, the airmail pages fluttering from his hand.

A hammering on the door. "Todd? Todd, it's me!"

And he could hear an ambulance siren in the distance as well. Dussander had drifted away into semi-consciousness again.

"Coming, Dad!" Todd shouted.

He put the airmail pages on the table, fanning them a little as if they had been dropped in a hurry, and then he went back down the hall and let his father in.

"Where is he?" Dick Bowden asked, shouldering past Todd.

"In the kitchen."

"You did everything just right, Todd," his father said, and hugged him in a rough, embarrassed way.

"I just hope I remembered everything," Todd said modestly, and then followed his father down the hall and into the kitchen.

In the rush to get Dussander out of the house, the letter was almost completely ignored. Todd's father picked it up briefly, then put it down when the medics came in with the stretcher. Todd and his father followed the ambulance, and his explanation of what had happened was accepted without question by the doctor attending Dussander's case. "Mr. Denker" was, after all, eighty years old, and his habits were not the best. The doctor also offered Todd a brusque commendation for his quick thinking and action. Todd thanked him wanly and then asked his father if they could go home.

As they rode back, Dick told him again how proud of him he was. Todd barely heard him. He was thinking about his .30-.30 again.

## 18

That was the same day Morris Heisel broke his back.

Morris had never *intended* to break his back; all he had *intended* to do was nail up the corner of the rain-gutter on the west side of his house. Breaking his back was the furthest thing from his mind, he had had enough grief in his life without that, thank you very much. His first wife had died at the age of twenty-five, and both of their daughters were also dead. His brother was dead, killed in a tragic car accident not far from Disneyland in 1971. Morris himself was nearing sixty, and had a case of arthritis that was worsening early and fast. He also had warts on both hands, warts that seemed to grow back as fast as the doctor could burn them off. He was *also* prone to migraine headaches, and in the last couple of years, that *potzer* Rogan next door had taken to calling him "Morris the Cat." Morris had wondered aloud to Lydia, his second wife, how Rogan would like it if Morris took up calling him "Rogan the hemorrhoid."

"Quit it, Morris," Lydia said on these occasions. "You can't take a joke, you never *could* take a joke, sometimes I wonder how I could marry a man with absolutely *no* sense of humor. We go to Las Vegas," Lydia had said, addressing the empty kitchen as if an

invisible horde of spectators which only she could see were standing there, “we see Buddy Hackett, and Morris doesn’t laugh *once*.”

Besides arthritis, warts, and migraines, Morris also had Lydia, who, God love her, had developed into something of a nag over the last five years or so ... ever since her hysterectomy. So he had plenty of sorrows and plenty of problems without adding a broken back.

“*Morris!*” Lydia cried, coming to the back door and wiping suds from her hands with a dishtowel. “Morris, you come down off that ladder right now!”

“What?” He twisted his head so he could see her. He was almost at the top of his aluminum stepladder. There was a bright yellow sticker on this step which said: DANGER! BALANCE MAY SHIFT WITHOUT WARNING ABOVE THIS STEP! Morris was wearing his carpenter’s apron with the wide pockets, one of the pockets filled with nails and the other filled with heavy-duty staples. The ground under the stepladder’s feet was slightly uneven and the ladder rocked a little when he moved. His neck ached with the unlovely prelude to one of his migraines. He was out of temper. “*What?*”

“Come down from there, I said, before you break your back.”

“I’m almost finished.”

“You’re rocking on that ladder like you were on a boat, Morris. Come down.”

“I’ll come down when I’m done!” he said angrily. “Leave me alone!”

“You’ll break your back,” she reiterated dolefully, and went into the house again.

Ten minutes later, as he was hammering the last nail into the rain-gutter, tipped back nearly to the point of overbalancing, he heard a feline yowl followed by fierce barking.

“What in God’s name—?”

He looked around and the stepladder rocked alarmingly. At that same moment, their cat—it was named Lover Boy, *not* Morris—tore around the corner of the garage, its fur bushed out into hackles and its green eyes flaring. The Rogans’ collie pup was in hot pursuit, its tongue hanging out and its leash dragging behind it.

Lover Boy, apparently not superstitious; ran under the stepladder. The collie pup followed.

“Look out, look out, you dumb mutt!” Morris shouted.

The ladder rocked. The pup bunted it with the side of its body. The ladder tipped over and Morris tipped with it, uttering a howl of dismay. Nails and staples flew out of his carpenter’s apron. He landed half on and half off the concrete driveway, and a gigantic agony flared in his back. He did not so much hear his spine snap as feel it happen. Then the world grayed out for awhile.

When things swam back into focus, he was still lying half on and half off the driveway in a litter of nails and staples. Lydia was kneeling over him, weeping. Rogan from next door was there, too, his face as white as a shroud.

“I told you!” Lydia babbled. “I told you to come down off that ladder! Now look! Now look at this!”

Morris found he had absolutely no desire to look. A suffocating, throbbing band of pain had cinched itself around his middle like a belt, and that was bad, but there was something much worse: he could feel nothing below that belt of pain—nothing at all.

“Wail later,” he said huskily. “Call the doctor now.”

“I’ll do it,” Rogan said, and ran back to his own house.

“Lydia,” Morris said. He wet his lips.

“What? What, Morris?” She bent over him and a tear splashed on his cheek. It was touching, he supposed, but it had made him flinch, and the flinch had made the pain worse.

“Lydia, I also have one of my migraines.”

“Oh, poor darling! Poor Morrish But I *told* you—”

“I’ve got the headache because that *potzer* Rogan’s dog barked all night and kept me awake. Today the dog chases my cat and knocks over my ladder and I think my back is broken.”

Lydia shrieked. The sound made Morris’s head vibrate.

“Lydia,” he said, and wet his lips again.

“What, darling?”

“I have suspected something for many years. Now I am sure.”

“My poor Morris! What?”

“There is no God,” Morris said, and fainted.

They took him to Santo Donato and his doctor told him, at about the same time that he would have ordinarily been sitting down to one

of Lydia's wretched suppers, that he would never walk again. By then they had put him in a body-cast. Blood and urine samples had been taken. Dr. Kimmelman had peered into his eyes and tapped his knees with a little rubber hammer—but no reflexive twitch of the leg answered the taps. And at every turn there was Lydia, the tears streaming from her eyes, as she used up one handkerchief after another. Lydia, a woman who would have been at home married to Job, went everywhere well-supplied with little lace snotrags, just in case reason for an extended crying spell should occur. She had called her mother, and her mother would be here soon ("That's nice, Lydia"—although if there was anyone on earth Morris honestly loathed, it was Lydia's mother). She had called the rabbi, he would be here soon, too ("That's nice, Lydia"—although he hadn't set foot inside the synagogue in five years and wasn't sure what the rabbi's name was). She had called his boss, and while he wouldn't be here soon, he sent his greatest sympathies and condolences ("That's nice, Lydia"—although if there was anyone in a class with Lydia's mother, it was that cigar-chewing *putz* Frank Haskell). At last they gave Morris a Valium and took Lydia away. Shortly afterward, Morris just drifted away—no worries, no migraines, no nothing. If they kept giving him little blue pills like that, went his last thought, he would go on up that stepladder and break his back again.

When he woke up—or regained consciousness, that was more like it—dawn was just breaking and the hospital was as quiet as Morris supposed it ever got. He felt very calm... almost serene. He had no pain; his body felt swaddled and weightless. His bed had been surrounded by some sort of contraption like a squirrel cage—a thing of stainless steel bars, guy wires, and pulleys. His legs were being held up by cables attached to this gadget. His back seemed to be bowed by something beneath, but it was hard to tell—he had only the angle of his vision to judge by.

*Others have it worse*, he thought. *All over the world, others have it worse. In Israel, the Palestinians kill busloads of farmers who were committing the political crime of going into town to see a movie. The*

*Israelis cope with this injustice by dropping bombs on the Palestinians and killing children along with whatever terrorists may be there. Others have it worse than me ... which is not to say this is good, don't get that idea, but others have it worse.*

He lifted one hand with some effort—there was pain somewhere in his body, but it was very faint—and made a weak fist in front of his eyes. There. Nothing wrong with his hands. Nothing wrong with his arms, either. So he couldn't feel anything below the waist, so what? There were people all over the world paralyzed from the *neck* down. There were people with leprosy. There were people dying of syphilis. Somewhere in the world right now, there might be people walking down the jetway and onto a plane that was going to crash. No, this wasn't good, but there were worse things in the world.

And there had been, once upon a time, *much* worse things in the world.

He raised his left arm. It seemed to float, disembodied, before his eyes—a scrawny old man's arm with the muscles deteriorating. He was in a hospital johnny but it had short sleeves and he could still read the numbers on the forearm, tattooed there in faded blue ink. P499965214. Worse things, yes, worse things than falling off a suburban stepladder and breaking your back and being taken to a clean and sterile metropolitan hospital and being given a Valium that was guaranteed to bubble your troubles away.

There were the showers, they were worse. His first wife, Ruth, had died in one of their filthy showers. There were the trenches that became graves—he could close his eyes and still see the men lined up along the open maw of the trenches, could still hear the volley of rifle-fire, could still remember the way they flopped backwards into the earth like badly made puppets. There were the crematoriums, they were worse, too, the crematoriums that filled the air with the steady sweet smell of Jews burning like torches no one could see. The horror-struck faces of old friends and relatives... faces that melted away like guttering candles, faces that seemed to melt away *before your very eyes*—thin, thinner, thinnest. Then one day they were gone. Where? Where does a torch-flame go when the cold wind has blown it out? Heaven. Hell? Lights in the darkness, candles

in the wind. When Job finally broke down and questioned, God asked him: *Where were you when I made the world?* If Morris Heisel had been Job, he would have responded: *Where were You when my Ruth was dying, You potzer, You? Watching the Yankees and the Senators? If You can't pay attention to Your business better than this, get out of my face.*

Yes, there were worse things than breaking your back, he had no doubt of it. But what sort of God would have allowed him to break his back and become paralyzed for life after watching his wife die, and his daughters, and his friends?

No God at all, that was Who.

A tear trickled from the corner of his eye and ran slowly down the side of his head to his ear. Outside the hospital room, a bell rang softly. A nurse squeaked by on white crepe-soled shoes. His door was ajar, and on the far wall of the corridor outside he could read the letters NSIVE CA and guessed that the whole sign must read INTENSIVE CARE.

There was movement in the room—a rustle of bedclothes.

Moving very carefully, Morris turned his head to the right, away from the door. He saw a night-table next to him with a pitcher of water on it. There were two call-buttons on the table. Beyond it was another bed, and in the bed was a man who looked even older and sicker than Morris felt. He was not hooked into a giant exercise-wheel for gerbils like Morris was, but an IV feed stood beside his bed and some sort of monitoring console stood at its foot. The man's skin was sunken and yellow. Lines around his mouth and eyes had driven deep. His hair was yellowish-white, dry and lifeless. His thin eyelids had a bruised and shiny look, and in his big nose Morris saw the burst capillaries of the life-long drinker.

Morris looked away ... and then looked back. As the dawnlight grew stronger and the hospital began to wake up, he began to have the strangest feeling that he knew his roommate. Could that be? The man looked to be somewhere between seventy-five and eighty, and Morris didn't believe he knew anyone quite that old—except for

Lydia's mother, a horror Morris sometimes believed to be older than the Sphinx, whom the woman closely resembled.

Maybe the guy was someone he had known in the past, maybe even before he, Morris, came to America. Maybe. Maybe not. And why all of a sudden did it seem to matter? For that matter, why had all his memories of the camp, of Patin, come flooding back tonight, when he always tried to—and most times succeeded in—keeping those things buried?

He broke out in a sudden rash of gooseflesh, as if he had stepped into some mental haunted house where old bodies were unquiet and old ghosts walked. Could that be, even here and now in this clean hospital, thirty years after those dark times had ended?

He looked away from the old man in the other bed, and soon he had begun to feel sleepy again.

*It's a trick of your mind that this other man seems familiar. Only your mind, amusing you in the best way it can, amusing you the way it used to try to amuse you in—*

But he would not think of that. He would not *allow* himself to think of that.

Drifting into sleep, he thought of a boast he had made to Ruth (but never to Lydia; it didn't pay to boast to Lydia; she was not like Ruth, who would always smile sweetly at his harmless puffing and crowing): *I never forget a face*. Here was his chance to find out if that was still so. If he had really known the man in the other bed at some time or other, perhaps he could remember when... and where.

Very close to sleep, drifting back and forth across its threshold, Morris thought: *Perhaps I knew him in the camp*.

That would be ironic indeed—what they called a “jest of God.”

What God? Morris Heisel asked himself again, and slept.

Todd graduated salutatorian of his class, just possibly because of his poor grade on the trig final he had been studying for the night Dussander had his heart attack. It dragged his final grade in the course down to 89, one point below an A-minus average.

A week after graduation, the Bowdens went to visit Mr. Denker at Santo Donato General. Todd fidgeted through fifteen minutes of banalities and thank-yous and how-do-you-feels and was grateful for the break when the man in the other bed asked him if he could come over for a minute.

“You’ll pardon me,” the other man said apologetically. He was in a huge body-cast and was for some reason attached to an overhead system of pulleys and wires. “My name is Morris Heisel. I broke my back.”

“That’s too bad,” Todd said gravely.

“Oy, too bad, he says! This boy has the gift of understatement!”

Todd started to apologize, but Heisel raised his hand, smiling a little. His face was pale and tired, the face of any old man in the hospital facing a life full of sweeping changes just ahead—and surely few of them for the better. In that way, Todd thought, he and Dussander were alike.

“No need,” Morris said. “No need to answer a rude comment. You are a stranger. Does a stranger need to be inflicted with my problems?”

“No man is an island, entire of itself—’ ” Todd began, and Morris laughed.

“Donne, he quotes at me! A smart kid! Your friend there, is he very bad off?”

“Well, the doctors say he’s doing fine, considering his age. He’s eighty.”

“That old!” Morris exclaimed. “He doesn’t talk to me much, you know. But from what he does say, I’d guess he’s naturalized. Like me. I’m Polish, you know. Originally, I mean. From Radom.”

“Oh?” Todd said politely.

“Yes. You know what they call an orange manhole cover in Radom?”

“No,” Todd said, smiling.

“Howard Johnson’s,” Morris said, and laughed. Todd laughed, too. Dussander glanced over at them, startled by the sound and frowning a little. Then Monica said something and he looked back at her again.

“Is your friend naturalized?”

“Oh, yes,” Todd said. “He’s from Germany. Essen. Do you know that town?”

“No,” Morris said, “but I was only in Germany once. I wonder if he was in the war.”

“I really couldn’t say.” Todd’s eyes had gone distant.

“No? Well, it doesn’t matter. That was a long time ago, the war. In another three years there will be people in this country constitutionally eligible to become President—President!—who weren’t even born until after the war was over. To them it must seem there is no difference between the Miracle of Dunkirk and Hannibal taking his elephants over the Alps”

“Were you in the war?” Todd asked.

“I suppose I was, in a manner of speaking. You’re a good boy to visit such an old man ... two old men, counting me.”

Todd smiled modestly.

“I’m tired now,” Morris said. “Perhaps I’ll sleep.”

“I hope you’ll feel better very soon,” Todd said.

Morris nodded, smiled, and closed his eyes. Todd went back to Dussander’s bed, where his parents were just getting ready to leave—his dad kept glancing at his watch and exclaiming with bluff heartiness at how late it was getting.

Two days later, Todd came back to the hospital alone. This time, Morris Heisel, immured in his body-cast, was deeply asleep in the other bed.

“You did well,” Dussander said quietly. “Did you go back to the house later?”

“Yes. I burned the damned letter. I don’t think anyone was too interested in that letter, and I was afraid ... I don’t know.” He shrugged, unable to tell Dussander he’d been almost superstitiously

afraid about the letter—afraid that maybe someone would wander into the house who could read German, someone who would notice references in the letter that were ten, perhaps twenty years out of date.

“Next time you come, smuggle me in something to drink,” Dussander said. “I find I don’t miss the cigarettes, but—”

“I won’t be back again,” Todd said flatly. “Not ever. It’s the end. We’re quits.”

“Quits.” Dussander folded his hands on his chest and smiled. It was not a gentle smile ... but it was perhaps as close as Dussander could come to such a thing. “I thought that was in the cards. They are going to let me out of this graveyard next week ... or so they promise. The doctor says I may have a few years left in my skin yet. I ask him how many, and he just laughs. I suspect that means no more than three, and probably no more than two. Still, I may give him a surprise.”

Todd said nothing.

“But between you and me, boy, I have almost given up my hopes of seeing the century turn.”

“I want to ask you about something,” Todd said, looking at Dussander steadily. “That’s why I came in today. I want to ask you about something you said once.”

Todd glanced over his shoulder at the man in the other bed and then drew his chair closer to Dussander’s bed. He could smell Dussander’s smell, as dry as the Egyptian room in the museum.

“So ask.”

“That wino. You said something about me having experience. First-hand experience. What was that supposed to mean?”

Dussander’s smile widened a bit. “I read the newspapers, boy. Old men always read the newspapers, but not in the same way younger people do. Buzzards are known to gather at the ends of certain airport runways in South America when the crosswinds are treacherous, did you know that? That is how an old man reads the newspaper. A month ago there was a story in the Sunday paper. Not a front-page story, no one cares enough about bums and alcoholics to put them on the front page, but it was the lead story in the feature

section. is SOMEONE STALKING SANTO DONATO'S DOWN-AND-OUT?—that's what it was called. Crude. Yellow journalism. You Americans are famous for it.”

Todd's hands were clenched into fists, hiding the butchered nails. He never read the Sunday papers, he had better things to do with his time. He had of course checked the papers every day for at least a week following each of his little adventures, and none of his stewbums had ever gotten beyond page three. The idea that someone had been making connections behind his back infuriated him.

“The story mentioned several murders, extremely brutal murders. Stabbings, bludgeonings. ‘Subhuman brutality’ was how the writer put it, but you know reporters. The writer of this lamentable piece admitted that there is a high death-rate among these unfortunates, and that Santo Donato has had more than its share of the indigent over the years. In any given year, not all of these men die naturally, or of their own bad habits. There are frequent murders. But in most cases the murderer is usually one of the deceased degenerate's compatriots, the motive no more than an argument over a penny-ante card-game or a bottle of muscatel. The killer is usually happy to confess. He is filled with remorse.

“But these recent killings have not been solved. Even more ominous, to this yellow journalist's mind—or whatever passes for his mind—is the high disappearance rate over the last few years. Of course, he admits again, these men are not much more than modern-day hoboes. They come and go. But some of these left without picking up welfare checks or day-labor checks from Spell O' Work, which only pays on Fridays. Could some of these have been victims of this yellow journalist's Wino Killer, he asks? Victims who haven't been found? *Pah!*”

Dussander waved his hand in the air as if to dismiss such arrant irresponsibility.

“Only titillation, of course. Give people a comfortable little scare on Sunday morning. He calls up old bogies, threadbare but still useful—the Cleveland Torso Murderer, Zodiac, the mysterious Mr. X who killed the Black Dahlia, Springheel Jack. Such drivel. But it makes

me think. What does an old man have to do but think when old friends don't come to visit anymore?"

Todd shrugged.

"I thought: 'If I wished to help this odious yellow-dog journalist, which I certainly do not, I could explain some of the disappearances. Not the corpses found stabbed or bludgeoned, not *them*, God rest their besotted souls, but some of the disappearances. Because at least some of the buns who disappeared are in my cellar.' "

"How many down there?" Todd asked in a low voice.

"Six," Dussander said calmly. "Counting the one you helped me dispose of, six."

"You're really nutso," Todd said. The skin below his eyes had gone white and shiny. "At some point you just blew all your fucking wheels."

" 'Blew my wheels.' What a charming idiom! Perhaps you're right! But then I said to myself: 'This newspaper jackal would love to pin the murders and the disappearances on the same somebody—his hypothetical Wino Killer. But I think maybe that's not what happened at all.' "

"Then I say to myself: 'Do I know anybody who might be doing such things? Somebody who has been under as much strain as I have during the last few years? Someone who has also been listening to old ghosts rattle their chains?' And the answer is yes. I know you, boy."

"I've never killed anyone."

The image that came was not of the winos; they weren't people, not really people at all. The image that came was of himself crouched behind the dead tree, peering through the telescopic sight of his .30-.30, the crosshairs fixed on the temple of the man with the scuzzy beard, the man driving the Brat pickup.

"Perhaps not," Dussander agreed, amicably enough. "Yet you took hold so well that night. Your surprise was mostly anger at having been put in such a dangerous position by an old man's infirmity, I think. Am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong," Todd said. "I was pissed off at you and I still am. I covered it up for you because you've got something in a

safety deposit box that could destroy my life.”

“No. I do not.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“It was as much a bluff as your ‘letter left with a friend.’ You never wrote such a letter, there never was such a friend, and I have never written a single word about our ... association, shall I call it? Now I lay my cards on the table. You saved my life. Never mind that you acted only to protect yourself; that does not change how speedily and efficiently you acted. I cannot hurt you, boy. I tell you that freely. I have looked death in the face and it frightens me, but not as badly as I thought it would. There is no document. It is as you say: we are quits.”

Todd smiled: a weird upward corkscrewing of the lips. A strange, sardonic light danced and fluttered in his eyes.

“Herr Dussander,” he said, “if only I could believe that.”

In the evening Todd walked down to the slope overlooking the freeway, climbed down to the dead tree, and sat on it. It was just past twilight. The evening was warm. Car headlights cut through the dusk in long yellow daisy chains.

*There is no document.*

He hadn't realized how completely irretrievable the entire situation was until the discussion that had followed. Dussander suggested Todd search the house for a safety deposit key, and when he didn't find one, that would prove there was no safety deposit box and hence no document. But a key could be hidden anywhere—it could be put in a Crisco can and then buried, it could be put in a Secrets tin and slid behind a board that had been loosened and then replaced; he might even have ridden the bus to San Diego and put it behind one of the rocks in the decorative stone wall which surrounded the bears' environmental area. For that matter, Todd went on, Dussander could even have thrown the key away. Why not? He had only needed it once, to put his written documents in. If he died, someone else would take it out.

Dussander nodded reluctantly at this, but after a moment's thought he made another suggestion. When he got well enough to go home, he would have the boy call every single bank in Santo Donato. He would tell each bank official he was calling for his grandfather. Poor grandfather, he would say, had grown lamentably senile over the last two years, and now he had misplaced the key to his safety deposit box. Even worse, he could no longer remember which bank the box was in. Could they just check their files for an Arthur Denker, no middle initial? And when Todd drew a blank at every bank in town—

Todd was already shaking his head again. First, a story like that was almost guaranteed to raise suspicions. It was too pat. They would probably suspect a con-game and get in touch with the police. Even if every one of them bought the story, it would do no good. If none of the almost nine dozen banks in Santo Donato had a box in the Denker name, it didn't mean that Dussander hadn't rented one in San Diego, L.A., or any town in between.

At last Dussander gave up.

"You have all the answers, boy. All, at least, but one. What would I stand to gain by lying to you? I invented this story to protect myself from you—that is a motive. Now I am trying to uninvent it. What possible gain do you see in that?"

Dussander got laboriously up on one elbow.

"For that matter, why would I need a document at all, at this point? I could destroy your life from this hospital bed, if that was what I wanted. I could open my mouth to the first passing doctor, they are all Jews, they would all know who I am, or at least who I was. But why would I do this? You are a fine student. You have a fine career ahead of you ... unless you get careless with those winos of yours."

Todd's face froze. "I told you—"

"I know. You never heard of them, you never touched so much as a hair on their scaly, tick-ridden heads, all right, good, fine. I say no more about it. Only tell me, boy: why should I lie about this? We are quits, you say. But I tell you we can only be quits if we can trust each other."

Now, sitting behind the dead tree on the slope which ran down to the freeway, looking at all the anonymous headlights disappearing endlessly like slow tracer bullets, he knew well enough what he was afraid of.

Dussander talking about trust. That made him afraid.

The idea that Dussander might be tending a small but perfect flame of hatred deep in his heart, that made him afraid, too.

A hatred of Todd Bowden, who was young, clean-featured, unwrinkled; Todd Bowden, who was an apt pupil with a whole bright life stretching ahead of him.

But what he feared most was Dussander's refusal to use his name.

Todd. What was so hard about that, even for an old kraut whose teeth were mostly false? Todd. One syllable. Easy to say. Put your tongue against the roof of your mouth, drop your teeth a little, replace your tongue, and it was out. Yet Dussander had always called him "boy." Only that. Contemptuous. *Anonymous*. Yes, that was it, anonymous. As anonymous as a concentration camp serial number.

Perhaps Dussander was telling the truth. No, not just perhaps; *probably*. But there were those fears ... the worst of them being Dussander's refusal to use his name.

And at the root of it all was his own inability to make a hard and final decision. At the root of it all was a rueful truth: even after four years of visiting Dussander, he still didn't know what went on in the old man's head. Perhaps he wasn't such an apt pupil after all.

Cars and cars and cars. His fingers itched to hold his rifle. How many could he get? Three? Six? An even baker's dozen? And how many miles to Babylon?

He stirred restlessly, uneasily.

Only Dussander's death would tell the final truth, he supposed. Sometime during the next five years, maybe even sooner. Three to five ... it sounded like a prison sentence. *Todd Bowden, this court hereby sentences you to three to five for associating with a known war criminal. Three to five at bad dreams and cold sweats.*

Sooner or later Dussander would simply drop dead. Then the waiting would begin. The knot in the stomach every time the phone or the doorbell rang.

He wasn't sure he could stand that.

His fingers itched to hold the gun and Todd curled them into fists and drove both fists into his crotch. Sick pain swallowed his belly and he lay for some time afterwards in a writhing ball on the ground, his lips pulled back in a silent shriek. The pain was dreadful, but it blotted out the endless parade of thoughts.

At least for a while.

## 20

For Morris Heisel, that Sunday was a day of miracles.

The Atlanta Braves, his favorite baseball team, swept a double-header from the high and mighty Cincinnati Reds by scores of 7-1 and 8-0. Lydia, who boasted smugly of always taking care of herself and whose favorite saying was "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," slipped on her friend Janet's wet kitchen floor and sprained her hip. She was at home in bed. It wasn't serious, not at all, and thank God (what God) for that, but it meant she wouldn't be able to visit him for at least two days, maybe as long as four.

Four days without Lydia! Four days that he wouldn't have to hear about how she had warned him that the stepladder was wobbly and how he was up too high on it in the bargain. Four days when he wouldn't have to listen to her tell him how she'd always said the Rogans' pup was going to cause them grief, always chasing Lover Boy that way. Four days without Lydia asking him if he wasn't glad now that she had kept after him about sending in that insurance application, for if she had not, they would surely be on their way to the poorhouse now. Four days without having Lydia tell him that many people lived perfectly normal lives—almost, anyway—paralyzed from the waist down; why, every museum and gallery in

the city had wheelchair ramps as well as stairs, and there were even special busses. After the observation, Lydia would smile bravely and then inevitably burst into tears.

Morris drifted off into a contented late afternoon nap.

When he woke up it was half-past five in the afternoon. His roommate was asleep. He still hadn't placed Denker, but all the same he felt sure that he had known the man at some time or other. He had begun to ask Denker about himself once or twice, but then something kept him from making more than the most banal conversation with the man—the weather, the last earthquake, the next earthquake, and yeah, the Guide says Myron Floren is going to come back for a special guest appearance this weekend on the Welk show.

Morris told himself he was holding back because it gave him a mental game to play, and when you were in a bodycast from your shoulders to your hips, mental games can come in handy. If you had a little mental contest going on, you didn't have to spend quite so much time wondering how it was going to be, pissing through a catheter for the rest of your life.

If he came right out and asked Denker, the mental game would probably come to a swift and unsatisfying conclusion. They would narrow their pasts down to some common experience—a train trip, a boat ride, possibly even the camp. Denker might have been in Patin; there had been plenty of German Jews there.

On the other hand, one of the nurses had told him Denker would probably be going home in a week or two. If Morris couldn't figure it out by then, he would mentally declare the game lost and ask the man straight out: *Say, I've had the feeling I know you—*

But there was more to it than just that, he admitted to himself. There was something in his feelings, a nasty sort of undertow, that made him think of that story "The Monkey's Paw," where every wish had been granted as the result of some evil turn of fate. The old couple who came into possession of the paw wished for a hundred dollars and received it as a gift of condolence when their only son was killed in a nasty mill accident. Then the mother had wished for the son to return to them. They had heard footsteps dragging up

their walk shortly afterward; then pounding on the door. The mother, mad with joy, had gone rushing down the stairs to let in her only child. The father, mad with fear, scrabbled through the darkness for the dried paw, found it at last, and wished his son dead again. The mother threw the door open a moment. later and found nothing on the stoop but an eddy of night wind.

In some way Morris felt that perhaps he *did* know where he and Denker had been acquainted, but that his knowledge was like the son of the old couple in the story—returned from the grave, but not as he was in his mother’s memory; returned, instead, horribly crushed and mangled from his fall into the gnashing, whirling machinery. He felt that his knowledge of Denker might be a subconscious thing, pounding on the door between that area of his mind and that of rational understanding and recognition, demanding admittance ... and that another part of him was searching frantically for the monkey’s paw, or its psychological equivalent; for the talisman that would wish away the knowledge forever.

Now he looked at Denker, frowning.

*Denker, Denker, Where have I known you, Denker? Was it Patin? Is that why I don't want to know? But surely, two survivors of a common horror do not have to be afraid of each other. Unless, of course ...*

He frowned. He felt very close to it, suddenly, but his feet were tingling, breaking his concentration, annoying him. They were tingling in just the way a limb tingles when you’ve slept on it and it’s returning to normal circulation. If it wasn’t for the damned body-cast, he could sit up and rub his feet until that tingle went away. He could

—  
Morris’s eyes widened.

For a long time he lay perfectly still, Lydia forgotten, Denker forgotten, Patin forgotten, *everything* forgotten except that tingly feeling in his feet. Yes, both feet, but it was stronger in the right one. When you felt that tingle, you said *My foot went to sleep*.

But what you really meant, of course, was *My foot is waking up*.

Morris fumbled for a call-button. He pressed it again and again until the nurse came.

\* \* \*

The nurse tried to dismiss it—she had had hopeful patients before. His doctor wasn't in the building, and the nurse didn't want to call him at home. Dr. Kemmelman had a vast reputation for evil temper ... especially when he was called at home. Morris wouldn't let her dismiss it. He was a mild man, but now he was prepared to make more than a fuss; he was prepared to make an uproar if that's what it took. The Braves had taken two. Lydia had sprained her hip. But good things came in threes, everyone knew that.

At last the nurse came back with an intern, a young man named Dr. Timpnell whose hair looked as if it had been cut by a Lawn Boy with very dull blades. Dr. Timpnell pulled a Swiss Army knife from the pocket of his white pants, folded out the Phillips screwdriver attachment, and ran it from the toes of Morris's right foot down to the heel. The foot did not curl, but his toes twitched—it was an obvious twitch, too definite to miss. Morris burst into tears.

Timpnell, looking rather dazed, sat beside him on the bed and patted his hand.

"This sort of thing happens from time to time," he said (possibly from his wealth of practical experience, which stretched back perhaps as far as six months). "No doctor predicts it, but it *does* happen. And apparently it's happened to you."

Morris nodded through his tears.

"Obviously, you're not totally paralyzed." Timpnell was still patting his hand. "But I wouldn't try to predict if your recovery will be slight, partial, or total. I doubt if Dr. Kemmelman will, either. I suspect you'll have to undergo a lot of physical therapy, and not all of it will be pleasant. But it will be more pleasant than ... you know."

"Yes," Morris said through his tears. "I know. Thank God!" He remembered telling Lydia there was no God and felt his face fill up with hot blood.

"I'll see that Dr. Kemmelman is informed," Timpnell said, giving Morris's hand a final pat and rising.

“Could you call my wife?” Morris asked. Because, doom-crying and hand-wringing aside, he felt *something* for her. Maybe it was even love, an emotion which seemed to have little to do with sometimes feeling like you could wring a person’s neck.

“Yes, I’ll see that it’s done. Nurse, would you—?”

“Of course, doctor,” the nurse said, and Timpnell could barely stifle his grin.

“Thank you,” Morris said, wiping his eyes with a Kleenex from the box on the nightstand. “Thank you very much.”

Timpnell went out. At some point during the discussion, Mr. Denker had awakened. Morris considered apologizing for all the noise, or perhaps for his tears, and then decided no apology was necessary.

“You are to be congratulated, I take it,” Mr. Denker said. “We’ll see,” Morris said, but like Timpnell, he was barely able to stifle his grin. “We’ll see.”

“Things have a way of working out,” Denker replied vaguely, and then turned on the TV with the remote control device. It was now quarter to six, and they watched the last of *Hee Haw*. It was followed by the evening news. Unemployment was worse. Inflation was not so bad. Billy Carter was thinking about going into the beer business. A new Gallup poll showed that, if the election were to be held right then, there were four Republican candidates who could beat Billy’s brother Jimmy. And there had been racial incidents following the murder of a black child in Miami. “A night of violence,” the newscaster called it. Closer to home, an unidentified man had been found in an orchard near Highway 46, stabbed and bludgeoned.

Lydia called just before six-thirty. Dr. Kemmelman had called her and, based on the young intern’s report, he had been cautiously optimistic. Lydia was cautiously joyous. She vowed to come in the following day even if it killed her. Morris told her he loved her. Tonight he loved everyone—Lydia, Dr. Timpnell with his Lawn Boy haircut, Mr. Denker, even the young girl who brought in the supper trays as Morris hung up.

Supper was hamburgers, mashed potatoes, a carrots-and-peas combination, and small dishes of ice cream for dessert. The candy

striper who served it was Felice, a shy blonde girl of perhaps twenty. She had her own good news—her boy-friend had landed a job as a computer programmer with IBM and had formally asked her to marry him.

Mr. Denker, who exuded a certain courtly charm that all the young ladies responded to, expressed great pleasure. “Really, how wonderful. You must sit down and tell us all about it. Tell us everything. Omit nothing.”

Felice blushed and smiled and said she couldn’t do that. “We’ve still got the rest of the B Wing to do and C Wing after that. And look, here it is six-thirty!”

“Then tomorrow night, for sure. We insist ... don’t we, Mr. Heisel?”

“Yes, indeed,” Morris murmured, but his mind was a million miles away.

*(you must sit down and tell us all about it)*

Words spoken in that exact-same bantering tone. He had heard them before; of that there could be no doubt. But had Denker been the one to speak them? *Had* he?

*(tell us everything)*

The voice of an urbane man. A cultured man. But there was a threat in the voice. A steel hand in a velvet glove. Yes.

Where?

*(tell us everything. omit nothing.)*

*(? PATIN ?)*

Morris Heisel looked at his supper. Mr. Denker had already fallen to with a will. The encounter with Felice had left him in the best of spirits—the way he had been after the young boy with the blonde hair came to visit him.

“A nice girl,” Denker said, his words muffled by a mouthful of carrots and peas.

“Oh yes—

*(you must sit down)*

“—Felice, you mean. She’s

*(and tell us all about it.)*

“very sweet.”

*(tell us everything. omit nothing.)*

He looked down at his own supper, suddenly remembering how it got to be in the camps after awhile. At first you would have killed for a scrap of meat, no matter how maggoty or green with decay. But after awhile, that crazy hunger went away and your belly lay inside your middle like a small gray rock. You felt you would never be hungry again.

Until someone showed you food.

*(“tell us everything, my friend. omit nothing. you must sit down and tell us AAALLLLL about it.”)*

The main course on Morris’s plastic hospital tray was hamburger. Why should it suddenly make him think of lamb? Not mutton, not chops—mutton was often stringy, chops often tough, and a person whose teeth had rotted out like old stumps would perhaps not be overly tempted by mutton or a chop. No, what he thought of now was a savory lamb stew, gravy-rich and full of vegetables. Soft tasty vegetables. Why think of lamp stew? Why, unless—

The door banged open. It was Lydia, her face rosy with smiles. An aluminum crutch was propped in her armpit and she was walking like Marshal Dillon’s friend Chester. *“Morris!”* she trilled. Trailing her and looking just as tremulously happy was Emma Rogan from next door.

Mr. Denker, startled, dropped his fork. He cursed softly under his breath and picked it up off the floor with a wince.

“It’s so *WONDERFUL!*” Lydia was almost baying with excitement. “I called Emma and asked her if we could come tonight instead of tomorrow, I had the crutch already, and I said, ‘Em,’ I said, ‘if I can’t bear this agony for Morris, what kind of wife am I to him?’ Those were my very words, weren’t they, Emma?”

Emma Rogan, perhaps remembering that her collie pup had caused at least some of the problem, nodded eagerly.

“So I called the hospital,” Lydia said, shrugging her coat off and settling in for a good long visit, “and *they* said it was past visiting hours but in my case they would make an exception, except we couldn’t stay too long because we might bother Mr. Denker. We aren’t bothering you, are we, Mr. Denker?”

“No, dear lady,” Mr. Denker said resignedly.

“Sit down, Emma, take Mr. Denker’s chair, he’s not using it. Here, Morris, stop with the ice cream, you’re slobbering it all over yourself, just like a baby. Never mind, we’ll have you up and around in no time. I’ll feed it to you. Goo-goo, ga-ga. Open wide ... over the teeth, over the gums ... look out, stomach, here it comes! ... No, don’t say a word, Mommy knows best. Would you look at him, Emma, he hardly has any hair left and I don’t wonder, thinking he might never walk again. It’s God’s mercy. I told him that stepladder was wobbly. I said, ‘Morris,’ I said, ‘come down off there before—’ ”

She fed him ice cream and chattered for the next hour and by the time she left, hobbling ostentatiously on the crutch while Emma held her other arm, thoughts of lamb stew and voices echoing up through the years were the last things in Morris Heisel’s mind. He was exhausted. To say it had been a busy day was putting it mildly. Morris fell deeply asleep.

He awoke sometime between 3:00 and 4:00 A.M. with a scream locked behind his lips.

Now he knew. He knew exactly where and exactly when he had been acquainted with the man in the other bed. Except his name had not been Denker then. Oh no, not at all.

He had awakened from the most terrible nightmare of his whole life. Someone had given him and Lydia a monkey’s paw, and they had wished for money. Then, somehow, a Western Union boy in a Hitler Youth uniform had been in the room with them. He handed Morris a telegram which read:

REGRET TO INFORM YOU BOTH DAUGHTERS DEAD STOP  
PATIN CONCENTRATION CAMP STOP GREATEST REGRETS AT  
THIS FINAL SOLUTION STOP COMMANDANT’S LETTER  
FOLLOWS STOP WILL TELL YOU EVERYTHING AND OMIT  
NOTHING STOP PLEASE ACCEPT OUR CHECK FOR 100  
REICHMARKS ON DEPOSIT YOUR BANK TOMORROW STOP  
SIGNED ADOLF HITLER CHANCELLOR.

A great wail from Lydia, and although she had never even seen Morris's daughters, she held the monkey's paw high and wished for them to be returned to life. The room went dark. And suddenly, from outside, came the sound of dragging, lurching footfalls.

Morris was down on his hands and knees in a darkness that suddenly stank of smoke and gas and death. He was searching for the paw. One wish left. If he could find the paw he could wish this dreadful dream away. He would spare himself the sight of his daughters, thin as scarecrows, their eyes deep wounded holes, their numbers burning on the scant flesh of their arms.

Hammering on the door.

In the nightmare, his search for the paw became ever more frenzied, but it bore no fruit. It seemed to go on for years. And then, behind him, the door crashed open. No, he thought. *I won't look. I'll close my eyes. Rip them from my head if I have to, but I won't look.*

But he did look. He had to look. In the dream it was as if huge hands had grasped his head and wrenched it around.

It was not his daughters standing in the doorway; it was Denker. A much younger Denker, a Denker who wore a Nazi SS uniform, the cap with its death's-head insignia cocked rakishly to one side. His buttons gleamed heartlessly, his boots were polished to a killing gloss.

Clasped in his arms was a huge and slowly bubbling pot of lamb stew.

And the dream-Denker, smiling his dark, suave smile, said: *You must sit down and tell us all about it—as one friend to another, hein? We have heard that gold has been hidden. That tobacco has been hoarded. That it was not food-poisoning with Schneibel at all but powdered glass in his supper two nights ago. You must not insult our intelligence by pretending you know nothing. You knew EVERYTHING. So tell it all. Omit nothing.*

And in the dark, smelling the maddening aroma of the stew, he told them everything. His stomach, which had been a small gray rock, was now a ravening tiger. Words spilled helplessly from his lips. They spewed from him in the senseless sermon of a lunatic, truth and falsehood all mixed together.

*Brodin has his mother's wedding ring taped below his scrotum!*

*("you must sit down")*

*Laslo and Herman Dorksy have talked about rushing guard tower number three!*

*("and tell us everything!")*

*Rachel Tannenbaum's husband has tobacco, he gave the guard who comes on after Zeickert, the one they call Booger-Eater because he is always picking his nose and then putting his fingers in his mouth. Tannenbaum, some of it to Booger-Eater so he wouldn't take his wife's pearl earrings!*

*("oh that makes no sense no sense at all you've mixed up two different stories I think but that's all right quite all right we'd rather have you mix up two stories than omit one completely you must omit NOTHING!")*

*There is a man who has been calling out his dead son's name in order to get double rations!*

*("tell us his name")*

*I don't know it but I can point him out to you please yes I can show him to you I will I will I will I*

*("tell us everything you know")*

*will I will I will I will I will I will I will I*

*Until he swam up into consciousness with a scream in his throat like fire.*

*Trembling uncontrollably, he looked at the sleeping form in the other bed. He found himself staring particularly at the wrinkled, caved-in mouth. Old tiger with no teeth. Ancient and vicious rogue elephant with one tusk gone and the other rotted loose in its socket. Senile monster.*

*"Oh my God," Morris Heisel whispered. His voice was high and faint, inaudible to anyone but himself. Tears trickled down his cheeks toward his ears. "Oh dear God, the man who murdered my wife and my daughters is sleeping in the same room with me, my God, oh dear dear God, he is here with me now in this room."*

*The tears began to flow faster now—tears of rage and horror, hot, scalding.*

He trembled and waited for morning, and morning did not come for an age.

## 21

The next day, Monday, Todd was up at six o'clock in the morning and poking listlessly at a scrambled egg he had fixed for himself when his father came down still dressed in his monogrammed bathrobe and slippers.

"Mumph," he said to Todd, going past him to the refrigerator for orange juice.

Todd grunted back without looking up from his book, one of the 87th Squad mysteries. He had been lucky enough to land a summer job with a landscaping outfit that operated out of Pasadena. That would have been much too far to commute ordinarily, even if one of his parents had been willing to loan him a car for the summer (neither was), but his father was working on-site not far from there, and he was able to drop Todd off at a bus stop on his way and pick him up at the same place on his way back. Todd was less than wild about the arrangement; he didn't like riding home from work with his father and absolutely detested riding to work with him in the morning. It was in the mornings that he felt the most naked, when the wall between what he was and what he might be seemed the thinnest. It was worse after a night of bad dreams, but even if no dreams had come in the night, it was bad. One morning he realized with a fright so suddenly it was almost terror that he had been seriously considering reaching across his father's briefcase, grabbing the wheel of the Porsche, and sending them corkscrewing into the two express lanes, cutting a swath of destruction through the morning commuters.

"You want another egg, Todd-O?"

"No thanks, Dad." Dick Bowden ate them fried. How could anyone stand to eat a fried egg? On the grill of the Jenn-Air for two minutes,

then over easy. What you got on your plate at the end looked like a giant dead eye with a cataract over it, an eye that would bleed orange when you poked it with your fork.

He pushed his scrambled egg away. He had barely touched it.

Outside, the morning paper slapped the step.

His father finished cooking, turned off the grill, and came to the table. "Not hungry this morning, Todd-O?"

*You call me that one more time and I'm going to stick my knife right up your fucking nose . . . Dad-O.*

"Not much appetite, I guess."

Dick grinned affectionately at his son; there was still a tiny dab of shaving cream on the boy's right ear. "Betty Trask stole your appetite. That's my guess."

"Yeah, maybe that's it." He offered a wan smile that vanished as soon as his father went down the stairs from the breakfast nook to get the paper. *Would it wake you up if I told you what a cunt she is, Dad-O? How about if I said, "Oh, by the way, did you know your good friend Ray Trask's daughter is one of the biggest sluts in Santo Donato? She'd kiss her own twat if she was double-jointed, Dad-O. That's how much she thinks of it. Just a stinking little slut. Two lines of coke and she's yours for the night. And if you don't happen to have any coke, she's still yours for the night. She'd fuck a dog if she couldn't get a man." Think that'd wake you up, Dad-O? Get you a flying start on the day?*

He pushed the thoughts back away viciously, knowing they wouldn't stay gone.

His father came back with the paper. Todd glimpsed the headline: SPACE SHUTTLE WON'T FLY, EXPERT SAYS.

Dick sat down. "Betty's a fine-looking girl," he said. "She reminds me of your mother when I first met her."

"Is that so?"

"Pretty ... young ... fresh ..." Dick Bowden's eyes had gone vague. Now they came back, focusing almost anxiously on his son. "Not that your mother isn't still a fine-looking woman. But at that age a girl has a certain ... glow, I guess you'd say. It's there for awhile, and then it's gone." He shrugged and opened the paper. "*C'est la vie*, I guess."

*She's a bitch in heat. Maybe that's what makes her glow.*

"You're treating her right, aren't you, Todd-O?" His father was making his usual rapid trip through the paper toward the sports pages. "Not getting too fresh?"

"Everything's cool, Dad."

*(if he doesn't stop pretty soon I'll I'll do something. scream. throw his coffee in his face. something.)*

"Ray thinks you're a fine boy," Dick said absently. He had at last reached the sports. He became absorbed. There was blessed silence at the breakfast table.

Betty Trask had been all over him the very first time they went out. He had taken her to the local lovers' lane after the movie because he knew it would be expected of them; they could swap spits for half an hour or so and have all the right things to tell their respective friends the next day. She could roll her eyes and tell how she had fought off his advances—boys were so tiresome, really, and she never fucked on the first date, she wasn't that kind of girl. Her friends would agree and then all of them would troop into the girls' room and do whatever it was they did in there—put on fresh makeup, smoke Tampax, whatever.

And for a guy ... well, you had to make out. You had to get at least to second base and try for third. Because there were reputations and reputations. Todd couldn't have cared less about having a stud reputation; he only wanted a reputation for being normal. And if you didn't at least try, word got around. People started to wonder if you were all right.

So he took them up on Jane's Hill, kissed them, felt their tits, went a little further than that if they would allow it. And that was it. The girl would stop him, he would put up a little good-natured argument, and then take her home. No worries about what might be said in the girls' room the next day. No worries that anyone was going to think Todd Bowden was anything but normal. Except—

Except Betty Trask was the kind of girl who fucked on the first date. On every date. And in between dates.

The first time had been a month or so before the goddam Nazi's heart attack, and Todd thought he had done pretty well for a virgin ...

perhaps for the same reason a young pitcher will do well if he's tapped to throw the biggest game of the year with no forewarning. There had been no time to worry, to get all strung up about it.

Always before, Todd had been able to sense when a girl had made up her mind that on the next date she would just allow herself to be carried away. He was aware that he was personable and that both his looks and his prospects were good. The kind of boy their cunty mothers regarded as "a good catch." And when he sensed that physical capitulation about to happen, he would start dating some other girl. And whatever it said about his personality, Todd was able to admit to himself that if he ever started dating a truly frigid girl, he would probably be happy to date her for years to come. Maybe even marry her.

But the first time with Betty had gone fairly *well*—*she* was no virgin, even if he was. She had to help him get his cock into her, but she seemed to take that as a matter of course. And halfway through the act itself she had gurgled up from the blanket they were lying on: "I just love to fuck!" It was the tone of voice another girl might have used to express her love for strawberry whirl ice cream.

Later encounters—there had been five of them (five and a half, he supposed, if you wanted to count last night)—hadn't been so good. They had, in fact, gotten worse at what seemed an exponential rate ... although he didn't believe even now that Betty had been aware of that (at least not until last night). In fact, quite the opposite. Betty apparently believed she had found the battering-ram of her dreams.

Todd hadn't felt any of the things he was supposed to feel at a time like that. Kissing her lips was like kissing warm but uncooked liver. Having her tongue in his mouth only made him wonder what kind of germs she was carrying, and sometimes he thought he could smell her fillings—an unpleasant metallic odor, like chrome. Her breasts were bags of meat. No more.

Todd had done it twice more with her before Dussander's heart attack. Each time he had more trouble getting erect. In both cases he had finally succeeded by using a fantasy. She was stripped naked in front of all their friends. Crying. Todd was forcing her to walk up and down before them while he cried out: *Show your tits! Let them*

*see your snatch, you cheap slut! Spread your cheeks! That's right, bend over and SPREAD them!*

Betty's appreciation was not at all surprising. He was a good lover, not in spite of his problems but because of them. Getting hard was only the first step. Once you achieved erection, you had to have an orgasm. The fourth time they had done it—this was three days after Dussander's heart attack—he had pounded away at her for over ten minutes. Betty Trask thought she had died and gone to heaven; she had three orgasms and was trying for a fourth when Todd recalled an old fantasy ... what was, in fact, the First Fantasy. The girl on the table, clamped and helpless. The huge dildo. The rubber squeeze-bulb. Only now, desperate and sweaty and almost insane with his desire to come and get this horror over with, the face of the girl on the table became Betty's face. That brought on a joyless, rubbery spasm that he supposed was, technically, at least, an orgasm. A moment later Betty was whispering in his ear, her breath warm and redolent of Juicy Fruit gum: "Lover, you do me any old time. Just call me."

Todd had nearly groaned aloud.

The nub of his dilemma was this: Wouldn't his reputation suffer if he broke off with a girl who obviously wanted to put out for him? Wouldn't people wonder why? Part of him said they would not. He remembered walking down the hall behind two senior boys during his freshman year and hearing one of them tell the other he had broken off with his girlfriend. The other wanted to know why. "Fucked 'er out," the first said, and both of them bellowed goatish laughter.

*If someone asks me why I dropped her, I'll just say I fucked her out. But what if she says we only did it five times? Is that enough? What? ... How much? ... How many? ... Who'll talk? ... What'll they say?*

So his mind ran on, as restless as a hungry rat in an insoluble maze. He was vaguely aware that he was turning a minor problem into a big problem, and that this very inability to solve the problem had something to say about how shaky he had gotten. But knowing it brought him no fresh ability to change his behavior, and he sank into a black depression.

College. College was the answer. College offered an excuse to break with Betty that no one could question. But September seemed so far away.

The fifth time it had taken him almost twenty minutes to get hard, but Betty had proclaimed the experience well worth the wait. And then, last night, he hadn't been able to perform at all.

"What are you, anyway?" Betty had asked petulantly. After twenty minutes of manipulating his lax penis, she was dishevelled and out of patience. "Are you one of those AC/DC guys?"

He very nearly strangled her on the spot. And if he'd had his .30-.30—

"Well, I'll be a son of a *gun!* Congratulations, son!"

"Huh?" He looked up and out of his black study.

"You made the Southern Cal High School All-Stars!" His father was grinning with pride and pleasure.

"Is that so?" For a moment he hardly knew what his father was talking about; he had to grope for the meaning of the words. "Say, yeah, Coach Haines mentioned something to me about that at the end of the year. Said he was putting me and Billy DeLyons up. I never expected anything to happen."

"Well Jesus, you don't seem very excited about it!"

"I'm still trying

*(who gives a ripe fuck?)*

to get used to the idea." With a huge effort, he managed a grin.

"Can I see the article?"

His father handed the paper across the table to Todd and got to his feet. "I'm going to wake Monica up. She's got to see this before we leave."

*No, God—I can't face both of them this morning.*

"Aw, don't do that. You know she won't be able to get back to sleep if you wake her up. We'll leave it for her on the table."

"Yes, I suppose we could do that. You're a damned thoughtful boy, Todd." He clapped Todd on the back, and Todd squeezed his eyes closed. At the same time he shrugged his shoulders in an aw-shucks gesture that made his father laugh. Todd opened his eyes again and looked at the paper.

4 BOYS NAMED TO SOUTHERN CAL ALL-STARS, the headline read. Beneath were pictures of them in their uniforms—the catcher and left-fielder from Fairview High, the harp south-paw from Mountford, and Todd to the far right, grinning openly out at the world from beneath the bill of his baseball cap. He read the story and saw that Billy DeLyons had made the second squad. That, at least, was something to feel happy about. DeLyons could claim he was a Methodist until his tongue fell out, if it made him feel good, but he wasn't fooling Todd. He knew perfectly well what Billy DeLyons was. Maybe he ought to introduce him to Betty Trask, she was another sheeny. He had wondered about that for a long time, and last night he had decided for sure. The Trasks were passing for white. One look at her nose and that olive complexion—her old man's was even worse—and you knew. That was probably why he hadn't been able to get it up. It was simple: his cock had known the difference before his brain. Who did they think they were kidding, calling themselves Trask?

“Congratulations again, son.”

He looked up and first saw his father's hand stuck out, then his father's foolishly grinning face.

*Your buddy Trask is a yid!* he heard himself yelling into his father's face. *That's why I was impotent with his slut of a daughter last night! That's the reason!* Then, on the heels of that, the cold voice that sometimes came at moments like this rose up from deep inside him, shutting off the rising flood of irrationality, as if

*(GET HOLD OF YOURSELF RIGHT NOW)*

behind steel gates.

He took his father's hand and shook it. Smiled guilelessly into his father's proud face. Said: “Jeez, thanks, Dad.”

They left that page of the newspaper folded back and a note for Monica, which Dick insisted Todd write and sign *Your All-Star Son, Todd*.

Ed French, aka “Pucker” French, aka Sneaker Pete and The Ked Man, *also* aka Rubber Ed French, was in the small and lovely seaside town of San Remo for a guidance counsellors’ convention. It was a waste of time if ever there had been one—all guidance counsellors could ever agree on was not to agree on anything—and he grew bored with the papers, seminars, and discussion periods after a single day. Halfway through the second day, he discovered he was also bored with San Remo, and that of the adjectives small, lovely, and seaside, the *key* adjective was probably *small*. Gorgeous views and redwood trees aside, San Remo didn’t have a movie theater or a bowling alley, and Ed hadn’t wanted to go in the place’s only bar—it had a dirt parking lot filled with pickup trucks, and most of the pickups had Reagan stickers on their rusty bumpers and tailgates. He wasn’t afraid of being picked on, but he hadn’t wanted to spend an evening looking at men in cowboy hats and listening to Loretta Lynn on the jukebox.

So here he was on the third day of a convention which stretched out over an incredible four days; here he was in room 217 of the Holiday Inn, his wife and daughter at home, the TV broken, an unpleasant smell hanging around in the bathroom. There was a swimming pool, but his eczema was so bad this summer that he wouldn’t have been caught dead in a bathing suit. From the shins down he looked like a leper. He had an hour before the next workshop (Helping the Vocally Challenged Child—what they meant was doing something for kids who stuttered or who had cleft palates, but we wouldn’t want to come right out and say that, Christ no, someone might lower our salaries), he had eaten lunch at San Remo’s only restaurant, he didn’t feel like a nap, and the TV’s one station was showing a re-run of *Bewitched*.

So he sat down with the telephone book and began to flip through it aimlessly, hardly aware of what he was doing, wondering distantly if he knew anyone crazy enough about either small, lovely, or seaside to live in San Remo. He supposed this was what all the bored people in all the Holiday Inns all over the world ended up doing—looking for a forgotten friend or relative to call up on the phone. It was that, *Bewitched*, or the Gideon Bible. And if you did

happen to get hold of somebody, what the hell did you say? “Frank! How the hell are you? And by the way, which was it—small, lovely, or seaside?” Sure. Right. Give that man a cigar and set him on fire.

Yet, as he lay on the bed flipping through the thin San Remo white pages and half-scanning the columns, it seemed to him that he *did* know somebody in San Remo. A book salesman? One of Sondra’s nieces or nephews, of which there were marching battalions? A poker buddy from college? The relative of a student? That seemed to ring a bell, but he couldn’t fine it down any more tightly.

He kept thumbing, and found he was sleepy after all. He had almost dozed off when it came to him and he sat up, wide-awake again.

Lord Peter!

They were re-running those Wimsey stories on PBS just lately—*Clouds of Witness*, *Murder Must Advertise*, *The Nine Tailors*. He and Sondra were hooked. A man named Ian Carmichael played Wimsey, and Sondra was nuts for him. So nuts, in fact, that Ed, who didn’t think Carmichael looked like Lord Peter at all, actually became quite irritated.

“Sandy, the shape of his face is all wrong. And he’s wearing false teeth, for heaven’s sake!”

“Poo,” Sondra had replied airily from the couch where she was curled up. “You’re just jealous. He’s so *handsome*.”

“Daddy’s jealous, Daddy’s jealous,” little Norma sang, prancing around the living room in her duck pajamas.

“You should have been in bed an hour ago,” Ed told her, gazing at his daughter with a jaundiced eye. “And if I keep noticing you’re *here*, I’ll probably remember that you aren’t *there*.”

Little Norma was momentarily abashed. Ed turned back to Sondra.

“I remember back three or four years ago. I had a kid named Todd Bowden, and his grandfather came in for a conference. Now *that* guy looked like Wimsey. A very *old* Wimsey, but the shape of his face was right, and—”

“Wim-zee, Wim-zee, *Dim-zee*, *Jim-zee*,” little Norma sang. “*Wim-zee*, *Bim-zee*, doodle-oodle-ooo-doo-”

“Shh, both of you,” Sondra said. “I think he’s the most *beautiful* man.” Irritating woman!

But hadn’t Todd Bowden’s grandfather retired to San Remo? Sure. It had been on the forms. Todd had been one of the brightest boys in that year’s class. Then, all at once, his grades had gone to hell. The old man had come in, told a familiar tale of marital difficulties, and had persuaded Ed to let the situation alone for awhile and see if things didn’t straighten themselves out. Ed’s view was that the old *laissez-faire* bit didn’t work—if you told a teenage kid to root, hog, or die, he or she usually died. But the old man had been almost eerily persuasive (it was the resemblance to Wimsey, perhaps), and Ed had agreed to give Todd to the end of the next Flunk Card period. And damned if Todd hadn’t pulled through. The old man must have gone right through the whole family and really kicked some ass, Ed thought. He looked like the type who not only could do it, but who might derive a certain dour pleasure from it. Then, just two days ago, he had seen Todd’s picture in the paper—he had made the Southern Cal All-Stars in baseball. No mean feat when you consider that about five hundred boys were nominated each spring. He supposed he might never have come up with the grandfather’s name if he hadn’t seen the picture.

He flicked through the white pages more purposefully now, ran his finger down a column of fine type, and there it was. BOWDEN, VICTOR s. 403 Ridge Lane. Ed dialed the number and it rang several times at the other end. He was just about to hang up when an old man answered. “Hello?”

“Hello, Mr. Bowden. Ed French. From Santo Donato Junior High.”

“Yes?” Politeness, but no more. Certainly no recognition. Well, the old guy was three years further along (weren’t they all!) and things undoubtedly slipped his mind from time to time.

“Do you remember me, sir?”

“Should I?” Bowden’s voice was cautious, and Ed smiled. The old man forgot things, but he didn’t want anybody to know if he could help it. His own old man had been that way when his hearing started to go.

“I was your grandson Todd’s guidance counsellor at S.D.J.H.S. I called to congratulate you. He sure tore up the pea-patch when he got to high school, didn’t he? And now he’s All-Conference to top it off. Wow!”

“*Todd!*” the old man said, his voice brightening immediately. “Yes, he certainly did a fine job, didn’t he? Second in his class! And the girl who was ahead of him took the business courses.” A sniff of disdain in the old man’s voice. “My son called and offered to take me to Todd’s commencement, but I’m in a wheelchair now. I broke my hip last January. I didn’t want to go in a wheelchair. But I have his graduation picture right in the hall, you bet! Todd’s made his parents very proud. And me, of course.”

“Yes, I guess we got him over the hump,” Ed said. He was smiling as he said it, but his smile was a trifle puzzled—somehow Todd’s grandfather didn’t sound the same. But it had been a long time ago, of course.

“Hump? What hump?”

“The little talk we had. When Todd was having problems with his course-work. Back in ninth.”

“I’m not following you,” the old man said slowly. “I would never presume to speak for Richard’s son. It would cause trouble ... ho-ho, you don’t *know* how much trouble it would cause. You’ve made a mistake, young fellow.”

“But—”

“Some sort of mistake. Got me confused with another student and another grandfather, I imagine.”

Ed was moderately thunderstruck. For one of the few times in his life, he could not think of a single thing to say. If there was confusion, it sure wasn’t on *his* part.

“Well,” Bowden said doubtfully, “it was nice of you to call, Mr.—”

Ed found his tongue. “I’m right here in town, Mr. Bowden. It’s a convention. Guidance counsellors. I’ll be done around ten tomorrow morning, after the final paper is read. Could I come around to ...” He consulted the phone book again. “. . . to Ridge Lane and see you for a few minutes?”

“What in the world for?”

“Just curiosity, I guess. It’s all water over the dam now. But about three years ago, Todd got himself into a real crack with his grades. They were so bad I had to send a letter home with his report card requesting a conference with a parent, or, ideally, with both of his parents. What I got was his grandfather, a very pleasant man named Victor Bowden.”

“But I’ve already told you—”

“Yes. I know. Just the same, I talked to *somebody* claiming to be Todd’s grandfather. It doesn’t matter much now, I suppose, but seeing is believing. I’d only take a few minutes of your time. It’s all I *can* take, because I’m expected home by suppertime.”

“Time is all I have,” Bowden said, a bit ruefully. “I’ll be here all day. You’re welcome to stop in.”

Ed thanked him, said goodbye, and hung up. He sat on the end of the bed, staring thoughtfully at the telephone. After awhile he got up and took a pack of Phillies Cheroots from the sport coat hanging on the back of the desk chair. He ought to go; there was a workshop, and if he wasn’t there, he would be missed. He lit his Cheroot with a Holiday Inn match and dropped the burnt stub into a Holiday Inn ashtray. He went to the Holiday Inn window and looked blankly out into the Holiday Inn courtyard.

*It doesn’t matter much now*, he had told Bowden, but it mattered to him. He wasn’t used to being sold a bill of goods by one of his kids, and this unexpected news upset him. Technically he supposed it could still turn out to be a case of an old man’s senility, but Victor Bowden hadn’t sounded as if he was drooling in his beard yet. And, damn it, he didn’t sound the *same*.

Had Todd Bowden jobbed him?

He decided it could have been done. Theoretically, at least. Especially by a bright boy like Todd. He could have jobbed everyone, not just Ed French. He could have forged his mother or father’s name to the Flunk Cards he had been issued during his bad patch. Lots of kids discovered a latent forging ability when they got Flunk Cards. He could have used ink eradicator on his second- and third-quarter reports, changing the grades up for his parents and then back down again so that his home-room teacher wouldn’t notice

anything weird if he or she glanced at his card. The double application of eradicator would be visible to someone who was really looking, but home-room teachers carried an average of sixty students each. They were lucky if they could get the entire roll called before the first bell, let alone spot-checking returned cards for tampering.

As for Todd's final class standing, it would have dipped perhaps no more than three points overall—two bad marking periods out of a total of twelve. His other grades had been lopsidedly good enough to make up most of the difference. And how many parents drop by the school to look at the student records kept by the California Department of Education? Especially the parents of a bright student like Todd Bowden?

Frown lines appeared on Ed French's normally smooth forehead.

*It doesn't matter much now.* That was nothing but the truth. Todd's high school work had been exemplary; there was no way in the world you could fake a 94 percent. The boy was going on to Berkeley, the newspaper article had said, and Ed supposed his folks were damned proud—as they had every right to be. More and more it seemed to Ed that there was a . vicious downside of American life, a greased skid of opportunism, cut comers, easy drugs, easy sex, a morality that grew cloudier each year. When your kid got through in standout style, parents had a right to be proud.

*It doesn't matter much now—but who was his frigging grandfather?*

That kept sticking into him. Who, indeed? Had Todd Bowden gone to the local branch of the Screen Actors' Guild and hung a notice on the bulletin board? YOUNG MAN IN GRADES TROUBLE NEEDS OLDER MAN, PREF. 70-80 YRS., TO GIVE BOFFO PERFORMANCE AS GRANDFATHER, WILL PAY UNION SCALE? Uh-uh. No way, José. And just what sort of adult would have fallen in with such a crazy conspiracy, and for what reason?

Ed French, aka Pucker, aka Rubber Ed, just didn't know. And because it didn't really matter, he stubbed out his Cheroot and went to his workshop. But his attention kept wandering.

The next day he drove out to Ridge Lane and had a long talk with Victor Bowden. They discussed grapes; they discussed the retail grocery business and how the big chain stores were pushing the little guys out; they discussed the political climate in southern California. Mr. Bowden offered Ed a glass of wine. Ed accepted with pleasure. He felt that he needed a glass of wine, even if it was only ten-forty in the morning. Victor Bowden looked as much like Peter Wimsey as a machine-gun looks like a shillelagh. Victor Bowden had no trace of the faint accent Ed remembered, and he was quite fat. The man who had purported to be Todd's grandfather had been whip-thin.

Before leaving, Ed told him: "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention any of this to Mr. or Mrs. Bowden. There may be a perfectly reasonable explanation for all of it ... and even if there isn't, it's all in the past."

"Sometimes," Bowden said, holding his glass of wine up to the sun and admiring its rich dark color, "the past don't rest so easy. Why else do people study history?"

Ed smiled uneasily and said nothing.

"But don't you worry. I never meddle in Richard's affairs. And Todd is a good boy. Salutatorian of his class . . . he must be a good boy. Am I right?"

"As rain," Ed French said heartily, and then asked for another glass of wine.

## 23

Dussander's sleep was uneasy; he lay in a trench of bad dreams.

*They were breaking down the fence. Thousands, perhaps millions of them. They ran out of the jungle and threw themselves against the electrified barbed wire and now it was beginning to lean ominously inward. Some of the strands had given way and now coiled uneasily on the packed earth of the parade ground, squirting blue sparks. And still there was no end to them, no end. The Fuehrer was as mad as*

*Rommel had claimed if he thought now—if he had ever thought—there could be a final solution to this problem. There were billions of them; they filled the universe; and they were all after him.*

“Old man. Wake up, old man. Dussander. Wake up, old man, wake up.”

At first he thought this was the voice of the dream.

Spoken in German; it had to be part of the dream. That was why the voice was so terrifying, of course. If he awoke he would escape it, so he swam upward ...

The man was sitting by his bed on a chair that had been turned around backwards—a real man. “Wake up, old man,” this visitor was saying. He was young—no more than thirty. His eyes were dark and studious behind plain steel-framed glasses. His brown hair was longish, collar-length, and for a confused moment Dussander thought it was the boy in a disguise. But this was not the boy, wearing a rather old-fashioned blue suit much too hot for the California climate. There was a small silver pin on the lapel of the suit. Silver, the metal you used to kill vampires and werewolves. It was a Jewish star.

“Are you speaking to me?” Dussander asked in German.

“Who else? Your roommate is gone.”

“Heisel? Yes. He went home yesterday.”

“Are you awake now?”

“Of course. But you’ve apparently mistaken me for someone else. My name is Arthur Denker. Perhaps you have the wrong room.”

“My name is Weiskopf. And yours is Kurt Dussander.” Dussander wanted to lick his lips but didn’t. Just possibly this was still all part of the dream—a new phase, no more. *Bring me a wine and a steak-knife, Mr. Jewish Star in the Lapel, and I’ll blow you away like smoke.*

“I know no Dussander,” he told the young man. “I don’t understand you. Shall I ring for the nurse?”

“You understand,” Weiskopf said. He shifted position slightly and brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. The prosiness of this gesture dispelled Dussander’s last hope.

“Heisel,” Weiskopf said, and pointed at the empty bed.

“Heisel, Dussander, Weiskopf—none of these names mean anything to me.”

“Heisel fell off a ladder while he was nailing a new gutter onto the side of his house,” Weiskopf said. “He broke his back. He may never walk again. Unfortunate. But that was not the only tragedy of his life. He was an inmate of Patin, where he lost his wife and daughters. Patin, which you commanded.”

“I think you are insane,” Dussander said. “My name is Arthur Denker. I came to this country when my wife died. Before that was —”

“Spare me your tale,” Weiskopf said, raising a hand. “He had not forgotten your face. This face.”

Weiskopf flicked a photograph into Dussander’s face like a magician doing a trick. It was one of those the boy had shown him years ago. A young Dussander in a jauntily cocked SS cap, seated behind his desk.

Dussander spoke slowly, in English now, enunciating carefully.

“During the war I was a factory machinist. My job was to oversee the manufacture of drive-columns and power-trains for armored cars and trucks. Later I helped to build Tiger tanks. My reserve unit was called up during the battle of Berlin and I fought honorably, if briefly. After the war I worked in Essen, at the Menschler Motor Works until —”

“—until it became necessary for you to run away to South America. With your gold that had been melted down from Jewish teeth and your silver melted down from Jewish jewelry and your numbered Swiss bank account. Mr. Heisel went home a happy man, you know. Oh, he had a bad moment when he woke up in the dark and realized with whom he was sharing a room. But he feels better now. He feels that God allowed him the sublime privilege of breaking his back so that he could be instrumental in the capture of one of the greatest butchers of human beings ever to live.”

Dussander spoke slowly, enunciating carefully.

“During the war I was a factory machinist—”

“Oh, why not drop it? Your papers will not stand up to a serious examination. I .know it and you know it. You are found out ”

“My job was to oversee the manufacture of—”

“Of corpses! One way or another, you will be in Tel Aviv before the new year. The authorities are cooperating with us this time, Dussander. The Americans want to make us happy, and you are one of the things that will make us happy.”

“—the manufacture of drive-columns and power-trains for armored cars and trucks. Later I helped to build Tiger tanks.”

“Why be tiresome? Why drag it out?”

“My reserve unit was called up—”

“Very well then. You’ll see me again. Soon.”

Weiskopf rose. He left the room. For a moment his shadow bobbed on the wall and then that was gone, too. Dussander closed his eyes. He wondered if Weiskopf could be telling the truth about American cooperation. Three years ago, when oil was tight in America, he wouldn’t have believed it. But the current upheaval in Iran might well harden American support for Israel. It was possible. And what did it matter? One way or the other, legal or illegal, Weiskopf and his colleagues would have him. On the subject of Nazis they were intransigent, and on the subject of the camps they were lunatics.

He was trembling all over. But he knew what he must do now.

## 24

The school records for the pupils who had passed through Santo Donato Junior High were kept in an old, rambling warehouse on the north side. It was not far from the abandoned trainyard. It was dark and echoing and it smelled of wax and polish and 999 Industrial Cleaner—it was also the school department’s custodial warehouse.

Ed French got there around four in the afternoon with Norma in tow. A janitor let them in, told Ed what he wanted was on the fourth floor, and showed them to a creeping, clanking elevator that frightened Norma into an uncharacteristic silence.

She regained herself on the fourth floor, prancing and capering up and down the dim aisles of stacked boxes and files while Ed searched for and eventually found the files containing report cards from 1975. He pulled the second box and began to leaf through the B's. BORK. BOSTWICK. BOSWELL. BOWDEN, TODD. He pulled the card, shook his head impatiently over it in the dim light, and took it across to one of the high, dusty windows.

"Don't run around in here, honey," he called over his shoulder.

"Why, Daddy?"

"Because the trolls will get you," he said, and held Todd's card up to the light.

He saw it at once. This report card, in those files for three years now, had been carefully, almost professionally, doctored.

"Jesus Christ," Ed French muttered.

"Trolls, trolls, trolls!" Norma sang gleefully, as she continued to dance up and down the aisles.

## 25

Dussander walked carefully down the hospital corridor. He was still a bit unsteady on his legs. He was wearing his blue bathrobe over his white hospital johnny. It was night now, just after eight o'clock, and the nurses were changing shifts. The next half hour would be confused—he had observed that all the shift changes were confused. It was a time for exchanging notes, gossip, and drinking coffee at the nurses' station, which was just around the corner from the drinking fountain.

What he wanted was just across from the drinking fountain. He was not noticed in the wide hallway, which at this hour reminded him of a long and echoing train station minutes before a passenger train departs. The walking wounded paraded slowly up and down, some dressed in robes as he was, others holding the backs of their johnnies together. Disconnected music came from half a dozen

different transistor radios in half a dozen different rooms. Visitors came and went. A man laughed in one room and another man seemed to be weeping across the hall. A doctor walked by with his nose in a paperback novel.

Dussander went to the fountain, got a drink, wiped his mouth with his cupped hand, and looked at the closed door across the hall. This door was always locked—at least, that was the theory. In practice he had observed that it was sometimes both unlocked and unattended. Most often during the chaotic half hour when the shifts were changing and the nurses were gathered around the corner. Dussander had observed all of this with the trained and wary eye of a man who has been on the jump for a long, long time. He only wished he could observe the unmarked door for another week or so, looking for dangerous breaks in the pattern—he would only have the one chance. But he didn't have another week. His status as Werewolf in Residence might not become known for another two or three days, but it might happen tomorrow. He did not dare wait. When it came out, he would be watched constantly.

He took another small drink, wiped his mouth again, and looked both ways. Then, casually, with no effort at concealment, he stepped across the hall, turned the knob, and walked into the drug closet. If the woman in charge had happened to already be behind her desk, he was only nearsighted Mr. Denker. So sorry, dear lady, I thought it was the W.C. Stupid of me.

But the drug closet was empty.

He ran his eye over the top shelf at his left. Nothing but eyedrops and eardrops. Second shelf: laxatives, suppositories. On the third shelf he saw both Seconal and Veronal. He slipped a bottle of Seconals into the pocket of his robe. Then he went back to the door and stepped out without looking around, a puzzled smile on his face—that certainly wasn't the W.C., was it? *There* it was, right next to the drinking fountain. Stupid me!

He crossed to the door labelled MEN, went inside, and washed his hands. Then he went back down the hall to the semi-private room that was now completely private since the departure of the illustrious Mr. Heisel. On the table between the beds was a glass and a plastic

pitcher filled with water. Pity there was no bourbon; really, it was a shame. But the pills would float him off just as nicely no matter how they were washed down.

“Morris Heisel, *salud*,” he said with a faint smile, and poured himself a glass of water. After all those years of jumping at shadows, of seeing faces that looked familiar on park benches or in restaurants or bus terminals, he had finally been recognized and turned in by a man he wouldn’t have known from Adam. It was almost funny. He had barely spared Heisel two glances, Heisel and his broken back from God. On second thought, it wasn’t *almost* funny; it was very funny.

He put three pills in his mouth, swallowed them with water, took three more, then three more. In the room across the hall he could see two old men hunched over a night-table, playing a grumpy game of cribbage. One of them had a hernia. Dussander knew. What was the other? Gallstones? Kidney stones? Tumor? Prostate? The horrors of old age. They were legion.

He refilled his water glass but didn’t take any more pills right away. Too many could defeat his purpose. He might throw them up and they would pump the residue out of his stomach, saving him for whatever indignities the Americans and the Israelis could devise. He had no intention of trying to take his life stupidly, like a *Hausfrau* on a crying jag. When he began to get drowsy, he would take a few more. That would be fine.

The quavering voice of one of the cribbage players came to him, thin and triumphant: “A double run of three for eight ... fifteens for twelve ... and the right jack for thirteen. How do you like *those* apples?”

“Don’t worry,” the old man with the hernia said confidently. “I got first count. I’ll peg out”

*Peg out*, Dussander thought, sleepy now. An apt enough phrase—but the Americans had a turn of idiom. *I don’t give a tin shit, get hip or get out, stick it where the sun don’t shine, money talks, nobody walks*. Wonderful idiom.

They thought they had him, but he was going to peg out before their very eyes.

He found himself wishing, of all absurd things, that he could leave a note for the boy. Wishing he could tell him to be very careful. To listen to an old man who had finally overstepped himself. He wished he could tell the boy that in the end he, Dussander, had come to respect him, even if he could never like him, and that talking to him had been better than listening to the run of his own thoughts. But any note, no matter how innocent, might cast suspicion on the boy, and Dussander did not want that. Oh, he would have a bad month or two, waiting for some government agent to show up and question him about a certain document that had been found in a safety deposit box rented to Kurt Dussander, aka Arthur Denker ... but after a time, the boy would come to believe he had been telling the truth. There was no need for the boy to be touched by any of this, as long as he kept his head.

Dussander reached out with a hand that seemed to stretch for miles, got the glass of water, and took another three pills. He put the glass back, closed his eyes, and settled deeper into his soft, soft pillow. He had never felt so much like sleeping, and his sleep would be long. It would be restful.

Unless there were dreams.

The thought shocked him. *Dreams? Please God, no. Not those dreams. Not for eternity, not with all possibility of awakening gone. Not—*

In sudden terror, he tried to struggle awake. It seemed that hands were reaching eagerly up out of the bed to grab him, hands with hungry fingers.

*(!NO!)*

His thoughts broke up in a steepening spiral of darkness, and he rode down that spiral as if down a greased slide, down and down, to whatever dreams there are.

His overdose was discovered at 1:35 A.M., and he was pronounced dead fifteen minutes later. The nurse on duty was young and had been susceptible to elderly Mr. Denker's slightly ironic courtliness. She burst into tears. She was a Catholic, and she could

not understand why such a sweet old man, who had been getting better, would want to do such a thing and damn his immortal soul to hell.

## 26

On Saturday morning in the Bowden household, nobody got up until at least nine. This morning at nine-thirty Todd and his father were reading at the table and Monica, who was a slow waker, served them scrambled eggs, juice, and coffee without speaking, still half in her dreams.

Todd was reading a paperback science fiction novel and Dick was absorbed in *Architectural Digest* when the paper slapped against the door.

“Want me to get it, Dad?”

“I will.”

Dick brought it in, started to sip his coffee, and then choked on it as he got a look at the front page.

“Dick, what’s wrong?” Monica asked, hurrying toward him.

Dick coughed out coffee that had gone down the wrong pipe, and while Todd looked at him over the top of the paperback in mild wonder, Monica started to pound him on the back. On the third stroke, her eyes fell to the paper’s headline and she stopped in mid-stroke, as if playing statues. Her eyes widened until it seemed they might actually fall out onto the table.

“Holy God up in heaven!” Dick Bowden managed in a choked voice.

“Isn’t that ... I can’t believe . . .” Monica began, and then stopped. She looked at Todd. “Oh, honey—”

His father was looking at him, too.

Alarmed now, Todd came around the table. “What’s the matter?”

“Mr. Denker,” Dick said—it was all he could manage.

Todd read the headline and understood everything. In dark letters it read: FUGITIVE NAZI COMMITS SUICIDE IN SANTO DONATO HOSPITAL. Below were two photos, side by side. Todd had seen both of them before. One showed Arthur Denker, six years younger and spryer. Todd knew it had been taken by a hippie street photographer, and that the old man had bought it only to make sure it didn't fall into the wrong hands by chance. The other photo showed an SS officer named Kurt Dussander behind his desk at Patin, his cap cocked to one side.

If they had the photograph the hippie had taken, they had been in his house.

Todd skimmed the article, his mind whizzing frantically. No mention of the winos. But the bodies would be found, and when they were, it would be a worldwide story. PATIN COMMANDANT NEVER LOST HIS TOUCH. HORROR IN NAZI'S BASEMENT. HE NEVER STOPPED KILLING.

Todd Bowden swayed on his feet.

Far away, echoing, he heard his mother cry sharply: "Catch him, Dick! He's fainting!"

The word

*(faintingfaintingfainting)*

repeated itself over and over. He dimly felt his father's arms grab him, and then for a little while Todd felt nothing, heard nothing at all.

## 27

Ed French was eating a danish when he unfolded the paper. He coughed, made a strange gagging sound, and spat dismembered pastry all over the table.

"Eddie!" Sondra French said with some alarm. "Are you okay?"

"Daddy's chokun, Daddy's chokun," little Norma proclaimed with nervous good humor, and then happily joined her mother in

slamming Ed on the back. Ed barely felt the blows. He was still goggling down at the newspaper.

“What’s wrong, Eddie?” Sondra asked again.

“Him! Him!” Ed shouted, stabbing his finger down at the paper so hard that his fingernail tore all the way through the A section.

“That man! Lord Peter!”

“What in God’s name are you t—”

“*That’s Todd Bowden’s grandfather!*”

“What? That war criminal? Eddie, that’s *crazy!*”

“But it’s *him*,” Ed almost moaned. “Jesus Christ *Almighty*, that’s *him!*”

Sondra French looked at the picture long and fixedly.

“He doesn’t look like Peter Wimsey at all,” she said finally.

## 28

Todd, pale as window-glass, sat on a couch between his mother and father.

Opposite them was a graying, polite police detective named Richler. Todd’s father had offered to call the police, but Todd had done it himself, his voice cracking through the registers as it had done when he was fourteen.

He finished his recital. It hadn’t taken long. He spoke with a mechanical colorlessness that scared the hell out of Monica. He was seventeen, true enough, but he was still a boy in so many ways. This was going to scar him forever.

“I read him ... oh, I don’t know. *Tom Jones*. *The Mill on the Floss*. That was a boring one. I didn’t think we’d ever get through it. Some stories by Hawthorne—I remember he especially liked ‘The Great Stone Face’ and ‘Young Goodman Brown.’ We started *The Pickwick Papers*, but he didn’t like it. He said Dickens could only be funny when he was being serious, and *Pickwick* was only kittenish. That

was his word, kittenish. We got along the best with *Tom Jones*. We both liked that one.”

“And that was three years ago,” Richler said.

“Yes. I kept stopping in to see him when I got the chance, but in high school we were bussed across town . . . and some of the kids got up a scratch ballteam ... there was more homework ... you know ... things just came up.”

“You had less time.”

“Less time, that’s right. The work in high school was a lot harder ... making the grades to get into college.”

“But Todd is a very apt pupil,” Monica said almost automatically. “He graduated salutatorian. We were so proud.”

“I’ll bet you were,” Richler said with a warm smile. “I’ve got two boys in Fairview, down in the Valley, and they’re just about able to keep their sports eligibility.” He turned back to Todd. “You didn’t read him any more books after you started high school?”

“No. Once in awhile I’d read him the paper. I’d come over and he’d ask me what the headlines were. He was interested in Watergate when that was going on. And he always wanted to know about the stock market, and the print on that page used to drive him batshit—sorry. Mom.”

She patted his hand.

“I don’t know why he was interested in the stocks, but he was.”

“He had a few stocks,” Richler said. “That’s how he was getting by. He also had five different sets of ID salted around that house. He was a cagey one, all right.”

“I suppose he kept the stocks in a safe deposit box somewhere,” Todd remarked.

“Pardon me?” Richler raised his eyebrows.

“His stocks,” Todd said. His father, who had also looked puzzled, now nodded at Richler.

“His stock certificates, the few that were left, were in a footlocker under his bed,” Richler said, “along with that photo of him as Denker. Did he have a safety deposit box, son? Did he ever say he did?”

Todd thought, and then shook his head. “I just thought that was where you kept your stocks. I don’t know. This ... this whole thing

has just ... you know . . . it blows my wheels.” He shook his head in a dazed way that was perfectly real. He really was dazed. Yet, little by little, he felt his instinct of self-preservation surfacing. He felt a growing alertness, and the first stirrings of confidence. If Dussander had really taken a safety deposit box in which to store his insurance document, wouldn't he have transferred his remaining stock certificates there? And that photograph?

“We're working with the Israelis on this,” Richler said. “In a very unofficial way. I'd be grateful if you didn't mention that if you decide to see any press people. They're real professionals. There's a man named Weiskopf who'd like to talk to you tomorrow, Todd. If that's okay by you and your folks.”

“I guess so,” Todd said, but he felt a touch of atavistic dread at the thought of being sniffed over by the same hounds that had chased Dussander for the last half of his life. Dussander had had a healthy respect for them, and Todd knew he would do well to keep that in mind.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bowden? Do you have any objections to Todd seeing Mr. Weiskopf?”

“Not if Todd doesn't,” Dick Bowden said. “I'd like to be present, though. I've read about these Mossad characters—”

“Weiskopf isn't Mossad. He's what the Israelis call a special operative. In fact, he teaches Yiddish literature and English grammar. Also, he's written two novels.” Richler smiled.

Dick raised a hand, dismissing it. “Whatever he is, I'm not going to let him badger Todd. From what I've read, these fellows can be a little too professional. Maybe he's okay. But I want you and this Weiskopf to remember that Todd tried to help that old man. He was flying under false colors, but Todd didn't know that.”

“That's okay, Dad,” Todd said with a wan smile.

“I just want you to help us all that you can,” Richler said. “I appreciate your concern, Mr. Bowden. I think you're going to find that Weiskopf is a pleasant, low-pressure kind of guy. I've finished my own questions, but I'll break a little ground by telling you what the Israelis are most interested in. Todd was with Dussander when he had the heart attack that landed him in the hospital—”

“He asked me to come over and read him a letter,” Todd said.

“We know.” Richler leaned forward, elbows on his knees, tie swinging out to form a plumb-line to the floor. “The Israelis want to know about that letter. Dussander was a big fish, but he wasn’t the last one in the lake—or so Sam Weiskopf says, and I believe him. They think Dussander might have known about a lot of other fish. Most of those still alive are probably in South America, but there may be others in a dozen countries ... including the United States. Did you know they collared a man who had been an *Unterkommandant* at Buchenwald in the lobby of a Tel Aviv hotel?”

“Really!” Monica said, her eyes widening.

“Really.” Richler nodded. “Two years ago. The point is just that the Israelis think the letter Dussander wanted Todd to read might have been from one of those other fish. Maybe they’re right, maybe they’re wrong. Either way, they want to know.”

Todd, who had gone back to Dussander’s house and burned the letter, said: “I’d help you—or this Weiskopf—if I could, Lieutenant Richler, but the letter was in German. It was really tough to read. I felt like a fool. Mr. Denker . . . Dussander ... kept getting more excited and asking me to spell the words he couldn’t understand because of my, you know, pronunciation. But I guess he was following all right. I remember once he laughed and said, ‘Yes, yes, that is what you’d do, isn’t it?’ Then he said something in German. This was about two or three minutes before he had the heart attack. Something about *Dummkopf*. That means stupid in German, I think.”

He was looking at Richler uncertainly, inwardly quite pleased with this lie.

Richler was nodding. “Yes, we understand that the letter was in German. The admitting doctor heard the story from you and corroborated it. But the letter *itself*, Todd ... do you remember what happened to it?”

*Here it is*, Todd thought. *The crunch.*

“I guess it was still on the table when the ambulance came. When we all left. I couldn’t testify to it in court, but—”

“I think there was a letter on the table,” Dick said. “I picked something up and glanced at it. Airmail stationery, I think, but I didn’t

notice it was written in German.”

“Then it should still be there,” Richler said. “That’s what we can’t figure out.”

“It’s not?” Dick said. “I mean, it wasn’t?”

“It wasn’t, and it isn’t.”

“Maybe somebody broke in,” Monica suggested.

“There would have been no need to break in,” Richler said.

“In the confusion of getting him out, the house was never locked. Dussander himself never thought to ask someone to lock up, apparently. His latchkey was still in the pocket of his pants when he died. His house was unlocked from the time the MED-Q attendants wheeled him out until we sealed it this morning at two-thirty A.M.”

“Well, there you are,” Dick said.

“No,” Todd said. “I see what’s bugging Lieutenant Richler.” Oh yes, he saw it very well. You’d have to be blind to miss it. “Why would a burglar steal nothing but a letter? Especially one written in German? It doesn’t listen. Mr. Denker didn’t have much to steal, but a guy who broke in could find something better than that.”

“You got it, all right,” Richler said. “Not bad.”

“Todd used to want to be a detective when he grew up,” Monica said, and ruffled Todd’s hair a bit. Since he had gotten big he seemed to object to that, but right now he didn’t seem to mind. God, she hated to see him looking so pale. “I guess he’s changed his mind to history these days.”

“History is a good field,” Richler said. “You can be an investigative historian. Have you ever read Josephine Tey?”

“No, sir.”

“Doesn’t matter. I just wish my boys had some ambition greater than seeing the Angels win the pennant this year.”

Todd offered a wan smile and said nothing.

Richler turned serious again. “Anyway, I’ll tell you the theory we’re going on. We figure that someone, probably right here in Santo Donato, knew who and what Dussander was.”

“Really?” Dick said.

“Oh yes. Someone who knew the truth. Maybe another fugitive Nazi. I know that sounds like Robert Ludlum stuff, but who would

have thought there was even *one* fugitive Nazi in a quiet little suburb like this? And when Dussander was taken to the hospital, we think that Mr. X scooted over to the house and got that incriminating letter. And that by now it's so many decomposing ashes floating around in the sewer system."

"That doesn't make much sense either," Todd said.

"Why not, Todd?"

"Well, if Mr. Denk ... if *Dussander* had an old buddy from the camps, or just an old Nazi buddy, why did he bother to have me come over and read him that letter? I mean, if you could have heard him correcting me, and stuff ... at least this old Nazi buddy you're talking about would know how to speak German."

"A good point. Except maybe this other fellow is in a wheelchair, or blind. For all we know, it might be Bormann himself and he doesn't even dare go out and show his face."

"Guys that are blind or in wheelchairs aren't that good at scooting out to get letters," Todd said.

Richler looked admiring again. "True. But a blind man could steal a letter even if he couldn't read it, though. Or hire it done."

Todd thought this over, and nodded—but he shrugged at the same time to show how farfetched he thought the idea. Richler had progressed far beyond Robert Ludlum and into the land of Sax Rohmer. But how farfetched the idea was or wasn't didn't matter one fucking little bit, did it? No. What mattered was that Richler was still sniffing around ... and that sheeny, Weiskopf, was also sniffing around. The letter, the goddam letter! Dussander's stupid goddam idea! And suddenly he was thinking of his .30-.30, cased and resting on its shelf in the cool, dark garage. He pulled his mind away from it quickly. The palms of his hands had gone damp.

"Did Dussander have any friends that you knew of?" Richler was asking.

"Friends? No. There used to be a cleaning lady, but she moved away and he didn't bother to get another one. In the summer he hired a kid to mow his lawn, but I don't think he'd gotten one this year. The grass is pretty long, isn't it?"

“Yes. We’ve knocked on a lot of doors, and it doesn’t seem as if he’d hired anyone. Did he get phone calls?”

“Sure,” Todd said off-handedly ... here was a gleam of light, a possible escape-hatch that was relatively safe. Dussander’s phone had actually rung only half a dozen times or so in all the time Todd had known him—salesmen, a polling organization asking about breakfast foods, the rest wrong numbers. He only had the phone in case he got sick ... as he finally had, might his soul rot in hell. “He used to get a call or two every week.”

“Did he speak German on those occasions?” Richler asked quickly. He seemed excited.

“No,” Todd said, suddenly cautious. He didn’t like Richler’s excitement—there was something wrong about it, something dangerous. He felt sure of it, and suddenly Todd had to work furiously to keep himself from breaking out in a sweat. “He didn’t talk much at all. I remember that a couple of times he said things like. ‘The boy who reads to me is here right now. I’ll call you back.’ ”

“I’ll bet that’s it!” Richler said, whacking his palms on his thighs. “I’d bet two weeks’ pay that was the guy!” He closed his notebook with a snap (so far as Todd could see he had done nothing but doodle in it) and stood up. “I want to thank all three of you for your time. You in particular, Todd. I know all of this has been a hell of a shock to you, but it will be over soon. We’re going to turn the house upside down this afternoon—cellar to attic and then back down to the cellar again. We’re bringing in all the special teams. We may find some trace of Dussander’s phonemate yet ”

“I hope so,” Todd said.

Richler shook hands all around and left. Dick asked Todd if he felt like going out back and hitting the badminton birdie around until lunch. Todd said he didn’t feel much like badminton or lunch, and went upstairs with his head down and his shoulders slumped. His parents exchanged sympathetic, troubled glances. Todd lay down on his bed, stared at the ceiling, and thought about his .30-.30. He could see it very clearly in his mind’s eye. He thought about shoving the blued steel barrel right up Betty Trask’s slimy Jewish cooze—just what she needed, a prick that never went soft. How do you *like it*,

*Betty?* he heard himself asking her. *You just tell me if you get enough, okay?* He imagined her screams. And at last a terrible flat smile came to his face. Sure, *just tell me, you bitch ... okay? Okay? Okay? ...*

“So what do you think?” Weiskopf asked Richler when Richler picked him up at a luncheonette three blocks from the Bowden home.

“Oh, I think the kid was in on it somehow,” Richler said. “Somehpw, some way, to some degree. But is he cool? If you poured hot water into his mouth I think he’d spit out ice-cubes. I tripped him up a couple of times, but I’ve got nothing I could use in court. And if I’d gone much further, some smart lawyer might be able to get him off on entrapment a year or two down the road even if something *does* pull together. I mean, the courts are still going to look at him as a juvenile—the kid’s only seventeen. In some ways, I’d guess he hasn’t *really* been a juvenile since he was maybe eight. He’s creepy, man.” Richler stuck a cigarette in his mouth and laughed—the laugh had a shaky sound. “I mean, really fuckin creepy.”

“What slips did he make?”

“The phone calls. That’s the main thing. When I slipped him the idea, I could see his eyes light up like a pinball machine.” Richler turned left and wheeled the nondescript Chevy Nova down the freeway entrance ramp. Two hundred yards to their right was the slope and the dead tree where Todd had dry-fired his rifle at the freeway traffic one Saturday morning not long ago.

“He’s saying to himself, ‘This cop is off the wall if he thinks Dussander had a Nazi friend here in town, but if he does think that, it takes me off ground-zero.’ So he says yeah, Dussander got one or two calls a week. Very mysterious. ‘I can’t talk now, Z-five, call later’—that type of thing. But Dussander’s been getting a special ‘quiet phone’ rate for the last seven years. Almost no activity at all, and no long distance. He wasn’t getting a call or two a week.”

“What else?”

“He immediately jumped to the conclusion that the letter was gone and nothing else. He knew that was the only thing missing because he was the one who went back and took it ”

Richler jammed his cigarette out in the ashtray.

“We *think* the letter was just a prop. We *think* that Dussander had the heart attack while he was trying to bury that body ... the freshest body. There was dirt on his shoes and his cuffs, and so that’s a pretty fair assumption. That means he called the kid *after* he had the heart attack, not before. He crawls upstairs and phones the kid. The kid flips out—as much as he ever flips out, anyway—and cooks up the letter story on the spur of the moment. It’s not great, but not that bad, either . . . considering the circumstances. He goes over there and cleans up Dussander’s mess for him. Now the kid is in fucking overdrive. MED-Q’s coming, his father is coming, and he needs that letter for stage-dressing. He goes upstairs and breaks open that box —”

“You’ve got confirmation on that?” Weiskopf asked, lighting a cigarette of his own. It was an unfiltered Player, and to Richler it smelled like horseshit. No wonder the British Empire fell, he thought, if they started smoking cigarettes like that.

“Yes, we’ve got confirmation right up the ying-yang,” Richler said. “There are fingerprints on the box which match those in his school records. But his fingerprints are on almost *everything* in the goddam house!”

“Still, if you confront him with all of that, you can rattle him,” Weiskopf said.

“Oh, listen, hey, you don’t know this kid. When I said he was cool, I meant it. He’d say Dussander asked him to fetch the box once or twice so he could put something in it or take something out of it.”

“His fingerprints are on the shovel.”

“He’d say he used it to plant a rose-bush in the back yard.” Richler took out his cigarettes but the pack was empty. Weiskopf offered him a Player. Richler took one puff and began coughing. “They taste as bad as they smell,” he choked.

“Like those hamburgers we had for lunch yesterday,” Weiskopf said, smiling. “Those Mac-Burgers.”

“Big Macs,” Richler said, and laughed. “Okay. So cross-cultural pollination doesn’t always work.” His smile faded. “He looks so clean-cut, you know?”

“Yes.”

“This is no j.d. from Vasco with hair down to his asshole and chains on his motorcycle boots.”

“No.” Weiskopf stared at the traffic all around them and was very glad he wasn’t driving. “He’s just a boy. A white boy from a good home. And I find it difficult to believe that—”

“I thought you had them ready to handle rifles and grenades by the time they were eighteen. In Israel.”

“Yes. But he was *fourteen* when all of this started. Why would a fourteen-year-old boy mix himself up with such a man as Dussander? I have tried and tried to understand that and still I can’t.”

“I’d settle for how,” Richter said, and flicked the cigarette out the window. It was giving him a headache.

“Perhaps, if it did happen, it was just luck. A coincidence. Serendipity. I think there is black serendipity as well as white.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Richler said gloomily. “All I know is the kid is creepier than a bug under a rock.”

“What I’m saying is simple. Any other boy would have been more than happy to tell his parents, or the police. To say, ‘I have recognized a wanted man. He is living at this address. Yes, I am sure.’ And then let the authorities take over. Or do you feel I am wrong?”

“No, I wouldn’t say so. The kid would be in the limelight for a few days. Most kids would dig that. Picture in the paper, an interview on the evening news, probably a school assembly award for good citizenship.” Richler laughed. “Hell, the kid would probably get a shot on *Real People*.”

“What’s that?”

“Never mind,” Richler said. He had to raise his voice slightly because ten-wheelers were passing the Nova on either side. Weiskopf looked nervously from one to the other. “You don’t want to know. But you’re right about most kids. Most kids.”

“But not *this* kid,” Weiskopf said. “This boy, probably by dumb luck alone, penetrates Dussander’s cover. Yet instead of going to his parents or the authorities ... he goes to Dussander. Why? You say you don’t care, but I think you do. I think it haunts you just as it does me.”

“Not blackmail,” Richler said. “That’s for sure. That kid’s got everything a kid could want. There was a dune-buggy in the garage, not to mention an elephant gun on the wall. And even if he wanted to squeeze Dussander just for the thrill of it, Dussander was practically un squeezable. Except for those few stocks, he didn’t have a pot to piss in.”

“How sure are you that the boy doesn’t know you’ve found the bodies?”

“I’m sure. Maybe I’ll go back this afternoon and hit him with that. Right now it looks like our best shot.” Richler struck the steering wheel lightly. “If all of this had come out even one day sooner, I think I would have tried for a search warrant.”

“The clothes the boy was wearing that night?”

“Yeah. If we could have found soil samples on his clothes that matched the dirt in Dussander’s cellar, I almost think we could break him. But the clothes he was wearing that night have probably been washed six times since then.”

“What about the other dead winos? The ones your police department has been finding around the city?”

“Those belong to Dan Bozeman. I don’t think there’s any connection anyhow. Dussander just wasn’t that strong ... and more to the point, he had such a neat little racket already worked out. Promise them a drink and a meal, take them home on the city bus—the fucking city bus!—and waste them right in his kitchen.”

Weiskopf said quietly: “It wasn’t *Dussander* I was thinking of.”

“What do you mean by th—” Richler began, and then his mouth snapped suddenly closed. There was a long, unbelieving moment of silence, broken only by the drone of the traffic all around them. Then Richler said softly: “Hey. Hey, come on now. Give me a fucking br—”

“As an agent of my government, I am only interested in Bowden because of what, if anything, he may know about Dussander’s

remaining contacts with the Nazi underground. But as a human being, I am becoming more and more interested in the boy himself. I'd like to know what makes him tick. I want to know *why*. And as I try to answer that question to my own satisfaction, I find that more and more I am asking myself *What else.*"

"But—"

"Do you suppose, I ask myself, that the very atrocities in which Dussander took part formed the basis of some attraction between them? That's an unholy idea, I tell myself. The things that happened in those camps still have power enough to make the stomach flutter with nausea. I feel that way myself, although the only close relative I ever had in the camps was my grandfather, and he died when I was three. But maybe there is something about what the Germans did that exercises a deadly fascination over us—something that opens the catacombs of the imagination. Maybe part of our dread and horror comes from a secret knowledge that under the right—or wrong—set of circumstances, we ourselves would be willing to build such places and staff them. Black serendipity. Maybe we know that under the right set of circumstances the things that live in the catacombs would be glad to crawl out. And what do you think they would look like? Like mad Fuehrers with forelocks and shoe-polish moustaches, *heil-ing* all over the place? Like red devils, or demons, or the dragon that floats on its stinking reptile wings?"

"I don't know," Richler said.

"I think most of them would look like ordinary accountants," Weiskopf said: "Little mind-men with graphs and flow-charts and electronic calculators, all ready to start maximizing the kill ratios so that *next* time they could perhaps kill twenty or thirty millions instead of only six. And some of them might look like Todd Bowden."

"You're damn near as creepy as he is," Richler said.

Weiskopf nodded. "It's a creepy subject. Finding those dead men and animals in Dussander's cellar . . . *that* was creepy, *nu*? Have you ever thought that maybe this boy began with a simple interest in the camps? An interest not much different from the interests of boys who collect coins or stamps or who like to read about Wild West

desperados? And that he went to Dussander to get his information straight from the horse's head?"

"Mouth," Richler said automatically. "Man, at this point I could believe anything."

"Maybe," Weiskopf muttered. It was almost lost in the roar of another ten-wheeler passing them. BUDWEISER was printed on the side in letters six feet tall. *What an amazing country*, Weiskopf thought, and lit a fresh cigarette. *They don't understand how we can live surrounded by half-mad Arabs, but if I lived here for two years I would have a nervous breakdown.* "Maybe. And maybe it isn't possible to stand close to murder piled on murder and not be touched by it."

## 29

The short guy who entered the squadroom brought stench after him like a wake. He smelled like rotten bananas and Wildroot Cream Oil and cockroach shit and the inside of a city garbage truck at the end of a busy morning. He was dressed in a pair of ageing herringbone pants, a ripped gray institutional shirt, and a faded blue warmup jacket from which most of the zipper hung loose like a string of pygmy teeth. The uppers of his shoes were bound to the lowers with Krazy Glue. A pestiferous hat sat on his head.

"Oh Christ, get out of here!" the duty sergeant cried. "You're not under arrest, Hap! I swear to God! I swear it on my mother's name! Get out of here! I want to breathe again."

"I want to talk to Lieutenant Bozeman."

"He died, Hap. It happened yesterday. We'll all really fucked up over it. So get out and let us mourn in peace."

"I want to talk to Lieutenant Bozeman!" Hap said more loudly. His breath drifted fragrantly from his mouth: a juicy, fermenting mixture of pizza, Hall's Mentho-lyptus lozenges, and sweet red wine.

“He had to go to Siam on a case, Hap. So why don’t you just get out of here? Go someplace and eat a lightbulb.”

*“I want to talk to Lieutenant Bozeman and I ain’t leaving until I do!”*

The duty sergeant fled the room. He returned about five minutes later with Bozeman, a thin, slightly stooped man of fifty.

“Take him into your office, okay, Dan?” the duty sergeant begged. “Won’t that be all right?”

“Come on, Hap,” Bozeman said, and a minute later they were in the three-sided stall that was Bozeman’s office. Bozeman prudently opened his only window and turned on his fan before sitting down. “Do something for you, Hap?”

“You still on those murders, Lieutenant Bozeman?”

“The derelicts? Yeah, I guess that’s still mine.”

“Well, I know who greased ’em.”

“Is that so, Hap?” Bozeman asked. He was busy lighting his pipe. He rarely smoked the pipe, but neither the fan nor the open window was quite enough to overwhelm Hap’s smell. Soon, Bozeman thought, the paint would begin to blister and peel. He sighed.

“You remember I told you Poley was talkin to a guy just a day before they found him all cut up in that pipe? You member me tellin you that, Lieutenant Bozeman?”

“I remember.” Several of the winos who hung around the Salvation Army and the soup kitchen a few blocks away had told a similar story about two of the murdered derelicts, Charles “Sonny” Brackett and Peter “Poley” Smith. They had seen a guy hanging around, a young guy, talking to Sonny and Poley. Nobody knew for sure if Poley had gone off with the guy, but Hap and two others claimed to have seen Poley Smith walk off with him. They had the idea that the “guy” was underage and willing to spring for a bottle of musky in exchange for some juice. Several other winos claimed to have seen a “guy” like that around. The description of this “guy” was superb, bound to stand up in court, coming as it did from such unimpeachable sources. Young, blond, and white. What else did you need to make a bust?

“Well, last night I was in the park,” Hap said, “and I just happened to have this old bunch of newspapers—”

“There’s a law against vagrancy in this city, Hap.”

“I was just collectin em up,” Hap said righteously. “It’s so awful the way people litter. I was doon a public surface, Lieutenant. A friggin public surface. Some of those papers was a week old.”

“Yes, Hap,” Bozeman said. He remembered—vaguely—being quite hungry and looking forward keenly to his lunch. That time seemed long ago now.

“Well, when I woke up, one of those papers had blew onto my face and I was lookin right at the guy. Gave me a hell of a jump, I can tell you. Look. This is the guy. This guy right here.”

Hap pulled a crumpled, yellowed, water-spotted sheet of newspaper from his warmup jacket and unfolded it. Bozeman leaned forward, now moderately interested. Hap put the paper on his desk so he could read the headline: 4 BOYS NAMED TO SOUTHERN CAL ALL-STARS. Below the head were four photos.

“Which one, Hap?”

Hap put a grimy finger on the picture to the far right. “Him. It says his name is Todd Bowden.”

Bozeman looked from the picture to Hap, wondering how many of Hap’s brain-cells were still unfried and in some kind of working order after twenty years of being sauteed in a bubbling sauce of cheap wine seasoned with an occasional shot of sterno.

“How can you be sure, Hap? He’s wearing a baseball cap in the picture. I can’t tell if he’s got blonde hair or not.”

“The grin,” Hap said. “It’s the way he’s grinnin. He was grinnin at Poley in just that same ain’t-life-grand way when they walked off together. I couldn’t mistake that grin in a million years. That’s him, that’s the guy.”

Bozeman barely heard the last; he was thinking, and thinking hard. *Todd Bowden*. There was something very familiar about that name. Something that bothered him even worse than the thought that a local high school hero might be going around and offing winos. He thought he had heard that name just this morning in conversation. He frowned, trying to remember where.

Hap was gone and Dan Bozeman was still trying to figure it out when Richler and Weiskopf came in ... and it was the sound of their

voices as they got coffee in the squadroom that finally brought it home to him.

“Holy God,” said Lieutenant Bozeman, and got up in a hurry.

Both of his parents had offered to cancel their afternoon plans—Monica at the market and Dick golfing with some business people—and stay home with him, but Todd told them he would rather be alone. He thought he would clean his rifle and just sort of think the whole thing over. Try to get it straight in his mind.

“Todd,” Dick said, and suddenly found he had nothing much to say. He supposed if he had been his own father, he would have at this point advised prayer. But the generations had turned, and the Bowdens weren’t much into that these days. “Sometimes these things happen,” he finished lamely, because Todd was still looking at him. “Try not to brood about it.”

“It’ll be all right,” Todd said.

After they were gone, he took some rags and a bottle of Alpaca gun oil out onto the bench beside the roses. He went back into the garage and got the .30-.30. He took it to the bench and broke it down, the dusty-sweet smell of the flowers lingering pleasantly in his nose. He cleaned the gun thoroughly, humming a tune as he did it, sometimes whistling a snatch between his teeth. Then he put the gun together again. He could have done it just as easily in the dark. His mind wandered free. When it came back some five minutes later, he observed that he had loaded the gun. The idea of target-shooting didn’t much appeal, not today, but he had still loaded it. He told himself he didn’t know why.

*Sure you do, Todd-baby. The time, so to speak, has come.*

And that was when the shiny yellow Saab turned into the driveway. The man who got out was vaguely familiar to Todd, but it wasn’t until he slammed the car door and started to walk toward him that Todd saw the sneakers—tow-topped Keds, light blue. Talk about Blasts from the Past; here, walking up the Bowden driveway, was Rubber Ed French, The Ked Man.

“Hi, Todd. Long time no see.”

Todd leaned the rifle against the side of the bench and offered his wide and winsome grin. “Hi, Mr. French. What are you doing out here on the wild side of town?”

“Are your folks home?”

“Gee, no. Did you want them for something?”

“No,” Ed French said after a long, thoughtful pause. “No, I guess not. I guess maybe it would be better if just you and

I talked. For starters, anyway. You may be able to offer a perfectly reasonable explanation for all this. Although God knows I doubt it.”

He reached into his hip pocket and brought out a newsclipping. Todd knew what it was even before Rubber Ed passed it to him, and for the second time that day he was looking at the side-by-side pictures of Dussander. The one the street photographer had taken had been circled in black ink. The meaning was clear enough to Todd; French had recognized Todd’s “grandfather.” And now he wanted to tell everyone in the world all about it. He wanted to midwife the good news. Good old Rubber Ed, with his jive talk and his motherfucking sneakers.

The police would be very interested—but, of course, they already were. He knew that now. The sinking feeling had begun about thirty minutes after Richler left. It was as if he had been riding high in a balloon filled with happy-gas. Then a cold steel arrow had ripped through the balloon’s fabric, and now it was sinking steadily.

The phone calls, that was the biggie. Richler had trotted that out just as slick as warm owlshit. *Sure*, he had said, practically breaking his neck to rush into the trap. *He gets one or two calls a week*. Let them go ranting all over southern California looking for geriatric ex-Nazis. Fine. Except maybe they had gotten a different story from Ma Bell. Todd didn’t know if the phone company could tell how much your phone got used . . . but there had been a look in Richler’s eyes .

. . .

Then there was the letter. He had inadvertently told Richler that the house hadn’t been burgled, and Richler had no doubt gone away thinking that the only way Todd could have known that was if he had been back . . . as he had been, not just once but three times, first to get the letter and twice more looking for anything incriminating.

There had been nothing; even the SS uniform was gone, disposed of by Dussander sometime during the last four years.

And then there were the bodies. Richler had never mentioned the bodies.

At first Todd had thought that was good. Let them hunt a little longer while he got his own head—not to mention his story—straight. No fear about the dirt that had gotten on his clothes burying the body; they had all been cleaned later that same night. He ran them through the washer-dryer himself, perfectly aware that Dussander might die and then everything might come out. You can't be too careful, boy, as Dussander himself would have said.

Then, little by little, he had realized it was not good. The weather had been warm, and the warm weather always made the cellar smell worse; on his last trip to Dussander's house it had been a rank presence. Surely the police would have been interested in that smell, and would have tracked it to its source. So why had Richler withheld the information? Was he saving it for later? Saving it for a nasty little surprise? And if Richler was into planning nasty little surprises, it could only mean that he suspected.

Todd looked up from the clipping and saw that Rubber Ed had half-turned away from him. He was looking into the street, although not much was happening out there. Richler could suspect, but suspicion was the best he could do.

Unless there was some sort of concrete evidence binding Todd to the old man.

Exactly the sort of evidence Rubber Ed French could give. Ridiculous man in a pair of ridiculous sneakers. Such a ridiculous man hardly deserved to live. Todd touched the barrel of the .30-.30.

Yes, Rubber Ed was a link they didn't have. They could *never* prove that Todd had been an accessory to one of Dussander's murders. But with Rubber Ed's testimony they could prove conspiracy. And would even *that* end it? Oh, no. They would get his high school graduation picture next and start showing it to the stewbums down in the Mission district. A long shot, but one Richler could ill afford not to play. If we can't pin one bunch of winos on him, maybe we can get him for the other bunch.

What next? Court next.

His father would get him a wonderful bunch of lawyers, of course. And the lawyers would get him off, of course. Too much circumstantial evidence. He would make too favorable an impression on the jury. But by then his life would be ruined anyway, just as Dussander had said it would be. It would be all dragged through the newspapers, dug up and brought into the light like the half-decayed bodies in Dussander's cellar.

"The man in that picture is the man who came to my office when you were in the ninth grade," Ed told him abruptly, turning to Todd again. "He purported to be your grandfather. Now it turns out he was a wanted war criminal."

"Yes," Todd said. His face had gone oddly blank. It was the face of a department-store dummy. All the healthiness, life, and vivacity had drained from it. What was left was frightening in its vacuous emptiness.

"How did it happen?" Ed asked, and perhaps he intended his question as a thundering accusation, but it came out sounding plaintive and lost and somehow cheated. "How did this happen, Todd?"

"Oh, one thing just followed another," Todd said, and picked up the .30-.30. "That's really how it happened. One thing just . . . followed another." He pushed the safety catch to the off position with his thumb and pointed the rifle at Rubber Ed. "As stupid as it sounds, that's just what happened. That's all there was to it."

"Todd," Ed said, his eyes widening. He took a step backwards. "Todd, you don't want to ... please, Todd. We can talk this over. We can disc—"

"You and the fucking kraut can discuss it down in hell," Todd said, and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot rolled away in the hot and windless quiet of the afternoon. Ed French was flung back against his Saab. His hand groped behind him and tore off a windshield wiper. He stared at it foolishly as blood spread on his blue turtleneck, and then he dropped it and looked at Todd.

"Norma," he whispered.

“Okay,” Todd said. “Whatever you say, champ.” He shot Rubber Ed again and roughly half of his head disappeared in a spray of blood and bone.

Ed turned drunkenly and began to grope toward the driver’s-side door, speaking his daughter’s name over and over again in a choked and failing voice. Todd shot him again, aiming for the base of the spine, and Ed fell down. His feet drummed briefly on the gravel and then were still.

*Sure did die hard for a guidance counsellor*, Todd thought, and brief laughter escaped him. At the same moment a burst of pain as sharp as an icepick drove into his brain and he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he felt better than he had in months—maybe better than he had felt in years. Everything was fine. Everything was together. The blankness left his face and a kind of wild beauty filled it.

He went back into the garage and got all the shells he had, better than four hundred rounds. He put them in his old knapsack and shouldered it. When he came back out into the sunshine he was smiling excitedly, his eyes dancing—it was the way boys smile on their birthdays, on Christmas, on the Fourth of July. It was a smile that betokened skyrockets, treehouses, secret signs and secret meeting-places, the aftermath of the triumphal big game when the players are carried out of the stadium and into town on the shoulders of the exultant fans. The ecstatic smile of tow-headed boys going off to war in coal-scuttle helmets.

*“I’m king of the world!”* he shouted mightily at the high blue sky, and raised the rifle two-handed over his head for a moment. Then, switching it to his right hand, he started toward that place above the freeway where the land fell away and where the dead tree would give him shelter.

It was five hours later and almost dark before they took him down.

# FALL FROM INNOCENCE

*For George McLeod*

# The Body

## 1

*The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of, because words diminish them—words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they're brought out. But it's more than that, isn't it? The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure your enemies would love to steal away. And you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you've said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried while you were saying it. That's the worst, I think. When the secret stays locked within not for want of a teller but for want of an understanding ear.*

*I was twelve going on thirteen when I first saw a dead human being. It happened in 1960, a long time ago . . . although sometimes it doesn't seem that long to me. Especially on the nights I wake up from dreams where the hail falls into his open eyes.*

## 2

We had a treehouse in a big elm which overhung a vacant lot in Castle Rock. There's a moving company on that lot today, and the elm is gone. Progress. It was a sort of social club, although it had no name. There were five, maybe six steady guys and some other wet ends who just hung around. We'd let them come up when there was a card game and we needed some fresh blood. The game was usually blackjack and we played for pennies, nickel limit. But you got

double money on blackjack and five-card-under ... *triple* money on six-card-under, although Teddy was the only guy crazy enough to go for that.

The sides of the treehouse were planks scavenged from the shitpile behind Mackey Lumber & Building Supply on Carbine Road—they were splintery and full of knotholes we plugged with either toilet paper or paper towels. The roof was a corrugated tin sheet we hawked from the dump, looking over our shoulders all the time we were hustling it out of there, because the dump custodian's dog was supposed to be a real kid-eating monster. We found a screen door out there on the same day. It was flyproof but really rusty—I mean, that rust was *extreme*. No matter what time of day you looked out that screen door, it looked like sunset.

Besides playing cards, the club was a good place to go and smoke cigarettes and look at girly books. There were half a dozen battered tin ashtrays that said CAMELS on the bottom, a lot of centerfolds tacked to the splintery walls, twenty or thirty dog-eared packs of Bike cards (Teddy got them from his uncle, who ran the Castle Rock Stationery Shoppe—when Teddy's unc asked him one day what kind of cards we played, Teddy said we had cribbage tournaments and Teddy's unc thought that was just fine), a set of plastic poker chips, and a pile of ancient *Master Detective* murder magazines to leaf through if there was nothing else shaking. We also built a 12" x 10" secret compartment under the floor to hide most of this stuff in on the rare occasions when some kid's father decided it was time to do the we're-really-good-pals routine. When it rained, being in the club was like being inside a Jamaican steel drum ... but that summer there had been no rain.

It had been the driest and hottest since 1907—or so the newspapers said, and on that Friday preceding the Labor Day weekend and the start of another school year, even the goldenrod in the fields and the ditches beside the backroads looked parched and poorly. Nobody's garden had done doodly-squat that year, and the big displays of canning stuff in the Castle Rock Red & White were still there, gathering dust. No one had anything to put up that summer, except maybe dandelion wine.

Teddy and Chris and I were up in the club on that Friday morning, glooming to each other about school being so near and playing cards and swapping the same old traveling salesman jokes and frenchman jokes. How do you know when a frenchman's been in your back yard? Well, your garbage cans are empty and your dog is pregnant. Teddy would try to look offended, but he was the first one to bring in a joke as soon as he heard it, only switching frenchman to polack.

The elm gave good shade, but we already had our shirts off so we wouldn't sweat them up too bad. We were playing three-penny-scat, the dullest card-game ever invented, but it was too hot to think about anything more complicated. We'd had a pretty fair scratch ballteam until the middle of August and then a lot of kids just drifted away. Too hot.

I was down to my ride and building spades. I'd started with thirteen, gotten an eight to make twenty-one, and nothing had happened since then. Chris knocked. I took my last draw and got nothing helpful.

"Twenty-nine," Chris said, laying down diamonds.

"Twenty-two," Teddy said, looking disgusted.

"Piss up a rope," I said, and tossed my cards onto the table face down.

"Gordie's out, ole Gordie just bit the bag and stepped out the door," Teddy bugled, and then gave out with his patented Teddy Duchamp laugh—*Eeee-eee-eee*, like a rusty nail being slowly hauled out of a rotten board. Well, he was weird; we all knew it. He was close to being thirteen like the rest of us, but the thick glasses and the hearing aid he wore sometimes made him look like an old man. Kids were always trying to cadge smokes off him on the street, but the bugle in his shirt was just his hearing-aid battery.

In spite of the glasses and the flesh-colored button always screwed into his ear, Teddy couldn't see very well and often misunderstood the things people said to him. In baseball you had to have him play the fences, way beyond Chris in left field and Billy Greer in right. You just hoped no one would hit one that far because Teddy would go grimly after it, see it or not. Every now and then he

got bonked a good one, and once he went out cold when he ran full-tilt-boogie into the fence by the treehouse. He lay there on his back with his eyes showing whites for almost five minutes, and I got scared. Then he woke up and walked around with a bloody nose and a huge purple lump rising on his forehead, trying to claim that the ball was foul.

His eyesight was just naturally bad, but there was nothing natural about what had happened to his ears. Back in those days, when it was cool to get your hair cut so that your ears stuck out like a couple of jug-handles, Teddy had Castle Rock's first Beatle haircut—four years before anyone in America had ever heard of the Beatles. He kept his ears covered because they looked like two lumps of warm wax.

One day when he was eight, Teddy's father got pissed at him for breaking a plate. His mother was working at the shoe factory in South Paris when it happened and by the time she found out about it, it was all over.

Teddy's dad took Teddy over to the big woodstove at the back of the kitchen and shoved the side of Teddy's head down against one of the cast-iron burner plates. He held it down there for about ten seconds. Then he yanked Teddy up by the hair of the head and did the other side. Then he called the Central Main General Emergency unit and told them to come get his boy. Then he hung up the phone, went into the closet, got his .410, and sat down to watch the daytime stories on TV with the shotgun laid across his knees. When Mrs. Burroughs from next door came over to ask if Teddy was all right—she'd heard the screaming—Teddy's dad pointed the shotgun at her. Mrs. Burroughs went out of the Duchamp house at roughly the speed of light, locked herself into her own house, and called the police. When the ambulance came, Mr. Duchamp let the orderlies in and then went out on the back porch to stand guard while they wheeled Teddy to the old portholed Buick ambulance on a stretcher.

Teddy's dad explained to the orderlies that while the fucking brass hats said the area was clear, there were still kraut snipers everywhere. One of the orderlies asked Teddy's dad if he thought he could hold on. Teddy's dad smiled tightly and told the orderly he'd

hold until hell was a Frigidaire dealership, if that's what it took. The orderly saluted, and Teddy's dad snapped it right back at him. A few minutes after the ambulance left, the state police arrived and relieved Norman Duchamp of duty.

He'd been doing odd things like shooting cats and lighting fires in mailboxes for over a year, and after the atrocity he had visited upon his son, they had a quick hearing and sent him to Togus, which is a VA hospital. Togus is where you have to go if you're a section eight. Teddy's dad had stormed the beach at Normandy, and that's just the way Teddy always put it. Teddy was proud of his old man in spite of what his old man had done to him, and Teddy went with his mom to visit him every week.

He was the dumbest guy we hung around with, I guess, and he was crazy. He'd take the craziest chances you can imagine, and get away with them. His big thing was what he called "truck-dodging." He'd run out in front of them on 196 and sometimes they'd miss him by bare inches. God knew how many heart attacks he'd caused, and he'd be laughing while the windblast from the passing truck rippled his clothes. It scared us because his vision was so lousy, Coke-bottle glasses or not. It seemed like only a matter of time before he misjudged one of those trucks. And you had to be careful what you dared him, because Teddy would do anything on a dare.

"Gordie's out, eeeeeee-eee-eee!"

"Screw," I said, and picked up a *Master Detective* to read while they played it out. I turned to "He Stomped the Pretty Co-Ed to Death in a Stalled Elevator" and got right into it.

Teddy picked up his cards, gave them one brief look, and said: "I knock."

"You four-eyed pile of shit!" Chris cried.

"The pile of shit has a thousand eyes," Teddy said gravely, and both Chris and I cracked up. Teddy stared at us with a slight frown, as if wondering what had gotten us laughing. That was another thing about the cat—he was always coming out with weird stuff like "The pile of shit has a thousand eyes," and you could never be sure if he *meant* it to be funny or if it just happened that way. He'd look at the

people who were laughing with that slight frown on his face, as if to say: *O Lord what is it this time?*

Teddy had a natural thirty—jack, queen, and king of clubs. Chris had only sixteen and went down to his ride.

Teddy was shuffling the cards in his clumsy way and I was just getting to the gooshy part of the murder story, where this deranged sailor from New Orleans was doing the Bristol Stomp all over this college girl from Bryn Mawr because he couldn't stand being in closed-in places, when we heard someone coming fast up the ladder nailed to the side of the elm. A fist rapped on the underside of the trapdoor.

"Who goes?" Chris yelled.

"Vern!" He sounded excited and out of breath.

I went to the trapdoor and pulled the bolt. The trapdoor banged up and Vern Tessio, one of the other regulars, pulled himself into the clubhouse. He was sweating buckets and his hair, which he usually kept combed in a perfect imitation of his rock and roll idol, Bobby Rydell, was plastered to his bullet head in chunks and strings.

"Wow, man," he panted. "Wait'll you hear this."

"Hear what?" I asked.

"Lemme get my breath. I ran all the way from my house."

*"I ran all the way home,"* Teddy wavered in a dreadful Little Anthony falsetto, *"just to say I'm soh-ree—"*

"Fuck your hand, man," Vern said.

"Drop dead in a shed, Fred," Teddy returned smartly.

"You ran all the way from your place?" Chris asked unbelievably. "Man, you're crazy." Vern's house was two miles down Grand Street. "It must be ninety out there."

"This is worth it," Vern said. "Holy Jeezum. You won't believe this. Sincerely." He slapped his sweaty forehead to show us how sincere he was.

"Okay, what?" Chris asked.

"Can you guys camp out tonight?" Vern was looking at us earnestly, excitedly. His eyes looked like raisins pushed into dark circles of sweat. "I mean, if you tell your folks we're gonna tent out in my back field?"

“Yeah, I guess so,” Chris said, picking up his new hand and looking at it. “But my dad’s on a mean streak. Drinkin, y’know.”

“You got to, man,” Vern said. “Sincerely. You won’t *believe* this. Can you, Gordie?”

“Probably.”

I was able to do most stuff like that—in fact, I’d been like the Invisible Boy that whole summer. In April my older brother, Dennis, had been killed in a Jeep accident. That was at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he was in Basic. He and another guy were on their way to the PX and an Army truck hit them broadside. Dennis was killed instantly and his passenger had been in a coma ever since. Dennis would have been twenty-two later that week. I’d already picked out a birthday card for him at Dahlie’s over in Castle Green.

I cried when I heard, and I cried more at the funeral, and I couldn’t believe that Dennis was gone, that anyone that used to knuckle my head or scare me with a rubber spider until I cried or give me a kiss when I fell down and scraped both knees bloody and whisper in my ear, “Now stop cryin, ya baby!”—that a person who had *touched* me could be dead. It hurt me and it scared me that he could be dead . . . but it seemed to have taken all the heart out of my parents. For me, Dennis was hardly more than an acquaintance. He was ten years older than me if you can dig it, and he had his own friends and classmates. We ate at the same table for a lot of years, and sometimes he was my friend and sometimes my tormentor, but mostly he was, you know, just a guy. When he died he’d been gone for a year except for a couple of furloughs. We didn’t even look alike. It took me a long time after that summer to realize that most of the tears I cried were for my mom and dad. Fat lot of good it did them, or me.

“So what are you pissing and moaning about, Vern-O?” Teddy asked.

“I knock,” Chris said.

“*What?*” Teddy screamed, immediately forgetting all about Vern. “You friggin liar! You ain’t got no pat hand. I didn’t deal you no pat hand.”

Chris smirked. “Make your draw, shitheap.”

Teddy reached for the top card on the pile of Bikes. Chris reached for the Winstons on the ledge behind him. I bent over to pick up my detective magazine.

Vern Tessio said: "You guys want to go see a dead body?"

Everybody stopped.

### 3

We'd all heard about it on the radio, of course. The radio, a Philco with a cracked case which had also been scavenged from the dump, played all the time. We kept it tuned to WALM in Lewiston, which churned out the super-hits and the boss oldies: "What in the World's Come Over You" by Jack Scott and "This Time" by Troy Shondell and "King Creole" by Elvis and "Only the Lonely" by Roy Orbison. When the news came on we usually switched some mental dial over to Mute. The news was a lot of happy horseshit about Kennedy and Nixon and Quemoy and Matsu and the missile gap and what a shit that Castro was turning out to be after all. But we had all listened to the Ray Brower story a little more closely, because he was a kid our age.

He was from Chamberlain, a town forty miles or so east of Castle Rock. Three days before Vern came busting into the clubhouse after a two-mile run up Grand Street, Ray Brower had gone out with one of his mother's pots to pick blueberries. When dark came and he still wasn't back, the Browsers called the county sheriff and a search started—first just around the kid's house and then spreading to the surrounding towns of Motton and Durham and Pownal. Everybody got into the act—cops, deputies, game wardens, volunteers. But three days later the kid was still missing. You could tell, hearing about it on the radio, that they were never going to find that poor sucker alive; eventually the search would just peter away into nothing. He might have gotten smothered in a gravel pit slide or drowned in a brook, and ten years from now some hunter would find

his bones. They were already dragging the ponds in Chamberlain, and the Motton Reservoir.

Nothing like that could happen in southwestern Maine today; most of the area has become suburbanized, and the bedroom communities surrounding Portland and Lewiston have spread out like the tentacles of a giant squid. The woods are still there, and they get heavier as you work your way west toward the White Mountains, but these days if you can keep your head long enough to walk five miles in one consistent direction, you're certain to cross two-lane blacktop. But in 1960 the whole area between Chamberlain and Castle Rock was undeveloped, and there were places that hadn't even been logged since before World War II. In those days it was still possible to walk into the woods and lose your direction there and die there.

## 4

Vern Tessio had been under his porch that morning, digging.

We all understood that right away, but maybe I should take just a minute to explain it to you. Teddy Duchamp was only about half-bright, but Vern Tessio would never be spending any of his spare time on *College Bowl* either. Still his brother Billy was even dumber, as you will see. But first I have to tell you why Vern was digging under the porch.

Four years ago, when he was eight, Vern buried a quart jar of pennies under the long Tessio front porch. Vern called the dark space under the porch his "cave." He was playing a pirate sort of game, and the pennies were buried treasure—only if you were playing pirate with Vern, you couldn't call it buried treasure, you had to call it "booty." So he buried the jar of pennies deep, filled in the hole, and covered the fresh dirt with some of the old leaves that had drifted under there over the years. He drew a treasure map which he put up in his room with the rest of his junk. He forgot all about it for a

month or so. Then, being low on cash for a movie or something, he remembered the pennies and went to get his map. But his mom had been in to clean two or three times since then, and had collected all the old homework papers and candy wrappers and comic magazines and joke books. She burned them in the stove to start the cook-fire one morning, and Vern's treasure map went right up the kitchen chimney.

Or so he figured it.

He tried to find the spot from memory and dug there. No luck. To the right and the left of that spot. Still no luck. He gave up for the day but had tried off and on ever since. Four years, man. Four *years*. Isn't that a pisser? You didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

It had gotten to be sort of an obsession with him. The Tessio front porch ran the length of the house, probably forty feet long and seven feet wide. He had dug through damn near every inch of that area two, maybe three times and no pennies. The *number* of pennies began to grow in his mind. When it first happened he told Chris and me that there had been maybe three dollars' worth. A year later he was up to five and just lately it was running around ten, more or less, depending on how broke he was.

Every so often we tried to tell him what was so clear to us—that Billy had known about the jar and dug it up himself. Vern refused to believe it, although he hated Billy like the Arabs hate the Jews and probably would have cheerfully voted the death-penalty on his brother for shoplifting, if the opportunity had ever presented itself. He also refused to ask Billy point blank. Probably he was afraid Billy would laugh and say *Course I got them, you stupid pussy, and there was twenty bucks' worth of pennies in that jar and I spent every fuckin cent of it*. Instead, Vern went out and dug for the pennies whenever the spirit moved him (and whenever Billy wasn't around). He always crawled out from under the porch with his jeans dirty and his hair leafy and his hands empty. We ragged him about it something wicked, and his nickname was Penny—Penny Tessio. I think he came up to the club with his news as quick as he did not just to get it out but to show us that some good had finally come of his penny-hunt.

He had been up that morning before anybody, ate his comflakes, and was out in the driveway shooting baskets through the old hoop nailed up on the garage, nothing much to do, no one to play Ghost with or anything, and he decided to have another dig for his pennies. He was under the porch when the screen door slammed up above. He froze, not making a sound. If it was his dad, he would crawl out; if it was Billy, he'd stay put until Billy and his j.d. friend Charlie Hogan had taken off.

Two pair of footsteps crossed the porch, and then Charlie Hogan himself said in a trembling, crybaby voice: "Jesus Christ, Billy, what are we gonna do?"

Vern said that just hearing Charlie Hogan talk like that—Charlie, who was one of the toughest kids in town—made him prick up his ears. Charlie, after all, hung out with Ace Merrill and Eyeball Chambers, and if you hung out with cats like that, you had to be tough.

"Nuthin," Billy said. "That's all we're gonna do. Nuthin."

"We gotta do *some*thin," Charlie said, and they sat down on the porch close to where Vern was hunkered down.

"Didn't you see him?"

Vern took a chance and crept a little closer to the steps, practically slavering. At that point he thought that maybe Billy and Charlie had been really drunked up and had run somebody down. Vern was careful not to crackle any of the old leaves as he moved. If the two of them found out he was under the porch and had overheard them, you could have put what was left of him in a Ken-L Ration dogfood can.

"It's nuthin to us," Billy Tessio said. "The kid's dead so it's nuthin to him, neither. Who gives a fuck if they ever find him? I don't."

"It was that kid they been talkin about on the radio," Charlie said. "It was, sure as shit. Brocker, Brower, Flowers, whatever his name is. Fuckin train must have hit him."

"Yeah," Billy said. Sound of a scratched match. Vern saw it flicked into the gravel driveway and then smelled cigarette smoke. "It sure did. And you puked."

No words, but Vern sensed emotional waves of shame radiating off Charlie Hogan.

“Well, the girls didn’t see it,” Billy said after awhile. “Lucky break.” From the sound, he clapped Charlie on the back to buck him up. “They’d blab it from here to Portland. We tore out of there fast, though. You think they knew there was something wrong?”

“No,” Charlie said. “Marie don’t like to go down that Back Harlow Road past the cemetery, anyway. She’s afraid of ghosts.” Then again in that scared crybaby voice: “Jesus, I wish we’d never boosted no car last night! Just gone to the show like we was gonna!”

Charlie and Billy went with a couple of scags named Marie Dougherty and Beverly Thomas; you never saw such gross-looking broads outside of a carnival show—pimples, moustaches, the whole works. Sometimes the four of them—or maybe six or eight if Fuzzy Bracowicz or Ace Merrill were along with their girls—would boost a car from a Lewiston parking lot and go joyriding out into the country with two or three bottles of Wild Irish Rose wine and a six-pack of ginger ale. They’d take the girls parking somewhere in Castle View or Harlow or Shiloh, drink Purple Jesuses, and make out. Then they’d dump the car somewhere near home. Cheap thrills in the monkey-house, as Chris sometimes said. They’d never been caught at it, but Vern kept hoping. He really dug the idea of visiting Billy on Sundays at the reformatory.

“If we told the cops, they’d want to know how we got way the hell out in Harlow,” Billy said. “We ain’t got no car, neither of us. It’s better if we just keep our mouths shut. Then they can’t touch us.”

“We could make a nonnamus call,” Charlie said.

“They trace those fuckin’ calls,” Billy said ominously. “I seen it on *Highway Patrol*. And *Dragnet*.”

“Yeah, right,” Charlie said miserably. “Jesus. I wish Ace’d been with us. We could have told the cops we was in his car.”

“Well, he wasn’t.”

“Yeah,” Charlie said. He sighed. “I guess you’re right.” A cigarette butt flicked into the driveway. “We hadda walk up and take a piss by the tracks, didn’t we? Couldn’t walk the other way, could we? And I

got puke on my new P.F. Fliers.” His voice sank a little. “Fuckin kid was laid right out, you know it? Didja see that sonofawhore, Billy?”

“I seen him,” Billy said, and a second cigarette butt joined the first in the driveway. “Let’s go see if Ace is up. I want some juice.”

“We gonna tell him?”

“Charlie, we ain’t gonna tell *nobody*. Nobody never. You dig me?”

“I dig you,” Charlie said. “Christ Jesus, I wish we never boosted that fucking Dodge.”

“Aw, shut the fuck up and come on.”

Two pairs of legs clad in tight, wash-faded pegged jeans, two pairs of feet in black engineer boots with side-buckles, came down the steps. Vern froze on his hands and knees (“My balls crawled up so high I thought they was trine to get back home,” he told us), sure his brother would sense him beneath the porch and drag him out and kill him—he and Charlie Hogan would kick the few brains the good Lord had seen fit to give him right out his jug ears and then stomp him with their engineer boots. But they just kept going and when Vern was sure they were really gone, he had crawled out from under the porch and ran here.

## 5

“You’re really lucky,” I said. “They *would* have killed you.”

Teddy said, “I know the Back Harlow Road. It comes to a dead end by the river. We used to fish for cossies out there.”

Chris nodded. “There used to be a bridge, but there was a flood. A long time ago. Now there’s just the train-tracks.”

“Could a kid really have gotten all the way from Chamberlain to Harlow?” I asked Chris. “That’s twenty or thirty miles.”

“I think so. He probably happened on the train-tracks and followed them the whole way. Maybe he thought they’d take him out, or maybe he thought he could flag down a train if he had to. But that’s just a freight run now—GS&WM up to Derry and Brownsville—and

not many of those anymore. He'd have to've walked all the way to Castle Rock to get out. After dark a train must have finally come along . . . and el smacko."

Chris drove his right fist down against his left palm, making a flat noise. Teddy, a veteran of many close calls dodging the pulp-trucks on 196, looked vaguely pleased. I felt a little sick, imagining that kid so far away from home, scared to death but doggedly following the GS&WM tracks, probably walking on the ties because of the night-noises from the overhanging trees and bushes . . . maybe even from the culverts underneath the railroad bed. And here comes the train, and maybe the big headlight on the front hypnotized him until it was too late to jump. Or maybe he was just lying there on the tracks in a hunger-faint when the train came along. Either way, any way, Chris had the straight of it: el smacko had been the final result. The kid was dead.

"So anyway, you want to go see it?" Vern asked. He was squirming around like he had to go to the bathroom he was so excited.

We all looked at him for a long second, no one saying anything. Then Chris tossed his cards down and said: "Sure! And I bet you anything we get our pictures in the paper!"

"Huh?" Vern said.

"Yeah?" Teddy said, and grinning his crazy truck-dodging grin.

"Look," Chris said, leaning across the ratty card-table. "We can find the body and report it! We'll be on the news!"

"I dunno," Vern said, obviously taken aback. "Billy will know where I found out. He'll beat the living shit outta me."

"No he won't," I said, "because it'll be us guys that find that kid, not Billy and Charlie Hogan in a boosted car. Then they won't have to worry about it anymore. They'll probably pin a medal on you, Penny."

"Yeah?" Vern grinned, showing his bad teeth. It was a dazed sort of grin, as if the thought of Billy being pleased with anything he did had acted on him like a hard shot to the chin. "Yeah, you think so?"

Teddy was grinning, too. Then he frowned and said: "Oh-oh."

"What?" Vern asked. He was squirming again, afraid that some really basic objection to the idea had just cropped up in Teddy's mind

. . . or what passed for Teddy's mind.

"Our folks," Teddy said. "If we find that kid's body over in South Harlow tomorrow, they're gonna know we didn't spend the night campin out in Vern's back field."

"Yeah," Chris said. "They'll know we went lookin for that kid."

"No they won't," I said. I felt funny—both excited and scared because I knew we could do it and get away with it. The mixture of emotions made me feel heatsick and headachy. I picked up the Bikes to have something to do with my hands and started box-shuffling them. That and how to play cribbage was about all I got for older brother stuff from Dennis. The other kids envied that shuffle, and I guess everyone I knew had asked me to show them how it went . . . everyone except Chris. I guess only Chris knew that showing someone would be like giving away a piece of Dennis, and I just didn't have so much of him that I could afford to pass pieces around.

I said: "We'll just tell em we got bored tenting in Vern's field because we've done it so many times before. So we decided to hike up the tracks and have a campout in the woods. I bet we don't even get hided for it because everybody'll be so excited about what we found."

"My dad'll hide me anyway," Chris said. "He's on a really mean streak this time." He shook his head sullenly. "To hell, it's worth a hiding."

"Okay," Teddy said, getting up. He was still grinning like crazy, ready to break into his high-pitched, cackling laugh at any second. "Let's all get together at Vern's house after lunch. What can we tell em about supper?"

Chris said, "You and me and Gordie can say we're eating at Vern's."

"And I'll tell my mom I'm eating over at Chris's," Vern said.

That would work unless there was some emergency we couldn't control or unless any of the parents got together. And neither Vern's folks or Chris's had a phone. Back then there were a lot of families which still considered a telephone a luxury, especially families of the shirttail variety. And none of us came from the upper crust.

My dad was retired. Vern's dad worked in the mill and was still driving a 1952 DeSoto. Teddy's mom had a house on Danberry Street and she took in a boarder whenever she could get one. She didn't have one that summer; the FURNISHED ROOM TO LET sign had been up in the parlor window since June. And Chris's dad was always on a "mean streak," more or less; he was a drunk who got welfare off and on—mostly on—and spent most of his time hanging out in Sukey's Tavern with Junior Merrill, Ace Merrill's old man, and a couple of other local rumpots.

Chris didn't talk much about his dad, but we all knew he hated him like poison. Chris was marked up every two weeks or so, bruises on his cheeks and neck or one eye swelled up and as colorful as a sunset, and once he came into school with a big clumsy bandage on the back of his head. Other times he never got to school at all. His mom would call him in sick because he was too lamed up to come in. Chris was smart, really smart, but he played truant a lot, and Mr. Halliburton, the town truant officer, was always showing up at Chris's house, driving his old black Chevrolet with the NO RIDERS sticker in the corner of the windshield. If Chris was being truant and Bertie (as we called him—always behind his back, of course) caught him, he would haul him back to school and see that Chris got detention for a week. But if Bertie found out that Chris was home because his father had beaten the shit out of him, Bertie just went away and didn't say boo to a cuckoo-bird. It never occurred to me to question this set of priorities until about twenty years later.

The year before, Chris had been suspended from school for three days. A bunch of milk-money disappeared when it was Chris's turn to be room-monitor and collect it, and because he was a Chambers from those no-account Chamberses, he had to take a hike even though he always swore he never hawked that money. That was the time Mr. Chambers put Chris in the hospital for an overnight stay; when his dad heard Chris was suspended, he broke Chris's nose and his right wrist. Chris came from a bad family, all right, and everybody thought he would turn out bad . . . including Chris. His brothers had lived up to the town's expectations admirably. Frank, the eldest, ran away from home when he was seventeen, joined the

Navy, and ended up doing a long stretch in Portsmouth for rape and criminal assault. The next-eldest, Richard (his right eye was all funny and jittery, which was why everybody called him Eyeball), had dropped out of high school in the tenth grade, and chummed around with Charlie and Billy Tessio and their j.d. buddies.

“I think all that’ll work,” I told Chris. “What about John and Marty?” John and Marty DeSpain were two other members of our regular gang.

“They’re still away,” Chris said. “They won’t be back until Monday.”

“Oh. That’s too bad.”

“So are we set?” Vern asked, still squirming. He didn’t want the conversation sidetracked even for a minute.

“I guess we are,” Chris said. “Who wants to play some more scat?”

No one did. We were too excited to play cards. We climbed down from the treehouse, climbed the fence into the vacant lot, and played three-flies-six-grounders for awhile with Vern’s old friction-taped baseball, but that was no fun, either. All we could think about was that kid Brower, hit by a train, and how we were going to see him, or what was left of him. Around ten o’clock we all drifted away home to fix it with our parents.

## 6

I got to my house at quarter of eleven, after stopping at the drugstore to check out the paperbacks. I did that every couple of days to see if there were any new John D. MacDonalds. I had a quarter and I figured if there was, I’d take it along. But there were only the old ones, and I’d read most of those half a dozen times.

When I got home the car was gone and I remembered that my mom and some of her hen-party friends had gone to Boston to see a concert. A great old concert-goer, my mother. And why not? Her only kid was dead and she had to do something to take her mind off it. I

guess that sounds pretty bitter. And I guess if you'd been there, you'd understand why I felt that way.

Dad was out back, passing a fine spray from the hose over his ruined garden. If you couldn't tell it was a lost cause from his glum face, you sure could by looking at the garden itself. The soil was a light, powdery gray. Everything in it was dead except for the corn, which had never grown so much as a single edible ear. Dad said he'd never known how to water a garden; it had to be mother nature or nobody. He'd water too long in one spot and drown the plants. In the next row, plants were dying of thirst. He could never hit a happy medium. But he didn't talk about it often. He'd lost a son in April and a garden in August. And if he didn't want to talk about either one, I guess that was his privilege. It just bugged me that he'd given up talking about everything else, too. That was taking democracy too fucking far.

"Hi, Daddy," I said, standing beside him. I offered him the Rollos I'd bought at the drugstore. "Want one?"

"Hello, Gordon. No thanks." He kept on flicking the fine spray over the hopeless gray earth.

"Be okay if I camp out in Vern Tessio's back field tonight with some of the guys?"

"What guys?"

"Vern. Teddy Duchamp. Maybe Chris."

I expected him to start right in on Chris—how Chris was bad company, a rotten apple from the bottom of the barrel, a thief, and an apprentice juvenile delinquent.

But he just sighed and said, "I suppose it's okay."

"Great! Thanks!"

I turned to go into the house and check out what was on the boob tube when he stopped me with: "Those are the only people you want to be with, aren't they, Gordon?"

I looked back at him, braced for an argument, but there was no argument in him that morning. It would have been better if there had been, I think. His shoulders were slumped. His face, pointed toward

the dead garden and not toward me, sagged. There was a certain unnatural sparkle in his eyes that might have been tears.

“Aw, Dad, they’re okay—”

“Of course they are. A thief and two feebs. Fine company for my son.”

“Vern Tessio isn’t feeble,” I said. Teddy was a harder case to argue.

“Twelve years old and still in the fifth grade,” my dad said. “And that time he slept over. When the Sunday paper came the next morning, he took an hour and a half to read the funnypages.”

That made me mad, because I didn’t think he was being fair. He was judging Vern the way he judged all my friends, from having seen them off and on, mostly going in and out of the house. He was wrong about them. And when he called Chris a thief I always saw red, because he didn’t know *anything* about Chris. I wanted to tell him that, but if I pissed him off he’d keep me home. And he wasn’t really mad anyway, not like he got at the supper-table sometimes, ranting so loud that nobody wanted to eat. Now he just looked sad and tired and used. He was sixty-three years old, old enough to be my grandfather.

My mom was fifty-five—no spring chicken, either. When she and dad got married they tried to start a family right away and my mom got pregnant and had a miscarriage. She miscarried two more and the doctor told her she’d never be able to carry a baby to term. I got all of this stuff, chapter and verse, whenever one of them was lecturing me, you understand. They wanted me to think I was a special delivery from God and I wasn’t appreciating my great good fortune in being conceived when my mother was forty-two and starting to gray. I wasn’t appreciating my great good fortune and I wasn’t appreciating her tremendous pain and sacrifices, either.

Five years after the doctor said Mom would never have a baby she got pregnant with Dennis. She carried him for eight months and then he just sort of fell out, all eight pounds of him—my father used to say that if she had carried Dennis to term, the kid would have weighed fifteen pounds. The doctor said: Well, sometimes nature fools us, but he’ll be the only one you’ll ever have. Thank God for him and be

content. Ten years later she got pregnant with me. She not only carried me to term, the doctor had to use forceps to yank me out. Did you ever hear of such a fucked-up family? I came into the world the child of two Geritol-chuggers, not to go on and on about it, and my only brother was playing league baseball in the big kids' park before I even got out of diapers.

In the case of my mom and dad, one gift from God had been enough. I won't say they treated me badly, and they sure never beat me, but I was a hell of a big surprise and I guess when you get into your forties you're not as partial to surprises as you were in your twenties. After I was born, Mom got the operation her hen-party friends referred to as "The Band-Aid." I guess she wanted to make a hundred percent sure that there wouldn't be any more gifts from God. When I got to college I found out I'd beaten long odds just by not being born retarded ... although I think my dad had his doubts when he saw my friend Vern taking ten minutes to puzzle out the dialogue in *Beetle Baily*.

This business about being ignored: I could never really pin it down until I did a book report in high school on this novel called *The Invisible Man*. When I agreed to do the book for Miss Hardy I thought it was going to be the science fiction story about the guy in bandages and Foster Grants—Claude Rains played him in the movies. When I found out this was a different story I tried to give the book back but Miss Hardy wouldn't let me off the hook. I ended up being real glad. This *Invisible Man* is about a Negro. Nobody ever notices him at all unless he fucks up. People look right through him. When he talks, nobody answers. He's like a black ghost. Once I got into it, I ate that book up like it was a John D. MacDonald, because that cat Ralph Ellison was writing about *me*. At the supper-table it was Denny how many did you strike out and Denny who asked you to the Sadie Hawkins dance and Denny I want to talk to you man to man about that car we were looking at. I'd say: "Pass the butter," and Dad would say: Denny, are you sure the Army is what you want? I'd say: "Pass the butter someone, okay?" and Mom would ask Denny if he wanted her to pick him up one of the Pendleton shirts on sale downtown, and I'd end up getting the butter myself. One night when I was nine,

just to see what would happen: I said, "Please pass those goddam spuds." And my mom said: Denny, Auntie Grace called today and she asked after you and Gordon.

The night Dennis graduated with honors from Castle Rock High School I played sick and stayed home. I got Stevie Darabont's oldest brother Royce to buy me a bottle of Wild Irish Rose and I drank half of it and puked in my bed in the middle of the night.

In a family situation like that, you're supposed to either hate the older brother or idolize him hopelessly—at least that's what they teach you in college psychology. Bullshit, right? But so far as I can tell, I didn't feel either way about Dennis. We rarely argued and never had a fist-fight. That would have been ridiculous. Can you see a fourteen-year-old boy finding something to beat up his four-year-old brother about? And our folks were always a little too impressed with him to burden him with the care of his kid brother, so he never resented me the way some older kids come to resent their sibs. When Denny took me with him somewhere, it was of his own free will, and those were some of the happiest times I can remember.

*"Hey Lachance, who the fuck is that?"*

*"My kid brother and you better watch your mouth, Davis. He'll beat the crap out of you. Gordie's tough."*

*They gather around me for a moment, huge, impossibly tall, just a moment of interest like a patch of sun. They are so big, they are so old.*

*"Hey kid! This wet end really your big brother?"*

*I nod shyly.*

*"He's a real asshole, ain't he, kid?"*

*I nod again and everybody, Dennis included, roars with laughter. Then Dennis claps his hands together twice, briskly, and says: "Come on, we gonna have a practice or stand around here like a bunch of pussies?"*

*They run to their positions, already peppering the ball around the infield.*

*"Go sit over there on the bench, Gordie. Be quiet. Don't bother anybody. "*

*I go sit over there on the bench. I am good. I feel impossibly small under the sweet summer clouds. I watch my brother pitch. I don't bother anybody.*

But there weren't many times like that.

Sometimes he read me bedtime stories that were better than Mom's; Mom's stories were about The Gingerbread Man and The Three Little Pigs, okay stuff, but Dennis's were about stuff like Bluebeard and Jack the Ripper. He also had a version of Billy Goat's Gruff where the troll under the bridge ended up the winner. And, as I have already said, he taught me the game of cribbage and how to do a box-shuffle. Not that much, but hey! in this world you take what you can get, am I right?

As I grew older, my feelings of love for Dennis were replaced with an almost clinical awe, the kind of awe so-so Christians feel for God, I guess. And when he died, I was mildly shocked and mildly sad, the way I imagine those same so-so Christians must have felt when *Time* magazine said God was dead. Let me put it this way: I was as sad for Denny's dying as I was when I heard on the radio that Dan Blocker had died. I'd seen them both about as frequently, and Denny never even got any re-runs.

He was buried in a closed coffin with the American flag on top (they took the flag off the box before they finally stuck it in the ground and folded it—the flag, not the box—into a cocked hat and gave it to my mom). My parents just fell to pieces. Four months hadn't been long enough to put them back together again; I didn't know if they'd ever be whole again. Mr. and Mrs. Dumpty. Denny's room was in suspended animation just one door down from my room, suspended animation or maybe in a time-warp. The Ivy League college pennants were still on the walls, and the senior pictures of the girls he had dated were still tucked into the mirror where he had stood for what seemed like hours at a stretch, combing his hair back into a ducktail like Elvis's. The stack of *Trues* and *Sports Illustrateds* remained on his desk, their dates looking more and more antique as time passed. It's the kind of thing you see in sticky-sentimental movies. But it wasn't sentimental to me; it was terrible. I didn't go into Dennis's room unless I had to because I kept expecting that he

would be behind the door, or under the bed, or in the closet. Mostly it was the closet that preyed on my mind, and if my mother sent me in to get Denny's postcard album or his shoebox of photographs so she could look at them, I would imagine that door swinging slowly open while I stood rooted to the spot with horror. I would imagine him pallid and bloody in the darkness, the side of his head walloped in, a gray-veined cake of blood and brains drying on his shirt. I would imagine his arms coming up, his bloody hands hooking into claws, and he would be croaking: *It should have been you, Gordon. It should have been you.*

## 7

*Stud City*, by Gordon Lachance. Originally published in *Greenspun Quarterly*, Issue 45, Fall, 1970. Used by permission.

March.

Chico stands at the window, arms crossed, elbows on the ledge that divides upper and lower panes, naked, looking out, breath fogging the glass. A draft against his belly. Bottom right pane is gone. Blocked by a piece of cardboard.

"Chico."

He doesn't turn. She doesn't speak again. He can see a ghost of her in the glass, in his bed, sitting, blankets pulled up in apparent defiance of gravity. Her eye makeup has smeared into deep hollows under her eyes.

Chico shifts his gaze beyond her ghost, out beyond the house. Raining. Patches of snow sloughed away to reveal the bald ground underneath. He sees last year's dead grass, a plastic toy—Billy's—a rusty rake. His brother Johnny's Dodge is up on blocks, the detired wheels sticking out like stumps. He remembers times he and Johnny worked on it, listening to the super-hits and boss oldies from WLAM in Lewiston pour out of Johnny's old transistor radio—a couple of

times Johnny would give him a beer. *She gonna run fast, Chico,* Johnny would say. *She gonna eat up everything on this road from Gates Falls to Castle Rock. Wait till we get that Hearst shifter in her!*

But that had been then, and this was now.

Beyond Johnny's Dodge was the highway. Route 14, goes to Portland and New Hampshire south, all the way to Canada north, if you turned left on U.S. 1 at Thomaston.

"Stud City," Chico says to the glass. He smokes his cigarette.

"What?"

"Nothing, babe."

"Chico?" Her voice is puzzled. He will have to change the sheets before Dad gets back. She bled.

"What?"

"I love you, Chico."

"That's right."

Dirty March. *You're some old whore,* Chico thinks. *Dirty, staggering old baggy-tits March with rain in her face.*

"This room used to be Johnny's," he says suddenly.

"Who?"

"My brother."

"Oh. Where is he?"

"In the Army," Chico says, but Johnny isn't in the Army. He had been working the summer before at Oxford Plains Speedway and a car went out of control and skidded across the infield toward the pit area, where Johnny had been changing the back tires on a Chevy Charger-class stocker. Some guys shouted at him to look out, but Johnny never heard them. One of the guys who shouted was Johnny's brother Chico.

"Aren't you cold?" she asks.

"No. Well, my feet. A little."

And he thinks suddenly: *Well, my God. Nothing happened to Johnny that isn't going to happen to you, too, sooner or later.* He sees it again, though: the skidding, skating Ford Mustang, the knobs of his brother's spine picked out in a series of dimpled shadows against the white of his Hanes tee-shirt; he had been hunkered down, pulling one of the Chevy's back tires. There had been time to

see rubber flaying off the tires of the runaway Mustang, to see its hanging muffler scraping up sparks from the infield. It had struck Johnny even as Johnny tried to get to his feet. Then the yellow shout of flame.

*Well*, Chico thinks, *it could have been slow*, and he thinks of his grandfather. Hospital smells. Pretty young nurses bearing bedpans. A last papery breath. Were there any good ways?

He shivers and wonders about God. He touches the small silver St. Christopher's medal that hangs on a chain around his neck. He is not a Catholic and he's surely not a Mexican: his real name is Edward May and his friends all call him Chico because his hair is black and he greases it back with Brylcreem and he wears boots with pointed toes and Cuban heels. Not Catholic, but he wears this medallion. Maybe if Johnny had been wearing one, the runaway Mustang would have missed him. You never knew.

He smokes and stares out the window and behind him the girl gets out of bed and comes to him quickly, almost mincing, maybe afraid he will turn around and look at her. She puts a warm hand on his back. Her breasts push against his side. Her belly touches his buttock.

"Oh. It *is* cold."

"It's this place."

"Do you love me, Chico?"

"You bet!" he says off-handedly, and then, more seriously: "You were cherry."

"What does that—"

"You were a virgin."

The hand reaches higher. One finger traces the skin on the nape of his neck. "I said, didn't I?"

"Was it hard? Did it hurt?"

She laughs. "No. But I was scared."

They watch the rain. A new Oldsmobile goes by on 14, spraying up water.

"Stud City," Chico says.

"What?"

“That guy. He’s going Stud City. In his new stud car.” She kisses the place her finger has been touching gently and he brushes at her as if she were a fly.

“What’s the matter?”

He turns to her. Her eyes flick down to his penis and then up again hastily. Her arms twitch to cover herself, and then she remembers that they never do stuff like that in the movies and she drops them to her sides again. Her hair is black and her skin is winter white, the color of cream. Her breasts are firm, her belly perhaps a little too soft. One flaw to remind, Chico thinks, that this isn’t the movies.

“Jane?”

“What?” He can feel himself getting ready. Not beginning, but getting ready.

“It’s all right,” he says. “We’re friends.” He eyes her deliberately, letting himself reach at her in all sorts of ways. When he looks at her face again, it is flushed. “Do you mind me looking at you?”

“I . . . no. No, Chico.”

She steps back, closes her eyes, sits on the bed, and leans back, legs spread. He sees all of her. The muscles, the little muscles on the insides of her thighs ... they’re jumping, uncontrolled, and this suddenly excites him more than the taut cones of her breasts or the mild pink pearl of her cunt. Excitement trembles in him, some stupid Bozo on a spring. Love may be as divine as the poets say, he thinks, but sex is Bozo the Clown bouncing around on a spring. How could a woman look at an erect penis without going off into mad gales of laughter?

The rain beats against the roof, against the window, against the sodden cardboard patch blocking the glass-less lower pane. He presses his hand against his chest, looking for a moment like a stage Roman about to orate. His hand is cold. He drops it to his side.

“Open your eyes. We’re friends, I said.”

Obediently, she opens them. She looks at him. Her eyes appear violet now. The rainwater running down the window makes rippling patterns on her face, her neck, her breasts. Stretched across the bed, her belly has been pulled tight. She is perfect in her moment.

“Oh,” she says. “Oh Chico, it feels so *funny*.” A shiver goes through her. She has curled her toes involuntarily. He can see the insteps of her feet. Her insteps are pink. “Chico. Chico.”

He steps toward her. His body is shivering and her eyes widen. She says something, one word, but he can’t tell what it is. This isn’t the time to ask. He half-kneels before her for just a second, looking at the floor with frowning concentration, touching her legs just above the knees. He measures the tide within himself. Its pull is thoughtless, fantastic. He pauses a little longer.

The only sound is the tinny tick of the alarm clock on the bedtable, standing brassy-legged atop a pile of Spiderman comic books. Her breathing flutters faster and faster. His muscles slide smoothly as he dives upward and forward. They begin. It’s better this time. Outside, the rain goes on washing away the snow.

A half-hour later Chico shakes her out of a light doze. “We gotta move,” he says. “Dad and Virginia will be home pretty quick.”

She looks at her wristwatch and sits up. This time she makes no attempt to shield herself. Her whole tone—her body English—has changed. She has not matured (although she probably believes she has) or learned anything more complex than tying a shoe, but her tone has changed just the same. He nods and she smiles tentatively at him. He reaches for the cigarettes on the bedtable. As she draws on her panties, he thinks of a line from an old novelty song: *Keep playin till I shoot through, Blue . . . play your digeree, do*. “Tie Me Kangaroo Down,” by Rolf Harris. He grins. That was a song Johnny used to sing. It ended: *So we tanned his hide when he died, Clyde, and that’s it hanging on the shed*.

She hooks her bra and begins buttoning her blouse. “What are you smiling about, Chico?”

“Nothing,” he says.

“Zip me up?”

He goes to her, still naked, and zips her up. He kisses her cheek. “Go on in the bathroom and do your face if you want,” he says. “Just don’t take too long, okay?”

She goes up the hall gracefully, and Chico watches her, smoking. She is a tall girl—tatter than he—and she has to duck her head a

little going through the bathroom door. Chico finds his underpants under the bed. He puts them in the dirty clothes bag hanging just inside the closet door, and gets another pair from the bureau. He puts them on, and then, while walking back to the bed, he slips and almost falls in a patch of wetness the square of cardboard has let in.

“Goddam,” he whispers resentfully.

He looks around at the room, which had been Johnny’s until Johnny died (*why did I tell her he was in the Army, for Christ’s sake?* he wonders ... a little uneasily). Fiberboard walls, so thin he can hear Dad and Virginia going at it at night, that don’t quite make it all the way to the ceiling. The floor has a slightly crazy hipshot angle so that the room’s door will only stay open if you block it open—if you forget, it swings stealthily closed as soon as your back is turned. On the far wall is a movie poster from *Easy Rider—TwoMen Went Looking for America and Couldn’t Find It Anywhere*. The room had more life when Johnny lived here. Chico doesn’t know how or why; only that it’s true. And he knows something else, as well. He knows that sometimes the room spooks him at night. Sometimes he thinks that the closet door will swing open and Johnny will be standing there, his body charred and twisted and blackened, his teeth yellow dentures poking out of wax that has partially melted and re-hardened; and Johnny will be whispering: *Get out of my room, Chico. And if you lay a hand on my Dodge, I’ll fuckin kill you. Got it?*

*Got it, bro,* Chico thinks.

For a moment he stands still, looking at the rumpled sheet spotted with the girl’s blood, and then he spreads the blankets up in one quick gesture. Here. Right here. How do you like that, Virginia? How does that grab your snatch? He puts on his pants, his engineer boots, finds a sweater.

He’s dry-combing his hair in front of the mirror when she comes out of the john. She looks classy. Her too-soft stomach doesn’t show in the jumper. She looks at the bed, does a couple of things to it, and it comes out looking made instead of just spread up.

“Good,” Chico says.

She laughs a little self-consciously and pushes a lock of hair behind her ear. It is an evocative, poignant gesture.

“Let’s go,” he says.

They go out through the hall and the living room. Jane pauses in front of the tinted studio photograph on top of the TV. It shows his father and Virginia, a high-school-age Johnny, a grammar-school-age Chico, and an infant Bitty—in the picture, Johnny is holding Billy. All of them have fixed, stone grins . . . all except Virginia, whose face is its sleepy, indecipherable self. That picture, Chico remembers, was taken less than a month after his dad married the bitch.

“That your mother and father?”

“It’s my father,” Chico says. “She’s my stepmother, Virginia. Come on.”

“Is she still that pretty?” Jane asks, picking up her coat and handing Chico his windbreaker.

“I guess my old man thinks so,” Chico says.

They step out into the shed. It’s a damp and drafty place—the wind hoots through the cracks in its slapstick walls. There is a pile of old bald tires, Johnny’s old bike that Chico inherited when he was ten and which he promptly wrecked, a pile of detective magazines, returnable Pepsi bottles, a greasy monolithic engine block, an orange crate full of paperback books, an old paint-by-numbers of a horse standing on dusty green grass.

Chico helps her pick her way outside. The rain is falling with disheartening steadiness. Chico’s old sedan stands in a driveway puddle, looking downhearted. Even up on blocks and with a piece of plastic covering the place where the windshield should go, Johnny’s Dodge has more class. Chico’s car is a Buick. The paint is dull and flowered with spots of rust. The front seat upholstery has been covered with a brown Army blanket. A large button pinned to the sun visor on the passenger side says: I WANT IT EVERY DAY. There is a rusty starter assembly on the back seat; if it ever stops raining he will clean it, he thinks, and maybe put it into the Dodge. Or maybe not.

The Buick smells musty and his own starter grinds a long time before the Buick starts up.

“Is it your battery?” she asks.

“Just the goddam rain, I guess.” He backs out onto the road, flicking on the windshield wipers and pausing for a moment to look at

the house. It is a completely unappetizing aqua color. The shed sticks off from it at a ragtag, double-jointed angle, tarpaper and peeled-looking shingles.

The radio comes on with a blare and Chico shuts it off at once. There is the beginning of a Sunday afternoon headache behind his forehead. They ride past the Grange hall and the Volunteer Fire Department and Brownie's Store. Sally Morrison's T-Bird is parked by Brownie's hi-test pump, and Chico raises a hand to her as he turns off onto the old Lewiston road.

"Who's that?"

"Sally Morrison."

"Pretty lady." Very neutral.

He feels for his cigarettes. "She's been married twice and divorced twice. Now she's the town pump, if you believe half the talk that goes on in this shitass little town."

"She looks young."

"She is."

"Have you ever—"

He slides his hand up her leg and smiles. "No," he says. "My brother, maybe, but not me. I like Sally, though. She's got her alimony and her big white Bird, she doesn't care what people say about her."

It starts to seem like a long drive. The Androscoggin, off to the right, is slaty and sullen. The ice is all out of it now. Jane has grown quiet and thoughtful. The only sound is the steady snap of the windshield wipers. When the car rolls through the dips in the road there is groundfog, waiting for evening when it will creep out of these pockets and take over the whole River Road.

They cross into Auburn and Chico drives the cutoff and swings onto Minot Avenue. The four lanes are nearly deserted, and all the suburban homes look packaged. They see one little boy in a yellow plastic raincoat walking up the sidewalk, carefully stepping in all the puddles.

"Go, man," Chico says softly.

"What?" Jane asks.

"Nothing, babe. Go back to sleep."

She laughs a little doubtfully.

Chico turns up Keston Street and into the driveway of one of the packaged houses. He doesn't turn off the ignition.

"Come in and I'll give you cookies," she says.

He shakes his head. "I have to get back."

"I know." She puts her arms around him and kisses him. "Thank you for the most wonderful time of my life."

He smiles suddenly. His face shines. It is nearly magical. "I'll see you Monday, Janey-Jane. Still friends, right?"

"You know we are," she says, and kisses him again ... but when he cups a breast through her jumper, she pulls away. "Don't. My father might see."

He lets her go, only a little of the smile left. She gets out of the car quickly and runs through the rain to the back door. A second later she's gone. Chico pauses for a moment to light a cigarette and then he backs out of the driveway. The Buick stalls and the starter seems to grind forever before the engine manages to catch. It is a long ride home.

When he gets there, Dad's station wagon is parked in the driveway. He pulls in beside it and lets the engine die. For a moment he sits inside silently, listening to the rain. It is like being inside a steel drum.

Inside, Billy is watching Carl Stormer and His Country Buckaroos on the TV set. When Chico comes in, Billy jumps up, excited. "Eddie, hey Eddie, you know what Uncle Pete said? He said him and a whole mess of other guys sank a kraut sub in the war! Will you take me to the show next Saturday?"

"I don't know," Chico says, grinning. "Maybe if you kiss my shoes every night before supper all week." He pulls Billy's hair. Billy hollers and laughs and kicks him in the shins.

"Cut it out, now," Sam May says, coming into the room. "Cut it out, you two. You know how your mother feels about the rough-housing." He has pulled his tie down and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. He's got a couple-three red hotdogs on a plate. The hotdogs are wrapped in white bread, and Sam May has put the old mustard right to them. "Where you been, Eddie?"

“At Jane’s.”

The toilet flushes in the bathroom. Virginia. Chico wonders briefly if Jane has left any hairs in the sink, or a lipstick, or a bobby pin.

“You should have come with us to see your Uncle Pete and Aunt Ann,” his father says. He eats a frank in three quick bites. “You’re getting to be like a stranger around here, Eddie. I don’t like that. Not while we provide the bed and board.”

“Some bed,” Chico says. “Some board.”

Sam looks up quickly, hurt at first, then angry. When he speaks, Chico sees that his teeth are yellow with French’s mustard. He feels vaguely nauseated. “Your lip. Your goddam lip. You aren’t too big yet, snotnose.”

Chico shrugs, peels a slice of Wonder Bread off the loaf standing on the TV tray by his father’s chair, and spreads it with ketchup. “In three months I’m going to be gone anyway.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m gonna fix up Johnny’s car and go out to Califor- . nia. Look for work.”

“Oh, yeah. Right.” He is a big man, big in a shambling way, but Chico thinks now that he got smaller after he married Virginia, and smaller again after Johnny died. And in his mind he hears himself saying to Jane: *My brother, maybe, but not me.* And on the heels of that: *Play your digeree, do, Blue.* “You ain’t never going to get that car as far as Castle Rock, let alone California.”

“You don’t think so? Just watch my fucking dust.”

For a moment his father only looks at him and then he throws the frank he has been holding. It hits Chico in the chest, spraying mustard on his sweater and on the chair.

“Say that word again and I’ll break your nose for you, smartass.”

Chico picks up the frank and looks at it. Cheap red frank, smeared with French’s mustard. Spread a little sunshine. He throws it back at his father. Sam gets up, his face the color of an old brick, the vein in the middle of his forehead pulsing. His thigh connects with the TV tray and it overturns. Billy stands in the kitchen doorway watching them. He’s gotten himself a plate of franks and beans and the plate has tipped and beanjuice runs onto the floor. Billy’s eyes are wide,

his mouth trembling. On the TV, Carl Stormer and His Country Buckaroos are tearing through “Long Black Veil” at a breakneck pace.

“You raise them up best you can and they spit on you,” his father says thickly. “Ayuh. Thafs how it goes.” He gropes blindly on the seat of his chair and comes up with the half-eaten hotdog. He holds it in his fist like a severed phallus. Incredibly, he begins to eat it ... at the same time, Chico sees that he has begun to cry. “Ayuh, they spit on you, that’s just how it goes.”

“Well, why in the hell did you have to marry *her*?” he bursts out, and then has to bite down on the rest of it: *If you hadn’t married her, Johnny would still be alive.*

“That’s none of your goddam business!” Sam May roars through his tears. “That’s my business!”

“Oh?” Chico shouts back. “Is that so? I only have to live with her! Me and Billy, we have to live with her! Watch her grind you down! And you don’t even know—”

“What?” his father says, and his voice is suddenly low and ominous. The chunk of hotdog left in his closed fist is like a bloody chunk of bone. “What don’t I know?”

“You don’t know shit from Shinola,” he says, appalled at what has almost come out of his mouth.

“You want to stop it now,” his father says. “Or I’ll beat the hell out of you, Chico.” He only calls him this when he is very angry indeed.

Chico turns and sees that Virginia is standing at the other side of the room, adjusting her skirt minutely, looking at him with her large, calm, brown eyes. Her eyes are beautiful; the rest of her is not so beautiful, so self-renewing, but those eyes will carry her for years yet, Chico thinks, and he feels the sick hate come back—*So we tanned his hide when he died, Clyde, and that’s it hanging on the shed.*

“She’s got you pussywhipped and you don’t have the guts to do anything about it!”

All of this shouting has finally become too much for Billy—he gives a great wail of terror, drops his plate of franks and beans, and covers

his face with his hands. Beanjuice splatters his Sunday shoes and sprays across the rug.

Sam takes a single step forward and then stops when Chico makes a curt beckoning gesture, as if to say: *Yeah, come on, let's get down to it, what took you so fuckin long?* They stand like statues until Virginia speaks—her voice is low, as calm as her brown eyes.

“Have you had a girl in your room, Ed? You know how your father and I feel about that.” Almost as an afterthought: “She left a handkerchief.”

He stares at her, savagely unable to express the way he feels, the way she is dirty, the way she shoots unerringly at the back, the way she clips in behind you and cuts your hamstrings.

*You could hurt me if you wanted to,* the calm brown eyes say. *I know you know what was going on before he died. But that's the only way you can hurt me, isn't it, Chico? And only then if your father believed you. And if he believed you, it would kill him.*

His father lunges at the new gambit like a bear. “Have you been screwing in my house, you little bastard?”

“Watch your language, please, Sam,” Virginia says calmly.

“Is that why you didn't want to come with us? So you could scr—so you could—”

“*Say it!*” Chico weeps. “Don't let her do it to you! Say it! Say what you mean!”

“Get out,” he says dully. “Don't you come back until you can apologize to your mother and me.”

“Don't you dare!” he cries. “Don't you dare call that bitch my mother! I'll kill you!”

“Stop it, Eddie!” Billy screams. The words are muffled, blurred through his hands, which still cover his face. “Stop yelling at Daddy! Stop it, *please!*”

Virginia doesn't move from the doorway. Her calm eyes remain on Chico.

Sam blunders back a step and the backs of his knees strike the edge of his easy chair. He sits down in it heavily and averts his face against a hairy forearm. “I can't even look at you when you got words like that in your mouth, Eddie. You are making me feel so bad.”

“*She* makes you feel bad! Why don’t you admit it?” He does not reply. Still not looking at Chico, he fumbles another frank wrapped in bread from the plate on the TV tray. He fumbles for the mustard. Billy goes on crying. Carl Stormer and His Country Buckaroos are singing a truck-driving song. “My rig is old, but that don’t mean she’s slow,” Carl tells all his western Maine viewers.

“The boy doesn’t know what he’s saying, Sam,” Virginia says gently. “It’s hard, at his age. It’s hard to grow up.”

She’s whipped him. That’s the end, all right.

He turns and heads for the door which leads first into the shed and then outdoors. As he opens it he looks back at Virginia, and she gazes at him tranquilly when he speaks her name.

“What is it, Ed?”

“The sheets are bloody.” He pauses. “I broke her in.”

He thinks something has stirred in her eyes, but that is probably only his wish. “Please go now, Ed. You’re scaring Billy.”

He leaves. The Buick doesn’t want to start and he has almost resigned himself to walking in the rain when the engine finally catches. He lights a cigarette and backs out onto 14, slamming the clutch back in and racing the mill when it starts to jerk and splutter. The generator light blinks balefully at him twice, and then the car settles into a ragged idle. At last he is on his way, creeping up the road toward Gates Falls.

He spares Johnny’s Dodge one last look.

Johnny could have had steady work at Gates Mills & Weaving, but only on the night shift. Nightwork didn’t bother him, he had told Chico, and the pay was better than at the Plains, but their father worked days, and working nights at the mill would have meant Johnny would have been home with her, home alone or with Chico in the next room . . . and the walls were thin. *I can’t stop and she won’t let me try*, Johnny said. *Yeah, I know what it would do to him. But she’s . . . she just won’t stop and it’s like I can’t stop . . . she’s always at me, you know what I mean, you’ve seen her, Billy’s too young to understand, but you’ve seen her . . .*

Yes. He had seen her. And Johnny had gone to work at the Plains, telling their father it was because he could get parts for the Dodge on

the cheap. And that's how it happened that he had been changing a tire when the Mustang came skidding and skating across the infield with its muffler draggin up sparks; that was how his stepmother had killed his brother, so just keep playing until I shoot through, Blue, cause we goin Stud City right here in this shitheap Buick, and he remembers how the rubber smelled, and how the knobs of Johnny's spine cast small crescent shadows on the bright white of his tee-shirt, he remembers seeing Johnny get halfway up from the squat he had been working in when the Mustang hit him, squashing him between it and the Chevy, and there had been a hollow bang as the Chevy came down off its jacks, and then the bright yellow flare of flame, the rich smell of gasoiine—

Chico strikes the brakes with both feet, bringing the sedan to a crunching, juddering halt on the sodden shoulder. He leans wildly across the seat, throws open the passenger door, and sprays yellow puke onto the mud and snow. The sight of it makes him puke again, and the thought of it makes him dry-heave one more time. The car almost stalls, but he catches it in time. The generator light winks out reluctantly when he guns the engine. He sits, letting the shakes work their way out of him. A car goes by him fast, a new Ford, white, throwing up great dirty fans of water and slush.

“Stud City,” Chico says. “In his new stud car. Funky.”

He tastes puke on his lips and in his throat and coating his sinuses. He doesn't want a cigarette. Danny Carter will let him sleep over. Tomorrow will be time enough for further decisions. He pulls back onto Route 14 and gets rolling.

## 8

Pretty fucking melodramatic, right?

The world has seen one or two better stories, I know that—one or two hundred thousand better ones, more like it. It ought to have THIS IS A PRODUCT OF AN UNDERGRADUATE CREATIVE

WRITING WORKSHOP stamped on every page . . . because that's just what it was, at least up to a certain point. It seems both painfully derivative and painfully sophomoric to me now; style by Hemingway (except we've got the whole thing in the present tense for some reason—how too fucking trendy), theme by Faulkner. Could anything be more *serious*? More *lit'ry*?

But even its pretensions can't hide the fact that it's an extremely sexual story written by an extremely inexperienced young man (at the time I wrote "Stud City," I had been to bed with two girls and had ejaculated prematurely all over one of them—not much like Chico in the foregoing tale, I guess). Its attitude toward women goes beyond hostility and to a point which verges on actual ugliness—two of the women in "Stud City" are sluts, and the third is a simple receptacle who says things like "I love you, Chico" and "Come in, I'll give you cookies." Chico, on the other hand, is a macho cigarette-smoking working-class hero who could have stepped whole and breathing from the grooves of a Bruce Springsteen record—although Springsteen was yet to be heard from when I published the story in the college literary magazine (where it ran between a poem called "Images of Me" and an essay on student parietals written entirely in lower case). It is the work of a young man every bit as insecure as he was inexperienced.

And yet it was the first story I ever wrote that felt like *my* story—the first one that really felt *whole*, after five years of trying. The first one that might still be able to stand up, even with its props taken away. Ugly but alive. Even now when I read it, stifling a smile at its pseudo-toughness and its pretensions, I can see the true face of Gordon Lachance lurking just behind the lines of print, a Gordon Lachance younger than the one living and writing now, one certainly more idealistic than the best-selling novelist who is more apt to have his paperback contracts reviewed than his books, but not so young as the one who went with his friends that day to see the body of a dead kid named Ray Brower. A Gordon Lachance halfway along in the process of losing the shine.

No, it's not a very good story—its author was too busy listening to other voices to listen as closely as he should have to the one coming

from inside. But it was the first time I had ever really used the place I knew and the things I felt in a piece of fiction, and there was a kind of dreadful exhilaration in seeing things that had troubled me for years come out in a new form, *a form over which I had imposed control*. It had been years since that childhood idea of Denny being in the closet of his spookily preserved room had occurred to me; I would have honestly believed I had forgotten it. Yet there it is in “Stud City,” only slightly changed . . . but controlled.

I’ve resisted the urge to change it a lot more, to rewrite it, to juice it up—and that urge was fairly strong, because I find the story quite embarrassing now. But there are still things in it I like, things that would be cheapened by changes made by this later Lachance, who has the first threads of gray in his hair. Things, like that image of the shadows on Johnny’s white tee-shirt or that of the rain-ripples on Jane’s naked body, that seem better than they have any right to be.

Also, it was the first story I never showed to my mother and father. There was too much Denny in it. Too much Castle Rock. And most of all, too much 1960. You always know the truth, because when you cut yourself or someone else with it, there’s always a bloody show.

## 9

My room was on the second floor, and it must have been at least ninety degrees up there. It would be a hundred and ten by afternoon, even with all the windows open. I was really glad I wasn’t sleeping there that night, and the thought of where we were going made me excited all over again. I made two blankets into a bedroll and tied it with my old belt. I collected all my money, which was sixty-eight cents. Then I was ready to go.

I went down the back stairs to avoid meeting my dad in front of the house, but I hadn’t needed to worry; he was still out in the garden with the hose, making useless rainbows in the air and looking through them.

I walked down Summer Street and cut through a vacant lot to Carbine—where the offices of the Castle Rock *Call* stand today. I was headed up Carbine toward the clubhouse when a car pulled over to the curb and Chris got out. He had his old Boy Scout pack in one hand and two blankets rolled up and tied with clothesrope in the other.

“Thanks, mister,” he said, and trotted over to join me as the car pulled away. His Boy Scout canteen was slung around his neck and under one arm so that it finally ended up banging on his hip. His eyes were sparkling.

“Gordie! You wanna see something?”

“Sure, I guess so. What?”

“Come on down here first.” He pointed at the narrow space between the Blue Point Diner and the Castle Rock Drugstore.

“What is it, Chris?”

“Come on, I said!”

He ran down the alley and after a brief moment (that’s all it took me to cast aside my better judgment) I ran after him. The two buildings were set slightly toward each other rather than running parallel, and so the alley narrowed as it went back. We waded through trashy drifts of old newspapers and stepped over cruel, sparkly nests of broken beer and soda bottles. Chris cut behind the Blue Point and put his bedroll down. There were eight or nine garbage cans lined up here and the stench was incredible.

“Phew! Chris! Come on, gimme a break!”

“Gimme your arm,” Chris said, by rote.

“No, sincerely, I’m gonna throw u—”

The words broke off in my mouth and I forgot all about the smelly garbage cans. Chris had unslung his pack and opened it and reached inside. Now he was holding out a huge pistol with dark wood grips.

“You wanna be the Lone Ranger or the Cisco Kid?” Chris asked, grinning.

“Walking, talking Jesus! Where’d you get that?”

“Hawked it out of my dad’s bureau. It’s a forty-five.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” I said, although it could have been a .38 or a .357 for all I knew—in spite of all the John D. MacDonalds and Ed McBains I’d read, the only pistol I’d ever seen up close was the one Constable Bannerman carried ... and although all the kids asked him to take it out of its holster, Bannerman never would. “Man, your dad’s gonna hide you when he finds out. You said he was on a mean streak *anyway*.”

His eyes just went on dancing. “That’s *it*, man. He ain’t gonna find out *nothing*. Him and these other rummies are all laid up down in Harrison with six or eight bottles of wine. They won’t be back for a week. Fucking rummies.” His lip curled. He was the only guy in our gang who would never take a drink, even to show he had, you know, big balls. He said he wasn’t going to grow up to be a fucking tosspot like his old man. And he told me once privately—this was after the DeSpain twins showed up with a six-pack they’d hawked from their old man and everybody teased Chris because he wouldn’t take a beer or even a swallow—that he was *scared* to drink. He said his father never got his nose all the way out of the bottle anymore, that his older brother had been drunk out of his tits when he raped that girl, and that Eyeball was always guzzling Purple Jesuses with Ace Merrill and Charlie Hogan and Billy Tessio. What, he asked me, did I think his chances of letting go of the bottle would be once he picked it up? Maybe you think that’s funny, a twelve-year-old worrying that he might be an incipient alcoholic, but it wasn’t funny to Chris. Not at all. He’d thought about the possibility a lot. He’d had occasion to.

“You got shells for it?”

“Nine of them—all that was left in the box. He’ll think he used em himself, shooting at cans while he was drunk.”

“Is it loaded?”

“*No!* Chrissake, what do you think I *am*?”

I finally took the gun. I liked the heavy way it sat there in my hand. I could see myself as Steve Carella of the 87th Squad, going after that guy The Heckler or maybe covering Meyer Meyer or Kling while they broke into a desperate junkie’s sleazy apartment. I sighted on one of the smelly trashcans and squeezed the trigger.

KA-BLAM!

The gun bucked in my hand. Fire licked from the end. It felt as if my wrist had just been broken. My heart vaulted nimbly into the back of my mouth and crouched there, trembling. A big hole appeared in the corrugated metal surface of the trashcan—it was the work of an evil conjuror.

“Jesus!” I screamed.

Chris was cackling wildly—in real amusement or hysterical terror I couldn’t tell. “You did it, you did it! *Gordie did it!*” he bugled. “*Hey, Gordon Lachance is shooting up Castle Rock!*”

“*Shut up! Let’s get out of here!*” I screamed, and grabbed him by the shirt.

As we ran, the back door of the Blue Point jerked open and Francine Tupper stepped out in her white rayon waitress’s uniform. “Who did that? Who’s letting off cherry-bombs back here?”

We ran like hell, cutting behind the drugstore and the hardware store and the Emporium Galorium, which sold antiques and junk and dime books. We climbed a fence, spiking our palms with splinters, and finally came out on Curran Street. I threw the .45 at Chris as we ran; he was killing himself laughing but caught it and somehow managed to stuff it back into his knapsack and close one of the snaps. Once around the corner of Curran and back on Carbine Street, we slowed to a walk so we wouldn’t look suspicious, running in the heat. Chris was still giggling.

“Man, you shoulda seen your face. Oh man, that was priceless. That was really fine. My fucking-A.” He shook his head and slapped his leg and howled.

“You knew it was loaded, didn’t you? You wet! I’m gonna be in trouble. That Tupper babe saw me.”

“Shit, she thought it was a firecracker. Besides, ole Thunderjugs Tupper can’t see past the end of her own nose, you know that. Thinks wearing glasses would spoil her *pret-ty face*.” He put one

palm against the small of his back and bumped his hips and got laughing again.

“Well, I don’t care. That was a mean trick, Chris. Really.”

“Come on, Gordie.” He put a hand on my shoulder. “I didn’t know it was loaded, honest to God, I swear on my mother’s name I just took it out of my dad’s bureau. He always unloads it. He must have been really drunk when he put it away the last time.”

“You really didn’t load it?”

“No sir.”

“You swear it on your mother’s name even if she goes to hell for you telling a lie?”

“I swear.” He crossed himself and spit, his face as open and repentant as any choirboy’s. But when we turned into the vacant lot where our treehouse was and saw Vern and Teddy sitting on their bedrolls waiting for us, he started to laugh again. He told them the whole story, and after everybody had had their yucks, Teddy asked him what Chris thought they needed a pistol for.

“Nothin,” Chris said. “Except we might see a bear. Something like that. Besides, it’s spooky sleeping out at night in the woods.”

Everybody nodded at that. Chris was the biggest, toughest guy in our gang, and he could always get away with saying things like that. Teddy, on the other hand, would have gotten his ass ragged off if he even hinted he was afraid of the dark.

“Did you set your tent up in the field?” Teddy asked Vern.

“Yeah. And I put two turned-on flashlights in it so it’ll look like we’re there after dark.”

“Hot shit!” I said, and clapped Vern on the back. For him, that was thinking. He grinned and blushed.

“So let’s go,” Teddy said. “Come on, it’s almost twelve already!”

Chris got up and we gathered around him.

“We’ll walk across Beeman’s field and behind that furniture place by Sonny’s Texaco,” he said. “Then we’ll get on the railroad tracks down by the dump and just walk across the trestle into Harlow.”

“How far do you think it’s gonna be?” Teddy asked.

Chris shrugged. “Harlow’s big. We’re gonna be walking at least twenty miles. That sound right to you, Gordie?”

“Yeah. It might even be thirty.”

“Even if it’s thirty we ought to be there by tomorrow afternoon, if no one goes pussy.”

“No pussies here,” Teddy said at once.

We all looked at each other for a second.

“*Miaoww*,” Vern said, and we all laughed.

“Come on, you guys,” Chris said, and shouldered his pack.

We walked out of the vacant lot together, Chris slightly in the lead.

## 10

By the time we got across Beeman’s field and had struggled up the cindery embankment to the Great Southern and Western Maine tracks, we had all taken our shirts off and tied them around our waists. We were sweating like pigs. At the top of the embankment we looked down the tracks, toward where we’d have to go.

I’ll never forget that moment, no matter how old I get. I was the only one with a watch—a cheap Timex I’d gotten as a premium for selling Cloverine Brand Salve the year before. Its hands stood at straight up noon, and the sun beat down on the dry, shadeless vista before us with savage heat. You could feel it working to get in under your skull and fry your brains.

Behind us was Castle Rock, spread out on the long hill that was known as Castle View, surrounding its green and shady common. Further down Castle River you could see the stacks of the woollen mill spewing smoke into a sky the color of gunmetal and spewing waste into the water. The Jolly Furniture Barn was on our left. And straight ahead of us the railroad tracks, bright and heliographing in the sun. They paralleled the Castle River, which was on our left. To our right was a lot of overgrown scrubland (there’s motorcycle track there today—they have scrambles every Sunday afternoon at 2:00 P.M.). An old abandoned water tower stood on the horizon, rusty and somehow scary.

We stood there for that one noontime moment and then Chris said impatiently, "Come on, let's get going."

We walked beside the tracks in the cinders, kicking up little puffs of blackish dust at every step. Our socks and sneakers were soon gritty with it. Vern started singing "Roll Me Over in the Clover" but soon quit it, which was a break for our ears. Only Teddy and Chris had brought canteens, and we were all hitting them pretty hard.

"We could fill the canteens again at the dump faucet," I said. "My dad told me that's a safe well. It's a hundred and ninety feet deep."

"Okay," Chris said, being the tough platoon leader. "That'll be a good place to take five, anyway."

"What about food?" Teddy asked suddenly. "I bet nobody thought to bring something to eat. I know I didn't."

Chris stopped. "Shit! I didn't, either. Gordie?"

I shook my head, wondering how I could have been so dumb.

"Vern?"

"Zip," Vern said. "Sorry."

"Well, let's see how much money we got," I said. I untied my shirt, spread it on the cinders, and dropped my own sixty-eight cents onto it. The coins glittered feverishly in the sunlight. Chris had a tattered dollar and two pennies. Teddy had two quarters and two nickels. Vern had exactly seven cents.

"Two-thirty-seven," I said. "Not bad. There's a store at the end of that little road that goes to the dump. Somebody'll have to walk down there and get some hamburger and some tonics while the others rest."

"Who?" Vern asked.

"We'll match for it when we get to the dump. Come on."

I slid all the money into my pants pocket and was just tying my shirt around my waist again when Chris hollered: "*Train!*"

I put my hand out on one of the rails to feel it, even though I could already hear it. The rail was thrumming crazily; for a moment it was like holding the train in my hand.

"*Paratroops over the side!*" Vern bawled, and leaped halfway down the embankment in one crazy, clownish stride. Vern was nuts for playing paratroops anyplace the ground was soft—a gravel pit, a

haymow, an embankment like this one. Chris jumped after him. The train was really loud now, probably headed straight up our side of the river toward Lewiston. Instead of jumping, Teddy turned in the direction from which it was coming. His thick glasses glittered in the sun. His long hair flopped untidily over his brow in sweat-soaked stringers.

“Go on, Teddy,” I said.

“No, huh-uh, I’m gonna dodge it.” He looked at me, his magnified eyes frantic with excitement. “A train-dodge, dig it? What’s trucks after a fuckin train-dodge?”

“You’re crazy, man. You want to get killed?”

“Just like the beach at Normandy!” Teddy yelled, and strode out into the middle of the tracks. He stood on one of the crossties, lightly balanced.

I stood stunned for a moment, unable to believe stupidity of such width and breadth. Then I grabbed him, dragged him fighting and protesting to the embankment, and pushed him over. I jumped after him and Teddy caught me a good one in the guts while I was still in the air. The wind whooshed out of me, but I was still able to hit him in the sternum with my knee and knock him flat on his back before he could get all the way up. I landed, gasping and sprawling, and Teddy grabbed me around the neck. We went rolling all the way to the bottom of the embankment, hitting and clawing at each other while Chris and Vern stared at us, stupidly surprised.

“You little son of a bitch!” Teddy was screaming at me. “You fucker! Don’t you throw your weight around on me! I’ll kill you, you dipshit!”

I was getting my breath back now, and I made it to my feet. I backed away as Teddy advanced, holding my open hands up to slap away his punches, half-laughing and half-scared. Teddy was no one to fool around with when he went into one of his screaming fits. He’d take on a big kid in that state, and after the big kid broke both of his arms, he’d bite.

“Teddy, you can dodge anything you want after we see what we’re going to see but *whack* on the shoulder as one wildly swinging fist got past me

“until then no one’s supposed to see *us*, you *whack* on the side of the face, and then we might have had a real fight if Chris and Vern

“stupid wet end!” hadn’t grabbed us and kept us apart. Above us, the train roared by in a thunder of diesel exhaust and the great heavy clacking of boxcar wheels. A few cinders bounced down the embankment and the argument was over ... at least until we could hear ourselves talk again.

It was only a short freight, and when the caboose had trailed by, Teddy said: “I’m gonna kill him. At least give him a fat lip.” He struggled against Chris, but Chris only grabbed him tighter.

“Calm down, Teddy,” Chris said quietly, and he kept saying it until Teddy stopped struggling and just stood there, his glasses hanging askew and his hearing-aid cord dangling limply against his chest on its way down to the battery, which he had shoved into the pocket of his jeans.

When he was completely still, Chris turned to me and said: “What the hell are you fighting with him about, Gordon?”

“He wanted to dodge the train. I figured the engineer would see him and report it. They might send a cop out.”

“Ahhh, he’d be too busy makin chocolate in his drawers,” Teddy said, but he didn’t seem angry anymore. The storm had passed.

“Gordie was just trying to do the right thing,” Vern said. “Come on, peace.”

“Peace, you guys,” Chris agreed.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, and held out my hand, palm up. “Peace, Teddy?”

“I coulda dodged it,” he said to me. “You know that, Gordie?”

“Yeah,” I said, although the thought turned me cold inside. “I know it.”

“Okay. Peace, then.”

“Skin it, man,” Chris ordered, and let go of Teddy.

Teddy slapped his hand down on mine hard enough to sting and then turned it over. I slapped his.

“Fuckin pussy Lachance,” Teddy said.

“*Meeiowww*,” I said.

“Come on, you guys,” Vern said. “Let’s go, okay?”

“Go anywhere you want, but don’t go here,” Chris said solemnly, and Vern drew back as if to hit him.

## 11

We got to the dump around one-thirty, and Vern led the way down the embankment with a *Paratroops over the side!* We went to the bottom in big jumps and leaped over the brackish trickle of water oozing listlessly out of the culvert which poked out of the cinders. Beyond this small boggy area was the sandy, trash-littered verge of the dump.

There was a six-foot security fence surrounding it. Every twenty feet weather-faded signs were posted. They said:

CASTLE ROCK DUMP  
HOURS 4-8 P.M.  
CLOSED MONDAYS  
TRESPASSING STRICTLY FORBIDDEN

We climbed to the top of the fence, swung over, and jumped down. Teddy and Vern led the way toward the well, which you tapped with an old-fashioned pump—the kind from which you had to call the water with elbow-grease. There was a Crisco can filled with water next to the pump handle, and the great sin was to forget to leave it filled for the next guy to come along. The iron handle stuck off at an angle, looking a one-winged bird that was trying to fly. It had once been green, but almost all of the paint had been rubbed off by the thousands of hands that had worked that handle since 1940.

The dump is one of my strongest memories of Castle Rock. It always reminds me of the surrealist painters when I think of it—those fellows who were always painting pictures of clockfaces lying limply in the crotches of trees or Victorian living rooms standing in the middle of the Sahara or steam engines coming out of fireplaces. To my child’s eye, *nothing* in the Castle Rock Dump looked as if it really belonged there.

We had entered from the back. If you came from the front, a wide dirt road came in through the gate, broadened out into a semicircular area that had been bulldozed as flat as a dirt landing-strip, and then ended abruptly at the edge of the dumping-pit. The pump (Teddy and Vern were currently standing there and squabbling about who was going to prime it) was at the back of this great pit. It was maybe eighty feet deep and filled with all the American things that get empty, wear out, or just don't work anymore. There was so much stuff that my eyes hurt just looking at it—or maybe it was your brain that actually hurt, because it could never quite decide what your eye should stop on. Then your eye *would* stop, or be stopped, by something that seemed as out of place as those limp clockfaces or the living room in the desert. A brass bedstead leaning drunkenly in the sun. A little girl's dolly looking amazedly between her thighs as she gave birth to stuffing. An overturned Studebaker automobile with its chrome bullet nose glittering in the sun like some Buck Rogers missile. One of those giant water bottles they have in office buildings, transformed by the summer sun into a hot, blazing sapphire.

There was plenty of wildlife there, too, although it wasn't the kind you see in the Walt Disney nature films or at those tame zoos where you can pet the animals. Plump rats, wood-chucks grown sleek and lumbering on such rich chow as rotting hamburger and maggoty vegetables, seagulls by the thousands, and stalking among the gulls like thoughtful, introspective ministers, an occasional huge crow. It was also the place where the town's stray dogs came for a meal when they couldn't find any trashcans to knock over or any deer to run. They were a miserable, ugly-tempered, mongrel lot; slat-sided and grinning bitterly, they would attack each other over a fly-blown piece of bologna or a pile of chicken guts fuming in the sun.

But these dogs never attacked Milo Pressman, the dump-keeper, because Milo was never without Chopper at his heel. Chopper was—at least until Joe Camber's dog Cujo went rabid twenty years later—the most feared and least seen dog in Castle Rock. He was the meanest dog for forty miles around (or so we heard), and ugly enough to stop a striking clock. The kids whispered legends about

Chopper's meanness. Some said he was half German shepherd, some said he was mostly boxer, and a kid from Castle View with the unfortunate name of Harry Horr claimed that Chopper was a Doberman pinscher whose vocal cords had been surgically removed so you couldn't hear him when he was on the attack. There were other kids who claimed Chopper was a maniacal Irish wolfhound and Milo Pressman fed him a special mixture of Gaines Meal and chicken blood. These same kids claimed that Milo didn't dare take Chopper out of his shack unless the dog was hooded like a hunting falcon.

The most common story was that Pressman had trained Chopper not just to sic but to sic specific *parts* of the human anatomy. Thus an unfortunate kid who had illegally scaled the dump fence to pick up illicit treasures might hear Milo Pressman cry: "Chopper! Sic! Hand!" And Chopper would grab that hand and hold on, ripping skin and tendons, powdering bones between his slavering jaws, until Milo told him to quit. It was rumored that Chopper could take an ear, an eye, a foot, or a leg ... and that a second offender who was surprised by Milo and the ever-loyal Chopper would hear the dread cry: "Chopper! Sic! Balls!" And that kid would be a soprano for the rest of his life. Milo himself was more commonly seen and thus more commonly regarded. He was just a half-bright working joe who supplemented his small town salary by fixing things people threw away and selling them around town.

There was no sign of either Milo or Chopper today.

Chris and I watched Vem prime the pump while Teddy worked the handle frantically. At last he was rewarded with a flood of clear water. A moment later both of them had their heads under the trough, Teddy still pumping away a mile a minute.

"Teddy's crazy," I said softly.

"Oh yeah," Chris said matter-of-factly. "He won't live to be twice the age he is now, I bet. His dad burnin his ears like that. That's what did it. He's crazy to dodge trucks the way he does. He can't see worth a shit, glasses or no glasses."

"You remember that time in the tree?"

"Yeah."

The year before, Teddy and Chris had been climbing the big pine tree behind my house. They were almost to the top and Chris said they couldn't go any further because all of the branches up there were rotten. Teddy got that crazy, stubborn look on his face and said fuck that, he had pine tar all over his hands and he was gonna go up until he could touch the top. Nothing Chris said could talk him out of it. So up he went, and he actually made it—he only weighed seventy-five pounds or so, remember. He stood there, clutching the top of the pine in one tar-gummy hand, shouting that he was king of the world or some stupid thing like that, and then there was a sickening, rotted crack as the branch he was standing on gave way and he plummeted. What happened next was one of those things that make you sure there must be a God. Chris reached out, purely on reflex, and what he caught was a fistful of Teddy Duchamp's hair. And although his wrist swelled up fat and he was unable to use his right hand very well for almost two weeks, Chris held him until Teddy, screaming and cursing, got his foot on a live branch thick enough to support his weight. Except for Chris's blind grab, he would have turned and crashed and smashed all the way to the foot of the tree, a hundred and twenty feet below. When they got down, Chris was gray-faced and almost puking with the fear reaction. And Teddy wanted to fight him for pulling his hair. They would have gone at it, too, if I hadn't been there to make peace.

"I dream about that every now and then," Chris said, and looked at me with strangely defenseless eyes. "Except in this dream I have, I always miss him. I just get a couple of hairs and Teddy screams and down he goes. Weird, huh?"

"Weird," I agreed, and for just one moment we looked in each other's eyes and saw some of the true things that made us friends. Then we looked away again and watched Teddy and Vern throwing water at each other, screaming and laughing and calling each other pussies.

"Yeah, but you didn't miss him," I said. "Chris Chambers never misses, am I right?"

"Not even when the ladies leave the seat down," he said. He winked at me, formed an O with his thumb and forefinger, and spat a

neat white bullet through it.

“Eat me raw, Chambers,” I said.

“Through a Flavor Straw,” he said, and we grinned at each other.

Vern yelled: *“Come on and get your water before it runs back down the pipe!”*

“Race you,” Chris said.

“In this heat? You’re off your gourd.”

“Come on,” he said, still grinning. “On my go.”

“Okay.”

“Go!”

We raced, our sneakers digging up the hard, sunbaked dirt, our torsos leaning out ahead of our flying bluejeaned legs, our fists doubled. It was a dead heat, with both Vern on Chris’s side and Teddy on mine holding up their middle fingers at the same moment. We collapsed laughing in the still, smoky odor of the place, and Chris tossed Vern his canteen. When it was full, Chris and I went to the pump and first Chris pumped for me and then I pumped for him, the shocking cold water sluicing off the soot and the heat all in a flash, sending our suddenly freezing scalps four months ahead into January. Then I re-filled the lard can and we all walked over to sit down in the shade of the dump’s only tree, a stunted ash forty feet from Milo Pressman’s tarpaper shack. The tree was hunched slightly to the west, as if what it really wanted to do was pick up its roots the way an old lady would pick up her skirts and just get the hell out of the dump.

“The most!” Chris said, laughing, tossing his tangled hair back from his brow.

“A blast,” I said, nodding, still laughing myself.

“This is really a good time,” Vern said simply, and he didn’t just mean being off-limits inside the dump, or fudging our folks, or going on a hike up the railroad tracks into Harlow; he meant those things but it seems to me now that there was more, and that we all knew it. Everything was there and around us. We knew exactly who we were and exactly where we were going. It was grand.

We sat under the tree for awhile, shooting the shit like we always did—who had the best ballteam (still the Yankees with Mantle and

Maris, of course), what was the best car ('55 Thunderbird, with Teddy holding out stubbornly for the '58 Corvette), who was the toughest guy in Castle Rock who wasn't in our gang (we all agreed it was Jamie Gallant, who gave Mrs. Ewing the finger and then sauntered out of her class with his hands in his pockets while she shouted at him), the best TV show (either *The Untouchables* or *Peter Gunn*-both Robert Stack as Eliot Ness and Craig Stevens as Gunn were cool), all that stuff.

It was Teddy who first noticed that the shade of the ash tree was getting longer and asked me what time it was. I looked at my watch and was surprised to see it was quarter after two.

"Hey man," Vern said. "Somebody's got to go for provisions. Dump opens at four. I don't want to still be here when Milo and Chopper make the scene."

Even Teddy agreed. He wasn't afraid of Milo, who had a pot belly and was at least forty, but every kid in Castle Rock squeezed his balls between his legs when Chopper's name was mentioned.

"Okay," I said. "Odd man goes?"

"That's you, Gordie," Chris said, smiling. "Odd as a cod."

"So's your mother," I said, and gave them each a coin. "Flip."

Four coins glittered up into the sun. Four hands snatched them from the air. Four flat smacks on four grimy wrists. We uncovered. Two heads and two tails. We flipped again and this time all four of us had tails.

"Oh Jesus, that's a goocher," Vern said, not telling us anything we didn't know. Four heads, or a moon, was supposed to be extraordinarily good luck. Four tails was a goocher, and that meant very bad luck.

"Fuck that shit," Chris said. "It doesn't mean anything. Go again."

"No, man," Vern said earnestly. "A goocher, that's really bad. You remember when Clint Bracken and those guys got wiped out on Sirois Hill in Durham? Billy tole me they was flippin for beers and they came up a goocher just before they got into the car. And bang! they all get fuckin totalled. I don't like that. Sincerely."

"Nobody believes that crap about moons and goochers," Teddy said impatiently. "It's baby stuff, Vern. You gonna flip or not?"

Vern flipped, but with obvious reluctance. This time he, Chris, and Teddy all had tails. I was showing Thomas Jefferson on a nickel. And I was suddenly scared. It was as if a shadow had crossed some inner sun. They still had a goocher, the three of them, as if dumb fate had pointed at them a second time. Abruptly I thought of Chris saying: *I just get a couple of hairs and Teddy screams and down he goes. Weird, huh?*

Three tails, one head.

Then Teddy was laughing his crazy, cackling laugh and pointing at me and the feeling was gone.

"I heard that only fairies laugh like that," I said, and gave him the finger.

"Eeee-eeee-eeee, Gordie," Teddy laughed. "Go get the provisions, you fuckin morphadite."

I wasn't really sorry to be going. I was rested up and didn't mind going down the road to the Florida Market.

"Don't call me any of your mother's pet names," I said to Teddy.

"Eeee-eee-eeee, what a fuckin wet you are, Lachance."

"Go on, Gordie," Chris said. "We'll wait over by the tracks."

"You guys better not go without me," I said.

Vern laughed. "Goin without you'd be like goin with Slitz instead of Budweiser's, Gordie."

"Ah, shut up."

They chanted together: "I don't shut up, I *grow* up. And when I look at you I *throw* up."

"Then your mother goes around the corner and licks it up," I said, and hauled ass out of there, giving them the finger over my shoulder as I went. I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, did you?

## 12

*Different strokes for different folks*, they say now, and that's cool. So if I say *summer* to you, you get one set of private, personal images that are all the way different from mine. That's cool. But for me, *summer* is always going to mean running down the road to the Florida Market with change jingling in my pockets, the temperature in the gay nineties, my feet dressed in Keds. The word conjures an image of the GS&WM railroad tracks running into a perspective-point in the distance, burnished so white under the sun that when you closed your eyes you could still see them there in the dark, only blue instead of white.

But there was more to that summer than our trip across the river to look for Ray Brower, although that looms the largest. Sounds of The Fleetwoods singing, "Come Softly to Me" and Robin Luke singing "Susie Darlin" and Little Anthony popping the vocal on "I Ran All the Way Home." Were they all hits in that summer of 1960? Yes and no. Mostly yes. In the long purple evenings when rock and roll from WLAM blurred into night baseball from WCOU, time shifted. I think it was all 1960 and that the summer went on for a space of years, held magically intact in a web of sounds: the sweet hum of crickets, the machine-gun roar of playing-cards riffing against the spokes of some kid's bicycle as he pedaled home for a late supper of cold cuts and iced tea, the flat Texas voice of Buddy Knox singing "Come along and be my party doll, and I'll make love to you, to you," and the baseball announcer's voice mingling with the song and with the smell of freshly cut grass: "Count's three and two now. Whitey Ford leans over ... shakes off the sign ... now he's got it ... Ford pauses ... pitches ... *and there it goes! Williams got all of that one! Kiss it goodbye! RED SOX LEAD, THREE TO ONE!*" Was Ted Williams still playing for the Red Sox in 1960? You bet your ass he was—.316 for my man Ted. I remember that very clearly. Baseball had become

important to me in the last couple of years, ever since I'd had to face the knowledge that baseball players were as much flesh and blood as I was. That knowledge came when Roy Campanella's car overturned and the papers screamed mortal news from the front pages: his career was done, he was going to sit in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. How that came back to me, with that same sickening mortal thud, when I sat down to this typewriter one morning two years ago, turned on the radio, and heard that Thurman Munson had died while trying to land his airplane.

There were movies to go see at the Gem, which has long since been torn down; science fiction movies like *Gog* with Richard Egan and westerns with Audie Murphy (Teddy saw every movie Audie Murphy made at least three times; he believed Murphy was almost a god) and war movies with John Wayne. There were games and endless bolted meals, lawns to mow, places to run to, walls to pitch pennies against, people to clap you on the back. And now I sit here trying to look through an IBM keyboard and see that time, trying to recall the best and the worst of that green and brown summer, and I can almost feel the skinny, scabbed boy still buried in this advancing body and hear those sounds. But the apotheosis of the memory and the time is Gordon Lachance running down the road to the Florida Market with change in his pockets and sweat running down his back.

I asked for three pounds of hamburger and got some hamburger rolls, four bottles of Coke and a two-cent churchkey to open them with. The owner, a man named George Dusset, got the meat and then leaned by his cash register, one hammy hand planted on the counter by the big bottle of hardcooked eggs, a toothpick in his mouth, his huge beer belly rounding his white tee-shirt like a sail filled with a good wind. He stood right there as I shopped, making sure I didn't try to hawk anything. He didn't say a word until he was weighing up the hamburger.

"I know you. You're Denny Lachance's brother. Ain't you?" The toothpick journeyed from one corner of his mouth to the other, as if on ball bearings. He reached behind the cash register, picked up a bottle of S'OK cream soda, and chugged it.

"Yes, sir. But Denny, he—"

“Yeah, I know. That’s a sad thing, kid. The Bible says: ‘In the midst of life, we are in death.’ Did you know that? Yuh. I lost a brother in Korea. You look just like Denny, people ever tell you that? Yuh. Spitting image.”

“Yes, sir, sometimes,” I said glumly.

“I remember the year he was All-Conference. Halfback, he played. Yuh. Could he run? Father God and Sonny Jesus! You’re probably too young to remember.” He was looking over my head, out through the screen door and into the blasting heat, as if he were having a beautiful vision of my brother.

“I remember. Uh, Mr. Dusset?”

“What, kid?” His eyes were still misty with memory; the toothpick trembled a little between his lips.

“Your thumb is on that scales.”

“*What?*” He looked down, astounded, to where the ball of his thumb was pressed firmly on the white enamel. If I hadn’t moved away from him a little bit when he started talking about Dennis, the ground meat would have hidden it. “Why, so it is. Yuh. I guess I just got thinkin about your brother, God love him.” George Dusset signed a cross on himself. When he took his thumb off the scales, the needle sprang back six ounces. He patted a little more meat on top and then did the package up with white butcher’s paper.

“Okay,” he said past the toothpick. “Let’s see what we got here. Three pounds of hamburg, that’s a dollar forty-four. Hamburg rolls, that’s twenty-seven. Four sodas, forty cents. One churchkey, two pence. Comes to ...” He added it up on the bag he was going to put the stuff in. “Two-twenty-nine.”

“Thirteen,” I said.

He looked up at me very slowly, frowning. “Huh?”

“Two-thirteen. You added it wrong.”

“Kid, are you—”

“You added it wrong,” I said. “First you put your thumb on the scales and then you overcharged on the groceries, Mr. Dusset. I was gonna throw some Hostess Twinkies on top of that order but now I guess I won’t.” I spanged two dollars and thirteen cents down on the Schlitz placemat in front of him.

He looked at the money, then at me. The frown was now tremendous, the lines on his face as deep as fissures. "What are you, kid?" he said in a low voice that was ominously confidential. "Are you some kind of smartass?"

"No, sir," I said. "But you ain't gonna jap me and get away with it. What would your mother say if she knew you was japping little kids?"

He thrust our stuff into the paper bag with quick stiff movements, making the Coke bottles clink together. He thrust the bag at me roughly, not caring if I dropped it and broke the sodas or not. His swarthy face was flushed and dull, the frown now frozen in place. "Okay, kid. Here you go. Now what you do is you get the Christ out of my store. I see you in here again and I going to throw you out, me. Yuh. Smartass little sonofawhore."

"I won't come in again," I said, walking over to the screen door and pushing it open. The hot afternoon buzzed somnolently along its appointed course outside, sounding green and brown and full of silent light. "Neither will none of my friends. I guess I got fifty or so."

"Your brother wasn't no smartass!" George Dusset yelled.

"*Fuck you!*" I yelled, and ran like hell down the road.

I heard the screen door bang open like a gunshot and his bull roar came after me: "*If you ever come in here again I'll fat your lip for you, you little punk!*"

I ran until I was over the first hill, scared and laughing to myself, my heart beating out a triphammer pulse in my chest. Then I slowed to a fast walk, looking back over my shoulder every now and then to make sure he wasn't going to take after me in his car, or anything.

He didn't, and pretty soon I got to the dump gate. I put the bag inside my shirt, climbed the gate, and monkeyed down the other side. I was halfway across the dump area when I saw something I didn't like—Milo Pressman's portholed '56 Buick was parked behind his tarpaper shack. If Milo saw me I was going to be in a world of hurt. As yet there was no sign of either him or the infamous Chopper, but all at once the chain-link fence at the back of the dump seemed very far away. I found myself wishing I'd gone around the outside, but I was now too far into the dump to want to turn around and go back. If Milo saw me climbing the dump fence, I'd probably be in

dutch when I got home, but that didn't scare me as much as Milo yelling for Chopper to sic would.

Scary violin music started to play in my head. I kept putting one foot in front of the other, trying to look casual, trying to look as if I belonged here with a paper grocery sack poking out of my shirt, heading for the fence between the dump and the railroad tracks.

I was about fifty feet from the fence and just beginning to think that everything was going to be all right after all when I heard Milo shout: "Hey! Hey, you! Kid! Get away f'n that fence! Get outta here!"

The smart thing to have done would have been to just agree with the guy and go around, but by then I was so keyed that instead of doing the smart thing I just broke for the fence with a wild yell, my sneakers kicking up dirt. Vern, Teddy, and Chris came out of the underbrush on the other side of the fence and stared anxiously through the chain-link.

*"You come back here!"* Milo bawled. *"Come back here or I'll sic my dawg on you, goddammit!"*

I did not exactly find that to be the voice of sanity and conciliation, and I ran even faster for the fence, my arms pumping, the brown grocery bag crackling against my skin. Teddy started to laugh his idiotic chortling laugh, *eee-eee-eeee* into the air like some reed instrument being played by a lunatic.

"Go, Gordie! Go!" Vern screamed.

And Milo yelled: "Sic 'im, Chopper! Go get 'im, boy!"

I threw the bag over the fence and Vern elbowed Teddy out of the way to catch it. Behind me I could hear Chopper coming, shaking the earth, blurting fire out of one distended nostril and ice out of the other, dripping sulphur from his champing jaws. I threw myself halfway up the fence with one leap, screaming. I made it to the top in no more than three seconds and simply leaped—I never thought about it, never even looked down to see what I might land on. What I *almost* landed on was Teddy, who was doubled over and laughing like crazy. His glasses had fallen off and tears were streaming out of his eyes. I missed him by inches and hit the clay-gravel embankment just to his left. At the same instant, Chopper hit the chain-link fence behind me and let out a howl of mingled pain and disappointment. I

turned around, holding one skinned knee, and got my first look at the famous Chopper—and my first lesson in the vast difference between myth and reality.

Instead of some huge hellhound with red, savage eyes and teeth jutting out of his mouth like straight-pipes from a hotrod, I was looking at a medium-sized mongrel dog that was a perfectly common black and white. He was yapping and jumping fruitlessly, going up on his back legs to paw the fence.

Teddy was now strutting up and down in front of the fence, twiddling his glasses in one hand, and inciting Chopper to ever greater rage.

“Kiss my ass, Choppie!” Teddy invited, spittle flying from his lips. “Kiss my ass! Bite shit!”

He bumped his fanny against the chain-link fence and Chopper did his level best to take Teddy up on his invitation. He got nothing for his pains but a good healthy nose-bump. He began to bark crazily, foam flying from his snout. Teddy kept bumping his rump against the fence and Chopper kept lunging at it, always missing, doing nothing but racking out his nose, which was now bleeding. Teddy kept exhorting him, calling him by the somehow grisly diminutive “Choppie,” and Chris and Vern were lying weakly on the embankment, laughing so hard that they could now do little more than wheeze.

And here came Milo Pressman, dressed in sweat-stained fatigues and a New York Giants baseball cap, his mouth drawn down in distracted anger.

“Here, here!” he was yelling. “You boys stop a-teasing that dawg! You hear me? *Stop it right now!*”

“Bite it, Choppie!” Teddy yelled, strutting up and down on our side of the fence like a mad Prussian reviewing his troops. “Come on and sic me! Sic me!”

Chopper went nuts. I mean it sincerely. He ran around in a big circle, yelping and barking and foaming, rear feet spewing up tough little dry clods. He went around about three times, getting his courage up, I guess, and then he launched himself straight at the security fence. He must have been going thirty miles an hour when

he hit it, I kid you not—his doggy lips were stretched back from his teeth and his ears were flying in the slipstream. The whole fence made a low, musical sound as the chain-link was not just driven back against the posts but sort of *stretched* back. It was like a zither note—*yimmmmmmmmm*. A strangled yawp came out of Chopper’s mouth, both eyes came up blank and he did a totally amazing reverse snap-roll, landing on his back with a solid thump that sent dust puffing up around him. He just lay there for a moment and then he crawled off with his tongue hanging crookedly from the left side of his mouth.

At this, Milo himself went almost berserk with rage. His complexion darkened to a scary plum color—even his scalp was purple under the short hedgehog bristles of his flattop haircut. Sitting stunned in the dirt, both knees of my jeans torn out, my heart still thudding from the nearness of my escape, I thought that Milo looked like a human version of Chopper.

“I know you!” Milo raved. “You’re Teddy Duchamp! I know *all* of you! Sonny, I’ll beat your ass, teasing my dawg like that!”

“Like to see you try!” Teddy raved right back. “Let’s see you climb over this fence and get me, fatass!”

*“WHAT? WHAT DID YOU CALL ME?”*

*“FATASS!”* Teddy screamed happily. *“LARD-BUCKET! TUBBAGUTS! COME ON! COME ON!”* He was jumping up and down, fists clenched, sweat flying from his hair. *“TEACH YOU TO SIC YOUR STUPID DOG ON PEOPLE! COME ON! LIKE TO SEE YOU TRY!”*

“You little tin-weasel peckerwood loony’s son! I’ll see your mother gets an invitation to go down and talk to the judge in court about what you done to my dawg!”

“What did you call me?” Teddy asked hoarsely. He had stopped jumping up and down. His eyes had gone huge and glassy, and his skin was the color of lead.

Milo had called Teddy a lot of things, but he was able to go back and get the one that had struck home with no trouble at all—since then I have noticed again and again what a genius people have for that ... for finding the LOONY button down inside and not just pressing it but hammering on the fucker.

“Your dad was a loony,” he said, grinning. “Loony up in Togus, that’s what. Crazier’n a shithouse rat. Crazier’n a buck with tickwood fever. Nuttier’n a long-tailed cat in a room fulla rockin chairs. Loony. No wonder you’re actin the way you are, with a loony for a f—”

“*YOUR MOTHER BLOWS DEAD RATS!*” Teddy screamed. “*AND IF YOU CALL MY DAD A LOONY AGAIN, I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU, YOU COCKSUCKER!*”

“Loony,” Milo said smugly. He’d found the button, all right. “Loony’s kid, loony’s kid, your father’s got toys in the attic, kid, tough break.”

Vern and Chris had been getting over their laughing fit, perhaps getting ready to appreciate the seriousness of the situation and call Teddy off, but when Teddy told Milo that his mother blew dead rats, they went back into hysterics again, lying there on the bank, rolling from side to side, their feet kicking, holding their bellies. “No more,” Chris said weakly. “No more, please, no more, I swear to God I’m gonna *bust!*”

Chopper was walking around in a large, dazed figure-eight behind Milo. He looked like the losing fighter about ten seconds after the ref has ended the match and awarded the winner a TKO. Meanwhile, Teddy and Milo continued their discussion of Teddy’s father, standing nose to nose, with the wire fence Milo was too old and too fat to climb between them.

“Don’t you say nothing else about my dad! My dad stormed the beach at Normandy, you fucking wet end!”

“Yeah, well, where is he now, you ugly little four-eyed turd? He’s up to Togus, ain’t he? He’s up to Togus because *HE WENT FUCKING SECTION EIGHT!*”

“Okay, that’s it,” Teddy said. “That’s it, that’s the end, I’m gonna kill you.” He threw himself at the fence and started up.

“You come on and try it, you slimy little bastard.” Milo stood back, grinning and waiting.

“No!” I shouted. I got to my feet, grabbed Teddy by the loose seat of his jeans, and pulled him off the fence. We both staggered back and fell over, him on top. He squashed my balls pretty good and I groaned. Nothing hurts like having your balls squashed, you know it? But I kept my arms locked around Teddy’s middle.

“Lemme up!” Teddy sobbed, writhing in my arms. “Lemme up, Gordie! Nobody ranks out my old man. *LEMME UP GODDAMMIT LEMME UP!*”

“That’s just what he wants!” I shouted in his ear. “He wants to get you over there and beat the piss out of you and then take you to the cops!”

“Huh?” Teddy craned around to look at me, his face dazed.

“Never mind your smartmouth, kid,” Milo said, advancing to the fence again with his hands curled into ham-sized fists. “Let’im fight his own battles.”

“Sure,” I said. “You only outweigh him by five hundred pounds.”

“I know you, too,” Milo said ominously. “Your name’s Lachance.” He pointed to where Vern and Chris were finally picking themselves up, still breathing fast from laughing so hard. “And those guys are Chris Chambers and one of those stupid Tessio kids. All your fathers are going to get calls from me, except for the loony up to Togus. You’ll go to the ’formatory, every one of you. Juvenile delinquents!”

He stood flat on his feet, big freckled hands held out like a guy who wanted to play One Potato Two Potato, breathing hard, eyes narrow, waiting for us to cry or say we were sorry or maybe give him Teddy so he could feed Teddy to Chopper.

Chris made an O out of his thumb and index finger and spat neatly through it.

Vern hummed and looked at the sky.

Teddy said: “Come on, Gordie. Let’s get away from this asshole before I puke.”

“Oh, you’re gonna get it, you foulmouthed little whoremaster. Wait’ll I get you to the Constable.”

“We heard what you said about his father,” I told him. “We’re all witnesses. And you sicced that dog on me. That’s against the law.”

Milo looked a trifle uneasy. “You was trespassin.”

“The hell I was. The dump’s public property.”

“You climbed the fence.”

“Sure I did, after you sicced your dog on me,” I said, hoping that Milo wouldn’t recall that I’d also climbed the gate to get in. “What’d

you think I was gonna do? Stand there and let 'im rip me to pieces? Come on, you guys. Let's go. It stinks around here."

"Formatory," Milo promised hoarsely, his voice shaking. "'Formatory for you wise guys."

"Can't wait to tell the cops how you called a war vet a fuckin loony," Chris called back over his shoulder as we moved away. "What did you do in the war, Mr. Pressman?"

*"NONE OF YOUR DAMN BUSINESS!"* Milo shrieked. *"YOU HURT MY DAWG!"*

"Put it on your t.s. slip and send it to the chaplain," Vern muttered, and then we were climbing the railroad embankment again.

"Come back here!" Milo shouted, but his voice was fainter now and he seemed to be losing interest.

Teddy shot him the finger as we walked away. I looked back over my shoulder when we got to the top of the embankment. Milo was standing there behind the security fence, a big man in a baseball cap with his dog sitting beside him. His fingers were hooked through the small chain-link diamonds as he shouted at us, and all at once I felt very sorry for him—he looked like the biggest third-grader in the world, locked inside the playground by mistake, yelling for someone to come and let him out. He kept on yelling for awhile and then he either gave up or we got out of range. No more was seen or heard of Milo Pressman and Chopper that day.

## 13

There was some discussion—in righteous tones that were actually kind of forced-sounding—about how we had shown that creepy Milo Pressman we weren't just another bunch of pussies. I told how the guy at the Florida Market had tried to jap us, and then we fell into a gloomy silence, thinking it over.

For my part, I was thinking that maybe there was something to that stupid goocher business after all. Things couldn't have turned out

much worse—in fact, I thought, it might be better to just keep going and spare my folks the pain of having one son in the Castle View Cemetery and one in South Windham Boys' Correctional. I had no doubt that Milo would go to the cops as soon as the importance of the dump having been closed at the time of the incident filtered into his thick skull. When that happened, he would realize that I really *had* been trespassing, public property or not. Probably that gave him every right in the world to sic his stupid dog on me. And while Chopper wasn't the hellhound he was cracked up to be, he sure would have ripped the sitdown out of my jeans if I hadn't won the race to the fence. All of it put a big dark crimp in the day. And there was another gloomy idea rolling around inside my head—the idea that this was no lark after all, and maybe we deserved our bad luck. Maybe it was even God warning us to go home. What were we doing, anyway, going to look at some kid that had gotten himself all mashed up by a freight train?

But we were doing it, and none of us wanted to stop.

We had almost reached the trestle which carried the tracks across the river when Teddy burst into tears. It was as if a great inner tidal wave had broken through a carefully constructed set of mental dykes. No bullshit—it was that sudden and that fierce. The sobs doubled him over like punches and he sort of collapsed into a heap, his hands going from his stomach to the mutilated gobs of flesh that were the remains of his ears. He went on crying in hard, violent bursts.

None of us knew what the fuck to do. It wasn't crying like when you got hit by a line drive while you were playing shortstop or smashed on the head playing tackle football on the common or when you fell off your bike. There was nothing physically wrong with him. We walked away a little and watched him, our hands in our pockets.

“Hey, man ...” Vern said in a very thin voice. Chris and I looked at Vern hopefully. “Hey, man” was always a good start. But Vern couldn't follow it up.

Teddy leaned forward onto the crossties and put a hand over his eyes. Now he looked like he was doing the Allah bit—“Salami, salami, baloney,” as Popeye says. Except it wasn't funny.

At last, when the force of his crying had trailed off a little, it was Chris who went to him. He was the toughest guy in our gang (maybe even tougher than Jamie Gallant, I thought privately), but he was also the guy who made the best peace. He had a way about it. I'd seen him sit down on the curb next to a little kid with a scraped knee, a kid he didn't even fucking *know*, and get him talking about something—the Shrine Circus that was coming to town or Huckleberry Hound on TV—until the kid forgot he was supposed to be hurt. Chris was good at it. He was tough enough to be good at it.

“Lissen, Teddy, what do you care what a fat old pile of shit like him said about your father? Huh? I mean, sincerely! That don't change nothing, does it? What a fat old pile of shit like him says? Huh? Huh? Does it?”

Teddy shook his head violently. It changed nothing. But to hear it spoken of in bright daylight, something he must have gone over and over in his mind while he was lying awake in bed and looking at the moon off-center in one windowpane, something he must have thought about in his slow and broken way until it seemed almost holy, trying to make sense out of it, and then to have it brought home to him that everybody else had merely dismissed his dad as a loony ... that had rocked him. But it changed nothing. Nothing.

“He still stormed the beach at Normandy, right?” Chris said. He picked up one of Teddy's sweaty, grimy hands and patted it.

Teddy nodded fiercely, crying. Snot was running out of his nose.

“Do you think that pile of shit was at Normandy?”

Teddy shook his head violently. “*Nuh-Nuh-No!*”

“Do you think that guy knows you?”

“Nuh-No! No, b-b-but—”

“Or your father? He one of your father's buddies?”

“*NO!*” Angry, horrified. The thought. Teddy's chest heaved and more sobs came out of it. He had pushed his hair away from his ears and I could see the round brown plastic button of the hearing aid set in the middle of his right one. The shape of the hearing aid made more sense than the shape of his ear, if you get what I mean.

Chris said calmly: “Talk is cheap.”

Teddy nodded, still not looking up.

“And whatever’s between you and your old man, talk can’t change that.”

Teddy’s head shook without definition, unsure if this was true. Someone had redefined his pain, and redefined it in shockingly common terms. That would

*(loony)*

have to be examined

*(fucking section eight)*

later. In depth. On long sleepless nights.

Chris rocked him. “He was ranking you, man,” he said in soothing cadences that were almost a lullaby. “He was tryin to rank you over that frigin fence, you know it? No strain, man. No fuckin strain. He don’t know nothin about your old man. He don’t know nothin but stuff he heard from those rumdums down at The Mellow Tiger. He’s just dogshit, man. Right, Teddy? Huh? Right?”

Teddy’s crying was down to sniffles. He wiped his eyes, leaving two sooty rings around them, and sat up.

“I’m okay,” he said, and the sound of his own voice seemed to convince him. “Yeah, I’m okay.” He stood up and put his glasses back on—dressing his naked face, it seemed to me. He laughed thinly and swiped his bare arm across the snot of his upper lip. “Fuckin crybaby, right?”

“No, man,” Vern said uncomfortably. “If anyone was rankin out my dad—”

“Then you got to kill em!” Teddy said briskly, almost arrogantly. “Kill their asses. Right, Chris?”

“Right,” Chris said amiably, and clapped Teddy on the back.

“Right, Gordie?”

“Absolutely,” I said, wondering how Teddy could care so much for his dad when his dad had practically killed him, and how I couldn’t seem to give much of a shit one way or the other about my own dad, when so far as I could remember, he had never laid a hand on me since I was three and got some bleach from under the sink and started to eat it.

We walked another two hundred yards down the tracks and Teddy said in a quieter voice: “Hey, if I spoiled your good time, I’m sorry. I

guess that was pretty stupid shit back there at that fence.”

“I ain’t sure I want it to be no good time,” Vern said suddenly.

Chris looked at him. “You sayin you want to go back, man?”

“No, huh-uh!” Vern’s face knotted in thought. “But going to see a dead kid—it shouldn’t be a party, maybe. I mean, if you can dig it. I mean ...” He looked at us rather wildly. “I mean, I could be a little scared. If you get me.”

Nobody said anything and Vern plunged on:

“I mean, sometimes I get nightmares. Like ... aw, you guys remember the time Danny Naughton left that pile of old funnybooks, the ones with the vampires and people gettin cut up and all that shit? Jeezum-crow, I’d wake up in the middle of the night dreamin about some guy hangin in a house with his face all green or somethin, you know, like that, and it seems like there’s somethin under the bed and if I dangled a hand over the side, that thing might, you know, grab me ...”

We all began to nod. We knew about the night shift. I would have laughed then, though, if you had told me that one day not too many years from then I’d parlay all those childhood fears and night-sweats into about a million dollars.

“And I don’t dare say anything because my friggin *brother* ... well, you know Billy ... he’d broadcast it ...” He shrugged miserably. “So I’m ascaresed to look at that kid cause if he’s, you know, if he’s really *bad* ...”

I swallowed and glanced at Chris. He was looking gravely at Vern and nodding for him to go on.

“If he’s really *bad*,” Vern resumed, “I’ll have nightmares about *him* and wake up thinkin it’s *him* under my bed, all cut up in a pool of blood like he just came out of one of those Saladmaster gadgets they show on TV, just eyeballs and hair, but *movin* somehow, if you can dig that, *moovin* somehow, you know, and gettin ready to grab —”

“Jesus Christ,” Teddy said thickly. “What a fuckin bedtime story.”

“Well I can’t *help* it,” Vern said, his voice defensive. “But I feel like we *hafta* see him, even if there are bad dreams. You know? Like we *hafta*. But ... but maybe it shouldn’t be no good time.”

“Yeah,” Chris said softly. “Maybe it shouldn’t.”

Vern said pleadingly: “You won’t tell none of the other guys, will you? I don’t mean about the nightmares, everybody has those—I mean about wakin up and thinkin there might be somethin under the bed. I’m too fuckin old for the boogeyman.”

We all said we wouldn’t tell, and a glum silence fell over us again. It was only quarter to three, but it felt much later. It was too hot and too much had happened. We weren’t even over into Harlow yet. We were going to have to pick them up and lay them down if we were going to make some real miles before dark.

We passed the railroad junction and a signal on a tall, rusty pole and all of us paused to chuck cinders at the steel flag on top, but nobody hit it. And around three-thirty we came to the Castle River and the GS&WM trestle which crossed it.

## 14

The river was better than a hundred yards across at that point in 1960; I’ve been back to look at it since then, and found it had narrowed up quite a bit during the years between. They’re always fooling with the river, trying to make it work better for the mills, and they’ve put in so many dams that it’s pretty well tamed. But in those days there were only three dams on the whole length of the river as it ran across New Hampshire and half of Maine. The Castle was still almost free back then, and every third spring it would overflow its banks and cover Route 136 in either Harlow or Danvers Junction or both.

Now, at the end of the driest summer western Maine had seen since the depression, it was still broad. From where we stood on the Castle Rock side, the bulking forest on the Harlow side looked like a different country altogether. The pines and spruces over there were bluish in the heat-haze of the afternoon. The rails went across the water fifty feet up, supported by an underpinning of tarred wooden

support posts and crisscrossing beams. The water was so shallow you could look down and see the tops of the cement plugs which had been planted ten feet deep in the riverbed to hold up the trestle.

The trestle itself was pretty chintzy—the rails ran over a long, narrow wooden platform of six-by-fours. There was a four-inch gap between each pair of these beams where you could look all the way down into the water. On the sides, there was no more than eighteen inches between the rail and the edge of the trestle. If a train came, it was maybe enough room to avoid getting plastered ... but the wind generated by a highballing freight would surely sweep you off to fall to a certain death against the rocks just below the surface of the shallow running water.

Looking at the trestle, we all felt fear start to crawl around in our bellies ... and mixing uneasily with the fear was the excitement of a boss dare, a really big one, something you could brag on for weeks after you got home ... if you got home. That queer light was creeping back into Teddy's eyes and I thought he wasn't seeing the GS&WM train trestle at all but a long sandy beach, a thousand LSTs aground in the foaming waves, ten thousand GIs charging up the sand, combat boots digging. They were leaping rolls of barbed wire! Tossing grenades at pillboxes! Overrunning machine-gun nests!

We were standing beside the tracks where the cinders sloped away toward the river's cut—the place where the embankment stopped and the trestle began. Looking down, I could see where the slope started to get steep. The cinders gave way to scraggly, tough-looking bushes and slabs of gray rock. Further down there were a few stunted firs with exposed roots writhing their way out of fissures in the plates of rock; they seemed to be looking down at their own miserable reflections in the running water.

At this point, the Castle River actually looked fairly clean; at Castle Rock it was just entering Maine's textile-mill belt. But there were no fish jumping out there, although the river was clear enough to see bottom—you had to go another ten miles upstream and toward New Hampshire before you could see any fish in the Castle. There were no fish, and along the edges of the river you could see dirty collars of foam around some of the rocks—the foam was the color of old ivory.

The river's smell was not particularly pleasant, either; it smelled like a laundry hamper full of mildewy towels. Dragonflies stitched at the surface of the water and laid their eggs with impunity. There were no trout to eat them. Hell, there weren't even any shiners.

"Man," Chris said softly.

"Come on," Teddy said in that brisk, arrogant way. "Let's go." He was already edging his way out, walking on the six-by-fours between the shining rails.

"Say," Vern said uneasily, "any of you guys know when the next train's due?"

We all shrugged.

I said: "There's the Route 136 bridge ..."

"Hey, come on, gimme a break!" Teddy cried. "That means walkin five miles down the river on this side and then five miles back up on the other side ... it'll take us until dark! If we use the trestle, we can get to the same place in *ten minutes!*"

"But if a train comes, there's nowhere to go," Vern said. He wasn't looking at Teddy. He was looking down at the fast, bland river.

"Fuck there isn't!" Teddy said indignantly. He swung over the edge and held one of the wooden supports between the rails. He hadn't gone out very far—his sneakers were almost touching the ground—but the thought of doing that same thing above the middle of the river with a fifty-foot drop beneath and a train bellowing by just over my head, a train that would probably be dropping some nice hot sparks into my hair and down the back of my neck ... none of that actually made me feel like Queen for a Day.

"See how easy it is?" Teddy said. He dropped to the embankment, dusted his hands, and climbed back up beside us.

"You tellin me you're gonna hang on that way if it's a two-hundred-car freight?" Chris asked. "Just sorta hang there by your hands for five or ten minutes?"

"You chicken?" Teddy shouted.

"No, just askin what you'd do," Chris said, grinning. "Peace, man."

"Go around if you want to!" Teddy brayed. "Who gives a fuck? I'll wait for you! I'll take a *nap!*"

“One train already went by,” I said reluctantly. “And there probably isn’t any more than one, two trains a day that go through Harlow. Look at this.” I kicked the weeds growing up through the railroad ties with one sneaker. There were no weeds growing between the tracks which ran between Castle Rock and Lewiston.

“There. See?” Teddy triumphant.

“But still, there’s a *chance*,” I added.

“Yeah,” Chris said. He was looking only at me, his eyes sparkling. “Dare you, Lachance.”

“Dares go first.”

“Okay,” Chris said. He widened his gaze to take in Teddy and Vern. “Any pussies here?”

“**NO!**” Teddy shouted.

Vern cleared his throat, croaked, cleared it again, and said “No” in a very small voice. He smiled a weak, sick smile.

“Okay,” Chris said ... but we hesitated for a moment, even Teddy, looking warily up and down the tracks. I knelt down and took one of the steel rails firmly in my hand, never minding that it was almost hot enough to blister the skin. The rail was mute.

“Okay,” I said, and as I said it some guy pole-vaulted in my stomach. He dug his pole all the way into my balls, it felt like, and ended up sitting astride my heart.

We went out onto the trestle single file: Chris first, then Teddy, then Vern, and me playing tail-end Charlie because I was the one who said dares go first. We walked on the platform crossties between the rails, and you had to look at your feet whether you were scared of heights or not. A misstep and you would go down to your crotch, probably with a broken ankle to pay.

The embankment dropped away beneath me, and every step further out seemed to seal our decision more firmly ... and to make it feel more suicidally stupid. I stopped to look up when I saw the rocks giving way to water far beneath me. Chris and Teddy were a long way ahead, almost out over the middle, and Vern was tottering slowly along behind them, peering studiously down at his feet. He looked like an old lady trying out stilts with his head poked downward, his back hunched, his arms held out for balance. I looked

back over my shoulder. Too far, man. I had to keep going now, and not only because a train might come. If I went back, I'd be a pussy for life.

So I got walking again. After looking down at that endless series of crossties for awhile, with a glimpse of running water between each pair, I started to feel dizzy and disoriented. Each time I brought my foot down, part of my brain assured me it was going to plunge through into space, even though I could see it was not.

I became acutely aware of all the noises inside me and outside me, like some crazy orchestra tuning up to play. The steady thump of my heart, the bloodbeat in my ears like a drum being played with brushes, the creak of sinews like the strings of a violin that has been tuned radically upward, the steady hiss of the river, the hot hum of a locust digging into tight bark, the monotonous cry of a chickadee, and somewhere, far away, a barking dog. Chopper, maybe. The mildewy smell of the Castle River was strong in my nose. The long muscles in my thighs were trembling. I kept thinking how much safer it would be (probably faster, as well) if I just got down on my hands and knees and scuttered along that way. But I wouldn't do that—none of us would. If the Saturday matinee movies down to the Gem had taught us anything, it was that Only Losers Crawl. It was one of the central tenets of the Gospel According to Hollywood. Good guys walk firmly upright, and if your sinews are creaking like overtuned violin strings because of the adrenaline rush going on in your body, and if the long muscles in your thighs are trembling for the same reason, why, so be it.

I had to stop in the middle of the trestle and look up at the sky for awhile. That dizzy feeling had been getting worse. I saw phantom crossties—they seemed to float right in front of my nose. Then they faded out and I began to feel okay again. I looked ahead and saw I had almost caught up with Vern, who was slowpoking along worse than ever. Chris and Teddy were almost all the way across.

And although I've since written seven books about people who can do such exotic things as read minds and precognit the future, that was when I had my first and last psychic flash. I'm sure that's what it was; how else to explain it? I squatted and made a fist around the

rail on my left. It thrummed in my hand. It was thrumming so hard that it was like gripping a bundle of deadly metallic snakes.

You've heard it said "His bowels turned to water"? I know what that phrase means—*exactly* what it means. It may be the most accurate cliché ever coined. I've been scared since, badly scared, but I've never been as scared as I was in that moment, holding that hot live rail. It seemed that for a moment all my works below throat level just went limp and lay there in an internal faint. A thin stream of urine ran listlessly down the inside of one thigh. My mouth opened. I didn't open it, it opened by itself, the jaw dropping like a trapdoor from which the hinge pins had suddenly been removed. My tongue was plastered suffocatingly against the roof of my mouth. All my muscles were locked. That was the worst. My works went limp but my muscles were in a kind of dreadful lockbolt and I couldn't move at all. It was only for a moment, but in the subjective timestream, it seemed forever.

All sensory input became intensified, as if some power-surge had occurred in the electrical flow of my brain, cranking everything up from a hundred and ten volts to two-twenty. I could hear a plane passing in the sky somewhere near and had time to wish I was on it, just sitting in a window seat with a Coke in my hand and gazing idly down at the shining line of a river whose name I did not know. I could see every little splinter and gouge in the tarred crosstie I was squatting on. And out of the corner of my eye I could see the rail itself with my hand still clutched around it, glittering insanely. The vibration from that rail sank so deeply into my hand that when I took it away it still vibrated, the nerve-endings kicking each other over again and again, tingling the way a hand or foot tingles when it has been asleep and is starting to wake up. I could taste my saliva, suddenly all electric and sour and thickened to curds along my gums. And worst, somehow most horrible of all, I couldn't *hear* the train yet, could not know if it was rushing at me from ahead or behind, or how close it was. It was invisible. It was unannounced, except for that shaking rail. There was only that to advertise its imminent arrival. An image of Ray Brower, dreadfully mangled and thrown into a ditch somewhere like a ripped-open laundry bag,

reeled before my eyes. We would join him, or at least Vern and I would, or at least I would. We had invited ourselves to our own funerals.

The last thought broke the paralysis and I shot to my feet. I probably would have looked like a jack-in-the-box to anyone watching, but to myself I felt like a boy in underwater slow motion, shooting up not through five feet of air but rather up through five hundred feet of water, moving slowly, moving with a dreadful languidness as the water parted grudgingly.

But at last I did break the surface.

I screamed: "*TRAIN!*"

The last of the paralysis fell from me and I began to run. Vern's head jerked back over his shoulder. The surprise that distorted his face was almost comically exaggerated, written as large as the letters in a Dick and Jane primer. He saw me break into my clumsy, shambling run, dancing from one horribly high crosstie to the next, and knew I wasn't joking. He began to run himself.

Far ahead, I could see Chris stepping off the ties and onto the solid safe embankment and I hated him with a sudden bright green hate as juicy and as bitter as the sap in an April leaf. He was safe. *That fucker was safe.* I watched him drop to his knees and grab a rail.

My left foot almost slipped into the yaw beneath me. I flailed with my arms, my eyes as hot as ball bearings in some runaway piece of machinery, got my balance, and ran on. Now I was right behind Vern. We were past the halfway point and for the first time I heard the train. It was coming from behind us, coming from the Castle Rock side of the river. It was a low rumbling noise that began to rise slightly and sort itself into the diesel thrum of the engine and the higher, more sinister sound of big grooved wheels turning heavily on the rails.

"*Awwwwwwww, shit!*" Vern screamed.

"Run, you pussy!" I yelled, and thumped him on the back.

"I can't! I'll fall!"

"*Run faster!*"

"*AWWWWWWWWWW-SHIT!*"

But he ran faster, a shambling scarecrow with a bare, sunburnt back, the collar of his shirt swinging and dangling below his butt. I could see the sweat standing out on his peeling shoulderblades, standing out in perfect little beads. I could see the fine down on the nape of his neck. His muscles clenched and loosened, clenched and loosened, clenched and loosened. His spine stood out in a series of knobs, each knob casting its own crescent-shaped shadow—I could see that these knobs grew closer together as they approached his neck. He was still holding his bedroll and I was still holding mine. Vern’s feet thudded on the crossties. He almost missed one, lunged forward with his arms out, and I whacked him on the back again to keep him going.

*“Gordeee I can’t AWWWWWWWWW-SHEEEEEYYIT—”*

*“RUN FASTER, DICKFACE!”* I bellowed and was I *enjoying* this?

Yeah—in some peculiar, self-destructive way that I have experienced since only when completely and utterly drunk, I was. I was driving Vern Tessio like a drover getting a particularly fine cow to market. And maybe he was enjoying his own fear in that same way, bawling like that self-same cow, hollering and sweating, his ribcage rising and falling like the bellows of a blacksmith on a speed-trip, clumsily keeping his footing, lurching ahead.

The train was very loud now, its engine deepening to a steady rumble. Its whistle sounded as it crossed the junction point where we had paused to chuck cinders at the rail-flag. I had finally gotten my hellhound, like it or not. I kept waiting for the trestle to start shaking under my feet. When that happened, it would be right behind us.

*“GO FASTER, VERN! FAAASTER!”*

*“Oh Gawd Gordie oh Gawd Gordie oh Gawd AWWWWWWW-SHEEEEEYYIT!”*

The freight’s electric horn suddenly spanked the air into a hundred pieces with one long loud blast, making everything you ever saw in a movie or a comic book or one of your own daydreams fly apart, letting you know what both the heroes and the cowards really heard when death flew at them:

*WHHHHHHHHONNNNNNNNK! WHHHHHHHHONNNNN-NNNNK!*

And then Chris was below us and to the right, and Teddy was behind him, his glasses flashing back arcs of sunlight, and they were both mouthing a single word and the word was *jump!* but the train had sucked all the blood out of the word, leaving only its shape in their mouths. The trestle began to shake as the train charged across it. We jumped.

Vern landed full-length in the dust and the cinders and I landed right beside him, almost on top of him. I never did see that train, nor do I know if its engineer saw us—when I mentioned the possibility that he hadn't seen us to Chris a couple of years later, he said: "They don't blow the horn like that just for chucks, Gordie." But he *could* have; he could have been blowing it just for the hell of it. I suppose. Right then, such fine points didn't much matter. I clapped my hands over my ears and dug my face into the hot dirt as the freight went by, metal squalling against metal, the air buffeting us. I had no urge to look at it. It was a long freight but I never looked at all. Before it had passed completely, I felt a warm hand on my neck and knew it was Chris's.

When it was gone—when I was *sure* it was gone—I raised my head like a soldier coming out of his foxhole at the end of a day-long artillery barrage. Vern was still plastered into the dirt, shivering. Chris was sitting cross-legged between us, one hand on Vern's sweaty neck, the other still on mine.

When Vern finally sat up, shaking all over and licking his lips compulsively, Chris said: "What you guys think if we drink those Cokes? Could anybody use one besides me?"

We all thought we could use one.

## 15

About a quarter of a mile along on the Harlow side, the GS&WM tracks plunged directly into the woods. The heavily wooded land

sloped down to a marshy area. It was full of mosquitoes almost as big as fighter-planes, but it was cool ... blessedly cool.

We sat down in the shade to drink our Cokes. Vern and I threw our shirts over our shoulders to keep the bugs off, but Chris and Teddy just sat naked to the waist, looking as cool and collected as two Eskimos in an icehouse. We hadn't been there five minutes when Vern had to go off into the bushes and take a squat, which led to a good deal of joking and elbowing when he got back.

"Train scare you much, Vern?"

"No," Vern said. "I was gonna squat when we got across, anyway, I had to take a squat, you know?"

"Verrrrrrrrn?" Chris and Teddy chorused.

"Come on, you guys, I *did*. Sincerely."

"Then you won't mind if we examine the seat of your Jockeys for Hershey-squirts, willya?" Teddy asked, and Vern laughed, finally understanding that he was getting ribbed.

"Go screw."

Chris turned to me. "That train scare you, Gordie?"

"Nope," I said, and sipped my Coke.

"Not much, you sucker." He punched my arm.

"Sincerely! I wasn't scared at all."

"Yeah? You wasn't scared?" Teddy was looking me over carefully.

"No. I was fuckin' *petrified*."

This slew all of them, even Vern, and we laughed long and hard. Then we just lay back, not goofing anymore, just drinking our Cokes and being quiet. My body felt warm, exercised, at peace with itself. Nothing in it was working crossgrain to anything else. I was alive and glad to be. Everything seemed to stand out with a special dearness, and although I never could have said that out loud I didn't think it mattered—maybe that sense of dearness was something I wanted just for myself.

I think I began to understand a little bit that day what makes men become daredevils. I paid twenty dollars to watch Evel Kneivel attempt his jump over the Snake River Canyon a couple of years ago and my wife was horrified. She told me that if I'd been born a Roman I would have been right there in the Colosseum, munching grapes

and watching as the lions disemboweled the Christians. She was wrong, although it was hard for me to explain why (and, really, I think she thought I was just jiving her). I didn't cough up that twenty to watch the man die on coast-to-coast closed-circuit TV, although I was quite sure that was exactly what was going to happen. I went because of the shadows that are always somewhere behind our eyes, because of what Bruce Springsteen calls the darkness on the edge of town in one of his songs, and at one time or another I think everyone wants to dare that darkness in spite of the jalopy bodies that some joker of a God gave us human beings. No ... not in *spite* of our jalopy bodies but *because* of them.

"Hey, tell that story," Chris said suddenly, sitting up.

"What story?" I asked, although I guess I knew.

I always felt uncomfortable when the talk turned to my stories, although all of them seemed to like them—wanting to tell stories, even wanting to write them down ... that was just peculiar enough to be sort of cool, like wanting to grow up to be a sewer inspector or a Grand Prix mechanic. Richie Jenner, a kid who hung around with us until his family moved to Nebraska in 1959, was the first one to find out that I wanted to be a writer when I grew up, that I wanted to do that for my full-time job. We were up in my room, just fooling around, and he found a bunch of handwritten pages under the comic books in a carton in my closet. What's *this*? Richie asks. Nothin, I say, and try to grab them back. Richie held the pages up out of reach ... and I must admit that I didn't try very *hard* to get them back. I wanted him to read them and at the same time I didn't—an uneasy mix of pride and shyness that has never changed in me very much when someone asks to look. The act of writing itself is done in secret, like masturbation—oh, I have one friend who has done things like write stories in the display windows of bookshops and department stores, but this is a man who is nearly crazy with courage, the kind of man you'd like to have with you if you just happened to fall down with a heart attack in a city where no one knew you. For me, it always wants to be sex and always falls short—it's always that adolescent handjob in the bathroom with the door locked.

Richie sat right there on the end of my bed for most of the afternoon reading his way through the stuff I had been doing, most of it influenced by the same sort of comic books as the ones that had given Vern nightmares. And when he was done, Richie looked at me in a strange new way that made me feel very peculiar, as if he had been forced to re-appraise my whole personality. He said: You're pretty good at this. Why don't you show these to Chris? I said no, I wanted it to be a secret, and Richie said: Why? It ain't pussy. You ain't no queer. I mean, it ain't *poetry*.

Still, I made him promise not to tell anybody about my stories and of course he did and it turned out most of them liked to read the stuff I wrote, which was mostly about getting burned alive or some crook coming back from the dead and slaughtering the jury that had condemned him in *Twelve Interesting Ways* or a maniac that went crazy and chopped a lot of people into veal cutlets before the hero, Curt Cannon, "cut the subhuman, screeching madman to pieces with round after round from his smoking .45 automatic."

In my stories, there were always rounds. *Never* bullets.

For a change of pace, there were the Le Dio stories. Le Dio was a town in France, and during 1942, a grim squad of tired American dogfaces were trying to retake it from the Nazis (this was two years before I discovered that the Allies didn't land in France until 1944). They went on trying to retake it, fighting their way from street to street, through about forty stories which I wrote between the ages of nine and fourteen. Teddy was absolutely mad for the Le Dio stories, and I think I wrote the last dozen or so just for him—by then I was heartily sick of Le Dio and writing things like *Mon Dieu and Cherchez le Boche!* and *Fermez le porte!* In Le Dio, French peasants were always hissing to GI dogfaces to *Fermez le porte!* But Teddy would hunch over the pages, his eyes big, his brow beaded with sweat, his face twisting. There were times when I could almost hear air-cooled Brownings and whistling 88s going off in his skull. The way he clamored for more Le Dio stories was both pleasing and frightening.

Nowadays writing is my work and the pleasure has diminished a little, and more and more often that guilty, masturbatory pleasure has become associated in my head with the coldly clinical images of

artificial insemination: I come according to the rules and regs laid down in my publishing contract. And although no one is ever going to call me the Thomas Wolfe of my generation, I rarely feel like a cheat: I get it off as hard as I can every fucking time. Doing less would, in an odd way, be like going faggot—or what that meant to us back then. What scares me is how often it hurts these days. Back then I was sometimes disgusted by how damned *good* it felt to write. These days I sometimes look at this typewriter and wonder when it's going to run out of good words. I don't want that to happen. I guess I can stay cool as long as I don't run out of good words, you know?

"What's this story?" Vern asked uneasily. "It ain't a horror story, is it, Gordie? I don't think I want to hear no horror stories. I'm not up for that, man."

"No, it ain't a horror," Chris said. "It's really funny. Gross, but funny. Go on, Gordie. Hammer that fucker to us."

"Is it about Le Dio?" Teddy asked.

"No, it ain't about Le Dio, you psycho," Chris said, and rabbit-punched him. "It's about this pie-eatin contest."

"Hey, I didn't even write it down yet," I said.

"Yeah, but tell it."

"You guys want to hear it?"

"Sure," Teddy said. "Boss."

"Well, it's about this made-up town. *Gretna*, I call it. *Gretna*, Maine."

"*Gretna*?" Vern said, grinning. "What kind of name is that? There ain't no *Gretna* in Maine."

"Shut up, fool," Chris said. "He just toldja it was made-up, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but *Gretna*, that sounds pretty stupid—"

"Lots of *real* towns sound stupid," Chris said. "I mean, what about *Alfred*, Maine? Or *Saco*, Maine? Or Jerusalem's Lot? Or Castle-fuckin-Rock? There ain't no castle here. *Most* town names are stupid. You just don't think so because you're used to em. Right, Gordie?"

"Sure," I said, but privately I thought Vern was right—*Gretna* was a pretty stupid name for a town. I just hadn't been able to think of

another one. “So anyway, they’re having their annual Pioneer Days, just like in Castle Rock—”

“Yeah, Pioneer Days, that’s a fuckin *blast*,” Vern said earnestly.

“I put my whole family in that jail on wheels they have, even fuckin Billy. It was only for half an hour and it cost me my whole allowance but it was worth it just to know where that sonofawhore was—”

“Will you shut up and let him tell it?” Teddy hollered.

Vern blinked. “Sure. Yeah. Okay.”

“Go on, Gordie,” Chris said.

“It’s not really much—”

“Naw, we don’t expect much from a wet end like you,” Teddy said, “but tell it anyway.”

I cleared my throat. “So anyway. It’s Pioneer Days, and on the last night they have these three big events. There’s an egg-roll for the little kids and a sack-race for kids that are like eight or nine, and then there’s the pie-eating contest. And the main guy of the story is this fat kid nobody likes named Davie Hogan.”

“Like Charlie Hogan’s brother if he had one,” Vern said, and then shrank back as Chris rabbit-punched him again.

“This kid, he’s our age, but he’s fat. He weighs like one-eighty and he’s always gettin beat up and ranked out. And all the kids, instead of callin him Davie, they call him Lard Ass Hogan and rank him out wherever they get the chance.”

They nodded respectfully, showing the proper sympathy for Lard Ass, although if such a guy ever showed up in Castle Rock, we all would have been out teasing him and ranking him to the dogs and back.

“So he decides to take revenge because he’s, like, fed up, you know? He’s only in the pie-eating contest, but that’s like the final event during Pioneer Days and everyone really digs it. The prize is five bucks—”

“So he wins it and gives the finger to everybody!” Teddy said. “Boss!”

“No, it’s better than that,” Chris said. “Just shut up and listen.”

“Lard Ass figures to himself, five bucks, what’s that? If anybody remembers anything at all in two weeks, it’ll just be that fuckin pig

Hogan out-ate everybody, well, it figures, let's go over his house and rank the shit out of him, only now we'll call him Pie Ass instead of Lard Ass."

They nodded some more, agreeing that Davie Hogan was a thinking cat. I began to warm to my own story.

"But everybody expects him to enter the contest, you know. Even his mom and dad. Hey, they practically got that five bucks spent for him already."

"Yeah, right," Chris said.

"So he's thinkin about it and hating the whole thing, because being fat isn't really his fault. See, he's got these weird fuckin glands, somethin, and—"

"My cousin's like that!" Vern said excitedly. "Sincerely! She weighs close to three hundred pounds! Supposed to be Hyboid Gland or somethin like that. I dunno about her Hyboid Gland, but what a fuckin blimp, no shit, she looks like a fuckin Thanksgiving turkey, and this one time—"

"Will you shut the fuck *up*, Vern?" Chris cried violently. "For the last time! Honest to God!" He had finished his Coke and now he turned the hourglass-shaped green bottle upside down and brandished it over Vern's head.

"Yeah, right, I'm sorry. Go on, Gordie. It's a swell story." I smiled. I didn't really mind Vern's interruptions, but of course I couldn't tell Chris that; he was the self-appointed Guardian of Art.

"So he's turnin it over in his mind, you know, the whole week before the contest. At school, kids keep comin up to him and sayin: Hey Lard Ass, how many pies ya gonna eat? Ya gonna eat ten? Twenty? Fuckin *eighty*? And Lard Ass, *he* says: How should I know. I don't even know what *kind* they are. And see, there's quite a bit of interest in the contest because the champ is this grownup whose name is, uh, Bill Traynor, I guess. And this guy Traynor, he ain't even fat. In fact, he's a real stringbean. But he can eat pies like a whiz, and the year before he ate six pies in five minutes."

"*Whole* pies?" Teddy asked, awe-struck.

"Right you are. And Lard Ass, he's the youngest guy to ever be in the contest."

“Go, Lard Ass!” Teddy cried excitedly. “Scoff up those fuckin pies!”

“Tell em about the other guys in it,” Chris said.

“Okay. Besides Lard Ass Hogan and Bill Traynor, there was Calvin Spier, the fattest guy in town—he ran the jewelry store—”

“Gretna Jewels,” Vern said, and snickered. Chris gave him a black look.

“And then there’s this guy who’s a disc jockey at a radio station up in Lewiston, he ain’t exactly fat but he’s sorta chubby, you know. And the last guy was Hubert Gretna the Third, who was the principal of Lard Ass Hogan’s school.”

“He was eatin against his own *princibal*?” Teddy asked.

Chris clutched his knees and rocked back and forth joyfully. “Ain’t that *great*? Go on, Gordie!”

I had them now. They were all leaning forward. I felt an intoxicating sense of power. I tossed my empty Coke bottle into the woods and scrunched around a little bit to get comfortable. I remember hearing the chickadee again, off in the woods, farther away now, lifting its monotonous, endless call into the sky: *dee-dee-dee-dee* ...

“So he gets this idea,” I said. “The greatest revenge idea a kid ever had. The big night comes—the end of Pioneer Days. The pie-eating contest comes just before the fireworks. The Main Street of Gretna has been closed off so people can walk around in it, and there’s this big platform set up right in the street. There’s bunting hanging down and a big crowd in front. There’s also a photographer from the paper, to get a picture of the winner with blueberries all over his face, because it turned out to be blueberry pies that year. Also, I almost forgot to tell you this, they had to eat the pies with their hands tied behind their backs. So, dig it, they come up onto the platform ...”

## 16

From *The Revenge of Lard Ass Hogan*, by Gordon Lachance. Originally published in *Cavalier* magazine, March, 1975. Used by

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They came up onto the platform one by one and stood behind a long trestle table covered with a linen cloth. The table was stacked high with pies and stood at the edge of the platform. Above it were looped necklaces of bare 100-watt bulbs, moths and night-fliers banging softly against them and haloing them. Above the platform, bathed in spotlights, was a long sign which read: THE GREAT GRETNA PIE-EAT OF 1960! To either side of this sign hung battered loudspeakers, supplied by Chuck Day of the Great Day Appliance Shop. Bill Travis, the reigning champion, was Chuck's cousin.

As each contestant came up, his hands bound behind him and his shirtfront open, like Sydney Carton on his way to the guillotine, Mayor Charbonneau would announce his name over Chuck's PA system and tie a large white bib around his neck. Calvin Spier received token applause only; in spite of his belly, which was the size of a twenty-gallon waterbarrel, he was considered an underdog second only to the Hogan kid (most considered Lard Ass a comer, but too young and inexperienced to do much this year).

After Spier, Bob Cormier was introduced. Cormier was a disc jockey who did a popular afternoon program at WLAM in Lewiston. He got a bigger hand, accompanied by a few screams from the teenaged girls in the audience. The girls thought he was "cute." John Wiggins, principal of Gretna Elementary School, followed Cormier. He received a hearty cheer from the older section of the audience—and a few scattered boos from the fractious members of his student body. Wiggins managed to beam paternally and frown sternly down on the audience at the same time.

Next, Mayor Charbonneau introduced Lard Ass.

"A new participant in the annual Great Gretna Pie-Eat, but one we expect great things from in the future ... *young Master David Hogan!*" Lard Ass got a big round of applause as Mayor Charbonneau tied on his bib, and as it was dying away, a rehearsed Greek chorus just beyond the reach of the 100-watt bulbs cried out in wicked unison: "*Go-get-'em-Lard-Ass!*"

There were muffled shrieks of laughter, running footsteps, a few shadows that no one could (or would) identify, some nervous laughter, some judicial frowns (the largest from Hizzoner Charbonneau, the most visible figure of authority). Lard Ass himself appeared to not even notice. The small smile greasing his thick lips and creasing his thick chops did not change as the Mayor, still frowning largely, tied his bib around his neck and told him not to pay any attention to fools in the audience (as if the Mayor had even the faintest inkling of what monstrous fools Lard Ass Hogan had suffered and would continue to suffer as he rumbled through life like a Nazi Tiger tank). The Mayor's breath was warm and smelled of beer.

The last contestant to mount the bunting-decorated stage drew the loudest and most sustained applause; this was the legendary Bill Travis, six feet five inches tall, gangling, voracious. Travis was a mechanic at the local Amoco station down by the railyard, a likeable fellow if there ever was one.

It was common knowledge around town that there was more involved in the Great Gretna Pie-Eat than a mere five dollars—at least, for Bill Travis there was. There were two reasons for this. First, people always came by the station to congratulate Bill after he won the contest, and most everyone who came to congratulate stayed to get his gas-tank filled. And the two garage-bays were sometimes booked up for a solid month after the contest. Folks would come in to get a muffler replaced or their wheelbearings greased, and would sit in the theater chairs ranged along one wall (Jerry Maling, who owned the Amoco, had salvaged them from the old Gem Theater when it was torn down in 1957), drinking Cokes and Moxies from out of the machine and gassing with Bill about the contest as he changed sparkplugs or rolled around on a crawlie-wheelie under someone's international Harvester pickup, looking for holes in the exhaust system. Bill always seemed willing to talk, which was one of the reasons he was so well-liked in Gretna.

There was some dispute around town as to whether Jerry Maling gave Bill a flat bonus for the extra business his yearly feat (or yearly eat, if you prefer) brought in, or if he got an out-and-out raise. Whatever way it was, there could be no doubt that Travis did much

better than most small-town wrench jockies. He had a nice-looking two-story ranch out on the Sabbatus Road, and certain snide people referred to it as “the house that pies built.” That was probably an exaggeration, but Bill had it coming another way—which brings us to the second reason there was more in it for Travis than just five dollars.

The Pie-Eat was a hot wagering event in Gretna. Perhaps most people only came to laugh, but a goodly minority also came to lay their money down. Contestants were observed and discussed by these bettors as ardently as thoroughbreds are observed and discussed by racing touts. The wagerers accosted contestants’ friends, relatives, even mere acquaintances. They pried out any and all details concerning the contestants’ eating habits. There was always a lot of discussion about that year’s official pie—apple was considered a “heavy” pie, apricot a “light” one (although a contestant had to resign himself to a day or two of the trots after downing three or four apricot pies). That year’s official pie, blueberry, was considered a happy medium. Bettors, of course, were particularly interested in their man’s stomach for blueberry dishes. How did he do on blueberry buckle? Did he favor blueberry jam over strawberry preserves? Had he been known to sprinkle blueberries on his breakfast cereal, or was he strictly a bananas-and-cream sort of fellow?

There were other questions of some moment. Was he a fast eater who slowed down or a slow eater who started to speed up as things got serious or just a good steady all-around trencherman? How many hotdogs could he put away while watching a Babe Ruth League game down at the St. Dom’s baseball field? Was he much of a beer-drinker, and, if so, how many bottles did he usually put away in the course of an evening? Was he a belcher? It was believed that a good belcher was a bit tougher to beat over the long haul.

All of this and other information was sifted, the odds laid, the bets made. How much money actually changed hands during the week or so following pie-night I have no way of knowing, but if you held a gun to my head and forced me to guess, I’d put it at close to a thousand dollars—that probably sounds like a pretty paltry figure, but it was a

lot of money to be passing around in such a small town fifteen years ago.

And because the contest was honest and a strict time-limit of ten minutes was observed, no one objected to a competitor betting on himself, and Bill Travis did so every year. Talk was, as he nodded, smiling, to his audience on that summer night in 1960, that he had bet a substantial amount on himself again, and that the best he had been able to do this year was one-for-five odds. If you're not the betting type, let me explain it this way: he'd have to put two hundred and fifty dollars at risk to win fifty. Not a good deal at all, but it was the price of success—and as he stood there, soaking up the applause and smiling easy, he didn't look too worried about it.

“And the defending *champeen*,” Mayor Charbonneau trumpeted, “Gretna's own *Bill Travis!*”

“Hoo, Bill!”

“How many you goin through tonight, Bill?”

“You goin for ten, Billy-boy?”

“I got a two-spot on you, Bill! Don't let me down, boy!”

“Save me one of those pies, Trav!”

Nodding and smiling with all proper modesty, Bill Travis allowed the mayor to tie his bib around his neck. Then he sat down at the far right end of the table, near the place where Mayor Charbonneau would stand during the contest. From right to left, then, the eaters were Bill Travis, David “Lard Ass” Hogan, Bob Cormier, principal John Wiggins, and Calvin Spier holding down the stool on the far left.

Mayor Charbonneau introduced Sylvia Dodge, who was even more of a contest figure than Bill Travis himself. She had been President of the Gretna Ladies' Auxiliary for years beyond telling (since the First Manassas, according to some town wits), and it was she who oversaw the baking of each year's pies, strictly subjecting each to her own rigorous quality control, which included a weigh-in ceremony on Mr. Bancichek's butcher's scales down at the Freedom Market—this to make sure that each pie weighed within an ounce of the others.

Sylvia smiled regally down at the crowd, her blue hair twinkling under the hot glow of the lightbulbs. She made a short speech about

how glad she was that so much of the town had turned out to celebrate their hardy pioneer forebears, the people who made this country great, for it *was* great, not only on the grassroots level where Mayor Charbonneau would be leading the local Republicans to the hallowed seats of town government again in November, but on the national level where the team of Nixon and Lodge would take the torch of freedom from Our Great and Beloved General and hold it high for—

Calvin Spier's belly rumbled noisily—*goinnngg!* There was laughter and even some applause. Sylvia Dodge, who knew perfectly well that Calvin was both a Democrat and a Catholic (either would have been forgivable alone, but the two combined, never), managed to blush, smile, and look furious all at the same time. She cleared her throat and wound up with a ringing exhortation to every boy and girl in the audience, telling them to always hold the red, white, and blue high, both in their hands and in their hearts, and to remember that smoking was a dirty, evil habit which made you cough. The boys and girls in the audience, most of whom would be wearing peace medallions and smoking not Camels but marijuana in another eight years, shuffled their feet and waited for the action to begin.

“Less talk, more eatin!” someone in the back row called, and there was another burst of applause—it was heartier this time.

Mayor Charbonneau handed Sylvia a stopwatch and a silver police whistle, which she would blow at the end of the ten minutes of all-out pie-eating. Mayor Charbonneau would then step forward and hold up the hand of the winner.

“Are you *ready??*” Hizzoner's voice rolled triumphantly through the Great Day PA and off down Main Street.

The five pie-eaters declared they were ready.

“Are you *SET??*” Hizzoner enquired further.

The eaters growled that they were indeed set. Down-street, a boy set off a rattling skein of firecrackers.

Mayor Charbonneau raised one pudgy hand and then dropped it.  
“*GO!!!*”

Five heads dropped into five pie-plates. The sound was like five large feet stamping firmly into mud. Wet chomping noises rose on the mild night air and then were blotted out as the bettors and partisans in the crowd began to cheer on their favorites. And no more than the first pie had been demolished before most people realized that a possible upset was in the making.

Lard Ass Hogan, a seven-to-one underdog because of his age and inexperience, was eating like a boy possessed. His jaws machine-gunned up crust (the contest rules required that only the top crust of the pie be eaten, not the bottom), and when that had disappeared, a huge sucking sound issued from between his lips. It was like the sound of an industrial vacuum cleaner going to work. Then his whole head disappeared into the pie-plate. He raised it fifteen seconds later to indicate he was done. His cheeks and forehead were smeared with blueberry juice, and he looked like an extra in a minstrel show. He was done—done before the legendary Bill Travis had finished *half of his* first pie.

Startled applause went up as the Mayor examined Lard Ass's pie-plate and pronounced it clean enough. He whipped a second pie into place before the pace-maker. Lard Ass had gobbled a regulation-size pie in just forty-two seconds. It was a contest record.

He went at the second pie even more furiously yet, his head bobbing and smooching in the soft blueberry filling, and Bill Travis threw him a worried glance as he called for his second blueberry pie. As he told friends later, he felt he was in a real contest for the first time since 1957, when George Gamache gobbled three pies in four minutes and then fainted dead away. He had to wonder, he said, if he was up against a boy or a demon. He thought of the money he had riding on this and redoubled his efforts.

But if Travis had redoubled, Lard Ass had trebled. Blueberries flew from his second pie-dish, staining the tablecloth around him like a Jackson Pollock painting. There were blueberries in his hair, blueberries on his bib, blueberries standing out on his forehead as if, in an agony of concentration, he had actually begun to *sweat* blueberries.

*“Done!”* he cried, lifting his head from his second pie-dish before Bill Travis had even consumed the crust on his new pie.

“Better slow down, boy,” Hizzoner murmured. Charbonneau himself had ten dollars riding on Bill Travis. “You got to pace yourself if you want to hold out.”

It was as if Lard Ass hadn’t heard. He tore into his third pie with lunatic speed, jaws moving with lightning rapidity. And then—

But I must interrupt for a moment to tell you that there was an empty bottle in the medicine cabinet at Lard Ass Hogan’s house. Earlier, that bottle had been three-quarters full of pearl-yellow castor oil, perhaps the most noxious fluid that the good Lord, in His infinite wisdom, ever allowed upon or beneath the face of the earth. Lard Ass had emptied the bottle himself, drinking every last drop and then licking the rim, his mouth twisting, his belly gagging sourly, his brain filled with thoughts of sweet revenge.

And as he rapidly worked his way through his third pie (Calvin Spier, dead last as predicted, had not yet finished his first), Lard Ass began to deliberately torture himself with grisly fantasies. He was not eating pies at all; he was eating cowflops. He was eating great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher-guts. He was eating diced-up woodchuck intestines with blueberry sauce poured over them. Rancid blueberry sauce.

He finished his third pie and called for his fourth, now one full pie ahead of the legendary Bill Travis. The fickle crowd, sensing a new and unexpected champ in the making, began to cheer him on lustily.

But Lard Ass had no hope or intention of winning. He could not have continued at the pace he was currently setting if his own mother’s life had been the prize. And besides, winning for him was losing; revenge was the only blue ribbon he sought. His belly groaning with castor oil, his throat opening and closing sickly, he finished his fourth pie and called for his fifth, the Ultimate Pie—Blueberries Become Electra, so to speak. He dropped his head into the dish, breaking the crust, and snuffled blueberries up his nose. Blueberries went down his shirt. The contents of his stomach seemed to suddenly gain weight. He chewed up pasty pastry crust and swallowed it. He inhaled blueberries.

And suddenly the moment of revenge was at hand. His stomach, loaded beyond endurance, revolted. It clenched like a strong hand encased in a slick rubber glove. His throat opened.

Lard Ass raised his head.

He grinned at Bill Travis with blue teeth.

Puke rumbled up his throat like a six-ton Peterbilt shooting through a tunnel.

It roared out of his mouth in huge blue-and-yellow glurt, warm and gaily steaming. It covered Bill Travis, who only had time to utter one nonsense syllable “Goog!” was what it sounded like. Women in the audience screamed. Calvin Spier, who had watched this unannounced event with a numb and surprised expression on his face, leaned conversationally over the table as if to explain to the gaping audience just what was happening, and puked on the head of Marguerite Charbonneau, the Mayor’s wife. She screamed and backed away, pawing futilely at her hair, which was now covered with a mixture of crushed berries, baked beans, and partially digested frankfurters (the latter two had been Cal Spier’s dinner). She turned to her good friend Maria Lavin and threw up on the front of Maria’s buck-skin jacket.

In rapid succession, like a replay of the firecrackers:

Bill Travis blew a great—and seemingly supercharged-jet of vomit out over the first two rows of spectators, his stunned face proclaiming to one and all, *Man, I just can’t believe I’m doing this;*

Chuck Day, who had received a generous portion of Bill Travis’s surprise gift, threw up on his Hush Puppies and then blinked at them wonderingly, knowing full well that stuff would *never* come off suede;

John Wiggins, principal of Gretna Elementary, opened his bluelined mouth and said reprovingly: “Really, this has ... *YURRK!*” As befitted a man of his breeding and position, he did it in his own pie-plate;

Hizzoner Charbonneau, who found himself suddenly presiding over what must have seemed more like a stomach-flu hospital ward than a pie-eating contest, opened his mouth to call the whole thing off and upchucked all over the microphone.

*“Jesus save us!”* moaned Sylvia Dodge, and then her outraged supper-fried clams, cole slaw, butter-and-sugar corn (two ears’ worth), and a generous helping of Muriel Harrington’s Bosco chocolate cake—bolted out the emergency exit and landed with a large wet splash on the back of the Mayor’s Robert Hall suitcoat.

Lard Ass Hogan, now at the absolute apogee of his young life, beamed happily out over the audience. Puke was everywhere. People staggered around in drunken circles, holding their throats and making weak cawing noises. Somebody’s pet Pekingese ran past the stage, yapping crazily, and a man wearing jeans and a Western-style silk shirt threw up on it, nearly drowning it. Mrs. Brockway, the Methodist minister’s wife, made a long, basso belching noise which was followed by a gusher of degenerated roast beef and mashed potatoes and apple cobbler. The cobbler looked as if it might have been good when it first went down. Jerry Maling, who had come to see his pet mechanic walk away with all the marbles again, decided to get the righteous fuck out of this madhouse. He got about fifteen yards before tripping over a kid’s little red wagon and realizing he had landed in a puddle of warm bile. Jerry tossed his cookies in his own lap and told folks later he only thanked Providence he had been wearing his coveralls. And Miss Norman, who taught Latin and English Fundamentals at the Gretna Consolidated High School, vomited into her own purse in an agony of propriety.

Lard Ass Hogan watched it all, his large face calm and beaming, his stomach suddenly sweet and steady with a warm balm it might never know again—that balm was a feeling of utter and complete satisfaction. He stood up, took the slightly tacky microphone from the trembling hand of Mayor Charbonneau, and said ...

“ ‘I declare this contest a draw.’ Then he puts the mike down, walks off the back of the platform, and goes straight home. His mother’s there, on account of she couldn’t get a baby-sitter for Lard Ass’s little sister, who was only two. And as soon as he comes in, all covered with puke and pie-drool, still wearing his bib, she says, ‘Davie, did you win?’ But he doesn’t say a fuckin word, you know. Just goes upstairs to his room, locks the door, and lays down on his bed.”

I downed the last swallow in Chris’s Coke and tossed it into the woods.

“Yeah, that’s cool, then what happened?” Teddy asked eagerly.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t *know*?” Teddy asked.

“It means it’s the end. When you don’t know what happens next, that’s the end.”

“*Whaaaaat?*” Vern cried. There was an upset, suspicious look on his face, like he thought maybe he’d just gotten rooked playing penny-up Bingo at the Topsham Fair. “What’s all this happy crappy? How’d it come *out*?”

“You have to use your imagination,” Chris said patiently.

“No, I ain’t!” Vern said angrily. “*He’s* supposed to use *his* imagination! He made up the fuckin story!”

“Yeah, what happened to the cat?” Teddy persisted. “Come on, Gordie, tell us.”

“I think his dad was at the Pie-Eat and when he came home he beat the living crap out of Lard Ass.”

“Yeah, right,” Chris said. “I bet that’s just what happened.”

“And,” I said, “the kids went right on calling him Lard Ass. Except that maybe some of them started calling him Puke-Yer-Guts, too.”

“That ending sucks,” Teddy said sadly.

“That’s why I didn’t want to tell it.”

“You could have made it so he shot his father and ran away and joined the Texas Rangers,” Teddy said. “How about that?”

Chris and I exchanged a glance. Chris raised one shoulder in a barely perceptible shrug.

“I guess so,” I said.

“Hey, you got any new Le Dio stories, Gordie?”

“Not just now. Maybe I’ll think of some.” I didn’t want to upset Teddy, but I wasn’t very interested in checking out what was happening in Le Dio, either. “Sorry you didn’t go for this one better.”

“Nah, it was good,” Teddy said. “Right up to the end, it was good. All that pukin was really cool.”

“Yeah, that was cool, really gross,” Vern agreed. “But Teddy’s right about the ending. It was sort of a gyp.”

“Yeah,” I said, and sighed.

Chris stood up. “Let’s do some walking,” he said. It was still bright daylight, the sky a hot, steely blue, but our shadows had begun to trail out long. I remember that as a kid, September days always seemed to end much too soon, catching me by surprise—it was as if something inside my heart expected it to always be June, with daylight lingering in the sky until almost nine-thirty. “What time is it, Gordie?”

I looked at my watch and was astonished to see it was after five.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Teddy said. “But let’s make camp before dark so we can see to get wood and stuff. I’m getting hungry, too.”

“Six-thirty,” Chris promised. “Okay with you guys?”

It was. We started to walk again, using the cinders beside the tracks now. Soon the river was so far behind us we couldn’t even hear its sound. Mosquitoes hummed and I slapped one off my neck. Vern and Teddy were walking up ahead, working out some sort of complicated comic-book trade. Chris was beside me, hands in his pockets, shirt slapping against his knees and thighs like an apron.

“I got some Winstons,” he said. “Hawked em off my old man’s dresser. One apiece. For after supper.”

“Yeah? That’s boss.”

“That’s when a cigarette tastes best,” Chris said. “After supper.”

“Right.”

We walked in silence for awhile.

“That’s a really fine story,” Chris said suddenly. “They’re just a little too dumb to understand.”

“No, it’s not that hot. It’s a mumbler.”

“That’s what you always say. Don’t give me that bullshit you don’t believe. Are you gonna write it down? The story?”

“Probably. But not for awhile. I can’t write em down right after I tell em. It’ll keep.”

“What Vern said? About the ending being a gyp?”

“Yeah?”

Chris laughed. “*Life’s* a gyp, you know it? I mean, look at us.”

“Nah, we have a great time.”

“Sure,” Chris said. “All the fuckin time, you wet.”

I laughed. Chris did, too.

“They come outta you just like bubbles out of soda-pop,” he said after awhile.

“What does?” But I thought I knew what he meant.

“The stories. That really bugs me, man. It’s like you could tell a million stories and still only get the ones on top. You’ll be a great writer someday, Gordie.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, you will. Maybe you’ll even write about us guys if you ever get hard up for material.”

“Have to be pretty fuckin hard up.” I gave him the elbow.

There was another period of silence and then he asked suddenly: “You ready for school?”

I shrugged. Who ever was? You got a little excited thinking about going back, seeing your friends; you were curious about your new teachers and what they would be like—pretty young things just out of teachers’ college that you could rag or some old topkick that had been there since the Alamo. In a funny way you could even get excited about the long droning classes, because as the summer vacation neared its end you sometimes got bored enough to believe you could learn something. But summer boredom was nothing like the school boredom that always set in by the end of the second week, and by the beginning of the third week you got down to the *real* business: Could you hit Stinky Fiske in the back of the head with your Art-Gum while the teacher was putting The Principal Exports of South America on the board? How many good loud squeaks could you get off on the varnished surface of your desk if your hands were

real sweaty? Who could cut the loudest farts in the locker room while changing up for phys ed? How many girls could you get to play Who Goosed the Moose during lunch hour? Higher learning, baby.

“Junior High,” Chris said. “And you know what, Gordie? By next June, we’ll all be quits.”

“What are you talking about? Why would *that* happen?”

“It’s not gonna be like grammar school, that’s why. You’ll be in the college courses. Me and Teddy and Vern, we’ll all be in the shop courses, playing pocket-pool with the rest of the retards, making ashtrays and birdhouses. Vern might even have to go into Remedial. You’ll meet a lot of new guys. Smart guys. That’s just the way it works, Gordie. That’s how they got it set up.”

“Meet a lot of pussies is what you mean,” I said.

He gripped my arm. “No, man. Don’t say that. Don’t even *think* that. They’ll get your stories. Not like Vern and Teddy.”

“Fuck the stories. I’m not going in with a lot of pussies. No sir.”

“If you don’t, then you’re an asshole.”

“What’s asshole about wanting to be with your friends?” He looked at me thoughtfully, as if deciding whether or not to tell me something. We had slowed down: Vern and Teddy had pulled almost half a mile ahead. The sun, lower now, came at us through the overlacing trees in broken, dusty shafts, turning everything gold—but it was a tawdry gold, dime-store gold, if you can dig that. The tracks stretched ahead of us in the gloom that was just starting to gather—they seemed almost to twinkle. Star-pricks of light stood out on them here and there, as if some nutty rich guy masquerading as a common laborer had decided to embed a diamond in the steel every sixty yards or so. It was still hot. The sweat rolled off us, slicking our bodies.

“It’s asshole if your friends can drag you down,” Chris said finally. “I know about you and your folks. They don’t give a shit about you. Your big brother was the one they cared about. Like my dad, when Frank got thrown into the stockade in Portsmouth. That was when he started always bein mad at us other kids and hitting us all the time. Your dad doesn’t beat on you, but maybe that’s even worse. He’s got you asleep. You could tell him you were enrolling in the fuckin shop division and you know what he’d do? He’d turn to the next page in

his paper and say: Well, that's nice, Gordon, go ask your mother what's for dinner. And don't try to tell me different. I've met him."

I didn't try to tell him different. It's scary to find out that someone else, even a friend, knows just how things are with you.

"You're just a kid, Gordie—"

"Gee, thanks, Dad."

"I wish to fuck I *was* your father!" he said angrily. "You wouldn't go around talking about takin those stupid shop courses if I was! It's like God gave you something, all those stories you can make up, and He said: This is what we got for you, kid. Try not to lose it. But kids lose *everything* unless somebody looks out for them and if your folks are too fucked up to do it then maybe I ought to."

His face looked like he was expecting me to take a swing at him; it was set and unhappy in the green-gold late afternoon light. He had broken the cardinal rule for kids in those days. You could say anything about another kid, you could rank him to the dogs and back, but you didn't say a bad word ever about his mom and dad. That was the Fabled Automatic, the same way not inviting your Catholic friends home to dinner on Friday unless you'd checked first to make sure you weren't having meat was the Fabled Automatic. If a kid ranked out your mom and dad, you had to feed him some knuckles.

"Those stories you tell, they're no good to anybody but you, Gordie. If you go along with us just because you don't want the gang to break up, you'll wind up just another grunt, makin C's to get on the teams. You'll get to High and take the same fuckin shop courses and throw erasers and pull your meat along with the rest of the grunts. Get detentions. Fuckin *suspensions*. And after awhile all you'll care about is gettin a car so you can take some skag to the hops or down to the fuckin Twin Bridges Tavern. Then you'll knock her up and spend the rest of your life in the mill or some fuckin shoeshop in Auburn or maybe even up to Hillcrest pluckin chickens. And that pie story will never get written down. *Nothin*'ll get written down. Cause you'll just be another wiseguy with shit for brains."

Chris Chambers was twelve when he said all that to me. But while he was saying it his face crumpled and folded into something older,

oldest, ageless. He spoke tonelessly, colorlessly, but nevertheless, what he said struck terror into my bowels. It was as if he had lived that whole life already, that life where they tell you to step right up and spin the Wheel of Fortune, and it spins so pretty and the guy steps on a pedal and it comes up double zeros, house number, everybody loses. They give you a free pass and then they turn on the rain machine, pretty funny, huh, a joke even Vern Tessio could appreciate.

He grabbed my naked arm and his fingers closed tight. They dug grooves in my flesh. They ground at the bones. His eyes were hooded and dead—so dead, man, that he might have just fallen out of his own coffin.

“I know what people think of my family in this town. I know what they think of me and what they expect. Nobody even *asked* me if I took the milk-money that time. I just got a three-day vacation.”

“Did you take it?” I asked. I had never asked him before, and if you had told me I ever would, I would have called you crazy. The words came out in a little dry bullet.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I took it.” He was silent for a moment, looking ahead at Teddy and Vern. “You knew I took it, Teddy knew. *Everybody* knew. Even Vern knew, I think.”

I started to deny it, and then closed my mouth. He was right. No matter what I might have said to my mother and father about how a person was supposed to be innocent until proved guilty, I had known.

“Then maybe I was sorry and tried to give it back,” Chris said.

I stared at him, my eyes widening. “You tried to give it *back*?”

“*Maybe*, I said. Just *maybe*. And maybe I took it to old lady Simons and told her, and maybe the money was all there but I got a three-day vacation *anyway*, because the money never showed up. And maybe the next week old lady Simons had this brand-new skirt on when she came to school.”

I stared at Chris, speechless with horror. He smiled at me, but it was a crimped, terrible smile that never touched his eyes.

“Just *maybe*,” he said, but I remembered the new skirt—a light brown paisley, sort of full. I remembered thinking that it made old lady Simons look younger, almost pretty.

“Chris, how much was that milk-money?”

“Almost seven bucks.”

“Christ,” I whispered.

“So just say that *I* stole the milk-money but then old lady Simons stole it from *me*. Just suppose I told that story. Me, Chris Chambers. Kid brother of Frank Chambers and Eyeball Chambers. You think anybody would have believed it?”

“No way,” I whispered. “Jesus Christ!”

He smiled his wintry, awful smile. “And do you think that bitch would have dared try something like that if it had been one of those dootchbags from up on The View that had taken the money?”

“No,” I said.

“Yeah, If it had been one of them, Simons would have said: ‘Kay, ’kay, we’ll forget it this time, but we’re gonna spank your wrist real hard and if you ever do it again we’ll have to spank *both* wrists. But *me* ... well, maybe she had her eye on that skirt for a long time. Anyway, she saw her chance and she took it. I was the stupid one for even trying to give that money back. But I never thought ... I never thought that a *teacher*... oh, who gives a fuck, anyway? Why am I even talkin about it?”

He swiped an arm angrily across his eyes and I realized he was almost crying.

“Chris,” I said, “why don’t you go into the college courses? You’re smart enough.”

“They decide all of that in the office. And in their smart little conferences. The teachers, they sit around in this big circle-jerk and all they say is Yeah, Yeah, Right, Right. All they give a fuck about is whether you behaved yourself in grammar school and what the town thinks of your family. All they’re deciding is whether or not you’ll contaminate all those precious college-course dootchbags. But maybe I’ll try to work myself up. I don’t know if I could do it, but I might try. Because I want to get out of Castle Rock and go to college and never see my old man or any of my brothers again. I want to go someplace where nobody knows me and I don’t have any black marks against me before I start. But I don’t know if I can do it.”

“Why not?”

“People. People drag you down.”

“Who?” I asked, thinking he must mean the teachers, or adult monsters like Miss Simons, who had wanted a new skirt, or maybe his brother Eyeball who hung around with Ace and Billy and Charlie and the rest, or maybe his own mom and dad.

But he said: “Your friends drag you down, Gordie. Don’t you know that?” He pointed at Vern and Teddy, who were standing and waiting for us to catch up. They were laughing about something; in fact, Vern was just about busting a gut.

“Your friends do. They’re like drowning guys that are holding onto your legs. You can’t save them. You can only drown with them.”

“Come on, you fuckin slowpokes!” Vern shouted, still laughing.

“Yeah, comin!” Chris called, and before I could say anything else, he began to run. I ran, too, but he caught up to them before I could catch up to him.

## 18

We went another mile and then decided to camp for the night. There was still some daylight left, but nobody really wanted to use it. We were pooped from the scene at the dump and from our scare on the train trestle, but it was more than that. We were in Harlow now, in the woods. Somewhere up ahead was a dead kid, probably mangled and covered with flies. Maggots, too, by this time. Nobody wanted to get too close to him with the night coming on. I had read somewhere—in an Algernon Blackwood story, I think—that a guy’s ghost hangs out around his dead body until that body is given a decent Christian burial, and there was no way I wanted to wake up in the night and confront the glowing, disembodied ghost of Ray Brower, moaning and gibbering and floating among the dark and rustling pines. By stopping here we figured there had to be at least ten miles between us and him, and of course all four of us knew there were no such

things as ghosts, but ten miles seemed just about far enough in case what everybody knew was wrong.

Vern, Chris, and Teddy gathered wood and got a modest little campfire going on a bed of cinders. Chris scraped a bare patch all around the fire—the woods were powder-dry, and he didn't want to take any chances. While they were doing that I sharpened some sticks and made what my brother Denny used to call "Pioneer Drumsticks"—lumps of hamburger pushed onto the ends of green branches. The three of them laughed and bickered over their woodcraft (which was almost nil; there was a Castle Rock Boy Scout troop, but most of the kids who hung around our vacant lot considered it to be an organization made up mostly of pussies), arguing about whether it was better to cook over flames or over coals (a moot point; we were too hungry to wait for coals), whether dried moss would work as kindling, what they would do if they used up all the matches before they got the fire to stay lit. Teddy claimed he could make a fire by rubbing two sticks together. Chris claimed he was so full of shit he squeaked. They didn't have to try; Vern got the small pile of twigs and dry moss to catch from the second match. The day was perfectly still and there was no wind to puff out the light. We all took turns feeding the thin flames until they began to grow stouter on wrist-chunks of wood fetched from an old deadfall some thirty yards into the forest.

When the flames began to die back a little bit, I stuck the sticks holding the Pioneer Drumsticks firmly into the ground at an angle over the fire. We sat around watching them as they shimmered and dripped and finally began to brown. Our stomachs made pre-dinner conversation.

Unable to wait until they were really cooked, we each took one of them, stuck it in a roll, and yanked the hot stick out of the center. They were charred outside, raw inside, and totally delicious. We wolfed them down and wiped the grease from our mouths with our bare arms. Chris opened his pack and took out a tin Band-Aids box (the pistol was way at the bottom of his pack, and because he hadn't told Vern and Teddy, I guessed it was to be our secret). He opened it and gave each of us a battered Winston. We lit them with flaming

twigs from the fire and then leaned back, men of the world, watching the cigarette smoke drift away into the soft twilight. None of us inhaled because we might cough and that would mean a day or two of ragging from the others. And it was pleasant enough just to drag and blow, hawking into the fire to hear the sizzle (that was the summer I learned how you can pick out someone who is just learning to smoke: if you're new at it you spit a lot). We were feeling good. We smoked the Winstons down to the filters, then tossed them into the fire.

"Nothin like a smoke after a meal," Teddy said.

"Fucking-A," Vern agreed.

Crickets had started to hum in the green gloom. I looked up at the lane of sky visible through the railroad cut and saw that the blue was now bruising toward purple. Seeing that outrider of twilight made me feel sad and calm at the same time, brave but not really brave, comfortably lonely.

We tromped down a flat place in the underbrush beside the embankment and laid out our bedrolls. Then, for an hour or so, we fed the fire and talked, the kind of talk you can never quite remember once you get past fifteen and discover girls. We talked about who was the best dragger in Castle Rock, if Boston could maybe stay out of the cellar this year, and about the summer just past. Teddy told about the time he had been at White's Beach in Brunswick and some kid had hit his head while diving off the float and almost drowned. We discussed at some length the relative merits of the teachers we had had. We agreed that Mr. Brooks was the biggest pussy in Castle Rock Elementary—he would just about cry if you sassed him back. On the other hand, there was Mrs. Cote (pronounced Cody)—she was just about the meanest bitch God had ever set down on the earth. Vern said he'd heard she hit a kid so hard two years ago that the kid almost went blind. I looked at Chris, wondering if he would say anything about Miss Simons, but he didn't say anything at all, and he didn't see me looking at him—he was looking at Vern and nodding soberly at Vern's story.

We didn't talk about Ray Brower as the dark drew down, but I was thinking about him. There's something horrible and fascinating about

the way dark comes to the woods, its coming unsoftened by headlights or streetlights or houselights or neon. It comes with no mothers' voices, calling for their kids to leave off and come on in now, to herald it. If you're used to the town, the coming of the dark in the woods seems more like a natural disaster than a natural phenomenon; it rises like the Castle River rises in the spring.

And as I thought about the body of Ray Brower in this light—or lack of it—what I felt was not queasiness or fear that he would suddenly appear before us, a green and gibbering banshee whose purpose was to drive us back the way we had come before we could disturb his—*its*—peace, but a sudden and unexpected wash of pity that he should be so alone and so defenseless in the dark that was now coming over our side of the earth. If something wanted to eat on him, it would. His mother wasn't here to stop that from happening, and neither was his father, nor Jesus Christ in the company of all the saints. He was dead and he was all alone, flung off the railroad tracks and into the ditch, and I realized that if I didn't stop thinking about it I was going to cry.

So I told a Le Dio story, made up on the spot and not very good, and when it ended as most of my Le Dio stories did, with one lone American dogface coughing out a dying declaration of patriotism and love for the girl back home into the sad and wise face of the platoon sergeant, it was not the white, scared face of some pfc from Castle Rock or White River Junction I saw in my mind's eye but the face of a much younger boy, already dead, his eyes closed, his features troubled, a rill of blood running from the left corner of his mouth to his jawline. And in back of him, instead of the shattered shops and churches of my Le Dio dreamscape, I saw only dark forest and the cindered railway bed bulking against the starry sky like a prehistoric burial mound.

I came awake in the middle of the night, disoriented, wondering why it was so chilly in my bedroom and who had left the windows open. Denny, maybe. I had been dreaming of Denny, something about body-surfing at Harrison State Park. But it had been four years ago that we had done that.

This wasn't my room; this was someplace else. Somebody was holding me in a mighty bearhug, somebody else was pressed against my back, and a shadowy third was crouched beside me, head cocked in a listening attitude.

"What the fuck?" I asked in honest puzzlement.

A long-drawn-out groan in answer. It sounded like Vern.

That brought things into focus, and I remembered where I was ... but what was everybody doing awake in the middle of the night? Or had I only been asleep for seconds? No, that couldn't be, because a thin sliver of moon was floating dead center in an inky sky.

"Don't let it get me!" Vern gibbered. "I swear I'll be a good boy, I won't do nothin bad, I'll put the ring up before I take a piss, I'll ... I'll . . ." With some astonishment I realized that I was listening to a prayer—or at least the Vern Tessio equivalent of a prayer.

I sat bolt upright, scared. "Chris?"

"Shut up, Vern," Chris said. He was the one crouching and listening. "It's nothing."

"Oh, yes it is," Teddy said ominously. "It's something."

"*What* is?" I asked. I was still sleepy and disoriented, unstrung from my place in space and time. It scared me that I had come in late on whatever had developed—too late to defend myself properly, maybe.

Then, as if to answer my question, a long and hollow scream rose languidly from the woods—it was the sort of scream you might expect from a woman dying in extreme agony and extreme fear.

"Oh-dear-to-Jesus!" Vern whimpered, his voice high and filled with tears. He re-applied the bearhug that had awakened me, making it hard for me to breathe and adding to my own terror. I threw him loose with an effort but he scrambled right back beside me like a puppy which can't think of anyplace else to go.

“It’s that Brower kid,” Teddy whispered hoarsely. “His ghost’s out walkin in the woods.”

“Oh God!” Vern screamed, apparently not crazy about that idea at all. “I promise I won’t hawk no more dirty books out of Dahlie’s Market! I promise I won’t give my carrots to the dog no more! I ... I ... I ...” He floundered there, wanting to bribe God with everything but unable to think of anything really good in the extremity of his fear. “*I won’t smoke no more unfiltered cigarettes! I won’t say no bad swears! I won’t put my Bazooka in the offerin plate! I won’t—*”

“Shut up, Vern,” Chris said, and beneath his usual authoritative toughness I could hear the hollow boom of awe. I wondered if his arms and back and belly were as stiff with gooseflesh as my own were, and if the hair on the nape of his neck was trying to stand up in hackles, as mine was.

Vern’s voice dropped to a whisper as he continued to expand the reforms he planned to institute if God would only let him live through this night.

“It’s a bird, isn’t it?” I asked Chris.

“No. At least, I don’t think so. I think it’s a wildcat. My dad says they scream bloody murder when they’re getting ready to mate. Sounds like a woman, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said. My voice hitched in the middle of the word and two ice-cubes broke off in the gap.

“But no woman could scream that loud,” Chris said ... and then added helplessly: “Could she, Gordie?”

“It’s his ghost,” Teddy whispered again. His eyeglasses reflected the moonlight in weak, somehow dreamy smears.

“I’m gonna go look for it.”

I don’t think he was serious, but we took no chances. When he started to get up, Chris and I hauled him back down. Perhaps we were too rough with him, but our muscles had been turned to cables with fear.

“Let me up, fuckheads!” Teddy hissed, struggling. “If I say I wanna go look for it, then I’m gonna go look for it! I wanna see it! I wanna see the ghost! I wanna see if—”

The wild, sobbing cry rose into the night again, cutting the air like a knife with a crystal blade, freezing us with our hands on Teddy—if he'd been a flag, we would have looked like that picture of the Marines claiming Iwo Jima. The scream climbed with a crazy ease through octave after octave, finally reaching a glassy, freezing edge. It hung there for a moment and then whirled back down again, disappearing into an impossible bass register that buzzed like a monstrous honeybee. This was followed by a burst of what sounded like mad laughter ... and then there was silence again.

“Jesus H Baldheaded Christ,” Teddy whispered, and he talked no more of going into the woods to see what was making that screaming noise. All four of us huddled up together and I thought of running. I doubt if I was the only one. If we had been tenting in Vern's field—where our folks *thought* we were—we probably *would* have run. But Castle Rock was too far, and the thought of trying to run across that trestle in the dark made my blood freeze. Running deeper into Harlow and closer to the corpse of Ray Brower was equally unthinkable. We were stuck. If there was a ha'ant out there in the woods—what my dad called a Goosalum—and it wanted us, it would probably get us.

Chris proposed we keep a guard and everyone was agreeable to that. We flipped for watches and Vern got the first one. I got the last. Vern sat up cross-legged by the husk of the campfire while the rest of us lay down again. We huddled together like sheep.

I was positive that sleep would be impossible, but I did sleep—a light, uneasy sleep that skimmed through unconsciousness like a sub with its periscope up. My half-sleeping dreams were populated with wild cries that might have been real or might have only been products of my imagination. I saw—or thought I saw—something white and shapeless steal through the trees like a grotesquely ambulatory bedsheet.

At last I slipped into something I knew was a dream. Chris and I were swimming at White's Beach, a gravel-pit in Brunswick that had been turned into a miniature lake when the gravel-diggers struck water. It was where Teddy had seen the kid hit his head and almost drown.

In my dream we were out over our heads, stroking lazily along, with a hot July sun blazing down. From behind us, on the float, came cries and shouts and yells of laughter as kids climbed and dived or climbed and were pushed. I could hear the empty kerosene drums that held the float up clanging and booming together—a sound not unlike that of churchbells, which are so solemn and empty profound. On the sand-and-gravel beach, oiled bodies lay face down on blankets, little kids with buckets squatted on the verge of the water or sat happily flipping muck into their hair with plastic shovels, and teenagers clustered in grinning groups, watching the young girls promenade endlessly back and forth in pairs and trios, never alone, the secret places of their bodies wrapped in Jantzen tank suits. People walked up the hot sand on the balls of their feet, wincing, to the snackbar. They came back with chips, Devil Dogs, Red Ball Popsicles.

Mrs. Cote drifted past us on an inflatable rubber raft. She was lying on her back, dressed in her typical September-to-June school uniform: a gray two-piece suit with a thick sweater instead of a blouse under the jacket, a flower pinned over one almost nonexistent breast, thick support hose the color of Canada Mints on her legs. Her black old lady's high-heeled shoes were trailing in the water, making small V's. Her hair was blue-rinsed, like my mother's, and done up in those tight, medicinal-smelling clockspring curls. Her glasses flashed brutally in the sun.

"Watch your steps, boys," she said. "Watch your steps or I'll hit you hard enough to strike you blind. I can do that; I have been given that power by the school board. Now, Mr. Chambers, 'Mending Wall,' if you please. By rote."

"I tried to give the money back," Chris said. "Old lady Simons said okay, but she *took* it! Do you hear me? She *took* it! Now what are you going to do about it? Are you going to whack *her* blind?"

"'Mending Wall,' Mr. Chambers, if you please. By *rote*."

Chris threw me a despairing glance, as if to say *Didn't I tell you it would be this way?*, and then began to tread water. He began: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that sends the frozen-

ground-swell under it—' ” And then his head went under, his reciting mouth filling with water.

He popped back up, crying: “Help me, Gordie! Help me!”

Then he was dragged under again. Looking into the clear water I could see two bloated, naked corpses holding his ankles. One was Vern and the other was Teddy, and their open eyes were as blank and pupilless as the eyes of Greek statues. Their small pre-pubescent penises floated limply up from their distended bellies like albino strands of kelp. Chris's head broke water again. He held one hand up limply to me and voiced a screaming, womanish cry that rose and rose, ululating in the hot sunny summer air. I looked wildly toward the beach but nobody had heard. The lifeguard, his bronzed, athletic body lolling attractively on the seat at the top of his whitewashed cruciform wooden tower, just went on smiling down at a girl in a red bathing suit. Chris's scream turned into a bubbling water-choked gurgle as the corpses pulled him under again. And as they dragged him down to black water I could see his rippling, distorted eyes turned up to me in a pleading agony; I could see his white starfish hands held helplessly up to the sun-burnished roof of the water. But instead of diving down and trying to save him, I stroked madly for the shore, or at least to a place where the water would not be over my head. Before I could get there—before I could even get close—I felt a soft, rotted, implacable hand wrap itself around my calf and begin to pull. A scream built up in my chest ... but before I could utter it, the dream washed away into a grainy facsimile of reality. It was Teddy with his hand on my leg. He was shaking me awake. It was my watch.

Still half in the dream, almost talking in my sleep, I asked him thickly: “You alive, Teddy?”

“No. I'm dead and you're a black nigger,” he said crossly. It dispelled the last of the dream. I sat up by the campfire and Teddy lay down.

The others slept heavily through the rest of the night. I was in and out, dozing, waking, dozing again. The night was far from silent; I heard the triumphant screech-squawk of a pouncing owl, the tiny cry of some small animal perhaps about to be eaten, a larger something blundering wildly through the undergrowth. Under all of this, a steady tone, were the crickets. There were no more screams. I dozed and woke, woke and dozed, and I suppose if I had been discovered standing such a slipshod watch in Le Dio, I probably would have been courtmartialed and shot.

I snapped more solidly out of my last doze and became aware that something was different. It took me a moment or two to figure it out: although the moon was down, I could see my hands resting on my jeans. My watch said quarter to five. It was dawn.

I stood, hearing my spine crackle, walked two dozen feet away from the limped-together bodies of my friends, and pissed into a clump of sumac. I was starting to shake the night-willies; I could feel them sliding away. It was a fine feeling.

I scrambled up the cinders to the railroad tracks and sat on one of the rails, idly chucking cinders between my feet, in no hurry to wake the others. At that precise moment the new day felt too good to share.

Morning came on apace. The noise of the crickets began to drop, and the shadows under the trees and bushes evaporated like puddles after a shower. The air had that peculiar lack of taste that presages the latest hot day in a famous series of hot days. Birds that had maybe cowered all night just as we had done now began to twitter self-importantly. A wren landed on top of the deadfall from which we had taken our firewood, preened itself, and then flew off.

I don't know how long I sat there on the rail, watching the purple steal out of the sky as noiselessly as it had stolen in the evening before. Long enough for my butt to start complaining anyway. I was about to get up when I looked to my right and saw a deer standing in the railroad bed not ten yards from me.

My heart went up into my throat so high that I think I could have put my hand in my mouth and touched it. My stomach and genitals filled with a hot dry excitement. I didn't move. I couldn't have moved

if I had wanted to. Her eyes weren't brown but a dark, dusty black—the kind of velvet you see backgrounding jewelry displays. Her small ears were scuffed suede. She looked serenely at me, head slightly lowered in what I took for curiosity, seeing a kid with his hair in a sleep-scarecrow of whirls and many-tined cowlicks, wearing jeans with cuffs and a brown khaki shirt with the elbows mended and the collar turned up in the hoody tradition of the day. What I was seeing was some sort of gift, something given with a carelessness that was appalling.

We looked at each other for a long time ... I *think* it was a long time. Then she turned and walked off to the other side of the tracks, white bobtail flipping insouciantly. She found grass and began to crop. I couldn't believe it. She had begun to *crop*. She didn't look back at me and didn't need to; I was frozen solid.

Then the rail started to thrum under my ass and bare seconds later the doe's head came up, cocked back toward Castle Rock. She stood there, her branch-black nose working on the air, coaxing it a little. Then she was gone in three gangling leaps, vanishing into the woods with no sound but one rotted branch, which broke with a sound like a track ref's starter-gun.

I sat there, looking mesmerized at the spot where she had been, until the actual sound of the freight came up through the stillness. Then I skidded back down the bank to where the others were sleeping.

The freight's slow, loud passage woke them up, yawning and scratching. There was some funny, nervous talk about "the case of the screaming ghost," as Chris called it, but not as much as you might imagine. In daylight it seemed more foolish than interesting—almost embarrassing. Best forgotten.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell them about the deer, but I ended up not doing it. That was one thing I kept to myself. I've never spoken or written of it until just now, today. And I have to tell you that it seems a lesser thing written down, damn near inconsequential. But for me it was the best part of that trip, the cleanest part, and it was a moment I found myself returning to, almost helplessly, when there was trouble in my life—my first day in the bush in Vietnam, and this

fellow walked into the clearing where we were with his hand over his nose and when he took his hand away there was no nose there because it had been shot off; the time the doctor told us our youngest son might be hydrocephalic (he turned out just to have an oversized head, thank God); the long, crazy weeks before my mother died. I would find my thoughts turning back to that morning, the scuffed suede of her ears, the white flash of her tail. But eight hundred million Red Chinese don't give a shit, right? The most important things are the hardest to say, because words diminish them. It's hard to make strangers care about the good things in your life.

## 21

The tracks now bent southwest and ran through tangles of second-growth fir and heavy underbrush. We got a breakfast of late blackberries from some of these bushes, but berries never fill you up; your stomach just gives them a thirty-minute option and then begins growling again. We went back to the tracks—it was about eight o'clock by then—and took five. Our mouths were a dark purple and our naked torsos were scratched from the blackberry brambles. Vem wished glumly aloud for a couple of fried eggs with bacon on the side.

That was the last day of the heat, and I think it was the worst of all. The early scud of clouds melted away and by nine o'clock the sky was a pale steel color that made you feel hotter just looking at it. The sweat rolled and ran from our chests and backs, leaving clean streaks through the accumulated soot and grime. Mosquitoes and blackflies whirled and dipped around our heads in aggravating clouds. Knowing that we had long miles to go didn't make us feel any better. Yet the fascination of the thing drew us on and kept us walking faster than we had any business doing, in that heat. We were all crazy to see that kid's body—I can't put it any more simply

or honestly than that. Whether it was harmless or whether it turned out to have the power to murder sleep with a hundred mangled dreams, we wanted to see it. I think that we had come to believe we *deserved* to see it.

It was about nine-thirty when Teddy and Chris spotted water up ahead—they shouted to Vern and me. We ran over to where they were standing. Chris was laughing, delighted. “Look there! Beavers did that!” He pointed.

It was the work of beavers, all right. A large-bore culvert ran under the railroad embankment a little way ahead, and the beavers had sealed the right end with one of their neat and industrious little dams—sticks and branches cemented together with leaves, twigs, and dried mud. Beavers are busy little fuckers, all right. Behind the dam was a clear and shining pool of water, brilliantly mirroring the sunlight. Beaver houses humped up and out of the water in several places—they looked like wooden igloos. A small creek trickled into the far end of the pool, and the trees which bordered it were gnawed a clean bone-white to a height of almost three feet in places.

“Railroad’ll clean this shit out pretty soon,” Chris said.

“Why?” Vern asked.

“They can’t have a pool here,” Chris said. “It’d undercut their precious railroad line. That’s why they put that culvert in there to start with. They’ll shoot them some beavers and scare off the rest and then knock out their dam. Then this’ll go back to being a bog, like it probably was before.”

“I think that eats the meat,” Teddy said.

Chris shrugged. “Who cares about beavers? Not the Great Southern and Western Maine, that’s for sure.”

“You think it’s deep enough to swim in?” Vern asked, looking hungrily at the water.

“One way to find out,” Teddy said.

“Who goes first?” I asked.

“Me!” Chris said. He went running down the bank, kicking off his sneakers and untying his shirt from around his waist with a jerk. He pushed his pants and undershorts down with a single shove of his thumbs. He balanced, first on one leg and then on the other, to get

his socks. Then he made a shallow dive. He came up shaking his head to get his wet hair out of his eyes. “It’s fuckin *great!*” he shouted.

“How deep?” Teddy called back. He had never learned to swim.

Chris stood up in the water and his shoulders broke the surface. I saw something on one of them—a blackish-grayish something. I decided it was a piece of mud and dismissed it. If I had looked more closely I could have saved myself a lot of nightmares later on. “Come on in, you chickens!”

He turned and thrashed off across the pool in a clumsy breast-stroke, turned over, and thrashed back. By then we were all getting undressed. Vern was in next, then me.

Hitting the water was fantastic—clean and cool. I swam across to Chris, loving the silky feel of having nothing on but water. I stood up and we grinned into each other’s faces.

“Boss!” We said it at exactly the same instant.

“Fuckin jerkoff,” he said, splashed water in my face, and swam off the other way.

We goofed off in the water for almost half an hour before we realized that the pond was full of bloodsuckers. We dived, swam under water, ducked each other. We never knew a thing. Then Vern swam into the shallower part, went under, and stood on his hands. When his legs broke water in a shaky but triumphant V, I saw that they were covered with blackish-gray lumps, just like the one I had seen on Chris’s shoulder. They were slugs—big ones.

Chris’s mouth dropped open, and I felt all the blood in my body go as cold as dry ice. Teddy screamed, his face going pale. Then all three of us were thrashing for the bank, going just as fast as we could. I know more about freshwater slugs now than I did then, but the fact that they are mostly harmless has done nothing to allay the almost insane horror of them I’ve had ever since that day in the beaver-pool. They carry a local anesthetic and an anti-coagulant in their alien saliva, which means that the host never feels a thing when they attach themselves. If you don’t happen to see them they’ll go on feeding until their swelled, loathsome bodies fall off you, sated, or until they actually burst.

We pulled ourselves up on the bank and Teddy went into a hysterical paroxysm as he looked down at himself. He was screaming as he picked the leeches off his naked body.

Vern broke the water and looked at us, puzzled. “What the hell’s wrong with h—”

“*Leeches!*” Teddy screamed, pulling two of them off his trembling thighs and throwing them just as far as he could. “Dirty mother-fuckin *bloodsuckers!*” His voice broke shrilly on the last word.

“*OhGodOhGodOhGod!*” Vern cried. He paddled across the pool and stumbled out.

I was still cold; the heat of the day had been suspended. I kept telling myself to catch hold. Not to get screaming. Not to be a pussy. I picked half a dozen off my arms and several more off my chest.

Chris turned his back to me. “Gordie? Are there any more? Take em off if there are, please, Gordie!” There *were* more, five or six, running down his back like grotesque black buttons. I pulled their soft, boneless bodies off him.

I brushed even more off my legs, then got Chris to do my back.

I was starting to relax a little—and that was when I looked down at myself and saw the granddaddy of them all clinging to my testicles, its body swelled to four times its normal size. Its blackish-gray skin had gone a bruised purplish-red. That was when I began to lose control. Not outside, at least not in any big way, but inside, where it counts.

I brushed its slick, glutinous body with the back of my hand. It held on. I tried to do it again and couldn’t bring myself to actually touch it. I turned to Chris, tried to speak, couldn’t. I pointed instead. His cheeks, already ashy, went whiter still.

“I can’t get it off,” I said through numb lips. “You ... can you ...”

But he backed away, shaking his head, his mouth twisted. “I can’t, Gordie,” he said, unable to take his eyes away. “I’m sorry but I can’t. No. Oh. No.” He turned away, bowed with one hand pressed to his midsection like the butler in a musical comedy, and was sick in a stand of juniper bushes.

*You got to hold onto yourself*, I thought, looking at the leech that hung off me like a crazy beard. Its body was still visibly swelling. *You*

*got to hold onto yourself and get him. Be tough. It's the last one. The. Last. One.*

I reached down again and picked it off and it burst between my fingers. My own blood ran across my palm and inner wrist in a warm flood. I began to cry.

Still crying, I walked back to my clothes and put them on. I wanted to stop crying, but I just didn't seem able to turn off the waterworks. Then the shakes set in, making it worse. Vern ran up to me, still naked.

"They off, Gordie? They off me? They off me?"

He twirled in front of me like an insane dancer on a carnival stage.

"They off? Huh? Huh? They off me, Gordie?"

His eyes kept going past me, as wide and white as the eyes of a plaster horse on a merry-go-round.

I nodded that they were and just kept on crying. It seemed that crying was going to be my new career. I tucked my shirt in and then buttoned it all the way to the neck. I put on my socks and my sneakers. Little by little the tears began to slow down. Finally there was nothing left but a few hitches and moans, and then they stopped, too.

Chris walked over to me, wiping his mouth with a handful of elm leaves. His eyes were wide and mute and apologetic.

When we were all dressed we just stood there looking at each other for a moment, and then we began to climb the railroad embankment. I looked back once at the burst leech lying on top of the tromped-down bushes where we had danced and screamed and groaned them off. It looked deflated ... but still ominous.

Fourteen years later I sold my first novel and made my first trip to New York. "It's going to be a three-day celebration," my new editor told me over the phone. "People slinging bullshit will be summarily shot." But of course it was three days of unmitigated bullshit.

While I was there I wanted to do all the standard out-of-towner things—see a stage show at the Radio City Music Hall, go to the top of the Empire State Building (fuck the World Trade Center; the building King Kong climbed in 1933 is always gonna be the tallest one in the world for me), visit Times Square by night. Keith, my

editor, seemed more than pleased to show his city off. The last touristy thing we did was to take a ride on the Staten Island Ferry, and while leaning on the rail I happened to look down and see scores of used condoms floating on the mild swells. And I had a moment of almost total recall—or perhaps it was an actual incidence of time-travel. Either way, for one second I was literally in the past, pausing halfway up that embankment and looking back at the burst leech: dead, deflated ... but still ominous.

Keith must have seen something in my face because he said: “Not very pretty, are they?”

I only shook my head, wanting to tell him not to apologize, wanting to tell him that you didn't have to come to the Apple and ride the ferry to see used rubbers, wanting to say: *The only reason anyone writes stories is so they can understand the past and get ready for some future mortality; that's why all the verbs in stories have -ed endings, Keith my good man, even the ones that sell millions of paperbacks. The only two useful artforms are religion and stories.*

I was pretty drunk that night, as you may have guessed.

What I did tell him was: “I was thinking of something else, that's all.” The most important things are the hardest things to say.

## 22

We walked further down the tracks—I don't know just how far—and I was starting to think: *Well, okay, I'm going to be able to handle it, it's all over anyway, just a bunch of leeches, what the fuck;* I was still thinking it when waves of whiteness suddenly began to come over my sight and I fell down.

I must have fallen hard, but landing on the crossties was like plunging into a warm and puffy feather bed. Someone turned me over. The touch of hands was faint and unimportant. Their faces were disembodied balloons looking down at me from miles up. They looked the way the ref's face must look to a fighter who has been

punched silly and is currently taking a ten-second rest on the canvas. Their words came in gentle oscillations, fading in and out.

“ . . . him?”

“ . . . be all . . .”

“ . . . if you think the sun ...”

“Gordie, are you ...”

Then I must have said something that didn't make much sense because they began to look *really* worried.

“We better take him back, man,” Teddy said, and then the whiteness came over everything again.

When it cleared, I seemed to be all right. Chris was squatting next to me, saying: “Can you hear me, Gordie? You there, man?”

“Yes,” I said, and sat up. A swarm of black dots exploded in front of my eyes, and then went away. I waited to see if they'd come back, and when they didn't, I stood up.

“You scared the cheesly old shit outta me, Gordie,” he said. “You want a drink of water?”

“Yeah.”

He gave me his canteen, half-full of water, and I let three warm gulps roll down my throat.

“Why’d you faint, Gordie?” Vern asked anxiously.

“Made a bad mistake and looked at your face,” I said.

“Eeee-eee-eeee!” Teddy cackled. “Fuckin Gordie! You wet!”

“You really okay?” Vern persisted.

“Yeah. Sure. It was ... bad there for a minute. Thinking about those suckers.”

They nodded soberly. We took five in the shade and then went on walking, me and Vern on one side of the tracks again, Chris and Teddy on the other. We figured we must be getting close.

## 23

We weren’t as close as we thought, and if we’d had the brains to spend two minutes looking at a roadmap, we would have seen why. We knew that Ray Brower’s corpse had to be near the Back Harlow Road, which dead-ends on the bank of the Royal River. Another trestle carries the GS&WM tracks across the Royal. So this is the way we figured: Once we got close to the Royal, we’d be getting close to the Back Harlow Road, where Billy and Charlie had been parked when they saw the boy. And since the Royal was only ten miles from the Castle River, we figured we had it made in the shade.

But that was ten miles as the crow flies, and the tracks didn’t move on a straight line between the Castle and the Royal. Instead, they made a very shallow loop to avoid a hilly, crumbling region called The Bluffs. Anyway, we could have seen that loop quite clearly if we had looked on a map, and figured out that, instead of ten miles, we had about sixteen to walk.

Chris began to suspect the truth when noon had come and gone and the Royal still wasn’t in sight. We stopped while he climbed a high pine tree and took a look around. He came down and gave us a simple enough report: it was going to be at least four in the afternoon before we got to the Royal, and we would only make it by then if we humped right along.

“Ah, *shit!*” Teddy cried. “So what’re we gonna do now?”

We looked into each others’ tired, sweaty faces. We were hungry and out of temper. The big adventure had turned into a long slog—dirty and sometimes scary. We would have been missed back home by now, too, and if Milo Pressman hadn’t already called the cops on us, the engineer of the train crossing the trestle might have done it. We had been planning to hitchhike back to Castle Rock, but four o’clock was just three hours from dark, and *nobody* gives four kids on a back country road a lift after dark.

I tried to summon up the cool image of my deer, cropping at green morning grass, but even that seemed dusty and no good, no better than a stuffed trophy over the mantel in some guy’s hunting lodge, the eyes sprayed to give them that phony lifelike shine.

Finally Chris said: “It’s still closer out going ahead. Let’s go.”

He turned and started to walk along the tracks in his dusty sneakers, head down, his shadow only a puddle at his feet. After a minute or so the rest of us followed him, strung out in Indian file.

## 24

In the years between then and the writing of this memoir, I’ve thought remarkably little about those two days in September, at least consciously. The associations the memories bring to the surface are as unpleasant as week-old river-corpses brought to the surface by cannonfire. As a result, I never really questioned our decision to walk down the tracks. Put another way, I’ve wondered sometimes about *what* we had decided to do but never how we did it.

But now a much simpler scenario comes to mind. I’m confident that if the idea *had* come up it would have been shot down—walking down the tracks would have seemed neater, *bossier*, as we said then. But if the idea had come up and hadn’t been shot down in flames, none of the things which occurred later would have happened. Maybe Chris and Teddy and Vern would even be alive today. No,

they didn't die in the woods or on the railroad tracks; nobody dies in this story except some bloodsuckers and Ray Brower, and if you want to be completely fair about it, he was dead before it even started. But it is true that, of the four of us who flipped coins to see who would go down to the Florida Market to get supplies, only the one who actually went is still alive. The Ancient Mariner at thirty-four, with you, Gentle Reader, in the role of Wedding Guest (at this point shouldn't you flip to the jacket photo to see if my eye holdeth you in its spell?). If you sense a certain flipness on my part, you're right—but maybe I have cause. At an age when all four of us would be considered too young and immature to be President, three of us are dead. And if small events really do echo up larger and larger through time, yes, maybe if we had done the simple thing and simply hitched into Harlow, they would still be alive today.

We could have hooked a ride all the way up Route 7 to the Shiloh Church, which stood at the intersection of the highway and the Back Harlow Road (at least until 1967, when it was levelled by a fire attributed to a tramp's smouldering cigarette butt). With reasonable luck we could have gotten to where the body was by sundown of the previous day.

But the idea wouldn't have lived. It wouldn't have been shot down with tightly buttressed arguments and debating society rhetoric, but with grunts and scowls and farts and raised middle fingers. The verbal part of the discussion would have been carried forward with such trenchant and sparkling contributions as "Fuck no," "That sucks," and that old reliable standby, "Did your mother ever have any kids that lived?"

Unspoken—maybe it was too fundamental to be spoken—was the idea that this was a *big* thing. It wasn't screwing around with firecrackers or trying to look through the knot-hole in the back of the girls' privy at Harrison State Park. This was something on a par with getting laid for the first time, or going into the Army, or buying your first bottle of legal liquor—just bopping into that state store, if you can dig it, selecting a bottle of good Scotch, showing the clerk your draft-card and driver's license, then walking out with a grin on your face and that brown bag in your hand, member of a club with just a

few more rights and privileges than our old treehouse with the tin roof.

There's a high ritual to all fundamental events, the rites of passage, the magic corridor where the change happens. Buying the condoms. Standing before the minister. Raising your hand and taking the oath. Or, if you please, walking down the railroad tracks to meet a fellow your own age halfway, the same as I'd walk halfway over to Pine Street to meet Chris if he was coming over to my house, or the way Teddy would walk halfway down Gates Street to meet me if I was going to his. It seemed right to do it this way, because the rite of passage is a magic corridor and so we always provide an aisle—it's what you walk down when you get married, what they carry you down when you get buried. Our corridor was those twin rails, and we walked between them, just hopping along toward whatever this was supposed to mean. You don't hitchhike your way to a thing like that, maybe. And maybe we thought it was also right that it should have turned out to be harder than we had expected. Events surrounding our hike had turned it into what we had suspected it was all along: serious business.

What we *didn't* know as we walked around The Bluffs was that Billy Tessio, Charlie Hogan, Jack Mudgett, Norman

"Fuzzy" Bracowicz, Vince Desjardins, Chris's older brother Eyeball, and Ace Merrill himself were all on their way to take a look at the body themselves—in a weird kind of way, Ray Brower had become famous, and our secret had turned into a regular roadshow. They were piling into Ace's chopped and channelled '52 Ford and Vince's pink '54 Studebaker even as we started on the last leg of our trip.

Billy and Charlie had managed to keep their enormous secret for just about thirty-six hours. Then Charlie spilled it to Ace while they were shooting pool, and Billy had spilled it to Jack Mudgett while they were fishing for steelies from the Boom Road Bridge. Both Ace and Jack had sworn solemnly on their mothers' names to keep the secret, and that was how everybody in their gang knew about it by noon. Guess you could tell what those assholes thought about their mothers.

They all congregated down at the pool hall, and Fuzzy Bracowicz advanced a theory (which you have heard before, Gentle Reader) that they could all become heroes—not to mention instant radio and TV personalities—by “discovering” the body. All they had to do, Fuzzy maintained, was to take two cars with a lot of fishing gear in the trunks. After they found the body, their story would be a hundred per cent. We was just plannin to take a few pickerel out of the Royal River, officer. Heh-heh-heh. Look what we found.

They were burning up the road from Castle Rock to the Back Harlow area just as we started to finally get close.

## 25

Clouds began to build in the sky around two o'clock, but at first none of us took them seriously. It hadn't rained since the early days of July, so why should it rain now? But they kept building to the south of us, up and up and up, thunderheads in great pillars as purple as bruises, and they began to move slowly our way. I looked at them closely, checking for that membrane beneath that means it's already raining twenty miles away, or fifty. But there was no rain yet. The clouds were still just building.

Vern got a blister on his heel and we stopped and rested while he packed the back of his left sneaker with moss stripped from the bark of an old oak tree.

“Is it gonna rain, Gordie?” Teddy asked.

“I think so.”

“Pisser!” he said, and sighed. “The pisser good end to a pisser good day.”

I laughed and he tipped me a wink.

We started to walk again, a little more slowly now out of respect for Vern's hurt foot. And in the hour between two and three, the quality of the day's light began to change, and we knew for sure that rain was coming. It was just as hot as ever, and even more humid, but we

knew. And the birds did. They seemed to appear from nowhere and swoop across the sky, chattering and crying shrilly to each other. And the light. From a steady, beating brightness it seemed to evolve into something filtered, almost pearly. Our shadows, which had begun to grow long again, also grew fuzzy and ill-defined. The sun had begun to sail in and out through the thickening decks of clouds, and the southern sky had gone a coppery shade. We watched the thunderheads lumber closer, fascinated by their size and their mute threat. Every now and then it seemed that a giant flashbulb had gone off inside one of them, turning their purplish, bruised color momentarily to a light gray. I saw a jagged fork of lightning lick down from the underside of the closest. It was bright enough to print a blue tattoo on my retinas. It was followed by a long, shaking blast of thunder.

We did a little bitching about how we were going to get caught out in the rain, but only because it was the expected thing—of course we were all looking forward to it. It would be cold and refreshing ... and leech-free.

At a little past three-thirty, we saw running water through a break in the trees.

“That’s it!” Chris yelled jubilantly. “That’s the Royal!”

We began to walk faster, taking our second wind. The storm was getting close now. The air began to stir, and it seemed that the temperature dropped ten degrees in a space of seconds. I looked down and saw that my shadow had disappeared entirely.

We were walking in pairs again, each two watching a side of the railroad embankment. My mouth was dry, throbbing with a sickish tension. The sun sailed behind another cloudbank and this time it didn’t come back out. For a moment the bank’s edges were embroidered with gold, like a cloud in an Old Testament Bible illustration, and then the wine-colored, dragging belly of the thunderhead blotted out all traces of the sun. The day became gloomy—the clouds were rapidly eating up the last of the blue. We could smell the river so clearly that we might have been horses—or perhaps it was the smell of rain impending in the air as well. There

was an ocean above us, held in by a thin sac that might rupture and let down a flood at any second.

I kept trying to look into the underbrush, but my eyes were continually drawn back to that turbulent, racing sky; in its deepening colors you could read whatever doom you liked: water, fire, wind, hail. The cool breeze became more insistent, hissing in the firs. A sudden impossible bolt of lightning flashed down, seemingly from directly overhead, making me cry out and clap my hands to my eyes. God had taken my picture, a little kid with his shirt tied around his waist, duck-bumps on his bare chest and cinders on his cheeks. I heard the rending fall of some big tree not sixty yards away. The crack of thunder which followed made me cringe. I wanted to be at home reading a good book in a safe place ... like down in the potato cellar.

“Jeezis!” Vern screamed in a high, fainting voice. “Oh my Jeezis Chrise, lookit *that!*”

I looked in the direction Vern was pointing and saw a blue-white fireball bowling its way up the lefthand rail of the GS&WM tracks, crackling and hissing for all the world like a scalded cat. It hurried past us as we turned to watch it go, dumbfounded, aware for the first time that such things could exist. Twenty feet beyond us it made a sudden—*pop!!*—and just disappeared, leaving a greasy smell of ozone behind.

“What am I *doin* here, anyway?” Teddy muttered.

“What a pisser!” Chris exclaimed happily, his face upturned. “This is gonna be a pisser like you wouldn’t *believe!*” But I was with Teddy. Looking up at that sky gave me a dismaying sense of vertigo. It was more like looking into some deeply mysterious marbled gorge. Another lightning-bolt crashed down, making us duck. This time the ozone smell was hotter, more urgent. The following clap of thunder came with no perceptible pause at all.

My ears were still ringing from it when Vern began to screech triumphantly: “*THERE! THERE HE IS! RIGHT THERE! I SEE HIM!*”

I can see Vern right this minute, if I want to—all I have to do is sit back for a minute and close my eyes. He’s standing there on the lefthand rail like an explorer on the prow of his ship, one hand

shielding his eyes from the silver stroke of lightning that has just come down, the other extended and pointing.

We ran up beside him and looked. I was thinking to myself: *Vern's imagination just ran away with him, that's all. The suckers, the heat, now this storm... his eyes are dealing wild cards, that's all.* But that wasn't what it was, although there was a split second when I wanted it to be. In that split second I knew I never wanted to see a corpse, not even a runover woodchuck.

In the place where we were standing, early spring rains had washed part of the embankment away, leaving a gravelly, uncertain four-foot drop-off. The railroad maintenance crews had either not yet gotten around to it in their yellow diesel-operated repair carts, or it had happened so recently it hadn't yet been reported. At the bottom of this washout was a marshy, mucky tangle of undergrowth that smelled bad. And sticking out of a wild clingspring of blackberry brambles was a single pale white hand.

Did any of us breathe? I didn't.

The breeze was now a wind—harsh and jerky, coming at us from no particular direction, jumping and whirling, slapping at our sweaty skins and open pores. I hardly noticed. I think part of my mind was waiting for Teddy to cry out *Paratroops over the side!*, and I thought if he did that I might just go crazy. It would have been better to see the whole body, all at once, but instead there was only that limp outstretched hand, horribly white, the fingers limply splayed, like the hand of a drowned boy. It told us the truth of the whole matter. It explained every graveyard in the world. The image of that hand came back to me every time I heard or read of an atrocity. Somewhere, attached to that hand, was the rest of Ray Brower.

Lightning flickered and stroked. Thunder ripped in behind each stroke as if a drag race had started over our heads.

"Sheeeee ..." Chris said, the sound not quite a cuss word, not quite the country version of *shit* as it is pronounced around a slender stem of timothy grass when the baler breaks down—instead it was a long, tuneless syllable without meaning; a sigh that had just happened to pass through the vocal cords.

Vern was licking his lips in a compulsive sort of way, as if he had tasted some obscure new delicacy, a Howard John-son's 29th flavor, Tibetan Sausage Rolls, Interstellar Escargot, something so weird that it excited and revolted him at the same time.

Teddy only stood and looked. The wind whipped his greasy, clotted hair first away from his ears and then back over them. His face was a total blank. I could tell you I saw something there, and perhaps I did, in hindsight ... but not then.

There were black ants trundling back and forth across the hand.

A great whispering noise began to rise in the woods on either side of the tracks, as if the forest had just noticed we were there and was commenting on it. The rain had started.

Dime-sized drops fell on my head and arms. They struck the embankment, turning the fill dark for a moment—and then the color changed back again as the greedy dry ground sucked the moisture up.

Those big drops fell for maybe five seconds and then they stopped. I looked at Chris and he blinked back at me.

Then the storm came all at once, as if a shower chain had been pulled in the sky. The whispering sound changed to loud contention. It was as if we were being rebuked for our discovery, and it was frightening. Nobody tells you about the pathetic fallacy until you're in college ... and even then I noticed that nobody but the total dorks completely believed it *was* a fallacy.

Chris jumped over the side of the washout, his hair already soaked and clinging to his head. I followed. Vern and Teddy came close behind, but Chris and I were first to reach the body of Ray Brower. He was face down. Chris looked into my eyes, his face set and stern—an adult's face. I nodded slightly, as if he had spoken aloud.

I think he was down here and relatively intact instead of up there between the rails and completely mangled because he was trying to get out of the way when the train hit him, knocking him head over heels. He had landed with his head pointed toward the tracks, arms over his head like a diver about to execute. He had landed in this boggy cup of land that was becoming a small swamp. His hair was a dark reddish color. The moisture in the air had made it curl slightly at

the ends. There was blood in it, but not a great deal, not a gross-out amount. The ants were grosser. He was wearing a solid color dark green tee-shirt and bluejeans. His feet were bare, and a few feet behind him, caught in tall blackberry brambles, I saw a pair of filthy low-topped Keds. For a moment I was puzzled—why was he here and his tennies there? Then I realized, and the realization was like a dirty punch below the belt. My wife, my kids, my friends—they all think that having an imagination like mine must be quite nice; aside from making all this dough, I can have a little mind-movie whenever things get dull. Mostly they're right. But every now and then it turns around and bites the shit out of you with these long teeth, teeth that have been filed to points like the teeth of a cannibal. You see things you'd just as soon not see, things that keep you awake until first light. I saw one of those things now, saw it with absolute clarity and certainty. He had been knocked spang out of his Keds. The train had knocked him out of his Keds just as it had knocked the life out of his body.

That finally rammed it all the way home for me. The kid was dead. The kid wasn't sick, the kid wasn't sleeping. The kid wasn't going to get up in the morning anymore or get the runs from eating too many apples or catch poison ivy or wear out the eraser on the end of his Ticonderoga No. 2 during a hard math test. The kid was dead; stone dead. The kid was never going to go out bottling with his friends in the spring, gunnysack over his shoulder to pick up the returnables the retreating snow uncovered. The kid wasn't going to wake up at two o'clock A.M. on the morning of November 1st this year, run to the bathroom, and vomit up a big glurt of cheap Halloween candy. The kid wasn't going to pull a single girl's braid in home room. The kid wasn't going to give a bloody nose, or get one. The kid was *can't, don't, won't, never, shouldn't, wouldn't, couldn't*. He was the side of the battery where the terminal says NEG. The fuse you have to put a penny in. The wastebasket by the teacher's desk, which always smells of wood-shavings from the sharpener and dead orange peels from lunch. The haunted house outside of town where the windows are crashed out, the NO TRESPASSING signs whipped away across the fields, the attic full of bats, the cellar full of rats. The kid was

dead, mister, ma'am, young sir, little miss. I could go on all day and never get it right about the distance between his bare feet on the ground and his dirty Keds hanging in the bushes. It was thirty-plus inches, it was a googol of light-years. The kid was disconnected from his Keds beyond all hope of reconciliation. He was dead.

We turned him face up into the pouring rain, the lightning, the steady crack of thunder.

There were ants and bugs all over his face and neck. They ran briskly in and out of the round collar of his tee-shirt. His eyes were open, but terrifyingly out of sync—one was rolled back so far that we could see only a tiny arc of iris; the other stared straight up into the storm. There was a dried froth of blood above his mouth and on his chin—from a bloody nose, I thought—and the right side of his face was lacerated and darkly bruised. Still, I thought, he didn't really look bad. I had once walked into a door my brother Dennis was shoving open, came off with bruises even worse than this kid's, *plus* the bloody nose, and still had two helpings of everything for supper after it happened.

Teddy and Vern stood behind us, and if there had been any sight at all left in that one upward-staring eye, I suppose we would have looked to Ray Brower like pallbearers in a horror movie.

A beetle came out of his mouth, trekked across his fuzzless cheek, stepped onto a nettle, and was gone.

"D'joo see that?" Teddy asked in a high, strange, fainting voice. "I bet he's fuckin *fulla* bugs! I bet his *brains're*—"

"Shut up, Teddy," Chris said, and Teddy did, looking relieved.

Lightning forked blue across the sky, making the boy's single eye light up. You could almost believe he was glad to be found, and found by boys his own age. His torso had swelled up and there was a faint gassy odor about him, like the smell of old farts.

I turned away, sure I was going to be sick, but my stomach was dry, hard, steady. I suddenly rammed two fingers down my throat, trying to *make* myself heave, needing to do it, as if I could sick it up and get rid of it. But my stomach only hitched a little and then was steady again.

The roaring downpour and the accompanying thunder had completely covered the sound of cars approaching along the Back Harlow Road, which lay bare yards beyond this boggy tangle. It likewise covered the crackle-crunch of the underbrush as they blundered through it from the dead end where they had parked.

And the first we knew of them was Ace Merrill's voice raised above the tumult of the storm, saying: "Well what the fuck do you know about this?"

## 26

We all jumped like we had been goosed and Vern cried out—he admitted later that he thought, for just a second, that the voice had come from the dead boy.

On the far side of the boggy patch, where the woods took up again, masking the butt end of the road, Ace Merrill and Eyeball Chambers stood together, half-obscurd by a pouring gray curtain of rain. They were both wearing red nylon high school jackets, the kind you can buy in the office if you're a regular student, the same kind they give away free to varsity sports players. Their d.a. haircuts had been plastered back against their skulls and a mixture of rainwater and Vitalis ran down their cheeks like ersatz tears.

"Sumbitch!" Eyeball said. "That's my little brother!" Chris was staring at Eyeball with his mouth open. His shirt, wet, limp, and dark, was still tied around his skinny middle. His pack, stained a darker green by the rain, was hanging against his naked shoulderblades.

"You get away, Rich," he said in a trembling voice. "We found him. We got dibs."

"Fuck your dibs. We're gonna report 'im."

"No you're not," I said. I was suddenly furious with them, turning up this way at the last minute. If we'd thought about it, we'd have known something like this was going to happen ... but this was one time, somehow, that the older, bigger kids weren't going to steal it—

to take something they wanted as if by divine right, as if their easy way was the right way, the only way. They had come in *cars*—I think that was what made me angriest. They had come in cars. “There’s four of us, Eyeball. You just try.”

“Oh, we’ll *try*, don’t worry,” Eyeball said, and the trees shook behind him and Ace. Charlie Hogan and Vern’s brother Billy stepped through them, cursing and wiping water out of their eyes. I felt a lead ball drop into my belly. It grew bigger as Jack Mudgett, Fuzzy Bracowicz and Vince Desjardins stepped out behind Charlie and Billy.

“Here we all are,” Ace said, grinning. “So you just—”

“*VERN!!*” Billy Tessio cried in a terrible, accusing, my-judgment-cometh-and-that-right-early voice. He made a pair of dripping fists. “You little sonofawhore! You was under the porch! *Cock-knocker!*”

Vern flinched.

Charlie Hogan waxed positively lyrical: “You little keyhole-peeping cunt-licking *bungwipe!* I ought to beat the living shit out of you!”

“Yeah? Well, try it!” Teddy brayed suddenly. His eyes were crazily alight behind his rainspotted glasses. “Come on, fightcha for ’im! Come on! Come on, big men!”

Billy and Charlie didn’t need a second invitation. They started forward together and Vern flinched again—no doubt visualizing the ghosts of Beatings Past and Beatings Yet to Come. He flinched ... but hung tough. He was with his friends, and we had been through a lot, and we hadn’t got here in a couple of *cars*.

But Ace held Billy and Charlie back, simply by touching each of them on the shoulder.

“Now listen, you guys,” Ace said. He spoke patiently, just as if we weren’t all standing in a roaring rainstorm. “There’s more of us than there are of you. We’re bigger. We’ll give you one chance to just blow away. I don’t give a fuck where. Just make like a tree and leave.”

Chris’s brother giggled and Fuzzy clapped Ace on the back in appreciation of his great wit. The Sid Caesar of the j.d. set.

“Cause *we’re* takin him.” Ace smiled gently, and you could imagine him smiling that same gentle smile just before breaking his cue over

the head of some uneducated punk who had made the terrible mistake of lipping off while Ace was lining up a shot. “If you go, we’ll take him. If you stay, we’ll beat the piss outta you and still take him. Besides,” he added, trying to gild the thuggery with a little righteousness, “Charlie and Billy found him, so it’s their dibs anyway.”

“They was chicken!” Teddy shot back. “Vern told us about it! They was fuckin chicken right outta their fuckin minds!” He screwed his face up into a terrified, snivelling parody of Charlie Hogan. “ ‘I wish we never boosted that car! I wish we never went out on no Back Harlow Road to whack off a piece! Oh, Billee, what are we gonna do? Oh Billee, I think I just turned my Fruit of the Looms into a fudge factory! Oh Billee—’ ”

“That’s it,” Charlie said, starting forward again. His face was knotted with rage and sullen embarrassment. “Kid, whatever your name is, get ready to reach down your fuckin throat the next time you need to pick your nose.”

I looked wildly down at Ray Brower. He stared calmly up into the rain with his one eye, below us but above it all. The thunder was still booming steadily, but the rain had begun to slack off.

“What do you say, Gordie?” Ace asked. He was holding Charlie lightly by the arm, the way an accomplished trainer would restrain a vicious dog. “You must have at least some of your brother’s sense. Tell these guys to back off. I’ll let Charlie beat up the foureyes el punko a little bit and then we all go about our business. What do you say?”

He was wrong to mention Denny. I had wanted to reason with him, to point out what Ace knew perfectly well, that we had every right to take Billy and Charlie’s dibs since Vern had heard them giving said dibs away. I wanted to tell him how Vern and I had almost gotten run down by a freight train on the trestle which spans the Castle River. About Milo Pressman and his fearless—if stupid—sidekick, Chopper the Wonder-Dog. About the blood-suckers, too. I guess all I really wanted to tell him was Come on, Ace, fair is fair. You know that. But he had to bring Denny into it, and what I heard coming out of my

mouth instead of sweet reason was my own death-warrant: “Suck my fat one, you cheap dimestore hood.”

Ace’s mouth formed a perfect O of surprise—the expression was so unexpectedly prissy that under other circumstances it would have been a laff riot, so to speak. All of the others—on both sides of the bog—stared at me, dumbfounded.

Then Teddy screamed gleefully: “That’s telling ’im, Gordie! Oh boy! Too cool!”

I stood numbly, unable to believe it. It was like some crazed understudy had shot onstage at the critical moment and declaimed lines that weren’t even in the play. Telling a guy to suck was as bad as you could get without resorting to his mother. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Chris had un-shouldered his knapsack and was digging into it frantically, but I didn’t get it—not then, anyway.

“Okay,” Ace said softly. “Let’s take em. Don’t hurt nobody but the Lachance kid. I’m gonna break both his fuckin arms.”

I went dead cold. I didn’t piss myself the way I had on the railroad trestle, but it must have been because I had nothing inside to let out. He meant it, you see; the years between then and now have changed my mind about a lot of things, but not about that. When Ace said he was going to break both of my arms, he absolutely meant it.

They started to walk toward us through the slackening rain. Jackie Mudgett took a switchknife out of his pocket and hit the chrome. Six inches of steel flicked out, dove-gray in the afternoon half-light. Vern and Teddy dropped suddenly into fighting crouches on either side of me. Teddy did so eagerly, Vern with a desperate, cornered grimace on his face.

The big kids advanced in a line, their feet splashing through the bog, which was now one big sludgy puddle because of the storm. The body of Ray Brower lay at our feet like a waterlogged barrel. I got ready to fight ... and that was when Chris fired the pistol he had hawked out of his old man’s dresser.

*KA-BLAM!*

God, what a wonderful sound that was! Charlie Hogan jumped right up into the air. Ace Merrill, who had been staring straight at me, now jerked around and looked at Chris. His mouth made that O again. Eyeball looked absolutely astounded.

“Hey, Chris, that’s Daddy’s,” he said. “You’re gonna get the tar whaled out of you—”

“That’s nothing to what you’ll get,” Chris said. His face was horribly pale, and all the life in him seemed to have been sucked upward, into his eyes. They blazed out of his face.

“Gordie was right, you’re nothing but a bunch of cheap hoods. Charlie and Billy didn’t want their fuckin dibs and you all know it. We wouldn’t have walked way to fuck out here if they said they did. They just went someplace and puked the story up and let Ace Merrill do their thinkin for them.” His voice rose to a scream. “*But you ain’t gonna get him, do you hear me?*”

“Now listen,” Ace said. “You better put that down before you take your foot off with it. You ain’t got the sack to shoot a woodchuck.” He began to walk forward again, smiling his gentle smile as he came. “You’re just a sawed-off pint-sized pissy-assed little runt and I’m gonna make you *eat* that fuckin gun.”

“Ace, if you don’t stand still I’m going to shoot you. I swear to God.”

“You’ll go to *jayy-ail*,” Ace crooned, not even hesitating. He was still smiling. The others watched him with horrified fascination ... much the same way as Teddy and Vern and I were looking at Chris. Ace Merrill was the hardest case for miles around and I didn’t think Chris could bluff him down. And what did that leave? Ace didn’t think a twelve-year-old punk would actually shoot him. I thought he was wrong; I thought Chris would shoot Ace before he let Ace take his father’s pistol away from him. In those few seconds I was sure there was going to be bad trouble, the worst I’d ever known. Killing trouble, maybe. And all of it over who got dibs on a dead body.

Chris said softly, with great regret: "Where do you want it, Ace? Arm or leg? I can't pick. You pick for me."

And Ace stopped.

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His face sagged, and I saw sudden terror on it. It was Chris's tone rather than his actual words, I think; the real regret that things were going to go from bad to worse. If it was a bluff, it's still the best I've ever seen. The other big kids were totally convinced; their faces were squinched up as if someone had just touched a match to a cherry-bomb with a short fuse.

Ace slowly got control of himself. The muscles in his face tightened again, his lips pressed together, and he looked at Chris the way you'd look at a man who has made a serious business proposition—to merge with your company, or handle your line of credit, or shoot your balls off. It was a waiting, almost curious expression, one that made you know that the terror was either gone or tightly lidded. Ace had recomputed the odds on not getting shot and had decided that they weren't as much in his favor as he had thought. But he was still dangerous—maybe more than before. Since then I've thought it was the rawest piece of brinkmanship I've ever seen. Neither of them was bluffing, they both meant business.

"All right," Ace said softly, speaking to Chris. "But I know how you're going to come out of this, motherfuck."

"No you don't," Chris said.

"You little prick!" Eyeball said loudly. "You're gonna wind up in traction for this!"

"Bite my bag," Chris told him.

With an inarticulate sound of rage Eyeball started forward and Chris put a bullet into the water about ten feet in front of him. It kicked up a splash. Eyeball jumped back, cursing.

"Okay, now what?" Ace asked.

“Now you guys get into your cars and bomb on back to Castle Rock. After that I don’t care. But you ain’t getting him.” He touched Ray Brower lightly, almost reverently, with the toe of one sopping sneaker. “You dig me?”

“But we’ll get *you*,” Ace said. He was starting to smile again. “Don’t you know that?”

“You might. You might not.”

“We’ll get you hard,” Ace said, smiling. “We’ll hurt you. I can’t believe you don’t *know* that. We’ll put you all in the fuckin hospital with fuckin ruptures. Sincerely.”

“Oh, why don’t you go home and fuck your mother some more? I hear she loves the way you do it.”

Ace’s smile froze. “I’ll kill you for that. Nobody ranks my mother.”

“I heard your mother fucks for bucks,” Chris informed him, and as Ace began to pale, as his complexion began to approach Chris’s own ghastly whiteness, he added: “In fact, I heard she throws blowjobs for jukebox nickels. I heard—”

Then the storm came back, viciously, all at once. Only this time it was hail instead of rain. Instead of whispering or talking, the woods now seemed alive with hokey B-movie jungle drums—it was the sound of big icy hailstones honking off tree trunks. Stinging pebbles began to hit my shoulders—it felt as if some sentient, malevolent force were throwing them. Worse than that, they began to strike Ray Brower’s upturned face with an awful splatting sound that reminded us of him again, of his terrible and unending patience.

Vern caved in first, with a wailing scream. He fled up the embankment in huge, gangling strides. Teddy held out a minute longer, then ran after Vern, his hands held up over his head. On their side, Vince Desjardins floundered back under some nearby trees and Fuzzy Bracowicz joined him. But the others stood pat, and Ace began to grin again.

“Stick with me, Gordie,” Chris said in a low, shaky voice. “Stick with me, man.”

“I’m right here.”

“Go on, now,” Chris said to Ace, and he was able, by some magic, to get the shakiness out of his voice. He sounded as if he were

instructing a stupid infant.

“We’ll get you,” Ace said. “We’re not going to forget it, if that’s what you’re thinking. This is big time, baby.”

“That’s fine. You just go on and do your getting another day.”

“We’ll fuckin ambush you, Chambers. We’ll—”

“*Get out!*” Chris screamed, and levelled the gun. Ace stepped back.

He looked at Chris a moment longer, nodded, then turned around. “Come on,” he said to the others. He looked back over his shoulder at Chris and me once more. “Be seeing you.”

They went back into the screen of trees between the bog and the road. Chris and I stood perfectly still in spite of the hail that was wetting us, reddening our skins, and piling up all around us like summer snow. We stood and listened and above the crazy calypso sound of the hail hitting the tree trunks we heard two cars start up.

“Stay right here,” Chris told me, and he started across the bog.

“Chris!” I said, panicky.

“I got to. Stay here.”

It seemed he was gone a very long time. I became convinced that either Ace or Eyeball had lurked behind and grabbed him. I stood my ground with nobody but Ray Brower for company and waited for somebody—anybody—to come back. After a while, Chris did.

“We did it,” he said. “They’re gone.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Both cars.” He held his hands up over his head, locked together with the gun between them, and shook the double fist in a wry championship gesture. Then he dropped them and smiled at me. I think it was the saddest scarest smile I ever saw. “‘Suck my fat one’—whoever told you you had a fat one, Lachance?”

“Biggest one in four counties,” I said. I was shaking all over.

We looked at each other warmly for a second, and then, maybe embarrassed by what we were seeing, looked down together. A nasty thrill of fear shot through me, and the sudden *splash/splash* as Chris shifted his feet let me know that he had seen, too. Ray Brower’s eyes had gone wide and white, starey and pupilless, like the eyes that look out at you from Grecian statuary. It only took a

second to understand what had happened, but understanding didn't lessen the horror. His eyes had filled up with round white hailstones. Now they were melting and the water ran down his cheeks as if he were weeping for his own grotesque position—a tatty prize to be fought over by two bunches of stupid hick kids. His clothes were also white with hail. He seemed to be lying in his own shroud.

“Oh, Gordie, hey,” Chris said shakily. “Say-hey, man. What a creepshow for him.”

“I don't think he knows—”

“Maybe that was his ghost we heard. Maybe he knew this was gonna happen. What a fuckin creepshow, I'm sincere.”

Branches crackled behind us. I whirled, sure they had flanked us, but Chris went back to contemplating the body after one short, almost casual glance. It was Vern and Teddy, their jeans soaked black and plastered to their legs, both of them grinning like dogs that have been sucking eggs.

“What are we gonna do, man?” Chris asked, and I felt a weird chill steal through me. Maybe he was talking to me, maybe he was ... but he was still looking down at the body.

“We're gonna take him back, ain't we?” Teddy asked, puzzled. “We're gonna be heroes. Ain't that right?” He looked from Chris to me and back to Chris again.

Chris looked up as if startled out of a dream. His lip curled. He took big steps toward Teddy, planted both hands on Teddy's chest, and pushed him roughly backwards. Teddy stumbled, pinwheeled his arms for balance, then sat down with a soggy splash. He blinked up at Chris like a surprised muskrat. Vern was looking warily at Chris, as if he feared madness. Perhaps that wasn't far from the mark.

“You keep your trap shut,” Chris said to Teddy. “Paratroops over the side my ass. You lousy rubber chicken.”

“It was the *hail!*” Teddy cried out, angry and ashamed. “It wasn't those guys, Chris! I'm ascares of *storms!* I can't help it! I would have taken all of em on at once, I swear on my mother's name! But I'm ascares of *storms!* Shit! I can't help it!” He began to cry again, sitting there in the water.

“What about you?” Chris asked, turning to Vern. “Are you scared of storms, too?”

Vern shook his head vacuously, still astounded by Chris’s rage. “Hey, man, I thought we was all runnin.”

“You must be a mind-reader then, because you ran first.”

Vern swallowed twice and said nothing.

Chris stared at him, his eyes sullen and wild. Then he turned to me. “Going to build him a litter, Gordie.”

“If you say so, Chris.”

“Sure! Like in Scouts.” His voice had begun to climb into strange, reedy levels. “Just like in the fuckin Scouts. A litter—poles and shirts. Like in the handbook. Right, Gordie?”

“Yeah. If you want. But what if those guys—”

*“Fuck those guys!”* he screamed. *“You’re all a bunch of chickens! Fuck off, creeps!”*

“Chris, they could call the Constable. To get back at us.”

*“He’s ours and we’re gonna take him OUT!”*

“Those guys would say anything to get us in dutch,” I told him. My words sounded thin, stupid, sick with the flu. “Say anything and then lie each other up. You know how people can get other people in trouble telling lies, man. Like with the milk-mo—”

*“I DON’T CARE!”* he screamed, and lunged at me with his fists up. But one of his feet struck Ray Brower’s ribcage with a soggy thump, making the body rock. He tripped and fell full-length and I waited for him to get up and maybe punch me in the mouth but instead he lay where he had fallen, head pointing toward the embankment, arms stretched out over his head like a diver about to execute, in the exact posture Ray Brower had been in when we found him. I looked wildly at Chris’s feet to make sure his sneakers were still on. Then he began to cry and scream, his body bucking in the muddy water, splashing it around, fists drumming up and down in it, head twisting from side to side. Teddy and Vern were staring at him, agog, because nobody had ever seen Chris Chambers cry. After a moment or two I walked back to the embankment, climbed it, and sat down on one of the rails. Teddy and Vern followed me. And we sat there in the rain, not talking, looking like those three Monkeys of Virtue they

sell in dime-stores and those sleazy gift-shops that always look like they are tottering on the edge of bankruptcy.

## 28

It was twenty minutes before Chris climbed the embankment to sit down beside us. The clouds had begun to break. Spears of sun came down through the rips. The bushes seemed to have gone three shades darker green in the last forty-five minutes. He was mud all the way up one side and down the other. His hair was standing up in muddy spikes. The only clean parts of him were the whitewashed circles around his eyes.

“You’re right, Gordie,” he said. “Nobody gets last dibs. Goocher all around, huh?”

I nodded. Five minutes passed. No one said anything. And I happened to have a thought—just in case they *did* call Bannerman. I went back down the embankment and over to where Chris had been standing. I got down on my knees and began to comb carefully through the water and marshgrass with my fingers.

“What you doing?” Teddy asked, joining me.

“It’s to your left, I think,” Chris said, and pointed.

I looked there and after a minute or two I found both shell casings. They winked in the fresh sunlight. I gave them to Chris. He nodded and stuffed them into a pocket of his jeans.

“Now we go,” Chris said.

“Hey, come *on!*” Teddy yelled, in real agony. “I wanna *take* ’im!”

“Listen, dummy,” Chris said, “if we take him back we could all wind up in the reformatory. It’s like Gordie says. Those guys could make up any story they wanted to. What if they said we killed him, huh? How would you like that?”

“I don’t give a damn,” Teddy said sulkily. Then he looked at us with absurd hope. “Besides, we might only get a couple of months or so.

As excessories. I mean, we're only twelve fuckin years old, they ain't gonna put us in Shawshank."

Chris said softly: "You can't get in the Army if you got a record, Teddy."

I was pretty sure that was nothing but a bald-faced lie—but somehow this didn't seem the time to say so. Teddy just looked at Chris for a long time, his mouth trembling. Finally he managed to squeak out: "No shit?"

"Ask Gordie."

He looked at me hopefully.

"He's right," I said, feeling like a great big turd. "He's right, Teddy. First thing they do when you volunteer is to check your name through R&I."

"Holy God!"

"We're gonna shag ass back to the trestle," Chris said.

"Then we'll get off the tracks and come into Castle Rock from the other direction. If people ask where we were, we'll say we went campin up on Brickyard Hill and got lost."

"Milo Pressman knows better," I said. "That creep at the Florida Market does, too."

"Well, we'll say Milo scared us and that's when we decided to go up on the Brickyard."

I nodded. That might work. If Vern and Teddy could remember to stick to it.

"What about if our folks get together?" Vern asked.

"You worry about it if you want," Chris said. "My dad'll still be juiced up."

"Come on, then," Vern said, eyeing the screen of trees between us and the Back Harlow Road. He looked like he expected Bannerman, along with a brace of bloodhounds, to come crashing through at any moment. "Let's get while the gettin's good."

We were all on our feet now, ready to go. The birds were singing like crazy, pleased with the rain and the shine and the worms and just about everything in the world, I guess. We all turned around, as if pulled on strings, and looked back at Ray Brower.

He was lying there, alone again. His arms had flopped out when we turned him over and now he was sort of spreadeagled, as if to welcome the sunshine. For a moment it seemed all right, a more natural deathscene than any ever constructed for a viewing-room audience by a mortician. Then you saw the bruise, the caked blood on the chin and under the nose, and the way the corpse was beginning to bloat. You saw that the bluebottles had come out with the sun and that they were circling the body, buzzing indolently. You remembered that gassy smell, sickish but dry, like farts in a closed room. He was a boy our age, he was dead, and I rejected the idea that anything about it could be natural; I pushed it away with horror.

“Okay,” Chris said, and he meant to be brisk but his voice came out of his throat like a handful of dry bristles from an old whiskbroom. “Double-time.”

We started to almost-trot back the way we had come. We didn’t talk. I don’t know about the others, but I was too busy thinking to talk. There were things that bothered me about the body of Ray Brower—they bothered me then and they bother me now.

A bad bruise on the side of his face, a scalp laceration, a bloody nose. No more—at least, no more visible. People walk away from bar-fights in worse condition and go right on drinking. Yet the train *must* have hit him; why else would his sneakers be off his feet that way? And how come the engineer hadn’t seen him? Could it be that the train had hit him hard enough to toss him but not to kill him? I thought that, under just the right combination of circumstances, that could have happened. Had the train hit him a hefty, teeth-rattling side-swipe as he tried to get out of the way? Hit him and knocked him in a flying, backwards somersault over that caved-in banking? Had he perhaps lain awake and trembling in the dark for hours, not just lost now but disoriented as well, cut off from the world? Maybe he had died of fear. A bird with crushed tailfeathers once died in my cupped hands in just that way. Its body trembled and vibrated lightly, its beak opened and closed, its dark, bright eyes stared up at me. Then the vibration quit, the beak froze half-open and the black eyes became lackluster and uncaring. It could have been that way with

Ray Brower. He could have died because he was simply too frightened to go on living.

But there was another thing, and that bothered me most of all, I think. He had started off to go berrying. I seemed to remember the news reports saying he'd been carrying a pot to put his berries in. When we got back I went to the library and looked it up in the newspapers just to be sure, and I was right. He'd been berrying, and he'd had a pail, or a pot—something like that. But we hadn't found it. We found him, and we found his sneakers. He must have thrown it away somewhere between Chamberlain and the boggy patch of ground in Harlow where he died. He perhaps clutched it even tighter at first, as though it linked him to home and safety. But as his fear grew, and with it that sense of being utterly alone, with no chance of rescue except for whatever he could do by himself, as the real cold terror set in, he maybe threw it away into the woods on one side of the tracks or the other, hardly even noticing it was gone.

I've thought of going back and looking for it—how does that strike you for morbid? I've thought of driving to the end of the Back Harlow Road in my almost new Ford van and getting out of it some bright summer morning, all by myself, my wife and children far off in another world where, if you turn a switch, lights come on in the dark. I've thought about how it would be. Pulling my pack out of the back and resting it on the customized van's rear bumper while I carefully remove my shirt and tie it around my waist. Rubbing my chest and shoulders with Muskol insect repellent and then crashing through the woods to where that boggy place was, the place where we found him. Would the grass grow up yellow there, in the shape of his body? Of course not, there would be no sign, but still you wonder, and you realize what a thin film there is between your rational man costume—the writer with leather elbow-patches on his corduroy jacket—and the capering, Gorgon myths of childhood. Then climbing the embankment, now overgrown with weeds, and walking slowly beside the rusted tracks and rotted ties toward Chamberlain.

Stupid fantasy. An expedition looking for a twenty-year-old blueberry bucket, which was probably cast deep into the woods or plowed under by a bulldozer readying a half-acre plot for a tract

house or so deeply overgrown by weeds and brambles it had become invisible. But I feel sure it is still there, somewhere along the old discontinued GS&WM line, and at times the urge to go and look is almost a frenzy. It usually comes early in the morning, when my wife is showering and the kids are watching *Batman* and *Scooby-Doo* on channel 38 out of Boston, and I am feeling the most like the pre-adolescent Gordon Lachance that once strode the earth, walking and talking and occasionally crawling on his belly like a reptile. That boy was *me*, I think. And the thought which follows, chilling me like a dash of cold water, is: *Which boy do you mean?*

Sipping a cup of tea, looking at sun slanting through the kitchen windows, hearing the TV from one end of the house and the shower from the other, feeling the pulse behind my eyes that means I got through one beer too many the night before, I feel sure I could find it. I would see clear metal winking through rust, the bright summer sun reflecting it back to my eyes. I would go down the side of the embankment, push aside the grasses that had grown up and twined toughly around its handle, and then I would ... what? Why, simply pull it out of time. I would turn it over and over in my hands, wondering at the feel of it, marvelling at the knowledge that the last person to touch it had been long years in his grave. Suppose there was a note in it? *Help me, I'm lost*. Of course there wouldn't be—boys don't go out to pick blueberries with paper and pencil—but just suppose. I imagine the awe I'd feel would be as dark as an eclipse. Still, it's mostly just the idea of holding that pail in my two hands, I guess—as much a symbol of my living as his dying, proof that I really do know which boy it was—which boy of the five of us. Holding it. Reading every year in its cake of rust and the fading of its bright shine. Feeling it, trying to understand the suns that shone on it, the rains that fell on it, and the snows that covered it. And to wonder where I was when each thing happened to it in its lonely place, where I was, what I was doing, who I was loving, how I was getting along, where I was. I'd hold it, read it, feel it ... and look at my own face in whatever reflection might be left. Can you dig it?

We got back to Castle Rock a little past five o'clock on Sunday morning, the day before Labor Day. We had walked all night. Nobody complained, although we all had blisters and were all ravenously hungry. My head was throbbing with a killer headache, and my legs felt twisted and burning with fatigue. Twice we had to scramble down the embankment to get out of the way of freights. One of them was going our way, but moving far too fast to hop. It was seeping daylight when we got to the trestle spanning the Castle again. Chris looked at it, looked at the river, looked back at us.

"Fuck it. I'm walking across. If I get hit by a train I won't have to watch out for fuckin Ace Merrill."

We all walked across it—plodded might be the better verb. No train came. When we got to the dump we climbed the fence (no Milo and no Chopper, not this early, and not on a Sunday morning) and went directly to the pump. Vern primed it and we all took turns sticking our heads under the icy flow, slapping the water over our bodies, drinking until we could hold no more. Then we had to put our shirts on again because the morning seemed chilly. We walked—limped—back into town and stood for a moment on the sidewalk in front of the vacant lot. We looked at our treehouse so we wouldn't have to look at each other.

"Well," Teddy said at last, "see ya in school on Wednesday. I think I'm gonna sleep until then."

"Me too," Vern said. "I'm too pooped to pop."

Chris whistled tunelessly through his teeth and said nothing.

"Hey, man," Teddy said awkwardly. "No hard feelins, okay?"

"No," Chris said, and suddenly his somber, tired face broke into a sweet and sunny grin. "We did it, didn't we? We did the bastard."

"Yeah," Vern said. "You're fuckin-A. Now Billy's gonna do *me*."

"So what?" Chris said. "Richie's gonna tool up on me and Ace is probably gonna tool up on Gordie and somebody else'll tool up on Teddy. But we *did* it."

"That's right," Vern said. But he still sounded unhappy.

Chris looked at me. "We did it, didn't we?" he asked softly. "It was worth it, wasn't it?"

"Sure it was," I said.

"Fuck this," Teddy said in his dry I'm-losing-interest way. "You guys sound like fuckin *Meet the Press*. Gimme some skin, man. I'm gonna toot home and see if Mom's got me on the Ten Most Wanted List."

We all laughed, Teddy gave us his surprised Oh-Lord-what-now look, and we gave him skin. Then he and Vern started off in their direction and I should have gone in mine ... but I hesitated for a second.

"Walk with you," Chris offered.

"Sure, okay."

We walked a block or so without talking. Castle Rock was awesomely quiet in the day's first light, and I felt an almost holy tiredness-is-slipping-away sort of feeling. We were awake and the whole world was asleep and I almost expected to turn the corner and see my deer standing at the far end of Carbine Street, where the GS&WM tracks pass through the mill's loading yard.

Finally Chris spoke. "They'll tell," he said.

"You bet they will. But not today or tomorrow, if that's what you're worried about. It'll be a long time before they tell, I think. Years, maybe."

He looked at me, surprised.

"They're scared, Chris. Teddy especially, that they won't take him in the Army. But Vern's scared, too. They'll lose some sleep over it, and there's gonna be times this fall when it's right on the tips of their tongues to tell somebody, but I don't think they will. And then... you know what? It sounds fucking crazy, but... I think they'll almost forget it ever happened."

He was nodding slowly. "I didn't think of it just like that. You see through people, Gordie."

"Man, I wish I did."

"You do, though."

We walked another block in silence.

"I'm never gonna get out of this town," Chris said, and sighed. "When you come back from college on summer vacation, you'll be

able to look me and Vern and Teddy up down at Sukey's after the seven-to-three shift's over. If you want to. Except you'll probably never want to." He laughed a creepy laugh.

"Quit jerking yourself off," I said, trying to sound tougher than I felt—I was thinking about being out there in the woods, about Chris saying: *And maybe I took it to old lady Simons and told her, and maybe the money was all there and I got a three-day vacation anyway, because the money never showed up. And maybe the next week old lady Simons had this brand-new skirt on when she came to school ...* The look. The look in his eyes.

"No jerkoff, daddy-O," Chris said.

I rubbed my first finger against my thumb. "This is the world's smallest violin playing 'My Heart Pumps Purple Piss for You.' "

"He was *ours*," Chris said, his eyes dark in the morning light.

We had reached the corner of my street and we stopped there. It was quarter past six. Back toward town we could see the Sunday *Telegram* truck pulling up in front of Teddy's uncle's stationery shop. A man in bluejeans and a tee-shirt threw off a bundle of papers. They bounced upside down on the sidewalk, showing the color funnies (always Dick Tracy and Blondie on the first page). Then the truck drove on, its driver intent on delivering the outside world to the rest of the whistlestops up the line—Otisfield, Norway-South Paris, Waterford, Stoneham. I wanted to say something more to Chris and didn't know how to.

"Gimme some skin, man," he said, sounding tired.

"Chris—"

"Skin."

I gave him some skin. "I'll see you."

He grinned—that same sweet, sunny grin. "Not if I see you first, fuckface."

He walked off, still laughing, moving easily and gracefully, as though he didn't hurt like me and have blisters like me and like he wasn't lumped and bumped with mosquito and chigger and blackfly bites like me. As if he didn't have a care in the world, as if he was going to some real boss place instead of just home to a three-room house (shack would have been closer to the truth) with no indoor

plumbing and broken windows covered with plastic and a brother who was probably laying for him in the front yard. Even if I'd known the right thing to say, I probably couldn't have said it. Speech destroys the functions of love, I think—that's a hell of a thing for a writer to say, I guess, but I believe it to be true. If you speak to tell a deer you mean it no harm, it glides away with a single flip of its tail. The word is the harm. Love isn't what these asshole poets like McKuen want you to think it is. Love has teeth; they bite; the wounds never close. No word, no combination of words, can close those lovebites. It's the other way around, that's the joke. If those wounds dry up, the words die with them. Take it from me. I've made my life from the words, and I know that is so.

## 30

The back door was locked so I fished the spare key out from under the mat and let myself in. The kitchen was empty, silent, suicidally clean. I could hear the hum the fluorescent bars over the sink made when I turned on the switch. It had been literally years since I had been up before my mother; I couldn't even remember the last time such a thing had happened.

I took off my shirt and put it in the plastic clothesbasket behind the washing machine. I got a clean rag from under the sink and sponged off with it—face, neck, pits, belly. Then I unzipped my pants and scrubbed my crotch—my testicles in particular—until my skin began to hurt. It seemed I couldn't get clean enough down there, although the red weal left by the bloodsucker was rapidly fading. I still have a tiny crescent-shaped scar there. My wife once asked about it and I told her a lie before I was even aware I meant to do so. When I was done with the rag, I threw it away. It was filthy.

I got out a dozen eggs and scrambled six of them together. When they were semi-solid in the pan, I added a side dish of crushed pineapple and half a quart of milk. I was just sitting down to eat when

my mother came in, her gray hair tied in a knot behind her head. She was wearing a faded pink bathrobe and smoking a Camel.

“Gordon, where have you been?”

“Camping,” I said, and began to eat. “We started off in Vern’s field and then went up the Brickyard Hill. Vern’s mom said she would call you. Didn’t she?”

“She probably talked to your father,” she said, and glided past me to the sink. She looked like a pink ghost. The fluorescent bars were less than kind to her face; they made her complexion look almost yellow. She sighed... almost sobbed. “I miss Dennis most in the mornings,” she said. “I always look in his room and it’s always empty, Gordon. Always.”

“Yeah, that’s a bitch,” I said.

“He always slept with his window open and the blankets... Gordon? Did you say something?”

“Nothing important, Mom.” ... and the blankets pulled up to his chin,” she finished. Then she just stared out the window, her back to me. I went on eating. I was trembling all over.

## 31

The story never did get out.

Oh, I don’t mean that Ray Brower’s body was never found; it was. But neither our gang nor their gang got the credit. In the end, Ace must have decided that an anonymous phone call was the safest course, because that’s how the location of the corpse was reported. What I meant was that none of our parents ever found out what we’d been up to that Labor Day weekend.

Chris’s dad was still drinking, just as Chris had said he would be. His mom had gone off to Lewiston to stay with her sister, the way she almost always did when Mr. Chambers was on a bender. She went and left Eyeball in charge of the younger kids. Eyeball had fulfilled his responsibility by going off with Ace and his j.d. buddies,

leaving nine-year-old Sheldon, five-year-old Emery, and two-year-old Deborah to sink or swim on their own.

Teddy's mom got worried the second night and called Vern's mom. Vern's mom, who was also never going to do the game-show circuit, said we were still out in Vern's tent. She knew because she had seen a light on in there the night before. Teddy's mom said she sure hoped no one was smoking cigarettes in there and Vern's mom said it looked like a flashlight to her, and besides, she was sure that none of Vern's or Billy's friends smoked.

My dad asked me some vague questions, looking mildly troubled at my evasive answers, said we'd go fishing together sometime, and that was the end of it. If the parents had gotten together in the week or two afterward, everything would have fallen down... but they never did.

Milo Pressman never spoke up, either. My guess is that he thought twice about it being our word against his, and how we would all swear that he sicced Chopper on me.

So the story never came out—but that wasn't the end of it.

## 32

One day near the end of the month, while I was walking home from school, a black 1952 Ford cut into the curb in front of me. There was no mistaking that car. Gangster white-walls and spinner hubcaps, highrise chrome bumpers and Lucite death-knob with a rose embedded in it clamped to the steering wheel. Painted on the back deck was a deuce and a one-eyed jack. Beneath them, in Roman Gothic script, were the words WILD CARD.

The doors flew open; Ace Merrill and Fuzzy Bracowicz stepped out.

"Cheap hood, right?" Ace said, smiling his gentle smile. "My mother loves the way I do it to her, right?"

"We're gonna rack you, baby," Fuzzy said.

I dropped my schoolbooks on the sidewalk and ran. I was busting my buns but they caught me before I even made the end of the block. Ace hit me with a flying tackle and I went full-length on the paving. My chin hit the cement and I didn't just see stars; I saw whole constellations, whole nebulae. I was already crying when they picked me up, not so much from my elbows and knees, both pairs scraped and bleeding, or even from fear—it was vast, impotent rage that made me cry. Chris was right. He had been ours.

I twisted and turned and almost squiggled free. Then Fuzzy hoicked his knee into my crotch. The pain was amazing, incredible, nonpareil; it widened the horizons of pain from plain old wide screen to Vista Vision. I began to scream. Screaming seemed to be my best chance.

Ace punched me twice in the face, long and looping hay-maker blows. The first one closed my left eye; it would be four days before I was really able to see out of that eye again. The second broke my nose with a crunch that sounded the way crispy cereal sounds inside your head when you chew. Then old Mrs. Chalmers came out on her porch with her cane clutched in one arthritis-twisted hand and a Herbert Tareyton jutting from one corner of her mouth. She began to bellow at them:

“Hi! Hi there, you boys! You stop that! Police! Poleeeeece!”

“Don't let me see you around, dipshit,” Ace said, smiling, and they let go of me and backed off. I sat up and then leaned over, cupping my wounded balls, sickly sure I was going to throw up and then die. I was still crying, too. But when Fuzzy started to walk around me, the sight of his pegged jeans-leg snuggered down over the top of his motorcycle boot brought all the fury back. I grabbed him and bit his calf through his jeans. I bit him just as hard as I could. Fuzzy began to do a little screaming of his own. He also began hopping around on one leg, and, incredibly, he was calling me a dirty-fighter. I was watching him hop around and that was when Ace stamped down on my left hand, breaking the first two fingers. I heard them break. They didn't sound like crispy cereal. They sounded like pretzels. Then Ace and Fuzzy were going back to Ace's '52, Ace sauntering with his hands in his back pockets, Fuzzy hopping on one leg and throwing

curses back over his shoulder at me. I curled up on the sidewalk, crying. Aunt Evvie Chalmers came down her walk, thudding her cane angrily as she came. She asked me if I needed the doctor. I sat up and managed to stop most of the crying. I told her I didn't.

"Bullshit," she bellowed—Aunt Evvie was deaf and bellowed everything. "I saw where that bully got you. Boy, your sweetmeats are going to swell up to the size of Mason jars."

She took me into her house, gave me a wet rag for my nose—it had begun to resemble a summer squash by then—and gave me a big cup of medicinal-tasting coffee that was somehow calming. She kept bellowing at me that she should call the doctor and I kept telling her not to. Finally she gave up and I walked home. Very slowly, I walked home. My balls weren't the size of Mason jars yet, but they were on their way.

My mom and dad got a look at me and wiggled right out—I was sort of surprised that they noticed anything at all, to tell the truth. Who were the boys? Could I pick them out of a line-up? That from my father, who never missed *Naked City* and *The Untouchables*. I said I didn't think I could pick the boys out of a line-up. I said I was tired. Actually I think I was in shock—in shock and more than a little drunk from Aunt Evvie's coffee, which must have been at least sixty per cent VSOP brandy. I said I thought they were from some other town, or from "up the city"—a phrase everyone understood to mean Lewiston-Auburn.

They took me to Dr. Clarkson in the station wagon—Dr. Clarkson, who is still alive today, was even then old enough to have quite possibly been on armchair-to-armchair terms with God. He set my nose and my fingers and gave my mother a prescription for painkiller. Then he got them out of the examining room on some pretext or other and came over to me, shuffling, head forward, like Boris Karloff approaching Igor.

"Who did it, Gordon?"

"I don't know, Dr. Cla—"

"You're lying."

"No, sir. Huh-uh."

His sallow cheeks began to flow with color. “Why should you protect the cretins who did this? Do you think they will respect you? They will laugh and call you stupid-fool! ‘Oh,’ they’ll say, ‘there goes the stupid-fool we beat up for kicks the other day. Ha-ha! Hoo-hoo! Har-de-har-har-har!’ ”

“I didn’t know them. Really.”

I could see his hands itching to shake me, but of course he couldn’t do that. So he sent me out to my parents, shaking his white head and muttering about juvenile delinquents. He would no doubt tell his old friend God all about it that night over their cigars and sherry.

I didn’t care if Ace and Fuzzy and the rest of those assholes respected me or thought I was stupid or never thought about me at all. But there was Chris to think of. His brother Eyeball had broken his arm in two places and had left his face looking like a Canadian sunrise. They had to set the elbow-break with a steel pin. Mrs. McGinn from down the road saw Chris staggering along the soft shoulder, bleeding from both ears and reading a Richie Rich comic book. She took him to the CMG Emergency Room where Chris told the doctor he had fallen down the cellar stairs in the dark.

“Right,” the doctor said, every bit as disgusted with Chris as Dr. Clarkson had been with me, and then he went to call Constable Bannerman..

While he did that from his office, Chris went slowly down the hall, holding the temporary sling against his chest so the arm wouldn’t swing and grate the broken bones together, and used a nickel in the pay phone to call Mrs. McGinn—he told me later it was the first collect call he had ever made and he was scared to death that she wouldn’t accept the charges—but she did.

“Chris, are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Chris said.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t stay with you, Chris, but I had pies in the—”

“That’s all right, Missus McGinn,” Chris said. “Can you see the Buick in our dooryard?” The Buick was the car Chris’s mother drove. It was ten years old and when the engine got hot it smelled like frying Hush Puppies.

“It’s there,” she said cautiously. Best not to mix in too much with the Chamberses. Poor white trash; shanty Irish.

“Would you go over and tell Mamma to go downstairs and take the lightbulb out of the socket in the cellar?”

“Chris, I really, my pies—”

“Tell her,” Chris said implacably, “to do it right away. Unless she maybe wants my brother to go to jail.”

There was a long, long pause and then Mrs. McGinn agreed. She asked no questions and Chris told her no lies. Constable Bannerman did indeed come out to the Chambers house, but Richie Chambers didn’t go to jail.

Vern and Teddy took their lumps, too, although not as bad as either Chris or I. Billy was laying for Vern when Vern got home. He took after him with a stovelength and hit him hard enough to knock him unconscious after only four or five good licks. Vern was no more than stunned, but Billy got scared he might have killed him and stopped. Three of them caught Teddy walking home from the vacant lot one afternoon. They punched him out and broke his glasses. He fought them, but they wouldn’t fight him when they realized he was groping after them like a blindman in the dark.

We hung out together at school looking like the remains of a Korean assault force. Nobody knew exactly what had happened, but everybody understood that we’d had a pretty serious run-in with the big kids and comported ourselves like men. A few stories went around. All of them were wildly wrong.

When the casts came off and the bruises healed, Vern and Teddy just drifted away. They had discovered a whole new group of contemporaries that they could lord it over. Most of them were real wets—scabby, scrubby little fifth-grade assholes—but Vern and Teddy kept bringing them to the treehouse, ordering them around, strutting like Nazi generals.

Chris and I began to drop by there less and less frequently, and after awhile the place was theirs by default. I remember going up one time in the spring of 1961 and noticing that the place smelled like a shootoff in a haymow. I never went there again that I can recall. Teddy and Vern slowly became just two more faces in the

halls or in three-thirty detention. We nodded and said hi. That was all. It happens. Friends come in and out of your life like busboys in a restaurant, did you ever notice that? But when I think of that dream, the corpses under the water pulling implacably at my legs, it seems right that it should be that way. Some people drown, that's all. It's not fair, but it happens. Some people drown.

## 33

Vern Tessio was killed in a housefire that swept a Lewiston apartment building in 1966—in Brooklyn and the Bronx, they call that sort of apartment building a slum tenement, I believe. The Fire Department said it started around two in the morning, and the entire building was nothing but cinders in the cellarhole by dawn. There had been a large drunken party; Vern was there. Someone fell asleep in one of the bedrooms with a live cigarette going. Vern himself, maybe, drifting off, dreaming of his pennies. They identified him and the four others who died by their teeth.

Teddy went in a squalid car crash. That was 1971, I think, or maybe it was early 1972. There used to be a saying when I was growing up: “If you go out alone you're a hero. Take somebody else with you and you're dogpiss.” Teddy, who had wanted nothing but the service since the time he was old enough to want anything, was turned down by the Air Force and classified 4-F by the draft. Anyone who had seen his glasses and his hearing aid knew it was going to happen— anyone but Teddy. In his junior year at high school he got a three-day vacation from school for calling the guidance counselor a lying sack of shit. The g.o. had observed Teddy coming in every so often—tike every day—and checking over his career-board for new service literature. He told Teddy that maybe he should think about another career, and that was when Teddy blew his stack.

He was held back a year for repeated absences, tardies, and the attendant flunked courses... but he *did* graduate. He had an ancient

Chevrolet Bel Air, and he used to hang around the places where Ace and Fuzzy and the rest had hung around before him: the pool hall, the dance hall, Sukey's Tavern, which is closed now, and The Mellow Tiger, which isn't. He eventually got a job with the Castle Rock Public Works Department, filling up holes with hotpatch.

The crash happened over in Harlow. Teddy's Bel Air was full of his friends (two of them had been part of that group he and Vern took to bossing around way back in 1960), and they were all passing around a couple of joints and a couple of bottles of Popov. They hit a utility pole and sheared it off and the Chevrolet rolled six times. One girl came out technically still alive. She lay for six months in what the nurses and orderlies at Central Maine General call the C&T Ward—Cabbages and Turnips. Then some merciful phantom pulled the plug on her respirator. Teddy Duchamp was posthumously awarded the Dogpiss of the Year Award.

Chris enrolled in the college courses in his second year of junior high—he and I both knew that if he waited any longer it would be too late; he would never catch up. Everyone jawed at him about it: his parents, who thought he was putting on airs, his friends, most of whom dismissed him as a pussy, the guidance counsellor, who didn't believe he could do the work, and most of all the teachers, who didn't approve of this duck-tailed, leather-jacketed, engineer-booted apparition who had materialized without warning in their classrooms. You could see that the sight of those boots and that many-zippered jacket offended them in connection with such high-minded subjects as algebra, Latin, and earth science; such attire was meant for the shop courses only. Chris sat among the well-dressed, vivacious boys and girls from the middle class families in Castle View and Brickyard Hill like some silent, brooding Grendel that might turn on them at any moment, produce a horrible roaring like the sound of dual glass-pack mufflers, and gobble them up, penny loafers, Peter Pan collars, button-down paisley shirts, and all.

He almost quit a dozen times that year. His father in particular hounded him, accusing Chris of thinking he was better than his old man, accusing Chris of wanting “to go up there to the college so you can turn me into a bankrupt.” He once broke a Rhinegold bottle over

the back of Chris's head and Chris wound up in the CMG Emergency Room again, where it took four stitches to close his scalp. His old friends, most of whom were now majoring in Smoking Area, catcalled him on the streets. The guidance counsellor huckstered him to take at least *some* shop courses so he wouldn't flunk the whole slate. Worst of all, of course, was just this: he'd been fucking off for the entire first seven years of his public education, and now the bill had come due with a vengeance.

We studied together almost every night, sometimes for as long as six hours at a stretch. I always came away from those sessions exhausted, and sometimes I came away frightened as well—frightened by his incredulous rage at just how murderously high that bill was. Before he could even begin to understand introductory algebra, he had to re-learn the fractions that he and Teddy and Vern had played pocket-pool through in the fifth grade. Before he could even begin to understand *Pater noster qui est in caelis*, he had to be told what nouns and prepositions and objects were. On the inside of his English grammar, neatly lettered, were the words FUCK GERUNDS. His compositional ideas were good and not badly organized, but his grammar was bad and he approached the whole business of punctuation as if with a shotgun. He wore out his copy of Warriner's and bought another in a Portland bookstore—it was the first hardcover book he actually owned, and it became a queer sort of Bible to him.

But by our junior year in high school, he had been accepted. Neither of us made top honors, but I came out seventh and Chris stood nineteenth. We were both accepted at the University of Maine, but I went to the Orono campus while Chris enrolled at the Portland campus. Pre-law, can you believe that? More Latin.

We both dated through high school, but no girl ever came between us. Does that sound like we went faggot? It would have to most of our old friends, Vern and Teddy included. But it was only survival. We were clinging to each other in deep water. I've explained about Chris, I think; my reasons for clinging to him were less definable. His desire to get away from Castle Rock and out of the mill's shadow seemed to me to be my best part, and I could not just leave him to

sink or swim on his own. If he had drowned, that part of me would have drowned with him, I think.

Near the end of 1971, Chris went into a Chicken Delight in Portland to get a three-piece Snack Bucket. Just ahead of him, two men started arguing about which one had been first in line. One of them pulled a knife. Chris, who had always been the best of us at making peace, stepped between them and was stabbed in the throat. The man with the knife had spent time in four different institutions; he had been released from Shawshank State Prison only the week before. Chris died almost instantly.

I read about it in the paper—Chris had been finishing his second year of graduate studies. Me, I had been married a year and a half and was teaching high school English. My wife was pregnant and I was trying to write a book. When I read the news item—STUDENT FATALLY STABBED IN PORTLAND RESTAURANT—I told my wife I was going out for a milk-shake. I drove out of town, parked, and cried for him. Cried for damn near half an hour, I guess. I couldn't have done that in front of my wife, much as I love her. It would have been pussy.

## 34

Me?

I'm a writer now, like I said. A lot of critics think what I write is shit. A lot of the time I think they are right... but it still freaks me out to put those words, "Freelance Writer," down in the *Occupation* blank of the forms you have to fill out at credit desks and in doctors' offices. My story sounds so much like a fairytale that it's fucking absurd.

I sold the book and it was made into a movie and the movie got good reviews and it was a smash hit besides. This all had happened by the time I was twenty-six. The second book was made into a movie as well, as was the third. I told you—it's fucking absurd. Meantime, my wife doesn't seem to mind having me around the

house and we have three kids now. They all seem perfect to me, and most of the time I'm happy.

But like I said, the writing isn't so easy or as much fun as it used to be. The phone rings a lot. Sometimes I get headaches, bad ones, and then I have to go into a dim room and lie down until they go away. The doctors say they aren't true migraines; he called them "stressaches" and told me to slow down. I worry about myself sometimes. What a stupid habit that is ... and yet I can't quite seem to stop it. And I wonder if there is really any point to what I'm doing, or what I'm supposed to make of a world where a man can get rich playing "let's pretend."

But it's funny how I saw Ace Merrill again. My friends are dead but Ace is alive. I saw him pulling out of the mill parking lot just after the three o'clock whistle the last time I took my kids down home to see my dad.

The '52 Ford had become a '77 Ford station wagon. A faded bumper-sticker said REAGAN/BUSH 1980. His hair was mowed into a crewcut and he'd gotten fat. The sharp, handsome features I remembered were buried in an avalanche of flesh. I had left the kids with Dad long enough to go downtown and get the paper. I was standing on the corner of Main and Carbine and he glanced at me as I waited to cross. There was no sign of recognition on the face of this thirty-two-year-old man who had broken my nose in another dimension of time.

I watched him wheel the Ford wagon into the dirt parking lot beside The Mellow Tiger, get out, hitch at his pants, and walk inside. I could imagine the brief wedge of country-western as he opened the door, the brief sour whiff of Knick and Gansett on draft, the welcoming shouts of the other regulars as he closed the door and placed his large ass on the same stool which had probably held him up for at least three hours every day of his life—except Sundays—since he was twenty-one.

I thought: *So that's what Ace is now.*

I looked to the left, and beyond the mill I could see the Castle River not so wide now but a little cleaner, still flowing under the

bridge between Castle Rock and Harlow. The trestle upstream is gone, but the river is still around. So am I.

# **A WINTER'S TALE**

*For Peter and Susan Straub*

# The Breathing Method

## I.

### The Club

I dressed a bit more speedily than normal on that snowy, windy, bitter night—I admit. It was December 23rd, 197-, and I suspect that there were other members of the club who did the same. Taxis are notoriously hard to come by in New York on stormy nights, so I called for a radio-cab. I did this at five-thirty for an eight o'clock pickup—my wife raised an eyebrow but said nothing. I was under the canopy of the apartment building on East Fifty-eighth Street, where Ellen and I had lived since 1946, by quarter to eight, and when the taxi was five minutes late, I found myself pacing up and down impatiently.

The taxi arrived at eight-ten and I got in, too glad to be out of the wind to be as angry with the driver as he probably deserved. That wind, part of a cold front that had swept down from Canada the day before, meant business. It whistled and whined around the cab's windows, occasionally drowning out the salsa on the driver's radio and rocking the big Checker on its springs. Many of the stores were open but the sidewalks were nearly bare of last-minute shoppers. Those that were abroad looked uncomfortable or actually pained.

It had been flurrying off and on all day, and now the snow began again, coming first in thin membranes, then twisting into cyclone shapes ahead of us in the street. Coming home that night, I would think of the combination of snow, a taxi, and New York City with considerably greater unease... but I did not of course know that then.

At the corner of Second and Fortieth, a large tinsel Christmas bell went floating through the intersection like a spirit.

“Bad night,” the cabbie said. “They’ll have an extra two dozen in the morgue tomorrow. Wino Popsicles. Plus a few bag-lady Popsicles.”

“I suppose.”

The cabbie ruminated. “Well, good riddance,” he said finally. “Less welfare, right?”

“Your Christmas spirit,” I said, “is stunning in its width and depth.”

The cabbie ruminated. “You one of those bleeding-heart liberals?” he asked finally.

“I refuse to answer on the grounds that my answer might tend to incriminate me,” I said. The cabbie gave a why-do-I-always-get-the-wisenheimers snort... but he shut up.

He let me out at Second and Thirty-fifth, and I walked halfway down the block to the club, bent over against the whistling wind, holding my hat on my head with one gloved hand. In almost no time at all the life-force seemed to have been driven deep into my body, a flickering blue flame about the size of the pilot-light in a gas oven. At seventy-three a man feels the cold quicker and deeper. That man should be home in front of a fireplace... or at least in front of an electric heater. At seventy-three hot blood isn’t even really a memory; it’s more of an academic report.

The latest flurry was letting up, but snow as dry as sand still beat into my face. I was glad to see that the steps leading up to the door of 249B had been sanded—that was Stevens’s work, of course—Stevens knew the base alchemy of old age well enough: not lead into gold but bones into glass. When I think about such things, I believe that God probably thinks a great deal like Groucho Marx.

Then Stevens was there, holding the door open, and a moment later I was inside. Down the mahogany-paneled hallway, through double doors standing three-quarters of the way open on their recessed tracks, into the library *cum* reading-room *cum* bar. It was a dark room in which occasional pools of light gleamed-reading-lamps. A richer, more textured light glowed across the oak parquet floor, and I could hear the steady snap of birch logs in the huge fireplace. The heat radiated all the way across the room—surely there is no welcome for a man or a woman that can equal a fire on the hearth. A

paper rustled—dry, slightly impatient. That would be Johanssen, with his *Wall Street Journal*. After ten years, it was possible to recognize his presence simply by the way he read his stocks. Amusing... and in a quiet way, amazing.

Stevens helped me off with my overcoat, murmuring that it was a dirty night; WCBS was now forecasting heavy snow before morning.

I agreed that it was indeed a dirty night and looked back into that big, high-ceilinged room again. A dirty night, a roaring fire... and a ghost story. Did I say that at seventy-three hot blood is a thing of the past? Perhaps so. But I felt something warm in my chest at the thought... something that hadn't been caused by the fire or Stevens's reliable, dignified welcome.

I think it was because it was McCarron's turn to tell the tale.

I had been coming to the brownstone which stands at 249B East Thirty-fifth Street for ten years—coming at intervals that were almost—but not quite—regular. In my own mind I think of it as a “gentlemen's club,” that amusing pre-Gloria Steinem antiquity. But even now I am not sure that's what it really is, or how it came to be in the first place.

On the night Emlyn McCarron told his story—the story of the Breathing Method—there were perhaps thirteen club-members in all, although only six of us had come out on that howling, bitter night. I can remember years when there might have been as few as eight full-time members, and others when there were at least twenty, and perhaps more.

I suppose Stevens might know how it all came to be—one thing I *am* sure of is that Stevens has been there from the first, no matter how long that may be ... and I believe Stevens to be older than he looks. Much, *much* older. He has a faint Brooklyn accent, but in spite of that he is as brutally correct and as cuttngly punctilious as a third-generation English butler. His reserve is part of his often maddening charm, and Stevens's small smile is a locked and latched door. I have never seen any club records—if he keeps them. I have never gotten a receipt of dues—there are no dues. I have never been

called by the club secretary—there is no secretary, and at 249B East Thirty-fifth, there are no phones. There is no box of white marbles and black balls. And the club—if it is a club—has never had a name.

I first came to the club (as I must continue to call it) as the guest of George Waterhouse. Waterhouse headed the law firm for which I had worked since 1951. My progress upward in the firm—one of New York's three biggest—had been steady but extremely slow; I was a slogger, a mule for work, something of a centerpuncher ... but I had no real flair or genius. I had seen men who had begun at the same time I had promoted in giant steps while I only continued to pace—and I saw it with no real surprise.

Waterhouse and I had exchanged pleasantries, attended the obligatory dinner put on by the firm each October, and had little more congress until the fall of 196-, when he dropped by my office one day in early November.

This in itself was unusual enough, and it had me thinking black thoughts (dismissal) that were counterbalanced by giddy ones (an unexpected promotion). It was a puzzling visit. Waterhouse leaned in the doorway, his Phi Beta Kappa key gleaming mellowly on his vest, and talked in amiable generalities—none of what he said seemed to have any real substance or importance. I kept expecting him to finish the pleasantries and get down to cases: “Now about this Casey brief or “We’ve been asked to research the Mayor’s appointment of Salkowitz to—” But it seemed there *were* no cases. He glanced at his watch, said he had enjoyed our talk and that he had to be going.

I was still blinking, bewildered, when he turned back and said casually: “There’s a place where I go most Thursday nights—a sort of club. Old duffers, mostly, but some of them are good company. They keep a really excellent cellar, if you’ve a palate. Every now and then someone tells a good story as well. Why not come down some night, David? As my guest.”

I stammered some reply—even now I’m not sure what it was. I was bewildered by the offer. It had a spur-of-the-moment sound, but there was nothing spur-of-the-moment about his eyes, blue Anglo-

Saxon ice under the bushy white whorls of his eyebrows. And if I don't remember exactly how I replied, it was because I felt suddenly sure that his offer—vague and puzzling as it was—had been exactly the specific I had kept expecting him to get down to.

Ellen's reaction that evening was one of amused exasperation. I had been with Waterhouse, Carden, Lawton, Frasier, and Effingham for something like fifteen years, and it was clear enough that I could not expect to rise much above the mid-level position I now held; it was her idea that this was the firm's cost-efficient substitute for a gold watch.

"Old men telling war stories and playing poker," she said. "A night of that and you're supposed to be happy in the Reading Library until they pension you off, I suppose... oh, I put two Beck's on ice for you." And she kissed me warmly. I suppose she had seen something on my face—God knows she's good at reading me after all the years we've spent together.

Nothing happened over a course of weeks. When my mind turned to Waterhouse's odd offer—certainly odd coming from a man with whom I met less than a dozen times a year, and whom I only saw socially at perhaps three parties a year, including the company party in October—I supposed that I had been mistaken about the expression in his eyes, that he really had made the offer casually, and had forgotten it. Or regretted it—ouch! And then he approached me one late afternoon, a man of nearly seventy who was still broad-shouldered and athletic looking. I was shrugging on my topcoat with my briefcase between my feet. He said: "If you'd still like to have a drink at the club, why not come tonight?"

"Well... I ..."

"Good." He slapped a slip of paper into my hand. "Here's the address."

He was waiting for me at the foot of the steps that evening, and Stevens held the door for us. The wine was as excellent as Waterhouse had promised. He made no attempt whatsoever to "introduce me around"—I took that for snobbery but later recanted the idea—but two or three of them introduced themselves to me. One of those who did so was Emlyn McCarron, even then in his late

sixties. He held out his hand and I clasped it briefly. His skin was dry, leathery, tough; almost turtlelike. He asked me if I played bridge. I said I did not.

“Goddamned good thing,” he said. “That goddamned game has done more in this century to kill intelligent after-dinner conversation than anything else I can think of.” And with that pronouncement he walked away into the murk of the library, where shelves of books went up apparently to infinity.

I looked around for Waterhouse, but he had disappeared. Feeling a little uncomfortable and a lot out of place, I wandered over to the fireplace. It was, as I believe I have already mentioned, a huge thing—it seemed particularly huge in New York, where apartment-dwellers such as myself have trouble imagining such a benevolence big enough to do anything more than pop corn or toast bread. The fireplace at 249B East Thirty-fifth was big enough to broil an ox whole. There was no mantel; instead a brawny stone arch curved over it. This arch was broken in the center by a keystone which jutted out slightly. It was just on the level of my eyes, and although the light was dim, I could read the legend engraved on that stone with no trouble: IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

“Here you go, David,” Waterhouse said from my elbow, and I jumped. He hadn’t deserted me after all; had only trudged off into some uncharted locale to bring back drinks. “Scotch and soda’s yours, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Thank you. Mr. Waterhouse—”

“George,” he said. “Here it’s just George.”

“George, then,” I said, although it seemed slightly mad to be using his first name. “What is all of—”

“Cheers,” he said.

We drank.

“Stevens tends the bar. He makes fine drinks. He likes to say it’s a small but vital skill.”

The scotch took the edge off my feelings of disorientation and awkwardness (the edge, but the feelings themselves remained—I had spent nearly half an hour gazing into my closet and wondering what to wear; I had finally settled on dark brown slacks and a rough

tweed jacket that almost matched them, hoping I would not be wandering into a group of men either turned out in tuxedos or wearing bluejeans and L. L. Bean's lumberjack shirts... it seemed that I hadn't gone too far wrong on the matter of dress, anyway). A new place and a new situation make one crucially aware of every social act, no matter how small, and at that moment, drink in hand and the obligatory small toast made, I wanted very much to be sure that I hadn't overlooked any of the amenities.

"Is there a guest book I ought to sign?" I asked. "Something like that?"

He looked mildly surprised. "We don't have anything like that," he said. "At least, I don't *think* we do." He glanced around the dim, quiet room. Johanssen rattled his *Wall Street Journal*. I saw Stevens pass in a doorway at the far end of the room, ghostly in his white messjacket. George put his drink on an endtable and tossed a fresh log onto the fire. Sparks corkscrewed up the black throat of the chimney.

"What does that mean?" I asked, pointing to the inscription on the keystone. "Any idea?"

Waterhouse read it carefully, as if for the first time. IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

"I suppose I have an idea," he said. "You may, too, if you should come back. Yes, I should say you may have an idea or two. In time. Enjoy yourself, David."

He walked away. And, although it may seem odd, having been left to sink or swim in such an unfamiliar situation, I *did* enjoy myself. For one thing, I have always loved books, and there was a trove of interesting ones to examine here. I walked slowly along the shelves, examining the spines as best I could in the faint light, pulling one out now and then, and pausing once to look out a narrow window at the Second Avenue intersection up the street. I stood there and watched through the frost-rimmed glass as the traffic light at the intersection cycled from red to green to amber and back to red again, and quite suddenly I felt the queerest—and yet very welcome—sense of peace come to me. It did not flood in; instead it seemed to almost steal in.

Oh yes, I can hear you saying, *that makes great sense; watching a stop-and-go light gives everyone a sense of peace.*

All right; it made no sense. I grant you that. But the feeling was there, just the same. It made me think for the first time in years of the winter nights in the Wisconsin farmhouse where I grew up: lying in bed in a drafty upstairs room and marking the contrast between the whistle of the January wind outside, drifting snow as dry as sand along miles of snow-fence, and the warmth my body created under the two quilts.

There were some law books, but they were pretty damn strange: *Twenty Cases of Dismemberment and Their Outcomes Under British Law* is one title I remember. *Pet Cases* was another. I opened that one and, sure enough, it was a scholarly legal tome dealing with the law's treatment (American law, this time) of cases which bore in some important respect upon pets—everything from housecats that had inherited great sums of money to an ocelot that had broken its chain and seriously injured a postman..

There was a set of Dickens, a set of Defoe, a nearly endless set of Trollope; and there was also a set of novels—eleven of them—by a man named Edward Gray Seville. They were bound in handsome green leather, and the name of the firm gold-stamped on the spine was Stedham & Son. I had never heard of Seville or of his publishers. The copyright date of the first *Seville—These Were Our Brothers*-was 1911. The date of the last, *Breakers*, was 1935.

Two shelves down from the set of Seville novels was a large folio volume which contained careful step-by-step plans for Erector Set enthusiasts. Next to it was another folio volume which featured famous scenes from famous movies. Each of these pictures filled one whole page, and opposite each, filling the facing pages, were free-verse poems either about the scenes with which they were paired or inspired by them. Not a very remarkable concept, but the poets who were represented *were* remarkable—Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Louis Zukofsky, and Erica Jong, to mention just a few. Halfway through the book I found a poem by Algernon Williams set next to that famous photograph of Marilyn Monroe standing on the subway grating and

trying to hold her skirt down. The poem was titled “The Toll” and it began:

The shape of the skirt is  
—we would say—  
the shape of a bell  
The legs are the clapper—

And some such more. Not a terrible poem, but certainly not Williams’s best or anywhere near the top drawer. I felt I could hold such an opinion because I had read a good deal of Algernon Williams over the years. I could not, however, recall this poem about Marilyn Monroe (which it is; the poem announced it even when divorced from the picture—at the end Williams writes: *My legs clap my name: Marilyn, ma belle*). I have looked for it since then and haven’t been able to find it... which means nothing, of course. Poems are not like novels or legal opinions; they are more like blown leaves, and any omnibus volume titled *The Complete So-and-So* must certainly be a lie. Poems have a way of getting lost under sofas—it is one of their charms, and one of the reasons they endure. But—

At some point Stevens came by with a second scotch (by then I had settled into a chair of my own with a volume of Ezra Pound). It was as fine as the first. As I sipped it I saw two of those present, George Gregson and Harry Stein (Harry was six years dead on the night Emlyn McCarron told us the story of the Breathing Method), leave the room by a peculiar door that could not have been more than forty-two inches high. It was an Alice Down the Rabbit-Hole door if ever there was one. They left it open, and shortly after their odd exit from the library I heard the muted click of billiard balls.

Stevens passed by and asked if I would like another scotch. I declined with real regret. He nodded. “Very good, sir.” His face never changed, and yet I had an obscure feeling that I had somehow pleased him.

Laughter startled me from my book sometime later. Someone had thrown a packet of chemical powder into the fire and turned the flames momentarily parti-colored. I thought of my boyhood again... but not in any wistful, sloppily romantic-nostalgic way. I feel a great

need to emphasize that, God knows why. I thought of times when I had done just such a thing as a kid, but the memory was a strong one, pleasant, un-tinged with regret.

I saw that most of the others had drawn chairs up around the hearth in a semi-circle. Stevens had produced a heaping, smoking platter of marvellous hot sausages. Harry Stein returned through the down-the-rabbit-hole door, introducing himself hurriedly but pleasantly to me. Gregson remained in the billiard room—practicing shots, by the sound.

After a moment's hesitation I joined the others. A story was told—not a pleasant one. It was Norman Stett who told it, and while it is not my purpose to recount it here, perhaps you'll understand what I mean about its quality if I tell you that it was about a man who drowned in a telephone booth.

When Stett—who is also dead now—finished, someone said, "You should have saved it for Christmas, Norman." There was laughter, which I of course did not understand. At least, not then.

Waterhouse himself spoke up then, and such a Waterhouse I never would have dreamed of in a thousand years of dreaming. A graduate of Yale, Phi Beta Kappa, silver-haired, three-piece-suited, head of a law firm so large it was more enterprise than company—*this* Waterhouse told a story that had to do with a teacher who had gotten stuck in a privy. The privy stood behind the one-room schoolhouse in which she had taught, and the day she got her caboose jammed into one of the privy's two holes also happened to be the day the privy was scheduled to be taken away as Anniston County's contribution to the Life As It Was in New England exhibition being held at the Prudential Center in Boston. The teacher hadn't made a sound during all the time it took to load the privy onto the back of a flatbed truck and to spike it down; she was struck dumb with embarrassment and horror, Waterhouse said. And when the privy door blew off into the passing lane on Route 128 in Somerville during rush hour—

But draw a curtain over that, and over any other stories which might have followed it; they are not my stories tonight. At some point Stevens produced a bottle of brandy that was more than just good; it

was damned near exquisite. It was passed around and Johanssen raised a toast—*the* toast, one might almost say: The tale, not he who tells it.

We drank to that.

Not long after, men began slipping away. It wasn't late; not yet midnight, anyway; but I've noticed that when your fifties give way to your sixties, late begins coming earlier and earlier. I saw Waterhouse slipping his arms into the overcoat Stevens was holding open for him, and decided that must be my cue. I thought it strange that Waterhouse would slip away without so much as a word to me (which certainly seemed to be what he was doing; if I had come back from shelving the Pound book forty seconds later, he would have been gone), but no stranger than most of the other things that had gone on that evening.

I stepped out just behind him, and Waterhouse glanced around, as if surprised to see me—and almost as if he had been startled out of a light doze. “Share a taxi?” he asked, as though we had just met by chance on this deserted, windy street.

“Thank you,” I said. I meant thanks for a great deal more than his offer to share a cab, and I believe that was unmistakable in my tone, but he nodded as if that were all I had meant. A taxi with its for-hire light lit was cruising slowly down the street—fellows like George Waterhouse seem to luck onto cabs even on those miserably cold or snowy New York nights when you would swear there isn't a cab to be had on the entire island of Manhattan—and he flagged it.

Inside, safely warm, the taxi-meter charting our journey in measured clicks, I told him how much I had enjoyed his story. I couldn't remember laughing so hard or so spontaneously since I was eighteen, I told him, which was not flattery but only the simple truth.

“Oh? How kind of you to say.” His voice was chillingly polite. I subsided, feeling a dull flush in my cheeks. One does not always need to hear a slam to know that the door has been closed.

When the taxi drew up to the curb in front of my building, I thanked him again, and this time he showed a trifle more warmth. “It was good of you to come on such short notice,” he said. “Come again, if you like. Don't wait for an invitation; we don't stand much on

ceremony at two-four-nine-B. Thursdays are best for stories, but the club is there every night.”

*Am I then to assume membership?*

The question was on my lips. I meant to ask it; it seemed *necessary* to ask it. I was only mulling it over, listening to it in my head (in my tiresome lawyer’s way) to hear if I had got the phrasing right—perhaps that was a little too blunt—when Waterhouse told the cabbie to drive on. The next moment the taxi was rolling on toward Park. I stood there on the sidewalk for a moment, the hem of my topcoat whipping around my shins, thinking: *He knew I was going to ask that question—he knew it, and he purposely had the driver go on before I could.* Then I told myself that was utterly absurd—paranoid, even. And it was. But it was also true. I could scoff all I liked; none of the scoffing changed that essential certainty.

I walked slowly to the door of my building and went inside.

Ellen was sixty per cent asleep when I sat down on the bed to take off my shoes. She rolled over and made a fuzzy interrogative sound deep in her throat. I told her to go back to sleep.

She made the muzzy sound again. This time it approximated English: “Howwuzzit?”

For a moment I hesitated, my shirt half-unbuttoned. And I thought with one moment’s utter clarity: *If I tell her, I will never see the other side of that door again.*

“It was all right,” I said. “Old men telling war stories.”

“I told you so.”

“But it wasn’t bad. I might go back again. It might do me some good with the firm.”

“‘The firm,’ she mocked lightly. “What an old buzzard you are, my love.”

“It takes one to know one,” I said, but she had already fallen asleep again. I undressed, showered, towelled, put on my pajamas ... and then, instead of going to bed as I should have done (it was edging past one by that time), I put on my robe and had another bottle of Beck’s. I sat at the kitchen table, drinking it slowly, looking out the window and up the cold canyon of Madison Avenue, thinking. My head was a trifle buzzy from my evening’s intake of alcohol—for

me an unexpectedly large intake. But the feeling was not at all unpleasant, and I had no sense of an impending hangover.

The thought which had come to me when Ellen asked me about my evening was as ridiculous as the one I'd entertained about George Waterhouse as the cab drew away from me—what in God's name could be wrong with telling my wife about a perfectly harmless evening at my boss's stuffy men's club... and even if something were wrong with telling her, who would know that I had? No, it was every bit as ridiculous and paranoid as those earlier musings ... and, my heart told me, every bit as true.

I met George Waterhouse the next day in the hallway between Accounts and the Reading Library. Met him? Passed him would be more accurate. He nodded my way and went on without speaking ... as he had done for years.

My stomach muscles ached all day long. That was the only thing that completely convinced me the evening had been real.

Three weeks passed. Four . . . five. No second invitation came from Waterhouse. Somehow I just hadn't been right; hadn't fit. Or so I told myself. It was a depressing, disappointing thought. I supposed it would begin to fade and lose its sting, as all disappointments eventually do. But I thought of that evening at the oddest moments—the isolated pools of library lamplight, so still and tranquil and somehow civilized; Waterhouse's absurd and hilarious tale of the schoolteacher stuck in the privy; the rich smell of leather in the narrow stacks. Most of all I thought of standing by that narrow window and watching the frost crystals change from green to amber to red. I thought of that sense of peace I had felt.

During that same five-week period I went to the library and checked out four volumes of Algernon Williams's poetry (I had three others myself, and had already checked through them); one of these volumes purported to be *The Complete Poems of*. I reacquainted myself with some old favorites, but I found no poem called "The Toll" in any of the volumes.

On that same trip to the New York Public Library, I checked the card catalogue for works of fiction by a man named Edward Gray Seville. A mystery novel by a woman named Ruth Seville was the closest I came.

*Come again, if you like. Don't wait for an invitation ...*

I was waiting for an invitation anyway, of course; my mother taught me donkey's years ago not to automatically believe people who tell you glibly to "drop by anytime" or that "the door is always open." I didn't feel I needed an engraved card delivered to my apartment door by a footman in livery bearing a gilt plate, I don't mean that, but I did want *something*, even if it was only a casual remark: "Coming by some night, David? Hope we didn't bore you." That kind of thing.

But when even that didn't come, I began to think more seriously about going back anyway—after all, sometimes people really did want you to drop in anytime; I supposed that, at some places, the door always was open; and that mothers weren't always right.

*... Don't wait for an invitation ...*

Anyway, that's how it happened that, on December 10th of that year, I found myself putting on my rough tweed coat and dark brown pants again and looking for my darkish red tie. I was rather more aware of my heartbeat than usual that night, I remember.

"George Waterhouse finally broke down and asked you back?" Ellen asked. "Back into the sty with the rest of the male chauvinist oinkers?"

"That's right," I said, thinking it must be the first time in at least a dozen years that I had told her a lie... and then I remembered that, after the first meeting, I had answered her question about what it had been like with a lie. Old men telling war stories, I had said.

"Well, maybe there really *will* be a promotion in it," she said... though without much hope. To her credit, she said it without much bitterness, either.

"Stranger things have happened," I said, and kissed her goodbye.

"Oink-oink," she said as I went out the door.

The taxi ride that night seemed very long. It was cold, still, and starry. The cab was a Checker and I felt somehow very small in it, like a child seeing the city for the first time. It was excitement I was

feeling as the cab pulled up in front of the brownstone—something as simple and yet complete as that. But such simple excitement seems to be one of life's qualities that slip away almost unnoticed, and its rediscovery as one grows older is always something of a surprise, like finding a black hair or two in one's comb years after one had last found such a thing.

I paid the driver, got out, and walked toward the four steps leading to the door. As I mounted them, my excitement curdled into plain apprehension (a feeling the old are much more familiar with). What exactly was I doing here?

The door was of thick paneled oak, and to my eye it looked as stout as the door of a castle keep. There was no doorbell that I could see, no knocker, no closed-circuit TV camera mounted unobtrusively in the shadow of a deep eave, and, of course, no Waterhouse waiting to take me in. I stopped at the foot of the steps and looked around. East Thirty-fifth Street suddenly seemed darker, colder, more threatening. The brownstones all looked somehow secret, as if hiding mysteries best not investigated. Their windows looked like eyes.

*Somewhere, behind one of those windows, there may be a man or woman contemplating murder,* I thought. A shudder worked up my spine. *Contemplating it ... or doing it.*

Then, suddenly, the door was open and Stevens was there. I felt an intense surge of relief. I am not an overly imaginative man, I think—at least not under ordinary circumstances—but this last thought had had all the eerie clarity of prophecy. I might have babbled aloud if I hadn't glanced at Stevens's eyes first. His eyes did not know me. His eyes did not know me at all.

Then there was another instance of that eerie, prophetic clarity; I saw the rest of my evening in perfect detail. Three hours in a quiet bar. Three scotches (perhaps four) to dull the embarrassment of having been fool enough to go where I wasn't wanted. The humiliation my mother's advice had been intended to avoid—that which comes with knowing one has overstepped.

I saw myself going home a little tipsy, but not in a good way. I saw myself merely sitting through the cab ride rather than experiencing it

through that childlike lens of excitement and anticipation. I heard myself saying to Ellen, *It wears thin after awhile... Waterhouse told the same story about winning a consignment of T-bone steaks for the Third Battalion in a poker game ... and they play Hearts for a dollar a point, can you believe it? ... Go back? ... I suppose I might, but I doubt it.* And that would be the end of it. Except, I suppose, for my own humiliation.

I saw all of this in the nothing of Stevens's eyes. Then the eyes warmed. He smiled slightly and said: "Mr. Adley! Come in. I'll take your coat."

I mounted the steps and Stevens closed the door firmly behind me. How different a door can feel when you are on the warm side of it! He took my coat and was gone with it. I stood in the hall for a moment, looking at my own reflection in the pier glass, a man of sixty-three whose face was rapidly becoming too gaunt to look middle-aged. And yet the reflection pleased me.

I slipped into the library.

Johanssen was there, reading his *Wall Street Journal*. In another island of light, Emlyn McCarron sat over a chessboard opposite Peter Andrews. McCarron was and is a cadaverous man, possessed of a narrow, bladelike nose; Andrews was huge, slope-shouldered, and choleric. A vast ginger-colored beard sprayed over his vest. Face to face over the inlaid board with its carved pieces of ivory and ebony, they looked like Indian totems: eagle and bear.

Waterhouse was there, frowning over that day's *Times*. He glanced up, nodded at me without surprise, and disappeared into the paper again.

Stevens brought me a scotch, unasked.

I took it into the stacks and found that puzzling, enticing set of green volumes again. I began reading the works of Edward Gray Seville that night. I started at the beginning, with *These Were Our Brothers*. Since then I have read them all, and believe them to be eleven of the finest novels of our century..

Near the end of the evening there was a story—just one—and Stevens brought brandy around. When the tale was told, people began to rise, preparing to leave. Stevens spoke from the double

doorway which communicated with the hallway. His voice was low and pleasant, but carrying:

“Who will bring us a tale for Christmas, then?”

People stopped what they were doing and glanced around. There was some low, good-natured talk and a burst of laughter.

Stevens, smiling but serious, clapped his hands together twice, like a grammar-school teacher calling an unruly class to order. “Come, gentlemen—who’ll bring the tale?”

Peter Andrews, he of the sloped shoulders and gingery beard, cleared his throat. “I have something I’ve been thinking about. I don’t know if it’s quite right; that is, if it’s—”

“That will be fine,” Stevens interrupted, and there was more laughter. Andrews had his back slapped good-naturedly. Cold drafts swirled up the hallway as men slipped out.

Then Stevens was there, as if by benign magic, holding my coat for me. “Good evening, Mr. Adley. Always a pleasure.”

“Do you really meet on Christmas night?” I asked, buttoning my coat. I was a little disappointed that I was going to miss Andrews’s story, but we had made firm plans to drive to Schenectady and keep the holiday with Ellen’s sister.

Stevens managed to look both shocked and amused at the same time. “In no case,” he said. “Christmas is a night a man should spend with his family. That night, if no other. Don’t you agree, sir?”

“I certainly do.”

“We always meet on the Thursday before Christmas. In fact, that is the one night of the year when we almost always have a large turnout.”

He hadn’t used the word *members*, I noticed—just happenstance? or neat avoidance?

“Many tales have been spun out in the main room, Mr. Adley, tales of every sort, from the comic to the tragic to the ironic to the sentimental. But on the Thursday before Christmas, it’s always a tale of the uncanny. It’s always been that way, at least as far back as I can remember.”

That at least explained the comment I had heard on my first visit, the one to the effect that Norman Stett should have saved his story

for Christmas. Other questions hovered on my lips, but I saw a reflected caution in Stevens's eyes. It was not a warning that he would not answer my questions; it was, rather, a warning that I should not even ask them.

"Was there something else, Mr. Adley?"

We were alone in the hall now. All the others had left. And suddenly the hallway seemed darker, Stevens's long face paler, his lips redder. A knot exploded in the fireplace and a red glow washed momentarily across the polished parquet floor. I thought I heard, from somewhere in those as-yet-unexplored rooms beyond, a kind of slithery bump. I did not like the sound. Not at all.

"No," I said in a voice that was not quite steady. "I think not."

"Goodnight, then," Stevens said, and I crossed the threshold. I heard the heavy door close behind me. I heard the lock turn. And then I was walking toward the lights of Third Avenue, not looking back over my shoulder, somehow afraid to look back, as if I might see some frightful fiend matching me stride for stride, or glimpse some secret better kept than known. I reached the corner, saw an empty cab, and flagged it.

"More war stories?" Ellen asked me that night. She was in bed with Philip Marlowe, the only lover she has ever taken.

"There was a war story or two," I said, hanging up my overcoat. "Mostly I sat and read a book."

"When you weren't oinking."

"Yes, that's right. When I wasn't oinking."

"Listen to this: *'The first time I laid eyes on Terry Lennox he was drunk in a Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith outside the terrace of The Dancers,'* Ellen read. " *'He had a young-looking face but his hair was bone white. You could tell by his eyes that he was plastered to the hairline, but otherwise he looked like any other nice young guy in a dinner jacket who had been spending too much money in a joint that exists for that purpose and for no other.'* Nice, huh? It's—"

"*The Long Goodbye,*" I said, taking off my shoes. "You read me that same passage once every three years. It's part of your life-

cycle.”

She wrinkled her nose at me. “Oink-oink.”

“Thank you,” I said.

She went back to her book. I went out into the kitchen to get a bottle of Beck’s. When I came back, she had laid *The Long Goodbye* open on the counterpane and was looking at me closely. “David, are you going to join this club?”

“I suppose I might... if I’m asked.” I felt uncomfortable. I had perhaps told her another lie. If there was such a thing as membership at 249B East Thirty-fifth, I already was a member.

“I’m glad,” she said. “You’ve needed something for a long time now. I don’t think you even know it, but you have. I’ve got the Relief Committee and the Commission on Women’s Rights and the Theater Society. But you’ve needed something. Some people to grow old with, I think.”

I went to the bed and sat beside her and picked up *The Long Goodbye*. It was a bright, new-minted paperback. I could remember buying the original hardback edition as a birthday present for Ellen. In 1953. “Are we old?” I asked her.

“I suspect we are,” she said, and smiled brilliantly at me.

I put the book down and touched her breast. “Too old for this?”

She turned the covers back with ladylike decorum... and then, giggling, kicked them onto the floor with her feet. “Beat me, daddy,” Ellen said, “eight to the bar.”

“Oink, oink,” I said, and then we were both laughing.

The Thursday before Christmas came. That evening was much the same as the others, with two notable exceptions. There were more people there, perhaps as many as eighteen. And there was a sharp, indefinable sense of excitement in the air. Johanssen took only a cursory glance at his *Journal* and then joined McCarron, Hugh Beagleman, and myself. We sat near the windows, talking of this and that, and finally fell into a passionate—and often hilarious—discussion of pre-war automobiles.

There was, now that I think of it, a third difference as well—Stevens had concocted a delicious eggnog punch. It was smooth, but it was also hot with rum and spices. It was served from an incredible Waterford bowl that looked like an ice-sculpture, and the animated hum of the conversation grew ever higher as the level of the punch grew lower.

I looked over in the corner by the tiny door leading to the billiard room and was astounded to see Waterhouse and Norman Stett flipping baseball cards into what looked like a genuine beaver tophat. They were laughing uproariously.

Groups formed and re-formed. The hour grew late... and then, at the time when people usually began slipping out through the front door, I saw Peter Andrews seated in front of the fire with an unmarked packet, about the size of a seed envelope, in one hand. He tossed it into the flames without opening it, and a moment later the fire began to dance with every color of the spectrum—and some, I would have sworn, from outside it—before turning yellow again. Chairs were dragged around. Over Andrews's shoulder I could see the keystone with its etched homily: IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

Stevens passed unobtrusively among us, taking punch glasses and replacing them with snifters of brandy. There were murmurs of "Merry Christmas" and "Top of the season, Stevens," and for the first time I saw money change hands—a ten-dollar bill was unobtrusively tendered here, a bill that looked like a fifty there, one which I clearly saw was a hundred from another chair.

"Thank you, Mr. McCarron... Mr. Johanssen ... Mr. Beagleman ..."  
A quiet, well-bred murmur.

I have lived in New York long enough to know that the Christmas season is a carnival of tips; something for the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker—not to mention the doorman, the super, and the cleaning lady who comes in Tuesdays and Fridays. I've never met anyone of my own class who regarded this as anything but a necessary nuisance ... but I felt none of that grudging spirit on that night. The money was given willingly, even eagerly... and suddenly, for no reason (it was the way thoughts often seemed to come when

one was at 249B), I thought of the boy calling up to Scrooge on the still, cold air of a London Christmas morning:

“Wot? The goose that’s as big as me?” And Scrooge, nearly crazed with joy, giggling: “A *good* boy! An *excellent* boy!”

I found my own wallet. In the back of this, behind the pictures of Ellen I keep, there has always been a fifty-dollar bill which I keep for emergencies. When Stevens gave me my brandy, I slipped it into his hand with never a qualm... although I was not a rich man.

“Happy Christmas, Stevens,” I said.

“Thank you, sir. And the same to you.”

He finished passing out the brandies and collecting his honorariums and retired. I glanced around once, at the midpoint of Peter Andrews’s story, and saw him standing by the double doors, a dim manlike shadow, stiff and silent.

“I’m a lawyer now, as most of you know,” Andrews said after sipping at his glass, clearing his throat, and then sipping again. “I’ve had offices on Park Avenue for the last twenty-two years. But before that, I was a legal assistant in a firm of lawyers which did business in Washington, D.C. One night in July I was required to stay late in order to finish indexing case citations in a brief which hasn’t anything at all to do with this story. But then a man came in—a man who was at that time one of the most widely known Senators on the Hill, a man who later almost became President. His shirt was matted with blood and his eyes were bulging from their sockets.

“ ‘I’ve got to talk to Joe,’ he said. Joe, you understand, was Joseph Woods, the head of my firm, one of the most influential private-sector lawyers in Washington, and this Senator’s close personal friend.

“ ‘He went home hours ago,’ I said. I was terribly frightened, I can tell you—he looked like a man who had just walked away from a dreadful car accident, or perhaps from a knife-fight. And somehow seeing his face—which I had seen in newspaper photos and on *Meet the Press*—seeing it streaked with gore, one cheek twitching spasmodically below one wild eye... all of that made my fright worse. ‘I can call him if you—’ I was already fumbling with the phone, mad with eagerness to turn this unexpected responsibility over to

someone else. Looking behind him, I could see the caked and bloody footprints he had left on the carpet.

“ ‘I’ve got to talk to Joe right now,’ he reiterated as if he hadn’t heard me. ‘There’s something in the trunk of my car ... something I found out at the Virginia place. I’ve shot it and stabbed it and I can’t kill it. It’s not human, and I can’t kill it.’

“He began to giggle... and then to laugh... and finally to scream. And he was still screaming when I finally got Mr. Woods on the phone and told him to come, for God’s sake, to come as fast as he could...”

It is not my purpose to tell Peter Andrews’s story, either. As a matter of fact, I am not sure I would dare to tell it. Suffice it to say that it was a tale so gruesome that I dreamed of it for weeks afterwards, and Ellen once looked at me over the breakfast table and asked me why I had suddenly cried out “His head! His head is still speaking in the earth!” in the middle of the night.

“I suppose it was a dream,” I said. “One of those you can’t remember afterwards.”

But my eyes dropped immediately to my coffee cup, and I think that Ellen knew the lie that time.

One day in August of the following year, I was buzzed as I worked in the Reading Library. It was George Waterhouse. He asked me if I could step up to his office. When I got there I saw that Robert Carden was also there, and Henry Effingham. For one moment I was positive I was about to be accused of some really dreadful act of stupidity or ineptitude.

Then Carden stepped around to me and said: “George believes the time has come to make you a junior partner, David. The rest of us agree.”

“It’s going to be a little bit like being the world’s oldest Jay-Cee,” Effingham said with a grin, “but it’s the channel you have to go through, David. With any luck, we can make you a full partner by Christmas.”

There were no bad dreams that night. Ellen and I went out to dinner, drank too much, went on to a jazz place where we hadn't been in nearly six years, and listened to that amazing blue-eyed black man, Dexter Gordon, blow his horn until almost two in the morning. We woke up the next morning with fluttery stomachs and achy heads, both of us still unable to completely believe what had happened. One of them was that my salary had just climbed by eight thousand dollars a year long after our expectations of such a staggering income jump had fallen by the wayside.

The firm sent me to Copenhagen for six weeks that fall, and I returned to discover that John Hanrahan, one of the regular attendees at 249B, had died of cancer. A collection was taken up for his wife, who had been left in unpleasant circumstances. I was pressed into service to total the amount—which was given entirely in cash—and convert it to a cashier's check. It came to more than ten thousand dollars. I turned the check over to Stevens and I suppose he mailed it.

It just so happened that Arlene Hanrahan was a member of Ellen's Theater Society, and Ellen told me sometime later that Arlene had received an anonymous check for ten thousand four hundred dollars. Written on the check stub was the brief and unilluminating message: *Friends of your late husband John*

"Isn't that the most amazing thing you ever heard in your *life*?" Ellen asked me.

"No," I said, "but it's right up there in the top ten. Are there any more strawberries, Ellen?"

The years went by. I discovered a warren of rooms upstairs at 249B—a writing room, a bedroom where guests sometimes stayed overnight (although, after that slithery bump I had heard—or imagined I had heard—I believe I personally would rather have registered at a good hotel), a small but well-equipped gymnasium, and a sauna bath. There was also a long, narrow room which ran the length of the building and contained two bowling alleys.

In those same years I re-read the novels of Edward Gray Seville, and discovered an absolutely stunning poet—the equal of Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens, perhaps—named Norbert Rosen. According to the back flap on one of the three volumes of his work in the stacks, he had been born in 1924 and killed at Anzio. All three volumes of his work had been published by Stedham & Son, New York and Boston.

I remember going back to the New York Public Library on a bright spring afternoon during one of those years (of which year I am no longer sure) and requesting twenty years' worth of *Literary Market Place*. The *LMP* is an annual publication the size of a large city's Yellow Pages, and the reference room librarian was quite put out with me, I'm afraid. But I persisted, and went through each volume carefully. And although *LMP* is supposed to list every publisher, great and small, in the United States (in addition to agents, editors, and book club staffs), I found no listing for Stedham & Son. A year later—or perhaps it was two years later—I fell into conversation with an antiquarian book-dealer and asked him about the imprint. He said he had never heard of it.

I thought of asking Stevens—saw that warning light in his eyes—and dropped the question unasked.

And, over those years, there were stories.

Tales, to use Stevens's word. Funny tales, tales of love found and love lost, tales of unease. Yes, and even a few war stories, although none of the sort Ellen had likely been thinking of when she made the suggestion.

I remember Gerard Tozeman's story the most clearly—the tale of an American base of operations which took a direct hit from German artillery four months before the end of World War I, killing everyone present except for Tozeman himself.

Lathrop Carruthers, the American general who everyone had by then decided must be utterly insane (he had been responsible for better than eighteen *thousand* casualties by then—lives and limbs spent as casually as you or I might spend a quarter in a jukebox),

was standing at a map of the front lines when the shell struck. He had been explaining yet another mad flanking operation at the moment—an operation which would have succeeded only on the level of all the others Carruthers had hatched: it would be wonderfully successful at making new widows.

And when the dust cleared, Gerard Tozeman, dazed and deaf, bleeding from his nose, his ears, and the comers of both eyes, his testicles already swelling from the force of the concussion, had come upon Carruthers's body while looking for a way out of the abbatoir that had been the staff HQ only minutes before. He looked at the general's body ... and then began to scream and laugh. The sounds went unheard by his own shellshocked ears, but they served to notify the medicos that someone was still alive in that strew of matchwood.

Carruthers had not been mutilated by the blast... at least, Tozeman said, it hadn't been what the soldiers of that long-ago war had come to think of as mutilation—men whose arms had been blown off, men with no feet, no eyes; men whose lungs had been shrivelled by gas. No, he said, it was nothing like that. The man's mother would have known him at once. But the map ...

... the map before which Carruthers had been standing with his butcher's pointer when the shell struck ...

It had somehow *been driven into his face*. Tozeman had found himself staring into a hideous tattooed deathmask. Here was the stony shore of Brittany on the bony ridge of Lathrop Carruthers's brow. Here was the Rhine flowing like a blue scar down his left cheek. Here were some of the finest wine-growing provinces in the world bumped and ridged over his chin. Here was the Saar drawn around his throat like a hang-man's noose ... and printed across one bulging eyeball was the word VERSAILLES.

That was our Christmas story in the year 197-.

I remember many others, but they do not belong here. Properly speaking, Tozeman's doesn't, either ... but it was the first "Christmas tale" I heard at 249B, and I could not resist telling it. And then, on the Thursday after Thanksgiving of this year, when Stevens clapped his hands together for attention and asked who would favor us with a Christmas tale, Emlyn McCarron growled: "I suppose I've got

something that bears telling. Tell it now or tell it never, God'll shut me up for good soon enough."

In the years I had been coming to 249B, I had never heard McCarron tell a story. And perhaps that's why I called the taxi so early, and why, when Stevens passed out eggnog to the six of us who had ventured out on that bellowing, frigid night, I felt so keenly excited. Nor was I the only one; I saw that same excitement on a good many other faces.

McCarron, old and dry and leathery, sat in the huge chair by the fire with the packet of powder in his gnarled hands. He tossed it in, and we watched the flames shift colors madly before returning to yellow again. Stevens passed among us with brandy, and we passed him his Christmas honorariums. Once, during that yearly ceremony, I had heard the clink of change passing from the hand of the giver to the hand of the receiver; on another occasion, I had seen a one-thousand-dollar bill for a moment in the firelight. On both occasions the murmur of Stevens's voice had been exactly the same: low, considerate, and entirely correct. Ten years, more or less, had passed since I had first come to 249B with George Waterhouse, and while much had changed in the world outside, nothing had changed in here, and Stevens seemed not to have aged a month, or even a single day.

He moved back into the shadows, and for a moment there was a silence so perfect that we could hear the faint whistle of boiling sap escaping from the burning logs on the hearth. Emlyn McCarron was looking into the fire and we all followed his gaze. The flames seemed particularly wild that night. I felt almost hypnotized by the sight of the fire—as, I suppose, the cavemen who birthed us were once hypnotized by it as the wind walked and talked outside their cold northern caves.

At last, still looking into the fire, bent slightly forward so that his forearms rested on his thighs and his clasped hands hung in a knot between his knees, McCarron began to speak.

## II

### The Breathing Method

I am nearly eighty now, which means that I was born with the century. All my life I have been associated with a building which stands almost directly across from Madison Square Garden; this building, which looks like a great gray prison—something out of *A Tale of Two Cities*—is actually a hospital, as most of you know. It is Harriet White Memorial Hospital. The Harriet White after whom it was named was my father's first wife, and she got her practical experience in nursing when there were still actual sheep grazing on Sheep Meadow in Central Park. A statue of the lady herself stands on a pedestal in the courtyard before the building, and if any of you have seen it, you may have wondered how a woman with such a stern and uncompromising face could have found such a gentle occupation. The motto chiselled into the statue's base, once you get rid of the Latin folderol, is even less comforting: *There is no comfort without pain; thus we define salvation through suffering.* Cato, if you please... or if you don't please!

I was born inside that gray stone building on March 20th 1900. I returned there as an intern in the year 1926. Twenty-six is old to be just starting out in the world of medicine, but I had done a more practical internship in France, at the end of World War I, trying to pack ruptured guts back into stomachs that had been blown wide open, and dealing on the black market for morphine, which was often tintured and sometimes dangerous.

As with the generation of physicians following World War II, we were a bedrock-practical lot of sawbones, and the records of the major medical schools show a remarkably small number of washouts in the years 1919 to 1928. We were older, more experienced, steadier. Were we also wiser? I don't know... but we were certainly more cynical. There was none of this nonsense you read about in

the popular medical novels, stuff about fainting or vomiting at one's first autopsy. Not after Belleau Wood, where mamma rats sometimes raised whole litters of ratlings in the gas-exploded intestines of the soldiers left to rot in no man's land. We had gotten all our puking and passing out behind us.

The Harriet White Memorial Hospital also figured largely in something that happened to me nine years after I had interned there—and this is the story I want to tell you gentlemen tonight. It is not a tale to be told at Christmas, you would say (although its final scene was played out on Christmas Eve), and yet, while it is certainly horrible, it also seems to express to me all the amazing power of our cursed, doomed species. In it I see the wonder of our will... and also its horrible, tenebrous power.

Birth itself, gentlemen, is a horrid thing to many; it is the fashion now that fathers should be present at the birth of their children, and while this fashion has served to inflict many men with a guilt which I feel they may not deserve (it is a guilt which some women use knowingly and with an almost prescient cruelty), it seems by and large to be a healthful, salubrious thing. Yet I have seen men leave the delivery room white and tottering and I have seen them swoon like girls, overcome by the cries and the blood. I remember one father who held up just fine... only to begin screaming hysterically as his perfectly healthy son pushed its way into the world. The infant's eyes were open, it gave the impression of looking around... and then its eyes settled on the father.

Birth is wonderful, gentlemen, but I have never found it beautiful—not by any stretch of the imagination. I believe it is too brutal to be beautiful. A woman's womb is like an engine. With conception, that engine is turned on. At first it barely idles... but as the creative cycle nears the climax of birth, that engine revs up and up and up. Its idling whisper becomes a steady running hum, and then a rumble, and finally a bellowing, frightening roar. Once that engine has been turned on, every mother-to-be understands that her life is in check. Either she will bring the baby forth and the engine will shut down again, or that engine will pound louder and harder and faster until it explodes, killing her in blood and pain.

This is a story of birth, gentlemen, on the eve of that birth we have celebrated for almost two thousand years.

I began practicing medicine in 1929—a bad year to begin anything. My grandfather was able to lend me a small sum of money, so I was luckier than many of my colleagues, but I still had to survive over the next four years mostly on my wits.

By 1935, things had improved a bit. I had developed a bedrock of steady patients and was getting quite a few outpatient referrals from White Memorial. In April of that year I saw a new patient, a young woman whom I will call Sandra Stansfield—that name is close enough to what her name really was. This was a young woman, white, who stated her age to be twenty-eight. After examining her, I guessed her true age to be between three and five years younger than that. She was blonde, slender, and tall for that time—about five feet eight inches. She was quite beautiful, but in an austere way that was almost forbidding. Her features were clear and regular, her eyes intelligent... and her mouth every bit as determined as the stone mouth of Harriet White on the statue across from Madison Square Garden. The name she put on her form was not Sandra Stansfield but Jane Smith. My examination subsequently showed her to be about two months gone in pregnancy. She wore no wedding ring.

After the preliminary exam—but before the results of the pregnancy test were in—my nurse, Ella Davidson, said: “That girl yesterday? Jane Smith? If that isn’t an assumed name, I never heard one.”

I agreed. Still, I rather admired her. She had not engaged in the usual shilly-shallying, toe-scuffing, blushing, tearful behavior. She had been straightforward and businesslike. Even her alias had seemed more a matter of business than of shame. There had been no attempt to provide verisimilitude by creating a “Betty Rucklehouse” or whomping up a “Ternina DeVille.” *You require a name for your form, she seemed to be saying, because that is the law. So here is a name; but rather than trusting to the professional ethics of a man I don’t know, I’ll trust in myself. If you don’t mind.*

Ella sniffed and passed a few remarks—“modern girls” and “bold as brass”—but she was a good woman, and I don’t think she said those things except for the sake of form. She knew as well as I did that, whatever my new patient might be, she was no little trollop with hard eyes and round heels. No; “Jane Smith” was merely an extremely serious, extremely determined young woman—if either of those things can be described by such a Milquetoast adverb as “merely.” It was an unpleasant situation (it used to be called “getting in a scrape,” as you gentlemen may remember; nowadays it seems that many young women use a scrape to get out of the scrape), and she meant to go through it with whatever grace and dignity she could manage.

A week after her initial appointment, she came in again. That was a peach of a day—one of the first real days of spring. The air was mild, the sky a soft, milky shade of blue, and there was a smell on the breeze—a warm, indefinable smell that seems to be nature’s signal that she is entering her own birth cycle again. The sort of day one wishes to be miles from any responsibility, sitting opposite a lovely woman of one’s own—at Coney Island, maybe, or on the Palisades across from the Hudson with a picnic hamper on a checkered cloth and the lady in question wearing a great white cartwheel hat and a sleeveless gown as pretty as the day.

“Jane Smith’s” dress had sleeves, but it was still almost as pretty as the day; a smart white linen with brown edging. She wore brown pumps, white gloves, and a cloche hat that was slightly out of fashion—it was the first sign I saw that she was a far from rich woman.

“You’re pregnant,” I said. “I don’t believe you doubted it much, did you?”

If there are to be tears, I thought, they will come now.

“No,” she said with perfect composure. There was no more a sign of tears in her eyes than there were rainclouds on the horizon that day. “I’m very regular as a rule.”

There was a pause between us.

“When may I expect to deliver?” she asked then, with an almost soundless sigh. It was the sound a man or woman might make

before bending over to pick up a heavy load.

“It will be a Christmas baby,” I said. “December tenth is the date I’ll give you, but it could be two weeks on either side of that.”

“All right.” She hesitated briefly, and then plunged ahead. “Will you attend me? Even though I’m not married?”

“Yes,” I said. “On one condition.”

She frowned, and in that moment her face was more like the face of Harriet White than ever. One would not think that the frown of a woman perhaps only twenty-three could be particularly formidable, but this one was. She was ready to leave, and the fact that she would have to go through this entire embarrassing process again with another doctor was not going to deter her.

“And what might that be,” she asked with perfect, colorless courtesy.

Now it was I who felt an urge to drop my eyes from her steady hazel ones, but I held her gaze. “I insist upon knowing your real name. We can continue to do business on a cash basis if that is how you prefer it, and I can continue to have Mrs. Davidson issue you receipts in the name of Jane Smith. But if we are going to travel through the next seven months or so together, I would like to be able to address you by the name to which you answer in all the rest of your life.”

I finished this absurdly stiff little speech and watched her think it through. I was somehow quite sure she was going to stand up, thank me for my time, and leave forever. I was going to feel disappointed if that happened. I liked her. Even more, I liked the straightforward way she was handling a problem which would have reduced ninety women out of a hundred to inept and undignified liars, terrified by the living clock within and so deeply ashamed of their situation that to make any reasonable plan for coping with it became impossible.

I suppose many young people today would find such a state of mind ludicrous, ugly, even hard to believe. People have become so eager to demonstrate their broad-mindedness that a pregnant woman who has no wedding ring is apt to be treated with twice the solicitude of one who does. You gentlemen will well remember when the situation was quite different—you will remember a time when

rectitude and hypocrisy were combined to make a situation that was viciously difficult for a woman who had gotten herself “in a scrape.” In those days, a married pregnant woman was a radiant woman, sure of her position and proud of fulfilling what she considered to be the function God put her on earth for. An unmarried pregnant woman was a trollop in the eyes of the world and apt to be a trollop in her own eyes as well. They were, to use Ella Davidson’s word, “easy,” and in that world and that time, “easiness” was not quickly forgiven. Such women crept away to have their babies in other towns or cities. Some took pills or jumped from buildings. Others went to butcher abortionists with dirty hands or tried to do the job themselves; in my time as a physician I have seen four women die of blood-loss before my eyes as the result of punctured wombs—in one case the puncturing was done by the jagged neck of a Dr Pepper bottle that had been tied to the handle of a whiskbroom. It is hard to believe now that such things happened, but they did, gentlemen. They did. It was, quite simply, the worst situation a healthy young woman could find herself in.

“All right,” she said at last. “That’s fair enough. My name is Sandra Stansfield.” And she held her hand out. Rather amazed, I took it and shook it. I’m rather glad Ella Davidson didn’t see me do that. She would have made no comment, but the coffee would have been bitter for the next week.

She smiled—at my own expression of bemusement, I imagine—and looked at me frankly. “I hope we can be friends, Dr. McCarron. I need a friend just now. I’m quite frightened.”

“I can understand that, and I’ll try to be your friend if I can, Miss Stansfield. Is there anything I can do for you now?”

She opened her handbag and took out a dime-store pad and a pen. She opened the pad, poised the pen, and looked up at me. For one horrified instant I believed she was going to ask me for the name and address of an abortionist. Then she said: “I’d like to know the best things to eat. For the baby, I mean.”

I laughed out loud. She looked at me with some amazement.

“Forgive me—it’s just that you seem so businesslike.”

“I suppose,” she said. “This baby is a part of my business now, isn’t it, Dr. McCarron?”

“Yes. Of course it is. And I have a folder which I give to all my pregnant patients. It deals with diet and weight and drinking and smoking and lots of other things. Please don’t laugh when you look at it. You’ll hurt my feelings if you do, because I wrote it myself.”

And so I had—although it was really more of a pamphlet than a folder, and in time became my book, *A Practical Guide to Pregnancy and Delivery*. I was quite interested in obstetrics and gynecology in those days—still am—although it was not a thing to specialize in back then unless you had plenty of uptown connections. Even if you did, it might take ten or fifteen years to establish a strong practice. Having hung out my shingle at a rather too-ripe age as a result of the war, I didn’t feel I had the time to spare. I contented myself with the knowledge that I would see a great many happy expectant mothers and deliver a great many babies in the course of my general practice. And so I did; at last count I had delivered well over two thousand babies—enough to fill fifty classrooms.

I kept up with the literature on having babies more smartly than I did on that applying to any other area of general practice. And because my opinions were strong, enthusiastic ones, I wrote my own pamphlet rather than just passing along the stale chestnuts so often foisted on young mothers then. I won’t run through the whole catalogue of these chestnuts—we’d be here all night—but I’ll mention a couple.

Expectant mothers were urged to stay off their feet as much as possible, and on no account were they to walk any sustained distance lest a miscarriage or “birth damage” result. Now giving birth is an extremely strenuous piece of work, and such advice is like telling a football player to prepare for the big game by sitting around as much as possible so he won’t tire himself out! Another sterling piece of advice, given by a good many doctors, was that moderately overweight mothers-to-be take up smoking ... **smoking!** The rationale was perfectly expressed by an advertising slogan of the day. “Have a Lucky instead of a sweet.” People who have the idea that when we entered the twentieth century we also entered an age

of medical light and reason have no idea of how utterly crazy medicine could sometimes be. Perhaps it's just as well; their hair would turn white.

I gave Miss Stansfield my folder and she looked through it with complete attention for perhaps five minutes. I asked her permission to smoke my pipe and she gave it absently, without looking up. When she did look up at last, there was a small smile on her lips. "Are you a radical, Dr. McCarron?" she asked.

"Why do you say that? Because I advise that the expectant mother should walk her round of errands instead of riding in a smoky, jolting subway car?"

" 'Pre-natal vitamins,' whatever they are ... swimming recommended ... and breathing exercises! What breathing exercises?"

"That comes later on, and no—I'm not a radical. Far from it. What I am is five minutes' overdue on my next patient."

"Oh! I'm sorry." She got to her feet quickly, tucking the thick folder into her purse.

"No need."

She shrugged into her light coat, looking at me with those direct hazel eyes as she did so. "No," she said. "Not a radical at all. I suspect you're actually quite ... comfortable? Is that the word I want?"

"I hope it will serve," I said. "It's a word I like. If you speak to Mrs. Davidson, she'll give you an appointment schedule. I'll want to see you again early next month."

"Your Mrs. Davidson doesn't approve of me."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true at all." But I've never been a particularly good liar, and the warmth between us suddenly slipped away. I did not accompany her to the door of my consulting room. "Miss Stansfield?"

She turned toward me, coolly enquiring.

"Do you intend to keep the baby?"

She considered me briefly and then smiled—a secret smile which I am convinced only pregnant women know. "Oh yes," she said, and let herself out.

By the end of that day I had treated identical twins for identical cases of poison ivy, lanced a boil, removed a hook of metal from a sheet-welder's eye, and referred one of my oldest patients to White Memorial for what was surely cancer. I had forgotten all about Sandra Stansfield by then. Ella Davidson recalled her to my mind by saying:

"Perhaps she's not a chippie after all."

I looked up from my last patient's folder. I had been looking at it, feeling that useless disgust most doctors feel when they know they have been rendered completely helpless, and thinking I ought to have a rubber stamp made up for such files—only instead of saying ACCOUNT RECEIVABLE OR PAID IN FULL OR PATIENT MOVED, it would simply say DEATH-WARRANT. Perhaps with a skull and crossbones above, like those on bottles of poison.

"Pardon me?"

"Your Miss Jane Smith. She did a most peculiar thing after her appointment this morning." The set of Mrs. Davidson's head and mouth made it clear that this was the sort of peculiar thing of which she approved.

"And what was that?"

"When I gave her her appointment card, she asked me to tot up her expenses. All of her expenses. Delivery and hospital stay included."

That was a peculiar thing, all right. This was 1935, remember, and Miss Stansfield gave every impression of being a woman on her own. Was she well off, even comfortably off? I didn't think so. Her dress, shoes, and gloves had all been smart, but she had worn no jewelry—not even costume jewelry. And then there was her hat, that decidedly out-of-date cloche.

"Did you do it?" I asked.

Mrs. Davidson looked at me as though I might have lost my senses. "Did I? Of course I did! And she paid the entire amount. In cash."

The last, which apparently had surprised Mrs. Davidson the most (in an extremely pleasant way, of course), surprised me not at all.

One thing which the Jane Smiths of the world can't do is write checks.

"Took a bank-book out of her purse, opened it, and counted the money right out onto my desk," Mrs. Davidson was continuing. "Then she put her receipt in where the cash had been, put the bank-book into her purse again, and said good day. Not half bad, when you think of the way we've had to chase some of these so-called 'respectable' people to make them pay their bills!"

I felt chagrined for some reason. I was not happy with the Stansfield woman for having done such a thing, with Mrs. Davidson for being so pleased and complacent with the arrangement, and with myself, for some reason I couldn't define then and can't now. Something about it made me feel small.

"But she couldn't very well pay for a hospital stay now, could she?" I asked—it was a ridiculously small thing to seize on, but it was all I could find at that moment on which to express my pique and half-amused frustration. "After all, none of us knows how long she'll have to remain there. Or are you reading the crystal now, Ella?"

"I told her that very thing, and she asked what the average stay was following an uncomplicated birth. I told her six days. Wasn't that right, Dr. McCarron?"

I had to admit it was.

"She said that she would pay for six days, then, and if it was longer, she would pay the difference, and if—"

"—if it was shorter, we could issue her a refund," I finished wearily. I thought: *Damn the woman, anyway!*—and then I laughed. She had guts. One couldn't deny that. All kinds of guts.

Mrs. Davidson allowed herself a smile ... and if I am ever tempted, now that I am in my dotage, to believe I know all there is to know about one of my fellow creatures, I try to remember that smile. Before that day I would have staked my life that I would never see Mrs. Davidson, one of the most "proper" women I have ever known, smile fondly as she thought about a girl who was pregnant out of wedlock.

"Guts? I don't know, doctor. But she knows her own mind, that one. She certainly does."

A month passed, and Miss Stansfield showed up promptly for her appointment, simply appearing out of that wide, amazing flow of humanity that was New York then and is New York now. She wore a fresh-looking blue dress to which she managed to communicate a feeling of originality, of one-of-a-kind-ness, despite the fact that it had been quite obviously picked from a rack of dozens just like it. Her pumps did not match it; they were the same brown ones in which I had seen her last time.

I checked her over carefully and found her normal in every way. I told her so and she was pleased. "I found the pre-natal vitamins, Dr. McCarron."

"Did you? That's good."

Her eyes sparkled impishly. "The druggist advised me against them."

"God save me from pestle-pounders," I said, and she giggled against the heel of her palm—it was a childlike gesture, winning in its unselfconsciousness. "I never met a druggist that wasn't a frustrated doctor. And a Republican. Pre-natal vitamins are new, so they're regarded with suspicion. Did you take his advice?"

"No, I took yours. You're my doctor."

"Thank you."

"Not at all." She looked at me straightforwardly, not giggling now. "Dr. McCarron, when will I begin to show?"

"Not until August, I should guess. September, if you choose garments which are ... uh, voluminous."

"Thank you." She picked up her purse but did not rise immediately to go. I thought that she wanted to talk ... and didn't know where or how to begin.

"You're a working woman, I take it?"

She nodded. "Yes. I work."

"Might I ask where? If you'd rather I didn't—"

She laughed—a brittle, humorless laugh, as different from a giggle as day is from dark. "In a department store. Where else does an

unmarried woman work in the city? I sell perfume to fat ladies who rinse their hair and then have it done up in tiny finger-waves.”

“How long will you continue?”

“Until my delicate condition is noticed. I suppose then I’ll be asked to leave, lest I upset any of the fat ladies. The shock of being waited on by a pregnant woman with no wedding band might cause their hair to straighten.”

Quite suddenly her eyes were bright with tears. Her lips began to tremble, and I groped for a handkerchief. But the tears didn’t fall—not so much as a single one. Her eyes brimmed for a moment and then she blinked them back. Her lips tightened ... and then smoothed out. She simply decided she was not going to lose control of her emotions ... and she did not. It was a remarkable thing to watch.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You’ve been very kind to me. I won’t repay your kindness with what would be a very common story.”

She rose to go, and I rose with her.

“I’m not a bad listener,” I said, “and I have some time. My next patient cancelled.”

“No,” she said. “Thank you, but no.”

“All right,” I said. “But there’s something else.”

“Yes?”

“It’s not my policy to make my patients—*any* of my patients—pay for services in advance of those services’ being rendered. I hope if you ... that is, if you feel you’d like to ... or have to ...” I fumbled my way into silence.

“I’ve been in New York four years, Dr. McCarron, and I’m thrifty by nature. After August—or September—I’ll have to live on what’s in my savings account until I can go back to work again. It’s not a great amount and sometimes, during the nights, mostly, I become frightened.”

She looked at me steadily with those wonderful hazel eyes.

“It seemed better to me—safer—to pay for the baby first. Ahead of everything. Because that is where the baby is in my thoughts, and because, later on, the temptation to spend that money might become very great.”

“All right,” I said. “But please remember that I see it as having been paid before accounts. If you need it, say so.”

“And bring out the dragon in Mrs. Davidson again?” The impish light was back in her eyes. “I don’t think so. And now, doctor—”

“You intend to work as long as possible? Absolutely as long as possible?”

“Yes. I have to. Why?”

“I think I’m going to frighten you a little before you go,” I said.

Her eyes widened slightly. “Don’t do that,” she said. “I’m frightened enough already.”

“Which is exactly why I’m going to do it. Sit down again, Miss Stansfield.” And when she only stood there, I added: “Please.”

She sat. Reluctantly.

“You’re in a unique and unenviable position,” I told her, sitting on the corner of my desk. “You are dealing with the situation with remarkable grace.”

She began to speak, and I held up my hand to silence her.

“That’s good. I salute you for it. But I would hate to see you hurt your baby in any way out of concern for your own financial security. I had a patient who, in spite of my strenuous advice to the contrary, continued packing herself into a girdle month after month, strapping it tighter and tighter as her pregnancy progressed. She was a vain, stupid, tiresome woman, and I don’t believe she really wanted the baby anyway. I don’t subscribe to many of these theories of the subconscious which everyone seems to discuss over their Mah-Jongg boards these days, but if I did, I would say that she—or some part of her—was trying to kill the baby.”

“And did she?” Her face was very still.

“No, not at all. But the baby was born retarded. It’s very possible that the baby would have been retarded anyway, and I’m not saying otherwise—we know next to nothing about what causes such things. But she *may* have caused it.”

“I take your point,” she said in a low voice. “You don’t want me to ... to pack myself in so I can work another month or six weeks. I’ll admit the thought had crossed my mind. So ... thank you for the fright.”

This time I walked her to the door. I would have liked to ask her just how much—or how little—she had left in that savings book, and just how close to the edge she was. It was a question she would not answer; I knew that well enough. So I merely bade her goodbye and made a joke about her vitamins. She left. I found myself thinking about her at odd moments over the next month, and—

Johanssen interrupted McCarron's story at this point. They were old friends, and I suppose that gave him the right to ask the question that had surely crossed all our minds.

"Did you love her, Emlyn? Is that what all this is about, this stuff about her eyes and smile and how you 'thought of her at odd moments'?"

I thought that McCarron might be annoyed at this interruption, but he was not. "You have a right to ask the question," he said, and paused, looking into the fire. It seemed that he might almost have fallen into a doze. Then a dry knot of wood exploded, sending sparks up the chimney in a swirl, and McCarron looked around, first at Johanssen and then at the rest of us.

"No. I didn't love her. The things I've said about her sound like the things a man who is falling in love would notice—her eyes, her dresses, her laugh." He lit his pipe with a special boltlike pipe-lighter that he carried, drawing the flame until there was a bed of coals there. Then he snapped the bolt shut, dropped it into the pocket of his jacket, and blew out a plume of smoke that shifted slowly around his head in an aromatic membrane.

"I admired her. That was the long and short of it. And my admiration grew with each of her visits. I suppose some of you sense this as a story of love crossed by circumstance. Nothing could be further from the truth. Her story came out a bit at a time over the next half-year or so, and when you gentlemen hear it, I think you'll agree that it was every bit as common as she herself said it was. She had been drawn to the city like a thousand other girls; she had come from a small town ...

... in Iowa or Nebraska. Or possibly it was Minnesota—I don't really remember anymore. She had done a lot of high school dramatics and community theater in her small town—good reviews in the local weekly written by a drama critic with an English degree from Cow and Sileage Junior College—and she came to New York to try a career in acting.

She was practical even about that—as practical as an impractical ambition will allow one to be, anyway. She came to New York, she told me, because she didn't believe the un-stated thesis of the movie magazines—that any girl who came to Hollywood could become a star, that she might be sipping a soda in Schwab's Drugstore one day and playing opposite Gable or MacMurray the next. She came to New York, she said, because she thought it might be easier to get her foot in the door there ... and, I think, because the legitimate theater interested her more than the talkies.

She got a job selling perfume in one of the big department stores and enrolled in acting classes. She was smart and terribly determined, this girl—her will was pure steel, through and through—but she was as human as anyone else. She was lonely, too. Lonely in a way that perhaps only single girls fresh from small Midwestern towns know. Homesickness is not always a vague, nostalgic, almost beautiful emotion, although that is somehow the way we always seem to picture it in our mind. It can be a terribly keen blade, not just a sickness in metaphor but in fact as well. It can change the way one looks at the world; the faces one sees in the street look not just indifferent but ugly ... perhaps even malignant. Homesickness is a real sickness—the ache of the uprooted plant.

Miss Stansfield, admirable as she may have been, determined as she may have been, was not immune to it. And the rest follows so naturally it needs no telling. There was a young man in her acting classes. The two of them went out several times. She did not love him, but she needed a friend. By the time she discovered he was not that and never would be, there had been two incidents. Sexual incidents. She discovered she was pregnant. She told the young man, who told her he would stand by her and “do the decent thing.”

A week later he was gone from his lodgings, leaving no forwarding address. That was when she came to me.

During her fourth month, I introduced Miss Stansfield to the Breathing Method—what is today called the Lamaze Method. In those days, you understand, Monsieur Lamaze was yet to be heard from.

“In those days”—the phrase has cropped up again and again, I notice. I apologize for it but am unable to help it—so much of what I have told you and will tell you happened as it did because it happened “in those days.”

So ... “in those days,” forty-five years ago, a visit to the delivery rooms in any large American hospital would have sounded to you like a visit to a madhouse. Women weeping wildly, women screaming that they wished they were dead, women screaming that they could not bear such agony, women screaming for Christ to forgive them their sins, women screaming out strings of curses and gutter-words their husbands and fathers never would have believed they knew. All of this was quite the accepted thing, in spite of the fact that most of the world’s women give birth in almost complete silence, aside from the grunting sounds of strain that we would associate with any piece of hard physical labor.

Doctors were responsible for some of this hysteria, I’m sorry to say. The stories the pregnant woman heard from friends and relatives who had already been through the birthing process also contributed to it. Believe me: if you are told that some experience is going to hurt, it *will* hurt. Most pain is in the mind, and when a woman absorbs the idea that the act of giving birth is excruciatingly painful—when she gets this information from her mother, her sisters, her married friends, *and* her physician—that woman has been mentally prepared to feel great agony.

Even after only six years’ practice, I had become used to seeing women who were trying to cope with a twofold problem: not just the fact that they were pregnant and must plan for the new arrival, but also the fact—what most of them saw as a fact, anyway—*that they*

*had entered the valley of the shadow of death.* Many were actually trying to put their affairs in coherent order so that if they should die, their husbands would be able to carry on without them.

This is neither the time nor the place for a lesson on obstetrics, but you should know that for a long time before “those days,” the act of giving birth was extremely dangerous in the Western countries. A revolution in medical procedure, beginning around 1900, had made the process much safer, but an absurdly small number of doctors bothered to tell their expectant mothers that. God knows why. But in light of this, is it any wonder that most delivery rooms sounded like Ward Nine in Bellevue? Here are these poor women, their time come round at last, experiencing a process which has, because of the almost Victorian decorum of the times, been described to them only in the vaguest of terms; here are these women experiencing that engine of birth finally running at full power. They are seized with an awe and wonder which they immediately interpret as insupportable pain, and most of them feel that they will very shortly die a dog’s death.

In the course of my reading on the subject of pregnancy, I discovered the principle of the silent birth and the idea of the Breathing Method. Screaming wastes energy which would be better used to expel the baby, it causes the woman to hyper-ventilate, and hyperventilation puts the body on an emergency basis—adrenals running full blast, respiration and pulse-rate up—that is really unnecessary. The Breathing Method was supposed to help the mother focus her attention on the job at hand and to cope with pain by utilizing the body’s own resources.

It was used widely at that time in India and Africa; in America, the Shoshone, Kiowa, and Micmac Indians all used it; the Eskimos have always used it; but, as you may guess, most Western doctors had little interest in it. One of my colleagues—an intelligent man—returned the typescript of my pregnancy pamphlet to me in the fall of 1931 with a red line drawn through the entire section on the Breathing Method. In the margin he had scribbled that if he wanted to know about “nigger superstitions,” he would stop by a newsstand and buy an issue of *Weird Tales!*

Well, I didn't cut the section from the pamphlet as he had suggested, but I had mixed results with the method—that was the best one could say. There were women who used it with great success. There were others who seemed to grasp the idea perfectly in principle but who lost their discipline completely as soon as their contractions became deep and heavy. In most of those cases I found that the entire idea had been subverted and undermined by well-meaning friends and relatives who had never heard of such a thing and thus could not believe it would actually work.

The method was based on the idea that, while no two labors are ever the same in specifics, all are pretty much alike in general. There are four stages: contractive labor, mid-labor, birth, and the expulsion of the afterbirth. Contractions are a complete hardening of the abdominal and pelvic-area muscles, and the expectant mother often finds them beginning in the sixth month. Many women pregnant for the first time expect something rather nasty, like bowel cramps, but I'm told it's much cleaner—a strongly physical sensation, which may deepen into a pain like a charley horse. A woman employing the Breathing Method began to breathe in a series of short, measured inhales and exhales when she felt a contraction coming on. Each breath was expelled in a puff, as if one were blowing a trumpet Dizzy Gillespie fashion.

During mid-labor, when more painful contractions begin coming every fifteen minutes or so, the woman switched to long inhales followed by long exhales—it's the way a marathon runner breathes when he's starting his final kick. The harder the contraction, the longer the inhale-exhale. In my pamphlet, I called this stage "riding the waves."

The final stage we need concern ourselves with here I called "locomotive," and Lamaze instructors today frequently call it the "choo-choo" stage of breathing. Final labor is accompanied by pains which are most frequently described as deep and glassy. They are accompanied by an irresistible urge on the mother's part to push ... to expel the baby. This is the point, gentlemen, at which that wonderful, frightening engine reaches its absolute crescendo. The cervix is fully dilated. The baby has begun its short journey down the

birth canal, and if you were to look directly between the mother's legs, you would see the baby's fontanel pulsing only inches from the open air. The mother using the Breathing Method now begins to take and let out short, sharp breaths between her lips, not filling her lungs, not hyperventilating, but almost panting in a perfectly controlled fashion. It really is the sound children make when they are imitating a steam-driven locomotive.

All of this has a salutary effect on the body—the mother's oxygen is kept high without putting her systems on an emergency basis, and she herself remains aware and alert, able to ask and answer questions, able to take instructions. But of course the *mental* results of the Breathing Method were even more important. The mother felt she was actively participating in the birth of her child—that she was in some part guiding the process. She felt on top of the experience ... and on top of the pain.

You can understand that the whole process was utterly dependent on the patient's state of mind. The Breathing Method was uniquely vulnerable, uniquely delicate, and if I had a good many failures, I'd explain them this way—what a patient can be convinced of by her doctor she may be unconvinced of by relatives who raise their hands in horror when told of such a heathenish practice.

From this aspect, at least, Miss Stansfield was the ideal patient. She had neither friends nor relatives to talk her out of her belief in the Breathing Method (although, in all fairness, I must add that I doubt anyone ever talked her out of *anything* once she had made up her mind on the subject) once she came to believe in it. And she *did* come to believe in it.

"It's a little like self-hypnosis, isn't it?" she asked me the first time we really discussed it.

I agreed, delighted. "Exactly! But you mustn't let that make you think it's a trick, or that it will let you down when the going gets tough."

"I don't think that at all. I'm very grateful to you. I'll practice assiduously, Dr. McCarron." She was the sort of woman the Breathing Method was invented for, and when she told me she would practice, she spoke nothing but the truth. I have never seen anyone

embrace an idea with such enthusiasm ... but, of course, the Breathing Method was uniquely suited to her temperament. There are docile men and women in this world by the millions, and some of them are damn fine people. But there are others whose hands ache to hold the throttles of their own lives, and Miss Stansfield was one of those.

When I say she embraced the Breathing Method totally, I mean it ... and I think the story of her final day at the department store where she sold perfumes and cosmetics proves the point.

The end of her gainful employment finally came late in August. Miss Stansfield was a slim young woman in fine physical condition, and this was, of course, her first child. Any doctor will tell you that such a woman is apt not to “show” for five, perhaps even six months ... and then, one day and all at once, *everything* will show.

She came in for her monthly checkup on the first of September, laughed ruefully, and told me she had discovered the Breathing Method had another use.

“What’s that?” I asked her.

“It’s even better than counting to ten when you’re mad as hell at someone,” she said. Those hazel eyes were dancing. “Although people look at you as if you might be a lunatic when you start puffing and blowing.”

She told me the tale readily enough. She had gone to work as usual on the previous Monday, and all I can think is that the curiously abrupt transition from a slim young woman to an obviously pregnant young woman—and that transition really can be almost as sudden as day to dark in the tropics—had happened over the weekend. Or maybe her supervisor finally decided that her suspicions were no longer just suspicions.

“I’ll want to see you in the office on your break,” this woman, a Mrs. Kelly, said coldly. She had previously been quite friendly to Miss Stansfield. She had shown her pictures of her two children, both in high school, and they had exchanged recipes at one point. Mrs. Kelly was always asking her if she had met “a nice boy” yet. That kindness and friendliness were gone now. And when she stepped

into Mrs. Kelly's office on her break, Miss Stansfield told me, she knew what to expect.

"You're in trouble," this previously kind woman said curtly.

"Yes," Miss Stansfield said. "It's called that by some people."

Mrs. Kelly's cheeks had gone the color of old brick. "Don't you be smart with me, young woman," she said. "From the looks of your belly, you've been too smart by half already."

I could see the two of them in my mind's eye as she told me the story—Miss Stansfield, her direct hazel eyes fixed on Mrs. Kelly, perfectly composed, refusing to drop her eyes, or weep, or exhibit shame in any other way. I believe she had a much more practical conception of the trouble she was in than her supervisor did, with her two almost-grown children and her respectable husband, who owned his own barber-shop and voted Republican.

"I must say you show remarkably little shame at the way you've deceived me!" Mrs. Kelly burst out bitterly.

"I have never deceived you. No mention of my pregnancy has been made until today." She looked at Mrs. Kelly curiously. "How can you say I have deceived you?"

"I took you home!" Mrs. Kelly cried. "I had you to dinner ... with my *sons*." She looked at Miss Stansfield with utter loathing.

This is when Miss Stansfield began to grow angry. Angrier, she told me, than she had ever been in her life. She had not been unaware of the sort of reaction she could expect when the secret came out, but as any one of you gentlemen will attest, the difference between academic theory and practical application can sometimes be shockingly huge.

Clutching her hands firmly together in her lap, Miss Stansfield said: "If you are suggesting I made or ever would make any attempt to seduce your sons, that's the dirtiest, filthiest thing I've ever heard in my life."

Mrs. Kelly's head rocked back as if she had been slapped. That bricky color drained from her cheeks, leaving only two small spots of hectic color. The two women looked grimly at each other across a desk littered with perfume samples in a room that smelled vaguely of

flowers. It was a moment, Miss Stansfield said, that seemed much longer than it actually could have been.

Then Mrs. Kelly yanked open one of her drawers and brought out a buff-colored check. A bright pink severance slip was attached to it. Showing her teeth, actually seeming to bite off each word, she said: “With hundreds of decent girls looking for work in this city, I hardly think we need a strumpet such as yourself in our employ, dear.”

She told me it was that final, contemptuous “dear” that brought all her anger to a sudden head. A moment later Mrs. Kelly’s jaw dropped and her eyes widened as Miss Stansfield, her hands locked together as tightly as links in a steel chain, so tightly she left bruises on herself (they were fading but still perfectly visible when I saw her on September 1st), began to “locomotive” between her clenched teeth.

It wasn’t a funny story, perhaps, but I burst out laughing at the image and Miss Stansfield joined me. Mrs. Davidson looked in—to make sure we hadn’t gotten into the nitrous oxide, perhaps—and then left again.

“It was all I could think to *do*,” Miss Stansfield said, still laughing and wiping her streaming eyes with her handkerchief. “Because at that moment, I saw myself reaching out and simply sweeping those sample bottles of perfume—every one of them—off her desk and onto the floor, which was uncarpeted concrete. I didn’t just *think* it, I *saw* it! I saw them crashing to the floor and filling the room with such a Godawful mixed stench that fumigators would have to come,

“I was going to do it; nothing was going to stop me doing it. Then I began to ‘locomotive,’ and everything was all right. I was able to take the check, and the pink slip, and get up, and get out. I wasn’t able to thank her, of course—I was still being a locomotive!”

We laughed again, and then she sobered.

“It’s all passed off now, and I am even able to feel a little sorry for her—or does that sound like a terribly stiff-necked thing to say?”

“Not at all. I think it’s an admirable way to be able to feel.”

“May I show you something I bought with my severance pay, Dr. McCarron?”

“Yes, if you like.”

She opened her purse and took out a small flat box. "I bought it at a pawnshop," she said. "For two dollars. And it's the only time during this whole nightmare that I've felt ashamed and dirty. Isn't that strange?"

She opened the box and laid it on my desk so I could look inside. I wasn't surprised at what I saw. It was a plain gold wedding ring.

"I'll do what's necessary," she said. "I am staying in what Mrs. Kelly would undoubtedly call 'a respectable boarding house.' My landlady has been kind and friendly ... but Mrs. Kelly was kind and friendly, too. I think she may ask me to leave at any time now, and I suspect that if I say anything about the rent-balance due me, or the damage deposit I paid when I moved in, she'll laugh in my face."

"My dear young woman, that would be quite illegal. There are courts and lawyers to help you answer such—"

"The courts are men's clubs," she said steadily, "and not apt to go out of their way to befriend a woman in my position. Perhaps I could get my money back, perhaps not. Either way, the expense and the trouble and the ... the unpleasantness ... hardly seem worth the forty-seven dollars or so. I had no business mentioning it to you in the first place. It hasn't happened yet, and maybe it won't. But in any case, I intend to be practical from now on."

She raised her head, and her eyes flashed at mine.

"I've got my eye on a place down in the Village—just in case. It's on the third floor, but it's clean, and it's five dollars a month cheaper than where I'm staying now." She picked the ring out of the box. "I wore this when the landlady showed me the room."

She put it on the third finger of her left hand with a small moue of disgust of which I believe she was unaware. "There. Now I'm Mrs. Stansfield. My husband was a truck-driver who was killed on the Pittsburgh-New York run. Very sad. But I am no longer a little roundheels strumpet, and my child is no longer a bastard."

She looked up at me, and the tears were in her eyes again. As I watched, one of them overspilled and rolled down her cheek.

"Please," I said, distressed, and reached across the desk to take her hand. It was very, very cold. "Don't, my dear."

She turned her hand—it was the left—over in my hand and looked at the ring. She smiled, and that smile was as bitter as gall and vinegar, gentlemen. Another tear fell—just that one.

“When I hear cynics say that the days of magic and miracles are all behind us, Dr. McCarron, I’ll know they’re deluded, won’t I? When you can buy a ring in a pawnshop for two dollars and that ring will instantly erase both bastardy and licentiousness, what else would you call that but magic? Cheap magic.”

“Miss Stansfield ... Sandra, if I may ... if you need help, if there’s anything I can do—”

She drew her hand away from me—if I had taken her right hand instead of her left, perhaps she would not have done. I did not love her, I’ve told you, but in that moment I could have loved her; I was on the verge of falling in love with her. Perhaps, if I’d taken her right hand instead of the one with that lying ring on it, and if she had allowed me to hold her hand only a little longer, until my own warmed it, perhaps then I should have.

“You’re a good, kind man, and you’ve done a great deal for me and my baby ... and your Breathing Method is a much better kind of magic than this awful ring. After all, it kept me from being jailed on charges of willful destruction, didn’t it?”

She left soon after that, and I went to the window to watch her move off down the street toward Fifth Avenue. God, I admired her just then! She looked so slight, so young, and so obviously pregnant—but there was still nothing timid or tentative about her. She did not scutter up the street; she walked as if she had every right to her place on the sidewalk.

She left my view and I turned back to my desk. As I did so, the framed photograph which hung on the wall next to my diploma caught my eye, and a terrible shudder worked through me. My skin—all of it, even the skin on my forehead and the backs of my hands—crawled up into cold knots of gooseflesh. The most suffocating fear of my entire life fell on me like a horrible shroud, and I found myself gasping for breath. It was a precognitive interlude, gentlemen. I do not take part in arguments about whether or not such things can occur; I know they can, because it has happened to me. Just that

once, on that hot early September afternoon. I pray to God I never have another.

The photograph had been taken by my mother on the day I finished medical school. It showed me standing in front of White Memorial, hands behind my back, grinning like a kid who's just gotten a full-day pass to the rides at Palisades Park. To my left the statue of Harriet White can be seen, and although the photograph cuts her off at about mid-shin, the pedestal and that queerly heartless inscription—*There is no comfort without pain; thus we define salvation through suffering*—could be clearly seen. It was at the foot of the statue of my father's first wife, directly below that inscription, that Sandra Stansfield died not quite four months later in a senseless accident that occurred just as she arrived at the hospital to deliver her child.

She exhibited some anxiety that fall that I would not be there to attend her during her labor—that I would be away for the Christmas holidays or not on call. She was partly afraid that she would be delivered by some doctor who would ignore her wish to use the Breathing Method and who would instead give her gas or a spinal block.

I assured her as best I could. I had no reason to leave the city, no family to visit over the holidays. My mother had died two years before, and there was no one else except a maiden aunt in California ... and the train didn't agree with me, I told Miss Stansfield.

"Are you ever lonely?" she asked.

"Sometimes. Usually I keep too busy. Now, take this." I jotted my home telephone number on a card and gave it to her. "If you get the answering service when your labor begins, call me here."

"Oh, no, I couldn't—"

"Do you want to use the Breathing Method, or do you want to get some sawbones who'll think you're mad and give you a capful of ether as soon as you start to 'locomotive'?"

She smiled a little. "All right. I'm convinced."

But as the autumn progressed and the butchers on Third Avenue began advertising the per-pound price of their “young and succulent Toms,” it became clear that her mind was still not at rest. She had indeed been asked to leave the place where she had been living when I first met her, and had moved to the Village. But that, at least, had turned out quite well for her. She had even found work of a sort. A blind woman with a fairly comfortable income had hired her to do some light housework, and then to read to her from the works of Gene Stratton Porter and Pearl Buck. She lived on the first floor of Miss Stansfield’s building. She had taken on that blooming, rosy look that most healthy women come to have during the final trimester of their pregnancies. But there was a shadow on her face. I would speak to her and she would be slow to answer ... and once, when she didn’t answer at all, I looked up from the notes I was making and saw her looking at the framed photograph next to my diploma with a strange, dreamy expression in her eyes. I felt a recurrence of that chill ... and her response, which had nothing to do with my question, hardly made me feel easier.

“I have a feeling, Dr. McCarron, sometimes quite a strong feeling, that I am doomed.”

Silly, melodramatic word! And yet, gentlemen, the response that rose to my own lips was this: *Yes; I feel that, too.* I bit it off, of course; a doctor who would say such a thing should immediately put his instruments and medical books up for sale and investigate his future in the plumbing or carpentry business.

I told her that she was not the first pregnant woman to have such feelings, and would not be the last. I told her that the feeling was indeed so common that doctors knew it by the tongue-in-cheek name of The Valley of the Shadow Syndrome. I’ve already mentioned it tonight, I believe.

Miss Stansfield nodded with perfect seriousness, and I remember how young she looked that day, and how large her belly seemed. “I know about that,” she said. “I’ve felt it. But it’s quite separate from this other feeling. This other feeling is like ... like something looming up. I can’t describe it any better than that. It’s silly, but I can’t shake it.”

“You must try,” I said. “It isn’t good for the—”

But she had drifted away from me. She was looking at the photograph again.

“Who is that?”

“Emlyn McCarron,” I said, trying to make a joke. It sounded extraordinarily feeble. “Back before the Civil War, when he was quite young.”

“No, I recognized you, of course,” she said. “The woman. You can only tell it is a woman from the hem of the skirt and the shoes. Who is she?”

“Her name is Harriet White,” I said, and thought: *And hers will be the first face you see when you arrive to deliver your child.* The chill came back—that dreadful drifting formless chill. *Her stone face.*

“And what does it say there at the base of the statue?” she asked, her eyes still dreamy, almost trancelike.

“I don’t know,” I lied. “My conversational Latin is not that good.”

That night I had the worst dream of my entire life—I woke up from it in utter terror, and if I had been married, I suppose I would have frightened my poor wife to death.

In the dream I opened the door to my consulting room and found Sandra Stansfield in there. She was wearing the brown pumps, the smart white linen dress with the brown edging, and the slightly out-of-date cloche hat. But the hat was between her breasts, because she was carrying her head in her arms. The white linen was stained and streaked with gore. Blood jetted from her neck and splattered the ceiling.

And then her eyes fluttered open—those wonderful hazel eyes—and they fixed on mine.

“Doomed,” the speaking head told me. “Doomed. I’m doomed. There’s no salvation without suffering. It’s cheap magic, but it’s all we have.”

That’s when I woke up screaming.

Her due date of December 10th came and went. I examined her on December 17th and suggested that, while the baby would almost certainly be born in 1935, I no longer expected the child to put in his or her appearance until after Christmas. Miss Stansfield accepted

this with good grace. She seemed to have thrown off the shadow that had hung over her that fall. Mrs. Gibbs, the blind woman who had hired her to read aloud and do light housework, was impressed with her—impressed enough to tell her friends about the brave young widow who, in spite of her recent bereavement and delicate condition, was facing her own future with such determined good cheer. Several of the blind woman's friends had expressed an interest in employing her following the birth of her child.

"I'll take them up on it, too," she told me. "For the baby. But only until I'm on my feet again, and able to find something steady. Sometimes I think the worst part of this—of everything that's happened—is that it's changed the way I look at people. Sometimes I think to myself, 'How can you sleep at night, knowing that you've deceived that dear old thing?' and then I think, 'If she knew, she'd show you the door, just like all the others.' Either way, it's a lie, and I feel the weight of it on my heart sometimes."

Before she left that day she took a small, gaily wrapped package from her purse and slid it shyly across the desk to me. "Merry Christmas, Dr. McCarron."

"You shouldn't have," I said, sliding open a drawer and taking out a package of my own. "But since I did, too—"

She looked at me for a moment, surprised ... and then we laughed together. She had gotten me a silver tie-clasp with a caduceus on it. I had gotten her an album in which to keep photographs of her baby. I still have the tie-clasp; as you see, gentlemen, I am wearing it tonight. What happened to the album, I cannot say.

I saw her to the door, and as we reached it, she turned to me, put her hands on my shoulders, stood on tiptoe, and kissed me on the mouth. Her lips were cool and firm. It was not a passionate kiss, gentlemen, but neither was it the sort of kiss you might expect from a sister or an aunt.

"Thank you again, Dr. McCarron," she said a little breathlessly. The color was high in her cheeks and her hazel eyes glowed lustrously. "Thank you for so much."

I laughed—a little uneasily. "You speak as if we'd never meet again, Sandra." It was, I believe, the second and last time I ever

used her Christian name.

“Oh, we’ll meet again,” she said. “I don’t doubt it a bit.” And she was right—although neither of us could have foreseen the dreadful circumstances of that last meeting.

Sandra Stansfield’s labor began on Christmas Eve, at just past six P.M. By that time, the snow which had fallen all that day had changed to sleet. And by the time Miss Stansfield entered mid-labor, not quite two hours later, the city streets were a dangerous glaze of ice.

Mrs. Gibbs, the blind woman, had a large and spacious first-floor apartment, and at six-thirty P.M. Miss Stansfield worked her way carefully downstairs, knocked at her door, was admitted, and asked if she might use the telephone to call a cab.

“Is it the baby, dear?” Mrs. Gibbs asked, fluttering already.

“Yes. The labor’s only begun, but I can’t chance the weather. It will take a cab a long time.”

She made that call and then called me. At that time, six-forty, the pains were coming at intervals of about twenty-five minutes. She repeated to me that she had begun everything early because of the foul weather. “I’d rather not have my child in the back of a Yellow,” she said. She sounded extraordinarily calm.

The cab was late and Miss Stansfield’s labor was progressing more rapidly than I would have predicted—but as I have said, no two labors are alike in their specifics. The driver, seeing that his fare was about to have a baby, helped her down the slick steps, constantly adjuring her to “be careful, lady.” Miss Stansfield only nodded, preoccupied with her deep inhale-exhales as a fresh contraction seized her. Sleet ticked off streetlights and the roofs of cars; it melted in large, magnifying drops on the taxi’s yellow dome-light. Mrs. Gibbs told me later that the young cab driver was more nervous than her “poor, dear Sandra,” and that was probably a contributing cause to the accident.

Another was almost certainly the Breathing Method itself.

The driver threaded his hack through the slippery streets, working his way slowly past the fender-benders and inching through the clogged intersections, slowly closing on the hospital. He was not seriously injured in the accident, and I talked to him in the hospital. He said the sound of the steady deep breathing coming from the back seat made him nervous; he kept looking in the rearview mirror to see if she was “dine or sumpin.” He said he would have felt less nervous if she had let out a few healthy bellows, the way a woman in labor was supposed to do. He asked her once or twice if she was feeling all right and she only nodded, continuing to “ride the waves” in deep inhales and exhales.

Two or three blocks from the hospital, she must have felt the onset of labor’s final stage. An hour had passed since she had entered the cab—traffic was that snarled—but this was still an extraordinarily fast labor for a woman having her first baby. The driver noticed the change in the way she was breathing. “She started pantin like a dog on a hot day, doc,” he told me. She had begun to “locomotive.”

At almost the same time the cabbie saw a hole open in the crawling traffic and shot through it. The way to White Memorial was now open. It was less than three blocks ahead. “I could see the statue of that broad,” he said. Eager to be rid of his panting, pregnant passenger, he stepped down on the gas again and the cab leaped forward, wheels spinning over the ice with little or no traction.

I had walked to the hospital, and my arrival coincided with the cab’s arrival only because I had underestimated just how bad driving conditions had become. I believed I would find her upstairs, a legally admitted patient with all her papers signed, her prep completed, working her way steadily through her mid-labor. I was mounting the steps when I saw the sudden sharp convergence of two sets of headlights reflected from the patch of ice where the janitors hadn’t yet spread cinders. I turned just in time to see it happen.

An ambulance was nosing its way out of the Emergency Wing rampway as Miss Stansfield’s cab came toward the hospital. The cab was simply going too fast to stop. The cabbie panicked and stamped down on the brake-pedal rather than pumping it. The cab slid, then began to turn broadside. The pulsing dome-light of the

ambulance threw moving stripes and blotches of blood-colored light over the scene, and, freakishly, one of these illuminated the face of Sandra Stansfield. For that one moment it was the face in my dream, the same bloody, open-eyed face that I had seen on her severed head.

I cried out her name, took two steps down, slipped, and fell sprawling. I cracked my elbow a paralyzing blow but somehow managed to hold on to my black bag. I saw the rest of what happened from where I lay, head ringing, elbow smarting.

The ambulance braked, and it also began to fishtail. Its rear end struck the base of the statue. The loading doors flew open. A stretcher, mercifully empty, shot out like a tongue and then crashed upside down in the street with its wheels spinning. A young woman on the sidewalk screamed and tried to run as the two vehicles approached each other. Her feet went out from under her after two strides and she fell on her stomach. Her purse flew out of her hand and shot down the icy sidewalk like a weight in a pinball bowling game.

The cab swung all the way around, now travelling backwards, and I could see the cabbie clearly. He was spinning his wheel madly, like a kid in a Dodgem Car. The ambulance rebounded from Harriet White's statue at an angle ... and smashed broadside into the cab. The taxi spun around once in a tight circle and was slammed against the base of the statue with fearful force. Its yellow light, the letters ON RADIO CALL still flashing, exploded like a bomb. The left side of the cab crumpled like tissue-paper. A moment later I saw that it was not just the left side; the cab had struck an angle of the pedestal hard enough to tear it in two. Glass sprayed onto the slick ice like diamonds. And my patient was thrown through the rear right-side window of the dismembered cab like a rag-doll.

I was on my feet again without even knowing it. I raced down the icy steps, slipped again, caught at the railing, and kept on. I was only aware of Miss Stansfield lying in the uncertain shadow cast by that hideous statue of Harriet White, some twenty feet from where the ambulance had come to rest on its side, flasher still strobing the night with red. There was something terribly wrong with that figure,

but I honestly don't believe I knew what it was until my foot struck something with a heavy enough thud to almost send me sprawling again. The thing I'd kicked skittered away—like the young woman's purse, it slid rather than rolled. It skittered away and it was only the fall of hair—bloodstreaked but still recognizably blonde, speckled with bits of glass—that made me realize what it was. She had been decapitated in the accident. What I had kicked into the frozen gutter was her head.

Moving in total numb shock now, I reached her body and turned it over. I think I tried to scream as soon as I had done it, as soon as I saw. If I did, no sound came out; I could not make a sound. The woman was still breathing, you see, gentlemen. Her chest was heaving up and down in quick, light, shallow breaths. Ice pattered down on her open coat and her blood-drenched dress. And I could hear a high, thin whistling noise. It waxed and waned like a teakettle which can't quite reach the boil. It was air being pulled into her severed wind-pipe and then exhaled again; little screams of air through the crude reed of vocal cords which no longer had a mouth to shape their sounds.

I wanted to run but I had no strength; I fell on my knees beside her on the ice, one hand cupped to my mouth. A moment later I was aware of fresh blood seeping through the lower part of her dress ... and of movement there. I became suddenly, frenziedly convinced that there was still a chance to save the baby.

I believe that as I yanked her dress up to her waist I began laughing. I believe I was mad. Her body was still warm. I remember that. I remember the way it heaved with her breathing. One of the ambulance attendants came up, weaving like a drunk, one hand clapped to the side of his head. Blood trickled through his fingers.

I was still laughing, still groping. My hands had found her fully dilated.

The attendant stared down at Sandra Stansfield's headless body with wide eyes. I don't know if he realized the corpse was still breathing or not. Perhaps he thought it was merely a thing of the nerves—a kind of final reflex action. If he did think such a thing, he could not have been driving an ambulance long. Chickens may walk

around for awhile with their heads cut off, but people only twitch once or twice ... if that.

“Stop staring at her and get me a blanket,” I snapped at him.

He wandered away, but not back toward the ambulance. He was pointed more or less toward Times Square. He simply walked off into the sleety night. I have no idea what became of him. I turned back to the dead woman who was somehow not dead, hesitated a moment, and then stripped off my overcoat. Then I lifted her hips so I could get it under her. Still I heard that whistle of breath as her headless body did “locomotive” breathing. I sometimes hear it still, gentlemen. In my dreams.

Please understand that all of this had happened in an extremely short time—it seemed longer to me, but only because my perceptions had been heightened to a feverish pitch. People were only beginning to run out of the hospital to see what had happened, and behind me a woman shrieked as she saw the severed head lying by the edge of the street.

I yanked open my black bag, thanking God I hadn't lost it in my fall, and pulled out a short scalpel. I opened it, cut through her underwear, and pulled it off. Now the ambulance driver approached—he came to within fifteen feet of us and then stopped dead. I glanced over at him, still wanting that blanket. I wasn't going to get it from him, I saw; he was staring down at the breathing body, his eyes widening until it seemed they must slip from their orbits and simply dangle from their optic nerves like grotesque seeing yo-yos. Then he dropped to his knees and raised his clasped hands. He meant to pray, I am quite sure of that. The attendant might not have known he was seeing an impossibility, but this fellow did. The next moment he had fainted dead away.

I had packed forceps in my bag that night; I don't know why. I hadn't used such things in three years, not since I had seen a doctor I will not name punch through a newborn's temple and into the child's brain with one of those infernal gadgets. The child died instantly. The corpse was “lost” and what went on the death certificate was *stillborn*.

But, for whatever reason, I had mine with me that night.

Miss Stansfield's body tightened down, her belly clenching, turning from flesh to stone. And the baby crowned. I saw the crown for just a moment, bloody and membranous and pulsing. Pulsing. It was alive, then. Definitely alive.

Stone became flesh again. The crown slipped back out of sight. And a voice behind me said: "What can I do, doctor?"

It was a middle-aged nurse, the sort of woman who is so often the backbone of our profession. Her face was as pale as milk, and while there was terror and a kind of superstitious awe on her face as she looked down at that weirdly breathing body, there was none of that dazed shock which would have made her difficult and dangerous to work with.

"You can get me a blanket, stat," I said curtly. "We've still got a chance, I think." Behind her I saw perhaps two dozen people from the hospital standing on the steps, not wanting to come any closer. How much or how little did they see? I have no way of knowing for sure. All I know is that I was avoided for days afterwards (and forever by some of them), and no one, including this nurse, ever spoke to me of it.

She now turned and started back toward the hospital.

"Nurse!" I called. "No time for that. Get one from the ambulance. This baby is coming *now*."

She changed course, slipping and sliding through the slush in her white crepe-soled shoes. I turned back to Miss Stansfield.

Rather than slowing down, the locomotive breathing had actually begun to speed up ... and then her body turned hard again, locked and straining. The baby crowned again. I waited for it to slip back but it did not; it simply kept coming. There was no need for the forceps after all. The baby all but *flew* into my hands. I saw the sleet ticking off his naked bloody body—for it was a boy, his sex unmistakable. I saw steam rising from him as the black, icy night snatched away the last of his mother's heat. His blood-grimed fists waved feebly; he uttered a thin, wailing cry.

"Nurse!" I bawled, "*move your ass, you bitch!*" It was perhaps inexcusable language, but for a moment I felt I was back in France, that in a few moments the shells would begin to whistle overhead

with a sound like that remorselessly ticking sleet; the machine-guns would begin their hellish stutter; the Germans would begin to materialize out of the murk, running and slipping and cursing and dying in the mud and smoke. Cheap magic, I thought, seeing the bodies twist and turn and fall. *But you're right, Sandra, it's all we have.* It was the closest I have ever come to losing my mind, gentlemen.

*"NURSE, FOR GOD'S SAKE!"*

The baby wailed again—such a tiny, lost sound!—and then he wailed no more. The steam rising from his skin had thinned to ribbons. I put my mouth against his face, smelling blood and the bland, damp aroma of placenta. I breathed into his mouth and heard the jerky susurrus of his breathing resume. Then the nurse was there, the blanket in her arms. I held out my hand for it.

She started to give it to me, and then held it back. "Doctor, what ... what if it's a monster? Some kind of monster?"

"Give me that blanket," I said. "Give it to me now, Sarge, before I kick your asshole right up to your shoulderblades."

"Yes, doctor," she said with perfect calmness (we must bless the women, gentlemen, who so often understand simply by not trying to), and gave me the blanket. I wrapped the child and gave him to her.

"If you drop him, Sarge, you'll be eating those stripes."

"Yes, doctor."

"It's cheap fucking magic, Sarge, but it's all God left us with."

"Yes, doctor."

I watched her half-walk, half-run back to the hospital with the child and watched the crowd on the steps part for her. Then I rose to my feet and backed away from the body. Its breathing, like the baby's, hitched and caught ... stopped ... hitched again ... stopped ...

I began to back away from it. My foot struck something. I turned. It was her head. And obeying some directive from outside of me, I dropped to one knee and turned the head over. The eyes were open—those direct hazel eyes that had always been full of such life and such determination. They were full of determination still. Gentlemen, *she was seeing me.*

Her teeth were clenched, her lips slightly parted. I heard the breath slipping rapidly back and forth between those lips and through those teeth as she “locomotived.” Her eyes moved; they rolled slightly to the left in their sockets so as to see me better. Her lips parted. They mouthed four words: *Thank you, Dr. McCarron.* And I *heard* them, gentlemen, but not from her mouth. They came from twenty feet away. From her vocal cords. And because her tongue and lips and teeth, all of which we use to shape our words, were here, they came out only in unformed modulations of sound. But there were seven of them, seven distinct sounds, just as there are seven syllables in that phrase, *Thank you, Dr. McCarron.*

“You’re welcome, Miss Stansfield,” I said. “It’s a boy.”

Her lips moved again, and from behind me, thin, ghostly, came the sound *boyyyyyy*—

Her eyes lost their focus and their determination. They seemed now to look at something beyond me, perhaps in that black, sleety sky. Then they closed. She began to “locomotive” again ... and then she simply stopped. Whatever had happened was now over. The nurse had seen some of it, the ambulance driver had perhaps seen some of it before he fainted, and some of the onlookers might have suspected something. But it was over now, over for sure. There was only the remains of an ugly accident out here ... and a new baby in there.

I looked up at the statue of Harriet White and there she still stood, looking stonily away toward the Garden across the way, as if nothing of any particular note had happened, as if such determination in a world as hard and as senseless as this one meant nothing ... or worse still, that it was perhaps the only thing which meant *anything*, the only thing that made any difference at all.

As I recall, I knelt there in the slush before her severed head and began to weep. As I recall, I was still weeping when an intern and two nurses helped me to my feet and inside.

McCarron’s pipe had gone out.

He re-lit it with his bolt-lighter while we sat in perfect, breathless silence. Outside, the wind howled and moaned. He snapped his lighter closed and looked up. He seemed mildly surprised to find us still there.

“That’s all,” he said. “That’s the end! What are you waiting for? Chariots of fire?” he snorted, then seemed to debate for a moment. “I paid her burial expenses out of my own pocket. She had no one else, you see.” He smiled a little. “Well . . . there was Ella Davidson, my nurse. She insisted on chipping in twenty-five dollars, which she could ill afford. But when Davidson insisted on a thing—” He shrugged, and then laughed a little.

“You’re quite sure it wasn’t a reflex?” I heard myself demanding suddenly. “Are you *quite* sure—”

“Quite sure,” McCarron said imperturbably. “The first contraction, perhaps. But the completion of her labor was not a matter of seconds but of minutes. And I sometimes think she might have held on even longer, if it had been necessary. Thank God it was not.”

“What about the baby?” Johanssen asked.

McCarron puffed at his pipe. “Adopted,” he said. “And you’ll understand that, even in those days, adoption records were kept as secret as possible.”

“Yes, but what about the baby?” Johanssen asked again, and McCarron laughed in a cross way.

“You never let go of a thing, do you?” he asked Johanssen.

Johanssen shook his head. “Some people have learned it to their sorrow. What about the baby?”

“Well, if you’ve come with me this far, perhaps you’ll also understand that I had a certain vested interest in knowing how it all came out for that child. Or I felt I did, which comes to the same. I did keep track, and I still do. There was a young man and his wife—their name was not Harrison, but that is close enough. They lived in Maine. They could have no children of their own. They adopted the child and named him . . . well, John’s good enough, isn’t it? John will do you fellows, won’t it?”

He puffed at his pipe but it had gone out again. I was faintly aware of Stevens hovering behind me, and knew that somewhere our coats

would be at the ready. Soon we would slip back into them ... and back into our lives. As McCarron had said, the tales were done for another year.

“The child I delivered that night is now head of the English Department at one of the two or three most respected private colleges in the country,” McCarron said. “He’s not forty-five yet. A young man. It’s early for him, but the day may well come when he will be President of that school. I shouldn’t doubt it a bit. He is handsome, intelligent, and charming.

“Once, on a pretext, I was able to dine with him in the private faculty club. We were four that evening. I said little and so was able to watch him. He has his mother’s determination, gentlemen ...

“... and his mother’s hazel eyes.”

### III.

## The Club

Stevens saw us out as he always did, holding coats, wishing men the happiest of happy Christmases, thanking them for their generosity. I contrived to be the last, and Stevens looked at me with no surprise when I said:

“I have a question I’d like to ask, if you don’t mind.”

He smiled a little. “I suppose you should,” he said. “Christmas is a fine time for questions.”

Somewhere down the hallway to our left—a hall I had never been down—a grandfather clock ticked sonorously, the sound of the age passing away. I could smell old leather and oiled wood and, much more faintly than either of these, the smell of Stevens’s aftershave.

“But I should warn you,” Stevens added as the wind rose in a gust outside, “it’s better not to ask too much. Not if you want to keep coming here.”

“People have been closed out for asking too much?” Closed out was not really the phrase I wanted, but it was as close as I could come.

“No,” Stevens said, his voice as low and polite as ever. “They simply choose to stay away.”

I returned his gaze, feeling a chill prickle its way up my back—it was as if a large, cold, invisible hand had been laid on my spine. I found myself remembering that strangely liquid thump I had heard upstairs one night and wondered (as I had more than once before) exactly how many rooms there really were here.

“If you still have a question, Mr. Adley, perhaps you’d better ask it. The evening’s almost over—”

“And you have a long train-ride ahead of you?” I asked, but Stevens only looked at me impassively. “All right,” I said.

“There are books in this library that I can’t find anywhere else—not in the New York Public Library, not in the catalogues of any of the antiquarian book-dealers I’ve checked with, and certainly not in *Books in Print*. The billiard table in the Small Room is a Nord. I’d never heard of such a brand, and so I called the International Trademark Commission. They have two Nord—one makes cross-country skis and the other makes wooden kitchen accessories. There’s a Seafront jukebox in the Long Room. The ITC has a *Seeburg* listed, but no *Seafront*.”

“What is your question, Mr. Adley?”

His voice was as mild as ever, but there was something terrible in his eyes suddenly ... no; if I am to be truthful, it was not just in his eyes; the terror I felt had infused the atmosphere all around me. The steady tock-tock from down the lefthand hall was no longer the pendulum of a grandfather clock; it was the tapping foot of the executioner as he watches the condemned led to the scaffold. The smells of oil and leather turned bitter and menacing, and when the wind rose in another wild whoop, I felt momentarily sure that the front door would blow open, revealing not Thirty-fifth Street but an insane Clark Ashton Smith landscape where the bitter shapes of twisted trees stood silhouetted on a sterile horizon below which double suns were setting in a gruesome red glare.

Oh, he knew what I had meant to ask; I saw it in his gray eyes.

*Where do all these things come from?* I had meant to ask. *Oh, I know well enough where you come from, Stevens; that accent isn't Dimension X, it's pure Brooklyn. But where do you go? What has put that timeless look in your eyes and stamped it on your face? And, Stevens—*

*—where are we RIGHT THIS SECOND?*

But he was waiting for my question.

I opened my mouth. And the question that came out was: “Are there many more rooms upstairs?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” he said, his eyes never leaving mine. “A great many. A man could become lost. In fact, men *have* become lost. Sometimes- it seems to me that they go on for miles. Rooms and corridors.”

“And entrances and exits?”

His eyebrows went up slightly. “Oh yes. Entrances and exits.”

He waited, but I had asked enough, I thought—I had come to the very edge of something that would, perhaps, drive me mad.

“Thank you, Stevens.”

“Of course, sir.” He held out my coat and I slipped into it.

“There will be more tales?”

“Here, sir, there are *always* more tales.”

That evening was some time ago, and my memory has not improved between then and now (when a man reaches my age, the opposite is much more likely to be true), but I remember with perfect clarity the stab of fear that went through me when Stevens swung the oaken door wide—the cold certainty that I would see that alien landscape, cracked and hellish in the bloody light of those double suns, which might set and bring on an unspeakable darkness of an hour's duration, or ten hours, or ten thousand years. I cannot explain it, but I tell you that world *exists*—I am as sure of that as Emlyn McCarron was sure that the severed head of Sandra Stansfield went on breathing. I thought for that one timeless second that the door

would open and Stevens would thrust me out into that world and I would then hear that door slam shut behind me ... forever.

Instead, I saw Thirty-fifth Street and a radio-cab standing at the curb, exhaling plumes of exhaust. I felt an utter, almost debilitating relief.

“Yes, always more tales,” Stevens repeated. “Goodnight, sir.”

*Always more tales.*

Indeed there have been. And, one day soon, perhaps I'll tell you another.

## Afterword

Although “Where do you get your ideas?” has always been the question I’m most frequently asked (it’s number one with a bullet, you might say), the runner-up is undoubtedly this one: “Is horror *all* you write?” When I say it isn’t, it’s hard to tell if the questioner seems relieved or disappointed.

Just before the publication of *Carrie*, my first novel, I got a letter from my editor, Bill Thompson, suggesting it was time to start thinking about what we were going to do for an encore (it may strike you as a bit strange, this thinking about the next book before the first was even out, but because the pre-publication schedule for a novel is almost as long as the post-production schedule on a film, we had been living with *Carrie* for a long time at that point—nearly a year). I promptly sent Bill the manuscripts of two novels, one called *Blaze* and one called *Second Coming*. The former had been written immediately after *Carrie*, during the six-month period when the first draft of *Carrie* was sitting in a desk drawer, mellowing; the latter was written during the year or so when *Carrie* inched, tortoiselike, closer and closer to publication.

*Blaze* was a melodrama about a huge, almost retarded criminal who kidnaps a baby, planning to ransom it back to the child’s rich parents ... and then falls in love with the child instead. *Second Coming* was a melodrama about vampires taking over a small town in Maine. Both were literary imitations of a sort, *Second Coming of Dracula*, *Blaze* of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*.

I think Bill must have been flabbergasted when these two manuscripts arrived in a single big package (some of the pages of

*Blaze* had been typed on the reverse side of milk-bills, and the *Second Coming* manuscript reeked of beer because someone had spilled a pitcher of Black Label on it during a New Year's Eve party three months before)—like a woman who wishes for a bouquet of flowers and discovers her husband has gone out and bought her a hothouse. The two manuscripts together totaled about five hundred and fifty single-spaced pages.

He read them both over the next couple of weeks—scratch an editor and find a saint—and I went down to New York from Maine to celebrate the publication of *Carrie* (April, 1974, friends and neighbors—Lennon was alive, Nixon was still hanging in there as President, and this kid had yet to see the first gray hair in his beard) and to talk about which of the two books should be next ...or if neither of them should be next.

I was in the city for a couple of days, and we talked around the question three or four times. The final decision was made on a street-corner—Park Avenue and Forty-sixth Street, in fact. Bill and I were standing there waiting for the light, watching the cabs roll into that funky tunnel or whatever it is—the one that seems to burrow straight through the Pan Am Building. And Bill said, “I think it should be *Second Coming*.”

Well, that was the one I liked better myself—but there was something so oddly reluctant in his voice that I looked at him sharply and asked him what the matter was. “It’s just that if you do a book about vampires as the follow-up to a book about a girl who can move things by mind-power, you’re going to get typed,” he said.

“Typed?” I asked, honestly bewildered. I could see no similarities to speak of between vampires and telekinesis. “As *what?*”

“As a horror writer,” he said, more reluctantly still.

“Oh,” I said, vastly relieved. “Is *that* all!”

“Give it a few years,” he said, “and see if you still think it’s ‘all.’ ”

“Bill,” I said, amused, “no one can make a living writing just horror stories in America. Lovecraft starved in Providence. Bloch gave it up for suspense novels and *Unknown*-type spoofs. The *Exorcist* was a one-shot. You’ll see.”

The light changed. Bill clapped me on the shoulder. “I think you’re going to be very successful,” he said, “but I don’t think you know shit from Shinola.”

He was closer to the truth than I was. It turned out that it was possible to make a living writing horror stories in America. *Second Coming*, eventually entitled ‘*Salem’s Lot*, did very well. By the time it was published, I was living in Colorado with my family and writing a novel about a haunted hotel. On a trip into New York, I sat up with Bill half the night in a bar called Jasper’s (where a huge, fog-gray tomcat apparently owned the Rock-Ola; you had to kind of lift him up to see what the selections were) and told him the plot. By the end, his elbows were planted on either side of his bourbon and his head was in his hands, like a man with a monster migraine.

“You don’t like it,” I said.

“I like it a lot,” he said hollowly.

“Then what’s wrong?”

“*First* the telekinetic girl, *then* vampires, *now* the haunted hotel and the telepathic kid. You’re gonna get typed.”

This time I thought about it a little more seriously—and then I thought about all the people who *had* been typed as horror writers, and who had given me such great pleasure over the years—Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson, and Shirley Jackson (yes; even she was typed as a spook writer). And I decided there in Jasper’s with the cat asleep on the juke and my editor sitting beside me with his head in his hands, that I could be in worse company. I could, for example, be an “important” writer like Joseph Heller and publish a novel every seven years or so, or a “brilliant” writer like John Gardner and write obscure books for bright academics who eat macrobiotic foods and drive old Saabs with faded but still legible GENE MCCARTHY FOR PRESIDENT stickers on the rear bumpers.

“That’s okay, Bill,” I said, “I’ll be a horror writer if that’s what people want. That’s just fine.”

We never had the discussion again. Bill’s still editing and I’m still writing horror stories, and neither of us is in analysis. It’s a good deal.

So I got typed and I don't much mind—after all, I write true to type ... at least, *most* of the time. But is horror all I write? If you've read the foregoing stories, you *know* it's not ... but elements of horror can be found in all of the tales, not just in *The Breathing Method*—that business with the slugs in *The Body* is pretty gruesome, as is much of the dream imagery in *Apt Pupil*. Sooner or later, my mind always seems to turn back in that direction. God knows why.

Each of these longish stories was written immediately after completing a novel—it's as if I've always finished the big job with just enough gas left in the tank to blow off one good-sized novella. *The Body*, the oldest story here, was written directly after '*Salem's Lot*'; *Apt Pupil* was written in a two-week period following the completion of *The Shining* (and following *Apt Pupil* I wrote nothing for three months—I was pooped); *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* was written after finishing *The Dead Zone*; and *The Breathing Method*, the most recently written of these stories, immediately following *Firestarter*.<sup>1</sup>

None of them has been published previous to this book; none has even been submitted for publication. Why? Because each of them comes out to 25,000 to 35,000 words—not exactly, maybe, but that's close enough to be in the ballpark. I've got to tell you: 25,000 to 35,000 words are numbers apt to make even the most stout-hearted writer of fiction shake and shiver in his boots. There is no hard-and-fast definition of what either a novel or a short story is—at least not in terms of word-count—nor should there be. But when a writer approaches the 20,000-word mark, he knows he is edging out of the country of the short story. Likewise, when he passes the 40,000-word mark, he is edging into the country of the novel. The borders of the country between these two more orderly regions are ill-defined, but at some point the writer wakes up with alarm and realizes that he's come or is coming to a really terrible place, an anarchy-ridden literary banana republic called the “novella” (or, rather too cutesy for my taste, the “novelette”).

Now, artistically speaking, there's nothing at all wrong with the novella. Of course, there's nothing wrong with circus freaks, either,

except that you rarely see them outside of the circus. The point is that there are great novellas, but they traditionally only sell to the “genre markets” (that’s the polite term; the impolite but more accurate one is “ghetto markets”). You can sell a good mystery novella to *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* or *Mike Shayne’s Mystery Magazine*, a good science fiction novella to *Amazing* or *Analog*, maybe even to *Omni* or *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Ironically, there are also markets for good horror novellas: the aforementioned *F&SF* is one; *Twilight Zone* is another and there are various anthologies of original creepy fiction, such as the *Shadows* series published by Doubleday and edited by Charles L. Grant.

But for novellas which can, on measure, only be described with the word “mainstream” (a word almost as depressing as “genre”) ... boy, as far as marketability goes, you in a heap o’ trouble. You look at your 25,000-to-35,000-word manuscript dismally, twist the cap off a beer, and in your head you seem to hear a heavily accented and rather greasy voice saying: “*Buenos dias, señor!* How was your flight on Revolución Airways? You like eet preety-good-fine I theenk, *sí?* Welcome to Novella, *señor!* You going to like heet here preety-good-fine, I theenk! Have a cheap cigar! Have some feelthy peectures! Put your feet up, *señor*, I theenk your story is going to be here a long, long time ... *qué pasa?* Ah-ha-hahhah-hah!”

Depressing.

Once upon a time (he mourned) there really was a market for such tales—there were magical magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier’s*, and *The American Mercury*. Fiction—fiction both short and long—was a staple of these and others. And, if the story was too long for a single issue, it was serialized in three parts, or five, or nine. The poisonous idea of “condensing” or “excerpting” novels was as yet unknown (both *Playboy* and *Cosmopolitan* have honed this particular obscenity to a noxious science: you can now read an entire novel in twenty minutes!), the tale was given the space it demanded, and I doubt if I’m the only one who can remember waiting for the mailman all day long because the new *Post* was due and a new short story by Ray Bradbury had been

promised, or perhaps because the final episode of the latest Clarence Buddington Kelland serial was due.

(My anxiety made me a particularly easy mark. When the postman finally did show up, walking briskly with his leather bag over his shoulder, dressed in his summer-issue shorts and wearing his summer-issue sun helmet, I'd meet him at the end of the walk, dancing from one foot to the other as if I badly needed to go to the bathroom; my heart in my throat. Grinning rather cruelly, he'd hand me an electric bill. Nothing but that. Heart plummets into my shoes. Finally he relents and gives me the Post after all: grinning Eisenhower on the cover, painted by Norman Rockwell: an article on Sophia Loren by Pete Martin; "I Say He's a Wonderful Guy" by Pat Nixon, concerning—yeah, you guessed it—her husband, Richard; and, of course, stories. Long ones, short ones, and the last chapter of the Kelland serial. Praise God!)

And this didn't happen just once in a while; this happened *every fucking week!* The day that the Post came, I guess I was the happiest kid on the whole eastern seaboard.

There are still magazines that publish long fiction—*Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker* are two which have been particularly sympathetic to the publication problems of a writer who has delivered (we won't say "gotten"; that's too close to "misbegotten") a 30,000-word novella. But neither of these magazines has been particularly receptive to my stuff, which is fairly plain, not very literary, and sometimes (although it hurts like hell to admit it) downright clumsy.

To some degree or other, I would guess that those very qualities—unadmirable though they may be—have been responsible for the success of my novels. Most of them have been plain fiction for plain folks, the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and a large fries from McDonald's. I am able to recognize elegant prose and to respond to it, but have found it difficult or impossible to write it myself (most of my idols as a maturing writer were muscular novelists with prose styles which ranged from the horrible to the nonexistent: cats like Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris). Subtract elegance from the novelist's craft and one finds himself left with only one strong leg to

stand on, and that leg is good weight. As a result, I've tried as hard as I can, always, to give good weight. Put another way, if you find out you can't run like a thoroughbred, you can still pull your brains out (a voice rises from the balcony: "*What* brains, King?" Ha-ha, very funny, fella, you can leave now).

The result of all this is that, when it came to the novellas you've just read, I found myself in a puzzling position. I had gotten to a place with my novels where people were saying King could publish his laundry list if he wanted to (and there are critics who claim that's exactly what I've been doing for the last eight years or so), but I couldn't publish these tales because they were too long to be short and too short to be really long. If you see what I mean.

"*Sí, señor*, I see! Take off your shoes! Have some cheap rum! Soon thee Medicare Revolución Steel Band iss gonna come along and play some bad calypso! You like eet preety-good-fine, I theenk! And you got time, *señor*! You got time because I theenk your story ees gonna—"

—be here a long time, yeah, yeah, great, why don't you go somewhere and overthrow a puppet imperialist democracy?

So I finally decided to see if Viking, my hardcover publisher, and New American Library, my paperback publisher, would want to do a book with stories in it about an off-beat prison-break, an old man and a young boy locked up in a gruesome relationship based on mutual parasitism, a quartet of country boys on a journey of discovery, and an off-the-wall horror story about a young woman determined to give birth to her child no matter what (or maybe the story is actually about that odd club that isn't a club). The publishers said okay. And that is how I managed to break these four long stories out of the banana republic of the novella.

I hope you like them preety-good-fine, *muchachos* and *muchachas*.

Oh, one other thing about type-casting before I call it a day.

Was talking to my editor—not Bill Thompson, this is my *new* editor, a real nice guy named Alan Williams, smart, witty, able, but usually on jury duty somewhere deep in the bowels of New Jersey—about a year ago.

“Loved *Cujo*,” Alan says (the editorial work on that novel, a real shaggy-dog story, had just been completed). “Have you thought about what you’re going to do next?”

*Déjà vu* sets in. I have had this conversation before.

“Well, yeah,” I say. “I *have* given it some thought—”

“Lay it on me.”

“What would you think about a book of four novellas? Most or all of them just sort of ordinary stories? What would you think about that?”

“Novellas,” Alan says. He is being a good sport, but his voice says some of the joy may have just gone out of his day; his voice says he feels he has just won two tickets to some dubious little banana republic on Revolución Airways. “Long stories, you mean.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I say. “And we’ll call the book something like *Different Seasons*, just so people will get the idea that it’s not about vampires or haunted hotels or anything like that.”

“Is the *next* one going to be about vampires?” Alan asks hopefully.

“No, I don’t think so. What do you think, Alan?”

“A haunted hotel, maybe?”

“No, I did that one already. *Different Seasons*, Alan. It’s got a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

“It’s got a great ring, Steve,” Alan says, and sighs. It is the sigh of a good sport who has just taken his seat in third class on Revolución Airways’ newest plane—a Lockheed Tristar—and has seen the first cockroach trundling busily over the top of the seat ahead of him.

“I hoped you’d like it,” I say.

“I don’t suppose,” Alan says, “we could have a horror story in it? Just one? A sort of ... *similar* season?”

I smile a little—just a little—thinking of Sandra Stansfield and Dr. McCarron’s Breathing Method. “I can probably whomp something up.”

“Great! And about that new novel—”

“How about a haunted car?” I say.

“My *man!*” Alan cries. I have the feeling that I’m sending him back to his editorial meeting—or possibly to jury duty in East Rahway—a happy man. I’m happy, too—I *love* my haunted car, and I think it’s

going to make a lot of people nervous about crossing busy streets after dark,

But I've been in love with each of these stories, too, and part of me always will be in love with them, I guess. I hope that you liked them, Reader; that they did for you what any good story should do—make you forget the real stuff weighing on your mind for a little while and take you away to a place you've never been. It's the most amiable sort of magic I know.

Okay. Gotta split. Until we see each other again, keep your head together, read some good books, be useful, be happy.

Love and good wishes,  
STEPHEN KING

*January 4th, 1982*  
*Bangor, Maine*

1

Something else about them, which I just realized: each one was written in a different house—three of those in Maine and one in Boulder, Colorado.

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# STEPHEN KING

FEATURES  
THE SHORT STORY  
"1408"—NOW  
A MAJOR MOTION  
PICTURE FROM  
DIMENSION FILMS

14  
DARK TALES

EVERYTHING'S  
EVENTUAL

1408



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STEPHEN  
KING

Everything's  
Eventual

14 DARK TALES



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*What I did was take all the spades out of a deck of cards plus a joker. Ace to King = 1–13. Joker = 14. I shuffled the cards and dealt them. The order in which they came out of the deck became the order of the stories, based on their position in the list my publisher sent me. And it actually created a very nice balance between the literary stories and the all-out screamers. I also added an explanatory note before or after each story, depending on which seemed the more fitting position. Next collection: selected by Tarot.*

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Introduction: Practicing the (Almost) Lost Art

Autopsy Room Four

The Man in the Black Suit

All That You Love Will Be Carried Away

The Death of Jack Hamilton

In the Deathroom

The Little Sisters of Eluria

Everything's Eventual

L.T.'s Theory of Pets

The Road Virus Heads North

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That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is in French

1408

Riding the Bullet

Luckey Quarter

About Stephen King

*This is for Shane Leonard*

## Introduction: Practicing the (Almost) Lost Art

I've written more than once about the joy of writing and see no need to reheat that particular skillet of hash at this late date, but here's a confession: I also take an amateur's slightly crazed pleasure in the business side of what I do. I like to goof widdit, do a little media cross-pollination and envelope-pushing. I've tried doing visual novels (*Storm of the Century*, *Rose Red*), serial novels (*The Green Mile*), and serial novels on the Internet (*The Plant*). It's not about making more money or even precisely about creating new markets; it's about trying to see the act, art, and craft of writing in different ways, thereby refreshing the process and keeping the resulting artifacts—the stories, in other words—as bright as possible.

I started to write “keeping [the stories] new” in the line above, then deleted the phrase in the interest of honesty. I mean, come on here, ladies and gentlemen, whom can I possibly kid at this late date, except maybe myself? I sold my first story when I was twenty-one and a junior in college. I'm now fifty-four, and have run a lot of language through the 2.2-pound organic computer/word processor I hang my Red Sox cap on. The act of writing stories hasn't been new for me in a long time, but that doesn't mean it's lost its fascination. If I don't find ways of keeping it fresh and interesting, though, it'll get old and tired in a hurry. I don't want that to happen, because I don't want to cheat the people who read my stuff (that would be you, dear Constant Reader), and I don't want to cheat myself, either. We're in it together, after all. This is a date we're on. We should have fun. We should dance.

So, keeping that in mind, here's yet another story. My wife and I own these two radio stations, okay? WZON-AM, which is sports radio, and WKIT-FM, which is classic rock (“The Rock of Bangor,” we say). Radio is a tough business these days, especially in a market like Bangor, where there are too many stations and not enough listeners. We've got contemporary country, *classic* country, oldies, *classic* oldies, Rush Limbaugh, Paul Harvey, and Casey Kasem. The Steve and Tabby King stations ran in the red for a lot of years—not deep in the red, but far enough to bug me. I like to be a winner, you see, and while

we were winning in the Arbs (that would be the Arbitron ratings, which are to radio what the Nielsens are to TV), we kept coming up short on the bottom line at the end of the year. It was explained to me that there just wasn't enough ad revenue in the Bangor market, that the pie had been cut into too many slices.

So I had an idea. I'd write a radio play, I thought, sort of like the ones I used to listen to with my grandfather when I was growing up (and he was growing old) in Durham, Maine. A Halloween play, by God! I knew about Orson Welles's famous—or infamous—Halloween adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* on *The Mercury Theatre*, of course. It was Welles's conceit (his absolutely *brilliant* conceit) to do H. G. Wells's classic invasion story as a series of news bulletins and reports. It worked, too. It worked so well that it sparked a national panic and Welles (Orson, not H.G.) had to make a public apology on the following week's *Mercury Theatre*. (I bet he made it with a smile on his face—I know *I'd* be smiling, if I were ever to come up with a lie so powerful and persuasive.)

I thought what had worked for Orson Welles would work for me. Instead of starting with dance-band music, as the Welles adaptation did, mine would start with Ted Nugent wailing on “Cat Scratch Fever.” Then an announcer breaks in, one of our actual WKIT air personalities (nobody calls em deejays anymore). “This is JJ West, WKIT news,” he says. “I'm in downtown Bangor, where roughly a thousand people are jammed into Pickering Square, watching as a large, silvery disc-like object descends toward the ground . . . wait a minute, if I raise the mike, perhaps you can hear it.”

And, just like that, we'd be off to the races. I could use our very own in-house production facilities to create the audio effects, local community-theater actors to do the roles, and the best part? The very best part of all? We could record the result and syndicate it to stations *all over the country!* The resulting income, I figured (and my accountant agreed), would be “radio station income” instead of “creative writing income.” It was a way to get around the advertising revenue shortfall, and at the end of the year, the radio stations might actually be in the black!

The idea for the radio play was exciting, and the prospect of helping my stations into a profit position with my skills as a writer for hire was also

exciting. So what happened? I couldn't do it, that's what happened. I tried and I tried, and everything I wrote came out sounding like narration. Not a play, the sort of thing that you see unspooling in your mind (those old enough to remember such radio programs as *Suspense* and *Gunsmoke* will know what I mean), but something more like a book on tape. I'm sure we still could have gone the syndication route and made some money, but I knew the play would not be a success. It was boring. It would cheat the listener. It was busted, and I didn't know how to fix it. Writing radio plays, it seems to me, is a lost art. We have lost the ability to see with our ears, although we had it once. I remember listening to some radio Foley guy tapping a hollow block of wood with his knuckles . . . and seeing Matt Dillon walking to the bar of the Long Branch Saloon in his dusty boots, clear as day. No more. Those days are gone.

Playwriting in the Shakespearean style—comedy and tragedy that works itself out in blank verse—is another lost art. Folks still go to see college productions of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, but let's be honest with ourselves: how do you think one of those plays would do on TV against *Weakest Link* or *Survivor Five: Stranded on the Moon*, even if you could get Brad Pitt to play Hamlet and Jack Nicholson to do Polonius? And although folks still go to such Elizabethan extravaganzas as *King Lear* or *Macbeth*, the enjoyment of an art-form is light-years from the ability to create a new example of that art-form. Every now and then someone tries mounting a blank-verse production either on Broadway or off it. They inevitably fail.

Poetry is *not* a lost art. Poetry is better than ever. Of course you've got the usual gang of idiots (as the *Mad* magazine staff writers used to call themselves) hiding in the thickets, folks who have gotten pretension and genius all confused, but there are also many brilliant practitioners of the art out there. Check the literary magazines at your local bookstore, if you don't believe me. For every six crappy poems you read, you'll actually find one or two good ones. And that, believe me, is a very acceptable ratio of trash to treasure.

The short story is also not a lost art, but I would argue it is a good deal closer than poetry to the lip of the drop into extinction's pit. When I sold my first short story in the delightfully antique year of 1968, I was already bemoaning the steady attrition of markets: the pulps were gone, the digests were going, the weeklies (such as *The Saturday Evening Post*) were dying. In the

years since, I have seen the markets for short stories continue to shrink. God bless the little magazines, where young writers can still publish their stories for contributors' copies, and God bless the editors who still read the contents of their slush piles (especially in the wake of 2001's anthrax scare), and God bless the publishers who still greenlight the occasional anthology of original stories, but God won't have to spend His whole day—or even His coffee break—blessing those people. Ten or fifteen minutes would do the trick. Their number is small, and every year there are one or two fewer. *Story* magazine, a lodestar for young writers (including myself, although I never actually published there), is now gone. *Amazing Stories* is gone, despite repeated efforts to revive it. Interesting science-fiction magazines such as *Vertex* are gone, and, of course, the horror mags like *Creepy* and *Eerie*. Those wonderful periodicals are *long* gone. Every now and then someone will try to revive one of these magazines; as I write this, *Weird Tales* is staggering through such a revival. Mostly, they fail. It's like those plays in blank verse, the ones that open and then close in what seems to be no more than the wink of an eye. When it's gone, you can't bring it back. What's lost has a way of staying lost.

I've continued to write short stories over the years, partly because the ideas still come from time to time—beautifully compressed ideas that cry out for three thousand words, maybe nine thousand, fifteen thousand at the very most—and partly because it's the way I affirm, at least to myself, the fact that I haven't sold out, no matter what the more unkind critics may think. Short stories are still piecework, the equivalent of those one-of-a-kind items you can buy in an artisan's shop. If, that is, you are willing to be patient and wait while it's made by hand in the back room.

But there's no reason for stories to be *marketed* by the same old just-like-Father-did-it methods, simply because the stories themselves are created that way, nor is there any reason to assume (as so many stodgies in the critical press seem to have done) that the way in which a piece of fiction is sold must in some way contaminate or cheapen the product itself.

I'm speaking here of "Riding the Bullet," which has surely been my oddest experience of selling my wares in the marketplace, and a story which illustrates the main points I'm trying to make: that what's lost cannot be easily retrieved, that once things go past a certain point, extinction is probably inevitable, but

that a fresh perspective on one aspect of creative writing—the commercial aspect—can sometimes refresh the whole.

“Bullet” was composed after *On Writing*, and while I was still recuperating from an accident which left me in a state of nearly constant physical misery. Writing took me away from the worst of that pain; it was (and continues to be) the best pain-killer in my limited arsenal. The story I wanted to tell was simplicity itself; little more than a campfire ghost-story, really. It was *The Hitchhiker Who Got Picked Up By A Dead Man*.

While I was writing away at my story in the unreal world of my imagination, a dot-com bubble was growing in the equally unreal world of e-commerce. One aspect of this was the so-called electronic book, which, according to some, would spell the end of books as we’d always known them, objects of glue and binding, pages you turned by hand (and which sometimes fell out, if the glue was weak or the binding old). In early 2000, there was great interest in an essay by Arthur C. Clarke, which had been published only in cyberspace.

It was extremely short, though (like kissing your sister is what I thought when I first read it). My story, when it was done, was quite long. Susan Moldow, my editor at Scribner (as an *X-Files* fan, I call her *Agent Moldow . . . you work it out*), called one day prompted by Ralph Vicinanza and asked if I had anything I’d like to try in the electronic marketplace. I sent her “Bullet,” and the three of us—Susan, Scribner, and I—made a little bit of publishing history. Several hundred thousand people downloaded the story, and I ended up making an embarrassing amount of money. (Except that’s a fucking lie, I wasn’t embarrassed a bit.) Even the audio rights went for over a hundred thousand dollars, a comically huge price.

Am I bragging here? Boasting my narrow whiteboy ass off? In a way I am. But I’m also here to tell you that “Riding the Bullet” made me absolutely crazy. Usually, if I’m in one of those fancy-schamncy airport lounges, I’m ignored by the rest of the clientele; they’re busy babbling into phones or making deals at the bar. Which is fine with me. Every now and then one of them will drop by and ask me to sign a cocktail napkin for the wife. The wife, these handsomely suited, briefcase-toting fellows usually want me to know, has read *all* my books. They, on the other hand, have read none. They want me to know that,

too. Just too busy. Read *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, read *Who Moved My Cheese?*, read *The Prayer of Jabez*, and that's pretty much it. Gotta hurry, gotta rush-rush, I got a heart attack due in about four years, and I want to be sure that I'm there to meet it with my 401(k) all in order when it shows up.

After "Bullet" was published as an e-book (cover, Scribner colophon, and all), that changed. I was *mobbed* in the airport lounges. I was even mobbed in the Boston Amtrak lounge. I was buttonholed on the street. For a little while there, I was turning down the chance to appear on a giddy three talk-shows a day (I was holding out for Springer, but Jerry never called). I even got on the cover of *Time*, and *The New York Times* pontificated at some length over the perceived success of "Riding the Bullet" and the perceived failure of its cyber-successor, *The Plant*. Dear God, I was on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. I had inadvertently become a mogul.

And what was driving me crazy? What made it all seem so pointless? Why, that nobody cared about the story. Hell, nobody even *asked* about the story, and do you know what? It's a pretty *good* story, if I do say so myself. Simple but fun. Gets the job done. If it got you to turn off the TV, as far as I'm concerned, it (or any of the stories in the collection which follows) is a total success.

But in the wake of "Bullet," all the guys in ties wanted to know was, "How's it doing? How's it selling?" How to tell them I didn't give a flying fuck how it was doing in the marketplace, that what I cared about was how it was doing in the reader's heart? Was it succeeding there? Failing? Getting through to the nerve-endings? Causing that little *frisson* which is the spooky story's *raison d'être*? I gradually realized that I was seeing another example of creative ebb, another step by another art on the road that may indeed end in extinction. There is something weirdly decadent about appearing on the cover of a major magazine simply because you used an alternate route into the marketplace. There is something weirder about realizing that all those readers might have been a lot more interested in the novelty of the electronic package than they were in what was inside the package. Do I want to know how many of the readers who downloaded "Riding the Bullet" actually *read* "Riding the Bullet"? I do not. I think I might be extremely disappointed.

E-publishing may or may not be the wave of the future; about that I care not a fiddler's fart, believe me. For me, going that route was simply another way of trying to keep myself fully involved in the process of writing stories. And then getting them to as many people as possible.

This book will probably end up on the best-seller lists for awhile; I've been very lucky that way. But if you see it there, you might ask yourself how many *other* books of short stories end up on the bestseller lists in the course of any given year, and how long publishers can be expected to publish books of a type that doesn't interest readers very much. Yet for me, there are few pleasures so excellent as sitting in my favorite chair on a cold night with a hot cup of tea, listening to the wind outside and reading a good story which I can complete in a single sitting.

Writing them is not so pleasurable. I can only think of two in the current collection—the title story and “L.T.'s Theory of Pets”—which were written without an amount of effort far greater than the relatively slight result. And yet I think I have succeeded in keeping my craft new, at least to myself, mostly because I refuse to let a year go by without writing at least one or two of them. Not for money, not even precisely for love, but as a kind of dues-paying. Because if you want to write short stories, you have to do more than *think* about writing short stories. It is *not* like riding a bicycle but more like working out in the gym: your choice is use it or lose it.

To see them collected here like this is a great pleasure for me. I hope it will be for you, as well. You can let me know at [www.stephenking.com](http://www.stephenking.com), and you can do something else for me (and yourself), as well: if these stories work for you, buy another collection. *Sam the Cat* by Matthew Klam, for instance, or *The Hotel Eden* by Ron Carlson, These are only two of the good writers doing good work out there, and although it's now officially the twenty-first century, they're doing it in the same old way, one word at a time. The format in which they eventually appear doesn't change that. If you care, support them. The best method of support really hasn't changed much: *read their stories*.

I'd like to thank a few of the people who've read mine: Bill Buford, at *The New Yorker*; Susan Moldow, at Scribner; Chuck Verrill, who has edited so much of my work across such a span of years; Ralph Vicinanza, Arthur Greene, Gordon Van Gelder, and Ed Ferman at *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science*

*Fiction*; Nye Willden at *Cavalier*; and the late Robert A. W. Lowndes, who bought that first short story back in '68. Also—most important—my wife, Tabitha, who remains my favorite Constant Reader. These are all people who have worked and are still working to keep the short story from becoming a lost art. So am I. And, by what you buy (and thus choose to subsidize) and by what you read, so are you. You most of all, Constant Reader. Always you.

Stephen King

Bangor, Maine

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## Autopsy Room Four

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

Then what is it?

Who am I?

And what's happening to me?

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

A voice: "Which one did they say?"

A pause.

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

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

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

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

out of my wits, I feel fine. And if these are orderlies wheeling me into an operating room, why can't I see? Why can't I *talk*?

A third voice: "Over here, boys."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Second voice (Rusty): “You’ll like this one, doc, he looks like Michael Bolton.”

Female doc: “Who’s that?”

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

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

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

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

Dear God, I’m in a bodybag.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The tie, tickling across my forehead like a feather.

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

My lips don't even quiver.

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

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

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

Shit.

I'm in the rough.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," Mike says, and for just a moment he looks down at me. Older than Rusty by at least ten years. Black hair with flecks of gray in it. Spectacles. *How*

*come none of these people can see that I am not dead?* “There was a doc in the foursome that found him, actually. That’s his signature on page one . . . see?”

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

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

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

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

“He’s *alive!*” Rusty cries. “He’s *alive*, and he’s gonna sing for the Room Four Michael Bolton Fan Club!”

His fingers pinch tighter—it hurts in a distant coming-out-of-the-Novocain way—and begin to move my jaw up and down, clicking my teeth together. “*If she’s ba-aaad, he can’t see it,*” Rusty sings in a hideous, atonal voice that would probably make Percy Sledge’s head explode. “*She can do no rrr-ongggg . . .*” My teeth open and close at the rough urging of his hand; my tongue rises and falls like a dead dog riding the surface of an uneasy waterbed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I *hate* that jerk,” she says when the door is closed. Now it’s just the three of us, only of course Ms. Cisco Kid thinks it’s just the two of them. “Why do I

always get the jerks, Peter?”

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

She laughs, and something clanks. The clank is followed by a sound that scares me badly: steel instruments clicking together. They are off to the left of me, and although I can’t see them, I know what they’re getting ready to do: the autopsy. They are getting ready to cut into me. They intend to remove Howard Cottrell’s heart and see if it blew a piston or threw a rod.

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

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

Then they take out your brain.

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

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

Pete, cautious: “Do you want me to?”

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

“All right,” he says. “You’ll assist?”

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

Now panic beats and flutters inside my skull like a flock of starlings locked in an attic. The Nam was a long time ago, but I saw half a dozen field autopsies there—what the doctors used to call “tentshow postmortems”—and I know what Cisco and Pancho mean to do. The scissors have long, sharp blades, *very* sharp blades, and fat finger-holes. Still, you have to be strong to use them. The lower blade slides into the gut like butter. Then, *snip*, up through the bundle of nerves at the solar plexus and into the beef-jerky weave of muscle and tendon

above it. Then into the sternum. When the blades come together this time, they do so with a heavy crunch as the bone parts and the rib cage pops apart like a couple of barrels which have been lashed together with twine. Then on up with those scissors that look like nothing so much as the poultry shears supermarket butchers use—*snip-CRUNCH, snip-CRUNCH, snip-CRUNCH*, splitting bone and shearing muscle, freeing the lungs, heading for the trachea, turning Howard the Conqueror into a Thanksgiving dinner no one will eat.

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

Pete: "Can I—"

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

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

"Why?" he asks.

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

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

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

"Okay," he says.

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

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

A sound!

I make a sound!

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

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

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

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

*Nnnnnnnnn*—

"You want some music?" the woman doctor asks. "I've got Marty Stuart, Tony Bennett—"

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

"All right," she says, laughing. "I've also got the Rolling Stones."

"*You?*"

"Me. I'm not quite as square as I look, Peter."

"I didn't mean . . ." He sounds flustered.

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

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

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

"Please, no!" he cries, and they both laugh.

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

Then, just as I begin to force the sound out of my nose like some rapidly solidifying liquid, the room is filled with a blare of fuzztone guitar and Mick Jagger's voice bashing off the walls: *"Awww, no, it's only rock and roll, but I LIYYYYYKE IT . . ."*

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

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

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

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

The scalpel hovers, then cuts.

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

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

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

Instead, she looks across the room, raising her voice to be heard above the music. (*I like it, like it, yes I do*, the Stones sing, and I think I will hear that nasal idiot chorus in the halls of hell through all eternity.) "What's your pick? Boxers or Jockeys?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She stops abruptly, and hope seizes me once more.

“Hey, Pete.”

“Yeah?”

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

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

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

“Yeah, but wearing them's not the law,” Pete says. He holds his gloved hands out over my upturned face, slides them together, and bends the fingers back. As the knuckles crack, talcum powder sprinkles down like fine snow. “At least

not yet. Not like bowling shoes. They catch you bowling without a pair of bowling shoes, they can send you to state prison.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

“The tape—”

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

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

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

“Hey, as long as you’ll cover for me if—”

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

He looks startled. “You can do that?”

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

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

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

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

The autopsy procedure has begun.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Enough with the history lesson, Pete.”

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

*Dead.*

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

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

It doesn’t.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It *was* ugly, and it *was* shrapnel. The end of my war. A mortar shell lobbed into a supply area, two men killed, one man—me—lucky. It’s a lot uglier around front, and in a more sensitive spot, but all the equipment works . . . or did, up until today. A quarter of an inch to the left and they could have fixed me up with a hand-pump and a CO<sub>2</sub> cartridge for those intimate moments.

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

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

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

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

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

“Okay, good. Great.”

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

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

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

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

“Mike said they found him in the rough,” Arlen calls over. She’s making one hell of a clatter; it sounds like she’s doing dishes in a cafeteria kitchen instead of filing stuff. “At a guess, he had a heart attack while he was looking for his ball.”

“Uh-huh . . .”

“Keep going, Peter, you’re doing fine.”

I find that an extremely debatable proposition.

“Okay.”

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

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

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

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

“He forgot his Deep Woods Off.”

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

This time he flips me by himself, probably happy to use those gym-grown Mr. Strongboy muscles of his, hiding the snake-bites and the mosquito-bites all around them, camouflaging them. I’m staring up into the bank of fluorescents again. Pete steps backward, out of my view. There’s a humming noise. The table begins to slant, and I know why. When they cut me open, the fluids will run downhill to collection-points at its base. Plenty of samples for the state lab in Augusta, should there be any questions raised by the autopsy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I burp.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Snick, snick, snickety-snick.

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

He looks hesitantly at Dr. Arlen.

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

She nods. "Go ahead. You'll be fine."

"Uh . . . you want to turn off the music?"

*Yes! Yes, turn it off!*

“Is it bothering you?”

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

“Well . . .”

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

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

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

He looks doubtfully at the doctor.

“Are you sure you don't—”

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

“You know I do, but—”

“Then cut.”

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

“Cutting,” he says, bending forward.

“Wait a sec!” she cries.

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

I feel her rubber-gloved hand slide around my penis as if she meant to give me some bizarre handjob, Safe Sex with the Dead, and then she says, “You missed this one, Pete.”

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

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

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

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

“Lucky he didn't lose one or both.”

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

“But shouldn't I—”

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

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

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

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

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

They turn to him, eyes wide, jaws dropped; her hand is still gripping me, but she's no more aware of that, at least for the time being, than Petie-Boy is

aware that he's got one hand clutching the left breast of his scrub-gown. He looks like *he's* the one with the clapped-out fuel pump.

"What . . . what are you . . ." Pete begins.

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

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

*Poor old Joseph Cotten*, I think.

He only got to *cry*.

#### AFTERNOTE

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

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

dangerous. Several were very rare, and one was of a species believed to have been extinct since midcentury, according to consulting herpetologists.

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

There was a snake for every cage in Kerr’s basement menagerie, except for one. The empty cage was unmarked, and the snake that popped out of my golf-bag (the ambulance orderlies had packed it in with my “corpse” and had been practicing chip-shots out in the ambulance parking area) was never found. The toxin in my blood-stream—the same toxin found to a far lesser degree in orderly Mike Hopper’s bloodstream—was documented but never identified. I have looked at a great many pictures of snakes in the last year, and have found at least one which has reportedly caused cases of full-body paralysis in humans. This is the Peruvian boomslang, a nasty viper which has supposedly been extinct since the 1920s. Dupont Street is less than half a mile from the Derry Municipal Golf Course. Most of the intervening land consists of scrub woods and vacant lots.

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

I was impotent unless she was wearing rubber gloves.

—

*At some point I think every writer of scary stories has to tackle the subject of premature burial, if only because it seems to be such a pervasive fear. When I was a kid of seven or so, the scariest TV program going was Alfred Hitchcock Presents, and the scariest AHP —my friends and I were in total agreement on this—was the one starring Joseph Cotten as a man who has been injured in a car accident. Injured so badly, in fact, that the doctors think he’s dead. They can’t even find a heartbeat. They are on the verge of doing a postmortem on him—cutting him up while he’s still alive and screaming inside, in other words—when*

*he produces one single tear to let them know he's still alive. That was touching, but touching isn't in my usual repertoire. When my own thoughts turned to this subject, a more—shall we say modern?—method of communicating liveliness occurred to me, and this story was the result. One final note, regarding the snake: I doubt like hell if there's any such reptile as a Peruvian boomslang, but in one of her Miss Marple capers, Dame Agatha Christie does mention an African boomslang. I just liked the word so much (boomslang, not African) I had to put it in this story.*

## The Man in the Black Suit

I am now a very old man and this is something which happened to me when I was very young—only nine years old. It was 1914, the summer after my brother Dan died in the west field and three years before America got into World War I. I've never told anyone about what happened at the fork in the stream that day, and I never will . . . at least not with my mouth. I've decided to write it down, though, in this book which I will leave on the table beside my bed. I can't write long, because my hands shake so these days and I have next to no strength, but I don't think it will take long.

Later, someone may find what I have written. That seems likely to me, as it is pretty much human nature to look in a book marked DIARY after its owner has passed along. So yes—my words will probably be read. A better question is whether or not anyone will believe them. Almost certainly not, but that doesn't matter. It's not belief I'm interested in but freedom. Writing can give that, I've found. For twenty years I wrote a column called "Long Ago and Far Away" for the *Castle Rock Call*, and I know that sometimes it works that way—what you write down sometimes leaves you forever, like old photographs left in the bright sun, fading to nothing but white.

I pray for that sort of release.

A man in his nineties should be well past the terrors of childhood, but as my infirmities slowly creep up on me, like waves licking closer and closer to some indifferently built castle of sand, that terrible face grows clearer and clearer in my mind's eye. It glows like a dark star in the constellations of my childhood. What I might have done yesterday, who I might have seen here in my room at the nursing home, what I might have said to them or they to me . . . those things are gone, but the face of the man in the black suit grows ever clearer, ever closer, and I remember every word he said. I don't want to think of him but I can't help it, and sometimes at night my old heart beats so hard and so fast I think it will tear itself right clear of my chest. So I uncap my fountain pen and force my trembling old hand to write this pointless anecdote in the diary one of my greatgrandchildren—I can't remember her name for

sure, at least not right now, but I know it starts with an S—gave to me last Christmas, and which I have never written in until now. Now I will write in it. I will write the story of how I met the man in the black suit on the bank of Castle Stream one afternoon in the summer of 1914.

\* \* \*

The town of Motton was a different world in those days—more different than I could ever tell you. That was a world without airplanes droning overhead, a world almost without cars and trucks, a world where the skies were not cut into lanes and slices by overhead power lines.

There was not a single paved road in the whole town, and the business district consisted of nothing but Corson's General Store, Thut's Livery & Hardware, the Methodist Church at Christ's Corner, the school, the town hall, and Harry's Restaurant half a mile down from there, which my mother called, with unflinching disdain, "the liquor house."

Mostly, though, the difference was in how people lived—how *apart* they were. I'm not sure people born after the middle of the twentieth century could quite credit that, although they might say they could, to be polite to old folks like me. There were no phones in western Maine back then, for one thing. The first one wouldn't be installed for another five years, and by the time there was one in our house, I was nineteen and going to college at the University of Maine in Orono.

But that is only the roof of the thing. There was no doctor closer than Casco, and no more than a dozen houses in what you would call town. There were no neighborhoods (I'm not even sure we knew the word, although we had a verb—*neighboring*—that described church functions and barn dances), and open fields were the exception rather than the rule. Out of town the houses were farms that stood far apart from each other, and from December until middle March we mostly hunkered down in the little pockets of stovewarmth we called families. We hunkered and listened to the wind in the chimney and hoped no one would get sick or break a leg or get a headful of bad ideas, like the farmer over in Castle Rock who had chopped up his wife and kids three winters before and then said in court that the ghosts made him do it. In those days before the Great War, most of Motton was woods and bog, dark long

places full of moose and mosquitoes, snakes and secrets. In those days there were ghosts everywhere.

\* \* \*

This thing I'm telling about happened on a Saturday. My father gave me a whole list of chores to do, including some that would have been Dan's, if he'd still been alive. He was my only brother, and he'd died of being stung by a bee. A year had gone by, and still my mother wouldn't hear that. She said it was something else, *had* to have been, that no one ever died of being stung by a bee. When Mama Sweet, the oldest lady in the Methodist Ladies' Aid, tried to tell her—at the church supper the previous winter, this was—that the same thing had happened to her favorite uncle back in '73, my mother clapped her hands over her ears, got up, and walked out of the church basement. She'd never been back since, either, and nothing my father could say to her would change her mind. She claimed she was done with church, and that if she ever had to see Helen Robichaud again (that was Mama Sweet's real name), she would slap her eyes out. She wouldn't be able to help herself, she said.

That day, Dad wanted me to lug wood for the cookstove, weed the beans and the cukes, pitch hay out of the loft, get two jugs of water to put in the cold pantry, and scrape as much old paint off the cellar bulkhead as I could. Then, he said, I could go fishing, if I didn't mind going by myself—he had to go over and see Bill Eversham about some cows. I said I sure didn't mind going by myself, and my Dad smiled like that didn't surprise him so very much. He'd given me a bamboo pole the week before—not because it was my birthday or anything, but just because he liked to give me things, sometimes—and I was wild to try it in Castle Stream, which was by far the troutiest brook I'd ever fished.

“But don't you go too far in the woods,” he told me. “Not beyond where it splits.”

“No, sir.”

“Promise me.”

“Yessir, I promise.”

“Now promise your mother.”

We were standing on the back stoop; I had been bound for the springhouse with the waterjugs when my Dad stopped me. Now he turned me around to face my mother, who was standing at the marble counter in a flood of strong morning sunshine falling through the double windows over the sink. There was a curl of hair lying across the side of her forehead and touching her eyebrow—you see how well I remember it all? The bright light turned that little curl to filaments of gold and made me want to run to her and put my arms around her. In that instant I saw her as a woman, saw her as my father must have seen her. She was wearing a housedress with little red roses all over it, I remember, and she was kneading bread. Candy Bill, our little black Scottie dog, was standing alertly beside her feet, looking up, waiting for anything that might drop. My mother was looking at me.

“I promise,” I said.

She smiled, but it was the worried kind of smile she always seemed to make since my father brought Dan back from the west field in his arms. My father had come sobbing and bare-chested. He had taken off his shirt and draped it over Dan’s face, which had swelled and turned color. *My boy!* he had been crying. *Oh, look at my boy! Jesus, look at my boy!* I remember that as if it had been yesterday. It was the only time I ever heard my Dad take the Savior’s name in vain.

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

“Promise not to go no further than where it forks, ma’am.”

“*Any* further.”

“Any.”

She gave me a patient look, saying nothing as her hands went on working in the dough, which now had a smooth, silky look.

“I promise not to go any further than where it forks, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Gary,” she said. “And try to remember that grammar is for the world as well as for school.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

\* \* \*

Candy Bill followed me as I did my chores, and sat between my feet as I bolted my lunch, looking up at me with the same attentiveness he had shown my mother while she was kneading her bread, but when I got my new bamboo pole and my old, splintery creel and started out of the dooryard, he stopped and only stood in the dust by an old roll of snowfence, watching. I called him but he wouldn't come. He yapped a time or two, as if telling me to come back, but that was all.

"Stay, then," I said, trying to sound as if I didn't care. I did, though, at least a little. Candy Bill *always* went fishing with me.

My mother came to the door and looked out at me with her left hand held up to shade her eyes. I can see her that way still, and it's like looking at a photograph of someone who later became unhappy, or died suddenly. "You mind your Dad now, Gary!"

"Yes, ma'am, I will."

She waved. I waved, too. Then I turned my back on her and walked away.

\* \* \*

The sun beat down on my neck, hard and hot, for the first quarter-mile or so, but then I entered the woods, where double shadow fell over the road and it was cool and fir-smelling and you could hear the wind hissing through the deep needled groves. I walked with my pole on my shoulder like boys did back then, holding my creel in my other hand like a valise or a salesman's sample-case. About two miles into the woods along a road which was really nothing but a double rut with a grassy strip growing up the center hump, I began to hear the hurried, eager gossip of Castle Stream. I thought of trout with bright speckled backs and pure white bellies, and my heart went up in my chest.

The stream flowed under a little wooden bridge, and the banks leading down to the water were steep and brushy. I worked my way down carefully, holding on where I could and digging my heels in. I went down out of summer and back into midspring, or so it felt. The cool rose gently off the water, and a green smell like moss. When I got to the edge of the water I only stood there for a little while, breathing deep of that mossy smell and watching the dragonflies circle and the skitterbugs skate. Then, farther down, I saw a

trout leap at a butterfly—a good big brookie, maybe fourteen inches long—and remembered I hadn't come here just to sightsee.

I walked along the bank, following the current, and wet my line for the first time with the bridge still in sight upstream. Something jerked the tip of my pole down a time or two and ate half my worm, but he was too sly for my nine-year-old hands—or maybe just not hungry enough to be careless—so I went on.

I stopped at two or three other places before I got to the place where Castle Stream forks, going southwest into Castle Rock and southeast into Kashwakamak Township, and at one of them I caught the biggest trout I have ever caught in my life, a beauty that measured nineteen inches from tip to tail on the little ruler I kept in my creel. That was a monster of a brook trout, even for those days.

If I had accepted this as gift enough for one day and gone back, I would not be writing now (and this is going to turn out longer than I thought it would, I see that already), but I didn't. Instead I saw to my catch right then and there as my father had shown me—cleaning it, placing it on dry grass at the bottom of the creel, then laying damp grass on top of it—and went on. I did not, at age nine, think that catching a nineteen-inch brook trout was particularly remarkable, although I do remember being amazed that my line had not broken when I, netless as well as artless, had hauled it out and swung it toward me in a clumsy tail-flapping arc.

Ten minutes later, I came to the place where the stream split in those days (it is long gone now; there is a settlement of duplex homes where Castle Stream once went its course, and a district grammar school as well, and if there is a stream it goes in darkness), dividing around a huge gray rock nearly the size of our outhouse. There was a pleasant flat space here, grassy and soft, overlooking what my Dad and I called South Branch. I squatted on my heels, dropped my line into the water, and almost immediately snagged a fine rainbow trout. He wasn't the size of my brookie—only a foot or so—but a good fish, just the same. I had it cleaned out before the gills had stopped flexing, stored it in my creel, and dropped my line back into the water.

This time there was no immediate bite so I leaned back, looking up at the blue stripe of sky I could see along the stream's course. Clouds floated by, west

to east, and I tried to think what they looked like. I saw a unicorn, then a rooster, then a dog that looked a little like Candy Bill. I was looking for the next one when I drowsed off.

\* \* \*

Or maybe slept. I don't know for sure. All I know is that a tug on my line so strong it almost pulled the bamboo pole out of my hand was what brought me back into the afternoon. I sat up, clutched the pole, and suddenly became aware that something was sitting on the tip of my nose. I crossed my eyes and saw a bee. My heart seemed to fall dead in my chest, and for a horrible second I was sure I was going to wet my pants.

The tug on my line came again, stronger this time, but although I maintained my grip on the end of the pole so it wouldn't be pulled into the stream and perhaps carried away (I think I even had the presence of mind to snub the line with my forefinger), I made no effort to pull in my catch. All of my horrified attention was fixed on the fat black-and-yellow thing that was using my nose as a rest-stop.

I slowly poked out my lower lip and blew upward. The bee ruffled a little but kept its place. I blew again and it ruffled again . . . but this time it also seemed to shift impatiently, and I didn't dare blow anymore, for fear it would lose its temper completely and give me a shot. It was too close for me to focus on what it was doing, but it was easy to imagine it ramming its stinger into one of my nostrils and shooting its poison up toward my eyes. And my brain.

A terrible idea came to me: that this was the very bee which had killed my brother. I knew it wasn't true, and not only because honeybees probably didn't live longer than a single year (except maybe for the queens; about them I was not so sure). It couldn't be true because bees died when they stung, and even at nine I knew it. Their stingers were barbed, and when they tried to fly away after doing the deed, they tore themselves apart. Still, the idea stayed. This was a special bee, a devil-bee, and it had come back to finish the other of Albion and Loretta's two boys.

And here is something else: I had been stung by bees before, and although the stings had swelled more than is perhaps usual (I can't really say for sure), I had never died of them. That was only for my brother, a terrible trap which

had been laid for him in his very making, a trap which I had somehow escaped. But as I crossed my eyes until they hurt in an effort to focus on the bee, logic did not exist. It was the *bee* that existed, only that, the bee that had killed my brother, killed him so bad that my father had slipped down the straps of his overalls so he could take off his shirt and cover Dan's swelled, engorged face. Even in the depths of his grief he had done that, because he didn't want his wife to see what had become of her firstborn. Now the bee had returned, and now it would kill me. It would kill me and I would die in convulsions on the bank, flopping just as a brookie flops after you take the hook out of its mouth.

As I sat there trembling on the edge of panic—of simply bolting to my feet and then bolting anywhere—there came a report from behind me. It was as sharp and peremptory as a pistol-shot, but I knew it wasn't a pistol-shot; it was someone clapping his hands. One single clap. At the moment it came, the bee tumbled off my nose and fell into my lap. It lay there on my pants with its legs sticking up and its stinger a threatless black thread against the old scuffed brown of the corduroy. It was dead as a doornail, I saw that at once. At the same moment, the pole gave another tug—the hardest yet—and I almost lost it again.

I grabbed it with both hands and gave it a big stupid yank that would have made my father clutch his head with both hands, if he had been there to see it. A rainbow trout, a good bit larger than the one I had already caught, rose out of the water in a wet, writhing flash, spraying fine drops of water from its filament of tail—it looked like one of those romanticized fishing pictures they used to put on the covers of men's magazines like *True* and *Man's Adventure* back in the forties and fifties. At that moment hauling in a big one was about the last thing on my mind, however, and when the line snapped and the fish fell back into the stream, I barely noticed. I looked over my shoulder to see who had clapped. A man was standing above me, at the edge of the trees. His face was very long and pale. His black hair was combed tight against his skull and parted with rigorous care on the left side of his narrow head. He was very tall. He was wearing a black three-piece suit, and I knew right away that he was not a human being, because his eyes were the orangey-red of flames in a woodstove. I don't just mean the irises, because he *had* no irises, and no pupils,

and certainly no whites. His eyes were completely orange—an orange that shifted and flickered. And it's really too late not to say exactly what I mean, isn't it? He was on fire inside, and his eyes were like the little isinglass portholes you sometimes see in stove doors.

My bladder let go, and the scuffed brown the dead bee was lying on went a darker brown. I was hardly aware of what had happened, and I couldn't take my eyes off the man standing on top of the bank and looking down at me, the man who had walked out of thirty miles of trackless western Maine woods in a fine black suit and narrow shoes of gleaming leather. I could see the watch-chain looped across his vest glittering in the summer sunshine. There was not so much as a single pine-needle on him. And he was smiling at me.

"Why, it's a fisherboy!" he cried in a mellow, pleasing voice. "Imagine that! Are we well-met, fisherboy?"

"Hello, sir," I said. The voice that came out of me did not tremble, but it didn't sound like my voice, either. It sounded older. Like Dan's voice, maybe. Or my father's, even. And all I could think was that maybe he would let me go if I pretended not to see what he was. If I pretended I didn't see there were flames glowing and dancing where his eyes should have been.

"I've saved you a nasty sting, perhaps," he said, and then, to my horror, he came down the bank to where I sat with a dead bee in my wet lap and a bamboo fishing pole in my nerveless hands. His slick-soled city shoes should have slipped on the low, grassy weeds which dressed the steep bank, but they didn't; nor did they leave tracks behind, I saw. Where his feet had touched—or seemed to touch—there was not a single broken twig, crushed leaf, or trampled shoe-shape.

Even before he reached me, I recognized the aroma baking up from the skin under the suit—the smell of burned matches. The smell of sulfur. The man in the black suit was the Devil. He had walked out of the deep woods between Motton and Kashwakamak, and now he was standing here beside me. From the corner of one eye I could see a hand as pale as the hand of a store window dummy. The fingers were hideously long.

He hunkered beside me on his hams, his knees popping just as the knees of any normal man might, but when he moved his hands so they dangled

between his knees, I saw that each of those long fingers ended in what was not a fingernail but a long yellow claw.

“You didn’t answer my question, fisherboy,” he said in his mellow voice. It was, now that I think of it, like the voice of one of those radio announcers on the big-band shows years later, the ones that would sell Geritol and Serutan and Ovaltine and Dr. Grabow pipes. “Are we well-met?”

“Please don’t hurt me,” I whispered, in a voice so low I could barely hear it. I was more afraid than I could ever write down, more afraid than I want to remember . . . but I do. I do. It never even crossed my mind to hope I was having a dream, although I might have, I suppose, if I had been older. But I wasn’t older; I was nine, and I knew the truth when it squatted down on its hunkers beside me. I knew a hawk from a handsaw, as my father would have said. The man who had come out of the woods on that Saturday afternoon in midsummer was the Devil, and inside the empty holes of his eyes, his brains were burning.

“Oh, do I smell something?” he asked, as if he hadn’t heard me . . . although I knew he had. “Do I smell something . . . wet?”

He leaned forward toward me with his nose stuck out, like someone who means to smell a flower. And I noticed an awful thing; as the shadow of his head travelled over the bank, the grass beneath it turned yellow and died. He lowered his head toward my pants and sniffed. His glaring eyes half-closed, as if he had inhaled some sublime aroma and wanted to concentrate on nothing but that.

“Oh, bad!” he cried. “Lovely-bad!” And then he chanted: “Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary’s lemonade!” Then he threw himself on his back in the little flat place and laughed wildly. It was the sound of a lunatic.

I thought about running, but my legs seemed two counties away from my brain. I wasn’t crying, though; I had wet my pants like a baby, but I wasn’t crying. I was too scared to cry. I suddenly knew that I was going to die, and probably painfully, but the worst of it was that that might not be the worst of it.

The worst of it might come later. *After* I was dead.

He sat up suddenly, the smell of burnt matches fluffing out from his suit and making me feel all gaggy in my throat. He looked at me solemnly from his

narrow white face and burning eyes, but there was a sense of laughter about him, too. There was always that sense of laughter about him.

“Sad news, fisherboy,” he said. “I’ve come with sad news.”

I could only look at him—the black suit, the fine black shoes, the long white fingers that ended not in nails but in talons.

“Your mother is dead.”

“No!” I cried. I thought of her making bread, of the curl lying across her forehead and just touching her eyebrow, standing there in the strong morning sunlight, and the terror swept over me again . . . but not for myself this time. Then I thought of how she’d looked when I set off with my fishing pole, standing in the kitchen doorway with her hand shading her eyes, and how she had looked to me in that moment like a photograph of someone you expected to see again but never did. “No, you lie!” I screamed.

He smiled—the sadly patient smile of a man who has often been accused falsely. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “It was the same thing that happened to your brother, Gary. It was a bee.”

“No, that’s not true,” I said, and now I *did* begin to cry. “She’s old, she’s thirty-five, if a bee-sting could kill her the way it did Danny she would have died a long time ago and you’re a lying bastard!”

I had called the Devil a lying bastard. On some level I was aware of this, but the entire front of my mind was taken up by the enormity of what he’d said. My mother dead? He might as well have told me that there was a new ocean where the Rockies had been. But I believed him. On some level I believed him completely, as we always believe, on some level, the worst thing our hearts can imagine.

“I understand your grief, little fisherboy, but that particular argument just doesn’t hold water, I’m afraid.” He spoke in a tone of bogus comfort that was horrible, maddening, without remorse or pity. “A man can go his whole life without seeing a mockingbird, you know, but does that mean mockingbirds don’t exist? Your mother—”

A fish jumped below us. The man in the black suit frowned, then pointed a finger at it. The trout convulsed in the air, its body bending so strenuously that for a split-second it appeared to be snapping at its own tail, and when it fell back into Castle Stream it was floating lifelessly, dead. It struck the big gray

rock where the waters divided, spun around twice in the whirlpool eddy that formed there, and then floated off in the direction of Castle Rock. Meanwhile, the terrible stranger turned his burning eyes on me again, his thin lips pulled back from tiny rows of sharp teeth in a cannibal smile.

“Your mother simply went through her entire life without being stung by a bee,” he said. “But then—less than an hour ago, actually—one flew in through the kitchen window while she was taking the bread out of the oven and putting it on the counter to cool.”

“No, I won’t hear this, I won’t hear this, I *won’t!*”

I raised my hands and clapped them over my ears. He pursed his lips as if to whistle and blew at me gently. It was only a little breath, but the stench was foul beyond belief—clogged sewers, outhouses that have never known a single sprinkle of lime, dead chickens after a flood.

My hands fell away from the sides of my face.

“Good,” he said. “You need to hear this, Gary; you need to hear this, my little fisherboy. It was your mother who passed that fatal weakness on to your brother Dan; you got some of it, but you also got a protection from your father that poor Dan somehow missed.” He pursed his lips again, only this time, he made a cruelly comic little *tsktsk* sound instead of blowing his nasty breath at me. “So, although I don’t like to speak ill of the dead, it’s almost a case of poetic justice, isn’t it? After all, she killed your brother Dan as surely as if she had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger.”

“No,” I whispered. “No, it isn’t true.”

“I assure you it is,” he said. “The bee flew in the window and lit on her neck. She slapped at it before she even knew what she was doing—*you* were wiser than that, weren’t you, Gary?—and the bee stung her. She felt her throat start to close up at once. That’s what happens, you know, to people who are allergic to bee-venom. Their throats close and they drown in the open air. That’s why Dan’s face was so swollen and purple. That’s why your father covered it with his shirt.”

I stared at him, now incapable of speech. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn’t want to believe him, and knew from my church schooling that the devil is the father of lies, but I *did* believe him, just the same. I believed he had been standing there in our dooryard, looking in the kitchen window, as my mother

fell to her knees, clutching at her swollen throat while Candy Bill danced around her, barking shrilly.

“She made the most wonderfully awful noises,” the man in the black suit said reflectively, “and she scratched her face quite badly, I’m afraid. Her eyes bulged out like a frog’s eyes. She wept.” He paused, then added: “She wept as she died, isn’t that sweet? And here’s the most beautiful thing of all. After she was dead . . . after she had been lying on the floor for fifteen minutes or so with no sound but the stove ticking and with that little stick of a bee-stinger still poking out of the side of her neck—so small, so small—do you know what Candy Bill did? That little rascal licked away her tears. First on one side . . . and then on the other.”

He looked out at the stream for a moment, his face sad and thoughtful. Then he turned back to me and his expression of bereavement disappeared like a dream. His face was as slack and avid as the face of a corpse that has died hungry. His eyes blazed. I could see his sharp little teeth between his pale lips.

“I’m starving,” he said abruptly. “I’m going to kill you and tear you open and eat your guts, little fisherboy. What do you think about that?”

*No*, I tried to say, *please, no*, but no sound came out. He meant to do it, I saw. He really meant to do it.

“I’m just so *hungry*,” he said, both petulant and teasing. “And you won’t want to live without your precious mommy, anyhow, take my word for it. Because your father’s the sort of man who’ll have to have some warm hole to stick it in, believe me, and if you’re the only one available, you’re the one who’ll have to serve. I’ll save you all that discomfort and unpleasantness. Also, you’ll go to Heaven, think of that. Murdered souls *always* go to Heaven. So we’ll both be serving God this afternoon, Gary. Isn’t that nice?”

He reached for me again with his long, pale hands, and without thinking what I was doing, I flipped open the top of my creel, pawed all the way down to the bottom, and brought out the monster brookie I’d caught earlier—the one I should have been satisfied with. I held it out to him blindly, my fingers in the red slit of its belly from which I had removed its insides as the man in the black suit had threatened to remove mine. The fish’s glazed eye stared dreamily at me, the gold ring around the black center reminding me of my mother’s wedding ring. And in that moment I saw her lying in her coffin with

the sun shining off the wedding band and knew it was true—she had been stung by a bee, she had drowned in the warm, bread-smelling kitchen air, and Candy Bill had licked her dying tears from her swollen cheeks.

“Big fish!” the man in the black suit cried in a guttural, greedy voice. “Oh, *biig fiiish!*”

He snatched it away from me and crammed it into a mouth that opened wider than any human mouth ever could. Many years later, when I was sixty-five (I know it was sixty-five because that was the summer I retired from teaching), I went to the New England Aquarium and finally saw a shark. The mouth of the man in the black suit was like that shark’s mouth when it opened, only his gullet was blazing red, the same color as his awful eyes, and I felt heat bake out of it and into my face, the way you feel a sudden wave of heat come pushing out of a fireplace when a dry piece of wood catches alight. And I didn’t imagine that heat, either, I know I didn’t, because just before he slid the head of my nineteen-inch brook trout between his gaping jaws, I saw the scales along the sides of the fish rise up and begin to curl like bits of paper floating over an open incinerator.

He slid the fish in like a man in a travelling show swallowing a sword. He didn’t chew, and his blazing eyes bulged out, as if in effort. The fish went in and went in, his throat bulged as it slid down his gullet, and now he began to cry tears of his own . . . except his tears were blood, scarlet and thick.

I think it was the sight of those bloody tears that gave me my body back. I don’t know why that should have been, but I think it was. I bolted to my feet like a jack released from its box, turned with my bamboo pole still in one hand, and fled up the bank, bending over and tearing tough bunches of weeds out with my free hand in an effort to get up the slope more quickly.

He made a strangled, furious noise—the sound of any man with his mouth too full—and I looked back just as I got to the top. He was coming after me, the back of his suit-coat flapping and his thin gold watch-chain flashing and winking in the sun. The tail of the fish was still protruding from his mouth and I could smell the rest of it, roasting in the oven of his throat.

He reached for me, groping with his talons, and I fled along the top of the bank. After a hundred yards or so I found my voice and went to screaming—

screaming in fear, of course, but also screaming in grief for my beautiful dead mother.

He was coming along after me. I could hear snapping branches and whipping bushes, but I didn't look back again. I lowered my head, slitted my eyes against the bushes and low-hanging branches along the stream's bank, and ran as fast as I could. And at every step I expected to feel his hands descending on my shoulders pulling me back into a final hot hug.

That didn't happen. Some unknown length of time later—it couldn't have been longer than five or ten minutes, I suppose, but it seemed like forever—I saw the bridge through layerings of leaves and firs. Still screaming, but breathlessly now, sounding like a teakettle which has almost boiled dry, I reached this second, steeper bank and charged up to it.

Halfway to the top I slipped to my knees, looked over my shoulder, and saw the man in the black suit almost at my heels, his white face pulled into a convulsion of fury and greed. His cheeks were splattered with his bloody tears and his shark's mouth hung open like a hinge.

"*Fisherboy!*" he snarled, and started up the bank after me, grasping at my foot with one long hand. I tore free, turned, and threw my fishing pole at him. He batted it down easily, but it tangled his feet up somehow and he went to his knees. I didn't wait to see anymore; I turned and bolted to the top of the slope. I almost slipped at the very top, but managed to grab one of the support struts running beneath the bridge and save myself.

"You can't get away, fisherboy!" he cried from behind me. He sounded furious, but he also sounded as if he were laughing. "It takes more than a mouthful of trout to fill *me* up!"

"Leave me alone!" I screamed back at him. I grabbed the bridge's railing and threw myself over it in a clumsy somersault, filling my hands with splinters and bumping my head so hard on the boards when I came down that I saw stars. I rolled over onto my belly and began crawling. I lurched to my feet just before I got to the end of the bridge, stumbled once, found my rhythm, and then began to run. I ran as only nine-year-old boys can run, which is like the wind. It felt as if my feet only touched the ground with every third or fourth stride, and for all I know, that may be true. I ran straight up the righthand wheelrut in the road, ran until my temples pounded and my eyes pulsed in their sockets,

ran until I had a hot stitch in my left side from the bottom of my ribs to my armpit, ran until I could taste blood and something like metal-shavings in the back of my throat. When I couldn't run anymore I stumbled to a stop and looked back over my shoulder, puffing and blowing like a windbroke horse. I was convinced I would see him standing right there behind me in his natty black suit, the watch-chain a glittering loop across his vest and not a hair out of place.

But he was gone. The road stretching back toward Castle Stream between the darkly massed pines and spruces was empty. And yet I sensed him somewhere near in those woods, watching me with his grassfire eyes, smelling of burnt matches and roasted fish.

I turned and began walking as fast as I could, limping a little—I'd pulled muscles in both legs, and when I got out of bed the next morning I was so sore I could barely walk. I didn't notice those things then, though. I just kept looking over my shoulder, needing again and again to verify that the road behind me was still empty. It was, each time I looked, but those backward glances seemed to increase my fear rather than lessening it. The firs looked darker, massier, and I kept imagining what lay behind the trees which marched beside the road—long, tangled corridors of forest, leg-breaking deadfalls, ravines where anything might live. Until that Saturday in 1914, I had thought that bears were the worst thing the forest could hold.

Now I knew better.

\* \* \*

A mile or so further up the road, just beyond the place where it came out of the woods and joined the Geegan Flat Road, I saw my father walking toward me and whistling "The Old Oaken Bucket." He was carrying his own rod, the one with the fancy spinning reel from Monkey Ward. In his other hand he had his creel, the one with the ribbon my mother had woven through the handle back when Dan was still alive. DEDICATED TO JESUS, that ribbon said. I had been walking but when I saw him I started to run again, screaming *Dad! Dad! Dad!* at the top of my lungs and staggering from side to side on my tired, sprung legs like a drunken sailor. The expression of surprise on his face when he recognized me might have been comical under other circumstances, but not

under these. He dropped his rod and creel into the road without so much as a downward glance at them and ran to me. It was the fastest I ever saw my Dad run in his life; when we came together it was a wonder the impact didn't knock us both senseless, and I struck my face on his belt-buckle hard enough to start a little nosebleed. I didn't notice that until later, though. Right then I only reached out my arms and clutched him as hard as I could. I held on and rubbed my hot face back and forth against his belly, covering his old blue workshirt with blood and tears and snot.

"Gary, what is it? What happened? Are you all right?"

"Ma's dead!" I sobbed. "I met a man in the woods and he told me! Ma's dead! She got stung by a bee and it swelled her all up just like what happened to Dan, and she's dead! She's on the kitchen floor and Candy Bill . . . licked the t-t-tears . . . off her . . . off her . . ."

*Face* was the last word I had to say, but by then my chest was hitching so bad I couldn't get it out. My tears were flowing again, and my Dad's startled, frightened face had blurred into three overlapping images. I began to howl—not like a little kid who's skun his knee but like a dog that's seen something bad by moonlight—and my father pressed my head against his hard flat stomach again. I slipped out from under his hand, though, and looked back over my shoulder. I wanted to make sure the man in the black suit wasn't coming. There was no sign of him; the road winding back into the woods was completely empty. I promised myself I would never go back down that road again, not ever, no matter what, and I suppose now God's greatest blessing to His creatures below is that they can't see the future. It might have broken my mind if I had known I *would* be going back down that road, and not two hours later. For that moment, though, I was only relieved to see we were still alone. Then I thought of my mother—my beautiful dead mother—and laid my face back against my father's stomach and bawled some more.

"Gary, listen to me," he said a moment or two later. I went on bawling. He gave me a little longer to do that, then reached down and lifted my chin so he could look into my face and I could look into his. "Your Mom's fine," he said.

I could only look at him with tears streaming down my cheeks. I didn't believe him.

“I don’t know who told you different, or what kind of dirty dog would want to put a scare like that into a little boy, but I swear to God your mother’s fine.”

“But . . . but he said . . .”

“I don’t care *what* he said. I got back from Eversham’s earlier than I expected—he doesn’t want to sell any cows, it’s all just talk—and decided I had time to catch up with you. I got my pole and my creel and your mother made us a couple of jelly fold-overs. Her new bread. Still warm. So she was fine half an hour ago, Gary, and there’s nobody knows any different that’s come from this direction, I guarantee you. Not in just half an hour’s time.” He looked over my shoulder. “Who was this man? And where was he? I’m going to find him and thrash him within an inch of his life.”

I thought a thousand things in just two seconds—that’s what it seemed like, anyway—but the last thing I thought was the most powerful: if my Dad met up with the man in the black suit, I didn’t think my Dad would be the one to do the thrashing. Or the walking away.

I kept remembering those long white fingers, and the talons at the ends of them.

“Gary?”

“I don’t know that I remember,” I said.

“Were you where the stream splits? The big rock?”

I could never lie to my father when he asked a direct question—not to save his life or mine. “Yes, but don’t go down there.” I seized his arm with both hands and tugged it hard. “Please don’t. He was a scary man.” Inspiration struck like an illuminating lightning-bolt. “I think he had a gun.”

He looked at me thoughtfully. “Maybe there wasn’t a man,” he said, lifting his voice a little on the last word and turning it into something that was almost but not quite a question. “Maybe you fell asleep while you were fishing, son, and had a bad dream. Like the ones you had about Danny last winter.”

I *had* had a lot of bad dreams about Dan last winter, dreams where I would open the door to our closet or to the dark, fruity interior of the cider shed and see him standing there and looking at me out of his purple strangulated face; from many of these dreams I had awakened screaming, and awakened my parents, as well. I had fallen asleep on the bank of the stream for a little while, too—dozed off, anyway—but I hadn’t dreamed and I was sure I had awakened

just before the man in the black suit clapped the bee dead, sending it tumbling off my nose and into my lap. I hadn't dreamed him the way I had dreamed Dan, I was quite sure of that, although my meeting with him had already attained a dreamlike quality in my mind, as I suppose supernatural occurrences always must. But if my Dad thought that the man had only existed in my own head, that might be better. Better for him.

"It might have been, I guess," I said.

"Well, we ought to go back and find your rod and your creel."

He actually started in that direction, and I had to tug frantically at his arm to stop him again, and turn him back toward me.

"Later," I said. "Please, Dad? I want to see Mother. I've got to see her with my own eyes."

He thought that over, then nodded. "Yes, I suppose you do. We'll go home first, and get your rod and creel later."

So we walked back to the farm together, my father with his fish-pole propped on his shoulder just like one of my friends, me carrying his creel, both of us eating folded-over slices of my mother's bread smeared with blackcurrant jam.

"Did you catch anything?" he asked as we came in sight of the barn.

"Yes, sir," I said. "A rainbow. Pretty good-sized." *And a brookie that was a lot bigger, I thought but didn't say. Biggest one I ever saw, to tell the truth, but I don't have that one to show you, Dad. I gave that one to the man in the black suit, so he wouldn't eat me. And it worked . . . but just barely.*

"That's all? Nothing else?"

"After I caught it I fell asleep." This was not really an answer, but not really a lie, either.

"Lucky you didn't lose your pole. You didn't, did you, Gary?"

"No, sir," I said, very reluctantly. Lying about that would do no good even if I'd been able to think up a whopper—not if he was set on going back to get my creel anyway, and I could see by his face that he was.

Up ahead, Candy Bill came racing out of the back door, barking his shrill bark and wagging his whole rear end back and forth the way Scotties do when they're excited. I couldn't wait any longer; hope and anxiety bubbled up in my throat like foam. I broke away from my father and ran to the house, still

lugging his creel and still convinced, in my heart of hearts, that I was going to find my mother dead on the kitchen floor with her face swelled and purple like Dan's had been when my father carried him in from the west field, crying and calling the name of Jesus.

But she was standing at the counter, just as well and fine as when I had left her, humming a song as she shelled peas into a bowl. She looked around at me, first in surprise and then in fright as she took in my wide eyes and pale cheeks.

"Gary, what is it? What's the matter?"

I didn't answer, only ran to her and covered her with kisses. At some point my father came in and said, "Don't worry, Lo—he's all right. He just had one of his bad dreams, down there by the brook."

"Pray God it's the last of them," she said, and hugged me tighter while Candy Bill danced around our feet, barking his shrill bark.

\* \* \*

"You don't have to come with me if you don't want to, Gary," my father said, although he had already made it clear that he thought I should—that I should go back, that I should face my fear, as I suppose folks would say nowadays. That's very well for fearful things that are make-believe, but two hours hadn't done much to change my conviction that the man in the black suit had been real. I wouldn't be able to convince my father of that, though. I don't think there was a nine-year-old that ever lived who would have been able to convince his father he'd seen the Devil come walking out of the woods in a black suit.

"I'll come," I said. I had walked out of the house to join him before he left, mustering all my courage in order to get my feet moving, and now we were standing by the chopping-block in the side yard, not far from the woodpile.

"What you got behind your back?" he asked.

I brought it out slowly. I would go with him, and I would hope the man in the black suit with the arrow-straight part down the left side of his head was gone . . . but if he wasn't, I wanted to be prepared. As prepared as I could be, anyway. I had the family Bible in the hand I had brought out from behind my back. I'd set out just to bring my New Testament, which I had won for memorizing the most psalms in the Thursday night Youth Fellowship

competition (I managed eight, although most of them except the Twenty-third had floated out of my mind in a week's time), but the little red Testament didn't seem like enough when you were maybe going to face the Devil himself, not even when the words of Jesus were marked out in red ink.

My father looked at the old Bible, swelled with family documents and pictures, and I thought he'd tell me to put it back, but he didn't. A look of mixed grief and sympathy crossed his face, and he nodded. "All right," he said. "Does your mother know you took that?"

"No, sir."

He nodded again. "Then we'll hope she doesn't spot it gone before we get back. Come on. And don't drop it."

\* \* \*

Half an hour or so later, the two of us stood on the bank looking down at the place where Castle Stream forked, and at the flat place where I'd had my encounter with the man with the red-orange eyes. I had my bamboo rod in my hand—I'd picked it up below the bridge—and my creel lay down below, on the flat place. Its wicker top was flipped back. We stood looking down, my father and I, for a long time, and neither of us said anything.

*Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary's lemonade!* That had been his unpleasant little poem, and once he had recited it, he had thrown himself on his back, laughing like a child who has just discovered he has enough courage to say bathroom words like shit or piss. The flat place down there was as green and lush as any place in Maine that the sun can get to in early July . . . except where the stranger had lain. There the grass was dead and yellow in the shape of a man.

I looked down and saw I was holding our lumpy old family Bible straight out in front of me with both thumbs pressing so hard on the cover that they were white. It was the way Mama Sweet's husband Norville held a willow-fork when he was trying to dowse somebody a well.

"Stay here," my father said at last, and skidded sideways down the bank, digging his shoes into the rich soft soil and holding his arms out for balance. I stood where I was, holding the Bible stiffly out at the ends of my arms like a

willow-fork, my heart thumping wildly. I don't know if I had a sense of being watched that time or not; I was too scared to have a sense of anything, except for a sense of wanting to be far away from that place and those woods.

My Dad bent down, sniffed at where the grass was dead, and grimaced. I knew what he was smelling: something like burnt matches. Then he grabbed my creel and came on back up the bank, hurrying. He snagged one fast look over his shoulder to make sure nothing was coming along behind. Nothing was. When he handed me the creel, the lid was still hanging back on its cunning little leather hinges. I looked inside and saw nothing but two handfuls of grass.

"Thought you said you caught a rainbow," my father said, "but maybe you dreamed that, too."

Something in his voice stung me. "No, sir," I said. "I caught one."

"Well, it sure as hell didn't flop out, not if it was gutted and cleaned. And you wouldn't put a catch into your fisherbox without doing that, would you, Gary? I taught you better than that."

"Yes, sir, you did, but—"

"So if you didn't dream catching it and if it was dead in the box, something must have come along and eaten it," my father said, and then he grabbed another quick glance over his shoulder, eyes wide, as if he had heard something move in the woods. I wasn't exactly surprised to see drops of sweat standing out on his forehead like big clear jewels. "Come on," he said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

I was for that, and we went back along the bank to the bridge, walking quick without speaking. When we got there, my Dad dropped to one knee and examined the place where we'd found my rod. There was another patch of dead grass there, and the lady's slipper was all brown and curled in on itself, as if a blast of heat had charred it. While my father did this, I looked in my empty creel.

"He must have gone back and eaten my other fish, too," I said.

My father looked up at me. "*Other* fish!"

"Yes, sir. I didn't tell you, but I caught a brookie, too. A big one. He was awful hungry, that fella." I wanted to say more, and the words trembled just behind my lips, but in the end I didn't.

We climbed up to the bridge and helped one another over the railing. My father took my creel, looked into it, then went to the railing and threw it over. I came up beside him in time to see it splash down and float away like a boat, riding lower and lower in the stream as the water poured in between the wicker weavings.

“It smelled bad,” my father said, but he didn’t look at me when he said it, and his voice sounded oddly defensive. It was the only time I ever heard him speak just that way.

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll tell your mother we couldn’t find it. If she asks. If she doesn’t ask, we won’t tell her anything.”

“No, sir, we won’t.”

And she didn’t and we didn’t and that’s the way it was.

\* \* \*

That day in the woods is eighty-one years gone, and for many of the years in between I have never even thought of it . . . not awake, at least. Like any other man or woman who ever lived, I can’t say about my dreams, not for sure. But now I’m old, and I dream awake, it seems. My infirmities have crept up like waves which will soon take a child’s abandoned sand castle, and my memories have also crept up, making me think of some old rhyme that went, in part, “Just leave them alone/And they’ll come home/Wagging their tails behind them.” I remember meals I ate, games I played, girls I kissed in the school cloakroom when we played Post Office, boys I chummed with, the first drink I ever took, the first cigarette I ever smoked (cornshuck behind Dicky Hammer’s pig-shed, and I threw up). Yet of all the memories, the one of the man in the black suit is the strongest, and glows with its own spectral, haunted light. He was real, he was the Devil, and that day I was either his errand or his luck. I feel more and more strongly that escaping him was my luck—*just* luck, and not the intercession of the God I have worshipped and sung hymns to all my life.

As I lie here in my nursing-home room, and in the ruined sand castle that is my body, I tell myself that I need not fear the Devil—that I have lived a good,

kindly life, and I need not fear the Devil. Sometimes I remind myself that it was I, not my father, who finally coaxed my mother back to church later on that summer. In the dark, however, these thoughts have no power to ease or comfort. In the dark comes a voice which whispers that the nine-year-old boy I was had done nothing for which he might legitimately fear the devil either . . . and yet the Devil came. And in the dark I sometimes hear that voice drop even lower, into ranges which are inhuman. *Big fish!* it whispers in tones of hushed greed, and all the truths of the moral world fall to ruin before its hunger. *Biiig fiiish!*

The Devil came to me once, long ago; suppose he were to come again now? I am too old to run now; I can't even get to the bathroom and back without my walker. I have no fine large brook trout with which to propitiate him, either, even for a moment or two; I am old and my creel is empty. Suppose he were to come back and find me so?

And suppose he is still hungry?

—

*My favorite Nathaniel Hawthorne story is "Young Goodman Brown." I think it's one of the ten best stories ever written by an American. "The Man in the Black Suit" is my homage to it. As for the particulars, I was talking with a friend of mine one day, and he happened to mention that his Grandpa believed—truly believed—that he had seen the Devil in the woods, back around the turn of the twentieth century. Grandpa said the Devil came walking out of the woods and started talking to him just like a natural man. While Grandpa was chinning with him, he realized that the man from the woods had burning red eyes and smelled like sulfur. My friend's Grandpa became convinced that the Devil would kill him if he realized Grandpa had caught on, so he did his best to make normal conversation until he could eventually get away. My story grew from my friend's story. Writing it was no fun, but I went on with it, anyway. Sometimes stories cry out to be told in such loud voices that you write them just to shut them up. I thought the finished product a rather humdrum folktale told in pedestrian language, certainly miles*

*from the Hawthorne story I liked so much. When The New Yorker asked to publish it, I was shocked. When it won first prize in the O. Henry Best Short Story competition for 1996, I was convinced someone had made a mistake (that did not keep me from accepting the award, however). Reader response was generally positive, too. This story is proof that writers are often the worst judges of what they have written.*

## All That You Love Will Be Carried Away

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He stood where he was a moment longer, waiting for the wind to drop. It did, and he could see the spark lights again. The farmhouse. And was it possible that behind those lights, some farmer's wife was even now heating up a pot of Cottager Split Pea Soup or perhaps microwaving a Cottager Shepherd's Pie or Chicken Français? It was. It was as possible as hell. While her husband watched the early news with his shoes off and his sock feet on a hassock, and overhead their son played a video game on his GameCube and

their daughter sat in the tub, chin-deep in fragrant bubbles, her hair tied up with a ribbon, reading *The Golden Compass*, by Philip Pullman, or perhaps one of the Harry Potter books, which were favorites of Alfie's daughter, Carlene. All that going on behind the spark lights, some family's universal joint turning smoothly in its socket, but between them and the edge of this parking lot was a mile and a half of flat field, white in the running-away light of a low sky, comatose with the season. Alfie briefly imagined himself walking into that field in his city shoes, his briefcase in one hand and his suitcase in the other, working his way across the frozen furrows, finally arriving, knocking; the door would be opened and he would smell pea soup, that good hearty smell, and hear the KETV meteorologist in the other room saying, "But now look at this low-pressure system just coming over the Rockies."

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

Freezing. Standing here and freezing.

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

There was an overhang, so he was able to get out of the snow. There was a Coke machine with a sign saying, USE CORRECT CHANGE. There was an ice machine and a Snax machine with candy bars and various kinds of potato chips behind curls of metal like bedsprings. There was no USE CORRECT CHANGE sign on the Snax machine. From the room to the left of the one

where he intended to kill himself, Alfie could hear the early news, but it would sound better in that farmhouse over yonder, he was sure of that. The wind boomed. Snow swirled around his city shoes, and then Alfie let himself into his room. The light switch was to the left. He turned it on and shut the door.

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

There were twin double beds, each covered with bright-gold spreads that had been tucked under the pillows and then pulled over them, so the pillows looked like the corpses of infants. There was a table between the beds with a Gideon Bible, a TV-channel guide, and a flesh-colored phone on it. Beyond the second bed was the door to the bathroom. When you turned on the light in there, the fan would go on, too. If you wanted the light, you got the fan, too. There was no way around it. The light itself would be fluorescent, with the ghosts of dead flies inside. On the counter beside the sink there would be a hot plate and a Proctor-Silex electric kettle and little packets of instant coffee. There was a smell in here, the mingling of some harsh cleaning fluid and mildew on the shower curtain. Alfie knew it all. He had dreamed it right down to the green rug, but that was no accomplishment, it was an easy dream. He thought about turning on the heater, but that would rattle, too, and, besides, what was the point?

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

He lit a cigarette, reached for the telephone, then remembered his notebook. He reached into his right coat pocket and pulled it out. It was an

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Here I sit, brokenhearted, tried to shit but only farted.” Everyone knew that one, but here was an interesting variation from Double D Steaks in Hooker, Oklahoma: “Here I sit, I’m at a loss, trying to shit out taco sauce. I

know I'm going to drop a load, only hope I don't explode." And from Casey, Iowa, where SR 25 crossed I-80: "My mother made me a whore." To which someone had added in very different penmanship: "If I supply the yarn will she make me one?"

He had started collecting when he was selling the UPCs, noting various bits of graffiti in the Spiral notebook without at first knowing why he was doing it. They were just amusing, or disconcerting, or both at the same time. Yet little by little he had become fascinated with these messages from the interstate, where the only other communications seemed to be dipped headlights when you passed in the rain, or maybe somebody in a bad mood flipping you the bird when you went by in the passing lane pulling a rooster-tail of snow behind you. He came gradually to see—or perhaps only to hope—that something was going on here. The e. e. cummings lilt of "Poopie doopie you so loopy," for instance, or the inarticulate rage of "1380 West Avenue kill my mother TAKE HER JEWELS."

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

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

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

name consisted of a single syllable. Yet again, it was in triplets: “Here I *sit*, on the *pooper*.”

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

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

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

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

He hung up, thought about another cigarette—no worries about lung cancer, not now—and decided against it. He put the notebook, open to the last page, beside the telephone. He picked up the gun and rolled out the cylinder. Fully loaded. He snapped the cylinder back in with a flick of his

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

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

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

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

Alfie didn't like the idea of people thinking he was crazy (further examination of the book, which contained such information as "Medger Evers is alive and well in Disneyland," would only confirm that impression). He was not crazy, and the things he had written here over the years weren't crazy, either. He was convinced of it. And if he was wrong, if these were the rantings of lunatics, they needed to be examined even more closely. That thing about don't look up here, you're pissing on your shoes, for instance, was that humor? Or a growl of rage?

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

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

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

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

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

Ludicrous or not, it nagged him. The way thinking a stove burner might still be on sometimes nagged him when he was home, nagged until he finally got up and checked and found it cold. Only this was worse. Because he loved

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

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

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

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

Behind the picture, then.

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

Alfie stood at the edge of the pavement, gasping a little because the air was so cold and full of snow. In his left hand he held the Spiral notebook, bent almost double. There was no need to destroy it, after all. He would simply throw it into Farmer John's east field, here on the west side of Lincoln. The wind would help him. The notebook might carry twenty feet on the fly, and the wind could tumble it even farther before it finally fetched up against the

side of the furrow and was covered. It would lie there buried all winter, long after his body had been shipped home. In the spring, Farmer John would come out this way on his tractor, the cab filled with the music of Patty Loveless or George Jones or maybe even Clint Black, and he would plow the Spiral notebook under without seeing it and it would disappear into the scheme of things. Always supposing there was one. "Relax, it's all just the rinse cycle," someone had written beside a pay phone on I-35 not far from Cameron, Missouri.

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

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

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

Either way. Either way.

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

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

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<sup>1</sup>“To read this you must also look at the exit ramp from the Walton Rest Area back to highway, i.e. at departing transients.”

## The Death of Jack Hamilton

Want you to get one thing straight from the start: wasn't nobody on earth didn't like my pal Johnnie Dillinger, except Melvin Purvis of the F.B.I. Purvis was J. Edgar Hoover's right-hand man, and he hated Johnnie like poison. Everyone else—well, Johnnie had a way of making folks like him, that's all. And he had a way of making people laugh. God makes it come right in the end, that's something he used to say. And how can you not like a guy with that kind of philosophy?

But people don't want to let a man like that die. You'd be surprised how many folks still say it wasn't Johnnie the Feds knocked down in Chicago beside the Biograph Theater on July 22, 1934. After all, it was Melvin Purvis who'd been in charge of hunting Johnnie down, and, besides being mean, Purvis was a goddam fool (the sort of man who'd try to piss out a window without remembering to open it first). You won't hear no better from me, either. Little fag of a dandy, how I hated him! How we all did!

We got away from Purvis and the Gees after the shootout at Little Bohemia, Wisconsin—all of us! The biggest mystery of the year was how that goddam pansy ever kept his job. Johnnie once said, "J. Edgar probably can't get that good a blow job from a dame." How we laughed! Sure, Purvis got Johnnie in the end, but only after setting an ambush outside the Biograph and shooting him in the back while he was running down an alley. He fell down in the muck and the cat shit and said, "How's this, then?" and died.

Still folks won't believe it. Johnnie was handsome, they say, looked almost like a movie star. The fella the Gees shot outside the Biograph had a fat face, all swollen up and bloated like a cooked sausage. Johnnie was barely thirty-one, they say, and the mug the cops shot that night looked forty, easy! Also (and here they drop their voices to a whisper), everyone knows John Dillinger had a pecker the size of a Louisville Slugger. That fella Purvis ambushed outside the Biograph didn't have nothing but the standard six inches. And then there's the matter of that scar on his upper lip. You can see it clear as day in the morgue photographs (like the one where some yo-yo is holding up my old pal's head

and looking all solemn, as if to tell the world once and for all that Crime Does Not Pay). The scar cuts the side of Johnnie's mustache in two. Everyone knows John Dillinger never had a scar like that, people say; just look at any of the other pictures. God knows there's enough of them.

There's even a book that says Johnnie didn't die—that he lived on long after the rest of his running buddies, and finished up in Mexico, living in a haci and pleasing any number of *señoras* and *señoritas* with his oversized tool. The book claims that my old pal died on November 20, 1963—two days before Kennedy—at the ripe old age of sixty, and it wasn't no federal bullet that took him off but a plain old heart attack, that John Dillinger died in bed.

It's a nice story, but it ain't true.

Johnnie's face looks big in those last photos because he'd really packed on the pounds. He was the type who eats when he's nervous, and after Jack Hamilton died, in Aurora, Illinois, Johnnie felt he was next. Said as much, in that gravel pit where we took poor old Jack.

As for his tool—well, I'd known Johnnie ever since we met at Pendleton Reformatory in Indiana. I saw him dressed and undressed, and Homer Van Meter is here to tell you that he had a good one, but not an especially great one. (I'll tell you who had a great one, if you want to know: Dock Barker—the mama's boy! Ha!)

Which brings me to the scar on Johnnie's upper lip, the one you can see cutting through his mustache in those pictures where he's lying on the cooling board. The reason the scar doesn't show in any of Johnnie's other pictures is that he got it near the end. It happened in Aurora, while Jack (Red) Hamilton, our old pal, was on his deathbed. That's what I want to tell you about: how Johnnie Dillinger got the scar on his upper lip.

\* \* \*

Me and Johnnie and Red Hamilton got away from the Little Bohemia shootout through the kitchen windows in back, making our way down the side of the lake while Purvis and his idiots were still pouring lead into the front of the lodge. Boy, I hope the kraut who owned the place had insurance! The first car we found belonged to an elderly neighbor couple, and it wouldn't start. We had better luck with the second—a Ford coupe that belonged to a carpenter

just up the road. Johnnie put him in the driver's seat, and he chauffeured us a good way back toward St. Paul. Then he was invited to step out—which he did quite willingly—and I took over.

We crossed the Mississippi about twenty miles downriver from St. Paul, and although the local cops were all on the lookout for what they called the Dillinger Gang, I think we would have been all right if Jack Hamilton hadn't lost his hat while we were making our escape. He was sweating like a pig—he always did when he was nervous—and when he found a rag on the backseat of the carpenter's car he whipped it into a kind of rope and tied it around his head, Injun style. That was what caught the eye of those cops parked on the Wisconsin side of the Spiral Bridge as we went past them, and they came after us for a closer look.

That might have been the end of us right there, but Johnnie always had the Devil's own luck—until the Biograph, anyway. He put a cattle truck right between us and them, and the cops couldn't get past.

“Step on it, Homer!” Johnnie shouts at me. He was in the backseat, and in rare good humor from the sound of him. “Make it walk!”

I did, too, and we left the cattle truck in the dust, with those cops stuck behind it. So long, Mother, I'll write when I get work. Ha!

Once it seemed we had them buried for good, Jack says, “Slow down, you damned fool—no sense getting picked up for speeding.”

So I slowed down to thirty-five and for a quarter of an hour everything was fine. We were talking about Little Bohemia, and whether or not Lester (the one they were always calling Baby Face) might have gotten away, when all at once there's the crackle of rifles and pistols, and the sound of bullets whining off the pavement. It was those hick cops from the bridge. They'd caught up, creeping easy the last ninety or a hundred yards, and were close enough now to be shooting for the tires—they probably weren't entirely sure, even then, that it was Dillinger.

They weren't in doubt for long. Johnnie broke out the back window of the Ford with the butt of his pistol and started shooting back. I mashed the gas pedal again and got that Ford all the way up to fifty, which was a tearing rush in those days. There wasn't much traffic, but what there was I passed any way I could—on the left, on the right, in the ditch. Twice I felt the driver's-side

wheels go up, but we never tipped. Nothing like a Ford when it came to a getaway. Once Johnnie wrote to Henry Ford himself. "When I'm in a Ford, I can make any car take my dust," he told Mr. Ford, and we surely dusted them that day.

We paid a price, though. There were these *spink! spink! spink!* noises, and a crack ran up the windshield and a slug—I'm pretty sure it was a .45—fell dead on the dashboard. It looked like a big black elm beetle.

Jack Hamilton was in the passenger seat. He got his tommy gun off the floor and was checking the drum, ready to lean out the window, I imagine, when there came another of those *spink!* noises. Jack says, "Oh! Bastard! I'm hit!" That bullet had to have come in the busted back window and how it missed Johnnie to hit Jack I don't know.

"Are you all right?" I shouted. I was hung over the wheel like a monkey and driving like one, too, very likely. I passed a Coulee Dairy truck on the right, honking all the time, yelling for that white-coat-farmer-son-of-a-bitch to get out of my road. "Jack, are you all right?"

"I'm okay, I'm fine!" he says, and shoves himself and his sub gun out the window, almost to his waist. Only, at first the milk truck was in the way. I could see the driver in the mirror, gawking at us from under his little hat. And when I looked over at Jack as he leaned out I could see a hole, just as neat and round as something you'd draw with a pencil, in the middle of his overcoat. There was no blood, just that little black hole.

"Never mind Jack, just run the son of a bitch!" Johnnie shouted at me.

I ran it. We gained maybe half a mile on the milk truck, and the cops stuck behind it the whole while because there was a guardrail on one side and a line of slowpoke traffic coming the other way. We turned hard, around a sharp curve, and for a moment both the milk truck and the police car were out of sight. Suddenly, on the right, there was a gravel road all grown in with weeds.

"In there!" Jack gasps, falling back into the passenger seat, but I was already turning in.

It was an old driveway. I drove about seventy yards, over a little rise and down the other side, ending at a farmhouse that looked long empty. I killed the engine, and we all got out and stood behind the car.

“If they come, we’ll give em a show,” Jack says. “I ain’t going to no electric chair like Harry Pierpont.”

But no one came, and after ten minutes or so we got back in the car and drove out to the main road, all slow and careful. And that’s when I saw something I didn’t like much. “Jack,” I says, “you’re bleeding out your mouth. Look out or it’ll be on your shirt.”

Jack wiped his mouth with the big finger of his right hand, looked at the blood on it, and then gave me a smile that I still see in my dreams: big and broad and scared to death. “I just bit the inside of my cheek,” says he. “I’m all right.”

“You sure?” Johnnie asks. “You sound kind of funny.”

“I can’t catch all my breath just yet,” Jack says. He wiped his big finger across his mouth again and there was less blood, and that seemed to satisfy him. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Turn back toward the Spiral Bridge, Homer,” Johnnie says, and I did like he told me. Not all the stories about Johnnie Dillinger are true, but he could always find his way home, even after he didn’t have no home no more, and I always trusted him.

We were once again doing a perfectly legal parson-go-to-meeting thirty miles per, when Johnnie saw a Texaco station and told me to turn off to the right. We were soon on country gravel roads, Johnnie calling lefts and rights, even though all the roads looked the same to me: just wheel ruts running between clapped-out cornfields. The roads were muddy, and there were still scraps of snow in some of the fields. Every now and then there’d be some hick kid watching us go by. Jack was getting quieter and quieter. I asked him how he was doing and he said, “I’m all right.”

“Yes, well, we ought to get you looked at when we cool off a little,” Johnnie said. “And we have to get your coat mended, too. With that hole in it, it looks like somebody shot you!” He laughed, and so did I. Even Jack laughed. Johnnie could always cheer you up.

“I don’t think it went deep,” Jack said, just as we came out on Route 43. “I’m not bleeding out of my mouth anymore—look.” He turned to show Johnnie his finger, which now just had a maroon smear on it. But when he twisted back into his seat blood poured out of his mouth and nose.

“I think it went deep enough,” Johnnie said. “We’ll take care of you—if you can still talk, you’re likely fine.”

“Sure,” Jack said. “I’m fine.” His voice was smaller than ever.

“Fine as a fiddler’s fuck,” I said.

“Aw, shut up, you dummocks,” he said, and we all had a laugh. They laughed at me a lot. It was all in fun.

About five minutes after we got back on the main road, Jack passed out. He slumped against the window, and a thread of blood trickled from one corner of his mouth and smeared on the glass. It reminded me of swatting a mosquito that’s had its dinner—the claret everywhere. Jack still had the rag on his head, but it had gone crooked. Johnny took it off and cleaned the blood from Jack’s face with it. Jack muttered and raised his hands as if to push Johnnie away, but they dropped back into his lap.

“Those cops will have radioed ahead,” Johnnie says. “If we go to St. Paul, we’re finished. That’s what I think. How about you, Homer?”

“The same,” I says. “What does that leave? Chicago?”

“Yep,” he says. “Only first we have to ditch this motor. They’ll have the plates by now. Even if they didn’t, it’s bad luck. It’s a damn hoodoo.”

“What about Jack?” I says.

“Jack will be all right,” he says, and I knew to say no more on the subject.

We stopped about a mile down the road, and Johnnie shot out the front tire of the hoodoo Ford while Jack leaned against the hood, looking pale and sick.

When we needed a car, it was always my job to flag one down. “People who wouldn’t stop for any of the rest of us will stop for you,” Johnnie said once. “Why is that, I wonder?”

Harry Pierpont answered him. This was back in the days when it was still the Pierpont Gang instead of the Dillinger Gang. “Because he looks like a Homer,” he said. “Wasn’t ever anyone looked so much like a Homer as Homer Van Meter does.”

We all laughed at that, and now here I was again, and this time it was really important. You’d have to say life or death.

Three or four cars went by and I pretended to be fiddling with the tire. A farm truck was next, but it was too slow and waddly. Also, there were some fellas in the back. Driver slows down and says, “You need any help, amigo?”

“I’m fine,” I says. “Workin’ up a appetite for lunch. You go right on.”

He gives me a laugh and on he went. The fellas in the back also waved.

Next up was another Ford, all by its lonesome. I waved my arms for them to stop, standing where they couldn’t help but see that flat shoe. Also, I was giving them a grin. That big one that says I’m just a harmless Homer by the side of the road.

It worked. The Ford stopped. There was three folks inside, a man and a young woman and a fat baby. A family.

“Looks like you got a flat there, partner,” the man says. He was wearing a suit and a topcoat, both clean but not what you’d call Grade A.

“Well, I don’t know how bad it can be,” I says, “when it’s only flat on the bottom.”

We was still laughing over that just like it was new when Johnnie and Jack come out of the trees with their guns drawn.

“Just hold still, sir,” Jack says. “No one is going to get hurt.”

The man looked at Jack, looked at Johnnie, looked at Jack again. Then his eyes went back to Johnnie and his mouth dropped open. I seen it a thousand times, but it always tickled me.

“You’re Dillinger!” he gasps, and then shoots his hands up.

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Johnnie says, and grabs one of the man’s hands out of the air. “Get those mitts down, would you?”

Just as he did, another two or three cars came along—country-go-to-town types, sitting up straight as sticks in their old muddy sedans. We didn’t look like nothing but a bunch of folks at the side of the road getting ready for a tire-changing party.

Jack, meanwhile, went to the driver’s side of the new Ford, turned off the switch, and took the keys. The sky was white that day, as if with rain or snow, but Jack’s face was whiter.

“What’s your name, Ma’am?” Jack asks the woman. She was wearing a long gray coat and a cute sailor’s cap.

“Deelie Francis,” she says. Her eyes were as big and dark as plums. “That’s Roy. He’s my husband. Are you going to kill us?”

Johnnie give her a stern look and says, “We are the Dillinger Gang, Mrs. Francis, and we have never killed anyone.” Johnnie always made this point.

Harry Pierpont used to laugh at him and ask him why he wasted his breath, but I think Johnnie was right to do that. It's one of the reasons he'll be remembered long after the straw-hat-wearing little pansy is forgot.

"That's right," Jack says. "We just rob banks, and not half as many as they say. And who is this fine little man?" He chucked the kiddo under the chin. He was fat, all right; looked like W. C. Fields.

"That's Buster," Deelie Francis says.

"Well, he's a regular little bouncer, ain't he?" Jack smiled. There was blood on his teeth. "How old is he? Three or so?"

"Just barely two and a half," Mrs. Francis says proudly.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, but he's big for his age. Mister, are you all right? You're awful pale. And there's blood on your—"

Johnnie speaks up then. "Jack, can you drive this one into the trees?" He pointed at the carpenter's old Ford.

"Sure," Jack says.

"Flat tire and all?"

"You just try me. It's just that . . . I'm awful thirsty. Ma'am—Missus Francis—do you have anything to drink?"

She turned around and bent over—not easy with that horse of a baby in her arms—and got a thermos from the back.

Another couple of cars went puttering by. The folks inside waved, and we waved back. I was still grinning fit to split, trying to look just as Homer as a Homer could be. I was worried about Jack and didn't know how he could stay on his feet, let alone tip up that thermos and swig what was inside. Iced tea, she told him, but he seemed not to hear. When he handed it back to her, there were tears rolling down his cheeks. He thanked her, and she asked him again if he was all right.

"I am now," Jack says. He got into the hoodoo Ford and drove it into the bushes, the car jouncing up and down on the tire Johnnie had shot out.

"Why couldn't you have shot out a back one, you goddam fool?" Jack sounded angry and out of breath. Then he wrestled the car into the trees and out of sight, and came back, walking slow and looking at his feet, like an old man on ice.

“All right,” Johnnie says. He’d discovered a rabbit’s foot on Mr. Francis’s key ring, and was working it in a way that made me know that Mr. Francis wasn’t ever going to see that Ford again. “Now, we’re all friends here, and we’re going to take a little ride.”

Johnnie drove. Jack sat in the passenger seat. I squeezed in back with the Francis and tried to get the piglet to shoot me a grin.

“When we get to the next little town,” Johnnie says to the Francis family in the backseat, “we’re going to drop you off with enough for bus fare to get you where you were going. We’ll take the car. We won’t hurt it a bit, and if no one shoots any bullet holes in it you’ll get it back good as new. One of us’ll phone you where it is.”

“We haven’t got a phone yet,” Deelie says. It was really a whine. She sounded like the kind of woman who needs a smack every second week or so to keep her tits up. “We’re on the list, but those telephone people are slower than cold molasses.”

“Well, then,” Johnnie says, good-humored and not at all perplexed, “we’ll give the cops a call, and they’ll get in touch. But if you squawk, you won’t ever get it back in running shape.”

Mr. Francis nodded as if he believed every word. Probably he did. This was the Dillinger Gang, after all.

Johnnie pulled in at a Texaco, gassed up, and bought soda pops all around. Jack drank a bottle of grape like a man dying of thirst in the desert, but the woman wouldn’t let Master Piglet have his. Not so much as a swallow. The kid was holding his hands out for it and bawling.

“He can’t have pop before his lunch,” she says to Johnnie, “what’s wrong with you?”

Jack was leaning his head against the glass of the passenger window with his eyes shut. I thought he’d passed out again, but he says, “Shut that brat up, missus, or I will.”

“I think you’ve forgotten whose car you’re in,” she says, all haughty.

“Give him his pop, you bitch,” Johnnie says. He was still smiling, but now it was his other smile. She looked at him and the color in her cheeks disappeared. And that’s how Master Piglet got his Nehi, lunch or no lunch.

Twenty miles farther on, we dropped them off in some little town and went on our way toward Chicago.

“A man who marries a woman like that deserves all he gets,” Johnnie remarked, “and he’ll get plenty.”

“She’ll call the law,” Jack says, still without opening his eyes.

“Never will,” Johnnie says, as confident as ever. “Wouldn’t spare the nickel.” And he was right. We saw only two blue beetles before we got into Chi, both going the other way, and neither one of them so much as slowed down to look at us. It was Johnnie’s luck. As for Jack, you had only to look at him to know that his supply of luck was running out fast. By the time we got to the Loop, he was delirious and talking to his mother.

“Homer!” Johnnie says, in that wide-eyed way that always used to tickle me. Like a girl doing a flirt.

“What!” I says, giving him the glad eye right back.

“We got no place to go. This is worse than St. Paul.”

“Go to Murphy’s,” Jack says without opening his eyes. “I want a cold beer. I’m thirsty.”

“Murphy’s,” Johnnie says. “You know, that’s not a bad idea.”

Murphy’s was an Irish saloon on the South Side. Sawdust, a steam table, two bartenders, three bouncers, friendly girls at the bar, and a room upstairs where you could take them. More rooms in the back, where people sometimes met, or cooled off for a day or two. We knew four places like it in St. Paul, but only a couple in Chi. I parked the Francis’s Ford up in the alley. Johnnie was in the backseat with our delirious friend—we weren’t yet ready to call him our dying friend—and he was holding Jack’s head against the shoulder of his coat.

“Go in and get Brian Mooney off the bar,” Johnnie says.

“What if he isn’t there?”

“Then I don’t know,” Johnnie says.

“Harry!” Jack shouts, presumably calling for Harry Pierpont. “That whore you set me up with has given me the goddam clap!”

“Go on,” Johnnie says to me, soothing his hand through Jack’s hair just like a mother.

Well, Brian Mooney was there—Johnnie’s luck again—and we got a room for the night, although it cost two hundred dollars, which was pretty dear,

considering the view was an alley and the toilet was at the far end of the hall.

“You boys are hotter than hell,” Brian says. “Mickey McClure would have sent you right back into the street. There’s nothing in the papers and on the radio but Little Bohemia.”

Jack sat down on a cot in the corner, and got himself a cigarette and a cold draft beer. The beer brought him back wonderful; he was almost himself again. “Did Lester get away?” he asked Mooney. I looked over at him when he spoke up and saw a terrible thing. When he took a drag off his Lucky and inhaled, a little puff come out of the hole in the back of his overcoat like a smoke signal.

“You mean Baby Face?” Mooney asked.

“You don’t want to call him that where he can hear you,” Johnnie said, grinning. He was happier now that Jack had come back around, but he hadn’t seen that puff of smoke coming out of his back. I wished I hadn’t, either.

“He shot a bunch of Gees and got away,” Mooney said. “At least one of the Gees is dead, maybe two. Anyway, it just makes it that much worse. You can stay here tonight, but you have to be gone by tomorrow afternoon.”

He went out. Johnnie waited a few seconds, then stuck his tongue out at the door like a little kid. I got laughing—Johnnie could always make me laugh. Jack tried to laugh, too, but quit. It hurt him too much.

“Time to get you out of that coat and see how bad it is, partner,” Johnnie said.

It took us five minutes. By the time he was down to his undershirt, all three of us were soaked with sweat. Four or five times I had to put my hands over Jack’s mouth to muffle him. I got blood all over my cuffs.

There was no more than a rose on the lining of his overcoat, but his white shirt had gone half red and his undershirt was soaked right through. Sticking up on the left side, just below his shoulder blade, was a lump with a hole in the middle of it, like a little volcano.

“No more,” Jack says, crying. “Please, no more.”

“That’s all right,” Johnnie says, running the palm of his hand through Jack’s hair again. “We’re all done. You can lie down now. Go to sleep. You need your rest.”

“I can’t,” he says. “It hurts too much. Oh, God, if you only knew how it hurts! And I want another beer. I’m thirsty. Only don’t put so much salt in it

this time. Where's Harry, where's Charlie?"

Harry Pierpont and Charlie Makley, I guessed—Charlie was the Fagin who'd turned Harry and Jack out when they weren't no more than snotnoses.

"There he goes again," Johnnie says. "He needs a doc, Homer, and you're the boy who has to find one."

"Jesus, Johnnie, this ain't my town!"

"Doesn't matter," Johnnie says. "If I go out, you know what's going to happen. I'll write down some names and addresses."

It ended up being just one name and one address, and when I got there it was all for nothing. The doc (a pill-roller whose mission was giving abortions and acid melts to erase fingerprints) had happied himself to death on his own laudanum two months before.

\* \* \*

We stayed in that cheesy room behind Murphy's for five days. Mickey McClure showed up and tried to turn us out, but Johnnie talked to him in the way that Johnnie had—when he turned on the charm, it was almost impossible to tell Johnnie no. And, besides, we paid. By the fifth night, the rent was four hundred, and we were forbidden to so much as show our faces in the taproom for fear someone would see us. No one did, and as far as I know the cops never found out where we were during those five days in late April. I wonder how much Mickey McClure made on the deal—it was more than a grand. We pulled bank jobs where we took less.

I ended up going around to half a dozen scrape artists and hairline-changers. There wasn't one of them who would come and look at Jack. Too hot, they said. It was the worst time of all, and even now I hate to think about it. Let's just say that me and Johnnie found out what Jesus felt like when Peter Pilot denied Him three times in the Garden of Gethsemane.

For a while, Jack was in and out of delirium, and then he was mostly in. He talked about his mother, and Harry Pierpont, and then about Boobie Clark, a famous fag from Michigan City we'd all known.

"Boobie tried to kiss me," Jack said one night, over and over, until I thought I'd go nuts. Johnnie never minded, though. He just sat there beside

Jack on the cot, stroking his hair. He'd cut out a square of cloth in Jack's undershirt around the bullet hole, and kept painting it with Mercurochrome, but the skin had already turned gray-green, and a smell was coming out of the hole. Just a whiff of it was enough to make your eyes water.

"That's gangrene," Mickey McClure said on a trip to pick up the rent. "He's a goner."

"He's no goner," Johnnie said.

Mickey leaned forward with his fat hands on his fat knees. He smelled Jack's breath like a cop with a drunk, then pulled back. "You better find a doc fast. Smell it in a wound, that's bad. Smell it on a man's breath . . ." Mickey shook his head and walked out.

"Fuck him," Johnnie said to Jack, still stroking his hair. "What does he know?"

Only, Jack didn't say nothing. He was asleep. A few hours later, after Johnnie and I had gone to sleep ourselves, Jack was on the edge of the bunk, raving about Henry Claudy, the warden at Michigan City. I-God Claudy, we used to call him, because it was always I-God I'll do this and I-God you'll do that. Jack was screaming that he'd kill Claudy if he didn't let us out. That got someone pounding on the wall and yelling for us to shut that man up.

Johnnie sat next to Jack and talked to him and got him soothed down again.

"Homer?" Jack says after a while.

"Yes, Jack," I says.

"Won't you do the trick with the flies?" he asks.

I was surprised he remembered it. "Well," I says, "I'd be happy to, but there ain't no flies in here. Around these parts, flies ain't in season just yet."

In a low, hoarse voice, Jack sang, "There may be flies on some of you guys but there ain't no flies on me. Right, Chummah?"

I had no idea who Chummah was, but I nodded and patted his shoulder. It was hot and sticky. "That's right, Jack."

There were big purple circles under his eyes and dried spit on his lips. He was already losing weight. I could smell him, too. The smell of piss, which wasn't so bad, and the smell of gangrene, which was. Johnnie, though, never gave no sign that he smelled anything bad at all.

“Walk on your hands for me, John,” Jack said. “Like you used to.”

“In a minute,” Johnnie said. He poured Jack a glass of water. “Drink this first. Wet your whistle. Then I’ll see if I can still get across the room upside down. Remember when I used to run on my hands in the shirt factory? After I ran all the way to the gate, they stuck me in the hole.”

“I remember,” Jack said.

Johnnie didn’t do no walking on his hands that night. By the time he got the glass of water to Jack’s lips, the poor bugger had gone back to sleep with his head on Johnnie’s shoulder.

“He’s gonna die,” I said.

“He’s not,” Johnnie said.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I asked Johnnie what we were going to do. What we could do.

“I got one more name out of McClure. Joe Moran. McClure says he was the go-between on the Bremer kidnapping. If he’ll fix Jack up, it’s worth a thousand to me.”

“I got six hundred,” I said. And I’d give it up, but not for Jack Hamilton. Jack had gone beyond needing a doctor; what Jack needed by then was a preacher. I did it for Johnnie Dillinger.

“Thanks, Homer,” he said. “I’ll be back in an hour. Meantime, you mind the baby.” But Johnnie looked bleak. He knew that if Moran wouldn’t help us we’d have to get out of town. It would mean taking Jack back to St. Paul and trying there. And we knew what going back in a stolen Ford would likely mean. It was the spring of 1934 and all three of us—me, Jack, and especially Johnnie—were on J. Edgar Hoover’s list of “public enemies.”

“Well, good luck,” I says. “See you in the funny pages.”

He went out. I mooned around. I was mighty sick of the room by then. It was like being back in Michigan City, only worse. Because when you were in stir they’d done the worst they could to you. Here, hiding out in the back of Murphy’s, things could always get worse.

Jack muttered, then he dropped off again.

There was a chair at the foot of the cot, with a cushion. I took the cushion and sat down beside Jack. It wouldn't take long, I didn't think. And when Johnnie came back I'd only have to say that poor old Jack took one final breath and just copped out. The cushion would be back on the chair. Really, it would be doing Johnnie a favor. Jack, too.

"I see you, Chummah," Jack says suddenly. I tell you, it scared the living hell out of me.

"Jack!" I says, putting my elbows on that cushion. "How you doing?"

His eyes drifted closed. "Do the trick . . . with the flies," he says, and then he was asleep again. But he'd woken up at just the right time; if he hadn't, Johnnie would have found a dead man on that cot.

\* \* \*

When Johnnie finally did come back, he practically busted down the door. I had my gun out. He saw it and laughed. "Put away the bean shooter, pal, and pack up your troubles in your old kit bag!"

"What's up?"

"We're getting out of here, that's what." He looked five years younger. "High time, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah."

"He been all right while I was gone?"

"Yeah," I said. The cushion lying on the chair had SEE YOU IN CHICAGO written on it in needlework.

"No change?"

"No change. Where are we going?"

"Aurora," Johnnie said. "It's a little town upstate. We're going to move in with Volney Davis and his girlfriend." He leaned over the cot. Jack's red hair, thin to start with, had started falling out. It was on the pillow, and you could see the crown of his head, white as snow. "You hear that, Jack?" Johnnie shouts. "We're hot now, but we're going to cool off quick! You understand?"

"Walk on your hands like Johnnie Dillinger used to," Jack said, without opening his eyes.

Johnnie just kept smiling. He winked at me. “He understands,” he said. “He’s just not awake. You know?”

“Sure,” I said.

\* \* \*

On the ride up to Aurora, Jack sat against the window, his head flying up and then thumping against the glass every time we hit a pothole. He was holding long, muttery conversations with folks we couldn’t see. Once we were out of town, me and Johnnie had to roll down our windows. The smell was just too bad otherwise. Jack was rotting from the inside out, but he wouldn’t die. I’ve heard it said that life is fragile and fleeting, but I don’t believe it. It would be better if it was.

“That Dr. Moran was a crybaby,” Johnnie said. We were in the woods by then, the city behind us. “I decided I didn’t want no crybaby like him working on my partner. But I wasn’t going to leave without something.” Johnnie always travelled with a .38 pistol tucked into his belt. Now he pulled it out and showed it to me, the way he must have shown it to Dr. Moran. “I says, ‘If I can’t take away nothing else, Doc, I’ll just have to take your life.’ He seen I meant business, and he called someone up there. Volney Davis.”

I nodded as if that name meant something to me. I found out later that Volney was another member of Ma Barker’s gang. He was a pretty nice fella. So was Dock Barker. And Volney’s girlfriend, the one they called Rabbits. They called her Rabbits because she dug herself out of prison a few times. She was the best of the lot. Aces. Rabbits, at least, tried to help poor old troublesome Jack. None of the others would—not the pill-rollers, the scrapers, the face artists, and certainly not Dr. Joseph (Crybaby) Moran.

The Barkers were on the run after a botched kidnapping; Dock’s Ma had already left—gone all the way to Florida. The hideout in Aurora wasn’t much—four rooms, no electricity, a privy out back—but it was better than Murphy’s saloon. And, like I say, Volney’s girlfriend at least tried to do something. That was on our second night there.

She set up kerosene lamps all around the bed, then sterilized a paring knife in a pot of boiling water. “If you boys feel pukey,” she said, “you just choke it back until I’m done.”

“We’ll be okay,” Johnnie said. “Won’t we, Homer?”

I nodded, but I was queasy even before she got going. Jack was laying on his stomach, head turned to the side, muttering. It seemed he never stopped. Whatever room he happened to be in was filled with people only he could see.

“I hope so,” she says, “because once I start in, there’s no going back.” She looked up and seen Dock standing in the doorway. Volney Davis, too. “Go on, baldy,” she says to Dock, “and take-um heap big chief with you.” Volney Davis was no more a Indian than I was, but they used to rib him because he was born in the Cherokee Nation. Some judge had given him three years for stealing a pair of shoes, which was how he got into a life of crime.

Volney and Dock went out. When they were gone, Rabbits turned Jack over and then cut him open in a X, bearing down in a way I could barely stand to look at. I held Jack’s feet. Johnnie sat beside his head, trying to soothe him, but it didn’t do no good. When Jack started to scream, Johnnie put a dishtowel over his head and nodded for Rabbits to go on, all the time stroking Jack’s head and telling him not to worry, everything would be just fine.

That Rabbits. They call them frails, but there was nothing frail about her. Her hands never even shook. Blood, some of it black and clotted, come pouring out of the sunken place when she cut it. She cut deeper and then out came the pus. Some was white, but there was big green chunks which looked like boogers. That was bad. But when she got to the lung the smell was a thousand times worse. It couldn’t have been worse in France during the gas attacks.

Jack was gasping in these big whistling breaths. You could hear it in his throat, and from the hole in his back, too.

“You better hurry up,” Johnnie says. “He’s sprung a leak in his air hose.”

“You’re telling me,” she says. “The bullet’s in his lung. You just hold him down, handsome.”

In fact, Jack wasn’t thrashing much. He was too weak. The sound of the air shrieking in and out of him kept getting thinner and thinner. It was hotter than hell with those lamps set up all around the bed, and the stink of the hot oil was almost as strong as the gangrene. I wish we’d thought to open a window before we got started, but it was too late by then.

Rabbits had a set of tongs, but she couldn't get them in the hole. "Fuck this!" she cried, and tossed them to one side, and then stuck her fingers into the bloody hole, reached around until she found the slug that was in there, pulled it out, and threw it to the floor. Johnnie started to bend over for it and she said, "You can get your souvenir later, handsome. For now just hold him."

She went to work packing gauze into the mess she'd made.

Johnnie lifted up the dishtowel and peeked underneath it. "Not a minute too soon," he told her with a grin. "Old Red Hamilton has turned a wee bit blue."

Outside, a car pulled into the driveway. It could have been the cops, for all we knew, but there wasn't nothing we could do about it then.

"Pinch this shut," she told me, and pointed at the hole with the gauze in it. "I ain't much of a seamstress, but I guess I can put in half a dozen."

I didn't want to get my hands anywhere near that hole, but I wasn't going to tell her no. I pinched it shut, and more watery pus ran out when I did. My midsection clenched up and I started making this *gurk-gurk* noise. I couldn't help it.

"Come on," she says, kind of smiling. "If you're man enough to pull the trigger, you're man enough to deal with a hole." Then she sewed him up with these big, looping overhand strokes—really punching the needle in. After the first two, I couldn't look.

"Thank you," Johnnie told her when it was done. "I want you to know I'm going to take care of you for this."

"Don't go getting your hopes up," she says. "I wouldn't give him one chance in twenty."

"He'll pull through now," Johnnie says.

Then Dock and Volney rushed back in. Behind them was another member of the gang—Buster Daggs or Draggs, I can't remember which. Anyway, he'd been down to the phone they used at the Cities Service station in town, and he said the Gees had been busy back in Chicago, arresting anyone and everyone they thought might be connected to the Bremer kidnapping, which had been the Barker Gang's last big job. One of the fellas they took was John J. (Boss) McLaughlin, a high mucky-muck in the Chicago political machine. Another was Dr. Joseph Moran, also known as the Crybaby.

“Moran’ll give this place up, just as sure as shit sticks to a blanket,” Volney says.

“Maybe it’s not even true,” Johnnie says. Jack was unconscious now. His red hair lay on the pillow like little pieces of wire. “Maybe it’s just a rumor.”

“You better not believe that,” Buster says. “I got it from Timmy O’Shea.”

“Who’s Timmy O’Shea? The Pope’s butt-wiper?” Johnnie says.

“He’s Moran’s nephew,” Dock says, and that kind of sealed the deal.

“I know what you’re thinking, handsome,” Rabbits says to Johnnie, “and you can stop thinking it right now. You put this fella in a car and go bumping him over those back roads between here and St. Paul, he’ll be dead by morning.”

“You could leave him,” Volney says. “The cops show up, they’ll have to take care of him.”

Johnnie sat there, sweat running down his face in streams. He looked tired, but he was smiling. Johnnie was always able to find a smile. “They’d take care of him, all right,” he says, “but they wouldn’t take him to any hospital. Stick a pillow over his face and sit down on it, most likely.” Which gave me a start, as I’m sure you’ll understand.

“Well, you better decide,” Buster says, “because they’ll have this joint surrounded by dawn. I’m getting the hell out.”

“You all go,” Johnnie says. “You, too, Homer. I’ll stay here with Jack.”

“Well, what the hell,” Dock says. “I’ll stay, too.”

“Why not?” Volney Davis says.

Buster Daggs or Draggs looked at them like they was crazy, but you know what? I wasn’t surprised a bit. That’s just the effect Johnnie had on people.

“I’ll stay, too,” I says.

“Well, I’m getting out,” Buster says.

“Fine,” Dock says. “Take Rabbits with you.”

“The hell you say,” Rabbits pipes up. “I feel like cooking.”

“Have you gone cuckoo?” Dock asks her. “It’s one o’clock in the morning, and you’re in blood right up to the elbows.”

“I don’t care what time it is, and blood washes off,” she says. “I’m making you boys the biggest breakfast you ever ate—eggs, bacon, biscuits, gravy, hash browns.”

“I love you, marry me,” Johnnie says, and we all laughed.

“Oh, hell,” Buster says. “If there’s breakfast, I’ll hang around.”

Which is how we all wound up staying put in that Aurora farmhouse, ready to die for a man who was already—whether Johnnie liked it or not—on his way out. We barricaded the front door with a sofa and some chairs, and the back door with the gas stove, which didn’t work anyway. Only the woodstove worked. Me and Johnnie got our tommy guns from the Ford, and Dock got some more from the attic. Also a crate of grenades, a mortar, and a crate of mortar shells. I bet the Army didn’t have as much stuff in those parts as we did. Ha-ha!

“Well, I don’t care how many of them we get, as long as that son of a bitch Melvin Purvis is one of them,” Dock says. By the time Rabbits actually got the grub on the table, it was almost the time farmers eat. We took it in shifts, two men always watching the long driveway. Buster raised the alarm once and we all rushed to our places, but it was only a milk truck on the main road. The Gees never came. You could call that bad info; I called it more of John Dillinger’s luck.

Jack, meanwhile, was on his not-so-merry way from bad to worse. By midafternoon of the next day, even Johnnie must have seen he couldn’t go on much longer, although he wouldn’t come right out and say so. It was the woman I felt bad for. Rabbits seen new pus oozing out between those big black stitches of hers, and she started crying. She just cried and cried. It was like she’d known Jack Hamilton her whole life.

“Never mind,” Johnnie said. “Chin up, beautiful. You did the best you could. Besides, he might still come around.”

“It’s cause I took the bullet out with my fingers,” she says. “I never should have done that. I knew better.”

“No,” I says, “it wasn’t that. It was the gangrene. The gangrene was already in there.”

“Bullshit,” Johnnie said, and looked at me hard. “An infection, maybe, but no gangrene. There isn’t any gangrene now.”

You could smell it in the pus. There wasn’t nothing to say.

Johnnie was still looking at me. “Remember what Harry used to call you when we were in Pendleton?”

I nodded. Harry Pierpont and Johnnie were always the best of friends, but Harry never liked me. If not for Johnnie, he never would've taken me into the gang, which was the Pierpont Gang to begin with, remember. Harry thought I was a fool. That was another thing Johnnie would never admit, or even talk about. Johnnie wanted everyone to be friends.

"I want you to go out and wrangle up some big uns," Johnnie says, "just like you used to when you was on the Pendleton mat. Some big old buzzers." When he asked for that, I knew he finally understood Jack was finished.

Fly-Boy was what Harry Pierpont used to call me at Pendleton Reformatory, when we were all just kids and I used to cry myself to sleep with my head under my pillow so the screws wouldn't hear. Well, Harry went on and rode the lightning in Ohio State, so maybe I wasn't the only fool.

Rabbits was in the kitchen, cutting up vegetables for supper. Something was simmering on the stove. I asked her if she had thread, and she said I knew goddam well she did, hadn't I been right beside her when she sewed up my friend? You bet, I said, but that was black and I wanted white. Half a dozen pieces, about so long. And I held out my index fingers maybe eight inches apart. She wanted to know what I was going to do. I told her that if she was that curious she could watch right out the window over the sink.

"Ain't nothing out there but the privy," she says. "I got no interest in watching you do your personal business, Mr. Van Meter."

She had a bag hanging on the pantry door, and she rummaged through it and came out with a spool of white thread and cut me off six pieces. I thanked her kindly and then asked if she had a Band-Aid. She took some out of the drawer right beside the sink—because, she said, she was always cutting her fingers. I took one, then went to the door.

\* \* \*

I got in Pendleton for robbing wallets off the New York Central line with that same Charlie Makley—small world, ain't it? Ha! Anyhow, when it come to ways of keeping the bad boys busy, the reformatory at Pendleton, Indiana, was loaded. They had a laundry, a carpentry shop, and a clothes factory where the dubs made shirts and pants, mostly for the guards in the Indiana penal system. Some called it the shirt shop; some called it the shit shop. That's what I drew—

and met both Johnnie and Harry Pierpont. Johnnie and Harry never had any problem “making the day,” but I was always coming up ten shirts short, or five pairs of trousers short, and being made to stand on the mat. The screws thought it was because I was always clowning around. Harry thought the same thing. The truth was that I was slow, and clumsy—which Johnnie seemed to understand. *That* was why I played around.

If you didn’t make your day, you had to spend the next day in the guardhouse, where there was a rush mat, about two feet square. You had to take off everything but your socks and then stand there all day. If you stepped off the mat once, you got your ass paddled. If you stepped off twice, a screw held you while another worked you over. Step off a third time and it was a week in solitary. You were allowed all the water you wanted to drink, but that was a trick, because you were allowed only one toilet break in the course of the day. If you were caught standing there with piss running down your leg, you got a beating and a trip to the hole.

It was boring. Boring at Pendleton, boring at Michigan City, I-God’s prison for big boys. Some fellows told themselves stories. Some fellows sang. Some made lists of all the women they were going to screw when they got out.

Me, I taught myself to rope flies.

A privy’s a damned fine place for fly-roping. I took up my station outside the door, then proceeded to make loops in the pieces of thread Rabbits had given me. After that, there was nothing to it except not moving much. Those were the skills I’d learned on the mat. You don’t forget them.

It didn’t take long. Flies are out in early May, but they’re slow flies. And anyone who thinks it’s impossible to lasso a horsefly . . . well, all I can say is, if you want a challenge, try mosquitoes.

I took three casts and got my first one. That was nothing; there were times on the mat when I’d spend half the morning before I got my first. Right after I snagged him, Rabbits cried out, “What in God’s name are you doing? Is it magic?”

From a distance, it *did* look like magic. You have to imagine how it appeared to her, twenty yards away: man standing by a privy throws out a little piece of thread—at nothing, so far as you can see—but, instead of drifting to

the ground, the thread hangs in midair! It was attached to a good-sized horsefly. Johnnie would have seen it, but Rabbits didn't have Johnnie's eyes.

I got the end of the thread and taped it to the handle of the privy door with the Band-Aid. Then I went after the next one. And the next. Rabbits came out to get a closer look, and I told her that she could stay if she was quiet, and she tried, but she wasn't good at being quiet and finally I had to tell her she was scaring off the game and send her back inside.

I worked the privy for an hour and a half—long enough that I couldn't smell it anymore. Then it started getting cold, and my flies were sluggish. I'd got five. By Pendleton standards, that was quite a herd, although not that many for a man standing next to a shithouse. Anyway, I had to get inside before it got too cold for them to stay airborne.

When I came walking slowly through the kitchen, Dock, Volney, and Rabbits were all laughing and clapping. Jack's bedroom was on the other side of the house, and it was shadowy and dim. That was why I'd asked for white thread instead of black. I looked like a man with a handful of strings leading up to invisible balloons. Except that you could hear the flies buzzing—all mad and bewildered, like anything else that's been caught it don't know how.

"I be dog," Dock Barker says. "I mean it, Homer. Double dog. Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Pendleton Reformatory," I says.

"Who showed you?"

"Nobody," I said. "I just did it one day."

"Why don't they tangle the strings?" Volney asked. His eyes were as big as grapes. It tickled me, I tell you that.

"Dunno," I says. "They always fly in their own space and don't hardly ever cross. It's a mystery."

"Homer!" Johnnie yells from the other room. "If you got em, this'd be a good time to get in here with em!"

I started across the kitchen, tugging the flies along by their halters like a good fly cowboy, and Rabbits touched my arm. "Be careful," she says. "Your pal is going, and it's made your other pal crazy. He'll be better—after—but right now he's not safe."

I knew it better than she did. When Johnnie set his heart on a thing, he almost always got it. Not this time, though.

Jack was propped up on the pillows with his head in the corner, and although his face was white as paper, he was in his right mind again. He'd come around at the end, like folks sometimes do.

"Homer!" he says, just as bright as you could want. Then he sees the strings and laughs. It was a shrill, whistley laughter, not a bit right, and immediately he starts to cough. Coughing and laughing, all mixed together. Blood comes out of his mouth—some splattered on my strings. "Just like Michigan City!" he says, and pounds his leg. More blood now, running down his chin and dripping onto his undershirt. "Just like old times!" He coughed again.

Johnnie's face looked terrible. I could see he wanted me to get out of the bedroom before Jack tore himself apart; at the same time, he knew it didn't matter a fiddler's fuck, and if this was a way Jack could die happy, looking at a handful of roped shithouse flies, then so be it.

"Jack," I says, "you got to be quiet."

"Naw, I'm all right now," he says, grinning and wheezing. "Bring em over here! Bring em over where I can see!" But before he could say any more he was coughing again, all bent over with his knees up, and the sheet, spattered with a spray of blood, like a trough between them.

I looked at Johnnie and he nodded. He'd passed beyond something in his mind. He beckoned me over. I went slowly, the strings in my hand, floating up, just white lines in the gloom. And Jack too tickled to know he was coughing his last.

"Let em go," he says, in a wet and husky voice I could hardly understand. "I remember . . ."

And so I did. I let the strings go. For a second or two, they stayed clumped together at the bottom—stuck together on the sweat from my palm—and then they drifted apart, hanging straight and upright in the air. I suddenly thought of Jack standing in the street after the Mason City bank job. He was firing his tommy gun and was covering me and Johnnie and Lester as we herded the hostages to the getaway car. Bullets flew all around him, and although he took a flesh wound, he looked like he'd live forever. Now he lay with his knees sticking up in a sheet filled with blood.

“Golly, look at em,” he says as the white strings rose up, all on their own.

“That ain’t all, either,” Johnnie says. “Watch this.” He then walked one step to the kitchen door, turned, and took a bow. He was grinning, but it was the saddest grin I ever saw in my life. All we did was the best we could; we couldn’t very well give him a last meal, could we? “Remember how I used to walk on my hands in the shirt shop?”

“Yeah! Don’t forget the spiel!” Jack says.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Johnnie says. “Now in the center ring for your delight and amazement, John Herbert Dillinger!” He said the “G” hard, the way his old man said it, the way he had said it himself before he got so famous. Then he clapped once and dived forward onto his hands. Buster Crabbe couldn’t have done it better. His pants slid up to his knees, showing the tops of his stockings and his shins. His change come out of his pockets and rattled away across the boards. He started walking across the floor that way, limber as ever, singing “Tra-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!” at the top of his voice. The keys from the stolen Ford fell out of his pocket, too. Jack was laughing in these big hoarse gusts—like he had the flu—and Dock Barker and Rabbits and Volney, all crowded in the doorway, were also laughing. Fit to split. Rabbits clapped her hands and called “Bravo! Encore!” Above my head the white threads were still floating on, only drifting apart a little at a time. I was laughing along with the rest, and then I saw what was going to happen and I stopped.

“Johnnie!” I shouted. “Johnnie, look out for your gun! Look out for your gun!”

It was that goddam .38 he kept tucked into the top of his pants. It was working free of his belt.

“Huh?” he said, and then it dropped onto the floor on top of the keys and went off. A .38 isn’t the world’s loudest gun, but it was loud enough in that back bedroom. And the flash was plenty bright. Dock yelled and Rabbits screamed. Johnnie didn’t say nothing, just did a complete somersault and fell flat on his face. His feet came down with a crash, almost hitting the foot of the bed Jack Hamilton was dying in. Then he just lay there. I ran to him, brushing the white threads aside.

At first I thought he was dead, because when I turned him over there was blood all over his mouth and his cheek. Then he sat up. He wiped his face,

looked at the blood, then looked at me.

“Holy shit, Homer, did I just shoot myself?” Johnnie says.

“I think you did,” I says.

“How bad is it?”

Before I could tell him I didn't know, Rabbits pushed me to the side and wiped away the blood with her apron. She looked at him hard for a second or two, and then she says, “You're all right. It's just a scrape.” Only we seen later, when she dabbled him up with the iodine, that it was actually two scrapes. The bullet cut through the skin over his lip on the right side, flew through maybe two inches of air, then it cut him again on the cheekbone, right beside his eye. After that it went into the ceiling, but before it did it plugged one of my flies. I know that's hard to believe, but it's true, I swear. The fly lay there on the floor in a little heap of white thread, nothing left of it but a couple of legs.

“Johnnie?” Dock says. “I think I got some bad news for you, partner.” He didn't have to tell us what it was. Jack was still sitting up, but now his head was bowed over so far that his hair was touching the sheet between his knees. While we were checking to see how bad Johnnie was hurt, Jack had died.

\* \* \*

Dock told us to take the body to a gravel pit about two miles farther down the road, just past the Aurora town line. There was a bottle of lye under the sink, and Rabbits gave it to us. “You know what to do with this, don't you?” she asks.

“Sure,” Johnnie says. He had one of her Band-Aids stuck on his upper lip, over that place where his mustache never grew in later on. He sounded listless and he wouldn't meet her eye.

“Make him do it, Homer,” she says, then jerked her thumb toward the bedroom, where Jack was laying wrapped up in the bloodstained sheet. “If they find that one and identify him before you get clear, it'll make things just so much worse for you. Us, too, maybe.”

“You took us in when nobody else would,” Johnnie says, “and you won't live to regret it.”

She gave him a smile. Women almost always fell for Johnnie. I'd thought this one was an exception because she was so businesslike, but now I seen she wasn't. She'd just kept it all business because she knew she wasn't much in the looks department. Also, when a bunch of men with guns are cooped up like we were, a woman in her right mind doesn't want to make trouble among them.

"We'll be gone when you get back," Volney says. "Ma keeps talking about Florida, she got her eye on a place in Lake Weir—"

"Shut up, Vol," Dock says, and gives him a hard poke in the shoulder.

"Anyway, we're gettin' out of here," he says, rubbing the sore place. "You ought to get out, too. Take your luggage. Don't even pull in on your way back. Things can change in a hurry."

"Okay," Johnnie says.

"At least he died happy," Volney says. "Died laughin'."

I didn't say nothing. It was coming home to me that Red Hamilton—my old running buddy—was really dead. It made me awful sad. I turned my mind to how the bullet had just grazed Johnnie (and then gone on to kill a fly instead), thinking that would cheer me up. But it didn't. It only made me feel worse.

Dock shook my hand, then Johnnie's. He looked pale and glum. "I don't know how we ended up like this, and that's the truth," he says. "When I was a boy, the only goddam thing I wanted was to be a railroad engineer."

"Well, I'll tell you something," Johnnie says. "We don't have to worry. God makes it all come right in the end."

\* \* \*

We took Jack on his last ride, wrapped up in a bloodstained sheet and pushed into the back of that stolen Ford. Johnnie drove us to the far side of the pit, all bump and jounce (when it comes to rough riding, I'll take a Terraplane over a Ford any day). Then he killed the engine and touched the Band-Aid riding his upper lip. He says, "I used up the last of my luck today, Homer. They'll get me now."

"Don't talk like that," I says.

“Why not? It’s true.” The sky above us was white and full of rain. I reckoned we’d have a muddy splash of it between Aurora and Chicago (Johnnie had decided we should go back there because the Feds would be expecting us in St. Paul). Somewhere crows was calling. The only other sound was the ticktock of the cooling engine. I kept looking into the mirror at the wrapped-up body in the backseat. I could see the bumps of elbows and knees, the fine red spatters where he’d bent over, coughing and laughing, at the end.

“Look at this, Homer,” Johnnie says, and points to the .38, which was tucked back in his belt. Then he twiddled Mr. Francis’s key ring with the tips of his fingers, where the prints were growing back in spite of all his trouble. There were four or five keys on the ring besides the one to the Ford. And that lucky rabbit’s foot. “Butt of the gun hit this when it come down,” he says. He nodded his head. “Hit my very own lucky piece. And now my luck’s gone. Help me with him.”

We lugged Jack to the gravel slope. Then Johnnie got the bottle of lye. It had a big brown skull and crossbones on the label.

Johnnie knelt down and pulled the sheet back. “Get his rings,” he says, and I pulled them off. Johnnie put them in his pocket. We ended up getting forty-five dollars for them in Calumet City, although Johnnie swore up and down that the little one had a real diamond in it.

“Now hold out his hands.”

I did, and Johnnie poured a cap of lye over the tip of each finger. That was one set of prints wasn’t ever going to come back. Then he leaned over Jack’s face and kissed him on the forehead. “I hate to do this, Red, but I know you’d do the same to me if it’d gone the other way.”

He then poured the lye over Jack’s cheeks and mouth and brow. It hissed and bubbled and turned white. When it started to eat through his closed eyelids, I turned away. And of course none of it done no good; the body was found by a farmer after a load of gravel. A pack of dogs had knocked away most of the stones we covered him with and were eating what was left of his hands and face. As for the rest of him, there were enough scars for the cops to I.D. him as Jack Hamilton.

It was the end of Johnnie’s luck, all right. Every move he made after that—right up to the night Purvis and his badge-carrying gunsels got him at the

Biograph—was a bad one. Could he have just thrown up his hands that night and surrendered? I'd have to say no. Purvis meant to have him dead one way or the other. That's why the Gees never told the Chicago cops Johnnie was in town.

\* \* \*

I'll never forget the way Jack laughed when I brought them flies in on their strings. He was a good fellow. They all were, mostly—good fellows who got into the wrong line of work. And Johnnie was the best of the bunch. No man ever had a truer friend. We robbed one more bank together, the Merchants National in South Bend, Indiana. Lester Nelson joined us on that caper. Getting out of town, it seemed like every hick in Indiana was throwing lead at us, and we still got away. But for what? We'd been expecting more than a hundred grand, enough to move to Mexico and live like kings. We ended up with a lousy twenty thousand, most of it in dimes and dirty dollar bills.

God makes it all come right in the end, that's what Johnnie told Dock Barker just before we parted company. I was raised a Christian—I admit I fell away a bit along my journey—and I believe that: we're stuck with what we have, but that's all right; in God's eyes, none of us are really much more than flies on strings and all that matters is how much sunshine you can spread along the way. The last time I seen Johnnie Dillinger was in Chicago, and he was laughing at something I said. That's good enough for me.

—

*As a kid, I was fascinated by tales of the Depression-era outlaws, an interest that probably peaked with Arthur Penn's remarkable Bonnie and Clyde. In the spring of 2000, I re-read John Toland's history of that era, The Dillinger Days, and was particularly taken by his story about how Dillinger's sidekick, Homer Van Meter, taught himself how to rope flies in Pendleton Reformatory. Jack "Red" Hamilton's lingering death is a documented fact; my story of what happened in Dock Barker's hideout is, of course, pure imagination . . . or myth, if you like that word better; I do.*

## In the Deathroom

It was a deathroom. Fletcher knew it for what it was as soon as the door opened. The floor was gray industrial tile. The walls were discolored white stone, marked here and there with darker patches that might have been blood—certainly blood had been spilled in this room. The overhead lights were cupped in wire cages. Halfway across the room stood a long wooden table with three people seated behind it. Before the table was an empty chair, waiting for Fletcher. Beside the chair stood a small wheeled trolley. The object on it had been draped with a piece of cloth, as a sculptor might cover his work-in-progress between sessions.

Fletcher was half-led, half-dragged toward the chair which had been placed for him. He reeled in the guard's grip and let himself reel. If he looked more dazed than he really was, more shocked and unthinking, that was fine. He thought his chances of ever leaving this basement room in the Ministry of Information were perhaps one or two in thirty, and perhaps that was optimistic. Whatever they were, he had no intention of thinning them further by looking even halfway alert. His swelled eye, puffy nose, and broken lower lip might help in this regard; so might the crust of blood, like a dark red goatee, around his mouth. One thing Fletcher knew for sure: if he *did* leave, the others—the guard and the three sitting in tribunal behind the table—would be dead. He was a newspaper reporter and had never killed anything much larger than a hornet, but if he had to kill to escape this room, he would. He thought of his sister, on her retreat. He thought of his sister swimming in a river with a Spanish name. He thought of the light on the water at noon, moving river light too bright to look at. They reached the chair in front of the table. The guard pushed him into it so hard that Fletcher almost tipped himself over.

“Careful now, that's not the way, no accidents,” said one of the men behind the table. It was Escobar. He spoke to the guard in Spanish. To Escobar's left sat the other man. To Escobar's right sat a woman of about sixty. The woman and the other man were thin. Escobar was fat and as greasy as a cheap candle.

He looked like a movie Mexican. You expected him to say, “Batches? *Batches?* We don’t need no steenkin batches.” Yet this was the Chief Minister of Information. Sometimes he gave the English-language portion of the weather on the city television station. When he did this he invariably got fan mail. In a suit he didn’t look greasy, just roly-poly. Fletcher knew all this. He had done three or four stories on Escobar. He was colorful. He was also, according to rumor, an enthusiastic torturer. *A Central American Himmler*, Fletcher thought, and was amazed to discover that one’s sense of humor—rudimentary, granted—could function this far into a state of terror.

“Handcuffs?” the guard asked, also in Spanish, and held up a pair of the plastic kind. Fletcher tried to keep his look of dazed incomprehension. If they cuffed him, it was over. He could forget about one chance in thirty, or one in three hundred.

Escobar turned briefly to the woman on his right. Her face was very dark, her hair black with startling white streaks. It flowed back and up from her forehead as if blown by a gale-force wind. The look of her hair reminded Fletcher of Elsa Lanchester in *Bride of Frankenstein*. He gripped this similarity with a fierceness that was close to panic, the way he gripped the thought of bright light on the river, or his sister laughing with her friends as they walked to the water. He wanted images, not ideas. Images were luxury items now. And ideas were no good in a place like this. In a place like this all you got were the wrong ideas.

The woman gave Escobar a small nod. Fletcher had seen her around the building, always garbed in shapeless dresses like the one she wore now. She had been with Escobar often enough for Fletcher to assume she was his secretary, personal assistant, perhaps even his biographer—Christ knew that men like Escobar had egos large enough to warrant such accessories. Now Fletcher wondered if he’d had it backward all along, if she was *his* boss.

In any case, the nod seemed to satisfy Escobar. When he turned back to Fletcher, Escobar was smiling. And when he spoke, it was in English. “Don’t be silly, put them away. Mr. Fletcher is only here to help us in a few matters. He will soon be returning to his own country”—Escobar sighed deeply to show how deeply he regretted this. “. . . but in the meantime he is an honored guest.”

*We don't need no steenkin handcuffs*, Fletcher thought.

The woman who looked like the Bride of Frankenstein with a very deep tan leaned toward Escobar and whispered briefly behind her hand. Escobar nodded, smiling.

“Of course, Ramón, if our guest should try anything foolish or make any aggressive moves, you would have to shoot him a little.” He roared laughter—roly-poly TV laughter—and then repeated what he had said in Spanish, so that Ramón would understand as well as Fletcher. Ramón nodded seriously, replaced his handcuffs on his belt, and stepped back to the periphery of Fletcher’s vision.

Escobar returned his attention to Fletcher. From one pocket of his parrot-and-foliage-studded guayabera he removed a red-and-white package: Marlboros, the preferred cigarette of third-world peoples everywhere. “Smoke, Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher reached toward the pack, which Escobar had placed on the edge of the table, then withdrew his hand. He had quit smoking three years ago, and supposed he might take the habit up again if he actually did get out of this—drinking high-tension liquor as well, quite likely—but at this moment he had no craving or need for a cigarette. He had wanted them to see his fingers shaking, that was all.

“Perhaps later. Right now a cigarette might—”

Might what? It didn’t matter to Escobar; he just nodded understandingly and left the red-and-white pack where it was, on the edge of the table. Fletcher had a sudden, agonizing vision in which he saw himself stopping at a newsstand on Forty-third Street and buying a pack of Marlboros. A free man buying the happy poison on a New York street. He told himself that if he got out of this, he would do that. He would do it as some people went on pilgrimages to Rome or Jerusalem after their cancer was cured or their sight was restored.

“The men who did that to you”—Escobar indicated Fletcher’s face with a wave of one not-particularly-clean hand—“have been disciplined. Yet not too harshly, and I myself stop short of apology, you will notice. Those men are patriots, as are we here. As you are yourself, Mr. Fletcher, yes?”

“I suppose.” It was his job to appear ingratiating and frightened, a man who would say anything in order to get out of here. It was Escobar’s job to be soothing, to convince the man in the chair that his swelled eye, split lip, and loosened teeth meant nothing; all that was just a misunderstanding which would soon be straightened out, and when it was he would be free to go. They were still busy trying to deceive each other, even here in the deathroom.

Escobar switched his attention to Ramón the guard and spoke in rapid Spanish. Fletcher’s Spanish wasn’t good enough to pick up everything, but you couldn’t spend almost five years in this shithole capital city without picking up a fair vocabulary; Spanish wasn’t the world’s most difficult language, as both Escobar and his friend the Bride of Frankenstein undoubtedly knew.

Escobar asked if Fletcher’s things had been packed and if he had been checked out of the Hotel Magnificent: *Sí*. Escobar wanted to know if there was a car waiting outside the Ministry of Information to take Mr. Fletcher to the airport when the interrogation was done. *Sí*, around the corner on the Street Fifth of May.

Escobar turned back and said, “Do you understand what I ask him?” From Escobar, *understand* came out *unnerstand*, and Fletcher thought again of Escobar’s TV appearances. *Low bressure? What low bressure? We don’t need no steenkin low bressure.*

“I ask have you been checked out of your room—although after all this time it probably seems more like an apartment to you, yes?—and if there’s a car to take you to the airport when we finish our conversation.” Except conversation hadn’t been the word he used.

“Ye-es?” Sounding as if he could not believe his own good fortune. Or so Fletcher hoped.

“You’ll be on the first Delta flight back to Miami,” the Bride of Frankenstein said. She spoke without a trace of Spanish accent. “Your passport will be given back to you once the plane has touched down on American soil. You will not be harmed or held here, Mr. Fletcher—not if you cooperate with our inquiries—but you are being deported, let’s be clear on that. Kicked out. Given what you Americans call the bum’s rush.”

She was much smoother than Escobar. Fletcher found it amusing that he had thought her Escobar’s assistant. *And you call yourself a reporter*, he thought.

Of course if he was just a reporter, the *Times's* man in Central America, he would not be here in the basement of the Ministry of Information, where the stains on the wall looked suspiciously like blood. He had ceased being a reporter some sixteen months ago, around the time he'd first met Núñez.

"I understand," Fletcher said.

Escobar had taken a cigarette. He lighted it with a gold-plated Zippo. There was a fake ruby in the side of the Zippo. He said, "Are you prepared to help us in our inquiries, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Do I have any choice?"

"You always have a choice," Escobar said, "but I think you have worn out your carpet in our country, yes? Is that what you say, worn out your carpet?"

"Close enough," Fletcher said. He thought: *What you must guard against is your desire to believe them. It is natural to want to believe, and probably natural to want to tell the truth—especially after you've been grabbed outside your favorite café and briskly beaten by men who smell of refried beans—but giving them what they want won't help you. That's the thing to hold onto, the only idea that's any good in a room like this. What they say means nothing. What matters is the thing on that trolley, the thing under that piece of cloth. What matters is the guy who hasn't said anything yet. And the stains on the walls, of course.*

Escobar leaned forward, looking serious.

"Do you deny that for the last fourteen months you have given certain information to a man named Tomás Herrera, who has in turn funneled it to a certain Communist insurgent named Pedro Núñez?"

"No," Fletcher said. "I don't deny it." To adequately keep up his side of this charade—the charade summarized by the difference between the words *conversation* and *interrogation*—he should now justify, attempt to explain. As if anyone in the history of the world had ever won a political argument in a room like this. But he didn't have it in him to do so. "Although it was a little longer than that. Almost a year and a half in all, I think."

"Have a cigarette, Mr. Fletcher." Escobar opened a drawer and took out a thin folder.

"Not just yet. Thank you."

"Okay." From Escobar it of course came out *ho-kay*. When he did the TV weather, the boys in the control room would sometimes superimpose a

photograph of a woman in a bikini on the weather map. When he saw this, Escobar would laugh and wave his hands and pat his chest. People liked it. It was comical. It was like the sound of *ho-kay*. It was like the sound of *steenkin batches*.

Escobar opened the folder with his own cigarette planted squarely in the middle of his mouth with the smoke running up into his eyes. It was the way you saw the old men smoking on the street corners down here, the ones who still wore straw hats, sandals, and baggy white pants. Now Escobar was smiling, keeping his lips shut so his Marlboro wouldn't fall out of his mouth and onto the table but smiling just the same. He took a glossy black-and-white photograph out of the thin folder and slid it across to Fletcher. "Here is your friend Tomás. Not too pretty, is he?"

It was a high-contrast full-face shot. It made Fletcher think of photographs by that semi-famous news photographer of the forties and fifties, the one who called himself Weegee. It was a portrait of a dead man. The eyes were open. The flashbulb had reflected in them, giving them a kind of life. There was no blood, only one mark and no blood, but still one knew at once that the man was dead. His hair was combed, one could still see the toothmarks the comb had left, and there were those little lights in his eyes, but they were reflected lights. One knew at once the man was dead.

The mark was on the left temple, a comet shape that looked like a powder burn, but there was no bullet hole, no blood, and the skull wasn't pushed out of shape. Even a low-caliber pistol like a .22, fired close enough to the skin to leave a powder burn, would have pushed the skull out of shape.

Escobar took the picture back, put it in the folder, closed the folder, and shrugged as if to say *You see? You see what happens?* When he shrugged, the ash fell off his cigarette onto the table. He brushed it off onto the gray lino floor with the side of one fat hand.

"We dint actually want to bother you," Escobar said. "Why would we? This a small country. We are small people in a small country. *The New York Times* a big paper in a big country. We have our pride, of course, but we also have our . . ." Escobar tapped his temple with one finger. "You see?"

Fletcher nodded. He kept seeing Tomás. Even with the picture back in the folder he could see Tomás, the marks the comb had left in Tomás's dark hair.

He had eaten food Tomás's wife had cooked, had sat on the floor and watched cartoons with Tomás's youngest child, a little girl of perhaps five. Tom and Jerry cartoons, with what little dialogue there was in Spanish.

"We don't want to bother you," Escobar was saying as the cigarette smoke rose and broke apart on his face and curled around his ears, "but for a long time we was watching. You dint see us—maybe because you are so big and we are just little—but we was watching. We know that you know what Tomás knows, and so we go to him. We try to get him to tell what he knows so we don't have to bother you, but he won't. Finally we ask Heinz here to try and make him tell. Heinz, show Mr. Fletcher how you try to make Tomás tell, when Tomás was sitting right where Mr. Fletcher was sitting now."

"I can do that," said Heinz. He spoke English in a nasal New York accent. He was bald, except for a fringe of hair around his ears. He wore little glasses. Escobar looked like a movie Mexican, the woman looked like Elsa Lanchester in *Bride of Frankenstein*, Heinz looked like an actor in a TV commercial, the one who explained why Excedrin was best for your headache. He walked around the table to the trolley, gave Fletcher a look both roguish and conspiratorial, and flicked away the cloth over the top.

There was a machine underneath, something with dials and lights that were now all dark. Fletcher at first thought it was a lie detector—that made a certain amount of sense—but in front of the rudimentary control panel, connected to the side of the machine by a fat black cord, was an object with a rubber grip. It looked like a stylus or some sort of fountain pen. There was no nib, though. The thing just tapered to a blunt steel point.

Below the machine was a shelf. On the shelf was a car battery marked DELCO. There were rubber cups over the battery terminals. Wires rose from the rubber cups to the back of the machine. No, not a lie detector. Except maybe to these people it was.

Heinz spoke briskly, with the pleasure of a man who likes to explain what he does. "It's quite simple, really, a modification of the device neurologists use to administer electric shocks to people suffering unipolar neurosis. Only this administers a far more powerful jolt. The pain is really secondary, I find. Most people don't even remember the pain. What makes them so eager to talk is an

aversion to the process. This might almost be called an atavism. Someday I hope to write a paper.”

Heinz picked up the stylus by its insulated rubber grip and held it in front of his eyes.

“This can be touched to the extremities . . . the torso . . . the genitals, of course . . . but it can also be inserted in places where—forgive the crudity—the sun never shines. A man whose shit has been electrified never forgets it, Mr. Fletcher.”

“Did you do that to Tomás?”

“No,” Heinz said, and replaced the stylus carefully in front of the shock-generator. “He got a jolt at half-power on the hand, just to acquaint him with what he was up against, and when he still declined to discuss El Cóndor—”

“Never mind that,” the Bride of Frankenstein said.

“Beg pardon. When he still wouldn’t tell us what we wanted to know, I applied the wand to his temple and administered another measured jolt. Carefully measured, I assure you, half-power, not a bit more. He had a seizure and died. I believe it may have been epilepsy. Did he have a history of epilepsy, do you know, Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher shook his head.

“Nevertheless, I believe that’s what it was. The autopsy revealed nothing wrong with his heart.” Heinz folded his long-fingered hands in front of him and looked at Escobar.

Escobar removed his cigarette from the center of his mouth, looked at it, dropped it to the gray tile floor, stepped on it. Then he looked at Fletcher and smiled. “Very sad, of course. Now I ask you some questions, Mr. Fletcher. Many of them—I tell you this frankly—are the questions Tomás Herrera refused to answer. I hope you will not refuse, Mr. Fletcher. I like you. You sit there in dignity, do not cry or beg or urinate the pants. I like you. I know you only do what you believe. It is patriotism. So I tell you, my friend, it’s good if you answer my questions quickly and truthfully. You don’t want Heinz to use his machine.”

“I’ve said I’d help you,” Fletcher said. Death was closer than the overhead lights in their cunning wire cages. Pain, unfortunately, was closer yet. And how close was Núñez, El Cóndor? Closer than these three guessed, but not close

enough to help him. If Escobar and the Bride of Frankenstein had waited another two days, perhaps even another twenty-four hours . . . but they had not, and he was here in the deathroom. Now he would see what he was made of.

“You said it and you had better mean it,” the woman said, speaking very clearly. “We’re not fucking around, *gringo*.”

“I know you’re not,” Fletcher said in a sighing, trembling voice.

“You want that cigarette now, I think,” said Escobar, and when Fletcher shook his head, Escobar took one himself, lit it, then seemed to meditate. At last he looked up. This cigarette was planted in the middle of his face like the last one. “Núñez comes soon?” he asked. “Like Zorro in that movie?”

Fletcher nodded.

“How soon?”

“I don’t know.” Fletcher was very aware of Heinz standing next to his infernal machine with his long-fingered hands folded in front of him, looking ready to talk about pain-relievers at the drop of a cue. He was equally aware of Ramón standing to his right, at the edge of his peripheral vision. He could not see, but guessed that Ramón’s hand would be on the butt of his pistol. And here came the next question.

“When he comes, will he strike at the garrison in the hills of El Cándido, the garrison at St. Thérèse, or will he come right into the city?”

“The garrison at St. Thérèse,” Fletcher said.

*He will come to the city*, Tomás had said while his wife and daughter now watched cartoons, sitting on the floor side by side and eating popcorn from a white bowl with a blue stripe around the rim. Fletcher remembered the blue stripe. He could see it clearly. Fletcher remembered everything. *He will come at the heart. No fucking around. He will strike for the heart, like a man who would kill a vampire.*

“He will not want the TV station?” Escobar asked. “Or the government radio station?”

*First the radio station on Civil Hill*, Tomás had said while the cartoons played. By then it was the Road Runner, always gone in a puff of dust just ahead of whatever Acme Road Runner-catching device the Coyote was using, just beep-beep and gone.

“No,” Fletcher said. “I’ve been told El Cóndor says ‘Let them babble.’”

“Does he have rockets? Air-to-ground rockets? Copter-killers?”

“Yes.” It was true.

“Many?”

“Not many.” This was not true. Núñez had better than sixty. There were only a dozen helicopters in the country’s whole shitpot air force—bad Russian helicopters that never flew for long.

The Bride of Frankenstein tapped Escobar on the shoulder. Escobar leaned toward her. She whispered without covering her mouth. She had no need to cover her mouth because her lips barely moved. This was a skill Fletcher associated with prisons. He had never been to prison but he had seen movies. When Escobar whispered back, he raised a fat hand to cover his own mouth.

Fletcher watched them and waited, knowing that the woman was telling Escobar he was lying. Soon Heinz would have more data for his paper, *Certain Preliminary Observations on the Administration and Consequences of Electrifying the Shit of Reluctant Interrogation Subjects*. Fletcher discovered that terror had created two new people inside him, at least two, sub-Fletchers with their own useless but quite powerful views on how this was going to go. One was sadly hopeful, the other just sad. The sadly hopeful one was Mr. Maybe They Will, as in maybe they really will let me go, maybe there really is a car parked on the Street Fifth of May, just around the corner, maybe they really mean to kick me out of the country, maybe I really will be landing in Miami tomorrow morning, scared but alive, with this already beginning to seem like a bad dream.

The other one, the one who was merely sad, was Mr. Even If I Do. Fletcher might be able to surprise them by making a sudden move—he had been beaten and they were arrogant, so yes, he might be able to surprise them.

*But Ramón will shoot me even if I do.*

And if he went for Ramón? Managed to get his gun? Unlikely but not impossible; the man was fat, fatter than Escobar by at least thirty pounds, and he wheezed when he breathed.

*Escobar and Heinz will be all over me before I can shoot even if I do.*

The woman too, maybe; she talked without moving her lips; she might know judo or karate or tae kwon do, as well. And if he shot them all and

managed to escape this room?

*There'll be more guards everywhere even if I do—they'll hear the shots and come running.*

Of course rooms like this tended to be soundproofed, for obvious reasons, but even if he got up the stairs and out the door and onto the street, that was only the beginning. And Mr. Even If I Do would be running with him the whole way, for however long his run lasted.

The thing was, neither Mr. Maybe They Will or Mr. Even If I Do could help him; they were only distractions, lies his increasingly frantic mind tried to tell itself. Men like him did not talk themselves out of rooms like this. He might as well try inventing a third sub-Fletcher, Mr. Maybe I Can, and go for it. He had nothing to lose. He only had to make sure they didn't know he knew that.

Escobar and the Bride of Frankenstein drew apart. Escobar put his cigarette back in his mouth and smiled sadly at Fletcher. "*Amigo*, you are lying."

"No," he said. "Why would I lie? Don't you think I want to get out of here?"

"We have no *idea* why you would lie," said the woman with the narrow blade of a face. "We have no idea why you would choose to aid Núñez in the first place. Some have suggested American naiveté, and I have no doubt that played its part, but that cannot be all. It doesn't matter. I believe a demonstration is in order. Heinz?"

Smiling, Heinz turned to his machine and flicked a switch. There was a hum, the kind that comes from an old-fashioned radio when it's warming up, and three green lights came on.

"No," Fletcher said, trying to get to his feet, thinking that he did panic very well, and why not? He *was* panicked, or almost panicked. Certainly the idea of Heinz touching him anywhere with that stainless steel dildo for pygmies was terrifying. But there was another part of him, very cold and calculating, that knew he would have to take at least one shock. He wasn't aware of anything so coherent as a plan, but he had to take at least one shock. Mr. Maybe I Can insisted that this was so.

Escobar nodded to Ramón.

“You can’t do this, I’m an American citizen and I work for *The New York Times*, people know where I am.”

A heavy hand pressed down on his left shoulder, pushing him back into the chair. At the same moment, the barrel of a pistol went deep into his right ear. The pain was so sudden that bright dots appeared before Fletcher’s eyes, dancing frantically. He screamed, and the sound seemed muffled. Because one ear was plugged, of course—one ear was plugged.

“Hold out your hand, Mr. Fletcher,” Escobar said, and he was smiling around his cigarette again.

“Right hand,” Heinz said. He held the stylus by its black rubber grip like a pencil, and his machine was humming.

Fletcher gripped the arm of the chair with his right hand. He was no longer sure if he was acting or not—the line between acting and panic was gone.

“Do it,” the woman said. Her hands were folded on the table; she leaned forward over them. There was a point of light in each of her pupils, turning her dark eyes into nailheads. “Do it or I can’t account for the consequences.”

Fletcher began to loosen his fingers on the chair arm, but before he could get the hand up, Heinz darted forward and poked the tip of the blunt stylus against the back of Fletcher’s left hand. That had probably been his target all along—certainly it was closer to where Heinz stood.

There was a snapping sound, very thin, like a twig, and Fletcher’s left hand closed into a fist so tight his nails cut into his palm. A kind of dancing sickness raced up from his wrist to his forearm to his flopping elbow and finally to his shoulder, the side of his neck, and to his gums. He could even feel the shock in his teeth on that side, or in the fillings. A grunt escaped him. He bit his tongue and shot sideways in the chair. The gun was gone from his ear and Ramón caught him. If he hadn’t, Fletcher would have fallen on the gray tile floor.

The stylus was withdrawn. Where it had touched, between the second and third knuckles of the third finger of his left hand, there was a small hot spot. It was the only real pain, although his arm still tingled and the muscles still jumped. Yet it was horrible, being shocked like that. Fletcher felt he would seriously consider shooting his own mother to avoid another touch of the little steel dildo. An atavism, Heinz had called it. Someday he hoped to write a paper.

Heinz's face loomed down, lips pulled back and teeth revealed in an idiotic grin, eyes alight. "How do you describe it?" he cried. "Now, while the experience is still fresh, how do you describe it?"

"Like dying," Fletcher said in a voice that didn't sound like his own.

Heinz looked transported. "Yes! And you see, he has wet himself! Not much, just a little, but yes . . . and Mr. Fletcher—"

"Stand aside," the Bride of Frankenstein said. "Don't be an ass. Let us take care of our business."

"And that was only *one-quarter power*," Heinz said in a tone of awed confidentiality, and then he stood aside and refolded his hands in front of him.

"Mr. Fletcher, you been bad," Escobar said reproachfully. He took the stub of his cigarette from his mouth, examined it, threw it on the floor.

*The cigarette*, Fletcher thought. *The cigarette, yes*. The shock had seriously insulted his arm—the muscles were still twitching and he could see blood in his cupped palm—but it seemed to have revitalized his brain, refreshed it. Of course that was what shock treatments were supposed to do.

"No . . . I want to help . . ."

But Escobar was shaking his head. "We know Núñez will come to the city. We know on the way he will take the radio station if he can . . . and he probably can."

"For awhile," said the Bride of Frankenstein. "Only for awhile."

Escobar was nodding. "Only for awhile. A matter of days, perhaps hours. Is of no concern. What matters is we give you a bit of rope, see if you make a noose . . . and you do."

Fletcher sat up straight in the chair again. Ramón had retreated a step or two. Fletcher looked at the back of his left hand and saw a small smudge there, like the one on the side of Tomás's dead face in the photograph. And there was Heinz who had killed Fletcher's friend, standing beside his machine with his hands folded in front of him, smiling and perhaps thinking about the paper he would write, words and graphs and little pictures labeled Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 and, for all Fletcher knew, Fig. 994.

"Mr. Fletcher?"

Fletcher looked at Escobar and straightened the fingers of his left hand. The muscles of that arm were still twitching, but the twitch was subsiding. He

thought that when the time came, he would be able to use the arm. And if Ramón shot him, so what? Let Heinz see if his machine could raise the dead.

“Do we have your attention, Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher nodded.

“Why do you want to protect this man Núñez?” Escobar asked. “Why do you want to suffer to protect this man? He takes the cocaine. If he wins his revolution he will proclaim himself President for Life and sell the cocaine to your country. He will go to mass on Sunday and fuck his coke-whores the rest of the week. In the end who wins? Maybe the Communists. Maybe United Fruit. Not the people.” Escobar spoke low. His eyes were soft. “Help us, Mr. Fletcher. Of your own free will. Don’t make us make you help us. Don’t make us pull on your string.” He looked up at Fletcher from beneath his single bushy eyebrow. He looked up with his soft cocker spaniel eyes. “You can still be on that plane to Miami. On the way you like a drink, yes?”

“Yes,” Fletcher said. “I’ll help you.”

“Ah, good.” Escobar smiled, then looked at the woman.

“Does he have rockets?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Many?”

“At least sixty.”

“Russian?”

“Some are. Others came in crates with Israeli markings, but the writing on the missiles themselves looks Japanese.”

She nodded, seeming satisfied. Escobar beamed.

“Where are they?”

“Everywhere. You can’t just swoop down and grab them. There might still be a dozen at Ortiz.” Fletcher knew that wasn’t so.

“And Núñez?” she asked. “Is El Cóndor at Ortiz?”

She knew better. “He’s in the jungle. Last I knew, he was in Belén Province.” This was a lie. Núñez had been in Cristóbal, a suburb of the capital city, when Fletcher last saw him. He was probably still there. But if Escobar and the woman had known that, there would have been no need of this interrogation. And why would they believe Núñez would trust Fletcher with his whereabouts, anyway? In a country like this, where Escobar and Heinz and

the Bride of Frankenstein were only three of your enemies, why would you trust a Yankee newspaper reporter with your address? *Loco!* Why was the Yankee newspaperman involved at all? But they had stopped wondering about that, at least for now.

“Who does he talk to in the city?” the woman asked. “Not who he fucks, who he talks to.”

This was the point where he had to move, if he was going to. The truth was no longer safe and they might know a lie.

“There’s a man . . .” he started, then paused. “Could I have that cigarette now?”

“Mr. Fletcher! But of course!” Escobar was for a moment the concerned dinner-party host. Fletcher did not think this was playacting. Escobar picked up the red-and-white pack—the kind of pack any free man or woman could buy at any newsstand like the one Fletcher remembered on Forty-third Street—and shook out a cigarette. Fletcher took it, knowing he might be dead before it burned all the way down to the filter, no longer a part of this earth. He felt nothing, only the fading twitch of the muscles in his left arm and a funny baked taste in his fillings on that side of his mouth.

He put the cigarette between his lips. Escobar leaned further forward and snapped back the cover of his gold-plated lighter. He flicked the wheel. The lighter produced a flame. Fletcher was aware of Heinz’s infernal machine humming like an old radio, the kind with tubes in the back. He was aware of the woman he had come to think of, without a trace of humor, as the Bride of Frankenstein, looking at him the way the Coyote in the cartoons looked at the Road Runner. He was aware of his heart beating, of the remembered circular feel of the cigarette in his mouth—“a tube of singular delight,” some playwright or other had called it—and of the beat of his heart, incredibly slow. Last month he’d been called upon to make an after-luncheon speech at the Club Internacional, where all the foreign press geeks hung out, and his heart had beat faster then.

Here it was, and so what? Even the blind found their way through this; even his sister had, there by the river.

Fletcher bent to the flame. The end of the Marlboro caught fire and glowed red. Fletcher drew deep, and it was easy to start coughing; after three years

without a cigarette, it would have been harder not to cough. He sat back in the chair and added a harsh, gagging growl to the cough. He began to shake all over, throwing his elbows out, jerking his head to the left, drumming his feet. Best of all, he recalled an old childhood talent and rolled his eyes up to the whites. During none of this did he let go of the cigarette.

Fletcher had never seen an actual epileptic fit, although he vaguely remembered Patty Duke throwing one in *The Miracle Worker*. He had no way of knowing if he was doing what epileptics actually did, but he hoped that the unexpected death of Tomás Herrera would help them to overlook any false notes in his own act.

“Shit, not *again!*” Heinz cried in a shrill near-scream; in a movie it might have been funny.

“Grab him, Ramón!” Escobar yelled in Spanish. He tried to stand up and struck the table so hard with his meaty thighs that it rose up and thumped back down. The woman didn’t move, and Fletcher thought: *She suspects. I don’t think she even knows it yet, but she’s smarter than Escobar, smarter by a mile, and she suspects.*

Was this true? With his eyes rolled up he could see only a ghost of her, not enough to really know if it was or not . . . but he knew. What did it matter? Things had been set in motion, and now they would play out. They would play out very fast.

“*Ramón!*” Escobar shouted. “Don’t let him fall on the floor, you idiot! Don’t let him swallow his t—”

Ramón bent over and grabbed Fletcher’s shaking shoulders, perhaps wanting to get Fletcher’s head back, perhaps wanting to make sure Fletcher’s tongue was still safely unswallowed (a person *couldn’t* swallow his own tongue, not unless it was cut off; Ramón clearly did not watch *ER*). Whatever he wanted didn’t matter. When his face was where Fletcher could get at it, Fletcher struck the burning end of the Marlboro in Ramón’s eye.

Ramón shrieked and jerked backward. His right hand rose toward his face, where the still-burning cigarette hung askew in the socket of his eye, but his left hand remained on Fletcher’s shoulder. It was now tightened down to a clamp, and when he stepped back, Ramón pulled Fletcher’s chair over. Fletcher spilled out of it, rolled over, and got to his feet.

Heinz was screaming something, words, maybe, but to Fletcher he sounded like a girl of about ten screaming at the sight of a singing idol—one of the Hansons, perhaps. Escobar wasn't making any noise at all and that was bad.

Fletcher didn't look back at the table. He didn't have to look to know that Escobar was coming for him. Instead he shot both hands forward, grabbed the butt of Ramón's revolver, and pulled it from its holster. Fletcher didn't think Ramón ever knew it was gone. He was screaming a flood of Spanish and pawing at his face. He struck the cigarette but instead of coming free it broke off, the burning end still stuck in his eye.

Fletcher turned. Escobar was there, already around the end of the long table, coming for him with his fat hands out. Escobar no longer looked like a fellow who sometimes did the TV weather and talked about high bressure.

"Get that Yankee son of a bitch!" the woman spat.

Fletcher kicked the overturned chair into Escobar's path and Escobar tripped on it. As he went down, Fletcher stuck the gun out, still held in both hands, and shot it into the top of Escobar's head. Escobar's hair jumped. Gouts of blood burst from his nose and mouth and from the underside of his chin, where the bullet came out. Escobar fell flat on his bleeding face. His feet drummed on the gray tile floor. The smell of shit rose from his dying body.

The woman was no longer in her chair, but she had no intention of approaching Fletcher. She ran for the door, fleet as a deer in her dark shapeless dress. Ramón, still bellowing, was between Fletcher and the woman. And he was reaching for Fletcher, wanting to grab him by the neck, throttle him.

Fletcher shot him twice, once in the chest and once in the face. The face-shot tore off most of Ramón's nose and right cheek, but the big man in the brown uniform came on just the same, roaring, the cigarette still dangling from his eye, his big sausage fingers, a silver ring on one of them, opening and closing.

Ramón stumbled over Escobar just as Escobar had stumbled over the chair. Fletcher had a moment to think of a famous cartoon that shows fish in a line, each with his mouth open to eat the next one down in size. *The Food Chain*, that drawing was called.

Ramón, facedown and with two bullets in him, reached out and clamped a hand on Fletcher's ankle. Fletcher tore free, staggered, and fired a fourth shot

into the ceiling when he did. Dust sifted down. There was a strong smell of gunsmoke in the room now. Fletcher looked at the door. The woman was still there, yanking at the doorknob with one hand and fumbling at the turn-lock with the other hand, but she couldn't open the door. If she'd been able to, she'd have already done it. She'd be all the way down the hall by now, and screaming bloody murder up the stairs.

"Hey," Fletcher said. He felt like an ordinary guy who goes to his Thursday-night bowling league and rolls a 300 game. "Hey, you bitch, look at me."

She turned and put her palms flat against the door, as if she were holding it up. There was still a little nailhead of light in each of her eyes. She began to tell him he mustn't hurt her. She started in Spanish, hesitated, then began to say the same thing in English. "You mustn't hurt me in any way, Mr. Fletcher, I am the only one who can guarantee your safe conduct from here, and I swear I will on my solemn oath, but you must not hurt me."

From behind them, Heinz was keening like a child in love or terror. Now that Fletcher was close to the woman—the woman standing against the door of the deathroom with her hands pressed flat against its metal surface—he could smell some bittersweet perfume. Her eyes were shaped like almonds. Her hair streamed back above the top of her head. *We're not just fucking around*, she had told him, and Fletcher thought: *Neither am I*.

The woman saw the news of her death in his eyes and began to talk faster, pressing her butt and back and palms harder and harder against the metal door as she talked. It was as if she believed she could somehow melt herself through the door and come out whole on the other side if she just pushed hard enough. She had papers, she said, papers in his name, and she would give him these papers. She also had money, a great deal of money, also gold; there was a Swiss bank account which he could access by computer from her home. It occurred to Fletcher that in the end there might only be one way to tell the thugs from the patriots: when they saw their own death rising in your eyes like water, patriots made speeches. The thugs, on the other hand, gave you the number of their Swiss bank account and offered to put you on-line.

"Shut up," Fletcher said. Unless this room was very well insulated indeed, a dozen ordinary troops from upstairs were probably on their way now. He had no means of standing them off, but this one was not going to get away.

She shut up, still standing against the door, pressing it with her palms. Still with the nailheads in her eyes. How old was she? Fletcher wondered. Sixty-five? And how many had she killed in this room, or rooms like it? How many had she ordered killed?

“Listen to me,” Fletcher said. “Are you listening?”

What she was undoubtedly listening for were the sounds of approaching rescue. *In your dreams*, Fletcher thought.

“The weatherman there said that El Cóndor uses cocaine, that he’s a Communist butt-boy, a whore for United Fruit, who knows what else. Maybe he’s some of those things, maybe none. I don’t know or care. What I know about, what I care about, was he was never in charge of the ordinaries patrolling the Caya River in the summer of 1994. Núñez was in New York then. At NYU. So he wasn’t part of the bunch that found the nuns on retreat from La Caya. They put three of the nuns’ heads up on sticks, there by the water’s edge. The one in the middle was my sister.”

Fletcher shot her twice and then Ramón’s gun clicked empty. Two was enough. The woman went sliding down the door, her bright eyes never leaving Fletcher’s. *You were the one who was supposed to die*, those eyes said. *I don’t understand this, you were the one who was supposed to die*. Her hand clawed at her throat once, twice, then was still. Her eyes remained on his a moment longer, the bright eyes of an ancient mariner with a whale of a tale to tell, and then her head fell forward.

Fletcher turned around and began walking toward Heinz with Ramón’s gun held out. As he walked he realized that his right shoe was gone. He looked at Ramón, who was still lying facedown in a spreading pool of blood. Ramón still had hold of Fletcher’s loafer. He was like a dying weasel that refuses to let go of a chicken. Fletcher stopped long enough to put it on.

Heinz turned as if to run, and Fletcher waggled the gun at him. The gun was empty but Heinz didn’t seem to know that. And maybe he remembered there was nowhere to run anyway, not here in the deathroom. He stopped moving and only stared at the oncoming gun and the oncoming man behind it. Heinz was crying. “One step back,” Fletcher said, and, still crying, Heinz took one step back.

Fletcher stopped in front of Heinz's machine. What was the word Heinz had used? Atavism, wasn't it?

The machine on the trolley looked much too simple for a man of Heinz's intelligence—three dials, one switch marked ON and OFF (now in the OFF position), and a rheostat which had been turned so the white line on it pointed to roughly eleven o'clock. The needles on the dials all lay flat on their zeroes.

Fletcher picked up the stylus and held it out to Heinz. Heinz made a wet sound, shook his head, and took another step backward. His face would lift and pull together in a kind of grief-struck sneer, then loosen again. His forehead was wet with sweat, his cheeks with tears. This second backward step took him almost beneath one of the caged lights, and his shadow puddled around his feet.

"Take it or I'll kill you," Fletcher said. "And if you take another step backward I'll kill you." He had no time for this and it felt wrong in any case, but Fletcher could not stop himself. He kept seeing that picture of Tomás, the open eyes, the little scorched mark like a powder burn.

Sobbing, Heinz took the blunt fountain-pen-shaped object, careful to hold it only by the rubber insulated sleeve.

"Put it in your mouth," Fletcher said. "Suck on it like it was a lollipop."

"*No!*" Heinz cried in a weepy voice. He shook his head and water flew off his face. His face was still going through its contortions: cramp and release, cramp and release. There was a green bubble of snot at the entrance to one of his nostrils; it expanded and contracted with Heinz's rapid breathing but didn't break. Fletcher had never seen anything quite like it. "*No, you can't make me!*"

But Heinz knew Fletcher could. The Bride of Frankenstein might not have believed it, and Escobar likely hadn't had time to believe it, but Heinz knew he had no more right of refusal. He was in Tomás Herrera's position, in Fletcher's position. In one way that was revenge enough, but in another way it wasn't. Knowing was an idea. Ideas were no good in here. In here seeing was believing.

"Put it in your mouth or I'll shoot you in the head," Fletcher said, and shoved the empty gun at Heinz's face. Heinz recoiled with a wail of terror. And now Fletcher heard his own voice drop, become confidential, become sincere. In a way it reminded him of Escobar's voice. *We are havin an area of low bressure*, he thought. *We are havin the steenkin rain-showers*. "I'm not going to

shock you if you just do it and hurry up. But I need you to know what it feels like.”

Heinz stared at Fletcher. His eyes were blue and red-rimmed, swimming with tears. He didn't believe Fletcher, of course, what Fletcher was saying made no sense, but Heinz very clearly wanted to believe it anyway, because, sense or nonsense, Fletcher was holding out the possibility of life. He just needed to be pushed a single step further.

Fletcher smiled. “Do it for your *research*.”

Heinz was convinced—not completely, but enough to believe Fletcher could be Mr. Maybe He Will after all. He put the steel rod into his mouth. His bulging eyes stared at Fletcher. Below them and above the jutting stylus—which looked not like a lollipop but an old-fashioned fever thermometer—that green bubble of snot swelled and retreated, swelled and retreated. Still pointing the gun at Heinz, Fletcher flicked the switch on the control panel from OFF to ON and gave the rheostat a hard turn. The white line on the knob went from eleven in the morning to five in the afternoon.

Heinz might have had time to spit the stylus out, but shock caused him to clamp his lips down on the stainless steel barrel instead. The snapping sound was louder this time, like a small branch instead of a twig. Heinz's lips pressed down even tighter. The green mucus bubble in his nostril popped. So did one of his eyes. Heinz's entire body seemed to vibrate inside his clothes. His hands were bent at the wrists, the long fingers splayed. His cheeks went from white to pale gray to a darkish purple. Smoke began to pour out of his nose. His other eye popped out on his cheek. Above the dislocated eyes there were now two raw sockets that stared at Fletcher with surprise. One of Heinz's cheeks either tore open or melted. A quantity of smoke and a strong odor of burned meat came out through the hole, and Fletcher observed small flames, orange and blue. Heinz's mouth was on fire. His tongue was burning like a rug.

Fletcher's fingers were still on the rheostat. He turned it all the way back to the left, then flicked the switch to OFF. The needles, which had swung all the way to the +50 marks on their little dials, immediately fell dead again. The moment the electricity left him, Heinz crashed to the gray tile floor, trailing smoke from his mouth as he went. The stylus fell free, and Fletcher saw there were little pieces of Heinz's lips on it. Fletcher's gorge gave a salty, burping

lurch, and he closed his throat against it. He didn't have time to vomit over what he had done to Heinz; he might consider vomiting at a later time. Still, he lingered a moment longer, leaning over to look at Heinz's smoking mouth and dislocated eyes. "How do you describe it?" he asked the corpse. "Now, while the experience is still fresh? What, nothing to say?"

Fletcher turned and hurried across the room, detouring around Ramón, who was still alive and moaning. He sounded like a man having a bad dream.

He remembered that the door was locked. Ramón had locked it; the key would be on the ring hanging at Ramón's belt. Fletcher went back to the guard, knelt beside him, and tore the ring off his belt. When he did, Ramón groped out and seized Fletcher by the ankle again. Fletcher was still holding the gun. He rapped the butt down on the top of Ramón's head. For a moment the hand on his ankle gripped even tighter, and then it let go.

Fletcher started to get up and then thought, *Bullets. He must have more. The gun's empty.* His next thought was that he didn't need no steenkin bullets, Ramón's gun had done all that it could for him. Shooting outside this room would bring the ordinaries like flies.

Even so, Fletcher felt along Ramón's belt, opening the little leather snap pouches until he found a speed-loader. He used it to fill up the gun. He didn't know if he could actually bring himself to shoot ordinaries who were only men like Tomás, men with families to feed, but he could shoot officers and he could save at least one bullet for himself. He would very likely not be able to get out of the building—that would be like rolling a second 300 game in a row—but he would never be brought back to this room again, and set in the chair next to Heinz's machine.

He pushed the Bride of Frankenstein away from the door with his foot. Her eyes glared dully at the ceiling. Fletcher was coming more and more to understand that he had survived and these others had not. They were cooling off. On their skin, galaxies of bacteria had already begun to die. These were bad thoughts to be having in the basement of the Ministry of Information, bad thoughts to be in the head of a man who had become—perhaps only for a little while, more likely forever—a *desaparecido*. Still, he couldn't help having them.

The third key opened the door. Fletcher stuck his head out into the hall—cinder-block walls, green on the bottom half and a dirty cream-white on the top half, like the walls of an old school corridor. Faded red lino on the floor. No one was in the hall. About thirty feet down to the left, a small brown dog lay asleep against the wall. His feet were twitching. Fletcher didn't know if the dog was dreaming about chasing or being chased, but he didn't think he would be asleep at all if the gunshots—or Heinz's screaming—had been very loud out here. *If I ever get back, he thought, I'll write that soundproofing is the great triumph of dictatorship. I'll tell the world. Of course I probably won't get back, those stairs down to the right are probably as close to Forty-third Street as I'm ever going to get, but—*

But there was Mr. Maybe I Can.

Fletcher stepped into the hall and pulled the door of the death-room shut behind him. The little brown dog lifted its head, looked at Fletcher, puffed its lips out in a *woof* that was mostly a whisper, then lowered its head again and appeared to go back to sleep.

Fletcher dropped to his knees, put his hands (one still holding Ramón's gun) on the floor, bent, and kissed the lino. As he did it he thought of his sister—how she had looked going off to college eight years before her death by the river. She had been wearing a tartan skirt on the day she'd gone off to college, and the red in it hadn't been the exact same red of the faded lino, but it was close. Close enough for government work, as they said.

Fletcher got up. He started down the hall toward the stairs, the first-floor hallway, the street, the city, Highway 4, the patrols, the roadblocks, the border, the checkpoints, the water. The Chinese said a journey of a thousand miles started with a single step.

*I'll see how far I get,* Fletcher thought as he reached the foot of the stairs. *I might just surprise myself.* But he was already surprised, just to be alive. Smiling a little, holding Ramón's gun out before him, Fletcher started up the stairs.

\* \* \*

A month later, a man walked up to Carlo Arcuzzi's newsstand kiosk on Forty-third Street. Carlo had a nasty moment when he was almost sure the man meant to stick a gun in his face and rob him. It was only eight o'clock and still

light, lots of people about, but did any of those things stop a man who was *pazzo*? And this man looked plenty *pazzo*—so thin his white shirt and gray pants seemed to float on him, and his eyes lay at the bottom of great round sockets. He looked like a man who had just been released from a concentration camp or (by some huge mistake) a loony bin. When his hand went into his pants pocket, Carlo Arcuzzi thought, *Now comes the gun.*

But instead of a gun came a battered old Lord Buxton, and from the wallet came a ten-dollar bill. Then, in a perfectly sane tone of voice, the man in the white shirt and gray pants asked for a pack of Marlboros. Carlo got them, put a package of matches on top of them, and pushed them across the counter of his kiosk. While the man opened the Marlboros, Carlo made change.

“No,” the man said when he saw the change. He had put one of the cigarettes in his mouth.

“No? What you mean no?”

“I mean keep the change,” the man said. He offered the pack to Carlo. “Do you smoke? Have one of these, if you like.”

Carlo looked mistrustfully at the man in the white shirt and gray pants. “I don’t smoke. It’s a bad habit.”

“Very bad,” the man agreed, then lit his cigarette and inhaled with apparent pleasure. He stood smoking and watching the people on the other side of the street. There were girls on the other side of the street. Men would look at girls in their summer clothes, that was human nature. Carlo didn’t think this customer was crazy anymore, although he had left the change of a ten-dollar bill sitting on the narrow counter of the kiosk.

The thin man smoked the cigarette all the way down to the filter. He turned toward Carlo, staggering a little, as if he was not used to smoking and the cigarette had made him dizzy.

“A nice night,” the man said.

Carlo nodded. It was. It was a nice night. “We’re lucky to be alive,” Carlo said.

The man nodded. “All of us. All of the time.”

He walked to the curb, where there was a litter basket. He dropped the pack of cigarettes, full save one, into the litter basket. “All of us,” he said. “All of the

time.” He walked away. Carlo watched him go and thought that maybe he was *pazzo* after all. Or maybe not. Crazy was a hard state to define.

—

*This is a slightly Kafka-esque story about an interrogation room in the South American version of Hell. In such stories, the fellow being interrogated usually ends up spilling everything and then being killed (or losing his mind). I wanted to write one with a happier ending, however unreal that might be. And here it is.*

## The Little Sisters of Eluria

*If there's a magnum opus in my life, it's probably the yet unfinished seven-volume series about Roland Deschain of Gilead and his search for the Dark Tower which serves as the hub of existence. In 1996 or 1997, Ralph Vicinanza (my sometime agent and foreign rights man of business) asked me if I'd like to contribute a story about Roland's younger years for a whopper fantasy anthology Robert Silverberg was putting together. I tentatively agreed. Nothing came, though, and nothing came. I was about to give up when I woke one morning thinking about The Talisman, and the great pavilion where Jack Sawyer first glimpses the Queen of the Territories. In the shower (where I invariably do my best imagining—I think it's a womb thing), I started to visualize that tent in ruins . . . but still filled with whispering women. Ghosts. Maybe vampires. Little Sisters. Nurses of death instead of life. Composing a story from that central image was amazingly difficult. I had lots of space to move around in—Silverberg wanted short novels, not short stories—but it was still hard. These days, everything about Roland and his friends wants to be not just long but sort of epic. One thing this story has going for it is that you don't need to have read the Dark Tower novels to enjoy it. And by the way, for you Tower junkies, DT 5 is now finished, all nine hundred pages of it. It's called Wolves of the Calla.*

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[Author's Note: The Dark Tower books begin with Roland of Gilead, the last gunslinger in an exhausted world that has "moved on," pursuing a magician in a black robe. Roland has been chasing Walter for a very long time. In the first book of the cycle, he finally catches up. This story, however, takes place while Roland is still casting about for Walter's trail. S. K.]

I. FULL EARTH. THE EMPTY TOWN. THE BELLS. THE DEAD BOY. THE  
OVERTURNED WAGON. THE GREEN FOLK.

On a day in Full Earth so hot that it seemed to suck the breath from his chest before his body could use it, Roland of Gilead came to the gates of a village in the Desatoya Mountains. He was travelling alone by then, and would soon be travelling afoot, as well. This whole last week he had been hoping for a horse doctor, but guessed such a fellow would do him no good now, even if this town had one. His mount, a two-year-old roan, was pretty well done for.

The town gates, still decorated with flowers from some festival or other, stood open and welcoming, but the silence beyond them was all wrong. The gunslinger heard no clip-clop of horses, no rumble of wagon wheels, no merchants' huckstering cries from the marketplace. The only sounds were the low hum of crickets (some sort of bug, at any rate; they were a bit more tuneful than crickets, at that), a queer wooden knocking sound, and the faint, dreamy tinkle of small bells.

Also, the flowers twined through the wrought-iron staves of the ornamental gate were long dead.

Between his knees, Topsy gave two great, hollow sneezes—*K'chow! K'chow!*—and staggered sideways. Roland dismounted, partly out of respect for the horse, partly out of respect for himself—he didn't want to break a leg under Topsy if Topsy chose this moment to give up and canter into the clearing at the end of his path.

The gunslinger stood in his dusty boots and faded jeans under the beating sun, stroking the roan's matted neck, pausing every now and then to yank his fingers through the tangles of Topsy's mane, and stopping once to shoo off the tiny flies clustering at the corners of Topsy's eyes. Let them lay their eggs and hatch their maggots there after Topsy was dead, but not before.

Roland thus honored his horse as best he could, listening to those distant, dreamy bells and the strange wooden tocking sound as he did. After awhile he ceased his absent grooming and looked thoughtfully at the open gate.

The cross above its center was a bit unusual, but otherwise the gate was a typical example of its type, a western commonplace which was not useful but traditional—all the little towns he had come to in the last tenmonth seemed to

have one such where you came in (grand) and one more such where you went out (not so grand). None had been built to exclude visitors, certainly not this one. It stood between two walls of pink adobe that ran into the scree for a distance of about twenty feet on either side of the road and then simply stopped. Close the gate, lock it with many locks, and all that meant was a short walk around one bit of adobe wall or the other.

Beyond the gate, Roland could see what looked in most respects like a perfectly ordinary High Street—an inn, two saloons (one of which was called The Bustling Pig; the sign over the other was too faded to read), a mercantile, a smithy, a Gathering Hall. There was also a small but rather lovely wooden building with a modest bell tower on top, a sturdy fieldstone foundation on the bottom, and a gold-painted cross on its double doors. The cross, like the one over the gate, marked this as a worshipping place for those who held to the Jesus Man. This wasn't a common religion in Mid-World, but far from unknown; that same thing could have been said about most forms of worship in those days, including the worship of Baal, Asmodeus, and a hundred others. Faith, like everything else in the world these days, had moved on. As far as Roland was concerned, God o' the Cross was just another religion which taught that love and murder were inextricably bound together—that in the end, God always drank blood.

Meanwhile, there was the singing hum of insects that sounded *almost* like crickets. The dreamlike tinkle of the bells. And that queer wooden thumping, like a fist on a door. Or on a coffintop.

*Something here's a long way from right,* the gunslinger thought. *'Ware, Roland; this place has a reddish odor.*

He led Topsy through the gate with its adornments of dead flowers and down the High Street. On the porch of the mercantile, where the old men should have congregated to discuss crops, politics, and the follies of the younger generation, there stood only a line of empty rockers. Lying beneath one, as if dropped from a careless (and long-departed) hand, was a charred corncob pipe. The hitching rack in front of The Bustling Pig stood empty; the windows of the saloon itself were dark. One of the batwing doors had been yanked off and stood propped against the side of the building; the other hung

ajar, its faded green slats spattered with maroon stuff that might have been paint but probably wasn't.

The shopfront of the livery stable stood intact, like the face of a ruined woman who has access to good cosmetics, but the double barn behind it was a charred skeleton. That fire must have happened on a rainy day, the gunslinger thought, or the whole damned town would have gone up in flames; a jolly spin and raree-show for anyone around to see it.

To his right now, halfway up to where the street opened into the town square, was the church. There were grassy borders on both sides, one separating the church from the town's Gathering Hall, the other from the little house set aside for the preacher and his family (if this was one of the Jesus-sects which allowed its shamans to have wives and families, that was; some of them, clearly administered by lunatics, demanded at least the appearance of celibacy). There were flowers in these grassy strips, and while they looked parched, most were still alive. So whatever had happened here to empty the place out had not happened long ago. A week, perhaps. Two at the outside, given the heat.

Topsy sneezed again—*K'chow!*—and lowered his head wearily.

The gunslinger saw the source of the tinkling. Above the cross on the church doors, a cord had been strung in a long, shallow arc. Hung from it were perhaps two dozen tiny silver bells. There was hardly any breeze today, but enough so these smalls were never quite still . . . and if a real wind should rise, Roland thought, the sound made by the tintinnabulation of the bells would probably be a good deal less pleasant; more like the strident parlay of gossips' tongues.

"Hello!" Roland called, looking across the street at what a large false-fronted sign proclaimed to be the Good Beds Hotel. "Hello, the town!"

No answer but the bells, the tunesome insects, and that odd wooden clunking. No answer, no movement . . . but there were folk here. Folk or *something*. He was being watched. The tiny hairs on the nape of his neck had stiffened.

Roland stepped onward, leading Topsy toward the center of town, puffing up the unlaid High Street dust with each step. Forty paces farther along, he stopped in front of a low building marked with a single curt word: LAW. The Sheriff's office (if they had such this far from the Inners) looked remarkably

similar to the church—wooden boards stained a rather forbidding shade of dark brown above a stone foundation.

The bells behind him rustled and whispered.

He left the roan standing in the middle of the street and mounted the steps to the LAW office. He was very aware of the bells, of the sun beating against his neck, and of the sweat trickling down his sides. The door was shut but unlocked. He opened it, then winced back, half-raising a hand as the heat trapped inside rushed out in a soundless gasp. If all the closed buildings were this hot inside, he mused, the livery barns would soon not be the only burnt-out hulks. And with no rain to stop the flames (and certainly no volunteer fire department, not anymore), the town would not be long for the face of the earth.

He stepped inside, trying to sip at the stifling air rather than taking deep breaths. He immediately heard the low drone of flies.

There was a single cell, commodious and empty, its barred door standing open. Filthy skin-shoes, one of the pair coming unsewn, lay beneath a bunk sodden with the same dried maroon stuff that had marked The Bustling Pig. Here was where the flies were, crawling over the stain, feeding from it.

On the desk was a ledger. Roland turned it toward him and read what was embossed upon its red cover:

REGISTRY OF MISDEEDS & REDRESS  
IN THE YEARS OF OUR LORD  
ELURIA

So now he knew the name of the town, at least—Eluria. Pretty, yet somehow ominous, as well. But any name would have seemed ominous, Roland supposed, given these circumstances. He turned to leave, and saw a closed door secured by a wooden bolt.

He went to it, stood before it for a moment, then drew one of the big revolvers he carried low on his hips. He stood a moment longer, head down, thinking (Cuthbert, his old friend, liked to say that the wheels inside Roland's head ground slow but exceedingly fine), and then retracted the bolt. He opened the door and immediately stood back, leveling his gun, expecting a

body (Eluria's Sheriff, mayhap) to come tumbling into the room with his throat cut and his eyes gouged out, victim of a MISDEED in need of REDRESS

—

Nothing.

Well, half a dozen stained jumpers which longer-term prisoners were probably required to wear, two bows, a quiver of arrows, an old, dusty motor, a rifle that had probably last been fired a hundred years ago, and a mop . . . but in the gunslinger's mind, all that came down to nothing. Just a storage closet.

He went back to the desk, opened the register, and leafed through it. Even the pages were warm, as if the book had been baked. In a way, he supposed it had been. If the High Street layout had been different, he might have expected a large number of religious offenses to be recorded, but he wasn't surprised to find none here—if the Jesus-Man church had coexisted with a couple of saloons, the churchfolk must have been fairly reasonable.

What Roland found was the usual petty offenses, and a few not so petty—a murder, a horse-thieving, the Distressal of a Lady (which probably meant rape). The murderer had been removed to a place called Lexingworth to be hanged. Roland had never heard of it. One note toward the end read *Green folk sent hence*. It meant nothing to Roland. The most recent entry was this:

*12/Fe/99. Chas. Freeborn, cattle-theef to be tryed.*

Roland wasn't familiar with the notation *12/Fe/99*, but as this was a long stretch from February, he supposed *Fe* might stand for Full Earth. In any case, the ink looked about as fresh as the blood on the bunk in the cell, and the gunslinger had a good idea that Chas. Freeborn, cattle-theef, had reached the clearing at the end of his path.

He went out into the heat and the lacy sound of bells. Topsy looked at Roland dully, then lowered his head again, as if there were something in the dust of the High Street which could be cropped. As if he would ever want to crop again, for that matter.

The gunslinger gathered up the reins, slapped the dust off them against the faded no-color of his jeans, and continued on up the street. The wooden knocking sound grew steadily louder as he walked (he had not holstered his

gun when leaving LAW, nor cared to holster it now), and as he neared the town square, which must have housed the Eluria market in more normal times, Roland at last saw movement.

On the far side of the square was a long watering trough, made of ironwood from the look (what some called “seequoiah” out here), apparently fed in happier times from a rusty steel pipe which now jutted waterless above the trough’s south end. Lolling over one side of this municipal oasis, about halfway down its length, was a leg clad in faded gray pants and terminating in a well-chewed cowboy boot.

The chewer was a large dog, perhaps two shades grayer than the corduroy pants. Under other circumstances, Roland supposed, the mutt would have had the boot off long since, but perhaps the foot and lower calf inside it had swelled. In any case, the dog was well on its way to simply chewing the obstacle away. It would seize the boot and shake it back and forth. Every now and then the boot’s heel would collide with the wooden side of the trough, producing another hollow knock. The gunslinger hadn’t been so wrong to think of coffintops after all, it seemed.

*Why doesn’t it just back off a few steps, jump into the trough, and have at him?* Roland wondered. *No water coming out of the pipe, so it can’t be afraid of drowning.*

Topsy uttered another of his hollow, tired sneezes, and when the dog lurched around in response, Roland understood why it was doing things the hard way. One of its front legs had been badly broken and crookedly mended. Walking would be a chore for it, jumping out of the question. On its chest was a patch of dirty white fur. Growing out of this patch was black fur in a roughly cruciform shape. A Jesus-dog, mayhap, hoping for a spot of afternoon communion.

There was nothing very religious about the snarl which began to wind out of its chest, however, or the roll of its rheumy eyes. It lifted its upper lip in a trembling sneer, revealing a goodish set of teeth.

“Light out,” Roland said. “While you can.”

The dog backed up until its hindquarters were pressed against the chewed boot. It regarded the oncoming man fearfully, but clearly meant to stand its ground. The revolver in Roland’s hand held no significance for it. The

gunslinger wasn't surprised—he guessed the dog had never seen one, had no idea it was anything other than a club of some kind, which could only be thrown once.

“Hie on with you, now,” Roland said, but still the dog wouldn't move.

He should have shot it—it was no good to itself, and a dog that had acquired a taste for human flesh could be no good to anyone else—but he somehow didn't like to. Killing the only thing still living in this town (other than the singing bugs, that was) seemed like an invitation to bad luck.

He fired into the dust near the dog's good forepaw, the sound crashing into the hot day and temporarily silencing the insects. The dog *could* run, it seemed, although at a lurching trot that hurt Roland's eyes . . . and his heart, a little, too. It stopped at the far side of the square, by an overturned flatbed wagon (there looked to be more dried blood splashed on the freighter's side), and glanced back. It uttered a forlorn howl that raised the hairs on the nape of Roland's neck even further. Then it turned, skirted the wrecked wagon, and limped down a lane which opened between two of the stalls. This way toward Eluria's back gate, Roland guessed.

Still leading his dying horse, the gunslinger crossed the square to the ironwood trough and looked in.

The owner of the chewed boot wasn't a man but a boy who had just been beginning to get his man's growth—and that would have been quite a large growth, indeed, Roland judged, even setting aside the bloating effects which had resulted from being immersed for some unknown length of time in nine inches of water simmering under a summer sun.

The boy's eyes, now just milky balls, stared blindly up at the gunslinger like the eyes of a statue. His hair appeared to be the white of old age, although that was the effect of the water; he had likely been a towhead. His clothes were those of a cowboy, although he couldn't have been much more than fourteen or sixteen. Around his neck, gleaming blearily in water that was slowly turning into a skin stew under the summer sun, was a gold medallion.

Roland reached into the water, not liking to but feeling a certain obligation. He wrapped his fingers around the medallion and pulled. The chain parted, and he lifted the thing, dripping, into the air.

He rather expected a Jesus-Man *sigul*—what was called the crucifix or the rood—but a small rectangle hung from the chain, instead. The object looked like pure gold. Engraved into it was this legend:

*James*  
*Loved of family. Loved of GOD*

Roland, who had been almost too revolted to reach into the polluted water (as a younger man, he could never have brought himself to that), was now glad he'd done it. He might never run into any of those who had loved this boy, but he knew enough of *ka* to think it might be so. In any case, it was the right thing. So was giving the kid a decent burial . . . assuming, that was, he could get the body out of the trough without having it break apart inside the clothes.

Roland was considering this, trying to balance what might be his duty in this circumstance against his growing desire to get out of this town, when Topsy finally fell dead.

The roan went over with a creak of gear and a last whuffling groan as it hit the ground. Roland turned and saw eight people in the street, walking toward him in a line, like beaters who hope to flush out birds or drive small game. Their skin was waxy green. Folk wearing such skin would likely glow in the dark like ghosts. It was hard to tell their sex, and what could it matter—to them or anyone else? They were slow mutants, walking with the hunched deliberation of corpses reanimated by some arcane magic.

The dust had muffled their feet like carpet. With the dog banished, they might well have gotten within attacking distance if Topsy hadn't done Roland the favor of dying at such an opportune moment. No guns that Roland could see; they were armed with clubs. These were chair legs and table legs, for the most part, but Roland saw one that looked made rather than seized—it had a bristle of rusty nails sticking out of it, and he suspected it had once been the property of a saloon bouncer, possibly the one who kept school in The Bustling Pig.

Roland raised his pistol, aiming at the fellow in the center of the line. Now he could hear the shuffle of their feet, and the wet snuffle of their breathing. As if they all had bad chest colds.

*Came out of the mines, most likely, Roland thought. There are radium mines somewhere about. That would account for the skin. I wonder that the sun doesn't kill them.*

Then, as he watched, the one on the end—a creature with a face like melted candle wax—*did* die . . . or collapsed, at any rate. He (Roland was quite sure it was a male) went to his knees with a low, gobbling cry, groping for the hand of the thing walking next to it—something with a lumpy bald head and red sores sizzling on its neck. This creature took no notice of its fallen companion, but kept its dim eyes on Roland, lurching along in rough step with its remaining companions.

“Stop where you are!” Roland said. “’Ware me, if you’d live to see day’s end! ’Ware me very well!”

He spoke mostly to the one in the center, who wore ancient red suspenders over rags of shirt, and a filthy bowler hat. This gent had only one good eye, and it peered at the gunslinger with a greed as horrible as it was unmistakable. The one beside Bowler Hat (Roland believed this one might be a woman, with the dangling vestiges of breasts beneath the vest it wore) threw the chair leg it held. The arc was true, but the missile fell ten yards short.

Roland thumbed back the trigger of his revolver and fired again. This time the dirt displaced by the slug kicked up on the tattered remains of Bowler Hat’s shoe instead of on a lame dog’s paw.

The green folk didn’t run as the dog had, but they stopped, staring at him with their dull greed. Had the missing folk of Eluria finished up in these creatures’ stomachs? Roland couldn’t believe it . . . although he knew perfectly well that such as these held no scruple against cannibalism. (And perhaps it wasn’t cannibalism, not really; how could such things as these be considered human, whatever they might once have been?) They were too slow, too stupid. If they had dared come back into town after the Sheriff had run them out, they would have been burned or stoned to death.

Without thinking about what he was doing, wanting only to free his other hand to draw his second gun if the apparitions didn’t see reason, Roland stuffed the medallion that he had taken from the dead boy into the pocket of his jeans, pushing the broken fine-link chain in after.

They stood staring at him, their strangely twisted shadows drawn out behind them. What next? Tell them to go back where they'd come from? Roland didn't know if they'd do it, and in any case had decided he liked them best where he could see them. And at least there was no question now about staying to bury the boy named James; that conundrum had been solved.

"Stand steady," he said in the low speech, beginning to retreat. "First fellow that moves—"

Before he could finish, one of them—a thick-chested troll with a pouty toad's mouth and what looked like gills on the sides of his wattled neck—lunged forward, gibbering in a high-pitched and peculiarly flabby voice. It might have been a species of laughter. He was waving what looked like a piano leg.

Roland fired. Mr. Toad's chest caved in like a bad piece of roofing. He ran backward several steps, trying to catch his balance and clawing at his chest with the hand not holding the piano leg. His feet, clad in dirty red velvet slippers with curled-up toes, tangled in each other and he fell over, making a queer and somehow lonely gargling sound. He let go of his club, rolled over on one side, tried to rise, and then fell back into the dust. The brutal sun glared into his open eyes, and as Roland watched, white tendrils of steam began to rise from his skin, which was rapidly losing its green undertint. There was also a hissing sound, like a gob of spit on top of a hot stove.

*Saves explaining, at least,* Roland thought, and swept his eyes over the others. "All right; he was the first one to move. Who wants to be the second?"

None did, it seemed. They only stood there, watching him, not coming at him . . . but not retreating, either. He thought (as he had about the cross-dog) that he should kill them as they stood there, just draw his other gun and mow them down. It would be the work of seconds only, and child's play to his gifted hands, even if some ran. But he couldn't. Not just cold, like that. He wasn't that kind of killer . . . at least, not yet.

Very slowly, he began to step backward, first bending his course around the watering trough, then putting it between him and them. When Bowler Hat took a step forward, Roland didn't give the others in the line a chance to copy him; he put a bullet into the dust of the High Street an inch in advance of Bowler Hat's foot.

“That’s your last warning,” he said, still using the low speech. He had no idea if they understood it, didn’t really care. He guessed they caught this tune’s music well enough. “Next bullet I fire eats up someone’s heart. The way it works is, you stay and I go. You get this one chance. Follow me, and you all die. It’s too hot to play games and I’ve lost my—”

“Booh!” cried a rough, liquidy voice from behind him. There was unmistakable glee in it. Roland saw a shadow grow from the shadow of the overturned freight wagon, which he had now almost reached, and had just time to understand that another of the green folk had been hiding beneath it.

As he began to turn, a club crashed down on Roland’s shoulder, numbing his right arm all the way to the wrist. He held onto the gun and fired once, but the bullet went into one of the wagon wheels, smashing a wooden spoke and turning the wheel on its hub with a high screeing sound. Behind him, he heard the green folk in the street uttering hoarse, yapping cries as they charged forward.

The thing which had been hiding beneath the overturned wagon was a monster with two heads growing out of his neck, one with the vestigial, slack face of a corpse. The other, although just as green, was more lively. Broad lips spread in a cheerful grin as he raised his club to strike again.

Roland drew with his left hand—the one that wasn’t numbed and distant. He had time to put one bullet through the bushwhacker’s grin, flinging him backward in a spray of blood and teeth, the bludgeon flying out of his relaxing fingers. Then the others were on him, clubbing and drubbing.

The gunslinger was able to slip the first couple of blows, and there was one moment when he thought he might be able to spin around to the rear of the overturned wagon, spin and turn and go to work with his guns. Surely he would be able to do that. Surely his quest for the Dark Tower wasn’t supposed to end on the sun-blasted street of a little far western town called Eluria, at the hands of half a dozen green-skinned slow mutants. Surely *ka* could not be so cruel.

But Bowler Hat caught him with a vicious sidehand blow, and Roland crashed into the wagon’s slowly spinning rear wheel instead of skirting around it. As he went to his hands and knees, still scrambling and trying to turn, trying to evade the blows which rained down on him, he saw there were now

many more than half a dozen. Coming up the street toward the town square were at least thirty green men and women. This wasn't a clan but a damned *tribe* of them. And in broad, hot daylight! Slow mutants were, in his experience, creatures that loved the dark, almost like toadstools with brains, and he had never seen any such as these before. They—

The one in the red vest was female. Her bare breasts swinging beneath the dirty red vest were the last things he saw clearly as they gathered around and above him, bashing away with their clubs. The one with the nails studded in it came down on his lower right calf, sinking its stupid rusty fangs in deep. He tried again to raise one of the big guns (his vision was fading, now, but that wouldn't help them if he got to shooting; he had always been the most hellishly talented of them, Jamie DeCurry had once proclaimed that Roland could shoot blindfolded, because he had eyes in his fingers), and it was kicked out of his hand and into the dust. Although he could still feel the smooth sandalwood grip of the other, he thought it was nevertheless already gone.

He could smell them—the rich, rotted smell of decaying meat. Or was that only his hands, as he raised them in a feeble and useless effort to protect his head? His hands, which had been in the polluted water where flecks and strips of the dead boy's skin floated?

The clubs slamming down on him, slamming down all over him, as if the green folk wanted not just to beat him to death but to tenderize him as they did so. And as he went down into the darkness of what he most certainly believed would be his death, he heard the bugs singing, the dog he had spared barking, and the bells hung on the church door ringing. These sounds merged together into strangely sweet music. Then that was gone, too; the darkness ate it all.

## II. RISING. HANGING SUSPENDED. WHITE BEAUTY. TWO OTHERS. THE MEDALLION.

The gunslinger's return to the world wasn't like coming back to consciousness after a blow, which he'd done several times before, and it wasn't like waking from sleep, either. It was like rising.

*I'm dead*, he thought at some point during this process . . . when the power to think had been at least partially restored to him. *Dead and rising into whatever afterlife there is. That's what it must be. The singing I hear is the singing of dead souls.*

Total blackness gave way to the dark gray of rainclouds, then to the lighter gray of fog. This brightened to the uniform clarity of a heavy mist moments before the sun breaks through. And through it all was that sense of *rising*, as if he had been caught in some mild but powerful updraft.

As the sense of rising began to diminish and the brightness behind his eyelids grew, Roland at last began to believe he was still alive. It was the singing that convinced him. Not dead souls, not the heavenly host of angels sometimes described by the Jesus-Man preachers, but only those bugs. A little like crickets, but sweeter-voiced. The ones he had heard in Eluria.

On this thought, he opened his eyes.

His belief that he was still alive was severely tried, for Roland found himself hanging suspended in a world of white beauty—his first bewildered thought was that he was in the sky, floating within a fair-weather cloud. All around him was the reedy singing of the bugs. Now he could hear the tinkling of bells, too.

He tried to turn his head and swayed in some sort of harness. He could hear it creaking. The soft singing of the bugs, like crickets in the grass at the end of day back home in Gilead, hesitated and broke rhythm. When it did, what felt like a tree of pain grew up Roland's back. He had no idea what its burning branches might be, but the trunk was surely his spine. A far deadlier pain sank into one of his lower legs—in his confusion, the gunslinger could not tell which one. *That's where the club with the nails in it got me*, he thought. And more pain in his head. His skull felt like a badly cracked egg. He cried out, and could hardly believe that the harsh crow's caw he heard came from his own throat. He thought he could also hear, very faintly, the barking of the cross-dog, but surely that was his imagination.

*Am I dying? Have I awakened once more at the very end?*

A hand stroked his brow. He could feel it but not see it—fingers trailing across his skin, pausing here and there to massage a knot or a line. Delicious, like a drink of cool water on a hot day. He began to close his eyes, and then a

horrible idea came to him: suppose that hand were green, its owner wearing a tattered red vest over her hanging duggs?

*What if it is? What could you do?*

“Hush, man,” a young woman’s voice said . . . or perhaps it was the voice of a girl. Certainly the first person Roland thought of was Susan, the girl from Mejis, she who had spoken to him as *thee*.

“Where . . . where . . .”

“Hush, stir not. ’Tis far too soon.”

The pain in his back was subsiding now, but the image of the pain as a tree remained, for his very skin seemed to be moving like leaves in a light breeze. How could that be?

He let the question go—let all questions go—and concentrated on the small, cool hand stroking his brow.

“Hush, pretty man, God’s love be upon ye. Yet it’s sore hurt ye are. Be still. Heal.”

The dog had hushed its barking (if it had ever been there in the first place), and Roland became aware of that low creaking sound again. It reminded him of horse tethers, or something

*(hangropes)*

he didn’t like to think of. Now he believed he could feel pressure beneath his thighs, his buttocks, and perhaps . . . yes . . . his shoulders.

*I’m not in a bed at all. I think I’m above a bed. Can that be?*

He supposed he could be in a sling. He seemed to remember once, as a boy, that some fellow had been suspended that way in the horse doctor’s room behind the Great Hall. A stablehand who had been burned too badly by kerosene to be laid in a bed. The man had died, but not soon enough; for two nights, his shrieks had filled the sweet summer air of the Gathering Fields.

*Am I burned, then, nothing but a cinder with legs, hanging in a sling?*

The fingers touched the center of his brow, rubbing away the frown forming there. And it was as if the voice which went with the hand had read his thoughts, picking them up with the tips of her clever, soothing fingers.

“Ye’ll be fine if God wills, sai,” the voice which went with the hand said. “But time belongs to God, not to you.”

*No, he would have said, if he had been able. Time belongs to the Tower.*

Then he slipped down again, descending as smoothly as he had risen, going away from the hand and the dreamlike sounds of the singing insects and chiming bells. There was an interval that might have been sleep, or perhaps unconsciousness, but he never went all the way back down.

At one point he thought he heard the girl's voice, although he couldn't be sure, because this time it was raised in fury, or fear, or both. "No!" she cried. "Ye can't have it off him and ye know it! Go your course and stop talking of it, do!"

When he rose back to consciousness the second time, he was no stronger in body, but a little more himself in mind. What he saw when he opened his eyes wasn't the inside of a cloud, but at first that same phrase—*white beauty*—recurred to him. It was in some ways the most beautiful place Roland had ever been in his life . . . partially because he still *had* a life, of course, but mostly because it was so fey and peaceful.

It was a huge room, high and long. When Roland at last turned his head—cautiously, so cautiously—to take its measure as well as he could, he thought it must run at least two hundred yards from end to end. It was built narrow, but its height gave the place a feeling of tremendous airiness.

There were no walls or ceilings such as those he was familiar with, although it was a little like being in a vast tent. Above him, the sun struck and diffused its light across billowy panels of thin white silk, turning them into the bright swags that he had first mistaken for clouds. Beneath this silk canopy, the room was as gray as twilight. The walls, also silk, rippled like sails in a faint breeze. Hanging from each wall panel was a curved rope bearing small bells. These lay against the fabric and rang in low and charming unison, like wind chimes, when the walls rippled.

An aisle ran down the center of the long room; on either side of it were scores of beds, each made up with clean white sheets and headed with crisp white pillows. There were perhaps forty on the far side of the aisle, all empty, and another forty on Roland's side. There were two other occupied beds here, one next to Roland on his right. This fellow—

*It's the boy. The one who was in the trough.*

The idea ran goose-bumps up Roland's arms and gave him a nasty, superstitious start. He peered more closely at the sleeping boy.

*Can't be. You're just dazed, that's all; it can't be.*

Yet closer scrutiny refused to dispel the idea. It certainly *seemed* to be the boy from the trough, probably ill (why else would he be in a place like this?) but far from dead; Roland could see the slow rise and fall of his chest, and the occasional twitch of the fingers that dangled over the side of the bed.

*You didn't get a good enough look at him to be sure of anything, and after a few days in that trough, his own mother couldn't have said for sure who it was.*

But Roland, who'd had a mother, knew better than that. He also knew that he'd seen the gold medallion around the boy's neck. Just before the attack of the green folk, he had taken it from this lad's corpse and put it in his pocket. Now someone—the proprietors of this place, most likely, those who had sorcerously restored the lad named James to his interrupted life—had taken it back from Roland and put it around the boy's neck again.

Had the girl with the wonderfully cool hand done that? Did she in consequence think Roland a ghoul who would steal from the dead? He didn't like to think so. In fact, the notion made him more uncomfortable than the idea that the young cowboy's bloated body had been somehow returned to its normal size and then reanimated.

Farther down the aisle on this side, perhaps a dozen empty beds away from the boy and Roland Deschain, the gunslinger saw a third inmate of this queer infirmary. This fellow looked at least four times the age of the lad, twice the age of the gunslinger. He had a long beard, more gray than black, that hung to his upper chest in two straggly forks. The face above it was sun-darkened, heavily lined, and pouched beneath the eyes. Running from his left cheek and across the bridge of his nose was a thick dark mark which Roland took to be a scar. The bearded man was either asleep or unconscious—Roland could hear him snoring—and was suspended three feet above his bed, held up by a complex series of white belts that glimmered in the dim air. These crisscrossed each other, making a series of figure eights all the way around the man's body. He looked like a bug in some exotic spider's web. He wore a gauzy white bed-dress. One of the belts ran beneath his buttocks, elevating his crotch in a way that seemed to offer the bulge of his privates to the gray and dreaming air. Farther down his body, Roland could see the dark shadow-shapes of his legs. They appeared to be twisted like ancient dead trees. Roland didn't like to think

in how many places they must have been broken to look like that. And yet they appeared to be *moving*. How could they be, if the bearded man was unconscious? It was a trick of the light, perhaps, or of the shadows . . . perhaps the gauzy singlet the man was wearing was stirring in a light breeze, or . . .

Roland looked away, up at the billowy silk panels high above, trying to control the accelerating beat of his heart. What he saw hadn't been caused by the wind, or a shadow, or anything else. The man's legs were somehow moving without moving . . . as Roland had seemed to feel his own back moving without moving. He didn't know what could cause such a phenomenon, and didn't want to know, at least not yet.

"I'm not ready," he whispered. His lips felt very dry. He closed his eyes again, wanting to sleep, wanting not to think about what the bearded man's twisted legs might indicate about his own condition. But—

*But you'd better get ready.*

That was the voice that always seemed to come when he tried to slack off, to scamp a job or take the easy way around an obstacle. It was the voice of Cort, his old teacher. The man whose stick they had all feared, as boys. They hadn't feared his stick as much as his mouth, however. His jeers when they were weak, his contempt when they complained or tried whining about their lot.

*Are you a gunslinger, Roland? If you are, you better get ready.*

Roland opened his eyes again and turned his head to the left again. As he did, he felt something shift against his chest.

Moving very slowly, he raised his right hand out of the sling that held it. The pain in his back stirred and muttered. He stopped moving until he decided the pain was going to get no worse (if he was careful, at least), then lifted the hand the rest of the way to his chest. It encountered finely woven cloth. Cotton. He moved his chin to his breastbone and saw that he was wearing a bed-dress like the one draped on the body of the bearded man.

Roland reached beneath the neck of the gown and felt a fine chain. A little farther down, his fingers encountered a rectangular metal shape. He thought he knew what it was, but had to be sure. He pulled it out, still moving with great care, trying not to engage any of the muscles in his back. A gold medallion. He dared the pain, lifting it until he could read what was engraved upon it:

*James*  
*Loved of family. Loved of GOD*

He tucked it into the top of the bed-dress again and looked back at the sleeping boy in the next bed—in it, not suspended over it. The sheet was only pulled up to the boy's rib cage, and the medallion lay on the pristine white breast of his bed-dress. The same medallion Roland now wore. Except . . .

Roland thought he understood, and understanding was a relief.

He looked back at the bearded man, and saw an exceedingly strange thing: the thick black line of scar across the bearded man's cheek and nose was gone. Where it had been was the pinkish-red mark of a healing wound . . . a cut, or perhaps a slash.

*I imagined it.*

*No, gunslinger, Cort's voice returned. Such as you was not made to imagine. As you well know.*

The little bit of movement had tired him out again . . . or perhaps it was the thinking which had really tired him out. The singing bugs and chiming bells combined had made something too much like a lullaby to resist. This time when Roland closed his eyes, he slept.

III. FIVE SISTERS. JENNA. THE DOCTORS OF ELURIA. THE MEDALLION. A  
PROMISE OF SILENCE.

When Roland awoke again, he was at first sure that he was still sleeping. Dreaming. Having a nightmare.

Once, at the time he had met and fallen in love with Susan Delgado, he had known a witch named Rhea—the first real witch of Mid-World he had ever met. It was she who had caused Susan's death, although Roland had played his own part. Now, opening his eyes and seeing Rhea not just once but five times over, he thought: *This is what comes of remembering those old times. By conjuring Susan, I've conjured Rhea of the Cöös, as well. Rhea and her sisters.*

The five were dressed in billowing habits as white as the walls and the panels of the ceiling. Their antique crones' faces were framed in wimples just as white, their skin as gray and runneled as droughted earth by comparison. Hanging

like phylacteries from the bands of silk imprisoning their hair (if they indeed had hair) were lines of tiny bells which chimed as they moved or spoke. Upon the snowy breasts of their habits was embroidered a blood-red rose . . . the *sigul* of the Dark Tower. Seeing this, Roland thought: *I am not dreaming. These harridans are real.*

“He wakes!” one of them cried in a gruesomely coquettish voice.

“Oooo!”

“Ooooh!”

“Ah!”

They fluttered like birds. The one in the center stepped forward, and as she did, their faces seemed to shimmer like the silk walls of the ward. They weren't old after all, he saw—middle-aged, perhaps, but not old.

*Yes. They are old. They changed.*

The one who now took charge was taller than the others, and with a broad, slightly bulging brow. She bent toward Roland, and the bells that fringed her forehead tinkled. The sound made him feel sick, somehow, and weaker than he had felt a moment before. Her hazel eyes were intent. Greedy, mayhap. She touched his cheek for a moment, and a numbness seemed to spread there. Then she glanced down, and a look which could have been disquiet cramped her face. She took her hand back.

“Ye wake, pretty man. So ye do. 'Tis well.”

“Who are you? Where am I?”

“We are the Little Sisters of Eluria,” she said. “I am Sister Mary. Here is Sister Louise, and Sister Michela, and Sister Coquina—”

“And Sister Tamra,” said the last. “A lovely lass of one-and-twenty.” She giggled. Her face shimmered, and for a moment she was again as old as the world. Hooked of nose, gray of skin. Roland thought once more of Rhea.

They moved closer, encircling the complication of harness in which he lay suspended, and when Roland shrank back, the pain roared up his back and injured leg again. He groaned. The straps holding him creaked.

“Ooooo!”

“It hurts!”

“Hurts him!”

“Hurts so fierce!”

They pressed even closer, as if his pain fascinated them. And now he could smell them, a dry and earthy smell. The one named Sister Michela reached out —

“Go away! Leave him! Have I not told ye before?”

They jumped back from this voice, startled. Sister Mary looked particularly annoyed. But she stepped back, with one final glare (Roland would have sworn it) at the medallion lying on his chest. He had tucked it back under the bed-dress at his last waking, but it was out again now.

A sixth sister appeared, pushing rudely in between Mary and Tamra. This one perhaps *was* only one-and-twenty, with flushed cheeks, smooth skin, and dark eyes. Her white habit billowed like a dream. The red rose over her breast stood out like a curse.

“Go! Leave him!”

“Oooo, my *dear!*” cried Sister Louise in a voice both laughing and angry. “Here’s Jenna, the baby, and has she fallen in love with him?”

“She has!” Tamra said, laughing. “Baby’s heart is his for the purchase!”

“Oh, so it *is!*” agreed Sister Coquina.

Mary turned to the newcomer, lips pursed into a tight line. “Ye have no business here, saucy girl.”

“I do if I say I do,” Sister Jenna replied. She seemed more in charge of herself now. A curl of black hair had escaped her wimple and lay across her forehead in a comma. “Now go. He’s not up to your jokes and laughter.”

“Order us not,” Sister Mary said, “for we never joke. So you know, Sister Jenna.”

The girl’s face softened a little, and Roland saw she was afraid. It made him afraid for her. For himself, as well. “Go,” she repeated. “’Tis not the time. Are there not others to tend?”

Sister Mary seemed to consider. The others watched her. At last she nodded, and smiled down at Roland. Again her face seemed to shimmer, like something seen through a heat-haze. What he saw (or thought he saw) beneath was horrible and watchful. “Bide well, pretty man,” she said to Roland. “Bide with us a bit, and we’ll heal ye.”

*What choice have I?* Roland thought.

The others laughed, birdlike titters which rose into the dimness like ribbons. Sister Michela actually blew him a kiss.

“Come, ladies!” Sister Mary cried. “We’ll leave Jenna with him a bit in memory of her mother, whom we loved well!” And with that, she led the others away, five white birds flying off down the center aisle, their skirts nodding this way and that.

“Thank you,” Roland said, looking up at the owner of the cool hand . . . for he knew it was she who had soothed him.

She took up his fingers as if to prove this, and caressed them. “They mean ye no harm,” she said . . . yet Roland saw she believed not a word of it, nor did he. He was in trouble here, very bad trouble.

“What is this place?”

“Our place,” she said simply. “The home of the Little Sisters of Eluria. Our convent, if’ee like.”

“This is no convent,” Roland said, looking past her at the empty beds. “It’s an infirmary. Isn’t it?”

“A hospital,” she said, still stroking his fingers. “We serve the doctors . . . and they serve us.” He was fascinated by the black curl lying on the cream of her brow—would have stroked it, if he had dared reach up. Just to tell its texture. He found it beautiful because it was the only dark thing in all this white. The white had lost its charm for him. “We are hospitalers . . . or were, before the world moved on.”

“Are you for the Jesus Man?”

She looked surprised for a moment, almost shocked, and then laughed merrily. “No, not us!”

“If you are hospitalers . . . nurses . . . where are the doctors?”

She looked at him, biting at her lip, as if trying to decide something. Roland found her doubt utterly charming, and he realized that, sick or not, he was looking at a woman *as* a woman for the first time since Susan Delgado had died, and that had been long ago. The whole world had changed since then, and not for the better.

“Would you really know?”

“Yes, of course,” he said, a little surprised. A little disquieted, too. He kept waiting for her face to shimmer and change, as the faces of the others had

done. It didn't. There was none of that unpleasant dead-earth smell about her, either.

*Wait*, he cautioned himself. *Believe nothing here, least of all your senses. Not yet.*

"I suppose you must," she said with a sigh. It tinkled the bells at her forehead, which were darker in color than those the others wore—not black like her hair but charry, somehow, as if they had been hung in the smoke of a campfire. Their sound, however, was brightest silver. "Promise me you'll not scream and wake the pube in yonder bed."

"Pube?"

"The boy. Do ye promise?"

"Aye," he said, falling into the half-forgotten patois of the Outer Arc without even being aware of it. Susan's dialect. "It's been long since I screamed, pretty."

She colored more definitely at that, roses more natural and lively than the one on her breast mounting in her cheeks.

"Don't call pretty what ye can't properly see," she said.

"Then push back the wimple you wear."

Her face he could see perfectly well, but he badly wanted to see her hair—hungered for it, almost. A full flood of black in all this dreaming white. Of course it might be cropped, those of her order might wear it that way, but he somehow didn't think so.

"No, 'tis not allowed."

"By whom?"

"Big Sister."

"She who calls herself Mary?"

"Aye, her." She started away, then paused and looked back over her shoulder. In another girl her age, one as pretty as this, that look back would have been flirtatious. This girl's was only grave.

"Remember your promise."

"Aye, no screams."

She went to the bearded man, skirt swinging. In the dimness, she cast only a blur of shadow on the empty beds she passed. When she reached the man

(this one was unconscious, Roland thought, not just sleeping), she looked back at Roland once more. He nodded.

Sister Jenna stepped close to the suspended man, on the far side of his bed, so that Roland saw her through the twists and loops of woven white silk. She placed her hands lightly on the left side of his chest, bent over him . . . and shook her head from side to side, like one expressing a brisk negative. The bells she wore on her forehead rang sharply, and Roland once more felt that weird stirring up his back, accompanied by a low ripple of pain. It was as if he had shuddered without actually shuddering, or shuddered in a dream.

What happened next almost *did* jerk a scream from him; he had to bite his lips against it. Once more the unconscious man's legs seemed to move without moving . . . because it was what was *on* them that moved. The man's hairy shins, ankles, and feet were exposed below the hem of his bed-dress. Now a black wave of bugs moved down them. They were singing fiercely, like an army column that sings as it marches.

Roland remembered the black scar across the man's cheek and nose—the scar that had disappeared. More such as these, of course. And they were on *him*, as well. That was how he could shiver without shivering. They were all over his back. *Battening* on him.

No, keeping back a scream wasn't as easy as he had expected it to be.

The bugs ran down to the tips of the suspended man's toes, then leaped off them in waves, like creatures springing off an embankment and into a swimming hole. They organized themselves quickly and easily on the bright white sheet below, and began to march down to the floor in a battalion about a foot wide. Roland couldn't get a good look at them, the distance was too far and the light too dim, but he thought they were perhaps twice the size of ants, and a little smaller than the fat honeybees which had swarmed the flower beds back home.

They sang as they went.

The bearded man didn't sing. As the swarms of bugs that had coated his twisted legs began to diminish, he shuddered and groaned. The young woman put her hand on his brow and soothed him, making Roland a little jealous even in his revulsion at what he was seeing.

And was what he was seeing really so awful? In Gilead, leeches had been used for certain ailments—swellings of the brain, the armpits, and the groin, primarily. When it came to the brain, the leeches, ugly as they were, were certainly preferable to the next step, which was trepanning.

Yet there *was* something loathsome about them, perhaps only because he couldn't see them well, and something awful about trying to imagine them all over his back as he hung here, helpless. Not singing, though. Why? Because they were feeding? Sleeping? Both at once?

The bearded man's groans subsided. The bugs marched away across the floor, toward one of the mildly rippling silken walls. Roland lost sight of them in the shadows.

Jenna came back to him, her eyes anxious. "Ye did well. Yet I see how ye feel; it's on your face."

"The doctors," he said.

"Yes. Their power is very great, but . . ." She dropped her voice. "I believe that drover is beyond their help. His legs are a little better, and the wounds on his face are all but healed, but he has injuries where the doctors cannot reach." She traced a hand across her midsection, suggesting the location of these injuries, if not their nature.

"And me?" Roland asked.

"Ye were ta'en by the green folk," she said. "Ye must have angered them powerfully, for them not to kill ye outright. They roped ye and dragged ye, instead. Tamra, Michela, and Louise were out gathering herbs. They saw the green folk at play with ye, and bade them stop, but—"

"Do the muties always obey you, Sister Jenna?"

She smiled, perhaps pleased he remembered her name. "Not always, but mostly. This time they did, or ye'd have now found the clearing in the trees."

"I suppose so."

"The skin was stripped almost clean off your back—red ye were from nape to waist. Ye'll always bear the scars, but the doctors have gone far toward healing ye. And their singing is passing fair, is it not?"

"Yes," Roland said, but the thought of those black things all over his back, roosting in his raw flesh, still revolted him. "I owe you thanks, and give it freely. Anything I can do for you—"

“Tell me your name, then. Do that.”

“I’m Roland of Gilead. A gunslinger. I had revolvers, Sister Jenna. Have you seen them?”

“I’ve seen no shooters,” she said, but cast her eyes aside. The roses bloomed in her cheeks again. She might be a good nurse, and fair, but Roland thought her a poor liar. He was glad. Good liars were common. Honesty, on the other hand, came dear.

*Let the untruth pass for now, he told himself. She speaks it out of fear, I think.*

“Jenna!” The cry came from the deeper shadows at the far end of the infirmary—today it seemed longer than ever to the gunslinger—and Sister Jenna jumped guiltily. “Come away! Ye’ve passed words enough to entertain twenty men! Let him sleep!”

“Aye!” she called, then turned back to Roland. “Don’t let on that I showed you the doctors.”

“Mum is the word, Jenna.”

She paused, biting her lip again, then suddenly swept back her wimple. It fell against the nape of her neck in a soft chiming of bells. Freed from its confinement, her hair swept against her cheeks like shadows.

“*Am* I pretty? *Am* I? Tell me the truth, Roland of Gilead—no flattery. For flattery’s kind only a candle’s length.”

“Pretty as a summer night.”

What she saw in his face seemed to please her more than his words, because she smiled radiantly. She pulled the wimple up again, tucking her hair back in with quick little finger-pokes. “Am I decent?”

“Decent as fair,” he said, then cautiously lifted an arm and pointed at her brow. “One curl’s out . . . just there.”

“Aye, always that one to devil me.” With a comical little grimace, she tucked it back. Roland thought how much he would like to kiss her rosy cheeks . . . and perhaps her rosy mouth for good measure.

“All’s well,” he said.

“*Jenna!*” The cry was more impatient than ever. “Meditations!”

“I’m coming just now!” she called, and gathered her voluminous skirts to go. Yet she turned back once more, her face now very grave and very serious. “One more thing,” she said in a voice only a step above a whisper. She

snatched a quick look around. “The gold medallion ye wear—ye wear it because it’s yours. Do’ee understand . . . James?”

“Yes.” He turned his head a bit to look at the sleeping boy. “This is my brother.”

“If they ask, yes. To say different would be to get Jenna in serious trouble.”

How serious he did not ask, and she was gone in any case, seeming to flow along the aisle between all the empty beds, her skirt caught up in one hand. The roses had fled from her face, leaving her cheeks and brow ashy. He remembered the greedy look on the faces of the others, how they had gathered around him in a tightening knot . . . and the way their faces had shimmered.

Six women, five old and one young.

Doctors that sang and then crawled away across the floor when dismissed by jingling bells.

And an improbable hospital ward of perhaps a hundred beds, a ward with a silk roof and silk walls . . .

. . . and all the beds empty save three.

Roland didn’t understand why Jenna had taken the dead boy’s medallion from his pants pocket and put it around his neck, but he had an idea that if they found out she had done so, the Little Sisters of Eluria might kill her.

Roland closed his eyes, and the soft singing of the doctor-insects once again floated him off into sleep.

#### IV. A BOWL OF SOUP. THE BOY IN THE NEXT BED. THE NIGHT-NURSES.

Roland dreamed that a very large bug (a doctor-bug, mayhap) was flying around his head and banging repeatedly into his nose—collisions which were annoying rather than painful. He swiped at the bug repeatedly, and although his hands were eerily fast under ordinary circumstances, he kept missing it. And each time he missed, the bug giggled.

*I’m slow because I’ve been sick*, he thought.

No, ambushed. Dragged across the ground by slow mutants, saved by the Little Sisters of Eluria.

Roland had a sudden, vivid image of a man’s shadow growing from the shadow of an overturned freight wagon; heard a rough, gleeful voice cry

“Booh!”

He jerked awake hard enough to set his body rocking in its complication of slings, and the woman who had been standing beside his head, giggling as she tapped his nose lightly with a wooden spoon, stepped back so quickly that the bowl in her other hand slipped from her fingers.

Roland’s hands shot out, and they were as quick as ever—his frustrated failure to catch the bug had been only part of his dream. He caught the bowl before more than a few drops could spill. The woman—Sister Coquina—looked at him with round eyes.

There was pain all up and down his back from the sudden movement, but it was nowhere near as sharp as it had been before, and there was no sensation of movement on his skin. Perhaps the “doctors” were only sleeping, but he had an idea they were gone.

He held out his hand for the spoon Coquina had been teasing him with (he found he wasn’t surprised at all that one of these would tease a sick and sleeping man in such a way; it would have surprised him only if it had been Jenna), and she handed it to him, her eyes still big.

“How speedy ye are!” she said. “Twas like a magic trick, and you still rising from sleep!”

“Remember it, sai,” he said, and tried the soup. There were tiny bits of chicken floating in it. He probably would have considered it bland under other circumstances, but under these, it seemed ambrosial. He began to eat greedily.

“What do’ee mean by that?” she asked. The light was very dim now, the wall panels across the way a pinkish orange that suggested sunset. In this light, Coquina looked quite young and pretty . . . but it was a glamour, Roland was sure; a sorcerous kind of makeup.

“I mean nothing in particular.” Roland dismissed the spoon as too slow, preferring to tilt the bowl itself to his lips. In this way he disposed of the soup in four large gulps. “You have been kind to me—”

“Aye, so we *have!*” she said, rather indignantly.

“—and I hope your kindness has no hidden motive. If it does, Sister, remember that I’m quick. And, as for myself, I have not always been kind.”

She made no reply, only took the bowl when Roland handed it back. She did this delicately, perhaps not wanting to touch his fingers. Her eyes dropped

to where the medallion lay, once more hidden beneath the breast of his bed-dress. He said no more, not wanting to weaken the implied threat by reminding her that the man who made it was unarmed, next to naked, and hung in the air because his back couldn't yet bear the weight of his body.

"Where's Sister Jenna?" he asked.

"Oooo," Sister Coquina said, raising her eyebrows. "We like her, do we? She makes our heart go . . ." She put her hand against the rose on her breast and fluttered it rapidly.

"Not at all, not at all," Roland said, "but she was kind. I doubt she would have teased me with a spoon, as some would."

Sister Coquina's smile faded. She looked both angry and worried. "Say nothing of that to Mary, if she comes by later. Ye might get me in trouble."

"Should I care?"

"I might get back at one who caused me trouble by causing little Jenna trouble," Sister Coquina said. "She's in Big Sister's black books, just now, anyway. Sister Mary doesn't care for the way Jenna spoke to her about ye . . . nor does she like it that Jenna came back to us wearing the Dark Bells."

This was scarcely out of her mouth before Sister Coquina put her hand over that frequently imprudent organ, as if realizing she had said too much.

Roland, intrigued by what she'd said but not liking to show it just now, only replied, "I'll keep my mouth shut about you, if you keep your mouth shut to Sister Mary about Jenna."

Coquina looked relieved. "Aye, that's a bargain." She leaned forward confidingly. "She's in Thoughtful House. That's the little cave in the hillside where we have to go and meditate when Big Sister decides we've been bad. She'll have to stay and consider her impudence until Mary lets her out." She paused, then said abruptly, "Who's this beside ye? Do ye know?"

Roland turned his head and saw that the young man was awake, and had been listening. His eyes were as dark as Jenna's.

"Know him?" Roland asked, with what he hoped was the right touch of scorn. "Should I not know my own brother?"

"Is he, now, and him so young and you so old?" Another of the sisters materialized out of the darkness: Sister Tamra, who had called herself one-and-twenty. In the moment before she reached Roland's bed, her face was that of a

hag who will never see eighty again . . . or ninety. Then it shimmered and was once more the plump, healthy countenance of a thirty-year-old matron. Except for the eyes. They remained yellowish in the corneas, gummy in the corners, and watchful.

“He’s the youngest, I the eldest,” Roland said. “Betwixt us are seven others, and twenty years of our parents’ lives.”

“How sweet! And if he’s yer brother, then ye’ll know his name, won’t ye? Know it very well.”

Before the gunslinger could flounder, the young man said, “They think you’ve forgotten such a simple hook as John Norman. What culleens they be, eh, Jimmy?”

Coquina and Tamra looked at the pale boy in the bed next to Roland’s, clearly angry . . . and clearly trumped. For the time being, at least.

“You’ve fed him your muck,” the boy (whose medallion undoubtedly proclaimed him *John, Loved of family. Loved of GOD*) said. “Why don’t you go, and let us have a natter?”

“Well!” Sister Coquina huffed. “I like the gratitude around here, so I do!”

“I’m grateful for what’s given me,” Norman responded, looking at her steadily, “but not for what folk would take away.”

Tamra snorted through her nose, turned violently enough for her swirling dress to push a draught of air into Roland’s face, and then took her leave. Coquina stayed a moment.

“Be discreet, and mayhap someone ye like better than ye like me will get out of hack in the morning, instead of a week from tonight.”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and followed Sister Tamra.

Roland and John Norman waited until they were both gone, and then Norman turned to Roland and spoke in a low voice. “My brother. Dead?”

Roland nodded. “The medallion I took in case I should meet with any of his people. It rightly belongs to you. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thankee-sai.” John Norman’s lower lip trembled, then firmed. “I knew the green men did for him, although these old biddies wouldn’t tell me for sure. They did for plenty, and scotched the rest.”

“Perhaps the Sisters didn’t know for sure.”

“They knew. Don’t you doubt it. They don’t say much, but they know *plenty*. The only one any different is Jenna. That’s who the old battle-axe meant when she said ‘your friend.’ Aye?”

Roland nodded. “And she said something about the Dark Bells. I’d know more of that, if would were could.”

“She’s something special, Jenna is. More like a princess—someone whose place is made by bloodline and can’t be refused—than like the other Sisters. I lie here and look like I’m asleep—it’s safer, I think—but I’ve heard em talking. Jenna’s just come back among em recently, and those Dark Bells mean something special . . . but Mary’s still the one who swings the weight. I think the Dark Bells are only ceremonial, like the rings the old Barons used to hand down from father to son. Was it she who put Jimmy’s medal around your neck?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t take it off, whatever you do.” His face was strained, grim. “I don’t know if it’s the gold or the God, but they don’t like to get too close. I think that’s the only reason I’m still here.” Now his voice dropped all the way to a whisper. “They ain’t human.”

“Well, perhaps a bit fey and magical, but . . .”

“No!” With what was clearly an effort, the boy got up on one elbow. He looked at Roland earnestly. “You’re thinking about hubberwomen, or witches. These ain’t hubbers, nor witches, either. *They ain’t human!*”

“Then what are they?”

“Don’t know.”

“How came you here, John?”

Speaking in a low voice, John Norman told Roland what he knew of what had happened to him. He, his brother, and four other young men who were quick and owned good horses had been hired as scouts, riding drogue-and-forward, protecting a long-haul caravan of seven freight wagons taking goods—seeds, food, tools, mail, and four ordered brides—to an unincorporated township called Tejuas some two hundred miles farther west of Eluria. The scouts rode fore and aft of the goods-train in turn-and-turn-about fashion; one brother rode with each party because, Norman explained, when they were together they fought like . . . well . . .

“Like brothers,” Roland suggested.

John Norman managed a brief, pained smile. “Aye,” he said.

The trio of which John was a part had been riding drogue, about two miles behind the freight wagons, when the green mutants had sprung an ambush in Eluria.

“How many wagons did you see when you got there?” he asked Roland.

“Only one. Overturned.”

“How many bodies?”

“Only your brother’s.”

John Norman nodded grimly. “They wouldn’t take him because of the medallion, I think.”

“The muties?”

“The Sisters. The muties care nothing for gold or God. These bitches, though . . .” He looked into the dark, which was now almost complete. Roland felt lethargy creeping over him again, but it wasn’t until later that he realized the soup had been drugged.

“The other wagons?” Roland asked. “The ones not overturned?”

“The muties would have taken them, and the goods, as well,” Norman said. “They don’t care for gold or God; the Sisters don’t care for goods. Like as not they have their own foodstuffs, something I’d as soon not think of. Nasty stuff . . . like those bugs.”

He and the other drogue riders galloped into Eluria, but the fight was over by the time they got there. Men had been lying about, some dead but many more still alive. At least two of the ordered brides had still been alive, as well. Survivors able to walk were being herded together by the green folk—John Norman remembered the one in the bowler hat very well, and the woman in the ragged red vest.

Norman and the other two had tried to fight. He had seen one of his pards gutshot by an arrow, and then he saw no more—someone had cracked him over the head from behind, and the lights had gone out.

Roland wondered if the ambusher had cried “Booh!” before he had struck, but didn’t ask.

“When I woke up again, I was here,” Norman said. “I saw that some of the others—*most* of them—had those cursed bugs on them.”

“Others?” Roland looked at the empty beds. In the growing darkness, they glimmered like white islands. “How many were brought here?”

“At least twenty. They healed . . . the bugs healed em . . . and then, one by one, they disappeared. You’d go to sleep, and when you woke up there’d be one more empty bed. One by one they went, until only me and that one down yonder was left.”

He looked at Roland solemnly.

“And now you.”

“Norman,” Roland’s head was swimming. “I—”

“I reckon I know what’s wrong with you,” Norman said. He seemed to speak from far away . . . perhaps from all the way around the curve of the earth. “It’s the soup. But a man has to eat. A woman, too. If she’s a natural woman, anyway. These ones ain’t natural. Even Sister Jenna’s not natural. Nice don’t mean natural.” Farther and farther away. “And she’ll be like them in the end. Mark me well.”

“Can’t move.” Saying even that required a huge effort. It was like moving boulders.

“No.” Norman suddenly laughed. It was a shocking sound, and echoed in the growing blackness which filled Roland’s head. “It ain’t just sleep medicine they put in their soup; it’s can’t-move medicine, too. There’s nothing much wrong with me, brother . . . so why do you think I’m still here?”

Norman was now speaking not from around the curve of the earth but perhaps from the moon. He said: “I don’t think either of us is ever going to see the sun shining on a flat piece of ground again.”

*You’re wrong about that,* Roland tried to reply, and more in that vein, as well, but nothing came out. He sailed around to the black side of the moon, losing all his words in the void he found there.

Yet he never quite lost awareness of himself. Perhaps the dose of “medicine” in Sister Coquina’s soup had been badly calculated, or perhaps it was just that they had never had a gunslinger to work their mischief on, and did not know they had one now.

Except, of course, for Sister Jenna—*she* knew.

At some point in the night, whispering, giggling voices and lightly chiming bells brought him back from the darkness where he had been biding, not quite

asleep or unconscious. Around him, so constant he now barely heard it, were the singing “doctors.”

Roland opened his eyes. He saw pale and chancy light dancing in the black air. The giggles and whispers were closer. Roland tried to turn his head and at first couldn't. He rested, gathered his will into a hard blue ball, and tried again. This time his head *did* turn. Only a little, but a little was enough.

It was five of the Little Sisters—Mary, Louise, Tamra, Coquina, Michela. They came up the long aisle of the black infirmary, laughing together like children out on a prank, carrying long tapers in silver holders, the bells lining the forehead-bands of their wimples chiming little silver runs of sound. They gathered about the bed of the bearded man. From within their circle, candleglow rose in a shimmery column that died before it got halfway to the silken ceiling.

Sister Mary spoke briefly. Roland recognized her voice, but not the words—it was neither low speech nor the High, but some other language entirely. One phrase stood out—*can de lach, mi him en tow*—and he had no idea what it might mean.

He realized that now he could hear only the tinkle of bells—the doctor-bugs had stilled.

“*Ras me! On! On!*” Sister Mary cried in a harsh, powerful voice. The candles went out. The light that had shone through the wings of their wimples as they gathered around the bearded man's bed vanished, and all was darkness once more.

Roland waited for what might happen next, his skin cold. He tried to flex his hands or feet, and could not. He had been able to move his head perhaps fifteen degrees; otherwise he was as paralyzed as a fly neatly wrapped up and hung in a spider's web.

The low jingling of bells in the black . . . and then sucking sounds. As soon as he heard them, Roland knew he'd been waiting for them. Some part of him had known what the Little Sisters of Eluria were, all along.

If Roland could have raised his hands, he would have put them to his ears to block those sounds out. As it was, he could only lie still, listening and waiting for them to stop.

For a long time—forever, it seemed—they did not. The women slurped and grunted like pigs snuffling half-liquefied feed up out of a trough. There was even one resounding belch, followed by more whispered giggles (these ended when Sister Mary uttered a single curt word—“*Hais!*”). And once there was a low, moaning cry—from the bearded man, Roland was quite sure. If so, it was his last on this side of the clearing.

In time, the sounds of their feeding began to taper off. As it did, the bugs began to sing again—first hesitantly, then with more confidence. The whispering and giggling recommenced. The candles were relit. Roland was by now lying with his head turned in the other direction. He didn’t want them to know what he’d seen, but that wasn’t all; he had no urge to see more on any account. He had seen and heard enough.

But the giggles and whispers now came his way. Roland closed his eyes, concentrating on the medallion that lay against his chest. *I don’t know if it’s the gold or the God, but they don’t like to get too close*, John Norman had said. It was good to have such a thing to remember as the Little Sisters drew nigh, gossiping and whispering in their strange other tongue, but the medallion seemed a thin protection in the dark.

Faintly, at a great distance, Roland heard the cross-dog barking.

As the Sisters circled him, the gunslinger realized he could smell them. It was a low, unpleasant odor, like spoiled meat. And what else *would* they smell of, such as these?

“Such a pretty man it is.” Sister Mary. She spoke in a low, meditative tone.

“But such an ugly *sigul* it wears.” Sister Tamra.

“We’ll have it off him!” Sister Louise.

“And then we shall have kisses!” Sister Coquina.

“Kisses for all!” exclaimed Sister Michela, with such fervent enthusiasm that they all laughed.

Roland discovered that not *all* of him was paralyzed, after all. Part of him had, in fact, arisen from its sleep at the sound of their voices and now stood tall. A hand reached beneath the bed-dress he wore, touched that stiffened member, encircled it, caressed it. He lay in silent horror, feigning sleep, as wet warmth almost immediately spilled from him. The hand remained where it was

for a moment, the thumb rubbing up and down the wilting shaft. Then it let him go and rose a little higher. Found the wetness pooled on his lower belly.

Giggles, soft as wind.

Chiming bells.

Roland opened his eyes the tiniest crack and looked up at the ancient faces laughing down at him in the light of their candles—glittering eyes, yellow cheeks, hanging teeth that jutted over lower lips. Sister Michela and Sister Louise appeared to have grown goatees, but of course that wasn't the darkness of hair but of the bearded man's blood.

Mary's hand was cupped. She passed it from Sister to Sister; each licked from her palm in the candlelight.

Roland closed his eyes all the way and waited for them to be gone. Eventually they were.

*I'll never sleep again*, he thought, and was five minutes later lost to himself and the world.

V. SISTER MARY. A MESSAGE. A VISIT FROM RALPH. NORMAN'S FATE.  
SISTER MARY AGAIN.

When Roland awoke, it was full daylight, the silk roof overhead a bright white and billowing in a mild breeze. The doctor-bugs were singing contentedly. Beside him on his left, Norman was heavily asleep with his head turned so far to one side that his stubbly cheek rested on his shoulder.

Roland and John Norman were the only ones here. Farther down on their side of the infirmary, the bed where the bearded man had been was empty, its top sheet pulled up and neatly tucked in, the pillow neatly nestled in a crisp white case. The complication of slings in which his body had rested was gone.

Roland remembered the candles—the way their glow had combined and streamed up in a column, illuminating the Sisters as they gathered around the bearded man. Giggling. Their damned bells jingling.

Now, as if summoned by his thoughts, came Sister Mary, gliding along rapidly with Sister Louise in her wake. Louise bore a tray, and looked nervous. Mary was frowning, obviously not in good temper.

*To be grumpy after you've fed so well?* Roland thought. *Fie, Sister.*

She reached the gunslinger's bed and looked down at him. "I have little to thank ye for, sai," she said with no preamble.

"Have I asked for your thanks?" he responded in a voice that sounded as dusty and little-used as the pages of an old book.

She took no notice. "Ye've made one who was only impudent and restless with her place outright rebellious. Well, her mother was the same way, and died of it not long after returning Jenna to her proper place. Raise your hand, thankless man."

"I can't. I can't move at all."

"Oh, cully! Haven't you heard it said 'fool not your mother 'less she's out of face'? I know pretty well what ye can and can't do. Now raise your hand."

Roland raised his right hand, trying to suggest more effort than it actually took. He thought that this morning he might be strong enough to slip free of the slings . . . but what then? Any real walking would be beyond him for hours yet, even without another dose of "medicine" . . . and behind Sister Mary, Sister Louise was taking the cover from a fresh bowl of soup. As Roland looked at it, his stomach rumbled.

Big Sister heard and smiled a bit. "Even lying in bed builds an appetite in a strong man, if it's done long enough. Wouldn't you say so, Jason, brother of John?"

"My name is James. As you well know, Sister."

"Do I?" She laughed angrily. "Oh, la! And if I whipped your little sweetheart hard enough and long enough—until the blood jumped out her back like drops of sweat, let us say—should I not whip a different name out of her? Or didn't ye trust her with it, during your little talk?"

"Touch her and I'll kill you."

She laughed again. Her face shimmered; her firm mouth turned into something that looked like a dying jellyfish. "Speak not of killing to us, cully; lest we speak of it to you."

"Sister, if you and Jenna don't see eye to eye, why not release her from her vows and let her go her course?"

"Such as us can never be released from our vows, nor be let go. Her mother tried and then came back, her dying and the girl sick. Why, it was we nursed Jenna back to health after her mother was nothing but dirt in the breeze that

blows out toward End-World, and how little she thanks us! Besides, she bears the Dark Bells, the *sigul* of our sisterhood. Of our *ka-tet*. Now eat—yer belly says ye're hungry!"

Sister Louise offered the bowl, but her eyes kept drifting to the shape the medallion made under the breast of his bed-dress. *Don't like it, do you?* Roland thought, and then remembered Louise by candlelight, the freighter's blood on her chin, her ancient eyes eager as she leaned forward to lick his spend from Sister Mary's hand.

He turned his head aside. "I want nothing."

"But ye're hungry!" Louise protested. "If'ee don't eat, James, how will'ee get'ee strength back?"

"Send Jenna. I'll eat what she brings."

Sister Mary's frown was black. "Ye'll see her no more. She's been released from Thoughtful House only on her solemn promise to double her time of meditation . . . and to stay out of infirmary. Now eat, James, or whoever ye are. Take what's in the soup, or we'll cut ye with knives and rub it in with flannel poultices. Either way, makes no difference to us. Does it, Louise?"

"Nar," Louise said. She still held out the bowl. Steam rose from it, and the good smell of chicken.

"But it might make a difference to you." Sister Mary grinned humorlessly, baring her unnaturally large teeth. "Flowing blood's risky around here. The doctors don't like it. It stirs them up."

It wasn't just the bugs that were stirred up at the sight of blood, and Roland knew it. He also knew he had no choice in the matter of the soup. He took the bowl from Louise and ate slowly. He would have given much to wipe out the look of satisfaction he saw on Sister Mary's face.

"Good," she said after he had handed the bowl back and she had peered inside to make sure it was completely empty. His hand thumped back into the sling which had been rigged for it, already too heavy to hold up. He could feel the world drawing away again.

Sister Mary leaned forward, the billowing top of her habit touching the skin of his left shoulder. He could smell her, an aroma both ripe and dry, and would have gagged if he'd had the strength.

“Have that foul gold thing off ye when yer strength comes back a little—put it in the pissoir under the bed. Where it belongs. For to be even this close to where it lies hurts my head and makes my throat close.”

Speaking with enormous effort, Roland said, “If you want it, take it. How can I stop you, you bitch?”

Once more her frown turned her face into something like a thunderhead. He thought she would have slapped him, if she had dared touch him so close to where the medallion lay. Her ability to touch seemed to end above his waist, however.

“I think you had better consider the matter a little more fully,” she said. “I can still have Jenna whipped, if I like. She bears the Dark Bells, but I am the Big Sister. Consider that very well.”

She left. Sister Louise followed, casting one look—a strange combination of fright and lust—back over her shoulder.

Roland thought, *I must get out of here—I must.*

Instead, he drifted back to that dark place which wasn't quite sleep. Or perhaps he did sleep, at least for awhile; perhaps he dreamed. Fingers once more caressed his fingers, and lips first kissed his ear and then whispered into it: “Look beneath your pillow, Roland . . . but let no one know I was here.”

At some point after this, Roland opened his eyes again, half-expecting to see Sister Jenna's pretty young face hovering above him. And that comma of dark hair once more poking out from beneath her wimple. There was no one. The swags of silk overhead were at their brightest, and although it was impossible to tell the hours in here with any real accuracy, Roland guessed it to be around noon. Perhaps three hours since his second bowl of the Sisters' soup.

Beside him, John Norman still slept, his breath whistling out in faint, nasal snores.

Roland tried to raise his hand and slide it under his pillow. The hand wouldn't move. He could wiggle the tips of his fingers, but that was all. He waited, calming his mind as well as he could, gathering his patience. Patience wasn't easy to come by. He kept thinking about what Norman had said—that there had been twenty survivors of the ambush . . . at least to start with. *One by one they went, until only me and that one down yonder was left. And now you.*

*The girl wasn't here.* His mind spoke in the soft, regretful tone of Alain, one of his old friends, dead these many years now. *She wouldn't dare, not with the others watching. That was only a dream you had.*

But Roland thought perhaps it had been more than a dream.

Some length of time later—the slowly shifting brightness overhead made him believe it had been about an hour—Roland tried his hand again. This time he was able to get it beneath his pillow. This was puffy and soft, tucked snugly into the wide sling that supported the gunslinger's neck. At first he found nothing, but as his fingers worked their slow way deeper, they touched what felt like a stiffish bundle of thin rods.

He paused, gathering a little more strength (every movement was like swimming in glue), and then burrowed deeper. It felt like a dead bouquet. Wrapped around it was what felt like a ribbon.

Roland looked around to make sure the ward was still empty and Norman still asleep, then drew out what was under the pillow. It was six brittle stems of fading green with brownish reed heads at the tops. They gave off a strange, yeasty aroma that made Roland think of early-morning begging expeditions to the Great House kitchens as a child—forays he had usually made with Cuthbert. The reeds were tied with a wide white silk ribbon, and smelled like burnt toast. Beneath the ribbon was a fold of cloth. Like everything else in this cursed place, it seemed, the cloth was of silk.

Roland was breathing hard and could feel drops of sweat on his brow. Still alone, though—good. He took the scrap of cloth and unfolded it. Printed painstakingly in blurred charcoal letters was this message:

NIBBLE HEDS. ONCE EACH HOUR. TOO  
MUCH, CRAMPS OR DETH.  
TOMORROW NITE. CAN'T BE SOONER.  
BE CAREFUL!

No explanation, but Roland supposed none was needed. Nor did he have any option; if he remained here, he would die. All they had to do was have the medallion off him, and he felt sure Sister Mary was smart enough to figure a way to do that.

He nibbled at one of the dry reed heads. The taste was nothing like the toast they had begged from the kitchen as boys; it was bitter in his throat and hot in his stomach. Less than a minute after his nibble, his heart rate had doubled. His muscles awakened, but not in a pleasant way, as after good sleep; they felt first trembly and then hard, as if they were gathered into knots. This feeling passed rapidly, and his heartbeat was back to normal before Norman stirred awake an hour or so later, but he understood why Jenna's note had warned him not to take more than a nibble at a time—this was very powerful stuff.

He slipped the bouquet of reeds back under the pillow, being careful to brush away the few crumbs of vegetable matter which had dropped to the sheet. Then he used the ball of his thumb to blur the painstaking charcoaled words on the bit of silk. When he was finished, there was nothing on the square but meaningless smudges. The square he also tucked back under his pillow.

When Norman awoke, he and the gunslinger spoke briefly of the young scout's home—Delain, it was, sometimes known jestingly as Dragon's Lair, or Liar's Heaven. All tall tales were said to originate in Delain. The boy asked Roland to take his medallion and that of his brother home to their parents, if Roland was able, and explain as well as he could what had happened to James and John, sons of Jesse.

"You'll do all that yourself," Roland said.

"No." Norman tried to raise his hand, perhaps to scratch his nose, and was unable to do even that. The hand rose perhaps six inches, then fell back to the counterpane with a small thump. "I think not. It's a pity for us to have run up against each other this way, you know—I like you."

"And I you, John Norman. Would that we were better met."

"Aye. When not in the company of such fascinating ladies."

He dropped off to sleep again soon after. Roland never spoke with him again . . . although he certainly heard from him. Yes. Roland was lying above his bed, shamming sleep, as John Norman screamed his last.

Sister Michela came with his evening soup just as Roland was getting past the shivery muscles and galloping heartbeat that resulted from his second nibble of brown reed. Michela looked at his flushed face with some concern,

but had to accept his assurances that he did not feel feverish; she couldn't bring herself to touch him and judge the heat of his skin for herself—the medallion held her away.

With the soup was a popkin. The bread was leathery and the meat inside it tough, but Roland demolished it greedily, just the same. Michela watched with a complacent smile, hands folded in front of her, nodding from time to time. When he had finished the soup, she took the bowl back from him carefully, making sure their fingers did not touch.

“Ye’re healing,” she said. “Soon you’ll be on yer way, and we’ll have just yer memory to keep, Jim.”

“Is that true?” he asked quietly.

She only looked at him, touched her tongue against her upper lip, giggled, and departed. Roland closed his eyes and lay back against his pillow, feeling lethargy steal over him again. Her speculative eyes . . . her peeping tongue. He had seen women look at roast chickens and joints of mutton that same way, calculating when they might be done.

His body badly wanted to sleep, but Roland held onto wakefulness for what he judged was an hour, then worked one of the reeds out from under the pillow. With a fresh infusion of their “can’t-move medicine” in his system, this took an enormous effort, and he wasn’t sure he could have done it at all, had he not separated this one reed from the ribbon holding the others. Tomorrow night, Jenna’s note had said. If that meant escape, the idea seemed preposterous. The way he felt now, he might be lying in this bed until the end of the age.

He nibbled. Energy washed into his system, clenching his muscles and racing his heart, but the burst of vitality was gone almost as soon as it came, buried beneath the Sisters’ stronger drug. He could only hope . . . and sleep.

When he woke it was full dark, and he found he could move his arms and legs in their network of slings almost naturally. He slipped one of the reeds out from beneath his pillow and nibbled cautiously. She had left half a dozen, and the first two were now almost entirely consumed.

The gunslinger put the stem back under the pillow, then began to shiver like a wet dog in a downpour. *I took too much*, he thought. *I’ll be lucky not to convulse—*

His heart, racing like a runaway engine. And then, to make matters worse, he saw candlelight at the far end of the aisle. A moment later he heard the rustle of their gowns and the whisk of their slippers.

*Gods, why now? They'll see me shaking, they'll know—*

Calling on every bit of his willpower and control, Roland closed his eyes and concentrated on stilling his jerking limbs. If only he had been in bed instead of in these cursed slings, which seemed to tremble as if with their own ague at every movement!

The Little Sisters drew closer. The light of their candles bloomed red within his closed eyelids. Tonight they were not giggling, nor whispering among themselves. It was not until they were almost on top of him that Roland became aware of the stranger in their midst—a creature that breathed through its nose in great, slobbery gasps of mixed air and snot.

The gunslinger lay with his eyes closed, the gross twitches and jumps of his arms and legs under control, but with his muscles still knotted and crampy, thrumming beneath the skin. Anyone who looked at him closely would see at once that something was wrong with him. His heart was larruping away like a horse under the whip, surely they must see—

But it wasn't him they were looking at—not yet, at least.

“Have it off him,” Mary said. She spoke in a bastardized version of the low speech Roland could barely understand. “Then t'other 'un. Go on, Ralph.”

“U'se has whik-sky?” the slobberer asked, his dialect even heavier than Mary's. “U'se has 'backky?”

“Yes, yes, plenty whiskey and plenty smoke, but not until you have these wretched things off!” Impatient. Perhaps afraid, as well.

Roland cautiously rolled his head to the left and cracked his eyelids open.

Five of the six Little Sisters of Eluria were clustered around the far side of the sleeping John Norman's bed, their candles raised to cast their light upon him. It also cast light upon their own faces, faces which would have given the strongest man nightmares. Now, in the ditch of the night, their glammers were set aside, and they were but ancient corpses in voluminous habits.

Sister Mary had one of Roland's guns in her hand. Looking at her holding it, Roland felt a bright flash of hate for her, and promised himself she would pay for her temerity.

The thing standing at the foot of the bed, strange as it was, looked almost normal in comparison with the Sisters. It was one of the green folk. Roland recognized Ralph at once. He would be a long time forgetting that bowler hat.

Now Ralph walked slowly around to the side of Norman's bed closest to Roland, momentarily blocking the gunslinger's view of the Sisters. The mutie went all the way to Norman's head, however, clearing the hags to Roland's slitted view once more.

Norman's medallion lay exposed—the boy had perhaps wakened enough to take it out of his bed-dress, hoping it would protect him better so. Ralph picked it up in his melted-tallow hand. The Sisters watched eagerly in the glow of their candles as the green man stretched it to the end of its chain . . . and then put it down again. Their faces drooped in disappointment.

"Don't care for such as that," Ralph said in his clotted voice. "Want whik-sky! Want 'backky!"

"You shall have it," Sister Mary said. "Enough for you and all your verminous clan. But first, you must have that horrid thing off him! Off both of them! Do you understand? And you shan't tease us."

"Or what?" Ralph asked. He laughed. It was a choked and gargly sound, the laughter of a man dying from some evil sickness of the throat and lungs, but Roland still liked it better than the giggles of the Sisters. "Or what, Sisser Mary, you'll drink my bluid? My bluid'd drop'ee dead where'ee stand, and glowing in the dark!"

Mary raised the gunslinger's revolver and pointed it at Ralph. "Take that wretched thing, or you die where *you* stand."

"And die after I've done what you want, likely."

Sister Mary said nothing to that. The others peered at him with their black eyes.

Ralph lowered his head, appearing to think. Roland suspected his friend Bowler Hat *could* think, too. Sister Mary and her cohorts might not believe that, but Ralph *had* to be trig to have survived as long as he had. But of course when he came here, he hadn't considered Roland's guns.

"Smasher was wrong to give them shooters to you," he said at last. "Give em and not tell me. Did u'se give him whik-sky? Give him 'backky?"

“That’s none o’ yours,” Sister Mary replied. “You have that gold-piece off the boy’s neck right now, or I’ll put one of yonder man’s bullets in what’s left of yer brain.”

“All right,” Ralph said. “Just as you wish, sai.”

Once more he reached down and took the gold medallion in his melted fist. That he did slow; what happened after, happened fast. He snatched it away, breaking the chain and flinging the gold heedlessly into the dark. With his other hand he reached down, sank his long and ragged nails into John Norman’s neck, and tore it open.

Blood flew from the hapless boy’s throat in a jetting, heart-driven gush more black than red in the candlelight, and he made a single bubbly cry. The women screamed—but not in horror. They screamed as women do in a frenzy of excitement. The green man was forgotten; Roland was forgotten; all was forgotten save the life’s blood pouring out of John Norman’s throat.

They dropped their candles. Mary dropped Roland’s revolver in the same hapless, careless fashion. The last the gunslinger saw as Ralph darted away into the shadows (whiskey and tobacco another time, wily Ralph must have thought; tonight he had best concentrate on saving his own life) was the Sisters bending forward to catch as much of the flow as they could before it dried up.

Roland lay in the dark, muscles shivering, heart pounding, listening to the harpies as they fed on the boy lying in the bed next to his own. It seemed to go on forever, but at last they had done with him. The Sisters relit their candles and left, murmuring.

When the drug in the soup once more got the better of the drug in the reeds, Roland was grateful . . . yet for the first time since he’d come here, his sleep was haunted.

In his dream he stood looking down at the bloated body in the town trough, thinking of a line in the book marked REGISTRY OF MISDEEDS AND REDRESS. *Green folk sent hence*, it had read, and perhaps the green folk *had* been sent hence, but then a worse tribe had come. The Little Sisters of Eluria, they called themselves. And a year hence, they might be the Little Sisters of Tejuas, or of Kambero, or some other far western village. They came with their bells and their bugs . . . from where? Who knew? Did it matter?

A shadow fell beside his on the scummy water of the trough. Roland tried to turn and face it. He couldn't; he was frozen in place. Then a green hand grasped his shoulder and whirled him about. It was Ralph. His bowler hat was cocked back on his head; John Norman's medallion, now red with blood, hung around his neck.

"Booh!" cried Ralph, his lips stretching in a toothless grin. He raised a big revolver with worn sandalwood grips. He thumbed the hammer back—

—and Roland jerked awake, shivering all over, dressed in skin both wet and icy cold. He looked at the bed on his left. It was empty, the sheet pulled up and tucked about neatly, the pillow resting above it in its snowy sleeve. Of John Norman there was no sign. It might have been empty for years, that bed.

Roland was alone now. Gods help him, he was the last patient of the Little Sisters of Eluria, those sweet and patient hospitalers. The last human being still alive in this terrible place, the last with warm blood flowing in his veins.

Roland, lying suspended, gripped the gold medallion in his fist and looked across the aisle at the long row of empty beds. After a little while, he brought one of the reeds out from beneath his pillow and nibbled at it.

When Mary came fifteen minutes later, the gunslinger took the bowl she brought with a show of weakness he didn't really feel. Porridge instead of soup this time . . . but he had no doubt the basic ingredient was still the same.

"How well ye look this morning, sai," Big Sister said. She looked well herself—there were no shimmers to give away the ancient *wampir* hiding inside her. She had supped well, and her meal had firmed her up. Roland's stomach rolled over at the thought. "Ye'll be on yer pins in no time, I'll warrant."

"That's shit," Roland said, speaking in an ill-natured growl. "Put me on my pins and you'd be picking me up off the floor directly after. I've started to wonder if you're not putting something in the food."

She laughed merrily at that. "La, you lads! Always eager to blame yer weakness on a scheming woman! How scared of us ye are—aye, way down in yer little boys' hearts, how scared ye are!"

"Where's my brother? I dreamed there was a commotion about him in the night, and now I see his bed's empty."

Her smile narrowed. Her eyes glittered. “He came over fevery and pitched a fit. We’ve taken him to Thoughtful House, which has been home to contagion more than once in its time.”

*To the grave is where you’ve taken him, Roland thought. Mayhap that is a Thoughtful House, but little would you know it, sai, one way or another.*

“I know ye’re no brother to that boy,” Mary said, watching him eat. Already Roland could feel the stuff hidden in the porridge draining his strength once more. “*Sigul* or no *sigul*, I know ye’re no brother to him. Why do you lie? ’Tis a sin against God.”

“What gives you such an idea, sai?” Roland asked, curious to see if she would mention the guns.

“Big Sister knows what she knows. Why not ’fess up, Jimmy? Confession’s good for the soul, they say.”

“Send me Jenna to pass the time, and perhaps I’d tell you much,” Roland said.

The narrow bone of smile on Sister Mary’s face disappeared like chalk-writing in a rainstorm. “Why would ye talk to such as her?”

“She’s passing fair,” Roland said. “Unlike some.”

Her lips pulled back from her overlarge teeth. “Ye’ll see her no more, cully. Ye’ve stirred her up, so you have, and I won’t have that.”

She turned to go. Still trying to appear weak and hoping he would not overdo it (acting was never his forte), Roland held out the empty porridge bowl. “Do you not want to take this?”

“Put it on your head and wear it as a nightcap, for all of me. Or stick it in your ass. You’ll talk before I’m done with ye, cully—talk till I bid you shut up and then beg to talk some more!”

On this note she swept regally away, hands lifting the front of her skirt off the floor. Roland had heard that such as she couldn’t go about in daylight, and that part of the old tales was surely a lie. Yet another part was almost true, it seemed: a fuzzy, amorphous shape kept pace with her, running along the row of empty beds to her right, but she cast no real shadow at all.

## VI. JENNA. SISTER COQUINA. TAMRA, MICHELA, LOUISE. THE CROSS-DOG. WHAT HAPPENED IN THE SAGE.

That was one of the longest days of Roland's life. He dozed, but never deeply; the reeds were doing their work, and he had begun to believe that he might, with Jenna's help, actually get out of here. And there was the matter of his guns, as well—perhaps she might be able to help there, too.

He passed the slow hours thinking of old times—of Gilead and his friends, of the riddling he had almost won at one Wide Earth Fair. In the end another had taken the goose, but he'd had his chance, aye. He thought of his mother and father; he thought of Abel Vannay, who had limped his way through a life of gentle goodness, and Eldred Jonas, who had limped his way through a life of evil . . . until Roland had blown him loose of his saddle, one fine desert day.

He thought, as always, of Susan.

*If you love me, then love me*, she'd said . . . and so he had.

So he had.

In this way the time passed. At rough hourly intervals, he took one of the reeds from beneath his pillow and nibbled it. Now his muscles didn't tremble so badly as the stuff passed into his system, nor his heart pound so fiercely. The medicine in the reeds no longer had to battle the Sisters' medicine so fiercely, Roland thought; the reeds were winning.

The diffused brightness of the sun moved across the white silk ceiling of the ward, and at last the dimness which always seemed to hover at bed-level began to rise. The long room's western wall bloomed with the rose-melting-to-orange shades of sunset.

It was Sister Tamra who brought him his dinner that night—soup and another popkin. She also laid a desert lily beside his hand. She smiled as she did it. Her cheeks were bright with color. All of them were bright with color today, like leeches that had gorged until they were full almost to bursting.

"From your admirer, Jimmy," she said. "She's so sweet on ye! The lily means 'Do not forget my promise.' What has she promised ye, Jimmy, brother of Johnny?"

"That she'd see me again, and we'd talk."

Tamra laughed so hard that the bells lining her forehead jingled. She clasped her hands together in a perfect ecstasy of glee. "Sweet as honey! Oh, yes!" She bent her smiling gaze on Roland. "It's sad such a promise can never be kept. Ye'll never see her again, pretty man." She took the bowl. "Big Sister

has decided.” She stood up, still smiling. “Why not take that ugly gold *sigul* off?”

“I think not.”

“Yer brother took his off—look!” She pointed, and Roland spied the gold medallion lying far down the aisle, where it had landed when Ralph threw it.

Sister Tamra looked at him, still smiling.

“He decided it was part of what was making him sick, and cast it away. Ye’d do the same, were ye wise.”

Roland repeated, “I think not.”

“So,” she said dismissively, and left him alone with the empty beds glimmering in the thickening shadows.

Roland hung on, in spite of growing sleepiness, until the hot colors bleeding across the infirmary’s western wall had cooled to ashes. Then he nibbled one of the reeds and felt strength—real strength, not a jittery, heart-thudding substitute—bloom in his body. He looked toward where the castaway medallion gleamed in the last light and made a silent promise to John Norman: he would take it with the other one to Norman’s kin, if *ka* chanced that he should encounter them in his travels.

Feeling completely easy in his mind for the first time that day, the gunslinger dozed. When he awoke it was full dark. The doctor-bugs were singing with extraordinary shrillness. He had taken one of the reeds out from under the pillow and had begun to nibble on it when a cold voice said, “So—Big Sister was right. Ye’ve been keeping secrets.”

Roland’s heart seemed to stop dead in his chest. He looked around and saw Sister Coquina getting to her feet. She had crept in while he was dozing and hidden under the bed on his right side to watch him.

“Where did ye get that?” she asked. “Was it—”

“He got it from me.”

Coquina whirled about. Jenna was walking down the aisle toward them. Her habit was gone. She still wore her wimple with its forehead-fringe of bells, but its hem rested on the shoulders of a simple checkered shirt. Below this she wore jeans and scuffed desert boots. She had something in her hands. It was too dark for Roland to be sure, but he thought—

“*You*,” Sister Coquina whispered with infinite hate. “When I tell Big Sister —”

“You’ll tell no one anything,” Roland said.

If he had planned his escape from the slings that entangled him, he no doubt would have made a bad business of it, but, as always, the gunslinger did best when he thought least. His arms were free in a moment; so was his left leg. His right caught at the ankle, however, twisting, hanging him up with his shoulders on the bed and his leg in the air.

Coquina turned on him, hissing like a cat. Her lips pulled back from teeth that were needle-sharp. She rushed at him, her fingers splayed. The nails at the ends of them looked sharp and ragged.

Roland clasped the medallion and shoved it out toward her. She recoiled from it, still hissing, and whirled back to Sister Jenna in a flare of white skirt. “I’ll do for ye, ye interfering trull!” she cried in a low, harsh voice.

Roland struggled to free his leg and couldn’t. It was firmly caught, the shitting sling actually wrapped around the ankle somehow, like a noose.

Jenna raised her hands, and he saw he had been right: it was his revolvers she had brought, holstered and hanging from the two old gunbelts he had worn out of Gilead after the last burning.

“Shoot her, Jenna! Shoot her!”

Instead, still holding the holstered guns up, Jenna shook her head as she had on the day when Roland had persuaded her to push back her wimple so he could see her hair. The bells rang with a sharpness that seemed to go into the gunslinger’s head like a spike.

*The Dark Bells. The sigul of their ka-tet. What—*

The sound of the doctor-bugs rose to a shrill, reedy scream that was eerily like the sound of the bells Jenna wore. Nothing sweet about them now. Sister Coquina’s hands faltered on their way to Jenna’s throat; Jenna herself had not so much as flinched or blinked her eyes.

“No,” Coquina whispered. “You *can’t!*”

“I *have*,” Jenna said, and Roland saw the bugs. Descending from the legs of the bearded man, he’d observed a battalion. What he saw coming from the shadows now was an army to end all armies; had they been men instead of

insects, there might have been more than all the men who had ever carried arms in the long and bloody history of Mid-World.

Yet the sight of them advancing down the boards of the aisle was not what Roland would always remember, nor what would haunt his dreams for a year or more; it was the way they coated the *beds*. These were turning black two by two on both sides of the aisle, like pairs of dim rectangular lights going out.

Coquina shrieked and began to shake her own head, to ring her own bells. The sound they made was thin and pointless compared with the sharp ringing of the Dark Bells.

Still the bugs marched on, darkening the floor, blacking out the beds.

Jenna darted past the shrieking Sister Coquina, dropped Roland's guns beside him, then yanked the twisted sling straight with one hard pull. Roland slid his leg free.

"Come," she said. "I've started them, but staying them could be a different thing."

Now Sister Coquina's shrieks were not of horror but of pain. The bugs had found her.

"Don't look," Jenna said, helping Roland to his feet. He thought that never in his life had he been so glad to be upon them. "Come. We must be quick—she'll rouse the others. I've put your boots and clothes aside up the path that leads away from here—I carried as much as I could. How are ye? Are ye strong?"

"Thanks to you." How long he would stay strong Roland didn't know . . . and right now it wasn't a question that mattered. He saw Jenna snatch up two of the reeds—in his struggle to escape the slings, they had scattered all over the head of the bed—and then they were hurrying up the aisle, away from the bugs and from Sister Coquina, whose cries were now failing.

Roland buckled on his guns and tied them down without breaking stride.

They passed only three beds on each side before reaching the flap of the tent . . . and it *was* a tent, he saw, not a vast pavilion. The silk walls and ceiling were fraying canvas, thin enough to let in the light of a three-quarters Kissing Moon. And the beds weren't beds at all, but only a double row of shabby cots.

He turned and saw a black, writhing hump on the floor where Sister Coquina had been. At the sight of her, Roland was struck by an unpleasant thought.

“I forgot John Norman’s medallion!” A keen sense of regret—almost of mourning—went through him like wind.

Jenna reached into the pocket of her jeans and brought it out. It glimmered in the moonlight.

“I picked it up off the floor.”

He didn’t know which made him gladder—the sight of the medallion or the sight of it in her hand. It meant she wasn’t like the others.

Then, as if to dispel that notion before it got too firm a hold on him, she said, “Take it, Roland—I can hold it no more.” And, as he took it, he saw unmistakable marks of charring on her fingers.

He took her hand and kissed each burn.

“Thankee-sai,” she said, and he saw she was crying. “Thankee, dear. To be kissed so is lovely, worth every pain. Now . . .”

Roland saw her eyes shift, and followed them. Here were bobbing lights descending a rocky path. Beyond them he saw the building where the Little Sisters had been living—not a convent but a ruined *hacienda* that looked a thousand years old. There were three candles; as they drew closer, Roland saw that there were only three sisters. Mary wasn’t among them.

He drew his guns.

“Oooo, it’s a gunslinger-man he is!” Louise.

“A *scary* man!” Michela.

“And he’s found his ladylove as well as his shooters!” Tamra.

“His slut-whore!” Louise.

Laughing angrily. Not afraid . . . at least, not of *his* weapons.

“Put them away,” Jenna told him, and when she looked, saw that he already had.

The others, meanwhile, had drawn closer.

“Ooo, see, she cries!” Tamra.

“Doffed her habit, she has!” Michela. “Perhaps it’s her broken vows she cries for.”

“Why such tears, pretty?” Louise.

“Because he kissed my fingers where they were burned,” Jenna said. “I’ve never been kissed before. It made me cry.”

“Ooooo!”

“*Luv-ly!*”

“Next he’ll stick his thing in her! Even *luv-lier!*”

Jenna bore their japes with no sign of anger. When they were done, she said, “I’m going with him. Stand aside.”

They gaped at her, counterfeit laughter disappearing in shock.

“No!” Louise whispered. “Are ye mad? Ye know what’ll happen!”

“No, and neither do you,” Jenna said. “Besides, I care not.” She half-turned and held her hand out to the mouth of the ancient hospital tent. It was a faded olive-drab in the moonlight, with an old red cross drawn on its roof. Roland wondered how many towns the Sisters had been to with this tent, which was so small and plain on the outside, so huge and gloriously dim on the inside. How many towns and over how many years.

Now, cramming the mouth of it in a black, shiny tongue, were the doctor-bugs. They had stopped their singing. Their silence was terrible.

“Stand aside or I’ll have them on ye,” Jenna said.

“Ye never would!” Sister Michela cried in a low, horrified voice.

“Aye. I’ve already set them on Sister Coquina. She’s a part of their medicine, now.”

Their gasp was like cold wind passing through dead trees. Nor was all of that dismay directed toward their own precious hides. What Jenna had done was clearly far outside their reckoning.

“Then you’re damned,” Sister Tamra said.

“Such ones to speak of damnation! Stand aside.”

They did. Roland walked past them and they shrank away from him . . . but they shrank from her more.

“Damned?” he asked after they had skirted the *hacienda* and reached the path beyond it. The Kissing Moon glimmered above a tumbled scree of rocks. In its light Roland could see a small black opening low on the scarp. He guessed it was the cave the Sisters called Thoughtful House. “What did they mean, damned?”

“Never mind. All we have to worry about now is Sister Mary. I like it not that we haven’t seen her.”

She tried to walk faster, but he grasped her arm and turned her about. He could still hear the singing of the bugs, but faintly; they were leaving the place of the Sisters behind. Eluria, too, if the compass in his head was still working; he thought the town was in the other direction. The husk of the town, he amended.

“Tell me what they meant.”

“Perhaps nothing. Ask me not, Roland—what good is it? ’Tis done, the bridge burned. I can’t go back. Nor would if I could.” She looked down, biting her lip, and when she looked up again, Roland saw fresh tears falling on her cheeks. “I have supped with them. There were times when I couldn’t help it, no more than you could help drinking their wretched soup, no matter if you knew what was in it.”

Roland remembered John Norman saying *A man has to eat . . . a woman, too*. He nodded.

“I’d go no farther down that road. If there’s to be damnation, let it be of my choosing, not theirs. My mother meant well by bringing me back to them, but she was wrong.” She looked at him shyly and fearfully . . . but met his eyes. “I’d go beside ye on yer road, Roland of Gilead. For as long as I may, or as long as ye’d have me.”

“You’re welcome to your share of my way,” he said. “And I am—”

*Blessed by your company*, he would have finished, but before he could, a voice spoke from the tangle of moonshadow ahead of them, where the path at last climbed out of the rocky, sterile valley in which the Little Sisters had practiced their glammers.

“It’s a sad duty to stop such a pretty elopement, but stop it I must.”

Sister Mary came from the shadows. Her fine white habit with its bright red rose had reverted to what it really was: the shroud of a corpse. Caught, hooded in its grimy folds, was a wrinkled, sagging face from which two black eyes stared. They looked like rotted dates. Below them, exposed by the thing’s smile, four great incisors gleamed.

Upon the stretched skin of Sister Mary’s forehead, bells tinkled . . . but not the Dark Bells, Roland thought. There was that.

“Stand clear,” Jenna said. “Or I’ll bring the *can tam* on ye.”

“No,” Sister Mary said, stepping closer, “ye won’t. They’ll not stray so far from the others. Shake your head and ring those damned bells until the clappers fall out, and still they’ll never come.”

Jenna did as bid, shaking her head furiously from side to side. The Dark Bells rang piercingly, but without that extra, almost psychic tone-quality that had gone through Roland’s head like a spike. And the doctor-bugs—what Jenna had called the *can tam*—did not come.

Smiling ever more broadly (Roland had an idea Mary herself hadn’t been completely sure they wouldn’t come until the experiment was made), the corpse-woman closed in on them, seeming to float above the ground. Her eyes flicked toward him. “And put that away,” she said.

Roland looked down and saw that one of his guns was in his hand. He had no memory of drawing it.

“Unless ’tis been blessed or dipped in some sect’s holy wet—blood, water, semen—it can’t harm such as me, gunslinger. For I am more shade than substance . . . yet still the equal to such as yerself, for all that.”

She thought he would try shooting her, anyway; he saw it in her eyes. *Those shooters are all ye have*, her eyes said. *Without em, you might as well be back in the tent we dreamed around ye, caught up in our slings and awaiting our pleasure.*

Instead of shooting, he dropped the revolver back into its holster and launched himself at her with his hands out. Sister Mary uttered a scream that was mostly surprise, but it was not a long one; Roland’s fingers clamped down on her throat and choked the sound off before it was fairly started.

The touch of her flesh was obscene—it seemed not just alive but *various* beneath his hands, as if it was trying to crawl away from him. He could feel it running like liquid, *flowing*, and the sensation was horrible beyond description. Yet he clamped down harder, determined to choke the life out of her.

Then there came a blue flash (not in the air, he would think later; that flash happened inside his head, a single stroke of lightning as she touched off some brief but powerful brainstorm), and his hands flew away from her neck. For one moment his dazzled eyes saw great wet gouges in her gray flesh—gouges in the shapes of his hands. Then he was flung backward, hitting the scree on his

back and sliding, hitting his head on a jutting rock hard enough to provoke a second, lesser, flash of light.

“Nay, my pretty man,” she said, grimacing at him, laughing with those terrible dull eyes of hers. “Ye don’t choke such as me, and I’ll take ye slow for’ee impertinence—cut ye shallow in a hundred places to refresh my thirst! First, though, I’ll have this vowless girl . . . and I’ll have those damned bells off her, in the bargain.”

“Come and see if you can!” Jenna cried in a trembling voice, and shook her head from side to side. The Dark Bells rang mockingly, provokingly.

Mary’s grimace of a smile fell away. “Oh, I can,” she breathed. Her mouth yawned. In the moonlight, her fangs gleamed in her gums like bone needles poked through a red pillow. “I can and I—”

There was a growl from above them. It rose, then splintered into a volley of snarling barks. Mary turned to her left, and in the moment before the snarling thing left the rock on which it was standing, Roland could clearly read the startled bewilderment on Big Sister’s face.

It launched itself at her, only a dark shape against the stars, legs outstretched so it looked like some sort of weird bat, but even before it crashed into the woman, striking her in the chest above her half-raised arms and fastening its own teeth on her throat, Roland knew exactly what it was.

As the shape bore her over onto her back, Sister Mary uttered a gibbering shriek that went through Roland’s head like the Dark Bells themselves. He scrambled to his feet, gasping. The shadowy thing tore at her, forepaws on either side of her head, rear paws planted on the grave-shroud above her chest, where the rose had been.

Roland grabbed Jenna, who was looking down at the fallen Sister with a kind of frozen fascination.

“Come on!” he shouted. “Before it decides it wants a bite of you, too!”

The dog took no notice of them as Roland pulled Jenna past. It had torn Sister Mary’s head mostly off.

Her flesh seemed to be changing, somehow—decomposing, very likely—but whatever was happening, Roland did not want to see it. He didn’t want Jenna to see it, either.

They half-walked, half-ran to the top of the ridge, and when they got there paused for breath in the moonlight, heads down, hands linked, both of them gasping harshly.

The growling and snarling below them had faded, but was still faintly audible when Sister Jenna raised her head and asked him, “What was it? You know—I saw it in your face. And how could it attack her? We all have power over animals, but she has—had—the most.”

“Not over that one.” Roland found himself recalling the unfortunate boy in the next bed. Norman hadn’t known why the medallions kept the Sisters at arm’s length—whether it was the gold or the God. Now Roland knew the answer. “It was a dog. Just a town-dog. I saw it in the square, before the green folk knocked me out and took me to the Sisters. I suppose the other animals that could run away *did* run away, but not that one. It had nothing to fear from the Little Sisters of Eluria, and somehow it knew it didn’t. It bears the sign of the Jesus Man on its chest. Black fur on white. Just an accident of its birth, I imagine. In any case, it’s done for her now. I knew it was lurking around. I heard it barking two or three times.”

“Why?” Jenna whispered. “Why would it come? Why would it stay? And why would it take on her as it did?”

Roland of Gilead responded as he ever had and ever would when such useless, mystifying questions were raised: “*Ka*. Come on. Let’s get as far as we can from this place before we hide up for the day.”

As far as they could turned out to be eight miles at most . . . and probably, Roland thought as the two of them sank down in a patch of sweet-smelling sage beneath an overhang of rock, a good deal less. Five, perhaps. It was him slowing them down; or rather, it was the residue of the poison in the soup. When it was clear to him that he could not go farther without help, he asked her for one of the reeds. She refused, saying that the stuff in it might combine with the unaccustomed exercise to burst his heart.

“Besides,” she said as they lay back against the embankment of the little nook they had found, “they’ll not follow. Those that are left—Michela, Louise, Tamra—will be packing up to move on. They know to leave when the time comes; that’s why the Sisters have survived as long as they have. As *we* have.

We're strong in some ways, but weak in many more. Sister Mary forgot that. It was her arrogance that did for her as much as the cross-dog, I think."

She had cached not just his boots and clothes beyond the top of the ridge, but the smaller of his two purses, as well. When she began to apologize for not bringing his bedroll and the larger purse (she'd tried, she said, but they were simply too heavy), Roland hushed her with a finger to her lips. He thought it a miracle to have as much as he did. And besides (this he did not say, but perhaps she knew it, anyway), the guns were the only things that really mattered. The guns of his father, and his father before him, all the way back to the days of Arthur Eld, when dreams and dragons had still walked the earth.

"Will you be all right?" he asked her as they settled down. The moon had set, but dawn was still at least three hours away. They were surrounded by the sweet smell of the sage. A purple smell, he thought it then . . . and ever after. Already he could feel it forming a kind of magic carpet under him, which would soon float him away to sleep. He thought he had never been so tired.

"Roland, I know not." But even then, he thought she had known. Her mother had brought her back once; no mother would bring her back again. And she had eaten with the others, had taken the communion of the Sisters. *Ka* was a wheel; it was also a net from which none ever escaped.

But then he was too tired to think much of such things . . . and what good would thinking have done, in any case? As she had said, the bridge was burned. Roland guessed that even if they were to return to the valley, they would find nothing but the cave the Sisters had called Thoughtful House. The surviving Sisters would have packed their tent of bad dreams and moved on, just a sound of bells and singing insects moving down the late night breeze.

He looked at her, raised a hand (it felt heavy), and touched the curl which once more lay across her forehead.

Jenna laughed, embarrassed. "That one always escapes. It's wayward. Like its mistress."

She raised her hand to poke it back in, but Roland took her fingers before she could. "It's beautiful," he said. "Black as night and as beautiful as forever."

He sat up—it took an effort; weariness dragged at his body like soft hands. He kissed the curl. She closed her eyes and sighed. He felt her trembling

beneath his lips. The skin of her brow was very cool; the dark curve of the wayward curl like silk.

“Push back your wimple, as you did before,” he said.

She did it without speaking. For a moment he only looked at her. Jenna looked back gravely, her eyes never leaving his. He ran his hands through her hair, feeling its smooth weight (like rain, he thought, rain with weight), then took her shoulders and kissed each of her cheeks. He drew back for a moment.

“Would ye kiss me as a man does a woman, Roland? On my mouth?”

“Aye.”

And, as he had thought of doing as he lay caught in the silken infirmary tent, he kissed her lips. She kissed back with the clumsy sweetness of one who has never kissed before, except perhaps in dreams. Roland thought to make love to her then—it had been long and long, and she was beautiful—but he fell asleep instead, still kissing her.

He dreamed of the cross-dog, barking its way across a great open landscape. He followed, wanting to see the source of its agitation, and soon he did. At the far edge of that plain stood the Dark Tower, its smoky stone outlined by the dull orange ball of a setting sun, its fearful windows rising in a spiral. The dog stopped at the sight of it and began to howl.

Bells—peculiarly shrill and as terrible as doom—began to ring. Dark Bells, he knew, but their tone was as bright as silver. At their sound, the dark windows of the Tower glowed with a deadly red light—the red of poisoned roses. A scream of unbearable pain rose in the night.

The dream blew away in an instant, but the scream remained, now unraveling to a moan. That part was real—as real as the Tower, brooding in its place at the very end of End-World. Roland came back to the brightness of dawn and the soft purple smell of desert sage. He had drawn both his guns, and was on his feet before he had fully realized he was awake.

Jenna was gone. Her boots lay empty beside his purse. A little distance from them, her jeans lay as flat as discarded snakeskins. Above them was her shirt. It was, Roland observed with wonder, still tucked into the pants. Beyond them was her empty wimple, with its fringe of bells lying on the powdery ground. He thought for a moment that they were ringing, mistaking the sound he heard at first.

Not bells but bugs. The doctor-bugs. They sang in the sage, sounding a bit like crickets, but far sweeter.

“Jenna?”

No answer . . . unless the bugs answered. For their singing suddenly stopped.

“Jenna?”

Nothing. Only the wind and the smell of the sage.

Without thinking about what he was doing (like playacting, reasoned thought was not his strong suit), he bent, picked up the wimple, and shook it. The Dark Bells rang.

For a moment there was nothing. Then a thousand small dark creatures came scurrying out of the sage, gathering on the broken earth. Roland thought of the battalion marching down the side of the freighter’s bed and took a step back. Then he held his position. As, he saw, the bugs were holding theirs.

He believed he understood. Some of this understanding came from his memory of how Sister Mary’s flesh had felt under his hands . . . how it had felt *various*, not one thing but many. Part of it was what she had said: *I have supped with them*. Such as them might never die . . . but they might *change*.

The insects trembled, a dark cloud of them blotting out the white, powdery earth.

Roland shook the bells again.

A shiver ran through them in a subtle wave, and then they began to form a shape. They hesitated as if unsure of how to go on, regrouped, began again. What they eventually made on the whiteness of the sand there between the blowing fluffs of lilac-colored sage was one of the Great Letters: the letter C.

Except it wasn’t really a letter, the gunslinger saw; it was a curl.

They began to sing, and to Roland it sounded as if they were singing his name.

The bells fell from his unnerved hand, and when they struck the ground and chimed there, the mass of bugs broke apart, running in every direction. He thought of calling them back—ringing the bells again might do that—but to what purpose? To what end?

*Ask me not, Roland. ’Tis done, the bridge burned.*

Yet she had come to him one last time, imposing her will over a thousand various parts that should have lost the ability to think when the whole lost its cohesion . . . and yet she *had* thought, somehow—enough to make that shape. How much effort might that have taken?

They fanned wider and wider, some disappearing into the sage, some trundling up the sides of a rock overhang, pouring into the cracks where they would, mayhap, wait out the heat of the day.

They were gone. *She* was gone.

Roland sat down on the ground and put his hands over his face. He thought he might weep, but in time the urge passed; when he raised his head again, his eyes were as dry as the desert he would eventually come to, still following the trail of Walter, the man in black.

*If there's to be damnation*, she had said, *let it be of my choosing, not theirs.*

He knew a little about damnation himself . . . and he had an idea that the lessons, far from being done, were just beginning.

She had brought him the purse with his tobacco in it. He rolled a cigarette and smoked it hunkered over his knees. He smoked it down to a glowing roach, looking at her empty clothes the while, remembering the steady gaze of her dark eyes. Remembering the scorch-marks on her fingers from the chain of the medallion. Yet she had picked it up, because she had known he would want it; had dared that pain, and Roland now wore both around his neck.

When the sun was fully up, the gunslinger moved on west. He would find another horse eventually, or a mule, but for now he was content to walk. All that day he was haunted by a ringing, singing sound in his ears, a sound like bells. Several times he stopped and looked around, sure he would see a dark following shape flowing over the ground, chasing after as the shadows of our best and worst memories chase after, but no shape was ever there. He was alone in the low hill country west of Eluria.

Quite alone.

# Everything's Eventual

*One day, out of nowhere, I had a clear image of a young man pouring change into a sewer grating outside of the small suburban house in which he lived. I had nothing else, but the image was so clear—and so disturbingly odd—that I had to write a story about it. It came out smoothly and without a single hesitation, supporting my idea that stories are artifacts: not really made things which we create (and can take credit for), but preexisting objects which we dig up.*

—

## I

I've got a good job now, and no reason to feel glum. No more hanging out with the gumbyheads at the Supr Savr, policing up the Kart Korral and getting bothered by assholes like Skipper. Skipper's munching the old dirt sandwich these days, but one thing I have learned in my nineteen years on this Planet Earth is don't relax, there are Skippers everywhere.

Ditto no more pulling pizza patrol on rainy nights, driving my old Ford with the bad muffler, freezing my ass off with the driver's-side window down and a little Italian flag sticking out on a wire. Like somebody in Harkerville was going to salute. Pizza Roma. Quarter tips from people who don't even see you, because most of their mind's still on the TV football game. Driving for Pizza Roma was the lowest point, I think. Since then I've even had a ride in a private jet, so how could things be bad?

"This is what comes of leaving school without a diploma," Ma would say during my Delivery Dan stint. And, "You've got this to look forward to *for the rest of your life.*" Good old Ma. On and on, until I actually thought about writing her one of those special letters. As I say, that was the low point. You know what Mr. Sharpton told me that night in his car? "It's not just a job,

Dink, it's a goddam adventure." And he was right. Whatever he might have been wrong about, he was right about that.

I suppose you're wondering about the salary of this famous job. Well, I got to tell you, there's not much money in it. Might as well get that right up front. But a job isn't just about money, or getting ahead. That's what Mr. Sharpton told me. Mr. Sharpton said that a real job is about the fringe benefits. He said that's where the power is.

Mr. Sharpton. I only saw him that once, sitting behind the wheel of his big old Mercedes-Benz, but sometimes once is enough.

Take that any way you want. Any old way at all.

## II

I've got a house, okay? My very own house. That's fringe benefit number one. I call Ma sometimes, ask how her bad leg is, shoot the shit, but I've never invited her over here, although Harkerville is only seventy or so miles away and I know she's practically busting a gut with curiosity. I don't even have to go see her unless I want to. Mostly I don't want to. If you knew my mother, you wouldn't want to, either. Sit there in that living room with her while she talks about all her relatives and whines about her puffy leg. Also I never noticed how much the house smelled of catshit until I got out of it. I'm never going to have a pet. Pets bite the big one.

Mostly I just stay here. It's only got one bedroom, but it's still an excellent house. *Eventual*, as Pug used to say. He was the one guy at the Supr Savr I liked. When he wanted to say something was really good, Pug'd never say it was awesome, like most people do; he'd say it was eventual. How funny is that? The old Pugmeister. I wonder how he's doing. Okay, I suppose. But I can't call him and make sure. I can call my Ma, and I have an emergency number if anything ever goes wrong or if I think somebody's getting nosy about what's not their business, but I can't buzz any of my old friends (as if any of them besides Pug gave Shit One about Dinky Earnshaw). Mr. Sharpton's rules.

But never mind that. Let's go back to my house here in Columbia City. How many nineteen-year-old high-school dropouts do *you* know who have

their own houses? Plus a new car? Only a Honda, true, but the first three numbers on the odometer are still zeroes, and that's the important part. It has a CD/tape-player, and I don't slide in behind the wheel wondering if the goddam thing'll start, like I always did with the Ford, which Skipper used to make fun of. The Assholemobile, he called it. Why are there so many Skippers in the world? That's what I really wonder about.

I do get *some* money, by the way. More than enough to meet my needs. Check this out. I watch *As the World Turns* every day while I'm eating my lunch, and on Thursdays, about halfway through the show, I hear the clack of the mail-slot. I don't do anything then, I'm not supposed to. Like Mr. Sharpton said, "Them's the rules, Dink."

I just watch the rest of my show. The exciting stuff on the soaps always happens around the weekends—murders on Fridays, fucking on Mondays—but I watch right to the end every day, just the same. I'm especially careful to stay in the living room until the end on Thursdays. On Thursdays I don't even go out to the kitchen for another glass of milk. When *World* is over, I turn off the TV for awhile—Oprah Winfrey comes on next, I hate her show, all that sitting-around-talking shit is for the Mas of the world—and go out to the front hall.

Lying on the floor under the mail-slot, there's always a plain white envelope, sealed. Nothing written on the front. Inside there'll be either fourteen five-dollar bills or seven ten-dollar bills. That's my money for the week. Here's what I do with it. I go to the movies twice, always in the afternoon, when it's just \$4.50. That's \$9. On Saturday I fill up my Honda with gas, and that's usually about \$7. I don't drive much. I'm not invested in it, as Pug would say. So now we're up to \$16. I'll eat out maybe four times at Mickey D's, either at breakfast (Egg McMuffin, coffee, two hash browns) or at dinner (Quarter Pounder with Cheese, never mind that McSpecial shit, what dimbulb thought *those* sandwiches up). Once a week I put on chinos and a button-up shirt and see how the other half lives—have a fancy meal at a place like Adam's Ribs or the Chuck Wagon. All of that goes me about \$25 and now we're up to \$41. Then I might go by News Plus and buy a stroke book or two, nothing really kinky, just your usual like *Variations* or *Penthouse*. I have tried writing these mags down on DINKY'S DAYBOARD, but with no success. I can buy them myself,

and they don't disappear on cleaning day or anything, but they don't *show up*, if you see what I'm getting at, like most other stuff does. I guess Mr. Sharpton's cleaners don't like to buy dirty stuff (pun). Also, I can't get to any of the sex stuff on the Internet. I have tried, but it's blocked out, somehow. Usually things like that are easy to deal with—you go under or around the roadblocks if you can't hack straight through—but this is different.

Not to belabor the point, but I can't dial 900 numbers on the phone, either. The auto-dialer works, of course, and if I want to call somebody just at random, anywhere in the world, and shoot the shit with them for awhile, that's okay. That works. But the 900 numbers don't. You just get a busy. Probably just as well. In my experience, thinking about sex is like scratching poison ivy. You only spread it around. Besides, sex is no big deal, at least for me. It's there, but it isn't *eventual*. Still, considering what I'm doing, that little prudey streak is sort of weird. Almost funny . . . except I seem to have lost my sense of humor on the subject. A few others, as well.

Oh well, back to the budget.

If I get a *Variations*, that's four bucks and we're up to \$45. Some of the money that's left I might use to buy a CD, although I don't have to, or a candy-bar or two (I know I shouldn't, because my complexion still blows dead rats, although I'm almost not a teenager anymore). I think of calling out for a pizza or for Chinese sometimes, but it's against TransCorp's rules. Also, I would feel weird doing it, like a member of the oppressing class. I have delivered pizza, remember. I know what a sucky job it is. Still, if I *could* order in, the pizza guy wouldn't leave *this* house with a quarter tip. I'd lay five on him, watch his eyes light up.

But you're starting to see what I mean about not needing a lot of cash money, aren't you? When Thursday morning rolls around again, I usually have at least eight bucks left, and sometimes it's more like twenty. What I do with the coins is drop them down the storm-drain in front of my house. I am aware that this would freak the neighbors out if they saw me doing it (I'm a high-school dropout, but I didn't leave because I was stupid, thank you very much), so I take out the blue plastic recycling basket with the newspapers in it (and sometimes with a *Penthouse* or *Variations* buried halfway down the stack, I don't keep that shit around for long, who would), and while I'm putting it

down on the curb, I open the hand with the change in it, and through the grate in the gutter it goes. Tinkle-tinkle-tinkle-splash. Like a magician's trick. Now you see it, now you don't. Someday that drain will get clogged up, they'll send a guy down there and he'll think he won the fucking lottery, unless there's a flood or something that pushes all the change down to the waste treatment plant, or wherever it goes. By then I'll be gone. I'm *not* going to spend my life in Columbia City, I can tell you that. I'm leaving, and soon. One way or the other.

The currency is easier. I just poke it down the garbage disposal in the kitchen. Another magic trick, presto-change-o, money into lettuce. You probably think that's very weird, running money through the sink-pig. I did, too, at first. But you get used to just about anything after you do it awhile, and besides, there's always another seventy falling through the letter-slot. The rule is simple: no squirrelling it away. End the week broke. Besides, it's not millions we're talking about, only eight or ten bucks a week. Chump-change, really.

### III

DINKY'S DAYBOARD. That's another fringe benefit. I write down whatever I want during the week, and I get everything I ask for (except sex-mags, as I told you). Maybe I'll get bored with that eventually, but right now it's like having Santa Claus all year round. Mostly what I write down is groceries, like anyone does on their kitchen chalkboard, but by no means is groceries all.

I might, for instance, write down "New Bruce Willis Video" or "New Weezer CD" or something like that. A funny thing about that Weezer CD, since we're on the subject. I happened to go into Toones Xpress one Friday after my movie was over (I always go to the show on Friday afternoons, even if there's nothing I really want to see, because that's when the cleaners come), just killing time inside because it was rainy and that squashed going to the park, and while I was looking at the new releases, this kid asks a clerk about the new Weezer CD. The clerk tells him it won't be in for another ten days or so, but I'd had it since the Friday before.

Fringe benefits, like I say.

If I write down “sport shirt” on the DAYBOARD, there it is when I get back to the house on Friday night, always in one of the nice earth-tone colors I like. If I write down “new jeans” or “chinos,” I get those. All stuff from The Gap, which is where I’d go myself, if I had to do stuff like that. If I want a certain kind of after-shave lotion or cologne, I write the name on DINKY’S DAYBOARD and it’s on the bathroom counter when I get home. I don’t date, but I’m a fool for cologne. Go figure.

Here’s something you’ll laugh at, I bet. Once I wrote down “Rembrandt Painting” on the DAYBOARD. Then I spent the afternoon at the movies and walking in the park, watching people making out and dogs catching Frisbees, thinking how eventual it would be if the cleaners actually brought me my own fucking Rembrandt. Think of it, a genuine Old Master on the wall of a house in the Sunset Knoll section of Columbia City. How eventual would *that* be?

And it happened, in a manner of speaking. My Rembrandt was hung on the living room wall when I got home, over the sofa where the velvet clowns used to be. My heart was beating about two hundred a minute as I walked across the room toward it. When I got closer, I saw it was just a copy . . . you know, a reproduction. I was disappointed, but not very. I mean, it *was* a Rembrandt. Just not an *original* Rembrandt.

Another time, I wrote “Autographed Photo of Nicole Kidman” on the DAYBOARD. I think she’s the best-looking actress alive, she just gets me on so much. And when I got home that day, there was a publicity still of her on the fridge, held there by a couple of those little vegetable magnets. She was on her *Moulin Rouge* swing. And that time it was the real deal. I know because of the way it was signed: “To Dinky Earnshaw, with love & kisses from Nicole.”

Oh, baby. Oh, honey.

Tell you something, my friend—if I worked hard and really wanted it, there might be a *real* Rembrandt on my wall someday. Sure. In a job like this, there is nowhere to go but up. In a way, that’s the scary part.

## IV

I never have to make grocery lists. The cleaners know what I like—Stouffer’s frozen dinners, especially that boil-in-the-bag stuff they call creamed chipped beef and Ma had always called shit on a shingle, frozen strawberries, whole milk, pre-formed hamburger patties that you just have to slap in a hot frying pan (I hate playing with raw meat), Dole puddings, the ones that come in plastic cups (bad for my complexion but I love em), ordinary food like that. If I want something special, I write it down on DINKY’S DAYBOARD.

Once I asked for a homemade apple pie, specifically *not* from the supermarket, and when I came back that night around the time it was getting dark, my pie was in the fridge with the rest of the week’s groceries. Only it wasn’t wrapped up, it was just sitting there on a blue plate. That’s how I knew it was homemade. I was a little hesitant about eating it at first, not knowing where it came from and all, and then I decided I was being stupid. A person doesn’t really know where *supermarket* food comes from, not really. I mean, we assume it’s okay because it’s wrapped up or in a can or “double-sealed for your protection,” but anyone could have been handling it with dirty fingers *before* it was double-sealed, or sneezing great big whoops of booger-breath on it, or even wiping their asses with it. I don’t mean to gross you out, but it’s true, isn’t it? The world is full of strangers, and a lot of them are “up to no good.” I have had personal experience of this, believe me.

Anyway, I tried the pie and it was delicious. I ate half of it Friday night and the rest on Saturday morning, while I was running the numbers in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Most of Saturday night I spent on the toilet, shitting my guts out from all those apples, I guess, but I didn’t care. The pie was worth it. “Like mother used to make” is what people say, but it can’t be my mother they say it about. My Ma couldn’t fry Spam.

## V

I never have to write down underwear on the DAYBOARD. Every five weeks or so the old drawers disappear and there are brand-new Hanes Jockey-shorts in my bureau, four three-packs still in their plastic bags. Double-sealed for my

protection, ha-ha. Toilet-paper, laundry soap, dishwasher soap, I never have to write any of that shit down. It just appears.

Very eventual, don't you think?

## VI

I have never seen the cleaners, any more than I have ever seen the guy (or maybe it's a gal) who delivers my seventy bucks every Thursday during *As the World Turns*. I never *want* to see them, either. I don't need to, for one thing. For another, yes, okay, I'm afraid of them. Just like I was afraid of Mr. Sharpton in his big gray Mercedes on the night I went out to meet him. So sue me.

I don't eat lunch in my house on Fridays. I watch *As the World Turns*, then jump in my car and drive into town. I get a burger at Mickey D's, then go to a movie, then to the park if the weather is good. I like the park. It's a good place to think, and these days I've got an awful lot to think about.

If the weather is bad, I go to the mall. Now that the days are beginning to shorten, I'm thinking about taking up bowling again. It'd be something to do on Friday afternoons, at least. I used to go now and then with Pug.

I sort of miss Pug. I wish I could call him, just shoot the shit, tell him some of the stuff that's been going on. Like about that guy Neff, for instance.

Oh, well, spit in the ocean and see if it comes back.

While I'm away, the cleaners are doing my house from wall to wall and top to bottom—wash the dishes (although I'm pretty good about that myself), wash the floors, wash the dirty clothes, change the sheets, put out fresh towels, restock the fridge, get any of the incidentals that are written on the DAYBOARD. It's like living in a hotel with the world's most efficient (not to mention eventual) maid service.

The one place they don't mess around with much is the study off the dining room. I keep that room fairly dark, the shades always pulled, and they have never raised them to let in so much as a crack of daylight, like they do in the rest of the house. It never smells of Lemon Pledge in there, either, although every other room just about reeks of it on Friday nights. Sometimes it's so bad

I have these sneezing fits. It's not an allergy; more like a nasal protest-demonstration.

Someone vacuums the floor in there, and they empty the waste-paper basket, but no one has ever moved any of the papers that I keep on the desk, no matter how cluttered-up and junky-looking they are. Once I put a little piece of tape over where the drawer above the knee-hole opens, but it was still there, unbroken, when I got back home that night. I don't keep anything top secret in that drawer, you understand; I just wanted to know.

Also, if the computer and modem are on when I leave, they're still on when I come back, the VDT showing one of the screen-saver programs (usually the one of the people doing stuff behind their blinds in this high-rise building, because that's my favorite). If my stuff was off when I left, it's off when I come back. They don't mess around in Dinky's study.

Maybe the cleaners are a little afraid of me, too.

## VII

I got the call that changed my life just when I thought the combination of Ma and delivering for Pizza Roma was going to drive me crazy. I know how melodramatic that sounds, but in this case, it's true. The call came on my night off. Ma was out with her girlfriends, playing Bingo at the Reservation, all of them smoking up a storm and no doubt laughing every time the caller pulled B-12 out of the hopper and said, "All right, ladies, it's time to take your vitamins." Me, I was watching a Clint Eastwood movie on TNT and wishing I was anywhere else on Planet Earth. Saskatchewan, even.

The phone rings, and I think, oh good, it's Pug, gotta be, and so when I pick it up I say in my smoothest voice, "You have reached the Church of Any Eventuality, Harkerville branch, Reverend Dink speaking."

"Hello, Mr. Earnshaw," a voice says back. It was one I'd never heard before, but it didn't seem the least put-out or puzzled by my bullshit. I was mortified enough for both of us, though. Have you ever noticed that when you do something like that on the phone—try to be cool right from the pickup—it's never the person you expected on the other end? Once I heard about this girl

who picked up the phone and said “Hi, it’s Helen, and I want you to fuck me raw” because she was sure it was her boyfriend, only it turned out to be her father. That story is probably made up, like the one about the alligators in the New York sewers (or the letters in *Penthouse*), but you get the point.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say, too flustered to wonder how the owner of this strange voice knows that Reverend Dink is also Mr. Earnshaw, actual name Richard Ellery Earnshaw. “I thought you were someone else.”

“I *am* someone else,” the voice says, and although I didn’t laugh then, I did later on. Mr. Sharpton was someone else, all right. Seriously, eventually someone else.

“Can I help you?” I asked. “If you wanted my mother, I’ll have to take a message, because she’s—”

“—out playing Bingo, I know. In any case, I want you, Mr. Earnshaw. I want to offer you a job.”

For a moment I was too surprised to say anything. Then it hit me—some sort of phone-scam. “I got a job,” I go. “Sorry.”

“Delivering pizza?” he says, sounding amused. “Well, I suppose. If you call that a job.”

“Who are you, mister?” I ask.

“My name is Sharpton. And now let me ‘cut through the bullshit,’ as you might say, Mr. Earnshaw. Dink? May I call you Dink?”

“Sure,” I said. “Can I call you Sharpie?”

“Call me whatever you want, just listen.”

“I’m listening.” I was, too. Why not? The movie on the tube was *Coogan’s Bluff*, not one of Clint’s better efforts.

“I want to make you the best job-offer you’ve ever had, and the best one you probably ever will have. It’s not just a job, Dink, it’s an adventure.”

“Gee, where have I heard that before?” I had a bowl of popcorn in my lap, and I tossed a handful into my mouth. This was turning into fun, sort of.

“Others promise; I deliver. But this is a discussion we must have face-to-face. Will you meet me?”

“Are you a queer?” I asked.

“No.” There was a touch of amusement in his voice. Just enough so that it was hard to disbelieve. And I was already in the hole, so to speak, from the

smartass way I'd answered the phone. "My sexual orientation doesn't come into this."

"Why're you yanking my chain, then? I don't know *anybody* who'd call me at nine-thirty in the fucking night and offer me a job."

"Do me a favor. Put the phone down and go look in your front hall."

Crazier and crazier. But what did I have to lose? I did what he said, and found an envelope lying there. Someone had poked it through the mail-slot while I was watching Clint Eastwood chase Don Stroud through Central Park. The first envelope of many, although of course I didn't know that then. I tore it open, and seven ten-dollar bills fell out into my hand. Also a note.

*This can be the beginning of a great career!*

I went back into the living room, still looking at the money. Know how weirded-out I was? I almost sat on my bowl of popcorn. I saw it at the last second, set it aside, and plopped back on the couch. I picked up the phone, really sort of expecting Sharpton to be gone, but when I said hello, he answered.

"What's this all about?" I asked him. "What's the seventy bucks for? I'm keeping it, but not because I think I owe you anything. I didn't fucking *ask* for anything."

"The money is absolutely yours," Sharpton says, "with not a string in the world attached. But I'll let you in on a secret, Dink—a job isn't just about money. A real job is about the fringe benefits. That's where the power is."

"If you say so."

"I absolutely do. And all I ask is that you meet me and hear a little more. I'll make you an offer that will change your life, if you take it. That will open the door to a *new* life, in fact. Once I've made that offer, you can ask all the questions you like. Although I must be honest and say you probably won't get all the *answers* you'd like."

"And if I just decide to walk away?"

"I'll shake your hand, clap you on the back, and wish you good luck."

"When did you want to meet?" Part of me—most of me—still thought all this was a joke, but there was a minority opinion forming by then. There was the money, for one thing; two weeks' worth of tips driving for Pizza Roma, and that's if business was good. But mostly it was the way Sharpton talked. He

sounded like he'd been to school . . . and I don't mean at Sheep's Rectum State College over in Van Drusen, either. And really, what harm could there be? Since Skipper's accident, there was no one on Planet Earth who wanted to take after me in a way that was dangerous or painful. Well, Ma, I suppose, but her only weapon was her mouth . . . and she wasn't into elaborate practical jokes. Also, I couldn't see her parting with seventy dollars. Not when there was still a Bingo game in the vicinity.

"Tonight," he said. "Right now, in fact."

"All right, why not? Come on over. I guess if you can drop an envelope full of tens through the mail-slot, you don't need me to give you the address."

"Not at your house. I'll meet you in the Supr Savr parking lot."

My stomach dropped like an elevator with the cables cut, and the conversation stopped being the least bit funny. Maybe this was some kind of setup—something with cops in it, even. I told myself no one could know about Skipper, least of all the cops, but Jesus. There was the letter; Skipper could have left the letter lying around anywhere. Nothing in it anyone could make out (except for his sister's name, but there are millions of Debbies in the world), no more than anyone could've made out the stuff I wrote on the sidewalk outside Mrs. Bukowski's yard . . . or so I would have said before the goddam phone rang. But who could be absolutely sure? And you know what they say about a guilty conscience. I didn't exactly feel *guilty* about Skipper, not then, but still . . .

"The Supr Savr's kind of a weird place for a job interview, don't you think? Especially when it's been closed since eight o'clock."

"That's what makes it good, Dink. Privacy in a public place. I'll park right by the Kart Korral. You'll know the car—it's a big gray Mercedes."

"I'll know it because it'll be the only one there," I said, but he was already gone.

I hung up and put the money in my pocket, almost without realizing I was doing it. I was sweating lightly all over my body. The voice on the phone wanted to meet me by the Kart Korral, where Skipper had so often teased me. Where he had once mashed my fingers between a couple of shopping carts, laughing when I screamed. That hurts the worst, getting your fingers mashed. Two of the nails had turned black and fallen off. That was when I'd made up

my mind to try the letter. And the results had been unbelievable. Still, if Skipper Brannigan had a ghost, the Kart Korral was likely where it would hang out, looking for fresh victims to torture. The voice on the phone couldn't have picked that place by accident. I tried to tell myself that was bullshit, that coincidences happened all the time, but I just didn't believe it. Mr. Sharpton knew about Skipper. Somehow he knew.

I was afraid to meet him, but I didn't see what choice I had. If nothing else, I ought to find out how much he knew. And who he might tell.

I got up, put on my coat (it was early spring then, and cold at night—it seems to me that it's always cold at night in western Pennsylvania), started out the door, then went back and left a note for Ma. "Went out to see a couple of guys," I wrote. "Will be back by midnight." I intended to be back well *before* midnight, but that note seemed like a good idea. I wouldn't let myself think too closely about *why* it seemed like a good idea, not then, but I can own up to it now: if something happened to me, something bad, I wanted to make sure Ma would call the police.

## VIII

There are two kinds of scared—at least that's my theory. There's TV-scared, and there's real-scared. I think we go through most of our lives only getting TV-scared. Like when we're waiting for our blood-tests to come back from the doctor or when we're walking home from the library in the dark and thinking about bad guys in the bushes. We don't get real-scared about shit like that, because we know in our heart of hearts that the blood-tests will come back clean and there won't be any bad guys in the bushes. Why? Because stuff like that only happens to the people on TV.

When I saw that big gray Mercedes, the only car in about an acre of empty parking lot, I got real-scared for the first time since the thing in the box-room with Skipper Brannigan. That time was the closest we ever came to really getting into it.

Mr. Sharpton's ride was sitting under the light of the lot's yellow mercury-vapor lamps, a big old Krautmobile, at least a 450 and probably a 500, the

kind of car that costs a hundred and twenty grand these days. Sitting there next to the Kart Korral (now almost empty for the night, all the carts except for one poor old three-wheeled cripple safely locked up inside) with its parking lights on and white exhaust drifting up into the air. Engine rumbling like a sleepy cat.

I drove toward it, my heart pumping slow but hard and a taste like pennies in my throat. I wanted to just mat the accelerator of my Ford (which in those days always smelled like a pepperoni pizza) and get the hell out of there, but I couldn't get rid of the idea that the guy knew about Skipper. I could tell myself there was nothing to know, that Charles "Skipper" Brannigan had either had an accident or committed suicide, the cops weren't sure which (they couldn't have known him very well; if they had, they would have thrown the idea of suicide right out the window—guys like Skipper don't off themselves, not at the age of twenty-three they don't), but that didn't stop the voice from yammering away that I was in trouble, someone had figured it out, someone had gotten hold of the letter and figured it out.

That voice didn't have logic on its side, but it didn't need to. It had good lungs and just outscrambled logic. I parked beside the idling Mercedes and rolled my window down. At the same time, the driver's-side window of the Mercedes rolled down. We looked at each other, me and Mr. Sharpton, like a couple of old friends meeting at the Hi-Hat Drive-In.

I don't remember much about him now. That's weird, considering all the time I've spent thinking about him since, but it's the truth. Only that he was thin, and that he was wearing a suit. A good one, I think, although judging stuff like that's not my strong point. Still, the suit eased me a little. I guess that, unconsciously, I had this idea that a suit means business, and jeans and a tee-shirt means fuckery.

"Hello, Dink," he says. "I'm Mr. Sharpton. Come on in here and sit down."

"Why don't we just stay the way we are?" I asked. "We can talk to each other through these windows. People do it all the time."

He only looked at me and said nothing. After a few seconds of that, I turned off the Ford and got out. I don't know exactly why, but I did. I was more scared than ever, I can tell you that. Real-scared. Real as real as real. Maybe that was why he could get me to do what he wanted.

I stood between Mr. Sharpton's car and mine for a minute, looking at the Kart Korral and thinking about Skipper. He was tall, with this wavy blond hair he combed straight back from his forehead. He had pimples, and these red lips, like a girl wearing lipstick. "Hey Dinky, let's see your dinky," he'd say. Or "Hey Dinky, you want to suck my dinky?" You know, witty shit like that. Sometimes, when we were rounding up the carts, he'd chase me with one, nipping at my heels with it and going "Rmmmm! Rmmmmmm! Rmmmmmm!" like a fucking race-car. A couple of times he knocked me over. At dinner-break, if I had my food on my lap, he'd bump into me good and hard, see if he could knock something onto the floor. You know the kind of stuff I'm talking about, I'm sure. It was like he'd never gotten over those ideas of what's funny to bored kids sitting in the back row of study hall.

I had a ponytail at work, you had to wear your hair in a ponytail if you had it long, supermarket rules, and sometimes Skipper would come up behind me, grab the rubber band I used, and yank it out. Sometimes it would snarl in my hair and pull it. Sometimes it would break and snap against my neck. It got so I'd stick two or three extra rubber bands in my pants pocket before I left for work. I'd try not to think about why I was doing it, what I was putting up with. If I did, I'd probably start hating myself.

Once I turned around on my heels when he did that, and he must have seen something on my face, because his teasing smile went away and another one came up where it had been. The teasing smile didn't show his teeth, but the new one did. Out in the box-room, this was, where the north wall is always cold because it backs up against the meat-locker. He raised his hands and made them into fists. The other guys sat around with their lunches, looking at us, and I knew none of them would help. Not even Pug, who stands about five-foot-four anyway and weighs about a hundred and ten pounds. Skipper would have eaten him like candy, and Pug knew it.

"Come on, assface," Skipper said, smiling that smile. The broken rubber band he'd stripped out of my hair was dangling between two of his knuckles, hanging down like a little red lizard's tongue. "Come on, you want to fight me? Come on, sure. I'll fight you."

What I wanted was to ask why it had to be me he settled on, why it was me who somehow rubbed his fur wrong, why it had to be *any* guy. But he

wouldn't have had an answer. Guys like Skipper never do. They just want to knock your teeth out. So instead, I just sat back down and picked up my sandwich again. If I tried to fight Skipper, he'd likely put me in the hospital. I started to eat, although I wasn't hungry anymore. He looked at me a second or two longer, and I thought he might go after me, anyway, but then he unrolled his fists. The broken rubber band dropped onto the floor beside a smashed lettuce-crate. "You waste," Skipper said. "You fucking longhair hippie waste." Then he walked away. It was only a few days later that he mashed my fingers between two of the carts in the Korral, and a few days after that Skipper was lying on satin in the Methodist Church with the organ playing. He brought it on himself, though. At least that's what I thought then.

"A little trip down Memory Lane?" Mr. Sharpton asked, and that jerked me back to the present. I was standing between his car and mine, standing by the Kart Korral where Skipper would never mash anyone else's fingers.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"And it doesn't matter. Hop in here, Dink, and let's have a little talk."

I opened the door of the Mercedes and got in. Man, that smell. It's leather, but not just leather. You know how, in Monopoly, there's a Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card? When you're rich enough to afford a car that smells like Mr. Sharpton's gray Mercedes, you must have a Get-Out-of-Everything-Free card.

I took a deep breath, held it, then let it out and said, "This is eventual."

Mr. Sharpton laughed, his clean-shaven cheeks gleaming in the dashboard lights. He didn't ask what I meant; he knew. "Everything's eventual, Dink," he said. "Or can be, for the right person."

"You think so?"

"*Know* so." Not a shred of doubt in his voice.

"I like your tie," I said. I said it just to be saying something, but it was true, too. The tie wasn't what I'd call eventual, but it was good. You know those ties that are printed all over with skulls or dinosaurs or little golf-clubs, stuff like that? Mr. Sharpton's was printed all over with swords, a firm hand holding each one up.

He laughed and ran a hand down it, kind of stroking it. "It's my lucky tie," he said. "When I put it on, I feel like King Arthur." The smile died off his face, little by little, and I realized he wasn't joking. "King Arthur, out gathering the

best men there ever were. Knights to sit with him at the Round Table and remake the world.”

That gave me a chill, but I tried not to show it. “What do you want with me, Art? Help you hunt for the Holy Grail, or whatever they call it?”

“A tie doesn’t make a man a king,” he said. “I know that, in case you were wondering.”

I shifted, feeling a little uncomfortable. “Hey, I wasn’t trying to put you down—”

“It doesn’t matter, Dink. Really. The answer to your question is I’m two parts headhunter, two parts talent scout, and four parts walking, talking destiny. Cigarette?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“That’s good, you’ll live longer. Cigarettes are killers. Why else would people call them coffin-nails?”

“You got me,” I said.

“I hope so,” Mr. Sharpton said, lighting up. “I most sincerely hope so. You’re top-shelf goods, Dink. I doubt if you believe that, but it’s true.”

“What’s this offer you were talking about?”

“Tell me what happened to Skipper Brannigan.”

Kabam, my worst fear come true. He couldn’t know, *nobody* could, but somehow he did. I only sat there feeling numb, my head pounding, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth like it was glued there.

“Come on, tell me.” His voice seemed to be coming in from far away, like on a shortwave radio late at night.

I got my tongue back where it belonged. It took an effort, but I managed. “I didn’t do anything.” My own voice seemed to be coming through on that same shitty shortwave band. “Skipper had an accident, that’s all. He was driving home and he went off the road. His car rolled over and went into Lockerby Stream. They found water in his lungs, so I guess he drowned, at least technically, but it was in the paper that he probably would have died, anyway. Most of his head got torn off in the rollover, or that’s what people say. And some people say it wasn’t an accident, that he killed himself, but I don’t buy that. Skipper was . . . he was getting too much fun out of life to kill himself.”

“Yes. You were part of his fun, weren’t you?”

I didn’t say anything, but my lips were trembling and there were tears in my eyes.

Mr. Sharpton reached over and put his hand on my arm. It was the kind of thing you’d expect to get from an old guy like him, sitting with him in his big German car in a deserted parking lot, but I knew when he touched me that it wasn’t like that, he wasn’t hitting on me. It was good to be touched the way he touched me. Until then, I didn’t know how sad I was. Sometimes you don’t, because it’s just, I don’t know, all around. I put my head down. I didn’t start bawling or anything, but the tears went running down my cheeks. The swords on his tie doubled, then tripled—three for one, such a deal.

“If you’re worried that I’m a cop, you can quit. And I gave you money—that screws up any sort of prosecution that might come out of this. But even if that wasn’t the case, no one would believe what really happened to young Mr. Brannigan, anyway. Not even if you confessed on nationwide TV. Would they?”

“No,” I whispered. Then, louder: “I put up with a lot. Finally I couldn’t put up with any more. He made me, he brought it on himself.”

“Tell me what happened,” Mr. Sharpton said.

“I wrote him a letter,” I said. “A special letter.”

“Yes, very special indeed. And what did you put in it so it could only work on him?”

I knew what he meant, but there was more to it than that. When you personalized the letters, you increased their power. You made them lethal, not just dangerous.

“His sister’s name,” I said. I think that was when I gave up completely. “His sister, Debbie.”

## IX

I’ve always had something, some kind of deal, and I sort of knew it, but not how to use it or what its name was or what it meant. And I sort of knew I had

to keep quiet about it, because other people didn't have it. I thought they might put me in the circus if they found out. Or in jail.

I remember once—vaguely, I might have been three or four, it's one of my first memories—standing by this dirty window and looking out at the yard. There was a wood-chopping block and a mailbox with a red flag, so it must have been while we were at Aunt Mabel's, out in the country. That was where we lived after my father ran off. Ma got a job in the Harkerville Fancy Bakery and we moved back to town later on, when I was five or so. We were living in town when I started school, I know that. Because of Mrs. Bukowski's dog, having to walk past that fucking canine cannibal five days a week. I'll never forget that dog. It was a boxer with a white ear. Talk about Memory Lane.

Anyway, I was looking out and there were these flies buzzing around at the top of the window, you know how they do. I didn't like the sound, but I couldn't reach high enough, even with a rolled-up magazine, to swat them or make them go away. So instead of that, I made these two triangles on the windowpane, drawing in the dirt with the tip of my finger, and I made this other shape, a special circle-shape, to hold the triangles together. And as soon as I did that, as soon as I closed the circle, the flies—there were four or five of them—dropped dead on the windowsill. Big as jellybeans, they were—the black jellybeans that taste like licorice. I picked one up and looked at it, but it wasn't very interesting, so I dropped it on the floor and went on looking out the window.

Stuff like that would happen from time to time, but never on purpose, never because I made it happen. The first time I remember doing something absolutely on purpose—before Skipper, I mean—was when I used my whatever-it-was on Mrs. Bukowski's dog. Mrs. Bukowski lived on the corner of our street, when we rented on Dugway Avenue. Her dog was mean and dangerous, every kid on the West Side was afraid of that white-eared fuck. She kept it tied in her side yard—hell, *staked out* in her side yard is more like it—and it barked at everyone who went by. Not harmless yapping, like some dogs do, but the kind that says *If I could get you in here with me or get out there with you, I'd tear your balls off, Brewster*. Once the dog *did* get loose, and it bit the paperboy. Anyone else's dog probably would have sniffed gas for that, but Mrs. Bukowski's son was the police chief, and he fixed it up, somehow.

I hated that dog the way I hated Skipper. In a way, I suppose, it *was* Skipper. I had to go by Mrs. Bukowski's on my way to school unless I wanted to detour all the way around the block and get called a sissy-boy, and I was terrified of the way that mutt would run to the end of its rope, barking so hard that foam would fly off its teeth and muzzle. Sometimes it hit the end of the rope so hard it'd go right off its feet, *boi-yoi-yoinng*, which might have looked funny to some people but never looked funny to me; I was just scared the rope (not a chain, but a plain old piece of rope) would break one day, and the dog would jump over the low picket fence between Mrs. Bukowski's yard and Dugway Avenue, and it would rip my throat out.

Then one day I woke up with an idea. I mean it was right there. I woke up with it the way some days I'd wake up with a great big throbbing boner. It was a Saturday, bright and early, and I didn't have to go anywhere near Mrs. Bukowski's if I didn't want to, but that day I *did* want to. I got out of bed and threw on my clothes just as fast as I could. I did everything fast because I didn't want to lose that idea. I would, too—I'd lose it the way you eventually lose the dreams you wake up with (or the boners you wake up with, if you want to be crude)—but right then I had the whole thing in my mind just as clear as a bell: words with triangles around them and curlicues over them, special circles to hold the whole shebang together . . . two or three of those, overlapping for extra strength.

I just about flew through the living room (Ma was still sleeping, I could hear her snoring, and her pink bakery uniform was hung over the shower rod in the bathroom) and went into the kitchen. Ma had a little blackboard by the phone for numbers and reminders to herself—MA'S DAYBOARD instead of DINKY'S DAYBOARD, I guess you'd say—and I stopped just long enough to gleep the piece of pink chalk hanging on a string beside it. I put it in my pocket and went out the door. I remember what a beautiful morning that was, cool but not cold, the sky so blue it looked like someone had run it through the Happy Wheels Carwash, no one moving around much yet, most folks sleeping in a little, like everyone likes to do on Saturdays, if they can.

Mrs. Bukowski's dog wasn't sleeping in. Fuck, no. That dog was a firm believer in rooty-tooty, do your duty. It saw me coming through the picket-fence and went charging to the end of its rope as hard as ever, maybe even

harder, as if some part of its dim little doggy brain knew it was Saturday and I had no business being there. It hit the end of the rope, *boi-yoi-yoinng*, and went right over backward. It was up again in a second, though, standing at the end of its rope and barking in its choky I'm-strangling-but-I-don't-care way. I suppose Mrs. Bukowski was used to that sound, maybe even *liked* it, but I've wondered since how the neighbors stood it.

I paid no attention that day. I was too excited to be scared. I fished the chalk out of my pocket and dropped down on one knee. For one second I thought the whole works had gone out of my head, and that was bad. I felt despair and sadness trying to fill me up and I thought, No, don't let it, don't let it, Dinky, fight it. Write anything, even if it's only FUCK MRS. BUKOWSKI'S DOG.

But I didn't write that. I drew this shape, I think it was a sankofite, instead. Some weird shape, but the *right* shape, because it unlocked everything else. My head flooded with stuff. It was wonderful, but at the same time it was really scary because there was so fucking much of it. For the next five minutes or so I knelt there on the sidewalk, sweating like a pig and writing like a mad fiend. I wrote words I'd never heard and drew shapes I'd never seen—shapes *nobody* had ever seen: not just sankofites but japps and fouders and mirks. I wrote and drew until I was pink dust halfway to my right elbow and Ma's piece of chalk was nothing but a little pebble between my thumb and finger. Mrs. Bukowski's dog didn't die like the flies, it barked at me the whole time, and it probably drew back and ran out the length of its rope leash another time or two, but I didn't notice. I was in this total frenzy. I could never describe it to you in a million years, but I bet it's how great musicians like Mozart and Eric Clapton feel when they're writing their music, or how painters feel when they're getting their best work on canvas. If someone had come along, I would have ignored him. Shit, if Mrs. Bukowski's dog had finally broken its rope, jumped the fence, and clamped down on my ass, I probably would have ignored *that*.

It was eventual, man. It was so fucking eventual I can't even tell you.

No one *did* come, although a few cars went by and maybe the people in them wondered what that kid was doing, what he was drawing on the sidewalk, and Mrs. Bukowski's dog went on barking. At the end, I realized I had to make it stronger, and the way to do that was to make it just for the dog.

I didn't know its name, so I printed BOXER with the last of the chalk, drew a circle around it, then made an arrow at the bottom of the circle, pointing to the rest. I felt dizzy and my head was throbbing, the way it does when you've just finished taking a super-hard test, or if you spend too long watching TV. I felt like I was going to be sick . . . but I still also felt totally eventual.

I looked at the dog—it was still just as lively as ever, barking and kind of prancing on its back legs when it ran out of slack—but that didn't bother me. I went back home feeling easy in my mind. I knew Mrs. Bukowski's dog was toast. The same way, I bet, that a good painter knows when he's painted a good picture, or a good writer knows when he's written a good story. When it's right, I think you just know. It sits there in your head and hums.

Three days later the dog was eating the old dirt sandwich. I got the story from the best possible source when it comes to mean asshole dogs: the neighborhood mailman. Mr. Shermerhorn, his name was. Mr. Shermerhorn said Mrs. Bukowski's boxer for some reason started running around the tree he was tied to, and when he got to the end of his rope (ha-ha, end of his rope), he couldn't get back. Mrs. Bukowski was out shopping somewhere, so she was no help. When she got home, she found her dog lying at the base of the tree in her side yard, choked to death.

The writing on the sidewalk stayed there for about a week; then it rained hard and afterward there was just a pink blur. But until it rained, it stayed pretty sharp. And while it was sharp, no one walked on it. I saw this for myself. People—kids walking to school, ladies walking downtown, Mr. Shermerhorn, the mailman—would just kind of veer around it. They didn't even seem to know they were doing it. And nobody ever talked about it, either, like “What's up with this weird shit on the sidewalk?” or “What do you suppose you call something that looks like that?” (A foudler, dimbulb.) It was as if they didn't even see it was there. Except part of them must have. Why else would they have walked around it?

I didn't tell Mr. Sharpton all that, but I told him what he wanted to know about Skipper. I had decided I could trust him. Maybe that secret part of me knew I could trust him, but I don't think so. I think it was just the way he put his hand on my arm, like your Dad would. Not that I have a Dad, but I can imagine.

Plus, it was like he said—even if he was a cop and arrested me, what judge and jury would believe Skipper Brannigan had driven his car off the road because of a letter I sent him? Especially one full of nonsense words and symbols made up by a pizza delivery-boy who had flunked high school geometry. *Twice.*

When I was done, there was silence between us for a long time. At last Mr. Sharpton said, "He deserved it. You know that, don't you?"

And for some reason that did it. The dam burst and I cried like a baby. I must have cried for fifteen minutes or more. Mr. Sharpton put his arm around me and pulled me against his chest and I watered the lapel of his suit. If someone had driven by and seen us that way, they would have thought we were a couple of queers for sure, but nobody did. There was just him and me under the yellow mercury-vapor lamps, there by the Kart Korral. Yippy-ti-yi-yo, get along little shopping cart, Pug used to sing, for yew know Supr Savr will be yer new home. We'd laugh till we cried.

At last I was able to turn off the waterworks. Mr. Sharpton handed me a hanky and I wiped my eyes with it. "How did you know?" I asked. My voice sounded all deep and weird, like a foghorn.

"Once you were spotted, all it took was a little rudimentary detective work."

"Yeah, but how was I spotted?"

"We have certain people—a dozen or so in all—who look for fellows and gals like you," he said. "They can actually *see* fellows and gals like you, Dink, the way certain satellites in space can see nuclear piles and power-plants. You folks show up yellow. Like matchflames is how this one spotter described it to me." He shook his head and gave a wry little smile. "I'd like to see something like that just once in my life. Or be able to do what you do. Of course, I'd also like to be given a day—just one would be fine—when I could paint like Picasso or write like Faulkner."

I gaped at him. “Is that true? There are people who can *see*—”

“Yes. They’re our bloodhounds. They crisscross the country—and all the other countries—looking for that bright yellow glow. Looking for matchheads in the darkness. This particular young woman was on Route 90, actually headed for Pittsburgh to catch a plane home—to grab a little R-and-R—when she saw you. Or sensed you. Or whatever it is they do. The finders don’t really know themselves, any more than you really know what you did to Skipper. Do you?”

“What—”

He raised a hand. “I told you that you wouldn’t get all the answers you’d like—this is something you’ll have to decide on the basis of what you feel, not on what you know—but I can tell you a couple of things. To begin with, Dink, I work for an outfit called the Trans Corporation. Our job is getting rid of the world’s Skipper Brannigans—the big ones, the ones who do it on a grand scale. We have company headquarters in Chicago and a training center in Peoria . . . where you’ll spend a week, if you agree to my proposal.”

I didn’t say anything then, but I knew already I was going to say yes to his proposal. Whatever it was, I was going to say yes.

“You’re a tranny, my young friend. Better get used to the idea.”

“What is it?”

“A trait. There are folks in our organization who think of what you have . . . what you can do . . . as a talent or an ability or even a kind of glitch, but they’re wrong. Talent and ability are born of trait. Trait is general, talent and ability are specific.”

“You’ll have to simplify that. I’m a high-school dropout, remember.”

“I know,” he said. “I also know that you didn’t drop out because you were stupid; you dropped out because you didn’t fit. In that way, you are like every other tranny I’ve ever met.” He laughed in the sharp way people do when they’re not really amused. “All twenty-one of them. Now listen to me, and don’t play dumb. Creativity is like a hand at the end of your arm. But a hand has many fingers, doesn’t it?”

“Well, at least five.”

“Think of those fingers as abilities. A creative person may write, paint, sculpt, or think up math formulae; he or she might dance or sing or play a

musical instrument. Those are the fingers, but creativity is the hand that gives them life. And just as all hands are basically the same—form follows function—all creative people are the same once you get down to the place where the fingers join.

“Trans is also like a hand. Sometimes its fingers are called precognition, the ability to see the future. Sometimes they’re postcognition, the ability to see the past—we have a guy who knows who killed John F. Kennedy, and it wasn’t Lee Harvey Oswald; it was, in fact, a woman. There’s telepathy, pyrokinesis, telempathy, and who knows how many others. *We* don’t know, certainly; this is a new world, and we’ve barely begun to explore its first continent. But trans is different from creativity in one vital way: it’s much rarer. One person in eight hundred is what occupational psychologists call ‘gifted.’ We believe that there may only be one tranny in each eight *million* people.”

That took my breath away—the idea that you might be one in eight million would take *anybody’s* breath away, right?

“That’s about a hundred and twenty for every *billion* ordinary folks,” he said. “We think there may be no more than three thousand so-called trannies in the whole world. We’re finding them, one by one. It’s slow work. The sensing ability is fairly low-level, but we still only have a dozen or so finders, and each one takes a lot of training. This is a hard calling . . . but it’s also fabulously rewarding. We’re finding trannies and we’re putting them to work. That’s what we want to do with you, Dink: put you to work. We want to help you focus your talent, sharpen it, and use it for the betterment of all mankind. You won’t be able to see any of your old friends again—there’s no security risk on earth like an old friend, we’ve found—and there’s not a whole lot of cash in it, at least to begin with, but there’s a lot of satisfaction, and what I’m going to offer you is only the bottom rung of what may turn out to be a very high ladder.”

“Don’t forget those fringe benefits,” I said, kind of raising my voice on the last word, turning it into a question, if he wanted to take it that way.

He grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. “That’s right,” he said. “Those famous fringe benefits.”

By then I was starting to get excited. My doubts weren’t gone, but they were melting away. “So tell me about it,” I said. My heart was beating hard, but it

wasn't fear. Not anymore. "Make me an offer I can't refuse."

And that's just what he did.

## XI

Three weeks later I'm on an airplane for the first time in my life—and what a way to lose your cherry! The only passenger in a Lear 35, listening to Counting Crows pouring out of quad speakers with a Coke in one hand, watching as the altimeter climbs all the way to forty-two thousand feet. That's over a mile higher than most commercial jetliners fly, the pilot told me. And a ride as smooth as the seat of a girl's underpants.

I spent a week in Peoria, and I was homesick. *Really* homesick. Surprised the shit out of me. There were a couple of nights when I even cried myself to sleep. I'm ashamed to say that, but I've been truthful so far, and don't want to start lying or leaving things out now.

Ma was the least of what I missed. You'd think we would have been close, as it was "us against the world," in a manner of speaking, but my mother was never much for loving and comforting. She didn't whip on my head or put out her cigarettes in my armpits or anything like that, but so what? I mean, big whoop. I've never had any kids, so I guess I can't say for sure, but I somehow don't think being a great parent is about the stuff you *didn't* do to your rug monkeys. Ma was always more into her friends than me, and her weekly trip to the beauty shop, and Friday nights out at the Reservation. Her big ambition in life was to win a twenty-number Bingo and drive home in a brand-new Monte Carlo. I'm not sitting on the pity-pot, either. I'm just telling you how it was.

Mr. Sharpton called Ma and told her that I'd been chosen to intern in the Trans Corporation's advanced computer training and placement project, a special deal for non-diploma kids with potential. The story was actually pretty believable. I was a shitty math student and froze up almost completely in classes like English, where you were supposed to talk, but I was always on good terms with the school computers. In fact, although I don't like to brag (and I never let any of the faculty in on this little secret), I could program rings around Mr. Jacobois and Mrs. Wilcoxen. I never cared much about computer

games—they're strictly for dickbrains, in my humble opinion—but I could keyjack like a mad motherfucker. Pug used to drop by and watch me, sometimes.

"I can't believe you," he said once. "Man, you got that thing smokin and tokin."

I shrugged. "Any fool can peel the Apple," I said. "It takes a real man to eat the core."

So Ma believed it (she might have had a few more questions if she knew the Trans Corporation was flying me out to Illinois in a private jet, but she didn't), and I didn't miss her all that much. But I missed Pug, and John Cassiday, who was our other friend from our Supr Savr days. John plays bass in a punk band, wears a gold ring in his left eyebrow, and has just about every Subpop record ever made. He cried when Kurt Cobain ate the dirt sandwich. Didn't try to hide it or blame it on allergies, either. Just said, "I'm sad because Kurt died." John's eventual.

And I missed Harkerville. Perverse but true. Being at the training center in Peoria was like being born again, somehow, and I guess being born always hurts.

I thought I might meet some other people like me—if this was a book or a movie (or maybe just an episode of *The X-Files*), I would meet a cute chick with nifty little tits and the ability to shut doors from across the room—but that didn't happen. I'm pretty sure there were other trannies at Peoria when I was there, but Dr. Wentworth and the other folks running the place were careful to keep us separated. I once asked why, and got a runaround. That's when I started to realize that not everybody who had TRANSCORP printed on their shirts or walked around with TransCorp clipboards was my pal, or wanted to be my long-lost Dad.

And it was about killing people; that's what I was training for. The folks in Peoria didn't talk about that all the time, but no one tried to sugarcoat it, either. I just had to remember the targets were bad guys, dictators and spies and serial killers, and as Mr. Sharpton said, people did it in wars all the time. Plus, it wasn't personal. No guns, no knives, no garrotes. I'd never get blood splashed on me.

Like I told you, I never saw Mr. Sharpton again—at least not yet, I haven't—but I talked to him every day of the week I was in Peoria, and that eased the pain and strangeness considerably. Talking to him was like having someone put a cool cloth on your brow. He gave me his number the night we talked in his Mercedes, and told me to call him anytime. Even at three in the morning, if I was feeling upset. Once I did just that. I almost hung up on the second ring, because people may *say* call them anytime, even at three in the morning, but they don't really expect you to do it. But I hung in there. I was homesick, yeah, but it was more than that. The place wasn't what I had expected, exactly, and I wanted to tell Mr. Sharpton so. See how he took it, kind of.

He answered on the third ring, and although he sounded sleepy (big surprise there, huh?), he didn't sound at all pissed. I told him that some of the stuff they were doing was quite weird. The test with all the flashing lights, for example. They said it was a test for epilepsy, but—

"I went to sleep right in the middle of it," I said. "And when I woke up, I had a headache and it was hard to think. You know what I felt like? A file-cabinet after someone's been rummaging through it."

"What's your point, Dink?" Mr. Sharpton asked.

"I think they hypnotized me," I said.

A brief pause. Then: "Maybe they did. *Probably* they did."

"But why? Why would they? I'm doing everything they ask, so why would they want to hypnotize me?"

"I don't know all their routines and protocols, but I suspect they're programming you. Putting a lot of housekeeping stuff on the lower levels of your mind so they won't have to junk up the conscious part . . . and maybe screw up your special ability, while they're at it. Really no different than programming a computer's hard disk, and no more sinister."

"But you don't know for sure?"

"No—as I say, training and testing are not my purview. But I'll make some calls, and Dr. Wentworth will talk to you. It may even be that an apology is due. If that's the case, Dink, you may be sure that it will be tendered. Our trannies are too rare and too valuable to be upset needlessly. Now, is there anything else?"

I thought about it, then said no. I thanked him and hung up. It had been on the tip of my tongue to tell him I thought I'd been drugged, as well . . . given some sort of mood-elevator to help me through the worst of my homesickness, but in the end I decided not to bother him. It was three in the morning, after all, and if they had been giving me anything, it was probably for my own good.

## XII

Dr. Wentworth came to see me the next day—he was the Big Kahuna—and he *did* apologize. He was perfectly nice about it, but he had a look, I don't know, like maybe Mr. Sharpton had called him about two minutes after I hung up and gave him a hot reaming.

Dr. Wentworth took me for a walk on the back lawn—green and rolling and damned near perfect there at the end of spring—and said he was sorry for not keeping me “up to speed.” The epilepsy test really *was* an epilepsy test, he said (and a CAT-scan, too), but since it induced a hypnotic state in most subjects, they usually took advantage of it to give certain “baseline instructions.” In my case, they were instructions about the computer programs I'd be using in Columbia City. Dr. Wentworth asked me if I had any other questions. I lied and said no.

You probably think that's weird, but it's not. I mean, I had a long and sucky school career which ended three months short of graduation. I had teachers I liked as well as teachers I hated, but never one I entirely trusted. I was the kind of kid who always sat in the back of the room if the teacher's seating-chart wasn't alphabetical, and never took part in class discussions. I mostly said “Huh?” when I was called on, and wild horses wouldn't have dragged a question out of me. Mr. Sharpton was the only guy I ever met who was able to get into where I lived, and ole Doc Wentworth with his bald head and sharp eyes behind his little rimless glasses was no Mr. Sharpton. I could imagine pigs flying south for the winter before I could imagine opening up to that dude, let alone crying on his shoulder.

And fuck, I didn't know what else to ask, anyway. A lot of the time I liked it in Peoria, and I was excited by the prospects ahead—new job, new house, new town. People were great to me in Peoria. Even the food was great—meatloaf, fried chicken, milkshakes, everything I liked. Okay, I didn't like the diagnostic tests, those boogersnots you have to do with an IBM pencil, and sometimes I'd feel dopey, as if someone had put something in my mashed potatoes (or hyper, sometimes I'd feel that way, too), and there were other times—at least two—when I was pretty sure I'd been hypnotized again. But so what? I mean, was any of it a big deal after you'd been chased around a supermarket parking lot by a maniac who was laughing and making race-car noises and trying to run you over with a shopping cart?

### XIII

I had one more talk on the phone with Mr. Sharpton that I suppose I should mention. That was just a day before my second airplane ride, the one that took me to Columbia City, where a guy was waiting with the keys to my new house. By then I knew about the cleaners, and the basic money-rule—start every week broke, end every week broke—and I knew who to call locally if I had a problem. (Any big problem and I call Mr. Sharpton, who is technically my “control.”) I had maps, a list of restaurants, directions to the cinema complex and the mall. I had a line on everything but the most important thing of all.

“Mr. Sharpton, I don't know what to *do*,” I said. I was talking to him on the phone just outside the caff. There was a phone in my room, but by then I was too nervous to sit down, let alone lie on my bed. If they were still putting shit in my food, it sure wasn't working that day.

“I can't help you there, Dink,” he said, calm as ever. “So solly, Cholly.”

“What do you mean? You've *got* to help me! You *recruited* me, for jeepers' sake!”

“Let me give you a hypothetical case. Suppose I'm the President of a well-endowed college. Do you know what *well-endowed* means?”

“Lots of bucks. I'm not stupid, I told you that.”

“So you did—I apologize. Anyhow, let’s say that I, President Sharpton, use some of my school’s plentiful bucks to hire a great novelist as the writer-in-residence, or a great pianist to teach music. Would that entitle me to tell the novelist what to write, or the pianist what to compose?”

“Probably not.”

“*Absolutely* not. But let’s say it did. If I told the novelist, ‘Write a comedy about Betsy Ross screwing around with George Washington in Gay Paree,’ do you think he could do it?”

I got laughing. I couldn’t help it. Mr. Sharpton’s just got a vibe about him, somehow.

“Maybe,” I said. “Especially if you whipped a bonus on the guy.”

“Okay, but even if he held his nose and cranked it out, it would likely be a very bad novel. Because creative people aren’t always in charge. And when they do their best work, they’re hardly *ever* in charge. They’re just sort of rolling along with their eyes shut, yelling *Wheeeee*.”

“What’s all that got to do with me? Listen, Mr. Sharpton—when I try to imagine what I’m going to do in Columbia City, all I see is a great big blank. Help people, you said. Make the world a better place. Get rid of the Skippers. All that sounds great, except *I don’t know how to do it!*”

“You will,” he said. “When the time comes, you will.”

“You said Wentworth and his guys would focus my talent. Sharpen it. Mostly what they did was give me a bunch of stupid tests and make me feel like I was back in school. Is it *all* in my subconscious? Is it *all* on the hard disk?”

“Trust me, Dink,” he said. “Trust me, and trust yourself.”

So I did. I have. But just lately, things haven’t been so good. Not so good at all.

That goddam Neff—all the bad stuff started with him. I wish I’d never seen his picture. And if I *had* to see a picture, I wish I’d seen one where he wasn’t smiling.

My first week in Columbia City, I did nothing. I mean absolutely zilch. I didn't even go to the movies. When the cleaners came, I just went to the park and sat on a bench and felt like the whole world was watching me. When it came time to get rid of my extra money on Thursday, I ended up shredding better than fifty dollars in the garbage disposal. And doing that was new to me then, remember. Talk about feeling *weird*—man, you don't have a clue. While I was standing there, listening to the motor under the sink grinding away, I kept thinking about Ma. If Ma had been there to see what I was doing, she would have probably run me through with a butcher-knife to make me stop. That was a dozen twenty-number Bingo games (or two dozen cover-alls) going straight down the kitchen pig.

I slept like shit that week. Every now and then I'd go to the little study—I didn't want to, but my feet would drag me there. Like they say murderers always return to the scenes of their crimes, I guess. Anyway, I'd stand there in the doorway and look at the dark computer screen, at the Global Village modem, and I'd just sweat with guilt and embarrassment and fear. Even the way the desk was so neat and clean, without a single paper or note on it, made me sweat. I could just about hear the walls muttering stuff like “Nah, nothing going on in here” and “Who's *this* turkey, the cable-installer?”

I had nightmares. In one of them, the doorbell rings and when I open it, Mr. Sharpton's there. He's got a pair of handcuffs. “Put out your wrists, Dink,” he says. “We thought you were a tranny, but obviously we were wrong. Sometimes it happens.”

“No, I *am*,” I say. “I *am* a tranny, I just need a little more time to get acclimated. I've never been away from home before, remember.”

“You've had five years,” he goes.

I'm stunned. I can't believe it. But part of me knows it's true. It *feels* like days, but it's really been *five fucking years*, and I haven't turned on the computer in the little study a single time. If not for the cleaners, the desk it sits on would be six inches deep in dust.

“Hold out your hands, Dink. Stop making this hard on both of us.”

“I won't,” I say, “and you can't make me.”

He looks behind him then, and who should come up the steps but Skipper Brannigan. He is wearing his red nylon tunic, only now TRANSCORP is sewn

on it instead of SUPR SAVR. He looks pale but otherwise okay. Not dead is what I mean. “You thought you did something to me, but you didn’t,” Skipper says. “You couldn’t do anything to anyone. You’re just a hippie waste.”

“I’m going to put these cuffs on him,” Mr. Sharpton says to Skipper. “If he gives me any trouble, run him over with a shopping cart.”

“Totally eventual,” Skipper says, and I wake up half out of my bed and on the floor, screaming.

## XV

Then, about ten days after I moved in, I had another kind of dream. I don’t remember what it was, but it must have been a good one, because when I woke up, I was smiling. I could feel it on my face, a big, happy smile. It was like when I woke up with the idea about Mrs. Bukowski’s dog. Almost exactly like that.

I pulled on a pair of jeans and went into the study. I turned on the computer and opened the window marked TOOLS. There was a program in there called DINKY’S NOTEBOOK. I went right to it, and all my symbols were there—circles, triangles, japps, mirks, rhomboids, bews, smims, fouders, hundreds more. *Thousands* more. Maybe *millions* more. It’s sort of like Mr. Sharpton said: a new world, and I’m on the coastline of the first continent.

All I know is that all at once it was *there* for me, I had a great big Macintosh computer to work with instead of a little piece of pink chalk, and all I had to do was type the words for the symbols and the symbols would appear. I was jacked to the max. I mean my God. It was like a river of fire burning in the middle of my head. I wrote, I called up symbols, I used the mouse to drag everything where it was supposed to be. And when it was done, I had a letter. One of the special letters.

But a letter to who?

A letter to where?

Then I realized it didn’t matter. Make a few minor customizing touches, and there were many people the letter could go to . . . although this one had been written for a man rather than a woman. I don’t know how I knew that; I just

did. I decided to start with Cincinnati, only because Cincinnati was the first city to come into my mind. It could as easily have been Zurich, Switzerland, or Waterville, Maine.

I tried to open a TOOLS program titled DINKYMAIL. Before the computer would let me in there, it prompted me to wake up my modem. Once the modem was running, the computer wanted a 312 area code. 312's Chicago, and I imagine that, as far as the phone company is concerned, my compu-calls all come from TransCorp's headquarters. I didn't care one way or another; that was their business. I had found my business and was taking care of it.

With the modem awake and linked to Chicago, the computer flashed

DINKYMAIL READY.

I clicked on LOCALE. I'd been in the study almost three hours by then, with only one break to take a quick piss, and I could smell myself, sweating and stinking like a monkey in a greenhouse. I didn't mind. I liked the smell. I was having the time of my life. I was fucking delirious.

I typed CINCINNATI and hit EXECUTE.

NO LISTINGS CINCINNATI

the computer said. Okay, not a problem. Try Columbus—closer to home, anyway. And yes, folks! We have a Bingo.

TWO LISTINGS COLUMBUS

There were two telephone numbers. I clicked on the top one, curious and a little afraid of what might pop out. But it wasn't a dossier, a profile, or—God forbid—a photograph. There was one single word:

MUFFIN.

Say *what?*

But then I knew. Muffin was Mr. Columbus's pet. Very likely a cat. I called up my special letter again, transposed two symbols and deleted a third. Then I

added MUFFIN to the top, with an arrow pointing down. There. Perfect.

Did I wonder who Muffin's owner was, or what he had done to warrant TransCorp's attention, or exactly what was going to happen to him? I did not. The idea that my conditioning at Peoria might have been partially responsible for this disinterest never crossed my mind, either. I was doing my thing, that was all. Just doing my thing, and as happy as a clam at high tide.

I called the number on the screen. I had the computer's speaker on, but there was no hello, only the screechy mating-call of another computer. Just as well, really. Life's easier when you subtract the human element. Then it's like that movie, *Twelve O'Clock High*, cruising over Berlin in your trusty B-25, looking through your trusty Norden bombsight and waiting for just the right moment to push your trusty button. You might see smokestacks, or factory roofs, but no people. The guys who dropped the bombs from their B-25s didn't have to hear the screams of mothers whose children had just been reduced to guts, and I didn't even have to hear anyone say hello. A very good deal.

After a little bit, I turned off the speaker anyway. I found it distracting.

MODEM FOUND,

the computer flashed, and then

SEARCH FOR E-MAIL ADDRESS Y/N.

I typed Y and waited. This time the wait was longer. I think the computer was going back to Chicago again, and getting what it needed to unlock the e-mail address of Mr. Columbus. Still, it was less than thirty seconds before the computer was right back at me with

E-MAIL ADDRESS FOUND

SEND DINKYMAIL Y/N.

I typed Y with absolutely no hesitation. The computer flashed

SENDING DINKYMAIL

and then

DINKYMAIL SENT.

That was all. No fireworks.  
I wonder what happened to Muffin, though.  
You know. After.

## XVI

That night I called Mr. Sharpton and said, "I'm working."

"That's good, Dink. Great news. Feel better?" Calm as ever. Mr. Sharpton is like the weather in Tahiti.

"Yeah," I said. The fact was, I felt blissful. It was the best day of my life. Doubts or no doubts, worries or no worries, I still say that. The most eventual day of my life. It was like a river of fire in my head, *a fucking river of fire*, can you get that? "Do *you* feel better, Mr. Sharpton? Relieved?"

"I'm happy for you, but I can't say I'm relieved, because—"

"—you were never worried in the first place."

"Got it in one," he said.

"Everything's eventual, in other words."

He laughed at that. He always laughs when I say that. "That's right, Dink. Everything's eventual."

"Mr. Sharpton?"

"Yes?"

"E-mail's not exactly private, you know. Anybody who's really dedicated can hack into it."

"Part of what you send is a suggestion that the recipient delete the message from all files, is it not?"

"Yes, but I can't absolutely guarantee that he'll do it. Or she."

"Even if they don't, nothing can happen to someone else who chances on such a message, am I correct? Because it's . . . personalized."

"Well, it might give someone a headache, but that would be about all."

“And the communication itself would look like so much gibberish.”

“Or a code.”

He laughed heartily at that. “Let them try to break it, Dinky, eh? Just let them try!”

I sighed. “I suppose.”

“Let’s discuss something more important, Dink . . . how did it *feel*?”

“Fucking *wonderful*.”

“Good. Don’t question wonder, Dink. Don’t ever question wonder.”

And he hung up.

## XVII

Sometimes I have to send actual letters—print out the stuff I whomp up in DINKY’S NOTEBOOK, stick it in an envelope, lick stamps, and mail it off to somebody somewhere. Professor Ann Tevitch, University of New Mexico at Las Cruces. Mr. Andrew Neff, *c/o* The New York *Post*, New York, New York. Billy Unger, General Delivery, Stovington, Vermont. Only names, but they were still more upsetting than the phone numbers. More *personal* than the phone numbers. It was like seeing faces swim up at you for a second inside your Norden bomb-sight. I mean, what a freak-out, right? You’re up there at twenty-five thousand feet, no faces allowed up there, but sometimes one shows up for a second or two, just the same.

I wondered how a University Professor could get along without a modem (or a guy whose address was a fucking New York newspaper, for that matter), but I never wondered too much. I didn’t have to. We live in a modern world, but letters don’t *have* to be sent by computer, after all. There’s still snail-mail. And the stuff I really needed was always in the database. The fact that Unger had a 1957 Thunderbird, for instance. Or that Ann Tevitch had a loved one—perhaps her husband, perhaps her son, perhaps her father—named Simon.

And people like Tevitch and Unger were exceptions. Most of the folks I reach out and touch are like that first one in Columbus—fully equipped for the twenty-first century. SENDING DINKYMAIL, DINKYMAIL SENT, velly good, so long, Cholly.

I could have gone on like that for a long time, maybe forever—browsing the database (there's no schedule to follow, no list of primary cities and targets; I'm completely on my own . . . unless all that shit is *also* in my subconscious, down there on the hard disk), going to afternoon movies, enjoying the Ma-less silence of my little house, and dreaming of my next step up the ladder, except I woke up feeling horny one day. I worked for an hour or so, browsing around in Australia, but it was no good—my dick kept trespassing on my brain, so to speak. I shut off the computer and went down to News Plus to see if I could find a magazine featuring pretty ladies in frothy lingerie.

As I got there, a guy was coming out, reading the Columbus *Dispatch*. I never read the paper myself. Why bother? It's the same old shit day in and day out, dictators beating the ching-chong out of people weaker than they are, men in uniforms beating the ching-chong out of soccer balls or footballs, politicians kissing babies and kissing ass. Mostly stories about the Skipper Brannigans of the world, in other words. And I wouldn't have seen this story even if I'd happened to look at the newspaper display rack once I got inside, because it was on the bottom half of the front page, below the fold. But this fucking dimbulb comes out with the paper hanging open and his face buried inside it.

In the lower right corner was a picture of a white-haired guy smoking a pipe and smiling. He looked like a good-humored fuck, probably Irish, eyes all crinkled up and these white bushy eyebrows. And the headline over the photo—not a big one, but you could read it—said NEFF SUICIDE STILL PUZZLES, GRIEVES COLLEAGUES

For a second or two I thought I'd just skip News Plus that day, I didn't feel like ladies in lingerie after all, maybe I'd just go home and take a nap. If I went in, I'd probably pick up a copy of the *Dispatch*, wouldn't be able to help myself, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know any more about that Irish-looking guy than I already did . . . which was nothing at all, as you can fucking believe I hastened to tell myself. Neff couldn't be that weird a name anyway, only four letters, not like Shittendookus or Horecake, there must be thousands of Neffs, if you're talking coast to coast. This one didn't have to be the Neff I knew about, the one who loved Frank Sinatra records.

It would be better, in any case, to just leave and come back tomorrow. Tomorrow the picture of that guy with the pipe would be gone. Tomorrow somebody else's picture would be there, on the lower right corner of page one. People always dying, right? People who aren't superstars or anything, just famous enough to get their pictures down there in the lower right corner of page one. And sometimes people were puzzled about it, the way folks back home in Harkerville had been puzzled about Skipper's death—no alcohol in his blood, clear night, dry road, not the suicidal type.

The world is full of mysteries like that, though, and sometimes it's best not to solve them. Sometimes the solutions aren't, you know, too eventual.

But willpower has never been my strong point. I can't always keep away from the chocolate, even though I know my skin doesn't like it, and I couldn't keep away from the Columbus *Dispatch* that day. I went on inside and bought one.

I started home, then had a funny thought. The funny thought was that I didn't want a newspaper with Andrew Neff's picture on the front page going out with my trash. The trash pick-up guys came in a city truck, surely they didn't—*couldn't*—have anything to do with TransCorp, but . . .

There was this show me and Pug used to watch one summer back when we were little kids. *Golden Years*, it was called. You probably don't remember it. Anyway, there was a guy on that show who used to say "Perfect paranoia is perfect awareness." It was like his motto. And I sort of believe that.

Anyway, I went to the park instead of back home. I sat on a bench and read the story, and when I was done, I stuck the paper in a park trashbarrel. I didn't even like doing that, but hey—if Mr. Sharpton has got a guy following me around and checking on every little thing I throw away, I'm fucked up the wazoo no matter what.

There was no doubt that Andrew Neff, age sixty-two, a columnist for the *Post* since 1970, had committed suicide. He took a bunch of pills that probably would have done the trick, then climbed into his bathtub, put a plastic bag over his head, and rounded the evening off by slitting his wrists. There was a man totally dedicated to avoiding counselling.

He left no note, though, and the autopsy showed no signs of disease. His colleagues scoffed at the idea of Alzheimer's, or even early senility. "He was the

sharpest guy I've ever known, right up to the day he died," a guy named Pete Hamill said. "He could have gone on *Challenge Jeopardy!* and run both boards. I have no idea why Andy did such a thing." Hamill went on to say that one of Neff's "charming oddities" was his complete refusal to participate in the computer revolution. No modems for him, no laptop word processor, no handheld spell-checker from Franklin Electronic Publishers. He didn't even have a CD player in his apartment, Hamill said; Neff claimed, perhaps only half-joking, that compact discs were the Devil's work. He loved the Chairman of the Board, but only on vinyl.

This guy Hamill and several others said Neff was unfailingly cheerful, right up to the afternoon he filed his last column, went home, drank a glass of wine, and then demo'd himself. One of the *Post's* chatter columnists, Liz Smith, said she'd shared a piece of pie with him just before he left on that last day, and Neff had seemed "a trifle distracted, but otherwise fine."

Distracted, sure. With a headful of fouders, bews, and smims, you'd be distracted, too.

Neff, the piece went on, had been something of an anomaly on the *Post*, which sticks up for the more conservative view of life—I guess they don't come right out and recommend electrocuting welfare recipients after three years and still no job, but they *do* hint that it's always an option. I guess Neff was the house liberal. He wrote a column called "Eneff Is Eneff," and in it he talked about changing the way New York treated single teen mothers, suggested that maybe abortion wasn't always murder, argued that the low-income housing in the outer boroughs was a self-perpetuating hate machine. Near the end of his life, he'd been writing columns about the size of the military, and asking why we as a country felt we had to keep pouring on the bucks when there was, essentially, no one left to fight except for the terrorists. He said we'd do better to spend that money creating jobs. And *Post* readers, who would have crucified anyone else saying stuff like that, pretty much loved it when Neff laid it down. Because he was funny. Because he was charming. Maybe because he was Irish and had kissed the Blarney Stone.

That was about all. I started home. Somewhere along the way I took a detour, though, and ended up walking all over downtown. I zigged and zagged, walking down boulevards and cutting through parking lots, all the time

thinking about Andrew Neff climbing into his bathtub and putting a Baggie over his head. A big one, a gallon-size, keeps all your leftovers supermarket-fresh.

He was funny. He was charming. And I had killed him. Neff had opened my letter and it had gotten into his head, somehow. Judging by what I'd read in the paper, the special words and symbols took maybe three days to fuck him up enough to swallow the pills and climb into the tub.

*He deserved it.*

That's what Mr. Sharpton said about Skipper, and maybe he was right . . . that time. But did Neff deserve it? Was there shit about him I didn't know, did he maybe like little girls in the wrong way or push dope or go after people too weak to fight back, like Skipper had gone after me with the shopping cart?

*We want to help you use your talent for the betterment of all mankind*, Mr. Sharpton said, and surely that didn't mean making a guy off himself because he thought the Defense Department was spending too much money on smart-bombs. Paranoid shit like that is strictly for movies starring Steven Seagal and Jean-Claude Van Damme.

Then I had a bad idea—a scary idea.

Maybe TransCorp didn't want him dead because he wrote that stuff.

Maybe they wanted him dead because people—the wrong people—were starting to *think* about what he wrote.

“That's crazy,” I said, right out loud, and a woman looking into the window of Columbia City-Oh So Pretty turned around and gave me the old fish-eye.

I ended up at the public library around two o'clock, with my legs aching and my head throbbing. I kept seeing that guy in the bathtub, with his wrinkled old man's tits and white chest-hair, his nice smile gone, replaced by this vague Planet X look. I kept seeing him putting a Baggie over his head, humming a Sinatra tune (“My Way,” maybe) as he snugged it down tight, then peered through it the way you'd peer through a cloudy window, so he could see to slit the veins in his wrists. I didn't want to see that stuff, but I couldn't stop. My bombsight had turned into a telescope.

They had a computer room in the library, and you could get on the Internet at a very reasonable cost. I had to get a library card, too, but that was okay. A

library card is good to have, you can never have too much ID.

It took me only three bucks' worth of time to find Ann Tevitch and call up the report of her death. The story started, I saw with a sinking sensation, in the bottom righthand corner of page one, The Official Dead Folks' Nook, and then jumped to the obituary page. Professor Tevitch had been a pretty lady, blond, thirty-seven. In the photo she was holding her glasses in her hand, as if she wanted people to know she wore them . . . but as if she'd wanted people to see what pretty eyes she had, too. That made me feel sad and guilty.

Her death was startlingly like Skipper's—coming home from her office at UNM just after dark, maybe hurrying a little because it was her turn to make supper, but what the hell, good driving conditions and great visibility. Her car—vanity license plate DNA FAN, I happened to know—had veered off the road, overturned, and landed in a drywash. She was still alive when someone spotted the headlights and found her, but there had never been any real hope; her injuries were too grave.

There was no alcohol in her system and her marriage was in good shape (no kids, at least, thank God for small favors), so the idea of suicide was farfetched. She had been looking forward to the future, had even talked about getting a computer to celebrate a new research grant. She'd refused to own a PC since 1988 or so; had lost some valuable data in one when it locked up, and had distrusted them ever since. She would use her department's equipment when she absolutely had to, but that was all.

The coroner's verdict had been accidental death.

Professor Ann Tevitch, a clinical biologist, had been in the forefront of West Coast AIDS research. Another scientist, this one in California, said that her death might set back the search for a cure five years. "She was a key player," he said. "Smart, yes, but more—I once heard someone refer to her as 'a natural-born facilitator,' and that's as good a description as any. Ann was the kind of person who holds other people together. Her death is a great loss to the dozens of people who knew and loved her, but it's an even greater loss to this cause."

Billy Unger was also easy enough to find. His picture topped page one of the Stovington *Weekly Courant* instead of getting stuck down there in The Dead Folks' Nook, but that might have been because there weren't many famous people in Stovington. Unger had been General William "Roll Em"

Unger, winner of the Silver Star and Bronze Star in Korea. During the Kennedy administration he was an Undersecretary of Defense (Acquisition Reform), and one of the really big war-hawks of that time. Kill the Russkies, drink their blood, keep America safe for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, that sort of thing.

Then, around the time Lyndon Johnson was escalating the war in Vietnam, Billy Unger had a change of mind and heart. He began writing letters to newspapers. He started his op-ed page career by saying that we were handling the war wrong. He progressed to the idea that we were wrong to be in Vietnam at all. Then, around 1975 or so, he got to the point of saying *all* wars were wrong. That was okay with most Vermonters.

He served seven terms in the state legislature, starting in 1978. When a group of Progressive Democrats asked him to run for the U.S. Senate in 1996, he said he wanted to "do some reading and consider his options." The implication was that he would be ready for a national career in politics by 2000, 2002 at the latest. He was getting old, but Vermonters like old guys, I guess. 1996 went past without Unger declaring himself a candidate for anything (possibly because his wife died of cancer), and before 2002 came around, he bought himself a big old dirt sandwich and ate every bite.

There was a small but loyal contingent in Stovington which claimed Roll Em's death was an accident, that Silver Star winners don't jump off their roofs even if they *have* lost a wife to cancer in the last year or so, but the rest pointed out that the guy probably hadn't been repairing the shingles—not in his nightshirt, not at two o'clock in the morning.

Suicide was the verdict.

Yeah. Right. Kiss my ass and go to Heaven.

## XVIII

I left the library and thought I'd head home. Instead, I went back to the same park bench again. I sat there until the sun was low and the place had pretty much emptied out of kids and Frisbee-catching dogs. And although I'd been in Columbia City for three months by then, it was the latest I'd ever been out.

That's sad, I guess. I thought I was living a life here, finally getting away from Ma and living a life, but all I've been doing is throwing a shadow.

If people, certain people, were checking up on me, they might wonder why the change in routine. So I got up, went on home, boiled up a bag of that shit-on-a-shingle stuff, and turned on my TV. I've got cable, the full package including premium movie channels, and I've never seen a single bill. How's that for an eventual deal? I turned on Cinemax. Rutger Hauer was playing a blind karate-fighter. I sat down on the couch beneath my fake Rembrandt and watched the show. I didn't see it, but I ate my chow and looked at it.

I thought about stuff. About a newspaper columnist who had liberal ideas and a conservative readership. About an AIDS researcher who served an important linking function with other AIDS researchers. About an old general who changed his mind. I thought about the fact that I only knew these three by name because they didn't have modems and e-mail capability.

There was other stuff to think about, too. Like how you could hypnotize a talented guy, or drug him, or maybe even expose him to other talented guys in order to keep him from asking any of the wrong questions or doing any of the wrong things. Like how you could make sure such a talented guy couldn't run away even if he happened to wake up to the truth. You'd do that by setting him up in what was, essentially, a cashless existence . . . a life where rule number one was no ratholing any extra dough, not even pocket-change. What sort of talented guy would fall for something like that? A naive one, with few friends and next to no self-image. A guy who would sell you his talented soul for a few groceries and seventy bucks a week, because he believes that's about what it's worth.

I didn't want to think about any of that. I tried to concentrate on Rutger Hauer, doing all that amusing blind karate shit (Pug would have laughed his ass off if he'd been there, believe me), so I wouldn't *have* to think about any of that.

*Two hundred*, for instance. There was a number I didn't want to think about. 200. 10 x 20, 40 x 5. CC, to the old Romans. At least two hundred times I'd pushed the button that brought the message DINKYMAIL SENT up on my screen.

It occurred to me—for the first time, as if I was finally waking up—that I was a murderer. A *mass* murderer.

Yes indeed. That's what it comes down to.

Good of mankind? Bad of mankind? Indifferent of mankind? Who makes those judgements? Mr. Sharpton? His bosses? *Their* bosses? And does it matter?

I decided it didn't matter a fuck in a rabbit-hutch. I further decided I really couldn't spend too much time moaning (even to myself) how I had been drugged, hypnotized, or exposed to some kind of mind-control. The truth was, I'd been doing what I was doing because I loved the feeling I got when I was composing the special letters, the feeling that there was a river of fire running through the center of my head.

Mostly, I'd been doing it because I could.

"That's not true," I said . . . but not real loud. I whispered it under my breath. They probably don't have any bugs planted here, I'm sure they don't, but it's best to be safe.

I started writing this . . . what is it? A report, maybe. I started writing this report later that night . . . as soon as the Rutger Hauer movie was over, in fact. I write in a notebook, though, not on my computer, and I write in plain old English. No sankofites, no bews, no smims. There's a loose floor-tile under the Ping-Pong table down in the basement. That's where I keep my report. I just now looked back at how I started. *I've got a good job now*, I wrote, *and no reason to feel glum*. Idiotic. But of course, any fool who can pucker is apt to whistle past the graveyard.

When I went to bed that night, I dreamed I was in the parking lot of the Supr Savr. Pug was there, wearing his red duster and a hat on his head like the one Mickey Mouse wore in *Fantasia*—that's the movie where Mickey played the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Halfway across the parking lot, shopping carts were lined up in a row. Pug would raise his hand, then lower it. Each time he did this, a cart would start rolling by itself, gathering speed, rushing across the lot until it crashed into the brick side of the supermarket. They were piling up there, a glittering junkheap of metal and wheels. For once in his life, Pug wasn't smiling. I wanted to ask him what he was doing and what it meant, but of course I knew.

“He’s been good to me,” I told Pug in this dream. It was Mr. Sharp-ton I meant, of course. “He’s been really, really eventual.”

Pug turned fully to me then, and I saw it wasn’t Pug at all. It was Skipper, and his head had been smashed in all the way down to the eyebrows. Shattered hunks of skull stuck up in a circle, making him look like he was wearing a bone crown.

“You’re not looking through a bombsight,” Skipper said, and grinned. “You *are* the bombsight. How do you like that, Dinkster?”

I woke up in the dark of my room, sweating, with my hands over my mouth to hold in a scream, so I guess I didn’t like it very much.

## XIX

Writing this has been a sad education, let me tell you. It’s like hey, Dink, welcome to the real world. Mostly it’s the image of grinding up dollar bills in the kitchen pig that comes to me when I think about what has happened to me, but I know that’s only because it’s easier to think of grinding up money (or chucking it into the storm-drain) than it is to think about grinding up people. Sometimes I hate myself, sometimes I’m scared for my immortal soul (if I have one), and sometimes I’m just embarrassed. Trust me, Mr. Sharpton said, and I did. I mean, duh, how dumb can you get? I tell myself I’m just a kid, the same age as the kids who crewed those B-25s I sometimes think about, that kids are allowed to be dumb. But I wonder if that’s true when lives are at stake.

And, of course, I’m still doing it.

Yes.

I thought at first that I wouldn’t be able to, no more than the kids in *Mary Poppins* could keep floating around the house when they lost their happy thoughts . . . but I could. And once I sat down in front of the computer screen and that river of fire started to flow, I was lost. You see (at least I *think* you do), this is what I was put on Planet Earth for. Can I be blamed for doing the thing that finishes me off, that completes me?

Answer: yes. Absolutely.

But I can't stop. Sometimes I tell myself that I've gone on because if I do stop—maybe even for a day—they'll know I've caught on, and the cleaners will make an unscheduled stop. Except what they'll clean up this time will be *me*. But that's not why. I do it because I'm just another addict, same as a guy smoking crack in an alley or some chick taking a spike in her arm. I do it because of the hateful fucking rush, I do it because when I'm working in DINKY'S NOTEBOOK, everything's eventual. It's like being caught in a candy trap. And it's all the fault of that dork who came out of News Plus with his fucking *Dispatch* open. If not for him, I'd still see nothing but cloud-hazy buildings in the crosshairs. No people, just targets.

*You are the bombsight*, Skipper said in my dream. *You are the bomb-sight*, Dinkster.

That's true. I know it is. Horrible but true. I'm just another tool, just the lens the *real* bombardier looks through. Just the button he pushes.

What bombardier, you ask?

Oh come on, get real.

I thought of calling him, how's that for crazy? Or maybe it's not. "Call me anytime, Dink, even three in the morning." That's what the man said, and I'm pretty sure that's what the man meant—about that, at least, Mr. Sharpton wasn't lying.

I thought of calling him and saying, "You want to know what hurts the most, Mr. Sharpton? That thing you said about how I could make the world a better place by getting rid of people like Skipper. The truth is, *you're* the guys like Skipper."

Sure. And I'm the shopping cart they chase people with, laughing and barking and making race-car sounds. I work cheap, too . . . at bargain-basement rates. So far I've killed over two hundred people, and what did it cost TransCorp? A little house in a third-rate Ohio town, seventy bucks a week, and a Honda automobile. Plus cable TV. Don't want to forget that.

I stood there for awhile, looking at the telephone, then put it down again. Couldn't say any of that. It would be the same as putting a Baggie over my head and then slitting my wrists.

So what am I going to do?

Oh God, what am I going to do?

## XX

It's been two weeks since I last took this notebook out from under the basement tile and wrote in it. Twice I've heard the mail-slot clack on Thursdays, during *As the World Turns*, and gone out into the hall to get my money. I've gone to four movies, all in the afternoon. Twice I've ground up money in the kitchen pig, and thrown my loose change down the storm-drain, hiding what I was doing behind the blue plastic recycling basket when I put it down on the curb. One day I went down to News Plus, thinking I'd get a copy of *Variations* or *Forum*, but there was a headline on the front of the *Dispatch* that once again took away any sexy feelings I might have had. POPE DIES OF HEART ATTACK ON PEACE MISSION, it said.

Did I do it? Nah, the story said he died in Asia, and I've been sticking to the American Northwest these last few weeks. But I could have been the one. If I'd been nosing around in Pakistan last week, I very likely *would* have been the one.

Two weeks of living in a nightmare.

Then, this morning, there was something in the mail. Not a letter, I've only gotten three or four of those (all from Pug, and now he's stopped writing, and I miss him so much), but a Kmart advertising circular. It flopped open just as I was putting it into the trash, and something fluttered out. A note, printed in block letters. DO YOU WANT OUT? it read. IF YES, SEND MESSAGE "*DON'T STAND SO CLOSE TO ME*" IS BEST POLICE SONG.

My heart was beating hard and fast, the way it did on the day I came into my house and saw the Rembrandt print over the sofa where the velvet clowns had been.

Below the message, someone had drawn a foudler. It was harmless just sitting there all by itself, but looking at it still made all the spit in my mouth dry up. It was a real message, the foudler proved it, but who had it come from? And how did the sender know about me?

I went into the study, walking slowly with my head down, thinking. A message tucked into an advertising circular. Hand-printed and tucked into an advertising circular. That meant someone close. Someone in town.

I turned on my computer and modem. I called the Columbia City Public Library, where you can surf cheap . . . and in relative anonymity. Anything I sent would go through TransCorp in Chicago, but that wasn't going to matter. They weren't going to suspect a thing. Not if I was careful.

And, of course, if there was anybody there.

There was. My computer connected with the library's computer, and a menu flashed on my screen. For just a moment, something else flashed on my screen, as well.

A smim.

In the lower righthand corner. Just a flicker.

I sent the message about the best Police song and added a little touch of my own down in The Dead Folks' Nook: a sankofite.

I could write more—things have started to happen, and I believe that soon they'll be happening fast—but I don't think it would be safe. Up to now, I've just talked about myself. If I went any further, I'd have to talk about other people. But there *are* two more things I want to say.

First, that I'm sorry for what I've done—for what I did to Skipper, even. I'd take it back if I could. I didn't know what I was doing. I know that's a piss-poor excuse, but it's the only one I have.

Second, I've got it in mind to write one more special letter . . . the most special of all.

I have Mr. Sharpton's e-mail address. And I have something even better: a memory of how he stroked his lucky tie as we sat in his big expensive Mercedes. The loving way he ran his palm over those silk swords. So, you see, I know just enough about him. I know just what to add to his letter, how to make it eventual. I can close my eyes and see one word floating there in the darkness behind my lids—floating there like black fire, deadly as an arrow fired into the brain, and it's the only word that matters:

EXCALIBUR.

## L.T.'s Theory of Pets

*I guess if I have a favorite in this collection of stories, "L.T." would be it. The origin of the story, so far as I can remember, was a "Dear Abby" column where Abby opined that a pet is just about the worst sort of present one can give anyone. It makes the assumption that the pet and the recipient will hit it off, for one thing; it assumes that feeding an animal twice a day and cleaning up its messes (both indoors and out) was the very thing you had been pining to do. So far as I can remember, she called the giving of pets "an exercise in arrogance." I think that's laying it on a bit thick. My wife gave me a dog for my fortieth birthday, and Marlowe—a Corgi who's now fourteen and has only one eye—has been an honored part of the family ever since. During five of those years we also had a rather crazed Siamese cat named Pearl. It was while watching Marlowe and Pearl interact—which they did with a kind of cautious respect—that I first started thinking about a story where the pets in a marriage would imprint not upon the nominal owner of each, but on the other. I had a marvelous time working on it, and whenever I'm called upon to read a story out loud, this is the one I choose, always assuming I have the required fifty minutes it takes. It makes people laugh, and I like that. What I like even more is the unexpected shift in tone, away from humor and toward sadness and horror, which occurs near the end. When it comes, the reader's defenses are down and the story's emotional payoff is a little higher. For me, that emotional payoff is what it's all about. I want to make you laugh or cry when you read a story . . . or do both at the same time. I want your heart, in other words. If you want to learn something, go to school.*



My friend L.T. hardly ever talks about how his wife disappeared, or how she's probably dead, just another victim of the Axe Man, but he likes to tell the

story of how she walked out on him. He does it with just the right roll of the eyes, as if to say, “She fooled me, boys—right, good, and proper!” He’ll sometimes tell the story to a bunch of men sitting on one of the loading docks behind the plant and eating their lunches, him eating his lunch, too, the one he fixed for himself—no Lulubelle back at home to do it for him these days. They usually laugh when he tells the story, which always ends with L.T.’s Theory of Pets. Hell, *I* usually laugh. It’s a funny story, even if you *do* know how it turned out. Not that any of us do, not completely.

“I punched out at four, just like usual,” L.T. will say, “then went down to Deb’s Den for a couple of beers, just like most days. Had a game of pinball, then went home. That was where things stopped being just like usual. When a person gets up in the morning, he doesn’t have the slightest idea how much may have changed in his life by the time he lays his head down again that night. ‘Ye know not the day or the hour,’ the Bible says. I believe that particular verse is about dying, but it fits everything else, boys. Everything else in this world. You just never know when you’re going to bust a fiddle-string.

“When I turn into the driveway I see the garage door’s open and the little Subaru she brought to the marriage is gone, but that doesn’t strike me as immediately peculiar. She was always driving off someplace—to a yard sale or someplace—and leaving the goddam garage door open. I’d tell her, ‘Lulu, if you keep doing that long enough, someone’ll eventually take advantage of it. Come in and take a rake or a bag of peat moss or maybe even the power mower. Hell, even a Seventh-Day Adventist fresh out of college and doing his merit badge rounds will steal if you put enough temptation in his way, and that’s the worst kind of person to tempt, because they feel it more than the rest of us.’ Anyway, she’d always say, ‘I’ll do better, L.T., try, anyway, I really will, honey.’ And she *did* do better, just backslid from time to time like any ordinary sinner.

“I park off to the side so she’ll be able to get her car in when she comes back from wherever, but I close the garage door. Then I go in by way of the kitchen. I check the mailbox, but it’s empty, the mail inside on the counter, so she must have left after eleven, because he don’t come until at least then. The mailman, I mean.

“Well, Lucy’s right there by the door, crying in that way Siamese have—I like that cry, think it’s sort of cute, but Lulu always hated it, maybe because it sounds like a baby’s cry and she didn’t want anything to do with babies. ‘What would I want with a rugmonkey?’ she’d say.

“Lucy being at the door wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, either. That cat loved my ass. Still does. She’s two years old now. We got her at the start of the last year we were married. Right around. Seems impossible to believe Lulu’s been gone a year, and we were only together three to start with. But Lulubelle was the type to make an impression on you. Lulubelle had what I have to call star quality. You know who she always reminded me of? Lucille Ball. Now that I think of it, I guess that’s why I named the cat Lucy, although I don’t remember thinking it at the time. It might have been what you’d call a subconscious association. She’d come into a room—Lulubelle, I mean, not the cat—and just light it up somehow. A person like that, when they’re gone you can hardly believe it, and you keep expecting them to come back.

“Meanwhile, there’s the cat. Her name was Lucy to start with, but Lulubelle hated the way she acted so much that she started calling her Screwlucy, and it kind of stuck. Lucy wasn’t nuts, though, she only wanted to be loved. Wanted to be loved more than any other pet I ever had in my life, and I’ve had quite a few.

“Anyway, I come in the house and pick up the cat and pet her a little and she climbs up onto my shoulder and sits there, purring and talking her Siamese talk. I check the mail on the counter, put the bills in the basket, then go over to the fridge to get Lucy something to eat. I always keep a working can of cat food in there, with a piece of tinfoil over the top. Saves having Lucy get excited and digging her claws into my shoulder when she hears the can opener. Cats are smart, you know. Much smarter than dogs. They’re different in other ways, too. It might be that the biggest division in the world isn’t men and women but folks who like cats and folks who like dogs. Did any of you pork-packers ever think of that?

“Lulu bitched like hell about having an open can of cat food in the fridge, even one with a piece of foil over the top, said it made everything in there taste like old tuna, but I wouldn’t give in on that one. On most stuff I did it her way, but that cat food business was one of the few places where I really stood

up for my rights. It didn't have anything to do with the cat food, anyway. It had to do with the *cat*. She just didn't like Lucy, that was all. Lucy was her cat, but she didn't like it.

"Anyway, I go over to the fridge, and I see there's a note on it, stuck there with one of the vegetable magnets. It's from Lulubelle. Best as I can remember, it goes like this:

"Dear L.T.—I am leaving you, honey. Unless you come home early, I will be long gone by the time you get this note. I don't think you will get home early, you have never got home early in all the time we have been married, but at least I know you'll get this almost as soon as you get in the door, because the first thing you always do when you get home isn't to come see me and say "Hi sweet girl I'm home" and give me a kiss but go to the fridge and get whatever's left of the last nasty can of Calo you put in there and feed Screwlucy. So at least I know you won't just go upstairs and get shocked when you see my Elvis Last Supper picture is gone and my half of the closet is mostly empty and think we had a burglar who likes ladies' dresses (unlike some who only care about what is under them).

"I get irritated with you sometimes, honey, but I still think you're sweet and kind and nice, you will always be my little maple duff and sugar dumpling, no matter where our paths may lead. It's just that I have decided I was never cut out to be a Spam-packer's wife. I don't mean that in any conceited way, either. I even called the Psychic Hotline last week as I struggled with this decision, lying awake night after night (and listening to you snore, boy, I don't mean to hurt your feelings but have you ever got a snore on *you*), and I was given this message: "A broken spoon may become a fork." I didn't understand that at first, but I didn't give up on it. I am not smart like some people (or like some people *think* they are smart), but I *work* at things. The best mill grinds slow but exceedingly fine, my mother used to say, and I ground away at this like a pepper mill in a Chinese restaurant, thinking late at night while you snored and no doubt dreamed of how many pork-snouts you could get in a can of Spam. And it came to me that saying about how a broken spoon can become a fork is a beautiful thing to behold. Because a fork has tines. And those tines may have to separate, like you and me must now have to separate, but still they have the same handle. So do we. We are both human

beings, L.T., capable of loving and respecting one another. Look at all the fights we had about Frank and Screwluca and still we mostly managed to get along. Yet the time has now come for me to seek my fortune along different lines from yours, and to poke into the great roast of life with a different point from yours. Besides, I miss my mother.”

(I can't say for sure if all this stuff was really in the note L.T. found on his fridge; it doesn't seem entirely likely, I must admit, but the men listening to his story would be rolling in the aisles by this point—or around on the loading dock, at least—and it did *sound* like Lulubelle, that I can testify to.)

“Please do not try to follow me, L.T., and although I'll be at my mother's and I know you have that number, I would appreciate you not calling but waiting for me to call you. In time I will, but in the meanwhile I have a lot of thinking to do, and although I have gotten on a fair way with it, I'm not “out of the fog” yet. I suppose I will be asking you for a divorce eventually, and think it is only fair to tell you so. I have never been one to hold out false hope, believing it better to “tell the truth and smoke out the Devil.” Please remember that what I do I do in love, not in hatred and resentment. And please remember what was told to me and what I now tell to you: a broken spoon may be a fork in disguise. All my love, Lulubelle Simms.”

L.T. would pause there, letting them digest the fact that she had gone back to her maiden name, and giving his eyes a few of those patented L. T. DeWitt rolls. Then he'd tell them the P.S. she'd tacked on the note.

“I have taken Frank with me and left Screwluca for you. I thought this would probably be the way you'd want it. Love, Lulu.”

If the DeWitt family was a fork, Screwluca and Frank were the other two tines on it. If there wasn't a fork (and speaking for myself, I've always felt marriage was more like a knife—the dangerous kind with two sharp edges), Screwluca and Frank could still be said to sum up everything that went wrong in the marriage of L.T. and Lulubelle. Because, think of it—although Lulubelle bought Frank for L.T. (first wedding anniversary) and L.T. bought Lucy, soon to be Screwluca, for Lulubelle (second wedding anniversary), they each wound up with the other one's pets when Lulu walked out on the marriage.

“She got me that dog because I liked the one on *Frasier*,” L.T. would say. “That kind of dog's a terrier, but I don't remember now what they call that

kind. A Jack something. Jack Sprat? Jack Robinson? Jack Shit? You know how a thing like that gets on the tip of your tongue?”

Somebody would tell him that the dog on *Frasier* was a Jack Russell terrier and L.T. would nod emphatically.

“That’s right!” he’d exclaim. “Sure! Exactly! That’s what Frank was, all right, a Jack Russell terrier. But you want to know the cold hard truth? An hour from now, that will have slipped away from me again—it’ll be there in my brain, but like something behind a rock. An hour from now, I’ll be going to myself, ‘*What* did that guy say Frank was? A Jack Handle terrier? A Jack Rabbit terrier? That’s close, I know that’s close . . .’ And so on. Why? I think because I just hated that little fuck so much. That barking rat. That fur-covered shit machine. I hated it from the first time I laid eyes on it. There. It’s out and I’m glad. And do you know what? Frank felt the same about me. It was hate at first sight.

“You know how some men train their dog to bring them their slippers? Frank wouldn’t bring me my slippers, but he’d *puke* in them. Yes. The first time he did it, I stuck my right foot right into it. It was like sticking your foot into warm tapioca with extra-big lumps in it. Although I didn’t see him, my theory is that he waited outside the bedroom door until he saw me coming—fucking *lurked* outside the bedroom door—then went in, unloaded in my right slipper, then hid under the bed to watch the fun. I deduce that on the basis of how it was still warm. Fucking dog. Man’s best friend my ass. I wanted to take it to the pound after that, had the leash out and everything, but Lulu threw an absolute shit fit. You would have thought she’d come into the kitchen and caught me trying to give the dog a drain-cleaner enema.

“If you take Frank to the pound, you might as well take me to the pound,’ she says, starting to cry. ‘That’s all you think of him, and that’s all you think of me. Honey, all we are to you is nuisances you’d like to be rid of. That’s the cold hard truth.’ I mean, oh my bleeding piles, on and on.

“He puked in my slipper,’ I says.

“The dog puked in his slipper so off with his head,’ she says. ‘Oh sugarpie, if only you could *hear* yourself!’

“Hey,’ I say, ‘you try sticking *your* bare foot into a slipper filled with dog-puke and see how *you* like it.’ Getting mad by then, you know.

“Except getting mad at Lulu never did any good. Most times, if you had the king, she had the ace. If you had the ace, she had a trump. Also, the woman would fucking *escalate*. If something happened and I got irritated, she’d get pissed. If I got pissed, she’d get mad. If I got mad, she’d go fucking Red Alert Defcon I and empty the missile silos. I’m talking scorched fucking earth. Mostly it wasn’t worth it. Except almost every time we’d get into a fight, I’d forget that.

“She goes, ‘Oh dear. Maple duff stuck his wittle footie in a wittle spit-up.’ I tried to get in there, tell her that wasn’t right, spit-up is like drool, spit-up doesn’t have these big fucking *chunks* in it, but she won’t let me get a word out. By then she’s over in the passing lane and cruising, all pumped up and ready to teach school.

“‘Let me tell you something, honey,’ she goes, ‘a little drool in your slipper is very minor stuff. You men slay me. Try being a woman sometimes, okay? Try always being the one that ends up laying with the small of your back in that come-spot, or the one that goes to the toilet in the middle of the night and the guy’s left the goddam ring up and you splash your can right down into this cold water. Little midnight skindiving. The toilet probably hasn’t been flushed, either, men think the Urine Fairy comes by around two A.M. and takes care of that, and there you are, sitting crack-deep in piss, and all at once you realize your *feet’re* in it, too, you’re paddling around in Lemon Squirt because, although guys think they’re dead-eye Dick with that thing, most can’t shoot for shit; drunk or sober they gotta wash the goddam floor all around the toilet before they can even start the main event. All my life I’ve been living with this, honey—a father, four brothers, one ex-husband, plus a few roommates that are none of your business at this late date—and you’re ready to send poor Frank off to the gas factory because just one time he happened to reflux a little drool into your slipper.’

“‘My *fur-lined* slipper,’ I tell her, but it’s just a little shot back over my shoulder. One thing about living with Lulu, and maybe to my credit, I always knew when I was beat. When I lost, it was fucking decisive. One thing I certainly wasn’t going to tell her even though I knew it for a fact was that the dog puked in my slipper on purpose, the same way that he peed on my underwear on purpose if I forgot to put it in the hamper before I went off to

work. She could leave her bras and pants scattered around from hell to Harvard—and did—but if I left so much as a pair of athletic socks in the corner, I'd come home and find that fucking Jack Shit terrier had given it a lemonade shower. But tell her that? She would have been booking me time with a psychiatrist. She would have been doing that *even though she knew it was true*. Because then she might have had to take the stuff I was saying seriously, and she didn't want to. She loved Frank, you see, and Frank loved her. They were like Romeo and Juliet or Rocky and Adrian.

“Frank would come to her chair while we were watching TV, lie down on the floor beside her, and put his muzzle on her shoe. Just lie there like that all night, looking up at her, all soulful and loving, and with his butt pointed in my direction so if he should have to blow a little gas, I'd get the full benefit of it. He loved her and she loved him. Why? Christ knows. Love's a mystery to everyone except the poets, I guess, and nobody sane can understand a thing they write about it. I don't think most of them can understand it themselves on the rare occasions when they wake up and smell the coffee.

“But Lulubelle never gave me that dog so she could have it, let's get that one thing straight. I know that some people do stuff like that—a guy'll give his wife a trip to Miami because he wants to go there, or a wife'll give her husband a NordicTrack because she thinks he ought to do something about his gut—but this wasn't that kind of deal. We were crazy in love with each other at the beginning; I know I was with her, and I'd stake my life she was with me. No, she bought that dog for me because I always laughed so hard at the one on *Frasier*. She wanted to make me happy, that's all. She didn't know Frank was going to take a shine to her, or her to him, no more than she knew the dog was going to dislike me so much that throwing up in one of my slippers or chewing the bottoms of the curtains on my side of the bed would be the high point of his day.”

L.T. would look around at the grinning men, not grinning himself, but he'd give his eyes that knowing, long-suffering roll, and they'd laugh again, in anticipation. Me too, likely as not, in spite of what I knew about the Axe Man.

“I haven't ever been hated before,” he'd say, “not by man or beast, and it unsettled me a lot. It unsettled me *bigtime*. I tried to make friends with Frank—first for my sake, then for the sake of her that gave him to me—but it didn't

work. For all I know, he might've tried to make friends with me . . . with a dog, who can tell? If he did, it didn't work for him, either. Since then I've read—in "Dear Abby," I think it was—that a pet is just about the worst present you can give a person, and I agree. I mean, even if you like the animal and the animal likes you, think about what that kind of gift says. 'Say, darling, I'm giving you this wonderful present, it's a machine that eats at one end and shits out the other, it's going to run for fifteen years, give or take, merry fucking Christmas.' But that's the kind of thing you only think about *after*, more often than not. You know what I mean?

"I think we did try to do our best, Frank and I. After all, even though we hated each other's guts, we both loved Lulubelle. That's why, I think, that although he'd sometimes growl at me if I sat down next to her on the couch during *Murphy Brown* or a movie or something, he never actually bit. Still, it used to drive me crazy. Just the fucking *nerve* of it, that little bag of hair and eyes daring to growl at me.

"Listen to him,' I'd say, 'he's growling at me.'

"She'd stroke his head the way she hardly ever stroked mine, unless she'd had a few, and say it was really just a dog's version of purring. That he was just happy to be with us, having a quiet evening at home. I'll tell you something, though, I never tried patting him when she wasn't around. I'd feed him sometimes, and I never gave him a kick (although I was tempted a few times, I'd be a liar if I said different), but I never tried patting him. I think he would have snapped at me, and then we would have gotten into it. Like two guys living with the same pretty girl, almost. *Ménage à trois* is what they call it in the *Penthouse* 'Forum.' Both of us love her and she loves both of us, but as time goes by, I start realizing that the scales are tipping and she's starting to love Frank a little more than me. Maybe because Frank never talks back and never pukes in *her* slippers, and with Frank the goddam toilet ring is never an issue, because he goes outside. Unless, that is, I forget and leave a pair of my shorts in the corner or under the bed."

At this point L.T. would likely finish off the iced coffee in his Thermos, crack his knuckles, or both. It was his way of saying the first act was over and Act Two was about to commence.

“So then one day, a Saturday, Lulu and I are out to the mall. Just walking around, like people do. You know. And we go by Pet Notions, up by J.C. Penney, and there’s a whole crowd of people in front of the display window. ‘Oh, let’s see,’ Lulu says, so we go over and work our way to the front.

“It’s a fake tree with bare branches and fake grass—AstroTurf—all around it. And there are these Siamese kittens, half a dozen of them chasing each other around, climbing the tree, batting each other’s ears.

“ ‘Oh ain’ day jus’ da key-youtest *ones!*’ Lulu says. ‘Oh ain’t dey jus’ the key-youtest wittle *babies!*’ Look, honey, look!’

“ ‘I’m lookin,’ I says, and what I’m thinking is that I just found what I wanted to get Lulu for our anniversary. And that was a relief. I wanted it to be something extra-special, something that would really bowl her over, because things had been quite a bit short of great between us during the last year. I thought about Frank, but I wasn’t too worried about him; cats and dogs always fight in the cartoons, but in real life they usually get along, that’s been my experience. They usually get along better than people do. Especially when it’s cold outside.

“To make a long story just a little bit shorter, I bought one of them and gave it to her on our anniversary. Got it a velvet collar, and tucked a little card under it. ‘HELLO, I am LUCY!’ the card said. ‘I come with love from L.T.! Happy second anniversary!’

“You probably know what I’m going to tell you now, don’t you? Sure. It was just like goddam Frank the terrier all over again, only in reverse. At first I was as happy as a pig in shit with Frank, and Lulubelle was as happy as a pig in shit with Lucy at first. Held her up over her head, talking that baby-talk to her, ‘Oh yookit *you*, oh yookit my wittle pwecious, she so *key-yout*,’ and so on and so on . . . until Lucy let out a yowl and batted at the end of Lulubelle’s nose. With her claws out, too. Then she ran away and hid under the kitchen table. Lulu laughed it off, like it was the funniest thing she’d ever had happen to her, and as key-yout as anything else a little kitten might do, but I could see she was miffed.

“Right then Frank came in. He’d been sleeping up in our room—at the foot of her side of the bed—but Lulu’d let out a little shriek when the kitten batted her nose, so he came down to see what the fuss was about.

“He spotted Lucy under the table right away and walked toward her, sniffing the linoleum where she’d been.

“‘Stop them, honey, stop them, L.T., they’re going to get into it,’ Lulubelle says. ‘Frank’ll kill her.’

“‘Just let them alone a minute,’ I says. ‘See what happens.’

“Lucy humped up her back the way cats do, but stood her ground and watched him come. Lulu started forward, wanting to get in between them in spite of what I’d said (listening up wasn’t exactly one of Lulu’s strong points), but I took her wrist and held her back. It’s best to let them work it out between them, if you can. Always best. It’s quicker.

“Well, Frank got to the edge of the table, poked his nose under, and started this low rumbling way back in his throat. ‘Let me go, L.T. I got to get her,’ Lulubelle says, ‘Frank’s growling at her.’

“‘No, he’s not,’ I say, ‘he’s just purring. I recognize it from all the times he’s purred at me.’

“She gave me a look that would just about have boiled water, but didn’t say anything. The only times in the three years we were married that I got the last word, it was always about Frank and Screwlucy. Strange but true. Any other subject, Lulu could talk rings around me. But when it came to the pets, it seemed she was always fresh out of comebacks. Used to drive her crazy.

“Frank poked his head under the table a little farther, and Lucy batted at his nose the way she’d batted at Lulubelle’s—only when she batted at Frank, she did it without popping her claws. I had an idea Frank would go for her, but he didn’t. He just kind of whoofed and turned away. Not scared, more like he’s thinking, ‘Oh, okay, so that’s what *that’s* about.’ Went back into the living room and laid down in front of the TV.

“And that was all the confrontation there ever was between them. They divvied up the territory pretty much the way that Lulu and I divvied it up that last year we spent together, when things were getting bad; the bedroom belonged to Frank and Lulu, the kitchen belonged to me and Lucy—only by Christmas, Lulubelle was calling her Screwlucy—and the living room was neutral territory. The four of us spent a lot of evenings there that last year, Screwlucy on my lap, Frank with his muzzle on Lulu’s shoe, us humans on the couch, Lulubelle reading a book and me watching *Wheel of Fortune* or *Lifestyles*

*of the Rich and Famous*, which Lulubelle always called *Lifestyles of the Rich and Topless*.

“The cat wouldn’t have a thing to do with her, not from day one. Frank, every now and then you could get the idea Frank was at least *trying* to get along with me. His nature would always get the better of him in the end and he’d chew up one of my sneakers or take another leak on my underwear, but every now and then it did seem like he was putting forth an effort. Lap my hand, maybe give me a grin. Usually if I had a plate of something he wanted a bite of, though.

“Cats are different, though. A cat won’t curry favor even if it’s in their best interests to do so. A cat can’t be a hypocrite. If more preachers were like cats, this would be a religious country again. If a cat likes you, you know. If she doesn’t, you know that, too. Screwlucy never liked Lulu, not one whit, and she made it clear from the start. If I was getting ready to feed her, Lucy’d rub around my legs, purring, while I spooned it up and dumped it in her dish. If Lulu fed her, Lucy’d sit all the way across the kitchen, in front of the fridge, watching her. And wouldn’t go to the dish until Lulu had cleared off. It drove Lulu crazy. ‘That cat thinks she’s the Queen of Sheba,’ she’d say. By then she’d given up the baby-talk. Given up picking Lucy up, too. If she did, she’d get her wrist scratched, more often than not.

“Now, I tried to pretend I liked Frank and Lulu tried to pretend she liked Lucy, but Lulu gave up pretending a lot sooner than I did. I guess maybe neither one of them, the cat or the woman, could stand being a hypocrite. I don’t think Lucy was the only reason Lulu left—hell, I know it wasn’t—but I’m sure Lucy helped Lulubelle make her final decision. Pets can live a long time, you know. So the present I got her for our second was really the straw that broke the camel’s back. Tell *that* to “Dear Abby”!

“The cat’s talking was maybe the worst, as far as Lulu was concerned. She couldn’t stand it. One night Lulubelle says to me, ‘If that cat doesn’t stop yowling, L.T., I think I’m going to hit it with an encyclopedia.’

“‘That’s not yowling,’ I said, ‘that’s chatting.’

“‘Well,’ Lulu says, ‘I wish it would stop chatting.’

“And right about then, Lucy jumped up into my lap and she did shut up. She always did, except for a little low purring, way back in her throat. Purring

that really *was* purring. I scratched her between her ears like she likes, and I happened to look up. Lulu turned her eyes back down on her book, but before she did, what I saw was real hate. Not for me. For Screwluca. Throw an encyclopedia at it? She looked like she'd like to stick the cat between *two* encyclopedias and just kind of clap it to death.

"Sometimes Lulu would come into the kitchen and catch the cat up on the table and swat it off. I asked her once if she'd ever seen me swat Frank off the bed that way—he'd get up on it, you know, always on her side, and leave these nasty tangles of white hair. When I said that, Lulu gave me a kind of grin. Her teeth were showing, anyway. 'If you ever tried, you'd find yourself a finger or three shy, most likely,' she says.

"Sometimes Lucy really *was* Screwluca. Cats are moody, and sometimes they get manic; anyone who's ever had one will tell you that. Their eyes get big and kind of glarey, their tails bush out, they go racing around the house; sometimes they'll rear right up on their back legs and prance, boxing at the air, like they're fighting with something they can see but human beings can't. Lucy got into a mood like that one night when she was about a year old—couldn't have been more than three weeks before the day when I come home and found Lulubelle gone.

"Anyway, Lucy came racing in from the kitchen, did a kind of racing slide on the wood floor, jumped over Frank, and went skittering up the living room drapes, paw over paw. Left some pretty good holes in them, with threads hanging down. Then she just perched at the top of the rod, staring around the room with her blue eyes all big and wild and the tip of her tail snapping back and forth.

"Frank only jumped a little and then put his muzzle back on Lulubelle's shoe, but the cat scared the hell out of Lulubelle, who was deep in her book, and when she looked up at the cat, I could see that outright hate in her eyes again.

" 'All right,' she said, 'that's enough. Everybody out of the goddam pool. We're going to find a good home for that little blue-eyed bitch, and if we're not smart enough to find a home for a purebred Siamese, we're going to take her to the animal shelter. I've had enough.'

" 'What do you mean?' I ask her.

“ ‘Are you blind?’ she asks. ‘Look what she did to my *drapes!* They’re full of holes!’

“ ‘You want to see drapes with holes in them,’ I say, ‘why don’t you go upstairs and look at the ones on my side of the bed. The bottoms are all ragged. Because *he* chews them.’

“ ‘That’s different,’ she says, glaring at me. ‘That’s different and you know it.’

“Well, I wasn’t going to let that lie. No way was I going to let that one lie. ‘The only reason you think it’s different is because you like the dog you gave me and you don’t like the cat I gave you,’ I says. ‘But I’ll tell you one thing, Mrs. DeWitt: you take the cat to the animal shelter for clawing the living room drapes on Tuesday, I guarantee you I’ll take the dog to the animal shelter for chewing the bedroom drapes on Wednesday. You got that?’

“She looked at me and started to cry. She threw her book at me and called me a bastard. A *mean* bastard. I tried to grab hold of her, make her stay long enough for me to at least *try* to make up—if there was a way to make up without backing down, which I didn’t mean to do that time—but she pulled her arm out of my hand and ran out of the room. Frank ran out after her. They went upstairs and the bedroom door slammed.

“I gave her half an hour or so to cool off; then I went upstairs myself. The bedroom door was still shut, and when I started to open it, I was pushing against Frank. I could move him, but it was slow work with him sliding across the floor, and also noisy work. He was growling. And I mean *growling*, my friends; that was no fucking *purr*. If I’d gone in there, I believe he would have tried his solemn best to bite my manhood off. I slept on the couch that night. First time.

“A month later, give or take, she was gone.”

If L.T. had timed his story right (most times he did; practice makes perfect), the bell signalling back to work at the W. S. Hepperton Processed Meats Plant of Ames, Iowa, would ring just about then, sparing him any questions from the new men (the old hands knew . . . and knew better than to ask) about whether or not L.T. and Lulubelle had reconciled, or if he knew where she was today, or—the all-time sixty-four-thousand-dollar question—if she and Frank

were still together. There's nothing like the back-to-work bell to close off life's more embarrassing questions.

"Well," L.T. would say, putting away his Thermos and then standing up and giving a stretch. "It has all led me to create what I call L. T. DeWitt's Theory of Pets."

They'd look at him expectantly, just as I had the first time I heard him use that grand phrase, but they would always end up feeling let down, just as I always had; a story that good deserved a better punchline, but L.T.'s never changed.

"If your dog and cat are getting along better than you and your wife," he'd say, "you better expect to come home some night and find a Dear John note on your refrigerator door."

\* \* \*

He told that story a lot, as I've said, and one night when he came to my house for dinner, he told it for my wife and my wife's sister. My wife had invited Holly, who had been divorced almost two years, so the boys and the girls would balance up. I'm sure that's all it was, because Roslyn never liked L. T. DeWitt. Most people do, most people take to him like hands take to warm water, but Roslyn has never been most people. She didn't like the story of the note on the fridge and the pets, either—I could tell she didn't, although she chuckled in the right places. Holly . . . shit, I don't know. I've never been able to tell what that girl's thinking. Mostly just sits there with her hands in her lap, smiling like Mona Lisa. It was my fault that time, though, and I admit it. L.T. didn't want to tell it, but I kind of egged him on because it was so quiet around the dinner table, just the click of silverware and the clink of glasses, and I could almost feel my wife disliking L.T. It seemed to be coming off her in waves. And if L.T. had been able to feel that little Jack Russell terrier disliking him, he would probably be able to feel my wife doing the same. That's what I figured, anyhow.

So he told it, mostly to please me, I suppose, and he rolled his eyeballs in all the right places, as if saying, "Gosh, she fooled me right and proper, didn't she?" and my wife chuckled here and there—those chuckles sounded as phony to me as Monopoly money looks—and Holly smiled her little Mona Lisa smile

with her eyes downcast. Otherwise the dinner went off all right, and when it was over L.T. told Roslyn that he thanked her for “a sportin-fine meal” (whatever that is) and she told him to come anytime, she and I liked to see his face in the place. That was a lie on her part, but I doubt there was ever a dinner-party in the history of the world where a few lies weren’t told. So it went off all right, at least until I was driving him home. L.T. started to talk about how it would be a year Lulubelle had been gone in just another week or so, their fourth anniversary, which is flowers if you’re old-fashioned and electrical appliances if you’re newfangled. Then he said as how Lulubelle’s mother—at whose house Lulubelle had never shown up—was going to put up a marker with Lulubelle’s name on it at the local cemetery. “Mrs. Simms says we have to consider her as one dead,” L.T. said, and then he began to bawl. I was so shocked I nearly ran off the goddam road.

He cried so hard that when I was done being shocked I began to be afraid all that pent-up grief might kill him with a stroke or a burst blood-vessel or something. He rocked back and forth in the seat and slammed his open hands down on the dashboard. It was like there was a twister loose inside him. Finally I pulled over to the side of the road and began patting his shoulder. I could feel the heat of his skin right through his shirt, so hot it was baking.

“Come on, L.T.,” I said. “That’s enough.”

“I just miss her,” he said in a voice so thick with tears I could barely understand what he was saying. “Just so goddam *much*. I come home and there’s no one but the cat, crying and crying, and pretty soon I’m crying, too, both of us crying while I fill up her dish with that goddam muck she eats.”

He turned his flushed, streaming face full on me. Looking back into it was almost more than I could take, but I *did* take it; felt I *had* to take it. Who had gotten him telling the story about Lucy and Frank and the note on the refrigerator that night, after all? It hadn’t been Mike Wallace or Dan Rather, that was for sure. So I looked back at him. I didn’t quite dare hug him, in case that twister should somehow jump from him to me, but I kept patting his arm.

“I think she’s alive somewhere, that’s what I think,” he said. His voice was still thick and wavery, but there was a kind of pitiful weak defiance in it, as

well. He wasn't telling me what he believed, but what he wished he could believe. I'm pretty sure of that.

"Well," I said, "you can believe that. No law against it, is there? And it isn't as if they found her *body*, or anything."

"I like to think of her out there in Nevada singing in some little casino hotel," he said. "Not in Vegas or Reno, she couldn't make it in one of the big towns, but in Winnemucca or Ely I'm pretty sure she could get by. Some place like that. She just saw a SINGER WANTED sign and gave up her idea of going home to her mother. Hell, the two of them never got on worth a shit anyway, that's what Lu used to say. And she *could* sing, you know. I don't know if you ever heard her, but she could. I don't guess she was great, but she was good. The first time I saw her, she was singing in the lounge of the Marriott Hotel. In Columbus, Ohio, that was. Or, another possibility . . ."

He hesitated, then went on in a lower voice.

"Prostitution is legal out there in Nevada, you know. Not in all the counties, but in most of them. She could be working one of them Green Lantern trailers or the Mustang Ranch. Lots of women have got a streak of whore in them. Lu had one. I don't mean she stepped around on me, or *slept* around on me, so I can't say how I know, but I do. She . . . yes, she could be in one of those places."

He stopped, eyes distant, maybe imagining Lulubelle on a bed in the back room of a Nevada trailer whorehouse, Lulubelle wearing nothing but stockings, washing off some unknown cowboy's stiff cock while from the other room came the sound of Steve Earle and the Dukes singing "Six Days on the Road" or a TV playing *Hollywood Squares*. Lulubelle whoring but not dead, the car by the side of the road—the little Subaru she had brought to the marriage—meaning nothing. The way an animal's look, so seemingly attentive, usually means nothing.

"I can believe that if I want," he said, swiping at his swollen eyes with the insides of his wrists.

"Sure," I said, "you bet, L.T.," wondering what the grinning men who listened to his story while they ate their lunches would make of this L.T., this shaking man with his pale cheeks and red eyes and hot skin.

“Hell,” he said, “I *do* believe that.” He hesitated, then said it again: “I *do* believe that.”

\* \* \*

When I got back, Roslyn was in bed with a book in her hand and the covers pulled up to her breasts. Holly had gone home while I was driving L.T. back to his house. Roslyn was in a bad mood, and I found out why soon enough. The woman behind the Mona Lisa smile had been quite taken with my friend. Smitten by him, maybe. And my wife most definitely did not approve.

“How did he lose his license?” she asked, and before I could answer: “Drinking, wasn’t it?”

“Drinking, yes. OUI.” I sat down on my side of the bed and slipped off my shoes. “But that was nearly six months ago, and if he keeps his nose clean another two months, he gets it back. I think he will. He goes to AA, you know.”

My wife grunted, clearly not impressed. I took off my shirt, sniffed the armpits, hung it back in the closet. I’d only worn it an hour or two, just for dinner.

“You know,” my wife said, “I think it’s a wonder the police didn’t look a little more closely at *him* after his wife disappeared.”

“They asked him some questions,” I said, “but only to get as much information as they could. There was never any question of him doing it, Ros. They were never suspicious of him.”

“Oh, you’re so sure.”

“As a matter of fact, I am. I know some stuff. Lulubelle called her mother from a hotel in eastern Colorado the day she left, and called her again from Salt Lake City the next day. She was fine then. Those were both weekdays, and L.T. was at the plant. He was at the plant the day they found her car parked off that ranch road near Caliente, as well. Unless he can magically transport himself from place to place in the blink of an eye, he didn’t kill her. Besides, he wouldn’t. He loved her.”

She grunted. It’s this hateful sound of skepticism she makes sometimes. After almost thirty years of marriage, that sound still makes me want to turn

on her and yell at her to stop it, to shit or get off the pot, either say what she means or keep quiet. This time I thought about telling her how L.T. had cried; how it had been like there was a cyclone inside of him, tearing loose everything that wasn't nailed down. I thought about it, but I didn't. Women don't trust tears from men. They may say different, but down deep they don't trust tears from men.

"Maybe you ought to call the police yourself," I said. "Offer them a little of your expert help. Point out the stuff they missed, just like Angela Lansbury on *Murder, She Wrote*."

I swung my legs into bed. She turned off the light. We lay there in darkness. When she spoke again, her tone was gentler.

"I don't like him. That's all. I don't, and I never have."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess that's clear."

"And I didn't like the way he looked at Holly."

Which meant, as I found out eventually, that she hadn't liked the way Holly looked at *him*. When she wasn't looking down at her plate, that is.

"I'd prefer you didn't ask him back to dinner," she said.

I kept quiet. It was late. I was tired. It had been a hard day, a harder evening, and I was tired. The last thing I wanted was to have an argument with my wife when I was tired and she was worried. That's the sort of argument where one of you ends up spending the night on the couch. And the only way to stop an argument like that is to be quiet. In a marriage, words are like rain. And the land of a marriage is filled with dry washes and arroyos that can become raging rivers in almost the wink of an eye. The therapists believe in talk, but most of them are either divorced or queer. It's silence that is a marriage's best friend.

Silence.

After awhile, my best friend rolled over on her side, away from me and into the place where she goes when she finally gives up the day. I lay awake a little while longer, thinking of a dusty little car, perhaps once white, parked nose-down in the ditch beside a ranch road out in the Nevada desert not too far from Caliente. The driver's-side door standing open, the rearview mirror torn off its post and lying on the floor, the front seat sodden with blood and tracked over by the animals that had come in to investigate, perhaps to sample.

There was a man—they assumed he was a man, it almost always is—who had butchered five women out in that part of the world, five in three years, mostly during the time L.T. had been living with Lulubelle. Four of the women were transients. He would get them to stop, somehow, then pull them out of their cars, rape them, dismember them with an axe, leave them a rise or two away for the buzzards and crows and weasels. The fifth one was an elderly rancher's wife. The police call this killer the Axe Man. As I write this, the Axe Man has not been captured. Nor has he killed again; if Cynthia Lulubelle Simms DeWitt was the Axe Man's sixth victim, she was also his last, at least so far. There is still some question, however, as to whether or not she *was* his sixth victim. If not in most minds, that question exists in the part of L.T.'s mind which is still allowed to hope.

The blood on the seat wasn't human blood, you see; it didn't take the Nevada State Forensics Unit five hours to determine that. The ranch hand who found Lulubelle's Subaru saw a cloud of circling birds half a mile away, and when he reached them, he found not a dismembered woman but a dismembered dog. Little was left but bones and teeth; the predators and scavengers had had their day, and there's not much meat on a Jack Russell terrier to begin with. The Axe Man most definitely got Frank; Lulubelle's fate is probable, but far from certain.

Perhaps, I thought, she *is* alive. Singing "Tie a Yellow Ribbon" at The Jailhouse in Ely or "Take a Message to Michael" at The Rose of Santa Fe in Hawthorne. Backed up by a three-piece combo. Old men trying to look young in red vests and black string ties. Or maybe she's blowing GM cowboys in Austin or Wendover—bending forward until her breasts press flat on her thighs beneath a calendar showing tulips in Holland; gripping set after set of flabby buttocks in her hands and thinking about what to watch on TV that night, when her shift is done. Perhaps she just pulled over to the side of the road and walked away. People do that. I know it, and probably you do, too. Sometimes people just say fuck it and walk away. Maybe she left Frank behind, thinking someone would come along and give him a good home, only it was the Axe Man who came along, and . . .

But no. I met Lulubelle, and for the life of me I can't see her leaving a dog to most likely roast to death or starve to death in the barrens. Especially not a

dog she loved the way she loved Frank. No, L.T. hadn't been exaggerating about that; I saw them together, and I know.

She could still be alive somewhere. Technically speaking, at least, L.T.'s right about that. Just because I can't think of a scenario that would lead from that car with the door hanging open and the rearview mirror lying on the floor and the dog lying dead and crow-picked two rises away, just because I can't think of a scenario that would lead from that place near Caliente to some other place where Lulubelle Simms sings or sews or blows truckers, safe and unknown, well, that doesn't mean that no such scenario exists. As I told L.T., it isn't as if they found her *body*; they just found her *car*, and the remains of the dog a little way from the car. Lulubelle herself could be anywhere. You can see that.

I couldn't sleep and I felt thirsty. I got out of bed, went into the bathroom, and took the toothbrushes out of the glass we keep by the sink. I filled the glass with water. Then I sat down on the closed lid of the toilet and drank the water and thought about the sound that Siamese cats make, that weird crying, how it must sound good if you love them, how it must sound like coming home.

## The Road Virus Heads North

*I actually have the picture described in this story, how weird is that? My wife saw it and thought I'd like it (or at least react to it), so she gave it to me as a . . . birthday present? Christmas present? I can't remember. What I can remember is that none of my three kids liked it. I hung it in my office, and they claimed the driver's eyes followed them as they crossed the room (as a very small boy, my son Owen was similarly freaked by a picture of Jim Morrison). I like stories about pictures that change, and finally I wrote this one about my picture. The only other time I can remember being inspired to write a story based on an actual picture was "The House on Maple Street," based on a black-and-white drawing by Chris Van Allsburg. That story is in Nightmares and Dreamscapes. I also wrote a novel about a picture that changes. It's called Rose Madder, and is probably the least read of my novels (no movie, either). In that story, the Road Virus is named Norman.*

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Richard Kinnell wasn't frightened when he first saw the picture at the yard sale in Rosewood.

He was fascinated by it, and he felt he'd had the good luck to find something which might be very special, but fright? No. It didn't occur to him until later ("not until it was too late," as he might have written in one of his own numbingly successful novels) that he had felt much the same way about certain illegal drugs as a young man.

He had gone down to Boston to participate in a PEN/New England conference titled "The Threat of Popularity." You could count on PEN to come up with such subjects, Kinnell had found; it was actually sort of comforting. He drove the two hundred and sixty miles from Derry rather than flying because he'd come to a plot impasse on his latest book and wanted some quiet time to try to work it out.

At the conference, he sat on a panel where people who should have known better asked him where he got his ideas and if he ever scared himself. He left the city by way of the Tobin Bridge, then got on Route 1. He never took the turnpike when he was trying to work out problems; the turnpike lulled him into a state that was like dreamless, waking sleep. It was restful, but not very creative. The stop-and-go traffic on the coast road, however, acted like grit inside an oyster—it created a fair amount of mental activity . . . and sometimes even a pearl.

Not, he supposed, that his critics would use that word. In an issue of *Esquire* last year, Bradley Simons had begun his review of *Nightmare City* this way: “Richard Kinnell, who writes like Jeffrey Dahmer cooks, has suffered a fresh bout of projectile vomiting. He has titled this most recent mass of ejecta *Nightmare City*.”

Route 1 took him through Revere, Malden, Everett, and up the coast to Newburyport. Beyond Newburyport and just south of the Massachusetts–New Hampshire border was the tidy little town of Rosewood. A mile or so beyond the town center, he saw an array of cheap-looking goods spread out on the lawn of a two-story Cape. Propped against an avocado-colored electric stove was a sign reading YARD SALE. Cars were parked on both sides of the road, creating one of those bottlenecks which travellers unaffected by the yard sale mystique curse their way through. Kinnell liked yard sales, particularly the boxes of old books you sometimes found at them. He drove through the bottleneck, parked his Audi at the head of the line of cars pointed toward Maine and New Hampshire, then walked back.

A dozen or so people were circulating on the littered front lawn of the blue-and-gray Cape Cod. A large television stood to the left of the cement walk, its feet planted on four paper ashtrays that were doing absolutely nothing to protect the lawn. On top was a sign reading MAKE AN OFFER—YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED. An electrical cord, augmented by an extension, trailed back from the TV and through the open front door. A fat woman sat in a lawn chair before it, shaded by an umbrella with CINZANO printed on the colorful scalloped flaps. There was a card table beside her with a cigar box, a pad of paper, and another hand-lettered sign on it. This sign read ALL SALES CASH, ALL SALES FINAL. The TV was on, tuned to an afternoon soap opera where two

beautiful young people looked on the verge of having deeply unsafe sex. The fat woman glanced at Kinnell, then back at the TV. She looked at it for a moment, then looked back at him again. This time her mouth was slightly sprung.

*Ah*, Kinnell thought, looking around for the liquor box filled with paperbacks that was sure to be here someplace, *a fan*.

He didn't see any paperbacks, but he saw the picture, leaning against an ironing board and held in place by a couple of plastic laundry baskets, and his breath stopped in his throat. He wanted it at once.

He walked over with a casualness that felt exaggerated and dropped to one knee in front of it. The painting was a watercolor, and technically very good. Kinnell didn't care about that; technique didn't interest him (a fact the critics of his own work had duly noted). What he liked in works of art was *content*, and the more unsettling the better. This picture scored high in that department. He knelt between the two laundry baskets, which had been filled with a jumble of small appliances, and let his fingers slip over the glass facing of the picture. He glanced around briefly, looking for others like it, and saw none—only the usual yard sale art collection of Little Bo Peeps, praying hands, and gambling dogs.

He looked back at the framed watercolor, and in his mind he was already moving his suitcase into the backseat of the Audi so he could slip the picture comfortably into the trunk.

It showed a young man behind the wheel of a muscle car—maybe a Grand Am, maybe a GTX, something with a T-top, anyway—crossing the Tobin Bridge at sunset. The T-top was off, turning the black car into a half-assed convertible. The young man's left arm was cocked on the door; his right wrist was draped casually over the wheel. Behind him, the sky was a bruise-colored mass of yellows and grays, streaked with veins of pink. The young man had lank blond hair that spilled over his low forehead. He was grinning, and his parted lips revealed teeth which were not teeth at all but fangs.

*Or maybe they're filed to points*, Kinnell thought. *Maybe he's supposed to be a cannibal*.

He liked that; liked the idea of a cannibal crossing the Tobin Bridge at sunset. In a Grand Am. He knew what most of the audience at the PEN panel

discussion would have thought—*Oh, yes, great picture for Rich Kinnell; he probably wants it for inspiration, a feather to tickle his tired old gorge into one more fit of projectile vomiting*—but most of those folks were ignoramuses, at least as far as his work went, and what was more, they treasured their ignorance, cossetted it the way some people inexplicably treasured and cossetted those stupid, mean-spirited little dogs that yapped at visitors and sometimes bit the paperboy’s ankles. He hadn’t been attracted to this painting because he wrote horror stories; he wrote horror stories because he was attracted to things like this painting. His fans sent him stuff—pictures, mostly—and he threw most of them away, not because they were bad art but because they were tiresome and predictable. One fan from Omaha had sent him a little ceramic sculpture of a screaming, horrified monkey’s head poking out of a refrigerator door, however, and that one he had kept. It was unskillfully executed, but there was an unexpected juxtaposition there that lit up his dials. This painting had some of the same quality, but it was even better. *Much better.*

As he was reaching for it, wanting to pick it up right now, this second, wanting to tuck it under his arm and proclaim his intentions, a voice spoke up behind him: “Aren’t you Richard Kinnell?”

He jumped, then turned. The fat woman was standing directly behind him, blotting out most of the immediate landscape. She had put on fresh lipstick before approaching, and now her mouth had been transformed into a bleeding grin.

“Yes, I am,” he said, smiling back.

Her eyes dropped to the picture. “I should have known you’d go right to that,” she said, simpering. “It’s so *you*.”

“It is, isn’t it?” he said, and smiled his best celebrity smile. “How much would you need for it?”

“Forty-five dollars,” she said. “I’ll be honest with you, I started it at seventy, but nobody likes it, so now it’s marked down. If you come back tomorrow, you can probably have it for thirty.” The simper had grown to frightening proportions. Kinnell could see little gray spit-buds in the dimples at the corners of her stretched mouth.

“I don’t think I want to take that chance,” he said. “I’ll write you a check right now.”

The simper continued to stretch; the woman now looked like some grotesque John Waters parody. Divine does Shirley Temple. “I’m really not supposed to take checks, but *all right*,” she said, her tone that of a teenage girl finally consenting to have sex with her boyfriend. “Only while you have your pen out, could you write an autograph for my daughter? Her name is Robin?”

“What a nice name,” Kinnell said automatically. He took the picture and followed the fat woman back to the card table. On the TV next to it, the lustful young people had been temporarily displaced by an elderly woman gobbling bran flakes.

“Robin reads all your books,” the fat woman said. “Where in the world do you get all those crazy ideas?”

“I don’t know,” Kinnell said, smiling more widely than ever. “They just come to me. Isn’t that amazing?”

\* \* \*

The yard sale minder’s name was Judy Diment, and she lived in the house next door. When Kinnell asked her if she knew who the artist happened to be, she said she certainly did; Bobby Hastings had done it, and Bobby Hastings was the reason she was selling off the Hastingses’ things. “That’s the only painting he didn’t burn,” she said. “Poor Iris! She’s the one I really feel sorry for. I don’t think George cared much, really. And I *know* he didn’t understand why she wants to sell the house.” She rolled her eyes in her large, sweaty face—the old can-you-imagine-that look. She took Kinnell’s check when he tore it off, then gave him the pad where she had written down all the items she’d sold and the prices she’d obtained for them. “Just make it out to Robin,” she said. “Pretty please with sugar on it?” The simper reappeared, like an old acquaintance you’d hoped was dead.

“Uh-huh,” Kinnell said, and wrote his standard thanks-for-being-a-fan message. He didn’t have to watch his hands or even think about it anymore, not after twenty-five years of writing autographs. “Tell me about the picture, and the Hastingses.”

Judy Diment folded her pudgy hands in the manner of a woman about to recite a favorite story.

“Bobby was just twenty-three when he killed himself this spring. Can you believe that? He was the tortured-genius type, you know, but still living at home.” Her eyes rolled, again asking Kinnell if he could imagine it. “He must have had seventy, eighty paintings, plus all his sketchbooks. Down in the basement, they were.” She pointed her chin at the Cape Cod, then looked at the picture of the fiendish young man driving across the Tobin Bridge at sunset. “Iris—that’s Bobby’s mother—said most of them were real bad, lots worse’n this. Stuff that’d curl your hair.” She lowered her voice to a whisper, glancing at a woman who was looking at the Hastingses’ mismatched silverware and a pretty good collection of old McDonald’s plastic glasses in a *Honey, I Shrank the Kids* motif. “Most of them had sex stuff in them.”

“Oh no,” Kinnell said.

“He did the worst ones after he got on drugs,” Judy Diment continued. “After he was dead—he hung himself down in the basement, where he used to paint—they found over a hundred of those little bottles they sell crack cocaine in. Aren’t drugs awful, Mr. Kinnell?”

“They sure are.”

“Anyway, I guess he finally just got to the end of his rope, no pun intended. He took all of his sketches and paintings out into the backyard—except for that one, I guess—and burned them. Then he hung himself down in the basement. He pinned a note to his shirt. It said, ‘I can’t stand what’s happening to me.’ Isn’t that awful, Mr. Kinnell? Isn’t that just the horriblest thing you ever heard?”

“Yes,” Kinnell said, sincerely enough. “It just about is.”

“Like I say, I think George would go right on living in the house if he had his druthers,” Judy Diment said. She took the sheet of paper with Robin’s autograph on it, held it up next to Kinnell’s check, and shook her head, as if the similarity of the signatures amazed her. “But men are different.”

“Are they?”

“Oh, yes, much less sensitive. By the end of his life, Bobby Hastings was just skin and bone, dirty all the time—you could smell him—and he wore the same Tee-shirt, day in and day out. It had a picture of the Led Zeppelins on it.

His eyes were red, he had a scraggle on his cheeks that you couldn't quite call a beard, and his pimples were coming back, like he was a teenager again. But she loved him, because a mother's love sees past all those things."

The woman who had been looking at the silverware and the glasses came over with a set of Star Wars placemats. Mrs. Diment took five dollars for them, wrote the sale carefully down on her pad below "ONE DOZ. ASSORTED POTHOLDERS & HOTPADS," then turned back to Kinnell.

"They went out to Arizona," she said, "to stay with Iris's folks. I know George is looking for work out there in Flagstaff—he's a draftsman—but I don't know if he's found any yet. If he has, I suppose we might not ever see them again here in Rosewood. She marked out all the stuff she wanted me to sell—Iris did—and told me I could keep twenty per cent for my trouble. I'll send a check for the rest. There won't be much." She sighed.

"The picture is great," Kinnell said.

"Yeah, too bad he burned the rest, because most of this other stuff is your standard yard sale crap, pardon my French. What's that?"

Kinnell had turned the picture around. There was a length of Dymotape pasted to the back.

"A title, I think."

"What does it say?"

He grabbed the picture by the sides and held it up so she could read it for herself. This put the picture at eye-level to him, and he studied it eagerly, once again taken by the simpleminded weirdness of the subject: kid behind the wheel of a muscle car, a kid with a nasty, knowing grin that revealed the filed points of an even nastier set of teeth.

*It fits, he thought. If ever a title fitted a painting, this one does.*

"*The Road Virus Heads North,*" she read. "I never noticed that when my boys were lugging stuff out. *Is it the title, do you think?*"

"Must be." Kinnell couldn't take his eyes off the blond kid's grin. *I know something, the grin said. I know something you never will.*

"Well, I guess you'd have to believe the fella who did this was high on drugs," she said, sounding upset—authentically upset, Kinnell thought. "No wonder he could kill himself and break his mamma's heart."

“I’ve got to be heading north myself,” Kinnell said, tucking the picture under his arm. “Thanks for—”

“Mr. Kinnell?”

“Yes?”

“Can I see your driver’s license?” She apparently found nothing ironic or even amusing in this request. “I ought to write the number on the back of your check.”

Kinnell put the picture down so he could dig for his wallet. “Sure. You bet.”

The woman who’d bought the Star Wars placemats had paused on her way back to her car to watch some of the soap opera playing on the lawn TV. Now she glanced at the picture, which Kinnell had propped against his shins.

“Ag,” she said. “Who’d want an ugly old thing like that? I’d think about it every time I turned the lights out.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Kinnell asked.

\* \* \*

Kinnell’s Aunt Trudy lived in Wells, which is about six miles north of the Maine–New Hampshire border. Kinnell pulled off at the exit which circled the bright green Wells water tower, the one with the comic sign on it (KEEP MAINE GREEN, BRING MONEY in letters four feet high), and five minutes later he was turning into the driveway of her neat little saltbox house. No TV sinking into the lawn on paper ashtrays here, only Aunt Trudy’s amiable masses of flowers. Kinnell needed to pee and hadn’t wanted to take care of that in a roadside rest-stop when he could come here, but he also wanted an update on all the family gossip. Aunt Trudy retailed the best; she was to gossip what Zabar’s is to deli. Also, of course, he wanted to show her his new acquisition.

She came out to meet him, gave him a hug, and covered his face with her patented little birdy-kisses, the ones that had made him shiver all over as a kid.

“Want to see something?” he asked her. “It’ll blow your pantyhose off.”

“What a charming thought,” Aunt Trudy said, clasping her elbows in her palms and looking at him with amusement.

He opened the trunk and took out his new picture. It affected her, all right, but not in the way he had expected. The color fell out of her face in a sheet—

he had never seen anything quite like it in his entire life. "It's horrible," she said in a tight, controlled voice. "I hate it. I suppose I can see what attracted you to it, Richie, but what you play at, it does for real. Put it back in your trunk, like a good boy. And when you get to the Saco River, why don't you pull over into the breakdown lane and throw it in?"

He gaped at her. Aunt Trudy's lips were pressed tightly together to stop them trembling, and now her long, thin hands were not just clasping her elbows but clutching them, as if to keep her from flying away. At that moment she looked not sixty-one but ninety-one.

"Auntie?" Kinnell spoke tentatively, not sure what was going on here. "Auntie, what's wrong?"

"*That,*" she said, unlocking her right hand and pointing at the picture. "I'm surprised you don't feel it more strongly yourself, an imaginative guy like you."

Well, he felt *something*, obviously he had, or he never would have unlimbered his checkbook in the first place. Aunt Trudy was feeling something else, though . . . or something *more*. He turned the picture around so he could see it (he had been holding it out for her, so the side with the Dymotaped title faced him), and looked at it again. What he saw hit him in the chest and belly like a one-two punch.

The picture had *changed*, that was punch number one. Not much, but it had clearly changed. The young blond man's smile was wider, revealing more of those filed cannibal-teeth. His eyes were squinted down more, too, giving his face a look which was more knowing and nastier than ever.

The degree of a smile . . . the vista of sharpened teeth widening slightly . . . the tilt and squint of the eyes . . . all pretty subjective stuff. A person could be mistaken about things like that, and of course he hadn't really *studied* the painting before buying it. Also, there had been the distraction of Mrs. Diment, who could probably talk the cock off a brass monkey.

But there was also punch number two, and that *wasn't* subjective. In the darkness of the Audi's trunk, the blond young man had turned his left arm, the one cocked on the door, so that Kinnell could now see a tattoo which had been hidden before. It was a vine-wrapped dagger with a bloody tip. Below it were words. Kinnell could make out DEATH BEFORE, and he supposed you didn't have to be a big best-selling novelist to figure out the word that was still

hidden. DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR was, after all, just the sort of a thing a hoodoo travelling man like this was apt to have on his arm. *And an ace of spades on the other one*, Kinnell thought.

“You hate it, don’t you, Auntie?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, and now he saw an even more amazing thing: she had turned away from him, pretending to look out at the street (which was dozing and deserted in the hot afternoon sunlight) so she wouldn’t have to look at the picture. “In fact, Auntie *loathes* it. Now put it away and come on into the house. I’ll bet you need to use the bathroom.”

\* \* \*

Aunt Trudy recovered her *savoir-faire* almost as soon as the watercolor was back in the trunk. They talked about Kinnell’s mother (Pasadena), his sister (Baton Rouge), and his ex-wife, Sally (Nashua). Sally was a space-case who ran an animal shelter out of a double-wide trailer and published two newsletters each month. *Survivors* was filled with astral info and supposedly true tales of the spirit world; *Visitors* contained the reports of people who’d had close encounters with space aliens. Kinnell no longer went to fan conventions which specialized in fantasy and horror. One Sally in a lifetime, he thought, was enough.

When Aunt Trudy walked him back out to the car, it was four-thirty and he’d turned down the obligatory dinner invitation. “I can get most of the way back to Derry in daylight, if I leave now.”

“Okay,” she said. “And I’m sorry I was so mean about your picture. Of *course* you like it, you’ve always liked your . . . your oddities. It just hit me the wrong way. That awful *face*.” She shuddered. “As if we were looking at him . . . and he was looking right back.”

Kinnell grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. “You’ve got quite an imagination yourself, sweetheart.”

“Of course, it runs in the family. Are you sure you don’t want to use the facility again before you go?”

He shook his head. “That’s not why I stop, anyway, not really.”

“Oh? Why do you?”

He grinned. “Because you know who’s being naughty and who’s being nice. And you’re not afraid to share what you know.”

“Go on, get going,” she said, pushing at his shoulder but clearly pleased. “If I were you, I’d want to get home quick. I wouldn’t want that nasty guy riding along behind *me* in the dark, even in the trunk. I mean, did you see his teeth? *Ag!*”

\* \* \*

He got on the turnpike, trading scenery for speed, and made it as far as the Gray service area before deciding to have another look at the picture. Some of his aunt’s unease had transmitted itself to him like a germ, but he didn’t think that was really the problem. The problem was his perception that the picture had changed.

The service area featured the usual gourmet chow—burgers by Roy Rogers, cones by TCBY—and had a small, littered picnic and dog-walking area at the rear. Kinnell parked next to a van with Missouri plates, drew in a deep breath, let it out. He’d driven to Boston in order to kill some plot gremlins in the new book, which was pretty ironic. He’d spent the ride down working out what he’d say on the panel if certain tough questions were tossed at him, but none had been—once they’d found out he didn’t *know* where he got his ideas, and yes, he *did* sometimes scare himself, they’d only wanted to know how you got an agent.

And now, heading back, he couldn’t think of anything but the damned picture.

*Had* it changed? If it had, if the blond kid’s arm had moved enough so he, Kinnell, could read a tattoo which had been partly hidden before, then he could write a column for one of Sally’s magazines. Hell, a four-part series. If, on the other hand, it *wasn’t* changing, then . . . what? He was suffering a hallucination? Having a breakdown? That was crap. His life was pretty much in order, and he felt good. *Had*, anyway, until his fascination with the picture had begun to waver into something else, something darker.

“Ah, fuck, you just saw it wrong the first time,” he said out loud as he got out of the car. Well, maybe. Maybe. It wouldn’t be the first time his head had

screwed with his perceptions. That was also a part of what he did. Sometimes his imagination got a little . . . well . . .

“Feisty,” Kinnell said, and opened the trunk. He took the picture out of the trunk and looked at it, and it was during the space of the ten seconds when he looked at it without remembering to breathe that he became authentically afraid of the thing, afraid the way you were afraid of a sudden dry rattle in the bushes, afraid the way you were when you saw an insect that would probably sting if you provoked it.

The blond driver was grinning insanely at him now—yes, at *him*, Kinnell was sure of it—with those filed cannibal-teeth exposed all the way to the gumlines. His eyes simultaneously glared and laughed. And the Tobin Bridge was gone. So was the Boston skyline. So was the sunset. It was almost dark in the painting now, the car and its wild rider illuminated by a single streetlamp that ran a buttery glow across the road and the car’s chrome. It looked to Kinnell as if the car (he was pretty sure it was a Grand Am) was on the edge of a small town on Route 1, and he was pretty sure he knew what town it was—he had driven through it himself only a few hours ago.

“Rosewood,” he muttered. “That’s Rosewood. I’m pretty sure.”

The Road Virus was heading north, all right, coming up Route 1 just as he had. The blond’s left arm was still cocked out the window, but it had rotated enough back toward its original position so that Kinnell could no longer see the tattoo. But he knew it was there, didn’t he? Yes, you bet.

The blond kid looked like a Metallica fan who had escaped from a mental asylum for the criminally insane.

“Jesus,” Kinnell whispered, and the word seemed to come from someplace else, not from him. The strength suddenly ran out of his body, ran out like water from a bucket with a hole in the bottom, and he sat down heavily on the curb separating the parking lot from the dog-walking zone. He suddenly understood that this was the truth he’d missed in all his fiction, this was how people really reacted when they came face-to-face with something which made no rational sense. You felt as if you were bleeding to death, only inside your head.

“No wonder the guy who painted it killed himself,” he croaked, still staring at the picture, at the ferocious grin, at the eyes that were both shrewd and

stupid.

*There was a note pinned to his shirt, Mrs. Diment had said. "I can't stand what's happening to me." Isn't that awful, Mr. Kinnell?*

Yes, it was awful, all right.

*Really* awful.

He got up, gripping the picture by its top, and strode across the dog-walking area. He kept his eyes trained strictly in front of him, looking for canine land mines. He did not look down at the picture. His legs felt trembly and untrustworthy, but they seemed to support him all right. Just ahead, close to the belt of trees at the rear of the service area, was a pretty young thing in white shorts and a red halter. She was walking a cocker spaniel. She began to smile at Kinnell, then saw something in his face that straightened her lips out in a hurry. She headed left, and fast. The cocker didn't want to go that fast, so she dragged it, coughing, in her wake.

The scrubby pines behind the service area sloped down to a boggy acre that stank of plant and animal decomposition. The carpet of pine-needles was a road-litter fallout zone: burger wrappers, paper soft-drink cups, TCBY napkins, beer cans, empty wine-cooler bottles, cigarette butts. He saw a used condom lying like a dead snail next to a torn pair of panties with the word TUESDAY stitched on them in cursive girly-girl script.

Now that he was here, he chanced another look down at the picture. He steeled himself for further changes—even for the possibility that the painting would be in motion, like a movie in a frame—but there was none. There didn't have to be, Kinnell realized; the blond kid's face was enough. That stone-crazy grin. Those pointed teeth. The face said, *Hey, old man, guess what? I'm done fucking with civilization. I'm a representative of the real generation X, the next millennium is right here behind the wheel of this fine, high-steppin' mo-sheen.*

Aunt Trudy's initial reaction to the painting had been to advise Kinnell that he should throw it into the Saco River. Auntie had been right. The Saco was now almost twenty miles behind him, but . . .

"This'll do," he said. "I think this'll do just fine."

He raised the picture over his head like a guy holding up some kind of sports trophy for the postgame photographers and then heaved it down the slope. It flipped over twice, the frame catching winks of hazy late-day sun, then

struck a tree. The glass facing shattered. The picture fell to the ground and then slid down the dry, needle-carpeted slope, as if down a chute. It landed in the bog, one corner of the frame protruding from a thick stand of reeds. Otherwise, there was nothing visible but the strew of broken glass, and Kinnell thought that went very well with the rest of the litter.

He turned and went back to his car, already picking up his mental trowel. He would wall this incident off in its own special niche, he thought . . . and it occurred to him that that was probably what *most* people did when they ran into stuff like this. Liars and wannabees (or maybe in this case they were wannasees) wrote up their fantasies for publications like *Survivors* and called them truth; those who blundered into authentic occult phenomena kept their mouths shut and used those trowels. Because when cracks like this appeared in your life, you had to do something about them; if you didn't, they were apt to widen and sooner or later everything would fall in.

Kinnell glanced up and saw the pretty young thing watching him apprehensively from what she probably hoped was a safe distance. When she saw him looking at her, she turned around and started toward the restaurant building, once more dragging her cocker spaniel behind her and trying to keep as much sway out of her hips as possible.

*You think I'm crazy, don't you, pretty girl?* Kinnell thought. He saw he had left his trunk lid up. It gaped like a mouth. He slammed it shut. *But I'm not crazy. Absolutely not. I just made a little mistake, that's all. Stopped at a yard sale I should have passed up. Anyone could have done it. You could have done it. And that picture—*

"*What picture?*" Rich Kinnell asked the hot summer evening, and tried on a smile. "*I don't see any picture.*"

He slid behind the wheel of his Audi and started the engine. He looked at the fuel gauge and saw it had dropped under a half. He was going to need gas before he got home, but he thought he'd fill the tank a little farther up the line. Right now all he wanted to do was to put a belt of miles—as thick a one as possible—between him and the discarded painting.

\* \* \*

Once outside the city limits of Derry, Kansas Street becomes Kansas Road. As it approaches the incorporated town limits (an area that is actually open countryside), it becomes Kansas Lane. Not long after, Kansas Lane passes between two fieldstone posts. Tar gives way to gravel. What is one of Derry's busiest downtown streets eight miles east of here has become a driveway leading up a shallow hill, and on moonlit summer nights it glimmers like something out of an Alfred Noyes poem. At the top of the hill stands an angular, handsome barn-board structure with reflectorized windows, a stable that is actually a garage, and a satellite dish tilted at the stars. A waggish reporter from the *Derry News* once called it the House that Gore Built . . . *not* meaning the vice president of the United States. Richard Kinnell simply called it home, and he parked in front of it that night with a sense of weary satisfaction. He felt as if he had lived through a week's worth of time since getting up in the Boston Harbor hotel that morning at nine o'clock.

*No more yard sales*, he thought, looking up at the moon. *No more yard sales ever.*

"Amen," he said, and started toward the house. He probably should stick the car in the garage, but the hell with it. What he wanted right now was a drink, a light meal—something microwaveable—and then sleep. Preferably the kind without dreams. He couldn't wait to put this day behind him.

He stuck his key in the lock, turned it, and punched 3817 to silence the warning bleep from the burglar-alarm panel. He turned on the front-hall light, stepped through the door, pushed it shut behind him, began to turn, saw what was on the wall where his collection of framed book covers had been just two days ago, and screamed. In his *head* he screamed. Nothing actually came out of his mouth but a harsh exhalation of air. He heard a thump and a tuneless little jingle as his keys fell out of his relaxing hand and dropped to the carpet between his feet.

*The Road Virus Heads North* was no longer in the puckerbrush behind the Gray turnpike service area.

It was mounted on his entry wall.

It had changed yet again. The car was now parked in the driveway of the yard sale yard. The goods were still spread out everywhere—glassware and furniture and ceramic knickknacks (Scottie dogs smoking pipes, bare-assed

toddlers, winking fish), but now they gleamed beneath the light of the same skullface moon that rode in the sky above Kinnell's house. The TV was still there, too, and it was still on, casting its own pallid radiance onto the grass, and what lay in front of it, next to an overturned lawn chair. Judy Diment was on her back, and she was no longer all there. After a moment, Kinnell saw the rest. It was on the ironing board, dead eyes glowing like fifty-cent pieces in the moonlight.

The Grand Am's taillights were a blur of red-pink watercolor paint. It was Kinnell's first look at the car's back deck. Written across it in Old English letters were three words: THE ROAD VIRUS.

*Makes perfect sense, Kinnell thought numbly. Not him, his car. Except for a guy like this, there's probably not much difference.*

"This isn't happening," he whispered, except it was. Maybe it *wouldn't* have happened to someone a little less open to such things, but it *was* happening. And as he stared at the painting he found himself remembering the little sign on Judy Diment's card table. ALL SALES CASH, it had said (although she had taken *his* check, only adding his driver's license ID number for safety's sake). And it had said something else, too.

ALL SALES FINAL.

Kinnell walked past the picture and into the living room. He felt like a stranger inside his own body, and he sensed part of his mind groping around for the trowel he had used earlier. He seemed to have misplaced it.

He turned on the TV, then the Toshiba satellite tuner which sat on top of it. He turned to V-14, and all the time he could feel the picture out there in the hall, pushing at the back of his head. The picture that had somehow beaten him here.

"Must have known a shortcut," Kinnell said, and laughed.

He hadn't been able to see much of the blond in this version of the picture, but there had been a blur behind the wheel which Kinnell assumed had been him. The Road Virus had finished his business in Rosewood. It was time to move north. Next stop—

He brought a heavy steel door down on that thought, cutting it off before he could see all of it. "After all, I could still be imagining all this," he told the empty living room. Instead of comforting him, the hoarse, shaky quality of his

voice frightened him even more. “This could be . . .” But he couldn’t finish. All that came to him was an old song, belted out in the pseudo-hip style of some early fifties Sinatra clone: *This could be the start of something BIG . . .*

The tune oozing from the TV’s stereo speakers wasn’t Sinatra but Paul Simon, arranged for strings. The white computer type on the blue screen said WELCOME TO NEW ENGLAND NEWSWIRE. There were ordering instructions below this, but Kinnell didn’t have to read them; he was a Newswire junkie and knew the drill by heart. He dialed, punched in his MasterCard number, then 508.

“You have ordered Newswire for [slight pause] central and northern Massachusetts,” the robot voice said. “Thank you very m—”

Kinnell dropped the phone back into the cradle and stood looking at the New England Newswire logo, snapping his fingers nervously. “Come on,” he said. “Come on, come on.”

The screen flickered then, and the blue background became green. Words began scrolling up, something about a house fire in Taunton. This was followed by the latest on a dog-racing scandal, then tonight’s weather—clear and mild. Kinnell was starting to relax, starting to wonder if he’d really seen what he thought he’d seen on the entryway wall or if it had been a bit of travel-induced fugue, when the TV beeped shrilly and the words BREAKING NEWS appeared. He stood watching the caps scroll up.

NENphAUG19/8:40P A ROSEWOOD WOMAN HAS BEEN BRUTALLY MURDERED WHILE DOING A FAVOR FOR AN ABSENT FRIEND. 38-YEAR-OLD JUDITH DIMENT WAS SAVEGELY HACKED TO DEATH ON THE LAWN OF HER NEIGHBOR’S HOUSE, WHERE SHE HAD BEEN CONDUCTING A YARD SALE. NO SCREAMS WERE HEARD AND MRS. DIMENT WAS NOT FOUND UNTIL EIGHT O’CLOCK, WHEN A NEIGHBOR ACROSS THE STREET CAME OVER TO COMPLAIN ABOUT LOUD TELEVISION NOISE. THE NEIGHBOR, MATTHEW GRAVES, SAID THAT MRS. DIMENT HAD BEEN DECAPITATED. “HER HEAD WAS ON THE IRONING BOARD,” HE SAID. “IT WAS THE MOST AWFUL THING I’VE EVER SEEN IN MY LIFE.” GRAVES SAID HE HEARD NO SIGNS OF A STRUGGLE, ONLY THE TV AND, SHORTLY BEFORE FINDING THE BODY, A LOUD CAR, POSSIBLY EQUIPPED WITH A GLASSPACK MUFFLER,

ACCELERATING AWAY FROM THE VICINITY ALONG ROUTE ONE. SPECULATION THAT THIS VEHICLE MAY HAVE BELONGED TO THE KILLER—

Except that wasn't speculation; that was a simple fact.

Breathing hard, not quite panting, Kinnell hurried back into the entryway. The picture was still there, but it had changed once more. Now it showed two glaring white circles—headlights—with the dark shape of the car hulking behind them.

*He's on the move again,* Kinnell thought, and Aunt Trudy *was* on top of his mind now—sweet Aunt Trudy, who always knew who had been naughty and who had been nice. Aunt Trudy, who lived in Wells, no more than forty miles from Rosewood.

“God, please God, please send him by the coast road,” Kinnell said, reaching for the picture. Was it his imagination or were the headlights farther apart now, as if the car were actually moving before his eyes . . . but stealthily, the way the minute hand moved on a pocket watch? “Send him by the coast road, please.”

He tore the picture off the wall and ran back into the living room with it. The screen was in place before the fireplace, of course; it would be at least two months before a fire was wanted in here. Kinnell batted it aside and threw the painting in, breaking the glass fronting—which he had already broken once, at the Gray service area—against the firedogs. Then he pelted for the kitchen, wondering what he would do if this didn't work either.

*It has to,* he thought. *It will because it has to, and that's all there is to it.*

He opened the kitchen cabinets and pawed through them, spilling the oatmeal, spilling a canister of salt, spilling the vinegar. The bottle broke open on the counter and assaulted his nose and eyes with the high stink.

Not there. What he wanted wasn't there.

He raced into the pantry, looked behind the door—nothing but a plastic bucket and an O Cedar—and then on the shelf by the dryer. There it was, next to the briquets.

Lighter fluid.

He grabbed it and ran back, glancing at the telephone on the kitchen wall as he hurried by. He wanted to stop, wanted to call Aunt Trudy. Credibility wasn't an issue with her; if her favorite nephew called and told her to get out of

the house, to get out *right now*, she would do it . . . but what if the blond kid followed her? Chased her?

And he would. Kinnell *knew* he would.

He hurried across the living room and stopped in front of the fireplace.

“Jesus,” he whispered. “Jesus, no.”

The picture beneath the splintered glass no longer showed oncoming headlights. Now it showed the Grand Am on a sharply curving piece of road that could only be an exit ramp. Moonlight shone like liquid satin on the car’s dark flank. In the background was a water tower, and the words on it were easily readable in the moonlight. KEEP MAINE GREEN, they said. BRING MONEY.

Kinnell didn’t hit the picture with the first squeeze of lighter fluid; his hands were shaking badly and the aromatic liquid simply ran down the unbroken part of the glass, blurring the Road Virus’s back deck. He took a deep breath, aimed, then squeezed again. This time the lighter fluid squirted in through the jagged hole made by one of the firedogs and ran down the picture, cutting through the paint, making it run, turning a Goodyear Wide Oval into a sooty teardrop.

Kinnell took one of the ornamental matches from the jar on the mantel, struck it on the hearth, and poked it in through the hole in the glass. The painting caught at once, fire billowing up and down across the Grand Am and the water tower. The remaining glass in the frame turned black, then broke outward in a shower of flaming pieces. Kinnell crunched them under his sneakers, putting them out before they could set the rug on fire.

\* \* \*

He went to the phone and punched in Aunt Trudy’s number, unaware that he was crying. On the third ring, his aunt’s answering machine picked up. “Hello,” Aunt Trudy said, “I know it encourages the burglars to say things like this, but I’ve gone up to Kennebunk to watch the new Harrison Ford movie. If you intend to break in, please don’t take my china pigs. If you want to leave a message, do so at the beep.”

Kinnell waited, then, keeping his voice as steady as possible, he said: “It’s Richie, Aunt Trudy. Call me when you get back, okay? No matter how late.”

He hung up, looked at the TV, then dialed Newswire again, this time punching in the Maine area code. While the computers on the other end processed his order, he went back and used a poker to jab at the blackened, twisted thing in the fireplace. The stench was ghastly—it made the spilled vinegar smell like a flowerpatch in comparison—but Kinnell found he didn’t mind. The picture was entirely gone, reduced to ash, and that made it worthwhile.

*What if it comes back again?*

“It won’t,” he said, putting the poker back and returning to the TV. “I’m sure it won’t.”

\* \* \*

But every time the news scroll started to recycle, he got up to check. The picture was just ashes on the hearth . . . and there was no word of elderly women being murdered in the Wells-Saco-Kennebunk area of the state. Kinnell kept watching, almost expecting to see A GRAND AM MOVING AT HIGH SPEED CRASHED INTO A KENNEBUNK MOVIE THEATER TONIGHT, KILLING AT LEAST TEN, but nothing of the sort showed up.

At a quarter of eleven the telephone rang. Kinnell snatched it up. “Hello?”

“It’s Trudy, dear. Are you all right?”

“Yes, fine.”

“You don’t *sound* fine,” she said. “Your voice sounds trembly and . . . funny. What’s wrong? What is it?” And then, chilling him but not really surprising him: “It’s that picture you were so pleased with, isn’t it? That goddamned picture!”

It calmed him somehow, that she should guess so much . . . and, of course, there was the relief of knowing she was safe.

“Well, maybe,” he said. “I had the heebie-jeebies all the way back here, so I burned it. In the fireplace.”

*She’s going to find out about Judy Diment, you know, a voice inside warned. She doesn’t have a twenty-thousand-dollar satellite hookup, but she does subscribe to*

*the Union Leader and this'll be on the front page. She'll put two and two together. She's far from stupid.*

Yes, that was undoubtedly true, but further explanations could wait until the morning, when he might be a little less freaked . . . when he might've found a way to think about the Road Virus without losing his mind . . . and when he'd begun to be sure it was really over.

"Good!" she said emphatically. "You ought to scatter the ashes, too!" She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice was lower. "You were worried about me, weren't you? Because you showed it to me."

"A little, yes."

"But you feel better now?"

He leaned back and closed his eyes. It was true, he did. "Uh-huh. How was the movie?"

"Good. Harrison Ford looks wonderful in a uniform. Now, if he'd just get rid of that little bump on his chin . . ."

"Good night, Aunt Trudy. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Will we?"

"Yes," he said. "I think so."

He hung up, went over to the fireplace again, and stirred the ashes with the poker. He could see a scrap of fender and a ragged little flap of road, but that was it. Fire was what it had needed all along, apparently. Wasn't that how you usually killed supernatural emissaries of evil? Of course it was. He'd used it a few times himself, most notably in *The Departing*, his haunted train station novel.

"Yes, indeed," he said. "Burn, baby, burn."

He thought about getting the drink he'd promised himself, then remembered the spilled bottle of vinegar (which by now would probably be soaking into the spilled oatmeal—what a thought). He decided he would simply go on upstairs instead. In a book—one by Richard Kinnell, for instance—sleep would be out of the question after the sort of thing which had just happened to him.

In real life, he thought he might sleep just fine.

\* \* \*

He actually dozed off in the shower, leaning against the back wall with his hair full of shampoo and the water beating on his chest. He was at the yard sale again, and the TV standing on the paper ashtrays was broadcasting Judy Diment. Her head was back on, but Kinnell could see the medical examiner's primitive industrial stitch-work; it circled her throat like a grisly necklace. "Now this New England Newswire update," she said, and Kinnell, who had always been a vivid dreamer, could actually see the stitches on her neck stretch and relax as she spoke. "Bobby Hastings took *all* his paintings and burned them, including yours, Mr. Kinnell . . . and it *is* yours, as I'm sure you know. All sales are final, you saw the sign. Why, you just ought to be glad I took your check."

*Burned all his paintings, yes, of course he did,* Kinnell thought in his watery dream. *He couldn't stand what was happening to him, that's what the note said, and when you get to that point in the festivities, you don't pause to see if you want to except one special piece of work from the bonfire. It's just that you got something special into The Road Virus Heads North, didn't you, Bobby? And probably completely by accident. You were talented, I could see that right away, but talent has nothing to do with what's going on in that picture.*

"Some things are just good at survival," Judy Diment said on the TV. "They keep coming back no matter *how* hard you try to get rid of them. They keep coming back like viruses."

Kinnell reached out and changed the channel, but apparently there was nothing on all the way around the dial except for *The Judy Diment Show*.

"You might say he opened a hole into the basement of the universe," she was saying now. "Bobby Hastings, I mean. And this is what drove out. Nice, isn't it?"

Kinnell's feet slid then, not enough to go out from under him completely, but enough to snap him to.

He opened his eyes, winced at the immediate sting of the soap (Prell had run down his face in thick white rivulets while he had been dozing), and cupped his hands under the shower-spray to splash it away. He did this once and was reaching out to do it again when he heard something. A ragged rumbling sound.

*Don't be stupid, he told himself. All you hear is the shower. The rest is only imagination. Your stupid, overtrained imagination.*

Except it wasn't.

Kinnell reached out and turned off the water.

The rumbling sound continued. Low and powerful. Coming from outside.

He got out of the shower and walked, dripping, across his bedroom on the second floor. There was still enough shampoo in his hair to make him look as if it had turned white while he was dozing—as if his dream of Judy Diment had turned it white.

*Why did I ever stop at that yard sale?* he asked himself, but for this he had no answer. He supposed no one ever did.

The rumbling sound grew louder as he approached the window overlooking the driveway—the driveway that glimmered in the summer moonlight like something out of an Alfred Noyes poem.

As he brushed aside the curtain and looked out, he found himself thinking of his ex-wife, Sally, whom he had met at the World Fantasy Convention in 1978. Sally, who now published two newsletters out of her trailer home, one called *Survivors*, one called *Visitors*. Looking down at the driveway, these two titles came together in Kinnell's mind like a double image in a stereopticon.

He had a visitor who was definitely a survivor.

The Grand Am idled in front of the house, the white haze from its twin chromed tailpipes rising in the still night air. The Old English letters on the back deck were perfectly readable. The driver's-side door stood open, and that wasn't all; the light spilling down the porch steps suggested that Kinnell's front door was also open.

*Forgot to lock it, Kinnell thought, wiping soap off his forehead with a hand he could no longer feel. Forgot to reset the burglar alarm, too. . . not that it would have made much difference to this guy.*

Well, he might have caused it to detour around Aunt Trudy, and that was something, but just now the thought brought him no comfort.

Survivors.

The soft rumble of the big engine, probably at least a 442 with a four-barrel carb, reground valves, fuel injection.

He turned slowly on legs that had lost all feeling, a naked man with a headful of soap, and saw the picture over his bed, just as he'd known he would. In it, the Grand Am stood in his driveway with the driver's door open and two plumes of exhaust rising from the chromed tailpipes. From this angle he could also see his own front door, standing open, and a long man-shaped shadow stretching down the hall.

Survivors.

Survivors and *visitors*.

Now he could hear feet ascending the stairs. It was a heavy tread, and he knew without having to see that the blond kid was wearing motorcycle boots. People with DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR tattooed on their arms always wore motorcycle boots, just as they always smoked unfiltered Camels. These things were like a national law.

And the knife. He would be carrying a long, sharp knife—more of a machete, actually, the sort of knife that could strike off a person's head in a single stroke.

And he would be grinning, showing those filed cannibal teeth.

Kinnell *knew* these things. He was an imaginative guy, after all.

He didn't need anyone to draw him a picture.

"No," he whispered, suddenly conscious of his global nakedness, suddenly freezing all the way around his skin. "No, please, go away." But the footfalls kept coming, of course they did. You couldn't tell a guy like this to go away. It didn't work; it wasn't the way the story was supposed to end.

Kinnell could hear him nearing the top of the stairs. Outside, the Grand Am went on rumbling in the moonlight.

The feet coming down the hall now, worn bootheels rapping on polished hardwood.

A terrible paralysis had gripped Kinnell. He threw it off with an effort and bolted toward the bedroom door, wanting to lock it before the thing could get in here, but he slipped in a puddle of soapy water and this time he *did* go down, flat on his back on the oak planks, and what he saw as the door clicked open and the motorcycle boots crossed the room toward where he lay, naked and with his hair full of Prell, was the picture hanging on the wall over his bed,

the picture of the Road Virus idling in front of his house with the driver's-side door open.

The driver's-side bucket seat, he saw, was full of blood. *I'm going outside, I think*, Kinnell thought, and closed his eyes.

## Lunch at the Gotham Café

*One day when I was in New York, I walked past a very nice-looking restaurant. Inside, the maître d' was showing a couple to their table. The couple was arguing. The maître d' caught my eye and tipped me what may have been the most cynical wink in the universe. I went back to my hotel and wrote this story. For the three days it was in work, I was totally possessed by it. For me what makes it go isn't the crazy maître d' but the spooky relationship between the divorcing couple. In their own way, they're crazier than he is. By far.*

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One day I came home from the brokerage house where I worked and found a letter—more of a note, actually—from my wife on the dining room table. It said she was leaving me, that she was pursuing a divorce, that I would hear from her lawyer. I sat on the chair at the kitchen end of the table, reading this communication over and over again, not able to believe it. After awhile I got up, went into the bedroom, and looked in the closet. All her clothes were gone except for one pair of sweatpants and a joke sweatshirt someone had given her, with the words RICH BLONDE printed on the front in spangly stuff.

I went back to the dining room table (which was actually at one end of the living room; it was only a four-room apartment) and read the six sentences over again. It was the same, but looking into the half-empty bedroom closet had started me on the way to believing what it said. It was a chilly piece of work, that note. There was no “Love” or “Good luck” or even “Best” at the bottom of it. “Take care of yourself” was as warm as it got. Just below that she had scratched her name, Diane.

I walked into the kitchen, poured myself a glass of orange juice, then knocked it onto the floor when I tried to pick it up. The juice sprayed onto the lower cabinets and the glass broke. I knew I would cut myself if I tried to pick up the glass—my hands were shaking—but I picked it up anyway, and I cut

myself. Two places, neither deep. I kept thinking that it was a joke, then realizing it wasn't. Diane wasn't much of a joker. But the thing was, I didn't see it coming. I didn't have a clue. I didn't know if that made me stupid or insensitive. As the days passed and I thought about the last six or eight months of our two-year marriage, I realized I had been both.

That night I called her folks in Pound Ridge and asked if Diane was there. "She is, and she doesn't want to talk to you," her mother said. "Don't call back." The phone went dead in my ear.

\* \* \*

Two days later I got a call at work from Diane's lawyer, who introduced himself as William Humboldt, and, after ascertaining that he was indeed speaking to Steven Davis, began calling me Steve. I suppose that's a little hard to believe, but it's what happened. Lawyers are so bizarre.

Humboldt told me I would be receiving "preliminary paperwork" early the following week, and suggested I prepare "an account overview prefatory to dissolving your domestic corporation." He also advised me not to make any "sudden fiduciary movements" and suggested that I keep all receipts for items purchased, even the smallest, during this "financially difficult passage." Last of all, he suggested that I find myself a lawyer.

"Listen a minute, would you?" I asked. I was sitting at my desk with my head down and my left hand curled around my forehead. My eyes were shut so I wouldn't have to look into the bright gray socket of my computer screen. I'd been crying a lot, and my eyes felt like they were full of sand.

"Of course," he said. "Happy to listen, Steve."

"I've got two things for you. First, you mean 'preparatory to ending your marriage,' not 'prefatory to dissolving your domestic corporation' . . . and if Diane thinks I'm going to try and cheat her out of what's hers, she's wrong."

"Yes," Humboldt said, not indicating agreement but that he understood my point.

"Second, you're *her* lawyer, not mine. I find you calling me by my first name patronizing and insensitive. Do it again on the phone and I'll hang up on you. Do it to my face and I'll probably try to punch your lights out."

“Steve . . . Mr. Davis . . . I hardly think—”

I hung up on him. It was the first thing I’d done that gave me any pleasure since finding that note on the dining room table, with her three apartment keys on top of it to hold it down.

\* \* \*

That afternoon I talked to a friend in the legal department, and he recommended a friend of his who did divorce work. The divorce lawyer was John Ring, and I made an appointment with him for the following day. I went home from the office as late as I could, walked back and forth through the apartment for awhile, decided to go out to a movie, couldn’t find anything I wanted to see, tried the television, couldn’t find anything there to look at, either, and did some more walking. And at some point I found myself in the bedroom, standing in front of an open window fourteen floors above the street, and chucking out all my cigarettes, even the stale old pack of Viceroy’s from the very back of my top desk drawer, a pack that had probably been there for ten years or more—since before I had any idea there was such a creature as Diane Coslaw in the world, in other words.

Although I’d been smoking between twenty and forty cigarettes a day for twenty years, I don’t remember any sudden decision to quit, nor any dissenting interior opinions—not even a mental suggestion that maybe two days after your wife walks out is not the optimum time to quit smoking. I just stuffed the full carton, the half carton, and the two or three half-used packs I found lying around out the window and into the dark. Then I shut the window (it never once occurred to me that it might have been more efficient to throw the user out instead of the product; it was never *that* kind of situation), lay down on my bed, and closed my eyes. As I drifted off, it occurred to me that tomorrow was probably going to be one of the worst days of my life. It further occurred to me that I would probably be smoking again by noon. I was right about the first thing, wrong about the second.

\* \* \*

The next ten days—the time during which I was going through the worst of the physical withdrawal from nicotine—were difficult and often unpleasant, but perhaps not as bad as I had thought they would be. And although I was on the verge of smoking dozens—no, hundreds—of times, I never did. There were moments when I thought I would go insane if I didn't have a cigarette, and when I passed people on the street who were smoking I felt like screaming *Give that to me, motherfucker, that's mine!* at them, but I didn't.

For me, the worst times were late at night. I think (but I'm not sure; all my thought processes from around the time Diane left are very blurry in my mind) I had an idea that I would sleep better if I quit, but I didn't. I lay awake some mornings until three, hands laced together under my pillow, looking up at the ceiling, listening to sirens and to the rumble of trucks headed downtown. At those times I would think about the twenty-four-hour Korean market almost directly across the street from my building. I would think about the white fluorescent light inside, so bright it was almost like a Kübler-Ross near-death experience, and how it spilled out onto the sidewalk between the displays which, in another hour, two young Korean men in white paper hats would begin to fill with fruit. I would think about the older man behind the counter, also Korean, also in a paper hat, and the formidable racks of cigarettes behind him, as big as the stone tablets Charlton Heston brought down from Mount Sinai in *The Ten Commandments*. I would think about getting up, dressing, going over there, getting a pack of cigarettes (or maybe nine or ten of them), and sitting by the window, smoking one Marlboro after another as the sky lightened to the east and the sun came up. I never did, but on many early mornings I went to sleep counting cigarette brands instead of sheep: Winston . . . Winston 100s . . . Virginia Slims . . . Doral . . . Merit . . . Merit 100s . . . Camels . . . Camel Filters . . . Camel Lights.

Later—around the time I was starting to see the last three or four months of our marriage in a clearer light, as a matter of fact—I began to understand that my decision to quit smoking when I did was perhaps not so unconsidered as it at first seemed, and a very long way from ill-considered. I'm not a brilliant man, not a brave one, either, but that decision might have been both. It's certainly possible; sometimes we rise above ourselves. In any case, it gave my

mind something concrete to pitch upon in the days after Diane left; it gave my misery a vocabulary it would not otherwise have had.

Of course I have speculated that quitting when I did may have played a part in what happened at the Gotham Café that day, and I'm sure there's some truth to that. But who can foresee such things? None of us can predict the final outcomes of our actions, and few of us even try; most of us just do what we do to prolong a moment's pleasure or to stop the pain. And even when we act for the noblest reasons, the last link of the chain all too often drips with someone's blood.

\* \* \*

Humboldt called me again two weeks after the evening when I'd bombed West Eighty-third Street with my cigarettes, and this time he stuck with Mr. Davis as a form of address. He thanked me for the copies of various documents forwarded him through Mr. Ring and said that the time had come for "all four of us" to sit down to lunch. *All four of us* meant Diane. I hadn't seen her since the morning of the day she'd left, and even then I hadn't really seen her; she'd been sleeping with her face buried in her pillow. I hadn't even talked to her. My heart speeded up in my chest, and I could feel a pulse tapping away in the wrist of the hand holding the telephone.

"There are a number of details to be worked out, and a number of pertinent arrangements to be discussed, and this seems to be the time to put that process in work," Humboldt said. He chuckled fatly in my ear, like a repulsive adult giving a child some minor treat. "It's always best to let some time pass before bringing the principals together, a little cooling-off period, but in my judgement a face-to-face meeting at this time would facilitate—"

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You're talking about—"

"Lunch," he said. "The day after tomorrow? Can you clear that on your schedule?" *Of course you can*, his voice said. *Just to see her again . . . to experience the slightest touch of her hand. Eh, Steve?*

"I don't have anything on for lunch Thursday anyhow, so that's not a problem. And I should bring my lawyer?"

The fat chuckle came again, shivering in my ear like something just turned out of a Jell-O mold. "I imagine Mr. Ring would like to be included, yes."

"Did you have a place in mind?" I wondered for a moment who would be paying for this lunch, and then had to smile at my own naiveté. I reached into my pocket for a cigarette and poked the tip of a toothpick under my thumbnail instead. I winced, brought the pick out, checked the tip for blood, saw none, and stuck it in my mouth.

Humboldt had said something, but I had missed it. The sight of the toothpick had reminded me all over again that I was floating smokeless on the waves of the world.

"Pardon me?"

"I asked if you know the Gotham Café on Fifty-third Street," he said, sounding a touch impatient now. "Between Madison and Park."

"No, but I'm sure I can find it."

"Noon?"

"Noon's fine," I said, and thought of telling him to tell Diane to wear the green dress with the little black speckles and the slit up the side. "I'll just check with my lawyer." It occurred to me that that was a pompous, hateful little phrase, one I couldn't wait to stop using.

"Do that, and call me back if there's a problem."

I called John Ring, who hemmed and hawed enough to justify his retainer (not outrageous, but considerable) and then said he supposed a meeting was in order "at this time."

I hung up, settled back in front of my computer terminal, and wondered how I was possibly going to be able to meet Diane again without at least one cigarette beforehand.

\* \* \*

On the morning of our scheduled lunch, John Ring called and told me he couldn't make it, and that I would have to cancel. "It's my mother," he said, sounding harried. "She fell down the damned stairs and broke her hip. Out in Babylon. I'm leaving now for Penn Station. I'll have to take the train." He spoke in the tone of a man saying he'll have to go by camel across the Gobi.

I thought for a second, jiggling a fresh toothpick between my fingers. Two used ones lay beside my computer terminal, the ends frayed. I was going to have to watch that; it was all too easy to imagine my stomach filling up with sharp little splinterettes. The replacement of one bad habit with another seems almost inevitable, I've noticed.

"Steven? Are you there?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm sorry about your mother, but I'm going to keep the lunch-date."

He sighed, and when he spoke he sounded sympathetic as well as harried. "I understand that you want to see her, and that's the reason why you have to be very careful, and make no mistakes. You're not Donald Trump and she's not Ivana, but this isn't a no-faulter we got here, either, where you get your decree by registered mail. You've done very well for yourself, Steven, especially in the last five years."

"I know, but—"

"And for *thuh-ree* of those years," Ring overrode me, now putting on his courtroom voice like an overcoat, "Diane Davis was not your wife, not your live-in companion, and not by any stretch of the imagination your helpmate. She was just Diane Coslaw from Pound Ridge, and she did not go before you tossing flower-petals or blowing a cornet."

"No, but I want to see her." And what I was thinking would have driven him mad: I wanted to see if she was wearing the green dress with the black speckles, because she knew damned well it was my favorite.

He sighed again. "I can't have this discussion, or I'm going to miss my train. There isn't another one until one-oh-one."

"Go and catch your train."

"I will, but first I'm going to make one more effort to get through to you. A meeting like this is like a joust. The lawyers are the knights; the clients are reduced, for the time being, to no more than squires with Sir Barrister's lance in one hand and the reins of his horse in the other." His tone suggested that this was an old image, and well-loved. "What you're telling me is that, since I can't be there, you're going to hop on my nag and go galloping at the other guy with no lance, no armor, no faceplate, probably not even a jockstrap."

“I want to see her,” I said. “I want to see how she is. How she looks. Hey, without you there, maybe Humboldt won’t even want to talk.”

“Oh, wouldn’t that be nice,” he said, and came out with a small, cynical laugh. “I’m not going to talk you out of it, am I?”

“No.”

“All right, then I want you to follow certain instructions. If I find out you haven’t, and that you’ve gummed up the works, I may decide it would be simpler to just resign the case. Are you hearing me?”

“I’m hearing you.”

“Good. Don’t yell at her, Steven. That’s big number one. Are you hearing *that?*”

“Yes.” I wasn’t going to yell at her. If I could quit smoking two days after she had walked out—and stick to it—I thought I could get through a hundred minutes and three courses without calling her a bitch.

“Don’t yell at him, that’s number two.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t just say okay. I know you don’t like him, and he doesn’t like you much, either.”

“He’s never even met me. How can he have an opinion about me one way or another?”

“Don’t be dense,” he said. “He’s being *paid* to have an opinion, that’s how. So say okay like you mean it.”

“Okay like I mean it.”

“Better.” But *he* didn’t say it like he really meant it; he said it like a man who is checking his watch.

“Don’t get into substantive matters,” he said. “Don’t discuss financial-settlement issues, not even on a ‘What would you think if I suggested this’ basis. If he gets pissed off and asks why you kept the lunch-date if you weren’t going to discuss nuts and bolts, tell him just what you told me, that you wanted to see your wife again.”

“Okay.”

“And if they leave at that point, can you live with it?”

“Yes.” I didn’t know if I could or not, but I thought I could, and I knew that Ring wanted to catch his train.

“As a lawyer—*your* lawyer—I’m telling you that this is a bullshit move, and that if it backfires in court, I’ll call a recess just so I can pull you out into the hall and say I told you so. Now have you got that?”

“Yes. Say hello to your mother.”

“Maybe tonight,” Ring said, and now he sounded as if he were rolling his eyes. “I won’t get a word in until then. I have to run, Steven.”

“Okay.”

“I hope she stands you up.”

“I know you do.”

He hung up and went to see his mother, out in Babylon. When I saw him next, a few days later, there was something between us that didn’t quite bear discussion, although I think we would have talked about it if we had known each other even a little bit better. I saw it in his eyes and I suppose he saw it in mine, as well—the knowledge that if his mother hadn’t fallen down the stairs and broken her hip, he might have wound up as dead as William Humboldt.

\* \* \*

I walked from my office to the Gotham Café, leaving at eleven-fifteen and arriving across from the restaurant at eleven-forty-five. I got there early for my own peace of mind—to make sure the place was where Humboldt had said it was, in other words. That’s the way I am, and pretty much the way I’ve always been. Diane used to call it my “obsessive streak” when we were first married, but I think that by the end she knew better. I don’t trust the competence of others very easily, that’s all. I realize it’s a pain-in-the-ass characteristic, and I know it drove her crazy, but what she never seemed to realize was that I didn’t exactly love it in myself, either. Some things take longer to change than others, though. And some things you can never change, no matter how hard you try.

The restaurant was right where Humboldt had said it would be, the location marked by a green awning with the words GOTHAM CAFÉ on it. A white city skyline was traced across the plate-glass windows. It looked New York—trendy. It also looked pretty unamazing, just one of the eight hundred or so pricey restaurants crammed together in midtown.

With the meeting-place located and my mind temporarily set at rest (about that, anyway; I was tense as hell about seeing Diane again and craving a cigarette like mad), I walked up to Madison and browsed in a luggage store for fifteen minutes. Mere window-shopping was no good; if Diane and Humboldt came from uptown, they might see me. Diane was liable to recognize me by the set of my shoulders and the hang of my topcoat even from behind, and I didn't want that. I didn't want them to know I'd arrived early. I thought it might look needy. So I went inside.

I bought an umbrella I didn't need and left the shop at straight up noon by my watch, knowing I could step through the door of the Gotham Café at twelve-oh-five. My father's dictum: If you need to be there, show up five minutes early. If they need *you* to be there, show up five minutes late. I had reached a point where I didn't know who needed what or why or for how long, but my father's dictum seemed like the safest course. If it had been just Diane alone, I think I would have arrived dead on time.

No, that's probably a lie. I suppose if it had just been Diane, I would have gone in at eleven-forty-five, when I first arrived, and waited for her.

I stood under the awning for a moment, looking in. The place was bright, and I marked that down in its favor. I have an intense dislike for dark restaurants where you can't see what you're eating or drinking. The walls were white and hung with vibrant Impressionist drawings. You couldn't tell what they were, but that didn't matter; with their primary colors and broad, exuberant strokes, they hit your eyes like visual caffeine. I looked for Diane and saw a woman that might be her, seated about halfway down the long room and by the wall. It was hard to say, because her back was turned and I don't have her knack of recognition under difficult circumstances. But the heavysset, balding man she was sitting with certainly looked like a Humboldt. I took a deep breath, opened the restaurant door, and went in.

\* \* \*

There are two phases of withdrawal from tobacco, and I'm convinced that it's the second that causes most cases of recidivism. The physical withdrawal lasts ten days to two weeks, and then most of the symptoms—sweats, headaches, muscle twitches, pounding eyes, insomnia, irritability—disappear. What

follows is a much longer period of mental withdrawal. These symptoms may include mild to moderate depression, mourning, some degree of anhedonia (emotional flat-line, in other words), forgetfulness, even a species of transient dyslexia. I know all this stuff because I read up on it. Following what happened at the Gotham Café, it seemed very important that I do that. I suppose you'd have to say that my interest in the subject fell somewhere between the Land of Hobbies and the Kingdom of Obsession.

The most common symptom of phase-two withdrawal is a feeling of mild unreality. Nicotine improves synaptic transferral and improves concentration—widens the brain's information highway, in other words. It's not a big boost, and not really necessary to successful thinking (although most confirmed cigarette junkies believe differently), but when you take it away, you're left with a feeling—a *pervasive* feeling, in my case—that the world has taken on a decidedly dreamy cast. There were many times when it seemed to me that people and cars and the little sidewalk vignettes I observed were actually passing by me on a moving screen, a thing controlled by hidden stagehands turning enormous cranks and revolving enormous drums. It was also a little like being mildly stoned all the time, because the feeling was accompanied by a sense of helplessness and moral exhaustion, a feeling that things had to simply go on the way they were going, for good or for ill, because you (except of course it's me I'm talking about) were just too damned busy *not-smoking* to do much of anything else.

I'm not sure how much all this bears on what happened, but I know it has *some* bearing, because I was pretty sure something was wrong with the maître d' almost as soon as I saw him, and as soon as he spoke to me, I knew.

He was tall, maybe forty-five, slim (in his tux, at least; in ordinary clothes he probably would have looked skinny), mustached. He had a leather-bound menu in one hand. He looked like battalions of maître d's in battalions of fancy New York restaurants, in other words. Except for his bow-tie, which was askew, and something on his shirt that was a splotch just above the place where his jacket buttoned. It looked like either gravy or a glob of some dark jelly. Also, several strands of his hair stuck up defiantly in back, making me think of Alfalfa in the old *Little Rascals* one-reelers. That almost made me burst out

laughing—I was very nervous, remember—and I had to bite my lips to keep it in.

“Yes, sir?” he asked as I approached the desk. It came out sounding like *Yais sair?* All maître d’s in New York City have accents, but it is never one you can positively identify. A girl I dated in the mid-eighties, one who *did* have a sense of humor (along with a fairly large drug habit, unfortunately), told me once that they all grew up on the same little island and hence all spoke the same language.

“What language is it?” I asked her.

“Snooti,” she said, and I cracked up.

This thought came back to me as I looked past the desk to the woman I’d seen while outside—I was now almost positive it was Diane—and I had to bite the insides of my lips again. As a result, Humboldt’s name came out of me sounding like a half-smothered sneeze.

The maître d’s high, pale brow contracted in a frown. His eyes bored into mine. I had taken them for brown as I approached the desk, but now they looked black.

“Pardon, sir?” he asked. It came out sounding like *Pahdun, sair* and looking like *Fuck you, Jack*. His long fingers, as pale as his brow—concert pianist’s fingers, they looked like—tapped nervously on the cover of the menu. The tassel sticking out of it like some sort of half-assed bookmark swung back and forth.

“Humboldt,” I said. “Party of three.” I found I couldn’t take my eyes off his bow-tie, so crooked that the left side of it was almost brushing the shelf under his chin, and that blob on his snowy-white dress shirt. Now that I was closer, it didn’t look like either gravy or jelly; it looked like partially dried blood.

He was looking down at his reservations book, the rogue tuft at the back of his head waving back and forth over the rest of his slicked-down hair. I could see his scalp through the grooves his comb had laid down, and a speckle of dandruff on the shoulders of his tux. It occurred to me that a good headwaiter might have fired an underling put together in such sloppy fashion.

“Ah, yes, *monsieur*.” (*Ah yais, messoo*.) He had found the name. “Your party is—” He was starting to look up. He stopped abruptly, and his eyes sharpened even more, if that was possible, as he looked past me and down. “You cannot

bring that dog in here,” he said sharply. “How many times have I told you you can’t bring that *dog* in here!”

He didn’t quite shout, but spoke so loudly that several of the diners closest to his pulpit-like desk stopped eating and looked around curiously.

I looked around myself. He had been so emphatic I expected to see *somebody’s* dog, but there was no one behind me and most certainly no dog. It occurred to me then, I don’t know why, that he was talking about my umbrella, that perhaps on the Island of the Maître D’s, *dog* was a slang term for umbrella, especially when carried by a patron on a day when rain did not seem likely.

I looked back at the maître d’ and saw that he had already started away from his desk, holding my menu in his hands. He must have sensed that I wasn’t following, because he looked back over his shoulder, eyebrows slightly raised. There was nothing on his face now but polite enquiry—*Are you coming, messoo?*—and I came. I knew something was wrong with him, but I came. I could not take the time or effort to try to decide what might be wrong with the maître d’ of a restaurant where I had never been before today and where I would probably never be again; I had Humboldt and Diane to deal with, I had to do it without smoking, and the maître d’ of the Gotham Café would have to take care of his own problems, dog included.

\* \* \*

Diane turned around and at first I saw nothing in her face and in her eyes but a kind of frozen politeness. Then, just below it, I saw anger, or thought I did. We’d done a lot of arguing during our last three or four months together, but I couldn’t recall ever seeing the sort of concealed anger I sensed in her now, anger that was meant to be hidden by the makeup and the new dress (blue, no speckles, no slit up the side) and the new hairdo. The heavysset man she was with was saying something, and she reached out and touched his arm. As he turned toward me, beginning to get to his feet, I saw something else in her face. She was afraid of me as well as angry with me. And although she hadn’t said a single word, I was already furious at her. Everything on her face and in her eyes was negative; she might as well have been wearing a CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE sign on her forehead. I thought I deserved better.

“Monsieur,” the maître d’ said, pulling out the chair to Diane’s left. I barely heard him, and certainly any thought of his eccentric behavior and crooked bow-tie had left my head. I think that even the subject of tobacco had briefly vacated my head for the first time since I’d quit smoking. I could only consider the careful composure of her face and marvel at how I could be angry with her and still want her so much it made me ache to look at her. Absence may or may not make the heart grow fonder, but it certainly freshens the eye.

I also found time to wonder if I had really seen all I’d surmised. Anger? Yes, that was possible, even likely. If she hadn’t been angry with me to at least some degree, she never would have left in the first place, I supposed. But afraid? Why in God’s name would Diane be afraid of me? I’d never laid a single finger on her. Yes, I suppose I had raised my voice during some of our arguments, but so had she.

“Enjoy your lunch, monsieur,” the maître d’ said from some other universe—the one where service people usually stay, only poking their heads into ours when we call them, either because we need something or to complain.

“Mr. Davis, I’m Bill Humboldt,” Diane’s companion said. He held out a large hand that looked reddish and chapped. I shook it briefly. The rest of him was as big as his hand, and his broad face wore the sort of flush habitual drinkers often get after the first one of the day. I put him in his mid-forties, about ten years away from the time when his sagging cheeks would turn into jowls.

“Pleasure,” I said, not thinking about what I was saying any more than I was thinking about the maître d’ with the blob on his shirt, only wanting to get the hand-shaking part over so I could turn back to the pretty blonde with the rose-and-cream complexion, the pale pink lips, and the trim, slim figure. The woman who had, not so long ago, liked to whisper “Do me do me do me” in my ear while she held onto my ass like a saddle with two pommels.

“Where is Mr. Ring?” Humboldt asked, looking around (a bit theatrically, I thought).

“Mr. Ring is on his way to Long Island. His mother fell downstairs and broke her hip.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Humboldt said. He picked up the half-finished martini in front of him on the table and drained it until the olive with the toothpick in it

rested against his lips. He spat it back, then set the glass down and looked at me. “And I bet I can guess what he told you.”

I heard this but paid no attention. For the time being, Humboldt was no more important than minor static on a radio program you really want to hear. I looked at Diane instead. It was marvellous, really, how she looked smarter and prettier than previous. As if she had learned things—yes, even after only two weeks of separation, and while living with Ernie and Dee Dee Coslaw in Pound Ridge—that I could never know.

“How are you, Steve?” she asked.

“Fine,” I said. Then, “Not so fine, actually. I’ve missed you.”

Only watchful silence from the lady greeted this. Those big blue-green eyes looking at me, no more. Certainly no return serve, no *I’ve missed you, too*.

“And I quit smoking. That’s also played hell with my peace of mind.”

“Did you, finally? Good for you.”

I felt another flash of anger, this time a really ugly one, at her politely dismissive tone. As if I might not be telling the truth, but it didn’t really matter if I was. She’d carped at me about the cigarettes every day for two years, it seemed—how they were going to give me cancer, how they were going to give *her* cancer, how she wouldn’t even consider getting pregnant until I stopped, so I could just save any breath I might have been planning to waste on *that* subject—and now all at once it didn’t matter anymore, because I didn’t matter anymore.

“We have a little business to transact,” Humboldt said. “If you don’t mind, that is.”

There was one of those big, boxy lawyer suitcases on the floor beside him. He picked it up with a grunt and set it on the chair where my lawyer would have been if his mother hadn’t broken her hip. Humboldt began unsnapping the clasps, but I quit paying attention at that point. The fact was, I *did* mind. It wasn’t a matter of caution, either; it was a matter of priorities. I felt an instant’s gratitude that Ring had been called away. It had certainly clarified the issues.

I looked at Diane and said, “I want to try again. Can we reconcile? Is there any chance of that?”

The look of absolute horror on her face crashed hopes I hadn't even known I'd been holding onto. Instead of answering, she looked past me at Humboldt.

"You said we didn't have to talk about this!" Her voice was trembling, accusatory. "You said you wouldn't even let it come up!"

Humboldt looked a little flustered. He shrugged and glanced briefly down at his empty martini glass before looking back up at Diane. I think he was wishing he'd ordered a double. "I didn't know Mr. Davis would be attending this meeting without his lawyer. You should have called me, Mr. Davis. Since you did not, I feel it necessary to inform you that Diane did not greenlight this meeting with any thoughts of reconciliation in mind. Her decision to seek a divorce is final."

He glanced at her briefly, seeking confirmation, and got it. She was nodding emphatically. Her cheeks were considerably brighter than they had been when I sat down, and it was not the sort of flush I associate with embarrassment. "You *bet* it is," she said, and I saw that furious look on her face again.

"Diane, why?" I hated the plaintive note I heard in my voice, a sound almost like a sheep's bleat, but there wasn't a goddamned thing I could do about it. "*Why?*"

"Oh Jesus," she said. "Are you telling me you really don't know?"

"Yes—"

Her cheeks were brighter than ever, the flush now rising almost to her temples. "No, probably you don't. Isn't that *typical*." She picked up her water and spilled the top two inches on the tablecloth because her hand was trembling. I flashed back at once—I mean *kapow*—to the day she'd left, remembering how I'd knocked the glass of orange juice onto the floor and how I'd cautioned myself not to try picking up the broken pieces of glass until my hands had settled down, and how I'd gone ahead anyway and cut myself for my pains.

"Stop it, this is counterproductive," Humboldt said. He sounded like a playground monitor trying to prevent a scuffle before it gets started, but his eyes were sweeping the rear part of the room, looking for our waiter, or any waiter whose eye he could catch. He was a lot less interested in us, at that particular moment, than he was in obtaining what the British like to call "the other half."

“I just want to know—” I began.

“What you want to *know* doesn’t have anything to do with why we’re *here*,” Humboldt said, and for a moment he sounded as sharp and alert as he probably had been when he first strode out of law school with his diploma in his hand.

“Yes, right, *finally*,” Diane said. She spoke in a brittle, urgent voice. “Finally it’s not about what you *want*, what you *need*.”

“I don’t know what that means, but I’m willing to listen,” I said. “We could try counselling, I’m not against it if maybe—”

She raised her hands to shoulder-level, palms out. “Oh God, Mr. Macho’s gone New Age,” she said, then dropped her hands back into her lap. “After all the days you rode off into the sunset, tall in the saddle. Say it ain’t so, Joe.”

“Stop it,” Humboldt told her. He looked from his client to his client’s soon-to-be ex-husband (it was going to happen, all right; even the slight unreality that comes with *not-smoking* couldn’t conceal that self-evident truth from me by that point). “One more word from either of you and I’m going to declare this luncheon at an end.” He gave us a small smile, one so obviously manufactured that I found it perversely endearing. “And we haven’t even heard the specials yet.”

That—the first mention of food since I’d joined them—was just before the bad things started to happen, and I remember smelling salmon from one of the nearby tables. In the two weeks since I’d quit smoking, my sense of smell had become incredibly sharp, but I do not count that as much of a blessing, especially when it comes to salmon. I used to like it, but now I can’t abide the smell of it, let alone the taste. To me it smells of pain and fear and blood and death.

“He started it,” Diane said sulkily.

You *started it*, you *were the one who walked out*, I thought, but I kept it to myself. Humboldt clearly meant what he said; he would take Diane by the hand and walk her out of the restaurant if we started that schoolyard *no-I-didn’t, yes-you-did* shit. Not even the prospect of another drink would hold him here.

“Okay,” I said mildly . . . and I had to work hard to achieve that mild tone, believe me. “I started it. What’s next?” I knew, of course; papers, papers,

papers. And probably the only satisfaction I was going to get out of this sorry situation was telling them that I wasn't going to sign any, or even look at any, on the advice of my lawyer. I glanced at Diane again, but she was looking down at her empty plate and her hair hid her face. I felt a strong urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake her inside her new blue dress like a pebble inside of a gourd. *Do you think you're in this alone?* I would shout at her. *Do you think you're in this alone? Well, the Marlboro Man has got news for you, sweetheart—you're a stubborn, self-indulgent little bi—*

"Mr. Davis?" Humboldt asked politely.

I looked around at him.

"There you are," he said. "I thought we'd lost you again."

"Not at all," I said.

"Good. Lovely."

He had several sheafs of paper in his hands. They were held together by those paperclips that come in different colors—red, blue, yellow, purple. They went well with the Impressionist drawings on the walls of the Gotham Café. It occurred to me that I had come abysmally unprepared for this meeting, and not just because my lawyer was on the twelve-thirty-three to Babylon, either. Diane had her new dress; Humboldt had his Brinks truck of a briefcase, plus documents held together by color-coded paperclips; all I had was a new umbrella on a sunny day. I looked down at where it lay beside my chair (it had never crossed my mind to check it) and saw there was still a price-tag dangling from the handle. All at once I felt like Minnie Pearl.

The room smelled wonderful, as most restaurants do since they banned smoking in them—of flowers and wine and fresh coffee and chocolate and pastry—but what I smelled most clearly was salmon. I remember thinking that it smelled very good, and that I would probably order some. I also remember thinking that if I could eat at a meeting like this, I could probably eat anywhere.

"I have here a number of forms which will allow both you and Ms. Davis to remain financially mobile while assuring that neither of you will have unfair access to the funds you've both worked so hard to accumulate," Humboldt said. "I also have preliminary court notifications which need to be signed by

you, and forms that will allow us to put your bonds and T-bills in an escrow account until your current situation is settled by the court.”

I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn't going to sign anything, and if that meant the meeting was over so be it, but I didn't get out so much as a single word. Before I could, I was interrupted by the maître d'. He was screaming as well as talking, and I've tried to indicate that, but a bunch of *e*'s strung together can't really convey the quality of that sound. It was as if he had a bellyful of steam and a teakettle whistle caught in his throat.

*“That dog . . . Eeeeeee! . . . I told you time and again about that dog . . . Eeeeeee! . . . All that time I can't sleep . . . Eeeeeee! . . . She says cut your face, that cunt . . . Eeeeeee! . . . How you tease me! . . . Eeeeeee! . . . And now you bring that dog in here . . . Eeeeeee!”*

The room fell silent at once, of course, diners looking up in astonishment from their meals or their conversations as the thin, pale, black-clad figure came stalking across the room with its face outthrust and its long, storklike legs scissoring. The maître d's bow-tie had turned a full ninety degrees from its normal position, so it now looked like the hands of a clock indicating the hour of six. His hands were clasped behind his back as he walked, and bent forward slightly from the waist as he was, he made me think of a drawing in my sixth-grade literature book, an illustration of Washington Irving's unfortunate schoolteacher, Ichabod Crane.

It was me he was looking at, me he was approaching. I stared at him, feeling almost hypnotized—it was like one of those dreams where you discover that you haven't studied for the exam you're supposed to take or that you're attending a White House dinner in your honor with no clothes on—and I might have stayed that way if Humboldt hadn't moved.

I heard his chair scrape back and glanced at him. He was standing up, his napkin held loosely in one hand. He looked surprised, but he also looked furious. I suddenly realized two things: that he was drunk, quite drunk, in fact, and that he saw this as a smirch on both his hospitality and his competence. He had chosen the restaurant, after all, and now look—the master of ceremonies had gone bonkers.

*“Eeeeeee! . . . I teach you! For the last time I teach you . . .”*

“Oh my God, he’s wet his pants,” a woman at a nearby table murmured. Her voice was low but perfectly audible in the silence as the maître d’ drew in a fresh breath with which to scream, and I saw she was right. The crotch of the skinny man’s dress pants was soaked.

“See here, you idiot,” Humboldt said, turning to face him, and the maître d’ brought his left hand out from behind his back. In it was the largest butcher-knife I have ever seen. It had to have been two feet long, with the top part of its cutting edge slightly belled, like a cutlass in an old pirate movie.

“*Look out!*” I yelled at Humboldt, and at one of the tables against the wall a skinny man in rimless spectacles screamed, ejecting a mouthful of chewed brown fragments of food onto the tablecloth in front of him.

Humboldt seemed to hear neither my yell nor the other man’s scream. He was frowning thunderously at the maître d’. “You don’t need to expect to see me in here again if this is the way—” Humboldt began.

“*Eeeeeee! EEEEEEEEE!*” the maître d’ screamed, and swung the butcher-knife flat through the air. It made a kind of whickering sound, like a whispered sentence. The period was the sound of the blade burying itself in William Humboldt’s right cheek. Blood exploded out of the wound in a furious spray of tiny droplets. They decorated the tablecloth in a fan-shaped stipplework, and I clearly saw (I will never forget it) one bright red drop fall into my waterglass and then dive for the bottom with a pinkish filament like a tail stretching out behind it. It looked like a bloody tadpole.

Humboldt’s cheek snapped open, revealing his teeth, and as he clapped his hand to the gouting wound, I saw something pinkish-white lying on the shoulder of his charcoal-gray suitcoat. It wasn’t until the whole thing was over that I realized it must have been his earlobe.

“*Tell this in your ears!*” the maître d’ screamed furiously at Diane’s bleeding lawyer, who stood there with one hand clapped to his cheek. Except for the blood pouring over and between his fingers, Humboldt looked weirdly like Jack Benny doing one of his famous double-takes. “*Call this to your hateful tattle-tale friends of the street . . . you misery . . . Eeeeeee! . . . DOG-LOVER!*”

Now other people were screaming, mostly at the sight of the blood. Humboldt was a big man, and he was bleeding like a stuck pig. I could hear it

pattering on the floor like water from a broken pipe, and the front of his white shirt was now red. His tie, which had been red to start with, was now black.

“Steve?” Diane said. “*Steven?*”

A man and a woman had been having lunch at the table behind her and slightly to her left. Now the man—about thirty and handsome in the way George Hamilton used to be—bolted to his feet and ran toward the front of the restaurant. “*Troy, don’t go without me!*” his date screamed, but Troy never looked back. He’d forgotten all about a library book he was supposed to return, it seemed, or maybe about how he’d promised to wax the car.

If there had been a paralysis in the room—I can’t actually say if there was or not, although I seem to have seen a great deal, and to remember it all—that broke it. There were more screams and other people got up. Several tables were overturned. Glasses and china shattered on the floor. I saw a man with his arm around the waist of his female companion hurry past behind the maître d’; her hand was clamped into his shoulder like a claw. For a moment her eyes met mine, and they were as empty as the eyes of a Greek bust. Her face was dead pale, haglike with horror.

All of this might have happened in ten seconds, or maybe twenty. I remember it like a series of photographs or filmstrips, but it has no timeline. Time ceased to exist for me at the moment Alfalfa the maître d’ brought his left hand out from behind his back and I saw the butcher-knife. During that time, the man in the tuxedo continued to spew out a confusion of words in his special maître d’s language, the one that old girlfriend of mine had called Snooti. Some of it really *was* in a foreign language, some of it was English but completely without sense, and some of it was striking . . . almost haunting. Have you ever read any of Dutch Schultz’s long, confused deathbed statement? It was like that. Much of it I can’t remember. What I can remember I suppose I’ll never forget.

Humboldt staggered backward, still holding his lacerated cheek. The backs of his knees struck the seat of his chair and he sat down heavily on it. *He looks like someone who’s just been told he’s disinherited*, I thought. He started to turn toward Diane and me, his eyes wide and shocked. I had time to see there were tears spilling out of them, and then the maître d’ wrapped both hands around

the handle of the butcher-knife and buried it in the center of Humboldt's head. It made a sound like someone whacking a pile of towels with a cane.

"*Boot!*" Humboldt cried. I'm quite sure that's what his last word on planet Earth was—"boot." Then his weeping eyes rolled up to whites and he slumped forward onto his plate, sweeping his own glassware off the table and onto the floor with one outflung hand. As this happened, the maître d'—all his hair was sticking up in back, now, not just some of it—pried the long knife out of his head. Blood sprayed out of the headwound in a kind of vertical curtain, and splashed the front of Diane's dress. She raised her hands to her shoulders with the palms turned out once again, but this time it was in horror rather than exasperation. She shrieked, and then clapped her bloodspattered hands to her face, over her eyes. The maître d' paid no attention to her. Instead, he turned to me.

\* \* \*

"That dog of yours," he said, speaking in an almost conversational tone. He registered absolutely no interest in or even knowledge of the screaming, terrified people stampeding behind him toward the doors. His eyes were very large, very dark. They looked brown to me again, but there seemed to be black circles around the irises. "That dog of yours is so much rage. All the radios of Coney Island don't make up to dat dog, you motherfucker."

I had the umbrella in my hand, and the one thing I can't remember, no matter how hard I try, is when I grabbed it. I think it must have been while Humboldt was standing transfixed by the realization that his mouth had been expanded by eight inches or so, but I simply can't remember. I remember the man who looked like George Hamilton bolting for the door, and I know his name was Troy because that's what his companion called after him, but I can't remember picking up the umbrella I'd bought in the luggage store. It *was* in my hand, though, the price-tag sticking out of the bottom of my fist, and when the maître d' bent forward as if bowing and ran the knife through the air at me—meaning, I think, to bury it in my throat—I raised it and brought it down on his wrist, like an old-time teacher whacking an unruly pupil with his hickory stick.

“Ud!” the maître d’ grunted as his hand was driven sharply down and the blade meant for my throat ploughed through the soggy pinkish tablecloth instead. He held on, though, and pulled it back. If I’d tried to hit his knife-hand again I’m sure I would have missed, but I didn’t. I swung at his face, and fetched him an excellent lick—as excellent a lick as one can administer with an umbrella, anyway—up the side of his head. And as I did, the umbrella popped open like the visual punchline of a slapstick act.

I didn’t think it was funny, though. The bloom of the umbrella hid him from me completely as he staggered backward with his free hand flying up to the place where I’d hit him, and I didn’t like not being able to see him. In fact, it terrified me. Not that I wasn’t terrified already.

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

*“Eeeee! You boinker!”* the maître d’ screamed, or perhaps it was a “boinger” he called me. It probably doesn’t matter, I know that, and yet it quite often seems to me that it does. Late at night, the little questions haunt me as much as the big ones. *“You boinking bastard! All these radios! Hush-do-baba! Fuck Cousin Brucie! Fuck YOU!”*

He started around the table toward us (the area behind him was completely empty now, and looked like the aftermath of a brawl in a western movie saloon). My umbrella was still lying on the table with the opened top jutting off the far side, and the maître d’ bumped it with his hip. It fell off in front of him, and while he kicked it aside, I set Diane back on her feet and pulled her toward the far side of the room. The front door was no good; it was probably too far away in any case, but even if we could get there, it was still jammed tight with frightened, screaming people. If he wanted me—or both of us—he would have no trouble catching us and carving us like a couple of turkeys.

*“Bugs! You bugs! . . . Eeeee! . . . So much for your dog, eh? So much for your barking dog!”*

*“Make him stop!”* Diane screamed. *“Oh Jesus, he’s going to kill us both, make him stop!”*

*"I rot you, you abominations!"* Closer, now. The umbrella hadn't held him up for long, that was for sure. *"I rot you and all your trulls!"*

I saw three doors, two of them facing each other in a small alcove where there was also a pay telephone. Men's and women's rooms. No good. Even if they were single toilets with locks on the doors, they were no good. A nut like this one behind us would have no trouble bashing a bathroom lock off its screws, and we would have nowhere to run.

I dragged her toward the third door and shoved through it into a world of clean green tiles, strong fluorescent light, gleaming chrome, and steamy odors of food. The smell of salmon dominated. Humboldt had never gotten a chance to ask about the specials, but I thought I knew what at least one of them had been.

A waiter was standing there with a loaded tray balanced on the flat of one hand, his mouth agape and his eyes wide. He looked like Gimpel the Fool in that Isaac Singer story. "What—" he said, and then I shoved him aside. The tray went flying, with plates and glassware shattering against the wall.

"Ay!" a man yelled. He was huge, wearing a white smock and a white chef's hat like a cloud. There was a red bandanna around his neck, and in one hand he held a ladle that was dripping some sort of brown sauce. "Ay, you can't come in here like-a dat!"

"We have to get out," I said. "He's crazy. He's—"

An idea struck me then, a way of explaining without explaining, and I put my hand over Diane's left breast for a moment, on the soaked cloth of her dress. It was the last time I ever touched her intimately, and I don't know if it felt good or not. I held my hand out to the chef, showing him a palm streaked with Humboldt's blood.

"Good Christ," he said. "Here. Inna da back."

At that instant, the door we'd come through burst open again and the maître d' rolled in, eyes wild, hair sticking out everywhere like fur on a hedgehog that's tucked itself into a ball. He looked around, saw the waiter, dismissed him, saw me, and rushed at me.

I bolted again, dragging Diane with me, shoving blindly at the softbellied bulk of the chef. We went past him, the front of Diane's dress leaving a smear of blood on the front of his tunic. I saw he wasn't coming with us, that he was

turning toward the maître d' instead, and wanted to warn him, wanted to tell him that wouldn't work, that it was the worst idea in the world and likely to be the last idea he ever had, but there was no time.

"Ay!" the chef cried. "Ay, Guy, what's dis?" He said the maître d's name as the French do, so it rhymes with *free*, and then he didn't say anything at all. There was a heavy thud that made me think of the sound of the knife burying itself in Humboldt's skull, and then the cook screamed. It had a watery sound. It was followed by a thick wet splat that haunts my dreams. I don't know what it was, and I don't want to know.

I yanked Diane down a narrow aisle between two stoves that baked a furious dull heat out at us. There was a door at the end, locked shut by two heavy steel bolts. I reached for the top one and then heard Guy, The Maître d' from Hell, coming after us, babbling.

I wanted to keep at the bolt, wanted to believe I could open the door and get us outside before he could get within sticking distance, but part of me—the part that was determined to live—knew better. I pushed Diane against the door, stepped in front of her in a protective maneuver that must go all the way back to the Ice Age, and faced him.

He came running up the narrow aisle between the stoves with the knife gripped in his left hand and raised above his head. His mouth was open and pulled back from a set of dingy, eroded teeth. Any hope of help I might have had from Gimpel the Fool disappeared. He was cowering against the wall beside the door to the restaurant. His fingers were buried deep inside his mouth, making him look more like the village idiot than ever.

*"Forgetful of me you shouldn't have been!"* Guy screamed, sounding like Yoda in the *Star Wars* movies. *"Your hateful dog! . . . Your loud music, so disharmonious! . . . Eeeee! . . . How you ever—"*

There was a large pot on one of the front burners of the lefthand stove. I reached out for it and slapped it at him. It was over an hour before I realized how badly I'd burned my hand doing that; I had a palmful of blisters like little buns, and more blisters on my three middle fingers. The pot skidded off its burner and tipped over in midair, dousing Guy from the waist down with what looked like corn, rice, and maybe two gallons of boiling water.

He screamed, staggered backward, and put the hand that wasn't holding the knife down on the other stove, almost directly into the blue-yellow gasflame underneath a skillet where mushrooms which had been sautéing were now turning to charcoal. He screamed again, this time in a register so high it hurt my ears, and held his hand up before his eyes, as if not able to believe it was connected to him.

I looked to my right and saw a little nestle of cleaning equipment beside the door—Glass-X and Clorox and Janitor In A Drum on a shelf, a broom with a dustpan stuck on top of the handle like a hat, and a mop in a steel bucket with a squeegee on the side.

As Guy came toward me again, holding the knife in the hand that wasn't red and swelling up like an innertube, I grabbed the handle of the mop, used it to roll the bucket in front of me on its little casters, and then jabbed it out at him. Guy pulled back with his upper body but stood his ground. There was a peculiar, twitching little smile on his lips. He looked like a dog who has forgotten, temporarily, at least, how to snarl. He held the knife up in front of his face and made several mystic passes with it. The overhead fluorescents glimmered liquidly on the blade . . . where it wasn't caked with blood, that was. He didn't seem to feel any pain in his burned hand, or in his legs, although they had been doused with boiling water and his tuxedo pants were spackled with rice.

"Rotten bugger," Guy said, making his mystic passes. He was like a Crusader preparing to go into battle. If, that was, you could imagine a Crusader in a rice-caked tux. "Kill you like I did your nasty barking dog."

"I don't have a dog," I said. "I *can't* have a dog. It's in the lease."

I think it was the only thing I said to him during the whole nightmare, and I'm not entirely sure I *did* say it out loud. It might only have been a thought. Behind him, I could see the chef struggling to his feet. He had one hand wrapped around the handle of the kitchen's big refrigerator and the other clapped to his bloodstained tunic, which was torn open across the swelling of his stomach in a big purple grin. He was doing his best to hold his plumbing in, but it was a battle he was losing. One loop of intestines, shiny and bruise-colored, already hung out, resting against his left side like some awful watch-chain.

Guy fainted at me with his knife. I countered by shoving the mop-bucket at him, and he drew back. I pulled it to me again and stood there with my hands wrapped around the wooden mop-handle, ready to shove the bucket at him if he moved. My own hand was throbbing and I could feel sweat trickling down my cheeks like hot oil. Behind Guy, the cook had managed to get all the way up. Slowly, like an invalid in early recovery from a serious operation, he started working his way down the aisle toward Gimpel the Fool. I wished him well.

“Undo those bolts,” I said to Diane.

“What?”

“The bolts on the *door*. Undo them.”

“I can’t move,” she said. She was crying so hard I could barely understand her. “You’re *crushing* me.”

I moved forward a little to give her room. Guy bared his teeth at me. Mock-jabbed with the knife, then pulled it back, grinning his nervous, snarly little grin as I rolled the bucket at him again on its squeaky casters.

“Bug-infested stinkpot,” he said. He sounded like a man discussing the Mets’ chances in the forthcoming campaign. “Let’s see you play your radio this loud now, stinkpot. It gives you a change in your thinking, doesn’t it? *Boink!*”

He jabbed. I rolled. But this time he didn’t pull back as far, and I realized he was nerving himself up. He meant to go for it, and soon. I could feel Diane’s breasts brush against my back as she gasped for breath. I’d given her room, but she hadn’t turned around to work the bolts. She was just standing there.

“Open the door,” I told her, speaking out of the side of my mouth like a prison con. “Pull the goddam bolts, Diane.”

“I can’t,” she sobbed. “I can’t, I don’t have any strength in my hands. Make him stop, Steven, don’t stand there *talking* with him, make him *stop*.”

She was driving me insane. I really thought she was. “You turn around and pull those bolts, Diane, or I’ll just stand aside and let—”

“EEEEEEEEEE!” he screamed, and charged, waving and stabbing with the knife.

I slammed the mop-bucket forward with all the force I could muster, and swept his legs out from under him. He howled and brought the knife down in a long, desperate stroke. Any closer and it would have torn off the tip of my nose. Then he landed spraddled awkwardly on wide-spread knees, with his face

just above the mop-squeezing gadget hung on the side of the bucket. Perfect! I drove the mophead into the nape of his neck. The strings draggled down over the shoulders of his black jacket like a witch-wig. His face slammed into the squeegee. I bent, grabbed the handle with my free hand, and clamped it shut. Guy shrieked with pain, the sound muffled by the mop.

*“PULL THOSE BOLTS!”* I screamed at Diane. *“PULL THOSE BOLTS, YOU USELESS BITCH! PULL—”*

*Thud!* Something hard and pointed slammed into my left buttock. I staggered forward with a yell—more surprise than pain, I think, although it *did* hurt. I went to one knee and lost my hold on the squeegee handle. Guy pulled back, slipping out from under the stringy head of the mop at the same time, breathing so loudly he sounded almost as if he were barking. It hadn't slowed him down much, though; he lashed out at me with the knife as soon as he was clear of the bucket. I pulled back, feeling the breeze as the blade cut the air beside my cheek.

It was only as I scrambled up that I realized what had happened, what she had done. I snatched a quick glance over my shoulder at her. She stared back defiantly, her back pressed against the door. A crazy thought came to me: she *wanted* me to get killed. Had perhaps even planned it, the whole thing. Found herself a crazy maître d' and—

Her eyes widened. *“Look out!”*

I turned back just in time to see him lunging at me. The sides of his face were bright red, except for the big white spots made by the drain-holes in the squeegee. I rammed the mophead at him, aiming for the throat and getting his chest instead. I stopped his charge and actually knocked him backward a step. What happened then was only luck. He slipped in water from the overturned bucket and went down hard, slamming his head on the tiles. Not thinking and just vaguely aware that I was screaming, I snatched up the skillet of mushrooms from the stove and brought it down on his upturned face as hard as I could. There was a muffled thump, followed by a horrible (but mercifully brief) hissing sound as the skin of his cheeks and forehead boiled.

I turned, shoved Diane aside, and drew the bolts holding the door shut. I opened the door and sunlight hit me like a hammer. And the smell of the air. I

can't remember air ever smelling better, not even when I was a kid, and it was the first day of summer vacation.

I grabbed Diane's arm and pulled her out into a narrow alley lined with padlocked trash-bins. At the far end of this narrow stone slit, like a vision of heaven, was Fifty-third Street with traffic going heedlessly back and forth. I looked over my shoulder and through the open kitchen door. Guy lay on his back with carbonized mushrooms circling his head like an existential diadem. The skillet had slid off to one side, revealing a face that was red and swelling with blisters. One of his eyes was open, but it looked unseeingly up at the fluorescent lights. Behind him, the kitchen was empty. There was a pool of blood on the floor and bloody handprints on the white enamel front of the walk-in fridge, but both the chef and Gimpel the Fool were gone.

I slammed the door shut and pointed down the alley. "Go on."

She didn't move, only looked at me.

I shoved her lightly on her left shoulder. "Go!"

She raised a hand like a traffic-cop, shook her head, then pointed a finger at me. "Don't you touch me."

"What'll you do? Sic your lawyer on me? I think he's dead, sweetheart."

"Don't you patronize me like that. Don't you *dare*. And don't touch me, Steven, I'm warning you."

The kitchen door burst open. Moving, not thinking but just moving, I slammed it shut again. I heard a muffled cry—whether anger or pain I didn't know and didn't care—just before it clicked shut. I leaned my back against it and braced my feet. "Do you want to stand here and discuss it?" I asked her. "He's still pretty lively, by the sound." He hit the door again. I rocked with it, then slammed it shut. I waited for him to try again, but he didn't.

Diane gave me a long look, glarey and uncertain, and then started walking up the alleyway with her head down and her hair hanging at the sides of her neck. I stood with my back against the door until she got about three quarters of the way to the street, then stood away from it, watching it warily. No one came out, but I decided that wasn't going to guarantee any peace of mind. I dragged one of the trash-bins in front of the door, then set off after Diane, jogging.

\* \* \*

When I got to the mouth of the alley, she wasn't there anymore. I looked right, toward Madison, and didn't see her. I looked left and there she was, wandering slowly across Fifty-third on a diagonal, her head still down and her hair still hanging like curtains at the sides of her face. No one paid any attention to her; the people in front of the Gotham Café were gawking through the plate-glass windows like people in front of the New England Aquarium shark-tank at feeding time. Sirens were approaching, a lot of them.

I went across the street, reached for her shoulder, thought better of it. I settled for calling her name, instead.

She turned around, her eyes dulled with horror and shock. The front of her dress had turned into a grisly purple bib. She stank of blood and spent adrenaline.

"Leave me alone," she said. "I never want to see you again, Steven."

"You kicked my ass in there," I said. "You kicked my ass and almost got me killed. Both of us. I can't believe you, Diane."

"I've wanted to kick your ass for the last fourteen months," she said. "When it comes to fulfilling our dreams, we can't always pick our times, can w—"

I slapped her across the face. I didn't think about it, I just did it, and few things in my adult life have given me so much pleasure. I'm ashamed of that, but I've come too far in this story to tell a lie, even one of omission.

Her head rocked back. Her eyes widened in shock and pain, losing that dull, traumatized look.

"You bastard!" she cried, her hand going to her cheek. Now tears were brimming in her eyes. "Oh, you *bastard!*"

"I saved your life," I said. "Don't you realize that? Doesn't that get through? *I saved your fucking life.*"

"You son of a bitch," she whispered. "You controlling, judgemental, small-minded, conceited, complacent son of a bitch. I hate you."

"Did you even hear me? If it wasn't for the conceited, small-minded son of a bitch, you'd be dead now."

"If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have been there in the first place," she said as the first three police cars came screaming down Fifty-third Street and pulled up

in front of the Gotham Café. Cops poured out of them like clowns in a circus act. “If you ever touch me again, I’ll scratch your eyes out, Steve,” she said. “Stay away from me.”

I had to put my hands in my armpits. They wanted to kill her, to reach out and wrap themselves around her neck and just kill her.

She walked seven or eight steps, then turned back to me. She was smiling. It was a terrible smile, more awful than any expression I had seen on the face of Guy the Demon Waiter. “I had lovers,” she said, smiling her terrible smile. She was lying. The lie was all over her face, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. She *wished* it was true; that was all over her face, too. “Three of them over the last year or so. You weren’t any good at it, so I found men who were.”

She turned and walked down the street, like a woman who was sixty-five instead of twenty-seven. I stood and watched her. Just before she reached the corner I shouted it again. It was the one thing I couldn’t get past; it was stuck in my throat like a chicken bone. “I saved your *life!* Your goddam *life!*”

She paused at the corner and turned back to me. The terrible smile was still on her face. “No,” she said. “You didn’t.”

Then she went on around the corner. I haven’t seen her since, although I suppose I will. I’ll see her in court, as the saying goes.

\* \* \*

I found a market on the next block and bought a package of Marlboros. When I got back to the corner of Madison and Fifty-third, Fifty-third had been blocked off with those blue sawhorses the cops use to protect crime-scenes and parade routes. I could see the restaurant, though. I could see it just fine. I sat down on the curb, lit a cigarette, and observed developments. Half a dozen rescue vehicles arrived—a scream of ambulances, I guess you could say. The chef went into the first one, unconscious but apparently still alive. His brief appearance before his fans on Fifty-third Street was followed by a body-bag on a stretcher—Humboldt. Next came Guy, strapped tightly to a stretcher and staring wildly around as he was loaded into the back of an ambulance. I thought that for just a moment his eyes met mine, but that was probably my imagination.

As Guy's ambulance pulled away, rolling through a hole in the sawhorse barricade provided by two uniformed cops, I tossed the cigarette I'd been smoking in the gutter. I hadn't gone through this day just to start killing myself with tobacco again, I decided.

I looked after the departing ambulance and tried to imagine the man inside it living wherever maître d's live—Queens or Brooklyn or maybe even Rye or Mamaroneck. I tried to imagine what his own dining room might look like, what pictures might be on the walls. I couldn't do that, but I found I could imagine his bedroom with relative ease, although not whether he shared it with a woman. I could see him lying awake but perfectly still, looking up at the ceiling in the small hours while the moon hung in the black firmament like the half-lidded eye of a corpse; I could imagine him lying there and listening to the neighbor's dog bark steadily and monotonously, going on and on until the sound was like a silver nail driving into his brain. I imagined him lying not far from a closet filled with tuxedos in plastic dry-cleaning bags. I could see them hanging there like executed felons. I wondered if he did have a wife. If so, had he killed her before coming to work? I thought of the blob on his shirt and decided it was a possibility. I also wondered about the neighbor's dog, the one that wouldn't shut up. And the neighbor's family.

But mostly it was Guy I thought about, lying sleepless through all the same nights I had lain sleepless, listening to the dog next door or down the street as I had listened to sirens and the rumble of trucks heading downtown. I thought of him lying there and looking up at the shadows the moon had tacked to the ceiling. Thought of that cry—*Eeeeeee!*—building up in his head like gas in a closed room.

"Eeeee," I said . . . just to see how it sounded. I dropped the package of Marlboros into the gutter and began stamping it methodically as I sat there on the curb. "Eeeee. Eeeee. Eeeeeee."

One of the cops standing by the sawhorses looked over at me. "Hey, buddy, want to stop being a pain in the butt?" he called over. "We got us a situation here."

Of course you do, I thought. Don't we all.

I didn't say anything, though. I stopped stamping—the cigarette pack was pretty well dead by then, anyway—and stopped making the noise. I could still

hear it in my head, though, and why not? It makes as much sense as anything else.

Eeeeeee.

Eeeeeee.

Eeeeeee.

## That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is in French

*Floyd, what's that over there? Oh shit.*

The man's voice speaking these words was vaguely familiar, but the words themselves were just a disconnected snip of dialogue, the kind of thing you heard when you were channel-surfing with the remote. There was no one named Floyd in her life. Still, that was the start. Even before she saw the little girl in the red pinafore, there were those disconnected words.

But it was the little girl who brought it on strong. "Oh-oh, I'm getting that feeling," Carol said.

The girl in the pinafore was in front of a country market called Carson's—BEER, WINE, GROC, FRESH BAIT, LOTTERY—crouched down with her butt between her ankles and the bright-red apron-dress tucked between her thighs, playing with a doll. The doll was yellow-haired and dirty, the kind that's round and stuffed and boneless in the body.

"What feeling?" Bill asked.

"You know. The one you can only say what it is in French. Help me here."

"Déjà vu," he said.

"That's it," she said, and turned to look at the little girl one more time. *She'll have the doll by one leg*, Carol thought. *Holding it upside down by one leg with its grimy yellow hair hanging down.*

But the little girl had abandoned the doll on the store's splintery gray steps and had gone over to look at a dog caged up in the back of a station wagon. Then Bill and Carol Shelton went around a curve in the road and the store was out of sight.

"How much farther?" Carol asked.

Bill looked at her with one eyebrow raised and his mouth dimpled at one corner—left eyebrow, right dimple, always the same. The look that said, *You think I'm amused, but I'm really irritated. For the ninety trillionth or so time in the*

*marriage, I'm really irritated. You don't know that, though, because you can only see about two inches into me and then your vision fails.*

But she had better vision than he realized; it was one of the secrets of the marriage. Probably he had a few secrets of his own. And there were, of course, the ones they kept together.

"I don't know," he said. "I've never been here."

"But you're sure we're on the right road."

"Once you get over the causeway and onto Sanibel Island, there's only one," he said. "It goes across to Captiva, and there it ends. But before it does we'll come to Palm House. That I promise you."

The arch in his eyebrow began to flatten. The dimple began to fill in. He was returning to what she thought of as the Great Level. She had come to dislike the Great Level, too, but not as much as the eyebrow and the dimple, or his sarcastic way of saying "Excuse me?" when you said something he considered stupid, or his habit of pooching out his lower lip when he wanted to appear thoughtful and deliberative.

"Bill?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you know anyone named Floyd?"

"There was Floyd Denning. He and I ran the downstairs snack bar at Christ the Redeemer in our senior year. I told you about him, didn't I? He stole the Coke money one Friday and spent the weekend in New York with his girlfriend. They suspended him and expelled her. What made you think of him?"

"I don't know," she said. Easier than telling him that the Floyd with whom Bill had gone to high school wasn't the Floyd the voice in her head was speaking to. At least, she didn't think it was.

*Second honeymoon, that's what you call this, she thought, looking at the palms that lined Highway 867, a white bird that stalked along the shoulder like an angry preacher, and a sign that read SEMINOLE WILDLIFE PARK, BRING A CARFUL FOR \$10. Florida the Sunshine State. Florida the Hospitality State. Not to mention Florida the Second-Honeymoon State. Florida, where Bill Shelton and Carol Shelton, the former Carol O'Neill, of Lynn, Massachusetts, came on their first honeymoon twenty-five years before. Only that was on the other side, the*

*Atlantic side, at a little cabin colony, and there were cockroaches in the bureau drawers. He couldn't stop touching me. That was all right, though, in those days I wanted to be touched. Hell, I wanted to be torched like Atlanta in Gone With the Wind, and he torched me, rebuilt me, torched me again. Now it's silver. Twenty-five is silver. And sometimes I get that feeling.*

They were approaching a curve, and she thought, *Three crosses on the right side of the road. Two small ones flanking a bigger one. The small ones are clapped-together wood. The one in the middle is white birch with a picture on it, a tiny photograph of the seventeen-year-old boy who lost control of his car on this curve one drunk night that was his last drunk night, and this is where his girlfriend and her girlfriends marked the spot—*

Bill drove around the curve. A pair of black crows, plump and shiny, lifted off from something pasted to the macadam in a splat of blood. The birds had eaten so well that Carol wasn't sure they were going to get out of the way until they did. There were no crosses, not on the left, not on the right. Just roadkill in the middle, a woodchuck or something, now passing beneath a luxury car that had never been north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

*Floyd, what's that over there?*

"What's wrong?"

"Huh?" She looked at him, bewildered, feeling a little wild.

"You're sitting bolt-upright. Got a cramp in your back?"

"Just a slight one." She settled back by degrees. "I had that feeling again. The déjà vu."

"Is it gone?"

"Yes," she said, but she was lying. It had retreated a little, but that was all. She'd had this before, but never so *continuously*. It came up and went down, but it didn't go away. She'd been aware of it ever since that thing about Floyd started knocking around in her head—and then the little girl in the red pinafore.

But, really, hadn't she felt something before either of those things? Hadn't it actually started when they came down the steps of the Lear 35 into the hammering heat of the Fort Myers sunshine? Or even before? En route from Boston?

They were coming to an intersection. Overhead was a flashing yellow light, and she thought, *To the right is a used-car lot and a sign for the Sanibel Community Theater.*

Then she thought, *No, it'll be like the crosses that weren't there. It's a strong feeling but a false feeling.*

Here was the intersection. On the right there *was* a used-car lot—Palmdale Motors. Carol felt a real jump at that, a stab of something sharper than disquiet. She told herself to quit being stupid. There had to be car lots all over Florida and if you predicted one at every intersection sooner or later the law of averages made you a prophet. It was a trick mediums had been using for hundreds of years.

*Besides, there's no theater sign.*

But there was another sign. It was Mary the Mother of God, the ghost of all her childhood days, holding out her hands the way she did on the medallion Carol's grandmother had given her for her tenth birthday. Her grandmother had pressed it into her hand and looped the chain around her fingers, saying, "Wear her always as you grow, because all the hard days are coming." She had worn it, all right. At Our Lady of Angels grammar and middle school she had worn it, then at St. Vincent de Paul high. She wore the medal until breasts grew around it like ordinary miracles, and then someplace, probably on the class trip to Hampton Beach, she had lost it. Coming home on the bus she had tongue-kissed for the first time. Butch Soucy had been the boy, and she had been able to taste the cotton candy he'd eaten.

Mary on that long-gone medallion and Mary on this billboard had exactly the same look, the one that made you feel guilty of thinking impure thoughts even when all you were thinking about was a peanut-butter sandwich. Beneath Mary, the sign said MOTHER OF MERCY CHARITIES HELP THE FLORIDA HOMELESS—WON'T YOU HELP US?

*Hey there, Mary, what's the story—*

More than one voice this time; many voices, girls' voices, chanting ghost voices. These were ordinary miracles; there were also ordinary ghosts. You found these things out as you got older.

"What's wrong with you?" She knew that voice as well as she did the eyebrow-and-dimple look. Bill's I'm-only-pretending-to-be-pissed tone of

voice, the one that meant he really *was* pissed, at least a little.

“Nothing.” She gave him the best smile she could manage.

“You really don’t seem like yourself. Maybe you shouldn’t have slept on the plane.”

“You’re probably right,” she said, and not just to be agreeable, either. After all, how many women got a second honeymoon on Captiva Island for their twenty-fifth anniversary? Round trip on a chartered Learjet? Ten days at one of those places where your money was no good (at least until MasterCard coughed up the bill at the end of the month) and if you wanted a massage a big Swedish babe would come and pummel you in your six-room beach house?

\* \* \*

Things had been different at the start. Bill, whom she’d first met at a crosstown high-school dance and then met again at college three years later (another ordinary miracle), had begun their married life working as a janitor, because there were no openings in the computer industry. It was 1973, and computers were essentially going nowhere and they were living in a grotty place in Revere, not on the beach but close to it, and all night people kept going up the stairs to buy drugs from the two sallow creatures who lived in the apartment above them and listened endlessly to dopey records from the sixties. Carol used to lie awake waiting for the shouting to start, thinking, *We won’t ever get out of here, we’ll grow old and die within earshot of Cream and Blue Cheer and the Dodgem cars down on the beach.*

Bill, exhausted at the end of his shift, would sleep through the noise, lying on his side, sometimes with one hand on her hip. And when it wasn’t there she often put it there, especially if the creatures upstairs were arguing with their customers. Bill was all she had. Her parents had practically disowned her when she married him. He was a Catholic, but the wrong sort of Catholic. Gram had asked why she wanted to go with that boy when anyone could tell he was shanty, how could she fall for all his foolish talk, why did she want to break her father’s heart. And what could she say?

It was a long distance from that place in Revere to a private jet soaring at forty-one thousand feet; a long way to this rental car, which was a Crown Victoria—what the goodfellas in the gangster movies invariably called a Crown

Vic—heading for ten days in a place where the tab would probably be . . . well, she didn't even want to think about it.

*Floyd? . . . Oh shit.*

“Carol? What is it now?”

“Nothing,” she said. Up ahead by the road was a little pink bungalow, the porch flanked by palms—seeing those trees with their fringy heads lifted against the blue sky made her think of Japanese Zeros coming in low, their underwing machine guns firing, such an association clearly the result of a youth misspent in front of the TV—and as they passed a black woman would come out. She would be drying her hands on a piece of pink towelling and would watch them expressionlessly as they passed, rich folks in a Crown Vic headed for Captiva, and she'd have no idea that Carol Shelton once lay awake in a ninety-dollar-a-month apartment, listening to the records and the drug deals upstairs, feeling something alive inside her, something that made her think of a cigarette that had fallen down behind the drapes at a party, small and unseen but smoldering away next to the fabric.

“Hon?”

“Nothing, I said.” They passed the house. There was no woman. An old man—white, not black—sat in a rocking chair, watching them pass. There were rimless glasses on his nose and a piece of ragged pink towelling, the same shade as the house, across his lap. “I'm fine now. Just anxious to get there and change into some shorts.”

His hand touched her hip—where he had so often touched her during those first days—and then crept a little farther inland. She thought about stopping him (Roman hands and Russian fingers, they used to say) and didn't. They were, after all, on their second honeymoon. Also, it would make that expression go away.

“Maybe,” he said, “we could take a pause. You know, after the dress comes off and before the shorts go on.”

“I think that's a lovely idea,” she said, and put her hand over his, pressed both more tightly against her. Ahead was a sign that would read PALM HOUSE 3 MI. ON LEFT when they got close enough to see it.

The sign actually read PALM HOUSE 2 MI. ON LEFT. Beyond it was another sign, Mother Mary again, with her hands outstretched and that little electric

shimmy that wasn't quite a halo around her head. This version read MOTHER OF MERCY CHARITIES HELP THE FLORIDA SICK—WON'T YOU HELP US?

Bill said, "The next one ought to say 'Burma Shave.'"

She didn't understand what he meant, but it was clearly a joke and so she smiled. The next one would say "Mother of Mercy Charities Help the Florida Hungry," but she couldn't tell him that. Dear Bill. Dear in spite of his sometimes stupid expressions and his sometimes unclear allusions. *He'll most likely leave you, and you know something? If you go through with it that's probably the best luck you can expect.* This according to her father. Dear Bill, who had proved that just once, just that one crucial time, her judgement had been far better than her father's. She was still married to the man her Gram had called "the big boaster." At a price, true, but what was that old axiom? God says take what you want . . . and pay for it.

Her head itched. She scratched at it absently, watching for the next Mother of Mercy billboard.

Horrible as it was to say, things had started turning around when she lost the baby. That was just before Bill got a job with Beach Computers, out on Route 128; that was when the first winds of change in the industry began to blow.

Lost the baby, had a miscarriage—they all believed that except maybe Bill. Certainly her family had believed it: Dad, Mom, Gram. "Miscarriage" was the story they told, miscarriage was a Catholic's story if ever there was one. *Hey, Mary, what's the story,* they had sometimes sung when they skipped rope, feeling daring, feeling sinful, the skirts of their uniforms flipping up and down over their scabby knees. That was at Our Lady of Angels, where Sister Annunciata would spank your knuckles with her ruler if she caught you gazing out the window during Sentence Time, where Sister Dormatilla would tell you that a million years was but the first tick of eternity's endless clock (and you could spend eternity in Hell, most people did, it was easy). In Hell you would live forever with your skin on fire and your bones roasting. Now she was in Florida, now she was in a Crown Vic sitting next to her husband, whose hand was still in her crotch; the dress would be wrinkled but who cared if it got that look off his face, and why wouldn't the feeling *stop?*

She thought of a mailbox with RAGLAN painted on the side and an American-flag decal on the front, and although the name turned out to be Reagan and the flag a Grateful Dead sticker, the box was there. She thought of a small black dog trotting briskly along the other side of the road, its head down, sniffing, and the small black dog was there. She thought again of the billboard and, yes, there it was: MOTHER OF MERCY CHARITIES HELP THE FLORIDA HUNGRY—WON'T *YOU* HELP *US*?

Bill was pointing. “There—see? I think that’s Palm House. No, not where the billboard is, the other side. Why do they let people put those things up out here, anyway?”

“I don’t know.” Her head itched. She scratched, and black dandruff began falling past her eyes. She looked at her fingers and was horrified to see dark smutches on the tips; it was as if someone had just taken her fingerprints.

“Bill?” She raked her hand through her blond hair and this time the flakes were bigger. She saw they were not flakes of skin but flakes of paper. There was a face on one, peering out of the char like a face peering out of a botched negative.

*“Bill?”*

“What? Wh—” Then a total change in his voice, and that frightened her more than the way the car swerved. “Christ, honey, what’s in your hair?”

The face appeared to be Mother Teresa’s. Or was that just because she’d been thinking about Our Lady of Angels? Carol plucked it from her dress, meaning to show it to Bill, and it crumbled between her fingers before she could. She turned to him and saw that his glasses were melted to his cheeks. One of his eyes had popped from its socket and then split like a grape pumped full of blood.

*And I knew it, she thought. Even before I turned, I knew it. Because I had that feeling.*

A bird was crying in the trees. On the billboard, Mary held out her hands. Carol tried to scream. Tried to scream.

\* \* \*

“Carol?”

It was Bill's voice, coming from a thousand miles away. Then his hand—not pressing the folds of her dress into her crotch, but on her shoulder.

“You okay, babe?”

She opened her eyes to brilliant sunlight and her ears to the steady hum of the Learjet's engines. And something else—pressure against her eardrums. She looked from Bill's mildly concerned face to the dial below the temperature gauge in the cabin and saw that it had wound down to twenty-eight thousand.

“Landing?” she said, sounding muzzy to herself. “Already?”

“It's fast, huh?” Sounding pleased, as if he had flown it himself instead of only paying for it. “Pilot says we'll be on the ground in Fort Myers in twenty minutes. You took a hell of a jump, girl.”

“I had a nightmare.”

He laughed—the plummy ain't-you-the-silly-billy laugh she had come really to detest. “No nightmares allowed on your second honeymoon, babe. What was it?”

“I don't remember,” she said, and it was the truth. There were only fragments: Bill with his glasses melted all over his face, and one of the three or four forbidden skip rhymes they had sometimes chanted back in fifth and sixth grade. This one had gone *Hey there, Mary, what's the story . . .* and then something-something-something. She couldn't come up with the rest. She could remember *Jangle-tangle jingle-bingle, I saw daddy's great big dingle*, but she couldn't remember the one about Mary.

*Mary helps the Florida sick*, she thought, with no idea of what the thought meant, and just then there was a beep as the pilot turned the seat-belt light on. They had started their final descent. *Let the wild rumpus start*, she thought, and tightened her belt.

“You really don't remember?” he asked, tightening his own. The little jet ran through a cloud filled with bumps, one of the pilots in the cockpit made a minor adjustment, and the ride smoothed out again. “Because usually, just after you wake up, you can still remember. Even the bad ones.”

“I remember Sister Annunciata, from Our Lady of Angels. Sentence Time.”

“Now, *that's* a nightmare.”

Ten minutes later the landing gear came down with a whine and a thump. Five minutes after that they landed.

“They were supposed to bring the car right out to the plane,” Bill said, already starting up the Type A shit. This she didn’t like, but at least she didn’t detest it the way she detested the plummy laugh and his repertoire of patronizing looks. “I hope there hasn’t been a hitch.”

*There hasn’t been,* she thought, and the feeling swept over her full force. *I’m going to see it out the window on my side in just a second or two. It’s your total Florida vacation car, a great big white goddam Cadillac, or maybe it’s a Lincoln—*

And, yes, here it came, proving what? Well, she supposed, it proved that sometimes when you had déjà vu what you thought was going to happen next really did. It wasn’t a Caddy or a Lincoln after all, but a Crown Victoria—what the gangsters in a Martin Scorsese film would doubtless call a Crown Vic.

“Whoo,” she said as he helped her down the steps and off the plane. The hot sun made her feel dizzy.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, really. I’ve got déjà vu. Left over from my dream, I guess. We’ve been here before, that kind of thing.”

“It’s being in a strange place, that’s all,” he said, and kissed her cheek. “Come on, let the wild rumpus start.”

They went to the car. Bill showed his driver’s license to the young woman who had driven it out. Carol saw him check out the hem of her skirt, then sign the paper on her clipboard.

*She’s going to drop it,* Carol thought. The feeling was now so strong it was like being on an amusement-park ride that goes just a little too fast; all at once you realize you’re edging out of the Land of Fun and into the Kingdom of Nausea. *She’ll drop it, and Bill will say “Whoopsy-daisy” and pick it up for her, get an even closer look at her legs.*

But the Hertz woman didn’t drop her clipboard. A white courtesy van had appeared, to take her back to the Butler Aviation terminal. She gave Bill a final smile—Carol she had ignored completely—and opened the front passenger door. She stepped up, then slipped. “Whoopsy-daisy, don’t be crazy,” Bill said, and took her elbow, steadying her. She gave him a smile, he gave her well-turned legs a goodbye look, and Carol stood by the growing pile of their luggage and thought, *Hey there, Mary . . .*

“Mrs. Shelton?” It was the co-pilot. He had the last bag, the case with Bill’s laptop inside it, and he looked concerned. “Are you all right? You’re very pale.”

Bill heard and turned away from the departing white van, his face worried. If her strongest feelings about Bill were her only feelings about Bill, now that they were twenty-five years on, she would have left him when she found out about the secretary, a Clairol blonde too young to remember the Clairol slogan that started “If I have only one life to live.” But there were other feelings. There was love, for instance. Still love. A kind that girls in Catholic-school uniforms didn’t suspect, a weedy, unlovely species too tough to die.

Besides, it wasn’t just love that held people together. There were secrets, and the price you paid to keep them.

“Carol?” he asked her. “Babe? All right?”

She thought about telling him no, she wasn’t all right, she was drowning, but then she managed to smile and said, “It’s the heat, that’s all. I feel a little groggy. Get me in the car and crank up the air-conditioning. I’ll be fine.”

Bill took her by the elbow (*Bet you’re not checking out my legs, though, Carol thought. You know where they go, don’t you?*) and led her toward the Crown Vic as if she were a very old lady. By the time the door was closed and cool air was pumping over her face, she actually had started to feel a little better.

*If the feeling comes back, I’ll tell him, Carol thought. I’ll have to. It’s just too strong. Not normal.*

Well, déjà vu was never normal, she supposed—it was something that was part dream, part chemistry, and (she was sure she’d read this, maybe in a doctor’s office somewhere while waiting for her gynecologist to go prospecting up her fifty-two-year-old twat) part the result of an electrical misfire in the brain, causing new experience to be identified as old data. A temporary hole in the pipes, hot water and cold water mingling. She closed her eyes and prayed for it to go away.

*Oh, Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.*

Please (“Oh puh-lease,” they used to say), not back to parochial school. This was supposed to be a vacation, not—

*Floyd, what’s that over there? Oh shit! Oh SHIT!*

Who was Floyd? The only Floyd Bill knew was Floyd Dorning (or maybe it was Darling), the kid he’d run the snack bar with, the one who’d run off to

New York with his girlfriend. Carol couldn't remember when Bill had told her about that kid, but she knew he had.

*Just quit it, girl. There's nothing here for you. Slam the door on the whole train of thought.*

And that worked. There was a final whisper—*what's the story*—and then she was just Carol Shelton, on her way to Captiva Island, on her way to Palm House with her husband the renowned software designer, on their way to the beaches and the rum drinks, and the sound of a steel band playing “Margaritaville.”

\* \* \*

They passed a Publix market. They passed an old black man minding a roadside fruit stand—he made her think of actors from the thirties and movies you saw on the American Movie Channel, an old yassuh-boss type of guy wearing bib overalls and a straw hat with a round crown. Bill made small talk, and she made it right back at him. She was faintly amazed that the little girl who had worn a Mary medallion every day from ten to sixteen had become this woman in the Donna Karan dress—that the desperate couple in that Revere apartment were these middle-aged rich folks rolling down a lush aisle of palms—but she was and they were. Once in those Revere days he had come home drunk and she had hit him and drawn blood from below his eye. Once she had been in fear of Hell, had lain half-drugged in steel stirrups, thinking, *I'm damned, I've come to damnation. A million years, and that's only the first tick of the clock.*

They stopped at the causeway toll-booth and Carol thought, *The toll-taker has a strawberry birthmark on the left side of his forehead, all mixed in with his eyebrow.*

There was no mark—the toll-taker was just an ordinary guy in his late forties or early fifties, iron-gray hair in a buzz cut, horn-rimmed specs, the kind of guy who says, “Y'all have a nahce tahm, okai?”—but the feeling began to come back, and Carol realized that now the things she thought she knew were things she really did know, at first not all of them, but then, by the time they neared the little market on the right side of Route 41, it was almost everything.

*The market's called Corson's and there's a little girl out front, Carol thought. She's wearing a red pinafore. She's got a doll, a dirty old yellow-haired thing, that she's left on the store steps so she can look at a dog in the back of a station wagon.*

The name of the market turned out to be Carson's, not Corson's, but everything else was the same. As the white Crown Vic passed, the little girl in the red dress turned her solemn face in Carol's direction, a country girl's face, although what a girl from the toolies could be doing here in rich folks' tourist country, her and her dirty yellow-headed doll, Carol didn't know.

*Here's where I ask Bill how much farther, only I won't do it. Because I have to break out of this cycle, this groove. I have to.*

"How much farther?" she asked him. *He says there's only one road, we can't get lost. He says he promises me we'll get to the Palm House with no problem. And, by the way, who's Floyd?*

Bill's eyebrow went up. The dimple beside his mouth appeared. "Once you get over the causeway and onto Sanibel Island, there's only one road," he said. Carol barely heard him. He was still talking about the road, her husband who had spent a dirty weekend in bed with his secretary two years ago, risking all they had done and all they had made, Bill doing that with his other face on, being the Bill Carol's mother had warned would break her heart. And later Bill trying to tell her he hadn't been able to help himself, her wanting to scream, *I once murdered a child for you, the potential of a child, anyway. How high is that price? And is this what I get in return? To reach my fifties and find out that my husband had to get into some Clairol girl's pants?*

*Tell him!* she shrieked. *Make him pull over and stop, make him do anything that will break you free—change one thing, change everything! You can do it—if you could put your feet up in those stirrups, you can do anything!*

But she could do nothing, and it all began to tick by faster. The two overfed crows lifted off from their splatter of lunch. Her husband asked why she was sitting that way, was it a cramp, her saying, Yes, yes, a cramp in her back but it was easing. Her mouth quacked on about déjà vu just as if she weren't drowning in it, and the Crown Vic moved forward like one of those sadistic Dodgem cars at Revere Beach. Here came Palmdale Motors on the right. And on the left? Some kind of sign for the local community theater, a production of *Naughty Marietta*.

*No, it's Mary, not Marietta. Mary, mother of Jesus, Mary, mother of God, she's got her hands out . . .*

Carol bent all her will toward telling her husband what was happening, because the right Bill was behind the wheel, the right Bill could still hear her. Being heard was what married love was all about.

Nothing came out. In her mind Gram said, "All the hard days are coming." In her mind a voice asked Floyd what was over there, then said, "Oh shit," then *screamed* "Oh shit!"

She looked at the speedometer and saw it was calibrated not in miles an hour but thousands of feet: they were at twenty-eight thousand and descending. Bill was telling her that she shouldn't have slept on the plane and she was agreeing.

There was a pink house coming up, little more than a bungalow, fringed with palm trees that looked like the ones you saw in the Second World War movies, fronds framing incoming Learjets with their machine guns blazing—

*Blazing. Burning hot. All at once the magazine he's holding turns into a torch. Holy Mary, mother of God, hey there, Mary, what's the story—*

They passed the house. The old man sat on the porch and watched them go by. The lenses of his rimless glasses glinted in the sun. Bill's hand established a beachhead on her hip. He said something about how they might pause to refresh themselves between the doffing of her dress and the donning of her shorts and she agreed, although they were never going to get to Palm House. They were going to go down this road and down this road, they were for the white Crown Vic and the white Crown Vic was for them, forever and ever amen.

The next billboard would say PALM HOUSE 2 MI. Beyond it was the one saying that Mother of Mercy Charities helped the Florida sick. Would they help her?

Now that it was too late she was beginning to understand. Beginning to see the light the way she could see the subtropical sun sparkling off the water on their left. Wondering how many wrongs she had done in her life, how many sins if you liked that word, God knew her parents and her Gram certainly had, sin this and sin that and wear the medallion between those growing things the boys look at. And years later she had lain in bed with her new husband on hot

summer nights, knowing a decision had to be made, knowing the clock was ticking, the cigarette butt was smoldering, and she remembered making the decision, not telling him out loud because about some things you could be silent.

Her head itched. She scratched it. Black flecks came swirling down past her face. On the Crown Vic's instrument panel the speedometer froze at sixteen thousand feet and then blew out, but Bill appeared not to notice.

Here came a mailbox with a Grateful Dead sticker pasted on the front; here came a little black dog with its head down, trotting busily, and God how her head itched, black flakes drifting in the air like fallout and Mother Teresa's face looking out of one of them.

MOTHER OF MERCY CHARITIES HELP THE FLORIDA HUNGRY—WON'T YOU HELP US?

*Floyd. What's that over there? Oh shit.*

She has time to see something big. And to read the word DELTA.

“Bill? *Bill?*”

His reply, clear enough but nevertheless coming from around the rim of the universe: “Christ, honey, what's in your *hair?*”

She plucked the charred remnant of Mother Teresa's face from her lap and held it out to him, the older version of the man she had married, the secretary-fucking man she had married, the man who had nonetheless rescued her from people who thought that you could live forever in paradise if you only lit enough candles and wore the blue blazer and stuck to the approved skipping rhymes. Lying there with this man one hot summer night while the drug deals went on upstairs and Iron Butterfly sang “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida” for the nine billionth time, she had asked what he thought you got, you know, after. When your part in the show was over. He had taken her in his arms and held her, down the beach she had heard the jangle-jingle of the midway and the bang of the Dodgem cars and Bill—

Bill's glasses were melted to his face. One eye bulged out of its socket. His mouth was a bloodhole. In the trees a bird was crying, a bird was *screaming*, and Carol began to scream with it, holding out the charred fragment of paper with Mother Teresa's picture on it, screaming, watching as his cheeks turned black and his forehead swarmed and his neck split open like a poisoned goiter,

screaming, she was screaming, somewhere Iron Butterfly was singing “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida” and she was screaming.

\* \* \*

“Carol?”

It was Bill’s voice, from a thousand miles away. His hand was on her, but it was concern in his touch rather than lust.

She opened her eyes and looked around the sun-brilliant cabin of the Lear 35, and for a moment she understood everything—in the way one understands the tremendous import of a dream upon the first moment of waking. She remembered asking him what he believed you got, you know, *after*, and he had said you probably got what you’d always thought you *would* get, that if Jerry Lee Lewis thought he was going to Hell for playing boogie-woogie, that’s exactly where he’d go. Heaven, Hell, or Grand Rapids, it was your choice—or the choice of those who had taught you what to believe. It was the human mind’s final great parlor-trick: the perception of eternity in the place where you’d always expected to spend it.

“Carol? You okay, babe?” In one hand was the magazine he’d been reading, a *Newsweek* with Mother Teresa on the cover. SAINTHOOD NOW? it said in white.

Looking around wildly at the cabin, she was thinking, *It happens at sixteen thousand feet. I have to tell them, I have to warn them.*

But it was fading, all of it, the way those feelings always did. They went like dreams, or cotton candy turning into a sweet mist just above your tongue.

“Landing? Already?” She felt wide-awake, but her voice sounded thick and muzzy.

“It’s fast, huh?” he said, sounding pleased, as if he’d flown it himself instead of paying for it. “Floyd says we’ll be on the ground in—”

“Who?” she asked. The cabin of the little plane was warm but her fingers were cold. “Who?”

“Floyd. You know, the *pilot*.” He pointed his thumb toward the cockpit’s lefthand seat. They were descending into a scrim of clouds. The plane began to

shake. “He says we’ll be on the ground in Fort Myers in twenty minutes. You took a hell of a jump, girl. And before that you were moaning.”

Carol opened her mouth to say it was that feeling, the one you could only say what it was in French, something *vu* or *vous*, but it was fading and all she said was “I had a nightmare.”

There was a beep as Floyd the pilot switched the seat-belt light on. Carol turned her head. Somewhere below, waiting for them now and forever, was a white car from Hertz, a gangster car, the kind the characters in a Martin Scorsese movie would probably call a Crown Vic. She looked at the cover of the news magazine, at the face of Mother Teresa, and all at once she remembered skipping rope behind Our Lady of Angels, skipping to one of the forbidden rhymes, skipping to the one that went *Hey there, Mary, what’s the story, save my ass from Purgatory*.

*All the hard days are coming*, her Gram had said. She had pressed the medal into Carol’s palm, wrapped the chain around her fingers. *The hard days are coming*.

—

*I think this story is about Hell. A version of it where you are condemned to do the same thing over and over again. Existentialism, baby, what a concept; paging Albert Camus. There’s an idea that Hell is other people. My idea is that it might be repetition.*

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

*It's just down the hall.*

—

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

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

"Mr. Enslin. Good evening."

"Mr. Olin. Is there a problem?"

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

"Mr. Olin?" Mike repeated.

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

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

"Of course, Mr. Olin."

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

“I’m fine with it,” Mike said. “Nothing but a change of clothes and a toothbrush.”

“Are you sure?”

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

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

\* \* \*

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

Mike sat down in front of the desk. He expected Olin to sit behind the desk, but Olin surprised him. He took the chair beside Mike’s, crossed his legs, then leaned forward over his tidy little belly to touch the humidior.

“Cigar, Mr. Enslin?”

“No, thank you. I don’t smoke.”

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

“Haven’t had a one in nine years,” he said. “Had an older brother who died of lung cancer. I quit after he died. The cigarette behind the ear . . .” He shrugged. “Part affectation, part superstition, I guess. Like the Hawaiian shirt. Or the cigarettes you sometimes see on people’s desks or walls, mounted in a

little box with a sign saying BREAK GLASS IN CASE OF EMERGENCY. Is 1408 a smoking room, Mr. Olin? Just in case nuclear war breaks out?”

“As a matter of fact, it is.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you have a point?"

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

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

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

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

But Mr. Olin was not to be diverted from the subject of Mike's last three books—*New York Times* best-sellers, all—just yet. He simply shuffled through them a third time. The mellow lamplight reflected off their shiny covers. There was a lot of purple on the covers. Purple sold scary books better than any other color, Mike had been told.

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

"Like me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mike steeled himself for what would almost certainly come next, Olin’s variation of *What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this*. Olin the urbane hotelier, host to blond women who wore black dresses out into the night, hirer of weedy, retiring men who wore tuxes and tinkled old standards like “Night and Day” in the hotel bar. Olin who probably read Proust on his nights off.

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

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

“I assume you do it for the money,” Olin said mildly. “And you’re feeding a long way from the bottom, at least in my estimation . . . although it’s

interesting that you would jump so nimbly to such a conclusion.”

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

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

That wasn't exactly true, Mike thought. He'd written perhaps two dozen stories he believed in, had actually published a few. He'd written reams of poetry he believed in during his first eighteen months in New York, when he had starved on the payroll of *The Village Voice*. But did he believe that the headless ghost of Eugene Rilsby walked his deserted Kansas farmhouse by moonlight? No. He had spent the night in that farmhouse, camped out on the dirty linoleum hills of the kitchen floor, and had seen nothing scarier than two mice trundling along the baseboard. He had spent a hot summer night in the ruins of the Transylvanian castle where Vlad Tepes supposedly still held court; the only vampires to actually show up had been a fog of European mosquitoes. During the night camped out by the grave of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, a white, blood-streaked figure waving a knife *had* come at him out of the two o'clock darkness, but the giggles of the apparition's friends had given him away, and Mike Enslin hadn't been terribly impressed, anyway; he knew a teenage ghost waving a rubber knife when he saw one. But he had no intention of telling any of this to Olin. He couldn't afford—

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

“No,” he said, “I don't believe in ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggety beasties. I think it's good there are no such things, because I don't believe there's any good Lord that can protect us from them, either. That's what I believe, but I've kept an open mind from the very start. I may never win the

Pulitzer Prize for investigating The Barking Ghost in Mount Hope Cemetery, but I would have written fairly about him if he had shown up.”

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

“I beg pardon?”

“I said no.” Olin looked at him almost apologetically.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Have a drink, Mr. Enslin.”

“No, I really—”

Mr. Olin reached into his coat pocket and brought out a key on a long brass paddle. The brass looked old and scratched and tarnished. Embossed on it were the numbers **1408**. “Please,” Olin said. “Humor me. You give me ten more minutes of your time—long enough to consume a short Scotch—and I’ll hand you this key. I would give almost anything to be able to change your mind, but I like to think I can recognize the inevitable when I see it.”

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*That'll change after my book*, Mike thought, sipping his drink."

"—and there are no ghost-tours with stops at the Hotel Dolphin, although they do tour through the Sherry-Netherland, the Plaza, and the Park Lane. We

have kept 1408 as quiet as possible . . . although, of course, the history has always been there for a researcher who is both lucky and tenacious.”

Mike allowed himself a small smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It makes you a hotel manager.”

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

“Hoping for that bond to withstand the bogies?”

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

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

*“What?”*

“She went blind. Rommie Van Gelder, that was. She was dusting the top of the television, and all at once she began to scream. I asked her what was wrong. She dropped her dustrag and put her hands over her eyes and screamed that she was blind . . . but that she could see the most awful colors. They went away almost as soon as I got her out through the door, and by the time I got her down the hallway to the elevator, her sight had begun to come back.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Except for the French twins.”

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

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

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

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

“I beg your pardon?”

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

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

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

“Yet her sister is fine and well, according to what you said earlier. An American success story, in fact. As you are yourself, Mr. Olin, from the look of

you. Yet you've been in and out of room 1408 how many times? A hundred? Two hundred?"

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

He steepled his fingers beneath his chin.

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

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

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

"Thirty," Olin replied. "Thirty, at least. Thirty that I know of."

"You're lying!" The words were out of his mouth before he could call them back.

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

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

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

Olin looked levelly at Mike Enslin.

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

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

“Coincidence,” Olin repeated softly, not quite contemptuously. He held out the old-fashioned key on its old-fashioned brass paddle. “How is your own heart, Mr. Enslin? Not to mention your blood-pressure and psychological condition?”

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mike Enslin stepped out of the elevator on legs that seemed heavier than they should have. He turned back to Olin, a pudgy little man in a black coat and a carefully knotted wine-colored tie. Olin's manicured hands were clasped behind him now, and Mike saw that the little man's face was as pale as cream. On his high, lineless forehead, drops of perspiration stood out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## II

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

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

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

The little tape recorder was more practical than written notes, too, especially when you were in a chilly New Brunswick graveyard and a squall of rain and wind collapsed your tent at three in the morning. You couldn't take very successful notes in such circumstances, but you *could* talk . . . which was what Mike had done, gone on talking as he struggled out of the wet, flapping canvas of his tent, never losing sight of the minicorder's comforting red eye. Over the years and the “case expeditions,” the Sony minicorder had become his

friend. He had never recorded a first-hand account of a true supernatural event on the filament-thin ribbon of tape running between its reels, and that included the broken comments he made while in 1408, but it was probably not surprising that he had arrived at such feelings of affection for the gadget. Long-haul truckers come to love their Kenworths and Jimmy-Petes; writers treasure a certain pen or battered old typewriter; professional cleaning ladies are loath to give up the old Electrolux. Mike had never had to stand up to an actual ghost or psychokinetic event with only the minicorder—his version of a cross and a bunch of garlic—to protect him, but it had been there on plenty of cold, uncomfortable nights. He was hardheaded, but that didn't make him inhuman.

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

The door was crooked.

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

*Yes, I do. Just a little.*

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

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

He said *The door*, and that's all. If you listen to the tape, you can hear both words clearly, *The door* and then the click of the STOP button. Because the door *wasn't* crooked. It was perfectly straight. Mike turned, looked at the door

of 1409 across the hall, then back at the door of 1408. Both doors were the same, white with gold number-plaques and gold doorknobs. Both perfectly straight.

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

The door was crooked again.

This time it tilted slightly to the right.

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

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

His thoughts broke off as he realized Olin very likely *could* see him. Mike looked back down the corridor toward the elevator, barely noticing that the slightly whoopsy feeling in his stomach left the moment he stopped staring at the door. Above and to the left of the elevators, he saw what he had expected: a closed-circuit camera. One of the house dicks might be looking at it this very moment, and Mike was willing to bet that Olin was right there with him, both of them grinning like apes. *Teach him to come in here and start throwing his weight and his lawyer around, Olin says. Lookit him!* the security man replies, grinning more widely than ever. *White as a ghost himself, and he hasn’t even touched the key to the lock yet. You got him, boss! Got him hook, line, and sinker!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

What Mike had noticed at that point were the pictures on the walls. There were three of them: a lady in twenties-style evening dress standing on a

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

The lady on the stairs tilted left. So did the sailing ship, which showed bell-bottomed British tars lining the rail to watch a school of flying fish. The yellowish-orange fruit—to Mike it looked like a bowl of fruit painted by the light of a suffocating equatorial sun, a Paul Bowles desert sun—tilted to the right. Although he was not ordinarily a fussy man, he circled the room, setting them straight. Looking at them crooked like that was making him feel a touch nauseated again. He wasn't entirely surprised, either. One grew susceptible to the feeling; he had discovered that on the *QE 2*. He had been told that if one persevered through that period of increased susceptibility, one usually adapted . . . “got your sealegs,” some of the old hands still said. Mike hadn't done enough sailing to get his sealegs, nor cared to. These days he stuck with his land legs, and if straightening the three pictures in the unremarkable sitting room of 1408 would settle his midsection, good for him.

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

When the pictures were set to rights, he stepped back and surveyed them in turn: the evening-dressed lady by the door leading into the bedroom, the ship plying one of the seven seas to the left of the writing desk, and finally the nasty (and quite badly painted) fruit by the TV cabinet. Part of him expected that they would be crooked again, or fall crooked as he looked at them—that was the way things happened in movies like *House on Haunted Hill* and in old episodes of *The Twilight Zone*—but the pictures remained perfectly straight, as he had fixed them. Not, he told himself, that he would have found anything

supernatural or paranormal in a return to their former crooked state; in his experience, reversion was the nature of things—people who had given up smoking (he touched the cigarette cocked behind his ear without being aware of it) wanted to go on smoking, and pictures that had been hanging crooked since Nixon was President wanted to go on hanging crooked. *And they've been here a long time, no doubt about that*, Mike thought. *If I lifted them away from the walls, I'd see lighter patches on the wallpaper. Or bugs squirming out, the way they do when you turn over a rock.*

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

Mike raised the minicorder, pushed RECORD, and said: “Olin has certainly started a train of thought in my head. Or a chain of thought, which is it? He set out to give me the heebie-jeebies, and he certainly succeeded. I don't mean . . .” Didn't mean what? To be racist? Was “heebie-jeebies” short for *Hebrew* jeebies? But that was ridiculous. That would be “Hebrew-jeebrews,” a phrase which was meaningless. It—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*(it feels like skin like old dead skin)*

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

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

Mike pushed RECORD, the little red eye came on, he said “Orpheus on the Orpheum Circuit!” into the mike, then pushed STOP again. He approached the bed. The coverlet gleamed yellow-orange. The wallpaper, perhaps cream-colored by daylight, had picked up the yellow-orange glow of the coverlet. There was a little night-table to either side of the bed. On one was a telephone

—black and large and equipped with a dial. The finger-holes in the dial looked like surprised white eyes. On the other table was a dish with a plum on it. Mike pushed RECORD and said: “That isn’t a real plum. That’s a plastic plum.” He pushed STOP again.

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

He closed his eyes and opened them.

The menu was in Russian.

He closed his eyes and opened them.

The menu was in Italian.

Closed his eyes, opened them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The pictures on the living room wall were crooked again, and there were other changes, as well. The lady on the stairs had pulled down the top of her gown, baring her breasts. She held one in each hand. A drop of blood hung from each nipple. She was staring directly into Mike's eyes and grinning ferociously. Her teeth were filed to cannibal points. At the rail of the sailing ship, the tars had been replaced by a line of pallid men and women. The man on the far left, nearest the ship's bow, wore a brown wool suit and held a derby hat in one hand. His hair was slicked to his brow and parted in the middle. His face was shocked and vacant. Mike knew his name: Kevin O'Malley, this room's first occupant, a sewing machine salesman who had jumped from this room in October of 1910. To O'Malley's left were the others who had died here, all with that same vacant, shocked expression. It made them look related, all members of the same inbred and cataclysmically retarded family.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Before him, the room had begun to melt.

It was sagging out of its right angles and straight lines, not into curves but into strange Moorish arcs that hurt his eyes. The glass chandelier in the center of the ceiling began to sag like a thick glob of spit. The pictures began to bend, turning into shapes like the windshields of old cars. From behind the glass of the picture by the door leading into the bedroom, the twenties woman with the bleeding nipples and grinning cannibal-teeth whirled around and ran back up the stairs, going with the jerky delirious high knee-pistoning of a vamp in a silent movie. The telephone continued to grind and spit, the voice coming

from it now the voice of an electric hair-clipper that has learned how to talk: “*Five!* This is *five!* Ignore the siren! Even if you leave this room, you can never leave this room! *Eight!* This is *eight!*”

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

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

CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING.

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

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

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

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

### III

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

Not that Dearborn ever remembered exactly what happened. He constructed a coherent enough story for the newspapers and TV cameras (he liked the idea of being a hero very much, and it certainly did no harm to his executive aspirations), and he clearly remembered seeing the man on fire lunge

out into the hall, but after that everything was a blur. Thinking about it was like trying to reconstruct the things you had done during the vilest, deepest drunk of your life.

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

Dearborn ran down the hall with the full ice-bucket in his hand. The burning man—"It was just his shirt on fire, I saw that right away," he told the reporters—struck the door opposite the room he had come out of, rebounded, staggered, and fell to his knees. That was when Dearborn reached him. He put his foot on the burning shoulder of the screaming man's shirt and pushed him over onto the hall carpet. Then he dumped the contents of the ice-bucket onto him.

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

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

Dearborn looked up, and it seemed—this was crazy, but it seemed the door to the room the man had come out of was filled with the burning light of an Australian sundown, the hot light of an empty place where things no man had

ever seen might live. It was terrible, that light (and the low buzzing, like an electric clipper that was trying desperately to speak), but it was fascinating, too. He wanted to go into it. He wanted to see what was behind it.

Perhaps Mike saved Dearborn's life, as well. He was certainly aware that Dearborn was getting up—as if Mike no longer held any interest for him—and that his face was filled with the blazing, pulsing light coming out of 1408. He remembered this better than Dearborn later did himself, but of course Rufe Dearborn had not been reduced to setting himself on fire in order to survive.

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

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

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

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

## IV

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

The minicorder itself melted around the corners, but it still works, and the tape inside it was fine. It's the things on it which are not fine. After listening to it three or four times, Mike's agent, Sam Farrell, tossed it into his wall-safe, refusing to acknowledge the gooseflesh all over his tanned, scrawny arms. In that wall-safe the tape has stayed ever since. Farrell has no urge to take it out

and play it again, not for himself, not for his curious friends, some of whom would cheerfully kill to hear it; New York publishing is a small community, and word gets around.

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

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

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

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

As for Mike Enslin himself, he got off lucky, all things considered. And he knows it. He could have been burned much more badly than he actually was; if not for Mr. Dearborn and his bucket of ice, he might have had twenty or

even thirty different skin-graft procedures to suffer through instead of only four. His neck is scarred on the left side in spite of the grafts, but the doctors at the Boston Burn Institute tell him the scars will fade on their own. He also knows that the burns, painful as they were in the weeks and months after that night, were necessary. If not for the matches with CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING written on the front, he would have died in 1408, and his end would have been unspeakable. To a coroner it might have looked like a stroke or a heart attack, but the actual cause of death would have been much nastier.

*Much* nastier.

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

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

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

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

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

## Riding the Bullet

*I think I've said almost everything that needs to be said about this story in the Introduction. It's essentially my telling of a tale you can hear in almost any small town. And, like an earlier story of mine ("The Woman in the Room," in Night Shift), it's an attempt to talk about how my own mother's approaching death made me feel. There comes a time in most lives when we must face the deaths of our loved ones as an actual reality . . . and, by proxy, the fact of our own approaching death. This is probably the single great subject of horror fiction: our need to cope with a mystery that can be understood only with the aid of a hopeful imagination.*

—

I've never told anyone this story, and never thought I would—not because I was afraid of being disbelieved, exactly, but because I was ashamed . . . and because it was *mine*. I've always felt that telling it would cheapen both me and the story itself, make it smaller and more mundane, no more than a camp counselor's ghost story told before lights-out. I think I was also afraid that if I told it, heard it with my own ears, I might start to disbelieve it myself. But since my mother died I haven't been able to sleep very well. I doze off and then snap back again, wide-awake and shivering. Leaving the bedside lamp on helps, but not as much as you might think. There are so many more shadows at night, have you ever noticed that? Even with a light on there are so many shadows. The long ones could be the shadows of anything, you think.

Anything at all.

\* \* \*

I was a junior at the University of Maine when Mrs. McCurdy called about Ma. My father died when I was too young to remember him and I was an only

child, so it was just Alan and Jean Parker against the world. Mrs. McCurdy, who lived just up the road, called at the apartment I shared with three other guys. She had gotten the number off the magnetic minder-board Ma kept on her fridge.

“’Twas a stroke,” she said in that long and drawling Yankee accent of hers. “Happened at the restaurant. But don’t you go flyin off all half-cocked. Doctor says it wa’ant too bad. She’s awake and she’s talkin.”

“Yeah, but is she making sense?” I asked. I was trying to sound calm, even amused, but my heart was beating fast and the living room suddenly felt too warm. I had the apartment all to myself; it was Wednesday, and both my roomies had classes all day.

“Oh, ayuh. First thing she said was for me to call you but not to scare you. That’s pretty sensible, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah.” But of course I *was* scared. When someone calls and tells you your mother’s been taken from work to the hospital in an ambulance, how else are you supposed to feel?

“She said for you to stay right there and mind your schoolin until the weekend. She said you could come then, if you didn’t have too much studyin t’do.”

Sure, I thought. Fat chance. I’d just stay here in this ratty, beer-smelling apartment while my mother lay in a hospital bed a hundred miles south, maybe dying.

“She’s still a young woman, your Ma,” Mrs. McCurdy said. “It’s just that she’s let herself get awful heavy these last few years, and she’s got the hypertension. Plus the cigarettes. She’s going to have to give up the smokes.”

I doubted if she would, though, stroke or no stroke, and about that I was right—my mother loved her smokes. I thanked Mrs. McCurdy for calling.

“First thing I did when I got home,” she said. “So when are you coming, Alan? Sad’dy?” There was a sly note in her voice that suggested she knew better.

I looked out the window into a perfect afternoon in October: bright blue New England sky over trees that were shaking down their yellow leaves onto Mill Street. Then I glanced at my watch. Twenty past three. I’d just been on my way out to my four o’clock philosophy seminar when the phone rang.

“You kidding?” I asked. “I’ll be there tonight.”

Her laughter was dry and a little cracked around the edges—Mrs. McCurdy was a great one to talk about giving up the cigarettes, her and her Winstons. “Good boy! You’ll go straight to the hospital, won’t you, then drive out to the house?”

“I guess so, yeah,” I said. I saw no sense in telling Mrs. McCurdy that there was something wrong with the transmission of my old car, and it wasn’t going anywhere but the driveway for the foreseeable future. I’d hitchhike down to Lewiston, then out to our little house in Harlow if it wasn’t too late. If it was, I’d snooze in one of the hospital lounges. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d ridden my thumb home from school. Or slept sitting up with my head leaning against a Coke machine, for that matter.

“I’ll make sure the key’s under the red wheelbarrow,” she said. “You know where I mean, don’t you?”

“Sure.” My mother kept an old red wheelbarrow by the door to the back shed; in the summer it foamed with flowers. Thinking of it for some reason brought Mrs. McCurdy’s news home to me as a true fact: my mother was in the hospital, the little house in Harlow where I’d grown up was going to be dark tonight—there was no one there to turn on the lights after the sun went down. Mrs. McCurdy could say she was young, but when you’re just twenty-one yourself, forty-eight seems ancient.

“Be careful, Alan. Don’t speed.”

My speed, of course, would be up to whoever I hooked a ride with, and I personally hoped that whoever it was would go like hell. As far as I was concerned, I couldn’t get to Central Maine Medical Center fast enough. Still, there was no sense worrying Mrs. McCurdy.

“I won’t. Thanks.”

“Welcome,” she said. “Your Ma’s going to be just fine. And won’t she be some happy to see you.”

I hung up, then scribbled a note saying what had happened and where I was going. I asked Hector Passmore, the more responsible of my roommates, to call my advisor and ask him to tell my instructors what was up so I wouldn’t get whacked for cutting—two or three of my teachers were real bears about that. Then I stuffed a change of clothes into my backpack, added my dog-eared copy of *Introduction to Philosophy*, and headed out. I dropped the course the

following week, although I had been doing quite well in it. The way I looked at the world changed that night, changed quite a lot, and nothing in my philosophy textbook seemed to fit the changes. I came to understand that there are things underneath, you see—*underneath*—and no book can explain what they are. I think that sometimes it's best to just forget those things are there. If you can, that is.

\* \* \*

It's a hundred and twenty miles from the University of Maine in Orono to Lewiston in Androscoggin County, and the quickest way to get there is by I-95. The turnpike isn't such a good road to take if you're hitchhiking, though; the State Police are apt to boot anyone they see off—even if you're just standing on the ramp they give you the boot—and if the same cop catches you twice, he's apt to write you a ticket, as well. So I took Route 68, which winds southwest from Bangor. It's a pretty well-traveled road, and if you don't look like an out-and-out psycho, you can usually do quite well. The cops leave you alone, too, for the most part.

My first lift was with a morose insurance man and took me as far as Newport. I stood at the intersection of Route 68 and Route 2 for about twenty minutes, then got a ride with an elderly gentleman who was on his way to Bowdoinham. He kept grabbing at his crotch as he drove. It was as if he was trying to catch something that was running around in there.

"My wife allus told me I'd wind up in the ditch with a knife in my back if I kept on pickin up hitchhikers," he said, "but when I see a young fella standin t'side of the rud, I allus remember my own younger days. Rode my thumb quite a bit, so I did. Rode the rods, too. And lookit this, her dead four year and me still a-goin, driving this same old Dodge. I miss her somethin turrible." He snatched at his crotch. "Where you headed, son?"

I told him I was going to Lewiston, and why.

"That's turrible," he said. "Your Ma! I'm so sorry!"

His sympathy was so strong and spontaneous that it made the corners of my eyes prickle. I blinked the tears back. The last thing in the world I wanted was to burst out crying in this old man's old car, which rattled and wallowed and smelled quite strongly of pee.

“Mrs. McCurdy—the lady who called me—said it isn’t that serious. My mother’s still young, only forty-eight.”

“Still! A stroke!” He was genuinely dismayed. He snatched at the baggy crotch of his green pants again, yanking with an old man’s oversized, clawlike hand. “A stroke’s allus serious! Son, I’d take you to the CMMC myself—drive you right up to the front door—if I hadn’t promised my brother Ralph I’d take him up to the nursin home in Gates. His wife’s there, she has that forgettin disease, I can’t think what in the world they call it, Anderson’s or Alvarez or somethin like that—”

“Alzheimer’s,” I said.

“Ayuh, prob’ly I’m gettin it myself. Hell, I’m tempted to take you anyway.”

“You don’t need to do that,” I said. “I can get a ride from Gates easy.”

“Still,” he said. “Your mother! A stroke! Only forty-eight!” He grabbed at the baggy crotch of his pants. “Fuckin truss!” he cried, then laughed—the sound was both desperate and amused. “Fuckin rupture! If you stick around, son, all your works start fallin apart. God kicks your ass in the end, let me tell you. But you’re a good boy to just drop everythin and go to her like you’re doin.”

“She’s a good Mom,” I said, and once again I felt the tears bite. I never felt very homesick when I went away to school—a little bit the first week, that was all—but I felt homesick then. There was just me and her, no other close relatives. I couldn’t image life without her. Wasn’t too bad, Mrs. McCurdy had said; a stroke, but not too bad. Damn old lady better be telling the truth, I thought, she just better be.

We rode in silence for a little while. It wasn’t the fast ride I’d hoped for—the old man maintained a steady forty-five miles an hour and sometimes wandered over the white line to sample the other lane—but it was a long ride, and that was really just as good. Highway 68 unrolled before us, turning its way through miles of woods and splitting the little towns that were there and gone in a slow blink, each one with its bar and its self-service gas station: New Sharon, Ophelia, West Ophelia, Ganistan (which had once been *Afghanistan*, strange but true), Mechanic Falls, Castle View, Castle Rock. The bright blue of the sky dimmed as the day drained out of it; the old man turned on first his parking lights and then his headlights. They were the high beams but he didn’t

seem to notice, not even when cars coming the other way flashed their own high beams at him.

“My sister’n-law don’t even remember her own name,” he said. “She don’t know aye, yes, no, nor maybe. That’s what that Anderson’s Disease does to you, son. There’s a look in her eyes . . . like she’s sayin’ ‘Let me *out* of here’ . . . or *would* say it, if she could think of the words. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” I said. I took a deep breath and wondered if the pee I smelled was the old man’s or if he maybe had a dog that rode with him sometimes. I wondered if he’d be offended if I rolled down my window a little. Finally I did. He didn’t seem to notice, any more than he noticed the oncoming cars flashing their highs at him.

Around seven o’clock we breasted a hill in West Gates and my chauffeur cried, “Lookit, son! The moon! Ain’t she a corker?”

She was indeed a corker—a huge orange ball hoisting itself over the horizon. I thought there was nevertheless something terrible about it. It looked both pregnant and infected. Looking at the rising moon, a sudden and awful thought came to me: what if I got to the hospital and my Ma didn’t recognize me? What if her memory was gone, completely shot, and she didn’t know aye, yes, no, nor maybe? What if the doctor told me she’d need someone to take care of her for the rest of her life? That someone would have to be me, of course; there was no one else. Goodbye college. What about that, friends and neighbors?

“Make a wish on it, boyo!” the old man cried. In his excitement his voice grew sharp and unpleasant—it was like having shards of glass stuffed into your ear. He gave his crotch a terrific tug. Something in there made a snapping sound. I didn’t see how you could yank on your crotch like that and not rip your balls right off at the stem, truss or no truss. “Wish you make on the ha’vest moon allus comes true, that’s what my father said!”

So I wished that my mother would know me when I walked into her room, that her eyes would light up at once and she would say my name. I made that wish and immediately wished I could have it back again; I thought that no wish made in that fevery orange light could come to any good.

“Ah, son!” the old man said. “I wish my wife was here! I’d beg forgiveness for every sha’ap and unkind word I ever said to her!”

Twenty minutes later, with the last light of the day still in the air and the moon still hanging low and bloated in the sky, we arrived in Gates Falls. There's a yellow blinker at the intersection of Route 68 and Pleasant Street. Just before he reached it, the old man swerved to the side of the road, bumping the Dodge's right front wheel up over the curb and then back down again. It rattled my teeth. The old man looked at me with a kind of wild, defiant excitement—everything about him was wild, although I hadn't seen that at first; everything about him had that broken-glass feeling. And everything that came out of his mouth seemed to be an exclamation.

"I'll take you up there! I will, yessir! Never mind Ralph! Hell with him! You just say the word!"

I wanted to get to my mother, but the thought of another twenty miles with the smell of piss in the air and cars flashing their brights at us wasn't very pleasant. Neither was the image of the old fellow wandering and weaving across four lanes of Lisbon Street. Mostly, though, it was him. I couldn't stand another twenty miles of crotch-snatching and that excited broken-glass voice.

"Hey, no," I said, "that's okay. You go on and take care of your brother." I opened the door and what I feared happened—he reached out and took hold of my arm with his twisted old man's hand. It was the hand with which he kept tearing at his crotch.

"You just say the word!" he told me. His voice was hoarse, confidential. His fingers were pressing deep into the flesh just below my armpit. "I'll take you right to the hospital door! Ayuh! Don't matter if I never saw you before in my life nor you me! Don't matter aye, yes, no, nor maybe! I'll take you right . . . *there!*"

"It's okay," I repeated, and all at once I was fighting an urge to bolt out of the car, leaving my shirt behind in his grip if that was what it took to get free. It was as if he were drowning. I thought that when I moved, his grip would tighten, that he might even go for the nape of my neck, but he didn't. His fingers loosened, then slipped away entirely as I put my leg out. And I wondered, as we always do when an irrational moment of panic passes, what I had been so afraid of in the first place. He was just an elderly carbon-based life-form in an elderly Dodge's pee-smelling ecosystem, looking disappointed that

his offer had been refused. Just an old man who couldn't get comfortable in his truss. What in God's name had I been afraid of?

"I thank you for the ride and even more for the offer," I said. "But I can go out that way"—I pointed at Pleasant Street—"and I'll have a ride in no time."

He was quiet for a moment, then sighed and nodded. "Ayuh, that's the best way to go," he said. "Stay right out of town, nobody wants to give a fella a ride in town, no one wants to slow down and get honked at."

He was right about that; hitchhiking in town, even a small one like Gates Falls, was futile. I guess he *had* spent some time riding his thumb.

"But son, are you sure? You know what they say about a bird in the hand."

I hesitated again. He was right about a bird in the hand, too. Pleasant Street became Ridge Road a mile or so west of the blinker, and Ridge Road ran through fifteen miles of woods before arriving at Route 196 on the outskirts of Lewiston. It was almost dark, and it's always harder to get a ride at night—when headlights pick you out on a country road, you look like an escapee from Wyndham Boys' Correctional even with your hair combed and your shirt tucked in. But I didn't want to ride with the old man anymore. Even now, when I was safely out of his car, I thought there was something creepy about him—maybe it was just the way his voice seemed full of exclamation points. Besides, I've always been lucky getting rides.

"I'm sure," I said. "And thanks again. Really."

"Anytime, son. Anytime. My wife . . ." He stopped, and I saw there were tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. I thanked him again, then slammed the door shut before he could say anything else.

I hurried across the street, my shadow appearing and disappearing in the light of the blinker. On the far side I turned and looked back. The Dodge was still there, parked beside Frank's Fountain & Fruits. By the light of the blinker and the streetlight twenty feet or so beyond the car, I could see him sitting slumped over the wheel. The thought came to me that he was dead, that I had killed him with my refusal to let him help.

Then a car came around the corner and the driver flashed his high beams at the Dodge. This time the old man dipped his own lights, and that was how I knew he was still alive. A moment later he pulled back into the street and piloted the Dodge slowly around the corner. I watched until he was gone, then

looked up at the moon. It was starting to lose its orange bloat, but there was still something sinister about it. It occurred to me that I had never heard of wishing on the moon before—the evening star, yes, but not the moon. I wished again I could take my own wish back; as the dark drew down and I stood there at the crossroads, it was too easy to think of that story about the monkey’s paw.

\* \* \*

I walked out Pleasant Street, waving my thumb at cars that went by without even slowing. At first there were shops and houses on both sides of the road, then the sidewalk ended and the trees closed in again, silently retaking the land. Each time the road flooded with light, pushing my shadow out ahead of me, I’d turn around, stick out my thumb, and put what I hoped was a reassuring smile on my face. And each time the oncoming car would swoosh by without slowing. Once someone shouted out, “Get a job, monkeymeat!” and there was laughter.

I’m not afraid of the dark—or wasn’t then—but I began to be afraid I’d made a mistake by not taking the old man up on his offer to drive me straight to the hospital. I could have made a sign reading NEED A RIDE, MOTHER SICK before starting out, but I doubted if it would have helped. Any psycho can make a sign, after all.

I walked along, sneakers scuffing the gravelly dirt of the soft shoulder, listening to the sounds of the gathering night: a dog, far away; an owl, much closer; the sigh of a rising wind. The sky was bright with moonlight, but I couldn’t see the moon itself just now—the trees were tall here, and had blotted it out for the time being.

As I left Gates Falls farther behind, fewer cars passed me. My decision not to take the old man up on his offer seemed more foolish with each passing minute. I began to imagine my mother in her hospital bed, mouth turned down in a frozen sneer, losing her grip on life but trying to hold onto that increasingly slippery bark for me, not knowing I wasn’t going to make it simply because I hadn’t liked an old man’s shrill voice, or the pissy smell of his car.

I breasted a steep hill and stepped back into moonlight again at the top. The trees were gone on my right, replaced by a small country graveyard. The stones gleamed in the pale light. Something small and black was crouched beside one of them, watching me. I took a step closer, curious. The black thing moved and became a woodchuck. It spared me a single reproachful red-eyed glance and was gone into the high grass. All at once I became aware that I was very tired, in fact close to exhausted. I had been running on pure adrenaline since Mrs. McCurdy called five hours before, but now that was gone. That was the bad part. The good part was that useless sense of frantic urgency left me, at least for the time being. I had made my choice, decided on Ridge Road instead of Route 68, and there was no sense beating myself up over it—fun is fun and done is done, my mother sometimes said. She was full of stuff like that, little Zen aphorisms that almost made sense. Sense or nonsense, this one comforted me now. If she was dead when I got to the hospital, that was that. Probably she wouldn't be. Doctor said it wasn't too bad, according to Mrs. McCurdy; Mrs. McCurdy had also said she was still a young woman. A bit on the heavy side, true, and a heavy smoker in the bargain, but still young.

Meantime, I was out here in the williwags and I was suddenly tired out—my feet felt as if they had been dipped in cement.

There was a stone wall running along the road side of the cemetery, with a break in it where two ruts ran through. I sat on the wall with my feet planted in one of these ruts. From this position I could see a good length of Ridge Road in both directions. When I saw headlights coming west, in the direction of Lewiston, I could walk back to the edge of the road and put my thumb out. In the meantime I'd just sit here with my backpack in my lap and wait for some strength to come back into my legs.

A groundmist, fine and glowing, was rising out of the grass. The trees surrounding the cemetery on three sides rustled in the rising breeze. From beyond the graveyard came the sound of running water and the occasional plunk-plunk of a frog. The place was beautiful and oddly soothing, like a picture in a book of romantic poems.

I looked both ways along the road. Nothing coming, not so much as a glow on the horizon. Putting my pack down in the wheelrut where I'd been dangling my feet, I got up and walked into the cemetery. A lock of hair had

fallen onto my brow; the wind blew it off. The mist roiled lazily around my shoes. The stones at the back were old; more than a few had fallen over. The ones at the front were much newer. I bent, hands planted on knees, to look at one which was surrounded by almost-fresh flowers. By moonlight the name was easy to read: **GEORGE STAUB**. Below it were the dates marking the brief span of George Staub's life: January 19, 1977, at one end, October 12, 1998, at the other. That explained the flowers which had only begun to wilt; October 12<sup>th</sup> was two days ago and 1998 was just two years ago. George's friends and relatives had stopped by to pay their respects. Below the name and dates was something else, a brief inscription. I leaned down further to read it—

—and stumbled back, terrified and all too aware that I was by myself, visiting a graveyard by moonlight.

### **Fun Is Fun and Done Is Done**

was the inscription.

My mother was dead, had died perhaps at that very minute, and something had sent me a message. Something with a thoroughly unpleasant sense of humor.

I began to back slowly toward the road, listening to the wind in the trees, listening to the stream, listening to the frog, suddenly afraid I might hear another sound, the sound of rubbing earth and tearing roots as something not quite dead reached up, groping for one of my sneakers—

My feet tangled together and I fell down, thumping my elbow on a gravestone, barely missing another with the back of my head. I landed with a grassy thud, looking up at the moon which had just barely cleared the trees. It was white instead of orange now, and as bright as a polished bone.

Instead of panicking me further, the fall cleared my head. I didn't know what I'd seen, but it couldn't have been what I *thought* I'd seen; that kind of stuff might work in John Carpenter and Wes Craven movies, but it wasn't the stuff of real life.

*Yes, okay, good, a voice whispered in my head. And if you just walk out of here now, you can go on believing that. You can go on believing it for the rest of your life.*

“Fuck that,” I said, and got up. The seat of my jeans was wet, and I plucked it away from my skin. It wasn’t exactly easy to reapproach the stone marking George Staub’s final resting-place, but it wasn’t as hard as I’d expected, either. The wind sighed through the trees, still rising, signalling a change in the weather. Shadows danced unsteadily around me. Branches rubbed together, a creaky sound off in the woods. I bent over the tombstone and read:

**GEORGE STAUB**

JANUARY 19, 1977–OCTOBER 12, 1998

*Well Begun, Too Soon Done*

I stood there, leaning down with my hands planted just above my knees, not aware of how fast my heart had been beating until it started to slow down. A nasty little coincidence, that was all, and was it any wonder that I’d misread what was beneath the name and dates? Even without being tired and under stress, I might have read it wrong—moonlight was a notorious misleader. Case closed.

Except I *knew* what I’d read: *Fun Is Fun and Done Is Done*.

My Ma was dead.

“Fuck that,” I repeated, and turned away. As I did, I realized the mist curling through the grass and around my ankles had begun to brighten. I could hear the mutter of an approaching motor. A car was coming.

I hurried back through the opening in the rock wall, snagging my pack on the way by. The lights of the approaching car were halfway up the hill. I stuck out my thumb just as they struck me, momentarily blinding me. I knew the guy was going to stop even before he started slowing down. It’s funny how you can just know sometimes, but anyone who’s spent a lot of time hitchhiking will tell you that it happens.

The car passed me, brakelights flaring, and swerved onto the soft shoulder near the end of the rock wall dividing the graveyard from Ridge Road. I ran to it with my backpack banging against the side of my knee. The car was a Mustang, one of the cool ones from the late sixties or early seventies. The motor rumbled loudly, the fat sound of it coming through a muffler that

maybe wouldn't pass inspection the next time the sticker came due . . . but that wasn't my problem.

I swung the door open and slid inside. As I put my backpack between my feet an odor struck me, something almost familiar and a trifle unpleasant. "Thank you," I said. "Thanks a lot."

The guy behind the wheel was wearing faded jeans and a black tee-shirt with the arms cut off. His skin was tanned, the muscles heavy, and his right bicep was ringed with a blue barbwire tattoo. He was wearing a green John Deere cap turned around backward. There was a button pinned near the round collar of his tee-shirt, but I couldn't read it from my angle. "Not a problem," he said. "You headed up the city?"

"Yes," I said. In this part of the world "up the city" meant Lewiston, the only city of any size north of Portland. As I closed the door, I saw one of those pine-tree air fresheners hanging from the rearview mirror. That was what I'd smelled. It sure wasn't my night as far as odors went; first pee and now artificial pine. Still, it was a ride. I should have been relieved. And as the guy accelerated back onto Ridge Road, the big engine of his vintage Mustang growling, I tried to tell myself I *was* relieved.

"What's going on for you in the city?" the driver asked. I put him at about my age, some townie who maybe went to vocational-technical school in Auburn or maybe worked in one of the few remaining textile mills in the area. He'd probably fixed up this Mustang in his spare time, because that was what townie kids did: drank beer, smoked a little rope, fixed up their cars. Or their motorcycles.

"My brother's getting married. I'm going to be his best man." I told this lie with absolutely no premeditation. I didn't want him to know about my mother, although I didn't know why. Something was wrong here. I didn't know what it was or why I should think such a thing in the first place, but I knew. I was positive. "The rehearsal's tomorrow. Plus a stag party tomorrow night."

"Yeah? That right?" He turned to look at me, wide-set eyes and handsome face, full lips smiling slightly, the eyes unbelieving.

"Yeah," I said.

I was afraid. Just like that I was afraid again. Something was wrong, had maybe started being wrong when the old geezer in the Dodge had invited me

to wish on the infected moon instead of on a star. Or maybe from the moment I'd picked up the telephone and listened to Mrs. McCurdy saying she had some bad news for me, but 'twasn't s'bad as it could've been.

"Well that's good," said the young man in the turned-around cap. "A brother getting married, man, that's good. What's your name?"

I wasn't just afraid, I was terrified. Everything was wrong, *everything*, and I didn't know why or how it could possibly have happened so fast. I did know one thing, however: I wanted the driver of the Mustang to know my name no more than I wanted him to know my business in Lewiston. Not that I'd be getting to Lewiston. I was suddenly sure that I would never see Lewiston again. It was like knowing the car was going to stop. And there was the smell, I knew something about that, as well. It wasn't the air freshener; it was something *beneath* the air freshener.

"Hector," I said, giving him my roommate's name. "Hector Pass-more, that's me." It came out of my dry mouth smooth and calm, and that was good. Something inside me insisted that I must not let the driver of the Mustang know that I sensed something wrong. It was my only chance.

He turned toward me a little, and I could read his button: I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I knew the place; had been there, although not for a long time.

I could also see a heavy black line which circled his throat just as the barbwire tattoo circled his upper arm, only the line around the driver's throat wasn't a tattoo. Dozens of black marks crossed it vertically. They were the stitches put in by whoever had put his head back on his body.

"Nice to meet you, Hector," he said. "I'm George Staub."

My hand seemed to float out like a hand in a dream. I wish that it had been a dream, but it wasn't; it had all the sharp edges of reality. The smell on top was pine. The smell underneath was some chemical, probably formaldehyde. I was riding with a dead man.

\* \* \*

The Mustang rushed along Ridge Road at sixty miles an hour, chasing its high beams under the light of a polished button moon. To either side the trees

crowding the road danced and writhed in the wind. George Staub smiled at me with his empty eyes, then let go of my hand and returned his attention to the road. In high school I'd read *Dracula*, and now a line from it recurred, clanging in my head like a cracked bell: The dead drive fast.

*Can't let him know I know.* This also clanged in my head. It wasn't much, but it was all I had. *Can't let him know, can't let him, can't.* I wondered where the old man was now. Safe at his brother's? Or had the old man been in on it all along? Was he maybe right behind us, driving along in his old Dodge, hunched over the wheel and snapping at his truss? Was he dead, too? Probably not. The dead drive fast, according to Bram Stoker, and the old man had never gone a tick over forty-five. I felt demented laughter bubbling in the back of my throat and held it down. If I laughed he'd know. And he mustn't know, because that was my only hope.

"There's nothing like a wedding," he said.

"Yeah," I said, "everyone should do it at least twice."

My hands had settled on each other and were squeezing. I could feel the nails digging into the backs of them just above the knuckles, but the sensation was distant. I couldn't let him know, that was the thing. The woods were all around us, the only light was the heartless bone-glow of the moon, and I couldn't let him know that I knew he was dead. Because he wasn't a ghost, nothing so harmless. You might *see* a ghost, but what sort of thing stopped to give you a ride? What kind of creature was that? Zombie? Ghoul? Vampire? None of the above?

George Staub laughed. "Do it twice! Yeah, man, that's my whole family!"

"Mine, too," I said. My voice sounded calm, just the voice of a hitchhiker passing the time of day—night, in this case—making agreeable conversation as some small payment for his ride. "There's really nothing like a funeral."

"Wedding," he said mildly. In the light from the dashboard his face was waxy, the face of a corpse before the makeup went on. That turned-around cap was particularly horrible. It made you wonder how much was left beneath it. I had read somewhere that morticians sawed off the top of the skull and took out the brains and put in some sort of chemically treated cotton. To keep the face from falling in, maybe.

“Wedding,” I said through numb lips, and even laughed a little—a light little chuckle. “Wedding’s what I meant to say.”

“We always say what we mean to say, that’s what I think,” the driver said. He was still smiling.

Yes, Freud had believed that, too, I’d read it in Psych 101. I doubted if this fellow knew much about Freud, I didn’t think many Freudian scholars wore sleeveless tee-shirts and baseball caps turned around backward, but he knew enough. Funeral, I’d said. Dear Christ, I’d said funeral. It came to me then that he was playing me. I didn’t want to let him know I knew he was dead. *He* didn’t want to let me know that he knew I knew he was dead. And so I couldn’t let him know that I knew that he knew that . . .

The world began to swing in front of me. In a moment it would begin to spin, then to whirl, and I’d lose it. I closed my eyes for a moment. In the darkness the afterimage of the moon hung, turning green.

“You feeling all right, man?” he asked. The concern in his voice was gruesome.

“Yes,” I said, opening my eyes. Things had steadied again. The pain in the backs of my hands where my nails were digging into the skin was strong and real. And the smell. Not just pine air freshener, not just chemicals. There was a smell of earth, as well.

“You sure?” he asked.

“Just a little tired. Been hitchhiking a long time. And sometimes I get a little carsick.” Inspiration suddenly struck. “You know what, I think you better let me out. If I get a little fresh air, my stomach will settle. Someone else will come along and—”

“I couldn’t do that,” he said. “Leave you out here? No way. It could be an hour before someone came along, and they might not pick you up when they did. I got to take care of you. What’s that song? Get me to the church on time, right? No way I’m letting you out. Crack your window a little, that’ll help. I know it doesn’t smell exactly great in here. I hung up that air freshener, but those things don’t work worth a shit. Of course, some smells are harder to get rid of than others.”

I wanted to reach out for the window-crank and turn it, let in the fresh air, but the muscles in my arm wouldn’t seem to tighten. All I could do was sit

there with my hands locked together, nails biting into the backs of them. One set of muscles wouldn't work; another wouldn't stop working. What a joke.

"It's like that story," he said. "The one about the kid who buys the almost new Cadillac for seven hundred and fifty dollars. You know that story, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said through my numb lips. I didn't know the story, but I knew perfectly well that I didn't want to hear it, didn't want to hear any story this man might have to tell. "That one's famous." Ahead of us the road leaped forward like a road in an old black-and-white movie.

"Yeah, it is, fucking famous. So the kid's looking for a car and he sees an almost brand-new Cadillac on this guy's lawn."

"I said I—"

"Yeah, and there's a sign that says FOR SALE BY OWNER in the window."

There was a cigarette parked behind his ear. He reached for it, and when he did his shirt pulled up in the front. I could see another puckered black line there, more stitches. Then he leaned forward to punch in the cigarette lighter and his shirt dropped back into place.

"Kid knows he can't afford no Cadillac-car, can't get within a *shout* of a Caddy, but he's curious, you know? So he goes over to the guy and says, 'How much does something like that go for?' And the guy, he turns off the hose he's got—cause he's washin the car, you know—and he says, 'Kid, this is your lucky day. Seven hundred and fifty bucks and you drive it away.'"

The cigarette lighter popped out. Staub pulled it free and pressed the coil to the end of his cigarette. He drew in smoke and I saw little tendrils come seeping out between the stitches holding the incision on his neck closed.

"The kid, he looks in through the driver's-side window and sees there's only seventeen thou on the odometer. He says to the guy, 'Yeah, sure, that's as funny as a screen door in a submarine.' The guy says, 'No joke, kid, pony up the cash and it's yours. Hell, I'll even take a check, you got a honest face.' And the kid says . . ."

I looked out the window. I *had* heard the story before, years ago, probably while I was still in junior high. In the version I'd been told the car was a Thunderbird instead of a Caddy, but otherwise everything was the same. The kid says *I may only be seventeen but I'm not an idiot, no one sells a car like this,*

*especially one with low mileage, for only seven hundred and fifty bucks.* And the guy tells him he's doing it because the car smells, you can't get the smell out, he's tried and tried and nothing will take it out. You see he was on a business trip, a fairly long one, gone for at least . . .

“. . . a coupla weeks,” the driver was saying. He was smiling the way people do when they're telling a joke that really slays them. “And when he comes back, he finds the car in the garage and his wife in the car, she's been dead practically the whole time he's been gone. I don't know if it was suicide or a heart attack or what, but she's all bloated up and the car, it's full of that smell and all he wants to do is sell it, you know.” He laughed. “That's quite a story, huh?”

“Why wouldn't he call home?” It was my mouth, talking all by itself. My brain was frozen. “He's gone for two weeks on a business trip and he never calls home once to see how his wife's doing?”

“Well,” the driver said, “that's sorta beside the point, wouldn't you say? I mean hey, what a bargain—*that's* the point. Who wouldn't be tempted? After all, you could always drive the car with the fuckin windows open, right? And it's basically just a story. Fiction. I thought of it because of the smell in *this* car. Which is fact.”

Silence. And I thought: *He's waiting for me to say something, waiting for me to end this.* And I wanted to. I did. Except . . . what then? What would he do then?

He rubbed the ball of his thumb over the button on his shirt, the one reading I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I saw there was dirt under his fingernails. “That's where I was today,” he said. “Thrill Village. I did some work for a guy and he gave me an all-day pass. My girlfriend was gonna go with me, but she called and said she was sick, she gets these periods that really hurt sometimes, they make her sick as a dog. It's too bad, but I always think, hey, what's the alternative? No rag at all, right, and then I'm in trouble, we both are.” He yapped, a humorless bark of sound. “So I went by myself. No sense wasting an all-day pass. You ever been to Thrill Village?”

“Yes,” I said. Once. When I was twelve.

“Who'd you go with?” he asked. “You didn't go alone, did you? Not if you were only twelve.”

I hadn't told him that part, had I? No. He was playing with me, that was all, swatting me idly back and forth. I thought about opening the door and just rolling out into the night, trying to tuck my head into my arms before I hit, only I knew he'd reach over and pull me back before I could get away. And I couldn't raise my arms, anyway. The best I could do was clutch my hands together.

"No," I said. "I went with my dad. My Dad took me."

"Did you ride the Bullet? I rode that fucker four times. Man! It goes right upside down!" He looked at me and uttered another empty bark of laughter. The moonlight swam in his eyes, turning them into white circles, making them into the eyes of a statue. And I understood he was more than dead; he was crazy. "Did you ride that, Alan?"

I thought of telling him he had the wrong name, my name was Hector, but what was the use? We were coming to the end of it now.

"Yeah," I whispered. Not a single light out there except for the moon. The trees rushed by, writhing like spontaneous dancers at a tentshow revival. The road rushed under us. I looked at the speedometer and saw he was up to eighty miles an hour. We were riding the bullet right now, he and I; the dead drive fast. "Yeah, the Bullet. I rode it."

"Nah," he said. He drew on his cigarette, and once again I watched the little trickles of smoke escape from the stitched incision on his neck. "You never. Especially not with your father. You got into the line, all right, but you were with your Ma. The line was long, the line for the Bullet always is, and she didn't want to stand out there in the hot sun. She was fat even then, and the heat bothered her. But you pestered her all day, pestered pestered pestered, and here's the joke of it, man—when you finally got to the head of the line, you chickened. Didn't you?"

I said nothing. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth.

His hand stole out, the skin yellow in the light of the Mustang's dashboard lights, the nails filthy, and gripped my locked hands. The strength went out of them when he did and they fell apart like a knot that magically unties itself at the touch of the magician's wand. His skin was cold and somehow snaky.

*"Didn't you?"*

“Yes,” I said. I couldn’t get my voice much above a whisper. “When we got close and I saw how high it was . . . how it turned over at the top and how they screamed inside when it did . . . I chickened out. She swatted me, and she wouldn’t talk to me all the way home. I never rode the Bullet.” Until now, at least.

“You should have, man. That’s the best one. That’s the one to ride. Nothin else is as good, at least not there. I stopped on the way home and got some beers at that store by the state line. I was gonna stop over my girlfriend’s house, give her the button as a joke.” He tapped the button on his chest, then unrolled his window and flicked his cigarette out into the windy night. “Only you probably know what happened.”

Of course I knew. It was every ghost story you’d ever heard, wasn’t it? He crashed his Mustang and when the cops got there he’d been sitting dead in the crumpled remains with his body behind the wheel and his head in the backseat, his cap turned around backward and his dead eyes staring up at the roof and ever since you see him on Ridge Road when the moon is full and the wind is high, *wheee-oooo*, we will return after this brief word from our sponsor. I know something now that I didn’t before—the worst stories are the ones you’ve heard your whole life. Those are the real nightmares.

“Nothing like a funeral,” he said, and laughed. “Isn’t that what you said? You slipped there, Al. No doubt about it. Slipped, tripped, and fell.”

“Let me out,” I whispered. “Please.”

“Well,” he said, turning toward me, “we have to talk about that, don’t we? Do you know who I am, Alan?”

“You’re a ghost,” I said.

He gave an impatient little snort, and in the glow of the speedometer the corners of his mouth turned down. “Come on, man, you can do better than that. Fuckin *Casper*’s a ghost. Do I float in the air? Can you see through me?” He held up one of his hands, opened and closed it in front of me. I could hear the dry, unlubricated sound of his tendons creaking.

I tried to say something. I don’t know what, and it doesn’t really matter, because nothing came out.

“I’m a kind of messenger,” Staub said. “Fuckin FedEx from beyond the grave, you like that? Guys like me actually come out pretty often—whenever

the circumstances are just right. You know what I think? I think that whoever runs things—God or whatever—must like to be entertained. He always wants to see if you'll keep what you already got or if he can talk you into goin for what's behind the curtain. Things have to be just right, though. Tonight they were. You out all by yourself . . . mother sick . . . needin a ride . . .”

“If I'd stayed with the old man, none of this would have happened,” I said. “Would it?” I could smell Staub clearly now, the needle-sharp smell of the chemicals and the duller, blunter stink of decaying meat, and wondered how I ever could have missed it, or mistaken it for something else.

“Hard to say,” Staub replied. “Maybe this old man you're talking about was dead, too.”

I thought of the old man's shrill handful-of-glass voice, the snap of his truss. No, he hadn't been dead, and I had traded the smell of piss in his old Dodge for something a lot worse.

“Anyway, man, we don't have time to talk about all that. Five more miles and we'll start seeing houses again. Seven more and we're at the Lewiston city line. Which means you have to decide now.”

“Decide what?” Only I thought I knew.

“Who rides the Bullet and who stays on the ground. You or your mother.” He turned and looked at me with his drowning moonlight eyes. He smiled more fully and I saw most of his teeth were gone, knocked out in the crash. He patted the steering wheel. “I'm taking one of you with me, man. And since you're here, you get to choose. What do you say?”

*You can't be serious* rose to my lips, but what would be the point of saying that, or anything like it? Of course he was serious. Dead serious.

I thought of all the years she and I had spent together, Alan and Jean Parker against the world. A lot of good times and more than a few really bad ones. Patches on my pants and casserole suppers. Most of the other kids took a quarter a week to buy the hot lunch; I always got a peanut-butter sandwich or a piece of bologna rolled up in day-old bread, like a kid in one of those dopey rags-to-riches stories. Her working in God knew how many different restaurants and cocktail lounges to support us. The time she took the day off work to talk to the ADC man, her dressed in her best pants suit, him sitting in our kitchen rocker in a suit of his own, one even a nine-year-old kid like me

could tell was a lot better than hers, with a clipboard in his lap and a fat, shiny pen in his fingers. Her answering the insulting, embarrassing questions he asked with a fixed smile on her mouth, even offering him more coffee, because if he turned in the right report she'd get an extra fifty dollars a month, a lousy fifty bucks. Lying on her bed after he'd gone, crying, and when I came in to sit beside her she had tried to smile and said ADC didn't stand for Aid to Dependent Children but Awful Damn Crapheads. I had laughed and then she laughed, too, because you had to laugh, we'd found that out. When it was just you and your fat chain-smoking Ma against the world, laughing was quite often the only way you could get through without going insane and beating your fists on the walls. But there was more to it than that, you know. For people like us, little people who went scurrying through the world like mice in a cartoon, sometimes laughing at the assholes was the only revenge you could ever get. Her working all those jobs and taking the overtime and taping her ankles when they swelled and putting her tips away in a jar marked ALAN'S COLLEGE FUND—just like one of those dopey rags-to-riches stories, yeah, yeah—and telling me again and again that I had to work hard, other kids could maybe afford to play Freddy Fuckaround at school but I couldn't because she could put away her tips until doomsday cracked and there still wouldn't be enough; in the end it was going to come down to scholarships and loans if I was going to go to college and I *had* to go to college because it was the only way out for me . . . and for her. So I had worked hard, you want to believe I did, because I wasn't blind—I saw how heavy she was, I saw how much she smoked (it was her only private pleasure . . . her only vice, if you're one of those who must take that view), and I knew that someday our positions would reverse and I'd be the one taking care of her. With a college education and a good job, maybe I could do that. I *wanted* to do that. I loved her. She had a fierce temper and an ugly mouth on her—that day we waited for the Bullet and then I chickened out wasn't the only time she ever yelled at me and then swatted me—but I loved her in spite of it. Partly even *because* of it. I loved her when she hit me as much as when she kissed me. Do you understand that? Me either. And that's all right. I don't think you can sum up lives or explain families, and we *were* a family, she and I, the smallest family there is, a shared secret. If you had asked, I would have said I'd do anything for her. And now

that was exactly what I was being asked to do. I was being asked to die for her, to die in her place, even though she had lived half her life, probably a lot more. I had hardly begun mine.

“What say, Al?” George Staub asked. “Time’s wasting.”

“I can’t decide something like that,” I said hoarsely. The moon sailed above the road, swift and brilliant. “It’s not fair to ask me.”

“I know, and believe me, that’s what they all say.” Then he lowered his voice. “But I gotta tell you something—if you don’t decide by the time we get back to the first house-lights, I’ll have to take you both.” He frowned, then brightened again, as if remembering there was good news as well as bad. “You could ride together in the backseat if I took you both, talk over old times, there’s that.”

“Ride to where?”

He didn’t reply. Perhaps he didn’t know.

The trees blurred by like black ink. The headlights rushed and the road rolled. I was twenty-one. I wasn’t a virgin but I’d only been with a girl once and I’d been drunk and couldn’t remember much of what it had been like. There were a thousand places I wanted to go—Los Angeles, Tahiti, maybe Luckenbach, Texas—and a thousand things I wanted to do. My mother was forty-eight and that was *old*, goddammit. Mrs. McCurdy wouldn’t say so but Mrs. McCurdy was old herself. My mother had done right by me, worked all those long hours and taken care of me, but had I chosen her life for her? Asked to be born and then demanded that she live for me? She was forty-eight. I was twenty-one. I had, as they said, my whole life before me. But was that the way you judged? How did you decide a thing like this? How *could* you decide a thing like this?

The woods bolting by. The moon looking down like a bright and deadly eye.

“Better hurry up, man,” George Staub said. “We’re running out of wilderness.”

I opened my mouth and tried to speak. Nothing came out but an arid sigh.

“Here, got just the thing,” he said, and reached behind him. His shirt pulled up again and I got another look (I could have done without it) at the stitched black line on his belly. Were there still guts behind that line or just

packing soaked in chemicals? When he brought his hand back, he had a can of beer in it—one of those he'd bought at the state line store on his last ride, presumably.

"I know how it is," he said. "Stress gets you dry in the mouth. Here."

He handed me the can. I took it, pulled the ringtab, and drank deeply. The taste of the beer going down was cold and bitter. I've never had a beer since. I just can't drink it. I can barely stand to watch the commercials on TV.

Ahead of us in the blowing dark, a yellow light glimmered.

"Hurry up, Al—got to speed it up. That's the first house, right up at the top of this hill. If you got something to say to me, you better say it now."

The light disappeared, then came back again, only now it was several lights. They were windows. Behind them were ordinary people doing ordinary things—watching TV, feeding the cat, maybe beating off in the bathroom.

I thought of us standing in line at Thrill Village, Jean and Alan Parker, a big woman with dark patches of sweat around the armpits of her sundress, and her little boy. She hadn't wanted to stand in that line, Staub was right about that . . . but I had pestered pestered pestered. He had been right about that, too. She had swatted me, but she had stood in line with me, too. She had stood with me in a lot of lines, and I could go over all of it again, all the arguments pro and con, but there was no time.

"Take her," I said as the lights of the first house swept toward the Mustang. My voice was hoarse and raw and loud. "Take her, take my Ma, don't take me."

I threw the can of beer down on the floor of the car and put my hands up to my face. He touched me then, touched the front of my shirt, his fingers fumbling, and I thought—with sudden brilliant clarity—that it had all been a test. I had failed and now he was going to rip my beating heart right out of my chest, like an evil *djinn* in one of those cruel Arabian fairy-tales. I screamed. Then his fingers let go—it was as if he'd changed his mind at the last second—and he reached past me. For one moment my nose and lungs were so full of his deathly smell that I felt positive I was dead myself. Then there was the click of the door opening and cold fresh air came streaming in, washing the death-smell away.

"Pleasant dreams, Al," he grunted in my ear and then pushed. I went rolling out into the windy October darkness with my eyes closed and my hands raised

and my body tensed for the bone-breaking smashdown. I might have been screaming, I don't remember for sure.

The smashdown didn't come and after an endless moment I realized I was already down—I could feel the ground under me. I opened my eyes, then squeezed them shut almost at once. The glare of the moon was blinding. It sent a bolt of pain through my head, one that settled not behind my eyes, where you usually feel pain after staring into an unexpectedly bright light, but in the back, way down low just above the nape of my neck. I became aware that my legs and bottom were cold and wet. I didn't care. I was on the ground, and that was all I cared about.

I pushed up on my elbows and opened my eyes again, more cautiously this time. I think I already knew where I was, and one look around was enough to confirm it: lying on my back in the little graveyard at the top of the hill on Ridge Road. The moon was almost directly overhead now, fiercely bright but much smaller than it had been only a few moments before. The mist was deeper as well, lying over the cemetery like a blanket. A few markers poked up through it like stone islands. I tried getting to my feet and another bolt of pain went through the back of my head. I put my hand there and felt a lump. There was sticky wetness, as well. I looked at my hand. In the moonlight, the blood streaked across my palm looked black.

On my second try I succeeded in getting up, and stood there swaying among the tombstones, knee-deep in mist. I turned around, saw the break in the rock wall and Ridge Road beyond it. I couldn't see my pack because the mist had overlaid it, but I knew it was there. If I walked out to the road in the lefthand wheelrut of the lane, I'd find it. Hell, would likely stumble over it.

So here was my story, all neatly packaged and tied up with a bow: I had stopped for a rest at the top of this hill, had gone inside the cemetery to have a little look around, and while backing away from the grave of one George Staub had tripped over my own large and stupid feet. Fell down, banged my head on a marker. How long had I been unconscious? I wasn't savvy enough to tell time by the changing position of the moon with to-the-minute accuracy, but it had to be at least an hour. Long enough to have a dream that I'd gotten a ride with a dead man. What dead man? George Staub, of course, the name I'd read on a grave-marker just before the lights went out. It was the classic ending, wasn't it?

Gosh-What-An-Awful-Dream-I-Had. And when I got to Lewiston and found my mother had died? Just a little touch of precognition in the night, put it down to that. It was the sort of story you might tell years later, near the end of a party, and people would nod their heads thoughtfully and look solemn and some dinkleberry with leather patches on the elbows of his tweed jacket would say there were more things in Heaven and earth than were dreamed of in our philosophy and then—

“Then shit,” I croaked. The top of the mist was moving slowly, like mist on a clouded mirror. “I’m never talking about this. Never, not in my whole life, not even on my deathbed.”

But it had all happened just the way I remembered it, of that I was sure. George Staub had come along and picked me up in his Mustang, Ichabod Crane’s old pal with his head stitched on instead of under his arm, demanding that I choose. And I *had* chosen—faced with the oncoming lights of the first house, I had bartered away my mother’s life with hardly a pause. It might be understandable, but that didn’t make the guilt of it any less. No one had to know, however; that was the good part. Her death would look natural—hell, would *be* natural—and that’s the way I intended to leave it.

I walked out of the graveyard in the lefthand rut, and when my foot struck my pack, I picked it up and slung it back over my shoulders. Lights appeared at the bottom of the hill as if someone had given them the cue. I stuck out my thumb, oddly sure it was the old man in the Dodge—he’d come back this way looking for me, of course he had, it gave the story that final finishing roundness.

Only it wasn’t the old guy. It was a tobacco-chewing farmer in a Ford pickup truck filled with apple-baskets, a perfectly ordinary fellow: not old and not dead.

“Where you goin, son?” he asked, and when I told him he said, “That works for both of us.” Less than forty minutes later, at twenty minutes after nine, he pulled up in front of the Central Maine Medical Center. “Good luck. Hope your Ma’s on the mend.”

“Thank you,” I said, and opened the door.

“I see you been pretty nervous about it, but she’ll most likely be fine. Ought to get some disinfectant on those, though.” He pointed at my hands.

I looked down at them and saw the deep, purpling crescents on the backs. I remembered clutching them together, digging in with my nails, feeling it but unable to stop. And I remembered Staub's eyes, filled up with moonlight like radiant water. *Did you ride the Bullet?* he'd asked me. *I rode that fucker four times.*

"Son?" the man driving the pickup asked. "You all right?"

"Huh?"

"You come over all shivery."

"I'm okay," I said. "Thanks again." I slammed the door of the pickup and went up the wide walk past the line of parked wheelchairs gleaming in the moonlight.

I walked to the information desk, reminding myself that I had to look surprised when they told me she was dead, had to look surprised, they'd think it was funny if I didn't . . . or maybe they'd just think I was in shock . . . or that we didn't get along . . . or . . .

I was so deep in these thoughts that I didn't at first grasp what the woman behind the desk had told me. I had to ask her to repeat it.

"I said that she's in room 487, but you can't go up just now. Visiting hours end at nine."

"But . . ." I felt suddenly woozy. I gripped the edge of the desk. The lobby was lit by fluorescents, and in that bright even glare the cuts on the backs of my hands stood out boldly—eight small purple crescents like grins, just above the knuckles. The man in the pickup was right. I ought to get some disinfectant on those.

The woman behind the desk was looking at me patiently. The plaque in front of her said she was YVONNE EDERLE.

"But is she all right?"

She looked at her computer. "What I have here is S. Stands for satisfactory. And four is a general-population floor. If your mother had taken a turn for the worse, she'd be in ICU. That's on three. I'm sure if you come back tomorrow, you'll find her just fine. Visiting hours begin at—"

"She's my Ma," I said. "I hitchhiked all the way down from the University of Maine to see her. Don't you think I could go up, just for a few minutes?"

“Exceptions are sometimes made for immediate family,” she said, and gave me a smile. “You just hang on a second. Let me see what I can do.” She picked up the phone and punched a couple of buttons, no doubt calling the nurses’ station on the fourth floor, and I could see the course of the next two minutes as if I really *did* have second sight. Yvonne the Information Lady would ask if the son of Jean Parker in 487 could come up for a minute or two—just long enough to give his mother a kiss and an encouraging word—and the nurse would say oh God, Mrs. Parker died not fifteen minutes ago, we just sent her down to the morgue, we haven’t had a chance to update the computer, this is so terrible.

The woman at the desk said, “Muriel? It’s Yvonne. I have a young man down here at the desk, his name is”—she looked at me, eyebrows raised, and I gave her my name—“Alan Parker. His mother is Jean Parker, in 487? He wonders if he could just . . .”

She stopped. Listened. On the other end the nurse on the fourth floor was no doubt telling her that Jean Parker was dead.

“All right,” Yvonne said. “Yes, I understand.” She sat quietly for a moment, looking off into space, then put the mouthpiece of the telephone against her shoulder and said, “She’s sending Anne Corrigan down to peek in on her. It will only be a second.”

“It never ends,” I said.

Yvonne frowned. “I beg pardon?”

“Nothing,” I said. “It’s been a long night and—”

“—and you’re worried about your mom. Of course. I think you’re a very good son to drop everything the way you did and come on the run.”

I suspected Yvonne Ederle’s opinion of me would have taken a drastic drop if she’d heard my conversation with the young man behind the wheel of the Mustang, but of course she hadn’t. That was a little secret, just between George and me.

It seemed that hours passed as I stood there under the bright fluorescents, waiting for the nurse on the fourth floor to come back on the line. Yvonne had some papers in front of her. She trailed her pen down one of them, putting neat little checkmarks beside some of the names, and it occurred to me that if there really was an Angel of Death, he or she was probably just like this

woman, a slightly overworked functionary with a desk, a computer, and too much paperwork. Yvonne kept the phone pinched between her ear and one raised shoulder. The loudspeaker said that Dr. Farquhar was wanted in radiology, Dr. Farquhar. On the fourth floor a nurse named Anne Corrigan would now be looking at my mother, lying dead in her bed with her eyes open, the stroke-induced sneer of her mouth finally relaxing.

Yvonne straightened as a voice came back on the line. She listened, then said: "All right, yes, I understand. I will. Of course I will. Thank you, Muriel." She hung up the telephone and looked at me solemnly. "Muriel says you can come up, but you can only visit for five minutes. Your mother's had her evening meds, and she's very soupy."

I stood there, gaping at her.

Her smile faded a little bit. "Are you sure you're all right, Mr. Parker?"

"Yes," I said. "I guess I just thought—"

Her smile came back. It was sympathetic this time. "Lots of people think that," she said. "It's understandable. You get a call out of the blue, you rush to get here . . . it's understandable to think the worst. But Muriel wouldn't let you up on her floor if your mother wasn't fine. Trust me on that."

"Thanks," I said. "Thank you so much."

As I started to turn away, she said: "Mr. Parker? If you came from the University of Maine up north, may I ask why you're wearing that button? Thrill Village is in New Hampshire, isn't it?"

I looked down at the front of my shirt and saw the button pinned to the breast pocket: I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I remembered thinking he intended to rip my heart out. Now I understood: he had pinned his button on my shirt just before pushing me into the night. It was his way of marking me, of making our encounter impossible not to believe. The cuts on the backs of my hands said so; the button on my shirt said so, too. He had asked me to choose and I had chosen.

So how could my mother still be alive?

"This?" I touched it with the ball of my thumb, even polished it a little. "It's my good-luck charm." The lie was so horrible that it had a kind of splendor. "I got it when I was there with my mother, a long time ago. She took me on the Bullet."

Yvonne the Information Lady smiled as if this were the sweetest thing she had ever heard. "Give her a nice hug and kiss," she said. "Seeing you will send her off to sleep better than any of the pills the doctors have." She pointed. "The elevators are over there, around the corner."

With visiting hours over, I was the only one waiting for a car. There was a litter-basket off to the left, by the door to the newsstand, which was closed and dark. I tore the button off my shirt and threw it in the basket. Then I rubbed my hand on my pants. I was still rubbing it when one of the elevator doors opened. I got in and pushed for four. The car began to rise. Above the floor-buttons was a poster announcing a blood drive for the following week. As I read it, an idea came to me . . . except it wasn't so much an idea as a certainty. My mother was dying now, at this very second, while I rode up to her floor in this slow industrial elevator. I had made the choice; it therefore fell to me to find her. It made perfect sense.

\* \* \*

The elevator door opened on another poster. This one showed a cartoon finger pressed to big red cartoon lips. Beneath it was a line reading OUR PATIENTS APPRECIATE YOUR QUIET! Beyond the elevator lobby was a corridor going right and left. The odd-numbered rooms were to the left. I walked down that way, my sneakers seeming to gain weight with every step. I slowed in the four-seventies, then stopped entirely between 481 and 483. I couldn't do this. Sweat as cold and sticky as half-frozen syrup crept out of my hair in little trickles. My stomach was knotted up like a fist inside a slick glove. No, I couldn't do it. Best to turn around and skedaddle like the cowardly chicken-shit I was. I'd hitchhike out to Harlow and call Mrs. McCurdy in the morning. Things would be easier to face in the morning.

I started to turn, and then a nurse poked her head out of the room two doors up . . . my mother's room. "Mr. Parker?" she asked in a low voice.

For a wild moment I almost denied it. Then I nodded.

"Come in. Hurry. She's going."

They were the words I'd expected, but they still sent a cramp of terror through me and buckled my knees.

The nurse saw this and came hurrying toward me, her skirt rustling, her face alarmed. The little gold pin on her breast read ANNE CORRIGAN. “No, no, I just meant the *sedative* . . . she’s going to sleep. Oh my God, I’m so stupid. She’s fine, Mr. Parker, I gave her her Ambien and she’s going to sleep, that’s all I meant. You aren’t going to faint, are you?” She took my arm.

“No,” I said, not knowing if I was going to faint or not. The world was swooping and there was a buzzing in my ears. I thought of how the road had leaped toward the car, a black-and-white movie road in all that silver moonlight. *Did you ride the Bullet? Man, I rode that fucker four times.*

Anne Corrigan led me into the room and I saw my mother. She had always been a big woman, and the hospital bed was small and narrow, but she still looked almost lost in it. Her hair, now more gray than black, was spilled across the pillow. Her hands lay on top of the sheet like a child’s hands, or even a doll’s. There was no frozen stroke-sneer such as the one I’d imagined on her face, but her complexion was yellow. Her eyes were closed, but when the nurse beside me murmured her name, they opened. They were a deep and iridescent blue, the youngest part of her, and perfectly alive. For a moment they looked nowhere, and then they found me. She smiled and tried to hold out her arms. One of them came up. The other trembled, rose a little bit, then fell back. “Al,” she whispered.

I went to her, starting to cry. There was a chair by the wall, but I didn’t bother with it. I knelt on the floor and put my arms around her. She smelled warm and clean. I kissed her temple, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. She raised her good hand and patted her fingers under one of my eyes.

“Don’t cry,” she whispered. “No need of that.”

“I came as soon as I heard,” I said. “Betsy McCurdy called.”

“Told her . . . weekend,” she said. “Said the weekend would be fine.”

“Yeah, and to hell with that,” I said, and hugged her.

“Car . . . fixed?”

“No,” I said. “I hitchhiked.”

“Oh gorry,” she said. Each word was clearly an effort for her, but they weren’t slurred, and I sensed no bewilderment or disorientation. She knew who she was, who I was, where we were, why we were here. The only sign of anything wrong was her weak left arm. I felt an enormous sense of relief. It had

all been a cruel practical joke on Staub's part . . . or perhaps there had been no Staub, perhaps it had all been a dream after all, corny as that might be. Now that I was here, kneeling by her bed with my arms around her, smelling a faint remnant of her Lanvin perfume, the dream idea seemed a lot more plausible.

"Al? There's blood on your collar." Her eyes rolled closed, then came slowly open again. I imagined her lids must feel as heavy to her as my sneakers had to me, out in the hall.

"I bumped my head, Ma, it's nothing."

"Good. Have to . . . take care of yourself." The lids came down again; rose even more slowly.

"Mr. Parker, I think we'd better let her sleep now," the nurse said from behind me. "She's had an extremely difficult day."

"I know." I kissed her on the corner of the mouth again. "I'm going, Ma, but I'll be back tomorrow."

"Don't . . . hitchhike . . . dangerous."

"I won't. I'll catch a ride in with Mrs. McCurdy. You get some sleep."

"Sleep . . . all I do," she said. "I was at work, unloading the dishwasher. I came over all headachy. Fell down. Woke up . . . here." She looked up at me. "Was a stroke. Doctor says . . . not too bad."

"You're fine," I said. I got up, then took her hand. The skin was fine, as smooth as watered silk. An old person's hand.

"I dreamed we were at that amusement park in New Hampshire," she said. I looked down at her, feeling my skin go cold all over. "Did you?"

"Ayuh. Waiting in line for the one that goes . . . way up high. Do you remember that one?"

"The Bullet," I said. "I remember it, Ma."

"You were afraid and I shouted. Shouted at you."

"No, Ma, you—"

Her hand squeezed down on mine and the corners of her mouth deepened into near-dimples. It was a ghost of her old impatient expression.

"Yes," she said. "Shouted and swatted you. Back . . . of the neck, wasn't it?"

"Probably, yeah," I said, giving up. "That's mostly where you gave it to me."

"Shouldn't have," she said. "It was hot and I was tired, but still . . . shouldn't have. Wanted to tell you I was sorry."

My eyes started leaking again. “It’s all right, Ma. That was a long time ago.”

“You never got your ride,” she whispered.

“I did, though,” I said. “In the end I did.”

She smiled up at me. She looked small and weak, miles from the angry, sweaty, muscular woman who had yelled at me when we finally got to the head of the line, yelled and then whacked me across the nape of the neck. She must have seen something on someone’s face—one of the other people waiting to ride the Bullet—because I remember her saying *What are you looking at, beautiful?* as she led me away by the hand, me snivelling under the hot summer sun, rubbing the back of my neck . . . only it didn’t really hurt, she hadn’t swatted me *that* hard; mostly what I remember was being grateful to get away from that high, twirling construction with the capsules at either end, that revolving scream machine.

“Mr. Parker, it really is time to go,” the nurse said.

I raised my mother’s hand and kissed the knuckles. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said. “I love you, Ma.”

“Love you, too. Alan . . . sorry for all the times I swatted you. That was no way to be.”

But it had been; it had been *her* way to be. I didn’t know how to tell her I knew that, accepted it. It was part of our family secret, something whispered along the nerve-endings.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Ma. Okay?”

She didn’t answer. Her eyes had rolled shut again, and this time the lids didn’t come back up. Her chest rose and fell slowly and regularly. I backed away from the bed, never taking my eyes off her.

In the hall I said to the nurse, “Is she going to be all right? Really all right?”

“No one can say that for sure, Mr. Parker. She’s Dr. Nunnally’s patient. He’s very good. He’ll be on the floor tomorrow afternoon and you can ask him—”

“Tell me what *you* think.”

“I think she’s going to be fine,” the nurse said, leading me back down the hall toward the elevator lobby. “Her vital signs are strong, and all the residual effects suggest a very light stroke.” She frowned a little. “She’s going to have to make some changes, of course. In her diet . . . her lifestyle . . .”

“Her smoking, you mean.”

“Oh yes. That has to go.” She said it as if my mother quitting her lifetime habit would be no more difficult than moving a vase from a table in the living room to one in the hall. I pushed the button for the elevators, and the door of the car I’d ridden up in opened at once. Things clearly slowed down a lot at CMMC once visiting hours were over.

“Thanks for everything,” I said.

“Not at all. I’m sorry I scared you. What I said was incredibly stupid.”

“Not at all,” I said, although I agreed with her. “Don’t mention it.”

I got into the elevator and pushed for the lobby. The nurse raised her hand and twiddled her fingers. I twiddled my own in return, and then the door slid between us. The car started down. I looked at the fingernail marks on the backs of my hands and thought that I was an awful creature, the lowest of the low. Even if it had only been a dream, I was the lowest of the goddam low. *Take her*, I’d said. She was my mother but I had said it just the same: *Take my Ma, don’t take me*. She had raised me, worked overtime for me, waited in line with me under the hot summer sun in a dusty little New Hampshire amusement park, and in the end I had hardly hesitated. *Take her, don’t take me*. Chickenshit, chickenshit, you fucking chickenshit.

When the elevator door opened I stepped out, took the lid off the litterbasket, and there it was, lying in someone’s almost-empty paper coffee cup: I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA.

I bent, plucked the button out of the cold puddle of coffee it was lying in, wiped it on my jeans, put it in my pocket. Throwing it away had been the wrong idea. It was my button now—good-luck charm or bad-luck charm, it was mine. I left the hospital, giving Yvonne a little wave on my way by. Outside, the moon rode the roof of the sky, flooding the world with its strange and perfectly dreamy light. I had never felt so tired or so dispirited in my whole life. I wished I had the choice to make again. I would have made a different one. Which was funny—if I’d found her dead, as I’d expected to, I think I could have lived with it. After all, wasn’t that the way stories like this one were supposed to end?

\* \* \*

*Nobody wants to give a fella a ride in town*, the old man with the truss had said, and how true that was. I walked all the way across Lewiston—three dozen blocks of Lisbon Street and nine blocks of Canal Street, past all the bottle clubs with the jukeboxes playing old songs by Foreigner and Led Zeppelin and AC/DC in French—without putting my thumb out a single time. It would have done no good. It was well past eleven before I reached the DeMuth Bridge. Once I was on the Harlow side, the first car I raised my thumb to stopped. Forty minutes later I was fishing the key out from under the red wheelbarrow by the door to the back shed, and ten minutes after that I was in bed. It occurred to me as I dropped off that it was the first time in my life I'd slept in that house all by myself.

\* \* \*

It was the phone that woke me up at quarter past noon. I thought it would be the hospital, someone from the hospital saying my mother had taken a sudden turn for the worse and had passed away only a few minutes ago, so sorry. But it was only Mrs. McCurdy, wanting to be sure I'd gotten home all right, wanting to know all the details of my visit the night before (she took me through it three times, and by the end of the third recitation I had begun to feel like a criminal being interrogated on a murder charge), also wanting to know if I'd like to ride up to the hospital with her that afternoon. I told her that would be great.

When I hung up, I crossed the room to the bedroom door. Here was a full-length mirror. In it was a tall, unshaven young man with a small potbelly, dressed only in baggy undershorts. "You have to get it together, big boy," I told my reflection. "Can't go through the rest of your life thinking that every time the phone rings it's someone calling to tell you your mother's dead."

Not that I would. Time would dull the memory, time always did . . . but it was amazing how real and immediate the night before still seemed. Every edge and corner was sharp and clear. I could still see Staub's good-looking young face beneath his turned-around cap, and the cigarette behind his ear, and the way the smoke had seeped out of the incision on his neck when he inhaled. I could still hear him telling the story of the Cadillac that was selling cheap.

Time would blunt the edges and round the corners, but not for awhile. After all, I had the button, it was on the dresser by the bathroom door. The button was my souvenir. Didn't the hero of every ghost-story come away with a souvenir, something that proved it had all really happened?

There was an ancient stereo system in the corner of the room, and I shuffled through my old tapes, hunting for something to listen to while I shaved. I found one marked FOLK MIX and put it in the tape player. I'd made it in high school and could barely remember what was on it. Bob Dylan sang about the lonesome death of Hattie Carroll, Tom Paxton sang about his own ramblin' pal, and then Dave Van Ronk started to sing about the cocaine blues. Halfway through the third verse I paused with my razor by my cheek. *Got a headful of whiskey and a bellyful of gin*, Dave sang in his rasping voice. *Doctor say it kill me but he don't say when*. And that was the answer, of course. A guilty conscience had led me to assume that my mother would die *immediately*, and Staub had never corrected that assumption—how could he, when I had never even asked?—but it clearly wasn't true.

*Doctor say it kill me but he don't say when.*

What in God's name was I beating myself up about? Didn't my choice amount to no more than the natural order of things? Didn't children usually outlive their parents? The son of a bitch had tried to scare me—to guilt-trip me—but I didn't have to buy what he was selling, did I? Didn't we all ride the Bullet in the end?

*You're just trying to let yourself off. Trying to find a way to make it okay. Maybe what you're thinking is true . . . but when he asked you to choose, you chose her. There's no way to think your way around that, buddy—you chose her.*

I opened my eyes and looked at my face in the mirror. "I did what I had to," I said. I didn't quite believe it, but in time I supposed I would.

\* \* \*

Mrs. McCurdy and I went up to see my mother and my mother was a little better. I asked her if she remembered her dream about Thrill Village, in Laconia. She shook her head. "I barely remember you coming in last night," she said. "I was awful sleepy. Does it matter?"

“Nope,” I said, and kissed her temple. “Not a bit.”

\* \* \*

My Ma got out of the hospital five days later. She walked with a limp for a little while, but that went away and a month later she was back at work again—only half shifts at first but then full-time, just as if nothing had happened. I returned to school and got a job at Pat’s Pizza in downtown Orono. The money wasn’t great, but it was enough to get my car fixed. That was good; I’d lost what little taste for hitchhiking I’d ever had.

My mother tried to quit smoking and for a little while she did. Then I came back from school for April vacation a day early, and the kitchen was just as smoky as it had ever been. She looked at me with eyes that were both ashamed and defiant. “I can’t,” she said. “I’m sorry, Al—I know you want me to and I know I should, but there’s such a hole in my life without it. Nothing fills it. The best I can do is wish I’d never started in the first place.”

\* \* \*

Two weeks after I graduated from college, my Ma had another stroke—just a little one. She tried to quit smoking again when the doctor scolded her, then put on fifty pounds and went back to the tobacco. “As a dog returneth to its vomit,” the Bible says; I’ve always liked that one. I got a pretty good job in Portland on my first try—lucky, I guess—and started the work of convincing her to quit her own job. It was a tough sled at first. I might have given up in disgust, but I had a certain memory that kept me digging away at her Yankee defenses.

“You ought to be saving for your own life, not taking care of me,” she said. “You’ll want to get married someday, Al, and what you spend on me you won’t have for that. For your real life.”

“*You’re* my real life,” I said, and kissed her. “You can like it or lump it, but that’s just the way it is.”

And finally she threw in the towel.

We had some pretty good years after that—seven of them in all. I didn’t live with her, but I visited her almost every day. We played a lot of gin rummy and

watched a lot of movies on the video recorder I bought her. Had a bucketload of laughs, as she liked to say. I don't know if I owe those years to George Staub or not, but they were good years. And my memory of the night I met Staub never faded and grew dreamlike, as I always expected it would; every incident, from the old man telling me to wish on the harvest moon to the fingers fumbling at my shirt as Staub passed his button on to me, remained perfectly clear. And there came a day when I could no longer find that button. I knew I'd had it when I'd moved into my little apartment in Falmouth—I kept it in the top drawer of my bedside table, along with a couple of combs, my two sets of cufflinks, and an old political button that said BILL CLINTON, THE SAFE SAX PRESIDENT—but then it came up missing. And when the telephone rang a day or two later, I knew why Mrs. McCurdy was crying. It was the bad news I'd never quite stopped expecting; fun is fun and done is done.

\* \* \*

When the funeral was over, and the wake, and the seemingly endless line of mourners had finally come to its end, I went back to the little house in Harlow where my mother had spent her final few years, smoking and eating powdered doughnuts. It had been Jean and Alan Parker against the world; now it was just me.

I went through her personal effects, putting aside the few papers that would have to be dealt with later, boxing up the things I'd want to keep on one side of the room and the things I'd want to give away to the Goodwill on the other. Near the end of the job I got down on my knees and looked under her bed and there it was, what I'd been looking for all along without quite admitting it to myself: a dusty button reading I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I curled my fist tight around it. The pin dug into my flesh and I squeezed my hand even tighter, taking a bitter pleasure in the pain. When I rolled my fingers open again, my eyes had filled with tears and the words on the button had doubled, overlaying each other in a shimmer. It was like looking at a 3-D movie without the glasses.

“Are you satisfied?” I asked the silent room. “Is it enough?” There was no answer, of course. “Why did you even bother? What was the goddam point?”

Still no answer, and why would there be? You wait in line, that's all. You wait in line beneath the moon and make your wishes by its infected light. You wait in line and listen to them screaming—they pay to be terrified, and on the Bullet they always get their money's worth. Maybe when it's your turn you ride; maybe you run. Either way it comes to the same, I think. There ought to be more to it, but there's really not—fun is fun and done is done.

Take your button and get out of here.

## Luckey Quarter

*In the fall of 1996, I crossed the United States from Maine to California on my Harley-Davidson motorcycle, stopping at independent bookstores to promote a novel called Insomnia. It was a great trip. The high point was probably sitting on the stoop of an abandoned general store in Kansas, watching the sun go down in the west as the full moon rose in the east. I thought of a scene in Pat Conroy's The Prince of Tides where the same thing happens, and an enraptured child cries out, "Oh, Mama, do it again!" Later, in Nevada, I stayed in a ramshackle hotel where the turn-down maids left two-dollar slots chips on the pillow. Beside each chip was a little card that said something like, "Hi, I'm Marie, Good Luck!" This story came to mind. I wrote it longhand, on hotel stationery.*

---

"Oh you cheap son of a bitch!" she cried in the empty hotel room, more in surprise than in anger.

Then—it was the way she was built—Darlene Pullen started to laugh. She sat down in the chair beside the ruffled, abandoned bed with the quarter in one hand and the envelope it had fallen out of in the other, looking back and forth between them and laughing until tears spilled from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Patsy, her older kid, needed braces. Darlene had absolutely no idea how she was going to pay for them, she had been worried about it all week, and if this wasn't the final straw, what was? And if you couldn't laugh, what *could* you do? Find a gun and shoot yourself?

Different girls had different places to leave the all-important envelope, which they called "the honeypot." Gerda, the Swede who'd been a downtown corner-girl before finding Jesus the previous summer at a revival meeting in Tahoe, propped hers up against one of the bathroom glasses; Melissa put hers under the TV controller. Darlene always leaned hers against the telephone, and

when she came in this morning and found 322's on the pillow instead, she had known he'd left something for her.

Yes, he certainly had. A little copper sandwich, one quarter-dollar, In God We Trust.

Her laughter, which had been tapering off to giggles, broke out in full spate again.

There was printed matter on the front of the honeypot, plus the hotel's logo: the silhouettes of a horse and rider on top of a bluff, enclosed in a diamond shape.

*Welcome to Carson City, the friendliest town in Nevada!* [said the words below the logo]. *And welcome to The Rancher's Hotel, the friendliest lodging in Carson City! Your room was made up by Darlene. If anything's wrong, please dial 0 and we'll put it right "pronto."* *This envelope is provided should you find everything right and care to leave a little "extra something" for this chambermaid.*

*Once again, welcome to Carson, and welcome to the Rancher's.*

*William Avery  
Trail-Boss*

Quite often the honeypot was empty—she had found envelopes torn up in the wastebasket, crumpled up in the corner (as if the idea of tipping the chambermaid actually infuriated some guests), floating in the toilet bowl—but sometimes there was a nice little surprise in there, especially if the slot machines or the gaming tables had been kind to a guest. And 322 had certainly used his; he'd left her a quarter, by God! That would take care of Patsy's braces *and* get that Sega game system Paul wanted with all his heart. He wouldn't even have to wait until Christmas, he could have it as a . . . a . . .

"A Thanksgiving present," she said. "Sure, why not? And I'll pay off the cable people, so we won't have to give it up after all, we'll even add the Disney Channel, and I can finally go see a doctor about my back . . . shit, I'm rich. If I could find you, mister, I'd drop down on my knees and kiss your fucking feet."

No chance of that; 322 was long gone. The Rancher's probably *was* the best lodging in Carson City, but the trade was still almost entirely transient. When

Darlene came in the back door at seven A.M., they were getting up, shaving, taking their showers, in some cases medicating their hangovers; while she was in Housekeeping with Gerda, Melissa, and Jane (the head housekeeper, she of the formidable gunshell tits and set, red-painted mouth), first drinking coffee, then filling her cart and getting ready for the day, the truckers and cowboys and salesmen were checking out, their honeypot envelopes either filled or unfilled.

322, that gent, had dropped a quarter in his. And probably left her a little something on his sheets as well, not to mention a souvenir or two in the unflushed toilet. Because some people couldn't seem to stop giving. It was just their nature.

Darlene sighed, wiped her wet cheeks with the hem of her apron, and squeezed open the envelope—322 had actually gone to the trouble of sealing it, and she'd ripped off the end in her eagerness to see what was inside. She meant to drop the quarter back into it, then saw there was something inside: a scrawled note written on a sheet from the desk-pad. She fished it out.

Below the horse-and-rider logo and the words JUST A NOTE FROM THE RANCH, 322 had printed nine words, working with a blunt-tipped pencil:

*This is a lucky quarter! Its true! Luckey you!*

“Good deal!” Darlene said. “I got a couple of kids and a husband five years late home from work and I could use a little luck. Honest to God I could.” Then she laughed again—a short snort—and dropped the quarter into the envelope. She went into the bathroom and peeped into the toilet. Nothing there but clean water, and that was something.

\* \* \*

She went about her chores, and they didn't take long. The quarter was a nasty dig, she supposed, but otherwise, 322 had been polite enough. No streaks or spots on the sheets, no unpleasant little surprises (on at least four occasions in her five years as a chambermaid, the five years since Deke had left her, she had found drying streaks of what could only have been semen on the TV screen

and once a reeking puddle of piss in a bureau drawer), nothing stolen. There was really only the bed to make, the sink and shower to rinse out, and the towels to replace. As she did these things, she speculated about what 322 might have looked like, and what kind of a man left a woman who was trying to raise two kids on her own a twenty-five-cent tip. One who could laugh and be mean at the same time, she guessed; one who probably had tattoos on his arms and looked like the character Woody Harrelson had played in that movie *Natural Born Killers*.

*He doesn't know anything about me*, she thought as she stepped into the hall and pulled the door closed behind her. *Probably he was drunk and it seemed funny, that's all. And it was funny, in a way; why else did you laugh?*

Right. Why else had she laughed?

Pushing her cart across to 323, she thought she would give the quarter to Paul. Of the two kids, Paul was the one who usually came up holding the short end of the stick. He was seven, silent, and afflicted with what seemed to be a perpetual case of the sniffles. Darlene also thought he might be the only seven-year-old in the clean air of this high-desert town who was an incipient asthmatic.

She sighed and used her passkey on 323, thinking that maybe she'd find a fifty—or even a hundred—in this room's honeypot. It was almost always her first thought on entering a room. The envelope was just where she had left it, however, propped against the telephone, and although she checked it just to be sure, she knew it would be empty, and it was.

323 *had* left a little something for her in the toilet, though.

“Look at this, the luck's starting to flow already,” Darlene said, and began to laugh as she flushed the john—it was just the way she was built.

\* \* \*

There was a one-armed bandit—just that single one—in the lobby of the Rancher's, and although Darlene had never used it during her five years of work here, she dropped her hand into her pocket on her way to lunch that day, felt the envelope with the torn-off end, and swerved toward the chrome-plated foolcatcher. She hadn't forgotten her intention to give the quarter to Paul, but

a quarter meant nothing to kids these days, and why should it? You couldn't even get a lousy bottle of Coke for a quarter. And suddenly she just wanted to be rid of the damned thing. Her back hurt, she had unaccustomed acid indigestion from her ten o'clock cup of coffee, and she felt savagely depressed. Suddenly the shine was off the world, and it all seemed the fault of that lousy quarter . . . as if it were sitting there in her pocket and sending out little batches of rotten vibes.

Gerda came out of the elevator just in time to see Darlene plant herself in front of the slot machine and dump the quarter out of the envelope and into her palm.

"You?" Gerda said. "*You?* No, never—I don't believe it."

"Just watch me," Darlene said, and dropped the coin into the slot which read USE 1 2 OR 3 COINS. "That baby is gone."

She started to walk off, then, almost as an afterthought, turned back long enough to yank the bandit's lever. She turned away again, not bothering to watch the drums spin, and so did not see the bells slot into place in the windows—one, two, and three. She paused only when she heard quarters begin to shower into the tray at the bottom of the machine. Her eyes widened, then narrowed suspiciously, as if this was another joke . . . or maybe the punchline of the first one.

"You vin!" Gerda cried, her Swedish accent coming out more strongly in her excitement. "Darlene, you vin!"

She darted past Darlene, who simply stood where she was, listening to the coins cascade into the tray. The sound seemed to go on forever. *Luckey me*, she thought. *Luckey, luckey me*.

At last the quarters stopped falling.

"Oh, goodness!" Gerda said. "Goodness me! And to think this cheap machine never paid me anything, after all the quarters I'm stuffing it with! Vut luck is here! There must be fifteen dollars, Darl! Imagine if you'd put in *tree* quarters!"

"That would have been more luck than I could have stood," Darlene said. She felt like crying. She didn't know why that should be, but it was; she could feel the tears burning the backs of her eyeballs like weak acid. Gerda helped her scoop the quarters out of the tray, and when they were all in Darlene's uniform

pocket, that side of her dress sagged comically. The only thought to cross her mind was to think that she ought to get Paul something nice, some toy. Fifteen dollars wasn't enough for the Sega system he wanted, not by a long shot, but it might buy one of the electronic things he was always looking at in the window of Radio Shack at the mall, not asking, he knew better, he was sickly but that didn't make him stupid, just staring with eyes that always seemed to be inflamed and watering.

*The hell you will*, she told herself. *You'll put it toward a pair of shoes, is what you'll do . . . or Patsy's goddam braces. Paul wouldn't mind that, and you know it.*

No, Paul wouldn't mind, and that was the hell of it, she thought, sifting her fingers through the weight of quarters in her pocket and listening to them jingle. You minded things *for* them. Paul knew the radio-controlled boats and cars and planes in the store window were as out of reach as the Sega system and all the games you could play on it; to him that stuff existed to be appreciated in the imagination only, like pictures in a gallery or sculptures in a museum. To her, however . . .

Well, maybe she *would* get him something silly with her windfall. Something silly and nice. Surprise him.

Surprise herself.

\* \* \*

She surprised herself, all right.

Plenty.

That night she decided to walk home instead of taking the bus. Halfway down North Street, she turned into the Silver City Casino, where she had never been before in her life. She had changed the quarters—there had been eighteen dollars' worth in all—into bills at the hotel desk, and now, feeling like a visitor inside her own body, she approached the roulette wheel and held these bills out to the croupier with a hand entirely void of feeling. Nor was it just her hand; every nerve below the surface of her skin seemed to have gone dead, as if this sudden, aberrant behavior had blown them out like overloaded fuses.

*It doesn't matter*, she told herself as she put all eighteen of the unmarked pink dollar chips on the space marked ODD. *It's just a quarter, that's really all it*

*is no matter what it looks like on that runner of felt, it's only someone's bad joke on a chambermaid he'd never actually have to look in the eye. It's only a quarter and you're still just trying to get rid of it, because it's multiplied and changed its shape, but it's still sending out bad vibes.*

“No more bets, no more bets,” the wheel’s minder chanted as the ball revolved counterclockwise to the spinning wheel. The ball dropped, bounced, caught, and Darlene closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she saw the ball riding around in the slot marked 15.

The croupier pushed eighteen more pink chips—to Darlene they looked like squashed Canada Mints—over to her. Darlene picked them up and put them all back down on the red. The croupier looked at her, eyebrows raised, asking without saying a word if she was sure. She nodded that she was, and he spun. When red came up, she shifted her growing pile of chips to the black.

Then the odd.

Then the even.

She had five hundred and seventy-six dollars in front of her after that last one, and her head had gone to some other planet. It was not black and green and pink chips she saw in front of her, not precisely; it was braces and a radio-controlled submarine.

*Luckey me, Darlene Pullen thought. Oh luckey, luckey me.*

She put the chips down again, all of them, and the crowd that always forms behind and around sudden hot-streak winners in gambling towns, even at five o'clock in the afternoon, groaned.

“Ma’am, I can’t allow that bet without the pit-boss’s okay,” the roulette wheel’s minder said. He looked considerably more awake now than he had when Darlene walked up in her blue-and-white-striped rayon uniform. She had put her money down on the second triple—the numbers from 13 to 24.

“Better get him over here then, hon,” Darlene said, and waited, calm, her feet on Mother Earth here in Carson City, Nevada, seven miles from where the first big silver mine opened up in 1878, her head somewhere deep in the deluminum mines of the Planet Chumpa-diddle, as the pit-boss and the minder conferred and the crowd around her murmured. At last the pit-boss came over to her and asked her to write down her name and address and telephone number on a piece of pink memo paper. Darlene did it, interested to

see that her handwriting hardly looked like her own. She felt calm, as calm as the calmest deluminum miner who had ever lived, but her hands were shaking badly.

The pit-boss turned to Mr. Roulette Minder and twirled his finger in the air—spin it, son.

This time the rattle of the little white ball was clearly audible in the area around the roulette table; the crowd had fallen entirely silent, and Darlene's was the only bet on the felt. This was Carson City, not Monte Carlo, and for Carson, this was a monster bet. The ball rattled, fell into a slot, jumped, fell into another, then jumped again. Darlene closed her eyes.

*Luckey*, she thought, she prayed. *Luckey me, luckey mom, luckey girl.*

The crowd moaned, either in horror or ecstasy. That was how she knew the wheel had slowed enough to read. Darlene opened her eyes, knowing that her quarter was finally gone.

Except it wasn't.

The little white ball was resting in the slot marked 13 Black.

"Oh my God, honey," a woman behind her said. "Give me your hand, I want to rub your hand." Darlene gave it, and felt the other one gently taken as well—taken and fondled. From some distance far, far away from the deluminum mines where she was having this fantasy, she could feel first two people, then four, then six, then eight, gently rubbing her hands, trying to catch her luck like a cold-germ.

Mr. Roulette was pushing piles and piles of chips over to her.

"How much?" she asked faintly. "How much is that?"

"Seventeen hundred and twenty-eight dollars," he said. "Congratulations, ma'am. If I were you—"

"But you're not," Darlene said. "I want to put it all down on one number. That one." She pointed. "25." Behind her, someone screamed softly, as if in sexual rapture. "Every cent of it."

"No," the pit-boss said.

"But—"

"No," he said again, and she had been working for men most of her life, enough of it to know when one of them meant exactly what he was saying. "House policy, Mrs. Pullen."

“All right,” she said. “All right, you chickenshit.” She pulled the chips back toward her, spilling some of the piles. “How much *will* you let me put down?”

“Excuse me,” the pit-boss said.

He was gone for almost five minutes. During that time the wheel stood silent. No one spoke to Darlene, but her hands were touched repeatedly, and sometimes chafed as if she were a fainting victim. When the pit-boss came back, he had a tall bald man with him. The tall bald man was wearing a tuxedo and gold-rimmed glasses. He did not look at Darlene so much as through her.

“Eight hundred dollars,” he said, “but I advise against it.” His eyes dropped down the front of her uniform, then back up at her face. “I think you should cash in your winnings, madam.”

“I don’t think you know jack shit in a backyard outhouse,” Darlene said, and the tall bald man’s mouth tightened in distaste. She shifted her gaze to Mr. Roulette. “Do it,” she said.

\* \* \*

Mr. Roulette put down a plaque with \$800 written on it, positioning it fussily so it covered the number 25. Then he spun the wheel and dropped the ball. The entire casino had gone silent now, even the persistent ratchet-and-ding of the slot machines. Darlene looked up, across the room, and wasn’t surprised to see that the bank of TVs which had previously been showing horse races and boxing matches were now showing the spinning roulette wheel . . . and her.

*I’m even a TV star. Luckey me. Luckey me. Oh so luckey me.*

The ball spun. The ball bounced. It almost caught, then spun again, a little white dervish racing around the polished wood circumference of the wheel.

“Odds!” she suddenly cried. “What are the odds?”

“Thirty to one,” the tall bald man said. “Twenty-four thousand dollars should you win, madam.”

Darlene closed her eyes . . .

\* \* \*

. . . and opened them in 322. She was still sitting in the chair, with the envelope in one hand and the quarter that had fallen out of it in the other. Her

tears of laughter were still wet on her cheeks.

“Luckey me,” she said, and squeezed the envelope so she could look into it. No note. Just another part of the fantasy, misspellings and all.

Sighing, Darlene slipped the quarter into her uniform pocket and began to clean up 322.

\* \* \*

Instead of taking Paul home as she normally did after school, Patsy brought him to the hotel. “He’s snotting all over the place,” she explained to her mother, her voice dripping with disdain which only a thirteen-year-old could muster in such quantities. “He’s, like, *choking* on it. I thought maybe you’d want to take him to the Doc in the Box.”

Paul looked at her silently from his watering, patient eyes. His nose was as red as the stripe on a candy cane. They were in the lobby; there were no guests checking in currently, and Mr. Avery (Tex to the maids, who unanimously hated the little prick) was away from the desk. Probably back in the office, choking his chicken. If he could find it.

Darlene put her palm on Paul’s forehead, felt the warmth simmering there, and sighed. “Suppose you’re right,” she said. “How are you feeling, Paul?”

“Ogay,” Paul said in a distant, foghorning voice.

Even Patsy looked depressed. “He’ll probably be dead by the time he’s sixteen,” she said. “The only case of, like, spontaneous AIDS in the history of the world.”

“You shut your dirty little mouth!” Darlene said, much more sharply than she had intended, but Paul was the one who looked wounded—he winced and looked away from her.

“He’s a baby, too,” Patsy said hopelessly. “I mean, really.”

“No, he’s not. He’s sensitive, that’s all. And his resistance is low.” She fished in her uniform pocket. “Paul? Want this?”

He looked back at her, saw the quarter, and smiled a little.

“What are you going to do with it, Paul?” Patsy asked him as he took it. “Take Deirdre McCausland out on a date?” She snickered.

“I’ll thing of subething,” Paul said.

“Leave him alone,” Darlene said. “Don’t bug him for a little while, could you do that?”

“Yeah, but what do *I* get?” Patsy asked her. “I walked him over here safe, I *always* walk him safe, so what do *I* get?”

*Braces*, Darlene thought, *if I can ever afford them*. And she was suddenly overwhelmed by unhappiness, by a sense of life as some vast cold junkpile—deluminum slag, if you liked—that was always looming over you, always waiting to fall, cutting you to screaming ribbons even before it crushed the life out of you. Luck was a joke. Even good luck was just bad luck with its hair combed.

“Mom? Mommy?” Patsy sounded suddenly concerned. “I don’t want anything, I was just kidding around, you know.”

“I’ve got a *Sassy* for you, if you want,” Darlene said. “I found it in one of my rooms and put it in my locker.”

“This month’s?” Patsy sounded suspicious.

“Actually this month’s. Come on.”

They were halfway across the room when they heard the drop of the coin and the unmistakable ratchet of the handle and whir of the drums as Paul pulled the handle of the slot machine beside the desk and then let it go.

“Oh you dumb hoser, you’re in trouble now!” Patsy cried. She did not sound exactly unhappy about it. “How many times has Mom told you not to throw your money away on stuff like that? Slots’re for the tourists!”

But Darlene didn’t even turn around. She stood looking at the door that led back to the maid’s country, where the cheap cloth coats from Ames and Wal-Mart hung in a row like dreams that have grown seedy and been discarded, where the time-clock ticked, where the air always smelled of Melissa’s perfume and Jane’s Ben-Gay. She stood listening to the drums whir, she stood waiting for the rattle of coins into the tray, and by the time they began to fall she was already thinking about how she could ask Melissa to watch the kids while she went down to the casino. It wouldn’t take long.

*Luckey me*, she thought, and closed her eyes. In the darkness behind her lids, the sound of the falling coins seemed very loud. It sounded like metal slag falling on top of a coffin.

It was all going to happen just the way she had imagined, she was somehow sure that it was, and yet that image of life as a huge slagheap, a pile of alien metal, remained. It was like an indelible stain that you know will never come out of some favorite piece of clothing.

Yet Patsy needed braces, Paul needed to see a doctor about his constantly running nose and constantly watering eyes, he needed a Sega system the way Patsy needed some colorful underwear that would make her feel funny and sexy, and she needed . . . what? What did she need? Deke back?

*Sure, Deke back, she thought, almost laughing. I need him back like I need puberty back, or labor pains. I need . . . well . . .*

*(nothing)*

Yes, that was right. Nothing at all, zero, empty, *adiós*. Black days, empty nights, and laughing all the way.

*I don't need anything because I'm lucky, she thought, her eyes still closed. Tears, squeezing out from beneath her closed lids, while behind her Patsy was screaming at the top of her lungs. "Oh shit! Oh shit-a-booger, you hit the jackpot, Paulie! You hit the damned jackpot!"*

*Lucky, Darlene thought. So lucky, oh lucky me.*

**STEPHEN KING** is the author of more than fifty worldwide bestsellers. Among his most recent are *Lisey's Story*, the *Dark Tower* novels, *Cell*, *From a Buick 8*, *Everything's Eventual*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *Bag of Bones*, and his acclaimed nonfiction book, *On Writing*. He is the recipient of the 2003 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

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RIVETING, DARK STORIES FROM THE No. 1 BESTSELLING WRITER

# STEPHEN KING

## FOUR PAST MIDNIGHT

Right time, wrong place





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FOUR PAST  
MIDNIGHT



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*In the desert*

*I saw a creature, naked, bestial,  
Who, squatting upon the ground,  
Held his heart in his hands,  
And ate of it.*

*I said, "Is it good, friend?"*

*"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;*

*"But I like it*

*Because it is bitter*

*And because it is my heart."*

*—Stephen Crane*

*I'm gonna kiss you, girl, and hold ya,  
I'm gonna do all the things I told ya  
In the midnight hour.*

*—Wilson Pickett*

# STRAIGHT UP MIDNIGHT

## *AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE*

Well, look at this—we're all here. We made it back again. I hope you're half as happy to be here as I am. Just saying that reminds me of a story, and since telling stories is what I do for a living (and to keep myself sane), I'll pass this one along.

Earlier this year—I'm writing this in late July of 1989—I was crashed out in front of the TV, watching the Boston Red Sox play the Milwaukee Brewers. Robin Yount of the Brewers stepped to the plate, and the Boston commentators began marvelling at the fact that Yount was still in his early thirties. "Sometimes it seems that Robin helped Abner Doubleday lay down the first set of foul lines," Ned Martin said as Yount stepped into the box to face Roger Clemens.

"Yep," Joe Castiglione agreed. "He came to the Brewers right out of high school, I think—he's been playing for them since 1974."

I sat up so fast I nearly spilled a can of Pepsi-Cola all over myself. *Wait a minute!* I was thinking. *Wait just a goddam minute! I published my first book in 1974! That wasn't so long ago! What's this shit about helping Abner Doubleday put down the first set of foul lines?*

Then it occurred to me that the perception of how time passes—a subject which comes up again and again in the stories which follow—is a highly individual thing. It's true that the publication of *Carrie* in the spring of 1974 (it was published, in fact, just two days before baseball season began and a teenager named Robin Yount played his first game for the Milwaukee Brewers) doesn't seem like a long time ago to me subjectively—just a quick glance back over the shoulder, in fact—but there are other ways to count the years, and some of them suggest that fifteen years can be a long time, indeed.

In 1974 Gerald Ford was President and the Shah was still running the show in Iran. John Lennon was alive, and so was Elvis Presley. Donny Osmond was singing with his brothers and sisters in a high, piping voice. Home video cassette recorders had been invented but could be purchased in only a few test markets. Insiders predicted that when they became widely available, Sony's Beta-format machines would quickly stomp the rival format, known as VHS, into the ground. The idea that people might soon be renting popular movies as they had once rented popular novels at lending libraries was still over the horizon. Gasoline prices had risen to unthinkable highs: forty-eight cents a gallon for regular, fifty-five cents for unleaded.

The first white hairs had yet to make their appearance on my head and in my beard. My daughter, now a college sophomore, was four. My older son, who is now taller than I am, plays the blues harp, and sports luxuriant shoulder-length Sammy Hagar locks, had just been promoted to training pants. And my younger son, who now pitches and plays first base for a championship Little League team, would not be born for another three years.

Time has this funny, plastic quality, and everything that goes around comes around. When you get on the bus, you think it won't be taking you far—across town, maybe, no further than that—and all at once, holy shit! You're halfway across the next continent. Do you find the metaphor a trifle naive? So do I, and the hell of it is just this: it doesn't matter. The essential conundrum of time is so perfect that even such jejune observations as the one I have just made retain an odd, plangent resonance.

One thing hasn't changed during those years—the major reason, I suppose, why it sometimes seems to me (and probably to Robin Yount as well) that no time has passed at all. I'm still doing the same thing: writing stories. And it is still a great deal more than what I know; it is still what I love. Oh, don't get me wrong—I love my wife and I love my children, but it's still a pleasure to find these peculiar side roads, to go down them, to see who lives there, to see what they're doing and who they're doing it to and maybe even why. I still love the strangeness of it, and those gorgeous moments when the

pictures come clear and the events begin to make a pattern. There is always a tail to the tale. The beast is quick and I sometimes miss my grip, but when I do get it, I hang on tight ... and it feels fine.

When this book is published, in 1990, I will have been sixteen years in the business of make-believe. Halfway through those years, long after I had become, by some process I still do not fully understand, America's literary boogeyman, I published a book called *Different Seasons*. It was a collection of four previously unpublished novellas, three of which were not horror stories. The publisher accepted this book in good heart but, I think, with some mental reservations as well. I know I had some. As it turned out, neither of us had to worry. Sometimes a writer will publish a book which is just naturally lucky, and *Different Seasons* was that way for me.

One of the stories, "The Body," became a movie (*Stand By Me*) which enjoyed a successful run ... the first really successful film to be made from a work of mine since *Carrie* (a movie which came out back when Abner Doubleday and you-know-who were laying down those foul lines). Rob Reiner, who made *Stand By Me*, is one of the bravest, smartest filmmakers I have ever met, and I'm proud of my association with him. I am also amused to note that the company Mr. Reiner formed following the success of *Stand By Me* is Castle Rock Productions ... a name with which many of my long-time readers will be familiar.

The critics, by and large, also liked *Different Seasons*. Almost all of them would napalm one particular novella, but since each of them picked a different story to scorch, I felt I could disregard them all with impunity ... and I did. Such behavior is not always possible; when most of the reviews of *Christine* suggested it was a really dreadful piece of work, I came to the reluctant decision that it probably *wasn't* as good as I had hoped (that, however, did not stop me from cashing the royalty checks). I know writers who claim not to read their notices, or not to be hurt by the bad ones if they do, and I actually believe two of these individuals. I'm one of the other kind—I obsess over the possibility of bad reviews and brood over them when they come. But they don't get me down for long; I just kill a few children and old ladies, and then I'm right as a trivet again.

Most important, the *readers* liked *Different Seasons*. I don't remember a single correspondent from that time who scolded me for writing something that wasn't horror. Most readers, in fact, wanted to tell me that one of the stories roused their emotions in some way, made them think, made them *feel*, and those letters are the *real* payback for the days (and there are a lot of them) when the words come hard and inspiration seems thin or even nonexistent. God bless and keep Constant Reader; the mouth can speak, but there is no tale unless there is a sympathetic ear to listen.

1982, that was. The year the Milwaukee Brewers won their only American League pennant, led by—yes, you got it—Robin Yount. Yount hit .331 that year, bashed twenty-nine home runs, and was named the American League's Most Valuable Player.

It was a good year for both us old geezers.

*Different Seasons* was not a planned book; it just happened. The four long stories in it came out at odd intervals over a period of five years, stories which were too long to be published as short stories and just a little too short to be books on their own. Like pitching a no-hitter or batting for the cycle (getting a single, double, triple, and home run all in the same ball game), it was not so much a feat as a kind of statistical oddity. I took great pleasure in its success and acceptance, but I also felt a clear sense of regret when the manuscript was finally turned in to The Viking Press. I knew it was good; I also knew that I'd probably never publish another book exactly like it in my life.

If you're expecting me to say Well, *I was wrong*, I must disappoint you. The book you are holding is quite different from the earlier book. *Different Seasons* consisted of three "mainstream" stories and one tale of the supernatural; all four of the tales in this book are tales of horror. They are, by and large, a little longer than the stories in *Different Seasons*, and they were written for the most part during the two years when I was supposedly retired. Perhaps they are different because they came from a mind which found itself turning, at least temporarily, to darker subjects.

Time, for instance, and the corrosive effects it can have on the human heart. The past, and the shadows it throws upon the present

—shadows where unpleasant things sometimes grow and even more unpleasant things hide ... and grow fat.

Yet not all of my concerns have changed, and most of my convictions have only grown stronger. I still believe in the resilience of the human heart and the essential validity of love; I still believe that connections between people can be made and that the spirits which inhabit us sometimes touch. I still believe that the cost of those connections is horribly, outrageously high ... and I still believe that the value received far outweighs the price which must be paid. I still believe, I suppose, in the coming of the White and in finding a place to make a stand ... and defending that place to the death. They are old-fashioned concerns and beliefs, but I would be a liar if I did not admit I still own them. And that they still own me.

I still love a good story, too. I love hearing one, and I love telling one. You may or may not know (or care) that I was paid a great deal of money to publish this book and the two which will follow it, but if you do know or care, you should also know that I wasn't paid a cent for *writing* the stories in the book. Like anything else that happens on its own, the act of writing is beyond currency. Money is great stuff to have, but when it comes to the act of creation, the best thing is not to think of money too much. It constipates the whole process.

The way I tell my stories has also changed a little, I suppose (I hope I've gotten better at it, but of course that is something each reader should and will judge for himself), but that is only to be expected. When the Brewers won the pennant in 1982, Robin Yount was playing shortstop. Now he's in center field. I suppose that means he's slowed down a little ... but he still catches almost everything that's hit in his direction.

That will do for me. That will do just fine.

Because a great many readers seem curious about where stories come from, or wonder if they fit into a wider scheme the writer may be pursuing, I have prefaced each of these with a little note about how it came to be written. You may be amused by these notes, but you needn't read them if you don't want to; this is not a school assignment, thank God, and there will be no pop quiz later.

Let me close by saying again how good it is to be here, alive and well and talking to you once more ... and how good it is to know that *you* are still *there*, alive and well and waiting to go to some other place—a place where, perhaps, the walls have eyes and the trees have ears and something *really* unpleasant is trying to find its way out of the attic and downstairs, to where the people are. That thing still interests me ... but I think these days that the people who may or may not be listening for it interest me more.

Before I go, I ought to tell you how that baseball game turned out. The Brewers ended up beating the Red Sox. Clemens struck Robin Yount out on Yount's first at-bat ... but the second time up, Yount (who helped Abner Doubleday lay out the first foul lines, according to Ned Martin) banged a double high off the Green Monster in left field and drove home two runs.

Robin isn't done playing the game just yet, I guess.

Me, either.

*Bangor, Maine July, 1989*



## The Langoliers

***THIS IS FOR JOE, ANOTHER WHITE-KNUCKLE  
FLIER.***

**ONE PAST MIDNIGHT**  
*A NOTE ON "THE LANGOLIERS"*

Stories come at different times and places for me—in the car, in the shower, while walking, even while standing around at parties. On a couple of occasions, stories have come to me in dreams. But it's very rare for me to write one as soon as the idea comes, and I don't keep an "idea notebook." Not writing ideas down is an exercise in self-preservation. I get a lot of them, but only a small percentage are any good, so I tuck them all into a kind of mental file. The bad ones eventually self-destruct in there, like the tape from *Control* at the beginning of every *Mission: Impossible* episode. The good ones don't do that. Every now and then, when I open the file drawer to peek at what's left inside, this small handful of ideas looks up at me, each with its own bright central image.

With "The Langoliers," that image was of a woman pressing her hand over a crack in the wall of a commercial jetliner.

It did no good to tell myself I knew very little about commercial aircraft; I did exactly that, but the image was there every time I opened the file cabinet to dump in another idea, nevertheless. It got so I could even smell that woman's perfume (it was L'Envoi), see her green eyes, and hear her rapid, frightened breathing.

One night, while I was lying in bed, on the edge of sleep, I realized this woman was a ghost.

I remember sitting up, swinging my feet out onto the floor, and turning on the light. I sat that way for a little while, not thinking about much of anything ... at least on top. Underneath, however, the guy who really runs this job for me was busy clearing his work-space and getting ready to start up all his machines again. The next day, I—or he—began writing this story. It took about a month, and it came the most easily of all the stories in this book, layering itself sweetly and naturally as it went along. Once in awhile both stories and babies arrive in the world almost without labor pains, and this story was like that. Because it had an apocalyptic feel similar to an earlier novella of mine called “The Mist,” I headed each chapter in the same old-fashioned, rococo way. I came out of this one feeling almost as good about it as I did going in ... a rare occurrence.

I’m a lazy researcher, but I tried very hard to do my home-work this time. Three pilots—Michael Russo, Frank Soares, and Douglas Damon—helped me to get my facts straight and keep them straight. They were real sports, once I promised not to break anything.

Have I gotten everything right? I doubt it. Not even the great Daniel Defoe did that; in *Robinson Crusoe*, our hero strips naked, swims out to the ship he has recently escaped ... and then fills up his pockets with items he will need to stay alive on his desert island. And then there is the novel (title and author will be mercifully omitted here) about the New York subway system where the writer apparently mistook the motormen’s cubicles for public toilets.

My standard *caveat* goes like this: for what I got right, thank Messrs. Russo, Soares, and Damon. For what I got wrong, blame me. Nor is the statement one of hollow politeness. Factual mistakes usually result from a failure to ask the right question and not from erroneous information. I *have* taken a liberty or two with the airplane you will shortly be entering; these liberties are small, and seemed necessary to the course of the tale.

Well, that’s enough from me; step aboard.

Let’s fly the unfriendly skies.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ***BAD NEWS POR CAPTAIN ENGLE. THE LITTLE BLIND GIRL. THE LADY'S SCENT. THE DALTON GANG ARRIVES IN TOMBSTONE. THE STRANGE PLIGHT OF FLIGHT 29.***

#### 1

Brian Engle rolled the American Pride L1011 to a stop at Gate 22 and flicked off the FASTEN SEATBELT light at exactly 10:14 P.M. He let a long sigh hiss through his teeth and unfastened his shoulder harness.

He could not remember the last time he had been so relieved—and so tired—at the end of a flight. He had a nasty, pounding headache, and his plans for the evening were firmly set. No drink in the pilots' lounge, no dinner, not even a bath when he got back to Westwood. He intended to fall into bed and sleep for fourteen hours.

American Pride's Flight 7—Flagship Service from Tokyo to Los Angeles—had been delayed first by strong headwinds and then by typical congestion at LAX ... which was, Engle thought, arguably America's worst airport, if you left out Logan in Boston. To make matters worse, a pressurization problem had developed during the latter part of the flight. Minor at first, it had gradually worsened until it was scary. It had almost gotten to the point where a blowout and explosive decompression could have occurred ... and had mercifully grown no worse. Sometimes such problems suddenly and mysteriously stabilized themselves, and that was what had happened this time. The passengers now disembarking just behind the control cabin had not the slightest idea how close they had come

to being people *pâté* on tonight's flight from Tokyo, but Brian knew ... and it had given him a whammer of a headache.

"This bitch goes right into diagnostic from here," he told his co-pilot. "They know it's coming and what the problem is, right?"

The co-pilot nodded. "They don't like it, but they know."

"I don't give a shit what they like and what they don't like, Danny. We came close tonight."

Danny Keene nodded. He knew they had.

Brian sighed and rubbed a hand up and down the back of his neck. His head ached like a bad tooth. "Maybe I'm getting too old for this business."

That was, of course, the sort of thing anyone said about his job from time to time, particularly at the end of a bad shift, and Brian knew damned well he wasn't too old for the job—at forty-three, he was just entering prime time for airline pilots. Nevertheless, tonight he almost believed it. God, he was tired.

There was a knock at the compartment door; Steve Searles, the navigator, turned in his seat and opened it without standing up. A man in a green American Pride blazer was standing there. He looked like a gate agent, but Brian knew he wasn't. It was John (or maybe it was James) Deegan, Deputy Chief of Operations for American Pride at LAX.

"Captain Engle?"

"Yes?" An internal set of defenses went up, and his headache flared. His first thought, born not of logic but of strain and weariness, was that they were going to try and pin responsibility for the leaky aircraft on him. Paranoid, of course, but he was in a paranoid frame of mind.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, Captain."

"Is this about the leak?" Brian's voice was too sharp, and a few of the disembarking passengers glanced around, but it was too late to do anything about that now.

Deegan was shaking his head. "It's your wife, Captain Engle."

For a moment Brian didn't have the foggiest notion what the man was talking about and could only sit there, gaping at him and feeling

exquisitely stupid. Then the penny dropped. He meant Anne, of course.

“She’s my ex-wife. We were divorced eighteen months ago. What about her?”

“There’s been an accident,” Deegan said. “Perhaps you’d better come up to the office.”

Brian looked at him curiously. After the last three long, tense hours, all of this seemed strangely unreal. He resisted an urge to tell Deegan that if this was some sort of *Candid Camera* bullshit, he could go fuck himself. But of course it wasn’t. Airlines brass weren’t into pranks and games, especially at the expense of pilots who had just come very close to having nasty midair mishaps.

“What about Anne?” Brian heard himself asking again, this time in a softer voice. He was aware that his co-pilot was looking at him with cautious sympathy. “Is she all right?”

Deegan looked down at his shiny shoes and Brian knew that the news was very bad indeed, that Anne was a lot more than not all right. Knew, but found it impossible to believe. Anne was only thirty-four, healthy, and careful in her habits. He had also thought on more than one occasion that she was the only completely sane driver in the city of Boston ... perhaps in the whole state of Massachusetts.

Now he heard himself asking something else, and it was really like that—as if some stranger had stepped into his brain and was using his mouth as a loudspeaker. “Is she dead?”

John or James Deegan looked around, as if for support, but there was only a single flight attendant standing by the hatch, wishing the deplaning passengers a pleasant evening in Los Angeles and glancing anxiously toward the cockpit every now and then, probably worried about the same thing that had crossed Brian’s mind—that the crew was for some reason to be blamed for the slow leak which had made the last few hours of the flight such a nightmare. Deegan was on his own. He looked at Brian again and nodded. “Yes—I’m afraid she is. Would you come with me, Captain Engle?”

At quarter past midnight, Brian Engle was settling into seat 5A of American Pride's Flight 29—Flagship Service from Los Angeles to Boston. In fifteen minutes or so, that flight known to transcontinental travelers as the red-eye would be airborne. He remembered thinking earlier that if LAX wasn't the most dangerous commercial airport in America, then Logan was. Through the most unpleasant of coincidences, he would now have a chance to experience both places within an eight-hour span of time: into LAX as the pilot, into Logan as a deadheading passenger.

His headache, now a good deal worse than it had been upon landing Flight 7, stepped up another notch.

*A fire, he thought. A goddamned fire. What happened to the smoke-detectors, for Christ's sake? It was a brand-new building!*

It occurred to him that he had hardly thought about Anne at all for the last four or five months. During the first year of the divorce, she was all he *had* thought about, it seemed—what she was doing, what she was wearing, and, of course, who she was seeing. When the healing finally began, it had happened very fast ... as if he had been injected with some spirit-reviving antibiotic. He had read enough about divorce to know what that reviving agent usually was: not an antibiotic but another woman. The rebound effect, in other words.

There had been no other woman for Brian—at least not yet. A few dates and one cautious sexual encounter (he had come to believe that all sexual encounters outside of marriage in the Age of AIDS were cautious), but no other woman. He had simply ... healed.

Brian watched his fellow passengers come aboard. A young woman with blonde hair was walking with a little girl in dark glasses. The little girl's hand was on the blonde's elbow. The woman murmured to her charge, the girl looked immediately toward the sound of her voice, and Brian understood she was blind—it was something in the gesture of the head. Funny, he thought, how such small gestures could tell so much.

*Anne, he thought. Shouldn't you be thinking about Anne?*

But his tired mind kept trying to slip away from the subject of Anne—Anne, who had been his wife, Anne, who was the only woman he had ever struck in anger, Anne who was now dead.

He supposed he could go on a lecture tour; he would talk to groups of divorced men. Hell, divorced women as well, for that matter. His subject would be divorce and the art of forgetfulness.

*Shortly after the fourth anniversary is the optimum time for divorce, he would tell them. Take my case. I spent the following year in purgatory, wondering just how much of it was my fault and how much was hers, wondering how right or wrong it was to keep pushing her on the subject of kids—that was the big thing with us, nothing dramatic like drugs or adultery, just the old kids-versus-career thing—and then it was like there was an express elevator inside my head, and Anne was in it, and down it went.*

Yes. Down it had gone. And for the last several months, he hadn't really thought of Anne at all ... not even when the monthly alimony check was due. It was a very reasonable, very civilized amount; Anne had been making eighty thousand a year on her own before taxes. His lawyer paid it, and it was just another item on the monthly statement Brian got, a little two-thousand-dollar item tucked between the electricity bill and the mortgage payment on the condo.

He watched a gangly teenaged boy with a violin case under his arm and a *yarmulke* on his head walk down the aisle. The boy looked both nervous and excited, his eyes full of the future. Brian envied him.

There had been a lot of bitterness and anger between the two of them during the last year of the marriage, and finally, about four months before the end, it had happened: his hand had said go before his brain could say no. He didn't like to remember that. She'd had too much to drink at a party, and she had really torn into him when they got home.

*Leave me alone about it, Brian. Just leave me alone. No more talk about kids. If you want a sperm-test, go to a doctor. My job is advertising, not baby-making. I'm so tired of all your macho bullshit—*

That was when he had slapped her, hard, across the mouth. The blow had clipped the last word off with brutal neatness. They had

stood looking at each other in the apartment where she would later die, both of them more shocked and frightened than they would ever admit (except maybe now, sitting here in seat 5A and watching Flight 29's passengers come on board, he was admitting it, finally admitting it to himself). She had touched her mouth, which had started to bleed. She held out her fingers toward him.

You *hit* me, she said. It was not anger in her voice but wonder. He had an idea it might have been the first time anyone had ever laid an angry hand upon any part of Anne Quinlan Engle's body.

Yes, he had said. *You bet. And I'll do it again if you don't shut up. You're not going to whip me with that tongue of yours anymore, sweetheart. You better put a padlock on it. I'm telling you for your own good. Those days are over. If you want something to kick around the house, buy a dog.*

The marriage had crutched along for another few months, but it had really ended in that moment when Brian's palm made brisk contact with the side of Anne's mouth. He had been provoked—God knew he had been provoked—but he still would have given a great deal to take that one wretched second back.

As the last passengers began to trickle on board, he found himself also thinking, almost obsessively, about Anne's perfume. He could recall its fragrance exactly, but not the name. What had it been? Lissome? Lithesome? Lithium, for God's sake? It danced just beyond his grasp. It was maddening.

*I miss her*, he thought dully. *Now that she's gone forever, I miss her. Isn't that amazing?*

Lawnboy? Something stupid like that?

*Oh stop it*, he told his weary mind. *Put a cork in it.*

*Okay*, his mind agreed. *No problem; I can quit. I can quit anytime I want. Was it maybe Lifebuoy? No—that's soap. Sorry. Lovebite? Lovelorn?*

Brian snapped his seatbelt shut, leaned back, closed his eyes, and smelled a perfume he could not quite name.

That was when the flight attendant spoke to him. Of course: Brian Engle had a theory that they were taught-in a highly secret post-graduate course, perhaps called Teasing the Geese—to wait until

the passenger closed his or her eyes before offering some not-quite-essential service. And, of course, they were to wait until they were reasonably sure the passenger was asleep before waking him to ask if he would like a blanket or a pillow.

“Pardon me ...” she began, then stopped. Brian saw her eyes go from the epaulets on the shoulders of his black jacket to the hat, with its meaningless squiggle of scrambled eggs, on the empty seat beside him.

She rethought herself and started again.

“Pardon me, Captain, would you like coffee or orange juice?” Brian was faintly amused to see he had flustered her a little. She gestured toward the table at the front of the compartment, just below the small rectangular movie screen. There were two ice-buckets on the table. The slender green neck of a wine bottle poked out of each. “Of course, I also have champagne.”

Engle considered

*(Love Boy that’s not it close but no cigar)*

the champagne, but only briefly. “Nothing, thanks,” he said. “And no in-flight service. I think I’ll sleep all the way to Boston. How’s the weather look?”

“Clouds at 20,000 feet from the Great Plains all the way to Boston, but no problem. We’ll be at thirty-six. Oh, and we’ve had reports of the aurora borealis over the Mojave Desert. You might want to stay awake for that.”

Brian raised his eyebrows. “You’re kidding. The aurora borealis over California? And at this time of year?”

“That’s what we’ve been told.”

“Somebody’s been taking too many cheap drugs,” Brian said, and she laughed. “I think I’ll just snooze, thanks.”

“Very good, Captain.” She hesitated a moment longer. “You’re the captain who just lost his wife, aren’t you?”

The headache pulsed and snarled, but he made himself smile. This woman—who was really no more than a girl—meant no harm. “She was my ex-wife, but otherwise, yes. I am.”

“I’m awfully sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

“Have I flown with you before, sir?”

His smile reappeared briefly. “I don’t think so. I’ve been on overseas for the past four years or so.” And because it seemed somehow necessary, he offered his hand. “Brian Engle.”

She took it. “Melanie Trevor.”

Engle smiled at her again, then leaned back and closed his eyes once more. He let himself drift, but not sleep—the pre-flight announcements, followed by the take-off roll, would only wake him up again. There would be time enough to sleep when they were in the air.

Flight 29, like most red-eye flights, left promptly—Brian reflected that was high on their meager list of attractions. The plane was a 767, a little over half full. There were half a dozen other passengers in first class. None of them looked drunk or rowdy to Brian. That was good. Maybe he really *would* sleep all the way to Boston.

He watched Melanie Trevor patiently as she pointed out the exit doors, demonstrated how to use the little gold cup if there was a pressure loss (a procedure Brian had been reviewing in his own mind, and with some urgency, not long ago), and how to inflate the life vest under the seat. When the plane was airborne, she came by his seat and asked him again if she could get him something to drink. Brian shook his head, thanked her, then pushed the button which caused his seat to recline. He closed his eyes and promptly fell asleep.

He never saw Melanie Trevor again.

### 3

About three hours after Flight 29 took off, a little girl named Dinah Bellman woke up and asked her Aunt Vicky if she could have a drink of water.

Aunt Vicky did not answer, so Dinah asked again. When there was still no answer, she reached over to touch her aunt’s shoulder, but

she was already quite sure that her hand would touch nothing but the back of an empty seat, and that was what happened. Dr. Feldman had told her that children who were blind from birth often developed a high sensitivity—almost a kind of radar—to the presence or absence of people in their immediate area, but Dinah hadn't really needed the information. She knew it was true. It didn't always work, but it usually did ... especially if the person in question was her Sighted Person.

*Well, she's gone to the bathroom and she'll be right back,* Dinah thought, but she felt an odd, vague disquiet settle over her just the same. She hadn't come awake all at once; it had been a slow process, like a diver kicking her way to the surface of a lake. If Aunt Vicky, who had the window seat, had brushed by her to get to the aisle in the last two or three minutes, Dinah should have felt her.

*So she went sooner, she told herself. Probably she had to Number Two—it's really no big deal, Dinah. Or maybe she stopped to talk with somebody on her way back.*

Except Dinah couldn't hear anyone talking in the big airplane's main cabin; only the steady soft drone of the jet engines. Her feeling of disquiet grew.

The voice of Miss Lee, her therapist (except Dinah always thought of her as her blind teacher), spoke up in her head: *You mustn't be afraid to be afraid, Dinah—all children are afraid from time to time, especially in situations that are new to them. That goes double for children who are blind. Believe me, I know.* And Dinah did believe her, because, like Dinah herself, Miss Lee had been blind since birth. *Don't give up your fear ... but don't give in to it, either. Sit still and try to reason things out. You'll be surprised how often it works.*

*Especially in situations that are new to them.*

Well, that certainly fit; this was the first time Dinah had ever flown in *anything*, let alone coast to coast in a huge transcontinental jetliner.

*Try to reason it out.*

Well, she had awakened in a strange place to find her Sighted Person gone. Of course that was scary, even if you knew the absence was only temporary—after all, your Sighted Person couldn't

very well decide to pop off to the nearest Taco Bell because she had the munchies when she was shut up in an airplane flying at 37,000 feet. As for the strange silence in the cabin ... well, this was the red-eye, after all. The other passengers were probably sleeping.

*All of them?* the worried part of her mind asked doubtfully. *ALL of them are sleeping? Can that be?*

Then the answer came to her: the movie. The ones who were awake were watching the in-flight movie. Of course.

A sense of almost palpable relief swept over her. Aunt Vicky had told her the movie was Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally ...*, and said she planned to watch it herself ... if she could stay awake, that was.

Dinah ran her hand lightly over her aunt's seat, feeling for her headphones, but they weren't there. Her fingers touched a paperback book instead. One of the romance novels Aunt Vicky liked to read, no doubt—tales of the days when men were men and women weren't, she called them.

Dinah's fingers went a little further and happened on something else—smooth, fine-grained leather. A moment later she felt a zipper, and a moment after that she felt the strap.

It was Aunt Vicky's purse.

Dinah's disquiet returned. The earphones weren't on Aunt Vicky's seat, but her purse was. All the traveller's checks, except for a twenty tucked deep into Dinah's own purse, were in there—Dinah knew, because she had heard Mom and Aunt Vicky discussing them before they left the house in Pasadena.

Would Aunt Vicky go off to the bathroom and leave her purse on the seat? Would she do that when her travelling companion was not only ten, not only asleep, but *blind*?

Dinah didn't think so.

*Don't give up your fear ... but don't give in to it, either. Sit still and try to reason things out.*

But she didn't like that empty seat, and she didn't like the silence of the plane. It made perfect sense to her that most of the people would be asleep, and that the ones who were awake would be keeping as quiet as possible out of consideration for the rest, but she

still didn't like it. An animal, one with extremely sharp teeth and claws, awakened and started to snarl inside of her head. She knew the name of that animal; it was panic, and if she didn't control it fast, she might do something which would embarrass both her and Aunt Vicky.

*When I can see, when the doctors in Boston fix my eyes, I won't have to go through stupid stuff like this.*

This was undoubtedly true, but it was absolutely no help to her right now.

Dinah suddenly remembered that, after they sat down, Aunt Vicky had taken her hand, folded all the fingers but the pointer under, and then guided that one finger to the side of her seat. The controls were there—only a few of them, simple, easy to remember. There were two little wheels you could use once you put on the headphones—one switched around to the different audio channels; the other controlled the volume. The small rectangular switch controlled the light over her seat. *You won't need that one*, Aunt Vicky said with a smile in her voice. *At least, not yet.* The last one was a square button—when you pushed that one, a flight attendant came.

Dinah's finger touched this button now, and skated over its slightly convex surface.

*Do you really want to do this?* she asked herself, and the answer came back at once. *Yeah, I do.*

She pushed the button and heard the soft chime. Then she waited. No one came.

There was only the soft, seemingly eternal whisper of the jet engines. No one spoke. No one laughed (*Guess that movie isn't as funny as Aunt Vicky thought it would be*, Dinah thought). No one coughed. The seat beside her, Aunt Vicky's seat, was still empty, and no flight attendant bent over her in a comforting little envelope of perfume and shampoo and faint smells of make-up to ask Dinah if she could get her something—a snack, or maybe that drink of water.

Only the steady soft drone of the jet engines.

The panic animal was yammering louder than ever. To combat it, Dinah concentrated on focussing that radar gadget, making it into a kind of invisible cane she could jab out from her seat here in the

middle of the main cabin. She was good at that; at times, when she concentrated very hard, she almost believed she could see through the eyes of others. If she thought about it hard enough, wanted to hard enough. Once she had told Miss Lee about this feeling, and Miss Lee's response had been uncharacteristically sharp. *Sight-sharing is a frequent fantasy of the blind, she'd said. Particularly of blind children. Don't ever make the mistake of relying on that feeling, Dinah, or you're apt to find yourself in traction after falling down a flight of stairs or stepping in front of a car.*

So she had put aside her efforts to "sight-share," as Miss Lee had called it, and on the few occasions when the sensation stole over her again—that she was seeing the world, shadowy, wavery, but *there*—through her mother's eyes or Aunt Vicky's eyes, she had tried to get rid of it ... as a person who fears he is losing his mind will try to block out the murmur of phantom voices. But now she was afraid and so she felt for others, *sensed* for others, and did not find them.

Now the terror was very large in her, the yammering of the panic animal very loud. She felt a cry building up in her throat and clamped her teeth against it. Because it would not come out as a cry, or a yell; if she let it out, it would exit her mouth as a fireball scream.

*I won't scream, she told herself fiercely. I won't scream and embarrass Aunt Vicky. I won't scream and wake up all the ones who are asleep and scare all the ones who are awake and they'll all come running and say look at the scared little girl, look at the scared little blind girl.*

But now that radar sense—that part of her which evaluated all sorts of vague sensory input and which sometimes *did* seem to see through the eyes of others (no matter what Miss Lee said)—was adding to her fear rather than alleviating it.

Because that sense was telling her there was *nobody* within its circle of effectiveness.

Nobody at all.

Brian Engle was having a very bad dream. In it, he was once again piloting Flight 7 from Tokyo to L.A., but this time the leak was much worse. There was a palpable feeling of doom in the cockpit; Steve Searles was weeping as he ate a Danish pastry.

*If you're so upset, how come you're eating?* Brian asked. A shrill, teakettle whistling had begun to fill the cockpit—the sound of the pressure leak, he reckoned. This was silly, of course—leaks were almost always silent until the blowout occurred—but he supposed in dreams anything was possible.

*Because I love these things, and I'm never going to get to eat another one,* Steve said, sobbing harder than ever.

Then, suddenly, the shrill whistling sound stopped. A smiling, relieved flight attendant—it was, in fact, Melanie Trevor—appeared to tell him the leak had been found and plugged. Brian got up and followed her through the plane to the main cabin, where Anne Quinlan Engle, his ex-wife, was standing in a little alcove from which the seats had been removed. Written over the window beside her was the cryptic and somehow ominous phrase SHOOTING STARS ONLY. It was written in red, the color of danger.

Anne was dressed in the dark-green uniform of an American Pride flight attendant, which was strange—she was an advertising executive with a Boston agency, and had always looked down her narrow, aristocratic nose at the stewards with whom her husband flew. Her hand was pressed against a crack in the fuselage.

*See, darling?* she said proudly. *It's all taken care of. It doesn't even matter that you hit me. I have forgiven you.*

*Don't do that, Anne!* he cried, but it was already too late. A fold appeared in the back of her hand, mimicking the shape of the crack in the fuselage. It grew deeper as the pressure differential sucked her hand relentlessly outward. Her middle finger went through first, then the ring finger, then the first finger and her pinky. There was a brisk popping sound, like a champagne cork being drawn by an overeager waiter, as her entire hand was pulled through the crack in the airplane.

Yet Anne went on smiling.

*It's L'Envoi, darling,* she said as her arm began to disappear. Her hair was escaping the clip which held it back and blowing around her face in a misty cloud. *It's what I've always worn, don't you remember?*

He did ... now he did. But now it didn't matter.

*Anne, come back!* he screamed.

She went on smiling as her arm was sucked slowly into the emptiness outside the plane. *It doesn't hurt at all, Brian-believe me.*

The sleeve of her green American Pride blazer began to flutter, and Brian saw that her flesh was being pulled out through the crack in a thickish white ooze. It looked like Elmer's Glue.

*L'Envoi, remember?* Anne asked as she was sucked out through the crack, and now Brian could hear it again—that sound which the poet James Dickey once called “the vast beast-whistle of space.” It grew steadily louder as the dream darkened, and at the same time it began to broaden. To become not the scream of wind but that of a human voice.

Brian's eyes snapped open. He was disoriented by the power of the dream for a moment, but only a moment—he was a professional in a high-risk, high-responsibility job, a job where one of the absolute prerequisites was fast reaction time. He was on Flight 29, not Flight 7, not Tokyo to Los Angeles but Los Angeles to Boston, where Anne was already dead—not the victim of a pressure leak but of a fire in her Atlantic Avenue condominium near the waterfront. But the sound was still there.

It was a little girl, screaming shrilly.

## 5

“Would somebody speak to me, please?” Dinah Bellman asked in a low, clear voice. “I'm sorry, but my aunt is gone and I'm blind.”

No one answered her. Forty rows and two partitions forward, Captain Brian Engle was dreaming that his navigator was weeping

and eating a Danish pastry.

There was only the continuing drone of the jet engines.

The panic overshadowed her mind again, and Dinah did the only thing she could think of to stave it off: she unbuckled her seatbelt, stood up, and edged into the aisle.

“Hello?” she asked in a louder voice. “Hello, *anybody!*”

There was still no answer. Dinah began to cry. She held onto herself grimly, nonetheless, and began walking forward slowly along the portside aisle. **Keep count, though, part of** her mind warned frantically. **Keep count of how many rows you pass, or you’ll get lost and never find your way back again.**

She stopped at the row of portside seats just ahead of the row in which she and Aunt Vicky had been sitting and bent, arms outstretched, fingers splayed. She was steeled to touch the sleeping face of the man sitting there. She knew there was a man here, because Aunt Vicky had spoken to him only a minute or so before the plane took off. When he spoke back to her, his voice had come from the seat directly in front of Dinah’s own. She knew that; marking the locations of voices was part of her life, an ordinary fact of existence like breathing. The sleeping man would jump when her outstretched fingers touched him, but Dinah was beyond caring.

Except the seat was empty.

Completely empty.

Dinah straightened up again, her cheeks wet, her head pounding with fright. They couldn’t be in the bathroom *together*, could they? Of course not.

Perhaps there were two bathrooms. In a plane this big there **must** be two bathrooms.

Except that didn’t matter, either.

Aunt Vicky wouldn’t have left her purse, no matter what. Dinah was sure of it.

She began to walk slowly forward, stopping at each row of seats, reaching into the two closest her first on the port side and then on the starboard.

She felt another purse in one, what felt like a briefcase in another, a pen and a pad of paper in a third. In two others she felt

headphones. She touched something sticky on an earpiece of the second set. She rubbed her fingers together, then grimaced and wiped them on the mat which covered the headrest of the seat. That had been earwax. She was sure of it. It had its own unmistakable, yucky texture.

Dinah Bellman felt her slow way up the aisle, no longer taking pains to be gentle in her investigations. It didn't matter. She poked no eye, pinched no cheek, pulled no hair.

Every seat she investigated was empty.

***This can't be***, she thought wildly. ***It just can't be! They were all around us when we got on! I heard them! I felt them! I smelled them! Where have they all gone?***

She didn't know, but they were gone: she was becoming steadily more sure of that.

At some point, while she slept, her aunt and everyone else on Flight 29 had disappeared.

***No!*** The rational part of her mind clamored in the voice of Miss Lee. ***No, that's impossible, Dinah! If everyone's gone, who is flying the plane?***

She began to move forward faster now, hands gripping the edges of the seats, her blind eyes wide open behind her dark glasses, the hem of her pink travelling dress fluttering. She had lost count, but in her greater distress over the continuing silence, this did not matter much to her.

She stopped again, and reached her groping hands into the seat on her right. This time she touched hair ... but its location was all wrong. The hair was on the seat—how could that be?

Her hands closed around it ... and lifted it. Realization, sudden and terrible, came to her.

***It's hair, but the man it belongs to is gone. It's a scalp. I'm holding a dead man's scalp.***

That was when Dinah Bellman opened her mouth and began to give voice to the shrieks which pulled Brian Engle from his dream.

## 6

Albert Kaussner was belly up to the bar, drinking Branding Iron Whiskey. The Earp brothers, Wyatt and Virgil, were on his right, and Doc Holliday was on his left. He was just lifting his glass to offer a toast when a man with a peg leg ran-hopped into the Sergio Leone Saloon.

*"It's the Dalton Gang!"* he screamed. *"The Daltons have just rid into Dodge!"*

Wyatt turned to face him calmly. His face was narrow, tanned, and handsome. He looked a great deal like Hugh O'Brian. "This here is Tombstone, Muffin," he said. "You got to get yore stinky ole shit together."

"Well, they're ridin in, wherever we are!" Muffin exclaimed. "And they look *maaad*, Wyatt! They look *reeely reeely maaaaaad!*"

As if to prove this, guns began to fire in the street outside—the heavy thunder of Army .44s (probably stolen) mixed in with the higher whipcrack explosions of Garand rifles.

"Don't get your panties all up in a bunch, Muffy," Doc Holliday said, and tipped his hat back. Albert was not terribly surprised to see that Doc looked like Robert De Niro. He had always believed that if anyone was absolutely right to play the consumptive dentist, De Niro was the one.

"What do you say, boys?" Virgil Earp asked, looking around. Virgil didn't look like much of anyone.

"Let's go," Wyatt said. "I've had enough of these damned Clantons to last me a lifetime."

"It's the Daltons, Wyatt," Albert said quietly.

"I don't care if it's John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd!" Wyatt exclaimed. "Are you with us or not, Ace?"

"I'm with you," Albert Kaussner said, speaking in the soft but menacing tones of the born killer. He dropped one hand to the butt of his long-barrelled Buntline Special and put the other to his head for a moment to make sure his *yarmulke* was on solidly. It was.

"Okay, boys," Doc said. "Let's go cut some Dalton butt."

They strode out together, four abreast through the batwing doors, just as the bell in the Tombstone Baptist Church began to toll high noon.

The Daltons were coming down Main Street at a full gallop, shooting holes in plate-glass windows and false fronts. They turned the waterbarrel in front of Duke's Mercantile and Reliable Gun Repair into a fountain.

Ike Dalton was the first to see the four men standing in the dusty street, their frock coats pulled back to free the handles of their guns. Ike reined his horse in savagely and it rose on its rear legs, squealing, foam splattering in thick curds around the bit. Ike Dalton looked quite a bit like Rutger Hauer.

"Look what we have got here," he sneered. "It is Wyatt Earp and his pansy brother, Virgil."

Emmett Dalton (who looked like Donald Sutherland after a month of hard nights) pulled up beside Ike. "And their faggot dentist friend, too," he snarled. "Who else wants—" Then he looked at Albert and paled. The thin sneer faltered on his lips.

Paw Dalton pulled up beside his two sons. Paw bore a strong resemblance to Slim Pickens.

"Christ," Paw whispered. "It's Ace Kaussner!"

Now Frank James pulled *his* mount into line next to Paw. His face was the color of dirty parchment. "What the hell, boys!" Frank cried. "I don't mind hoorawin a town or two on a dull day, but nobody told me The Arizona Jew was gonna be here!"

Albert "Ace" Kaussner, known from Sedalia to Steamboat Springs as The Arizona Jew, took a step forward. His hand hovered over the butt of his Buntline. He spat a stream of tobacco to one side, never taking his chilly gray eyes from the hardcases mounted twenty feet in front of him.

"Go on and make your moves, boys," said The Arizona Jew. "By my count, hell ain't half full."

The Dalton Gang slapped leather just as the clock in the tower of the Tombstone Baptist Church beat the last stroke of noon into the hot desert air. Ace went for his own gun, his draw as fast as blue blazes, and as he began to fan the hammer with the flat of his left

hand, sending a spray of .45-caliber death into the Dalton Gang, a little girl standing outside The Longhorn Hotel began to scream.

*Somebody make that brat stop yowling, Ace thought. What's the matter with her, anyway? I got this under control. They don't call me the fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi for nothing.*

But the scream went on, ripping across the air, darkening it as it came, and everything began to break up.

For a moment Albert was nowhere at all—lost in a darkness through which fragments of his dream tumbled and spun in a whirlpool. The only constant was that terrible scream; it sounded like the shriek of an overloaded teakettle.

He opened his eyes and looked around. He was in his seat toward the front of Flight 29's main cabin. Coming up the aisle from the rear of the plane was a girl of about ten or twelve, wearing a pink dress and a pair of ditty-bop shades.

*What is she, a movie star or something?* he thought, but he was badly frightened, all the same. It was a bad way to exit his favorite dream.

"Hey!" he cried—but softly, so as not to wake the other passengers. "Hey, kid! What's the deal?"

The little girl whiplashed her head toward the sound of his voice. Her body turned a moment later, and she collided with one of the seats which ran down the center of the cabin in four-across rows. She struck it with her thighs, rebounded, and tumbled backward over the armrest of a portside seat. She fell into it with her legs up.

*"Where is everybody?"* she was screaming. *"Help me! Help me!"*

"Hey, stewardess!" Albert yelled, concerned, and unbuckled his seatbelt. He stood up, slipped out of his seat, turned toward the screaming little girl ... and stopped. He was now facing fully toward the back of the plane, and what he saw froze him in place.

The first thought to cross his mind was, *I guess I don't have to worry about waking up the other passengers, after all.*

To Albert it looked like the entire main cabin of the 767 was empty.

Brian Engle was almost to the partition separating Flight 29's first-class and business-class sections when he realized that first class was now entirely empty. He stopped for just a moment, then got moving again. The others had left their seats to see what all the screaming was about, perhaps.

Of course he knew this was not the case; he had been flying passengers long enough to know a good bit about their group psychology. When a passenger freaked out, few if any of the others ever moved. Most air travellers meekly surrendered their option to take individual action when they entered the bird, sat down, and buckled their seatbelts around them. Once those few simple things were accomplished, all problem-solving tasks became the crew's responsibility. Airline personnel called them geese, but they were really sheep ... an attitude most flight crews liked just fine. It made the nervous ones easier to handle.

But, since it was the only thing that made even remote sense, Brian ignored what he knew and plunged on. The rags of his own dream were still wrapped around him, and a part of his mind was convinced that it was Anne who was screaming, that he would find her halfway down the main cabin with her hand plastered against a crack in the body of the airliner, a crack located beneath a sign which read SHOOTING STARS ONLY.

There was only one passenger in the business section, an older man in a brown three-piece suit. His bald head gleamed mellowly in the glow thrown by his reading lamp. His arthritis-swollen hands were folded neatly over the buckle of his seatbelt. He was fast asleep and snoring loudly, ignoring the whole ruckus.

Brian burst through into the main cabin and there his forward motion was finally checked by utter stunned disbelief. He saw a teenaged boy standing near a little girl who had fallen into a seat on the port side about a quarter of the way down the cabin. The boy was not looking at her, however; he was staring toward the rear of

the plane, with his jaw hanging almost all the way to the round collar of his Hard Rock Cafe tee-shirt.

Brian's first reaction was about the same as Albert Kaussner's: *My God, the whole plane is empty!*

Then he saw a woman on the starboard side of the airplane stand up and walk into the aisle to see what was happening. She had the dazed, puffy look of someone who has just been jerked out of a sound sleep. Halfway down, in the center aisle, a young man in a crew-necked jersey was craning his neck toward the little girl and staring with flat, incurious eyes. Another man, this one about sixty, got up from a seat close to Brian and stood there indecisively. He was dressed in a red flannel shirt and he looked utterly bewildered. His hair was fluffed up around his head in untidy mad-scientist corkscrews.

"Who's screaming?" he asked Brian. "Is the plane in trouble, mister? You don't think we're goin down, do you?"

The little girl stopped screaming. She struggled up from the seat she had fallen into, and then almost tumbled forward in the other direction. The kid caught her just in time; he was moving with dazed slowness.

*Where have they gone?* Brian thought. *My dear God, where have they all gone?*

But his feet were moving toward the teenager and the little girl now. As he went, he passed another passenger who was still sleeping, this one a girl of about seventeen. Her mouth was open in an unlovely yawp and she was breathing in long, dry inhalations.

He reached the teenager and the girl with the pink dress.

"Where are they, man?" Albert Kaussner asked. He had an arm around the shoulders of the sobbing child, but he wasn't looking at her; his eyes slipped relentlessly back and forth across the almost deserted main cabin. "Did we land someplace while I was asleep and let them off?"

"My aunt's gone!" the little girl sobbed. "My Aunt Vicky! I thought the plane was empty! I thought I was the only one! Where's my aunt, please? I want my aunt!"

Brian knelt beside her for a moment, so they were at approximately the same level. He noticed the sunglasses and remembered seeing her get on with the blonde woman.

"You're all right," he said. "You're all right, young lady. What's your name?"

"Dinah," she sobbed. "I can't find my aunt. I'm blind and I can't see her. I woke up and the seat was empty—"

"What's going on?" the young man in the crew-neck jersey asked. He was talking over Brian's head, ignoring both Brian and Dinah, speaking to the boy in the Hard Rock tee-shirt and the older man in the flannel shirt. "Where's everybody else?"

"You're all right, Dinah," Brian repeated. "There are other people here. Can you hear them?"

"Y-yes. I can hear them. But where's Aunt Vicky? And who's been killed?"

"Killed?" a woman asked sharply. It was the one from the starboard side. Brian glanced up briefly and saw she was young, dark-haired, pretty. "*Has* someone been killed? Have we been hijacked?"

"No one's been killed," Brian said. It was, at least, something to say. His mind felt weird: like a boat which has slipped its moorings. "Calm down, honey."

"I felt his hair!" Dinah insisted. "Someone cut off his HAIR!"

This was just too odd to deal with on top of everything else, and Brian dismissed it. Dinah's earlier thought suddenly struck home to him with chilly intensity—who the fuck was flying the plane?

He stood up and turned to the older man in the red shirt. "I have to go forward," he said. "Stay with the little girl."

"All right," the man in the red shirt said. "But what's happening?"

They were joined by a man of about thirty-five who was wearing pressed blue-jeans and an oxford shirt. Unlike the others, he looked utterly calm. He took a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles from his pocket, shook them out by one bow, and put them on. "We seem a few passengers short, don't we?" he said. His British accent was almost as crisp as his shirt. "What about crew? Anybody know?"

“That’s what I’m going to find out,” Brian said, and started forward again. At the head of the main cabin he turned back and counted quickly. Two more passengers had joined the huddle around the girl in the dark glasses. One was the teenaged girl who had been sleeping so heavily; she swayed on her feet as if she were either drunk or stoned. The other was an elderly gent in a fraying sport-coat. Eight people in all. To those he added himself and the guy in business class, who was, at least so far, sleeping through it all.

Ten people.

*For the love of God, where are the rest of them?*

But *this* was not *the* time to worry about it—there were bigger problems at hand. Brian hurried forward, barely glancing at the old bald fellow snoozing in business class.

## 8

The service area squeezed behind the movie screen and between the two first-class heads was empty. So was the galley, but there Brian saw something which was extremely troubling: the beverage trolley was parked kitty-corner by the starboard bathroom. There were a number of used glasses on its bottom shelf.

*They were just getting ready to serve drinks, he thought. When it happened—whatever “it” was—they’d just taken out the trolley. Those used glasses are the ones that were collected before the roll-out. So whatever happened must have happened within half an hour of take-off, maybe a little longer—weren’t there turbulence reports over the desert? I think so. And that weird shit about the aurora borealis—*

For a moment Brian was almost convinced that last was a part of his dream—it was certainly odd enough—but further reflection convinced him that Melanie Trevor, the flight attendant, had actually said it.

*Never mind that; what did happen? In God’s name, what?*

He didn't know, but he *did* know that looking at the abandoned drinks trolley put an enormous feeling of terror and superstitious dread into his guts. For just a moment he thought that this was what the first boarders of the *Mary Celeste* must have felt like, coming upon a totally abandoned ship where all the sail was neatly laid on, where the captain's table had been set for dinner, where all ropes were neatly coiled and some sailor's pipe was still smoldering away the last of its tobacco on the foredeck ...

Brian shook these paralyzing thoughts off with a tremendous effort and went to the door between the service area and the cockpit. He knocked. As he had feared, there was no response. And although he knew it was useless to do so, he curled his fist up and hammered on it.

Nothing.

He tried the doorknob. It didn't move. That was SOP in the age of unscheduled side-trips to Havana, Lebanon, and Tehran. Only the pilots could open it. Brian *could* fly this plane ... but not from out here.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, you guys! Open the door!"

Except he knew better. The flight attendants were gone; almost all the passengers were gone; Brian Engle was willing to bet the 767's two-man cockpit crew was also gone.

He believed Flight 29 was heading east on automatic pilot.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ***DARKNESS AND MOUNTAINS. THE TREASURETROVE. CREW-NECK'S NOSE. THE SOUND OF No DOGS BARKING. PANIC IS NOT ALLOWED. A CHANGE OF DESTINATION.***

#### 1

Brian had asked the older man in the red shirt to look after Dinah, but as soon as Dinah heard the woman from the starboard side—the one with the pretty young voice—she imprinted on her with scary intensity, crowding next to her and reaching with a timid sort of determination for her hand. After the years spent with Miss Lee, Dinah knew a teacher's voice when she heard one. The dark-haired woman took her hand willingly enough.

"Did you say your name was Dinah, honey?"

"Yes," Dinah said. "I'm blind, but after my operation in Boston, I'll be able to see again. *Probably* be able to see. The doctors say there's a seventy per cent chance I'll get some vision, and a forty per cent chance I'll get all of it. What's your name?"

"Laurel Stevenson," the dark-haired woman said. Her eyes were still conning the main cabin, and her face seemed unable to break out of its initial expression: dazed disbelief.

"Laurel, that's a flower, isn't it?" Dinah asked. She spoke with feverish vivacity.

"Uh-huh," Laurel said.

"Pardon me," the man with the horn-rimmed glasses and the British accent said. "I'm going forward to join our friend."

"I'll come along," the older man in the red shirt said.

“I want to know what’s going on here!” the man in the crew-neck jersey exclaimed abruptly. His face was dead pale except for two spots of color, as bright as rouge, on his cheeks. “I want to know what’s going on right *now*.”

“Nor am I a bit surprised,” the Brit said, and then began walking forward. The man in the red shirt trailed after him. The teenaged girl with the dopey look drifted along behind them for awhile and then stopped at the partition between the main cabin and the business section, as if unsure of where she was.

The elderly gent in the fraying sport-coat went to a portside window, leaned over, and peered out.

“What do you see?” Laurel Stevenson asked.

“Darkness and mountains,” the man in the sport-coat said.

“The Rockies?” Albert asked.

The man in the frayed sport-coat nodded. “I believe so, young man.”

Albert decided to go forward himself. He was seventeen, fiercely bright, and this evening’s Bonus Mystery Question had also occurred to him: who was flying the plane?

Then he decided it didn’t matter ... at least for the moment. They were moving smoothly along, so presumably *someone* was, and even if *someone* turned out to be *something*—the autopilot, in other words—there wasn’t a thing he could do about it. As Albert Kaussner he was a talented violinist—not quite a prodigy—on his way to study at The Berklee College of Music. As Ace Kaussner he was (in his dreams, at least) the fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi, a bounty hunter who took it easy on Saturdays, was careful to keep his shoes off the bed, and always kept one eye out for the main chance and the other for a good kosher café somewhere along the dusty trail. Ace was, he supposed, his way of sheltering himself from loving parents who hadn’t allowed him to play Little League baseball because he might damage his talented hands and who had believed, in their hearts, that every snuffle signalled the onset of pneumonia. He was a gunslinging violinist—an interesting combination—but he didn’t know a thing about flying planes. And the little girl had said

something which had simultaneously intrigued him and curdled his blood. *I felt his hair!* she had said. *Someone cut off his HAIR!*

He broke away from Dinah and Laurel (the man in the ratty sport-coat had moved to the starboard side of the plane to look out one of those windows, and the man in the crew-necked jersey was going forward to join the others, his eyes narrowed pugnaciously) and began to retrace Dinah's progress up the portside aisle.

*Someone cut off his HAIR!* she had said, and not too many rows down, Albert saw what she had been talking about.

## 2

"I am praying, sir," the Brit said, "that the pilot's cap I noticed in one of the first-class seats belongs to you."

Brian was standing in front of the locked door, head down, thinking furiously. When the Brit spoke up behind him, he jerked in surprise and whirled on his heels.

"Didn't mean to put your wind up," the Brit said mildly. "I'm Nick Hopewell." He stuck out his hand.

Brian shook it. As he did so, performing his half of the ancient ritual, it occurred to him that this must be a dream. The scary flight from Tokyo and finding out that Anne was dead had brought it on.

Part of his mind knew this was not so, just as part of his mind had known the little girl's scream had had nothing to do with the deserted first-class section, but he seized on this idea just as he had seized on that one. It helped, so why not? Everything else was nuts—so nutty that even attempting to think about it made his mind feel sick and feverish. Besides, there was really no time to think, simply no time, and he found that this was also something of a relief.

"Brian Engle," he said. "I'm pleased to meet you, although the circumstances are—" He shrugged helplessly. What were the circumstances, exactly? He could not think of an adjective which would adequately describe them.

“Bit bizarre, aren’t they?” Hopewell agreed. “Best not to think of them right now, I suppose. Does the crew answer?”

“No,” Brian said, and abruptly struck his fist against the door in frustration.

“Easy, easy,” Hopewell soothed. “Tell me about the cap, Mr. Engle. You have no idea what satisfaction and relief it would give me to address you as Captain Engle.”

Brian grinned in spite of himself. “I *am* Captain Engle,” he said, “but under the circumstances, I guess you can call me Brian.”

Nick Hopewell seized Brian’s left hand and kissed it heartily. “I believe I’ll call you Savior instead,” he said. “Do you mind awfully?”

Brian threw his head back and began to laugh. Nick joined him. They were standing there in front of the locked door in the nearly empty plane, laughing wildly, when the man in the red shirt and the man in the crew-necked jersey arrived, looking at them as if they had both gone crazy.

### 3

Albert Kaussner held the hair in his right hand for several moments, looking at it thoughtfully. It was black and glossy in the overhead lights, a right proper pelt, and he wasn’t at all surprised it had scared the hell out of the little girl. It would have scared Albert, too, if he hadn’t been able to see it.

He tossed the wig back into the seat, glanced at the purse lying in the next seat, then looked more closely at what was lying next to the purse. It was a plain gold wedding ring. He picked it up, examined it, then put it back where it had been. He began walking slowly toward the back of the airplane. In less than a minute, Albert was so struck with wonder that he had forgotten all about who was flying the plane, or how the hell they were going to get down from here if it was the automatic pilot.

Flight 29's passengers were gone, but they had left a fabulous—and sometimes perplexing—treasure trove behind. Albert found jewelry on almost every seat: wedding rings, mostly, but there were also diamonds, emeralds, and rubies. There were earrings, most of them five-and-dime stuff but some which looked pretty expensive to Albert's eyes. His mom had a few good pieces, and some of this stuff made her best jewelry look like rummage-sale buys. There were studs, necklaces, cufflinks, ID bracelets. And watches, watches, watches. From Timex to Rolex, there seemed to be at least two hundred of them, lying on seats, lying on the floor between seats, lying in the aisles. They twinkled in the lights.

There were at least sixty pairs of spectacles. Wire-rimmed, horn-rimmed, gold-rimmed. There were prim glasses, punky glasses, and glasses with rhinestones set in the bows. There were Ray-Bans, Polaroids, and Foster Grants.

There were belt buckles and service pins and piles of pocket-change. No bills, but easily four hundred dollars in quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies. There were wallets—not as many wallets as purses, but still a good dozen of them, from fine leather to plastic. There were pocket knives. There were at least a dozen hand-held calculators.

And odder things, as well. He picked up a flesh-colored plastic cylinder and examined it for almost thirty seconds before deciding it really was a dildo and putting it down again in a hurry. There was a small gold spoon on a fine gold chain. There were bright speckles of metal here and there on the seats and the floor, mostly silver but some gold. He picked up a couple of these to verify the judgment of his own wondering mind: some were dental caps, but most were fillings from human teeth. And, in one of the back rows, he picked up two tiny steel rods. He looked at these for several moments before realizing they were surgical pins, and that they belonged not on the floor of a nearly deserted airliner but in some passenger's knee or shoulder.

He discovered one more passenger, a young bearded man who was sprawled over two seats in the very last row, snoring loudly and smelling like a brewery.

Two seats away, he found a gadget that looked like a pacemaker implant.

Albert stood at the rear of the plane and looked forward along the large, empty tube of the fuselage.

“What in the fuck is going on here?” he asked in a soft, trembling voice.

## 4

“I demand to know just what is going on here!” the man in the crew-neck jersey said in a loud voice. He strode into the service area at the head of first class like a corporate raider mounting a hostile takeover.

“Currently? We’re just about to break the lock on this door,” Nick Hopewell said, fixing Crew-Neck with a bright gaze. “The flight crew appears to have abdicated along with everyone else, but we’re in luck, just the same. My new acquaintance here is a pilot who just happened to be deadheading, and—”

“*Someone* around here is a deadhead, all right,” Crew-Neck said, “and I intend to find out who, believe me.” He pushed past Nick without a glance and stuck his face into Brian’s, as aggressive as a ballplayer disputing an umpire’s call. “Do you work for American Pride, friend?”

“Yes,” Brian said, “but why don’t we put that off for now, sir? It’s important that—”

“*I’ll* tell you what’s important!” Crew-Neck shouted. A fine mist of spit settled on Brian’s cheeks and he had to sit on a sudden and amazingly strong impulse to clamp his hands around this twerp’s neck and see how far he could twist his head before something inside cracked. “I’ve got a meeting at the Prudential Center with representatives of Bankers International at nine o’clock this morning! *Promptly* at nine o’clock! I booked a seat on this conveyance in good faith, and I have no intention of being late for my appointment! I want

to know three things: *who* authorized an unscheduled stop for this airliner while I was asleep, *where* that stop was made, and *why it was done!*”

“Have you ever watched *Star Trek*?” Nick Hopewell asked suddenly.

Crew-Neck’s face, suffused with angry blood, swung around. His expression said that he believed the Englishman was clearly mad. “What in the hell are you talking about?”

“Marvellous American program,” Nick said. “Science fiction. Exploring strange new worlds, like the one which apparently exists inside your head. And if you don’t shut your gob at once, you bloody idiot, I’ll be happy to demonstrate Mr. Spock’s famous Vulcan sleeper-hold for you.”

“You can’t talk to me like that!” Crew-Neck snarled. “Do you know who I am?”

“Of course,” Nick said. “You’re a bloody-minded little bugger who has mistaken his airline boarding pass for credentials proclaiming him to be the Grand High Pooh-Bah of Creation. You’re also badly frightened. No harm in that, but you *are* in the way.”

Crew-Neck’s face was now so clogged with blood that Brian began to be afraid his entire head would explode. He had once seen a movie where that happened. He did not want to see it in real life. “You can’t talk to me like that! You’re not even an American citizen!”

Nick Hopewell moved so fast that Brian barely saw what was happening. At one moment the man in the crew-neck jersey was yelling into Nick’s face while Nick stood at ease beside Brian, his hands on the hips of his pressed jeans. A moment later, Crew-Neck’s nose was caught firmly between the first and second fingers of Nick’s right hand.

Crew-Neck tried to pull away. Nick’s fingers tightened ... and then his hand turned slightly, in the gesture of a man tightening a screw or winding an alarm clock. Crew-Neck bellowed.

“I can break it,” Nick said softly. “Easiest thing in the world, believe me.”

Crew-Neck tried to jerk backward. His hands beat ineffectually at Nick’s arm. Nick twisted again and Crew-Neck bellowed again.

“I don’t think you heard me. I can break it. Do you understand? Signify if you have understanding.”

He twisted Crew-Neck’s nose a third time.

Crew-Neck did not just bellow this time; he screamed.

“Oh, wow,” the stoned-looking girl said from behind them. “A nose-hold.”

“I don’t have time to discuss your business appointments,” Nick said softly to Crew-Neck. “Nor do I have time to deal with hysteria masquerading as aggression. We have a nasty, perplexing situation here. You, sir, are clearly not part of the solution, and I have no intention whatever of allowing you to become part of the problem. Therefore, I am going to send you back into the main cabin. This gentleman in the red shirt—”

“Don Gaffney,” the gentleman in the red shirt said. He looked as vastly surprised as Brian felt.

“Thank you,” Nick said. He still held Crew-Neck’s nose in that amazing clamp, and Brian could now see a thread of blood lining one of the man’s pinched nostrils.

Nick pulled him closer and spoke in a warm, confidential voice.

“Mr. Gaffney here will be your escort. Once you arrive in the main cabin, my buggardly friend, you will take a seat with your safety belt fixed firmly around your middle. Later, when the captain here has assured himself we are not going to fly into a mountain, a building, or another plane, we may be able to discuss our current situation at greater length. For the present, however, your input is not necessary. Do you understand all these things I have told you?”

Crew-Neck uttered a pained, outraged bellow.

“If you understand, please favor me with a thumbs-up.”

Crew-Neck raised one thumb. The nail, Brian saw, was neatly manicured.

“Fine,” Nick said. “One more thing. When I let go of your nose, you may feel vengeful. To *feel* that way is fine. To give vent to the feeling would be a terrible mistake. I want you to remember that what I have done to your nose I can just as easily do to your testicles. In fact, I can wind them up so far that when I let go of them, you may actually

fly about the cabin like a child's airplane. I expect you to leave with Mr.—”

He looked questioningly at the man in the red shirt.

“Gaffney,” the man in the red shirt repeated.

“Gaffney, right. Sorry. I expect you to leave with Mr. Gaffney. You will not remonstrate. You will not indulge in rebuttal. In fact, if you say so much as a single word, you will find yourself investigating hitherto unexplored realms of pain. Give me a thumbs-up if you understand *this*.”

Crew-Neck waved his thumb so enthusiastically that for a moment he looked like a hitchhiker with diarrhea.

“Right, then!” Nick said, and let go of Crew-Neck's nose.

Crew-Neck stepped back, staring at Nick Hopewell with angry, perplexed eyes—he looked like a cat which had just been doused with a bucket of cold water. By itself, anger would have left Brian unmoved. It was the perplexity that made him feel a little sorry for Crew-Neck. He felt mightily perplexed himself.

Crew-Neck raised a hand to his nose, verifying that it was still there. A narrow ribbon of blood, no wider than the pull-strip on a pack of cigarettes, ran from each nostril. The tips of his fingers came away bloody, and he looked at them unbelievably. He opened his mouth.

“I wouldn't, mister,” Don Gaffney said. “Guy means it. You better come along with me.”

He took Crew-Neck's arm. For a moment Crew-Neck resisted Gaffney's gentle tug. He opened his mouth again.

“Bad idea,” the girl who looked stoned told him.

Crew-Neck closed his mouth and allowed Gaffney to lead him back toward the rear of first class. He looked over his shoulder once, his eyes wide and stunned, and then dabbed his fingers under his nose again.

Nick, meanwhile, had lost all interest in the man. He was peering out one of the windows. “We appear to be over the Rockies,” he said, “and we seem to be at a safe enough altitude.”

Brian looked out himself for a moment. It was the Rockies, all right, and near the center of the range, by the look. He put their

altitude at about 35,000 feet. Just about what Melanie Trevor had told him. So they were fine ... at least, so far.

"Come on," he said. "Help me break down this door."

Nick joined him in front of the door. "Shall I captain this part of the operation, Brian? I have some experience."

"Be my guest." Brian found himself wondering exactly how Nick Hopewell had come by his experience in twisting noses and breaking down doors. He had an idea it was probably a long story.

"It would be helpful to know how strong the lock is," Nick said. "If we hit it too hard, we're apt to go catapulting straight into the cockpit. I wouldn't want to run into something that won't bear running into."

"I don't know," Brian said truthfully. "I don't think it's tremendously strong, though."

"All right," Nick said. "Turn and face me—your right shoulder pointing at the door, my left."

Brian did.

"I'll count off. We're going to shoulder it together on three. Dip your legs as we go in; we're more apt to pop the lock if we hit the door lower down. *Don't* hit it as hard as you can. About half. If that isn't enough, we can always go again. Got it?"

"I've got it."

The girl, who looked a little more awake and with it now, said: "I don't suppose they leave a key under the doormat or anything, huh?"

Nick looked at her, startled, then back at Brian. "*Do* they by any chance leave a key someplace?"

Brian shook his head. "I'm afraid not. It's an anti-terrorist precaution."

"Of course," Nick said. "Of course it is." He glanced at the girl and winked. "But that's using your head, just the same."

The girl smiled at him uncertainly.

Nick turned back to Brian. "Ready, then?"

"Ready."

"Right, then. One ... two ... *three!*"

They drove forward into the door, dipping down in perfect synchronicity just before they hit it, and the door popped open with absurd ease. There was a small tip—too short by at least three

inches to be considered a step—between the service area and the cockpit. Brian struck this with the edge of his shoe and would have fallen sideways into the cockpit if Nick hadn't grabbed him by the shoulder. The man was as quick as a cat.

“Right, then,” he said, more to himself than to Brian. “Let's just see what we're dealing with here, shall we?”

## 5

The cockpit was empty. Looking into it made Brian's arms and neck prickle with gooseflesh. It was all well and good to know that a 767 could fly thousands of miles on autopilot, using information which had been programmed into its inertial navigation system—God knew he had flown enough miles that way himself—but it was another to see the two empty seats. That was what chilled him. He had never seen an empty in-flight cockpit during his entire career.

He was seeing one now. The pilot's controls moved by themselves, making the infinitesimal corrections necessary to keep the plane on its plotted course to Boston. The board was green. The two small wings on the plane's attitude indicator were steady above the artificial horizon. Beyond the two small, slanted-forward windows, a billion stars twinkled in an early-morning sky.

“Oh, wow,” the teenaged girl said softly.

“Coo-eee,” Nick said at the same moment. “Look there, matey.”

Nick was pointing at a half-empty cup of coffee on the service console beside the left arm of the pilot's seat. Next to the coffee was a Danish pastry with two bites gone. This brought Brian's dream back in a rush, and he shivered violently.

“It happened fast, whatever it was,” Brian said. “And look there. And there.”

He pointed first to the seat of the pilot's chair and then to the floor by the co-pilot's seat. Two wristwatches glimmered in the lights of the controls, one a pressure-proof Rolex, the other a digital Pulsar.

“If you want watches, you can take your pick,” a voice said from behind them. “There’s tons of them back there.” Brian looked over his shoulder and saw Albert Kaussner, looking neat and very young in his small black skull-cap and his Hard Rock Cafe tee-shirt. Standing beside him was the elderly gent in the fraying sport-coat.

“Are there indeed?” Nick asked. For the first time he seemed to have lost his self-possession.

“Watches, jewelry, and glasses,” Albert said. “Also purses. But the weirdest thing is ... there’s stuff I’m pretty sure came from *inside* people. Things like surgical pins and pacemakers.”

Nick looked at Brian Engle. The Englishman had paled noticeably. “I had been going on roughly the same assumption as our rude and loquacious friend,” he said. “That the plane set down someplace, for some reason, while I was asleep. That most of the passengers—and the crew—were somehow offloaded.”

“I would have woken the minute descent started,” Brian said. “It’s habit.” He found he could not take his eyes off the empty seats, the half-drunk cup of coffee, the half-eaten Danish.

“Ordinarily, I’d say the same,” Nick agreed, “so I decided my drink had been doped.”

*I don’t know what this guy does for a living, Brian thought, but he sure doesn’t sell used cars.*

“No one doped my drink,” Brian said, “because I didn’t have one.”

“Neither did I,” Albert said.

“In any case, there *couldn’t* have been a landing and take-off while we were sleeping,” Brian told them. “You can *fly* a plane on autopilot, and the Concorde can *land* on autopilot, but you need a human being to take one up.”

“We didn’t land, then,” Nick said.

“Nope.”

“So where did they go, Brian?”

“I don’t know,” Brian said. He moved to the pilot’s chair and sat down.

## 6

Flight 29 was flying at 36,000 feet, just as Melanie Trevor had told him, on heading 090. An hour or two from now that would change as the plane doglegged further north. Brian took the navigator's chart book, looked at the airspeed indicator, and made a series of rapid calculations. Then he put on the headset.

"Denver Center, this is American Pride Flight 29, over?"

He flicked the toggle ... and heard nothing. Nothing at all. No static; no chatter; no ground control; no other planes. He checked the transponder setting: 7700, just as it should be. Then he flicked the toggle back to transmit again. "Denver Center, come in please, this is American Pride Flight 29, repeat, American Pride Heavy, and I have a problem, Denver, I have a problem."

Flicked back the toggle to receive. Listened.

Then Brian did something which made Albert "Ace" Kaussner's heart begin to bump faster with fear: he hit the control panel just below the radio equipment with the heel of his hand. The Boeing 767 was a high-tech, state-of-the-art passenger plane. One did not try to make the equipment on such a plane operate in such a fashion. What the pilot had just done was what you did when the old Philco radio you bought for a buck at the Kiwanis Auction wouldn't play after you got it home.

Brian tried Denver Center again. And got no response. No response at all.

## 7

To this moment, Brian had been dazed and terribly perplexed. Now he began to feel frightened—really frightened—as well. Up until now there had been no time to be scared. He wished that were still so ... but it wasn't. He flicked the radio to the emergency band and tried again. There was no response. This was the equivalent of dialing

911 in Manhattan and getting a recording which said everyone had left for the weekend. When you called for help on the emergency band, you always got a prompt response.

*Until now, at least,* Brian thought.

He switched to UNICOM, where private pilots obtained landing advisories at small airports. No response. He listened ... and heard nothing at all. Which just couldn't be. Private pilots chattered like grackles on a telephone line. The gal in the Piper wanted to know the weather. The guy in the Cessna would just flop back dead in his seat if he couldn't get someone to call his wife and tell her he was bringing home three extra for dinner. The guys in the Lear wanted the girl on the desk at the Arvada Airport to tell their charter passengers that they were going to be fifteen minutes late and to hold their water, they would still make the baseball game in Chicago on time.

But none of that was there. All the grackles had flown, it seemed, and the telephone lines were bare.

He flicked back to the FAA emergency band. "Denver come in! Come in right now! *This is AP Flight 29, you answer me, goddammit!*"

Nick touched his shoulder. "Easy, mate."

"The dog won't bark!" Brian said frantically. "That's impossible, but that's what's happening! Christ, what did they do, have a fucking nuclear war?"

"*Easy,*" Nick repeated. "Steady down, Brian, and tell me what you mean, the dog won't bark."

"I mean Denver Control!" Brian cried. "*That dog!* I mean FAA Emergency! *That dog!* UNICOM, that dog, too! I've never—"

He flicked another switch. "Here," he said, "this is the medium-shortwave band. They should be jumping all over each other like frogs on a hot sidewalk, but I can't pick up jack shit."

He flicked another switch, then looked up at Nick and Albert Kaussner, who had crowded in close. "There's no VOR beacon out of Denver," he said.

"Meaning?"

“Meaning I have no radio, I have no Denver navigation beacon, and my board says everything is just peachy keen. Which is crap. Got to be.”

A terrible idea began to surface in his mind, coming up like a bloated corpse rising to the top of a river.

“Hey, kid—look out the window. Left side of the plane. Tell me what you see.”

Albert Kaussner looked out. He looked out for a long time. “Nothing,” he said. “Nothing at all. Just the last of the Rockies and the beginning of the plains.”

“No lights?”

“No.”

Brian got up on legs which felt weak and watery. He stood looking down for a long time.

At last Nick Hopewell said quietly, “Denver’s gone, isn’t it?”

Brian knew from the navigator’s charts and his on-board navigational equipment that they should now be flying less than fifty miles south of Denver ... but below them he saw only the dark, featureless landscape that marked the beginning of the Great Plains.

“Yes,” he said. “Denver’s gone.”

## 8

There was a moment of utter silence in the cockpit, and then Nick Hopewell turned to the peanut gallery, currently consisting of Albert, the man in the ratty sport-coat, and the young girl. Nick clapped his hands together briskly, like a kindergarten teacher. He sounded like one, too, when he spoke. “All right, people! Back to your seats. I think we need a little quiet here.”

“We *are* being quiet,” the girl objected, and reasonably enough.

“I believe that what the gentleman actually means isn’t quiet but a little privacy,” the man in the ratty sport-coat said. He spoke in cultured tones, but his soft, worried eyes were fixed on Brian.

“That’s *exactly* what I mean,” Nick agreed. “Please?”

“Is he going to be all right?” the man in the ratty sport-coat asked in a low voice. “He looks rather upset.”

Nick answered in the same confidential tone. “Yes,” he said. “He’ll be fine. I’ll see to it.”

“Come on, children,” the man in the ratty sport-coat said. He put one arm around the girl’s shoulders, the other around Albert’s. “Let’s go back and sit down. Our pilot has work to do.”

They need not have lowered their voices even temporarily as far as Brian Engle was concerned. He might have been a fish feeding in a stream while a small flock of birds passes overhead. The sound may reach the fish, but he certainly attaches no significance to it. Brian was busy working his way through the radio bands and switching from one navigational touchpoint to another. It was useless. No Denver; no Colorado Springs; no Omaha. All gone.

He could feel sweat trickling down his cheeks like tears, could feel his shirt sticking to his back.

*I must smell like a pig*, he thought, *or a—*

Then inspiration struck. He switched to the military-aircraft band, although regulations expressly forbade his doing so. The Strategic Air Command practically owned Omaha. *They* would not be off the air. They might tell him to get the fuck off their frequency, would probably threaten to report him to the FAA, but Brian would accept all this cheerfully. Perhaps he would be the first to tell them that the city of Denver had apparently gone on vacation.

“Air Force Control, Air Force Control, this is American Pride Flight 29 and we have a problem here, a big problem here, do you read me? Over.”

No dog barked there, either.

That was when Brian felt something—something like a bolt—starting to give way deep inside his mind. That was when he felt his entire structure of organized thought begin to slide slowly toward some dark abyss.

Nick Hopewell clamped a hand on him then, high up on his shoulder, near the neck. Brian jumped in his seat and almost cried out aloud. He turned his head and found Nick's face less than three inches from his own.

*Now he'll grab my nose and start to twist it,* Brian thought.

Nick did not grab his nose. He spoke with quiet intensity, his eyes fixed unflinchingly on Brian's. "I see a look in your eyes, my friend ... but I didn't need to see your eyes to know it was there. I can hear it in your voice and see it in the way you're sitting in your seat. Now listen to me, and listen well: *panic is not allowed.*"

Brian stared at him, frozen by that blue gaze.

"Do you understand me?"

He spoke with great effort. "They don't let guys do what I do for a living if they panic, Nick."

"I know that," Nick said, "but this is a unique situation. You need to remember, however, that there are a dozen or more people on this plane, and your job is the same as it ever was: to bring them down in one piece."

"You don't need to tell me what my job is!" Brian snapped.

"I'm afraid I did," Nick said, "but you're looking a hundred per cent better now, I'm relieved to say."

Brian was doing more than looking better; he was starting to feel better again. Nick had stuck a pin into the most sensitive place—his sense of responsibility. *Just where he meant to stick me,* he thought.

"What do you do for a living, Nick?" he asked a trifle shakily.

Nick threw back his head and laughed. "Junior attaché, British embassy, old man."

"My aunt's hat."

Nick shrugged. "Well ... that's what it says on my papers, and I reckon that's good enough. If they said anything else, I suppose it would be Her Majesty's Mechanic. I fix things that need fixing. Right now that means you."

"Thank you," Brian said touchily, "but I'm fixed."

“All right, then—what do you mean to do? Can you navigate without those ground-beam thingies? Can you avoid other planes?”

“I can navigate just fine with on-board equipment,” Brian said. “As for other planes—” He pointed at the radar screen. “This bastard says there *aren’t* any other planes.”

“Could be there are, though,” Nick said softly. “Could be that radio and radar conditions are snafued, at least for the time being. You mentioned nuclear war, Brian. I think if there had been a nuclear exchange, we’d know. But that doesn’t mean there hasn’t been some sort of accident. Are you familiar with the phenomenon called the electromagnetic pulse?”

Brian thought briefly of Melanie Trevor. *Oh, and we’ve had reports of the aurora borealis over the Mojave Desert. You might want to stay awake for that.*

Could that be it? Some freakish weather phenomenon?

He supposed it was just possible. But, if so, how come he heard no static on the radio? How come there was no wave interference across the radar screen? Why just this dead blankness? And he didn’t think the aurora borealis had been responsible for the disappearance of a hundred and fifty to two hundred passengers.

“Well?” Nick asked.

“You’re some mechanic, Nick,” Brian said at last, “but I don’t think it’s EMP. All on-board equipment—including the directional gear—seems to be working just fine.” He pointed to the digital compass readout. “If we’d experienced an electromagnetic pulse, that baby would be all over the place. But it’s holding dead steady.”

“So. Do you intend to continue on to Boston?”

*Do you intend ... ?*

And with that, the last of Brian’s panic drained away. *That’s right, he thought. I’m the captain of this ship now ... and in the end, that’s all it comes down to. You should have reminded me of that in the first place, my friend, and saved us both a lot of trouble.*

“Logan at dawn, with no idea what’s going on in the country below us, or the rest of the world? No way.”

“Then what is our destination? Or do you need time to consider the matter?”

Brian didn't. And now the other things he needed to do began to click into place.

"I know," he said. "And I think it's time to talk to the passengers. The few that are left, anyway."

He picked up the microphone, and that was when the bald man who had been sleeping in the business section poked his head into the cockpit. "Would one of you gentlemen be so kind as to tell me what's happened to all the service personnel on this craft?" he asked querulously. "I've had a very nice nap... but now I'd like my dinner."

## 10

Dinah Bellman felt much better. It was good to have other people around her, to feel their comforting presence. She was sitting in a small group with Albert Kaussner, Laurel Stevenson, and the man in the ratty sport-coat, who had introduced himself as Robert Jenkins. He was, he said, the author of more than forty mystery novels, and had been on his way to Boston to address a convention of mystery fans.

"Now," he said, "I find myself involved in a mystery a good deal more extravagant than any I would ever have dared to write."

These four were sitting in the center section, near the head of the main cabin. The man in the crew-neck jersey sat in the starboard aisle, several rows down, holding a handkerchief to his nose (which had actually stopped bleeding several minutes ago) and fuming in solitary splendor. Don Gaffney sat nearby, keeping an uneasy watch on him. Gaffney had only spoken once, to ask Crew-Neck what his name was. Crew-Neck had not replied. He simply fixed Gaffney with a gaze of baleful intensity over the crumpled bouquet of his handkerchief.

Gaffney had not asked again.

"Does anyone have the *slightest* idea of what's going on here?" Laurel almost pleaded. "I'm supposed to be starting my first real

vacation in ten years tomorrow, and now this happens.”

Albert happened to be looking directly at Miss Stevenson as she spoke. As she dropped the line about this being her first real vacation in ten years, he saw her eyes suddenly shift to the right and blink rapidly three or four times, as if a particle of dust had landed in one of them. An idea so strong it was a certainty rose in his mind: the lady was lying. For some reason, the lady was lying. He looked at her more closely and saw nothing really remarkable—a woman with a species of fading prettiness, a woman falling rapidly out of her twenties and toward middle age (and to Albert, thirty was definitely where middle age began), a woman who would soon become colorless and invisible. But she had color now; her cheeks flamed with it. He didn't know what the lie meant, but he could see that it had momentarily refreshed her prettiness and made her nearly beautiful.

*There's a lady who should lie more often,* Albert thought. Then, before he or anyone else could reply to her, Brian's voice came from the overhead speakers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain.”

“Captain my ass,” Crew-Neck snarled.

“Shut up!” Gaffney exclaimed from across the aisle.

Crew-Neck looked at him, startled, and subsided.

“As you undoubtedly know, we have an extremely odd situation on our hands here,” Brian continued. “You don't need me to explain it; you only have to look around yourselves to understand.”

“I don't understand anything,” Albert muttered.

“I know a few other things, as well. They won't exactly make your day, I'm afraid, but since we're in this together, I want to be as frank as I possibly can. I have no cockpit-to-ground communication. And about five minutes ago we should have been able to see the lights of Denver clearly from the airplane. We couldn't. The only conclusion I'm willing to draw right now is that somebody down there forgot to pay the electricity bill. And until we know a little more, I think that's the only conclusion *any* of us should draw.”

He paused. Laurel was holding Dinah's hand. Albert produced a low, awed whistle. Robert Jenkins, the mystery writer, was staring

dreamily into space with his hands resting on his thighs.

“All of that is the bad news,” Brian went on. “The good news is this: the plane is undamaged, we have plenty of fuel, and I’m qualified to fly this make and model. Also to land it. I think we’ll all agree that landing safely is our first priority. There isn’t a thing we can do until we accomplish that, and I want you to rest assured that it will be done.

“The last thing I want to pass on to you is that our destination will now be Bangor, Maine.”

Crew-Neck sat up with a jerk. “*Whaaat?*” he bellowed.

“Our in-flight navigation equipment is in five-by-five working order, but I can’t say the same for the navigational beams—VOR—which we also use. Under these circumstances, I have elected not to enter Logan airspace. I haven’t been able to raise anyone, in air or on ground, by radio. The aircraft’s radio equipment appears to be working, but I don’t feel I can depend on appearances in the current circumstances. Bangor International Airport has the following advantages: the short approach is over land rather than water; air traffic at our ETA, about 8:30 A.M., will be much lighter—assuming there’s any at all; and BIA, which used to be Dow Air Force Base, has the longest commercial runway on the East Coast of the United States. Our British and French friends land the Concorde there when they can’t get into New York.”

Crew-Neck bawled: “*I have an important business meeting at the Pru this morning at nine o’clock AND I FORBID YOU TO FLY INTO SOME DIPSHIT MAINE AIRPORT!*”

Dinah jumped and then cringed away from the sound of Crew-Neck’s voice, pressing her cheek against the side of Laurel Stevenson’s breast. She was not crying—not yet, anyway—but Laurel felt her chest begin to hitch.

“*DO YOU HEAR ME?*” Crew-Neck was bellowing. “*I AM DUE IN BOSTON TO DISCUSS AN UNUSUALLY LARGE BOND TRANSACTION, AND I HAVE EVERY INTENTION OF ARRIVING AT THAT MEETING ON TIME!*” He unlatched his seatbelt and began to stand up. His cheeks were red, his brow waxy white. There was a

blank look in his eyes which Laurel found extremely frightening. *“DO YOU UNDERSTA—”*

“Please,” Laurel said. “Please, mister, you’re scaring the little girl.”

Crew-Neck turned his head and that unsettling blank gaze fell on her. Laurel could have waited. *“SCARING THE LITTLE GIRL? WE’RE DIVERTING TO SOME TINPOT, CHICKENSHIT AIRPORT IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, AND ALL YOU’VE GOT TO WORRY ABOUT IS—”*

“Sit down and shut up or I’ll pop you one,” Gaffney said, standing up. He had at least twenty years on Crew-Neck, but he was heavier and much broader through the chest. He had rolled the sleeves of his red flannel shirt to the elbows, and when he clenched his hands into fists, the muscles in his forearms bunched. He looked like a lumberjack just starting to soften into retirement.

Crew-Neck’s upper lip pulled back from his teeth. This doglike grimace scared Laurel, because she didn’t believe the man in the crew-neck jersey knew he was making a face. She was the first of them to wonder if this man might not be crazy.

“I don’t think you could do it alone, pops,” he said.

“He won’t have to.” It was the bald man from the business section. “I’ll take a swing at you myself, if you don’t shut up.”

Albert Kaussner mustered all his courage and said, “So will I, you putz.” Saying it was a great relief. He felt like one of the guys at the Alamo, stepping over the line Colonel Travis had drawn in the dirt.

Crew-Neck looked around. His lip rose and fell again in that queer, doglike snarl. “I see. I see. You’re all against me. Fine.” He sat down and stared at them truculently. “But if you knew anything about the market in South American bonds—” He didn’t finish. There was a cocktail napkin sitting on the arm of the seat next to him. He picked it up, looked at it, and began to pluck at it.

“Doesn’t have to be this way,” Gaffney said. “I wasn’t born a hardass, mister, and I ain’t one by inclination, either.” He was trying to sound pleasant, Laurel thought, but wariness showed through, perhaps anger as well. “You ought to just relax and take it easy. Look on the bright side! The airline’ll probably refund your full ticket price on this trip.”

Crew-Neck cut his eyes briefly in Don Gaffney's direction, then looked back at the cocktail napkin. He quit plucking it and began to tear it into long strips.

"Anyone here know how to run that little oven in the galley?" Baldy asked, as if nothing had happened. "I want my dinner."

No one answered.

"I didn't think so," the bald man said sadly. "This is the era of specialization. A shameful time to be alive." With this philosophical pronouncement, Baldy retreated once more to business class.

Laurel looked down and saw that, below the rims of the dark glasses with their jaunty red plastic frames, Dinah Bellman's cheeks were wet with tears. Laurel forgot some of her own fear and perplexity, at least temporarily, and hugged the little girl. "Don't cry, honey—that man was just upset. He's better now."

*If you call sitting here and looking hypnotized while you tear a paper napkin into teeny shreds better,* she thought.

"I'm scared," Dinah whispered. "We all look like monsters to that man."

"No, I don't think so," Laurel said, surprised and a little taken aback. "Why would you think a thing like that?"

"I don't know," Dinah said. She liked this woman—had liked her from the instant she heard her voice—but she had no intention of telling Laurel that for just a moment she had seen them all, herself included, looking back at the man with the loud voice. She had been *inside* the man with the loud voice—his name was Mr. Tooms or Mr. Tunney or something like that—and to him they looked like a bunch of evil, selfish trolls.

If she told Miss Lee something like that, Miss Lee would think she was crazy. Why would this woman, whom Dinah had just met, think any different?

So Dinah said nothing.

Laurel kissed the girl's cheek. The skin was hot beneath her lips. "Don't be scared, honey. We're going along just as smooth as can be—can't you feel it?—and in just a few hours we'll be safe on the ground again."

“That’s good. I want my Aunt Vicky, though. Where is she, do you think?”

“I don’t know, hon,” Laurel said. “I wish I did.”

Dinah thought again of the faces the yelling man saw: evil faces, cruel faces. She thought of her own face as he perceived it, a piggish baby face with the eyes hidden behind huge black lenses. Her courage broke then, and she began to weep in hoarse racking sobs that hurt Laurel’s heart. She held the girl, because it was the only thing she could think of to do, and soon she was crying herself. They cried together for nearly five minutes, and then Dinah began to calm again. Laurel looked over at the slim young boy, whose name was either Albert or Alvin, she could not remember which, and saw that his eyes were also wet. He caught her looking and glanced hastily down at his hands.

Dinah fetched one final gasping sob and then just lay with her head pillowed against Laurel’s breast. “I guess crying won’t help, huh?”

“No, I guess not,” Laurel agreed. “Why don’t you try going to sleep, Dinah?”

Dinah sighed—a watery, unhappy sound. “I don’t think I can. I was asleep.”

*Tell me about it*, Laurel thought. And Flight 29 continued east at 36,000 feet, flying at over five hundred miles an hour above the dark midsection of America.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ***THE DEDUCTIVE METHOD. ACCIDENTS AND STATISTICS. SPECULATIVE POSSIBILITIES. PRESSURE IN THE TRENCHES. BETHANY'S PROBLEM. THE DESCENT BEGINS.***

#### 1

"That little girl said something interesting an hour or so ago," Robert Jenkins said suddenly.

The little girl in question had gone to sleep again in the meantime, despite her doubts about her ability to do so. Albert Kaussner had also been nodding, perchance to return once more to those mythic streets of Tombstone. He had taken his violin case down from the overhead compartment and was holding it across his lap.

"Huh!" he said, and straightened up.

"I'm sorry," Jenkins said. "Were you dozing?"

"Nope," Albert said. "Wide awake." He turned two large, bloodshot orbs on Jenkins to prove this. A darkish shadow lay under each. Jenkins thought he looked a little like a raccoon which has been startled while raiding garbage cans. "What did she say?"

"She told Miss Stevenson she didn't think she could get back to sleep because she *had* been sleeping. Earlier."

Albert gazed at Dinah for a moment. "Well, she's out now," he said.

"I see she is, but that is not the point, dear boy. Not the point at all."

Albert considered telling Mr. Jenkins that Ace Kaussner, the fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi and the only Texan to survive

the Battle of the Alamo, did not much cotton to being called dear boy, and decided to let it pass ... at least for the time being. "Then what *is* the point?"

"I was also asleep. Corked off even before the captain—our original captain, I mean—turned off the No SMOKING light. I've always been that way. Trains, busses, planes—I drift off like a baby the minute they turn on the motors. What about you, dear boy?"

"What about me what?"

"Were you asleep? You were, weren't you?"

"Well, yeah."

"We were *all* asleep. The people who disappeared were all awake."

Albert thought about this. "Well... maybe."

"Nonsense," Jenkins said almost jovially. "I write mysteries for a living. Deduction is my bread and butter, you might say. Don't you think that if someone had been awake when all those people were eliminated, that person would have screamed bloody murder, waking the rest of us?"

"I guess so," Albert agreed thoughtfully. "Except maybe for that guy all the way in the back. I don't think an air-raid siren would wake *that* guy up."

"All right; your exception is duly noted. But *no one* screamed, did they? And no one has offered to tell the rest of us what happened. So I deduce that only waking passengers were subtracted. Along with the flight crew, of course."

"Yeah. Maybe so."

"You look troubled, dear boy. Your expression says that, despite its charms, the idea does not scan perfectly for you. May I ask why not? Have I missed something?" Jenkins's expression said he didn't believe that was possible, but that his mother had raised him to be polite.

"I don't know," Albert said honestly. "How many of us are there? Eleven?"

"Yes. Counting the fellow in the back—the one who is comatose—we number eleven."

"If you're right, shouldn't there be more of us?"

“Why?”

But Albert fell silent, struck by a sudden, vivid image from his childhood. He had been raised in a theological twilight zone by parents who were not Orthodox but who were not agnostics, either. He and his brothers had grown up observing most of the dietary traditions (or laws, or whatever they were), they had had their Bar Mitzvahs, and they had been raised to know who they were, where they came from, and what that was supposed to mean. And the story Albert remembered most clearly from his childhood visits to temple was the story of the final plague which had been visited on Pharaoh—the gruesome tribute exacted by God’s dark angel of the morning.

In his mind’s eye he now saw that angel moving not over Egypt but through Flight 29, gathering most of the passengers to its terrible breast ... not because they had neglected to daub their lintels (or their seat-backs, perhaps) with the blood of a lamb, but because...

Why? Because *why*?

Albert didn’t know, but he shivered just the same. And wished that creepy old story had never occurred to him. *Let my Frequent Fliers go*, he thought. Except it wasn’t funny.

“Albert?” Mr. Jenkins’s voice seemed to come from a long way off. “Albert, are you all right?”

“Yes. Just thinking.” He cleared his throat. “If *all* the sleeping passengers were, you know, passed over, there’d be at least sixty of us. Maybe more. I mean, this is the red-eye.”

“Dear boy, have you ever ...”

“Could you call me Albert, Mr. Jenkins? That’s my name.”

Jenkins patted Albert’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. Really. I don’t mean to be patronizing. I’m upset, and when I’m upset, I have a tendency to retreat ... like a turtle pulling his head back into his shell. Only what I retreat into is fiction. I believe I was playing Philo Vance. He’s a detective—a great detective—created by the late S. S. Van Dine. I suppose you’ve never read him. Hardly anyone does these days, which is a pity. At any rate, I apologize.”

“It’s okay,” Albert said uncomfortably.

“Albert you are and Albert you shall be from now on,” Robert Jenkins promised. “I started to ask you if you’ve ever taken the red-

eye before.”

“No. I’ve never even flown across the country before.”

“Well, I have. Many times. On a few occasions I have even gone against my natural inclination and stayed awake for awhile. Mostly when I was a younger man and the flights were noisier. Having said that much, I may as well date myself outrageously by admitting that my first coast-to-coast trip was on a TWA prop-job that made two stops ... to refuel.

“My observation is that very few people go to sleep on such flights during the first hour or so ... and then just about everyone goes to sleep. During that first hour, people occupy themselves with looking at the scenery, talking with their spouses or their travelling companions, having a drink or two—”

“Settling in, you mean,” Albert suggested. What Mr. Jenkins was saying made perfect sense to him, although he had done precious little settling in himself; he had been so excited about his coming journey and the new life which would be waiting for him that he had hardly slept at all during the last couple of nights. As a result, he had gone out like a light almost as soon as the 767 left the ground.

“Making little nests for themselves,” Jenkins agreed. “Did you happen to notice the drinks trolley outside the cockpit, dea—Albert?”

“I saw it was there,” Albert agreed.

Jenkins’s eyes shone. “Yes indeed—it was either see it or fall over it. But did you really notice it?”

“I guess not, if you saw something I didn’t.”

“It’s not the eye that notices, but the *mind*, Albert. The trained deductive mind. I’m no Sherlock Holmes, but I *did* notice that it had just been taken out of the small closet in which it is stored, and that the used glasses from the pre-flight service were still stacked on the bottom shelf. From this I deduce the following: the plane took off uneventfully, it climbed toward its cruising altitude, and the autopilot device was fortunately engaged. Then the captain turned off the seatbelt light. This would all be about thirty minutes into the flight, if I’m reading the signs correctly—about 1:00 A.M., PDT. When the seatbelt light was turned out, the stewardesses arose and began their first task—cocktails for about one hundred and fifty at about

24,000 feet and rising. The pilot, meanwhile, has programmed the autopilot to level the plane off at 36,000 feet and fly east on heading thus-and-such. A few passengers—eleven of us, in fact—have fallen asleep. Of the rest, some are dozing, perhaps (but not deeply enough to save them from whatever happened), and the rest are all wide awake.”

“Building their nests,” Albert said.

“Exactly! Building their nests!” Jenkins paused and then added, not without some melodrama: “And then it happened!”

“*What* happened, Mr. Jenkins?” Albert asked. “Do you have any ideas about that?”

Jenkins did not answer for a long time, and when he finally did, a lot of the fun had gone out of his voice. Listening to him, Albert understood for the first time that, beneath the slightly theatrical veneer, Robert Jenkins was as frightened as Albert was himself. He found he did not mind this; it made the elderly mystery writer in his running-to-seed sport-coat seem more real.

“The locked-room mystery is the tale of deduction at its most pure,” Jenkins said. “I’ve written a few of them myself—more than a few, to be completely honest—but I never expected to be a part of one.”

Albert looked at him and could think of no reply. He found himself remembering a Sherlock Holmes story called “The Speckled Band.” In that story a poisonous snake had gotten into the famous locked room through a ventilating duct. The immortal Sherlock hadn’t even had to wake up all his brain-cells to solve that one.

But even if the overhead luggage compartments of Flight 29 had been filled with poisonous snakes—*stuffed* with them—where were the bodies? Where were the bodies? Fear began to creep into him again, seeming to flow up his legs toward his vitals. He reflected that he had never felt less like that famous gunslinger Ace Kaussner in his whole life.

“If it were just the plane,” Jenkins went on softly, “I suppose I could come up with a scenario—it is, after all, how I have been earning my daily bread for the last twenty-five years or so. Would you like to hear one such scenario?”

“Sure,” Albert said.

“Very well. Let us say that some shadowy government organization like The Shop has decided to carry out an experiment, and we are the test subjects. The purpose of such an experiment, given the circumstances, might be to document the effects of severe mental and emotional stress on a number of average Americans. They, the scientists running the experiment, load the airplane’s oxygen system with some sort of odorless hypnotic drug—”

“Are there such things?” Albert asked, fascinated.

“There are indeed,” Jenkins said. “Diazaline, for one. Methoprominol, for another. I remember when readers who liked to think of themselves as ‘serious-minded’ laughed at Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu novels. They called them panting melodrama at its most shameful.” Jenkins shook his head slowly. “Now, thanks to biological research and the paranoia of alphabet agencies like the CIA and the DIA, we’re living in a world that could be Sax Rohmer’s worst nightmare.

“Diazaline, which is actually a nerve gas, would be best. It’s supposed to be very fast. After it is released into the air, everyone falls asleep, except for the pilot, who is breathing uncontaminated air through a mask.”

“But—” Albert began.

Jenkins smiled and raised a hand. “I know what your objection is, Albert, and I can explain it. Allow me?”

Albert nodded.

“The pilot lands the plane—at a secret airstrip in Nevada, let us say. The passengers who were awake when the gas was released—and the stewardesses, of course—are offloaded by sinister men wearing white *Andromeda Strain* suits. The passengers who were asleep—you and I among them, my young friend—simply go on sleeping, only a little more deeply than before. The pilot then returns Flight 29 to its proper altitude and heading. He engages the autopilot. As the plane reaches the Rockies, the effects of the gas begin to wear off. Diazaline is a so-called clear drug, one that leaves no appreciable after-effects. No hangover, in other words. Over his intercom, the pilot can hear the little blind girl crying out for her aunt.

He knows she will wake the others. The experiment is about to commence. So he gets up and leaves the cockpit, closing the door behind him.”

“How could he do that? There’s no knob on the outside.”

Jenkins waved a dismissive hand. “Simplest thing in the world, Albert. He uses a strip of adhesive tape, sticky side out. Once the door latches from the inside, it’s locked.”

A smile of admiration began to overspread Albert’s face—and then it froze. “In that case, the pilot would be one of us,” he said.

“Yes and no. In my scenario, Albert, the pilot is the pilot. The pilot who just happened to be on board, supposedly deadheading to Boston. The pilot who was sitting in first class, less than thirty feet from the cockpit door, when the manure hit the fan.”

“Captain Engle,” Albert said in a low, horrified voice.

Jenkins replied in the pleased but complacent tone of a geometry professor who has just written QED below the proof of a particularly difficult theorem. “Captain Engle,” he agreed.

Neither of them noticed Crew-Neck looking at them with glittering, feverish eyes. Now Crew-Neck took the in-flight magazine from the seat-pocket in front of him, pulled off the cover, and began to tear it in long, slow strips. He let them flutter to the floor, where they joined the shreds of the cocktail napkin around his brown loafers.

His lips were moving soundlessly.

## 2

Had Albert been a student of the New Testament, he would have understood how Saul, that most zealous persecutor of the early Christians, must have felt when the scales fell from his eyes on the road to Damascus. He stared at Robert Jenkins with shining enthusiasm, every vestige of sleepiness banished from his brain.

Of course, when you thought about it—or when somebody like Mr. Jenkins, who was clearly a real head, ratty sport-coat or no ratty

sport-coat, thought about it for you—it was just too big and too obvious to miss. Almost the entire cast and crew of American Pride’s Flight 29 had disappeared between the Mojave Desert and the Great Divide... but one of the few survivors just happened to be—surprise, surprise! —*another* American Pride pilot who was, in his own words, “qualified to fly this make and model—also to land it.”

Jenkins had been watching Albert closely, and now he smiled. There wasn’t much humor in that smile. “It’s a tempting scenario,” he said, “isn’t it?”

“We’ll have to capture him as soon as we land,” Albert said, scraping one hand feverishly up the side of his face. “You, me, Mr. Gaffney, and that British guy. He looks tough. Only ... what if the Brit’s in on it, too? He could be Captain Engle’s, you know, bodyguard. Just in case someone figured things out the way you did.”

Jenkins opened his mouth to reply, but Albert rushed on before he could.

“We’ll just have to put the arm on them both. Somehow.” He offered Mr. Jenkins a narrow smile—an Ace Kaussner smile. Cool, tight, dangerous. The smile of a man who is faster than blue blazes, and knows it. “I may not be the world’s smartest guy, Mr. Jenkins, but I’m nobody’s lab rat.”

“But it doesn’t stand up, you know,” Jenkins said mildly.

Albert blinked. “What?”

“The scenario I just outlined for you. It doesn’t stand up.”

“But—you said—”

“I said *if it were just the plane*, I could come up with a scenario. And I did. A good one. If it was a book idea, I’ll bet my agent could sell it. Unfortunately, it *isn’t* just the plane. Denver might still have been down there, but all the lights were off if it was. I have been coordinating our route of travel with my wristwatch, and I can tell you now that it’s not just Denver, either. Omaha, Des Moines—no sign of them down there in the dark, my boy. I have seen no lights at all, in fact. No farmhouses, no grain storage and shipping locations, no interstate turnpikes. Those things show up at night, you know—with the new high-intensity lighting, they show up very well, even when

one is almost six miles up. The land is utterly dark. Now, I can believe that there *might* be a government agency unethical enough to drug us all in order to observe our reactions. Hypothetically, at least. What I cannot believe is that even The Shop could have persuaded everyone over our flight-path to turn off their lights in order to reinforce the illusion that we are all alone.”

“Well... maybe it’s all a fake,” Albert suggested. “Maybe we’re really still on the ground and everything we can see outside the windows is, you know, projected. I saw a movie something like that once.”

Jenkins shook his head slowly, regretfully. “I’m sure it was an interesting film, but I don’t believe it would work in real life. Unless our theoretical secret agency has perfected some sort of ultra-wide-screen 3-D projection, I think not. Whatever is happening is not just going on inside the plane, Albert, and that is where deduction breaks down.”

“But the pilot!” Albert said wildly. “What about him just happening to be here at the right place and time?”

“Are you a baseball fan, Albert?”

“Huh? No. I mean, sometimes I watch the Dodgers on TV, but not really.”

“Well, let me tell you what may be the most amazing statistic ever recorded in a game which thrives on statistics. In 1957, Ted Williams reached base on sixteen consecutive at-bats. This streak encompassed six baseball games. In 1941, Joe DiMaggio batted safely in fifty-six straight games, but the odds against what DiMaggio did pale next to the odds against Williams’s accomplishment, which have been put somewhere in the neighborhood of two *billion* to one. Baseball fans like to say DiMaggio’s streak will never be equaled. I disagree. But I’d be willing to bet that, if they’re still playing baseball a thousand years from now, Williams’s sixteen on-bases in a row will still stand.”

“All of which means what?”

“It means that I believe Captain Engle’s presence on board tonight is nothing more or less than an accident, like Ted Williams’s sixteen consecutive on-bases. And, considering our circumstances, I’d say

it's a very lucky accident indeed. If life was like a mystery novel, Albert, where coincidence is not allowed and the odds are never beaten for long, it would be a much tidier business. I've found, though, that in real life coincidence is not the exception but the rule."

"Then what is happening?" Albert whispered.

Jenkins uttered a long, uneasy sigh. "I'm the wrong person to ask, I'm afraid. It's too bad Larry Niven or John Varley isn't on board."

"Who are those guys?"

"Science-fiction writers," Jenkins said.

### 3

"I don't suppose you read science fiction, do you?" Nick Hopewell asked suddenly. Brian turned around to look at him. Nick had been sitting quietly in the navigator's seat since Brian had taken control of Flight 29, almost two hours ago now. He had listened wordlessly as Brian continued trying to reach someone—*anyone*—on the ground or in the air.

"I was crazy about it as a kid," Brian said. "You?"

Nick smiled. "Until I was eighteen or so, I firmly believed that the Holy Trinity consisted of Robert Heinlein, John Christopher, and John Wyndham. I've been sitting here and running all those old stories through my head, matey. And thinking about such exotic things as time-warps and space-warps and alien raiding parties."

Brian nodded. He felt relieved; it was good to know he wasn't the only one who was thinking crazy thoughts.

"I mean, we don't really have any way of knowing if *anything* is left down there, do we?"

"No," Brian said. "We don't."

Over Illinois, low-lying clouds had blotted out the dark bulk of the earth far below the plane. He was sure it still was the earth—the Rockies had looked reassuringly familiar, even from 36,000 feet—but beyond that he was sure of nothing. And the cloud cover might hold

all the way to Bangor. With Air Traffic Control out of commission, he had no real way of knowing. Brian had been playing with a number of scenarios, and the most unpleasant of the lot was this: that they would come out of the clouds and discover that every sign of human life—including the airport where he hoped to land—was gone. Where would he put this bird down then?

“I’ve always found waiting the hardest part,” Nick said.

*The hardest part of what?* Brian wondered, but he did not ask.

“Suppose you took us down to 5,000 feet or so?” Nick proposed suddenly. “Just for a quick look-see. Perhaps the sight of a few small towns and interstate highways will set our minds at rest.”

Brian had already considered this idea. Had considered it with great longing. “It’s tempting,” he said, “but I can’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“The passengers are still my first responsibility, Nick. They’d probably panic, even if I explained what I was going to do in advance. I’m thinking of our loudmouth friend with the pressing appointment at the Pru in particular. The one whose nose you twisted.”

“I can handle him,” Nick replied. “Any others who cut up rough, as well.”

“I’m sure you can,” Brian said, “but I still see no need of scaring them unnecessarily. And we will find out, eventually. We can’t stay up here forever, you know.”

“Too true, matey,” Nick said dryly.

“I might do it anyway, if I could be sure I could get under the cloud cover at 4,000 or 5,000 feet, but with no ATC and no other planes to talk to, I can’t be sure. I don’t even know for sure what the weather’s like down there, and I’m not talking about normal stuff, either. You can laugh at me if you want to—”

“I’m not laughing, matey. I’m not even close to laughing. Believe me.”

“Well, suppose we *have* gone through a time-warp, like in a science-fiction story? What if I took us down through the clouds and we got one quick look at a bunch of brontosauruses grazing in some

Farmer John's field before we were torn apart by a cyclone or fried in an electrical storm?"

"Do you really think that's possible?" Nick asked. Brian looked at him closely to see if the question was sarcastic. It didn't appear to be, but it was hard to tell. The British were famous for their dry sense of humor, weren't they?

Brian started to tell him he had once seen something just like that on an old *Twilight Zone* episode and then decided it wouldn't help his credibility at all. "It's pretty unlikely, I suppose, but you get the idea—we just don't know what we're dealing with. We might hit a brand-new mountain in what used to be upstate New York. Or another plane. Hell—maybe even a rocket-shuttle. After all, if it's a time-warp, we could as easily be in the future as in the past."

Nick looked out through the window. "We seem to have the sky pretty much to ourselves."

"Up here, that's true. Down there, who knows? And who knows is a very dicey situation for an airline pilot. I intend to overfly Bangor when we get there, if these clouds still hold. I'll take us out over the Atlantic and drop under the ceiling as we head back. Our odds will be better if we make our initial descent over water."

"So for now, we just go on."

"Right."

"And wait."

"Right again."

Nick sighed. "Well, you're the captain."

Brian smiled. "That's three in a row."

## 4

Deep in the trenches carved into the floors of the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, there are fish which live and die without ever seeing or sensing the sun. These fabulous creatures cruise the depths like ghostly balloons, lit from within by their own radiance. Although they

look delicate, they are actually marvels of biological design, built to withstand pressures that would squash a man as flat as a windowpane in the blink of an eye. Their great strength, however, is also their great weakness. Prisoners of their own alien bodies, they are locked forever in their dark depths. If they are captured and drawn toward the surface, toward the sun, they simply explode. It is not external pressure that destroys them, but its absence.

Craig Toomy had been raised in his own dark trench, had lived in his own atmosphere of high pressure. His father had been an executive in the Bank of America, away from home for long stretches of time, a caricature type-A overachiever. He drove his only child as furiously and as unforgivingly as he drove himself. The bedtime stories he told Craig in Craig's early years terrified the boy. Nor was this surprising, because terror was exactly the emotion Roger Toomy meant to awaken in the boy's breast. These tales concerned themselves, for the most part, with a race of monstrous beings called the langoliers.

Their job, their mission in life (in the world of Roger Toomy, *everything* had a job, *everything* had serious work to do), was to prey on lazy, time-wasting children. By the time he was seven, Craig was a dedicated type-A overachiever, just like Daddy. He had made up his mind: the langoliers were never going to get *him*.

A report card which did not contain all A's was an unacceptable report card. An A—was the subject of a lecture fraught with dire warnings of what life would be like digging ditches or emptying garbage cans, and a B resulted in punishment—most commonly confinement to his room for a week. During that week, Craig was allowed out only for school and for meals. There was no time off for good behavior. On the other hand, extraordinary achievement—the time Craig won the tri-school decathlon, for instance—warranted no corresponding praise. When Craig showed his father the medal which had been awarded him on that occasion—in an assembly before the entire student body—his father glanced at it, grunted once, and went back to his newspaper. Craig was nine years old when his father died of a heart attack. He was actually sort of

relieved that the Bank of America's answer to General Patton was gone.

His mother was an alcoholic whose drinking had been controlled only by her fear of the man she had married. Once Roger Toomy was safely in the ground, where he could no longer search out her bottles and break them, or slap her and tell her to get hold of herself, for God's sake, Catherine Toomy began her life's work in earnest. She alternately smothered her son with affection and froze him with rejection, depending on how much gin was currently perking through her bloodstream. Her behavior was often odd and sometimes bizarre. On the day Craig turned ten, she placed a wooden kitchen match between two of his toes, lit it, and sang "Happy Birthday to You" while it burned slowly down toward his flesh. She told him that if he tried to shake it out or kick it loose, she would take him to THE ORPHAN'S HOME at once. The threat of THE ORPHAN'S HOME was a frequent one when Catherine Toomy was loaded. "I ought to, anyway," she told him as she lit the match which stuck up between her weeping son's toes like a skinny birthday candle. "You're just like your father. He didn't know how to have fun, and neither do you. You're a bore, Craiggy-weggy." She finished the song and blew out the match before the skin of Craig's second and third right toes was more than singed, but Craig never forgot the yellow flame, the curling, blackening stick of wood, and the growing heat as his mother warbled "Happy birthday, dear Craiggy-weggy, happy birthday to yooooou" in her droning, off-key drunk's voice.

Pressure.

Pressure in the trenches.

Craig Toomy continued to get all A's, and he continued to spend a lot of time in his room. The place which had been his Coventry had become his refuge. Mostly he studied there, but sometimes—when things were going badly, when he felt pressed to the wall—he would take one piece of notepaper after another and tear them into narrow strips. He would let them flutter around his feet in a growing drift while his eyes stared out blankly into space. But these blank periods were not frequent. Not then.

He graduated valedictorian from high school. His mother didn't come. She was drunk. He graduated ninth in his class from the UCLA Graduate School of Management. His mother didn't come. She was dead. In the dark trench which existed in the center of his own heart, Craig was quite sure that the langoliers had finally come for her.

Craig went to work for the Desert Sun Banking Corporation of California as part of the executive training program. He did very well, which was not surprising; Craig Toomy had been built, after all, to get all A's, built to thrive under the pressures which exist in the deep fathoms. And sometimes, following some small reverse at work (and in those days, only five short years ago, all the reverses had been small ones), he would go back to his apartment in Westwood, less than half a mile from the condo Brian Engle would occupy following his divorce, and tear small strips of paper for hours at a time. The paper-tearing episodes were gradually becoming more frequent.

During those five years, Craig ran the corporate fast track like a greyhound chasing a mechanical rabbit. Water-cooler gossips speculated that he might well become the youngest vice-president in Desert Sun's glorious forty-year history. But some fish are built to rise just so far and no farther; they explode if they transgress their built-in limits.

Eight months ago, Craig Toomy had been put in sole charge of his first big project—the corporate equivalent of a master's thesis. This project was created by the bonds department. Bonds—foreign bonds and junk bonds (they were frequently the same)—were Craig's specialty. This project proposed buying a limited number of questionable South American bonds—sometimes called Bad Debt Bonds—on a carefully set schedule. The theory behind these buys was sound enough, given the limited insurance on them that was available, and the much larger tax-breaks available on turn-overs resulting in a profit (Uncle Sam was practically falling all over himself to keep the complex structure of South American indebtedness from collapsing like a house of cards). It just had to be done carefully.

Craig Toomy had presented a daring plan which raised a good many eyebrows. It centered upon a large buy of various Argentinian

bonds, generally considered to be the worst of a bad lot. Craig had argued forcefully and persuasively for his plan, producing facts, figures, and projections to prove his contention that Argentinian bonds were a good deal more solid than they looked. In one bold stroke, he argued, Desert Sun could become the most important—and *richest*—buyer of foreign bonds in the American West. The money they made, he said, would be a lot less important than the long-run credibility they would establish.

After a good deal of discussion—some of it hot—Craig's take on the project got a green light. Tom Holby, a senior vice-president, had drawn Craig aside after the meeting to offer congratulations ... and a word of warning. "If this comes off the way you expect at the end of the fiscal year, you're going to be everyone's fair-haired boy. If it doesn't, you are going to find yourself in a very windy place, Craig. I'd suggest that the next few months might be a good time to build a storm-shelter."

"I won't need a storm-shelter, Mr. Holby," Craig said confidently. "After this, what I'll need is a hang-glider. This is going to be the bond-buy of the century—like finding diamonds at a barn-sale. Just wait and see."

He had gone home early that night, and as soon as his apartment door was closed and triple-locked behind him, the confident smile had slipped from his face. What replaced it was that unsettling look of blankness. He had bought the news magazines on the way home. He took them into the kitchen, squared them up neatly in front of him on the table, and began to rip them into long, narrow strips. He went on doing this for over six hours. He ripped until *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report* lay in shreds on the floor all around him. His Gucci loafers were buried. He looked like the lone survivor of an explosion in a tickertape factory.

The bonds he had proposed buying—the Argentinian bonds in particular—were a much higher risk than he had let on. He had pushed his proposal through by exaggerating some facts, suppressing others ... and even making some up out of whole cloth. Quite a few of these latter, actually. Then he had gone home, ripped strips of paper for hours, and wondered why he had done it. He did

not know about the fish that exist in trenches, living their lives and dying their deaths without ever seeing the sun. He did not know that there are both fish and men whose *bête noire* is not pressure but the lack of it. He only knew that he had been under an unbreakable compulsion to buy those bonds, to paste a target on his own forehead.

Now he was due to meet with bond representatives of five large banking corporations at the Prudential Center in Boston. There would be much comparing of notes, much speculation about the future of the world bond market, much discussion about the buys of the last sixteen months and the result of those buys. And before the first day of the three-day conference was over, they would all know what Craig Toomy had known for the last ninety days: the bonds he had purchased were now worth less than six cents on the dollar. And not long after that, the top brass at Desert Sun would discover the rest of the truth: that he had bought more than three times as much as he had been empowered to buy. He had also invested every penny of his personal savings ... not that they would care about *that*.

Who knows how the fish captured in one of those deep trenches and brought swiftly toward the surface—toward the light of a sun it has never suspected—may feel? Is it not at least possible that its final moments are filled with ecstasy rather than horror? That it senses the crushing reality of all that pressure only as it finally falls away? That it thinks—as far as fish may be supposed to think, that is—in a kind of joyous frenzy, *I am free of that weight at last!* in the seconds before it explodes? Probably not. Fish from those dark depths may not feel at all, at least not in any way we could recognize, and they certainly do not think ... but people do.

Instead of feeling shame, Craig Toomy had been dominated by vast relief and a kind of hectic, horrified happiness as he boarded American Pride's Flight 29 to Boston. He was going to explode, and he found he didn't give a damn. In fact, he found himself looking forward to it. He could feel the pressure peeling away from all the surfaces of his skin as he rose toward the surface. For the first time in weeks, there had been no paper-ripping. He had fallen asleep

before Flight 29 even left the gate, and he had slept like a baby until that blind little brat had begun to caterwaul.

And now they told him everything had changed, and that simply could not be allowed. It must not be allowed. He had been firmly caught in the net, had felt the dizzying rise and the stretch of his skin as it tried to compensate. They could not now change their minds and drop him back into the deeps.

Bangor?

Bangor, *Maine*?

Oh no. No indeed.

Craig Toomy was vaguely aware that most of the people on Flight 29 had disappeared, but he didn't care. They weren't the important thing. They weren't part of what his father had always liked to call THE BIG PICTURE. The meeting at the Pru was part of THE BIG PICTURE.

This crazy idea of diverting to Bangor, Maine ... whose scheme, exactly, had *that* been?

It had been the pilot's idea, of course. Engle's idea. The so-called captain.

Engle, now... Engle might very well be part of THE BIG PICTURE. He might, in fact, be an AGENT OF THE ENEMY. Craig had suspected this in his heart from the moment when Engle had begun to speak over the intercom, but in this case he hadn't needed to depend on his heart, had he? No indeed. He had been listening to the conversation between the skinny kid and the man in the fire-sale sport-coat. The man's taste in clothes was terrible, but what he had to say made perfect sense to Craig Toomy ... at least, up to a point.

*In that case, the pilot would be one of us,* the kid had said.

*Yes and no,* the guy in the fire-sale sport-coat had said. *In my scenario, the pilot is the pilot. The pilot who just happened to be on board, supposedly deadheading to Boston, the pilot who just happened to be sitting less than thirty feet from the cockpit door.*

Engle, in other words.

And the other fellow, the one who had twisted Craig's nose, was clearly in on it with him, serving as a kind of sky-marshal to protect Engle from anyone who happened to catch on.

He hadn't eavesdropped on the conversation between the kid and the man in the fire-sale sport-coat much longer, because around that time the man in the fire-sale sport-coat stopped making sense and began babbling a lot of crazy shit about Denver and Des Moines and Omaha being gone. The idea that three large American cities could simply disappear was absolutely out to lunch ... but that didn't mean *everything* the old guy had to say was out to lunch.

It *was* an experiment, of course. *That* idea wasn't silly, not a bit. But the old guy's idea that all of them were test subjects was just more crackpot stuff.

Me, Craig thought. *It's me. I'm the test subject.*

All his life Craig had felt himself a test subject in an experiment just like this one. *This is a question, gentlemen, of ratio: pressure to success. The right ratio produces some x-factor. What x-factor? That is what our test subject, Mr. Craig Toomy, will show us.*

But then Craig Toomy had done something they hadn't expected, something none of their cats and rats and guinea pigs had ever dared to do: he had told them he was pulling out.

*But you can't do that! You'll explode!*

*Will I? Fine.*

And now it had all become clear to him, so clear. These other people were either innocent bystanders or extras who had been hired to give this stupid little drama some badly needed verisimilitude. The whole thing had been rigged with one object in mind: to keep Craig Toomy away from Boston, to keep Craig Toomy from opting out of the experiment.

*But I'll show them,* Craig thought. He pulled another sheet from the in-flight magazine and looked at it. It showed a happy man, a man who had obviously never heard of the langoliers, who obviously did not know they were lurking everywhere, behind every bush and tree, in every shadow, just over the horizon. The happy man was driving down a country road behind the wheel of his Avis rental car. The ad said that when you showed your American Pride Frequent Flier Card at the Avis desk, they'd just about give you that rental car, and maybe a game-show hostess to drive it, as well. He began to tear a

strip of paper from the side of the glossy ad. The long, slow ripping sound was at the same time excruciating and exquisitely calming.

*I'll show them that when I say I'm getting out, I mean what I say.*

He dropped the strip onto the floor and began on the next one. It was important to rip slowly. It was important that each strip should be as narrow as possible, but you couldn't make them too narrow or they got away from you and petered out before you got to the bottom of the page. Getting each one just right demanded sharp eyes and fearless hands. *And I've got them. You better believe it. You just better believe it.*

*Rii-ip.*

*I might have to kill the pilot.*

His hands stopped halfway down the page. He looked out the window and saw his own long, pallid face superimposed over the darkness.

*I might have to kill the Englishman, too.*

Craig Toomy had never killed anyone in his life. Could he do it? With growing relief, he decided that he could. Not while they were still in the air, of course; the Englishman was very fast, very strong, and up here there were no weapons that were sure enough. But once they landed?

*Yes. If I have to, yes.*

After all, the conference at the Pru was scheduled to last for three days. It seemed now that his late arrival was unavoidable, but at least he would be able to explain: he had been drugged and taken hostage by a government agency. It would stun them. He could see their startled faces as he stood before them, the three hundred bankers from all over the country assembled to discuss bonds and indebtedness, bankers who would instead hear the dirty truth about what the government was up to. *My friends, I was abducted by—*

*Rii-ip.*

*—and was able to escape only when I—*

*Rii-ip.*

*If I have to, I can kill them both. In fact, I can kill them all.*

Craig Toomy's hands began to move again. He tore off the rest of the strip, dropped it on the floor, and began on the next one. There

were a lot of pages in the magazine, there were a lot of strips to each page, and that meant a lot of work lay ahead before the plane landed. But he wasn't worried.

Craig Toomy was a can-do type of guy.

## 5

Laurel Stevenson didn't go back to sleep but she did slide into a light doze. Her thoughts—which became something close to dreams in this mentally untethered state—turned to why she had really been going to Boston.

*I'm supposed to be starting my first real vacation in ten years*, she had said, but that was a lie. It contained a small grain of truth, but she doubted if she had been very believable when she told it; she had not been raised to tell lies, and her technique was not very good. Not that any of the people left on Flight 29 would have cared much either way, she supposed. Not in this situation. The fact that you were going to Boston to meet—and almost certainly sleep with—a man you had never met paled next to the fact that you were heading east in an airplane from which most of the passengers and all of the crew had disappeared.

Dear Laurel,

I am so much looking forward to meeting you. You won't even have to double-check my photo when you step out of the jetway. I'll have so many butterflies in my stomach that all you need to do is look for the guy who's floating somewhere near the ceiling ...

His name was Darren Crosby.

She wouldn't need to look at his photograph; that much was true. She had memorized his face, just as she had memorized most of his letters. The question was *why*. And to that question she had no answer. Not even a clue. It was just another proof of J. R. R. Tolkien's observation: you must be careful each time you step out of

your door, because your front walk is really a road, and the road leads ever onward. If you aren't careful, you're apt to find yourself ... well... simply swept away, a stranger in a strange land with no clue as to how you got there.

Laurel had told everyone where she was going, but she had told no one *why* she was going or what she was doing. She was a graduate of the University of California with a master's degree in library science. Although she was no model, she was cleanly built and pleasant enough to look at. She had a small circle of good friends, and they would have been flabbergasted by what she was up to: heading off to Boston, planning to stay with a man she knew only through correspondence, a man she had met through the extensive personals column of a magazine called *Friends and Lovers*.

She was, in fact, flabbergasted herself.

Darren Crosby was six-feet-one, weighed one hundred and eighty pounds, and had dark-blue eyes. He preferred Scotch (although not to excess), he had a cat named Stanley, he was a dedicated heterosexual, he was a perfect gentleman (or so he claimed), and he thought Laurel was the most beautiful name he had ever heard. The pictures he had sent showed a man with a pleasant, open, intelligent face. She guessed he was the sort of man who would look sinister if he didn't shave twice a day. And that was really all she knew.

Laurel had corresponded with half a dozen men over half a dozen years—it was a hobby, she supposed—but she had never expected to take the next step ... this step. She supposed that Darren's wry and self-deprecating sense of humor was part of the attraction, but she was dismally aware that her real reasons were not in him at all, but in herself. And wasn't the real attraction her own inability to understand this strong desire to step out of character? To just fly off into the unknown, hoping for the right kind of lightning to strike?

*What are you doing?* she asked herself again.

The plane ran through some light turbulence and back into smooth air again. Laurel stirred out of her doze and looked around. She saw the young teenaged girl had taken the seat across from her. She was looking out the window.

“What do you see?” Laurel asked. “Anything?”

“Well, the sun’s up,” the girl said, “but that’s all.”

“What about the ground?” Laurel didn’t want to get up and look for herself. Dinah’s head was still resting on her, and Laurel didn’t want to wake her.

“Can’t see it. It’s all clouds down there.” She looked around. Her eyes had cleared and a little color—not much, but a little—had come back into her face. “My name’s Bethany Simms. What’s yours?”

“Laurel Stevenson.”

“Do you think we’ll be all right?”

“I think so,” Laurel said, and then added reluctantly: “I hope so.”

“I’m scared about what might be under those clouds,” Bethany said, “but I was scared anyway. About Boston. My mother all at once decided how it would be a great idea if I spent a couple of weeks with my Aunt Shawna, even though school starts again in ten days. I think the idea was for me to get off the plane, just like Mary’s little lamb, and then Aunt Shawna pulls the string on me.”

“What string?”

“Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars, go directly to the nearest rehab, and start drying out,” Bethany said. She raked her hands through her short dark hair. “Things were already so weird that this seems like just more of the same.” She looked Laurel over carefully and then added with perfect seriousness: “This *is* really happening, isn’t it? I mean, I’ve already pinched myself. *Several* times. Nothing changed.”

“It’s real.”

“It doesn’t *seem* real,” Bethany said. “It seems like one of those stupid disaster movies. *Airport 1990*, something like that. I keep looking around for a couple of old actors like Wilford Brimley and Olivia de Havilland. They’re supposed to meet during the shitstorm and fall in love, you know?”

“I don’t think they’re on the plane,” Laurel said gravely. They glanced into each other’s eyes and for a moment they almost laughed together. It could have made them friends if it had happened ... but it didn’t. Not quite.

“What about you, Laurel? Do you have a disaster-movie problem?”

“I’m afraid not,” Laurel replied ... and then she *did* begin to laugh. Because the thought which shot across her mind in red neon was Oh you liar!

Bethany put a hand over her mouth and giggled.

“Jesus,” she said after a minute. “I mean, this is the ultimate hairball, you know?”

Laurel nodded. “I know.” She paused and then asked, “Do you need a rehab, Bethany?”

“I don’t know.” She turned to look out the window again. Her smile was gone and her voice was morose. “I guess I might. I used to think it was just party-time, but now I don’t know. I guess it’s out of control. But getting shipped off this way... I feel like a pig in a slaughterhouse chute.”

“I’m sorry,” Laurel said, but she was also sorry for herself. The blind girl had already adopted her; she did not need a second adoptee. Now that she was fully awake again she found herself scared—badly scared. She did not want to be behind this kid’s dumpster if she was going to offload a big pile of disaster-movie angst. The thought made her grin again; she simply couldn’t help it. It was the ultimate hairball. It really was.

“I’m sorry, too,” Bethany said, “but I guess this is the wrong time to worry about it, huh?”

“I guess maybe it is,” Laurel said.

“The pilot never disappeared in any of those Airport movies, did he?”

“Not that I remember.”

“It’s almost six o’clock. Two and a half hours to go.”

“Yes.”

“If only the world’s still there,” Bethany said, “that’ll be enough for a start.” She looked closely at Laurel again. “I don’t suppose you’ve got any grass, do you?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Bethany shrugged and offered Laurel a tired smile which was oddly winning. “Well,” she said, “you’re one ahead of me—I’m just afraid.”

## 6

Some time later, Brian Engle rechecked his heading, his airspeed, his navigational figures, and his charts. Last of all he checked his wristwatch. It was two minutes past eight.

“Well,” he said to Nick without looking around, “I think it’s about that time. Shit or git.”

He reached forward and flicked on the FASTEN SEATBELTS sign. The bell made its low, pleasant chime. Then he flicked the intercom toggle and picked up the mike.

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen. This is Captain Engle again. We’re currently over the Atlantic Ocean, roughly thirty miles east of the Maine coast, and I’ll be commencing our initial descent into the Bangor area very soon. Under ordinary circumstances I wouldn’t turn on the seatbelt sign so early, but these circumstances aren’t ordinary, and my mother always said prudence is the better part of valor. In that spirit, I want you to make sure your lap-belts are snug and secure. Conditions below us don’t look especially threatening, but since I have no radio communication, the weather is going to be something of a surprise package for all of us. I kept hoping the clouds would break, and I did see a few small holes over Vermont, but I’m afraid they’ve closed up again. I can tell you from my experience as a pilot that the clouds you see below us don’t suggest very bad weather to me. I think the weather in Bangor may be overcast, with some light rain. I’m beginning our descent now. Please be calm; my board is green across and all procedures here on the flight deck remain routine.”

Brian had not bothered programming the autopilot for descent; he now began the process himself. He brought the plane around in a long, slow turn, and the seat beneath him canted slightly forward as the 767 began its slow slide down toward the clouds at 4,000 feet.

“Very comforting, that,” Nick said. “You should have been a politician, matey.”

“I doubt if they’re feeling very comfortable right now,” Brian said. “I know I’m not.”

He was, in fact, more frightened than he had ever been while at the controls of an airplane. The pressure-leak on Flight 7 from Tokyo seemed like a minor glitch in comparison to this situation. His heart was beating slowly and heavily in his chest, like a funeral drum. He swallowed and heard a click in his throat. Flight 29 passed through 30,000 feet, still descending. The white, featureless clouds were closer now. They stretched from horizon to horizon like some strange ballroom floor.

“I’m scared shitless, mate,” Nick Hopewell said in a strange, hoarse voice. “I saw men die in the Falklands, took a bullet in the leg there myself, got the Teflon knee to prove it, and I came within an ace of getting blown up by a truck bomb in Beirut—in ’82, that was—but I’ve never been as scared as I am right now. Part of me would like to grab you and make you take us right back up. Just as far up as this bird will go.”

“It wouldn’t do any good,” Brian replied. His own voice was no longer steady; he could hear his heartbeat in it, making it jig-jag up and down in minute variations. “Remember what I said before—we can’t stay up here forever.”

“I know it. But I’m afraid of what’s under those clouds. Or not under them.”

“Well, we’ll all find out together.”

“No help for it, is there, mate?”

“Not a bit.”

The 767 passed through 25,000 feet, still descending.

## 7

All the passengers were in the main cabin; even the bald man, who had stuck stubbornly to his seat in business class for most of the flight, had joined them. And they were all awake, except for the bearded man at the very back of the plane. They could hear him snoring blithely away, and Albert Kaussner felt one moment of bitter

jealousy, a wish that *he* could wake up after they were safely on the ground as the bearded man would most likely do, and say what the bearded man was most likely going to say: *Where the hell are we?*

The only other sound was the soft *rii-ip ... rii-ip ... rii-ip* of Craig Toomy dismembering the in-flight magazine. He sat with his shoes in a deep pile of paper strips.

“Would you mind stopping that?” Don Gaffney asked. His voice was tight and strained. “It’s driving me up the wall, buddy.”

Craig turned his head. Regarded Don Gaffney with a pair of wide, smooth, empty eyes. Turned his head back. Held up the page he was currently working on, which happened to be the eastern half of the American Pride route map.

*Rii-ip.*

Gaffney opened his mouth to say something, then closed it tight.

Laurel had her arm around Dinah’s shoulders. Dinah was holding Laurel’s free hand in both of hers.

Albert sat with Robert Jenkins, just ahead of Gaffney. Ahead of him was the girl with the short dark hair. She was looking out the window, her body held so stiffly upright it might have been wired together. And ahead of her sat Baldy from business class.

“Well, at least we’ll be able to get some chow!” he said loudly.

No one answered. The main cabin seemed encased in a stiff shell of tension. Albert Kaussner felt each individual hair on his body standing at attention. He searched for the comforting cloak of Ace Kaussner, that duke of the desert, that baron of the Buntline, and could not find him. Ace had gone on vacation.

The clouds were much closer. They had lost their flat look; Laurel could now see fluffy curves and mild crenellations filled with early-morning shadows. She wondered if Darren Crosby was still down there, patiently waiting for her at a Logan Airport arrivals gate somewhere along the American Pride concourse. She was not terribly surprised to find she didn’t care much, one way or another. Her gaze was drawn back to the clouds, and she forgot all about Darren Crosby, who liked Scotch (although not to excess) and claimed to be a perfect gentleman.

She imagined a hand, a huge green hand, suddenly slamming its way up through those clouds and seizing the 767 the way an angry child might seize a toy. She imagined the hand *squeezing*, saw the jet-fuel exploding in orange licks of flame between the huge knuckles, and closed her eyes for a moment.

*Don't go down there!* she wanted to scream. *Oh please, don't go down there!*

But what choice had they? What choice?

"I'm very scared," Bethany Simms said in a blurred, watery voice. She moved to one of the seats in the center section, fastened her lap-belt, and pressed her hands tightly against her middle. "I think I'm going to pass out."

Craig Toomy glanced at her, and then began ripping a fresh strip from the route map. After a moment, Albert unbuckled his seatbelt, got up, sat down beside Bethany, and buckled up again. As soon as he had, she grasped his hands. Her skin was as cold as marble.

"It's going to be all right," he said, striving to sound tough and unafraid, striving to sound like the fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi. Instead he only sounded like Albert Kaussner, a seventeen-year-old violin student who felt on the verge of pissing his pants.

"I hope—" she began, and then Flight 29 began to bounce. Bethany screamed.

"What's wrong?" Dinah asked Laurel in a thin, anxious voice. "Is something wrong with the plane? Are we going to crash?"

"I don't—"

Brian's voice came over the speakers. "This is ordinary light turbulence, folks," he said. "Please be calm. We're apt to hit some heavier bumps when we go into the clouds. Most of you have been through this before, so just settle down."

*Rii-ip.*

Don Gaffney looked toward the man in the crew-neck jersey again and felt a sudden, almost overmastering urge to rip the flight magazine out of the weird son of a bitch's hands and begin whacking him with it.

The clouds were very close now. Robert Jenkins could see the 767's black shape rushing across their white surfaces just below the plane. Shortly the plane would kiss its own shadow and disappear. He had never had a premonition in his life, but one came to him now, one which was sure and complete. *When we break through those clouds, we are going to see something no human being has ever seen before. It will be something which is utterly beyond belief... yet we will be forced to believe it. We will have no choice.*

His hands curled into tight knobs on the arms of his seat. A drop of sweat ran into one eye. Instead of raising a hand to wipe the eye clear, Jenkins tried to blink the sting away. His hands felt nailed to the arms of the seat.

"Is it going to be all right?" Dinah asked frantically. Her hands were locked over Laurel's. They were small, but they squeezed with almost painful force. "Is it really going to be all right?"

Laurel looked out the window. Now the 767 was skimming the tops of the clouds, and the first cotton-candy wisps drifted past her window. The plane ran through another series of jolts and she had to close her throat against a moan. For the first time in her life she felt physically ill with terror.

"I hope so, honey," she said. "I hope so, but I really don't know."

## 8

"What's on your radar, Brian?" Nick asked. "Anything unusual? Anything at all?"

"No," Brian said. "It says the world is down there, and that's all it says. We're—"

"Wait," Nick said. His voice had a tight, strangled sound, as if his throat had closed down to a bare pinhole. "Climb back up. Let's think this over. Wait for the clouds to break—"

"Not enough time and not enough fuel." Brian's eyes were locked on his instruments. The plane began to bounce again. He made the

corrections automatically. "Hang on. We're going in."

He pushed the wheel forward. The altimeter needle began to move more swiftly beneath its glass circle. And Flight 29 slid into the clouds. For a moment its tail protruded, cutting through the fluffy surface like the fin of a shark. A moment later that was also gone and the sky was empty ... as if no plane had ever been there at all.

## CHAPTER FOUR

***IN THE CLOUDS. WELCOME TO BANGOR. A ROUND OF APPLAUSE. THE SLIDE AND THE CONVEYOR BELT. THE SOUND OF NO PHONES RINGING. CRAIG TOOMY MAKES A SIDE-TRIP. THE LITTLE BLIND GIRL'S WARNING.***

### 1

The main cabin went from bright sunlight to the gloom of late twilight and the plane began to buck harder. After one particularly hard washboard bump, Albert felt a pressure against his right shoulder. He looked around and saw Bethany's head lying there, as heavy as a ripe October pumpkin. The girl had fainted.

The plane leaped again and there was a heavy thud in first class. This time it was Dinah who shrieked, and Gaffney let out a yell: "What was that? *For God's sake what was that?*"

"The drinks trolley," Bob Jenkins said in a low, dry voice. He tried to speak louder so they would all hear him and found himself unable. "The drinks trolley was left out, remember? I think it must have rolled across—"

The plane took a dizzying rollercoaster leap, came down with a jarring smack, and the drinks trolley fell over with a bang. Glass shattered. Dinah screamed again.

"It's all right," Laurel said frantically. "Don't hold me so tight, Dinah, honey, it's okay—"

"Please, I don't want to die! I just don't want to *die!*"

“Normal turbulence, folks.” Brian’s voice, coming through the speakers, sounded calm... but Bob Jenkins thought he heard barely controlled terror in that voice. “Just be—”

Another rocketing, twisting bump. Another crash as more glasses and mini-bottles fell out of the overturned drinks trolley.

“—calm,” Brian finished.

From across the aisle on Don Gaffney’s left: *rii-ip*.

Gaffney turned in that direction. “Quit it right now, motherfucker, or I’ll stuff what’s left of that magazine right down your throat.”

Craig looked at him blandly. “Try it, you old jackass.”

The plane bumped up and down again. Albert leaned over Bethany toward the window. Her breasts pressed softly against his arm as he did, and for the first time in the last five years that sensation did not immediately drive everything else out of his mind. He stared out the window, desperately looking for a break in the clouds, trying to *will* a break in the clouds.

There was nothing but shades of dark gray.

## 2

“How low is the ceiling, mate?” Nick asked. Now that they were actually in the clouds, he seemed calmer.

“I don’t know,” Brian said. “Lower than I’d hoped, I can tell you that.”

“What happens if you run out of room?”

“If my instruments are off even a little, we’ll go into the drink,” he said flatly. “I doubt if they are, though. If I get down to five hundred feet and there’s still no joy, I’ll take us up again and fly down to Portland.”

“Maybe you ought to just head that way now.”

Brian shook his head. “The weather there is almost always worse than the weather here.”

“What about Presque Isle? Isn’t there a long-range SAC base there?”

Brian had just a moment to think that this guy really did know much more than he should. “It’s out of our reach. We’d crash in the woods.”

“Then Boston is out of reach, too.”

“You bet.”

“This is starting to look like being a bad decision, matey.”

The plane struck another invisible current of turbulence, and the 767 shivered like a dog with a bad chill. Brian heard faint screams from the main cabin even as he made the necessary corrections and wished he could tell them all that this was nothing, that the 767 could ride out turbulence twenty times this bad. The real problem was the ceiling.

“We’re not struck out yet,” he said. The altimeter stood at 2,200 feet.

“But we are running out of room.”

“We—” Brian broke off. A wave of relief rushed over him like a cooling hand. “Here we are,” he said. “Coming through.”

Ahead of the 767’s black nose, the clouds were rapidly thinning. For the first time since they had overflowed Vermont, Brian saw a gauzy rip in the whitish-gray blanket. Through it he saw the leaden color of the Atlantic Ocean.

Into the cabin microphone, Brian said: “We’ve reached the ceiling, ladies and gentlemen. I expect this minor turbulence to ease off once we pass through. In a few minutes, you’re going to hear a thump from below. That will be the landing gear descending and locking into place. I am continuing our descent into the Bangor area.”

He clicked off and turned briefly to the man in the navigator’s seat.

“Wish me luck, Nick.”

“Oh, I do, matey—I do.”

Laurel looked out the window with her breath caught in her throat. The clouds were unravelling fast now. She saw the ocean in a series of brief winks: waves, whitecaps, then a large chunk of rock poking out of the water like the fang of a dead monster. She caught a glimpse of bright orange that might have been a buoy.

They passed over a small, tree-shrouded island, and by leaning and craning her neck, she could see the coast dead ahead. Thin wisps of smoky cloud obscured the view for an endless forty-five seconds. When they cleared, the 767 was over land again. They passed above a field; a patch of forest; what looked like a pond.

*But where are the houses? Where are the roads and the cars and the buildings and the high-tension wires?*

Then a cry burst from her throat.

“What is it?” Dinah nearly screamed. “What is it, Laurel? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” she shouted triumphantly. Down below she could see a narrow road leading into a small seaside village. From up here, it looked like a toy town with tiny toy cars parked along the main street. She saw a church steeple, a town gravel pit, a Little League baseball field. “Nothing’s wrong! *It’s all there! It’s all still there!*”

From behind her, Robert Jenkins spoke. His voice was calm, level, and deeply dismayed. “Madam,” he said, “I’m afraid you are quite wrong.”

## 4

A long white passenger jet cruised slowly above the ground thirty-five miles east of Bangor International Airport. 767 was printed on its tail in large, proud numerals. Along the fuselage, the words AMERICAN PRIDE were written in letters which had been raked backward to indicate speed. On both sides of the nose was the airline’s trademark: a large red eagle. Its spread wings were spangled with blue stars; its talons were flexed and its head was

slightly bent. Like the airliner it decorated, the eagle appeared to be coming in for a landing.

The plane printed no shadow on the ground below it as it flew toward the cluster of city ahead; there was no rain, but the morning was gray and sunless. Its belly slid open. The undercarriage dropped down and spread out. The wheels locked into place below the body of the plane and the cockpit area.

American Pride Flight 29 slipped down the chute toward Bangor. It banked slightly left as it went; Captain Engle was now able to correct his course visually, and he did so.

“I see it!” Nick cried. “I see the airport! My God, what a beautiful sight!”

“If you see it, you’re out of your seat,” Brian said. He spoke without turning around. There was no time to turn around now. “Buckle up and shut up.”

But that single long runway was a beautiful sight.

Brian centered the plane’s nose on it and continued down the slide, passing through 1,000 to 800. Below him, a seemingly endless pine forest passed beneath Flight 29’s wings. This finally gave way to a sprawl of buildings—Brian’s restless eyes automatically recorded the usual litter of motels, gas stations, and fast-food restaurants—and then they were passing over the Penobscot River and into Bangor airspace. Brian checked the board again, noted he had green lights on his flaps, and then tried the airport again ... although he knew it was hopeless.

“Bangor tower, this is Flight 29,” he said. “I am declaring an emergency. Repeat, *I am declaring an emergency*. If you have runway traffic, get it out of my way. I’m coming in.”

He glanced at the airspeed indicator just in time to see it drop below 140, the speed which theoretically committed him to landing. Below him, thinning trees gave way to a golf-course. He caught a quick glimpse of a green Holiday Inn sign and then the lights which marked the end of the runway—33 painted on it in big white numerals—were rushing toward him.

The lights were not red, not green.

They were simply dead.

No time to think about it. No time to think about what would happen to them if a Learjet or a fat little Doyka puddle-jumper suddenly trundled onto the runway ahead of them. No time to do anything now but land the bird.

They passed over a short strip of weeds and gravel and then concrete runway was unrolling thirty feet below the plane. They passed over the first set of white stripes and then the skidmarks—probably made by Air National Guard jets this far out—began just below them.

Brian babied the 767 down toward the runway. The second set of stripes flashed just below them... and a moment later there was a light bump as the main landing gear touched down. Now Flight 29 streaked along Runway 33 at a hundred and twenty miles an hour with its nose slightly up and its wings tilted at a mild angle. Brian applied full flaps and reversed the thrusters. There was another bump, even lighter than the first, as the nose came down.

Then the plane was slowing, from a hundred and twenty to a hundred, from a hundred to eighty, from eighty to forty, from forty to the speed at which a man might run.

It was done. They were down.

“Routine landing,” Brian said. “Nothing to it.” Then he let out a long, shuddery breath and brought the plane to a full stop still four hundred yards from the nearest taxiway. His slim body was suddenly twisted by a flock of shivers. When he raised his hand to his face, it wiped away a great warm handful of sweat. He looked at it and uttered a weak laugh.

A hand fell on his shoulder. “You all right, Brian?”

“Yes,” he said, and picked up the intercom mike again. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “welcome to Bangor.”

From behind him Brian heard a chorus of cheers and he laughed.

Nick Hopewell was not laughing. He was leaning over Brian’s seat and peering out through the cockpit window. Nothing moved on the gridwork of runways; nothing moved on the taxiways. No trucks or security vehicles buzzed back and forth on the tarmac. He could see a few vehicles, he could see an Army transport plane—a C-12—

parked on an outer taxiway and a Delta 727 parked at one of the jetways, but they were as still as statues.

“Thank you for the welcome, my friend,” Nick said softly. “My deep appreciation stems from the fact that it appears you are the only one who is going to extend one. This place is utterly deserted.”

## 5

In spite of the continued radio silence, Brian was reluctant to accept Nick’s judgment ... but by the time he had taxied to a point between two of the passenger terminal’s jetways, he found it impossible to believe anything else. It was not just the absence of people; not just the lack of a single security car rushing out to see what was up with this unexpected 767; it was an air of utter lifelessness, as if Bangor International Airport had been deserted for a thousand years, or a hundred thousand. A Jeep-driven baggage train with a few scattered pieces of luggage on its flatties was parked beneath one wing of the Delta jet. It was to this that Brian’s eyes kept returning as he brought Flight 29 as close to the terminal as he dared and parked it. The dozen or so bags looked as ancient as artifacts exhumed from the site of some fabulous ancient city. *I wonder if the guy who discovered King Tut’s tomb felt the way I do now*, he thought.

He let the engines die and just sat there for a moment. Now there was no sound but the faint whisper of an auxiliary power unit—one of four—at the rear of the plane. Brian’s hand moved toward a switch marked INTERNAL POWER and actually touched it before drawing his hand back. Suddenly he didn’t want to shut down completely. There was no reason not to, but the voice of instinct was very strong.

*Besides*, he thought, *I don’t think there’s anyone around to bitch about wasting fuel ... what little there is left to waste.*

Then he unbuckled his safety harness and got up.

“Now what, Brian?” Nick asked. He had also risen, and Brian noticed for the first time that Nick was a good four inches taller than

he was. He thought: *I have been in charge. Ever since this weird thing happened—ever since we discovered it had happened, to be more accurate—I have been in charge. But I think that’s going to change very shortly.*

He discovered he didn’t care. Flying the 767 into the clouds had taken every ounce of courage he possessed, but he didn’t expect any thanks for keeping his head and doing his job; courage was one of the things he got paid for. He remembered a pilot telling him once, “They pay us a hundred thousand dollars or more a year, Brian, and they really do it for just one reason. They know that in almost every pilot’s career, there are thirty or forty seconds when he might actually make a difference. They pay us not to freeze when those seconds finally come.”

It was all very well for your brain to tell you that you had to go down, clouds or no clouds, that there was simply no choice; your nerve-endings just went on screaming their old warning, telegraphing the old high-voltage terror of the unknown. Even Nick, whatever he was and whatever he did on the ground, had wanted to back away from the clouds when it came to the sticking point. He had needed Brian to do what needed to be done. He and all the others had needed Brian to be their guts. Now they were down and there were no monsters beneath the clouds; only this weird silence and one deserted luggage train sitting beneath the wing of a Delta 727.

*So if you want to take over and be the captain, my nose-twisting friend, you have my blessing. I’ll even let you wear my cap if you want to. But not until we’re off the plane. Until you and the rest of the geese actually stand on the ground, you’re my responsibility.*

But Nick had asked him a question, and Brian supposed he deserved an answer.

“Now we get off the airplane and see what’s what,” he said, brushing past the Englishman.

Nick put a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Do you think—”

Brian felt a flash of uncharacteristic anger. He shook loose from Nick’s hand. “I think we get off the plane,” he said. “There’s no one to extend a jetway or run us out a set of stairs, so I think we use the emergency slide. After that, you think. *Matey.*”

He pushed through into first class ... and almost fell over the drinks trolley, which lay on its side. There was a lot of broken glass and an eye-watering stink of alcohol. He stepped over it. Nick caught up with him at the rear of the first-class compartment.

“Brian, if I said something to offend you, I’m sorry. You did a hell of a fine job.”

“You didn’t offend me,” Brian said. “It’s just that in the last ten hours or so I’ve had to cope with a pressure leak over the Pacific Ocean, finding out that my ex-wife died in a stupid apartment fire in Boston, and that the United States has been cancelled. I’m feeling a little zonked.”

He walked through business class into the main cabin. For a moment there was utter silence; they only sat there, looking at him from their white faces with dumb incomprehension.

Then Albert Kaussner began to applaud.

After a moment, Bob Jenkins joined him... and Don Gaffney .. and Laurel Stevenson. The bald man looked around and also began to applaud.

“What is it?” Dinah asked Laurel. “What’s happening?”

“It’s the captain,” Laurel said. She began to cry. “It’s the captain who brought us down safe.”

Then Dinah began to applaud, too.

Brian stared at them, dumbfounded. Standing behind him, Nick joined in. They unbuckled their belts and stood in front of their seats, applauding him. The only three who did not join in were Bethany, who had fainted, the bearded man, who was still snoring in the back row, and Craig Toomy, who panned them all with his strange lunar gaze and then began to rip a fresh strip from the airline magazine.

## 6

Brian felt his face flush—this was just too goony. He raised his hands but for a moment they went on, regardless.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please... please ... I assure you, it was a very routine landing—”

“Shucks, ma’am—t’warn’t nothin,” Bob Jenkins said, doing a very passable Gary Cooper imitation, and Albert burst out laughing. Beside him, Bethany’s eyes fluttered open and she looked around, dazed.

“We got down alive, didn’t we?” she said. “My God! That’s great! I thought we were all dead meat!”

“Please,” Brian said. He raised his arms higher and now he felt weirdly like Richard Nixon, accepting his party’s nomination for four more years. He had to struggle against sudden shrieks of laughter. He couldn’t do that; the passengers wouldn’t understand. They wanted a hero, and he was elected. He might as well accept the position... and use it. He still had to get them off the plane, after all. “If I could have your attention, please!”

They stopped applauding one by one and looked at him expectantly—all except Craig, who threw his magazine aside in a sudden resolute gesture. He unbuckled his seatbelt, rose, and stepped out into the aisle, kicking a drift of paper strips aside. He began to rummage around in the compartment above his seat, frowning with concentration as he did so.

“You’ve looked out the windows, so you know as much as I do,” Brian said. “Most of the passengers and all of the crew on this flight disappeared while we were asleep. That’s crazy enough, but now we appear to be faced with an even crazier proposition. It looks like a lot of other people have disappeared as well ... but logic suggests that other people must be around *somewhere*. We survived whatever-it-was, so others must have survived it as well.”

Bob Jenkins, the mystery writer, whispered something under his breath. Albert heard him but could not make out the words. He half-turned in Jenkins’s direction just as the writer muttered the two words again. This time Albert caught them. They were *false logic*.

“The best way to deal with this, I think, is to take things one step at a time. Step one is exiting the plane.”

“I bought a ticket to Boston,” Craig Toomy said in a calm, rational voice. “Boston is where I want to go.”

Nick stepped out from behind Brian's shoulder. Craig glanced at him and his eyes narrowed. For a moment he looked like a bad-tempered housecat again. Nick raised one hand with the fingers curled in against his palm and scissored two of his knuckles together in a nose-pinching gesture. Craig Toomy, who had once been forced to stand with a lit match between his toes while his mother sang "Happy Birthday," got the message at once. He had always been a quick study. And he could wait.

"We'll have to use the emergency slide," Brian said, "so I want to review the procedures with you. Listen carefully, then form a single-file line and follow me to the front of the aircraft."

## 7

Four minutes later, the forward entrance of American Pride's Flight 29 swung inward. Some murmured conversation drifted out of the opening and seemed to fall immediately dead on the cool, still air. There was a hissing sound and a large clump of orange fabric suddenly bloomed in the doorway. For a moment it looked like a strange hybrid sunflower. It grew and took shape as it fell, its surface inflating into a plump ribbed slide. As the foot of the slide struck the tarmac there was a low *pop!* and then it just leaned there, looking like a giant orange air mattress.

Brian and Nick stood at the head of the short line in the portside row of first class.

"There's something wrong with the air out there," Nick said in a low voice.

"What do you mean?" Brian asked. He pitched his voice even lower. "Poisoned?"

"No... at least I don't think so. But it has no smell, no taste."

"You're nuts," Brian said uneasily.

"No I'm not," Nick said. "This is an *airport*, mate, not a bloody hayfield, but can you smell oil or gas? I can't."

Brian sniffed. And there was nothing. If the air was poisoned—he didn't believe it was, but if—it was a slow-acting toxin. His lungs seemed to be processing it just fine. But Nick was right. There was no smell. And that other, more elusive, quality that the Brit had called taste ... that wasn't there, either. The air outside the open door tasted utterly neutral. It tasted canned.

"Is something wrong?" Bethany Simms asked anxiously. "I mean, I'm not sure if I really want to know if there is, but—"

"There's nothing wrong," Brian said. He counted heads, came up with ten, and turned to Nick again. "That guy in the back is still asleep. Do you think we should wake him up?"

Nick thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Let's not. Haven't we got enough problems for now without having to play nursemaid to a bloke with a hangover?"

Brian grinned. They were his thoughts exactly. "Yes, I think we do. All right—you go down first, Nick. Hold the bottom of the slide. I'll help the rest off."

"Maybe *you'd* better go first. In case my loudmouthed friend decides to cut up rough about the unscheduled stop again." He pronounced *unscheduled* as *un-shed-youled*.

Brian glanced at the man in the crew-necked jersey. He was standing at the rear of the line, a slim monogrammed briefcase in one hand, staring blankly at the ceiling. His face had all the expression of a department-store dummy. "I'm not going to have any trouble with him," he said, "because I don't give a crap what he does. He can go or stay, it's all the same to me."

Nick grinned. "Good enough for me, too. Let the grand exodus begin."

"Shoes off?"

Nick held up a pair of black kidskin loafers.

"Okay—away you go." Brian turned to Bethany. "Watch closely, miss—you're next."

"Oh god—I *hate* shit like this."

Bethany nevertheless crowded up beside Brian and watched apprehensively as Nick Hopewell addressed the slide. He jumped, raising both legs at the same time so he looked like a man doing a

seat-drop on a trampoline. He landed on his butt and slid to the bottom. It was neatly done; the foot of the slide barely moved. He hit the tarmac with his stocking feet, stood up, twirled around, and made a mock bow with his arms held out behind him.

“Easy as pie!” he called up. “Next customer!”

“That’s you, miss,” Brian said. “Is it Bethany?”

“Yes,” she said nervously. “I don’t think I can do this. I flunked gym all three semesters and they finally let me take home ec again instead.”

“You’ll do fine,” Brian told her. He reflected that people used the slide with much less coaxing and a lot more enthusiasm when there was a threat they could see—a hole in the fuselage or a fire in one of the portside engines. “Shoes off?”

Bethany’s shoes—actually a pair of old pink sneakers—were off, but she tried to withdraw from the doorway and the bright-orange slide just the same. “Maybe if I could just have a drink before—”

“Mr. Hopewell’s holding the slide and you’ll be fine,” Brian coaxed, but he was beginning to be afraid he might have to push her. He didn’t want to, but if she didn’t jump soon, he would. You couldn’t let them go to the end of the line until their courage returned; that was the big no-no when it came to the escape slide. If you did that, they *all* wanted to go to the end of the line.

“Go on, Bethany,” Albert said suddenly. He had taken his violin case from the overhead compartment and held it tucked under one arm. “I’m scared to death of that thing, and if you go, I’ll have to.”

She looked at him, surprised. “Why?”

Albert’s face was very red. “Because you’re a girl,” he said simply. “I know I’m a sexist rat, but that’s it.”

Bethany looked at him a moment longer, then laughed and turned to the slide. Brian had made up his mind to push her if she looked around or drew back again, but she didn’t. “Boy, I wish I had some grass,” she said, and jumped.

She had seen Nick’s seat-drop maneuver and knew what to do, but at the last moment she lost her courage and tried to get her feet under her again. As a result, she skidded to one side when she came down on the slide’s bouncy surface. Brian was sure she was

going to tumble off, but Bethany herself saw the danger and managed to roll back. She shot down the slope on her right side, one hand over her head, her blouse rucking up almost to the nape of her neck. Then Nick caught her and she stepped off.

“Oh boy,” she said breathlessly. “Just like being a kid again.”

“Are you all right?” Nick asked.

“Yeah. I think I might have wet my pants a little, but I’m okay.”

Nick smiled at her and turned back to the slide.

Albert looked apologetically at Brian and extended the violin case. “Would you mind holding this for me? I’m afraid if I fall off the slide, it might get broken. My folks’d kill me. It’s a Gretch.”

Brian took it. His face was calm and serious, but he was smiling inside. “Could I look? I used to play one of these about a thousand years ago.”

“Sure,” Albert said.

Brian’s interest had a calming effect on the boy ... which was exactly what he had hoped for. He unsnapped the three catches and opened the case. The violin inside was indeed a Gretch, and not from the bottom of that prestigious line, either. Brian guessed you could buy a compact car for the amount of money this had cost.

“Beautiful,” he said, and plucked out four quick notes along the neck: *My dog has fleas*. They rang sweetly and beautifully. Brian closed and latched the case again. “I’ll keep it safe. Promise.”

“Thanks.” Albert stood in the doorway, took a deep breath, then let it out again. “Geronimo,” he said in a weak little voice and jumped. He tucked his hands into his armpits as he did so—protecting his hands in any situation where physical damage was possible was so ingrained in him that it had become a reflex. He seat-dropped onto the slide and shot neatly to the bottom.

“Well done!” Nick said.

“Nothing to it,” Ace Kaussner drawled, stepped off, and then nearly tripped over his own feet.

“Albert!” Brian called down. “Catch!” He leaned out, placed the violin case on the center of the slide, and let it go. Albert caught it easily five feet from the bottom, tucked it under his arm, and stood back.

Jenkins shut his eyes as he leaped and came down aslant on one scrawny buttock. Nick stepped nimbly to the left side of the slide and caught the writer just as he fell off, saving him a nasty tumble to the concrete.

“Thank you, young man.”

“Don’t mention it, matey.”

Gaffney followed; so did the bald man. Then Laurel and Dinah Bellman stood in the hatchway.

“I’m scared,” Dinah said in a thin, wavery voice.

“You’ll be fine, honey,” Brian said. “You don’t even have to jump.” He put his hands on Dinah’s shoulders and turned her so she was facing him with her back to the slide. “Give me your hands and I’ll lower you onto the slide.”

But Dinah put them behind her back. “Not you. I want Laurel to do it.”

Brian looked at the youngish woman with the dark hair. “Would you?”

“Yes,” she said. “If you tell me what to do.”

“Dinah already knows. Lower her onto the slide by her hands. When she’s lying on her tummy with her feet pointed straight, she can shoot right down.”

Dinah’s hands were cold in Laurel’s. “I’m scared,” she repeated.

“Honey, it’ll be just like going down a playground slide,” Brian said. “The man with the English accent is waiting at the bottom to catch you. He’s got his hands up just like a catcher in a baseball game.” Not, he reflected, that Dinah would know what *that* looked like.

Dinah looked at him as if he were being quite foolish. “Not of *that*. I’m scared of this *place*. It smells funny.”

Laurel, who detected no smell but her own nervous sweat, looked helplessly at Brian.

“Honey,” Brian said, dropping to one knee in front of the little blind girl, “we have to get off the plane. You know that, don’t you?”

The lenses of the dark glasses turned toward him. “*Why? Why* do we have to get off the plane? There’s no one here.”

Brian and Laurel exchanged a glance.

“Well,” Brian said, “we won’t really know that until we check, will we?”

“I know already,” Dinah said. “There’s nothing to smell and nothing to hear. But ... but...”

“But what, Dinah?” Laurel asked.

Dinah hesitated. She wanted to make them understand that the way she had to leave the plane was really not what was bothering her. She had gone down slides before, and she trusted Laurel. Laurel would not let go of her hands if it was dangerous. Something was *wrong* here, *wrong*, and that was what she was afraid of—the wrong thing. It wasn’t the quiet and it wasn’t the emptiness. It might have to do with those things, but it was more than those things.

Something *wrong*.

But grownups did not believe children, especially not blind children, even more especially not blind *girl* children. She wanted to tell them they couldn’t stay here, that it wasn’t *safe* to stay here, that they had to start the plane up and get going again. But what would they say? Okay, sure, Dinah’s right, everybody back on the plane? No way.

*They’ll see. They’ll see that it’s empty and then we’ll get back on the airplane and go someplace else. Someplace where it doesn’t feel wrong. There’s still time.*

*I think.*

“Never mind,” she told Laurel. Her voice was low and resigned. “Lower me down.”

Laurel lowered her carefully onto the slide. A moment later Dinah was looking up at her—*except she’s not really looking*, Laurel thought, *she can’t really look at all*—with her bare feet splayed out behind her on the orange slide.

“Okay, Dinah?” Laurel asked.

“No,” Dinah said. “*Nothing’s* okay here.” And before Laurel could release her, Dinah unlocked her hands from Laurel’s and released herself. She slid to the bottom, and Nick caught her.

Laurel went next, dropping neatly onto the slide and holding her skirt primly as she slid to the bottom. That left Brian, the snoozing

drunk at the back of the plane, and that fun-loving paper-ripping party animal, Mr. Crew-Neck Jersey.

*I'm not going to have any trouble with him,* Brian had said, *because I don't give a crap what he does.* Now he discovered that was not really true. The man was not playing with a full deck. Brian suspected even the little girl knew that, and the little girl was blind. What if they left him behind and the guy decided to go on a rampage? What if, in the course of that rampage, he decided to trash the cockpit?

*So what? You're not going anyplace. The tanks are almost dry.*

Still, he didn't like the idea, and not just because the 767 was a multi-million-dollar piece of equipment, either. Perhaps what he felt was a vague echo of what he had seen in Dinah's face as she looked up from the slide. Things here seemed wrong, even wronger than they looked ... and that was scary, because he didn't know how things could be wronger than that. The plane, however, was right. Even with its fuel tanks all but empty, it was a world he knew and understood.

"Your turn, friend," he said as civilly as he could.

"You know I'm going to report you for this, don't you?" Craig Toomy asked in a queerly gentle voice. "You know I plan to sue this entire airline for thirty million dollars, and that I plan to name you a primary respondent?"

"That's your privilege, Mr.—"

"Toomy. Craig Toomy."

"Mr. Toomy," Brian agreed. He hesitated. "Mr. Toomy, are you aware of what has happened to us?"

Craig looked out the open doorway for a moment—looked at the deserted tarmac and the wide, slightly polarized terminal windows on the second level, where no happy friends and relatives stood waiting to embrace arriving passengers, where no impatient travellers waited for their flights to be called.

Of course he knew. It was the langoliers. The langoliers had come for all the foolish, lazy people, just as his father had always said they would.

In that same gentle voice, Craig said: “In the Bond Department of the Desert Sun Banking Corporation, I am known as The Wheelhorse. Did you know that?” He paused for a moment, apparently waiting for Brian to make some response. When Brian didn’t, Craig continued. “Of course you didn’t. No more than you know how important this meeting at the Prudential Center in Boston is. No more than you care. But let me tell you something, Captain: the economic fate of nations may hinge upon the results of that meeting—that meeting from which I will be absent when the roll is taken.”

“Mr. Toomy, all that’s very interesting, but I really don’t have time —”

“*Time!*” Craig screamed at him suddenly. “What in the hell do *you* know about time? Ask me! Ask me! I know about time! I know *all about* time! Time is short, sir! Time is *very fucking short!*”

*Hell with it, I’m going to push the crazy son of a bitch,* Brian thought, but before he could, Craig Toomy turned and leaped. He did a perfect seat-drop, holding his briefcase to his chest as he did so, and Brian was crazily reminded of that old Hertz ad on TV, the one where O. J. Simpson went flying through airports in a suit and a tie.

“*Time is short as hell!*” Craig shouted as he slid down, briefcase over his chest like a shield, pantslegs pulling up to reveal his knee-high dress-for-success black nylon socks.

Brian muttered: “Jesus, what a fucking weirdo.” He paused at the head of the slide, looked around once more at the comforting, known world of his aircraft... and jumped.

## 8

Ten people stood in two small groups beneath the giant wing of the 767 with the red-and-blue eagle on the nose. In one group were Brian, Nick, the bald man, Bethany Simms, Albert Kaussner, Robert Jenkins, Dinah, Laurel, and Don Gaffney. Standing slightly apart

from them and constituting his own group was Craig Toomy, a.k.a. The Wheelhorse. Craig bent and shook out the creases of his pants with fussy concentration, using his left hand to do it. The right was tightly locked around the handle of his briefcase. Then he simply stood and looked around with wide, disinterested eyes.

“What now, Captain?” Nick asked briskly.

“You tell me. Us.”

Nick looked at him for a moment, one eyebrow slightly raised, as if to ask Brian if he really meant it. Brian inclined his head half an inch. It was enough.

“Well, inside the terminal will do for a start, I reckon,” Nick said. “What would be the quickest way to get there? Any idea?”

Brian nodded toward a line of baggage trains parked beneath the overhang of the main terminal. “I’d guess the quickest way in without a jetway would be the luggage conveyor.”

“All right; let’s hike on over, ladies and gentlemen, shall we?”

It was a short walk, but Laurel, who walked hand-in-hand with Dinah, thought it was the strangest one she had ever taken in her life. She could see them as if from above, less than a dozen dots trundling slowly across a wide concrete plain. There was no breeze. No birds sang. No motors revved in the distance, and no human voice broke the unnatural quiet. Even their footfalls seemed wrong to her. She was wearing a pair of high heels, but instead of the brisk click she was used to, she seemed to hear only small, dull thuds.

*Seemed, she thought. That’s the key word. Because the situation is so strange, everything begins to seem strange. It’s the concrete, that’s all. High heels sound different on concrete.*

But she had walked on concrete in high heels before. She didn’t remember ever hearing a sound precisely like this. It was ... pallid, somehow. Strengthless.

They reached the parked luggage trains. Nick wove between them, leading the line, and stopped at a dead conveyor belt which emerged from a hole lined with hanging strips of rubber. The conveyor made a wide circle on the apron where the handlers normally stood to unload the flatties, then re-entered the terminal through another hole hung with rubber strips.

“What are those pieces of rubber for?” Bethany asked nervously.

“To keep out the draft in cold weather, I imagine,” Nick said. “Just let me poke my head through and have a look. No fear; won’t be a moment.” And before anyone could reply, he had boosted himself onto the conveyor belt and was walking bent-over down to one of the holes cut into the building. When he got there, he dropped to his knees and poked his head through the rubber strips.

*We’re going to hear a whistle and then a thud, Albert thought wildly, and when we pull him back, his head will be gone.*

There was no whistle, no thud. When Nick withdrew, his head was still firmly attached to his neck, and his face wore a thoughtful expression. “Coast’s clear,” he said, and to Albert his cheery tone now sounded manufactured. “Come on through, friends. When a body meet a body, and all that.”

Bethany held back. “Are there bodies? Mister, are there dead people in there?”

“Not that I saw, miss,” Nick said, and now he had dropped any attempt at lightness. “I was misquoting old Bobby Burns in an attempt to be funny. I’m afraid I achieved tastelessness instead of humor. The fact is, I didn’t see anyone at all. But that’s pretty much what we expected, isn’t it?”

It was... but it struck heavily at their hearts just the same. Nick’s as well, from his tone.

One after the other they climbed onto the conveyor belt and crawled after him through the hanging rubber strips.

Dinah paused just outside the entrance hole and turned her head back toward Laurel. Hazy light flashed across her dark glasses, turning them to momentary mirrors.

“It’s really wrong here,” she repeated, and pushed through to the other side.

One by one they emerged into the main terminal of Bangor International Airport, exotic baggage crawling along a stalled conveyor belt. Albert helped Dinah off and then they all stood there, looking around in silent wonder.

The shocked amazement at waking to a plane which had been magically emptied of people had worn off; now dislocation had taken the place of wonder. None of them had ever been in an airport terminal which was utterly empty. The rental-car stalls were deserted. The ARRIVALS/DEPARTURES monitors were dark and dead. No one stood at the bank of counters serving Delta, United, Northwest Air-Link, or Mid-Coast Airways. The huge tank in the middle of the floor with the BUY MAINE LOBSTERS banner stretched over it was full of water, but there were no lobsters in it. The overhead fluorescents were off, and the small amount of light entering through the doors on the far side of the large room petered out halfway across the floor, leaving the little group from Flight 29 huddled together in an unpleasant nest of shadows.

“Right, then,” Nick said, trying for briskness and managing only unease. “Let’s try the telephones, shall we?”

While he went to the bank of telephones, Albert wandered over to the Budget Rent A Car desk. In the slots on the rear wall he saw folders for BRIGGS, HANDLEFORD, MARCHANT, FENWICK and PESTLEMAN. There was, no doubt, a rental agreement inside each one, along with a map of the central Maine area, and on each map there would be an arrow with the legend YOU ARE HERE on it, pointing at the city of Bangor.

*But where are we really? Albert wondered. And where are Briggs, Handleford, Marchant, Fenwick, and Pestleman? Have they been transported to another dimension? Maybe it’s the Grateful Dead. Maybe the Dead’s playing somewhere downstate and everybody left for the show.*

There was a dry scratching noise just behind him. Albert nearly jumped out of his skin and whirled around fast, holding his violin case up like a cudgel. Bethany was standing there, just touching a match to the tip of her cigarette.

She raised her eyebrows. “Scare you?”

“A little,” Albert said, lowering the case and offering her a small, embarrassed smile.

“Sorry.” She shook out the match, dropped it on the floor, and drew deeply on her cigarette. “There. At least that’s better. I didn’t dare to on the plane. I was afraid something might blow up.”

Bob Jenkins strolled over. “You know, I quit those about ten years ago.”

“No lectures, please,” Bethany said. “I’ve got a feeling that if we get out of this alive and sane, I’m in for about a month of lectures. Solid. Wall-to-wall.”

Jenkins raised his eyebrows but didn’t ask for an explanation. “Actually,” he said, “I was going to ask you if I could have one. This seems like an excellent time to renew acquaintance with old habits.”

Bethany smiled and offered him a Marlboro. Jenkins took it and she lit it for him. He inhaled, then coughed out a series of smoke-signal puffs.

“You *have* been away,” she observed matter-of-factly.

Jenkins agreed. “But I’ll get used to it again in a hurry. That’s the real horror of the habit, I’m afraid. Did you two notice the clock?”

“No,” Albert said.

Jenkins pointed to the wall above the doors of the men’s and women’s bathrooms. The clock mounted there had stopped at 4:07.

“It fits,” he said. “We knew we had been in the air for awhile when—let’s call it The Event, for want of a better term—when The Event took place. 4:07A.M. Eastern Daylight Time is 1:07A.M. PDT. So now we know the when.”

“Gee, that’s great,” Bethany said.

“Yes,” Jenkins said, either not noticing or preferring to ignore the light overlay of sarcasm in her voice. “But there’s something wrong with it. I only wish the sun was out. Then I could be sure.”

“What do you mean?” Albert asked.

“The clocks—the electric ones, anyway—are no good. There’s no juice. But if the sun was out, we could get at least a rough idea of what time it is by the length and direction of our shadows. My watch says it’s going on quarter of nine, but I don’t trust it. It feels later to me than that. I have no proof for it, and I can’t explain it, but it does.”

Albert thought about it. Looked around. Looked back at Jenkins. “You know,” he said, “it *does*. It feels like it’s almost lunchtime. Isn’t that nuts?”

“It’s not nuts,” Bethany said, “it’s just jetlag.”

“I disagree,” Jenkins said. “We travelled west to east, young lady. Any temporal dislocation west-east travellers feel goes the other way. They feel it’s *earlier* than it should be.”

“I want to ask you about something you said on the plane,” Albert said. “When the captain told us that there must be *some* other people here, you said ‘false logic.’ In fact, you said it twice. But it seems straight enough to me. We were all asleep, and *we’re* here. And if this thing happened at”—Albert glanced toward the clock—“at 4:07, Bangor time, almost everyone in *town* must have been asleep.”

“Yes,” Jenkins said blandly. “So where are they?”

Albert was nonplussed. “Well ...”

There was a bang as Nick forcibly hung up one of the pay telephones. It was the last in a long line of them; he had tried every one. “It’s a washout,” he said. “They’re all dead. The coin-fed ones as well as the direct-dials. You can add the sound of no phones ringing to that of no dogs barking, Brian.”

“So what do we do now?” Laurel asked. She heard the forlorn sound of her own voice and it made her feel very small, very lost. Beside her, Dinah was turning in slow circles. She looked like a human radar dish.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Baldy proposed. “That’s where the restaurant must be.”

They all looked at him. Gaffney snorted. “You got a one-track mind, mister.”

The bald man looked at him from beneath one raised eyebrow. “First, the name is Rudy Warwick, not mister,” he replied. “Second, people think better when their stomachs are full.” He shrugged. “It’s just a law of nature.”

“I think Mr. Warwick is quite right,” Jenkins said. “We all *could* use something to eat ... and if we go upstairs, we may find some other clues pointing toward what has happened. In fact, I rather think we will.”

Nick shrugged. He looked suddenly tired and confused. "Why not?" he said. "I'm starting to feel like Mr. Robinson Bloody Crusoe."

They started toward the escalator, which was also dead, in a straggling little group. Albert, Bethany, and Bob Jenkins walked together, toward the rear.

"You know something, don't you?" Albert asked abruptly. "What is it?"

"I *might* know something," Jenkins corrected. "I might not. For the time being I'm going to hold my peace ... except for one suggestion."

"What?"

"It's not for you; it's for the young lady." He turned to Bethany. "Save your matches. That's my suggestion."

"What?" Bethany frowned at him.

"You heard me."

"Yeah, I guess I did, but I don't get what you mean. There's probably a newsstand upstairs, Mr. Jenkins. They'll have lots of matches. Cigarettes and disposable lighters, too."

"I agree," Jenkins said. "I still advise you to save your matches."

*He's playing Philo Christie or whoever it was again,* Albert thought.

He was about to point this out and ask Jenkins to please remember that this wasn't one of his novels when Brian Engle stopped at the foot of the escalator, so suddenly that Laurel had to jerk sharply on Dinah's hand to keep the blind girl from running into him.

"Watch where you're going, okay?" Laurel asked. "In case you didn't notice, the kid here can't see."

Brian ignored her. He was looking around at the little group of refugees. "Where's Mr. Toomy?"

"Who?" the bald man—Warwick—asked.

"The guy with the pressing appointment in Boston."

"Who cares?" Gaffney asked. "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

But Brian was uneasy. He didn't like the idea that Toomy had slipped away and gone off on his own. He didn't know why, but he didn't like that idea at all. He glanced at Nick. Nick shrugged, then shook his head. "Didn't see him go, mate. I was fooling with the phones. Sorry."

*“Toomy!”* Brian shouted. *“Craig Toomy! Where are you?”*

There was no response. Only that queer, oppressive silence. And Laurel noticed something then, something that made her skin cold. Brian had cupped his hands and shouted up the escalator. In a high-ceilinged place like this one, there should have been at least some echo.

But there had been none.

No echo at all.

## 10

While the others were occupied downstairs—the two teenagers and the old geezer standing by one of the car-rental desks, the others watching the British thug as he tried the phones—Craig Toomy had crept up the stalled escalator as quietly as a mouse. He knew exactly where he wanted to go; he knew exactly what to look for when he got there.

He strode briskly across the large waiting room with his briefcase swinging beside his right knee, ignoring both the empty chairs and an empty bar called The Red Baron. At the far end of the room was a sign hanging over the mouth of a wide, dark corridor. It read

GATE 5 INTERNATIONAL ARRIVALS  
DUTY FREE SHOPS  
U.S. CUSTOMS  
AIRPORT SECURITY

He had almost reached the head of this corridor when he glanced out one of the wide windows at the tarmac again ... and his pace faltered. He approached the glass slowly and looked out.

There was nothing to see but the empty concrete and the moveless white sky, but his eyes began to widen nonetheless and he felt fear begin to steal into his heart.

*They're coming*, a dead voice suddenly told him. It was the voice of his father, and it spoke from a small, haunted mausoleum tucked

away in a gloomy corner of Craig Toomy's heart.

"No," he whispered, and the word spun a little blossom of fog on the window in front of his lips. "No one is coming."

*You've been bad. Worse, you've been lazy.*

"No!"

*Yes. You had an appointment and you skipped it. You ran away. You ran away to Bangor, Maine, of all the silly places.*

"It wasn't my fault," he muttered. He was gripping the handle of the briefcase with almost painful tightness now. "I was taken against my will. I ... I was shanghaied!"

No reply from that interior voice. Only waves of disapproval. And once again Craig intuited the pressure he was under, the terrible never-ending pressure, the weight of the fathoms. The interior voice did not have to tell him there were no excuses; Craig knew that. He knew it of old.

*THEY were here ... and they will be back. You know that, don't you?*

He knew. The langoliers would be back. They would be back for *him*. He could sense them. He had never seen them, but he knew how horrible they would be. And was he alone in his knowledge? He thought not.

He thought perhaps the little blind girl knew something about the langoliers as well.

But that didn't matter. The only thing which did was getting to Boston—getting to Boston before the langoliers could arrive in Bangor from their terrible, doomish lair to eat him alive and screaming. He had to get to that meeting at the Pru, had to let them know what he had done, and then he would be...

Free.

He would be free.

Craig pulled himself away from the window, away from the emptiness and the stillness, and plunged into the corridor beneath the sign. He passed the empty shops without a glance. Beyond them he came to the door he was looking for. There was a small rectangular plaque mounted on it, just above a bullseye peephole. AIRPORT SECURITY, it said.

He had to get in there. One way or another, he had to get in there.

*All of this ... this craziness ... it doesn't have to belong to me. I don't have to own it. Not anymore.*

Craig reached out and touched the doorknob of the Airport Security office. The blank look in his eyes had been replaced by an expression of clear determination.

*I have been under stress for a long, a very long, time. Since I was seven? No—I think it started even before that. The fact is, I've been under stress for as long as I can remember. This latest piece of craziness is just a new variation. It's probably just what the man in the ratty sport-coat said it was: a test. Agents of some secret government agency or sinister foreign power running a test. But I choose not to participate in any more tests. I don't care if it's my father in charge, or my mother, or the dean of the Graduate School of Management, or the Desert Sun Banking Corporation's Board of Directors. I choose not to, participate. I choose to escape. I choose to get to Boston and finish what I set out to do when I presented the Argentinian bond-buy in the first place. If I don't ...*

But he knew what would happen if he didn't.

He would go mad.

Craig tried the doorknob. It did not move beneath his hand, but when he gave it a small, frustrated push, the door swung open. Either it had been left slightly unlatched, or it had unlocked when the power went off and the security systems went dead. Craig didn't care which. The important thing was that he wouldn't need to muss his clothes trying to crawl through an air-conditioning duct or something. He still had every intention of showing up at his meeting before the end of the day, and he didn't want his clothes smeared with dirt and grease when he got there. One of the simple, unexceptioned truths of life was this: guys with dirt on their suits have no credibility.

He pushed the door open and went inside.

Brian and Nick reached the top of the escalator first, and the others gathered around them. This was BIA's central waiting room, a large square box filled with contour plastic seats (some with coin-op TVs bolted to the arms) and dominated by a wall of polarized floor-to-ceiling windows. To their immediate left was the airport newsstand and the security checkpoint which served Gate 1; to their right and all the way across the room were The Red Baron Bar and The Cloud Nine Restaurant. Beyond the restaurant was the corridor leading to the Airport Security office and the International Arrivals Annex.

"Come on—" Nick began, and Dinah said, "Wait."

She spoke in a strong, urgent voice and they all turned toward her curiously.

Dinah dropped Laurel's hand and raised both of her own. She cupped the thumbs behind her ears and splayed her fingers out like fans. Then she simply stood there, still as a post, in this odd and rather weird listening posture.

"What—" Brian began, and Dinah said "*Shhh!*" in an abrupt, inarguable sibilant.

She turned slightly to the left, paused, then turned in the other direction until the white light coming through the windows fell directly on her, turning her already pale face into something which was ghostlike and eerie. She took off her dark glasses. The eyes beneath were wide, brown, and not quite blank.

"There," she said in a low, dreaming voice, and Laurel felt terror begin to stroke at her heart with chilly fingers. Nor was she alone. Bethany was crowding close to her on one side, and Don Gaffney moved in against her other side. "There—I can feel the light. They said that's how they know I can see again. I can always feel the light. It's like heat inside my head."

"Dinah, what—" Brian began.

Nick elbowed him. The Englishman's face was long and drawn, his forehead ribbed with lines. "Be quiet, mate."

"The light is ... here."

She walked slowly away from them, her hands still fanned out by her ears, her elbows held out before her to encounter any object which might stand in her way. She advanced until she was less than

two feet from the window. Then she slowly reached out until her fingers touched the glass. They looked like black starfish outlined against the white sky. She let out a small, unhappy murmur.

“The glass is wrong, too,” she said in that dreaming voice.

“Dinah—” Laurel began.

“Shhh ...” she whispered without turning around. She stood at the window like a little girl waiting for her father to come home from work. *“I hear something.”*

These whispered words sent a wordless, thoughtless horror through Albert Kaussner’s mind. He felt pressure on his shoulders and looked down to see he had crossed his arms across his chest and was clutching himself hard.

Brian listened with all his concentration. He heard his own breathing, and the breathing of the others ... but he heard nothing else. *It’s her imagination, he thought. That’s all it is.*

But he wondered.

“What?” Laurel asked urgently. “What do you hear, Dinah?”

“I don’t know,” she said without turning from the window. “It’s very faint. I thought I heard it when we got off the airplane, and then I decided it was just my imagination. Now I can hear it better. I can hear it even through the glass. It sounds ... a little like Rice Krispies after you pour in the milk.”

Brian turned to Nick and spoke in a low voice. “Do you hear anything?”

“Not a bloody thing,” Nick said, matching Brian’s tone. “But she’s blind. She’s used to making her ears do double duty.”

“I think it’s hysteria,” Brian said. He was whispering now, his lips almost touching Nick’s ear.

Dinah turned from the window.

“ ‘Do you hear anything?’ ” she mimicked. “ ‘Not a bloody thing. But she’s blind. She’s used to making her ears do double duty.’ ” She paused, then added: “ ‘I think it’s hysteria.’ ”

“Dinah, what are you talking about?” Laurel asked, perplexed and frightened. She had not heard Brian and Nick’s muttered conversation, although she had been standing much closer to them than Dinah was.

“Ask *them*,” Dinah said. Her voice was trembling. “I’m not crazy! I’m blind, but I’m *not* crazy!”

“All right,” Brian said, shaken. “All right, Dinah.” And to Laurel he said: “I was talking to Nick. She heard us. From over there by the windows, she heard us.”

“You’ve got great ears, hon,” Bethany said.

“I hear what I hear,” Dinah said. “And I hear something out there. In that direction.” She pointed due east through the glass. Her unseeing eyes swept them. “And it’s *bad*. It’s an awful sound, a scary sound.”

Don Gaffney said hesitantly: “If you knew what it was, little miss, that would help, maybe.”

“I don’t,” Dinah said. “But I know that it’s closer than it was.” She put her dark glasses back on with a hand that was trembling. “We have to get out of here. And we have to get out soon. Because something is coming. The bad something making the cereal noise.”

“Dinah,” Brian said, “the plane we came in is almost out of fuel.”

“*Then you have to put some more in it!*” Dinah screamed shrilly at him. “*It’s coming*, don’t you understand? *It’s coming*, and if we haven’t gone when it gets here, we’re going to die! *We’re all going to die!*”

Her voice cracked and she began to sob. She was not a sibyl or a medium but only a little girl forced to live her terror in a darkness which was almost complete. She staggered toward them, her self-possession utterly gone. Laurel grabbed her before she could stumble over one of the guide-ropes which marked the way to the security checkpoint and hugged her tight. She tried to soothe the girl, but those last words echoed and rang in Laurel’s confused, shocked mind: *If we haven’t gone when it gets here, we’re going to die.*

*We’re all going to die.*

Craig Toomy heard the brat begin to caterwaul back there someplace and ignored it. He had found what he was looking for in the third locker he opened, the one with the name MARKEY Dymotaped to the front. Mr. Markey's lunch—a sub sandwich poking out of a brown paper bag—was on the top shelf. Mr. Markey's street shoes were placed neatly side by side on the bottom shelf. Hanging in between, from the same hook, were a plain white shirt and a gunbelt. Protruding from the holster was the butt of Mr. Markey's service revolver.

Craig unsnapped the safety strap and took the gun out. He didn't know much about guns—this could have been a .32, a .38, or even a .45, for all of him—but he was not stupid, and after a few moments of fumbling he was able to roll the cylinder. All six chambers were loaded. He pushed the cylinder back in, nodding slightly when he heard it click home, and then inspected the hammer area and both sides of the grip. He was looking for a safety catch, but there didn't appear to be one. He put his finger on the trigger and tightened until he saw both the hammer and the cylinder move slightly. Craig nodded, satisfied.

He turned around and without warning the most intense loneliness of his adult life struck him. The gun seemed to take on weight and the hand holding it sagged. Now he stood with his shoulders slumped, the briefcase dangling from his right hand, the security guard's pistol dangling from his left. On his face was an expression of utter, abject misery. And suddenly a memory recurred to him, something he hadn't thought of in years: Craig Toomy, twelve years old, lying in bed and shivering as hot tears ran down his face. In the other room the stereo was turned up loud and his mother was singing along with Merrilee Rush in her droning off-key drunk's voice: "Just call me *angel* ... of the *morn-ing*, *bay-bee* ... just touch my cheek ... before you leave me, *bay-bee* ..."

Lying there in bed. Shaking. Crying. Not making a sound. And thinking: *Why can't you love me and leave me alone, Momma? Why can't you just love me and leave me alone?*

"I don't want to hurt anyone," Craig Toomy muttered through his tears. "I don't want to, but this ... this is intolerable."

Across the room was a bank of TV monitors, all blank. For a moment, as he looked at them, the truth of what had happened, what was *still* happening, tried to crowd in on him. For a moment it almost broke through his complex system of neurotic shields and into the air-raid shelter where he lived his life.

*Everyone is gone, Craigggy-weggy. The whole world is gone except for you and the people who were on that plane.*

“No,” he moaned, and collapsed into one of the chairs standing around the Formica-topped kitchen table in the center of the room. “No, that’s not so. That’s just not so. I refute that idea. I refute it *utterly.*”

*The langoliers were here, and they will be back,* his father said. It overrode the voice of his mother, as it always had. *You better be gone when they get here ... or you know what will happen.*

He knew, all right. They would eat him. The langoliers would eat him up.

“But I don’t want to hurt anyone,” he repeated in a dreary, distraught voice. There was a mimeographed duty roster lying on the table. Craig let go of his briefcase and laid the gun on the table beside him. Then he picked up the duty roster, looked at it for a moment with unseeing eyes, and began to tear a long strip from the lefthand side.

*Rii-ip.*

Soon he was hypnotized as a pile of thin strips—maybe the thinnest ever!—began to flutter down onto the table. But even then the cold voice of his father would not entirely leave him:

*Or you know what will happen.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ***A BOOK OF MATCHES. THE ADVENTURE OF THE SALAMI SANDWICH. ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE DEDUCTIVE METHOD. THE ARIZONA JEW PLAYS THE VIOLIN. THE ONLY SOUND IN TOWN.***

#### 1

The frozen silence following Dinah's warning was finally broken by Robert Jenkins. "We have some problems," he said in a dry lecture-hall voice. "If Dinah hears something—and following the remarkable demonstration she's just given us, I'm inclined to think she does—it would be helpful if we knew what it is. We don't. That's one problem. The plane's lack of fuel is another problem."

"There's a 727 out there," Nick said, "all cozied up to a jetway. Can you fly one of those, Brian?"

"Yes," Brian said.

Nick spread his hands in Bob's direction and shrugged, as if to say *There you are; one knot untied already.*

"Assuming we do take off again, where should we go?" Bob Jenkins went on. "A third problem."

"Away," Dinah said immediately. "Away from that sound. We have to get away from that sound, and what's making it."

"How long do you think we have?" Bob asked her gently. "How long before it gets here, Dinah? Do you have any idea at all?"

"No," she said from the safe circle of Laurel's arms. "I think it's still far. I think there's still time. But ..."

“Then I suggest we do exactly as Mr. Warwick has suggested,” Bob said. “Let’s step over to the restaurant, have a bite to eat, and discuss what happens next. Food does have a beneficial effect on what Monsieur Poirot liked to call the little gray cells.”

“We shouldn’t *wait*,” Dinah said fretfully.

“Fifteen minutes,” Bob said. “No more than that. And even at your age, Dinah, you should know that useful thinking must always precede useful action.”

Albert suddenly realized that the mystery writer had his own reasons for wanting to go to the restaurant. Mr. Jenkins’s little gray cells were all in apple-pie working order—or at least he believed they were—and following his eerily sharp assessment of their situation on board the plane, Albert was willing at least to give him the benefit of the doubt. *He wants to show us something, or prove something to us*, he thought.

“Surely we have fifteen minutes?” he coaxed.

“Well ...” Dinah said unwillingly. “I guess so ...”

“Fine,” Bob said briskly. “It’s decided.” And he struck off across the room toward the restaurant, as if taking it for granted that the others would follow him.

Brian and Nick looked at each other.

“We better go along,” Albert said quietly. “I think he knows stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?” Brian asked.

“I don’t know, exactly, but I think it might be stuff worth finding out.”

Albert followed Bob; Bethany followed Albert; the others fell in behind them, Laurel leading Dinah by the hand. The little girl was very pale.

## 2

The Cloud Nine Restaurant was really a cafeteria with a cold-case full of drinks and sandwiches at the rear and a stainless-steel counter running beside a long, compartmentalized steam-table. All

the compartments were empty, all sparkling clean. There wasn't a speck of grease on the grill. Glasses—those tough cafeteria glasses with the ripply sides—were stacked in neat pyramids on rear shelves, along with a wide selection of even tougher cafeteria crockery.

Robert Jenkins was standing by the cash register. As Albert and Bethany came in, he said: "May I have another cigarette, Bethany?"

"Gee, you're a real mooch," she said, but her tone was good-natured. She produced her box of Marlboros and shook one out. He took it, then touched her hand as she also produced her book of matches.

"I'll just use one of these, shall I?" There was a bowl filled with paper matches advertising LaSalle Business School by the cash register. FOR OUR MATCHLESS FRIENDS, a little sign beside the bowl read. Bob took a book of these matches, opened it, and pulled one of the matches free.

"Sure," Bethany said, "but why?"

"That's what we're going to find out," he said. He glanced at the others. They were standing around in a semicircle, watching—all except Rudy Warwick, who had drifted to the rear of the serving area and was closely inspecting the contents of the cold-case.

Bob struck the match. It left a little smear of white stuff on the striker, but didn't light. He struck it again with the same result. On the third try, the paper match bent. Most of the flammable head was gone, anyway.

"My, my," he said in an utterly unsurprised tone. "I suppose they must be wet. Let's try a book from the bottom, shall we? *They* should be dry."

He dug to the bottom of the bowl, spilling a number of matchbooks off the top and onto the counter as he did so. They all looked perfectly dry to Albert. Behind him, Nick and Brian exchanged another glance.

Bob fished out another book of matches, pulled one, and tried to strike it. It didn't light.

"Son of a bee," he said. "We seem to have discovered yet another problem. May I borrow your book of matches, Bethany?"

She handed it over without a word.

“Wait a minute,” Nick said slowly. “What do you know, matey?”

“Only that this situation has even wider implications than we at first thought,” Bob said. His eyes were calm enough, but the face from which they looked was haggard. “And I have an idea that we all may have made one *big* mistake. Understandable enough under the circumstances ... but until we’ve rectified our thinking on this subject, I don’t believe we can make any progress. An error of perspective, I’d call it.”

Warwick was wandering back toward them. He had selected a wrapped sandwich and a bottle of beer. His acquisitions seemed to have cheered him considerably. “What’s happening, folks?”

“I’ll be damned if I know,” Brian said, “but I don’t like it much.”

Bob Jenkins pulled one of the matches from Bethany’s book and struck it. It lit on the first strike. “Ah,” he said, and applied the flame to the tip of his cigarette. The smoke smelled incredibly pungent, incredibly sweet to Brian, and a moment’s reflection suggested a reason why: it was the only thing, save for the faint tang of Nick Hopewell’s shaving lotion and Laurel’s perfume, that he *could* smell. Now that he thought about it, Brian realized that he could hardly even smell his travelling companions’ sweat.

Bob still held the lit match in his hand. Now he bent back the top of the book he’d taken from the bowl, exposing all the matches, and touched the lit match to the heads of the others. For a long moment nothing happened. The writer slipped the flame back and forth along the heads of the matches, but they didn’t light. The others watched, fascinated.

At last there was a sickly *phsssss* sound, and a few of the matches erupted into dull, momentary life. They did not really burn at all; there was a weak glow and they went out. A few tendrils of smoke drifted up ... smoke which seemed to have no odor at all.

Bob looked around at them and smiled grimly. “Even that,” he said, “is more than I expected.”

“All right,” Brian said. “Tell us about it. I know—”

At that moment, Rudy Warwick uttered a cry of disgust. Dinah gave a little shriek and pressed closer to Laurel. Albert felt his heart

take a high skip in his chest.

Rudy had unwrapped his sandwich—it looked to Brian like salami and cheese—and had taken a large bite. Now he spat it out onto the floor with a grimace of disgust.

“It’s spoiled!” Rudy cried. “Oh, goddam! I *hate* that!”

“Spoiled?” Bob Jenkins said swiftly. His eyes gleamed like blue electrical sparks. “Oh, I doubt that. Processed meats are so loaded with preservatives these days that it takes eight hours or more in the hot sun to send them over. And we know by the clocks that the power in that cold-case went out less than five hours ago.”

“Maybe not,” Albert spoke up. “You were the one who said it felt later than our wristwatches say.”

“Yes, but I don’t think ... Was the case still cold, Mr. Warwick? When you opened it, was the case still cold?”

“Not *cold*, exactly, but cool,” Rudy said. “That sandwich is all fucked up, though. Pardon me, ladies. Here.” He held it out. “If you don’t think it’s spoiled, *you* try it.”

Bob stared at the sandwich, appeared to screw up his courage, and then did just that, taking a small bite from the untouched half. Albert saw an expression of disgust pass over his face, but he did not get rid of the food immediately. He chewed once ... twice ... then turned and spat into his hand. He stuffed the half-chewed bite of sandwich into the trash-bin below the condiments shelf, and dropped the rest of the sandwich in after it.

“Not spoiled,” he said. “Tasteless. And not just that, either. It seemed to have no texture.” His mouth drew down in an involuntary expression of disgust. “We talk about things being Mand—unseasoned white rice, boiled potatoes—but even the blandest food has *some* taste, I think. That had none. It was like chewing paper. No wonder you thought it was spoiled.”

“It was spoiled,” the bald man reiterated stubbornly.

“Try your beer,” Bob invited. “*That* shouldn’t be spoiled. The cap is still on, and a capped bottle of beer shouldn’t spoil even if it isn’t refrigerated.”

Rudy looked thoughtfully at the bottle of Budweiser in his hand, then shook his head and held it out to Bob. “I don’t want it anymore,”

he said. He glanced at the cold-case. His gaze was baleful, as if he suspected Jenkins of having played an unfunny practical joke on him.

"I will if I have to," Bob said, "but I've already offered my body up to science once. Will somebody else try this beer? I think it's very important."

"Give it to me," Nick said.

"No." It was Don Gaffney. "Give it to me. I could use a beer, by God. I've drunk em warm before and they don't cross my eyes none."

He took the beer, twisted off the cap, and upended it. A moment later he whirled and sprayed the mouthful he had taken onto the floor.

"*Jesus!*" he cried. "Flat! Flat as a pancake!"

"Is it?" Bob asked brightly. "Good! Great! Something we can all see!" He was around the counter in a flash, and taking one of the glasses down from the shelf. Gaffney had set the bottle down beside the cash register, and Brian looked at it closely as Bob Jenkins picked it up. He could see no foam clinging to the inside of the bottleneck. *It might as well be water in there*, he thought.

What Bob poured out didn't look like water, however; it looked like beer. Flat beer. There was no head. A few small bubbles clung to the inside of the glass, but none of them came pinging up through the liquid to the surface.

"All right," Nick said slowly, "it's flat. Sometimes that happens. The cap doesn't get screwed on all the way at the factory and the gas escapes. Everyone's gotten a flat lager from time to time."

"But when you add in the tasteless salami sandwich, it's suggestive, isn't it?"

"Suggestive of *what?*" Brian exploded.

"In a moment," Bob said. "Let's take care of Mr. Hopewell's *caveat* first, shall we?" He turned, grabbed glasses with both hands (a couple of others fell off the shelf and shattered on the floor), then began to set them out along the counter with the agile speed of a bartender. "Bring me some more beer. And a couple of soft drinks, while you're at it."

Albert and Bethany went down to the cold-case and each took four or five bottles, picking at random.

“Is he nuts?” Bethany asked in a low voice.

“I don’t think so,” Albert said. He had a vague idea of what the writer was trying to show them ... and he didn’t like the shape it made in his mind. “Remember when he told you to save your matches? He knew something like this was going to happen. That’s why he was so hot to get us to the restaurant. He wanted to show us.”

### 3

The duty roster was ripped into three dozen narrow strips and the langoliers were closer now.

Craig could feel their approach at the back of his mind—more weight.

More insupportable weight.

It was time to go.

He picked up the gun and his briefcase, then stood up and left the security room. He walked slowly, rehearsing as he *went: I don’t want to shoot you, but I will if I have to. Take me to Boston. I don’t want to shoot you, but I will if I have to. Take me to Boston.*

“I will if I have to,” Craig muttered as he walked back into the waiting room. “I will if I have to.” His finger found the hammer of the gun and cocked it back.

Halfway across the room, his attention was once more snared by the pallid light which fell through the windows, and he turned in that direction. He could feel them out there. The langoliers. They had eaten all the useless, lazy people, and now they were returning for him. He *had* to get to Boston. It was the only way he knew to save the rest of himself ... because *their* death would be horrible. Their death would be horrible indeed.

He walked slowly to the windows and looked out, ignoring—at least for the time being—the murmur of the other passengers behind him.

## 4

Bob Jenkins poured a little from each bottle into its own glass. The contents of each was as flat as the first beer had been. “Are you convinced?” he asked Nick.

“Yes,” Nick said. “If you know what’s going on here, mate, spill it. Please spill it.”

“I have an idea,” Bob said. “It’s not ... I’m afraid it’s not very comforting, but I’m one of those people who believe that knowledge is always better—safer—in the long run than ignorance, no matter how dismayed one may feel when one first understands certain facts. Does that make any sense?”

“No,” Gaffney said at once.

Bob shrugged and offered a small, wry smile. “Be that as it may, I stand by my statement. And before I say anything else, I want to ask you all to look around this place and tell me what you see.”

They looked around, concentrating so fiercely on the little clusters of tables and chairs that no one noticed Craig Toomy standing on the far side of the waiting room, his back to them, gazing out at the tarmac.

“Nothing,” Laurel said at last. “I’m sorry, but I don’t see anything. Your eyes must be sharper than mine, Mr. Jenkins.”

“Not a bit. I see what you see: nothing. But airports are open twenty-four hours a day. When this thing—this Event—happened, it was probably at the dead low tide of its twenty-four-hour cycle, but I find it difficult to believe there weren’t at least a few people in here, drinking coffee and perhaps eating early breakfasts. Aircraft maintenance men. Airport personnel. Perhaps a handful of connecting passengers who elected to save money by spending the

hours between midnight and six or seven o'clock in the terminal instead of in a nearby motel. When I first got off that baggage conveyor and looked around, I felt utterly dislocated. Why? Because airports are never completely deserted, just as police and fire stations are never completely deserted. Now look around again, and ask yourself this: where are the half-eaten meals, the half-empty glasses? Remember the drinks trolley on the airplane with the dirty glasses on the lower shelf? Remember the half-eaten pastry and the half-drunk cup of coffee beside the pilot's seat in the cockpit? There's nothing like that here. *Where is the least sign that there were people here at all when this Event occurred?*"

Albert looked around again and then said slowly, "There's no pipe on the foredeck, is there?"

Bob looked at him closely. "What? What do you say, Albert?"

"When we were on the plane," Albert said slowly, "I was thinking of this sailing ship I read about once. It was called the *Mary Celeste*, and someone spotted it, just floating aimlessly along. Well... not really *floating*, I guess, because the book said the sails were set, but when the people who found it boarded her, everyone on the *Mary Celeste* was gone. Their stuff was still there, though, and there was food cooking on the stove. Someone even found a pipe on the foredeck. It was still lit."

"Bravo!" Bob cried, almost feverishly. They were all looking at him now, and no one saw Craig Toomy walking slowly toward them. The gun he had found was no longer pointed at the floor.

"Bravo, Albert! You've put your finger on it! And there was another famous disappearance—an entire colony of settlers at a place called Roanoke Island ... off the coast of North Carolina, I believe. All gone, but they had left remains of campfires, cluttered houses, and trash middens behind. Now, Albert, take this a step further. How else does this terminal differ from our airplane?"

For a moment Albert looked entirely blank, and then understanding dawned in his eyes. "The rings!" he shouted. "The purses! The wallets! The money! The surgical pins! None of that stuff is here!"

“Correct,” Bob said softly. “One hundred per cent correct. As you say, none of that stuff is here. But it was on the airplane when we survivors woke up, wasn’t it? There were even a cup of coffee and a half-eaten Danish in the cockpit. The equivalent of a smoking pipe on the foredeck.”

“You think we’ve flown into another dimension, don’t you?” Albert said. His voice was awed. “Just like in a science-fiction story.”

Dinah’s head cocked to one side, and for a moment she looked strikingly like Nipper, the dog on the old RCA Victor labels.

“No,” Bob said. “I think—”

“Watch out!” Dinah cried sharply. “I hear some—”

She was too late. Once Craig Toomy broke the paralysis which had held him and he started to move, he moved fast. Before Nick or Brian could do more than begin to turn around, he had locked one forearm around Bethany’s throat and was dragging her backward. He pointed the gun at her temple. The girl uttered a desperate, terrorized squawk.

“I don’t want to shoot her, but I will if I have to,” Craig panted. “Take me to Boston.” His eyes were no longer blank; they shot glances full of terrified, paranoid intelligence in every direction. “Do you hear me? Take me to Boston!”

Brian started toward him, and Nick placed a hand against his chest without shifting his eyes away from Craig. “Steady down, mate,” he said in a low voice. “It wouldn’t be safe. Our friend here is quite bonkers.”

Bethany was squirming under Craig’s restraining forearm. “You’re choking me! Please stop *choking* me!”

“What’s happening?” Dinah cried. “What is it?”

“Stop that!” Craig shouted at Bethany. “Stop moving around! You’re going to force me to do something I don’t want to do!” He pressed the muzzle of the gun against the side of her head. She continued to struggle, and Albert suddenly realized she didn’t know he had a gun—even with it pressed against her skull she didn’t know.

“Quit it, girl!” Nick said sharply. “Quit fighting!”

For the first time in his waking life, Albert found himself not just thinking like The Arizona Jew but possibly called upon to act like that fabled character. Without taking his eyes off the lunatic in the crew-neck jersey, he slowly began to raise his violin case. He switched his grip from the handle and settled both hands around the neck of the case. Toomy was not looking at him; his eyes were shuttling rapidly back and forth between Brian and Nick, and he had his hands full—quite literally—holding onto Bethany.

“I don’t want to shoot her—” Craig was beginning again, and then his arm slipped upward as the girl bucked against him, socking her behind into his crotch. Bethany immediately sank her teeth into his wrist. “Ow!” Craig screamed. “owww!”

His grip loosened. Bethany ducked under it. Albert leaped forward, raising the violin case, as Toomy pointed the gun at Bethany. Toomy’s face was screwed into a grimace of pain and anger.

“No, Albert!” Nick bawled.

Craig Toomy saw Albert coming and shifted the muzzle toward him. For one moment Albert looked straight into it, and it was like none of his dreams or fantasies. Looking into the muzzle was like looking into an open grave.

*I might have made a mistake here*, he thought, and then Craig pulled the trigger.

## 5

Instead of an explosion there was a small pop—the sound of an old Daisy air rifle, no more. Albert felt something thump against the chest of his Hard Rock Cafe tee-shirt, had time to realize he had been shot, and then he brought the violin case down on Craig’s head. There was a solid thud which ran all the way up his arms, and the indignant voice of his father suddenly spoke up in his mind: *What’s the matter with you, Albert? That’s no way to treat an expensive musical instrument!*

There was a startled *broink!* from inside the case as the violin jumped. One of the brass latches dug into Toomy's forehead and blood splashed outward in an amazing spray. Then the man's knees came unhinged and he went down in front of Albert like an express elevator. Albert saw his eyes roll up to whites, and then Craig Toomy was lying at his feet, unconscious.

A crazy but somehow wonderful thought filled Albert's mind for a moment: *By God, I never played better in my life!* And then he realized that he was no longer able to get his breath. He turned to the others, the corners of his mouth turning up in a thin-lipped, slightly confused smile. "I think I have been plugged," Ace Kaussner said, and then the world bleached out to shades of gray and his own knees came unhinged. He crumpled to the floor on top of his violin case.

## 6

He was out for less than thirty seconds. When he came around, Brian was slapping his cheeks lightly and looking anxious. Bethany was on her knees beside him, looking at Albert with shining my-hero eyes. Behind her, Dinah Bellman was still crying within the circle of Laurel's arms. Albert looked back at Bethany and felt his heart—apparently still whole—expand in his chest. "The Arizona Jew rides again," he muttered.

"What, Albert?" she asked, and stroked his cheek. Her hand was wonderfully soft, wonderfully cool. Albert decided he was in love.

"Nothing," he said, and then the pilot whacked him across the face again.

"Are you all right, kid?" Brian was asking. "Are you all right?"

"I think so," Albert said. "Stop doing that, okay? And the name is Albert. Ace, to my friends. How bad am I hit? I can't feel anything yet. Were you able to stop the bleeding?"

Nick Hopewell squatted beside Bethany. His face wore a bemused, unbelieving smile. "I think you'll live, matey. I never saw anything like that in my life ... and I've seen a lot. You Americans are too foolish not to love. Hold out your hand and I'll give you a souvenir."

Albert held out a hand which shook uncontrollably with reaction, and Nick dropped something into it. Albert held it up to his eyes and saw it was a bullet.

"I picked it up off the floor," Nick said. "Not even misshapen. It must have hit you square in the chest—there's a little powder mark on your shirt—and then bounced off. It was a misfire. God must like you, mate."

"I was thinking of the matches," Albert said weakly. "I sort of thought it wouldn't fire at all."

"That was very brave and very foolish, my boy," Bob Jenkins said. His face was dead white and he looked as if he might pass out himself in another few moments. "Never believe a writer. Listen to them, by all means, but never believe them. My God, what if I'd been wrong?"

"You almost were," Brian said. He helped Albert to his feet. "It was like when you lit the other matches—the ones from the bowl. There was just enough pop to drive the bullet out of the muzzle. A little more pop and Albert would have had a bullet in his lung."

Another wave of dizziness washed over Albert. He swayed on his feet, and Bethany immediately slipped an arm around his waist. "I thought it was really brave," she said, looking up at him with eyes which suggested she believed Albert Kaussner must shit diamonds from a platinum asshole. "I mean *incredible*."

"Thanks," Ace said, smiling coolly (if a trifle woozily). "It wasn't much." The fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi was aware that there was a great deal of girl pressed tightly against him, and that the girl smelled almost unbearably good. Suddenly *he* felt good. In fact, he believed he had never felt better in his life. Then he remembered his violin, bent down, and picked up the case. There was a deep dent in one side, and one of the catches had been sprung. There was blood and hair on it, and Albert felt his stomach

turn over lazily. He opened the case and looked in. The instrument looked all right, and he let out a little sigh.

Then he thought of Craig Toomy, and alarm replaced relief.

“Say, I didn’t kill that guy, did I? I hit him pretty hard.” He looked toward Craig, who was lying near the restaurant door with Don Gaffney kneeling beside him. Albert suddenly felt like passing out again. There was a great deal of blood on Craig’s face and forehead.

“He’s alive,” Don said, “but he’s out like a light.”

Albert, who had blown away more hardcases than The Man with No Name in his dreams, felt his gorge rise. “Jesus, there’s so much *blood!*”

“Doesn’t mean a thing,” Nick said. “Scalp wounds tend to bleed a lot.” He joined Don, picked up Craig’s wrist, and felt for a pulse. “You want to remember he had a gun to that girl’s head, matey. If he’d pulled the trigger at point-blank range, he might well have done for her. Remember the actor who killed himself with a blank round a few years ago? Mr. Toomy brought this on himself; he owns it completely. Don’t take on.”

Nick dropped Craig’s wrist and stood up.

“Besides,” he said, pulling a large swatch of paper napkins from the dispenser on one of the tables, “his pulse is strong and regular. I think he’ll wake up in a few minutes with nothing but a bad headache. I also think it might be prudent to take a few precautions against that happy event. Mr. Gaffney, the tables in yonder watering hole actually appear to be equipped with tablecloths—strange but true. I wonder if you’d get a couple? We might be wise to bind old Mr. I’ve-Got-to-Get-to-Boston’s hands behind him.”

“Do you really have to do that?” Laurel asked quietly. “The man is unconscious, after all, and bleeding.”

Nick pressed his makeshift napkin compress against Craig Toomy’s head-wound and looked up at her. “You’re Laurel, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, Laurel, let’s not paint it fine. This man is a lunatic. I don’t know if our current adventure did that to him or if he just grewed that way, like Topsy, but I do know he’s dangerous. He would have

grabbed Dinah instead of Bethany if she had been closer. If we leave him untied, he might do just that next time.”

Craig groaned and waved his hands feebly. Bob Jenkins stepped away from him the moment he began to move, even though the revolver was now safely tucked into the waistband of Brian Engle’s pants, and Laurel did the same, pulling Dinah with her.

“Is anybody dead?” Dinah asked nervously. “No one is, are they?”

“No, honey.”

“I should have heard him sooner, but I was listening to the man who sounds like a teacher.”

“It’s okay,” Laurel said. “It turned out all right, Dinah.” Then she looked out at the empty terminal and her own words mocked her. Nothing was all right here. Nothing at all.

Don returned with a red-and-white-checked tablecloth in each fist.

“Marvellous,” Nick said. He took one of them and spun it quickly and expertly into a rope. He put the center of it in his mouth, clamping his teeth on it to keep it from unwinding, and used his hands to flip Craig over like a human omelette.

Craig cried out and his eyelids fluttered.

“Do you have to be so *rough*?” Laurel asked sharply.

Nick gazed at her for a moment, and she dropped her eyes at once. She could not help comparing Nick Hopewell’s eyes with the eyes in the pictures which Darren Crosby had sent her. Widely spaced, clear eyes in a good-looking-if unremarkable—face. But the eyes had also been rather unremarkable, hadn’t they? And didn’t Darren’s eyes have something, perhaps even a great deal, to do with why she had made this trip in the first place? Hadn’t she decided, after a great deal of close study, that they were the eyes of a man who would behave himself? A man who would back off if you told him to back off?

She had boarded Flight 29 telling herself that this was her great adventure, her one extravagant tango with romance—an impulsive transcontinental dash into the arms of the tall, dark stranger. But sometimes you found yourself in one of those tiresome situations where the truth could no longer be avoided, and Laurel reckoned the truth to be this: she had chosen Darren Crosby because his pictures

and letters had told her he wasn't much different from the placid boys and men she had been dating ever since she was fifteen or so, boys and men who would learn quickly to wipe their feet on the mat before they came in on rainy nights, boys and men who would grab a towel and help with the dishes without being asked, boys and men who would let you go if you told them to do it in a sharp enough tone of voice.

Would she have been on Flight 29 tonight if the photos had shown Nick Hopewell's dark-blue eyes instead of Darren's mild brown ones? She didn't think so. She thought she would have written him a kind but rather impersonal note—*Thank you for your reply and your picture, Mr. Hopewell, but I somehow don't think we would be right for each other—and*

gone on looking for a man like Darren. And, of course, she doubted very much if men like Mr. Hopewell even read the lonely-hearts magazines, let alone placed ads in their personals columns. All the same, she was here with him now, in this weird situation.

Well ... she had wanted to have an adventure, just one adventure, before middle-age settled in for keeps. Wasn't that true? Yes. And here she was, proving Tolkien right—she had stepped out of her own door last evening, just the same as always, and look where she had ended up: a strange and dreary version of Fantasyland. But it was an adventure, all right. Emergency landings ... deserted airports ... a lunatic with a gun. Of course it was an adventure. Something she had read years ago suddenly popped into Laurel's mind. *Be careful what you pray for, because you just might get it.*

How true.

And how confusing.

There was no confusion in Nick Hopewell's eyes ... but there was no mercy in them, either. They made Laurel feel shivery, and there was nothing romantic in the feeling.

*Are you sure?* a voice whispered, and Laurel shut it up at once.

Nick pulled Craig's hands out from under him, then brought his wrists together at the small of his back. Craig groaned again, louder this time, and began to struggle weakly.

“Easy now, my good old mate,” Nick said soothingly. He wrapped the tablecloth rope twice around Craig’s lower forearms and knotted it tightly. Craig’s elbows flapped and he uttered a strange weak scream. “There!” Nick said, standing up. “Trussed as neatly as Father John’s Christmas turkey. We’ve even got a spare if that one looks like not holding.” He sat on the edge of one of the tables and looked at Bob Jenkins. “Now, what were you saying when we were so rudely interrupted?”

Bob looked at him, dazed and unbelieving. “What?”

“Go on,” Nick said. He might have been an interested lecturegoer instead of a man sitting on a table in a deserted airport restaurant with his feet planted beside a bound man lying in a pool of his own blood. “You had just got to the part about Flight 29 being like the *Mary Celeste*. Interesting concept, that.”

“And you want me to ... to just go on?” Bob asked incredulously. “As if nothing had happened?”

“Let me *up!*” Craig shouted. His words were slightly muffled by the tough industrial carpet on the restaurant floor, but he still sounded remarkably lively for a man who had been coldcocked with a violin case not five minutes previous. “Let me up right now! I demand that you—”

Then Nick did something that shocked all of them, even those who had seen the Englishman twist Craig’s nose like the handle of a bathtub faucet. He drove a short, hard kick into Craig’s ribs. He pulled it at the last instant ... but not much. Craig uttered a pained grunt and shut up.

“Start again, mate, and I’ll stave them in,” Nick said grimly. “My patience with you has run out.”

“Hey!” Gaffney cried, bewildered. “What did you do that f—”

“Listen to me!” Nick said, and looked around. His urbane surface was entirely gone for the first time; his voice vibrated with anger and urgency. “You need waking up, fellows and girls, and I haven’t the time to do it gently. That little girl—Dinah—says we are in bad trouble here, and I believe her. She says she hears something, something which may be coming our way, and I rather believe that, too. I don’t hear a bloody thing, but my nerves are jumping like

grease on a hot griddle, and I'm used to paying attention when they do that. I think something is coming, and I don't believe it's going to try and sell us vacuum-cleaner attachments or the latest insurance scheme when it gets here. Now we can make all the correct civilized noises over this bloody madman or we can try to understand what has happened to us. Understanding may not save our lives, but I'm rapidly becoming convinced that the lack of it may end them, and soon." His eyes shifted to Dinah. "Tell me I'm wrong if you believe I am, Dinah. I'll listen to *you*, and gladly."

"I don't want you to hurt Mr. Toomy, but I don't think you're wrong, either," Dinah said in a small, wavery voice.

"All right," Nick said. "Fair enough. I'll try my very best not to hurt him again ... but I make no promises. Let's begin with a very simple concept. This fellow I've trussed up—"

"Toomy," Brian said. "His name is Craig Toomy."

"All right. Mr. Toomy is mad. Perhaps if we find our way back to our proper place, or if we find the place where all the people have gone, we can get some help for him. But for now, we can only help him by putting him out of commission—which I have done, with the generous if foolhardy assistance of Albert there—and getting back to our current business. Does anyone hold a view which runs counter to this?"

There was no reply. The other passengers who had been aboard Flight 29 looked at Nick uneasily.

"All right," Nick said. "Please go on, Mr. Jenkins."

"I ... I'm not used to ..." Bob made a visible effort to collect himself. "In books, I suppose I've killed enough people to fill every seat in the plane that brought us here, but what just happened is the first act of violence I've ever personally witnessed. I'm sorry if I've ... er ... behaved badly."

"I think you're doing great, Mr. Jenkins," Dinah said. "And I like listening to you, too. It makes me feel better."

Bob looked at her gratefully and smiled. "Thank you, Dinah." He stuffed his hands in his pockets, cast a troubled glance at Craig Toomy, then looked beyond them, across the empty waiting room.

“I think I mentioned a central fallacy in our thinking,” he said at last. “It is this: we all assumed, when we began to grasp the dimensions of this Event, that something had happened to *the rest of the world*. That assumption is easy enough to understand, since we are all fine and everyone else—including those other passengers with whom we boarded at Los Angeles International—seems to have disappeared. But the evidence before us doesn’t bear the assumption out. What has happened has happened to us and us alone. I am convinced that the world as we have always known it is ticking along just as it always has.

“It’s us—the missing passengers and the eleven survivors of Flight 29—who are lost.”

## 7

“Maybe I’m dumb, but I don’t understand what you’re getting at,” Rudy Warwick said after a moment.

“Neither do I,” Laurel added.

“We’ve mentioned two famous disappearances,” Bob said quietly. Now even Craig Toomy seemed to be listening ... he had stopped struggling, at any rate. “One, the case of the *Mary Celeste*, took place at sea. The second, the case of Roanoke Island, took place near the sea. They are not the only ones, either. I can think of at least two others which involved aircraft: the disappearance of the aviatrix Amelia Earhart over the Pacific Ocean, and the disappearance of several Navy planes over that part of the Atlantic known as the Bermuda Triangle. That happened in 1945 or 1946, I believe. There was some sort of garbled transmission from the lead aircraft’s pilot, and rescue planes were sent out at once from an airbase in Florida, but no trace of the planes or their crews was ever found.”

“I’ve heard of the case,” Nick said. “It’s the basis for the Triangle’s infamous reputation, I think.”

“No, there have been lots of ships and planes lost there,” Albert put in. “I read the book about it by Charles Berlitz. Really interesting.” He glanced around. “I just never thought I’d be in it, if you know what I mean.”

Jenkins said, “I don’t know if an aircraft has ever disappeared over the continental United States before, but—”

“It’s happened lots of times with small planes,” Brian said, “and once, about thirty-five years ago, it happened with a commercial passenger plane. There were over a hundred people aboard. 1955 or ’56, this was. The carrier was either TWA or Monarch, I can’t remember which. The plane was bound for Denver out of San Francisco. The pilot made radio contact with the Reno tower—absolutely routine—and the plane was never heard from again. There was a search, of course, but ... nothing.”

Brian saw they were all looking at him with a species of dreadful fascination, and he laughed uncomfortably.

“Pilot ghost stories,” he said with a note of apology in his voice. “It sounds like a caption for a Gary Larson cartoon.”

“I’ll bet they all went through,” the writer muttered. He had begun to scrub the side of his face with his hand again. He looked distressed—almost horrified. “Unless they found bodies ... ?”

“Please tell us what you know, or what you think you know,” Laurel said. “The effect of this ... this thing ... seems to pile up on a person. If I don’t get some answers soon, I think you can tie me up and put me down next to Mr. Toomy.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Craig said, speaking clearly if rather obscurely.

Bob favored him with another uncomfortable glance and then appeared to muster his thoughts. “There’s no mess here, but there’s a mess on the plane. There’s no electricity here, but there’s electricity on the plane. That isn’t conclusive, of course—the plane has its own self-contained power supply, while the electricity here comes from a power plant somewhere. But then consider the matches. Bethany was on the plane, and her matches work fine. The matches I took from the bowl in here wouldn’t strike. The gun which Mr. Toomy took—from the Security office, I imagine—barely fired. I

think that, if you tried a battery-powered flashlight, you'd find *that* wouldn't work, either. Or, if it did work, it wouldn't work for long."

"You're right," Nick said. "And we don't need to find a flashlight in order to test your theory." He pointed upward. There was an emergency light mounted on the wall behind the kitchen grill. It was as dead as the overhead lights. "That's battery-powered," Nick went on. "A light-sensitive solenoid turns it on when the power fails. It's dim enough in here for that thing to have gone into operation, but it didn't do so. Which means that either the solenoid's circuit failed or the battery is dead."

"I suspect it's both," Bob Jenkins said. He walked slowly toward the restaurant door and looked out. "We find ourselves in a world which appears to be whole, but it is also a world which seems almost exhausted. The carbonated drinks are flat. The food is tasteless. The air is odorless. We still give off scents—I can smell Laurel's perfume and the captain's aftershave lotion, for instance—but everything else seems to have lost its smell."

Albert picked up one of the glasses with beer in it and sniffed deeply. There was a smell, he decided, but it was very, very faint. A flower-petal pressed for many years between the pages of a book might give off the same distant memory of scent.

"The same is true for sounds," Bob went on. "They are flat, one-dimensional, utterly without resonance."

Laurel thought of the listless *clup-clup* sound of her high heels on the cement, and the lack of echo when Captain Engle cupped his hands around his mouth and called up the escalator for Mr. Toomy.

"Albert, could I ask you to play something on your violin?" Bob asked.

Albert glanced at Bethany. She smiled and nodded.

"All right. Sure. In fact, I'm sort of curious about how it sounds after ..." He glanced at Craig Toomy. "You know."

He opened the case, grimacing as his fingers touched the latch which had opened the wound in Craig Toomy's forehead, and drew out his violin. He caressed it briefly, then took the bow in his right hand and tucked the violin under his chin. He stood like that for a moment, thinking. What was the proper sort of music for this strange

new world where no phones rang and no dogs barked? Ralph Vaughan Williams? Stravinsky? Mozart? Dvořák, perhaps? No. None of them were right. Then inspiration struck, and he began to play “Someone’s in the Kitchen with Dinah.”

Halfway through the tune the bow faltered to a stop.

“I guess you must have hurt your fiddle after all when you bopped that guy with it,” Don Gaffney said. “It sounds like it’s stuffed full of cotton batting.”

“No,” Albert said slowly. “My violin is perfectly okay. I can tell just by the way it feels, and the action of the strings under my fingers ... but there’s something else as well. Come on over here, Mr. Gaffney.” Gaffney came over and stood beside Albert. “Now get as close to my violin as you can. No ... not that close; I’d put out your eye with the bow. There. Just right. Listen again.”

Albert began to play, singing along in his mind, as he almost always did when he played this corny but endlessly cheerful shitkicking music:

*Singing fee-fi-fiddly-I-oh,  
Fee-fi-fiddly-I-oh-oh-oh-oh,  
Fee-fi-fiddly-I-oh,  
Strummin’ on the old banjo.*

“Did you hear the difference?” he asked when he had finished.

“It sounds a lot better close up, if that’s what you mean,” Gaffney said. He was looking at Albert with real respect. “You play good, kid.”

Albert smiled at Gaffney, but it was really Bethany Simms he was talking to. “Sometimes, when I’m sure my music teacher isn’t around, I play old Led Zeppelin songs,” he said. “That stuff *really* cooks on the violin. You’d be surprised.” He looked at Bob. “Anyway, it fits right in with what you were saying. The closer you get, the better the violin sounds. It’s the *air* that’s wrong, not the instrument. It’s not conducting the sounds the way it should, and so what comes out sounds the way the beer tasted.”

“Flat,” Brian said.

Albert nodded.

“Thank you, Albert,” Bob said.

“Sure. Can I put it away now?”

“Of course.” Bob continued as Albert replaced his violin in its case, and then used a napkin to clean off the fouled latch and his own fingers. “Taste and sound are not the only off-key elements of the situation in which we find ourselves. Take the clouds, for instance.”

“What about them?” Rudy Warwick asked.

“They haven’t moved since we arrived, and I don’t think they’re going to move. I think the weather patterns we’re all used to living with have either stopped or are running down like an old pocket-watch.”

Bob paused for a moment. He suddenly looked old and helpless and frightened.

“As Mr. Hopewell would say, let’s not draw it fine. *Everything* here feels wrong. Dinah, whose senses—including that odd, vague one we call the sixth sense—are more developed than ours, has perhaps felt it the most strongly, but I think we’ve all felt it to some degree. Things here are just wrong.

“And now we come to the very hub of the matter.”

He turned to face them.

“I said not fifteen minutes ago that it felt like lunchtime. It now feels much later than that to me. Three in the afternoon, perhaps four. It isn’t breakfast my stomach is grumbling for right now; it wants high tea. I have a terrible feeling that it may start to get dark outside before our watches tell us it’s quarter to ten in the morning.”

“Get to it, mate,” Nick said.

“I think it’s about time,” Bob said quietly. “Not about dimension, as Albert suggested, but *time*. Suppose that, every now and then, a hole appears in the time stream? Not a time-*warp*, but a time-rip. A rip in the temporal fabric.”

“That’s the craziest shit I ever heard!” Don Gaffney exclaimed.

“Amen!” Craig Toomy seconded from the floor.

“No,” Bob replied sharply. “If you want crazy shit, think about how Albert’s violin sounded when you were standing six feet away from it. Or look around you, Mr. Gaffney. Just look around you. What’s happening to us ... what we’re *in* ... *that’s* crazy shit.”

Don frowned and stuffed his hands deep in his pockets.

“Go on,” Brian said.

“All right. I’m not saying that I’ve got this right; I’m just offering a hypothesis that fits the situation in which we have found ourselves. Let us say that such rips in the fabric of time appear every now and then, but mostly over unpopulated areas ... by which I mean the ocean, of course. I can’t say why that would be, but it’s still a logical assumption to make, since that’s where most of these disappearances seem to occur.”

“Weather patterns over water are almost always different from weather patterns over large land-masses,” Brian said. “That could be it.”

Bob nodded. “Right or wrong, it’s a good way to think of it, because it puts it in a context we’re all familiar with. This could be similar to rare weather phenomena which are sometimes reported: upside-down tornadoes, circular rainbows, daytime starlight. These time-rips may appear and disappear at random, or they may move, the way fronts and pressure systems move, but they very rarely appear over land.

“But a statistician will tell you that sooner or later whatever can happen will happen, so let us say that last night one did appear over land ... and we had the bad luck to fly into it. And we know something else. Some unknown rule or property of this fabulous meteorological freak makes it impossible for any living being to travel through unless he or she is fast asleep.”

“Aw, this is a fairy tale,” Gaffney said.

“I agree completely,” Craig said from the floor.

“Shut your cake-hole,” Gaffney growled at him. Craig blinked, then lifted his upper lip in a feeble sneer.

“It feels right,” Bethany said in a low voice. “It feels as if we’re out of step with ... with everything.”

“What happened to the crew and the passengers?” Albert asked. He sounded sick. “If the plane came through, and we came through, what happened to the rest of them?”

His imagination provided him with an answer in the form of a sudden indelible image: hundreds of people falling out of the sky, ties and trousers rippling, dresses skating up to reveal garter-belts and

underwear, shoes falling off, pens (the ones which weren't back on the plane, that was) shooting out of pockets; people waving their arms and legs and trying to scream in the thin air; people who had left wallets, purses, pocket-change, and, in at least one case, a pacemaker implant, behind. He saw them hitting the ground like dud bombs, squashing bushes flat, kicking up small clouds of stony dust, imprinting the desert floor with the shapes of their bodies.

"My guess is that they were vaporized," Bob said. "Utterly disincorporated."

Dinah didn't understand at first; then she thought of Aunt Vicky's purse with the traveller's checks still inside and began to cry softly. Laurel crossed her arms over the little blind girl's shoulders and hugged her. Albert, meanwhile, was fervently thanking God that his mother had changed her mind at the last moment, deciding not to accompany him east after all.

"In many cases their things went with them," the writer went on. "Those who left wallets and purses may have had them out at the time of The ... The Event. It's hard to say, though. What was taken and what was left behind—I suppose I'm thinking of the wig more than anything else—doesn't seem to have a lot of rhyme or reason to it."

"You got that right," Albert said. "The surgical pins, for instance. I doubt if the guy they belonged to took them out of his shoulder or knee to play with because he got bored."

"I agree," Rudy Warwick said. "It was too early in the flight to get *that* bored."

Bethany looked at him, startled, then burst out laughing.

"I'm originally from Kansas," Bob said, "and the element of caprice makes me think of the twisters we used to sometimes get in the summer. They'd totally obliterate a farmhouse and leave the privy standing, or they'd rip away a barn without pulling so much as a shingle from the silo standing right next to it."

"Get to the bottom line, mate," Nick said. "Whatever time it is we're in, I can't help feeling that it's very late in the day."

Brian thought of Craig Toomy, Old Mr. I've-Got-to-Get-to-Boston, standing at the head of the emergency slide and screaming: *Time is*

*short! Time is very fucking short!*

“All right,” Bob said. “The bottom line. Let’s suppose there *are* such things as time-rips, and we’ve gone through one. I think we’ve gone into the past and discovered the unlovely truth of time-travel: you can’t appear in the Texas State School Book Depository on November 22, 1963, and put a stop to the Kennedy assassination; you can’t watch the building of the pyramids or the sack of Rome; you can’t investigate the Age of the Dinosaurs at first hand.”

He raised his arms, hands outstretched, as if to encompass the whole silent world in which they found themselves.

“Take a good look around you, fellow time-travellers. This is the past. It is empty; it is silent. It is a world—perhaps a *universe*-with all the sense and meaning of a discarded paint-can. I believe we may have hopped an absurdly short distance in time, perhaps as little as fifteen minutes—at least initially. But the world is clearly unwinding around us. Sensory input is disappearing. Electricity has already disappeared. The weather is what the weather was when we made the jump into the past. But it seems to me that as the world winds down, time itself is winding up in a kind of spiral ... crowding in on itself.”

“Couldn’t this be the future?” Albert asked cautiously.

Bob Jenkins shrugged. He suddenly looked very tired. “I don’t know for sure, of course—how could I?-but I don’t think so. This place we’re in feels old and stupid and feeble and meaningless. It feels ... I don’t know ...”

Dinah spoke then. They all looked toward her.

“It feels *over*,” she said softly.

“Yes,” Bob said. “Thank you, dear. That’s the word I was looking for.”

“Mr. Jenkins?”

“Yes?”

“The sound I told you about before? I can hear it again.” She paused. “It’s getting closer.”

They all fell silent, their faces long and listening. Brian thought he heard something, then decided it was the sound of his own heart. Or simply imagination.

"I want to go out by the windows again," Nick said abruptly. He stepped over Craig's prone body without so much as a glance down and strode from the restaurant without another word.

"Hey!" Bethany cried. "Hey, I want to come, too!"

Albert followed her; most of the others trailed after. "What about you two?" Brian asked Laurel and Dinah.

"I don't want to go," Dinah said. "I can hear it as well as I want to from here." She paused and added: "But I'm going to hear it better, I think, if we don't get out of here soon."

Brian glanced at Laurel Stevenson.

"I'll stay here with Dinah," she said quietly.

"All right," Brian said. "Keep away from Mr. Toomy."

"'Keep away from Mr. Toomy,'" Craig mimicked savagely from his place on the floor. He turned his head with an effort and rolled his eyes in their sockets to look at Brian. "You really can't get away with this, Captain Engle. I don't know what game you and your Limey friend think you're playing, but you can't get away with it. Your next piloting job will probably be running cocaine in from Colombia after dark. At least you won't be lying when you tell your friends all about what a crack pilot you are."

Brian started to reply, then thought better of it. Nick said this man was at least temporarily insane, and Brian thought Nick was right. Trying to reason with a madman was both useless and time-consuming.

"We'll keep our distance, don't worry," Laurel said. She drew Dinah over to one of the small tables and sat down with her. "And we'll be fine."

"All right," Brian said. "Yell if he starts trying to get loose."

Laurel smiled wanly. "You can count on it."

Brian bent, checked the tablecloth with which Nick had bound Craig's hands, then walked across the waiting room to join the others, who were standing in a line at the floor-to-ceiling windows.

## 9

He began to hear it before he was halfway across the waiting room and by the time he had joined the others, it was impossible to believe it was an auditory hallucination.

*That girl's hearing is really remarkable,* Brian thought.

The sound was very faint—to him, at least—but it was there, and it did seem to be coming from the east. Dinah had said it sounded like Rice Krispies after you poured milk over them. To Brian it sounded more like radio static—the exceptionally rough static you got sometimes during periods of high sunspot activity. He agreed with Dinah about one thing, though; it sounded *bad*.

He could feel the hairs on the nape of his neck stiffening in response to that sound. He looked at the others and saw identical expressions of frightened dismay on every face. Nick was controlling himself the best, and the young girl who had almost balked at using the slide—Bethany—looked the most deeply scared, but they all heard the same thing in the sound.

Bad.

Something bad on the way. *Hurrying.*

Nick turned toward him. “What do you make of it, Brian? Any ideas?”

“No,” Brian said. “Not even a little one. All I know is that it's the only sound in town.”

“It's not in town yet,” Don said, “but it's going to be, I think. I only wish I knew how long it was going to take.”

They were quiet again, listening to the steady hissing crackle from the east. And Brian thought: *I almost know that sound, I think. Not cereal in milk, not radio static, but ... what? If only it wasn't so faint ...*

But he didn't want to know. He suddenly realized that, and very strongly. He didn't want to know at all. The sound filled him with a bone-deep loathing.

"We do have to get out of here!" Bethany said. Her voice was loud and wavery. Albert put an arm around her waist and she gripped his hand in both of hers. Gripped it with panicky tightness. "We have to get out of here *right now!*"

"Yes," Bob Jenkins said. "She's right. That sound—I don't know what it is, but it's *awful*. We have to get out of here."

They were all looking at Brian and he thought, *It looks like I'm the captain again. But not for long.* Because they didn't understand. Not even Jenkins understood, sharp as some of his other deductions might have been, that they weren't going anywhere.

Whatever was making that sound was on its way, and it didn't matter, because they would still be here when it arrived. There was no way out of that. He understood the reason why it was so, even if none of the others did ... and Brian Engle suddenly understood how an animal caught in a trap must feel as it hears the steady thud of the hunter's approaching boots.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ***STRANDED. BETHANY'S MATCHES. TWO-WAY TRAFFIC AHEAD. ALBERT'S EXPERIMENT. NIGHTFALL. THE DARK AND THE BLADE.***

#### 1

Brian turned to look at the writer. "You say we have to get out of here, right?"

"Yes. I think we must do that just as soon as we possibly—"

"And where do you suggest we go? Atlantic City? Miami Beach? Club Med?"

"You are suggesting, Captain Engle, that there's no place we *can* go. I think—I *hope*—that you're wrong about that. I have an idea."

"Which is?"

"In a moment. First, answer one question for me. Can you refuel the airplane? Can you do that even if there's no power?"

"I think so, yes. Let's say that, with the help of a few able-bodied men, I could. Then what?"

"Then we take off again," Bob said. Little beads of sweat stood out on his deeply lined face. They looked like droplets of clear oil. "That sound—that crunchy sound—is coming from the east. The time-rip was several thousand miles west of here. If we retraced our original course ... could you do that?"

"Yes," Brian said. He had left the auxiliary power units running, and that meant the INS computer's program was still intact. That program was an exact log of the trip they had just made, from the moment Flight 29 had left the ground in southern California until the moment it had set down in central Maine. One touch of a button would

instruct the computer to simply reverse that course; the touch of another button, once in the air, would put the autopilot to work flying it. The Teledyne inertial navigation system would re-create the trip down to the smallest degree deviations. "I could do that, but why?"

"Because the rip may still be there. Don't you see? *We might be able to fly back through it.*"

Nick looked at Bob in sudden startled concentration, then turned to Brian. "He might have something there, mate. He just might."

Albert Kaussner's mind was diverted onto an irrelevant but fascinating side-track: if the rip were still there, and if Flight 29 had been on a frequently used altitude and heading—a kind of east-west avenue in the sky—then perhaps other planes had gone through it between 1:07 this morning and now (whenever now was). Perhaps there were other planes landing or landed at other deserted American airports, other crews and passengers wandering around, stunned ...

No, he thought. *We happened to have a pilot on board. What are the chances of that happening twice?*

He thought of what Mr. Jenkins had said about Ted Williams's sixteen consecutive on-bases and shivered.

"He might or he might not," Brian said. "It doesn't really matter, because we're not going anyplace in that plane."

"Why not?" Rudy asked. "If you could refuel it, I don't see..."

"Remember the matches? The ones from the bowl in the restaurant? The ones that wouldn't light?"

Rudy looked blank, but an expression of huge dismay dawned on Bob Jenkins's face. He put his hand to his forehead and took a step backward. He actually seemed to shrink before them.

"What?" Don asked. He was looking at Brian from beneath drawn-together brows. It was a look which conveyed both confusion and suspicion. "What does that have to—"

But Nick knew.

"Don't you see?" he asked quietly. "Don't you see, mate? If batteries don't work, if matches don't light—"

"—then jet-fuel won't burn," Brian finished. "It will be as used up and worn out as everything else in this world." He looked at each

one of them in turn. "I might as well fill up the fuel tanks with molasses."

## 2

"Have either of you fine young ladies ever heard of the langoliers?" Craig asked suddenly. His tone was light, almost vivacious.

Laurel jumped and looked nervously toward the others, who were still standing by the windows and talking. Dinah only turned toward Craig's voice, apparently not surprised at all.

"No," she said calmly. "What are those?"

"Don't talk to him, Dinah," Laurel whispered.

"I heard that," Craig said in the same pleasant tone of voice. "Dinah's not the only one with sharp ears, you know."

Laurel felt her face grow warm.

"I wouldn't hurt the child, anyway," Craig went on. "No more than I would have hurt that girl. I'm just frightened. Aren't you?"

"Yes," Laurel snapped, "but I don't take hostages and then try to shoot teenage boys when I'm frightened."

"You didn't have what looked like the whole front line of the Los Angeles Rams caving in on you at once," Craig said. "And that English fellow ..." He laughed. The sound of his laughter in this quiet place was disturbingly merry, disturbingly *normal*. "Well, all I can say is that if you think *I'm* crazy, you haven't been watching *him* at all. That man's got a chainsaw for a mind."

Laurel didn't know what to say. She knew it hadn't been the way Craig Toomy was presenting it, but when he spoke it seemed as though it *should* have been that way ... and what he said about the Englishman was too close to the truth. The man's eyes ... and the kick he had chopped into Mr. Toomy's ribs after he had been tied up ... Laurel shivered.

"What are the langoliers, Mr. Toomy?" Dinah asked.

“Well, I always used to think they were just make-believe,” Craig said in that same good-humored voice. “Now I’m beginning to wonder ... because I hear it, too, young lady. Yes I do.”

“The sound?” Dinah asked softly. “That sound is the langoliers?”

Laurel put one hand on Dinah’s shoulder. “I really wish you wouldn’t talk to him anymore, honey. He makes me nervous.”

“Why? He’s tied up, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but—”

“And you could always call for the others, couldn’t you?”

“Well, I think—”

“I want to know about the langoliers.”

With some effort, Craig turned his head to look at them ... and now Laurel felt some of the charm and force of personality which had kept Craig firmly on the fast track as he worked out the high-pressure script his parents had written for him. She felt this even though he was lying on the floor with his hands tied behind him and his own blood drying on his forehead and left cheek.

“My father said the langoliers were little creatures that lived in closets and sewers and other dark places.”

“Like elves?” Dinah wanted to know.

Craig laughed and shook his head. “Nothing so pleasant, I’m afraid. He said that all they really were was hair and teeth and fast little legs—their little legs were fast, he said, so they could catch up with bad boys and girls no matter how quickly they scampered.”

“Stop it,” Laurel said coldly. “You’re scaring the child.”

“No, he’s not,” Dinah said. “I know make-believe when I hear it. It’s interesting, that’s all.” Her face said it was something more than interesting, however. She was intent, fascinated.

“It *is*, isn’t it?” Craig said, apparently pleased by her interest. “I think what Laurel means is that I’m scaring *her*. Do I win the cigar, Laurel? If so, I’d like an El Producto, please. None of those cheap White Owls for me.” He laughed again.

Laurel didn’t reply, and after a moment Craig resumed.

“My dad said there were thousands of langoliers. He said there had to be, because there were *millions* of bad boys and girls scampering about the world. That’s how he always put it. My father

never saw a child run in his entire life. They always scampered. I think he liked that word because it implies senseless, directionless, nonproductive motion. But the langoliers ... *they* run. *They* have purpose. In fact, you could say that the langoliers are purpose personified.”

“What did the kids do that was so bad?” Dinah asked. “What did they do that was so bad the langoliers had to run after them?”

“You know, I’m glad you asked that question,” Craig said. “Because when my father said someone was bad, Dinah, what he meant was lazy. A lazy person couldn’t be part of THE BIG PICTURE. No way. In my house, you were either part of THE BIG PICTURE or you were LYING DOWN ON THE JOB, and that was the worst kind of bad you could be. Throat-cutting was a venial sin compared to LYING DOWN ON THE JOB. He said that if you weren’t part of THE BIG PICTURE, the langoliers would come and take you out of the picture completely. He said you’d be in your bed one night and then you’d hear them coming ... crunching and smacking their way toward you ... and even if you tried to scamper off, they’d get you. Because of their fast little—”

“*That’s enough,*” Laurel said. Her voice was flat and dry.

“The sound is out there, though,” Craig said. His eyes regarded her brightly, almost roguishly. “You can’t deny that. The sound really is out th—”

“Stop it or I’ll hit you with something myself.”

“Okay,” Craig said. He rolled over on his back, grimaced, and then rolled further, onto his other side and away from them. “A man gets tired of being hit when he’s down and hog-tied.”

Laurel’s face grew not just warm but hot this time. She bit her lip and said nothing. She felt like crying. How was she supposed to handle someone like this? *How?* First the man seemed as crazy as a bedbug, and then he seemed as sane as could be. And meanwhile, the whole world—Mr. Toomy’s BIG PICTURE—had gone to hell.

“I bet you were scared of your dad, weren’t you, Mr. Toomy?”

Craig looked back over his shoulder at Dinah, startled. He smiled again, but this smile was different. It was a rueful, hurt smile with no

public relations in it. “This time you win the cigar, miss,” he said. “I was terrified of him.”

“Is he dead?”

“Yes.”

“Was he LYING DOWN ON THE JOB? Did the langoliers get him?”

Craig thought for a long time. He remembered being told that his father had had his heart attack while in his office. When his secretary buzzed him for his ten o'clock staff meeting and there was no answer, she had come in to find him dead on the carpet, eyes bulging, foam drying on his mouth.

*Did someone tell you that?* he wondered suddenly. *That his eyes were bugging out, that there was foam on his mouth? Did someone actually tell you that—Mother, perhaps, when she was drunk—or was it just wishful thinking?*

“Mr. Toomy? Did they?”

“Yes,” Craig said thoughtfully. “I guess he was, and I guess they did.”

“Mr. Toomy?”

“What?”

“I’m not the way you see me. I’m not ugly. None of us are.”

He looked at her, startled. “How would you know how you look to me, little blind miss?”

“You might be surprised,” Dinah said.

Laurel turned toward her, suddenly more uneasy than ever ... but of course there was nothing to see. Dinah’s dark glasses defeated curiosity.

### 3

The other passengers stood on the far side of the waiting room, listening to that low rattling sound and saying nothing. It seemed there was nothing left to say.

“What do we do now?” Don asked. He seemed to have wilted inside his red lumberjack’s shirt. Albert thought the shirt itself had lost some of its cheerfully macho vibrancy.

“I don’t know,” Brian said. He felt a horrible impotence toiling away in his belly. He looked out at the plane, which had been *his* plane for a little while, and was struck by its clean lines and smooth beauty. The Delta 727 sitting to its left at the jetway looked like a dowdy matron by comparison. *It looks good to you because it’s never going to fly again, that’s all. It’s like glimpsing a beautiful woman for just a moment in the back seat of a limousine—she looks even more beautiful than she really is because you know she’s not yours, can never be yours.*

“How much fuel is left, Brian?” Nick asked suddenly. “Maybe the burn-rate isn’t the same over here. Maybe there’s more than you realize.”

“All the gauges are in apple-pie working order,” Brian said. “When we landed, I had less than 600 pounds. To get back to where this happened, we’d need at least 50,000.”

Bethany took out her cigarettes and offered the pack to Bob. He shook his head. She stuck one in her mouth, took out her matches, and struck one.

It didn’t light.

“Oh-oh,” she said.

Albert glanced over. She struck the match again ... and again ... and again. There was nothing. She looked at him, frightened.

“Here,” Albert said. “Let me.”

He took the matches from her hand and tore another one loose. He struck it across the strip on the back. There was nothing.

“Whatever it is, it seems to be catching,” Rudy Warwick observed.

Bethany burst into tears, and Bob offered her his handkerchief.

“Wait a minute,” Albert said, and struck the match again. This time it lit ... but the flame was low, guttering, unenthusiastic. He applied it to the quivering tip of Bethany’s cigarette and a clear image suddenly filled his mind: a sign he had passed as he rode his ten-speed to Pasadena High School every day for the last three years. CAUTION, this sign said. TWO-WAY TRAFFIC AHEAD.

*What in the hell does that mean?*

He didn't know ... at least not yet. All he knew for sure was that some idea wanted out but was, at least for the time being, stuck in the gears.

Albert shook the match out. It didn't take much shaking.

Bethany drew on her cigarette, then grimaced. "Blick! It tastes like a Carlton, or something."

"Blow smoke in my face," Albert said.

"What?"

"You heard me. Blow some in my face."

She did as he asked, and Albert sniffed at the smoke. Its former sweet fragrance was now muted.

*Whatever it is, it seems to be catching.*

**CAUTION: TWO-WAY TRAFFIC AHEAD.**

"I'm going back to the restaurant," Nick said. He looked depressed. "Yon Cassius has a lean and slippery feel. I don't like leaving him with the ladies for too long."

Brian started after him and the others followed. Albert thought there was something a little amusing about these tidal flows—they were behaving like cows which sense thunder in the air.

"Come on," Bethany said. "Let's go." She dropped her half-smoked cigarette into an ashtray and used Bob's handkerchief to wipe her eyes. Then she took Albert's hand.

They were halfway across the waiting room and Albert was looking at the back of Mr. Gaffney's red shirt when it struck him again, more forcibly this time: **TWO-WAY TRAFFIC AHEAD.**

"Wait a minute!" he yelled. He suddenly slipped an arm around Bethany's waist, pulled her to him, put his face into the hollow of her throat, and breathed in deeply.

"Oh my! We hardly know each other!" Bethany cried. Then she began to giggle helplessly and put her arms around Albert's neck. Albert, a boy whose natural shyness usually disappeared only in his daydreams, paid no notice. He took another deep breath through his nose. The smells of her hair, sweat, and perfume were still there, but they were faint; very faint.

They all looked around, but Albert had already let Bethany go and was hurrying back to the windows.

“Wow!” Bethany said. She was still giggling a little, and blushing brightly. “Strange dude!”

Albert looked at Flight 29 and saw what Brian had noticed a few minutes earlier: it was clean and smooth and almost impossibly white. It seemed to vibrate in the dull stillness outside.

Suddenly the idea came up for him. It seemed to burst behind his eyes like a firework. The central concept was a bright, burning ball; implications radiated out from it like fiery spangles and for a moment he quite literally forgot to breathe.

“Albert?” Bob asked. “Albert, what’s wro—”

“*Captain Engle!*” Albert screamed. In the restaurant, Laurel sat bolt upright and Dinah clasped her arm with hands like talons. Craig Toomy craned his neck to look. “*Captain Engle, come here!*”

## 4

Outside, the sound was louder.

To Brian it was the sound of radio static. Nick Hopewell thought it sounded like a strong wind rattling dry tropical grasses. Albert, who had worked at McDonald’s the summer before, was reminded of the sound of french fries in a deep-fat fryer, and to Bob Jenkins it was the sound of paper being crumpled in a distant room.

The four of them crawled through the hanging rubber strips and then stepped down into the luggage-unloading area, listening to the sound of what Craig Toomy called the langoliers.

“How much closer is it?” Brian asked Nick.

“Can’t tell. It *sounds* closer, but of course we were inside before.”

“Come on,” Albert said impatiently. “How do we get back aboard? Climb the slide?”

“Won’t be necessary,” Brian said, and pointed. A rolling stairway stood on the far side of Gate 2. They walked toward it, their shoes

clopping listlessly on the concrete.

“You know what a long shot this is, don’t you, Albert?” Brian asked as they walked.

“Yes, but—”

“Long shots are better than no shots at all,” Nick finished for him.

“I just don’t want him to be too disappointed if it doesn’t pan out.”

“Don’t worry,” Bob said softly. “I will be disappointed enough for all of us. The lad’s idea makes good logical sense. It *should* prove out ... although, Albert, you do realize there may be factors here which we haven’t discovered, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

They reached the rolling ladder, and Brian kicked up the foot-brakes on the wheels. Nick took a position on the grip which jutted from the left railing, and Brian laid hold of the one on the right.

“I hope it still rolls,” Brian said.

“It should,” Bob Jenkins answered. “Some—perhaps even most—of the ordinary physical and chemical components of life seem to remain in operation; our bodies are able to process the air, doors open and close—”

“Don’t forget gravity,” Albert put in. “The earth still sucks.”

“Let’s quit talking about it and just try it,” Nick said.

The stairway rolled easily. The two men trundled it across the tarmac toward the 767 with Albert and Bob walking behind them. One of the wheels squeaked rhythmically. The only other sound was that low, constant crunch-rattle-crunch from somewhere over the eastern horizon.

“Look at it,” Albert said as they neared the 767. “Just look at it. Can’t you see? Can’t you see how much more there it is than anything else?”

There was no need to answer, and no one did. They could all see it. And reluctantly, almost against his will, Brian began to think the kid might have something.

They set the stairway at an angle between the escape slide and the fuselage of the plane, with the top step only a long stride away from the open door. “I’ll go first,” Brian said. “After I pull the slide in, Nick, you and Albert roll the stairs into better position.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Nick said, and clipped off a smart little salute, the knuckles of his first and second fingers touching his forehead.

Brian snorted. “Junior attaché,” he said, and then ran fleetly up the stairs. A few moments later he had used the escape slide’s lanyard to pull it back inside. Then he leaned out to watch as Nick and Albert carefully maneuvered the rolling staircase into position with its top step just below the 767’s forward entrance.

## 5

Rudy Warwick and Don Gaffney were now babysitting Craig. Bethany, Dinah, and Laurel were lined up at the waiting-room windows, looking out. “What are they doing?” Dinah asked.

“They’ve taken away the slide and put a stairway by the door,” Laurel said. “Now they’re going up.” She looked at Bethany. “You’re sure you don’t know what they’re up to?”

Bethany shook her head. “All I know is that Ace—Albert, I mean—almost went nuts. I’d like to think it was this mad sexual attraction, but I don’t think it was.” She paused, smiled, and added: “At least, not yet. He said something about the plane being more there. And my perfume being less there, which probably wouldn’t please Coco Chanel or whatever her name is. And two-way traffic. I didn’t get it. He was really jabbering.”

“I bet I know,” Dinah said.

“What’s your guess, hon?”

Dinah only shook her head. “I just hope they hurry up. Because poor Mr. Toomy is right. The langoliers are coming.”

“Dinah, that’s just something his father made up.”

“Maybe once it was make-believe,” Dinah said, turning her sightless eyes back to the windows, “but not anymore.”

## 6

“All right, Ace,” Nick said. “On with the show.”

Albert’s heart was thudding and his hands shook as he set the four elements of his experiment out on the shelf in first class, where, a thousand years ago and on the other side of the continent, a woman named Melanie Trevor had supervised a carton of orange juice and two bottles of champagne.

Brian watched closely as Albert put down a book of matches, a bottle of Budweiser, a can of Pepsi, and a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich from the restaurant cold-case. The sandwich had been sealed in plastic wrap.

“Okay,” Albert said, and took a deep breath. “Let’s see what we got here.”

## 7

Don left the restaurant and walked over to the windows. “What’s happening?”

“We don’t know,” Bethany said. She had managed to coax a flame from another of her matches and was smoking again. When she removed the cigarette from her mouth, Laurel saw she had torn off the filter. “They went inside the plane; they’re still inside the plane; end of story.”

Don gazed out for several seconds. “It looks different outside. I can’t say just why, but it does.”

“The light’s going,” Dinah said. “That’s what’s different.” Her voice was calm enough, but her small face was an imprint of loneliness and fear. “I can feel it going.”

“She’s right,” Laurel agreed. “It’s only been daylight for two or three hours, but it’s already getting dark again.”

“I keep thinking this is a dream, you know,” Don said. “I keep thinking it’s the worst nightmare I ever had but I’ll wake up soon.”

Laurel nodded. “How is Mr. Toomy?”

Don laughed without much humor. “You won’t believe it.”

“Won’t believe what?” Bethany asked.  
“He’s gone to sleep.”

## 8

Craig Toomy, of course, was not sleeping. People who fell asleep at critical moments, like that fellow who was supposed to have been keeping an eye out while Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, were most definitely not part of THE BIG PICTURE.

He had watched the two men carefully through eyes which were not quite shut and wilted one or both of them to go away. Eventually the one in the red shirt *did* go away. Warwick, the bald man with the big false teeth, walked over to Craig and bent down. Craig let his eyes close all the way.

“Hey,” Warwick said. “Hey, you ’wake?”

Craig lay still, eyes closed, breathing regularly. He considered manufacturing a small snore and thought better of it.

Warwick poked him in the side.

Craig kept his eyes shut and went on breathing regularly.

Baldy straightened up, stepped over him, and went to the restaurant door to watch the others. Craig cracked his eyelids and made sure Warwick’s back was turned. Then, very quietly and very carefully, he began to work his wrists up and down inside the tight figure-eight of cloth which bound them. The tablecloth rope felt looser already.

He moved his wrists in short strokes, watching Warwick’s back, ready to cease movement and close his eyes again the instant Warwick showed signs of turning around. He willed Warwick *not* to turn around. He wanted to be free before the assholes came back from the plane. Especially the English asshole, the one who had hurt his nose and then kicked him while he was down. The English asshole had tied him up pretty well; thank God it was only a

tablecloth instead of a length of nylon line. Then he would have been out of luck, but as it was—

One of the knots loosened, and now Craig began to rotate his wrists from side to side. He could hear the langoliers approaching. He intended to be out of here and on his way to Boston before they arrived. In Boston he would be safe. When you were in a boardroom filled with bankers, no scampering was allowed.

And God help anyone—man, woman, or child—who tried to get in his way.

## 9

Albert picked up the book of matches he had taken from the bowl in the restaurant. “Exhibit A,” he said. “Here goes.”

He tore a match from the book and struck it. His unsteady hands betrayed him and he struck the match a full two inches above the rough strip which ran along the bottom of the paper folder. The match bent.

“Shit!” Albert cried.

“Would you like me to—” Bob began.

“Let him alone,” Brian said. “It’s Albert’s show.”

“Steady on, Albert,” Nick said.

Albert tore another match from the book, offered them a sickly smile, and struck it.

The match didn’t light.

He struck it again.

The match didn’t light.

“I guess that does it,” Brian said. “There’s nothing—”

“I *smelled* it,” Nick said. “I smelled the sulphur! Try another one, Ace!”

Instead, Albert snapped the same match across the rough strip a third time ... and this time it flared alight. It did not just burn the flammable head and then gutter out; it stood up in the familiar little

teardrop shape, blue at its base, yellow at its tip, and began to burn the paper stick.

Albert looked up, a wild grin on his face. “You see?” he said. “*You see?*”

He shook the match out, dropped it, and pulled another. This one lit on the first strike. He bent back the cover of the matchbook and touched the lit flame to the other matches, just as Bob Jenkins had done in the restaurant. This time they all flared alight with a dry fsss! sound. Albert blew them out like a birthday candle. It took two puffs of air to do the job.

“You see?” he asked. “You see what it means? Two-way traffic! *We brought our own time with us!* There’s the past out there ... and everywhere, I guess, east of the hole we came through ... but the present is still in here! *Still caught inside this airplane!*”

“I don’t know,” Brian said, but suddenly everything seemed possible again. He felt a wild, almost unrestrainable urge to pull Albert into his arms and pound him on the back.

“Bravo, Albert!” Bob said. “The beer! Try the beer!”

Albert spun the cap off the beer while Nick fished an unbroken glass from the wreckage around the drinks trolley.

“Where’s the smoke?” Brian asked.

“Smoke?” Bob asked, puzzled.

“Well, I guess it’s not smoke, exactly, but when you open a beer there’s usually something that looks like smoke around the mouth of the bottle.”

Albert sniffed, then tipped the beer toward Brian. “Smell.”

Brian did, and began to grin. He couldn’t help it. “By God, it sure *smells* like beer, smoke or no smoke.”

Nick held out the glass, and Albert was pleased to see that the Englishman’s hand was not quite steady, either. “Pour it,” he said. “Hurry up, mate—my sawbones says suspense is bad for the old ticker.”

Albert poured the beer and their smiles faded.

The beer was flat. Utterly flat. It simply sat in the whiskey glass Nick had found, looking like a urine sample.

## 10

“Christ almighty, it’s getting dark!”

The people standing at the windows looked around as Rudy Warwick joined them.

“You’re supposed to be watching the nut,” Don said.

Rudy gestured impatiently. “He’s out like a light. I think that whack on the head rattled his furniture a little more than we thought at first. What’s going on out there? And why is it getting dark so fast?”

“We don’t know,” Bethany said. “It just is. Do you think that weird dude is going into a coma, or something like that?”

“I don’t know,” Rudy said. “But if he is, we won’t have to worry about him anymore, will we? Christ, is that sound *creepy!* It sounds like a bunch of coked-up termites in a balsa-wood glider.” For the first time, Rudy seemed to have forgotten his stomach.

Dinah looked up at Laurel. “I think we better check on Mr. Toomy,” she said. “I’m worried about him. I bet he’s scared.”

“If he’s unconscious, Dinah, there isn’t anything we can—”

“I don’t think he’s unconscious,” Dinah said quietly. “I don’t think he’s even asleep.”

Laurel looked down at the child thoughtfully for a moment and then took her hand. “All right,” she said. “Let’s have a look.”

## 11

The knot Nick Hopewell had tied against Craig’s right wrist finally loosened enough for him to pull his hand free. He used it to push down the loop holding his left hand. He got quickly to his feet. A bolt of pain shot through his head, and for a moment he swayed. Flocks of black dots chased across his field of vision and then slowly cleared away. He became aware that the terminal was being swallowed in gloom. Premature night was falling. He could hear the chew-crunch-chew sound of the langoliers much more clearly now,

perhaps because his ears had become attuned to them, perhaps because they were closer.

On the far side of the terminal he saw two silhouettes, one tall and one short, break away from the others and start back toward the restaurant. The woman with the bitchy voice and the little blind girl with the ugly, pouty face. He couldn't let them raise the alarm. That would be very bad.

Craig backed away from the bloody patch of carpet where he had been lying, never taking his eyes from the approaching figures. He could not get over how rapidly the light was failing.

There were pots of eating utensils set into a counter to the left of the cash register, but it was all plastic crap, no good to him. Craig ducked around the cash register and saw something better: a butcher knife lying on the counter next to the grill. He took it and crouched behind the cash register to watch them approach. He watched the little girl with a particular anxious interest. The little girl knew a lot ... too much, maybe. The question was, where had she come by her knowledge?

That was a very interesting question indeed.

Wasn't it?

## 12

Nick looked from Albert to Bob. "So," he said. "The matches work but the lager doesn't." He turned to set the glass of beer on the counter. "What does that mea—"

All at once a small mushroom cloud of bubbles burst from nowhere in the bottom of the glass. They rose rapidly, spread, and burst into a thin head at the top. Nick's eyes widened.

"Apparently," Bob said dryly, "it takes a moment or two for things to catch up." He took the glass, drank it off and smacked his lips. "Excellent," he said. They all looked at the complicated lace of white

foam on the inside of the glass. “I can say without doubt that it’s the best glass of beer I ever drank in my life.”

Albert poured more beer into the glass. This time it came out foaming; the head overspilled the rim and ran down the outside. Brian picked it up.

“Are you sure you want to do that, matey?” Nick asked, grinning. “Don’t you fellows like to say ‘twenty-four hours from bottle to throttle’?”

“In cases of time-travel, the rule is suspended,” Brian said. “You could look it up.” He tilted the glass, drank, then laughed out loud. “You’re right,” he said to Bob. “It’s the best goddam beer there ever was. Try the Pepsi, Albert.”

Albert opened the can and they all heard the familiar pophiss of carbonation, mainstay of a hundred soft-drink commercials. He took a deep drink. When he lowered the can he was grinning ... but there were tears in his eyes.

“Gentlemen, the Pepsi-Cola is also very good today,” he said in plummy headwaiter’s tones, and they all began to laugh.

## 13

Don Gaffney caught up with Laurel and Dinah just as they entered the restaurant. “I thought I’d better—” he began, and then stopped. He looked around. “Oh, shit. Where is he?”

“I don’t—” Laurel began, and then, from beside her, Dinah Bellman said, “*Be quiet.*”

Her head turned slowly, like the lamp of a dead searchlight. For a moment there was no sound at all in the restaurant ... at least no sound Laurel could hear.

“There,” Dinah said at last, and pointed toward the cash register. “He’s hiding over there. Behind something.”

“How do you know that?” Don asked in a dry, nervous voice. “I don’t hear—”

“I do,” Dinah said calmly. “I hear his fingernails on metal. And I hear his heart. It’s beating very fast and very hard. He’s scared to death. I feel so sorry for him.” She suddenly disengaged her hand from Laurel’s and stepped forward.

“*Dinah, no!*” Laurel screamed.

Dinah took no notice. She walked toward the cash register, arms out, fingers seeking possible obstacles. The shadows seemed to reach for her and enfold her.

“Mr. Toomy? Please come out. We don’t want to hurt you. Please don’t be afraid—”

A sound began to arise from behind the cash register. It was a high, keening scream. It was a word, or something which was trying to be a word, but there was no sanity in it.

“*Youuuuuuuuuuu—*”

Craig arose from his hiding place, eyes blazing, butcher knife upraised, suddenly understanding that it was *her*, she was one of *them*, behind those dark glasses she was one of *them*, she was not only a langolier but the *head* langolier, the one who was calling the others, calling them with her dead blind eyes.

“*Youuuuuuuuuuu—*”

He rushed at her, shrieking. Don Gaffney shoved Laurel out of his way, almost knocking her to the floor, and leaped forward. He was fast, but not fast enough. Craig Toomy was crazy, and he moved with the speed of a langolier himself. He approached Dinah at a dead-out run. No scampering for him.

Dinah made no effort to draw away. She looked up from her darkness and into his, and now she held her arms out, as if to enfold him and comfort him.

“*—oooouuuuuuuu—*”

“It’s all right, Mr. Toomy,” she said. “Don’t be afr—” And then Craig buried the butcher knife in her chest and ran past Laurel into the terminal, still shrieking.

Dinah stood where she was for a moment. Her hands found the wooden handle jutting out of the front of her dress and her fingers fluttered over it, exploring it. Then she sank slowly, gracefully, to the floor, becoming just another shadow in the growing darkness.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ***DINAH IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW. THE FASTEST TOASTER EAST OF THE MISSISSIPPI. RACING AGAINST TIME. NICK MAKES A DECISION.***

#### 1

Albert, Brian, Bob, and Nick passed the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich around. They each got two bites and then it was gone ... but while it lasted, Albert thought he had never sunk his teeth into such wonderful chow in his life. His belly awakened and immediately began clamoring for more.

“I think our bald friend Mr. Warwick is going to like this part best,” Nick said, swallowing. He looked at Albert. “You’re a genius, Ace. You know that, don’t you? Nothing but a pure genius.”

Albert flushed happily. “It wasn’t much,” he said. “Just a little of what Mr. Jenkins calls the deductive method. If two streams flowing in different directions come together, they mix and make a whirlpool. I saw what was happening with Bethany’s matches and thought something like that might be happening here. And there was Mr. Gaffney’s bright-red shirt. It started to lose its color. So I thought, well, if stuff starts to fade when it’s not on the plane anymore, maybe if you brought faded stuff *onto* the plane, it would—”

“I hate to interrupt,” Bob said softly, “but I think that if we intend to try and get back, we should start the process as soon as possible. The sounds we are hearing worry me, but there’s something else that worries me more. This airplane is not a closed system. I think

there's a good chance that before long it will begin to lose its ... its ...

"Its temporal integrity?" Albert suggested.

"Yes. Well put. Any fuel we load into its tanks now may burn ... but a few hours from now, it may not."

An unpleasant idea occurred to Brian: that the fuel might stop burning halfway across the country, with the 767 at 36,000 feet. He opened his mouth to tell them this ... and then closed it again. What good would it do to put the idea in their minds, when they could do nothing about it?

"How do we start, Brian?" Nick asked in clipped, businesslike tones.

Brian ran the process over in his mind. It would be a little awkward, especially working with men whose only experience with aircraft probably began and ended with model planes, but he thought it could be done.

"We start by turning on the engines and taxiing as close to that Delta 727 as we can get," he said. "When we get there, I'll kill the starboard engine and leave the portside engine turning over. We're lucky. This 767 is equipped with wet-wing fuel tanks and an APU system that—"

A shrill, panicked scream drifted up to them, cutting across the low rattling background noise like a fork drawn across a slate blackboard. It was followed by running footfalls on the ladder. Nick turned in that direction and his hands came up in a gesture Albert recognized at once; he had seen some of the martial-arts freaks at school back home practicing the move. It was the classic Tae Kwan Do defensive position. A moment later Bethany's pallid, terrified face appeared in the doorway and Nick let his hands relax.

"*Come!*" Bethany screamed. "You've got to *come!*" She was panting, out of breath, and she reeled backward on the platform of the ladder. For a moment Albert and Brian were sure she was going to tumble back down the steep steps, breaking her neck on the way. Then Nick leaped forward, cupped a hand on the nape of her neck, and pulled her into the plane. Bethany did not even seem to realize she had had a close call. Her dark eyes blazed at them from the

white circle of her face. “Please come! He’s stabbed her! I think she’s dying!”

Nick put his hands on her shoulders and lowered his face toward hers as if he intended to kiss her. “Who has stabbed whom?” he asked very quietly. “Who is dying?”

“I ... she ... Mr. T-T-Toomy—”

“Bethany, say teacup.”

She looked at him, eyes shocked and uncomprehending. Brian was looking at Nick as though he had gone insane.

Nick gave the girl’s shoulders a little shake.

“Say teacup. Right now.”

“T-T-Teacup.”

“Teacup and saucer. Say it, Bethany.”

“Teacup and saucer.”

“All right. Better?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. If you feel yourself losing control again, say teacup at once and you’ll come back. Now—who’s been stabbed?”

“The blind girl. Dinah.”

“Bloody *shit*. All right, Bethany. Just—” Nick raised his voice sharply as he saw Brian move behind Bethany, headed for the ladder, with Albert right behind him. “*No!*” he shouted in a bright, hard tone that stopped both of them. “Stay fucking *put!*”

Brian, who had served two tours in Vietnam and knew the sound of unquestionable command when he heard it, stopped so suddenly that Albert ran face-first into the middle of his back. *I knew it*, he thought. *I knew he’d take over. It was just a matter of time and circumstance.*

“Do you know how this happened or where our wretched travelling companion is now?” Nick asked Bethany.

“The guy ... the guy in the red shirt said—”

“All right. Never mind.” He glanced briefly up at Brian. His eyes were red with anger. “The bloody fools left him alone. I’d wager my pension on it. Well, it won’t happen again. Our Mr. Toomy has cut his last caper.”

He looked back at the girl. Her head drooped; her hair hung dejectedly in her face; she was breathing in great, watery swoops of breath.

“Is she alive, Bethany?” he asked gently.

“I ... I ... I...”

“Teacup, Bethany.”

“*Teacup!*” Bethany shouted, and looked up at him from teary, red-rimmed eyes. “I don’t know. She was alive when I ... you know, came for you. She might be dead now. He really got her. Jesus, why did we have to get stuck with a fucking psycho? Weren’t things bad enough without that?”

“And none of you who were supposed to be minding this fellow have the slightest idea where he went following the attack, is that right?”

Bethany put her hands over her face and began to sob. It was all the answer any of them needed.

“Don’t be so hard on her,” Albert said quietly, and slipped an arm around Bethany’s waist. She put her head on his shoulder and began to sob more strenuously.

Nick moved the two of them gently aside. “If I was inclined to be hard on someone, it would be myself, Ace. I should have stayed behind.”

He turned to Brian.

“I’m going back into the terminal. You’re not. Mr. Jenkins here is almost certainly right; our time here is short. I don’t like to think just *how* short. Start the engines but don’t move the aircraft yet. If the girl is alive, we’ll need the stairs to bring her up. Bob, bottom of the stairs. Keep an eye out for that bugger Toomy. Albert, you come with me.”

Then he said something which chilled them all.

“I almost hope she’s dead, God help me. It will save time if she is.”

Dinah was not dead, not even unconscious. Laurel had taken off her sunglasses to wipe away the sweat which had sprung up on the girl's face, and Dinah's eyes, deep brown and very wide, looked up unseeingly into Laurel's blue-green ones. Behind her, Don and Rudy stood shoulder to shoulder, looking down anxiously.

"I'm sorry," Rudy said for the fifth time. "I really thought he was out. Out *cold*."

Laurel ignored him. "How are you, Dinah?" she asked softly. She didn't want to look at the wooden handle growing out of the girl's dress, but couldn't take her eyes from it. There was very little blood, at least so far; a circle the size of a demitasse cup around the place where the blade had gone in, and that was all.

So far.

"It hurts," Dinah said in a faint voice. "It's hard to breathe. And it's *hot*."

"You're going to be all right," Laurel said, but her eyes were drawn relentlessly back to the handle of the knife. The girl was very small, and she couldn't understand why the blade hadn't gone all the way through her. Couldn't understand why she wasn't dead already.

"... out of here," Dinah said. She grimaced, and a thick, slow curdle of blood escaped from the corner of her mouth and ran down her cheek.

"Don't try to talk, honey," Laurel said, and brushed damp curls back from Dinah's forehead.

"You have to get *out* of here," Dinah insisted. Her voice was little more than a whisper. "And you shouldn't blame Mr. Toomy. He's ... he's scared, that's all. Of them."

Don looked around balefully. "If I find that bastard, *I'll* scare him," he said, and curled both hands into fists. A lodge ring gleamed above one knuckle in the growing gloom. "I'll make him wish he was born dead."

Nick came into the restaurant then, followed by Albert. He pushed past Rudy Warwick without a word of apology and knelt next to Dinah. His bright gaze fixed upon the handle of the knife for a moment, then moved to the child's face.

“Hello, love.” He spoke cheerily, but his eyes had darkened. “I see you’ve been air-conditioned. Not to worry; you’ll be right as a trivet in no time flat.”

Dinah smiled a little. “What’s a trivet?” she whispered. More blood ran out of her mouth as she spoke, and Laurel could see it on her teeth. Laurel’s stomach did a slow, lazy roll.

“I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s something nice,” Nick replied. “I’m going to turn your head to one side. Be as still as you can.”

“Okay.”

Nick moved her head, very gently, until her cheek was almost resting on the carpet. “Hurt?”

“Yes,” Dinah whispered. “Hot. Hurts to ... breathe.” Her whispery voice had taken on a hoarse, cracked quality. A thin stream of blood ran from her mouth and pooled on the carpet less than ten feet from the place where Craig Toomy’s blood was drying.

From outside came the sudden high-pressure whine of aircraft engines starting. Don, Rudy, and Albert looked in that direction. Nick never looked away from the girl. He spoke gently. “Do you feel like coughing, Dinah?”

“Yes ... no ... don’t know.” “It’s better if you don’t,” he said. “If you get that tickly feeling, try to ignore it. And don’t talk anymore, right?”

“Don’t ... hurt ... Mr. Toomy.” Her words, whispered though they were, conveyed great emphasis, great urgency.

“No, love, wouldn’t think of it. Take it from me.”

“... don’t ... trust ... you...”

He bent, kissed her cheek, and whispered in her ear: “But you *can*, you know—trust me, I mean. For now, all you’ve got to do is lie still and let us take care of things.”

He looked at Laurel.

“You didn’t try to remove the knife?”

“I ... no.” Laurel swallowed. There was a hot, harsh lump in her throat. The swallow didn’t move it. “Should I have?”

“If you had, there wouldn’t be much chance. Do you have any nursing experience?”

“No.”

“All right, I’m going to tell you what to do ... but first I need to know if the sight of blood—quite a bit of it—is going to make you pass out. And I need the truth.”

Laurel said, “I haven’t really *seen* a lot of blood since my sister ran into a door and knocked out two of her teeth while we were playing hide-and-seek. But I didn’t faint then.”

“Good. And you’re not going to faint now. Mr. Warwick, bring me half a dozen tablecloths from that grotty little pub around the corner.” He smiled down at the girl. “Give me a minute or two, Dinah, and I think you’ll feel much better. Young Dr. Hopewell is ever so gentle with the tadies—especially the ones who are young and pretty.”

Laurel felt a sudden and absolutely absurd desire to reach out and touch Nick’s hair.

*What’s the matter with you? This little girl is probably dying, and you’re wondering what his hair feels like! Quit it! How stupid can you be?*

*Well, let’s see ... Stupid enough to have been flying across the country to meet a man I first contacted through the personals column of a so-called friendship magazine. Stupid enough to have been planning to sleep with him if he turned out to be reasonably presentable ... and if he didn’t have bad breath, of course.*

*Oh, quit it! Quit it, Laurel!*

*Yes, the other voice in her mind agreed. You’re absolutely right, it’s crazy to be thinking things like that at a time like this, and I will quit it ... but I wonder what Young Dr. Hopewell would be like in bed? I wonder if he would be gentle, or—*

Laurel shivered and wondered if this was the way your average nervous breakdown started.

“They’re closer,” Dinah said. “You really ...” She coughed, and a large bubble of blood appeared between her lips. It popped, splattering her cheeks. Don Gaffney muttered and turned away. “... really have to hurry,” she finished.

Nick’s cheery smile didn’t change a bit. “I know,” he said.

### 3

Craig dashed across the terminal, nimbly vaulted the escalator's handrail, and ran down the frozen metal steps with panic roaring and beating in his head like the sound of the ocean in a storm; it even drowned out that other sound, the relentless chewing, crunching sound of the langoliers. No one saw him go. He sprinted across the lower lobby toward the exit doors ... and crashed into them. He had forgotten everything, including the fact that the electric-eye door-openers wouldn't work with the power out.

He rebounded, the breath knocked out of him, and fell to the floor, gasping like a netted fish. He lay there for a moment, groping for whatever remained of his mind, and found himself gazing at his right hand. It was only a white blob in the growing darkness, but he could see the black splatters on it, and he knew what they were: the little girl's blood.

*Except she wasn't a little girl, not really. She just looked like a little girl. She was the head langolier, and with her gone the others won't be able to ... won't be able to ... to ...*

To what?

To find him?

But he could still hear the hungry sound of their approach: that maddening chewing sound, as if somewhere to the east a tribe of huge, hungry insects was on the march.

His mind whirled. Oh, he was so confused.

Craig saw a smaller door leading outside, got up, and started in that direction. Then he stopped. There was a road out there, and the road undoubtedly led to the town of Bangor, but so what? He didn't care about *Bangor*; Bangor was most definitely not part of that fabled BIG PICTURE. It was *Boston* that he had to get to. If he could get there, everything would be all right. And what did that mean? His father would have known. It meant he had to STOP SCAMPERING AROUND - and GET WITH THE PROGRAM.

His mind seized on this idea the way a shipwreck victim seizes upon a piece of wreckage—anything that still floats, even if it's only

the shithouse door, is a prize to be cherished. If he could get to Boston, this whole experience would be ... would be ...

“Set aside,” he muttered.

At the words, a bright beam of rational light seemed to shaft through the darkness inside his head, and a voice (it might have been his father’s) cried out *YES!!* in affirmation.

But how was he to do that? Boston was too far to walk and the others wouldn’t let him back on board the only plane that still worked. Not after what he had done to their little blind mascot.

“But they don’t know,” Craig whispered. “They don’t know I did them a favor, because they don’t know what she is.” He nodded his head sagely. His eyes, huge and wet in the dark, gleamed.

*Stow away*, his father’s voice whispered to him. *Stow away on the plane.*

*Yes!* his mother’s voice added. *Stow away! That’s the ticket, Craiggy-weggy! Only if you do that, you won’t need a ticket, will you?*

Craig looked doubtfully toward the luggage conveyor belt. He could use it to get to the tarmac, but suppose they had posted a guard by the plane? The pilot wouldn’t think of it—once out of his cockpit, the man was obviously an imbecile—but the Englishman almost surely would.

So what was he supposed to do?

If the Bangor side of the terminal was no good, and the runway side of the terminal was *also* no good, what was he supposed to do and where was he supposed to go?

Craig looked nervously at the dead escalator. They would be hunting him soon—the Englishman undoubtedly leading the pack—and here he stood in the middle of the floor, as exposed as a stripper who has just tossed her pasties and g-string into the audience.

*I have to hide, at least for awhile.*

He had heard the jet engines start up outside, but this did not worry him; he knew a little about planes and understood that Engle couldn’t go anywhere until he had refuelled. And refuelling would take time. He didn’t have to worry about them leaving without him.

Not yet, anyway.

*Hide, Craiggy-weggy. That's what you have to do right now. You have to hide before they come for you.*

He turned slowly, looking for the best place, squinting into the growing dark. And this time he saw a sign on a door tucked between the Avis desk and the Bangor Travel Agency.

AIRPORT SERVICES,

it read. A sign which could mean almost anything.

Craig hurried across to the door, casting nervous looks back over his shoulder as he went, and tried it. As with the door to Airport Security, the knob would not turn but the door opened when he pushed on it. Craig took one final look over his shoulder, saw no one, and closed the door behind him.

Utter, total dark swallowed him; in here, he was as blind as the little girl he had stabbed. Craig didn't mind. He was not afraid of the dark; in fact, he rather liked it. Unless you were with a woman, no one expected you to do anything significant in the dark. In the dark, performance ceased to be a factor.

Even better, the chewing sound of the langoliers was muffled.

Craig felt his way slowly forward, hands outstretched, feet shuffling. After three of these shuffling steps, his thigh came in contact with a hard object that felt like the edge of a desk. He reached forward and down. Yes. A desk. He let his hands flutter over it for a moment, taking comfort in the familiar accoutrements of white-collar America: a stack of paper, an IN/OUT basket, the edge of a blotter, a caddy filled with paper-clips, a pencil-and-pen set. He worked his way around the desk to the far side, where his hip bumped the arm of a chair. Craig maneuvered himself between the chair and the desk and then sat down. Being behind a desk made him feel better still. It made him feel like himself—calm, in control. He fumbled for the top drawer and pulled it open. Felt inside for a weapon—something sharp. His hand happened almost immediately upon a letter-opener.

He took it out, shut the drawer, and put it on the desk by his right hand.

He just sat there for a moment, listening to the muffled *whisk-thud* of his heartbeat and the dim sound of the jet engines, then sent his

hands fluttering delicately over the surface of the desk again until they re-encountered the stack of papers. He took the top sheet and brought it toward him, but there wasn't a glimmer of white ... not even when he held it right in front of his eyes.

*That's all right, Craigggy-weggy. You just sit here in the dark. Sit here and wait until it's time to move. When the time comes—*

*I'll tell you*, his father finished grimly.

"That's right," Craig said. His fingers spidered up the unseen sheet of paper to the righthand comer. He tore smoothly downward.

*Riii-ip.*

Calm filled his mind like cool blue water. He dropped the unseen strip on the unseen desk and returned his fingers to the top of the sheet. Everything was going to be fine. Just fine. He began to sing under his breath in a tuneless little whisper.

"Just call me angel ... of the *morn-ing, ba-by ...*"

*Riii-ip.*

"Just touch my cheek before you leave me ... *ba-by ...*"

Calm now, at peace, Craig sat and waited for his father to tell him what he should do next, just as he had done so many times as a child.

## 4

"Listen carefully, Albert," Nick said. "We have to take her on board the plane, but we'll need a litter to do it. There won't be one on board, but there must be one in here. Where?"

"Gee, Mr. Hopewell, Captain Engle would know better than—"

"But Captain Engle isn't here," Nick said patiently. "We shall have to manage on our own."

Albert frowned ... then thought of a sign he had seen on the lower level. "Airport Services?" he asked. "Does that sound right?"

"It bloody well does," Nick said. "Where did you see that?"

"On the lower level. Next to the rent-a-car counters."

“All right,” Nick said. “Here’s how we’re going to handle this. You and Mr. Gaffney are designated litter-finders and litter-bearers. Mr. Gaffney, I suggest you check by the grill behind the counter. I expect you’ll find some sharp knives. I’m sure that’s where our unpleasant friend found his. Get one for you and one for Albert.”

Don went behind the counter without a word. Rudy Warwick returned from The Red Baron Bar with an armload of red-and-white-checked tablecloths.

“I’m really sorry—” he began again, but Nick cut him off. He was still looking at Albert, his face now only a circle of white above the deeper shadow of Dinah’s small body. The dark had almost arrived.

“You probably won’t see Mr. Toomy; my guess is that he left here unarmed, in a panic. I imagine he’s either found a bolthole by now or has left the terminal. If you *do* see him, I advise you very strongly not to engage him unless he makes it necessary.” He swung his head to look at Don as Don returned with a pair of butcher knives. “Keep your priorities straight, you two. Your mission isn’t to recapture Mr. Toomy and bring him to justice. Your job is to get a stretcher and bring it here as quick as you can. We have to get out of here.”

Don offered Albert one of the knives, but Albert shook his head and looked at Rudy Warwick. “Could I have one of those tablecloths instead?”

Don looked at him as if Albert had gone crazy. “A tablecloth? What in God’s name for?”

“I’ll show you.”

Albert had been kneeling by Dinah. Now he got up and went behind the counter. He peered around, not sure exactly what he was looking for, but positive he would know it when he saw it. And so he did. There was an old-fashioned two-slice toaster sitting well back on the counter. He picked it up, jerking the plug out of the wall, and wrapped the cord tightly around it as he came back to where the others were. He took one of the tablecloths, spread it, and placed the toaster in one corner. Then he turned it over twice, wrapping the toaster in the end of the tablecloth like a Christmas present. He fashioned tight rabbit’s-ear knots in the corners to make a pocket.

When he gripped the loose end of the tablecloth and stood up, the wrapped toaster had become a rock in a makeshift sling.

“When I was a kid, we used to play Indiana Jones,” Albert said apologetically. “I made something like this and pretended it was my whip. I almost broke my brother David’s arm once. I loaded an old blanket with a sashweight I found in the garage. Pretty stupid, I guess. I didn’t know how hard it would hit. I got a hell of a spanking for it. It looks stupid, I guess, but it actually works pretty well. It always did, at least.”

Nick looked at Albert’s makeshift weapon dubiously but said nothing. If a toaster wrapped in a tablecloth made Albert feel more comfortable about going downstairs in the dark, so be it.

“Good enough, then. Now go find a stretcher and bring it back. If there isn’t one in the Airport Services office, try someplace else. If you don’t find anything in fifteen minutes—no, make that ten—just come back and we’ll carry her.”

“You can’t do that!” Laurel cried softly. “If there’s internal bleeding —”

Nick looked up at her. “There’s internal bleeding already. And ten minutes is all the time I think we can spare.”

Laurel opened her mouth to answer, to *argue*, but Dinah’s husky whisper stopped her. “He’s right.”

Don slipped the blade of his knife into his belt. “Come on, son,” he said. They crossed the terminal together and started down the escalator to the first floor. Albert wrapped the end of his loaded tablecloth around his hand as they went.

## 5

Nick turned his attention back to the girl on the floor. “How are you feeling, Dinah?”

“Hurts bad,” Dinah said faintly.

“Yes, of course it does,” Nick said. “And I’m afraid that what I’m about to do is going to make it hurt a good deal more, for a few seconds, at least. But the knife is in your lung, and it’s got to come out. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Her dark, unseeing eyes looked up at him. “Scared.”

“So am I, Dinah. So am I. But it has to be done. Are you game?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl.” Nick bent and planted a soft kiss on her cheek. “That’s a good, brave girl. It won’t take long, and that’s a promise. I want you to lie just as still as you can, Dinah, and try not to cough. Do you understand me? It’s very important. *Try not to cough.*”

“I’ll try.”

“There may be a moment or two when you feel that you can’t breathe. You may even feel that you’re leaking, like a tire with a puncture. That’s a scary feeling, love, and it may make you want to move around, or cry out. You mustn’t do it. *And you mustn’t cough.*”

Dinah made a reply none of them could hear.

Nick swallowed, armed sweat off his forehead in a quick gesture, and turned to Laurel. “Fold two of those tablecloths into square pads. Thick as you can. Kneel beside me. Close as you can get. Warwick, take off your belt.”

Rudy began to comply at once.

Nick looked back at Laurel. She was again struck, and not unpleasantly this time, by the power of his gaze. “I’m going to grasp the handle of the knife and draw it out. If it’s not caught on one of her ribs—and judging from its position, I don’t think it is—the blade should come out in one slow, smooth pull. The moment it’s out, I will draw back, giving you clear access to the girl’s chest area. You will place one of your pads over the wound and press. Press *hard*. You’re not to worry about hurting her, or compressing her chest so much she can’t breathe. She’s got at least one perforation in her lung, and I’m betting there’s a pair of them. Those are what we’ve got to worry about. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“When you’ve placed the pad, I’m going to lift her against the pressure you’re putting on. Mr. Warwick here will then slip the other

pad beneath her if we see blood on the back of her dress. Then we're going to tie the compresses in place with Mr. Warwick's belt." He glanced up at Rudy. "When I call for it, my friend, give it to me. Don't make me ask you twice."

"I won't."

"Can you see well enough to do this, Nick?" Laurel asked.

"I think so," Nick replied. "I hope so." He looked at Dinah again. "Ready?"

Dinah muttered something.

"All right," Nick said. He drew in a long breath and then let it out. "Jesus help me."

He wrapped his slim, long-fingered hands around the handle of the knife like a man gripping a baseball bat. He pulled. Dinah shrieked. A great gout of blood spewed from her mouth. Laurel had been leaning tensely forward, and her face was suddenly bathed in Dinah's blood. She recoiled.

"No!" Nick spat at her without looking around. "Don't you *dare* go weak-sister on me! Don't you *dare*!"

Laurel leaned forward again, gagging and shuddering. The blade, a dully gleaming triangle of silver in the deep gloom, emerged from Dinah's chest and glimmered in the air. The little blind girl's chest heaved and there was a high, unearthly whistling sound as the wound sucked inward.

"*Now!*" Nick grunted. "Press down! Hard as you can!"

Laurel leaned forward. For just a moment she saw blood pouring out of the hole in Dinah's chest, and then the wound was covered. The tablecloth pad grew warm and wet under her hands almost immediately.

"Harder!" Nick snarled at her. "Press harder! Seal it! Seal the wound!"

Laurel now understood what people meant when they talked about coming completely unstrung, because she felt on the verge of it herself. "I can't! I'll break her ribs if—"

"*Fuck her ribs! You have to make a seal!*"

Laurel rocked forward on her knees and brought her entire weight down on her hands. Now she could feel liquid seeping slowly

between her fingers, although she had folded the tablecloth thick.

The Englishman tossed the knife aside and leaned forward until his face was almost touching Dinah's. Her eyes were closed. He rolled one of the lids. "I think she's finally out," he said. "Can't tell for sure because her eyes are so odd, but I hope to heaven she is." Hair had fallen over his brow. He tossed it back impatiently with a jerk of his head and looked at Laurel. "You're doing well. Stay with it, all right? I'm rolling her now. Keep the pressure on as I do."

"There's so much blood," Laurel groaned. "Will she drown?"

"I don't know. Keep the pressure on. Ready, Mr. Warwick?"

"Oh Christ I guess so," Rudy Warwick croaked.

"Right. Here we go." Nick slipped his hands beneath Dinah's right shoulderblade and grimaced. "It's worse than I thought," he muttered. "Far worse. She's *soaked*." He began to pull Dinah slowly upward against the pressure Laurel was putting on. Dinah uttered a thick, croaking moan. A gout of half-congealed blood flew from her mouth and splattered across the floor. And now Laurel could hear a rain of blood pattering down on the carpet from beneath the girl.

Suddenly the world began to swim away from her.

"Keep that pressure *on!*" Nick cried. "Don't let up!"

But she was fainting.

It was her understanding of what Nick Hopewell would think of her if she *did* faint which caused her to do what she did next. Laurel stuck her tongue out between her teeth like a child making a face and bit down on it as hard as she could. The pain was bright and exquisite, the salty taste of her own blood immediately filled her mouth ... but that sensation that the world was swimming away from her like a big lazy fish in an aquarium passed. She was *here* again.

Downstairs, there was a sudden shriek of pain and surprise. It was followed by a hoarse shout. On the heels of the shout came a loud, drilling scream.

Rudy and Laurel both turned in that direction. "The boy!" Rudy said. "Him and Gaffney! They—"

"They've found Mr. Toomy after all," Nick said. His face was a complicated mask of effort. The tendons on his neck stood out like steel pulleys. "We'll just have to hope—"

There was a thud from downstairs, followed by a terrible howl of agony. Then a whole series of muffled thumps.

“—that they’re on top of the situation. We can’t do anything about it now. If we stop in the middle of what we’re doing, this little girl is going to die for sure.”

“But that sounded like the *kid!*”

“Can’t be helped, can it? Slide the pad under her, Warwick. Do it right now, or I’ll kick your bloody arse square.”

## 6

Don led the way down the escalator, then stopped briefly at the bottom to fumble in his pocket. He brought out a square object that gleamed faintly in the dark. “It’s my Zippo,” he said. “Do you think it’ll still work?”

“I don’t know,” Albert said. “It might ... for awhile. You better not try it until you have to. I sure hope it does. We won’t be able to see a thing without it.”

“Where’s this Airport Services place?”

Albert pointed to the door Craig Toomy had gone through less than five minutes before. “Right over there.”

“Do you think it’s unlocked?”

“Well,” Albert said, “there’s only one way to find out.”

They crossed the terminal, Don still leading the way with his lighter in his right hand.

## 7

Craig heard them coming—more servants of the langoliers, no doubt. But he wasn’t worried. He had taken care of the thing which had been masquerading as a little girl, and he would take care of

these other things, as well. He curled his hand around the letter-opener, got up, and sidled back around the desk.

“Do you think it’s unlocked?”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out.”

*You’re going to find out something, anyway,* Craig thought. He reached the wall beside the door. It was lined with paper-stacked shelves. He reached out and felt doorhinges. Good. The opening door would block him off from them ... not that they were likely to see him, anyway. It was as black as an elephant’s asshole in here. He raised the letter-opener to shoulder height.

“The knob doesn’t move.” Craig relaxed ... but only for a moment.

“Try pushing it.” That was the smart-ass kid.

The door began to open.

## 8

Don stepped in, blinking at the gloom. He thumbed the cover of his lighter back, held it up, and flicked the wheel. There was a spark and the wick caught at once, producing a low flame. They saw what was apparently a combined office and storeroom. There was an untidy stack of luggage in one corner and a Xerox machine in another. The back wall was lined with shelves and the shelves were stacked with what looked like forms of various kinds.

Don stepped further into the office, lifting his lighter like a spelunker holding up a guttering candle in a dark cave. He pointed to the right wall. “Hey, kid! Ace! Look!”

A poster mounted there showed a tipsy guy in a business suit staggering out of a bar and looking at his watch. WORK IS THE CURSE OF THE DRINKING CLASS, the poster advised. Mounted on the wall beside it was a white plastic box with a large red cross on it. And leaning below it was a folded stretcher ... the kind with wheels.

Albert wasn't looking at the poster or the first-aid kit or the stretcher, however. His eyes were fixed on the desk in the center of the room.

On it he saw a heaped tangle of paper strips.

*"Look out!"* he shouted. *"Look out, he's in h—"*

Craig Toomy stepped out from behind the door and struck.

## 9

"Belt," Nick said.

Rudy didn't move or reply. His head was turned toward the door of the restaurant. The sounds from downstairs had ceased. There was only the rattling noise and the steady, throbbing rumble of the jet engine in the dark outside.

Nick kicked backward like a mule, connecting with Rudy's shin.

*"Ow!"*

*"Belt! Now!"*

Rudy dropped clumsily to his knees and moved next to Nick, who was holding Dinah up with one hand and pressing a second tablecloth pad against her back with the other.

"Slip it under the pad," Nick said. He was panting, and sweat was running down his face in wide streams. "Quick! I can't hold her up forever!"

Rudy slid the belt under the pad. Nick lowered Dinah, reached across the girl's small body, and lifted her left shoulder long enough to pull the belt out the other side. Then he looped it over her chest and cinched it tight. He put the belt's free end in Laurel's hand. "Keep the pressure on," he said, standing up. "You can't use the buckte—she's much too small."

"Are you going downstairs?" Laurel asked.

"Yes. That seems indicated."

"Be careful. Please be careful."

He grinned at her, and all those white teeth suddenly shining out in the gloom were startling ... but not frightening, she discovered. Quite the opposite.

“Of course. It’s how I get along.” He reached down and squeezed her shoulder. His hand was warm, and at his touch a little shiver chased through her. “You did very well, Laurel. Thank you.”

He began to turn away, and then a small hand groped out and caught the cuff of his blue-jeans. He looked down and saw that Dinah’s blind eyes were open again.

“Don’t ...” she began, and then a choked sneezing fit shook her. Blood flew from her nose in a spray of fine droplets.

“Dinah, you mustn’t—”

“Don’t ... you ... kill him!” she said, and even in the dark Laurel could sense the fantastic effort she was making to speak at all.

Nick looked down at her thoughtfully. “The bugger stabbed you, you know. Why are you so insistent on keeping him whole?”

Her narrow chest strained against the belt. The bloodstained tablecloth pad heaved. She struggled and managed to say one thing more. They all heard it; Dinah was at great pains to speak clearly. “All ... I know ... is that we need him,” she whispered, and then her eyes closed again.

## 10

Craig buried the letter-opener fist-deep in the nape of Don Gaffney’s neck. Don screamed and dropped the lighter. It struck the floor and lay there, guttering sickishly. Albert shouted in surprise as he saw Craig step toward Don, who was now staggering in the direction of the desk and clawing weakly behind him for the protruding object.

Craig grabbed the opener with one hand and planted his other against Don’s back. As he simultaneously pushed and pulled, Albert heard the sound of a hungry man pulling a drumstick off a well-done turkey. Don screamed again, louder this time, and went sprawling

over the desk. His arms flew out ahead of him, knocking to the floor an IN/OUT box and the stack of lost-luggage forms Craig had been ripping.

Craig turned toward Albert, flicking a spray of blood-droplets from the blade of the letter-opener as he did so. "You're one of them, too," he breathed. "Well, fuck you. I'm going to Boston and you can't stop me. *None* of you can stop me." Then the lighter on the floor went out and they were in darkness.

Albert took a step backward and felt a warm swoop of air in his face as Craig swung the blade through the spot where he had been only a second before. He flailed behind him with his free hand, terrified of backing into a corner where Craig could use the knife (in the Zippo's pallid, fading light, that was what he had thought it was) on him at will and his own weapon would be useless as well as stupid. His fingers found only empty space, and he backed through the door into the lobby. He did not feel cool; he did not feel like the fastest Hebrew on *any* side of the Mississippi; he did not feel faster than blue blazes. He felt like a scared kid who had foolishly chosen a childhood playtoy instead of a real weapon because he had been unable to believe—really, really believe—that it could come to this in spite of what the lunatic asshole had done to the little girl upstairs. He could smell himself. Even in the dead air he could smell himself. It was the rancid monkeypiss aroma of fear.

Craig came gliding out through the door with the letter-opener raised. He moved like a dancing shadow in the dark. "I see you, sonny," he breathed. "I see you just like a cat."

He began to slide forward. Albert backed away from him. At the same time he began to pendulum the toaster back and forth, reminding himself that he would have only one good shot before Toomy moved in and planted the blade in his throat or chest.

*And if the toaster goes flying out of the goddam pocket before it hits him, I'm a goner.*

Craig closed in, weaving the top half of his body from side to side like a snake coming out of a basket. An absent little smile touched the comers of his lips and made small dimples there. *That's right,* Craig's father said grimly from his undying stronghold inside Craig's head. *If you have to pick them off one by one, you can do that. EPO, Craig, remember? EPO. Effort Pays Off.*

*That's right, Craigggy-weggy,* his mother chimed in. *You can do it, and you have to do it.*

"I'm sorry," Craig murmured to the white-faced boy through his smile. "I'm really, really sorry, but I have to do it. If you could see things from my perspective, you'd understand."

## 12

Albert shot a quick glance behind him and saw he was backing toward the United Airlines ticket desk. If he retreated much further, the backward arc of his swing would be restricted. It had to be soon. He began to pendulum the toaster more rapidly, his sweaty hand clutching the twist of tablecloth.

Craig caught the movement in the dark, but couldn't tell what it was the kid was swinging. It didn't matter. He couldn't let it matter. He gathered himself, then sprang forward.

*"I'M GOING TO BOSTON!"* he shrieked. *"I'M GOING TO—"*

Albert's eyes were adjusting to the dark, and he saw Craig make his move. The toaster was on the rearward half of its arc. Instead of snapping his wrist forward to reverse its direction, Albert let his arm go with the weight of the toaster, swinging it up and over his head in an exaggerated pitching gesture. At the same time he stepped to the left. The lump at the end of the tablecloth made a short, hard circlet in the air, held firmly in its pocket by centripetal force. Craig cooperated by stepping forward into the toaster's descending arc. It met his forehead and the bridge of his nose with a hard, toneless crunch.

Craig wailed with agony and dropped the letter-opener. His hands went to his face and he staggered backward. Blood from his broken nose poured between his fingers like water from a busted hydrant. Albert was terrified of what he had done but even more terrified of letting up now that Toomy was hurt. Albert took another step to the left and swung the tablecloth sidearm. It whipped through the air and smashed into the center of Craig's chest with a hard thump. Craig fell over backward, still howling.

For Albert "Ace" Kaussner, only one thought remained; all else was a tumbling, fragmented swirl of color, image, and emotion.

*I have to make him stop moving or he'll get up and kill me. I have to make him stop moving or he'll get up and kill me.*

At least Toomy had dropped his weapon; it lay glinting on the lobby carpet. Albert planted one of his loafers on it and unloaded with the toaster again. As it came down, Albert bowed from the waist like an old-fashioned butler greeting a member of the royal family. The lump at the end of the tablecloth smashed into Craig Toomy's gasping mouth. There was a sound like glass being crushed inside of a handkerchief.

*Oh God,* Albert thought. *That was his teeth.*

Craig flopped and squirmed on the floor. It was terrible to watch him, perhaps more terrible because of the poor light. There was something monstrous and unkillable and insectile about his horrible vitality.

His hand closed upon Albert's loafer. Albert stepped away from the letter-opener with a little cry of revulsion, and Craig tried to grasp it when he did. Between his eyes, his nose was a burst bulb of flesh. He could hardly see Albert at all; his vision was eaten up by a vast white corona of light. A steady high keening note rang in his head, the sound of a TV test-pattern turned up to full volume.

He was beyond doing any damage, but Albert didn't know it. In a panic, he brought the toaster down on Craig's head again. There was a metallic crunch-rattle as the heating elements inside it broke free.

Craig stopped moving.

Albert stood over him, sobbing for breath, the weighted tablecloth dangling from one hand. Then he took two long, shambling steps toward the escalator, bowed deeply again, and vomited on the floor.

## 13

Brian crossed himself as he thumbed back the black plastic shield which covered the screen of the 767's INS video-display terminal, half-expecting it to be smooth and blank. He looked at it closely ... and let out a deep sigh of relief.

### **LAST PROGRAM COMPLETE**

it informed him in cool blue-green letters, and below that:

### **NEW PROGRAM? Y N**

Brian typed Y, then:

### **REVERSE AP 29: LAX/LOGAN**

The screen went dark for a moment. Then:

### **INCLUDE DIVERSION IN REVERSE PROGRAM AP 299 Y N**

Brian typed Y.

### **COMPUTING REVERSE**

the screen informed him, and less than five seconds later:

### **PROGRAM COMPLETE**

"Captain Engle?"

He turned around. Bethany was standing in the cockpit doorway. She looked pale and haggard in the cabin lights.

"I'm a little busy right now, Bethany."

"Why aren't they back?"

"I can't say."

“I asked Bob—Mr. Jenkins—if he could see anyone moving inside the terminal, and he said he couldn’t. What if they’re all dead?”

“I’m sure they’re not. If it will make you feel better, why don’t you join him at the bottom of the ladder? I’ve got some more work to do here.” *At least I hope I do.*

“Are you scared?” she asked.

“Yes. I sure am.”

She smiled a little. “I’m sort of glad. It’s bad to be scared all by yourself—totally bogus. I’ll leave you alone now.”

“Thanks. I’m sure they’ll be out soon.”

She left. Brian turned back to the INS monitor and typed:

**ARE THERE PROBLEMS WITH THIS PROGRAM?**

He hit EXECUTE.

**NO PROBLEMS. THANK YOU FOR FLYING AMERICAN PRIDE.**

“You’re welcome, I’m sure,” Brian murmured, and wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

*Now, he thought, if only the fuel will burn.*

## 14

Bob heard footsteps on the ladder and turned quickly. It was only Bethany, descending slowly and carefully, but he still felt jumpy. The sound coming out of the east was gradually growing louder.

Closer.

“Hi, Bethany. May I borrow another of your cigarettes?”

She offered the depleted pack to him, then took one herself. She had tucked Albert’s book of experimental matches into the cellophane covering the pack, and when she tried one it lit easily.

“Any sign of them?”

“Well, it all depends on what you mean by ‘any sign,’ I guess,” Bob said cautiously. “I think I heard some shouting just before you came

down.” What he had heard actually sounded like screaming—*shrieking*, not to put too fine a point on it—but he saw no reason to tell the girl that. She looked as frightened as Bob felt, and he had an idea she’d taken a liking to Albert.

“I hope Dinah’s going to be all right,” she said, “but I don’t know. He cut her really bad.”

“Did you see the captain?”

Bethany nodded. “He sort of kicked me out. I guess he’s programming his instruments, or something.”

Bob Jenkins nodded soberly. “I hope so.”

Conversation lapsed. They both looked east. A new and even more ominous sound now underlay the crunching, chewing noise: a high, inanimate screaming. It was a strangely mechanical sound, one that made Bob think of an automatic transmission low on fluid.

“It’s a lot closer now, isn’t it?”

Bob nodded reluctantly. He drew on his cigarette and the glowing ember momentarily illuminated a pair of tired, terrified eyes.

“What do you suppose it is, Mr. Jenkins?”

He shook his head slowly. “Dear girl, I hope we never have to find out.”

## 15

Halfway down the escalator, Nick saw a bent-over figure standing in front of the useless bank of pay telephones. It was impossible to tell if it was Albert or Craig Toomy. The Englishman reached into his right front pocket, holding his left hand against it to prevent any jingling, and by touch selected a pair of quarters from his change. He closed his right hand into a fist and slipped the quarters between his fingers, creating a makeshift set of brass knuckles. Then he continued down to the lobby.

The figure by the telephones looked up as Nick approached. It was Albert. “Don’t step in the puke,” he said dully.

Nick dropped the quarters back into his pocket and hurried to where the boy was standing with his hands propped above his knees like an old man who has badly overestimated his capacity for exercise. He could smell the high, sour stench of vomit. That and the sweaty stink of fear coming off the boy were smells with which he was all too familiar. He knew them from the Falklands, and even more intimately from Northern Ireland. He put his left arm around the boy's shoulders and Albert straightened very slowly.

"Where are they, Ace?" Nick asked quietly. "Gaffney and Toomy—where are they?"

"Mr. Toomy's there." He pointed toward a crumpled shape on the floor. "Mr. Gaffney's in the Airport Services office. I think they're both dead. Mr. Toomy was in the Airport Services office. Behind the door, I guess. He killed Mr. Gaffney because Mr. Gaffney walked in first. If I'd walked in first, he would have killed me instead."

Albert swallowed hard.

"Then I killed Mr. Toomy. I had to. He came after me, see? He found another knife someplace and he came after me." He spoke in a tone which could have been mistaken for indifference, but Nick knew better. And it was not indifference he saw on the white blur of Albert's face.

"Can you get hold of yourself, Ace?" Nick asked.

"I don't know. I never k-k-killed anyone before, and—" Albert uttered a strangled, miserable sob.

"I know," Nick said. "It's a horrible thing, but it can be gotten over. I know. And you must get over it, Ace. We have miles to go before we sleep, and there's no time for therapy. The sound is louder."

He left Albert and went over to the crumpled form on the floor. Craig Toomy was lying on his side with one upraised arm partially obscuring his face. Nick rolled him onto his back, looked, whistled softly. Toomy was still alive—he could hear the harsh rasp of his breath—but Nick would have bet his bank account that the man was not shamming this time. His nose hadn't just been broken; it looked vaporized. His mouth was a bloody socket ringed with the shattered remains of his teeth. And the deep, troubled dent in the center of

Toomy's forehead suggested that Albert had done some creative retooling of the man's skull-plate.

"He did all this with a *toaster*?" Nick muttered. "Jesus and Mary, Tom, Dick, and Harry." He got up and raised his voice. "He's not dead, Ace."

Albert had bent over again when Nick left him. Now he straightened slowly and took a step toward him. "He's not?"

"Listen for yourself. Out for the count, but still in the game." *Not for long, though; not by the sound of him.* "Let's check on Mr. Gaffney—maybe he got off lucky, too. And what about the stretcher?"

"Huh?" Albert looked at Nick as though he had spoken in a foreign language.

"The stretcher," Nick repeated patiently as they walked toward the open Airport Services door.

"We found it," Albert said.

"Did you? Super!"

Albert stopped just inside the door. "Wait a minute," he muttered, then squatted and felt around for Don's lighter. He found it after a moment or two. It was still warm. He stood up again. "Mr. Gaffney's on the other side of the desk, I think."

They walked around, stepping over the tumbled stacks of paper and the IN/OUT basket. Albert held out the lighter and flicked the wheel. On the fifth try the wick caught and burned feebly for three or four seconds. It was enough. Nick had actually seen enough in the spark-flashes the lighter's wheel had struck, but he hadn't liked to say so to Albert. Don Gaffney lay sprawled on his back, eyes open, a look of terrible surprise still fixed on his face. He hadn't gotten off lucky after all.

"How was it that Toomy didn't get you as well?" Nick asked after a moment.

"I knew he was in here," Albert said. "Even before he stuck Mr. Gaffney, I knew." His voice was still dry and shaky, but he felt a little better. Now that he had actually faced poor Mr. Gaffney—looked him in the eye, so to speak—he felt a little better.

"Did you hear him?"

“No—I saw those. On the desk.” Albert pointed to the little heap of torn strips.

“Lucky you did.” Nick put his hand on Albert’s shoulder in the dark. “You deserve to be alive, mate. You earned the privilege. All right?”

“I’ll try,” Albert said.

“You do that, old son. It saves a lot of nightmares. You’re looking at a man who knows.”

Albert nodded.

“Keep it together, Ace. That’s all there is to it—just keep things together and you’ll be fine.”

“Mr. Hopewell?”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind not calling me that? I—” His voice clogged, and Albert cleared his throat violently. “I don’t think I like it anymore.”

## 16

They emerged from the dark cave which was Airport Services thirty seconds later, Nick carrying the folded stretcher by the handle. When they reached the bank of phones, Nick handed the stretcher to Albert, who accepted it wordlessly. The tablecloth lay on the floor about five feet away from Toomy, who was snoring now in great rhythmless snatches of air.

Time was short, time was very fucking short, but Nick had to see this. He *had* to.

He picked up the tablecloth and pulled the toaster out. One of the heating elements caught in a bread slot; the other tumbled out onto the floor. The timer-dial and the handle you used to push the bread down fell off. One corner of the toaster was crumpled inward. The left side was bashed into a deep circular dent.

*That’s the part that collided with Friend Toomy’s sniffer,* Nick thought. *Amazing.* He shook the toaster and listened to the loose rattle of broken parts inside.

“A toaster,” he marvelled. “I have friends, Albert—*professional* friends—who wouldn’t believe it. I hardly believe it myself. I mean ... a *toaster*.”

Albert had turned his head. “Throw it away,” he said hoarsely. “I don’t want to look at it.”

Nick did as the boy asked, then clapped him on the shoulder. “Take the stretcher upstairs. I’ll join you directly.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I want to see if there’s anything else we can use in that office.”

Albert looked at him for a moment, but he couldn’t make out Nick’s features in the dark. At last he said, “I don’t believe you.”

“Nor do you have to,” Nick said in an oddly gentle voice. “Go on, Ace ... Albert, I mean. I’ll join you soon. And don’t look back.”

Albert stared at him a moment longer, then began to trudge up the frozen escalator, his head down, the stretcher dangling like a suitcase from his right hand. He didn’t look back.

## 17

Nick waited until the boy had disappeared into the gloom. Then he walked back over to where Craig Toomy lay and squatted beside him. Toomy was still out, but his breathing seemed a little more regular. Nick supposed it was not impossible, given a week or two of constant-care treatment in hospital, that Toomy might recover. He had proved at least one thing: he had an awesomely hard head.

*Shame the brains underneath are so soft, mate*, Nick thought. He reached out, meaning to put one hand over Toomy’s mouth and the other over his nose—or what remained of it. It would take less than a minute, and they would not have to worry about Mr. Craig Toomy anymore. The others would have recoiled in horror at the act—would have called it cold-blooded murder—but Nick saw it as an insurance policy, no more and no less. Toomy had arisen once from what appeared to be total unconsciousness and now one of their number

was dead and another was badly, perhaps mortally, wounded. There was no sense taking the same chance again.

And there was something else. If he left Toomy alive, what, exactly, would he be leaving him alive *for*? A short, haunted existence in a dead world? A chance to breathe dying air under a moveless sky in which all weather patterns appeared to have ceased? An opportunity to meet whatever was approaching from the east ... approaching with a sound like that of a colony of giant, marauding ants?

No. Best to see him out of it. It would be painless, and that would have to be good enough.

"Better than the bastard deserves," Nick said, but still he hesitated.

He remembered the little girl looking up at him with her dark, unseeing eyes.

*Don't you kill him!* Not a plea; that had been a command. She had summoned up a little strength from some hidden last reserve in order to give him that command. *All I know is that we need him.*

*Why is she so bloody protective of him?*

He squatted a moment longer, looking into Craig Toomy's ruined face. And when Rudy Warwick spoke from the head of the escalator, he jumped as if it had been the devil himself.

"Mr. Hopewell? Nick? Are you coming?"

"In a jiffy!" he called back over his shoulder. He reached toward Toomy's face again and stopped again, remembering her dark eyes.

*We need him.*

Abruptly he stood up, leaving Craig Toomy to his tortured struggle for breath. "Coming now," he called, and ran lightly up the escalator.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ***REFUELLING. DAWN'S EARLY LIGHT. THE APPROACH OF THE LANGOLIERS. ANGEL OF THE MORNING. THE TIME-KEEPERS OF ETERNITY. TAKE-OFF.***

#### 1

Bethany had cast away her almost tasteless cigarette and was halfway up the ladder again when Bob Jenkins shouted: "I think they're coming out!"

She turned and ran back down the stairs. A series of dark blobs was emerging from the luggage bay and crawling along the conveyor belt. Bob and Bethany ran to meet them.

Dinah was strapped to the stretcher. Rudy had one end, Nick the other. They were walking on their knees, and Bethany could hear the bald man breathing in harsh, out-of-breath gasps.

"Let me help," she told him, and Rudy gave up his end of the stretcher willingly.

"Try not to jiggle her," Nick said, swinging his legs off the conveyor belt. "Albert, get on Bethany's end and help us take her up the stairs. We want this thing to stay as level as possible."

"How bad is she?" Bethany asked Albert.

"Not good," he said grimly. "Unconscious but still alive. That's all I know."

"Where are Gaffney and Toomy?" Bob asked as they crossed to the plane. He had to raise his voice slightly to be heard; the crunching sound was louder now, and that shrieking wounded-transmission undertone was becoming a dominant, maddening note.

“Gaffney’s dead and Toomy might as well be,” Nick said. “We’ll discuss it later, if you like. Right now there’s no time.” He halted at the foot of the stairs. “Mind you keep your end up, you two.”

They moved the stretcher slowly and carefully up the stairs, Nick walking backward and bent over the forward end, Albert and Bethany holding the stretcher up at forehead level and jostling hips on the narrow stairway at the rear. Bob, Rudy, and Laurel followed behind. Laurel had spoken only once since Albert and Nick had returned, to ask if Toomy was dead. When Nick told her he wasn’t, she had looked at him closely and then nodded her head with relief.

Brian was standing at the cockpit door when Nick reached the top of the ladder and eased his end of the stretcher inside.

“I want to put her in first class,” Nick said, “with this end of the stretcher raised so her head is up. Can I do that?”

“No problem. Secure the stretcher by looping a couple of seatbelts through the head-frame. Do you see where?”

“Yes.” And to Albert and Bethany: “Come on up. You’re doing fine.”

In the cabin lights, the blood smeared on Dinah’s cheeks and chin stood out starkly against her yellow-white skin. Her eyes were closed; her lids were a delicate shade of lavender. Under the belt (in which Nick had punched a new hole, high above the others), the makeshift compress was dark red. Brian could hear her breathing. It sounded like a straw dragging wind at the bottom of an almost empty glass.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” Brian asked in a low voice.

“Well, it’s her lung and not her heart, and she’s not filling up anywhere near as fast as I was afraid she might ... but it’s bad, yes.”

“Will she live until we get back?”

“How in hell should I know?” Nick shouted at him suddenly. “I’m a soldier, not a bloody sawbones!”

The other froze, looking at him with cautious eyes. Laurel felt her skin prickle again.

“I’m sorry,” Nick muttered. “Time travel plays the very devil with one’s nerves, doesn’t it? I’m very sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” Laurel said, and touched his arm. “We’re all under strain.”

He gave her a tired smile and touched her hair. “You’re a sweetheart, Laurel, and no mistake. Come on—let’s strap her in and see what we can do about getting the hell out of here.”

## 2

Five minutes later Dinah’s stretcher had been secured in an inclined position to a pair of first-class seats, her head up, her feet down. The rest of the passengers were gathered in a tight little knot around Brian in the first-class serving area.

“We need to refuel the plane,” Brian said. “I’m going to start the other engine now and pull over as close as I can to that 727-400 at the jetway.” He pointed to the Delta plane, which was just a gray lump in the dark. “Because our aircraft sits higher, I’ll be able to lay our right wing right over the Delta’s left wing. While I do that, four of you are going to bring over a hose cart—there’s one sitting by the other jetway. I saw it before it got dark.”

“Maybe we better wake Sleeping Beauty at the back of the plane and get him to lend a hand,” Bob said.

Brian thought it over briefly and then shook his head. “The last thing we need right now is another scared, disoriented passenger on our hands ... and one with a killer hangover to boot. And we won’t need him—two strong men can push a hose cart in a pinch. I’ve seen it done. Just check the transmission lever to make sure it’s in neutral. It wants to end up directly beneath the overlapping wings. Got it?”

They all nodded. Brian looked them over and decided that Rudy and Bethany were still too blown from wrestling the stretcher to be of much help. “Nick, Bob, and Albert. You push. Laurel, you steer. Okay?”

They nodded.

“Go on and do it, then. Bethany? Mr. Warwick? Go down with them. Pull the ladder away from the plane, and when I’ve got the

plane repositioned, place it next to the overlapping wings. The wings, not the door. Got it?”

They nodded. Looking around at them, Brian saw that their eyes looked clear and bright for the first time since they had landed. *Of course*, he thought. *They have something to do now. And so do I, thank God.*

### 3

As they approached the hose cart sitting off to the left of the unoccupied jetway, Laurel realized she could actually see it. “My God,” she said. “It’s coming daylight again already. How long has it been since it got dark?”

“Less than forty minutes, by my watch,” Bob said, “but I have a feeling that my watch doesn’t keep very accurate time when we’re outside the plane. I’ve also got a feeling time doesn’t matter much here, anyway.”

“What’s going to happen to Mr. Toomy?” Laurel asked.

They had reached the cart. It was a small vehicle with a tank on the back, an open-air cab, and thick black hoses coiled on either side. Nick put an arm around her waist and turned her toward him. For a moment she had the crazy idea that he meant to kiss her, and she felt her heart speed up.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen to him,” he said. “All I know is that when the chips were down, I chose to do what Dinah wanted. I left him lying unconscious on the floor. All right?”

“No,” she said in a slightly unsteady voice, “but I guess it will have to do.”

He smiled a little, nodded, and gave her waist a brief squeeze. “Would you like to go to dinner with me when and if we make it back to L.A.?”

“Yes,” she said at once. “That would be something to look forward to.”

He nodded again. "For me, too. But unless we can get this airplane refuelled, we're not going anywhere." He looked at the open cab of the hose cart. "Can you find neutral, do you think?"

Laurel eyed the stick-shift jutting up from the floor of the cab. "I'm afraid I only drive an automatic."

"I'll do it." Albert jumped into the cab, depressed the clutch, then peered at the diagram on the knob of the shift lever. Behind him, the 767's second engine whined into life and both engines began to throb harder as Brian powered up. The noise was very loud, but Laurel found she didn't mind it at all. It blotted out that other sound, at least temporarily. And she kept wanting to look at Nick. Had he actually invited her out to dinner? Already it seemed hard to believe.

Albert changed gears, then waggled the shift lever. "Got it," he said, and jumped down. "Up you go, Laurel. Once we get it rolling, you'll have to hang a hard right and bring it around in a circle."

"All right."

She looked back nervously as the three men lined themselves up along the rear of the hose cart with Nick in the middle.

"Ready, you lot?" he asked.

Albert and Bob nodded.

"Right, then—all together."

Bob had been braced to push as hard as he could, and damn the low back pain which had plagued him for the last ten years, but the hose cart rolled with absurd ease. Laurel hauled the stiff, balky steering wheel around with all her might. The yellow cart described a small circle on the gray tarmac and began to roll back toward the 767, which was trundling slowly into position on the righthand side of the parked Delta jet.

"The difference between the two aircraft is incredible," Bob said.

"Yes," Nick agreed. "You were right, Albert. We may have wandered away from the present, but in some strange way, that airplane is still a part of it."

"So are we," Albert said. "At least, so far."

The 767's turbines died, leaving only the steady low rumble of the APUs—Brian was now running all four of them. They were not loud enough to cover the sound in the east. Before, that sound had had a

kind of massive uniformity, but as it neared it was fragmenting; there seemed to be sounds within sounds, and the sum total began to seem horribly familiar.

*Animals at feeding time*, Laurel thought, and shivered. *That's what it sounds like—the sound of feeding animals, sent through an amplifier and blown up to grotesque proportions.*

She shivered violently and felt panic begin to nibble at her thoughts, an elemental force she could control no more than she could control whatever was making that sound.

“Maybe if we could see it, we could deal with it,” Bob said as they began to push the fuel cart again.

Albert glanced at him briefly and said, “I don't think so.”

## 4

Brian appeared in the forward door of the 767 and motioned Bethany and Rudy to roll the ladder over to him. When they did, he stepped onto the platform at the top and pointed to the overlapping wings. As they rolled him in that direction, he listened to the approaching noise and found himself remembering a movie he had seen on the late show a long time ago. In it, Charlton Heston had owned a big plantation in South America. The plantation had been attacked by a vast moving carpet of soldier ants, ants which ate everything in their path—trees, grass, buildings, cows, men. What had that movie been called? Brian couldn't remember. He only remembered that Charlton had kept trying increasingly desperate tricks to stop the ants, or at least delay them. Had he beaten them in the end? Brian couldn't remember, but a fragment of his dream suddenly recurred, disturbing in its lack of association to anything: an ominous red sign which read SHOOTING STARS ONLY.

“Hold it!” he shouted down to Rudy and Bethany.

They ceased pushing, and Brian carefully climbed down the ladder until his head was on a level with the underside of the Delta jet's

wing. Both the 767 and 727 were equipped with single-point fuelling ports in the left wing. He was now looking at a small square hatch with the words FUEL TANK ACCESS and CHECK SHUT-OFF VALVE BEFORE REFUELLING stencilled across it. And some wit had pasted a round yellow happy-face sticker to the fuel hatch. It was the final surreal touch.

Albert, Bob, and Nick had pushed the hose cart into position below him and were now looking up, their faces dirty gray circles in the brightening gloom. Brian leaned over and shouted down to Nick.

“There are two hoses, one on each side of the cart! I want the short one!”

Nick pulled it free and handed it up. Holding both the ladder and the nozzle of the hose with one hand, Brian leaned under the wing and opened the refuelling hatch. Inside was a male connector with a steel prong poking out like a finger. Brian leaned further out ... and slipped. He grabbed the railing of the ladder.

“Hold on, mate,” Nick said, mounting the ladder. “Help is on the way.” He stopped three rungs below Brian and seized his belt. “Do me a favor, all right?”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t fart.”

“I’ll try, but no promises.”

He leaned out again and looked down at the others. Rudy and Bethany had joined Bob and Albert below the wing. “Move away, unless you want a jet-fuel shower!” he called. “I can’t control the Delta’s shut-off valve, and it may leak!” As he waited for them to back away he thought, *Of course, it may not. For all I know, the tanks on this thing are as dry as a goddam bone.*

He leaned out again, using both hands now that Nick had him firmly anchored, and slammed the nozzle into the fuel port. There was a brief, spattering shower of jet-fuel—a very welcome shower, under the circumstances—and then a hard metallic click. Brian twisted the nozzle a quarter-turn to the right, locking it in place, and listened with satisfaction as jet-fuel ran down the hose to the cart, where a closed valve would dam its flow.

“Okay,” he sighed, pulling himself back to the ladder. “So far, so good.”

“What now, mate? How do we make that cart run? Do we jump-start it from the plane, or what?”

“I doubt if we could do that even if someone had remembered to bring the jumper cables,” Brian said. “Luckily, it doesn’t *have* to run. Essentially, the cart is just a gadget to filter and transfer fuel. I’m going to use the auxiliary power units on our plane to suck the fuel out of the 727 the way you’d use a straw to suck lemonade out of a glass.”

“How long is it going to take?”

“Under optimum conditions—which would mean pumping with ground power—we could load 2,000 pounds of fuel a minute. Doing it like this makes it harder to figure. I’ve never had to use the APUs to pump fuel before. At least an hour. Maybe two.”

Nick gazed anxiously eastward for a moment, and when he spoke again his voice was low. “Do me a favor, mate—don’t tell the others that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t think we *have* two hours. We may not even have one.”

## 5

Alone in first class, Dinah Catherine Bellman opened her eyes.

And *saw*.

“Craig,” she whispered.

## 6

*Craig.*

But he didn't want to hear his name again. When people called his name, something bad always happened. *Always.*

*Craig! Get up, Craig!*

No. He *wouldn't* get up. His head had become a vast chambered hive; pain roared and raved in each irregular room and crooked corridor. Bees had come. The bees had thought he was dead. They had invaded his head and turned his skull into a honeycomb. And now ... now ...

*They sense my thoughts and are trying to sting them to death,* he thought, and uttered a thick, agonized groan. His bloodstreaked hands opened and closed slowly on the industrial carpet which covered the lower-lobby floor. *Let me die, oh please just let me die.*

*Craig, you have to get up! Now!*

It was his father's voice, the one voice he had never been able to refuse or shut out. But he would refuse it now. He would shut it out now.

"Go away," he croaked. "I hate you. Go away."

Pain blared through his head in a golden shriek of trumpets. Clouds of bees, furious and stinging, flew from the bells as they blew.

*Oh let me die,* he thought. *Oh let me die. This is hell. I am in a hell of bees and big-band horns.*

*Get up, Craiggy-weggy. It's your birthday, and guess what? As soon as you get up, someone's going to hand you a beer and hit you over the head ... because THIS thud's for you!*

"No," he said. "No more hitting." His hands shuffled on the carpet. He made an effort to open his eyes, but a glue of drying blood had stuck them shut. "You're dead. Both of you are dead. You can't hit me, and you can't make me do things. Both of you are dead, and I want to be dead, too."

But he wasn't dead. Somewhere beyond these phantom voices he could hear the whine of jet engines ... and that other sound. The sound of the langoliers on the march. On the *run*.

*Craig, get up. You have to get up.*

He realized that it wasn't the voice of his father, or of his mother, either. That had only been his poor, wounded mind trying to fool

itself. This was a voice from ... from  
(above?)

some other place, some high bright place where pain was a myth and pressure was a dream.

*Craig, they've come to you—all the people you wanted to see. They left Boston and came here. That's how important you are to them. You can still do it, Craig. You can still pull the pin. There's still time to hand in your papers and fall out of your father's army ... if you're man enough to do it, that is.*

*If you're man enough to do it.*

"Man enough?" he croaked. "Man enough? Whoever you are, you've got to be shitting me."

He tried again to open his eyes. The tacky blood holding them shut gave a little but would not let go. He managed to work one hand up to his face. It brushed the remains of his nose and he gave voice to a low, tired scream of pain. Inside his head the trumpets blared and the bees swarmed. He waited until the worst of the pain had subsided, then poked out two fingers and used them to pull his own eyelids up.

That corona of light was still there. It made a vaguely evocative shape in the gloom.

Slowly, a little at a time, Craig raised his head.

And saw *her*.

*She* stood within the corona of light.

It was the little girl, but her dark glasses were gone and she was looking at him, and her eyes were kind.

*Come on, Craig. Get up. I know it's hard, but you have to get up—you have to. Because they are all here, they are all waiting ... but they won't wait forever. The langoliers will see to that.*

She was not standing on the floor, he saw. Her shoes appeared to float an inch or two above it, and the bright light was all around her. She was outlined in spectral radiance.

*Come, Craig. Get up.*

He started struggling to his feet. It was very hard. His sense of balance was almost gone, and it was hard to hold his head up—because, of course, it was full of angry honeybees. Twice he fell

back, but each time he began again, mesmerized and entranced by the glowing girl with her kind eyes and her promise of ultimate release.

*They are all waiting, Craig. For you.*

*They are waiting for you.*

## 7

Dinah lay on the stretcher, watching with her blind eyes as Craig Toomy got to one knee, fell over on his side, then began trying to rise once more. Her heart was suffused with a terrible stern pity for this hurt and broken man, this murdering fish that only wanted to explode. On his ruined, bloody face she saw a terrible mixture of emotions: fear, hope, and a kind of merciless determination.

*I'm sorry, Mr. Toomy, she thought. In spite of what you did, I'm sorry. But we need you.*

Then called to him again, called with her own dying consciousness:

*Get up, Craig! Hurry! It's almost too late!*

And she sensed that it was.

## 8

Once the longer of the two hoses was looped under the belly of the 767 and attached to its fuel port, Brian returned to the cockpit, cycled up the APUs, and went to work sucking the 727-400's fuel tanks dry. As he watched the LED readout on his right tank slowly climb toward 24,000 pounds, he waited tensely for the APUs to start chugging and lugging, trying to eat fuel which would not burn.

The right tank had reached the 8,000-pound mark when he heard the note of the small jet engines at the rear of the plane change—

they grew rough and labored.

“What’s happening, mate?” Nick asked. He was sitting in the co-pilot’s chair again. His hair was disarrayed, and there were wide streaks of grease and blood across his formerly natty button-down shirt.

“The APU engines are getting a taste of the 727’s fuel and they don’t like it,” Brian said. “I hope Albert’s magic works, Nick, but I don’t know.”

Just before the LED reached 9,000 pounds in the right tank, the first APU cut out. A red ENGINE SHUTDOWN light appeared on Brian’s board. He flicked the APU off.

“What can you do about it?” Nick asked, getting up and coming to look over Brian’s shoulder.

“Use the other three APUs to keep the pumps running and hope,” Brian said.

The second APU cut out thirty seconds later, and while Brian was moving his hand to shut it down, the third went. The cockpit lights went with it; now there was only the irregular chug of the hydraulic pumps and the lights on Brian’s board, which were flickering. The last APU was roaring choppily, cycling up and down, shaking the plane.

“I’m shutting down completely,” Brian said. He sounded harsh and strained to himself, a man who was way out of his depth and tiring fast in the undertow. “We’ll have to wait for the Delta’s fuel to join our plane’s time-stream, or time-frame, or whatever the fuck it is. We can’t go on like this. A strong power-surge before the last APU cuts out could wipe the INS clean. Maybe even fry it.”

But as Brian reached for the switch, the engine’s choppy note suddenly began to smooth out. He turned and stared at Nick unbelievably. Nick looked back, and a big, slow grin lit his face.

“We might have lucked out, mate.”

Brian raised his hands, crossed both sets of fingers, and shook them in the air. “I hope so,” he said, and swung back to the boards. He flicked the switches marked APU 1, 3, and 4. They kicked in smoothly. The cockpit lights flashed back on. The cabin bells binged. Nick whooped and clapped Brian on the back.

Bethany appeared in the doorway behind them. “What’s happening? Is everything all right?”

“I think.” Brian said without turning, “that we might just have a shot at this thing.”

## 9

Craig finally managed to stand upright. The glowing girl now stood with her feet just above the luggage conveyor belt. She looked at him with a supernatural sweetness and something else ... something he had longed for his whole life. What was it?

He groped for it, and at last it came to him.

It was compassion.

Compassion and understanding.

He looked around and saw that the darkness was draining away. That meant he had been out all night, didn’t it? He didn’t know. And it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that the glowing girl had brought *them* to *him*—*the* investment bankers, the bond specialists, the commission-brokers, and the stock-rollers. They were here, they would want an explanation of just what young Mr. Craiggy-Weggy Toomy-Woomy had been up to, and here was the ecstatic truth: *monkey-business!* That was what he had been up to—yards and yards of monkey-business—*miles* of monkey-business. And when he told them that ...

“They’ll have to let me go ... won’t they?”

Yes, she said. *But you have to hurry, Craig. You have to hurry before they decide you’re not coming and leave.*

Craig began to make his slow way forward. The girl’s feet did not move, but as he approached her she floated backward like a mirage, toward the rubber strips which hung between the luggage-retrieval area and the loading dock outside.

And ... oh, glorious: she was *smiling*.

They were all back on the plane now, all except Bob and Albert, who were sitting on the stairs and listening to the sound roll toward them in a slow, broken wave.

Laurel Stevenson was standing at the open forward door and looking at the terminal, still wondering what they were going to do about Mr. Toomy, when Bethany tugged the back of her blouse.

“Dinah is talking in her sleep, or something. I think she might be delirious. Can you come?”

Laurel came. Rudy Warwick was sitting across from Dinah, holding one of her hands and looking at her anxiously.

“I dunno,” he said worriedly. “I dunno, but I think she might be going.”

Laurel felt the girl’s forehead. It was dry and very hot. The bleeding had either slowed down or stopped entirely, but the girl’s respiration came in a series of pitiful whistling sounds. Blood was crusted around her mouth like strawberry sauce.

Laurel began, “I think—” and then Dinah said, quite clearly, “You have to hurry before they decide you’re not coming and leave.”

Laurel and Bethany exchanged puzzled, frightened glances.

“I think she’s dreaming about that guy Toomy,” Rudy told Laurel. “She said his name once.”

“Yes,” Dinah said. Her eyes were closed, but her head moved slightly and she appeared to listen. “Yes I will be,” she said. “If you want me to, I will. But hurry. I know it hurts, but you have to hurry.”

“She *is* delirious, isn’t she?” Bethany whispered.

“No,” Laurel said. “I don’t think so. I think she might be ... dreaming.”

But that was not what she thought at all. What she really thought was that Dinah might be

*(seeing)*

doing something else. She didn’t think she wanted to know what that something might be, although an idea whirled and danced far back in her mind. Laurel knew she could summon that idea if she

wanted to, but she didn't. Because something creepy was going on here, *extremely* creepy, and she could not escape the idea that it *did* have something to do with (*don't kill him ... we need him*)

Mr. Toomy.

"Leave her alone," she said in a dry, abrupt tone of voice. "Leave her alone and let her (*do what she has to do to him*) sleep."

"God, I hope we take off soon," Bethany said miserably, and Rudy put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

## 11

Craig reached the conveyor belt and fell onto it. A white sheet of agony ripped through his head, his neck, his chest. He tried to remember what had happened to him and couldn't. He had run down the stalled escalator, he had hidden in a little room, he had sat tearing strips of paper in the dark ... and that was where memory stopped.

He raised his head, hair hanging in his eyes, and looked at the glowing girl, who now sat cross-legged in front of the rubber strips, an inch off the conveyor belt. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life; how could he ever have thought she was one of *them*?

"Are you an angel?" he croaked.

Yes, the glowing girl replied, and Craig felt his pain overwhelmed with joy. His vision blurred and then tears—the first ones he had ever cried as an adult—began to run slowly down his cheeks. Suddenly he found himself remembering his mother's sweet, droning, drunken voice as she sang that old song.

"Are you an angel of the morning? Will you be my angel of the morning?"

*Yes—I will be. If you want me to, I will. But hurry. I know it hurts, Mr. Toomy, but you have to hurry.*

“Yes,” Craig sobbed, and began to crawl eagerly along the luggage conveyor belt toward her. Every movement sent fresh pain jig-jagging through him on irregular courses; blood dripped from his smashed nose and shattered mouth. Yet he still hurried as much as he could. Ahead of him, the little girl faded back through the hanging rubber strips, somehow not disturbing them at all as she went.

“Just touch my cheek before you leave me, baby,” Craig said. He hawked up a spongy mat of blood, spat it on the wall where it clung like a dead spider, and tried to crawl faster.

## 12

To the east of the airport, a large cracking, rending sound filled the freakish morning. Bob and Albert got to their feet, faces pallid and filled with dreadful questions.

“What was that?” Albert asked.

“I think it was a tree,” Bob replied, and licked his lips.

“But there’s no wind!”

“No,” Bob agreed. “There’s no wind.”

The noise had now become a moving barricade of splintered sound. Parts of it would seem to come into focus ... and then drop back again just before identification was possible. At one moment Albert could swear he heard something barking, and then the barks ... or yaps ... or whatever they were ... would be swallowed up by a brief sour humming sound like evil electricity. The only constants were the crunching and the steady drilling whine.

“What’s happening?” Bethany called shrilly from behind them.

“Noth—” Albert began, and then Bob seized his shoulder and pointed.

“*Look!*” he shouted. “*Look over there!*”

Far to the east of them, on the horizon, a series of power pylons marched north and south across a high wooded ridge. As Albert looked, one of the pylons tottered like a toy and then fell over, pulling

a snarl of power cables after it. A moment later another pylon went, and another, and another.

“That’s not all, either,” Albert said numbly. “Look at the trees. The trees over there are shaking like shrubs.”

But they were not just shaking. As Albert and the others looked, the trees began to fall over, to disappear.

*Crunch, smack, crunch, thud, BARK!*

*Crunch, smack, BARK!, thump, crunch.*

“We have to get out of here,” Bob said. He gripped Albert with both hands. His eyes were huge, avid with a kind of idiotic terror. The expression stood in sick, jagged contrast to his narrow, intelligent face. “I believe we have to get out of here *right now.*”

On the horizon, perhaps ten miles distant, the tall gantry of a radio tower trembled, rolled outward, and crashed down to disappear into the quaking trees. Now they could feel the very earth beginning to vibrate; it ran up the ladder and shook their feet in their shoes.

“Make it stop!” Bethany suddenly screamed from the doorway above them. She clapped her hands to her ears. “*Oh please make it STOP!*”

But the sound-wave rolled on toward them—the crunching, smacking, eating sound of the langoliers.

## 13

“I don’t like to tease, Brian, but how much longer?” Nick’s voice was taut. “There’s a river about four miles east of here—I saw it when we were coming down—and I reckon whatever’s coming is just now on the other side of it.”

Brian glanced at his fuel readouts. 24,000 pounds in the right wing; 16,000 pounds in the left. It was going faster now that he didn’t have to pump the Delta’s fuel overwing to the other side.

“Fifteen minutes,” he said. He could feel sweat standing out on his brow in big drops. “We’ve got to have more fuel, Nick, or we’ll come

down dead in the Mojave Desert. Another ten minutes to unhook, button up, and taxi out.”

“You can’t cut that? You’re sure you can’t cut that?”

Brian shook his head and turned back to his gauges.

## 14

Craig crawled slowly through the rubber strips, feeling them slide down his back like limp fingers. He emerged in the white, dead light of a new—and vastly shortened—day. The sound was terrible, overwhelming, the sound of an invading cannibal army. Even the sky seemed to shake with it, and for a moment fear froze him in place.

*Look*, his angel of the morning said, and pointed.

Craig looked ... and forgot his fear. Beyond the American Pride 767, in a triangle of dead grass bounded by two taxiways and a runway, there was a long mahogany boardroom table. It gleamed brightly in the listless light. At each place were a yellow legal pad, a pitcher of ice water, and a Waterford glass. Sitting around the table were two dozen men in sober bankers’ suits, and now they were all turning to look at him.

Suddenly they began to clap their hands. They stood and faced him, applauding his arrival. Craig felt a huge, grateful grin begin to stretch his face.

## 15

Dinah had been left alone in first class. Her breathing had become very labored now, and her voice was a strangled choke.

“Run to them, Craig! Quick! Quick!”

## 16

Craig tumbled off the conveyor, struck the concrete with a bone-rattling thump, and flailed to his feet. The pain no longer mattered. The angel had brought them! Of *course* she had brought them! Angels were like the ghosts in that story about Mr. Scrooge—they could do anything they wanted! The corona around her had begun to dim and she was fading out, but it didn't matter. She had brought his salvation: a net in which he was finally, blessedly caught.

*Run to them, Craig! Run around the plane! Run away from the plane! Run to them now!*

Craig began to run—a shambling stride that quickly became a crippled sprint. As he ran his head nodded up and down like a sunflower on a broken stalk. He ran toward humorless, unforgiving men who were his salvation, men who might have been fisher-folk standing in a boat beyond an unsuspected silver sky, retrieving their net to see what fabulous thing they had caught.

## 17

The LED readout for the left tank began to slow down when it reached 21,000 pounds, and by the time it topped 22,000 it had almost stopped. Brian understood what was happening and quickly flicked two switches, shutting down the hydraulic pumps. The 727-400 had given them what she had to give: a little over 46,000 pounds of jet-fuel. It would have to be enough.

“All right,” he said, standing up.

“All right what?” Nick asked, also standing.

“We're uncoupling and getting the fuck out of here.”

The approaching noise had reached deafening levels. Mixed into the crunching smacking sound and the transmission squeal were falling trees and the dull crump of collapsing buildings. Just before shutting the pumps down he had heard a number of crackling thuds

followed by a series of deep splashes. A bridge falling into the river Nick had seen, he imagined.

“Mr. Toomy!” Bethany screamed suddenly. “*It’s Mr. Toomy!*”

Nick beat Brian out the door and into first class, but they were both in time to see Craig go shambling and lurching across the taxiway. He ignored the plane completely. His destination appeared to be an empty triangle of grass bounded by a pair of crisscrossing taxiways.

“What’s he doing?” Rudy breathed.

“Never mind him,” Brian said. “We’re all out of time. Nick? Go down the ladder ahead of me. Hold me while I uncouple the hose.” Brian felt like a man standing naked on a beach as a tidal wave humps up on the horizon and rushes toward the shore.

Nick followed him down and laid hold of Brian’s belt again as Brian leaned out and twisted the nozzle of the hose, unlocking it. A moment later he yanked the hose free and dropped it to the cement, where the nozzle-ring clanged dully. Brian slammed the fuel-port door shut.

“Come on,” he said after Nick had pulled him back. His face was dirty gray. “Let’s get out of here.”

But Nick did not move. He was frozen in place, staring to the east. His skin had gone the color of paper. On his face was an expression of dreamlike horror. His upper lip trembled, and in that moment he looked like a dog that is too frightened to snarl.

Brian turned his head slowly in that direction, hearing the tendons in his neck creak like a rusty spring on an old screen door as he did so. He turned his head and watched as the langoliers finally entered stage left.

## 18

“So you see,” Craig said, approaching the empty chair at the head of the table and standing before the men seated around it, “the brokers with whom I did business were not only unscrupulous ; many of them

were actually CIA plants whose job it was to contact and fake out just such bankers as myself—men looking to fill up skinny portfolios in a hurry. As far as they are concerned, the end—keeping communism out of South America—justifies any available means.”

“What procedures did you follow to check these fellows out?” a fat man in an expensive blue suit asked. “Did you use a bond-insurance company, or does your bank retain a specific investigation firm in such cases?” Blue Suit’s round, jowly face was perfectly shaved; his cheeks glowed with either good health or forty years of Scotch and sodas; his eyes were merciless chips of blue ice. They were wonderful eyes; they were father-eyes.

Somewhere, far away from this boardroom two floors below the top of the Prudential Center, Craig could hear a hell of a racket going on. Road construction, he supposed. There was always road construction going on in Boston, and he suspected that most of it was unnecessary, that in most cases it was just the old, old story—the unscrupulous taking cheerful advantage of the unwary. It had nothing to do with him. Nothing whatever. His job was to deal with the man in the blue suit, and he couldn’t wait to get started.

“We’re waiting, Craig,” the president of his own banking institution said. Craig felt momentary surprise—Mr. Parker hadn’t been scheduled to attend this meeting—and then the feeling was overwhelmed by happiness.

*“No procedures at all!”* he screamed joyfully into their shocked faces. *“I just bought and bought and bought! I followed NO ... PROCEDURES ... AT ALL!”*

He was about to go on, to elaborate on this theme, to really *expound* on it, when a sound stopped him. *This* sound was not miles away; this sound was close, very close, perhaps in the boardroom itself.

A whickering chopping sound, like dry hungry teeth.

Suddenly Craig felt a deep need to tear some paper—any paper would do. He reached for the legal pad in front of his place at the table, but the pad was gone. So was the table. So were the bankers. So was *Boston*.

“Where *am* I?” he asked in a small, perplexed voice, and looked around. Suddenly he realized ... and suddenly he saw *them*.

The langoliers had come.

They had come for *him*.

Craig Toomy began to scream.

## 19

Brian could see them, but could not understand what it was he was seeing. In some strange way they seemed to defy seeing, and he sensed his frantic, overstressed mind trying to change the incoming information, to make the shapes which had begun to appear at the east end of Runway 21 into something it could understand.

At first there were only two shapes, one black, one a dark tomato red.

*Are they balls?* his mind asked doubtfully. *Could they be balls?*

Something actually seemed to *click* in the center of his head and they *were* balls, sort of like beachballs, but balls which rippled and contracted and then expanded again, as if he was seeing them through a heat-haze. They came bowling out of the high dead grass at the end of Runway 21, leaving cut swaths of blackness behind them. They were somehow cutting the grass—

*No*, his mind reluctantly denied. *They are not just cutting the grass, and you know it. They are cutting a lot more than the grass.*

What they left behind were narrow lines of perfect blackness. And now, as they raced playfully down the white concrete at the end of the runway, they were *still* leaving narrow dark tracks behind. They glistened like tar.

*No*, his mind reluctantly denied. *Not tar. You know what that blackness is. It's nothing. Nothing at all. They are eating a lot more than the surface of the runway.*

There was something malignantly joyful about their behavior. They crisscrossed each other's paths, leaving a wavery black X on the

outer taxiway. They bounced high in the air, did an exuberant, crisscrossing maneuver, and then raced straight for the plane.

As they did, Brian screamed and Nick screamed beside him. *Faces* lurked below the surfaces of the racing balls—monstrous, alien faces. They shimmered and twitched and wavered like faces made of glowing swamp-gas. The eyes were only rudimentary indentations, but the mouths were huge: semicircular caves lined with gnashing, blurring teeth.

They ate as they came, rolling up narrow strips of the world.

A Texaco fuel truck was parked on the outer taxiway. The langoliers pounced upon it, high-speed teeth whirring and crunching and bulging out of their blurred bodies. They went through it without pause. One of them burrowed a path directly through the rear tires, and for a moment, before the tires collapsed, Brian could see the shape it had cut—a shape like a cartoon mouse-hole in a cartoon baseboard.

The other leaped high, disappeared for a moment behind the Texaco truck's boxy tank, and then blasted straight through, leaving a metal-ringed hole from which av-gas sprayed in a dull amber flood. They struck the ground, bounced as if on springs, crisscrossed again, and raced on toward the airplane. Reality peeled away in narrow strips beneath them, peeled away wherever and whatever they touched, and as they neared, Brian realized that they were unzipping more than the world—they were opening all the depths of forever.

They reached the edge of the tarmac and paused. They jittered uncertainly in place for a moment, looking like the bouncing balls that hopped over the words in old movie-house sing-alongs.

Then they turned and zipped off in a new direction.

Zipped off in the direction of Craig Toomy, who stood watching them and screaming into the white day.

With a huge effort, Brian snapped the paralysis which held him. He elbowed Nick, who was still frozen below him. "Come on!" Nick didn't move and Brian drove his elbow back harder this time, connecting solidly with Nick's forehead. "Come on, I said! Move your ass! *We're getting out of here!*"

Now more black and red balls were appearing at the edge of the airport. They bounced, danced, circled ... and then raced toward them.

## 20

*You can't get away from them, his father had said, because of their legs. Their fast little legs.*

Craig tried, nevertheless.

He turned and ran for the terminal, casting horrified, grimacing looks behind him as he did. His shoes rattled on the pavement. He ignored the American Pride 767, which was now cycling up again, and ran for the luggage area instead.

*No, Craig, his father said. You may THINK you're running, but you're not. You know what you're really doing—you're SCAMPERING!*

Behind him the two ball-shapes sped up, closing the gap with effortless, happy speed. They crisscrossed twice, just a pair of daffy showoffs in a dead world, leaving spiky lines of blackness behind them. They rolled after Craig about seven inches apart, creating what looked like negative ski-tracks behind their weird, shimmering bodies. They caught him twenty feet from the luggage conveyor belt and chewed off his feet in a millisecond. At one moment his briskly scampering feet were there. At the next, Craig was three inches shorter; his feet, along with his expensive Bally loafers, had simply ceased to exist. There was no blood; the wounds were cauterized instantly in the langoliers' scorching passage.

Craig didn't know his feet had ceased to exist. He scampered on the stumps of his ankles, and as the first pain began to sizzle up his legs, the langoliers banked in a tight turn and came back, rolling up the pavement side by side. Their trails crossed twice this time, creating a crescent of cement bordered in black, like a depiction of the moon in a child's coloring book. Only this crescent began to *sink*,

not into the earth—for there appeared to be no earth beneath the surface—but into nowhere at all.

This time the langoliers bounced upward in perfect tandem and clipped Craig off at the knees. He came down, still trying to run, and then fell sprawling, waving his stumps. His scampering days were over.

*“No!” he screamed. “No, Daddy! No! I’ll be good! Please make them go away! I’ll be good, I SWEAR I’LL BE GOOD FROM NOW ON IF YOU JUST MAKE THEM GO AW—”*

Then they rushed at him again, gibbering yammering buzzing whining, and he saw the frozen machine blur of their gnashing teeth and felt the hot bellows of their frantic, blind vitality in the half-instant before they began to cut him apart in random chunks.

His last thought was: *How can their little legs be fast? They have no le*

## 21

Scores of the black things had now appeared, and Laurel understood that soon there would be hundreds, thousands, millions, billions. Even with the jet engines screaming through the open forward door as Brian pulled the 767 away from the ladder and the wing of the Delta jet, she could hear their yammering, inhuman cry.

Great looping coils of blackness crisscrossed the end of Runway 21—and then the tracks narrowed toward the terminal, converging as the balls making them rushed toward Craig Toomy.

*I guess they don’t get live meat very often,* she thought, and suddenly felt like vomiting.

Nick Hopewell slammed the forward door after one final, unbelieving glance and dogged it shut. He began to stagger back down the aisle, swaying from side to side like a drunk as he came. His eyes seemed to fill his whole face. Blood streamed down his chin; he had bitten his lower lip deeply. He put his arms around

Laurel and buried his burning face in the hollow where her neck met her shoulder. She put her arms around him and held him tight.

## 22

In the cockpit, Brian powered up as fast as he dared, and sent the 767 charging along the taxiway at a suicidal rate of speed. The eastern edge of the airport was now black with the invading balls; the end of Runway 21 had completely disappeared and the world beyond it was going. In that direction the white, unmoving sky now arched down over a world of scrawled black lines and fallen trees.

As the plane neared the end of the taxiway, Brian grabbed the microphone and shouted: "Belt in! Belt in! If you're not belted in, hold on!"

He slowed marginally, then slewed the 767 onto Runway 33. As he did so he saw something which made his mind cringe and wail: huge sections of the world which lay to the east of the runway, huge irregular pieces of *reality itself*, were falling into the ground like freight elevators, leaving big senseless chunks of emptiness behind.

*They are eating the world*, he thought. *My God, my dear God, they are eating the world.*

Then the entire airfield was turning in front of him and Flight 29 was pointed west again, with Runway 33 lying open and long and deserted before it.

## 23

Overhead compartments burst open when the 767 swerved onto the runway, spraying carry-on luggage across the main cabin in a deadly hail. Bethany, who hadn't had time to fasten her seatbelt, was hurled into Albert Kaussner's lap. Albert noticed neither his lapful of warm

girl nor the attaché case that caromed off the curved wall three feet in front of his nose. He saw only the dark, speeding shapes rushing across Runway 21 to the left of them, and the glistening dark tracks they left behind. These tracks converged in a giant well of blackness where the luggage-unloading area had been.

*They are being drawn to Mr. Toomy, he thought, or to where Mr. Toomy was. If he hadn't come out of the terminal, they would have chosen the airplane instead. They would have eaten it—and us inside it—from the wheels up.*

Behind him, Bob Jenkins spoke in a trembling, awed voice. “Now we know, don't we?”

“*What?*” Laurel screamed in an odd, breathless voice she did not recognize as her own. A duffel-bag landed in her lap; Nick raised his head, let go of her, and batted it absently into the aisle. “*What do we know?*”

“Why, what happens to today when it becomes yesterday, what happens to the present when it becomes the past. It waits—dead and empty and deserted. It waits for *them*. It waits for the time-keepers of eternity, always running along behind, cleaning up the mess in the most efficient way possible ... by eating it.”

“Mr. Toomy knew about them,” Dinah said in a clear, dreaming voice. “Mr. Toomy says they are the langoliers.” Then the jet engines cycled up to full power and the plane charged down Runway 33.

## 24

Brian saw two of the balls zip across the runway ahead of him, peeling back the surface of reality in a pair of parallel tracks which gleamed like polished ebony. It was too late to stop. The 767 shuddered like a dog with a chill as it raced over the empty places, but he was able to hold it on the runway. He shoved his throttles forward, burying them, and watched his ground-speed indicator rise toward the commit point.

Even now he could hear those manic chewing, gobbling sounds ... although he did not know if they were in his ears or only his reeling mind. And did not care.

## 25

Leaning over Laurel to look out the window, Nick saw the Bangor International terminal sliced, diced, chopped, and channelled. It tottered in its various jigsaw pieces and then began to tumble into loony chasms of darkness.

Bethany Simms screamed. A black track was speeding along next to the 767, chewing up the edge of the runway. Suddenly it jagged to the right and disappeared underneath the plane.

There was another terrific bump.

“Did it get us?” Nick shouted. “*Did it get us?*”

No one answered him. Their pale, terrified faces stared out the windows and no one answered him. Trees rushed by in a gray-green blur. In the cockpit, Brian sat tensely forward in his seat, waiting for one of those balls to bounce up in front of the cockpit window and bullet through. None did.

On his board, the last red lights turned green. Brian hauled back on the yoke and the 767 was airborne again.

## 26

In the main cabin, a black-bearded man with bloodshot eyes staggered forward, blinking owlshly at his fellow travellers. “Are we almost in Boston yet?” he inquired at large. “I hope so, because I want to go back to bed. I’ve got one *bastard* of a headache.”

## CHAPTER NINE

### ***GOODBYE TO BANGOR. HEADING WEST THROUGH DAYS AND NIGHTS. SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF OTHERS. THE ENDLESS GULF. THE RIP. THE WARNING. BRIAN'S DECISION. THE LANDING. SHOOTING STARS ONLY.***

#### 1

The plane banked heavily east, throwing the man with the black beard into a row of empty seats three-quarters of the way up the main cabin. He looked around at all the other empty seats with a wide, frightened gaze, and squeezed his eyes shut. "Jesus," he muttered. "DTs. Fucking DTs. This is the worst they've ever been." He looked around fearfully. "The bugs come next . . . where's the motherfuckin bugs?"

*No bugs, Albert thought, but wait till you see the balls. You're going to love those.*

"Buckle yourself in, mate," Nick said, "and shut u—"

He broke off, staring down incredulously at the airport ... or where the airport had been. The main buildings were gone, and the National Guard base at the west end was going. Flight 29 overflew a growing abyss of darkness, an eternal cistern that seemed to have no end.

"Oh dear Jesus, Nick," Laurel said unsteadily, and suddenly put her hands over her eyes.

As they overflowed Runway 33 at 1,500 feet, Nick saw sixty or a hundred parallel lines racing up the concrete, cutting the runway into long strips that sank into emptiness. The strips reminded him of Craig Toomy:

*Rii-ip.*

On the other side of the aisle, Bethany pulled down the windowshade beside Albert's seat with a bang.

"Don't you dare open that!" she told him in a scolding, hysterical voice.

"Don't worry," Albert said, and suddenly remembered that he had left his violin down there. Well . . . it was undoubtedly gone now. He abruptly put his hands over his own face.

## 2

Before Brian began to turn west again, he saw what lay east of Bangor. It was nothing. Nothing at all. A titanic river of blackness lay in a still sweep from horizon to horizon under the white dome of the sky. The trees were gone, the city was gone, the earth itself was gone.

*This is what it must be like to fly in outer space*, he thought, and he felt his rationality slip a cog, as it had on the trip east. He held onto himself desperately and made himself concentrate on flying the plane.

He brought them up quickly, wanting to be in the clouds, wanting that hellish vision to be blotted out. Then Flight 29 was pointed west again. In the moments before they entered the clouds, he saw the hills and woods and lakes which stretched to the west of the city, saw them being cut ruthlessly apart by thousands of black spiderweb lines. He saw huge swatches of reality go sliding soundlessly into the growing mouth of the abyss, and Brian did something he had never done before while in the cockpit of an airplane.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again they were in the clouds.

### 3

There was almost no turbulence this time; as Bob Jenkins had suggested, the weather patterns appeared to be running down like an old clock. Ten minutes after entering the clouds, Flight 29 emerged into the bright-blue world which began at 18,000 feet. The remaining passengers looked around at each other nervously, then at the speakers as Brian came on the intercom.

“We’re up,” he said simply. “You all know what happens now: we go back exactly the way we came, and hope that whatever doorway we came through is still there. If it is, we’ll try going through.”

He paused for a moment, then resumed.

“Our return flight is going to take somewhere between four and a half and six hours. I’d like to be more exact, but I can’t. Under ordinary circumstances, the flight west usually takes longer than the flight east, because of prevailing wind conditions, but so far as I can tell from my cockpit instruments, there is no wind.” Brian paused for a moment and then added, “There’s nothing moving up here but us.” For a moment the intercom stayed on, as if Brian meant to add something else, and then it clicked off.

### 4

“What in God’s name is going on here?” the man with the black beard asked shakily.

Albert looked at him for a moment and then said, “I don’t think you want to know.”

“Am I in the hospital again?” The man with the black beard blinked at Albert fearfully, and Albert felt sudden sympathy for him.

“Well, why don’t you believe you are, if it will help?”

The man with the black beard continued to stare at him for a moment in dreadful fascination and then announced, “I’m going back to sleep. Right now.” He reclined his seat and closed his eyes. In less than a minute his chest was moving up and down with deep regularity and he was snoring under his breath.

Albert envied him.

## 5

Nick gave Laurel a brief hug, then unbuckled his seatbelt and stood up. “I’m going forward,” he said. “Want to come?”

Laurel shook her head and pointed across the aisle at Dinah. “I’ll stay with her.”

“There’s nothing you can do, you know,” Nick said. “It’s in God’s hands now, I’m afraid.”

“I do know that,” she said, “but I want to stay.”

“All right, Laurel.” He brushed at her hair gently with the palm of his hand. “It’s such a pretty name. You deserve it.”

She glanced up at him and smiled. “Thank you.”

“We have a dinner date—you haven’t forgotten, have you?”

“No,” she said, still smiling. “I haven’t and I won’t.”

He bent down and brushed a kiss lightly across her mouth. “Good,” he said. “Neither will I.”

He went forward and she pressed her fingers lightly against her mouth, as if to hold his kiss there, where it belonged. Dinner with Nick Hopewett—a dark, mysterious stranger. Maybe with candles and a good bottle of wine. More kisses afterward—real kisses. It all seemed like something which might happen in one of the Harlequin romances she sometimes read. So what? They were pleasant

stories, full of sweet and harmless dreams. It didn't hurt to dream a little, did it?

Of course not. But why did she feel the dream was so unlikely to come true?

She unbuckled her own seatbelt, crossed the aisle, and put her hand on the girl's forehead. The hectic heat she had felt before was gone; Dinah's skin was now waxy-cool.

*I think she's going*, Rudy had said shortly before they started their headlong take-off charge. Now the words recurred to Laurel and rang in her head with sickening validity. Dinah was taking air in shallow sips, her chest barely rising and falling beneath the strap which cinched the tablecloth pad tight over her wound.

Laurel brushed the girl's hair off her forehead with infinite tenderness and thought of that strange moment in the restaurant, when Dinah had reached out and grasped the cuff of Nick's jeans. *Don't you kill him . . . we need him.*

*Did you save us, Dinah? Did you do something to Mr. Toomy that saved us? Did you make him somehow trade his life for ours?*

She thought that perhaps something like that had happened ... and reflected that, if it was true, this little girl, blind and badly wounded, had made a dreadful decision inside her darkness.

She leaned forward and kissed each of Dinah's cool, closed lids. "Hold on," she whispered. "Please hold on, Dinah."

## 6

Bethany turned to Albert, grasped both of his hands in hers, and asked: "What happens if the fuel goes bad?"

Albert looked at her seriously and kindly. "You know the answer to that, Bethany."

"You can call me Beth, if you want."

"Okay."

She fumbled out her cigarettes, looked up at the NO SMOKING light, and put them away again. "Yeah," she said. "I know. We crash. End of story. And do you know what?"

He shook his head, smiling a little.

"If we can't find that hole again, I hope Captain Engle won't even try to land the plane. I hope he just picks out a nice high mountain and crashes us into the top of it. Did you see what happened to that crazy guy? I don't want that to happen to me."

She shuddered, and Albert put an arm around her. She looked up at him frankly. "Would you like to kiss me?"

"Yes," Albert said.

"Well, you better go ahead, then. The later it gets, the later it gets."

Albert went ahead. It was only the third time in his life that the fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi had kissed a girl, and it was great. He could spend the whole trip back in a lip-lock with this girl and never worry about a thing.

"Thank you," she said, and put her head on his shoulder. "I needed that."

"Well, if you need it again, just ask," Albert said.

She looked up at him, amused. "Do you *need* me to ask, Albert?"

"I reckon not," drawled The Arizona Jew, and went back to work.

## 7

Nick had stopped on his way to the cockpit to speak to Bob Jenkins—an extremely nasty idea had occurred to him, and he wanted to ask the writer about it.

"Do you think there could be any of those things up here?"

Bob thought it over for a moment. "Judging from what we saw back at Bangor, I would think not. But it's hard to tell, isn't it? In a thing like this, all bets are off."

"Yes. I suppose so. All bets are off." Nick thought this over for a moment. "What about this time-rip of yours? Would you like to give

odds on us finding it again?”

Bob Jenkins slowly shook his head.

Rudy Warwick spoke up from behind them, startling them both. “You didn’t ask me, but I’ll give you my opinion just the same. I put them at one in a thousand.”

Nick thought this over. After a moment a rare, radiant smile burst across his face. “Not bad odds at all,” he said. “Not when you consider the alternative.”

## 8

Less than forty minutes later, the blue sky through which Flight 29 moved began to deepen in color. It cycled slowly to indigo, and then to deep purple. Sitting in the cockpit, monitoring his instruments and wishing for a cup of coffee, Brian thought of an old song: *When the deep purple falls . . . over sleepy garden walls* ...

No garden walls up here, but he could see the first ice-chip stars gleaming in the firmament. There was something reassuring and calming about the old constellations appearing, one by one, in their old places. He did not know how they could be the same when so many other things were so badly out of joint, but he was very glad they were.

“It’s going faster, isn’t it?” Nick said from behind him.

Brian turned in his seat to face him. “Yes. It is. After awhile the ‘days’ and ‘nights’ will be passing as fast as a camera shutter can click, I think.”

Nick sighed. “And now we do the hardest thing of all, don’t we? We wait to see what happens. And pray a little bit, I suppose.”

“It couldn’t hurt.” Brian took a long, measuring look at Nick Hopewell. “I was on my way to Boston because my ex-wife died in a stupid fire. Dinah was going because a bunch of doctors promised her a new pair of eyes. Bob was going to a convention, Albert to

music school, Laurel on vacation. Why were you going to Boston, Nick? 'Fess up. The hour groweth late."

Nick looked at him thoughtfully for a long time and then laughed. "Well, why not?" he asked, but Brian was not so foolish as to believe this question was directed at him. "What does a Most Secret classification mean when you've just seen a bunch of killer fuzzballs rolling up the world like an old rug?"

He laughed again.

"The United States hasn't exactly cornered the market on dirty tricks and covert operations," he told Brian. "We Limeys have forgotten more nasty mischief than you johnnies ever knew. We've cut capers in India, South Africa, China, and the part of Palestine which became Israel. We certainly got into a pissing contest with the wrong fellows that time, didn't we? Nevertheless, we British are great believers in cloak and dagger, and the fabled MI5 isn't where it ends but only where it begins. I spent eighteen years in the armed services, Brian—the last five of them in Special Operations. Since then I've done various odd jobs, some innocuous, some fabulously nasty."

It was full dark outside now, the stars gleaming like spangles on a woman's formal evening gown.

"I was in Los Angeles—on vacation, actually—when I was contacted and told to fly to Boston. Extremely short notice, this was, and after four days spent backpacking in the San Gabriels, I was falling-down tired. That's why I happened to be sound asleep when Mr. Jenkins's Event happened.

"There's a man in Boston, you see . . . or was . . . or will be (time-travel plays hell on the old verb tenses, doesn't it?) . . . who is a politician of some note. The sort of fellow who moves and shakes with great vigor behind the scenes. This man—I'll call him Mr. O'Banion, for the sake of conversation—is very rich, Brian, and he is an enthusiastic supporter of the Irish Republican Army. He has channelled millions of dollars into what some like to call Boston's favorite charity, and there is a good deal of blood on his hands. Not just British soldiers but children in schoolyards, women in laundrettes, and babies blown out of their prams in pieces. He is an

idealist of the most dangerous sort: one who never has to view the carnage at first hand, one who has never had to look at a severed leg lying in the gutter and been forced to reconsider his actions in light of that experience.”

“You were supposed to kill this man O’Banion?”

“Not unless I had to,” Nick said calmly. “He’s very wealthy, but that’s not the only problem. He’s the total politician, you see, and he’s got more fingers than the one he uses to stir the pot in Ireland. He has a great many powerful American friends, and some of his friends are our friends . . . that’s the nature of politics; a cat’s cradle woven by men who for the most part belong in rooms with rubber walls. Killing Mr. O’Banion would be a great political risk. But he keeps a little bit of fluff on the side. *She* was the one I was supposed to kill.”

“As a warning,” Brian said in a low, fascinated voice.

“Yes. As a warning.”

Almost a full minute passed as the two men sat in the cockpit, looking at each other. The only sound was the sleepy drone of the jet engines. Brian’s eyes were shocked and somehow very young. Nick only looked weary.

“If we get out of this,” Brian said at last, “if we get back, will you carry through with it?”

Nick shook his head. He did this slowly, but with great finality. “I believe I’ve had what the Adventist blokes like to call a soul conversion, old mate of mine. No more midnight creeps or extreme-prejudice jobs for Mrs. Hopewell’s boy Nicholas. If we get out of this—a proposition I find rather shaky just now—I believe I’ll retire.”

“And do what?”

Nick looked at him thoughtfully for a moment or two and then said, “Well . . . I suppose I could take flying lessons.”

Brian burst out laughing. After a moment, Mrs. Hopewell’s boy Nicholas joined him.

Thirty-five minutes later, daylight began to seep back into the main cabin of Flight 29. Three minutes later it might have been mid-morning; fifteen minutes after that it might have been noon.

Laurel looked around and saw that Dinah's sightless eyes were open.

Yet were they *entirely* sightless? There was something in them, something just beyond definition, which made Laurel wonder. She felt a sense of unknown awe creep into her, a feeling which almost touched upon fear.

She reached out and gently grasped one of Dinah's hands. "Don't try to talk," she said quietly. "If you're awake, Dinah, don't try to talk—just listen. We're in the air. We're going back, and you're going to be all right—I promise you that."

Dinah's hand tightened on hers, and after a moment Laurel realized the little girl was tugging her forward. She leaned over the secured stretcher. Dinah spoke in a tiny voice that seemed to Laurel a perfect scale model of her former voice.

"Don't worry about me, Laurel. I got . . . what I wanted."

"Dinah, you shouldn't—"

The unseeing brown eyes moved toward the sound of Laurel's voice. A little smile touched Dinah's bloody mouth. "I saw," that tiny voice, frail as a glass reed, told her. "I saw through Mr. Toomy's eyes. At the beginning, and then again at the end. It was better at the end. At the start, everything looked mean and nasty to him. It was better at the end."

Laurel looked at her with helpless wonder.

The girl's hand let go of Laurel's and rose waveringly to touch her cheek. "He wasn't such a bad guy, you know." She coughed. Small flecks of blood flew from her mouth.

"Please, Dinah," Laurel said. She had a sudden sensation that she could almost see through the little blind girl, and this brought a feeling of stifling, directionless panic. "Please don't try to talk anymore."

Dinah smiled. "I saw *you*," she said. "You are beautiful, Laurel. *Everything* was beautiful . . . even the things that were dead. It was so wonderful to . . . you know . . . just to see."

She drew in one of her tiny sips of air, let it out, and simply didn't take the next one. Her sightless eyes now seemed to be looking far beyond Laurel Stevenson.

"Please breathe, Dinah," Laurel said. She took the girl's hands in hers and began to kiss them repeatedly, as if she could kiss life back into that which was now beyond it. It was not fair for Dinah to die after she had saved them all; no God could demand such a sacrifice, not even for people who had somehow stepped outside of time itself. "Please breathe, please, please, please breathe."

But Dinah did not breathe. After a long time, Laurel returned the girl's hands to her lap and looked fixedly into her pale, still face. Laurel waited for her own eyes to fill up with tears, but no tears came. Yet her heart ached with fierce sorrow and her mind beat with its own deep and outraged protest: *Oh, no! Oh, not fair! This is not fair! Take it back, God! Take it back, damn you, take it back, you just take it BACK!*

But God did not take it back. The jet engines throbbed steadily, the sun shone on the bloody sleeve of Dinah's good travelling dress in a bright oblong, and God did not take it back. Laurel looked across the aisle and saw Albert and Bethany kissing. Albert was touching one of the girl's breasts through her tee-shirt, lightly, delicately, almost religiously. They seemed to make a ritual shape, a symbolic representation of life and that stubborn, intangible spark which carries life on in the face of the most dreadful reversals and ludicrous turns of fate. Laurel looked hopefully from them to Dinah . . . and God had not taken it back.

God had not taken it back.

Laurel kissed the still slope of Dinah's cheek and then raised her hand to the little girl's face. Her fingers stopped only an inch from her eyelids.

*I saw through Mr. Toomy's eyes. Everything was beautiful ... even the things that were dead. It was so wonderful to see.*

"Yes," Laurel said. "I can live with that."

She left Dinah's eyes open.

American Pride 29 flew west through the days and nights, going from light to darkness and light to darkness as if flying through a great, lazily shifting parade of fat clouds. Each cycle came slightly faster than the one before.

A little over three hours into the flight, the clouds below them ceased, and over exactly the same spot where they had begun on the flight east. Brian was willing to bet the front had not moved so much as a single foot. The Great Plains lay below them in a silent roan-colored expanse of land.

“No sign of them over here,” Rudy Warwick said. He did not have to specify what he was talking about.

“No,” Bob Jenkins agreed. “We seem to have outrun them, either in space or in time.”

“Or in both,” Albert put in.

“Yes—or both.”

But they had not. As Flight 29 crossed the Rockies, they began to see the black lines below them again, thin as threads from this height. They shot up and down the rough, slabbed slopes and drew not-quite-meaningless patterns in the blue-gray carpet of trees. Nick stood at the forward door, looking out of the bullet porthole set into it. This porthole had a queer magnifying effect, and he soon discovered he could see better than he really wanted to. As he watched, two of the black lines split, raced around a jagged, snow-tipped peak, met on the far side, crossed, and raced down the other slope in diverging directions. Behind them the entire top of the mountain fell into itself, leaving something which looked like a volcano with a vast dead caldera at its truncated top.

“Jumping Jiminy Jesus,” Nick muttered, and passed a quivering hand over his brow.

As they crossed the Western Slope toward Utah, the dark began to come down again. The setting sun threw an orange-red glare over a fragmented hellscape that none of them could look at for long; one by one, they followed Bethany’s example and pulled their

window shades. Nick went back to his seat on unsteady legs and dropped his forehead into one cold, clutching hand. After a moment or two he turned toward Laurel and she took him wordlessly in her arms.

Brian was forced to look at it. There were no shades in the cockpit.

Western Colorado and eastern Utah fell into the pit of eternity piece by jagged piece below him and ahead of him. Mountains, buttes, mesas, and cols one by one ceased to exist as the crisscrossing langoliers cut them adrift from the rotting fabric of this dead past, cut them loose and sent them tumbling into sunless endless gulfs of forever. There was no sound up here, and somehow that was the most horrible thing of all. The land below them disappeared as silently as dust-motes.

Then darkness came like an act of mercy and for a little while he could concentrate on the stars. He clung to them with the fierceness of panic, the only real things left in this horrible world: Orion the hunter; Pegasus, the great shimmering horse of midnight; Cassiopeia in her starry chair.

## 11

Half an hour later the sun rose again, and Brian felt his sanity give a deep shudder and slide closer to the edge of its own abyss. The world below was gone; utterly and finally gone. The deepening blue sky was a dome over a cyclopean ocean of deepest, purest ebony.

The world had been torn from beneath Flight 29.

Bethany's thought had also crossed Brian's mind; if push came to shove, if worse came to worst, he had thought, he could put the 767 into a dive and crash them into a mountain, ending it for good and all. But now there were no mountains to crash into.

Now there was no *earth* to crash into.

*What will happen to us if we can't find the rip again? he wondered. What will happen if we run out of fuel? Don't try to tell me we'll crash,*

*because I simply don't believe it—you can't crash into nothing. I think we'll simply fall . . . and fall . . . and fall. For how long? And how far? How far can you fall into nothing?*

*Don't think about it.*

But how, exactly, did one do that? How did one refuse to think about nothing?

He turned deliberately back to his sheet of calculations. He worked on them, referring frequently to the INS readout, until the light had begun to fade out of the sky again. He now put the elapsed time between sunrise and sunset at about twenty-eight minutes.

He reached for the switch that controlled the cabin intercom and opened the circuit.

"Nick? Can you come up front?"

Nick appeared in the cockpit doorway less than thirty seconds later.

"Have they got their shades pulled back there?" Brian asked him before he could come all the way in.

"You better believe it," Nick said.

"Very wise of them. I'm going to ask you not to look down yet, if you can help it. I'll *want* you to look out in a few minutes, and once you look out I don't suppose you'll be able to help looking down, but I advise you to put it off as long as possible. It's not . . . very nice."

"Gone, is it?"

"Yes. Everything."

"The little girl is gone, too. Dinah. Laurel was with her at the end. She's taking it very well. She liked that girl. So did I."

Brian nodded. He was not surprised—the girl's wound was the sort that demanded immediate treatment in an emergency room, and even then the prognosis would undoubtedly be cloudy—but it still rolled a stone against his heart. He had also liked Dinah, and he believed what Laurel believed—that the girl was somehow more responsible for their continued survival than anyone else. She had done something to Mr. Toomy, had used him in some strange way . . . and Brian had an idea that, somewhere inside, Toomy would not have minded being used in such a fashion. So, if her death was an omen, it was one of the worst sort.

“She never got her operation,” he said.

“No. ”

“But Laurel is okay?”

“More or less.”

“You like her, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Nick said. “I have mates who would laugh at that, but I do like her. She’s a bit dewy-eyed, but she’s got grit.”

Brian nodded. “Well, if we get back, I wish you the best of luck.”

“Thanks.” Nick sat down in the co-pilot’s seat again. “I’ve been thinking about the question you asked me before. About what I’ll do when and if we get out of this mess . . . besides taking the lovely Laurel to dinner, that is. I suppose I might end up going after Mr. O’Banion after all. As I see it, he’s not all that much different from our friend Toomy.”

“Dinah asked you to spare Mr. Toomy,” Brian pointed out. “Maybe that’s something you should add into the equation.”

Nick nodded. He did this as if his head had grown too heavy for his neck. “Maybe it is.”

“Listen, Nick. I called you up front because if Bob’s time-rip actually exists, we’ve got to be getting close to the place where we went through it. We’re going to man the crow’s nest together, you and I. You take the starboard side and right center; I’ll take port and left center. If you see anything that looks like a time-rip, sing out.”

Nick gazed at Brian with wide, innocent eyes. “Are we looking for a thingumabob-type time-rip, or do you think it’ll be one of the more or less fuckadelic variety, mate?”

“Very funny.” Brian felt a grin touch his lips in spite of himself. “I don’t have the slightest idea what it’s going to look like or even if we’ll be able to see it at all. If we can’t, we’re going to be in a hell of a jam if it’s drifted to one side, or if its altitude has changed. Finding a needle in a haystack would be child’s play in comparison.”

“What about radar?”

Brian pointed to the RCA/TL color radar monitor. “Nothing, as you can see. But that’s not surprising. If the original crew had acquired the damned thing on radar, they never would have gone through it in the first place.”

“They wouldn’t have gone through it if they’d seen it, either,” Nick pointed out gloomily.

“That’s not necessarily true. They might have seen it too late to avoid it. Jetliners move fast, and airplane crews don’t spend the entire flight searching the sky for bogies. They don’t have to; that’s what ground control is for. Thirty or thirty-five minutes into the flight, the crew’s major outbound tasks are completed. The bird is up, it’s out of L.A. airspace, the anti-collision honker is on and beeping every ninety seconds to show it’s working. The INS is all programmed—that happens before the bird ever leaves the ground—and it is telling the autopilot just what to do. From the look of the cockpit, the pilot and co-pilot were on their coffee break. They could have been sitting here, facing each other, talking about the last movie they saw or how much they dropped at Hollywood Park. If there had been a flight attendant up front just before The Event took place, there would at least have been one more set of eyes, but we know there wasn’t. The male crew had their coffee and Danish; the flight attendants were getting ready to serve drinks to the passengers when it happened.”

“That’s an extremely detailed scenario,” Nick said. “Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

“At this point, I’ll settle for convincing anyone at all.”

Nick smiled and stepped to the starboard cockpit window. His eyes dropped involuntarily downward, toward the place where the ground belonged, and his smile first froze, then dropped off his face. His knees buckled, and he gripped the bulkhead with one hand to steady himself.

“Shit on toast,” he said in a tiny dismayed voice.

“Not very nice, is it?”

Nick looked around at Brian. His eyes seemed to float in his pallid face. “All my life,” he said, “I’ve thought of Australia when I heard people talk about the great bugger-all, but it’s not. *That’s* the great bugger-all, right down there.”

Brian checked the INS and the charts again, quickly. He had made a small red circle on one of the charts; they were now on the verge

of entering the airspace that circle represented. "Can you do what I asked? If you can't, say so. Pride is a luxury we can't—"

"Of course I can," Nick murmured. He had torn his eyes away from the huge black socket below the plane and was scanning the sky. "I only wish I knew what I was looking *for*."

"I think you'll know it when you see it," Brian said. He paused and then added, "*If* you see it."

## 12

Bob Jenkins sat with his arms folded tightly across his chest, as if he were cold. Part of him *was* cold, but this was not a physical coldness. The chill was coming out of his head.

Something was wrong.

He did not know what it was, but something was wrong. Something was out of place . . . or lost . . . or forgotten. Either a mistake had been made or was going to be made. The feeling nagged at him like some pain not quite localized enough to be identified. That sense of wrongness would almost crystallize into a thought . . . and then it would skitter away again like some small, not-quite-tame animal.

Something wrong.

Or out of place. Or lost.

Or forgotten.

Ahead of him, Albert and Bethany were spooning contentedly. Behind him, Rudy Warwick was sitting with his eyes closed and his lips moving. The beads of a rosary were clamped in one fist. Across the aisle, Laurel Stevenson sat beside Dinah, holding one of her hands and stroking it gently.

*Wrong.*

Bob eased up the shade beside his seat, peeked out, and slammed it down again. Looking at *that* would not aid rational thought but erase it. What lay below the plane was utter madness.

*I must warn them. I have to. They are going forward on my hypothesis, but if my hypothesis is somehow mistaken—and dangerous—then I must warn them.*

Warn them of what?

Again it almost came into the light of his focussed thoughts, then slipped away, becoming just a shadow among shadows . . . but one with shiny feral eyes.

He abruptly unbuckled his seatbelt and stood up.

Albert looked around. “Where are you going?”

“Cleveland,” Bob said grumpily, and began to walk down the aisle toward the tail of the aircraft, still trying to track the source of that interior alarm bell.

## 13

Brian tore his eyes away from the sky—which was already showing signs of light again—long enough to take a quick glance first at the INS readout and then at the circle on his chart. They were approaching the far side of the circle now. If the time-rip was still here, they should see it soon. If they didn’t, he supposed he would have to take over the controls and send them circling back for another pass at a slightly different altitude and on a slightly different heading. It would play hell on their fuel situation, which was already tight, but since the whole thing was probably hopeless anyway, it didn’t matter very—

“Brian?” Nick’s voice was unsteady. “Brian? I think I see something.”

## 14

Bob Jenkins reached the rear of the plane, made an about-face, and started slowly back up the aisle again, passing row after row of empty seats. He looked at the objects that lay in them and on the floor in front of them as he passed: purses . . . pairs of eyeglasses . . . wristwatches . . . a pocket-watch . . . two worn, crescent-shaped pieces of metal that were probably heel-taps . . . dental fillings . . . wedding rings . . .

*Something is wrong.*

Yes? Was that really so, or was it only his overworked mind nagging fiercely over nothing? The mental equivalent of a tired muscle which will not stop twitching?

*Leave it, he advised himself, but he couldn't.*

*If something really is amiss, why can't you see it? Didn't you tell the boy that deduction is your meat and drink? Haven't you written forty mystery novels, and weren't a dozen of those actually quite good? Didn't Newgate Callendar call *The Sleeping Madonna* "a masterpiece of logic" when he—*

Bob Jenkins came to a dead stop, his eyes widening. They fixed on a portside seat near the front of the cabin. In it, the man with the black beard was out cold again, snoring lustily. Inside Bob's head, the shy animal at last began to creep fearfully into the light. Only it wasn't small, as he had thought. That had been his mistake. Sometimes you couldn't see things because they were too small, but sometimes you ignored things because they were too big, too obvious.

*The Sleeping Madonna.*

The sleeping man.

He opened his mouth and tried to scream, but no sound came out. His throat was locked. Terror sat on his chest like an ape. He tried again to scream and managed no more than a breathless squeak.

Sleeping madonna, sleeping man.

*They, the survivors, had all been asleep.*

*Now, with the exception of the bearded man, none of them were asleep.*

Bob opened his mouth once more, tried once more to scream, and once more nothing came out.

“Holy Christ in the morning,” Brian whispered.

The time-rip lay about ninety miles ahead, off to the starboard side of the 767’s nose by no more than seven or eight degrees. If it had drifted, it had not drifted much; Brian’s guess was that the slight differential was the result of a minor navigational error.

It was a lozenge-shaped hole in reality, but not a black void. It cycled with a dim pink-purple light, like the aurora borealis. Brian could see the stars beyond it, but they were also rippling. A wide white ribbon of vapor was slowly streaming either into or out of the shape which hung in the sky. It looked like some strange, ethereal highway.

*We can follow it right in, Brian thought excitedly. It’s better than an ILS beacon!*

“We’re in business!” he said, laughed idiotically, and shook his clenched fists in the air.

“It must be two miles across,” Nick whispered. “My God, Brian, how many other planes do you suppose went through?”

“I don’t know,” Brian said, “but I’ll bet you my gun and dog that we’re the only one with a shot at getting back.”

He opened the intercom.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve found what we were looking for.” His voice crackled with triumph and relief. “I don’t know exactly what happens next, or how, or why, but we have sighted what appears to be an extremely large trapdoor in the sky. I’m going to take us straight through the middle of it. We’ll find out what’s on the other side together. Right now I’d like you all to fasten your seatbelts and —”

That was when Bob Jenkins came pelting madly up the aisle, screaming at the top of his lungs. *“No! No! We’ll all die if you go into it! Turn back! You’ve got to turn back!”*

Brian swung around in his seat and exchanged a puzzled look with Nick.

Nick unbuckled his belt and stood up. “That’s Bob Jenkins,” he said. “Sounds like he’s worked himself up to a good set of nerves. Carry on, Brian. I’ll handle him.”

“Okay,” Brian said. “Just keep him away from me. I’d hate to have him grab me at the wrong second and send us into the edge of that thing.”

He turned off the autopilot and took control of the 767 himself. The floor tilted gently to the right as he banked toward the long, glowing slot ahead of them. It seemed to slide across the sky until it was centered in front of the 767’s nose. Now he could hear a sound mixing with the drone of the jet engines—a deep throbbing noise, like a huge diesel idling. As they approached the river of vapor—it was flowing into the hole, he now saw, not out of it—he began to pick up flashes of color travelling within it: green, blue, violet, red, candy pink. *It’s the first real color I’ve seen in this world*, he thought.

Behind him, Bob Jenkins sprinted through the first-class section, up the narrow aisle which led to the service area . . . and right into Nick’s waiting arms.

“Easy, mate,” Nick soothed. “Everything’s going to be all right now.”

“No!” Bob struggled wildly, but Nick held him as easily as a man might hold a struggling kitten. “No, you don’t understand! He’s got to turn back! He’s got to turn back before it’s too late!”

Nick pulled the writer away from the cockpit door and back into first class. “We’ll just sit down here and belt up tight, shall we?” he said in that same soothing, chummy voice. “It may be a trifle bumpy.”

To Brian, Nick’s voice was only a faint blur of sound. As he entered the wide flow of vapor streaming into the time-rip, he felt a large and immensely powerful hand seize the plane, dragging it eagerly forward. He found himself thinking of the leak on the flight from Tokyo to L.A., and of how fast air rushed out of a hole in a pressurized environment.

*It’s as if this whole world—or what is left of it—is leaking through that hole*, he thought, and then that queer and ominous phrase from his dream recurred again: SHOOTING STARS

ONLY.

The rip lay dead ahead of the 767's nose now, growing rapidly. *We're going in*, he thought. *God help us, we're really going in.*

## 16

Bob continued to struggle as Nick pinned him in one of the first-class seats with one hand and worked to fasten his seatbelt with the other. Bob was a small, skinny man, surely no more than a hundred and forty pounds soaking wet, but panic had animated him and he was making it extremely hard for Nick.

"We're really going to be all right, matey," Nick said. He finally managed to click Bob's seatbelt shut. "We were when we came through, weren't we?"

*"We were all asleep when we came through, you damned fool!"* Bob shrieked into his face. *"Don't you understand? WE WERE ASLEEP! You've got to stop him!"*

Nick froze in the act of reaching for his own belt. What Bob was saying—what he had been trying to say all along—suddenly struck him like a dropped load of bricks.

"Oh dear God," he whispered. "Dear God, what were we thinking of?"

He leaped out of his seat and dashed for the cockpit.

"Brian, stop! Turn back! *Turn back!*"

## 17

Brian had been staring into the rip, nearly hypnotized, as they approached. There was no turbulence, but that sense of tremendous power, of air rushing into the hole like a mighty river, had increased. He looked down at his instruments and saw the 767's airspeed was increasing rapidly. Then Nick began to shout, and a moment later the

Englishman was behind him, gripping his shoulders, staring at the rip as it swelled in front of the jet's nose, its play of deepening colors racing across his cheeks and brow, making him look like a man staring at a stained-glass window on a sunny day. The steady thrumming sound had become dark thunder.

*"Turn back, Brian, you have to turn back!"*

Did Nick have a reason for what he was saying, or had Bob's panic been infectious? There was no time to make a decision on any rational basis; only a split-second to consult the silent tickings of instinct.

Brain Engle grabbed the steering yoke and hauled it hard over to port.

## 18

Nick was thrown across the cockpit and into a bulkhead; there was a sickening crack as his arm broke. In the main cabin, the luggage which had fallen from the overhead compartments when Brian swerved onto the runway at BIA now flew once more, striking the curved walls and thudding off the windows in a vicious hail. The man with the black beard was thrown out of his seat like a Cabbage Patch Kid and had time to utter one bleary squawk before his head collided with the arm of a seat and he fell into the aisle in an untidy tangle of limbs. Bethany screamed and Albert hugged her tight against him. Two rows behind, Rudy Warwick closed his eyes tighter, clutched his rosary harder, and prayed faster as his seat tilted away beneath him.

Now there was turbulence; Flight 29 became a surfboard with wings, rocking and twisting and thumping through the unsteady air. Brian's hands were momentarily thrown off the yoke and then he grabbed it again. At the same time he opened the throttle all the way to the stop and the plane's turbos responded with a deep snarl of power rarely heard outside of the airline's diagnostic hangars. The

turbulence increased; the plane slammed viciously up and down, and from somewhere came the deadly shriek of overstressed metal.

In first class, Bob Jenkins clutched at the arms of his seat, numbly grateful that the Englishman had managed to belt him in. He felt as if he had been strapped to some madman's jet-powered pogo stick. The plane took another great leap, rocked up almost to the vertical on its portside wing, and his false teeth shot from his mouth.

*Are we going in? Dear Jesus, are we?*

He didn't know. He only knew that the world was a thumping, bucking nightmare . . . but he was still in it.

For the time being, at least, he was still in it.

## 19

The turbulence continued to increase as Brian drove the 767 across the wide stream of vapor feeding into the rip. Ahead of him, the hole continued to swell in front of the plane's nose even as it continued sliding off to starboard. Then, after one particularly vicious jolt, they came out of the rapids and into smoother air. The time-rip disappeared to starboard. They had missed it ... by how little Brian did not like to think.

He continued to bank the plane, but at a less drastic angle. "Nick!" he shouted without turning around. "Nick, are you all right?"

Nick got slowly to his feet, holding his right arm against his belly with his left hand. His face was very white and his teeth were set in a grimace of pain. Small trickles of blood ran from his nostrils. "I've been better, mate. Broke my arm, I think. Not the first time for this poor old fellow, either. We missed it, didn't we?"

"We missed it," Brian agreed. He continued to bring the plane back in a big, slow circle. "And in just a minute you're going to tell me *why* we missed it, when we came all this way to find it. And it better be good, broken arm or no broken arm."

He reached for the intercom toggle.

## 20

Laurel opened her eyes as Brian began to speak and discovered that Dinah's head was in her lap. She stroked her hair gently and then readjusted her position on the stretcher.

"This is Captain Engle, folks. I'm sorry about that. It was pretty damned hairy, but we're okay; I've got a green board. Let me repeat that we've found what we were looking for, but—"

He clicked off suddenly.

The others waited. Bethany Simms was sobbing against Albert's chest. Behind them, Rudy was still saying his rosary.

## 21

Brian had broken his transmission when he realized that Bob Jenkins was standing beside him. The writer was shaking, there was a wet patch on his slacks, his mouth had an odd, sunken look Brian hadn't noticed before . . . but he seemed in charge of himself. Behind him, Nick sat heavily in the co-pilot's chair, wincing as he did so and still cradling his arm. It had begun to swell.

"What the hell is this all about?" Brian asked Bob sternly. "A little more turbulence and this bitch would have broken into about ten thousand pieces."

"Can I talk through that thing?" Bob asked, pointing to the switch marked INTERCOM.

"Yes, but—"

"Then let me do it."

Brian started to protest, then thought better of it. He flicked the switch. "Go ahead; you're on." Then he repeated: "And it better be good."

"Listen to me, all of you!" Bob shouted.

From behind them came a protesting whine of feedback. "We—"

“Just talk in your normal tone of voice,” Brian said. “You’ll blow their goddam eardrums out.”

Bob made a visible effort to compose himself, then went on in a lower tone of voice. “We had to turn back, and we did. The captain has made it clear to me that we only just managed to do it. We have been extremely lucky . . . and extremely stupid, as well. We forgot the most elementary thing, you see, although it was right in front of us all the time. When we went through the time-rip in the first place, *everyone on the plane who was awake disappeared.*”

Brian jerked in his seat. He felt as if someone had slugged him. Ahead of the 767’s nose, about thirty miles distant, the faintly glowing lozenge shape had appeared again in the sky, looking like some gigantic semi-precious stone. It seemed to mock him.

“We are all awake,” Bob said. (In the main cabin, Albert looked at the man with the black beard lying out cold in the aisle and thought, *With one exception.*) “Logic suggests that if we try to go through that way, we will disappear.” He thought about this and then said, “That is all.”

Brian flicked the intercom link closed without thinking about it. Behind him, Nick voiced a painful, incredulous laugh.

“That is all? That is bloody *all*? What do we *do* about it?”

Brian looked at him and didn’t answer. Neither did Bob Jenkins.

## 22

Bethany raised her head and looked into Albert’s strained, bewildered face. “We have to go to sleep? How do we do *that*? I never felt less like sleeping in my whole *life!*”

“I don’t know.” He looked hopefully across the aisle at Laurel. She was already shaking her head. She wished she *could* go to sleep, just go to sleep and make this whole crazy nightmare *gone*—but, like Bethany, she had never felt less like it in her entire life.

Bob took a step forward and gazed out through the cockpit window in silent fascination. After a long moment he said in a soft, awed voice: "So that's what it looks like."

A line from some rock-and-roll song popped into Brian's head: *You can look but you better not touch*. He glanced down at the LED fuel indicators. What he saw there didn't ease his mind any, and he raised his eyes helplessly to Nick's. Like the others, he had never felt so wide awake in his life.

"I don't know what we do now," he said, "but if we're going to try that hole, it has to be soon. The fuel we've got will carry us for an hour, maybe a little more. After that, forget it. Got any ideas?"

Nick lowered his head, still cradling his swelling arm. After a moment or two he looked up again. "Yes," he said. "As a matter of fact, I do. People who fly rarely stick their prescription medicine in their checked baggage—they like to have it with them in case their luggage ends up on the other side of the world and takes a few days to get back to them. If we go through the hand-carry bags, we're sure to find scads of sedatives. We won't even have to take the bags out of the bins. Judging from the sounds, most of them are already lying on the floor . . . what? What's the matter with it?"

This last was directed at Bob Jenkins, who had begun shaking his head as soon as the phrase "prescription medicines" popped out of Nick's mouth.

"Do you know anything about prescription sedatives?" he asked Nick.

"A little," Nick said, but he sounded defensive. "A little, yeah."

"Well, I know a lot," Bob said dryly. "I've researched them exhaustively—from All-Nite to Xanax. Murder by sleeping potion has always been a great favorite in my field, you understand. Even if you happened to find one of the more potent medications in the very first bag you checked—unlikely in itself—you couldn't administer a safe dose which would act quickly enough."

"Why bloody *not*?"

“Because it would take at least forty minutes for the stuff to work . . . and I strongly doubt it *would* work on everyone. The natural reaction of minds under stress to such medication is to fight—to try to refuse it. There is absolutely no way to combat such a reaction, Nick . . . you might as well try to legislate your own heartbeat. What you’d do, always supposing you found a supply of medication large enough to allow it, would be to administer a series of lethal overdoses and turn the plane into Jonestown. We might all come through, but we’d be dead.”

“Forty minutes,” Nick said. “Christ. Are you sure? Are you absolutely *sure*?”

“Yes,” Bob said unflinchingly.

Brian looked out at the glowing lozenge shape in the sky. He had put Flight 29 into a circling pattern and the rip was on the verge of disappearing again. It would be back shortly . . . but they would be no closer to it.

“I can’t believe it,” Nick said heavily. “To go through the things we’ve gone through . . . to have taken off successfully and come all this way ... to have *actually found* the bloody thing ... and then we find out we can’t go through it and back to our own time just because we can’t go to *sleep*?”

“We don’t have forty minutes, anyway,” Brian said quietly. “If we waited that long, this plane would crash sixty miles east of the airport.”

“Surely there are other fields—”

“There are, but none big enough to handle an airplane of this size.”

“If we went through and then turned back east again?”

“Vegas. But Vegas is going to be out of reach in ...” Brian glanced at his instruments. “. . . less than eight minutes. I think it has to be LAX. I’ll need at least thirty-five minutes to get there. That’s cutting it extremely fine even if they clear everything out of our way and vector us straight in. That gives us ...” He looked at the chronometer again. “... twenty minutes at most to figure this thing out and get through the hole.”

Bob was looking thoughtfully at Nick. “What about you?” he asked.

“What do you mean, what about me?”

“I think you’re a soldier ... but I don’t think you’re an ordinary one. Might you be SAS, perhaps?”

Nick’s face tightened. “And if I was that or something like it, mate?”

“Maybe you could put us to sleep,” Bob said. “Don’t they teach you Special Forces men tricks like that?”

Brian’s mind flashed back to Nick’s first confrontation with Craig Toomy. *Have you ever watched Star Trek?* he had asked Craig. *Marvellous American program . . . And if you don’t shut your gob at once, you bloody idiot, I’ll be happy to demonstrate Mr. Spock’s famous Vulcan sleeper-hold for you.*

“What about it, Nick?” he said softly. “If we ever needed the famous Vulcan sleeper-hold, it’s now.”

Nick looked unbelievably from Bob to Brian and then back to Bob again. “Please don’t make me laugh, gents—it makes my arm hurt worse.”

“What does that mean?” Bob asked.

“I’ve got my sedatives all wrong, have I? Well, let me tell you both that you’ve got it all wrong about me. I am *not* James Bond. There never *was* a James Bond in the real world. I suppose I might be able to kill you with a neck-chop, Bob, but I’d more likely just leave you paralyzed for life. Might not even knock you out. And then there’s this.” Nick held up his rapidly swelling right arm with a little wince. “My smart hand happens to be attached to my recently re-broken arm. I could perhaps defend myself with my left hand—against an unschooled opponent—but the kind of thing you’re talking about? No. No way.”

“You’re all forgetting the most important thing of all,” a new voice said.

They turned. Laurel Stevenson, white and haggard, was standing in the cockpit door. She had folded her arms across her breasts as if she was cold and was cupping her elbows in her hands.

“If we’re all knocked out, who is going to fly the plane?” she asked. “Who is going to fly the plane into L.A.?”

The three men gaped at her wordlessly. Behind them, unnoticed, the large semi-precious stone that was the time-rip glided into view

again.

“We’re fucked,” Nick said quietly. “Do you know that? We are absolutely dead-out fucked.” He laughed a little, then winced as his stomach jogged his broken arm.

“Maybe not,” Albert said. He and Bethany had appeared behind Laurel; Albert had his arm around the girl’s waist. His hair was plastered against his forehead in sweaty ringlets, but his dark eyes were clear and intent. They were focussed on Brian. “I think *you* can put us to sleep,” he said, “and I think *you* can land us.”

“What are you talking about?” Brian asked roughly.

Albert replied: “Pressure. I’m talking about pressure.”

## 24

Brian’s dream recurred to him then, recurred with such terrible force that he might have been reliving it: Anne with her hand plastered over the crack in the body of the plane, the crack with the words SHOOTING STARS ONLY printed over it in red.

Pressure.

*See, darling? It’s all taken care of.*

“What does he mean, Brian?” Nick asked. “I can see he’s got *something*—your face says so. What is it?”

Brian ignored him. He looked steadily at the seventeen-year-old music student who might just have thought of a way out of the box they were in.

“What about after?” he asked. “What about after we come through? How do I wake up again so I can land the plane?”

“Will somebody please explain this?” Laurel pleaded. She had gone to Nick, who put his good arm around her waist.

“Albert is suggesting that I use this”—Brian tapped a rheostat on the control board, a rheostat marked CABIN PRESSURE—“ to knock us all out cold.”

“Can you do that, mate? Can you really do that?”

“Yes,” Brian said. “I’ve known pilots—charter pilots ... who *have* done it, when passengers who’ve had too much to drink started cutting up and endangering either themselves or the crew. Knocking out a drunk by lowering the air pressure isn’t that difficult. To knock out everyone, all I have to do is lower it some more ... to half sea-level pressure, say. It’s like ascending to a height of two miles without an oxygen mask. Boom! You’re out cold.”

“If you can really do that, why hasn’t it been used on terrorists?” Bob asked.

“Because there *are* oxygen masks, right?” Albert asked.

“Yes,” Brian said. “The cabin crew demonstrates them at the start of every commercial jet-night—put the gold cup over your mouth and nose and breathe normally, right? They drop automatically when cabin pressure falls below twelve psi. If a hostage pilot tried to knock out a terrorist by lowering the air pressure, all the terrorist would have to do is grab a mask, put it on, and start shooting. On smaller jets, like the Lear, that isn’t the case. If the cabin loses pressure, the passenger has to open the overhead compartment himself.”

Nick looked at the chronometer. Their window was now only fourteen minutes wide.

“I think we better stop talking about it and just do it,” he said. “Time is getting very short.”

“Not yet,” Brian said, and looked at Albert again. “I can bring us back in line with the rip, Albert, and start decreasing pressure as we head toward it. I can control the cabin pressure pretty accurately, and I’m pretty sure I can put us all out before we go through. But that leaves Laurel’s question: who flies the airplane if we’re all knocked out?”

Albert opened his mouth; closed it again and shook his head.

Bob Jenkins spoke up then. His voice was dry and toneless, the voice of a judge pronouncing doom. “I think you can fly us home, Brian. But someone else will have to die in order for you to do it.”

“Explain,” Nick said crisply.

Bob did so. It didn’t take long. By the time he finished, Rudy Warwick had joined the little group standing in the cockpit door.

“Would it work, Brian?” Nick asked.

“Yes,” Brian said absently. “No reason why not.” He looked at the chronometer again. Eleven minutes now. Eleven minutes to get across to the other side of the rip. It would take almost that long to line the plane up, program the autopilot, and move them along the forty-mile approach. “But who’s going to do it? Do the rest of you draw straws, or what?”

“No need for that,” Nick said. He spoke lightly, almost casually. “I’ll do it.”

“No!” Laurel said. Her eyes were very wide and very dark. “Why you? Why does it have to be you?”

“Shut up!” Bethany hissed at her. “If he wants to, let him!”

Albert glanced unhappily at Bethany, at Laurel, and then back at Nick. A voice—not a very strong one—was whispering that he should have volunteered, that this was a job for a tough Alamo survivor like The Arizona Jew. But most of him was only aware that he loved life very much . . . and did not want it to end just yet. So he opened his mouth and then closed it again without speaking.

“Why you?” Laurel asked again, urgently. “Why *shouldn’t* we draw straws? Why not Bob? Or Rudy? Why not me?”

Nick took her arm. “Come with me a moment,” he said.

“Nick, there’s not much time,” Brian said. He tried to keep his tone of voice even, but he could hear desperation—perhaps even panic—bleeding through.

“I know. Start doing the things you have to do.”

Nick drew Laurel through the door.

## 25

She resisted for a moment, then came along. He stopped in the small galley alcove and faced her. In that moment, with his face less than four inches from hers, she realized a dismal truth—he was the man she had been hoping to find in Boston. He had been on the

plane all the time. There was nothing at all romantic about this discovery; it was horrible.

“I think we might have had something, you and me,” he said. “Do you think I could be right about that? If you do, say so—there’s no time to dance. Absolutely none.”

“Yes,” she said. Her voice was dry, uneven. “I think that’s right. ”

“But we don’t know. We *can’t* know. It all comes back to time, doesn’t it? Time . . . and sleep . . . and not knowing. But I have to be the one, Laurel. I have tried to keep some reasonable account of myself, and all my books are deeply in the red. This is my chance to balance them, and I mean to take it.”

“I don’t understand what you mea—”

“No—but I do.” He spoke fast, almost rapping his words. Now he reached out and took her forearm and drew her even closer to him. “You were on an adventure of some sort, weren’t you, Laurel?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

He gave her a brisk shake. “I told you—there’s no time to dance! *Were* you on an adventure?”

“I ... yes.”

“Nick!” Brian called from the cockpit.

Nick looked rapidly in that direction. “Coming!” he shouted, and then looked back at Laurel. “I’m going to send you on another one. If you get out of this, that is, and if you agree to go.”

She only looked at him, her lips trembling. She had no idea of what to say. Her mind was tumbling helplessly. His grip on her arm was very tight, but she would not be aware of that until later, when she saw the bruises left by his fingers; at that moment, the grip of his eyes was much stronger.

“Listen. Listen carefully.” He paused and then spoke with peculiar, measured emphasis: “I was going to quit it. I’d made up my mind.”

“Quit what?” she asked in a small, quivery voice.

Nick shook his head impatiently. “Doesn’t matter. What matters is whether or not you believe me. Do you?”

“Yes,” she said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I believe you mean it.”

“*Nick!*” Brian warned from the cockpit. “*We’re heading toward it!*”

He shot a glance toward the cockpit again, his eyes narrow and gleaming. “Coming just now!” he called. When he looked at her again, Laurel thought she had never in her life been the focus of such ferocious, focussed intensity. “My father lives in the village of Fluting, south of London,” he said. “Ask for him in any shop along the High Street. Mr. Hopewell. The older ones still call him the gaffer. Go to him and tell him I’d made up my mind to quit it. You’ll need to be persistent; he tends to turn away and curse loudly when he hears my name. The old I-have-no-son bit. Can you be persistent?”

“Yes.”

He nodded and smiled grimly. “Good! Repeat what I’ve told you, and tell him you believed me. Tell him I tried my best to atone for the day behind the church in Belfast.”

“In Belfast.”

“Right. And if you can’t get him to listen any other way, tell him he *must* listen. Because of the daisies. The time I brought the daisies. Can you remember that, as well?”

“Because once you brought him daisies.”

Nick seemed to almost laugh—but she had never seen a face filled with such sadness and bitterness. “No—not to him, but it’ll do. That’s your adventure. Will you do it?”

“Yes ... but . . .”

“Good. Laurel, thank you.” He put his left hand against the nape of her neck, pulled her face to his, and kissed her. His mouth was cold, and she tasted fear on his breath.

A moment later he was gone.

## 26

“Are we going to feel like we’re—you know, choking?” Bethany asked. “Suffocating?”

“No,” Brian said. He had gotten up to see if Nick was coming; now, as Nick reappeared with a very shaken Laurel Stevenson behind

him, Brian dropped back into his seat. “You’ll feel a little giddy ... swimmy in the head ... then, nothing.” He glanced at Nick. “Until we all wake up.”

“Right!” Nick said cheerily. “And who knows? I may still be right here. Bad pennies have a way of turning up, you know. Don’t they, Brian?”

“Anything’s possible, I guess,” Brian said. He pushed the throttle forward slightly. The sky was growing bright again. The rip lay dead ahead. “Sit down, folks. Nick, right up here beside me. I’m going to show you what to do ... and when to do it.”

“One second, please,” Laurel said. She had regained some of her color and self-possession. She stood on tiptoe and planted a kiss on Nick’s mouth.

“Thank you,” Nick said gravely.

“You were going to quit it. You’d made up your mind. And if he won’t listen, I’m to remind him of the day you brought the daisies. Have I got it right?”

He grinned. “Letter-perfect, my love. Letter-perfect.” He encircled her with his left arm and kissed her again, long and hard. When he let her go, there was a gentle, thoughtful smile on his mouth. “That’s the one to go on,” he said. “Right enough.”

## 27

Three minutes later, Brian opened the intercom. “I’m starting to decrease pressure now. Check your belts, everyone.”

They did so. Albert waited tensely for some sound—the hiss of escaping air, perhaps—but there was only the steady, droning mumble of the jet engines. He felt more wide awake than ever.

“Albert?” Bethany said in a small, scared voice. “Would you hold me, please?”

“Yes,” Albert said. “If you’ll hold me.”

Behind them, Rudy Warwick was telling his rosary again. Across the aisle, Laurel Stevenson gripped the arms of her seat. She could still feel the warm print of Nick Hopewell's lips on her mouth. She raised her head, looked at the overhead compartment, and began to take deep, slow breaths. She was waiting for the masks to fall . . . and ninety seconds or so later, they did.

*Remember about the day in Belfast, too, she thought. Behind the church. An act of atonement, he said. An act . . .*

In the middle of that thought, her mind drifted away.

## 28

"You know . . . what to do?" Brian asked again. He spoke in a dreamy, furry voice. Ahead of them, the time-rip was once more swelling in the cockpit windows, spreading across the sky. It was now lit with dawn, and a fantastic new array of colors coiled, swam, and then streamed away into its queer depths.

"I know," Nick said. He was standing beside Brian and his words were muffled by the oxygen mask he wore. Above the rubber seal, his eyes were calm and clear. "No fear, Brian. All's safe as houses. Off to sleep you go. Sweet dreams, and all that."

Brian was fading now. He could feel himself going . . . and yet he hung on, staring at the vast fault in the fabric of reality. It seemed to be swelling toward the cockpit windows, reaching for the plane. *It's so beautiful*, he thought. *God, it's so beautiful !*

He felt that invisible hand seize the plane and draw it forward again. No turning back this time.

"Nick," he said. It now took a tremendous effort to speak; he felt as if his mouth was a hundred miles away from his brain. He held his hand up. It seemed to stretch away from him at the end of a long taffy arm.

"Go to sleep," Nick said, taking his hand. "Don't fight it, unless you want to go with me. It won't be long now."

“I just wanted to say ... thank you.”

Nick smiled and gave Brian’s hand a squeeze. “You’re welcome, mate. It’s been a flight to remember. Even without the movie and the free mimosas.”

Brian looked back into the rip. A river of gorgeous colors flowed into it now. They spiralled . . . mixed . . . and seemed to form words before his dazed, wondering eyes:

### SHOOTING STARS ONLY

“Is that . . . what we are?” he asked curiously, and now his voice came to him from some distant universe.

The darkness swallowed him.

## 29

Nick was alone now; the only person awake on Flight 29 was a man who had once gunned down three boys behind a church in Belfast, three boys who had been chucking potatoes painted dark gray to look like grenades. Why had they done such a thing? Had it been some mad sort of dare? He had never found out.

He was not afraid, but an intense loneliness filled him. The feeling wasn’t a new one. This was not the first watch he had stood alone, with the lives of others in his hands.

Ahead of him, the rip neared. He dropped his hand to the rheostat which controlled the cabin pressure.

*It’s gorgeous*, he thought. It seemed to him that the colors that now blazed out of the rip were the antithesis of everything which they had experienced in the last few hours; he was looking into a crucible of new life and new motion.

*Why shouldn’t it be beautiful? This is the place where life—all life, maybe—begins. The place where life is freshly minted every second of every day; the cradle of creation and the wellspring of time. No langoliers allowed beyond this point.*

Colors ran across his cheeks and brows in a fountain-spray of hues: jungle green was overthrown by lava orange; lava orange was replaced by yellow-white tropical sunshine; sunshine was supplanted by the chilly blue of Northern oceans. The roar of the jet engines seemed muted and distant; he looked down and was not surprised to see that Brian Engle's slumped, sleeping form was being consumed by color, his form and features overthrown in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of brightness. He had become a fabulous ghost.

Nor was Nick surprised to see that his own hands and arms were as colorless as clay. *Brian's not the ghost; I am.*

The rip loomed.

Now the sound of the jets was lost entirely in a new sound; the 767 seemed to be rushing through a windtunnel filled with feathers. Suddenly, directly ahead of the airliner's nose, a vast nova of light exploded like a heavenly firework; in it, Nick Hopewell saw colors no man had ever imagined. It did not just fill the time-rip; it filled his mind, his nerves, his muscles, his very bones in a gigantic, coruscating fireflash.

*"Oh my God, so BEAUTIFUL!"* he cried, and as Flight 29 plunged into the rip, he twisted the cabin-pressure rheostat back up to full.

A split-second later the fillings from Nick's teeth pattered onto the cockpit floor. There was a small thump as the Teflon disc which had been in his knee—souvenir of a conflict marginally more honorable than the one in Northern Ireland—joined them. That was all.

Nick Hopewell had ceased to exist.

## 30

The first things Brian was aware of were that his shirt was wet and his headache had returned.

He sat up slowly in his seat, wincing at the bolt of pain in his head, and tried to remember who he was, where he was, and why he felt

such a vast and urgent need to wake up quickly. What had he been doing that was so important?

*The leak, his mind whispered. There's a leak in the main cabin, and if it isn't stabilized, there's going to be big tr—*

No, that wasn't right. The leak had been stabilized—or had in some mysterious way stabilized itself—and he had landed Flight 7 safely at LAX. Then the man in the green blazer had come, and—

*It's Anne's funeral! My God, I've overslept!*

His eyes flew open, but he was in neither a motel room nor the spare bedroom at Anne's brother's house in Revere. He was looking through a cockpit window at a sky filled with stars.

Suddenly it came back to him . . . everything.

He sat up all the way, too quickly. His head screamed a sickly hungover protest. Blood flew from his nose and splattered on the center control console. He looked down and saw the front of his shirt was soaked with it. There had been a leak, all right. In *him*.

*Of course, he thought. Depressurization often does that. I should have warned the passengers . . . How many passengers do I have left, by the way?*

He couldn't remember. His head was filled with fog.

He looked at his fuel indicators, saw that their situation was rapidly approaching the critical point, and then checked the INS. They were exactly where they should be, descending rapidly toward L.A., and at any moment they might wander into someone else's airspace while the someone else was still there.

Someone else had been sharing his airspace just before he passed out . . . who?

He fumbled, and it came. Nick, of course. Nick Hopewell. Nick was gone. He hadn't been such a bad penny after all, it seemed. But he must have done his job, or Brian wouldn't be awake now.

He got on the radio, fast.

"LAX ground control, this is American Pride Flight—" He stopped. What flight were they? He couldn't remember. The fog was in the way.

"Twenty-nine, aren't we?" a dazed, unsteady voice said from behind him.

“Thank you, Laurel.” Brian didn’t turn around. “Now go back and belt up. I may have to make this plane do some tricks.”

He spoke into his mike again.

“American Pride Flight 29, repeat, two-niner. Mayday, ground control, I am declaring an emergency here. Please clear everything in front of me, I am coming in on heading 85 and I have no fuel. Get a foam truck out and—”

“Oh, quit it,” Laurel said dully from behind him. “Just quit it.”

Brian wheeled around then, ignoring the fresh bolt of pain through his head and the fresh spray of blood which flew from his nose. “Sit *down*, goddammit!” he snarled. “We’re coming in unannounced into heavy traffic. If you don’t want to break your neck—”

“There’s no heavy traffic down there,” Laurel said in the same dull voice. “No heavy traffic, no foam trucks. Nick died for nothing, and I’ll never get a chance to deliver his message. Look for yourself.”

Brian did. And, although they were now over the outlying suburbs of Los Angeles, he saw nothing but darkness.

There was no one down there, it seemed.

No one at all.

Behind him, Laurel Stevenson burst into harsh, raging sobs of terror and frustration.

## 31

A long white passenger jet cruised slowly above the ground sixteen miles east of Los Angeles International Airport. 767 was printed on its tail in large, proud numerals. Along the fuselage, the words AMERICAN PRIDE were written in letters which had been raked backward to indicate speed. On both sides of the nose was a large red eagle, its wings spangled with blue stars. Like the airliner it decorated, the eagle appeared to be coming in for a landing.

The plane printed no shadow on the deserted grid of streets as it passed above them; dawn was still an hour away. Below it, no car

moved, no streetlight glowed. Below it, all was silent and moveless. Ahead of it, no runway lights gleamed.

The plane's belly slid open. The undercarriage dropped down and spread out. The landing gear locked in place.

American Pride Flight 29 slipped down the chute toward L.A. It banked slightly to the right as it came; Brian was now able to correct his course visually, and he did so. They passed over a cluster of airport motels, and for a moment Brian could see the monument that stood near the center of the terminal complex, a graceful tripod with curved legs and a restaurant in its center. They passed over a short strip of dead grass and then concrete runway was unrolling thirty feet below the plane.

There was no time to baby the 767 in this time; Brian's fuel indicators read zeros across and the bird was about to turn into a bitch. He brought it in hard, like a sled filled with bricks. There was a thud that rattled his teeth and started his nose bleeding again. His chest harness locked. Laurel, who was in the co-pilot's seat, cried out.

Then he had the flaps up and was applying reverse thrusters at full. The plane began to slow. They were doing a little over a hundred miles an hour when two of the thrusters cut out and the red ENGINE SHUTDOWN lights flashed on. He grabbed for the intercom switch.

"Hang on! We're going in hard! Hang on!"

Thrusters two and four kept running a few moments longer, and then they were gone, too. Flight 29 rushed down the runway in ghastly silence, with only the flaps to slow her now. Brian watched helplessly as the concrete ran away beneath the plane and the crisscross tangle of taxiways loomed. And there, dead ahead, sat the carcass of a Pacific Airways commuter jet.

The 767 was still doing at least sixty-five. Brian horsed it to the right, leaning into the dead steering yoke with every ounce of his strength. The plane responded soupily, and he skated by the parked jet with only six feet to spare. Its windows flashed past like a row of blind eyes.

Then they were rolling toward the United terminal, where at least a dozen planes were parked at extended jetways like nursing infants.

The 767's speed was down to just over thirty now.

*"Brace yourselves!"* Brian shouted into the intercom, momentarily forgetting that his own plane was now as dead as the rest of them and the intercom was useless. *"Brace yourselves for a collision! Bra—"* American Pride 29 crashed into Gate 29 of the United Airlines terminal at roughly twenty-nine miles an hour. There was a loud, hollow bang followed by the sound of crumpling metal and breaking glass. Brian was thrown into his harness again, then snapped back into his seat. He sat there for a moment, stiff, waiting for the explosion ... and then remembered there was nothing left in the tanks to explode.

He flicked all the switches on the control panel off—the panel was dead, but the habit ran deep—and then turned to check on Laurel. She looked at him with dull, apathetic eyes.

"That was about as close as I'd ever want to cut it," Brian said unsteadily.

"You should have let us crash. Everything we tried . . . Dinah . . . Nick . . . all for nothing. It's just the same here. Just the same."

Brian unbuckled his harness and got shakily to his feet. He took his handkerchief out of his back pocket and handed it to her. "Wipe your nose. It's bleeding."

She took the handkerchief and then only looked at it, as if she had never seen one before in her life.

Brian passed her and plodded slowly into the main cabin. He stood in the doorway, counting noses. His passengers—those few still remaining, that was—seemed all right. Bethany's head was pressed against Albert's chest and she was sobbing hard. Rudy Warwick unbuckled his seatbelt, got up, rapped his head on the overhead bin, and sat down again. He looked at Brian with dazed, uncomprehending eyes. Brian found himself wondering if Rudy was still hungry. He guessed not.

"Let's get off the plane," Brian said.

Bethany raised her head. "When do they come?" she asked him hysterically. "How long will it be before they come this time? Can anyone hear them yet?"

Fresh pain stroked Brian's head and he rocked on his feet, suddenly quite sure he was going to faint.

A steadying arm slipped around his waist and he looked around, surprised. It was Laurel.

"Captain Engle's right," she said quietly. "Let's get off the plane. Maybe it's not as bad as it looks."

Bethany uttered a hysterical bark of laughter. "How bad can it look?" she demanded. "Just how bad can it—"

"Something's different," Albert said suddenly. He was looking out the window. "Something's changed. I can't tell what it is ... but it's not the same." He looked first at Bethany, then at Brian and Laurel. "It's just not the same."

Brian bent down next to Bob Jenkins and looked out the window. He could see nothing very different from BIA—there were more planes, of course, but they were just as deserted, just as dead—yet he felt that Albert might be onto something, just the same. It was *feeling* more than seeing. Some essential difference which he could not quite grasp. It danced just beyond his reach, as the name of his ex-wife's perfume had done.

*It's L' Envoi, darling. It's what I've always worn, don't you remember?*

Don't you remember?

"Come on," he said. "This time we use the cockpit exit."

## 32

Brian opened the trapdoor which lay below the jut of the instrument panel and tried to remember why he hadn't used it to offload his passengers at Bangor International; it was a hell of a lot easier to use than the slide. There didn't seem to be a why. He just hadn't thought of it, probably because he was trained to think of the escape slide before anything else in an emergency.

He dropped down into the forward-hold area, ducked below a cluster of electrical cables, and undogged the hatch in the floor of the 767's nose. Albert joined him and helped Bethany down. Brian helped Laurel, and then he and Albert helped Rudy, who moved as if his bones had turned to glass. Rudy was still clutching his rosary tight in one hand. The space below the cockpit was now very cramped, and Bob Jenkins waited for them above, propped on his hands and peering down at them through the trapdoor.

Brian pulled the ladder out of its storage clips, secured it in place, and then, one by one, they descended to the tarmac, Brian first, Bob last.

As Brian's feet touched down, he felt a mad urge to place his hand over his heart and cry out: *I claim this land of rancid milk and sour honey for the survivors of Flight 29 ... at least until the langoliers arrive!*

He said nothing. He only stood there with the others below the loom of the jetliner's nose, feeling a light breeze against one cheek and looking around. In the distance he heard a sound. It was not the chewing, crunching sound of which they had gradually become aware in Bangor—nothing like it—but he couldn't decide exactly what it *did* sound like.

"What's that?" Bethany asked. "What's that humming? It sounds like electricity."

"No, it doesn't," Bob said thoughtfully. "It sounds like . . ." He shook his head.

"It doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard before," Brian said, but he wasn't sure if that was true. Again he was haunted by the sense that something he knew or should know was dancing just beyond his mental grasp.

"It's them, isn't it?" Bethany asked half-hysterically. "It's them, coming. It's the langoliers Dinah told us about."

"I don't think so. It doesn't sound the same at all." But he felt the fear begin in his belly just the same.

"Now what?" Rudy asked. His voice was as harsh as a crow's. "Do we start all over again?"

“Well, we won’t need the conveyor belt, and that’s a start,” Brian said. “The jetway service door is open.” He stepped out from beneath the 767’s nose and pointed. The force of their arrival at Gate 29 had knocked the rolling ladder away from the door, but it would be easy enough to slip it back into position. “Come on.”

They walked toward the ladder.

“Albert?” Brian said. “Help me with the lad—”

“Wait,” Bob said.

Brian turned his head and saw Bob looking around with cautious wonder. And the expression in his previously dazed eyes . . . was that hope?

“What? What is it, Bob? What do you see?”

“Just another deserted airport. It’s what I *feel*.” He raised a hand to his cheek . . . then simply held it out in the air, like a man trying to flag a ride.

Brian started to ask him what he meant, and realized that he knew. Hadn’t he noticed it himself while they had been standing under the liner’s nose? Noticed it and then dismissed it?

There was a breeze blowing against his face. Not much of a breeze, hardly more than a puff, but it *was* a breeze. *The air was in motion.*

“Holy crow,” Albert said. He popped a finger into his mouth, wetting it, and held it up. An unbelieving grin touched his face.

“That isn’t all, either,” Laurel said. “Listen!”

She dashed from where they were standing down toward the 767’s wing. Then she ran back to them again, her hair streaming out behind her. The high heels she was wearing clicked crisply on the concrete.

“Did you hear it?” she asked them. “Did you *hear* it?”

They had heard. The flat, muffled quality was gone. Now, just listening to Laurel speak, Brian realized that in Bangor they had all sounded as if they had been talking with their heads poked inside bells which had been cast from some dulling metal—brass, or maybe lead.

Bethany raised her hands and rapidly clapped out the back-beat of the old Routers instrumental, “Let’s Go.” Each clap was as clean and

clear as the pop of a track-starter's pistol. A delighted grin broke over her face.

"What does it m—" Rudy began.

"*The plane!*" Albert shouted in a high-pitched, gleeful voice, and for a moment Brian was absurdly reminded of the little guy on that old TV show, *Fantasy Island*. He almost laughed out loud. "I know what's different! Look at the plane! *Now it's the same as all the others!*"

They turned and looked. No one said anything for a long moment; perhaps no one was capable of speech. The Delta 727 standing next to the American Pride jetliner in Bangor had looked dull and dingy, somehow less real than the 767. Now all the aircraft—Flight 29 and the United planes lined up along the extended jetways behind it—looked equally bright, equally new. Even in the dark, their paintwork and trademark logos appeared to gleam.

"What does it mean?" Rudy asked, speaking to Bob. "What does it mean? If things have really gone back to normal, where's the electricity? Where are the *people?*"

"And what's that noise?" Albert put in.

The sound was already closer, already clearer. It was a humming sound, as Bethany had said, but there was nothing electrical about it. It sounded like wind blowing across an open pipe, or an inhuman choir which was uttering the same open-throated syllable in unison: *aaaaaaa ...*

Bob shook his head. "I don't know," he said, turning away. "Let's push that ladder back into position and go in—"

Laurel grabbed his shoulder.

"You know something!" she said. Her voice was strained and tense. "I can see that you do. Let the rest of us in on it, why don't you?"

He hesitated for a moment before shaking his head. "I'm not prepared to say right now, Laurel. I want to go inside and look around first."

With that they had to be content. Brian and Albert pushed the ladder back into position. One of the supporting struts had buckled slightly, and Brian held it as they ascended one by one. He himself came last, walking on the side of the ladder away from the buckled

strut. The others had waited for him, and they walked up the jetway and into the terminal together.

They found themselves in a large, round room with boarding gates located at intervals along the single curving wall. The rows of seats stood ghostly and deserted, the overhead fluorescents were dark squares, but here Albert thought he could almost *smell* other people . . . as if they had all trooped out only seconds before the Flight 29 survivors emerged from the jetway.

From outside, that choral humming continued to swell, approaching like a slow invisible wave: —aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—

“Come with me,” Bob Jenkins said, taking effortless charge of the group. “Quickly, please.”

He set off toward the concourse. and the others fell into line behind him, Albert and Bethany walking together with arms linked about each other’s waists. Once off the carpeted surface of the United boarding lounge and in the concourse itself, their heels clicked and echoed, as if there were two dozen of them instead of only six. They passed dim, dark advertising posters on the walls: Watch CNN, Smoke Marlboros, Drive Hertz, Read *Newsweek*, See Disneyland.

And that sound, that open-throated choral humming sound, continued to grow. Outside, Laurel had been convinced the sound had been approaching them from the west. Now it seemed to be right in here with them, as though the singers—if they *were* singers—had already arrived. The sound did not frighten her, exactly, but it made the flesh of her arms and back prickle with awe.

They reached a cafeteria-style restaurant, and Bob led them inside. Without pausing, he went around the counter and took a wrapped pastry from a pile of them on the counter. He tried to tear it open with his teeth . . . then realized his teeth were back on the plane. He made a small, disgusted sound and tossed it over the counter to Albert.

“You do it,” he said. His eyes were glowing now. “Quickly, Albert! Quickly!”

“Quick, Watson, the game’s afoot!” Albert said, and laughed crazily. He tore open the cellophane and looked at Bob, who nodded.

Albert took out the pastry and bit into it. Cream and raspberry jam squirted out the sides. Albert grinned. "It's delicious!" he said in a muffled voice, spraying crumbs as he spoke. "*Delicious!*" He offered it to Bethany, who took an even larger bite.

Laurel could smell the raspberry filling, and her stomach made a goinging, boinging sound. She laughed. Suddenly she felt giddy, joyful, almost stoned. The cobwebs from the depressurization experience were entirely gone; her head felt like an upstairs room after a fresh sea breeze had blown in on a hot and horribly muggy afternoon. She thought of Nick, who wasn't here, who had died so the rest of them could be here, and thought that Nick would not have minded her feeling this way.

The choral sound continued to swell, a sound with no direction at all, a sourceless, singing sigh that existed all around them:

—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—

Bob Jenkins raced back around the counter, cutting the corner by the cash register so tightly that his feet almost flew out from beneath him and he had to grab the condiments trolley to keep from falling. He stayed up but the stainless-steel trolley fell over with a gorgeous, resounding crash, spraying plastic cutlery and little packets of mustard, ketchup, and relish everywhere.

"Quickly!" he cried. "We can't be here! It's going to happen soon—at any moment, I believe—and we can't be here when it does! I don't think it's safe!"

"*What* isn't sa—" Bethany began, but then Albert put his arm around her shoulders and hustled her after Bob, a lunatic tour-guide who had already bolted for the cafeteria door.

They ran out, following him as he dashed for the United boarding lobby again. Now the echoing rattle of their footfalls was almost lost in the powerful hum which filled the deserted terminal, echoing and reechoing in the many throats of its spoked corridors.

Brian could hear that single vast note beginning to break up. It was not shattering, not even really changing, he thought, but *focussing*, the way the sound of the langoliers had focussed as they approached Bangor.

As they re-entered the boarding lounge, he saw an ethereal light begin to skate over the empty chairs, the dark ARRIVALS and DEPARTURES TV monitors, and the boarding desks. Red followed blue; yellow followed red; green followed yellow. Some rich and exotic expectation seemed to fill the air. A shiver chased through him; he felt all his body-hair stir and try to stand up. A clear assurance filled him like a morning sunray: *We are on the verge of something—some great and amazing thing.*

“Over here!” Bob shouted. He led them toward the wall beside the jetway through which they had entered. This was a passengers-only area, guarded by a red velvet rope. Bob jumped it as easily as the high-school hurdler he might once have been. “Against the wall!”

“Up against the wall, motherfuckers!” Albert cried through a spasm of sudden, uncontrollable laughter.

He and the rest joined Bob, pressing against the wall like suspects in a police line-up. In the deserted circular lounge which now lay before them, the colors flared for a moment ... and then began to fade out. The sound, however, continued to deepen and become more real. Brian thought he could now hear voices in that sound, and footsteps, even a few fussing babies.

“I don’t know what it is, but it’s *wonderful!*” Laurel cried. She was half-laughing, half-weeping. “I love it!”

“I hope we’re safe here,” Bob said. He had to raise his voice to be heard. “I think we will be. We’re out of the main traffic areas.”

“What’s going to happen?” Brian asked. “What do you know?”

“When we went through the time-rip headed east, we travelled back in time!” Bob shouted. “We went into the past! Perhaps as little as fifteen minutes . . . do you remember me telling you that?”

Brian nodded, and Albert’s face suddenly lit up.

“*This time it brought us into the future!*” Albert cried. “That’s it, isn’t it? *This time the rip brought us into the future!*”

“I believe so, yes!” Bob yelled back. He was grinning helplessly. “And instead of arriving in a dead world—a world which had moved on without us—we *have arrived in a world waiting to be born!* A world as fresh and new as a rose on the verge of opening! *That* is what is happening now, I believe. *That* is what we hear, and what we

sense . . . what has filled us with such marvellous, helpless joy. I believe we are about to see and experience something which no living man or woman has ever witnessed before. We have seen the death of the world; now I believe we are going to see it born. I believe that the present is on the verge of catching up to us.”

As the colors had flared and faded, so now the deep, reverberating quality of the sound suddenly dropped. At the same time, the voices which had been within it grew louder, clearer. Laurel realized she could make out words, even whole phrases.

“—have to call her before she decides—”

“—I really don’t think the option is a viable—”

“—home and dry if we can just turn this thing over to the parent company—”

That one passed directly before them through the emptiness on the other side of the velvet rope.

Brian Engle felt a kind of ecstasy rise within him, suffusing him in a glow of wonder and happiness. He took Laurel’s hand and grinned at her as she clasped it and then squeezed it fiercely. Beside them, Albert suddenly hugged Bethany, and she began to shower kisses all over his face, laughing as she did it. Bob and Rudy grinned at each other delightedly, like long-lost friends who have met by chance in one of the world’s more absurd backwaters.

Overhead, the fluorescent squares in the ceiling began to flash on. They went sequentially, racing out from the center of the room in an expanding circle of light that flowed down the concourse, chasing the night-shadows before it like a flock of black sheep.

Smells suddenly struck Brian with a bang: sweat, perfume, aftershave, cologne, cigarette smoke, leather, soap, industrial cleaner.

For a moment longer the wide circle of the boarding lounge remained deserted, a place haunted by the voices and footsteps of the not-quite-living. And Brian thought: *I am going to see it happen; I am going to see the moving present lock onto this stationary future and pull it along, the way hooks on moving express trains used to snatch bags of mail from the Postal Service poles standing by the*

*tracks in sleepy little towns down south and out west. I am going to see time itself open like a rose on a summer morning.*

“Brace yourselves,” Bob murmured. “There may be a jerk.”

A bare second later Brian felt a thud—not just in his feet, but all through his body. At the same instant he felt as if an invisible hand had given him a strong push, directly in the center of his back. He rocked forward and felt Laurel rock forward with him. Albert had to grab Rudy to keep him from falling over. Rudy didn’t seem to mind; a huge, goony smile split his face.

“Look!” Laurel gasped. “Oh, Brian—look!”

He looked . . . and felt his breath stop in his throat.

The boarding lounge was full of ghosts.

Ethereal, transparent figures crossed and crisscrossed the large central area: men in business suits toting briefcases, women in smart travelling dresses, teenagers in Levi’s and tee-shirts with rock-group logos printed on them. He saw a ghost-father leading two small ghost-children, and through them he could see more ghosts sitting in the chairs, reading transparent copies of *Cosmopolitan* and *Esquire* and *U.S. News & World Report*. Then color dove into the shapes in a series of cometary flickers, solidifying them, and the echoing voices resolved themselves into the prosaic stereo swarm of real human voices.

*Shooting stars*, Brian thought wonderingly. *Shooting stars only.*

The two children were the only ones who happened to be looking directly at the survivors of Flight 29 when the change took place; the children were the only ones who saw four men and two women appear in a place where there had only been a wall the second before.

“Daddy!” the little boy exclaimed, tugging his father’s right hand.

“Dad!” the little girl demanded, tugging his left.

“What?” he asked, tossing them an impatient glance. “I’m looking for your mother!”

“New people!” the little girl said, pointing at Brian and his bedraggled quintet of passengers. “Look at the new people!”

The man glanced at Brian and the others for a moment, and his mouth tightened nervously. It was the blood, Brian supposed. He,

Laurel, and Bethany had all suffered nosebleeds. The man tightened his grip on their hands and began to pull them away fast. “Yes, great. Now help me look for your mother. What a mess this turned out to be.”

“But they weren’t there *before!*” the little boy protested. “They—”  
Then they were gone into the hurrying crowds.

Brian glanced up at the monitors and noted the time as 4:17 A.M.  
*Too many people here, he thought, and I bet I know why.*

*As if to confirm this, the overhead speaker blared: “All eastbound flights out of Los Angeles International Airport continue to be delayed because of unusual weather patterns over the Mojave Desert. We are sorry for this inconvenience, but ask for your patience and understanding while this safety precaution is in force. Repeat: all eastbound flights. . .”*

*Unusual weather patterns, Brian thought. Oh yeah. Strangest goddam weather patterns ever.*

Laurel turned to Brian and looked up into his face. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she made no effort to wipe them away. “Did you hear her? Did you hear what that little girl said?”

“Yes.”

“Is that what we are, Brian? The new people? Do you think that’s what we are?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “but that’s what it feels like.”

“That was wonderful,” Albert said. “My God, that was the most wonderful thing.”

“*Totally tubular!*” Bethany yelled happily, and then began to clap out “Let’s Go” again.

“What do we do now, Brian?” Bob asked. “Any ideas?”

Brian glanced around at the choked boarding area and said, “I think I want to go outside. Breathe some fresh air. And look at the sky.”

“Shouldn’t we inform the authorities of what—”

“We will,” Brian said. “But the sky first.”

“And maybe something to eat on the way?” Rudy asked hopefully.

Brian laughed. “Why not?”

“My watch has stopped,” Bethany said.

Brian looked down at his wrist and saw that his watch had also stopped. *All* their watches had stopped.

Brian took his off, dropped it indifferently to the floor, and put his arm around Laurel's waist. "Let's blow this joint," he said. "Unless any of you want to wait for the next flight east?"

"Not today," Laurel said, "but soon. All the way to England. There's a man I have to see in ..." For one horrible moment the name wouldn't come to her ... and then it did. "Fluting," she said. "Ask anyone along the High Street. The old folks still just call him the gaffer."

"What are you talking about?" Albert asked.

"Daisies," she said, and laughed. "I'm talking about daisies. Come on—let's go."

Bob grinned widely, exposing baby-pink gums. "As for me, I think that the next time I have to go to Boston, I'll take the train."

Laurel toed Brian's watch and asked, "Are you sure you don't want that? It looks expensive."

Brian grinned, shook his head, and kissed her forehead. The smell of her hair was amazingly sweet. He felt more than good; he felt reborn, every inch of him new and fresh and unmarked by the world. He felt, in fact, that if he spread his arms, he would be able to fly without the aid of engines. "Not at all," he said. "I know what time it is."

"Oh? And what time is that?"

"It's half past *now*."

Albert clapped him on the back.

They left the boarding lounge in a group, weaving their way through the disgruntled clots of delayed passengers. A good many of these looked curiously after them, and not just because some of them appeared to have recently suffered nosebleeds, or because they were laughing their way through so many angry, inconvenienced people.

They looked because the six people seemed somehow *brighter* than anyone else in the crowded lounge.

More actual.

More *there*.

*Shooting stars only*, Brian thought, and suddenly remembered that there was one passenger still back on the plane—the man with the black beard. *This is one hangover that guy will never forget*, Brian thought, grinning. He swept Laurel into a run. She laughed and hugged him.

The six of them ran down the concourse together toward the escalators and all the outside world beyond.



**Secret Window, Secret Garden**

***THIS IS FOR CHUCK VERRILL.***

**TWO PAST MIDNIGHT**  
*A NOTE ON "SECRET WINDOW, SECRET GARDEN"*

I'm one of those people who believe that life is a series of cycles—wheels within wheels, some meshing with others, some spinning alone, but all of them performing some finite, repeating function. I like that abstract image of life as something like an efficient factory machine, probably because actual life, up close and personal, seems so messy and strange. It's nice to be able to pull away every once in awhile and say, "There's a pattern there after all! I'm not sure what it means, but by God, I see it!"

All of these wheels seem to finish their cycles at roughly the same time, and when they do—about every twenty years would be my guess—we go through a time when we end things. Psychologists have even lifted a parliamentary term to describe this phenomenon—they call it cloture.

I'm forty-two now, and as I look back over the last four years of my life I can see all sorts of cloture. It's as apparent in my work as anywhere else. In *It*, I took an outrageous amount of space to finish talking about children and the wide perceptions which light their interior lives. Next year I intend to publish the last Castle Rock novel, *Needful Things* (the last story in this volume, "The Sun Dog," forms a prologue to that novel). And this story is, I think, the last story about writers and writing and the strange no man's land which exists between what's real and what's make-believe. I believe a good many

of my long-time readers, who have borne my fascination with this subject patiently, will be glad to hear that.

A few years ago I published a novel called *Misery* which tried, at least in part, to illustrate the powerful hold fiction can achieve over the reader. Last year I published *The Dark Half*, where I tried to explore the converse: the powerful hold fiction can achieve over the writer. While that book was between drafts, I started to think that there might be a way to tell both stories at the same time by approaching some of the plot elements of *The Dark Half* from a totally different angle. Writing, it seems to me, is a secret act—as secret as dreaming—and that was one aspect of this strange and dangerous craft I had never thought about much.

I knew that writers have from time to time revised old works—John Fowles did it with *The Magus*, and I have done it myself with *The Stand*—but revision was not what I had in mind. What I wanted to do was to take familiar elements and put them together in an entirely new way. This I had tried to do at least once before, restructuring and updating the basic elements of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to create 'Salem's Lot, and I was fairly comfortable with the idea.

One day in the late fall of 1987, while these things were tumbling around in my head, I stopped in the laundry room of our house to drop a dirty shirt into the washing machine. Our laundry room is a small, narrow alcove on the second floor. I disposed of the shirt and then stepped over to one of the room's two windows. It was casual curiosity, no more. We've been living in the same house for eleven or twelve years now, but I had never taken a good hard look out this particular window before. The reason is perfectly simple; set at floor level, mostly hidden behind the drier, half blocked by baskets of mending, it's a hard window to look out of.

I squeezed in, nevertheless, and looked out. That window looks down on a little brick-paved alcove between the house and the attached sunporch. It's an area I see just about every day . . . but the *angle* was new. My wife had set half a dozen pots out there, so the plants could take a little of the early-November sun, I suppose, and the result was a charming little garden which only I could see. The phrase which occurred to me was, of course, the title of this story. It

seemed to me as good a metaphor as any for what writers—especially writers of fantasy—do with their days and nights. Sitting down at the typewriter or picking up a pencil is a physical act; the spiritual analogue is looking out of an almost forgotten window, a window which offers a common view from an entirely different angle . . . an angle which renders the common extraordinary. The writer's job is to gaze through that window and report on what he sees.

But sometimes windows break. I think that, more than anything else, is the concern of this story: what happens to the wide-eyed observer when the window between reality and unreality breaks and the glass begins to fly?

## 1

“You stole my story,” the man on the doorstep said. “You stole my story and something's got to be done about it. Right is right and fair is fair and something has to be done.”

Morton Rainey, who had just gotten up from a nap and who was still feeling only halfway into the real world, didn't have the slightest idea what to say. This was never the case when he was at work, sick or well, wide awake or half asleep; he was a writer, and hardly ever at a loss when it became necessary to fill a character's mouth with a snappy comeback. Rainey opened his mouth, found no snappy comeback there (not even a limp one, in fact), and so closed it again.

He thought: *This man doesn't look exactly real. He looks like a character out of a novel by William Faulkner.*

This was of no help in resolving the situation, but it was undeniably true. The man who had rung Rainey's doorbell out here in the western Maine version of nowhere looked about forty-five. He was very thin. His face was calm, almost serene, but carved with deep lines. They moved horizontally across his high brow in regular waves, cut vertically downward from the ends of his thin lips to his jawline, and radiated outward in tiny sprays from the corners of his

eyes. The eyes were bright, unfaded blue. Rainey couldn't tell what color his hair was; he wore a large black hat with a round crown planted squarely on his head. The underside of the brim touched the tops of his ears. It looked like the sort of hat Quakers wore. He had no sideburns, either, and for all Morton Rainey knew, he might be as bald as Telly Savalas under that round-crowned felt hat.

He was wearing a blue work-shirt. It was buttoned neatly all the way to the loose, razor-reddened flesh of his neck, although he wore no tie. The bottom of the shirt disappeared into a pair of blue-jeans that looked a little too big for the man who was wearing them. They ended in cuffs which lay neatly on a pair of faded yellow work-shoes which looked made for walking in a furrow of played-out earth about three and a half feet behind a mule's ass.

"Well?" he asked when Rainey continued to say nothing.

"I don't know you," Rainey said finally. It was the first thing he'd said since he'd gotten up off the couch and come to answer the door, and it sounded sublimely stupid in his own ears.

"I know *that*," said the man. "*That* doesn't matter. I know *you*, Mr. Rainey. *That's* what matters." And then he reiterated: "You stole my story."

He held out his hand, and for the first time Rainey saw that he had something in it. It was a sheaf of paper. But not just any old sheaf of paper; it was a manuscript. After you've been in the business awhile, he thought, you always recognized the look of a manuscript. Especially an unsolicited one.

And, belatedly, he thought: *Good thing for you it wasn't a gun, Mort old kid. You would have been in hell before you knew you were dead.*

And, even more belatedly, he realized that he was probably dealing with one of the Crazy Folks. It was long overdue, of course; although his last three books had been best-sellers, this was his first visit from one of that fabled tribe. He felt a mixture of fear and chagrin, and his thoughts narrowed to a single point: how to get rid of the guy as fast as possible, and with as little unpleasantness as possible.

"I don't read manuscripts—" he began.

“You read this one already,” the man with the hard-working sharecropper’s face said evenly. “You stole it.” He spoke as if stating a simple fact, like a man noting that the sun was out and it was a pleasant fall day.

All of Mort’s thoughts were belated this afternoon, it seemed; he now realized for the first time how alone he was out here. He had come to the house in Tashmore Glen in early October, after two miserable months in New York; his divorce had become final just last week.

It was a big house, but it was a summer place, and Tashmore Glen was a summer town. There were maybe twenty cottages on this particular road running along the north bay of Tashmore Lake, and in July or August there would be people staying in most or all of them... but this wasn’t July or August. It was late October. The sound of a gunshot, he realized, would probably drift away unheard. If it was heard, the hearers would simply assume someone was shooting at quail or pheasant—it was the season.

“I can assure you—”

“I *know* you can,” the man in the black hat said with that same unearthly patience. “I *know* that.”

Behind him, Mort could see the car the man had come in. It was an old station wagon which looked as if it had seen a great many miles, very few of them on good roads. He could see that the plate on it wasn’t from the State of Maine, but couldn’t tell what state it was from; he’d known for some time now that he needed to go to the optometrist and have his glasses changed, had even planned early last summer to do that little chore, but then Henry Young had called him one day in April, asking who the fellow was he’d seen Amy with at the mall—some relative, maybe?—and the suspicions which had culminated in the eerily quick and quiet no-fault divorce had begun, the shitstorm which had taken up all his time and energy these last few months. During that time he had been doing well if he remembered to change his underwear, let alone handle more esoteric things like optometrist appointments.

“If you want to talk to someone about some grievance you feel you have,” Mort began uncertainly, hating the pompous, talking-

boilerplate sound of his own voice but not knowing how else to reply, “you could talk to my ag—”

“This is between you and me,” the man on the doorstep said patiently. Bump, Mort’s tomcat, had been curled up on the low cabinet built into the side of the house—you had to store your garbage in a closed compartment or the raccoons came in the night and pulled it all over hell—and now he jumped down and twined his way sinuously between the stranger’s legs. The stranger’s bright-blue eyes never left Rainey’s face. “We don’t need any outsiders, Mr. Rainey. It is strictly between you and me.”

“I don’t like being accused of plagiarism, if that’s what you’re doing,” Mort said. At the same time, part of his mind was cautioning him that you had to be very careful when dealing with people of the Crazy Folks tribe. Humor them? Yes. But this man didn’t seem to have a gun, and Mort outweighed him by at least fifty pounds. *I’ve also got five or ten years on him, by the look*, he thought. He had read that a bona-fide Crazy Guy could muster abnormal strength, but he was damned if he was simply going to stand here and let this man he had never seen before go on saying that he, Morton Rainey, had stolen his story. Not without some kind of rebuttal.

“I don’t blame you for not liking it,” the man in the black hat said. He spoke in the same patient and serene way. He spoke, Mort thought, like a therapist whose work is teaching small children who are retarded in some mild way. “But you did it. You stole my story.”

“You’ll have to leave,” Mort said. He was fully awake now, and he no longer felt so bewildered, at such a disadvantage. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Yes, I’ll go,” the man said. “We’ll talk more later.” He held out the sheaf of manuscript, and Mort actually found himself reaching for it. He put his hand back down to his side just before his uninvited and unwanted guest could slip the manuscript into it, like a process server finally slipping a subpoena to a man who has been ducking it for months.

“I’m not taking that,” Mort said, and part of him was marvelling at what a really accommodating beast a man was: when someone held something out to you, your first instinct was to take it. No matter if it

was a check for a thousand dollars or a stick of dynamite with a lit and fizzing fuse, your first instinct was to take it.

“Won’t do you any good to play games with me, Mr. Rainey,” the man said mildly. “This has got to be settled.”

“So far as I’m concerned, it is,” Mort said, and closed the door on that lined, used, and somehow timeless face.

He had only felt a moment or two of fear, and those had come when he first realized, in a disoriented and sleep-befogged way, what this man was saying. Then it had been swallowed by anger—anger at being bothered during his nap, and more anger at the realization that he was being bothered by a representative of the Crazy Folks.

Once the door was closed, the fear returned. He pressed his lips together and waited for the man to start pounding on it. And when that didn’t come, he became convinced that the man was just standing out there, still as a stone and as patient as same, waiting for him to reopen the door... as he would have to do, sooner or later.

Then he heard a low thump, followed by a series of light steps crossing the board porch. Mort walked into the master bedroom, which looked out on the driveway. There were two big windows in here, one giving on the driveway and the shoulder of hill behind it, the other providing a view of the slope which fell away to the blue and agreeable expanse of Tashmore Lake. Both windows were reflectorized, which meant he could look out but anyone trying to look in would see only his own distorted image, unless he put his nose to the glass and cupped his eyes against the glare.

He saw the man in the work-shirt and cuffed blue-jeans walking back to his old station wagon. From this angle, he could make out the license plate’s state of issue—Mississippi. As the man opened the driver’s-side door, Mort thought: *Oh shit. The gun’s in the car. He didn’t have it on him because he believed he could reason with me ... whatever his idea of “reasoning” is. But now he’s going to get it and come back. It’s probably in the glove compartment or under the seat—*

But the man got in behind the wheel, pausing only long enough to take off his black hat and toss it down beside him. As he slammed

the door and started the engine, Mort thought, *There's something different about him now*. But it wasn't until his unwanted afternoon visitor had backed up the driveway and out of sight behind the thick screen of bushes Mort kept forgetting to trim that he realized what it was.

When the man got into his car, he had no longer been holding the manuscript.

## 2

It was on the back porch. There was a rock on it to keep the individual pages from blowing all over the little dooryard in the light breeze. The small thump he'd heard had been the man putting the rock on the manuscript.

Mort stood in the doorway, hands in the pockets of his khaki pants, looking at it. He knew that craziness wasn't catching (except maybe in cases of prolonged exposure, he supposed), but he still didn't want to touch the goddam thing. He supposed he would have to, though. He didn't know just how long he would be here—a day, a week, a month, and a year all looked equally possible at this point—but he couldn't just let the fucking thing sit there. Greg Carstairs, his caretaker, would be down early this afternoon to give him an estimate on how much it would cost to reshingle the house, for one thing, and Greg would wonder what it was. Worse, he would probably assume it was Mort's, and that would entail more explanations than the damned thing was worth.

He stood there until the sound of his visitor's engine had merged into the low, slow hum of the afternoon, and then he went out on the porch, walking carefully in his bare feet (the porch had needed painting for at least a year now, and the dry wood was prickly with potential splinters), and tossed the rock into the juniper-choked gully to the left of the porch. He picked up the little sheaf of pages and looked down at it. The top one was a title page. It read:

## SECRET WINDOW, SECRET GARDEN

### *By John Shooter*

Mort felt a moment's relief in spite of himself. He had never heard of John Shooter, and he had never read or written a short story called "Secret Window, Secret Garden" in his life.

He tossed the manuscript in the kitchen wastebasket on his way by, went back to the couch in the living room, lay down again, and was asleep in five minutes.

He dreamed of Amy. He slept a great lot and he dreamed of Amy a great lot these days, and waking up to the sound of his own hoarse shouts no longer surprised him much. He supposed it would pass.

### 3

The next morning he was sitting in front of his word processor in the small nook off the living room which had always served as his study when they were down here. The word processor was on, but Mort was looking out the window at the lake. Two motor-boats were out there, cutting broad white wakes in the blue water. He had thought they were fishermen at first, but they never slowed down—just cut back and forth across each other's bows in big loops. Kids, he decided. Just kids playing games.

They weren't doing anything very interesting, but then, neither was he. He hadn't written anything worth a damn since he had left Amy. He sat in front of the word processor every day from nine to eleven, just as he had every day for the last three years (and for about a thousand years before that he had spent those two hours sitting in front of an old Royal office model), but for all the good he was doing with it, he might as well have traded it in on a motor-boat and gone out grab-assing with the kids on the lake.

Today, he had written the following lines of deathless prose during his two-hour stint:

Four days after George had confirmed to his own satisfaction that his wife was cheating on him, he confronted her.

“I have to talk to you, Abby,” he said.

It was no good.

It was too close to real life to be good.

He had never been so hot when it came to real life. Maybe that was part of the problem.

He turned off the word processor, realizing just a second after he'd flicked the switch that he'd forgotten to save the document. Well, that was all right. Maybe it had even been the critic in his subconscious, telling him the document wasn't worth saving.

Mrs. Gavin had apparently finished upstairs; the drone of the Electrolux had finally ceased. She came in every Tuesday to clean, and she had been shocked into a silence very unlike her when Mort had told her two Tuesdays ago that he and Amy were quits. He suspected that she had liked Amy a good deal more than she had liked him. But she was still coming, and Mort supposed that was something.

He got up and went out into the living room just as Mrs. Gavin came down the main staircase. She was holding the vacuum-cleaner hose and dragging the small tubular machine after her. It came down in a series of thumps, looking like a small mechanical dog. *If I tried to pull the vacuum downstairs that way, it'd smack into one of my ankles and then roll all the way to the bottom,* Mort thought. *How does she get it to do that, I wonder?*

“Hi there, Mrs. G.,” he said, and crossed the living room toward the kitchen door. He wanted a Coke. Writing shit always made him thirsty.

“Hello, Mr. Rainey.” He had tried to get her to call him Mort, but she wouldn't. She wouldn't even call him Morton. Mrs. Gavin was a woman of her principles, but her principles had never kept her from calling his wife Amy.

*Maybe I should tell her I caught Amy in bed with another man at one of Derry's finer motels,* Mort thought as he pushed through the

swing door. *She might go back to calling her Mrs. Rainey again, at the very least.*

This was an ugly and mean-spirited thought, the kind of thinking he suspected was at the root of his writing problems, but he didn't seem to be able to help it. Perhaps it would also pass... like the dreams. For some reason this idea made him think of a bumper sticker he'd seen once on the back of a very old VW beetle. CONSTIPATED—CANNOT PASS, the sticker had read.

As the kitchen door swung back, Mrs. Gavin called: "I found one of your stories in the trash, Mr. Rainey. I thought you might want it, so I put it on the counter."

"Okay," he said, having no idea what she might be talking about. He was not in the habit of tossing bad manuscripts or frags in the kitchen trash. When he produced a stinker—and lately he had produced more than his share—it went either directly to data heaven or into the circular file to the right of his word-processing station.

The man with the lined face and round black Quaker hat never even entered his mind.

He opened the refrigerator door, moved two small Tupperware dishes filled with nameless leftovers, discovered a bottle of Pepsi, and opened it as he nudged the fridge door closed with his hip. As he went to toss the cap in the trash, he saw the manuscript—its title page was spotted with something that looked like orange juice, but otherwise it was all right—sitting on the counter by the Silex. *Then* he remembered. John Shooter, right. Charter member of the Crazy Folks, Mississippi Branch.

He took a drink of Pepsi, then picked up the manuscript. He put the title page on the bottom and saw this at the head of the first page:

John Shooter  
General Delivery  
Dellacourt, Mississippi

30 pages  
Approximately 7500 words

## Selling 1st serial rights, North America

### SECRET WINDOW, SECRET GARDEN *By John Shooter*

The manuscript had been typed on a good grade of bond paper, but the machine must have been a sad case—an old office model, from the look, and not very well maintained. Most of the letters were as crooked as an old man's teeth.

He read the first sentence, then the second, then the third, and for a few moments clear thought ceased.

Todd Downey thought that a woman who would steal your love when your love was really all you had was not much of a woman. He therefore decided to kill her. He would do it in the deep corner formed where the house and barn came together at an extreme angle—he would do it where his wife kept her garden.

“Oh shit,” Mort said, and put the manuscript back down. His arm struck the Pepsi bottle. It overturned, foaming and fizzing across the counter and running down the cabinet facings. “Oh *SHIT!*” he yelled.

Mrs. Gavin came in a hurry, surveyed the situation, and said: “Oh, that's nothing. I thought from the sound that maybe you'd cut your own throat. Move a little, can't you, Mr. Rainey?”

He moved, and the first thing she did was to pick the sheaf of manuscript up off the counter and thrust it back into his hands. It was still okay; the soda had run the other way. He had once been a man with a fairly good sense of humor—he had always thought so, anyway—but as he looked down at the little pile of paper in his hands, the best he could manage was a sour sense of irony. *It's like the cat in the nursery rhyme*, he thought. *The one that kept coming back.*

“If you're trying to wreck that,” Mrs. Gavin said, nodding at the manuscript as she got a dishrag from under the sink, “you're on the right track.”

“It's not mine,” he said, but it was funny, wasn't it? Yesterday, when he had almost reached out and taken the script from the man who

had brought it to him, he'd thought about what an accommodating beast a man was. Apparently that urge to accommodate stretched in all directions, because the first thing he'd felt when he read those three sentences was guilt ... and wasn't that just what Shooter (if that was really his name) had wanted him to feel? Of course it was. *You stole my story*, he'd said, and weren't thieves supposed to feel guilty?

"Pardon me, Mr. Rainey," Mrs. Gavin said, holding up the dishrag.

He stepped aside so she could get at the spill. "It's not mine," he repeated—insisted, really.

"Oh," she said, wiping up the spill on the counter and then stepping to the sink to wring out the cloth. "I thought it was."

"It says John Shooter," he said, putting the title page back on top and turning it toward her. "See?"

Mrs. Gavin favored the title page with the shortest glance politeness would allow and then began wiping the cabinet faces. "Thought it was one of those whatchacallums," she said. "Pseudonyms. Or nyms. Whatever the word is for pen names."

"I don't use one," he said. "I never have."

This time she favored *him* with a brief glance—country shrewd and slightly amused—before getting down on her knees to wipe up the puddle of Pepsi on the floor. "Don't s'pose you'd tell me if you did," she said.

"I'm sorry about the spill," he said, edging toward the door.

"My job," she said shortly. She didn't look up again. Mort took the hint and left.

He stood in the living room for a moment, looking at the abandoned vacuum cleaner in the middle of the rug. In his head he heard the man with the lined face saying patiently, *This is between you and me. We don't need any outsiders, Mr. Rainey. It is strictly between you and me.*

Mort thought of that face, recalled it carefully to a mind which was trained to recall faces and actions, and thought: *It wasn't just a momentary aberration, or a bizarre way to meet an author he may or may not consider famous. He will be back.*

He suddenly headed back into his study, rolling the manuscript into a tube as he went.

## 4

Three of the four study walls were lined with bookshelves, and one of them had been set aside for the various editions, domestic and foreign, of his works. He had published six books in all: five novels and a collection of short stories. The book of short stories and his first two novels had been well received by his immediate family and a few friends. His third novel, *The Organ-Grinder's Boy*, had been an instant best-seller. The early works had been reissued after he became a success, and had done quite well, but they had never been as popular as his later books.

The short-story collection was called *Everybody Drops the Dime*, and most of the tales had originally been published in the men's magazines, sandwiched around pictures of women wearing lots of eye make-up and not much else. One of the stories, however, had been published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. It was called "Sowing Season," and it was to this story he now turned.

A woman who would steal your love when your love was all you had wasn't much of a woman—that, at least, was Tommy Havelock's opinion. He decided to kill her. He even knew the place he would do it, the exact place: the little patch of garden she kept in the extreme angle formed where the house and the barn came together.

Mort sat down and worked his way slowly through the two stories, reading back and forth. By the time he was halfway through, he understood he really didn't need to go any further. They varied in diction in some places; in many others even that was the same, word for word. Diction aside, they were *exactly* the same. In both of them, a man killed his wife. In both of them, the wife was a cold, loveless bitch who cared only for her garden and her canning. In both of

them, the killer buried his spousal victim in her garden and then tended it, growing a really spectacular crop. In Morton Rainey's version, the crop was beans. In Shooter's, it was corn. In both versions, the killer eventually went crazy and was discovered by the police eating vast amounts of the vegetable in question and swearing he would be rid of her, that in the end he would finally be rid of her.

Mort had never considered himself much of a horror-story writer—and there was nothing supernatural about “Sowing Season”—but it had been a creepy little piece of work all the same. Amy had finished it with a little shiver and said, “I suppose it's good, but that man's mind... God, Mort, what a can of worms.”

That had summed up his own feelings pretty well. The landscape of “Sowing Season” wasn't one he would care to travel through often, and it was no “Tell-Tale Heart,” but he thought he had done a fair job of painting Tom Havelock's homicidal breakdown. The editor at *EQMM* had agreed, and so had the readers—the story had generated favorable mail. The editor had asked for more, but Mort had never come up with another story even remotely like “Sowing Season.”

“I know I can do it,” Todd Downey said, helping himself to another ear of corn from the steaming bowl. “I'm sure that in time all of her will be gone.”

That was how Shooter's ended.

“I am confident I can take care of this business,” Tom Havelock told them, and helped himself to another portion of beans from the brimming, steaming bowl. “I'm sure that, in time, her death will be a mystery even to me.”

That was how Mort Rainey's ended.

Mort closed his copy of *Everybody Drops the Dime* and replaced it thoughtfully on his shelf of first editions.

He sat down and began to rummage slowly and thoroughly through the drawers of his desk. It was a big one, so big the furniture

men had had to bring it into the room in sections, and it had a lot of drawers. The desk was solely his domain; neither Amy nor Mrs. G. had ever set a hand to it, and the drawers were full of ten years' worth of accumulated rick-rack. It had been four years since Mort had given up smoking, and if there were any cigarettes left in the house, this was where they would be. If he found some, he would smoke. Just about now, he was crazy for a smoke. If he didn't find any, that was all right, too; going through his junk was soothing. Old letters which he'd put aside to answer and never had, what had once seemed so important now looking antique, even arcane; postcards he'd bought but never mailed; chunks of manuscript in varying stages of completion; half a bag of very elderly Doritos; envelopes; paper-clips; cancelled checks. He could sense layers here which were almost geological—layers of summer life frozen in place. And it *was* soothing. He finished one drawer and went on to the next, thinking all the while about John Shooter and how John Shooter's story—*his* story, goddammit!—had made him feel.

The most obvious thing, of course, was that it had made him feel like he needed a cigarette. This wasn't the first time he'd felt that way in the last four years; there had been times when just seeing someone puffing away behind the wheel of a car next to his at a stoplight could set off a raging momentary lust for tobacco. But the key word there, of course, was "momentary." Those feelings passed in a hurry, like fierce rain-squalls—five minutes after a blinding silver curtain of rain has dropped out of the sky, the sun is shining again. He'd never felt the need to turn in to the next convenience store on his way for a deck of smokes ... or go rummaging through his glove compartment for a stray or two as he was now rummaging through his desk.

He felt *guilty*, and that was absurd. Infuriating. He had not stolen John Shooter's story, and he knew he hadn't—if there had been stealing (and there must have been; for the two stories to be that close without prior knowledge on the part of one of the two players was impossible for Mort to believe), then it had been *Shooter* who had stolen from *him*.

Of course.

It was as plain as the nose on his face... or the round black hat on John Shooter's head.

Yet he still felt upset, unsettled, guilty... he felt *at a loss* in a way for which there was perhaps no word. And why? Well—because ...

At that moment Mort lifted up a Xerox of *The Organ-Grinder's Boy* manuscript, and there, beneath it, was a package of L & M cigarettes. Did they even *make* L & M's anymore? He didn't know. The pack was old, crumpled, but definitely not flat. He took it out and looked at it. He reflected that he must have bought this particular pack in 1985, according to the informal science of stratification one might call—for want of a better word—Deskology.

He peered inside the pack. He saw three little coffin nails, all in a row.

*Time-travellers from another age*, Mort thought. He stuck one of the cigarettes in his mouth, then went out into the kitchen to get a match from the box by the stove. *Time-travellers from another age, riding up through the years, patient cylindrical voyagers, their mission to wait, to persevere, to bide until the proper moment to start me on the road to lung cancer again finally arrives. And it seems the time has finally come.*

"It'll probably taste like shit," he said aloud to the empty house (Mrs. Gavin had long since gone home), and set fire to the tip of the cigarette. It didn't taste like shit, though. It tasted pretty good. He wandered back toward his study, puffing away and feeling pleasantly lightheaded. *Ah, the dreadful patient persistence of addiction*, he thought. What had Hemingway said? Not this August, nor this September—this year you have to do what you like. But the time comes around again. It always does. Sooner or later you stick something back in your big dumb old mouth again. A drink, a smoke, maybe the barrel of a shotgun. Not this August, nor this September...

... unfortunately, this was October.

At an earlier point in his prospecting, he had found an old bottle half full of Planter's Peanuts. He doubted if the nuts would be fit to eat, but the lid of the bottle made a fine ashtray. He sat behind his desk, looked out at the lake (like Mrs. G., the boats which had been out there earlier were gone), relished his old, vile habit, and found he

could think about John Shooter and John Shooter's story with a little more equanimity.

The man *was* one of the Crazy Folks, of course; that was now proven in brass if any further proof had been needed. As to how it had made him feel, finding that the similarity actually existed ...

Well, a story was a thing, a real thing—you could think of it like that, anyway, especially if someone had paid you for it—but in another, more important, way, it wasn't a thing at all. It wasn't like a vase, or a chair, or an automobile. It was ink on paper, but it wasn't the ink and it wasn't the paper. People sometimes asked him where he got his ideas, and although he scoffed at the question, it always made him feel vaguely ashamed, vaguely spurious. They seemed to feel there was a Central Idea Dump somewhere (just as there was supposed to be an elephant graveyard somewhere, and a fabled lost city of gold somewhere else), and he must have a secret map which allowed him to get there and back, but Mort knew better. He could remember *where he had been* when certain ideas came to him, and he knew that the idea was often the result of seeing or sensing some odd connection between objects or events or people which had never seemed to have the slightest connection before, but that was the best he could do. As to why he should see these connections or want to make stories out of them after he had ... to that he hadn't a clue.

If John Shooter had come to his door and said "You stole my car" instead of "You stole my story," Mort would have scotched the idea quickly and decisively. He could have done it even if the two cars in question had been the same year, make, model, and color. He would have shown the man in the round black hat his automobile registration, invited him to compare the number on the pink slip to the one on the doorpost, and sent him packing.

But when you got a story idea, no one gave you a bill of sale. There was no provenance to be traced. Why would there be? Nobody gave you a bill of sale when you got something for free. You charged whoever wanted to buy that thing from *you*—oh yes, all the traffic would bear, and a little more than that, if you could, to make up for all the times the bastards shorted you—magazines, newspapers,

book publishers, movie companies. But the item came to you free, clear, and unencumbered. That was it, he decided. That was why he felt guilty even though he knew he hadn't plagiarized Farmer John Shooter's story. He felt guilty because writing stories had *always* felt a little bit like stealing, and probably always would. John Shooter just happened to be the first person to show up on his doorstep and accuse him of it right out loud. He thought that, subconsciously, he had been expecting something like this for years.

Mort crushed out his cigarette and decided to take a nap. Then he decided that was a bad idea. It would be better, healthier both mentally and physically, to eat some lunch, read for half an hour or so, and then go for a nice long walk down by the lake. He was sleeping too much, and sleeping too much was a sign of depression. Halfway to the kitchen, he deviated to the long sectional couch by the window-wall in the living room. *The hell with it*, he thought, putting a pillow under his neck and another one behind his head. *I AM depressed.*

His last thought before drifting off was a repeat: *He's not done with me yet. Oh no, not this guy. He's a repeater.*

## 5

He dreamed he was lost in a vast cornfield. He blundered from one row to the next, and the sun glinted off the watches he was wearing—half a dozen on each forearm, and each watch set to a different time.

*Please help me! he cried. Someone please help me! I'm lost and afraid!*

Ahead of him, the corn on both sides of the row shook and rustled. Amy stepped out from one side. John Shooter stepped out from the other. Both of them held knives.

*I am confident I can take care of this business*, Shooter said as they advanced on him with their knives raised. *I'm sure that, in time,*

*your death will be a mystery even to us.*

Mort turned to run, but a hand—Amy’s, he was sure—seized him by the belt and pulled him back. And then the knives, glittering in the hot sun of this huge secret garden—

## 6

It was the telephone which woke him an hour and a quarter later. He struggled out of a terrible dream—someone had been chasing him, that was all he could clearly remember—to a sitting position on the couch. He was horribly hot; every inch of his skin seemed to be running with sweat. The sun had crept around to this side of the house while he was sleeping and had shone in on him through the window-wall for God knew how long.

Mort walked slowly toward the telephone table in the front hall, plodding like a man in a diver’s suit walking in the bed of a river against the current, his head thumping slowly, his mouth tasting like old dead gopher-shit. For every step he took forward, the entrance to the hall seemed to retreat a step, and it occurred to Mort, not for the first time, that hell was probably like the way you felt after sleeping too long and too hard on a hot afternoon. The worst of it wasn’t physical. The worst was that dismaying, disorienting sense of being outside yourself, somehow—just an observer looking through dual TV cameras with blurry lenses.

He picked up the phone thinking it would be Shooter.

*Yeah, it’ll be him, all right—the one person in the whole wide world I shouldn’t be talking to with my guard down and one half of my mind feeling unbuttoned from the other half. Sure it’ll be him—who else?*

“Hello?”

It wasn’t Shooter, but as he listened to the voice on the other end of the line reply to his greeting, he discovered there was at least one other person to whom he had no business talking while in a psychically vulnerable state.

“Hello, Mort,” Amy said. “Are you all right?”

## 7

Some time later that afternoon, Mort donned the extra-large red flannel shirt he used as a jacket in the early fall and took the walk he should have taken earlier. Bump the cat followed him long enough to ascertain that Mort was serious, then returned to the house.

He walked slowly and deliberately through an exquisite afternoon which seemed to be all blue sky, red leaves, and golden air. He walked with his hands stuffed into his pockets, trying to let the lake’s quiet work through his skin and calm him down, as it had always done before—he supposed that was the reason he had come here instead of staying in New York, as Amy had expected him to do, while they trundled steadily along toward divorce. He had come here because it was a magic place, especially in autumn, and he had felt, when he arrived, that if there was a sad sack anywhere on the planet who needed a little magic, he was that person. And if that old magic failed him now that the writing had turned so sour, he wasn’t sure what he would do.

It turned out that he didn’t need to worry about it. After a while the silence and that queer atmosphere of suspension which always seemed to possess Tashmore Lake when fall had finally come and the summer people had finally gone began to work on him, loosening him up like gently kneading hands. But now he had something besides John Shooter to think about; he had Amy to think about as well.

“Of course I’m all right,” he’d said, speaking as carefully as a drunk trying to convince people that he’s sober. In truth, he was still so muzzy that he felt a little bit drunk. The shapes of words felt too big in his mouth, like chunks of soft, friable rock, and he had proceeded with great care, groping his way through the opening formalities and

gambits of telephone conversation as if for the first time. “How are *you?*”

“Oh, fine, I’m fine,” she said, and then trilled the quick little laugh which usually meant she was either flirting or nervous as hell, and Mort doubted that she was flirting with him—not at this point. The realization that she was nervous, too, set him a little more at ease. “It’s just that you’re alone down there, and almost anything could happen and nobody would know—” She broke off abruptly.

“I’m really not alone,” he said mildly. “Mrs. Gavin was here today and Greg Carstairs is always around.”

“Oh, I forgot about the roof repairs,” Amy said, and for a moment he marvelled at how natural they sounded, how natural and undivorced. *Listening to us*, Mort thought, *you’d never guess there’s a rogue real-estate agent in my bed ... or*

*what used to be my bed.* He waited for the anger to come back—the hurt, jealous, cheated anger—but only a ghost stirred where those lively if unpleasant feelings had been.

“Well, *Greg* didn’t forget,” he assured her. “He came down yesterday and crawled around on the roof for an hour and a half.”

“How bad is it?”

He told her, and they talked about the roof for the next five minutes or so, while Mort slowly woke up; they talked about that old roof as if things were just the same as they always had been, talked about it as if they would be spending next summer under the new cedar shingles just as they had spent the last nine summers under the old cedar shingles. Mort thought: *Gimme a roof, gimme some shingles, and I’ll talk to this bitch forever.*

As he listened to himself holding up his side of the conversation, he felt a deepening sense of unreality settling in. It felt as if he were returning to the half-waking, half-sleeping zombie state in which he had answered the phone, and at last he couldn’t stand it anymore. If this was some sort of contest to see who could go the longest pretending that the last six months had never happened, then he was willing to concede. More than willing.

She was asking where Greg was going to get the cedar shakes and if he would be using a crew from town when Mort broke in. “Why

*did* you call, Amy?”

There was a moment's silence in which he sensed her trying on responses and then rejecting them, like a woman trying on hats, and that *did* cause the anger to stir again. It was one of the things—one of the few things, actually—that he could honestly say he detested in her. That totally unconscious duplicity.

“I *told* you why,” she said at last. “To see if you were all right.” She sounded flustered and unsure of herself again, and that usually meant she was telling the truth. When Amy lied, she always sounded as if she was telling you the world was round. “I had one of my feelings—I know you don't believe in them, but I think you do know that I get them, and that *I* believe in them... don't you, Mort?” There was none of her usual posturing or defensive anger, that was the thing—she sounded almost as if she were pleading with him.

“Yeah, I know that.”

“Well, I had one. I was making myself a sandwich for lunch, and I had a feeling that you... that you might not be all right. I held off for awhile—I thought it would go away, but it didn't. So I finally called. You are all right, aren't you?”

“Yes,” he said.

“And nothing's happened?”

“Well, something *did* happen,” he said, after only a moment of interior debate. He thought it was possible, maybe even likely, that John Shooter (*if that's really his name*, his mind insisted on adding) had tried to make contact with him in Derry before coming down here. Derry, after all, was where he usually was at this time of year. Amy might even have sent him down here.

“I *knew* it,” she said. “Did you hurt yourself with that goddam chainsaw? Or—”

“Nothing requiring hospitalization,” he said, smiling a little. “Just an annoyance. Does the name John Shooter ring a bell with you, Amy?”

“No, why?”

He let an irritated little sigh escape through his closed teeth like steam. Amy was a bright woman, but she had always had a bit of a dead-short between her brain and her mouth. He remembered once musing that she should have a tee-shirt reading SPEAK NOW,

THINK LATER. “Don’t say no right off the bat. Take a few seconds and really think about it. The guy is fairly tall, about six feet, and I’d guess he’s in his mid-forties. His face looked older, but he *moved* like a man in his forties. He has a country kind of face. Lots of color, lots of sun-wrinkles. When I saw him, I thought he looked like a character out of Faulk—”

“What’s this all about, Mort?”

Now he felt all the way back; now he could understand again why, as hurt and confused as he had been, he had rejected the urges he felt—mostly at night—to ask her if they couldn’t at least *try* to reconcile their differences. He supposed he knew that, if he asked long enough and hard enough, she would agree. But facts were facts; there had been a lot more wrong with their marriage than Amy’s real-estate salesman. The drilling quality her voice had taken on now—that was another symptom of what had killed them. *What have you done now?* the tone under the words asked... no, demanded. *What kind of a mess have you gotten yourself into now? Explain yourself.*

He closed his eyes and hissed breath through his clenched teeth again before answering. Then he told her about John Shooter, and Shooter’s manuscript, and his own short story. Amy clearly remembered “Sowing Season,” but said she had never heard of a man named John Shooter—it wasn’t the kind of name you forget, she said, and Mort was inclined to agree—in her life. And she certainly hadn’t seen him.

“You’re sure?” Mort pressed.

“Yes, I am,” Amy said. She sounded faintly resentful of Mort’s continued questioning. “I haven’t seen anyone like that since you left. And before you tell me again not to say no right off the bat, let me assure you that I have a very clear memory of almost everything that’s happened since then.”

She paused, and he realized she was speaking with an effort now, quite possibly with real pain. That small, mean part of him rejoiced. Most of him did not; most of him was disgusted to find even a small part of him happy about any of this. That had no effect on the interior

celebrant, however. That guy might be outvoted, but he also seemed impervious to Mort's—the larger Mort's—attempts to root him out.

“Maybe Ted saw him,” he said. Ted Milner was the real-estate agent. He still found it hard to believe she had tossed him over for a real-estate agent, and he supposed that was part of the problem, part of the conceit which had allowed things to progress to this point in the first place. He certainly wasn't going to claim, especially to himself, that he had been as innocent as Mary's little lamb, was he?

“Is that supposed to be funny?” Amy sounded angry, ashamed, sorrowful, and defiant all at the same time.

“No,” he said. He was beginning to feel tired again.

“Ted isn't here,” she said. “Ted hardly ever comes here. I... I go to his place.”

*Thank you for sharing that with me, Amy,* he almost said, and choked it off. It would be nice to get out of at least one conversation without a swap of accusations. So he didn't say thanks for sharing and he didn't say that'll change and most of all he didn't ask what in the hell's the matter with you, Amy?

Mostly because she might then have asked the same thing of him.

## 8

She had suggested he call Dave Newsome, the Tashmore constable—after all, the man might be dangerous. Mort told her he didn't think that would be necessary, at least not yet, but if “John Shooter” called by again, he would probably give Dave a jingle. After a few more stilted amenities, they hung up. He could tell she was still smarting over his oblique suggestion that Ted might currently be sitting in Mortybear's chair and sleeping in Mortybear's bed, but he honestly didn't know how he could have avoided mentioning Ted Milner sooner or later. The man had become a part of Amy's life, after all. And *she* had called *him*, that was the thing. She had gotten one of her funny feelings and called *him*.

Mort reached the place where the lakeside path forked, the righthand branch climbing the steep bank back up to Lake Drive. He took that branch, walking slowly and savoring the fall color. As he came around the final curve in the path and into sight of the narrow ribbon of blacktop, he was somehow not surprised to see the dusty blue station wagon with the Mississippi plates parked there like an oft-whipped dog chained to a tree, nor the lean figure of John Shooter propped against the right front mudguard with his arms folded across his chest.

Mort waited for his heartbeat to speed up, for the surge of adrenaline into his body, but his heart went on maintaining its normal beat, and his glands kept their own counsel—which, for the time being, seemed to be to remain quiet.

The sun, which had gone behind a cloud, came out again, and fall colors which had already been bright now seemed to burst into flame. His own shadow reappeared, dark and long and clearcut. Shooter's round black hat looked blacker, his blue shirt bluer, and the air was so clear the man seemed scissored from a swatch of reality that was brighter and more vital than the one Mort knew as a rule. And he understood that he had been wrong about his reasons for not calling Dave Newsome—wrong, or practicing a little deception—on himself as well as on Amy. The truth was that he wanted to deal with this matter himself. *Maybe just to prove to myself that there are things I still CAN deal with*, he thought, and started up the hill again toward where John Shooter was leaning against his car and waiting for him.

## 9

His walk along the lake path had been both long and slow, and Amy's call hadn't been the only thing Mort had thought about as he picked his way over or around the occasional downed tree or paused to skip the occasional flat stone across the water (as a boy he had

been able to get a really good one—what they called “a flattie”—to skip as many as nine times, but today four was the most he’d been able to manage). He had also thought about how to deal with Shooter, when and if Shooter turned up again.

It was true he had felt a transient—or maybe not-so-transient—guilt when he saw how close to identical the two stories were, but he had worked that one out; it was only the generalized guilt he guessed all writers of fiction felt from time to time. As for Shooter himself, the only feelings he had were annoyance, anger... and a kind of relief. He was full of an unfocussed rage; had been for months. It was good to finally have a donkey to pin this rotten, stinking tail on.

Mort had heard the old saw about how, if four hundred monkeys banged away on four hundred typewriters for four million years, one of them would produce the complete works of Shakespeare. He didn’t believe it. Even if it were true, John Shooter was no monkey and he hadn’t been alive anywhere near that long, no matter how lined his face was.

So Shooter had copied his story. Why he had picked “Sowing Season” was beyond Mort Rainey’s powers of conjecture, but he knew that was what had happened because he had ruled out coincidence, and he knew damned well that, while he might have stolen that story, like all his others, from The Great Idea Bank of the Universe, he most certainly had not stolen it from Mr. John Shooter of the Great State of Mississippi.

Where, then, had Shooter copied it *from*? Mort thought that was the most important question; his chance to expose Shooter as a fake and a cheat might lie buried within the answer to it.

There were only two possible answers, because “Sowing Season” had only been published twice—first in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, and then in his collection, *Everybody Drops the Dime*. The dates of publication for the short stories in a collection are usually listed on the copyright page at the front of the book, and this format had been followed in *Everybody Drops the Dime*. He had looked up the acknowledgment for “Sowing Season” and found that it had been originally published in the June, 1980, issue of *EQMM*.

The collection, *Everybody Drops the Dime*, had been issued by St. Martin's Press in 1983. There had been subsequent printings since then—all but one of them in paperback—but that didn't matter. All he really had to work with were those two dates, 1980 and 1983 ... and his own hopeful belief that, aside from agents and publishing-company lawyers, no one paid much attention to those lines of fine print on the copyright page.

Hoping that this would prove true of John Shooter, hoping that Shooter would simply assume—as most general readers did—that a story he had read for the first time in a collection had no prior existence, Mort approached the man and finally stood before him on the edge of the road.

## 10

"I guess you must have had a chance to read my story by now," Shooter said. He spoke as casually as a man commenting on the weather.

"I did."

Shooter nodded gravely. "I imagine it rang a bell, didn't it?"

"It certainly did," Mort agreed, and then, with studied casualness: "When did you write it?"

"I thought you'd ask that," Shooter said. He smiled a secret little smile, but said no more. His arms remained crossed over his chest, his hands laid against his sides just below the armpits. He looked like a man who would be perfectly content to remain where he was forever, or at least until the sun sank below the horizon and ceased to warm his face.

"Well, sure," Mort said, still casually. "I have to, you know. When two fellows show up with the same story, that's serious."

"Serious," Shooter agreed in a deeply meditative tone of voice.

"And the only way to sort a thing like that out," Mort continued, "to decide who copied from whom, is to find out who wrote the words

first.” He fixed Shooter’s faded blue eyes with his own dry and uncompromising gaze. Somewhere nearby a chickadee twittered self-importantly in a tangle of trees and was then quiet again. “Wouldn’t you say that’s true?”

“I suppose I would,” Shooter agreed. “I suppose that’s why I came all the way up here from Miss’ippi.”

Mort heard the rumble of an approaching vehicle. They both turned in that direction, and Tom Greenleaf’s Scout came over the nearest hill, pulling a little cyclone of fallen leaves behind it. Tom, a hale and healthy Tashmore native of seventy-something, was the caretaker for most of the places on this side of the lake that Greg Carstairs didn’t handle. Tom raised one hand in salute as he passed. Mort waved back. Shooter removed one hand from its resting place and tipped a finger at Tom in a friendly gesture which spoke in some obscure way of a great many years spent in the country, of the uncountable and unrecollected number of times he had saluted the passing drivers of passing trucks and tractors and tedders and balers in that exact same casual way. Then, as Tom’s Scout passed out of sight, he returned his hand to his ribcage so that his arms were crossed again. As the leaves rattled to rest on the road, his patient, unwavering, almost eternal gaze came back to Mort Rainey’s face once more. “Now what were we saying?” he asked almost gently.

“We were trying to establish provenance,” Mort said. “That means —”

“I know what it means,” Shooter said, favoring Mort with a glance which was both calm and mildly contemptuous. “I know I am wearing shitkicker clothes and driving a shitkicker car, and I come from a long line of shitkickers, and maybe that makes me a shitkicker myself, but it doesn’t necessarily make me a *stupid* shitkicker.”

“No,” Mort agreed. “I don’t guess it does. But being smart doesn’t necessarily make you honest, either. In fact, I think it’s more often apt to go the other way.”

“I could figure that much out from you, had I not known it,” Shooter said dryly, and Mort felt himself flush. He didn’t like to be zinged and

rarely was, but Shooter had just done it with the effortless ease of an experienced shotgunner popping a clay pigeon.

His hopes of trapping Shooter dropped. Not all the way to zero, but quite a considerable way. Smart and sharp were not the same things, but he now suspected that Shooter might be both. Still, there was no sense drawing this out. He didn't want to be around the man any longer than he had to be. In some strange way he had looked forward to this confrontation, once he had become sure that another confrontation was inevitable—maybe only because it was a break in a routine which had already become dull and unpleasant. Now he wanted it over. He was no longer sure John Shooter was crazy—not completely, anyway—but he thought the man could be dangerous. He was so goddam implacable. He decided to take his best shot and get it over with—no more dancing around.

“When *did* you write your story, Mr. Shooter?”

“Maybe my name's not Shooter,” the man said, looking faintly amused. “Maybe that's just a pen name.”

“I see. What's your real one?” “I didn't say it wasn't; I only said maybe. Either way, that's not part of our business.” He spoke serenely, appearing to be more interested in a cloud which was making its way slowly across the high blue sky and toward the westering sun.

“Okay,” Mort said, “but when you wrote that story is.”

“I wrote it seven years ago,” he said, still studying the cloud—it had touched the edge of the sun now and had acquired a gold fringe. “In 1982.”

*Bingo, Mort thought. Wily old bastard or not, he stepped right into the trap after all. He got the story out of the collection, all right. And since Everybody Drops the Dime was published in 1983, he thought any date before then had to be safe. Should have read the copyright page, old son.*

He waited for a feeling of triumph, but there was none. Only a muted sense of relief that this nut could be sent on his merry way with no further fuss or muss. Still, he was curious; it was the curse of the writing class. For instance, why that particular story, a story which was so out of his usual run, so downright atypical? And if the

guy was going to accuse him of plagiarism, why settle for an obscure short story when he could have cobbled up the same sort of almost identical manuscript of a best-seller like *The Organ-Grinder's Boy*? *That* would have been juicy; this was almost a joke.

*I suppose knocking off one of the novels would have been too much like work*, Mort thought.

"Why did you wait so long?" he asked. "I mean, my book of short stories was published in 1983, and that's six years ago. Going on seven now."

"Because I didn't know," Shooter said. He removed his gaze from the cloud and studied Mort with that discomfiting look of faint contempt again. "A man like you, I suppose that kind of man just assumes that everyone in America, if not everyone in every country where his books are published, reads what he has written."

"I know better than that, I think," Mort said, and it was his turn to be dry.

"But that's not true," Shooter went on, ignoring what Mort had said in his scarily serene and utterly fixated way. "That is not true at all. I never saw that story until the middle of June. *This* June."

Mort thought of saying: *Well, guess what, Johnny-me-boy? I never saw my wife in bed with another man until the middle of May! Would it knock Shooter off his pace if he actually did say something like that out loud?*

He looked into the man's face and decided not. The serenity had burned out of those faded eyes the way mist bums off the hills on a day which is going to be a real scorcher. Now Shooter looked like a fundamentalist preacher about to ladle a large helping of fire and brimstone upon the trembling, downcast heads of his flock, and for the first time Mort Rainey felt really and personally afraid of the man. Yet he was also still angry. The thought he'd had near the end of his first encounter with "John Shooter" now recurred: scared or not, he was damned if he was just going to stand here and take it while this man accused him of theft—especially now that the falsity had been revealed out of the man's own mouth.

"Let me guess," Mort said. "A guy like you is a little too picky about what he reads to bother with the sort of trash I write. You stick to

guys like Marcel Proust and Thomas Hardy, right? At night, after the milking's done, you like to fire up one of those honest country kerosene lamps, plunk it down on the kitchen table—which is, of course, covered with a homey red-and-white-checked tablecloth—and unwind with a little *Tess* or *Remembrance of Things Past*. Maybe on the weekend you let your hair down a little, get a little funky, and drag out some Erskine Caldwell or Annie Dillard. It was one of your friends who told you about how I'd copied your honestly wrought tale. Isn't that how the story goes, Mr. Shooter ... or whatever your name is?"

His voice had taken on a rough edge, and he was surprised to find himself on the edge of real fury. But, he discovered, not *totally* surprised.

"Nope. I don't have any friends." Shooter spoke in the dry tone of a man who is only stating a fact. "No friends, no family, no wife. I've got a little place about twenty miles south of Perkinsburg, and I do have a checked tablecloth on my kitchen table—now that you mention it—but we got electric lights in our town. I only bring out the kerosenes when there's a storm and the lines go down."

"Good for you," Mort said.

Shooter ignored the sarcasm. "I got the place from my father, and added to it with a little money that came to me from my gram. I do have a dairy herd, about twenty milkers, you were right about that, too, and in the evenings I write stories. I suppose you've got one of those fancy computers with a screen, but I make do with an old typewriter."

He fell silent, and for a moment they could both hear the crisp rustle of the leaves in the light late-afternoon wind that had sprung up.

"As for your story being the same as mine, I found that out all on my own hook. You see, I'd been thinking about selling the farm. Thinking that with a little more money, I could write days, when my mind's fresh, instead of just after dark. The realtor in Perkinsburg wanted me to meet a fellow up in Jackson, who owns a lot of dairy farms in Miss'ippi. I don't like to drive more than ten or fifteen miles at a time—it gives me a headache, especially when some of it's city

driving, because that's where they let all the fools loose—and so I took the bus. I got ready to get on, and then remembered I hadn't brought anything to read. I *hate* a long bus ride without something to read."

Mort found himself nodding involuntarily. He also hated a ride—bus, train, plane, or car—without something to read, something a little more substantial than the daily paper.

"There isn't any bus station in Perkinsburg—the Greyhound just stops at the Rexall for five minutes or so and then it's down the road. I was already inside the door of that 'hound and starting up the steps when I realized I was empty-handed. I asked the bus driver if he'd hold it for me and he said he was damned if he would, he was late already, and he was pulling out in another three minutes by his pocket-watch. If I was with him, that would be fine by him, and if I wasn't, then I could kiss his fanny when we met up again."

*He TALKS like a storyteller*, Mort thought. *Be damned if he doesn't*. He tried to cancel this thought—it didn't seem to be a good way to be thinking—and couldn't quite do it.

"Well, I ran inside that drugstore. They've got one of those old-fashioned wire paperback racks in the Perkinsburg Rexall, the ones that turn around and around, just like the one in the little general store up the road from you."

"Bowie's?"

Shooter nodded. "That's the place, all right. Anyway, I grabbed the first book my hand happened on. Could have been a paperback Bible, for all I saw of the cover. But it wasn't. It was your book of short stories. *Everybody Drops the Dime*. And for all I know, they were your short stories. All but that one."

*Stop this now. He's working up a head of steam, so spike his boiler right now.*

But he discovered he didn't want to. Maybe Shooter was a writer. He fulfilled both of the main requirements: he told a tale you wanted to hear to the end, even if you had a pretty good idea what the end was going to be, and he was so full of shit he squeaked.

Instead of saying what he should have said—that even if Shooter was by some wild stretch of the imagination telling the truth, he,

Mort, had beaten him to that miserable story by two years—he said: “So you read ‘Sowing Season’ on a Greyhound bus while you were going to Jackson to sell your dairy farm last June.”

“No. The way it happened, I read it on the way back. I sold the farm and went back on the Greyhound with a check for sixty thousand dollars in my pocket. I’d read the first half a dozen stories going down. I didn’t think they were any great shakes, but they passed the time.”

“Thank you.”

Shooter studied him briefly. “Wasn’t offering you any real compliment.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Shooter thought about this for a moment, then shrugged. “Anyway, I read two more going back ... and then that one. My story.”

He looked at the cloud, which was now an airy mass of shimmering gold, and then back at Mort. His face was as dispassionate as ever, but Mort suddenly understood he had been badly mistaken in believing this man possessed even the slightest shred of peace or serenity. What he had mistaken for those things was the iron mantle of control Shooter had donned to keep himself from killing Morton Rainey with his bare hands. The face was dispassionate, but his eyes blazed with the deepest, wildest fury Mort had ever seen. He understood that he had stupidly walked up the path from the lake toward what might really be his own death at this fellow’s hands. Here was a man mad enough—in both senses of that word—to do murder.

“I am surprised no one has taken that story up with you before—it’s not like any of the others. Not a bit.” Shooter’s voice was still even, but Mort now recognized it as the voice of a man laboring mightily to keep from striking out, bludgeoning, perhaps throttling; the voice of a man who knows that all the incentive he would ever need to cross the line between talking and killing would be to hear his own voice begin to spiral upward into the registers of cheated anger; the voice of a man who knows how fatally easy it would be to become his own lynch-mob.

Mort suddenly felt like a man in a dark room which is crisscrossed with hair-thin tripwires, all of them leading to packets of high explosive. It was hard to believe that only moments ago he had felt in charge of this situation. His problems—Amy, his inability to write—now seemed like unimportant figures in an unimportant landscape. In a sense, they had ceased to be problems at all. He only had one problem now, and that was staying alive long enough to get back to his house, let alone long enough to see the sun go down.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. There was nothing he dared to say, not now. The room was full of tripwires.

“I am very surprised,” Shooter repeated in that heavy even voice that now sounded like a hideous parody of calmness.

Mort heard himself say: “My wife. She didn’t like it. *She* said that it wasn’t like anything I’d ever written before.”

“How did you get it?” Shooter asked slowly and fiercely. “That’s what I really want to know. How in hell did a big-money scribbling asshole like you get down to a little shitsplat town in Mississippi and steal my goddam story? I’d like to know why, too, unless you stole all the other ones as well, but the how of it’ll be enough to satisfy me right now.”

The monstrous unfairness of this brought Mort’s own anger back like an unslaked thirst. For a moment he forgot that he was out here on Lake Drive, alone except for this lunatic from Mississippi.

“Drop it,” he said harshly.

“*Drop* it?” Shooter asked, looking at Mort with a kind of clumsy amazement. “*Drop* it? What in hell do you mean, *drop* it?”

“You said you wrote your story in 1982,” Mort said. “I think I wrote mine in late 1979. I can’t remember the exact date, but I do know that it was published for the first time in June of 1980. In a magazine. I beat you by two years, Mr. Shooter or whatever your name is. If anyone here has got a bitch about plagiarism, it’s me.”

Mort did not precisely see the man move. At one moment they were standing by Shooter’s car, looking at each other; at the next he found himself pressed against the driver’s door, with Shooter’s hands wrapped around his upper arms and Shooter’s face pressed against his own, forehead to forehead. In between his two positions,

there was only a blurred sensation of being first grabbed and then whirled.

“You lie,” Shooter said, and on his breath was a dry whiff of cinnamon.

“The fuck I *do*,” Mort said, and lunged forward against the man’s pressing weight.

Shooter was strong, almost certainly stronger than Mort Rainey, but Mort was younger, heavier, and he had the old blue station wagon to push against. He was able to break Shooter’s hold and send him stumbling two or three steps backward.

*Now he’ll come for me*, Mort thought. Although he hadn’t had a fight since a schoolyard you-pull-me-and-I’ll-push-you scuffle back in the fourth grade, he was astounded to find his mind was clear and cool. *We’re going to duke it out over that dumb fucking story. Well, okay; I wasn’t doing anything else today anyhow.*

But it didn’t happen. Shooter raised his hands, looked at them, saw they were knotted into fists... and forced them to open. Mort saw the effort it took for the man to reimpose that mantle of control, and felt a kind of awe. Shooter put one of his open palms to his mouth and wiped his lips with it, very slowly and very deliberately.

“Prove it,” he said.

“All right. Come back to the house with me. I’ll show you the entry on the copyright page of the book.”

“No,” Shooter said. “I don’t care about the *book*. I don’t care a *pin* for the *book*. Show me the *story*. Show me the magazine with the story in it, so I can read it for myself.”

“I don’t have the magazine here.”

He was about to say something else, but Shooter turned his face up toward the sky and uttered a single bark of laughter. The sound was as dry as an axe splitting kindling wood. “No,” he said. The fury was still blazing and dancing in his eyes, but he seemed in charge of himself again. “No, I bet you *don’t*.”

“Listen to me,” Mort said. “Ordinarily, this is just a place my wife and I come in the summer. I have copies of my books here, and some foreign editions, but I’ve published in a lot of magazines as

well—articles and essays as well as stories. Those magazines are in our year-round house. The one in Derry.”

“Then why aren’t you there?” Shooter asked. In his eyes Mort read both disbelief and a galling satisfaction—it was clear that Shooter had expected him to try and squirm his way out of it, and in Shooter’s mind, that was just what Mort was doing. Or trying to do.

“I’m here because—” He stopped. “How did *you* know I’d be here?”

“I just looked on the back of the book I bought,” Shooter said, and Mort could have slapped his own forehead in frustration and sudden understanding. Of course—there had been a picture of him on the back of both the hardcover and paperback editions of *Everybody Drops the Dime*. Amy had taken it herself, and it had been an excellent shot. He was in the foreground; the house was in the middle distance; Tashmore Lake was in the background. The caption had read simply, *Morton Rainey at his home in western Maine*. So Shooter had come to western Maine, and he probably hadn’t had to visit too many small-town bars and/or drugstores before he found someone who said, “Mort Rainey? Hell, yes! Got a place over in Tashmore. Personal friend of mine, in fact!”

Well, that answered one question, anyway.

“I’m here because my wife and I got a divorce,” he said. “It just became final. She stayed in Derry. Any other year, the house down here would have been empty.”

“Uh-huh,” Shooter said. His tone of voice infuriated Mort all over again. You’re lying, it said, *but in this case it doesn’t much matter. Because I knew you’d lie. After all, lying is mostly*

*what you’re about, isn’t it?* “Well, I would have found you, one place or the other.”

He fixed Mort with a flinty stare.

“I would have found you if you’d moved to Brazil.”

“I believe that,” Mort said. “Nevertheless, you are mistaken. Or conning me. I’ll do you the courtesy of believing it’s only a mistake, because you *seem* sincere enough—”

Oh God, didn’t he.

“—but I published that story two years before you say you wrote it.”

He saw that mad flash in Shooter’s eyes again, and then it was gone. Not extinguished but collared, the way a man might collar a dog with an evil nature.

“You say this magazine is at your other house?”

“Yes.”

“And the magazine has your story in it.”

“Yes.”

“And the date of that magazine is June, 1980.”

“Yes.”

Mort had felt impatient with this laborious catechism (there was a long, thoughtful pause before each question) at first, but now he felt a little hope: it was as if the man was trying to teach himself the truth of what Mort had said... a truth, Mort thought, that part of “John Shooter” must have known all along, because the almost exact similarity between the two stories was *not* coincidence. He still believed that firmly, but he *had* come around to the idea that Shooter might have no conscious memory of committing the plagiarism. Because the man was clearly mad.

He wasn’t quite as afraid as he had been when he first saw the hate and fury dancing in Shooter’s eyes, like the reflection of a barn-fire blazing out of control. When he pushed the man, he had staggered backward, and Mort thought that if it came to a fight, he could probably hold his own... or actually put his man on the ground.

Still, it would be better if it didn’t come to that. In an odd, backhand sort of way, he had begun to feel a bit sorry for Shooter.

That gentleman, meanwhile, was stolidly pursuing his course.

“This other house—the one your wife has now—it’s here in Maine, too?”

“Yes.”

“She’s there?”

“Yes.”

There was a much longer pause this time. In a weird way, Shooter reminded Mort of a computer processing a heavy load of information. At last he said: “I’ll give you three days.”

“That’s very generous of you,” Mort said.

Shooter’s long upper lip drew back from teeth too even to be anything but mail-order dentures. “Don’t you make light of me, son,” he said. “I’m trying my best to hold my temper, and doing a pretty good job of it, but—”

“*You!*” Mort cried at him. “What about *me*? This is unbelievable! You come out of nowhere and make just about the most serious accusation a man can make against a writer, and when I tell you I’ve got proof you’re either mistaken or lying through your damned teeth, you start patting yourself on the back for holding your temper! *Unbelievable!*”

Shooter’s eyelids drooped, giving him a sly look. “Proof?” he said. “I don’t see no proof. I hear you talking, but talking ain’t *proof*.”

“I *told* you!” Mort shouted. He felt helpless, like a man trying to box cobwebs. “I *explained* all that!”

Shooter looked at Mort for a long moment, then turned and reached through the open window of his car.

“What are you doing?” Mort asked, his voice tight. *Now* he felt the adrenaline dump into his body, readying him for fight or flight ... probably the latter, if Shooter was reaching for the big handgun Mort suddenly saw in the eye of his imagination.

“Just gettin m’smokes,” Shooter said. “Hold your water.” When he pulled his arm out of the car, he had a red package of Pall Malls in his hand. He had taken them off the dashboard. “Want one?”

“I have my own,” Mort said rather sulkily, and took the ancient pack of L & M’s from the pocket beneath the red flannel overshirt.

They lit up, each from his own pack.

“If we keep on this way, we’re going to have a fight,” Shooter said finally. “I don’t want that.”

“Well, Jesus, neither do I!”

“Part of you does,” Shooter contradicted. He continued to study Mort from beneath his dropped lids with that expression of country shrewdness. “Part of you wants *just* that. But I don’t think it’s just me or my story that’s making you want to fight. You have got some other bee under your blanket that’s got you all riled up, and *that* is making *this* harder. Part of you wants to fight, but what you don’t understand

is that, if we *do* start to fight, it's not going to end until one or the other of us is dead."

Mort looked for signs that Shooter was exaggerating for effect and saw none. He suddenly felt cold along the base of his spine.

"So I'm going to give you three days. You call your ex and get her to send down the magazine with your story in it, if there is such a magazine. And I'll be back. There *isn't* any magazine, of course; I think we both know that. But you strike me as a man who needs to do some long, hard thinking."

He looked at Mort with a disconcerting expression of stern pity.

"You didn't believe anybody would ever catch you out, did you?" he asked. "You really didn't."

"If I show you the magazine, will you go away?" Mort asked. He was speaking more to himself than to Shooter. "I guess what I really want to know is whether or not it's even worth it."

Shooter abruptly opened his car door and slid in behind the wheel. Mort found the speed with which the man could move a little creepy. "Three days. Use it the way you like, Mr. Rainey."

He started the engine. It ran with the low wheeze characteristic of valves which need to be reground, and the tang of oilsmoke from the old tailpipe polluted the air of the fading afternoon. "Right is right and fair is fair. The first thing is to get you to a place where you see I have really got you, and you can't wiggle out of this mess the way you've probably been wiggling out of the messes you have made all your life. That's the first thing."

He looked at Mort expressionlessly out of the driver's-side window.

"The second thing," he said, "is the real reason I come."

"What's that?" Mort heard himself say. It was strange and not a little infuriating, but he felt that sensation of guilt creeping relentlessly over him again, as if he really had done the thing of which this rustic lunatic was accusing him.

"We'll talk about it," Shooter said, and threw his elderly station wagon in gear. "Meantime, you think about what's right and what's fair."

"You're nuts!" Mort shouted, but Shooter was already rolling up Lake Drive toward where it spilled out onto Route

23.

He watched until the wagon was out of sight, then walked slowly back to the house. It felt emptier and emptier in his mind as he drew closer and closer to it. The rage and the fear were gone. He felt only cold, tired, and homesick for a marriage which no longer was, and which, it now began to seem to him, had never been at all.

## 11

The telephone started ringing when he was halfway along the driveway which ran down the steep hill from Lake Drive to the house. Mort broke into a run, knowing he wasn't going to make it but running anyway, cursing himself for his foolish reaction. Talk about Pavlov's dogs!

He had opened the screen door and was fumbling with the knob of the inside door when the phone silenced. He stepped in, closed the door behind him, and looked at the telephone, which stood on a little antique desk Amy had picked up at a flea market in Mechanic Falls. He could, in that moment, easily imagine that the phone was looking back at him with studied mechanical impatience: *Don't ask me, boss—I don't make the news, I only report it.* He thought that he ought to buy one of those machines that take messages ... or maybe not. When he thought about it carefully, he realized that the telephone was hardly his favorite gadget. If people really wanted you, they eventually called back.

He made himself a sandwich and a bowl of soup and then discovered he didn't want them. He felt lonely, unhappy, and mildly infected by John Shooter's craziness. He was not much surprised to find that the sum of these feelings was sleepiness. He began to cast longing glances at the couch.

*Okay, an interior voice whispered. Remember, though—you can run but you can't hide. This shit is still gonna be here when you wake up.*

That was very true, he thought, but in the meantime, it would all be gone, gone, blessedly gone. The one thing you could definitely say for short-term solutions was that they were better than nothing. He decided he would call home (his mind persisted in thinking of the Derry house as home, and he suspected that was a circumstance which would not soon change), ask Amy to pull the copy of *EQMM* with “Sowing Season” in it and send it down by express mail. Then he would sack on the couch for a couple of hours. He would arise around seven or so, go into the study refreshed, and write a little more shit.

*And shit is all you will write, with that attitude*, the interior voice reproached him.

“Fuck you,” Mort told it—one of the few advantages to living alone, so far as he could see, was that you could talk to yourself right out loud without having anyone wonder if you were crazy or what.

He picked up the phone and dialled the Derry number. He listened to the customary clicks of the long-distance connection being made, and then that most irritating of all telephone sounds: the dah-dah-dah of a busy signal. Amy was on the telephone with someone, and when Amy really got going, a conversation could go on for hours. Possibly days.

“Oh, fuck, great!” Mort cried, and jacked the handset back into the cradle hard enough to make the bell jingle faintly.

So—what now, little man?

He supposed he could call Isabelle Fortin, who lived across the street, but that suddenly seemed like too much work and a pain in the ass besides. Isabelle was already so deeply into his and Amy’s breakup that she was doing everything but taking home movies. Also, it was already past five o’clock—the magazine couldn’t actually start to move along the postal channel between Derry and Tashmore until tomorrow morning no matter what time it was mailed today. He would try Amy later on this evening, and if the line to the house was busy again (or if Amy was, perchance, still on the same call), he would call Isabelle with the message after all. For the moment, the siren-song of the couch in the living room was too strong to be denied.

Mort pulled the phone jack—whoever had tried to call him just as he was coming down the driveway would have to wait a little longer, please and thank you—and strolled into the living room.

He propped the pillows in their familiar positions, one behind his head and one behind his neck, and looked out at the lake, where the sun was setting at the end of a long and spectacular golden track. *I have never felt so lonely and so utterly horrible in my whole life*, he thought with some amazement. Then his lids closed slowly over his slightly bloodshot eyes, and Mort Rainey, who had yet to discover what true horror was all about, fell asleep.

## 12

He dreamed he was in a classroom.

It was a familiar classroom, although he couldn't have said just why. He was in the classroom with John Shooter. Shooter was holding a grocery bag in the curve of one arm. He took an orange out of the bag and bounced it reflectively up and down in his hand. He was looking in Mort's direction, but not at Mort; his gaze seemed fixed on something beyond Mort's shoulder. Mort turned and saw a cinderblock wall and a blackboard and a door with a frosted-glass upper panel. After a moment he could puzzle out the backward writing on the frosted glass.

WELCOME TO THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS,  
it said. The writing on the blackboard was easier to read.

SOWING SEASON *A Short Story by Morton Rainey*,  
it said.

Suddenly something whizzed over Mort's shoulder, just missing his head. The orange. As Mort cringed back, the orange struck the blackboard, burst open with a rotten squashing sound, and splattered gore across what had been written there.

He turned back to Shooter. *Stop that!* he cried in a shaky scolding voice.

Shooter dipped into his bag again. *What's the matter?* Shooter asked in his calm, stern voice. *Don't you recognize blood oranges when you see them? What kind of writer are you?*

He threw another one. It splattered crimson across Mort's name and began to drip slowly down the wall.

*No more!* Mort screamed, but Shooter dipped slowly, implacably, into the bag again. His long, callused fingers sank into the skin of the orange he brought out; blood began to sweat its way onto the orange's skin in pinprick droplets.

*No more! No more! Please! No more! I'll admit it, I'll admit anything, everything, if you just stop! Anything, if you'll just stop! If you'll—*

## 13

“—stop, if you'll just stop—”

He was falling.

Mort grabbed at the edge of the couch just in time to save himself a short and probably painful trip to the living-room floor. He rolled toward the back of the couch and simply lay there for a moment, clutching the cushions, shivering, and trying to grasp at the ragged tails of the dream.

Something about a classroom, and blood oranges, and the school of hard knocks. Even this was going, and the rest was already gone. It had been real, whatever it was. Much too real.

At last he opened his eyes, but there was precious little to see; he had slept until long past sundown. He was horribly stiff, especially at the base of his neck, and he suspected he had been asleep at least four hours, maybe five. He felt his way cautiously to the living-room light-switch, managing to avoid the octagonal glass-topped coffee table for a change (he had an idea the coffee table was semi-

sentient, and given to shifting its position slightly after dark, the better to hack away at his shins), and then went into the front hall to try Amy again. On the way, he checked his watch. It was quarter past ten. He had slept over five hours... nor was this the first time. And he wouldn't even pay for it by tossing and turning all night. Judging by past experience, he would be asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow in the bedroom.

He picked up the phone, was momentarily puzzled by the dead silence in his ear, then remembered he had yanked the damn thing's fang. He pulled the wire through his fingers until he got to the jack, turned around to plug it in ... and paused. From here he could look out the small window to the left of the door. This gave him an angle of vision on the back porch, where the mysterious and unpleasant Mr. Shooter had left his manuscript under a rock yesterday. He could also see the garbage cabinet, and there was something on it—two some-things, actually. A white something and a dark something. The dark something looked nasty; for one frightening second, Mort thought a giant spider was crouched there.

He dropped the phone cord and turned on the porch light in a hurry. Then there was a space of time—he didn't know just *how* long and didn't care to know—when he was incapable of further movement.

The white thing was a sheet of paper—a perfectly ordinary 8½" x 11" sheet of typing paper. Although the garbage cabinet was a good fifteen feet away from where Mort was standing, the few words on it were printed in large strokes and he could read them easily. He thought Shooter must have used either a pencil with an extremely soft lead or a piece of artist's charcoal. REMEMBER, YOU HAVE 3 DAYS, the message read. I AM NOT JOKING.

The black thing was Bump. Shooter had apparently broken the cat's neck before nailing him to the roof of the garbage cabinet with a screwdriver from Mort's own toolshed.

He wasn't aware of breaking the paralysis which held him. At one moment he was standing frozen in the hall by the telephone table, looking out at good old Bump, who seemed to have grown a screwdriver handle in the middle of his chest, where there was a ruff of white fur—what Amy had liked to call Bump's bib. At the next he was standing in the middle of the porch with the chilly night air biting through his thin shirt, trying to look six different ways at once.

He forced himself to stop. Shooter was gone, of course. That's why he had left the note. Nor did Shooter seem like the kind of nut who would enjoy watching Mort's obvious fear and horror. He was a nut, all right, but one which had fallen from a different tree. He had simply used Bump, used him on Mort the way a farmer might use a crowbar on a stubborn rock in his north forty. There was nothing personal in it; it was just a job that had to be done.

Then he thought of how Shooter's eyes had looked that afternoon and shivered violently. No, it was personal, all right. It was all kinds of personal.

"He believes I did it," Mort whispered to the cold western Maine night, and the words came out in ragged chunks, bitten off by his chattering teeth. "The crazy son of a bitch really believes I did it."

He approached the garbage cabinet and his stomach rolled over like a dog doing a trick. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, and he wasn't sure he could take care of what needed taking care of. Bump's head was cocked far to the left, giving him a grotesque questioning look. His teeth, small, neat, and needle-sharp, were bared. There was a little blood around the blade of the screwdriver at the point where it was driven into his

(bib)

ruff, but not very much. Bump was a friendly cat; if Shooter had approached him, Bump would not have shied away. And that was what Shooter must have done, Mort thought, and wiped the sick sweat off his forehead. He had picked the cat up, snapped its neck between his fingers like a Popsicle stick, and then nailed it to the slanting roof of the garbage cabinet, all while Mort Rainey slept, if not the sleep of the just, that of the unheeding.

Mort crumpled up the sheet of paper, stuffed it in his back pocket, then put his hand on Bump's chest. The body, not stiff and not even entirely cold, shifted under his hand. His stomach rolled again, but he forced his other hand to close around the screwdriver's yellow plastic handle and pull it free.

He tossed the screwdriver onto the porch and held poor old Bump in his right hand like a bundle of rags. Now his stomach was in free fall, simply rolling and rolling and rolling. He lifted one of the two lids on top of the garbage cabinet, and secured it with the hook-and-eyelet that kept the heavy lid from crashing down on the arms or head of whoever was depositing trash inside. Three cans were lined up within. Mort lifted the lid from the center one and deposited Bump's body gently inside. It lay draped over the top of an olive-green Hefty bag like a fur stole.

He was suddenly furious with Shooter. If the man had appeared in the driveway at that second, Mort would have charged him without a second thought—driven him to the ground and choked him if he could.

*Easy—it really is catching.*

Maybe it was. And maybe he didn't care. It wasn't just that Shooter had killed his only companion in this lonely October house by the lake; it was that he had done it while Mort was asleep, and in such a way that good old Bump had become an object of revulsion, something it was hard not to puke over.

Most of all it was the fact that he had been forced to put his good cat in a garbage can like a piece of worthless trash.

*I'll bury him tomorrow. Right over in that soft patch to the left of the house. In sight of the lake.*

Yes, but tonight Bump would lie in undignified state on top of a Hefty bag in the garbage cabinet because some man—some crazy son of a bitch—could be out there, and the man had a grudge over a story Mort Rainey hadn't even *thought* of for the last five years or so. The man was crazy, and consequently Mort was afraid to bury Bump tonight, because, note or no note, Shooter might be out there.

*I want to kill him. And if the crazy bastard pushes me much more, I might just try to do it.*

He went inside, slammed the door, and locked it. Then he walked deliberately through the house, locking all the doors and windows. When that was done, he went back to the window by the porch door and stared pensively out into the darkness. He could see the screwdriver lying on the boards, and the dark round hole the blade had made when Shooter plunged it into the right-hand lid of the garbage cabinet.

All at once he remembered he had been about to try Amy again.

He plugged the jack into the wall. He dialled rapidly, fingers tapping the old familiar keys which added up to home, and wondered if he would tell Amy about Bump.

There was an unnaturally long pause after the preliminary clicks. He was about to hang up when there was one final click—so loud it was almost a thud—followed by a robot voice telling him that the number he had dialled was out of service.

“Wonderful,” he muttered. “What the hell did you do, Amy? Use it until it broke?”

He pushed the disconnect button down, thinking he would have to call Isabelle Fortin after all, and while he was conning his memory for her number, the telephone rang in his hand.

He hadn't realized how keyed up he was until that happened. He gave a squeaky little cry and skipped backward, dropping the telephone handset on the floor and then almost tripping over the goddam bench Amy had bought and put by the telephone table, the bench absolutely no one, including Amy herself, ever used.

He pawed out with one hand, grabbed the bookcase, and kept himself from falling. Then he snatched up the phone and said, “Hello? Is that you, Shooter?” For in that moment, when it seemed that the whole world was slowly but surely turning topsy-turvy, he couldn't imagine who else it could be.

“Mort?” It was Amy, and she was nearly screaming. He knew the tone very well from the last two years of their marriage. It was either frustration or fury, more likely the latter. “Mort, is that you? Is it you, for God's sake? Mort? M—”

“Yes, it's me,” he said. He suddenly felt weary.

“Where in the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to get you for the last *three hours!*”

“Asleep,” he said.

“You pulled the jack.” She spoke in the tired but accusatory tone of one who had been down this road before. “Well, you picked a great time to do it this time, champ.” “I tried to call around five—”

“I was at Ted’s.”

“Well, *somebody* was there,” he said. “Maybe—”

“What do you mean, someone was there?” she asked, whiplash quick. “*Who* was there?”

“How the hell would I know, Amy? You’re the one in Derry, remember? You Derry, me Tashmore. All I know is that the line was busy when I tried to call you. If you were over at Ted’s, then I assume Isabelle—”

“I’m *still* at Ted’s,” she said, and now her voice was queerly flat. “I guess I’ll be at Ted’s for quite awhile to come, like it or not. Someone burned our house down, Mort. Someone burned it right to the ground.” And suddenly Amy began to cry.

## 15

He had become so fixated on John Shooter that his immediate assumption, as he stood numbly in the hallway of the one remaining Rainey home with the telephone screwed against his ear, was that Shooter had burned the house down. Motive? Why, certainly, officer. He burned the house, a restored Victorian worth about \$800,000, to get rid of a magazine. *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, to be precise; June of 1980 issue.

But *could* it have been Shooter? Surely not. The distance between Derry and Tashmore was over a hundred miles, and Bump’s body had still been warm and flexible, the blood around the screwdriver blade tacky but not yet dry.

*If he hurried—*

*Oh, quit it, why don't you? Pretty soon you'll be blaming Shooter for your divorce and thinking you've been sleeping sixteen hours out of every twenty-four because Shooter has been putting Phenobarb in your food. And after that? You can start writing letters to the paper saying that America's cocaine kingpin is a gentleman from Crow's Ass Mississippi named John Shooter. That he killed Jimmy Hoffa and also happened to be the famous second gun who fired at Kennedy from the grassy knoll in November of 1963. The man's crazy, okay... but do you really think he drove a hundred miles north and massacred your goddam house in order to kill a magazine? Especially when there must be copies of that magazine still in existence all across America? Get serious.*

*But still... if he hurried ...*

No. It was ridiculous. But, Mort suddenly realized, he wouldn't be able to show the man his goddam proof, would he? Not unless...

The study was at the back of the house; they had converted what had once been the loft of the carriage-barn.

"Amy," he said.

"It's so *horrible!*" she wept. "I was at Ted's and Isabelle called ... she said there were at least fifteen fire trucks there ... hoses spraying ... crowds ... rubberneckers ... gawkers ... you know how I hate it when people come and gawk at the house, even when it's not burning down ..."

He had to bite down hard on the insides of his cheeks to stifle a wild bray of laughter. To laugh now would be the worst thing, the cruellest thing he could possibly do, because he *did* know. His success at his chosen trade after the years of struggle had been a great and fulfilling thing for him; he sometimes felt like a man who has won his way through a perilous jungle where most other adventurers perish and has gained a fabulous prize by so doing. Amy had been glad for him, at least initially, but for her there had been a bitter downside: the loss of her identity not only as a private person but as a *separate* person.

"Yes," he said as gently as he could, still biting at his cheeks to protect against the laughter which threatened. If he laughed, it would be at her unfortunate choice of phrasing, but she wouldn't see it that

way. So often during their years together she had misinterpreted his laughter. “Yes, I know, hon. Tell me what happened.”

“Somebody burned down our *house!*” Amy cried tearily. “That’s what *happened!*”

“Is it a total loss?”

“Yes. That’s what the fire chief said.” He could hear her gulping, trying to get herself under control, and then her tears stormed out again. “It b-b-burned fuh-fuh-*flat!*”

“Even my study?”

“That’s w-where it *st-started,*” she sniffled. “At least, that’s what the fire chief said they thought. And it fits with what Patty saw.”

“Patty Champion?”

The Champions owned the house next to the Rainey’s on the right; the two lots were separated by a belt of yew trees that had slowly run wild over the years.

“Yes. Just a second, Mort.”

He heard a mighty honk as she blew her nose, and when she came back on the line, she seemed more composed. “Patty was walking her dog, she told the firemen. This was a little while after it got dark. She walked past our house and saw a car parked under the portico. Then she heard a crash from inside, and saw fire in your big study window.”

“Did she see what kind of a car it was?” Mort asked. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach. As the news sank in, the John Shooter business began to dwindle in size and importance. It wasn’t just the goddam June, 1980, issue of *EQMM*; it was almost all his manuscripts, both those which had been published and those which were incomplete, it was most of his first editions, his foreign editions, his contributors’ copies.

Oh, but that was only the start. They had lost their books, as many as four thousand volumes. All of Amy’s clothes would have burned, if the damage was as bad as she said it was, and the antique furniture she had collected—sometimes with his help, but mostly on her own—would all be cinders and clinkers now. Her jewelry and their personal papers—insurance policies and so on—would probably be okay (the safe hidden at the back of the upstairs closet was

supposed to be fireproof), but the Turkish rugs would be ash, the thousand or so videotapes melted lumps of plastic, the audiovisual equipment... his clothes ... their photographs, thousands of them....

Good Christ, and the first thing he'd thought of was that goddam *magazine*.

"No," Amy was saying, answering the question he had almost forgotten asking in his realization of how enormous the personal loss must be, "she couldn't tell what kind of car it was. She said she thought somebody must have used a Molotov cocktail, or something like that. Because of the way the fire came up in the window right after the sound of breaking glass. She said she started up the driveway and then the kitchen door opened and a man ran out. Bruno started to bark at him, but Patty got scared and pulled him back, although she said he just about ripped the leash out of her hand.

"Then the man got into the car and started it up. He turned on the headlights, and Patty said they almost blinded her. She threw her arm up to shield her eyes and the car just roared out from under the portico ... that's what she said ... and she squeezed back against our front fence and pulled Bruno as hard as she could, or the man would have hit him. Then he turned out of the driveway and drove down the street, fast."

"And she never saw what kind of car it was?"

"No. First it was dark, and then, when the fire started to shine through your study window, the headlights dazzled her. She ran back to the house and called the fire department. Isabelle said they came fast, but you know how old our house is ... was... and... and how fast dry wood burns... especially if you use gasoline ..."

Yes, he knew. Old, dry, full of wood, the house had been an arsonist's wet dream. But who? If not Shooter, *who*? This terrible news, coming on top of the day's events like a hideous dessert at the end of a loathsome meal, had almost completely paralyzed his ability to think.

"He said it *was* probably gasoline... the fire chief, I mean... he was there first, but then the police came, and they kept asking questions, Mort, mostly about you... about any enemies you might have made

... *enemies* ... and I said I didn't think you h-had any enemies... I tried to answer all his questions ...”

“I'm sure you did the best job you could,” he said gently.

She went on as if she hadn't heard him, speaking in breathless ellipses, like a telegraph operator relating dire news aloud just as it spills off the wire. “I didn't even know how to tell them we were *divorced* ... and of course they didn't know... it was Ted who had to tell them finally... Mort... my mother's Bible... it was on the nightstand in the bedroom ... there were pictures in it of my family ... and... and it was the only thing... only thing of hers I h-h-had ...”

Her voice dissolved into miserable sobs.

“I'll be up in the morning,” he said. “If I leave at seven, I can be there by nine-thirty. Maybe by nine, now that there's no summer traffic. Where will you stay tonight? At Ted's?”

“Yes,” she said, sniffing. “I know you don't like him, Mort, but I don't know what I would have done without him tonight... how I could have handled it... you know... all their questions ...”

“Then I'm glad you had him,” he said firmly. He found the calmness, the *civilization*, in his voice really astounding. “Take care of yourself. Have you got your pills?” She'd had a tranquilizer prescription for the last six years of their marriage, but only took them when she had to fly ... or, he remembered, when he had some public function to fulfill. One which required the presence of the Designated Spouse.

“They were in the medicine cabinet,” she said dully. “It doesn't matter. I'm not stressed. Just heartsick.”

Mort almost told her he believed they were the same thing, and decided not to.

“I'll be there as soon as I can,” he said. “If you think I could do something by coming tonight—”

“No,” she said. “Where should we meet? Ted's?”

Suddenly, unbidden, he saw his hand holding a chamber-maid's passkey. Saw it turning in the lock of a motel-room door. Saw the door swinging open. Saw the surprised faces above the sheet, Amy's on the left, Ted Milner's on the right. His blow-dried look had been knocked all aslant and asprawl by sleep, and to Mort he had

looked a little bit like Alfalfa in the old Little Rascals short subjects. Seeing Ted's hair in sleep corkscrews like that had also made the man look really real to Mort for the first time. He had seen their dismay and their bare shoulders. And suddenly, almost randomly, he thought: *A woman who would steal your love when your love was really all you had—*

"No," he said, "not Ted's. What about that little coffee shop on Witcham Street?"

"Would you prefer I came alone?" She didn't sound angry, but she sounded *ready* to be angry. How well I know her, he thought. Every move, every lift and drop of her voice, every turn of phrase. And how well she must know me.

"No," he said. "Bring Ted. That'd be fine." Not fine, but he could live with it. He thought.

"Nine-thirty, then," she said, and he could hear her standing down a little. "Marchman's."

"Is that the name of that place?"

"Yes—Marchman's Restaurant."

"Okay. Nine-thirty or a little earlier. If I get there first, I'll chalk a mark on the door—"

"—and if *I* get there first, I'll rub it out," she finished the old catechism, and they both laughed a little. Mort found that even the laugh hurt. They knew each other, all right. Wasn't that what the years together were supposed to be for? And wasn't that why it hurt so goddam bad when you discovered that, not only *could* the years end, they really had?

He suddenly thought of the note which had been stuck under one of the garbage cabinet's shake shingles—REMEMBER, YOU HAVE 3 DAYS. I AM NOT JOKING. He thought of saying, *I've had a little trouble of my own down here, Amy*, and then knew he couldn't add that to her current load of woe. It was his trouble.

"If it had happened later, at least you would have saved your stuff," she was saying. "I don't like to think about all the manuscripts you must have lost, Mort. If you'd gotten the fireproof drawers two years ago, when Herb suggested them, maybe—"

“I don’t think it matters,” Mort said. “I’ve got the manuscript of the new novel down here.” He did, too. All fourteen shitty, wooden pages of it. “To hell with the rest. I’ll see you tomorrow, Amy, I—”

*(love you)*

He closed his lips over it. They were divorced. *Could* he still love her? It seemed almost perverse. And even if he did, did he have any right to say so?

“I’m sorry as hell about this,” he told her instead.

“So am I, Mort. So very sorry.” She was starting to cry again. Now he could hear someone—a woman, probably Isabelle Fortin—comforting her.

“Get some sleep, Amy.”

“You, too.”

He hung up. All at once the house seemed much quieter than it had on any of the other nights he had been here alone; he could hear nothing but the night wind whispering around the eaves and, very far off, a loon calling on the lake. He took the note out of his pocket, smoothed it out, and read it again. It was the sort of thing you were supposed to put aside for the police. In fact, it was the sort of thing you weren’t even supposed to touch until the police had had a chance to photograph it and work their juju on it. It was—ruffle of drums and blast of trumpets, please—EVIDENCE.

*Well, fuck it,* Mort thought, crumpling it up again. No police. Dave Newsome, the local constable, probably had trouble remembering what he’d eaten for breakfast by the time lunch rolled around, and he couldn’t see taking the matter to either the county sheriff or the State Police. After all, it wasn’t as though an attempt had been made on his life; his cat had been killed, but a cat wasn’t a person. And in the wake of Amy’s devastating news, John Shooter simply didn’t seem as important anymore. He was one of the Crazy Folks, he had a bee in his bonnet, and he might be dangerous... but Mort felt more and more inclined to try and handle the business himself, even if Shooter was dangerous. *Especially* if he was dangerous.

The house in Derry took precedence over John Shooter and John Shooter’s crazy ideas. It even took precedence over who had done the deed—Shooter or some other fruitcake with a grudge, a mental

problem, or both. The house, and, he supposed, Amy. She was clearly in bad shape, and it couldn't hurt either of them for him to offer her what comfort he could. Maybe she would even...

But he closed his mind to any speculation about what Amy might even do. He saw nothing but pain down that road. Better to believe that road was closed for good.

He went into the bedroom, undressed, and lay down with his hands behind his head. The loon called again, desperate and distant. It occurred to him again that Shooter could be out there, creeping around, his face a pale circle beneath his odd black hat. Shooter was nuts, and although he had used his hands and a screwdriver on Bump, that did not preclude the possibility that he still might have a gun.

But Mort didn't think Shooter was out there, armed or not.

*Calls, he thought. I'll have to make at least two on my way up to Derry. One to Greg Carstairs and one to Herb Creekmore. Too early to make them from here if I leave at seven, but I could use one of the pay phones at the Augusta tollbooths....*

He turned over on his side, thinking it would be a long time before he fell asleep tonight after all ... and then sleep rolled over him in a smooth dark wave, and if anyone came to peer in on him as he slept, he did not know it.

## 16

The alarm got him up at six-fifteen. He took half an hour to bury Bump in the sandy patch of ground between the house and the lake, and by seven he was rolling, just as planned. He was ten miles down the road and heading into Mechanic Falls, a bustling metropolis which consisted of a textile mill that had closed in 1970, five thousand souls, and a yellow blinker at the intersection of Routes 23 and 7, when he noticed that his old Buick was running on fumes. He pulled into Bill's Chevron, cursing himself for not having checked the

gauge before setting out—if he had gotten through Mechanic Falls without noticing how low the gauge had fallen, he might have had a pretty good walk for himself and ended up very late for his appointment with Amy.

He went to the pay phone on the wall while the pump jockey tried to fill the Buick's bottomless pit. He dug his battered address book out of his left rear pocket and dialed Greg Carstairs's number. He thought he might actually catch Greg in this early, and he was right.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Greg—Mort Rainey."

"Hi, Mort. I guess you've got some trouble up in Derry, huh?"

"Yes," Mort said. "Was it on the news?"

"Channel 5."

"How did it look?"

"How did *what* look?" Greg replied. Mort winced... but if he had to hear that from anybody, he was glad it had been Greg Carstairs. He was an amiable, long-haired ex-hippie who had converted to some fairly obscure religious sect—the Swedenborgians, maybe—not long after Woodstock. He had a wife and two kids, one seven and one five, and so far as Mort could tell, the whole family was as laid back as Greg himself. You got so used to the man's small but constant smile that he looked undressed on the few occasions he was without it.

"That bad, huh?"

"Yes," Greg said simply. "It must have gone up like a rocket. I'm really sorry, man."

"Thank you. I'm on my way up there now, Greg. I'm calling from Mechanic Falls. Can you do me a favor while I'm gone?"

"If you mean the shingles, I think they'll be in by—"

"No, not the shingles. Something else. There's been a guy bothering me the last two or three days. A crackpot. He claims I stole a story he wrote six or seven years ago. When I told him I'd written my version of the same story before he claims to have written his, and told him I could prove it, he got wiggy. I was sort of hoping I'd seen the last of him, but no such luck. Last evening, while I was sleeping on the couch, he killed my cat."

“Bump?” Greg sounded faintly startled, a reaction that equalled roaring surprise in anyone else. “He killed *Bump*?”

“That’s right.”

“Did you talk to Dave Newsome about it?”

“No, and I don’t want to, either. I want to handle him myself, if I can.”

“The guy doesn’t exactly sound like a pacifist, Mort.”

“Killing a cat is a long way from killing a man,” Mort said, “and I think maybe I could handle him better than Dave.”

“Well, you could have something there,” Greg agreed. “Dave’s slowed down a little since he turned seventy. What can I do for you, Mort?”

“I’d like to know where the guy is staying, for one thing.” “What’s his name?”

“I don’t know. The name on the story he showed me was John Shooter, but he got cute about that later on, told me it might be a pseudonym. I think it is—it *sounds* like a pseudonym. Either way, I doubt if he’s registered under that name if he’s staying at an area motel.”

“What does he look like?”

“He’s about six feet tall and forty-something. He’s got a kind of weatherbeaten face—sun-wrinkles around the eyes and lines going down from the comers of the mouth, kind of bracketing the chin.”

As he spoke, the face of “John Shooter” floated into his consciousness with increasing clarity, like the face of a spirit swimming up to the curved side of a medium’s crystal ball. Mort felt gooseflesh prick the backs of his hands and shivered a little. A voice in his midbrain kept muttering that he was either making a mistake or deliberately misleading Greg. Shooter was dangerous, all right. He hadn’t needed to see what the man had done to Bump to know that. He had seen it in Shooter’s eyes yesterday afternoon. Why was he playing vigilante, then?

*Because*, another, deeper, voice answered with a kind of dangerous firmness. *Just because, that’s all.*

The midbrain voice spoke up again, worried: *Do you mean to hurt him? Is that what this is all about? Do you mean to hurt him?*

But the deep voice would not answer. It had fallen silent.

"Sounds like half the farmers around here," Greg was saying doubtfully.

"Well, there's a couple of other things that may help pick him out," Mort said. "He's Southern, for one thing—got an accent on him that sticks out a mile. He wears a big black hat—felt, I think—with a round crown. It looks like the kind of hat Amish men wear. And he's driving a blue Ford station wagon, early or mid-sixties. Mississippi plates."

"Okay—better. I'll ask around. If he's in the area, somebody'll know where. Outta-state plates stand out this time of year."

"I know." Something else crossed his mind suddenly. "You might start by asking Tom Greenleaf. I was talking to this Shooter yesterday on Lake Drive, about half a mile north of my place. Tom came along in his Scout. He waved at us when he went by, and both of us waved back. Tom must have gotten a damned fine look at him."

"Okay. I'll probably see him up at Bowie's Store if I drop by for a coffee around ten."

"He's been there, too," Mort said. "I know, because he mentioned the paperback book-rack. It's one of the old-fashioned ones."

"And if I track him down, what?"

"Nothing," Mort said. "Don't do a thing. I'll call you tonight. Tomorrow night I should be back at the place on the lake. I don't know what the hell I can do up in Derry, except scuffle through the ashes."

"What about Amy?"

"She's got a guy," Mort said, trying not to sound stiff and probably sounding that way just the same. "I guess what Amy does next is something the two of them will have to work out."

"Oh. Sorry."

"No need to be," Mort said. He looked over toward the gas islands and saw that the jockey had finished filling his tank and was now washing the Buick's windshield, a sight he had never expected to witness again in his lifetime.

"Handling this guy yourself ... are you really sure it's what you want to do?"

“Yes, I think so,” Mort said.

He hesitated, suddenly understanding what was very likely going on in Greg’s mind: he was thinking that if he found the man in the black hat and Mort got hurt as a result, he, Greg, would be responsible.

“Listen, Greg—you could go along while I talk to the guy, if you wanted to.”

“I might just do that,” Greg said, relieved.

“It’s proof he wants,” Mort said, “so I’ll just have to get it for him.”

“But you said you *had* proof.”

“Yes, but he didn’t exactly take my word for it. I guess I’m going to have to shove it in his face to get him to leave me alone.”

“Oh.” Greg thought it over. “The guy really is crazy, isn’t he?”

“Yes indeed.”

“Well, I’ll see if I can find him. Give me a call tonight.”

“I will. And thanks, Greg.”

“Don’t mention it. A change is as good as a rest.”

“So they say.”

He told Greg goodbye and checked his watch. It was almost seven-thirty, and that was much too early to call Herb Creekmore, unless he wanted to pry Herb out of bed, and this wasn’t that urgent. A stop at the Augusta tollbooths would do fine. He walked back to the Buick, replacing his address book and digging out his wallet. He asked the pump jockey how much he owed him.

“That’s twenty-two fifty, with the cash discount,” the jockey said, and then looked at Mort shyly. “I wonder if I could have your autograph, Mr. Rainey? I’ve all your books.”

That made him think of Amy again, and how Amy had hated the autograph seekers. Mort himself didn’t understand them, but saw no harm in them. For her they had seemed to sum up an aspect of their lives which she found increasingly hateful. Toward the end, he had cringed inwardly every time someone asked *that* question in Amy’s presence. Sometimes he could almost sense her thinking: *If you love me, why don’t you STOP them?* As if he could, he thought. His job was to write books people like this guy would want to read... or so he saw it. When he succeeded at that, they asked for autographs.

He scribbled his name on the back of a credit slip for the pump jockey (who had, after all, actually washed his windshield) and reflected that if Amy had blamed him for doing something they liked—and he thought that, on some level she herself might not be aware of, she had—he supposed he was guilty. But it was only the way he had been built.

Right was right, after all, just as Shooter had said. And fair was fair.

He got back into his car and drove off toward Derry.

## 17

He paid his seventy-five cents at the Augusta toll plaza, then pulled into the parking area by the telephones on the far side. The day was sunny, chilly, and windy—coming out of the southwest from the direction of Litchfield and running straight and unbroken across the open plain where the turnpike plaza lay, that wind was strong enough to bring tears to Mort's eyes. He relished it, all the same. He could almost feel it blowing the dust out of rooms inside his head which had been closed and shuttered too long.

He used his credit card to call Herb Creekmore in New York—the apartment, not the office. Herb wouldn't actually make it to James and Creekmore, Mort Rainey's literary agency, for another hour or so, but Mort had known Herb long enough to guess that the man had probably been through the shower by now and was drinking a cup of coffee while he waited for the bathroom mirror to unsteam so he could shave.

He was lucky for the second time in a row. Herb answered in a voice from which most of the sleep-fuzz had departed. *Am I on a roll this morning, or what?* Mort thought, and grinned into the teeth of the cold October wind. Across the four lanes of highway, he could see men stringing snowfence in preparation for the winter which lay just over the calendar's horizon.

“Hi, Herb,” he said. “I’m calling you from a pay telephone outside the Augusta toll plaza. My divorce is final, my house in Derry burned flat last night, some nut killed my cat, and it’s colder than a well-digger’s belt buckle—are we having fun yet?”

He hadn’t realized how absurd his catalogue of woes sounded until he heard himself reciting them aloud, and he almost laughed. Jesus, it was cold out here, but didn’t it feel good! Didn’t it feel *clean*!

“Mort?” Herb said cautiously, like a man who suspects a practical joke.

“At your service,” Mort said.

“What’s this about your house?”

“I’ll tell you, but only once. Take notes if you have to, because I plan to be back in my car before I freeze solid to this telephone.” He began with John Shooter and John Shooter’s accusation. He finished with the conversation he’d had with Amy last night.

Herb, who had spent a fair amount of time as Mort and Amy’s guest (and who had been entirely dismayed by their breakup, Mort guessed), expressed his surprise and sorrow at what had happened to the house in Derry. He asked if Mort had any idea who had done it. Mort said he didn’t.

“Do you suspect this guy Shooter?” Herb asked. “I understand the significance of the cat being killed only a short time before you woke up, but—”

“I guess it’s technically possible, and I’m not ruling it out completely,” Mort said, “but I doubt it like hell. Maybe it’s only because I can’t get my mind around the idea of a man burning down a twenty-four-room house in order to get rid of a magazine. But I think it’s mostly because I met him. He really believes I stole his story, Herb. I mean, he has no doubts at all. His attitude when I told him I could show him proof was ‘Go ahead, motherfucker, make my day.’ ”

“Still ... you called the police, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I made a call this morning,” Mort said, and while this statement was a bit disingenuous, it was not an out-and-out lie. He *had* made a call this morning. To Greg Carstairs. But if he told Herb Creekmore, whom he could visualize sitting in the living room of his

New York apartment in a pair of natty tweed pants and a strap-style tee shirt, that he intended to handle this himself, with only Greg to lend a hand, he doubted if Herb would understand. Herb was a good friend, but he was something of a stereotype: Civilized Man, late-twentieth-century model, urban and urbane. He was the sort of man who believed in counselling. The sort of man who believed in meditation and mediation. The sort of man who believed in discussion when reason was present, and the immediate delegation of the problem to Persons in Authority when it was absent. To Herb, the concept that sometimes a man has got to do what a man has got to do was one which had its place ... but its place was in movies starring Sylvester Stallone.

“Well, that’s good.” Herb sounded relieved. “You’ve got enough on your plate without worrying about some psycho from Mississippi. If they find him, what will you do? Have him charged with harassment?”

“I’d rather convince him to take his persecution act and put it on the road,” Mort said. His feeling of cheery optimism, so unwarranted but indubitably real, persisted. He supposed he would crash soon enough, but for the time being, he couldn’t stop grinning. So he wiped his leaking nose with the cuff of his coat and went right on doing it. He had forgotten how good it could feel to have a grin pasted onto your kisser.

“How will you do that?”

“With your help, I hope. You’ve got files of my stuff, right?”

“Right, but—”

“Well, I need you to pull the June, 1980, issue of *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*. That’s the one with ‘Sowing Season’ in it. I can’t very well pull mine because of the fire, so—”

“I don’t have it,” Herb said mildly.

“You don’t?” Mort blinked. This was one thing he hadn’t expected. “Why not?”

“Because 1980 was two years before I came on board as your agent. I have at least one copy of everything I sold for you, but that’s one of the stories you sold yourself.”

“Oh, *shit!*” In his mind’s eye, Mort could see the acknowledgment for “Sowing Season” in *Everybody Drops the Dime*. Most of the other acknowledgments contained the line, “Reprinted by permission of the author and the author’s agents, James and Creekmore.” The one for “Sowing Season” (and two or three other stories in the collection) read only, “Reprinted by permission of the author.”

“Sorry,” Herb said.

“Of *course* I sent it in myself—I remember writing the query letter before I submitted. It’s just that it seems like you’ve been my agent forever.” He laughed a little then and added, “No offense.”

“None taken,” Herb said. “Do you want me to make a call to *EQMM*? They must have back issues.”

“Would you?” Mort asked gratefully. “That’d be great.”

“I’ll do it first thing. Only—” Herb paused.

“Only what?”

“Promise me you’re not planning to confront this guy on your own once you have a copy of the printed story in hand.”

“I promise,” Mort agreed promptly. He was being disingenuous again, but what the hell—he *had* asked Greg to come along when he did it, and Greg had agreed, so he *wouldn’t* be alone. And Herb Creekmore was his literary agent, after all, not his father. How he handled his personal problems wasn’t really Herb’s concern.

“Okay,” Herb said. “I’ll take care of it. Call me from Derry, Mort—maybe it isn’t as bad as it seems.”

“I’d like to believe that.”

“But you don’t?”

“Afraid not.”

“Okay.” Herb sighed. Then, diffidently, he added: “Is it okay to ask you to give Amy my best?”

“It is, and I will.”

“Good. You go on and get out of the wind, Mort. I can hear it shrieking in the receiver. You must be freezing.”

“Getting there. Thanks again, Herb.”

He hung up and looked thoughtfully at the telephone for a moment. He’d forgotten that the Buick needed gas, which was minor, but he’d also forgotten that Herb Creekmore hadn’t been his agent

until 1982, and that wasn't so minor. Too much pressure, he supposed. It made a man wonder what else he might have forgotten.

The voice in his mind, not the midbrain voice but the one from the deep ranges, spoke up suddenly: *What about stealing the story in the first place? Maybe you forgot that.*

He snorted a laugh as he hurried back to his car. He had never been to Mississippi in his life, and even now, stuck in a writer's block as he was, he was a long way from stooping to plagiarism. He slid behind the wheel and started the engine, reflecting that a person's mind certainly got up to some weird shit every now and again.

## 18

Mort didn't believe that people—even those who tried to be fairly honest with themselves—knew when some things were over. He believed they often went on believing, or trying to believe, even when the handwriting was not only on the wall but writ in letters large enough to read a hundred yards away without a spyglass. If it was something you really cared about and felt that you needed, it was easy to cheat, easy to confuse your life with TV and convince yourself that what felt so wrong would eventually come right ... probably after the next commercial break. He supposed that, without its great capacity for self-deception, the human race would be even crazier than it already was.

But sometimes the truth crashed through, and if you had consciously tried to think or dream your way around that truth, the results could be devastating: it was like being there when a tidal wave roared not over but straight through a dike which had been set in its way, smashing it and you flat.

Mort Rainey experienced one of these cataclysmic epiphanies after the representatives of the police and fire departments had gone and he and Amy and Ted Milner were left alone to walk slowly around the smoking ruin of the green Victorian house which had

stood at 92 Kansas Street for one hundred and thirty-six years. It was while they were making that mournful inspection tour that he understood that his marriage to the former Amy Dowd of Portland, Maine, was over. It was no “period of marital stress.” It was no “trial separation.” It was not going to be one of those cases you heard of from time to time where both parties repented their decision and remarried. It was over. Their lives together were history. Even the house where they had shared so many good times was nothing but evilly smouldering beams tumbled into the cellar-hole like the teeth of a giant.

Their meeting at Marchman’s, the little coffee shop on Witcham Street, had gone well enough. Amy had hugged him and he had hugged her back, but when he tried to kiss her mouth, she turned her head deftly aside so that his lips landed on her cheek instead. Kiss-kiss, as they said at the office parties. So good to see you, darling.

Ted Milner, blow-dried hair perfectly in place this morning and nary an Alfalfa corkscrew in sight, sat at the table in the corner, watching them. He was holding the pipe which Mort had seen clenched in his teeth at various parties over the last three years or so. Mort was convinced the pipe was an affectation, a little prop employed for the sole purpose of making its owner look older than he was. And how old was that? Mort wasn’t sure, but Amy was thirty-six, and he thought Ted, in his impeccable stone-washed jeans and open-throated J. Press shirt, had to be at least four years younger than that, possibly more. He wondered if Amy knew she could be in for trouble ten years down the line—maybe even five—and then reflected it would take a better man than he was to suggest it to her.

He asked if there was anything new. Amy said there wasn’t. Then Ted took over, speaking with a faintly Southern accent which was a good deal softer than John Shooter’s nasal burr. He told Mort the fire chief and a lieutenant from the Derry Police Department would meet them at what Ted called “the site.” They wanted to ask Mort a few questions. Mort said that was fine. Ted asked if he’d like a cup of coffee—they had time. Mort said that would also be fine. Ted asked how he had been. Mort used the word fine again. Each time it came

out of his mouth it felt a little more threadbare. Amy watched the exchange between them with some apprehension, and Mort could understand that. On the day he had discovered the two of them in bed together, he had told Ted he would kill him. In fact, he might have said something about killing them both. His memory of the event was quite foggy. He suspected theirs might be rather foggy, too. He didn't know about the other two corners of the triangle, but he himself found that foggy not only understandable but merciful.

They had coffee. Amy asked him about "John Shooter." Mort said he thought that situation was pretty much under control. He did not mention cats or notes or magazines. And after awhile, they left Marchman's and went to 92 Kansas Street, which had once been a house instead of a site.

The fire chief and police detective were there as promised, and there were questions, also as promised. Most of the questions were about any people who might dislike him enough to have tossed a Texaco cocktail into his study. If Mort had been on his own, he would have left Shooter's name out of it entirely, but of course Amy would bring it up if he didn't, so he recounted the initial encounter just as it had happened.

The fire chief, Wickersham, said: "The guy was pretty angry?"

"Yes."

"Angry enough to have driven to Derry and torched your house?" the police detective, Bradley, asked.

He was almost positive Shooter hadn't done it, but he didn't want to delve into his brief dealings with Shooter any more deeply. It would mean telling them what Shooter had done to Bump, for one thing. That would upset Amy; it would upset her a great deal ... and it would open up a can of worms he would prefer to leave closed. It was time, Mort reckoned, to be disingenuous again.

"He might have been at first. But after I discovered the two stories really *were* alike, I looked up the original date of publication on mine."

"His had never been published?" Bradley asked.

“No, I’m sure it hadn’t been. Then, yesterday, he showed up again. I asked him when he’d written his story, hoping he’d mention a date that was later than the one I had. Do you understand?”

Detective Bradley nodded. “You were hoping to prove you scooped him.”

“Right. ‘Sowing Season’ was in a book of short stories I published in 1983, but it was *originally* published in 1980. I was hoping the guy would feel safe picking a date only a year or two before 1983. I got lucky. He said he’d written it in 1982. So you see, I had him.”

He hoped it would end there, but Wickersham, the fire chief, pursued it. “You see and we see, Mr. Rainey, but did he see?”

Mort sighed inwardly. He supposed he had known that you could only be disingenuous for so long—if things went on long enough, they almost always progressed to a point where you had to either tell the truth or carve an outright lie. And here he was, at that point. But whose business was it? Theirs or his? His. Right. And he meant to see it stayed that way.

“Yes,” he told them, “he saw.”

“What did he do?” Ted asked. Mort looked at him with mild annoyance. Ted glanced away, looking as if he wished he had his pipe to play with. The pipe was in the car. The J. Press shirt had no pocket to carry it in.

“He went away,” Mort said. His irritation with Ted, who had absolutely no business sticking *his* oar in, made it easier to lie. The fact that he was lying to Ted seemed to make it more all right, too. “He muttered some bullshit about what an incredible coincidence it all was, then jumped into his car like his hair was on fire and his ass was catching, and took off.”

“Happen to notice the make of the car and the license plate, Mr. Rainey?” Bradley asked. He had taken out a pad and a ballpoint pen.

“It was a Ford,” Mort said. “I’m sorry, but I can’t help you with the plate. It wasn’t a Maine plate, but other than that . . .” He shrugged and tried to look apologetic. Inside, he felt increasingly uncomfortable with the way this was going. It had seemed okay when he was just being cute, skirting around any outright lies—it had

seemed a way of sparing Amy the pain of knowing that the man had broken Bump's neck and then skewered him with a screwdriver. But now he had put himself in a position where he had told different stories to different people. If they got together and did a comparison, he wouldn't look so hot. Explaining his reasons for the lies might be sticky. He supposed that such comparisons were pretty unlikely, as long as Amy didn't talk to either Greg Carstairs or Herb Creekmore, but suppose there was a hassle with Shooter when he and Greg caught up to him and shoved the June, 1980, issue of EQMM in Shooter's face?

*Never mind*, he told himself, *we'll burn that bridge when we come to it, big guy*. At this thought, he experienced a brief return of the high spirits he'd felt while talking to Herb at the toll plaza, and almost cackled aloud. He held it in. They would wonder why he was laughing if he did something like that, and he supposed they would be right to wonder.

"I think Shooter must be bound for—"

*(Mississippi)*

"—for wherever he came from by now," he finished, with hardly a break.

"I imagine you're right," Lieutenant Bradley said, "but I'm inclined to pursue this, Mr. Rainey. You might have convinced the guy he was wrong, but that doesn't mean he left your place feeling mellow. It's possible that he drove up here in a rage and torched your house just because he was pissed off—pardon me, Mrs. Rainey."

Amy offered a crooked little smile and waved the apology away.

"Don't you think that's possible?"

*No*, Mort thought, *I don't. If he'd decided to torch the house, I think he would have killed Bump before he left for Derry, just in case I woke up before he got back. In that case, the blood would have been dry and Bump would have been stiff when I found him. That isn't the way it happened ... but I can't say so. Not even if I wanted to. They'd wonder why I held back the stuff about Bump as long as I did, for one thing. They'd probably think I've got a few loose screws.*

"I guess so," he said, "but I met the guy. He didn't strike me as the house-burning type."

“You mean he wasn’t a Snopes,” Amy said suddenly.

Mort looked at her, startled—then smiled. “That’s right,” he said. “A Southerner, but not a Snopes.”

“Meaning what?” Bradley asked, a little warily.

“An old joke, Lieutenant,” Amy said. “The Snopeses were characters in some novels by William Faulkner. They got their start in business burning barns.”

“Oh,” Bradley said blankly.

Wickersham said: “There is no house-burning type, Mr. Rainey. They come in all shapes and sizes. Believe me.”

“Well—”

“Give me a little more on the car, if you can,” Bradley said. He poised a pencil over his notebook. “I want to make the State Police aware of this guy.”

Mort suddenly decided he was going to lie some more. Quite a lot more, actually.

“Well, it was a sedan. I can tell you that much for sure.”

“Uh-huh. Ford sedan. Year?”

“Somewhere in the seventies, I guess,” Mort said. He was fairly sure Shooter’s station wagon had actually been built around the time a fellow named Oswald had elected Lyndon Johnson President of the United States. He paused, then added: “The plate was a light color. It could have been Florida. I won’t swear to it, but it could have been.”

“Uh-huh. And the man himself?”

“Average height. Blonde hair. Eyeglasses. The round wire-framed ones John Lennon used to wear. That’s really all I re—”

“Didn’t you say he was wearing a hat?” Amy asked suddenly.

Mort felt his teeth come together with a click. “Yes,” he said pleasantly. “That’s right, I forgot. Dark gray or black. Except it was more of a cap. With a bill, you know.”

“Okay.” Bradley snapped his book closed. “It’s a start.”

“Couldn’t this have been a simple case of vandalism, arson for kicks?” Mort asked. “In novels, everything has a connection, but my experience has been that in real life, things sometimes just happen.”

“It could have been,” Wickersham agreed, “but it doesn’t hurt to check out the obvious connections.” He dropped Mort a solemn little wink and said, “Sometimes life imitates art, you know.”

“Do you need anything else?” Ted asked them, and put an arm around Amy’s shoulders.

Wickersham and Bradley exchanged a glance and then Bradley shook his head. “I don’t think so, at least not at the present.”

“I only ask because Amy and Mort will have to put in some time with the insurance agent,” Ted said. “Probably an investigator from the parent company, as well.”

Mort found the man’s Southern accent more and more irritating. He suspected that Ted came from a part of the South several states north of Faulkner country, but it was still a coincidence he could have done without.

The officials shook hands with Amy and Mort, expressed their sympathy, told them to get in touch if anything else occurred to either of them, and then took themselves off, leaving the three of them to take another turn around the house.

“I’m sorry about all of this, Amy,” Mort said suddenly. She was walking between them, and looked over at him, apparently startled by something she had heard in his voice. Simple sincerity, maybe. “All of it. Really sorry.”

“So am I,” she said softly, and touched his hand.

“Well, Teddy makes three,” Ted said with solemn heartiness. She turned back to him, and in that moment Mort could have cheerfully strangled the man until his eyes popped out jittering at the ends of their optic strings.

They were walking up the west side of the house toward the street now. Over here had been the deep corner where his study had met the house, and not far away was Amy’s flower-garden. All the flowers were dead now, and Mort reflected that was probably just as well. The fire had been hot enough to crisp what grass had remained green in a twelve-foot border all around the ruin. If the flowers had been in bloom, it would have crisped them, as well, and that would have been just too sad. It would have been—

Mort stopped suddenly. He was remembering the stories. The story. You could call it "Sowing Season" or you could call it "Secret Window, Secret Garden," but they were the same thing once you took the geegaws off and looked underneath. He looked up. There was nothing to see but blue sky, at least now, but before last night's fire, there would have been a window right where he was looking. It was the window in the little room next to the laundry. The little room that was Amy's office. It was where she went to write checks, to write in her daily journal, to make the telephone calls that needed to be made ... the room where, he suspected, Amy had several years ago started a novel. And, when it died, it was the room where she had buried it decently and quietly in a desk drawer. The desk had been by the window. Amy had liked to go there in the mornings. She could start the wash in the next room and then do paperwork while she waited for the buzzer which proclaimed it was time to strip the washer and feed the drier. The room was well away from the main house and she liked the quiet, she said. The quiet and the clear, sane morning light. She liked to look out the window every now and then, at her flowers growing in the deep corner formed by the house and the study ell. And he heard her saying, *It's the best room in the house, at least for me, because hardly anybody ever goes there but me. It's got a secret window, and it looks down on a secret garden.*

"Mort?" Amy was saying now, and for a moment Mort took no notice, confusing her real voice with her voice in his mind, which was the voice of memory. But was it a true memory or a false one? That was the real question, wasn't it? It *seemed* like a true memory, but he had been under a great deal of stress even before Shooter, and Bump, and the fire. Wasn't it at least possible that he was having a ... well, a recollective hallucination? That he was trying to make his own past with Amy in some way conform to that goddam story where a man had gone crazy and killed his wife?

*Jesus, I hope not. I hope not, because if I am, that's too close to nervous-breakdown territory for comfort.*

"Mort, are you okay?" Amy asked. She plucked fretfully at his sleeve, at least temporarily breaking his trance.

“Yes,” he said, and then, abruptly: “No. To tell you the truth, I’m feeling a little sick.”

“Breakfast, maybe,” Ted said.

Amy gave him a look that made Mort feel a bit better. It was not a very friendly look. “It *isn’t* breakfast,” she said a little indignantly. She swept her arm at the blackened ruins. “It’s this. Let’s get out of here.”

“The insurance people are due at noon,” Ted said.

“Well, that’s more than an hour from now. Let’s go to your place, Ted. I don’t feel so hot myself. I’d like to sit down.”

“All right.” Ted spoke in a slightly nettled no-need-to-shout tone which also did Mort’s heart good. And although he would have said at breakfast that morning that Ted Milner’s place was the last one on earth he wanted to go, he accompanied them without protest.

They were all quiet on the ride across town to the split-level on the east side where Ted hung his hat. Mort didn't know what Amy and Ted were thinking about, although the house for Amy and whether or not they'd be on time to meet the wallahs from the insurance company for Ted would probably be a couple of good guesses, but he knew what he was thinking about. He was trying to decide if he was going crazy or not. Is it real, or is it Memorex?

He decided finally that Amy really *had* said that about her office next to the laundry room—it was not a false memory. Had she said it before 1982, when “John Shooter” claimed to have written a story called “Secret Window, Secret Garden”? He didn't know. No matter how earnestly he coned his confused and aching brain, what kept coming back was a single curt message: answer inconclusive. But if she had said it, no matter when, couldn't the title of Shooter's story still be simple coincidence? Maybe, but the coincidences were piling up, weren't they? He had decided the fire was, must be, a coincidence. But the memory which Amy's garden with its crop of dead flowers had prodded forth ... well, it was getting harder and harder to believe all of this wasn't tied together in some strange, possibly even supernatural fashion.

And in his own way, hadn't “Shooter” himself been just as confused? How did you get it? he had asked; his voice had been fierce with rage and puzzlement. *That's what I really want to know. How in hell did a big-money scribbling asshole like you get down to a little shitsplat town in Mississippi and*

*steal my goddam story?* At the time, Mort had thought either that it was another sign of the man's madness or that the guy was one hell of a good actor. Now, in Ted's car, it occurred to him for the first time that it was exactly the way he himself would have reacted, had the circumstances been reversed.

As, in a way, they had been. The one place where the two stories differed completely was in the matter of the title. They both fit, but now Mort found that he had a question to ask Shooter which was very similar to the one Shooter had already asked him: *How did you happen by that title, Mr. Shooter? That's what I really want to know. How did you happen to know that, twelve hundred miles away from your shitsplat town in Mississippi, the wife of a writer you claim you never heard of before this year had her own secret window, looking down on her own secret garden?*

Well, there was only one way to find out, of course. When Greg ran Shooter down, Mort would have to ask him.

## 20

Mort passed on the cup of coffee Ted offered and asked if he had a Coke or a Pepsi. Ted did, and after Mort had drunk it, his stomach settled. He had expected that just being here, here where Ted and Amy played house now that they no longer had to bother with the cheap little town-line motels, would make him angry and restless. It didn't. It was just a house, one where every room seemed to proclaim that the owner was a Swinging Young Bachelor Who Was Making It. Mort found that he could deal with that quite easily, although it made him feel a little nervous for Amy all over again. He thought of her little office with its clear, sane light and the soporific drone of the drier coming through the wall, her little office with its secret window, the only one in the whole place which looked down into the tight little angle of space formed by the house and the ell, and thought how much she had belonged there and how little she seemed to belong here. But that was something she would have to deal with herself, and he thought, after a few minutes in this other house which was not a dreaded den of iniquity at all but only a house, that he could live with that ... that he could even be content with it.

She asked him if he would be staying in Derry overnight. “Uh-uh. I’ll be going back as soon as we finish with the insurance adjustors. If something else pops, they can get in touch with me ... or you can.”

He smiled at her. She smiled back and touched his hand briefly. Ted didn’t like it. He frowned out the window and fingered his pipe.

## 21

They were on time for their meeting with the representatives of the insurance company, which undoubtedly relieved Ted Milner’s mind. Mort was not particularly crazy about having Ted in attendance; it had never been Ted’s house, after all, not even after the divorce. Still, it seemed to ease Amy’s mind to have him there, and so Mort left it alone.

Don Strick, the Consolidated Assurance Company agent with whom they had done business, conducted the meeting at his office, where they went after another brief tour of “the site.” At the office they met a man named Fred Evans, a Consolidated field investigator specializing in arson. The reason Evans hadn’t been with Wickersham and Bradley that morning or at “the site” when Strick met them there at noon became obvious very quickly: he had spent most of the previous night poking through the ruins with a ten-cell flashlight and a Polaroid camera. He had gone back to his motel room, he said, to catch a few winks before meeting the Rainey’s.

Mort liked Evans very much. He seemed to really care about the loss he and Amy had suffered, while everyone else, including Mr. Teddy Makes Three, seemed to have only mouthed the traditional words of sympathy before going on to whatever they considered the business at hand (and in Ted Milner’s case, Mort thought, the business at hand was getting him out of Derry and back to Tashmore Lake as soon as possible). Fred Evans did not refer to 92 Kansas Street as “the site.” He referred to it as “the house.”

His questions, while essentially the same as those asked by Wickersham and Bradley, were gentler, more detailed, and more probing. Although he'd had four hours' sleep at most, his eyes were bright, his speech quick and clear. After speaking with him for twenty minutes, Mort decided that he would deal with a company other than Consolidated Assurance if he ever decided to burn down a house for the insurance money. Or wait until this man retired.

When he had finished his questions, Evans smiled at them. "You've been very helpful, and I want to thank you again, both for your thoughtful answers and for your kind treatment of me. In a lot of cases, people's feathers get ruffled the second they hear the words 'insurance investigator.' They're already upset, understandably so, and quite often they take the presence of an investigator on the scene as an accusation that they torched their own property."

"Given the circumstances, I don't think we could have asked for better treatment," Amy said, and Ted Milner nodded so violently that his head might have been on a string—one controlled by a puppeteer with a bad case of nerves.

"This next part is hard," Evans said. He nodded to Strick, who opened a desk drawer and produced a clipboard with a computer printout on it. "When an investigator ascertains that a fire was as serious as this one clearly was, we have to show the clients a list of claimed insurable property. You look it over, then sign an affidavit swearing that the items listed still belong to you, and that they were still in the house when the fire occurred. You should put a check mark beside any item or items you've sold since your last insurance overhaul with Mr. Strick here, and any insured property which was not in the house at the time of the fire." Evans put a fist to his lips and cleared his throat before going on. "I'm told that there has been a separation of residence recently, so that last bit may be particularly important."

"We're divorced," Mort said bluntly. "I'm living in our place on Tashmore Lake. We only used it during the summers, but it's got a furnace and is livable during the cold months. Unfortunately, I hadn't got around to moving the bulk of my things out of the house up here. I'd been putting it off."

Don Strick nodded sympathetically. Ted crossed his legs, fiddled with his pipe, and generally gave the impression of a man who is trying not to look as deeply bored as he is.

“Do the best you can with the list,” Evans said. He took the clipboard from Strick and handed it across the desk to Amy. “This can be a bit unpleasant—it’s a little like a treasure hunt in reverse.”

Ted had put his pipe down and was craning at the list, his boredom gone, at least for the time being; his eyes were as avid as those of any bystander gleeping the aftermath of a bad accident. Amy saw him looking and obligingly tipped the form his way. Mort, who was sitting on the other side of her, tipped it back the other way.

“Do you mind?” he asked Ted. He was angry, really angry, and they all heard it in his voice.

“Mort—” Amy said.

“I’m not going to make a big deal of this,” Mort said to her, “but this was *our* stuff, Amy. *Ours*.”

“I hardly think—” Ted began indignantly.

“No, he’s perfectly right, Mr. Milner,” Fred Evans said with a mildness Mort felt might have been deceptive. “The law says you have no right to be looking at the listed items at all. We wink at something like that if nobody minds ... but I think Mr. Rainey does.”

“You’re damned *tooting* Mr. Rainey does,” Mort said. His hands were tightly clenched in his lap; he could feel his fingernails biting smile-shapes into the soft meat of his palms.

Amy switched her look of unhappy appeal from Mort to Ted. Mort expected Ted to huff and puff and try to blow somebody’s house down, but Ted did not. Mort supposed it was a measure of his own hostile feeling toward the man that he’d made such an assumption; he didn’t know Ted very well (although he did know he looked a bit like Alfalfa when you woke him up suddenly in a no-tell motel), but he knew Amy. If Ted had been a blowhard, she would have left him already.

Smiling a little, speaking to her and ignoring Mort and the others completely, Ted said: “Would it help matters if I took a walk around the block?”

Mort tried to restrain himself and couldn't quite do it. "Why not make it two?" he asked Ted with bogus amiability.

Amy shot him a narrow, dark stare, then looked back at Ted. "Would you? This might be a little easier ..."

"Sure," he said. He kissed her high on her cheekbone, and Mort had another dolorous revelation: the man cared for her. He might not always care for her, but right now he did. Mort realized he had come halfway to thinking Amy was just a toy that had captivated Ted for a little while, a toy of which he would tire soon enough. But that didn't jibe with what he knew of Amy, either. She had better instincts about people than that ... and more respect for herself.

Ted got up and left. Amy looked at Mort reproachfully. "Are you satisfied?"

"I suppose," he said. "Look, Amy—I probably didn't handle that as well as I could have, but my motives are honorable enough. We shared a lot over the years. I guess this is the last thing, and I think it belongs between the two of us. Okay?"

Strick looked uncomfortable. Fred Evans did not; he looked from Mort to Amy and then back to Mort again with the bright interest of a man watching a really good tennis match.

"Okay," Amy said in a low voice. He touched her hand lightly, and she gave him a smile. It was strained, but better than no smile at all, he reckoned.

He pulled his chair closer to hers and they bent over the list, heads close together, like kids studying for a test. It didn't take Mort long to understand why Evans had warned them. He thought he had grasped the size of the loss. He had been wrong.

Looking at the columns of cold computer type, Mort thought he could not have been more dismayed if someone had taken everything in the house at 92 Kansas Street and strewn it along the block for the whole world to stare at. He couldn't believe all the things he had forgotten, all the things that were gone.

Seven major appliances. Four TVs, one with a videotape editing hook-up. The Spode china, and the authentic Early American furniture which Amy had bought a piece at a time. The value of the antique armoire which had stood in their bedroom was listed at

\$14,000. They had not been serious art-collectors, but they had been appreciators, and they had lost twelve pieces of original art. Their value was listed at \$22,000, but Mort didn't care about the dollar value; he was thinking about the N. C. Wyeth line-drawing of two boys putting to sea in a small boat. It was raining in the picture; the boys were wearing slickers and galoshes and big grins. Mort had loved that picture, and now it was gone. The Waterford glassware. The sports equipment stored in the garage—skis, ten-speed bikes, and the Old Town canoe. Amy's three furs were listed. He saw her make tiny check marks beside the beaver and the mink—still in storage, apparently—but she passed the short fox jacket without checking it off. It had been hanging in the closet, warm and stylish outerwear for fall, when the fire happened. He remembered giving her that coat for her birthday six or seven years ago. Gone now. His Celestron telescope. Gone. The big puzzle quilt Amy's mother had given them when they were married. Amy's mother was dead and the quilt was now so much ash in the wind.

The worst, at least for Mort, was halfway down the second column, and again it wasn't the dollar value that hurt. 124 BOTS. WINE, the item read. VALUE \$4,900. Wine was something they had both liked. They weren't rabid about it, but they had built the little wine room in the cellar together, stocked it together, and had drunk the occasional bottle together.

"Even the wine," he said to Evans. "Even that."

Evans gave him an odd look that Mort couldn't interpret, then nodded. "The wine room itself didn't burn, because you had very little fuel oil in the cellar tank and there was no explosion. But it got very hot inside, and most of the bottles burst. The few that didn't ... Well, I don't know much about wine, but I doubt if it would be good to drink. Perhaps I'm wrong."

"You're not," Amy said. A single tear rolled down her cheek and she wiped it absently away.

Evans offered her his handkerchief. She shook her head and bent over the list with Mort again.

Ten minutes later it was finished. They signed on the correct lines and Strick witnessed their signatures. Ted Milner showed up only

instants later, as if he had been watching the whole thing on some private viewscreen.

“Is there anything else?” Mort asked Evans.

“Not now. There may be. Is your number down in Tashmore unlisted, Mr. Rainey?”

“Yes.” He wrote it down for Evans. “Please get in touch if I can help.”

“I will.” He rose, hand outstretched. “This is always a nasty business. I’m sorry you two had to go through it.”

They shook hands all around and left Strick and Evans to write reports. It was well past one, and Ted asked Mort if he’d like to have some lunch with him and Amy. Mort shook his head.

“I want to get back. Do some work and see if I can’t forget all this for awhile.” And he felt as if maybe he really could write. That was not surprising. In tough times—up until the divorce, anyway, which seemed to be an exception to the general rule—he had always found it easy to write. Necessary, even. It was good to have those make-believe worlds to fall back on when the real one had hurt you.

He half-expected Amy to ask him to change his mind, but she didn’t. “Drive safe,” she said, and planted a chaste kiss on the corner of his mouth. “Thanks for coming, and for being so ... so reasonable about everything.”

“Can I do anything for you, Amy?”

She shook her head, smiling a little, and took Ted’s hand. If he had been looking for a message, this one was much too clear to miss.

They walked slowly toward Mort’s Buick.

“You keepin well enough down there?” Ted asked. “Anything you need?”

For the third time he was struck by the man’s Southern accent—just one more coincidence.

“Can’t think of anything,” he said, opening the Buick’s door and fishing the car keys out of his pocket. “Where do you come from originally, Ted? You or Amy must have told me sometime, but I’ll be damned if I can remember. Was it Mississippi?”

Ted laughed heartily. “A long way from there, Mort. I grew up in Tennessee. A little town called Shooter’s Knob, Tennessee.”

Mort drove back to Tashmore Lake with his hands clamped to the steering wheel, his spine as straight as a ruler, and his eyes fixed firmly on the road. He played the radio loud and concentrated ferociously on the music each time he sensed telltale signs of mental activity behind the center of his forehead. Before he had made forty miles, he felt a pressing sensation in his bladder. He welcomed this development and did not even consider stopping at a wayside comfort-station. The need to take a whizz was another excellent distraction.

He arrived at the house around four-thirty and parked the Buick in its accustomed place around the side of the house. Eric Clapton was throttled in the middle of a full-tilt-boogie guitar solo when Mort shut off the motor, and quiet crashed down like a load of stones encased in foam rubber. There wasn't a single boat on the lake, not a single bug in the grass.

*Pissing and thinking have a lot in common*, he thought, climbing out of the car and unzipping his fly. *You can put them both off... but not forever.*

Mort Rainey stood there urinating and thought about secret windows and secret gardens; he thought about those who might own the latter and those who might look through the former. He thought about the fact that the magazine he needed to prove a certain fellow was either a lunatic or a con man had just happened to burn up on the very evening he had tried to get his hands on it. He thought about the fact that his ex-wife's lover, a man he cordially detested, had come from a town called Shooter's Knob and that Shooter happened to be the pseudonym of the aforementioned loony-or-con-man who had come into Mort Rainey's life at the exact time when the aforementioned Mort Rainey was beginning to grasp his divorce not just as an academic concept but as a simple fact of his life forever after. He even thought about the fact that "John Shooter" claimed to have discovered Mort Rainey's act of plagiarism at about the same time Mort Rainey had separated from his wife.

Question: Were all of these things coincidences?

Answer: It was technically possible.

Question: Did he *believe* all these things were coincidences?

Answer: No.

Question: Did he believe he was going mad, then?

“The answer is no,” Mort said. “He does not. At least not yet.” He zipped up his fly and went back around the corner to the door.

## 23

He found his housekey, started to put it in the lock, and then pulled it out again. His hand went to the doorknob instead, and as his fingers closed over it, he felt a clear certainty that it would rotate easily. Shooter had been here ... had been, or was still. And he wouldn't have needed to force entry, either. Nope. Not this sucker. Mort kept a spare key to the Tashmore Lake house in an old soap-dish on a high shelf in the toolshed, which was where Shooter had gone to get a screwdriver in a hurry when the time had come to nail poor old Bump to the garbage cabinet. He was in the house now, looking around ... or maybe hiding. He was—

The knob refused to move; Mort's fingers simply slid around it. The door was still locked.

“Okay,” Mort said. “Okay, no big deal.” He even laughed a little as he socked the key home and turned it. Just because the door was locked didn't mean Shooter wasn't in the house. In fact, it made it more likely that he was in the house, when you really stopped to think about it. He could have used the spare key, put it back, then locked the door from the inside to lull his enemy's suspicions. All you had to do to lock it, after all, was to press the button set into the knob. *He's trying to psych me out*, Mort thought as he stepped in.

The house was full of dusty late-afternoon sunlight and silence. But it did not feel like *unoccupied* silence.

“You’re trying to psych me out, aren’t you?” he called. He expected to sound crazy to himself: a lonely, paranoid man addressing the intruder who only exists, after all, in his own imagination. But he *didn’t* sound crazy to himself. He sounded, instead, like a man who has tumbled to at least *half* the trick. Only getting half a scam wasn’t so great, maybe, but half was better than nothing.

He walked into the living room with its cathedral ceiling, its window-wall facing the lake, and, of course, The World-Famous Mort Rainey Sofa, also known as The Couch of the Comatose Writer. An economical little smile tugged at his cheeks. His balls felt high and tight against the fork of his groin.

“Half a scam’s better than none, right, Mr. Shooter?” he called.

The words died into dusty silence. He could smell old tobacco smoke in that dust. His eye happened on the battered package of cigarettes he had excavated from the drawer of his desk. It occurred to him that the house had a smell—almost a stink—that was horribly negative: it was an un-woman smell. Then he thought: No. *That’s a mistake. That’s not it. What you smell is Shooter. You smell the man, and you smell his cigarettes. Not yours, his.*

He turned slowly around, his head cocked back. A second-floor bedroom looked down on the living room halfway up the cream-colored wall; the opening was lined with dark-brown wooden slats. The slats were supposed to keep the unwary from falling out and splattering themselves all over the living-room floor, but they were also supposed to be decorative. Right then they didn’t look particularly decorative to Mort; they looked like the bars of a jail cell. All he could see of what he and Amy had called the guest bedroom was the ceiling and one of the bed’s four posts.

“You up there, Mr. Shooter?” he yelled.

There was no answer.

*“I know you’re trying to psych me out!”* Now he was beginning to feel just the tiniest bit ridiculous. “It won’t work, though!”

About six years before, they had plugged the big fieldstone fireplace in the living room with a Blackstone Jersey stove. A rack of fire-tools stood beside it. Mort grasped the handle of the ash-shovel, considered it for a moment, then let go of it and took the poker

instead. He faced the barred guest-room overlook and held the poker up like a knight saluting his queen. Then he walked slowly to the stairs and began to climb them. He could feel tension worming its way into his muscles now, but he understood it wasn't *Shooter* he was afraid of; what he was afraid of was finding nothing.

"I know you're here, and I know you're trying to psyCh me out! The only thing I don't know is what it's all about, Alfie, and when I find you, you better tell me!"

He paused on the second-floor landing, his heart pumping hard in his chest now. The guest-room door was to his left. The door to the guest bathroom was to the right. And he suddenly understood that Shooter was here, all right, but not in the bedroom. No; that was just a ploy. That was just what Shooter wanted him to believe.

Shooter was in the bathroom.

And, as he stood there on the landing with the poker clutched tightly in his right hand and sweat running out of his hair and down his cheeks, Mort *heard* him. A faint shuffle-shuffle. He was in there, all right. Standing in the tub, by the sound. He had moved the tiniest bit. Peekaboo, Johnny-boy, I hear you. Are you armed, fuckface?

Mort thought he probably was, but he didn't think it would turn out to be a gun. Mort had an idea that the man's pen-name was about as close to firearms as he had ever come. Shooter had looked like the sort of guy who would feel more at home with instruments of a blunter nature. What he had done to Bump seemed to bear this out.

*I bet it's a hammer*, Mort thought, and wiped sweat off the back of his neck with his free hand. He could feel his eyes pulsing in and out of their sockets in time with his heartbeat. *I'm betting it's a hammer from the toolshed.*

He had no more thought of this before he saw Shooter, saw him clearly, standing in the bathtub in his black round-crowned hat and his yellow shitkicker work-shoes, his lips split over his mail-order dentures in a grin which was really a grimace, sweat trickling down his own face, running down the deep lines grooved there like water running down a network of galvanized tin gutters, with the hammer from the toolshed raised to shoulder height like a judge's gavel. Just

standing there in the tub, waiting to bring the hammer down. Next case, bailiff.

*I know you, buddy. I got your number. I got it the first time I saw you. And guess what? You picked the wrong writer to fuck with. I think I've been wanting to kill somebody since the middle of May, and you'll do as well as anybody.*

He turned his head toward the bedroom door. At the same time, he reached out with his left hand (after drying it on the front of his shirt so his grip wouldn't slip at the crucial moment) and curled it around the bathroom doorknob.

*"I know you're in there!"* he shouted at the closed bedroom door. *"If you're under the bed, you better get out! I'm counting to five! If you're not out by the time I get there, I'm coming in ... and I'll come in swinging! You hear me?"*

There was no answer ... but then, he hadn't really expected one. Or *wanted* one. He tightened his grip on the bathroom doorknob, but would shout the numbers toward the guest-room door. He didn't know if Shooter would hear or sense the difference if he turned his head in the direction of the bathroom, but he thought Shooter might. The man was obviously clever. Hellishly clever.

In the instant before he started counting, he heard another faint movement in the bathroom. He would have missed it, even standing this close, if he hadn't been listening with every bit of concentration he could muster.

*"One!"*

Christ, he was sweating! Like a pig!

*"Two!"*

The knob of the bathroom door was like a cold rock in his clenched fist.

*"Thr-"*

He turned the knob of the bathroom door and slammed in, bouncing the door off the wall hard enough to chop through the wallpaper and pop the door's lower hinge, and there he was, *there he was*, coming at him with a raised weapon, his teeth bared in a killer's grin, and his eyes were insane, utterly insane, and Mort brought the poker down in a whistling overhand blow and he had just

time enough to realize that Shooter was also swinging a poker, and to realize that Shooter was not wearing his round-crowned black hat, and to realize it wasn't Shooter at all, to realize it was him, the madman was him, and then the poker shattered the mirror over the washbasin and silver-backed glass sprayed every whichway, twinkling in the gloom, and the medicine cabinet fell into the sink. The bent door swung open like a gaping mouth, spilling bottles of cough syrup and iodine and Listerine.

*"I killed a goddam fucking mirror!"* he shrieked, and was about to sling the poker away when something *did* move in the tub, behind the corrugated shower door. There was a frightened little squeal. Grinning, Mort slashed sideways with the poker, tearing a jagged gash through the plastic door and knocking it off its tracks. He raised the poker over his shoulder, his eyes glassy and staring, his lips drawn into the grimace he had imagined on Shooter's face.

Then he lowered the poker slowly. He found he had to use the fingers of his left hand to pry open the fingers of his right so that the poker could fall to the floor.

"Wee sleekit cowerin' beastie," he said to the fieldmouse scurrying blindly about in the tub. "What a panic's in thy breastie." His voice sounded hoarse and flat and strange. It didn't sound like his own voice at all. It was like listening to himself on tape for the first time.

He turned and walked slowly out of the bathroom past the leaning door with its popped hinge, his shoes gritting on broken mirror glass.

All at once he wanted to go downstairs and lie on the couch and take a nap. All at once he wanted that more than anything else in the world.

## 24

It was the telephone that woke him up. Twilight had almost become night, and he made his way slowly past the glass-topped coffee table that liked to bite with a weird feeling that time had somehow doubled

back on itself. His right arm ached like hell. His back wasn't in much better shape. Exactly how hard had he swung that poker, anyway? How much panic had been driving him? He didn't like to think.

He picked up the telephone, not bothering to guess who it might be. Life has been so dreadfully busy lately, darling, that it might even be the President. "Hello?"

"How you doin, Mr. Rainey?" the voice asked, and Mort recoiled, snatching the telephone away from his ear for a moment as if it were a snake which had tried to bite. He returned it slowly.

"I'm doing fine, Mr. Shooter," he said in a dry, spittleless voice. "How are you doing?"

"I'm-a country fair," Shooter allowed, speaking in that thick crackerbarrel Southern accent that was somehow as bald and staring as an unpainted barn standing all by itself in the middle of a field. "But I don't think you're really all that well. Stealing from another man, that don't seem to have ever bothered you none. Being caught up on, though ... that seems to have given you the pure miseries."

"What are you talking about?"

Shooter sounded faintly amused. "Well, I heard on the radio news that someone burned down your house. Your other house. And then, when you come back down here, it sounded like you pitched a fit or something once you got into the house. Shouting ... whacking on things ... or maybe it's just that successful writers like you throw tantrums when things don't go the way they expect. Is that it, maybe?"

My God, *he was here. He was.*

Mort found himself looking out the window as if Shooter *still* might be out there ... hiding in the bushes, perhaps, while he spoke to Mort on some sort of cordless telephone. Ridiculous, of course.

"The magazine with my story in it is on the way," he said. "When it gets here, are you going to leave me alone?"

Shooter still sounded lazily amused. "There isn't any magazine with that story in it, Mr. Rainey. You and me, we *know* that. Not from 1980, there isn't. How could there be, when my story wasn't there for you to steal until 1982?"

*"Goddammit, I did not steal your st-"*

"When I heard about your house," Shooter said, "I went out and bought an *Evening Express*. They had a picture of what was left. Wasn't very much. Had a picture of your wife, too." There was a long, thoughtful pause. Then Shooter said, "She's purty." He used the country pronunciation purposely, sarcastically. "How'd an ugly son of a buck like you luck into such a purty wife, Mr. Rainey?"

"We're divorced," he said. "I told you that. Maybe she discovered how ugly I was. Why don't we leave Amy out of this? It's between you and me."

For the second time in two days, he realized he had answered the phone while he was only half awake and nearly defenseless. As a result, Shooter was in almost total control of the conversation. He was leading Mort by the nose, calling the shots.

*Hang up, then.*

But he couldn't. At least, not yet.

"Between you and me, is it?" Shooter asked. "Then I don't s'pose you even mentioned me to anyone else."

"What do you want? Tell me! What in the hell do you want?"

"You want the second reason I came, is that it?"

"Yes!"

"I want you to write me a story," Shooter said calmly. "I want you to write a story and put my name on it and then give it to me. You owe me that. Right is right and fair is fair."

Mort stood in the hallway with the telephone clutched in his aching fist and a vein pulsing in the middle of his forehead. For a few moments his rage was so total that he found himself buried alive inside it and all he was capable of thinking was *So THAT'S it! SO THAT'S it! SO THAT'S it!* over and over again.

"You there, Mr. Rainey?" Shooter asked in his calm, drawling voice.

"The only thing I'll write for you," Mort said, his own voice slow and syrupy-thick with rage, "is your death-warrant, if you don't leave me alone."

"You talk big, pilgrim," Shooter said in the patient voice of a man explaining a simple problem to a stupid child, "because you know I

can't put no hurtin on you. If you had stolen my dog or my car, I could take *your* dog or car. I could do that just as easy as I broke your cat's neck. If you tried to stop me, I could put a hurtin on you and take it anyway. But this is different. The goods I want are inside your head. You got the goods locked up like they were inside a safe. Only I can't just blow off the door or torch open the back. I have to find me the combination. Don't I?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mort said, "but the day you get a story out of me will be the day the Statue of Liberty wears a diaper. *Pilgrim.*"

Shooter said meditatively, "I'd leave her out of it if I could,. but I'm startin to think you ain't going to leave me that option."

All the spit in Mort's mouth was suddenly gone, leaving it dry and glassy and hot. "What ... what do you—"

"Do you want to wake up from one of your stupid naps and find *Amy* nailed to your garbage bin?" Shooter asked. "Or turn on the radio some morning and hear she came off second best in a match with the chainsaw you keep in your garage up there? Or did the garage burn, too?"

"Watch what you say," Mort whispered. His wide eyes began to prickle with tears of rage and fear.

"You still have two days to think about it. I'd think about it real close, Mr. Rainey. I mean I'd really hunker down over her, if I were you. And I don't think I'd talk about this to anyone else. That'd be like standing out in a thunderstorm and tempting the lightning. Divorced or not, I have got an idea you still have some feeling for that lady. It's time for you to grow up a little. *You can't get away with it.* Don't you realize that yet? *I know what you did, and I ain't quitting until I get what's mine.*"

"You're *crazy!*" Mort screamed.

"Good night, Mr. Rainey," Shooter said, and hung up.

Mort stood there for a moment, the handset sinking away from his ear. Then he scooped up the bottom half of the Princess-style telephone. He was on the verge of throwing the whole combination against the wall before he was able to get hold of himself. He set it down again and took a dozen deep breaths—enough to make his head feel swimmy and light. Then he dialed Herb Creekmore's home telephone.

Herb's lady-friend, Delores, picked it up on the second ring and called Herb to the telephone.

"Hi, Mort," Herb said. "What's the story on the house?" His voice moved away from the telephone's mouthpiece a little. "Delores, will you move that skillet to the back burner?"

*Suppertime in New York*, Mort thought, *and he wants me to know it. Well, what the hell. A maniac has just threatened to turn my wife into veal cutlets, but life has to go on, right?*

"The house is gone," Mort said. "The insurance will cover the loss." He paused. "The *monetary* loss, anyway."

"I'm sorry," Herb said. "Can I do anything?"

"Well, not about the house," Mort said, "but thanks for offering. About the story, though—"

"What story is that, Mort?"

He felt his hand tightening down on the telephone's handset again and forced himself to loosen up. He doesn't know what *the situation up here is*. You have to remember that.

"The one my nutty friend is kicking sand about," he said, trying to maintain a tone which was light and mostly unconcerned. " 'Sowing Season.' *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* ?"

"Oh, *that!*" Herb said.

Mort felt a jolt of fear. "You didn't forget to call, did you?"

"No—I called," Herb reassured him. "I just forgot all about it for a minute. You losing your house and all ..."

"Well? What did they say?"

"Don't worry about a thing. They're going to send a Xerox over to me by messenger tomorrow, and I'll send it right up to you by Federal Express. You'll have it by ten o'clock day after tomorrow."

For a moment it seemed that all of his problems were solved, and he started to relax. Then he thought of the way Shooter's eyes had blazed. The way he had brought his face down until his forehead and Mort's were almost touching. He thought of the dry smell of cinnamon on Shooter's breath as he said, "You lie."

A Xerox? He was by no means sure that Shooter would accept an *original* copy ... but a *Xerox*?

"No," he said slowly. "That's no good, Herb. No Xerox, no phone-call from the editor. It has to be an original copy of the magazine."

"Well, that's a little tougher. They have their editorial offices in Manhattan, of course, but they store copies at their subscription offices in Pennsylvania. They only keep about five copies of each issue—it's really all they can *afford* to keep, when you consider that *EQMM* has been publishing since 1941. They really aren't crazy about lending them out."

"Come on, Herb! You can find those magazines at yard sales and in half the small-town libraries in America!"

"But never a complete run." Herb paused. "Not even a phone-call will do, huh? Are you telling me this guy is so paranoid he'd think he was talking to one of your thousands of stooges?"

From the background: "Do you want me to pour the wine, Herb?"

Herb spoke again with his mouth away from the phone. "Hold on a couple of minutes, Dee."

"I'm holding up your dinner," Mort said. "I'm sorry."

"It goes with the territory. Listen, Mort, be straight with me—is this guy as crazy as he sounds? Is he dangerous?"

*I don't think I'd talk about this to anyone else. That'd be like standing out in a thunderstorm and tempting the lightning.*

"I don't think so," he said, "but I want him off my back, Herb." He hesitated, searching for the right tone. "I've spent the last half-year or so walking through a shitstorm. This might be one thing I can do something about. I just want the doofus off my back."

"Okay," Herb said with sudden decision. "I'll call Marianne Jaffery over at *EQMM*. I've known her for a long time. If I ask her to ask the library curator—that's what they call the guy, honest, the library curator—to send us a copy of the June, 1980, ish, she'll do it. Is it

okay if I say you might have a story for them at some point in the future?"

"Sure," Mort said, and thought: *Tell her it'll be under the name John Shooter*, and almost laughed aloud.

"Good. She'll have the curator send it on to you Federal Express, direct from Pennsylvania. Just return it in good condition, or you'll have to find a replacement copy at one of those yard sales you were talking about."

"Is there any chance all this could happen by the day after tomorrow?" Mort asked. He felt miserably sure that Herb would think he was crazy for even asking ... and he surely must feel that Mort was making an awfully big mountain out of one small molehill.

"I think there's a very good chance," Herb said. "I won't guarantee it, but I'll almost guarantee it."

"Thanks, Herb," Mort said with honest gratitude. "You're swell."

"Aw, shucks, ma'am," Herb said, doing the bad John Wayne imitation of which he was so absurdly proud.

"Now go get your dinner. And give Delores a kiss for me."

Herb was still in his John Wayne mode. "To heck with that. I'll give 'er a kiss fer *me*, pilgrim."

*You talk big, pilgrim.*

Mort felt such a spurt of horror and fear that he almost cried out aloud. Same word, same flat, staring drawl. Shooter had tapped his telephone line, somehow, and no matter who Mort tried to call or what number he dialed, it was John Shooter who answered. Herb Creekmore had become just another one of his pen names, and—

"Mort? Are you still there?"

He closed his eyes. Now that Herb had dispensed with the bogus John Wayne imitation, it was okay. It was just Herb again, and always had been. Herb using that word, that had just been—

What?

*Just another float in the Parade of Coincidences? Okay. Sure. No problem: I'll just stand on the curb and watch it slide past. Why not? I've already watched half a dozen bigger ones go by.*

"Right here, Herb," he said, opening his eyes. "I was just trying to figure out how do I love thee. You know, counting the ways?"

“You’re thilly,” Herb said, obviously pleased. “And you’re going to handle this carefully and prudently, right?”

“Right.”

“Then I think I’ll go eat supper with the light of my life.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Goodbye, Herb—and thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll try to make it the day after tomorrow. Dee says goodbye, too.”

“If she wants to pour the wine, I bet she does,” Mort said, and they both hung up laughing.

As soon as he put the telephone back on its table, the fantasy came back. Shooter. He do the police in different voices. Of course, he was alone and it was dark, a condition which bred fantasies. Nevertheless, he did not believe—at least in his head—that John Shooter was either a supernatural being or a supercriminal. If he had been the former, he would surely know that Morton Rainey had not committed plagiarism—at least not on that particular story—and if he had been the latter, he would have been off knocking over a bank or something, not farting around western Maine, trying to squeeze a short story out of a writer who made a lot more money from his novels.

He started slowly back toward the living room, intending to go through to the study and try the word processor, when a thought (*at least not that particular story*)

struck him and stopped him.

What exactly did *that* mean, not that particular story? Had he ever stolen someone else’s work?

For the first time since Shooter had turned up on his porch with his sheaf of pages, Mort considered this question seriously. A good many reviews of his books had suggested that he was not really an original writer; that most of his works consisted of twice-told tales. He remembered Amy reading a review of *The Organ-Grinder’s Boy* which had first acknowledged the book’s pace and readability, and then suggested a certain derivativeness in its plotting. She’d said, “So what? Don’t these people know there are only about five really good stories, and writers just tell them over and over, with different characters?”

Mort himself believed there were at least six stories: success; failure; love and loss; revenge; mistaken identity; the search for a higher power, be it God or the devil. He had told the first four over and over, obsessively, and now that he thought of it, "Sowing Season" embodied at least three of those ideas. But was that plagiarism? If it was, every novelist at work in the world would be guilty of the crime.

Plagiarism, he decided, was outright theft. And he had never done it in his life. *Never.*

"Never," he said, and strode into his study with his head up and his eyes wide, like a warrior approaching the field of battle. And there he sat for the next one hour, and words he wrote none.

## 26

His dry stint on the word processor convinced him that it might be a good idea to drink dinner instead of eat it, and he was on his second bourbon and water when the telephone rang again. He approached it gingerly, suddenly wishing he had a phone answering machine after all. They did have at least one sterling quality: you could monitor incoming calls and separate friend from foe.

He stood over it irresolutely, thinking how much he disliked the sound modem telephones made. Once upon a time they had rung—jingled merrily, even. Now they made a shrill ululating noise that sounded like a migraine headache trying to happen.

*Well, are you going to pick it up or just stand here listening to it do that?*

*I don't want to talk to him again. He scares me and he infuriates me, and I don't know which feeling I dislike more.*

*Maybe it's not him.*

*Maybe it is.*

Listening to those two thoughts go around and around was even worse than listening to the warbling *beep-yawp* of the phone, so he

picked it up and said hello gruffly and it was, after all, no one more dangerous than his caretaker, Greg Carstairs.

Greg asked the now-familiar questions about the house and Mort answered them all again, reflecting that explaining such an event was very similar to explaining a sudden death—if anything could get you over the shock, it was the constant repetition of the known facts.

“Listen, Mort, I finally caught up with Tom Greenleaf late this afternoon,” Greg said, and Mort thought Greg sounded a little funny—a little cautious. “He and Sonny Trotts were painting the Methodist Parish Hall.”

“Uh-huh? Did you speak to him about my buddy?”

“Yeah, I did,” Greg said. He sounded more cautious than ever.

“Well?”

There was a short pause. Then Greg said, “Tom thought you must have been mixed up on your days.”

“Mixed up on my ... what do you mean?”

“Well,” Greg said apologetically, “he says he did swing down Lake Drive yesterday afternoon, and he did see you; he said he waved to you and you waved back. But, Mort—”

“*What?*” But he was afraid he already knew what.

“Tom says you were alone,” Greg finished.

## 27

For a long moment, Mort didn't say anything. He did not feel *capable* of saying anything. Greg didn't say anything, either, giving him time to think. Tom Greenleaf, of course, was no spring chicken; he was Dave Newsome's senior by at least three and perhaps as many as six years. But neither was he senile.

“Jesus,” Mort said at last. He spoke very softly. The truth was, he felt a little winded.

“My idea,” Greg said diffidently, “was maybe *Tom* was the one who got a little mixed up. You know he's not exactly—”

“A spring chicken,” Mort finished. “I know it. But if there’s anybody in Tashmore with a better eye for strangers than Tom, I don’t know who it is. He’s been remembering strangers all his *life*, Greg. That’s one of the things caretakers do, right?” He hesitated, then burst out: “He looked at us! He looked right at *both* of us!”

Carefully, speaking as if he were only joshing, Greg said: “Are you sure you didn’t just dream this fella, Mort?”

“I hadn’t even considered it,” Mort said slowly, “until now. If none of this happened, and I’m running around telling people it *did*, I guess that would make me crazy.”

“Oh, I don’t think *that* at all,” Greg said hastily.

“I do,” Mort replied. He thought: *But maybe that’s what he really wants. To make people think you are crazy. And, maybe in the end, to make what people think the truth.*

*Oh yes. Right. And he partnered up with old Tom Greenleaf to do the job. In fact, it was probably Tom who went up to Derry and burned the house, while Shooter stayed down here and wasted the cat—right?*

*Now, think about it. Really THINK. Was he there? Was he REALLY?*

So Mort thought about it. He thought about it harder than he had ever thought about anything in his life; harder, even, than he had thought about Amy and Ted and what he should do about them after he had discovered them in bed together on that day in May. Had he hallucinated John Shooter?

He thought again of the speed with which Shooter had grabbed him and thrown him against the side of the car.

“Greg?”

“I’m here, Mort.”

“Tom didn’t see the car, either? Old station wagon, Mississippi plates?”

“He says he didn’t see a car on Lake Drive at all yesterday. Just you, standing up by the end of the path that goes down to the lake. He thought you were admiring the view.”

*Is it live, or is it Memorex?*

He kept coming back to the hard grip of Shooter's hands on his upper arms, the speed with which the man had thrown him against the car. "You lie," Shooter had said. Mort had seen the rage chained in his eyes, and had smelled dry cinnamon on his breath.

His hands.

The pressure of his hands.

"Greg, hold the phone a sec."

"Sure."

Mort put the receiver down and tried to roll up his shirt-sleeves. He was not very successful, because his hands were shaking badly. He unbuttoned the shirt instead, pulled it off, then held out his arms. At first he saw nothing. Then he rotated them outward as far as they would go, and there they were, two yellowing bruises on the inside of each arm, just above the elbow.

The marks made by John Shooter's thumbs when he grabbed him and threw him against the car.

He suddenly thought he might understand, and was afraid. Not for himself, though.

For old Tom Greenleaf.

## 28

He picked up the telephone. "Greg?"

"I'm here."

"Did Tom seem all right when you talked to him?"

"He was exhausted," Greg said promptly. "Foolish old man has got no business crawling around on a scaffold and painting all day in a cold wind. Not at his age. He looked ready to fall into the nearest pile of leaves, if he couldn't get to a bed in a hurry. I see what you're getting at, Mort, and I suppose that if he was tired enough, it could have slipped his mind, but—"

"No, that's not what I'm thinking about. Are you sure exhaustion was all it was? Could he have been scared?"

Now there was a long, thinking silence at the other end of the line. Impatient though he was, Mort did not break it. He intended to allow Greg all the thinking time he needed.

“He didn’t seem himself,” Greg said at last. “He seemed distracted ... off, somehow. I chalked it up to plain old tiredness, but maybe that wasn’t it. Or not all of it.”

“Could he have been hiding something from you?”

This time the pause was not so long. “I don’t know. He might have been. That’s all I can say for sure, Mort. You’re making me wish I’d talked to him longer and pressed him a little harder.”

“I think it might be a good idea if we went over to his place,” Mort said. “Now. It happened the way I told you, Greg. If Tom said something different, it could be because my friend scared the bejesus out of him. I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay.” Greg sounded worried all over again. “But, you know, Tom isn’t the sort of man who’d scare easy.”

“I’m sure that was true once, but Tom’s seventy-five if he’s a day. I think that the older you get, the easier to scare you get.”

“Why don’t I meet you there?”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Mort hung up the telephone, poured the rest of his bourbon down the sink, and headed for Tom Greenleaf’s house in the Buick.

## 29

Greg was parked in the driveway when Mort arrived. Tom’s Scout was by the back door. Greg was wearing a flannel jacket with the collar turned up; the wind off the lake was keen enough to be uncomfortable.

“He’s okay,” he told Mort at once.

“How do you know?”

They both spoke in low tones.

“I saw his Scout, so I went to the back door. There’s a note pinned there saying he had a hard day and went to bed early.” Greg grinned and shoved his long hair out of his face. “It *also* says that if any of his regular people need him, they should call me.”

“Is the note in his handwriting?”

“Yeah. Big old-man’s scrawl. I’d know it anywhere. I went around and looked in his bedroom window. He’s in there. The window’s shut, but it’s a wonder he doesn’t break the damned glass, he’s snoring so loud. Do you want to check for yourself?”

Mort sighed and shook his head. “But something’s wrong, Greg. Tom saw us. *Both* of us. The man got hot under the collar a few minutes after Tom passed and grabbed me by the arms. I’m wearing his bruises. I’ll show you, if you want to see.”

Greg shook his head. “I believe you. The more I think about it, the less I like the way he sounded when he said you were all by yourself when he saw you. There was something ... off about it. I’ll talk to him again in the morning. Or we can talk to him together, if you want.”

“That would be good. What time?”

“Why not come down to the Parish Hall around nine-thirty? He’ll have had two-three cups of coffee—you can’t say boo to him before he’s had his coffee—and we can get him down off that damned scaffolding for awhile. Maybe save his life. Sound okay?”

“Yes.” Mort held out his hand. “Sorry I got you out on a wild goosechase.”

Greg shook his hand. “No need to be. Something’s not right here. I’m good and curious to find out what it is.”

Mort got back into his Buick, and Greg slipped behind the wheel of his truck. They drove off in opposite directions, leaving the old man to his exhausted sleep.

Mort himself did not sleep until almost three in the morning. He tossed and turned in the bedroom until the sheets were a battlefield and he could stand it no longer. Then he walked to the living-room couch in a kind of daze. He barked his shins on the rogue coffee table, cursed in a monotone, lay down, adjusted the cushions behind his head, and fell almost immediately down a black hole.

When he woke up at eight o'clock the next morning, he thought he felt fine. He went right on thinking so until he swung his legs off the couch and sat up. Then a groan so loud it was almost a muted scream escaped him and he could only sit for a moment, wishing he could hold his back, his knees, and his right arm all at the same time. The arm was the worst, so he settled for holding that. He had read someplace that people can accomplish almost supernatural acts of strength while in the grip of panic; that they feel nothing while lifting cars off trapped infants or strangling killer Dobermans with their bare hands, only realizing how badly they have strained their bodies after the tide of emotion has receded. Now he believed it. He had thrown open the door of the upstairs bathroom hard enough to pop one of the hinges. How hard had he swung the poker? Harder than he wanted to think about, according to the way his back and right arm felt this morning. Nor did he want to think what the damage up there might look like to a less inflamed eye. He did know that he was going to put the damage right himself—or as much of it as he could, anyway. Mort thought Greg Carstairs must have some serious doubts about his sanity already, his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. A look at the broken bathroom door, smashed shower-stall door, and shattered medicine cabinet would do little to improve Greg's faith in his rationality. He remembered thinking that Shooter might be trying to make people believe he was crazy. The idea did not seem foolish at all now that he examined it in the light of day; it seemed, if anything, more logical and believable than ever.

But he had promised to meet Greg at the Parish Hall in ninety minutes—less than that, now—to talk to Tom Greenleaf. Sitting here and counting his aches wasn't going to get him there.

Mort forced himself to his feet and walked slowly through the house to the master bathroom. He turned the shower on hot enough to send up billows of steam, swallowed three aspirin, and climbed in.

By the time he emerged, the aspirin had started its work, and he thought he could get through the day after all. It wouldn't be fun, and

he might feel as if it had lasted several years by the time it was over, but he thought he could get through it.

*This is the second day*, he thought as he dressed. A little cramp of apprehension went through him. *Tomorrow is his deadline*. That made him think first of Amy, and then of Shooter saying, *I'd leave her out of it if I could, but I'm startin to think you ain't going to leave me that option*.

The cramp returned. First the crazy son of a bitch had killed Bump, then he had threatened Tom Greenleaf (surely he *must* have threatened Tom Greenleaf), and, Mort had come to realize, it really was possible that Shooter could have torched the Derry house. He supposed he had known this all along, and had simply not wanted to admit it to himself. Torching the house and getting rid of the magazine had been his main mission—of course; a man as crazy as Shooter simply wouldn't think of all the other copies of that magazine that were lying around. Such things would not be a part of a lunatic's world view.

And Bump? The cat was probably just an afterthought. Shooter got back, saw the cat on the stoop waiting to be let back in, saw that Mort was still sleeping, and killed the cat on a whim. Making a round trip to Derry that fast would have been tight, but it could have been done. It all made sense.

And now he was threatening to involve Amy.

*I'll have to warn her*, he thought, stuffing his shirt into the back of his pants. *Call her up this morning and come totally clean. Handling the man myself is one thing; standing by while a madman involves the only woman I've ever really loved in something she doesn't know anything about... that's something else*.

Yes. But first he would talk with Tom Greenleaf and get the truth out of him. Without Tom's corroboration of the fact that Shooter was really around and really dangerous, Mort's own behavior was going to look suspicious or nutty, or both. Probably both. So, Tom first.

But before he met Greg at the Methodist Parish Hall, he intended to stop in at Bowie's and have one of Gerda's famous bacon-and-cheese omelettes. An army marches on its stomach, Private Rainey. Right you are, sir. He went out to the front hallway, opened the little

wooden box mounted on the wall over the telephone table, and felt for the Buick keys. The Buick keys weren't there.

Frowning, he walked out into the kitchen. There they were, on the counter by the sink. He picked them up and bounced them thoughtfully on the palm of his hand. Hadn't he put them back in the box when he returned from his run to Tom's house last night? He tried to remember, and couldn't—not for sure. Dropping the keys into the box after returning home was such a habit that one drop-off blended in with another. If you ask a man who likes fried eggs what he had for breakfast three days ago, he can't remember—he *assumes* he had fried eggs, because he has them so often, but he can't be sure. This was like that. He had come back tired, achy, and preoccupied. He just couldn't remember.

But he didn't like it.

He didn't like it at all.

He went to the back door and opened it. There, lying on the porch boards, was John Shooter's black hat with the round crown.

Mort stood in the doorway looking at it, his car keys clutched in one hand with the brass key-fob hanging down so it caught and reflected a shaft of morning sunlight. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears. It was beating slowly and deliberately. Some part of him had expected this.

The hat was lying exactly where Shooter had left his manuscript. And beyond it, in the driveway, was his Buick. He had parked it around the corner when he returned last night—that he did remember—but now it was here.

"What did you do?" Mort Rainey screamed suddenly into the morning sunshine, and the birds which had been twittering unconcernedly away in the trees fell suddenly silent. "*What in God's name did you do?*"

But if Shooter was there, watching him, he made no reply. Perhaps he felt that Mort would find out what he had done soon enough.

## 31

The Buick's ashtray was pulled open, and there were two cigarette butts in it. They were unfiltered. Mort picked one of them out with his fingernails, his face contorted into a grimace of distaste, sure it would be a Pall Mall, Shooter's brand. It was.

He turned the key and the engine started at once. Mort hadn't heard it ticking and popping when he came out, but it started as if it were warm, all the same. Shooter's hat was now in the trunk. Mort had picked it up with the same distaste he had shown for the cigarette butt, putting only enough of his fingers on the brim to get a grip on it. There had been nothing under it, and nothing inside it but a very old sweat-stained inner band. It had some other smell, however, one which was sharper and more acrid than sweat. It was a smell which Mort recognized in some vague way but could not place. Perhaps it would come to him. He put the hat in the back seat, then remembered he would be seeing Greg and Tom in a little less than an hour. He wasn't sure he wanted them to see the hat. He didn't know exactly why he felt that way, but this morning it seemed safer to follow his instincts than to question them, so he put the hat in the trunk and set off for town.

## 32

He passed Tom's house again on the way to Bowie's. The Scout was no longer in the driveway. For a moment this made Mort feel nervous, and then he decided it was a good sign, not a bad one—Tom must have already started his day's work. Or he might have gone to Bowie's himself—Tom was a widower, and he ate a lot of his meals at the lunch counter in the general store.

Most of the Tashmore Public Works Department was at the counter, drinking coffee and talking about the upcoming deer season, but Tom was

*(dead he's dead Shooter killed him and guess whose car he used)*  
not among them.

"Mort Rainey!" Gerda Bowie greeted him in her usual hoarse, Bleacher Creature's shout. She was a tall woman with masses of frizzy chestnut hair and a great rounded bosom. "Ain't seen you in a coon's age! Writing any good books lately?"

"Trying," Mort said. "You wouldn't make me one of your special omelettes, would you?"

"Shit, no!" Gerda said, and laughed to show she was only joking. The PW guys in their olive-drab coveralls laughed right along with her. Mort wished briefly for a great big gun like the one Dirty Harry wore under his tweed sport-coats. Boom-bang-blam, and maybe they could have a little order around here. "Coming right up, Mort."

"Thanks."

When she delivered it, along with toast, coffee, and OJ, she said in a lower voice: "I heard about your divorce. I'm sorry."

He lifted the mug of coffee to his lips with a hand that was almost steady. "Thanks, Gerda."

"Are you taking care of yourself?"

"Well ... trying."

"Because you look a little peaky."

"It's hard work getting to sleep some nights. I guess I'm not used to the quiet yet."

"Bullshit—it's sleeping alone you're not used to yet. But a man doesn't have to sleep alone forever, Mort, just because his woman don't know a good thing when she has it. I hope you don't mind me talking to you this way—"

"Not at all," Mort said. But he did. He thought Gerda Bowie made a shitty Ann Landers.

"—but you're the only famous writer this town has got."

"Probably just as well."

She laughed and tweaked his ear. Mort wondered briefly what she would say, what the big men in the olive-drab coveralls would say, if he were to bite the hand that tweaked him. He was a little shocked at how powerfully attractive the idea was. Were they all talking about him and Amy? Some saying she didn't know a good thing when she

had it, others saying the poor woman finally got tired of living with a crazy man and decided to get out, none of them knowing what the fuck they were talking about, or what he and Amy had been about when they had been good? Of course they were, he thought tiredly. That's what people were best at. Big talk about people whose names they saw in the newspapers.

He looked down at his omelette and didn't want it.

He dug in just the same, however, and managed to shovel most of it down his throat. It was still going to be a long day. Gerda Bowie's opinions on his looks and his love-life wouldn't change that.

When he finished, paid for breakfast and a paper, and left the store (the Public Works crews had decamped en masse five minutes before him, one stopping just long enough to obtain an autograph for his niece, who was having a birthday), it was five past nine. He sat behind the steering wheel long enough to check the paper for a story about the Derry house, and found one on page three. DERRY FIRE INSPECTORS REPORT NO LEADS IN RAINEY ARSON, the headline read. The story itself was less than half a column long. The last sentence read, "Morton Rainey, known for such best-selling novels as *The Organ-Grinder's Boy* and *The Delacourt Family*, could not be reached for comment." Which meant that Amy hadn't given them the Tashmore number. Good deal. He'd thank her for that if he talked to her later on.

Tom Greenleaf came first. It would be almost twenty past the hour by the time he reached the Methodist Parish Hall. Close enough to nine-thirty. He put the Buick in gear and drove off.

## 33

When he arrived at the Parish Hall, there was a single vehicle parked in the drive—an ancient Ford Bronco with a camper on the back and a sign reading SONNY TROTTS PAINTING CARETAKING GENERAL CARPENTRY on each of the doors. Mort saw Sonny

himself, a short man of about forty with no hair and merry eyes, on a scaffold. He was painting in great sweeps while the boom box beside him played something Las Vegas by Ed Ames or Tom Jones—one of those fellows who sang with the top three buttons of their shirts undone, anyway.

“Hi, Sonny!” Mort called.

Sonny went on painting, sweeping back and forth in almost perfect rhythm as Ed Ames or whoever it was asked the musical questions what is a man, what has he got. They were questions Mort had asked himself a time or two, although without the horn section.

“*Sonny!*”

Sonny jerked. White paint flew from the end of his brush, and for an alarming moment Mort thought he might actually topple off the scaffold. Then he caught one of the ropes, turned, and looked down. “Why, Mr. Rainey!” he said. “You gave me a helluva turn!”

For some reason Mort thought of the doorknob in Disney’s *Alice in Wonderland* and had to suppress a violent bray of laughter.

“Mr. Rainey? You okay?”

“Yes.” Mort swallowed crooked. It was a trick he had learned in parochial school about a thousand years ago, and was the only foolproof way to keep from laughing he had ever found. Like most good tricks that worked, it hurt. “I thought you were going to fall off.”

“Not me,” Sonny said with a laugh of his own. He killed the voice coming from the boom box as it set off on a fresh voyage of emotion. “Tom might fall off, maybe, but not me.”

“Where is Tom?” Mort asked. “I wanted to talk to him.”

“He called early and said he couldn’t make it today. I told him that was okay, there wasn’t enough work for both of us anyways.”

Sonny looked down upon Mort confidentially.

“There is, a’ course, but Tom ladled too much onto his plate this time. This ain’t no job for a older fella. He said he was all bound up in his back. Must be, too. Didn’t sound like himself at all.”

“What time was that?” Mort asked, trying hard to sound casual.

“Early,” Sonny said. “Six or so. I was just about to step into the old shitatorium for my morning constitutional. Awful regular, I am.” Sonny

sounded extremely proud of this. "Course Tom, he knows what time I rise and commence my doins."

"But he didn't sound so good?"

"Nope. Not like himself at all." Sonny paused, frowning. He looked as if he was trying very hard to remember something. Then he gave a little shrug and went on. "Wind off the lake was fierce yesterday. Probably took a cold. But Tommy's iron. Give him a day or two and he'll be fine. I worry more about him gettin preoccupied and walkin the plank." Sonny indicated the floor of the scaffold with his brush, sending a ruffle of white drops marching up the boards past his shoes. "Can I do anything for you, Mr. Rainey?"

"No," Mort said. There was a dull ball of dread, like a piece of crumpled canvas, under his heart. "Have you seen Greg, by the way?"

"Greg Carstairs?"

"Yes."

"Not this morning. Course, *he* deals with the carriage trade." Sonny laughed. "Rises later'n the rest of us, he does."

"Well, I thought he was going to come by and see Tom, too," Mort said. "Do you mind if I wait a little? He might show up."

"Be my guest," Sonny said. "You mind the music?"

"Not at all."

"You can get some wowser tapes off the TV these days. All you gotta do is give em your Mastercard number. Don't even have to pay for the call. It's a eight-hundred number." He bent toward the boom box, then looked earnestly down at Mort. "This is Roger Whittaker," he said in low and reverent tones.

"Oh."

Sonny pushed PLAY. Roger Whittaker told them there were times (he was sure they knew) when he bit off more than he could chew. That was also something Mort had done without the horn section. He strolled to the edge of the driveway and tapped absently at his shirt pocket. He was a little surprised to find that the old pack of L & M's, now reduced to a single hardy survivor, was in there. He lit the last cigarette, wincing in anticipation of the harsh taste. But it wasn't bad.

It had, in fact, almost no taste at all ... as if the years had stolen it away.

*That's not the only thing the years have stolen.*

How true. Irrelevant, but true. He smoked and looked at the road. Now Roger Whittaker was telling him and Sonny that a ship lay loaded in the harbor, and that soon for England they would sail. Sonny Trotts sang the last word of each line. No more; just the last word. Cars and trucks went back and forth on Route 23. Greg's Ford Ranger did not come. Mort pitched away his cigarette, looked at his watch, and saw it was quarter to ten. He understood that Greg, who was almost religiously punctual, was not coming, either.

*Shooter got them both.*

*Oh, bullshit! You don't know that!*

*Yes I do. The hat. The car. The keys.*

*You're not just jumping to conclusions, you're leaping to them.*

*The hat. The car. The keys.*

He turned and walked back toward the scaffold. "I guess he forgot," he said, but Sonny didn't hear him. He was swaying back and forth, lost in the art of painting and the soul of Roger Whittaker.

Mort got back into his car and drove away. Lost in his own thoughts, he never heard Sonny call after him.

The music probably would have covered it, anyway.

## 34

He arrived back at his house at quarter past ten, got out of the car, and started for the house. Halfway there, he turned back and opened the trunk. The hat sat inside, black and final, a real toad in an imaginary garden. He picked it up, not being so choosy of how he handled it this time, slammed the trunk shut, and went into the house.

He stood in the front hallway, not sure what he wanted to do next ... and suddenly, for no reason at all, he put the hat on his head. He

shuddered when he did it, the way a man will sometimes shudder after swallowing a mouthful of raw liquor. But the shudder passed.

And the hat felt like quite a good fit, actually.

He went slowly into the master bathroom, turned on the light, and positioned himself in front of the mirror. He almost burst out laughing—he looked like the man with the pitchfork in that Grant Wood painting, “American Gothic.” He looked like that even though the guy in the picture was bareheaded. The hat covered Mort’s hair completely, as it had covered Shooter’s (if Shooter had hair—that was yet to be determined, although Mort supposed that he would know for sure the next time he saw him, since Mort now had his chapeau), and just touched the tops of his ears. It was pretty funny. A scream, in fact.

Then the restless voice in his mind asked, *Why’d you put it on? Who’d you think you’d look like? Him?* and the laughter died. *Why had he put the hat on in the first place?*

*He wanted you to,* the restless voice said quietly.

Yes? But why? Why would Shooter want Mort to put on his hat?

*Maybe he wants you to ...*

Yes? he prompted the restless voice again. Wants me to what?

He thought the voice had gone away and was reaching for the light-switch when it spoke again.

*... to get confused,* it said.

The phone rang then, making him jump. He snatched the hat off guiltily (a little like a man who fears he may be caught trying on his wife’s underwear) and went to answer it, thinking it would be Greg, and it would turn out Tom was at Greg’s house. Yes, of course, that was what had happened; Tom had called Greg, had told him about Shooter and Shooter’s threats, and Greg had taken the old man to *his* place. To protect him. It made such perfect sense that Mort couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of it before.

Except it wasn’t Greg. It was Herb Creekmore.

“Everything’s arranged,” Herb said cheerfully. “Marianne came through for me. She’s a peach.”

“Marianne?” Mort asked stupidly.

“Marianne Jaffery, at *EQMM!*” Herb said. “EQMM? ‘Sowing Season’? June, 1980? You understand dese t’ings, bwana?”

“Oh,” Mort said. “Oh, *good!* Thanks, Herb! Is it for sure?”

“Yep. You’ll have it tomorrow—the actual magazine, not just a Xerox of the story. It’s coming up from PA. Federal Express. Have you heard anything else from Mr. Shooter?”

“Not yet,” Mort said, looking down at the black hat in his hand. He could still smell the odd, evocative aroma it held.

“Well, no news is good news, they say. Did you talk to the local law?”

Had he promised Herb he would do that? Mort couldn’t remember for sure, but he might have. Best to play safe, anyway. “Yes. Old Dave Newsome didn’t exactly burst a gasket. He thought the guy was probably just playing games.” It was downright nasty to lie to Herb, especially after Herb had done him such a favor, but what sense would it make to tell him the truth? It was too crazy, too complicated.

“Well—you passed it along. I think that’s important, Mort—I really do.”

“Yes.”

“Anything else?”

“No—but thanks a million for this. You saved my life.” And maybe, he thought, that wasn’t just a figure of speech.

“My pleasure. Remember that in small towns, FedEx usually delivers right to the local post office. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s the new book coming? I’ve really been wanting to ask.”

“Great!” Mort cried heartily.

“Well, good. Get this guy off your back and turn to it. Work has saved many a better man than you or me, Mort.”

“I know. Best to your lady.”

“Thanks. Best to—” Herb stopped abruptly, and Mort could almost see him biting his lip. Separations were hard to get used to. Amputees kept feeling the foot which was no longer there, they said. “—to you,” he finished.

“I got it,” Mort said. “Take care, Herbert.”

He walked slowly out to the deck and looked down at the lake. There were no boats on it today. *I'm one step up, no matter what else happens. I can show the man the goddam magazine. It may not tame him... but then again, it may. He's crazy, after all, and you never know what people from the fabled tribe of the Crazy Folks will or won't do. That is their dubious charm. Anything is possible.*

It was even possible that Greg was at home after all, he thought—he might have forgotten their meeting at the Parish Hall, or something totally unrelated to this business might have come up. Feeling suddenly hopeful, Mort went to the telephone and dialed Greg's number. The phone was on the third ring when he remembered Greg saying the week before that his wife and kids were going to spend some time at his in-laws'. Megan starts school next year, and it'll be harder for them to get away, he'd said.

So Greg had been alone.

*(the hat)*

Like Tom Greenleaf.

*(the car)*

The young husband and the old widower.

*(the keys)*

And how does it work? Why, as simple as ordering a Roger Whittaker tape off the TV. Shooter goes to Tom Greenleaf's house, but not in his station wagon—oh no, that would be too much like advertising. He leaves his car parked in Mort Rainey's driveway, or maybe around the side of the house. He goes to Tom's in the Buick. Forces Tom to call Greg. Probably gets Greg out of bed, but Greg has got Tom on his mind and comes in a hurry. Then Shooter forces Tom to call Sonny Trotts and tell Sonny he doesn't feel well enough to come to work. Shooter puts a screwdriver against old Tom's jugular and suggests that if Tom doesn't make it good, he'll be one sorry old coot. Tom makes it good enough ... although even Sonny, not too bright and just out of bed, realizes that Tom doesn't sound like himself at all. Shooter uses the screwdriver on Tom. And when Greg Carstairs arrives, he uses the screwdriver—or something like it—on *him*. And—

*You've gone shit out of your mind. This is just a bad case of the screaming meemies and that's all. Repeat: that ... is ... ALL.*

That was reasonable, but it didn't convince him. It wasn't a Chesterfield. It didn't satisfy.

Mort walked rapidly through the downstairs part of the house, tugging and twirling at his hair.

*What about the trucks? Tom's Scout, Greg's Ranger? Add the Buick and you're thinking about three vehicles here-four if you count in Shooter's Ford wagon, and Shooter is just one man.*

He didn't know ... but he knew that enough was enough.

When he arrived at the telephone again, he pulled the phone book out of its drawer and started looking for the town constable's number. He stopped abruptly.

*One of those vehicles was the Buick. MY Buick.*

He put the telephone down slowly. He tried to think of a way Shooter could have handled all of the vehicles. Nothing came. It was like sitting in front of the word processor when you were tapped for ideas—you got nothing but a blank screen. But he *did* know he didn't want to call Dave Newsome. Not yet. He was walking away from the telephone, headed toward no place in particular, when it rang.

It was Shooter.

"Go to where we met the other day," Shooter said. "Walk down the path a little way. You impress me as a man who thinks the way old folks chew their food, Mr. Rainey, but I'm willing to give you all the time you need. I'll call back late this afternoon. Anybody you call between now and then is your responsibility."

"What did you do?" he asked again. This time his voice was robbed of all force, little more than a whisper. "What in the world did you *do*?"

But there was only a dead line.

He walked up to the place where the path and the road came together, the place where he had been talking to Shooter when Tom Greenleaf had had the misfortune to see them. For some reason he didn't like the idea of driving the Buick. The bushes on either side of the path were beaten down and skinned-looking, making a rough path. He walked jerkily down this path, knowing what he would find in the first good-sized copse of trees he came to ... and he *did* find it. It was Tom Greenleaf's Scout. Both men were inside.

Greg Carstairs was sitting behind the wheel with his head thrown back and a screwdriver—a Phillips, this time—buried up to the hilt in his forehead, above his right eye. The screwdriver had come from a cupboard in the pantry of Mort's house. The red plastic handle was badly chipped and impossible not to recognize.

Tom Greenleaf was in the back seat with a hatchet planted in the top of his head. His eyes were open. Dried brains had trickled down around his ears. Written along the hatchet's ash handle in faded but still legible red letters was one word: RAINEY. It had come from the toolshed.

Mort stood silently. A chickadee called. A woodpecker used a hollow tree to send Morse code. A freshening breeze was producing whitecaps on the lake; the water was a dark cobalt today, and the whitecaps made a pretty contrast.

There was a rustling sound behind him. Mort wheeled around so fast he almost fell—would have fallen, if he'd not had the Scout to lean against. It wasn't Shooter. It was a squirrel. It looked down at him with bright hate from where it was frozen halfway up the trunk of a maple which blazed with red fall fire. Mort waited for his galloping heart to slow. He waited for the squirrel to dash up the tree. His heart did; the squirrel did not.

"He killed them both," he said at last, speaking to the squirrel. "He went to Tom's in my Buick. Then he went to Greg's in Tom's Scout, with Tom driving. He killed Greg. Then he had Tom drive down here, and killed *him*. He used my tools to do both of them. Then he walked back to Tom's house ... or maybe he jogged. He looks rugged enough to have jogged. Sonny didn't think Tom sounded like himself, and I know why. By the time Sonny got that call, the sun was getting

ready to come up and Tom was already dead. It was Shooter, *"imitating* Tom. And it was probably easy. From the way Sonny had his music cranked this morning, he's a little deaf, anyway. Once he was done with Sonny Trotts, he got in my Buick again and drove it back to the house. Greg's Ranger is still parked in his own driveway, where it's been all along. And that's how—"

The squirrel scurried up the trunk and disappeared into the blazing red leaves.

"—that's how it worked," Mort finished dully.

Suddenly his legs felt watery. He took two steps back up the path, thought of Tom Greenleaf's brains drying on his cheeks, and his legs just gave up. He fell down and the world swam away for awhile.

## 36

When he came to, Mort rolled over, sat up groggily, and turned his wrist to look at his watch. It said quarter past two, but of course it must have stopped at that time last night; he had found Tom's Scout at mid-morning, and this *couldn't* be afternoon. He had fainted, and, considering the circumstances, that wasn't surprising. But no one faints for three and a half *hours*.

The watch's second hand was making its steady little circle, however.

*Must have jogged it when I sat up, that's all.*

But that *wasn't* all. The sun had changed position, and would soon be lost behind the clouds which were filling up the sky. The color of the lake had dulled to a listless chrome.

So he had started off fainting, or swooning, and then what? Well, it sounded incredible, but he supposed he must have fallen asleep. The last three days had been nerve-racking, and last night he had been sleepless until three. So call it a combination of mental and physical fatigue. His mind had just pulled the plug. And—

*Shooter! Christ, Shooter said he'd call!*

He tried to get to his feet, then fell back with a little *oof!* sound of mingled pain and surprise as his left leg buckled under him. It was full of pins and needles, all of them crazily dancing. He must have lain on the goddam thing. Why hadn't he brought the Buick, for Christ's sake? If Shooter called and Mort wasn't there to take the call, the man might do anything.

He lunged to his feet again, and this time made it all the way up. But when he tried to stride on the left leg, it refused his weight and spilled him forward again. He almost hit his head on the side of the truck going down and was suddenly looking at himself in one of the hubcaps of the Scout. The convex surface made his face look like a grotesque funhouse mask. At least he had left the goddamned hat back at the house; if he had seen *that* on his head, Mort thought he would have screamed. He wouldn't have been able to help himself.

All at once he remembered there were two dead men in the Scout. They were sitting above him, getting stiff, and there were tools sticking out of their heads.

He crawled out of the Scout's shadow, dragged his left leg across his right with his hands, and began to pound at it with his fists, like a man trying to tenderize a cheap cut of meat.

*Stop it!* a small voice cried—it was the last kernel of rationality at his command, a little sane light in what felt like a vast bank of black thunderheads between his ears. *Stop it! He said he'd call late in the afternoon, and it's only quarter past two! Plenty of time!*

But what if he called early? Or what if "late afternoon" started after two o'clock in the deep-dish, crackerbarrel South?

*Keep beating on your leg like that and you'll wind up with a charley horse. Then you can see how you like trying to crawl back in time to take his call.*

That did the trick. He was able to make himself stop. This time he got up more cautiously and just stood for a moment (he was careful to keep his back to Tom's Scout—he did not want to look inside again) before trying to walk. He found that the pins and needles were subsiding. He walked with a pronounced limp at first, but his gait began to smooth out after the first dozen strides.

He was almost clear of the bushes Shooter had stripped and beaten down with Tom's Scout when he heard a car approaching. Mort dropped to his knees without even thinking about it and watched as a rusty old Cadillac swept by. It belonged to Don Bassinger, who owned a place on the far side of the lake. Bassinger, a veteran alcoholic who spent most of his time drinking up what remained of his once-substantial inheritance, often used Lake Drive as a shortcut to what was known as Bassinger Road. Don was about the only year-round resident down here, Mort thought.

After the Caddy was out of sight, Mort got to his feet and hurried the rest of the way up to the road. Now he was glad he hadn't brought the Buick. He knew Don Bassinger's Cadillac, and Bassinger knew Mort's Buick. It was probably too early in the day for Don to be in a blackout, and he might well have remembered seeing Mort's car, if it had been there, parked not far from the place where, before too much longer, someone was going to make an *extremely* horrible discovery.

*He's busy tying you to this business, Mort thought as he limped along Lake Drive toward his house. He's been doing it all along. If anyone saw a car near Tom Greenleaf's last night, it will almost certainly turn out to be your Buick. He killed them with your tools—*

*I could get rid of the tools, he thought suddenly. I could throw them in the lake. I might heave up a time or two getting them out, but I think I could go through with it.*

*Could you? I wonder. And even if you did... well, Shooter almost certainly will have thought of that possibility, too. He seems to have thought of all the others. And he knows that if you tried to get rid of the hatchet and the screwdriver and the police dragged the bottom for them and they were found, things would look even worse for you. Do you see what he's done? Do you?*

Yes. He saw. John Shooter had given him a present. It was a tar baby. A large, glistening tar baby. Mort had smacked the tar baby in the head with his left hand and it had stuck fast. So he had whopped that old tar baby in the gut with his right hand to make it let go, only his *right* hand had stuck, too. He had been—what was the word he had kept using with such smug satisfaction? "Disingenuous," wasn't

it? Yes, that was it. And all the time he had been getting more entangled with John Shooter's tar baby. And now? Well, he had told lies to all sorts of people, and that would look bad if it came out, and a quarter of a mile behind him a man was wearing a hatchet for a hat and Mort's name was written on the handle, and that would look even worse.

Mort imagined the telephone ringing in the empty house and forced himself into a trot.

## 37

Shooter didn't call.

The minutes stretched out like taffy, and Shooter didn't call. Mort walked restlessly through the house, twirling and pulling at his hair. He imagined this was what it felt like to be a junkie waiting for the pusher-man.

Twice he had second thoughts about waiting, and went to the phone to call the authorities—not old Dave Newsome, or even the county sheriff, but the State Police. He would hew to the old Vietnam axiom: Kill em all and let God sort em out. Why not? He had a good reputation, after all; he was a respected member of two Maine communities, and John Shooter was a—

Just what was Shooter?

The word "phantom" came to mind.

The word "will-o'-the-wisp" *also* came to mind.

But it was not this that stopped him. What stopped him was a horrible certainty that Shooter would be trying to call while Mort himself was using the line ... that Shooter would hear the busy signal, hang up, and Mort would never hear from him again.

At quarter of four, it began to rain—a steady fall rain, cold and gentle, sighing down from a white sky, tapping on the roof and the stiff leaves around the house.

At ten of, the telephone rang. Mort leaped for it.

It was Amy.

Amy wanted to talk about the fire. Amy wanted to talk about how unhappy she was, not just for herself, but for both of them. Amy wanted to tell him that Fred Evans, the insurance investigator, was still in Derry, still picking over the site, still asking questions about everything from the most recent wiring inspection to who had keys to the wine cellar, and Ted was suspicious of his motives. Amy wanted Mort to wonder with her if things would have been different if they had had children.

Mort responded to all this as best he could, and all the time he was talking with her, he felt time—prime late-afternoon time—slipping away. He was half mad with worry that Shooter would call, find the line busy, and commit some fresh atrocity. Finally he said the only thing he could think of to get her off the line: that if he didn't get to the bathroom soon, he was going to have an accident.

“Is it booze?” she asked, concerned. “Have you been drinking?”

“Breakfast, I think,” he said. “Listen, Amy, I—”

“At Bowie’s?”

“Yes,” he said, trying to sound strangled with pain and effort. The truth was, he *felt* strangled. It was all quite a comedy, when you really considered it. “Amy, really, I—”

“God, Mort, she keeps the dirtiest grill in town,” Amy said. “Go. I’ll call back later.” The phone went dead in his ear. He put the receiver into its cradle, stood there a moment, and was amazed and dismayed to discover his fictional complaint was suddenly real: his bowels had drawn themselves into an aching, throbbing knot.

He ran for the bathroom, unclasping his belt as he went.

It was a near thing, but he made it. He sat on the ring in the rich odor of his own wastes, his pants around his ankles, catching his breath ... and the phone began to ring again.

He sprang up like a jack released from its box, cracking one knee smartly on the side of the washstand, and ran for it, holding his pants up with one hand and mincing along like a girl in a tight skirt. He had that miserable, embarrassing I-didn’ t-have-time-to-wipe feeling, and he guessed it happened to everyone, but it suddenly occurred to him he had never read about it in a book—not one single book, ever.

Oh, life was such a comedy.

This time it was Shooter.

“I saw you down there,” Shooter said. His voice was as calm and serene as ever. “Down where I left them, I mean. Looked like you had you a heat-stroke, only it isn’t summer.”

“What do you want?” Mort switched the telephone to his other ear. His pants slid down to his ankles again. He let them go and stood there with the waistband of his Jockey shorts suspended halfway between his knees and his hips. What an author photograph this would make, he thought.

“I almost pinned a note on you,” Shooter said. “I decided not to.” He paused, then added with a kind of absent contempt : “You scare too easy.”

“What do you want?”

“Why, I told you that already, Mr. Rainey. I want a story to make up for the one you stole. Ain’t you ready to admit it yet?”

*Yes-tell him yes! Tell him anything, the earth is flat, John Kennedy and Elvis Presley are alive and well and playing banjo duets in Cuba, Meryl Streep’s a transvestite, tell him ANYTHING-*

But he wouldn’t.

All the fury and frustration and horror and confusion suddenly burst out of his mouth in a howl.

*“I DIDN’T.! I DIDN’T! YOU’RE CRAZY, AND I CAN PROVE IT! I HAVE THE MAGAZINE, YOU LOONY! DO YOU HEAR ME? I HAVE THE GODDAM MAGAZINE!”*

The response to this was no response. The line was silent and dead, without even the faraway gabble of a phantom voice to break that smooth darkness, like that which crept up to the window-wall each night he had spent here alone.

“Shooter?”

Silence.

“Shooter, are you still there?”

More silence. He was gone.

Mort let the telephone sag away from his ear. He was returning it to the cradle when Shooter’s voice, tinny and distant and almost lost, said: “... now?”

Mort put the phone back to his ear. It seemed to weigh eight hundred pounds. “What?” he asked. “I thought you were gone.”

“You have it? You *have* this so-called magazine? *Now?*” He thought Shooter sounded upset for the first time. Upset and unsure.

“No,” Mort said.

“Well, *there!*” Shooter said, sounding relieved. “I think you might finally be ready to talk turk—”

“It’s coming Federal Express,” Mort interrupted. “It will be at the post office by ten tomorrow.”

“What will be?” Shooter asked. “Some fuzzy old thing that’s supposed to be a *copy?*”

“No,” Mort said. The feeling that he had rocked the man, that he had actually gotten past his defenses and hit him hard enough to make it hurt, was strong and undeniable. For a moment or two

Shooter had sounded almost afraid, and Mort was angrily glad. “The magazine. The actual *magazine*.”

There was another long pause, but this time Mort kept the telephone screwed tightly against his ear. Shooter was there. And suddenly the *story* was the central issue again, the story and the accusation of plagiarism; Shooter treating him like he was a goddam college kid was the issue, and maybe the man was on the run at last.

Once, in the same parochial school where Mort had learned the trick of swallowing crooked, he had seen a boy stick a pin in a beetle which had been trundling across his desk. The beetle had been caught—pinned, wriggling, and dying. At the time, Mort had been sad and horrified. Now he understood. Now he only wanted to do the same thing to this man. This crazy man.

“There can’t be any magazine,” Shooter said finally. “Not with that story in it. That story is *mine!*”

Mort could hear anguish in the man’s voice. Real anguish. It made him glad. The pin was in Shooter. He was wriggling around on it.

“It’ll be here at ten tomorrow,” Mort said, “or as soon after as FedEx drops the Tashmore stuff. I’ll be happy to meet you there. You can take a look. As long a look as you want, you goddamned maniac.”

“Not there,” Shooter said after another pause. “At your house.”

“Forget it. When I show you that issue of *Ellery Queen*, I want to be someplace where I can yell for help if you go apeshit.”

“You’ll do it my way,” Shooter said. He sounded a little more in control ... but Mort did not believe Shooter had even half the control he’d had previously. “If you don’t, I’ll see you in the Maine State Prison for murder.”

“Don’t make me laugh.” But Mort felt his bowels begin to knot up again.

“I hooked you to those two men in more ways than you know,” Shooter said, “and you have told a right smart of lies. If I just disappear, Mr. Rainey, you are going to find yourself standing with your head in a noose and your feet in Crisco.”

“You don’t scare me.”

“Yeah, I do,” Shooter said. He spoke almost gently. “The only thing is, you’re startin to scare me a little, too. I can’t quite figure you out.”

Mort was silent.

“It’d be funny,” Shooter said in a strange, ruminating tone, “if we had come by the same story in two different places, at two different times.”

“The thought had occurred to me.”

“Did it?”

“I dismissed it,” Mort said. “Too much of a coincidence. If it was just the same plot, that would be one thing. But the same language? The same goddam *diction*?”

“Uh-huh,” Shooter said. “I thought the same thing, pilgrim. It’s just too much. Coincidence is out. You stole it from me, all right, but I’m goddamned if I can figure out how or when.”

“Oh, quit it!” Mort burst out. “I have the magazine! I have *proof*! Don’t you understand that? It’s over! Whether it was some nutty game on your part or just a delusion, it is over! *I have the magazine!*”

After a long silence, Shooter said: “Not yet, you don’t.”

“How true,” Mort said. He felt a sudden and totally unwanted sense of kinship with the man. “So what do we do tonight?”

“Why, nothing,” Shooter said. “Those men will keep. One has a wife and kids visiting family. The other lives alone. You go and get your magazine tomorrow morning. I will come to your place around noon.”

“You’ll kill me,” Mort said. He found that the idea didn’t carry much terror with it—not tonight, anyway. “If I show you the magazine, your delusion will break down and you’ll kill me.”

“No!” Shooter replied, and this time he seemed clearly surprised. “You? No, sir! But those others were going to get in the way of our business. I couldn’t have that... and I saw that I could use them to make you deal with me. To face up to your responsibility.”

“You’re crafty,” Mort said. “I’ll give you that. I believe you’re nuts, but I also believe you’re just about the craftiest son of a bitch I ever ran across in my life.”

“Well, you can believe this,” Shooter said. “If I come tomorrow and find you gone, Mr. Rainey, I will make it my business to destroy every

person in the world that you love and care for. I will burn your life like a canefield in a high wind. You will go to jail for killing those two men, but going to jail will be the least of your sorrows. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Mort said. "I understand. Pilgrim."

"Then you be there."

"And suppose—just suppose—I show you the magazine, and it has my name on the contents page and my story inside. What then?"

There was a short pause. Then Shooter said, "I go to the authorities and confess to the whole shooting match. But I'd take care of myself long before the trial, Mr. Rainey. Because if things turn out that way, then I suppose I am crazy. And that kind of a crazy man..." There was a sigh. "That kind of crazy man has no excuse or reason to live."

The words struck Mort with queer force. *He's unsure*, he thought. *For the first time, he's really unsure ... which is more than I've ever been.*

But he cut that off, and hard. He had never had a reason to be unsure. This was Shooter's fault. Every bit of it was Shooter's fault.

He said: "How do I know you won't claim the magazine is a fake?"

He expected no response to this, except maybe something about how Mort would have to take his word, but Shooter surprised him.

"If it's real, I'll know," he said, "and if it's fake, we'll both know. I don't reckon you could have rigged a whole fake magazine in three days, no matter how many people you have got working for you in New York."

It was Mort's turn to think, and he thought for a long, long time. Shooter waited for him.

"I'm going to trust you," Mort said at last. "I don't know why, for sure. Maybe because I don't have a lot to live for myself these days. But I'm not going to trust you whole hog. You come down here. Stand in the driveway where I can see you, and see that you're unarmed. I'll come out. Is that satisfactory?"

"That'll do her."

"God help us both."

“Yessir. I’ll be damned if I’m sure what I’m into anymore ... and that is not a comfortable feeling.”

“Shooter?”

“Right here.”

“I want you to answer one question.”

Silence ... but an inviting silence, Mort thought.

“Did you burn down my house in Derry?”

“No,” Shooter said at once. “I was keeping an eye on you.”

“And Bump,” Mort said bitterly.

“Listen,” Shooter said. “You got my hat?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll want it,” Shooter said, “one way or the other.”

And the line went dead.

Just like that.

Mort put the phone down slowly and carefully and walked back to the bathroom—once again holding his pants up as he went—to finish his business.

## 38

Amy *did* call back, around seven, and this time Mort was able to talk to her quite normally—just as if the bathroom upstairs wasn’t trashed and there weren’t two dead men sitting behind a screen of bushes on the path down to the lake, stiffening as the twilight turned to dark around them.

She had spoken with Fred Evans herself since her last call, she said, and she was convinced he either knew something or suspected something about the fire he didn’t want to tell them. Mort tried to soothe her, and thought he succeeded to some degree, but he was worried himself. If Shooter hadn’t started the fire—and Mort felt inclined to believe the man had been telling the truth about that—then it must have been raw coincidence ... right?

He didn’t know if it was right or not.

“Mort, I’ve been so worried about you,” she said suddenly.

That snapped him back from his thoughts. “Me? I’m okay.”

“Are you sure? When I saw you yesterday, I thought you looked ... strained.” She paused. “In fact, I thought you looked like you did before you had the ... you know.”

“Amy, I did not have a nervous breakdown.”

“Well, no,” she said quickly. “But you know what I mean. When the movie people were being so awful about *The Delacourt Family*.”

That had been one of the bitterest experiences of Mort’s life. Paramount had optioned the book for \$75,000 on a pick-up price of \$750,000—damned big money. And they had been on the verge of exercising their option when someone had turned up an old script in the files, something called *The Home Team*, which was enough like *The Delacourt Family* to open up potential legal problems. It was the only time in his career—before this nightmare, anyway—when he had been exposed to the possibility of a plagiarism charge. The execs had ended up letting the option lapse at the eleventh hour. Mort still did not know if they had been really worried about plagiarism or had simply had second thoughts about his novel’s film potential. If they really *had* been worried, he didn’t know how such a bunch of pansies could make any movies. Herb Creekmore had obtained a copy of the *Home Team* screenplay, and Mort had seen only the most casual similarity. Amy agreed.

The fuss happened just as he was reaching a dead end on a novel he had wanted desperately to write. There had been a short PR tour for the paperback version of *The Delacourt Family* at the same time. All of that at once had put him under a great deal of strain.

But he had not had a nervous breakdown.

“I’m okay,” he insisted again, speaking gently. He had discovered an amazing and rather touching thing about Amy some years before: if you spoke to her gently enough, she was apt to believe you about almost anything. He had often thought that, if it had been a species-wide trait, like showing your teeth to indicate rage or amusement, wars would have ceased millennia ago.

“Are you *sure*, Mort?”

“Yes. Call me if you hear any more from our insurance friend.”

“I will.”

He paused. “Are you at Ted’s?”

“Yes.”

“How do you feel about him, these days?”

She hesitated, then said simply: “I love him.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t go with other men,” she said suddenly. “I’ve always wanted to tell you that. I didn’t go with other men. But Ted ... he looked past your name and saw me, Mort. He saw *me*.”

“You mean I didn’t.”

“You did when you were here,” she said. Her voice sounded small and forlorn. “But you were gone so much.”

His eyes widened and he was instantly ready to do battle. *Righteous* battle. “*What?* I haven’t been on tour since *The Delacourt Family!* And that was a short one!”

“I don’t want to argue with you, Mort,” she said softly. “That part should be over. All I’m trying to say is that, even when you were here, you were gone a lot. You had your own lover, you know. Your work was your lover.” Her voice was steady, but he sensed tears buried deep inside it. “How I hated that bitch, Mort. She was prettier than me, smarter than me, more fun than me. How could I compete?”

“Blame it all on me, why not?” he asked her, dismayed to find himself on the edge of tears. “What did you want me to do? Become a goddam plumber? We would have been poor and I would have been unemployed. There was nothing else I could fucking do, don’t you understand that? There was nothing else I could do!” He had hoped the tears were over, at least for awhile, but here they were. Who had rubbed this horrible magic lamp again? Had it been him or her this time?

“I’m not blaming you. There’s blame for me, too. You never would have found us ... the way you did ... if I hadn’t been weak and cowardly. It wasn’t Ted; Ted wanted us to go to you and tell you together. He kept asking. And I kept putting him off. I told him I wasn’t sure. I told myself I still loved you, that things could go back to the way they were ... but things never do, I guess. I’ll-” She caught

her breath, and Mort realized she was crying, too. "I'll never forget the look on your face when you opened the door of that motel room. I'll carry that to my grave."

*Good! he wanted to cry out at her. Good! Because you only had to see it! I had to wear it!*

"You knew my love," he said unsteadily. "I never hid her from you. You knew from the start."

"But I never knew," she said, "how deep her embrace could be."

"Well, cheer up," Mort said. "She seems to have left me now."

Amy was weeping. "Mort, Mort—I only want you to live and be happy. Can't you see that? Can't you do that?"

What he had seen was one of her bare shoulders touching one of Ted Milner's bare shoulders. He had seen their eyes, wide and frightened, and Ted's hair stuck up in an Alfalfa corkscrew. He thought of telling her this—of trying, anyway—and let it go. It was enough. They had hurt each other enough. Another time, perhaps, they could go at it again. He wished she hadn't said that thing about the nervous breakdown, though. He had not had a nervous breakdown.

"Amy, I think I ought to go."

"Yes—both of us. Ted's out showing a house, but he'll be back soon. I have to put some dinner together."

"I'm sorry about the argument."

"Will you call if you need me? I'm still worried."

"Yes," he said, and said goodbye, and hung up. He stood there by the telephone for a moment, thinking he would surely burst into tears. But it passed. That was perhaps the real horror.

It passed.

## 39

The steadily falling rain made him feel listless and stupid. He made a little fire in the woodstove, drew a chair over, and tried to read the

current issue of *Harper's*, but he kept nodding off and then jerking awake again as his chin dropped, squeezing his windpipe and producing a snore. *I should have bought some cigarettes today*, he thought. *A few smokes would have kept me awake*. But he hadn't bought any smokes, and he wasn't really sure they would have kept him awake, anyway. He wasn't just tired; he was suffering from shock.

At last he walked over to the couch, adjusted the pillows, and lay back. Next to his cheek, cold rain spickle-spangled against the dark glass.

*Only once, he thought. I only did it once.* And then he fell deeply asleep.

## 40

In his dream, he was in the world's biggest classroom.

The walls stretched up for miles. Each desk was a mesa, the gray tiles the endless plain which swept among them. The clock on the wall was a huge cold sun. The door to the hallway was shut, but Morton Rainey could read the words on the pebbled glass:

HOME TEAM WRITING ROOM  
PROF. DELLACOURT

*They spelled it wrong*, Mort thought, *too many L's*.

But another voice told him this was not so.

Mort was standing on the giant blackboard's wide chalk gutter, stretching up. He had a piece of chalk the size of a baseball bat in his hand. He wanted to drop his arm, which ached ferociously, but he could not. Not until he had written the same sentence on the blackboard five hundred times: *I will not copy from John Kintner*. He must have written it four hundred times already, he thought, but four hundred wasn't enough. Stealing a man's work when a man's work was really all he had was unforgivable. So he would have to write and write and write, and never mind the voice in his mind trying to

tell him that this was a dream, that his right arm ached for other reasons.

The chalk squeaked monstrosly. The dust, acrid and somehow familiar—so familiar—sifted down into his face. At last he could go on no longer. His arm dropped to his side like a bag filled with lead shot. He turned on the chalk gutter, and saw that only one of the desks in the huge classroom was occupied. The occupant was a young man with a country kind of face; a face you expected to see in the north forty behind the ass end of a mule. His pale-brown hair stuck up in spikes from his head. His country-cousin hands, seemingly all knuckles, were folded on the desk before him. He was looking at Mort with pale, absorbed eyes.

*I know you,* Mort said in the dream.

*That's right, pilgrim,* John Kintner said in his bald, drawling Southern accent. *You just put me together wrong. Now keep on writing. It's not five hundred. It's five thousand.*

Mort started to turn, but his foot slipped on the edge of the gutter, and suddenly he was spilling outward, screaming into the dry, chalky air, and John Kintner was laughing, and he—

## 41

—woke up on the floor with his head almost underneath the rogue coffee table, clutching at the carpet and crying out in high-pitched, whinnying shrieks.

He was at Tashmore Lake. Not in some weird, cyclopean classroom but at the lake ... and dawn was coming up misty in the east.

*I'm all right. It was just a dream and I'm all right.*

But he wasn't. Because it *hadn't* just been a dream. John Kintner had been real. How in God's name could he have forgotten John Kintner?

Mort had gone to college at Bates, and had majored in creative writing. Later, when he spoke to classes of aspiring writers (a chore he ducked whenever possible), he told them that such a major was probably the worst mistake a man or woman could make, if he or she wanted to write fiction for a living.

“Get a job with the post office,” he’d say. “It worked for Faulkner.” And they would laugh. They liked to listen to him, and he supposed he was fairly good at keeping them entertained. That seemed very important, since he doubted that he or anyone else could teach them how to write creatively. Still, he was always glad to get out at the end of the class or seminar or workshop. The kids made him nervous. He supposed John Kintner was the reason why.

Had Kintner been from Mississippi? Mort couldn’t remember, but he didn’t think so. But he had been from some enclave of the Deep South all the same—Alabama, Louisiana, maybe the toolies of north Florida. He didn’t know for sure. Bates College had been a long time ago, and he hadn’t thought of John Kintner, who had suddenly dropped out one day for reasons known only to himself, in years.

*That’s not true. You thought about him last night.*

*Dreamed about him, you mean,* Mort corrected himself quickly, but that hellish little voice inside would not let it go.

*No, earlier than that. You thought about him while you were talking to Shooter on the telephone.*

He didn’t want to think about this. He *wouldn’t* think about this. John Kintner was in the past; John Kintner had nothing to do with what was happening now. He got up and walked unsteadily toward the kitchen in the milky, early light to make strong coffee. Lots and lots of strong coffee. Except the hellish little voice wouldn’t let him be. Mort looked at Amy’s set of kitchen knives hanging from their magnetized steel runners and thought that if he could cut that little voice out, he would try the operation immediately.

*You were thinking that you rocked the man—that you finally rocked him. You were thinking that the story had become the central issue again, the story and the accusation of plagiarism. Shooter treating you like a goddam college kid was the issue. Like a goddam college kid. Like a—*

“Shut up,” Mort said hoarsely. “Just shut the fuck up.”

The voice did, but he found himself unable to stop thinking about John Kintner anyway.

As he measured coffee with a shaking hand, he thought of his constant, strident protestations that he hadn't plagiarized Shooter's story, that he had never plagiarized *anything*.

But he had, of course.

Once.

Just once.

“But that was so long ago,” he whispered. “And it doesn't have anything to do with this.”

It might be true, but that did not stop his thoughts.

## 42

He had been a junior, and it was spring semester. The creative-writing class of which he was a part was focussing on the short story that semester. The teacher was a fellow named Richard Perkins, Jr., who had written two novels which had gotten very good reviews and sold very few copies. Mort had tried one, and thought the good reviews and bad sales had the same root cause: the books were incomprehensible. But the man hadn't been a bad teacher—he had kept them entertained, at least.

There had been about a dozen students in the class. One of them was John Kintner. Kintner was only a freshman, but he had gotten special permission to take the class. And had deserved it, Mort supposed. Southern-fried cracker or not, that sucker had been good.

The course required each of them to write either six short stories or three longer ones. Each week, Perkins dittoed off the ones he thought would make for the liveliest discussion and handed them out at the end of the class. The students were supposed to come the following week prepared to discuss and criticize. It was the usual

way to run such a class. And one week Perkins had given them a story by John Kintner. It had been called ... What had it been called?

Mort had turned on the water to fill the coffeemaker, but now he only stood, looking absently out at the fog beyond the window-wall and listening to the running water.

*You know damned well what it was called. "Secret Window, Secret Garden."*

"But it wasn't!" he yelled petulantly to the empty house. He thought furiously, determined to shut the hellish little voice up once and for all ... and suddenly it came to him.

" 'Crowfoot Mile'!" he shrieked. "The name of the story was 'Crowfoot Mile,' and it doesn't have *anything* to do with *anything*!"

Except that was not quite true, either, and he didn't really need the little voice hunkered down someplace in the middle of his aching head to point out the fact.

Kintner had turned in three or maybe four stories before disappearing to wherever he had disappeared to (if asked to guess, Mort would have guessed Vietnam—it was where most of them had disappeared to at the end of the sixties—the young men, anyhow). "Crowfoot Mile" hadn't been the best of Kintner's stories ... but it had been good. Kintner was clearly the best writer in Richard Perkins, Jr.'s class. Perkins treated the boy almost as an equal, and in Mort Rainey's not-so-humble estimation, Perkins had been right to do so, because he thought Kintner had been quite a bit better than Richard Perkins, Jr. As far as that went, Mort believed he had been better.

But had he been better than *Kintner*?

"Huh-uh," he said under his breath as he turned on the coffeemaker. "I was second."

Yes. He had been second, and he had hated that. He knew that most students taking writing courses were just marking time, pursuing a whim before giving up childish things and settling into a study of whatever it was that would be their real life's work. The creative writing most of them would do in later life would consist of contributing items to the Community Calendar pages of their local newspapers or writing advertising copy for Bright Blue Breeze dish detergent. Mort had come into Perkins's class confidently expecting

to be the best, because it had never been any other way with him. For that reason, John Kintner had come as an unpleasant shock.

He remembered trying to talk to the boy once ... but Kintner, who contributed in class only when asked, had proved to be almost inarticulate. When he spoke out loud, he mumbled and stumbled like a poor-white sharecropper's boy whose education had stopped at the fourth-grade level. His writing was the only voice he had, apparently.

*And you stole it.*

"Shut up," he muttered. *"Just shut up."*

*You were second best and you hated it. You were glad when he was gone, because then you could be first again. Just like you always had been.*

Yes. True. And a year later, when he was preparing to graduate, he had been cleaning out the back closet of the sleazy Lewiston apartment he had shared with two other students, and had come upon a pile of offprints from Perkins's writing course. Only one of Kintner's stories had been in the stack. It happened to be "Crowfoot Mile."

He remembered sitting on the seedy, beer-smelling rug of his bedroom, reading the story, and the old jealousy had come over him again.

He threw the other offprints away, but he had taken that one with him ... for reasons he wasn't sure he wanted to examine closely.

As a sophomore, Mort had submitted a story to a literary magazine called *Aspen Quarterly*. It came back with a note which said the readers had found it quite good "although the ending seemed rather jejune." The note, which Mort found both patronizing and tremendously exciting, invited him to submit other material.

Over the next two years, he had submitted four more stories. None were accepted, but a personal note accompanied each of the rejection slips. Mort went through an unpublished writer's agony of optimism alternating with deep pessimism. He had days when he was sure it was only a matter of time before he cracked *Aspen Quarterly*. And he had days when he was positive that the entire editorial staff-pencil-necked geeks to a man—was only playing with

him, teasing him the way a man might tease a hungry dog by holding a piece of meat up over its head and then jerking the scrap out of reach when it leaps. He sometimes imagined one of them holding up one of his manuscripts, fresh out of its manila envelope, and shouting: "Here's another one from that putz in Maine! Who wants to write the letter this time?" And all of them cracking up, perhaps even rolling around on the floor under their posters of Joan Baez and Moby Grape at the Fillmore.

Most days, Mort had not indulged in this sort of sad paranoia. He understood that he was good, and that it was only a matter of time. And that summer, working as a waiter in a Rockland restaurant, he thought of the story by John Kintner. He thought it was probably still in his trunk, kicking around at the bottom. He had a sudden idea. He would change the title and submit "Crowfoot Mile" to *Aspen Quarterly* under his own name! He remembered thinking it would be a fine joke on them, although, looking back now, he could not imagine what the joke would have been.

He *did* remember that he'd had no intention of *publishing* the story under his own name... or, if he had had such an intention on some deeper level, he hadn't been aware of it. In the unlikely event of an acceptance, he would withdraw the story, saying he wanted to work on it some more. And if they rejected it, he could at least take some cheer in the thought that John Kintner wasn't good enough for *Aspen Quarterly*, either.

So he had sent the story.

And they had accepted it.

And he had let them accept it.

And they sent him a check for twenty-five dollars. "An honorarium," the accompanying letter had called it.

And then they had published it.

And Morton Rainey, overcome by belated guilt at what he had done, had cashed the check and had stuffed the bills into the poor box of St. Catherine's in Augusta one day.

But guilt hadn't been *all* he'd felt. Oh no.

Mort sat at the kitchen table with his head propped in one hand, waiting for the coffee to perk. His head ached. He didn't want to be

thinking about John Kintner and John Kintner's story. What he had done with "Crowfoot Mile" had been one of the most shameful events of his life; was it really surprising that he had buried it for so many years? He wished he could bury it again now. This, after all, was going to be a big day—maybe the biggest of his life. Maybe even the last of his life. He should be thinking about going to the post office. He should be thinking about his confrontation with Shooter, but his mind would not let that sad old time alone.

When he'd seen the magazine, the actual *magazine* with his name in it above John Kintner's story, he felt like a man waking from a horrible episode of sleepwalking, an unconscious outing in which he has done some irrevocable thing. How had he let it go so far? It was supposed to have been a *joke*, for Christ's sake, just a little *giggle*—

But he *had* let it go so far. The story had been published, and there were at least a dozen other people in the world who knew it wasn't his—including Kintner himself. And if one of them happened to pick up *Aspen Quarterly*—

He himself told no one—of course. He simply waited, sick with terror. He slept and ate very little that late summer and early fall; he lost weight and dark shadows brushed themselves under his eyes. His heart began to triphammer every time the telephone rang. If the call was for him, he would approach the instrument with dragging feet and cold sweat on his brow, sure it would be Kintner, and the first words out of Kintner's mouth would be, *You stole my story, and something has got to be done about it. I think I'll start by telling everybody what kind of thief you are.*

The most incredible thing was this: he had *known* better. He had *known* the possible consequences of such an act for a young man who hoped to make a career of writing. It was like playing Russian roulette with a bazooka. Yet still ... still ...

But as that fall slipped uneventfully past, he began to relax a little. *The issue of Aspen Quarterly* had been replaced by a new issue. The issue was no longer lying out on tables in library periodical rooms all across the country; it had been tucked away into the stacks or transferred to microfiche. It might still cause trouble—he bleakly

supposed he would have to live with that possibility for the rest of his life—but in most cases, out of sight meant out of mind.

Then, in November of that year, a letter from *Aspen Quarterly* came.

Mort held it in his hands, looking at his name on the envelope, and began to shake all over. His eyes filled with some liquid that felt too hot and corrosive to be tears, and the envelope first doubled and then trebled.

*Caught. They caught me. They'll want me to respond to a letter they have from Kintner... or Perkins... or one of the others in the class... I'm caught.*

He had thought of suicide then—quite calmly and quite rationally. His mother had sleeping pills. He would use those. Somewhat eased by this prospect, he tore the envelope open and pulled out a single sheet of stationery. He held it folded in one hand for a long moment and considered burning it without even looking at it. He wasn't sure he could stand to see the accusation held baldly up in front of him. He thought it might drive him mad.

*Go ahead, dammit—look. The least you can do is look at the consequences. You may not be able to stand up to them, but you can by-God look at them.*

He unfolded the letter.

Dear Mort Rainey,

Your short story, "Eye of the Crow," was extremely well received here. I'm sorry this follow-up letter has been so slow in coming, but, frankly, we expected to hear from you. You have been so faithful in your submissions over the years that your silence now that you have finally succeeded in "making it" is a little perplexing. If there was anything about the way your story was handled—typesetting, design, placement, etc.—that you didn't like, we hope you'll bring it up. Meantime, how about another tale?

Respectfully yours,

*Charlie*

Charles Palmer  
Assistant Editor

Mort had read this letter twice, and then began to peal hoarse bursts of laughter at the house, which was luckily empty. He had heard of side-splitting laughter, and this was surely it—he felt that if he didn't stop soon, his sides really *would* split, and send his guts spewing out all over the floor. He had been ready to kill himself with his mother's sleeping pills, and they wanted to know if he was upset with the way the story had been typeset! He had expected to find that his career was ruined even before it was fairly begun, and they wanted more! *More!*

He laughed—howled, actually—until his side-splitting laughter turned to hysterical tears. Then he sat on the sofa, reread Charles Palmer's letter, and cried until he laughed again. At last he had gone into his room and lain down with the pillows arranged behind him just the way he liked, and then he had fallen asleep.

He had gotten away with it. That was the upshot. He had gotten away with it, and he had never done anything even remotely like it again, and it had all happened about a thousand years ago, and so why had it come back to haunt him now?

He didn't know, but he intended to stop thinking about it.

"And right now, too," he told the empty room, and walked briskly over to the coffeemaker, trying to ignore his aching head.

*You know why you're thinking about it now.*

"Shut up." He spoke in a conversational tone which was rather cheery ... but his hands were shaking as he picked up the Silex.

*Some things you can't hide forever. You might be ill, Mort.*

"Shut up, I'm warning you," he said in his cheery conversational voice.

You might be very *ill*. In fact, you might be having a nervous *br*—

"Shut *up!*" he cried, and threw the Silex as hard as he could. It sailed over the counter, flew across the room, turning over and over as it went, crunched into the window-wall, shattered, and fell dead on the floor. He looked at the window-wall and saw a long, silvery crack zig-zagging up to the top. It started at the place where the Silex had

impacted. He felt very much like a man who might have a similar crack running right through the middle of his brain.

But the voice had shut up.

He walked stolidly into the bedroom, got the alarm clock, and walked back into the living room. He set the alarm for ten-thirty as he walked. At ten-thirty he was going to go to the post office, pick up his Federal Express package, and go stolidly about the task of putting this nightmare behind him.

In the meantime, though, he would sleep.

He would sleep on the couch, where he had always slept best.

“I am not having a nervous breakdown,” he whispered to the little voice, but the little voice was having none of the argument. Mort thought that he might have frightened the little voice. He hoped so, because the little voice had certainly frightened *him*.

His eyes found the silvery crack in the window-wall and traced it dully. He thought of using the chambermaid’s key. How the room had been dim, and it had taken his eyes a moment to adjust. Their naked shoulders. Their frightened eyes. He had been shouting, he couldn’t remember what—and had never dared to ask Amy—but it must have been some scary shit, judging from the look in their eyes.

*If I was ever going to have a nervous breakdown, he thought, looking at the lightning-bolt senselessness of the crack, it would have been then. Hell, that letter from Aspen Quarterly was nothing compared to opening a motel-room door and seeing your wife with another man, a slick real-estate agent from some shitsplat little town in Tennessee—*

Mort closed his eyes, and when he opened them again it was because another voice was clamoring. This one belonged to the alarm clock. The fog had cleared, the sun had come out, and it was time to go to the post office.

On the way, he became suddenly sure that Federal Express would have come and gone ... and Juliet would stand there at the window with her bare face hanging out and shake her head and tell him there was nothing for him, sorry. And his proof? It would be gone like smoke. This feeling was irrational —Herb was a cautious man, one who did not make promises that couldn't be kept—but it was almost too strong to deny.

He had to force himself out of the car, and the walk from the door of the post office to the window where Juliet Stoker stood sorting mail seemed at least a thousand miles long.

When he got there, he tried to speak and no words came out. His lips moved, but his throat was too dry to make the sounds. Juliet looked up at him, then took a step back. She looked alarmed. Not, however, as alarmed as Amy and Ted had looked when he opened the motel-room door and pointed the gun at them.

“Mr. Rainey? Are you all right?”

He cleared his throat. “Sorry, Juliet. My throat kind of double-clutched on me for a second.”

“You're very pale,” she said, and he could hear in her voice that tone so many of the Tashmore residents used when they spoke to him—it was a sort of pride, but it held an undertaste of irritation and condescension, as though he was a child prodigy who needed special care and feeding.

“Something I ate last night, I guess,” he said. “Did Federal Express leave anything for me?”

“No, not a thing.”

He gripped the underside of the counter desperately, and for a moment thought he would faint, although he had understood almost immediately that that was not what she had said.

“Pardon me?”

She had already turned away; her sturdy country bum was presented to him as she shuffled through some packages on the floor.

“Just the one thing, I said,” she replied, and then turned around and slid the package across the counter to him. He saw the return

address was *EQMM* in Pennsylvania, and felt relief course through him. It felt like cool water pouring down a dry throat.

“Thank you.”

“Welcome. You know, the post office would have a cow if they knew we handle that Federal Express man’s mail.”

“Well, I certainly appreciate it,” Mort said. Now that he had the magazine, he felt a need to get away, to get back to the house. This need was so strong it was almost elemental. He didn’t know why—it was an hour and a quarter until noon—but it was there. In his distress and confusion, he actually thought of giving Juliet a tip to shut her up ... and that would have caused her soul, Yankee to its roots, to rise up in a clamor.

“You won’t tell them, will you?” she asked archly.

“No way,” he said, managing a grin.

“Good,” Juliet Stoker said, and smiled. “Because I saw what you did.”

He stopped by the door. “Pardon me?”

“I said they’d shoot me if you did,” she said, and looked closely at his face. “You ought to go home and lie down, Mr. Rainey. You really don’t look well at all.”

*I feel like I spent the last three days lying down, Juliet—the time I didn’t spend hitting things, that is.*

“Well,” he said, “maybe that’s not such a bad idea. I still feel weak.”

“There’s a virus going around. You probably caught it.”

Then the two women from Camp Wigmore—the ones everybody in town suspected of being lesbians, albeit discreet ones—came in, and Mort made good his escape. He sat in the Buick with the blue package on his lap, not liking the way everybody kept saying he looked sick, liking the way his mind had been working even less.

*It doesn’t matter. It’s almost over.*

He started to pull the envelope open, and then the ladies from Camp Wigmore came back out and looked at him. They put their heads together. One of them smiled. The other laughed out loud. And Mort suddenly decided he would wait until he got back home.

He parked the Buick around the side of the house, in its customary place, turned off the ignition ... and then a soft grayness came over his vision. When it drew back, he felt strange and frightened. Was something wrong with him, then? Something physical?

No—he was just under strain, he decided.

He heard something—or thought he did—and looked around quickly. Nothing there. *Get hold of your nerves*, he told himself shakily. *That's really all you have to do—just get hold of your motherfucking nerves.*

And then he thought: *I did have a gun. That day. But it was unloaded. I told them that, later. Amy believed me. I don't know about Milner, but Amy did, and—*

*Was it, Mort ? Was it really unloaded?*

He thought of the crack in the window—wall again, senseless silver lightning-bolt zig-zagging right up through the middle of things. *That's how it happens*, he thought. *That's how it happens in a person's life.*

Then he looked down at the Federal Express package again. This was what he should be thinking about, not Amy and Mr. Ted Kiss-My-Ass from Shooter's Knob, Tennessee, but this.

The flap was already half open—everyone was careless these days. He pulled it up and shook the magazine out into his lap. *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, the logo said in bright red letters. Beneath that, in much smaller type, *June, 1980*. And below that, the names of some of the writers featured in the issue. Edward D. Hoch. Ruth Rendell. Ed McBain. Patricia Highsmith. Lawrence Sanders.

His name wasn't on the cover.

Well, of course not. He was scarcely known as a writer at all then, and certainly not as a writer of mystery stories; "Sowing Season" had been a one. His name would have meant nothing to regular readers of the magazine, so the editors would not have put it on. He turned the cover back.

There was no contents page beneath.

The contents page had been cut out.

He thumbed frantically through the magazine, dropping it once and then picking it up with a little cry. He didn't find the excision the first time, but on the second pass, he realized that pages 83 to 97 were gone.

*"You cut it out!"* he screamed. He screamed so loudly that his eyeballs bulged from their sockets. He began to bring his fists down on the steering wheel of the Buick, again and again and again. The horn burped and blared. *"You cut it out, you son of a bitch! How did you do that? You cut it out! You cut it out! You cut it out!"*

## 45

He was halfway to the house before the deadly little voice again wondered how Shooter could have done that. The envelope had come Federal Express from Pennsylvania, and Juliet had taken possession of it, so how, how in God's name—

He stopped.

*Good, Juliet had said. Good, because I saw what you did.*

That was it; that explained it. Juliet was in on it. Except—

Except Juliet had been in Tashmore since forever.

Except that hadn't been what she said. That had only been his mind. A little paranoid flatulence.

"He's doing it, though," Mort said. He went into the house and once he was inside the door, he threw the magazine as hard as he could. It flew like a startled bird, pages riffling, and landed on the floor with a slap. "Oh yeah, you bet, you bet your fucking ass, he's doing it. But I don't have to wait around for him. I—"

He saw Shooter's hat. Shooter's hat was lying on the floor in front of the door to his study.

Mort stood where he was for a moment, heart thundering in his ears, and then walked over to the stove in great cartoon tippy-toe steps. He pulled the poker from the little clutch of tools, wincing

when the poker's tip clanged softly against the ash-shovel. He took the poker and walked carefully back to the closed door again, holding the poker as he had held it before crashing into the bathroom. He had to skirt the magazine he'd thrown on the way.

He reached the door and stood in front of it.

"Shooter?"

There was no answer.

"Shooter, you better come out under your own power! If I have to come in and get you, you'll never walk out of anyplace under your own power again!"

There was still no answer.

He stood a moment longer, nerving himself (but not really sure he had the nerve), and then twisted the knob. He hit the door with his shoulder and barrelled in, screaming, waving the poker—

And the room was empty.

But Shooter had been here, all right. Yes. The VDT unit of Mort's word cruncher lay on the floor, its screen a shattered staring eye. Shooter had killed it. On the desk where the VDT had stood was an old Royal typewriter. The steel surfaces of this dinosaur were dull and dusty. Propped on the keyboard was a manuscript. Shooter's manuscript, the one he had left under a rock on the porch a million years ago.

It was "Secret Window, Secret Garden."

Mort dropped the poker on the floor. He walked toward the typewriter as if mesmerized and picked up the manuscript. He shuffled slowly through its pages, and came to understand why Mrs. Gavin had been so sure it was his ... sure enough to rescue it from the trash. Maybe she hadn't known consciously, but her eye had recognized the irregular typeface. And why not? She had seen manuscripts which looked like "Secret Window, Secret Garden" for years. The Wang word processor and the System Five laser printer were relative new-comers. For most of his writing career he had used this old Royal. The years had almost worn it out, and it was a sad case now—when you typed on it, it produced letters as crooked as an old man's teeth.

But it had been here all the time, of course—tucked away at the back of the study closet behind piles of old galleys and manuscripts ... what editors called “foul matter.” Shooter must have stolen it, typed his manuscript on it, and then sneaked it back when Mort was out at the post office. Sure. That made sense, didn’t it?

*No, Mort. That doesn’t make sense. Would you like to do something that does make sense? Call the police, then. That makes sense. Call the police and tell them to come down here and lock you up. Tell them to do it fast, before you can do any more damage. Tell them to do it before you kill anyone else.*

Mort dropped the pages with a great wild cry and they seesawed lazily down around him as all of the truth rushed in on him at once like a jagged bolt of silver lightning.

## 46

There was no John Shooter.

There never had been.

“No,” Mort said. He was striding back and forth through the big living room again. His headache came and went in waves of pain. “No, I do not accept that. I do not accept that at *all*. ”

But his acceptance or rejection didn’t make much difference. All the pieces of the puzzle were there, and when he saw the old Royal typewriter, they began to fly together. Now, fifteen minutes later, they were *still* flying together, and he seemed to have no power to will them apart.

The picture which kept coming back to him was of the gas jockey in Mechanic Falls, using a squeegee to wash his windshield. A sight he had never expected to witness again in his lifetime. Later, he had assumed that the kid had given him a little extra service because he had recognized Mort and liked Mort’s books. Maybe that was so, but the windshield had *needed* washing. Summer was gone, but plenty of stuff still splatted on your windshield if you drove far enough and

fast enough on the back roads. And he must have used the back roads. He must have sped up to Derry and back again in record time, only stopping long enough to burn down his house. He hadn't even stopped long enough to get gas on the way back. After all, he'd had places to go and cats to kill, hadn't he? Busy, busy, busy.

He stopped in the middle of the floor and whirled to stare at the window-wall. "If I did all that, why can't I remember?" he asked the silvery crack in the glass. "Why can't I remember even now?"

He didn't know ... but he *did* know where the name had come from, didn't he? One half from the Southern man whose story he had stolen in college; one half from the man who had stolen his wife. It was like some bizarre literary in-joke.

*She says she loves him, Mort. She says she loves him now.*

"Fuck that. A man who sleeps with another man's wife is a thief. And the woman is his accomplice."

He looked defiantly at the crack.

The crack said nothing.

Three years ago, Mort had published a novel called *The Delacourt Family*. The return address on Shooter's story had been Dellacourt, Mississippi. It—

He suddenly ran for the encyclopedias in the study, slipping and almost falling in the mess of pages strewn on the floor in his hurry. He pulled out the M volume and at last found the entry for Mississippi. He ran a trembling finger down the list of towns—it took up one entire page—hoping against hope.

It was no good.

There was no Dellacourt or Delacourt, Mississippi.

He thought of looking for Perkinsburg, the town where Shooter had told him he'd picked up a paperback copy of *Everybody Drops the Dime* before getting on the Greyhound bus, and then simply closed the encyclopedia. Why bother? There might be a Perkinsburg in Mississippi, but it would mean nothing if there was.

The name of the novelist who'd taught the class in which Mort had met John Kintner had been Richard Perkins, Jr. That was where the name had come from.

*Yes, but I don't remember any of this, so how-?*

*Oh, Mort, the small voice mourned. You're very sick. You're a very sick man.*

"I don't accept that," he said again, horrified by the wavery weakness of his voice, but what other choice was there? Hadn't he even thought once that it was almost as if he were doing things, taking irrevocable steps, in his sleep?

*You killed two men, the little voice whispered. You killed Tom because he knew you were alone that day, and you killed Greg so he wouldn't find out for sure. If you had just killed Tom, Greg would have called the police. And you didn't want that, COULDN'T have that. Not until this horrible story you've been telling is all finished. You were so sore when you got up yesterday. So stiff and sore. But it wasn't just from breaking in the bathroom door and trashing the shower stall, was it? You were a lot busier than that. You had Tom and Greg to take care of. And you were right about how the vehicles got moved around ... but you were the one who called up Sonny Trotts and pretended to be Tom. A man who just got into town from Mississippi wouldn't know Sonny was a little deaf, but you would. You killed them, Mort, you KILLED those men!*

*"I do not accept that I did!" he shrieked. "This is all just part of his plan! This is just part of his little game! His little mind-game! And I do not... I do not accept ..."*

Stop, the little voice whispered inside his head, and Mort stopped.

For a moment there was utter silence in both worlds: the one inside his head, and the one outside of it.

And, after an interval, the little voice asked quietly: *Why did you do it, Mort? This whole elaborate and homicidal episode? Shooter kept saying he wanted a story, but there is no Shooter. What do you want, Mort? What did you create John Shooter FOR?*

Then, from outside, came the sound of a car rolling down the driveway. Mort looked at his watch and saw that the hands were standing straight up at noon. A blaze of triumph and relief roared through him like flames shooting up the neck of a chimney. That he had the magazine but still no proof did not matter. That Shooter might kill him did not matter. He could die happily, just knowing that

there was a John Shooter and that he himself was not responsible for the horrors he had been considering.

*"He's here!"* he screamed joyfully, and ran out of the study. He waved his hands wildly above his head, and actually cut a little caper as he rounded the corner and came into the hall.

He stopped, looking out at the driveway past the sloping roof of the garbage cabinet where Bump's body had been nailed up. His hands dropped slowly to his sides. Dark horror stole over his brain. No, not over it; it came down, as if some merciless hand were pulling a shade. The last piece fell into place. It had occurred to him moments before in the study that he might have created a fantasy assassin because he lacked the courage to commit suicide. Now he realized that Shooter had told the truth when he said he would never kill Mort.

It wasn't John Shooter's imaginary station wagon but Amy's nonsense little Subaru which was just now coming to a stop. Amy was behind the wheel. She had stolen his love, and a woman who would steal your love when your love was really all you had to give was not much of a woman.

He loved her, all the same.

It was *Shooter* who hated her. It was *Shooter* who meant to kill her and then bury her down by the lake near Bump, where she would before long be a mystery to both of them.

"Go away, Amy," he whispered in the palsied voice of a very old man. "Go away before it's too late."

But Amy was getting out of the car, and as she closed the door behind her, the hand pulled the shade in Mort's head all the way down and he was in darkness.

Amy tried the door and found it unlocked. She stepped in, started to call for Mort, and then didn't. She looked around, wide-eyed and

startled.

The place was a mess. The trash can was full and had overflowed onto the floor. A few sluggish autumn flies were crawling in and out of an aluminum pot-pie dish that had been kicked into the corner. She could smell stale cooking and musty air. She thought she could even smell spoiled food.

“Mort?”

There was no answer. She walked further into the house, taking small steps, not entirely sure she wanted to look at the rest of the place. Mrs. Gavin had been in only three days ago—how had things gotten so out of hand since then? What had happened?

She had been worried about Mort during the entire last year of their marriage, but she had been even more worried since the divorce. Worried, and, of course, guilty. She held part of the blame for herself, and supposed she always would. But Mort had never been strong ... and his greatest weakness was his stubborn (and sometimes almost hysterical) refusal to recognize the fact. This morning he had sounded like a man on the point of suicide. And the only reason she had heeded his admonition not to bring Ted was because she thought the sight of him might set Mort off if he really was poised on the edge of such an act.

The thought of murder had never crossed her mind, nor did it do so now. Even when he had brandished the gun at them that horrible afternoon at the motel, she had not been afraid. Not of *that*. Mort was no killer.

“Mort? M—”

She came around the kitchen counter and the word died. She stared at the big living room with wide, stunned eyes. Paper was littered everywhere. It looked as if Mort must at some point have exhumed every copy of every manuscript he had in his desk drawers and in his files and strewn the pages about in here like confetti at some black New Year’s Eve celebration. The table was heaped with dirty dishes. The Silex was lying shattered on the floor by the window-wall, which was cracked.

And everywhere, everywhere, everywhere was one word. The word was SHOOTER.

SHOOTER had been written on the walls in colored chalks he must have taken from her drawer of art supplies. SHOOTER was sprayed on the window twice in what looked like dried whipped cream—and yes, there was the Redi-Whip pressure-can, lying discarded under the stove. SHOOTER was written over and over on the kitchen counters in ink, and on the wooden support posts of the deck on the far side of the house in pencil—a neat column like adding that went down in a straight line and said SHOOTER SHOOTER SHOOTER SHOOTER.

Worst of all, it had been carved into the polished cherrywood surface of the table in great jagged letters three feet high, like a grotesque declaration of love: SHOOTER.

The screwdriver he had used to do this last was lying on a chair nearby. There was red stuff on its steel shaft—stain from the cherrywood, she assumed.

“Mort?” she whispered, looking around.

Now she was frightened that she would find him dead by his own hand. And where? Why, in the study, of course. Where else? He had lived all the most important parts of his life in there; surely he had chosen to die there.

Although she had no wish to go in, no wish to be the one to find him, her feet carried her in that direction all the same. As she went, she kicked the issue of *EQMM* Herb Creekmore had had sent out of her way. She did not look down. She reached the study door and pushed it slowly open.

## 48

Mort stood in front of his old Royal typewriter; the screen-and-keyboard unit of his word processor lay overturned in a bouquet of glass on the floor. He looked strangely like a country preacher. It was partly the posture he had adopted, she supposed; he was standing almost primly with his hands behind his back. But most of it was the

hat. The black hat, pulled down so it almost touched the tops of his ears. She thought he looked a little bit like the old man in that picture, “American Gothic,” even though the man in the picture wasn’t wearing a hat.

“Mort?” she asked. Her voice was weak and uncertain.

He made no reply, only stared at her. His eyes were grim and glittering. She had never seen Mort’s eyes look this way, not even on the horrible afternoon at the motel. It was almost as if this was not Mort at all, but some stranger who looked like Mort.

She recognized the hat, though.

“Where did you find that old thing? The attic?” Her heartbeat was in her voice, making it stagger.

He must have found it in the attic. The smell of mothballs on it was strong, even from where she was standing. Mort had gotten the hat years ago, at a gift shop in Pennsylvania. They had been travelling through Amish country. She had kept a little garden at the Derry house, in the angle where the house and the study addition met. It was her garden, but Mort often went out to weed it when he was stuck for an idea. He usually wore the hat when he did this. He called it his thinking cap. She remembered him looking at himself in a mirror once when he was wearing it and joking that he ought to have a bookjacket photo taken in it. “When I put this on,” he’d said, “I look like a man who belongs out in the north forty, walking plow-furrows behind a mule’s ass.”

Then the hat had disappeared. It must have migrated down here and been stored. But—

“It’s my hat,” he said at last in a rusty, bemused voice. “Wasn’t ever anybody else’s.”

“Mort? What’s wrong? What’s—”

“You got you a wrong number, woman. Ain’t no Mort here. Mort’s dead.” The gimlet eyes never wavered. “He did a lot of squirming around, but in the end he couldn’t lie to himself anymore, let alone to me. I never put a hand on him, Mrs. Rainey. I swear. He took the coward’s way out.”

“Why are you talking that way?” Amy asked.

“This is just the way I talk,” he said with mild surprise. “Everybody down in Miss’ippi talks this way.”

“Mort, *stop!*”

“Don’t you understand what I *said?*” he asked. “You ain’t deaf, are you? He’s *dead*. He killed himself.”

“Stop it, Mort,” she said, beginning to cry. “You’re scaring me, and I don’t like it.”

“Don’t matter,” he said. He took his hands out from behind his back. In one of them he held the scissors from the top drawer of the desk. He raised them. The sun had come out, and it sent a starflash glitter along the blades as he snicked them open and then closed. “You won’t be scared long.” He began walking toward her.

## 49

For a moment she stood where she was. Mort would not kill her; if there had been killing in Mort, then surely he would have done some that day at the motel.

Then she saw the look in his eyes and understood that Mort knew that, too.

But this wasn’t him.

She screamed and wheeled around and lunged for the door.

Shooter came after her, bringing the scissors down in a silver arc. He would have buried them up to the handles between her shoulderblades if his feet had not slid on the papers scattered about the hardwood floor. He fell full-length with a cry of mingled perplexity and anger. The blades stabbed down through page nine of “Secret Window, Secret Garden” and the tips broke off. His mouth struck the floor and sprayed blood. The package of Pall Mails—the brand John Kintner had silently smoked during the breaks halfway through the writing class he and Mort Rainey had shared—shot out of his pocket and slid along the slick wood like the weight in a barroom

shuffleboard game. He got up on his knees, his mouth snarling and smiling through the blood which ran over his lips and teeth.

“Won’t do you no help, Mrs. Rainey!” he cried, getting to his feet. He looked at the scissors, snicked them open to study the blunted tips a little better, and then tossed them impatiently aside. “I got a place in the garden for you! I got it all picked out. You mind me, now!”

He ran out the door after her.

## 50

Halfway across the living room, Amy took her own spill. One of her feet came down on the discarded issue of *EQMM* and she fell sprawling on her side, hurting her hip and right breast. She cried out.

Behind her, Shooter ran across to the table and snatched up the screwdriver he had used on the cat.

“Stay right there, and be still,” he said as she turned over on her back and stared at him with wide eyes which looked almost drugged. “If you move around, I’m only goin to hurt you before it’s over. I don’t want to hurt you, missus, but I will if I have to. I’ve got to have something, you see. I have come all this way, and I’ve got to have something for my trouble.”

As he approached, Amy propped herself up on her elbows and shoved herself backward with her feet. Her hair hung in her face. Her skin was coated with sweat; she could smell it pouring out of her, hot and stinking. The face above her was the solemn, judgmental face of insanity.

“No, Mort! Please! Please, Mort—”

He flung himself at her, raising the screwdriver over his head and then bringing it down. Amy shrieked and rolled to the left. Pain burned a line across her hip as the screwdriver blade tore her dress and grooved her flesh. Then she was scrambling to her knees,

hearing and feeling the dress shred out a long unwinding strip as she did it.

“No, ma’am,” Shooter panted. His hand closed upon her ankle. “No, ma’am.” She looked over her shoulder and through the tangles of her hair and saw he was using his other hand to work the screwdriver out of the floor. The round-crowned black hat sat askew on his head.

He yanked the screwdriver free and drove it into her right calf.

The pain was horrid. The pain was the whole world. She screamed and kicked backward, connecting with his nose, breaking it. Shooter grunted and fell on his side, clutching at his face, and Amy got to her feet. She could hear a woman howling. It sounded like a dog howling at the moon. She supposed it wasn’t a dog. She supposed it was her.

Shooter was getting to his feet. His lower face was a mask of blood. The mask split open, showing Mort Rainey’s crooked front teeth. She could remember licking across those teeth with her tongue.

“Feisty one, ain’t you?” he said, grinning. “That’s all right, ma’am. You go right on.”

He lunged for her.

Amy staggered backward. The screwdriver fell out of her calf and rolled across the floor. Shooter glanced at it, then lunged at her again, almost playfully. Amy grabbed one of the living-room chairs and dumped it in front of him. For a moment they only stared at each other over it ... and then he snatched for the front of her dress. Amy recoiled.

“I’m about done fussin with you,” he panted.

Amy turned and bolted for the door.

He was after her at once, flailing at her back, his fingertips skating and skidding down the nape of her neck, trying to close on the top of the dress, catching it, then just missing the hold which would have coiled her back to him for good.

Amy bolted past the kitchen counter and toward the back door. Her right loafer squelched and smooched on her foot. It was full of

blood. Shooter was after her, puffing and blowing bubbles of blood from his nostrils, clutching at her.

She struck the screen door with her hands, then tripped and fell full-length on the porch, the breath whooshing out of her. She fell exactly where Shooter had left his manuscript. She rolled over and saw him coming. He only had his bare hands now, but they looked like they would be more than enough. His eyes were stern and unflinching and horribly kind beneath the brim of the black hat.

“I am so sorry, missus,” he said.

*“Rainey!”* a voice cried. *“Stop!”*

She tried to look around and could not. She had strained something in her neck. Shooter never even tried. He simply came on toward her.

*“Rainey! Stop!”*

“There is no Rainey h—” Shooter began, and then a gunshot rapped briskly across the fall air. Shooter stopped where he was, and looked curiously, almost casually, down at his chest. There was a small hole there. No blood issued from it—at least, not at first—but the hole was there. He put his hand to it, then brought it away. His index finger was marked by a small dot of blood. It looked like a bit of punctuation—the period which ends a sentence. He looked at this thoughtfully. Then he dropped his hands and looked at Amy.

“Babe?” he asked, and then fell full-length beside her on the porch boards.

She rolled over, managed to get up on her elbows, and crawled to where he lay, beginning to sob.

“Mort?” she cried. “Mort? Please, Mort, try to say something!”

But he was not going to say anything, and after a moment she let this realization fill her up. She would reject the simple fact of his death again and again over the next few weeks and months, and would then weaken, and the realization would fill her up again. He was dead. He was dead. He had gone crazy down here and he was dead.

He, and whoever had been inside him at the end.

She put her head down on his chest and wept, and when someone came up behind her and put a comforting hand on her

shoulder, Amy did not look around.

## EPILOGUE

Ted and Amy Milner came to see the man who had shot and killed Amy's first husband, the well-known writer Morton Rainey, about three months after the events at Tashmore Lake.

They had seen the man at one other time during the three-month period, at the inquest, but that had been a formal situation, and Amy had not wanted to speak to him personally. Not there. She was grateful that he had saved her life ... but Mort had been her husband, and she had loved him for many years, and in her deepest heart she felt that Fred Evans's finger hadn't been the only one which pulled the trigger.

She would have come in time anyway, she suspected, in order to clarify it as much as possible in her mind. Her time might have been a year, or two, possibly even three. But things had happened in the meanwhile which made her move more quickly. She had hoped Ted would let her come to New York alone, but he was emphatic. Not after the last time he had let her go someplace alone. *That* time she had almost gotten killed.

Amy pointed out with some asperity that it would have been hard for Ted to "let her go," since she had never told him she was going in the first place, but Ted only shrugged. So they went to New York together, rode up to the fifty-third floor of a large skyscraper together, and were together shown to the small cubicle in the offices of the Consolidated Assurance Company which Fred Evans called home during the working day ... unless he was in the field, of course.

She sat as far into the corner as she could get, and although the offices were quite warm, she kept her shawl wrapped around her.

Evans's manner was slow and kind—he seemed to her almost like the country doctor who had nursed her through her childhood illnesses—and she liked him. *But that's something he'll never know, she thought. I might be able to summon up the strength to tell him,*

*and he would nod, but his nod wouldn't indicate belief. He only knows that to me he will always be the man who shot Mort, and he had to watch me cry on Mort's chest until the ambulance came, and one of the paramedics had to give me a shot before I would let him go. And what he won't know is that I like him just the same.*

He buzzed a woman from one of the outer offices and had her bring in three big, steaming mugs of tea. It was January outside now, the wind high, the temperature low. She thought with some brief longing of how it would be in Tashmore, with the lake finally frozen and that killer wind blowing long, ghostly snakes of powdered snow across the ice. Then her mind made some obscure but nasty association, and she saw Mort hitting the floor, saw the package of Pall Malls skidding across the wood like a shuffleboard weight. She shivered, her brief sense of longing totally dispelled.

"Are you okay, Mrs. Milner?" Evans asked.

She nodded.

Frowning ponderously and playing with his pipe, Ted said, "My wife wants to hear everything you know about what happened, Mr. Evans. I tried to discourage her at first, but I've come to think that it might be a good thing. She's had bad dreams ever since—"

"Of course," Evans said, not exactly ignoring Ted, but speaking directly to Amy. "I suppose you will for a long time. I've had a few of my own, actually. I never shot a man before." He paused, then added, "I missed Vietnam by a year or so."

Amy offered him a smile. It was wan, but it was a smile.

"She heard it all at the inquest," Ted went on, "but she wanted to hear it again, from you, and with the legalese omitted."

"I understand," Evans said. He pointed at the pipe. "You can light that, if you want to."

Ted looked at it, then dropped it into the pocket of his coat quickly, as if he were slightly ashamed of it. "I'm trying to give it up, actually."

Evans looked at Amy. "What purpose do you think this will serve?" he asked her in the same kind, rather sweet voice. "Or maybe a better question would be what purpose do you *need* it to serve?"

"I don't know." Her voice was low and composed. "But we were in Tashmore three weeks ago, Ted and I, to clean the place out—we've

put it up for sale—and something happened. Two things, actually.” She looked at her husband and offered the wan smile again. “Ted knows *something* happened, because that’s when I got in touch with you and made this appointment. But he doesn’t know what, and I’m afraid he’s put out with me. Perhaps he’s right to be.”

Ted Milner did not deny that he was put out with Amy. His hand stole into his coat pocket, started to remove the pipe, and then let it drop back again.

“But these two things—they bear on what happened at your lake home in October?”

“I don’t know. Mr. Evans ... what *did* happen? How much do *you* know?”

“Well,” he said, leaning back in his chair and sipping from his mug, “if you came expecting all the answers, you’re going to be sorely disappointed. I can tell you about the fire, but as for why your husband did what he did ... you can probably fill in more of those blanks than I can. What puzzled us most about the fire was where it started—not in the main house but in Mr. Rainey’s office, which is an addition. That made the act seem directed against him, but he wasn’t even there.

“Then we found a large chunk of bottle in the wreckage of the office. It had contained wine—champagne, to be exact—but there wasn’t any doubt that the last thing it had contained was gasoline. Part of the label was intact, and we sent a Fax copy to New York. It was identified as Moët et Chandon, nineteen-eighty-something. That wasn’t proof indisputable that the bottle used for the Molotov cocktail came from your own wine room, Mrs. Milner, but it was very persuasive, since you listed better than a dozen bottles of Moët et Chandon, some from 1983 and some from 1984.

“This led us toward a supposition which seemed clear but not very sensible: that you or your ex-husband might have burned down your own house. Mrs. Milner here said she went off and left the house unlocked—”

“I lost a lot of sleep over that,” Amy said. “I often forgot to lock up when I was only going out for a little while. I grew up in a little town north of Bangor and country habits die hard. Mort used to ...” Her lips

trembled and she stopped speaking for a moment, pressing them together so tightly they turned white. When she had herself under control again, she finished her thought in a low voice. "He used to scold me about it."

Ted took her hand.

"It didn't matter, of course," Evans said. "If you had locked the house, Mr. Rainey still could have gained access, because he still had his keys. Correct?"

"Yes," Ted said.

"It might have sped up the detection end a little if you'd locked the door, but it's impossible to say for sure. Monday-morning quarterbacking is a vice we try to steer clear of in my business, anyway. There's a theory that it causes ulcers, and that's one I subscribe to. The point is this: given Mrs. Rainey's—excuse me, Mrs. Milner's—testimony that the house was left unlocked, we at first believed the arsonist could have been literally anyone. But once we started playing around with the assumption that the bottle used had come from the cellar wine room, it narrowed things down."

"Because *that* room was locked," Ted said.

Evans nodded. "Do you remember me asking who held keys to that room, Mrs. Milner?"

"Call me Amy, won't you?"

He nodded. "Do you remember, Amy?"

"Yes. We started locking the little wine closet three or four years ago, after some bottles of red table wine disappeared. Mort thought it was the housekeeper. I didn't like to believe it, because I liked her, but I knew he could be right, and probably was. We started locking it then so nobody else would be tempted."

Evans looked at Ted Milner.

"Amy had a key to the wine room, and she believed Mr. Rainey still had his. So that limited the possibilities. Of course, if it had been Amy, you would have had to have been in collusion with her, Mr. Milner, since you were each other's alibis for that evening. Mr. Rainey didn't have an alibi, but he was at a considerable distance. And the main thing was this: we could see no motive for the crime. His work had left both Amy and himself financially comfortable.

Nevertheless, we dusted for fingerprints and came up with two good ones. This was the day after we had our meeting in Derry. Both prints belonged to Mr. Rainey. It still wasn't proof—"

"It *wasn't*?" Ted asked, looking startled.

Evans shook his head. "Lab tests were able to confirm that the prints were made before what remained of the bottle was charred in the fire, but not how long before. The heat had cooked the oils in them, you see. And if our assumption that the bottle came from the wine room was correct, why, someone had to physically pick it up out of the bag or carton it came in and store it in its cradle. That someone would have been either Mr. or Mrs. Rainey, and he could have argued that that was where the prints came from."

"He was in no shape to argue anything," Amy said softly. "Not at the end."

"I guess that's true, but we didn't know that. All we knew is that when people carry bottles, they generally pick them up by the neck or the upper barrel. These two prints were near the bottom, and the angle was very odd."

"As if he had been carrying it sideways or even upside down," Ted broke in. "Isn't that what you said at the hearing?"

"Yes—and people who know anything about wine don't do it. With most wines, it disturbs the sediment. And with champagne—"

"It shakes it up," Ted said.

Evans nodded. "If you shake a bottle of champagne really hard, it will burst from the pressure."

"But there was no champagne in it, anyway," Amy said quietly.

"No. Still, it was not proof. I canvassed the area gas stations to see if anyone who looked like Mr. Rainey had bought a small amount of gas that night, but had no luck. I wasn't too surprised; he could have bought the gasoline in Tashmore or at half a hundred service stations between the two places.

"Then I went to see Patricia Champion, our one witness. I took a picture of a 1986 Buick—the make and model we assumed Mr. Rainey would have been driving. She said it might have been the car, but she still couldn't be sure. So I was up against it. I went back

out to the house to look around, and you came, Amy. It was early morning. I wanted to ask you some questions, but you were clearly upset. I did ask you why you were there, and you said a peculiar thing. You said you were going down to Tashmore Lake to see your husband, but you came by first to look in the garden.”

“On the phone he kept talking about what he called my secret window ... the one that looked down on the garden. He said he’d left something there. But there wasn’t anything. Not that I could see, anyway.”

“I had a feeling about the man when we met,” Evans said slowly. “A feeling that he wasn’t ... quite on track. It wasn’t that he was lying about some things, although I was pretty sure he was. It was something else. A kind of distance.”

“Yes—I felt it in him more and more. That distance.”

“You looked almost sick with worry. I decided I could do worse than follow you down to the other house, Amy, especially when you told me not to tell Mr. Milner here where you’d gone if he came looking for you. I didn’t believe that idea was original with you. I thought I might just find something out. And I also thought He trailed off, looking bemused.

“You thought something might happen to me,” she said. “Thank you, Mr. Evans. He would have killed me, you know. If you hadn’t followed me, he would have killed me.”

“I parked at the head of the driveway and walked down. I heard a terrific rumpus from inside the house and I started to run. That was when you more or less fell out through the screen door, and he came out after you.”

Evans looked at them both earnestly.

“I asked him to stop,” he said. “I asked him twice.”

Amy reached out, squeezed his hand gently for a moment, then let it go.

“And that’s it,” Evans said. “I know a little more, mostly from the newspapers and two chats I had with Mr. Milner—”

“Call me Ted.”

“Ted, then.” Evans did not seem to take to Ted’s first name as easily as he had to Amy’s. “I know that Mr. Rainey had what was

probably a schizophrenic episode in which he was two people, and that neither one of them had any idea they were actually existing in the same body. I know that one of them was named John Shooter. I know from Herbert Creekmore's deposition that Mr. Rainey imagined this Shooter was hounding him over a story called 'Sowing Season,' and that Mr. Creekmore had a copy of the magazine in which that story appeared sent up so Mr. Rainey could prove that he had published first. The magazine arrived shortly before you did, Amy—it was found in the house. The Federal Express envelope it came in was on the seat of your ex-husband's Buick."

"But he cut the story out, didn't he?" Ted asked.

"Not just the story—the contents page as well. He was careful to remove every trace of himself. He carried a Swiss-army knife, and that was probably what he used. The missing pages were in the Buick's glove compartment."

"In the end, the existence of that story became a mystery even to him," Amy said softly.

Evans looked at her, eyebrows raised. "Beg pardon?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"I think I've told you everything I can," Evans said. "Anything else would be pure speculation. I'm an insurance investigator, after all, not a psychiatrist."

"He was two men," Amy said. "He was himself ... and he became a character he created. Ted believes that the last name, Shooter, was something Mort picked up and stored in his head when he found out Ted came from a little town called Shooter's Knob, Tennessee. I'm sure he's right. Mort was always picking out character names just that way ... like anagrams, almost.

"I don't know the rest of it—I can only guess. I do know that when a film studio dropped its option on his novel *The Delacourt Family*, Mort almost had a nervous breakdown. They made it clear—and so did Herb Creekmore—that they were concerned about an accidental similarity, and they understood he never could have seen the screenplay, which was called *The Home Team*. There was no question of plagiarism ... except in Mort's head. His reaction was

exaggerated, abnormal. It was like stirring a stick around in what looks like a dead campfire and uncovering a live coal.”

“You don’t think he created John Shooter just to punish you, do you?” Evans asked.

“No. Shooter was there to punish *Mort*. I think ...” She paused and adjusted her shawl, pulling it a little more tightly about her shoulders. Then she picked up her teacup with a hand which wasn’t quite steady. “I think that Mort stole somebody’s work sometime in the past,” she said. “Probably quite far in the past, because everything he wrote from *The Organ-Grinder’s Boy* on was widely read. It would have come out, I think. I doubt that he even actually published what he stole. But I think that’s what happened, and I think that’s where John Shooter *really* came from. Not from the film company dropping his novel, or from my ... my time with Ted, and not from the divorce. Maybe all those things contributed, but I think the root goes back to a time before I knew him. Then, when he was alone at the lake house ...”

“Shooter came,” Evans said quietly. “He came and accused him of plagiarism. Whoever Mr. Rainey stole from never did, so in the end he had to punish himself. But I doubt if that was all, Amy. He *did* try to kill you.”

“No,” she said. “That was Shooter.”

He raised his eyebrows. Ted looked at her carefully, and then drew the pipe out of his pocket again.

“The *real* Shooter.”

“I don’t understand you.”

She smiled her wan smile. “I don’t understand myself. That’s why I’m here. I don’t think telling this serves any practical purpose—Mort’s dead, and it’s over—but it may help me. It may help me to sleep better.”

“Then tell us, by all means,” Evans said.

“You see, when we went down to clean out the house, we stopped at the little store in town—Bowie’s. Ted filled the gas tank—it’s always been self-service at Bowie’s—and I went in to get some things. There was a man in there, Sonny Trotts, who used to work with Tom Greenleaf. Tom was the older of the two caretakers who

were killed. Sonny wanted to tell me how sorry he was about Mort, and he wanted to tell me something else, too, because he saw Mort the day before Mort died, and meant to tell him. So he said. It was about Tom Greenleaf—something Tom told Sonny while they were painting the Methodist Parish Hall together. Sonny saw Mort after that, but didn't think to tell him right away, he said. Then he remembered that it had something to do with Greg Carstairs—

“The other dead man?”

“Yes. So he turned around and called, but Mort didn't hear him. And the next day, Mort was dead.”

“What did Mr. Greenleaf tell this guy?”

“That he thought he might have seen a ghost,” Amy said calmly.

They looked at her, not speaking.

“Sonny said Tom had been getting forgetful lately, and that Tom was worried about it. Sonny thought it was no more than the ordinary sort of forgetfulness that settles in when a person gets a little older, but Tom had nursed his wife through Alzheimer's disease five or six years before, and he was terrified of getting it himself and going the same way. According to Sonny, if Tom forgot a paintbrush, he spent half the day obsessing about it. Tom said that was why, when Greg Carstairs asked him if he recognized the man he'd seen Mort Rainey talking to the day before, or if he would recognize him if he saw him again, Tom said he hadn't seen *anyone* with Mort—that Mort had been alone.”

There was the snap of a match. Ted Milner had decided to light his pipe after all. Evans ignored him. He was leaning forward in his chair, his gaze fixed intently on Amy Milner.

“Let's get this straight. According to this Sonny Troots—”

“Trots.”

“Okay, Trots. According to him, Tom Greenleaf *did* see Mort with someone?”

“Not exactly,” Amy said. “Sonny thought if Tom believed that, believed it for sure, he wouldn't have lied to Greg. What Tom said was that he didn't know *what* he'd seen. That he was confused. That it seemed safer to say nothing about it at all. He didn't want anybody—particularly Greg Carstairs, who was also in the caretaking

business—to know how confused he was, and most of all he didn't want anybody to think that he might be getting sick the way his late wife had gotten sick.”

“I'm not sure I understand this—I'm sorry.”

“According to Sonny,” she said, “Tom came down Lake Drive in his Scout and saw Mort, standing by himself where the lakeside path comes out.”

“Near where the bodies were found?”

“Yes. Very near. Mort waved. Tom waved back. He drove by. Then, according to what Sonny says, Tom looked in his rear-view mirror and saw another man with Mort, and an old station wagon, although neither the man nor the car had been there ten seconds before. The man was wearing a black hat, he said ... *but you could see right through him, and the car, too.* ”

“Oh, Amy,” Ted said softly. “The man was bullshitting you. Big time.”

She shook her head. “I don't think Sonny is smart enough to make up such a story. He told me Tom thought he ought to get in touch with Greg and tell him he might have seen such a man after all; that it would be all right if he left out the see-through part. But Sonny said the old man was terrified. He was convinced that it was one of two things: either he was coming down with Alzheimer's disease, or he'd seen a ghost.”

“Well, it's certainly creepy,” Evans said, and it was—the skin on his arms and back had crinkled into gooseflesh for a moment or two. “But it's hearsay ... hearsay from a dead man, in fact.”

“Yes ... but there's the other thing.” She set her teacup on the desk, picked up her purse, and began to rummage in it. “When I was cleaning out Mort's office, I found that hat—that awful black hat—behind his desk. It gave me a shock, because I wasn't expecting it. I thought the police must have taken it away as evidence, or something. I hooked it out from behind there with a stick. It came out upside down, with the stick inside it. I used the stick to carry it outside and dump it in the trash cabinet. Do you understand?”

Ted clearly didn't; Evans clearly did. “You didn't want to touch it.”

“That’s right. I didn’t want to touch it. It landed right side up on one of the green trash bags—I’d swear to that. Then, about an hour later, I went out with a bag of old medicines and shampoos and things from the bathroom. When I opened the lid of the garbage cabinet to put it in, the hat was turned over again. And this was tucked into the sweatband.” She pulled a folded sheet of paper from her purse and offered it to Evans with a hand that still trembled minutely. “It wasn’t there when the hat came out from behind the desk. I *know* that.”

Evans took the folded sheet and just held it for a moment. He didn’t like it. It felt too heavy, and the texture was somehow wrong.

“I think there was a John Shooter,” she said. “I think he was Mort’s greatest creation—a character so vivid that he actually *did* become real.

“And I think that this is a message from a ghost.”

He took the slip of paper and opened it. Written halfway down was this message:

*Missus-I am sorry for all the trouble. Things got out of hand. I am going back to my home now. I got my story, which is all I came for in the first place. It is called “Crowfoot Mile,” and it is a crackerjack.*

*Yours truly,*

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John Shooter". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally below the typed text of the message.

The signature was a bald scrawl below the neat lines of script.

“Is this your late husband’s signature, Amy?” Evans asked.

“No,” she said. “Nothing like it.”

The three of them sat in the office, looking at one another. Fred Evans tried to think of something to say and could not. After awhile, the silence (and the smell of Ted Milner’s pipe) became more than any of them could stand. So Mr. and Mrs. Milner offered their thanks, said their goodbyes, and left his office to get on with their lives as best they could, and Fred Evans got on with his own as best he could, and sometimes, late at night, both he and the woman who had

been married to Morton Rainey woke from dreams in which a man in a round-crowned black hat looked at them from sun-faded eyes caught in nets of wrinkles. He looked at them with no love ... but, they both felt, with an odd kind of stern pity.

It was not a kind expression, and it left no feeling of comfort, but they also both felt, in their different places, that they could find room to live with that look. And to tend their gardens.



**The Library Policeman**

***THIS IS FOR THE STAFF AND PATRONS OF THE  
PASADENA PUBLIC LIBRARY.***

**THREE PAST MIDNIGHT  
A NOTE ON "THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN"**

On the morning when this story started to happen, I was sitting at the breakfast table with my son Owen. My wife had already gone upstairs to shower and dress. Those two vital seven o'clock divisions had been made: the scrambled eggs and the newspaper. Willard Scott, who visits our house five days out of every seven, was telling us about a lady in Nebraska who had just turned a hundred and four, and I think Owen and I had one whole pair of eyes open between us. A typical weekday morning *chez King*, in other words.

Owen tore himself away from the sports section just long enough to ask me if I'd be going by the mall that day—there was a book he wanted me to pick up for a school report. I can't remember what it was—it might have been *Johnny Tremain* or *April Morning*, Howard Fast's novel of the American Revolution—but it was one of those tomes you can never quite lay your hands on in a bookshop; it's always just out of print or just about to come back into print or some damned thing.

I suggested that Owen try the local library, which is a very good one. I was sure they'd have it. He muttered some reply. I only caught two words of it, but, given my interests, those two words were more than enough to pique my interest. They were "library police."

I put my half of the newspaper aside, used the MUTE button on the remote control to strangle Willard in the middle of his ecstatic report on the Georgia Peach Festival, and asked Owen to kindly repeat himself.

He was reluctant to do so, but I pressed him. Finally he told me that he didn't like to use the library because he worried about the Library Police. He knew there *were* no Library Police, he hastened to add, but it was one of those stories that burrowed down into your subconscious and just sort of lurked there. He had heard it from his Aunt Stephanie when he was seven or eight and much more gullible, and it had been lurking ever since.

I, of course, was delighted, because I had been afraid of the Library Police myself as a kid—the faceless enforcers who would *actually come to your house* if you didn't bring your overdue books back. That would be bad enough... but what if you couldn't find the books in question when those strange lawmen turned up? What then? What would they do to you? What might they take to make up for the missing volumes? It had been years since I'd thought of the Library Police (although not since childhood; I can clearly remember discussing them with Peter Straub and his son, Ben, six or eight years ago), but now all those old questions, both dreadful and somehow enticing, recurred.

I found myself musing on the Library Police over the next three or four days, and as I mused, I began to glimpse the outlines of the story which follows. This is the way stories usually happen for me, but the musing period usually lasts a lot longer than it did in this case. When I began, the story was titled "The Library Police," and I had no clear idea of where I was going with it. I thought it would probably be a funny story, sort of like the suburban nightmares the late Max Shulman used to bolt together. After all, the idea was funny, wasn't it? I mean, the Library Police! How absurd!

What I realized, however, was something I knew already: the fears of childhood have a hideous persistence. Writing is an act of self-hypnosis, and in that state a kind of total emotional recall often takes place and terrors which should have been long dead start to walk and talk again.

As I worked on this story, that began to happen to me. I knew, going in, that I had loved the library as a kid—why not? It was the only place a relatively poor kid like me could get all the books he wanted—but as I continued to write, I became reacquainted with a deeper truth: I had also feared it. I feared becoming lost in the dark stacks, I feared being forgotten in a dark corner of the reading room and ending up locked in for the night, I feared the old librarian with the blue hair and the cat's-eye glasses and the almost lipless mouth who would pinch the backs of your hands with her long, pale fingers and hiss “*Shhhh!*” if you forgot where you were and started to talk too loud. And yes, I feared the Library Police.

What happened with a much longer work, a novel called *Christine*, began to happen here. About thirty pages in, the humor began to go out of the situation. And about fifty pages in, the whole story took a screaming left turn into the dark places I have travelled so often and which I still know so little about. Eventually I found the guy I was looking for, and managed to raise my head enough to look into his merciless silver eyes. I have tried to bring back a sketch of him for you, Constant Reader, but it may not be very good.

My hands were trembling quite badly when I made it, you see.

# CHAPTER ONE

## *THE STAND-IN*

### 1

Everything, Sam Peebles decided later, was the fault of the goddamned acrobat. If the acrobat hadn't gotten drunk at exactly the wrong time, Sam never would have ended up in such trouble.

*It is not bad enough, he thought with a perhaps justifiable bitterness, that life is like a narrow beam over an endless chasm, a beam we have to walk blindfolded. It's bad, but not bad enough. Sometimes, we also get pushed.*

But that was later. First, even before the Library Policeman, was the drunken acrobat.

### 2

In Junction City, the last Friday of every month was Speaker's Night at the local Rotarians' Hall. On the last Friday in March of 1990, the Rotarians were scheduled to hear—and to be entertained by—The Amazing Joe, an acrobat with Curry & Trembo's All-Star Circus and Travelling Carnival.

The telephone on Sam Peebles's desk at Junction City Realty and Insurance rang at five past four on Thursday afternoon. Sam picked it up. It was always Sam who picked it up—either Sam in person or Sam on the answering machine, because he was Junction City Realty and Insurance's owner and sole employee. He was not a rich man, but he was a reasonably happy one. He liked to tell people that

his first Mercedes was still quite a distance in the future, but he had a Ford which was almost new and owned his own home on Kelton Avenue. “Also, the business keeps me in beer and skittles,” he liked to add ... although in truth, he hadn’t drunk much beer since college and wasn’t exactly sure what skittles were. He thought they might be pretzels.

“Junction City Realty and In—”

“Sam, this is Craig. The acrobat broke his neck.”

“*What?*”

“You heard me!” Craig Jones cried in deeply aggrieved tones. “The acrobat broke his fucking neck!”

“Oh,” Sam said. “Gee.” He thought about this for a moment and then asked cautiously, “Is he dead, Craig?”

“No, he’s not dead, but he might as well be as far as we’re concerned. He’s in the hospital over in Cedar Rapids with his’ neck dipped in about twenty pounds of plaster. Billy Bright just called me. He said the guy came on drunk as a skunk at the matinee this afternoon, tried to do a back-over flip, and landed outside the center ring on the nape of his neck. Billy said he could hear it way up in the bleachers, where he was sitting. He said it sounded like when you step in a puddle that just iced over.”

“Ouch!” Sam exclaimed, wincing.

“I’m not surprised. After all—The Amazing Joe. What kind of name is that for a circus performer? I mean, The Amazing Randix, okay. The Amazing Tortellini, still not bad. But The Amazing Joe? It sounds like a prime example of brain damage in action to me.”

“Jesus, that’s too bad.”

“Fucking shit on toast is what it is. It leaves us without a speaker tomorrow night, good buddy.”

Sam began to wish he had left the office promptly at four. Craig would have been stuck with Sam the answering machine, and that would have given Sam the living being a little more time to think. He felt he would soon *need* time to think. He also felt that Craig Jones was not going to give him any.

“Yes,” he said, “I guess that’s true enough.” He hoped he sounded philosophical but helpless. “What a shame.”

"It sure is," Craig said, and then dropped the dime. "But I know you'll be happy to step in and fill the slot."

"*Me?* Craig, you've got to be kidding! I can't even do a somersault, let alone a back-over fi—"

"I thought you could talk about the importance of the independently owned business in small-town life," Craig Jones pressed on relentlessly. "If that doesn't do it for you, there's baseball. Lacking *that*, you could always drop your pants and wag your wing-wang at the audience. Sam, I am not just the head of the Speakers Committee—that would be bad enough. But since Kenny moved away and Carl quit coming, I *am* the Speakers Committee. Now, you've got to help me. I *need* a speaker tomorrow night. There are about five guys in the whole damn club I feel I can trust in a pinch, and you're one of them."

"But—"

"You're also the only one who hasn't filled in already in a situation like this, so you're elected, buddy-boy."

"Frank Stephens—"

"—pinch-hit for the guy from the trucking union last year when the grand jury indicted him for fraud and he couldn't show up. Sam—it's your turn in the barrel. You can't let me down, man. You owe me."

"I run an insurance business!" Sam cried. "When I'm not writing insurance, I sell farms! Mostly to banks! Most people find it *boring!* The ones who don't find it boring find it *disgusting!*"

"None of that matters." Craig was now moving in for the kill, marching over Sam's puny objection in grim hobnailed boots. "They'll all be drunk by the end of dinner and you know it. They won't remember a goddam word you said come Saturday morning, but in the meantime, *I need someone to stand up and talk for half an hour and you're elected!*"

Sam continued to object a little longer, but Craig kept coming down on the imperatives, italicizing them mercilessly. Need. Gotta. Owe.

"All right!" he said at last. "All right, all right! Enough!"

"My man!" Craig exclaimed. His voice was suddenly full of sunshine and rainbows. "Remember, it doesn't have to be any longer

than thirty minutes, plus maybe another ten for questions. If anybody has any questions. And you really can wag your wing-wang if you want to. I doubt that anybody could actually see it, but—”

“Craig,” Sam said, “that’s enough.”

“Oh! *Sorry!* Shet mah mouf !” Craig, perhaps lightheaded with relief, cackled.

“Listen, why don’t we terminate this discussion?” Sam reached for the roll of Turns he kept in his desk drawer. He suddenly felt he might need quite a few Turns during the next twenty-eight hours or so. “It looks as if I’ve got a speech to write.”

“You got it,” Craig said. “Just remember—dinner at six, speech at seven-thirty. As they used to say on Hawaii *Five-O*, be there! Aloha!”

“Aloha, Craig,” Sam said, and hung up. He stared at the phone. He felt hot gas rising slowly up through his chest and into his throat. He opened his mouth and uttered a sour burp—the product of a stomach which had been reasonably serene until five minutes ago.

He ate the first of what would prove to be a great many Turns indeed.

### 3

Instead of going bowling that night as he had planned, Sam Peebles shut himself in his study at home with a yellow legal pad, three sharpened pencils, a package of Kent cigarettes, and a six-pack of Jolt. He unplugged the telephone from the wall, lit a cigarette, and stared at the yellow pad. After five minutes of staring, he wrote this on the top line of the top sheet:

SMALL-TOWN BUSINESSES: THE LIFEBLOOD OF AMERICA

He said it out loud and liked the sound of it. Well ... maybe he didn’t exactly *like* it, but he could live with it. He said it louder and liked it better. A *little* better. It actually wasn’t *that* good; in fact, it probably sucked the big hairy one, but it beat the shit out of

“Communism: Threat or Menace.” And Craig was right—most of them would be too hung over on Saturday morning to remember what they’d heard on Friday night, anyway.

Marginally encouraged, Sam began to write.

“When I moved to Junction City from the more or less thriving metropolis of Ames in 1984 ...”

## 4

“... and that is why I feel now, as I did on that bright September morn in 1984, that small businesses are not just the lifeblood of America, but the bright and sparkly lifeblood of the entire Western world.”

Sam stopped, crushed out a cigarette in the ashtray on his office desk, and looked hopefully at Naomi Higgins.

“Well? What do you think?”

Naomi was a pretty young woman from Proverbia, a town four miles west of Junction City. She lived in a ramshackle house by the Proverbia River with her ramshackle mother. Most of the Rotarians knew Naomi, and wagers had been offered from time to time on whether the house or the mother would fall apart first. Sam didn’t know if any of these wagers had ever been taken, but if so, their resolution was still pending.

Naomi had graduated from Iowa City Business College, and could actually retrieve whole legible sentences from her shorthand. Since she was the only local woman who possessed such a skill, she was in great demand among Junction City’s limited business population. She also had extremely good legs, and that didn’t hurt. She worked mornings five days a week, for four men and one woman—two lawyers, one banker, and two realtors. In the afternoons she went back to the ramshackle house, and when she was not caring for her ramshackle mother, she typed up the dictation she had taken.

Sam Peebles engaged Naomi’s services each Friday morning from ten until noon, but this morning he had put aside his

correspondence—even though some of it badly needed to be answered—and asked Naomi if she would listen to something.

“Sure, I guess so,” Naomi had replied. She looked a little worried, as if she thought Sam—whom she had briefly dated—might be planning to propose marriage. When he explained that Craig Jones had drafted him to stand in for the wounded acrobat, and that he wanted her to listen to his speech, she’d relaxed and listened to the whole thing—all twenty-six minutes of it—with flattering attention.

“Don’t be afraid to be honest,” he added before Naomi could do more than open her mouth.

“It’s good,” she said. “Pretty interesting.”

“No, that’s okay—you don’t have to spare my feelings. Let it all hang out.”

“I *am*. It’s really okay. Besides, by the time you start talking, they’ll all be—”

“Yes, they’ll all be hammered, I know.” This prospect had comforted Sam at first, but now it disappointed him a little. Listening to himself read, he’d actually thought the speech was pretty good.

“There is one thing,” Naomi said thoughtfully.

“Oh?”

“It’s kind of ... you know ... dry.”

“Oh,” Sam said. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. He had been up until nearly one o’clock this morning, first writing and then revising.

“But that’s easy to fix,” she assured him. “Just go to the library and get a couple of those books.”

Sam felt a sudden sharp pain in his lower belly and grabbed his roll of Turns. Research for a stupid Rotary Club speech? Library research? That was going a little overboard, wasn’t it? He had never been to the Junction City Library before, and he didn’t see a reason to go there now. Still, Naomi had listened very closely, Naomi was trying to help, and it would be rude not to at least listen to what she had to say.

“What books?”

“*You* know—books with stuff in them to liven up speeches. They’re like ...” Naomi groped. “Well, you know the hot sauce they give you at China Light, if you want it?”

“Yes—”

“They’re like that. They have jokes. Also, there’s this one book, *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. You could probably find something in there for the end. Something sort of uplifting.”

“There are poems in this book about the importance of small businesses in American life?” Sam asked doubtfully.

“When you quote poetry, people get *uplifted*, Naomi said. “Nobody cares what it’s *about*, Sam, let alone what it’s *for*.”

“And they really have joke-books especially for speeches?” Sam found this almost impossible to believe, although hearing that the library carried books on such esoterica as small-engine repair and wig-styling wouldn’t have surprised him in the least.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“When Phil Brakeman was running for the State House, I used to type up speeches for him all the time,” Naomi said. “He had one of those books. I just can’t remember what the name of it was. All I can think of is *Jokes for the John*, and of course *that’s* not right.”

“No,” Sam agreed, thinking that a few choice tidbits from *Jokes for the John* would probably make him a howling success. But he began to see what Naomi was getting at, and the idea appealed to him despite his reluctance to visit the local library after all his years of cheerful neglect. A little spice for the old speech. Dress up your leftovers, turn your meatloaf into a masterpiece. And a library, after all, was just a library. If you didn’t know how to find what you wanted, all you had to do was ask a librarian. Answering questions was one of their jobs, right?

“Anyway, you *could* leave it just the way it is,” Naomi said. “I mean, they *will* be drunk.” She looked at Sam kindly but severely and then checked her watch. “You have over an hour left—did you want to do some letters?”

“No, I guess not. Why don’t you type up my speech instead?” He had already decided to spend his lunch hour at the library.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *THE LIBRARY (1)*

#### 1

Sam had gone by the Library hundreds of times during his years in Junction City, but this was the first time he had really *looked* at it, and he discovered a rather amazing thing: he hated the place on sight.

The Junction City Public Library stood on the corner of State Street and Miller Avenue, a square granite box of a building with windows so narrow they looked like loopholes. A slate roof overhung all four sides of the building, and when one approached it from the front, the combination of the narrow windows and the line of shadow created by the roof made the building look like the frowning face of a stone robot. It was a fairly common style of Iowa architecture, common enough so Sam Peebles, who had been selling real estate for nearly twenty years, had given it a name: *Midwestern Ugly*. During spring, summer, and fall, the building's forbidding aspect was softened by the maples which stood around it in a kind of grove, but now, at the end of a hard Iowa winter, the maples were still bare and the Library looked like an oversized crypt.

He didn't like it; it made him uneasy; he didn't know why. It was, after all, just a library, not the dungeons of the Inquisition. Just the same, another acidic burp rose up through his chest as he made his way along the flagstone walk. There was a funny sweet undertaste to the burp that reminded him of something ... something from a long time ago, perhaps. He put a Tum in his mouth, began to crunch it up, and came to an abrupt decision. His speech was good enough as it stood. Not great, but good enough. After all, they were talking Rotary

Club here, not the United Nations. It was time to stop playing with it. He was going to go back to the office and do some of the correspondence he had neglected that morning.

He started to turn, then thought: *That's dumb. Really dumb. You want to be dumb? Okay. But you agreed to give the goddam speech; why not give a good one?*

He stood on the Library walk, frowning and undecided. He liked to make fun of Rotary. Craig did, too. And Frank Stephens. Most of the young business types in Junction City laughed about the meetings. But they rarely missed one, and Sam supposed he knew why: it was a place where connections could be made. A place where a fellow like him could meet some of the not-so-young business types in Junction City. Guys like Elmer Baskin, whose bank had helped float a strip shopping center in Beaverton two years ago. Guys like George Candy—who, it was said, could produce three million dollars in development money with one phone call ... if he chose to make it.

These were small-town fellows, high-school basketball fans, guys who got their hair cut at Jimmy's, guys who wore boxer shorts and strappy tee-shirts to bed instead of pajamas, guys who still drank their beer from the bottle, guys who didn't feel comfortable about a night on the town in Cedar Rapids unless they were turned out in Full Cleveland. They were also Junction City's movers and shakers, and when you came right down to it, wasn't that why Sam kept going on Friday nights? When you came right down to it, wasn't that why Craig had called in such a sweat after the stupid acrobat broke his stupid neck? You wanted to get noticed by the movers and shakers ... but not because you had fucked up. *They'll all be drunk*, Craig had said, and Naomi had seconded the motion, but it now occurred to Sam that he had never seen Elmer Baskin take anything stronger than coffee. Not once. And he probably wasn't the only one. Some of them might be drunk ... but not all of them. And the ones who weren't might well be the ones who really mattered.

*Handle this right, Sam, and you might do yourself some good. It's not impossible.*

No. It wasn't. Unlikely, of course, but not impossible. And there was something else, quite aside from the shadow politics which

might or might not attend a Friday-night Rotary Club speaker's meeting: he had always prided himself on doing the best job possible. So it was just a dumb little speech. So what?

*Also, it's just a dumb little small-town library. What's the big deal? There aren't even any bushes growing along the sides.*

Sam had started up the walk again, but now he stopped with a frown creasing his forehead. That was a strange thought to have; it seemed to have come right out of nowhere. So there were no bushes growing along the sides of the Library-what difference did *that* make? He didn't know ... but he did know it had an almost magical effect on him. His uncharacteristic hesitation fell away and he began to move forward once more. He climbed the four stone steps and paused for a moment. The place felt deserted, somehow. He grasped the door-handle and thought, *I bet it's locked. I bet the place is closed Friday afternoons.* There was something strangely comforting in this thought.

But the old-fashioned latch-plate depressed under his thumb, and the heavy door swung noiselessly inward. Sam stepped into a small foyer with a marble floor in checkerboard black and white squares. An easel stood in the center of this antechamber. There was a sign propped on the easel; the message consisted of one word in very large letters.

SILENCE!

it read. Not

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

or

QUIET, PLEASE

but just that one staring, glaring word:

SILENCE!

"You bet," Sam said. He only murmured the words, but the acoustics of the place were very good, and his low murmur was magnified into a grouchy grumble that made him cringe. It actually

seemed to bounce back at him from the high ceiling. At that moment he felt as if he was in the fourth grade again, and about to be called to task by Mrs. Glasters for cutting up rough at exactly the wrong moment. He looked around uneasily, half-expecting an ill-natured librarian to come swooping out of the main room to see who had dared profane the silence.

*Stop it, for Christ's sake. You're forty years old. Fourth grade was a long time ago, buddy.*

Except it didn't seem like a long time ago. Not in here. In here, fourth grade seemed almost close enough to reach out and touch.

He crossed the marble floor to the left of the easel, unconsciously walking with his weight thrown forward so the heels of his loafers would not click, and entered the main lobby of the Junction City Library.

There were a number of glass globes hanging down from the ceiling (which was at least twenty feet higher than the ceiling of the foyer), but none of them were on. The light was provided by two large, angled skylights. On a sunny day these would have been quite enough to light the room; they might even have rendered it cheery and welcoming. But this Friday was overcast and dreary, and the light was dim. The corners of the lobby were filled with gloomy webs of shadow.

What Sam Peebles felt was a sense of *wrongness*. It was as if he had done more than step through a door and cross a foyer; he felt as if he had entered another world, one which bore absolutely no resemblance to the small Iowa town that he sometimes liked, sometimes hated, but mostly just took for granted. The air in here seemed heavier than normal air, and did not seem to conduct light as well as normal air did. The silence was thick as a blanket. As cold as snow.

The library was deserted.

Shelves of books stretched above him on every side. Looking up toward the skylights with their crisscrosses of reinforcing wire made Sam a little dizzy, and he had a momentary illusion: he felt that he was upside down, that he had been hung by his heels over a deep square pit lined with books.

Ladders leaned against the walls here and there, the kind that were mounted on tracks and rolled along the floor on rubber wheels. Two wooden islands broke the lake of space between the place where he stood and the checkout desk on the far side of the large, high room. One was a long oak magazine rack. Periodicals, each encased in a clear plastic cover, hung from this rack on wooden dowels. They looked like the hides of strange animals which had been left to cure in this silent room. A sign mounted on top of the rack commanded :

RETURN ALL MAGAZINES TO THEIR PROPER PLACES!

To the left of the magazine rack was a shelf of brand-new novels and nonfiction books. The sign mounted on top of the shelf proclaimed them to be seven-day rentals.

Sam passed down the wide aisle between the magazines and the seven-day bookshelf, his heels rapping and echoing in spite of his effort to move quietly. He found himself wishing he had heeded his original impulse to just turn around and go back to the office. This place was spooky. Although there was a small, hooded micro-film camera alight and humming on the desk, there was no one manning—or womaning—it. A small plaque reading

A. LORTZ

stood on the desk, but there was no sign of A. Lortz or anyone else.

*Probably taking a dump and checking out the new issue of Library Journal.*

Sam felt a crazy desire to open his mouth and yell, “Everything coming out all right, A. Lortz?” It passed quickly. The Junction City Public Library was not the sort of place that encouraged amusing sallies.

Sam’s thoughts suddenly spun back to a little rhyme from his childhood. *No more laughing, no more fun; Quaker meeting has begun. If you show your teeth or tongue, you may pay a forfeit.*

*If you show your teeth or tongue in here, does A. Lortz make you pay a forfeit?* he wondered. He looked around again, let his nerve

endings feel the frowning quality of the silence, and thought you could make book on it.

No longer interested in obtaining a joke-book *or Best Loved Poems of the American People*, but fascinated by the library's suspended, dreamy atmosphere in spite of himself, Sam walked toward a door to the right of the seven-day books. A sign over the door said this was the Children's Library. Had he used the Children's Library when he had been growing up in St. Louis? He thought so, but those memories were hazy, distant, and hard to hold. All the same, approaching the door of the Children's Library gave him an odd and haunting feeling. It was almost like coming home.

The door was closed. On it was a picture of Little Red Riding Hood, looking down at the wolf in Grandma's bed. The wolf was wearing Grandma's nightgown and Grandma's nightcap. It was snarling. Foam dripped from between its bared fangs. An expression of almost exquisite horror had transfixed Little Red Riding Hood's face, and the poster seemed not just to suggest but to actually proclaim that the happy ending of this story—of all fairy tales—was a convenient lie. Parents might believe such guff, Red Riding Hood's ghastly-sick face said, but the little ones knew better, didn't they?

*Nice, Sam thought. With a poster like that on the door, I bet lots of kids use the Children's Library. I bet the little ones are especially fond of it.*

He opened the door and poked his head in.

His sense of unease left him; he was charmed at once. The poster on the door was all wrong, of course, but what was behind it seemed perfectly right. Of *course* he had used the library as a child; it only took one look into this scale-model world to refresh those memories. His father had died young; Sam had been an only child raised by a working mother he rarely saw except on Sundays and holidays. When he could not promote money for a movie after school—and that was often—the library had to do, and the room he saw now brought those days back in a sudden wave of nostalgia that was sweet and painful and obscurely frightening.

It had been a *small* world, and this was a small world; it had been a well-lighted world, even on the grimmest, rainiest days, and so was

this one. No hanging glass globes for this room; there were shadow-banishing fluorescent lights behind frosted panels in the suspended ceiling, and all of them were on. The tops of the tables were only two feet from the floor; the seats of the chairs were even closer. In this world the adults would be the interlopers, the uncomfortable aliens. They would balance the tables on their knees if they tried to sit at them, and they would be apt to crack their skulls bending to drink from the water fountain which was mounted on the far wall.

Here the shelves did not stretch up in an unkind trick of perspective which made one giddy if one looked up too long; the ceiling was low enough to be cozy, but not low enough to make a child feel cramped. Here were no rows of gloomy bindings but books which fairly shouted with raucous primary colors: bright blues, reds, yellows. In this world Dr. Seuss was king, Judy Blume was queen, and all the princes and princesses attended Sweet Valley High. Here Sam felt all that old sense of benevolent after-school welcome, a place where the books did all but beg to be touched, handled, looked at, explored. Yet these feelings had their own dark undertaste.

His clearest sense, however, was one of almost wistful pleasure. On one wall was a photograph of a puppy with large, thoughtful eyes. Written beneath the puppy's anxious-hopeful face was one of the world's great truths: IT IS HARD TO BE GOOD. On the other wall was a drawing of mallards making their way down a riverbank to the reedy verge of the water. MAKE WAY FOR DUCKUNGS! the poster trumpeted.

Sam looked to his left, and the faint smile on his lips first faltered and then died. Here was a poster which showed a large, dark car speeding away from what he supposed was a school building. A little boy was looking out of the passenger window. His hands were plastered against the glass and his mouth was open in a scream. In the background, a man—only a vague, ominous shape—was hunched over the wheel, driving hell for leather. The words beneath this picture read:

**NEVER TAKE RIDES FROM STRANGERS!**

Sam recognized that this poster and the Little Red Riding Hood picture on the door of the Children's Library both appealed to the same primitive emotions of dread, but he found this one much more disturbing. Of course children shouldn't accept rides from strangers, and of course they had to be taught not to do so, but was this the right way to make the point?

*How many kids, he wondered, have had a week's worth of nightmares thanks to that little public-service announcement?*

And there was another one, posted right on the front of the checkout desk, that struck a chill as deep as January down Sam's back. It showed a dismayed boy and girl, surely no older than eight, cringing back from a man in a trenchcoat and gray hat. The man looked at least eleven feet tall; his shadow fell on the upturned faces of the children. The brim of his 1940s-style fedora threw its own shadow, and the eyes of the man in the trenchcoat gleamed relentlessly from its black depths. They looked like chips of ice as they studied the children, marking them with the grim gaze of Authority. He was holding out an ID folder with a star pinned to it—an odd sort of star, with at least nine points on it. Maybe as many as a dozen. The message beneath read:

AVOID THE LIBRARY POLICE! GOOD BOYS AND GIRLS  
RETURN THEIR BOOKS ON *TIME!*

That taste was in his mouth again. That sweet, unpleasant taste. And a queer, frightening thought occurred to him: *I have seen this man before.* But that was ridiculous, of course. Wasn't it?

Sam thought of how such a poster would have intimidated him as a child—of how much simple, unalloyed pleasure it would have stolen from the safe haven of the library—and felt indignation rise in his chest. He took a step toward the poster to examine the odd star more closely, taking his roll of Tums out of his pocket at the same time.

He was putting one of them into his mouth when a voice spoke up from behind him. "Well, hello there!"

He jumped and turned around, ready to do battle with the library dragon, now that it had finally disclosed itself.

No dragon presented itself. There was only a plump, white-haired woman of about fifty-five, pushing a trolley of books on silent rubber tires. Her white hair fell around her pleasant, unlined face in neat beauty-shop curls.

"I suppose you were looking for me," she said. "Did Mr. Peckham direct you in here?"

"I didn't see anybody at all."

"No? Then he's gone along home," she said. "I'm not really surprised, since it's Friday. Mr. Peckham comes in to dust and read the paper every morning around eleven. He's the janitor—only part-time, of course. Sometimes he stays until one-one-thirty on most Mondays, because that's the day when both the dust and the paper are thickest—but you know how thin Friday's paper is."

Sam smiled. "I take it you're the librarian?"

"I am she," Mrs. Lortz said, and smiled at him. But Sam didn't think her eyes were smiling; her eyes seemed to be watching him carefully, almost coldly. "And you are ... ?"

"Sam Peebles."

"Oh yes! Real estate and insurance! That's *your* game!"

"Guilty as charged."

"I'm sorry you found the main section of the library deserted—you must have thought we were closed and someone left the door open by mistake."

"Actually," he said, "the idea did cross my mind."

"From two until seven there are three of us on duty," said Mrs. Lortz. "Two is when the schools begin to let out, you know—the grammar school at two, the middle school at two-thirty, the high school at two-forty-five. The children are our most faithful clients, and the most welcome, as far as I am concerned. I love the little ones. I used to have an all-day assistant, but last year the Town Council cut our budget by eight hundred dollars and ..." Mrs. Lortz put her hands together and mimed a bird flying away. It was an amusing charming gesture.

*So why, Sam wondered, aren't I charmed or amused?*

The posters, he supposed. He was still trying to make Red Riding Hood, the screaming child in the car, and the grim-eyed Library Policeman jibe with this smiling small-town librarian.

She put her left hand out—a small hand, as plump and round as the rest of her—with perfect unstudied confidence. He looked at the third finger and saw it was ringless; she wasn't Mrs. Lortz after all. The fact of her spinsterhood struck him as utterly typical, utterly small-town. Almost a caricature, really. Sam shook it.

"You haven't been to our library before, have you, Mr. Peebles?"

"No, I'm afraid not. And please make it Sam." He did not know if he really wanted to be Sam to this woman or not, but he was a businessman in a small town—a salesman, when you got right down to it—and the offer of his first name was automatic.

"Why, thank you, Sam."

He waited for her to respond by offering her own first name, but she only looked at him expectantly.

"I've gotten myself into a bit of a bind," he said. "Our scheduled speaker tonight at Rotary Club had an accident, and—"

"Oh, that's too bad!"

"For me as well as him. I got drafted to take his place."

"Oh-oh!" Ms. Lortz said. Her tone was alarmed, but her eyes crinkled with amusement. And still Sam did not find himself warming to her, although he was a person who warmed up to other people quickly (if superficially) as a rule; the kind of man who had few close friends but felt compelled nonetheless to start conversations with strangers in elevators.

"I wrote a speech last night and this morning I read it to the young woman who takes dictation and types up my correspondence—"

"Naomi Higgins, I'll bet."

"Yes—how did you know that?"

"Naomi is a regular. She borrows a great many romance novels—Jennifer Blake, Rosemary Rogers, Paul Sheldon, people like that." She lowered her voice and said, "She says they're for her mother, but actually I think she reads them herself."

Sam laughed. Naomi *did* have the dreamy eyes of a closet romance reader.

“Anyway, I know she’s what would be called an office temporary in a big city. I imagine that here in Junction City she’s the whole secretarial pool. It seemed reasonable that she was the young woman of whom you spoke.”

“Yes. She liked my speech—or so she said—but she thought it was a bit dry. She suggested—”

“*The Speaker’s Companion*, I’ll bet!”

“Well, she couldn’t remember the exact title, but that sure *sounds* right.” He paused, then asked a little anxiously: “Does it have jokes?”

“Only three hundred pages of them,” she said. She reached out her right hand—it was as innocent of rings as her left—and tugged at his sleeve with it. “Right this way.” She led him toward the door by the sleeve. “I am going to solve all your problems, Sam. I only hope it won’t take a crisis to bring you back to our library. It’s small, but it’s very fine. I think so, anyway, although of course I’m prejudiced.”

They passed through the door into the frowning shadows of the Library’s main room. Ms. Lortz flicked three switches by the door, and the hanging globes lit up, casting a soft yellow glow that warmed and cheered the room considerably.

“It gets so *gloomy* in here when it’s overcast,” she said in a confidential we’re-in-the-real-Library-now voice. She was still tugging firmly on Sam’s sleeve. “But of course you know how the Town Council complains about the electricity bill in a place like this ... or perhaps you don’t, but I’ll bet you can *guess*. ”

“I can,” Sam agreed, also dropping his voice to a near-whisper.

“But that’s a holiday compared to what they have to say about the heating expenses in the winter.” She rolled her eyes. “Oil is so *dear*. It’s the fault of those Arabs ... and now look what they are up to—hiring religious hit-men to try and kill *writers*.”

“It does seem a little harsh,” Sam said, and for some reason he found himself thinking of the poster of the tall man again—the one with the odd star pinned to his ID case, the one whose shadow was falling so ominously over the upturned faces of the children. Falling over them like a stain.

“And of course, I’ve been fussing in the Children’s Library. I lose all track of time when I’m in there.”

“That’s an interesting place,” Sam said. He meant to go on, to ask her about the posters, but Ms. Lortz forestalled him. It was clear to Sam exactly who was in charge of this peculiar little side-trip in an otherwise ordinary day.

“You bet it is! Now, you just give me one minute.” She reached up and put her hands on his shoulders—she had to stand on tiptoe to do it—and for one moment Sam had the absurd idea that she meant to kiss him. Instead she pressed him down onto a wooden bench which ran along the far side of the seven-day bookshelf. “I know right where to find the books you need, Sam. I don’t even have to check the card catalogue.”

“I could get them myself—”

“I’m sure,” she said, “but they’re in the Special Reference section, and I don’t like to let people in there if I can help it. I’m very bossy about that, but I *always* know where to put my hand right on the things I need ... back there, anyway. People are so *messy*, they have so little regard for *order*, you know. Children are the worst, but even adults get up to didos if you let them. Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll be back in two shakes.”

Sam had no intention of protesting further, but he wouldn’t have had time even if he had wanted to. She was gone. He sat on the bench, once more feeling like a fourth-grader ... like a fourth-grader who had done something wrong this time, who had gotten up to didos and so couldn’t go out and play with the other children at recess.

He could hear Ms. Lortz moving about in the room behind the checkout desk, and he looked around thoughtfully. There was nothing to see except books—there was not even one old pensioner reading the paper or leafing through a magazine. It seemed odd. He wouldn’t have expected a small-town library like this to be doing a *booming* business on a weekday afternoon, but no one at all?

*Well, there was Mr. Peckham, he thought, but he finished the paper and went home. Dreadfully thin paper on Friday,*

you know. *Thin dust, too.* And then he realized he only had the word of Ms. Lortz that a Mr. Peckham had ever been here at all.

*True enough—but why would she lie?*

He didn't know, and doubted very much that she had, but the fact that he was questioning the honesty of a sweet-faced woman he had just met highlighted the central puzzling fact of this meeting: he didn't like her. Sweet face or not, he didn't like her one bit.

*It's the posters. You were prepared not to like ANYBODY that would put up posters like that in a children's room. But it doesn't matter, because a side-trip is all it is. Get the books and get out.*

He shifted on the bench, looked up, and saw a motto on the wall:

*If you would know how a man treats his wife and his children, see how he treats his books.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sam didn't care much for *that* little homily, either. He didn't know exactly why ... except that maybe he thought a man, even a bookworm, might be expected to treat his family a little better than his reading matter. The motto, painted in gold leaf on a length of varnished oak, glared down at him nevertheless, seeming to suggest he better think again.

Before he could, Ms. Lortz returned, lifting a gate in the checkout desk, stepping through it, and lowering it neatly behind her again.

"I think I've got what you need," she said cheerfully. "I hope you'll agree."

She handed him two books. One was *The Speaker's Companion*, edited by Kent Adelman, and the other was *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. The contents of this latter book, according to the jacket (which was, in its turn, protected by a tough plastic overjacket), had not been edited, exactly, but *selected* by one Hazel Felleman. "Poems of life!" the jacket promised. "Poems of home and mother! Poems of laughter and whimsey! The poems most frequently asked for by the readers of the *New York Times Book Review!*" It further advised that Hazel Felleman "has been able to keep her finger on the poetry pulse of the American people."

Sam looked at her with some doubt, and she read his mind effortlessly.

“Yes, I know, they look old-fashioned,” she said. “Especially nowadays, when self-help books are all the rage. I imagine if you went to one of the chain bookstores in the Cedar Rapids mall, you could find a dozen books designed to help the beginning public speaker. But none of them would be as good as these, Sam. I really believe these are the best helps there are for men and women who are new to the art of public speaking.”

“Amateurs, in other words,” Sam said, grinning.

“Well, yes. Take *Best Loved Poems*, for instance. The second section of the book—it begins on page sixty-five, if memory serves—is called ‘Inspiration.’ You can almost surely find something there which will make a suitable climax to your little talk, Sam. And you’re apt to find that your listeners will remember a well-chosen verse even if they forget everything else. Especially if they’re a little—”

“Drunk,” he said.

“*Tight* was the word I would have used,” she said with gentle reproof, “although I suppose you know them better than I do.” But the gaze she shot at him suggested that she was only saying this because she was polite.

She held up *The Speaker’s Companion*. The jacket was a cartoonist’s drawing of a bunting-draped hall. Small groups of men in old-fashioned evening dress were seated at tables with drinks in front of them. They were all yucking it up. The man behind the podium—also in evening dress and clearly the after-dinner speaker—was grinning triumphantly down at them. It was clear he was a roaring success.

“There’s a section at the beginning on the *theory* of after-dinner speeches,” said Ms. Lortz, “but since you don’t strike me as the sort of man who wants to make a *career* out of this—”

“You’ve got *that* right,” Sam agreed fervently.

“—I suggest you go directly to the middle section, which is called ‘Lively Speaking.’ There you will find jokes and stories divided into three categories: ‘Easing Them In,’ ‘Softening Them Up,’ and ‘Finishing Them Off.’ ”

*Sounds like a manual for gigolos*, Sam thought but did not say.

She read his mind again. “A little suggestive, I suppose—but these books were published in a simpler, more innocent time. The late thirties, to be exact.”

“Much more innocent, right,” Sam said, thinking of deserted dust-bowl farms, little girls in flour-sack dresses, and rusty, thrown-together Hoovervilles surrounded by police wielding truncheons.

“But both books still *work*,” she said, tapping them for emphasis, “and that’s the important thing in business, isn’t it, Sam? Results!”

“Yes ... I guess it is.”

He looked at her thoughtfully, and Ms. Lortz raised her eyebrows—a trifle defensively, perhaps. “A penny for your thoughts,” she said.

“I was thinking that this has been a fairly rare occurrence in my adult life,” he said. “Not unheard-of, nothing like that, but *rare*. I came in here to get a couple of books to liven up my speech, and you seem to have given me exactly what I came for. How often does something like that happen in a world where you usually can’t even get a couple of good lambchops at the grocery store when you’ve got your face fixed for them?”

She smiled. It appeared to be a smile of genuine pleasure ... except Sam noticed once again that her eyes did not smile. He didn’t think they had changed expression since he had first come upon her—or she upon him—in the Children’s Library. They just went on watching. “I think I’ve just been paid a compliment!”

“Yes, ma’am. You have.”

“I thank you, Sam. I thank you very kindly. They say flattery will get you everywhere, but I’m afraid I’m still going to have to ask you for two dollars.”

“You are?”

“That’s the charge for issuing an adult library card,” she said, “but it’s good for three years, and renewal is only fifty cents. Now, is that a deal, or what?”

“It sounds fine to me.”

“Then step right this way,” she said, and Sam followed her to the checkout desk.

### 3

She gave him a card to fill out—on it he wrote his name, address, telephone numbers, and place of business.

“I see you live on Kelton Avenue. Nice!”

“Well, / like it.”

“The houses are lovely and big—you should be married.”

He started a little. “How did you know I wasn’t married?”

“The same way you knew / wasn’t,” she said. Her smile had become a trifle sly, a trifle catlike. “Nothing on the third left.”

“Oh,” he said lamely, and smiled. He didn’t think it was his usual sparkly smile, and his cheeks felt warm.

“Two dollars, please.”

He gave her two singles. She went over to a small desk where an aged, skeletal typewriter stood, and typed briefly on a bright-orange card. She brought it back to the checkout desk, signed her name at the bottom with a flourish, and then pushed it across to him.

“Check and make sure all the information’s correct, please.”

Sam did so. “It’s all fine.” Her first name, he noted, was Ardelia. A pretty name, and rather unusual.

She took his new library card back—the first one he’d owned since college, now that he thought about it, and he had used that one precious little—and placed it under the microfilm recorder beside a card she took from the pocket of each book. “You can only keep these out for a week, because they’re from Special Reference. That’s a category I invented myself for books which are in great demand.”

“Helps for the beginning speaker are in great demand?”

“Those, and books on things like plumbing repair, simple magic tricks, social etiquette ... You’d be surprised what books people call for in a pinch. But I know.”

“I’ll bet you do.”

“I’ve been in the business a long, long time, Sam. And they’re not renewable, so be sure to get them back by April sixth.” She raised her head, and the light caught in her eyes. Sam almost dismissed

what he saw there as a twinkle ... but that wasn't what it was. It was a shine. A flat, hard shine. For just a moment Ardelia Lortz looked as if she had a nickel in each eye.

"Or?" he asked, and his smile suddenly didn't feel like a smite—it felt like a mask.

"Or else I'll have to send the Library Policeman after you," she said.

## 4

For a moment their gazes locked, and Sam thought he saw the *real* Ardelia Lortz, and there was nothing charming or *soft* or spinster-librarian about that woman at all.

*This woman might actually be dangerous*, he thought, and *then dismissed it, a little embarrassed*. The gloomy day—and perhaps the pressure of the impending speech—was getting to him. *She's about as dangerous as a canned peach ... and it isn't the gloomy day or the Rotarians tonight, either. It's those goddam posters.*

He had *The Speaker's Companion and Best Loved Poems of the American People* under his arm and they were almost to the door before he realized she was showing him out. He planted his feet firmly and stopped. She looked at him, surprised.

"Can I ask you something, Ms. Lortz?"

"Of course, Sam. That's what I'm here for—to answer questions."

"It's about the Children's Library," he said, "and the posters. Some of them surprised me. Shocked me, almost." He expected that to come out sounding like something a Baptist preacher might say about an issue of *Playboy* glimpsed beneath the other magazines on a parishioner's coffee table, but it didn't come out that way at all. *Because*, he thought, *it's not just a conventional sentiment. I really was shocked. No almost about it.*

"Posters?" she asked, frowning, and then her brow cleared. She laughed. "Oh! You must mean the Library Policeman ... and Simple

Simon, of course.”

“Simple Simon?”

“You know the poster that says NEVER TAKE RIDES FROM STRANGERS? That’s what the kids call the little boy in the picture. The one who is yelling. They call him Simple Simon—I suppose they feel contempt for him because he did such a foolish thing. I think that’s very healthy, don’t you?”

“He’s not yelling,” Sam said slowly. “He’s *screaming*.”

She shrugged. “Yelling, screaming, what’s the difference? We don’t hear much of either in here. The children are very good—very respectful.”

“I’ll bet,” Sam said. They were back in the foyer again now, and he glanced at the sign on the easel, the sign which didn’t say

**SILENCE IS GOLDEN**

or

**PLEASE TRY TO BE QUIET**

but just offered that one inarguable imperative:

**SILENCE!**

“Besides—it’s all a matter of interpretation, isn’t it?”

“I suppose,” Sam said. He felt that he was being maneuvered—and very efficiently—into a place where he would not have a moral leg to stand on, and the field of dialectic would belong to Ardelia Lortz. She gave him the impression that she was used to doing this, and that made him feel stubborn. “But they struck me as extreme, those posters.”

“Did they?” she asked politely. They had halted by the outer door now.

“Yes. Scary.” He gathered himself and said what he really believed. “Not appropriate to a place where small children gather.”

He found he still did not sound prissy or self-righteous, at least to himself, and this was a relief.

She was smiling, and the smile irritated him. “You’re not the first person who ever expressed that opinion, Sam. Childless adults

aren't frequent visitors to the Children's Library, but they do come in from time to time—uncles, aunts, some single mother's boyfriend who got stuck with pick-up duty ... or people like you, Sam, who are looking for me."

*People in a pinch*, her cool blue-gray eyes said. *People who come for help and then, once they HAVE been helped, stay to criticize the way we run things here at the Junction City Public Library. The way I run things at the Junction City Public Library.*

"I guess you think I was wrong to put my two cents in," Sam said good-naturedly. He didn't feel good-natured, all of a sudden he didn't feel good-natured at all, but it was another trick of the trade, one he now wrapped around himself like a protective cloak.

"Not at all. It's just that you don't understand. We had a poll last summer, Sam—it was part of the annual Summer Reading Program. We call our program Junction City's Summer Sizzlers, and each child gets one vote for every book he or she reads. It's one of the strategies we've developed over the years to encourage children to read. That is one of our most important responsibilities, you see."

*We know what we're doing*, her steady gaze told him. *And I'm being very polite, aren't I? Considering that you, who have never been here in your life before, have presumed to poke your head in once and start shotgunning criticisms.*

Sam began to feel very much in the wrong. That dialectical battlefield did not belong to the Lortz woman yet—at least not entirely—but he recognized the fact that he was in retreat.

"According to the poll, last summer's favorite movie among the children was *A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 5*. Their favorite rock group is called Guns n' Roses—the runner-up was something named Ozzy Osbourne, who, I understand, has a reputation for biting the heads off live animals during his concerts. Their favorite novel was a paperback original called *Swan Song*. It's a horror novel by a man named Robert McCammon. We can't keep it in stock, Sam. They read each new copy to rags in weeks. I had a copy put in Vinabind, but of course it was stolen. By one of the bad children."

Her lips pursed in a thin line.

“Runner-up was a horror novel about incest and infanticide called *Flowers in the Attic*. That one was the champ for five years running. Several of them even mentioned *Peyton Place!*”

She looked at him sternly.

“I myself have never seen any of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies. I have never heard an Ozzy Osbourne record and have no desire to do so, nor to read a novel by Robert McCammon, Stephen King, or V. C. Andrews. Do you see what I’m getting at, Sam?”

“I suppose. You’re saying it wouldn’t be fair to ...” He needed a word, groped for it, and found it. “... to usurp the children’s tastes.”

She smiled radiantly—everything but the eyes, which seemed to have nickels in them again.

“That’s *part* of it, but that’s not *all* of it. The posters in the Children’s Library—both the nice, uncontroversial ones and the ones which put you off—came to us from the Iowa Library Association. The ILA is a member of the Midwest Library Association, and that is, in turn, a member of The National Library Association, which gets the majority of its funding from tax money. From John Q. Public—which is to say from me. And you.”

Sam shifted from one foot to the other. He didn’t want to spend the afternoon listening to a lecture on How Your Library Works for You, but hadn’t he invited it? He supposed so. The only thing he was absolutely sure of was that he was liking Ardelia Lortz less and less all the time.

“The Iowa Library Association sends us a sheet every other month, with reproductions of about forty posters,” Ms. Lortz continued relentlessly. “We can pick any five free; extras cost three dollars each. I see you’re getting restless, Sam, but you do deserve an explanation, and we are finally reaching the nub of the matter.”

“Me? I’m not restless,” Sam said restlessly.

She smiled at him, revealing teeth too even to be anything but dentures. “We have a Children’s Library Committee,” she said. “Who is on it? Why, children, of course! Nine of them. Four high-school students, three middle-school students, and two grammar-school students. Each child has to have an overall B average in his schoolwork to qualify. They pick some of the new books we order,

they picked the new drapes and tables when we redecorated last fall ... and, of course, they pick the posters. That is, as one of our younger Committeemen once put it, 'the funnest part.' Now do you understand?"

"Yes," Sam said. "The kids picked out Little Red Riding Hood, and Simple Simon, and the Library Policeman. They like them because they're scary."

"Correct!" she beamed.

Suddenly he'd had enough. It was something about the Library. Not the posters, not the librarian, exactly, but the Library itself. Suddenly the Library was like an aggravating, infuriating splinter jammed deep in one buttock. Whatever it was, it was ... *enough*.

"Ms. Lortz, do you keep a videotape of *A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 5*, in the Children's Library? Or a selection of albums by Guns n' Roses and Ozzy Osbourne?"

"Sam, you miss the *point*," she began patiently.

"What about *Peyton Place*? Do you keep a copy of that in the Children's Library just because some of the kids have read it?"

Even as he was speaking, he thought, *Does ANYBODY still read that old thing?*

"No," she said, and he saw that an ill-tempered flush was rising in her cheeks. This was not a woman who was used to having her judgments called into question. "But we do keep stories about housebreaking, parental abuse, and burglary. I am speaking, of course, of 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears,' 'Hansel and Gretel,' and 'Jack and the Beanstalk.' I expected a man such as yourself to be a little more understanding, Sam."

*A man you helped out in a pinch is what you mean, Sam thought, but what the hell, lady—isn't that what the town pays you to do?*

Then he got hold of himself. He didn't know exactly what she meant by "a man such as himself," wasn't sure he *wanted* to know, but he did understand that this discussion was on the edge of getting out of hand—of becoming an argument. He had come in here to find a little tenderizer to sprinkle over his speech, not to get in a hassle about the Children's Library with the head librarian.

"I apologize if I've said anything to offend you," he said, "and I really ought to be going."

"Yes," she said. "I think you ought." *Your apology is not accepted, her eyes telegraphed. It is not accepted at all.*

"I suppose," he said, "that I'm a little nervous about my speaking debut. And I was up late last night working on this." He smiled his old good-natured Sam Peebles smile and hoisted the briefcase.

She stood down—a little—but her eyes were still snapping. "That's understandable. We are here to serve, and, of course, we're always interested in constructive criticism from the taxpayers." She accented the word *constructive* ever so slightly, to let him know, he supposed, that his had been anything but.

Now that it was over, he had an urge—almost a need—to make it all over, to smooth it down like the coverlet on a well-made bed. And this was also part of the businessman's habit, he supposed ... or the businessman's protective coloration. An odd thought occurred to him—that what he should really talk about tonight was his encounter with Ardelia Lortz. It said more about the small-town heart and spirit than his whole written speech. Not all of it was flattering, but it surely wasn't dry. And it would offer a sound rarely heard during Friday-night Rotary speeches: the unmistakable ring of truth.

"Well, we got a little feisty there for a second or two," he heard himself saying, and saw his hand go out. "I expect I overstepped my bounds. I hope there are no hard feelings."

She touched his hand. It was a brief, token touch. Cool, smooth flesh. Unpleasant, somehow. Like shaking hands with an umbrella stand. "None at all," she said, but her eyes continued to tell a different story.

"Well then ... I'll be getting along."

"Yes. Remember—one week on those, Sam." She lifted a finger. Pointed a well-manicured nail at the books he was holding. And smiled. Sam found something extremely disturbing about that smile, but he could not for the life of him have said exactly what it was. "I wouldn't want to have to send the Library Cop after you."

"No," Sam agreed. "I wouldn't want that, either."

"That's right," said Ardelia Lortz, still smiling. "You wouldn't."

Halfway down the walk, the face of that screaming child (*Simple Simon, the kids call him Simple Simon I think that's very healthy, don't you*)

recurred to him, and with it came a thought—one simple enough and practical enough to stop him in his tracks. It was this: given a chance to pick such a poster, a jury of kids might very well do so ... but would *any* Library Association, whether from Iowa, the Midwest, or the country as a whole, actually send one out?

Sam Peebles thought of the pleading hands plastered against the obdurate, imprisoning glass, the screaming, agonized mouth, and suddenly found that more than difficult to believe. He found it *impossible* to believe.

And *Peyton Place*. What about that? He guessed that most of the *adults* who used the Library had forgotten about it. Did he really believe that some of their children—the ones young enough to use the Children's Library—had rediscovered that old relic?

*I don't believe that one, either.*

He had no wish to incur a second dose of Ardelia Lortz's anger—the first had been enough, and he'd had a feeling her dial hadn't been turned up to anything near full volume—but these thoughts were strong enough to cause him to turn around.

She was gone.

The library doors stood shut, a vertical slot of mouth in that brooding granite face.

Sam stood where he was a moment longer, then hurried down to where his car was parked at the curb.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *SAM'S SPEECH*

#### 1

It was a rousing success.

He began with his own adaptations of two anecdotes from the “Easing Them In” section of *The Speaker’s Companion*—one was about a farmer who tried to wholesale his own produce and the other was about selling frozen dinners to Eskimos—and used a third in the middle (which really was pretty arid). He found another good one in the subsection titled “Finishing Them Off,” started to pencil it in, then remembered Ardelia Lortz and *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. *You’re apt to find your listeners remember a well-chosen verse even if they forget everything else*, she had said, and Sam found a good short poem in the “Inspiration” section, just as she had told him he might.

He looked down on the upturned faces of his fellow Rotarians and said: “I’ve tried to give you some of the reasons why I live and work in a small town like Junction City, and I hope they make at least some sense. If they don’t, I’m in a lot of trouble.”

A rumble of good-natured laughter (and a whiff of mixed Scotch and bourbon) greeted this.

Sam was sweating freely, but he actually felt pretty good, and he had begun to believe he was going to get out of this unscathed. The microphone had produced feedback whine only once, no one had walked out, no one had thrown food, and there had only been a few catcalls—good-natured ones, at that.

“I think a poet named Spencer Michael Free summed up the things I’ve been trying to say better than I ever could. You see,

almost everything we have to sell in our small-town businesses can be sold cheaper in big-city shopping centers and suburban malls. Those places like to boast that you can get just about all the goods and services you'd ever need right there, and park for free in the bargain. And I guess they're almost right. But there is still one thing the small-town business has to offer that the malls and shopping centers don't, and that's the thing Mr. Free talks about in his poem. It isn't a very long one, but it says a lot. It goes like this.

*“ 'Tis the human touch in this world that counts,  
The touch of your hand and mine,  
Which means far more to the fainting heart  
Than shelter and bread and wine;  
For shelter is gone when the night is o'er,  
And bread lasts only a day,  
But the touch of the hand and the sound of a voice  
Sing on in the soul always.”*

Sam looked up at them from his text, and for the second time that day was surprised to find that he meant every word he had just said. He found that his heart was suddenly full of happiness and simple gratitude. It was good just to find out you still *had* a heart, that the ordinary routine of ordinary days hadn't worn it away, but it was even better to find it could still speak through your mouth.

“We small-town businessmen and businesswomen offer that human touch. On the one hand, it isn't much ... but on the other, it's just about everything. I know that it keeps me coming back for more. I want to wish our originally scheduled speaker, The Amazing Joe, a speedy recovery; I want to thank Craig Jones for asking me to sub for him; and I want to thank all of you for listening so patiently to my boring little talk. So ... thanks very much.”

The applause started even before he finished his last sentence ; it swelled while he gathered up the few pages of text which Naomi had typed and which he had spent the afternoon amending; it rose to a crescendo as he sat down, bemused by the reaction.

*Well, it's just the booze,* he told himself. They would have *applauded you if you'd told them about how you managed to quit*

*smoking after you found Jesus at a Tupperware party.*

Then they started to rise to their feet and he thought he must have spoken too long if they were that anxious to get out. But they went on applauding, and then he saw Craig Jones was flapping his hands at him. After a moment, Sam understood. Craig wanted him to stand up and take a bow.

He twirled a forefinger around his ear: *You're nuts!*

Craig shook his head emphatically and began elevating his hands so energetically that he looked like a revival preacher encouraging the faithful to sing louder.

So Sam stood up and was amazed when they actually *cheered* him.

After a few moments, Craig approached the lectern. The cheers at last died down when he tapped the microphone a few times, producing a sound like a giant fist wrapped in cotton knocking on a coffin.

"I think we'll all agree," he said, "that Sam's speech more than made up for the price of the rubber chicken."

This brought another hearty burst of applause.

Craig turned toward Sam and said, "If I'd known you had *that* in you, Sammy, I would have booked you in the first place!"

This produced more clapping and whistling. Before it died out, Craig Jones had seized Sam's hand and began pumping it briskly up and down.

"That was great!" Craig said. "Where'd you copy it from, Sam?"

"I didn't," Sam said. His cheeks felt warm, and although he'd only had one gin and tonic—a weak one—before getting up to speak, he felt a little drunk. "It's mine. I got a couple of books from the Library, and they helped."

Other Rotarians were crowding around now; Sam's hand was shaken again and again. He started to feel like the town pump during a summer drought.

"Great!" someone shouted in his ear. Sam turned toward the voice and saw it belonged to Frank Stephens, who had filled in when the trucking-union official was indicted for malfeasance. "We shoulda

had it on tape, we coulda sold it to the goddam JayCees! Damn, that was a good talk, Sam!”

“Oughtta take it on the road!” Rudy Pearlman said. His round face was red and sweating. “I darn near cried! Honest to God! Where’d you find that pome?”

“At the Library,” Sam said. He still felt dazed ... but his relief at having actually finished in one piece was being supplanted by a kind of cautious delight. He thought he would have to give Naomi a bonus. “It was in a book called—”

But before he could tell Rudy what the book had been called, Bruce Engalls had grasped him by the elbow and was guiding him toward the bar. “Best damned speech I’ve heard at this foolish club in two years!” Bruce was exclaiming. “Maybe five! Who needs a goddam acrobat, anyway? Let me buy you a drink, Sam. Hell, let me buy you two!”

## 2

Before he was able to get away, Sam consumed a total of six drinks, all of them free, and ended his triumphant evening by puking on his own WELCOME mat shortly after Craig Jones let him out in front of his house on Kelton Avenue. When his stomach vapor-locked, Sam had been trying to get his housekey in the lock of his front door—it was a job, because there appeared to be three locks and four keys—and there was just no time to get rid of it in the bushes at the side of the stoop. So when he finally succeeded in getting the door open, he simply picked the WELCOME mat up (carefully, holding it by the sides so the gunk would pool in the middle) and tossed it over the side.

He got a cup of coffee to stay down, but the phone rang twice while he was drinking it. More congratulations. The second call was from Elmer Baskin, who hadn’t even been there. He felt a little like Judy Garland in *A Star Is Born*, but it was hard to enjoy the feeling

while his stomach was still treading water and his head was beginning to punish him for his overindulgence.

Sam put on the answering machine in the living room to field any further calls, then went upstairs to his bedroom, unplugged the phone by the bed, took two aspirin, stripped, and lay down.

Consciousness began to fade fast—he was tired as well as bombed—but before sleep took him, he had time to think: *I owe most of it to Naomi ... and to that unpleasant woman at the Library. Horst. Borscht. Whatever her name was. Maybe I ought to give her a bonus, too.*

He heard the telephone start to ring downstairs, and then the answering machine cut in.

Good boy, Sam thought sleepily. *Do your duty—I mean, after all, isn't that what I pay you to do?*

Then he was in blackness, and knew no more until ten o'clock Saturday morning.

### 3

He returned to the land of the living with a sour stomach and a slight headache, but it could have been a lot worse. He was sorry about the WELCOME mat, but glad he'd offloaded at least some of the booze before it could swell his head any worse than it already was. He stood in the shower for ten minutes, making only token washing motions, then dried off, dressed, and went downstairs with a towel draped over his head. The red message light on the telephone answering machine was blinking. The tape only rewound a short way when he pushed the PLAY MESSAGES button; apparently the call he'd heard just as he was drifting off had been the last.

Beep! "Hello, Sam." Sam paused in the act of removing the towel, frowning. It was a woman's voice, and he knew it. Whose? "I heard your speech was a great success. I'm so glad for you."

It was the Lortz woman, he realized.

*Now how did she get my number?* But that was what the telephone book was for, of course ... and he had written it on his library-card application as well, hadn't he? Yes. For no reason he could rightly tell, a small shiver shook its way up his back.

"Be sure to get your borrowed books back by the sixth of April," she continued, and then, archly: "Remember the Library Policeman."

There was the click of the connection being broken. On Sam's answering machine, the ALL MESSAGES PLAYED lamp lit up.

"You're a bit of a bitch, aren't you, lady?" Sam said to the empty house, and then went into the kitchen to make himself some toast.

## 4

When Naomi came in at ten o'clock on the Friday morning a week after Sam's triumphant debut as an after-dinner speaker, Sam handed her a long white envelope with her name written on the front.

"What's this?" Naomi asked suspiciously, taking off her cloak. It was raining hard outside, a driving, dismal early-spring rain.

"Open it and see."

She did. It was a thank-you card. Taped inside was a portrait of Andrew Jackson.

"Twenty dollars!" She looked at him more suspiciously than ever. "Why?"

"Because you saved my bacon when you sent me to the Library," Sam said. "The speech went over very well, Naomi. I guess it wouldn't be wrong to say I was a big hit. I would have put in fifty, if I'd thought you would take it."

Now she understood, and was clearly pleased, but she tried to give the money back just the same. "I'm really glad it worked, Sam, but I can't take th—"

"Yes you can," he said, "and you will. You'd take a commission if you worked for me as a salesperson, wouldn't you?"

“I don’t, though. I could never sell anything. When I was in the Girl Scouts, my mother was the only person who ever bought cookies from me.”

“Naomi. My dear girl. No—don’t start looking all nervous and cornered. I’m not going to make a pass at you. We went through all of that two years ago.”

“We certainly *did*,” Naomi agreed, but she still looked nervous and checked to make sure that she had a clear line of retreat to the door, should she need one.

“Do you realize I’ve sold two houses and written almost two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of insurance since that damn speech? Most of it was common group coverage with a high top-off and a low commission rate, true, but it still adds up to the price of a new car. If you don’t take that twenty, I’m going to feel like shit.”

“Sam, *please!*” she said, looking shocked. Naomi was a dedicated Baptist. She and her mother went to a little church in Proverbia which was almost as ramshackle as the house they lived in. He knew; he had been there once. But he was happy to see that she also looked pleased ... and a little more relaxed.

In the summer of 1988, Sam had dated Naomi twice. On the second date, he made a pass. It was as well behaved as a pass can be and still remain a pass, but a pass it was. Much good it had done him; Naomi, it turned out, was a good enough pass deflector to play in the Denver Broncos’ defensive backfield. It wasn’t that she didn’t like him, she explained; it was just that she had decided the two of them could never get along “that way.” Sam, bewildered, had asked her why not. Naomi only shook her head. *Some things are hard to explain, Sam, but that doesn’t make them less true. It could*

*never work. Believe me, it just couldn’t.* And that had been all he could get out of her.

“I’m sorry I said the s-word, Naomi,” he told her now. He spoke humbly, although he doubted somehow that Naomi was even half as priggish as she liked to sound. “What I mean to say is that if you don’t take that twenty, I’ll feel like cacapoopie.”

She tucked the bill into her purse and then endeavored to look at him with an expression of dignified primness. She almost made it ...

but the corners of her lips quivered slightly.

“There. Satisfied?”

“Short of giving you fifty,” he said. “Would you take fifty, Omes?”

“No,” she said. “And please don’t call me Omes. You know I don’t like it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted. Now why don’t we just drop the subject?”

“Okay,” Sam said agreeably.

“I heard several people say your speech was good. Craig Jones just *raved* about it. Do you really think that’s the reason you’ve done more business?”

“Does a bear—” Sam began, and then retraced his steps. “Yes. I do. Things work that way sometimes. It’s funny, but it’s true. The old sales graph has really spiked this week. It’ll drop back, of course, but I don’t think it’ll drop back all the way. If the new folks like the way I do business—and I like to think they will—there’ll be a carry-over.”

Sam leaned back in his chair, laced his hands together behind his neck, and looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling.

“When Craig Jones called up and put me on the spot, I was ready to shoot him. No joke, Naomi.”

“Yes,” she said. “You looked like a man coming down with a bad case of poison ivy.”

“Did I?” He laughed. “Yeah, I suppose so. It’s funny how things work out sometimes—purest luck. If there is a God, it makes you wonder sometimes if He tightened all the screws in the big machine before He set it going.”

He expected Naomi to scold him for his irreverence (it wouldn’t be the first time), but she didn’t take the gambit today. Instead she said, “You’re luckier than you know, if the books you got at the Library really did help you out. It usually doesn’t open until five o’clock on Fridays. I meant to tell you that, but then I forgot.”

“Oh?”

“You must have found Mr. Price catching up on his paperwork or something.”

“Price?” Sam asked. “Don’t you mean Mr. Peckham? The newspaper-reading janitor?”

Naomi shook her head. “The only Peckham I ever heard of around here was old Eddie Peckham, and he died years ago. I’m talking about Mr. *Price*. The *librarian*.” She was looking at Sam as though he were the thickest man on earth ... or at least in Junction City, Iowa. “Tall man? Thin? About fifty?”

“Nope,” Sam said. “I got a lady named Lortz. Short, plump, somewhere around the age when women form lasting attachments to bright-green polyester.”

A rather strange mix of expressions crossed Naomi’s face—surprise was followed by suspicion; suspicion was followed by a species of faintly exasperated amusement. That particular sequence of expressions almost always indicates the same thing: someone is coming to realize that his or her leg is being shaken vigorously. Under more ordinary circumstances Sam might have wondered about that, but he had done a land-office business all week long, and as a result he had a great deal of his own paperwork to catch up on. Half of his mind had already wandered off to examine it.

“Oh,” Naomi said and laughed. “Miss *Lortz*, was it? That must have been fun.”

“She’s peculiar, all right,” Sam said.

“You bet,” Naomi agreed. “In fact, she’s absolutely—”

If she had finished what she had started to say she probably would have startled Sam Peebles a great deal, but tuck—as he had just pointed out—plays an absurdly important part in human affairs, and luck now intervened.

The telephone rang.

It was Burt Iverson, the spiritual chief of Junction City’s small legal tribe. He wanted to talk about a really huge insurance deal—the new medical center, comp-group coverage, still in the planning stages but you know how big this could be, Sam—and by the time Sam got back to Naomi, thoughts of Ms. Lortz had gone entirely out of his mind. He knew how big it could be, all right; it could land him behind the wheel of that Mercedes-Benz after all. And he really didn’t like to think just how much of all this good fortune he might be able to trace back to that stupid little speech, if he really wanted to.

Naomi *did* think her leg was being pulled; she knew perfectly well who Ardelia Lortz was, and thought Sam must, too. After all, the woman had been at the center of the nastiest piece of business to occur in Junction City in the last twenty years ... maybe since World War II, when the Moggins boy had come home from the Pacific all funny in the head and had killed his whole family before sticking the barrel of his service pistol in his right ear and taking care of himself as well. Ira Moggins had done that before Naomi's time; it did not occur to her that *l'affaire Ardelia* had occurred long before Sam had come to Junction City.

At any rate, she had dismissed the whole thing from her mind and was trying to decide between Stouffer's lasagna and something from Lean Cuisine for supper by the time Sam put the telephone down. He dictated letters steadily until twelve o'clock, then asked Naomi if she would like to step down to McKenna's with him for a spot of lunch. Naomi declined, saying she had to get back to her mother, who had Failed Greatly over the course of the winter. No more was said about Ardelia Lortz.

*That day.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *THE MISSING BOOKS*

#### 1

Sam wasn't much of a breakfast-eater through the week—a glass of orange juice and an oat-bran muffin did him just fine— but on Saturday mornings (at least on Saturday mornings when he wasn't dealing with a Rotary-inspired hangover) he liked to rise a little late, stroll down to McKenna's on the square, and work his way slowly through an order of steak and eggs while he really *read* the paper instead of just scanning it between appointments.

He followed this routine the next morning, the seventh of April. The previous day's rain was gone, and the sky was a pale, perfect blue—the very image of early spring. Sam took the long way home following his breakfast, pausing to check out whose tulips and crocuses were in good order and whose were a little late. He arrived back at his own house at ten minutes past ten.

The PLAY MESSAGES lamp on his answering machine was lit. He pushed the button, got out a cigarette, and struck a match.

"Hello, Sam," Ardelia Lortz's soft and utterly unmistakable voice said, and the match paused six inches shy of Sam's cigarette. "I'm very disappointed in you. Your books are overdue."

"Ah, *shit!*" Sam exclaimed.

Something had been nagging at him all week long, the way a word you want will use the tip of your tongue for a trampoline, bouncing just out of reach. The books. The goddam books. The woman would undoubtedly regard him as exactly the sort of Philistine she wanted him to be—him with his gratuitous judgments of which posters belonged in the Children's Library and which ones didn't. The only

real question was whether she had put her tongue-lashing on the answering machine or was saving it until she saw him in person.

He shook out the match and dropped it in the ashtray beside the telephone.

“I explained to you, I believe,” she was going on in her soft and just a little too reasonable voice, “that *The Speaker’s Companion* and *Best Loved Poems of the American People* are from the Library’s Special Reference section, and cannot be kept out for longer than one week. I expected better things of you, Sam. I really did.”

Sam, to his great exasperation, found he was standing here in his own house with an unlit cigarette between his lips and a guilty flush climbing up his neck and beginning to overrun his cheeks. Once more he had been deposited firmly back in the fourth grade—this time sitting on a stool facing into the corner with a pointed dunce-cap perched firmly on his head.

Speaking as one who is conferring a great favor, Ardelia Lortz went on: “I have decided to give you an extension, however; you have until Monday afternoon to return your borrowed books. Please help me avoid any unpleasantness.” There was a pause. “Remember the Library Policeman, Sam.”

“That one’s getting old, Ardelia-baby,” Sam muttered, but he wasn’t even speaking to the recording. She had hung up after mentioning the Library Policeman, and the machine switched itself quietly off.

## 2

Sam used a fresh match to light his smoke. He was still exhaling the first drag when a course of action popped into his mind. It might be a trifle cowardly, but it would close his accounts with Ms. Lortz for good. And it also had a certain rough justice to it.

He had given Naomi *her* just reward, and he would do the same for Ardelia. He sat down at the desk in his study, where he had composed the famous speech, and drew his note-pad to him. Below the heading (*From the Desk of SAMUEL PEEBLES*), he scrawled the following note:

Dear Ms. Lortz,

I apologize for being late returning your books. This is a sincere apology, because the books were extremely helpful in preparing my speech. Please accept this money in payment of the fine on tardy books. I want you to keep the rest as a token of my thanks.

Sincerely yours

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sam Peebles". The ink is black and the signature is centered on the page.

Sam Peebles

Sam read the note over while he fished a paper clip out of his desk drawer. He considered changing "... returning your books" to "... returning the library's books" and decided to leave it as it was. Ardelia Lortz had impressed him very much as the sort of woman who subscribed to the philosophy of *l'Etat c'est moi*, even if *l'état* in this case was just the local library.

He removed a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and used the clip to attach it to the note. He hesitated a moment longer, drumming his fingers restlessly on the edge of the desk.

*She's going to look at this as a bribe. She'll probably be offended and mad as hell.*

That might be true, but Sam didn't care. He knew what was behind the Lortz woman's arch little call this morning—behind *both* arch little calls, probably. He had pulled her chain a little too hard about the posters in the Children's Library, and she was getting back at him—or trying to. But this wasn't the fourth grade, he wasn't a scurrying, terrified little kid (not anymore, at least), and he wasn't going to be

intimidated. Not by the ill-tempered sign in the library foyer, nor by the librarian's you're-one-whole-day-late-you-bad-boy-you nagging.

"Fuck it!" he said out loud. "If you don't want the goddam money, stick it in the Library Defense Fund, or something."

He laid the note with the twenty paper-clipped to it on the desk. He had no intention of presenting it in person so she could get shirty on him. He would bind the two volumes together with a couple of rubber bands after laying the note and the money into one of them so it stuck out. Then he would simply dump the whole shebang into the book-drop. He had spent six years in Junction City without making Ardelia Lortz's acquaintance; with any luck, it would be six years before he saw her again.

Now all he had to do was find the books.

They were not on his study desk, that was for sure. Sam went out into the dining room and looked on the table. It was where he usually stacked things which needed to be returned. There were two VHS tapes ready to go back to Bruce's Video Stop, an envelope with *Paperboy* written across the front, two folders with insurance policies in them ... but no *Speaker's Companion*. No *Best Loved Poems of the American People*, either.

"Crap," Sam said, and scratched his head. "Where the belt—?"

He went out into the kitchen. Nothing on the kitchen table but the morning paper; he'd put it down there when he came in. He tossed it absently in the cardboard carton by the woodstove as he checked the counter. Nothing on the counter but the box from which he had taken last night's frozen dinner.

He went slowly upstairs to check the rooms on the second story, but he was already starting to get a very bad feeling.

### 3

By three o'clock that afternoon, the bad feeling was a lot worse. Sam Peebles was, in fact, fuming. After going through the house twice

from top to bottom (on the second pass he even checked the cellar), he had gone down to the office, even though he was pretty sure he had brought the two books home with him when he left work late last Monday afternoon. Sure enough, he had found nothing there. And here he was, most of a beautiful spring Saturday shot in a fruitless search for two library books, no further ahead.

He kept thinking of her arch tone—*remember the Library Policeman, Sam*—and how happy she would feel if she knew just how far under his skin she had gotten. If there really *were* Library Police, Sam had no doubt at all that the woman would be happy to sic one on him. The more he thought about it, the madder he got.

He went back into his study. His note to Ardelia Lortz, with the twenty attached, stared at him blandly from the desk.

*"Balls!"* he cried, and was almost off on another whirlwind search of the house before he caught himself and stopped. That would accomplish nothing.

Suddenly he heard the voice of his long-dead mother. It was soft and sweetly reasonable. *When you can't find a thing, Samuel, tearing around and looking for it usually does no good. Sit down and think things over instead. Use your head and save your feet.*

It had been good advice when he was ten; he guessed it was just as good now that he was forty. Sam sat down behind his desk, closed his eyes, and set out to trace the progress of those goddamned library books from the moment Ms. Lortz had handed them to him until ... whenever.

From the Library he had taken them back to the office, stopping at Sam's House of Pizza on the way for a pepperoni-and-double-mushroom pie, which he had eaten at his desk while he looked through *The Speaker's Companion* for two things: good jokes and how to use them. He remembered how careful he'd been not to get even the smallest dollop of pizza sauce on the book—which was sort of ironic, considering the fact that he couldn't find either of them now.

He had spent most of the afternoon on the speech, working in the jokes, then rewriting the whole last part so the poem would fit better. When he went home late Friday afternoon, he'd taken the finished speech but not the books. He was sure of that. Craig Jones had

picked him up when it was time for the Rotary Club dinner, and Craig had dropped him off later on—just in time for Sam to baptize the WELCOME mat.

Saturday morning had been spent nursing his minor but annoying hangover; for the rest of the weekend he had just stayed around the house, reading, watching TV, and—let's face it, gang—basking in his triumph. He hadn't gone near the office all weekend. He was sure of it.

*Okay, he thought. Here comes the hard part. Now concentrate.* But he didn't need to concentrate all that hard after all, he discovered.

He had started out of the office around quarter to five on Monday afternoon, and then the phone had rung, calling him back. It had been Stu Youngman, wanting him to write a large homeowner's policy. That had been the start of this week's shower of bucks. While he was talking with Stu, his eye had happened on the two library books, still sitting on the corner of his desk. When he left the second time, he'd had his briefcase in one hand and the books in the other. He was positive of that much.

He had intended to return them to the Library that evening, but then Frank Stephens had called, wanting him to come out to dinner with him and his wife and their niece, who was visiting from Omaha (when you were a bachelor in a small town, Sam had discovered, even your casual acquaintances became relentless matchmakers). They had gone to Brady's Ribs, had returned late—around eleven, late for a week-night—and by the time he got home again, he had forgotten all about the library books.

After that, he lost sight of them completely. He hadn't thought of returning them—his unexpectedly brisk business had taken up most of his thinking time—until the Lortz woman's call.

*Okay—I probably haven't moved them since then. They must be right where I left them when I got home late Monday afternoon.*

For a moment he felt a burst of hope—maybe they were still in the car! Then, just as he was getting up to check, he remembered how he'd shifted his briefcase to the hand holding the books when he'd arrived home on Monday. He'd done that so he could get his

housekey out of his right front pocket. He hadn't left them in the car at all.

*So what did you do when you got in?*

He saw himself unlocking the kitchen door, stepping in, putting his briefcase on a kitchen chair, turning with the books in his hand—

“Oh *no*,” Sam muttered. The bad feeling returned in a rush.

There was a fair-sized cardboard carton sitting on the shelf by his little kitchen woodstove, the kind of carton you could pick up at the liquor store. It had been there for a couple of years now. People sometimes packed their smaller belongings into such cartons when they were moving house, but the cartons also made great hold-alls. Sam used the one by the stove for newspaper storage. He put each day's paper into the box after he had finished reading it; he had tossed today's paper in only a short time before. And, once every month or so—

“Dirty Dave!” Sam muttered.

He got up from behind his desk and hurried into the kitchen.

## 4

The box, with Johnnie Walker's monocled ain't-I-hip image on the side, was almost empty. Sam thumbed through the thin sheaf of newspapers, knowing he would find nothing but looking anyway, the way people do when they are so exasperated they half-believe that just *wanting* a thing badly enough will make it *be* there. He found the *Saturday Gazette*—*the* one he had so recently disposed of—and the Friday paper. No books between or beneath them, of course. Sam stood there for a moment, thinking black thoughts, then went to the telephone to call Mary Vasser, who cleaned house for him every Thursday morning.

“Hello?” a faintly worried voice answered.

“Hi, Mary. This is Sam Peebles.”

“Sam?” The worry deepened. “Is something wrong?”

*Yes! By Monday afternoon the bitch who runs the local Library is going to be after me! Probably with a cross and a number of very long nails!*

But of course he couldn't say anything like that, not to Mary; she was one of those unfortunate human beings who have been born under a bad sign and live in their own dark cloud of doomish premonition. The Mary Vassers of the world believe that there are a great many large black safes dangling three stories above a great many sidewalks, held by fraying cables, waiting for a destiny to carry the doom-fated into the drop zone. If not a safe, then a drunk driver; if not a drunk driver, a tidal wave (in Iowa? yes, in Iowa); if not a tidal wave, a meteorite. Mary Vasser was one of those afflicted folks who *always* want to know if something is wrong when you call them on the phone.

"Nothing," Sam said. "Nothing wrong at all. I just wondered if you saw Dave on Thursday." The question wasn't much more than a formality; the papers, after all, were gone, and Dirty Dave was the only Newspaper Fairy in Junction City.

"Yes," Mary agreed. Sam's hearty assurance that nothing was wrong seemed to have put her wind up even higher. Now barely concealed terror positively vibrated in her voice. "He came to get the papers. Was I wrong to let him? He's been coming for *years*, and I thought—"

"Not at all," Sam said with insane cheerfulness. "I just saw they were gone and thought I'd check that—"

"You never checked *before*." Her voice caught. "Is he all right? Has something happened to Dave?"

"No," Sam said. "I mean, I don't know. I just—" An idea flashed into his mind. "The coupons!" he cried wildly. "I forgot to clip the coupons on Thursday, so—"

"*Oh!*" she said. "You can have mine, if you want."

"No, I couldn't do th—"

"I'll bring them next Thursday," she overrode him. "I have thousands." *So many I'll never get a chance to use them all*, her voice implied. *After all, somewhere out there a safe is waiting for me to walk under it, or a tree is waiting to fall over in a windstorm and*

*squash me, or in some North Dakota motel a hair-dryer is waiting to fall off the shelf and into the bathtub. I'm living on borrowed time, so what do I need a bunch of fucking Folger's Crystals coupons for?*

"All right," Sam said. "That would be great. Thanks, Mary, you're a peach."

"And you're sure nothing else is wrong?"

"Not a thing," Sam replied, speaking more heartily than ever. To himself he sounded like a lunatic top-sergeant urging his few remaining men to mount a final fruitless frontal assault on a fortified machine-gun nest. *Come on, men, I think they might be asleep!*

"All right," Mary said doubtfully, and Sam was finally permitted to escape.

He sat down heavily in one of the kitchen chairs and regarded the almost empty Johnnie Walker box with a bitter eye. Dirty Dave had come to collect the newspapers, as he did during the first week of every month, but this time he had unknowingly taken along a little bonus: *The Speaker's Companion* and *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. And Sam had a very good idea of what they were now.

Pulp. Recycled pulp.

Dirty Dave was one of Junction City's functioning alcoholics. Unable to hold down a steady job, he eked out a living on the discards of others, and in that way he was a fairly useful citizen. He collected returnable bottles, and, like twelve-year-old Keith Jordan, he had a paper route. The only difference was that Keith delivered the Junction City Gazette every day, and Dirty Dave Duncan collected it—from Sam and God knew how many other homeowners in the Kelton Avenue section of town—once a month. Sam had seen him many times, trundling his shopping cart full of green plastic garbage bags across town toward the Recycling Center which stood between the old train depot and the small homeless shelter where Dirty Dave and a dozen or so of his *compadres* spent most of their nights.

He sat where he was for a moment longer, drumming his fingers on the kitchen table, then got up, pulled on a jacket, and went out to the car.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *ANGLE STREET(1)*

#### 1

The intentions of the sign-maker had undoubtedly been the best, but his spelling had been poor. The sign was nailed to one of the porch uprights of the old house by the railroad tracks, and it read:

ANGLE STREET

Since there were no angles on Railroad Avenue that Sam could see—like most Iowa streets and roads, it was as straight as a string—he reckoned the sign-maker had meant Angel Street. Well, so what? Sam thought that, while the road of good intentions might end in hell, the people who tried to fill the potholes along the way deserved at least some credit.

Angle Street was a big building which, Sam guessed, had housed railroad-company offices back in the days when Junction City really *had* been a railway junction point. Now there were just two sets of working tracks, both going east-west. All the others were rusty and overgrown with weeds. Most of the cross-ties were gone, appropriated for fires by the same homeless people Angle Street was here to serve.

Sam arrived at quarter to five. The sun cast a mournful, failing light over the empty fields which took over here at the edge of town. A seemingly endless freight was rumbling by behind the few buildings which stood out here. A breeze had sprung up, and as he stopped his car and got out, he could hear the rusty squeak of the old JUNCTION CITY sign swinging back and forth above the deserted platform where people had once boarded passenger trains for St.

Louis and Chicago—even the old Sunnyland Express, which had made its only Iowa stop in Junction City on its way west to the fabulous kingdoms of Las Vegas and Los Angeles.

The homeless shelter had once been white; now it was a paintless gray. The curtains in the windows were clean but tired and limp. Weeds were trying to grow in the cindery yard. Sam thought they might gain a foothold by June, but right now they were making a bad job of it. A rusty barrel had been placed by the splintery steps leading up to the porch. Opposite the Angle Street sign, nailed to another porch support, was this message:

NO DRINKING ALLOWED AT THIS SHELTER! IF YOU  
HAVE A BOTTLE, IT MUST GO HERE BEFORE YOU  
ENTER!

His luck was in. Although Saturday night had almost arrived and the ginmills and beerjoints of Junction City awaited, Dirty Dave was here, and he was sober. He was, in fact, sitting on the porch with two other winos. They were engaged in making posters on large rectangles of white cardboard, and enjoying varying degrees of success. The fellow sitting on the floor at the far end of the porch was holding his right wrist with his left hand in an effort to offset a bad case of the shakes. The one in the middle worked with his tongue peeking from the corner of his mouth, and looked like a very old nursery child trying his level best to draw a tree which would earn him a gold star to show Mommy. Dirty Dave, sitting in a splintered rocking chair near the porch steps, was easily in the best shape, but all three of them looked folded, stapled, and mutilated.

“Hello, Dave,” Sam said, mounting the steps.

Dave looked up, squinted, and then offered a tentative smile. All of his remaining teeth were in front. The smile revealed all five of them.

“Mr. Peebles?”

“Yes,” he said. “How you doing, Dave?”

“Oh, purty fair, I guess. Purty fair.” He looked around. “Say, you guys! Say hello to Mr. Peebles! He’s a lawyer!”

The fellow with the tip of his tongue sticking out looked up, nodded briefly, and went back to his poster. A long runner of snot depended

from his left nostril.

“Actually,” Sam said, “real estate’s my game, Dave. Real estate and insur—”

“You got me my Slim Jim?” the man with the shakes asked abruptly. He did not look up at all, but his frown of concentration deepened. Sam could see his poster from where he stood; it was covered with long orange squiggles which vaguely resembled words.

“Pardon?” Sam asked.

“That’s Lukey,” Dave said in a low voice. “He ain’t havin one of his better days, Mr. Peebles.”

“Got me my Slim Jim, got me my Slim Jim, got me my Slim Fuckin Slim Jim?” Lukey chanted without looking up.

“Uh, I’m sorry—” Sam began.

“He ain’t got no Slim Jims!” Dirty Dave yelled. “Shut up and do your poster, Lukey! Sarah wants em by six! She’s comin out special!”

“I’ll get me a fuckin Slim Jim,” Lukey said in a low intense voice. “If I don’t, I guess I’ll eat rat-turds.”

“Don’t mind him, Mr. Peebles,” Dave said. “What’s up?”

“Well, I was just wondering if you might have found a couple of books when you picked up the newspapers last Thursday. I’ve misplaced them, and I thought I’d check. They’re overdue at the Library.”

“You got a quarter?” the man with the tip of his tongue sticking out asked abruptly. “What’s the word? Thunderbird!”

Sam reached automatically into his pocket. Dave reached out and touched his wrist, almost apologetically.

“Don’t give him any money, Mr. Peebles,” he said. “That’s Rudolph. He don’t need no Thunderbird. Him and the Bird don’t agree no more. He just needs a night’s sleep.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said. “I’m tapped, Rudolph.”

“Yeah, you and everybody else,” Rudolph said. As he went back to his poster he muttered: “What’s the price? Fifty twice.”

“I didn’t see any books,” Dirty Dave said. “I’m sorry. I just got the papers, like usual. Missus V. was there, and she can tell you. I didn’t do nothing wrong.” But his rheumy, unhappy eyes said he did not expect Sam to believe this. Unlike Mary, Dirty Dave Duncan did not

live in a world where doom lay just up the road or around the corner; his surrounded him. He lived in it with what little dignity he could muster.

“I believe you.” Sam laid a hand on Dave’s shoulder. “I just dumped your box of papers into one of my bags, like always,” Dave said.

“If I had a thousand Slim Jims, I’d eat them all,” Lukey said abruptly. “I would snark those suckers right down! That’s chow! That’s chow! That’s *chow-de-dow!*”

“I believe you,” Sam repeated, and patted Dave’s horribly bony shoulder. He found himself wondering, God help him, if Dave had fleas. On the heels of this uncharitable thought came another: he wondered if any of the other Rotarians, those hale and hearty fellows with whom he had made such a hit a week ago, had been down to this end of town lately. He wondered if they even knew about Angle Street. And he wondered if Spencer Michael Free had been thinking about such men as Lukey and Rudolph and Dirty Dave when he wrote that it was the human touch in this world that counted—the touch of your hand and mine. Sam felt a sudden burst of shame at the recollection of his speech, so full of innocent boosterism and approval for the simple pleasures of small-town life.

“That’s good,” Dave said. “Then I can come back next month?”

“Sure. You took the papers to the Recycling Center, right?”

“Uh-huh.” Dirty Dave pointed with a finger which ended in a yellow, ragged nail. “Right over there. But they’re closed.”

Sam nodded. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Aw, just passin the time,” Dave said, and turned the poster around so Sam could see it.

It showed a picture of a smiling woman holding a platter of fried chicken, and the first thing that struck Sam was that it was good—really good. Wino or not, Dirty Dave had a natural touch. Above the picture, the following was neatly printed:

CHICKEN DINNER AT THE 1ST METHODIST CHURCH  
TO BENEFIT “ANGEL STREET” HOMELESS SHELTER

SUNDAY APRIL 15TH  
6:00 TO 8:00 P.M.  
COME ONE COME ALL

"It's before the AA meeting," Dave said, "but you can't put nothing on the poster about AA. That's because it's sort of secret."

"I know," Sam said. He paused, then asked: "Do you go to AA? You don't have to answer if you don't want to. I know it's really none of my business."

"I go," Dave said, "but it's hard, Mr. Peebles. I got more white chips than Carter has got liver pills. I'm good for a month, sometimes two, and once I went sober almost a whole year. But it's hard." He shook his head. "Some people can't never get with the program, they say. I must be one of those. But I keep tryin."

Sam's eyes were drawn back to the woman with her platter of chicken. The picture was too detailed to be a cartoon or a sketch, but it wasn't a painting, either. It was clear that Dirty Dave had done it in a hurry, but he had caught a kindness about the eyes and a faint slant of humor, like one last sunbeam at the close of the day, in the mouth. And the oddest thing was that the woman looked familiar to Sam.

"Is that a real person?" he asked Dave.

Dave's smile widened. He nodded. "That's Sarah. She's a great gal, Mr. Peebles. This place would have closed down five years ago except for her. She finds people to give money just when it seems the taxes will be too much or we won't be able to fix the place up enough to satisfy the building inspectors when they come. She calls the people who give the money angels, but she's the angel. We named the place for Sarah. Of course, Tommy St. John spelled part of it wrong when he made the sign, but he meant well." Dirty Dave fell silent for a moment, looking at his poster. Without looking up, he added: "Tommy's dead now, a course. Died this last winter. His liver busted."

"Oh," Sam said, and then he added lamely, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He's well out of it."

“Chow-de-dow!” Lukey exclaimed, getting up. “Chow-de-dow! Ain’t that some fuckin chow-de-dow!” He brought his poster over to Dave. Below the orange squiggles he had drawn a monster woman whose legs ended in sharkfins Sam thought were meant to be shoes. Balanced on one hand was a misshapen plate which appeared to be loaded with blue snakes. Clutched in the other was a cylindrical brown object.

Dave took the poster from Lukey and examined it. “This is *good*, Lukey.”

Lukey’s lips peeled back in a gleeful smile. He pointed at the brown thing. “Look, Dave! She got her a Slim Fuckin Slim Jim!”

“She sure does. Purty good. Go on inside and turn on the TV, if you want. *Star Trek’s* on right away. How you doin, Dolph?”

“I draw better when I’m stewed,” Rudolph said, and gave his poster to Dave. On it was a gigantic chicken leg with stick men and women standing around and looking up at it. “It’s the fantasy approach,” Rudolph said to Sam. He spoke with some truculence.

“I like it,” Sam said. He did, actually. Rudolph’s poster reminded him of a *New Yorker* cartoon, one of the ones he sometimes couldn’t understand because they were so surreal.

“Good.” Rudolph studied him closely. “You sure you ain’t got a quarter?”

“No,” Sam said.

Rudolph nodded. “In a way, that’s good,” he said. “But in another way, it really shits the bed.” He followed Lukey inside, and soon the *Star Trek* theme drifted out through the open door. William Shatner told the winos and burnouts of Angle Street that their mission was to boldly go where no man had gone before. Sam guessed that several members of this audience were already there.

“Nobody much comes to the dinners but us guys and some of the AA’s from town,” Dave said, “but it gives us something to do. Lukey hardly talks at all anymore, ’less he’s drawing.”

“You’re awfully good,” Sam told him. “You really are, Dave. Why don’t you—” He stopped.

“Why don’t I what, Mr. Peebles?” Dave asked gently. “Why don’t I use my right hand to turn a buck? The same reason I don’t get

myself a regular job. The day got late while I was doin other things.”

Sam couldn't think of a thing to say.

“I had a shot at it, though. Do you know I went to the Lorillard School in Des Moines on full scholarship? The best art school in the Midwest. I flunked out my first semester. Booze. It don't matter. Do you want to come in and have a cup of coffee, Mr. Peebles? Wait around? You could meet Sarah.”

“No, I better get back. I've got an errand to run.”

He did, too.

“All right. Are you sure you're not mad at me?”

“Not a bit.”

Dave stood up. “I guess I'll go in awhile, then,” he said. “It was a beautiful day, but it's gettin nippy now. You have a nice night, Mr. Peebles.”

“Okay,” Sam said, although he doubted that he was going to enjoy himself very much *this* Saturday evening. But his mother had had another saying: the way to make the best of bad medicine is to swallow it just as fast as you can. And that was what he intended to do.

He walked back down the steps of Angle Street, and Dirty Dave Duncan went on inside.

## 2

Sam got almost all the way back to his car, then detoured in the direction of the Recycling Center. He walked across the weedy, cindery ground slowly, watching the long freight disappear in the direction of Camden and Omaha. The red lamps on the caboose twinkled like dying stars. Freight trains always made him feel lonely for some reason, and now, following his conversation with Dirty Dave, he felt lonelier than ever. On the few occasions when he had met Dave while Dave was collecting his papers, he had seemed a jolly, almost clownish man. Tonight Sam thought he had seen behind

the make-up, and what he had seen made him feel unhappy and helpless. Dave was a lost man, calm but totally lost, using what was clearly a talent of some size to make posters for a church supper.

One approached the Recycling Center through zones of litter—first the yellowing ad supplements which had escaped old copies of the *Gazette*, then the torn plastic garbage bags, finally an asteroid belt of busted bottles and squashed cans. The shades of the small clapboard building were drawn. The sign hanging in the door simply read CLOSED.

Sam lit a cigarette and started back to his car. He had gone only half a dozen steps when he saw something familiar lying on the ground. He picked it up. It was the bookjacket of *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. The words PROPERTY OF THE JUNCTION CITY-PUBLIC LIBRARY were stamped across it.

So now he knew for sure. He had set the books on top of the papers in the Johnnie Walker box and then forgotten them. He had put other papers—Tuesday's, Wednesday's, and Thursday's—on top of the books. Then Dirty Dave had come along late Thursday morning and had dumped the whole shebang into his plastic collection bag. The bag had gone into his shopping-cart, the shopping-cart had come here, and this was all that was left—a bookjacket with a muddy sneaker-print tattooed on it.

Sam let the bookjacket flutter out of his fingers and walked slowly back to his car. He had an errand to run, and it was fitting that he should run it at the dinner hour.

It seemed he had some crow to eat.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *THE LIBRARY (II)*

#### 11

Halfway to the library, an idea suddenly struck him—it was so obvious he could hardly believe it hadn't occurred to him already. He had lost a couple of library books; he had since discovered they had been destroyed; he would have to pay for them.

And that was all.

It occurred to him that Ardelia Lortz had been more successful in getting him to think like a fourth-grader than he had realized. When a kid lost a book, it was the end of the world; powerless, he cringed beneath the shadow of bureaucracy and waited for the Library Policeman to show up. But there *were* no Library Police, and Sam, as an adult, knew that perfectly well. There were only town employees like Ms. Lortz, who sometimes got overinflated ideas of their place in the scheme of things, and taxpayers like him, who sometimes forgot they were the dog which wagged the tail, and not the other way around.

*I'm going to go in, I'm going to apologize, and then I'm going to ask her to send me a bill for the replacement copies, Sam thought. And that's all. That's the end.*

It was so simple it was amazing.

Still feeling a little nervous and a little embarrassed (but much more in control of this teapot tempest), Sam parked across the street from the Library. The carriage lamps which flanked the main entrance were on, casting soft white radiance down the steps and across the building's granite facade. Evening lent the building a kindness and a welcoming air it had definitely been lacking on his

first visit—or maybe it was just that spring was clearly on the rise now, something which had not been the case on the overcast March day when he had first met the resident dragon. The forbidding face of the stone robot was gone. It was just the public library again.

Sam started to get out of the car and then stopped. He had been granted one revelation; now he was suddenly afforded another.

The face of the woman in Dirty Dave’s poster came back to him, the woman with the platter of fried chicken. The one Dave had called Sarah. That woman had looked familiar to Sam, and all at once some obscure circuit fired off in his brain and he knew why.

It had been Naomi Higgins.

## 2

He passed two kids in JCHS jackets on the steps and caught the door before it could swing all the way closed. He stepped into the foyer. The first thing that struck him was the sound. The reading room beyond the marble steps was by no means rowdy, but neither was it the smooth pit of silence which had greeted Sam on Friday noon just over a week ago.

*Well, but it’s Saturday evening now, he thought. There are kids here, maybe studying for their midterm exams.*

But would Ardelia Lortz condone such chatter, muted as it was? The answer seemed to be yes, judging from the sound, but it surely didn’t seem in character.

The second thing had to do with that single mute adjuration which had been mounted on the easel.

SILENCE!

was gone. In its place was a picture of Thomas Jefferson. Below it was this quotation:

*“I cannot live without books.”* —Thomas Jefferson (in a letter to John Adams) June 10th, 1815

Sam studied this for a moment, thinking that it changed the whole flavor in one's mouth as one prepared to enter the library.

SILENCE!

induced feelings of trepidation and disquiet (what if one's belly was rumbling, for instance, or if one felt an attack of not necessarily silent flatulence might be imminent?).

*"I cannot live without books, "*

on the other hand, induced feelings of pleasure and anticipation—it made one feel as hungry men and women feel when the food is finally arriving.

Puzzling over how such a small thing could make such an essential difference, Sam entered the Library ... and stopped dead.

### 3

It was much brighter in the main room than it had been on his first visit, but that was only one of the changes. The ladders which had stretched up to the dim reaches of the upper shelves were gone. There was no need of them, because the ceiling was now only eight or nine feet above the floor instead of thirty or forty. If you wanted to take a book from one of the higher shelves, all you needed was one of the stools which were scattered about. The magazines were placed in an inviting fan on a wide table by the circulation desk. The oak rack from which they had hung like the skins of dead animals was gone. So was the sign reading

RETURN ALL MAGAZINES TO THEIR PROPER PLACES!

The shelf of new novels was still there, but the 7-DAY RENTALS sign had been replaced with one which said READ A BEST SELLER—JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT!

People—mostly young people—came and went, talking in low tones. Someone chuckled. It was an easy, unselfconscious sound.

Sam looked up at the ceiling, trying desperately to understand what in hell had happened here. The slanted skylights were gone. The upper reaches of the room had been hidden by a modern suspended ceiling. The old-fashioned hanging globes had been replaced by panelled fluorescent lighting set into the new ceiling.

A woman on her way up to the main desk with a handful of mystery novels followed Sam's gaze up to the ceiling, saw nothing unusual there, and looked curiously at Sam instead. One of the boys sitting at a long desk to the right of the magazine table nudged his fellows and pointed Sam out. Another tapped his temple and they all snickered.

Sam noticed neither the stares nor the snickers. He was unaware that he was simply standing in the entrance to the main reading room, gawking up at the ceiling with his mouth open. He was trying to get this major change straight in his mind.

*Well, they've put in a suspended ceiling since you were here last. So what? It's probably more heat-efficient.*

*Yes, but the Lortz woman never said anything about changes.*

No, but why would she say anything to him? Sam was hardly a library regular, was he?

*She should have been upset, though. She struck me as a rock-ribbed traditionalist. She wouldn't like this. Not at all.*

That was true, but there was something else, something even more troubling. Putting in a suspended ceiling was a major renovation. Sam didn't see how it could have been accomplished in just a week. And what about the high shelves, and all the books which had been on them? Where had the shelves gone? Where had the *books* gone?

Other people were looking at Sam now; even one of the library assistants was staring at him from the other side of the circulation desk. Most of the lively, hushed chatter in the big room had stilled.

Sam rubbed his eyes—actually rubbed his eyes—and looked up at the suspended ceiling with its inset fluorescent squares again. It was still there.

*I'm in the wrong library!* he thought wildly. *That's what it is!*

His confused mind first jumped at this idea and then backed away again, like a kitten that has been tricked into pouncing on a shadow. Junction City was fairly large by central Iowa standards, with a population of thirty-five thousand or so, but it was ridiculous to think it could support two libraries. Besides, the location of the building and the configuration of the room were right ... it was just everything else that was wrong.

Sam wondered for just a moment if he might be going insane, and then dismissed the thought. He looked around and noticed for the first time that everyone had stopped what they were doing. They were all looking at him. He felt a momentary, mad urge to say, "Go back to what you were doing—I was just noticing that the whole library is different this week." Instead, he sauntered over to the magazine table and picked up a copy of *U.S. News & World Report*. He began leafing through it with a show of great interest, and watched out of the corners of his eyes as the people in the room went back to what they had been doing.

When he felt that he could move without attracting undue attention, Sam replaced the magazine on the table and sauntered toward the Children's Library. He felt a little like a spy crossing enemy territory. The sign over the door was exactly the same, gold letters on warm dark oak, but the poster was different. Little Red Riding Hood at the moment of her terrible realization had been replaced by Donald Duck's nephews, Huey, Dewey, and Louie. They were wearing bathing trunks and diving into a swimming pool filled with books. The tag-line beneath read:

COME ON IN! THE READING'S FINE!

"What's going *on* here?" Sam muttered. His heart had begun to beat too fast; he could feel a fine sweat breaking out on his arms and back. If it had been just the poster, he could have assumed that La Lortz had been fired ... but it *wasn't* just the poster. It was *everything*.

He opened the door of the Children's Library and peeked inside. He saw the same agreeable small world with its low tables and chairs, the same bright-blue curtains, the same water fountain mounted on the wall. Only now the suspended ceiling in here

matched the suspended ceiling in the main reading room, and all the posters had been changed. The screaming child in the black sedan (*Simple Simon they call him Simple Simon they feel contempt for him I think that's very healthy, don't you*)

was gone, and so was the Library Policeman with his trenchcoat and his strange star of many points. Sam drew back, turned around, and walked slowly to the main circulation desk. He felt as if his whole body had turned to glass.

Two library assistants—a college-age boy and girl—watched him approach. Sam was not too upset himself to see that they looked a trifle nervous.

*Be careful. No ... be NORMAL. They already think you're halfway to being nuts.*

He suddenly thought of Lukey and a horrible, destructive impulse tried to seize him. He could see himself opening his mouth and yelling at these two nervous young people, demanding at the top of his voice that they give him a few Slim Fucking Slim Jims, because that was chow, that was chow, that was *chow-de-dow*.

He spoke in a calm, low voice instead.

"Perhaps you could help me. I need to speak to the librarian."

"Gee, I'm sorry," the girl said. "Mr. Price doesn't come in on Saturday nights."

Sam glanced down at the desk. As on his previous trip to the library, there was a small name-plaque standing next to the microfilm recorder, but it no longer said

A. LORTZ.

Now it said

MR. PRICE.

In his mind he heard Naomi say, *Tall man? About fifty?* "No," he said. "Not Mr. Price. Not Mr. Peckham, either. The other one. Ardelia Lortz."

The boy and girl exchanged a puzzled glance. "No one named Ardelia Lord works here," the boy said. "You must be thinking of some other library."

“Not Lord,” Sam told them. His voice seemed to be coming from a great distance. “*Lortz.*”

“No,” the girl said. “You really must be mistaken, sir.”

They were starting to look cautious again, and although Sam felt like insisting, telling them of *course* Ardelia Lortz worked here, he had met her only *eight days ago*, he made himself pull back. And in a way, it all made perfect sense, didn’t it? It was perfect sense within a framework of utter lunacy, granted, but that didn’t change the fact that the interior logic was intact. Like the posters, the skylights, and the magazine rack, Ardelia Lortz had simply ceased to exist.

Naomi spoke up again inside his head. *Oh? Miss Lortz, was it? That must have been fun.*

“Naomi recognized the name,” he muttered.

Now the library assistants were looking at him with identical expressions of consternation.

“Pardon me,” Sam said, and tried to smile. It felt crooked on his face. “I’m having one of those days.”

“Yes,” the boy said.

“You bet,” the girl said.

*They think I’m crazy, Sam thought, and do you know what? I don’t blame them a bit.*

“Was there anything else?” the boy asked.

Sam opened his mouth to say no—after which he would beat a hasty retreat—and then changed his mind. He was in for a penny; he might as well go in for a pound.

“How long has Mr. Price been the head librarian?”

The two assistants exchanged another glance. The girl shrugged. “Since we’ve been here,” she said, “but that’s not very long, Mr.—?”

“Peebles,” Sam said, offering his hand. “Sam Peebles. I’m sorry. My manners seem to have flown away with the rest of my mind.”

They both relaxed a little—it was an indefinable thing, but it was there, and it helped Sam do the same. Upset or not, he had managed to hold onto at least some of his not inconsiderable ability to put people at ease. A real-estate-and-insurance salesman who couldn’t do that was a fellow who ought to be looking for a new line of work.

“I’m Cynthia Berrigan,” she said, giving his hand a tentative shake. “This is Tom Stanford.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Tom Stanford said. He didn’t look entirely sure of this, but he also gave Sam’s hand a quick shake.

“Pardon me?” the woman with the mystery novels asked. “Could someone help me, please? I’ll be late for my bridge game.”

“I’ll do it,” Tom told Cynthia, and walked down the desk to check out the woman’s books.

She said, “Tom and I go to Chapelton Junior College, Mr. Peebles. This is a work-study job. I’ve been here three semesters now—Mr. Price hired me last spring. Tom came during the summer.”

“Mr. Price is the only full-time employee?”

“Uh-huh.” She had lovely brown eyes and now he could see a touch of concern in them. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Sam looked up again. He couldn’t help it. “Has this suspended ceiling been here since you came to work?”

She followed his glance. “Well,” she said, “I didn’t know that was what it’s called, but yes, it’s been this way since I’ve been here.”

“I had an idea there were skylights, you see.”

Cynthia smiled. “Well, sure. I mean, you can see them from the outside, if you go around to the side of the building. And, of course, you can see them from the stacks, but they’re boarded over. The skylights, I mean—not the stacks. I think they’ve been that way for years.”

For years.

“And you’ve never heard of Ardelia Lortz.”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. Sorry.”

“What about the Library Police?” Sam asked impulsively.

She laughed. “Only from my old aunt. She used to tell me the Library Police would get me if I didn’t bring my books back on time. But that was back in Providence, Rhode Island, when I was a little girl. A long time ago.”

*Sure, Sam thought. Maybe as long as ten, twelve years ago. Back when dinosaurs walked the earth.*

“Well,” he said, “thanks for the information. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

“You didn’t.”

“I think I did, a little. I was just confused for a second.”

“Who is this Ardelia Lortz?” Tom Stanford asked, coming back. “That name rings a bell, but I’ll be darned if I know why.”

“That’s just it. I don’t really know,” Sam said.

“Well, we’re closed tomorrow, but Mr. Price will be in Monday afternoon and Monday evening,” he said. “Maybe he can tell you what you want to know.”

Sam nodded. “I think I’ll come and see him. Meantime, thanks again.”

“We’re here to help if we can,” Tom said. “I only wish we could have helped you more, Mr. Peebles.”

“Me too,” Sam said.

## 4

He was okay until he got to the car, and then, as he was unlocking the driver’s-side door, all the muscles in his belly and legs seemed to drop dead. He had to support himself with a hand on the roof of his car to keep from falling down while he swung the door open. He did not really get in; he simply collapsed behind the wheel and then sat there, breathing hard and wondering with some alarm if he was going to faint.

*What’s going on here? I feel like a character in Rod Serling’s old show. “Submitted for your examination, one Samuel Peebles, ex-resident of Junction City, now selling real estate and whole life in ... the Twilight Zone.”*

Yes, that was what it was like. Only watching people cope with inexplicable happenings on TV was sort of fun. Sam was discovering that the inexplicable lost a lot of its charm when you were the one who had to struggle with it.

He looked across the street at the Library, where people came and went beneath the soft glow of the carriage lamps. The old lady with

the mystery novels was headed off down the street, presumably bound for her bridge game. A couple of girls were coming down the steps, talking and laughing together, books held to their blooming chests. Everything looked perfectly normal ... and of course it was. The *abnormal* Library had been the one he had entered a week ago. The only reason the oddities hadn't struck him more forcibly, he supposed, was because his mind had been on that damned speech of his.

*Don't think about it*, he instructed himself, although he was afraid that this was going to be one of those times when his mind simply wouldn't take instruction. *Do a Scarlett O'Hara and think about it tomorrow. Once the sun is up, all this will make a lot more sense.*

He put the car in gear and thought about it all the way home.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *NIGHT TERRORS*

#### 1

The first thing he did after letting himself in was to check the answering machine. His heartbeat cranked up a notch when he saw the MESSAGE WAITING lamp was lit.

*It'll be her. I don't know who she really is, but I'm beginning to think she won't be happy until she's driven me completely crackers.*

*Don't listen to it, then,* another part of his mind spoke up, and Sam was now so confused he couldn't tell if that was a reasonable idea or not. It *seemed* reasonable, but it also seemed a little cowardly. In fact—

He realized that he was standing here in a sweat, gnawing his fingernails, and suddenly grunted—a soft, exasperated noise.

*From the fourth grade to the mental ward,* he thought. *Well, I'll be damned if it's going to work that way, hon.*

He pushed the button.

“Hi!” a man's whiskey-roughened voice said. “This is Joseph Randowski, Mr. Peebles. My stage name is The Amazing Joe. I just called to thank you for filling in for me at that Kiwanis meeting or whatever it was. I wanted to tell you that I'm feeling a lot better—my neck was only sprained, not broke like they thought at first. I'm sending you a whole bunch of free tickets to the show. Pass em out to your friends. Take care of yourself. Thanks again. Bye.”

The tape stopped. The ALL MESSAGES PLAYED lamp came on. Sam snorted at his case of nerves—if Ardelia Lortz wanted him jumping at shadows, she was getting exactly what she wanted. He pushed the REWIND button, and a new thought struck him.

Rewinding the tape that took his messages was a habit with him, but it meant that the old messages disappeared under the new ones. The Amazing Joe's message would have erased Ardelia's earlier message. His only evidence that the woman actually existed was gone.

But that wasn't true, was it? There was his library card. He had stood in front of that goddamned circulation desk and watched her sign her name on it in large, flourishing letters.

Sam pulled out his wallet and went through it three times before admitting to himself that the library card was gone, too. And he thought he knew why. He vaguely remembered tucking it into the inside pocket of *Best Loved Poems of the American People*.

For safekeeping.

So he wouldn't lose it.

Great. Just great.

Sam sat down on the couch and put his forehead in his hand. His head was starting to ache.

## 2

He was heating a can of soup on the stove fifteen minutes later, hoping a little hot food would do something for his head, when he thought of Naomi again—Naomi, who looked so much like the woman in Dirty Dave's poster. The question of whether or not Naomi was leading a secret life of some sort under the name of Sarah had taken a back seat to something that seemed a lot more important, at least right now: Naomi had known who Ardelia Lortz was. But her reaction to the name ... it had been a little odd, hadn't it? It had startled her for a moment or two, and she'd started to make a joke, and then the phone had rung and it had been Burt Iverson, and—

Sam tried to replay the conversation in his mind and was chagrined at how little he remembered. Naomi had said Ardelia was peculiar, all right; he was sure of that, but not much else. It hadn't

seemed important then. The important thing then was that his career seemed to have taken a quantum leap forward. And that was still important, but this other thing seemed to dwarf it. In truth, it seemed to dwarf *everything*. His mind kept going back to that modern no-nonsense suspended ceiling and the short bookcases. He didn't believe he was crazy, not at all, but he was beginning to feel that if he didn't get this thing sorted out, he might go crazy. It was as if he had uncovered a hole in the middle of his head, one so deep you could throw things into it and not hear a splash no matter how big the things you threw were or how long you waited with your ear cocked for the sound. He supposed the feeling would pass—maybe—but in the meantime it was horrible.

He turned the burner under the soup to LO, went into the study, and found Naomi's telephone number. It rang three times and then a cracked, elderly voice said, "Who is it, please?" Sam recognized the voice at once, although he hadn't seen its owner in person for almost two years. It was Naomi's ramshackle mother.

"Hello, Mrs. Higgins," he said. "It's Sam Peebles."

He stopped, waited for her to say *Oh, hello, Sam* or maybe *How are you?* but there was only Mrs. Higgins's heavy, emphysemic breathing. Sam had never been one of her favorite people, and it seemed that absence had not made her heart grow fonder.

Since she wasn't going to ask it, Sam decided he might as well. "How are you, Mrs. Higgins?"

"I have my good days and my bad ones."

For a moment Sam was nonplussed. It seemed to be one of those remarks to which there was no adequate reply. *I'm sorry to hear that* didn't fit, but *That's great, Mrs. Higgins!* would sound even worse.

He settled for asking if he could speak to Naomi.

"She's out this evening. I don't know when she'll be back."

"Could you ask her to call me?"

"I'm going to bed. And don't ask me to leave her a note, either. My arthritis is very bad."

Sam sighed. "I'll call tomorrow."

"We'll be in church tomorrow morning," Mrs. Higgins stated in the same flat, unhelpful voice, "and the first Baptist Youth Picnic of the

season is tomorrow afternoon. Naomi has promised to help.”

Sam decided to call it off. It was clear that Mrs. Higgins was sticking as close to name, rank, and serial number as she possibly could. He started to say goodbye, then changed his mind. “Mrs. Higgins, does the name Lortz mean anything to you? Ardelia Lortz?”

The heavy wheeze of her respiration stopped in mid-snuffle. For a moment there was total silence on the line and then Mrs. Higgins spoke in a low, vicious voice. “How long are you Godless heathens going to go on throwing that woman in our faces? Do you think it’s *funny*? Do you think it’s *clever*?”

“Mrs. Higgins, you don’t understand. I just want to know—”

There was a sharp little click in his ear. It sounded as if Mrs. Higgins had broken a small dry stick over her knee. And then the line went dead.

### 3

Sam ate his soup, then spent half an hour trying to watch TV. It was no good. His mind kept wandering away. It might start with the woman in Dirty Dave’s poster, or with the muddy footprint on the cover of *Best Loved Poems of the American People*, or with the missing poster of Little Red Riding Hood. But no matter where it started, it always ended up in the same place: that completely different ceiling above the main reading room of the Junction City Public Library.

Finally he gave it up and crawled into bed. It had been one of the worst Saturdays he could remember, and might well have been the worst Saturday of his life. The only thing he wanted now was a quick trip into the land of dreamless unconsciousness.

But sleep didn’t come.

The horrors came instead.

Chief among them was the idea that he was losing his mind. Sam had never realized just how terrible such an idea could be. He had

seen movies where some fellow would go to see a psychiatrist and say “I feel like I’m losing my mind, doc,” while dramatically clutching his head, and he supposed he had come to equate the onset of mental instability with an Excedrin headache. It wasn’t like that, he discovered as the long hours passed and April 7 gradually became April 8. It was more like reaching down to scratch your balls and finding a large lump there, a lump that was probably a tumor of some kind.

The Library *couldn’t* have changed so radically in just over a week. He *couldn’t* have seen the skylights from the reading room. The girl, Cynthia Berrigan, had said they were boarded over, had been since she had arrived, at least a year ago. So this was some sort of a mental breakdown. Or a brain tumor. Or what about Alzheimer’s disease? *There* was a pleasant thought. He had read someplace—*Newsweek*, perhaps—that Alzheimer’s victims were getting younger and younger. Maybe the whole weird episode was a signal of creeping, premature senility.

An unpleasant billboard began to fill his thoughts, a billboard with three words written on it in greasy letters the color of red licorice. These words were

#### LOSING MY MIND.

He had lived an ordinary life, full of ordinary pleasures and ordinary regrets; a pretty-much-unexamined life. He had never seen his name in lights, true, but he had never had any reason to question his sanity, either. Now he found himself lying in his rumpled bed and wondering if this was how you came untethered from the real, rational world. If this was how it started when you

#### LOST YOUR MIND.

The idea that the angel of Junction City’s homeless shelter was Naomi—Naomi going under an alias—was another nutso idea. It just couldn’t be ... could it? He even began to question the strong upsurge in his business. Maybe he had hallucinated the whole thing.

Toward midnight, his thoughts turned to Ardelia Lortz, and that was when things really began to get bad. He began to think of how

awful it would be if Ardelia Lortz was in his closet, or even under his bed. He saw her grinning happily, secretly, in the dark, wriggling fingers tipped with long, sharp nails, her hair sprayed out all around her face in a weird fright-wig. He imagined how his bones would turn to jelly if she began to whisper to him.

*You lost the books, Sam, so it will have to be the Library Policeman . . . you lost the books . . . you looosssst them . . .*

At last, around twelve-thirty, Sam couldn't stand it any longer. He sat up and fumbled in the dark for the bedside lamp. And as he did, he was gripped by a new fantasy, one so vivid it was almost a certainty: he was not alone in his bedroom, but his visitor was not Ardelia Lortz. Oh no. His visitor was the Library Policeman from the poster that was no longer in the Children's Library. He was standing here in the dark, a tall, pale man wrapped in a trenchcoat, a man with a bad complexion and a white, jagged scar lying across his left cheek, below his left eye, and over the bridge of his nose. Sam hadn't seen that scar on the face in the poster, but that was only because the artist hadn't wanted to put it in. It was there. Sam knew it was there.

*You were wrong about the bushes, the Library Policeman would say in his lightly lisping voice. There are bushes growing along the sideth. Loth of bushes. And we're going to ecthplore them. We're going to ecthplore them together.*

*No! Stop it! Just . . . STOP it!*

As his trembling hand finally found the lamp, a board creaked in the room and he uttered a breathless little scream. His hand clenched, squeezing the switch. The light came on. For a moment he actually thought he saw the tall man, and then he realized it was only a shadow cast on the wall by the bureau.

Sam swung his feet out onto the floor and put his face in his hands for a moment. Then he reached for the pack of Kents on the nightstand.

"You've got to get hold of yourself," he muttered. "What the fuck were you thinking about?"

*I don't know, the voice inside responded promptly. Furthermore, I don't want to know. Ever. The bushes were a long time ago. I never*

*have to remember the bushes again. Or the taste. That sweet sweet taste.*

He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

The worst thing was this: Next time he might really see the man in the trenchcoat. Or Ardelia. Or Gorgo, High Emperor of Pellucidar. Because if he'd been able to create a hallucination as complete as his visit to the Library and his meeting with Ardelia Lortz, he could hallucinate *anything*. Once you started thinking about skylights that weren't there, and people who weren't there, and even *bushes* that weren't there, everything seemed possible. How did you quell a rebellion in your own *mind*?

He went down to the kitchen, turning on lights as he went, resisting an urge to look over his shoulder and see if anyone was creeping after him. A man with a badge in his hand, for instance. He supposed that what he needed was a sleeping pill, but since he didn't have any—not even one of the over-the-counter preparations like Sominex—he would just have to improvise. He splashed milk into a saucepan, heated it, poured it into a coffee mug, and then added a healthy shot of brandy. This was something else he had seen in the movies. He took a taste, grimaced, almost poured the evil mixture down the sink, and then looked at the clock on the microwave. Quarter to one in the morning. It was a long time until dawn, a long time to spend imagining Ardelia Lortz and the Library Policeman creeping up the stairs with knives gripped between their teeth.

*Or arrows, he thought. Long black arrows. Ardelia and the Library Policeman creeping up the stairs with long black arrows clamped between their teeth. How about that image, friends and neighbors?*

Arrows?

Why arrows?

He didn't want to think about it. He was tired of thoughts which came whizzing out of the previously unsuspected darkness inside him like horrid, stinking Frisbees.

*I don't want to think about it. I won't think about it.*

He finished the brandy-laced milk and went back to bed.

## 4

He left the bedside lamp on, and that made him feel a little calmer. He actually began to think he might go to sleep at some point before the heat-death of the universe. He pulled the comforter up to his chin, laced his hands behind his head, and looked at the ceiling.

*SOME of it must have really happened, he thought. It can't ALL have been a hallucination . . . unless this is part of it, and I'm really in one of the rubber rooms up in Cedar Rapids, wrapped in a straitjacket and only imagining I'm lying here in my own bed.*

He *had* delivered the speech. He *had* used the jokes from *The Speaker's Companion*, and Spencer Michael Free's verse from *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. And since he had neither volume in his own small collection of books, he must have gotten them from the Library. Naomi had known Ardelia Lortz—had known her name, anyway—and so had Naomi's mother. Had she! It was as if he'd set a firecracker off under her easy chair.

*I can check around, he thought. If Mrs. Higgins knows the name, other people will, too. Not work-study kids from Chapelton, maybe, but people who've been in Junction City a long time. Frank Stephens, maybe. Or Dirty Dave ...*

At this point, Sam finally drifted off. He crossed the almost seamless border between waking and sleeping without knowing it; his thoughts never ceased but began instead to twist themselves into ever more strange and fabulous shapes. The shapes became a dream. And the dream became a nightmare. He was at Angle Street again, and the three alkiees were on the porch, laboring over their posters. He asked Dirty Dave what he was doing.

*Aw, just passin the time, Dave said, and then, shyly, he turned the poster around so Sam could see it.*

It was a picture of Simple Simon. He had been impaled on a spit over an open fire. He was clutching a great bundle of melting red licorice in one hand. His clothes were burning but he was still alive. He was screaming. The words written above this terrible image were:

CHILDREN DINNER IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY BUSHES  
TO BENEFIT THE LIBRARY POLICE FUND  
MIDNITE TO 2 A.M.  
COME ONE COME ALL  
“THAT’S CHOW-DE-DOW!”

*Dave, that’s horrible, Sam said in the dream.*

*Not at all, Dirty Dave replied. The children call him Simple Simon. They love to eat him. I think that’s very healthy, don’t you?*

*Look! Rudolph cried. Look, it’s Sarah!*

Sam looked up and saw Naomi crossing the littered, weedy ground between Angle Street and the Recycling Center. She was moving very slowly, because she was pushing a shopping-cart filled with copies of *The Speaker’s Companion* and *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. Behind her, the sun was going down in a sullen furnace glare of red light and a long passenger train was rumbling slowly along the track, headed out into the emptiness of western Iowa. It was at least thirty coaches long, and every car was black. Crepe hung and swung in the windows. It was a funeral train, Sam realized.

Sam turned back to Dirty Dave and said, *Her name isn’t Sarah. That’s Naomi. Naomi Higgins from Proverbia.*

*Not at all, Dirty Dave said. It’s Death coming, Mr. Peebles. Death is a woman.*

Lukey began to squeal then. In the extremity of his terror he sounded like a human pig. *She got Slim Jims! She got Slim Jims! Oh my God, she got all Slim Fuckin Slim Jims!*

Sam turned back to see what Lukey was talking about. The woman was closer, but it was no longer Naomi. It was Ardelia. She was dressed in a trenchcoat the color of a winter storm-cloud. The shopping cart was not full of Slim Jims, as Lukey had said, but thousands of intertwined red licorice whips. While Sam watched, Ardelia snatched up handfuls of them and began to cram them into her mouth. Her teeth were no longer dentures; they were long and discolored. They looked like vampire teeth to Sam, both sharp and horribly strong. Grimacing, she bit down on her mouthful of candy.

Bright blood squirted out, spraying a pink cloud in the sunset air and dribbling down her chin. Severed chunks of licorice tumbled to the weedy earth, still jetting blood.

She raised hands which had become hooked talons.

*“Youuuu losst the BOOOOOKS!”* she screamed at Sam, and charged at him.

## 5

Sam came awake in a breathless jerk. He had pulled all the bedclothes loose from their moorings, and was huddled beneath them near the foot of the bed in a sweaty ball. Outside, the first thin light of a new day was peeking under the drawn shade. The bedside clock said it was 5:53 A.M.

He got up, the bedroom air cool and refreshing on his sweaty skin, went into the bathroom, and urinated. His head ached vaguely, either as a result of the early-morning shot of brandy or stress from the dream. He opened the medicine cabinet, took two aspirin, and then shambled back to his bed. He pulled the covers up as best he could, feeling the residue of his nightmare in every damp fold of the sheet. He wouldn't go back to sleep again—he knew that—but he could at least lie here until the nightmare started to dissolve.

As his head touched the pillow, he suddenly realized he knew something else, something as surprising and unexpected as his sudden understanding that the woman in Dirty Dave's poster had been his part-time secretary. This new understanding also had to do with Dirty Dave ... and with Ardelia Lortz.

*It was the dream,* he thought. *That's where I found out.*

Sam fell into a deep, natural sleep. There were no more dreams and when he woke up it was almost eleven o'clock. Churchbells were calling the faithful to worship, and outside it was a beautiful day. The sight of all that sunshine lying on all that bright new grass did more than make him feel good; it made him feel almost reborn.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *ANGLE STREET (II)*

#### 1

He made himself brunch—orange juice, a three-egg omelette loaded with green onions, lots of strong coffee—and thought about going back to Angle Street. He could still remember the moment of illumination he had experienced during his brief period of waking and was perfectly sure that his insight was true, but he wondered if he really wanted to pursue this crazy business any further.

In the bright light of a spring morning, his fears of the previous night seemed both distant and absurd, and he felt a strong temptation—almost a need—to simply let the matter rest. Something had happened to him, he thought, something which had no reasonable, rational explanation. The question was, so what?

He had read about such things, about ghosts and premonitions and possessions, but they held only minimal interest for him. He liked a spooky movie once in awhile, but that was about as far as it went. He was a practical man, and he could see no practical use for paranormal episodes ... if they did indeed occur. He had experienced ... well, call it an event, for want of a better word. Now the event was over. Why not leave it at that?

*Because she said she wanted the books back by tomorrow—what about that?*

But this seemed to have no power over him now. In spite of the messages she had left on his answering machine, Sam no longer exactly believed in Ardelia Lortz.

What did interest him was his own reaction to what had happened. He found himself remembering a college biology lecture. The

instructor had begun by saying that the human body had an extremely efficient way of dealing with the incursion of alien organisms. Sam remembered the teacher saying that because the bad news—cancer, influenza, sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis—got all the headlines, people tended to believe they were a lot more vulnerable to disease than they really were. “The human body,” the instructor had said, “has its own Green Beret force at its disposal. When the human body is attacked by an outsider, ladies and gentlemen, the response of this force is quick and without mercy. No quarter is given. Without this army of trained killers, each of you would have been dead twenty times over before the end of your first year.”

The prime technique the body employed to rid itself of invaders was isolation. The invaders were first surrounded, cut off from the nutrients they needed to live, then either eaten, beaten, or starved. Now Sam was discovering—or thought he was—that the mind employed exactly the same technique when it was attacked. He could remember many occasions when he had felt he was coming down with a cold only to wake up the next morning feeling fine. The body had done its work. A vicious war had been going on even as he slept, and the invaders had been wiped out to the last man ... or bug. They had been eaten, beaten, or starved.

Last night he had experienced the mental equivalent of an impending cold. This morning the invader, the threat to his clear, rational perceptions, had been surrounded. Cut off from its nutrients. Now it was only a matter of time. And part of him was warning the rest of him that, by investigating this business further, he might be feeding the enemy.

*This is how it happens, he thought. This is why the world isn't full of reports of strange happenings and inexplicable phenomena. The mind experiences them . . . reels around for a while . . . then counterattacks.*

But he was curious. That was the thing. And didn't they say that, although curiosity killed the cat, satisfaction brought the beast back?

*Who? Who says?*

He didn't know ... but he supposed he could find out. At his local library. Sam smiled a little as he took his dishes over to the sink. And discovered he had already made his decision: he *would* pursue this crazy business just a little further.

Just a little bit.

## 2

Sam arrived back at Angle Street around twelve-thirty. He was not terribly surprised to see Naomi's old blue Datsun parked in the driveway. Sam parked behind it, got out, and climbed the rickety steps past the sign telling him he'd have to drop any bottles he might have in the trash barrel. He knocked, but there was no answer. He pushed the door open, revealing a wide hall that was barren of furniture ... unless the pay telephone halfway down counted. The wallpaper was clean but faded. Sam saw a place where it had been mended with Scotch tape.

"Hello?"

There was no answer. He went in, feeling like an intruder, and walked down the hall. The first door on the left opened into the common room. Two signs had been thumbtacked to this door.

FRIENDS OF BILL ENTER HERE!

read the top one. Below this was another, which seemed at once utterly sensible and exquisitely dumb to Sam. It read:

TIME TAKES TIME.

The common room was furnished with mismatched, cast-off chairs and a long sofa which had also been mended with tape—electrician's tape, this time. More slogans had been hung on the wall. There was a coffeemaker on a little table by the TV. Both the TV and the coffeemaker were off.

Sam walked on down the hall past the stairs, feeling more like an intruder than ever. He glanced into the three other rooms which

opened off the corridor. Each was furnished with two plain cots, and all were empty. The rooms were scrupulously clean, but they told their tales just the same. One smelled of Musterole. Another smelled unpleasantly of some deep sickness. *Either someone has died recently in this room, Sam thought, or someone is going to.*

The kitchen, also empty, was at the far end of the hall. It was a big, sunny room with faded linoleum covering the floor in uneven dunes and valleys. A gigantic stove, combination wood and gas, filled an alcove. The sink was old and deep, its enamel discolored with rust stains. The faucets were equipped with old-fashioned propeller handles. An ancient Maytag washing machine and a gas-fired Kenmore drier stood next to the pantry. The air smelled faintly of last night's baked beans. Sam liked the room. It spoke to him of pennies which had been pinched until they screamed, but it also spoke of love and care and some hard-won happiness. It reminded him of his grandmother's kitchen, and that had been a good place. A safe place.

On the old restaurant-sized Amana refrigerator was a magnetized plaque which read:

GOD BLESS OUR BOOZELESS HOME.

Sam heard faint voices outside. He crossed the kitchen and looked through one of the windows, which had been raised to admit as much of the warm spring day as the mild breeze could coax in.

The back lawn of Angle Street was showing the first touches of green; at the rear of the property, by a thin belt of just-budding trees, an idle vegetable garden waited for warmer days. To the left, a volleyball net sagged in a gentle arc. To the right were two horseshoe pits, just beginning to sprout a few weeds. It was not a prepossessing back yard—at this time of year, few country yards were—but Sam saw it had been raked at least once since the snow had released its winter grip, and there were no cinders, although he could see the steely shine of the railroad tracks less than fifty feet from the garden. The residents of Angle Street might not have a lot to take care of, he thought, but they were taking care of what they did have.

About a dozen people were sitting on folding camp chairs in a rough circle between the volleyball net and the horseshoe pits. Sam recognized Naomi, Dave, Lukey, and Rudolph. A moment later he realized he also recognized Burt Iverson, Junction City's most prosperous lawyer, and Elmer Baskin, the banker who hadn't gotten to his Rotary speech but who had called later to congratulate him just the same. The breeze gusted, blowing back the homely checked curtains which hung at the sides of the window through which Sam was looking. It also ruffled Elmer's silver hair. Elmer turned his face up to the sun and smiled. Sam was struck by the simple pleasure he saw, not on Elmer's face but *in* it. At that moment he was both more and less than a small city's richest banker; he was every man who ever greeted spring after a long, cold winter, happy to still be alive, whole, and free of pain.

Sam felt struck with unreality. It was weird enough that Naomi Higgins should be out here consorting with the un-homed winos of Junction City—and under another name, at that. To find that the town's most respected banker and one of its sharpest legal eagles were also here was a bit of a mind-blower.

A man in ragged green pants and a Cincinnati Bengals sweatshirt raised his hand. Rudolph pointed at him. "My name's John, and I'm an alcoholic," the man in the Bengals sweatshirt said.

Sam backed away from the window quickly. His face felt hot. Now he felt not only like an intruder but a spy. He supposed they usually held their Sunday-noon AA meeting in the common room—the coffeepot suggested it, anyway—but today the weather had been so nice that they had taken their chairs outside. He bet it had been Naomi's idea.

*We'll be in church tomorrow morning, Mrs. Higgins had said, and the first Baptist Youth Picnic of the season is tomorrow afternoon. Naomi has promised to help.* He wondered if Mrs. Higgins knew her daughter was spending the afternoon with the alkies instead of the Baptists and supposed she did. He thought he also understood why Naomi had abruptly decided two dates with Sam Peebles was enough. He had thought it was the religion thing at the time, and Naomi hadn't ever tried to suggest it was anything else. But after the

first date, which had been a movie, she had agreed to go out with him again. After the *second* date, any romantic interest she'd had in him ceased. Or seemed to. The second date had been dinner. And he had ordered wine.

*Well for Christ's sake—how was I supposed to know she's an alcoholic? Am I a mind-reader?*

The answer, of course, was he *couldn't* have known ... but his face felt hotter, just the same.

*Or maybe it's not booze . . . or not just booze. Maybe she's got other problems, too.*

He also found himself wondering what would happen if Burt Iverson and Elmer Baskin, both powerful men, found out that he knew they belonged to the world's largest secret society. Maybe nothing; he didn't know enough about AA to be sure. He *did* know two things, however: that the second A stood for Anonymous, and that these were men who could squash his rising business aspirations flat if they chose to do so.

Sam decided to leave as quickly and quietly as he could. To his credit, this decision was not based on personal considerations. The people sitting out there on the back lawn of Angle Street shared a serious problem. He had discovered this by accident; he had no intention of staying—and eavesdropping—on purpose.

As he went back down the hallway again, he saw a pile of cut-up paper resting on top of the pay phone. A stub of pencil had been tacked to the wall on a short length of string beside the phone. On impulse he took a sheet of paper and printed a quick note on it.

Dave,

I stopped by this morning to see you, but nobody was around. I want to talk to you about a woman named Ardelia Lortz. I've got an idea you know who she is, and I'm anxious to find out about her. Will you give me a call this afternoon or this evening, if you get a chance? The number is 555-8699. Thanks very much.

He signed his name at the bottom, folded the sheet in half, and printed Dave's name on the fold. He thought briefly about taking it back down to the kitchen and putting it on the counter, but he didn't want any of them—Naomi most of all—worrying that he might have seen them at their odd but perhaps helpful devotions. He propped it on top of the TV in the common room instead, with Dave's name facing out. He thought about placing a quarter for the telephone beside the note and then didn't. Dave might take that wrong.

He left then, glad to be out in the sun again undiscovered. As he got back into his car, he saw the bumper sticker on Naomi's Datsun.

LET GO AND LET GOD,

it said.

"Better God than Ardelia," Sam muttered, and backed out the driveway to the road.

### 3

By late afternoon, Sam's broken rest of the night before had begun to tell, and a vast sleepiness stole over him. He turned on the TV, found a Cincinnati-Boston exhibition baseball game wending its slow way into the eighth inning, lay down on the sofa to watch it, and almost immediately dozed off. The telephone rang before the doze had a chance to spiral down into real sleep, and Sam got up to answer it, feeling woozy and disoriented.

"Hello?"

"You don't want to be talking about that woman," Dirty Dave said with no preamble whatsoever. His voice was trembling at the far edge of control. "You don't even want to be *thinking* about her."

*How long are you Godless heathens going to go on throwing that woman in our faces? Do you think it's funny? Do you think it's clever?*

All of Sam's drowsiness was gone in an instant. "Dave, what is it about that woman? Either people react as though she were the devil

or they don't know anything about her. Who is she? What in the hell did she do to freak you out this way?"

There was a long period of silence. Sam waited through it, his heart beating heavily in his chest and throat. He would have thought the connection had been broken if not for the sound of Dave's broken breathing in his ear.

"Mr. Peebles," he said at last, "you've been a real good help to me over the years. You and some others helped me stay alive when I wasn't even sure I wanted to myself. But I can't talk about that bitch. I can't. And if you know what's good for you, you won't talk to anybody else about her, neither."

"That sounds like a threat."

"No!" Dave said. He sounded more than surprised; he sounded shocked. "No—I'm just warnin you, Mr. Peebles, same as I'd do if I saw you wanderin around an old well where the weeds were all grown up so you couldn't see the hole. Don't talk about her and don't think about her. Let the dead stay dead."

*Let the dead stay dead.*

In a way it didn't surprise him; everything that had happened (with, perhaps, the exception of the messages left on his answering machine) pointed to the same conclusion: that Ardelia Lortz was no longer among the living. He—Sam Peebles, small-town realtor and insurance agent—had been speaking to a ghost without even knowing it. Spoken to her? Hell! Had done *business* with her! He had given her two bucks and she had given him a library card.

So he was not exactly surprised . . . but a deep chill began to radiate out along the white highways of his skeleton just the same. He looked down and saw pale knobs of gooseflesh standing out on his arms.

*You should have left it alone*, part of his mind mourned. *Didn't I tell you so?*

"When did she die?" Sam asked. His voice sounded dull and listless to his own ears.

"I don't want to talk about it, Mr. Peebles!" Dave sounded nearly frantic now. His voice trembled, skipped into a higher register which was almost falsetto, and splintered there. "*Please!*"

*Leave him alone*, Sam cried angrily at himself. *Doesn't he have enough problems without this crap to worry about?*

Yes. And he could leave Dave alone—there must be other people in town who would talk to him about Ardelia Lortz ... if he could find a way to approach them that wouldn't make them want to call for the men with the butterfly nets, that was. But there was one other thing, a thing perhaps only Dirty Dave Duncan could tell him for sure.

"You drew some posters for the Library once, didn't you? I think I recognized your style from the poster you were doing yesterday on the porch. In fact, I'm almost sure. There was one showing a little boy in a black car. And a man in a trenchcoat—the Library Policeman. Did you—"

Before he could finish, Dave burst out with such a shriek of shame and grief and fear that Sam was silenced.

"Dave? I—"

*"Leave it alone!"* Dave wept. *"I couldn't help myself, so can't you just please leave—"*

His cries abruptly diminished and there was a rattle as someone took the phone from him.

"Stop it," Naomi said. She sounded near tears herself, but she also sounded furious. "Can't you just stop it, you horrible man?"

"Naomi—"

"My name is Sarah when I'm here," she said slowly, "but I hate you equally under both names, Sam Peebles. I'm never going to set foot in your office again." Her voice began to rise. "Why couldn't you leave him alone? Why did you have to rake up all this old *shit*? Why?"

Unnerved, hardly in control of himself, Sam said: "Why did you send me to the Library? If you didn't want me to meet her, Naomi, why did you send me to the goddam Library in the first place?"

There was a gasp on the other end of the line.

"Naomi? Can we—"

There was a click as she hung up the telephone.

Connection broken.

Sam sat in his study until almost nine-thirty, eating Tums and writing one name after another on the same legal pad he had used when composing the first draft of his speech. He would look at each name for a little while, then cross it off. Six years had seemed like a long time to spend in one place . . . at least until tonight. Tonight it seemed like a much shorter period of time—a weekend, say.

Craig *Jones*, he wrote.

He stared at the name and thought, *Craig might know about Ardelia . . . but he'd want to know why I was interested.*

Did he know Craig well enough to answer that question truthfully? The answer to that question was a firm no. Craig was one of Junction City's younger lawyers, a real wannabe. They'd had a few business lunches . . . and there was Rotary Club, of course—and Craig had invited him to his house for dinner once. When they happened to meet on the street they spoke cordially, sometimes about business, more often about the weather. None of that added up to friendship, though, and if Sam meant to spill this nutty business to someone, he wanted it to be a friend, not an associate that called him ole buddy after the second sloe-gin fizz.

He scratched Craig's name off the list.

He'd made two fairly close friends since coming to Junction City, one a physician's assistant with Dr. Melden's practice, the other a city cop. Russ Frame, his PA friend, had jumped to a better-paying family practice in Grand Rapids early in 1989. And since the first of January, Tom Wycliffe had been overseeing the Iowa State Patrol's new Traffic Control Board. He had fallen out of touch with both men since—he was slow making friends, and not good at keeping them, either.

Which left him just where?

Sam didn't know. He *did* know that Ardelia Lortz's name affected some people in Junction City like a satchel charge. He knew—or believed he knew—that he had met her even though she was dead.

He couldn't even tell himself that he had met a relative, or some nutty woman calling herself Ardelia Lortz. Because—

*I think I met a ghost. In fact, I think I met a ghost inside of a ghost. I think that the library I entered was the Junction City Library as it was when Ardelia Lortz was alive and in charge of the place. I think that's why it felt so weird and off-kilter. It wasn't like time-travel, or the way I imagine time-travel would be. It was more like stepping into limbo for a little while. And it was real. I'm sure it was real.*

He paused, drumming his fingers on the desk.

*Where did she call me from? Do they have telephones in limbo?*

He stared at the list of crossed-off names for a long moment, then tore the yellow sheet slowly off the pad. He crumpled it up and tossed it in the wastebasket.

*You should have left it alone,* part of him continued to mourn.

But he hadn't. So now what?

*Call one of the guys you trust. Call Russ Frame or Tom Wycliffe. Just pick up the phone and make a call.*

But he didn't want to do that. Not tonight, at least. He recognized this as an irrational, half-superstitious feeling—he had given and gotten a lot of unpleasant information over the phone just lately, or so it seemed—but he was too tired to grapple with it tonight. If he could get a good night's sleep (and he thought he could, if he left the bedside lamp on again), maybe something better, something more concrete, would occur to him tomorrow morning, when he was fresh. Further along, he supposed he would have to try and mend his fences with Naomi Higgins and Dave Duncan—but first he wanted to find out just what kind of fences they were.

If he could.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN (1)*

He did sleep well. There were no dreams, and an idea came to him naturally and easily in the shower the next morning, the way ideas sometimes did when your body was rested and your mind hadn't been awake long enough to get cluttered up with a load of shit. The Public Library was not the only place where information was available, and when it was local history—*recent* local history—you were interested in, it wasn't even the best place.

"The *Gazette*!" he cried, and stuck his head under the shower nozzle to rinse the soap out of it.

Twenty minutes later he was downstairs, dressed except for his coat and tie, and drinking coffee in his study. The legal pad was once more in front of him, and on it was the start of another list.

1. *Ardelia Lortz—who is she? Or who was she?*
2. *Ardelia Lortz—what did she do?*
3. *Junction City Public Library—renovated? When? Pictures?*

At this point the doorbell rang. Sam glanced at the clock as he got up to answer it. It was going on eight-thirty, time to get to work. He could shoot over to the *Gazette* office at ten, the time he usually took his coffee break, and check some back issues. Which ones? He was still mulling this over—some would undoubtedly bear fruit quicker than others—as he dug in his pocket for the paperboy's money. The doorbell rang again.

"I'm coming as fast as I can, Keith!" he called, stepping into the kitchen entryway and grabbing the doorknob. "Don't punch a hole in the damn d—"

At that moment he looked up and saw a shape much larger than Keith Jordan's bulking behind the sheer curtain hung across the window in the door. His mind had been preoccupied, more

concerned with the day ahead than this Monday-morning ritual of paying the newsboy, but in that instant an icepick of pure terror stabbed its way through his scattered thoughts. He did not have to see the face; even through the sheer he recognized the shape, the set of the body ... and the trenchcoat, of course.

The taste of red licorice, high, sweet, and sickening, flooded his mouth.

He let go of the doorknob, but an instant too late. The latch had clicked back, and the moment it did, the figure standing on the back porch rammed the door open. Sam was thrown backward into the kitchen. He flailed his arms to keep his balance and managed to knock all three coats hanging from the rod in the entryway to the floor.

The Library Policeman stepped in, wrapped in his own pocket of cold air. He stepped in slowly, as if he had all the time in the world, and closed the door behind him. In one hand he held Sam's copy of the *Gazette* neatly rolled and folded. He raised it like a baton.

"I brought you your paper," the Library Policeman said. His voice was strangely distant, as if it was coming to Sam through a heavy pane of glass. "I was going to pay the boy as well, but he theemed in a hurry to get away. I wonder why."

He advanced toward the kitchen—toward Sam, who was cowering against the counter and staring at the intruder with the huge, shocked eyes of a terrified child, of some poor fourth-grade Simple Simon.

*I am imagining this, Sam thought, or I'm having a nightmare—a nightmare so horrible it makes the one I had two nights ago look like a sweet dream.*

But it was no nightmare. It was terrifying, but it was no nightmare. Sam had time to hope he had gone crazy after all. Insanity was no day at the beach, but nothing could be as awful as this man-shaped thing which had come into his house, this thing which walked in its own wedge of winter.

Sam's house was old and the ceilings were high, but the Library Policeman had to duck his head in the entry, and even in the kitchen

the crown of his gray felt hat almost brushed the ceiling. That meant he was over seven feet tall.

His body was wrapped in a trenchcoat the leaden color of fog at twilight. His skin was paper white. His face was dead, as if he could understand neither kindness nor love nor mercy. His mouth was set in lines of ultimate, passionless authority and Sam thought for one confused moment of how the closed library door had looked, like the slotted mouth in the face of a granite robot. The Library Policeman's eyes appeared to be silver circles which had been punctured by tiny shotgun pellets. They were rimmed with pinkish-red flesh that looked ready to bleed. They were lashless. And the worst thing of all was this: it was a face Sam *knew*. He did not think this was the first time he had cringed in terror beneath that black gaze, and far back in his mind, Sam heard a voice with the slightest trace of a lisp say: *Come with me, son . . . I'm a poleethman.*

The scar overlaid the geography of that face exactly as it had in Sam's imagination—across the left cheek, below the left eye, across the bridge of the nose. Except for the scar, it was the man in the poster . . . or was it? He could no longer be sure.

*Come with me, son . . . I'm a poleethman.*

Sam Peebles, darling of the Junction City Rotary Club, wet his pants. He felt his bladder let go in a warm gush, but that seemed far away and unimportant. What was important was that there was a monster in his kitchen, and the most terrible thing about this monster was that Sam almost knew his face. Sam felt a triple-locked door far back in his mind straining to burst open. He never thought of running. The idea of flight was beyond his capacity to imagine. He was a child again, a child who has been caught red-handed

*(the book isn't The Speaker's Companion)*

doing some awful bad thing. Instead of running

*(the book isn't Best Loved Poems of the American People)*

he folded slowly over his own wet crotch and collapsed between the two stools which stood at the counter, holding his hands up blindly above his head.

*(the book is)*

“No,” he said in a husky, strengthless voice. “No, please—no, please, please don’t do it to me, please, I’ll be good, please don’t hurt me that way.”

He was reduced to this. But it didn’t matter; the giant in the fog-colored trenchcoat

*(the book is The Black Arrow by Robert Louis Stevenson)*

now stood directly over him.

Sam dropped his head. It seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. He looked at the floor and prayed incoherently that when he looked up—when he had the *strength* to look up—the figure would be gone.

“Look at me,” the distant, thudding voice instructed. It was the voice of an evil god.

“No,” Sam cried in a shrieky, breathless voice, and then burst into helpless tears. It was not just terror, although the terror was real enough, bad enough. Separate from it was a cold deep drift of childish fright and childish shame. Those feelings clung like poison syrup to whatever it was he dared not remember, the thing that had something to do with a book he had never read: *The Black Arrow*, by Robert Louis Stevenson.

*Whack!*

Something struck Sam’s head and he screamed.

*“Look at me!”*

“No, please don’t make me,” Sam begged.

*Whack!*

He looked up, shielding his streaming eyes with one rubbery arm, just in time to see the Library Policeman’s arm come down again.

*Whack!*

He was hitting Sam with Sam’s own rolled-up copy of the *Gazette*, whacking him the way you might a heedless puppy that has piddled on the floor.

“That’th better,” said the Library Policeman. He grinned, lips parting to reveal the points of sharp teeth, teeth which were almost fangs. He reached into the pocket of his trenchcoat and brought out a leather folder. He flipped it open and revealed the strange star of many points. It glinted in the clean morning light.

Sam was now helpless to look away from that merciless face, those silver eyes with their tiny birdshot pupils. He was slobbering and knew it but was helpless to stop that, either.

"You have two books which belong to uth," the Library Policeman said. His voice still seemed to be coming from a distance, or from behind a thick pane of glass. "Mith Lorth is very upthet with you, Mr. Peebles."

"I lost them," Sam said, beginning to cry harder. The thought of lying to this man about (*The Black Arrow*)

the books, about *anything*, was out of the question. He was all authority, all power, all force. He was judge, jury, and executioner.

*Where's the janitor? Sam wondered incoherently. Where's the janitor who checks the dials and then goes back into the sane world? The sane world where things like this don't have to happen?*

"I ... I ... I ..."

"I don't want to hear your thick ecthcuses," the Library Policeman said. He flipped his leather folder closed and stuffed it into his right pocket. At the same time he reached into his left pocket and drew out a knife with a long, sharp blade. Sam, who had spent three summers earning money for college as a stockboy, recognized it. It was a carton-slitter. There was undoubtedly a knife like that in every library in America. "You have until midnight. Then . . ."

He leaned down, extending the knife in one white, corpse-like hand. That freezing envelope of air struck Sam's face, numbed it. He tried to scream and could produce only a glassy whisper of silent air.

The tip of the blade pricked the flesh of his throat. It was like being pricked with an icicle. A single bead of scarlet oozed out and then froze solid, a tiny seed-pearl of blood.

". . . then I come again," the Library Policeman said in his odd, lisp-rounded voice. "You better find what you loht, Mr. Peebles."

The knife disappeared back into the pocket. The Library Policeman drew back up to his full height.

"There is another thing," he said. "You have been athking questions, Mr. Peebles. Don't athk any more. Do you underthand me?"

Sam tried to answer and could only utter a deep groan.

The Library Policeman began to bend down, pushing chill air ahead of him the way the flat prow of a barge might push a chunk of river-ice. "Don't pry into things that don't concern you. *Do you underhand me?*"

"Yes!" Sam screamed. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"Good. Because I will be watching. And I am not alone."

He turned, his trenchcoat rustling, and recrossed the kitchen toward the entry. He spared not a single backward glance for Sam. He passed through a bright patch of morning sun as he went, and Sam saw a wonderful, terrible thing: the Library Policeman cast no shadow.

He reached the back door. He grasped the knob. Without turning around he said in a low, terrible voice: "If you don't want to see me again, Mr. Peebles, *find those books.*"

He opened the door and went out.

A single frantic thought filled Sam's mind the minute the door closed again and he heard the Library Policeman's feet on the back porch: he had to lock the door.

He got halfway to his feet and then grayness swam over him and he fell forward, unconscious.

## CHAPTER TEN

### ***CHRON-O-LODGE-ICK-A-LEE SPEAKING***

#### 1

“May I . . . help you?” the receptionist asked. The slight pause came as she took a second look at the man who had just approached the desk.

“Yes,” Sam said. “I want to look at some back issues of the *Gazette*, if that’s possible.”

“Of course it is,” she said. “But—pardon me if I’m out of line—do you feel all right, sir? Your color is very bad.”

“I think I may be coming down with something, at that,” Sam said.

“Spring colds are the worst, aren’t they?” she said, getting up. “Come right through the gate at the end of the counter, Mr.—?”

“Peebles. Sam Peebles.”

She stopped, a chubby woman of perhaps sixty, and cocked her head. She put one red-tipped nail to the corner of her mouth. “You sell insurance, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“I thought I recognized you. Your picture was in the paper last week. Was it some sort of award?”

“No, ma’am,” Sam said, “I gave a speech. At the Rotary Club.” *And would give anything to be able to turn back the clock, he thought. I’d tell Craig Jones to go fuck himself.*

“Well, that’s wonderful,” she said . . . but she spoke as if there might be some doubt about it. “You looked different in the picture.”

Sam came in through the gate.

“I’m Doreen McGill,” the woman said, and put out a plump hand.

Sam shook it and said he was pleased to meet her. It took an effort. He thought that speaking to people—and touching people, especially that—was going to be an effort for quite awhile to come. All of his old ease seemed to be gone.

She led him toward a carpeted flight of stairs and flicked a light-switch. The stairway was narrow, the overhead bulb dim, and Sam felt the horrors begin to crowd in on him at once. They came eagerly, as fans might congregate around a person offering free tickets to some fabulous sold-out show. The Library Policeman could be down there, waiting in the dark. The Library Policeman with his dead white skin and red-rimmed silver eyes and small but hauntingly familiar lisp.

*Stop it, he told himself. And if you can't stop it, then for God's sake control it. You have to. Because this is your only chance. What will you do if you can't go down a flight of stairs to a simple office basement? Just cower in your house and wait for midnight?*

"That's the morgue," Doreen McGill said, pointing. This was clearly a lady who pointed every chance she got. "You only have to—"

"Morgue?" Sam asked, turning toward her. His heart had begun to knock nastily against his ribs. "*Morgue?*"

Doreen McGill laughed. "Everyone says it just like that. It's awful, isn't it? But that's what they call it. Some silly newspaper tradition, I guess. Don't worry, Mr. Peebles—there are no bodies down there; just reels and reels of microfilm."

*I wouldn't be so sure,* Sam thought, following her down the carpeted stairs. He was very glad she was leading the way.

She flicked on a line of switches at the foot of the stairs. A number of fluorescent lights, embedded in what looked like oversized inverted ice-cube trays, went on. They lit up a large low room carpeted in the same dark blue as the stairs. The room was lined with shelves of small boxes. Along the left wall were four microfilm readers that looked like futuristic hair-driers. They were the same blue as the carpet.

"What I started to say was that you have to sign the book," Doreen said. She pointed again, this time at a large book chained to a stand by the door. "You also have to write the date, the time you came in,

which is”—she checked her wristwatch—“ twenty past ten, and the time you leave.”

Sam bent over and signed the book. The name above his was Arthur Meecham. Mr. Meecham had been down here on December 27th, 1989. Over three months ago. This was a well-lighted, well-stocked, efficient room that apparently did very little business.

“It’s nice down here, isn’t it?” Doreen asked complacently. “That’s because the federal government helps subsidize newspaper morgues—or libraries, if you like that word better. I know / do.”

A shadow danced in one of the aisles and Sam’s heart began to knock again. But it was only Doreen McGill’s shadow; she had bent over to make sure he had entered the correct time of day, and—

—*and HE didn’t cast a shadow. The Library Policeman. Also . . .*

He tried to duck the rest and couldn’t.

*Also, I can’t live like this. I can’t live with this kind of fear. I’d stick my head in a gas oven if it went on too long. And if it does, I will. It’s not just fear of him—that man, or whatever he is. It’s the way a person’s mind feels, the way it screams when it feels everything it ever believed in slipping effortlessly away.*

Doreen pointed to the right wall, where three large folio volumes stood on a single shelf. “That’s January, February, and March of 1990,” she said. “Every July the paper sends the first six months of the year to Grand Island, Nebraska, to be microfilmed. The same thing when December is over.” She extended the plump hand and pointed a red-tipped nail at the shelves, counting over from the shelf at the right toward the microfilm readers at the left. She appeared to be admiring her fingernail as she did it. “The microfilms go that way, chronologically,” she said. She pronounced the word carefully, producing something mildly exotic: *chron-o-lodge-ick-a-lee*. “Modern times on your right; ancient days on your left.”

She smiled to show that this was a joke, and perhaps to convey a sense of how wonderful she thought all this was. Chron-o-lodge-ick-a-lee speaking, the smile said, it was all sort of a gas.

“Thank you,” Sam said.

“Don’t mention it. It’s what we’re here for. *One* of the things, anyway.” She put her nail to the corner of her mouth and gave him

her peek-a-boo smile again. “Do you know how to run a microfilm reader, Mr. Peebles?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“All right. If I can help you further, I’ll be right upstairs. Don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Are you—” he began, and then snapped his mouth shut on the rest: —*going to leave me here alone?*

She raised her eyebrows.

“Nothing,” he said, and watched her go back upstairs. He had to resist a strong urge to pelt up the stairs behind her. Because, cushy blue carpet or not, this was another Junction City library.

And this one was called the morgue.

## 2

Sam walked slowly toward the shelves with their weight of square microfilm boxes, unsure of where to begin. He was very glad that the overhead fluorescents were bright enough to banish most of the troubling shadows in the corners.

He hadn’t dared ask Doreen McGill if the name Ardelia Lortz rang a bell, or even if she knew roughly when the city Library had last undergone renovations. *You have been asking questions*, the Library Policeman had said. *Don’t pry into things that don’t concern you. Do you understand?*

Yes, he understood. And he supposed he was risking the Library Policeman’s wrath by prying anyway . . . but he wasn’t asking questions, at least not exactly, and these *were* things that concerned him. They concerned him desperately.

*I will be watching. And I am not alone.*

Sam looked nervously over his shoulder. Saw nothing. And still found it impossible to move with any decision. He had gotten this far, but he didn’t know if he could get any further. He felt more than intimidated, more than frightened. He felt shattered.

“You’ve got to,” he muttered harshly, and wiped at his lips with a shaking hand. “You’ve just got to.”

He made his left foot move forward. He stood that way a moment, legs apart, like a man caught in the act of fording a small stream. Then he made his right foot catch up with his left one. He made his way across to the shelf nearest the bound folios in this hesitant, reluctant fashion. A card on the end of the shelf read:

1987-1989.

That was almost certainly too recent—in fact, the Library renovations must have taken place before the spring of 1984, when he had moved to Junction City. If it had happened since, he would have noticed the workmen, heard people talking about it, and read about it in the *Gazette*. But, other than guessing that it must have happened in the last fifteen or twenty years (the suspended ceilings had not looked any older than that), he could narrow it down no further. If only he could *think* more clearly! But he couldn’t. What had happened that morning screwed up any normal, rational effort to think the way heavy sunspot activity screwed up radio and TV transmissions. Reality and unreality had come together like vast stones, and Sam Peebles, one tiny, screaming, struggling speck of humanity, had had the bad luck to get caught between them.

He moved two aisles to the left, mostly because he was afraid that if he stopped moving for too long he might freeze up entirely, and walked down the aisle marked

1981-1983.

He picked a box almost at random and took it over to one of the microfilm readers. He snapped it on and tried to concentrate on the spool of microfilm (the spool was also blue, and Sam wondered if there was any reason why everything in this clean, well-lighted place was color coordinated) and nothing else. First you had to mount it on one of the spindles, right; then you had to thread it, check; then you had to secure the leader in the core of the take-up reel, okay. The machine was so simple an eight-year-old could have executed these little tasks, but it took Sam almost five minutes; he had his shaking

hands and shocked, wandering mind to deal with. When he finally got the microfilm mounted and scrolled to the first frame, he discovered he had mounted the reel backward. The printed matter was upside down.

He patiently rewound the microfilm, turned it around, and rethreaded it. He discovered he didn't mind this little setback in the least; repeating the operation, one simple step at a time, seemed to calm him. This time the front page of the April 1, 1981, issue of the Junction city *Gazette* appeared before him, right side up. The headline bannered the surprise resignation of a town official Sam had never heard of, but his eyes were quickly drawn to a box at the bottom of the page. Inside the box was this message:

RICHARD PRICE AND THE ENTIRE STAFF OF  
THE JUNCTION CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY  
REMIND YOU THAT  
APRIL 6TH-13TH IS  
NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK  
COME AND SEE US!

*Did I know that? Sam wondered. Is that why I grabbed this particular box? Did I subconsciously remember that the second week of April is National Library Week?*

*Come with me,* a tenebrous, whispering voice answered. *Come with me, son . . . I'm a poleethman.*

Gooseflesh gripped him; a shudder shook him. Sam pushed both the question and that phantom voice away. After all, it didn't really matter why he had picked the April, 1981, issues of the *Gazette*; the important thing was that he had, and it was a lucky break.

*Might* be a lucky break.

He advanced the reel quickly to April 6th, and saw exactly what he had hoped for. Over the *Gazette* masthead, in red ink, it said:

SPECIAL LIBRARY SUPPLEMENT ENCLOSED!

Sam advanced to the supplement. There were two photos on the first page of the supplement. One was of the Library's exterior. The other showed Richard Price, the head librarian, standing at the

circulation desk and smiling nervously into the camera. He looked exactly as Naomi Higgins had described him—a tall, bespectacled man of about forty with a narrow little mustache. Sam was more interested in the background. He could see the suspended ceiling which had so shocked him on his second trip to the Library. So the renovations had been done prior to April of 1981.

The stories were exactly the sort of self-congratulatory puff-pieces he expected—he had been reading the *Gazette* for six years now and was very familiar with its ain't-we-a-jolly-bunch-of-JayCees editorial slant. There were informative (and rather breathless) items about National Library Week, the Summer Reading Program, the Junction County Bookmobile, and the new fund drive which had just commenced. Sam glanced over these quickly. On the last page of the supplement he found a much more interesting story, one written by Price himself. It was titled

THE JUNCTION CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY  
*One Hundred Years of History*

Sam's eagerness did not last long. Ardelia's name wasn't there. He reached for the power switch to rewind the microfilm and then stopped. He saw a mention of the renovation project—it had happened in 1970—and there was something else. Something just a little off-key. Sam began to read the last part of Mr. Price's chatty historical note again, this time more carefully.

With the end of the Great Depression our Library turned the corner. In 1942, the Junction City Town Council voted \$5,000 to repair the extensive water damage the Library sustained during the Flood of '32, and Mrs. Felicia Culpepper took on the job of Head Librarian, donating her time without recompense. She never lost sight of her goal: a completely renovated Library, serving a Town which was rapidly becoming a City.

Mrs. Culpepper stepped down in 1951, giving way to Christopher Lavin, the first Junction City Librarian with a degree in Library Science. Mr. Lavin inaugurated the

Culpepper Memorial Fund, which raised over \$15,000 for the acquisition of new books in its first year, and the Junction City Public Library was on its way into the modern age!

Shortly after I became Head Librarian in 1964, I made major renovations my number one goal. The funds needed to achieve this goal were finally raised by the end of 1969, and while both City and Federal money helped in the construction of the splendid building Junction City “bookworms” enjoy today, this project could not have been completed without the help of all those volunteers who later showed up to swing a hammer or run a bench-saw during “Build Your Library Month” in August of 1970!

Other notable projects during the 1970’s and 1980’s included ...

Sam looked up thoughtfully. He believed there was something missing from Richard Price’s careful, droning history of the town Library. No; on second thought, missing was the wrong word. The essay made Sam decide Price was a fuss-budget of the first water—probably a nice man, but a fuss-budget just the same—and such men did not miss things, especially when they were dealing with subjects which were clearly close to their hearts.

So—not missing. Concealed.

It didn’t quite add up, chron-o-lodge-ick-a-lee speaking. In 1951, a man named Christopher Lavin had succeeded that saint Felicia Culpepper as head librarian. In 1964, Richard Price had become city librarian. Had Price succeeded Lavin? Sam didn’t think so. He thought that at some point during those thirteen blank years, a woman named Ardelia Lortz had succeeded Lavin. Price, Sam thought, had succeeded her. She wasn’t in Mr. Price’s fussbudgety account of the Library because she had done ... *something*. Sam was no closer to knowing what that something might have been, but he had a better idea of the magnitude. Whatever it was, it had been bad enough for Price to make her an unperson in spite of his very obvious love of detail and continuity.

*Murder*, Sam thought. *It must have been murder. It's really the only thing bad enough to f—*

At that second a hand dropped on Sam's shoulder.

### 3

If he had screamed, he would undoubtedly have terrified the hand's owner almost as much as she had already terrorized him, but Sam was unable to scream. Instead, all the air whooshed out of him and the world went gray again. His chest felt like an accordion being slowly crushed under an elephant's foot. All of his muscles seemed to have turned to macaroni. He did not wet his pants again. That was perhaps the only saving grace.

"Sam?" he heard a voice ask. It seemed to come from quite a distance—somewhere in Kansas, say. "Is that you?"

He swung around, almost falling out of his chair in front of the microfilm reader, and saw Naomi. He tried to get his breath back so he could say something. Nothing but a tired wheeze came out. The room seemed to waver in front of his eyes. The grayness came and went.

Then he saw Naomi take a stumble-step backward, her eyes widening in alarm, her hand going to her mouth. She struck one of the microfilm shelves almost hard enough to knock it over. It rocked, two or three of the boxes tumbled to the carpet with soft thumps, and then it settled back again.

"Omes," he managed at last. His voice came out in a whispery squeak. He remembered once, as a boy in St. Louis, trapping a mouse under his baseball cap. It had made a sound like that as it scurried about, looking for an escape hatch.

"Sam, what's *happened* to you?" She also sounded like someone who would have been screaming if shock hadn't whipped the breath out of her. *We make quite a pair*, Sam thought, *Abbott and Costello Meet the Monsters*.

“What are you doing here?” he said. “You scared the living shit out of me!”

*There, he thought. I went and used the s-word again. Called you Omes again, too. Sorry about that.* He felt a little better, and thought of getting up, but decided against it. No sense pressing his luck. He was still not entirely sure his heart wasn't going to vapor-lock.

“I went to the office to see you,” she said. “Cammy Harrington said she thought she saw you come in here. I wanted to apologize. Maybe. I thought at first you must have played some cruel trick on Dave. He said you'd never do a thing like that, and I started to think that it *didn't* seem like you. You've always been so nice . . .”

“Thanks,” Sam said. “I guess.”

“... and you seemed so ... so bewildered on the telephone. I asked Dave what it was about, but he wouldn't tell me anything else. All I know is what I heard . . . and how he looked when he was talking to you. He looked like he'd seen a ghost.”

*No, Sam thought of telling her. I was the one who saw the ghost. And this morning I saw something even worse.*

“Sam, you have to understand something about Dave . . . and about me. Well, I guess you already know about Dave, but I'm—”

“I guess I know,” Sam told her. “I said in my note to Dave that I didn't see anyone at Angle Street, but that wasn't the truth. I didn't see anyone at first, but I walked through the downstairs, looking for Dave. I saw you guys out back. So . . . I know. But I don't know on purpose, if you see what I mean.”

“Yes,” she said. “It's all right. But . . . Sam . . . dear God, what's happened? Your hair . . .”

“What about my hair?” he asked her sharply.

She fumbled her purse open with hands that shook slightly and brought out a compact. “Look,” she said.

He did, but he already knew what he was going to see.

Since eight-thirty this morning, his hair had gone almost completely white.

"I see you found your friend," Doreen McGill said to Naomi as they climbed back up the stairs. She put a nail to the corner of her mouth and smiled her cute-little-me smile.

"Yes."

"Did you remember to sign out?"

"Yes," Naomi said again. Sam hadn't, but she had done it for both of them.

"And did you return any microfilms you might have used?"

This time Sam said yes. He couldn't remember if either he or Naomi had returned the one spool of microfilm he had mounted, and he didn't care. All he wanted was to get out of here.

Doreen was still being coy. Finger tapping the edge of her lower lip, she cocked her head and said to Sam, "You did look different in the newspaper picture. I just can't put my finger on what it is."

As they went out the door, Naomi said: "He finally got smart and quit dyeing his hair."

On the steps outside, Sam exploded with laughter. The force of his bellows doubled him over. It was hysterical laughter, its sound only half a step removed from the sound of screams, but he didn't care. It felt good. It felt enormously cleansing.

Naomi stood beside him, seeming to be bothered neither by Sam's laughing fit nor the curious glances they were drawing from passersby on the street. She even lifted one hand and waved to someone she knew. Sam propped his hands on his upper thighs, still caught in his helpless gale of laughter, and yet there was a part of him sober enough to think: *She has seen this sort of reaction before. I wonder where?* But he knew the answer even before his mind had finished articulating the question. Naomi was an alcoholic, and she had made working with other alcoholics, helping them, part of her own therapy. She had probably seen a good deal more than a hysterical laughing fit during her time at Angle Street.

*She'll slap me*, he thought, still howling helplessly at the image of himself at his bathroom mirror, patiently combing Grecian Formula

into his locks. *She'll slap me, because that's what you do with hysterical people.*

Naomi apparently knew better. She only stood patiently beside him in the sunshine, waiting for him to regain control. At last his laughter began to taper off to wild snorts and runaway snickers. His stomach muscles ached and his vision was water-wavery and his cheeks were wet with tears.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"Oh, Naomi—" he began, and then another hee-haw bray of laughter escaped him and galloped off into the sunshiny morning. "You don't know how much better."

"Sure I do," she said. "Come on—we'll take my car."

"Where ..." He hiccupped. "Where are we going?"

"Angel Street," she said, pronouncing it the way the sign-painter had intended it to be pronounced. "I'm very worried about Dave. I went there first this morning, but he wasn't there. I'm afraid he may be out drinking."

"That's nothing new, is it?" he asked, walking beside her down the steps. Her Datsun was parked at the curb, behind Sam's own car.

She glanced at him. It was a brief glance, but a complex one: irritation, resignation, compassion. Sam thought that if you boiled that glance down it would say *You don't know what you're talking about, but it's not your fault.*

"Dave's been sober almost a year this time, but his general health isn't good. As you say, falling off the wagon isn't anything new for him, but another fall may kill him."

"And that would be my fault." The last of his laughter dried up.

She looked at him, a little surprised. "No," she said. "That would be nobody's fault . . . but that doesn't mean I want it to happen. Or that it has to. Come on. We'll take my car. We can talk on the way."

“Tell me what happened to you,” she said as they headed toward the edge of town. “Tell me everything. It isn’t just your hair, Sam; you look ten years older.”

“Bullshit,” Sam said. He had seen more than his hair in Naomi’s compact mirror; he had gotten a better look at himself than he wanted. “More like twenty. And it feels like a hundred.”

“What happened? What was it?”

Sam opened his mouth to tell her, thought of how it would sound, then shook his head. “No,” he said, “not yet. You’re going to tell me something first. You’re going to tell me about Ardelia Lortz. You thought I was joking the other day. I didn’t realize that then, but I do now. So tell me all about her. Tell me who she was and what she did.”

Naomi pulled over to the curb beyond Junction City’s old granite firehouse and looked at Sam. Her skin was very pale beneath her light make-up, and her eyes were wide. “You *weren’t*? Sam, are you trying to tell me you *weren’t* joking?”

“That’s right.”

“But Sam ...” She stopped, and for a moment she seemed not to know how she should go on. At last she spoke very softly, as though to a child who has done something he doesn’t know is wrong. “But Sam, Ardelia Lortz is dead. She has been dead for thirty years.”

“I know she’s dead. I mean, I know it *now*. What I want to know is the rest.”

“Sam, whoever you think you saw—”

“I know who I saw.”

“Tell me what makes you think—”

“First, you tell me.”

She put her car back in gear, checked her rear-view mirror, and began to drive toward Angle Street again. “I don’t know very much,” she said. “I was only five when she died, you see. Most of what I *do* know comes from overheard gossip. She belonged to The First Baptist Church of Proverbia—she went there, at least—but my mother doesn’t talk about her. Neither do any of the older parishioners. To them it’s like she never existed.”

Sam nodded. “That’s just how Mr. Price treated her in the article he wrote about the Library. The one I was reading when you put your hand on my shoulder and took about twelve more years off my life. It also explains why your mother was so mad at me when I mentioned her name Saturday night.”

Naomi glanced at him, startled. “*That’s* what you called about?”

Sam nodded.

“Oh, Sam—if you weren’t on Mom’s s-list before, you are now.”

“Oh, I was on before, but I’ve got an idea she’s moved me up.”

Sam laughed, then winced. His stomach still hurt from his fit on the steps of the newspaper office, but he was very glad he had had that fit—an hour ago he never would have believed he could have gotten so much of his equilibrium back. In fact, an hour ago he had been quite sure that Sam Peebles and equilibrium were going to remain mutually exclusive concepts for the rest of his life. “Go ahead, Naomi.”

“Most of what I’ve heard I picked up at what AA people call ‘the real meeting,’ ” she said. “That’s when people stand around drinking coffee before and then after, talking about everything under the sun.”

He looked at her curiously. “How long have you been in AA, Naomi?”

“Nine years,” Naomi said evenly. “And it’s been six since I had to take a drink. But I’ve been an alcoholic forever. Drunks aren’t made, Sam. They’re born.”

“Oh,” he said lamely. And then: “Was *she* in the program? Ardelia Lortz?”

“God, no—but that doesn’t mean there aren’t people in AA who remember her. She showed up in Junction City in 1956 o’57, I think. She went to work for Mr. Lavin in the Public Library. A year or two later, he died very suddenly—it was a heart attack or a stroke, I think—and the town gave the job to the Lortz woman. I’ve heard she was very good at it, but judging by what happened, I’d say the thing she was best at was fooling people.”

“What did she do, Naomi?”

“She killed two children and then herself,” Naomi said simply. “In the summer of 1960. There was a search for the kids. No one

thought of looking for them in the Library, because it was supposed to be closed that day. They were found the next day, when the Library was supposed to be open but wasn't. There are skylights in the Library roof—

"I know."

"—but these days you can only see them from the outside, because they changed the Library inside. Lowered the ceiling to conserve heat, or something. Anyway, those skylights had big brass catches on them. You grabbed the catches with a long pole to open the skylights and let in fresh air, I guess. She tied a rope to one of the catches—she must have used one of the track-ladders that ran along the bookcases to do it—and hanged herself from it. She did that after she killed the children."

"I see." Sam's voice was calm, but his heart was beating slowly and very hard. "And how did she . . . how did she kill the children?"

"I don't know. No one's ever said, and I've never asked. I suppose it was horrible."

"Yes. I suppose it was."

"Now tell me what happened to you."

"First I want to see if Dave's at the shelter."

Naomi tightened up at once. "I'll see if Dave's at the shelter," she said. "You're going to sit tight in the car. I'm sorry for you, Sam, and I'm sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion last night. But you won't upset Dave anymore. I'll see to that."

"Naomi, he's a *part* of this!"

"That's impossible," she said in a brisk this-closes-the-discussion tone of voice.

"Dammit, the whole thing is impossible!"

They were nearing Angle Street now. Ahead of them was a pick-up truck rattling toward the Recycling Center, its bed full of cardboard cartons filled with bottles and cans.

"I don't think you understand what I told you," she said. "It doesn't surprise me; Earth People rarely do. So open your ears, Sam. I'm going to say it in words of one syllable. If *Dave drinks, Dave dies*. Do you follow that? Does it get through?"

She tossed another glance Sam's way. This one was so furious it was still smoking around the edges, and even in the depths of his own distress, Sam realized something. Before, even on the two occasions when he had taken Naomi out, he had thought she was pretty. Now he saw she was beautiful.

"What does that mean, Earth People?" he asked her.

"People who don't have a problem with booze or pills or pot or cough medicine or any of the other things that mess up the human head," she nearly spat. "People who can afford to moralize and make judgments."

Ahead of them, the pick-up truck turned off onto the long, rutted driveway leading to the redemption center. Angle Street lay ahead. Sam could see something parked in front of the porch, but it wasn't a car. It was Dirty Dave's shopping-cart.

"Stop a minute," he said.

Naomi did, but she wouldn't look at him. She stared straight ahead through the windshield. Her jaw was working. There was high color in her cheeks.

"You care about him," he said, "and I'm glad. Do you also care about me, Sarah? Even though I'm an Earth Person?"

"You have no right to call me Sarah. I can, because it's part of my name—I was christened Naomi Sarah Higgins. And they can, because they are, in a way, closer to me than blood relatives could ever be. We are blood relatives, in fact—because there's something in us that makes us the way we are. Something in our blood. You, Sam—you have no right."

"Maybe I do," Sam said. "Maybe I'm one of you now. You've got booze. This Earth Person has got the Library Police."

Now she looked at him, and her eyes were wide and wary. "Sam, I don't underst—"

"Neither do I. All I know is that I need help. I need it desperately. I borrowed two books from a library that doesn't exist anymore, and now the books don't exist, either. I lost them. Do you know where they ended up?"

She shook her head.

Sam pointed over to the left, where two men had gotten out of the pick-up's cab and were starting to unload the cartons of returnables. "There. That's where they ended up. They've been pulped. I've got until midnight, Sarah, and then the Library Police are going to pulp *me*. And I don't think they'll even leave my jacket behind."

## 6

Sam sat in the passenger seat of Naomi Sarah Higgins's Datsun for what seemed like a long, long time. Twice his hand went to the door-handle and then fell back. She had relented ... a little. *If* Dave wanted to talk to him, and if Dave was still in any condition to talk, she would allow it. Otherwise, no soap.

At last the door of Angle Street opened. Naomi and Dave Duncan came out. She had an arm around his waist, his feet were shuffling, and Sam's heart sank. Then, as they stepped out into the sun, he saw that Dave wasn't drunk . . . or at least not necessarily. Looking at him was, in a weird way, like looking into Naomi's compact mirror all over again. Dave Duncan looked like a man trying to weather the worst shock of his life . . . and not doing a very good job of it.

Sam got out of the car and stood by the door, indecisive.

"Come up on the porch," Naomi said. Her voice was both resigned and fearful. "I don't trust him to make it down the steps."

Sam came up to where they stood. Dave Duncan was probably sixty years old. On Saturday he had looked seventy or seventy-five. That was the booze, Sam supposed. And now, as Iowa turned slowly on the axis of noon, he looked older than all the ages. And that, Sam knew, was his fault. It was the shock of things Dave had assumed were long buried.

*I didn't know*, Sam thought, but this, however true it might be, had lost its power to comfort. Except for the burst veins in his nose and cheeks, Dave's face was the color of very old paper. His eyes were

watery and stunned. His lips had a bluish tinge, and little beads of spittle pulsed in the deep pockets at the corners of his mouth.

“I didn’t want him to talk to you,” Naomi said. “I wanted to take him to Dr. Melden, but he refuses to go until he talks to you.”

“Mr. Peebles,” Dave said feebly. “I’m sorry, Mr. Peebles, it’s all my fault, isn’t it? I—”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Sam said. “Come on over here and sit down.”

He and Naomi led Dave to a rocking chair at the corner of the porch and Dave eased himself into it. Sam and Naomi drew up chairs with sagging wicker bottoms and sat on either side of him. They sat without speaking for some little time, looking out across the railroad tracks and into the flat farm country beyond.

“She’s after you, isn’t she?” Dave asked. “That bitch from the far side of hell.”

“She’s sicced someone on me,” Sam said. “Someone who was in one of those posters you drew. He’s a ... I know this sounds crazy, but he’s a Library Policeman. He came to see me this morning. He did . . .” Sam touched his hair. “He did this. And this.” He pointed to the small red dot in the center of his throat. “And he says he isn’t alone.”

Dave was silent for a long time, looking out into the emptiness, looking at the flat horizon which was broken only by tall silos and, to the north, the apocalyptic shape of the Proverbia Feed Company’s grain elevator. “The man you saw isn’t real,” he said at last. “None of them are real. Only her. Only the devil-bitch.”

“Can you tell us, Dave?” Naomi asked gently. “If you can’t, say so. But if it will make it better for you . . . easier . . . tell us.”

“Dear Sarah,” Dave said. He took her hand and smiled. “I love you—have I ever told you so?”

She shook her head, smiling back. Tears glinted in her eyes like tiny specks of mica. “No. But I’m glad, Dave.”

“I have to tell,” he said. “It isn’t a question of better or easier. It can’t be allowed to go on. Do you know what I remember about my first AA meeting, Sarah?”

She shook her head.

“How they said it was a program of honesty. How they said you had to tell everything, not just to God, but to God and another person. I thought, ‘If that’s what it takes to live a sober life, I’ve had it. They’ll throw me in a plot up on Wayvem Hill in that part of the boneyard they set aside for the drunks and all-time losers who never had a pot to piss in nor a window to throw it out of. Because I could never tell all the things I’ve seen, all the things I’ve done.’ ”

“We all think that at first,” she said gently.

“I know. But there can’t be many that’ve seen the things I have, or done what I have. I did the best I could, though. Little by little I did the best I could. I set my house in order. But those things I saw and did back then . . . those I never told. Not to any person, not to no man’s God. I found a room in the basement of my heart, and I put those things in that room and then I locked the door.”

He looked at Sam, and Sam saw tears rolling slowly and tiredly down the deep wrinkles in Dave’s blasted cheeks.

“Yes. I did. And when the door was locked, I nailed boards across it. And when the boards was nailed, I put sheet steel across the boards and riveted it tight. And when the riveting was done, I drew a bureau up against the whole works, and before I called it good and walked away, I piled bricks on top of the bureau. And all these years since, I’ve spent telling myself I forgot all about Ardelia and her strange ways, about the things she wanted me to do and the things she told me and the promises she made and what she really was. I took a lot of forgetting medicine, but it never did the job. And when I got into AA, that was the one thing that always drove me back. The thing in that room, you know. That thing has a name, Mr. Peebles—its name is Ardelia Lortz. After I was sobered up awhile, I would start having bad dreams. Mostly I dreamed of the posters I did for her—the ones that scared the children so bad—but they weren’t the worst dreams.”

His voice had fallen to a trembling whisper.

“They weren’t the worst ones by a long chalk.”

“Maybe you better rest a little,” Sam said. He had discovered that no matter how much might depend on what Dave had to say, a part of him didn’t want to hear it. A part of him was *afraid* to hear it.

“Never mind resting,” he said. “Doctor says I’m diabetic, my pancreas is a mess, and my liver is falling apart. Pretty soon I’m going on a permanent vacation. I don’t know if it’ll be heaven or hell for me, but I’m pretty sure the bars and package stores are closed in both places, and thank God for that. But the time for restin isn’t now. If I’m ever goin to talk, it has to be now.” He looked carefully at Sam. “You know you’re in trouble, don’t you?”

Sam nodded.

“Yes. But you don’t know just how bad your trouble is. That’s why I have to talk. I think she has to ... has to lie still sometimes. But her time of bein still is over, and she has picked you, Mr. Peebles. That’s why I have to talk. Not that I want to. I went out last night after Sarah was gone and bought myself a jug. I took it down to the switchin yard and sat where I’ve sat many times before, in the weeds and cinders and busted glass. I spun the cap off and held that jug up to my nose and smelled it. You know how that jug wine smells? To me it always smells like the wallpaper in cheap hotel rooms, or like a stream that has flowed its way through a town dump somewhere. But I have always liked that smell just the same, because it smells like sleep, too.

“And all the time I was holdin that jug up, smellin it, I could hear the bitch queen talkin from inside the room where I locked her up. From behind the bricks, the bureau, the sheet steel, the boards and locks. Talkin like someone who’s been buried alive. She was a little muffled, but I could still hear her just fine. I could hear her sayin, ‘That’s right, Dave, that’s the answer, it’s the only answer there is for folks like you, the only one that works, and it will be the only answer you need until answers don’t matter anymore.’

“I tipped that jug up for a good long drink, and then at the last second it smelled like *her* . . . and I remembered her face at the end, all covered with little threads . . . and how her mouth changed . . . and I threw that jug away. Smashed it on a railroad tie. Because this shit has got to end. I won’t let her take another nip out of this town!”

His voice rose to a trembling but powerful old man’s shout. “*This shit has gone on long enough!*”

Naomi laid a hand on Dave's arm. Her face was frightened and full of trouble. "What, Dave? What is it?"

"I want to be sure," Dave said. "You tell me first, Mr. Peebles. Tell me everything that's been happening to you, and don't leave out nothing."

"I will," Sam said, "on one condition."

Dave smiled faintly. "What condition is that?"

"You have to promise to call me Sam . . . and in return, I'll never call you Dirty Dave again."

His smile broadened. "You got a deal there, Sam."

"Good." He took a deep breath. "Everything was the fault of the goddam acrobat," he began.

## 7

It took longer than he had thought it would, but there was an inexpressible relief—a joy, almost—in telling it all, holding nothing back. He told Dave about The Amazing Joe, Craig's call for help, and Naomi's suggestion about livening up his material. He told them about how the Library had looked, and about his meeting with Ardelia Lortz. Naomi's eyes grew wider and wider as he spoke. When he got to the part about the Red Riding Hood poster on the door to the Children's Library, Dave nodded.

"That's the only one I didn't draw," he said. "She had that one with her. I bet they never found it, either. I bet she still has that one with her. She liked mine, but that one was her favorite."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

Dave only shook his head and told Sam to go on.

He told them about the library card, the books he had borrowed, and the strange little argument they had had on Sam's way out.

"That's it," Dave said flatly. "That's all it took. You might not believe it, but I know her. You made her mad. Goddam if you didn't. You made her mad ... and now she's set her cap for you."

Sam finished his story as quickly as he could, but his voice slowed and nearly halted when he came to the visit from the Library Policeman in his fog-gray trenchcoat. When Sam finished, he was nearly weeping and his hands had begun to shake again.

“Could I have a glass of water?” he asked Naomi thickly.

“Of course,” she said, and got up to get it. She took two steps, then returned and kissed Sam on the cheek. Her lips were cool and soft. And before she left to get his water, she spoke three blessed words into his ear: “I believe you.”

## 8

Sam raised the glass to his lips, using both hands to be sure he wouldn't spill it, and drank half of it at a draught. When he put it down he said, “What about you, Dave? Do you believe me?”

“Yeah,” Dave said. He spoke almost absently, as if this were a foregone conclusion. Sam supposed that, to Dave, it was. After all, he had known the mysterious Ardelia Lortz firsthand, and his ravaged, too-old face suggested that theirs had not been a loving relationship.

Dave said nothing else for several moments, but a little of his color had come back. He looked out across the railroad tracks toward the fallow fields. They would be green with sprouting corn in another six or seven weeks, but now they looked barren. His eyes watched a cloud shadow flow across that Midwestern emptiness in the shape of a giant hawk.

At last he seemed to rouse himself and turned to Sam.

“My Library Policeman—the one I drew for her—didn't have no scar,” he said at last.

Sam thought of the stranger's long, white face. The scar had been there, all right—across the cheek, under the eye, over the bridge of the nose in a thin flowing line.

“So?” he asked. “What does that mean?”

“It don’t mean nothing to me, but I think it must mean somethin to you, Mr.—Sam. I know about the badge ... what you called the star of many points. I found that in a book of heraldry right there in the Junction City Library. It’s called a Maltese Cross. Christian knights wore them in the middle of their chests when they went into battle durin the Crusades. They were supposed to be magical. I was so taken with the shape that I put it into the picture. But . . . a scar? No. Not on *my* Library Policeman. Who was *your* Library Policeman, Sam?”

“I don’t . . . I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sam said slowly, but that voice—faint, mocking, haunting—recurred: *Come with me, son . . . I’m a poleethman*. And his mouth was suddenly full of that taste again. The sugar-slimy taste of red licorice. His tastebuds cramped; his stomach rolled. But it was stupid. Really quite stupid. He had never eaten red licorice in his life. He hated it.

*If you’ve never eaten it, how do you know you hate it?*

“I really don’t get you,” he said, speaking more strongly.

“You’re getting *something*,” Naomi said. “You look like someone just kicked you in the stomach.”

Sam glanced at her, annoyed. She looked back at him calmly, and Sam felt his heart rate speed up.

“Let it alone for now,” Dave said, “although you can’t let it alone for long, Sam—not if you want to hold onto any hope of getting out of this. Let me tell you my story. I’ve never told it before, and I’ll never tell it again ... but it’s time.”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## *DAVE'S STORY*

### 1

“I wasn’t always Dirty Dave Duncan,” he began. “In the early fifties I was just plain old Dave Duncan, and people liked me just fine. I was a member of that same Rotary Club you talked to the other night, Sam. Why not? I had my own business, and it made money. I was a sign-painter, and I was a damned good one. I had all the work I could handle in Junction City and Proverbia, but I sometimes did a little work up in Cedar Rapids, as well. Once I painted a Lucky Strike cigarette ad on the right-field wall of the minor-league ballpark all the way to hell and gone in Omaha. I was in great demand, and I deserved to be. I was good. I was just the best sign-painter around these parts.

“I stayed here because serious painting was what I was really interested in, and I thought you could do that anywhere. I didn’t have no formal art education—I tried but I flunked out—and I knew that put me down on the count, so to speak, but I knew that there were artists who made it without all that speed-shit bushwah—Gramma Moses, for one. She didn’t need no driver’s license; she went right to town without one.

“I might even have made it. I sold some canvases, but not many—I didn’t need to, because I wasn’t married and I was doing well with my sign-painting business. Also, I kept most of my pitchers so I could put on shows, the way artists are supposed to. I had some, too. Right here in town at first, then in Cedar Rapids, and then in Des Moines. That one was written up in the *Democrat*, and they made me sound like the second coming of James Whistler.”

Dave fell silent for a moment, thinking. Then he raised his head and looked out at the empty, fallow fields again.

“In AA, they talk about folks who have one foot in the future and the other in the past and spend their time pissin all over today because of it. But sometimes it’s hard not to wonder what might have happened if you’d done things just a little different.”

He looked almost guiltily at Naomi, who smiled and pressed his hand.

“Because I *was* good, and I *did* come close. But I was drinkin heavy, even back then. I didn’t think much of it—hell, I was young, I was strong, and besides, don’t all great artists drink? I thought they did. And I still might have made it—made something, anyway, for awhile—but then Ardelia Lortz came to Junction City.

“And when she came, I was lost.”

He looked at Sam.

“I recognize her from your story, Sam, but that wasn’t how she looked back then. You expected to see an old-lady librarian, and that suited her purpose, so that’s just what you *did* see. But when she came to Junction City in the summer of ’57, her hair was ash-blonde, and the only places she was plump was where a woman is supposed to be plump.

“I was living out in Proverbia then, and I used to go to the Baptist Church. I wasn’t much on religion, but there were some fine-looking women there. Your mom was one of em, Sarah.”

Naomi laughed in the way women do when they are told something they cannot quite believe.

“Ardelia caught on with the home folks right away. These days, when the folks from that church talk about her—if they ever do—I bet they say things like ‘I knew from the very start there *was somethin* funny about that Lortz woman’ or ‘I never trusted the look in that woman’s eye,’ but let me tell you, that wasn’t how it was. They buzzed around her—the women as well as the men—like bees around the first flower of spring. She got a job as Mr. Lavin’s assistant before she was in town a month, but she was teachin the little ones at the Sunday School out there in Proverbia two weeks before that.

“Just what she was teachin em I don’t like to think—you can bet your bottom dollar it wasn’t the Gospel According to Matthew—but she was teachin em. And everyone swore on how much the little ones loved her. *They* swore on it, too, but there was a look in their eyes when they said so ... a far-off look, like they wasn’t really sure where they were, or even *who* they were.

“Well, she caught my eye . . . and I caught hers. You wouldn’t know it from the way I am now, but I was a pretty good-lookin fella in those days. I always had a tan from workin outdoors, I had muscles, my hair was faded almost blonde from the sun, and my belly was as flat as your ironin board, Sarah.

“Ardelia had rented herself a farmhouse about a mile and a half from the church, a tight enough little place, but it needed a coat of paint as bad as a man in the desert needs a drink of water. So after church the second week I noticed her there—I didn’t go often and by then it was half-past August—I offered to paint it for her.

“She had the biggest eyes you’ve ever seen. I guess most people would have called them gray, but when she looked right at you, hard, you would have sworn they were silver. And she looked at *me* hard that day after church. She was wearin some kind of perfume that I never smelled before and ain’t never smelled since. Lavender, I think. I can’t think how to describe it, but I know it always made me think of little white flowers that only bloom after the sun has gone down. And I was smitten. Right there and then.

“She was close to me—almost close enough for our bodies to touch. She was wearin this dowdy black dress, the kind of dress an old lady would wear, and a hat with a little net veil, and she was holdin her purse in front of her. All prim and proper. Her eyes weren’t prim, though. Nossir. Nor proper. Not a bit.

“ ‘I hope you don’t want to put advertisements for bleach and chewing tobacco all over my new house,’ she says.

“ ‘No ma’am,’ I says back. ‘I thought just two coats of plain old white. Houses aren’t what I do for a livin, anyway, but with you bein new in town and all, I thought it would be neighborly—’

“ ‘Yes indeed,’ she says, and touches my shoulder.”

Dave looked apologetically at Naomi.

“I think I ought to give you a chance to leave, if you want to. Pretty soon I’m gonna start tellin some dirty stuff, Sarah. I’m ashamed of it, but I want to clean the slate of my doins with her.”

She patted his old, chapped hand. “Go ahead,” she told him quietly. “Say it all.”

He fetched in a deep breath and went on again.

“When she touched me, I knew I had to have her or die tryin. Just that one little touch made me feel better—and crazier—than any woman-touch ever made me feel in my whole life. She knew it, too. I could see it in her eyes. It was a sly look. It was a mean look, too, but somethin about that excited me more than anything else.

“ ‘It *would* be neighborly, Dave,’ she says, ‘and I want to be a very good neighbor.’

“So I walked her home. Left all the other young fellows standin at the church door, you might say, fumin and no doubt cursin my name. They didn’t know how lucky they were. None of them.

“My Ford was in the shop and she didn’t have no car, so we were stuck with shank’s mare. I didn’t mind a bit, and she didn’t seem to, neither. We went out the Truman Road, which was still dirt in those days, although they sent a town truck along to oil it every two or three weeks and lay the dust.

“We got about halfway to her place, and she stopped. It was just the two of us, standin in the middle of Truman Road at high noon on a summer’s day, with about a million acres of Sam Orday’s corn on one side and about two million of Bill Humpe’s corn on the other, all of it growin high over our heads and rustlin in that secret way corn has, even when there’s no breeze. My granddad used to say it was the sound of the corn growin. I dunno if that’s the truth or not, but it’s a spooky sound. I can tell you that.

“ ‘Look!’ she says, pointin to the right. ‘Do you see it?’

“I looked, but I didn’t see nothing—only corn. I told her so.

“ ‘I’ll show you!’ she says, and runs into the corn, Sunday dress and high heels and all. She didn’t even take off that hat with the veil on it.

“I stood there for a few seconds, sorta stunned. Then I heard her laughin. I heard her laughin in the corn. So I ran in after her, partly to

see whatever it was she'd seen, but mostly because of that laugh. I was so randy. I can't begin to tell you.

"I seen her standin way up the row I was in, and then she faded into the next one, still laughin. I started to laugh, too, and went on through myself, not carin that I was bustin down some of Sam Orday's plants. He'd never miss em, not in all those acres. But when I got through, trailin cornsilk off my shoulders and a green leaf stuck in my tie like some new kind of clip, I stopped laughin in a hurry, because she wasn't there. Then I heard her on the other side of me. I didn't have no idea how she could have got back there without me seein her, but she had. So I busted back through just in time to see her runnin into the next row.

"We played hide n seek for half an hour, I guess, and I couldn't catch her. All I did was get hotter and randier. I'd think she was a row over, in front of me, but I'd get there and hear her two rows over, *behind* me. Sometimes I'd see her foot, or her leg, and of course she left tracks in the soft dirt, but they weren't no good, because they seemed to go every which way at once.

"Then, just when I was startin to get mad—I'd sweat through my good shirt, my tie was undone, and my shoes was full of dirt—I come through to a row and seen her hat hangin off a corn-plant with the veil flippin in the little breeze that got down there into the corn.

" 'Come and get me, Dave!' she calls. I grabbed her hat and busted through to the next row on a slant. She was gone—I could just see the corn waverin where she'd went through—but both her shoes were there. In the next row I found one of her silk stockings hung over an ear of corn. And still I could hear her laughin. Over on my blind side, she was, and how the bitch got there, God only knows. Not that it mattered to me by then.

"I ripped off my tie and tore after her, around and around and dosey-doe, pantin like a stupid dog that don't know enough to lie still on a hot day. And I'll tell you somethin—I broke the corn down everywhere I went. Left a trail of trampled stalks and leaners behind me. But *she* never busted a one. They'd just waver a bit when she passed, as if there was no more to her than there was to that little summer breeze.

“I found her dress, her slip, and her garter-belt. Then I found her bra and step-ins. I couldn’t hear her laughin no more. There wasn’t no sound but the corn. I stood there in one of the rows, puffin like a leaky boiler, with all her clothes bundled up against my chest. I could smell her perfume in em, and it was drivin me crazy.

“ ‘Where are you?’ I yelled, but there wasn’t no answer. Well, I finally lost what little sanity I had left . . . and of course, that was just what she wanted. ‘*Where the fuck are you?*’ I screamed, and her long white arm reached through the corn-plants right beside me and she stroked my neck with one finger. It jumped the shit out of me.

“ ‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ she said. ‘What took you so long? Don’t you want to see it?’ She grabbed me and drawed me through the corn, and there she was with her feet planted in the dirt, not a stitch on her, and her eyes as silver as rain on a foggy day.”

## 2

Dave took a long drink of water, closed his eyes, and went on.

“We didn’t make love there in the corn—in all the time I knew her, we never made love. But we made *somethin*. I had Ardelia in just about every way a man can have a woman, and I think I had her in some ways you’d think would be impossible. I can’t remember all the ways, but I can remember her body, how white it was; how her legs looked; how her toes curled and seemed to feel along the shoots of the plants comin out of the dirt; I can remember how she pulled her fingernails back and forth across the skin of my neck and my throat.

“We went on and on and on. I don’t know how many times, but I know I didn’t never get tired. When we started I felt horny enough to rape the Statue of Liberty, and when we finished I felt the same way. I couldn’t get enough of her. It was like the booze, I guess. Wasn’t any way I could *ever* get enough of her. And she knew it, too.

“But we finally *did* stop. She put her hands behind her head and wriggled her white shoulders in the black dirt we was layin in and

looked up at me with those silvery eyes of hers and she says, 'Well, Dave? Are we neighbors yet?'

"I told her I wanted to go again and she told me not to push my luck. I tried to climb on just the same, and she pushed me off as easy as a mother pushes a baby off'n her tit when she don't want to feed it no more. I tried again and she swiped at my face with her nails and split the skin open in two places. That finally damped my boiler down. She was quick as a cat and twice as strong. When she saw I knew playtime was over, she got dressed and led me out of the corn. I went just as meek as Mary's little lamb.

"We walked the rest of the way to her house. Nobody passed us, and that was probably just as well. My clothes were all covered with dirt and cornsilk, my shirttail was out, my tie was stuffed into my back pocket and flappin along behind me like a tail, and every place that the cloth rubbed I felt raw. *Her*, though—she looked as smooth and cool as an ice-cream soda in a drugstore glass. Not a hair out of place, not a speck of dirt on her shoes, not a strand of cornsilk on her skirt.

"We got to the house and while I was lookin it over, tryin to decide how much paint it would take, she brought me a drink in a tall glass. There was a straw in it, and a sprig of mint. I thought it was iced tea until I took a sip. It was straight Scotch.

" 'Jesus!' I says, almost chokin.

" 'Don't you want it?' she asks me, smilin in that mockin way she had. 'Maybe you'd prefer some iced coffee.'

" 'Oh, I want it,' I says, but it was more than that. I *needed* it. I was tryin not to drink in the middle of the day back then, because that's what alcoholics do. But that was the end of that. For the rest of the time I knew her, I drank pretty near all day, every day. For me, the last two and a half years Ike was President was one long souse.

"While I was paintin her house—and doin everything she'd let me do to her whenever I could—she was settlin in at the Library. Mr. Lavin hired her first crack outta the box, and put her in charge of the Children's Library. I used to go there every chance I got, which was a lot, since I was self-employed. When Mr. Lavin spoke to me about how much time I was spendin there, I promised to paint the whole

inside of the Library for free. Then he let me come and go as much as I wanted. Ardelia told me it would work out just that way, and she was right—as usual.

“I don’t have any connected memories of the time I spent under her spell—and that’s what I was, an enchanted man livin under the spell of a woman who wasn’t really a woman at all. It wasn’t the blackouts that drunks sometimes get; it was wantin to forget things after they were over. So what I have is memories that stand apart from each other but seem to lie in a chain, like those islands in the Pacific Ocean. Archie Pelligos, or whatever they call em.

“I remember she put the poster of Little Red Ridin Hood up on the door to the Children’s Room about a month before Mr. Lavin died, and I remember her takin one little boy by the hand and leadin him over to it. ‘Do you see that little girl?’ Ardelia asked him. ‘Yes,’ he says. ‘Do you know why that Bad Thing is getting ready to eat her?’ Ardelia asks. ‘No,’ the kid says back, his eyes all big and solemn and full of tears. ‘Because he forgot to bring back his library book on time,’ she says. ‘You won’t ever do that, Willy, will you?’ ‘No, never,’ the little boy says, and Ardelia says, ‘You better not.’ And then she led him into the Children’s Room for Story Hour, still holdin him by the hand. That kid—it was Willy Klemmart, who got killed in Vietnam—looked back over his shoulder at where I was, standin on my scaffold with a paintbrush in my hand, and I could read his eyes like they were a newspaper headline. *Save me from her*, his eyes said. *Please, Mr. Duncan*. But how could I? I couldn’t even save myself.”

Dave produced a clean but badly wrinkled bandanna from the depths of one back pocket and blew a mighty honk into it.

“Mr. Lavin began by thinkin Ardelia just about walked on water, but he changed his mind after awhile. They got into a hell of a scrap over that Red Ridin Hood poster about a week before he died. He never liked it. Maybe he didn’t have a very good idea of what went on durin Story Hour—I’ll get to that pretty soon—but he wasn’t *entirely* blind. He saw the way the kids looked at that poster. At last he told her to take it down. That was when the argument started. I didn’t hear it all because I was on the scaffold, high above them, and the acoustics were bad, but I heard enough. He said somethin about scaring the

children, or maybe it was *scarring* the children, and she said somethin back about how it helped her keep ‘the rowdy element’ under control. She called it a teachin tool, just like the hickory stick.

“But he stuck to his guns and she finally had to take it down. That night, at her house, she was like a tiger in the zoo after some kid has spent all day pokin it with a stick. She went back and forth in great big long strides, not a stitch on, her hair flyin out behind her. I was in bed, drunk as a lord. But I remember she turned around and her eyes had gone from silver to bright red, as if her brains had caught afire, and her mouth looked funny, like it was tryin to pull itself right out of her face, or somethin. It almost scared me sober. I hadn’t ever seen nothin like that, and never wanted to see it again.

“ ‘I’m going to fix him,’ she said. ‘I’m going to fix that fat old whoremaster, Davey. You wait and see.’

“I told her not to do anything stupid, not to let her temper get the best of her, and a lot of other stuff that didn’t stand knee-high to jack shit. She listened to me for awhile and then she ran across the room so fast that ... well, I don’t know how to say it. One second she was standin all the way across the room by the door, and the next second she was jumpin on top of me, her eyes red and glaring, her mouth all pooched out of her face like she wanted to kiss me so bad she was stretchin her skin somehow to do it, and I had an idea that instead of just scratchin me this time, she was gonna put her nails into my throat and peel me to the backbone.

“But she didn’t. She put her face right down to mine and looked at me. I don’t know what she saw—how scared I was, I guess—but it must have made her happy, because she tipped her head back so her hair fell all the way down to my thighs, and she laughed. ‘Stop talking, you damned souse,’ she said, ‘and stick it in me. What else are you good for?’

“So I did. Because stickin it in her—and drinkin—was all I was good for by then. I surely wasn’t paintin pitchers anymore, I lost my license after I got clipped for my third OUI—in ‘58 or early ‘59, that was—and I was gettin bad reports on some of my jobs. I didn’t care much how I did them anymore, you see; all I wanted was her. Talk started to circulate about how Dave Duncan wasn’t trustworthy no

more ... but the *reason* they said I wasn't was always the booze. The word of what we were to each other never got around much. She was careful as the devil about that. My reputation went to hell in a handbasket, but she never got so much as a splash of mud on the hem of her skirts.

"I think Mr. Lavin suspected. At first he thought I just had a crush on her and she never so much as knew I was makin calf's eyes at her from up on my scaffold, but I think that in the end he suspected. But then Mr. Lavin died. They said it was a heart attack, but I know better. We were in the hammock on her back porch that night after it happened, and that night it was *her* that couldn't get enough of it. She screwed me until I hollered uncle. Then she lay down next to me and looked at me as content as a cat that's had its fill of cream, and her eyes had that deep-red glow again. I am not talking about something in my imagination; I could see the reflection of that red glow on the skin of my bare arm. And I could *feel* it. It was like sittin next to a woodstove that's been stoked and then damped down. 'I told you I'd fix him, Davey,' she says all at once in this mean, teasin voice.

"Me, I was drunk and half killed with fuckin—what she said hardly registered on me. I felt like I was fallin asleep in a pit of quicksand. 'What'd you do to him?' I asked, half in a doze.

" 'I hugged him,' she said. 'I give special hugs, Davey—you don't know about my special hugs, and if you're lucky, you never will. I got him in the stacks and put my arms around him and showed him what I really looked like. Then he began to cry. That's how scared he was. He began to cry his special tears, and I kissed them away, and when I was done, he was dead in my arms.'

" 'His special tears.' That's what she called them. And then her face ... it *changed*. It rippled, like it was underwater. And I seen something ... "

Dave trailed off, looking out into the flatlands, looking at the grain elevator, looking at nothing. His hands had gripped the porch rail. They flexed, loosened, flexed again.

"I don't remember," he said at last. "Or maybe I don't *want* to remember. Except for two things: it had red eyes with no lids, and

there was a lot of loose flesh around its mouth, lyin in folds and flaps, but it wasn't skin. It looked ... dangerous. Then that flesh around its mouth started to move somehow and I think I started to scream. Then it was gone. All of it was gone. It was only Ardelia again, peepin up at me and smilin like a pretty, curious cat.

“ ‘Don't worry,’ she says. ‘You don't have to see, Davey. As long as you do what I tell you, that is. As long as you're one of the Good Babies. As long as you behave. Tonight I'm very happy, because that old fool is gone at last. The Town Council is going to appoint me in his place, and I'll run things the way I want.’

“*God help us all, then*, I thought, but I didn't say it. You wouldn't've, either, if you'd looked down and seen that thing with those starin red eyeballs curled up next to you in a hammock way out in the country, so far out nobody would hear you screamin even if you did it at the top of your lungs.

“A little while later she went into the house and come back out with two of those tall glasses full of Scotch, and pretty soon I was twenty thousand leagues under the sea again, where nothing mattered.

“She kept the Library closed for a week ... ‘out of respect for Mr. Lavin’ was how she put it, and when she opened up again, Little Red Ridin Hood was back on the door of the Children's Room. A week or two after that, she told me she wanted me to make some new posters for the Children's Room.”

He paused, then went on in a lower, slower voice.

“There's a part of me, even now, that wants to sugarcoat it, make my part in it better than it was. I'd like to tell you that I fought with her, argued, told her I didn't want nothin to do with scarin a bunch of kids ... but it wouldn't be true. I went right along with what she wanted me to do. God help me, I did. Partly it was because I was scared of her by then. But mostly it was because I was still besotted with her. And there was something else, too. There was a mean, nasty part of me—I don't think it's in everyone, but I think it's in a lot of us—that liked what she was up to. *Liked* it.

“Now, you're wonderin what I *did* do, and I can't really tell you all of it. I really don't remember. Those times is all jumbled up, like the

broken toys you send to the Salvation Army just to get the damned things out of the attic.

“I didn’t kill anyone. That’s the only thing I’m sure of. She wanted me to ... and I almost did ... but in the end I drew back. That’s the only reason I’ve been able to go on livin with myself, because in the end I was able to crawl away. She kept part of my soul with her—the best part, maybe—but she never kept all of it.”

He looked at Naomi and Sam thoughtfully. He seemed calmer now, more in control; perhaps even at peace with himself, Sam thought.

“I remember going in one day in the fall of 1959—I *think* it was ‘59—and her telling me that she wanted me to make a poster for the Children’s Room. She told me exactly what she wanted, and I agreed willingly enough. I didn’t see nothing wrong with it. I thought it was kind of funny, in fact. What she wanted, you see, was a poster that showed a little kid flattened by a steamroller in the middle of the street. Underneath it was supposed to say HASTE MAKES WASTE! GET YOUR LIBRARY BOOKS BACK IN PLENTY OF TIME!

“I thought it was just a joke, like when the coyote is chasing the Road Runner and gets flattened by a freight train or something. So I said sure. She was pleased as Punch. I went into her office and drew the poster. It didn’t take long, because it was just a cartoon.

“I thought she’d like it, but she didn’t. Her brows drew down and her mouth almost disappeared. I’d made a cartoon boy with crosses for eyes, and as a joke I had a word-balloon comin out of the mouth of the guy drivin the steamroller. ‘If you had a stamp, you could mail him like a postcard,’ he was saying.

“She didn’t even crack a smile. ‘No, Davey,’ she says, ‘you don’t understand. *This* won’t make the children bring their books back on time. *This* will only make them laugh, and they spend too much time doing that as it is.’

“‘Well,’ I says, ‘I guess I didn’t understand what you wanted.’

“We were standin behind the circulation desk, so nobody could see us except from the waist up. And she reached down and took my balls in her hand and looked at me with those big silver eyes of hers and said, ‘I want you to make it *realistic*.’

“It took me a second or two to understand what she really meant. When I did, I couldn’t believe it. ‘Ardelia,’ I says, ‘you don’t understand what you’re sayin. If a kid really *did* get run over by a steamroller—’

“She gave my balls a squeeze, one that hurt—as if to remind me just how she had me—and said: ‘I understand, all right. Now *you* understand *me*. I don’t want them to *laugh*, Davey; I want them to *cry*. So why don’t you go on back in there and do it right this time?’

“I went back into her office. I don’t know what I meant to do, but my mind got made up in a hurry. There was a fresh piece of posterboard on the desk, and a tall glass of Scotch with a straw and a sprig of mint in it, and a note from Ardelia that said ‘D.—Use a lot of *red* this time.’ ”

He looked soberly at Sam and Naomi. “But she’d never been in there, you see. Never for a minute.”

### 3

Naomi brought Dave a fresh glass of water, and when she came back, Sam noticed that her face was very pale and that the corners of her eyes looked red. But she sat down very quietly and motioned for Dave to go on.

“I did what alcoholics do best,” he said. “I drank the drink and did what I was told. A kind of ... of frenzy, I suppose you’d say ... fell over me. I spent two hours at her desk, workin with a box of five-and-dime watercolors, sloppin water and paint all over her desk, not givin a shit what flew where. What I came out with was somethin I don’t like to remember ... but I do remember. It was a little boy splattered all over Rampole Street with his shoes knocked off and his head all spread out like a pat of butter that’s melted in the sun. The man drivin the steamroller was just a silhouette, but he was lookin back, and you could see the grin on his face. That guy showed up again and again

in the posters I did for her. He was drivin the car in the poster you mentioned, Sam, the one about never takin rides from strangers.

“My father left my mom about a year after I was born, just left her flat, and I got an idea now that was who I was tryin to draw in all those posters. I used to call him the dark man, and I think it was my dad. I think maybe Ardelia prodded him out of me somehow. And when I took the second one out, she liked it fine. She laughed over it. ‘It’s *perfect*, Davey!’ she said. ‘It’ll scare a whole *mountain* of do-right into the little snotnoses! I’ll put it up right away!’ She did, too, on the front of the checkout desk in the Children’s Room. And when she did, I saw somethin that really chilled my blood. I *knew* the little boy I’d drawn, you see. It was Willy Klemmart. I’d drawn him without even knowin it, and the expression on what was left of his face was the one I’d seen that day when she took his hand and led him into the Children’s Room.

“I was there when the kids came in for Story Hour and saw that poster for the first time. They were scared. Their eyes got big, and one little girl started to cry. And I *liked* it that they were scared. I thought, ‘That’ll pound the do-right into em, all right. That’ll teach em what’ll happen if they cross her, if they don’t do what she says.’ And part of me thought, *You’re gettin to think like her, Dave. Pretty soon you’ll get to be like her, and then you’ll be lost. You’ll be lost forever.*

“But I went on, just the same. I felt like I had a one-way ticket and I wasn’t goin to get off until I rode all the way to the end of the line. Ardelia hired some college kids, but she always put em in the circulation room and the reference room and on the main desk. *She* kept complete charge of the kids ... they were the easiest to scare, you see. And I think they were the *best* scares, the ones that fed her the best. Because that’s what she lived on, you know—she fed on their fright. And I made more posters. I can’t remember them all, but I remember the Library Policeman. He was in a lot of them. In one—it was called LIBRARY POLICEMEN GO ON VACATION, Too—he was standin on the edge of a stream and fishin. Only what he’d baited his hook with was that little boy the kids called Simple Simon. In another one, he had Simple Simon strapped to the nose of a rocket and was pullin the switch that would send him into outer

space. That one said LEARN MORE ABOUT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY AT THE LIBRARY—BUT BE SURE TO DO RIGHT AND GET YOUR BOOKS BACK ON TIME.

“We turned the Children’s Room into a house of horrors for the kids who came there,” Dave said. He spoke slowly, and his voice was full of tears. “She and I. We did that to the children. But do you know what? They always came back. They always came back for more. And they never, never told. *She* saw to that.”

“But the parents!” Naomi exclaimed suddenly, and so sharply that Sam jumped. “Surely when the parents saw—”

“No!” Dave told her. “Their parents never saw *nothing*. The only scary poster they ever saw was the one of Little Red Ridin Hood and the wolf. Ardelia left that one up all the time, but the others only went up during Story Hour—after school, on Thursday nights, and Saturday mornings. She wasn’t a human bein, Sarah. You’ve got to get that straight in your mind. *She was not human*. She *knew* when grownups was comin, and she always got the posters I’d drawn off the walls and other ones—regular posters that said things like READ BOOKS JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT—up before they came.

“I can remember times when I’d be there for Story Hour—in those days I never left her if I could stay close, and I had lots of time to stay close, because I’d quit paintin pictures, all my regular jobs had fell through, and I was livin on the little I’d managed to save up. Before long the money was gone, too, and I had to start sellin things—my TV, my guitar, my truck, finally my house. But that don’t matter. What matters is that I was there a lot, and I saw what went on. The little ones would have their chairs drawn up in a circle with Ardelia sittin in the middle. I’d be in the back of the room, sittin in one of those kid-sized chairs myself, wearing my old paint-spotted duster more often than not, drunk as a skunk, needin a shave, reekin of Scotch. And she’d be readin—readin one of her special Ardelia-stories—and then she’d break off and cock her head to one side, like she was listenin. The kids would stir around and look uneasy. They looked another way, too—like they was wakin out of a deep sleep she’d put em into.

“ ‘We’re going to have company,’ she’d say, smiling. ‘Isn’t that special, children? Do I have some Good-Baby volunteers to help me get ready for our Big People company?’ They’d *all* raise their hands when she said that, because they all wanted to be Good Babies. The posters I’d made showed em what happened to Bad Babies who didn’t do right. Even I’d raise my hand, sittin drunk in the back of the room in my filthy old duster, lookin like the world’s oldest, tiredest kid. And then they’d get up and some would take down my posters and others would take the regular posters out of the bottom drawer of her desk. They’d swap em. Then they’d sit down and she’d switch from whatever horrible thing she’d been tellin em to a story like ‘The Princess and the Pea,’ and sure enough, a few minutes later some mother’d poke her head in and see all the do-right Good Babies listenin to that nice Miss Lortz readin em a story, and they’d smile at whatever kid was theirs, and the kid would smile back, and things would go on.”

“What do you mean, ‘whatever horrible thing she’d been telling them’?” Sam asked. His voice was husky and his mouth felt dry. He had been listening to Dave with a mounting sense of horror and revulsion.

“Fairy tales,” Dave said. “But she’d change em into horror stories. You’d be surprised how little work she had to do on most of em to make the change.”

“I wouldn’t,” Naomi said grimly. “I remember those stories.”

“I’ll bet you do,” he said, “but you never heard em like Ardelia told em. And the kids *liked* them—part of them liked the stories, and they liked her, because she drew on them and fascinated them the same way she drew on me. Well, not *exactly*, because there was never the sex thing—at least, I don’t think so—but the darkness in her called to the darkness in them. Do you understand me?”

And Sam, who remembered his dreadful fascination with the story of Bluebeard and the dancing brooms in *Fantasia*, thought he *did* understand. Children hated and feared the darkness ... but it drew them, didn’t it? It beckoned to them,

*(come with me, son)*

didn’t it? It sang to them,

(I'm a *poleethman*)

didn't it?

*Didn't* it?

"I know what you mean, Dave," he said.

He nodded. "Have you figured it out yet, Sam? Who *your* Library Policeman was?"

"I still don't understand that part," Sam said, but he thought part of him did. It was as if his mind was some deep, dark body of water and there was a boat sunk at the bottom of it—but not just any boat. No—this was a pirate schooner, full of loot and dead bodies, and now it had begun to shift in the muck which had held it so long. Soon, he feared, this ghostly, glaring wreck would surface again, its blasted masts draped with black seaweed and a skeleton with a million-dollar grin still lashed to the rotting remains of the wheel.

"I think maybe you do," Dave said, "or that you're beginning to. And it will have to come out, Sam. Believe me."

"I still don't really understand about the stories," Naomi said.

"One of her favorites, Sarah—and it was a favorite of the children, too; you have to understand that, and believe it—was 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears.' You know the story, but you don't know it the way some people in this town—people who are grown-ups now, bankers and lawyers and big-time farmers with whole fleets of John Deere tractors—know it. Deep in their hearts, it's the Ardelia Lortz version they keep, you see. It may be that some of them have told those same stories to their own children, never knowing there are other ways to tell them. I don't like to think that's so, but in my heart I know it is.

"In Ardelia's version, Goldilocks is a Bad Baby who won't do right. She comes into the house of the Three Bears and wrecks it on purpose—pulls down Mamma Bear's curtains and drags the washin through the mud and tears up all of Papa Bear's magazines and business papers and uses one of the steak-knives to cut holes in his favorite chair. Then she tears up all their books. That was Ardelia's favorite part, I think, when Goldilocks spoiled the books. And she don't eat the porridge, oh no! Not when Ardelia told the story! The way Ardelia told it, Goldilocks got some rat poison off a high shelf

and shook it all over the porridge like powdered sugar. She didn't know anything about who lived in the house, but she wanted to kill them anyway, because that's the kind of Bad Baby she was."

"That's *horrible!*" Naomi exclaimed. She had lost her composure—really lost it—for the first time. Her hands were pressed over her mouth, and her wide eyes regarded Dave from above them.

"Yes. It was. But it wasn't the end. Goldilocks was so tired from wreckin the house, you see, that when she went upstairs to tear their bedrooms apart, she fell asleep in Baby Bear's bed. And when the Three Bears came home and saw her, they fell upon her—that was just how Ardelia used to say it—they fell upon her and ate that wicked Bad Baby alive. They ate her from the feet up, while she screamed and struggled. All except for her head. They saved that, because they knew what she had done to their porridge. They smelled the poison. 'They could do that, children, because they were *bears,*' Ardelia used to say, and all the children—Ardelia's Good Babies—would nod their heads, because they saw how that could be. 'They took Goldilocks' head down to the kitchen and boiled it and ate her brains for their breakfast. They all agreed it was very tasty ... and they lived happily ever after.' "

## 4

There was a thick, almost deathly silence on the porch. Dave reached for his glass of water and almost knocked it off the railing with his trembling fingers. He rescued it at the last moment, held it in both hands, and drank deeply. Then he put it down and said to Sam, "Are you surprised that my boozing got a little bit out of control?"

Sam shook his head.

Dave looked at Naomi and said, "Do you understand now why I was never able to tell this story? Why I put it in that room?"

"Yes," she said in a trembling, sighing voice that was not much more than a whisper. "And I think I understand why the kids never

told, either. Some things are just too ... too monstrous.”

“For us, maybe,” Dave said. “For kids? I don’t know, Sarah. I don’t think kids know monsters so well at first glance. It’s their folks that tell em how to recognize the monsters. And she had somethin else goin for her. You remember me tellin you about how, when she told the kids a parent was comin, they looked like they were wakin up from a deep sleep? They *were* sleepin, in some funny way. It wasn’t hypnosis—at least, I don’t think it was—but it was *like* hypnosis. And when they went home, they didn’t remember, in the top part of their minds, anyway, about the stories or the posters. Down underneath, I think they remembered plenty ... just like down underneath Sam knows who his Library Policeman is. I think they still remember today—the bankers and lawyers and big-time farmers who were once Ardelia’s Good Babies. I can still see em, wearin pinafores and short pants, sittin in those little chairs, lookin at Ardelia in the middle of the circle, their eyes so big and round they looked like pie-plates. And I think that when it gets dark and the storms come, or when they are sleepin and the nightmares come, they go *back* to bein kids. I think the doors open and they see the Three Bears—*Ardelia’s* Three Bears—eatin the brains out of Goldilocks’ head with their wooden porridge-spoons, and Baby Bear wearin Goldilocks’ scalp on his head like a long golden wig. I think they wake up sweaty, feelin sick and afraid. I think that’s what she left this town. I think she left a legacy of secret nightmares.

“But I still haven’t got to the worst thing. Those stories, you see—well, sometimes it was the posters, but mostly it was the stories—would scare one of them into a crying fit, or they’d start to faint or pass out or whatever. And when that happened, she’d tell the others, ‘Put your heads down and rest while I take Billy ... or Sandra ... or Tommy ... to the bathroom and make him feel better.’

“They’d all drop their heads at the same instant. It was like they were dead. The first time I seen it happen, I waited about two minutes after she took some little girl out of the room, and then I got up and went over to the circle. I went to Willy Klemmart first.

“ ‘Willy!’ I whispered, and poked him in the shoulder. ‘You okay, Will?’

“He never moved, so I poked him harder and said his name again. He still didn’t move. I could hear him breathin—kinda snotty and snory, the way kids are so much of the time, always runnin around with colds like they do—but it was still like he was dead. His eyelids were partway open, but I could only see the whites, and this long thread of spit was hangin off his lower lip. I got scared and went to three or four of the others, but wouldn’t none of them look up at me or make a sound.”

“You’re saying she enchanted them, aren’t you?” Sam asked. “That they were like Snow White after she ate the poisoned apple.”

“Yes,” Dave agreed. “That’s what they were like. In a different kind of way, that’s what I was like, too. Then, just as I was gettin ready to take hold of Willy Klemmart and shake the shit out of him, I heard her comin back from the bathroom. I ran to my seat so she wouldn’t catch me. Because I was more scared of what she might do to me than anything she might have done to them.

“She came in, and that little girl, who’d been as gray as a dirty sheet and half unconscious when Ardelia took her out, looked like somebody had just filled her up with the finest nerve-tonic in the world. She was wide awake, with roses in her cheeks and a sparkle in her eye. Ardelia patted her on the bottom and she ran for her seat. Then Ardelia clapped her hands together and said, ‘All Good Babies lift your heads up! Sonja feels much better, and she wants us to finish the story, don’t you, Sonja?’

“ ‘Yes, ma’am,’ Sonja pipes up, just as pert as a robin in a birdbath. And their heads all came up. You never would have known that two seconds before that room looked like it was full of dead kids.

“The third or fourth time this happened, I let her get out of the room and then I followed her. I knew she was scarin them on purpose, you see, and I had an idea there was a reason for it. I was scared almost to death myself, but I wanted to see what it was.

“That time it was Willy Klemmart she’d taken down to the bathroom. He’d started havin hysterics during Ardelia’s version of ‘Hansel and Gretel.’ I opened the door real easy and quiet, and I seen Ardelia kneelin in front of Willy down by where the washbasin was. He had stopped cryin, but beyond that I couldn’t tell anything.

Her back was to me, you see, and Willy was so short she blocked him right out of my view, even on her knees. I could see his hands were on the shoulders of the jumper she was wearin, and I could see one sleeve of his red sweater, but that was all. Then I heard somethin—a thick suckin sound, like a straw makes when you’ve gotten just about all of your milkshake out of the glass. I had an idea then she was ... you know, molestin him, and she was, but not the way I thought.

“I walked in a little further, and slipped over to the right, walkin high up on the toes of my shoes so the heels wouldn’t clack. I expected her to hear me just the same, though ... she had ears like goddam radar dishes, and I kept waitin for her to turn around and pin me with those red eyes of hers. But I couldn’t stop. I *had* to see. And little by little, as I angled over to the right, I began to.

“Willy’s face came into my sight over her shoulder, a little piece at a time, like a moon coming out of a ‘clipse. At first all I could see of her was her blonde hair—there was masses of it, all in curls and ringlets—but then I began to see *her* face, as well. And I seen what she was doin. All the strength ran out of my legs just like water down a pipe. There was no way they were goin to see me, not unless I reached up and started hammerin on one of the overhead pipes. Their eyes were closed, but that wasn’t the reason. They were lost in what they were doin, you see, and they were both lost in the same place, because they were hooked together.

“Ardelia’s face wasn’t human anymore. It had run like warm taffy and made itself into this funnel shape that flattened her nose and pulled her eyesockets all long and Chinese to the sides and made her look like some kind of insect ... a fly, maybe, or a bee. Her mouth was gone again. It had turned into that thing I started to see just after she killed Mr. Lavin, the night we were layin in the hammock. It had turned into the narrow part of the funnel. I could see these funny red streaks on it, and at first I thought it was blood, or maybe veins under her skin, and then I realized it was lipstick. She didn’t *have* lips anymore, but that red paint marked where her lips had been.

“She was usin that sucker thing to drink from Willy’s eyes.”

Sam looked at Dave, thunderstruck. He wondered for a moment if the man had lost his mind. Ghosts were one thing; this was something else. He didn't have the slightest idea what *this* was. And yet sincerity and honesty shone on Dave's face like a lamp, and Sam thought: *If he's lying, he doesn't know it.*

"Dave, are you saying Ardelia Lortz was drinking his tears?" Naomi asked hesitantly.

"Yes ... and no. It was his *special* tears she was drinkin. Her face was all stretched out to him, it was beatin like a heart, and her features were drawn out flat. She looked like a face you might draw on a shoppin bag to make a Halloween mask.

"What was comin out of the comers of Willy's eyes was gummy and pink, like bloody snot, or chunks of flesh that have almost liquefied. She sucked it in with that slurpin sound. It was his *fear* she was drinkin. She had made it real, somehow, and made it so big that it had to come out in those awful tears or kill him."

"You're saying that Ardelia was some kind of vampire, aren't you?" Sam asked.

Dave looked relieved. "Yes. That's right. When I've thought of that day since—when I've *dared* to think of it—I believe that's *just* what she was. All those old stories about vampires sinking their teeth into people's throats and drinkin their blood are wrong. Not by much, but in this business, close is not good enough. They drink, but not from the neck; they grow fat and healthy on what they take from their victims, but what they take isn't blood. Maybe the stuff they take is redder, *bloodier*, when the victims are grownups. Maybe she took it from Mr. Lavin. I think she did. But it's not blood.

"It's fear."

## 5

"I dunno how long I stood there, watchin her, but it couldn't have been too long—she was never gone much more than five minutes.

After awhile, the stuff comin from the corners of Willy's eyes started to get paler and paler, and there was less and less of it. I could see that ... you know, that thing of hers ... ”

“Proboscis,” Naomi said quietly. “I think it must have been a proboscis.”

“Is it? All right. I could see that probos-thing stretchin further and further out, not wanting to miss any, wanting to get every last bit, and I knew she was almost done. And when she was, they'd wake up and she'd see me. And when she did, I thought she'd probably kill me.

“I started to back up, slow, one step at a time. I didn't think I was going to make it, but at last my butt bumped the bathroom door. I almost screamed when that happened, because I thought she'd got behind me somehow. I was sure of that even though I could see her kneelin there right in front of me.

“I clapped my hand over my mouth to keep the scream in and pushed out through the door. I stood there while it swung shut on the pneumatic hinge. It seemed to take forever. When it was closed, I started for the main door. I was half crazy; all I wanted to do was get out of there and never go back. I wanted to run forever.

“I got down into the foyer, where she'd put up that sign you saw, Sam—the one that just said SILENCE!—and then I caught hold of myself. If she led Willy back to the Children's Room and saw I was gone, she'd know I'd seen. She'd chase me, and she'd catch me, too. I didn't even think she'd have to try hard. I kept rememberin that day in the corn, and how she'd run rings all around me and never even worked up a sweat.

“So I turned around and walked back to my seat in the Children's Room instead. It was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, but somehow I managed to do it. My ass wasn't on the chair two seconds before I heard them coming. And of course Willy was all happy and smilin and full of beans, and so was she. Ardelia looked ready to go three fast rounds with Carmen Basilio and whip him solid.

“ ‘All Good Babies lift your heads up!’ she called, and clapped her hands. They all raised their heads and looked at her. ‘Willy feels lots

better, and he wants me to finish the story. Don't you, Willy?'

" 'Yes, ma'am,' Willy said. She kissed him and he ran back to his seat. She went on with the story. I sat there and listened. And when that Story Hour was done, I started drinkin. And from then until the end, I never really stopped."

## 6

"How *did* it end?" Sam asked. "What do you know about that?"

"Not as much as I would have known if I hadn't been so dog-drunk all the time, but more than I wish I knew. That last part of it, I'm not even sure how long it was. About four months, I think, but it might have been six, or even eight. By then I wasn't even noticin the seasons much. When a drunk like me really starts to slide, Sam, the only weather he notices is inside of a bottle. I know two things, though, and they are really the only two things that matter. Somebody *did* start to catch onto her, that was one thing. And it was time for her to go back to sleep. To change. That was the other.

"I remember one night at her house—she never came to mine, not once—she said to me, 'I'm getting sleepy, Dave. All the time now I'm sleepy. Soon it will be time for a long rest. When that time comes, I want you to sleep with me. I've grown fond of you, you see.'

"I was drunk, of course, but what she said still gave me a chill. I thought I knew what she was talkin about, but when I asked her, she only laughed.

" 'No, not *that*,' she said, and gave me a scornful, amused kind of look. 'I'm talking about *sleep*, not death. But you'll need to feed with me.'

"That sobered me up in a hurry. She didn't think I knew what she was talkin about, but I did. I'd seen.

"After that, she began to ask me questions about the kids. About which ones I didn't like, which ones I thought were sneaky, which ones were too loud, which ones were the brattiest. 'They're Bad

Babies, and they don't deserve to live,' she'd say. 'They're rude, they're destructive, they bring their books back with pencil marks in them and ripped pages. Which ones do *you* think deserve to die, Davey?'

"That was when I knew I had to get away from her, and if killin myself was the only way, I'd have to take that way out. Something was happenin to her, you see. Her hair was gettin dull, and her skin, which had always been perfect, started to show up with blemishes. And there was something else—I could see that *thing*, that thing her mouth turned into—all the time, just under the surface of her skin. But it was starting to look all wrinkled and dewlapped, and there were strings like cobwebs on it.

"One night while we were in bed she saw me lookin at her hair and said, 'You see the change in me, don't you, Davey?' She patted my face. 'It's all right; it's perfectly natural. It's always this way when I'm getting ready to go to sleep again. I will have to do it soon, and if you mean to come with me, you will have to take one of the children soon. Or two. Or three. The more the merrier!' She laughed in the crazy way she had, and when she looked back at me, her eyes had gone red again. 'In any case, I don't mean to leave you behind. All else aside, it wouldn't be safe. You know that, don't you?'

"I said I did.

" 'So if you don't want to die, Davey, it has to be soon. Very soon. And if you've made up your mind not to, you should tell me now. We can end our time together pleasantly and painlessly, tonight.'

"She leaned over me and I could smell her breath. It was like spoiled dogfood, and I couldn't believe I'd ever kissed the mouth that smell was coming out of, sober or drunk. But there was some part of me—some little part—that must have still wanted to live, because I told her I *did* want to come with her, but I needed a little more time to get ready. To prepare my mind.

" 'To drink, you mean,' she said. 'You ought to get down on your knees and thank your miserable, unlucky stars for me, Dave Duncan. If not for me, you'd be dead in the gutter in a year, or even less. With me, you can live almost forever.'

“Her mouth stretched out for just a second, stretched out until it touched my cheek. And somehow I managed to keep from screaming.”

Dave looked at them with his deep, haunted eyes. Then he smiled. Sam Peebles never forgot the eldritch quality of that smile; it haunted his dreams ever after.

“But that’s all right,” he said. “Somewhere, down deep inside of me, I have been screaming ever since.”

## 7

“I’d like to say that in the end I broke her hold over me, but that’d be a lie. It was just happenstance—or what Program people call a higher power. You have to understand that by 1960, I was entirely cut off from the rest of the town. Remember me tellin you that once I was a member of the Rotary Club, Sam? Well, by February of ‘60, those boys wouldn’t have hired me to clean the urinals in their john. As far as Junction City was concerned, I was just another Bad Baby livin the life of a bum. People I’d known all my life would cross the street to get out of my way when they saw me comin. I had the constitution of a brass eagle in those days, but the booze was rustin me out just the same, and what the booze wasn’t takin, Ardelia Lortz was.

“I wondered more’n once if she wouldn’t turn to me for what she needed, but she never did. Maybe I was no good to her that way ... but I don’t really think that was it. I don’t think she loved me—I don’t think Ardelia could love anybody—but I do think she was lonely. I think she’s lived, if you can call what she does living, a very long time, and that she’s had ...”

Dave trailed off. His crooked fingers drummed restlessly on his knees and his eyes sought the grain elevator on the horizon again, as if for comfort.

“*Companions* seems like the word that comes closest to fittin. I think she’s had companions for some of her long life, but I don’t think she’d had one for a very long time when she came to Junction City. Don’t ask what she said to make me feel that way, because I don’t remember. It’s lost, like so much of the rest. But I’m pretty sure it’s true. And she had me tapped for the job. I’m pretty sure I would have gone with her, too, if she hadn’t been found out.”

“Who found her out, Dave?” Naomi asked, leaning forward. “Who?”

“Deputy Sheriff John Power. In those days, the Homestead County sheriff was Norman Beeman, and Norm’s the best argument I know for why sheriffs should be appointed rather than elected. The voters gave him the job when he got back to Junction City in ’45 with a suitcase full of medals he’d won when Patton’s army was drivin into Germany. He was a hell of a scrapper, no one could take that away from him, but as county sheriff he wasn’t worth a fart in a windstorm. What he had was the biggest, whitest smile you ever saw, and a load of bullshit two mules wide. And he was a Republican, of course. That’s always been the most important thing in Homestead County. I think Norm would be gettin elected still if he hadn’t dropped dead of a stroke in Hughie’s Barber Shop in the summer of 1963. I remember *that* real clear; by then Ardelia had been gone awhile and I’d come around a little bit.

“There were two secrets to Norm’s success—other than that big grin and the line of bullshit, I mean. First, he was honest. So far as I know, he never took a dime. Second, he always made sure he had at least one deputy sheriff under him who could think fast and didn’t have no interest in runnin for the top job himself. He always played square with those fellows; every one of them got a rock-solid recommendation when he was ready to move on and move up. Norm took care of his own. I think, if you looked, you’d find there are six or eight town police chiefs and State Police colonels scattered across the Midwest who spent two or three years here in Junction City, shovelling shit for Norm Beeman.

“Not John Power, though. He’s dead. If you looked up his obituary, it’d say he died of a heart attack, although he wasn’t yet thirty years

old and with none of the bad habits that cause people's tickers to seize up early sometimes. I know the truth—it wasn't a heart attack killed John any more than it was a heart attack that killed Lavin. *She* killed him."

"How do you know that, Dave?" Sam asked.

"I know because there were supposed to be *three* children killed in the Library on that last day."

Dave's voice was still calm, but Sam heard the terror this man had lived with so long running just below the surface like a low-voltage electrical charge. Supposing that even half of what Dave had told them this afternoon was true, then he must have lived these last thirty years with terrors beyond Sam's capacity to imagine. No wonder he had used a bottle to keep the worst of them at bay.

"Two *did* die—Patsy Harrigan and Tom Gibson. The third was to be my price of admission to whatever circus it is that Ardelia Lortz is ringmaster of. That third was the one she really wanted, because she was the one who turned the spotlight on Ardelia just when Ardelia most needed to operate in the dark. That third had to be mine, because that one wasn't allowed to come to the Library anymore, and Ardelia couldn't be sure of gettin near her. That third Bad Baby was Tansy Power, Deputy Power's daughter."

"You aren't talking about Tansy *Ryan*, are you?" Naomi asked, and her voice was almost pleading.

"Yeah, I am. Tansy Ryan from the post office, Tansy Ryan who goes to meetins with us, Tansy Ryan who used to be Tansy Power. A lot of the kids who used to come to Ardelia's Story Hours are in AA around these parts, Sarah—make of it what you will. In the summer of 1960, I came very close to killin Tansy Power ... and that's not the worst of it. I only wish it were."

Naomi excused herself, and after several minutes had dragged by, Sam got up to go after her.

“Let her be,” Dave said. “She’s a wonderful woman, Sam, but she needs a little time to put herself back in order. You would, too, if you found out that one of the members of the most important group in your life once came close to murderin your closest friend. Let her abide. She’ll be back—Sarah’s strong.”

A few minutes later, she did come back. She had washed her face—the hair at her temples was still wet and slick—and she was carrying a tray with three glasses of iced tea on it.

“Ah, we’re getting down to the hard stuff at last, ain’t we, dear?” Dave said.

Naomi did her best to return his smile. “You bet. I just couldn’t hold out any longer.”

Sam thought her effort was better than good; he thought it was noble. All the same, the ice was talking to the glasses in brittle, chattering phrases. Sam rose again and took the tray from her unsteady hands. She looked at him gratefully.

“Now,” she said, sitting down. “Finish, Dave. Tell it to the end.”

## 9

“A lot of what’s left is stuff she told me,” Dave resumed, “because by then I wasn’t in a position to see anything that went on first hand. Ardelia told me sometime late in ’59 that I wasn’t to come around the Public Library anymore. If she saw me in there, she said she’d turn me out, and if I hung around outside, she’d sic the cops on me. She said I was gettin too seedy, and talk would start if I was seen goin in there anymore.

“ ‘Talk about you and me?’ I asked. ‘Ardelia, who’d believe it?’

“ ‘Nobody,’ she said. ‘It’s not talk about you and me that concerns me, you idiot.’

“ ‘Well then, what does?’

“ ‘Talk about you and the children,’ she said. I guess that was the first time I really understood how low I’d fallen. You’ve seen me low in the years since we started goin to the AA meetins together, Sarah, but you’ve never seen me that low. I’m glad, too.

“That left her house. It was the only place I was allowed to see her, and the only time I was allowed to come was long after dark. She told me not to come by the road any closer than the Orday farm. After that I was to cut through the fields. She told me she’d know if I tried to cheat on that, and I believed her—when those silver eyes of hers turned red, Ardelia saw *everything*. I’d usually show up sometime between eleven o’clock and one in the morning, dependin on how much I’d had to drink, and I was usually frozen almost to the bone. I can’t tell you much about those months, but I can tell you that in 1959 and 1960 the state of Iowa had a damned cold winter. There were lots of nights when I believe a sober man would have frozen to death out there in those cornfields.

“There wasn’t no problem on the night I want to tell you about next, though—it must have been July of 1960 by then, and it was hotter than the hinges of hell. I remember how the moon looked that night, bloated and red, hangin over the fields. It seemed like every dog in Homestead County was yarkin up at that moon.

“Walkin into Ardelia’s house that night was like walkin under the skirt of a cyclone. That week—that whole month, I guess—she’d been slow and sleepy, but not that night. That night she was wide awake, and she was in a fury. I hadn’t seen her that way since the night after Mr. Lavin told her to take the Little Red Ridin Hood poster down because it was scarin the children. At first she didn’t even know I was there. She went back and forth through the downstairs, naked as the day she was born—if she ever *was* born—with her head down and her hands rolled into fists. She was madder’n a bear with a sore ass. She usually wore her hair up in an old-maidy bun when she was at home, but it was down when I let myself in through the kitchen door and she was walkin so fast it went flyin out behind her. I could hear it makin little crackly sounds, like it was full of static electricity. Her eyes were red as blood and glowin like those railroad lamps they used to put out in the old days when the tracks were

blocked someplace up the line, and they seemed to be poppin right out of her face. Her body was oiled with sweat, and bad as I was myself, I could smell her; she stank like a bobcat in heat. I remember I could see big oily drops rollin down her bosom and her belly. Her hips and thighs shone with it. It was one of those still, muggy nights we get out here in the summer sometimes, when the air smells green and sits on your chest like a pile of junk iron, and it seems like there's cornsilk in every breath you pull in. You wish it would thunder and lightnin and pour down a gusher on nights like that, but it never does. You wish the wind would blow, at least, and not just because it would cool you off if it did, but because it would make the sound of the corn a little easier to bear ... the sound of it pushin itself up out of the ground all around you, soundin like an old man with arthritis tryin to get out of bed in the mornin without wakin his wife.

“Then I noticed she was scared as well as mad this time—someone had really looped the fear of God into her. And the change in her was speedin up. Whatever it was that happened to her, it had knocked her into a higher gear. She didn't look older, exactly; she looked less *there*. Her hair had started to look finer, like a baby's hair. You could see her scalp through it. And her skin looked like it was startin to grow its own skin—this fine, misty webbing over her cheeks, around her nostrils, at the corners of her eyes, between her fingers. Wherever there was a fold in the skin, that was where you could see it best. It fluttered a little as she walked. You want to hear something crazy? When the County Fair comes to town these days, I can't bear to go near the cotton-candy stands on the midway. You know the machine they make it with? Looks like a doughnut and goes round and round, and the man sticks in a paper cone and winds the pink sugar up on it? *That's* what Ardelia's skin was starting to look like—those fine strands of spun sugar. I think I know now what I was seein. She was doin what caterpillars do when they go to sleep. She was spinnin a cocoon around herself.

“I stood in the doorway for some time, watchin her go back and forth. She didn't notice me for a long while. She was too busy rollin around in whatever bed of nettles it was she'd stumbled into. Twice she hammered her fist against a wall and smashed all the way

through it—paper, plaster, and lath. It sounded like breakin bones, but it didn't seem to do her no hurt at all, and there was no blood. She screamed each time, too, but not with pain. What I heard was the sound of a pissed-off she-cat ... but, like I said, there was fear underneath her anger. And what she screamed was that deputy's name.

“ ‘*John Power!*’ she'd scream, and *whack!* Right through the wall her fist would go. 'God *damn* you, John Power! I'll teach you to stay out of my business! You want to look at me? Fine! But I'll teach you how to do it! I'll teach you, little baby of' mine!' Then she'd walk on, so fast she was almost runnin, and her bare feet'd come down so hard they shook the whole damn house, it seemed like. She'd be mutterin to herself while she walked. Then her lip would curl, her eyes would glare redder'n ever, and *whack!* would go her fist, right through the wall and a little puff of plaster dust comin out through the hole. 'John Power, you don't *dare!*' she'd snarl. 'You don't *dare* cross me!'”

“But you only had to look into her face to know she was afraid he *did* dare. And if you'd known Deputy Power, you'd have known she was right to be worried. He was smart, and he wasn't afraid of nothing. He was a good deputy and a bad man to cross.

“She got into the kitchen doorway on her fourth or fifth trip through the house, and all at once she saw me. Her eyes glared into mine, and her mouth began to stretch out into that horn shape—only now it was all coated with those spidery, smoky threads—and I thought I was dead. If she couldn't lay hands on John Power, she'd have me in his place.

“She started toward me and I slid down the kitchen door in a kind of puddle. She saw that and she stopped. The red light went out of her eyes. She changed in the wink of an eye. She looked and spoke as if I'd come into a fancy cocktail party she was throwin instead of walking into her house at midnight to find her rammin around naked and smashin holes in the walls.

“ ‘Davey!’ she says. ‘I'm so glad you're here! Have a drink. In fact, have two!’”

“She wanted to kill me—I saw it in her eyes—but she needed me, and not just for a companion no more, neither. She needed me to kill Tansy Power. She knew she could take care of the cop, but she wanted him to know his daughter was dead before she did him. For that she needed me.

“ ‘There isn’t much time,’ she said. ‘Do you know this Deputy Power?’

“I said I ought to. He’d arrested me for public drunkenness half a dozen times.

“ ‘What do you make of him?’ she asked.

“ ‘He’s got a lot of hard bark on him,’ I says.

“ ‘Well, fuck him and fuck you, too!’

“I didn’t say nothing to that. It seemed wiser not to.

“ ‘That goddam squarehead came into the Library this afternoon and asked to see my references. And he kept asking me questions. He wanted to know where I’d been before I came to Junction City, where I went to school, where I grew up. You should have seen the way he looked at me, Davey—but I’ll teach him the right way to look at a lady like me. You see if I don’t.’

“ ‘You don’t want to make a mistake with Deputy Power,’ I said. ‘I don’t think he’s afraid of anything.’

“ ‘Yes, he is—he’s afraid of me. He just doesn’t know it yet,’ she said, but I caught the gleam of fear in her eyes again. He had picked the worst possible time to start askin questions, you see—she was gettin ready for her time of sleeping and change, and it weakened her somehow.”

“Did Ardelia tell you how he caught on?” Naomi asked.

“It’s obvious,” Sam said. “His daughter told him.”

“No,” Dave said. “I didn’t ask—I didn’t dare, not with her in the mood she was in—but I don’t think Tansy told her dad. I don’t think she could have—not in so many words, at least. When they left the Children’s Room, you see, they’d forget all about what she’d told them ... and done to them in there. And it wasn’t *just* forgetting, either—she put other memories, false memories, into their heads, so they’d go home just as jolly as could be. Most of their parents

thought Ardelia was just about the greatest thing that ever happened to the Junction City Library.

“I think it was what she took from Tansy that put her father’s wind up, and I think Deputy Power must have done a good deal of investigating before he ever went to see Ardelia at the Library. I don’t know what difference he noticed in Tansy, because the kids weren’t all pale and listless, like the people who get their blood sucked in the vampire movies, and there weren’t any marks on their necks. But she was takin *something* from them, just the same, and John Power saw it or sensed it.”

“Even if he did see something, why did it make him suspicious of Ardelia?” Sam asked.

“I told you his nose was keen. I think he must have asked Tansy some questions—nothing direct, all on the slant, if you see what I mean—and the answers he got must have been just enough to point him in the right direction.. When he came to the Library that day he didn’t *know* anything ... but he *suspected* something. Enough to put Ardelia on her mettle. I remember what made her the maddest—and scared her the most—was how he looked at her. ‘I’ll teach you how to look at me,’ she said. Over and over again. I’ve wondered since how long it had been since anyone looked at her with real suspicion ... how long since anyone got into sniffin distance of what she was. I bet it scared her in more ways than one. I bet it made her wonder if she wasn’t finally losin her touch.”

“He might have talked to some of the other children, too,” Naomi said hesitantly. “Compared stories and got answers that didn’t quite jibe. Maybe they even saw her in different ways. The way you and Sam saw her in different ways.”

“It could be—any of those things could be. Whatever it was, he scared her into speedin up her plans.

“ ‘I’ll be at the Library all day tomorrow,’ she told me. ‘I’ll make sure plenty of people see me there, too. But *you*—you’re going to pay a visit to Deputy Power’s house, Davey. You’re going to watch and wait until you see that child alone—I don’t think you’ll have to wait long—and then you’re going to snatch her and take her into the woods. Do whatever you want to her, but you make sure that the *last* thing you

do is cut her throat. Cut her throat and leave her where she'll be found. I want that bastard to know before I see him.'

"I couldn't say nothing. It was probably just as well for me that I was tongue-tied, because anything I said she would have taken wrong, and she probably would have ripped my head off. But I only sat at her kitchen table with my drink in my hand, starin at her, and she must have taken my silence for agreement.

"After that we went into the bedroom. It was the last time. I remember thinkin I wouldn't be able to have it off with her; that a scared man can't get it up. But it was fine, God help me. Ardelia had that kind of magic, too. We went and went and went, and at some point / either fell asleep or just went unconscious. The next thing I remember was her pushin me out of bed with her bare feet, dumpin me right into a patch of early-morning sun. It was quarter past six, my stomach felt like an acid bath, and my head was throbbin like a swollen gum with an abscess in it.

" 'It's time for you to be about your business,' she said. 'Don't let anybody see you on your way back to town, Davey, and remember what I told you. Get her this morning. Take her into the woods and do for her. Hide until dark. If you're caught before then, there's nothing I can do for you. But if you get here, you'll be safe. I'll make sure today that there'll be a couple of kids at the Library tomorrow, even though it's closed. I've got them picked out already, the two worst little brats in town. We'll go to the Library together ... they'll come ... and when the rest of the fools find us, they'll think we're all dead. But you and I won't be dead, Davey; we'll be free. The joke will be on them, won't it?'

"Then she started to laugh. She sat naked on her bed with me grovellin at her feet, sick as a rat full of poison bait, and she laughed and laughed and laughed. Pretty soon her face started to change into the insect face again, that probos-thing pushin out of her face, almost like one of those Viking horns, and her eyes drawin off to the side. I knew everything in my guts was going to come up in a rush so I beat it out of there and puked into her ivy. Behind me I could her laughin ... laughin ... and laughin.

“I was puttin on my clothes by the side of the house when she spoke to me out the window. I didn’t see her, but I heard her just fine. ‘Don’t let me down, Davey,’ she said. ‘Don’t let me down, or I’ll kill you. And you won’t die fast.’

“ ‘I won’t let you down, Ardelia,’ I said, but I didn’t turn around to see her hangin out of her bedroom window. I knew I couldn’t stand to see her even one more time. I’d come to the end of my string. And still ... part of me wanted to go with her even if it meant goin mad first, and most of me thought I *would* go with her. Unless it was her plan to set me up somehow, to leave me holdin the bag for all of it. I wouldn’t have put it past her. I wouldn’t have put *nothin* past her.

“I set off through the corn back toward Junction City. Usually those walks would sober me up a little, and I’d sweat out the worst of the hangover. Not that day, though. Twice I had to stop to vomit, and the second time I didn’t think I was goin to be able to quit. I finally did, but I could see blood all over the corn I’d stopped to kneel in, and by the time I got back to town, my head was achin worse than ever and my vision was doubled. I thought I was dyin, but I still couldn’t stop thinkin about what she’d said: Do whatever you want to her, but you make sure that the *last* thing you do is cut her throat.

“I didn’t want to hurt Tansy Power, but I thought I was goin to, just the same. I wouldn’t be able to stand against what Ardelia wanted ... and then I would be damned forever. And the worst thing, I thought, might be if Ardelia was tellin the truth, and I just went on livin ... livin almost forever with that thing on my mind.

“In those days, there was two freight depots at the station, and a loading dock that wasn’t much used on the north side of the second one. I crawled under there and fell asleep for a couple of hours. When I woke up, I felt a little better. I knew there wasn’t any way I could stop her or myself, so I set out for John Power’s house, to find that little girl and snatch her away. I walked right through downtown, not lookin at anyone, and all I kept thinkin over and over was, ‘I can make it quick for her—I can do that, at least. I’ll snap her neck in a wink and she’ll never know a thing.’ ”

Dave produced his bandanna again and wiped his forehead with a hand which was shaking badly.

“I got as far as the five-and-dime. It’s gone now, but in those days it was the last business on O’Kane Street before you got into the residential district again. I had less than four blocks to go, and I thought that when I got to the Power house, I’d see Tansy in the yard. She’d be alone ... and the woods weren’t far.

“Only I looked into the five-and-dime show window and what I saw stopped me cold. It was a pile of dead children, all staring eyes, tangled arms, and busted legs. I let out a little scream and clapped my hands against my mouth. I closed my eyes tight. When I looked again, I saw it was a bunch of dolls old Mrs. Seger was gettin ready to make into a display. She saw me and flapped one of em at me—get away, you old drunk. But I didn’t. I kept lookin in at those dolls. I tried to tell myself dolls were all they were; *anyone* could see that. But when I closed my eyes tight and then opened em again, they were dead bodies again. Mrs. Seger was settin up a bunch of little corpses in the window of the five-and-dime and didn’t even know it. It came to me that someone was tryin to send me a message, and that maybe the message was that it wasn’t too late, even then. Maybe I couldn’t stop Ardelia, but maybe I could. And even if I couldn’t, maybe I could keep from bein dragged into the pit after her.

“That was the first time I really prayed, Sarah. I prayed for strength. I didn’t want to kill Tansy Power, but it was more than that—I wanted to save them all if I could.

“I started back toward the Texaco station a block down—it was where the Piggly Wiggly is now. On the way I stopped and picked a few pebbles out of the gutter. There was a phone booth by the side of the station—and it’s still there today, now that I think of it. I got there and then realized I didn’t have a cent. As a last resort, I felt in the coin return. There was a dime in there. Ever since that morning, when somebody tells me they don’t believe there’s a God, I think of how I felt when I poked my fingers into that coin-return slot and found that ten-cent piece.

“I thought about calling Mrs. Power, then decided it’d be better to call the Sheriff’s Office. Someone would pass the message on to John Power, and if he was as suspicious as Ardelia seemed to think, he might take the proper steps. I closed the door of the booth and

looked up the number—this was back in the days when you could sometimes still find a telephone book in a telephone booth, if you were lucky—and then, before I dialled it, I stuck the pebbles I'd picked up in my mouth.

“John Power himself answered the phone, and I think now that's why Patsy Harrigan and Tom Gibson died ... why John Power himself died ... and why Ardelia wasn't stopped then and there. I expected the dispatcher, you see—it was Hannah Verrill in those days—and I'd tell her what I had to say, and she'd pass it on to the deputy.

“Instead, I heard this hard don't-fuck-with-me voice say, 'Sheriff's Office, Deputy Power speaking, how can I help you?' I almost swallowed the mouthful of pebbles I had, and for a minute I couldn't say anything.

“He goes 'Damn kids,' and I knew he was gettin ready to hang up.

“ 'Wait!' I says. The pebbles made it sound like I was talkin through a mouthful of cotton. 'Don't hang up, Deputy!'

“ 'Who is this?' he asked.

“ 'Never mind,' I says back. 'Get your daughter out of town, if you value her, and *whatever* you do, don't let her near the Library. It's serious. She's in danger.'

“And then I hung up. Just like that. If Hannah had answered, I think I would have told more. I would have spoken names—Tansy's, Tom's, Patsy's ... and Ardelia's, too. But he scared me—I felt like if I stayed on that line, he'd be able to look right through it and see me on the other end, standin in that booth and stinkin like a bag of used-up peaches.

“I spat the pebbles out into my palm and got out of the booth in a hurry. Her power over me was broken—makin the call had done that much, anyway—but I was in a panic. Did you ever see a bird that's flown into a garage and goes swoopin around, bashin itself against the walls, it's so crazy to get out? That's what I was like. All of a sudden I wasn't worryin about Patsy Harrigan, or Tom Gibson, or even Tansy Power. I felt like *Ardelia* was the one who was lookin at me, that Ardelia knew what I'd done, and she'd be after me.

“I wanted to hide—hell, I *needed* to hide. I started walkin down Main Street, and by the time I got to the end, I was almost runnin. By then Ardelia had gotten all mixed up in my mind with the Library Policeman and the dark man—the one who was drivin the steamroller, and the car with Simple Simon in it. I expected to see all three of them turn onto Main Street in the dark man’s old Buick, lookin for me. I got out to the railway depot and crawled under the loadin platform again. I huddled up in there, shiverin and shakin, even cryin a little, waitin for her to show up and do for me. I kept thinkin I’d look up and I’d see her face pokin under the platform’s concrete skirt, her eyes all red and glaring, her mouth turnin into that horn thing.

“I crawled all the way to the back, and I found half a jug of wine under a pile of dead leaves and old spiderwebs. I’d stashed it back there God knows when and forgot all about it. I drank the wine in about three long swallows. Then I started to crawl back to the front of that space under the platform, but halfway there I passed out. When I woke up again, I thought at first that no time at all had gone by, because the light and the shadows were just about the same. Only my headache was gone, and my belly was roarin for food.”

“You’d slept the clock around, hadn’t you?” Naomi guessed.

“No—almost *twice* around. I’d made my call to the Sheriff’s Office around ten o’clock on Monday mornin. When I came to under the loadin platform with that empty jug of wine still in my hand, it was just past seven on Wednesday morning. Only it wasn’t sleep, not really. You have to remember that I hadn’t been on an all-day drunk or even a week-long toot. I’d been roaring drunk for the best part of *two years*, and that wasn’t all—there was Ardelia, and the Library, and the kids, and Story Hour. It was two years on a merry-go-round in hell. I think the part of my mind that still wanted to live and be sane decided the only thing to do was to pull the plug for awhile and shut down. And when I woke up, it was all over. They hadn’t found the bodies of Patsy Harrigan and Tom Gibson yet, but it was over, just the same. And I knew it even before I poked my head out from under the loadin platform. There was an empty place in me, like an empty

socket in your gum after a tooth falls out. Only that empty place was in my *mind*. And I understood. She was gone. Ardelia was gone.

“I crawled out from under and almost fainted again from hunger. I saw Brian Kelly, who used to be freightmaster back in those days. He was countin sacks of somethin on the other loadin platform and makin marks on a clipboard. I managed to walk over to him. He saw me, and an expression of disgust came over his face. There had been a time when we’d bought each other drinks in The Domino—a roadhouse that burned down long before your time, Sam—but those days were long gone. All he saw was a dirty, filthy drunk with leaves and dirt in his hair, a drunk that stank of piss and Old Duke.

“ ‘Get outta here, daddy-0, or I’ll call the cops,’ he says.

“That day was another first for me. One thing about bein a drunk—you’re always breakin new ground. That was the first time I ever begged for money. I asked him if he could spare a quarter so I could get a cuppa joe and some toast at the Route 32 Diner. He dug into his pocket and brought out some change. He didn’t hand it to me; he just tossed it in my general direction. I had to get down in the cinders and grub for it. I don’t think he threw the money to shame me. He just didn’t want to touch me. I don’t blame him, either.

“When he saw I had the money he said, ‘Get in the wind, daddy-0. And if I see you down here again, I *will* call the cops.’

“ ‘You bet,’ I said, and went on my way. He never even knew who I was, and I’m glad.

“About halfway to the diner, I passed one of those newspaper boxes, and I seen that day’s *Gazette* inside. That was when I realized I’d been out of it two days instead of just one. The date didn’t mean much to me—by then I wasn’t much interested in catendars—but I knew it was Monday morning when Ardelia booted me out of her bed for the last time and I made that call. Then I saw the headlines. I’d slept through just about the biggest day for news in Junction City’s history, it seemed like. SEARCH FOR MISSING CHILDREN CONTINUES, it said on one side. There was pictures of Tom Gibson and Patsy Harrigan. The headline on the other side read COUNTY CORONER SAYS DEPUTY DIED OF HEART ATTACK. Below that one there was a picture of John Power.

“I took one of the papers and left a nickel on top of the pile, which was how it was done back in the days when people still mostly trusted each other. Then I sat down, right there on the curb, and read both stories. The one about the kids was shorter. The thing was, nobody was very worried about em just yet—Sheriff Beeman was treatin it as a runaway case.

“She’d picked the right kids, all right; those two really *were* brats, and birds of a feather flock together. They was always chummin around. They lived on the same block, and the story said they’d gotten in trouble the week before when Patsy Harrigan’s mother caught em smokin cigarettes in the back shed. The Gibson boy had a no-account uncle with a farm in Nebraska, and Norm Beeman was pretty sure that’s where they were headed—I told you he wasn’t much in the brains department. But how could he know? And he was right about one thing—they weren’t the kind of kids who fall down wells or get drowned swimmin in the Proverbia River. But / knew where they were, and I knew Ardelia had beaten the clock again. I knew they’d find all three of them together, and later on that day, they did. I’d saved Tansy Power, and I’d saved myself, but I couldn’t find much consolation in that.

“The story about Deputy Power was longer. It was the second one, because Power had been found late Monday afternoon. His death’d been reported in Tuesday’s paper, but not the cause. He’d been found slumped behind the wheel of his cruiser about a mile west of the Orday farm. That was a place I knew pretty well, because it was where I usually left the road and went into the corn on my way to Ardelia’s.

“I could fill in the blanks pretty well. John Power wasn’t a man to let the grass grow under his feet, and he must have headed out to Ardelia’s house almost as soon as I hung up that pay telephone beside the Texaco station. He might have called his wife first, and told her to keep Tansy in the house until she heard from him. That wasn’t in the paper, of course, but I bet he did.

“When he got there, she must have known that I’d told on her and the game was up. So she killed him. She ... she hugged him to death, the way she did Mr. Lavin. He had a lot of hard bark on him,

just like I told her, but a maple tree has hard bark on it, too, and you can still get the sap to run out of it, if you drive your plug in deep enough. I imagine she drove hers plenty deep.

“When he was dead, she must have driven him in his own cruiser out to the place where he was found. Even though that road—Carson Road—wasn’t much travelled back then, it still took a heap of guts to do that. But what else *could* she do? Call the Sheriff’s Office and tell em John Power’d had a heart attack while he was talkin to her? That would have started up a lot more questions at the very time when she didn’t want nobody thinkin of her at all. And, you know, even Norm Beeman would have been curious about why John Power had been in such a tearin hurry to talk to the city librarian.

“So she drove him out Garson Road almost to the Orday farm, parked his cruiser in the ditch, and then she went back to her own house the same way I always went—through the corn.”

Dave looked from Sam to Naomi and then back to Sam again.

“I’ll bet I know what she did next, too. I’ll bet she started lookin for me.

“I don’t mean she jumped in her car and started drivin around Junction City, pokin her head into all my usual holes; she didn’t have to. Time and time again over those years she would show up where I was when she wanted me, or she would send one of the kids with a folded-over note. Didn’t matter if I was sittin in a pile of boxes behind the barber shop or fishin out at Grayling’s Stream or if I was just drunk behind the freight depot, she knew where I was to be found. That was one of her talents.

“Not that last time, though—the time she wanted to find me most of all—and I think I know why. I told you that I didn’t fall asleep or even black out after makin that call; it was more like goin into a coma, or being dead. And when she turned whatever eye she had in her mind outward, lookin for me, it couldn’t see me. I don’t know how many times that day and that night her eye might have passed right over where I lay, and I don’t want to know. I only know if she’d found me, it wouldn’t have been any kid with a folded-over note that showed up. It would have been *her*, and I can’t even imagine what

she would have done to me for interfering with her plans the way I did.

“She probably would have found me anyway if she’d had more time, but she didn’t. Her plans were laid, that was one thing. And then there was the way her change was speedin up. Her time of sleep was comin on, and she couldn’t waste time lookin for me. Besides, she must have known she’d have another chance, further up the line. And now her chance has come.”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” Sam said.

“Of course you do,” Dave replied. “Who took the books that have put you in this jam? Who sent em to the pulper, along with your newspapers? / did. Don’t you think she knows that?”

“Do you think that she still wants you?” Naomi asked.

“Yes, but not the way she did. Now she only wants to kill me.” His head turned and his bright, sorrowful eyes gazed into Sam’s. “*You’re* the one she wants now.”

Sam laughed uneasily. “I’m sure she was a firecracker thirty years ago,” he said, “but the lady has aged. She’s really not my type.”

“I guess you don’t understand after all,” Dave said. “She doesn’t want to *fuck* you, Sam; she wants to *be* you.”

## 10

After a few moments Sam said, “Wait. Just hold on a second.”

“You’ve heard me, but you haven’t taken it to heart the way you need to,” Dave told him. His voice was patient but weary; terribly weary. “So let me tell you a little more.

“After Ardelia killed John Power, she put him far enough away so she wouldn’t be the first one to fall under suspicion. Then she went ahead and opened the Library that afternoon, just like always. Part of it was because a guilty person looks more suspicious if they swerve away from their usual routines, but that wasn’t all of it. Her change was right upon her, *and she had to have those children’s lives*. Don’t

even think about asking me why, because I don't know. Maybe she's like a bear that has to stuff itself before it goes into hibernation. All I can be sure of is that she had to make sure there was a Story Hour that Monday afternoon ... and she did.

"Sometime during that Story Hour, when all the kids were sittin around her in the trance she could put em into, she told Tom and Patsy that she wanted em to come to the Library on Tuesday morning, even though the Library was closed Tuesdays and Thursdays in the summer. They did, and she did for em, and then she went to sleep ... that sleep that looks so much like death. And now you come along, Sam, thirty years later. You know me, and Ardelia still owes me a settling up, so that is a start ... but there's something a lot better than that. You also know about the Library Police."

"I don't know how—"

"No, you don't know *how* you know, and that makes you even better. Because secrets that are so bad that we even have to hide them from ourselves ... for someone like Ardelia Lortz, those are the best secrets of all. Plus, look at the bonuses—you're young, you're single, and you have no close friends. That's true, isn't it?"

"I would have said so until today," Sam said after a moment's thought. "I would have said the only good friends I made since I came to Junction City have moved away. But I consider you and Naomi my friends, Dave. I consider you very good friends indeed. The best."

Naomi took Sam's hand and squeezed it briefly.

"I appreciate that," Dave said, "but it doesn't matter, because she intends to do for me and Sarah as well. The more the merrier, as she told me once. She has to take lives to get through her time of change ... and waking up must be a time of change for her, too."

"You're saying that she means to possess Sam somehow, aren't you?" Naomi asked.

"I think I mean a little more than that, Sarah. I think she means to destroy whatever there is inside Sam that *makes* him Sam—I think she means to clean him out the way a kid cleans out a pumpkin to make a Halloween jack-o-lantern, and then she's going to put him on

like you'd put on a suit of new clothes. And after that happens—if it does—he'll go on lookin like a man named Sam Peebles, but he won't *be* a man anymore, no more than Ardelia Lortz was ever a woman. There's somethin not human, some *it* hidin inside her skin, and I think I always knew that. It's inside ... but it's forever an outsider. Where did Ardelia Lortz come from? Where did she live before she came to Junction City? I think, if you checked, you'd find that everything she put on the references she showed Mr. Lavin was a lie, and that nobody in town really knew. I think it was John Power's curiosity about that very thing that sealed his fate. But I think there was a *real* Ardelia Lortz at one time ... in Pass Christian, Mississippi ... or Harrisburg, Pennsylvania ... or Portland, Maine ... and the *it* took her over and put her on. Now she wants to do it again. If we let that happen, I think that later this year, in some other town, in San Francisco, California ... or Butte, Montana ... or Kingston, Rhode Island ... a man named Sam Peebles will show up. Most people will like him. Children in particular will like him ... although they may be afraid of him, too, in some way they don't understand and can't talk about.

“And, of course, he will be a librarian.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *BY AIR TO DES MOINES*

#### 1

Sam looked at his wristwatch and was astounded to see it was almost 3:00 P.M. Midnight was only nine hours away, and then the tall man with the silver eyes would be back. Or Ardelia Lortz would be back. Or maybe both of them together.

“What do you think I should do, Dave? Go out to the local graveyard and find Ardelia’s body and pound a stake through her heart?”

“A good trick if you could do it,” he replied, “since the lady was cremated.”

“Oh,” Sam said. He settled back into his chair with a little helpless sigh.

Naomi took his hand again. “In any case, you won’t be doing anything alone,” she said firmly. “Dave says she means to do us as well as you, but that’s almost beside the point. Friends stand by when there’s trouble. *That’s* the point. What else are they for?”

Sam lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Thank you—but I don’t know what you can do. Or me, either. There doesn’t seem to be anything to do. Unless ...” He looked at Dave hopefully. “Unless I ran?”

Dave shook his head. “She—or it—sees. I told you that. I guess you could drive most of the way to Denver before midnight if you really put your foot down and the cops didn’t catch you, but Ardelia Lortz would be right there to greet you when you got out of your car. Or you’d look over in some dark mile and see the Library Policeman sittin next to you on the seat.”

The thought of that—the white face and silver eyes, illuminated only by the green glow of the dashboard lights—made Sam shiver.

“What, then?”

“I think you both know what has to be done first,” Dave said. He drank the last of his iced tea and then set the glass on the porch. “Just think a minute, and you’ll see.”

Then they all looked out toward the grain elevator for awhile. Sam’s mind was a roaring confusion; all he could catch hold of were isolated snatches of Dave Duncan’s story and the voice of the Library Policeman, with his strange little lisp, saying *I don’t want to hear your sick ecthcuses ... You have until midnight ... then I come again.*

It was on Naomi’s face that light suddenly dawned.

“Of course!” she said. “How stupid! But ...”

She asked Dave a question, and Sam’s own eyes widened in understanding.

“There’s a place in Des Moines, as I recall,” Dave said. “Pell’s. If any place can help, it’ll be them. Why don’t you make a call, Sarah?”

## 2

When she was gone, Sam said: “Even if they can help, I don’t think we could get there before the close of business hours. I can try, I suppose ...”

“I never expected you’d drive,” Dave said. “No—you and Sarah have to go out to the Proverbia Airport.”

Sam blinked. “I didn’t know there *was* an airport in Proverbia.”

Dave smiled. “Well ... I guess that *is* stretchin it a little. There’s a half-mile of packed dirt Stan Soames calls a runway. Stan’s front parlor is the office of Western Iowa Air Charter. You and Sarah talk to Stan. He’s got a little Navajo. He’ll take you to Des Moines and have you back by eight o’clock, nine at the latest.”

“What if he’s not there?”

“Then we’ll try to figure out something else. I think he will be, though. The only thing Stan loves more than flyin is farm-in, and come the spring of the year, farmers don’t stray far. He’ll probably tell you he can’t take you because of his garden, come to that—he’ll say you shoulda made an appointment a few days in advance so he could get the Carter boy to come over and babysit his back ninety. If he says that, you tell him Dave Duncan sent you, and Dave says it’s time to pay for the baseballs. Can you remember that?”

“Yes, but what does it mean?”

“Nothing that concerns this business,” Dave said. “He’ll take you, that’s the important thing. And when he lands you again, never mind comin here. You and Sarah drive straight into town.”

Sam felt dread begin to seep into his body. “To the Library.”

“That’s right.”

“Dave, what Naomi said about friends is all very sweet—and maybe even true—but I think I have to take it from here. Neither one of you has to be a part of this. I was the one responsible for stirring her up again—”

Dave reached out and seized Sam’s wrist in a grip of surprising strength. “If you really think that, you haven’t heard a word I’ve said. You’re not responsible for *anything*. I carry the deaths of John Power and two little children on my conscience—not to mention the terrors I don’t know how many other children may have suffered—but I’m not responsible, either. Not really. I didn’t set out to be Ardelia Lortz’s companion any more than I set out to be a thirty-year drunk. Both things just happened. But she bears me a grudge, and she will be back for me, Sam. If I’m not with you when she comes, she’ll visit me first. And I won’t be the only one she visits. Sarah was right, Sam. She and I don’t have to stay close to protect you; the three of us have to stay close to protect each other. Sarah *knows* about Ardelia, don’t you see? If Ardelia don’t know that already, she will as soon as she shows up tonight. She plans to go on from Junction City as *you*, Sam. Do you think she’ll leave anybody behind who knows her new identity?”

“But—”

“But nothin,” Dave said. “In the end it comes down to a real simple choice, one even an old souse like me can understand: we share this together or we’re gonna die at her hands.”

He leaned forward.

“If you want to save Sarah from Ardelia, Sam, forget about bein a hero and start rememberin who *your* Library Policeman was. You *have* to. Because I don’t believe Ardelia can take just anyone. There’s only one coincidence in this business, but it’s a killer: once *you* had a Library Policeman, too. And you have to get that memory back.”

“I’ve tried,” Sam said, and knew that was a lie. Because every time he turned his mind toward

*(come with me, son ... I’m a poleethman)*

that voice, it shied away. He tasted red licorice, which he had never eaten and always hated—and that was all.

“You have to try harder,” Dave said, “or there’s no hope.”

Sam drew in a deep breath and let it out. Dave’s hand touched the back of his neck, then squeezed it gently.

“It’s the key to this,” Dave said. “You may even find it’s the key to everything that has troubled you in your life. To your loneliness and your sadness.”

Sam looked at him, startled. Dave smiled.

“Oh yes,” he said. “You’re lonely, you’re sad, and you’re closed off from other people. You talk a good game, but you don’t walk what you talk. Up until today I wasn’t nothing to you but Dirty Dave who comes to get your papers once a month, but a man like me sees a lot, Sam. And it takes one to know one.”

“The key to everything,” Sam mused. He wondered if there really were such conveniences, outside of popular novels and movies-of-the-week populated with Brave Psychiatrists and Troubled Patients.

“It’s true,” Dave persisted. “Such things are dreadful in their power, Sam. I don’t blame you for not wantin to search for it. But you can, you know, if you want to. You have that choice.”

“Is that something else you learn in AA, Dave?”

He smiled. “Well, they teach it there,” he said, “but that’s one I guess I always knew.”

Naomi came out onto the porch again. She was smiling and her eyes were sparkling.

“Ain’t she some gorgeous?” Dave asked quietly.

“Yes,” Sam said. “She sure is.” He was clearly aware of two things: that he was falling in love, and that Dave Duncan knew it.

### 3

“The man took so long checking that I got worried,” she said, “but we’re in luck.”

“Good,” Dave said. “You two are goin out to see Stan Soames, then. Does the Library still close at eight during the school year, Sarah?”

“Yes—I’m pretty sure it does.”

“I’ll be payin a visit there around five o’clock, then. I’ll meet you in back, where the loadin platform is, between eight and nine. Nearer eight would be better—n safer. For Christ’s sake, try not to be late.”

“How will we get in?” Sam asked.

“I’ll take care of that, don’t worry. You just get goin.”

“Maybe we ought to call this guy Soames from here,” Sam said. “Make sure he’s available.”

Dave shook his head. “Won’t do no good. Stan’s wife left him for another man four years ago—claimed he was married to his work, which always makes a good excuse for a woman who’s got a yen to make a change. There aren’t any kids. He’ll be out in his field. Go on, now. Daylight’s wastin.”

Naomi bent over and kissed Dave’s cheek. “Thank you for telling us,” she said.

“I’m glad I did it. It’s made me feel ever so much better.”

Sam started to offer Dave his hand, then thought better of it. He bent over the old man and hugged him.

## 4

Stan Soames was a tall, rawboned man with angry eyes burning out of a gentle face, a man who already had his summer sunburn although calendar spring had not yet run its first month. Sam and Naomi found him in the field behind his house, just as Dave had told them they would. Seventy yards north of Soames's idling, mud-splashed Rototiller, Sam could see what looked like a dirt road ... but since there was a small airplane with a tarpaulin thrown over it at one end and a windsock fluttering from a rusty pole at the other, he assumed it was the Proverbias Airport's single runway.

"Can't do it," Soames said. "I got fifty acres to turn this week and nobody but me to do it. You should have called a couple-three days ahead."

"It's an emergency," Naomi said. "Really, Mr. Soames."

He sighed and spread his arms, as if to encompass his entire farm. "You want to know what an emergency is?" he asked. "What the government's doing to farms like this and people like me. *That's* a dad-ratted emergency. Look, there's a fellow over in Cedar Rapids who might—"

"We don't have time to go to Cedar Rapids," Sam said. "Dave told us you'd probably say—"

"Dave?" Stan Soames turned to him with more interest than he had heretofore shown. "Dave who?"

"Duncan. He told me to say it's time to pay for the baseballs."

Soames's brows drew down. His hands rolled themselves up into fists, and for just a moment Sam thought the man was going to slug him. Then, abruptly, he laughed and shook his head.

"After all these years, Dave Duncan pops outta the woodwork with his IOU rolled up in his hand! Goddam!"

He began walking toward the Rototiller. He turned his head to them as he did, yelling to make himself heard over the machine's enthusiastic blattling. "*Walk on over to the airplane while I put this goddam thing away! Mind the boggy patch just on the edge of the runway, or it'll suck your damned shoes off!*"

Soames threw the Rototiller into gear. It was hard to tell with all the noise, but Sam thought he was still laughing. *“I thought that drunk old bastard was gonna die before I could quit evens with him!”*

He roared past them toward his barn, leaving Sam and Naomi looking at each other.

“What was that all about?” Naomi asked.

“I don’t know—Dave wouldn’t tell me.” He offered her his arm. “Madam, will you walk with me?”

She took it. “Thank you, sir.”

They did their best to skirt the mucky place Stan Soames had told them about, but didn’t entirely make it. Naomi’s foot went in to the ankle, and the mud pulled her loafer off when she jerked her foot back. Sam bent down, got it, and then swept Naomi into his arms.

“Sam, no!” she cried, startled into laughter. “You’ll break your *back!*”

“Nope,” he said. “You’re light.”

She was ... and his head suddenly felt light, too. He carried her up the graded slope of the runway to the airplane and set her on her feet. Naomi’s eyes looked up into his with calmness and a sort of luminous clarity. Without thinking, he bent and kissed her. After a moment, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

When he looked at her again, he was slightly out of breath. Naomi was smiling.

“You can call me Sarah anytime you want to,” she said. Sam laughed and kissed her again.

## 5

Riding in the Navajo behind Stan Soames was like riding piggyback on a pogo stick. They bounced and jounced on uneasy tides of spring air, and Sam thought once or twice that they might cheat Ardelia in a way not even that strange creature could have foreseen: by spreading themselves all over an Iowa cornfield.

Stan Soames didn't seem to be worried, however; he bawled out such hoary old ballads as "Sweet Sue" and "The Sidewalks of New York" at the top of his voice as the Navajo lurched toward Des Moines. Naomi was transfixed, peering out of her window at the roads and fields and houses below with her hands cupped to the sides of her face to cut the glare.

At last Sam tapped her on the shoulder. "You act like you've never flown before!" he yelled over the mosquito-drone of the engine.

She turned briefly toward him and grinned like an enraptured schoolgirl. "I haven't!" she said, and returned at once to the view.

"I'll be damned," Sam said, and then tightened his seatbelt as the plane took another of its gigantic, bucking leaps.

## 6

It was twenty past four when the Navajo skittered down from the sky and landed at County Airport in Des Moines. Soames taxied to the Civil Air Terminal, killed the engine, then opened the door. Sam was a little amused at the twinge of jealousy he felt as Soames put his hands on Naomi's waist to help her down.

"Thank you!" she gasped. Her cheeks were now deeply flushed and her eyes were dancing. "That was *wonderful!*"

Soames smiled, and suddenly he looked forty instead of sixty. "I've always liked it myself," he said, "and it beats spendin an afternoon abusin my kidneys on that Rototiller ... I have to admit that." He looked from Naomi to Sam. "Can you tell me what this big emergency is? I'll help if I can—I owe Dave a little more'n a puddle-jump from Proverbia to Des Moines and back again."

"We need to go into town," Sam said. "To a place called Pell's Book Shop. They're holding a couple of books for us."

Stan Soames looked at them, eyes wide. "Come again?"

"Pell's—"

“I know Pell’s,” he said. “New books out front, old books in the back. Biggest Selection in the Midwest, the ads say. What I’m tryin to get straight is this: you took me away from my garden and got me to fly you all the way across the state to get a couple of *books*?”

“They’re very important books, Mr. Soames,” Naomi said. She touched one of his rough farmer’s hands. “Right now, they’re just about the most important things in my life ... or Sam’s.”

“Dave’s, too,” Sam said.

“If you told me what was going on,” Soames asked, “would I be apt to understand it?”

“No,” Sam said.

“No,” Naomi agreed, and smiled a little.

Soames blew a deep sigh out of his wide nostrils and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants. “Well, I guess it don’t matter that much, anyway. I’ve owed Dave this one for ten years, and there have been times when it’s weighed on my mind pretty heavy.” He brightened. “And I got to give a pretty young lady her first airplane ride. The only thing prettier than a girl after her first plane ride is a girl after her first—”

He stopped abruptly and scuffed at the tar with his shoes. Naomi looked discreetly off toward the horizon. Just then a fuel truck drove up. Soames walked over quickly and fell into deep conversation with the driver.

Sam said, “You had quite an effect on our fearless pilot.”

“Maybe I did, at that,” she said. “I feel wonderful, Sam. Isn’t that crazy?”

He stroked an errant lock of her hair back into place behind her ear. “It’s been a crazy day. The craziest day I can ever remember.”

But the inside voice spoke then—it drifted up from that deep place where great objects were still in motion—and told him that wasn’t quite true. There was one other that had been just as crazy. More crazy. The day of *The Black Arrow* and the red licorice.

That strange, stifled panic rose in him again, and he closed his ears to that voice.

*If you want to save Sarah from Ardelia, Sam, forget about bein a hero and start rememberin who your Library Policeman was.*

*I don't! I can't! I ... I mustn't!*

*You have to get that memory back.*

*I mustn't! It's not allowed!*

*You have to try harder or there's no hope.*

"I really have to go home now," Sam Peebles muttered.

Naomi, who had strolled away to look at the Navajo's wing-flaps, heard him and came back.

"Did you say something?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter."

"You look very pale."

"I'm very tense," he said edgily.

Stan Soames returned. He cocked a thumb at the driver of the fuel truck. "Dawson says I can borrow his car. I'll run you into town."

"We could call a cab—" Sam began.

Naomi was shaking her head. "Time's too short for that," she said. "Thank you very much, Mr. Soames."

"Aw, hell," Soames said, and then flashed her a little-boy grin. "You go on and call me Stan. Let's go. Dawson says there's low pressure movin in from Colorado. I want to get back to Junction City before the rain starts."

## 7

Pell's was a big barnlike structure on the edge of the Des Moines business district—the very antithesis of the mall-bred chain bookstore. Naomi asked for Mike. She was directed to the customer-service desk, a kiosk which stood like a customs booth between the section which sold new books and the larger one which sold old books.

"My name is Naomi Higgins. I talked to you on the telephone earlier?"

"Ah, yes," Mike said. He rummaged on one of his cluttered shelves and brought out two books. One was *Best Loved Poems of the*

*American People*; the other was *The Speaker's Companion*, edited by Kent Adelman. Sam Peebles had never been so glad to see two books in his life, and he found himself fighting an impulse to snatch them from the clerk's hands and hug them to his chest.

"*Best Loved Poems* is easy," Mike said, "but *The Speaker's Companion* is out of print. I'd guess Pell's is the only bookshop between here and Denver with a copy as nice as this one ... except for library copies, of course."

"They both look great to me," Sam said with deep feeling.

"Is it a gift?"

"Sort of."

"I can have it gift-wrapped for you, if you like; it would only take a second."

"That won't be necessary," Naomi said.

The combined price of the books was twenty-two dollars and fifty-seven cents.

"I can't believe it," Sam said as they left the store and walked toward the place where Stan Soames had parked the borrowed car. He held the bag tightly in one hand. "I can't believe it's as simple as just ... just returning the books."

"Don't worry," Naomi said. "It won't be."

## 8

As they drove back to the airport, Sam asked Stan Soames if he could tell them about Dave and the baseballs.

"If it's personal, that's okay. I'm just curious."

Soames glanced at the bag Sam held in his lap. "I'm sorta curious about those, too," he said. "I'll make you a deal. The thing with the baseballs happened ten years ago. I'll tell you about that if you'll tell me about the books ten years from now."

"Deal," Naomi said from the back seat, and then added what Sam himself had been thinking. "If we're all still around, of course."

Soames laughed. “Yeah ... I suppose there’s *always that possibility*, isn’t there?”

Sam nodded. “Lousy things sometimes happen.”

“They sure do. One of em happened to my only boy in 1980. The doctors called it leukemia, but it’s really just what you said—one of those lousy things that sometimes happens.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Naomi said.

“Thanks. Every now and then I start to think I’m over it, and then it gets on my blind side and hits me again. I guess some things take a long time to shake out, and some things don’t ever shake out.”

*Some things don’t ever shake out.*

*Come with me, son ... I’m a poleethman.*

*I really have to go home now ... is my fine paid?*

Sam touched the corner of his mouth with a trembling hand.

“Well, hell, I’d known Dave a long time before it ever happened,” Stan Soames said. They passed a sign which read AIRPORT 3 MI. “We grew up together, went to school together, sowed a mess of wild oats together. The only thing was, I reaped my crop and quit. Dave just went on sowin.”

Soames shook his head.

“Drunk or sober, he was one of the sweetest fellows I ever met. But it got so he was drunk more’n he was sober, and we kinda fell out of touch. It seemed like the worst time for him was in the late fifties. During those years he was drunk *all* the time. After that he started goin to AA, and he seemed to get a little better ... but he’d always fall off the wagon with a crash.

“I got married in ’68, and I wanted to ask him to be my best man, but I didn’t dare. As it happened, he turned up sober—that time—but you couldn’t trust him to turn up sober.”

“I know what you mean,” Naomi said quietly.

Stan Soames laughed. “Well, I sort of doubt that—a little sweetie like you wouldn’t know what miseries a dedicated boozehound can get himself into—but take it from me. If I’d asked Dave to stand up for me at the weddin, Laura—that’s my ex—would have shit bricks. But Dave *did* come, and I saw him a little more frequently after our boy Joe was born in 1970. Dave seemed to have a special feeling

for all kids during those years when he was tryin to pull himself out of the bottle.

“The thing Joey loved most was baseball. He was nuts for it—he collected sticker books, chewing-gum cards ... he even pestered me to get a satellite dish so we could watch all the Royals games—the Royals were his favorites—and the Cubs, too, on WGN from Chicago. By the time he was eight, he knew the averages of all the Royals starting players, and the won-lost records of damn near every pitcher in the American League. Dave and I took him to games three or four times. It was a lot like takin a kid on a guided tour of heaven. Dave took him alone twice, when I had to work. Laura had a cow about that—said he’d show up drunk as a skunk, with the boy left behind, wandering the streets of K.C. or sittin in a police station somewhere, waitin for someone to come and get him. But nothing like that ever happened. So far as I know, Dave never took a drink when he was around Joey.

“When Joe got the leukemia, the worst part for him was the doctors tellin him he wouldn’t be able to go to any games that year at least until June and maybe not at all. He was more depressed about that than he was about having cancer. When Dave came to see him, Joe cried about it. Dave hugged him and said, ‘If you can’t go to the games, Joey, that’s okay; I’ll bring the Royals to you.’

“Joe stared up at him and says, ‘You mean in *person*, Uncle Dave?’ That’s what he called him—Uncle Dave.

“‘I can’t do that,’ Dave said, ‘but I can do somethin almost as good.’ ”

Soames drove up to the Civil Air Terminal gate and blew the horn. The gate rumbled back on its track and he drove out to where the Navajo was parked. He turned off the engine and just sat behind the wheel for a moment, looking down at his hands.

“I always knew Dave was a talented bastard,” he said finally. “What I don’t know is how he did what he did so damned *fast*. All I can figure is that he must have worked days and nights both, because he was done in ten days—and those suckers were *good*.”

“He knew he had to go fast, though. The doctors had told me and Laura the truth, you see, and I’d told Dave. Joe didn’t have much

chance of pulling through. They'd caught onto what was wrong with him too late. It was roaring in his blood like a grassfire.

"About ten days after Dave made that promise, he comes into my son's hospital room with a paper shopping-bag in each arm. 'What you got there, Uncle Dave?' Joe asks, sitting up in bed. He had been pretty low all that day—mostly because he was losin his hair, I think; in those days if a kid didn't have hair most of the way down his back, he was considered to be pretty low-class-but when Dave came in, he brightened right up.

" 'The Royals, a course,' Dave says back. 'Didn't I tell you?'

"Then he put those two shopping-bags down on the bed and spilled em out. And you never, ever, in your whole life, saw such an expression on a little boy's face. It lit up like a Christmas tree ... and ... and shit, I dunno ..."

Stan Soames's voice had been growing steadily thicker. Now he leaned forward against the steering wheel of Dawson's Buick so hard that the horn honked. He pulled a large bandanna from his back pocket, wiped his eyes with it, then blew his nose.

Naomi had also leaned forward. She pressed one of her hands against Soames's cheek. "If this is too hard for you, Mr. Soames—"

"No," he said, and smiled a little. Sam watched as a tear Stan Soames had missed ran its sparkling, unnoticed course down his cheek in the late-afternoon sun. "It's just that it brings him back so. How he was. That hurts, miss, but it feels good, too. Those two feelings are all wrapped up together."

"I understand," she said.

"When Dave tipped over those bags, what spilled out was baseballs—over two dozen of them. But they weren't *just* baseballs, because there was a face painted on every one, and each one was the face of a player on the 1980 Kansas City Royals baseball team. They weren't those whatdoyoucallums, caricatures, either. They were as good as the faces Norman Rockwell used to paint for the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post*. I've seen Dave's work—the work he did before he got drinkin real heavy—and it was good, but none of it was as good as this. There was Willie Aikens and Frank White and U. L. Washington and George Brett ... Willie Wilson and

Amos Otis ... Dan Quisenberry, lookin as fierce as a gunslinger in an old Western movie ... Paul Splittorff and Ken Brett ... I can't remember all the names, but it was the whole damned roster, including Jim Frey, the field manager.

"And sometime between when he finished em and when he gave em to my son, he took em to K.C. and got all the players but one to sign em. The one who didn't was Darrell Porter, the catcher. He was out with the flu, and he promised to sign the ball with *his* face on it as soon as he could. He did, too."

"Wow," Sam said softly.

"And it was all Dave's doing—the man I hear people in town laugh about and call Dirty Dave. I tell you, sometimes when I hear people say that and I remember what he did for Joe when Joey was dying of the leukemia, I could—"

Soames didn't finish, but his hands curled themselves into fists on his broad thighs. And Sam—who had used the name himself until today, and laughed with Craig Jones and Frank Stephens over the old drunk with his shopping-cart full of newspapers—felt a dull and shameful heat mount into his cheeks.

"That was a wonderful thing to do, wasn't it?" Naomi asked, and touched Stan Soames's cheek again. She was crying.

"You shoulda seen his face," Soames said dreamily. "You wouldn't have believed how he looked, sittin up in his bed and lookin down at all those faces with their K.C. baseball caps on their round heads. I can't describe it, but I'll never forget it.

"You shoulda seen his face.

"Joe got pretty sick before the end, but he didn't ever get too sick to watch the Royals on TV—or listen to em on the radio—and he kept those balls all over his room. The windowsill by his bed was the special place of honor, though. That's where he'd line up the nine men who were playin in the game he was watchin or listenin to on the radio. If Frey took out the pitcher, Joe would take that one down from the windowsill and put up the relief pitcher in his place. And when each man batted, Joe would hold that ball in his hands. So—"

Stan Soames broke off abruptly and hid his face in his bandanna. His chest hitched twice, and Sam could see his throat locked against

a sob. Then he wiped his eyes again and stuffed the bandanna briskly into his back pocket.

“So now you know why I took you two to Des Moines today, and why I would have taken you to New York to pick up those two books if that’s where you’d needed to go. It wasn’t my treat; it was Dave’s. He’s a special sort of man.”

“I think maybe you are, too,” Sam said.

Soames gave him a smile—a strange, crooked smile—and opened the door of Dawson’s Buick. “Well, thank you,” he said. “Thank you kindly. And now I think we ought to be rolling along if we want to beat the rain. Don’t forget your books, Miss Higgins.”

“I won’t,” Naomi said as she got out with the top of the bag wrapped tightly in one hand. “Believe me, I won’t.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN (II)*

#### 1

Twenty minutes after they took off from Des Moines, Naomi tore herself away from the view—she had been tracing Route 79 and marvelling at the toy cars bustling back and forth along it—and turned to Sam. What she saw frightened her. He had fallen asleep with his head resting against one of the windows, but there was no peace on his face; he looked like a man suffering some deep and private pain.

Tears trickled slowly from beneath his closed lids and ran down his face.

She leaned forward to shake him awake and heard him say in a trembling little-boy's voice: "Am I in trouble, sir?"

The Navajo arrowed its way into the clouds now massing over western Iowa and began to buck, but Naomi barely noticed. Her hand paused just above Sam's shoulder for a moment, then withdrew.

*Who was YOUR Library Policeman, Sam?*

*Whoever it was, Naomi thought, he's found him again, I think. I think he's with him now. I'm sorry, Sam ... but I can't wake you. Not now. Right now I think you're where you're supposed to be ... where you have to be. I'm sorry, but dream on. And remember what you dreamed when you wake up. Remember.*

*Remember.*

## 2

In his dream, Sam Peebles watched as Little Red Riding Hood set off from a gingerbread house with a covered basket over one arm; she was bound for Gramma's house, where the wolf was waiting to eat her from the feet up. It would finish by scalping her and then eating her brains out of her skull with a long wooden spoon.

Except none of that was right, because Little Red Riding Hood was a boy in this dream and the gingerbread house was the two-story duplex in St. Louis where he had lived with his mother after Dad died and there was no food in the covered basket. There was a book in the basket, *The Black Arrow* by Robert Louis Stevenson, and he *had* read it, every word, and he was not bound for Gramma's house but for the Briggs Avenue Branch of the St. Louis Public Library, and he had to hurry because his book was already four days overdue.

This was a watching dream.

He watched as Little White Walking Sam waited at the corner of Dunbar Street and Johnstown Avenue for the light to change. He watched as he scampered across the street with the book in his hand ... the basket was gone now. He watched as Little White Walking Sam went into the Dunbar Street News and then he was inside, too, smelling the old mingled smells of camphor, candy, and pipe tobacco, watching as Little White Walking Sam approached the counter with a nickel package of Bull's Eye red licorice—his favorite. He watched as the little boy carefully removed the dollar bill his mother had tucked into the card-pocket in the back of *The Black Arrow*. He watched as the clerk took the dollar and returned ninety-five cents ... more than enough to pay the fine. He watched as Little White Walking Sam left the store and paused on the street outside long enough to put the change in his pocket and tear open the package of licorice with his teeth. He watched as Little White Walking Sam went on his way—only three blocks to the Library now—munching the long red whips of candy as he went.

He tried to scream at the boy.

*Beware! Beware! The wolf is waiting, little boy! Beware the wolf! Beware the wolf!*

But the boy walked on, eating his red licorice; now he was on Briggs Avenue and the Library, a great pile of red brick, loomed ahead.

At this point Sam—Big White Plane-Riding Sam—tried to pull himself out of the dream. He sensed that Naomi and Stan Soames and *the world of real things* were just outside this hellish egg of nightmare in which he found himself. He could hear the drone of the Navajo's engine behind the sounds of the dream: the traffic on Briggs Avenue, the brisk *brrrinnng!-brrrinnng!* of some kid's bike-bell, the birds squabbling in the rich leaves of the midsummer elms. He closed his dreaming eyes and *yearned* toward that world outside the shell, the world of real things. And more: he sensed he could reach it, that he could hammer through the shell—

*No, Dave said. No, Sam, don't do that. You mustn't do that. If you want to save Sarah from Ardelia, forget about breaking out of this dream. There's only one coincidence in this business, but it's a killer: once you had a Library Policeman, too. And you have to get that memory back.*

*I don't want to see. I don't want to know. Once was bad enough.*

*Nothing is as bad as what's waiting for you, Sam. Nothing.*

He opened his eyes—not his outer eyes but the inside ones; the dreaming eyes.

Now Little White Walking Sam is on the concrete path which approaches the east side of the Public Library, the concrete path which leads to the Children's Wing. He moves in a kind of portentous slow motion, each step the soft swish of a pendulum in the glass throat of a grandfather clock, and everything is clear: the tiny sparks of mica and quartz gleaming in the concrete walk; the cheerful roses which border the concrete walk; the thick drift of green bushes along the side of the building; the climbing ivy on the red brick wall; the strange and somehow frightening Latin motto, *Fuimus, non sumus*, carved in a brief semicircle over the green doors with their thick panes of wire-reinforced glass.

And the Library Policeman standing by the steps is clear, too.

He is not pale. He is flushed. There are pimples on his forehead, red and flaring. He is not tall but of medium height with extremely broad shoulders. He is wearing not a trenchcoat but an overcoat, and that's very odd because this is a summer day, a hot St. Louis summer day. His eyes might be silver; Little White Walking Sam cannot see what color they are, because the Library Policeman is wearing little round black glasses—blind man's glasses.

*He's not a Library Policeman! He's the wolf! Beware! He's the wolf! The Library WOLF!*

But Little White Walking Sam doesn't hear. Little White Walking Sam isn't afraid. It is, after all, bright daylight, and the city is full of strange—and sometimes amusing—people. He has lived all his life in St. Louis, and he's not afraid of it. That is about to change.

He approaches the man, and as he draws closer he notices the scar: a tiny white thread which starts high on the left cheek, dips beneath the left eye, and peters out on the bridge of the nose.

Hello there, son, the man in the round black glasses says.

*Hello,* says Little White Walking Sam.

*Do you mind telling me thomething about the book you have before you go inthide?* the man asks. His voice is soft and polite, not a bit threatening. A faint lisp clips lightly along the top of his speech, turning some of his s-sounds into diphthongs. *I work for the Library, you thee.*

*It's called The Black Arrow, Little White Walking Sam says politely, and it's by Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson. He's dead. He died of toober-clue-rosis. It was very good. There were some great battles.*

The boy waits for the man in the little round black glasses to step aside and let him go in, but the man in the little round black glasses does not stand aside. The man only bends down to look at him more closely. Grandpa, what little round black eyes you have.

*One other quethion,* the man says. *Is your book overdue?*

Now Little White Walking Sam is more afraid.

*Yes ... but only a little. Only four days. It was very long, you see, and I have Little League, and day camp, and—*

*Come with me, son... I'm a poleethman.*

The man in the black glasses and the overcoat extends a hand. For a moment Sam almost runs. But he is a kid; this man is an adult. This man works for the Library. This man is a policeman. Suddenly this man—this scary man with his scar and his round black glasses—is all Authority. One cannot run from Authority; it is everywhere.

Sam timidly approaches the man. He begins to lift his hand—the one holding the package of red licorice, which is now almost empty—and then tries to pull it back at the last second. He is too late. The man seizes it. The package of Bull's Eye licorice falls to the walk. Little White Walking Sam will never eat red licorice again.

The man pulls Sam toward him, reels him in the way a fisherman would reel in a trout. The hand clamped over Sam's is very strong. It hurts. Sam begins to cry. The sun is still out, the grass is still green, but suddenly the whole world seems distant, no more than a cruel mirage in which he was for a little while allowed to believe.

He can smell Sen-Sen on the man's breath. *Am I in trouble, sir?* he asks, hoping with every fiber of his being that the man will say no.

Yes, the man says. *Yes, you are. In a Lot of trouble. And if you want to get out of trouble, son, you have to do ecthactly as I thay. Do you underthand?*

Sam cannot reply. He has never been so afraid. He can only look up at the man with wide, streaming eyes.

The man shakes him. *Do you underthand or not?*

Ye—yes! Sam gasps. He feels an almost irresistible heaviness in his bladder.

*Let me tell you exthactly who I am,* the man says, breathing little puffs of Sen-Sen into Sam's face. *I am the Briggth Avenue Library Cop, and I am in charge of punishing boyth and girth who bring their books back late.*

Little White Walking Sam begins to cry harder. *I've got the money!* he manages through his sobs. *I've got ninety-five cents! You can have it! You can have it all!*

He tries to pull the change out of his pocket. At the same moment the Library Cop looks around and his broad face suddenly seems sharp, suddenly the face of a fox or wolf who has successfully broken into the chicken house but now smells danger.

*Come on*, he says, and jerks Little White Walking Sam off the path and into the thick bushes which grow along the side of the library. *When the poleethman tellth you to come, you COME!* It is dark in here; dark and mysterious. The air smells of pungent juniper berries. The ground is dark with mulch. Sam is crying very loudly now.

*Thut up!* the Library Policeman grunts, and gives Sam a hard shake. The bones in Sam's hand grind together painfully. His head wobbles on his neck. They have reached a little clearing in the jungle of bushes now, a cove where the junipers have been smashed flat and the ferns broken off, and Sam understands that this is more than a place the Library Cop knows; it is a place he has *made*.

*Thut up, or the fine will only be the beginning! I'll have to call your mother and tell her what a bad boy you've been! Do you want that?*

*No!* Sam weeps. *I'll pay the fine! I'll pay it, mister, but please don't hurt me!*

The Library Policeman spins Little White Walking Sam around.

*Put your hands up on the wall! Thpread your feet! Now! Quick!*

Still sobbing, but terrified that his mother may find out he has done something bad enough to merit this sort of treatment, Little White Walking Sam does as the Library Cop tells him. The red bricks are cool, cool in the shade of the bushes which lie against this side of the building in a tangled, untidy heap. He sees a narrow window at ground level. It looks down into the Library's boiler room. Bare bulbs shaded with rounds of tin like Chinese coolie hats hang over the giant boiler; the duct-pipes throw weird octopus-tangles of shadow. He sees a janitor standing at the far wall, his back to the window, reading dials and making notes on a clipboard.

The Library Cop seizes Sam's pants and pulls them down. His underpants come with them. He jerks as the cool air strikes his bum.

*Thdeady*, the Library Policeman pants. *Don't move. Once you pay the fine, son, it's over ... and no one needth to know.*

Something heavy and hot presses itself against his bottom. Little White Walking Sam jerks again.

*Thdeady*, the Library Policeman says. He is panting harder now; Sam feels hot blurts of breath on his left shoulder and smells Sen-Sen. He is lost in terror now, but terror isn't all that he feels: there is

shame, as well. He has been dragged into the shadows, is being forced to submit to this grotesque, unknown punishment, because he has been late returning *The Black Arrow*. If he had only known that fines could run this high—!

The heavy thing jabs into his bottom, thrusting his buttocks apart. A horrible, tearing pain laces upward from Little White Walking Sam's vitals. There has never been pain like this, never in the world.

He drops *The Black Arrow* and shoves his wrist sideways into his mouth, gagging his own cries.

*Thdeady*, the Library Wolf pants, and now his hands descend on Sam's shoulders and he is rocking back and forth, in and out, back and forth, in and out. *Thdeady ... thdeaady ... oooh! Thdeeeaaaaaaddyyyyyy—*

Gasping and rocking, the Library Cop pounds what feels like a huge hot bar of steel in and out of Sam's bum; Sam stares with wide eyes into the Library basement, which is in another universe, an *orderly* universe where gruesome things like this don't ever happen. He watches the janitor nod, tuck his clipboard under his arm, and walk toward the door at the far end of the room. If the janitor turned his head just a little and raised his eyes slightly, he would see a face peering in the window at him, the pallid, wide-eyed face of a little boy with red licorice on his lips. Part of Sam wants the janitor to do just that—to rescue him the way the woodcutter rescued Little Red Riding Hood—but most of him knows the janitor would only turn away, disgusted, at the sight of another bad little boy submitting to his just punishment at the hands of the Briggs Avenue Library Cop.

*Thdeadeeeeeeeeeee!* the Library Wolf whisper-screams as the janitor goes out the door and into the rest of his orderly universe without looking around. The Wolf thrusts even further forward and for one agonized second the pain becomes so bad Little White Walking Sam is sure his belly will explode, that whatever it is the Library Cop has stuck up his bottom will simply come raving out the front of him, pushing his guts ahead of it.

The Library Cop collapses against him in a smear of rancid sweat, panting harshly, and Sam slips to his knees under his weight. As he does, the massive object—no longer quite so massive—pulls out of

him, but Sam can feel wetness all over his bottom. He is afraid to put his hands back there. He is afraid that when they come back he will discover he has become Little Red Bleeding Sam.

The Library Cop suddenly grasps Sam's arm and pulls him around to face him. His face is redder than ever, flushed in puffy, hectic bands like warpaint across his cheeks and forehead.

*Look at you!* the Library Cop says. His face pulls together in a knot of contempt and disgust. *Look at you with your panth down and your little dingle out! You liked it, didn't you? You LIKED it!*

Sam cannot reply. He can only weep. He pulls his underwear and his pants up together, as they were pulled down. He can feel mulch inside them, prickling his violated bottom, but he doesn't care. He squirms backward from the Library Cop until his back is to the Library's red brick wall. He can feel tough branches of ivy, like the bones of a large, fleshless hand, poking into his back. He doesn't care about this, either. All he cares about is the shame and terror and the sense of worthlessness that now abide in him, and of these three the shame is the greatest. The shame is beyond comprehension.

*Dirty boy!* the Library Cop spits at him. *Dirty little boy!*

*I really have to go home now,* Little White Walking Sam says, and the words come out minced into segments by his hoarse sobs: *Is my fine paid?*

The Library Cop crawls toward Sam on his hands and knees, his little round black eyes peering into Sam's face like the blind eyes of a mole, and this is somehow the final grotesquerie. Sam thinks, *He is going to punish me again,* and at this idea something in his mind, some overstressed strut or armature, gives way with a soggy snap he can almost hear. He does not cry or protest; he is now past that. He only looks at the Library Cop with silent apathy.

*No,* the Library Cop says. *I'm letting you go, thatth all. I'm taking pity on you, but if you ever tell anyone ... ever ... I'll come back and do it again. I'll do it until the fine is paid. And don't you ever let me catch you around here again, son. Do you underthand?*

Yes, Sam says. Of course he will come back and do it again if Sam tells. He will be in the closet late at night; under the bed;

perched in a tree like some gigantic, misshapen crow. When Sam looks up into a troubled sky, he will see the Library Policeman's twisted, contemptuous face in the clouds. He will be anywhere; he will be everywhere.

This thought makes Sam tired, and he closes his eyes against that lunatic mole-face, against everything.

The Library Cop grabs him, shakes him again. *Yeth, what?* he hisses. *Yeth what, son?*

*Yes, I understand,* Sam tells him without opening his eyes.

The Library Policeman withdraws his hand. Good, he says. *You better not forget. When bad boys and girls forget, I kill them.*

Little White Walking Sam sits against the wall with his eyes closed for a long time, waiting for the Library Cop to begin punishing him again, or to simply kill him. He wants to cry, but there are no tears. It will be years before he cries again, over anything. At last he opens his eyes and sees he is alone in the Library Cop's den in the bushes. The Library Cop is gone. There is only Sam, and his copy of *The Black Arrow*, lying open on its spine.

Sam begins to crawl toward daylight on his hands and knees. Leaves tickle his sweaty, tear-streaked face, branches scrape his back and spank against his hurt bottom. He takes *The Black Arrow* with him, but he will not bring it into the Library. He will never go into the Library, any library, ever again: this is the promise he makes to himself as he crawls away from the place of his punishment. He makes another promise, as well: nobody will ever find out about this terrible thing, because he intends to forget it ever happened. He senses he can do this. He can do it if he tries very, very hard, and he intends to start trying very, very hard right now.

When he reaches the edge of the bushes, he looks out like a small hunted animal. He sees kids crossing the lawn. He doesn't see the Library Cop, but of course this doesn't matter; the Library Cop sees *him*. From today on, the Library Cop will always be close.

At last the lawn is empty. A small, dishevelled boy, Little White Crawling Sam, wriggles out of the bushes with leaves in his hair and dirt on his face. His untucked shirt billows behind him. His eyes are wide and staring and no longer completely sane. He sidles over to

the concrete steps, casts one cringing, terrified look up at the cryptic Latin motto inscribed over the door, and then lays his book down on one of the steps with all the care and terror of an orphan girl leaving her nameless child on some stranger's doorstep. Then Little White Walking Sam becomes Little White Running Sam: he runs across the lawn, he sets the Briggs Avenue Branch of the St. Louis Public Library to his back and runs, but it doesn't matter how fast he runs because he can't outrun the taste of red licorice on his tongue and down his throat, sweet and sugar-slimy, and no matter how fast he runs the Library Wolf of course runs with him, the Library Wolf is just behind his shoulder where he cannot see, and the Library Wolf is whispering *Come with me, son ... I'm a poleethman*, and he will *always* whisper that, through all the years he will whisper that, in those dark dreams Sam dares not remember he will whisper that, Sam will always run from that voice screaming *Is it paid yet? Is the fine paid yet? Oh dear God please, is MY FINE PAID YET?* And the answer which comes back is always the same: *It will never be paid, son; it will never be paid.*

*Never.*

*Nev—*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *THE LIBRARY (III)*

#### 1

The final approach to the dirt runway which Stan called the Proverbia Airport was bumpy and scary. The Navajo came down, feeling its way through stacks of angry air, and landed with a final jarring thump. When it did, Sam uttered a pinched scream. His eyes flew open.

Naomi had been waiting patiently for something like this. She leaned forward at once, ignoring the seatbelt which cut into her middle, and put her arms around him. She ignored his raised arms and first instinctive drawing away, just as she ignored the first hot and unpleasant outrush of horrified breath. She had comforted a great many drunks in the grip of the d.t.'s; this wasn't much different. She could feel his heart as she pressed against him. It seemed to leap and skitter just below his shirt.

"It's okay. Sam, it's okay—it's just me, and you're back. It was a dream. You're back."

For a moment he continued trying to push himself into his seat. Then he collapsed, limp. His hands came up and hugged her with panicky tightness.

"Naomi," he said in a harsh, choked voice. "Naomi, oh Naomi, oh dear Jesus, what a nightmare I had, what a terrible dream."

Stan had radioed ahead, and someone had come out to turn on the runway landing lights. They were taxiing between them toward the end of the runway now. They had not beaten the rain after all; it drummed hollowly on the body of the plane. Up front, Stan Soames

was bellowing out something which might have been “Camptown Races.”

“Was it a nightmare?” Naomi asked, drawing back from Sam so she could look into his bloodshot eyes.

“Yes. But it was also true. All true.”

“Was it the Library Policeman, Sam? Your Library Policeman?”

“Yes,” he whispered, and pressed his face into her hair.

“Do you know who he is? Do you know who he is now, Sam?”

After a long, long moment, Sam whispered: “I know.”

## 2

Stan Soames took a look at Sam’s face as he and Naomi stepped from the plane and was instantly contrite. “Sorry it was so rough. I really thought we’d beat the rain. It’s just that with a headwind—”

“I’ll be okay,” Sam said. He was, in fact, looking better already.

“Yes,” Naomi said. “He’ll be fine. Thank you, Stan. Thank you so much. And Dave thanks you, too.”

“Well, as long as you got what you needed—”

“We did,” Sam assured him. “We really did.”

“Let’s walk around the end of the runway,” Stan told them. “That boggy place’d suck you right in to your waist if you tried the shortcut this evening. Come on into the house. We’ll have coffee. There’s some apple pie, too, I think.”

Sam glanced at his watch. It was quarter past seven.

“We’ll have to take a raincheck, Stan,” he said. “Naomi and I have to get these books into town right away.”

“You ought to at least come in and dry off. You’re gonna be soaked by the time you get to your car.”

Naomi shook her head. “It’s very important.”

“Yeah,” Stan said. “From the look of you two, I’d say it is. Just remember that you promised to tell me the story.”

“We will, too,” Sam said. He glanced at Naomi and saw his own thought reflected in her eyes: If we’re still alive to tell it.

### 3

Sam drove, resisting an urge to tromp the gas pedal all the way to the floor. He was worried about Dave. Driving off the road and turning Naomi’s car over in the ditch wasn’t a very effective way of showing concern, however, and the rain in which they had landed was now a downpour driven by a freshening wind. The wipers could not keep up with it, even on high, and the headlights petered out after twenty feet. Sam dared drive no more than twenty-five. He glanced at his watch, then looked over at where Naomi sat, with the bookshop bag in her lap.

“I hope we can make it by eight,” he said, “but I don’t know.”

“Just do the best you can, Sam.”

Headlights, wavery as the lights of an undersea diving bell, loomed ahead. Sam slowed to ten miles an hour and squeezed left as a ten-wheeler rumbled by—a half-glimpsed hulk in the rainy darkness.

“Can you talk about it? The dream you had?”

“I could, but I’m not going to,” he said. “Not now. It’s the wrong time.”

Naomi considered this, then nodded her head. “All right.”

“I can tell you this much—Dave was right when he said children made the best meal, and he was right when he said that what she really lives on is fear.”

They had reached the outskirts of town. A block further on, they drove through their first light-controlled intersection. Through the Datsun’s windshield, the signal was only a bright-green smear dancing in the air above them. A corresponding smear danced across the smooth wet hide of the pavement.

"I need to make one stop before we get to the Library," Sam said. "The Piggly Wiggly's on the way, isn't it?"

"Yes, but if we're going to meet Dave behind the Library at eight, we really don't have much time to spare. Like it or not, this is go-slow weather."

"I know—but this won't take long."

"What do you need?"

"I'm not sure," he said, "but I think I'll know it when I see it."

She glanced at him, and for the second time he found himself amazed by the foxlike, fragile quality of her beauty, and unable to understand why he had never seen it before today.

*Well, you dated her, didn't you? You must have seen SOMETHING.*

Except he hadn't. He had dated her because she was pretty, presentable, unattached, and approximately his own age. He had dated her because bachelors in cities which were really just overgrown small towns were *supposed* to date ... if they were bachelors interested in making a place for themselves in the local business community, that was. If you didn't date, people ... some people ... might think you were

*(a poleethman)*

a little bit funny.

*I WAS a little funny, he thought. On second thought, I was a toT funny. But whatever I was, I think I'm a little different now. And I am seeing her. There's that. I'm really SEEING her.*

For Naomi's part, she was struck by the strained whiteness of his face and the look of tension around his eyes and mouth. He looked strange ... but he no longer looked terrified. Naomi thought: *He looks like a man who has been granted the opportunity to return to his worst nightmare ... with some powerful weapon in his hands.*

She thought it was a face she might be falling in love with, and this made her deeply uneasy.

"This stop ... it's important, isn't it?"

"I think so, yes."

Five minutes later he stopped in the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly store. Sam was out at once and dashing for the door through

the rain.

Halfway there, he stopped. A telephone booth stood at the side of the parking lot—the same booth, undoubtedly, where Dave had made his call to the Junction City Sheriff's Office all those years before. The call made from that booth had not killed Ardelia ... but it *had* driven her off for a good long while.

Sam stepped into it. The light went on. There was nothing to see; it was just a phone booth with numbers and graffiti scribbled on the steel walls. The telephone book was gone, and Sam remembered Dave saying, *This was back in the days when you could sometimes still find a telephone book in a telephone booth, if you were lucky.*

Then he glanced at the floor, and saw what he had been looking for. It was a wrapper. He picked it up, smoothed it out, and read what was written there in the dingy overhead light: Bull's Eye Red Licorice.

From behind him, Naomi beat an impatient tattoo on the Datsun's horn. Sam left the booth with the wrapper in his hand, waved to her, and ran into the store through the pouring rain.

## 4

The Piggly Wiggly clerk looked like a young man who had been cryogenically frozen in 1969 and thawed out just that week. His eyes had the red and slightly glazed look of the veteran dope-smoker. His hair was long and held with a raw-hide Jesus thong. On one pinky he wore a silver ring beaten into the shape of the peace sign. Beneath his Piggly Wiggly tunic was a billowy shirt in an extravagant flower-print. Pinned to the collar was a button which read

MY FACE IS LEAVING IN 5 MINUTES  
BE ON IT!

Sam doubted if this was a sentiment of which the store manager would have approved ... but it was a rainy night, and the store manager was nowhere in sight. Sam was the only customer in the

place, and the clerk watched him with a bemused and uninvolved eye as he went to the candy rack and began to pick up packages of Bull's Eye Red Licorice. Sam took the entire stock—about twenty packages.

“You sure you got enough, dude?” the clerk asked him as Sam approached the counter and laid his trove upon it. “I think there might be another carton or two of the stuff out back in the storeroom. I know how it is when you get a serious case of the munchies.”

“This should do. Ring it up, would you? I'm in a hurry.”

“Yeah, it's a hurry-ass world,” the clerk said. His fingers tripped over the keys of the NCR register with the dreamy slowness of the habitually stoned.

There was a rubber band lying on the counter beside a baseball-card display. Sam picked it up. “Could I have this?”

“Be my guest, dude—consider it a gift from me, the Prince of Piggly Wiggly, to you, the Lord of Licorice, on a rainy Monday evening.”

As Sam slipped the rubber band over his wrist (it hung there like a loose bracelet), a gust of wind strong enough to rattle the windows shook the building. The lights overhead flickered.

“*Whoa*, dude,” the Prince of Piggly Wiggly said, looking up. “That wasn't in the forecast. Just showers, they said.” He looked back down at the register. “Fifteen forty-one.”

Sam handed him a twenty with a small, bitter smile. “This stuff was a hell of a lot cheaper when I was a kid.”

“Inflation sucks the big one, all right,” the clerk agreed. He was slowly returning to that soft spot in the ozone where he had been when Sam came in. “You must really like that stuff, man. Me, I stick to good old Mars Bars.”

“Like it?” Sam laughed as he pocketed his change. “I hate it. This is for someone else.” He laughed again. “Call it a present.”

The clerk saw something in Sam's eyes then, and suddenly took a big, hurried step away from him, almost knocking over a display of Skoal Bandits.

Sam looked at the clerk's face curiously and decided not to ask for a bag. He gathered up the packages, distributed them at random in

the pockets of the sport-coat he had put on a thousand years ago, and left the store. Cellophane crackled busily in his pockets with every stride he took.

## 5

Naomi had slipped behind the wheel, and she drove the rest of the way to the Library. As she pulled out of the Piggly Wiggly's lot, Sam took the two books from the Pell's bag and looked at them ruefully for a moment. *All this trouble*, he thought. *All this trouble over an outdated book of poems and a self help manual for fledgling public speakers*. Except, of course, that wasn't what it was about. It had never been about the books at all.

He stripped the rubber band from his wrist and put it around the books. Then he took out his wallet, removed a five-dollar bill from his dwindling supply of ready cash, and slipped it beneath the elastic.

"What's that for?"

"The fine. What I owe on these two, and one other from a long time ago—*The Black Arrow*, by Robert Louis Stevenson. This ends it."

He put the books on the console between the two bucket seats and took a package of red licorice out of his pocket. He tore it open and that old, sugary smell struck him at once, with the force of a hard slap. From his nose it seemed to go directly into his head, and from his head it plummeted into his stomach, which immediately cramped into a slick, hard fist. For one awful moment he thought he was going to vomit in his own lap. Apparently some things never changed.

Nonetheless, he continued opening packages of red licorice, making a bundle of limber, waxy-textured candy whips. Naomi slowed as the light at the next intersection turned red, then stopped, although Sam could not see another car moving in either direction. Rain and wind lashed at her little car. They were now only four blocks from the Library. "Sam, what on earth are you doing?"

And because he didn't really *know* what on earth he was doing, he said: "If fear is Ardelia's meat, Naomi, we have to find the other thing—the thing that's the opposite of fear. Because that, whatever it is, will be her poison. So ... what do you think that thing might be?"

"Well, I doubt if it's red licorice."

He gestured impatiently. "How can you be so sure? Crosses are supposed to kill vampires—the blood-sucking kind—but a cross is only two sticks of wood or metal set at right angles to each other. Maybe a head of lettuce would work just as well ... if it was turned on."

The light turned green. "If it was an *energized* head of lettuce," Naomi said thoughtfully, driving on.

"Right!" Sam held up half a dozen long red whips. "All I know is that this is what I have. Maybe it's ludicrous. Probably is. But I don't care. It's a by-God symbol of *all* the things my Library Policeman took away from me—the love, the friendship, the sense of belonging. I've felt like an outsider *all my life*, Naomi, and never knew why. Now I do. This is just another of the things he took away. I used to love this stuff. Now I can barely stand the smell of it. That's okay; I can deal with that. But I have to know how to turn it on."

Sam began to roll the licorice whips between his palms, gradually turning them into a sticky ball. He had thought the smell was the worst thing with which the red licorice could test him, but he had been wrong. The texture was worse ... and the dye was coming off on his palms and fingers, turning them a sinister dark red. He went on nevertheless, stopping only to add the contents of another fresh package to the soft mass every thirty seconds or so.

"Maybe I'm looking too hard," he said. "Maybe it's plain old bravery that's the opposite of fear. Courage, if you want a fancier word. Is that it? Is that all? Is bravery the difference between Naomi and Sarah?"

She looked startled. "Are you asking me if quitting drinking was an act of bravery?"

"I don't know *what* I'm asking," he said, "but I think you're in the right neighborhood, at least. I don't need to ask about fear; I *know*

what that is. Fear is an emotion which encloses and precludes change. *Was it an act of bravery when you gave up drinking?*

“I never really gave it up,” she said. “That isn’t how alcoholics do it. They *can’t* do it that way. You employ a lot of sideways thinking instead. One day at a time, easy does it, live and let live, all that. But the center of it is this: you give up believing you can *control* your drinking. That idea was a myth you told yourself, and *that’s* what you give up. The myth. You tell me—is that bravery?”

“Of course. But it’s sure not foxhole bravery.”

“Foxhole bravery,” she said, and laughed. “I like that. But you’re right. What I do—what *we* do—to keep away from the first one ... it’s not that kind of bravery. In spite of movies like *The Lost Weekend*, I think what we do is pretty undramatic.”

Sam was remembering the dreadful apathy which had settled over him after he had been raped in the bushes at the side of the Briggs Avenue Branch of the St. Louis Library. Raped by a man who had called himself a policeman. That had been pretty undramatic, too. Just a dirty trick, that was all it had been—a dirty, brainless trick played on a little kid by a man with serious mental problems. Sam supposed that, when you counted up the whole score, he ought to call himself lucky; the Library Cop might have killed him.

Ahead of them, the round white globes which marked the Junction City Public Library glimmered in the rain. Naomi said hesitantly, “I think the real opposite of fear might be honesty. Honesty and belief. How does that sound?”

“Honesty and belief,” he said quietly, tasting the words. He squeezed the sticky ball of red licorice in his right hand. “Not bad, I guess. Anyway, they’ll have to do. We’re here.”

## 6

The glimmering green numbers of the car’s dashboard clock read 7:57. They had made it before eight after all.

“Maybe we better wait and make sure everybody’s gone before we go around back,” she said.

“I think that’s a very good idea.”

They cruised into an empty parking space across the street from the Library’s entrance. The globes shimmered delicately in the rain. The rustle of the trees was a less delicate thing; the wind was still gaining strength. The oaks sounded as if they were dreaming, and all the dreams were bad.

At two minutes past eight, a van with a stuffed Garfield cat and a MOM’S TAXI sign in its rear window pulled up across from them. The horn honked, and the Library’s door—looking less grim even in this light than it had on Sam’s first visit to the Library, less like the mouth in the head of a vast granite robot—opened at once. Three kids, junior-high-schoolers by the look of them, came out and hurried down the steps. As they ran down the walk to MOM’S TAXI, two of them pulled their jackets up to shield their heads from the rain. The van’s side door rumbled open on its track, and the kids piled into it. Sam could hear the faint sound of their laughter, and envied the sound. He thought about how good it must be to come out of a library with laughter in your mouth. He had missed that experience, thanks to the man in the round black glasses.

*Honesty*, he thought. *Honesty and belief*. And then he thought again: *The fine is paid. The fine is paid, goddammit*. He ripped open the last two packages of licorice and began kneading their contents into his sticky, nasty-smelling red ball. He glanced at the rear of MOM’S TAXI as he did so. He could see white exhaust drifting up and tattering in the windy air. Suddenly he began to realize what he was up to here.

“Once, when I was in high school,” he said, “I watched a bunch of kids play a prank on this other kid they didn’t like. In those days, watching was what I did best. They took a wad of modelling clay from the Art Room and stuffed it in the tailpipe of the kid’s Pontiac. You know what happened?”

She glanced at him doubtfully. “No—what?”

“Blew the muffler off in two pieces,” he said. “One on each side of the car. They flew like shrapnel. The muffler was the weak point, you

see. I suppose if the gases had backflowed all the way to the engine, they might have blown the cylinders right out of the block.”

“Sam, what are you talking about?”

“Hope,” he said. “I’m talking about hope. I guess the honesty and belief have to come a little later.”

MOM’S TAXI pulled away from the curb, its headlights spearing through the silvery lines of rain.

The green numbers on Naomi’s dashboard clock read 8:06 when the Library’s front door opened again. A man and a woman came out. The man, awkwardly buttoning his overcoat with an umbrella tucked under his arm, was unmistakably Richard Price; Sam knew him at once, even though he had only seen a single photo of the man in an old newspaper. The girl was Cynthia Berrigan, the Library assistant he had spoken to on Saturday night.

Price said something to the girl. Sam thought she laughed. He was suddenly aware that he was sitting bolt upright in the bucket seat of Naomi’s Datsun, every muscle creaking with tension. He tried to make himself relax and discovered he couldn’t do it.

*Now why doesn’t that surprise me?* he thought.

Price raised his umbrella. The two of them hurried down the walk beneath it, the Berrigan girl tying a plastic rain-kerchief over her hair as they came. They separated at the foot of the walk, Price going to an old Impala the size of a cabin cruiser, the Berrigan girl to a Yugo parked half a block down. Price U-turned in the street (Naomi ducked down a little, startled, as the headlights shone briefly into her own car) and blipped his horn at the Yugo as he passed it. Cynthia Berrigan blipped hers in return, then drove away in the opposite direction.

Now there was only them, the Library, and possibly Ardelia, waiting for them someplace inside.

Along with Sam’s old friend the Library Policeman.

Naomi drove slowly around the block to Wegman Street. About halfway down on the left, a discreet sign marked a small break in the hedge. It read

LIBRARY DELIVERIES ONLY.

A gust of wind strong enough to rock the Datsun on its springs struck them, rattling rain against the windows so hard that it sounded like sand. Somewhere nearby there was a splintering crack as either a large branch or a small tree gave way. This was followed by a thud as whatever it was fell into the street.

“God!” Naomi said in a thin, distressed voice. “I don’t like this!”

“I’m not crazy about it myself,” Sam agreed, but he had barely heard her. He was thinking about how that modelling clay had looked. How it had looked bulging out of the tailpipe of the kid’s car. It had looked like a blister.

Naomi turned in at the sign. They drove up a short lane into a small paved loading/unloading area. A single orange arc-sodium lamp hung over the little square of pavement. It cast a strong, penetrating light, and the moving branches of the oaks which ringed the loading zone danced crazy shadows onto the rear face of the building in its glow. For a moment two of these shadows seemed to coalesce at the foot of the platform, making a shape that was almost manlike: it looked as if someone had been waiting under there, someone who was now crawling out to greet them.

*In just a second or two, Sam thought, the orange glare from that overhead light will strike his glasses—his little round black glasses—and he will look through the windshield at me. Not at Naomi; just at me. He’ll look at me and he’ll say, “Hello, son; I’ve been waiting for you. All theeth yearth, I’ve been waiting for you. Come with me now. Come with me, because I’m a poleethman.”*

There was another loud, splintering crack, and a tree-branch dropped to the pavement not three feet from the Datsun’s trunk, exploding chunks of bark and rot-infested wood in every direction. If it had landed on top of the car, it would have smashed the roof in like a tomato-soup can.

Naomi screamed.

The wind, still rising, screamed back.

Sam was reaching for her, meaning to put a comforting arm around her, when the door at the rear of the loading platform opened partway and Dave Duncan stepped into the gap. He was holding onto the door to keep the wind from snatching it out of his grasp. To Sam, the old man's face looked far too white and almost grotesquely frightened. He made frantic beckoning gestures with his free hand.

"Naomi, there's Dave."

"Where—? Oh yes, I see him." Her eyes widened. "My God, he looks *horrible!*"

She began to open her door. The wind gusted, ripped it out of her grasp, and whooshed through the Datsun in a tight little tornado, lifting the licorice wrappers and dancing them around in dizzy circles.

Naomi managed to get one hand down just in time to keep from being struck—and perhaps injured—by the rebound of her own car door. Then she was out, her hair blowing in its own storm about her head, her skirt soaked and painted against her thighs in a moment.

Sam shoved his own door open—the wind was blowing the wrong way for him, and he did literally have to put his shoulder to it—and struggled out. He had time to wonder where in the hell this storm had come from; the Prince of Piggly Wiggly had said there had been no prediction for such a spectacular capful of wind and rain. Just showers, he'd said.

Ardelia. Maybe it was Ardelia's storm.

As if to confirm this, Dave's voice rose in a momentary lull. "Hurry up! *I can smell her goddam perfume everywhere!*"

Sam found the idea that the smell of Ardelia's perfume might somehow precede her materialization obscurely terrifying.

He was halfway to the loading-platform steps before he realized that, although he still had the snot-textured ball of red licorice, he had left the books in the car. He turned back, muscled the door open, and got them. As he did, the quality of the light changed—it went from a bright, penetrating orange to white. Sam saw the change on the skin of his hands, and for a moment his eyes seemed to freeze in their sockets. He backed out of the car in a hurry, the books in his hand, and whirled around.

The orange arc-sodium security lamp was gone. It had been replaced by an old-fashioned mercury-vapor streetlight. The trees dancing and groaning around the loading platform in the wind were thicker now; stately old elms predominated, easily overtopping the oaks. The shape of the loading platform had changed, and now tangled runners of ivy climbed the rear wall of the Library—a wall which had been bare just a moment ago.

*Welcome to 1960*, Sam thought. *Welcome to the Ardelia Lortz edition of the Junction City Public Library.*

Naomi had gained the platform. She was saying something to Dave. Dave replied, then looked back over his shoulder. His body jerked. At the same moment, Naomi screamed. Sam ran for the steps to the platform, the tail of his coat billowing out behind him. As he climbed the steps, he saw a white hand float out of the darkness and settle on Dave's shoulder. It yanked him back into the Library.

"Grab the door!" Sam screamed. "Naomi, grab the door! *Don't let it lock!*"

But in this the wind helped them. It blew the door wide open, striking Naomi's shoulder and making her stagger backward. Sam reached it in time to catch it on the rebound.

Naomi turned horrified dark eyes on him. "It was the man who came to your house, Sam. The tall man with the silvery eyes. I saw him. He grabbed Dave!"

No time to think about it. "Come on." He slipped an arm around Naomi's waist and pulled her forward into the Library. Behind them, the wind dropped and the door slammed shut with a thud.

## 8

They were in a book-cataloguing area which was dim but not entirely dark. A small table-lamp with a red-fringed shade stood on the librarian's desk. Beyond this area, which was littered with boxes and packing materials (the latter consisted of crumpled newspapers,

Sam saw; this was 1960, and those polyethylene popcorn balls hadn't been invented yet), the stacks began. Standing in one of the aisles, walled in with books on both sides, was the Library Policeman. He had Dave Duncan in a half-nelson, and was holding him with almost absent ease three inches off the floor.

He looked at Sam and Naomi. His silver eyes glinted, and a crescent grin rose on his white face. It looked like a chrome moon.

"Not a thtep closer," he said, "or I'll thnap his neck like a chicken bone. You'll hear it go."

Sam considered this, but only for a moment. He could smell lavender sachet, thick and cloying. Outside the building, the wind whined and boomed. The Library Policeman's shadow danced up the wall, as gaunt as a gantry. *He didn't have a shadow before, Sam realized. What does that mean?*

Maybe it meant the Library Policeman was more real now, more *here* ... because Ardelia and the Library Policeman and the dark man in the old car were really the same person. There was only one, and these were simply the faces it wore, putting them on and taking them off again with the ease of a kid trying on Halloween masks.

"Am I supposed to think you'll let him live if we stand away from you?" he asked. "Bullshit."

He began to walk toward the Library Policeman.

An expression which sat oddly on the tall man's face now appeared. It was surprise. He took a step backward. His trenchcoat flapped around his shins and dragged against the folio volumes which formed the sides of the narrow aisle in which he stood.

"I'm warning you!"

"Warn and be damned," Sam said. "Your argument isn't with him. You've got a bone to pick with me, don't you? Okay—let's pick it."

"The *Librarian* has a score to thettle with the old man!" the Policeman said, and took another step backward. Something odd was happening to his face, and it took Sam an instant to see what it was. The silver light in the Library Policeman's eyes was fading.

"Then let her settle it," Sam said. "My score is with you, big boy, and it goes back thirty years."

He passed beyond the pool of radiance thrown by the table lamp.

“All right, then!” the Library Cop snarled. He made a half-turn and threw Dave Duncan down the aisle. Dave flew like a bag of laundry, a single croak of fear and surprise escaping him. He tried to raise one arm as he approached the wall, but it was only a dazed, half-hearted reflex. He collided with the fire-extinguisher mounted by the stairs, and Sam heard the dull crunch of a breaking bone. Dave fell, and the heavy red extinguisher fell off the wall on top of him.

“*Dave!*” Naomi shrieked, and darted toward him.

“*Naomi, no!*”

But she paid no attention. The Library Policeman’s grin reappeared; he grabbed Naomi by the arm as she tried to go past and curled her to him. His face came down and was for a moment hidden by the chestnut-colored hair at the nape of her neck. He uttered a strange, muffled cough against her flesh and then began kissing her—or so it appeared. His long white hand dug into her upper arm. Naomi screamed again, and then seemed to slump a little in his grip.

Sam had reached the entrance to the stacks now. He seized the first book his hand touched, yanked it off the shelf, cocked his arm back, and threw it. It flew end over end, the boards spreading, the pages riffling, and struck the Library Policeman on the side of the head. He uttered a cry of rage and surprise and looked up. Naomi tore free of his grasp and staggered sideways into one of the high shelves, flagging her arms for balance. The shelf rocked backward as she rebounded, and then fell with a gigantic, echoing crash. Books flew off shelves where they might have stood undisturbed for years and struck the floor in a rain of slaps that sounded oddly like applause.

Naomi ignored this. She reached Dave and fell on her knees beside him, crying his name over and over. The Library Policeman turned in that direction.

“Your argument isn’t with her, either,” Sam said.

The Library Policeman turned back to him. His silver eyes had been replaced with small black glasses that gave his face a blind, molelike look.

“I should have killed you the first time,” he said, and began to walk toward Sam. His walk was accompanied by a queer brushing sound. Sam looked down and saw the hem of the Library Cop’s trenchcoat was now brushing the floor. He was growing shorter.

“The fine is paid,” Sam said quietly. The Library Policeman stopped. Sam held up the books with the five-dollar bill beneath the elastic. “The fine is paid and the books are returned. It’s all over, you bitch ... or bastard ... or whatever you are.”

Outside, the wind rose in a long, hollow cry which ran beneath the eaves like glass. The Library Policeman’s tongue crept out and slicked his lips. It was very red, very pointed. Blemishes had begun to appear on his cheeks and forehead. There was a greasy lens of sweat on his skin.

And the smell of lavender sachet was much stronger. “Wrong!” the Library Policeman cried. “*Wrong!* Those aren’t the books you borrowed! I know! That drunk old cockthucker took the books you borrowed! They were—”

“—destroyed,” Sam finished. He began to walk again, closing in on the Library Policeman, and the lavender smell grew stronger with every step he took. His heart was racing in his chest. “I know whose idea that was, too. But these are perfectly acceptable replacements. Take them.” His voice rose into a stern shout. “*Take them, damn you!*”

He held the books out, and the Library Policeman, looking confused and afraid, reached for them.

“No, not like that,” Sam said, raising the books above the white, grasping hand. “Like *this*.”

He brought the books down in the Library Policeman’s face—brought them down hard. He could not remember ever feeling such sublime satisfaction in his life as that which he felt when *Best Loved Poems of the American People and The Speaker’s Companion* struck and broke the Library Policeman’s nose. The round black glasses flew off his face and fell to the floor. Beneath them were black sockets lined with a bed of whitish fluid. Tiny threads floated up from this oozy stuff, and Sam thought about Dave’s story—*looked like it was startin to grow its own skin*, he had said.

The Library Policeman screamed.

*“You can’t!”* it screamed. *“You can’t hurt me! You’re afraid of me! Besides, you liked it! You LIKED it! YOU DIRTY LITTLE BOY, YOU LIKED IT!”*

“Wrong,” Sam said. “I fucking hated it. Now take these books. Take them and get out of here. Because the fine is paid.”

He slammed the books into the Library Policeman’s chest. And, as the Library Policeman’s hands closed on them, Sam hoicked one knee squarely into the Library Policeman’s crotch.

“That’s for all the other kids,” he said. “The ones you fucked and the ones she ate.”

The creature wailed with pain. His flailing hands dropped the books as he bent to cup his groin. His greasy black hair fell over his face, mercifully hiding those blank, thread-choked sockets.

*Of course they are blank,* Sam had time to think. *I never saw the eyes behind the glasses he wore that day... so SHE couldn’t see them, either.*

“That doesn’t pay your fine,” Sam said, “but it’s a step in the right direction, isn’t it?”

The Library Policeman’s trenchcoat began to writhe and ripple, as if some unimaginable transformation had begun beneath it. And when he—*it*—looked up, Sam saw something which drove him back a step in horror and revulsion.

The man who had come half from Dave’s poster and half from Sam’s own mind had become a misshapen dwarf. The dwarf was becoming something else, a dreadful hermaphroditic creature. A sexual storm was happening on its face and beneath the bunching, twitching trenchcoat. Half the hair was still black; the other half was ash-blond. One socket was still empty; a savage blue eye glittered hate from the other.

*“I want you,”* the dwarfish creature hissed. *“I want you, and I’ll have you.”*

“Try me, Ardelia,” Sam said. “Let’s rock and r—”

He reached for the thing before him, but screamed and withdrew his hand as soon as it snagged in the trenchcoat. It wasn’t a coat at

all; it was some sort of dreadful loose skin, and it was like trying to grip a mass of freshly used teabags.

It scuttered up the canted side of the fallen bookshelf and thumped into the shadows on the far side. The smell of lavender sachet was suddenly much stronger.

A brutal laugh drifted up from the shadows.

A woman's laugh.

"Too late, Sam," she said. "It's already too late. The deed is done."

*Ardelia's back*, Sam thought, and from outside there was a tremendous, rending crash. The building shuddered as a tree fell against it, and the lights went out.

## 9

They were in total darkness only for a second, but it seemed much longer. Ardelia laughed again, and this time her laughter had a strange, hooting quality, like laughter broadcast through a megaphone.

Then a single emergency bulb high up on one wall went on, throwing a pallid sheaf of light over this section of the stacks and flinging shadows everywhere like tangles of black yarn. Sam could hear the light's battery buzzing noisily. He made his way to where Naomi still knelt beside Dave, twice almost falling as his feet slid in piles of books which had spilled from the overturned case.

Naomi looked up at him. Her face was white and shocked and streaked with tears. "Sam, I think he's dying."

He knelt beside Dave. The old man's eyes were shut and he was breathing in harsh, almost random gasps. Thin trickles of blood spilled from both nostrils and from one ear. There was a deep, crushed dent in his forehead, just above the right eyebrow. Looking at it made Sam's stomach clench. One of Dave's cheekbones was clearly broken, and the fire-extinguisher's handle was printed on that

side of his face in bright lines of blood and bruise. It looked like a tattoo.

“We’ve got to get him to a hospital, Sam!”

“Do you think she’d let us out of here now?” he asked, and, as if in answer to this question, a huge book—the T volume of *The Oxford English Dictionary*—came flying at them from beyond the rough circle of light thrown by the emergency unit mounted on the wall. Sam pulled Naomi backward and they both went sprawling in the dusty aisle. Seven pounds of *tabasco*, *tendrils*, *tomcat*, and *trepan* slammed through the space where Naomi’s head had been a moment before, hit the wall, and splashed to the floor in an untidy, tented heap.

From the shadows came shrill laughter. Sam rose to his knees in time to see a hunched shape flit down the aisle beyond the fallen bookcase. *It’s still changing*, Sam thought. *Into what, God only knows*. It buttonhooked to the left and was gone.

“Get her, Sam,” Naomi said hoarsely. She gripped one of his hands. “Get her, please get her.”

“I’ll try,” he said. He stepped over Dave’s sprawled legs and entered the deeper shadows beyond the overturned bookcase.

## 10

The smell freaked him out—the smell of lavender sachet mixed with the dusty aroma of books from all those latter years. That smell, mingled with the freight-train whoop of the wind outside, made him feel like H. G. Wells’s Time Traveller ... and the Library itself, bulking all around him, was his time machine.

He walked slowly down the aisle, squeezing the ball of red licorice nervously in his left hand. Books surrounded him, seemed to frown down at him. They climbed to a height that was twice his own. He could hear the click and squeak of his shoes on the old linoleum.

“Where are you?” he shouted. “If you want me, Ardelia, why don’t you come on and get me? I’m right here!”

No answer. But she would have to come out soon, wouldn’t she? If Dave was right, her change was upon her, and her time was short.

*Midnight*, he thought. *The Library Policeman gave me until midnight, so maybe that’s how long she has. But that’s over three and a half hours away... Dave can’t possibly wait that long.*

Then another thought, even less pleasant, occurred: suppose that, while he was mucking around back here in these dark aisles, Ardelia was circling her way back to Naomi and Dave?

He came to the end of the aisle, listened, heard nothing, and slipped over into the next. It was empty. He heard a low whispering sound from above him and looked up just in time to see half a dozen heavy books sliding out from one of the shelves above his head. He lunged backward with a cry as the books fell, striking his thighs, and heard Ardelia’s crazy laughter from the other side of the bookcase.

He could imagine her up there, clinging to the shelves like a spider bloated with poison, and his body seemed to act before his brain could think. He slewed around on his heels like a drunken soldier trying to do an about face and threw his back against the shelf. The laughter turned to a scream of fear and surprise as the stack tilted under Sam’s weight. He heard a meaty thud as the thing hurled itself from its perch. A second later the stack went over.

What happened then was something Sam had not foreseen: the stack he had pushed toppled across the aisle, shedding its books in a waterfall as it went, and struck the next one. The second fell against a third, the third against a fourth, and then they were all falling like dominoes, all the way across this huge, shadowy storage area, crashing and clanging and spilling everything from Marryat’s works to *The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. He heard Ardelia scream again and then Sam launched himself at the tilted bookcase he had pushed over. He climbed it like a ladder, kicking books out of his way in search of toe-holds, yanking himself upward with one hand.

He threw himself down on the far side and saw a white, hellishly misshapen creature pulling itself from beneath a jack-straw tumble of

atlases and travel volumes. It had blonde hair and blue eyes, but any resemblance to humanity ceased there. Its illusions were gone. The creature was a fat, naked thing with arms and legs that appeared to end in jointed claws. A sac of flesh hung below its neck like a deflated goiter. Thin white fibers stormed around its body. There was something horridly beetlelike about it, and Sam was suddenly screaming inside—silent, atavistic screams which seemed to radiate out along his bones. *This is it.* God help me, this is it. He felt revulsion, but suddenly his terror was gone; now that he could actually see the thing, it was not so bad.

Then it began to change again, and Sam's feeling of relief faded. It did not have a face, exactly, but below the bulging blue eyes, a horn shape began to extrude itself, pushing out of the horror-show face like a stubby elephant's trunk. The eyes stretched away to either side, becoming first Chinese and then insectile. Sam could hear it sniffing as it stretched toward him.

It was covered with wavering, dusty threads.

Part of him wanted to pull back—was screaming at him to pull back—but most of him wanted to stand his ground. And as the thing's fleshy proboscis touched him, Sam felt its deep power. A sense of lethargy filled him, a feeling that it would be better if he just stood still and let it happen. The wind had become a distant, dreamy howl. It was soothing, in a way, as the sound of the vacuum cleaner had been soothing when he was very small.

"Sam?" Naomi called, but her voice was distant, unimportant. "Sam, are you all right?"

Had he thought he loved her? That was silly. Quite ridiculous, when you thought about it ... when you got right down to it, this was much better.

This creature had ... stories to tell.

Very interesting stories.

The white thing's entire plastic body now yearned toward the proboscis; it fed itself into itself, and the proboscis elongated. The creature became a single tube-shaped thing, the rest of its body hanging as useless and forgotten as that sac below its neck had

hung. All its vitality was invested in the horn of flesh, the conduit through which it would suck Sam's vitality and essence into itself.

And it was nice.

The proboscis slipped gently up Sam's legs, pressed briefly against his groin, then rose higher, caressing his belly.

Sam fell on his knees to give it access to his face. He felt his eyes sting briefly and pleasantly as some fluid—not tears, this was thicker than tears—began to ooze from them.

The proboscis closed in on his eyes; he could see a pink petal of flesh opening and closing hungrily inside there. Each time it opened, it revealed a deeper darkness beyond. Then it clenched, forming a hole in the petal, a tube within a tube, and it slipped with sensual slowness across his lips and cheek toward that sticky outflow. Misshapen dark-blue eyes gazed at him hungrily.

*But the fine was paid.*

Summoning every last bit of his strength, Sam clamped his right hand over the proboscis. It was hot and noxious. The tiny threads of flesh which covered it stung his palm.

It jerked and tried to draw back. For a moment Sam almost lost it and then he closed his hand in a fist, digging his fingernails into the meat of the thing.

*"Here!"* he shouted. *"Here, I've got something for you, bitch! I brought it all the way from East St. Louis!"*

He brought his left hand around and slammed the sticky ball of red licorice into the end of the proboscis, plugging it the way the kids in that long-ago parking lot had plugged the tailpipe of Tommy Reed's Pontiac. It tried to shriek and could produce only a blocked humming sound. Then it tried again to pull itself away from Sam. The ball of red licorice bulged from the end of its convulsing snout like a blood-blisters.

Sam struggled to his knees, still holding the twitching, noisome flesh in his hand, and threw himself on top of the Ardelia-thing. It twisted and pulsed beneath him, trying to throw him off. They rolled over and over in the heaped pile of books. It was dreadfully strong. Once Sam was eye to eye with it, and he was nearly frozen by the hate and panic in that gaze.

Then he felt it begin to swell.

He let go and scrambled backward, gasping. The thing in the book-littered aisle now looked like a grotesque beachball with a trunk, a beachball covered with fine hair which wavered like tendrils of seaweed in a running tide. It rolled over in the aisle, its proboscis swelling like a firehose which has been tied in a knot. Sam watched, frozen with horror and fascination, as the thing which had called itself Ardelia Lortz strangled on its own fuming guts.

Bright red roadmap lines of blood popped out on its straining hide. Its eyes bulged, now staring at Sam in an expression of dazed surprise. It made one final effort to expel the soft blob of licorice, but its proboscis had been wide open in its anticipation of food, and the licorice stayed put.

Sam saw what was going to happen and threw an arm over his face an instant before it exploded.

Chunks of alien flesh flew in every direction. Ropes of thick blood splattered Sam's arms, chest, and legs. He cried out in mingled revulsion and relief.

An instant later the emergency light winked out, plunging them into darkness again.

## 11

Once more the interval of darkness was very brief, but it was long enough for Sam to sense the change. He felt it in his head—a clear sensation of things which had been out of joint snapping back into place. When the emergency lights came back on, there were four of them. Their batteries made a low, self-satisfied humming sound instead of a loud buzz, and they were very bright, banishing the shadows to the furthest comers of the room. He did not know if the world of 1960 they had entered when the arc-sodium light became a mercury-vapor lamp had been real or an illusion, but he knew it was gone.

The overturned bookcases were upright again. There was a litter of books in this aisle—a dozen or so—but he might have knocked those off himself in his struggle to get on his feet. And outside, the sound of the storm had fallen from a shout to a mutter. Sam could hear what sounded like a very sedate rain falling on the roof.

The Ardelia-thing was gone. There were no splatters of blood or chunks of flesh on the floor, on the books, or on him.

There was only one sign of her: a single golden earring, glinting up at him.

Sam got shakily to his feet and kicked it away. Then a grayness came over his sight and he swayed on his feet, eyes closed, waiting to see if he would faint or not.

“Sam!” It was Naomi, and she sounded as if she were crying. “Sam, *where are you?*”

“Here!” He reached up, grabbed a handful of his hair, and pulled it hard. Stupid, probably, but it worked. The wavery grayness didn’t go away entirely, but it retreated. He began moving back toward the cataloguing area, walking in large, careful strides.

The same desk, a graceless block of wood on stubby legs, stood in the cataloguing area, but the lamp with its old-fashioned, tasselled shade had been replaced with a fluorescent bar. The battered typewriter and Rolodex had been replaced by an Apple computer. And, if he had not already been sure of what time he was now in, a glance at the cardboard cartons on the floor would have convinced him: they were full of poppers and plastic bubble-strips.

Naomi was still kneeling beside Dave at the end of the aisle, and when Sam reached her side he saw that the fire-extinguisher (although thirty years had passed, it appeared to be the same one) was firmly mounted on its post again ... but the shape of its handle was still imprinted on Dave’s cheek and forehead.

His eyes were open, and when he saw Sam, he smiled. “Not ... bad,” he whispered. “I bet you ... didn’t know you had it ... in you.”

Sam felt a tremendous, buoyant sense of relief. “No,” he said. “I didn’t.” He bent down and held three fingers in front of Dave’s eyes. “How many fingers do you see?”

“About ... seventy-four,” Dave whispered.

“I’ll call the ambulance,” Naomi said, and started to get up. Dave’s left hand grasped her wrist before she could.

“No. Not yet.” His eyes shifted to Sam. “Bend down. I need to whisper.”

Sam bent over the old man. Dave put a trembling hand on the back of his neck. His lips tickled the cup of Sam’s ear and Sam had to force himself to hold steady—it tickled. “Sam,” he whispered. “She waits. Remember ... she waits.”

“What?” Sam asked. He felt almost totally unstrung. “Dave, what do you mean?”

But Dave’s hand had fallen away. He stared up at Sam, through Sam, his chest rising shallowly and rapidly.

“I’m going,” Naomi said, clearly upset. “There’s a telephone down there on the cataloguing desk.”

“No,” Sam said.

She turned toward him, eyes glaring, mouth pulled back from neat white teeth in a fury. “What do you mean, no? Are you crazy? His skull is fractured, at the very least! He’s—”

“*He’s* going, Sarah,” Sam said gently. “Very soon. Stay with him. Be his friend.”

She looked down, and this time she saw what Sam had seen. The pupil of Dave’s left eye had drawn down to a pinpoint; the pupil of his right was huge and fixed.

“Dave?” she whispered, frightened. “Dave?”

But Dave was looking at Sam again. “Remember,” he whispered. “She w ...”

His eyes grew still and fixed. His chest rose once more ... dropped ... and did not rise again.

Naomi began to sob. She put his hand against her cheek and closed his eyes. Sam knelt down painfully and put his arm around her waist.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *ANGLE STREET (III)*

#### 1

That night and the next were sleepless ones for Sam Peebles. He lay awake in his bed, all the second-floor lights turned on, and thought about Dave Duncan's last words: *She waits*.

Toward dawn of the second night, he began to believe he understood what the old man had been trying to say.

#### 2

Sam thought that Dave would be buried out of the Baptist Church in Proverbia, and was a little surprised to find that he had converted to Catholicism at some point between 1960 and 1990. The services were held at St. Martin's on April 11th, a blustery day that alternated between clouds and cold early-spring sunshine.

Following the graveside service, there was a reception at Angle Street. There were almost seventy people there, wandering through the downstairs rooms or clustered in little groups, by the time Sam arrived. They had all known Dave, and spoke of him with humor, respect, and unfailing love. They drank ginger ale from Styrofoam cups and ate small finger sandwiches. Sam moved from group to group, passing a word with someone he knew from time to time but not stopping to chat. He rarely took his hand from the pocket of his dark coat. He had made a stop at the Piggly Wiggly store on his way from the church, and now there were half a dozen cellophane

packages in there, four of them long and thin, two of them rectangular.

Sarah was not here.

He was about to leave when he spotted Lukey and Rudolph sitting together in a corner. There was a cribbage board between them, but they didn't seem to be playing.

"Hello, you guys," Sam said, walking over. "I guess you probably don't remember me—"

"Sure we do," Rudolph said. "Whatcha think we are? Coupla feebz? You're Dave's friend. You came over the day we was making the posters."

"Right!" Lukey said.

"Did you find those books you were lookin for?" Rudolph asked.

"Yes," Sam said, smiling. "I did, eventually."

"Right!" Lukey exclaimed.

Sam brought out the four slender cellophane packages. "I brought you guys something," he said.

Lukey glanced down, and his eyes lit up. "Slim Jims, Dolph!" he said, grinning delightedly. "Look! Sarah's boyfriend brought us all fuckin Slim Jims! Beautiful!"

"Here, gimme those, you old rummy," Rudolph said, and snatched them. "Fuckhead'd eat em all at once and then shit the bed tonight, you know," he told Sam. He stripped one of the Slim Jims and gave it to Lukey. "Here you go, dinkweed. I'll hang onto the rest of em for you."

"You can have one, Dolph. Go ahead."

"You know better, Lukey. Those things burn me at both ends."

Sam ignored this byplay. He was looking hard at Lukey. "Sarah's boyfriend? Where did you hear that?"

Lukey snatched down half a Slim Jim in one bite, then looked up. His expression was both good-humored and sly. He laid a finger against the side of his nose and said, "Word gets around when you're in the Program, Sunny Jim. Oh yes indeed, it do."

"He don't know nothing, mister," Rudolph said, draining his cup of ginger ale. "He's just beating his gums cause he likes the sound."

“That ain’t nothin but bullshit!” Lukey cried, taking another giant bite of Slim Jim. “I know because Dave told me! Last night! I had a dream, and Dave was in it, and he told me this fella was Sarah’s sweetie!”

“Where is Sarah?” Sam asked. “I thought she’d be here.”

“She spoke to me after the benediction,” Rudolph said. “Told me you’d know where to find her later on, if you wanted to see her. She said you’d seen her there once already.”

“She liked Dave awful much,” Lukey said. A sudden tear grew on the rim of one eye and spilled down his cheek. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. “We all did. Dave always tried so goddam hard. It’s too bad, you know. It’s really too bad.” And Lukey suddenly burst into tears.

“Well, let me tell you something,” Sam said. He hunkered beside Lukey and handed him his handkerchief. He was near tears himself, and terrified by what he now had to do ... or try to do. “He made it in the end. He died sober. Whatever talk you hear, you hold onto that, because I know it’s true. He died sober.”

“Amen,” Rudolph said reverently.

“Amen,” Lukey agreed. He handed Sam his handkerchief. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it, Lukey.”

“Say—you don’t have any more of those fuckin Slim Jims, do you?”

“Nope,” Sam said, and smiled. “You know what they say, Lukey—one’s too many and a thousand are never enough.”

Rudolph laughed. Lukey smiled ... then laid the tip of his finger against the side of his nose again.

“How about a quarter ... wouldn’t have an extra quarter, wouldja?”

Sam's first thought was that she might have gone back to the Library, but that didn't fit with what Dolph had said ... he had been at the Library with Sarah once, on the terrible night that already seemed a decade ago, but they had been there together; he hadn't "seen" her there, the way you saw someone through a window, or—

Then he remembered when he *had* seen Sarah through a window, right here at Angle Street. She had been part of the group out on the back lawn, doing whatever it was they did to keep themselves sober. He now walked through the kitchen as he had done on that day, saying hello to a few more people. Burt Iverson and Elmer Baskin stood in one of the little groups, drinking ice-cream punch as they listened gravely to an elderly woman Sam didn't know.

He stepped through the kitchen door and out onto the rear porch. The day had turned gray and blustery again. The backyard was deserted, but Sam thought he saw a flash of pastel color beyond the bushes that marked the yard's rear boundary.

He walked down the steps and crossed the back lawn, aware that his heart had begun to thud very hard again. His hand stole back into his pocket, and this time came out with the remaining two cellophane packages. They contained Bull's Eye Red Licorice. He tore them open and began to knead them into a ball, much smaller than the one he'd made in the Datsun on Monday night. The sweet, sugary smell was just as sickening as ever. In the distance he could hear a train coming, and it made him think of his dream—the one where Naomi had turned into Ardelia.

*Too late, Sam. It's already too late. The deed is done.*

*She waits. Remember, Sam—she waits.*

There was a lot of truth in dreams, sometimes.

How had she survived the years between? All the years between? They had never asked themselves that question, had they? How did she make the transition from one person to another? They had never asked that one, either. Perhaps the thing which looked like a woman named Ardelia Lortz was, beneath its glammers and illusions, like one of those larvae that spin their cocoons in the fork of a tree, cover them with protective webbing, and then fly away to their place of dying. The larvae in the cocoons lie silent, waiting ... changing ...

*She waits.*

Sam walked on, still kneading his smelly little ball made of that stuff the Library Policeman—*his* Library Policeman—had stolen and turned into the stuff of nightmares. The stuff he had somehow changed again, with the help of Naomi and Dave, into the stuff of salvation.

The Library Policeman, curling Naomi against him. Placing his mouth on the nape of her neck, as if to kiss her. And coughing instead.

The bag hanging under the Ardelia-thing's neck. Limp. Spent. Empty.

*Please don't let it be too late.*

He walked into the thin stand of bushes. Naomi Sarah Higgins was standing on the other side of them, her arms clasped over her bosom. She glanced briefly at him and he was shocked by the pallor of her cheeks and the haggard look in her eyes. Then she looked back at the railroad tracks. The train was closer now. Soon they would see it.

"Hello, Sam."

"Hello, Sarah."

Sam put an arm around her waist. She let him, but the shape of her body against his was stiff, inflexible, unyielding. *Please don't let it be too late*, he thought again, and found himself thinking of Dave.

They had left him there, at the Library, after propping the door to the loading platform open with a rubber wedge. Sam had used a pay phone two blocks away to report the open door. He hung up when the dispatcher asked for his name. So Dave had been found, and of course the verdict had been accidental death, and those people in town who cared enough to assume anything at all would make the expected assumption: one more old sot had gone to that great ginmill in the sky. They would assume he had gone up the lane with a jug, had seen the open door, wandered in, and had fallen against the fire-extinguisher in the dark. End of story. The postmortem results, showing zero alcohol in Dave's blood, would not change the assumptions one bit—probably not even for the police. *People just expect a drunk to die like a drunk*, Sam thought, *even when he's not.*

“How have you been, Sarah?” he asked.

She looked at him tiredly. “Not so well, Sam. Not so well at all. I can’t sleep ... can’t eat ... my mind seems full of the most horrible thoughts ... they don’t feel like my thoughts at all ... and I want to drink. That’s the worst of it. I want to drink ... and drink ... and drink. The meetings don’t help. For the first time in my life, the meetings don’t help.”

She closed her eyes and began to cry. The sound was strengthless and dreadfully lost.

“No,” he agreed softly. “They wouldn’t. They can’t. And I imagine she’d like it if you started drinking again. She’s waiting ... but that doesn’t mean she isn’t hungry.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him. “What ... Sam, what are you talking about?”

“Persistence, I think,” he said. “The persistence of evil. How it waits. How it can be so cunning and so baffling and so powerful.”

He raised his hand slowly and opened it. “Do you recognize this, Sarah?”

She flinched away from the ball of red licorice which lay on his palm. For a moment her eyes were wide and fully awake. They glinted with hate and fear.

And the glints were silver.

“Throw that away!” she whispered. “Throw that damned thing away!” Her hand jerked protectively toward the back of her neck, where her brownish-red hair hung against her shoulders.

“I’m talking to you,” he said steadily. “Not to her but to you. I love you, Sarah.”

She looked at him again, and that look of terrible weariness was back. “Yes,” she said. “Maybe you do. And maybe you should learn not to.”

“I want you to do something for me, Sarah. I want you to turn your back to me. There’s a train coming. I want you to watch that train and not look back at me until I tell you. Can you do that?”

Her upper lip lifted. That expression of hate and fear animated her haggard face again. “No! Leave me alone! Go away!”

“Is that what you want?” he asked. “Is it really? You told Dolph where I could find you, Sarah. Do you really want me to go?”

Her eyes closed again. Her mouth drew down in a trembling bow of anguish. When her eyes opened again, they were full of haunted terror and brimming with tears. “Oh, Sam, help me! Something is wrong and I don’t know what it is or what to do!”

“I know what to do,” he told her. “Trust in me, Sarah, and trust in what you said when we were on our way to the Library Monday night. Honesty and belief. Those things are the opposite of fear. Honesty and belief.”

“It’s hard, though,” she whispered. “Hard to trust. Hard to believe.”

He looked at her steadily.

Naomi’s upper lip lifted suddenly, and her lower lip curled out, turning her mouth momentarily into a shape that was almost like a horn. “*Fuck yourself!*” she said. “Go on and fuck yourself, Sam Peebles!”

He looked at her steadily.

She raised her hands and pressed them against her temples. “I didn’t mean it. I don’t know why I said it. I ... my head ... Sam, my poor *head!* It feels like it’s splitting in two.”

The oncoming train whistled as it crossed the Proverbial River and rolled into Junction City. It was the mid-afternoon freight, the one that charged through without stopping on its way to the Omaha stockyards. Sam could see it now.

“There’s not much time, Sarah. It has to be now. Turn around and look at the train. Watch it come.”

“Yes,” she said suddenly. “All right. Do what you want to do, Sam. And if you see ... see it isn’t going to work ... then push me. Push me in front of the train. Then you can tell the others that I jumped ... that it was suicide.” She looked at him pleadingly—deathly-tired eyes staring into his from her exhausted face. “They know I haven’t been feeling myself—the people in the Program. You can’t keep how you feel from them. After awhile that’s just not possible. They’ll believe you if you say I jumped, and they’d be right, because I don’t want to go on like this. But the thing is ... Sam, the thing is, I think that before long I *will* want to go on.”

“Be quiet,” he said. “We’re not going to talk about suicide. Look at the train, Sarah, and remember I love you.”

She turned toward the train, less than a mile away now and coming fast. Her hands went to the nape of her neck and lifted her hair. Sam bent forward ... and what he was looking for was there, crouched high on the clean white flesh of her neck. He knew that her brain-stem began less than half an inch below that place, and he felt his stomach twist with revulsion.

He bent forward toward the blistery growth. It was covered in a spiderweb skein of crisscrossing white threads, but he could see it beneath, a lump of pinkish jelly that throbbed and pulsed with the beat of her heart.

“*Leave me alone!*” Ardelia Lortz suddenly screamed from the mouth of the woman Sam had come to love. “*Leave me alone, you bastard!*” But Sarah’s hands were steady, holding her hair up, giving him access.

“Can you see the numbers on the engine, Sarah?” he murmured.

She moaned.

He drove his thumb into the soft glob of red licorice he held, making a well a little bigger than the parasite which lay on Sarah’s neck. “Read them to me, Sarah. Read me the numbers.”

“Two ... six ... oh Sam, oh my head hurts ... it feels like big hands pulling my brain into two pieces ...”

“Read the numbers, Sarah,” he murmured, and brought the Bull’s Eye licorice down toward that pulsing, obscene growth.

“Five ... nine ... five ...”

He closed the licorice gently over it. He could feel it suddenly, wriggling and squirming under the sugary blanket. *What if it breaks? What if it just breaks open before I can pull it off her? It’s all Ardelia’s concentrated poison ... what if it breaks before I get it off?*

The oncoming train whistled again. The sound buried Sarah’s shriek of pain.

“Steady—”

He simultaneously pulled the licorice back and folded it over. He had it; it was caught in the candy, pulsing and throbbing like a tiny

sick heart. On the back of Sarah's neck were three tiny dark holes, no bigger than pinpricks.

*"It's gone!"* she cried. *"Sam, it's gone!"*

"Not yet," Sam said grimly. The licorice lay on his palm again, and a bubble was pushing up its surface, straining to break through—

The train was roaring past the Junction City depot now, the depot where a man named Brian Kelly had once tossed Dave Duncan four bits and then told him to get in the wind. Less than three hundred yards away and coming fast.

Sam pushed past Sarah and knelt by the tracks.

*"Sam, what are you doing?"*

"Here you go, Ardelia," he murmured. "Try this." He slapped the pulsing, stretching blob of red licorice down on one of the gleaming steel rails.

In his mind he heard a shriek of unutterable fury and terror. He stood back, watching the thing trapped inside the licorice struggle and push. The candy split open ... he saw a darker red inside trying to push itself out ... and then the 2:20 to Omaha rushed over it in an organized storm of pounding rods and grinding wheels.

The licorice disappeared, and inside of Sam Peebles's mind, that drilling shriek was cut off as if with a knife.

He stepped back and turned to Sarah. She was swaying on her feet, her eyes wide and full of dazed joy. He slipped his arms around her waist and held her as the boxcars and flatcars and tankers thundered past them, blowing their hair back.

They stood like that until the caboose passed, trailing its small red lights off into the west. Then she drew away from him a little ... but not out of the circle of his arms—and looked at him.

"Am I free, Sam? Am I really free of her? It feels like I am, but I can hardly believe it."

"You're free," Sam agreed. "Your fine is paid, too, Sarah. Forever and ever, your fine is paid."

She brought her face to his and began to cover his lips and cheeks and eyes with small kisses. Her own eyes did not close as she did this; she looked at him gravely all the while.

He took her hands at last and said, "Why don't we go back inside, and finish paying our respects? Your friends will be wondering where you are."

"They can be your friends, too, Sam ... if you want them to be."

He nodded. "I do. I want that a lot."

"Honesty and belief," she said, and touched his cheek.

"Those are the words." He kissed her again, then offered his arm.

"Will you walk with me, lady?"

She linked her arm through his. "Anywhere you want, sir. Anywhere at all."

They walked slowly back across the lawn to Angle Street together, arm in arm.



## The Sun Dog

***THIS IS IN MEMORY OF JOHN D. MACDONALD. I  
MISS YOU, OLD FRIEND—AND YOU WERE***

# ***RIGHT ABOUT THE TIGERS.***

## **FOUR PAST MIDNIGHT A NOTE ON "THE SUN DOG"**

Every now and then someone will ask me, "When are you going to get tired of this horror stuff, Steve, and write something serious?"

I used to believe the implied insult in this question was accidental, but as the years go by I have become more and more convinced that it is not. I watch the faces of the people who drop that particular dime, you see, and most of them look like bombardiers waiting to see if their last stick of bombs is going to fall wide or hit the targeted factory or munitions dump dead on.

The fact is, almost all of the stuff I have written—and that includes a lot of the funny stuff—was written in a serious frame of mind. I can remember very few occasions when I sat at the typewriter laughing uncontrollably over some wild and crazy bit of fluff I had just finished churning out. I'm never going to be Reynolds Price or Larry Woiwode—it isn't in me—but that doesn't mean I don't care as deeply about what I do. I have to do what I *can* do, however—as Nils Lofgren once put it, "I gotta be my dirty self ... I won't play no jive."

If *real*—meaning **!!SOMETHING THAT COULD ACTUALLY HAPPEN!!**—is your definition of serious, you are in the wrong place and you should by all means leave the building. But please remember as you go that I'm not the only one doing business at this

particular site; Franz Kafka had an office here, and George Orwell, and Shirley Jackson, and Jorge Luis Borges, and Jonathan Swift, and Lewis Carroll. A glance at the directory in the lobby shows the present tenants include Thomas Berger, Ray Bradbury, Jonathan Carroll, Thomas Pynchon, Thomas Disch, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Peter Straub, Joyce Carol Oates, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Katherine Dunn, and Mark Halpern.

I am doing what I do for the most serious reasons: love, money, and obsession. The tale of the irrational is the sanest way I know of expressing the world in which I live. These tales have served me as instruments of both metaphor and morality; they continue to offer the best window I know on the question of how we perceive things and the corollary question of how we do or do not behave on the basis of our perceptions. I have explored these questions as well as I can within the limits of my talent and intelligence. I am no one's National Book Award or Pulitzer Prize winner, but I'm serious, all right. If you don't believe anything else, believe this: when I take you by your hand and begin to talk, my friend, I believe every word I say.

A lot of the things I have to say—those Really Serious Things—have to do with the small-town world in which I was raised and where I still live. Stories and novels are scale models of what we laughingly call “real life,” and I believe that lives as they are lived in small towns are scale models of what we laughingly call “society.” This idea is certainly open to argument, and argument is perfectly fine (without it, a lot of literature teachers and critics would be looking for work); I'm just saying that a writer needs some sort of launching pad, and aside from the firm belief that a story may exist with honor for its own self, the idea of the small town as social and psychological microcosm is mine. I began experimenting with this sort of thing in *Carrie*, and continued on a more ambitious level with *'Salem's Lot*. I never really hit my stride, however, until *The Dead Zone*.

That was, I think, the first of my Castle Rock stories (and Castle Rock is really just the town of Jerusalem's Lot without the vampires). In the years since it was written, Castle Rock has increasingly become “my town,” in the sense that the mythical city of Isola is Ed

McBain's town and the West Virginia village of Glory was Davis Grubb's town. I have been called back there time and time again to examine the lives of its residents and the geographies which seem to rule their lives—Castle Hill and Castle View, Castle Lake and the Town Roads which lie around it in a tangle at the western end of the town.

As the years passed, I became more and more interested in—almost entranced by—the secret life of this town, by the hidden relationships which seemed to come clearer and clearer to me. Much of this history remains either unwritten or unpublished: how the late Sheriff George Bannerman lost his virginity in the back seat of his dead father's car, how Ophelia Todd's husband was killed by a walking windmill, how Deputy Andy Clutterbuck lost the index finger on his left hand (it was cut off in a fan and the family dog ate it).

Following *The Dead Zone*, which is partly the story of the psychotic Frank Dodd, I wrote a novella called "The Body"; *Cujo*, the novel in which good old Sheriff Bannerman bit the dust; and a number of short stories and novelettes about the town (the best of them, at least in my mind, are "Mrs. Todd's Shortcut" and "Uncle Otto's Truck"). All of which is very well, but a state of entrancement with a fictional setting may not be the best thing in the world for a writer. It was for Faulkner and J. R. R. Tolkien, but sometimes a couple of exceptions just prove the rule, and besides, I don't play in that league.

So at some point I decided—first in my subconscious mind, I think, where all that Really Serious Work takes place—that the time had come to close the book on Castle Rock, Maine, where so many of my own favorite characters have lived and died. Enough, after all, is enough. Time to move on (maybe all the way next door to Harlow, ha-ha). But I didn't just want to walk away; I wanted to *finish* things, and do it with a bang.

Little by little I began to grasp how that could be done, and over the last four years or so I have been engaged in writing a Castle Rock Trilogy, if you please—the *last* Castle Rock stories. They were not written in order (I sometimes think "out of order" is the story of

my life), but now they are written, and they are serious enough ... but I hope that doesn't mean that they are sober-sided or boring.

The first of these stories, *The Dark Half*, was published in 1989. While it is primarily the story of Thad Beaumont and is in large part set in a town called Ludlow (the town where the Creeds lived in *Pet Sematary*), the town of Castle Rock figures in the tale, and the book serves to introduce Sheriff Bannerman's replacement, a fellow named Alan Pangborn. Sheriff Pangborn is at the center of the last story in this sequence, a long novel called *Needful Things*, which is scheduled to be published next year and will conclude my doings with what local people call The Rock.

The connective tissue between these longer works is the story which follows. You will meet few if any of Castle Rock's larger figures in "The Sun Dog," but it will serve to introduce you to Pop Merrill, whose nephew is town bad boy (and Gordie LaChance's *bête noire* in "The Body") Ace Merrill. "The Sun Dog" also sets the stage for the final fireworks display ... and, I hope, exists as a satisfying story on its own, one that can be read with pleasure even if you don't give a hang about *The Dark Half* or *Needful Things*.

One other thing needs to be said: every story has its own secret life, quite separate from its setting, and "The Sun Dog" is a story about cameras and photographs. About five years ago, my wife, Tabitha, became interested in photography, discovered she was good at it, and began to pursue it in a serious way, through study, experiment, and practice-practice-practice. I myself take bad photos (I'm one of those guys who always manage to cut off my subjects' heads, get pictures of them with their mouths hanging open, or both), but I have a great deal of respect for those who take good ones ... and the whole process fascinates me.

In the course of her experiments, my wife got a Polaroid camera, a simple one accessible even to a doofus like me. I became fascinated with this camera. I had seen and used Polaroids before, of course, but I had never really *thought* about them much, nor had I ever looked closely at the images these cameras produce. The more I thought about them, the stranger they seemed. They are, after all,

not just images but moments of time ... and there is something so *peculiar* about them.

This story came almost all at once one night in the summer of 1987, but the thinking which made it possible went on for almost a year. And that's enough out of me, I think. It's been great to be with all of you again, but that doesn't mean I'm letting you go home just yet.

I think we have a birthday party to attend in the little town of Castle Rock.

## CHAPTER ONE

September 15th was Kevin's birthday, and he got exactly what he wanted: a Sun.

The Kevin in question was Kevin Delevan, the birthday was his fifteenth, and the Sun was a Sun 660, a Polaroid camera which does everything for the novice photographer except make bologna sandwiches.

There *were* other gifts, of course; his sister, Meg, gave him a pair of mittens she had knitted herself, there was ten dollars from his grandmother in Des Moines, and his Aunt Hilda sent—as she always did—a string tie with a horrible clasp. She had sent the first of these when Kevin was three, which meant he already had twelve unused string ties with horrible clasps in a drawer of his bureau, to which this would be added—lucky thirteen. He had never worn any of them but was not allowed to throw them away. Aunt Hilda lived in Portland. She had never come to one of Kevin's or Meg's birthday parties, but she might decide to do just that one of these years. God knew she *could*; Portland was only fifty miles south of Castle Rock. And suppose she *did* come ... and asked to see Kevin in one of his *other* ties (or Meg in one of her other scarves, for that matter)? With some relatives, an excuse might do. Aunt Hilda, however, was different. Aunt Hilda presented a certain golden possibility at a point where two essential facts about her crossed: she was Rich, and she was Old.

Someday, Kevin's Mom was convinced, she might DO SOMETHING for Kevin and Meg. It was understood that the SOMETHING would probably come after Aunt Hilda finally kicked it, in the form of a clause in her will. In the meantime, it was thought wise to keep the horrible string ties and the equally horrible scarves. So this thirteenth string tie (on the clasp of which was a bird Kevin thought was a woodpecker) would join the others, and Kevin would write Aunt Hilda a thank-you note, not because his mother would

insist on it and not because he thought or even cared that Aunt Hilda might Do SOMETHING for him and his kid sister someday, but because he was a generally thoughtful boy with good habits and no real vices.

He thanked his family for all his gifts (his mother and father had, of course, supplied a number of lesser ones, although the Polaroid was clearly the centerpiece, and they were delighted with *his* delight), not forgetting to give Meg a kiss (she giggled and pretended to rub it off but her own delight was equally clear) and to tell her he was sure the mittens would come in handy on the ski team this winter—but most of his attention was reserved for the Polaroid box, and the extra film packs which had come with it.

He was a good sport about the birthday cake and the ice cream, although it was clear he was itching to get at the camera and try it out. And as soon as he decently could, he did.

That was when the trouble started.

He read the instruction booklet as thoroughly as his eagerness to begin would allow, then loaded the camera while the family watched with anticipation and unacknowledged dread (for some reason, the gifts which seem the most wanted are the ones which so often don't work). There was a little collective sigh—more puff than gust—when the camera obediently spat out the cardboard square on top of the film packet, just as the instruction booklet had promised it would.

There were two small dots, one red and one green, separated by a zig-zag lightning-bolt on the housing of the camera. When Kevin loaded the camera, the red light came on. It stayed on for a couple of seconds. The family watched in silent fascination as the Sun 660 sniffed for light. Then the red light went out and the green light began to blink rapidly.

"It's ready," Kevin said, in the same straining-to-be-offhand-but-not-quite-making-it tone with which Neil Arm-strong had reported his first step upon the surface of Luna. "Why don't all you guys stand together?"

"I hate having my picture taken!" Meg cried, covering her face with the theatrical anxiety and pleasure which only sub-teenage girls and really bad actresses can manage.

“Come on, Meg,” Mr. Delevan said.

“Don’t be a goose, Meg,” Mrs. Delevan said.

Meg dropped her hands (and her objections), and the three of them stood at the end of the table with the diminished birthday cake in the foreground.

Kevin looked through the viewfinder. “Squeeze a little closer to Meg, Mom,” he said, motioning with his left hand. “You too, Dad.” This time he motioned with his right.

“You’re *squishing* me!” Meg said to her parents.

Kevin put his finger on the button which would fire the camera, then remembered a briefly glimpsed note in the instructions about how easy it was to cut off your subjects’ heads in a photograph. *Off with their heads*, he thought, and it should have been funny, but for some reason he felt a little tingle at the base of his spine, gone and forgotten almost before it was noticed. He raised the camera a little. There. They were all in the frame. Good.

“Okay!” he sang. “Smile and say Intercourse!”

“*Kevin!*” his mother cried out.

His father burst out laughing, and Meg screeched the sort of mad laughter not even bad actresses often essay; girls between the ages of ten and twelve own sole title to that particular laugh.

Kevin pushed the button.

The flashbulb, powered by the battery in the film pack, washed the room in a moment of righteous white light.

*It’s mine*, Kevin thought, and it should have been the surpassing moment of his fifteenth birthday. Instead, the thought brought back that odd little tingle. It was more noticeable this time.

The camera made a noise, something between a squeal and a whirr, a sound just a little beyond description but familiar enough to most people, just the same: the sound of a Polaroid camera squirting out what may not be art but what is often serviceable and almost always provides instant gratification.

“Lemme see it!” Meg cried.

“Hold your horses, muffin,” Mr. Delevan said. “They take a little time to develop.”

Meg was staring at the stiff gray surface of what was not yet a photograph with the rapt attention of a woman gazing into a crystal ball.

The rest of the family gathered around, and there was that same feeling of anxiety which had attended the ceremony of Loading the Camera: still life of the American Family waiting to let out its breath.

Kevin felt a terrible tenseness stealing into his muscles, and this time there was no question of ignoring it. He could not explain it ... but it was there. He could not seem to take his eyes from that solid gray square within the white frame which would form the borders of the photograph.

“I think I see me!” Meg cried brightly. Then, a moment later: “No. I guess I don’t. I think I see—”

They watched in utter silence as the gray cleared, as the mists are reputed to do in a seer’s crystal when the vibrations or feelings or whatever they are are right, and the picture became visible to them.

Mr. Delevan was the first to break the silence.

“What is this?” he asked no one in particular. “Some kind of joke?”

Kevin had absently put the camera down rather too close to the edge of the table in order to watch the picture develop. Meg saw what the picture was and took a single step away. The expression on her face was neither fright nor awe but just ordinary surprise. One of her hands came up as she turned toward her father. The rising hand struck the camera and knocked it off the table and onto the floor. Mrs. Delevan had been looking at the emerging picture in a kind of trance, the expression on her face either that of a woman who is deeply puzzled or who is feeling the onset of a migraine headache. The sound of the camera hitting the floor startled her. She uttered a little scream and recoiled. In doing this, she tripped over Meg’s foot and lost her balance. Mr. Delevan reached for her, propelling Meg, who was still between them, forward again, quite forcefully. Mr. Delevan not only caught his wife, but did so with some grace; for a moment they would have made a pretty picture indeed: Mom and Dad, showing they still know how to Cut A Rug, caught at the end of a spirited tango, she with one hand thrown up and her back deeply bowed, he bent over her in that ambiguous male posture which may

be seen, when divorced from circumstance, as either solicitude or lust.

Meg was eleven, and less graceful. She went flying back toward the table and smacked into it with her stomach. The hit was hard enough to have injured her, but for the last year and a half she had been taking ballet lessons at the YWCA three afternoons a week. She did not dance with much grace, but she enjoyed ballet, and the dancing had fortunately toughened the muscles of her stomach enough for them to absorb the blow as efficiently as good shock absorbers absorb the pounding a road full of potholes can administer to a car. Still, there was a band of black and blue just above her hips the next day. These bruises took almost two weeks to first purple, then yellow, then fade ... like a Polaroid picture in reverse.

At the moment this Rube Goldberg accident happened, she didn't even feel it; she simply banged into the table and cried out. The table tipped. The birthday cake, which should have been in the foreground of Kevin's first picture with his new camera, slid off the table. Mrs. Delevan didn't even have time to start her Meg, *are you all right?* before the remaining half of the cake fell on top of the Sun 660 with a juicy *splat!* that sent frosting all over their shoes and the baseboard of the wall.

The viewfinder, heavily smeared with Dutch chocolate, peered out like a periscope. That was all.

Happy birthday, Kevin.

Kevin and Mr. Delevan were sitting on the couch in the living room that evening when Mrs. Delevan came in, waving two dog-eared sheets of paper which had been stapled together. Kevin and Mr. Delevan both had open books in their laps (*The Best and the Brightest for the father; Shoot-Out at Lare-*

*do for the son*), but what they were mostly doing was staring at the Sun camera, which sat in disgrace on the coffee table amid a litter of Polaroid pictures. All the pictures appeared to show exactly the same thing.

Meg was sitting on the floor in front of them, using the VCR to watch a rented movie. Kevin wasn't sure which one it was, but there were a lot of people running around and screaming, so he guessed it was a horror picture. Megan had a passion for them. Both parents considered this a low taste (Mr. Delevan in particular was often outraged by what he called "that useless junk"), but tonight neither of them had said a word. Kevin guessed they were just grateful she had quit complaining about her bruised stomach and wondering aloud what the exact symptoms of a ruptured spleen might be.

"Here they are," Mrs. Delevan said. "I found them at the bottom of my purse the second time through." She handed the papers—a sales slip from J. C. Penney's and a MasterCard receipt—to her husband. "I can never find anything like this the first time. I don't think anyone can. It's like a law of nature."

She surveyed her husband and son, hands on her hips.

"You two look like someone just killed the family cat."

"We don't *have* a cat," Kevin said.

"Well, you know what I mean. It's a shame, of course, but we'll get it sorted out in no time. Penney's will be happy to exchange it—"

"I'm not so sure of that," John Delevan said. He picked up the camera, looked at it with distaste (almost sneered at it, in fact), and then set it down again. "It got chipped when it hit the floor. See?"

Mrs. Delevan took only a cursory glance. "Well, if Penney's won't, I'm positive that the Polaroid company will. I mean, the fall obviously didn't cause whatever is wrong with it. The first picture looked just like all these, and Kevin took that one before Meg knocked it off the table."

"I didn't mean to," Meg said without turning around. On the screen, a pint-sized figure—a malevolent doll named Chucky, if Kevin had it right—was chasing a small boy. Chucky was dressed in blue overalls and waving a knife.

"I know, dear. How's your stomach?"

"Hurts," Meg said. "A little ice cream might help. Is there any left over?"

"Yes, I think so."

Meg gifted her mother with her most winning smile. “Would you get some for me?”

“Not at all,” Mrs. Delevan said pleasantly. “Get it yourself. And what’s that horrible thing you’re watching?”

“*Child’s Play*,” Megan said. “There’s this doll named Chucky that comes to life. It’s neat.”

Mrs. Delevan wrinkled her nose.

“Dolls don’t come to life, Meg,” her father said. He spoke heavily, as if knowing this was a lost cause.

“Chucky did,” Meg said. “In movies, anything can happen.” She used the remote control to freeze the movie and went to get her ice cream.

“Why does she want to watch that crap?” Mr. Delevan asked his wife, almost plaintively.

“I don’t know, dear.”

Kevin had picked up the camera in one hand and several of the exposed Polaroids in the other—they had taken almost a dozen in all. “I’m not so sure I *want* a refund,” he said.

His father stared at him. “*What?* Jesus wept!”

“Well,” Kevin said, a little defensively, “I’m just saying that maybe we ought to think about it. I mean, it’s not exactly an ordinary defect, is it? I mean, if the pictures came out overexposed ... or underexposed ... or just plain blank ... that would be one thing. But how do you get a thing like this? The same picture, over and over? I mean, look! And they’re outdoors, even though we took every one of these pictures inside!”

“It’s a practical joke,” his father said. “It must be. The thing to do is just exchange the damned thing and forget about it.”

“I don’t think it’s a practical joke,” Kevin said. “First, it’s too *complicated* to be a practical joke. How do you rig a camera to take the same picture over and over? Plus, the psychology is all wrong.”

“Psychology, yet,” Mr. Delevan said, rolling his eyes at his wife.

“Yes, psychology!” Kevin replied firmly. “When a guy loads your cigarette or hands you a stick of pepper gum, he hangs around to watch the fun, doesn’t he? But unless you or Mom have been pulling my leg—”

“Your father isn’t much of a leg-puller, dear,” Mrs. Delevan said, stating the obvious gently.

Mr. Delevan was looking at Kevin with his lips pressed together. It was the look he always got when he perceived his son drifting toward that area of the ballpark where Kevin seemed most at home: left field. Far left field. There was a hunchy, intuitive streak in Kevin that had always puzzled and confounded him. He didn’t know where it had come from, but he was sure it hadn’t been his side of the family.

He sighed and looked at the camera again. A piece of black plastic had been chipped from the left side of the housing, and there was a crack, surely no thicker than a human hair, down the center of the viewfinder lens. The crack was so thin it disappeared completely when you raised the camera to your eye to set the shot you would not get—what you would get was on the coffee table, and there were nearly a dozen other examples in the dining room.

What you got was something that looked like a refugee from the local animal shelter.

“All right, what in the devil are you going to do with it?” he asked. “I mean, let’s think this over reasonably, Kevin. What practical good is a camera that takes the same picture over and over?”

But it was not practical good Kevin was thinking about. In fact, he was not thinking at all. He was feeling ... and remembering. In the instant when he had pushed the shutter release, one clear idea

*(it’s mine)*

had filled his mind as completely as the momentary white flash had filled his eyes. That idea, complete yet somehow inexplicable, had been accompanied by a powerful mixture of emotions which he could still not identify completely ... but he thought fear and excitement had predominated.

And besides—his father *always* wanted to look at things reasonably. He would never be able to understand Kevin’s intuitions or Meg’s interest in killer dolls named Chucky.

Meg came back in with a huge dish of ice cream and started the movie again. Someone was now attempting to toast Chucky with a

blowtorch, but he went right on waving his knife. “Are you two still arguing?”

“We’re having a discussion,” Mr. Delevan said. His lips were pressed more tightly together than ever.

“Yeah, right,” Meg said, sitting down on the floor again and crossing her legs. “You always say that.”

“Meg?” Kevin said kindly.

“What?”

“If you dump that much ice cream on top of a ruptured spleen, you’ll die horribly in the night. Of course, your spleen might not actually be ruptured, but—”

Meg stuck her tongue out at him and turned back to the movie.

Mr. Delevan was looking at his son with an expression of mingled affection and exasperation. “Look, Kev—it’s your camera. No argument about that. You can do whatever you want with it. But—”

“Dad, aren’t you even the least bit interested in *why* it’s doing what it’s doing?”

“Nope,” John Delevan said.

It was Kevin’s turn to roll his eyes. Meanwhile, Mrs. Delevan was looking from one to the other like someone who is enjoying a pretty good tennis match. Nor was this far from the truth. She had spent years watching her son and her husband sharpen themselves on each other, and she was not bored with it yet. She sometimes wondered if they would ever discover how much alike they really were.

“Well, I want to think it over.”

“Fine. I just want *you* to know that I can swing by Penney’s tomorrow and exchange the thing—if you want me to and they agree to swap a piece of chipped merchandise, that is. If you want to keep it, that’s fine, too. I wash my hands of it.” He dusted his palms briskly together to illustrate.

“I suppose you don’t want *my* opinion,” Meg said.

“Right,” Kevin said.

“Of course we do, Meg,” Mrs. Delevan said.

“/ think it’s a supernatural camera,” Meg said. She licked ice cream from her spoon. “I think it’s a Manifestation.”

“That’s utterly ridiculous,” Mr. Delevan said at once.

“No, it’s not,” Meg said. “It happens to be the only explanation that fits. You just don’t think so because you don’t believe in stuff like that. If a ghost ever floated up to you, Dad, you wouldn’t even see it. What do you think, Kev?”

For a moment Kevin didn’t—couldn’t—answer. He felt as if another flashbulb had gone off, this one behind his eyes instead of in front of them.

“Kev? Earth to Kevin!”

“I think you might just have something there, squirt,” he said slowly.

“Oh my dear God,” John Delevan said, getting up. “It’s the revenge of Freddy and Jason—my kid thinks his birthday camera’s haunted. I’m going to bed, but before I do, I want to say just one more thing. A camera that takes photographs of the same thing over and over again—especially something as ordinary as what’s in *these* pictures—is a *boring* manifestation of the supernatural.”

“Still ...” Kevin said. He held up the photos like a dubious poker hand.

“I think it’s time we all went to bed,” Mrs. Delevan said briskly. “Meg, if you absolutely need to finish that cinematic masterpiece, you can do it in the morning.”

“But it’s almost *over!*” Meg cried.

“I’ll come up with her, Mom,” Kevin said, and, fifteen minutes later, with the malevolent Chucky disposed of (at least until the sequel), he did. But sleep did not come easily for Kevin that night. He lay long awake in his bedroom, listening to a strong late-summer wind rustle the leaves outside into whispery conversation, thinking about what might make a camera take the same picture over and over and over again, and what such a thing might mean. He only began to slip toward sleep when he realized his decision had been made: he would keep the Polaroid Sun at least a little while longer.

It’s *mine*, he thought again. He rolled over on his side, closed his eyes, and was sleeping deeply forty seconds later.

## CHAPTER TWO

Amid the tickings and tockings of what sounded like at least fifty thousand clocks and totally undisturbed by them, Reginald “Pop” Merrill shone a pencil-beam of light from a gadget even more slender than a doctor’s ophthalmoscope into Kevin’s Polaroid 660 while Kevin stood by. Pop’s eyeglasses, which he didn’t need for close work, were propped on the bald dome of his head.

“Uh-huh,” he said, and clicked the light off.

“Does that mean you know what’s wrong with it?” Kevin asked.

“Nope,” Pop Merrill said, and snapped the Sun’s film compartment, now empty, closed. “Don’t have a clue.” And before Kevin could say anything else, the clocks began to strike four o’clock, and for a few moments conversation, although possible, seemed absurd.

*I want to think it over*, he had told his father on the evening he had turned fifteen—three days ago now—and it was a statement which had surprised both of them. As a child he had made a career of *not* thinking about things, and Mr. Delevan had in his heart of hearts come to believe Kevin never *would* think about things, whether he ought to or not. They had been seduced, as fathers and sons often are, by the idea that their behavior and very different modes of thinking would never change, thus fixing their relationship eternally ... and childhood would thus go on forever. *I want to think it over*: there was a world of potential change implicit in that statement.

Further, as a human being who had gone through his life to that point making most decisions on instinct rather than reason (and he was one of those lucky ones whose instincts were almost always good—the sort of person, in other words, who drives reasonable people mad), Kevin was surprised and intrigued to find that he was actually On the Horns of a Dilemma.

Horn #1: he had wanted a Polaroid camera and he had gotten one for his birthday, but, dammit, he had wanted a Polaroid camera that *worked*.

Horn #2: he was deeply intrigued by Meg's use of the word *supernatural*.

His younger sister had a daffy streak a mile wide, but she wasn't stupid, and Kevin didn't think she had used the word lightly or thoughtlessly. His father, who was of the Reasonable rather than Instinctive tribe, had scoffed, but Kevin found he wasn't ready to go and do likewise ... at least, not yet. That word. That fascinating, exotic word. It became a plinth which his mind couldn't help circling.

*I think it's a Manifestation.*

Kevin was amused (and a little chagrined) that only Meg had been smart enough—or brave enough—to actually say what should have occurred to all of them, given the oddity of the pictures the Sun produced, but in truth, it wasn't really that amazing. They were not a religious family; they went to church on the Christmas Day every third year when Aunt Hilda came to spend the holiday with them instead of her other remaining relatives, but except for the occasional wedding or funeral, that was about all. If any of them truly believed in the invisible world it was Megan, who couldn't get enough of walking corpses, living dolls, and cars that came to life and ran down people they didn't like.

Neither of Kevin's parents had much taste for the bizarre. They didn't read their horoscopes in the daily paper; they would never mistake comets or falling stars for signs from the Almighty; where one couple might see the face of Jesus on the bottom of an enchilada, John and Mary Delevan would see only an overcooked enchilada. It was not surprising that Kevin, who had never seen the man in the moon because neither mother nor father had bothered to point it out to him, had been likewise unable to see the possibility of a *supernatural Manifestation* in a camera which took the same picture over and over again, inside or outside, even in the dark of his bedroom closet, until it was suggested to him by his sister, who had once written a fan-letter to Jason and gotten an autographed glossy photo of a guy in a bloodstained hockey mask by return mail.

Once the possibility *had* been pointed out, it became difficult to unthink; as Dostoyevsky, that smart old Russian, once said to his little brother when the two of them were both smart *young* Russians,

try to spend the next thirty seconds not thinking of a blue-eyed polar bear.

It was hard to do.

So he had spent two days circling that plinth in his mind, trying to read hieroglyphics that weren't even *there*, for pity's sake, and trying to decide which he wanted more: the camera or the possibility of a Manifestation. Or, put another way, whether he wanted the Sun ... or the man in the moon.

By the end of the second day (even in fifteen-year-olds who are clearly destined for the Reasonable tribe, dilemmas rarely last longer than a week), he had decided to take the man in the moon ... on a trial basis, at least.

He came to this decision in study hall period seven, and when the bell rang, signalling the end of both the study hall and the school-day, he had gone to the teacher he respected most, Mr. Baker, and had asked him if he knew of anyone who repaired cameras.

"Not like a regular camera-shop guy," he explained. "More like a ... you know ... a thoughtful guy."

"An F-stop philosopher?" Mr. Baker asked. His saying things like that was one of the reasons why Kevin respected him. It was just a cool thing to say. "A sage of the shutter? An alchemist of the aperture? A—"

"A guy who's seen a lot," Kevin said cagily.

"Pop Merrill," Mr. Baker said.

"Who?"

"He runs the Emporium Galorium."

"Oh. *That* place."

"Yeah," Mr. Baker said, grinning. "That place. If, that is, what you're looking for is a sort of homespun Mr. Fixit."

"I guess that's what I am looking for."

"He's got damn near everything in there," Mr. Baker said, and Kevin could agree with that. Even though he had never actually been inside, he passed the Emporium Galorium five, ten, maybe fifteen times a week (in a town the size of Castle Rock, you had to pass *everything* a lot, and it got amazingly boring in Kevin Delevan's humble opinion), and he had looked in the windows. It seemed

crammed literally to the rafters with objects, most of them mechanical. But his mother called it “a junk-store” in a sniffing voice, and his father said Mr. Merrill made his money “rooking the summer people,” and so Kevin had never gone in. If it had *only* been a “junk-store,” he might have; almost certainly would have, in fact. But doing what the summer people did, or buying something where summer people “got rooked” was unthinkable. He would be as apt to wear a blouse and skirt to high school. Summer people could do what they wanted (and did). They were all mad, and conducted their affairs in a mad fashion. Exist with them, fine. But be *confused* with them? No. No. And no sir.

“Damn near everything,” Mr. Baker repeated, “and most of what he’s got, he fixed himself. He thinks that crackerbarrel-philosopher act he does—glasses up on top of the head, wise pronouncements, all of that—fools people. No one who knows him disabuses him. I’m not sure anyone would dare disabuse him.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

Mr. Baker shrugged. An odd, tight little smile touched his mouth. “Pop—Mr. Merrill, I mean—has got his fingers in a lot of pies around here. You’d be surprised, Kevin.”

Kevin didn’t care about how many pies Pop Merrill was currently fingering, or what their fillings might be. He was left with only one more important question, since the summer people were gone and he could probably slink into the Emporium Galorium unseen tomorrow afternoon if he took advantage of the rule which allowed all students but freshmen to cut their last-period study hall twice a month.

“Do I call him Pop or Mr. Merrill?”

Solemnly, Mr. Baker replied, “I think the man kills anyone under the age of sixty who calls him Pop.”

And the thing was, Kevin had an idea Mr. Baker wasn’t exactly joking.

“You really don’t know, huh?” Kevin said when the clocks began to wind down.

It had not been like in a movie, where they all start and finish striking at once; these were real clocks, and he guessed that most of them—along with the rest of the appliances in the Emporium Galorium—were not really running at all but sort of lurching along. They had begun at what his own Seiko quartz watch said was 3:58. They began to pick up speed and volume gradually (like an old truck fetching second gear with a tired groan and jerk). There were maybe four seconds when all of them really did seem to be striking, bonging, chiming, clanging, and cuckoo-ing at the same time, but four seconds was all the synchronicity they could manage. And “winding down” was not exactly what they did. What they did was sort of give up, like water finally consenting to gurgle its way down a drain which is almost but not quite completely plugged.

He didn’t have any idea why he was so disappointed. Had he really expected anything else? For Pop Merrill, whom Mr. Baker had described as a crackerbarrel philosopher and homespun Mr. Fixit, to pull out a spring and say, “Here it is—this is the bastard causing that dog to show up every time you push the shutter release. It’s a dog-spring, belongs in one of those toy dogs a kid winds up so it’ll walk and bark a little, some joker on the Polaroid Sun 660 assembly line’s always putting them in the damn cameras.”

Had he expected that?

No. But he had expected ... something.

“Don’t have a friggin clue,” Pop repeated cheerfully. He reached behind him and took a Douglas MacArthur corncob pipe from a holder shaped like a bucket seat. He began to tamp tobacco into it from an imitation-leather pouch with the words EVIL WEED stamped into it. “Can’t even take these babies apart, you know.”

“You can’t?”

“Nope,” Pop said. He was just as chipper as a bird. He paused long enough to hook a thumb over the wire ridge between the lenses of his rimless specs and give them a yank. They dropped off his bald dome and fell neatly into place, hiding the red spots on the sides of his nose, with a fleshy little thump. “You could take apart the old

ones,” he went on, now producing a Diamond Blue Tip match from a pocket of his vest (of course he was wearing a vest) and pressing the thick yellow thumbnail of his right hand on its head. Yes, this was a man who could rook the summer people with one hand tied behind his back (always assuming it wasn’t the one he used to first fish out his matches and then light them)—even at fifteen years of age, Kevin could see that. Pop Merrill had style. “The Polaroid Land cameras, I mean. Ever seen one of those beauties?”

“No,” Kevin said.

Pop snapped the match alight on the first try, which of course he would always do, and applied it to the corncob, his words sending out little smoke-signals which looked pretty and smelled absolutely foul.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “They looked like those old-time cameras people like Mathew Brady used before the turn of the century—or before the Kodak people introduced the Brownie box camera, anyway. What I mean to say is” (Kevin was rapidly learning that this was Pop Merrill’s favorite phrase; he used it the way some of the kids in school used “you know,” as intensifier, modifier, qualifier, and most of all as a convenient thought-gathering pause) “they tricked it up some, put on chrome and real leather side-panels, but it still looked old-fashioned, like the sort of camera folks used to make daguerreotypes with. When you opened one of those old Polaroid Land cameras, it snapped out an accordion neck, because the lens needed half a foot, maybe even nine inches, to focus the image. It looked old-fashioned as hell when you put it next to one of the Kodaks in the late forties and early fifties, and it was like those old daguerreotype cameras in another way—it only took black-and-white photos.”

“Is that so?” Kevin asked, interested in spite of himself.

“Oh, ayuh!” Pop said, chipper as a chickadee, blue eyes twinkling at Kevin through the smoke from his fuming stewpot of a pipe and from behind his round rimless glasses. It was the sort of twinkle which may indicate either good humor or avarice. “What I mean to say is that people laughed at those cameras the way they laughed at the Volkswagen Beetles when they first come out ... but they bought

the Polaroids just like they bought the VWs. Because the Beetles got good gas mileage and didn't go bust so often as American cars, and the Polaroids did one thing the Kodaks and even the Nikons and Minoltas and Leicas didn't."

"Took instant pictures."

Pop smiled. "Well ... not exactly. What I mean to say is you took your pitcher, and then you yanked on this flap to pull it out. It didn't have no motor, didn't make that squidgy little whining noise like modem Polaroids."

So there was a perfect way to describe that sound after all, it was just that you had to find a Pop Merrill to tell it to you: the sound that Polaroid cameras made when they spat out their product was a *squidgy little whine*.

"Then you had to time her," Pop said.

"Time—?"

"Oh; ayuh!" Pop said with great relish, bright as the early bird who has found that fabled worm. "What I mean to say is they didn't have none of this happy automatic crappy back in those days. You yanked and out come this long strip which you put on the table or whatever and timed off sixty seconds on your watch. Had to be sixty, or right around there, anyway. Less and you'd have an underexposed pitcher. More and it'd be overexposed."

"Wow," Kevin said respectfully. And this was not bogus respect, jollying the old man along in hopes he would get back to the point, which was not a bunch of long-dead cameras that had been wonders in their day but his own camera, the damned balky Sun 660 sitting on Pop's worktable with the guts of an old seven-day clock on its right and something which looked suspiciously like a dildo on its left. It wasn't bogus respect and Pop knew it, and it occurred to Pop (it wouldn't have to Kevin) how fleeting that great white god "state-of-the-art" really was; ten years, he thought, and the phrase itself would be gone. From the boy's fascinated expression, you would have thought he was hearing about something as antique as George Washington's wooden dentures instead of a camera everyone had thought was the ultimate only thirty-five years ago. But of course this boy had still been circling around in the unhatched void thirty-five

years ago, part of a female who hadn't yet even met the male who would provide his other half.

"What I mean to say is it was a regular little darkroom goin on in there between the pitcher and the backing," Pop resumed, slow at first but speeding up as his own mostly genuine interest in the subject resurfaced (but the thoughts of who this kid's father was and what the kid might be worth to him and the strange thing the kid's camera was up to never completely left his mind). "And at the end of the minute, you peeled the pitcher off the back—had to be careful when you did it, too, because there was all this goo like jelly on the back, and if your skin was in the least bit sensitive, you could get a pretty good burn."

"Awesome," Kevin said. His eyes were wide, and now he looked like a kid hearing about the old two-holer outhouses which Pop and all his childhood colleagues (they were almost all colleagues; he had had few childhood friends in Castle Rock, perhaps preparing even then for his life's work of rooking the summer people and the other children somehow sensing it, like a faint smell of skunk) had taken for granted, doing your business as fast as you could in high summer because one of the wasps always circling around down there between the manna and the two holes which were the heaven from which the manna fell might at any time take a notion to plant its stinger in one of your tender little boycheeks, and also doing it as fast as you could in deep winter because your tender little boycheeks were apt to freeze solid if you didn't. Well, Pop thought, *so much for the Camera of the Future. Thirty-five years and to this kid it's interestin in the same way a backyard shithouse is interestin.*

"The negative was on the back," Pop said. "And your positive—well, it was black and white, but it was *fine* black and white. It was just as crisp and clear as you'd ever want even today. And you had this little pink thing, about as long as a school eraser, as I remember; it squeegeed out some kind of chemical, smelled like ether, and you had to rub it over the pitcher as fast as you could, or that pitcher'd roll right up, like the tube in the middle of a roll of bung-fodder."

Kevin burst out laughing, tickled by these pleasant antiquities.

Pops quit long enough to get his pipe going again. When he had, he resumed: "A camera like that, nobody but the Polaroid people really knew what it was doing—I mean to say those people were *close*—but it was *mechanical*. You could take it *apart*."

He looked at Kevin's Sun with some distaste.

"And, lots of times when one went bust, that was as much as you needed. Fella'd come in with one of those and say it wouldn't work, moanin about how he'd have to send it back to the Polaroid people to get it fixed and that'd prob'ly take months and would I take a look. 'Well,' I'd say, 'prob'ly nothin I can do, what I mean to say is nobody really knows about these cameras but the Polaroid people and they're goddam close, but I'll take a look.' All the time knowin it was prob'ly just a loose screw inside that shutter-housin or maybe a fouled spring, or hell, maybe Junior slathered some peanut butter in the film compartment."

One of his bright bird-eyes dropped in a wink so quick and so marvellously sly that, Kevin thought, if you hadn't known he was talking about summer people, you would have thought it was your paranoid imagination, or, more likely, missed it entirely.

"What I mean to say is you had your perfect situation," Pop said. "If you could fix it, you were a goddam wonder-worker. Why, I have put eight dollars and fifty cents in my pocket for takin a couple of little pieces of potato-chip out from between the trigger and the shutter-spring, my son, and the woman who brought that camera in kissed me on the lips. Right ... on ... the lips."

Kevin observed Pop's eye drop momentarily closed again behind the semi-transparent mat of blue smoke.

"And of course, if it was somethin you couldn't fix, they didn't hold it against you because, what I mean to say, they never really expected you to be able to do nothin in the first place. You was only a last resort before they put her in a box and stuffed newspaper around her to keep her from bein broke even worse in the mail, and shipped her off to Schenectady.

"But—*this* camera." He spoke in the ritualistic tone of distaste all philosophers of the crackerbarrel, whether in Athens of the golden age or in a small-town junk-shop during this current one of brass,

adopt to express their view of entropy without having to come right out and state it. “Wasn’t put together, son. What I mean to say is it was *poured*. I could maybe pop the lens, and will if you want me to, and I *did* look in the film compartment, although I knew I wouldn’t see a goddam thing wrong—that I recognized, at least—and I didn’t. But beyond that I can’t go. I could take a hammer and wind it right to her, could break it, what I mean to say, but fix it?” He spread his hands in pipe-smoke. “Nossir.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to—” *return it after all*, he meant to finish, but Pop broke in.

“Anyway, son, I think you knew that. What I mean to say is you’re a bright boy, you can see when a thing’s all of a piece. I don’t think you brought that camera in to be *fixed*. I think you know that even if it *wasn’t* all of a piece, a man couldn’t fix what that thing’s doing, at least not with a screwdriver. I think you brought it in to ask me if I knew what it’s *up* to.”

“Do you?” Kevin asked. He was suddenly tense all over.

“I might,” Pop Merrill said calmly. He bent over the pile of photographs—twenty-eight of them now, counting the one Kevin had snapped to demonstrate, and the one Pop had snapped to demonstrate to himself. “These in order?”

“Not really. Pretty close, though. Does it matter?”

“I think so,” Pop said. “They’re a little bit different, ain’t they? Not much, but a little.”

“Yeah,” Kevin said. “I can see the difference in *some* of them, but ...”

“Do you know which one is the first? I could prob’ly figure it out for myself, but time is money, son.”

“That’s easy,” Kevin said, and picked one out of the untidy little pile. “See the frosting?” He pointed at a small brown spot on the picture’s white edging.

“Ayup.” Pop didn’t spare the dab of frosting more than a glance. He looked closely at the photograph, and after a moment he opened the drawer of his worktable. Tools were littered untidily about inside. To one side, in its own space, was an object wrapped in jeweler’s velvet. Pop took this out, folded the cloth back, and removed a large

magnifying glass with a switch in its base. He bent over the Polaroid and pushed the switch. A bright circle of light fell on the picture's surface.

"That's neat!" Kevin said.

"Ayup," Pop said again. Kevin could tell that for Pop he was no longer there. Pop was studying the picture closely.

If one had not known the odd circumstances of its taking, the picture would hardly have seemed to warrant such close scrutiny. Like most photographs which are taken with a decent camera, good film, and by a photographer at least intelligent enough to keep his finger from blocking the lens, it was clear, understandable ... and, like so many Polaroids, oddly undramatic. It was a picture in which you could identify and name each object, but its content was as flat as its surface. It was not well composed, but composition wasn't what was wrong with it—that undramatic flatness could hardly be called wrong at all, any more than a real day in a real life could be called wrong because nothing worthy of even a made-for-television movie happened during its course. As in so many Polaroids, the things in the picture were only *there*, like an empty chair on a porch or an unoccupied child's swing in a back yard or a passengerless car sitting at an unremarkable curb without even a flat tire to make it interesting or unique.

What was wrong with the picture was the feeling that it was wrong. Kevin had remembered the sense of unease he had felt while composing his subjects for the picture he meant to take, and the ripple of gooseflesh up his back when, with the glare of the flashbulb still lighting the room, he had thought, *It's mine*. That was what was wrong, and as with the man in the moon you can't unsee once you've seen it, so, he was discovering, you couldn't *unfeel* certain feelings ... and when it came to these pictures, those feelings were bad.

Kevin thought: *It's like there was a wind—very soft, very cold—blowing out of that picture.*

For the first time, the idea that it might be something supernatural—that this was part of a Manifestation—did something more than just intrigue him. For the first time he found himself wishing he had

simply let this thing go. *It's mine*—that was what he had thought when his finger had pushed the shutter-button for the first time. Now he found himself wondering if maybe he hadn't gotten that backward.

*I'm scared of it. Of what it's doing.*

That made him mad, and he bent over Pop Merrill's shoulder, hunting as grimly as a man who has lost a diamond in a sandpile, determined that, no matter what he saw (always supposing he *should* see something new, and he didn't think he would; he had studied all these photographs often enough now to believe he had seen all there was to see in them), he would *look* at it, *study* it, and under no circumstances allow himself to unsee it. Even if he could ... and a dolorous voice inside suggested very strongly that the time for unseeing was now past, possibly forever.

What the picture showed was a large black dog in front of a white picket fence. The picket fence wasn't going to be white much longer, unless someone in that flat Polaroid world painted or at least whitewashed it. That didn't seem likely; the fence looked untended, forgotten. The tops of some pickets were broken off. Others sagged loosely outward.

The dog was on a sidewalk in front of the fence. His hindquarters were to the viewer. His tail, long and bushy, drooped. He appeared to be smelling one of the fence-pickets—probably, Kevin thought, because the fence was what his dad called a “letter-drop,” a place where many dogs would lift their legs and leave mystic yellow squirts of message before moving on.

The dog looked like a stray to Kevin. Its coat was long and tangled and sown with burdocks. One of its ears had the crumpled look of an old battle-scar. Its shadow trailed long enough to finish outside the frame on the weedy, patchy lawn inside the picket fence. The shadow made Kevin think the picture had been taken not long after dawn or not long before sunset; with no idea of the direction the photographer (what photographer, ha-ha) had been facing, it was

impossible to tell which, just that he (or she) must have been standing only a few degrees shy of due east or west.

There was something in the grass at the far left of the picture which looked like a child's red rubber ball. It was inside the fence, and enough behind one of the lackluster clumps of grass so it was hard to tell.

And that was all.

"Do you recognize anything?" Pop asked, cruising his magnifying glass slowly back and forth over the photo's surface. Now the dog's hindquarters swelled to the size of hillocks tangled with wild and ominously exotic black undergrowth; now three or four of the scaly pickets became the size of old telephone poles; now, suddenly, the object behind the clump of grass clearly became a child's ball (although under Pop's glass it was as big as a soccer ball): Kevin could even see the stars which girdled its middle in upraised rubber lines. So something new was revealed under Pop's glass, and in a few moments Kevin would see something else himself, without it. But that was later.

"Jeez, no," Kevin said. "How could I, Mr. Merrill?"

"Because there are *things* here," Pop said patiently. His glass went on cruising. Kevin thought of a movie he had seen once where the cops sent out a searchlight-equipped helicopter to look for escaped prisoners. "A dog, a sidewalk, a picket fence that needs paintin or takin down, a lawn that needs tendin. The sidewalk ain't much—you can't even see all of it—and the house, even the foundation, ain't in the frame, but what I mean to say is there's that dog. You recognize *it*?"

"No."

"The fence?"

"No."

"What about that red rubber ball? What about that, son?"

"No ... but you look like you think I should."

"I look like I thought you *might*," Pop said. "You never had a ball like that when you were a tyke?"

"Not that I remember, no."

"You got a sister, you said."

“Megan.”

“She never had a ball like that?”

“I don’t think so. I never took that much interest in Meg’s toys. She had a BoLo bouncer once, and the ball on the end of it was red, but a different shade. Darker.”

“Ayuh. I know what a ball like that looks like. This ain’t one. And that mightn’t be your lawn?”

“Jes—I mean jeepers, no.” Kevin felt a little offended. He and his dad took good care of the lawn around their house. It was a deep green and would stay that way, even under the fallen leaves, until at least mid-October. “We don’t have a picket fence, anyway.” *And if we did*, he thought, *it wouldn’t look like that mess*.

Pop let go of the switch in the base of the magnifying glass, placed it on the square of jeweler’s velvet, and with a care which approached reverence folded the sides over it. He returned it to its former place in the drawer and closed the drawer. He looked at Kevin closely. He had put his pipe aside, and there was now no smoke to obscure his eyes, which were still sharp but not twinkling anymore.

“What I mean to say is, could it have been your house before you owned it, do you think? Ten years ago—”

“We owned it ten years ago,” Kevin replied, bewildered.

“Well, twenty? Thirty? What I mean to say, do you recognize how the land lies? Looks like it climbs a little.”

“Our front lawn—” He thought deeply, then shook his head. “No, ours is flat. If it does anything, it goes down a little. Maybe that’s why the cellar ships a little water in a wet spring.”

“Ayuh, ayuh, could be. What about the back lawn?”

“There’s no sidewalk back there,” Kevin said. “And on the sides—” He broke off. “You’re trying to find out if my camera’s taking pictures of the past!” he said, and for the first time he was really, actively frightened. He rubbed his tongue on the roof of his mouth and seemed to taste metal.

“I was just askin.” Pop rapped his fingers beside the photographs, and when he spoke, it seemed to be more to himself than to Kevin. “You know,” he said, “some goddam funny things seem to happen

from time to time with two gadgets we've come to take pretty much for granted. I ain't sayin they do happen; only if they don't, there are a lot of liars and out-n-out hoaxers in the world."

"What gadgets?"

"Tape recorders and Polaroid cameras," Pop said, still seeming to talk to the pictures, or himself, and there was no Kevin in this dusty clock-drumming space at the back of the Emporium Galorium at all. "Take tape recorders. Do you know how many people claim to have recorded the voices of dead folks on tape recorders?"

"No," Kevin said. He didn't particularly mean for his own voice to come out hushed, but it did; he didn't seem to have a whole lot of air in his lungs to speak with, for some reason or other.

"Me neither," Pop said, stirring the photographs with one finger. It was blunt and gnarled, a finger which looked made for rude and clumsy motions and operations, for poking people and knocking vases off endtables and causing nosebleeds if it tried to do so much as hook a humble chunk of dried snot from one of its owner's nostrils. Yet Kevin had watched the man's hands and thought there was probably more grace in that one finger than in his sister Meg's entire body (and maybe in his own; Clan Delevan was not known for its lightfootedness or -handedness, which was probably one reason why he thought that image of his father so nimbly catching his mother on the way down had stuck with him, and might forever). Pop Merrill's finger looked as if it would at any moment sweep all the photographs onto the floor—by mistake; this sort of clumsy finger would always poke and knock and tweak by mistake—but it did not. The Polaroids seemed to barely stir in response to its restless movements.

*Supernatural*, Kevin thought again, and shivered a little. An *actual* shiver, surprising and dismaying and a little embarrassing even if Pop had not seen it.

"But there's even a way they do it," Pop said, and then, as if Kevin had asked: "Who? Damn if I know. I guess some of them are 'psychic investigators,' or at least call themselves that or some such, but I guess it's more'n likely most of em are just playin around, like folks that use Ouija Boards at parties."

He looked up at Kevin grimly, as if rediscovering him.

“You got a Ouija, son?”

“No.”

“Ever played with one?”

“No.”

“Don’t,” Pop said more grimly than ever. “Fucking things are dangerous.”

Kevin didn’t dare tell the old man he hadn’t the slightest idea what a weegee board was.

“Anyway, they set up a tape machine to record in an empty room. It’s supposed to be an old house, is what I mean to say, one with a History, if they can find it. Do you know what I mean when I say a house with a History, son?”

“I guess ... like a haunted house?” Kevin hazarded. He found he was sweating lightly, as he had done last year every time Mrs. Whittaker announced a pop quiz in Algebra I.

“Well, that’ll do. These ... people ... like it best if it’s a house with a Violent History, but they’ll take what they can get. Anyhow, they set up the machine and record that empty room. Then, the next day—they always do it at night is what I mean to say, they ain’t happy unless they can do it at night, and midnight if they can get it—the next day they play her back.”

“An empty room?”

“Sometimes,” Pop said in a musing voice that might or might not have disguised some deeper feeling, “there are voices.”

Kevin shivered again. There were hieroglyphics on the plinth after all. Nothing you’d want to read, but ... yeah. They were there.

“Real voices?”

“Usually imagination,” Pop said dismissively. “But once or twice I’ve heard people I trust say they’ve heard real voices.”

“But *you* never have?”

“Once,” Pop said shortly, and said nothing else for so long Kevin was beginning to think he was done when he added, “It was one word. Clear as a bell. ’Twas recorded in the parlor of an empty house in Bath. Man killed his wife there in 1946.”

“What was the word?” Kevin asked, knowing he would not be told just as surely as he knew no power on earth, certainly not his own willpower, could have kept him from asking.

But Pop *did* tell.

“Basin.”

Kevin blinked. “Basin?”

“Ayuh.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“It might,” Pop said calmly, “if you know he cut her throat and then held her head over a basin to catch the blood.”

“Oh my God!”

“Ayuh.”

“Oh my God, really?”

Pop didn’t bother answering that.

“It couldn’t have been a fake?”

Pop gestured with the stem of his pipe at the Polaroids. “Are those?”

“Oh my God.”

“Polaroids, now,” Pop said, like a narrator moving briskly to a new chapter in a novel and reading the words *Meanwhile, in another part of the forest*, “I’ve seen pitchers with people in em that the other people in the pitcher swear weren’t there with em when the pitcher was taken. And there’s one—this is a famous one—that a lady took over in England. What she did was snap a pitcher of some fox-hunters comin back home at the end of the day. You see em, about twenty in all, comin over a little wooden bridge. It’s a tree-lined country road on both sides of that bridge. The ones in front are off the bridge already. And over on the right of the pitcher, standin by the road, there’s a lady in a long dress and a hat with a veil on it so you can’t see her face and she’s got her pocketbook over her arm. Why, you can even see she’s wearin a locket on her boosom, or maybe it’s a watch.

“Well, when the lady that took the pitcher saw it, she got wicked upset, and wasn’t nobody could blame her, son, because what I mean to say is she meant to take a pitcher of those fox-hunters comin home and no one else, because there wasn’t nobody else

there. Except in the pitcher there is. And when you look real close, it seems like you can see the trees right through that lady.”

*He’s making all this up, putting me on, and when I leave he’ll have a great big horselaugh,* Kevin thought, knowing Pop Merrill was doing nothing of the sort.

“The lady that took that pitcher was stayin at one of those big English homes like they have on the education-TV shows, and when she showed that pitcher, I heard the man of the house fainted dead away. That part could be made up. Prob’ly is. Sounds made up, don’t it? But I seen that pitcher in an article next to a painted portrait of that fella’s great-grandmother, and it could be her, all right. Can’t tell for certain because of the veil. But it *could* be.”

“Could be a hoax, too,” Kevin said faintly.

“Could be,” Pop said indifferently. “People get up to all sorts of didos. Lookit my nephew, there, for instance, Ace.” Pop’s nose wrinkled. “Doin four years in Shawshank, and for what? Bustin into The Mellow Tiger. He got up to didos and Sheriff Pangborn slammed him in the jug for it. Little ring-meat got just what he deserved.”

Kevin, displaying a wisdom far beyond his years, said nothing.

“But when ghosts show up in photographs, son—or, like you say, what people claim to be ghosts—it’s almost always in *Polaroid* photographs. And it almost always seems to be by accident. Now your pitchers of flyin saucers and that Lock Nest Monster, they almost always show up in the other kind. The kind some smart fella can get up to didos with in a darkroom.”

He dropped Kevin a third wink, expressing all the didos (whatever *they* were) an unscrupulous photographer might get up to in a well-equipped darkroom.

Kevin thought of asking Pop if it was possible someone could get up to didos with a weegee and decided to continue keeping his mouth shut. It still seemed by far the wisest course.

“All by way of sayin I thought I’d ask if you saw somethin you knew in *these* Polaroid pitchers.”

“I don’t, though,” Kevin said so earnestly that he believed Pop would believe he was lying, as his mom always did when he made the tactical mistake of even controlled vehemence.

“Ayuh, ayuh,” Pop said, believing him so dismissively Kevin was almost irritated.

“Well,” Kevin said after a moment which was silent except for the fifty thousand ticking clocks, “I guess that’s it, huh?”

“Maybe not,” Pop said. “What I mean to say is I got me a little idear. You mind takin some more pitchers with that camera?”

“What good is it? They’re all the same.”

“That’s the point. They ain’t.”

Kevin opened his mouth, then closed it.

“I’ll even chip in for the film,” Pop said, and when he saw the amazed look on Kevin’s face he quickly qualified: “A little, anyway.”

“How many pictures would you want?”

“Well, you got ... what? Twenty-eight already, is that right?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Thirty more,” Pop said after a moment’s thought.

“Why?”

“Ain’t gonna tell you. Not right now.” He produced a heavy purse that was hooked to a belt-loop on a steel chain. He opened it and took out a ten-dollar bill, hesitated, and added two ones with obvious reluctance. “Guess that’d cover half of it.”

*Yeah, right,* Kevin thought.

“If you really are int’rested in the trick that camera’s doing, I guess you’d pony up the rest, wouldn’t you?” Pop’s eyes gleamed at him like the eyes of an old, curious cat.

Kevin understood the man did more than expect him to say yes; to Pop it was inconceivable that he could say no. Kevin thought, *If I said no he wouldn’t hear it; he’d say “Good, that’s agreed, then, ” and I’d end up back on the sidewalk with his money in my pocket whether I wanted it or not.*

And he *did* have his birthday money.

All the same, there was that chill wind to think about. That wind that seemed to blow not from the surface but right out of those photographs in spite of their deceptively flat, deceptively shiny surfaces. He felt that wind coming from them despite their mute declaration which averred *We are Polaroids, and for no reason we*

*can tell or even understand, we show only the undramatic surfaces of things.* That wind was there. What about that wind?

Kevin hesitated a moment longer and the bright eyes behind the rimless spectacles measured him. *I ain't gonna ask you if you're a man or a mouse,* Pop Merrill's eyes said. *You're fifteen years old, and what I mean to say is at fifteen you may not be a man yet, not quite, but you are too goddam old to be a mouse and both of us know it. And besides you're not from Away; you're from town, just like me.*

"Sure," Kevin said with a hollow lightness in his voice. It fooled neither of them. "I can get the film tonight, I guess, and bring the pictures in tomorrow, after school."

"Nope," Pop said.

"You're closed tomorrow?"

"Nope," Pop said, and because he was from town, Kevin waited patiently. "You're thinkin about takin thirty pitchers all at once, aren't you?"

"I guess so."

"That ain't the way I want you to do it," Pop said. "It don't matter *where* you take them, but it does matter when. Here. Lemme figure."

Pop figured, and then even wrote down a list of times, which Kevin pocketed.

"So!" Pop said, rubbing his hands briskly together so that they made a dry sound that was like two pieces of used-up sandpaper rubbing together. "You'll see me in ... oh, three days or so?"

"Yes ... I guess so."

"I'll bet you'd just as lief wait until Monday after school, anyway," Pop said. He dropped Kevin a fourth wink, slow and sly and humiliating in the extreme. "So your friends don't see you coming in here and tax you with it, is what I mean to say."

Kevin flushed and dropped his eyes to the worktable and began to gather up the Polaroids so his hands would have something to do. When he was embarrassed and they didn't, he cracked his knuckles.

"I—" He began some sort of absurd protest that would convince neither of them and then stopped, staring down at one of the photos.

“What?” Pop asked. For the first time since Kevin had approached him, Pop sounded entirely human, but Kevin hardly heard his words, much less his tone of faint alarm. “Now you look like you seen a ghost, boy.”

“No,” Kevin said. “No ghost. I see who took the picture. Who really took the picture.”

“What in glory are you talking about?”

Kevin pointed to a shadow. He, his father, his mother, Meg, and apparently Mr. Merrill himself had taken it for the shadow of a tree that wasn't itself in the frame. But it wasn't a tree. Kevin saw that now, and what you had seen could never be unseen.

More hieroglyphics on the plinth.

“I don't see what you're gettin at,” Pop said. But Kevin knew the old man knew he was getting at *something*, which was why he sounded put out.

“Look at the shadow of the dog first,” Kevin said. “Then look at this one here again.” He tapped the left side of the photograph. “In the picture, the sun is either going down or coming up. That makes all the shadows long, and it's hard to tell what's throwing them. But looking at it, just now, it clicked home for me.”

“*What* clicked home, son?” Pop reached for the drawer, probably meaning to get the magnifying glass with the light in it again ... and then stopped. All at once he didn't need it. All at once it had clicked into place for him, too.

“It's the shadow of a man, ain't it?” Pop said. “I be go to hell if that one ain't the shadow of a man.”

“Or a woman. You can't tell. Those are legs, I'm sure they are, but they could belong to a woman wearing pants. Or even a kid. With the shadow running so long—”

“Ayuh, you can't tell.”

Kevin said, “It's the shadow of whoever took it, isn't it?”

“Ayuh.”

“But it wasn't *me*,” Kevin said. “It came out of my camera—all of them did—but I didn't take it. So who did, Mr. Merrill? Who did?”

“Call me Pop,” the old man said absently, looking at the shadow in the picture, and Kevin felt his chest swell with pleasure as those few

clocks still capable of running a little fast began to signal the others that, weary as they might be, it was time to charge the half-hour.

## CHAPTER THREE

When Kevin arrived back at the Emporium Galorium with the photographs on Monday after school, the leaves had begun to turn color. He had been fifteen for almost two weeks and the novelty had worn off.

The novelty of that plinth, *the supernatural*, had not, but this wasn't anything he counted among his blessings. He had finished taking the schedule of photographs Pop had given him, and by the time he had, he had seen clearly—clearly enough, anyway—why Pop had wanted him to take them at intervals: the first ten on the hour, then let the camera rest, the second ten every two hours, and the third at three-hour intervals. He'd taken the last few that day at school. He had seen something else as well, something none of them could have seen at first; it was not clearly visible until the final three pictures. They had scared him so badly he had decided, even before taking the pictures to the Emporium Galorium, that he wanted to get rid of the Sun 660. Not exchange it; that was the last thing he wanted to do, because it would mean the camera would be out of his hands and hence out of his control. He couldn't have that.

*It's mine*, he had thought, and the thought kept recurring, but it wasn't a true thought. If it was—if the Sun only took pictures of the black breedless dog by the white picket fence when he, Kevin, was the one pushing the trigger—that would have been one thing. But that wasn't the case. Whatever the nasty magic inside the Sun might be, he was not its sole initiator. His father had taken the same (well, *almost* the same) picture, and so had Pop Merrill, and so had Meg when Kevin had let her take a couple of the pictures on Pop's carefully timed schedule.

"Did you number em, like I asked?" Pop asked when Kevin delivered them.

"Yes, one to fifty-eight," Kevin said. He thumbed through the stack of photographs, showing Pop the small circled numbers in the lower

lefthand corner of each. “But I don’t know if it matters. I’ve decided to get rid of the camera.”

“Get rid of it? That ain’t what you mean.”

“No. I guess not. I’m going to break it up with a sledgehammer.”

Pop looked at him with those shrewd little eyes. “That so?”

“Yes,” Kevin said, meeting the shrewd gaze steadfastly. “Last week I would have laughed at the idea, but I’m not laughing now. I think the thing is dangerous.”

“Well, I guess you could be right, and I guess you could tape a charge of dynamite to it and blow it to smithereens if you wanted. It’s yours, is what I mean to say. But why don’t you hold off a little while? There’s somethin I want to do with these pitchers. You might be interested.”

“What?”

“I druther not say,” Pop answered, “case it don’t turn out. But I might have somethin by the end of the week that’d help you decide better, one way or the other.”

“I have decided,” Kevin said, and tapped something that had shown up in the last two photographs.

“What is it?” Pop asked. “I’ve looked at it with m’glass, and I feel like I *should* know what it is—it’s like a name you can’t quite remember but have right on the tip of your tongue, is what I mean to say—but I don’t quite.”

“I suppose I could hold off until Friday or so,” Kevin said, choosing not to answer the old man’s question. “I really don’t want to hold off much longer.”

“Scared?”

“Yes,” Kevin said simply. “I’m scared.”

“You told your folks?”

“Not all of it, no.”

“Well, you might want to. Might want to tell your dad, anyway, is what I mean to say. You got time to think on it while I take care of what it is I want to take care of.”

“No matter what you want to do, I’m going to put my dad’s sledgehammer on it come Friday,” Kevin said. “I don’t even want a camera anymore. Not a Polaroid or any other kind.”

“Where is it now?”

“In my bureau drawer. And that’s where it’s going to stay.”

“Stop by the store here on Friday,” Pop said. “Bring the camera with you. We’ll take a look at this little idear of mine, and then, if you want to bust the goddam thing up, I’ll provide the sledgehammer myself. No charge. Even got a chopping block out back you can set it on.”

“That’s a deal,” Kevin said, and smiled.

“Just what have you told your folks about all this?”

“That I’m still deciding. I didn’t want to worry them. My mom, especially.” Kevin looked at him curiously. “Why did you say I might want to tell my dad?”

“You bust up that camera, your father is going to be mad at you,” Pop said. “That ain’t so bad, but he’s maybe gonna think you’re a little bit of a fool, too. Or an old maid, squallin burglar to the police on account of a creaky board is what I mean to say.”

Kevin flushed a little, thinking of how angry his father had gotten when the idea of the supernatural had come up, then sighed. He hadn’t thought of it in that light at all, but now that he did, he thought Pop was probably right. He didn’t like the idea of his father being mad at him, but he could live with it. The idea that his father might think him a coward, a fool, or both, though ... that was a different kettle of fish altogether.

Pop was watching him shrewdly, reading these thoughts as they crossed Kevin’s face as easily as a man might read the headlines on the front page of a tabloid newspaper.

“You think he could meet you here around four in the afternoon on Friday?”

“No way,” Kevin said. “He works in Portland. He hardly ever gets home before six.”

“I’ll give him a call, if you want,” Pop said. “He’ll come if I call.”

Kevin gave him a wide-eyed stare.

Pop smiled thinly. “Oh, I know him,” he said. “Know him of old. He don’t like to let on about me any more than you do, and I understand that, but what I mean to say is I know him. I know a lot of people in this town. You’d be surprised, son.”

“How?”

“Did him a favor one time,” Pop said. He popped a match alight with his thumbnail, and veiled those eyes behind enough smoke so you couldn’t tell if it was amusement, sentiment, or contempt in them.

“What kind of favor?”

“That,” Pop said, “is between him and me. Just like this business here”—he gestured at the pile of photographs—“is between me and you. *That’s* what I mean to say.”

“Well ... okay ... I guess. Should I say anything to him?”

“Nope!” Pop said in his chipper way. “You let me take care of everything.” And for a moment, in spite of the obfuscating pipe-smoke, there was something in Pop Merrill’s eyes Kevin Delevan didn’t care for. He went out, a sorely confused boy who knew only one thing for sure: he wanted this to be over.

When he was gone, Pop sat silent and moveless for nearly five minutes. He allowed his pipe to go out in his mouth and drummed his fingers, which were nearly as knowing and talented as those of a concert violinist but masqueraded as equipment which should more properly have belonged to a digger of ditches or a pourer of cement, next to the stack of photographs. As the smoke dissipated, his eyes stood out clearly, and they were as cold as ice in a December puddle.

Abruptly he put the pipe in its holder and called a camera-and-video shop in Lewiston. He asked two questions. The answer to both of them was yes. Pop hung up the phone and went back to drumming his fingers on the table beside the Polaroids. What he was planning wasn’t really fair to the boy, but the boy had uncovered the corner of something he not only didn’t understand but didn’t want to understand.

Fair or not, Pop didn’t believe he intended to let the boy do what the boy wanted to do. He hadn’t decided what he himself meant to do, not yet, not entirely, but it was wise to be prepared.

That was always wise.

He sat and drummed his fingers and wondered what that thing was the boy had seen. He had obviously felt Pop would know—or might know—but Pop hadn't a clue. The boy might tell him on Friday. Or not. But if the boy didn't, the father, to whom Pop had once loaned four hundred dollars to cover a bet on a basketball game, a bet he had lost and which his wife knew nothing about, certainly would. If, that was, he could. Even the best of fathers didn't know all about their sons anymore once those sons were fifteen or so, but Pop thought Kevin was a very *young* fifteen, and that his dad knew most things ... or could find them out.

He smiled and drummed his fingers and all the clocks began to charge wearily at the hour of five.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Pop Merrill turned the sign which hung in his door from OPEN to CLOSED at two o'clock on Friday afternoon, slipped himself behind the wheel of his 1959 Chevrolet, which had been for years perfectly maintained at Sonny's Texaco at absolutely no cost at all (the fallout of another little loan, and Sonny Jackett another town fellow who would prefer hot coals pressed against the soles of his feet to admitting that he not only knew but was deeply indebted to Pop Merrill, who had gotten him out of a desperate scrape over in New Hampshire in '69), and took himself up to Lewiston, a city he hated because it seemed to him that there were only two streets in the whole town (maybe three) that weren't one-ways. He arrived as he always did when Lewiston and only Lewiston would do: not by driving to it but arriving somewhere near it and then spiraling slowly inward along those beshitted one-way streets until he reckoned he was as close as he could get and then walking the rest of the way, a tall thin man with a bald head, rimless specs, clean khaki pants with creases and cuffs, and a blue workman's shirt buttoned right up to the collar.

There was a sign in the window of Twin City Camera and Video that showed a cartoon man who appeared to be battling a huge tangle of movie-film and losing. The fellow looked just about ready to blow his stack. The words over and under the picture read: TIRED OF FIGHTING? WE TRANSFER YOUR 8 MM MOVIES (SNAPSHOTS TOO!) ONTO VIDEO TAPE!

Just another goddam gadget, Pop thought, opening the door and going in. World's dying of em.

But he was one of those people—world's dying of em—not at all above using what he disparaged if it proved expedient. He spoke briefly with the clerk. The clerk got the proprietor. They had known each other for many years (probably since Homer sailed the wine-

dark sea, some wits might have said). The proprietor invited Pop into the back room, where they shared a nip.

“That’s a goddam strange bunch of photos,” the proprietor said.

“Ayuh.”

“The videotape I made of them is even stranger.”

“I bet so.”

“That all you got to say?”

“Ayuh.”

“Fuck ya, then,” the proprietor said, and they both cackled their shrill old-man’s cackles. Behind the counter, the clerk winced.

Pop left twenty minutes later with two items: a video cassette, and a brand-new Polaroid Sun 660, still in its box.

When he got back to the shop, he called Kevin’s house. He was not surprised when it was John Delevan who answered.

“If you’ve been fucking my boy over, I’ll kill you, you old snake,” John Delevan said without preamble, and distantly Pop could hear the boy’s wounded cry: “*Da-ad!*”

Pop’s lips skinned back from his teeth—crooked, eroded, pipe-yellow, but his own, by the bald-headed Christ—and if Kevin had seen him in that moment he would have done more than *wonder* if maybe Pop Merrill was something other than the Castle Rock version of the Kindly Old Sage of the Crackerbarrel: he would have *known*.

“Now, John,” he said. “I’ve been trying to help your boy with that camera. That’s all in the world I’ve been trying to do.” He paused. “Just like that one time I gave you a help when you got a little too proud of the Seventy-Sixers, is what I mean to say.”

A thundering silence from John Delevan’s end of the line which meant he had plenty to say on *that* subject, but the kiddo was in the room and that was as good as a gag.

“Now, your kid don’t know nothing about *that*,” Pop said, that nasty grin broadening in the tick-tock shadows of the Emporium Galorium, where the dominant smells were old magazines and mouse-turds. “I

told him it wasn't none of his business, just like I told him that this business here *was*. I wouldn't have even brought up that bet if I knew another way to get you here, is what I mean to say. And you ought to see what I've got, John, because if you don't you won't understand why the boy wants to smash that camera you bought him —”

“*Smash* it!”

“—and why I think it's a hell of a good idea. Now are you going to come down here with him, or not?”

“I'm not in Portland, am I, dammit?”

“Never mind the CLOSED sign on the door,” Pop said in the serene tone of a man who has been getting his own way for many years and expects to go right on getting it for many more. “Just knock.”

“Who in hell gave my boy your name, Merrill?”

“I didn't ask him,” Pop said in that same infuriatingly serene tone of voice, and hung up the telephone. And, to the empty shop: “All I know is that he came. Just like they always do.”

While he waited, he took the Sun 660 he had bought in Lewiston out of its box and buried the box deep in the trash-can beside his worktable. He looked at the camera thoughtfully, then loaded the four-picture starter-pack that came with the camera. With that done, he unfolded the body of the camera, exposing the lens. The red light to the left of the lightning-bolt shape came on briefly, and then the green one began to stutter. Pop was not very surprised to find he was filled with trepidation. *Well*, he thought, *God hates a coward*, and pushed the shutter-release. The clutter of the Emporium Galorium's barnlike interior was bathed in an instant of merciless and improbable white light. The camera made its squidgy little whine and spat out what would be a Polaroid picture—perfectly adequate but somehow lacking; a picture that was all surfaces depicting a world where ships undoubtedly *would* sail off the fuming and monster-raddled edge of the earth if they went far enough west.

Pop watched it with the same mesmerized expression Clan Delevan had worn as it waited for Kevin's first picture to develop. He told himself this camera would not do the same thing, of course not, but he was stiff and wiry with tension just the same and, tough old bird or not, if a random board had creaked in the place just then, he almost certainly would have cried out.

But no board *did* creak, and when the picture developed it showed only what it was supposed to show: clocks assembled, clocks in pieces, toasters, stacks of magazines tied with twine, lamps with shades so horrible only women of the British upper classes could truly love them, shelves of quarter paperbacks (six for a buck) with titles like *After Dark My Sweet* and *Fire in the Flesh* and *The Brass Cupcake*, and, in the distant background, the dusty front window. You could read the letters EMPOR backward before the bulky silhouette of a bureau blocked off the rest.

No hulking creature from beyond the grave; no knife-wielding doll in blue overalls. Just a camera. He supposed the whim which had caused him to take a picture in the first place, just to see, showed how deeply this thing had worked its way under his skin.

Pop sighed and buried the photograph in the trash-can. He opened the wide drawer of the worktable and took out a small hammer. He held the camera firmly in his left hand and then swung the hammer on a short arc through the dusty tick-tock air. He didn't use a great deal of force. There was no need. Nobody took any pride in workmanship anymore. They talked about the wonders of modern science, synthetics, new alloys, polymers, Christ knew what. It didn't matter. Snot. That was what everything was really made out of these days, and you didn't have to work very hard to bust a camera that was made of snot.

The lens shattered. Shards of plastic flew from around it, and that reminded Pop of something else. Had it been the left or right side? He frowned. Left. He thought. They wouldn't notice anyway, or remember which side themselves if they did, you could damn near take that to the bank, but Pop hadn't feathered his nest with damn-nears. It was wise to be prepared.

Always wise.

He replaced the hammer, used a small brush to sweep the broken chunks of glass and plastic off the table and onto the floor, then returned the brush and took out a grease-pencil with a fine tip and an X-Act-O knife. He drew what he thought was the approximate shape of the piece of plastic which had broken off Kevin Delevan's Sun when Meg knocked it on the floor, then used the X-Act-O to carve along the lines. When he thought he had dug deep enough into the plastic, he put the X-Act-O back in the drawer, and then knocked the Polaroid camera off the worktable. What had happened once ought to happen again, especially with the fault-lines he had pre-carved.

It worked pretty slick, too. He examined the camera, which now had a chunk of plastic gone from the side as well as a busted lens, nodded, and placed it in the deep shadow under the worktable. Then he found the piece of plastic that had split off from the camera, and buried it in the trash along with the box and the single exposure he had taken.

Now there was nothing to do but wait for the Delevans to arrive. Pop took the video cassette upstairs to the cramped little apartment where he lived. He put it on top of the VCR he had bought to watch the fuck-movies you could buy nowadays, then sat down to read the paper. He saw there had been a plane-crash in Pakistan. A hundred and thirty people killed. Goddam fools were always getting themselves killed, Pop thought, but that was all right. A few less woggies in the world was a good thing all around. Then he turned to the sports to see how the Red Sox had done. They still had a good chance of winning the Eastern Division.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“What was it?” Kevin asked as they prepared to go. They had the house to themselves. Meg was at her ballet class, and it was Mrs. Delevan’s day to play bridge with her friends. She would come home at five with a large loaded pizza and news of who was getting divorced or at least thinking of it.

“None of your business,” Mr. Delevan said in a rough voice which was both angry and embarrassed.

The day was chilly. Mr. Delevan had been looking for his light jacket. Now he stopped and turned around and looked at his son, who was standing behind him, wearing his own jacket and holding the Sun camera in one hand.

“All right,” he said. “I never pulled that crap on you before and I guess I don’t want to start now. You know what I mean.”

“Yes,” Kevin said, and thought: *I know exactly what you’re talking about, is what I mean to say.*

“Your mother doesn’t know anything about this.”

“I won’t tell her.”

“Don’t say that,” his father told him sharply. “Don’t start down that road or you’ll never stop.”

“But you said you never—”

“No, I never told her,” his father said, finding the jacket at last and shrugging into it. “She never asked and I never told her. If she never asks you, you never have to tell her. That sound like a bullshit qualification to you?”

“Yeah,” Kevin said. “To tell the truth, it does.”

“Okay,” Mr. Delevan said. “Okay ... but that’s the way we do it. If the subject ever comes up, you—we—have to tell. If it doesn’t, we don’t. That’s just the way we do things in the grown-up world. It sounds fucked up, I guess, and sometimes it is fucked up, but that’s how we do it. Can you live with that?”

“Yes. I guess so.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

They walked down the driveway side by side, zipping their jackets. The wind played with the hair at John Delevan’s temples, and Kevin noted for the first time—with uneasy surprise—that his father was starting to go gray there.

“It was no big deal, anyway,” Mr. Delevan said. He might almost have been talking to himself. “It never is with Pop Merrill. He isn’t a big-deal kind of guy, if you know what I mean.”

Kevin nodded.

“He’s a fairly wealthy man, you know, but that junk-shop of his isn’t the reason why. He’s Castle Rock’s version of Shylock.”

“Of who?”

“Never mind. You’ll read the play sooner or later if education hasn’t gone entirely to hell. He loans money at interest rates that are higher than the law allows.”

“Why would people borrow from him?” Kevin asked as they walked toward downtown under trees from which leaves of red and purple and gold sifted slowly down.

“Because,” Mr. Delevan said sourly, “they can’t borrow anyplace else.”

“You mean their credit’s no good?”

“Something like that.”

“But we ... you...”

“Yeah. We’re doing all right now. But we weren’t always doing all right. When your mother and I were first married, how we were doing was all the way across town from all right.”

He fell silent again for a time, and Kevin didn’t interrupt him.

“Well, there was a guy who was awful proud of the Celtics one year,” his father said. He was looking down at his feet, as if afraid to step on a crack and break his mother’s back. “They were going into the play-offs against the Philadelphia Seventy-Sixers. They—the Celtics—were favored to win, but by a lot less than usual. I had a feeling the Seventy-Sixers were going to take them, that it was their year.”

He looked quickly at his son, almost snatching the glance as a shoplifter might take a small but fairly valuable item and tuck it into

his coat, and then went back to minding the cracks in the sidewalk again. They were now walking down Castle Hill and toward the town's single signal-light at the crossing of Lower Main Street and Watermill Lane. Beyond the intersection, what locals called the Tin Bridge crossed Castle Stream. Its overstructure cut the deep-blue autumn sky into neat geometrical shapes.

"I guess it's that feeling, that special sureness, that infects the poor souls who lose their bank accounts, their houses, their cars, even the clothes they stand up in at casinos and back-room poker games. That feeling that you got a telegram from God. I only got it that once, and I thank God for that.

"In those days I'd make a friendly bet on a football game or the World Series with somebody, five dollars was the most, I think, and usually it was a lot less than that, just a token thing, a quarter or maybe a pack of cigarettes."

This time it was Kevin who shoplifted a glance, only Mr. Delevan caught it, cracks in the sidewalk or no cracks.

"Yes, I smoked in those days, too. Now I don't smoke and I don't bet. Not since that last one. That last one cured me.

"Back then your mother and I had only been married two years. You weren't born yet. I was working as a surveyor's assistant, bringing home just about a hundred and sixteen dollars a week. Or that was what I cleared, anyway, when the government finally let go of it.

"This fellow who was so proud of the Celtics was one of the engineers. He even wore one of those green Celtics warm-up jackets to work, the kind that have the shamrock on the back. The week before the play-offs, he kept saying he'd like to find someone brave enough and stupid enough to bet on the Seventy-Sixers, because he had four hundred dollars just waiting to catch him a dividend.

"That voice inside me kept getting louder and louder, and the day before the championship series started, I went up to him on lunch-break. My heart felt like it was going to tear right out of my chest, I was so scared."

“Because you didn’t have four hundred dollars,” Kevin said. “The other guy did, but you didn’t.” He was looking at his father openly now, the camera completely forgotten for the first time since his first visit to Pop Merrill. The wonder of what the Sun 660 was doing was lost—temporarily, anyway—in this newer, brighter wonder: as a young man his father had done something spectacularly stupid, just as Kevin knew other men did, just as he might do himself someday, when he was on his own and there was no adult member of the Reasonable tribe to protect him from some terrible impulse, some misbegotten instinct. His father, it seemed, had briefly been a member of the Instinctive tribe himself. It was hard to believe, but wasn’t this the proof?

“Right.”

“But you bet him.”

“Not right away,” his father said. “I told him I thought the Seventy-Sixers would take the championship, but four hundred bucks was a lot to risk for a guy who was only a surveyor’s assistant.”

“But you never came right out and told him you didn’t have the money.”

“I’m afraid it went a little further than that, Kevin. I implied I *did* have it. I said I couldn’t afford to *lose* four hundred dollars, and that was disingenuous, to say the least. I told him I couldn’t risk that kind of money on an even bet—still not lying, you see, but skating right up to the edge of the lie. Do you see?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what would have happened—maybe nothing—if the foreman hadn’t rung the back-to-work bell right then. But he did, and this engineer threw up his hands and said, ‘I’ll give you two-to-one, sonny, if that’s what you want. It don’t matter to me. It’s still gonna be four hundred in my pocket.’ And before I knew what was happening we’d shook on it with half a dozen men watching and I was in the soup, for better or worse. And going home that night I thought of your mother, and what she’d say if she knew, and I pulled over to the shoulder of the road in the old Ford I had back then and I puked out the door.”

A police car came rolling slowly down Harrington Street. Norris Ridgewick was driving and Andy Clutterbuck was riding shotgun. Clut raised his hand as the cruiser turned left on Main Street. John and Kevin Delevan raised their hands in return, and autumn drowsed peacefully around them as if John Delevan had never sat in the open door of his old Ford and puked into the road-dust between his own feet.

They crossed Main Street.

“Well... you could say I got my money’s worth, anyway. The Sixers took it right to the last few seconds of the seventh game, and then one of those Irish bastards—I forget which one it was—stole the ball from Hal Greer and went to the hole with it and there went the four hundred dollars I didn’t have. When I paid that goddam engineer off the next day he said he ‘got a little nervous there near the end.’ That was all. I could have popped his eyes out with my thumbs.”

“You paid him off the next *day*? How’d you do that?”

“I told you, it was like a fever. Once we shook hands on the bet, the fever passed. I hoped like hell I’d win that bet, but I knew I’d have to *think* like I was going to lose. There was a lot more at stake than just four hundred dollars. There was the question of my job, of course, and what might happen if I wasn’t able to pay off the guy I’d bet with. He was an engineer, after all, and technically my boss. That fellow had just enough son of a bitch in him to have fired my ass if I didn’t pay the wager. It wouldn’t have been the bet, but he would have found something, and it would have been something that would go on my work-record in big red letters, too. But that wasn’t the biggest thing. Not at all.”

“What was?”

“Your mother. Our marriage. When you’re young and don’t have either a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of, a marriage is under strain all the time. It doesn’t matter how much you love each other, that marriage is like an overloaded packhorse and you know it can fall to its knees or even roll over dead if all the wrong things happen at all the wrong times. I don’t think she would have divorced me over a four-hundred-dollar bet, but I’m glad I never had to find out for sure. So when the fever passed, I saw that I might have bet a

little more than four hundred dollars. I might just have bet my whole goddam future.”

They were approaching the Emporium Galorium. There was a bench on the verge of the grassy town common, and Mr. Delevan gestured for Kevin to sit down.

“This won’t take long,” he said, and then laughed. It was a grating, compressed sound, like an inexperienced driver working a transmission lever. “It hurts too much to stretch out, even after all these years.”

So they sat on the bench and Mr. Delevan finished the story of how he happened to know Pop Merrill while they looked across the grassy common with the bandstand in the middle.

“I went to him the same night I made the bet,” he said. “I told your mother I was going out for cigarettes. I went after dark, so no one would see me. From town, I mean. They would have known I was in some kind of trouble, and I didn’t want that. I went in and Pop said, ‘What’s a professional man like you doing in a place like this, Mr. John Delevan?’ and I told him what I’d done and he said, ‘You made a bet and already you have got your head set to the idea you’ve lost it.’ ‘If I do lose it,’ I said, ‘I want to make sure I don’t lose anything else.’

“That made him laugh. ‘I respect a wise man,’ he said. ‘I reckon I can trust you. If the Celtics win, you come see me. I’ll take care of you. You got an honest face.’ ”

“And that was *all*?” Kevin asked. In eighth-grade math, they had done a unit on loans, and he still remembered most of it. “He didn’t ask for any, uh, collateral?”

“People who go to Pop don’t have collateral,” his father said. “He’s not a loan-shark like you see in the movies; he doesn’t break any legs if you don’t pay up. But he has ways of fixing people.”

“What ways?”

“Never mind,” John Delevan said. “After that last game ended, I went upstairs to tell your mother I was going to go out for *cigarettes*—again. She was asleep, though, so I was spared that lie. It was late, late for Castle Rock, anyway, going on eleven, but the lights were on in his place. I knew they would be. He gave me the money

in tens. He took them out of an old Crisco can. All tens. I remember that. They were crumpled but he had made them straight. Forty ten-dollar bills, him counting them out like a bank-clerk with that pipe going and his glasses up on his head and for just a second there I felt like knocking his teeth out. Instead I thanked him. You don't know how hard it can be to say thank you sometimes. I hope you never do. He said, 'You understand the terms, now, don't you?' and I said I did, and he said, 'That's good. I ain't worried about you. What I mean to say is you got an honest face. You go on and take care of your business with that fella at work, and then take care of your business with me. And don't make any more bets. Man only has to look in your face to see you weren't cut out to be a gambler.' So I took the money and went home and put it under the floor-mat of the old Chevy and lay next to your mother and didn't sleep a wink all night long because I felt filthy. Next day I gave the tens to the engineer I bet with, and he counted them out, and then he just folded them over and tucked them into one of his shirt pockets and buttoned the flap like that cash didn't mean any more than a gas receipt he'd have to turn in to the chief contractor at the end of the day. Then he clapped me on the shoulder and said, 'Well, you're a good man, Johnny. Better than I thought. I won four hundred but I lost twenty to Bill Untermeyer. He bet you'd come up with the dough first thing this morning and I bet him I wouldn't see it till the end of the week. If I ever did.' 'I pay my debts,' I said. 'Easy, now,' he said, and clapped me on the shoulder again, and I think that time I really did come close to popping his eyeballs out with my thumbs."

"How much interest did Pop charge you, Dad?"

His father looked at him sharply. "Does he let you call him that?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Watch out for him, then," Mr. Delevan said. "He's a snake."

Then he sighed, as if admitting to both of them that he was begging the question, and knew it. "Ten per cent. That's what the interest was."

"That's not so m—"

"Compounded weekly," Mr. Delevan added.

Kevin sat struck dumb for a moment. Then: "But that's not *legal!*"

“How true,” Mr. Delevan said dryly. He looked at the strained expression of incredulity on his son’s face and his own strained look broke. He laughed and clapped his son on the shoulder. “It’s only the world, Kev,” he said. “It kills us all in the end, anyhow.”

“But—”

“But nothing. That was the freight, and he knew I’d pay it. I knew they were hiring on the three-to-eleven shift at the mill over in Oxford. I told you I’d gotten myself ready to lose, and going to Pop wasn’t the only thing I did. I’d talked to your mother, said I might take a shift over there for awhile. After all, she’d been wanting a newer car, and maybe to move to a better apartment, and get a little something into the bank in case we had some kind of financial setback.”

He laughed.

“Well, the financial setback had happened, and she didn’t know it, and I meant to do my damndest to keep her from finding out. I didn’t know if I could or not, but I meant to do my damndest. She was dead set against it. She said I’d kill myself, working sixteen hours a day. She said those mills were dangerous, you were always reading about someone losing an arm or leg or even getting crushed to death under the rollers. I told her not to worry, I’d get a job in the sorting room, minimum wage but sit-down work, and if it really was too much, I’d give it up. She was still against it. She said she’d go to work herself, but I talked her out of *that*. That was the last thing I wanted, you know.”

Kevin nodded.

“I told her I’d quit six months, eight at the outside, anyway. So I went up and they hired me on, but not in the sorting room. I got a job in the rolling shed, feeding raw stock into a machine that looked like the wringer on a giant’s washing machine. It was dangerous work, all right; if you slipped or if your attention wandered—and it was hard to keep that from happening because it was so damned monotonous—you’d lose part of yourself or all of it. I saw a man lose his hand in a roller once and I never want to see anything like that again. It was like watching a charge of dynamite go off in a rubber glove stuffed with meat.”

“God-damn,” Kevin said. He had rarely said that in his father’s presence, but his father did not seem to notice.

“Anyway, I got two dollars and eighty cents an hour, and after two months they bumped me to three ten,” he said. “It was hell. I’d work on the road project all day long—at least it was early spring and not hot—and then race off to the mill, pushing that Chevy for all it was worth to keep from being late. I’d take off my khakis and just about jump into a pair of blue-jeans and a tee-shirt and work the rollers from three until eleven. I’d get home around midnight and the worst part was the nights when your mother waited up—which she did two or three nights a week—and I’d have to act cheery and full of pep when I could hardly walk a straight line, I was so tired. But if she’d seen that—”

“She would have made you stop.”

“Yes. She would. So I’d act bright and chipper and tell her funny stories about the sorting room where I wasn’t working and sometimes I’d wonder what would happen if she ever decided to drive up some night—to give me a hot dinner, or something like that. I did a pretty good job, but some of it must have showed, because she kept telling me I was silly to be knocking myself out for so little—and it really did seem like chicken-feed once the government dipped their beak and Pop dipped his. It seemed like just about what a fellow working in the sorting room for minimum wage would clear. They paid Wednesday afternoons, and I always made sure to cash my check in the office before the girls went home.

“Your mother never saw one of those checks.

“The first week I paid Pop fifty dollars—forty was interest, and ten was on the four hundred, which left three hundred and ninety owing. I was like a walking zombie. On the road I’d sit in my car at lunch, eat my sandwich, and then sleep until the foreman rang his goddamned bell. I *hated* that bell.

“I paid him fifty dollars the second week-thirty-nine was interest, eleven was on the principal—and I had it down to three hundred and seventy-nine dollars. I felt like a bird trying to eat a mountain one peck at a time.

“The third week I almost went into the roller myself, and it scared me so bad I woke up for a few minutes—enough to have an idea, anyway, so I guess it was a blessing in disguise. I had to give up smoking. I couldn’t understand why I hadn’t seen it before. In those days a pack of smokes cost forty cents. I smoked two packs a day. That was five dollars and sixty cents a week!

“We had a cigarette break every two hours and I looked at my pack of Tareytons and saw I had ten, maybe twelve. I made those cigarettes last a week and a half, and I never bought another pack.

“I spent a month not knowing if I could make it or not. There were days when the alarm went off at six o’clock and I knew I couldn’t, that I’d just have to tell Mary and take whatever she wanted to dish out. But by the time the second month started, I knew I was probably going to be all right. I think to this day it was the extra five sixty a week—that, and all the returnable beer and soda bottles I could pick up along the sides of the road—that made the difference. I had the principal down to three hundred, and that meant I could knock off twenty-five, twenty-six dollars a week from it, more as time went on.

“Then, in late April, we finished the road project and got a week off, with pay. I told Mary I was getting ready to quit my job at the mill and she said thank God, and I spent that week off from my regular job working all the hours I could get at the mill, because it was time and a half. I never had an accident. I saw them, saw men fresher and more awake than I was have them, but I never did. I don’t know why. At the end of that week I gave Pop Merrill a hundred dollars and gave my week’s notice at the paper mill. After that last week I had whittled the nut down enough so I could chip the rest off my regular pay-check without your mother noticing.”

He fetched a deep sigh.

“Now you know how I know Pop Merrill, and why I don’t trust him. I spent ten weeks in hell and he reaped the sweat off my forehead and my ass, too, in ten-dollar bills that he undoubtedly took out of that Crisco can or another one and passed on to some other sad sack who had got himself in the same kind of mess I did.”

“Boy, you must hate him.”

“No,” Mr. Delevan said, getting up. “I don’t hate him and I don’t hate myself. I got a fever, that’s all. It could have been worse. My marriage could have died of it, and you and Meg never would have been born, Kevin. Or I might have died of it myself. Pop Merrill was the cure. He was a *hard* cure, but he worked. What’s hard to forgive is *how* he worked. He took every damned cent and wrote it down in a book in a drawer under his cash register and looked at the circles under my eyes and the way my pants had gotten a way of hanging off my hip-bones and he said nothing.”

They walked toward the Emporium Galorium, which was painted the dusty faded yellow of signs left too long in country store windows, its false front both obvious and unapologetic. Next to it, Polly Chalmers was sweeping her walk and talking to Alan Pangborn, the county sheriff. She looked young and fresh with her hair pulled back in a horsetail; he looked young and heroic in his neatly pressed uniform. But things were not always the way they looked; even Kevin, at fifteen, knew that. Sheriff Pangborn had lost his wife and youngest son in a car accident that spring, and Kevin had heard that Ms. Chalmers, young or not, had a bad case of arthritis and might be crippled up with it before too many more years passed. Things were not always the way they looked. This thought caused him to glance toward the Emporium Galorium again ... and then to look down at his birthday camera, which he was carrying in his hand.

“He even did me a favor,” Mr. Delevan mused. “He got me to quit smoking. But I don’t trust him. Walk careful around him, Kevin. And no matter what, let me do the talking. I might know him a little better now.”

So they went into the dusty ticking silence, where Pop Merrill waited for them by the door, with his glasses propped on the bald dome of his head and a trick or two still up his sleeve.

## CHAPTER SIX

“Well, and here you are, father and son,” Pop said, giving them an admiring, grandfatherly smile. His eyes twinkled behind a haze of pipe-smoke and for a moment, although he was clean-shaven, Kevin thought Pop looked like Father Christmas. “You’ve got a fine boy, Mr. Delevan. *Fine.*”

“I know,” Mr. Delevan said. “I was upset when I heard he’d been dealing with you because I want him to stay that way.”

“That’s hard,” Pop said, with the faintest touch of reproach. “That’s hard comin from a man who when he had nowhere else to turn—”

“That’s over,” Mr. Delevan said.

“Ayuh, ayuh, that’s just what I mean to say.”

“But this isn’t.”

“It will be,” Pop said. He held a hand out to Kevin and Kevin gave him the Sun camera. “It will be today.” He held the camera up, turning it over in his hands. “This is a piece of work. What *kind* of piece I don’t know, but your boy wants to smash it because he thinks it’s dangerous. I think he’s right. But I told him, ‘You don’t want your daddy to think you’re a sissy, do you?’ That’s the only reason I had him ho you down here, John—”

“I liked ‘Mr. Delevan’ better.”

“All right,” Pop said, and sighed. “I can see you ain’t gonna warm up none and let bygones be bygones.”

“No.”

Kevin looked from one man to the other, his face distressed.

“Well, it don’t matter,” Pop said; both his voice and face went cold with remarkable suddenness, and he didn’t look like Father Christmas at all. “When I said the past is the past and what’s done is done, I meant it ... except when it affects what people do in the here and now. But I’m gonna say this, Mr. Delevan: I don’t bottom deal, and you know it.”

Pop delivered this magnificent lie with such flat coldness that both of them believed it; Mr. Delevan even felt a little ashamed of himself, as incredible as that was.

“Our business was our business. You told me what you wanted, I told you what I’d have to have in return, and you give it to me, and there was an end to it. This is another thing.” And then Pop told a lie even more magnificent, a lie which was simply too towering to be disbelieved. “I got no stake in this, Mr. Delevan. There is nothing I want but to help your boy. I like him.”

He smiled and Father Christmas was back so fast and strong that Kevin forgot he had ever been gone. Yet more than this: John Delevan, who had for months worked himself to the edge of exhaustion and perhaps even death between the rollers in order to pay the exorbitant price this man demanded to atone for a momentary lapse into insanity—John Delevan forgot that other expression, too.

Pop led them along the twisting aisles, through the smell of dead newsprint and past the tick-tock clocks, and he put the Sun 660 casually down on the worktable a little too near the edge (just as Kevin had done in his own house after taking that first picture) and then just went on toward the stairs at the back which led up to his little apartment. There was a dusty old mirror propped against the wall back there, and Pop looked into it, watching to see if the boy or his father would pick the camera up or move it further away from the edge. He didn’t think either would, but it was possible.

They spared it not so much as a passing glance and as Pop led them up the narrow stairway with the ancient eroded rubber treads he grinned in a way it would have been bad business for anyone to see and thought, *Damn, I’m good!*

He opened the door and they went into the apartment.

Neither John nor Kevin Delevan had ever been in Pop’s private quarters, and John knew of no one who had. In a way this was not surprising; no one was ever going to nominate Pop as the town’s

number-one citizen. John thought it was not *impossible* that the old fuck had a friend or two—the world never exhausted its oddities, it seemed—but if so, he didn't know who they were.

And Kevin spared a fleeting thought for Mr. Baker, his favorite teacher. He wondered if, perchance, Mr. Baker had ever gotten into the sort of crack he'd need a fellow like Pop to get him out of. This seemed as unlikely to him as the idea of Pop having friends seemed to his father ... but then, an hour ago the idea that his own father—

Well. It was best let go, perhaps.

Pop *did* have a friend (or at least an acquaintance) or two, but he didn't bring them here. He didn't want to. It was his place, and it came closer to revealing his true nature than he wanted anyone to see. It struggled to be neat and couldn't get there. The wallpaper was marked with water-stains; they weren't glaring, but stealthy and brown, like the phantom thoughts that trouble anxious minds. There were crusty dishes in the old-fashioned deep sink, and although the table was clean and the lid on the plastic waste-can was shut, there was an odor of sardines and something else—unwashed feet, maybe—which was almost not there. An odor as stealthy as the water-stains on the wallpaper.

The living room was tiny. Here the smell was not of sardines and (maybe) feet but of old pipe-smoke. Two windows looked out on nothing more scenic than the alley that ran behind Mulberry Street, and while their panes showed some signs of having been washed—at least swiped at occasionally—the corners were bleared and greasy with years of condensed smoke. The whole place had an air of nasty things swept under the faded hooked rugs and hidden beneath the old-fashioned, overstuffed easy-chair and sofa. Both of these articles were light green, and your eye wanted to tell you they matched but couldn't, because they didn't. Not quite.

The only new things in the room were a large Mitsubishi television with a twenty-five-inch screen and a VCR on the endtable beside it. To the left of the endtable was a rack which caught Kevin's eye because it was totally empty. Pop had thought it best to put the better than seventy fuck-movies he owned in the closet for the time being.

One video cassette rested on top of the television in an unmarked case.

“Sit down,” Pop said, gesturing at the lumpy couch. He went over to the TV and slipped the cassette out of its case.

Mr. Delevan looked at the couch with a momentary expression of doubt, as if he thought it might have bugs, and then sat down gingerly. Kevin sat beside him. The fear was back, stronger than ever.

Pop turned on the VCR, slid the cassette in, and then pushed the carriage down. “I know a fellow up the city,” he began (to residents of Castle Rock and its neighboring towns, “up the city” always meant Lewiston), “who’s run a camera store for twenty years or so. He got into this VCR business as soon as it started up, said it was going to be the wave of the future. He wanted me to go halves with him, but I thought he was nuts. Well, I was wrong on that one, is what I mean to say, but—”

“Get to the point,” Kevin’s father said.

“I’m tryin’,” Pop said, wide-eyed and injured. “If you’ll let me.”

Kevin pushed his elbow gently against his father’s side, and Mr. Delevan said no more.

“Anyway, a couple of years ago he found out rentin tapes for folks to watch wasn’t the only way to make money with these gadgets. If you was willin to lay out as little as eight hundred bucks, you could take people’s movies and snapshots and put em on a tape for em. Lots easier to watch.”

Kevin made a little involuntary noise and Pop smiled and nodded.

“Ayuh. You took fifty-eight pitchers with that camera of yours, and we all saw each one was a little different than the last one, and I guess we knew what it meant, but I wanted to see for myself. You don’t have to be from Missouri to say show me, is what I mean to say.”

“You tried to make a movie out of those snapshots?” Mr. Delevan asked.

“Didn’t *try*,” Pop said. “*Did*. Or rather, the fella I know up the city did. But it was my idea.”

“Is it a movie?” Kevin asked. He understood what Pop had done, and part of him was even chagrined that he hadn’t thought of it himself, but mostly he was awash in wonder (and delight) at the idea.

“Look for yourself,” Pop said, and turned on the TV. “Fifty-eight pitchers. When this fella does snapshots for folks, he generally videotapes each one for five seconds—long enough to get a good look, he says, but not long enough to get bored before you go on to the next one. I told him I wanted each of these on for just a single second, and to run them right together with no fades.”

Kevin remembered a game he used to play in grade school when he had finished some lesson and had free time before the next one began. He had a little dime pad of paper which was called a Rain-Bo Skool Pad because there would be thirty pages of little yellow sheets, then thirty pages of little pink sheets, then thirty pages of green, and so on. To play the game, you went to the very last page and at the bottom you drew a stick-man wearing baggy shorts and holding his arms out. On the next page you drew the same stick-man in the same place and wearing the same baggy shorts, only this time you drew his arms further up ... but just a little bit. You did that on every page until the arms came together over the stick-man’s head. Then, if you still had time, you went on drawing the stick-man, but now with the arms going down. And if you flipped the pages very fast when you were done, you had a crude sort of cartoon which showed a boxer celebrating a KO: he raised his hands over his head, clasped them, shook them, lowered them.

He shivered. His father looked at him. Kevin shook his head and murmured, “Nothing.”

“So what I mean to say is the tape only runs about a minute,” Pop said. “You got to look close. Ready?”

*No*, Kevin thought.

“I guess so,” Mr. Delevan said. He was still trying to sound grumpy and put-out, but Kevin could tell he had gotten interested in spite of himself.

“Okay,” Pop Merrill said, and pushed the PLAY button.

Kevin told himself over and over again that it was stupid to feel scared. He told himself this and it didn't do a single bit of good.

He knew what he was going to see, because he and Meg had both noticed the Sun was doing something besides simply reproducing the same image over and over, like a photocopier; it did not take long for them to realize that the photographs were expressing movement from one to the next.

"Look," Meg had said. "The dog's moving!"

Instead of responding with one of the friendly-but-irritating wisecracks he usually reserved for his little sister, Kevin had said, "It does look like it ... but you can't tell for sure, Meg."

"Yes, you can," she said. They were in his room, where he had been morosely looking at the camera. It sat on the middle of his desk with his new schoolbooks, which he had been meaning to cover, pushed to one side. Meg had bent the goose-neck of his study-lamp so it shone a bright circle of light on the middle of his desk blotter. She moved the camera aside and put the first picture—the one with the dab of cake-frosting on it—in the center of the light. "Count the fence-posts between the dog's behind and the righthand edge of the picture," she said.

"Those are pickets, not fence-posts," he told her. "Like what you do when your nose goes on strike."

"Ha-ha. Count them."

He did. He could see four, and part of a fifth, although the dog's scraggly hindquarters obscured most of that one.

"Now look at this one."

She put the fourth Polaroid in front of him. Now he could see all of the fifth picket, and part of the sixth.

So he knew—or believed—he was going to see a cross between a very old cartoon and one of those "flip-books" he used to make in grammar school when the time weighed heavy on his hands.

The last twenty-five seconds of the tape were indeed like that, although, Kevin thought, the flip-books he had drawn in the second

grade were really better ... the perceived action of the boxer raising and lowering his hands smoother. In the last twenty-five seconds of the videotape the action moved in rams and jerks which made the old Keystone Kops silent films look like marvels of modern filmmaking in comparison.

Still, the key word was *action*, and it held all of them—even Pop—spellbound. They watched the minute of footage three times without saying a word. There was no sound but breathing: Kevin's fast and smooth through his nose, his father's deeper, Pop's a phlegmy rattle in his narrow chest.

And the first thirty seconds or so ...

He had expected action, he supposed; there was action in the flip-books, and there was action in the Saturday-morning cartoons, which were just a slightly more sophisticated version of the flip-books, but what he had not expected was that for the first thirty seconds of the tape it wasn't like watching notebook pages rapidly thumbed or even a primitive cartoon like *Possible Possum* on TV: for thirty seconds (twenty-eight, anyway), his single Polaroid photographs looked eerily like a real movie. Not a Hollywood movie, of course, not even a low-budget horror movie of the sort Megan sometimes pestered him to rent for their own VCR when their mother and father went out for the evening; it was more like a snippet of home movie made by someone who has just gotten an eight-millimeter camera and doesn't know how to use it very well yet.

In those first twenty-eight seconds, the black no-breed dog walked with barely perceptible jerks along the fence, exposing five, six, seven pickets; it even paused to sniff a second time at one of them, apparently reading another of those canine telegrams. Then it walked on, head down and toward the fence, hindquarters switched out toward the camera. And, halfway through this first part, Kevin noted something else he hadn't seen before: the photographer had apparently swung his camera to keep the dog in the frame. If he (or she) hadn't done so, the dog would have simply walked out of the picture, leaving nothing to look at but the fence. The pickets at the far right of the first two or three photographs disappeared beyond the righthand border of the picture and new pickets appeared at the left.

You could tell, because the tip of one of those two rightmost pickets had been broken off. Now it was no longer in the frame.

The dog started to sniff again ... and then its head came up. Its good ear stiffened; the one which had been slashed and laid limp in some long-ago fight tried to do the same. There was no sound, but Kevin felt with a certainty beyond repudiation that the dog had begun to growl. The dog had sensed something or someone. What or who?

Kevin looked at the shadow they had at first dismissed as the branch of a tree or maybe a phone-pole and knew.

Its head began to turn ... and that was when the second half of this strange "film" began, thirty seconds of snap-jerk action that made your head ache and your eyeballs hot. Pop had had a hunch, Kevin thought, or maybe he had even read about something like this before. Either way, it had proved out and was too obvious to need stating. With the pictures taken quite closely together, if not exactly one after another, the action in the makeshift "movie" almost flowed. Not quite, but almost. But when the time between photographs was spaced, what they were watching became something that nauseated your eye because it wanted to see either a moving picture or a series of still photographs and instead it saw both and neither.

Time was passing in that flat Polaroid world. Not at the same speed it passed in this

*(real?)*

one, or the sun would have come up (or gone down) over there three times already and whatever the dog was going to do would be done (if it *had* something to do), and if it did not, it would just be gone and there would be only the moveless and seemingly eternal eroded picket fence guarding the listless patch of lawn, but it *was* passing.

The dog's head was coming around to face the photographer, owner of the shadow, like the head of a dog in the grip of a fit: at one moment the face and even the shape of the head was obscured by that floppy ear; then you saw one black-brown eye enclosed by a round and somehow mucky corona that made Kevin think of a spoiled egg-white; then you saw half the muzzle with the lips appearing slightly wrinkled, as if the dog were getting ready to bark or growl; and last of all you saw three-quarters of a face somehow

more awful than the face of any mere dog had a right to be, even a mean one. The white spackles along its muzzle suggested it was no longer young. At the very end of the tape you saw the dog's lips were indeed pulling back. There was one blink of white Kevin thought was a tooth. He didn't see that until the third run-through. It was the eye that held him. It was homicidal. This breedless dog almost screamed rogue. And it was nameless; he knew that, as well. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that no Polaroid man or Polaroid woman or Polaroid child had ever named that Polaroid dog; it was a stray, born stray, raised stray, grown old and mean stray, the avatar of all the dogs who had ever wandered the world, unnamed and un-homed, killing chickens, eating garbage out of the cans they had long since learned to knock over, sleeping in culverts and beneath the porches of deserted houses. Its wits would be dim, but its instincts would be sharp and red. It—

When Pop Merrill spoke, Kevin was so deeply and fundamentally startled out of his thoughts that he nearly screamed.

"The man who took those pictures," he said. "If there was a person, is what I mean to say. What do you suppose happened to *him*?"

Pop had frozen the last frame with his remote control. A line of static ran through the picture. Kevin wished it ran through the dog's eye, but the line was below it. That eye stared out at them, baleful, stupidly murderous—no, not stupidly, not entirely, that was what made it not merely frightening but terrifying—and no one needed to answer Pop's question. You needed no more pictures to understand what was going to happen next. The dog had perhaps heard something: of course it had, and Kevin knew what. It had heard that squidgy little whine.

Further pictures would show it continuing to turn, and then beginning to fill more and more of each frame until there was nothing to see but dog—no listless patchy lawn, no fence, no sidewalk, no shadow. Just the dog.

Who meant to attack.

Who meant to kill, if it could.

Kevin's dry voice seemed to be coming from someone else. "I don't think it likes getting its picture taken," he said.

Pop's short laugh was like a bunch of dry twigs broken over a knee for kindling.

"Rewind it," Mr. Delevan said.

"You want to see the whole thing again?" Pop asked.

"No—just the last ten seconds or so."

Pop used the remote control to go back, then ran it again. The dog turned its head, as jerky as a robot which is old and running down but still dangerous, and Kevin wanted to tell them, *Stop now. Just stop. That's enough. Just stop and let's break the camera.* Because there was something else, wasn't there? Something he didn't want to think about but soon would, like it or not; he could feel it breaching in his mind like the broad back of a whale.

"Once more," Mr. Delevan said. "Frame by frame this time. Can you do that?"

"Ayuh," Pop said. "Goddam machine does everything but the laundry."

This time one frame, one picture, at a time. It was not like a robot now, or not exactly, but like some weird clock, something that belonged with Pop's other specimens downstairs. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. The head coming around. Soon they would be faced by that merciless, not-quite-idiotic eye again.

"What's that?" Mr. Delevan asked.

"What's what?" Pop asked, as if he didn't know it was the thing the boy hadn't wanted to talk about the other day, the thing, he was convinced, that had made up the boy's mind about destroying the camera once and for all.

"Underneath its neck," Mr. Delevan said, and pointed. "It's not wearing a collar or a tag, but it's got something around its neck on a string or a thin rope."

"I dunno," Pop said imperturbably. "Maybe your boy does. Young folks have sharper eyes than us old fellas."

Mr. Delevan turned to look at Kevin. "Can you make it out?"

"I—" He fell silent. "It's really small."

His mind returned to what his father had said when they were leaving the house. *If she never asks you, you never have to tell her.... That's just the way we do things in the grown-up world.* Just now he had asked Kevin if he could make out what that thing under the dog's neck was. Kevin hadn't really answered that question; he had said something else altogether. *It's really small.* And it was. The fact that he knew what it was in spite of that... well ...

What had his father called it? Skating up to the edge of a lie?

And he *couldn't* actually see it. Not *actually*. Just the same, he knew. The eye only suggested; the heart understood. Just as his heart understood that, if he was right, the camera must be destroyed. Must be.

At that moment, Pop Merrill was suddenly struck by an agreeable inspiration. He got up and snapped off the TV. "I've got the pitchers downstairs," he said. "Brought em back with the videotape. I seen that thing m'self, and ran my magnifying glass over it, but still couldn't tell ... but it does look familiar, God cuss it. Just let me go get the pitchers and m'glass."

"We might as well go down with you," Kevin said, which was the last thing in the world Pop wanted, but then Delevan stepped in, God bless him, and said he might like to look at the tape again after they looked at the last couple of pictures under the magnifying glass.

"Won't take a minute," Pop said, and was gone, sprightly as a bird hopping from twig to twig on an apple tree, before either of them could have protested, if either had had a mind to.

Kevin did not. That thought had finally breached its monstrous back in his mind, and, like it or not, he was forced to contemplate it.

It was simple, as a whale's back is simple—at least to the eye of one who does not study whales for a living—and it was colossal in the same way.

It wasn't an idea but a simple certainty. It had to do with that odd flatness Polaroids always seemed to have, with the way they showed you things only in two dimensions, although all photographs did that; it was that other photographs seemed to at least *suggest* a third dimension, even those taken with a simple Kodak 110.

The things in his photographs, photographs which showed things he had never seen through the Sun's viewfinder or anywhere else, for that matter, were that same way: flatly, unapologetically two-dimensional.

Except for the dog.

The dog wasn't *flat*. The dog wasn't meaningless, a thing you could recognize but which had no emotional impact. The dog not only seemed to suggest three dimensions but to really have them, the way a hologram seems to really have them, or one of those 3-D movies where you had to wear special glasses to reconcile the double images.

*It's not a Polaroid dog, Kevin thought, and it doesn't belong in the world Polaroids take pictures of. That's crazy, I know it is, but I also know it's true. So what does it mean? Why is my camera taking pictures of it over and over . . . and what Polaroid man or Polaroid woman is snapping pictures of it? Does he or she even see it? If it is a three-dimensional dog in a two-dimensional world, maybe he or she doesn't see it ... can't see it. They say for us time is the fourth dimension, and we know it's there, but we can't see it. We can't even really feel it pass, although sometimes, especially when we're bored, I guess, it seems like we can.*

But when you got right down to it, all that might not even matter, and the questions were far too tough for him, anyway. There were other questions that seemed more important to him, vital questions, maybe even mortal ones.

Like why was the dog in his camera?

Did it want something of *him*, or just of anybody? At first he had thought the answer was anybody, anybody would do because anybody could take pictures of it and the movement always advanced. But the thing around its neck, that thing that wasn't a collar ... that had to do with him, Kevin Delevan, and nobody else. Did it want to do something to him? If the answer to *that* question was yes, you could forget all the other ones, because it was pretty goddamned obvious what the dog wanted to do. It was in its murky eye, in the snarl you could just see beginning. He thought it wanted two things.

First to escape.

Then to kill.

*There's a man or woman over there with a camera who maybe doesn't even see that dog, Kevin thought, and if the photographer can't see the dog, maybe the dog can't see the photographer, and so the photographer is safe. But if the dog really is three-dimensional, maybe he sees out—maybe he sees whoever is using my camera. Maybe it's still not me, or not specifically me; maybe whoever is using the camera is its target.*

Still—the thing it was wearing around its neck. What about that?

He thought of the cur's dark eyes, saved from stupidity by a single malevolent spark. God knew how the dog had gotten into that Polaroid world in the first place, but when its picture was taken, it could see out, and it wanted to get out, and Kevin believed in his heart that it wanted to kill him first, the thing it was wearing around its neck *said* it wanted to kill him first, *proclaimed* that it wanted to kill him first, but after that?

Why, after Kevin, anyone would do.

Anyone at all.

In a way it was like another game you played when you were a little kid, wasn't it? It was like Giant Step. The dog had been walking along the fence. The dog had heard the Polaroid, that squidgy little whine. It turned, and saw ... what? Its own world or universe? A world or universe enough like its own so it saw or sensed it could or at least might be able to live and hunt here? It didn't matter. Now, every time someone took a picture of it, the dog would get closer. It would get closer and closer until ... well, until what? Until it burst through, somehow?

"That's stupid," he muttered. "It'd never fit."

"What?" his father asked, roused from his own musings.

"Nothing," Kevin said. "I was just talking to myse—"

Then, from downstairs, muffled but audible, they heard Pop Merrill cry out in mingled dismay, irritation, and surprise: "Well shit fire and save matches! *Goddammit!*"

Kevin and his father looked at each other, startled.

“Let’s go see what happened,” his father said, and got up. “I hope he didn’t fall down and break his arm, or something. I mean, part of me does hope it, but ... you know.”

Kevin thought: *What if he’s been taking pictures? What if that dog’s down there?*

It hadn’t sounded like fear in the old man’s voice, and of course there really was no way a dog that looked as big as a medium-sized German shepherd could come through either a camera the size of the Sun 660 or one of the prints it made. You might as well try to drag a washing machine through a knothole.

Still, he felt fear enough for both of them—for all three of them—as he followed his father back down the stairs to the gloomy bazaar below.

Going down the stairs, Pop Merrill was as happy as a clam at high tide.

He had been prepared to make the switch right in front of them if he had to. Might have been a problem if it had just been the boy, who was still a year or so away from thinking he knew everything, but the boy’s dad—ah, fooling that fine fellow would have been like stealing a bottle from a baby. Had he told the boy about the jam he’d gotten into that time? From the way the boy looked at him—a new, cautious way—Pop thought Delevan probably had. And what else had the father told the son? Well, let’s see. *Does he let you call him Pop? That means he’s planning to pull a fast one on you.* That was for starters. *He’s a lowdown snake in the grass, son.* That was for seconds. And, of course, there was the prize of them all: *Let me do the talking, boy. I know him better than you do. You just let me handle everything.* Men like Delevan were to Pop Merrill what a nice platter of fried chicken was to some folks—tender, tasty, juicy, and all but falling off the bone. Once Delevan had been little more than a kid himself, and he would never fully understand that it wasn’t Pop who had stuck his tit in the wringer but he himself. The man could have gone to his wife and she would have tapped that old biddy aunt of

hers whose tight little ass was lined with hundred-dollar bills, and Delevan would have spent some time in the doghouse, but she would have let him out in time. He not only hadn't seen it that way; he hadn't seen it at all. And now, for no reason but idiot time, which came and went without any help from anyone, he thought he knew all there was to know about Reginald Marion Merrill.

Which was just the way Pop liked it.

Why, he could have swapped one camera for the other right in front of the man and Delevan never would have seen a goddamned thing—that was how sure he was he had old Pop figured out.

But this was better.

You never ever asked Lady Luck for a date; she had a way of standing men up just when they needed her the most. But if she showed up on her own ... well, it was wise to drop whatever it was you were doing and take her out and wine her and dine her just as lavishly as you could. That was one bitch who always put out if you treated her right.

So he went quickly to the worktable, bent, and extracted the Polaroid 660 with the broken lens from the shadows underneath. He put it on the table, fished a key-ring from his pocket (with one quick glance over his shoulder to be sure neither of them had decided to come down after all), and selected the small key which opened the locked drawer that formed the entire left side of the table. In this deep drawer were a number of gold Krugerrands; a stamp album in which the least valuable stamp was worth six hundred dollars in the latest *Scott Stamp Catalogue*; a coin collection worth approximately nineteen thousand dollars; two dozen glossy photographs of a bleary-eyed woman having sexual congress with a Shetland pony; and an amount of cash totalling just over two thousand dollars.

The cash, which he stowed in a variety of tin cans, was Pop's loan-out money. John Delevan would have recognized the bills. They were all crumpled tens.

Pop deposited Kevin's Sun 660 in this drawer, locked it, and put his key-ring back in his pocket. Then he pushed the camera with the broken lens off the edge of the worktable (again) and cried out "Well

shit fire and save matches! *Goddammit!*" loud enough for them to hear.

Then he arranged his face in the proper expression of dismay and chagrin and waited for them to come running to see what had happened.

"Pop?" Kevin cried. "Mr. Merrill? Are you okay?"

"Ayuh," he said. "Didn't hurt nothin but my goddam pride. That camera's just bad luck, I guess. I bent over to open the tool-drawer, is what I mean to say, and I knocked the fucking thing right off onto the floor. Only I guess it didn't come through s'well this time. I dunno if I should say I'm sorry or not. I mean, you was gonna—"

He held the camera apologetically out to Kevin, who took it, looked at the broken lens and shattered plastic of the housing around it. "No, it's okay," Kevin told him, turning the camera over in his hands—but he did not handle it in the same gingerly, tentative way he had before: as if it might really be constructed not of plastic and glass but some sort of explosive. "I meant to bust it up, anyhow."

"Guess I saved you the trouble."

"I'd feel better—" Kevin began.

"Ayuh, ayuh. I feel the same way about mice. Laugh if you want to, but when I catch one in a trap and it's dead, I beat it with a broom anyway. Just to be sure, is what I mean to say."

Kevin smiled faintly, then looked at his father. "He said he's got a chopping block out back, Dad—"

"Got a pretty good sledge in the shed, too, if ain't nobody took it."

"Do you mind, Dad?"

"It's your camera, Kev," Delevan said. He flicked a distrustful glance at Pop, but it was a glance that said he distrusted Pop on general principles, and not for any specific reason. "But if it will make you feel any better, I think it's the right decision."

"Good," Kevin said. He felt a tremendous weight go off his shoulders—no, it was from his *heart* that the weight was lifted. With the lens broken, the camera was surely useless ... but he wouldn't feel really at ease until he saw it in fragments around Pop's chopping block. He turned it over in his hands, front to back and back to front,

amused and amazed at how much he liked the broken way it looked and felt.

“I think I owe you the cost of that camera, Delevan,” Pop said, knowing exactly how the man would respond.

“No,” Delevan said. “Let’s smash it and forget this whole crazy thing ever hap—” He paused. “I almost forgot—we were going to look at those last few photos under your magnifying glass. I wanted to see if I could make out the thing the dog’s wearing. I keep thinking it looks familiar.”

“We can do that after we get rid of the camera, can’t we?” Kevin asked. “Okay, Dad?”

“Sure.”

“And then,” Pop said, “it might not be such a bad idear to burn the pitchers themselves. You could do it right in my stove.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Kevin said. “What do you think, Dad?”

“I think Mrs. Merrill never raised any fools,” his father said.

“Well,” Pop said, smiling enigmatically from behind folds of rising blue smoke, “there was five of us, you know.”

The day had been bright blue when Kevin and his father walked down to the Emporium Galorium; a perfect autumn day. Now it was four-thirty, the sky had mostly clouded over, and it looked like it might rain before dark. The first real chill of the fall touched Kevin’s hands. It would chap them red if he stayed out long enough, but he had no plans to. His mom would be home in half an hour, and already he wondered what she would say when she saw Dad was with him, and what his dad would say.

But that was for later.

Kevin set the Sun 660 on the chopping block in the little backyard, and Pop Merrill handed him a sledgehammer. The haft was worn smooth with usage. The head was rusty, as if someone had left it carelessly out in the rain not once or twice but many times. Yet it would do the job, all right. Kevin had no doubt of that. The Polaroid, its lens broken and most of the housing around it shattered as well,

looked fragile and defenseless sitting there on the block's chipped, chunked, and splintered surface, where you expected to see a length of ash or maple waiting to be split in two.

Kevin set his hands on the sledgehammer's smooth handle and tightened them.

"You're sure, son?" Mr. Delevan asked.

"Yes."

"Okay." Kevin's father glanced at his own watch. "Do it, then."

Pop stood to one side with his pipe clamped between his wretched teeth, hands in his back pockets. He looked shrewdly from the boy to the man and then back to the boy, but said nothing.

Kevin lifted the sledgehammer and, suddenly surprised by an anger at the camera he hadn't even known he felt, he brought it down with all the force he could muster.

*Too hard, he thought. You're going to miss it, be lucky not to mash your own foot, and there it will sit, not much more than a piece of hollow plastic a little kid could stomp flat without half trying, and even if you're lucky enough to miss your foot, Pop will look at you. He won't say anything: he won't have to. It'll all be in the way he looks at you.*

*And thought also: It doesn't matter if I hit it or not. It's magic, some kind of magic camera, and you can't break it. Even if you hit it dead on the money the sledge will just bounce off it, like bullets off Superman's chest.*

But then there was no more time to think anything, because the sledge connected squarely with the camera. Kevin really had swung much too hard to maintain anything resembling control, but he got lucky. And the sledgehammer didn't just bounce back up, maybe hitting Kevin square between the eyes and killing him, like the final twist in a horror story.

The Sun didn't so much shatter as detonate. Black plastic flew everywhere. A long rectangle with a shiny black square at one end—a picture which would never be taken, Kevin supposed—fluttered to the bare ground beside the chopping block and lay there, face down.

There was a moment of silence so complete they could hear not only the cars on Lower Main Street but kids playing tag half a block

away in the parking lot behind Wardell's Country Store, which had gone bankrupt two years before and had stood vacant ever since.

"Well, that's *that*," Pop said. "You swung that sledge just like Paul Bunyan, Kevin! I should smile n kiss a pig if you didn't."

"No need to do that," he said, now addressing Mr. Delevan, who was picking up broken chunks of plastic as prissily as a man picking up the pieces of a glass he has accidentally knocked to the floor and shattered. "I have a boy comes in and cleans up the yard every week or two. I know it don't look like much as it is, but if I didn't have that kid ... Glory!"

"Then maybe we ought to use your magnifying glass and take a look at those pictures," Mr. Delevan said, standing up. He dropped the few pieces of plastic he had picked up into a rusty incinerator that stood nearby and then brushed off his hands.

"Fine by me," Pop said.

"Then burn them," Kevin reminded. "Don't forget that."

"I didn't," Pop said. "I'll feel better when they're gone, too."

"Jesus!" John Delevan said. He was bending over Pop Merrill's worktable, looking through the lighted magnifying glass at the second-to-last photograph. It was the one in which the object around the dog's neck showed most clearly; in the last photo, the object had swung back in the other direction again. "Kevin, look at that and tell me if it's what I think it is."

Kevin took the magnifying glass and looked. He had known, of course, but even so it still wasn't a look just for form's sake. Clyde Tombaugh must have looked at an actual photograph of the planet Pluto for the first time with the same fascination. Tombaugh had known it was there; calculations showing similar distortions in the orbital paths of Neptune and Uranus had made Pluto not just a possibility but a necessity. Still, to *know* a thing was there, even to know what it was ... that did not detract from the fascination of actually seeing it for the first time.

He let go of the switch and handed the glass back to Pop. “Yeah,” he said to his father. “It’s what you think it is.” His voice was as flat as ... as flat as the things in that Polaroid world, he supposed, and he felt an urge to laugh. He kept the sound inside, not because it would have been inappropriate to laugh (although he supposed it would have been) but because the sound would have come out sounding ... well... flat.

Pop waited and when it became clear to him they were going to need a nudge, he said: “Well, don’t keep me hoppin from one foot to the other! What the hell is it?”

Kevin had felt reluctant to tell him before, and he felt reluctant now. There was no reason for it, but—

*Stop being so goddamned dumb! He helped you when you needed helping, no matter how he earns his dough. Tell him and burn the pictures and let’s get out of here before all those clocks start striking five.*

Yes. If he was around when that happened, he thought it would be the final touch; he would just go completely bananas and they could cart him away to Juniper Hill, raving about real dogs in Polaroid worlds and cameras that took the same picture over and over again except not quite.

“The Polaroid camera was a birthday present,” he heard himself saying in that same dry voice. “What it’s wearing around its neck was another one.”

Pop slowly pushed his glasses up onto his bald head and squinted at Kevin. “I don’t guess I’m followin you, son.”

“I have an aunt,” Kevin said. “Actually she’s my great-aunt, but we’re not supposed to call her that, because she says it makes her feel old. Aunt Hilda. Anyway, Aunt Hilda’s husband left her a lot of money—my mom says she’s worth over a million dollars—but she’s a tightwad.”

He stopped, leaving his father space to protest, but his father only smiled sourly and nodded. Pop Merrill, who knew all about that situation (there was not, in truth, much in Castle Rock and the surrounding areas Pop didn’t know at least something about), simply held his peace and waited for the boy to get around to spilling it.

“She comes and spends Christmas with us once every three years, and that’s about the only time we go to church, because she goes to church. We have lots of broccoli when Aunt Hilda comes. None of us like it, and it just about makes my sister puke, but Aunt Hilda likes broccoli a lot, so we have it. There was a book on our summer reading list, *Great Expectations*, and there was a lady in it who was just like Aunt Hilda. She got her kicks dangling her money in front of her relatives. Her name was Miss Havisham, and when Miss Havisham said frog, people jumped. We jump, and I *guess the rest of our family does, too.*”

“Oh, your Uncle Randy makes your mother look like a piker,” Mr. Delevan said unexpectedly. Kevin thought his dad meant it to sound amused in a cynical sort of way, but what came through was a deep, acidic bitterness. “When Aunt Hilda says frog in Randy’s house, they all just about turn cartwheels over the roofbeams.”

“Anyway,” Kevin told Pop, “she sends me the same thing for my birthday every year. I mean, each one is different, but each one’s really the same.”

“What is it she sends you, boy?”

“A string tie,” Kevin said. “Like the kind you see guys wearing in old-time country-music bands. It has something different on the clasp every year, but it’s always a string tie.”

Pop snatched the magnifying glass and bent over the picture with it. “Stone the crows!” he said, straightening up. “A string tie! That’s just what it is! Now how come I didn’t see that?”

“Because it isn’t the sort of thing a dog would wear around his neck, I guess,” Kevin said in that same wooden voice. They had been here for only forty-five minutes or so, but he felt as if he had aged another fifteen years. *The thing to remember, his mind told him over and over, is that the camera is gone. It’s nothing but splinters. Never mind all the King’s horses and all the King’s men; not even all the guys who work making cameras at the Polaroid factory in Schenectady could put that baby back together again.*

Yes, and thank God. Because this was the end of the line. As far as Kevin was concerned, if he never encountered the *supernatural*

again until he was eighty, never so much as brushed up against it, it would still be too soon.

“Also, it’s very small,” Mr. Delevan pointed out. “I was there when Kevin took it out of the box, and we all knew what it was going to be. The only mystery was what would be on the clasp this year. We joked about it.”

“What is on the clasp?” Pop asked, peering into the photograph again ... or peering at it, anyway: Kevin would testify in any court in the land that peering *into* a Polaroid was simply impossible.

“A bird,” Kevin said. “I’m pretty sure it’s a woodpecker. And that’s what the dog in the picture is wearing around its neck. A string tie with a woodpecker on the clasp.”

“Jesus!” Pop said. He was in his own quiet way one of the world’s finer actors, but there was no need to simulate the surprise he felt now.

Mr. Delevan abruptly swept all the Polaroids together. “Let’s put these goddam things in the woodstove,” he said.

When Kevin and his father got home, it was ten minutes past five and starting to drizzle. Mrs. Delevan’s two-year-old Toyota was not in the driveway, but she had been and gone. There was a note from her on the kitchen table, held down by the salt and pepper shakers. When Kevin unfolded the note, a ten-dollar bill fell out.

Dear Kevin,

At the bridge game Jane Doyon asked if Meg and I would like to have dinner with her at Bonanza as her husband is off to Pittsburgh on business and she’s knocking around the house alone. I said we’d be delighted. Meg especially. You know how much she likes to be “one of the girls”! Hope you don’t mind eating in “solitary splendor.” Why not order a pizza & some soda for yourself, and your father can order for himself when he gets home. He doesn’t like reheated pizza & you know he’ll want a couple of beers.

Luv you,

Mom

They looked at each other, both saying *Well, there's one thing we don't have to worry about* without having to say it out loud. Apparently neither she nor Meg had noticed that Mr. Delevan's car was still in the garage.

"Do you want me to—" Kevin began, but there was no need to finish because his father cut across him: "Yes. Check. Right now."

Kevin went up the stairs by twos and into his room. He had a bureau and a desk. The bottom desk drawer was full of what Kevin simply thought of as "stuff": things it would have seemed somehow criminal to throw away, although he had no real use for any of them. There was his grandfather's pocket-watch, heavy, scrolled, magnificent ... and so badly rusted that the jeweler in Lewiston he and his mother had brought it to only took one look, shook his head, and pushed it back across the counter. There were two sets of matching cufflinks and two orphans, a *Penthouse* gatefold, a paperback book called *Gross Jokes*, and a Sony Walkman which had for some reason developed a habit of eating the tapes it was supposed to play. It was just stuff, that was all. There was no other word that fit.

Part of the stuff, of course, was the thirteen string ties Aunt Hilda had sent him for his last thirteen birthdays.

He took them out one by one, counted, came up with twelve instead of thirteen, rooted through the stuff-drawer again, then counted again. Still twelve.

"Not there?"

Kevin, who had been squatting, cried out and leaped to his feet.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Delevan said from the doorway. "That was dumb."

"That's okay," Kevin said. He wondered briefly how fast a person's heart could beat before the person in question simply blew his engine. "I'm just ... on edge. Stupid."

"It's not." His father looked at him soberly. "When I saw that tape, I got so scared I felt like maybe I'd have to reach into my mouth and push my stomach back down with my fingers."

Kevin looked at his father gratefully.

"It's not there, is it?" Mr. Delevan asked. "The one with the woodpecker or whatever in hell it was supposed to be?"

"No. It's not."

"Did you keep the camera in that drawer?"

Kevin nodded his head slowly. "Pop—Mr. Merrill—said to let it rest every so often. That was part of the schedule he made out."

Something tugged briefly at his mind, was gone.

"So I stuck it in there."

"Boy," Mr. Delevan said softly.

"Yeah."

They looked at each other in the gloom, and then suddenly Kevin smiled. It was like watching the sun burst through a raft of clouds.

"What?"

"I was remembering how it felt," Kevin said. "I swung that sledgehammer so hard—"

Mr. Delevan began to smile, too. "I thought you were going to take off your own damned—"

"—and when it hit it made this CRUNCH! sound—"

"—flew every damn whichway—"

"BOOM!" Kevin finished. "Gone!"

They began to laugh together in Kevin's room, and Kevin found he was almost—*almost*—glad all this had happened. The sense of relief was as inexpressible and yet as perfect as the sensation one feels when, either by happy accident or by some psychic guidance, another person manages to scratch that one itchy place on one's back that one cannot scratch oneself, hitting it exactly, bang on the money, making it wonderfully worse for a single second by the simple touch, pressure, arrival, of those fingers ... and then, oh blessed relief.

It was like that with the camera and with his father's knowing.

"It's gone," Kevin said. "Isn't it?"

"As gone as Hiroshima after the *Enola Gay* dropped the A-bomb on it," Mr. Delevan replied, and then added: "Smashed to shit, is what I mean to say."

Kevin gawped at his father and then burst into helpless peals—screams, almost—of laughter. His father joined him. They ordered a loaded pizza shortly after. When Mary and Meg Delevan arrived home at twenty past seven, they both still had the giggles.

“Well, you two look like you’ve been up to no good,” Mrs. Delevan said, a little puzzled. There was something in their hilarity that struck the woman center of her—that deep part which the sex seems to tap into fully only in times of childbirth and disaster—as a little unhealthy. They looked and sounded like men who may have just missed having a car accident. “Want to let the ladies in on it?”

“Just two bachelors having a good time,” Mr. Delevan said.

“*Smashing* good time,” Kevin amplified, to which his father added, “Is what we mean to say,” and they looked at each other and were howling again.

Meg, honestly bewildered, looked at her mother and said: “Why are they doing that, Mom?”

Mrs. Delevan said, “Because they have penises, dear. Go hang up your coat.”

Pop Merrill let the Delevans, *père et fils*, out, and then locked the door behind them. He turned off all the lights save for the one over the worktable, produced his keys, and opened his own stuff-drawer. From it he took Kevin Delevan’s Polaroid Sun 660, chipped but otherwise undamaged, and looked at it fixedly. It had scared both the father and the son. That was clear enough to Pop; it had scared him as well, and still did. But to put a thing like this on a block and smash it to smithereens? That was crazy.

There was a way to turn a buck on this goddam thing.

There always was.

Pop locked it away in the drawer. He would sleep on it, and by the morning he would know how to proceed. In truth, he already had a pretty goddam good idea.

He got up, snapped off the work-light, and wove his way through the gloom toward the steps leading up to his apartment. He moved

with the unthinking surefooted grace of long practice.

Halfway there, he stopped.

He felt an urge, an amazingly strong urge, to go back and look at the camera again. What in God's name for? He didn't even have any *film* for the Christless thing ... not that *he* had any intentions of taking any pictures with it. If someone *else* wanted to take some snapshots, watch that dog's progress, the buyer was welcome. Caveet *emperor*, as *he always said*. Let the goddam emperor caveet or not as it suited him. As for him, he'd as soon go into a cage filled with lions without even a goddam whip and chair.

Still ...

"Leave it," he said roughly in the darkness, and the sound of his own voice startled him and got him moving and he went upstairs without another look back.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Very early the next morning, Kevin Delevan had a nightmare so horrible he could only remember parts of it, like isolated phrases of music heard on a radio with a defective speaker.

He was walking into a grungy little mill-town. Apparently he was on the bum, because he had a pack on his back. The name of the town was Oatley, and Kevin had the idea it was either in Vermont or upstate New York. *You know anyone hiring here in Oatley?* he asked an old man pushing a shopping-cart along a cracked sidewalk. There were no groceries in the cart; it was full of indeterminate junk, and Kevin realized the man was a wino. *Get away!* the wino screamed. *Get away! Feef! Fushing feef! Fushing FEEF!*

Kevin ran, darted across the street, more frightened of the man's madness than he was of the idea anyone might believe that he, Kevin, was a thief. The wino called after him: *This ain't Oatley! This is Hildasville! Get out of town, you fushing feef!*

It was then that he realized that this town wasn't Oatley or Hildasville or any other town with a normal name. How could an utterly abnormal town have a normal name?

Everything—streets, buildings, cars, signs, the few pedestrians—was two-dimensional. Things had height, they had width ... but they had no thickness. He passed a woman who looked the way Meg's ballet teacher might look if the ballet teacher put on a hundred and fifty pounds. She was wearing slacks the color of Bazooka bubble gum. Like the wino, she was pushing a shopping-cart. It had a squeaky wheel. It was full of Polaroid Sun 660 cameras. She looked at Kevin with narrow suspicion as they drew closer together. At the moment when they passed each other on the sidewalk, she disappeared. Her *shadow* was still there and he could still hear that rhythmic squeaking, but she was no longer there. Then she reappeared, looking back at him from her fat flat suspicious face, and Kevin understood the reason why she had disappeared for a

moment. It was because the concept of “a side view” didn’t exist, *couldn’t* exist, in a world where everything was perfectly flat.

This is *Polaroidsville*, he thought with a relief which was strangely mingled with horror. *And that means this is only a dream.*

Then he saw the white picket fence, and the dog, and the photographer standing in the gutter. There were rimless spectacles propped up on his head. It was Pop Merrill.

*Well, son, you found him*, the two-dimensional Polaroid Pop said to Kevin without removing his eye from the shutter. *That’s the dog, right there. The one tore up that kid out in Schenectady. YOUR dog, is what I mean to say.*

Then Kevin woke up in his own bed, afraid he had screamed but more concerned at first not about the dream but to make sure he was *all there*, all three dimensions of him.

He was. But something was wrong.

Stupid dream, he thought. *Let it go, why can’t you? It’s over. Photos are burned, all fifty-eight of them. And the camera’s bus—*

His thought broke off like ice as that something, that something wrong, teased at his mind again.

*It’s not over*, he thought. *It’s n—*

But before the thought could finish itself, Kevin Delevan fell deeply, dreamlessly asleep. The next morning, he barely remembered the nightmare at all.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The two weeks following his acquisition of Kevin Delevan's Polaroid Sun were the most aggravating, infuriating, *humiliating* two weeks of Pop Merrill's life. There were quite a few people in Castle Rock who would have said it couldn't have happened to a more deserving guy. Not that anyone in Castle Rock did know ... and that was just about all the consolation Pop could take. He found it cold comfort. Very cold indeed, thank you very much.

But who would have ever believed the Mad Hatters would have, *could* have, let him down so badly?

It was almost enough to make a man wonder if he was starting to slip a little.

God forbid.

## CHAPTER NINE

Back in September, he hadn't even bothered to wonder if he would sell the Polaroid; the only questions were how soon and how much. The Delevans had bandied the word *supernatural* about, and Pop hadn't corrected them, although he knew that what the Sun was doing would be more properly classed by psychic investigators as a paranormal rather than supernatural phenomenon. He *could* have told them that, but if he *had*, they might both have wondered how come the owner of a small-town used-goods store (and part-time usurer) knew so much about the subject. The fact was this: he knew a lot because it was *profitable* to know a lot, and it was profitable to know a lot because of the people he thought of as "my Mad Hatters."

Mad Hatters were people who recorded empty rooms on expensive audio equipment not for a lark or a drunken party stunt, but either because they believed passionately in an unseen world and wanted to prove its existence, or because they wanted passionately to get in touch with friends and/or relatives who had "passed on" ("passed on": that's what they always called it; Mad Hatters never had relatives who did something so simple as die).

Mad Hatters not only owned and used Ouija Boards, they had regular conversations with "spirit guides" in the "other world" (never "heaven," "hell," or even "the rest area of the dead" but the "other world") who put them in touch with friends, relatives, queens, dead rock-and-roll singers, even arch-villains. Pop knew of a Mad Hatter in Vermont who had twice-weekly conversations with Hitler. Hitler had told him it was all a bum rap, he had sued for peace in January of 1943 and that son of a bitch Churchill had turned him down. Hitler had also told him Paul Newman was a space alien who had been born in a cave on the moon.

Mad Hatters went to séances as regularly (and as compulsively) as drug addicts visited their pushers. They bought crystal balls and amulets guaranteed to bring good luck; they organized their own little

societies and investigated reputedly haunted houses for all the usual phenomena: teleplasm, tablerappings, floating tables and beds, cold spots, and, of course, ghosts. They noted all of these, real or imagined, with the enthusiasm of dedicated bird-watchers.

Most of them had a ripping good time. Some did not. There was that fellow from Wolfeboro, for instance. He hanged himself in the notorious Tecumseh House, where a gentleman farmer had, in the 1880s and '90s, helped his fellow men by day and helped himself to them by night, dining on them at a formal table in his cellar. The table stood upon a floor of sour packed dirt which had yielded the bones and decomposed bodies of at least twelve and perhaps as many as thirty-five young men, all vagabonds. The fellow from Wolfeboro had left this brief note on a pad of paper beside his Ouija Board: *Can't leave the house. Doors all locked. I hear him eating. Tried cotton. Does no good.*

*And the poor deluded asshole probably thought he really did,* Pop had mused after hearing this story from a source he trusted.

Then there was a fellow in Dunwich, Massachusetts, to whom Pop had once sold a so-called spirit trumpet for ninety dollars; the fellow had taken the trumpet to the Dunwich Cemetery and must have heard something exceedingly unpleasant, because he had been raving in a padded cell in Arkham for almost six years now, totally insane. When he had gone into the boneyard, his hair had been black; when his screams awoke the few neighbors who lived close enough to the cemetery to hear them and the police were summoned, it was as white as his howling face.

And there was the woman in Portland who lost an eye when a session with the Ouija Board went cataclysmically wrong ... the man in Kingston, Rhode Island, who lost three fingers on his right hand when the rear door of a car in which two teenagers had committed suicide closed on it ... the old lady who landed in Massachusetts Memorial Hospital short most of one ear when her equally elderly cat, Claudette, supposedly went on a rampage during a séance ...

Pop believed some of these things, disbelieved others, and mostly held no opinion—not because he didn't have enough hard evidence one way or the other, but because he didn't give a fart in a high wind

about ghosts, séances, crystal balls, spirit trumpets, rampaging cats, or the fabled John the Conquerer Root. As far as Reginald Marion “Pop” Merrill was concerned, the Mad Hatters could all take a flying fuck at the moon.

As long, of course, as one of them handed over some mighty tall tickets for Kevin Delevan’s camera before taking passage on the next shuttle.

Pop didn’t call these enthusiasts Mad Hatters because of their spectral interests; he called them that because the great majority—he was sometimes tempted to say *all* of them—seemed to be rich, retired, and just begging to be plucked. If you were willing to spend fifteen minutes with them nodding and agreeing while they assured you they could pick a fake medium from a real one just by walking into the *room*, let alone sitting down at the séance table, or if you spent an equal amount of time listening to garbled noises which might or might not be words on a tape player with the proper expression of awe on your face, you could sell them a four-dollar paperweight for a hundred by telling them a man had once glimpsed his dead mother in it. You gave them a smile and they wrote you a check for two hundred dollars. You gave them an encouraging word and they wrote you a check for two *thousand* dollars. If you gave them both things at the same time, they just kind of passed the checkbook over to you and asked you to fill in an amount.

It had always been as easy as taking candy from a baby.

Until now.

Pop didn’t keep a file in his cabinet marked MAD HATTERS any more than he kept one marked COIN COLLECTORS or STAMP COLLECTORS. He didn’t even have a file-cabinet. The closest thing to it was a battered old book of phone numbers he carried around in his back pocket (which, like his purse, had over the years taken on the shallow ungenerous curve of the spindly buttock it lay against every day). Pop kept his files where a man in his line of work should *always* keep them: in his head. There were eight full-blown Mad

Hatters that he had done business with over the years, people who didn't just dabble in the occult but who got right down and rolled around in it. The richest was a retired industrialist named McCarty who lived on his own island about twelve miles off the coast. This fellow disdained boats and employed a full-time pilot who flew him back and forth to the mainland when he needed to go.

Pop went to see him on September 28th, the day after he obtained the camera from Kevin (he didn't, couldn't, exactly think of it as robbery; the boy, after all, had been planning to smash it to shit anyway, and what he didn't know surely couldn't hurt him). He drove to a private airstrip just north of Boothbay Harbor in his old but perfectly maintained car, then gritted his teeth and slitted his eyes and held onto the steel lockbox with the Polaroid Sun 660 in it for dear life as the Mad Hatter's Beechcraft plunged down the dirt runway like a rogue horse, rose into the air just as Pop was sure they were going to fall off the edge and be smashed to jelly on the rocks below, and flew away into the autumn empyrean. He had made this trip twice before, and had sworn each time that he would never get into that goddam flying coffin again.

They bumped and jounced along with the hungry Atlantic less than five hundred feet below, the pilot talking cheerfully the whole way. Pop nodded and said ayuh in what seemed like the right places, although he was more concerned with his imminent demise than with anything the pilot was saying.

Then the island was ahead with its horribly, dismally, suicidally short landing strip and its sprawling house of redwood and fieldstone, and the pilot swooped down, leaving Pop's poor old acid-shrivelled stomach somewhere in the air above them, and they hit with a thud and then, somehow, miraculously, they were taxiing to a stop, still alive and whole, and Pop could safely go back to believing God was just another invention of the Mad Hatters ... at least until he had to get back in that damned plane for the return journey.

"Great day for flying, huh, Mr. Merrill?" the pilot asked, unfolding the steps for him.

"Finest kind," Pop grunted, then strode up the walk to the house where the Thanksgiving turkey stood in the doorway, smiling in

eager anticipation. Pop had promised to show him “the goddamnedest thing I ever come across,” and Cedric McCarty looked like he couldn’t wait. He’d take one quick look for form’s sake, Pop thought, and then fork over the lettuce. He went back to the mainland forty-five minutes later, barely noticing the thumps and jounces and gut-goozling drops as the Beech hit the occasional air-pocket. He was a chastened, thoughtful man.

He had aimed the Polaroid at the Mad Hatter and took his picture. While they waited for it to develop, the Mad Hatter took a picture of Pop ... and when the flashbulb went off, had he heard something? Had he heard the low, ugly snarl of that black dog, or had it been his imagination? Imagination, most likely. Pop had made some magnificent deals in his time, and you couldn’t do that without imagination.

Still—

Cedric McCarty, retired industrialist *par excellence* and Mad Hatter *extraordinaire*, watched the photographs develop with that same childlike eagerness, but when they finally came clear, he looked amused and even perhaps a little contemptuous and Pop knew with the infallible intuition which had developed over almost fifty years that arguing, cajolery, even vague hints that he had another customer just *slavering* for a chance to buy this camera—none of those usually reliable techniques would work. A big orange No SALE card had gone up in Cedric McCarty’s mind.

By why?

Goddammit, why?

In the picture Pop took, that glint Kevin had spotted amid the wrinkles of the black dog’s muzzle had clearly become a tooth—except *tooth* wasn’t the right word, not by any stretch of the imagination. That was *a fang*. In the one McCarty took, you could see the beginnings of the neighboring teeth.

*Fucking dog’s got a mouth like a bear-trap*, Pop thought. Unbidden, an image of his arm in that dog’s mouth rose in his mind. He saw the dog not *biting* it, not *eating* it, but *shredding* it, the way the many teeth of a wood-chipper shred bark, leaves, and small branches. *How long would it take?* he wondered, and looked at

those dirty eyes staring out at him from the overgrown face and knew it wouldn't take long. Or suppose the dog seized him by the crotch, instead? Suppose—

But McCarty had said something and was waiting for a response. Pop turned his attention to the man, and any lingering hope he might have held of making a sale evaporated. The Mad Hatter *extraordinaire*, who would cheerfully spend an afternoon with you trying to call up the ghost of your dear departed Uncle Ned, was gone. In his place was McCarty's other side: the hardheaded realist who had made *Fortune* magazine's listing of the richest men in America for twelve straight years—not because he was an airhead who had had the good fortune to inherit both a lot of money and an honest, capable staff to husband and expand it, but because he had been a genius in the field of aerodynamic design and development. He was not as rich as Howard Hughes but not quite as crazy as Hughes had been at the end, either. When it came to psychic phenomena, the man was a Mad Hatter. Outside that one area, however, he was a shark that made the likes of Pop Merrill look like a tadpole swimming in a mud-puddle.

"Sorry," Pop said. "I was woolgatherin a little, Mr. McCarty."

"I said it's fascinating," McCarty said. "Especially the subtle indications of passing time from one photo to the next. How does it work? Camera in camera?"

"I don't understand what you're gettin at."

"No, not a camera," McCarty said, speaking to himself. He picked the camera up and shook it next to his ear. "More likely some sort of roller device."

Pop stared at the man with no idea what he was talking about ... except it spelled NO SALE, whatever it was. That goddam Christless ride in the little plane (and soon to do over again), all for nothing. But why? *Why?* He had been so sure of this fellow, who would probably believe the Brooklyn Bridge was a spectral illusion from the "other side" if you told him it was. *So why?*

"Slots, of course!" McCarty said, as delighted as a child. "Slots! There's a circular belt on pulleys inside this housing with a number of slots built into it. Each slot contains an exposed Polaroid picture of

this dog. Continuity suggests”—he looked carefully at the pictures again—“yes, that the dog might have been *filmed*, with the Polaroids made from individual frames. When the shutter is released, a picture drops from its slot and emerges. The battery turns the belt enough to position the next photo, and—*voilà!*”

His pleasant expression was suddenly gone, and Pop saw a man who looked like he might have made his way to fame and fortune over the broken, bleeding bodies of his competitors ... and enjoyed it.

“Joe will fly you back,” he said. His voice had gone chill and impersonal. “You’re good, Mr. Merrill”—this man, Pop realized glumly, would never call him Pop again—“I’ll admit that. You’ve finally overstepped yourself, but for a long time you had me fooled. How much did you take me for? Was it all claptrap?”

“I didn’t take you for one red cent,” Pop said, lying stoutly. “I never sold you one single thing I didn’t b’lieve was the genuine article, and what I mean to say is that goes for that camera as well.”

“You make me sick,” McCarty said. “Not because I trusted you; I’ve trusted others who were fakes and shams. Not because you took my money; it wasn’t enough to matter. You make me sick because it’s men like you that have kept the scientific investigation of psychic phenomena in the dark ages, something to be laughed at, something to be dismissed as the sole province of crackpots and dimwits. The one consolation is that sooner or later you fellows always overstep yourselves. You get greedy and try to palm off something ridiculous like this. I want you out of here, Mr. Merrill.”

Pop had his pipe in his mouth and a Diamond Blue Tip in one shaking hand. McCarty pointed at him, and the chilly eyes above that finger made it look like the barrel of a gun.

“And if you light that stinking thing in here,” he said, “I’ll have Joe yank it out of your mouth and dump the coals down the back of your pants. So unless you want to *leave my house* with your skinny ass in flames, I suggest—”

“What’s the matter with you, Mr. McCarty?” Pop bleated. “These pitchers didn’t come out all developed! *You watched em develop with your own eyes!*”

“An emulsion any kid with a twelve-dollar chemistry set could whip up,” McCarty said coldly. “It’s not the catalyst-fixative the Polaroid people use, but it’s close. You expose your Polaroids—or create them from movie-film, if that’s what you did—and then you take them in a standard darkroom and paint them with goop. When they’re dry, you load them. When they pop out, they look like any Polaroid that hasn’t started to develop yet. Solid gray in a white border. Then the light hits your home-made emulsion, creating a chemical change, and it evaporates, showing a picture you yourself took hours or days or weeks before. Joe?”

Before Pop could say anything else, his arms were seized and he was not so much walked as propelled from the spacious, glass-walled living room. He wouldn’t have said anything, anyway. Another of the many things a good businessman had to know was when he was licked. And yet he wanted to shout over his shoulder: *Some dumb cunt with dyed hair and a crystal ball she ordered from Fate magazine floats a book or a lamp or a page of goddam sheet-music through a dark room and you bout shit yourself, but when I show you a camera that takes pitchers of some other world, you have me thrown out by the seat of m’pants! You’re mad as a hatter, all right! Well, fuck ya! There’s other fish in the sea!*

So there were.

On October 5th, Pop got into his perfectly maintained car and drove to Portland to pay a visit on the Pus Sisters.

The Pus Sisters were identical twins who lived in Portland. They were eighty or so but looked older than Stonehenge. They chain-smoked Camel cigarettes, and had done so since they were seventeen, they were happy to tell you. They never coughed in spite of the six packs they smoked between them each and every day. They were driven about—on those rare occasions when they left their red brick Colonial mansion—in a 1958 Lincoln Continental which had the somber glow of a hearse. This vehicle was piloted by a black woman only a little younger than the Pus Sisters themselves.

This female chauffeur was probably a mute, but might just be something a bit more special: one of the few truly taciturn human beings God ever made. Pop did not know and had never asked. He had dealt with the two old ladies for nearly thirty years, the black woman had been with them all that time, mostly driving the car, sometimes washing it, sometimes mowing the lawn or clipping the hedges around the house, sometimes stalking down to the mailbox on the corner with letters from the Pus Sisters to God alone knew who (he didn't know if the black woman ever went or was allowed inside the house, either, only that he had never seen her there), and during all that time he had never heard this marvellous creature speak.

The Colonial mansion was in Portland's Bramhall district, which is to Portland what the Beacon Hill area is to Boston. In that latter city, in the land of the bean and the cod, it's said the Cabots speak only to Lowells and the Lowells speak only to God, but the Pus Sisters and their few remaining contemporaries in Portland would and did calmly assert that the Lowells had turned a private connection into a party line some years after the Deeres and their Portland contemporaries had set up the original wire.

And of course no one in his right mind would have called them the Pus Sisters to their identical faces any more than anyone in his right mind would have stuck his nose in a bandsaw to take care of a troublesome itch. They were the Pus Sisters when they weren't around (and when one was fairly sure one was in company which didn't contain a tale-bearer or two), but their real names were Miss Eleusippus Deere and Mrs. Meleusippus Verrill. Their father, in his determination to combine devout Christianity with an exhibition of his own erudition, had named them for two of three triplets who had all become saints ... but who, unfortunately, had been *male* saints.

Meleusippus's husband had died a great many years before, during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1944, as a matter of fact, but she had resolutely kept his name ever since, which made it impossible to take the easy way out and simply call them the Misses Deere. No; you had to practice those goddamned tongue-twister names until they came out as smooth as shit from a waxed asshole. If you

fucked up once, they held it against you, and you might lose their custom for as long as six months or a year. Fuck up twice, and don't even bother to call. Ever again.

Pop drove with the steel box containing the Polaroid camera on the seat beside him, saying their names over and over again in a low voice: "Eleusippus. *Meleusippus*. Eleusippus and Meleusippus. Ayuh. That's all right."

But, as it turned out, that was the only thing that was all right. They wanted the Polaroid no more than McCarty had wanted it ... although Pop had been so shaken by that encounter he went in fully prepared to take ten thousand dollars less, or fifty per cent of his original confident estimate of what the camera might fetch.

The elderly black woman was raking leaves, revealing a lawn which, October or not, was still as green as the felt on a billiard table. Pop nodded to her. She looked at him, looked *through* him, and continued raking leaves. Pop rang the bell and, somewhere in the depths of the house, a bell bonged. *Mansion* seemed the *perfectly* proper word for the Pus Sisters' domicile. Although it was nowhere near as big as some of the old homes in the Bramhall district, the perpetual dimness which reigned inside made it seem much bigger. The sound of the bell really *did* seem to come floating through a depth of rooms and corridors, and the sound of that bell always stirred a specific image in Pop's mind: the dead-cart passing through the streets of London during the plague year, the driver ceaselessly tolling his bell and crying, "Bring outcher dead! Bring outcher dead! For the luwa Jaysus, bring outcher dead!"

The Pus Sister who opened the door some thirty seconds later looked not only dead but embalmed; a mummy between whose lips someone had poked the smouldering butt of a cigarette for a joke.

"Merrill," the lady said. Her dress was a deep blue, her hair colored to match. She tried to speak to him as a great lady would speak to a tradesman who had come to the wrong door by mistake, but Pop could see she was, in her way, every bit as excited as that son of a bitch McCarty had been; it was just that the Pus Sisters had been born in Maine, raised in Maine, and would die in Maine, while McCarty hailed from someplace in the Midwest, where the art and

craft of taciturnity were apparently not considered an important part of a child's upbringing.

A shadow flitted somewhere near the parlor end of the hallway, just visible over the bony shoulder of the sister who had opened the door. The other one. Oh, they were eager, all right. Pop began to wonder if he couldn't squeeze twelve grand out of them after all. Maybe even fourteen.

Pop knew he *could* say, "Do I have the honor of addressing Miss Deere or Mrs. Verrill?" and be completely correct and completely polite, but he had dealt with this pair of eccentric old bags before and he knew that, while the Pus Sister who had opened the door wouldn't raise an eyebrow or flare a nostril, would simply tell him which one he was speaking to, he would lose at least a thousand by doing so. They took great pride in their odd masculine names, and were apt to look more kindly on a person who tried and failed than one who took the coward's way out.

So, saying a quick mental prayer that his tongue wouldn't fail him now that the moment had come, he gave it his best and was pleased to hear the names slip as smoothly from his tongue as a pitch from a snake-oil salesman: "Is it Eleusippus or Meleusippus?" he asked, his face suggesting he was no more concerned about getting the names right than if they had been Joan and Kate.

"Meleusippus, Mr. Merrill," she said, ah, good, now he was *Mister* Merrill, and he was sure everything was going to go just as slick as ever a man could want, and he was just as wrong as ever a man could be. "Won't you step in?"

"Thank you kindly," Pop said, and entered the gloomy depths of the Deere Mansion.

"*Oh dear,*" Eleusippus Deere said as the Polaroid began to develop.

"What a *brute* he looks!" Meleusippus Verrill said, speaking in tones of genuine dismay and fear.

The dog was getting uglier, Pop had to admit that, and there was something else that worried him even more: the time-sequence of the pictures seemed to be speeding up.

He had posed the Pus Sisters on their Queen Anne sofa for the demonstration picture. The camera flashed its bright white light, turning the room for one single instant from the purgatorial zone between the land of the living and that of the dead where these two old relics somehow existed into something flat and tawdry, like a police photo of a museum in which a crime had been committed.

Except the picture which emerged did not show the Pus Sisters sitting together on their parlor sofa like identical book-ends. The picture showed the black dog, now turned so that it was full-face to the camera and whatever photographer it was who was nuts enough to stand there and keep snapping pictures of it. Now all of its teeth were exposed in a crazy, homicidal snarl, and its head had taken on a slight, predatory tilt to the left. That head, Pop thought, would continue to tilt as it sprang at its victim, accomplishing two purposes: concealing the vulnerable area of its neck from possible attack and putting the head in a position where, once the teeth were clamped solidly in flesh, it could revolve upright again, ripping a large chunk of living tissue from its target.

"It's so *awful!*" Eleusippus said, putting one mummified hand to the scaly flesh of her neck.

"So terrible!" Meleusippus nearly moaned, lighting a fresh Camel from the butt of an old one with a hand shaking so badly she came close to branding the cracked and fissured left corner of her mouth.

"It's totally in-ex-*PLICK*-able!" Pop said triumphantly, thinking: *I wish you was here, McCarty, you happy asshole. I just wish you was. Here's two ladies been round the Horn and back a few times that don't think this goddam camera's just some kind of a carny magic-show trick!*

"Does it show something which *has* happened?" Meleusippus whispered.

"Or something which *will* happen?" Eleusippus added in an equally awed whisper.

“I dunno,” Pop said. “All I know for sure is that I have seen some goldarn strange things in my time, but I’ve never seen the beat of these pitchers.”

“I’m not surprised!” Eleusippus.

“Nor I!” Meleusippus.

Pop was all set to start the conversation going in the direction of price—a delicate business when you were dealing with anyone, but never more so than when you were dealing with the Pus Sisters: when it got down to hard trading, they were as delicate as a pair of virgins—which, for all Pop knew, at least one of them was. He was just deciding on the *To start with, it never crossed my mind to sell something like this,*

*but...* approach (it was older than the Pus Sisters themselves—although probably not by much, you would have said after a good close look at them—but when you were dealing with Mad Hatters, that didn’t matter a bit; in fact, they *liked* to hear it, the way small children like to hear the same fairy tales over and over) when Eleusippus absolutely floored him by saying, “I don’t know about my sister, Mr. Merrill, but I wouldn’t feel comfortable looking at anything you might have to”—here a slight, pained pause—“offer us in a business way until you put that ... that camera, or whatever God-awful thing it is ... back in your car.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Meleusippus said, stubbing out her half-smoked Camel in a fish-shaped ashtray which was doing everything but *shitting* Camel cigarette butts.

“Ghost photographs,” Eleusippus said, “are one thing. They have a certain—”

“*Dignity,*” Meleusippus suggested. “Yes! Dignity! But that *dog*—The old woman actually shivered. ”It looks as if it’s ready to jump right out of that photograph and bite one of us.”

“All of us!” Meleusippus elaborated.

Up until this last exchange, Pop had been convinced—perhaps because he had to be—that the sisters had merely begun their own part of the dickering, and in admirable style. But the tone of their voices, as identical as their faces and figures (if they could have been said to *have* such things as figures), was beyond his power to

disbelieve. They had no doubt that the Sun 660 was exhibiting some sort of paranormal behavior ... *too* paranormal to suit them. They weren't dickering ; they weren't pretending; they weren't playing games with him in an effort to knock the price down. When they said they wanted no part of the camera and the weird thing it was doing, that was exactly what they meant—nor had they done him the discourtesy (and that's just what it would have been, in their minds) of supposing or even *dreaming* that selling it had been his purpose in coming.

Pop looked around the parlor. It was like the old lady's room in a horror movie he'd watched once on his VCR—a piece of claptrap called *Burnt Offerings*, where this big old beefy fella tried to drown his son in the swimming pool but nobody even took their clothes off. That lady's room had been filled, overfilled, actually *stuffed* with old and new photographs. They sat on the tables and the mantel in every sort of frame; they covered so much of the walls you couldn't even tell what the pattern on the frigging paper was supposed to be.

The Pus Sisters' parlor wasn't quite that bad, but there were still plenty of photographs; maybe as many as a hundred and fifty, which seemed like three times that many in a room as small and dim as this one. Pop had been here often enough to notice most of them at least in passing, and he knew others even better than that, for he had been the one to sell them to Eleusippus and Meleusippus.

They had a great many more “ghost photographs,” as Eleusippus Deere called them, perhaps as many as a thousand in all, but apparently even they had realized a room the size of their parlor was limited in terms of display-space, if not in those of taste. The rest of the ghost photographs were distributed among the mansion's other fourteen rooms. Pop had seen them all. He was one of the fortunate few who had been granted what the Pus Sisters called, with simple grandiosity, The Tour. But it was here in the parlor that they kept their *prize* “ghost photographs,” with the prize of prizes attracting the eye by the simple fact that it stood in solitary splendor atop the closed Steinway baby grand by the bow windows. In it, a corpse was levitating from its coffin before fifty or sixty horrified mourners. It was a fake, of course. A child of ten— hell, a child of *eight*—would have

known it was a fake. It made the photographs of the dancing elves which had so bewitched poor Arthur Conan Doyle near the end of his life look accomplished by comparison. In fact, as Pop ranged his eye about the room, he saw only two photographs that weren't obvious fakes. It would take closer study to see how the trickery had been worked in those. Yet these two ancient pussies, who had collected "ghost photographs" all their lives and claimed to be great experts in the field, acted like a couple of teenage girls at a horror movie when he showed them not just a paranormal *photograph* but a goddam Jesus-jumping paranormal *camera* that didn't just do its trick once and then quit, like the one that had taken the picture of the ghost-lady watching the fox-hunters come home, but one that did it again and again and again, and how much had they spent on this stuff that was nothing but *claptrap*? Thousands? Tens of thousands? *Hundreds* of—

"—show us?" Meleusippus was asking him.

Pop Merrill forced his lips to turn up in what must have been at least a reasonable imitation of his Folksy Crackerbarrel Smile, because they registered no surprise or distrust.

"Pardon me, dear lady," Pop said. "M'mind went woolgatherin all on its own for a minute or two there. I guess it happens to all of us as we get on."

"We're eighty-three, and *our* minds are as clear as window-glass," Eleusippus said with clear disapproval.

"*Freshly washed* window-glass," Meleusippus added. "I asked if you have some new photographs you would care to show us ... once you've put that wretched thing away, of course."

"It's been *ages* since we saw any really good new ones," Eleusippus said, lighting a fresh Camel.

"We went to The New England Psychic and Tarot Convention in Providence last month," Meleusippus said, "and while the lectures were enlightening—"

"—and uplifting—"

"—so many of the photographs were *arrant* fakes! Even a child of ten—"

"—of *seven!*—"

“—could have seen through them. So ...” Meleusippus paused. Her face assumed an expression of perplexity which looked as if it might hurt (the muscles of her face having long since atrophied into expressions of mild pleasure and serene knowledge). “I am puzzled. Mr. Merrill, I must admit to being a bit puzzled.”

“I was about to say the same thing,” Eleusippus said.

“Why did you bring that awful thing?” Meleusippus and Eleusippus asked in perfect two-part harmony, spoiled only by the nicotine rasp of their voices.

The urge Pop felt to say *Because I didn't know what a pair of chickenshit old cunts you two were* was so strong that for one horrified second he believed he *had* said it, and he quailed, waiting for the twin screams of outrage to rise in the dim and hallowed confines of the parlor, screams which would rise like the squeal of rusty bandsaws biting into tough pine-knots, and go on rising until the glass in the frame of every bogus picture in the room shattered in an agony of vibration.

The idea that he had spoken such a terrible thought aloud lasted only a split-second, but when he relived it on later wakeful nights while the clocks rustled sleepily below (and while Kevin Delevan's Polaroid crouched sleeplessly in the locked drawer of the worktable), *it seemed* much longer. In those sleepless hours, he sometimes found himself wishing he *had* said it, and wondered if he was maybe losing his mind.

What he *did* do was react with a speed and a canny instinct for self-preservation that were nearly noble. To blow up at the Pus Sisters would give him immense gratification, but it would, unfortunately, be *short-lived* gratification. If he buttered them up—which was exactly what they expected, since they had been basted in butter all their lives (although it hadn't done a goddam thing for their skins)—he could perhaps sell them another three or four thousand dollars' worth of claptrap “ghost photographs,” if they continued to elude the lung cancer which should surely have claimed one or both at least a dozen years ago.

And there were, after all, other Mad Hatters in Pop's mental file, although not quite so many as he'd thought on the day he'd set off to

see Cedric McCarty. A little checking had revealed that two had died and one was currently learning how to weave baskets in a posh northern California retreat which catered to the incredibly rich who also happened to have gone hopelessly insane.

“Actually,” he said, “I brought the camera out so you ladies could look at it. What I mean to say,” he hastened on, observing their expressions of consternation, “is I know how much experience you ladies have in this field.”

Consternation turned to gratification; the sisters exchanged smug, comfy looks, and Pop found himself wishing he could douse a couple of their goddam packs of Camels with barbecue lighter fluid and jam them up their tight little old-maid asses and then strike a match. They’d smoke then, all right. They’d smoke just like plugged chimneys, was what he meant to say.

“I thought you might have some advice on what I should do with the camera, is what I mean to say,” he finished.

“Destroy it,” Eleusippus said immediately.

“I’d use dynamite,” Meleusippus said.

“Acid first, *then* dynamite,” Eleusippus said.

“Right,” Meleusippus finished. “It’s dangerous. You don’t have to look at that devil-dog to know that.” She did look though; they both did, and identical expressions of revulsion and fear crossed their faces.

“You can feel eevil coming out of it,” Eleusippus said in a voice of such portentousness that it should have been laughable, like a high-school girl playing a witch in *Macbeth*, but which somehow wasn’t. “Destroy it, Mr. Merrill. Before something awful happens. Before—perhaps, you’ll notice I only say *perhaps*—it destroys *you*.”

“Now, now,” Pop said, annoyed to find he felt just a little uneasy in spite of himself, “that’s drawing it a little strong. It’s just a camera is what I mean to say.”

Eleusippus Deere said quietly: “And the planchette that put out poor Colette Simineaux’s eye a few years ago—that was nothing but a piece of fiberboard.”

“At least until those foolish, foolish, *foolish* people put their fingers on it and woke it up,” Meleusippus said, more quietly still.

There seemed nothing left to say. Pop picked up the camera—careful to do so by the strap, not touching the actual camera itself, although he told himself this was just for the benefit of these two old pussies—and stood.

“Well, you’re the experts,” he said. The two old women looked at each other and preened.

Yes; retreat. Retreat was the answer ... for now, at least. But he wasn’t done yet. Every dog had its day, and you could take that to the bank. “I don’t want to take up any more of y’time, and I surely don’t want to discommode you.”

“Oh, you haven’t!” Eleusippus said, also rising.

“We have so very few guests these days!” Meleusippus said, also rising.

“Put it in your car, Mr. Merrill,” Eleusippus said, “and then—”

“—come in and have tea.”

“High tea!”

And although Pop wanted nothing more in his life than to be out of there (and to tell them exactly that: *Thanks but no thanks, I want to get the fuck out of here*), he made a courtly little half-bow and an excuse of the same sort. “It would be my pleasure,” he said, “but I’m afraid I have another appointment. I don’t get to the city as often as I’d like.” If you’re going to tell one lie, you might as well tell a pack, Pop’s own Pop had often told him, and it was advice he had taken to heart. He made a business of looking at his watch. “I’ve stayed too long already. You girls have made me late, I’m afraid, but I suppose I’m not the first man you’ve done that to.”

They giggled and actually raised identical blushes, like the glow of very old roses. “Why, Mr. *Merrill!*” Eleusippus trilled.

“Ask me next time,” he said, smiling until his face felt as if it would break. “Ask me next time, by the Lord Harry! You just ask and see if I don’t say yes faster’n a hoss can trot!”

He went out, and as one of them quickly closed the door behind him (maybe they think the sun’ll fade their goddam fake ghost photographs, Pop thought sourly), he turned and snapped the Polaroid at the old black woman, who was still raking leaves. He did

it on impulse, as a man with a mean streak may on impulse swerve across a country road to kill a skunk or raccoon.

The black woman's upper lip rose in a snarl, and Pop was stunned to see she was actually forking the sign of the evil eye at him.

He got into his car and backed hurriedly down the driveway.

The rear end of his car was halfway into the street and he was turning to check for traffic when his eye happened upon the Polaroid he had just taken. It wasn't fully developed; it had the listless, milky look of all Polaroid photographs which are still developing.

Yet it had come up enough so that Pop only stared at it, the breath he had begun to unthinkingly draw into his lungs suddenly ceasing like a breeze that unaccountably drops away to nothing for a moment. His very heart seemed to cease in mid-beat.

What Kevin had imagined was now happening. The dog had finished its pivot, and had now begun its relentless ordained irrefutable approach toward the camera and whoever held it ... ah, but he had held it this time, hadn't he? He, Reginald Marion "Pop" Merrill, had raised it and snapped it at the old black woman in a moment's pique like a spanked child that shoots a pop bottle off the top of a fence-post with his BB gun because he can't very well shoot his father, although in that humiliating, bottom-throbbing time directly after the paddling he would be more than happy to.

The dog was coming. Kevin had known that would happen next, and Pop would have known it, too, if he'd had occasion to think on it, which he hadn't—although from this moment on he would find it hard to think of anything else when he thought of the camera, and he would find those thoughts filling more and more of his time, both waking and dreaming.

*It's coming*, Pop thought with the sort of frozen horror a man might feel standing in the dark as some Thing, some unspeakable and unbearable Thing, approaches with its razor-sharp claws and teeth. *Oh my God, it's coming, that dog is coming.*

But it wasn't just *coming*; *it was changing*.

It was impossible to say how. His eyes hurt, caught between what they should be seeing and what they *were* seeing, and in the end the only handle he could find was a very small one: it was as if someone

had changed the lens on the camera, from the normal one to a fish-eye, so that the dog's forehead with its clots of tangled fur seemed somehow to bulge and recede at the same time, and the dog's murderous eyes seemed to have taken on filthy, barely visible glimmers of red, like the sparks a Polaroid flash sometimes puts in people's eyes.

The dog's *body* seemed to have elongated but not thinned; if anything, it seemed thicker—not fatter, but more heavily muscled.

And its teeth were bigger. Longer. Sharper.

Pop suddenly found himself remembering Joe Camber's Saint Bernard, Cujo—the one who had killed Joe and that old tosspot Gary Pervier and Big George Bannerman. The dog had gone rabid. It had trapped a woman and a young boy in their car up there at Camber's place and after two or three days the kid had died. And now Pop found himself wondering if *this* was what they had been looking at during those long days and nights trapped in the steaming oven of their car; this or something like this, the muddy red eyes, the long sharp teeth—

A horn blared impatiently.

Pop screamed, his heart not only starting again but *gunning*, like the engine of a Formula One racing-car.

A van swerved around his sedan, still half in the driveway and half in the narrow residential street. The van's driver stuck his fist out his open window and his middle finger popped up.

*"Eat my dick, you son of a whore!"* Pop screamed. He backed the rest of the way out, but so jerkily that he bumped up over the curb on the far side of the street. He twisted the wheel viciously (inadvertently honking his horn in the process) and then drove off. But three blocks south he had to pull over and just sit there behind the wheel for ten minutes, waiting for the shakes to subside enough so he could drive.

So much for the Pus Sisters.

During the next five days, Pop ran through the remaining names on his mental list. His asking price, which had begun at twenty thousand dollars with McCarty and dropped to ten with the Pus Sisters (not that he had gotten far enough into the business to mention price in either case), dropped steadily as he ran out the string. He was finally left with Emory Chaffee, and the possibility of realizing perhaps twenty-five hundred.

Chaffee presented a fascinating paradox: in all Pop's experience with the Mad Hatters—an experience that was long and amazingly varied—Emory Chaffee was the only believer in the “other world” who had absolutely no imagination whatsoever. That he had ever spared a single thought for the “other world” with such a mind was surprising; that he *believed* in it was amazing; that he paid good money to collect objects connected with it was something Pop found absolutely astounding. Yet it was so, and Pop would have put Chaffee much higher on his list save for the annoying fact that Chaffee was by far the least well off of what Pop thought of as his “rich” Mad Hatters. He was doing a game but poor job of holding onto the last unravelling threads of what had once been a great family fortune. Hence, another large drop in Pop's asking price for Kevin's Polaroid.

But, he had thought, pulling his car into the overgrown driveway of what had in the '20s been one of Sebago Lake's finest summer homes and which was now only a step or two away from becoming one of Sebago Lake's shabbiest year-round homes (the Chaffee house in Portland's Bramhall district had been sold for taxes fifteen years before), *if anyone'll buy this beshitted thing, I reckon Emory will.*

The only thing that really distressed him—and it had done so more and more as he worked his way fruitlessly down the list—was the demonstration part. He could *describe* what the camera did until he was black in the face, but not even an odd duck like Emory Chaffee would lay out good money on the basis of a description alone.

Sometimes Pop thought it had been stupid to have Kevin take all those pictures so he could make that videotape. But when you got right down to where the bear shit in the buckwheat, he wasn't sure it

would have made any difference. Time passed over there in that world (for, like Kevin, he had come to think of it as that: an actual world), and it passed much more slowly than it did in this one ... but wasn't it speeding up as the dog approached the camera? Pop thought it was. The movement of the dog along the fence had been barely visible at first; now only a blind man could fail to see that the dog was closer each time the shutter was pressed. You could see the difference in distance even if you snapped two photographs one right after the other. It was almost as if time over there were trying to ... well, trying to *catch up* somehow, and get in sync with time over here.

If that had been all, it would have been bad enough. But it *wasn't* all.

That was no *dog*, goddammit.

Pop didn't know what it *was*, but he knew as well as he knew his mother was buried in Homeland Cemetery that it was no *dog*.

He thought it had been a dog, when it had been snuffling its way along that picket fence which it had now left a good ten feet behind; it had *looked* like one, albeit an exceptionally mean one once it got its head turned enough so you could get a good look at its phiz.

But to Pop it now looked like no creature that had ever existed on God's earth, and probably not in Lucifer's hell, either. What troubled him even more was this: the few people for whom he had taken demonstration photographs did not seem to see this. They inevitably recoiled, inevitably said it was the ugliest, meanest-looking junkyard mongrel they had ever seen, but that was all. Not a single one of them suggested that the dog in Kevin's Sun 660 was turning into some kind of monster as it approached the photographer. As it approached the lens which might be some sort of portal between that world and this one.

Pop thought again (as Kevin had), *But it could never get through. Never. If something is going to happen, I'll tell you what that something will be, because that thing is an ANIMAL, maybe a goddam ugly one, a scary one, even, like the kind of thing a little kid imagines in his closet after his momma turns off the lights, but it's still an ANIMAL, and if anything happens it'll be this: there'll be one last*

*pitcher where you can't see nothing but blur because that devil-dog will have jumped, you can see that's what it means to do, and after that the camera either won't work, or if it does, it won't take pitchers that develop into anything but black squares, because you can't take pitchers with a camera that has a busted lens or with one that's broke right in two for that matter, and if whoever owns that shadow drops the camera when the devil-dog hits it and him, and I imagine he will, it's apt to fall on the sidewalk and it probably WILL break. Goddam thing's nothing but plastic, after all, and plastic and cement don't get along hardly at all.*

But Emory Chaffee had come out on his splintery porch now, where the paint on the boards was flaking off and the boards themselves were warping out of true and the screens were turning the rusty color of dried blood and gaping holes in some of them; Emory Chaffee wearing a blazer which had once been a natty blue but had now been cleaned so many times it was the nondescript gray of an elevator operator's uniform; Emory Chaffee with his high forehead sloping back and back until it finally disappeared beneath what little hair he had left and grinning his *Pip-pip, jolly good, old boy, jolly good, wot, wot?* grin that showed his gigantic buck teeth and made him look the way Pop imagined Bugs Bunny would look if Bugs had suffered some cataclysmic mental retardation.

Pop took hold of the camera's strap—God, how he had come to hate the thing!—got out of his car, and forced himself to return the man's wave and grin.

Business, after all, was business.

“That's one ugly pup, wouldn't you say?”

Chaffee was studying the Polaroid which was now almost completely developed. Pop had explained what the camera did, and had been encouraged by Chaffee's frank interest and curiosity. Then he had given the Sun to the man, inviting him to take a picture of anything he liked.

Emory Chaffee, grinning that repulsive buck-toothed grin, swung the Polaroid Pop's way.

"Except me," Pop said hastily. "I'd rather you pointed a shotgun at my head instead of that camera."

"When you sell a thing, you really sell it," Chaffee said admiringly, but he had obliged just the same, turning the Sun 660 toward the wide picture window with its view of the lake, a magnificent view that remained as rich now as the Chaffee family itself had been in those years which began after World War I, golden years which had somehow begun to turn to brass around 1970.

He pressed the shutter.

The camera whined.

Pop winced. He found that now he winced every time he heard that sound—that squidgy little whine. He had tried to control the wince and had found to his dismay that he could not.

"Yes, sir, one goddamned ugly brute!" Chaffee repeated after examining the developed picture, and Pop was sourly pleased to see that the repulsive buck-toothed wot-ho, bit-of-a-sticky-wicket grin had disappeared at last. The camera had been able to do that much, at least.

Yet it was equally clear to him that the man wasn't seeing what he, Pop, was seeing. Pop had had some preparation for this eventuality; he was, all the same, badly shaken behind his impassive Yankee mask. He believed that if Chaffee *had* been granted the power (for that was what it seemed to be) to see what Pop was seeing, the stupid fuck would have been headed for the nearest door, and at top speed.

The dog—well, it wasn't a dog, not anymore, but you had to call it *something*—hadn't begun its leap at the photographer yet, but it was getting ready; its hindquarters were simultaneously bunching and lowering toward the cracked anonymous sidewalk in a way that somehow reminded Pop of a kid's souped-up car, trembling, barely leashed by the clutch during the last few seconds of a red light; the

needle on the rpm dial already standing straight up at 60 x 10, the engine screaming through chrome pipes, fat deep-tread tires ready to smoke the macadam in a hot soul-kiss.

The dog's face was no longer a recognizable thing at all. It had twisted and distorted into a carny freak-show thing that seemed to have but a single dark and malevolent eye, neither round nor oval but somehow *runny*, like the yolk of an egg that has been stabbed with the tines of a fork. Its nose was a black beak with deep flared holes drilled into either side. And was there *smoke* coming from those holes—like steam from the vents of a volcano? Maybe—or maybe that part was just imagination.

*Don't matter, Pop thought. You just keep workin that shutter, or lettin people like this fool work it, and you are gonna find out, aren't you?*

But he didn't want to find out. He looked at the black, murdering thing whose matted coat had caught perhaps two dozen wayward burdocks, the thing which no longer had fur, exactly, but stuff like living spikes, and a tail like a medieval weapon. He observed the shadow it had taken a damned snot-nosed kid to extract meaning from, and saw it had changed. One of the shadow-legs appeared to have moved a stride backward—a very *long* stride, even taking the effect of the lowering or rising sun (but it was going down; Pop had somehow become very sure it was going down, that it was night coming in that world over there, not day) into account.

The photographer over there in that world had finally discovered that his subject did not mean to sit for its portrait; that had never been a part of its plan. It intended to *eat*, not *sit*. That was the plan.

Eat, and, maybe, in some way he didn't understand, escape.

Find out! he thought ironically. *Go ahead! Just keep taking pitchers! You'll find out! You'll find out PLENTY!*

“And you, sir,” Emory Chaffee was saying, for he had only been stopped for a moment; creatures of little imagination are rarely stopped for long by such trivial things as consideration, “are one hell of a salesman!”

The memory of McCarty was still very close to the surface of Pop's mind, and it still rankled.

“If you think it’s a fake—” he began.

“A fake? Not at all! Not ... at *all!*” Chaffee’s buck-toothed smile spread wide in all its repulsive splendor. He spread his hands in a surely-you-jest motion. “But I’m afraid, you see, that we can’t do business on this particular item, Mr. Merrill. I’m sorry to say so, but —”

“Why?” Pop bit off. “If you don’t think the goddam thing’s a fake, why in the hell don’t you want it?” And he was astonished to hear his voice rising in a kind of plaintive, balked fury. There had never been anything like this, never in the history of the *world*, Pop was sure of it, nor ever would be again. Yet it seemed he couldn’t give the goddam thing away.

“But ...” Chaffee looked puzzled, as if not sure how to state it, because whatever it was he had to say seemed so obvious to him. In that moment he looked like a pleasant but not very capable pre-school teacher trying to teach a backward child how to tie his shoes. “But it doesn’t *do* anything, does it?”

“Doesn’t do anything?” Pop nearly screamed. He couldn’t believe he had lost control of himself to such a degree as this, and was losing more all the time. What was happening to him? Or, cutting closer to the bone, what was the son-of-a-bitching *camera* doing to him? “Doesn’t do anything? What are you, blind? It takes pitchers of *another world!* It takes pitchers that move in time from one to the next, no matter *where* you take em or *when* you take em in *this* world! And that ... that thing ... that *monster—*”

Oh. Oh dear. He had finally done it. He had finally gone too far. He could see it in the way Chaffee was looking at him.

“But it’s just a dog, isn’t it?” Chaffee said in a low, comforting voice. It was the sort of voice you’d use to try and soothe a madman while the nurses ran for the cabinet where they kept the hypos and the knock-out stuff.

“Ayuh,” Pop said slowly and tiredly. “Just a dog is all it is. But you said yourself it was a hell of an ugly brute.”

“That’s right, that’s right, I did,” Chaffee said, agreeing much too quickly. Pop thought if the man’s grin got any wider and broader he might just be treated to the sight of the top three-quarters of the

idiot's head toppling off into his lap. "But ... surely you see, Mr. Merrill ... what a problem this presents for the collector. The *serious* collector."

"No, I guess I don't," Pop said, but after running through the entire list of Mad Hatters, a list which had seemed so promising at first, he was beginning to. In fact, he was beginning to see a whole *host* of problems the Polaroid Sun presented for the serious collector. As for Emory Chaffee ... God knew what Emory thought, exactly.

"There are most certainly such things as ghost photographs," Chaffee said in a rich, pedantic voice that made Pop want to strangle him. "But these are not ghost photographs. They—"

"They're sure as hell not *normal* photographs!"

"My point exactly," Chaffee said, frowning slightly. "But what sort of photographs are they? One can hardly say, can one? One can only display a perfectly normal camera that photographs a dog which is apparently preparing to leap. And once it leaps, it will be gone from the frame of the picture. At that point, one of three things may happen. The camera may start taking normal pictures, which is to say, pictures of the things it is aimed at; it may take no more pictures at all, its one purpose, to photograph—to *document*, one might even say—that dog, completed; or it may simply go on taking pictures of that white fence and the ill-tended lawn behind it." He paused and added, "I suppose someone might walk by at some point, forty photographs down the line—or four hundred—but unless the photographer raised his angle, which he doesn't seem to have done in any of these, one would only see the passerby from the waist down. More or less." And, echoing Kevin's father without even knowing who Kevin's father was, he added: "Pardon me for saying so, Mr. Merrill, but you've shown me something I thought I'd never see: an inexplicable and almost irrefutable paranormal occurrence that is really quite boring."

This amazing but apparently sincere remark forced Pop to disregard whatever Chaffee might think about his sanity and ask again: "It really is only a dog, as far as you can see?"

"Of course," Chaffee said, looking mildly surprised. "A stray mongrel that looks exceedingly bad-tempered."

He sighed.

“And it wouldn’t be taken seriously, of course. What I mean is it wouldn’t be taken seriously by people who don’t know you personally, Mr. Merrill. People who aren’t familiar with your honesty and reliability in these matters. It looks like a trick, you see? And not even a very good one. Something on the order of a child’s Magic Eight-Ball.”

Two weeks ago, Pop would have argued strenuously against such an idea. But that was before he had been not walked but actually *propelled* from that bastard McCarty’s house.

“Well, if that’s your final word,” Pop said, getting up and taking the camera by the strap.

“I’m very sorry you made a trip to such little purpose,” Chaffee said ... and then his horrid grin burst forth again, all rubbery lips and huge teeth shining with spit. “I was about to make myself a Spam sandwich when you drove in. Would you care to join me, Mr. Merrill? I make quite a nice one, if I do say so myself. I add a little horseradish and Bermuda onion—that’s my secret—and then I—”

“I’ll pass,” Pop said heavily. As in the Pus Sisters’ parlor, all he really wanted right now was to get out of here and put miles between himself and this grinning idiot. Pop had a definite allergy to places where he had gambled and lost. Just lately there seemed to be a lot of those. Too goddam many. “I already had m’dinner, is what I mean to say. Got to be gettin back.”

Chaffee laughed fruitily. “The lot of the toiler in the vineyards is busy but yields great bounty,” he said.

*Not just lately, Pop thought. Just lately it ain’t yielded no fuckin bounty at all.*

“It’s a livin, anyway,” Pop replied, and was eventually allowed out of the house, which was damp and chill (what it must be like to live in such a place come February, Pop couldn’t imagine) and had that mousy, mildewed smell that might be rotting curtains and sofa-covers and such ... or just the smell money leaves behind when it has spent a longish period of time in a place and then departed. He thought the fresh October air, tinged with just a small taste of the lake and a stronger tang of pine-needles, had never smelled so good.

He got into his car and started it up. Emory Chaffee, unlike the Pus Sister who had shown him as far as the door and then closed it quickly behind him, as if afraid the sun might strike her and turn her to dust like a vampire, was standing on the front porch, grinning his idiot grin and actually *waving*, as if he were seeing Pop off on a goddam ocean cruise.

And, without thinking, just as he had taken the picture of (or at, anyway) the old black woman without thinking, he had snapped Chaffee and the just-starting-to-moulder house which was all that remained of the Chaffee family holdings. He didn't remember picking the camera up off the seat where he had tossed it in disgust before closing his door, was not even aware that the camera was in his hands or the shutter fired until he heard the whine of the mechanism shoving the photograph out like a tongue coated with some bland gray fluid—Milk of Magnesia, perhaps. That sound seemed to vibrate along his nerve-endings now, making them scream; it was like the feeling you got when something too cold or hot hit a new filling.

He was peripherally aware that Chaffee was laughing as if it was the best goddam joke in the world before snatching the picture from the slot in a kind of furious horror, telling himself he had imagined the momentary, blurred sound of a snarl, a sound like you might hear if a power-boat was approaching while you had your head ducked under water; telling himself he had imagined the momentary feeling that the camera had *bulged* in his hands, as if some huge pressure inside had pushed the sides out momentarily. He punched the glove-compartment button and threw the picture inside and then closed it so hard and fast that he tore his thumbnail all the way down to the tender quick.

He pulled out jerkily, almost stalling, then almost hitting one of the hoary old spruces which flanked the house end of the long Chaffee driveway, and all the way up that driveway he thought he could hear Emory Chaffee laughing in loud mindless cheery bellows of sound: *Haw! Haw! Haw! Haw!*

His heart slammed in his chest, and his head felt as if someone was using a sledgehammer inside there. The small cluster of veins which nestled in the hollows of each temple pulsed steadily.

He got himself under control little by little. Five miles, and the little man inside his head quit using the sledgehammer. Ten miles (by now he was almost halfway back to Castle Rock), and his heartbeat was back to normal. And he told himself: *You ain't gonna look at it. You AIN'T. Let the goddam thing rot in there. You don't need to look at it, and you don't need to take no more of em, either. Time to mark the thing off as a dead loss. Time to do what you should have let the boy do in the first place.*

So of course when he got to the Castle View rest area, a turn-out from which you could, it seemed, see all of western Maine and half of New Hampshire, he swung in and turned off his motor and opened the glove compartment and brought out the picture which he had taken with no more intent or knowledge than a man might have if he did a thing while walking in his sleep. The photograph had developed in there, of course; the chemicals inside that deceptively flat square had come to life and done their usual efficient job. Dark or light, it didn't make any difference to a Polaroid picture.

The dog-thing was crouched all the way down now. It was as fully coiled as it was going to get, a trigger pulled back to full cock. Its teeth had outgrown its mouth so that the thing's snarl seemed now to be not only an expression of rage but a simple necessity; how could its lips ever fully close over those teeth? How could those jaws ever chew? It looked more like a weird species of wild boar than a dog now, but what it really looked like was nothing Pop had ever seen before. It did more than hurt his eyes to look at it; it hurt his mind. It made him feel as if he was going crazy.

*Why not get rid of that camera right here? he thought suddenly. You can. Just get out, walk to the guardrail there, and toss her over. All gone. Goodbye.*

But that would have been an impulsive act, and Pop Merrill belonged to the Reasonable tribe—belonged to it body and soul, is what I mean to say. He didn't want to do anything on the spur of the moment that he might regret later, and—

*If you don't do this, you'll regret it later.*

But no. And no. And no. A man couldn't run against his nature. It was unnatural. He needed time to think. To be sure.

He compromised by throwing the print out instead and then drove on quickly. For a minute or two he felt as if he might throw up, but the urge passed. When it did, he felt a little more himself. Safely back in his shop, he unlocked the steel box, took out the Sun, rummaged through his keys once more, and located the one for the drawer where he kept his “special” items. He started to put the camera inside ... and paused, brow furrowed. The image of the chopping block out back entered his mind with such clarity, every detail crisply limned, that it was like a photograph itself.

He thought: *Never mind all that about how a man can't run against his nature. That's crap, and you know it. It ain't in a man's nature to eat dirt, but you could eat a whole bowl of it, by the bald-headed Christ, if someone with a gun pointed at your head told you to do it. You know what time it is, chummy—time to do what you should have let the boy do in the first place. After all, it ain't like you got any investment in this.*

But at this, another part of his mind rose in angry, fist-waving protest. *Yes I do! I do have an investment, goddammit! That kid smashed a perfectly good Polaroid camera! He may not know it, but that don't change the fact that I'm out a hundred and thirty-nine bucks!*

“Oh, shit on toast!” he muttered agitatedly. “It ain't that! It ain't the fuckin money!”

No—it wasn't the fucking money. He could at least admit that it wasn't the money. He could afford it; Pop could indeed have afforded a great deal, including his own mansion in Portland's Bramhall district and a brand-new Mercedes-Benz to go in the carport. He never would have bought those things—he pinched his pennies and chose to regard almost pathological miserliness as nothing more than good old Yankee thrift—but that didn't mean he couldn't have had them if he so chose.

It wasn't about money; it was about something more important than money ever could be. It was about not *getting skinned*. Pop had made a life's work out of *not getting skinned*, and on the few occasions when he had been, he had felt like a man with red ants crawling around inside his skull.

Take the business of the goddam Kraut record-player, for instance. When Pop found out that antique dealer from Boston—Donahue, his name had been—had gotten fifty bucks more than he'd ought to have gotten for a 1915 Victor-Graff gramophone (which had actually turned out to be a much more common 1919 model), Pop had lost three hundred dollars' worth of sleep over it, sometimes plotting various forms of revenge (each more wild-eyed and ridiculous than the last), sometimes just damning himself for a fool, telling himself he must really be slipping if a city man like that Donahue could skin Pop Merrill. And sometimes he imagined the fucker telling his poker-buddies about how easy it had been, hell, they were all just a bunch of rubes up there, he believed that if you tried to sell the Brooklyn Bridge to a fellow like that country mouse Merrill in Castle Rock, the damned fool would ask "How much?" Then him and his cronies rocking back in their chairs around that poker-table (why he always saw them around such a table in this morbid daydream Pop didn't know, but he did), smoking dollar cigars and roaring with laughter like a bunch of trolls.

The business of the Polaroid was eating into him like acid, but he still wasn't ready to let go of the thing yet.

Not quite yet.

*You're crazy!* a voice shouted at him. *You're crazy to go on with it!*

"Damned if I'll eat it," he muttered sulkily to that voice and to his empty shadowed store, which ticked softly to itself like a bomb in a suitcase. "*Damned* if I will."

But that didn't mean he had to go haring off on any more stupid goddam trips trying to sell the sonofawhore, and he *certainly* didn't mean to take any more pictures with it. He judged there were at least three more "safe" ones left in it, and there were probably as many as seven, but he wasn't going to be the one to find out. Not at all.

Still, something might come up. You never knew. And it could hardly do him or anyone else any harm locked up in a drawer, could it?

"Nope," Pop agreed briskly to himself. He dropped the camera inside, locked the drawer, repocketed his keys, and then went to the

door and turned CLOSED over to OPEN with the air of a man who has finally put some nagging problem behind him for good.

## CHAPTER TEN

Pop woke up at three the next morning, bathed with sweat and peering fearfully into the dark. The clocks had just begun another weary run at the hour.

It was not this sound which awakened him, although it could have done, since he was not upstairs in his bed but down below, in the shop itself. The Emporium Galorium was a cave of darkness crowded with hulking shadows created by the streetlamp outside, which managed to send just enough light through the dirty plate-glass windows to create the unpleasant feeling of things hiding beyond the borders of vision.

It wasn't the clocks that woke him; it was the *flash*.

He was horrified to find himself standing in his pajamas beside his worktable with the Polaroid Sun 660 in his hands. The "special" drawer was open. He was aware that, although he had taken only a single picture, his finger had been pushing the button which triggered the shutter again and again and again. He would have taken a great many more than the one that protruded from the slot at the bottom of the camera but for simple good luck. There had only been a single picture left in the film pack currently in the camera.

Pop started to lower his arms—he had been holding the camera pointed toward the front of the shop, the viewfinder with its minute hairline crack held up to one open, sleeping eye—and when he got them down as far as his ribcage, they began to tremble and the muscles holding the hinges of his elbows just seemed to give way. His arms fell, his fingers opened, and the camera tumbled back into the "special" drawer with a clatter. The picture he had taken slipped from the slot and fluttered. It struck one edge of the open drawer, teetered first one way as if it would follow the camera in, and then the other. It fell on the floor.

*Heart attack*, Pop thought incoherently. *I'm gonna have a goddam Christing heart attack.*

He tried to raise his right arm, wanting to massage the left side of his chest with the hand on the end of it, but the arm wouldn't come. The hand on the end of it dangled as limp as a dead man at the end of a hangrope. The world wavered in and out of focus. The sound of the clocks (the tardy ones were just finishing up) faded away to distant echoes. Then the pain in his chest diminished, the light seemed to come back a little, and he realized all he was doing was trying to faint.

He made to sit down in the wheeled chair behind the worktable, and the business of lowering himself into the seat, like the business of lowering the camera, began all right, but before he had gotten even halfway down, *those* hinges, the ones that strapped his thighs and calves together by way of his knees, also gave way and he didn't so much sit in the chair as cave into it. It rolled a foot backward, struck a crate filled with old *Life* and *Look* magazines, and stopped.

Pop put his head down, the way you were supposed to do when you felt lightheaded, and time passed. He had no idea at all, then or later, how much. He might even have gone back to sleep for a little while. But when he raised his head, he was more or less all right again. There was a steady dull throbbing at his temples and behind his forehead, probably because he had stuffed his goddam noodle with blood, hanging it over so long that way, but he found he could stand up and he knew what he had to do. When the thing had gotten hold of him so badly it could make him walk in his sleep, then make him (his mind tried to revolt at that verb, that *make*, but he wouldn't let it) take pictures with it, that was enough. He had no idea what the goddam thing was, but one thing was clear: you couldn't compromise with it.

*Time to do what you should have let the boy do in the first place.*

Yes. But not tonight. He was exhausted, drenched with sweat, and shivering. He thought he would have his work cut out for him just climbing the stairs to his apartment again, let alone swinging that sledge. He supposed he could do the job in here, simply pick it out of the drawer and dash it against the floor again and again, but there was a deeper truth, and he'd better own up to it: he couldn't have

any more truck with that camera tonight. The morning would be time enough ... and the camera couldn't do any damage between now and then, could it? There was no film in it.

Pop shut the drawer and locked it. Then he got up slowly, looking more like a man pushing eighty than seventy, and tottered slowly to the stairs. He climbed them one at a time, resting on each, clinging to the bannister (which was none too solid itself) with one hand while he held his heavy bunch of keys on their steel ring in the other. At last he made the top. With the door shut behind him, he seemed to feel a little stronger. He went back into his bedroom and got into bed, unaware as always of the strong yellow smell of sweat and old man that puffed up when he lay down—he changed the sheets on the first of every month and called it good.

*I won't sleep now*, he thought, and then: *Yes you will. You will because you can, and you can because tomorrow morning you're going to take the sledge and pound that fucking thing to pieces and there's an end to it.*

This thought and sleep came simultaneously, and Pop slept without dreaming, almost without moving, all the rest of that night. When he woke he was astonished to hear the clocks downstairs seeming to chime an extra stroke, all of them: eight instead of seven. It wasn't until he looked at the light falling across the floor and wall in a slightly slanted oblong that he realized it really *was* eight; he had overslept for the first time in ten years. Then he remembered the night before. Now, in daylight, the whole episode seemed less weird; had he nearly *fainted*? Or was that maybe just a natural sort of weakness that came to a sleepwalker when he was unexpectedly wakened?

But of course, that was it, wasn't it? A little bright morning sunshine wasn't going to change that central fact: he *had* walked in his sleep, he *had* taken at least one picture and would have taken a whole slew of them if there had been more film in the pack.

He got up, got dressed, and went downstairs, meaning to see the thing in pieces before he even had his morning's coffee.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kevin wished his first visit to the two-dimensional town of Polaroidsville had also been his last visit there, but that was not the case. During the thirteen nights since the first one, he'd had the dream more and more often. If the dumb dream happened to take the night off—*little vacation, Kev, but seeya soon, okay?*—he was apt to have it twice the next night. Now he always knew it was a dream, and as soon as it started he would tell himself that all he had to do was wake himself up, *dammit, just wake yourself up!* Sometimes he did wake up, and sometimes the dream just faded back into deeper sleep, but he never succeeded in waking himself up.

It was always Polaroidsville now—never Oatley or Hildasville, those first two efforts of his fumbling mind to identify the place. And like the photograph, each dream took the action just a little bit further. First the man with the shopping-cart, which was never empty now even to start with but filled with a jumble of objects ... mostly clocks, but all from the Emporium Galorium, and all with the eerie look not of real things but rather of *photographs* of real things which had been cut out of magazines and then somehow, impossibly, paradoxically, stuffed into a shopping-cart, which, since it was as two-dimensional as the objects themselves, had no breadth in which to store them. Yet there they were, and the old man hunched protectively over them and told Kevin to get out, that he was a fushing feef ... only now he also told Kevin that if he *didn't* get out, "I'll sic Pop's dawg on you! Fee if I don't!"

The fat woman who couldn't be fat since she was perfectly flat but who was fat anyway came next. She appeared pushing her own shopping-cart filled with Polaroid Sun cameras. She also spoke to him before he passed her. "Be careful, boy," she'd say in the loud but toneless voice of one who is utterly deaf, "Pop's dog broke his leash and he's a mean un. He tore up three or four people at the Trenton

Farm in Camberville before he came here. It's hard to take his pitcher, but you can't do it at all, 'less you have a cam'ra."

She would bend to get one, would sometimes get as far as holding it out, and he would reach for the camera, not knowing why the woman would think he should take the dog's picture or why he'd want to ... or maybe he was just trying to be polite?

Either way, it made no difference. They both moved with the stately slowness of underwater swimmers, as dream-people so often do, and they always just missed making connections; when Kevin thought of this part of the dream, he often thought of the famous picture of God and Adam which Michelangelo had painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: each of them with an arm outstretched, and each with the hand at the end of the arm also outstretched, and the forefingers almost—not quite, but almost—touching.

Then she would disappear for a moment because she had no width, and when she reappeared again she was out of reach. *Well just go back to her, then*, Kevin would think each time the dream reached this point, but he couldn't. His feet carried him heedlessly and serenely onward to the peeling white picket fence and Pop and the dog ... only the dog was no longer a dog but some horrible mixed thing that gave off heat and smoke like a dragon and had the teeth and twisted, scarred snout of a wild pig. Pop and the Sun dog would turn toward him at the same time, and Pop would have the camera—his camera, Kevin knew, because there was a piece chipped out of the side—up to his right eye. His left eye was squinted shut. His rimless spectacles glinted on top of his head in hazy sunlight. Pop and the Sun dog had all three dimensions. They were the only things in this seedy, creepy little dreamtown that did.

"He's the one!" Pop cried in a shrill, fearful voice. "He's the thief! Sic em, boy! *Pull his fuckin guts out is what I mean to say!*"

And as he screamed out this last, heatless lightning flashed in the day as Pop triggered the shutter and the flash, and Kevin turned to run. The dream had stopped here the second time he had had it. Now, on each subsequent occasion, things went a little further. Again he was moving with the aquatic slowness of a performer in an underwater ballet. He felt that, if he had been outside himself, he

would even have *looked* like a dancer, his arms turning like the blades of a propeller just starting up, his shirt twisting with his body, pulling taut across his chest and his belly at the same time he heard the shirt's tail pulling free of his pants at the small of his back with a magnified rasp like sandpaper.

Then he was running back the way he came, each foot rising slowly and then floating dreamily (of *course* dreamily, what else, you fool? he would think at this point every time) back down until it hit the cracked and listless cement of the sidewalk, the soles of his tennis shoes flattening as they took his weight and spanking up small clouds of grit moving so slowly that he could see the individual particles revolving like atoms.

He ran slowly, yes, of course, and the Sun dog, nameless stray Grendel of a thing that came from nowhere and signified nothing and had all the sense of a cyclone but existed nevertheless, chased him slowly ... but not *quite* as slowly.

On the third night, the dream faded into normal sleep just as Kevin began to turn his head in that dragging, maddening slow motion to see how much of a lead he had on the dog. It then skipped a night. On the following night it returned—twice. In the first dream he got his head halfway around so he could see the street on his left disappearing into limbo behind him as he ran along it; in the second (and from this one his alarm-clock woke him, sweating lightly in a crouched fetal position on the far side of the bed) he got his head turned enough to see the dog just as its forepaws came down in his own tracks, and he saw the paws were digging crumbly little craters in the cement because they had sprouted claws ... and from the back of each lower leg-joint there protruded a long thorn of bone that looked like a spur. The thing's muddy reddish eye was locked on Kevin. Dim fire blew and dripped from its nostrils. *Jesus, Jesus Christ, its SNOT'S on fire*, Kevin thought, and when he woke he was horrified to hear himself whispering it over and over, very rapidly: "... snot's on fire, snot's on fire, snot's on fire."

Night by night the dog gained on him as he fled down the sidewalk. Even when he wasn't turning to look he could *hear* the Sun dog gaining. He was aware of a spread of warmth from his crotch

and knew he was in enough fear to have wet himself, although the emotion came through in the same diluted, numbed way he seemed to have to move in this world. He could hear the Sun dog's paws striking the cement, could hear the dry crack and squall of the cement breaking. He could hear the hot blurts of its breath, the suck of air flowing in past those outrageous teeth.

And on the night Pop woke up to find he had not only walked in his sleep but taken at least one picture in it, Kevin felt as well as heard the Sun dog's breath for the first time: a warm rush of air on his buttocks like the sultry suck of wind a subway on an express run pulls through a station where it needn't stop. He knew the dog was close enough to spring on his back now, and that would come next; he would feel one more breath, this one not just warm but hot, as hot as acute indigestion in your throat, and then that crooked living bear-trap of a mouth would sink deep into the flesh of his back, between the shoulderblades, ripping the skin and meat off his spine, and did he think this was really just a dream? *Did* he?

He awoke from this last one just as Pop was gaining the top of the stairs to his apartment and resting one final time before going inside back to bed. This time Kevin woke sitting bolt upright, the sheet and blanket which had been over him puddled around his waist, his skin covered with sweat and yet *freezing*, a million stiff little white goose-pimples standing out all over his belly, chest, back, and arms like stigmata. Even his cheeks seemed to crawl with them.

And what he thought about was not the dream, or at least not directly; he thought instead: *It's wrong, the number is wrong, it says three but it can't—*

Then he flopped back and, in the way of children (for even at fifteen most of him was still a child and would be until later that day), he fell into a deep sleep again.

The alarm woke him at seven-thirty, as it always did on school mornings, and he found himself sitting up in bed again, wide-eyed, every piece suddenly in place. The Sun he had smashed hadn't been his Sun, and that was why he kept having this same crazy dream over and over and over again. Pop Merrill, that kindly old crackerbarrel philosopher and repairer of cameras and clocks and

small appliances, had euchered him and his father as neatly and competently as a riverboat gambler does the tenderfeet in an old Western movie.

His father—!

He heard the door downstairs slam shut and leaped out of bed. He took two running strides toward the door in his underwear, thought better of it, turned, yanked the window up, and hollered "*Dad!*" just as his father was folding himself into the car to go to work.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Pop dredged his key-ring up from his pocket, unlocked the “special” drawer, and took out the camera, once again being careful to hold it by the strap only. He looked with some hope at the front of the Polaroid, thinking he might see that the lens had been smashed in its latest tumble, hoping that the goddam thing’s eye had been poked out, you might say, but his father had been fond of saying that the devil’s luck is always in, and that seemed to be the case with Kevin Delevan’s goddamned camera. The chipped place on the thing’s side had chipped away a little more, but that was all.

He closed the drawer and, as he turned the key, saw the one picture he’d taken in his sleep lying face-down on the floor. As unable not to look at it as Lot’s wife had been unable not to turn back and look at the destruction of Sodom, he picked it up with those blunt fingers that hid their dexterity from the world so well and turned it over.

The dog-creature had begun its spring. Its forepaws had barely left the ground, but along its misshapen backbone and in the bunches of muscle under the hide with its hair like the stiff filaments sticking out of black steel brushes he could see all that kinetic energy beginning to release itself. Its face and head were actually a little blurred in this photograph as its mouth yawned wider, and drifting up from the picture, like a sound heard under glass, he seemed to hear a low and throaty snarl beginning to rise toward a roar. The shadow-photographer looked as if he were trying to stumble back another pace, but what did it matter? That was smoke jetting from the holes in the dog-thing’s muzzle, all right, *smoke*, and more smoke drifting back from the hinges of its open jaws in the little space where the crogged and ugly stake-wall of its teeth ended, and any man would stumble back from a horror like *that*, any man would try to turn and run, but all Pop had to do was look to tell you that the man (of *course* it was a man, maybe once it had been a boy, a teenage boy, but who

had the camera now?) who had taken that picture in mere startled reflex, with a kind of wince of the finger ... that man didn't have a nickel's worth of chances. That man could keep his feet or trip over them, and all the difference it would make would be as to how he died: while he was on his feet or while he was on his ass.

Pop crumpled the picture between his fingers and then stuck his key-ring back into his pocket. He turned, holding what had been Kevin Delevan's Polaroid Sun 660 and was now his Polaroid Sun 660 by the strap and started toward the back of the store; he would pause on the way just long enough to get the sledge. And as he neared the door to the back shed, a shutterflash, huge and white and soundless, went off not in front of his eyes but behind them, in his brain.

He turned back, and now his eyes were as empty as the eyes of a man who has been temporarily blinded by some bright light. He walked past the worktable with the camera now held in his hands at chest level, as one might carry a votive urn or some other sort of religious offering or relic. Halfway between the worktable and the front of the store was a bureau covered with clocks. To its left was one of the barnlike structure's support beams, and from a hook planted in this there hung another clock, an imitation German cuckoo clock. Pop grasped it by the roof and pulled it off its hook, indifferent to the counterweights, which immediately became entangled in one another's chains, and to the pendulum, which snapped off when one of the disturbed chains tried to twine around it. The little door below the roofpeak of the clock sprang ajar; the wooden bird poked out its beak and one startled eye. It gave a single choked *sound—kook!*—as if in protest of this rough treatment before creeping back inside again.

Pop hung the Sun by its strap on the hook where the clock had been, then turned and moved toward the back of the store for the second time, his eyes still blank and dazzled. He clutched the clock by its roof, swinging it back and forth indifferently, not hearing the cluds and clunks from inside it, or the occasional strangled sound that might have been the bird trying to escape, not noticing when one of the counterweights smacked the end of an old bed, snapped

off, and went rolling beneath, leaving a deep trail in the undisturbed dust of years. He moved with the blank mindless purpose of a robot. In the shed, he paused just long enough to pick up the sledgehammer by its smooth shaft. With both hands thus filled, he had to use the elbow of his left arm to knock the hook out of the eyebolt so he could push open the shed door and walk into the backyard.

He crossed to the chopping block and set the imitation German cuckoo clock on it. He stood for a moment with his head inclined down toward it, both of his hands now on the handle of the sledge. His face remained blank, his eyes dim and dazzled, but there was a part of his mind which not only thought clearly but thought all of him was thinking—and acting—clearly. This part of him saw not a cuckoo clock which hadn't been worth much to begin with and was now broken in the bargain; it saw Kevin's Polaroid. This part of his mind really believed he had come downstairs, gotten the Polaroid from the drawer, and proceeded directly out back, pausing only to get the sledge.

And it was this part that would do his remembering later ... unless it became convenient for him to remember some other truth. Or any other truth, for that matter.

Pop Merrill raised the sledgehammer over his right shoulder and brought it down hard—not as hard as Kevin had done, but hard enough to do the job. It struck squarely on the roof of the imitation German cuckoo clock. The clock did not so much break or shatter as *splatter*; pieces of plastic wood and little gears and springs flew everywhere. And what that little piece of Pop which saw would remember (unless, of course, it became convenient to remember otherwise) were pieces of *camera* splattering everywhere.

He pulled the sledge off the block and stood for a moment with his meditating, unseeing eyes on the shambles. The bird, which to Pop looked exactly like a film-case, a Polaroid Sun film-case, was lying on its back with its little wooden feet sticking straight up in the air, looking both deader than any bird outside of a cartoon ever looked and yet somehow miraculously unhurt at the same time. He had his look, then turned and headed back toward the shed door.

“There,” he muttered under his breath. “Good ’nuff.”

Someone standing even very close to him might have been unable to pick up the words themselves, but it would have been hard to miss the unmistakable tone of relief with which they were spoken.

“*That’s* done. Don’t have to worry about *that* anymore. Now what’s next? Pipe-tobacco, isn’t it?”

But when he got to the drugstore on the other side of the block fifteen minutes later, it was not pipe-tobacco he asked for (although that was what he would *remember* asking for). He asked for film.

Polaroid film.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Kevin, I’m going to be late for work if I don’t—”

“Will you call in? Can you? Call in and say you’ll be late, or that you might not get there at all? If it was something really, really, really important?”

Warily, Mr. Delevan asked, “What’s the something?”

“*Could* you?”

Mrs. Delevan was standing in the doorway of Kevin’s bedroom now. Meg was behind her. Both of them were eyeing the man in his business suit and the tall boy, still wearing only his Jockey shorts, curiously.

“I suppose I—yes, say I could. But I won’t until I know what it *is*.”

Kevin lowered his voice, and, cutting his eyes toward the door, he said: “It’s about Pop Merrill. And the camera.”

Mr. Delevan, who had at first only looked puzzled at what Kevin’s eyes were doing, now went to the door. He murmured something to his wife, who nodded. Then he closed the door, paying no more attention to Meg’s protesting whine than he would have to a bird singing a bundle of notes on a telephone wire outside the bedroom window.

“What did you tell Mom?” Kevin asked.

“That it was man-to-man stuff.” Mr. Delevan smiled a little. “I think she thinks you want to talk about masturbating.”

Kevin flushed.

Mr. Delevan looked concerned. “You don’t, do you? I mean, you know about—”

“I know, I know,” Kevin said hastily; he was not about to tell his father (and wasn’t sure he would have been able to put the right string of words together, even if he had wanted to) that what had thrown him momentarily off-track was finding out that not only did *his father* know about whacking off—which of course shouldn’t have

surprised him at all but somehow did, leaving him with feelings of surprise at his own surprise—but that his mother somehow did, too.

Never mind. All this had nothing to do with the nightmares, or with the new certainty which had locked into place in his head.

“It’s about Pop, I told you. And some bad dreams I’ve been having. But mostly it’s about the camera. Because Pop stole it somehow, Dad.”

“Kevin—”

“I beat it to pieces on his chopping block, I know. But it wasn’t my camera. It was another camera. And that isn’t even the worst thing. The worst thing is that *he’s still using mine to take pictures!* And that dog is going to get out! When it does, I think it’s going to kill me. In that other world it’s already started to j-j-j—”

He couldn’t finish. Kevin surprised himself again—this time by bursting into tears.

By the time John Delevan got his son calmed down it was ten minutes of eight, and he had resigned himself to at least being late for work. He held the boy in his arms—whatever it was, it really had the kid shook, and if it really was nothing but a bunch of dreams, Mr. Delevan supposed he would find sex at the root of the matter someplace.

When Kevin was shivering and only sucking breath deep into his lungs in an occasional dry-sob, Mr. Delevan went to the door and opened it cautiously, hoping Kate had taken Meg downstairs. She had; the hallway was empty. *That’s one for our side, anyway*, he thought, and went back to Kevin.

“Can you talk now?” he asked.

“Pop’s got my camera,” Kevin said hoarsely. His red eyes, still watery, peered at his father almost myopically. “He got it somehow, and he’s using it.”

“And this is something you *dreamed?*”

“Yes ... and I remembered something.”

“Kevin ... that was your camera. I’m sorry, son, but it was. I even saw the little chip in the side.”

“He must have rigged that somehow—”

“Kevin, that seems pretty farf—”

“Listen,” Kevin said urgently, “will you just *listen?*”

“All right. Yes. I’m listening.”

“What I remembered was that when he handed me the camera—when we went out back to crunch it, remember?”

“Yes—”

“I looked in the little window where the camera keeps count of how many shots there are left. And it said three, Dad! It said *three!*”

“Well? What about it?”

“It had film in it, too! *Film!* I know, because I remember one of those shiny black things jumping up when I squashed the camera. It jumped up and then it fluttered back down.”

“I repeat: so what?”

“*There wasn’t any film in my camera when I gave it to Pop!* That’s so-what. I had twenty-eight pictures. He wanted me to take thirty more, for a total of fifty-eight. I might have bought more film if I’d known what he was up to, but probably not. By then I was scared of the thing—”

“Yeah. I was, a little, too.”

Kevin looked at him respectfully. “Were you?”

“Yeah. Go on. I think I see where you’re heading.”

“I was just going to say, he chipped in for the film, but not enough—not even half. He’s a *wicked* skinflint, Dad.”

John Delevan smiled thinly. “He is that, my boy. One of the world’s greatest, is what I mean to say. Go on and finish up. Tempus **is fugiting. away** like mad.”

Kevin glanced at the clock. It was almost eight. Although neither of them knew it, Pop would wake up in just under two minutes and start about his morning’s business, very little of which he would remember correctly.

“All right,” Kevin said. “All I’m trying to say is I couldn’t have bought any more film even if I’d wanted to. I used up all the money I had

buying the three film packs. I even borrowed a buck from Megan, so I let her shoot a couple, too.”

“Between the two of you, you used up all the exposures? Every single one?”

“*Yes! Yes!* He even said it was fifty-eight! And between the time when I finished shooting all the pictures he wanted and when we went to look at the tape he made, I never bought any more film. It was *dead empty* when I brought it in, Dad! The number in the little window was a *zero!* I saw it, I remember! So if it was my camera, how come it said *three* in the window when we went back downstairs?”

“He *couldn't* have—” Then his father stopped, and a queer look of uncharacteristic gloom came over his face as he realized that Pop could have, and that the truth of it was this: he, John Delevan, didn't want to believe that Pop *had*; that even bitter experience had not been sufficient vaccination against foolishness, and Pop might have pulled the wool over his own eyes as well as those of his son.

“Couldn't have *what?* What are you thinking about, Dad? Something just hit you!”

Something had hit him, all right. How eager Pop had been to go downstairs and get the original Polaroids so they could all get a closer look at the thing around the dog's neck, the thing that turned out to be Kevin's latest string tie from Aunt Hilda, the one with the bird on it that was probably a woodpecker.

*We might as well go down with you*, Kevin had said when Pop had offered to get the photos, but hadn't Pop jumped up himself, chipper as a chickadee? *Won't take a minute*, the old man had said, or some such thing, and the truth was, Mr. Delevan told himself, I hardly noticed *what* he was saying or doing, because I wanted to watch that goddamned tape again. And the truth also was this: Pop hadn't even had to pull the old switcheroo right in front of them—although, with his eyes unwooled, Mr. Delevan was reluctantly willing to believe the old son of a bitch had probably been prepared to do just that, if he had to, and probably could have done it, too, pushing seventy or not. With them upstairs and him downstairs, presumably doing no more

than getting Kevin's photographs, he could have swapped *twenty* cameras, at his leisure.

"Dad?"

"I suppose he could have," Mr. Delevan said. "But why?"

Kevin could only shake his head. He didn't know why. But that was all right; Mr. Delevan thought he did, and it was something of a relief. Maybe honest men *didn't* have to learn the world's simplest truths over and over again; maybe some of those truths eventually stuck fast. He'd only had to articulate the question aloud in order to find the answer. Why did the Pop Merrills of this world do anything? To make a profit. That was the reason, the whole reason, and nothing but the reason. Kevin had wanted to destroy it. After looking at Pop's videotape, Mr. Delevan had found himself in accord with that. Of the three of them, who had been the only one capable of taking a longer view?

Why, Pop, or course. Reginald Marion "Pop" Merrill.

John Delevan had been sitting on the edge of Kevin's bed with an arm about his son's shoulders. Now he stood up. "Get dressed. I'll go downstairs and call in. I'll tell Brandon I'll probably just be late, but to assume I won't be in at all."

He was preoccupied with this, already talking to Brandon Reed in his mind, but not so preoccupied he didn't see the gratitude which lighted his son's worried face. Mr. Delevan smiled a little and felt that uncharacteristic gloom first ease and then let go entirely. There was this much, at least: his son was as yet not too old to take comfort from him, or accept him as a higher power to whom appeals could sometimes be directed in the knowledge that they would be acted upon; nor was he himself too old to take comfort from his son's comfort.

"I think," he said, moving toward the door, "that we ought to pay a call on Pop Merrill." He glanced at the clock on Kevin's night-table. It was ten minutes after eight, and in back of the Emporium Galorium, a sledgehammer was coming down on an imitation German cuckoo clock. "He usually opens around eight-thirty. Just about the time we'll get there, I think. If you get a wiggle on, that is."

He paused on his way out and a brief, cold smile flickered on his mouth. He was not smiling at his son. "I think he's got some explaining to do, is what I mean to say."

Mr. Delevan went out, closing the door behind him. Kevin quickly began to dress.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Castle Rock LaVerdiere's Super Drug Store was a lot more than just a drugstore. Put another way, it was really only a drugstore as an afterthought. It was as if someone had noticed at the last moment—just before the grand opening, say—that one of the words in the sign was still “Drug.” That someone might have made a mental note to tell someone else, someone in the company's management, that here they were, opening yet another LaVerdiere's, and they had by simple oversight neglected yet again to correct the sign so it read, more simply and accurately, LaVerdiere's Super Store ... and, after making the mental note, the someone in charge of noticing such things had delayed the grand opening a day or two so they could shoe-horn in a prescription counter about the size of a telephone booth in the long building's furthest, darkest, and most neglected comer.

The LaVerdiere's Super Drug Store was really more of a jumped-up five-and-dime than anything else. The town's last real five-and-dime, a long dim room with feeble, fly-specked overhead globes hung on chains and reflected murkily in the creaking but often-waxed wooden floor, had been The Ben Franklin Store. It had given up the ghost in 1978 to make way for a video-games arcade called Galaxia and E-Z Video Rentals, where Tuesday was Toofers Day and no one under the age of twenty could go in the back room.

LaVerdiere's carried everything the old Ben Franklin had carried, but the goods were bathed in the pitiless light of Maxi-Glo fluorescent bars which gave every bit of stock its own hectic, feverish shimmer. *Buy me!* each item seemed to shriek. *Buy me or you may die! Or your wife may die! Or your kids! Or your best friend! Possibly all of them at once! Why? How should I know? I'm just a brainless item sitting on a pre-fab LaVerdiere's shelf! But doesn't it feel true? You know it does! So buy me and buy me RIGHT. . . Now!*

There was an aisle of notions, two aisles of first-aid supplies and nostrums, an aisle of video and audio tapes (both blank and pre-recorded). There was a long rack of magazines giving way to paperback books, a display of lighters under one digital cash-register and a display of watches under another (a third register was hidden in the dark corner where the pharmacist lurked in his lonely shadows). Halloween candy had taken over most of the toy aisle (the toys would not only come back after Halloween but eventually take over two whole aisles as the days slid remorselessly down toward Christmas). And, like something too neat to exist in reality except as a kind of dumb admission that there *was* such a thing as Fate with a capital F, and that Fate might, in its own way, indicate the existence of that whole “other world” about which Pop had never before cared (except in terms of how it might fatten his pocketbook, that was) and about which Kevin Delevan had never before even thought, at the front of the store, in the main display area, was a carefully arranged work of salesmanship which was billed as the FALL FOTO FESTIVAL.

This display consisted of a basket of colorful autumn leaves spilling out on the floor in a bright flood (a flood too large to actually have come from that one basket alone, a careful observer might have concluded). Amid the leaves were a number of Kodak and Polaroid cameras—several Sun 660s among the latter—and all sorts of other equipment: cases, albums, film, flashbars. In the midst of this odd cornucopia, an old-fashioned tripod rose like one of H. G. Wells’s Martian death-machines towering over the crispy wreck of London. It bore a sign which told all patrons interested enough to look that this week one could obtain SUPER REDUCITONS ON ALL POLAROID CAMERAS & ACCESSORIES!

At eight-thirty that morning, half an hour after La-Verdiere’s opened for the day, “all patrons” consisted of Pop Merrill and Pop alone. He took no notice of the display but marched straight to the only open counter, where Molly Durham had just finished laying out the watches on their imitation-velvet display-cloth.

*Oh no, here comes old Eyeballs*, she thought, and grimaced. Pop’s idea of a really keen way to kill a stretch of time about as long

as Molly's coffee-break was to kind of ooze up to the counter where she was working (he always picked hers, even if he had to stand in line; in fact, she thought he liked it better when there was a line) and buy a pouch of Prince Albert tobacco. This was a purchase an ordinary fellow could transact in maybe thirty seconds, but if she got Eyeballs out of her face in under three minutes, she thought she was doing very well indeed. He kept all of his money in a cracked leather purse on a chain, and he'd haul it out of his pocket—giving his doorbells a good feel on the way, it always looked to Motty—and then open it. It always gave out a little *screeeeek!* noise, and honest to God if you didn't expect to see a moth flutter out of it, just like in those cartoons people draw of tightwads. On top of the purse's contents there would be a whole mess of paper money, bills that looked somehow as if you shouldn't handle them, as if they might be coated with disease germs of some kind, and jingling silver underneath. Pop would fish out a dollar bill and then kind of hook the other bills to one side with one of those thick fingers of his to get to the change underneath—he'd never give you a couple of bucks, hunh-uh, that would make everything too quick to suit him—and then he'd work that out, too. And all the time his eyes would be busy, flicking down to the purse for a second or two but mostly letting the fingers sort out the proper coins by touch while his eyes crawled over her boobs, her belly, her hips, and then back up to her boobs again. Never once her face; not even so far as her mouth, which was a part of a girl in which most men seemed to be interested; no, Pop Merrill was strictly interested in the lower portions of the female anatomy. When he finally finished—and no matter how quick that was, it always seemed like three times as long to Molly—and got the hell out of the store again, she always felt like going somewhere and taking a long shower.

So she braced herself, put on her best it's-only-eight-thirty-and-I've-got-seven-and-a-half-hours-to-go smile, and stood at the counter as Pop approached. She told herself, *He's only looking at you, guys have been doing that since you sprouted,*

and that was true, but this wasn't the same. Because Pop Merrill wasn't like most of the guys who had run their eyes over her trim and

eminently watchable superstructure since that time ten years ago. Part of it was that Pop was old, but that wasn't all of it. The truth was that some guys looked at you and some—a very few—seemed to actually be feeling you up with their eyes, and Merrill was one of *those*. His gaze actually seemed to have weight; when he fumbled in his creaky old-maid's purse on its length of incongruously masculine chain, she seemed to actually feel his eyes squirming up and down her front, lashing their way up her hills on their optic nerves like tadpoles and then sliding bonelessly down into her valleys, making her wish she had worn a nun's habit to work that day. Or maybe a suit of armor.

But her mother had been fond of saying *What can't be cured must be endured, sweet Molly*, and until someone discovered a method of weighing gazes so those of dirty men both young and old could be outlawed, or, more likely, until Pop Merrill did everyone in Castle Rock a favor by dying so that eyesore of a tourist trap he kept could be torn down, she would just have to deal with it as best she could.

But today she was in for a pleasant surprise—or so it seemed at first. Pop's usual hungry appraisal was not even an ordinary patron's look; it seemed utterly blank. It wasn't that he looked through her, or that his gaze struck her and bounced off. It seemed to Molly that he was so deep in his thoughts that his usually penetrating look did not even reach her, but made it about halfway and then petered out—like a man trying to locate and observe a star on the far side of the galaxy with just the naked eye.

“May I help you, Mr. Merrill?” she asked, and her feet were already cocking so she could turn quickly and reach up for where the pouches of tobacco were kept. With Pop, this was a task she always did as quickly as possible, because when she turned and reached, she could feel his eyes crawling busily over her ass, dropping for a quick check of her legs, then rising again to her butt for a final ocular squeeze and perhaps a pinch before she turned back.

“Yes,” he said calmly and serenely, and he might as well have been talking to one of those automated bank machines for all the interest in her he showed. That was fine by Molly. “I'd like some” and then either a word she didn't hear right or one that was utter

gibberish. If it was gobbledegook, she thought with some hope, maybe the first few parts of the complicated network of dikes, levees, and spillways the old crock had constructed against the rising sea of senility were finally giving way.

It *sounded* as if he had said *toefilmacco*, which wasn't a product they stocked ... unless it was a prescription drug of some sort.

"I beg pardon, Mr. Merrill?"

"Film," he said, so clearly and firmly that Molly was more than disappointed; she was convinced he must have said it just that way the first time and her ears had picked it up wrong. Maybe *she* was the one who was beginning to lose her dikes and levees.

"What kind would you like?"

"Polaroid," he said. "Two packs." She didn't know exactly what was going on here, but it was beyond doubt that Castle Rock's premier dirty old man was not himself today. His eyes would still not focus, and the words ... they reminded her of something, something she associated with her five-year-old niece, Ellen, but she couldn't catch hold of it.

"For what model, Mr. Merrill?"

She sounded brittle and actressy to herself, but Pop Merrill didn't even come close to noticing. Pop was lost in the ozone.

After a moment's consideration in which he did not look at her at all but seemed instead to study the racks of cigarettes behind her left shoulder, he jerked out: "For a Polaroid Sun camera. Model 660." And then it came to her, even as she told him she'd have to get it from the display. Her niece owned a big soft panda toy, which she had, for reasons which would probably make sense only to another little girl, named Paulette. Somewhere inside of Paulette was an electronic circuitboard and a memory chip on which were stored about four hundred short, simple sentences such as "I like to hug, don't you?" and "I wish you'd *never* go away." Whenever you poked Paulette above her fuzzy little navel, there was a brief pause and then one of those lovesome little remarks would come out, almost jerk out, in a somehow remote and emotionless voice that seemed by its tone to deny the content of the words. Ellen thought Paulette was the nuts. Molly thought there was something creepy about it;

she kept expecting Ellen to poke the panda-doll in the guts someday and it would surprise them all (except for Aunt Molly from Castle Rock) by saying what was *really* on its mind. "I think tonight after you're asleep I'll strangle you dead," perhaps, or maybe just "I have a knife."

Pop Merrill sounded like Paulette the stuffed panda this morning. His blank gaze was uncannily like Paulette's. Molly had thought any change from the old man's usual leer would be a welcome one. She had been wrong.

Molly bent over the display, for once totally unconscious of the way her rump was poking out, and tried to find what the old man wanted as quickly as she could. She was sure that when she turned around, Pop would be looking at anything but her. This time she was right. When she had the film and started back (brushing a couple of errant fall leaves from one of the boxes), Pop was still staring at the cigarette racks, at first glance appearing to look so closely he might have been inventorying the stock. It took a second or two to see that that expression was no expression at all, really, but a gaze of almost divine blankness.

*Please get out of here, Molly prayed. Please, just take your film and go. And whatever else you do, don't touch me. Please.*

If he touched her while he was looking like that, Molly thought she would scream. Why did the place have to be empty? Why couldn't at least one other customer be in here, preferably Sheriff Pangborn, but since he seemed to be otherwise engaged, anyone at all? She supposed Mr. Constantine, the pharmacist, was in the store someplace, but the drug counter looked easily a quarter of a mile away, and while she knew it couldn't be that far, not really, it was still too far for him to reach her in a hurry if old man Merrill decided to touch her. And suppose Mr. Constantine had gone out to Nan's for coffee with Mr. Keeton from the selectmen's office? The more she thought about that possibility, the more likely it seemed. When something genuinely weird like this happened, wasn't it an almost foregone conclusion that it should happen while one was alone?

*He's having a mental breakdown of some kind.*

She heard herself saying with glassy cheerfulness: “Here you are, Mr. Merrill.” She put the film on the counter and scooted to her left and behind the register at once, wanting it between her and him.

The ancient leather purse came out of Pop Merrill’s pants, and her stuttering fingers miskeyed the purchase so she had to clear the register and start again.

He was holding two ten-dollar bills out to her.

She told herself they were only *rumpled* from being squashed up with the other bills in that little pocketbook, probably not even old, although they *looked* old. That didn’t stop her galloping mind, however. Her mind insisted that they weren’t just *rumpled*, they were rumpled and *slimy*. It further insisted that old wasn’t the right word, that old wasn’t even in the ballpark. For those particular items of currency, not even the word *ancient* would do. Those were *prehistoric* tens, somehow printed before Christ was born and Stonehenge was built, before the first low-browed, no-neck Neanderthal had crawled out of his cave. They belonged to a time when even God had been a baby.

She didn’t want to touch them.

She *had* to touch them.

The man would want his change.

Steeling herself, she took the bills and shoved them into the cash register as fast as she could, banging a finger so hard she ripped most of the nail clear off, an ordinarily exquisite pain she would not notice, in her extreme state of distress, until sometime later ... when, that was, she had chivvied her willing mind around enough to scold herself for acting like a whoopsy little girl on the edge of her first menstrual period.

At the moment, however, she only concentrated on getting the bills into the register as fast as she could and getting her hand *off* them, but even later she would remember what the surfaces of those tens had felt like. It felt as if they were actually crawling and moving under the pads of her fingers; as if billions of germs, *huge* germs almost big enough to be seen with the naked eye, were sliding along them toward her, eager to infect her with whatever he had.

But the man would want his change.

She concentrated on that, lips pressed together so tightly they were dead white; four singles that did not, absolutely did *not* want to come out from beneath the roller that held them down in the cash drawer. Then a dime, but oh Jesus-please-us, there *were* no dimes, and what the hell was *wrong* with her, what had she done to be saddled for so long with this weird old man on the one morning in recorded history when he actually seemed to want to get out of here in a hurry?

She fished out a nickel, feeling the silent, stinky loom of him so close to her (and she felt that when she was finally forced to look up she would see he was even closer, that he was leaning over the counter toward her), then three pennies, four, five ... but the last one dropped back into the drawer among the quarters and she had to fish for it with one of her cold, numb fingers. It almost squirted away from her again; she could feel sweat popping out on the nape of her neck and on the little strip of skin between her nose and her upper lip. Then, clutching the coins tightly in her fist and praying he wouldn't have his hand outstretched to receive them so she would have to touch his dry, reptilian skin, but knowing, somehow *knowing* that he would, she looked up, feeling her bright and cheery LaVerdiere's smile stretching the muscles of her face in a kind of frozen scream, trying to steel herself for even *that*, telling herself it would be the last, and never mind the image her stupid, insistent mind kept trying to make her see, an image of that dry hand suddenly snapping shut over hers like the talon of some old and horrid bird, a bird not of prey, no, not even that, but one of carrion; she told herself she did not see those images, absolutely did *NOT*, and, seeing them all the same, she looked up with that smile screaming off her face as brightly as a cry of murder on a hot still night, and the store was empty.

Pop was gone.

He had left while she was making change.

Molly began to shudder all over. If she had needed concrete proof that the old geezer was not right, this was it. This was proof positive, proof indubitable, proof of the purest ray serene: for the first time in her memory (and in the living memory of the town, she would have

bet, and she would have won her bet), Pop Merrill, who refused to tip even on those rare occasions when he was forced to eat in a restaurant that had no take-out service, had left a place of business without waiting for his change.

Molly tried to open her hand and let go of the four ones, the nickel, and the five pennies. She was stunned to find she couldn't do it. She had to reach over with her other hand and pry the fingers loose. Pop's change dropped to the glass top of the counter and she swept it off to one side, not wanting to touch it.

And she never wanted to see Pop Merrill again.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Pop's vacant gaze held as he left LaVerdiere's. It held as he crossed the sidewalk with the boxes of film in his hand. It broke and became an expression of somehow unsettling alertness as he stepped off into the gutter ... and stopped there, with one foot on the sidewalk and one planted amid the litter of squashed cigarette butts and empty potato-chip bags. Here was another Pop Molly would not have recognized, although there were those who had been sharp-traded by the old man who would have known it quite well. This was neither Merrill the lecher nor Merrill the robot, but Merrill the animal with its wind up. All at once he was there, in a way he seldom allowed himself to be there in public. Showing so much of one's true self in public was not, in Pop's estimation, a good idea. This morning, however, he was far from being in command of himself, and there was no one out to observe him, anyway. If there had been, that person would not have seen Pop the folksy crackerbarrel philosopher or even Pop the sharp trader, but something like the spirit of the man. In that moment of being totally there, Pop looked like a rogue dog himself, a stray who has gone feral and now pauses amid a midnight henhouse slaughter, raggedy ears up, head cocked, bloodstreaked teeth showing a little as he hears some sound from the farmer's house and thinks of the shotgun with its wide black holes like a figure eight rolled onto its side. The dog knows nothing of figure eights, but even a dog may recognize the dim shape of eternity if its instincts are honed sharp enough.

Across the town square he could see the urine-yellow front of the Emporium Galorium, standing slightly apart from its nearest neighbors: the vacant building which had housed The Village Washtub until earlier that year, Nan's Luncheonette, and You Sew and Sew, the dress-and-notions shop run by Evvie Chalmers's great-granddaughter, Polly-a woman of whom we must speak at another time.

There were slant-parking spaces in front of all the shops on Lower Main Street, and all of them were empty ... except for one, which was just now being filled with a Ford station-wagon Pop recognized. The light throb of its engine was clearly audible in the morning-still air. Then it cut off, the brakelights went out, and Pop pulled back the foot which had been in the gutter and prudently withdrew himself to the corner of LaVerdiere's. Here he stood as still as that dog who has been alerted in the henhouse by some small sound, the sort of sound which might be disregarded in the killing frenzy of dogs neither so old nor so wise as this one.

John Delevan got out from behind the wheel of the station-wagon. The boy got out on the passenger side. They went to the door of the Emporium Galorium. The man began to knock impatiently, loud enough so the sound of it came as clearly to Pop as the sound of the engine had done. Delevan paused, they both listened, and then Delevan started in again, not knocking now but hammering at the door, and you didn't have to be a goddam mind-reader to know the man was steamed up.

*They know, Pop thought. Somehow they know. Damned good thing I smashed the fucking camera.*

He stood a moment longer, nothing moving except his hooded eyes, and then he slipped around the corner of the drugstore and into the alley between it and the neighboring bank. He did it so smoothly that a man fifty years younger might have envied the almost effortless agility of the movement.

This morning, Pop figured, it might be a little wiser to go back home by backyard express.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When there was still no answer, John Delevan went at the door a third time, hammering so hard he made the glass rattle loosely in its rotting putty gums and hurt his hand. It was hurting his hand that made him realize how angry he was. Not that he felt the anger was in any way unjustified if Merrill had done what Kevin thought he had done—and yes, the more he thought about it, the more John Delevan was sure that Kevin was right. But he was surprised that he hadn't recognized the anger for what it was until just now.

*This seems to be a morning for learning about myself*, he thought, and there was something schoolmarmish in that. It allowed him to smile and relax a little.

Kevin was not smiling, nor did he look relaxed.

"It seems like one of three things has happened," Mr. Delevan said to his son. "Merrill's either not up, not answering the door, or he figured we were getting warm and he's absconded with your camera." He paused, then actually laughed. "I guess there's a fourth, too. Maybe he died in his sleep."

"He didn't die." Kevin now stood with his head against the dirty glass of the door he mightily wished he had never gone through in the first place. He had his hands cupped around his eyes to make blinders, because the sun rising over the east side of the town square ran a harsh glare across the glass. "Look."

Mr. Delevan cupped his own hands to the sides of his face and pressed his nose to the glass. They stood there side by side, backs to the square, looking into the dimness of the Emporium Galorium like the world's most dedicated window-shoppers. "Well," he said after a few seconds, "it looks like if he absconded he left his shit behind."

"Yeah—but that's not what I mean. Do you see it?"

"See what?"

“Hanging on that post. The one by the bureau with all the clocks on it.”

And after a moment, Mr. Delevan did see it: a Polaroid camera, hanging by its strap from a hook on the post. He thought he could even see the chipped place, although that might have been his imagination.

*It's not your imagination.*

The smile faded off his lips as he realized he was starting to feel what Kevin was feeling: the weird and distressing certainty that some simple yet terribly dangerous piece of machinery was running ... and unlike most of Pop's clocks, it was running right on time.

“Do you think he's just sitting upstairs and waiting for us to go away?” Mr. Delevan spoke aloud, but he was really talking to himself. The lock on the door looked both new and expensive ... but he was willing to bet that if one of them—probably Kevin was in better shape—hit the door hard enough, it would rip right through the old wood. He mused randomly: *A lock is only as good as the door you put it in. People never think.*

Kevin turned his strained face to look at his father. In that moment, John Delevan was as struck by Kevin's face as Kevin had been by his not long ago. He thought: *I wonder how many fathers get a chance to see what their sons will look like as men? He won't always look this strained, this tightly drawn— God, I hope not—but this is what he will look like. And, Jesus, he's going to be handsome!*

He, like Kevin, had that one moment in the midst of whatever it was that was going on here, and the moment was a short one, but he also never forgot; it was always within his mind's reach.

“What?” Kevin asked hoarsely. “What, Dad?”

“You want to bust it? Because I'd go along.”

“Not yet. I don't think we'll have to. I don't think he's here ... but he's close.”

*You can't know any such thing. Can't even think it.*

But his son did think it, and he believed Kevin was right. Some sort of link had been formed between Pop and his son. “Some sort” of link? Get serious. He knew perfectly well what the link was. It was that fucking camera hanging on the wall in there, and the longer this

went on, the longer he felt that machinery running, its gears grinding and its vicious unthinking cogs turning, the less he liked it.

*Break the camera, break the link*, he thought, and said: "Are you sure, Kev?"

"Let's go around to the back. Try the door there."

"There's a gate. He'll keep it locked."

"Maybe we can climb over."

"Okay," Mr. Delevan said, and followed his son down the steps of the Emporium Galorium and around to the alley, wondering as he went if he had lost his mind.

But the gate wasn't locked. Somewhere along the line Pop had forgotten to lock it, and although Mr. Delevan hadn't liked the idea of climbing over the fence, or maybe *falling* over the fence, quite likely tearing the hell out of his balls in the process, he somehow liked the open gate even less. All the same, he and Kevin went through it and into Pop's littered backyard, which not even the drifts of fallen October leaves could improve.

Kevin wove his way through the piles of junk Pop had thrown out but not bothered to take to the dump, and Mr. Delevan followed him. They arrived at the chopping block at about the same time Pop was coming out of Mrs. Althea Linden's backyard and onto Mulberry Street, a block west. He would follow Mulberry Street until he reached the offices of the Wolf Jaw Lumber Company. Although the company's pulp trucks would already be coursing the roads of western Maine and the yowl and yark of the cutters' chainsaws would have been rising from the area's diminishing stands of hardwood since six-thirty or so, no one would come in to man the office until nine, which was still a good fifteen minutes away. At the rear of the lumber company's tiny backyard was a high board fence. It was gated, and this gate was locked, but Pop had the key. He would unlock the gate and step through into his own backyard.

Kevin reached the chopping block. Mr. Delevan caught up, followed his son's gaze, and blinked. He opened his mouth to ask

what in the hell *this* was all about, then shut it again. He was starting to have an idea of what in the hell it was all about without any aid from Kevin. It wasn't *right* to have such ideas, wasn't *natural*, and he knew from bitter experience (in which Reginald Marion "Pop" Merrill himself had played a part at one point, as he had told his son not so long ago) that doing things on impulse was a good way to reach the wrong decision and go flying off half-cocked, but it didn't matter. Although he did not think it in such terms, it would be fair to say Mr. Delevan just hoped he could apply for readmittance to the Reasonable tribe when this was over.

At first he thought he was looking at the smashed remains of a Polaroid camera. Of course that was just his mind, trying to find a little rationality in repetition; what lay on and around the chopping block didn't look anything at all like a camera, Polaroid or otherwise. All those gears and flywheels could only belong to a clock. Then he saw the dead cartoon-bird and even knew what kind of clock. He opened his mouth to ask Kevin why in God's name Pop would bring a cuckoo clock out back and then sledgehammer it to death. He thought it over again and decided he didn't have to ask, after all. The answer to that was also beginning to come. He didn't *want* it to come, because it pointed to madness on what seemed to Mr. Delevan a grand scale, but that didn't matter; it came anyway.

You had to hang a cuckoo clock on something. You had to hang it because of the pendulum weights. And what did you hang it on? Why, a hook, of course.

Maybe a hook sticking out of a beam.

Like the beam Kevin's Polaroid had been hanging on.

Now he spoke, and his words seemed to come from some long distance away: "What in the hell is wrong with him, Kevin? Has he gone nuts?"

"Not *gone*," Kevin answered, and his voice also seemed to come from some long distance away as they stood above the chopping block, looking down on the busted timepiece. "*Driven* there. By the camera."

"We've got to smash it," Mr. Delevan said. His voice seemed to float to his ears long after he had felt the words coming out of his

mouth.

“Not yet,” Kevin said. “We have to go to the drugstore first. They’re having a special sale on them.”

“Having a special sale on wh—”

Kevin touched his arm. John Delevan looked at him. Kevin’s head was up, and he looked like a deer scenting fire. In that moment the boy was more than handsome; he was almost divine, like a young poet at the hour of his death.

“*What?*” Mr. Delevan asked urgently.

“Did you hear something?” Alertness slowly changing to doubt.

“A car on the street,” Mr. Delevan said. How much older was he than his son? he wondered suddenly. Twenty-five years? Jesus, wasn’t it time he started acting it?

He pushed the strangeness away from him, trying to get it at arm’s length. He groped desperately for his maturity and found a little of it. Putting it on was like putting on a badly tattered overcoat.

“You sure that’s all it was, Dad?”

“Yes. Kevin, you’re wound up too tight. Get hold of yourself or ...” Or what? But he knew, and laughed shakily. “Or you’ll have us both running like a pair of rabbits.”

Kevin looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, like someone coming out of a deep sleep, perhaps even a trance, and then nodded. “Come on.”

“Kevin, why? What do you want? He could be upstairs, just not answering—”

“I’ll tell you when we get there, Dad. Come *on.*” And almost dragged his father out of the littered backyard and into the narrow alleyway.

“Kevin, do you want to take my arm off, or what?” Mr. Delevan asked when they got back to the sidewalk.

“He was back there,” Kevin said. “Hiding. Waiting for us to go. I felt him.”

“He was—” Mr. Delevan stopped, then started again. “Well ... let’s say he was. Just for argument, let’s say he was. Shouldn’t we go back there and collar him?” And, belatedly: “*Where* was he?”

“On the other side of the fence,” Kevin said. His eyes seemed to be floating. Mr. Delevan liked this less all the time. “He’s already been. He’s already got what he needs. We’ll have to hurry.”

Kevin was already starting for the edge of the sidewalk, meaning to cut across the town square to LaVerdiere’s. Mr. Delevan reached out and grabbed him like a conductor grabbing a fellow he’s caught trying to sneak aboard a train without a ticket. “*Kevin, what are you talking about?*”

And then Kevin actually said it: looked at him and said it. “It’s coming, Dad. Please. It’s my life.” He looked at his father, pleading with his pallid face and his fey, floating eyes. “The dog is coming. It won’t do any good to just break in and take the camera. It’s gone way past that now. Please don’t stop me. Please don’t wake me up. It’s my *life*.”

Mr. Delevan made one last great effort not to give in to this creeping craziness ... and then succumbed.

“Come on,” he said, hooking his hand around his son’s elbow and almost dragging him into the square. “Whatever it is, let’s get it done.” He paused. “Do we have enough time?”

“I’m not sure,” Kevin said, and then, reluctantly: “I don’t think so.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Pop waited behind the board fence, looking at the Delevans through a knothole. He had put his tobacco in his back pocket so that his hands would be free to clench and unclench, clench and unclench.

*You're on my property*, his mind whispered at them, and if his mind had had the power to kill, he would have reached out with it and struck them both dead. *You're on my property, goddammit, you're on my property!*

What he ought to do was go get old John Law and bring him down on their fancy Castle View heads. That was what he ought to do. And he would have done it, too, right then, if they hadn't been standing over the wreckage of the camera the boy himself had supposedly destroyed with Pop's blessing two weeks ago. He thought maybe he would have tried to bullshit his way through anyway, but he knew how they felt about him in this town. Pangborn, Keeton, all the rest of them. Trash. That's what they thought of him. Trash.

Until they got their asses in a crack and needed a fast loan and the sun was down, that was.

Clench, unclench. Clench, unclench.

They were talking, but Pop didn't bother listening to what they were saying. His mind was a fuming forge. Now the litany had become: *They're on my goddam property and I can't do a thing about it! They're on my goddam property and I can't do a thing about it! Goddam them! Goddam them!*

At last they left. When he heard the rusty screech of the gate in the alley, Pop used his key on the one in the board fence. He slipped through and ran across the yard to his back door—ran with an unsettling fleetness for a man of seventy, with one hand clapped firmly against his upper right leg, as if, fleet or not, he was fighting a bad rheumatism pain there. In fact, Pop was feeling no pain at all. He didn't want either his keys or the change in his purse jingling, that

was all. In case the Delevans were still there, lurking just beyond where he could see. Pop wouldn't have been surprised if they were doing just that. When you were dealing with skunks, you expected them to get up to stinking didos.

He slipped his keys out of his pocket. *Now* they rattled, and although the sound was muted, it seemed very loud to him. He cut his eyes to the left for a moment, sure he would see the brat's staring sheep's face. Pop's mouth was set in a hard, strained grin of fear. There was no one there.

Yet, anyway.

He found the right key, slipped it into the lock, and went in. He was careful not to open the door to the shed too wide, because the hinges picked up a squeal when you exercised them too much.

Inside, he turned the thumb-bolt with a savage twist and then went into the Emporium Galorium. He was more than at home in these shadows. He could have negotiated the narrow, junk-lined corridors in his sleep ... *had*, in fact, although that, like a good many other things, had slipped his mind for the time being.

There was a dirty little side window near the front of the store that looked out upon the narrow alleyway the Delevans had used to trespass their way into his backyard. It also gave a sharply angled view on the sidewalk and part of the town common.

Pop slipped up to this window between piles of useless, valueless magazines that breathed their dusty yellow museum scent into the dark air. He looked out into the alley and saw it was empty. He looked to the right and saw the Delevans, wavery as fish in an aquarium through this dirty, flawed glass, crossing the common just below the bandstand. He didn't watch them out of sight in this window or go to the front windows to get a better angle on them. He guessed they were going over to LaVerdiere's, and since they had already been here, they would be asking about him. What could the little counter-slut tell them? That he had been and gone. Anything else?

Only that he had bought two pouches of tobacco.

Pop smiled.

*That* wasn't likely to hang him.

He found a brown bag, went out back, started for the chopping block, considered, then went to the gate in the alleyway instead. Careless once didn't mean a body had to be careless again.

After the gate was locked, he took his bag to the chopping block and picked up the pieces of shattered Polaroid camera. He worked as fast as he could, but he took time to be thorough.

He picked up everything but little shards and splinters that could be seen as no more than anonymous litter. A Police Lab investigating unit would probably be able to ID some of the stuff left around; Pop had seen TV crime shows (when he wasn't watching X-rated movies on his VCR, that was) where those scientific fellows went over the scene of a crime with little brushes and vacuums and even pairs of tweezers, putting things in little plastic bags, but the Castle Rock Sheriff's Department didn't have one of those units. And Pop doubted if Sheriff Pangborn could talk the State Police into sending their crime wagon, even if Pangborn himself could be persuaded to make the effort—not for what was no more than a case of camera theft, and that was all the Delevans could accuse him of without sounding crazy. Once he had policed the area, he went back inside, unlocked his “special” drawer, and deposited the brown bag inside. He relocked the drawer and put his keys back in his pocket. *That* was all right, then. He knew all about search warrants, too. It would be a snowy day in hell before the Delevans could get Pangborn into district court to ask for one of those. Even if he was crazy enough to try, the remains of the goddamned camera would be *gone—permanently—long* before they could turn the trick. To try and dispose of the pieces for good right now would be more dangerous than leaving them in the locked drawer. The Delevans would come back and catch him right in the middle of it. Best to wait.

Because they would be back.

Pop Merrill knew that as well as he knew his own name.

Later, perhaps, after all this hooraw and foolishment died down, he would be able to go to the boy and say Yes. *That's right. Everything*

*you think I did, I did. Now why don't we just leave her alone and go back to not knowin each other... all right? We can afford to do that. You might not think so, at least not at first, but we can. Because look—you wanted to bust it up because you thought it was dangerous, and I wanted to sell it because I thought it was valuable. Turned out you was right and I was wrong, and that's all the revenge you're ever gonna need. If you knew me better, you'd know why—there ain't many men in this town that have ever heard me say such a thing. It sticks in my gut, is what I mean to say, but that don't matter, when I'm wrong, I like to think I'm big enough to own up to it, no matter how bad it hurts. In the end, boy, I did what you meant to do in the first place. We all came out on the same street, is what I mean to say, and I think we ought to let bygones be bygones. I know what you think of me, and I know what I think of you, and neither of us would ever vote for the other one to be Grand Marshal in the annual Fourth of July parade, but that's all right; we can live with that, can't we? What I mean to say is just this: we're both glad that goddam camera is gone, so let's call it quits and walk away.*

But that was for later, and even then it was only perhaps. It wouldn't do for right now, that was for sure. They would need time to cool down. Right now both of them would be raring to tear a chunk out of his ass, like

*(the dog in that pitcher)*

like ... well, never mind what they'd be like. The important thing was to be down here, business as usual and as innocent as a goddam baby when they got back.

Because they *would* be back.

But that was all right. It was all right because—

“B’cause things are under control,” Pop whispered. “*That’s* what I mean to say.”

Now he did go to the front door, and switched the CLOSED sign over to OPEN (he then turned it promptly back to CLOSED again, but this Pop did not observe himself doing, nor would he remember it later). All right; that was a start. What was next? Make it look like just another normal day, no more and no less. He had to be all surprise and what-in-the-tar-nation-are-you-talking-about when they came

back with steam coming out of their collars, all ready to do or die for what had already been killed just as dead as sheepdip.

So ... what was the most normal thing they could find him doing when they came back, with Sheriff Pangborn or without him?

Pop's eye fixed on the cuckoo clock hanging from the beam beside that nice bureau he'd gotten at an estate sale in Sebago a month or six weeks ago. Not a very nice cuckoo clock, probably one originally purchased with trading stamps by some soul trying to be thrifty (people who could only try to be thrifty were, in Pop's estimation, poor puzzled souls who drifted through life in a vague and constant state of disappointment). Still, if he could put it right so it would run a little, he could maybe sell it to one of the skiers who would be up in another month or two, somebody who needed a clock at their cottage or ski-lodge because the last bargain had up and died and who didn't understand yet (and probably never would) that another bargain wasn't the solution but the problem.

Pop would feel sorry for that person, and would dicker with him or her as fairly as he thought he could, but he wouldn't disappoint the buyer. *Caveet emperor* was not only what he meant to say but often did say, and he had a living to make, didn't he?

Yes. So he would just sit back there at his worktable and fuss around with that clock, see if he could get it running, and when the Delevans got back, that was what they would find him doing. Maybe there'd even be a few prospective customers browsing around by then; he could hope, although this was always a slack time of year. Customers would be icing on the cake, anyway. The important thing was how it would look: just a fellow with nothing to hide, going through the ordinary motions and ordinary rhythms of his ordinary day.

Pop went over to the beam and took the cuckoo clock down, being careful not to tangle up the counterweights. He carried it back to his worktable, humming a little. He set it down, then felt his back pocket. Fresh tobacco. That was good, too.

Pop thought he would have himself a little pipe while he worked.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“You can’t know he was in here, Kevin!” Mr. Delevan was still protesting feebly as they went into LaVerdiere’s.

Ignoring him, Kevin went straight to the counter where Molly Durham stood. Her urge to vomit had passed off, and she felt much better. The whole thing seemed a little silly now, like a nightmare you have and then wake up from and after the initial relief you think: *I was afraid of THAT? How could I ever have thought THAT was really happening to me, even in a dream?*

But when the Delevan boy presented his drawn white face at the counter, she knew how you could be afraid, yes, oh yes, even of things as ridiculous as the things which happened in dreams, because she was tumbled back into her own waking dreamscape again.

The thing was, Kevin Delevan had almost the same look on his face: as though he were so deep inside somewhere that when his voice and his gaze finally reached her, they seemed almost expended.

“Pop Merrill was in here,” he said. “What did he buy?”

“Please excuse my son,” Mr. Delevan said. “He’s not feeling w—”

Then he saw *Molly’s* face and stopped. She looked like she had just seen a man lose his arm to a factory machine.

“Oh!” she said. “Oh my God!”

“Was it film?” Kevin asked her.

“What’s wrong with him?” Molly asked faintly. “I knew something was the minute he walked in. What is it? Has he ... done something?”

*Jesus*, John Delevan thought. *He DOES know. It’s all true, then.*

At that moment, Mr. Delevan made a quietly heroic decision: he gave up entirely. He gave up entirely and put himself and what he believed could and could not be true entirely in his son’s hands.

“It was, wasn’t it?” Kevin pressed her. His urgent face rebuked her for her flutters and tremors. “Polaroid film. From *that*.” He pointed at the display.

“Yes.” Her complexion was as pale as china; the bit of rouge she had put on that morning stood out in hectic, flaring patches. “He was so ... strange. Like a talking doll. What’s wrong with him? What—”

But Kevin had whirled away, back to his father.

“I need a camera,” he rapped. “I need it right now. A Polaroid Sun 660. They have them. They’re even on special. See?”

And in spite of his decision, Mr. Delevan’s mouth would not quite let go of the last clinging shreds of rationality. “Why—” he began, and that was as far as Kevin let him get.

“*I don’t know why!*” he shouted, and Molly Durham moaned. She didn’t want to throw up now; Kevin Delevan was scary, but not *that* scary. What she wanted to do right now was simply go home and creep up to her bedroom and draw the covers over her head. “*But we have to have it, and time’s almost up, Dad!*”

“Give me one of those cameras,” Mr. Delevan said, drawing his wallet out with shaking hands, unaware that Kevin had already darted to the display.

“Just take one,” she heard a trembling voice entirely unlike her own say. “Just take one and go.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Across the square, Pop Merrill, who believed he was peacefully repairing a cheap cuckoo clock, innocent as a babe in arms, finished loading Kevin's camera with one of the film packs. He snapped it shut. It made its squidgy little whine.

*Damn cuckoo sounds like he's got a bad case of laryngitis. Slipped a gear, I guess. Well, I got the cure for that.*

"I'll fix you," Pop said, and raised the camera. He applied one blank eye to the viewfinder with the hairline crack which was so tiny you didn't even see it when you got your eye up to it. The camera was aimed at the front of the store, but *that* didn't matter; wherever you pointed it, it was aimed at a certain black dog that wasn't any dog God had ever made in a little town called for the want of a better word Polaroidsville, which He also hadn't ever made.

**FLASH!**

That squidgy little whine as Kevin's camera pushed out a new picture.

"There," Pop said with quiet satisfaction. "Maybe I'll do more than get you talking, bird. What I mean to say is I might just get you *singing*. I don't promise, but I'll give her a try."

Pop grinned a dry, leathery grin and pushed the button again.

**FLASH!**

They were halfway across the square when John Delevan saw a silent white light fill the dirty windows of the Emporium Galorium. The light was silent, but following it, like an aftershock, he heard a low, dark rumble that seemed to come to his ears from the old man's junk-store ... but only because the old man's junk-store was the only place it could find a way to get out. Where it seemed to be *emanating* from was under the earth ... or was it just that the earth

itself seemed the only place large enough to cradle the owner of that voice?

“Run, Dad!” Kevin cried. “*He’s started doing it!*”

That flash recurred, lighting the windows like a heatless stroke of electricity. It was followed by that subaural growl again, the sound of a sonic boom in a wind-tunnel, the sound of some animal which was horrible beyond comprehension being kicked out of its sleep.

Mr. Delevan, helpless to stop himself and almost unaware of what he was doing, opened his mouth to tell his son that a light that big and bright could not possibly be coming from the built-in flash of a Polaroid camera, but Kevin had already started to run.

Mr. Delevan began to run himself, knowing perfectly well what he meant to do: catch up to his son and collar him and drag him away before something dreadful beyond his grasp of all dreadful things could happen.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The second Polaroid Pop took forced the first one out of the slot. It fluttered down to the top of the desk, where it landed with a thud heavier than such a square of chemically treated cardboard could possibly make. The Sun dog filled almost the entire frame now; the foreground was its impossible head, the black pits of the eyes, the smoking, teeth-filled jaws. The skull seemed to be elongating into a shape like a bullet or a teardrop as the dog-thing's speed and the shortening distance between it and the lens combined to drive it further out of focus. Only the tops of the pickets in the fence behind it were visible now; the bulk of the thing's flexed shoulders ate up the rest of the frame.

Kevin's birthday string tie, which had rested next to the Sun camera in his drawer, showed at the bottom of the frame, winking back a shaft of hazy sunlight.

"Almost got you, you son of a whore," Pop said in a high, cracked voice. His eyes were blinded by the light. He saw neither dog nor camera. He saw only the voiceless cuckoo which had become his life's mission. "You'll sing, damn you! *I'll make you sing!*"

*FLASH!*

The third picture pushed the second from the slot. It fell too fast, more like a chunk of stone than a square of cardboard, and when it hit the desk, it dug through the ancient frayed blotter there and sent startled splinters flying up from the wood beneath.

In this picture, the dog's head was torn even further out of focus; it had become a long column of flesh that gave it a strange, almost three-dimensional aspect.

In the third one, still poking out of the slot in the bottom of the camera, the Sun dog's snout seemed, impossibly, to be coming back into focus again. It was impossible because it was as close to the lens as it could get; so close it seemed to be the snout of some sea-monster just below that fragile meniscus we call the surface.

“Damn thing still ain’t quite right,” Pop said.  
His finger pushed the Polaroid’s trigger again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Kevin ran up the steps of the Emporium Galorium. His father reached for him, caught nothing but the air an inch from the fluttering tail of Kevin's shirt, stumbled, and landed on the heels of his hands. They slid across the second step from the top, sending a quiver of small splinters into his skin.

"Kevin!"

He looked up and for a moment the world was almost lost in another of those dazzling white flashes. This time the roar was much louder. It was the sound of a crazed animal on the verge of making its weakening cage give it up. He saw Kevin with his head down, one hand shielding his eyes from the white glare, frozen in that stroboscopic light as if he himself had turned into a photograph. He saw cracks like quicksilver jig-jag their way down the show windows.

*"Kevin, look ou—"*

The glass burst outward in a glittery spray and Mr. Delevan ducked his own head. Glass flew around him in a squall. He felt it patter into his hair and both cheeks were scratched, but none of the glass dug deeply into either the boy or the man; most of it had been pulverized to crumbs.

There was a splintering crunch. He looked up again and saw that Kevin had gained entry just as Mr. Delevan had thought they might earlier: by ramming the now-glassless door with his shoulder and tearing the new locking bolt right through the old, rotted wood.

*"KEVIN, GODDAMMIT!"* he bawled. He got up, almost stumbled to one knee again as his feet tangled together, then lurched upright and plunged after his son.

Something had happened to the goddam cuckoo clock. Something bad.

It was striking again and again—bad enough, but that wasn't all. It had also gained weight in Pop's hands ... and it seemed to be growing uncomfortably hot, as well.

Pop looked down at it, and suddenly tried to scream in horror through jaws which felt as if they had been wired together somehow.

He realized he had been struck blind, and he *also* suddenly realized that what he held was not a cuckoo clock at all.

He tried to make his hands relax their death-grip on the camera and was horrified to find he could not open his fingers. The field of gravity around the camera seemed to have increased. And the horrid thing was growing steadily hotter. Between Pop's splayed, white-nailed fingers, the gray plastic of the camera's housing had begun to smoke.

His right index finger began to crawl upward toward the red shutter-button like a crippled fly.

"No," he muttered, and then, in a plea: "*Please ...*"

His finger paid no attention. It reached the red button and settled upon it just as Kevin slammed his shoulder into the door and burst in. Glass from the door's panes crunched and sprayed.

Pop didn't push the button. Even blind, even feeling the flesh of his fingers begin to smoulder and scorch, he knew he didn't push the button. But as his finger settled upon it, that gravitational field first seemed to double, then treble. He tried to hold his finger up and off the button. It was like trying to hold the push-up position on the planet Jupiter.

"Drop it!" the kid screamed from somewhere out on the rim of his darkness. "Drop it, *drop it!*"

"*NO!*" Pop screamed back. "*What I mean to say is I CAN'T!*"

The red button began to slide in toward its contact point.

Kevin was standing with his legs spread, bent over the camera they had just taken from LaVerdiere's, the box it had come in lying at his feet. He had managed to hit the button that released the front of the camera on its hinge, revealing the wide loading slot. He was trying to

jam one of the film packs into it, and it stubbornly refused to go—it was as if this camera had turned traitor, too, possibly in sympathy to its brother.

Pop screamed again, but this time there were no words, only an inarticulate cry of pain and fear. Kevin smelled hot plastic and roasting flesh. He looked up and saw the Polaroid was melting, actually melting, in the old man's frozen hands. Its square, boxy silhouette was rearranging itself into an odd, hunched shape. Somehow the glass of both the viewfinder and the lens had also become plastic. Instead of breaking or popping out of the camera's increasingly shapeless shell, they were elongating and drooping like taffy, becoming a pair of grotesque eyes like those in a mask of tragedy.

Dark plastic, heated to a sludge like warm wax, ran over Pop's fingers and the backs of his hands in thick runnels, carving troughs in his flesh. The plastic cauterized what it burned, but Kevin saw blood squeezing from the sides of these runnels and dripping down Pop's flesh to strike the table in smoking droplets which sizzled like hot fat.

*"Your film's still wrapped up!"* his father bawled from behind him, breaking Kevin's paralysis. *"Unwrap it! Give it to me!"*

His father reached around him, bumping Kevin so hard he almost knocked him over. He snatched the film pack, with its heavy paper-foil wrapping still on it, and ripped the end. He stripped it off.

*"HELP ME!"* Pop screeched, the last coherent words either of them heard him say.

"Quick!" his father yelled, putting the fresh film pack back in his hands. "Quick!"

The sizzle of hot flesh. The patter of hot blood on the desk, what had been a shower now becoming a storm as the bigger veins and arteries in Pop's fingers and the backs of his hands began to let go. A brook of hot, running plastic braceleted his left wrist and the bundle of veins so close to the surface there let go, spraying out blood as if through a rotten gasket which has first begun to leak in several places and now begins to simply disintegrate under the insistent, beating pressure.

Pop howled like an animal.

Kevin tried to jam the film pack in again and cried out "*Fuck!*" as it still refused to go.

"*It's backwards!*" Mr. Delevan hollered. He tried to snatch the camera from Kevin, and Kevin tore away, leaving his father with a scrap of shirt and no more. He pulled the film pack out and for a moment it jittered on the ends of his fingers, almost dropping to the noor—which, he felt, longed to actually hump itself up into a fist and smash it when it came down.

Then he had it, turned it around, socked it home, and slammed the front of the camera, which was hanging limply downward like a creature with a broken neck, shut on its hinge.

Pop howled again, and—

*FLASH!*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

This time it was like standing in the center of a sun which goes supernova in one sudden, heatless gust of light. Kevin felt as if his shadow had actually been hammered off his heels and driven into the wall. Perhaps this was at least partly true, for all of the wall behind him was instantly flash-baked and threaded with a thousand crazy cracks except for one sunken area where his shadow fell. His outline, as clear and unmistakable as a silhouette cut-out, was tattooed there with one elbow stuck out in a flying wedge, caught and frozen even as the arm which cast the shadow left its frozen image behind, rising to bring the new camera up to his face.

The top of the camera in Pop's hands tore free of the rest with a thick sound like a very fat man clearing his throat. The Sun dog growled, and this time that bass thunder was loud enough, clear enough, near enough, to shatter the glass in the fronts of the clocks and to send the glass in the mirrors and in the frames of pictures belching across the floor in momentary crystal arcs of amazing and improbable beauty.

The camera did not moan or whine this time; the sound of its mechanism was a scream, high and drilling, like a woman who is dying in the throes of a breech delivery. The square of paper which shoved and bulled its way out of that slitted opening smoked and fumed. Then the dark delivery-slot itself began to melt, one side drooping downward, the other wrinkling upward, all of it beginning to yawn like a toothless mouth. A bubble was forming upon the shiny surface of the last picture, which still hung in the widening mouth of the channel from which the Polaroid Sun gave birth to its photographs.

As Kevin watched, frozen, looking through a curtain of flashing, zinging dots that last white explosion had put in front of his eyes, the Sun dog roared again. The sound was smaller now, with less of that

sense that it was coming from beneath and from everywhere, but it was also more deadly because it was more *real*, more *here*.

Part of the dissolving camera blew backward in a great gray gobbet, striking Pop Merrill's neck and expanding into a necklace. Suddenly both Pop's jugular vein and carotid artery gave way in spraying gouts of blood that jetted upward and outward in bright-red spirals. Pop's head whipped bonelessly backward.

The bubble on the surface of the picture grew. The picture itself began to jitter in the yawning slot at the bottom of the now-decapitated camera. Its sides began to spread, as if the picture was no longer on cardboard at all but some flexible substance like knitted nylon. It wiggled back and forth in the slot, and Kevin thought of the cowboy boots he had gotten for his birthday two years ago, and how he had had to wiggle his feet into them, because they were a little too tight.

The edges of the picture struck the edges of the camera delivery-slot, where they should have stuck firmly. But the camera was no longer a solid; was, in fact, losing all resemblance to what it had been. The edges of the picture sliced through its sides as cleanly as the razor-sharp sides of a good double-edged knife slide through tender meat. They poked through what had been the Polaroid's housing, sending gray drops of smoking plastic flying into the dim air. One landed on a dry, crumbling stack of old *Popular Mechanics* magazines and burrowed a fuming, charred hole into them.

The dog roared again, an angry, ugly sound—the cry of something with nothing but rending and killing on its mind. Those things, and nothing else.

The picture teetered on the edge of the sagging, dissolving slit, which now looked more like the bell of some misshapen wind instrument than anything else, and then fell forward to the desk with the speed of a stone tumbling into a well.

Kevin felt a hand claw at his shoulder.

“What's it doing?” his father asked hoarsely. “Jesus Christ almighty, Kevin, *what's it doing?*”

Kevin heard himself answer in a remote, almost disinterested voice: “Being born.”

## CRAFTER TWENTY-THREE

Pop Merrill died leaning back in the chair behind his worktable, where he had spent so many hours sitting: sitting and smoking; sitting and fixing things up so they would run for at least awhile and he could sell the worthless to the thoughtless; sitting and loaning money to the impulsive and the improvident after the sun went down. He died staring up at the ceiling, from which his own blood dripped back down to splatter on his cheeks and into his open eyes.

His chair overbalanced and spilled his lolling body onto the floor. His purse and his key-ring clattered.

On his desk, the final Polaroid continued to jiggle about restlessly. Its sides spread apart, and Kevin seemed to sense some unknown thing, both alive and not alive, groaning in horrid, unknowable labor pains.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” his father panted, pulling at him. John Delevan’s eyes were large and frenzied, riveted on that spreading, moving photograph which now covered half of Merrill’s worktable. It no longer resembled a photograph at all. Its sides bulged out like the cheeks of someone trying frantically to whistle. The shiny bubble, now a foot high, humped and shuddered. Strange, unnameable colors raced aimlessly back and forth across a surface which seemed to have broken some oily sort of sweat. That roar, full of frustration and purpose and frantic hunger, ripped through his brain again and again, threatening to split it and let in madness.

Kevin pulled away from him, ripping his shirt along the shoulder. His voice was full of a deep, strange calm. “No—it would just come after us. I think it wants me, because if it wanted Pop it’s already got him and I was the one who owned the camera first, anyway. But it wouldn’t stop there. It’d take you, too. And it might not stop there, either.”

“*You can’t do anything!*” his father screamed.

“Yes,” Kevin said. “I’ve got one chance.”

And raised the camera.

The edges of the picture reached the edges of the worktable. Instead of lolling over, they curled up and continued to twist and spread. Now they resembled odd wings which were somehow equipped with lungs and were trying to breathe in some tortured fashion.

The entire surface of the amorphous, pulsing thing continued to puff up; what should have been flat surface had become a horrid tumor, its lumped and cratered sides trickling with vile liquid. It gave off the bland smell of head cheese.

The dog's roars had become continuous, the trapped and furious belling of a hell-hound bent on escape, and some of the late Pop Merrill's clocks began to strike again and again, as if in protest.

Mr. Delevan's frantic urge to escape had deserted him; he felt overcome by a deep and dangerous lassitude, a kind of lethal sleepiness.

Kevin held the camera's viewfinder to his eye. He had only been deer-hunting a few times, but he remembered how it was when it was your turn to wait, hidden, with your rifle as your hunting partners walked through the woods toward you, deliberately making as much noise as they could, hoping to drive something out of the trees and into the clearing where you were waiting, your field of fire a safe angle that would cross in front of the men. You didn't have to worry about hitting them; you only had to worry about hitting the deer.

There was time to wonder if you *could* hit it, when and if it showed itself. There was also time to wonder if you could bring yourself to fire at all. Time to hope that the deer would remain hypothetical, so the test did not have to be made ... and so it had always turned out to be. The one time there had been a deer, his father's friend Bill Roberson had been lying up in the blind. Mr. Roberson had put the bullet just where you were supposed to put it, at the juncture of neck and shoulder, and they had gotten the game-warden to take their pictures around it, a twelve-point buck any man would be happy to brag on.

*Bet you wish it'd been your turn in the puckies, don't you, son?* the game-warden had asked, ruffling Kevin's hair (he had been twelve then, the growth spurt which had begun about seventeen months ago and which had so far taken him to just an inch under six feet still a year away ... which meant he had not been big enough to be resentful of a man who wanted to ruffle his hair). Kevin had nodded, keeping his secret to himself: he was glad it hadn't been his turn in the puckies, his the rifle which must be responsible for throwing the slug or not throwing it ... and, if he had turned out to have the courage to do the shooting, his reward would have been only another troublesome responsibility: to shoot the buck clean. He didn't know if he could have mustered the courage to put another bullet in the thing if the kill *wasn't* clean, or the strength to chase the trail of its blood and steaming, startled droppings and finish what he had started if it ran.

He had smiled up at the game-warden and nodded and his dad had snapped a picture of *that*, and there had never been any need to tell his dad that the thought going on behind that upturned brow and under the game-warden's ruffling hand had been *No. I don't wish it. The world is full of tests, but twelve's too young to go hunting them. I'm glad it was Mr. Roberson. I'm not ready yet to try a man's tests.*

But now he was the one in the blind, wasn't he? And the animal was coming, wasn't it? And it was no harmless eater of grasses this time, was it? This was a killing engine big enough and mean enough to swallow a tiger whole, and it meant to kill *him*, and that was only for starters, and he was the only one that could stop it.

The thought of turning the Polaroid over to his father crossed his mind, but only momentarily. Something deep inside himself knew the truth: to pass the camera would be tantamount to murdering his father and committing suicide himself. His father believed *something*, but that wasn't specific enough. The camera wouldn't work for his father even if his father managed to break out of his current stunned condition and press the shutter.

It would only work for him.

So he waited on the test, peering through the viewfinder of the camera as if it were the gunsight of a rifle, peering at the photograph

as it continued to spread and force that shiny, liquescent bubble wider and wider and higher and higher.

Then the actual birthing of the Sun dog into this world began to happen. The camera seemed to gain weight and turn to lead as the thing roared again with a sound like a whiplash loaded with steel shot. The camera trembled in his hands and he could feel his wet, slippery fingers simply wanting to uncurl and let go. He held on, his lips pulling back from his teeth in a sick and desperate grin. Sweat ran into one eye, momentarily doubling his vision. He threw his head back, snapping his hair off his forehead and out of his eyebrows, and then nestled his staring eye back into the viewfinder as a great ripping sound, like heavy cloth being torn in half by strong, slow hands, filled the Emporium Galorium.

The shiny surface of the bubble tore open. Red smoke, like the blast from a tea-kettle set in front of red neon, billowed out.

The thing roared again, an angry, homicidal sound. A gigantic jaw, filled with croggled teeth, burst up through the shrivelling membrane of the now-collapsing bubble like the jaw of a breaching pilot whale. It ripped and chewed and gnawed at the membrane, which gave way with gummy splattering sounds.

The clocks struck wildly, crazily.

His father grabbed him again, so hard that Kevin's teeth rapped against the plastic body of the camera and it came within a hair of spilling out of his hands and shattering on the floor.

*"Shoot it!"* his father screamed over the thing's bellowing din. *"Shoot it, Kevin, if you can shoot it, SHOOT IT NOW, Christ Jesus, it's going to—"*

Kevin yanked away from his father's hand. "Not yet," he said. "Not just y—"

The thing *screamed* at the sound of Kevin's voice. The Sun dog lunged up from wherever it was, driving the picture still wider. It gave and stretched with a groaning sound. This was replaced by the thick cough of ripping fabric again.

And suddenly the Sun dog was up, its head rising black and rough and tangled through the hole in reality like some weird periscope which was all tangled metal and glittering, glaring lenses ... except it

wasn't metal but that twisted, spiky fur Kevin was looking at, and those were not lenses but the thing's insane, raging eyes.

It caught at the neck, the spines of its pelt shredding the edges of the hole it had made into a strange sunburst pattern. It roared again, and sickly yellow-red fire licked out of its mouth.

John Delevan took a step backward and struck a table overloaded with thick copies of *Weird Tales and Fantastic Universe*. The table tilted and Mr. Delevan flailed helplessly against it, his heels first rocking back and then shooting out from under him. Man and table went over with a crash. The Sun dog roared again, then dipped its head with an unsuspected delicacy and tore at the membrane which held it. The membrane ripped. The thing barked out a thin stream of fire which ignited the membrane and turned it to ash. The beast lunged upward again and Kevin saw that the thing on the tie around its neck was no longer a tie-clasp but the spoon-shaped tool which Pop Merrill had used to clean his pipe.

In that moment a clean calmness fell over the boy. His father bellowed in surprise and fear as he tried to untangle himself from the table he had fallen over, but Kevin took no notice. The cry seemed to come from a great distance away.

*It's all right, Dad, he thought, fixing the struggling, emerging beast more firmly in the viewfinder. It's all right, don't you see? It can be all right, anyway ... because the charm it wears has changed.*

He thought that perhaps the Sun dog had its master, too ... and its master had realized that Kevin was no longer sure prey.

And perhaps there was a dog-catcher in that strange nowhere town of Polaroidsville; there must be, else why had the fat woman been in his dream? It was the fat woman who had told him what he must do, either on her own or because that dog-catcher had put her there for him to see and notice: the two-dimensional fat woman with her two-dimensional shopping-cart full of two-dimensional cameras. *Be careful, boy. Pop's dog broke his leash and he's a mean un.... It's hard to take his pitcher, but you can't do it at all, 'less you have a cam'ra.*

And now he had his camera, didn't he? It was not sure, not by any means, but at least he had it.

The dog paused, head turning almost aimlessly ... until its muddy, burning gaze settled on Kevin Delevan. Its black lips peeled back from its corkscrewed boar's fangs, its muzzle opened to reveal the smoking channel of its throat, and it gave a high, drilling howl of fury. The ancient hanging globes that lit Pop's place at night shattered one after another in rows, sending down spinning shards of frosted fly-beshitted glass. It lunged, its broad, panting chest bursting through the membrane between the worlds.

Kevin's finger settled on the Polaroid's trigger.

It lunged again, and now its front legs popped free, and those cruel spurs of bone, so like gigantic thorns, scraped and scabbled for purchase on the desk. They dug long vertical scars in the heavy rock-maple. Kevin could hear the dusky thud-and-scratch of its pistoning rear legs digging for a grip down there (*wherever down there was*), and he knew that this was the final short stretch of seconds in which it would be trapped and at his mercy; the next convulsive lunge would send it flying over the desk, and once free of the hole through which it was squirming, it would move as fast as liquid death, charging across the space between them, setting his pants ablaze with its fiery breath split-seconds before it tore into his warm innards.

Very clearly, Kevin instructed: "Say *cheese*, you motherfucker."

And triggered the Polaroid.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The flash was so bright that Kevin could not conceive of it later; could, in fact, barely remember it at all. The camera he was holding did not grow hot and melt; instead there were three or four quick, decisive breaking sounds from inside it as its ground-glass lenses burst and its springs either snapped or simply disintegrated.

In the white afterglare he saw the Sun dog *frozen*, a perfect black-and-white Polaroid photograph, its head thrown back, every twisting fold and crevasse in its wildly bushed-out fur caught like the complicated topography of a dry river-valley. Its teeth shone, no longer subtly shaded yellow but as white and nasty as old bones in that sterile emptiness where water had quit running millennia ago. Its single swollen eye, robbed of the dark and bloody porthole of iris by the merciless flash, was as white as an eye in the head of a Greek bust. Smoking snot drizzled from its flared nostrils and ran like hot lava in the narrow gutters between its rolled-back muzzle and its gums.

It was like a negative of all the Polaroids Kevin had ever seen: black-and-white instead of color, and in three dimensions instead of two. And it was like watching a living creature turned instantly to stone by a careless look at the head of Medusa.

*"You're done, you son of a bitch!"* Kevin screamed in a cracked, hysterical voice, and as if in agreement, the thing's frozen forelegs lost their hold on the desk and it began to disappear, first slowly and then rapidly, into the hole from which it had come. It went with a rocky coughing sound, like a landslide.

*What would I see if I ran over now and looked into that hole?* he wondered incoherently. *Would I see that house, that fence, the old man with his shopping-cart, staring with wide-eyed wonder at the face of a giant, not a boy but a Boy, staring back at him from a torn and charred hole in the hazy sky? Would it suck me in? What?*

Instead, he dropped the Polaroid and raised his hands to his face.

Only John Delevan, lying on the floor, saw the final act: the twisted, dead membrane shrivelling in on itself, pulling into a complicated but unimportant node around the hole, crumpling there, and then falling (or being *inhaled*) into itself.

There was a whooping sound of air, which rose from a broad gasp to a thin tea-kettle whistle.

Then it turned inside-out and was gone. Simply gone, as if it had never been.

Getting slowly and shakily to his feet, Mr. Delevan saw that the final inrush (or outrush, he supposed, depending on which side of that hole you were on) of air had pulled the desk-blotter and the other Polaroids the old man had taken in with it.

His son was standing in the middle of the floor with his hands over his face, weeping.

“Kevin,” he said quietly, and put his arms around his boy.

“I had to take its picture,” Kevin said through his tears and through his hands. “It was the only way to get rid of it. I had to take the rotten whoredog’s picture. *That’s* what I mean to say.”

“Yes.” He hugged him tighter. “Yes, and you did it.”

Kevin looked at his father with naked, streaming eyes. “*That’s* how I had to shoot it, Dad. Do you see?”

“Yes,” his father said. “Yes, I see that.” He kissed Kevin’s hot cheek again. “Let’s go home, son.”

He tightened his grip around Kevin’s shoulders, wanting to lead him toward the door and away from the smoking, bloody body of the old man (Kevin hadn’t really noticed yet, Mr. Delevan thought, but if they spent much longer here, he would), and for a moment Kevin resisted him.

“What are people going to say?” Kevin asked, and his tone was so prim and spinsterish that Mr. Delevan laughed in spite of his own sizzling nerves.

“Let them say whatever they want,” he told Kevin. “They’ll never get within shouting distance of the truth, and I don’t think anyone will try very hard, anyway.” He paused. “No one really liked him much, you know.”

“I never *want* to be in shouting distance of the truth,” Kevin whispered. “Let’s go home.”

“Yes. I love you, Kevin.”

“I love you, too,” Kevin said hoarsely, and they went out of the smoke and the stink of old things best left forgotten and into the bright light of day. Behind them, a pile of old magazines burst into flame ... and the fire was quick to stretch out its hungry orange fingers.

## EPILOGUE

It was Kevin Delevan's sixteenth birthday, and he got exactly what he wanted: a WordStar 70 PC and word processor. It was a seventeen-hundred-dollar toy, and his parents could never have afforded it in the old days, but in January, about three months after that final confrontation in the Emporium Galorium, Aunt Hilda had died quietly in her sleep. She had indeed Done Something for Kevin and Meg; had, in fact, Done Quite a Lot for the Whole Family. When the will cleared probate in early June, the Delevans found themselves richer by nearly seventy thousand dollars ... and that was after taxes, not before.

"Jeez, it's neat! Thank you!" Kevin cried, and kissed his mother, his father, and even his sister, Meg (who giggled but, being a year older, made no attempt to rub it off; Kevin couldn't decide if this change was a step in the right direction or not). He spent much of the afternoon in his room, fussing over it and trying out the test program.

Around four o'clock, he came downstairs and into his father's den. "Where's Mom and Meg?" he asked.

"They've gone out to the crafts fair at ... Kevin? Kevin, what's wrong?"

"You better come upstairs," Kevin said hollowly.

At the door to his room, he turned his pale face toward his father's equally pale face. There was something more to pay, Mr. Delevan had been thinking as he followed his son up the stairs. Of course there was. And hadn't he also learned that from Reginald Marion "Pop" Merrill? The debt you incurred was what hurt you.

It was the *interest* that broke your back.

"Can we get another one of these?" Kevin asked, pointing to the laptop computer which stood open on his desk, glowing a mystic yellow oblong of light onto the blotter.

"I don't know," Mr. Delevan said, approaching the desk. Kevin stood behind him, a pallid watcher. "I guess, if we *had* to—"

He stopped, looking down at the screen.

“I booted up the word-processing program and typed ‘The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy sleeping dog,’ ” Kevin said. “Only *that* was what came out of the printer.”

Mr. Delevan stood, silently reading the hard copy. His hands and forehead felt very cold. The words there read:

The dog is loose again. It is not sleeping. It is not lazy. It's coming for you, Kevin.

The original debt was what hurt you, he thought again; it was the interest that broke your back. The last two lines read:

It's very hungry. And it's VERY angry.

You are invited to preview Stephen King's latest triumph

## **NEEDFUL THINGS**

A new spectacle of terror from the undisputed master of  
the macabre

# CHAPTER ONE

## 1

In a small town, the opening of a new store is big news.

It wasn't as big a deal to Brian Rusk as it was to some; his mother, for instance. He had heard her discussing it (he wasn't supposed to call it gossiping, she had told him, because gossiping was a dirty habit and she didn't do it) at some length on the telephone with her best friend, Myra Evans, over the last month or so. The first workmen had arrived at the old building which had last housed Western Maine Realty and Insurance right around the time school let in again, and they had been busily at work ever since. Not that anyone had much idea what they were up to in there; their first act had been to put in a large display window, and their second had been to soap it opaque.

Two weeks ago a sign had appeared in the doorway, hung on a string over a plastic see-through suction-cup.

OPENING SOON!

The sign read.

NEEDFUL THINGS A NEW KIND OF STORE

*"You won't believe your eyes!"*

"It'll be just another antique shop," Brian's mother said to Myra. Cora Rusk had been reclining on the sofa at the time, holding the telephone with one hand and eating chocolate-covered cherries with the other while she watched *Santa Barbara* on the TV. "Just another antique shop with a lot of phony early American furniture and moldy old crank telephones. You wait and see."

That had been shortly after the new display window had been first installed and then soaped over, and his mother spoke with such

assurance that Brian should have felt sure the subject was closed. Only with his mother, no subject ever seemed to be completely closed. Her speculations and suppositions seemed as endless as the problems of the characters on *Santa Barbara* and *General Hospital*.

Last week the first line of the sign hanging in the door was changed to read:

GRAND OPENING OCTOBER 9TH—BRING YOUR FRIENDS!

Brian was not as interested in the new store as his mother (and some of the teachers; he had heard them talking about it in the teachers' room at Castle Rock Middle School when it was his turn to be Office Mailman), but he was eleven, and a healthy eleven-year-old boy is interested in anything new. Besides, the name of the place fascinated him. *Needful Things*: what, exactly, did that mean?

He had read the changed first line last Tuesday, on his way home from school. Tuesday afternoons were his late days. Brian had been born with a harelip, and although it had been surgically corrected when he was seven, he still had to go to speech therapy. He maintained stoutly to everyone who asked that he hated this, but he did not. He was deeply and hopelessly in love with Miss Ratcliffe, and he waited all week for his special ed class to come around. The Tuesday schoolday seemed to last a thousand years, and he always spent the last two hours of it with pleasant butterflies in his stomach.

There were only four other kids in the class, and none of them came from Brian's end of town. He was glad. After an hour in the same room with Miss Ratcliffe; he felt too exalted for company. He liked to make his way home slowly in the late afternoon, usually pushing his bike instead of riding it, dreaming of her as yellow and gold leaves fell around him in the slanting bars of October sunlight.

His way took him along the two-block section of Main Street across from the Town Common, and on the day he saw the sign announcing the grand opening, he had pushed his nose up to the glass of the door, hoping to see what had replaced the stodgy desks and industrial yellow walls of the departed Western Maine Realtors

and Insurance Agents. His curiosity was defeated. A shade had been installed and was pulled all the way down. Brian saw nothing but his own reflected face and cupped hands.

On Friday the 4th, there had been an ad for the new store in Castle Rock's weekly newspaper, the Call. The ad was surrounded by a ruffled border, and below the printed matter was a drawing of angels standing back to back and blowing long trumpets. Aside from the opening time, 10:00 a.m., the ad said nothing that could not be read on the sign dangling from the suction cup: the name of the store was Needful Things, it would open for business at ten o'clock in the morning on October 9th, and, of course, "You won't believe your eyes." There was not the slightest hint of what goods the proprietor or proprietors of Needful Things intended to dispense.

This seemed to irritate Cora Rusk a great deal—enough, anyway, for her to put in a rare Saturday-morning call to Myra.

"I'll believe *my eyes*, all right," she said. "When I see those *spool beds* that are supposed to be *two hundred years old* but have Rochester, *New York*, stamped on the *frames* for anybody who cares to bend down their *heads* and look under the *bedspread* flounces to see, I'll believe my eyes just *fine*."

Myra said something. Cora listened, fishing Planter's Peanuts out of the can by ones and twos and munching them rapidly. Brian and his little brother, Sean, sat on the living-room floor watching cartoons on TV. Sean was completely immersed in the world of the Smurfs, and Brian was not totally uninvolved with that community of small blue people, but he kept one ear cocked toward the conversation.

"*Ri-iiight!*" Cora Rusk had exclaimed with even more assurance and emphasis than usual as Myra made some particularly trenchant point. "High prices and moldy antique telephones!"

Yesterday, Monday, Brian had ridden through downtown right after school with two or three friends. They were across the street from the new shop, and he saw that during the day someone had put up a dark-green awning. Written across the front in white letters were the words NEEDFUL THINGS. Polly Chalmers, the lady who ran the sewing shop, was standing out on the sidewalk, hands on her

admirably slim hips, looking at the awning with an expression that seemed to be equally puzzled and admiring.

Brian, who knew a bit about awnings, admired it himself. It was the only real awning on Main Street, and it gave the new store its own special look. The word “sophisticated” was not a part of his working vocabulary, but he knew at once there was no other shop in Castle Rock which looked like this. The awning made it look like a store you might see in a television show. The Western Auto across the street looked dowdy and countrified by comparison.

When he got home, his mother was on the sofa, watching *Santa Barbara*, eating a Little Debbie Creme Pie, and drinking Diet Coke. His mother always drank diet soda while she watched the afternoon shows. Brian was not sure why, considering what she was using it to wash down, but thought it would probably be dangerous to ask. It might even get her shouting at him, and when his mother started shouting, it was wise to seek shelter.

“Hey, Ma!” he said, throwing his books on the counter and getting the milk out of the refrigerator. “Guess what? There’s an awnin on the new store.”

“Who’s yawning?” Her voice drifted out of the living room.

He poured his milk and came into the doorway. “*Awning*,” he said. “On the new store downstreet.

She sat up, found the remote control, and pushed the mute button. On the screen, Al and Corinne went on talking over their Santa Barbara problems in their favorite Santa Barbara restaurant, but now only a lip-reader could have told exactly what those problems were. “What?” she said. “That Needful Things place?”

“Uh-huh,” he said, and drank some milk.

“Don’t *slurp*,” she said, tucking the rest of her snack into her mouth. “It sounds *gruesome*. How many times have I told you that?”

About as many times as you’ve told me not to talk with my mouth full, Brian thought, but said nothing. He had learned verbal restraint at an early age.

“Sorry, Mom.”

“What kind of awning?”

“Green one.”

“Pressed or aluminum?”

Brian, whose father was a siding salesman for the Dick Perry Siding and Door Company in South Paris, knew exactly what she was talking about, but if it had been *that* kind of awning, he hardly would have noticed it. Aluminum and pressed-metal awnings were a dime a dozen. Half the homes in The Rock had them sticking out over their windows.

“Neither one,” he said. “It’s cloth. Canvas, I think. It sticks out, so there’s shade right underneath. And it’s round, like this.” He curved his hands (carefully, so as not to spill his milk) in a semi-circle. “The name is printed on the end. It’s most sincerely awesome.”

“Well, I’ll be butched!”

This was the phrase with which Cora most commonly expressed excitement or exasperation. Brian took a cautious step backward, in case it should be the latter.

“What do you think it is, Ma? A restaurant, maybe?”

“I don’t know,” she said, and reached for the Princess phone on the endtable. She had to move Squeebles the cat, the *TV Guide*, and a quart of Diet Coke to get it. “But it sounds sneaky.”

“Mom, what does Needful Things mean? Is it like—”

“Don’t bother me now, Brian, Mummy’s busy. There are Devil Dogs in the breadbox if you want one. Just one, though, or you’ll spoil your supper.” She was already dialling Myra, and they were soon discussing the green awning with great enthusiasm.

Brian, who didn’t want a Devil Dog (he loved his Ma a great deal, but sometimes watching her eat took away his appetite), sat down at the kitchen table, opened his math book, and started to do the assigned problems—he was a bright, conscientious boy, and his math was the only home-work he hadn’t finished at school. As he methodically moved decimal points and then divided, he listened to his mother’s end of the conversation. She was again telling Myra that soon they would have *another* store selling stinky old *perfume* bottles and pictures of someone’s dead *relatives*, and it was really a shame the way these things came and went. There were just too many people out there, Cora said, whose motto in life was take the money and run. When she spoke of the awning, she sounded as if

someone had deliberately set out to offend her, and had succeeded splendidly at the task.

I think she thinks someone was supposed to tell her, Brian had though as his pencil moved sturdily along, carrying down and rounding off. Yeah, that was it. She was curious, that was number one. And she was pissed off, that was number two. The combination was just about killing her. Well, she would find out soon enough. When she did, maybe she would let him in on the big secret. And if she was too busy, he could get it just by listening in on one of her afternoon conversations with Myra.

But as it turned out, Brian found out quite a lot about Needful Things before his mother or Myra or anyone else in Castle Rock.

## 2

He hardly rode his bike at all on his way home from school on the afternoon before Needful Things was scheduled to open; he was lost in a warm daydream (which would not have passed his lips had he been coaxed with hot coals or bristly tarantula spiders) where he asked Miss Ratcliffe to go with him to the Castle County Fair and she agreed.

*“Thank you, Brian,” Miss Ratcliffe says, and Brian sees little tears of gratitude in the corners of her blue eyes—eyes so dark in color that they look almost stormy. “I’ve been ... well, very sad lately. You see, I’ve lost my love.”*

*“I’ll help you forget him,” Brian says, his voice tough and tender at the same time, “if you’ll call me ... Bri.”*

*“Thank you, ” she whispers, and then, leaning close enough so he can smell her perfume—a dreamy scent of wildflowers—she says, “Thank you ... Bri. And since, for tonight at least, we will be girl and boy instead of teacher and student, you may call me ... Sally.”*

*He takes her hands. Looks into her eyes. “I’m not just a kid,” he says. “I can help you forget him ... Sally.”*

*She seems almost hypnotized by this unexpected understanding, this unexpected manliness; he may only be eleven, she thinks, but he is more of a man than Lester ever was! Her hands tighten on his. Their faces draw closer ... closer ...*

*“No, she murmurs, and now her eyes are so wide and so close that he seems almost to drown in them, “you mustn’t, Bri ... it’s wrong ...”*

*“It’s right, baby,” he says, and presses his lips to hers.*

*She draws away after a few moments and whispers tenderly*

*“Hey, kid, watch out where the fuck you’re going!”*

Jerked out of his daydream, Brian saw that he had just walked in front of Hugh Priest’s pick-up truck.

“Sorry, Mr. Priest,” he said, blushing madly. Hugh Priest was nobody to get mad at you. He worked for the Public Works Department and was reputed to have the worst temper in Castle Rock. Brian watched him narrowly. If he started to get out of his truck, Brian planned to jump on his bike and be gone down Main Street at roughly the speed of light. He had no interest in spending the next month or so in the hospital just because he’d been daydreaming about going to the County Fair with Miss Ratcliffe.

But Hugh Priest had a bottle of beer in the fork of his legs, Hank Williams, Jr., was on the radio singing “High and Pressurized,” and it was all just a little too comfy for anything so radical as beating the shit out of a little kid on Tuesday afternoon.

“You want to keep your eyes open,” he said, taking a pull from the neck of his bottle and looking at Brian balefully, “because next time I won’t bother to stop. I’ll just run you down in the road. Make you squeak, little buddy.”

He put the truck in gear and drove off. Brian felt an insane (and mercifully brief) urge to scream *Well I’ll be butched!* after him. He waited until the orange road-crew truck had turned off into Linden Street and then went on his way. The Daydream about Miss Ratcliffe, alas, was spoiled for the day. Hugh Priest had let in reality again. Miss Ratcliffe hadn’t had a fight with her fiancé, Lester Pratt; she was still wearing her small diamond engagement ring and was

still driving his blue Mustang while she waited for her own car to come back from the shop.

Brian had seen Miss Ratcliffe and Mr. Pratt only last evening, stapling those DICE AND THE DEVIL posters to the telephone poles on Lower Main Street along with a bunch of other people. They had been singing hymns. The only thing was, the Catholics went around as soon as they were done and took them down again. It was pretty funny in a way ... but if he had been bigger, Brian would have tried his best to protect any posters Miss Ratcliff put up with her hallowed hands.

Brian thought of her dark blue eyes, her long dancer's legs, and felt the same glum amazement he always felt when he realized that, come January, she intended to change Sally Ratcliffe, which was lovely, to Sally Pratt, which sounded to Brian like a fat lady falling down a short hard flight of stairs.

Well, he thought, fetching the other curb and starting slowly down Main Street, maybe she'll change her mind. It's not impossible. Or maybe Lester Pratt will get in a car accident or come down with a brain tumor or something like that. It might even turn out that he's a dope addict. Miss Ratcliffe would never marry a dope addict.

Such thoughts offered Brian a bizarre sort of comfort, but they did not change the fact that Hugh Priest had aborted the daydream just short of its apogee (kissing Miss Ratcliffe and actually *touching her right breast* while they were in the Tunnel of Love at the fair). It was a pretty wild idea anyway, an eleven-year-old kid taking a teacher to the County Fair. Miss Ratcliffe was pretty, but she was also old. She had told the speech kids once that she would be twenty-four in November.

So Brian carefully re-folded his daydream along its creases, as a man will carefully fold a well-read and much-valued document, and tucked it on the shelf at the back of his mind where it belonged. He prepared to mount his bike and pedal the rest of the way home.

But he was passing the new shop at just that moment, and the sign in the doorway caught his eye. Something about it had changed. He stopped his bike and looked at it.

GRAND OPENING OCTOBER 9TH—BRING YOUR FRIENDS!

at the top was gone. It had been replaced by a small square sign, red letters on a white background.

OPEN

it said, and

OPEN

was *all* it said. Brian stood with his bike between his legs, looking at this, and his heart began to beat a little faster.

You're not going in there, are you? he asked himself. I mean, even if it really is opening a day early, you're not going in there, right?

Why not? he answered himself.

Well ... because the window's still soaped over. The shade on the door's still drawn. You go in there, anything could happen to you. *Anything*.

Sure. Like the guy who runs it is Norman Bates or something, he dresses up in his mother's clothes and stabs his customers. *Ri-iight*.

Well, forget it, the timid part of his mind said, although that part sounded as if it already knew it had lost. There's *something* funny about it.

But then Brian thought of telling his mother. Just saying nonchalantly, "By the way, Ma, you know that new store, Needful Things? Well, it opened a day early. I went in and took a look around."

She'd push the mute button on the remote control in a hurry then, you better believe it! She'd want to hear all about it!

This thought was too much for Brian. He put down his bike's kickstand and passed slowly into the shade of the awning—it felt at least ten degrees cooler beneath its canopy—and approached the door of Needful Things.

As he put his hand on the big old-fashioned brass doorknob, it occurred to him that the sign must be a mistake. It had probably been sitting there, just inside the door, for tomorrow, and someone

had put it up by accident. He couldn't hear a single sound from behind the drawn shade; the place had a deserted feel.

But since he had come this far, he tried the knob ... and it turned easily under his hand. The latch clicked back and the door of Needful Things swung open.

### 3

It was dim inside, but not dark. Brian could see that track lighting (a specialty of the Dick Perry Siding and Door Company) had been installed, and a few of the spots mounted on the tracks were lit. They were trained on a number of glass display cases which were arranged around the large room. The cases were, for the most part, empty. The spots highlighted the few objects which were in the cases.

The floor, which had been bare wood when this was Western Maine Realty and Insurance, had been covered in a rich wall-to-wall carpet the color of burgundy wine. The walls had been painted eggshell white. A thin light, as white as the walls, filtered in through the soaped display window.

Well, it's a mistake, just the same, Brian thought. He hasn't even got his stock in yet. Whoever put the OPEN sign in the door by mistake left the door unlocked by mistake, too. The polite thing to do in these circumstances would be to close the door again, get on his bike, and ride away.

Yet he was loath to leave. He was, after all, actually seeing the inside of the new store. His mother would talk to him the rest of the afternoon when she heard that. The maddening part was this: he wasn't sure exactly what he was seeing. There were half a dozen (*exhibits*)

items in the display cases, and the spotlights were trained on them—a kind of trial run, probably—but he couldn't tell what they were. He could, however, tell what they *weren't*: spool beds and moldy crank telephones.

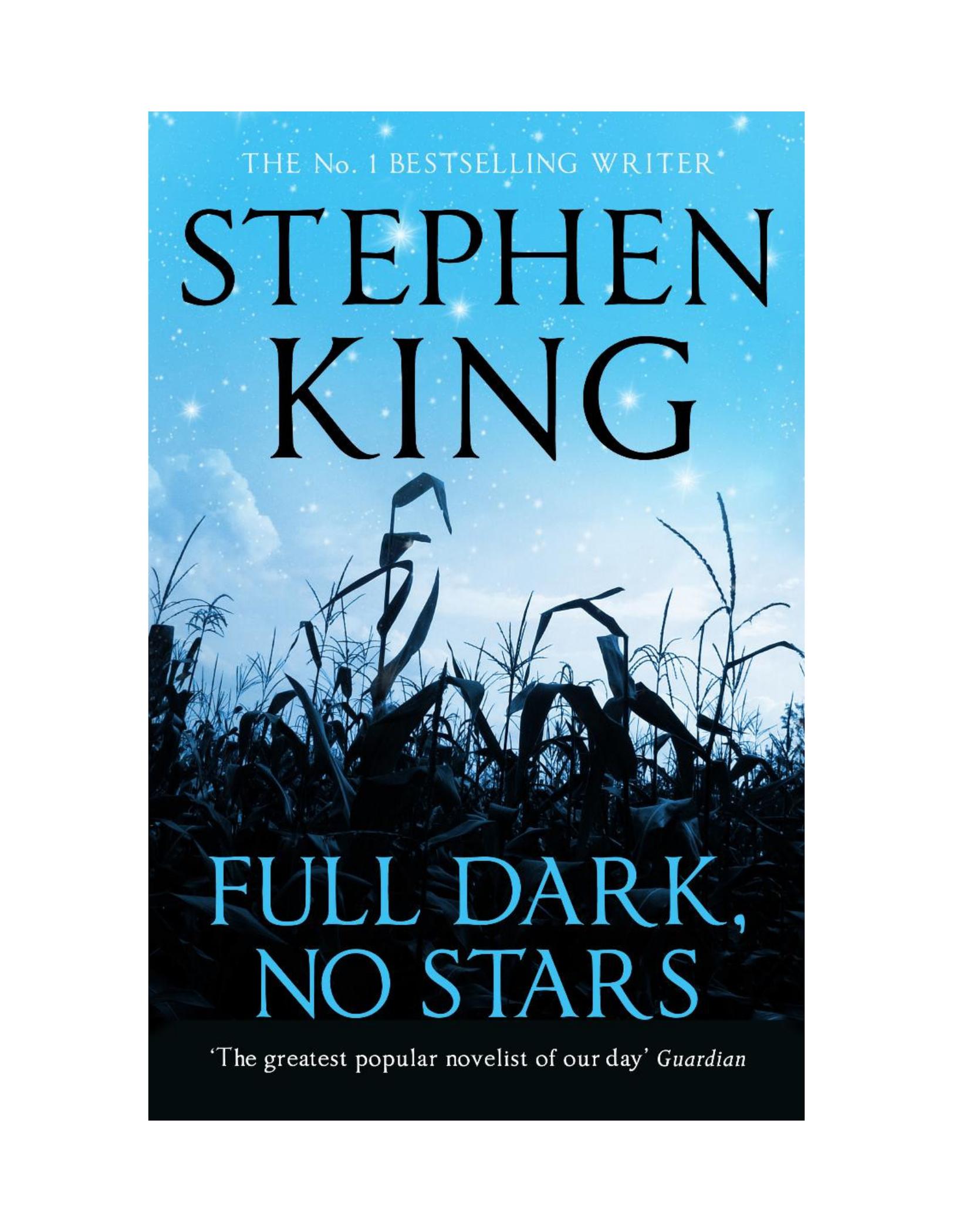
“Hello?” he asked uncertainly, still standing in the doorway. “Is anybody here?”

He was about to grasp the doorknob and pull the door shut again when a voice replied, “*I’m* here.”

A tall figure—what at first seemed to be an *impossibly* tall figure—came through a doorway behind one of the display cases. The doorway was masked with a dark velvet curtain. Brian felt a momentary and quite monstrous cramp of fear. Then the glow thrown by one of the spots slanted across the man’s face, and Brian’s fear was allayed. The guy was quite old, and his face was very kind. He looked at Brian with interest and pleasure.

“Your door was unlocked,” Brian began, “so I thought—”

“Of *course* it’s unlocked,” the tall man said. “I decided to open for a little while this afternoon as a kind of ... of preview. And you are my very first customer. Come in, my friend. Enter freely, and leave some of the happiness you bring!”



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FULL DARK,  
NO STARS



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### AFTERWORD

‘UNDER THE WEATHER’ Excerpt

*For Tabby  
Still.*

1922

April 11, 1930

Magnolia Hotel  
Omaha, Nebraska

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

My name is Wilfred Leland James, and this is my confession. In June of 1922 I murdered my wife, Arlette Christina Winters James, and hid her body by tugging it down an old well. My son, Henry Freeman James, aided me in this crime, although at 14 he was not responsible; I cozened him into it, playing upon his fears and beating down his quite normal objections over a period of 2 months. This is a thing I regret even more bitterly than the crime, for reasons this document will show.

The issue that led to my crime and damnation was 100 acres of good land in Hemingford Home, Nebraska. It was willed to my wife by John Henry Winters, her father. I wished to add this land to our freehold farm, which in 1922 totaled 80 acres. My wife, who never took to the farming life (or to being a farmer's wife), wished to sell it to the Farrington Company for cash money. When I asked her if she truly wanted to live downwind from a Farrington's hog butchery, she told me we could sell up the farm as well as her father's acreage—my father's farm, and his before him! When I asked her what we might do with money and no land, she said we could move to Omaha, or even St. Louis, and open a shop.

"I will never live in Omaha," I said. "Cities are for fools."

This is ironic, considering where I now live, but I will not live here for long; I know that as well as I know what is making the sounds I hear in the walls. And I know where I shall find myself after this earthly life is done. I wonder if Hell can be worse than the City of Omaha. Perhaps it *is* the City of Omaha, but with no good country surrounding it; only a smoking, brimstone-stinking emptiness full of lost souls like myself.

We argued bitterly over that 100 acres during the winter and spring of 1922. Henry was caught in the middle, yet tended more to my side; he favored

his mother in looks but me in his love for the land. He was a biddable lad with none of his mother's arrogance. Again and again he told her that he had no desire to live in Omaha or any city, and would go only if she and I came to an agreement, which we never could.

I thought of going to Law, feeling sure that, as the Husband in the matter, any court in the land would uphold my right to decide the use and purpose of that land. Yet something held me back. 'Twas not fear of the neighbors' chatter, I had no care for country gossip; 'twas something else. I had come to hate her, you see. I had come to wish her dead, and that was what held me back.

I believe that there is another man inside of every man, a stranger, a Conniving Man. And I believe that by March of 1922, when the Hemingford County skies were white and every field was a snow-scrimmed mudsuck, the Conniving Man inside Farmer Wilfred James had already passed judgment on my wife and decided her fate. 'Twas justice of the black-cap variety, too. The Bible says that an ungrateful child is like a serpent's tooth, but a nagging and ungrateful Wife is ever so much sharper than that.

I am not a monster; I tried to save her from the Conniving Man. I told her that if we could not agree, she should go to her mother's in Lincoln, which is sixty miles west—a good distance for a separation which is not quite a divorce yet signifies a dissolving of the marital corporation.

"And leave you my father's land, I suppose?" she asked, and tossed her head. How I had come to hate that pert head-toss, so like that of an ill-trained pony, and the little sniff which always accompanied it. "That will never happen, Wilf."

I told her that I would buy the land from her, if she insisted. It would have to be over a period of time—eight years, perhaps ten—but I would pay her every cent.

"A little money coming in is worse than none," she replied (with another sniff and head-toss). "This is something every woman knows. The Farrington Company will pay all at once, and their idea of top dollar is apt to be far more generous than yours. And I will never live in Lincoln. 'Tis not a city but only a village with more churches than houses."

Do you see my situation? Do you not understand the “spot” she put me in? Can I not count on at least a little of your sympathy? No? Then hear this.

In early April of that year—eight years to this very day, for all I know—she came to me all bright and shining. She had spent most of the day at the “beauty salon” in McCook, and her hair hung around her cheeks in fat curls that reminded me of the toilet-rolls one finds in hotels and inns. She said she’d had an idea. It was that we should sell the 100 acres *and* the farm to the Farrington combine. She believed they would buy it all just to get her father’s piece, which was near the railway line (and she was probably right).

“Then,” said this saucy vixen, “we can split the money, divorce, and start new lives apart from each other. We both know that’s what you want.” As if she didn’t.

“Ah,” I said (as if giving the idea serious consideration). “And with which of us does the boy go?”

“Me, of course,” she said, wide-eyed. “A boy of 14 needs to be with his mother.”

I began to “work on” Henry that very day, telling him his mother’s latest plan. We were sitting in the hay-mow. I wore my saddest face and spoke in my saddest voice, painting a picture of what his life would be like if his mother was allowed to carry through with this plan: how he would have neither farm nor father, how he would find himself in a much bigger school, all his friends (most since babyhood) left behind, how, once in that new school, he would have to fight for a place among strangers who would laugh at him and call him a country bumpkin. On the other hand, I said, if we could hold onto all the acreage, I was convinced we could pay off our note at the bank by 1925 and live happily debt-free, breathing sweet air instead of watching pig-guts float down our previously clear stream from sun-up to sun-down. “Now what is it you want?” I asked after drawing this picture in as much detail as I could manage.

“To stay here with you, Poppa,” he said. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. “Why does she have to be such a . . . such a . . .”

“Go on,” I said. “The truth is never cussing, Son.”

“Such a *bitch!*”

“Because most women are,” I said. “It’s an ineradicable part of their natures. The question is what we’re going to do about it.”

But the Conniving Man inside had already thought of the old well behind the cow barn, the one we only used for slop-water because it was so shallow and murky—only 20 feet deep and little more than a sluice. It was just a question of bringing him to it. And I *had* to, surely you see that; I could kill my wife but must save my lovely son. To what purpose the ownership of 180 acres—or a thousand—if you have no one to share them with and pass them on to?

I pretended to be considering Arlette’s mad plan to see good cornland turned into a hog-butchery. I asked her to give me time to get used to the idea. She assented. And during the next 2 months I worked on Henry, getting *him* used to a very different idea. ’Twasn’t as hard as it might have been; he had his mother’s looks (a woman’s looks are the honey, you know, that lure men on to the stinging hive) but not her God-awful stubbornness. It was only necessary to paint a picture of what his life would be like in Omaha or St. Louis. I raised the possibility that even those two overcrowded antheaps might not satisfy her; she might decide only Chicago would do. “Then,” I said, “you might find yourself going to high school with black niggers.”

He grew cold toward his mother; after a few efforts—all clumsy, all rebuffed—to regain his affections, she returned the chill. I (or rather the Conniving Man) rejoiced at this. In early June I told her that, after great consideration, I had decided I would never allow her to sell those 100 acres without a fight; that I would send us all to beggary and ruin if that was what it took.

She was calm. She decided to take legal advice of her own (for the Law, as we know, will befriend whomever pays it). This I foresaw. And smiled at it! Because she couldn’t pay for such advice. By then I was holding tight to what little cash money we had. Henry even turned his pig-bank over to me when I asked, so she couldn’t steal from that source, paltry as it was. She went, of course, to the Farrington Company offices in Deland, feeling quite sure (as was I) that they who had so much to gain would stand good her legal fees.

“They will, and she’ll win,” I told Henry from what had become our usual place of conversation in the hay-mow. I was not entirely sure of this, but I had already taken my decision, which I will not go so far as to call “a plan.”

“But Poppa, that’s not fair!” he cried. Sitting there in the hay, he looked very young, more like 10 than 14.

“Life never is,” I said. “Sometimes the only thing to do is to take the thing that you must have. Even if someone gets hurt.” I paused, gauging his face. “Even if someone dies.”

He went white. “Poppa!”

“If she was gone,” I said, “everything would be the way it was. All the arguments would cease. We could live here peacefully. I’ve offered her everything I can to make her go, and she won’t. There’s only one other thing I can do. That *we* can do.”

“But I love her!”

“I love her, too,” I said. Which, however little you might believe it, was true. The hate I felt toward her in that year of 1922 was greater than a man can feel for any woman unless love is a part of it. And, bitter and willful though she was, Arlette was a warm-natured woman. Our “marital relations” had never ceased, although since the arguments about the 100 acres had begun, our grapplings in the dark had become more and more like animals rutting.

“It needn’t be painful,” I said. “And when it’s over . . . well . . .”

I took him out back of the barn and showed him the well, where he burst into bitter tears. “No, Poppa. Not that. No matter what.”

But when she came back from Deland (Harlan Cotterie, our nearest neighbor, carried her most of the way in his Ford, leaving her to walk the last two miles) and Henry begged her to “leave off so we can just be a family again,” she lost her temper, struck him across the mouth, and told him to stop begging like a dog.

“Your father’s infected you with his timidity. Worse, he’s infected you with his greed.”

As though she were innocent of *that* sin!

“The lawyer assures me the land is mine to do with as I wish, and I’m going to sell it. As for the two of you, you can sit here and smell roasting hogs together and cook your own meals and make your own beds. You, my son, can plow all the day and read *his* everlasting books all night. They’ve done him little good, but you may get on better. Who knows?”

“Mama, that’s not fair!”

She looked at her son as a woman might look at a strange man who had presumed to touch her arm. And how my heart rejoiced when I saw him looking back just as coldly. “You can go to the devil, both of you. As for me, I’m going to Omaha and opening a dress shop. That’s *my* idea of fair.”

This conversation took place in the dusty door-yard between the house and the barn, and her idea of fair was the last word. She marched across the yard, raising dust with her dainty town shoes, went into the house, and slammed the door. Henry turned to look at me. There was blood at the corner of his mouth and his lower lip was swelling. The rage in his eyes was of the raw, pure sort that only adolescents can feel. It is rage that doesn’t count the cost. He nodded his head. I nodded back, just as gravely, but inside the Conniving Man was grinning.

That slap was her death-warrant.

\* \* \*

Two days later, when Henry came to me in the new corn, I saw he had weakened again. I wasn’t dismayed or surprised; the years between childhood and adulthood are gusty years, and those living through them spin like the weathercocks some farmers in the Midwest used to put atop their grain silos.

“We can’t,” he said. “Poppa, she’s in Error. And Shannon says those who die in Error go to Hell.”

*God damn the Methodist church and Methodist Youth Fellowship*, I thought . . . but the Conniving Man only smiled. For the next ten minutes we talked theology in the green corn while early summer clouds—the best clouds, the ones that float like schooners—sailed slowly above us, trailing their shadows like wakes. I explained to him that, quite the opposite of sending Arlette to Hell, we would be sending her to Heaven. “For,” I said, “a murdered man or woman dies not in God’s time but in Man’s. He . . . or she . . . is cut short before he . . . or she . . . can atone for sin, and so all errors must be forgiven. When you think of it that way, every murderer is a Gate of Heaven.”

“But what about us, Poppa? Wouldn’t we go to Hell?”

I gestured to the fields, brave with new growth. “How can you say so, when you see Heaven all around us? Yet she means to drive us away from it as surely

as the angel with the flaming sword drove Adam and Eve from the Garden.”

He gazed at me, troubled. Dark. I hated to darken my son in such a way, yet part of me believed then and believes still that it was not I who did it to him, but she.

“And think,” I said. “If she goes to Omaha, she’ll dig herself an even deeper pit in Sheol. If she takes you, you’ll become a city boy—”

“I never will!” He cried this so loudly that crows took wing from the fenceline and swirled away into the blue sky like charred paper.

“You’re young and you will,” I said. “You’ll forget all this . . . you’ll learn city ways . . . and begin digging your own pit.”

If he had returned by saying that murderers had no hope of joining their victims in Heaven, I might have been stumped. But either his theology did not stretch so far or he didn’t want to consider such things. And is there Hell, or do we make our own on earth? When I consider the last eight years of my life, I plump for the latter.

“How?” he asked. “When?”

I told him.

“And we can go on living here after?”

I said we could.

“And it won’t hurt her?”

“No,” I said. “It will be quick.”

He seemed satisfied. And still it might not have happened, if not for Arlette herself.

\* \* \*

We settled on a Saturday night about halfway through a June that was as fine as any I can remember. Arlette sometimes took a glass of wine on Summer evenings, although rarely more. There was good reason for this. She was one of those people who can never take two glasses without taking four, then six, then the whole bottle. And another bottle, if there is another. “I have to be very careful, Wilf. I like it too much. Luckily for me, my willpower is strong.”

That night we sat on the porch, watching the late light linger over the fields, listening to the somnolent *reeeee* of the crickets. Henry was in his room. He

had hardly touched his supper, and as Arlette and I sat on the porch in our matching rockers with the MA and PA seat-cushions, I thought I heard a faint sound that could have been retching. I remember thinking that when the moment came, he would not be able to go through with it. His mother would wake up bad-tempered the following morning with a “hang-over” and no knowledge of how close she had come to never seeing another Nebraska dawn. Yet I moved forward with the plan. Because I was like one of those Russian nesting dolls? Perhaps. Perhaps every man is like that. Inside me was the Conniving Man, but inside the Conniving Man was a Hopeful Man. That fellow died sometime between 1922 and 1930. The Conniving Man, having done his damage, disappeared. Without his schemes and ambitions, life has been a hollow place.

I brought the bottle out to the porch with me, but when I tried to fill her empty glass, she covered it with her hand. “You needn’t get me drunk to get what you want. I want it, too. I’ve got an itch.” She spread her legs and put her hand on her crotch to show where the itch was. There was a Vulgar Woman inside her—perhaps even a Harlot—and the wine always let her loose.

“Have another glass anyway,” I said. “We’ve something to celebrate.”

She looked at me warily. Even a single glass of wine made her eyes wet (as if part of her was weeping for all the wine it wanted and could not have), and in the sunset light they looked orange, like the eyes of a jack-o’-lantern with a candle inside it.

“There will be no suit,” I told her, “and there will be no divorce. If the Farrington Company can afford to pay us for my 80 as well as your father’s 100, our argument is over.”

For the first and only time in our troubled marriage, she actually *gaped*. “What are you saying? Is it what I think you’re saying? Don’t fool with me, Wilf!”

“I’m not,” said the Conniving Man. He spoke with hearty sincerity. “Henry and I have had many conversations about this—”

“You’ve been thick as thieves, that’s true,” she said. She had taken her hand from the top of her glass and I took the opportunity to fill it. “Always in the hay-mow or sitting on the woodpile or with your heads together in the back field. I thought it was about Shannon Cotterie.” A sniff and a head-toss. But I

thought she looked a little wistful, as well. She sipped at her second glass of wine. Two sips of a second glass and she could still put the glass down and go to bed. Four and I might as well hand her the bottle. Not to mention the other two I had standing by.

“No,” I said. “We haven’t been talking about Shannon.” Although I *had* seen Henry holding her hand on occasion as they walked the two miles to the Hemingford Home schoolhouse. “We’ve been talking about Omaha. He wants to go, I guess.” It wouldn’t do to lay it on too thick, not after a single glass of wine and two sips of another. She was suspicious by nature, was my Arlette, always looking for a deeper motive. And of course in this case I had one. “At least to try it on for size. And Omaha’s not that far from Hemingford . . .”

“No. It isn’t. As I’ve told you both a thousand times.” She sipped her wine, and instead of putting the glass down as she had before, she held it. The orange light above the western horizon was deepening to an otherworldly green-purple that seemed to burn in the glass.

“If it were St. Louis, that would be a different thing.”

“I’ve given that idea up,” she said. Which meant, of course, that she had investigated the possibility and found it problematic. Behind my back, of course. All of it behind my back except for the company lawyer. And she would have done *that* behind my back as well, if she hadn’t wanted to use it as a club to beat me with.

“Will they buy the whole piece, do you think?” I asked. “All 180 acres?”

“How would I know?” Sipping. The second glass half-empty. If I told her now that she’d had enough and tried to take it away from her, she’d refuse to give it up.

“You do, I have no doubt,” I said. “That 180 acres is like St. Louis. You’ve *investigated*.”

She gave me a shrewd sidelong look . . . then burst into harsh laughter. “P’raps I have.”

“I suppose we could hunt for a house on the outskirts of town,” I said. “Where there’s at least a field or two to look at.”

“Where you’d sit on your ass in a porch-rocker all day, letting your wife do the work for a change? Here, fill this up. If we’re celebrating, let’s celebrate.”

I filled both. It only took a splash in mine, as I’d taken but a single swallow.

“I thought I might look for work as a mechanic. Cars and trucks, but mostly farm machinery. If I can keep that old Farmall running”—I gestured with my glass toward the dark hulk of the tractor standing beside the barn —“then I guess I can keep anything running.”

“And Henry talked you into this.”

“He convinced me it would be better to take a chance at being happy in town than to stay here on my own in what would be sure misery.”

“The boy shows sense and the man listens! At long last! Hallelujah!” She drained her glass and held it out for more. She grasped my arm and leaned close enough for me to smell sour grapes on her breath. “You may get that thing you like tonight, Wilf.” She touched her purple-stained tongue to the middle of her upper lip. “That *nasty* thing.”

“I’ll look forward to that,” I said. If I had my way, an even nastier thing was going to happen that night in the bed we had shared for 15 years.

“Let’s have Henry down,” she said. She had begun to slur her words. “I want to congratulate him on finally seeing the light.” (Have I mentioned that the verb *to thank* was not in my wife’s vocabulary? Perhaps not. Perhaps by now I don’t need to.) Her eyes lit up as a thought occurred to her. “We’ll give ’im a glass of wine! He’s old enough!” She elbowed me like one of the old men you see sitting on the benches that flank the courthouse steps, telling each other dirty jokes. “If we loosen his tongue a little, we may even find out if he’s made any time with Shannon Cotterie . . . li’l baggage, but she’s got pretty hair, I’ll give ’er that.”

“Have another glass of wine first,” said the Conniving Man.

She had another two, and that emptied the bottle. (The first one.) By then she was singing “Avalon” in her best minstrel voice, and doing her best minstrel eye-rolls. It was painful to see and even more painful to hear.

I went into the kitchen to get another bottle of wine, and judged the time was right to call Henry. Although, as I’ve said, I was not in great hopes. I could only do it if he were my willing accomplice, and in my heart I believed that he would shy from the deed when the talk ran out and the time actually came. If so, we would simply put her to bed. In the morning I would tell her I’d changed my mind about selling my father’s land.

Henry came, and nothing in his white, woeful face offered any encouragement for success. “Poppa, I don’t think I can,” he whispered. “It’s *Mama*.”

“If you can’t, you can’t,” I said, and there was nothing of the Conniving Man in that. I was resigned; what would be would be. “In any case, she’s happy for the first time in months. Drunk, but happy.”

“Not just squiffy? She’s *drunk*?”

“Don’t be surprised; getting her own way is the only thing that ever makes her happy. Surely 14 years with her is long enough to have taught you that.”

Frowning, he cocked an ear to the porch as the woman who’d given him birth launched into a jarring but word-for-word rendition of “Dirty McGee.” Henry frowned at this barrelhouse ballad, perhaps because of the chorus (“She was willin’ to help him stick it in / For it was Dirty McGee again”), more likely at the way she was slurring the words. Henry had taken the Pledge at a Methodist Youth Fellowship Camp-Out on Labor Day weekend of the year before. I rather enjoyed his shock. When teenagers aren’t turning like weathervanes in a high wind, they’re as stiff as Puritans.

“She wants you to join us and have a glass of wine.”

“Poppa, you know I promised the Lord I would never drink.”

“You’ll have to take that up with her. She wants to have a celebration. We’re selling up and moving to Omaha.”

“*No!*”

“Well . . . we’ll see. It’s really up to you, Son. Come out on the porch.”

His mother rose tipsily to her feet when she saw him, wrapped her arms around his waist, pressed her body rather too tightly against his, and covered his face with extravagant kisses. Unpleasantly smelly ones, from the way he grimaced. The Conniving Man, meanwhile, filled up her glass, which was empty again.

“Finally we’re all together! My men see sense!” She raised her glass in a toast, and slopped a goodly portion of it onto her bosom. She laughed and gave me a wink. “If you’re good, Wilf, you can suck it out of the cloth later on.”

Henry looked at her with confused distaste as she plopped back down in her rocker, raised her skirts, and tucked them between her legs. She saw the look and laughed.

“No need to be so prissy. I’ve seen you with Shannon Cotterie. Li’l baggage, but she’s got pretty hair and a nice little figger.” She drank off the rest of her wine and belched. “If you’re not getting a touch of that, you’re a fool. Only you’d better be careful. Fourteen’s not too young to marry. Out here in the middle, fourteen’s not too young to marry your *cousin*.” She laughed some more and held out her glass. I filled it from the second bottle.

“Poppa, she’s had enough,” Henry said, as disapproving as a parson. Above us, the first stars were winking into view above that vast flat emptiness I have loved all my life.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said. “*In vino veritas*, that’s what Pliny the Elder said . . . in one of those *books* your mother’s always sneering about.”

“Hand on the plow all day, nose in a book all night,” Arlette said. “Except when he’s got something else in *me*.”

“*Mama!*”

“*Mama!*” she mocked, then raised her glass in the direction of Harlan Cotterie’s farm, although it was too far for us to see the lights. We couldn’t have seen them even if it had been a mile closer, now that the corn was high. When summer comes to Nebraska, each farmhouse is a ship sailing a vast green ocean. “Here’s to Shannon Cotterie and her brand-new bubbies, and if my son don’t know the color of her nipples, he’s a slowpoke.”

My son made no reply to this, but what I could see of his shadowed face made the Conniving Man rejoice.

She turned to Henry, grasped his arm, and spilled wine on his wrist. Ignoring his little mew of distaste, looking into his face with sudden grimness, she said: “Just make sure that when you’re lying down with her in the corn or behind the barn, you’re a *no-poke*.” She made her free hand into a fist, poked out the middle finger, then used it to tap a circle around her crotch: left thigh, right thigh, right belly, navel, left belly, back again to the left thigh. “Explore all you like, and rub around it with your Johnny Mac until he feels good and spits up, but stay out of the home place lest you find yourself locked in for life, just like your mummer and daddy.”

He got up and left, still without a word, and I don’t blame him. Even for Arlette, this was a performance of extreme vulgarity. He must have seen her change before his eyes from his mother—a difficult woman but sometimes

loving—to a smelly whorehouse madam instructing a green young customer. All bad enough, but he was sweet on the Cotterie girl, and that made it worse. Very young men cannot help but put their first loves on pedestals, and should someone come along and spit on the paragon . . . even if it happens to be one's mother . . .

Faintly, I heard his door slam. And faint but audible sobbing.

"You've hurt his feelings," I said.

She expressed the opinion that *feelings*, like *fairness*, were also the last resort of weaklings. Then she held out her glass. I filled it, knowing she would remember none of what she'd said in the morning (always supposing she was still there to greet the morning), and would deny it—vehemently—if I told her. I had seen her in this state of drunkenness before, but not for years.

We finished the second bottle (*she* did) and half of the third before her chin dropped onto her wine-stained bosom and she began to snore. Coming through her thus constricted throat, those snores sounded like the growling of an ill-tempered dog.

I put my arm around her shoulders, hooked my hand into her armpit, and hauled her to her feet. She muttered protests and slapped weakly at me with one stinking hand. "Lea' me 'lone. Want to go to slee'."

"And you will," I said. "But in your bed, not out here on the porch."

I led her—stumbling and snoring, one eye shut and the other open in a bleary glare—across the sitting room. Henry's door opened. He stood in it, his face expressionless and much older than his years. He nodded at me. Just one single dip of the head, but it told me all I needed to know.

I got her on the bed, took off her shoes, and left her there to snore with her legs spread and one hand dangling off the mattress. I went back into the sitting room and found Henry standing beside the radio Arlette had hounded me into buying the year before.

"She can't say those things about Shannon," he whispered.

"But she will," I said. "It's how she is, how the Lord made her."

"And she can't take me *away* from Shannon."

"She'll do that, too," I said. "If we let her."

"Couldn't you . . . Poppa, couldn't you get your own lawyer?"

“Do you think any lawyer whose services I could buy with the little bit of money I have in the bank could stand up to the lawyers Farrington would throw at us? They swing weight in Hemingford County; I swing nothing but a sickle when I want to cut hay. They want that 100 acres and she means for them to have it. This is the only way, but you have to help me. Will you?”

For a long time he said nothing. He lowered his head, and I could see tears dropping from his eyes to the hooked rug. Then he whispered, “Yes. But if I have to watch it . . . I’m not sure I can . . .”

“There’s a way you can help and still not have to watch. Go into the shed and fetch a burlap sack.”

He did as I asked. I went into the kitchen and got her sharpest butcher knife. When he came back with the sack and saw it, his face paled. “Does it have to be *that*? Can’t you . . . with a pillow . . .”

“It would be too slow and too painful,” I said. “She’d struggle.” He accepted that as if I had killed a dozen women before my wife and thus knew. But I didn’t. All I knew was that in all my half-plans—my daydreams of being rid of her, in other words—I had always seen the knife I now held in my hand. And so the knife it would be. The knife or nothing.

We stood there in the glow of the kerosene lamps—there’d be no electricity except for generators in Hemingford Home until 1928—looking at each other, the great night-silence that exists out there in the middle of things broken only by the unlovely sound of her snores. Yet there was a third presence in that room: her ineluctable will, which existed separate of the woman herself (I thought I sensed it then; these 8 years later I am sure). This is a ghost story, but the ghost was there even before the woman it belonged to died.

“All right, Poppa. We’ll . . . we’ll send her to Heaven.” Henry’s face brightened at the thought. How hideous that seems to me now, especially when I think of how he finished up.

“It will be quick,” I said. Man and boy I’ve slit nine-score hogs’ throats, and I thought it would be. But I was wrong.

\* \* \*

Let it be told quickly. On the nights when I can't sleep—and there are many—it plays over and over again, every thrash and cough and drop of blood in exquisite slowness, so let it be told quickly.

We went into the bedroom, me in the lead with the butcher knife in my hand, my son with the burlap sack. We went on tiptoe, but we could have come in clashing cymbals without waking her up. I motioned Henry to stand to my right, by her head. Now we could hear the Big Ben alarm clock ticking on her nightstand as well as her snores, and a curious thought came to me: we were like physicians attending the deathbed of an important patient. But I think physicians at deathbeds do not as a rule tremble with guilt and fear.

*Please let there not be too much blood, I thought. Let the bag catch it. Even better, let him cry off now, at the last minute.*

But he didn't. Perhaps he thought I'd hate him if he did; perhaps he had resigned her to Heaven; perhaps he was remembering that obscene middle finger, poking a circle around her crotch. I don't know. I only know he whispered, "Good-bye, Mama," and drew the bag down over her head.

She snorted and tried to twist away. I had meant to reach under the bag to do my business, but he had to push down tightly on it to hold her, and I couldn't. I saw her nose making a shape like a shark's fin in the burlap. I saw the look of panic dawning on his face, too, and knew he wouldn't hold on for long.

I put one knee on the bed and one hand on her shoulder. Then I slashed through the burlap and the throat beneath. She screamed and began to thrash in earnest. Blood welled through the slit in the burlap. Her hands came up and beat the air. Henry stumbled away from the bed with a screech. I tried to hold her. She pulled at the gushing bag with her hands and I slashed at them, cutting three of her fingers to the bone. She shrieked again—a sound as thin and sharp as a sliver of ice—and the hand fell away to twitch on the counterpane. I slashed another bleeding slit in the burlap, and another, and another. Five cuts in all I made before she pushed me away with her unwounded hand and then tore the burlap sack up from her face. She couldn't get it all the way off her head—it caught in her hair—and so she wore it like a snood.

I had cut her throat with the first two slashes, the first time deep enough to show the gristle of her wind-pipe. With the last two I had carved her cheek and her mouth, the latter so deeply that she wore a clown's grin. It stretched all the way to her ears and showed her teeth. She let loose a guttural, choked roar, the sound a lion might make at feeding-time. Blood flew from her throat all the way to the foot of the counterpane. I remember thinking it looked like the wine when she held her glass up to the last of the daylight.

She tried to get out of bed. I was first dumb-founded, then infuriated. She had been a trouble to me all the days of our marriage and was a trouble even now, at our bloody divorce. But what else should I have expected?

*"Oh Poppa, make her stop!"* Henry shrieked. *"Make her stop, o Poppa, for the love of God make her stop!"*

I leaped on her like an ardent lover and drove her back down on her blood-drenched pillow. More harsh growls came from deep in her mangled throat. Her eyes rolled in their sockets, gushing tears. I wound my hand into her hair, yanked her head back, and cut her throat yet again. Then I tore the counterpane free from my side of the bed and wrapped it over her head, catching all but the first pulse from her jugular. My face had caught that spray, and hot blood now dripped from my chin, nose, and eyebrows.

Behind me, Henry's shrieks ceased. I turned around and saw that God had taken pity on him (assuming He had not turned His face away when He saw what we were about): he had fainted. Her thrashings began to weaken. At last she lay still . . . but I remained on top of her, pressing down with the counterpane, now soaked with her blood. I reminded myself that she had never done anything easily. And I was right. After thirty seconds (the tinny mail-order clock counted them off), she gave another heave, this time bowing her back so strenuously that she almost threw me off. *Ride 'em, Cowboy*, I thought. Or perhaps I said it aloud. That I can't remember, God help me. Everything else, but not that.

She subsided. I counted another thirty tinny ticks, then thirty after that, for good measure. On the floor, Henry stirred and groaned. He began to sit up, then thought better of it. He crawled into the farthest corner of the room and curled in a ball.

"Henry?" I said.

Nothing from the curled shape in the corner.

“Henry, she’s dead. She’s dead and I need help.”

Nothing still.

“Henry, it’s too late to turn back now. The deed is done. If you don’t want to go to prison—and your father to the electric chair—then get on your feet and help me.”

He staggered toward the bed. His hair had fallen into his eyes; they glittered through the sweat-clumped locks like the eyes of an animal hiding in the bushes. He licked his lips repeatedly.

“Don’t step in the blood. We’ve got more of a mess to clean up in here than I wanted, but we can take care of it. If we don’t track it all through the house, that is.”

“Do I have to look at her? Poppa, do I have to *look?*”

“No. Neither of us do.”

We rolled her up, making the counterpane her shroud. Once it was done, I realized we couldn’t carry her through the house that way; in my half-plans and daydreams, I had seen no more than a discreet thread of blood marring the counterpane where her cut throat (her *neatly* cut throat) lay beneath. I had not foreseen or even considered the reality: the white counterpane was a blackish-purple in the dim room, oozing blood as a bloated sponge will ooze water.

There was a quilt in the closet. I could not suppress a brief thought of what my mother would think if she could see what use I was making of that lovingly stitched wedding present. I laid it on the floor. We dropped Arlette onto it. Then we rolled her up.

“Quick,” I said. “Before this starts to drip, too. No . . . wait . . . go for a lamp.”

He was gone so long that I began to fear he’d run away. Then I saw the light come bobbing down the short hall past his bedroom and to the one Arlette and I shared. *Had* shared. I could see the tears gushing down his waxy-pale face.

“Put it on the dresser.”

He set the lamp down by the book I had been reading: Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*. I never finished it; I could never *bear* to finish it. By the light of

the lamp, I pointed out the splashes of blood on the floor, and the pool of it right beside the bed.

“More is running out of the quilt,” he said. “If I’d known how much blood she had in her . . .”

I shook the case free of my pillow and snugged it over the end of the quilt like a sock over a bleeding shin. “Take her feet,” I said. “We need to do this part right now. And don’t faint again, Henry, because I can’t do it by myself.”

“I wish it was a dream,” he said, but he bent and got his arms around the bottom of the quilt. “Do you think it might be a dream, Poppa?”

“We’ll think it is, a year from now when it’s all behind us.” Part of me actually believed this. “Quickly, now. Before the pillow-case starts to drip. Or the rest of the quilt.”

We carried her down the hall, across the sitting room, and out through the front door like men carrying a piece of furniture wrapped in a mover’s rug. Once we were down the porch steps, I breathed a little easier; blood in the dooryard could easily be covered over.

Henry was all right until we got around the corner of the cow barn and the old well came in view. It was ringed by wooden stakes so no one would by accident step on the wooden cap that covered it. Those sticks looked grim and horrible in the starlight, and at the sight of them, Henry uttered a strangled cry.

“That’s no grave for a mum . . . muh . . .” He managed that much, and then fainted into the weedy scrub that grew behind the barn. Suddenly I was holding the dead weight of my murdered wife all by myself. I considered putting the grotesque bundle down—its wrappings now all askew and the slashed hand peeking out—long enough to revive him. I decided it would be more merciful to let him lie. I dragged her to the side of the well, put her down, and lifted up the wooden cap. As I leaned it against two of the stakes, the well exhaled into my face: a stench of stagnant water and rotting weeds. I fought with my gorge and lost. Holding onto two of the stakes to keep my balance, I bowed at the waist to vomit my supper and the little wine I had drunk. There was an echoing splash when it struck the murky water at the bottom. That splash, like thinking *Ride ’em, Cowboy*, has been within a hand’s reach of my memory for the last eight years. I will wake up in the middle of

the night with the echo in my mind and feel the splinters of the stakes dig into my palms as I clutch them, holding on for dear life.

I backed away from the well and tripped over the bundle that held Arlette. I fell down. The slashed hand was inches from my eyes. I tucked it back into the quilt and then patted it, as if comforting her. Henry was still lying in the weeds with his head pillowed on one arm. He looked like a child sleeping after a strenuous day during harvest-time. Overhead, the stars shone down in their thousands and tens of thousands. I could see the constellations—Orion, Cassiopeia, the Dippers—that my father had taught me. In the distance, the Cotteries' dog Rex barked once and then was still. I remember thinking, *This night will never end*. And that was right. In all the important ways, it never has.

I picked the bundle up in my arms, and it twitched.

I froze, my breath held in spite of my thundering heart. *Surely I didn't feel that*, I thought. I waited for it to come again. Or perhaps for her hand to creep out of the quilt and try to grip my wrist with the slashed fingers.

There was nothing. I had imagined it. Surely I had. And so I tugged her down the well. I saw the quilt unravel from the end not held by the pillowcase, and then came the splash. A much bigger one than my vomit had made, but there was also a squelchy *thud*. I'd known the water down there wasn't deep, but had hoped it would be deep enough to cover her. That thud told me it wasn't.

A high siren of laughter commenced behind me, a sound so close to insanity that it made gooseflesh prickle all the way from the crack of my backside to the nape of my neck. Henry had come to and gained his feet. No, much more than that. He was capering behind the cow barn, waving his arms at the star-shot sky, and laughing.

"Mama down the well and I don't care!" he singsonged. "Mama down the well and I don't care, for my master's gone *aw-aaay!*"

I reached him in three strides and slapped him as hard as I could, leaving bloody finger-marks on a downy cheek that hadn't yet felt the stroke of a razor. "Shut up! Your voice will carry! Your—. There, fool boy, you've raised that god damned dog again."

Rex barked once, twice, three times. Then silence. We stood, me grasping Henry's shoulders, listening with my head cocked. Sweat ran down the back of

my neck. Rex barked once more, then quit. If any of the Cotteries roused, they'd think it was a raccoon he'd been barking at. Or so I hoped.

"Go in the house," I said. "The worst is over."

"Is it, Poppa?" He looked at me solemnly. "Is it?"

"Yes. Are you all right? Are you going to faint again?"

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"I'm all right. I just . . . I don't know why I laughed like that. I was confused. Because I'm relieved, I guess. It's over!" A chuckle escaped him, and he clapped his hands over his mouth like a little boy who has inadvertently said a bad word in front of his grandma.

"Yes," I said. "It's over. We'll stay here. Your mother ran away to St. Louis . . . or perhaps it was Chicago . . . but we'll stay here."

"She . . . ?" His eyes strayed to the well, and the cap leaning against three of those stakes that were somehow so grim in the starlight.

"Yes, Hank, she did." His mother hated to hear me call him Hank, she said it was common, but there was nothing she could do about it now. "Up and left us cold. And of course we're sorry, but in the meantime, chores won't wait. Nor schooling."

"And I can still be . . . friends with Shannon."

"Of course," I said, and in my mind's eye I saw Arlette's middle finger tapping its lascivious circle around her crotch. "Of course you can. But if you should ever feel the urge to *confess* to Shannon—"

An expression of horror dawned on his face. "Not ever!"

"That's what you think now, and I'm glad. But if the urge should come on you someday, remember this: she'd run from you."

"Acourse she would," he muttered.

"Now go in the house and get both wash-buckets out of the pantry. Better get a couple of milk-buckets from the barn, as well. Fill them from the kitchen pump and suds 'em up with that stuff she keeps under the sink."

"Should I heat the water?"

I heard my mother say, *Cold water for blood, Wilf. Remember that.*

"No need," I said. "I'll be in as soon as I've put the cap back on the well."

He started to turn away, then seized my arm. His hands were dreadfully cold. “No one can ever know!” He whispered this hoarsely into my face. “No one can ever know what we did!”

“No one ever will,” I said, sounding far bolder than I felt. Things had already gone wrong, and I was starting to realize that a deed is never like the dream of a deed.

“She won’t come back, will she?”

“*What?*”

“She won’t haunt us, will she?” Only he said *haint*, the kind of country talk that had always made Arlette shake her head and roll her eyes. It is only now, eight years later, that I had come to realize how much *haint* sounds like *hate*.

“No,” I said.

But I was wrong.

\* \* \*

I looked down the well, and although it was only 20 feet deep, there was no moon and all I could see was the pale blur of the quilt. Or perhaps it was the pillow-case. I lowered the cover into place, straightened it a little, then walked back to the house. I tried to follow the path we’d taken with our terrible bundle, purposely scuffing my feet, trying to obliterate any traces of blood. I’d do a better job in the morning.

I discovered something that night that most people never have to learn: murder is sin, murder is damnation (surely of one’s own mind and spirit, even if the atheists are right and there is no afterlife), but murder is also work. We scrubbed the bedroom until our backs were sore, then moved on to the hall, the sitting room, and finally the porch. Each time we thought we were done, one of us would find another splotch. As dawn began to lighten the sky in the east, Henry was on his knees scrubbing the cracks between the boards of the bedroom floor, and I was down on mine in the sitting room, examining Arlette’s hooked rug square inch by square inch, looking for that one drop of blood that might betray us. There was none there—we had been fortunate in that respect—but a dime-sized drop beside it. It looked like blood from a shaving cut. I cleaned it up, then went back into our bedroom to see how

Henry was faring. He seemed better now, and I felt better myself. I think it was the coming of daylight, which always seems to dispel the worst of our horrors. But when George, our rooster, let out his first lusty crow of the day, Henry jumped. Then he laughed. It was a small laugh, and there was still something wrong with it, but it didn't terrify me the way his laughter had done when he regained consciousness between the barn and the old livestock well.

"I can't go to school today, Poppa. I'm too tired. And . . . I think people might see it on my face. Shannon especially."

I hadn't even considered school, which was another sign of half-planning. Half-*assed* planning. I should have put the deed off until County School was out for the summer. It would only have meant waiting a week. "You can stay home until Monday, then tell the teacher you had the grippe and didn't want to spread it to the rest of the class."

"It's not the grippe, but I *am* sick."

So was I.

We had spread a clean sheet from her linen closet (so many things in that house were *hers* . . . but no more) and piled the bloody bedclothes onto it. The mattress was also bloody, of course, and would have to go. There was another, not so good, in the back shed. I bundled the bedclothes together, and Henry carried the mattress. We went back out to the well just before the sun cleared the horizon. The sky above was perfectly clear. It was going to be a good day for corn.

"I can't look in there, Poppa."

"You don't have to," I said, and once more lifted the wooden cover. I was thinking that I should have left it up to begin with—*think ahead, save chores*, my own Poppa used to say—and knowing that I never could have. Not after feeling (or thinking I felt) that last blind twitch.

Now I could see to the bottom, and what I saw was horrible. She had landed sitting up with her legs crushed beneath her. The pillow-case was split open and lay in her lap. The quilt and counterpane had come loose and were spread around her shoulders like a complicated ladies' stole. The burlap bag, caught around her head and holding her hair back like a snood, completed the picture: she almost looked as if she were dressed for a night on the town.

*Yes! A night on the town! That's why I'm so happy! That's why I'm grinning from ear to ear! And do you notice how red my lipstick is, Wilf? I'd never wear this shade to church, would I? No, this is the kind of lipstick a woman puts on when she wants to do that nasty thing to her man. Come on down, Wilf, why don't you? Don't bother with the ladder, just jump! Show me how bad you want me! You did a nasty thing to me, now let me do one to you!*

"Poppa?" Henry was standing with his face toward the barn and his shoulders hunched, like a boy expecting to be beaten. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes." I flung down the bundle of linen, hoping it would land on top of her and cover that awful upturned grin, but a whim of draft floated it into her lap, instead. Now she appeared to be sitting in some strange and bloodstained cloud.

"Is she covered? Is she covered up, Poppa?"

I grabbed the mattress and tugged it in. It landed on end in the mucky water and then fell against the circular stone-cobbled wall, making a little lean-to shelter over her, at last hiding her cocked-back head and bloody grin.

"Now she is." I lowered the old wooden cap back into place, knowing there was more work ahead: the well would have to be filled in. Ah, but that was long overdue, anyway. It was a danger, which was why I had planted the circle of stakes around it. "Let's go in the house and have breakfast."

"I couldn't eat a single bite!"

But he did. We both did. I fried eggs, bacon, and potatoes, and we ate every bite. Hard work makes a person hungry. Everyone knows that.

\* \* \*

Henry slept until late afternoon. I stayed awake. Some of those hours I spent at the kitchen table, drinking cup after cup of black coffee. Some of them I spent walking in the corn, up one row and down another, listening to the swordlike leaves rattle in a light breeze. When it's June and corn's on the come, it seems almost to talk. This disquiets some people (and there are the foolish ones who say it's the sound of the corn actually growing), but I had always found that quiet rustling a comfort. It cleared my mind. Now, sitting in this city hotel

room, I miss it. City life is no life for a country man; for such a man that life is a kind of damnation in itself.

Confessing, I find, is also hard work.

I walked, I listened to the corn, I tried to plan, and at last I *did* plan. I had to, and not just for myself.

There had been a time not 20 years before, when a man in my position needn't have worried; in those days, a man's business was his own, especially if he happened to be a respected farmer: a fellow who paid his taxes, went to church on Sundays, supported the Hemingford Stars baseball team, and voted the straight Republican ticket. I think that in those days, all sorts of things happened on farms out in what we called "the middle." Things that went unremarked, let alone reported. In those days, a man's wife was considered a man's business, and if she disappeared, there was an end to it.

But those days were gone, and even if they hadn't been . . . there was the land. The 100 acres. The Farrington Company wanted those acres for their God damned hog butchery, and Arlette had led them to believe they were going to get them. That meant danger, and danger meant that daydreams and half-plans would no longer suffice.

When I went back to the house at midafternoon, I was tired but clear-headed and calm at last. Our few cows were bellowing, their morning milking hours overdue. I did that chore, then put them to pasture where I'd let them stay until sunset, instead of herding them back in for their second milking just after supper. They didn't care; cows accept what *is*. If Arlette had been more like one of our bossies, I reflected, she would still be alive and nagging me for a new washing machine out of the Monkey Ward catalogue. I probably would have bought it for her, too. She could always talk me around. Except when it came to the land. About that she should have known better. Land is a man's business.

Henry was still sleeping. In the weeks that followed, he slept a great deal, and I let him, although in an ordinary summer I would have filled his days with chores once school let out. And he would have filled his evenings either visiting over at Cotteries' or walking up and down our dirt road with Shannon, the two of them holding hands and watching the moon rise. When they

weren't kissing, that was. I hoped what we'd done had not spoiled such sweet pastimes for him, but believed it had. That *I* had. And of course I was right.

I cleared my mind of such thoughts, telling myself it was enough for now that he was sleeping. I had to make another visit to the well, and it would be best to do it alone. Our stripped bed seemed to shout murder. I went to the closet and studied her clothes. Women have so many, don't they? Skirts and dresses and blouses and sweaters and underthings—some of the latter so complicated and strange a man can't even tell which side is the front. To take them all would be a mistake, because the truck was still parked in the barn and the Model T under the elm. She had left on foot and taken only what she could carry. Why hadn't she taken the T? Because I would have heard it start and stopped her going. That was believable enough. So . . . a single valise.

I packed it with what I thought a woman would need and what she could not bear to leave. I put in her few pieces of good jewelry and the gold-framed picture of her mama and poppa. I debated over the toiletries in the bathroom, and decided to leave everything except for her atomizer bottle of Florient perfume and her horn-backed brush. There was a Testament in her night table, given to her by Pastor Hawkins, but I had never seen her read it, and so left it where it was. But I took the bottle of iron pills, which she kept for her monthlies.

Henry was still sleeping, but now tossing from side to side as if in the grip of bad dreams. I hurried about my business as quickly as I could, wanting to be in the house when he woke up. I went around the barn to the well, put the valise down, and lifted the splintery old cap for the third time. Thank God Henry wasn't with me. Thank God he didn't see what I saw. I think it would have driven him insane. It almost drove me insane.

The mattress had been shunted aside. My first thought was that she had pushed it away before trying to climb out. Because she was still alive. She was breathing. Or so it seemed to me at first. Then, just as ratiocinative ability began to resurface through my initial shock—when I began to ask myself what sort of breathing might cause a woman's dress to rise and fall not just at the bosom but all the way from neckline to hem—her jaw began to move, as if she were struggling to talk. It was not words that emerged from her greatly enlarged mouth, however, but the rat which had been chewing on the delicacy

of her tongue. Its tail appeared first. Then her lower jaw yawned wider as it backed out, the claws on its back feet digging into her chin for purchase.

The rat plopped into her lap, and when it did, a great flood of its brothers and sisters poured out from under her dress. One had something white caught in its whiskers—a fragment of her slip, or perhaps her skimmies. I chucked the valise at them. I didn't think about it—my mind was roaring with revulsion and horror—but just did it. It landed on her legs. Most of the rodents—perhaps all—avoided it nimbly enough. Then they streamed into a round black hole that the mattress (which they must have pushed aside through sheer weight of numbers) had covered, and were gone in a trice. I knew well enough what that hole was; the mouth of the pipe that had supplied water to the troughs in the barn until the water level sank too low and rendered it useless.

Her dress collapsed around her. The counterfeit breathing stopped. But she was *staring* at me, and what had seemed a clown's grin now looked like a gorgon's glare. I could see rat-bites on her cheeks, and one of her earlobes was gone.

"Dear God," I whispered. "Arlette, I'm so sorry."

*Your apology is not accepted, her glare seemed to say. And when they find me like this, with rat-bites on my dead face and the underwear beneath my dress chewed away, you'll ride the lightning over in Lincoln for sure. And mine will be the last face you see. You'll see me when the electricity fries your liver and sets fire to your heart, and I'll be grinning.*

I lowered the cap and staggered to the barn. There my legs betrayed me, and if I'd been in the sun, I surely would have passed out the way Henry had the night before. But I was in the shade, and after I sat for five minutes with my head lowered almost to my knees, I began to feel myself again. The rats had gotten to her—so what? Don't they get to all of us in the end? The rats and bugs? Sooner or later even the stoutest coffin must collapse and let in life to feed on death. It's the way of the world, and what did it matter? When the heart stops and the brain asphyxiates, our spirits either go somewhere else, or simply wink out. Either way, we aren't there to feel the gnawing as our flesh is eaten from our bones.

I started for the house and had reached the porch steps before a thought stopped me: what about the twitch? What if she had been alive when I threw

her into the well? What if she had *still* been alive, paralyzed, unable to move so much as one of her slashed fingers, when the rats came out of the pipe and began their depredations? What if she had felt the one that had squirmed into her conveniently enlarged mouth and began to—!

“No,” I whispered. “She didn’t feel it because she didn’t twitch. Never did. She was dead when I threw her in.”

“Poppa?” Henry called in a sleep-muzzy voice. “Pop, is that you?”

“Yes.”

“Who are you talking to?”

“No one. Myself.”

I went in. He was sitting at the kitchen table in his singlet and undershorts, looking dazed and unhappy. His hair, standing up in cowlicks, reminded me of the tyke he had once been, laughing and chasing the chickens around the dooryard with his hound dog Boo (long dead by that summer) at his heels.

“I wish we hadn’t done it,” he said as I sat down opposite him.

“Done is done and can’t be undone,” I said. “How many times have I told you that, boy?”

“Bout a million.” He lowered his head for a few moments, then looked up at me. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot. “Are we going to be caught? Are we going to jail? Or . . .”

“No. I’ve got a plan.”

“You had a plan that it wouldn’t hurt her! Look how *that* turned out!”

My hand itched to slap him for that, so I held it down with the other. This was not the time for recriminations. Besides, he was right. Everything that had gone wrong was my fault. *Except for the rats*, I thought. *They are not my fault*. But they were. Of course they were. If not for me, she would have been at the stove, putting on supper. Probably going on and on about those 100 acres, yes, but alive and well instead of *in* the well.

*The rats are probably back already*, a voice deep in my mind whispered. *Eating her. They’ll finish the good parts, the tasty parts, the delicacies, and then . . .*

Henry reached across the table to touch my knotted hands. I started.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “We’re in it together.”

I loved him for that.

“We’re going to be all right, Hank; if we keep our heads, we’ll be fine. Now listen to me.”

He listened. At some point he began to nod. When I finished, he asked me one question: when were we going to fill in the well?

“Not yet,” I said.

“Isn’t that risky?”

“Yes,” I said.

\* \* \*

Two days later, while I was mending a piece of fence about a quarter-mile from the farm, I saw a large cloud of dust boiling down our road from the Omaha-Lincoln Highway. We were about to have a visit from the world that Arlette had so badly wanted to be a part of. I walked back to the house with my hammer tucked into a belt loop and my carpenter’s apron around my waist, its long pouch full of jingling nails. Henry was not in view. Perhaps he’d gone down to the spring to bathe; perhaps he was in his room, sleeping.

By the time I got to the dooryard and sat on the chopping block, I had recognized the vehicle pulling the rooster-tail: Lars Olsen’s Red Baby delivery truck. Lars was the Hemingford Home blacksmith and village milkman. He would also, for a price, serve as a kind of chauffeur, and it was that function he was fulfilling on this June afternoon. The truck pulled into the dooryard, putting George, our bad-tempered rooster, and his little harem of chickens to flight. Before the motor had even finished coughing itself to death, a portly man wrapped in a flapping gray duster got out on the passenger side. He pulled off his goggles to reveal large (and comical) white circles around his eyes.

“Wilfred James?”

“At your service,” I said, getting up. I felt calm enough. I might have felt less so if he’d come out in the county Ford with the star on the side. “You are —?”

“Andrew Lester,” he said. “Attorney-at-law.”

He put his hand out. I considered it.

“Before I shake that, you’d better tell me whose lawyer you are, Mr. Lester.”

“I’m currently being retained by the Farrington Livestock Company of Chicago, Omaha, and Des Moines.”

*Yes, I thought, I’ve no doubt. But I’ll bet your name isn’t even on the door. The big boys back in Omaha don’t have to eat country dust to pay for their daily bread, do they? The big boys have got their feet up on their desks, drinking coffee and admiring the pretty ankles of their secretaries.*

I said, “In that case, sir, why don’t you just go on and put that hand away? No offense.”

He did just that, and with a lawyer’s smile. Sweat was cutting clean lines down his chubby cheeks, and his hair was all matted and tangled from the ride. I walked past him to Lars, who had thrown up the wing over his engine and was fiddling with something inside. He was whistling and sounded just as happy as a bird on a wire. I envied him that. I thought Henry and I might have another happy day—in a world as varied as this one, anything is possible—but it would not be in the summer of 1922. Or the fall.

I shook Lars’s hand and asked how he was.

“Tolerable fair,” he said, “but dry. I could use a drink.”

I nodded toward the east side of the house. “You know where it is.”

“I do,” he said, slamming down the wing with a metallic clatter that sent the chickens, who’d been creeping back, into flight once more. “Sweet and cold as ever, I guess?”

“I’d say so,” I agreed, thinking: *But if you could still pump from that other well, Lars, I don’t think you’d care for the taste at all.* “Try it and see.”

He started around to the shady side of the house where the outside pump stood in its little shelter. Mr. Lester watched him go, then turned back to me. He had unbuttoned his duster. The suit beneath would need dry-cleaning when he got back to Lincoln, Omaha, Deland, or wherever he hung his hat when he wasn’t doing Cole Farrington’s business.

“I could use a drink myself, Mr. James.”

“Me, too. Nailing fence is hot work.” I looked him up and down. “Not as hot as riding twenty miles in Lars’s truck, though, I’ll bet.”

He rubbed his butt and smiled his lawyer’s smile. This time it had a touch of rue in it. I could see his eyes already flicking here, there, and everywhere. It would not do to sell this man short just because he’d been ordered to rattle

twenty miles out into the country on a hot summer's day. "My sit-upon may never be the same."

There was a dipper chained to the side of the little shelter. Lars pumped it full, drank it down with his Adam's apple rising and falling in his scrawny, sunburned neck, then filled it again and offered it to Lester, who looked at it as doubtfully as I'd looked at his outstretched hand. "Perhaps we could drink it inside, Mr. James. It would be a little cooler."

"It would," I agreed, "but I'd no more invite you inside than I'd shake your hand."

Lars Olsen saw how the wind was blowing and wasted no time going back to his truck. But he handed the dipper to Lester first. My visitor didn't drink in gulps, as Lars had, but in fastidious sips. Like a lawyer, in other words—but he didn't stop until the dipper was empty, and that was also like a lawyer. The screen door slammed and Henry came out of the house in his overalls and bare feet. He gave us a glance that seemed utterly disinterested—good boy!—and then went where any red-blooded country lad would have gone: to watch Lars work on his truck, and, if he were lucky, to learn something.

I sat down on the woodpile we kept under a swatch of canvas on this side of the house. "I imagine you're out here on business. My wife's."

"I am."

"Well, you've had your drink, so we better get down to it. I've still got a full day's work ahead of me, and it's three in the afternoon."

"Sunrise to sunset. Farming's a hard life." He sighed as if he knew.

"It is, and a difficult wife can make it even harder. She sent you, I suppose, but I don't know why—if it was just some legal paperwork, I reckon a sheriff's deputy would have come out and served it on me."

He looked at me in surprise. "Your wife didn't send me, Mr. James. In point of fact, I came out here to look for *her*."

It was like a play, and this was my cue to look puzzled. Then to chuckle, because chuckling came next in the stage directions. "That just proves it."

"Proves what?"

"When I was a boy in Fordyce, we had a neighbor—a nasty old rip name of Bradlee. Everyone called him Pop Bradlee."

"Mr. James—"

“My father had to do business with him from time to time, and sometimes he took me with him. Back in the buckboard days, this was. Seed corn was what their trading was mostly about, at least in the spring, but sometimes they also swapped tools. There was no mail-order back then, and a good tool might circle the whole county before it got back home.”

“Mr. James, I hardly see the rel—”

“And every time we went to see that old fellow, my mama told me to plug my ears, because every other word that came out of Pop Bradlee’s mouth was a cuss or something filthy.” In a sour sort of way, I was starting to enjoy this. “So naturally I listened all the harder. I remember that one of Pop’s favorite sayings was ‘Never mount a mare without a bridle, because you can never tell which way a bitch will run.’”

“Am I supposed to understand that?”

“Which way do you suppose *my* bitch ran, Mr. Lester?”

“Are you telling me your wife has . . . ?”

“Absconded, Mr. Lester. Decamped. Took French leave. Did a midnight flit. As an avid reader and student of American slang, such terms occur naturally to me. Lars, however—and most other town folks—will just say ‘She run off and left him’ when the word gets around. Or him and the boy, in this case. I naturally thought she would have gone to her hog-fancying friends at the Farrington Company, and the next I heard from her would have been a notice that she was selling her father’s acreage.”

“As she means to do.”

“Has she signed it over yet? Because I guess I’d have to go to law, if she has.”

“As a matter of fact, she hasn’t. But when she does, I would advise you against the expense of a legal action you would surely lose.”

I stood up. One of my overall straps had fallen off my shoulder, and I hooked it back into place with a thumb. “Well, since she’s not here, it’s what the legal profession calls ‘a moot question,’ wouldn’t you say? I’d look in Omaha, if I were you.” I smiled. “Or Saint Louis. She was *always* talking about Sain’-Loo. It sounds to me as if she got as tired of you fellows as she did of me and the son she gave birth to. Said good riddance to bad rubbish. A plague on both your houses. That’s Shakespeare, by the way. *Romeo and Juliet*. A play about love.”

“You’ll pardon me for saying, but all this seems very strange to me, Mr. James.” He had produced a silk handkerchief from a pocket inside his suit—I bet traveling lawyers like him have lots of pockets—and began to mop his face with it. His cheeks were now not just flushed but bright red. It wasn’t the heat of the day that had turned his face that color. “Very strange indeed, considering the amount of money my client is willing to pay for that piece of property, which is contiguous with Hemingford Stream and close to the Great Western rail line.”

“It’s going to take some getting used to on my part as well, but I have the advantage of you.”

“Yes?”

“I know her. I’m sure you and your *clients* thought you had a deal all made, but Arlette James . . . let’s just say that nailing her down to something is like trying to nail jelly to the floor. We need to remember what Pop Bradlee said, Mr. Lester. Why, the man was a countrified genius.”

“Could I look in the house?”

I laughed again, and this time it wasn’t forced. The man had gall, I’ll give him that, and not wanting to go back empty-handed was understandable. He’d ridden twenty miles in a dusty truck with no doors, he had twenty more to bounce across before he got back to Hemingford City (and a train ride after that, no doubt), he had a sore ass, and the people who’d sent him out here weren’t going to be happy with his report when he finally got to the end of all that hard traveling. Poor feller!

“I’ll ask you one back: could you drop your pants so I could look at your goolie-bits?”

“I find that offensive.”

“I don’t blame you. Think of it as a . . . not a simile, that’s not right, but a kind of *parable*.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Well, you’ve got an hour back to the city to think it over—two, if Lars’s Red Baby throws a tire. And I can assure you, Mr. Lester, that if I *did* let you poke around through my house—my private place, my castle, my goolie-bits—you wouldn’t find my wife’s body in the closet or . . .” There was a terrible

moment when I almost said *or down the well*. I felt sweat spring out on my forehead. “Or under the bed.”

“I never said—”

“Henry!” I called. “Come over here a minute!”

Henry came with his head down and his feet dragging in the dust. He looked worried, maybe even guilty, but that was all right. “Yes, sir?”

“Tell this man where’s your mama.”

“I don’t know. When you called me to breakfast Friday morning, she was gone. Packed and gone.”

Lester was looking at him keenly. “Son, is that the truth?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The whole truth and nothing *but* the truth, so help you God?”

“Poppa, can I go back in the house? I’ve got schoolwork to make up from being sick.”

“Go on, then,” I said, “but don’t be slow. Remember, it’s your turn to milk.”

“Yes, sir.”

He trudged up the steps and inside. Lester watched him go, then turned back to me. “There’s more here than meets the eye.”

“I see you wear no wedding ring, Mr. Lester. If there comes a time when you’ve worn one as long as I have, you’ll know that in families, there always is. And you’ll know something else as well: you can never tell which way a bitch will run.”

He got up. “This isn’t finished.”

“It is,” I said. Knowing it wasn’t. But if things went all right, we were closer to the end than we had been. *If*.

He started across the dooryard, then turned back. He used his silk handkerchief to mop off his face again, then said, “If you think those 100 acres are yours just because you’ve scared your wife away . . . sent her packing to her aunt in Des Moines or a sister in Minnesota—”

“Check Omaha,” I said, smiling. “Or Sain’-Loo. She had no use for her relations, but she was crazy about the idea of living in Sain’-Loo. God knows why.”

“If you think you’ll plant and harvest out there, you’d better think again. That land’s not yours. If you so much as drop a seed there, you will be seeing

me in court.”

I said, “I’m sure you’ll hear from her as soon as she gets a bad case of broke-itis.”

What I wanted to say was, *No, it’s not mine . . . but it’s not yours, either. It’s just going to sit there. And that’s all right, because it will be mine in seven years, when I go to court to have her declared legally dead. I can wait. Seven years without smelling pigshit when the wind’s out of the west? Seven years without hearing the screams of dying hogs (so much like the screams of a dying woman) or seeing their intestines float down a creek that’s red with blood? That sounds like an excellent seven years to me.*

“Have yourself a fine day, Mr. Lester, and mind the sun going back. It gets pretty fierce in the late afternoon, and it’ll be right in your face.”

He got into the truck without replying. Lars waved to me and Lester snapped at him. Lars gave him a look that might have meant *Snap and yap all you want, it’s still twenty miles back to Hemingford City.*

When they were gone except for the rooster-tail of dust Henry came back out on the porch. “Did I do it right, Poppa?”

I took his wrist, gave it a squeeze, and pretended not to feel the flesh tighten momentarily under my hand, as if he had to override an impulse to pull away. “Just right. Perfect.”

“Are we going to fill in the well tomorrow?”

I thought about this carefully, because our lives might depend on what I decided. Sheriff Jones was getting on in years and up in pounds. He wasn’t lazy, but it was hard to get him moving without a good reason. Lester would eventually convince Jones to come out here, but probably not until Lester got one of Cole Farrington’s two hell-for-leather sons to call and remind the sheriff what company was the biggest taxpayer in Hemingford County (not to mention the neighboring counties of Clay, Fillmore, York, and Seward). Still, I thought we had at least two days.

“Not tomorrow,” I said. “The day after.”

“Poppa, *why?*”

“Because the High Sheriff will be out here, and Sheriff Jones is old but not stupid. A filled-in well might make him suspicious about *why* it got filled in, so recent and all. But one that’s still *being* filled in . . . and for a good reason . . .”

“What reason? Tell me!”

“Soon,” I said. “Soon.”

\* \* \*

All the next day we waited to see dust boiling toward us down our road, not being pulled by Lars Olsen’s truck but by the County Sheriff’s car. It didn’t come. What came was Shannon Cotterie, looking pretty in a cotton blouse and gingham skirt, to ask if Henry was all right, and could he take supper with her and her mama and her poppa if he was?

Henry said he was fine, and I watched them go up the road, hand-in-hand, with deep misgivings. He was keeping a terrible secret, and terrible secrets are heavy. Wanting to share them is the most natural thing in the world. And he loved the girl (or thought he did, which comes to the same when you’re just going on 15). To make things worse, he had a lie to tell, and she might know it was a lie. They say that loving eyes can never see, but that’s a fool’s axiom. Sometimes they see too much.

I hoed in the garden (pulling up more peas than weeds), then sat on the porch, smoking a pipe and waiting for him to come back. Just before moonrise, he did. His head was down, his shoulders were slumped, and he was trudging rather than walking. I hated to see him that way, but I was still relieved. If he had shared his secret—or even part of it—he wouldn’t have been walking like that. If he’d shared his secret, he might not have come back at all.

“You told it the way we decided?” I asked him when he sat down.

“The way *you* decided. Yes.”

“And she promised not to tell her folks?”

“Yes.”

“But will she?”

He sighed. “Probably, yes. She loves them and they love her. They’ll see something in her face, I reckon, and get it out of her. And even if they don’t, she’ll probably tell the Sheriff. If he bothers to talk to the Cotteries at all, that is.”

“Lester will see that he does. He’ll bark at Sheriff Jones because his bosses in Omaha are barking at him. Round and round it goes, and where it stops,

nobody knows.”

“We never should have done it.” He considered, then said it again in a fierce whisper.

I said nothing. For awhile, neither did he. We watched the moon rise out of the corn, red and pregnant.

“Poppa? Can I have a glass of beer?”

I looked at him, surprised and not surprised. Then I went inside and poured us each a glass of beer. I gave one to him and said, “None of this tomorrow or the day after, mind.”

“No.” He sipped, grimaced, then sipped again. “I hated lying to Shan, Poppa. Everything about this is dirty.”

“Dirt washes off.”

“Not this kind,” he said, and took another sip. This time he didn’t grimace.

A little while later, after the moon had gone to silver, I stepped around to use the privy, and to listen to the corn and the night breeze tell each other the old secrets of the earth. When I got back to the porch, Henry was gone. His glass of beer stood half-finished on the railing by the steps. Then I heard him in the barn, saying “Soo, Boss. Soo.”

I went out to see. He had his arms around Elphis’s neck and was stroking her. I believe he was crying. I watched for awhile, but in the end said nothing. I went back to the house, undressed, and lay down in the bed where I’d cut my wife’s throat. It was a long time before I went to sleep. And if you don’t understand why—*all* the reasons why—then reading this is of no use to you.

\* \* \*

I had named all our cows after minor Greek goddesses, but Elphis turned out to be either a bad choice or an ironic joke. In case you don’t remember the story of how evil came to our sad old world, let me refresh you: all the bad things flew out when Pandora gave in to her curiosity and opened the jar that had been left in her keeping. The only thing that remained when she regained enough wits to put the lid back on was Elphis, the goddess of hope. But in that summer of 1922, there was no hope left for our Elphis. She was old and cranky, no longer gave much milk, and we’d all but given up trying to get what

little she had; as soon as you sat down on the stool, she'd try to kick you. We should have converted her into comestibles a year before, but I balked at the cost of having Harlan Cotterie butcher her, and I was no good at slaughtering much beyond hogs . . . a self-assessment with which you, Reader, must now surely agree.

“And she'd be tough,” Arlette (who had shown a sneaking affection for Elphis, perhaps because she was never the one to milk her) said. “Better leave well enough alone.” But now we had a use for Elphis—in the well, as it so happened—and her death might serve an end far more useful than a few stringy cuts of meat.

Two days after Lester's visit, my son and I put a nose-halter on her and led her around the side of the barn. Halfway to the well, Henry stopped. His eyes shone with dismay. “Poppa! I *smell* her!”

“Go into the house then, and get some cotton balls for your nose. They're on her dresser.”

Although his head was lowered, I saw the sidelong glance he shot me as he went. *This is all your fault*, that look said. *All your fault because you couldn't let go*.

Yet I had no doubt that he would help me do the work that lay ahead. Whatever he now thought of me, there was a girl in the picture as well, and he didn't want her to know what he had done. I had forced him to it, but she would never understand that.

We led Elphis to the well-cap, where she quite reasonably balked. We went around to the far side, holding the halter-strings like ribbons in a Maypole dance, and hauled her out onto the rotted wood by main force. The cap cracked beneath her weight . . . bowed down . . . but held. The old cow stood on it, head lowered, looking as stupid and as stubborn as ever, showing the greenish-yellow rudiments of her teeth.

“What now?” Henry asked.

I started to say I didn't know, and that was when the well-cap broke in two with a loud and brittle snap. We held onto the halter-strings, although I thought for a moment I was going to be dragged into that damned well with two dislocated arms. Then the nose-rig ripped free and flew back up. It was

split down both the sides. Below, Elphis began to low in agony and drum her hoofs against the well's rock sides.

"*Poppa!*" Henry screamed. His hands were fists against his mouth, the knuckles digging into his upper lip. "*Make her stop!*"

Elphis uttered a long, echoing groan. Her hoofs continued to beat against the stone.

I took Henry's arm and hauled him, stumbling, back to the house. I pushed him down on Arlette's mail-order sofa and ordered him to stay there until I came back to get him. "And remember, this is almost over."

"It'll never be over," he said, and turned facedown on the sofa. He put his hands over his ears, even though Elphis couldn't be heard from in here. Except Henry still *was* hearing her, and so was I.

I got my varmint gun from the high shelf in the pantry. It was only a .22, but it would do the job. And if Harlan heard shots rolling across the acres between his place and mine? That would fit our story, too. If Henry could keep his wits long enough to tell it, that was.

\* \* \*

Here is something I learned in 1922: there are always worse things waiting. You think you have seen the most terrible thing, the one that coalesces all your nightmares into a freakish horror that actually exists, and the only consolation is that there can be nothing worse. Even if there is, your mind will snap at the sight of it, and you will know no more. But there *is* worse, your mind does *not* snap, and somehow you carry on. You might understand that all the joy has gone out of the world for you, that what you did has put all you hoped to gain out of your reach, you might wish you were the one who was dead—but you go on. You realize that you are in a hell of your own making, but you go on nevertheless. Because there is nothing else to do.

Elphis had landed on top of my wife's body, but Arlette's grinning face was still perfectly visible, still tilted up to the sunlit world above, still seeming to look at me. And the rats had come back. The cow falling into their world had doubtless caused them to retreat into the pipe I would eventually come to think of as Rat Boulevard, but then they had smelled fresh meat, and had

come hurrying out to investigate. They were already nibbling at poor old Elphis as she lowed and kicked (more feebly now), and one sat on top of my dead wife's head like an eldritch crown. It had picked a hole in the burlap sack and pulled a tuft of her hair out with its clever claws. Arlette's cheeks, once so round and pretty, hung in shreds.

*Nothing can be any worse than this, I thought. Surely I've reached the end of horror.*

But yes, there are always worse things waiting. As I peered down, frozen with shock and revulsion, Elphis kicked out again, and one of her hoofs connected with what remained of Arlette's face. There was a snap as my wife's jaw broke, and everything below her nose shifted to the left, as if on a hinge. Still the ear-to-ear grin remained. That it was no longer aligned with her eyes made it even worse. It was as if she now had two faces to haunt me with instead of just one. Her body shifted against the mattress, making it slide. The rat on her head scurried down behind it. Elphis lowed again. I thought that if Henry came back now, and looked into the well, he would kill me for making him a part of this. I probably deserved killing. But that would leave him alone, and alone he would be defenseless.

Part of the cap had fallen into the well; part of it was still hanging down. I loaded my rifle, rested it on this slope, and aimed at Elphis, who lay with her neck broken and her head cocked against the rock wall. I waited for my hands to steady, then pulled the trigger.

One shot was enough.

\* \* \*

Back in the house, I found that Henry had gone to sleep on the couch. I was too shocked myself to consider this strange. At that moment, he seemed to me like the only truly hopeful thing in the world: soiled, but not so filthy he could never be clean again. I bent and kissed his cheek. He moaned and turned his head away. I left him there and went to the barn for my tools. When he joined me three hours later, I had pulled the broken and hanging piece of the well-cap out of the hole and had begun to fill it in.

"I'll help," he said in a flat and dreary voice.

“Good. Get the truck and drive it out to the dirtpile at West Fence—”

“By myself?” The disbelief in his voice was only faint, but I was encouraged to hear any emotion at all.

“You know all the forward gears, and you can find reverse, can’t you?”

“Yes—”

“Then you’ll be fine. I’ve got enough to be going on with in the meantime, and when you come back, the worst will be over.”

I waited for him to tell me again that the worst would never be over, but he didn’t. I recommenced shoveling. I could still see the top of Arlette’s head and the burlap with that terrible picked-over tuft sticking out of it. There might already be a litter of newborn ratlings down there in the cradle of my dead wife’s thighs.

I heard the truck cough once, then twice. I hoped the crank wouldn’t kick back and break Henry’s arm.

The third time he turned the crank, our old truck bellowed into life. He retarded the spark, gunned the throttle a time or two, then drove away. He was gone for almost an hour, but when he came back, the truck’s bed was full of rocks and soil. He drove it to the edge of the well and killed the engine. He had taken off his shirt, and his sweat-shiny torso looked too thin; I could count his ribs. I tried to think when I’d last seen him eat a big meal, and at first I couldn’t. Then I realized it must have been breakfast on the morning after we’d done away with her.

*I’ll see that he gets a good dinner tonight, I thought. I’ll see that we both do. No beef, but there’s pork in the icebox—*

“Look yonder,” he said in his new flat voice, and pointed.

I saw a rooster-tail of dust coming toward us. I looked down into the well. It wasn’t good enough, not yet. Half of Elphis was still sticking up. That was all right, of course, but the corner of the bloodstained mattress was also still poking out of the dirt.

“Help me,” I said.

“Do we have enough time, Poppa?” He sounded only mildly interested.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Don’t just stand there, help me.”

The extra shovel was leaning against the side of the barn beside the splintered remains of the well-cap. Henry grabbed it, and we began shoveling

dirt and rocks out of the back of the truck as fast as ever we could.

\* \* \*

When the County Sheriff's car with the gold star on the door and the spotlight on the roof pulled up by the chopping block (once more putting George and the chickens to flight), Henry and I were sitting on the porch steps with our shirts off and sharing the last thing Arlette James had ever made: a pitcher of lemonade. Sheriff Jones got out, hitched up his belt, took off his Stetson, brushed back his graying hair, and resettled his hat along the line where the white skin of his brow ended and coppery red took over. He was by his lonesome. I took that as a good sign.

"Good day, gents." He took in our bare chests, dirty hands, and sweaty faces. "Hard chorin' this afternoon, is it?"

I spat. "My own damn fault."

"Is that so?"

"One of our cows fell in the old livestock well," Henry said.

Jones asked again, "Is that so?"

"It is," I said. "Would you want a glass of lemonade, Sheriff? It's Arlette's."

"Arlette's, is it? She decided to come back, did she?"

"No," I said. "She took her favorite clothes but left the lemonade. Have some."

"I will. But first I need to use your privy. Since I turned fifty-five or so, seems like I have to wee on every bush. It's a God damned inconvenience."

"It's around the back of the house. Just follow the path and look for the crescent moon on the door."

He laughed as though this were the funniest joke he'd heard all year, and went around the house. Would he pause on his way to look in the windows? He would if he was any good at his job, and I'd heard he was. At least in his younger days.

"Poppa," Henry said. He spoke in a low voice.

I looked at him.

"If he finds out, we can't do anything else. I can lie, but there can't be anymore killing."

“All right,” I said. That was a short conversation, but one I have pondered often in the eight years since.

Sheriff Jones came back, buttoning his fly.

“Go in and get the Sheriff a glass,” I told Henry.

Henry went. Jones finished with his fly, took off his hat, brushed back his hair some more, and reset the hat. His badge glittered in the early-afternoon sun. The gun on his hip was a big one, and although Jones was too old to have been in the Great War, the holster looked like AEF property. Maybe it was his son's. His son had died over there.

“Sweet-smelling privy,” he said. “Always nice on a hot day.”

“Arlette used to put the quicklime to it pretty constantly,” I said. “I’ll try to keep up the practice if she stays away. Come on up to the porch and we’ll sit in the shade.”

“Shade sounds good, but I believe I’ll stand. Need to stretch out my spine.”

I sat in my rocker with the PA cushion on it. He stood beside me, looking down. I didn’t like being in that position but tried to bear up patiently. Henry came out with a glass. Sheriff Jones poured his own lemonade, tasted, then gulped most of it down at a go and smacked his lips.

“Good, isn’t it? Not too sour, not too sweet, just right.” He laughed. “I’m like Goldilocks, aren’t I?” He drank the rest, but shook his head when Henry offered to refill his glass. “You want me pissing on every fencepost on the way back to Hemingford Home? And then all the way to Hemingford City after that?”

“Have you moved your office?” I asked. “I thought you were right there in the Home.”

“I am, aren’t I? The day they make me move the Sheriff’s Office to the county seat is the day I resign and let Hap Birdwell take over, like he wants to. No, no, it’s just a court hearing up to the City. Amounts to no more than paperwork, but there it is. And you know how Judge Cripps is . . . or no, I guess you don’t, being a law-abiding sort. He’s bad-tempered, and if a fellow isn’t on time, his temper gets worse. So even though it comes down to just saying so help me God and then signing my name to a bunch of legal folderol, I have to hurry right along with my business out here, don’t I? And hope my God damned Maxie doesn’t break down on the way back.”

I said nothing to this. He didn't *talk* like a man who was in a hurry, but perhaps that was just his way.

He took his hat off and brushed his hair back some more, but this time he didn't put the hat back on. He looked at me earnestly, then at Henry, then back at me again. "Guess you know I'm not out here on my own hook. I believe that doings between a man and his wife are their own business. It has to be that way, doesn't it? Bible says the man is the head of a woman, and that if a woman should learn any thing, it should be taught by her husband at home. Book of Corinthians. If the Bible was my only boss, I'd do things the Bible's way and life would be simpler."

"I'm surprised Mr. Lester's not out here with you," I said.

"Oh, he wanted to come, but I put the kye-bosh on that. He also wanted me to get a search warrant, but I told him I didn't need one. I said you'd either let me look around or you wouldn't." He shrugged. His face was placid, but the eyes were keen and always in motion: peeking and prying, prying and peeking.

When Henry asked me about the well, I'd said, *We'll watch him and decide how sharp he is. If he's sharp, we'll show him ourselves. We can't look as if we have anything to hide. If you see me flick my thumb, that means I think we have to take the chance. But we have to agree, Hank. If I don't see you flick yours back, I'll keep my mouth shut.*

I raised my glass and drank the last of my lemonade. When I saw Henry looking at me, I flicked my thumb. Just a little. It could have been a muscle twitch.

"What does that Lester think?" Henry asked, sounding indignant. "That we've got her tied up in the cellar?" His own hands stayed at his sides, not moving.

Sheriff Jones laughed heartily, his big belly shaking behind his belt. "I don't know *what* he's thinking, do I? I don't care much, either. Lawyers are fleas on the hide of human nature. I can say that, because I've worked for 'em—and against 'em, that too—my whole adult life. But . . ." The keen eyes fastened on mine. "I wouldn't mind a look, just because you wouldn't let *him* look. He's pretty hot under the collar about that."

Henry scratched his arm. His thumb flicked twice as he did it.

“I didn’t let him in the house because I took against him,” I said. “Although to be fair, I guess I would have taken against John the Apostle if he came out here batting for Cole Farrington’s team.”

Sheriff Jones laughed big at that: *Haw, haw, haw!* But his eyes didn’t laugh.

I stood up. It was a relief to be on my feet. Standing, I had three or four inches on Jones. “You can look to your heart’s content.”

“I appreciate that. It’ll make my life a lot easier, won’t it? I’ve got Judge Cripps to deal with when I go back, and that’s enough. Don’t need to listen to one of Farrington’s legal beagles yapping at me, not if I can help it.”

We went into the house with me leading and Henry bringing up the rear. After a few complimentary remarks about how neat the sitting room was and how tidy the kitchen was, we walked down the hall. Sheriff Jones had a perfunctory peek into Henry’s room, and then we arrived at the main attraction. I pushed open the door to our bedroom with a queer sense of certainty: the blood would be back. It would be pooled on the floor, splashed on the walls, and soaking into the new mattress. Sheriff Jones would look. Then he would turn to me, remove the handcuffs that sat on his meaty hip across from his revolver, and say: *I’m arresting you for the murder of Arlette James, aren’t I?*

There was no blood and no smell of blood, because the room had had days to air out. The bed was made, although not the way Arlette made it; my way was more Army-style, although my feet had kept me out of the war that had taken the Sheriff’s son. Can’t go kill Krauts if you have flat feet. Men with flat feet can only kill wives.

“Lovely room,” Sheriff Jones remarked. “Gets the early light, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said. “And stays cool most afternoons, even in summer, because the sun’s over on the other side.” I went to the closet and opened it. That sense of certainty returned, stronger than ever. *Where’s the quilt?* he’d say. *The one that belongs there in the middle of the top shelf?*

He didn’t, of course, but he came forward with alacrity when I invited him to. His sharp eyes—bright green, almost feline—went here, there, and everywhere. “Lot o’ duds,” he said.

“Yes,” I admitted, “Arlette liked clothes and she liked the mail-order catalogues. But since she only took the one valise—we have two, and the other

one's still there, see it in the back corner?—I'd have to say she only took the ones she liked the best. And the ones that were practical, I suppose. She had two pairs of slacks and a pair of blue denims, and those are gone, even though she didn't care for pants."

"Pants're good for traveling in, though, aren't they? Man or woman, pants are good for traveling. And a woman might choose them. If she was in a hurry, that is."

"I suppose."

"She took her good jewelry and her picture of Nana and Pop-Pop," Henry said from behind us. I jumped a little; I'd almost forgotten he was there.

"Did she, now? Well, I suppose she would."

He took another flick through the clothes, then closed the closet door. "Nice room," he said, trudging back toward the hall with his Stetson in his hands. "Nice *house*. Woman'd have to be crazy to leave a nice room and a nice house like this."

"Mama talked about the city a lot," Henry said, and sighed. "She had the idea of opening some kind of shop."

"Did she?" Sheriff Jones regarded him brightly with his green cat's eyes. "Well! But a thing like that takes money, doesn't it?"

"She's got those acres from her father," I said.

"Yes, yes." Smiling bashfully, as if he'd forgotten those acres. "And maybe it's for the best. 'Better to be living in a wasteland than with a bitter-tongued, angry woman.' Book of Proverbs. Are you glad she's gone, Son?"

"No," Henry said, and tears overspilled his eyes. I blessed each one.

Sheriff Jones said, "There-there." And after offering that perfunctory comfort, he bent down with his hands braced on his pudgy knees, and looked under the bed. "Appears to be a pair of woman's shoes under there. Broke in, too. The kind that would be good for walking. Don't suppose she ran away barefooty, do you?"

"She wore her canvas shoes," I said. "Those are the ones that are gone."

They were, too. The faded green ones she used to call her gardening shoes. I'd remembered them just before starting to fill in the well.

"Ah!" he said. "Another mystery solved." He pulled a silver-plated watch from his vest pocket and consulted it. "Well, I'd better get on the roll. Tempus

is fugiting right along.”

We went back through the house, Henry bringing up the rear, perhaps so he could swipe his eyes dry in privacy. We walked with the Sheriff toward his Maxwell sedan with the star on the door. I was about to ask him if he wanted to see the well—I even knew what I was going to call it—when he stopped and gave my son a look of frightening kindness.

“I stopped at the Cotteries’,” he said.

“Oh?” Henry said. “Did you?”

“Told you these days I have to water just about every bush, but I’ll use a privy anytime there’s one handy, always assuming folks keep it clean and I don’t have to worry about wasps while I’m waiting for my dingus to drip a little water. And the Cotteries are clean folks. Pretty daughter, too. Just about your age, isn’t she?”

“Yes, sir,” Henry said, lifting his voice just a tiny bit on the *sir*.

“Kind of sweet on her, I guess? And her on you, from what her mama says.”

“Did she say that?” Henry asked. He sounded surprised, but pleased, too.

“Yes. Mrs. Cotterie said you were troubled about your own mama, and that Shannon had told her something you said on that subject. I asked her what it was, and she said it wasn’t her place to tell, but I could ask Shannon. So I did.”

Henry looked at his feet. “I told her to keep it to herself.”

“You aren’t going to hold it against her, are you?” Sheriff Jones asked. “I mean, when a big man like me with a star on his chest asks a little thing like her what she knows, it’s kind of hard for the little thing to keep mum, isn’t it? She just about has to tell, doesn’t she?”

“I don’t know,” Henry said, still looking down. “Probably.” He wasn’t just *acting* unhappiness; he *was* unhappy. Even though it was going just the way we had hoped it would.

“Shannon says your ma and your pop here had a big fight about selling those hundred acres, and when you came down on your poppa’s side, Missus James slapped you up pretty good.”

“Yes,” Henry said colorlessly. “She’d had too much to drink.”

Sheriff Jones turned to me. “Was she drunk or just tiddly?”

“Somewhere in between,” I said. “If she’d been all the way to drunk, she would have slept all night instead of getting up and packing a grip and

creeping away like a thief.”

“Thought she’d come back once she sobered up, did you?”

“I did. It’s over four miles out to the tarvy. I thought for sure she’d come back. Someone must have come along and given her a ride before her head cleared. A trucker on the Lincoln-Omaha run would be my guess.”

“Yep, yep, that’d be mine, too. You’ll hear from her when she contacts Mr. Lester, I’m sure. If she means to stay out on her own, if she’s got that in her head, she’ll need money to do it.”

So he knew that, too.

His eyes sharpened. “Did she have any money at all, Mr. James?”

“Well . . .”

“Don’t be shy. Confession’s good for the soul. The Catholics have got hold of something there, don’t they?”

“I kept a box in my dresser. There was 200 dollars put by in it, to help pay the pickers when they start next month.”

“And Mr. Cotterie,” Henry reminded. To Sheriff Jones, he said: “Mr. Cotterie has a corn harvester. A Harris Giant. Almost new. It’s a pip.”

“Yep, yep, saw it in his dooryard. Big bastid, isn’t it? Pardon my Polish. Money all gone out’n that box, was it?”

I smiled sourly—only it wasn’t really me making that smile; the Conniving Man had been in charge ever since Sheriff Jones pulled up by the chopping block. “She left twenty. Very generous of her. But twenty’s all Harlan Cotterie will ever take for the use of his harvester, so *that’s* all right. And when it comes to the pickers, I guess Stoppenhauser at the bank’ll advance me a shortie loan. Unless he owes favors to the Farrington Company, that is. Either way, I’ve got my best farmhand right here.”

I tried to ruffle Henry’s hair. He ducked away, embarrassed.

“Well, I’ve got a good budget of news to tell Mr. Lester, don’t I? He won’t like any of it, but if he’s as smart as he thinks he is, I guess he’ll know enough to expect her in his office, and sooner rather than later. People have a way of turning up when they’re short on folding green, don’t they?”

“That’s been my experience,” I said. “If we’re done here, Sheriff, my boy and I better get back to work. That useless well should have been filled in three years ago. An old cow of mine—”

“Elphis.” Henry spoke like a boy in a dream. “Her name was Elphis.”

“Elphis,” I agreed. “She got out of the barn and decided to take a stroll on the cap, and it gave way. Didn’t have the good grace to die on her own, either. I had to shoot her. Come around the back of the barn I’ll show you the wages of laziness with its damn feet sticking up. We’re going to bury her right where she lies, and from now on I’m going to call that old well Wilfred’s Folly.”

“Well, I would, wouldn’t I? It’d be somethin’ to see. But I’ve got that bad-tempered old judge to contend with. Another time.” He hoisted himself into the car, grunting as he did so. “Thank you for the lemonade, and for bein’ so gracious. You could have been a lot less so, considering who sent me out here.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “We all have our jobs.”

“And our crosses to bear.” His sharp eyes fastened on Henry again. “Son, Mr. Lester told me you were hidin’ something. He was sure of it. And you were, weren’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” Henry said in his colorless and somehow awful voice. As if all his emotions had flown away, like those things in Pandora’s jar when she opened it. But there was no Elphis for Henry and me; our Elphis was dead in the well.

“If he asks me, I’ll tell him he was wrong,” Sheriff Jones said. “A company lawyer don’t need to know that a boy’s mother put her hand to him while she was in drink.” He groped under his seat, came up with a long S-shaped tool I knew well, and held it out to Henry. “Would you save an old man’s back and shoulder, son?”

“Yes, sir, happy to.” Henry took the crank and went around to the front of the Maxwell.

“Mind your wrist!” Jones hollered. “She kicks like a bull!” Then he turned to me. The inquisitive glitter had gone out of his eyes. So had the green. They looked dull and gray and hard, like lake water on a cloudy day. It was the face of a man who could beat a railroad bum within an inch of his life and never lose a minute’s sleep over it. “Mr. James,” he said. “I need to ask you something. Man to man.”

“All right,” I said. I tried to brace myself for what I felt sure was coming next: *Is there another cow in yonder well? One named Arlette?* But I was wrong.

“I can put her name and description out on the telegraph wire, if you want. She won’t have gone no further than Omaha, will she? Not on just a hundred

and eighty smackers. And a woman who's spent most of her life keepin' house has no idea of how to hide out. She'll like as not be in a rooming house over on the east side, where they run cheap. I could have her brought back. *Dragged* back by the hair of the head, if you want."

"That's a generous offer, but—"

The dull gray eyes surveyed me. "Think it over before you say yea or nay. Sometimes a fee-male needs talking to by hand, if you take my meaning, and after that they're all right. A good whacking has a way of sweetening some gals up. Think it over."

"I will."

The Maxwell's engine exploded into life. I stuck out my hand—the one that had cut her throat—but Sheriff Jones didn't notice. He was busy retarding the Maxwell's spark and adjusting her throttle.

Two minutes later he was no more than a diminishing boil of dust on the farm road.

"He never even wanted to look," Henry marveled.

"No."

And that turned out to be a very good thing.

\* \* \*

We had shoveled hard and fast when we saw him coming, and nothing stuck up now but one of Elphis's lower legs. The hoof was about four feet below the lip of the well. Flies circled it in a cloud. The Sheriff would have marveled, all right, and he would have marveled even more when the dirt in front of that protruding hoof began to pulse up and down.

Henry dropped his shovel and grabbed my arm. The afternoon was hot, but his hand was ice-cold. "It's her!" he whispered. His face seemed to be nothing but eyes. "*She's trying to get out!*"

"Stop being such a God damned ninny," I said, but I couldn't take my eyes off that circle of heaving dirt. It was as if the well were alive, and we were seeing the beating of its hidden heart.

Then dirt and pebbles sprayed to either side and a rat surfaced. The eyes, black as beads of oil, blinked in the sunshine. It was almost as big as a full-

grown cat. Caught in its whiskers was a shred of bloodstained brown burlap.

“*Oh you fuck!*” Henry screamed.

Something whistled inches past my ear and then the edge of Henry’s shovel split the rat’s head in two as it looked up into the dazzle.

“She sent it,” Henry said. He was grinning. “The rats are hers, now.”

“No such thing. You’re just upset.”

He dropped his shovel and went to the pile of rocks with which we meant to finish the job once the well was mostly filled in. There he sat down and stared at me raptly. “Are you sure? Are you positive she ain’t haunting us? People say someone who’s murdered will come back to haunt whoever—”

“People say lots of things. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place, a broken mirror brings seven years’ bad luck, a whippoorwill calling at midnight means someone in the family’s going to die.” I sounded reasonable, but I kept looking at the dead rat. And that shred of bloodstained burlap. From her *snood*. She was still wearing it down there in the dark, only now there was a hole in it with her hair sticking up. *That look is all the rage among dead women this summer*, I thought.

“When I was a kid, I really believed that if I stepped on a crack, I’d break my mother’s back,” Henry said musingly.

“There—you see?”

He brushed rock-dust from the seat of his pants, and stood beside me. “I got him, though—I got that fucker, didn’t I?”

“You did!” And because I didn’t like how he sounded—no, not at all—I clapped him on the back.

Henry was still grinning. “If the Sheriff had come back here to look, like you invited him, and seen that rat come tunneling to the top, he might have had a few more questions, don’t you think?”

Something about this idea set Henry to laughing hysterically. It took him four or five minutes to laugh himself out, and he scared a murder of crows up from the fence that kept the cows out of the corn, but eventually he got past it. By the time we finished our work it was past sundown, and we could hear owls comparing notes as they launched their pre-moonrise hunts from the barn loft. The rocks on top of the vanished well were tight together, and I didn’t think any more rats would be squirming to the surface. We didn’t bother replacing

the broken cap; there was no need. Henry seemed almost like his normal self again, and I thought we both might get a decent night's sleep.

"What do you say to sausage, beans, and corn-bread?" I asked him.

"Can I start the generator and play *Hayride Party* on the radio?"

"Yessir, you can."

He smiled at that, his old good smile. "Thanks, Poppa."

I cooked enough for four farmhands, and we ate it all.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, while I was deep in my sitting room chair and nodding over a copy of *Silas Marner*, Henry came in from his room, dressed in just his summer underdrawers. He regarded me soberly. "Mama always insisted on me saying my prayers, did you know that?"

I blinked at him, surprised. "Still? No. I didn't."

"Yes. Even after she wouldn't look at me unless I had my pants on, because she said I was too old and it wouldn't be right. But I can't pray now, or ever again. If I got down on my knees, I think God would strike me dead."

"If there is one," I said.

"I hope there isn't. It's lonely, but I hope there isn't. I imagine all murderers hope there isn't. Because if there's no Heaven, there's no Hell."

"Son, I was the one who killed her."

"No—we did it together."

It wasn't true—he was no more than a child, and I had cozened him—but it was true to him, and I thought it always would be.

"But you don't have to worry about me, Poppa. I know you think I'll slip—probably to Shannon. Or I might get feeling guilty enough to just go into Hemingford and confess to that Sheriff."

Of course these thoughts had crossed my mind.

Henry shook his head, slowly and emphatically. "That Sheriff—did you see the way he looked at everything? Did you see his *eyes*?"

"Yes."

"He'd try to put us both in the 'lectric chair, that's what I think, and never mind me not fifteen until August. He'd be there, too, lookin' at us with those

hard eyes of his when they strapped us in and—”

“Stop it, Hank. That’s enough.”

It wasn’t, though; not for him. “—and pulled the switch. I ain’t never letting that happen, if I can help it. Those eyes aren’t never going to be the last thing I see.” He thought over what he’d just said. “*Ever*, I mean. *Aren’t ever*.”

“Go to bed, Henry.”

“Hank.”

“Hank. Go to bed. I love you.”

He smiled. “I know, but I don’t much deserve it.” He shuffled off before I could reply.

\* \* \*

And so to bed, as Mr. Pepys says. We slept while the owls hunted and Arlette sat in her deeper darkness with the lower part of her hoof-kicked face swung off to one side. The next day the sun came up, it was a good day for corn, and we did chores.

When I came in hot and tired to fix us a noon meal, there was a covered casserole dish sitting on the porch. There was a note fluttering beneath one edge. It said: *Wilf—We are so sorry for your trouble and will help any way we can. Harlan says dont worry about paying for the harvester this summer. Please if you hear from your wife let us know. Love, Sallie Cotterie. PS: If Henry comes calling on Shan, I will send back a blueberry cake.*

I stuck the note in the front pocket of my overalls with a smile. Our life after Arlette had begun.

\* \* \*

If God rewards us on earth for good deeds—the Old Testament suggests it’s so, and the Puritans certainly believed it—then maybe Satan rewards us for evil ones. I can’t say for sure, but I can say that was a good summer, with plenty of heat and sun for the corn and just enough rain to keep our acre of vegetable garden refreshed. There was thunder and lightning some afternoons, but never one of those crop-crippling winds Midwestern farmers fear. Harlan Cotterie came with his Harris Giant and it never broke down a single time. I had

worried that the Farrington Company might meddle in my business, but it didn't. I got my loan from the bank with no trouble, and paid back the note in full by October, because that year corn prices were sky-high and the Great Western's freight fees were at rock bottom. If you know your history, you know that those two things—the price of produce and the price of shippage—had changed places by '23, and have stayed changed ever since. For farmers out in the middle, the Great Depression started when the Chicago Agricultural Exchange crashed the following summer. But the summer of 1922 was as perfect as any farmer could hope for. Only one incident marred it, having to do with another of our bovine goddesses, and that I will tell you about soon.

Mr. Lester came out twice. He tried to badger us, but he had nothing to badger with, and he must have known it, because he was looking pretty harried that July. I imagine his bosses were badgering *him*, and he was only passing it along. Or trying to. The first time, he asked a lot of questions that really weren't questions at all, but insinuations. Did I think my wife had had an accident? She must have, didn't I think, or she would either have contacted him in order to make a cash settlement on those 100 acres or just crept back to the farm with her (metaphorical) tail between her legs. Or did I think she had fallen afoul of some bad actor while on the road? Such things did happen, didn't they, from time to time? And it would certainly be convenient for me, wouldn't it?

The second time he showed up, he looked desperate as well as harried, and came right out with it: had my wife had an accident right there on the farm? Was that what had happened? Was it why she hadn't turned up either alive or dead?

"Mr. Lester, if you're asking me if I murdered my wife, the answer is no."

"Well of course you'd say so, wouldn't you?"

"That's your last question to me, sir. Get in yonder truck, drive away, and don't come back here. If you do, I'll take an axe-handle to you."

"You'd go to jail for assault!" He was wearing a celluloid collar that day, and it had come all askew. It was almost possible to feel sorry for him as he stood there with that collar poking into the underside of his chin and sweat cutting lines through the dust on his chubby face, his lips twitching and his eyes bulging.

“No such thing. I have warned you off my property, as is my right, and I intend to send a registered letter to your firm stating that very thing. Come back again and that’s trespassing and I *will* beat you. Take warning, sir.” Lars Olsen, who had brought Lester out again in his Red Baby, had all but cupped his hands around his ears to hear better.

When Lester reached the doorless passenger side of the truck, he whirled with an arm outstretched and a finger pointing, like a courtroom lawyer with a bent for the theatrical. “I think you killed her! And sooner or later, murder will out!”

Henry—or Hank, as he now preferred to be called—came out of the barn. He had been pitching hay and he held the pitchfork across his chest like a rifle at port arms. “What *I* think is you better get out of here before you start bleeding,” he said. The kind and rather timid boy I had known until the summer of ’22 would never have said such a thing, but this one did, and Lester saw that he meant it. He got in. With no door to slam, he settled for crossing his arms over his chest.

“Come back anytime, Lars,” I said pleasantly, “but don’t bring him, no matter how much he offers you to cart his useless ass.”

“No, sir, Mr. James,” Lars said, and off they went.

I turned to Henry. “Would you have stuck him with that pitchfork?”

“Yessir. Made him squeal.” Then, unsmiling, he went back into the barn.

\* \* \*

But he wasn’t *always* unsmiling that summer, and Shannon Cotterie was the reason why. He saw a lot of her (more of her than was good for either of them; that I found out in the fall). She began coming to the house on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, long-skirted and neatly bonneted, toting a side-sack loaded with good things to eat. She said she knew “what men cook”—as though she were 30 instead of just 15—and said she intended to see we had at least two decent suppers a week. And although I had only one of her mother’s casseroles for comparison, I’d have to say that even at 15 she was the superior cook. Henry and I just threw steaks in a skillet on the stove; she had a way of seasoning that made plain old chew-meat delicious. She brought fresh

vegetables in her side-sack—not just carrots and peas but exotic (to us) things like asparagus and fat green beans she cooked with pearl onions and bacon. There was even dessert. I can close my eyes in this shabby hotel room and smell her pastry. I can see her standing at the kitchen counter with her bottom swaying as she beat eggs or whipped cream.

Generous was the word for Shannon: of hip, of bust, of heart. She was gentle with Henry, and she cared for him. That made me care for her . . . only that's too thin, Reader. I loved her, and we both loved Henry. After those Tuesday and Thursday dinners, I'd insist on doing the washing-up and send them out on the porch. Sometimes I heard them murmuring to each other, and would peek out to see them sitting side by side in the wicker chairs, looking out at West Field and holding hands like an old married couple. Other times I spied them kissing, and there was nothing of the old married couple about that at all. There was a sweet urgency to those kisses that belongs only to the very young, and I stole away with my heart aching.

One hot Tuesday afternoon she came early. Her father was out in our North Field on his harvester, Henry riding with him, a little crew of Indians from the Shoshone reservation in Lyme Biska walking along behind . . . and behind them, Old Pie driving the gather-truck. Shannon asked for a dipper of cold water, which I was glad to provide. She stood there on the shady side of the house, looking impossibly cool in a voluminous dress that covered her from throat to shin and shoulder to wrist—a Quaker dress, almost. Her manner was grave, perhaps even scared, and for a moment I was scared myself. *He's told her*, I thought. That turned out not to be true. Except, in a way, it was.

“Mr. James, is Henry sick?”

“Sick? Why, no. Healthy as a horse, I'd say. And eats like one, too. You've seen that for yourself. Although I think even a man who *was* sick would have trouble saying no to your cooking, Shannon.”

That earned me a smile, but it was of the distracted variety. “He's different this summer. I always used to know what he was thinking, but now I don't. He *broods*.”

“Does he?” I asked (too heartily).

“You haven't seen it?”

“No, ma’am.” (I had.) “He seems like his old self to me. But he cares for you an awful lot, Shan. Maybe what looks like brooding to you feels like the lovesicks to him.”

I thought that would get me a real smile, but no. She touched my wrist. Her hand was cool from the dipper handle. “I’ve thought of that, but . . .” The rest she blurted out. “Mr. James, if he was sweet on someone else—one of the girls from school—you’d tell me, wouldn’t you? You wouldn’t try to . . . to spare my feelings?”

I laughed at that, and I could see her pretty face lighten with relief. “Shan, listen to me. Because I *am* your friend. Summer’s always a hardworking time, and with Arlette gone, Hank and I have been busier than one-armed paperhangers. When we come in at night, we eat a meal—a fine one, if you happen to show up—and then read for an hour. Sometimes he talks about how he misses his mama. After that we go to bed, and the next day we get up and do it all again. He barely has time to spark *you*, let alone another girl.”

“He’s sparked me, all right,” she said, and looked off to where her father’s harvester was chugging along the skyline.

“Well . . . that’s good, isn’t it?”

“I just thought . . . he’s so quiet now . . . so moody . . . sometimes he looks off into the distance and I have to say his name twice or three times before he hears me and answers.” She blushed fiercely. “Even his kisses seem different. I don’t know how to explain it, but they do. And if you ever tell him I said that, I’ll die. I will just *die*.”

“I never would,” I said. “Friends don’t peach on friends.”

“I guess I’m being a silly-billy. And of course he misses his mama, I know he does. But so many of the girls at school are prettier than me . . . prettier than me . . .”

I tilted her chin up so she was looking at me. “Shannon Cotterie, when my boy looks at you, he sees the prettiest girl in the world. And he’s right. Why, if I was his age, I’d spark you myself.”

“Thank you,” she said. Tears like tiny diamonds stood in the corners of her eyes.

“The only thing you need to worry about is putting him back in his place if he gets out of it. Boys can get pretty steamed up, you know. And if I’m out of

line, you just go on and tell me so. That's another thing that's all right, if it's between friends."

She hugged me then, and I hugged her back. A good strong hug, but perhaps better for Shannon than me. Because Arlette was between us. She was between me and everyone else in the summer of 1922, and it was the same for Henry. Shannon had just told me so.

\* \* \*

One night in August, with the good picking done and Old Pie's crew paid up and back on the rez, I woke to the sound of a cow lowing. *I overslept milking time*, I thought, but when I fumbled my father's pocket watch off the table beside my bed and peered at it, I saw it was quarter past three in the morning. I put the watch to my ear to see if it was still ticking, but a look out the window into the moonless dark would have served the same purpose. Those weren't the mildly uncomfortable calls of a cow needing to be rid of her milk, either. It was the sound of an animal in pain. Cows sometimes sound that way when they're calving, but our goddesses were long past that stage of their lives.

I got up, started out the door, then went back to the closet for my .22. I heard Henry sawing wood behind the closed door of his room as I hurried past with the rifle in one hand and my boots in the other. I hoped he wouldn't wake up and want to join me on what could be a dangerous errand. There were only a few wolves left on the plains by then, but Old Pie had told me there was summer-sick in some of the foxes along the Platte and Medicine Creek. It was what the Shoshone called rabies, and a rabid critter in the barn was the most likely cause of those cries.

Once I was outside the house, the agonized lowing was very loud, and hollow, somehow. Echoing. *Like a cow in a well*, I thought. That thought chilled the flesh on my arms and made me grip the .22 tighter.

By the time I reached the barn doors and shouldered the right one open, I could hear the rest of the cows starting to moo in sympathy, but those cries were calm inquiries compared to the agonized bawling that had awakened me . . . and would awaken Henry, too, if I didn't put an end to what was causing it. There was a carbon arc-lamp hanging on a hook to the right of the door—we

didn't use an open flame in the barn unless we absolutely had to, especially in the summertime, when the loft was loaded with hay and every corncrib crammed full to the top.

I felt for the spark-button and pushed it. A brilliant circle of blue-white radiance leaped out. At first my eyes were too dazzled to make out anything; I could only hear those painful cries and the hoof-thuds as one of our goddesses tried to escape from whatever was hurting her. It was Achelois. When my eyes adjusted a bit, I saw her tossing her head from side to side, backing up until her hindquarters hit the door of her stall—third on the right, as you walked up the aisle—and then lurching forward again. The other cows were working themselves into a full-bore panic.

I hauled on my muckies, then trotted to the stall with the .22 tucked under my left arm. I threw the door open, and stepped back. Achelois means “she who drives away pain,” but this Achelois was in agony. When she blundered into the aisle, I saw her back legs were smeared with blood. She reared up like a horse (something I never saw a cow do before), and when she did, I saw a huge Norway rat clinging to one of her teats. The weight had stretched the pink stub to a taut length of cartilage. Frozen in surprise (and horror), I thought of how, as a child, Henry would sometimes pull a string of pink bubble-gum out of his mouth. *Don't do that*, Arlette would scold him. *No one wants to look at what you've been chewing*.

I raised the gun, then lowered it. How could I shoot, with the rat swinging back and forth like a living weight at the end of a pendulum?

In the aisle now, Achelois lowed and shook her head from side to side, as if that might somehow help. Once all four of her feet were back on the floor, the rat was able to stand on the hay-littered barnboards. It was like some strange freak puppy with beads of bloodstained milk in its whiskers. I looked around for something to hit it with, but before I could grab the broom Henry had left leaning against Phe-monoe's stall, Achelois reared again and the rat thumped to the floor. At first I thought she had simply dislodged it, but then I saw the pink and wrinkled stub protruding from the rat's mouth, like a flesh cigar. The damned thing had torn one of poor Achelois's teats right off. She laid her head against one of the barn beams and mooed at me tiredly, as if to say: *I've given you milk all these years and offered no trouble, not like some I could mention, so*

*why did you let this happen to me?* Blood was pooling beneath her udder. Even in my shock and revulsion, I didn't think she would die of her wound, but the sight of her—and of the rat, with her blameless teat in its mouth—filled me with rage.

I still didn't shoot at it, partly because I was afraid of fire, but mostly because, with the carbon lamp in one hand, I was afraid I'd miss. Instead, I brought the rifle-stock down, hoping to kill this intruder as Henry had killed the survivor from the well with his shovel. But Henry was a boy with quick reflexes, and I was a man of middle age who had been roused from a sound sleep. The rat avoided me with ease and went trotting up the center aisle. The severed teat bobbed up and down in its mouth, and I realized the rat was eating it—warm and no doubt still full of milk—even as it ran. I gave chase, smacked at it twice more, and missed both times. Then I saw where it was running: the pipe leading into the defunct livestock well. Of course! Rat Boulevard! With the well filled in, it was their only means of egress. Without it, they'd have been buried alive. Buried with *her*.

*But surely, I thought, that thing is too big for the pipe. It must have come from outside—a nest in the manure pile, perhaps.*

It leaped for the opening, and as it did so, it elongated its body in the most amazing fashion. I swung the stock of the varmint gun one last time and shattered it on the lip of the pipe. The rat I missed entirely. When I lowered the carbon lamp to the pipe's mouth, I caught one blurred glimpse of its hairless tail slithering away into the darkness, and heard its little claws scraping on the galvanized metal. Then it was gone. My heart was pounding hard enough to put white dots in front of my eyes. I drew in a deep breath, but with it came a stench of putrefaction and decay so strong that I fell back with my hand over my nose. The need to scream was strangled by the need to retch. With that smell in my nostrils I could almost see Arlette at the other end of the pipe, her flesh now teeming with bugs and maggots, liquefying; her face beginning to drip off her skull, the grin of her lips giving way to the longer-lasting bone grin that lay beneath.

I crawled back from that awful pipe on all fours, spraying vomit first to my left and then to my right, and when my supper was all gone, I gagged up long strings of bile. Through watering eyes I saw that Achelois had gone back into

her stall. That was good. At least I wasn't going to have to chase her through the corn and put a nose-halter on her to lead her back.

What I wanted to do first was plug the pipe—I wanted to do that before anything—but as my gorge quieted, clear thinking reasserted itself. Achelois was the priority. She was a good milker. More important, she was my responsibility. I kept a medicine chest in the little barn office where I did the books. In the chest I found a large can of Rawleigh Antiseptic Salve. There was a pile of clean rags in the corner. I took half of them and went back to Achelois's stall. I closed the door of her stall to minimize the risk of being kicked, and sat on the milking stool. I think part of me felt I *deserved* to be kicked. But dear old Achelois stilled when I stroked her flank and whispered, "Soo, Boss, soo, Bossy-boss," and although she shivered when I smeared the salve on her hurt part, she stood quiet.

When I'd taken what steps I could to prevent infection, I used the rags to wipe up my vomit. It was important to do a good job, for any farmer will tell you that human vomit attracts predators every bit as much as a garbage-hole that hasn't been adequately covered. Raccoons and woodchucks, of course, but mostly rats. Rats love human leavings.

I had a few rags left over, but they were Arlette's kitchen castoffs and too thin for my next job. I took the hand-scythe from its peg, lit my way to our woodpile, and chopped a ragged square from the heavy canvas that covered it. Back in the barn, I bent down and held the lamp close to the pipe's mouth, wanting to make sure the rat (or another; where there was one, there would surely be more) wasn't lurking, ready to defend its territory, but it was empty for as far as I could see, which was four feet or so. There were no droppings, and that didn't surprise me. It was an active thoroughfare—now their *only* thoroughfare—and they wouldn't foul it as long as they could do their business outside.

I stuffed the canvas into the pipe. It was stiff and bulky, and in the end I had to use a broomhandle to poke it all the way in, but I managed. "There," I said. "See how you like that. Choke on it."

I went back and looked at Achelois. She stood quietly, and gave me a mild look over her shoulder as I stroked her. I knew then and know now she was only a cow—farmers hold few romantic notions about the natural world, you'll

find—but that look still brought tears to my eyes, and I had to stifle a sob. *I know you did your best*, it said. *I know it's not your fault*.

But it was.

I thought I would lie awake long, and when I went to sleep I would dream of the rat scurrying up the hay-littered barnboards toward its escape-hatch with that teat in its mouth, but I fell asleep at once and my sleep was both dreamless and restorative. I woke with morning light flooding the room and the stench of my dead wife's decaying body thick on my hands, sheets, and pillow-case. I sat bolt upright, gasping but already aware that the smell was an illusion. That smell was my bad dream. I had it not at night but by the morning's first, sanest light, and with my eyes wide open.

\* \* \*

I expected infection from the rat-bite in spite of the salve, but there was none. Achelois died later that year, but not of that. She never gave milk again, however; not a single drop. I should have butchered her, but I didn't have the heart to do it. She had suffered too much on my account.

\* \* \*

The next day, I handed Henry a list of supplies and told him to take the truck over to The Home and get them. A great, dazzled smile broke across his face.

"The truck? *Me?* On my own?"

"You still know all the forward gears? And you can still find reverse?"

"Gosh, sure!"

"Then I think you're ready. Maybe not for Omaha just yet—or even Lincoln—but if you take her slow, you ought to be just fine in Hemingford Home."

"Thanks!" He threw his arms around me and kissed my cheek. For a moment it seemed like we were friends again. I even let myself believe it a little, although in my heart I knew better. The evidence might be belowground, but the truth was between us, and always would be.

I gave him a leather wallet with money in it. "That was your grandfather's. You might as well keep it; I was going to give it to you for your birthday this

fall, anyway. There's money inside. You can keep what's left over, if there is any." I almost added, *And don't bring back any stray dogs*, but stopped myself in time. That had been his mother's stock witticism.

He tried to thank me again, and couldn't. It was all too much.

"Stop by Lars Olsen's smithy on your way back and fuel up. Mind me, now, or you'll be on foot instead of behind the wheel when you get home."

"I won't forget. And Poppa?"

"Yes."

He shuffled his feet, then looked at me shyly. "Could I stop at Cotteries' and ask Shan to come?"

"No," I said, and his face fell before I added: "You ask Sallie or Harlan if Shan can come. And you make sure you tell them that you've never driven in town before. I'm putting you on your honor, Son."

As if either of us had any left.

\* \* \*

I watched by the gate until our old truck disappeared into a ball of its own dust. There was a lump in my throat that I couldn't swallow. I had a stupid but very strong premonition that I would never see him again. I suppose it's something most parents feel the first time they see a child going away on his own and face the realization that if a child is old enough to be sent on errands without supervision, he's not totally a child any longer. But I couldn't spend too much time wallowing in my feelings; I had an important chore to do, and I'd sent Henry away so I could attend to it by myself. He would see what had happened to the cow, of course, and probably guess what had done it, but I thought I could still ease the knowledge for him a little.

I first checked on Achelois, who seemed listless but otherwise fine. Then I checked the pipe. It was still plugged, but I was under no illusions; it might take time, but eventually the rats would gnaw through the canvas. I had to do better. I took a bag of Portland cement around to the house-well and mixed up a batch in an old pail. Back in the barn, while I waited for it to thicken, I poked the swatch of canvas even deeper into the pipe. I got it in at least two feet, and those last two feet I packed with cement. By the time Henry got back (and in fine spirits; he had indeed taken Shannon, and they had shared an ice-cream soda bought with change from the errands), it had hardened. I suppose a few of the rats must have been out foraging, but I had no doubt I'd immured most of them—including the one that had savaged poor Achelois—down there in the dark. And down there in the dark they would die. If not of suffocation, then of starvation once their unspeakable pantry was exhausted.

So I thought then.

\* \* \*

In the years between 1916 and 1922, even stupid Nebraska farmers prospered. Harlan Cotterie, being far from stupid, prospered more than most. His farm showed it. He added a barn and a silo in 1919, and in 1920 he put in a deep well that pumped an unbelievable six gallons per minute. A year later, he added indoor plumbing (although he sensibly kept the backyard privy). Then, three times a week, he and his womenfolk could enjoy what was an unbelievable luxury that far out in the country: hot baths and showers supplied

not by pots of water heated on the kitchen stove but from pipes that first brought the water from the well and then carried it away to the sump. It was the showerbath that revealed the secret Shannon Cotterie had been keeping, although I suppose I already knew, and had since the day she said, *He's sparked me, all right*—speaking in a flat, lusterless voice that was unlike her, and looking not at me but off at the silhouettes of her father's harvester and the gleaners trudging behind it.

This was near the end of September, with the corn all picked for another year but plenty of garden-harvesting left to do. One Saturday afternoon, while Shannon was enjoying the showerbath, her mother came along the back hall with a load of laundry she'd taken in from the line early, because it was looking like rain. Shannon probably thought she had closed the bathroom door all the way—most ladies are private about their bathroom duties, and Shannon Cotterie had a special reason to feel that way as the summer of 1922 gave way to fall—but perhaps it came off the latch and swung open partway. Her mother happened to glance in, and although the old sheet that served as a shower-curtain was pulled all the way around on its U-shaped rail, the spray had rendered it translucent. There was no need for Sallie to see the girl herself; she saw the *shape* of the girl, for once without one of her voluminous Quaker-style dresses to hide it. That was all it took. The girl was five months along, or near to it; she probably could not have kept her secret much longer in any case.

Two days later, Henry came home from school (he now took the truck) looking frightened and guilty. "Shan hasn't been there the last two days," he said, "so I stopped by Cotteries' to ask if she was all right. I thought she might have come down with the Spanish Flu. They wouldn't let me in. Mrs. Cotterie just told me to get on, and said her husband would come to talk to you tonight, after his chores were done. I ast if I could do anything, and she said, 'You've done enough, Henry.'"

Then I remembered what Shan had said. Henry put his face in his hands and said, "She's pregnant, Poppa, and they found out. I know that's it. We want to get married, but I'm afraid they won't let us."

"Never mind them," I said, "*I* won't let you."

He looked at me from wounded, streaming eyes. "Why not?"

I thought: *You saw what it came to between your mother and me and you even have to ask?* But what I said was, “She’s 15 years old, and you won’t even be that for another two weeks.”

“But we love each other!”

O, that loonlike cry. That milksop hoot. My hands were clenched on the legs of my overalls, and I had to force them open and flat. Getting angry would serve no purpose. A boy needed a mother to discuss a thing like this with, but his was sitting at the bottom of a filled-in well, no doubt attended by a retinue of dead rats.

“I know you do, Henry—”

“*Hank!* And others get married that young!”

Once they had; not so much since the century turned and the frontiers closed. But this I didn’t say. What I said was that I had no money to give them a start. Maybe by ’25, if crops and prices stayed good, but now there was nothing. And with a baby on the way—

“There *would* be enough!” he said. “If you hadn’t been such a bugger about that hundred acres, there’d be *plenty!* *She* would’ve given me some of it! And *she* wouldn’t have talked to me this way!”

At first I was too shocked to say anything. It had been six weeks or more since Arlette’s name—or even the vague pronoun alias *she*—had passed between us.

He was looking at me defiantly. And then, far down our stub of road, I saw Harlan Cotterie on his way. I had always considered him my friend, but a daughter who turns up pregnant has a way of changing such things.

“No, she wouldn’t have talked to you this way,” I agreed, and made myself look him straight in the eye. “She would have talked to you worse. And laughed, likely as not. If you search your heart, Son, you’ll know it.”

“No!”

“Your mother called Shannon a little baggage, and then told you to keep your willy in your pants. It was her last advice, and although it was as crude and hurtful as most of what she had to say, you should have followed it.”

Henry’s anger collapsed. “It was only after that . . . after that night . . . that we . . . Shan didn’t want to, but I talked her into it. And once we started, she liked it as much as I did. Once we started, she asked for it.” He said that with a

strange, half-sick pride, then shook his head wearily. “Now that hundred acres just sits there sprouting weeds, and I’m in Dutch. If Momma was here, she’d help me fix it. Money fixes everything, that’s what *he* says.” Henry nodded at the approaching ball of dust.

“If you don’t remember how tight your momma was with a dollar, then you forget too fast for your own good,” I said. “And if you’ve forgotten how she slapped you across the mouth that time—”

“I ain’t,” he said sullenly. Then, more sullenly still: “I thought you’d help me.”

“I mean to try. Right now I want you to make yourself scarce. You being here when Shannon’s father turns up would be like waving a red rag in front of a bull. Let me see where we are—and how he is—and I may call you out on the porch.” I took his wrist. “I’m going to do my best for you, Son.”

He pulled his wrist out of my grasp. “You better.”

He went into the house, and just before Harlan pulled up in his new car (a Nash as green and gleaming under its coating of dust as a bottlefly’s back), I heard the screen door slam out back.

The Nash chugged, backfired, and died. Harlan got out, took off his duster, folded it, and laid it on the seat. He’d worn the duster because he was dressed for the occasion: white shirt, string tie, good Sunday pants held up by a belt with a silver buckle. He hitched at that, getting the pants set the way he wanted them just below his tidy little paunch. He’d always been good to me, and I’d always considered us not just friends but good friends, yet in that moment I hated him. Not because he’d come to tax me about my son; God knows I would have done the same, if our positions had been reversed. No, it was the brand-new shiny green Nash. It was the silver belt buckle made in the shape of a dolphin. It was the new silo, painted bright red, and the indoor plumbing. Most of all it was the plain-faced, biddable wife he’d left back at his farm, no doubt making supper in spite of her worry. The wife whose sweetly given reply in the face of any problem would be, *Whatever you think is best, dear*. Women, take note: a wife like that never needs to fear bubbling away the last of her life through a cut throat.

He strode to the porch steps. I stood and held out my hand, waiting to see if he’d take it or leave it. There was a hesitation while he considered the pros

and cons, but in the end he gave it a brief squeeze before letting loose. “We’ve got a considerable problem here, Wilf,” he said.

“I know it. Henry just told me. Better late than never.”

“Better never at all,” he said grimly.

“Will you sit down?”

He considered this, too, before taking what had always been Arlette’s rocker. I knew he didn’t want to sit—a man who’s mad and upset doesn’t feel good about sitting—but he did, just the same.

“Would you want some iced tea? There’s no lemonade, Arlette was the lemonade expert, but—”

He waved me quiet with one pudgy hand. Pudgy but hard. Harlan was one of the richest farmers in Hemingford County, but he was no straw boss; when it came to haying or harvest, he was right out there with the hired help. “I want to get back before sundown. I don’t see worth a shit by those headlamps. My girl has got a bun in her oven, and I guess you know who did the damn cooking.”

“Would it help to say I’m sorry?”

“No.” His lips were pressed tight together, and I could see hot blood beating on both sides of his neck. “I’m madder than a hornet, and what makes it worse is that I’ve got no one to be mad *at*. I can’t be mad at the kids because they’re just kids, although if she wasn’t with child, I’d turn Shannon over my knee and paddle her for not doing better when she *knew* better. She was raised better and churched better, too.”

I wanted to ask him if he was saying Henry was raised wrong. I kept my mouth shut instead, and let him say all the things he’d been fuming about on his drive over here. He’d thought up a speech, and once he said it, he might be easier to deal with.

“I’d like to blame Sallie for not seeing the girl’s condition sooner, but first-timers usually carry high, everyone knows that . . . and my God, you know the sort of dresses Shan wears. That’s not a new thing, either. She’s been wearing those granny-go-to-meetin’ dresses since she was 12 and started getting her . . .”

He held his pudgy hands out in front of his chest. I nodded.

“And I’d like to blame *you*, because it seems like you skipped that talk fathers usually have with sons.” *As if you’d know anything about raising sons*, I thought. “The one about how he’s got a pistol in his pants and he should keep the safety on.” A sob caught in his throat and he cried, “My . . . little . . . *girl* . . . is too young to be a mother!”

Of course there was blame for me Harlan didn’t know about. If I hadn’t put Henry in a situation where he was desperate for a woman’s love, Shannon might not be in the fix she was in. I also could have asked if Harlan had maybe saved a little blame for himself while he was busy sharing it out. But I held quiet. Quiet never came naturally to me, but living with Arlette had given me plenty of practice.

“Only I can’t blame you, either, because your wife went and run off this spring, and it’s natural your attention would lapse at a time like that. So I went out back and chopped damn near half a cord of wood before I came over here, trying to get some of that mad out, and it must have worked. I shook your hand, didn’t I?”

The self-congratulation I heard in his voice made me itch to say, *Unless it was rape, I think it still takes two to tango*. But I just said, “Yes, you did,” and left it at that.

“Well, that brings us to what you’re going to do about it. You and that boy who sat at my table and ate the food my wife cooked for him.”

Some devil—the creature that comes into a fellow, I suppose, when the Conniving Man leaves—made me say, “Henry wants to marry her and give the baby a name.”

“That’s so God damned ridiculous I don’t want to hear it. I won’t say Henry doesn’t have a pot to piss in nor a window to throw it out of—I know you’ve done right, Wilf, or as right as you can, but that’s the best I can say. These have been fat years, and you’re still only one step ahead of the bank. Where are you going to be when the years get lean again? And they always do. If you had the cash from that back hundred, then it might be different—cash cushions hard times, everyone knows that—but with Arlette gone, there they sit, like a constipated old maid on a chamberpot.”

For just a moment part of me tried to consider how things would have been if I had given in to Arlette about that fucking land, as I had about so many

other things. *I'd be living in stink, that's how it would have been. I would have had to dig out the old spring for the cows, because cows won't drink from a brook that's got blood and pigs' guts floating in it.*

True. But I'd be living instead of just existing, Arlette would be living with me, and Henry wouldn't be the sullen, anguished, difficult boy he had turned into. The boy who had gotten his friend since childhood into a peck of trouble.

"Well, what do you want to do?" I asked. "I doubt you made this trip with nothing in mind."

He appeared not to have heard me. He was looking out across the fields to where his new silo stood on the horizon. His face was heavy and sad, but I've come too far and written too much to lie; that expression did not move me much. 1922 had been the worst year of my life, one where I'd turned into a man I no longer knew, and Harlan Cotterie was just another washout on a rocky and miserable stretch of road.

"She's bright," Harlan said. "Mrs. McReady at school says Shan's the brightest pupil she's taught in her whole career, and that stretches back almost 40 years. She's good in English, and she's even better in the maths, which Mrs. McReady says is rare in girls. She can do triggeronomy, Wilf. Did you know that? Mrs. McReady herself can't do triggeronomy."

No, I hadn't known, but I knew how to say the word. I felt, however, that this might not be the time to correct my neighbor's pronunciation.

"Sallie wanted to send her to the normal school in Omaha. They've taken girls as well as boys since 1918, although no females have graduated so far." He gave me a look that was hard to take: mingled disgust and hostility. "The females always want to get *married*, you see. And *have babies*. Join *Eastern Star* and sweep the God damned *floor*."

He sighed.

"Shan could be the first. She has the skills and she has the brains. You didn't know that, did you?"

No, in truth I had not. I had simply made an assumption—one of many that I now know to have been wrong—that she was farm wife material, and no more.

"She might even teach college. We planned to send her to that school as soon as she turned 17."

*Sallie planned, is what you mean, I thought. Left to your own devices, such a crazy idea never would have crossed your farmer's mind.*

“Shan was willing, and the money was put aside. It was all arranged.” He turned to look at me, and I heard the tendons in his neck creak. “It’s *still* all arranged. But first—almost right away—she’s going to the St. Eusebia Catholic Home for Girls in Omaha. She doesn’t know it yet, but it’s going to happen. Sallie talked about sending her to Deland—Sal’s sister lives there—or to my aunt and uncle in Lyme Biska, but I don’t trust any of those people to carry through on what we’ve decided. Nor does a girl who causes this kind of problem deserve to go to people she knows and loves.”

“What is it you’ve decided, Harl? Besides sending your daughter to some kind of an . . . I don’t know . . . orphanage?”

He bristled. “It’s not an orphanage. It’s a clean, wholesome, and busy place. So I’ve been told. I’ve been on the exchange, and all the reports I get are good ones. She’ll have chores, she’ll have her schooling, and in another four months she’ll have her baby. When that’s done, the kid will be given up for adoption. The sisters at St. Eusebia will see to that. Then she can come home, and in another year and a half she can go to teachers’ college, just like Sallie wants. And me, of course. Sallie and me.”

“What’s my part in this? I assume I must have one.”

“Are you smarting on me, Wilf? I know you’ve had a tough year, but I still won’t bear you smarting on me.”

“I’m not smarting on you, but you need to know you’re not the only one who’s mad and ashamed. Just tell me what you want, and maybe we can stay friends.”

The singularly cold little smile with which he greeted this—just a twitch of the lips and a momentary appearance of dimples at the corners of his mouth—said a great deal about how little hope he held out for *that*.

“I know you’re not rich, but you still need to step up and take your share of the responsibility. Her time at the home—the sisters call it prenatal care—is going to cost me 300 dollars. Sister Camilla called it a donation when I talked to her on the phone, but I know a fee when I hear one.”

“If you’re going to ask me to split it with you—”

“I know you can’t lay your hands on 150 dollars, but you better be able to lay them on 75, because that’s what the tutor’s going to cost. The one who’s going to help her keep up with her lessons.”

“I can’t do that. Arlette cleaned me out when she left.” But for the first time I found myself wondering if she might’ve socked a little something away. That business about the 200 she was supposed to have taken when she ran off had been a pure lie, but even pin-and-ribbon money would help in this situation. I made a mental note to check the cupboards and the canisters in the kitchen.

“Take another shortie loan from the bank,” he said. “You paid the last one back, I hear.”

Of course he heard. Such things are supposed to be private, but men like Harlan Cotterie have long ears. I felt a fresh wave of dislike for him. He had loaned me the use of his corn harvester and only taken 20 dollars for the use of it? So what? He was asking for that and more, as though his precious daughter had never spread her legs and said *come on in and paint the walls*.

“I had crop money to pay it back with,” I said. “Now I don’t. I’ve got my land and my house and that’s pretty much it.”

“You find a way,” he said. “Mortgage the house, if that’s what it takes. 75 dollars is your share, and compared to having your boy changing didies at the age of 15, I think you’re getting off cheap.”

He stood up. I did, too. “And if I can’t find a way? What then, Harl? You send the Sheriff?”

His lips curled in an expression of contempt that turned my dislike of him to hate. It happened in an instant, and I still feel that hate today, when so many other feelings have been burned out of my heart. “I’d never go to law on a thing like this. But if you don’t take your share of the responsibility, you and me’s done.” He squinted into the declining daylight. “I’m going. Got to, if I want to get back before dark. I won’t need the 75 for a couple of weeks, so you got that long. And I won’t come dunning you for it. If you don’t, you don’t. Just don’t say you can’t, because I know better. You should have let her sell that acreage to Farrington, Wilf. If you’d done that, she’d still be here and you’d have some money in hand. And my daughter might not be in the fam’ly way.”

In my mind, I pushed him off the porch and jumped on his hard round belly with both feet when he tried to get up. Then I got my hand-scythe out of

the barn and put it through one of his eyes. In reality, I stood with one hand on the railing and watched him trudge down the steps.

“Do you want to talk to Henry?” I asked. “I can call him. He feels as bad about this as I do.”

Harlan didn't break stride. “She was clean and your boy filthied her up. If you hauled him out here, I might knock him down. I might not be able to help myself.”

I wondered about that. Henry was getting his growth, he was strong, and perhaps most important of all, he knew about murder. Harl Cotterie didn't.

He didn't need to crank the Nash but only push a button. Being prosperous was nice in all sorts of ways. “75 is what I need to close this business,” he called over the punch and blat of the engine. Then he whirled around the chopping block, sending George and his retinue flying, and headed back to his farm with its big generator and indoor plumbing.

When I turned around, Henry was standing beside me, looking sallow and furious. “They can't send her away like that.”

So he had been listening. I can't say I was surprised.

“Can and will,” I said. “And if you try something stupid and headstrong, you'll only make a bad situation worse.”

“We could run away. We wouldn't get caught. If we could get away with . . . with what we did . . . then I guess I could get away with eloping off to Colorado with my gal.”

“You couldn't,” I said, “because you'd have no money. Money fixes everything, he says. Well, this is what I say: *no money spoils* everything. I know it, and Shannon will, too. She's got her baby to watch out for now—”

“Not if they make her give it away!”

“That doesn't change how a woman feels when she's got the chap in her belly. A chap makes them wise in ways men don't understand. I haven't lost any respect for you or her just because she's going to have a baby—you two aren't the first, and you won't be the last, even if Mr. High and Mighty had the idea she was only going to use what's between her legs in the water-closet. But if you asked a five-months-pregnant girl to run off with you . . . and she agreed . . . I'd lose respect for both of you.”

“What do you know?” he asked with infinite contempt. “You couldn’t even cut a throat without making a mess of it.”

I was speechless. He saw it, and left me that way.

\* \* \*

He went off to school the next day without any argument even though his sweetie was no longer there. Probably because I let him take the truck. A boy will take any excuse to drive a truck when driving’s new. But of course the new wears off. The new wears off everything, and it usually doesn’t take long. What’s beneath is gray and shabby, more often than not. Like a rat’s hide.

Once he was gone, I went into the kitchen. I poured the sugar, flour, and salt out of their tin canisters and stirred through them. There was nothing. I went into the bedroom and searched her clothes. There was nothing. I looked in her shoes and there was nothing. But each time I found nothing, I became more sure there was *something*.

I had chores in the garden, but instead of doing them, I went out back of the barn to where the old well had been. Weeds were growing on it now: witchgrass and scraggly fall goldenrod. Elphis was down there, and Arlette was, too. Arlette with her face cocked to the side. Arlette with her clown’s grin. Arlette in her *snood*.

“Where is it, you contrary bitch?” I asked her. “Where did you hide it?”

I tried to empty my mind, which was what my father advised me to do when I’d misplaced a tool or one of my few precious books. After a little while I went back into the house, back into the bedroom, back into the closet. There were two hatboxes on the top shelf. In the first one I found nothing but a hat—the white one she wore to church (when she could trouble herself to go, which was about once a month). The hat in the other box was red, and I’d never seen her wear it. It looked like a whore’s hat to me. Tucked into the satin inner band, folded into tiny squares no bigger than pills, were two 20-dollar bills. I tell you now, sitting here in this cheap hotel room and listening to the rats scuttering and scampering in the walls (yes, my old friends are here), that those two 20-dollar bills were the seal on my damnation.

\* \* \*

Because they weren't enough. You see that, don't you? Of course you do. One doesn't need to be an expert in triggeronomy to know that one needs to add 35 to 40 to make 75. Doesn't sound like much, does it? But in those days you could buy two months' worth of groceries for 35 dollars, or a good used harness at Lars Olsen's smithy. You could buy a train ticket all the way to Sacramento . . . which I sometimes wish I had done.

35.

And sometimes when I lie in bed at night, I can actually *see* that number. It flashes red, like a warning not to cross a road because a train is coming. I tried to cross anyway, and the train ran me down. If each of us has a Conniving Man inside, each of us also has a Lunatic. And on those nights when I can't sleep because the flashing number won't *let* me sleep, my Lunatic says it was a conspiracy: that Cotterie, Stoppenhauser, and the Farrington shyster were all in it together. I know better, of course (at least in daylight). Cotterie and Mr. Attorney Lester might have had a talk with Stoppenhauser later on—after I did what I did—but it was surely innocent to begin with; Stoppenhauser was actually trying to help me out . . . and do a little business for Home Bank & Trust, of course. But when Harlan or Lester—or both of them together—saw an opportunity, they took it. The Conniving Man out-connived: how do you like that? By then I hardly cared, because by then I had lost my son, but do you know who I really blame?

Arlette.

Yes.

Because it was she who left those two bills inside her red whore's hat for me to find. And do you see how fiendishly clever she was? Because it wasn't the 40 that did me in; it was the money between that and what Cotterie demanded for his pregnant daughter's tutor; what he wanted so she could study Latin and keep up with her *triggeronomy*.

35, 35, 35.

\* \* \*

I thought about the money he wanted for the tutor all the rest of that week, and over the weekend, too. Sometimes I took out those two bills—I had unfolded them but the creases still remained—and studied at them. On Sunday night I made my decision. I told Henry that he'd have to take the Model T to school on Monday; I had to go to Hemingford Home and see Mr. Stoppenhauser at the bank about a shortie loan. A small one. Just 35 dollars.

“What for?” Henry was sitting at the window and looking moodily out at the darkening West Field.

I told him. I thought it would start another argument about Shannon, and in a way, I wanted that. He'd said nothing about her all week, although I knew Shan was gone. Mert Donovan had told me when he came by for a load of seed corn. “Went off to some fancy school back in Omaha,” he said. “Well, more power to her, that's what I think. If they're gonna vote, they better learn. Although,” he added after a moment's cogitation, “mine does what I tell her. She better, if she knows what's good for her.”

If I knew she was gone, Henry also knew, and probably before I did—schoolchildren are enthusiastic gossips. But he had said nothing. I suppose I was trying to give him a reason to let out all the hurt and recrimination. It wouldn't be pleasant, but in the long run it might be beneficial. Neither a sore on the forehead or in the brain behind the forehead should be allowed to fester. If they do, the infection is likely to spread.

But he only grunted at the news, so I decided to poke a little harder.

“You and I are going to split the payback,” I said. “It's apt to come to no more than 38 dollars if we retire the loan by Christmas. That's 19 apiece. I'll take yours out of your choring money.”

Surely, I thought, this would result in a flood of anger . . . but it brought only another surly little grunt. He didn't even argue about having to take the Model T to school, although he said the other kids made fun of it, calling it “Hank's ass-breaker.”

“Son?”

“What.”

“Are you all right?”

He turned to me and smiled—his lips moved around, at least. “I'm fine. Good luck at the bank tomorrow, Poppa. I'm going to bed.”

As he stood up, I said: “Will you give me a little kiss?”  
He kissed my cheek. It was the last one.

\* \* \*

He took the T to school and I drove the truck to Hemingford Home, where Mr. Stoppenhauser brought me into his office after a mere five-minute wait. I explained what I needed, but declined to say what I needed it for, only citing personal reasons. I thought for such a piddling amount I would not need to be more specific, and I was right. But when I'd finished, he folded his hands on his desk blotter and gave me a look of almost fatherly sternness. In the corner, the Regulator clock ticked away quiet slices of time. On the street—considerably louder—came the blat of an engine. It stopped, there was silence, and then another engine started up. Was that my son, first arriving in the Model T and then stealing my truck? There's no way I can know for sure, but I think it was.

“Wilf,” Mr. Stoppenhauser said, “you’ve had a little time to get over your wife leaving the way she did—pardon me for bringing up a painful subject, but it seems pertinent, and besides, a banker’s office is a little like a priest’s confessional—so I’m going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle. Which is only fitting, since that’s where my mother and father came from.”

I had heard this one before—as had, I imagine, most visitors to that office—and I gave it the dutiful smile it was meant to elicit.

“Will Home Bank & Trust loan you 35 dollars? You bet. I’m tempted to put it on a man-to-man basis and do the deal out of my own wallet, except I never carry more than what it takes to pay for my lunch at the Splendid Diner and a shoe-shine at the barber shop. Too much money’s a constant temptation, even for a wily old cuss like me, and besides, business is business. *But!*” He raised his finger. “You don’t *need* 35 dollars.”

“Sad to say, I do.” I wondered if he knew why. He might have; he was indeed a wily old cuss. But so was Harl Cotterie, and Harl was also a shamed old cuss that fall.

“No; you don’t. You need 750, that’s what you need, and you could have it today. Either bank it or walk out with it in your pocket, all the same to me

either way. You paid off the mortgage on your place 3 years ago. It's free and clear. So there's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't turn around and take out another mortgage. It's done all the time, my boy, and by the best people. You'd be surprised at some of the paper we're carrying. All the best people. Yessir."

"I thank you very kindly, Mr. Stoppenhauser, but I don't think so. That mortgage was like a gray cloud over my head the whole time it was in force, and—"

"Wilf, that's the *point!*" The finger went up again. This time it wagged back and forth, like the pendulum of the Regulator. "That is exactly the rootin'-tootin', cowboy-shootin' *point!* It's the fellows who take out a mortgage and then feel like they're always walking around in sunshine who end up defaulting and losing their valuable property! Fellows like you, who carry that bank-paper like a barrowload of rocks on a gloomy day, are the fellows who always pay back! And do you want to tell me that there aren't improvements you could make? A roof to fix? A little more livestock?" He gave me a sly and roguish look. "Maybe even indoor plumbing, like your neighbor down the road? Such things pay for themselves, you know. You could end up with improvements that far outweigh the cost of a mortgage. Value for money, Wilf! Value for money!"

I thought it over. At last I said, "I'm very tempted, sir. I won't lie about that —"

"No need to. A banker's office, the priest's confessional—very little difference. The best men in this county have sat in that chair, Wilf. The very best."

"But I only came in for a shortie loan—which you have kindly granted—and this new proposal needs a little thinking about." A new idea occurred to me, one that was surprisingly pleasant. "And I ought to talk it over with my boy, Henry—Hank, as he likes to be called now. He's getting to an age where he needs to be consulted, because what I've got will be his someday."

"Understood, completely understood. But it's the right thing to do, believe me." He got to his feet and stuck out his hand. I got to mine and shook it. "You came in here to buy a fish, Wilf. I'm offering to sell you a pole. Much better deal."

“Thank you.” And, leaving the bank, I thought: *I’ll talk it over with my son.* It was a good thought. A warm thought in a heart that had been chilly for months.

\* \* \*

The mind is a funny thing, isn’t it? Preoccupied as I was by Mr. Stoppenhauser’s unsolicited offer of a mortgage, I never noticed that the vehicle I’d come in had been replaced by the one Henry had taken to school. I’m not sure I would have noticed right away even if I’d had less weighty matters on my mind. They were both familiar to me, after all; they were both mine. I only realized when I was leaning in to get the crank and saw a folded piece of paper, held down by a rock, on the driving seat.

I just stood there for a moment, half in and half out of the T, one hand on the side of the cab, the other reaching under the seat, which was where we kept the crank. I suppose I knew why Henry had left school and made this swap even before I pulled his note from beneath the makeshift paperweight and unfolded it. The truck was more reliable on a long trip. A trip to Omaha, for instance.

*Poppa,*

*I have taken the truck. I guess you know where I am going. Leave me alone. I know you can send Sheriff Jones after me to bring me back, but if you do I will tell everything. You might think I’d change my mind because I am “just a kid,” BUT I WONT. Without Shan I dont care about nothing. I love you Poppa even if I don’t know why, since everything we did has brought me mizzery.*

*Your Loving Son,  
Henry “Hank” James*

I drove back to the farm in a daze. I think some people waved to me—I think even Sallie Cotterie, who was minding the Cotteries’ roadside vegetable stand, waved to me—and I probably waved back, but I’ve no memory of doing so. For the first time since Sheriff Jones had come out to the farm, asking his cheerful, no-answers-needed questions and looking at everything with his cold

inquisitive eyes, the electric chair seemed like a real possibility to me, so real I could almost feel the buckles on my skin as the leather straps were tightened on my wrists and above my elbows.

He would be caught whether I kept my mouth shut or not. That seemed inevitable to me. He had no money, not even six bits to fill the truck's gas tank, so he'd be walking long before he even got to Elkhorn. If he managed to steal some gas, he'd be caught when he approached the place where she was now living (Henry assumed as a prisoner; it had never crossed his unfinished mind that she might be a willing guest). Surely Harlan had given the person in charge—Sister Camilla—Henry's description. Even if he hadn't considered the possibility of the outraged swain making an appearance at the site of his lady-love's durance vile, Sister Camilla would have. In her business, she had surely dealt with outraged swains before.

My only hope was that, once accosted by the authorities, Henry would keep silent long enough to realize that he'd been snared by his own foolishly romantic notions rather than by my interference. Hoping for a teenage boy to come to his senses is like betting on a long shot at the horse track, but what else did I have?

As I drove into the dooryard, a wild thought crossed my mind: leave the T running, pack a bag, and take off for Colorado. The idea lived for no more than two seconds. I had money—75 dollars, in fact—but the T would die long before I crossed the state line at Julesburg. And that wasn't the important thing; if it had been, I could always have driven as far as Lincoln and then traded the T and 60 of my dollars for a reliable car. No, it was the place. The home place. *My* home place. I had murdered my wife to keep it, and I wasn't going to leave it now because my foolish and immature accomplice had gotten it into his head to take off on a romantic quest. If I left the farm, it wouldn't be for Colorado; it would be for state prison. And I would be taken there in chains.

\* \* \*

That was Monday. There was no word on Tuesday or Wednesday. Sheriff Jones didn't come to tell me Henry had been picked up hitch-hiking on the Lincoln-

Omaha Highway, and Harl Cotterie didn't come to tell me (with Puritanical satisfaction, no doubt) that the Omaha police had arrested Henry at Sister Camilla's request, and he was currently sitting in the pokey, telling wild tales about knives and wells and burlap bags. All was quiet on the farm. I worked in the garden harvesting pantry-vegetables, I mended fence, I milked the cows, I fed the chickens—and I did it all in a daze. Part of me, and not a small part, either, believed that all of this was a long and terribly complex dream from which I would awake with Arlette snoring beside me and the sound of Henry chopping wood for the morning fire.

Then, on Thursday, Mrs. McReady—the dear and portly widow who taught academic subjects at Hemingford School—came by in her own Model T to ask me if Henry was all right. “There's an . . . an intestinal *distress* going around,” she said. “I wondered if he caught it. He left very suddenly.”

“He's distressed all right,” I said, “but it's a love-bug instead of a stomach-bug. He's run off, Mrs. McReady.” Unexpected tears, stinging and hot, rose in my eyes. I took the handkerchief from the pocket on the front of my biballs, but some of them ran down my cheeks before I could wipe them away.

When my vision was clear again, I saw that Mrs. McReady, who meant well by every child, even the difficult ones, was near tears herself. She must have known all along what kind of bug Henry was suffering from.

“He'll be back, Mr. James. Don't you fear. I've seen this before, and I expect to see it a time or two again before I retire, although that time's not so far away as it once was.” She lowered her voice, as if she feared George the rooster or one of his feathered harem might be a spy. “The one you want to watch out for is her father. He's a hard and unbending man. Not a bad man, but hard.”

“I know,” I said. “And I suppose you know where his daughter is now.”

She lowered her eyes. It was answer enough.

“Thank you for coming out, Mrs. McReady. Can I ask you to keep this to yourself?”

“Of course . . . but the children are already whispering.”

Yes. They would be.

“Are you on the exchange, Mr. James?” She looked for telephone wires. “I see you are not. Never mind. If I hear anything, I'll come out and tell you.”

“You mean if you hear anything before Harlan Cotterie or Sheriff Jones.”

“God will take care of your son. Shannon, too. You know, they really were a lovely couple; everyone said so. Sometimes the fruit ripens too early, and a frost kills it. Such a shame. Such a sad, sad shame.”

She shook my hand—a man’s strong grip—and then drove away in her flivver. I don’t think she realized that, at the end, she had spoken of Shannon and my son in the past tense.

\* \* \*

On Friday Sheriff Jones came out, driving the car with the gold star on the door. And he wasn’t alone. Following along behind was my truck. My heart leaped at the sight of it, then sank again when I saw who was behind the wheel: Lars Olsen.

I tried to wait quietly while Jones went through his Ritual of Arrival: belt-hitching, forehead-wiping (even though the day was chilly and overcast), hair-brushing. I couldn’t do it. “Is he all right? Did you find him?”

“No, nope, can’t say we did.” He mounted the porch steps. “Line-rider over east of Lyme Biska found the truck, but no sign of the kid. We might know better about the state of his health if you’d reported this when it happened. Wouldn’t we?”

“I was hoping he’d come back on his own,” I said dully. “He’s gone to Omaha. I don’t know how much I need to tell you, Sheriff—”

Lars Olsen had meandered into auditory range, ears all but flapping. “Go on back to my car, Olsen,” Jones said. “This is a private conversation.”

Lars, a meek soul, scurried off without demur. Jones turned back to me. He was far less cheerful than on his previous visit, and had dispensed with the bumbling persona, as well.

“I already know enough, don’t I? That your kid got Harl Cotterie’s daughter in the fam’ly way and has probably gone haring off to Omaha. He run the truck off the road into a field of high grass when he knew the tank was ’bout dry. That was smart. He get that kind of smart from you? Or from Arlette?”

I said nothing, but he’d given me an idea. Just a little one, but it might come in handy.

“I’ll tell you one thing he did that we’ll thank him for,” Jones said. “Might keep him out of jail, too. He yanked all the grass from under the truck before he went on his merry way. So the exhaust wouldn’t catch it afire, you know. Start a big prairie fire that burned a couple thousand acres, a jury might get a bit touchy, don’t you think? Even if the offender was only 15 or so?”

“Well, it didn’t happen, Sheriff—he did the right thing—so why are you going on about it?” I knew the answer, of course. Sheriff Jones might not give a hoot in a high wind for the likes of Andrew Lester, attorney-at-law, but he was good friends with Harl. They were both members of the newly formed Elks Lodge, and Harl had it in for my son.

“A little touchy, aren’t you?” He wiped his forehead again, then resettled his Stetson. “Well, I might be touchy, too, if it was my son. And you know what? If it was my son and Harl Cotterie was my neighbor—my *good* neighbor—I might’ve just taken a run down there and said, ‘Harl? You know what? I think my son might be going to try and see your daughter. You want to tell someone to be on the peep for him?’ But you didn’t do that, either, did you?”

The idea he’d given me was looking better and better, and it was almost time to spring it.

“He hasn’t shown up wherever she is, has he?”

“Not yet, no, he may still be looking for it.”

“I don’t think he ran away to see Shannon,” I said.

“Why, then? Do they have a better brand of ice cream there in Omaha? Because that’s the way he was headed, sure as your life.”

“I think he went looking for his mother. I think she may have gotten in touch with him.”

That stopped him for a good ten seconds, long enough for a wipe of the forehead and a brush of the hair. Then he said, “How would she do that?”

“A letter would be my best guess.” The Hemingford Home Grocery was also the post office, where all the general delivery went. “They would have given it to him when he went in for candy or a bag of peanuts, as he often does on his way back from school. I don’t know for sure, Sheriff, any more than I know why you came out here acting like I committed some kind of crime. I wasn’t the one who knocked her up.”

“You ought to hush that kind of talk about a nice girl!”

“Maybe yes and maybe no, but this was as much a surprise to me as it was to the Cotteries, and now my boy is gone. They at least know where their daughter is.”

Once again he was stumped. Then he took out a little notebook from his back pocket and jotted something in it. He put it back and asked, “You don’t know for sure that your wife got in touch with your kid, though—that’s what you’re telling me? It’s just a guess?”

“I know he talked a lot about his mother after she left, but then he stopped. And I know he hasn’t shown up at that home where Harlan and his wife stuck Shannon.” And on that score I was as surprised as Sheriff Jones . . . but awfully grateful. “Put the two things together, and what do you get?”

“I don’t know,” Jones said, frowning. “I truly don’t. I thought I had this figured out, but I’ve been wrong before, haven’t I? Yes, and will be again. ‘We are all bound in error,’ that’s what the Book says. But good God, kids make my life hard. If you hear from your son, Wilfred, I’d tell him to get his skinny ass home and stay away from Shannon Cotterie, if he knows where she is. She won’t want to see him, guarantee you that. Good news is no prairie fire, and we can’t arrest him for stealing his father’s truck.”

“No,” I said grimly, “you’d never get me to press charges on that one.”

“*But.*” He raised his finger, which reminded me of Mr. Stoppenhauser at the bank. “Three days ago, in Lyme Biska—not so far from where the rider found your truck—someone held up that grocery and ethyl station on the edge of town. The one with the Blue Bonnet Girl on the roof? Took 23 dollars. I got the report sitting on my desk. It was a young fella dressed in old cowboy clothes, with a bandanna pulled up over his mouth and a plainsman hat slouched down over his eyes. The owner’s mother was tending the counter, and the fella menaced her with some sort of tool. She thought it might have been a crowbar or a pry-rod, but who knows? She’s pushing 80 and half-blind.”

It was my time to be silent. I was flabbergasted. At last I said, “Henry left from school, Sheriff, and so far as I can remember he was wearing a flannel shirt and corduroy trousers that day. He didn’t take any of his clothes, and in any case he doesn’t *have* any cowboy clothes, if you mean boots and all. Nor does he have a plainsman’s hat.”

“He could have stolen those things, too, couldn’t he?”

“If you don’t know anything more than what you just said, you ought to stop. I know you’re friends with Harlan—”

“Now, now, this has nothing to do with that.”

It did and we both knew it, but there was no reason to go any farther down that road. Maybe my 80 acres didn’t stack up very high against Harlan Cotterie’s 400, but I was still a landowner and a taxpayer, and I wasn’t going to be browbeaten. That was the point I was making, and Sheriff Jones had taken it.

“My son’s not a robber, and he doesn’t threaten women. That’s not how he acts and not the way he was raised.”

*Not until just lately, anyway,* a voice inside whispered.

“Probably just a drifter looking for a quick payday,” Jones said. “But I felt like I had to bring it up, and so I did. And we don’t know what people might say, do we? Talk gets around. Everybody talks, don’t they? Talk’s cheap. The subject’s closed as far as I’m concerned—let the Lyme County Sheriff worry about what goes on in Lyme Biska, that’s my motto—but you should know that the Omaha police are keeping an eye on the place where Shannon Cotterie’s at. Just in case your son gets in touch, you know.”

He brushed back his hair, then resettled his hat a final time.

“Maybe he’ll come back on his own, no harm done, and we can write this whole thing off as, I don’t know, a bad debt.”

“Fine. Just don’t call him a bad son, unless you’re willing to call Shannon Cotterie a bad daughter.”

The way his nostrils flared suggested he didn’t like that much, but he didn’t reply to it. What he said was, “If he comes back and says he’s seen his mother, let me know, would you? We’ve got her on the books as a missing person. Silly, I know, but the law is the law.”

“I’ll do that, of course.”

He nodded and went to his car. Lars had settled behind the wheel. Jones shooed him over—the sheriff was the kind of man who did his own driving. I thought about the young man who’d held up the store, and tried to tell myself that my Henry would never do such a thing, and even if he were driven to it, he wouldn’t be sly enough to put on clothes he’d stolen out of somebody’s barn

or bunkhouse. But Henry was different now, and murderers *learn* slyness, don't they? It's a survival skill. I thought that maybe—

But no. I won't say it that way. It's too weak. This is my confession, my last word on everything, and if I can't tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, what good is it? What good is anything?

It was him. It was Henry. I had seen by Sheriff Jones's eyes that he only brought up that side-o'-the-road robbery because I wouldn't kowtow to him the way he thought I should've, but *I* believed it. Because I knew more than Sheriff Jones. After helping your father to murder your mother, what was stealing some new clothes and waving a crowbar in an old granny's face? No such much. And if he tried it once, he would try it again, once those 23 dollars were gone. Probably in Omaha. Where they would catch him. And then the whole thing might come out. Almost certainly *would* come out.

I climbed to the porch, sat down, and put my face in my hands.

\* \* \*

Days went by. I don't know how many, only that they were rainy. When the rain comes in the fall, outside chores have to wait, and I didn't have enough livestock or outbuildings to fill the hours with inside chores. I tried to read, but the words wouldn't seem to string together, although every now and then a single one would seem to leap off the page and scream. Murder. Guilt. Betrayal. Words like those.

Days I sat on the porch with a book in my lap, bundled into my sheepskin coat against the damp and the cold, watching the rainwater drip off the overhang. Nights I lay awake until the small hours of the morning, listening to the rain on the roof overhead. It sounded like timid fingers tapping for entry. I spent too much time thinking about Arlette in the well with Elphis. I began to fancy that she was still . . . not alive (I was under stress but not crazy), but somehow *aware*. Somehow watching developments from her makeshift grave, and with pleasure.

*Do you like how things have turned out, Wilf?* she'd ask if she could (and, in my imagination, did). *Was it worth it? What do you say?*

\* \* \*

One night about a week after Sheriff Jones's visit, as I sat trying to read *The House of the Seven Gables*, Arlette crept up behind me, reached around the side of my head, and tapped the bridge of my nose with one cold, wet finger.

I dropped the book on the braided sitting room rug, screamed, and leaped to my feet. When I did, the cold fingertip ran down to the corner of my mouth. Then it touched me again, on top of my head, where the hair was getting thin. This time I laughed—a shaky, angry laugh—and bent to pick up my book. As I did, the finger tapped a third time, this one on the nape of the neck, as if my dead wife were saying, *Have I got your attention yet, Wilf?* I stepped away—so the fourth tap wouldn't be in the eye—and looked up. The ceiling overhead was discolored and dripping. The plaster hadn't started to bulge yet, but if the rain continued, it would. It might even dissolve and come down in chunks. The leak was above my special reading-place. Of course it was. The rest of the ceiling looked fine, at least so far.

I thought of Stoppenhauser saying, *Do you want to tell me there aren't improvements you could make? A roof to fix?* And that sly look. As if he had known. As if he and Arlette were in on it together.

*Don't be getting such things in your head,* I told myself. *Bad enough that you keep thinking of her, down there. Have the worms gotten her eyes yet, I wonder? Have the bugs eaten away her sharp tongue, or at least blunted it?*

I went to the table in the far corner of the room, got the bottle that stood there, and poured myself a good-sized hooker of brown whiskey. My hand trembled, but only a little. I downed it in two swallows. I knew it would be a bad business to turn such drinking into a habit, but it's not every night that a man feels his dead wife tap him on the nose. And the hooch made me feel better. More in control of myself. I didn't need to take on a 750-dollar mortgage to fix my roof, I could patch it with scrap lumber when the rain stopped. But it would be an ugly fix; would make the place look like what my mother would have called trash-poor. Nor was that the point. Fixing a leak would take only a day or two. I needed work that would keep me through the winter. Hard labor would drive out thoughts of Arlette on her dirt throne, Arlette in her burlap *snood*. I needed home improvement projects that would

send me to bed so tired that I'd sleep right through, and not lie there listening to the rain and wondering if Henry was out in it, maybe coughing from the grippe. Sometimes work is the only thing, the only answer.

The next day I drove to town in my truck and did what I never would have thought of doing if I hadn't needed to borrow 35 dollars: I took out a mortgage for 750. In the end we are all caught in devices of our own making. I believe that. In the end we are all caught.

\* \* \*

In Omaha that same week, a young man wearing a plainsman's hat walked into a pawnshop on Dodge Street and bought a nickel-plated .32 caliber pistol. He paid with 5 dollars that had no doubt been handed to him, under duress, by a half-blind old woman who did business beneath the sign of the Blue Bonnet Girl. The next day, a young man wearing a flat cap on his head and a red bandanna over his mouth and nose walked into the Omaha branch of the First Agricultural Bank, pointed a gun at a pretty young teller named Rhoda Penmark, and demanded all the money in her drawer. She passed over about 200 dollars, mostly in ones and fives—the grimy kind farmers carry rolled up in the pockets of their bib overalls.

As he left, stuffing the money into his pants with one hand (clearly nervous, he dropped several bills on the floor), the portly guard—a retired policeman—said: “Son, you don't want to do this.”

The young man fired his .32 into the air. Several people screamed. “I don't want to shoot you, either,” the young man said from behind his bandanna, “but I will if I have to. Fall back against that post, sir, and stay there if you know what's good for you. I've got a friend outside watching the door.”

The young man ran out, already stripping the bandanna from his face. The guard waited for a minute or so, then went out with his hands raised (he had no sidearm), just in case there really was a friend. There wasn't, of course. Hank James had no friends in Omaha except for the one with his baby growing in her belly.

\* \* \*

I took 200 dollars of my mortgage money in cash and left the rest in Mr. Stoppenhauser's bank. I went shopping at the hardware, the lumberyard, and the grocery store where Henry might have gotten a letter from his mother . . . if she were still alive to write one. I drove out of town in a drizzle that had turned to slashing rain by the time I got home. I unloaded my newly purchased lumber and shingles, did the feeding and milking, then put away my groceries—mostly dry goods and staples that were running low without Arlette to ride herd on the kitchen. With that chore done, I put water on the woodstove to heat for a bath and stripped off my damp clothes. I pulled the wad of money out of the right front pocket of my crumpled biballs, counted it, and saw I still had just shy of 160 dollars. Why had I taken so much in cash? Because my mind had been elsewhere. *Where* elsewhere, pray? On Arlette and Henry, of course. Not to mention Henry and Arlette. They were pretty much all I thought about on those rainy days.

I knew it wasn't a good idea to have so much cash money around. It would have to go back to the bank, where it could earn a little interest (although not nearly enough to equal the interest on the loan) while I was thinking about how best to put it to work. But in the meantime, I should lay it by someplace safe.

The box with the red whore's hat in it came to mind. It was where she'd stashed her own money, and it had been safe there for God knew how long. There was too much in my wad to fit in the band, so I thought I'd put it in the hat itself. It would only be there until I found an excuse to go back to town.

I went into the bedroom, stark naked, and opened the closet door. I shoved aside the box with her white church-hat in it, then reached for the other one. I'd pushed it all the way to the back of the shelf and had to stand on tiptoe to reach it. There was an elastic cord around it. I hooked my finger under it to pull it forward, was momentarily aware that the hatbox felt much too heavy—as though there were a brick inside it instead of a bonnet—and then there was a strange *freezing* sensation, as though my hand had been doused in ice-water. A moment later the freeze turned to fire. It was a pain so intense that it locked all the muscles in my arm. I stumbled backwards, roaring in surprise and agony and dropping money everywhere. My finger was still hooked into the

elastic, and the hatbox came tumbling out. Crouched on top of it was a Norway rat that looked all too familiar.

You might say to me, “Wilf, one rat looks like another,” and ordinarily you’d be right, but I knew this one; hadn’t I seen it running away from me with a cow’s teat jutting from its mouth like the butt of a cigar?

The hatbox came free of my bleeding hand, and the rat tumbled to the floor. If I had taken time to think, it would have gotten away again, but conscious thinking had been canceled by pain, surprise, and the horror I suppose almost any man feels when he sees blood pouring from a part of his body that was whole only seconds before. I didn’t even remember that I was as naked as the day I was born, just brought my right foot down on the rat. I heard its bones crunch and felt its guts squash. Blood and liquefied intestines squirted from beneath its tail and doused my left ankle with warmth. It tried to twist around and bite me again; I could see its large front teeth gnashing, but it couldn’t quite reach me. Not, that was, as long as I kept my foot on it. So I did. I pushed harder, holding my wounded hand against my chest, feeling the warm blood mat the thick pelt that grew there. The rat twisted and flopped. Its tail first lashed my calf, then wrapped around it like a grass snake. Blood gushed from its mouth. Its black eyes bulged like marbles.

I stood there with my foot on the dying rat for a long time. It was smashed to pieces inside, its innards reduced to gruel, and still it thrashed and tried to bite. Finally it stopped moving. I stood on it for another minute, wanting to make sure it wasn’t just playing possum (a rat playing possum—ha!), and when I was sure it was dead, I limped into the kitchen, leaving bloody footprints and thinking in a confused way of the oracle warning Pelias to beware of a man wearing just one sandal. But I was no Jason; I was a farmer half-mad with pain and amazement, a farmer who seemed condemned to foul his sleeping-place with blood.

As I held my hand under the pump and froze it with cold water, I could hear someone saying, “No more, no more, no more.” It was me, I knew it was, but it sounded like an old man. One who had been reduced to beggary.

\* \* \*

I can remember the rest of that night, but it's like looking at old photographs in a mildewy album. The rat had bitten all the way through the webbing between my left thumb and forefinger—a terrible bite, but in a way, lucky. If it had seized on the finger I'd hooked under that elastic cord, it might have bitten the finger entirely off. I realized that when I went back into the bedroom and picked up my adversary by the tail (using my right hand; the left was too stiff and painful to flex). It was two feet long, a six-pounder, at least.

*Then it wasn't the same rat that escaped into the pipe, I hear you saying. It couldn't have been.* But it was, I tell you it was. There was no identifying mark—no white patch of fur or conveniently memorable chewed ear—but I knew it was the one that had savaged Achelois. Just as I knew it hadn't been crouched up there by accident.

I carried it into the kitchen by the tail and dumped it in the ash bucket. This I took out to our swill-pit. I was naked in the pouring rain, but hardly aware of it. What I was mostly aware of was my left hand, throbbing with a pain so intense it threatened to obliterate all thought.

I took my duster from the hook in the mud-room (it was all I could manage), shrugged into it, and went out again, this time into the barn. I smeared my wounded hand with Rawleigh Salve. It had kept Achelois's udder from infecting, and might do the same for my hand. I started to leave, then remembered how the rat had escaped me last time. The pipe! I went to it and bent over, expecting to see the cement plug either chewed to pieces or completely gone, but it was intact. Of course it was. Even six-pound rats with oversized teeth can't chew through concrete. That the idea had even crossed my mind shows the state I was in. For a moment I seemed to see myself as if from outside: a man naked except for an unbuttoned duster, his body-hair matted with blood all the way to the groin, his torn left hand glistening under a thick snotlike coating of cow-salve, his eyes bugging out of his head. The way the rat's had bugged out, when I stepped on it.

*It wasn't the same rat, I told myself. The one that bit Achelois is either lying dead in the pipe or in Arlette's lap.*

But I knew it was. I knew it then and I know it now.

It was.

Back in the bedroom, I got down on my knees and picked up the bloodstained money. It was slow work with only one hand. Once I bumped my torn hand on the side of the bed and howled with pain. I could see fresh blood staining the salve, turning it pink. I put the cash on the dresser, not even bothering to cover it with a book or one of Arlette's damned ornamental plates. I couldn't even remember why it had seemed so important to hide the bills in the first place. The red hatbox I kicked into the closet, and then slammed the door. It could stay there until the end of time, for all of me.

\* \* \*

Anyone who's ever owned a farm or worked on one will tell you that accidents are commonplace, and precautions must be taken. I had a big roll of bandage in the chest beside the kitchen pump—the chest Arlette had always called the “hurt-locker.” I started to get the roll out, but then the big pot steaming on the stove caught my eye. The water I'd put on for a bath when I was still whole and when such monstrous pain as that which seemed to be consuming me was only theoretical. It occurred to me that hot soapy water might be just the thing for my hand. The wound couldn't hurt any worse, I reasoned, and the immersion would cleanse it. I was wrong on both counts, but how was I to know? All these years later, it still seems like a reasonable idea. I suppose it might even have worked, if I had been bitten by an ordinary rat.

I used my good right hand to ladle hot water into a basin (the idea of tilting the pot and pouring from it was out of the question), then added a cake of Arlette's coarse brown washing soap. The last cake, as it turned out; there are so many supplies a man neglects to lay in when he's not used to doing it. I added a rag, then went into the bedroom, got down on my knees again, and began mopping up the blood and guts. All the time remembering (of course) the last time I had cleaned blood from the floor in that damned bedroom. That time at least Henry had been with me to share the horror. Doing it alone, and in pain, was a terrible job. My shadow bumped and flitted on the wall, making me think of Quasimodo in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

With the job almost finished, I stopped and cocked my head, breath held, eyes wide, my heart seeming to thud in my bitten left hand. I heard a *scuttering*

sound, and it seemed to come from everywhere. The sound of running rats. In that moment I was sure of it. The rats from the well. Her loyal courtiers. They had found another way out. The one crouched on top of the red hatbox had only been the first and the boldest. They had infiltrated the house, they were in the walls, and soon they would come out and overwhelm me. She would have her revenge. I would hear her laughing as they tore me to pieces.

The wind gusted hard enough to shake the house and shriek briefly along the eaves. The scuttering sound intensified, then faded a bit when the wind died. The relief that filled me was so intense it overwhelmed the pain (for a few seconds, at least). It wasn't rats; it was sleet. With the coming of dark, the temperature had fallen and the rain had become semi-solid. I went back to scrubbing away the remains.

When I was done, I dumped the bloody wash-water over the porch rail, then went back to the barn to apply a fresh coating of salve to my hand. With the wound completely cleansed, I could see that the webbing between my thumb and forefinger was torn open in three slashes that looked like a sergeant's stripes. My left thumb hung askew, as if the rat's teeth had severed some important cable between it and the rest of my left hand. I applied the cow-goop and then plodded back to the house, thinking, *It hurts but at least it's clean. Achelois was all right; I'll be all right, too. Everything's fine.* I tried to imagine my body's defenses mobilizing and arriving at the scene of the bite like tiny firemen in red hats and long canvas coats.

At the bottom of the hurt-locker, wrapped in a torn piece of silk that might once have been part of a lady's slip, I found a bottle of pills from the Hemingford Home Drug Store. Fountain-penned on the label in neat capital letters was **ARLETTE JAMES Take 1 or 2 at Bed-Time for Monthly Pain.** I took three, with a large shot of whiskey. I don't know what was in those pills—morphia, I suppose—but they did the trick. The pain was still there, but it seemed to belong to a Wilfred James currently existing on some other level of reality. My head swam; the ceiling began to turn gently above me; the image of tiny firemen arriving to douse the blaze of infection before it could take hold grew clearer. The wind was strengthening, and to my half-dreaming mind, the constant low rattle of sleet against the house sounded

more like rats than ever, but I knew better. I think I even said so aloud: “I know better, Arlette, you don’t fool me.”

As consciousness dwindled and I began to slip away, I realized that I might be going for good: that the combination of shock, booze, and morphine might end my life. I would be found in a cold farmhouse, my skin blue-gray, my torn hand resting on my belly. The idea did not frighten me; on the contrary, it comforted me.

While I slept, the sleet turned to snow.

\* \* \*

When I woke at dawn the following morning, the house was as chilly as a tomb and my hand had swelled up to twice its ordinary size. The flesh around the bite was ashy gray but the first three fingers had gone a dull pink that would be red by the end of the day. Touching anywhere on that hand except for the pinky caused excruciating pain. Nevertheless, I wrapped it as tightly as I could, and that reduced the throbbing. I got a fire started in the kitchen stove—one-handed it was a long job, but I managed—and then drew up close, trying to get warm. All of me except for the bitten hand, that was; that part of me was warm already. Warm and pulsing like a glove with a rat hiding inside it.

By midafternoon I was feverish, and my hand had swelled so tightly against the bandages that I had to loosen them. Just doing that made me cry out. I needed doctoring, but it was snowing harder than ever, and I wouldn’t be able to get as far as Cotteries’, let alone all the way to Hemingford Home. Even if the day had been clear and bright and dry, how would I ever have managed to crank the truck or the T with just one hand? I sat in the kitchen, feeding the stove until it roared like a dragon, pouring sweat and shaking with cold, holding my bandaged club of a hand to my chest, and remembering the way kindly Mrs. McReady had surveyed my cluttered, not-particularly-prosperous dooryard. *Are you on the exchange, Mr. James? I see you are not.*

No. I was not. I was by myself on the farm I had killed for, with no means of summoning help. I could see the flesh beginning to turn red beyond where the bandages stopped: at the wrist, full of veins that would carry the poison all

through my body. The firemen had failed. I thought of tying the wrist off with elastics—of killing my left hand in an effort to save the rest of me—and even of amputating it with the hatchet we used to chop up kindling and behead the occasional chicken. Both ideas seemed perfectly plausible, but they also seemed like too much work. In the end I did nothing except hobble back to the hurt-locker for more of Arlette's pills. I took three more, this time with cold water—my throat was burning—and then resumed my seat by the fire. I was going to die of the bite. I was sure of it and resigned to it. Death from bites and infections was as common as dirt on the plains. If the pain became more than I could bear, I would swallow all the remaining pain-pills at once. What kept me from doing it right away—apart from the fear of death, which I suppose afflicts all of us, to a greater or lesser degree—was the possibility that someone might come: Harlan, or Sheriff Jones, or kindly Mrs. McReady. It was even possible that Attorney Lester might show up to hector me some more about those god damned 100 acres.

But what I hoped most of all was that Henry might return. He didn't, though.

It was Arlette who came.

\* \* \*

You may have wondered how I know about the gun Henry bought in the Dodge Street pawnshop, and the bank robbery in Jefferson Square. If you did, you probably said to yourself, *Well, it's a lot of time between 1922 and 1930; enough to fill in plenty of details at a library stocked with back issues of the Omaha World-Herald.*

I *did* go to the newspapers, of course. And I wrote to people who met my son and his pregnant girlfriend on their short, disastrous course from Nebraska to Nevada. Most of those people wrote back, willing enough to supply details. That sort of investigative work makes sense, and no doubt satisfies you. But those investigations came years later, after I left the farm, and only confirmed what I already knew.

*Already?* you ask, and I answer simply: *Yes. Already. And I knew it not just as it happened, but at least part of it before it happened. The last part of it.*

How? The answer is simple. My dead wife told me.

You disbelieve, of course. I understand that. Any rational person would. All I can do is reiterate that this is my confession, my last words on earth, and I've put nothing in it I don't know to be true.

\* \* \*

I woke from a doze in front of the stove the following night (or the next; as the fever settled in, I lost track of time) and heard the rustling, scuttering sounds again. At first I assumed it had recommenced sleeting, but when I got up to tear a chunk of bread from the hardening loaf on the counter, I saw a thin orange sunset-streak on the horizon and Venus glowing in the sky. The storm was over, but the scuttering sounds were louder than ever. They weren't coming from the walls, however, but from the back porch.

The door-latch began moving. At first it only trembled, as if the hand trying to operate it was too weak to lift it entirely clear of the notch. The movement ceased, and I had just decided I hadn't seen it at all—that it was a delusion born of the fever—when it went all the way up with a little *clack* sound and the door swung open on a cold breath of wind. Standing on the porch was my wife. She was still wearing her burlap snood, now flecked with snow; it must have been a slow and painful journey from what should have been her final resting place. Her face was slack with decay, the lower half slewed to one side, her grin wider than ever. It was a knowing grin, and why not? The dead understand everything.

She was surrounded by her loyal court. It was they that had somehow gotten her out of the well. It was they that were holding her up. Without them, she would have been no more than a ghost, malevolent but helpless. But they had animated her. She was their queen; she was also their puppet. She came into the kitchen, moving with a horribly boneless gait that had nothing to do with walking. The rats scurried all around her, some looking up at her with love, some at me with hate. She swayed all the way around the kitchen, touring what had been her domain as clods fell from the skirt of her dress (there was no sign of the quilt or the counterpane) and her head bobbed and

rolled on her cut throat. Once it tilted back all the way to her shoulder blades before snapping forward again with a low and fleshy smacking sound.

When she at last turned her cloudy eyes on me, I backed into the corner where the woodbox stood, now almost empty. “Leave me alone,” I whispered. “You aren’t even here. You’re in the well and you can’t get out even if you’re not dead.”

She made a gurgling noise—it sounded like someone choking on thick gravy—and kept coming, real enough to cast a shadow. And I could smell her decaying flesh, this woman who had sometimes put her tongue in my mouth during the throes of her passion. She was there. She was real. So was her royal retinue. I could feel them scurrying back and forth over my feet and tickling my ankles with their whiskers as they sniffed at the bottoms of my longjohn trousers.

My heels struck the woodbox, and when I tried to bend away from the approaching corpse, I over-balanced and sat down in it. I banged my swollen and infected hand, but hardly registered the pain. She was bending over me, and her face . . . *dangled*. The flesh had come loose from the bones and her face hung down like a face drawn on a child’s balloon. A rat climbed the side of the wood-box, plopped onto my belly, ran up my chest, and sniffed at the underside of my chin. I could feel others scurrying around beneath my bent knees. But they didn’t bite me. That particular task had already been accomplished.

She bent closer. The smell of her was overwhelming, and her cocked ear-to-ear grin . . . I can see it now, as I write. I told myself to die, but my heart kept pounding. Her hanging face slid alongside mine. I could feel my beard-stubble pulling off tiny bits of her skin; could hear her broken jaw grinding like a branch with ice on it. Then her cold lips were pressed against the burning, feverish cup of my ear, and she began whispering secrets that only a dead woman could know. I shrieked. I promised to kill myself and take her place in Hell if she would only stop. But she didn’t. She wouldn’t. The dead don’t stop.

That’s what I know now.

\* \* \*

After fleeing the First Agricultural Bank with 200 dollars stuffed into his pocket (or probably more like 150 dollars; some of it went on the floor, remember), Henry disappeared for a little while. He “laid low,” in the criminal parlance. I say this with a certain pride. I thought he would be caught almost immediately after he got to the city, but he proved me wrong. He was in love, he was desperate, he was still burning with guilt and horror over the crime he and I had committed . . . but in spite of those distractions (those *infections*), my son demonstrated bravery and cleverness, even a certain sad nobility. The thought of that last is the worst. It still fills me with melancholy for his wasted life (*three* wasted lives; I mustn't forget poor pregnant Shannon Cotterie) and shame for the ruination to which I led him, like a calf with a rope around its neck.

Arlette showed me the shack where he went to ground, and the bicycle stashed out back—that bicycle was the first thing he purchased with his stolen cash. I couldn't have told you then exactly where his hideout was, but in the years since I have located it and even visited it; just a side-o'-the-road lean-to with a fading Royal Crown Cola advertisement painted on the side. It was a few miles beyond Omaha's western outskirts and within sight of Boys Town, which had begun operating the year before. One room, a single glassless window, and no stove. He covered the bicycle with hay and weeds and laid his plans. Then, a week or so after robbing the First Agricultural Bank—by then police interest in a very minor robbery would have died down—he began making bicycle trips into Omaha.

A thick boy would have gone directly to the St. Eusebia Catholic Home and been snared by the Omaha cops (as Sheriff Jones had no doubt expected he would be), but Henry Freeman James was smarter than that. He sussed out the Home's location, but didn't approach it. Instead, he looked for the nearest candy store and soda fountain. He correctly assumed that the girls would frequent it whenever they could (which was whenever their behavior merited a free afternoon and they had a little money in their bags), and although the St. Eusebia girls weren't required to wear uniforms, they were easy enough to pick out by their dowdy dresses, downcast eyes, and their behavior—alternately flirty and skittish. Those with big bellies and no wedding rings would have been particularly conspicuous.

A thick boy would have attempted to strike up a conversation with one of these unfortunate daughters of Eve right there at the soda fountain, thus attracting attention. Henry took up a position outside, at the mouth of an alley running between the candy store and the notions shoppe next to it, sitting on a crate and reading the newspaper with his bike leaning against the brick next to him. He was waiting for a girl a little more adventurous than those content simply to sip their ice-cream sodas and then scuttle back to the sisters. That meant a girl who smoked. On his third afternoon in the alley, such a girl arrived.

I have found her since, and talked with her. There wasn't much detective work involved. I'm sure Omaha seemed like a metropolis to Henry and Shannon, but in 1922 it was really just a larger-than-average Midwestern town with city pretensions. Victoria Hallett is a respectable married woman with three children now, but in the fall of 1922, she was Victoria Stevenson: young, curious, rebellious, six months pregnant, and very fond of Sweet Caporals. She was happy enough to take one of Henry's when he offered her the pack.

"Take another couple for later," he invited.

She laughed. "I'd have to be a ding-dong to do that! The sisters search our bags and pull our pockets inside-out when we come back. I'll have to chew three sticks of Black Jack just to get the smell of this one fag off my breath." She patted her bulging tummy with amusement and defiance. "I'm in trouble, as I guess you can see. Bad girl! And my sweetie ran off. Bad *boy*, but the world don't care about that! So then the dapper stuck me in a jail with penguins for guards—"

"I don't get you."

"Jeez! The dapper's my dad! And penguins is what we call the sisters!" She laughed. "You're some country palooka, all right! And how! *Anyway*, the jail where I'm doing time's called—"

"St. Eusebia's."

"*Now* you're cooking with gas, Jackson." She puffed her cig, narrowed her eyes. "Say, I bet I know who you are—Shan Cotterie's boyfriend."

"Give that girl a Kewpie doll," Hank said.

"Well, I wouldn't get within two blocks of our place, that's my advice. The cops have got your description." She laughed cheerily. "Yours and half a dozen

other Lonesome Lennies, but none of 'em green-eyed clodhoppers like you, and none with gals as good-looking as Shannon. She's a real Sheba! Yow!"

"Why do you think I'm here instead of there?"

"I'll bite—why *are* you here?"

"I want to get in touch, but I don't want to get caught doing it. I'll give you 2 bucks to take a note to her."

Victoria's eyes went wide. "Buddy, for a 2-spot, I'd tuck a bugle under my arm and take a message to Garcia—that's how tapped out I am. Hand it over!"

"And another 2 if you keep your mouth shut about it. Now and later."

"For that you don't have to pay extra," she said. "I love pulling the business on those holier-than-thou bitches. Why, they smack your hand if you try to take an extra dinner roll! It's like *Gulliver Twist*!"

He gave her the note, and Victoria gave it to Shannon. It was in her little bag of things when the police finally caught up with her and Henry in Elko, Nevada, and I have seen a police photograph of it. But Arlette told me what it said long before then, and the actual item matched word for word.

*I'll wait from midnight to dawn behind yr place every night for 2 weeks, the note said. If you don't show up, I'll know it's over between us & go back to Hemingford & never bother you again even tho' I will go on loving you forever. We are young but we could lie about our ages & start a good life in another place (California). I have some money & know how to get more. Victoria knows how to find me if you want to send me a note, but only once. More would not be safe.*

I suppose Harlan and Sallie Cotterie might have that note. If so, they have seen that my son signed his name in a heart. I wonder if that was what convinced Shannon. I wonder if she even needed convincing. It's possible that all she wanted on earth was to keep (and legitimize) a baby she had already fallen in love with. That's a question Arlette's terrible whispering voice never addressed. Probably she didn't care one way or the other.

\* \* \*

Henry returned to the mouth of the alley every day after that meeting. I'm sure he knew that the cops might arrive instead of Victoria, but felt he had no choice. On the third day of his vigil, she came. "Shan wrote back right away,

but I couldn't get out any sooner," she said. "Some goofy-weed showed up in that hole they have the nerve to call a music room, and the penguins have been on the warpath ever since."

Henry held out his hand for the note, which Victoria gave over in exchange for a Sweet Caporal. There were only four words: *Tomorrow morning. 2 o'clock.*

Henry threw his arms around Victoria and kissed her. She laughed with excitement, eyes sparkling. "Gosh! Some girls get all the luck."

They undoubtedly do. But when you consider that Victoria ended up with a husband, three kids, and a nice home on Maple Street in the best part of Omaha, and Shannon Cotterie didn't live out that curse of a year . . . which of them would *you* say struck lucky?

\* \* \*

*I have some money & know how to get more*, Henry had written, and he did. Only hours after kissing the saucy Victoria (who took the message *He says he'll be there with bells on* back to Shannon), a young man with a flat cap pulled low on his forehead and a bandanna over his mouth and nose robbed the First National Bank of Omaha. This time the robber got 800 dollars, which was a fine haul. But the guard was younger and more enthusiastic about his responsibilities, which was not so fine. The thief had to shoot him in the thigh in order to effect his escape, and although Charles Griner lived, an infection set in (I could sympathize), and he lost the leg. When I met with him at his parents' house in the spring of 1925, Griner was philosophical about it.

"I'm lucky to be alive at all," he said. "By the time they got a tourniquet on my leg, I was lying in a pool of blood damn near an inch deep. I bet it took a whole box of Dreft to get *that* mess up."

When I tried to apologize for my son, he waved it away.

"I never should have approached him. The cap was pulled low and the bandanna was yanked high, but I could see his eyes all right. I should have known he wasn't going to stop unless he was shot down, and I never had a chance to pull my gun. It was in his eyes, see. But I was young myself. I'm older now. Older's something your son never got a chance to get. I'm sorry for your loss."

\* \* \*

After that job, Henry had more than enough money to buy a car—a nice one, a tourer—but he knew better. (Writing that, I again feel that sense of pride: low but undeniable.) A kid who looked like he only started shaving a week or two before, waving around enough wampum to buy an almost-new Olds? That would have brought John Law down on him for sure.

So instead of buying a car, he stole one. Not a touring car, either; he plumped for a nice, nondescript Ford coupe. That was the car he parked behind St. Eusebia's, and that was the one Shannon climbed into, after sneaking out of her room, creeping downstairs with her traveling bag in her hand, and wriggling through the window of the washroom adjacent to the kitchen. They had time to exchange a single kiss—Arlette didn't say so, but I still have my imagination—and then Henry pointed the Ford west. By dawn they were on the Omaha-Lincoln Highway. They must have passed close to his old home—and hers—around 3 that afternoon. They might have looked in that direction, but I doubt if Henry slowed; he would not want to stop for the night in an area where they might be recognized.

Their life as fugitives had begun.

Arlette whispered more about that life than I wished to know, and I don't have the heart to put more than the bare details down here. If you want to know more, write to the Omaha Public Library. For a fee, they will send you hectograph copies of stories having to do with the Sweetheart Bandits, as they became known (and as they called themselves). You may even be able to find stories from your own paper, if you do not live in Omaha; the conclusion of the tale was deemed heartrending enough to warrant national coverage.

Handsome Hank and Sweet Shannon, the *World-Herald* called them. In the photographs, they looked impossibly young. (And of course they were.) I didn't want to look at those photographs, but I did. There's more than one way to be bitten by rats, isn't there?

The stolen car blew a tire in Nebraska's sandhill country. Two men came walking up just as Henry was mounting the spare. One drew a shotgun from a sling setup he had under his coat—what was called a bandit hammerclaw back in the Wild West days—and pointed it at the runaway lovers. Henry had no

chance at all to get his own gun; it was in his coat pocket, and if he'd tried for it, he almost certainly would have been killed. So the robber was robbed. Henry and Shannon walked hand-in-hand to a nearby farmer's house under a cold autumn sky, and when the farmer came to the door to ask how he could help, Henry pointed his gun at the man's chest and said he wanted his car and all his cash.

The girl with him, the farmer told a reporter, stood on the porch looking away. The farmer said he thought she was crying. He said he felt sorry for her, because she was no bigger than a minute, just as pregnant as the old woman who lived in a shoe, and traveling with a young desperado bound for a bad end.

Did she try to stop him? the reporter asked. Try to talk him out of it?

No, the farmer said. Just stood with her back turned, like she thought that if she didn't see it, it wasn't happening. The farmer's old rattletrap Reo was found abandoned near the McCook train depot, with a note on the seat: *Here is your car back, we will send the money we stole when we can. We only took from you because we were in a scrape. Very truly yours, "The Sweetheart Bandits."* Whose idea was that name? Shannon's, probably; the note was in her handwriting. They only used it because they didn't want to give their names, but of such things legends are made.

A day or two later, there was a hold-up in the tiny Frontier Bank of Arapahoe, Colorado. The thief—wearing a flat cap yanked low and a bandanna yanked high—was alone. He got less than \$100 and drove off in a Hupmobile that had been reported stolen in McCook. The next day, in The First Bank of Cheyenne Wells (which was the only bank of Cheyenne Wells), the young man was joined by a young woman. She disguised her face with a bandanna of her own, but it was impossible to disguise her pregnant state. They made off with \$400 and drove out of town at high speed, headed west. A roadblock was set up on the road to Denver, but Henry played it smart and stayed lucky. They turned south not long after leaving Cheyenne Wells, picking their way along dirt roads and cattle tracks.

A week later, a young couple calling themselves Harry and Susan Freeman boarded the train for San Francisco in Colorado Springs. Why they suddenly got off in Grand Junction I don't know and Arlette didn't say—saw something

that put their wind up, I suppose. All I know is that they robbed a bank there, and another in Ogden, Utah. Their version of saving up money for their new life, maybe. And in Ogden, when a man tried to stop Henry outside the bank, Henry shot him in the chest. The man grappled with Henry anyway, and Shannon pushed him down the granite steps. They got away. The man Henry shot died in the hospital two days later. The Sweetheart Bandits had become murderers. In Utah, convicted murderers got the rope.

By then it was near Thanksgiving, although which side of it I don't know. The police west of the Rockies had their descriptions and were on the lookout. I had been bitten by the rat hiding in the closet—I think—or was about to be. Arlette told me they were dead, but they weren't; not when she and her royal court came to visit me, that was. She either lied or prophesied. To me they are both the same.

\* \* \*

Their next-to-last stop was Deeth, Nevada. It was a bitterly cold day in late November or early December, the sky white and beginning to spit snow. They only wanted eggs and coffee at the town's only diner, but their luck was almost all gone. The counterman was from Elkhorn, Nebraska, and although he hadn't been home in years, his mother still faithfully sent him issues of the *World-Herald* in large bundles. He had received just such a bundle a few days before, and he recognized the Omaha Sweetheart Bandits sitting in one of the booths.

Instead of ringing the police (or pit security at the nearby copper mine, which would have been quicker and more efficient), he decided to make a citizen's arrest. He took a rusty old cowboy pistol from under the counter, pointed it at them, and told them—in the finest Western tradition—to throw up their hands. Henry did no such thing. He slid out of the booth and walked toward the fellow, saying: "Don't do that, my friend, we mean you no harm, we'll just pay up and go."

The counterman pulled the trigger and the old pistol misfired. Henry took it out of his hand, broke it, looked at the cylinder, and laughed. "Good news!" he told Shannon. "These bullets have been in there so long they're green."

He put 2 dollars on the counter—for their food—and then made a terrible mistake. To this day I believe things would have ended badly for them no matter what, yet still I wish I could call to him across the years: *Don't put that gun down still loaded. Don't do that, son! Green or not, put those bullets in your pocket!* But only the dead can call across time; I know that now, and from personal experience.

As they were leaving (*hand-in-hand*, Arlette whispered in my burning ear), the counterman snatched that old horse-pistol off the counter, held it in both hands, and pulled the trigger again. This time it fired, and although he probably thought he was aiming at Henry, the bullet struck Shannon Cotterie in the lower back. She screamed and stumbled forward out the door into the blowing snow. Henry caught her before she could fall and helped her into their last stolen car, another Ford. The counterman tried to shoot him through the window, and that time the old gun blew up in his hands. A piece of metal took out his left eye. I have never been sorry. I am not as forgiving as Charles Griner.

Seriously wounded—perhaps dying already—Shannon went into labor as Henry drove through thickening snow toward Elko, thirty miles to the southwest, perhaps thinking he might find a doctor there. I don't know if there was a doctor or not, but there was certainly a police station, and the counterman rang it with the remains of his eye-ball still drying on his cheek. Two local cops and four members of the Nevada State Patrol were waiting for Henry and Shannon at the edge of town, but Henry and Shannon never saw them. It's 30 miles between Deeth and Elko, and Henry made only 28 of them.

Just inside the town limits (but still well beyond the edge of the village), the last of Henry's luck let go. With Shannon screaming and holding her belly as she bled all over the seat, he must have been driving fast—too fast. Or maybe he just hit a pothole in the road. However it was, the Ford skidded into the ditch and stalled. There they sat in that high-desert emptiness while a strengthening wind blew snow all around them, and what was Henry thinking? That what he and I had done in Nebraska had led him and the girl he loved to that place in Nevada. Arlette didn't tell me that, but she didn't have to. I knew.

He spied the ghost of a building through the thickening snow, and got Shannon out of the car. She managed a few steps into the wind, then could manage no more. The girl who could do triggeronomy and might have been the first female graduate of the normal school in Omaha laid her head on her young man's shoulder and said, "I can't go any farther, honey, put me on the ground."

"What about the baby?" he asked her.

"The baby is dead, and I want to die, too," she said. "I can't stand the pain. It's terrible. I love you, honey, but put me on the ground."

He carried her to that ghost of a building instead, which turned out to be a line shack not much different from the shanty near Boys Town, the one with the faded bottle of Royal Crown Cola painted on the side. There was a stove, but no wood. He went out and scrounged a few pieces of scrap lumber before the snow could cover them, and when he went back inside, Shannon was unconscious. Henry lit the stove, then put her head on his lap. Shannon Cotterie was dead before the little fire he'd made burned down to embers, and then there was only Henry, sitting on a mean line shack cot where a dozen dirty cowboys had lain themselves down before him, drunk more often than sober. He sat there and stroked Shannon's hair while the wind shrieked outside and the shack's tin roof shivered.

All these things Arlette told me on a day when those two doomed children were still alive. All these things she told me while the rats crawled around me and her stink filled my nose and my infected, swollen hand ached like fire.

I begged her to kill me, to open my throat as I had opened hers, and she wouldn't.

That was her revenge.

\* \* \*

It might have been two days later when my visitor arrived at the farm, or even three, but I don't think so. I think it was only one. I don't believe I could have lasted two or three more days without help. I had stopped eating and almost stopped drinking. Still, I managed to get out of bed and stagger to the door when the hammering on it commenced. Part of me thought it might be

Henry, because part of me still dared hope that Arlette's visit had been a delusion hatched in delirium . . . and even if it had been real, that she had lied.

It was Sheriff Jones. My knees loosened when I saw him, and I pitched forward. If he hadn't caught me, I would have gone tumbling out onto the porch. I tried to tell him about Henry and Shannon—that Shannon was going to be shot, that they were going to end up in a line shack on the outskirts of Elko, that he, Sheriff Jones, had to call somebody and stop it before it happened. All that came out was a garble, but he caught the names.

"He's run off with her, all right," Jones said. "But if Harl came down and told you that, why'd he leave you like *this*? What bit you?"

"Rat," I managed.

He got an arm around me and half-carried me down the porch steps and toward his car. George the rooster was lying frozen to the ground beside the woodpile, and the cows were lowing. When had I last fed them? I couldn't remember.

"Sheriff, you have to—"

But he cut me off. He thought I was raving, and why not? He could feel the fever baking off me and see it glowing in my face. It must have been like carrying an oven. "You need to save your strength. And you need to be grateful to Arlette, because I never would have come out here if not for her."

"Dead," I managed.

"Yes. She's dead, all right."

So then I told him I'd killed her, and oh, the relief. A plugged pipe inside my head had magically opened, and the infected ghost which had been trapped in there was finally gone.

He slung me into his car like a bag of meal. "We'll talk about Arlette, but right now I'm taking you to Angels of Mercy, and I'll thank you not to upchuck in my car."

As he drove out of the dooryard, leaving the dead rooster and lowing cows behind (and the rats! don't forget them! Ha!), I tried to tell him again that it might not be too late for Henry and Shannon, that it still might be possible to save them. I heard myself saying *these are things that may be*, as if I were the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come in the Dickens story. Then I passed out. When I woke up, it was the second of December, and the Western newspapers

were reporting “SWEETHEART BANDITS” ELUDE ELKO POLICE, ESCAPE AGAIN. They hadn’t, but no one knew that yet. Except Arlette, of course. And me.

\* \* \*

The doctor thought the gangrene hadn’t advanced up my forearm, and gambled my life by amputating only my left hand. That was a gamble he won. Five days after being carried into Hemingford City’s Angels of Mercy Hospital by Sheriff Jones, I lay wan and ghostly in a hospital bed, twenty-five pounds lighter and minus my left hand, but alive.

Jones came to see me, his face grave. I waited for him to tell me he was arresting me for the murder of my wife, and then handcuff my remaining hand to the hospital bedpost. But that never happened. Instead, he told me how sorry he was for my loss. My loss! What did that idiot know about loss?

\* \* \*

Why am I sitting in this mean hotel room (but not alone!) instead of lying in a murderer’s grave? I’ll tell you in two words: my mother.

Like Sheriff Jones, she had a habit of peppering her conversation with rhetorical questions. With him it was a conversational device he’d picked up during a lifetime in law enforcement—he asked his silly little questions, then observed the person he was talking to for any guilty reaction: a wince, a frown, a small shift of the eyes. With my mother, it was only a habit of speech she had picked up from her own mother, who was English, and passed on to me. I’ve lost any faint British accent I might once have had, but never lost my mother’s way of turning statements into questions. *You’d better come in now, hadn’t you?* she’d say. Or *Your father forgot his lunch again; you’ll have to take it to him, won’t you?* Even observations about the weather came couched as questions: *Another rainy day, isn’t it?*

Although I was feverish and very ill when Sheriff Jones came to the door on that late November day, I wasn’t delirious. I remember our conversation clearly, the way a man or woman may remember images from a particularly vivid nightmare.

*You need to be grateful to Arlette, because I never would have come out here if not for her,* he said.

*Dead,* I replied.

Sheriff Jones: *She's dead, all right.*

And then, speaking as I had learned to speak at my mother's knee: *I killed her, didn't I?*

Sheriff Jones took my mother's rhetorical device (and his own, don't forget) as a real question. Years later—it was in the factory where I found work after I lost the farm—I heard a foreman berating a clerk for sending an order to Des Moines instead of Davenport before the clerk had gotten the shipping form from the front office. *But we always send the Wednesday orders to Des Moines,* the soon-to-be-fired clerk protested. *I simply assumed—*

*Assume makes an ass out of you and me,* the foreman replied. An old saying, I suppose, but that was the first time I heard it. And is it any wonder that I thought of Sheriff Frank Jones when I did? My mother's habit of turning statements into questions saved me from the electric chair. I was never tried by a jury for the murder of my wife.

Until now, that is.

\* \* \*

They're here with me, a lot more than twelve, lined up along the baseboard all the way around the room, watching me with their oily eyes. If a maid came in with fresh sheets and saw those furry jurors, she would run, shrieking, but no maid will come; I hung the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door two days ago, and it's been there ever since. I haven't been out. I could order food sent up from the restaurant down the street, I suppose, but I suspect food would set them off. I'm not hungry, anyway, so it's no great sacrifice. They have been patient so far, my jurors, but I suspect they won't be for much longer. Like any jury, they're anxious for the testimony to be done so they can render a verdict, receive their token fee (in this case to be paid in flesh), and go home to their families. So I must finish. It won't take long. The hard work is done.

\* \* \*

What Sheriff Jones said when he sat down beside my hospital bed was, “You saw it in my eyes, I guess. Isn’t that right?”

I was still a very sick man, but enough recovered to be cautious. “Saw what, Sheriff?”

“What I’d come to tell you. You don’t remember, do you? Well, I’m not surprised. You were one sick American, Wilf. I was pretty sure you were going to die, and I thought you might do it before I got you back to town. I guess God’s not done with you yet, is he?”

*Something* wasn’t done with me, but I doubted if it was God.

“Was it Henry? Did you come out to tell me something about Henry?”

“No,” he said, “it was Arlette I came about. It’s bad news, the worst, but you can’t blame yourself. It’s not like you beat her out of the house with a stick.” He leaned forward. “You might have got the idea that I don’t like you, Wilf, but that’s not true. There’s some in these parts who don’t—and we know who they are, don’t we?—but don’t put me in with them just because I have to take their interests into account. You’ve irritated me a time or two, and I believe that you’d still be friends with Harl Cotterie if you’d kept your boy on a tighter rein, but I’ve always respected you.”

I doubted it, but kept my lip buttoned.

“As for what happened to Arlette, I’ll say it again, because it bears repeating: you can’t blame yourself.”

I couldn’t? I thought *that* was an odd conclusion to draw even for a lawman who would never be confused with Sherlock Holmes.

“Henry’s in trouble, if some of the reports I’m getting are true,” he said heavily, “and he’s dragged Shan Cotterie into the hot water with him. They’ll likely boil in it. That’s enough for you to handle without claiming responsibility for your wife’s death, as well. You don’t have to—”

“Just tell me,” I said.

Two days previous to his visit—perhaps the day the rat bit me, perhaps not, but around that time—a farmer headed into Lyme Biska with the last of his produce had spied a trio of coydogs fighting over something about twenty yards north of the road. He might have gone on if he hadn’t also spied a scuffed ladies’ patent leather shoe and a pair of pink step-ins lying in the ditch. He stopped, fired his rifle to scare off the coys, and advanced into the field to

inspect their prize. What he found was a woman's skeleton with the rags of a dress and a few bits of flesh still hanging from it. What remained of her hair was a listless brown, the color to which Arlette's rich auburn might have gone after months out in the elements.

"Two of the back teeth were gone," Jones said. "Was Arlette missing a couple of back teeth?"

"Yes," I lied. "Lost them from a gum infection."

"When I came out that day just after she ran off, your boy said she took her good jewelry."

"Yes." The jewelry that was now in the well.

"When I asked if she could have laid her hands on any money, you mentioned 200 dollars. Isn't that right?"

Ah yes. The fictional money Arlette had supposedly taken from my dresser. "That's right."

He was nodding. "Well, there you go, there you go. Some jewelry and some money. That explains everything, wouldn't you say?"

"I don't see—"

"Because you're not looking at it from a lawman's point of view. She was robbed on the road, that's all. Some bad egg spied a woman hitchhiking between Hemingford and Lyme Biska, picked her up, killed her, robbed her of her money and her jewelry, then carried her body far enough into the nearest field so it couldn't be seen from the road." From his long face I could see he was thinking she had probably been raped as well as robbed, and that it was probably a good thing that there wasn't enough of her left to tell for sure.

"That's probably it, then," I said, and somehow I was able to keep a straight face until he was gone. Then I turned over, and although I thumped my stump in doing so, I began to laugh. I buried my face in my pillow, but not even that would stifle the sound. When the nurse—an ugly old battleaxe—came in and saw the tears streaking my face, she assumed (which makes an ass out of you *and* me) that I had been crying. She softened, a thing I would have thought impossible, and gave me an extra morphine pill. I was, after all, the grieving husband and bereft father. I deserved comfort.

And do you know why I was laughing? Was it Jones's well-meaning stupidity? The fortuitous appearance of a dead female hobo who might have

been killed by her male traveling companion while they were drunk? It was both of those things, but mostly it was the shoe. The farmer had only stopped to investigate what the coydogs were fighting over because he'd seen a ladies' patent leather shoe in the ditch. But when Sheriff Jones had asked about footwear that day at the house the previous summer, I'd told him Arlette's *canvas* shoes were the ones that were gone. The idiot had forgotten.

And he never remembered.

\* \* \*

When I got back to the farm, almost all my livestock was dead. The only survivor was Achelois, who looked at me with reproachful, starveling eyes and lowed plaintively. I fed her as lovingly as you might feed a pet, and really, that was all she was. What else would you call an animal that can no longer contribute to a family's livelihood?

There was a time when Harlan, assisted by his wife, would have taken care of my place while I was in the hospital; it's how we neighbored out in the middle. But even after the mournful blat of my dying cows started drifting across the fields to him while he sat down to his supper, he stayed away. If I'd been in his place, I might have done the same. In Harl Cotterie's view (and the world's), my son hadn't been content just to ruin his daughter; he'd followed her to what should have been a place of refuge, stolen her away, and forced her into a life of crime. How that "Sweetheart Bandits" stuff must have eaten into her father! Like acid! Ha!

The following week—around the time the Christmas decorations were going up in farmhouses and along Main Street in Hemingford Home—Sheriff Jones came out to the farm again. One look at his face told me what his news was, and I began to shake my head. "No. No more. I won't have it. I can't have it. Go away."

I went back in the house and tried to bar the door against him, but I was both weak and one-handed, and he forced his way in easily enough. "Take hold, Wilf," he said. "You'll get through this." As if he knew what he was talking about.

He looked in the cabinet with the decorative ceramic beer stein on top of it, found my sadly depleted bottle of whiskey, poured the last finger into the stein, and handed it to me. "Doctor wouldn't approve," he said, "but he's not here and you're going to need it."

The Sweetheart Bandits had been discovered in their final hideout, Shannon dead of the counterman's bullet, Henry of one he had put into his own brain. The bodies had been taken to the Elko mortuary, pending instructions. Harlan Cotterie would see to his daughter, but would have nothing to do with my son. Of course not. I did that myself. Henry arrived in Hemingford by train on the eighteenth of December, and I was at the depot, along with a black funeral hack from Castings Brothers. My picture was taken repeatedly. I was asked questions which I didn't even try to answer. The headlines in both the *World-Herald* and the much humbler *Hemingford Weekly* featured the phrase GRIEVING FATHER.

If the reporters had seen me at the funeral home, however, when the cheap pine box was opened, they would have seen real grief; they could have featured the phrase SCREAMING FATHER. The bullet my son fired into his temple as he sat with Shannon's head on his lap had mushroomed as it crossed his brain and taken out a large chunk of his skull on the left side. But that wasn't the worst. His eyes were gone. His lower lip was chewed away so that his teeth jutted in a grim grin. All that remained of his nose was a red stub. Before some cop or sheriff's deputy had discovered the bodies, the rats had made a merry meal of my son and his dear love.

"Fix him up," I told Herbert Castings when I could talk rationally again.

"Mr. James . . . sir . . . the damage is . . ."

"I see what the damage is. Fix him up. And get him out of that shitting box. Put him in the finest coffin you have. I don't care what it costs. I have money." I bent and kissed his torn cheek. No father should have to kiss his son for the last time, but if any father ever deserved such a fate, it was I.

Shannon and Henry were both buried out of the Hemingford Glory of God Methodist Church, Shannon on the twenty-second and Henry on Christmas Eve. The church was full for Shannon, and the weeping was almost loud enough to raise the roof. I know, because I was there, at least for a little while. I stood in the back, unnoticed, then slunk out halfway through

Reverend Thursby's eulogy. Rev. Thursby also presided at Henry's funeral, but I hardly need tell you that the attendance was much smaller. Thursby saw only one, but there was another. Arlette was there, too, sitting next to me, unseen and smiling. Whispering in my ear.

*Do you like how things have turned out, Wilf? Was it worth it?*

Adding in the funeral cost, the burial expenses, the mortuary expenses, and the cost of shipping the body home, the disposal of my son's earthly remains cost just over \$300. I paid out of the mortgage money. What else did I have? When the funeral was finished, I went home to an empty house. But first I bought a fresh bottle of whiskey.

\* \* \*

1922 had one more trick left in its bag. The day after Christmas, a huge blizzard roared out of the Rockies, socking us with a foot of snow and gale-force winds. As dark came down, the snow turned first to sleet and then to driving rain. Around midnight, as I sat in the darkened parlor, doctoring my bellowing stump with little sips of whiskey, a grinding, rending sound came from the back of the house. It was the roof coming down on that side—the part I'd taken out the mortgage, at least in part, to fix. I toasted it with my glass, then had another sip. When the cold wind began to blow in around my shoulders, I took my coat from its hook in the mudroom, put it on, then sat back down and drank a little more whiskey. At some point I dozed. Another of those grinding crashes woke me around three o'clock. This time it was the front half of the barn that had collapsed. Achelois survived yet again, and the next night I took her into the house with me. Why? you might ask me, and my answer would be, Why not? Just why the hell not? We were the survivors. We were the survivors.

\* \* \*

On Christmas morning (which I spent sipping whiskey in my cold sitting room, with my surviving cow for company), I counted what was left of the mortgage money, and realized it would not begin to cover the damage done by the storm. I didn't much care, because I had lost my taste for the farming life,

but the thought of the Farrington Company putting up a hog butchery and polluting the stream still made me grind my teeth in rage. Especially after the high cost I had paid for keeping those triple-goddamned 100 acres out of the company's hands.

It suddenly struck home to me that, with Arlette officially dead instead of missing, those acres were mine. So two days later I swallowed my pride and went to see Harlan Cotterie.

The man who answered my knock had fared better than I, but that year's shocks had taken their toll, just the same. He had lost weight, he had lost hair, and his shirt was wrinkled—although not as wrinkled as his face, and the shirt, at least, would iron out. He looked sixty-five instead of forty-five.

"Don't hit me," I said when I saw him ball his fists. "Hear me out."

"I wouldn't hit a man with only one hand," he said, "but I'll thank you to keep it short. And we'll have to talk out here on the stoop, because you are never going to set foot inside my house again."

"That's fine," I said. I had lost weight myself—plenty—and I was shivering, but the cold air felt good on my stump, and on the invisible hand that still seemed to exist below it. "I want to sell you 100 acres of good land, Harl. The hundred Arlette was so determined to sell to the Farrington Company."

He smiled at that, and his eyes sparkled in their new deep hollows. "Fallen on hard times, haven't you? Half your house and half your barn caved in. Hermie Gordon says you've got a cow living in there with you." Hermie Gordon was the rural route mailman, and a notorious gossip.

I named a price so low that Harl's mouth fell open and his eyebrows shot up. It was then that I noticed a smell wafting out of the neat and well-appointed Cotterie farmhouse that seemed entirely alien to that place: burnt fried food. Sallie Cotterie was apparently not doing the cooking. Once I might have been interested in such a thing, but that time had passed. All I cared about right then was getting shed of the 100 acres. It only seemed right to sell them cheap, since they had cost me so dear.

"That's pennies on the dollar," he said. Then, with evident satisfaction: "Arlette would roll in her grave."

*She's done more than just roll in it,* I thought.

"What are you smiling about, Wilf?"

“Nothing. Except for one thing, I don’t care about that land anymore. The one thing I *do* care about is keeping that god damned Farrington slaughter-mill off it.”

“Even if you lose your own place?” He nodded as if I’d asked a question. “I know about the mortgage you took out. No secrets in a small town.”

“Even if I do,” I agreed. “Take the offer, Harl. You’d be crazy not to. That stream they’ll be filling up with blood and hair and hog intestines—that’s your stream, too.”

“No,” he said.

I stared at him, too surprised to say anything. But again he nodded as if I’d asked a question.

“You think you know what you’ve done to me, but you don’t know all of it. Sallie’s left me. She’s gone to stay with her folks down McCook. She says she may be back, says she’ll think things over, but I don’t think she will be. So that puts you and me in the same old broke wagon, doesn’t it? We’re two men who started the year with wives and are ending it without them. We’re two men who started the year with living children and are ending it with dead ones. The only difference I can see is that I didn’t lose half my house and most of my barn in a storm.” He thought about it. “And I’ve still got both hands. There’s that, I suppose. When it comes to pulling my peter—should I ever feel the urge to—I’d have a choice of which one to use.”

“What . . . why would she—”

“Oh, use your head. She blames me as well as you for Shannon’s death. She said that if I hadn’t gotten on my high horse and sent Shan away, she’d still be alive and living with Henry at your farm just down the road instead of lying frozen in a box underground. She says she’d have a grandchild. She called me a self-righteous fool, and she’s right.”

I reached for him with my remaining hand. He slapped it away.

“Don’t touch me, Wilf. A single warning on that is all you get.”

I put my hand back at my side.

“One thing I know for sure,” he said. “If I took you up on that offer, tasty as it is, I’d regret it. Because that land is cursed. We may not agree on everything, but I bet we would on that. If you want to sell it, sell it to the bank. You’ll get your mortgage paper back, and some cash besides.”

“They’d just turn around and sell it to Farrington!”

“Tough titty said the kitty” was his final word on it as he closed the door in my face.

\* \* \*

On the last day of the year, I drove to Hemingford Home and saw Mr. Stoppenhauser at the bank. I told him that I’d decided I could no longer live on the farm. I told him I would like to sell Arlette’s acreage to the bank and use the balance of the proceeds to retire the mortgage. Like Harlan Cotterie, he said no. For a moment or two I just sat in the chair facing his desk, not able to believe what I had heard.

“Why not? That’s good land!”

He told me that he worked for a bank, and a bank was not a real estate agency. He addressed me as Mr. James. My days of being Wilf in that office were over.

“That’s just . . .” *Ridiculous* was the word that came to mind, but I didn’t want to risk offending him if there was even a chance he might change his mind. Once I had made the decision to sell the land (and the cow, I would have to find a buyer for Achelois, too, possibly a stranger with a bag of magic beans to trade), the idea had taken hold of me with the force of an obsession. So I kept my voice low and spoke calmly.

“That’s not exactly true, Mr. Stoppenhauser. The bank bought the Rideout place last summer when it came up for auction. The Triple M, as well.”

“Those were different situations. We hold a mortgage on your original 80, and we’re content with that. What you do with that hundred acres of pasturage is of no interest to us.”

“Who’s been in to see you?” I asked, then realized I didn’t have to. “It was Lester, wasn’t it? Cole Farrington’s dogsbody.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Stoppenhauser said, but I saw the flicker in his eyes. “I think your grief and your . . . your injury . . . have temporarily damaged your ability to think clearly.”

“Oh no,” I said, and began to laugh. It was a dangerously unbalanced sound, even to my own ears. “I’ve never thought more clearly in my life, sir.

He came to see you—him or another, I'm sure Cole Farrington can afford to retain all the shysters he wants—and you made a deal. You *c-c-colluded!*” I was laughing harder than ever.

“Mr. James, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave.”

“Maybe you had it all planned out beforehand,” I said. “Maybe that's why you were so anxious to talk me into the god damned mortgage in the first place. Or maybe when Lester heard about my son, he saw a golden opportunity to take advantage of my misfortune and came running to you. Maybe he sat right in this chair and said, ‘This is going to work out for both of us, Stoppie—you get the farm, my client gets the land by the crick, and Wilf James can go to Hell.’ Isn't that pretty much how it went?”

He had pushed a button on his desk, and now the door opened. It was just a little bank, too small to employ a security guard, but the teller who leaned in was a beefy lad. One of the Rohrbacher family, from the look of him; I'd gone to school with his father, and Henry would have gone with his younger sister, Mandy.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Stoppenhauser?” he asked.

“Not if Mr. James leaves now,” he said. “Won't you see him out, Kevin?”

Kevin came in, and when I was slow to rise, he clamped a hand just above my left elbow. He was dressed like a banker, right down to the suspenders and the bow tie, but it was a farmer's hand, hard and callused. My still-healing stump gave a warning throb.

“Come along, sir,” he said.

“Don't pull me,” I said. “It hurts where my hand used to be.”

“Then come along.”

“I went to school with your father. He sat beside me and used to cheat off my paper during Spring Testing Week.”

He pulled me out of the chair where I had once been addressed as Wilf. Good old Wilf, who would be a fool not to take out a mortgage. The chair almost fell over.

“Happy New Year, Mr. James,” Stoppenhauser said.

“And to you, you cozening fuck,” I replied. Seeing the shocked expression on his face may have been the last good thing to happen to me in my life. I have sat here for five minutes, chewing on the end of my pen and trying to

think of one since—a good book, a good meal, a pleasant afternoon in the park—and I can't.

\* \* \*

Kevin Rohrbacher accompanied me across the lobby. I suppose that is the correct verb; it wasn't quite dragging. The floor was marble, and our footfalls echoed. The walls were dark oak. At the high tellers' windows, two women served a little group of year-end customers. One of the tellers was young and one was old, but their big-eyed expressions were identical. Yet it wasn't their horrified, almost prurient interest that took my own eye; it was captivated by something else entirely. A burlled oak rail three inches wide ran above the tellers' windows, and scurrying busily along it—

“Ware that rat!” I cried, and pointed.

The young teller voiced a little scream, looked up, then exchanged a glance with her older counterpart. There was no rat, only the passing shadow of the ceiling fan. And now everyone was looking at me.

“Stare all you want!” I told them. “Look your fill! Look until your God damned eyes fall out!”

Then I was in the street, and puffing out cold winter air that looked like cigarette smoke. “Don't come back unless you have business to do,” Kevin said. “And unless you can keep a civil tongue.”

“Your father was the biggest God damned cheater I ever went to school with,” I told him. I wanted him to hit me, but he only went back inside and left me alone on the sidewalk, standing in front of my saggy old truck. And that was how Wilfred Leland James spent his visit to town on the last day of 1922.

\* \* \*

When I got home, Achelois was no longer in the house. She was in the yard, lying on her side and puffing her own clouds of white vapor. I could see the snow-scuffs where she'd gone galloping off the porch, and the bigger one where she had landed badly and broken both front legs. Not even a blameless cow could survive around me, it seemed.

I went into the mudroom to get my gun, then into the house, wanting to see—if I could—what had frightened her so badly that she'd left her new shelter at a full gallop. It was rats, of course. Three of them sitting on Arlette's treasured sideboard, looking at me with their black and solemn eyes.

"Go back and tell her to leave me alone," I told them. "Tell her she's done damage enough. For God's sake tell her to let me be."

They only sat looking at me with their tails curled around their plump black-gray bodies. So I lifted my varmint rifle and shot the one in the middle. The bullet tore it apart and splattered its leavings all over the wallpaper Arlette had picked out with such care 9 or 10 years before. When Henry was still just a little 'un and things among the three of us were fine.

The other two fled. Back to their secret way underground, I have no doubt. Back to their rotting queen. What they left behind on my dead wife's sideboard were little piles of rat-shit and three or four bits of the burlap sack Henry fetched from the barn on that early summer night in 1922. The rats had come to kill my last cow and bring me little pieces of Arlette's *snood*.

I went outside and patted Achelois on the head. She stretched her neck up and lowed plaintively. *Make it stop. You're the master, you're the god of my world, so make it stop.*

I did.

Happy New Year.

\* \* \*

That was the end of 1922, and that is the end of my story; all the rest is epilogue. The emissaries crowded around this room—how the manager of this fine old hotel would scream if he saw them!—will not have to wait much longer to render their verdict. She is the judge, they are the jury, but I'll be my own executioner.

I lost the farm, of course. Nobody, including the Farrington Company, would buy those 100 acres until the home place was gone, and when the hog-butchers finally swooped in, I was forced to sell at an insanely low price. Lester's plan worked perfectly. I'm sure it was his, and I'm sure he got a bonus.

Oh, well; I would have lost my little toehold in Hemingford County even if I'd had financial resources to fall back on, and there is a perverse sort of comfort in that. They say this depression we are in started on Black Friday of last year, but people in states like Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska know it started in 1923, when the crops that survived the terrible storms that spring were killed in the drought that followed, a drought that lasted for 2 years. The few crops that did find their way to the big city markets and the small city agricultural exchanges brought a beggar's price. Harlan Cotterie hung on until 1925 or so, and then the bank took his farm. I happened on that news while perusing the Bank Sales items in the *World-Herald*. By 1925, such items sometimes took up whole pages in the newspaper. The small farms had begun to go, and I believe that in a hundred years—maybe only 75—they'll all be gone. Come 2030 (if there is such a year), all Nebraska west of Omaha will be one big farm. Probably it will be owned by the Farrington Company, and those unfortunate enough to live on that land will pass their existence under dirty yellow skies and wear gas masks to keep from choking on the stench of dead hogs. And *every* stream will run red with the blood of slaughter.

Come 2030, only the rats will be happy.

*That's pennies on the dollar*, Harlan said on the day I offered to sell him Arlette's land, and eventually I was forced to sell to Cole Farrington for even fewer on the dollar. Andrew Lester, attorney-at-law, brought the papers to the Hemingford City rooming house where I was then living, and he smiled as I signed them. Of course he did. The big boys always win. I was a fool to think it could ever be any different. I was a fool, and everyone I ever loved paid the price. I sometimes wonder if Sallie Cotterie ever came back to Harlan, or if he went to her in McCook after he lost the farm. I don't know, but I think Shannon's death probably ended that previously happy marriage. Poison spreads like ink in water.

Meanwhile, the rats have begun to move in from the baseboards of this room. What was a square has become a closing circle. They know that this is just the *after*, and nothing that comes after an irrevocable act matters much. Yet I will finish. And they won't have me while I'm alive; the final small victory will be mine. My old brown jacket is hung on the back of the chair I'm sitting in. The pistol is in the pocket. When I've finished the last few pages of this

confession, I'll use it. They say suicides and murderers go to Hell. If so, I will know my way around, because I've been there for the last eight years.

\* \* \*

I went to Omaha, and if it is indeed a city of fools, as I used to claim, then I was at first a model citizen. I set to work drinking up Arlette's 100 acres, and even at pennies on the dollar, it took 2 years. When I wasn't drinking, I visited the places Henry had been during the last months of his life: the grocery and gasoline station in Lyme Biska with the Blue Bonnet Girl on the roof (by then closed with a sign on the boarded-up door reading FOR SALE BY BANK), the pawnshop on Dodge Street (where I emulated my son and bought the pistol now in my jacket pocket), the Omaha branch of the First Agricultural. The pretty young teller still worked there, although her last name was no longer Penmark.

"When I passed him the money, he said thank you," she told me. "Maybe he went wrong, but somebody raised him right. Did you know him?"

"No," I said, "but I knew his family."

Of course I went to St. Eusebia's, but made no attempt to go in and inquire about Shannon Cotterie to the governess or matron or whatever her title may have been. It was a cold and forbidding hulk of a building, its thick stone and slit windows expressing perfectly how the papist hierarchy seems to feel in their hearts about women. Watching the few pregnant girls who slunk out with downcast eyes and hunched shoulders told me everything I needed to know about why Shan had been so willing to leave it.

Oddly enough, I felt closest to my son in an alley. It was the one next to the Gallatin Street Drug Store & Soda Fountain (Schrafft's Candy & Best Homemade Fudge Our Specialty), two blocks from St. Eusebia's. There was a crate there, probably too new to be the one Henry sat on while waiting for a girl adventurous enough to trade information for cigarettes, but I could pretend, and I did. Such pretense was easier when I was drunk, and most days when I turned up on Gallatin Street, I was very drunk indeed. Sometimes I pretended it was 1922 again and it was I who was waiting for Victoria Stevenson. If she came, I would trade her a whole carton of cigarettes to take

one message: *When a young man who calls himself Hank turns up here, asking about Shan Cotterie, tell him to get lost. To take his jazz elsewhere. Tell him his father needs him back on the farm, that maybe with two of them working together, they can save it.*

But that girl was beyond my reach. The only Victoria I met was the later version, the one with the three comely children and the respectable title of Mrs. Hallett. I had stopped drinking by then, I had a job at the Bilt-Rite Clothing factory, and had reacquainted myself with razor blade and shaving soap. Given this veneer of respectability, she received me willingly enough. I told her who I was only because—if I am to be honest to the end—lying was not an option. I could see in the slight widening of her eyes that she had noted the resemblance.

“Gee, but he was sweet,” she said. “And so crazy in love. I’m sorry for Shan, too. She was a great gal. It’s like a tragedy out of Shakespeare, isn’t it?”

Only she said it *trad-a-gee*, and after that I didn’t go back to the Gallatin Street alley anymore, because for me Arlette’s murder had poisoned even this blameless young Omaha matron’s attempt at kindness. She thought Henry and Shannon’s deaths were like a *trad-a-gee* out of Shakespeare. She thought it was romantic. Would she still have thought so, I wonder, if she had heard my wife screaming her last from inside a blood-sodden burlap sack? Or glimpsed my son’s eyeless, lipless face?

\* \* \*

I held two jobs during my years in the Gateway City, also known as the City of Fools. You will say of *course* I held jobs; I would have been living on the street otherwise. But men more honest than I have continued drinking even when they want to stop, and men more decent than I have ended up sleeping in doorways. I suppose I could say that after my lost years, I made one more effort to live an actual life. There were times when I actually believed that, but lying in bed at night (and listening to the rats scampering in the walls—they have been my constant companions), I always knew the truth: I was still trying to win. Even after Henry’s and Shannon’s deaths, even after losing the farm, I was trying to beat the corpse in the well. She and her *minions*.

John Hanrahan was the storage foreman at the Bilt-Rite factory. He didn't want to hire a man with only one hand, but I begged for a trial, and when I proved to him that I could pull a pallet fully loaded with shirts or overalls as well as any man on his payroll, he took me on. I hauled those pallets for 14 months, and often limped back to the boardinghouse where I was staying with my back and stump on fire. But I never complained, and I even found time to learn sewing. This I did on my lunch hour (which was actually 15 minutes long), and during my afternoon break. While the other men were out back on the loading dock, smoking and telling dirty jokes, I was teaching myself to sew seams, first in the burlap shipping bags we used, and then in the overalls that were the company's main stock-in-trade. I turned out to have a knack for it; I could even lay in a zipper, which is no mean skill on a garment assembly line. I'd press my stump on the garment to hold it in place as my foot ran the electric treadle.

Sewing paid better than hauling, and it was easier on my back, but the Sewing Floor was dark and cavernous, and after four months or so I began to see rats on the mountains of freshly blued denim and hunkering in the shadows beneath the hand-trucks that first brought in the piecework and then rolled it out again.

On several occasions I called the attention of my co-workers to these vermin. They claimed not to see them. Perhaps they really did not. I think it far more likely that they were afraid the Sewing Floor might be temporarily closed down so the ratcatchers could come in and do their work. The sewing crew might have lost three days' wages, or even a week. For men and women with families, that would have been catastrophic. It was easier for them to tell Mr. Hanrahan that I was seeing things. I understood. And when they began to call me Crazy Wilf? I understood that, too. It wasn't why I quit.

I quit because the rats kept moving in.

\* \* \*

I had been putting a little money away, and was prepared to live on it while I looked for another job, but I didn't have to. Only three days after leaving Bilt-Rite, I saw an ad in the paper for a librarian at the Omaha Public Library—

must have references or a degree. I had no degree, but I have been a reader my whole life, and if the events of 1922 taught me anything, it was how to deceive. I forged references from public libraries in Kansas City and Springfield, Missouri, and got the job. I felt sure Mr. Quarles would check the references and discover they were false, so I worked at becoming the best librarian in America, and I worked fast. When my new boss confronted me with my deception, I would simply throw myself on his mercy and hope for the best. But there was no confrontation. I held my job at the Omaha Public Library for four years. Technically speaking, I suppose I still hold it now, although I haven't been there in a week and have not 'phoned in sick.

The rats, you see. They found me there, too. I began to see them crouched on piles of old books in the Binding Room, or scuttering along the highest shelves in the stacks, peering down at me knowingly. Last week, in the Reference Room, I pulled out a volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for an elderly patron (it was Ra-St, which no doubt contains an entry for *Rattus norvegicus*, not to mention *slaughterhouse*) and saw a hungry gray-black face staring out at me from the vacant slot. It was the rat that bit off poor Achelois's teat. I don't know how that could be—I'm sure I killed it—but there was no doubt. I recognized it. How could I not? There was a scrap of burlap, *bloodstained* burlap, caught in its whiskers.

Snood!

I brought the volume of *Britannica* to the old lady who had requested it (she wore an ermine stole, and the thing's little black eyes regarded me bleakly). Then I simply walked out. I wandered the streets for hours, and eventually came here, to the Magnolia Hotel. And here I have been ever since, spending the money I have saved as a librarian—which doesn't matter any longer—and writing my confession, which does. I—

One of them just nipped me on the ankle. As if to say *Get on with it, time's almost up*. A little blood has begun to stain my sock. It doesn't disturb me, not in the slightest. I have seen more blood in my time; in 1922 there was a room filled with it.

And now I think I hear . . . is it my imagination?

No.

Someone has come visiting.

I plugged the pipe, but the rats still escaped. I filled in the well, but *she* also found her way out. And this time I don't think she's alone. I think I hear two sets of shuffling feet, not just one. Or—

Three? Is it three? Is the girl who would have been my daughter-in-law in a better world with them as well?

I think she is. Three corpses shuffling up the hall, their faces (what remains of them) disfigured by rat-bites, Arlette's cocked to one side as well . . . by the kick of a dying cow.

Another bite on the ankle.

And another!

How the management would—

Ow! Another. But they won't have me. And my visitors won't, either, although now I can see the doorknob turning and I can smell them, the remaining flesh hanging on their bones giving off the stench of slaughtered

slaught

The gun

god where is the

stop

OH MAKE THEM STOP BITING M

From the *Omaha World-Herald*, April 14th, 1930

## LIBRARIAN COMMITS SUICIDE IN LOCAL HOTEL Bizarre Scene Greeted Hotel Security Man

The body of Wilfred James, a librarian at the Omaha Public Library, was found in a local hotel on Sunday when efforts by hotel staff to contact him met with no response. The resident of a nearby room had complained of “a smell like bad meat,” and a hotel chambermaid reported hearing “muffled shouting or crying, like a man in pain” late Friday afternoon.

After knocking repeatedly and receiving no response, the hotel’s Chief of Security used his pass-key and discovered the body of Mr. James, slumped over the room’s writing desk. “I saw a pistol and assumed he had shot himself,” the security man said, “but no-one had reported a gunshot, and there was no smell of expended powder. When I checked the gun, I determined it was a badly maintained .25, and not loaded.

“By then, of course, I had seen the blood. I have never seen anything like that before, and never want to again. He had bitten himself all over—arms, legs, ankles, even his toes. Nor was that all. It was clear he had been busy with some sort of writing project, but he had chewed up the paper, as well. It was all over the floor. It looked like paper does when rats chew it up to make their nests. In the end, he chewed his own wrists open. I believe that’s what killed him. He certainly must have been deranged.”

Little is known of Mr. James at this writing. Ronald Quarles, the head librarian at the Omaha Public Library, took Mr. James on in late 1926. “He was obviously down on his luck, and handicapped by the loss of a hand, but he knew his books and his references were good,” Quarles said. “He was collegial but distant. I believe he had been doing factory work before applying for a position here, and he told people that before losing his hand, he had owned a small farm in Hemingford County.”

The *World-Herald* is interested in the unfortunate Mr. James, and solicits information from any readers who may have known him. The body is being held at the Omaha County Morgue, pending disposition by next of kin. "If no next of kin appears," said Dr. Tattersall, the Morgue's Chief Medical Officer, "I suppose he will be buried in public ground."

**BIG DRIVER**

Tess accepted twelve compensated speaking engagements a year, if she could get them. At twelve hundred dollars each, that came to over fourteen thousand dollars. It was her retirement fund. She was still happy enough with the Willow Grove Knitting Society after twelve books, but didn't kid herself that she could go on writing them until she was in her seventies. If she did, what would she find at the bottom of the barrel? *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes to Terre Haute?* *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Visits the International Space Station?* No. Not even if the ladies' book societies who were her mainstay read them (and they probably would). No.

So she was a good little squirrel, living well on the money her books brought in . . . but putting away acorns for the winter. Each year for the last ten she had put between twelve and sixteen thousand dollars into her money market fund. The total wasn't as high as she might have wished, thanks to the gyrations of the stock market, but she told herself that if she kept on plugging, she'd probably be all right; she was the little engine that could. And she did at least three events each year gratis to salve her conscience. That often annoying organ should not have troubled her about taking honest money for honest work but sometimes it did. Probably because running her gums and signing her name didn't fit the concept of work as she had been raised to understand it.

Other than an honorarium of at least twelve hundred dollars, she had one other requirement: that she be able to drive to the location of her lecture, with not more than one overnight stop on the way to or from. This meant she rarely went farther south than Richmond or farther west than Cleveland. One night in a motel was tiring but acceptable; two made her useless for a week. And Fritzy, her cat, hated keeping house by himself. This he made clear when she came home, twining between her feet on the stairs and often making promiscuous use of his claws when he sat in her lap. And although Patsy McClain from next door was very good about feeding him, he rarely ate much until Tess came home.

It wasn't that she was afraid of flying, or hesitant about billing the organizations that engaged her for travel expenses just as she billed them for her motel rooms (always nice, never elegant). She just hated it: the crowding, the indignity of the full-body scans, the way the airlines now had their hands out for what used to be free, the delays . . . and the inescapable fact that you were not in charge. That was the worst. Once you went through the interminable security checkpoints and were allowed to board, you had put your most valuable possession—your life—into the hands of strangers.

Of course that was also true on the turnpikes and interstates she almost always used when she traveled, a drunk could lose control, jump the median strip, and end your life in a head-on collision (*they* would live; the drunks, it seemed, always did), but at least when she was behind the wheel of her car, she had the *illusion* of control. And she liked to drive. It was soothing. She had some of her best ideas when she was on cruise control with the radio off.

"I bet you were a long-haul trucker in your last incarnation," Patsy McClain told her once.

Tess didn't believe in past lifetimes, or future ones for that matter—in metaphysical terms, she thought what you saw was pretty much what you got—but she liked the idea of a life where she was not a small woman with an elfin face, a shy smile, and a job writing cozy mysteries, but a big guy with a big hat shading his sunburned brow and grizzled cheeks, letting a bulldog hood ornament lead him along the million roads that crisscrossed the country. No need to carefully match her clothes before public appearances in that life; faded jeans and boots with side-buckles would do. She liked to write, and she didn't mind public speaking, but what she really liked to do was drive. After her Chicopee appearance, this struck her as funny . . . but not funny in a way that made you laugh. No, not that kind of funny at all.

The invitation from Books & Brown Baggers filled her requirements perfectly. Chicopee was hardly more than sixty miles from Stoke Village, the engagement was to be a daytime affair, and the Three Bs were offering an honorarium of not twelve but fifteen hundred dollars. Plus expenses, of course, but those would be minimal—not even a stay at a Courtyard Suites or a Hampton Inn. The query letter came from one Ramona Norville, who explained that, although she was the head librarian at the Chicopee Public Library, she was writing in her capacity as President of Books & Brown Baggers, which put on a noon lecture each month. People were encouraged to bring their lunches, and the events were very popular. Janet Evanovich had been scheduled for October 12th, but had been forced to cancel because of a family matter—a wedding or a funeral, Ramona Norville wasn't sure which.

“I know this is short notice,” Ms. Norville said in her slightly wheedling final paragraph, “but Wikipedia says you live in neighboring Connecticut, and our readers here in Chicopee are *such* fans of the Knitting Society gals. You would have our undying gratitude as well as the above-mentioned honorarium.”

Tess doubted that the gratitude would last much longer than a day or two, and she already had a speaking engagement lined up for October (Literary Cavalcade Week in the Hamptons), but I-84 would take her to I-90, and from 90, Chicopee was a straight shot. Easy in, easy out; Fritzzy would hardly know she was gone.

Ramona Norville had of course included her email address, and Tess wrote her immediately, accepting the date and the honorarium amount. She also specified—as was her wont—that she would sign autographs for no more than an hour. “I have a cat who bullies me if I'm not home to feed him his supper personally,” she wrote. She asked for any further details, although she already knew most of what would be expected of her; she had been doing similar events since she was thirty. Still, organizational types like Ramona Norville

expected to be asked, and if you didn't, they got nervous and started to wonder if that day's hired writer was going to show up braless and tipsy.

It crossed Tess's mind to suggest that perhaps two thousand dollars would be more appropriate for what was, in effect, a triage mission, but she dismissed the idea. It would be taking advantage. Also, she doubted if all the Knitting Society books put together (there were an even dozen) had sold as many copies as any one of Stephanie Plum's adventures. Like it or not—and in truth, Tess didn't mind much one way or the other—she was Ramona Norville's Plan B. A surcharge would be close to blackmail. Fifteen hundred was more than fair. Of course when she was lying in a culvert, coughing out blood from her swollen mouth and nose, it didn't seem fair at all. But would two thousand have been any fairer? Or two million?

Whether or not you could put a price tag on pain, rape, and terror was a question the Knitting Society ladies had never taken up. The crimes they solved were really not much more than the *ideas* of crimes. But when Tess was forced to consider it, she thought the answer was no. It seemed to her that only one thing could possibly constitute payback for such a crime. Both Tom and Fritzzy agreed.

Ramona Norville turned out to be a broad-shouldered, heavy-breasted, jovial woman of sixty or so with flushed cheeks, a Marine haircut, and a take-no-prisoners handshake. She was waiting for Tess outside the library, in the middle of the parking space reserved for Today's Author of Note. Instead of wishing Tess a very good morning (it was quarter to eleven), or complimenting her on her earrings (diamond drops, an extravagance reserved for her few dinners out and engagements like this), she asked a man's question: had Tess come by the 84?

When Tess said she had, Ms. Norville widened her eyes and blew out her cheeks. "Glad you got here safe. 84's the worst highway in America, in my humble opinion. Also the long way around. We can improve the situation going back, if the Internet's right and you live in Stoke Village."

Tess agreed that she did, although she wasn't sure she liked strangers—even a pleasant librarian—knowing where she went to lay down her weary head. But it did no good to complain; everything was on the Internet these days.

"I can save you ten miles," Ms. Norville said as they mounted the library steps. "Have you got a GPS? That makes things easier than directions written on the back of an envelope. Wonderful gadgets."

Tess, who had indeed added a GPS to her Expedition's dashboard array (it was called a Tomtom and plugged into the cigarette lighter), said that ten miles off her return journey would be very nice.

"Better a straight shot through Robin Hood's barn than all the way around it," Ms. Norville said, and clapped Tess lightly on the back. "Am I right or am I right?"

"Absolutely," Tess agreed, and her fate was decided as simply as that. She had always been a sucker for a shortcut.

*Les affaires du livre* usually had four well-defined acts, and Tess's appearance at the monthly convocation of Books & Brown Baggers could have been a template for the general case. The only diversion from the norm was Ramona Norville's introduction, which was succinct to the point of terseness. She carried no disheartening pile of file cards to the podium, felt no need to rehash Tess's Nebraska farmgirl childhood, and did not bother producing bouquets of critical praise for the Willow Grove Knitting Society books. (This was good, because they were rarely reviewed, and when they were, the name of Miss Marple was usually invoked, not always in a good way.) Ms. Norville simply said that the books were hugely popular (a forgivable overstatement), and that the author had been extremely generous in donating her time on short notice (although, at fifteen hundred dollars, it was hardly a donation). Then she yielded the podium, to the enthusiastic applause of the four hundred or so in the library's small but adequate auditorium. Most were ladies of the sort who do not attend public occasions without first donning hats.

But the introduction was more of an *entr'acte*. Act One was the eleven o'clock reception, where the higher rollers got to meet Tess in person over cheese, crackers, and cups of lousy coffee (evening events featured plastic glasses of lousy wine). Some asked for autographs; many more requested pictures, which they usually took with their cell phones. She was asked where she got her ideas and made the usual polite and humorous noises in response. Half a dozen people asked her how you got an agent, the glint in their eyes suggesting they had paid the extra twenty dollars just to ask this question. Tess said you kept writing letters until one of the hungrier ones agreed to look at your stuff. It wasn't the whole truth—when it came to agents, there *was* no whole truth—but it was close.

Act Two was the speech itself, which lasted about forty-five minutes. This consisted chiefly of anecdotes (none too personal) and a description of how she worked out her stories (back to front). It was important to insert at least three

mentions of the current book's title, which that fall happened to be *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes Spelunking* (she explained what that was for those who didn't already know).

Act Three was Question Time, during which she was asked where she got her ideas (humorous, vague response), if she drew her characters from real life ("my aunts"), and how one got an agent to look at one's work. Today she was also asked where she got her scrunchie (JCPenney, an answer which brought inexplicable applause).

The last act was Autograph Time, during which she dutifully fulfilled requests to inscribe happy birthday wishes, happy anniversary wishes, *To Janet, a fan of all my books*, and *To Leah—Hope to see you at Lake Toxaway again this summer!* (a slightly odd request, since Tess had never been there, but presumably the autograph-seeker had).

When all the books had been signed and the last few lingerers had been satisfied with more cellphone pictures, Ramona Norville escorted Tess into her office for a cup of real coffee. Ms. Norville took hers black, which didn't surprise Tess at all. Her hostess was a black-coffee type of chick if one had ever strode the surface of the earth (probably in Doc Martens on her day off). The only surprising thing in the office was the framed signed picture on the wall. The face was familiar, and after a moment, Tess was able to retrieve the name from the junkheap of memory that is every writer's most valuable asset.

"Richard Widmark?"

Ms. Norville laughed in an embarrassed but pleased sort of way. "My favorite actor. Had sort of a crush on him when I was a girl, if you want the whole truth. I got him to sign that for me ten years before he died. He was very old, even then, but it's a real signature, not a stamp. This is yours." For one crazed moment, Tess thought Ms. Norville meant the signed photo. Then she saw the envelope in those blunt fingers. The kind of envelope with a window, so you could peek at the check inside.

"Thank you," Tess said, taking it.

"No thanks necessary. You earned every penny."

Tess did not demur.

"Now. About that shortcut."

Tess leaned forward attentively. In one of the Knitting Society books, Doreen Marquis had said, *The two best things in life are warm croissants and a quick way home*. This was a case of the writer using her own dearly held beliefs to enliven her fiction.

“Can you program intersections in your GPS?”

“Yes, Tom’s very canny.”

Ms. Norville smiled. “Input Stagg Road and US 47, then. Stagg Road is very little used in this modern age—almost forgotten since that damn 84—but it’s scenic. You’ll ramble along it for, oh, sixteen miles or so. Patched asphalt, but not too bumpy, or wasn’t the last time I took it, and that was in the spring, when the worst bumps show up. At least that’s my experience.”

“Mine, too,” Tess said.

“When you get to 47, you’ll see a sign pointing you to I-84, but you’ll only need to take the turnpike for twelve miles or so, that’s the beauty part. And you’ll save tons of time and aggravation.”

“That’s also the beauty part,” Tess said, and they laughed together, two women of the same mind watched over by a smiling Richard Widmark. The abandoned store with the ticking sign was then still ninety minutes away, tucked snugly into the future like a snake in its hole. And the culvert, of course.

Tess not only had a GPS; she had spent extra for a customized one. She liked toys. After she had input the intersection (Ramona Norville leaned in the window as she did it, watching with manly interest), the gadget thought for a moment or two, then said, "Tess, I am calculating your route."

"Whoa-ho, how about that!" Norville said, and laughed the way that people do at some amiable peculiarity.

Tess smiled, although she privately thought programming your GPS to call you by name was no more peculiar than keeping a fan foto of a dead actor on your office wall. "Thank you for everything, Ramona. It was all very professional."

"We do our best at Three Bs. Now off you go. With my thanks."

"Off I go," Tess agreed. "And you're very welcome. I enjoyed it." This was true; she usually did enjoy such occasions, in an all-right-let's-get-this-taken-care-of fashion. And her retirement fund would certainly enjoy the unexpected infusion of cash.

"Have a safe trip home," Norville said, and Tess gave her a thumbs-up.

When she pulled away, the GPS said, "Hello, Tess. I see we're taking a trip."

"Yes indeed," she said. "And a good day for it, wouldn't you say?"

Unlike the computers in science fiction movies, Tom was poorly equipped for light conversation, although Tess sometimes helped him. He told her to make a right turn four hundred yards ahead, then take her first left. The map on the Tomtom's screen displayed green arrows and street names, sucking the information down from some whirling metal ball of technology high above.

She was soon on the outskirts of Chicopee, but Tom sent her past the turn for I-84 without comment and into countryside that was flaming with October color and smoky with the scent of burning leaves. After ten miles or so on something called Old County Road, and just as she was wondering if her GPS had made a mistake (as if), Tom spoke up again.

"In one mile, right turn."

Sure enough, she soon saw a green Stagg Road sign so pocked with shotgun pellets it was almost unreadable. But of course, Tom didn't need signs; in the words of the sociologists (Tess had been a major before discovering her talent for writing about old lady detectives), he was other-directed.

*You'll ramble along for sixteen miles or so*, Ramona Norville had said, but Tess rambled for only a dozen. She came around a curve, spied an old dilapidated building ahead on her left (the faded sign over the pumpless service island still read ESSO), and then saw—too late—several large, splintered pieces of wood scattered across the road. There were rusty nails jutting from many of them. She jounced across the pothole that had probably dislodged them from some country bumpkin's carelessly packed load, then veered for the soft shoulder in an effort to get around the litter, knowing she probably wasn't going to make it; why else would she hear herself saying *Oh-oh?*

There was a *clack-thump-thud* beneath her as chunks of wood flew up against the undercarriage, and then her trusty Expedition began pogoing up and down and pulling to the left, like a horse that's gone lame. She wrestled it into the weedy yard of the deserted store, wanting to get it off the road so someone who happened to come tearing around that last curve wouldn't rear-end her. She hadn't seen much traffic on Stagg Road, but there'd been some, including a couple of large trucks.

"Goddam you, Ramona," she said. She knew it wasn't really the librarian's fault; the head (and probably only member) of The Richard Widmark Fan Appreciation Society, Chicopee Branch, had only been trying to be helpful, but Tess didn't know the name of the dummocks who had dropped his nail-studded shit on the road and then gone gaily on his way, so Ramona had to do.

"Would you like me to recalculate your route, Tess?" Tom asked, making her jump.

She turned the GPS off, then killed the engine, as well. She wasn't going anywhere for awhile. It was very quiet out here. She heard birdsong, a metallic ticking sound like an old wind-up clock, and nothing else. The good news was that the Expedition seemed to be leaning to the left front instead of just leaning. Perhaps it was only the one tire. She wouldn't need a tow, if that was the case; just a little help from Triple-A.

When she got out and looked at the left front tire, she saw a splintered piece of wood impaled on it by a large, rusty spike. Tess uttered a one-syllable expletive that had never crossed the lips of a Knitting Society member, and got her cell phone out of the little storage compartment between the bucket seats. She would now be lucky to get home before dark, and Fritzzy would have to be content with his bowl of dry food in the pantry. So much for Ramona Norville's shortcut . . . although to be fair, Tess supposed the same thing could have happened to her on the interstate; certainly she had avoided her share of potentially car-crippling crap on many thruways, not just I-84.

The conventions of horror tales and mysteries—even mysteries of the bloodless, one-corpse variety enjoyed by her fans—were surprisingly similar, and as she flipped open her phone she thought, *In a story, it wouldn't work*. This was a case of life imitating art, because when she powered up her Nokia, the words NO SERVICE appeared in the window. Of course. Being able to use her phone would be too simple.

She heard an indifferently muffled engine approaching, turned, and saw an old white van come around the curve that had done her in. On the side was a cartoon skeleton pounding a drum kit that appeared to be made out of cupcakes. Written in drippy horror-movie script above this apparition (*much* more peculiar than a fan foto of Richard Widmark on a librarian's office wall) were the words ZOMBIE BAKERS. For a moment Tess was too bemused to wave, and when she did, the driver of the Zombie Bakers truck was busy trying to avoid the mess on the road and didn't notice her.

He was quicker to the shoulder than Tess had been, but the van had a higher center of gravity than the Expedition, and for a moment she was sure it was going to roll and land on its side in the ditch. It stayed up—barely—and regained the road beyond the spilled chunks of wood. The van disappeared around the next curve, leaving behind a blue cloud of exhaust and a smell of hot oil.

"Damn you, *Zombie Bakers!*" Tess yelled, then began to laugh. Sometimes it was all you could do.

She clipped her phone to the waistband of her dress slacks, went out to the road, and began picking up the mess herself. She did it slowly and carefully, because up close it became obvious that all the pieces of wood (which were

painted white and looked as if they had been stripped away by someone in the throes of a home renovation project) had nails in them. Big ugly ones. She worked slowly because she didn't want to cut herself, but she also hoped to be out here, observably doing A Good Work of Christian Charity, when the next car came along. But by the time she'd finished picking up everything but a few harmless splinters and casting the big pieces into the ditch below the shoulder of the road, no other cars had come along. Perhaps, she thought, the Zombie Bakers had eaten everyone in this immediate vicinity and were now hurrying back to their kitchen to put the leftovers into the always-popular People Pies.

She walked back to the defunct store's weedy parking lot and looked moodily at her leaning car. Thirty thousand dollars' worth of rolling iron, four-wheel drive, independent disc brakes, Tom the Talking Tomtom . . . and all it took to leave you stranded was a piece of wood with a nail in it.

*But of course they all had nails, she thought. In a mystery—or a horror movie—that wouldn't constitute carelessness; that would constitute a plan. A trap, in fact.*

“Too much imagination, Tessa Jean,” she said, quoting her mother . . . and that was ironic, of course, since it was her imagination that had ended up providing her with her daily bread. Not to mention the Daytona Beach home where her mother had spent the last six years of her life.

In the big silence she again became aware of that tinny ticking sound. The abandoned store was of a kind you didn't see much in the twenty-first century: it had a porch. The lefthand corner had collapsed and the railing was broken in a couple of places, but yes, it was an actual porch, charming even in its dilapidation. Maybe *because* of its dilapidation. Tess supposed general store porches had become obsolete because they encouraged you to sit a spell and chat about baseball or the weather instead of just paying up and hustling your credit cards on down the road to some other place where you could swipe them at the checkout. A tin sign hung askew from the porch roof. It was more faded than the Esso sign. She took a few steps closer, raising a hand to her forehead to shade her eyes. YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU. Which was a slogan for what, exactly?

She had almost plucked the answer from her mental junkheap when her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of an engine. As she turned toward it,

sure that the Zombie Bakers had come back after all, the sound of the motor was joined by the scream of ancient brakes. It wasn't the white van but an old Ford F-150 pickup with a bad blue paintjob and Bondo around the headlights. A man in bib overalls and a gimme cap sat behind the wheel. He was looking at the litter of wood scraps in the ditch.

"Hello?" Tess called. "Pardon me, sir?"

He turned his head, saw her standing in the overgrown parking lot, flicked a hand in salute, pulled in beside her Expedition, and turned off his engine. Given the sound of it, Tess thought that an act tantamount to mercy killing.

"Hey, there," he said. "Did you pick that happy crappy up off the road?"

"Yes, all but the piece that got my left front tire. And—" *And my phone doesn't work out here*, she almost added, then didn't. She was a woman in her late thirties who went one-twenty soaking wet, and this was a strange man. A big one. "—and here I am," she finished, a bit lamely.

"I'll change it forya if you got a spare," he said, working his way out of his truck. "Do you?"

For a moment she couldn't reply. The guy wasn't big, she'd been wrong about that. The guy was a giant. He had to go six-six, but head-to-foot was only part of it. He was deep in the belly, thick in the thighs, and as wide as a doorway. She knew it was impolite to stare (another of the world's facts learned at her mother's knee), but it was hard not to. Ramona Norville had been a healthy chunk of woman, but standing next to this guy, she would have looked like a ballerina.

"I know, I know," he said, sounding amused. "You didn't think you were going to meet the Jolly Green Giant out here in the williwags, didja?" Only he wasn't green; he was tanned a deep brown. His eyes were also brown. Even his cap was brown, although faded almost white in several places, as if it had been splattered with bleach at some point in its long life.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that I was thinking you don't ride in that truck of yours, you wear it."

He put his hands on his hips and guffawed at the sky. "Never heard it put like that before, but you're sort of right. When I win the lottery, I'm going to buy myself a Hummer."

“Well, I can’t buy you one of those, but if you change my tire, I’d be happy to pay you fifty dollars.”

“You kiddin? I’ll do it for free. You saved me a mess of my own when you picked up that scrapwood.”

“Someone went past in a funny truck with a skeleton on the side, but he missed it.”

The big guy had been heading for Tess’s flat front tire, but now he turned back to her, frowning. “Someone went by and didn’t offer to help you out?”

“I don’t think he saw me.”

“Didn’t stop to pick up that mess for the next fellow, either, did he?”

“No. He didn’t.”

“Just went on his way?”

“Yes.” There was something about these questions she didn’t quite like. Then the big guy smiled and Tess told herself she was being silly.

“Spare under the cargo compartment floor, I suppose?”

“Yes. That is, I think so. All you have to do is—”

“Pull up on the handle, yep, yep. Been there, done that.”

As he ambled around to the back of her Expedition with his hands tucked deep into the pockets of his overalls, Tess saw that the door of his truck hadn’t shut all the way and the dome light was on. Thinking that the F-150’s battery might be as battered as the truck it was powering, she opened the door (the hinge screamed almost as loudly as the brakes) and then slammed it closed. As she did, she looked through the cab’s back window and into the pickup’s bed. There were several pieces of wood scattered across the ribbed and rusty metal. They were painted white and had nails sticking out of them.

For a moment, Tess felt as if she were having an out-of-body experience. The ticking sign, YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU, now sounded not like an old-fashioned alarm clock but a ticking bomb.

She tried to tell herself the scraps of wood meant nothing, stuff like that only meant something in the kind of books she didn’t write and the kind of movies she rarely watched: the nasty, bloody kind. It didn’t work. Which left her with two choices. She could either go on trying to pretend because to do otherwise was terrifying, or she could take off running for the woods on the other side of the road.

Before she could decide, she smelled the whopping aroma of mansweat. She turned and he was there, towering over her with his hands in the side pockets of his overalls. “Instead of changing your tire,” he said pleasantly, “how about I fuck you? How would that be?”

Then Tess ran, but only in her mind. What she did in the real world was to stand pressed against his truck, looking up at him, a man so tall he blocked out the sun and put her in his shadow. She was thinking that not two hours ago four hundred people—mostly ladies in hats—had been applauding her in a small but entirely adequate auditorium. And somewhere south of here, Fritzzy was waiting for her. It dawned on her—laboriously, like lifting something heavy—that she might never see her cat again.

“Please don’t kill me,” some woman said in a very small and very humble voice.

“You bitch,” he said. He spoke in the tone of a man reflecting on the weather. The sign went on ticking against the eave of the porch. “You whiny whore bitch. Gosh sakes.”

His right hand came out of his pocket. It was a very big hand. On the pinky finger was a ring with a red stone in it. It looked like a ruby, but it was too big to be a ruby. Tess thought it was probably just glass. The sign ticked. YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU. Then the hand turned into a fist and came speeding toward her, growing until everything else was blotted out.

There was a muffled metallic bang from somewhere. She thought it was her head colliding with the side of the pickup truck’s cab. Tess thought: *Zombie Bakers*. Then for a little while it was dark.

She came to in a large shadowy room that smelled of damp wood, ancient coffee, and prehistoric pickles. An old paddle fan hung crookedly from the ceiling just above her. It looked like the broken merry-go-round in that Hitchcock movie, *Strangers on a Train*. She was on the floor, naked from the waist down, and he was raping her. The rape seemed secondary to the weight: he was also crushing her. She could barely draw a breath. It had to be a dream. But her nose was swollen, a lump that felt the size of a small mountain had grown at the base of her skull, and splinters were digging into her buttocks. You didn't notice those sorts of details in dreams. And you didn't feel actual pain in dreams; you always woke up before the real pain started. This was happening. He was raping her. He had taken her inside the old store and he was raping her while golden dust motes twirled lazily in the slanting afternoon sun. Somewhere people were listening to music and buying products online and taking naps and talking on phones, but in here a woman was being raped and she was that woman. He had taken her underpants; she could see them frothing from the pocket in the bib of his overalls. That made her think of *Deliverance*, which she had watched at a college film retrospective, back in the days when she had been slightly more adventurous in her moviegoing. *Get them panties down*, one of the hillbillies had said before commencing to rape the fat townie. It was funny what crossed your mind when you were lying under three hundred pounds of country meat with a rapist's cock creaking back and forth inside you like an unoiled hinge.

"Please," she said. "Oh please, no more."

"Lots more," he said, and here came that fist again, filling her field of vision. The side of her face went hot, there was a click in the middle of her head, and she blacked out.

The next time she came to, he was dancing around her in his overalls, tossing his hands from side to side and singing “Brown Sugar” in a squalling, atonal voice. The sun was going down, and the abandoned store’s two west-facing windows—the glass dusty but miraculously unbroken by vandals—were filled with fire. His shadow danced behind him, capering down the board floor and up the wall, which was marked with light squares where advertising signs had once hung. The sound of his cludding workboots was apocalyptic.

She could see her dress slacks crumpled under the counter where the cash register must once have stood (probably next to a jar of boiled eggs and another of pickled pigs’ feet). She could smell mold. And oh God she hurt. Her face, her chest, most of all down below, where she felt torn open.

*Pretend you’re dead. It’s your only chance.*

She closed her eyes. The singing stopped and she smelled approaching mansweat. Sharper now.

*Because he’s been exercising,* she thought. She forgot about playing dead and tried to scream. Before she could, his huge hands gripped her throat and began to choke. She thought: *It’s over. I’m over.* They were calm thoughts, full of relief. At least there would be no more pain, no more waking to watch the monster-man dance in the burning sunset light.

She passed out.

When Tess swam back to consciousness the third time, the world had turned black and silver and she was floating.

*This is what it's like to be dead.*

Then she registered hands beneath her—big hands, *his* hands—and the barbwire circlet of pain around her throat. He hadn't choked her quite enough to kill her, but she was wearing the shape of his hands like a necklace, palms in front, fingers on the sides and the nape of her neck.

It was night. The moon was up. A full moon. He was carrying her across the parking lot of the deserted store. He was carrying her past his truck. She didn't see her Expedition. Her Expedition was gone.

*Wherefore art thou, Tom?*

He stopped at the edge of the road. She could smell his sweat and feel the rise and fall of his chest. She could feel the night air, cool on her bare legs. She could hear the sign ticking behind her, YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU.

*Does he think I'm dead? He can't think I'm dead. I'm still bleeding.*

Or was she? It was hard to tell for sure. She lay limp in his arms, feeling like a girl in a horror movie, the one who's carried away by Jason or Michael or Freddy or whatever his name was after all the other ones are slaughtered. Carried to some slumpy deep-woods lair where she would be chained to a hook in the ceiling. In those movies there were always chains and hooks in the ceiling.

He got moving again. She could hear his work-shoes on the patched tar of Stagg Road: *clud-clump-clud*. Then, on the far side, scraping noises and clattering sounds. He was kicking away the chunks of wood she had so carefully cleaned up and thrown down here in the ditch. She could no longer hear the ticking sign, but she could hear running water. Not much, not a gush, only a trickle. He knelt down. A soft grunt escaped him.

*Now he'll kill me for sure. And at least I won't have to listen to any more of his awful singing. It's the beauty part, Ramona Norville would say.*

“Hey girl,” he said in a kindly voice.

She didn't reply, but she could see him bending over her, looking into her half-lidded eyes. She took great care to keep them still. If he saw them move, even a little . . . or a gleam of tears . . .

“Hey.” He popped the flat of his hand against her cheek. She let her head roll to the side.

“Hey!” This time he outright slapped her, but on the other cheek. Tess let her head roll back the other way.

He pinched her nipple, but he hadn't bothered to take off her blouse and bra and it didn't hurt too badly. She lay limp.

“I'm sorry I called you a bitch,” he said, still using the kindly voice. “You was a good fuck. And I like em a little older.”

Tess realized he really *might* think she was dead. It was amazing, but could be true. And all at once she wanted very badly to live.

He picked her up again. The mansweat smell was suddenly overwhelming. Beard bristles tickled the side of her face, and it was all she could do not to twitch away from them. He kissed the corner of her mouth.

“Sorry I was a little rough.”

Then he was moving her again. The sound of the running water got louder. The moonlight was blotted out. There was a smell—no, a stench—of rotting leaves. He put her down in four or five inches of water. It was very cold, and she almost cried out. He pushed on her feet and she let her knees go up. *Boneless*, she thought. *Have to stay boneless*. They didn't go far before bumping against a corrugated metal surface.

“Fuck,” he said, speaking in a reflective tone. Then he shoved her.

Tess remained limp even when something—a branch—scrawled a line of hurt down the center of her back. Her knees bumped along the corrugations above her. Her buttocks pushed a spongy mass, and the smell of rotting vegetable matter intensified. It was as thick as meat. She felt a terrible urge to cough the smell away. She could feel a mat of wet leaves gathering in the small of her back, like a throw-pillow soaked with water.

*If he figures it out now, I'll fight him. I'll kick him and kick him and kick him*

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But nothing happened. For a long time she was afraid to open her eyes any wider or move them in the slightest. She imagined him crouching there, looking into the pipe where he'd stashed her, head to one side, tilting a question, waiting for just such a move. How could he not know she was alive? Surely he'd felt the thump of her heart. And what good would kicking be against the giant from the pickup? He'd grab her bare feet in one hand, haul her out, and recommence choking her. Only this time he wouldn't stop.

She lay in the rotting leaves and sluggish water, looking up at nothing from her half-lidded eyes, concentrating on playing dead. She passed into a gray fugue that was not quite unconsciousness, and there she stayed for a length of time that felt long but probably wasn't. When she heard a motor—his truck, surely his truck—Tess thought: *I'm imagining that sound. Or dreaming it. He's still here.*

But the irregular thump of the motor first swelled, then faded off down Stagg Road.

*It's a trick.*

That was almost certainly hysteria. Even if it wasn't, she couldn't stay here all night. And when she raised her head (wincing at the stab of pain in her abused throat) and looked toward the mouth of the pipe, she saw only an unimpeded silver circle of moonlight. Tess started wriggling toward it, then stopped.

*It's a trick. I don't care what you heard, he's still here.*

This time the idea was more powerful. Seeing nothing at the mouth of the culvert *made* it more powerful. In a suspense novel, this would be the moment of false relaxation before the big climax. Or in a scary movie. The white hand emerging from the lake in *Deliverance*. Alan Arkin springing out at Audrey Hepburn in *Wait Until Dark*. She didn't like scary books and movies, but being raped and almost murdered seemed to have unlocked a whole vault of scary-movie memories, all the same. As if they were just there, in the air.

He *could* be waiting. If, for instance, he'd had an accomplice drive his truck away. He could be squatting on his hunkers beyond the mouth of the pipe in that patient way country men had.

"Get those panties down," she whispered, then covered her mouth. What if he heard her?

Five minutes passed. It might have been five. The water was cold and she began to shiver. Soon her teeth would begin to chatter. If he was out there, he would hear.

*He drove away. You heard him.*

*Maybe. Maybe not.*

And maybe she didn't need to leave the pipe the way she'd gone in. It was a culvert, it would go all the way under the road, and since she could feel water running under her, it wasn't blocked. She could crawl the length of it and look out into the deserted store's parking lot. Make sure his old truck was gone. She still wouldn't be safe if there was an accomplice, but Tess felt sure, deep down where her rational mind had gone to hide, that there was no accomplice. An accomplice would have insisted on taking his turn at her. Besides, giants worked alone.

*And if he is gone? What then?*

She didn't know. She couldn't imagine her life after her afternoon in the deserted store and her evening in the pipe with rotting leaves smooshed up into the hollow of her back, but maybe she didn't have to. Maybe she could concentrate on getting home to Fritzzy and feeding him a packet of Fancy Feast. She could see the Fancy Feast box very clearly. It was sitting on a shelf in her peaceful pantry.

She turned over on her belly and started to get up on her elbows, meaning to crawl the length of the pipe. Then she saw what was sharing the culvert with her. One of the corpses was not much more than a skeleton (stretching out bony hands as if in supplication), but there was still enough hair left on its head to make Tess all but certain it was the corpse of a woman. The other might have been a badly defaced department store mannequin, except for the bulging eyes and protruding tongue. This body was fresher, but the animals had been at it and even in the dark Tess could see the grin of the dead woman's teeth.

A beetle came lumbering out of the mannequin's hair and trundled down the bridge of her nose.

Screaming hoarsely, Tess backed out of the culvert and bolted to her feet, her clothes soaked to her body from the waist up. She was naked from the waist down. And although she did not pass out (at least she didn't think she

did), for a little while her consciousness was a queerly broken thing. Looking back on it, she would think of the next hour as a darkened stage lit by occasional spotlights. Every now and then a battered woman with a broken nose and blood on her thighs would walk into one of these spotlights. Then she would disappear back into darkness again.

She was in the store, in the big empty central room that had once been divided into aisles, with a frozen food case (maybe) at the back, and a beer cooler (for sure) running the length of the far wall. She was in the smell of departed coffee and pickles. He had either forgotten her dress slacks or meant to come back for them later—perhaps when he picked up the nail-studded scrapwood. She was fishing them out from under the counter. Beneath them were her shoes and her phone—smashed. Yes, at some point he would be back. Her scrunchie was gone. She remembered (vaguely, the way one remembers certain things from one's earliest childhood) some woman asking earlier today where she'd gotten it, and the inexplicable applause when she'd said JCPenney. She thought of the giant singing "Brown Sugar"—that squalling monotonous childish voice—and she went away again.

She was walking behind the store in the moonlight. She had a carpet remnant wrapped around her shivering shoulders, but couldn't remember where she had gotten it. It was filthy but it was warm, and she pulled it tighter. It came to her that she was actually *circling* the store, and this might be her second, third, or even fourth go-round. It came to her that she was looking for her Expedition, but each time she didn't find it behind the store, she forgot that she had looked and went around again. She forgot because she had been thumped on the head and raped and choked and was in shock. It came to her that her brain might be bleeding—how could you know, unless you woke up with the angels and they told you? The afternoon's light breeze had gotten a little stronger, and the ticking of the tin sign was a little louder. YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU.

"7Up," she said. Her voice was hoarse but serviceable. "That's what it is. You like it and it likes you." She heard herself raising her own voice in song. She had a good singing voice, and being choked had given it a surprisingly pleasant rasp. It was like listening to Bonnie Tyler sing out here in the moonlight. "7Up tastes good . . . like a cigarette should!" It came to her that that wasn't right, and even if it was, she should be singing something better than fucked-up advertising jingles while she had that pleasing rasp in her voice; if you were going to be raped and left for dead in a pipe with two rotting corpses, something good should come out of it.

*I'll sing Bonnie Tyler's hit record. I'll sing "It's a Heartache." I'm sure I know the words, I'm sure they're in the junkheap every writer has in the back of her . . .*

But then she went away again.

She was sitting on a rock and crying her eyes out. The filthy carpet-remnant was still around her shoulders. Her crotch ached and burned. The sour taste in her mouth suggested to her that she had vomited at some point between walking around the store and sitting on this rock, but she couldn't remember doing it. What she remembered—

*I was raped, I was raped, I was raped!*

“You're not the first and you won't be the last,” she said, but this tough-love sentiment, coming out as it did in a series of choked sobs, was not very helpful.

*He tried to kill me, he almost did kill me!*

Yes, yes. And at this moment his failure did not seem like much consolation. She looked to her left and saw the store fifty or sixty yards down the road.

*He killed others! They're in the pipe! Bugs are crawling on them and they don't care!*

“Yes, yes,” she said in her raspy Bonnie Tyler voice, then went away again.

She was walking down the center of Stagg Road and singing “It’s a Heartache” when she heard an approaching motor from behind her. She whirled around, almost falling, and saw headlights brightening the top of a hill she must have just come over. It was him. The giant. He had come back, had investigated the culvert after finding her clothes gone, and seen she was no longer in it. He was looking for her.

Tess bolted down into the ditch, stumbled to one knee, lost hold of her makeshift shawl, got up, and blundered into the bushes. A branch drew blood from her cheek. She heard a woman sobbing with fear. She dropped down on her hands and knees with her hair hanging in her eyes. The road brightened as the headlights cleared the hill. She saw the dropped piece of carpeting very clearly, and knew the giant would see it too. He would stop and get out. She would try to run but he would catch her. She would scream, but no one would hear her. In stories like this, they never did. He would kill her, but first he would rape her some more.

The car—it *was* a car, not a pickup truck—went by without slowing. From inside came the sound of Bachman-Turner Overdrive, turned up loud: “B-B-B-Baby, you just ain’t seen n-n-nuthin yet.” She watched the taillights wink out of sight. She felt herself getting ready to go away again and slapped her cheeks with both hands.

“*No!*” she growled in her Bonnie Tyler voice. “*No!*”

She came back a little. She felt a strong urge to stay crouched in the bushes, but that was no good. It wasn’t just a long time until daylight, it was probably still a long time until midnight. The moon was low in the sky. She couldn’t stay here, and she couldn’t just keep . . . blinking out. She had to think.

Tess picked the piece of carpeting out of the ditch, started to wrap it around her shoulders again, then touched her ears, knowing what she’d find. The diamond drop earrings, one of her few real extravagances, were gone. She burst into tears again, but this crying fit was shorter, and when it ended she felt more

like herself. More *in* herself, a resident of her head and body instead of a specter floating around it.

*Think, Tessa Jean!*

All right, she would try. But she would walk while she did it. And no more singing. The sound of her changed voice was creepy. It was as if by raping her, the giant had created a new woman. She didn't *want* to be a new woman. She had liked the old one.

Walking. Walking in the moonlight with her shadow walking on the road beside her. What road? Stagg Road. According to Tom, she had been a little less than four miles from the intersection of Stagg Road and US 47 when she'd run into the giant's trap. That wasn't so bad; she walked at least three miles a day to keep in shape, treadmilling on days when it rained or snowed. Of course this was her first walk as the New Tess, she of the aching, bleeding snatch and the raspy voice. But there was an upside: she was warming up, her top half was drying out, and she was in flat shoes. She had almost worn her three-quarter heels, and that would have made this evening stroll very unpleasant, indeed. Not that it would have been fun under any circumstances, no no n—

*Think!*

But before she could start doing that, the road brightened ahead of her. Tess darted into the underbrush again, this time managing to hold onto the carpet remnant. It was another car, thank God, not his truck, and it didn't slow.

*It could still be him. Maybe he switched to a car. He could have driven back to his house, his lair, and switched to a car. Thinking, she'll see it's a car and come out of wherever she's hiding. She'll wave me down and then I'll have her.*

Yes, yes. That was what would happen in a horror movie, wasn't it? *Screaming Victims 4* or *Stagg Road Horror 2*, or—

She was trying to go away again, so she slapped her cheeks some more. Once she was home, once Fritzy was fed and she was in her own bed (with all the doors locked and all the lights on), she could go away all she wanted. But not now. No no no. Now she had to keep walking, and hiding when cars came. If she could do those two things, she'd eventually reach US 47, and there might be a store. A *real* store, one with a pay phone, if she was lucky . . . and she deserved some good luck. She didn't have her purse, her purse was still in

her Expedition (wherever *that* was), but she knew her AT&T calling-card number by heart; it was her home phone number plus 9712. Easy-as-can-beezy.

Here was a sign at the side of the road. Tess read it easily enough in the moonlight:

YOU ARE NOW ENTERING  
COLEWICH TOWNSHIP  
WELCOME, FRIEND!

“You like Colewich, it likes you,” she whispered.

She knew the town, which the locals pronounced “Collitch.” It was actually a small city, one of many in New England that had been prosperous back in the textile-mill days and continued to struggle along somehow in the new free-trade era, when America’s pants and jackets were made in Asia or Central America, probably by children who couldn’t read or write. She was on the outskirts, but surely she could walk to a phone.

*Then what?*

Then she would . . . would . . .

“Call a limousine,” she said. The idea burst on her like a sunrise. Yes, that was exactly what she’d do. If this was Colewich, then her own Connecticut town was thirty miles away, maybe less. The limo service she used when she wanted to go to Bradley International or into Hartford or New York (Tess did not do city driving if she could help it) was based in the neighboring town of Woodfield. Royal Limousine boasted round-the-clock service. Even better, they would have her credit card on file.

Tess felt better and began to walk a little faster. Then headlights brightened the road and she once more hurried into the bushes and crouched down, as terrified as any hunted thing: doe fox rabbit. This vehicle *was* a truck, and she began to tremble. She went on trembling even when she saw it was a little white Toyota, nothing at all like the giant’s old Ford. When it was gone, she tried to force herself to walk back to the road, but at first she couldn’t. She was crying again, the tears warm on her chilly face. She felt herself getting ready to step out of the spotlight of awareness once more. She couldn’t let that happen.

If she allowed herself to go into that waking blackness too many times, she might eventually lose her way back.

She made herself think of thanking the limo driver and adding a tip to the credit card form before making her way slowly up the flower-lined walk to her front door. Tilting up her mailbox and taking the extra key from the hook behind it. Listening to Fritzy meow anxiously.

The thought of Fritzy turned the trick. She worked her way out of the bushes and resumed walking, ready to dart back into cover the second she saw more headlights. The very second. Because he was out there somewhere. She realized that from now on he would always be out there. Unless the police caught him, that was, and put him in jail. But for that to occur she would have to report what had happened, and the moment this idea came into her mind, she saw a glaring black *New York Post*-style headline:

### **“WILLOW GROVE” SCRIBE RAPED AFTER LECTURE**

Tabloids like the *Post* would undoubtedly run a picture of her from ten years ago, when her first Knitting Society book had been published. Back then she'd been in her late twenties, with long dark blond hair cascading down her back and good legs she liked to showcase in short skirts. Plus—in the evening—the kind of high-heeled slingbacks some men (the giant for one, almost certainly) referred to as fuckme shoes. They wouldn't mention that she was now ten years older, twenty pounds heavier, and had been dressed in sensible—almost dowdy—business attire when she was assaulted; those details didn't fit the kind of story the tabloids liked to tell. The copy would be respectful enough (if panting a trifle between the lines), but the picture of her old self would tell the real story, one that probably pre-dated the invention of the wheel: *She asked for it . . . and she got it.*

Was that realistic, or only her shame and badly battered sense of self-worth imagining the worst-case scenario? The part of her that might want to go on hiding in the bushes even if she managed to get off this awful road and out of this awful state of Massachusetts and back to her safe little house in Stoke Village? She didn't know, and guessed that the true answer lay somewhere in between. One thing she *did* know was that she would get the sort of

nationwide coverage every writer would like when she publishes a book and no writer wants when she has been raped and robbed and left for dead. She could visualize someone raising a hand during Question Time and asking, “Did you in any way encourage him?”

That was ridiculous, and even in her current state Tess knew it . . . but she also knew that if this came out, someone *would* raise his or her hand to ask, “Are you going to write about this?”

And what would she say? What *could* she say?

*Nothing*, Tess thought. *I would run off the stage with my hands over my ears.*

But no.

No no no.

The truth was she wouldn't be there in the first place. How could she ever do another reading, lecture, or autographing, knowing that *he* might turn up, smiling at her from the back row? Smiling from beneath that weird brown cap with the bleach spots on it? Maybe with her earrings in his pocket. Fondling them.

The thought of telling the police made her skin burn, and she could feel her face literally wincing in shame, even out here, alone in the dark. Maybe she wasn't Sue Grafton or Janet Evanovich, but neither was she, strictly speaking, a private person. She would even be on CNN for a day or two. The world would know a crazy, grinning giant had shot his load inside of the Willow Grove Scribe. Even the fact that he had taken her underwear as a souvenir might come out. CNN wouldn't report that part, but *The National Enquirer* or *Inside View* would have no such compunctions.

*Sources inside the investigation say they found a pair of the Scribe's panties in the accused rapist's drawer: blue Victoria's Secret hip-huggers, trimmed with lace.*

“I can't tell,” she said. “I won't tell.”

*But there were others before you, there could be others after y—*

She pushed this thought away. She was too tired to consider what might or might not be her moral responsibility. She'd work on that part later, if God meant to grant her a later . . . and it seemed He might. But not on this deserted road where any set of approaching lights might have her rapist behind it.

Hers. He was hers now.

A mile or so after passing the Colewich sign, Tess began to hear a low, rhythmic thudding that seemed to come up from the road through her feet. Her first thought was of H. G. Wells's mutant Morlocks, tending their machinery deep in the bowels of the earth, but another five minutes clarified the sound. It was coming through the air, not from the ground, and it was one she knew: the heartbeat of a bass guitar. The rest of the band coalesced around it as she walked. She began to see light on the horizon, not headlights but the white of arc sodiums and the red gleam of neon. The band was playing "Mustang Sally," and she could hear laughter. It was drunken and beautiful, punctuated by happy party-down whoops. The sound made her feel like crying some more.

The roadhouse, a big old honkytonk barn with a huge dirt parking lot that looked full to capacity, was called The Stagger Inn. She stood at the edge of the glare cast by the parking lot lights, frowning. Why so many cars? Then she remembered it was Friday night. Apparently The Stagger Inn was the place to go on Friday nights if you were from Colewich or any of the surrounding towns. They would have a phone, but there were too many people. They would see her bruised face and leaning nose. They would want to know what had happened to her, and she was in no shape to make up a story. At least not yet. Even a pay phone outside was no good, because she could see people out there, too. Lots of them. Of course. These days you had to go outside if you wanted to smoke a cigarette. Also . . .

*He* could be there. Hadn't he been capering around her at one point, singing a Rolling Stones song in his awful tuneless voice? Tess supposed she might have dreamed that part—or hallucinated it—but she didn't think so. Wasn't it possible that after hiding her car, he'd come right here to The Stagger Inn, pipes all cleaned and ready to party the night away?

The band launched into a perfectly adequate cover of an old Cramps song: "Can Your Pussy Do the Dog." *No*, Tess thought, *but today a dog certainly did*

*my pussy.* The Old Tess would not have approved of such a joke, but the New Tess thought it was pretty goddam funny. She barked a hoarse laugh and got walking again, moving to the other side of the road, where the lights from the road-house parking lot did not quite reach.

As she passed the far side of the building, she saw an old white van backed up to the loading dock. There were no arc sodiums on this side of The Stagger Inn, but the moonlight was enough to show her the skeleton pounding its cupcake drums. No wonder the van hadn't stopped to pick up the nail-studded road litter. The Zombie Bakers had been late for the load-in, and that wasn't good, because on Friday nights, The Stagger Inn was hopping with the bopping, rolling with the strolling, and reeling with the feeling.

"Can your pussy do the dog?" Tess asked, and pulled the filthy carpet remnant a little tighter around her neck. It was no mink stole, but on a cool October night, it was better than nothing.

When Tess got to the intersection of Stagg Road and Route 47, she saw something beautiful: a Gas & Dash with two pay telephones on the cinder-block wall between the restrooms.

She used the Women's first, and had to put a hand over her mouth to stifle a cry when her urine started to flow; it was as if someone had lit a book of matches in there. When she got up from the toilet, fresh tears were rolling down her cheeks. The water in the bowl was a pastel pink. She blotted herself—very gently—with a pad of toilet paper, then flushed. She would have taken another wad to fold into the crotch of her underwear, but of course she couldn't do that. The giant had taken her underpants as a souvenir.

“You bastard,” she said.

She paused with her hand on the doorknob, looking at the bruised, wide-eyed woman in the water-spotted metal mirror over the washbasin. Then she went out.

She discovered that using a pay telephone in this modern age had grown strangely difficult, even if you had your calling-card number memorized. The first phone she tried worked only one-way: she could hear the directory assistance operator, but the directory assistance operator couldn't hear her, and broke such connection as there was. The other phone was tilted askew on the cinder-block wall—not encouraging—but it worked. There was a steady annoying underwhine, but at least she and the operator could communicate. Only Tess had no pen or pencil. There were several writing implements in her purse, but of course her purse was gone.

“Can't you just connect me?” she asked the operator.

“No, ma'am, you have to dial it yourself in order to utilize your credit card.” The operator spoke in the voice of someone explaining the obvious to a stupid child. This didn't make Tess angry; she *felt* like a stupid child. Then she saw how dirty the cinder-block wall was. She told the operator to give her the number, and when it came, she wrote it in the dust with her finger.

Before she could start dialing, a truck pulled into the parking lot. Her heart launched itself into her throat with dizzying, acrobatic ease, and when two laughing boys in high school jackets got out and whipped into the store, she was glad it was up there. It blocked the scream that surely would have come out otherwise.

She felt the world trying to go away and leaned her head against the wall for a moment, gasping for breath. She closed her eyes. She saw the giant towering over her, hands in the pockets of his biballs, and opened her eyes again. She dialed the number written in dust on the wall.

She braced herself for an answering machine, or for a bored dispatcher telling her that they had no cars, of course they didn't, it was Friday night, were you born stupid, lady, or did you just grow that way? But the phone was answered on the second ring by a businesslike woman who identified herself as Andrea. She listened to Tess, and said they would send a car right out, her

driver would be Manuel. Yes, she knew exactly where Tess was calling from, because they ran cars out to The Stagger Inn all the time.

“Okay, but I’m not there,” Tess said. “I’m at the intersection about half a mile down from th—”

“Yes, ma’am, I have that,” Andrea said. “The Gas & Dash. Sometimes we go there, too. People often walk down and call if they’ve had a little too much to drink. It’ll probably be forty-five minutes, maybe even an hour.”

“That’s fine,” Tess said. The tears were falling again. Tears of gratitude this time, although she told herself not to relax, because in stories like this the heroine’s hopes so often turned out to be false. “That’s absolutely fine. I’ll be around the corner by the pay telephones. And I’ll be watching.”

*Now she’ll ask me if I had a little too much to drink. Because I probably sound that way.*

But Andrea only wanted to know if she would be paying with cash or credit.

“American Express. I should be in your computer.”

“Yes, ma’am, you are. Thank you for calling Royal Limousine, where every customer is treated like royalty.” Andrea clicked off before Tess could say she was very welcome.

She started to hang up the phone, and then a man—*him, it’s him*—ran around the corner of the store and right at her. This time there was no chance of screaming; she was paralyzed with terror.

It was one of the teenage boys. He went past without looking at her and hooked a left into the Men’s. The door slammed. A moment later she heard the enthusiastic, horselike sound of a young man voiding an awesomely healthy bladder.

Tess went down the side of the building and around back. There she stood beside a reeking Dumpster (*no, she thought, I’m not standing, I’m lurking*), waiting for the young man to finish and be gone. When he was, she walked back to the pay phones to watch the road. In spite of all the places where she hurt, her belly was rumbling with hunger. She had missed her dinner, had been too busy being raped and almost killed to eat. She would have been glad to have any of the snacks they sold in places like this—even some of those little nasty peanut butter crackers, so weirdly yellow, would have been a treat—but

she had no money. Even if she had, she wouldn't have gone in there. She knew what kind of lights they had in roadside convenience stores like Gas & Dash, those bright and heartless fluorescents that made even healthy people look like they were suffering from pancreatic cancer. The clerk behind the counter would look at her bruised cheeks and forehead, her broken nose and her swollen lips, and he or she might not say anything, but Tess would see the widening of the eyes. And maybe a quickly suppressed twitch of the lips. Because, face it, people could think a beat-up woman was funny. Especially on a Friday night. *Who tuned up on you, lady, and what did you do to deserve it? Wouldn't you come across after some guy spent his overtime on you?*

That reminded her of an old joke she'd heard somewhere: *Why are there three hundred thousand battered women each year in America? Because they won't . . . fuckin . . . listen.*

"Never mind," she whispered. "I'll have something to eat when I get home. Tuna salad, maybe."

It sounded good, but part of her was convinced that her days of eating tuna salad—or nasty yellow convenience-store peanut butter crackers, for that matter—were all over. The idea of a limo pulling up and driving her out of this nightmare was an insane mirage.

From somewhere to her left, Tess could hear cars rushing by on I-84—the road she would have taken if she hadn't been so pleased to be offered a shorter way home. Over there on the turnpike, people who had never been raped or stuffed in pipes were going places. Tess thought the sound of their blithe travel was the loneliest she'd ever heard.

The limo came. It was a Lincoln Town Car. The man behind the wheel got out and looked around. Tess observed him closely from the corner of the store. He was wearing a dark suit. He was a small, bespectacled fellow who didn't look like a rapist . . . but of course not all giants were rapists and not all rapists were giants. She had to trust him, though. If she were to get home and feed Fritzzy, there was no other option. So she dropped her filthy makeshift stole beside the pay phone that actually worked and walked slowly and steadily toward the car. The light shining through the store windows seemed blindingly bright after the shadows at the side of the building, and she knew what her face looked like.

*He'll ask what happened to me and then he'll ask if I want to go to the hospital.*

But Manuel (who might have seen worse, it wasn't impossible) only held the door for her and said, "Welcome to Royal Limousine, ma'am." He had a soft Hispanic accent to go with his olive skin and dark eyes.

"Where I'm treated like royalty," Tess said. She tried to smile. It hurt her swollen lips.

"Yes, ma'am." Nothing else. God bless Manuel, who might have seen worse—perhaps back where he'd come from, perhaps in the back of this very car. Who knew what secrets limo drivers kept? It was a question that might have a good book hidden in it. Not the kind she wrote, of course . . . only who knew what kind of books she might write after this? Or if she would write any more at all? Tonight's adventure might have turned that solitary joy out of her for awhile. Maybe even forever. It was impossible to tell.

She got into the back of the car, moving like an old woman with advanced osteoporosis. When she was seated and he had closed the door, she wrapped her fingers around the handle and watched closely, wanting to make sure it was Manuel who got in behind the wheel and not the giant in the bib overalls. In *Stagg Road Horror 2* it would have been the giant: one more turn of the screw before the credits. *Have some irony, it's good for your blood.*

But it was Manuel who got in. Of course it was. She relaxed.

“The address I have is 19 Primrose Lane, in Stoke Village. Is that correct?”

For a moment she couldn't remember; she had punched her calling-card number into the pay phone without a pause, but she was blanking on her own address.

*Relax, she told herself. It's over. This isn't a horror movie, it's your life. You've had a terrible experience, but it's over. So relax.*

“Yes, Manuel, that's right.”

“Will you want to be making any stops, or are we going right to your home?” It was the closest he came to mentioning what the lights of the Gas & Dash must have shown him when she walked to the Town Car.

It was only luck that she was still taking her oral contraceptive pills—luck and perhaps optimism, she hadn't had so much as a one-night stand for three years, unless you counted tonight—but luck had been in short supply today, and she was grateful for this short stroke of it. She was sure Manuel could find an all-night pharmacy somewhere along the way, limo drivers seem to know all that stuff, but she didn't think she would have been able to walk into a drugstore and ask for the morning-after pill. Her face would have made it all too obvious why she needed one. And of course there was the money problem.

“No other stops, just take me home, please.”

Soon they were on I-84, which was busy with Friday-night traffic. Stagg Road and the deserted store were behind her. What was ahead of her was her own house, with a security system and a lock for every door. And that was good.

It all went exactly as she had visualized: the arrival, the tip added to the credit card slip, the walk up the flower-lined path (she asked Manuel to stay, illuminating her with his headlights, until she was inside), the sound of Fritzy meowing as she tilted the mailbox and fished the emergency key off its hook. Then she was inside and Fritzy was twining anxiously around her feet, wanting to be picked up and stroked, wanting to be fed. Tess did those things, but first she locked the front door behind her, then set the burglar alarm for the first time in months. When she saw **ARMED** flash in the little green window above the keypad, she at last began to feel something like her true self. She looked at the kitchen clock and was astounded to see it was only quarter past eleven.

While Fritzy was eating his Fancy Feast, she checked the doors to the backyard and the side patio, making sure they were both locked. Then the windows. The alarm's command-box was supposed to tell you if something was open, but she didn't trust it. When she was positive everything was secure, she went to the front-hall closet and took down a box that had been on the top shelf so long there was a scrim of dust on the top.

Five years ago there had been a rash of burglaries and home invasions in northern Connecticut and southern Massachusetts. The bad boys were mostly drug addicts hooked on eighties, which was what its many New England fans called OxyContin. Residents were warned to be particularly careful and "take reasonable precautions." Tess had no strong feelings about handguns pro or con, nor had she felt especially worried about strange men breaking in at night (not then), but a gun seemed to come under the heading of reasonable precautions, and she had been meaning to educate herself about pistols for the next Willow Grove book, anyway. The burglary scare had seemed like the perfect opportunity.

She went to the Hartford gun store that rated best on the Internet, and the clerk had recommended a Smith & Wesson .38 model he called a Lemon

Squeezer. She bought it mostly because she liked that name. He also told her about a good shooting range on the outskirts of Stoke Village. Tess had dutifully taken her gun there once the forty-eight-hour waiting period was up and she was actually able to obtain it. She had fired off four hundred rounds or so over the course of a week, enjoying the thrill of banging away at first but quickly becoming bored. The gun had been in the closet ever since, stored in its box along with fifty rounds of ammunition and her carry permit.

She loaded it, feeling better—*safer*—with each filled chamber. She put it on the kitchen counter, then checked the answering machine. There was one message. It was from Patsy McClain next door. “I didn’t see any lights this evening, so I guess you decided to stay over in Chicopee. Or maybe you went to Boston? Anyway, I used the key behind the mailbox and fed Fritz. Oh, and I put your mail on the hall table. All adverts, sorry. Call me tomorrow before I go to work, if you’re back. Just want to know you got in safe.”

“Hey, Fritz,” Tess said, bending over to stroke him. “I guess you got double rations tonight. Pretty clever of y—”

Wings of grayness came over her vision, and if she hadn’t caught hold of the kitchen table, she would have gone sprawling full length on the linoleum. She uttered a cry of surprise that sounded faint and faraway. Fritz twitched his ears back, gave her a narrow, assessing look, seemed to decide she wasn’t going to fall over (at least not on him), and went back to his second supper.

Tess straightened up slowly, holding onto the table for safety’s sake, and opened the fridge. There was no tuna salad, but there was cottage cheese with strawberry jam. She ate it eagerly, scraping the plastic container with her spoon to get every last curd. It was cool and smooth on her hurt throat. She wasn’t sure she could have eaten flesh, anyway. Not even tuna out of a can.

She drank apple juice straight from the bottle, belched, then trudged to the downstairs bathroom. She took the gun along, curling her fingers outside the trigger guard, as she had been taught.

There was an oval magnifying mirror standing on the shelf above the washbasin, a Christmas gift from her brother in New Mexico. Written in gold-gilt script above it were the words PRETTY ME. The Old Tess had used it for tweezing her eyebrows and doing quick fixes to her makeup. The new one used it to examine her eyes. They were bloodshot, of course, but the pupils looked

the same size. She turned off the bathroom light, counted to twenty, then turned it back on and watched her pupils contract. That looked okay, too. So, probably no skull fracture. Maybe a concussion, a *light* concussion, but—

*As if I'd know. I've got a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Connecticut and an advanced degree in old lady detectives who spend at least a quarter of each book exchanging recipes I crib from the Internet and then change just enough so I won't get sued for plagiarism. I could go into a coma or die of a brain hemorrhage in the night. Patsy would find me the next time she came in to feed the cat. You need to see a doctor, Tessa Jean. And you know it.*

What she knew was that if she went to her doctor, her misfortune really could become public property. Doctors guaranteed confidentiality, it was a part of their oath, and a woman who made her living as a lawyer or a cleaning woman or a Realtor could probably count on getting it. Tess might get it herself, it was certainly possible. Probable, even. On the other hand, look what had happened to Farrah Fawcett: tabloid-fodder when some hospital employee blabbed. Tess herself had heard rumors about the psychiatric misadventures of a male novelist who had been a chart staple for years with his tales of lusty derring-do. Her own agent had passed the juiciest of these rumors on to Tess over lunch not two months ago . . . and Tess had listened.

*I did more than listen, she thought as she looked at her magnified, beaten self. I passed that puppy on just as soon as I could.*

Even if the doctor and his staff kept mum about the lady mystery writer who had been beaten, raped, and robbed on her way home from a public appearance, what about the other patients who might see her in the waiting room? To some of them she wouldn't be just another woman with a bruised face that practically screamed beating; she would be Stoke Village's resident novelist, you know the one, they made a TV movie about her old lady detectives a year or two ago, it was on Lifetime Channel, and my God, you should have *seen* her.

Her nose wasn't broken, after all. It was hard to believe anything could hurt that badly and *not* be broken, but it wasn't. Swollen (of course, poor thing), and it hurt, but she could breathe through it and she had some Vicodin upstairs that would manage the pain tonight. But she had a couple of blooming shiners, a bruised and swollen cheek, and a ring of bruises around

her throat. That was the worst, the sort of necklace people got in only one way. There were also assorted bumps, bruises, and scratches on her back, legs, and tushie. But clothes and hose would hide the worst of those.

*Great. I'm a poet and I don't know it.*

"The throat . . . I could wear a turtleneck . . ."

Absolutely. October was turtleneck weather. As for Patsy, she could say she'd fallen downstairs and hit her face in the night. Say that—

"That I thought I heard a noise and Fritzzy got between my feet when I went downstairs to check."

Fritzzy heard his name and meowed from the bathroom door.

"Say I hit my stupid face on the newel post at the bottom. I could even . . ."

Even put a little mark on the post, of course she could. Possibly with the meat-tenderizing hammer she had in one of her kitchen drawers. Nothing gaudy, just a tap or two to chip the paint. Such a story wouldn't fool a doctor (or a sharp old lady detective like Doreen Marquis, doyenne of the Knitting Society), but it would fool sweet Patsy McC, whose husband had surely never raised a hand to her a single time in the twenty years they'd been together.

"It's not that I have anything to be ashamed about," she whispered at the woman in the mirror. The New Woman with the crooked nose and the puffy lips. "It's not that." True, but public exposure would *make* her ashamed. She would be naked. A naked victim.

*But what about the women, Tessa Jean? The women in the pipe?*

She would have to think about them, but not tonight. Tonight she was tired, in pain, and harrowed to the bottom of her soul.

Deep inside her (in her harrowed soul) she felt a glowing ember of fury at the man responsible for this. The man who had put her in this position. She looked at the pistol lying beside the basin, and knew that if he were here, she would use it on him without a moment's hesitation. Knowing that made her feel confused about herself. It also made her feel a little stronger.

She chipped at the newel post with the meat-tenderizing hammer, by then so tired she felt like a dream in some other woman's head. She examined the mark, decided it looked too deliberate, and gave several more light taps around the edges of the blow. When she thought it looked like something she might have done with the side of her face—where the worst bruise was—she went slowly up the stairs and down the hall, holding her gun in one hand.

For a moment she hesitated outside her bedroom door, which was standing ajar. What if *he* was in there? If he had her purse, he had her address. The burglar alarm had not been set until she got back (so sloppy). He could have parked his old F-150 around the corner. He could have forced the kitchen door lock. It probably wouldn't have taken much more than a chisel.

*If he was here, I'd smell him. That mansweat. And I'd shoot him. No "Lie down on the floor," no "Keep your hands up while I dial 911," no horror-movie bullshit. I'd just shoot him. But you know what I'd say first?*

"You like it, it likes you," she said in her low rasp of a voice. Yes. That was it exactly. He wouldn't understand, but *she* would.

She discovered she sort of *wanted* him in her room. That probably meant the New Woman was more than a little crazy, but so what? If it all came out then, it would be worth it. Shooting him would make public humiliation bearable. And look at the bright side! It would probably help sales!

*I'd like to see the terror in his eyes when he realized I really meant to do it. That might make at least some of this right.*

It seemed to take her groping hand an age to find the bedroom light-switch, and of course she kept expecting her fingers to be grabbed while she fumbled. She took off her clothes slowly, uttering one watery, miserable sob when she unzipped her pants and saw dried blood in her pubic hair.

She ran the shower as hot as she could stand it, washing the places that could bear to be washed, letting the water rinse the rest. The clean hot water. She wanted his smell off her, and the mildewy smell of the carpet remnant,

too. Afterward, she sat on the toilet. This time peeing hurt less, but the bolt of pain that went through her head when she tried—very tentatively—to straighten her leaning nose made her cry out. Well, so what? Nell Gwyn, the famous Elizabethan actress, had had a bent nose. Tess was sure she had read that somewhere.

She put on flannel pajamas and shuffled to bed, where she lay with all the lights on and the Lemon Squeezer .38 on the night table, thinking she would never sleep, that her inflamed imagination would turn every sound from the street into the approach of the giant. But then Fritzy jumped up on the bed, curled himself beside her, and began to purr. That was better.

*I'm home, she thought. I'm home, I'm home, I'm home.*

When she woke up, the inarguably sane light of six AM was streaming through the windows. There were things that needed to be done and decisions that needed to be made, but for the moment it was enough to be alive and in her own bed instead of stuffed into a culvert.

This time peeing felt almost normal, and there was no blood. She got into the shower again, once more running the water as hot as she could stand it, closing her eyes and letting it beat on her throbbing face. When she'd had all of that she could take, she worked shampoo into her hair, doing it slowly and methodically, using her fingers to massage her scalp, skipping the painful spot where he must have hit her. At first the deep scratch on her back stung, but that passed and she felt a kind of bliss. She hardly thought of the shower scene in *Psycho* at all.

The shower was always where she had done her best thinking, a womblike environment, and if she had ever needed to think both hard and well, it was now.

*I don't want to see Dr. Hedstrom, and I don't need to see Dr. Hedstrom. That decision's been made, although later—a couple of weeks from now, maybe, when my face looks more or less normal again—I'll have to get checked out for STDs . . .*

“Don't forget the AIDS test,” she said, and the thought made her grimace hard enough to hurt her mouth. It was a scary thought. Nevertheless, the test would have to be taken. For her own peace of mind. And none of that addressed what she now recognized as this morning's central issue. What she did or didn't do about her own violation was her own business, but that was not true of the women in the pipe. They had lost far more than she. And what about the next woman the giant attacked? That there would be another she had no doubt. Maybe not for a month or a year, but there would be. As she turned off the shower Tess realized (again) that it might even be her, if he went back to check the culvert and found her gone. And her clothes gone from the store, of

course. If he'd looked through her purse, and surely he had, then he *did* have her address.

"Also my diamond earrings," she said. "Fucking pervert sonofabitch stole my earrings."

Even if he steered clear of the store and the culvert for awhile, those women belonged to her now. They were her responsibility, and she couldn't shirk it just because her picture might appear on the cover of *Inside View*.

In the calm morning light of a suburban Connecticut morning, the answer was ridiculously simple: an anonymous call to the police. The fact that a professional novelist with ten years' experience hadn't thought of it right away almost deserved a yellow penalty card. She would give them the location—the deserted YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU store on Stagg Road—and she would describe the giant. How hard could it be to locate a man like that? Or a blue Ford F-150 pickup with Bondo around the headlights?

Easy-as-can-beezy.

But while she was drying her hair, her eyes fell on her Lemon Squeezer .38 and she thought, *Too easy-as-can-beezy. Because . . .*

"What's in it for me?" she asked Fritzzy, who was sitting in the doorway and looking at her with his luminous green eyes. "Just what's in that for me?"

Standing in the kitchen an hour and a half later. Her cereal bowl soaking in the sink. Her second cup of coffee growing cold on the counter. Talking on the phone.

“Oh my God!” Patsy exclaimed. “I’m coming right over!”

“No, no, I’m fine, Pats. And you’ll be late for work.”

“Saturday mornings are strictly optional, and you should go to the doctor! What if you’re concussed, or something?”

“I’m not concussed, just colorful. And I’d be ashamed to go to the doctor, because I was three drinks over the limit. At least three. The only sensible thing I did all night was call a limo to bring me home.”

“You’re sure your nose isn’t broken?”

“Positive.” Well . . . *almost* positive.

“Is Fritzzy all right?”

Tess burst into perfectly genuine laughter. “I go downstairs half-shot in the middle of the night because the smoke detector’s beeping, trip over the cat and almost kill myself, and your sympathies are with the cat. Nice.”

“Honey, no—”

“I’m just teasing,” Tess said. “Go on to work and stop worrying. I just didn’t want you to scream when you saw me. I’ve got a couple of absolutely beautiful shiners. If I had an ex-husband, you’d probably think he’d paid me a visit.”

“Nobody would dare to put a hand on you,” Patsy said. “You’re feisty, girl.”

“That’s right,” Tess said. “I take no shit.”

“You sound hoarse.”

“On top of everything else, I’m getting a cold.”

“Well . . . if you need something tonight . . . chicken soup . . . a couple of old Percocets . . . a Johnny Depp DVD . . .”

“I’ll call if I do. Now go on. Fashion-conscious women seeking the elusive size six Ann Taylor are depending on you.”

“Piss off, woman,” Patsy said, and hung up, laughing.

Tess took her coffee to the kitchen table. The gun was sitting on it, next to the sugar bowl: not quite a Dalí image, but damn close. Then the image doubled as she burst into tears. It was the memory of her own cheery voice that did it. The sound of the lie she would now live until it felt like the truth. “You bastard!” she shouted. “You fuck-bastard! *I hate you!*”

She had showered twice in less than seven hours and still felt dirty. She had douched, but she thought she could still feel him in there, his . . .

“His cockslime.”

She bolted to her feet, from the corner of her eye glimpsed her alarmed cat racing down the front hall, and arrived at the sink just in time to avoid making a mess on the floor. Her coffee and Cheerios came up in a single hard contraction. When she was sure she was done, she collected her pistol and went upstairs to take another shower.

When she was done and wrapped in a comforting terry-cloth robe, she lay down on her bed to think about where she should go to make her anonymous call. Someplace big and busy would be best. Someplace with a parking lot so she could hang up and then scat. Stoke Village Mall sounded right. There was also the question of which authorities to call. Colewich, or would that be too Deputy Dawg? Maybe the State Police would be better. And she should write down what she meant to say . . . the call would go quicker . . . she'd be less likely to forget anyth . . .

Tess drifted off, lying on her bed in a bar of sunlight.

The telephone was ringing far away, in some adjacent universe. Then it stopped and Tess heard her own voice, the pleasantly impersonal recording that started *You have reached . . .* This was followed by someone leaving a message. A woman. By the time Tess struggled back to wakefulness, the caller had clicked off.

She looked at the clock on the night table and saw it was quarter to ten. She'd slept another two hours. For a moment she was alarmed: maybe she'd suffered a concussion or a fracture after all. Then she relaxed. She'd had a lot of exercise the previous night. Much of it had been extremely unpleasant, but exercise was exercise. Falling asleep again was natural. She might even take another nap this afternoon (another shower for sure), but she had an errand to run first. A responsibility to fulfill.

She put on a long tweed skirt and a turtleneck that was actually too big for her; it lapped the underside of her chin. That was fine with Tess. She had applied concealer to the bruise on her cheek. It didn't cover it completely, nor would even her biggest pair of sunglasses completely obscure her black eyes (the swollen lips were a lost cause), but the makeup helped, just the same. The very act of applying it made her feel more anchored in her life. More in charge.

Downstairs, she pushed the Play button on her answering machine, thinking the call had probably been from Ramona Norville, doing the obligatory day-after follow-up: we had fun, hope you had fun, the feedback was great, please come again (not bloody likely), blah-blah-blah. But it wasn't Ramona. The message was from a woman who identified herself as Betsy Neal. She said she was calling from The Stagger Inn.

"As part of our effort to discourage drinking and driving, our policy is to courtesy-call people who leave their cars in our lot after closing," Betsy Neal said. "Your Ford Expedition, Connecticut license plate 775 NSD, will be available for pickup until five PM this evening. After five it will be towed to Excellent Auto Repair, 1500 John Higgins Road, North Colewich, at your

expense. Please note that we don't have your keys, ma'am. You must have taken them with you." Betsy Neal paused. "We have other property of yours, so please come to the office. Remember that I'll need to see some ID. Thank you and have a nice day."

Tess sat down on her sofa and laughed. Before listening to the Neal woman's canned speech, she had been planning to drive her Expedition to the mall. She didn't have her purse, she didn't have her key-ring, she didn't have her damn *car*, but she had still planned to just walk out to the driveway, climb in, and—

She sat back against the cushion, whooping and pounding a fist on her thigh. Fritzy was under the easy chair on the other side of the room, looking at her as if she were mad. *We're all mad here, so have another cup of tea*, she thought, and laughed harder than ever.

When she finally stopped (only it felt more like running down), she played the message again. This time what she focused on was the Neal woman saying they had other property of hers. Her purse? Perhaps even her diamond earrings? But that would be too good to be true. Wouldn't it?

Arriving at The Stagger Inn in a black car from Royal Limo might be a little too memorable, so she called Stoke Village Taxi. The dispatcher said they'd be glad to run her out to what he called "The Stagger" for a flat fifty-dollar fee. "Sorry to charge you so much," he said, "but the driver's got to come back empty."

"How do you know that?" Tess asked, bemused.

"Left your car, right? Happens all the time, specially on weekends. Although we also get calls after karaoke nights. Your cab'll be there in fifteen minutes or less."

Tess ate a Pop-Tart (swallowing hurt, but she had lost her first try at breakfast and was hungry), then stood at the living-room window, watching for the taxi and bouncing her spare Expedition key on her palm. She decided on a change of plan. Never mind Stoke Village Mall; once she'd collected her car (and whatever other property Betsy Neal was holding), she would drive the half a mile or so to the Gas & Dash and call the police from there.

It seemed only fitting.

When her cab turned onto Stagg Road, Tess's pulse began to rise. By the time they reached The Stagger Inn, it was flying along at what felt like a hundred and thirty beats a minute. The cabbie must have seen something in his rearview mirror . . . or maybe it was just the visible signs of the beating that prompted his question.

"Everything okay, ma'am?"

"Peachy," she said. "It's just that I didn't plan on coming back here this morning."

"Few do," the cabbie said. He was sucking on a toothpick, which made a slow and philosophical journey from one side of his mouth to the other. "They got your keys, I suppose? Left em with the bartender?"

"Oh, no trouble there," she said brightly. "But they're holding other property for me—the lady who called wouldn't say what, and I can't for the life of me think what it could be." *Good God, I sound like one of my old lady detectives.*

The cabbie rolled his toothpick back to its starting point. It was his only reply.

"I'll pay you an extra ten dollars to wait until I come out," Tess said, nodding at the roadhouse. "I want to make sure my car starts."

"No problem-o," the cabbie said.

*And if I scream because he's in there, waiting for me, come on the run, okay?*

But she wouldn't have said that even if she could have done so without sounding absolutely bonkers. The cabdriver was fat, fifty, and wheezy. He'd be no match for the giant if this was a setup . . . which in a horror movie, it would be.

*Lured back, Tess thought dismally. Lured back by a phone call from the giant's girlfriend, who's just as crazy as he is.*

Foolish, paranoid idea, but the walk to The Stagger Inn's door seemed long, and the hard-packed dirt made her walking shoes seem very loud: *clump-clud-*

*clump*. The parking lot that had been a sea of cars last night was now deserted save for four automotive islands, one of which was her Expedition. It was at the very back of the lot—sure, he would not have wanted to be observed putting it there—and she could see the left front tire. It was a plain old blackwall that didn't match the other three, but otherwise it looked fine. He had changed her tire. Of course he had. How else could he have moved it away from his . . . his . . .

*His recreational facility. His kill-zone. He drove it down here, parked, walked back to the deserted store, and then off he went in his old F-150. Good thing I didn't come to sooner; he'd have found me wandering around in a daze and I wouldn't be here now.*

She looked back over her shoulder. In one of the movies she now could not stop thinking about, she surely would have seen the cab speeding away (*leaving me to my fate*), but it was still right there. She lifted a hand to the driver, and he lifted his in return. She was fine. Her car was here and the giant wasn't. The giant was at his house (his *lair*), quite possibly still sleeping off the previous evening's exertions.

The sign on the door said WE ARE CLOSED. Tess knocked and got no response. She tried the knob and when it turned, sinister movie plots returned to her mind. The really stupid plots where the knob always turns and the heroine calls out (in a tremulous voice), "Is anybody there?" Everyone knows she's crazy to go in, but she does anyway.

Tess looked back at the cab again, saw it was still right there, reminded herself that she was carrying a loaded gun in her spare purse, and went in anyway.

She entered a foyer that ran the length of the building on the parking lot side. The walls were decorated with publicity stills: bands in leather, bands in jeans, an all-girl band in miniskirts. An auxiliary bar stretched out beyond the coatracks; no stools, just a rail where you could have a drink while you waited for someone or because the bar inside was too packed. A single red sign glowed above the ranked bottles: BUDWEISER.

*You like Bud, Bud likes you,* Tess thought.

She took off her dark glasses so she could walk without stumbling into something and crossed the foyer to peep into the main room. It was vast and redolent of beer. There was a disco ball, now dark and still. The wooden floor reminded her of the roller-skating rink where she and her girlfriends had all but lived during the summer between eighth grade and high school. The instruments were still up on the bandstand, suggesting that The Zombie Bakers would be back tonight for another heaping bowl of rock n roll.

“Hello?” Her voice echoed.

“I’m right here,” a voice replied softly from behind her.

If it had been a man's voice, Tess would have shrieked. She managed to avoid that, but she still whirled around so quickly that she stumbled a little. The woman standing in the coat alcove—a skinny breath of a thing, no more than five feet three—blinked in surprise and took a step back. “Whoa, easy.”

“You startled me,” Tess said.

“I see I did.” The woman's tiny, perfect oval of a face was surrounded by a cloud of teased black hair. A pencil peeked from it. She had piquant blue eyes that didn't quite match. *A Picasso girl*, Tess thought. “I was in the office. Are you the Expedition lady or the Honda lady?”

“Expedition.”

“Have ID?”

“Yes, two pieces, but only one with my picture on it. My passport. The other stuff was in my purse. My other purse. I thought that was what you might have.”

“No, sorry. Maybe you stashed it under the seat, or something? We only look in the glove compartments, and of course we can't even do that if the car is locked. Yours wasn't, and your phone number was on the insurance card. But probably you know that. Maybe you'll find your purse at home.” Neal's voice suggested that this wasn't likely. “One photo ID will be okay if it looks like you, I guess.”

Neal led Tess to a door at the back of the coat area, then down a narrow curving corridor that skirted the main room. There were more band photos on the walls. At one point they passed through a fume of chlorine that stung Tess's eyes and tender throat.

“If you think the johns smell now, you should be here when the joint is going full tilt,” Neal said, then added, “Oh, I forgot—you were.”

Tess made no comment.

At the end of the hallway was a door marked OFFICE STAFF ONLY. The room beyond was large, pleasant, and filled with morning sunshine. A framed

picture of Barack Obama hung on the wall, above a bumper sticker bearing the YES WE CAN slogan. Tess couldn't see her cab—the building was in the way—but she could see its shadow.

*That's good. Stay right there and get your ten bucks. And if I don't come out, don't come in. Just call the police.*

Neal went to the desk in the corner and sat down. "Let's see your ID."

Tess opened her purse, fumbled past the .38, and brought out her passport and her Authors Guild card. Neal gave the passport photo only a cursory glance, but when she saw the Guild card, her eyes widened. "You're the Willow Grove lady!"

Tess smiled gamely. It hurt her lips. "Guilty as charged." Her voice sounded foggy, as though she were getting over a bad cold.

"My gran loves those books!"

"Many grans do," Tess said. "When the affection finally filters down to the next generation—the one not currently living on fixed incomes—I'm going to buy myself a château in France."

Sometimes this earned her a smile. Not from Ms. Neal, however. "I hope that didn't happen here." She wasn't more specific and didn't have to be. Tess knew what she was talking about, and Betsy Neal knew she knew.

Tess thought of revisiting the story she'd already told Patsy—the beeping smoke detector alarm, the cat under her feet, the collision with the newel post—and didn't bother. This woman had a look of daytime efficiency about her and probably visited The Stagger Inn as infrequently as possible during its hours of operation, but she was clearly under no illusions about what sometimes happened here when the hour grew late and the guests grew drunk. She was, after all, the one who came in early on Saturday mornings to make the courtesy calls. She had probably heard her share of morning-after stories featuring midnight stumbles, slips in the shower, etc., etc.

"Not here," Tess said. "Don't worry."

"Not even in the parking lot? If you ran into trouble there, I'll have to have Mr. Rumble talk with the security staff. Mr. Rumble's the boss, and security's supposed to check the video monitors regularly on busy nights."

"It happened after I left."

*I really do have to make the report anonymously now, if I mean to report it at all. Because I'm lying, and she'll remember.*

If she meant to report it at all? Of course she did. Right?

"I'm very sorry." Neal paused, seeming to debate with herself. Then she said, "I don't mean to offend you, but you probably don't have any business in a place like this to begin with. It didn't turn out so well for you, and if it got into the papers . . . well, my gran would be very disappointed."

Tess agreed. And because she could embellish convincingly (it was the talent that paid the bills, after all), she did. "A bad boyfriend is sharper than a serpent's tooth. I think the Bible says that. Or maybe it's Dr. Phil. In any case, I've broken up with him."

"A lot of women say that, then weaken. And a guy who does it once—"

"Will do it again. Yes, I know, I was very foolish. If you don't have my purse, what property of mine *do* you have?"

Ms. Neal turned in her swivel chair (the sun licked across her face, momentarily highlighting those unusual blue eyes), opened one of her file cabinets, and brought out Tom the Tomtom. Tess was delighted to see her old traveling buddy. It didn't make things all better, but it was a step in the right direction.

"We're not supposed to remove anything from patrons' cars, just get the address and the phone number if we can, then lock it up, but I didn't like to leave this. Thieves don't mind breaking a window to get a particularly tasty item, and it was sitting right there on your dashboard."

"Thank you." Tess felt tears springing into her eyes behind her dark glasses and willed them back. "That was very thoughtful."

Betsy Neal smiled, which transformed her stern Ms. Taking Care of Business face to radiant in an instant. "Very welcome. And when that boyfriend of yours comes crawling back, asking for a second chance, think of my gran and all your other loyal readers and tell him no way Jose." She considered. "But do it with the chain on your door. Because a bad boyfriend really *is* sharper than a serpent's tooth."

"That's good advice. Listen, I have to go. I told the cab to wait while I made sure I was really going to get my car."

And that might have been all—it really might have been—but then Neal asked, with becoming diffidence, if Tess would mind signing an autograph for her grandmother. Tess told her of course not, and in spite of all that had happened, watched with real amusement as Neal found a piece of business stationery and used a ruler to tear off the Stagger Inn logo at the top before handing it across the desk.

“Make it ‘To Mary, a true fan.’ Can you do that?”

Tess could. And as she was adding the date, a fresh confabulation came to mind. “A man helped me when my boyfriend and I were . . . you know, tussling. If not for him, I might have been hurt a lot worse.” *Yes! Raped, even!* “I’d like to thank him, but I don’t know his name.”

“I doubt if I could do you much good there. I’m just the office help.”

“But you’re local, right?”

“Yes . . .”

“I met him at the little store down the road.”

“The Gas & Dash?”

“I think that’s the name. It’s where my boyfriend and I had our argument. It was about the car. I didn’t want to drive and I wouldn’t let him. We were arguing about it all the time we walked down the road . . . staggered down the road . . . staggered down Stagg Road . . .”

Neal smiled as people do when they’ve heard a joke many times before.

“Anyway, this guy came along in an old blue pickup truck with that plastic stuff for rust around the headlights—”

“Bondo?”

“I think that’s what it’s called.” Knowing damn well that was what it was called. Her father had supported the company almost single-handed. “Anyway, I remember thinking when he got out that he wasn’t really riding in that truck, he was wearing it.”

When she handed the signed sheet of paper back across the desk, she saw that Betsy Neal was now actually grinning. “Oh my God, I might actually know who he was.”

“Really?”

“Was he big or was he *real* big?”

“Real big,” Tess said. She felt a peculiar watchful happiness that seemed located not in her head but in the center of her chest. It was the way she felt when the strings of some outlandish plot actually started to come together, pulling tight like the top of a nicely crafted tote-bag. She always felt both surprised and not surprised when this happened. There was no satisfaction like it.

“Did you happen to notice if he was wearing a ring on his little finger? Red stone?”

“Yes! Like a ruby! Only too big to be real. And a brown hat—”

Neal was nodding. “With white splatters on it. He’s been wearing the damn thing for ten years. That’s Big Driver you’re talking about. I don’t know where he lives, but he’s local, either Colewich or Nestor Falls. I see him around—supermarket, hardware store, Walmart, places like that. And once you see him, you don’t forget him. His real name is Al Something-Polish. You know, one of those hard-to-pronounce names. Strelkowicz, Stancowitz, something like that. I bet I could find him in the phone book, because he and his brother own a trucking company. Hawkline, I think it’s called. Or maybe Eagle Line. Something with a bird in it, anyway. Want me to look him up?”

“No, thanks,” Tess said pleasantly. “You’ve been helpful enough, and my cabdriver’s waiting.”

“Okay. Just do yourself a favor and stay away from that boyfriend of yours. And stay away from The Stagger. Of course, if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll have to find you and kill you.”

“Fair enough,” Tess said, smiling. “I’d deserve it.” At the doorway, she turned back. “A favor?”

“If I can.”

“If you happen to see Al Something-Polish around town, don’t mention that you talked to me.” She smiled more widely. It hurt her lips, but she did it. “I want to surprise him. Give him a little gift, or something.”

“Not a problem.”

Tess lingered a bit longer. “I love your eyes.”

Neal shrugged and smiled. “Thanks. They don’t quite match, do they? It used to make me self-conscious, but now . . .”

“Now it works for you,” Tess said. “You grew into them.”

“I guess I did. I even picked up some work modeling in my twenties. But sometimes, you know what? It’s better to grow out of things. Like a taste for bad-tempered men.”

To that there seemed to be nothing to say.

She made sure her Expedition would start, then tipped the cabdriver twenty instead of ten. He thanked her with feeling, then drove away toward the I-84. Tess followed, but not until she'd plugged Tom back into the cigarette lighter receptacle and powered him up.

"Hello, Tess," Tom said. "I see we're taking a trip."

"Just home, Tommy-boy," she said, and pulled out of the parking lot, very aware she was riding on a tire that had been mounted by the man who had almost killed her. Al Something-Polish. A truck-driving son of a gun. "One stop on the way."

"I don't know what you're thinking, Tess, but you should be careful."

If she had been home instead of in her car, Fritzzy would have been the one to say this, and Tess would have been equally unsurprised. She had been making up voices and conversations since childhood, although at the age of eight or nine, she'd quit doing it around other people, unless it was for comic effect.

"I don't know what I'm thinking, either," she said, but this was not quite true.

Up ahead was the US 47 intersection, and the Gas & Dash. She signaled, turned in, and parked with the Expedition's nose centered between the two pay phones on the side of the building. She saw the number for Royal Limousine on the dusty cinder block between them. The numbers were crooked, straggling, written by a finger that hadn't been able to stay steady. A chill shivered its way up her back, and she wrapped her arms around herself, hugging hard. Then she got out and went to the pay phone that still worked.

The instruction card had been defaced, maybe by a drunk with a car key, but she could still read the salient information: no charge for 911 calls, just lift the handset and punch in the numbers. Easy-as-can-beezy.

She punched 9, hesitated, punched 1, then hesitated again. She visualized a piñata, and a woman poised to hit it with a stick. Soon everything inside

would come tumbling out. Her friends and associates would know she had been raped. Patsy McClain would know the story about stumbling over Fritzzy in the dark was a shame-driven lie . . . and that Tess hadn't trusted her enough to tell the truth. But really, those weren't the main things. She supposed she could stand up to a little public scrutiny, especially if it kept the man Betsy Neal had called Big Driver from raping and killing another woman. Tess realized that she might even be perceived as a heroine, a thing that had been impossible to even consider last night, when urinating hurt enough to make her cry and her mind kept returning to the image of her stolen panties in the center pocket of the giant's bib overalls.

Only . . .

"What's in it for me?" she asked again. She spoke very quietly, while looking at the telephone number she'd written in the dust. "What's in that for me?"

And thought: *I have a gun and I know how to use it.*

She hung up the phone and went back to her car. She looked at Tom's screen, which was showing the intersection of Stag Road and Route 47. "I need to think about this some more," she said.

"What's to think about?" Tom asked. "If you were to kill him and then get caught, you'd go to jail. Raped or not."

"That's what I need to think about," she said, and turned onto US 47, which would take her to I-84.

Traffic on the big highway was Saturday-morning light, and being behind the wheel of her Expedition was good. Soothing. Normal. Tom was quiet until she passed the sign reading EXIT 9 STOKE VILLAGE 2 MILES. Then he said, "Are you sure it was an accident?"

"What?" Tess jumped, startled. She had heard Tom's words coming out of her mouth, spoken in the deeper voice she always used for the make-believe half of her make-believe conversations (it was a voice very little like Tom the Tomtom's actual robo-voice), but it didn't feel like her *thought*. "Are you saying the bastard raped me by *accident*?"

"No," Tom replied. "I'm saying that if it had been up to you, you would have gone back the way you came. *This* way. I-84. But somebody had a better idea, didn't they? Somebody knew a shortcut."

“Yes,” she agreed. “Ramona Norville did.” She considered it, then shook her head. “That’s pretty far-fetched, my friend.”

To this Tom made no reply.

Leaving the Gas & Dash, she had planned to go online and see if she could locate a trucking company, maybe a small independent, that operated out of Colewich or one of the surrounding towns. A company with a bird name, probably hawk or eagle. It was what the Willow Grove ladies would have done; they loved their computers and were always texting each other like teenagers. Other considerations aside, it would be interesting to see if her version of amateur sleuthing worked in real life.

Driving up the I-84 exit ramp a mile and a half from her house, she decided that she would do a little research on Ramona Norville first. Who knew, she might discover that, besides presiding over Books & Brown Baggers, Ramona was president of the Chicopee Rape Prevention Society. It was even plausible. Tess's hostess had pretty clearly been not just a lesbian but a *dyke* lesbian, and women of that persuasion were often not fond of men who were *non-rapists*.

"Many arsonists belong to their local volunteer fire departments," Tom observed as she turned onto her street.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Tess asked.

"That you shouldn't eliminate anyone based on their public affiliations. The Knitting Society ladies would never do that. But by all means check her out online." Tom spoke in a be-my-guest tone that Tess hadn't quite expected. It was mildly irritating.

"How kind of you to give me permission, Thomas," she said.

But when she was in her office with her computer booted up, she only stared at the Apple welcome screen for the first five minutes, wondering if she was really thinking of finding the giant and using her gun, or if that was just the sort of fantasy to which liars-for-profit such as herself were prone. A revenge fantasy, in this case. She avoided those kinds of movies, too, but she knew they were out there; you couldn't avoid the vibe of your culture unless you were a total recluse, and Tess wasn't. In the revenge movies, admirably muscular fellows like Charles Bronson and Sylvester Stallone didn't bother with the police, they got the baddies on their own. Frontier justice. Do you feel lucky, punk. She believed that even Jodie Foster, one of Yale's more famous graduates, had made a movie of this type. Tess couldn't quite remember the title. *The Courageous Woman*, maybe? It was something like that, anyway.

Her computer flipped to the word-of-the-day screen-saver. Today's word was *cormorant*, which just happened to be a bird.

"When you send your goodies by Cormorant Trucking, you'll think you're flying," Tess said in her deep pretending-to-be-Tom voice. Then she tapped a key and the screen-saver disappeared. She went online, but not to one of the search engines, at least not to begin with. First she went to YouTube and typed in RICHARD WIDMARK, with no idea at all why she was doing it. No conscious one, anyway.

*Maybe I want to find out if the guys really worthy of fanship*, she thought. *Ramona certainly thinks so.*

There were lots of clips. The top-rated one was a six-minute compilation titled **HE'S BAD, HE'S REALLY BAD**. Several hundred thousand people had viewed it. There were scenes from three movies, but the one that transfixed her was the first. It was black-and-white, it looked on the cheap side . . . but it was definitely one of *those* movies. Even the title told you so: *Kiss of Death*.

Tess watched the entire video, then returned to the *Kiss of Death* segment twice. Widmark played a giggling hood menacing an old lady in a wheelchair.

He wanted information: “Where’s that squealin’ son of yours?” And when the old lady wouldn’t tell him: “You know what I do to squealers? I let em have it in the belly, so they can roll around for a long time, thinkin’ it over.”

He didn’t shoot the old lady in the belly, though. He tied her into her wheelchair with a lamp cord and pushed her down the stairs.

Tess exited YouTube, Binged Richard Widmark, and found what she expected, given the power of that brief clip. Although he had played in many subsequent movies, more and more often as the hero, he was best known for *Kiss of Death*, and the giggling, psychotic Tommy Udo.

“Big deal,” Tess said. “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

“Meaning what?” Fritzzy asked from the windowsill where he was sunning himself.

“Meaning Ramona probably fell in love with him after seeing him play a heroic sheriff or a courageous battleship commander, or something like that.”

“She must have,” Fritzzy agreed, “because if you’re right about her sexual orientation, she probably doesn’t idolize men who murder old ladies in wheelchairs.”

Of course that was true. Good thinking, Fritzzy.

The cat regarded Tess with a skeptical eye and said, “But maybe you’re not right about that.”

“Even if I’m not,” Tess said, “*nobody* roots for psycho bad guys.”

She recognized this for the stupidity it was as soon as it was out of her mouth. If people didn’t root for psychos, they wouldn’t still be making movies about the nut in the hockey mask and the burn victim with scissors for fingers. But Fritzzy did her the courtesy of not laughing.

“You better not,” Tess said. “If you’re tempted, remember who fills your food dish.”

She googled *Ramona Norville*, got forty-four thousand hits, added *Chicopee*, and got a more manageable twelve hundred (although even most of those, she knew, would be coincidental dreck). The first relevant one was from the *Chicopee Weekly Reminder*, and concerned Tess herself: LIBRARIAN RAMONA NORVILLE ANNOUNCES “WILLOW GROVE FRIDAY.”

“There I am, the starring attraction,” Tess murmured. “Hooray for Tessa Jean. Now let’s see my supporting actress.” But when she pulled up the

clipping, the only photo Tess saw was her own. It was the bare-shoulders publicity shot her part-time assistant routinely sent out. She wrinkled her nose and went back to Google, not sure why she wanted to look at Ramona again, only knowing that she did. When she finally found a photo of the librarian, she saw what her subconscious might already have suspected, at least judging by Tom's comments on the ride back to her house.

It was in a story from the August 3 issue of the *Weekly Reminder*. BROWN BAGGERS ANNOUNCE SPEAKING SCHEDULE FOR FALL, the headline read. Below it, Ramona Norville stood on the library steps, smiling and squinting into the sun. A bad photograph, taken by a part-timer without much talent, and a bad (but probably typical) choice of clothes on Norville's part. The man-tailored blazer made her look as wide in the chest as a pro football tackle. Her shoes were ugly brown flatboats. A pair of too-tight gray slacks showcased what Tess and her friends back in middle school had called "thunder thighs."

"Holy fucking shit, Fritzzy," she said. Her voice was watery with dismay. "Look at this." Fritzzy didn't come over to look and didn't reply—how could he, when she was too upset to make his voice?

*Make sure of what you're seeing, she told herself. You've had a terrible shock, Tessa Jean, maybe the biggest shock a woman can have, short of a mortal diagnosis in a doctor's office. So make sure.*

She closed her eyes and summoned the image of the man from the old Ford pickup truck with the Bondo around the headlights. He had seemed so friendly at first. *Didn't think you were going to meet the Jolly Green Giant out here in the williwags, didja?*

Only he *hadn't* been green, he'd been a tanned hulk of a man who didn't ride in his pickup but wore it.

Ramona Norville, not a Big Driver but certainly a Big Librarian, was too old to be his sister. And if she was a lesbian now, she hadn't always been one, because the resemblance was unmistakable.

*Unless I'm badly mistaken, I'm looking at a picture of my rapist's mother.*

She went to the kitchen and had a drink of water, but water wasn't getting it. An old half-filled bottle of tequila had been brooding in a back corner of a kitchen cabinet for donkey's years. She took it out, considered a glass, then nipped directly from the bottle. It stung her mouth and throat, but had a positive effect otherwise. She helped herself to more—a sip rather than a nip—and then put the bottle back. She had no intention of getting drunk. If she had ever needed her wits about her, she needed them about her today.

Rage—the biggest, truest rage of her adult life—had invaded her like a fever, but it wasn't like any fever she had known previously. It circulated like weird serum, cold on the right side of her body, then hot on the left, where her heart was. It seemed to come nowhere near her head, which remained clear. Clearer since she'd had the tequila, actually.

She paced a series of rapid circles around the kitchen, head down, one hand massaging the ring of bruises around her throat. It did not occur to her that she was circling her kitchen as she had circled the deserted store after crawling out of the pipe Big Driver had meant for her tomb. Did she really think Ramona Norville had sent her, Tess, to her psychotic son like some kind of sacrifice? Was that likely? It was not. Could she even be sure that the two of them were mother and son, based on one bad photograph and her own memory?

*But my memory's good. Especially my memory for faces.*

Well, so she thought, but probably everyone did. Right?

*Yes, and the whole idea's crazy. You have to admit it is.*

She did admit it, but she had seen crazier things on true-crime programs (which she *did* watch). The ladies with the apartment house in San Francisco who had spent years killing their elderly tenants for their Social Security checks and burying them in the backyard. The airline pilot who murdered his wife, then froze the body so he could run her through the woodchipper behind the garage. The man who had doused his own children with gasoline and cooked

them like Cornish game hens to make sure his wife never got the custody the courts had awarded her. A woman sending victims to her own son was shocking and unlikely . . . but not impossible. When it came to the dark fuckery of the human heart, there seemed to be no limit.

“Oh boy,” she heard herself saying in a voice that combined dismay and anger. “Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy.”

*Find out. Find out for sure. If you can.*

She went back to her trusty computer. Her hands were trembling badly, and it took her three tries to enter COLEWICH TRUCKING FIRMS in the search field at the top of the Google page. Finally she got it right, hit enter, and there it was, at the top of the list: RED HAWK TRUCKING. The entry took her to the Red Hawk website, which featured a badly animated big rig with what she assumed was a red hawk on the side and a bizarre smiley-head man behind the wheel. The truck crossed the screen from right to left, flipped and came back left to right, then flipped again. An endless crisscross journey. The company’s motto flashed red, white, and blue above the animated truck: THE SMILES COME WITH THE SERVICE!

For those wishing to journey beyond the welcome screen, there were four or five choices, including phone numbers, rates, and testimonials from satisfied customers. Tess skipped these and clicked on the last one, which read CHECK OUT THE NEWEST ADDITION TO OUR FLEET! And when the picture came up, the final piece fell into place.

It was a much better photograph than the one of Ramona Norville standing on the library steps. In it, Tess’s rapist was sitting behind the wheel of a shiny cab-over Pete with RED HAWK TRUCKING COLEWICH, MASSACHUSETTS written on the door in fancy script. He wasn’t wearing his bleach-splattered brown cap, and the bristly blond crewcut revealed by its absence made him look even more like his mother, almost eerily so. His cheerful, you-can-trust-me grin was the one Tess had seen yesterday afternoon. The one he’d still been wearing when he said *Instead of changing your tire, how about I fuck you? How would that be?*

Looking at the photo made the weird rageserum cycle faster through her system. There was a pounding in her temples that wasn’t exactly a headache; in fact, it was almost pleasant.

He was wearing the red glass ring.

The caption below the picture read: “Al Strehlke, President of Red Hawk Trucking, seen here behind the wheel of the company’s newest acquisition, a 2008 Peterbilt 389. This horse of a hauler is now available to our customers, who are THE FINEST IN ALL THE LAND. Say! Doesn’t Al look like a Proud Papa?”

She heard him calling her a bitch, a whiny whore bitch, and clenched her hands into fists. She felt her fingernails sinking into her palms and clenched them even tighter, relishing the pain.

*Proud Papa.* That was what her eyes kept returning to. *Proud Papa.* The rage moved faster and faster, circling through her body the way she had circled her kitchen. The way she had circled the store last night, moving in and out of consciousness like an actress through a series of spotlights.

*You’re going to pay, Al. And never mind the cops, I’m the one coming to collect.*

And then there was Ramona Norville. The proud papa’s proud mama. Although Tess was still not sure of her. Partly it was not wanting to believe that a woman could allow something so horrible to happen to another woman, but she could also see an innocent explanation. Chicopee wasn’t that far from Colewich, and Ramona would have used the Stagg Road shortcut all the time when she went there.

“To visit her son,” Tess said, nodding. “To visit the proud papa with the new cab-over Pete. For all I know, she might be the one who took the picture of him behind the wheel.” And why wouldn’t she recommend her favorite route to that day’s speaker?

*But why didn’t she say, “I go that way all the time to visit my son”? Wouldn’t that be natural?*

“Maybe she doesn’t talk to strangers about the Strehlke phase of her life,” Tess said. “The phase before she discovered short hair and comfortable shoes.” It was possible, but there was the scatter of nail-studded boards to think about. The trap. Norville had sent her that way, and the trap had been set ahead of time. Because she had called him? Called him and said *I’m sending you a juicy one, don’t miss out?*

*It still doesn’t mean she was involved . . . or not knowingly involved. The proud papa could keep track of her guest speakers, how hard would that be?*

“Not hard at all,” Fritzzy said after leaping up on her filing cabinet. He began to lick one of his paws.

“And if he saw a photo of one he liked . . . a reasonably attractive one . . . I suppose he’d know his mother would send her back by . . .” She stopped. “No, that doesn’t scan. Without some input from Ma, how would he know I wasn’t driving to my home in Boston? Or flying back to my home in New York City?”

“You googled *him*,” Fritzzy said. “Maybe he googled *you*. Just like she did. Everything’s on the Internet these days; you said so yourself.”

That hung together, if only by a thread.

She thought there was one way to find out for sure, and that was to pay Ms. Norville a surprise visit. Look in her eyes when she saw Tess. If there was nothing in them but surprise and curiosity at the Return of the Willow Grove Scribe . . . to Ramona’s home rather than her library . . . that would be one thing. But if there was fear in them as well, the kind that might be prompted by the thought *why are you here instead of in a rusty culvert on the Stagg Road* . . . well . . .

“That would be different, Fritzzy. Wouldn’t it?”

Fritzzy looked at her with his cunning green eyes, still licking his paw. It looked harmless, that paw, but there were claws hidden inside it. Tess had seen them, and on occasion felt them.

*She found out where I lived; let’s see if I can return the favor.*

Tess went back to her computer, this time searching for a Books & Brown Baggers website. She was quite sure she’d find one—everybody had websites these days, there were prisoners doing life for murder who had websites—and she did. The Brown Baggers posted newsy notes about their members, book reviews, and informal summaries—not quite minutes—of their meetings. Tess chose the latter and began scrolling. It did not take her long to discover that the June 10 meeting had been held at Ramona Norville’s home in Brewster. Tess had never been to this town, but knew where it was, had passed a green turnpike sign pointing to it while on her way to yesterday’s gig. It was only two or three exits south of Chicopee.

Next she went to the Brewster Township tax records and scrolled down until she found Ramona’s name. She had paid \$913.06 in property taxes the

year before; said property at 75 Lacemaker Lane.

“Found you, dear,” Tess murmured.

“You need to think about how you’re going to handle this,” Fritzy said. “And about how far you’re willing to go.”

“If I’m right,” Tess said, “maybe quite far.”

She started to turn off her computer, then thought of one more thing worth checking out, although she knew it might come to nothing. She went to the *Weekly Reminder*’s home page and clicked on OBITUARIES. There was a place to enter the name you were interested in, and Tess typed STREHLKE. There was a single hit, for a man named Roscoe Strehlke. According to the 1999 obit, he had died suddenly in his home, at the age of forty-eight. Survived by his wife, Ramona, and two sons: Alvin (23) and Lester (17). For a mystery writer, even of the bloodless sort known as “cozies,” *died suddenly* was a red flag. She searched the *Reminder*’s general database and found nothing more.

She sat still for a moment, drumming her fingers restlessly against the arms of her chair as she did when she was working and found herself stuck for a word, a phrase, or a way of describing something. Then she looked for a list of newspapers in western and southern Massachusetts, and found the Springfield *Republican*. When she typed the name of Ramona Norville’s husband, the headline that came up was stark and to the point: CHICOPEE BUSINESSMAN COMMITS SUICIDE.

Strehlke had been discovered in his garage, hanging from a rafter. There was no note and Ramona wasn’t quoted, but a neighbor said that Mr. Strehlke had been distraught over “some trouble his older boy had been in.”

“What kind of trouble was Al in that got you so upset?” Tess asked the computer screen. “Was it something to do with a girl? Assault, maybe? Sexual battery? Was he working up to bigger things, even then? If that’s why you hung yourself, you were one chickenshit daddy.”

“Maybe Roscoe had help,” Fritzy said. “From Ramona. Big strong woman, you know. You *ought* to know; you saw her.”

Again, that didn’t sound like the voice she made when she was essentially talking to herself. She looked at Fritzy, startled. Fritzy looked back: green eyes asking *who, me?*

What Tess wanted to do was drive directly to Lacemaker Lane with her gun in her purse. What she *ought* to do was stop playing detective and call the police. Let them handle it. It was what the Old Tess would have done, but she was no longer that woman. That woman now seemed to her like a distant relative, the kind you sent a card to at Christmas and forgot for the rest of the year.

Because she couldn't decide—and because she hurt all over—she went upstairs and back to bed. She slept for four hours and got up almost too stiff to walk. She took two extra-strength Tylenol, waited until they improved matters, then drove down to Blockbuster video. She carried the Lemon Squeezer in her purse. She thought she would always carry it now while she was riding alone.

She got to Blockbuster just before closing and asked for a Jodie Foster movie called *The Courageous Woman*. The clerk (who had green hair, a safety pin in one ear, and looked all of eighteen years old) smiled indulgently and told her the film was actually called *The Brave One*. Mr. Retro Punk told her that for an extra fifty cents, she could get a bag of microwave popcorn to go with. Tess almost said no, then reconsidered. “Why the fuck not?” she asked Mr. Retro Punk. “You only live once, right?”

He gave her a startled, reconsidering look, then smiled and agreed that it was a case of one life to a customer.

At home, she popped the corn, inserted the DVD, and plopped onto the couch with a pillow at the small of her back to cushion the scrape there. Fritzzy joined her and they watched Jodie Foster go after the men (the *punks*, as in *do you feel lucky, punk*) who had killed her boyfriend. Foster got assorted other punks along the way, and used a pistol to do it. *The Brave One* was very much *that* kind of a movie, but Tess enjoyed it just the same. She thought it made perfect sense. She also thought that she had been missing something all these years: the low but authentic catharsis movies like *The Brave One* offered. When it was over, she turned to Fritzzy and said, “I wish Richard Widmark had met Jodie Foster instead of the old lady in the wheelchair, don't you?”

Fritzzy agreed one thousand percent.

Lying in bed that night with an October wind getting up to dickens around the house and Fritzzy beside her, curled up nose to tail, Tess made an agreement with herself: if she woke up tomorrow feeling as she did now, she would go to see Ramona Norville, and perhaps after Ramona—depending on how things turned out on Lacemaker Lane—she would pay a visit to Alvin “Big Driver” Strehlke. More likely she’d wake up with some semblance of sanity restored and call the police. No anonymous call, either; she’d face the music and dance. Proving actual rape forty hours and God knew how many showers after the fact might be difficult, but the signs of sexual battery were written all over her body.

And the women in the pipe: she was their advocate, like it or not.

*Tomorrow all these revenge ideas will seem silly to me. Like the kind of delusions people have when they're sick with a high fever.*

But when she woke up on Sunday, she was still in full New Tess mode. She looked at the gun on the night table and thought, *I want to use it. I want to take care of this myself, and given what I've been through, I deserve to take care of it myself.*

“But I need to make sure, and I don’t want to get caught,” she said to Fritzzy, who was now on his feet and stretching, getting ready for another exhausting day of lying around and snacking from his bowl.

Tess showered, dressed, then took a yellow legal pad out to the sunporch. She stared at her back lawn for almost fifteen minutes, occasionally sipping at a cooling cup of tea. Finally she wrote DON’T GET CAUGHT at the top of the first sheet. She considered this soberly, and then began making notes. As with each day’s work when she was writing a book, she started slowly, but picked up speed.

By ten o'clock she was ravenous. She cooked herself a huge brunch and ate every bite. Then she took her movie back to Blockbuster and asked if they had *Kiss of Death*. They didn't, but after ten minutes of browsing, she settled on a substitute called *Last House on the Left*. She took it home and watched closely. In the movie, men raped a young girl and left her for dead. It was so much like what had happened to her that Tess burst into tears, crying so loudly that Fritzy ran from the room. But she stuck with it and was rewarded with a happy ending: the parents of the young girl murdered the rapists.

She returned the disc to its case, which she left on the table in the hall. She would return it tomorrow, if she were still alive tomorrow. She planned to be, but nothing was certain; there were many strange twists and devious turns as one hopped down the overgrown bunny-trail of life. Tess had found this out for herself.

With time to kill—the daylight hours seemed to move so slowly—she went back online, searching for information about the trouble Al Strehlke had been in before his father committed suicide. She found nothing. Possibly the neighbor was full of shit (neighbors so often were), but Tess could think of another scenario: the trouble might have occurred while Strehlke was still a minor. In cases like that, names weren't released to the press and the court records (assuming the case had even gone to court) were sealed.

"But maybe he got worse," she told Fritzy.

"Those guys often do get worse," Fritzy agreed. (This was rare; Tom was usually the agreeable one. Fritzy's role tended to be devil's advocate.)

"Then, a few years later, something else happened. Something worse. Say Mom helped him to cover it up—"

"Don't forget the younger brother," Fritzy said. "Lester. He might have been in on it, too."

"Don't confuse me with too many characters, Fritz. All I know is that Al Fucking Big Driver raped me, and his mother may have been an accessory.

That's enough for me."

"Maybe Ramona's his aunt," Fritzzy speculated.

"Oh, shut up," Tess said, and Fritzzy did.

She lay down at four o'clock, not expecting to sleep a wink, but her healing body had its own priorities. She went under almost instantly, and when she woke to the insistent *dah-dah-dah* of her bedside clock, she was glad she had set the alarm. Outside, a gusty October breeze was combing leaves from the trees and sending them across her backyard in colorful skitters. The light had gone that strange and depthless gold which seems the exclusive property of late-fall afternoons in New England.

Her nose was better—the pain there down to a dull throb—but her throat was still sore and she hobbled rather than walked to the bathroom. She got into the shower and stayed in the stall until the bathroom was as foggy as an English moor in a Sherlock Holmes story. The shower helped. A couple of Tylenol from the medicine cabinet would help even more.

She dried her hair, then swiped a clear place on the mirror. The woman in the glass looked back from eyes haunted by rage and sanity. The glass didn't stay clear for long, but it was long enough for Tess to realize that she really meant to do this, no matter the consequences.

She dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and black cargo pants with big flap pockets. She tied her hair up in a bun and then yanked on a big black gimme cap. The bun made the cap bulge a little behind, but at least no potential witness would be able to say, *I didn't get a good look at her face, but she had long blond hair. It was tied back in one of those scrunchie things. You know, the kind you can buy at JCPenney.*

She went down to the basement where her kayak had been stored since Labor Day and took the reel of yellow boat-line from the shelf above it. She used the hedge clippers to cut off four feet, wound it around her forearm, then slipped the coil into one of her big pants pockets. Upstairs again in the kitchen, she tucked her Swiss Army knife into the same pocket—the left. The right pocket was for the Lemon Squeezer .38 . . . and one other item, which she took from the drawer next to the stove. Then she spooned out double

rations for Fritzzy, but before she let him start eating, she hugged him and kissed the top of his head. The old cat flattened his ears (more in surprise than distaste, probably; she wasn't ordinarily a kissy mistress) and hurried to his dish as soon as she put him down.

"Make that last," Tess told him. "Patsy will check on you eventually if I don't come back, but it could be a couple of days." She smiled a little and added, "I love you, you scruffy old thing."

"Right, right," Fritzzy said, then got busy eating.

Tess checked her DON'T GET CAUGHT memo one more time, mentally inventorying her supplies as she did so and going over the steps she intended to take once she got to Lacemaker Lane. She thought the most important thing to keep in mind was that things wouldn't go as she hoped they would. When it came to things like this, there were always jokers in the deck. Ramona might not be at home. Or she might be home but with her rapist-murderer son, the two of them cozied up in the living room and watching something uplifting from Blockbuster. *Saw*, maybe. The younger brother—no doubt known in Colewich as Little Driver—might be there, as well. For all Tess knew, Ramona might be hosting a Tupperware party or a reading circle tonight. The important thing was not to get flummoxed by unexpected developments. If she couldn't improvise, Tess thought it very likely that she really was leaving her house in Stoke Village for the last time.

She burned the DON'T GET CAUGHT memo in the fireplace, stirred the ashes apart with the poker, then put on her leather jacket and a pair of thin leather gloves. The jacket had a deep pocket in the lining. Tess slipped one of her butcher knives into it, just for good luck, then told herself not to forget it was there. The last thing she needed this weekend was an accidental mastectomy.

Just before stepping out the door, she set the burglar alarm.

The wind surrounded her immediately, flapping the collar of her jacket and the legs of her cargo pants. Leaves swirled in mini-cyclones. In the not-quite-dark sky above her tasteful little piece of Connecticut suburbia, clouds scudded across the face of a three-quarter moon. Tess thought it was a fine night for a horror movie.

She got into her Expedition and closed the door. A leaf spun down on the windshield, then dashed away. “I’ve lost my mind,” she said matter-of-factly. “It fell out and died in that culvert, or when I was walking around the store. It’s the only explanation for this.”

She started the engine. Tom the Tomtom lit up and said, “Hello, Tess. I see we’re taking a trip.”

“That’s right, my friend.” Tess leaned forward and programmed 75 Lacemaker Lane into Tom’s tidy little mechanical head.

She had checked out Ramona's neighborhood on Google Earth, and it looked the same when she got there. So far, so good. Brewster was a small New England town, Lacemaker Lane was on the outskirts, and the houses were far apart. Tess cruised past number 75 at a sedately suburban twenty miles an hour, determining that the lights were on and only a single car—a late-model Subaru that almost screamed librarian—was in the driveway. There was no sign of a cab-over Pete or any other big rig. No old Bondo-patched pickup, either.

The street ended in a turnaround. Tess took it, came back, and turned into Norville's driveway without giving herself a chance to hesitate. She killed the lights and the motor, then took a long, deep breath.

"Come back safe, Tess," Tom said from his place on the dashboard. "Come back safe and I'll take you to your next stop."

"I'll do my best." She grabbed her yellow legal pad (there was now nothing written on it) and got out of her car. She held the pad to the front of her jacket as she walked to Ramona Norville's door. Her moonshadow—perhaps all that was left of the Old Tess—walked beside her.

Norville's front door had beveled glass strips on either side. They were thick and warped the view, but Tess could make out nice wallpaper and a hallway floored with polished wood. There was an end table with a couple of magazines on it. Or maybe they were catalogues. There was a big room at the end of the hall. The sound of a TV came from there. She heard singing, so Ramona probably wasn't watching *Saw*. In fact—if Tess was right and the song was “Climb Ev'ry Mountain”—Ramona was watching *The Sound of Music*.

Tess rang the doorbell. From inside came a run of chimes that sounded like the opening notes of “Dixie”—a strange choice for New England, but then, if Tess was right about her, Ramona Norville was a strange woman.

Tess heard the clump of big feet and made a half-turn, so the light from the beveled glass would catch only a bit of her face. She lowered her blank pad from her chest and made writing motions with one gloved hand. She let her shoulders slump a little. She was a woman taking some kind of survey. It was Sunday evening, she was tired, all she wanted was to discover the name of this woman's favorite toothpaste (or maybe if she had Prince Albert in a can) and then go home.

*Don't worry, Ramona, you can open the door, anybody can see that I'm harmless, the kind of woman who wouldn't say boo to a goose.*

From the corner of her eye she glimpsed a distorted fish-face swim into view behind the beveled glass. There was a pause that seemed to last a very long time, then Ramona Norville opened the door. “Yes? Can I help y—”

Tess turned back. The light from the open door fell on her face. And the shock she saw on Norville's face, the utter drop-jaw shock, told her everything she needed to know.

“*You?* What are *you* doing h—”

Tess pulled the Lemon Squeezer .38 from her right front pocket. On the drive from Stoke Village she had imagined it getting stuck in there—had imagined it with nightmarish clarity—but it came out smoothly.

“Move back from the door. If you try to shut it, I’ll shoot you.”

“You won’t,” Norville said. She didn’t move back, but she didn’t shut the door, either. “Are you crazy?”

“Get inside.”

Norville was wearing a big blue housecoat, and when Tess saw the front of it rise precipitously, she raised the gun. “If you even start to yell, I’ll shoot. You better believe me, bitch, because I’m not even close to kidding.”

Norville’s large bosom deflated. Her lips were drawn back from her teeth and her eyes were shifting from side to side in their sockets. She didn’t look like a librarian now, and she didn’t look jovial and welcoming. To Tess she looked like a rat caught outside its hole.

“If you fire that gun, the whole neighborhood will hear.”

Tess doubted that, but didn’t argue. “It won’t matter to you, because you’ll be dead. Get inside. If you behave yourself and answer my questions, you might still be alive tomorrow morning.”

Norville backed up, and Tess came in through the open door with the gun held stiffly out in front of her. As soon as she closed the door—she did it with her foot—Norville stopped moving. She was standing by the little table with the catalogues on it.

“No grabbing, no throwing,” Tess said, and saw by the twitch of the other woman’s mouth that grabbing and throwing had indeed been in Ramona’s mind. “I can read you like a book. Why else would I be here? Keep backing up. All the way down to the living room. I just love the Trapp Family when they’re really rocking.”

“You’re crazy,” Ramona said, but she began to back up again. She was wearing shoes. Even in her housecoat she was wearing big ugly shoes. Men’s laceups. “I have no idea what you’re doing here, but—”

“Don’t bullshit me, Mommy. Don’t you *dare*. It was all on your face when you opened the door. Every bit of it. You thought I was dead, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“It’s just us girls, so why not fess up?”

They were in the living room now. There were sentimental paintings on the walls—clowns, waifs with big eyes—and lots of shelves and tables cluttered with knickknacks: snowglobes, troll babies, Hummel figures, Care Bears, a

ceramic candy house à la Hansel and Gretel. Although Norville was a librarian, there were no books in evidence. Facing the TV was a La-Z-Boy with a hassock in front of it. There was a TV tray beside the chair. On it was a bag of Cheez Doodles, a large bottle of Diet Coke, the remote control, and a *TV Guide*. On top of the television was a framed photograph of Ramona and another woman with their arms around each other and their cheeks pressed together. It looked as if it had been taken at an amusement park or a county fair. In front of the photo was a glass candy dish that gleamed with sparkle-points of light beneath the overhead fixture.

“How long have you been doing it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“How long have you been pimping for your homicidal rapist of a son?”

Norville’s eyes flickered, but again she denied it . . . which presented Tess with a problem. When she had come here, killing Ramona Norville had seemed not just an option but the most likely outcome. Tess had been almost positive she could do it, and that the boat-rope in the left front pocket of her cargo pants would go unused. Now, however, she discovered she couldn’t go ahead unless the woman admitted her complicity. Because what had been written on her face when she’d seen Tess standing at her door, bruised but otherwise very much alive, wasn’t enough.

Not quite enough.

“When did it start? How old was he? Fifteen? Did he claim he was ‘just foolin around’? That’s what a lot of them claim when they first start.”

“I have no idea what you mean. You come to the library and put on a perfectly acceptable presentation—lackluster, obviously you were only there for the money, but at least it filled the open date on our calendar—and the next thing I know you’re on my doorstep, pointing a gun and making all sorts of wild—”

“It’s no good, Ramona. I saw his picture on the Red Hawk website. Ring and all. He raped me and tried to kill me. He thought he *did* kill me. *And you sent me to him.*”

Norville’s mouth dropped open in a gruesome combination of shock, dismay, and guilt. “*That’s not true! You stupid cunt, you don’t know what you’re talking about!*” She started forward.

Tess raised the gun. “Nuh-uh, don’t do that. No.”

Norville stopped, but Tess didn’t think she would stay stopped for long. She was nerving herself up for either fight or flight. And because she had to know Tess would follow her if she tried to run deeper into the house, it would probably be fight.

The Trapp Family was singing again. Given the situation Tess was in—that she had put herself in—all that happy choral crap was maddening. Keeping the Lemon Squeezer trained on Norville with her right hand, Tess picked up the remote with her left and muted the TV. She started to put the remote down again, then froze. There were two things on top of the TV, but at first she had only registered the picture of Ramona and her girlfriend; the candy dish had just earned a glance.

Now she saw that the sparkles she had assumed were coming from the cut-glass sides of the dish weren’t coming from the sides at all. They were coming from something inside. Her earrings were in the dish. Her diamond earrings.

Norville grabbed the Hansel and Gretel candy house from its shelf and threw it. She threw it hard. Tess ducked and the candy house went an inch over her head, shattering on the wall behind her. She stepped backward, tripped over the hassock, and went sprawling. The gun flew from her hand.

They both went for it, Norville dropping to her knees and slamming her shoulder against Tess’s arm and shoulder like a football tackle intent on sacking the quarterback. She grabbed the gun, at first juggling it and then securing her grip. Tess reached inside her jacket and closed her hand around the handle of the butcher knife that was her backup, aware that she was going to be too late. Norville was too big . . . and too maternal. Yes, that was it. She had protected that rogue son of hers for years, and was intent on protecting him now. Tess should have shot her in the hall, the moment the door was shut behind her.

*But I couldn’t*, she thought, and even at this moment, knowing it was the truth brought some comfort. She got up on her knees, hand still inside the jacket, facing Ramona Norville.

“You’re a shitty writer and you were a shitty guest speaker,” Norville said. She was smiling, speaking faster and faster. Her voice had a nasal auctioneer’s lilt. “You phoned in your talk the same way you phone in your stupid books. You were perfect for him and he was going to do someone, I know the signs. I

sent you that way and it worked out right and I'm glad he fucked you. I don't know what you thought you were going to do, coming here, but this is what you get."

She pulled the trigger and there was nothing but a dry click. Tess had taken lessons when she bought the gun, and the most important had been not to put a bullet in the chamber that would first fall under the hammer. Just in case the trigger was pulled by accident.

An expression of almost comical surprise came over Norville's face. It made her young again. She looked down at the gun, and when she did, Tess drew the knife from the inside pocket of the jacket, stumbled forward, and jammed it up to the hilt in Norville's belly.

The woman made a glassy "OOO-OOOO" sound that tried to be a scream and failed. Tess's pistol dropped and Ramona staggered back against the wall, looking down at the handle of the knife. One flailing arm struck a rank of Hummel figures. They tumbled from the shelf and shattered on the floor. She made that "OOO-OOOO" sound again. The front of the housecoat was still unstained, but blood began to patter from beneath its hem, onto Ramona Norville's manshoes. She put her hands on the haft of the knife, tried to tug it free, and made the "OOO-OOOO" for the third time.

She looked up at Tess, unbelieving. Tess looked back. She was remembering something that had happened on her tenth birthday. Her father had given her a slingshot, and she had gone out looking for things to shoot with it. At some point, five or six blocks from her house, she had seen a raggedy-eared stray dog rooting in a garbage can. She had put a small rock in her slingshot and fired at it, only meaning to scare the dog away (or so she told herself), but hitting it in the rump instead. The dog had made a miserable *ike-ike-ike* sound and run away, but before it did, it gave Tess a look of reproach she had never forgotten. She would have given anything to take that casual shot back, and she had never fired her slingshot at another living thing. She understood that killing was a part of life—she felt no compunction about swatting mosquitoes, put down traps when she saw mouse-droppings in the cellar, and had eaten her fair share of Mickey D's Quarter Pounders—but then she had believed she would never again be able to hurt something that way without feeling remorse or regret. She suffered neither in the living room of the house on Lacemaker

Lane. Perhaps because, in the end, it had been self-defense. Or perhaps that wasn't it at all.

"Ramona," she said, "I'm feeling a certain kinship to Richard Widmark right now. This is what we do to squealers, honey."

Norville was standing in a puddle of her own blood and her housecoat was at last blooming with blood-poppies. Her face was pale. Her dark eyes were huge and glittery with shock. Her tongue came out and swiped slowly across her lower lip.

"Now you can roll around for a long time, thinkin' it over—how would that be?"

Norville began to slide. Her manshoes made squittering sounds in the blood. She groped for one of the other shelves and pulled it off the wall. A platoon of Care Bears tilted forward and committed suicide.

Although she still felt no regret or remorse, Tess found that, in spite of her big talk, she had very little inner Tommy Udo; she had no urge to watch or prolong Norville's suffering. She bent and picked up the .38. From the right front pocket of her cargo pants she removed the item she had taken from the kitchen drawer beside her stove. It was a quilted oven glove. It would silence a single pistol shot quite effectively, as long as the caliber wasn't too big. She had learned this while writing *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes on a Mystery Cruise*.

"You don't understand." Norville's voice was a harsh whisper. "You can't do this. It's a mistake. Take me . . . hospital."

"The mistake was yours." Tess pulled the oven glove over the pistol, which was in her right hand. "It was not having your son castrated as soon as you found out what he was." She put the oven glove against Ramona Norville's temple, turned her head slightly to one side, and pulled the trigger. There was a low, emphatic *pluh* sound, like a big man clearing his throat.

That was all.

She hadn't googled Al Strehlke's home address; she had been expecting to get that from Norville. But, as she had already reminded herself, things like this never went according to plan. What she had to do now was keep her wits about her and carry the job through to the end.

Norville's home office was upstairs, in what had probably been meant as a spare bedroom. There were more Care Bears and Hummels here. There were also half a dozen framed pictures, but none of her sons, her main squeeze, or the late great Roscoe Strehlke; these were autographed photos of writers who had spoken to the Brown Baggers. The room reminded Tess of the Stagger Inn's foyer, with its band photos.

*She didn't ask for an autograph on my photo, Tess thought. Of course not, why would she want to be reminded of a shitty writer like me? I was basically just a talking head to fill a hole in her schedule. Not to mention meat for her son's meatgrinder. How lucky for them that I came along at the right time.*

On Norville's desk, below a bulletin board buried in circulars and library correspondence, was a desktop Mac very much like Tess's. The screen was dark, but the glowing light on the CPU told her it was only sleeping. She pushed one of the keys with a gloved fingertip. The screen refreshed and she was looking at Norville's electronic desktop. No need for those pesky passwords, how nice.

Tess clicked the address book icon, scrolled down to the R's, and found Red Hawk Trucking. The address was 7 Transport Plaza, Township Road, Colewich. She scrolled further, to the S's, and found both her overgrown acquaintance from Friday night and her acquaintance's brother, Lester. Big Driver and Little Driver. They both lived on Township Road, near the company they must have inherited from their father: Alvin at number 23, Lester at number 101.

*If there was a third brother, she thought, they'd be The Three Little Truckers. One in a house of straw, one in a house of sticks, one in a house of bricks. Alas,*

*there are only two.*

Downstairs again, she plucked her earrings from the glass dish and put them in her coat pocket. She looked at the dead woman sitting against the wall as she did it. There was no pity in the glance, only the sort of parting acknowledgment anyone may give to a piece of hard work that has now been finished. There was no need to worry about trace evidence; Tess was confident she had left none, not so much as a single strand of hair. The oven-glove—now with a hole blown in it—was back in her pocket. The knife was a common item sold in department stores all over America. For all she knew (or cared), it matched Ramona's own set. So far she was clean, but the hard part might still be ahead. She left the house, got in her car, and drove away. Fifteen minutes later she pulled into the lot of a deserted strip mall long enough to program 23 Township Road, Colewich, into her GPS.

With Tom's guidance, Tess found herself near her destination not long after nine o'clock. The three-quarter moon was still low in the sky. The wind was blowing harder than ever.

Township Road branched off US 47, but at least seven miles from The Stagger Inn and even farther from Colewich's downtown. Transport Plaza was at the intersection of the two roads. According to the signage, three trucking firms and a moving company were based here. The buildings that housed them had an ugly prefab look. The smallest belonged to Red Hawk Trucking. All were dark on this Sunday night. Beyond them were acres of parking lot surrounded by Cyclone fence and lit with high-intensity arc lights. The depot lot was full of parked cabs and freight haulers. At least one of the cab-overs had RED HAWK TRUCKING on the side, but Tess didn't think it was the one pictured on the website, the one with the Proud Papa behind the wheel.

There was a truck stop adjacent to the depot area. The pumps—over a dozen—were lit by the same high-intensity arcs. Bright white fluorescents spilled out from the right side of the main building; the left side was dark. There was another building, this one U-shaped, to the rear. A scattering of cars and trucks was parked there. The sign out by the road was a huge digital job, loaded with bright red information.

RICHIE'S TOWNSHIP ROAD TRUCK STOP  
"YOU DRIVE 'EM, WE FILL 'EM"  
REG \$2.99 GAL  
DIESEL \$2.69 GAL  
NEWEST LOTTERY TIX ALWAYS AVAILABLE  
RESTAURANT CLOSED SUN. NITE  
SORRY NO SHOWERS SUN. NITE  
STORE & MOTEL "ALWAYS OPEN"  
RVS "ALWAYS WELCOME"

And at the bottom, badly spelled but fervent:

SUPPORT OUR TROOPS!  
WIN IN AFGANDISTAN!

With truckers coming and going, fueling up both their rigs and themselves (even with its lights off, Tess could tell that, when open, the restaurant was of the sort where chicken-fried steak, meatloaf, and Mom's Bread Pudding would always be on the menu), the place would probably be a beehive of activity during the week, but on Sunday night it was a graveyard because there was nothing out here, not even a roadhouse like The Stagger.

There was only a single vehicle parked at the pumps, facing out toward the road with a pump nozzle stuck in its gas hatch. It was an old Ford F-150 pickup with Bondo around the headlights. It was impossible to read the color in the harsh lighting, but Tess didn't have to. She had seen that truck close up, and knew the color. The cab was empty.

"You don't seem surprised, Tess," Tom said as she slowed to a stop on the shoulder of the road and squinted at the store. She could make out a couple of people in there in spite of the glare from the harsh outside lighting, and she could see that one of them was big. *Was he big or real big?* Betsy Neal had asked.

"I'm not surprised at all," she said. "He lives out here. Where else would he go to gas up?"

"Maybe he's getting ready to take a trip."

"This late on Sunday night? I don't think so. I think he was at home, watching *The Sound of Music*. I think he drank up all of his beer and came down here for more. He decided to top off his tank while he was at it."

"You could be wrong, though. Hadn't you better pull in behind the store and follow him when he leaves?"

But Tess didn't want to do that. The front of the truck-stop store was all glass. He might look out and see her when she drove in. Even if the bright lighting above the pump islands made it hard for him to see her face, he might recognize the vehicle. There were lots of Ford SUVs on the road, but after Friday night, Al Strehlke had to be particularly sensitized to black Ford

Expeditions. And there was her license plate—surely he would have noticed her Connecticut license plate on Friday, when he pulled up beside her in the gone-to-weeds parking lot of the deserted store.

There was something else. Something even more important. She got rolling again, putting Richie's Township Road Truck Stop in the rearview.

"I don't want to be behind him," she said. "I want to be ahead of him. I want to be waiting for him."

"What if he's married, Tess?" Tom asked. "What if he's got a wife waiting for him?"

The idea startled her for a moment. Then she smiled, and not just because the only ring he'd been wearing was the one too big to be a ruby. "Guys like him don't have wives," she said. "Not ones that stick around, anyway. There was only one woman in Al's life, and she's dead."

Unlike Lacemaker Lane, there was nothing suburban about Township Road; it was as country as Travis Tritt. The houses were glimmering islands of electric light beneath the glow of the rising moon.

“Tess, you are approaching your destination,” Tom said in his non-imaginary voice.

She breasted a rise, and there on her left was a mailbox marked STREHLKE and 23. The driveway was long, rising on a curve, paved with asphalt, smooth as black ice. Tess turned in without hesitation, but apprehension dropped over her as soon as Township Road was behind her. She had to fight to keep from jamming on the brakes and backing out again. Because if she kept going, she had no choice. She’d be like a bug in a bottle. And even if he *wasn’t* married, what if someone else was up there at the house? Brother Les, for instance? What if Big Driver had been at Tommy’s buying beer and snacks not for one but for two?

Tess killed her headlights and drove on by moonlight.

In her keyed-up state, the driveway seemed to go on forever, but it could have been no more than an eighth of a mile before she saw the lights of Strehlke’s house. It was at the top of the hill, a tidy-looking place that was bigger than a cottage but smaller than a farmhouse. Not a house of bricks, but not a humble house of straw, either. In the story of the three little pigs and the big bad wolf, Tess reckoned this would have been the house of sticks.

Parked on the left side of the house was a long trailer-box with RED HAWK TRUCKING on the side. Parked at the end of the driveway, in front of the garage, was the cab-over Pete from the website. It looked haunted in the moonlight. Tess slowed as she approached it, and then she was flooded with a white glare that dazzled her eyes and lit the lawn and the driveway. It was a motion-activated pole light, and if Strehlke came back while it was on, he would be able to see its glow at the foot of his driveway. Maybe even while he was still approaching on Township Road.

She jammed on the brakes, feeling as she had when, as a teenager, she'd dreamed of finding herself in school with no clothes on. She heard a woman groaning. She supposed it was her, but it didn't sound or feel like her.

"This isn't good, Tess."

"Shut up, Tom."

"He could come back any minute, and you don't know how long the timer on that thing is. You had trouble with the mother. He's *much* bigger than her."

"I said shut *up*!"

She tried to think, but that blaring light made it hard. Shadows from the parked cab-over and the long-box to her left seemed to reach for her with sharp black fingers—boogeyman fingers. Goddam pole light! Of *course* a man like him would have a pole light! She ought to go right now, just turn around on his lawn and drive back down to the road as fast as she could, but she would meet him if she did. She knew it. And with the element of surprise gone, she would die.

*Think, Tessa Jean, think!*

And oh God, just to make things a little worse, a dog started barking. There was a dog in the house. She imagined a pit bull with a headful of jutting teeth.

"If you're going to stay, you need to get out of sight," Tom said . . . and no, that didn't sound like her voice. Or not *exactly* like her voice. Perhaps it was the one that belonged to her deepest self, the survivor. And the killer—her, too. How many unsuspected selves could a person have, hiding deep inside? She was beginning to think the number might be infinite.

She glanced into her rearview mirror, chewing at her still-swollen lower lip. No approaching headlights yet. But would she even be able to tell, given the combined brilliance of the moon and that Christing pole light?

"It's on a timer," Tom said, "but I'd do something before it goes out, Tess. If you move the car after it does, you'll only trip it again."

She threw the Expedition into four-wheel, started to swing around the cab-over, then stopped. There was high grass on that side. In the pitiless glare of the pole light, he couldn't help but see the tracks she would leave. Even if the Christing light went out, it would come back on again when he drove up and then he would see them.

Inside, the dog continued to weigh in: *Yark! Yark! YarkYarkYark!*

“Drive across the lawn and put it behind the long-box,” Tom said.

“The tracks, though! The *tracks!*”

“You have to hide it somewhere,” Tom returned. He spoke apologetically but firmly. “At least the grass is mown on that side. Most people are pretty unobservant, you know. Doreen Marquis says that all the time.”

“Strehlke’s not a Knitting Society lady, he’s a fucking lunatic.”

But because there was really no choice—not now that she was up here—Tess drove onto the lawn and toward the parked silver long-box through a glare that seemed as bright as a summer noonday. She did it with her bottom slightly raised off the seat, as if by doing that she could somehow magically render the tracks of the Expedition’s passage less visible.

“Even if the motion light is still on when he comes back, he may not be suspicious,” Tom said. “I’ll bet deer trip it all the time. He might even have a light like that to scare them out of his vegetable garden.”

This made sense (and it sounded like her special Tom-voice again), but it did not comfort her much.

*Yark! Yark! YarkYark!* Whatever it was, it sounded like it was shitting nickels in there.

The ground behind the silver box was bumpy and bald—other freight-boxes had no doubt been parked on it from time to time—but solid enough. She drove the Expedition as deep into the long-box’s shadow as she could, then killed the engine. She was sweating heavily, producing a rank aroma no deodorant would be able to defeat.

She got out, and the motion light went out when she slammed the door. For one superstitious moment Tess thought she had done it herself, then realized the scary fucking thing had just timed out. She leaned over the warm hood of the Expedition, pulling in deep breaths and letting them out like a runner in the last quarter-mile of a marathon. It might come in handy to know how long it had been on, but that was a question she couldn’t answer. She’d been too scared. It had seemed like hours.

When she had herself under control again, she took inventory, forcing herself to move slowly and methodically. Pistol and oven glove. Both present and accounted for. She didn’t think the oven glove would muffle another shot, not with a hole in it; she’d have to count on the isolation of the little hilltop

house. It was okay that she'd left the knife in Ramona's belly; if she were reduced to trying to take out Big Driver with a butcher knife, she'd be in serious trouble.

*And there are only four shots left in the gun, you better not forget that and just start spraying him. Why didn't you bring any more bullets, Tessa Jean? You thought you were planning, but I don't think you did a very good job.*

"Shut up," she whispered. "Tom or Fritzzy or whoever you are, just shut up."

The scolding voice ceased, and when it did, Tess realized the real world had also gone silent. The dog had ceased its mad barking when the pole light went off. Now the only sound was the wind and the only light was the moon.

With that terrible glare gone, the long-box provided excellent cover, but she couldn't stay there. Not if she meant to do what she had come here to do. Tess scurried around the back of the house, terrified of tripping another motion light, but feeling she had no choice. There was no light to trip, but the moon went behind a cloud and she stumbled over the cellar bulkhead, almost hitting her head on a wheel barrow when she went to her knees. For a moment as she lay there, she wondered again what she had turned into. She was a member of the Authors Guild who had shot a woman in the head not long ago. After stabbing her in the stomach. *I've gone entirely off the reservation.* Then she thought of him calling her a bitch, a whiny whore bitch, and quit caring about whether she was on or off the reservation. It was a stupid saying, anyway. And racist in the bargain.

Strehlke *did* have a garden behind his house, but it was small and apparently not worth protecting from the depredations of the deer with a motion light. There was nothing left in it anyway except for a few pumpkins, most now rotting on the vine. She stepped over the rows, rounded the far corner of the house, and there was the cab-over. The moon had come out again and turned its chrome to the liquid silver of sword blades in fantasy novels.

Tess came up behind it, walked along the left side, and knelt by the chin-high (to her, at least) front wheel. She took the Lemon Squeezer out of her pocket. He couldn't drive into his garage because the cab-over was in the way. Even if it hadn't been, the garage was probably full of bachelor rickrack: tools, fishing gear, camping gear, truck parts, cases of discount soda.

*That's just guessing. It's dangerous to guess. Doreen would scold you for it.*

Of course she would, no one knew the Knitting Society ladies better than Tess did, but those dessert-loving babies rarely took chances. When you did take them, you were forced to make a certain number of guesses.

Tess looked at her watch and was astounded to see it was only twenty-five to ten. It seemed that she had fed Fritz double rations and left the house four

years ago. Maybe five. She thought she heard an approaching engine, then decided she didn't. She wished the wind wasn't blowing so hard, but wish in one hand and shit in the other, see which one fills up first. It was a saying no Knitting Society lady had ever voiced—Doreen Marquis and her friends were more into things like *soonest begun, soonest done*—but it was a true saying, just the same.

Maybe he really *was* going on a trip, Sunday night or not. Maybe she was still going to be here when the sun came up, chilled to her already aching bones by the constant wind combing this lonely hilltop where she was crazy to be.

*No, he's the crazy one. Remember how he danced? His shadow dancing on the wall behind him? Remember how he sang? His squalling voice? You wait for him, Tessa Jean. You wait until hell freezes over. You've come too far to turn back.*

She was afraid of that, actually.

*It can't be a decorous drawing-room murder. You understand that, don't you?*

She did. This particular killing—if she was able to bring it off—would be more *Death Wish* than *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes Backstage*. He would pull in, hopefully right up to the cab-over she was hiding behind. He would douse the lights of the pickup, and before his eyes could adjust—

It wasn't the wind this time. She recognized the badly tuned thump of the engine even before the headlights splashed up the curve of the drive. Tess got on one knee and yanked the brim of her cap down so the wind wouldn't blow it off. She would have to approach, and that meant her timing would have to be exquisite. If she tried to shoot him from ambush, she would quite likely miss, even at close range; the gun instructor had told her she could only count on the Lemon Squeezer at ten feet or less. He had recommended she buy a more reliable handgun, but she never had. And getting close enough to make sure of killing him wasn't all. She had to make sure it was Strehlke in the truck, and not the brother or some friend.

*I have no plan.*

But it was too late to plan, because it was the truck and when the pole light came on, she saw the brown cap with the bleach-splatters on it. She also saw him wince against the glare, as she had, and knew he was momentarily blinded. It was now or not at all.

*I am the Courageous Woman.*

With no plan, without even thinking, she walked around the back of the cab-over, not running but taking big, calm strides. The wind gusted around her, flapping her cargo pants. She opened the passenger door and saw the ring with the red stone on his hand. He was grabbing a paper bag with the shape of a square box inside it. Beer, probably a twelve-pack. He turned toward her and something terrible happened: she divided in two. The Courageous Woman saw the animal that had raped her, choked her, and put her in a pipe with two other rotting bodies. Tess saw the slightly broader face and lines around the mouth and eyes that hadn't been there on Friday afternoon. But even as she was registering these things, the Lemon Squeezer barked twice in her hand. The first bullet punctured Strehlke's throat, just below the chin. The second opened a black hole above his bushy right eyebrow and shattered the driver's side window. He fell backward against the door, the hand that had been grasping the top of the paper bag dropping away. He gave a monstrous whole-body twitch, and the hand with the ring on it thudded against the middle of the steering wheel, honking the horn. Inside the house, the dog began to bark again.

"No, it's him!" She stood at the open door with the gun in her hand, staring in. "*It's got to be him!*"

She rushed around the front of the pickup, lost her balance, went to one knee, got up, and yanked open the driver's side door. Strehlke fell out and hit his dead head on the smooth asphalt of his driveway. His hat fell off. His right eye, pulled out of true by the bullet that had entered his head just above it, stared up at the moon. The left one stared at Tess. And it wasn't the face that finally convinced her—the face with lines on it she was seeing for the very first time, the face pitted with old acne scars that hadn't been there on Friday afternoon.

*Was he big or real big?* Betsy Neal had asked.

*Real big,* Tess had replied, and he had been . . . but not as big as this man. Her rapist had been six-six, she had thought when he got out of the truck (*this* truck, she was in no doubt about that). Deep in the belly, thick in the thighs, and as wide as a doorway. But this man had to be at least six-*nine*. She had come hunting a giant and killed a leviathan.

“Oh my God,” Tess said, and the wind whipped her words away. “Oh my dear God, what have I done?”

“You killed me, Tess,” the man on the ground said . . . and that certainly made sense, given the hole in his head and the one in his throat. “You went and killed Big Driver, just like you meant to.”

The strength left her muscles. She went to her knees beside him. Overhead, the moon beamed down from the roaring sky.

“The ring,” she whispered. “The hat. The *truck*.”

“He wears the ring and the hat when he goes hunting,” Big Driver said. “And he drives the pickup. When he goes hunting, I’m on the road in a Red Hawk cab-over and if anyone sees him—especially if he’s sitting down—they think they’re seeing me.”

“Why would he do that?” Tess asked the dead man. “You’re his *brother*.”

“Because he’s crazy,” Big Driver said patiently.

“And because it worked before,” Doreen Marquis said. “When they were younger and Lester got in trouble with the police. The question is whether Roscoe Strehlke committed suicide because of that first trouble, or because Ramona made big brother Al take the blame for it. Or maybe Roscoe was going to tell and Ramona killed him. Made it look like suicide. Which way was it, Al?”

But on this subject Al was quiet. Dead quiet, in fact.

“I’ll tell you how I think it was,” Doreen said in the moonlight. “I think Ramona knew that if your little brother wound up in an interrogation room with an even half-smart policeman, he might confess to something a lot worse than touching a girl on the schoolbus or peeking into cars on the local lovers’ lane or whatever ten-cent crime it was he’d been accused of. I think she talked *you* into taking the blame, and she talked her husband into dummifying up. Or browbeat him into it, that’s more like it. And either because the police never asked the girl to make a positive identification or because she wouldn’t press charges, they got away with it.”

Al said nothing.

Tess thought, *I’m kneeling here talking in imaginary voices. I’ve lost my mind.*

Yet part of her knew she was trying to *keep* her mind. The only way to do it was to understand, and she thought the story she was telling in Doreen’s voice

was either true or close to true. It was based on guesswork and slopped-on deduction, but it made sense. It fit in with what Ramona had said in her last moments.

*You stupid cunt, you don't know what you're talking about.*

And: *You don't understand. It's a mistake.*

It was a mistake, all right. Everything she'd done tonight had been a mistake.

*No, not everything. She was in on it. She knew.*

"Did *you* know?" Tess asked the man she had killed. She reached out to grab Strehlke's arm, then drew away. It would be still warm under his sleeve. Still thinking it was alive. "*Did you?*"

He didn't answer.

"Let me try," Doreen said. And in her kindest, you-can-tell-me-everything old lady voice, the one that always worked in the books, she asked: "How *much* did you know, Mr. Driver?"

"I sometimes suspected," he said. "Mostly I didn't think about it. I had a business to run."

"Did you ever ask your mother?"

"I might have," he said, and Tess thought his strangely cocked right eye evasive. But in that wild moonlight, who could tell about such things? Who could tell for sure?

"When girls disappeared? Is that when you asked?"

To this Big Driver made no reply, perhaps because Doreen had begun to sound like Fritzy. And like Tom the Tomtom, of course.

"But there was never any proof, was there?" This time it was Tess herself. She wasn't sure he would answer her voice, but he did.

"No. No proof."

"And you didn't *want* proof, did you?"

No answer this time, so Tess got up and walked unsteadily to the bleach-spattered brown hat, which had blown across the driveway and onto the lawn. Just as she picked it up, the pole light went off again. Inside, the dog stopped barking. This made her think of Sherlock Holmes, and standing there in the windy moonlight, Tess heard herself voicing the saddest chuckle to ever come from a human throat. She took off her hat, stuffed it into her jacket pocket,

and put his on in its place. It was too big for her, so she took it off again long enough to adjust the strap in back. She returned to the man she had killed, the one she judged perhaps not quite innocent . . . but surely too innocent to deserve the punishment the Courageous Woman had meted out.

She tapped the brim of the brown hat and asked, “Is this the one you wear when you go on the road?” Knowing it wasn’t.

Strehlke didn’t answer, but Doreen Marquis, doyenne of the Knitting Society, did. “Of course not. When you’re driving for Red Hawk, you wear a Red Hawk cap, don’t you, dear?”

“Yes,” Strehlke said.

“And you don’t wear your ring, either, do you?”

“No. Too gaudy for customers. Not businesslike. And what if someone at one of those skanky truck-stops—someone too drunk or stoned to know better—saw it and thought it was real? No one would risk mugging me, I’m too big and strong for that—at least I was until tonight—but someone might shoot me. And I don’t deserve to be shot. Not for a fake ring, and not for the terrible things my brother might have done.”

“And you and your brother never drive for the company at the same time, do you, dear?”

“No. When he’s out on the road, I mind the office. When I’m out on the road, he . . . well. I guess you know what he does when I’m out on the road.”

“You should have *told!*” Tess screamed down at him. “Even if you only suspected, you should have *told!*”

“He was scared,” Doreen said in her kindly voice. “Weren’t you, dear?”

“Yes,” Al said. “I was scared.”

“Of your brother?” Tess asked, either unbelieving or not wanting to believe. “Scared of your *kid brother?*”

“Not him,” Al Strehlke said. “Her.”

When Tess got back in her car and started the motor, Tom said: “There was no way you could know, Tess. And it all happened so fast.”

That was true, but it ignored the central looming fact: by going after her rapist like a vigilante in a movie, she had sent herself to hell.

She raised the gun to her temple, then lowered it again. She couldn't, not now. She still had an obligation to the women in the pipe, and any other women who might join them if Lester Strehlke escaped. And after what she had just done, it was more important than ever that he not escape.

She had one more stop to make. But not in her Expedition.

The driveway at 101 Township Road wasn't long, and it wasn't paved. It was just a pair of ruts with bushes growing close enough to scrape the sides of the blue F-150 pickup truck as she drove it up to the little house. Nothing neat about this one; this one was a huddled old creep-manse that could have been straight out of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. How life did imitate art, sometimes. And the cruder the art, the closer the imitation.

Tess made no attempt at stealth—why bother to kill the headlights when Lester Strehlke would know the sound of his brother's truck almost as well as the sound of his brother's voice?

She was still wearing the bleach-splattered brown cap Big Driver wore when he wasn't on the road, the lucky cap that turned out to be unlucky in the end. The ring with the fake ruby stone was far too big for any of her fingers, so she had put it into the left front pocket of her cargo pants. Little Driver had dressed and driven as his big brother when he went out hunting, and while he might never have time enough (or brains enough) to appreciate the irony of his last victim coming to him with the same accessories, Tess did.

She parked by the back door, turned off the engine, and got out. She carried the gun in one hand. The door was unlocked. She stepped into a shed that smelled of beer and spoiled food. A single sixty-watt bulb hung from the ceiling on a length of dirty cord. Straight ahead were four overflowing plastic garbage cans, the thirty-two-gallon kind you could buy at Walmart. Behind them, stacked against the shed wall, were what looked like five years' worth of *Uncle Henry's* swap guide. To the left was another door, up a single step. It would lead to the kitchen. It had an old-fashioned latch rather than a knob. The door squalled on unoiled hinges when she depressed the latch and pushed it open. An hour ago, such a squall would have terrified her into immobility. Now it didn't bother her in the slightest. She had work to do. That was all it came down to, and it was a relief to be free of all that emotional baggage. She

stepped into the smell of whatever greasy meat Little Driver had fried for his supper. She could hear a TV laugh-track. Some sitcom. *Seinfeld*, she thought.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Lester Strehlke called from the vicinity of the laugh-track. “I ain’t got but a beer and a half left, if that’s what you came for. I’m gonna drink up and then go to bed.” She followed the sound of his voice. “If you’d a called, I coulda saved you the tr—”

She came into the room. He saw her. Tess hadn’t speculated on what his reaction might be to the reappearance of his last victim, carrying a gun and wearing the hat Lester himself wore when his urges came over him. Even if she had, she could never have predicted the extremity of the one she saw. His mouth dropped open, and then his entire face froze. The can of beer he was holding dropped from his hand and fell into his lap, spraying foam onto his only article of clothing, a pair of yellowing Jockey shorts.

*He’s seeing a ghost*, she thought as she walked toward him, raising the gun. *Good.*

There was time to see that, although the living room was a bachelor mess and there were no snowglobes or cutie-poo figurines, the TV-watching setup was the same as the one at his mother’s house on Lacemaker Lane: the La-Z-Boy, the TV tray (here holding a final unopened can of Pabst Blue Ribbon and a bag of Doritos instead of Diet Coke and Cheez Doodles), the same *TV Guide*, the one with Simon Cowell on it.

“You’re dead,” he whispered.

“No,” Tess replied. She put the barrel of the Lemon Squeezer against the side of his head. He made one feeble effort to grab her wrist, but it was far too little and much too late. “That’s you.”

She pulled the trigger. Blood came out of his ear and his head snapped briskly to the side. He looked like a man trying to free up a kink in his neck. On the TV, George Costanza said, “I was in the pool, I was in the pool.” The audience laughed.

It was almost midnight, and the wind was blowing harder than ever. When it gusted, Lester Strehlke's whole house shook, and each time Tess thought of the little pig who had built his house out of sticks.

The little piggy who had lived in this one would never have to worry about his shitty house blowing away, because he was dead in his La-Z-Boy. *And he wasn't a little piggy, anyway*, Tess thought. *He was a big bad wolf.*

She was sitting in the kitchen, writing on the pages of a grimy Blue Horse tablet she had found in Strehlke's upstairs bedroom. There were four rooms on the second floor, but the bedroom was the only one not stuffed with junk, everything from iron bedsteads to an Evinrude boat-motor that looked as if it might have been dropped from the top of a five-story building. Because it would take weeks or months to go through those caches of the useless, the worthless, and the pointless, Tess turned all her attention on Strehlke's bedroom and searched it carefully. The Blue Horse tablet was a bonus. She had found what she was looking for in an old travel-tote pushed to the very back of the closet shelf, where it had been camouflaged—not very successfully—with old issues of *National Geographic*. In it was a tangle of women's underwear. Her own panties were on top. Tess put them in her pocket and, packrat-like, replaced them with the coil of yellow boat-line. Nobody would be surprised to find rope in a rapist-killer's suitcase of trophy lingerie. Besides, she would not be needing it.

*"Tonto," said the Lone Ranger, "our work here is done."*

What she wrote, as *Seinfeld* gave way to *Frasier* and *Frasier* gave way to the local news (one Chicopee resident had won the lottery and another had suffered a broken back after falling from a scaffolding, so *that* balanced out), was a confession in the form of a letter. As she reached page five, the TV news gave way to an apparently endless commercial for Almighty Cleanse. Danny Vierra was saying, "Some Americans have a bowel movement only once every

two or three *days*, and because this has gone on for years, *they believe it's normal!* Any doctor worth his salt will tell you *it's not!*”

The letter was headed *TO THE PROPER AUTHORITIES*, and the first four pages consisted of a single paragraph. In her head it sounded like a scream. Her hand was tired, and the ballpoint pen she'd found in a kitchen drawer (RED HAWK TRUCKING printed in fading gilt on the barrel) was showing signs of drying up, but she was, thank God, almost done. While Little Driver went on not watching TV from where he sat in his La-Z-Boy, she at last started a new paragraph at the top of page five.

*I will not make excuses for what I have done. Nor can I say that I did it while of unsound mind. I was furious and I made a mistake. It's that simple. Under other circumstances—those less terrible, I mean—I might say, "It was a natural mistake, the two of them look almost enough alike to be twins." But these are not other circumstances.*

*I have thought of atonement as I sat here, writing these pages and listening to his television and to the wind—not because I hope for forgiveness, but because it seems wrong to do wrong without at least trying to balance it out with something right. (Here Tess thought of how the lottery winner and the man with the broken back evened out, but the concept would be difficult to express when she was so tired, and she wasn't sure it was germane, anyway.) I thought of going to Africa and working with AIDS victims. I thought about going down to New Orleans and volunteering at a homeless shelter or a food bank. I thought about going to the Gulf to clean oil off birds. I thought of donating the million dollars or so I have put away for my retirement to some group that works to end violence against women. There must be such a society in Connecticut, perhaps even several of them.*

*But then I thought of Doreen Marquis, from the Knitting Society, and what she says once in every book . . .*

What Doreen said at least once in every book was *murderers always overlook the obvious. You may depend on it, dears.* And even as Tess wrote about

atonement, she realized it would be impossible. Because Doreen was absolutely right.

Tess had worn a cap so that she wouldn't leave hair that could be analyzed for DNA. She had worn gloves which she had never taken off, even while driving Alvin Strehlke's pickup. It was not too late to burn this confession in Lester's kitchen woodstove, drive to Brother Alvin's considerably nicer house (house of bricks instead of house of sticks), get into her Expedition, and head back to Connecticut. She could go home, where Fritzzy was waiting. At first glance she looked clear, and it might take the police a few days to get to her, but get to her they would. Because while she had been concentrating on the forensic molehills, she had overlooked the obvious mountain, exactly like the killers in the Knitting Society books.

The obvious mountain had a name: Betsy Neal. A pretty woman with an oval face, mismatched Picasso eyes, and a cloud of dark hair. She had recognized Tess, had even gotten her autograph, but that wasn't the clincher. The clincher was going to be the bruises on her face (*I hope that didn't happen here*, Neal had said), and the fact that Tess had asked about Alvin Strehlke, describing his truck and recognizing the ring when Neal mentioned it. *Like a ruby*, Tess had agreed.

Neal would see the story on TV or read it in the newspaper—with three dead from the same family, how could she avoid it?—and she would go to the police. The police would come to Tess. They would check the Connecticut gun-registration records as a matter of course and discover that Tess owned a .38 Smith & Wesson revolver known as a Lemon Squeezer. They would ask her to produce it so they could test-fire it and do comparisons to the bullets found in the three victims. And what was she going to say? Was she going to look at them from her blackened eyes and say (in a voice still hoarse from the choking Lester Strehlke had given her) that she lost it? Would she continue to stick to that story even after the dead women were found in the culvert pipe?

Tess picked up her borrowed pen and began writing again.

*. . . what she says once in every book: murderers always overlook the obvious. Doreen also once took a leaf from Dorothy Sayer's book and left a murderer with a loaded gun, telling him to take the honorable way out. I have a gun.*

*My brother Mike is my only surviving close relative. He lives in Taos, New Mexico. I suppose he may inherit my estate. It depends on the legal ramifications of my crimes. If he does, I hope the authorities who find this letter will show it to him, and convey my wish that he donate the bulk to some charitable organization that works with women who have been sexually abused.*

*I am sorry about Big Driver—Alvin Strehlke. He was not the man who raped me, and Doreen is sure he didn't rape and kill those other women, either.*

Doreen? No, *her*. Doreen wasn't real. But Tess was too tired to go back and change it. And what the hell—she was near the end, anyway.

*For Ramona and that piece of garbage in the other room, I make no apologies. They are better off dead.*

*So, of course, am I.*

She paused long enough to look back over the pages and see if there was anything she had forgotten. There didn't appear to be, so she signed her name—her final autograph. The pen ran dry on the last letter and she put it aside.

“Got anything to say, Lester?” she asked.

Only the wind replied, gusting hard enough to make the little house groan in its joints and puff drafts of cold air.

She went back into the living room. She put the hat on his head and the ring on his finger. That was the way she wanted them to find him. There was a framed photo on the TV. In it, Lester and his mother stood with their arms around each other. They were smiling. Just a boy and his mum. She looked at it for awhile, then left.

She felt that she should go back to the deserted store where it had happened and finish her business there. She could sit for awhile in the weedy lot, listen to the wind ticking the old sign (YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU), thinking about whatever people think about in the final moments of a life. In her case that would probably be Fritzzy. She guessed Patsy would take him, and that would be fine. Cats were survivors. They didn't much care who fed them, as long as the bowl was full.

It wouldn't take long to get to the store at this hour, but it still seemed too far. She was very tired. She decided she would get into Al Strehlke's old truck and do it there. But she didn't want to splatter her painfully written confession with her blood, that seemed very wrong considering all the bloodshed detailed within it, and so—

She took the pages from the Blue Horse tablet into the living room, where the TV played on (a young man who looked like a criminal was now selling a robot floorwasher), and dropped them in Strehlke's lap. "Hold that for me, Les," she said.

"No problem," he replied. She noted that a portion of his diseased brains was now drying on his bony naked shoulder. That was all right.

Tess went out into the windy dark and slowly climbed behind the wheel of the pickup truck. The scream of the hinge when the driver's door swung shut was oddly familiar. But no, not so odd; hadn't she heard it at the store? Yes. She had been trying to do him a favor, because he was going to do her one—he was going to change her tire so she could go home and feed her cat. "I didn't want his battery to run down," she said, and laughed.

She put the short barrel of the .38 against her temple, then reconsidered. A shot like that wasn't always effective. She wanted her money to help women who had been hurt, not to pay for her care as she lay unconscious year after year in some home for human vegetables.

The mouth, that was better. Surer.

The barrel was oily against her tongue, and she could feel the small nub of the sight digging into the roof of her mouth.

*I've had a good life—pretty good, anyway—and although I made a terrible mistake at the end of it, maybe that won't be held against me if there's something after this.*

Ah, but the night wind was very sweet. So were the fragile fragrances it carried through the half-open driver's side window. It was a shame to leave, but what choice? It was time to go.

Tess closed her eyes, tightened her finger on the trigger, and that was when Tom spoke up. It was strange that he could do that, because Tom was in her Expedition, and the Expedition was at the other brother's house, almost a mile down the road from here. Also, the voice she heard was nothing like the one she usually manufactured for Tom. Nor did it sound like her own. It was a cold voice. And she—she had a gun in her mouth. She couldn't talk at all.

"She was never a very good detective, was she?"

She took it out. "Who? Doreen?"

In spite of everything, she was shocked.

"Who else, Tessa Jean? And why *would* she be a good one? She came from the old you. Didn't she?"

Tess supposed that was true.

"Doreen believes Big Driver didn't rape and kill those other women. Isn't that what you wrote?"

"*Me*," Tess said. "*I'm* sure. I was just tired, that's all. And shocked, I suppose."

"Also guilty."

"Yes. Also guilty."

"Do guilty people make good deductions, do you think?"

No. Perhaps they didn't.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"That you only solved part of the mystery. Before you could solve all of it—*you*, not some cliché-ridden old lady detective—something admittedly unfortunate happened."

"Unfortunate? Is that what you call it?" From a great distance, Tess heard herself laugh. Somewhere the wind was making a loose gutter click against an

eave. It sounded like the 7Up sign at the deserted store.

“Before you *shoot* yourself,” the new, strange Tom said (he was sounding more female all the time), “why don’t you *think* for yourself? But not here.”

“Where, then?”

Tom didn’t answer this question, and didn’t have to. What he said was, “And take that fucking confession with you.”

Tess got out of the truck and went back inside Lester Strehlke’s house. She stood in the dead man’s kitchen, thinking. She did it aloud, in Tom’s voice (which sounded more like her own all the time). Doreen seemed to have taken a hike.

“Al’s housekey will be on the ring with his ignition key,” Tom said, “but there’s the dog. You don’t want to forget the dog.”

No, that would be bad. Tess went to Lester’s refrigerator. After a little rummaging, she found a package of hamburger at the back of the bottom shelf. She used an issue of *Uncle Henry’s* to double-wrap it, then went back into the living room. She plucked the confession from Strehlke’s lap, doing it gingerly, very aware that the part of him that had hurt her—the part that had gotten three people killed tonight—lay just beneath the pages. “I’m taking your ground chuck, but don’t hold it against me. I’m doing you a favor. It smells punky-going-on-rotten.”

“A thief as well as a murderer,” Little Driver said in his droning deadvoice. “Isn’t that nice.”

“Shut up, Les,” she said, and left.

*Before you shoot yourself, why don't you think for yourself?*

As she drove the old pickup back down the windy road to Alvin Strehlke's house, she tried to do that. She was starting to think Tom, even when he wasn't in the vehicle with her, was a better detective than Doreen Marquis on her best day.

"I'll keep it short," Tom said. "If you don't think Al Strehlke was part of it—and I mean a *big* part—you're crazy."

"Of course I'm crazy," she replied. "Why else would I be trying to convince myself that I didn't shoot the wrong man when I know I *did*?"

"That's guilt talking, not logic," Tom replied. He sounded maddeningly smug. "He was no innocent little lamb, not even a half-black sheep. Wake up, Tessa Jean. They weren't just brothers, they were partners."

"*Business* partners."

"Brothers are never just business partners. It's always more complicated than that. Especially when you've got a woman like Ramona for a mother."

Tess turned up Al Strehlke's smoothly paved driveway. She supposed Tom could be right about that. She knew one thing: Doreen and her Knitting Society friends had never met a woman like Ramona Norville.

The pole light went on. The dog started up: *yark-yark, yarkyarkyark*. Tess waited for the light to go out and the dog to quiet down.

"There's no way I'll ever know for sure, Tom."

"You can't be certain of that unless you look."

"Even if he knew, *he wasn't the one who raped me.*"

Tom was silent for a moment. She thought he'd given up. Then he said, "When a person does a bad thing and another person knows but doesn't stop it, they're equally guilty."

"In the eyes of the law?"

"Also in the eyes of *me*. Say it was just Lester who did the hunting, the raping, and the killing. I don't think so, but say it was. If big brother knew and

said nothing, that makes him worth killing. In fact, I'd say bullets were too good for him. Impaling on a hot poker would be closer to justice."

Tess shook her head wearily and touched the gun on the seat. One bullet left. If she had to use it on the dog (and really, what was one more killing among friends), she would have to hunt for another gun, unless she meant to try and hang herself, or something. But guys like the Strehlkes usually had firearms. That was the beauty part, as Ramona would have said.

"If he knew, yes. But an if that big didn't deserve a bullet in the head. The mother, yes—on that score, the earrings were all the proof I needed. But there's no proof here."

"Really?" Tom's voice was so low Tess could barely hear it. "Go see."

The dog didn't bark when she clumped up the steps, but she could picture it standing just inside the door with its head down and its teeth bared.

"Goober?" What the hell, it was as good a name for a country dog as any. "My name's Tess. I have some hamburger for you. I also have a gun with one bullet in it. I'm going to open the door now. If I were you, I'd choose the meat. Okay? Is it a deal?"

Still no barking. Maybe it took the pole light to set him off. Or a juicy female burglar. Tess tried one key, then another. No good. Those two were probably for the trucking office. The third one turned in the lock, and she opened the door before she could lose her courage. She had been visualizing a bulldog or a Rottweiler or a pit bull with red eyes and slavering jaws. What she saw was a Jack Russell terrier who was looking at her hopefully and thumping its tail.

Tess put the gun in her jacket pocket and stroked the dog's head. "Good God," she said. "To think I was *terrified* of you."

"No need to be," Goober said. "Say, where's Al?"

"Don't ask," she said. "Want some hamburger? I warn you, it may have gone off."

"Give it to me, baby," Goober said.

Tess fed him a chunk of the hamburger, then came in, closed the door, and turned on the lights. Why not? It was only her and Goober, after all.

Alvin Strehlke had kept a neater house than his younger brother. The floors and walls were clean, there were no stacks of *Uncle Henry's Swap Guide*, and she actually saw a few books on the shelves. There were also several clusters of Hummel figures, and a large framed photo of Momzilla on the wall. Tess found that a touch suggestive, but it was hardly proof positive. Of anything. *If there was a photo of Richard Widmark in his famous Tommy Udo role, that might be different.*

"What are you smiling about?" Goober asked. "Want to share?"

“Actually, no,” Tess said. “Where should we start?”

“I don’t know,” Goober said. “I’m just the dog. How about some more of that tasty cow?”

Tess fed him some more meat. Goober got up on his hind legs and turned around twice. Tess wondered if she were going insane.

“Tom? Anything to say?”

“You found your underpants at the other brother’s house, right?”

“Yes, and I took them. They’re torn . . . and I’d never want to wear them again even if they weren’t . . . but they’re *mine*.”

“And what else did you find besides a bunch of undies?”

“What do you mean, what else?”

But Tom didn’t need to tell her that. It wasn’t a question of what she had found; it was a question of what she hadn’t: no purse and no keys. Lester Strehlke had probably thrown the keys into the woods. It was what Tess herself would have done in his place. The bag was a different matter. It had been a Kate Spade, very pricey, and inside was a sewn-in strip of silk with her name on it. If the bag—and the stuff in the bag—wasn’t at Lester’s house, and if he didn’t throw it into the woods with her keys, where is it?

“I vote for here,” Tom said. “Let’s look around.”

“Meat!” Goober cried, and did another pirouette.

Where should she start?

“Come on,” Tom said. “Men keep most of their secrets in one of two places: the study or the bedroom. Doreen might not know that, but you do. And this house doesn’t have a study.”

She went into Al Strehlke’s bedroom (trailed by Goober), where she found an extra-long double bed made up in no-nonsense military style. Tess looked under it. Nada. She started to turn toward the closet, paused, then pivoted back to the bed. She lifted the mattress. Looked. After five seconds—maybe ten—she uttered a single word in a dry flat voice.

“Jackpot.”

Lying on the box spring were three ladies’ handbags. The one in the middle was a cream-colored clutch that Tess would have recognized anywhere. She flipped it open. There was nothing inside but some Kleenex and an eyebrow pencil with a cunning little lash-comb hidden in the top half. She looked for the silk strip with her name on it, but it was gone. It had been removed carefully, but she saw one tiny cut in the fine Italian leather where the stitches had been unpicked.

“Yours?” Tom asked.

“You know it is.”

“What about the eyebrow pencil?”

“They sell those things by the thousands in drugstores all over Amer—”

*“Is it yours?”*

“Yes. It is.”

“Are you convinced yet?”

“I . . .” Tess swallowed. She was feeling something, but she wasn’t sure what it was. Relief? Horror? “I guess I am. But *why*? Why *both* of them?”

Tom didn’t say. He didn’t need to. Doreen might not know (or want to admit it if she did, because the old ladies who followed her adventures didn’t like the ooky stuff), but Tess supposed she did. Because Mommy fucked both

of them up. That's what a psychiatrist would say. Lester was the rapist; Al was the fetishist who participated vicariously. Maybe he even helped with one or both of the women in the pipe. She'd never know for sure.

"It would probably take until dawn to search the whole house," Tom said, "but you can search the rest of this room, Tessa Jean. He probably destroyed everything from the purse—cut up the credit cards and tossed them in the Colewich River, would be my guess—but you have to make sure, because anything with your name on it would lead the police right to your door. Start with the closet."

Tess didn't find her credit cards or anything else belonging to her in the closet, but she did find something. It was on the top shelf. She got off the chair she'd been standing on and studied it with growing dismay: a stuffed duck that might have been some child's favorite toy. One of its eyes was missing and its synthetic fur was matted. That fur was actually gone in places, as if the duck had been petted half to death.

On the faded yellow beak was a dark maroon splash.

"Is that what I think it is?" Tom asked.

"Oh Tom, I think so."

"The bodies you saw in the culvert . . . could one of them have been a child's body?"

No, neither of them had been that small. But maybe the culvert running beneath Stagg Road hadn't been the Strehlke brothers' only body dump.

"Put it back on the shelf. Leave it for the police to find. You need to make sure he doesn't have a computer with stuff on it about you. Then you need to get the hell out of here."

Something cold and wet nuzzled Tess's hand. She almost screamed. It was Goober, looking up at her with bright eyes.

"More meat!" Goober said, and Tess gave him some.

"If Al Strehlke has a computer," Tess said, "you can be sure it's password-protected. And his probably won't be open for me to poke around in."

"Then take it and throw it in the goddam river when you go home. Let it sleep with the fishes."

But there was no computer.

At the door, Tess fed Goober the rest of the hamburger. He would probably puke it all up on the rug, but that wasn't going to bother Big Driver.

Tom said, "Are you satisfied, Tessa Jean? Are you satisfied you didn't kill an innocent man?"

She supposed she must be, because suicide no longer seemed like an option. "What about Betsy Neal, Tom? What about her?"

Tom didn't answer . . . and once again didn't need to. Because, after all, he was she.

Wasn't she?

Tess wasn't entirely sure about that. And did it matter, as long as she knew what to do next? As for tomorrow, it was another day. Scarlett O'Hara had been right about that much.

What mattered most was that the police had to know about the bodies in the culvert. If only because somewhere there were friends and relatives who were still wondering. Also because . . .

"Because the stuffed duck says there might be more."

That was her own voice.

And that was all right.

At seven-thirty the next morning, after less than three hours of broken, nightmare-haunted sleep, Tess booted up her office computer. But not to write. Writing was the farthest thing from her mind.

Was Betsy Neal single? Tess thought so. She had seen no wedding ring that day in Neal's office, and while she might have missed that, there had been no family pictures, either. The only picture she could remember seeing was a framed photo of Barack Obama . . . and *he* was already married. So yes—Betsy Neal was probably divorced or single. And probably unlisted. In which case, a computer search would do her no good at all. Tess supposed she could go to The Stagger Inn and find her there . . . but she didn't *want* to go back to The Stagger. Ever again.

"Why are you buying trouble?" Fritzy said from the windowsill. "At least check the telephone listings for Colewich. And what's that I smell on you? Is that *dog*?"

"Yes. That's Goober."

"Traitor," Fritzy said contemptuously.

Her search turned up an even dozen Neals. One was an E Neal. E for Elizabeth? There was one way to find out.

With no hesitation—that would have almost certainly have caused her to lose her courage—Tess punched in the number. She was sweating, and her heart was beating rapidly.

The phone rang once. Twice.

*It's probably not her. It could be an Edith Neal. An Edwina Neal. Even an Elvira Neal.*

Three times.

*If it is Betsy Neal's phone, she's probably not even there. She's probably on vacation in the Catskills—*

Four times.

*—or shacked up with one of the Zombie Bakers, how about that? The lead guitarist. They probably sing “Can Your Pussy Do the Dog” together in the shower after they—*

The phone was picked up, and Tess recognized the voice in her ear at once.

“Hello, you’ve reached Betsy, but I can’t come to the phone right now. There’s a beep coming, and you know what to do when you hear it. Have a nice day.”

*I had a bad day, thanks, and last night was ever so much w—*

The beep came, and Tess heard herself talking before she was even aware she meant to. “Hello, Ms. Neal, this is Tessa Jean calling—the Willow Grove Lady? We met at The Stagger Inn. You gave me back my Tomtom and I signed an autograph for your gran. You saw how marked up I was and I told you some lies. It wasn’t a boyfriend, Ms. Neal.” Tess began to speak faster, afraid that the message tape would run out before she finished . . . and she discovered she badly wanted to finish. “I was raped and that was bad, but then I tried to make it right and . . . I . . . I have to talk to you about it because—”

There was a click on the line and then Betsy Neal herself was in Tess’s ear. “Start again,” she said, “but go slow. I just woke up and I’m still half asleep.”

They met for lunch on the Colewich town common. They sat on a bench near the bandstand. Tess didn't think she was hungry, but Betsy Neal forced a sandwich on her, and Tess found herself eating it in large bites that made her think of Goober snarfing up Lester Strehlke's hamburger.

"Start at the beginning," Betsy said. She was calm, Tess thought—almost preternaturally so. "Start from the beginning and tell me everything."

Tess began with the invitation from Books & Brown Baggers. Betsy Neal said little, only occasionally adding an "Uh-huh" or "Okay" to let Tess know she was still following the story. Telling it was thirsty work. Luckily, Betsy had also brought two cans of Dr. Brown's cream soda. Tess took one and drank it greedily.

When she finished, it was past one in the afternoon. The few people who had come to the common to eat their lunches were gone. There were two women walking babies in strollers, but they were a good distance away.

"Let me get this straight," Betsy Neal said. "You were going to kill yourself, and then some phantom voice told you to go back to Alvin Strehlke's house, instead."

"Yes," Tess replied. "Where I found my purse. And the duck with the blood on it."

"Your panties you found in the younger brother's house."

"Little Driver's, yes. They're in my Expedition. And the purse. Do you want to see them?"

"No. What about the gun?"

"That's in the car, too. With one bullet left in it." She looked at Neal curiously, thinking: *The girl with the Picasso eyes*. "Aren't you afraid of me? You're the one loose end. The only one I can think of, anyway."

"We're in a public park, Tess. Also, I've got quite the confession on my answering machine at home."

Tess blinked. Something else she hadn't thought of.

“Even if you somehow managed to kill me without those two young mothers over there noticing—”

“I’m not up for killing anyone else. Here or anywhere.”

“Good to know. Because even if you took care of me and my answering machine tape, sooner or later someone would find the cabdriver who brought you out to The Stagger on Saturday morning. And when the police got to you, they’d find you wearing a load of incriminating bruises.”

“Yes,” Tess said, touching the worst of them. “That’s true. So what now?”

“For one thing, I think you’d be wise to stay out of sight as much as you can until your pretty face looks pretty again.”

“I think I’m covered there,” Tess said, and told Betsy the tale she had confabulated for Patsy McClain’s benefit.

“That’s pretty good.”

“Ms. Neal . . . Betsy . . . do you believe me?”

“Oh yes,” she said, almost absently. “Now listen. Are you listening?”

Tess nodded.

“We’re a couple of women having a little picnic in the park, and that’s fine. But after today, we’re not going to see each other again. Right?”

“If you say so,” Tess said. Her brain felt the way her jaw did after the dentist gave her a healthy shot of novocaine.

“I do. And you need to have another story made up and ready, just in case the cops talk to either the limo driver who took you home—”

“Manuel. His name was Manuel.”

“—or the taxi driver who took you out to The Stagger on Saturday morning. I don’t think anybody will make the connection between you and the Strehlkes as long as none of your ID shows up, but when the story breaks, this is going to be big news and we can’t assume the investigation won’t touch you.” She leaned forward and tapped Tess once above the left breast. “I’m counting on you to make sure that it never touches *me*. Because I don’t deserve that.”

No. She absolutely didn’t.

“What story could you tell the cops, hon? Something good without me in it. Come on, you’re the writer.”

Tess thought for a full minute. Betsy let her.

“I’d say Ramona Norville told me about the Stagg Road shortcut after my appearance—which is true—and that I saw The Stagger Inn when I drove by. I’d say I stopped for dinner a few miles down the road, then decided to go back and have a few drinks. Listen to the band.”

“That’s good. They’re called—”

“I know what they’re called,” Tess said. Maybe the novocaine was wearing off. “I’d say I met some guys, drank a bunch, and decided I was too blitzed to drive. You’re not in this story, because you don’t work nights. I could also say —”

“Never mind, that’s enough. You’re pretty good at this stuff once you get cooking. Just don’t embellish too much.”

“I won’t,” Tess said. “And this is one story I might not ever have to tell. Once they have the Strehlkes and the Strehlkes’ victims, they’ll be looking for a killer a lot different than a little book-writing lady like me.”

Betsy Neal smiled. “Little book-writing lady, my ass. You’re one bad bitch.” Then she saw the look of startled alarm on Tess’s face. “What? What *now*?”

“They *will* be able to tie the women in the pipe to the Strehlkes, won’t they? At least to Lester?”

“Did he put on a rubber before he raped you?”

“No. God, no. His stuff was still on my thighs when I got home. And inside me.” She shuddered.

“Then he’ll have gone in bareback with the others. Plenty of evidence. They’ll put it together. As long as those bad boys really got rid of your ID, you should be home and dry. And there’s no sense worrying about what you can’t control, is there?”

“No.”

“As for you . . . not planning on going home and cutting your wrists in the bathtub, are you? Or using that last bullet?”

“No.” Tess thought of how sweet the night air had smelled as she sat in the truck with the short barrel of the Lemon Squeezer in her mouth. “No, I’m good.”

“Then it’s time for you to leave. I’ll sit here a little longer.”

Tess started to get off the bench, then sat down again. “There’s something I need to know. You’re making yourself an accessory after the fact. Why would

you do that for a woman you don't even know? A woman you only met once?"

"Would you believe because my gran loves your books and would be very disappointed if you went to jail for a triple murder?"

"Not a bit," Tess said.

Betsy said nothing for a moment. She picked up her can of Dr. Brown's, then put it back down again. "Lots of women get raped, wouldn't you say? I mean, you're not unique in that respect, are you?"

No, Tess knew she was not unique in that respect, but knowing it did not make the pain and shame any less. Nor would it help with her nerves while she waited for the results of the AIDS test she'd soon be taking.

Betsy smiled. There was nothing pleasant about it. Or pretty. "Women all over the world are being raped as we speak. Girls, too. Some who undoubtedly have favorite stuffed toys. Some are killed, and some survive. Of the survivors, how many do you think report what happened to them?"

Tess shook her head.

"I don't know, either," Betsy said, "but I know what the National Crime Victimization Survey says, because I googled it. Sixty per cent of rapes go unreported, according to them. Three in every five. I think that might be low, but who can say for sure? Outside of math classes, it's hard to prove a negative. Impossible, really."

"Who raped you?" Tess asked.

"My stepfather. I was twelve. He held a butter knife to my face while he did it. I kept still—I was scared—but the knife slipped when he came. Probably not on purpose, but who can say?"

Betsy pulled down the lower lid of her left eye with her left hand. The right she cupped beneath it, and the glass eye rolled neatly into that palm. The empty socket was mildly red and uptilted, seeming to stare out at the world with surprise.

"The pain was . . . well, there's no way to describe pain like that, not really. It seemed like the end of the world to me. There was blood, too. Lots. My mother took me to the doctor. She said I was to tell him I was running in my stocking feet and slipped on the kitchen linoleum because she'd just waxed it. That I pitched forward and put out my eye on the corner of the kitchen counter. She said the doctor would want to speak to me alone, and she was

depending on me. ‘I know he did a terrible thing to you,’ she said, ‘but if people find out, they’ll blame me. Please, baby, do this one thing for me and I’ll make sure nothing bad ever happens to you again.’ So that’s what I did.”

“And did it happen again?”

“Three or four more times. And I always kept still, because I only had one eye left to donate to the cause. Listen, are we done here or not?”

Tess moved to embrace her, but Betsy cringed back—*like a vampire who sees a crucifix*, Tess thought.

“Don’t do that,” Betsy said.

“But—”

“I know, I know, mucho thanks, solidarity, sisterhood forever, blah-blah-blah. I don’t like to be hugged, that’s all. Are we done here, or not?”

“We’re done.”

“Then go. And I’d throw that gun of yours in the river on your way back home. Did you burn the confession?”

“Yes. You bet.”

Betsy nodded. “And I’ll erase the message you left on my answering machine.”

Tess walked away. She looked back once. Betsy Neal was still sitting on the bench. She had put her eye back in.

In her Expedition, Tess realized it might be an extremely good idea to delete her last few journeys from her GPS. She pushed the power button, and the screen brightened. Tom said: “Hello, Tess. I see we’re taking a trip.”

Tess finished making her deletions, then turned the GPS unit off again. No trip, not really; she was only going home. And she thought she could find the way by herself.

# FAIR EXTENSION

Streeter only saw the sign because he had to pull over and puke. He puked a lot now, and there was very little warning—sometimes a flutter of nausea, sometimes a brassy taste in the back of his mouth, and sometimes nothing at all; just *urk* and out it came, howdy-do. It made driving a risky proposition, yet he also drove a lot now, partly because he wouldn't be able to by late fall and partly because he had a lot to think about. He had always done his best thinking behind the wheel.

He was out on the Harris Avenue Extension, a broad thoroughfare that ran for two miles beside the Derry County Airport and the attendant businesses: mostly motels and warehouses. The Extension was busy during the daytime, because it connected Derry's west and east sides as well as servicing the airport, but in the evening it was nearly deserted. Streeter pulled over into the bike lane, snatched one of his plastic barf-bags from the pile of them on the passenger seat, dropped his face into it, and let fly. Dinner made an encore appearance. Or would have, if he'd had his eyes open. He didn't. Once you'd seen one bellyful of puke, you'd seen them all.

When the puking phase started, there hadn't been pain. Dr. Henderson had warned him that would change, and over the last week, it had. Not agony as yet; just a quick lightning-stroke up from the gut and into the throat, like acid indigestion. It came, then faded. But it would get worse. Dr. Henderson had told him that, too.

He raised his head from the bag, opened the glove compartment, took out a wire bread-tie, and secured his dinner before the smell could permeate the car. He looked to his right and saw a providential litter basket with a cheerful lop-eared hound on the side and a stenciled message reading **DERRY DAWG SEZ "PUT LITTER IN ITS PLACE!"**

Streeter got out, went to the Dawg Basket, and disposed of the latest ejecta from his failing body. The summer sun was setting red over the airport's flat (and currently deserted) acreage, and the shadow tacked to his heels was long and grotesquely thin. It was as if it were four months ahead of his body, and already fully ravaged by the cancer that would soon be eating him alive.

He turned back to his car and saw the sign across the road. At first—probably because his eyes were still watering—he thought it said HAIR EXTENSION. Then he blinked and saw it actually said FAIR EXTENSION. Below that, in smaller letters: FAIR PRICE.

Fair extension, fair price. It sounded good, and almost made sense.

There was a gravel area on the far side of the Extension, outside the Cyclone fence marking the county airport's property. Lots of people set up roadside stands there during the busy hours of the day, because it was possible for customers to pull in without getting tailgated (if you were quick and remembered to use your blinker, that was). Streeter had lived his whole life in the little Maine city of Derry, and over the years he'd seen people selling fresh fiddleheads there in the spring, fresh berries and corn on the cob in the summer, and lobsters almost year-round. In mud season, a crazy old guy known as the Snowman took over the spot, selling scavenged knickknacks that had been lost in the winter and were revealed by the melting snow. Many years ago Streeter had bought a good-looking rag dolly from this man, intending to give it to his daughter May, who had been two or three back then. He made the mistake of telling Janet that he'd gotten it from the Snowman, and she made him throw it away. "Do you think we can boil a rag doll to kill the germs?" she asked. "Sometimes I wonder how a smart man can be so stupid."

Well, cancer didn't discriminate when it came to brains. Smart or stupid, he was about ready to leave the game and take off his uniform.

There was a card table set up where the Snowman had once displayed his wares. The pudgy man sitting behind it was shaded from the red rays of the lowering sun by a large yellow umbrella that was cocked at a rakish angle.

Streeter stood in front of his car for a minute, almost got in (the pudgy man had taken no notice of him; he appeared to be watching a small portable TV), and then curiosity got the better of him. He checked for traffic, saw none—the Extension was predictably dead at this hour, all the commuters at home eating dinner and taking their noncancerous states for granted—and crossed the four empty lanes. His scrawny shadow, the Ghost of Streeter Yet to Come, trailed out behind him.

The pudgy man looked up. "Hello there," he said. Before he turned the TV off, Streeter had time to see the guy was watching *Inside Edition*. "How are we

tonight?”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’ve been better,” Streeter said. “Kind of late to be selling, isn’t it? Very little traffic out here after rush hour. It’s the backside of the airport, you know. Nothing but freight deliveries. Passengers go in on Witcham Street.”

“Yes,” the pudgy man said, “but unfortunately, the zoning goes against little roadside businesses like mine on the busy side of the airport.” He shook his head at the unfairness of the world. “I was going to close up and go home at seven, but I had a feeling one more prospect might come by.”

Streeter looked at the table, saw no items for sale (unless the TV was), and smiled. “I can’t really be a prospect, Mr.—?”

“George Elvid,” the pudgy man said, standing and extending an equally pudgy hand.

Streeter shook with him. “Dave Streeter. And I can’t really be a prospect, because I have no idea what you’re selling. At first I thought the sign said *hair extension*.”

“Do you *want* a hair extension?” Elvid asked, giving him a critical once-over. “I ask because yours seems to be thinning.”

“And will soon be gone,” Streeter said. “I’m on chemo.”

“Oh my. Sorry.”

“Thanks. Although what the point of chemo can be . . .” He shrugged. He marveled at how easy it was to say these things to a stranger. He hadn’t even told his kids, although Janet knew, of course.

“Not much chance?” Elvid asked. There was simple sympathy in his voice—no more and no less—and Streeter felt his eyes fill with tears. Crying in front of Janet embarrassed him terribly, and he’d done it only twice. Here, with this stranger, it seemed all right. Nonetheless, he took his handkerchief from his back pocket and swiped his eyes with it. A small plane was coming in for a landing. Silhouetted against the red sun, it looked like a moving crucifix.

“No chance is what I’m hearing,” Streeter said. “So I guess the chemo is just . . . I don’t know . . .”

“Knee-jerk triage?”

Streeter laughed. “That’s it exactly.”

“Maybe you ought to consider trading the chemo for extra painkillers. Or, you could do a little business with me.”

“As I started to say, I can’t really be a prospect until I know what you’re selling.”

“Oh, well, most people would call it snake-oil,” Elvid said, smiling and bouncing on the balls of his feet behind his table. Streeter noted with some fascination that, although George Elvid was pudgy, his shadow was as thin and sick-looking as Streeter’s own. He supposed everyone’s shadow started to look sick as sunset approached, especially in August, when the end of the day was long and lingering and somehow not quite pleasant.

“I don’t see the bottles,” Streeter said.

Elvid tented his fingers on the table and leaned over them, looking suddenly businesslike. “I sell extensions,” he said.

“Which makes the name of this particular road fortuitous.”

“Never thought of it that way, but I suppose you’re right. Although sometimes a cigar is just a smoke and a coincidence is just a coincidence. Everyone wants an extension, Mr. Streeter. If you were a young woman with a love of shopping, I’d offer you a credit extension. If you were a man with a small penis—genetics can be so cruel—I’d offer you a dick extension.”

Streeter was amazed and amused by the baldness of it. For the first time in a month—since the diagnosis—he forgot he was suffering from an aggressive and extremely fast-moving form of cancer. “You’re kidding.”

“Oh, I’m a great kidder, but I never joke about business. I’ve sold dozens of dick extensions in my time, and was for awhile known in Arizona as *El Pene Grande*. I’m being totally honest, but, fortunately for me, I neither require nor expect you to believe it. Short men frequently want a height extension. If you *did* want more hair, Mr. Streeter, I’d be *happy* to sell you a hair extension.”

“Could a man with a big nose—you know, like Jimmy Durante—get a smaller one?”

Elvid shook his head, smiling. “Now you’re the one who’s kidding. The answer is no. If you need a reduction, you have to go somewhere else. I specialize only in extensions, a very American product. I’ve sold love extensions, sometimes called *potions*, to the lovelorn, loan extensions to the cash-strapped—plenty of those in this economy—time extensions to those

under some sort of deadline, and once an eye extension to a fellow who wanted to become an Air Force pilot and knew he couldn't pass the vision test."

Streeter was grinning, having fun. He would have said having fun was now out of reach, but life was full of surprises.

Elvid was also grinning, as if they were sharing an excellent joke. "And once," he said, "I swung a *reality* extension for a painter—very talented man—who was slipping into paranoid schizophrenia. *That* was expensive."

"How much? Dare I ask?"

"One of the fellow's paintings, which now graces my home. You'd know the name; famous in the Italian Renaissance. You probably studied him if you took an art appreciation course in college."

Streeter continued to grin, but he took a step back, just to be on the safe side. He had accepted the fact that he was going to die, but that didn't mean he wanted to do so today, at the hands of a possible escapee from the Juniper Hill asylum for the criminally insane in Augusta. "So what are we saying? That you're kind of . . . I don't know . . . immortal?"

"Very long-lived, certainly," Elvid said. "Which brings us to what I can do for you, I believe. You'd probably like a *life* extension."

"Can't be done, I suppose?" Streeter asked. Mentally he was calculating the distance back to his car, and how long it would take him to get there.

"Of course it can . . . for a price."

Streeter, who had played his share of Scrabble in his time, had already imagined the letters of Elvid's name on tiles and rearranged them. "Money? Or are we talking about my soul?"

Elvid flapped his hand and accompanied the gesture with a roguish roll of his eyes. "I wouldn't, as the saying goes, know a soul if it bit me on the buttocks. No, money's the answer, as it usually is. Fifteen percent of your income over the next fifteen years should do it. An agenting fee, you could call it."

"That's the length of my extension?" Streeter contemplated the idea of fifteen years with wistful greed. It seemed like a very long time, especially when he stacked it next to what actually lay ahead: six months of vomiting, increasing pain, coma, death. Plus an obituary that would undoubtedly

include the phrase “after a long and courageous battle with cancer.” Yada-yada, as they said on *Seinfeld*.

Elvid lifted his hands to his shoulders in an expansive who-knows gesture. “Might be twenty. Can’t say for sure; this is not rocket science. But if you’re expecting immortality, fuggeddaboutit. All I sell is fair extension. Best I can do.”

“Works for me,” Streeter said. The guy had cheered him up, and if he needed a straight man, Streeter was willing to oblige. Up to a point, anyway. Still smiling, he extended his hand across the card table. “Fifteen percent, fifteen years. Although I have to tell you, fifteen percent of an assistant bank manager’s salary won’t exactly put you behind the wheel of a Rolls-Royce. A Geo, maybe, but—”

“That’s not quite all,” Elvid said.

“Of course it isn’t,” Streeter said. He sighed and withdrew his hand. “Mr. Elvid, it’s been very nice talking to you, you’ve put a shine on my evening, which I would have thought was impossible, and I hope you get help with your mental prob—”

“Hush, you stupid man,” Elvid said, and although he was still smiling, there was nothing pleasant about it now. He suddenly seemed taller—at least three inches taller—and not so pudgy.

*It’s the light*, Streeter thought. *Sunset light is tricky*. And the unpleasant smell he suddenly noticed was probably nothing but burnt aviation fuel, carried to this little graveled square outside the Cyclone fence by an errant puff of wind. It all made sense . . . but he hushed as instructed.

“Why does a man or woman need an extension? Have you ever asked yourself that?”

“Of course I have,” Streeter said with a touch of asperity. “I work in a bank, Mr. Elvid—Derry Savings. People ask me for loan extensions all the time.”

“Then you know that people need *extensions* to compensate for *shortfalls*—short credit, short dick, short sight, et cetera.”

“Yeah, it’s a short-ass world,” Streeter said.

“Just so. But even things not there have weight. *Negative* weight, which is the worst kind. Weight lifted from you must go somewhere else. It’s simple physics. *Psychic* physics, we could say.”

Streeter studied Elvid with fascination. That momentary impression that the man was taller (and that there were too many teeth inside his smile) had gone. This was just a short, rotund fellow who probably had a green outpatient card in his wallet—if not from Juniper Hill, then from Acadia Mental Health in Bangor. If he *had* a wallet. He certainly had an extremely well-developed delusional geography, and that made him a fascinating study.

“Can I cut to the chase, Mr. Streeter?”

“Please.”

“You have to transfer the weight. In words of one syllable, you have to do the dirty to someone else if the dirty is to be lifted from you.”

“I see.” And he did. Elvid was back on message, and the message was a classic.

“But it can’t be just anyone. The old anonymous sacrifice has been tried, and it doesn’t work. It has to be someone you hate. Is there someone you hate, Mr. Streeter?”

“I’m not too crazy about Kim Jong-il,” Streeter said. “And I think jail’s *way* too good for the evil bastards who blew up the USS *Cole*, but I don’t suppose they’ll ever—”

“Be serious or begone,” Elvid said, and once again he seemed taller. Streeter wondered if this could be some peculiar side-effect of the medications he was taking.

“If you mean in my personal life, I don’t hate anyone. There are people I don’t *like*—Mrs. Denbrough next door puts out her garbage cans without the lids, and if a wind is blowing, crap ends up all over my law—”

“If I may misquote the late Dino Martino, Mr. Streeter, everybody hates somebody sometime.”

“Will Rogers said—”

“He was a rope-twirling fabricator who wore his hat down around his eyes like a little kid playing cowboy. Besides, if you really hate nobody, we can’t do business.”

Streeter thought it over. He looked down at his shoes and spoke in a small voice he hardly recognized as his own. “I suppose I hate Tom Goodhugh.”

“Who is he in your life?”

Streeter sighed. “My best friend since grammar school.”

There was a moment of silence before Elvid began bellowing laughter. He strode around his card table, clapped Streeter on the back (with a hand that felt cold and fingers that felt long and thin rather than short and pudgy), then strode back to his folding chair. He collapsed into it, still snorting and roaring. His face was red, and the tears streaming down his face also looked red—bloody, actually—in the sunset light.

*“Your best . . . since grammar . . . oh, that’s . . .”*

Elvid could manage no more. He went into gales and howls and gut-shaking spasms, his chin (strangely sharp for such a chubby face) nodding and dipping at the innocent (but darkening) summer sky. At last he got himself under control. Streeter thought about offering his handkerchief, and decided he didn’t want it on the extension salesman’s skin.

“This is excellent, Mr. Streeter,” he said. “We can do business.”

“Gee, that’s great,” Streeter said, taking another step back. “I’m enjoying my extra fifteen years already. But I’m parked in the bike lane, and that’s a traffic violation. I could get a ticket.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Elvid said. “As you may have noticed, not even a single *civilian* car has come along since we started dickering, let alone a minion of the Derry PD. Traffic never interferes when I get down to serious dealing with a serious man or woman; I see to it.”

Streeter looked around uneasily. It was true. He could hear traffic over on Witcham Street, headed for Upmile Hill, but here, Derry was utterly deserted. *Of course*, he reminded himself, *traffic’s always light over here when the working day is done.*

But *absent?* Completely *absent?* You might expect that at midnight, but not at seven-thirty PM.

“Tell me why you hate your best friend,” Elvid invited.

Streeter reminded himself again that this man was crazy. Anything Elvid passed on wouldn’t be believed. It was a liberating idea.

“Tom was better-looking when we were kids, and he’s *far* better-looking now. He lettered in three sports; the only one I’m even halfway good at is miniature golf.”

“I don’t think they have a cheerleading squad for that one,” Elvid said.

Streeter smiled grimly, warming to his subject. “Tom’s plenty smart, but he lazed his way through Derry High. His college ambitions were nil. But when his grades fell enough to put his athletic eligibility at risk, he’d panic. And then who got the call?”

“You did!” Elvid cried. “Old Mr. Responsible! Tutored him, did you? Maybe wrote a few papers as well? Making sure to misspell the words Tom’s teachers got used to him misspelling?”

“Guilty as charged. In fact, when we were seniors—the year Tom got the State of Maine Sportsman award—I was really *two* students: Dave Streeter and Tom Goodhugh.”

“Tough.”

“Do you know what’s tougher? I had a girlfriend. Beautiful girl named Norma Witten. Dark brown hair and eyes, flawless skin, beautiful cheekbones —”

“Tits that wouldn’t quit—”

“Yes indeed. But, sex appeal aside—”

“Not that you ever *did* put it aside—”

“—I loved that girl. Do you know what Tom did?”

“Stole her from you!” Elvid said indignantly.

“Correct. The two of them came to me, you know. Made a clean breast of it.”

“Noble!”

“Claimed they couldn’t help it.”

“Claimed they were in *love*, L-U-V.”

“Yes. Force of nature. This thing is bigger than both of us. And so on.”

“Let me guess. He knocked her up.”

“Indeed he did.” Streeter was looking at his shoes again, remembering a certain skirt Norma had worn when she was a sophomore or a junior. It was cut to show just a flirt of the slip beneath. That had been almost thirty years ago, but sometimes he still summoned that image to mind when he and Janet made love. He had never made love with Norma—not the Full Monty sort, anyway; she wouldn’t allow it. Although she had been eager enough to drop her pants for Tom Goodhugh. *Probably the first time he asked her.*

“And left her with a bun in the oven.”

“No.” Streeter sighed. “He married her.”

“Then divorced her! Possibly after beating her silly?”

“Worse still. They’re still married. Three kids. When you see them walking in Basse Park, they’re usually holding hands.”

“That’s about the crappiest thing I’ve ever heard. Not much could make it worse. Unless . . .” Elvid looked shrewdly at Streeter from beneath bushy brows. “Unless *you’re* the one who finds himself frozen in the iceberg of a loveless marriage.”

“Not at all,” Streeter said, surprised by the idea. “I love Janet very much, and she loves me. The way she’s stood by me during this cancer thing has been just extraordinary. If there’s such a thing as harmony in the universe, then Tom and I ended up with the right partners. Absolutely. But . . .”

“But?” Elvid looked at him with delighted eagerness.

Streeter became aware that his fingernails were sinking into his palms. Instead of easing up, he bore down harder. Bore down until he felt trickles of blood. “But he *fucking stole her!*” This had been eating him for years, and it felt good to shout the news.

“Indeed he did, and we never cease wanting what we want, whether it’s good for us or not. Wouldn’t you say so, Mr. Streeter?”

Streeter made no reply. He was breathing hard, like a man who has just dashed fifty yards or engaged in a street scuffle. Hard little balls of color had surfaced in his formerly pale cheeks.

“And is that all?” Elvid spoke in the tones of a kindly parish priest.

“No.”

“Get it all out, then. Drain that blister.”

“He’s a millionaire. He shouldn’t be, but he is. In the late eighties—not long after the flood that damn near wiped this town out—he started up a garbage company . . . only he called it Derry Waste Removal and Recycling. Nicer name, you know.”

“Less germy.”

“He came to me for the loan, and although the proposition looked shaky to everyone at the bank, I pushed it through. Do you know *why* I pushed it through, Elvid?”

“Of course! Because he’s your friend!”

“Guess again.”

“Because you thought he’d crash and burn.”

“Right. He sank all his savings into four garbage trucks, and mortgaged his house to buy a piece of land out by the Newport town line. For a landfill. The kind of thing New Jersey gangsters own to wash their dope-and-whore money and use as body-dumps. I thought it was crazy and I couldn’t wait to write the loan. He still loves me like a brother for it. Never fails to tell people how I stood up to the bank and put my job on the line. ‘Dave carried me, just like in high school,’ he says. Do you know what the kids in town call his landfill now?”

“Tell me!”

“Mount Trashmore! It’s huge! I wouldn’t be surprised if it was radioactive! It’s covered with sod, but there are KEEP OUT signs all around it, and there’s probably a Rat Manhattan under that nice green grass! *They’re* probably radioactive, as well!”

He stopped, aware that he sounded ridiculous, not caring. Elvid was insane, but—surprise! Streeter had turned out to be insane, too! At least on the subject of his old friend. Plus . . .

*In cancer veritas*, Streeter thought.

“So let’s recap.” Elvid began ticking off the points on his fingers, which were not long at all but as short, pudgy, and inoffensive as the rest of him. “Tom Goodhugh was better-looking than you, even when you were children. He was gifted with athletic skills you could only dream of. The girl who kept her smooth white thighs closed in the backseat of your car opened them for Tom. He married her. They are still in love. Children okay, I suppose?”

“Healthy and beautiful!” Streeter spat. “One getting married, one in college, one in high school! *That* one’s captain of the football team! Chip off the old fucking block!”

“Right. And—the cherry on the chocolate sundae—he’s rich and you’re knocking on through life at a salary of sixty thousand or so a year.”

“I got a bonus for writing his loan,” Streeter muttered. “For showing *vision*.”

“But what you actually wanted was a promotion.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m a businessman now, but at one time I was a humble salaryman. Got fired before striking out on my own. Best thing that ever happened to me. I know how these things go. Anything else? Might as well get it all off your chest.”

“He drinks Spotted Hen Microbrew!” Streeter shouted. “Nobody in Derry drinks that pretentious shit! Just him! Just Tom Goodhugh, the Garbage King!”

“Does he have a sports car?” Elvid spoke quietly, the words lined with silk.

“No. If he did, I could at least joke with Janet about sports car menopause. He drives a goddam *Range Rover*.”

“I think there might be one more thing,” Elvid said. “If so, you might as well get that off your chest, too.”

“He doesn’t have cancer.” Streeter almost whispered it. “He’s fifty-one, just like me, and he’s as healthy . . . as a fucking . . . *horse*.”

“So are you,” Elvid said.

“*What?*”

“It’s done, Mr. Streeter. Or, since I’ve cured your cancer, at least temporarily, may I call you Dave?”

“You’re a very crazy man,” Streeter said, not without admiration.

“No, sir. I’m as sane as a straight line. But notice I said *temporarily*. We are now in the ‘try it, you’ll buy it’ stage of our relationship. It will last a week at least, maybe ten days. I urge you to visit your doctor. I think he’ll find remarkable improvement in your condition. But it won’t last. Unless . . .”

“Unless?”

Elvid leaned forward, smiling chummily. His teeth again seemed too many (and too big) for his inoffensive mouth. “I come out here from time to time,” he said. “Usually at this time of day.”

“Just before sunset.”

“Exactly. Most people don’t notice me—they look through me as if I wasn’t there—but you’ll be looking. Won’t you?”

“If I’m better, I certainly will,” Streeter said.

“And you’ll bring me something.”

Elvid’s smile widened, and Streeter saw a wonderful, terrible thing: the man’s teeth weren’t just too big or too many. They were *sharp*.

\* \* \*

Janet was folding clothes in the laundry room when he got back. “There you are,” she said. “I was starting to worry. Did you have a nice drive?”

“Yes,” he said. He surveyed his kitchen. It looked different. It looked like a kitchen in a dream. Then he turned on a light, and that was better. Elvid was the dream. Elvid and his promises. Just a loony on a day pass from Acadia Mental.

She came to him and kissed his cheek. She was flushed from the heat of the dryer and very pretty. She was fifty herself, but looked years younger. Streeter thought she would probably have a fine life after he died. He guessed May and Justin might have a stepdaddy in their future.

“You look good,” she said. “You’ve actually got some color.”

“Do I?”

“You do.” She gave him an encouraging smile that was troubled just beneath. “Come talk to me while I fold the rest of these things. It’s so boring.”

He followed her and stood in the door of the laundry room. He knew better than to offer help; she said he even folded dish-wipers the wrong way.

“Justin called,” she said. “He and Carl are in Venice. At a youth hostel. He said their cabdriver spoke very good English. He’s having a ball.”

“Great.”

“You were right to keep the diagnosis to yourself,” she said. “You were right and I was wrong.”

“A first in our marriage.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Jus has so looked forward to this trip. But you’ll have to fess up when he gets back. May’s coming up from Searsport for Gracie’s wedding, and that would be the right time.” Gracie was Gracie Goodhugh, Tom and Norma’s oldest child. Carl Goodhugh, Justin’s traveling companion, was the one in the middle.

“We’ll see,” Streeter said. He had one of his puke-bags in his back pocket, but he had never felt less like upchucking. Something he *did* feel like was eating. For the first time in days.

*Nothing happened out there—you know that, right? This is just a little psychosomatic elevation. It’ll recede.*

“Like my hairline,” he said.

“What, honey?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, and speaking of Gracie, Norma called. She reminded me it was their turn to have us to dinner at their place Thursday night. I said I’d ask you, but that you were awfully busy at the bank, working late hours, all this bad-mortgage stuff. I didn’t think you’d want to see them.”

Her voice was as normal and as calm as ever, but all at once she began crying big storybook tears that welled in her eyes and then went rolling down her cheeks. Love grew humdrum in the later years of a marriage, but now his swelled up as fresh as it had been in the early days, the two of them living in a crappy apartment on Kossuth Street and sometimes making love on the living-room rug. He stepped into the laundry room, took the shirt she was folding out of her hands, and hugged her. She hugged him back, fiercely.

“This is just so hard and unfair,” she said. “We’ll get through it. I don’t know how, but we will.”

“That’s right. And we’ll start by having dinner on Thursday night with Tom and Norma, just like we always do.”

She drew back, looking at him with her wet eyes. “Are you going to tell them?”

“And spoil dinner? Nope.”

“Will you even be able to eat? Without . . .” She put two fingers to her closed lips, puffed her cheeks, and crossed her eyes: a comic puke-pantomime that made Streeter grin.

“I don’t know about Thursday, but I could eat something now,” he said. “Would you mind if I rustled myself up a hamburger? Or I could go out to McDonald’s . . . maybe bring you back a chocolate shake . . .”

“My God,” she said, and wiped her eyes. “It’s a miracle.”

\* \* \*

“I wouldn’t call it a miracle, exactly,” Dr. Henderson told Streeter on Wednesday afternoon. “But . . .”

It was two days since Streeter had discussed matters of life and death under Mr. Elvid's yellow umbrella, and a day before the Streeters' weekly dinner with the Goodhughs, this time to take place at the sprawling residence Streeter sometimes thought of as The House That Trash Built. The conversation was taking place not in Dr. Henderson's office, but in a small consultation room at Derry Home Hospital. Henderson had tried to discourage the MRI, telling Streeter that his insurance wouldn't cover it and the results were sure to be disappointing. Streeter had insisted.

"But what, Roddy?"

"The tumors appear to have shrunk, and your lungs seem clear. I've never seen such a result, and neither have the two other docs I brought in to look at the images. More important—this is just between you and me—the MRI tech has never seen anything like it, and those are the guys I really trust. He thinks it's probably a computer malfunction in the machine itself."

"I feel good, though," Streeter said, "which is why I asked for the test. Is that a malfunction?"

"Are you vomiting?"

"I have a couple of times," Streeter admitted, "but I think that's the chemo. I'm calling a halt to it, by the way."

Roddy Henderson frowned. "That's very unwise."

"The unwise thing was starting it in the first place, my friend. You say, 'Sorry, Dave, the chances of you dying before you get a chance to say Happy Valentine's Day are in the ninetieth percentile, so we're going to fuck up the time you have left by filling you full of poison. You might feel worse if I injected you with sludge from Tom Goodhugh's landfill, but probably not.' And like a fool, I said okay."

Henderson looked offended. "Chemo is the last best hope for—"

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter," Streeter said with a goodnatured grin. He drew a deep breath that went all the way down to the bottom of his lungs. It felt *wonderful*. "When the cancer's aggressive, chemo isn't for the patient. It's just an agony surcharge the patient pays so that when he's dead, the doctors and relatives can hug each other over the coffin and say 'We did everything we could.'"

"That's harsh," Henderson said. "You know you're apt to relapse, don't you?"

“Tell that to the tumors,” Streeter said. “The ones that are no longer there.”

Henderson looked at the images of Deepest Darkest Streeter that were still flicking past at twenty-second intervals on the conference room’s monitor and sighed. They were good pictures, even Streeter knew that, but they seemed to make his doctor unhappy.

“Relax, Roddy.” Streeter spoke gently, as he might once have spoken to May or Justin when a favorite toy got lost or broken. “Shit happens; sometimes miracles happen, too. I read it in the *Reader’s Digest*.”

“In my experience, one has never happened in an MRI tube.” Henderson picked up a pen and tapped it against Streeter’s file, which had fattened considerably over the last three months.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Streeter said.

\* \* \*

Thursday evening in Derry; dusk of a summer night. The declining sun casting its red and dreamy rays over the three perfectly clipped, watered, and landscaped acres Tom Goodhugh had the temerity to call “the old backyard.” Streeter sat in a lawn chair on the patio, listening to the rattle of plates and the laughter of Janet and Norma as they loaded the dishwasher.

*Yard? It’s not a yard, it’s a Shopping Channel fan’s idea of heaven.*

There was even a fountain with a marble child standing in the middle of it. Somehow it was the bare-ass cherub (pissing, of course) that offended Streeter the most. He was sure it had been Norma’s idea—she had gone back to college to get a liberal arts degree, and had half-assed Classical pretensions—but still, to see such a thing here in the dying glow of a perfect Maine evening and know its presence was a result of Tom’s garbage monopoly . . .

And, speak of the devil (*or the Elvid, if you like that better*, Streeter thought), enter the Garbage King himself, with the necks of two sweating bottles of Spotted Hen Microbrew caught between the fingers of his left hand. Slim and erect in his open-throated Oxford shirt and faded jeans, his lean face perfectly lit by the sunset glow, Tom Goodhugh looked like a model in a magazine beer ad. Streeter could even see the copy: *Live the good life, reach for a Spotted Hen.*

“Thought you might like a fresh one, since your beautiful wife says she’s driving.”

“Thanks.” Streeter took one of the bottles, tipped it to his lips, and drank. Pretentious or not, it was good.

As Goodhugh sat down, Jacob the football player came out with a plate of cheese and crackers. He was as broad-shouldered and handsome as Tom had been back in the day. *Probably has cheerleaders crawling all over him*, Streeter thought. *Probably has to beat them off with a damn stick.*

“Mom thought you might like these,” Jacob said.

“Thanks, Jake. You going out?”

“Just for a little while. Throw the Frisbee with some guys down in the Barrens until it gets dark, then study.”

“Stay on this side. There’s poison ivy down there since the crap grew back.”

“Yeah, we know. Denny caught it when we were in junior high, and it was so bad his mother thought he had cancer.”

“Ouch!” Streeter said.

“Drive home carefully, son. No hot-dogging.”

“You bet.” The boy put an arm around his father and kissed his cheek with a lack of self-consciousness that Streeter found depressing. Tom not only had his health, a still-gorgeous wife, and a ridiculous pissing cherub; he had a handsome eighteen-year-old son who still felt all right about kissing his dad goodbye before going out with his best buds.

“He’s a good boy,” Goodhugh said fondly, watching Jacob mount the stairs to the house and disappear inside. “Studies hard and makes his grades, unlike his old man. Luckily for me, I had you.”

“Lucky for both of us,” Streeter said, smiling and putting a goo of Brie on a Triscuit. He popped it into his mouth.

“Does me good to see you eating, chum,” Goodhugh said. “Me n Norma were starting to wonder if there was something wrong with you.”

“Never better,” Streeter said, and drank some more of the tasty (and no doubt expensive) beer. “I’ve been losing my hair in front, though. Jan says it makes me look thinner.”

“That’s one thing the ladies don’t have to worry about,” Goodhugh said, and stroked a hand back through his own locks, which were as full and rich as

they had been at eighteen. Not a touch of gray in them, either. Janet Streeter could still look forty on a good day, but in the red light of the declining sun, the Garbage King looked thirty-five. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink to excess, and he worked out at a health club that did business with Streeter's bank but which Streeter could not afford himself. His middle child, Carl, was currently doing the European thing with Justin Streeter, the two of them traveling on Carl Goodhugh's dime. Which was, of course, actually the Garbage King's dime.

*O man who has everything, thy name is Goodhugh,* Streeter thought, and smiled at his old friend.

His old friend smiled back, and touched the neck of his beer bottle to Streeter's. "Life is good, wouldn't you say?"

"Very good," Streeter agreed. "Long days and pleasant nights."

Goodhugh raised his eyebrows. "Where'd you get that?"

"Made it up, I guess," Streeter said. "But it's true, isn't it?"

"If it is, I owe a lot of my pleasant nights to you," Goodhugh said. "It has crossed my mind, old buddy, that I owe you my life." He toasted his insane backyard. "The tenderloin part of it, anyway."

"Nah, you're a self-made man."

Goodhugh lowered his voice and spoke confidentially. "Want the truth? The woman made this man. The Bible says 'Who can find a good woman? For her price is above rubies.' Something like that, anyway. And you introduced us. Don't know if you remember that."

Streeter felt a sudden and almost irresistible urge to smash his beer bottle on the patio bricks and shove the jagged and still foaming neck into his old friend's eyes. He smiled instead, sipped a little more beer, then stood up. "Think I need to pay a little visit to the facility."

"You don't buy beer, you only rent it," Goodhugh said, then burst out laughing. As if he had invented this himself, right on the spot.

"Truer words, et cetera," Streeter said. "Excuse me."

"You really are looking better," Goodhugh called after him as Streeter mounted the steps.

"Thanks," Streeter said. "Old buddy."

\* \* \*

He closed the bathroom door, pushed in the locking button, turned on the lights, and—for the first time in his life—swung open the medicine cabinet door in another person's house. The first thing his eye lighted on cheered him immensely: a tube of Just For Men shampoo. There were also a few prescription bottles.

Streeter thought, *People who leave their drugs in a bathroom the guests use are just asking for trouble.* Not that there was anything sensational: Norma had asthma medicine; Tom was taking blood pressure medicine—Atenolol—and using some sort of skin cream.

The Atenolol bottle was half full. Streeter took one of the tablets, tucked it into the watch-pocket of his jeans, and flushed the toilet. Then he left the bathroom, feeling like a man who has just snuck across the border of a strange country.

\* \* \*

The following evening was overcast, but George Elvid was still sitting beneath the yellow umbrella and once again watching *Inside Edition* on his portable TV. The lead story had to do with Whitney Houston, who had lost a suspicious amount of weight shortly after signing a huge new recording contract. Elvid disposed of this rumor with a twist of his pudgy fingers and regarded Streeter with a smile.

“How have you been feeling, Dave?”

“Better.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Vomiting?”

“Not today.”

“Eating?”

“Like a horse.”

“And I'll bet you've had some medical tests.”

“How did you know?”

“I’d expect no less of a successful bank official. Did you bring me something?”

For a moment Streeter considered walking away. He really did. Then he reached into the pocket of the light jacket he was wearing (the evening was chilly for August, and he was still on the thin side) and brought out a tiny square of Kleenex. He hesitated, then handed it across the table to Elvid, who unwrapped it.

“Ah, Atenolol,” Elvid said. He popped the pill into his mouth and swallowed.

Streeter’s mouth opened, then closed slowly.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Elvid said. “If you had a high-stress job like mine, you’d have blood pressure problems, too. And the reflux I suffer from, oy. You don’t want to know.”

“What happens now?” Streeter asked. Even in the jacket, he felt cold.

“Now?” Elvid looked surprised. “Now you start enjoying your fifteen years of good health. Possibly twenty or even twenty-five. Who knows?”

“And happiness?”

Elvid favored him with the roguish look. It would have been amusing if not for the coldness Streeter saw just beneath. And the *age*. In that moment he felt certain that George Elvid had been doing business for a very long time, reflux or no reflux. “The happiness part is up to you, Dave. And your family, of course—Janet, May, and Justin.”

Had he told Elvid their names? Streeter couldn’t remember.

“Perhaps the children most of all. There’s an old saying to the effect that children are our hostages to fortune, but in fact it’s the children who take the *parents* hostage, that’s what I think. One of them could have a fatal or disabling accident on a deserted country road . . . fall prey to a debilitating disease . . .”

“Are you saying—”

“No, no, no! This isn’t some half-assed morality tale. I’m a *businessman*, not a character out of ‘The Devil and Daniel Webster.’ All I’m saying is that your happiness is in your hands and those of your nearest and dearest. And if you think I’m going to show up two decades or so down the line to collect your soul in my moldy old pocketbook, you’d better think again. The souls of humans have become poor and transparent things.”

He spoke, Streeter thought, as the fox might have done after repeated leaps had proved to it that the grapes were really and truly out of reach. But Streeter had no intention of saying such a thing. Now that the deal was done, all he wanted to do was get out of here. But still he lingered, not wanting to ask the question that was on his mind but knowing he had to. Because there was no gift-giving going on here; Streeter had been making deals in the bank for most of his life, and he knew a horse-trade when he saw one. Or when he smelled it: a faint, unpleasant stink like burned aviation fuel.

*In words of one syllable, you have to do the dirty to someone else if the dirty is to be lifted from you.*

But stealing a single hypertension pill wasn't exactly doing the dirty. Was it?

Elvid, meanwhile, was yanking his big umbrella closed. And when it was furled, Streeter observed an amazing and disheartening fact: it wasn't yellow at all. It was as gray as the sky. Summer was almost over.

"Most of my clients are perfectly satisfied, perfectly happy. Is that what you want to hear?"

It was . . . and wasn't.

"I sense you have a more pertinent question," Elvid said. "If you want an answer, quit beating around the bush and ask it. It's going to rain, and I want to get undercover before it does. The last thing I need at my age is bronchitis."

"Where's your car?"

"Oh, was that your question?" Elvid sneered openly at him. His cheeks were lean, not in the least pudgy, and his eyes turned up at the corners, where the whites shaded to an unpleasant and—yes, it was true—cancerous black. He looked like the world's least pleasant clown, with half his makeup removed.

"Your teeth," Streeter said stupidly. "They have *points*."

*"Your question, Mr. Streeter!"*

"Is Tom Goodhugh going to get cancer?"

Elvid gaped for a moment, then started to giggle. The sound was wheezy, dusty, and unpleasant—like a dying calliope.

"No, Dave," he said. "Tom Goodhugh isn't going to get cancer. Not *him*."

"What, then? What?"

The contempt with which Elvid surveyed him made Streeter's bones feel weak—as if holes had been eaten in them by some painless but terribly

corrosive acid. “Why would you care? You hate him, you said so yourself.”

“But—”

“Watch. Wait. *Enjoy*. And take this.” He handed Streeter a business card. Written on it was THE NON-SECTARIAN CHILDREN’S FUND and the address of a bank in the Cayman Islands.

“Tax haven,” Elvid said. “You’ll send my fifteen percent there. If you short me, I’ll know. And then woe is you, kiddo.”

“What if my wife finds out and asks questions?”

“Your wife has a personal checkbook. Beyond that, she never looks at a thing. She trusts you. Am I right?”

“Well . . .” Streeter observed with no surprise that the raindrops striking Elvid’s hands and arms smoked and sizzled. “Yes.”

“Of course I am. Our dealing is done. Get out of here and go back to your wife. I’m sure she’ll welcome you with open arms. Take her to bed. Stick your mortal penis in her and pretend she’s your best friend’s wife. You don’t deserve her, but lucky you.”

“What if I want to take it back,” Streeter whispered.

Elvid favored him with a stony smile that revealed a jutting ring of cannibal teeth. “You can’t,” he said.

That was in August of 2001, less than a month before the fall of the Towers.

\* \* \*

In December (on the same day Winona Ryder was busted for shoplifting, in fact), Dr. Roderick Henderson proclaimed Dave Streeter cancer-free—and, in addition, a bona fide miracle of the modern age.

“I have no explanation for this,” Henderson said.

Streeter did, but kept his silence.

Their consultation took place in Henderson’s office. At Derry Home Hospital, in the conference room where Streeter had looked at the first pictures of his miraculously cured body, Norma Goodhugh sat in the same chair where Streeter had sat, looking at less pleasant MRI scans. She listened numbly as her doctor told her—as gently as possible—that the lump in her left breast was indeed cancer, and it had spread to her lymph nodes.

“The situation is bad, but not hopeless,” the doctor said, reaching across the table to take Norma’s cold hand. He smiled. “We’ll want to start you on chemotherapy immediately.”

\* \* \*

In June of the following year, Streeter finally got his promotion. May Streeter was admitted to the Columbia School of Journalism grad school. Streeter and his wife took a long-deferred Hawaii vacation to celebrate. They made love many times. On their last day in Maui, Tom Goodhugh called. The connection was bad and he could hardly talk, but the message got through: Norma had died.

“We’ll be there for you,” Streeter promised.

When he told Janet the news, she collapsed on the hotel bed, weeping with her hands over her face. Streeter lay down beside her, held her close, and thought: *Well, we were going home, anyway.* And although he felt bad about Norma (and sort of bad for Tom), there was an upside: they had missed bug season, which could be a bitch in Derry.

In December, Streeter sent a check for just over fifteen thousand dollars to The Non-Sectarian Children’s Fund. He took it as a deduction on his tax return.

\* \* \*

In 2003, Justin Streeter made the Dean’s List at Brown and—as a lark—invented a video game called Walk Fido Home. The object of the game was to get your leashed dog back from the mall while avoiding bad drivers, objects falling from tenth-story balconies, and a pack of crazed old ladies who called themselves the Canine-Killing Grannies. To Streeter it sounded like a joke (and Justin assured them it *was* meant as a satire), but Games, Inc. took one look and paid their handsome, good-humored son seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the rights. Plus royalties. Jus bought his parents matching Toyota Pathfinder SUVs, pink for the lady, blue for the gentleman. Janet wept and hugged him and called him a foolish, impetuous, generous, and altogether

splendid boy. Streeter took him to Roxie's Tavern and bought him a Spotted Hen Microbrew.

In October, Carl Goodhugh's roommate at Emerson came back from class to find Carl facedown on the kitchen floor of their apartment with the grilled cheese sandwich he'd been making for himself still smoking in the frypan. Although only twenty-two years of age, Carl had suffered a heart attack. The doctors attending the case pinpointed a congenital heart defect—something about a thin atrial wall—that had gone undetected. Carl didn't die; his roommate got to him just in time and knew CPR. But he suffered oxygen deprivation, and the bright, handsome, physically agile young man who had not long before toured Europe with Justin Streeter became a shuffling shadow of his former self. He was not always continent, he got lost if he wandered more than a block or two from home (he had moved back with his still-grieving father), and his speech had become a blurred blare that only Tom could understand. Goodhugh hired a companion for him. The companion administered physical therapy and saw that Carl changed his clothes. He also took Carl on biweekly "outing." The most common "outing" was to Wishful Dishful Ice Cream, where Carl would always get a pistachio cone and smear it all over his face. Afterward the companion would clean him up, patiently, with Wet-Naps.

Janet stopped going with Streeter to dinner at Tom's. "I can't bear it," she confessed. "It's not the way Carl shuffles, or how he sometimes wets his pants—it's the look in his eyes, as if he remembers how he was, and can't quite remember how he got to where he is now. And . . . I don't know . . . there's always something *hopeful* in his face that makes me feel like everything in life is a joke."

Streeter knew what she meant, and often considered the idea during his dinners with his old friend (without Norma to cook, it was now mostly takeout). He enjoyed watching Tom feed his damaged son, and he enjoyed the hopeful look on Carl's face. The one that said, "This is all a dream I'm having, and soon I'll wake up." Jan was right, it was a joke, but it was sort of a good joke.

If you really thought about it.

\* \* \*

In 2004, May Streeter got a job with the *Boston Globe* and declared herself the happiest girl in the USA. Justin Streeter created Rock the House, which would be a perennial bestseller until the advent of Guitar Hero made it obsolete. By then Jus had moved on to a music composition computer program called You Moog Me, Baby. Streeter himself was appointed manager of his bank branch, and there were rumors of a regional post in his future. He took Janet to Cancún, and they had a fabulous time. She began calling him “my nuzzle-bunny.”

Tom’s accountant at Goodhugh Waste Removal embezzled two million dollars and departed for parts unknown. The subsequent accounting review revealed that the business was on very shaky ground; that bad old accountant had been nibbling away for years, it seemed.

*Nibbling?* Streeter thought, reading the story in *The Derry News*. *Taking it a chomp at a time is more like it.*

Tom no longer looked thirty-five; he looked sixty. And must have known it, because he stopped dying his hair. Streeter was delighted to see that it hadn’t gone white underneath the artificial color; Goodhugh’s hair was the dull and listless gray of Elvid’s umbrella when he had furled it. The hair-color, Streeter decided, of the old men you see sitting on park benches and feeding the pigeons. Call it Just For Losers.

\* \* \*

In 2005, Jacob the football player, who had gone to work in his father’s dying company instead of to college (which he could have attended on a full-boat athletic scholarship), met a girl and got married. Bubbly little brunette named Cammy Dorrington. Streeter and his wife agreed it was a beautiful ceremony, even though Carl Goodhugh hooted, gurgled, and burbled all the way through it, and even though Goodhugh’s oldest child—Gracie—tripped over the hem of her dress on the church steps as she was leaving, fell down, and broke her leg in two places. Until that happened, Tom Goodhugh had looked almost like his former self. Happy, in other words. Streeter did not begrudge him a little happiness. He supposed that even in hell, people got an occasional sip of water,

if only so they could appreciate the full horror of unrequited thirst when it set in again.

The honeymooning couple went to Belize. *I'll bet it rains the whole time*, Streeter thought. It didn't, but Jacob spent most of the week in a rundown hospital, suffering from violent gastroenteritis and pooping into paper didies. He had only drunk bottled water, but then forgot and brushed his teeth from the tap. "My own darn fault," he said.

Over eight hundred US troops died in Iraq. Bad luck for those boys and girls.

Tom Goodhugh began to suffer from gout, developed a limp, started using a cane.

That year's check to The Non-Sectarian Children's Fund was of an extremely good size, but Streeter didn't begrudge it. It was more blessed to give than to receive. All the best people said so.

\* \* \*

In 2006, Tom's daughter Gracie fell victim to pyorrhea and lost all her teeth. She also lost her sense of smell. One night shortly thereafter, at Goodhugh and Streeter's weekly dinner (it was just the two men; Carl's attendant had taken Carl on an "outing"), Tom Goodhugh broke down in tears. He had given up microbrews in favor of Bombay Sapphire gin, and he was very drunk. "I don't understand what's happened to me!" he sobbed. "I feel like . . . I don't know . . . *fucking Job!*"

Streeter took him in his arms and comforted him. He told his old friend that clouds always roll in, and sooner or later they always roll out.

"Well, these clouds have been here a fuck of a long time!" Goodhugh cried, and thumped Streeter on the back with a closed fist. Streeter didn't mind. His old friend wasn't as strong as he used to be.

Charlie Sheen, Tori Spelling, and David Hasselhoff got divorces, but in Derry, David and Janet Streeter celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary. There was a party. Toward the end of it, Streeter escorted his wife out back. He had arranged fireworks. Everybody applauded except for Carl Goodhugh. He

tried, but kept missing his hands. Finally the former Emerson student gave up on the clapping thing and pointed at the sky, hooting.

\* \* \*

In 2007, Kiefer Sutherland went to jail (not for the first time) on DUI charges, and Gracie Goodhugh Dickerson's husband was killed in a car crash. A drunk driver veered into his lane while Andy Dickerson was on his way home from work. The good news was that the drunk wasn't Kiefer Sutherland. The bad news was that Gracie Dickerson was four months pregnant and broke. Her husband had let his life insurance lapse to save on expenses. Gracie moved back in with her father and her brother Carl.

"With their luck, that baby will be born deformed," Streeter said one night as he and his wife lay in bed after making love.

"Hush!" Janet cried, shocked.

"If you say it, it won't come true," Streeter explained, and soon the two nuzzle-bunnies were asleep in each other's arms.

That year's check to the Children's Fund was for thirty thousand dollars. Streeter wrote it without a qualm.

\* \* \*

Gracie's baby came at the height of a February snowstorm in 2008. The good news was that it wasn't deformed. The bad news was that it was born dead. That damned family heart defect. Gracie—toothless, husbandless, and unable to smell anything—dropped into a deep depression. Streeter thought that demonstrated her basic sanity. If she had gone around whistling "Don't Worry, Be Happy," he would have advised Tom to lock up all the sharp objects in the house.

A plane carrying two members of the rock band Blink-182 crashed. Bad news, four people died. Good news, the rockers actually survived for a change . . . although one of them would die not much later.

"I have offended God," Tom said at one of the dinners the two men now called their "bachelor nights." Streeter had brought spaghetti from Cara Mama, and cleaned his plate. Tom Goodhugh barely touched his. In the other room,

Gracie and Carl were watching *American Idol*, Gracie in silence, the former Emerson student hooting and gabbling. “I don’t know how, but I have.”

“Don’t say that, because it isn’t true.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I *do*,” Streeter said emphatically. “It’s foolish talk.”

“If you say so, buddy.” Tom’s eyes filled with tears. They rolled down his cheeks. One clung to the line of his unshaven jaw, dangled there for a moment, then plinked into his uneaten spaghetti. “Thank God for Jacob. *He’s* all right. Working for a TV station in Boston these days, and his wife’s in accounting at Brigham and Women’s. They see May once in awhile.”

“Great news,” Streeter said heartily, hoping Jake wouldn’t somehow contaminate his daughter with his company.

“And you still come and see me. I understand why Jan doesn’t, and I don’t hold it against her, but . . . I look forward to these nights. They’re like a link to the old days.”

*Yes*, Streeter thought, *the old days when you had everything and I had cancer.*

“You’ll always have me,” he said, and clasped one of Goodhugh’s slightly trembling hands in both of his own. “Friends to the end.”

\* \* \*

2008, what a year! Holy fuck! China hosted the Olympics! Chris Brown and Rihanna became nuzzle-bunnies! Banks collapsed! The stock market tanked! And in November, the EPA closed Mount Trashmore, Tom Goodhugh’s last source of income. The government stated its intention to bring suit in matters having to do with groundwater pollution and illegal dumping of medical wastes. *The Derry News* hinted that there might even be criminal action.

Streeter often drove out along the Harris Avenue Extension in the evenings, looking for a certain yellow umbrella. He didn’t want to dicker; he only wanted to shoot the shit. But he never saw the umbrella or its owner. He was disappointed but not surprised. Deal-makers were like sharks; they had to keep moving or they’d die.

He wrote a check and sent it to the bank in the Caymans.

\* \* \*

In 2009, Chris Brown beat the hell out of his Number One Nuzzle-Bunny after the Grammy Awards, and a few weeks later, Jacob Goodhugh the ex-football player beat the hell out of his bubbly wife Cammy after Cammy found a certain lady's undergarment and half a gram of cocaine in Jacob's jacket pocket. Lying on the floor, crying, she called him a son of a bitch. Jacob responded by stabbing her in the abdomen with a meat fork. He regretted it at once and called 911, but the damage was done; he'd punctured her stomach in two places. He told the police later that he remembered none of this. He was in a blackout, he said.

His court-appointed lawyer was too dumb to get a bail reduction. Jake Goodhugh appealed to his father, who was hardly able to pay his heating bills, let alone provide high-priced Boston legal talent for his spouse-abusing son. Goodhugh turned to Streeter, who didn't let his old friend get a dozen words into his painfully rehearsed speech before saying *you bet*. He still remembered the way Jacob had so unselfconsciously kissed his old man's cheek. Also, paying the legal fees allowed him to question the lawyer about Jake's mental state, which wasn't good; he was racked with guilt and deeply depressed. The lawyer told Streeter that the boy would probably get five years, hopefully with three of them suspended.

*When he gets out, he can go home, Streeter thought. He can watch American Idol with Gracie and Carl, if it's still on. It probably will be.*

"I've got my insurance," Tom Goodhugh said one night. He had lost a lot of weight, and his clothes bagged on him. His eyes were bleary. He had developed psoriasis, and scratched restlessly at his arms, leaving long red marks on the white skin. "I'd kill myself if I thought I could get away with making it look like an accident."

"I don't want to hear talk like that," Streeter said. "Things will turn around."

In June, Michael Jackson kicked the bucket. In August, Carl Goodhugh went and did him likewise, choking to death on a piece of apple. The companion might have performed the Heimlich maneuver and saved him, but the companion had been let go due to lack of funds sixteen months before. Gracie heard Carl gurgling but said she thought "it was just his usual bullshit."

The good news was Carl also had life insurance. Just a small policy, but enough to bury him.

After the funeral (Tom Goodhugh sobbed all the way through it, holding onto his old friend for support), Streeter had a generous impulse. He found Kiefer Sutherland's studio address and sent him an AA Big Book. It would probably go right in the trash, he knew (along with the countless other Big Books fans had sent him over the years), but you never knew. Sometimes miracles happened.

\* \* \*

In early September of 2009, on a hot summer evening, Streeter and Janet rode out to the road that runs along the back end of Derry's airport. No one was doing business on the graveled square outside the Cyclone fence, so he parked his fine blue Pathfinder there and put his arm around his wife, whom he loved more deeply and completely than ever. The sun was going down in a red ball.

He turned to Janet and saw that she was crying. He tilted her chin toward him and solemnly kissed the tears away. That made her smile.

"What is it, honey?"

"I was thinking about the Goodhughs. I've never known a family to have such a run of bad luck. *Bad* luck?" She laughed. "*Black* luck is more like it."

"I haven't, either," he said, "but it happens all the time. One of the women killed in the Mumbai attacks was pregnant, did you know that? Her two-year-old lived, but the kid was beaten within an inch of his life. And—"

She put two fingers to her lips. "Hush. No more. Life's not fair. We know that."

"But it *is!*" Streeter spoke earnestly. In the sunset light his face was ruddy and healthy. "Just look at me. There was a time when you never thought I'd live to see 2009, isn't that true?"

"Yes, but—"

"And the marriage, still as strong as an oak door. Or am I wrong?"

She shook her head. He wasn't wrong.

"You've started selling freelance pieces to *The Derry News*, May's going great guns with the *Globe*, and our son the geek is a media mogul at twenty-five."

She began to smile again. Streeter was glad. He hated to see her blue.

“Life *is* fair. We all get the same nine-month shake in the box, and then the dice roll. Some people get a run of sevens. Some people, unfortunately, get snake-eyes. It’s just how the world is.”

She put her arms around him. “I love you, sweetie. You always look on the bright side.”

Streeter shrugged modestly. “The law of averages favors optimists, any banker would tell you that. Things have a way of balancing out in the end.”

Venus came into view above the airport, glimmering against the darkening blue.

“Wish!” Streeter commanded.

Janet laughed and shook her head. “What would I wish for? I have everything I want.”

“Me too,” Streeter said, and then, with his eyes fixed firmly on Venus, he wished for more.

# A GOOD MARRIAGE

The one thing nobody asked in casual conversation, Darcy thought in the days after she found what she found in the garage, was this: *How's your marriage?* They asked *how was your weekend* and *how was your trip to Florida* and *how's your health* and *how are the kids*; they even asked *how's life been treatin you, hon?* But nobody asked *how's your marriage?*

*Good*, she would have answered the question before that night. *Everything's fine.*

She had been born Darcellen Madsen (Darcellen, a name only parents besotted with a freshly purchased book of baby names could love), in the year John F. Kennedy was elected President. She was raised in Freeport, Maine, back when it was a town instead of an adjunct to L.L. Bean, America's first superstore, and half a dozen other oversized retail operations of the sort that are called "outlets" (as if they were sewer drains rather than shopping locations). She went to Freeport High School, and then to Addison Business School, where she learned secretarial skills. She was hired by Joe Ransome Chevrolet, which by 1984, when she left the company, was the largest car dealership in Portland. She was plain, but with the help of two marginally more sophisticated girlfriends, learned enough makeup skills to make herself pretty on workdays and downright eye-catching on Friday and Saturday nights, when a bunch of them liked to go out for margaritas at The Lighthouse or Mexican Mike's (where there was live music).

In 1982, Joe Ransome hired a Portland accounting firm to help him figure out his tax situation, which had become complicated ("The kind of problem you want to have," Darcy overheard him tell one of the senior salesmen). A pair of briefcase-toting men came out, one old and one young. Both wore glasses and conservative suits; both combed their short hair neatly away from their foreheads in a way that made Darcy think of the photographs in her mother's MEMORIES OF '54 senior year-book, the one with the image of a

boy cheerleader holding a megaphone to his mouth stamped on its faux-leather cover.

The younger accountant was Bob Anderson. She got talking with him on their second day at the dealership, and in the course of their conversation, asked him if he had any hobbies. Yes, he said, he was a numismatist.

He started to tell her what that was and she said, “I know. My father collects Lady Liberty dimes and buffalo-head nickels. He says they’re his numismatical hobby-horse. Do you have a hobbyhorse, Mr. Anderson?”

He did: wheat pennies. His greatest hope was to some day come across a 1955 double-date, which was—

But she knew that, too. The ’55 double-date was a mistake. A *valuable* mistake.

Young Mr. Anderson, he of the thick and carefully combed brown hair, was delighted with this answer. He asked her to call him Bob. Later, during their lunch—which they took on a bench in the sunshine behind the body shop, a tuna on rye for him and a Greek salad in a Tupperware bowl for her—he asked if she would like to go with him on Saturday to a street sale in Castle Rock. He had just rented a new apartment, he said, and was looking for an armchair. Also a TV, if someone was selling a good one at a fair price. *A good one at a fair price* was a phrase with which she would grow comfortably familiar in the years to come.

He was as plain as she was, just another guy you’d pass on the street without noticing, and would never have makeup to make him prettier . . . except that day on the bench, he did. His cheeks flushed when he asked her out, just enough to light him up a little and give him a glow.

“No coin collections?” she teased.

He smiled, revealing even teeth. Small teeth, nicely cared for, and white. It never occurred to her that the thought of those teeth could make her shudder—why would it?

“If I saw a nice set of coins, of course I’d look,” he said.

“Especially wheat pennies?” Teasing, but just a little.

“Especially those. Would you like to come, Darcy?”

She came. And she came on their wedding night, too. Not terribly often after that, but now and then. Often enough to consider herself normal and

fulfilled.

In 1986, Bob got a promotion. He also (with Darcy's encouragement and help) started up a small mail-order business in collectible American coins. It was successful from the start, and in 1990, he added baseball trading cards and old movie memorabilia. He kept no stock of posters, one-sheets, or window cards, but when people queried him on such items, he could almost always find them. Actually it was Darcy who found them, using her overstuffed Rolodex in those pre-computer days to call collectors all over the country. The business never got big enough to become full-time, and that was all right. Neither of them wanted such a thing. They agreed on that as they did on the house they eventually bought in Pownal, and on the children when it came time to have them. They agreed. When they didn't agree, they compromised. But mostly they agreed. They saw eye-to-eye.

*How's your marriage?*

It was good. A good marriage. Donnie was born in 1986—she quit her job to have him, and except for helping with Anderson Coins & Collectibles never held another one—and Petra was born in 1988. By then, Bob Anderson's thick brown hair was thinning at the crown, and by 2002, the year Darcy's Macintosh computer finally swallowed her Rolodex whole, he had a large shiny bald spot back there. He experimented with different ways of combing what was left, which only made the bald spot more conspicuous, in her opinion. And he irritated her by trying two of the magical grow-it-all-back formulas, the kind of stuff sold by shifty-looking hucksters on high cable late at night (Bob Anderson became something of a night owl as he slipped into middle age). He didn't tell her he'd done it, but they shared a bedroom and although she wasn't tall enough to see the top shelf of the closet unaided, she sometimes used a stool to put away his "Saturday shirts," the tees he wore for puttering in the garden. And there they were: a bottle of liquid in the fall of 2004, a bottle of little green gel capsules a year later. She looked the names up on the Internet, and they weren't cheap. *Of course magic never is*, she remembered thinking.

But, irritated or not, she had held her peace about the magic potions, and also about the used Chevy Suburban he for some reason just had to buy in the same year that gas prices really started to climb. As he had held his, she supposed (as she *knew*, actually), when she had insisted on good summer

camps for the kids, an electric guitar for Donnie (he had played for two years, long enough to get surprisingly good, and then had simply stopped), horse rentals for Petra. A successful marriage was a balancing act—that was a thing everyone knew. A successful marriage was also dependent on a high tolerance for irritation—this was a thing *Darcy* knew. As the Stevie Winwood song said, you had to roll widdit, baby.

She rolled with it. So did he.

In 2004, Donnie went off to college in Pennsylvania. In 2006, Petra went to Colby, just up the road in Waterville. By then, Darcy Madsen Anderson was forty-six years old. Bob was forty-nine, and still doing Cub Scouts with Stan Morin, a construction contractor who lived half a mile down the road. She thought her balding husband looked rather amusing in the khaki shorts and long brown socks he wore for the monthly Wildlife Hikes, but never said so. His bald spot had become well entrenched; his glasses had become bifocals; his weight had spun up from one-eighty into the two-twenty range. He had become a partner in the accounting firm—Benson and Bacon was now Benson, Bacon & Anderson. They had traded the starter home in Pownal for a more expensive one in Yarmouth. Her breasts, formerly small and firm and high (her best feature, she'd always thought; she'd never wanted to look like a Hooters waitress), were now larger, not so firm, and of course they dropped down when she took off her bra at night—what else could you expect when you were closing in on the half-century mark?—but every so often Bob would still come up behind her and cup them. Every so often there was the pleasant interlude in the upstairs bedroom overlooking their peaceful two-acre patch of land, and if he was a little quick on the draw and often left her unsatisfied, often was not always, and the satisfaction of holding him afterward, feeling his warm man's body as he drowsed away next to her . . . that satisfaction never failed. It was, she supposed, the satisfaction of knowing they were still together when so many others were not; the satisfaction of knowing that as they approached their Silver Anniversary, the course was still steady as she goes.

In 2009, twenty-five years down the road from their I-do's in a small Baptist church that no longer existed (there was now a parking lot where it had stood), Donnie and Petra threw them a surprise party at The Birches on Castle View. There were over fifty guests, champagne (the good stuff), steak tips, a four-tier

cake. The honorees danced to Kenny Loggins's "Footloose," just as they had at their wedding. The guests applauded Bob's breakaway move, one she had forgotten until she saw it again, and its still-airy execution gave her a pang. Well it should have; he had grown a paunch to go with the embarrassing bald spot (embarrassing to him, at least), but he was still extremely light on his feet for an accountant.

But all of that was just history, the stuff of obituaries, and they were still too young to be thinking of those. It ignored the minutiae of marriage, and such ordinary mysteries, she believed (*firmly* believed), were the stuff that validated the partnership. The time she had eaten bad shrimp and vomited all night long, sitting on the edge of the bed with her sweaty hair clinging to the nape of her neck and tears rolling down her flushed cheeks and Bob sitting beside her, patiently holding the basin and then taking it to the bathroom, where he emptied and rinsed it after each ejection—so the smell of it wouldn't make her even sicker, he said. He had been warming up the car to take her to the Emergency Room at six the next morning when the horrible nausea had finally begun to abate. He had called in sick at B, B & A; he'd also canceled a trip to White River so he could sit with her in case the sickness came back.

That kind of thing worked both ways; one year's sauce for the goose was next year's sauce for the gander. She had sat with him in the waiting room at St. Stephen's—back in '94 or '95, this had been—waiting for the biopsy results after he had discovered (in the shower) a suspicious lump in his left armpit. The biopsy had been negative, the diagnosis an infected lymph node. The lump had lingered for another month or so, then went away on its own.

The sight of a crossword book on his knees glimpsed through the half-open bathroom door as he sat on the commode. The smell of cologne on his cheeks, which meant that the Suburban would be gone from the driveway for a day or two and his side of the bed would be empty for a night or two because he had to straighten out someone's accounting in New Hampshire or Vermont (B, B & A now had clients in all the northern New England states). Sometimes the smell meant a trip to look at someone's coin collection at an estate sale, because not all the numismatic buying and selling that went with their side-business could be accomplished by computer, they both understood that. The sight of his old black suitcase, the one he would never give up no matter how much she

nagged, in the front hall. His slippers at the end of the bed, one always tucked into the other. The glass of water on his end-table, with the orange vitamin pill next to it, on that month's issue of *Coin & Currency Collecting*. How he always said, "More room out than there is in" after belching and "Look out, gas attack!" after he farted. His coat on the first hook in the hall. The reflection of his toothbrush in the mirror (he would still be using the same one he'd had when they got married, Darcy believed, if she didn't regularly replace it). The way he dabbed his lips with his napkin after every second or third bite of food. The careful arrangement of camping gear (always including an extra compass) before he and Stan set out with yet another bunch of nine-year-olds on the hike up Dead Man's Trail—a dangerous and terrifying trek that took them through the woods behind the Golden Grove Mall and came out at Weinberg's Used Car City. The look of his nails, always short and clean. The taste of Dentyne on his breath when they kissed. These things and ten thousand others comprised the secret history of the marriage.

She knew he must have his own history of her, everything from the cinnamon-flavored ChapStick she used on her lips in the winter to the smell of her shampoo when he nuzzled the back of her neck (that nuzzle didn't come so often now, but it still came) to the click of her computer at two in the morning on those two or three nights a month when sleep for some reason jilted her.

Now it was twenty-seven years, or—she had amused herself figuring this one day using the calculator function on her computer—nine thousand eight hundred and fifty-five days. Almost a quarter of a million hours and over fourteen million minutes. Of course some of that time he'd been gone on business, and she'd taken a few trips herself (the saddest to be with her parents in Minneapolis after her kid sister Brandolyn had died in a freak accident), but mostly they had been together.

Did she know everything about him? Of course not. No more than he knew everything about her—how she sometimes (mostly on rainy days or on those nights when the insomnia was on her) gobbled Butterfingers or Baby Ruths, for instance, eating the candybars even after she no longer wanted them, even after she felt sick to her stomach. Or how she thought the new mailman was sort of cute. There was no knowing everything, but she felt that after twenty-seven years, they knew all the important things. It was a good

marriage, one of the fifty percent or so that kept working over the long haul. She believed that in the same unquestioning way she believed that gravity would hold her to the earth when she walked down the sidewalk.

Until that night in the garage.

The TV controller stopped working, and there were no double-A batteries in the kitchen cabinet to the left of the sink. There were D-cells and C-cells, even an unopened pack of the teeny tiny triple-As, but no goddamn frigging double-As. So she went out to the garage because she knew Bob kept a stash of Duracells there, and that was all it took to change her life. It was as if everyone was in the air, *high* in the air. One lousy little step in the wrong direction and you were falling.

The kitchen and the garage were connected by a breezeway. Darcy went through it in a hurry, clutching her housecoat against her—two days before their run of exceptionally warm Indian summer weather had broken, and now it felt more like November than October. The wind nipped at her ankles. She probably should have put on socks and a pair of slacks, but *Two and a Half Men* was going to come on in less than five minutes, and the goddamn TV was stuck on CNN. If Bob had been here, she would have asked him to change the channel manually—there were buttons for that somewhere, probably on the back where only a man could find them—and then sent him for the batteries. The garage was mostly his domain, after all. She only went there to get her car out, and that only on bad-weather days; otherwise she parked it in the driveway turnaround. But Bob was in Montpelier, evaluating a collection of World War II steel pennies, and she was, at least temporarily, in sole charge of *casa* Anderson.

She fumbled for the trio of switches beside the door and shoved them up with the heel of her hand. The overhead fluorescents buzzed on. The garage was spacious and neat, the tools hung on the pegboards and Bob's workbench in good order. The floor was a concrete slab painted battleship gray. There were no oilstains; Bob said that oil-stains on a garage floor either meant the people who owned the garage were running junk or were careless about maintenance. The year-old Prius he used for his weekday commutes into Portland was there;

he had taken his high-mileage SUV dinosaur to Vermont. Her Volvo was parked outside.

“It’s just as easy to pull it in,” he had said on more than one occasion (when you were married for twenty-seven years, original comments tended to be thin on the ground). “Just use the door opener on the visor.”

“I like it where I can see it,” she always replied, although the real reason was her fear of clipping the garage bay door while backing out. She hated backing. And she supposed he knew it . . . just as she knew that he had a peculiar fetish about keeping the paper money in his wallet heads-side up and would never leave a book facedown and open when he paused in his reading—because, he said, it broke the spines.

At least the garage was warm; big silver pipes (probably you called them ducts, but Darcy wasn’t quite sure) crisscrossed the ceiling. She walked to the bench, where several square tins were lined up, each neatly labeled: BOLTS, SCREWS, HINGES HASPS & L-CLAMPS, PLUMBING, and—she found this rather endearing—ODDS & ENDS. There was a calendar on the wall featuring a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit girl who looked depressingly young and sexy; to the left of the calendar two photos had been tacked up. One was an old snap of Donnie and Petra on the Yarmouth Little League field, dressed in Boston Red Sox jerseys. Below it, in Magic Marker, Bob had printed **THE HOME TEAM, 1999**. The other, much newer, showed a grownup and just-short-of-beautiful Petra standing with Michael, her fiancé, in front of a clam shack on Old Orchard Beach with their arms around each other. The Magic Marker caption below this one read **THE HAPPY COUPLE!**

The cabinet with the batteries bore a Dymo tape label reading ELECTRICAL STUFF and was mounted to the left of the photos. Darcy moved in that direction without looking where she was going—trusting to Bob’s just-short-of-maniacal neatness—and stumbled over a cardboard box that hadn’t been entirely pushed under the workbench. She tottered, then grabbed the workbench at the last possible second. She broke off a fingernail—painful and annoying—but saved herself a potentially nasty fall, which was good. *Very* good, considering there was no one in the house to call 911, had she cracked her skull on the floor—greaseless and clean, but extremely hard.

She could simply have pushed the box back under with the side of her foot—later she would realize this and ponder it carefully, like a mathematician going over an abstruse and complicated equation. She was in a hurry, after all. But she saw a Patternworks knitting catalogue on top of the box, and knelt down to grab it and take it in with the batteries. And when she lifted it out, there was a Brookstone catalogue she had misplaced just underneath. And beneath that Paula Young . . . Talbots . . . Forzieri . . . Bloomingdale's . . .

“Bob!” she cried, only it came out in two exasperated syllables (the way it did when he tracked in mud or left his sopping towels on the bathroom floor, as if they were in a fancy hotel with maid service), not *Bob* but *BOH-ub!* Because, really, she could read him like a book. He thought she ordered too much from the mail-order catalogues, had once gone so far as to declare she was addicted to them (which was ridiculous, it was Butterfingers she was addicted to). That little psychological analysis had earned him a two-day cold shoulder. But he knew how her mind worked, and that with things that weren't absolutely vital, she was the original out-of-sight, out-of-mind girl. So he had gathered up her catalogues, the sneak, and stowed them out here. Probably the next stop would have been the recycling bin.

Danskin . . . Express . . . Computer Outlet . . . *Macworld* . . . Monkey Ward . . . Layla Grace . . .

The deeper she went, the more exasperated she became. You'd think they were tottering on the edge of bankruptcy because of her spendthrift ways, which was utter bullshit. She had forgotten all about *Two and a Half Men*; she was already selecting the piece of her mind she intended to give Bob when he called from Montpelier (he always called after he'd had his dinner and was back at the motel). But first, she intended to take all these catalogues right back into the goddamn house, which would take three or possibly four trips, because the stack was at least two feet high, and those slick catalogues were *heavy*. It was really no wonder she'd stumbled over the box.

*Death by catalogues*, she thought. *Now that would be an ironic way to g—*

The thought broke off as clean as a dry branch. She was thumbing as she was thinking, now a quarter of the way down in the stack, and beneath Gooseberry Patch (country décor), she came to something that wasn't a catalogue. No, not a catalogue at all. It was a magazine called *Bondage Bitches*.

She almost didn't take it out, and probably wouldn't have if she'd come across it in one of his drawers, or on that high shelf with the magic hair-replacement products. But finding it here, stashed in a pile of what had to be at least two hundred catalogues . . . *her* catalogues . . . there was something about that which went beyond the embarrassment a man might feel about a sexual kink.

The woman on the cover was bound to a chair and naked except for a black hood, but the hood only covered the top half of her face and you could see she was screaming. She was tied with heavy ropes that bit into her breasts and belly. There was fake blood on her chin, neck, and arms. Across the bottom of the page, in screaming yellow type, was this unpleasant come-on: **BAD BITCH BRENDA ASKED FOR IT AND GETS IT ON PAGE 49!**

Darcy had no intention of turning to page 49, or to any other page. She was already explaining to herself what this was: a *male investigation*. She knew about male investigations from a *Cosmo* article she'd read in the dentist's office. A woman had written in to one of the magazine's many advisors (this one the on-staff shrink who specialized in the often mysterious bearded sex) about finding a couple of gay magazines in her husband's briefcase. Very explicit stuff, the letter-writer had said, and now she was worried that her husband might be in the closet. Although if he was, she continued, he was certainly hiding it well in the bedroom.

Not to worry, the advice-lady said. Men were adventurous by nature, and many of them liked to investigate sexual behavior that was either alternative—gay sex being number one in that regard, group sex a close second—or fetishistic: water sports, cross-dressing, public sex, latex. And, of course, bondage. She had added that some women were also fascinated by bondage, which had mystified Darcy, but she would have been the first to admit she didn't know everything.

Male investigation, that was all this was. He had maybe seen the magazine on a newsstand somewhere (although when Darcy tried to imagine that particular cover on a newsstand, her mind balked), and had been curious. Or maybe he'd picked it out of a trash can at a convenience store. He had taken it home, looked through it out here in the garage, had been as appalled as she was (the blood on the cover model was obviously fake, but that scream looked all too real), and had stuck it in this gigantic stack of catalogues bound for the

recycling bin so she wouldn't come across it and give him a hard time. That was all it was, a one-off. If she looked through the rest of these catalogues, she'd find nothing else like it. Maybe a few *Penthouses* and panty-mags—she knew most men liked silk and lace, and Bob was no exception in this regard—but nothing more in the *Bondage Bitches* genre.

She looked at the cover again, and noticed an odd thing: there was no price on it. No bar code, either. She checked the back cover, curious about what such a magazine might cost, and winced at the picture there: a naked blonde strapped to what looked like a steel operating-room table. This one's expression of terror looked about as real as a three-dollar bill, however, which was sort of comforting. And the portly man standing over her with what appeared to be a Ginsu knife just looked ridiculous in his armlets and leather underpants—more like an accountant than someone about to carve up the *Bondage Bitch du jour*.

*Bob's an accountant*, her mind remarked.

A stupid thought launched from her brain's all-too-large Stupid Zone. She pushed it away just as she pushed the remarkably unpleasant magazine back into the pile of catalogues after ascertaining that there was no price or bar code on the back, either. And as she shoved the cardboard box under the workbench—she had changed her mind about carting the catalogues back into the house—the answer to the no-price/no-bar-code mystery came to her. It was one of those magazines they sold in a plastic wrapper, with all the naughty bits covered. The price and the code had been on the wrapper, of course that was it, what else could it be? He had to've bought the goddamn thing somewhere, assuming he hadn't fished it out of the trash.

*Maybe he bought it over the Internet. There are probably sites that specialize in that sort of thing. Not to mention young women dressed up to look like twelve-year-olds.*

"Never mind," she said, and gave her head a single brisk nod. This was a done deal, a dead letter, a closed discussion. If she mentioned it on the phone when he called later tonight, or when he came home, he'd be embarrassed and defensive. He'd probably call her sexually naïve, which she supposed she was, and accuse her of overreacting, which she was determined not to do. What she was determined to do was roll widdit, baby. A marriage was like a house under

constant construction, each year seeing the completion of new rooms. A first-year marriage was a cottage; one that had gone on for twenty-seven years was a huge and rambling mansion. There were bound to be crannies and storage spaces, most of them dusty and abandoned, some containing a few unpleasant relics you would just as soon you hadn't found. But that was no biggie. You either threw those relics out or took them to Goodwill.

She liked this thought (which had a conclusive feel) so well that she said it out loud: "No biggie." And to prove it, she gave the cardboard box a hard two-handed shove, sending it all the way to the rear wall.

Where there was a clunk. What was that?

*I don't want to know*, she told herself, and was pretty sure that thought wasn't coming from the Stupid Zone but from the smart one. It was shadowy back there under the worktable, and there might be mice. Even a well-kept garage like this one could have mice, especially once cold weather came, and a scared mouse might bite.

Darcy stood up, brushed off the knees of her housecoat, and left the garage. Halfway across the breezeway, she heard the phone begin to ring.

She was back in the kitchen before the answering machine kicked in, but she waited. If it was Bob, she'd let the robot take it. She didn't want to talk to him right this minute. He might hear something in her voice. He would assume she'd gone out to the corner store or maybe to Video Village and call back in an hour. In an hour, after her unpleasant discovery would have had a chance to settle a bit, she'd be fine and they could have a pleasant conversation.

But it wasn't Bob, it was Donnie. "Oh, shoot, I really wanted to talk to you guys."

She picked up the phone, leaned back against the counter, and said, "So talk. I was coming back from the garage."

Donnie was bubbling over with news. He was living in Cleveland, Ohio, now, and after two years of thankless toiling in an entry-level position with the city's largest ad firm, he and a friend had decided to strike out on their own. Bob had strongly advised against this, telling Donnie that Donnie and his partner would never get the start-up loan they needed to make it through the first year.

"Wake up," he'd said after Darcy turned the phone over to him. In the early spring this had been, with the last bits of snow still lurking beneath the trees and bushes in the backyard. "You're twenty-four, Donnie, and so's your pal Ken. You two galoots can't even get collision insurance on your cars for another year, just straight liability. No bank's going to underwrite a seventy-thousand-dollar start-up, especially with the economy the way it is."

But they *had* gotten the loan, and now had landed two big clients, both on the same day. One was a car dealership looking for a fresh approach that would attract thirtysomething buyers. The other was the very bank that had issued Anderson & Hayward their start-up loan. Darcy shouted with delight, and Donnie yelled right back. They talked for twenty minutes or so. Once during the conversation they were interrupted by the double-beep of an incoming call.

"Do you want to get that?" Donnie asked.

“No, it’s just your father. He’s in Montpelier, looking at a collection of steel pennies. He’ll call back before he turns in.”

“How’s he doing?”

*Fine, she thought. Developing new interests.*

“Upright and sniffin the air,” she said. It was one of Bob’s favorites, and it made Donnie laugh. She loved to hear him laugh.

“And Pets?”

“Call her yourself and see, Donald.”

“I will, I will. I always get around to it. In the meantime, thumbnail me.”

“She’s great. Full of wedding plans.”

“You’d think it was next week instead of next June.”

“Donnie, if you don’t make an effort to understand women, you’ll never get married yourself.”

“I’m in no hurry, I’m having too much fun.”

“Just as long as you have fun carefully.”

“I’m very careful and very polite. I’ve got to run, Ma. I’m meeting Ken for a drink in half an hour. We’re going to start brainstorming this car thing.”

She almost told him not to drink too much, then restrained herself. He might still look like a high school junior, and in her clearest memory of him he was a five-year-old in a red corduroy jumper, tirelessly pushing his scooter up and down the concrete paths of Joshua Chamberlain Park in Pownal, but he was neither of those boys anymore. He was a young man, and also, as improbable as it seemed, a young entrepreneur beginning to make his way in the world.

“Okay,” she said. “Thanks for calling, Donnie. It was a treat.”

“Same here. Say hello to the old feller when he calls back, and give him my love.”

“I will.”

“Upright and sniffin the air,” Donnie said, and snickered. “How many Cub Scout packs has he taught that one to?”

“All of them.” Darcy opened the refrigerator to see if there was perchance a Butterfinger in there, chilling and awaiting her amorous intentions. Nope. “It’s terrifying.”

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too.”

She hung up, feeling good again. Smiling. But as she stood there, leaning against the counter, the smile faded.

A clunk.

There had been a clunk when she pushed the box of catalogues back under the workbench. Not a clatter, as if the box had struck a dropped tool, but a *clunk*. Sort of hollow-sounding.

*I don't care.*

Unfortunately, this was not true. The clunk felt like unfinished business. The carton did, too. *Were* there other magazines like *Bondage Bitches* stashed in there?

*I don't want to know.*

Right, right, but maybe she should find out, just the same. Because if there was just the one, she was right about its being sexual curiosity that had been fully satisfied by a single peek into an unsavory (*and unbalanced*, she added to herself) world. If there were more, that might still be all right—he was throwing them out, after all—but maybe she should know.

Mostly . . . that clunk. It lingered on her mind more than the question about the magazines.

She snagged a flashlight from the pantry and went back out to the garage. She pinched the lapels of her housecoat shut immediately and wished she'd put on her jacket. It was really getting cold.

Darcy got down on her knees, pushed the box of catalogues to one side, and shone the light under the worktable. For a moment she didn't understand what she was seeing: two lines of darkness interrupting the smooth baseboard, one slightly fatter than the other. Then a thread of disquiet formed in her midsection, stretching from the middle of her breastbone down to the pit of her stomach. It was a hiding place.

*Leave this alone, Darcy. It's his business, and for your own peace of mind you should let it stay that way.*

Good advice, but she had come too far to take it. She crawled under the worktable with the flashlight in her hand, steeling herself for the brush of cobwebs, but there were none. If she was the original out-of-sight, out-of-mind girl, then her balding, coin-collecting, Cub Scouting husband was the original everything-polished, everything-clean boy.

*Also, he's crawled under here himself, so no cobwebs would have a chance to form.*

Was that true? She didn't actually know, did she?

But she thought she did.

The cracks were at either end of an eight-inch length of baseboard that appeared to have a dowel or something in the middle so it could pivot. She had struck it with the box just hard enough to jar it open, but that didn't explain the clunk. She pushed one end of the board. It swung in on one end and out on the other, revealing a hidey-hole eight inches long, a foot high, and maybe eighteen inches deep. She thought she might discover more magazines, possibly rolled up, but there were no magazines. There was a little wooden box, one she was pretty sure she recognized. It was the box that had made the clunking sound. It had been standing on end, and the pivoting baseboard had knocked it over.

She reached in, grasped it, and—with a sense of misgiving so strong it almost had a texture—brought it out. It was the little oak box she had given to

him at Christmas five years ago, maybe more. Or had it been for his birthday? She didn't remember, just that it had been a good buy at the craft shop in Castle Rock. Hand-carved on the top, in bas-relief, was a chain. Below the chain, also in bas-relief, was the box's stated purpose: **LINKS**. Bob had a clutter of cufflinks, and although he favored button-style shirts for work, some of his wrist-jewelry was quite nice. She remembered thinking the box would help keep them organized. Darcy knew she'd seen it on top of the bureau on his side of the bedroom for awhile after the gift was unwrapped and exclaimed over, but couldn't remember seeing it lately. Of course she hadn't. It was out here, in the hidey-hole under his worktable, and she would have bet the house and lot (another of his sayings) that if she opened it, it wouldn't be cufflinks she found inside.

*Don't look, then.*

More good advice, but now she had come *much* too far to take it. Feeling like a woman who has wandered into a casino and for some mad reason staked her entire life's savings on a single turn of a single card, she opened the box.

*Let it be empty. Please God, if you love me let it be empty.*

But it wasn't. There were three plastic oblongs inside, bound with an elastic band. She picked the bundle out, using just the tips of her fingers—as a woman might handle a cast-off rag she fears may be germy as well as dirty. Darcy slipped off the elastic.

They weren't credit cards, which had been her first idea. The top one was a Red Cross blood donor's card belonging to someone named Marjorie Duvall. Her type was A-positive, her region New England. Darcy turned the card over and saw that Marjorie—whoever she was—had last given blood on August sixteenth of 2010. Three months ago.

Who the hell was Marjorie Duvall? How did Bob know her? And why did the name ring a faint but very clear bell?

The next one was Marjorie Duvall's North Conway Library card, and it had an address: 17 Honey Lane, South Gansett, New Hampshire.

The last piece of plastic was Marjorie Duvall's New Hampshire driver's license. She looked like a perfectly ordinary American woman in her mid-thirties, not very pretty (although nobody looked their best in driver's license photographs), but presentable. Darkish blond hair pulled back from her face,

either bunned or ponytailed; in the picture you couldn't tell. DOB, January 6, 1974. The address was the same as the one on the library card.

Darcy realized that she was making a desolate mewling sound. It was horrible to hear a sound like that coming from her own throat, but she couldn't stop. And her stomach had been replaced by a ball of lead. It was pulling all of her insides down, stretching them into new and unpleasant shapes. She had seen Marjorie Duvall's face in the newspaper. Also on the six o'clock news.

With hands that had absolutely no feeling, she put the rubber band back around the ID cards, put them back in the box, then put the box back in his hidey-hole. She was getting ready to close it up again when she heard herself saying, "No, no, no, that isn't right. It can't be."

Was that the voice of Smart Darcy or Stupid Darcy? It was hard to tell. All she knew for sure was that Stupid Darcy had been the one to open the box. And thanks to Stupid Darcy, she was falling.

Taking the box back out. Thinking, *It's a mistake, it has to be, we've been married over half our lives, I'd know, I would know.* Opening the box. Thinking, *Does anybody really know anybody?*

Before tonight she certainly would have thought so.

Marjorie Duvall's driver's license was now on the top of the stack. Before, it had been on the bottom. Darcy put it there. But which of the others had been on top, the Red Cross card or the library card? It was simple, it *had* to be simple when there were only two choices, but she was too upset to remember. She put the library card on top and knew at once that was wrong, because the first thing she'd seen when she opened the box was a flash of red, red like blood, of course a blood donor card would be red, and that had been the one on top.

She put it there, and as she was putting the elastic back around the little collection of plastic, the phone in the house started to ring again. It was him. It was Bob, calling from Vermont, and were she in the kitchen to take the call, she'd hear his cheery voice (a voice she knew as well as her own) asking, *Hey, honey, how are you?*

Her fingers jerked and the rubber band snapped. It flew away, and she cried out, whether in frustration or fear she didn't know. But really, why would she

be afraid? Twenty-seven years of marriage and he had never laid a hand on her, except to caress. On only a few occasions had he raised his voice to her.

The phone rang again . . . again . . . and then cut off in mid-ring. Now he would be leaving a message. *Missed you again! Damn! Give me a call so I won't worry, okay? The number is . . .*

He'd add the number of his room, too. He left nothing to chance, took nothing for granted.

What she was thinking absolutely couldn't be true. It was like one of those monster delusions that sometimes reared up from the mud at the bottom of a person's mind, sparkling with hideous plausibility: that the acid indigestion was the onset of a heart attack, the headache a brain tumor, and Petra's failure to call on Sunday night meant she had been in a car accident and was lying comatose in some hospital. But those delusions usually came at four in the morning, when the insomnia was in charge. Not at eight o'clock in the evening . . . and where was that damned rubber band?

She found it at last, lying behind the carton of catalogues she never wanted to look in again. She put it in her pocket, started to get up to look for another one without remembering where she was, and thumped her head on the bottom of the table. Darcy began to cry.

There were no rubber bands in any of the work-table's drawers, and that made her cry even harder. She went back through the breezeway, the terrible, inexplicable identity cards in her housecoat pocket, and got an elastic out of the kitchen drawer where she kept all sorts of semi-useful crap: paper clips, bread ties, fridge magnets that had lost most of their pull. One of these latter said DARCY RULES, and had been a stocking-stuffer present from Bob.

On the counter, the light on top of the phone blinked steadily, saying *message, message, message.*

She hurried back to the garage without holding the lapels of her housecoat. She no longer felt the outer chill, because the one inside was greater. And then there was the lead ball pulling down her guts. Elongating them. She was vaguely aware that she needed to move her bowels, and badly.

*Never mind. Hold it. Pretend you're on the turnpike and the next rest area's twenty miles ahead. Get this done. Put everything back the way it was. Then you can—*

Then she could what? Forget it?

Fat chance of that.

She bound the ID cards with the elastic, realized the driver's license had somehow gotten back on top, and called herself a stupid bitch . . . a pejorative for which she would have slapped Bob's face, had he ever tried to hang it on her. Not that he ever had.

"A stupid bitch but not a bondage bitch," she muttered, and a cramp knifed her belly. She dropped to her knees and froze that way, waiting for it to pass. If there had been a bathroom out here she would have dashed for it, but there wasn't. When the cramp let go—reluctantly—she rearranged the cards in what she was pretty sure was the right order (blood donor, library, driver's license), then put them back in the **LINKS** box. Box back in hole. Pivoting piece of baseboard closed up tight. Carton of catalogues back where it had been when she tripped on it: sticking out slightly. He would never know the difference.

But was she sure of that? If he was what she was thinking—monstrous that such a thing should even be in her mind, when all she'd wanted just a half an hour ago was fresh batteries for the goddamn remote control—if he *was*, then he'd been careful for a long time. And he *was* careful, he was neat, he was the original everything-polished, everything-clean boy, but if he was what those goddamn (no, *goddamned*) plastic cards seemed to suggest he was, then he must be *supernaturally* careful. Supernaturally watchful. Sly.

It was a word she had never thought of in connection to Bob until tonight.

"No," she told the garage. She was sweating, her hair was stuck to her face in unlovely spikelets, she was crampy and her hands were trembling like those of a person with Parkinson's, but her voice was weirdly calm, strangely serene.

"No, he's not. It's a mistake. *My husband is not Beadie.*"

She went back into the house.

She decided to make tea. Tea was calming. She was filling the kettle when the phone began to ring again. She dropped the kettle into the sink—the *bong* sound made her utter a small scream—then went to the phone, wiping her wet hands on her housecoat.

*Calm, calm,* she told herself. *If he can keep a secret, so can I. Remember that there's a reasonable explanation for all this—*

Oh, really?

*—and I just don't know what it is. I need time to think about it, that's all. So: calm.*

She picked up the phone and said brightly, “If that’s you, handsome, come right over. My husband’s out of town.”

Bob laughed. “Hey, honey, how are you?”

“Upright and sniffin the air. You?”

There was a long silence. It felt long, anyway, although it couldn’t have been more than a few seconds. In it she heard the somehow terrible whine of the refrigerator, and water dripping from the faucet onto the teakettle she’d dropped in the sink, the beating of her own heart—that last sound seeming to come from her throat and ears rather than her chest. They had been married so long that they had become almost exquisitely attuned to each other. Did that happen in every marriage? She didn’t know. She only knew her own. Except now she had to wonder if she even knew that one.

“You sound funny,” he said. “All thick in the voice. Is everything okay, sweetie?”

She should have been touched. Instead she was terrified. Marjorie Duvall: the name did not just hang in front of her eyes; it seemed to blink on and off, like a neon bar sign. For a moment she was speechless, and to her horror, the kitchen she knew so well was wavering in front of her as more tears rose in her eyes. That crampy heaviness was back in her bowels, too. Marjorie Duvall. A-

positive. 17 Honey Lane. As in *hey, hon, how's life been treatin you, are you upright and sniffin the air?*

"I was thinking about Brandolyn," she heard herself say.

"Oh, baby," he said, and the sympathy in his voice was all Bob. She knew it well. Hadn't she leaned on it time after time since 1984? Even before, when they'd still been courting and she came to understand that he was the one? Sure she had. As he had leaned on her. The idea that such sympathy could be nothing but sweet icing on a poison cake was insane. The fact that she was at this moment lying to him was even more insane. If, that was, there were degrees of insanity. Or maybe insane was like unique, and there was no comparative or superlative form. And what was she thinking? In God's name, what?

But he was talking, and she had no idea what he'd just said.

"Run that past me again. I was reaching for the tea." Another lie, her hands were shaking too badly to reach for anything, but a small plausible one. And her voice wasn't shaking. At least she didn't think it was.

"I said, what got that going?"

"Donnie called and asked after his sister. It got me thinking about mine. I went out and walked around for awhile. I got sniffing, although some of that was just the cold. You probably heard it in my voice."

"Yep, right away," he said. "Listen, I should skip Burlington tomorrow and come back home."

She almost cried out *No!*, but that would be exactly the wrong thing to do. That might get him on the road at first light, all solicitude.

"You do and I'll punch you in the eye," she said, and was relieved when he laughed. "Charlie Frady told you that estate sale in Burlington was worth going to, and his contacts are good. His instincts are, too. You've always said so."

"Yeah, but I don't like to hear you sounding so low."

That he had known (and at once! at *once!*) that something was wrong with her was bad. That she needed to lie about what the trouble was—ah, that was worse. She closed her eyes, saw Bad Bitch Brenda screaming inside the black hood, and opened them again.

“I was low, but I’m not now,” she said. “It was just a momentary fugue. She was my sister, and I saw my father bring her home. Sometimes I think about it, that’s all.”

“I know,” he said. He did, too. Her sister’s death wasn’t the reason she’d fallen in love with Bob Anderson, but his understanding of her grief had tightened the connection.

Brandolyn Madsen had been struck and killed by a drunk snowmobiler while she was out cross-country skiing. He fled, leaving her body in the woods half a mile from the Madsen house. When Brandi wasn’t back by eight o’clock, a pair of Freeport policemen and the local Neighborhood Watch had mounted a search party. It was Darcy’s father who found her body and carried it home through half a mile of pine woods. Darcy—stationed in the living room, monitoring the phone and trying to keep her mother calm—had been the first to see him. He came walking up the lawn under the harsh glare of a full winter moon with his breath puffing out in white clouds. Darcy’s initial thought (this was still terrible to her) had been of those corny old black-and-white love-movies they sometimes showed on TCM, the ones where some guy carries his new bride across the threshold of their happy honeymoon cottage while fifty violins pour syrup onto the soundtrack.

Bob Anderson, Darcy had discovered, could relate in a way many people could not. He hadn’t lost a brother or sister; he had lost his best friend. The boy had darted out into the road to grab an errant throw during a game of pickup baseball (not Bob’s throw, at least; no baseball player, he’d been swimming that day), had been struck by a delivery truck, and died in the hospital shortly afterward. This coincidence of old sorrows wasn’t the only thing that made their pairing seem special to her, but it was the one that made it feel somehow mystical—not a coincidence but a planned thing.

“Stay in Vermont, Bobby. Go to the estate sale. I love you for being concerned, but if you come running home, I’ll feel like a kid. Then I’ll be mad.”

“Okay. But I’m going to call you tomorrow at seven-thirty. Fair warning.”

She laughed, and was relieved to hear it was a real one . . . or so close as to make no difference. And why shouldn’t she be allowed a real laugh? Just why the heck not? She loved him, and would give him the benefit of the doubt. Of

*every* doubt. Nor was this a choice. You could not turn off love—even the rather absent, sometimes taken for granted love of twenty-seven years—the way you’d turn off a faucet. Love ran from the heart, and the heart had its own imperatives.

“Bobby, you always call at seven-thirty.”

“Guilty as charged. Call tonight if you—”

“—need anything, no matter what the hour,” she finished for him. Now she almost felt like herself again. It was really amazing, the number of hard hits from which a mind could recover. “I will.”

“Love you, honey.” The coda of so many conversations over the years.

“Love you, too,” she said, smiling. Then she hung up, put her forehead against the wall, closed her eyes, and began weeping before the smile could leave her face.

Her computer, an iMac now old enough to look fashionably retro, was in her sewing room. She rarely used it for anything but email and eBay, but now she opened Google and typed in Marjorie Duvall's name. She hesitated before adding *Beadie* to the search, but not long. Why prolong the agony? It would come up anyway, she was sure of it. She hit Enter, and as she watched the little wait-circle go around and around at the top of the screen, those cramps struck again. She hurried to the bathroom, sat down on the commode, and took care of her business with her face in her hands. There was a mirror on the back of the door, and she didn't want to see herself in it. Why was it there, anyway? Why had she *allowed* it to be there? Who wanted to watch themselves sitting on the pot? Even at the best of times, which this most certainly wasn't?

She went back to the computer slowly, dragging her feet like a child who knows she is about to be punished for the kind of thing Darcy's mother had called a Big Bad. She saw that Google had provided her with over five million results for her search: o omnipotent Google, so generous and so terrible. But the first one actually made her laugh; it invited her to follow Marjorie Duvall Beadie on Twitter. Darcy felt she could ignore that one. Unless she was wrong (and how wildly grateful that would make her), the Marjorie she was looking for had Twittered her last tweet some time ago.

The second result was from the *Portland Press Herald*, and when Darcy clicked on it, the photograph that greeted her (it felt like a slap, that greeting) was the one she remembered from TV, and probably in this very article, since the *Press Herald* was their paper. The article had been published ten days before, and was the lead story. **NEW HAMPSHIRE WOMAN MAY HAVE BEEN "BEADIE'S" 11th VICTIM**, the headline screamed. And the subhead: *Police Source: "We're Ninety Per Cent Sure"*

Marjorie Duvall looked a lot prettier in the newspaper picture, a studio shot that showed her posed in classic fashion, wearing a swirly black dress. Her hair was down, and looked a much lighter blond in this photo. Darcy wondered if

her husband had provided the picture. She supposed he had. She supposed it had been on their mantel at 17 Honey Lane, or perhaps mounted in the hall. The pretty hostess of the house greeting guests with her eternal smile.

*Gentlemen prefer blondes because they get tired of squeezin them blackheads.*

One of Bob's sayings. She had never much liked that one, and hated having it in her head now.

Marjorie Duvall had been found in a ravine six miles from her house in South Gansett, just over the North Conway town line. The County Sheriff speculated that the death had probably resulted from strangulation, but he couldn't say for sure; that was up to the County Medical Examiner. He refused to speculate further, or answer any other questions, but the reporter's unnamed source (whose information was at least semi-validated by being "close to the investigation") said that Duvall had been bitten and sexually molested "in a manner consistent with the other Beadie killings."

Which was a natural transition to a complete recap of the previous murders. The first had occurred in 1977. There had been two in 1978, another in 1980, and then two more in 1981. Two of the murders had occurred in New Hampshire, two in Massachusetts, the fifth and sixth in Vermont. After that, there had been a hiatus of sixteen years. The police assumed that one of three things had happened: Beadie had moved to another part of the country and was pursuing his hobby there, Beadie had been arrested for some other, unrelated crime and was in prison, or Beadie had killed himself. The one thing that *wasn't* likely, according to a psychiatrist the reporter had consulted for his story, was that Beadie had just gotten tired of it. "These guys don't get bored," the psychiatrist said. "It's their sport, their compulsion. More than that, it's their secret life."

Secret life. What a poison bonbon that phrase was.

Beadie's sixth victim had been a woman from Barre, uncovered in a snowdrift by a passing plow just a week before Christmas. *Such a holiday that must have been for her relatives*, Darcy thought. Not that she'd had much of a Christmas herself that year. Lonely away from home (a fact wild horses wouldn't have dragged from her mouth when talking to her mother), working at a job she wasn't sure she was qualified for even after eighteen months and one merit raise, she had felt absolutely no spirit of the season. She had

acquaintances (the Margarita Girls), but no real friends. She wasn't good when it came to making friends, never had been. Shy was the kind word for her personality, introverted probably a more accurate one.

Then Bob Anderson had walked into her life with a smile on his face—Bob who had asked her out and wouldn't take no for an answer. Not three months after the plow had uncovered the body of Beadie's last "early cycle" victim, that must have been. They fell in love. And Beadie stopped for sixteen years.

Because of her? Because he loved her? Because he wanted to stop doing Big Bads?

*Or just a coincidence. It could be that.*

Nice try, but the IDs she'd found squirreled away in the garage made the idea of coincidence seem a lot less likely.

Beadie's seventh victim, the first of what the paper called "the new cycle," had been a woman from Waterville, Maine, named Stacey Moore. Her husband found her in the cellar upon returning from Boston, where he and two friends had taken in a couple of Red Sox games. August of 1997, this had been. Her head had been stuffed into a bin of the sweet corn the Moores sold at their roadside Route 106 farmstand. She was naked, her hands bound behind her back, her buttocks and thighs bitten in a dozen places.

Two days later, Stacey Moore's driver's license and Blue Cross card, bound with a rubber band, had arrived in Augusta, addressed in block printing to BOOB ATTORNEY JENRAL DEPT. OF CRINIMAL INVESTIGATION. There was also a note: *HELLO! I'M BACK! BEADIE!*

This was a packet the detectives in charge of the Moore murder recognized at once. Similar selected bits of ID—and similar cheerful notes—had been delivered following each of the previous killings. He knew when they were alone. He tortured them, principally with his teeth; he raped or sexually molested them; he killed them; he sent their identification to some branch of the police weeks or months later. Taunting them with it.

*To make sure he gets the credit,* Darcy thought dismally.

There had been another Beadie murder in 2004, the ninth and tenth in 2007. Those two were the worst, because one of the victims had been a child. The woman's ten-year-old son had been excused from school after complaining of a stomachache, and had apparently walked in on Beadie while he was at

work. The boy's body had been found with his mother's, in a nearby creek. When the woman's ID—two credit cards and a driver's license—arrived at Massachusetts State Police Barracks #7, the attached card read: *HELLO! THE BOY WAS AN ACCIDENT! SORRY! BUT IT WAS QUICK, HE DID NOT "SUFFER!" BEADIE!*

There were many other articles she could have accessed (o omnipotent Google), but to what end? The sweet dream of one more ordinary evening in an ordinary life had been swallowed by a nightmare. Would reading more about Beadie dispel the nightmare? The answer to that was obvious.

Her belly clenched. She ran for the bathroom—still smelly in spite of the fan, usually you could ignore what a smelly business life was, but not always—and fell on her knees in front of the toilet, staring into the blue water with her mouth open. For a moment she thought the need to vomit was going to pass, then she thought of Stacey Moore with her black strangled face shoved into the corn and her buttocks covered with blood dried to the color of chocolate milk. That tipped her over and she vomited twice, hard enough to splash her face with Ty-D-Bol and a few flecks of her own effluvium.

Crying and gasping, she flushed the toilet. The porcelain would have to be cleaned, but for now she only lowered the lid and laid her flushed cheek on its cool beige plastic.

*What am I going to do?*

The obvious step was to call the police, but what if she did that and it all turned out to be a mistake? Bob had always been the most generous and forgiving of men—when she'd run the front of their old van into a tree at the edge of the post office parking lot and shattered the windshield, his only concern had been if she had cut her face—but would he forgive her if she mistakenly fingered him for eleven torture-killings he hadn't committed? And the world would know. Guilty or innocent, his picture would be in the paper. On the front page. Hers, too.

Darcy dragged herself to her feet, got the toilet-scrubbing brush from the bathroom closet, and cleaned up her mess. She did it slowly. Her back hurt. She supposed she had thrown up hard enough to pull a muscle.

Halfway through the job, the next realization thudded down. It wouldn't be just the two of them dragged into newspaper speculation and the filthy rinse-

cycle of twenty-four-hour cable news; there were the kids to think about. Donnie and Ken had just landed their first two clients, but the bank and the car dealership looking for a fresh approach would be gone three hours after this shit-bomb exploded. Anderson & Hayward, which had taken its first real breath today, would be dead tomorrow. Darcy didn't know how much Ken Hayward had invested, but Donnie was all in the pot. That didn't amount to such of a much in cash, but there were other things you invested when you were starting out on your own voyage. Your heart, your brains, your sense of self-worth.

Then there were Petra and Michael, probably at this very moment with their heads together making more wedding plans, unaware that a two-ton safe was dangling above them on a badly frayed cord. Pets had always idolized her father. What would it do to her if she found out the hands which had once pushed her on the backyard swing were the same hands that had strangled the life out of eleven women? That the lips which had kissed her goodnight were hiding teeth that had bitten eleven women, in some cases all the way down to the bone?

Sitting at her computer again, a terrible newspaper headline rose in Darcy's mind. It was accompanied by a photograph of Bob in his neckerchief, absurd khaki shorts, and long socks. It was so clear it could already have been printed:

**MASS MURDERER "BEADIE"  
LED CUB SCOUTS FOR 17 YEARS**

Darcy clapped a hand over her mouth. She could feel her eyes pulsing in their sockets. The notion of suicide occurred to her, and for a few moments (long ones) the idea seemed completely rational, the only reasonable solution. She could leave a note saying she'd done it because she was afraid she had cancer. Or early-onset Alzheimer's, that was even better. But suicide cast a deep shadow over families, too, and what if she was wrong? What if Bob had just found that ID packet by the side of the road, or something?

*Do you know how unlikely that is?* Smart Darcy sneered.

Okay, yes, but unlikely wasn't the same as impossible, was it? There was something else, too, something that made the cage she was in escape-proof:

what if she was right? Wouldn't her death free Bob to kill more, because he no longer had to lead so deep a double life? Darcy wasn't sure she believed in a conscious existence after death, but what if there was one? And what if she were confronted there not by Edenic green fields and rivers of plenty but by a ghastly receiving line of strangled women branded by her husband's teeth, all accusing her of causing their deaths by taking the easy way out herself? And by ignoring what she had found (if such a thing were even possible, which she didn't believe for a minute), wouldn't the accusation be true? Did she really think she could condemn more women to horrible deaths just so her daughter could have a nice June wedding?

She thought: *I wish I was dead.*

But she wasn't.

For the first time in years, Darcy Madsen Anderson slipped from her chair onto her knees and began to pray. It did no good. The house was empty except for her.

She had never kept a diary, but she had ten years' worth of appointment books stored in the bottom of her capacious sewing chest. And decades' worth of Bob's travel records stuffed in one of the file drawers of the cabinet he kept in his home office. As a tax accountant (and one with his own duly incorporated side-business to boot), he was meticulous when it came to record-keeping, taking every deduction, tax credit, and cent of automotive depreciation he could.

She stacked his files beside her computer along with her appointment books. She opened Google and forced herself to do the research she needed, noting the names and dates of death (some of these were necessarily approximate) of Beadie's victims. Then, as the digital clock on her computer's control strip marched soundlessly past ten PM, she began the laborious work of cross-checking.

She would have given a dozen years of her life to find something that would have indisputably eliminated him from even one of the murders, but her appointment books only made things worse. Kellie Gervais, of Keene, New Hampshire, had been discovered in the woods behind the local landfill on March fifteenth of 2004. According to the medical examiner, she had been dead three to five days. Scrawled across March tenth to twelfth in Darcy's appointment book for 2004 was *Bob to Fitzwilliam, Brat*. George Fitzwilliam was a well-heeled client of Benson, Bacon & Anderson. *Brat* was her abbreviation for Brattleboro, where Fitzwilliam lived. An easy drive from Keene, New Hampshire.

Helen Shaverstone and her son Robert had been discovered in Newrie Creek, in the town of Amesbury, on November eleventh of 2007. They had lived in Tassel Village, some twelve miles away. On the November page of her 2007 address book, she had drawn a line across the eighth to the tenth, scrawling *Bob in Saugus, 2 estate sales plus Boston coin auc*. And did she remember calling his Saugus motel on one of those nights and not getting

him? Assuming he was out late with some coin salesman, sniffing for leads, or maybe in the shower? She *seemed* to remember that. If so, had he actually been on the road that night? Perhaps coming back from doing an errand (a little drop-off) in the town of Amesbury? Or, if he *had* been in the shower, what in God's name had he been washing off?

She turned to his travel records and vouchers as the clock on the control strip passed eleven and started climbing toward midnight, the witching hour when graveyards reputedly yawned. She worked carefully and stopped often to double-check. The stuff from the late seventies was spotty and not much help—he hadn't been much more than your basic office drone in those days—but everything from the eighties was there, and the correlations she found for the Beadie murders in 1980 and 1981 were clear and undeniable. He had been traveling at the right times and in the right areas. And, Smart Darcy insisted, if you found enough cat hairs in a person's house, you pretty much had to assume there was a feline on the premises somewhere.

*So what do I do now?*

The answer seemed to be, carry her confused and frightened head upstairs. She doubted if she could sleep, but at least she could take a hot shower and then lie down. She was exhausted, her back ached from throwing up, and she stank of her own sweat.

She shut off her computer and climbed to the second floor at a slow trudge. The shower eased her back and a couple of Tylenol would probably ease it more by two AM or so; she was sure she'd be awake to find out. When she put the Tylenol back in the medicine cabinet, she took the Ambien bottle out, held it in her hand for almost a full minute, then replaced that, too. It wouldn't put her to sleep, only make her muzzy and—perhaps—more paranoid than she was already.

She lay down and looked at the night table on the other side of the bed. Bob's clock. Bob's spare set of reading glasses. A copy of a book called *The Shack*. *You ought to read this, Darce, it's a life-changer*, he'd said two or three nights before this latest trip.

She turned off her lamp, saw Stacey Moore stuffed into the cornbin, and turned the lamp back on again. On most nights, the dark was her friend—

sleep's kindly harbinger—but not tonight. Tonight the dark was populated by Bob's harem.

*You don't know that. Remember that you don't absolutely know that.*

But if you find enough cat hairs . . .

*Enough with the cat hairs, too.*

She lay there, even more wide awake than she'd feared she'd be, her mind going around and around, now thinking of the victims, now thinking of her children, now thinking of herself, even thinking of some long-forgotten Bible story about Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. She glanced at Bob's clock after what felt like an hour of going around that wretched worry-circle and saw that only twelve minutes had passed. She got up on one elbow and turned the clock's face to the window.

*He won't be home until six tomorrow night,* she thought . . . although, since it was now quarter past midnight, she supposed it was technically tonight that he'd be home. Still, that gave her eighteen hours. Surely enough time to make some sort of decision. It would help if she could sleep, even a little—sleep had a way of resetting the mind—but it was out of the question. She would drift a little, then think *Marjorie Duvall* or *Stacey Moore* or (this was the worst) *Robert Shaverstone, ten years old. HE DID NOT "SUFFER!"* And then any possibility of sleep would again be gone. The idea that she might never sleep again came to her. That was impossible, of course, but lying here with the taste of puke still in her mouth in spite of the Scope she had rinsed with, it seemed completely plausible.

At some point she found herself remembering the year in early childhood when she had gone around the house looking in mirrors. She would stand in front of them with her hands cupped to the sides of her face and her nose touching the glass, but holding her breath so she wouldn't fog the surface.

*If her mother caught her, she'd swat her away. That leaves a smudge, and I have to clean it off. Why are you so interested in yourself, anyway? You'll never be hung for your beauty. And why stand so close? You can't see anything worth looking at that way.*

How old had she been? Four? Five? Too young to explain that it wasn't her reflection she was interested in, anyway—or not primarily. She had been convinced that mirrors were doorways to another world, and what she saw

reflected in the glass wasn't *their* living room or bathroom, but the living room or bathroom of some other family. The Matsons instead of the Madsens, perhaps. Because it was *similar* on the other side of the glass, but not the *same*, and if you looked long enough, you could begin to pick up on some of the differences: a rug that appeared to be oval over there instead of round like over here, a door that seemed to have a turn-latch instead of a bolt, a light-switch that was on the wrong side of the door. The little girl wasn't the same, either. Darcy was sure they were related—sisters of the mirror?—but no, not the same. Instead of Darcellen Madsen that little girl might be named Jane or Sandra or even Eleanor Rigby, who for some reason (some *scary* reason) picked up the rice at churches where a wedding had been.

Lying in the circle of her bedside lamp, drowsing without realizing it, Darcy supposed that if she *had* been able to tell her mother what she was looking for, if she had explained about the Darker Girl who wasn't quite her, she might have passed some time with a child psychiatrist. But it wasn't the girl who interested her, it had never been the girl. What interested her was the idea that there was a whole other world behind the mirrors, and if you could walk through that other house (the Darker House) and out the door, the rest of that world would be waiting.

Of course this idea had passed and, aided by a new doll (which she had named Mrs. Butter-worth after the pancake syrup she loved) and a new dollhouse, she had moved on to more acceptable little-girl fantasies: cooking, cleaning, shopping, Scolding The Baby, Changing For Dinner. Now, all these years later, she had found her way through the mirror after all. Only there was no little girl waiting in the Darker House; instead there was a Darker Husband, one who had been living behind the mirror all the time, and doing terrible things there.

*A good one at a fair price*, Bob liked to say—an accountant's credo if ever there was one.

*Upright and sniffin the air*—an answer to *how you doin* that every kid in every Cub Scout pack he'd ever taken down Dead Man's Trail knew well. A response some of those boys no doubt still repeated as grown men.

*Gentlemen prefer blondes, don't forget that one. Because they get tired of squeezin . . .*

But then sleep took Darcy, and although that soft nurse could not carry her far, the lines on her forehead and at the corners of her reddened, puffy eyes softened a bit. She was close enough to consciousness to stir when her husband pulled into the driveway, but not close enough to come around. She might have if the Suburban's headlights had splashed across the ceiling, but Bob had doused them halfway down the block so as not to wake her.

A cat was stroking her cheek with a velvet paw. Very lightly but very insistently.

Darcy tried to brush it away, but her hand seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. And it was a dream, anyway—surely had to be. They had no cat. *Although if there are enough cat hairs in a house, there must be one around somewhere*, her struggling-to-wake mind told her, quite reasonably.

Now the paw was stroking her bangs and the forehead beneath, and it couldn't be a cat because cats don't talk.

“Wake up, Darce. Wake up, hon. We have to talk.”

The voice, as soft and soothing as the touch. Bob's voice. And not a cat's paw but a hand. Bob's hand. Only it couldn't be him, because he was in Montp

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Her eyes flew open and he was there, all right, sitting beside her on the bed, stroking her face and hair as he sometimes did when she was feeling under the weather. He was wearing a three-piece Jos. A. Bank suit (he bought all his suits there, calling it—another of his semi-amusing sayings—“Joss-Bank”), but the vest was unbuttoned and his collar undone. She could see the end of his tie poking out of his coat pocket like a red tongue. His midsection bulged over his belt and her first coherent thought was *You really have to do something about your weight, Bobby, that isn't good for your heart.*

“Wha—” It came out an almost incomprehensible crow-croak.

He smiled and kept stroking her hair, her cheek, the nape of her neck. She cleared her throat and tried again.

“What are you doing here, Bobby? It must be—” She raised her head to look at his clock, which of course did no good. She had turned its face to the wall.

He glanced down at his watch. He had been smiling as he stroked her awake, and was smiling now. “Quarter to three. I sat in my stupid old motel room for almost two hours after we talked, trying to convince myself that what I was thinking couldn't be true. Only I didn't get to where I am by dodging the

truth. So I jumped in the 'Burban and hit the road. No traffic whatsoever. I don't know why I don't do more traveling late at night. Maybe I will. If I'm not in Shawshank, that is. Or New Hampshire State Prison in Concord. But that's kind of up to you. Isn't it?"

His hand, stroking her face. The feel of it was familiar, even the smell of it was familiar, and she had always loved it. Now she didn't, and it wasn't just the night's wretched discoveries. How could she have never noticed how complacently possessive that stroking touch was? *You're an old bitch, but you're my old bitch*, that touch now seemed to say. *Only this time you piddled on the floor while I was gone, and that's bad. In fact, it's a Big Bad.*

She pushed his hand away and sat up. "What in God's name are you talking about? You come sneaking in, you wake me up—"

"Yes, you were sleeping with the light on—I saw it as soon as I turned up the driveway." There was no guilt in his smile. Nothing sinister, either. It was the same sweet-natured Bob Anderson smile she'd loved almost from the first. For a moment her memory flickered over how gentle he'd been on their wedding night, not hurrying her. Giving her time to get used to the new thing.

*Which he will do now*, she thought.

"You never sleep with the light on, Darce. And although you've got your nightgown on, you're wearing your bra under it, and you never do that, either. You just forgot to take it off, didn't you? Poor darlin. Poor tired girl."

For just a moment he touched her breast, then—thankfully—took his hand away.

"Also, you turned my clock around so you wouldn't have to look at the time. You've been upset, and I'm the cause. I'm sorry, Darce. From the bottom of my heart."

"I ate something that disagreed with me." It was all she could think of.

He smiled patiently. "You found my special hiding place in the garage."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, you did a good job of putting things back where you found them, but I'm very careful about such things, and the strip of tape I put on above the pivot in the baseboard was broken. You didn't notice that, did you? Why would you? It's the kind of tape that's almost invisible once it's on. Also, the

box inside was an inch or two to the left of where I put it—where I always put it.”

He reached to stroke her cheek some more, then withdrew his hand (seemingly without rancor) when she turned her face away.

“Bobby, I can see you’ve got a bee in your bonnet about something, but I honestly don’t know what it is. Maybe you’ve been working too hard.”

His mouth turned down in a *moue* of sadness, and his eyes were moistening with tears. Incredible. She actually had to stop herself from feeling sorry for him. Emotions were only another human habit, it seemed, as conditioned as any other. “I guess I always knew this day would come.”

“I haven’t got the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

He sighed. “I had a long ride back to think about this, honey. And the longer I thought, the *harder* I thought, the more it seemed like there was really only one question that needed an answer: WWDD.”

“I don’t—”

“Hush,” he said, and put a gentle finger on her lips. She could smell soap. He must have showered before he left the motel, a very Bob-like thing to do. “I’ll tell you everything. I’ll make a clean breast. I think that, down deep, I’ve always wanted you to know.”

He’d always wanted her to know? Dear God. There might be worse things waiting, but this was easily the most terrible thing so far. “I don’t *want* to know. Whatever it is you’ve got stuck in your head, I don’t *want* to know.”

“I see something different in your eyes, honey, and I’ve gotten very good at reading women’s eyes. I’ve become something of an expert. WWDD stands for What Would Darcy Do. In this case, What Would Darcy Do if she found my special hiding place, and what’s inside my special box. I’ve always loved that box, by the way, because you gave it to me.”

He leaned forward and planted a quick kiss between her brows. His lips were moist. For the first time in her life, the touch of them on her skin revolted her, and it occurred to her that she might be dead before the sun came up. Because dead women told no tales. *Although*, she thought, *he’d try to make sure I didn’t “suffer.”*

“First, I asked myself if the name Marjorie Duvall would mean anything to you. I would have liked to answer that question with a big ole no, but

sometimes a fellow has to be a realist. You're not the world's number one news junkie, but I've lived with you long enough to know that you follow the main stories on TV and in the news paper. I thought you'd know the name, and even if you didn't, I thought you'd recognize the picture on the driver's license. Besides, I said to myself, won't she be curious as to why I have those ID cards? Women are always curious. Look at Pandora."

*Or Bluebeard's wife, she thought. The woman who peeked into the locked room and found the severed heads of all her predecessors in matrimony.*

"Bob, I swear to you I don't have any idea what you're tal—"

"So the first thing I did when I came in was to boot up your computer, open Firefox—that's the search engine you always use—and check the history."

"The what?"

He chuckled as if she'd gotten off an exceptionally witty line. "You don't even know. I didn't think you did, because every time I check, everything's there. You *never* clear it!" And he chuckled again, as a man will do when a wife exhibits a trait he finds particularly endearing.

Darcy felt the first thin stirrings of anger. Probably absurd, given the circumstances, but there it was.

"You check my *computer*? You sneak! You dirty sneak!"

"Of *course* I check. I have a very bad friend who does very bad things. A man in a situation like that has to keep current with those closest to him. Since the kids left home, that's you and only you."

Bad friend? A bad friend who does bad things? Her head was swimming, but one thing seemed all too clear: further denials would be useless. She knew, and he knew she did.

"You haven't just been checking on Marjorie Duvall." She heard no shame or defensiveness in his voice, only a hideous regret that it should have come to this. "You've been checking on all of them." Then he laughed and said, "Whoops!"

She sat up against the headboard, which pulled her slightly away from him. That was good. Distance was good. All those years she'd lain with him hip to hip and thigh to thigh, and now distance was good.

"What bad friend? What are you talking about?"

He cocked his head to one side, Bob's body language for *I find you dense, but amusingly so*. "Brian."

At first she had no idea who he was talking about, and thought it must be someone from work. Possibly an accomplice? It didn't seem likely on the face of it, she would have said Bob was as lousy at making friends as she was, but men who did such things sometimes did have accomplices. Wolves hunted in packs, after all.

"Brian Delahanty," he said. "Don't tell me you forgot Brian. I told you all about him after you told me about what happened to Brandolyn."

Her mouth dropped open. "Your friend from junior high? Bob, he's dead! He got hit by a truck while he was chasing down a baseball, and he's *dead*."

"Well . . ." Bob's smile grew apologetic. "Yes . . . and no. I almost always called him Brian when I talked about him to you, but that's not what I called him back in school, because he hated that name. I called him by his initials. I called him BD."

She started to ask him what that had to do with the price of tea in China, but then she knew. Of course she knew. BD.

Beadie.

He talked for a long time, and the longer he talked, the more horrified she became. All these years she'd been living with a madman, but how could she have known? His insanity was like an underground sea. There was a layer of rock over it, and a layer of soil over the rock; flowers grew there. You could stroll through them and never know the madwater was there . . . but it was. It always had been. He blamed BD (who had become Beadie only years later, in his notes to the police) for everything, but Darcy suspected Bob knew better than that; blaming Brian Delahanty only made it easier to keep his two lives separate.

It had been BD's idea to take guns to school and go on a rampage, for instance. According to Bob, this inspiration had occurred in the summer between their freshman and sophomore years at Castle Rock High School. "1971," he said, shaking his head goodnaturedly, as a man might do when recalling some harmless childhood peccadillo. "Long before those Columbine oafs were even a twinkle in their daddies' eyes. There were these girls that snooted us. Diane Ramadge, Laurie Swenson, Gloria Haggerty . . . there were a couple of others, too, but I forget their names. The plan was to get a bunch of guns—Brian's dad had about twenty rifles and pistols in his basement, including a couple of German Lugers from World War II that we were just *fascinated* with—and take them to school. No searches or metal detectors back then, you know.

"We were going to barricade ourselves in the science wing. We'd chain the doors shut, kill some people—mostly teachers, but also some of the guys we didn't like—and then stampede the rest of the kids outside through the fire door at the far end of the hall. Well . . . *most* of the kids. We were going to keep the girls who snooted us as hostages. We planned—*BD* planned—to do all of this before the cops could get there, right? He drew maps, and he kept a list of the steps we'd have to take in his geometry notebook. I think there were

maybe twenty steps in all, starting with ‘Pull fire alarms to create confusion.’” He chuckled. “And after we had the place locked down . . .”

He gave her a slightly shamefaced smile, but she thought what he was mostly ashamed of was how stupid the plan had been in the first place.

“Well, you can probably guess. Couple of teenage boys, hormones so high we got horny when the wind blew. We were going to tell those girls that if they’d, you know, fuck us real good, we’d let them go. If they didn’t, we’d have to kill them. And they’d fuck, all right.”

He nodded slowly.

“They’d fuck to live. BD was right about that.” He was lost in his story. His eyes were hazy with (grotesque but true) nostalgia. For what? The crazy dreams of youth? She was afraid that might actually be it.

“We didn’t plan to kill ourselves like those heavy-metal dumbbells in Colorado, either. No way. There was a basement under the science wing, and Brian said there was a tunnel down there. He said it went from the supply room to the old fire station on the other side of Route 119. Brian said that when the high school was just a K-through-eight grammar school back in the fifties, there was a park over there, and the little kids used to play in it at recess. The tunnel was so they could get to the park without having to cross the road.”

Bob laughed, making her jump.

“I took his word for all that, but it turned out he was full of shit. I went down there the next fall to look for myself. The supply room was there, full of paper and stinking of that mimeograph juice they used to use, but if there was a tunnel, *I* never found it, and even back then I was very thorough. I don’t know if he was lying to both of us or just to himself, I only know there was no tunnel. We would have been trapped upstairs, and who knows, we might have killed ourselves after all. You never know what a fourteen-year-old’s going to do, do you? They roll around like unexploded bombs.”

*You’re not unexploded anymore*, she thought. *Are you, Bob?*

“We probably would have chickened out, anyway. But maybe not. Maybe we would have tried to go through with it. BD got me all excited, talking about how we were going to feel them up first, then make them take off each other’s clothes . . .” He looked at her earnestly. “Yes, I know how it sounds, just boys’ jack-off fantasies, but those girls really *were* snoots. You tried to talk to

them, they'd laugh and walk away. Then stand in the corner of the caff, the bunch of them, looking us over and laughing some more. So you really couldn't blame us, could you?"

He looked at his fingers, drumming restlessly on his suit-pants where they stretched tight over his thighs, then back up at Darcy.

"The thing you have to understand—that you really have to see—is how persuasive Brian was. He was lots worse than me. He really *was* crazy. Plus it was a time when the whole country was rioting, don't forget, and that was part of it, too."

*I doubt it*, she thought.

The amazing thing was how he made it sound almost normal, as if every adolescent boy's sexual fantasies involved rape and murder. Probably he believed that, just as he had believed in Brian Delahanty's mythical escape tunnel. Or had he? How could she know? She was, after all, listening to the recollections of a lunatic. It was just hard to believe that—still!—because the madman was Bob. Her Bob.

"Anyway," he said, shrugging, "it never happened. That was the summer Brian ran into the road and got killed. There was a reception at his house after the funeral, and his mother said I could go up to his room and take something, if I wanted. As a souvenir, you know. And I did want to! You bet I did! I took his geometry notebook, so nobody would go leafing through it and come across his plans for The Great Castle Rock Shoot-Out and Fuck Party. That's what he called it, you know."

Bob laughed ruefully.

"If I was a religious fella, I'd say God saved me from myself. And who knows if there isn't Something . . . some Fate . . . that has its own plan for us."

"And this Fate's plan for you was for you to torture and kill women?" Darcy asked. She couldn't help herself.

He looked at her reproachfully. "They were snoots," he said, and raised a teacherly finger. "Also, it wasn't me. It was Beadie who did that stuff—and I say *did* for a reason, Darce. I say *did* instead of *does* because all of that's behind me now."

"Bob—your friend BD is dead. He's been dead for almost forty years. You must know that. I mean, on some level you *must*."

He tossed his hands in the air: a gesture of good-natured surrender. “Do you want to call it guilt-avoidance? That’s what a shrink would call it, I suppose, and it’s fine if you do. But Darcy, listen!” He leaned forward and pressed a finger to her forehead, between her eyebrows. “Listen and get this through your head. It *was* Brian. He infected me with . . . well, certain ideas, let’s say that. Some ideas, once you get them in your head, you can’t unthink them. You can’t . . .”

“Put the toothpaste back in the tube?”

He clapped his hands together, almost making her scream. “*That’s it exactly!* You can’t put the toothpaste back in the tube. Brian was dead, but the ideas were alive. Those ideas—getting women, doing whatever to them, whatever crazy idea came into your head—they became his ghost.”

His eyes shifted upward and to the left when he said this. She had read somewhere that this meant the person who was talking was telling a conscious lie. But did it matter if he was? Or which one of them he was lying to? She thought not.

“I won’t go into the details,” he said. “It’s nothing for a sweetheart like you to hear, and like it or not—I know you don’t right now—you’re still my sweetheart. But you have to know I fought it. For seven years I fought it, but those ideas—*Brian’s* ideas—kept growing inside my head. Until finally I said to myself, ‘I’ll try it once, just to get it out of my head. To get *him* out of my head. If I get caught, I get caught—at least I’ll stop thinking about it. *Wondering* about it. What it would be like.’”

“You’re telling me it was a male exploration,” she said dully.

“Well, yes. I suppose you could say that.”

“Or like trying a joint just to see what all the shouting was about.”

He shrugged modestly, boyishly. “Kinda.”

“It wasn’t an exploration, Bobby. It wasn’t trying a joint. It was *taking a woman’s life.*”

She had seen no guilt or shame, absolutely none—he appeared incapable of those things, it seemed the circuit-breaker that controlled them had been fried, perhaps even before birth—but now he gave her a sulky, put-upon look. A teenager’s you-don’t-understand-me look.

“Darcy, they were *snoots.*”

She wanted a glass of water, but she was afraid to get up and go into the bathroom. She was afraid he would stop her, and what would come after that? What then?

“Besides,” he resumed, “I didn’t think I’d get caught. Not if I was careful and made a plan. Not a half-baked and horny-fourteen-year-old boy’s plan, you know, but a realistic one. And I realized something else, too. I couldn’t do it myself. Even if I didn’t screw up out of nervousness, I might out of guilt. Because I was one of the good guys. That’s how I saw myself, and believe it or not, I still do. And I have the proof, don’t I? A good home, a good wife, two beautiful children who are all grown up and starting their own lives. And I give back to the community. That’s why I took the Town Treasurer’s job for two years, gratis. That’s why I work with Vinnie Eschler every year to put on the Halloween blood drive.”

*You should have asked Marjorie Duvall to give,* Darcy thought. *She was A-positive.*

Then, puffing out his chest slightly—a man nailing down his argument with one final, irrefutable point—he said: “That’s what the Cub Scouts are about. You thought I’d quit when Donnie went on to Boy Scouts, I know you did. Only I didn’t. Because it’s not just about him, and never was. It’s about the community. It’s about giving back.”

“Then give Marjorie Duvall back her life. Or Stacey Moore. Or Robert Shaverstone.”

That last one got through; he winced as if she had struck him. “The boy was an accident. He wasn’t supposed to be there.”

“But you being there wasn’t an accident?”

“It wasn’t *me*,” he said, then added the ultimate surreal absurdity. “I’m no adulterer. It was BD. It’s always BD. It was his fault for putting those ideas in my head in the first place. I never would have thought of them on my own. I signed my notes to the police with his name just to make that clear. Of course I changed the spelling, because I sometimes called him BD back when I first told you about him. You might not remember that, but I did.”

She was impressed by the obsessive lengths he’d gone to. No wonder he hadn’t been caught. If she hadn’t stubbed her toe on that damned carton—

“None of them had any relation to me or my business. *Either* of my businesses. That would be very bad. Very dangerous. But I travel a lot, and I keep my eyes open. BD—the BD inside—he does, too. We watch out for the snooty ones. You can always tell. They wear their skirts too high and show their bra straps on purpose. They entice men. That Stacey Moore, for instance. You read about her, I’m sure. Married, but that didn’t keep her from brushing her titties against me. She worked as a waitress in a coffee shop—the Sunnyside in Waterville. I used to go up there to Mickleson’s Coins, remember? You even went with me a couple of times, when Pets was at Colby. This was before George Mickleson died and his son sold off all the stock so he could go to New Zealand or somewhere. That woman was *all over me*, Darce! Always asking me if I wanted a warm-up on my coffee and saying stuff like how ’bout those Red Sox, bending over, rubbing her titties on my shoulder, trying her best to get me hard. Which she did, I admit it, I’m a man with a man’s needs, and although you never turned me away or said no . . . well, rarely . . . I’m a man with a man’s needs and I’ve always been highly sexed. Some women sense that and like to play on it. It gets them off.”

He was looking down at his lap with dark, musing eyes. Then something else occurred to him and his head jerked up. His thinning hair flew, then settled back.

“Always smiling! Red lipstick and always smiling! Well, I recognize smiles like that. Most men do. ‘Ha-ha, I know you want it, I can smell it on you, but this little rub’s all you’re going to get, so deal with it.’ *I could!* I *could* deal with it! But not BD, not him.”

He shook his head slowly.

“There are lots of women like that. It’s easy to get their names. Then you can trace them down on the Internet. There’s a lot of information if you know how to look for it, and accountants know how. I’ve done that . . . oh, dozens of times. Maybe even a hundred. You could call it a hobby, I guess. You could say I collect information as well as coins. Usually it comes to nothing. But sometimes BD will say, ‘She’s the one you want to follow through on, Bobby. That one right there. We’ll make the plan together, and when the time comes, you just let me take over.’ And that’s what I do.”

He took her hand, and folded her limp and chilly fingers into his.

“You think I’m crazy. I can see it in your eyes. But I’m not, honey. It’s BD who’s crazy . . . or Beadie, if you like his for-the-public name better. By the way, if you read the stories in the paper, you know I purposely put a lot of misspellings in my notes to the police. I even misspell the addresses. I keep a list of misspellings in my wallet so that I’ll always do it the same way. It’s misdirection. I want them to think Beadie’s dumb—illiterate, anyway—and they do. Because *they’re* dumb. I’ve only been questioned a single time, years ago, and that was as a witness, about two weeks after BD killed the Moore woman. An old guy with a limp, semi-retired. Told me to give him a call if I remembered anything. I said I would. That was pretty rich.”

He chuckled soundlessly, as he sometimes did when they were watching *Modern Family* or *Two and a Half Men*. It was a way of laughing that had, until tonight, always heightened her own amusement.

“You want to know something, Darce? If they caught me dead to rights, I’d admit it—at least I guess I would, I don’t think anybody knows a hundred percent for sure what they’d do in a situation like that—but I couldn’t give them much of a confession. Because I don’t remember much about the actual . . . well . . . acts. Beadie does them, and I kind of . . . I don’t know . . . go unconscious. Get amnesia. Some damn thing.”

*Oh, you liar. You remember everything. It’s in your eyes, it’s even in the way your mouth turns down at the corners.*

“And now . . . everything’s in Darcellen’s hands.” He raised one of her hands to his lips and kissed the back of it, as if to emphasize this point. “You know that old punchline, the one that goes, ‘I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you’? That doesn’t apply here. I could never kill you. Everything I do, everything I’ve built . . . modest as it would look to some people, I guess . . . I’ve done and built for you. For the kids too, of course, but mostly for you. You walked into my life, and do you know what happened?”

“You stopped,” she said.

He broke into a radiant grin. “For over twenty years!”

*Sixteen*, she thought but didn’t say.

“For most of those years, when we were raising the kids and struggling to get the coin business off the ground—although that was mostly you—I was racing around New England doing taxes and setting up foundations—”

“You were the one who made it work,” she said, and was a little shocked by what she heard in her voice: calmness and warmth. “You were the one with the expertise.”

He looked almost touched enough to start crying again, and when he spoke his voice was husky. “Thank you, hon. It means the world to hear you say that. You saved me, you know. In more ways than one.”

He cleared his throat.

“For a dozen years, BD never made a peep. I thought he was gone. I honestly did. But then he came back. Like a ghost.” He seemed to consider this, then nodded his head very slowly. “That’s what he is. A ghost, a bad one. He started pointing out women when I was traveling. ‘Look at that one, she wants to make sure you see her nipples, but if you touched them she’d call the police and then laugh with her friends when they took you away. Look at that one, licking her lips with her tongue, she knows you’d like her to put it in your mouth and she knows you know she never will. Look at that one, showing off her panties when she gets out of her car, and if you think that’s an accident, you’re an idiot. She’s just one more snoot who thinks she’ll never get what she deserves.’”

He stopped, his eyes once more dark and downcast. In them was the Bobby who had successfully evaded her for twenty-seven years. The one he was trying to pass off as a ghost.

“When I started to have those urges, I fought them. There are magazines . . . certain magazines . . . I bought them before we got married, and I thought if I did that again . . . or certain sites on the Internet . . . I thought I could . . . I don’t know . . . substitute fantasy for reality, I guess you’d say . . . but once you’ve tried the real thing, fantasy isn’t worth a damn.”

He was talking, Darcy thought, like a man who had fallen in love with some expensive delicacy. Caviar. Truffles. Belgian chocolates.

“But the point is, I stopped. For all those years, I *stopped*. And I could stop again, Darcy. This time for good. If there’s a chance for us. If you could forgive me and just turn the page.” He looked at her, earnest and wet-eyed. “Is it possible you could do that?”

She thought of a woman buried in a snowdrift, her naked legs exposed by the careless swipe of a passing plow—some mother’s daughter, once the apple

of some father's eye as she danced clumsily across a grammar-school stage in a pink tutu. She thought of a mother and son discovered in a freezing creek, their hair rippling in the black, ice-edged water. She thought of the woman with her head in the corn.

"I'd have to think about it," she said, very carefully.

He grasped her by the upper arms and leaned toward her. She had to force herself not to flinch, and to meet his eyes. They were his eyes . . . and they weren't. *Maybe there's something to that ghost business after all*, she thought.

"This isn't one of those movies where the psycho husband chases his screaming wife all around the house. If you decide to go to the police and turn me in, I won't lift a finger to stop you. But I know you've thought about what it would do to the kids. You wouldn't be the woman I married if you hadn't thought about that. What you might not have thought about is what it would do to you. Nobody would believe that you were married to me all these years and never knew . . . or at least suspected. You'd have to move away and live on what savings there are, because I've always been the breadwinner, and a man can't win bread when he's in jail. You might not even be able to get at what there is, because of the civil suits. And of course the kids—"

"Stop it, don't talk about them when you talk about this, don't you *ever*."

He nodded humbly, still holding lightly to her forearms. "I beat BD once—I beat him for twenty years—"

*Sixteen*, she thought again. *Sixteen, and you know it.*

"—and I can beat him again. With your help, Darce. With your help I can do anything. Even if he were to come back in another twenty years, so what? Big deal! I'd be seventy-three. Hard to go snoot-hunting when you're shuffling around in a walker!" He laughed cheerily at this absurd image, then sobered again. "But—now listen to me carefully—if I were ever to backslide, even one single time, I'd kill myself. The kids would never know, they'd never have to be touched by that . . . that, you know, *stigma* . . . because I'd make it look like an accident . . . but *you'd* know. And you'd know why. So what do you say? Can we put this behind us?"

She appeared to consider. She *was* considering, in fact, although such thought processes as she could muster were probably not trending in a direction he would be likely to understand.

What she thought was: *It's what drug addicts say. "I'll never take any of that stuff again. I've quit before and this time I'll quit for good. I mean it." But they don't mean it, even when they think they do they don't, and neither does he.*

What she thought was: *What am I going to do? I can't fool him, we've been married too long.*

A cold voice replied to that, one she had never suspected of being inside her, one perhaps related to the BD-voice that whispered to Bob about the snoots it observed in restaurants, laughing on street corners, riding in expensive sports cars with the top down, whispering and smiling to each other on apartment-building balconies.

Or perhaps it was the voice of the Darker Girl.

*Why can't you?* it asked. *After all . . . he fooled you.*

And then what? She didn't know. She only knew that now was now, and now had to be dealt with.

"You'd have to promise to stop," she said, speaking very slowly and reluctantly. "Your most solemn, never-go-back promise."

His face filled with a relief so total—so somehow boyish—that she was touched. He so seldom looked like the boy he had been. Of course that was also the boy who had once planned to go to school with guns. "I would, Darcy. I do. I *do* promise. I already told you."

"And we could never talk about this again."

"I get that."

"You're not to send the Duvall woman's ID to the police, either."

She saw the disappointment (also weirdly boyish) that came over his face when she said that, but she meant to stick to it. He had to feel punished, if only a little. That way he'd believe he had convinced her.

*Hasn't he? Oh Darcellen, hasn't he?*

"I need more than promises, Bobby. Actions speak louder than words. Dig a hole in the woods and bury that woman's ID cards in it."

"Once I do that, are we—"

She reached out and put her hand to his mouth. She strove to make herself sound stern. "Hush. No more."

"Okay. Thank you, Darcy. So much."

“I don’t know what you’re thanking me for.” And then, although the thought of him lying next to her filled her with revulsion and dismay, she forced herself to say the rest.

“Now get undressed and come to bed. We both need to get some sleep.”

He was under almost as soon as his head hit the pillow, but long after he'd commenced his small, polite snores, Darcy lay awake, thinking that if she allowed herself to drift off, she would awake with his hands around her throat. She was in bed with a madman, after all. If he added her, his score would be an even dozen.

*But he meant it, she thought. This was right around the time that the sky began to lighten in the east. He said he loves me, and he meant it. And when I said I'd keep his secret—because that's what it comes down to, keeping his secret—he believed me. Why wouldn't he? I almost convinced myself.*

Wasn't it possible he could carry through on his promise? Not all drug addicts failed at getting clean, after all. And while she could never keep his secret for herself, wasn't it possible she could for the kids?

*I can't. I won't. But what choice?*

*What goddam choice?*

It was while pondering this question that her tired, confused mind finally gave up and slipped away.

She dreamed of going into the dining room and finding a woman bound with chains to the long Ethan Allen table there. The woman was naked except for a black leather hood that covered the top half of her face. *I don't know that woman, that woman is a stranger to me*, she thought in her dream, and then from beneath the hood Petra said: "Mama, is that you?"

Darcy tried to scream, but sometimes in nightmares, you can't.

When she finally struggled awake—headachey, miserable, feeling hungover—the other half of the bed was empty. Bob had turned his clock back around, and she saw it was quarter past ten. It was the latest she'd slept in years, but of course she hadn't dropped off until first light, and such sleep as she'd gotten was populated with horrors.

She used the toilet, dragged her housecoat off the hook on the back of the bathroom door, then brushed her teeth—her mouth tasted foul. *Like the bottom of a birdcage*, Bob would say on the rare mornings after he'd taken an extra glass of wine with dinner or a second bottle of beer during a baseball game. She spat, began to put her brush back in the toothglass, then paused, looking at her reflection. This morning she saw a woman who looked old instead of middle-aged: pale skin, deep lines bracketing the mouth, purple bruises under the eyes, the crazed bed-head you only got from tossing and turning. But all this was only of passing interest to her; how she looked was the last thing on her mind. She peered over her reflection's shoulder and through the open bathroom door into their bedroom. Except it wasn't theirs; it was the Darker Bedroom. She could see his slippers, only they weren't his. They were obviously too big to be Bob's, almost a giant's slippers. They belonged to the Darker Husband. And the double bed with the wrinkled sheets and unanchored blankets? That was the Darker Bed. She shifted her gaze back to the wild-haired woman with the bloodshot, frightened eyes: the Darker Wife, in all her raddled glory. Her first name was Darcy, but her last name wasn't Anderson. The Darker Wife was Mrs. Brian Delahanty.

Darcy leaned forward until her nose was touching the glass. She held her breath and cupped her hands to the sides of her face just as she had when she was a girl dressed in grass-stained shorts and falling-down white socks. She looked until she couldn't hold her breath any longer, then exhaled in a huff that fogged the mirror. She wiped it clean with a towel, and then went downstairs to face her first day as the monster's wife.

He had left a note for her under the sugarbowl.

*Darce—*

*I will take care of those documents, as you asked. I love you, honey.*

*Bob*

He had drawn a little Valentine heart around his name, a thing he hadn't done in years. She felt a wave of love for him, as thick and cloying as the scent of dying flowers. She wanted to wail like some woman in an Old Testament story, and stifled the sound with a napkin. The refrigerator kicked on and began its heartless whir. Water dripped in the sink, plinking away the seconds on the porcelain. Her tongue was a sour sponge crammed into her mouth. She felt time—all the time to come, as his wife in this house—close around her like a strait-jacket. Or a coffin. This was the world she had believed in as a child. It had been here all the time. Waiting for her.

The refrigerator whirred, the water dripped in the sink, and the raw seconds passed. This was the Darker Life, where every truth was written backward.

Her husband had coached Little League (also with Vinnie Eschler, that master of Polish jokes and big enveloping manhugs) during the years when Donnie had played shortstop for the Cavendish Hardware team, and Darcy still remembered what Bob said to the boys—many of them weeping—after they'd lost the final game of the District 19 tourney. Back in 1997 that would have been, probably only a month or so before Bob had murdered Stacey Moore and stuffed her into her cornbin. The talk he'd given to that bunch of drooping, sniffing boys had been short, wise, and (she'd thought so then and still did thirteen years later) incredibly kind.

*I know how bad you boys feel, but the sun will still come up tomorrow. And when it does, you'll feel better. When the sun comes up the day after tomorrow, a little better still. This is just a part of your life, and it's over. It would have been better to win, but either way, it's over. Life will go on.*

As hers did, following her ill-starred trip out to the garage for batteries. When Bob came home from work after her first long day at home (she couldn't bear the thought of going out herself, afraid her knowledge must be written on her face in capital letters), he said: "Honey, about last night—"

"Nothing happened last night. You came home early, that's all."

He ducked his head in that boyish way he had, and when he raised it again, his face was lit with a large and grateful smile. "That's fine, then," he said. "Case closed?"

"Closed book."

He opened his arms. "Give us a kiss, beautiful."

She did, wondering if he had kissed *them*.

*Do a good job, really use that educated tongue of yours, and I won't cut you, she could imagine him saying. Put your snooty little heart into it.*

He held her away from him, his hands on her shoulders. "Still friends?"

"Still friends."

"Sure?"

“Yes. I didn’t cook anything, and I don’t want to go out. Why don’t you change into some grubbies and go grab us a pizza.”

“All right.”

“And don’t forget to take your Prilosec.”

He beamed at her. “You bet.”

She watched him go bounding up the stairs, thought of saying *Don’t do that, Bobby, don’t test your heart like that.*

But no.

No.

Let him test it all he wanted.

The sun came up the next day. And the next. A week went by, then two, then a month. They resumed their old ways, the small habits of a long marriage. She brushed her teeth while he was in the shower (usually singing some hit from the eighties in a voice that was on-key but not particularly melodious), although she no longer did it naked, meaning to step into the shower as soon as he'd vacated it; now she showered after he'd left for B, B & A. If he noticed this little change in her modus operandi, he didn't mention it. She resumed her book club, telling the other ladies and the two retired gentlemen who took part that she had been feeling under the weather and didn't want to pass on a virus along with her opinion of the new Barbara Kingsolver, and everyone chuckled politely. A week after that, she resumed the knitting circle, Knuts for Knitting. Sometimes she caught herself singing along with the radio when she came back from the post office or the grocery store. She and Bob watched TV at night—always comedies, never the forensic crime shows. He came home early now; there had been no more road trips since the one to Montpelier. He got something called Skype for his computer, saying he could look at coin collections just as easily that way and save on gas. He didn't say it would also save on temptation, but he didn't have to. She watched the papers to see if Marjorie Duvall's ID showed up, knowing if he had lied about that, he would lie about everything. But it didn't. Once a week they went out to dinner at one of Yarmouth's two inexpensive restaurants. He ordered steak and she ordered fish. He drank iced tea and she had a Cranberry Breeze. Old habits died hard. Often, she thought, they don't die until we do.

In the daytime, while he was gone, she now rarely turned on the television. It was easier to listen to the refrigerator with it off, and to the small creaks and groans of their nice Yarmouth house as it settled toward another Maine winter. It was easier to think. Easier to face the truth: he would do it again. He would hold off as long as he could, she would gladly give him that much, but sooner or later Beadie would gain the upper hand. He wouldn't send the next woman's

ID to the police, thinking that might be enough to fool her, but probably not caring if she saw through the change in MO. *Because, he would reason, she's a part of it now. She'd have to admit she knew. The cops would get it out of her even if she tried to hide that part.*

Donnie called from Ohio. The business was going great guns; they had landed an office products account that might go national. Darcy said hooray (and so did Bob, cheerily admitting he'd been wrong about Donnie's chances of making it so young). Petra called to say they had tentatively decided on blue dresses for the bridesmaids, A-line, knee-high, matching chiffon scarves, and did Darcy think that was all right, or would outfits like that look a bit childish? Darcy said she thought they would look sweet, and the two of them went on to a discussion of shoes—blue pumps with three-quarter-inch heels, to be exact. Darcy's mother got sick down in Boca Grande, and it looked like she might have to go into the hospital, but then they started her on some new medication and she got well. The sun came up and the sun went down. The paper jack-o'-lanterns in the store windows went down and paper turkeys went up. Then the Christmas decorations went up. The first snow flurries appeared, right on schedule.

In her house, after her husband had taken his briefcase and gone to work, Darcy moved through the rooms, pausing to look into the various mirrors. Often for a long time. Asking the woman inside that other world what she should do.

Increasingly the answer seemed to be that she would do nothing.

On an unseasonably warm day two weeks before Christmas, Bob came home in the middle of the afternoon, shouting her name. Darcy was upstairs, reading a book. She tossed it on the night table (beside the hand mirror that had now taken up permanent residence there) and flew down the hall to the landing. Her first thought (horror mixed with relief) was that it was finally over. He had been found out. The police would soon be here. They would take him away, then come back to ask her the two age-old questions: what did she know, and when did she know it? News vans would park on the street. Young men and women with good hair would do stand-ups in front of their house.

Except that wasn't fear in his voice; she knew it for what it was even before he reached the foot of the stairs and turned his face up to her. It was excitement. Perhaps even jubilation.

"Bob? What—"

"You'll never believe it!" His topcoat hung open, his face was flushed all the way to the forehead, and such hair as he still had was blown every which way. It was as if he had driven home with all his car windows open. Given the springlike quality of the air, Darcy supposed he might've.

She came down cautiously and stood on the first riser, which put them eye-to-eye. "Tell me."

"The most amazing luck! Really! If I ever needed a sign that I'm on the right track again—that *we* are—boy, this is it!" He held out his hands. They were closed into fists with the knuckles up. His eyes were sparkling. Almost dancing. "Which hand? Pick."

"Bob, I don't want to play g—"

"Pick!"

She pointed to his right hand, just to get it over with. He laughed. "You read my mind . . . but you always could, couldn't you?"

He turned his fist over and opened it. On his palm lay a single coin, tails-side up, so she could see it was a wheat penny. Not uncirculated by any means,

but still in great shape. Assuming there were no scratches on the Lincoln side, she thought it was either F or VF. She reached for it, then paused. He nodded for her to go ahead. She turned it over, quite sure of what she would see. Nothing else could adequately explain his excitement. It was what she expected: a 1955 double-date. A double-*die*, in numismatic terms.

“Holy God, Bobby! Where . . . ? Did you buy it?” An uncirculated ’55 double-die had recently sold at an auction in Miami for over eight thousand dollars, setting a new record. This one wasn’t in that kind of shape, but no coin dealer with half a brain would have let it go for under four.

“God no! Some of the other fellows invited me to lunch at that Thai place, Eastern Promises, and I almost went, but I was working the goddamn Vision Associates account—you know, the private bank I told you about?—and so I gave Monica ten bucks and told her to get me a sandwich and a Fruitopia at Subway. She brought it back with the change in the bag. I shook it out . . . and there it was!” He plucked the penny from her hand and held it over his head, laughing up at it.

She laughed with him, then thought (as these days she often did): *HE DID NOT “SUFFER!”*

“Isn’t it great, honey?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m happy for you.” And, odd or not (*perverse* or not), she really was. He had brokered sales of several over the years and could have bought one for himself any old time, but that wasn’t the same as just coming across one. He had even forbidden her to give him one for Christmas or his birthday. The great accidental find was a collector’s most joyous moment, he had said so during their first real conversation, and now he had what he had been checking handfuls of change for all his life. His heart’s desire had come spilling out of a white sandwich-shop paper bag along with a turkey-bacon wrap.

He enveloped her in a hug. She hugged him back, then pushed him gently away. “What are you going to do with it, Bobby? Put it in a Lucite cube?”

This was a tease, and he knew it. He cocked a fingergun and shot her in the head. Which was all right, because when you were shot with a fingergun, you did not “suffer.”

She continued to smile at him, but now saw him again (after that brief, loving lapse) for what he was: the Darker Husband. Gollum, with his precious.

“You know better. I’m going to photo it, hang the photo on the wall, then tuck the penny away in our safe deposit box. What would you say it is, F or VF?”

She examined it again, then looked at him with a rueful smile. “I’d love to say VF, but—”

“Yeah, I know, I know—and I shouldn’t care. You’re not supposed to count the teeth when someone gives you a horse, but it’s hard to resist. Better than VG, though, right? Honest opinion, Darce.”

*My honest opinion is that you’ll do it again.*

“Better than VG, definitely.”

His smile faded. For a moment she was sure he had guessed what she was thinking, but she should have known better; on this side of the mirror, she could keep secrets, too.

“It’s not about the quality, anyway. It’s about the finding. Not getting it from a dealer or picking it out of a catalogue, but actually finding one when you least expect it.”

“I know.” She smiled. “If my dad was here right now, he’d be cracking a bottle of champagne.”

“I’ll take care of that little detail at dinner tonight,” he said. “Not in Yarmouth, either. We’re going to Portland. Pearl of the Shore. What do you say?”

“Oh, honey, I don’t know—”

He took her lightly by the shoulders as he always did when he wanted her to understand that he was really serious about a thing. “Come on—it’s going to be mild enough tonight for your prettiest summer dress. I heard it on the weather when I was driving back. And I’ll buy you all the champagne you can drink. How can you say no to a deal like that?”

“Well . . .” She considered. Then smiled. “I guess I can’t.”

They had not just one bottle of very pricey Moët et Chandon but two, and Bob drank most of it. Consequently it was Darcy who drove home in his quietly humming little Prius while Bob sat in the passenger seat, singing “Pennies from Heaven” in his on-key but not particularly melodious voice. He was drunk, she realized. Not just high, but actually drunk. It was the first time she had seen him that way in ten years. Ordinarily he watched his booze intake like a hawk, and sometimes, when someone at a party asked him why he wasn’t drinking, he’d quote a line from *True Grit*: “I would not put a thief in my mouth to steal my mind.” Tonight, high on his discovery of the double-date, he had allowed his mind to be stolen, and she knew what she intended to do as soon as he ordered that second bottle of bubbly. In the restaurant, she wasn’t sure she could carry it through, but listening to him sing on the way home, she knew. Of course she could do it. She was the Darker Wife now, and the Darker Wife knew that what he thought of as his good luck had really been her own.

Inside the house he whirled his sport coat onto the tree by the door and pulled her into his arms for a long kiss. She could taste champagne and sweet crème brûlée on his breath. It was not a bad combination, although she knew if things happened as they might, she would never want either again. His hand went to her breast. She let it linger there, feeling him against her, and then pushed him away. He looked disappointed, but brightened when she smiled.

“I’m going upstairs and getting out of this dress,” she said. “There’s Perrier in the refrigerator. If you bring me a glass—with a wedge of lime—you might get lucky, mister.”

He broke into a grin at that—his old, well-loved grin. Because there was one long-established habit of marriage they had not resumed since the night he had smelled her discovery (yes, smelled it, just as a wise old wolf may smell a poisoned bait) and come rushing home from Montpellier. Day by day they had walled up what he was—yes, as surely as Montresor had walled up his old pal Fortunato—and sex in the connubial bed would be the last brick.

He clicked his heels and threw her a British-style salute, fingers to forehead, palm out. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t be long,” she said pleasantly. “Mama wants what Mama wants.”

Going up the stairs, she thought: *This will never work. The only thing you’ll succeed in doing is getting yourself killed. He may not think he’s capable of it, but I think he is.*

Maybe that would be all right, though. Assuming he didn’t hurt her first, as he’d hurt those women. Maybe any sort of resolution would be all right. She couldn’t spend the rest of her life looking in mirrors. She wasn’t a kid anymore, and couldn’t get away with a kid’s craziness.

She went into the bedroom, but only long enough to toss her purse onto the table beside the hand mirror. Then she went out again and called, “Are you coming, Bobby? I could really use those bubbles!”

“On my way, ma’am, just pouring it over ice!”

And here he came out of the living room and into the hall, holding one of their good crystal glasses up before him at eye level like a comicopera waiter, weaving slightly as he crossed to the foot of the stairs. He continued to hold the glass up as he mounted them, the wedge of lime bobbing around on top. His free hand trailed lightly along the banister; his face shone with happiness and good cheer. For a moment she almost weakened, and then the image of Helen and Robert Shaverstone filled her mind, hellishly clear: the son and his molested, mutilated mother floating together in a Massachusetts creek that had begun to grow lacings of ice at its sides.

“One glass of Perrier for the lady, coming right uh—”

She saw the knowledge leap into his eyes at the very last second, something old and yellow and ancient. It was more than surprise; it was shocked fury. In that moment her understanding of him was complete. He loved nothing, least of all her. Every kindness, caress, boyish grin, and thoughtful gesture—all were nothing but camouflage. He was a shell. There was nothing inside but howling emptiness.

She pushed him.

It was a hard push and he made a three-quarters somersault above the stairs before coming down on them, first on his knees, then on his arm, then full on his face. She heard his arm break. The heavy Waterford glass shattered on one of the uncarpeted risers. He rolled over again and she heard something else inside him snap. He screamed in pain and somersaulted one final time before landing on the hardwood hall floor in a heap, the broken arm (not broken in just one place but in several) cocked back over his head at an angle nature had never intended. His head was twisted, one cheek on the floor.

Darcy hurried down the stairs. At one point she stepped on an ice cube, slipped, and had to grab the banister to save herself. At the bottom she saw a huge knob now poking out of the skin on the nape of his neck, turning it white, and said: “Don’t move, Bob, I think your neck is broken.”

His eye rolled up to look at her. Blood was trickling from his nose—that looked broken, too—and a lot more was coming out of his mouth. Almost gushing out. “You pushed me,” he said. “Oh Darcy, why did you push me?”

“I don’t know,” she said, thinking *we both know*. She began to cry. Crying came naturally; he was her husband, and he was badly hurt. “Oh God, I don’t

know. Something came over me. I'm sorry. Don't move, I'll call 911 and tell them to send an ambulance."

His foot scraped across the floor. "I'm not paralyzed," he said. "Thank God for that. But it *hurts*."

"I know, honey."

"Call the ambulance! Hurry!"

She went into the kitchen, spared a brief glance for the phone in its charger-cradle, then opened the cabinet under the sink. "Hello? Hello? Is this 911?" She took out the box of plastic GLAD bags, the storage-size ones she used for the leftovers when they had chicken or roast beef, and pulled one from the box. "This is Darcellen Anderson, I'm calling from 24 Sugar Mill Lane, in Yarmouth! Have you got that?"

From another drawer, she took a dishwiper from the top of the pile. She was still crying. *Nose like a firehose*, they'd said when they were kids. Crying was good. She needed to cry, and not just because it would look better for her later on. He was her husband, he was hurt, she needed to cry. She remembered when he still had a full head of hair. She remembered his flashy breakaway move when they danced to "Footloose." He brought her roses every year on her birthday. He never forgot. They had gone to Bermuda, where they rode bikes in the morning and made love in the afternoon. They had built a life together and now that life was over and she needed to cry. She wrapped the dishwiper around her hand and then stuffed her hand into the plastic bag.

"I need an ambulance, my husband fell down the stairs. I think his neck might be broken. Yes! Yes! Right away!"

She walked back into the hall with her right hand behind her back. She saw he had pulled himself away from the foot of the stairs a little, and it looked like he'd tried to turn over on his back, but at that he hadn't been successful. She knelt down beside him.

"I didn't fall," he said. "You pushed me. Why did you push me?"

"I guess for the Shaverstone boy," she said, and brought her hand out from behind her back. She was crying harder than ever. He saw the plastic bag. He saw the hand inside clutching the wad of toweling. He understood what she meant to do. Perhaps he had done something like it himself. Probably he had.

He began screaming . . . only the screams weren't really screams at all. His mouth was filled with blood, something had broken inside of his throat, and the sounds he produced were more guttural growls than screams. She jammed the plastic bag between his lips and deep inside his mouth. He had broken a number of teeth in the fall, and she could feel the jagged stumps. If they tore into her skin, she might have some serious explaining to do.

She yanked her hand free before he could bite, leaving the plastic bag and the dishwiper behind. She grabbed his jaw and chin. The other hand she put on top of his balding head. The flesh there was very warm. She could feel it throbbing with blood. She jammed his mouth shut on the wad of plastic and cloth. He tried to beat her off, but he only had one arm free, and that was the one that had been broken in the fall. The other was twisted beneath him. His feet paddled jerkily back and forth on the hardwood floor. One of his shoes came off. He was gurgling. She yanked her dress up to her waist, freeing her legs, then lunged forward, trying to straddle him. If she could do that, maybe she could pinch his nostrils shut.

But before she could try, his chest began to heave beneath her, and the gurgles became a deep grunting in his throat. It reminded her of how, when she was learning to drive, she would sometimes grind the transmission trying to find second gear, which was elusive on her father's old Chevrolet standard. Bob jerked, the one eye she could see bulging and cowlike in its socket. His face, which had been a bright crimson, now began to turn purple. He settled back onto the floor. She waited, gasping for breath, her face lathered with snot and tears. The eye was no longer rolling, and no longer bright with panic. She thought he was d—

Bob gave one final, titanic jerk and flung her off. He sat up, and she saw his top half no longer exactly matched his bottom half; he had broken his back as well as his neck, it seemed. His plastic-lined mouth yawned. His eyes met hers in a stare she knew she would never forget . . . but one she could live with, should she get through this.

*"Dar! Arrrrrrr!"*

He fell backward. His head made an egglike cracking sound on the floor. Darcy crawled closer to him, but not close enough to be in the mess. She had his blood on her, of course, and that was all right—she had tried to help him,

it was only natural—but that didn't mean she wanted to bathe in it. She sat up, propped on one hand, and watched him while she waited for her breath to come back. She watched to see if he would move. He didn't. When five minutes had gone by according to the little jeweled Michele on her wrist—the one she always wore when they went out—she reached a hand to the side of his neck and felt for a pulse there. She kept her fingers against his skin until she had counted all the way to thirty, and there was nothing. She lowered her ear to his chest, knowing this was the moment where he would come back to life and grab her. He didn't come back to life because there was no life left in him: no beating heart, no breathing lungs. It was over. She felt no satisfaction (let alone triumph) but only a focused determination to finish this and do it right. Partly for herself, but mostly for Donnie and Pets.

She went into the kitchen, moving fast. They had to know she'd called as soon as she could; if they could tell there had been a delay (if his blood had a chance to coagulate too much, for instance), there might be awkward questions. *I'll tell them I fainted, if I have to*, she thought. *They'll believe that, and even if they don't, they can't disprove it. At least, I don't think they can.*

She got the flashlight from the pantry, just as she had on the night when she had literally stumbled over his secret. She went back to where Bob lay, staring up at the ceiling with his glazed eyes. She pulled the plastic bag out of his mouth and examined it anxiously. If it was torn, there could be problems . . . and it was, in two places. She shone the flashlight into his mouth and spotted one tiny scrap of GLAD bag on his tongue. She picked it out with the tips of her fingers and put it in the bag.

*Enough, that's enough, Darcellen.*

But it wasn't. She pushed his cheeks back with her fingers, first the right, then the left. And on the left side she found another tiny scrap of plastic, stuck to his gum. She picked that out and put it in the bag with the other one. Were there more pieces? Had he swallowed them? If so, they were beyond her reach and all she could do was pray they wouldn't be discovered if someone—she didn't know who—had enough questions to order an autopsy.

Meanwhile, time was passing.

She hurried through the breezeway and into the garage, not quite running. She crawled under the worktable, opened his special hiding place, and stowed

away the blood-streaked plastic bag with the dishwiper inside. She closed the hidey-hole, put the carton of old catalogues in front of it, then went back into the house. She put the flashlight where it belonged. She picked up the phone, realized she had stopped crying, and put it back into its cradle. She went through the living room and looked at him. She thought about the roses, but that didn't work. *It's roses, not patriotism, that are the last resort of a scoundrel*, she thought, and was shocked to hear herself laugh. Then she thought of Donnie and Petra, who had both idolized their father, and that did the trick. Weeping, she went back to the kitchen phone and punched in 911. "Hello, my name is Darcellen Anderson, and I need an ambulance at—"

"Slow down a little, ma'am," the dispatcher said. "I'm having trouble understanding you."

*Good*, Darcy thought.

She cleared her throat. "Is this better? Can you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am, I can now. Just take it easy. You said you needed an ambulance?"

"Yes, at 24 Sugar Mill Lane."

"Are you hurt, Mrs. Anderson?"

"Not me, my husband. He fell down the stairs. He might only be unconscious, but I think he's dead."

The dispatcher said she would send an ambulance immediately. Darcy surmised she'd also send a Yarmouth police car. A state police car as well, if one were currently in the area. She hoped there wasn't. She went back into the front hall and sat on the bench there, but not for long. It was his eyes, looking at her. Accusing her.

She took his sport coat, wrapped it around herself, and went out on the front walk to wait for the ambulance.

The policeman who took her statement was Harold Shrewsbury, a local. Darcy didn't know him, but did know his wife, as it happened; Arlene Shrewsbury was a Knitting Knut. He talked to her in the kitchen while the EMTs first examined Bob's body and then took it away, not knowing there was another corpse inside him. A fellow who had been much more dangerous than Robert Anderson, CPA.

"Would you like coffee, Officer Shrewsbury? It's no trouble."

He looked at her trembling hands and said he would be very happy to make it for both of them. "I'm very handy in the kitchen."

"Arlene has never mentioned that," she said as he got up. He left his notebook open on the kitchen table. So far he had written nothing in it but her name, Bob's name, their address, and their telephone number. She took that as a good sign.

"No, she likes to hide my light under a bushel," he said. "Mrs. Anderson—Darcy—I'm very sorry for your loss, and I'm sure Arlene would say the same."

Darcy began to cry again. Officer Shrewsbury tore a handful of paper towels off the roll and gave them to her. "Sturdier than Kleenex."

"You have experience with this," she said.

He checked the Bunn, saw it was loaded, and flipped it on. "More than I'd like." He came back and sat down. "Can you tell me what happened? Do you feel up to that?"

She told him about Bob finding the double-date penny in his change from Subway, and how excited he'd been. About their celebratory dinner at Pearl of the Shore, and how he'd drunk too much. How he'd been clowning around (she mentioned the comic British salute he'd given when she asked for a glass of Perrier and lime). How he'd come up the stairs holding the glass high, like a waiter. How he was almost to the landing when he slipped. She even told about how she'd almost slipped herself, on one of the spilled ice cubes, while rushing down to him.

Officer Shrewsbury jotted something in his notebook, snapped it closed, then looked at her levelly. "Okay. I want you to come with me. Get your coat."

"What? Where?"

To jail, of course. Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars, go directly to jail. Bob had gotten away with almost a dozen murders, and she hadn't even been able to get away with one (of course he had planned his, and with an accountant's attention to detail). She didn't know where she'd slipped up, but it would undoubtedly turn out to be something obvious. Officer Shrewsbury would tell her on the way to the police station. It would be like the last chapter of an Elizabeth George.

"My house," he said. "You're staying with me and Arlene tonight."

She gaped at him. "I don't . . . I can't . . ."

"You can," he said, in a voice that brooked no argument. "She'd kill me if I left you here by yourself. Do you want to be responsible for my murder?"

She wiped tears from her face and smiled wanly. "No, I guess not. But . . . Officer Shrewsbury . . ."

"Harry."

"I have to make phone calls. My children . . . they don't know yet." The thought of this brought on fresh tears, and she put the last of the paper towels to work on them. Who knew a person could have so many tears inside them? She hadn't touched her coffee and now drank half of it in three long swallows, although it was still hot.

"I think we can stand the expense of a few long-distance calls," Harry Shrewsbury said. "And listen. Do you have something you can take? Anything of a, you know, calming nature?"

"Nothing like that," she whispered. "Only Ambien."

"Then Arlene will loan you one of her Valiums," he said. "You should take one at least half an hour before you start making any stressful calls. Meantime, I'll just let her know we're coming."

"You're very kind."

He opened first one of her kitchen drawers, then another, then a third. Darcy felt her heart slip into her throat as he opened the fourth. He took a dishwiper from it and handed it to her. "Sturdier than paper towels."

"Thank you," she said. "So much."

“How long were you married, Mrs. Anderson?”

“Twenty-seven years,” she said.

“Twenty-seven,” he marveled. “God. I am so sorry.”

“So am I,” she said, and lowered her face into the dishtowel.

Robert Emory Anderson was laid to rest in Yarmouth's Peace Cemetery two days later. Donnie and Petra flanked their mother as the minister talked about how a man's life was but a season. The weather had turned cold and overcast; a chilly wind rattled the leafless branches. B, B & A had closed for the day, and everyone had turned out. The accountants in their black overcoats clustered together like crows. There were no women among them. Darcy had never noticed this before.

Her eyes brimmed and she wiped at them periodically with the handkerchief she held in one black-gloved hand; Petra cried steadily and without letup; Donnie was red-eyed and grim. He was a good-looking young man, but his hair was already thinning, as his father's had at his age. *As long as he doesn't put on weight like Bob did,* she thought. *And doesn't kill women, of course.* But surely that kind of thing wasn't hereditary. Was it?

Soon this would be over. Donnie would stay only a couple of days—it was all the time he could afford to take away from the business at this point, he said. He hoped she could understand that and she said of course she did. Petra would be with her for a week, and said she could stay longer if Darcy needed her. Darcy told her how kind that was, privately hoping it would be no more than five days. She needed to be alone. She needed . . . not to think, exactly, but to find herself again. To re-establish herself on the right side of the mirror.

Not that anything had gone wrong; far from it. She didn't think things could have gone better if she had planned her husband's murder for months. If she had done that, she probably would have screwed it up by complicating things too much. Unlike for Bob, planning was not her forte.

There had been no hard questions. Her story was simple, believable, and almost true. The most important part was the solid bedrock beneath it: they had a marriage stretching back almost three decades, a good marriage, and there had been no recent arguments to mar it. Really, what was there to question?

The minister invited the family to step forward. They did so.

“Rest in peace, Pop,” Donnie said, and tossed a clod of earth into the grave. It landed on the shiny surface of the coffin. Darcy thought it looked like a dog turd.

“Daddy, I miss you so much,” Petra said, and threw her own handful of earth.

Darcy came last. She bent, took up a loose handful in her black glove, and let it fall. She said nothing.

The minister invoked a moment of silent prayer. The mourners bowed their heads. The wind rattled the branches. Not too far distant, traffic rushed by on I-295. Darcy thought: *God, if You're there, let this be the end.*

It wasn't.

Seven weeks or so after the funeral—it was the new year now, the weather blue and hard and cold—the doorbell of the house on Sugar Mill Lane rang. When Darcy opened it, she saw an elderly gentleman wearing a black topcoat and red muffler. Held before him in his gloved hands was an old-school Homburg hat. His face was deeply lined (with pain as well as age, Darcy thought) and what remained of his gray hair was buzzed to a fuzz.

“Yes?” she said.

He fumbled in his pocket and dropped his hat. Darcy bent and picked it up. When she straightened, she saw that the elderly gentleman was holding out a leather-cased identification folder. In it was a gold badge and a picture of her caller (looking quite a bit younger) on a plastic card.

“Holt Ramsey,” he said, sounding apologetic about it. “State Attorney General’s Office. I’m sorry as hell to disturb you, Mrs. Anderson. May I come in? You’ll freeze standing out here in that dress.”

“Please,” she said, and stood aside.

She observed his hitching walk and the way his right hand went unconsciously to his right hip—as if to hold it together—and a clear memory rose in her mind: Bob sitting beside her on the bed, her cold fingers held prisoner by his warm ones. Bob talking. Gloating, actually. *I want them to think Beadie’s dumb, and they do. Because they’re dumb. I’ve only been questioned a single time, and that was as a witness, about two weeks after BD killed the Moore woman. An old guy with a limp, semi-retired.* And here that old guy was, standing not half a dozen steps from where Bob had died. From where she had killed him. Holt Ramsey looked both sick and in pain, but his eyes were sharp. They moved quickly to the left and right, taking in everything before returning to her face.

*Be careful,* she told herself. *Be oh so careful of this one, Darcellen.*

“How can I help you, Mr. Ramsey?”

“Well, one thing—if it’s not too much to ask—I could sure use a cup of coffee. I’m awfully cold. I’ve got a State car, and the heater doesn’t work worth a darn. Of course if it’s an imposition . . .”

“Not at all. But I wonder . . . could I see your identification again?”

He handed the folder over to her equably enough, and hung his hat on the coat tree while she studied it.

“This RET stamped below the seal . . . does that mean you’re retired?”

“Yes and no.” His lips parted in a smile that revealed teeth too perfect to be anything but dentures. “Had to go, at least officially, when I turned sixty-eight, but I’ve spent my whole life either in the State Police or working at SAG—State Attorney General’s Office, you know—and now I’m like an old firehorse with an honorary place in the barn. Kind of a mascot, you know.”

*I think you’re a lot more than that.*

“Let me take your coat.”

“No, nope, I think I’ll wear it. Won’t be staying that long. I’d hang it up if it was snowing outside—so I wouldn’t drip on your floor—but it’s not. It’s just boogery cold, you know. Too cold to snow, my father would have said, and at my age I feel the cold a lot more than I did fifty years ago. Or even twenty-five.”

Leading him into the kitchen, walking slowly so Ramsey could keep up, she asked him how old he was.

“Seventy-eight in May.” He spoke with evident pride. “If I make it. I always add that for good luck. It’s worked so far. What a nice kitchen you have, Mrs. Anderson—a place for everything and everything in its place. My wife would have approved. She died four years ago. It was a heart attack, very sudden. How I miss her. The way you must miss your husband, I imagine.”

His twinkling eyes—young and alert in creased, pain-haunted sockets—searched her face.

*He knows. I don’t know how, but he does.*

She checked the Bunn’s basket and turned it on. As she got cups from the cabinet, she asked, “How may I help you today, Mr. Ramsey? Or is it Detective Ramsey?”

He laughed, and the laugh turned into a cough. “Oh, it’s been donkey’s years since anyone called me Detective. Never mind Ramsey, either, if you go

straight to Holt, that'll work for me. And it was really your husband I wanted to talk to, you know, but of course he's passed on—again, my condolences—and so that's out of the question. Yep, entirely out of the question.” He shook his head and settled himself on one of the stools that stood around the butcher-block table. His topcoat rustled. Somewhere inside his scant body, a bone creaked. “But I tell you what: an old man who lives in a rented room—which I do, although it's a nice one—sometimes gets bored with just the TV for company, and so I thought, what the hell, I'll drive on down to Yarmouth and ask my few little questions just the same. She won't be able to answer many of them, I said to myself, maybe not *any* of them, but why not go anyway? You need to get out before you get potbound, I said to myself.”

“On a day when the high is supposed to go all the way up to ten degrees,” she said. “In a State car with a bad heater.”

“Ayuh, but I have my thermals on,” he said modestly.

“Don't you have your own car, Mr. Ramsey?”

“I do, I do,” he said, as if this had never occurred to him until now. “Come sit down, Mrs. Anderson. No need to lurk in the corner. I'm too old to bite.”

“No, the coffee will be ready in a minute,” she said. She was afraid of this old man. Bob should have been afraid of him, too, but of course Bob was now beyond fear. “In the meantime, perhaps you can tell me what you wanted to talk about with my husband.”

“Well, you won't believe this, Mrs. Anderson—”

“Call me Darcy, why don't you?”

“Darcy!” He looked delighted. “Isn't that the nicest, old-fashioned name!”

“Thank you. Do you take cream?”

“Black as my hat, that's how I take it. Only I like to think of myself as one of the white-hats, actually. Well, I would, wouldn't I? Chasing down criminals and such. That's how I got this bad leg, you know. High-speed car chase, way back in '89. Fellow killed his wife and both of his children. Now a crime like that is usually an act of passion, committed by a man who's either drunk or drugged or not quite right in the head.” Ramsey tapped his fuzz with a finger arthritis had twisted out of true. “Not this guy. This guy did it for the insurance. Tried to make it look like a whatchacallit, home invasion. I won't go into all the details, but I sniffed around and sniffed around. For three years I

sniffed around. And finally I felt I had enough to arrest him. Probably not enough to convict him, but there was no need to tell *him* that, was there?"

"I suppose not," Darcy said. The coffee was hot, and she poured. She decided to take hers black, too. And to drink it as fast as possible. That way the caffeine would hit her all at once and turn on her lights.

"Thanks," he said when she brought it to the table. "Thanks very much. You're kindness itself. Hot coffee on a cold day—what could be better? Mulled cider, maybe; I can't think of anything else. Anyway, where was I? Oh, I know. Dwight Cheminoux. Way up in The County, this was. Just south of the Hainesville Woods."

Darcy worked on her coffee. She looked at Ramsey over the rim of her cup and suddenly it was like being married again—a long marriage, in many ways a good marriage (but not in all ways), the kind that was like a joke: she knew that he knew, and he knew that she knew that he knew. That kind of relationship was like looking into a mirror and seeing another mirror, a hall of them going down into infinity. The only real question here was what he was going to do about what he knew. What he *could* do.

"Well," Ramsey said, setting down his coffee cup and unconsciously beginning to rub his sore leg, "the simple fact is I was hoping to provoke that fella. I mean, he had the blood of a woman and two kiddies on his hands, so I felt justified in playing a little dirty. And it worked. He ran, and I chased him right into the Hainesville Woods, where the song says there's a tombstone every mile. And there we both crashed on Wickett's Curve—him into a tree and me into him. Which is where I got this leg, not to mention the steel rod in my neck."

"I'm sorry. And the fellow you were chasing? What did he get?"

Ramsey's mouth curved upward at the corners in a dry-lipped smile of singular coldness. His young eyes sparkled. "He got death, Darcy. Saved the state forty or fifty years of room and board in Shawshank."

"You're quite the hound of heaven, aren't you, Mr. Ramsey?"

Instead of looking puzzled, he placed his misshapen hands beside his face, palms out, and recited in a singsong schoolboy's voice: "I fled Him down the nights and down the days, I fled Him down the arches of the years, I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways . . .' And so on."

“You learned that in school?”

“No ma’am, in Methodist Youth Fellowship. Lo these many years ago. Won a Bible, which I lost at summer camp a year later. Only I didn’t lose it; it was stolen. Can you imagine someone low enough to steal a Bible?”

“Yes,” Darcy said.

He laughed. “Darcy, you go on and call me Holt. Please. All my friends do.”

*Are you my friend? Are you?*

She didn’t know, but of one thing she was sure: he wouldn’t have been Bob’s friend.

“Is that the only poem you have by heart? Holt?”

“Well, I used to know ‘The Death of the Hired Man,’” he said, “but now I only remember the part about how home is the place that, when you go there, they have to take you in. It’s a true thing, wouldn’t you say?”

“Absolutely.”

His eyes—they were a light hazel—searched hers. The intimacy of that gaze was indecent, as if he were looking at her with her clothes off. And pleasant, for perhaps the same reason.

“What did you want to ask my husband, Holt?”

“Well, I already talked to him once, you know, although I’m not sure he’d remember if he was still alive. A long time ago, that was. We were both a lot younger, and you must’ve been just a child yourself, given how young and pretty you are now.”

She gave him a chilly spare-me smile, then got up to pour herself a fresh cup of coffee. The first one was already gone.

“You probably know about the Beadie murders,” he said.

“The man who kills women and then sends their ID to the police?” She came back to the table, her coffee cup perfectly steady in her hand. “The newspapers dine out on that one.”

He pointed at her—Bob’s fingergun gesture—and tipped her a wink. “Got that right. Yessir. ‘If it bleeds, it leads,’ that’s their motto. I happened to work the case a little. I wasn’t retired then, but getting on to it. I had kind of a reputation as a fellow who could sometimes get results by sniffing around . . . following my whatdoyoucallums . . .”

“Instincts?”

Once more with the fingergun. Once more with the wink. As if there were a secret, and they were both in on it. “Anyway, they send me out to work on my own, you know—old limping Holt shows his pictures around, asks his questions, and kind’ve . . . you know . . . just *sniffs*. Because I’ve always had a nose for this kind of work, Darcy, and never really lost it. This was in the fall of 1997, not too long after a woman named Stacey Moore was killed. Name ring a bell?”

“I don’t think so,” Darcy said.

“You’d remember if you’d seen the crime scene photos. Terrible murder—how that woman must have suffered. But of course, this fellow who calls himself Beadie had stopped for a long time, over fifteen years, and he must have had a lot of steam built up in his boiler, just waiting to blow. And it was her that got scalded.

“Anyway, the fella who was SAG back then put me on it. ‘Let old Holt take a shot,’ he says, ‘he’s not doing anything else, and it’ll keep him out from underfoot.’ Even then old Holt was what they called me. Because of the limp, I should imagine. I talked to her friends, her relatives, her neighbors out there on Route 106, and the people she worked with in Waterville. Oh, I talked to them plenty. She was a waitress at a place called the Sunnyside Restaurant there in town. Lots of transients stop in, because the turnpike’s just down the road, but I was more interested in her regular customers. Her regular *male* customers.”

“Of course you would be,” she murmured.

“One of them turned out to be a presentable, well-turned-out fella in his mid or early forties. Came in every three or four weeks, always took one of Stacey’s booths. Now, probably I shouldn’t say this, since the fella turned out to be your late husband—speaking ill of the dead, but since they’re *both* dead, I kind’ve figure that cancels itself out, if you see what I mean . . .” Ramsey ceased, looking confused.

“You’re getting all tangled up,” Darcy said, amused in spite of herself. Maybe he *wanted* her to be amused. She couldn’t tell. “Do yourself a favor and just say it, I’m a big girl. She flirted with him? Is that what it comes down to?”

She wouldn't be the first waitress to flirt with a man on the road, even if the man had a wedding ring on his finger."

"No, that wasn't quite it. According to what the other waitstaff told me—and of course you have to take it with a grain of salt, because they all liked her—it was *him* that flirted with *her*. And according to them, she didn't like it much. She said the guy gave her the creeps."

"That doesn't sound like my husband." Or what Bob had told her, for that matter.

"No, but it probably was. Your husband, I mean. And a wife doesn't always know what a hubby does on the road, although she may think she does. Anyway, one of the waitresses told me this fella drove a Toyota 4Runner. She knew because she had one just like it. And do you know what? A number of the Moore woman's neighbors had seen a 4Runner like that out and about in the area of the family farmstand just days before the woman was murdered. Once only a day before the killing took place."

"But not on *the* day."

"No, but of course a fella as careful as this Beadie would look out for a thing like that. Wouldn't he?"

"I suppose."

"Well, I had a description and I canvassed the area around the restaurant. I had nothing better to do. For a week all I got was blisters and a few cups of mercy-coffee—none as good as yours, though!—and I was about to give up. Then I happened to stop at a place downtown. Mickleson's Coins. Does *that* name ring a bell?"

"Of course. My husband was a numismatist and Mickleson's was one of the three or four best buy-and-sell shops in the state. It's gone now. Old Mr. Mickleson died and his son closed the business."

"Yep. Well, you know what the song says, time takes it all in the end—your eyes, the spring in your step, even your friggin jump shot, pardon my French. But George Mickleson was alive then—"

"Upright and sniffin the air," Darcy murmured.

Holt Ramsey smiled. "Just as you say. Anyway, he recognized the description. 'Why, that sounds like Bob Anderson,' he says. And guess what? He drove a Toyota 4Runner."

“Oh, but he traded that in a long time ago,” Darcy said. “For a—”

“Chevrolet Suburban, wasn’t it?” Ramsey pronounced the company name *Shivvalay*.

“Yes.” Darcy folded her hands and looked at Ramsey calmly. They were almost down to it. The only question was which partner in the now-dissolved Anderson marriage this sharp-eyed old man was more interested in.

“Don’t suppose you still have that Suburban, do you?”

“No. I sold it about a month after my husband died. I put an ad in *Uncle Henry’s* swap guide, and someone snapped it right up. I thought I’d have problems, with the high mileage and gas being so expensive, but I didn’t. Of course I didn’t get much.”

And two days before the man who’d bought it came to pick it up, she had searched it carefully, from stem to stern, not neglecting to pull out the carpet in the cargo compartment. She found nothing, but still paid fifty dollars to have it washed on the outside (which she didn’t care about) and steam-cleaned on the inside (which she did).

“Ah. Good old *Uncle Henry’s*. I sold my late wife’s Ford the same way.”

“Mr. Ramsey—”

“Holt.”

“Holt, were you able to positively identify my husband as the man who used to flirt with Stacey Moore?”

“Well, when I talked to Mr. Anderson, he admitted he’d been in the Sunnyside from time to time—admitted it freely—but he claimed he never noticed any of the waitresses in particular. Claimed he usually had his head buried in paperwork. But of course I showed his picture—from his driver’s license, you understand—and the staff allowed as how it was him.”

“Did my husband know you had a . . . a particular interest in him?”

“No. Far as he was concerned, I was just old Limpin’ Lennie looking for witnesses who might have seen something. No one fears an old duck like me, you know.”

*I fear you plenty.*

“It’s not much of a case,” she said. “Assuming you were trying to make one.”

“No case at all!” He laughed cheerily, but his hazel eyes were cold. “If I could have made a case, me and Mr. Anderson wouldn’t have had our little

conversation in his office, Darcy. We would have had it in *my* office. Where you don't get to leave until I say you can. Or until a lawyer springs you, of course."

"Maybe it's time you stopped dancing, Holt."

"All right," he agreed, "why not? Because even a box-step hurts me like hell these days. Damn that old Dwight Cheminoux, anyway! And I don't want to take your whole morning, so let's speed this up. I was able to confirm a Toyota 4Runner at or near the scene of two of the earlier murders—what we call Beadie's first cycle. Not the same one; a different color. But I was also able to confirm that your husband owned another 4Runner in the seventies."

"That's right. He liked it, so he traded for the same kind."

"Yep, men will do that. And the 4Runner's a popular vehicle in places where it snows half the damn year. But after the Moore murder—and after I talked to him—he traded for a Suburban."

"Not immediately," Darcy said with a smile. "He had that 4Runner of his well after the turn of the century."

"I know. He traded in 2004, not long before Andrea Honeycutt was murdered down Nashua way. Blue and gray Suburban; year of manufacture 2002. A Suburban of that approximate year and those *exact* colors was seen quite often in Mrs. Honeycutt's neighborhood during the month or so before she was murdered. But here's the funny thing." He leaned forward. "I found one witness who said that Suburban had a Vermont plate, and another—a little old lady of the type who sits in her living room window and watches all the neighborhood doings from first light to last, on account of having nothing better to do—said the one *she* saw had a New York plate."

"Bob's had Maine plates," Darcy said. "As you very well know."

"Acourse, acourse, but plates can be stolen, you know."

"What about the Shaverstone murders, Holt? Was a blue and gray Suburban seen in Helen Shaverstone's neighborhood?"

"I see you've been following the Beadie case a little more closely than most people. A little more closely than you first let on, too."

"Was it?"

"No," Ramsey said. "As a matter of fact, no. But a gray-over-blue Suburban *was* seen near the creek in Amesbury where the bodies were dumped." He

smiled again while his cold eyes studied her. “Dumped like garbage.”

She sighed. “I know.”

“No one could tell me about the license plate of the Suburban seen in Amesbury, but if they had, I imagine it would have been Massachusetts. Or Pennsylvania. Or anything but Maine.”

He leaned forward.

“This Beadie sent us notes with his victims’ identification. Taunting us, you know—daring us to catch him. P’raps part of him even *wanted* to be caught.”

“Perhaps so,” Darcy said, although she doubted it.

“The notes were printed in block letters. Now people who do that think such printing can’t be identified, but most times it can. The similarities show up. I don’t suppose you have any of your husband’s files, do you?”

“The ones that haven’t gone back to his firm have been destroyed. But I imagine they’d have plenty of samples. Accountants never throw out anything.”

He sighed. “Yuh, but a firm like that, it’d take a court order to get anything loose, and to get one I’d have to show probable cause. Which I just don’t have. I’ve got a number of coincidences—although they’re not coincidences in my mind. And I’ve got a number of . . . well . . . *propinquities*, I guess you might call them, but nowhere near enough of them to qualify as circumstantial evidence. So I came to you, Darcy. I thought I’d probably be out on my ear by now, but you’ve been very kind.”

She said nothing.

He leaned forward even further, almost hunching over the table now. Like a bird of prey. But hiding not quite out of sight behind the coldness in his eyes was something else. She thought it might be kindness. She prayed it was.

“Darcy, was your husband Beadie?”

She was aware that he might be recording this conversation; it was certainly not outside the realm of possibility. Instead of speaking, she raised one hand from the table, showing him her pink palm.

“For a long time you never knew, did you?”

She said nothing. Only looked at him. Looked *into* him, the way you looked into people you knew well. Only you had to be careful when you did that, because you weren’t always seeing what you thought you were seeing. She knew that now.

“And then you did? One day you did?”

“Would you like another cup of coffee, Holt?”

“Half a cup,” he said. He sat back up and folded his arms over his thin chest. “More’d give me acid indigestion, and I forgot to take my Zantac pill this morning.”

“I think there’s some Prilosec in the upstairs medicine cabinet,” she said. “It was Bob’s. Would you like me to get it?”

“I wouldn’t take anything of his even if I was burning up inside.”

“All right,” she said mildly, and poured him a little more coffee.

“Sorry,” he said. “Sometimes my emotions get the better of me. Those women . . . all those women . . . and the boy, with his whole life ahead of him. That’s worst of all.”

“Yes,” she said, passing him the cup. She noticed how his hand trembled, and thought this was probably his last rodeo, no matter how smart he was . . . and he was fearsomely smart.

“A woman who found out what her husband was very late in the game would be in a hard place,” Ramsey said.

“Yes, I imagine she would be,” Darcy said.

“Who’d believe she could live with a man all those years and never know what he was? Why, she’d be like a whatdoyoucallit, the bird that lives in a crocodile’s mouth.”

“According to the story,” Darcy said, “the crocodile lets that bird live there because it keeps the crocodile’s teeth clean. Eats the grain right out from between them.” She made pecking motions with the fingers of her right hand. “It’s probably not true . . . but it *is* true that I used to drive Bobby to the dentist. Left to himself, he’d accidentally-on-purpose forget his appointments. He was such a baby about pain.” Her eyes filled unexpectedly with tears. She wiped them away with the heels of her hands, cursing them. This man would not respect tears shed on Robert Anderson’s account.

Or maybe she was wrong about that. He was smiling and nodding his head. “And your kids. They’d be run over once when the world found out their father was a serial killer and torturer of women. Then run over again when the world decided their mother had been covering up for him. Maybe even helping him, like Myra Hindley helped Ian Brady. Do you know who they were?”

“No.”

“Never mind, then. But ask yourself this: what would a woman in a difficult position like that do?”

“What would *you* do, Holt?”

“I don’t know. My situation’s a little different. I may be just an old nag—the oldest horse in the firebarn—but I have a responsibility to the families of those murdered women. They deserve closure.”

“They deserve it, no question . . . but do they *need* it?”

“Robert Shaverstone’s penis was bitten off, did you know that?”

She hadn’t. Of course she hadn’t. She closed her eyes and felt the warm tears trickling through the lashes. *Did not “suffer” my ass*, she thought, and if Bob had appeared before her, hands out and begging for mercy, she would have killed him again.

“His father knows,” Ramsey said. Speaking softly. “And he has to live with that knowledge about the child he loved every day.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I am so, so sorry.”

She felt him take her hand across the table. “Didn’t mean to upset you.”

She flung it off. “Of course you did! But do you think I haven’t been? Do you think I *haven’t* been, you . . . you nosy old man?”

He chuckled, revealing those sparkling dentures. “No. I don’t think that at all. Saw it as soon as you opened the door.” He paused, then said deliberately: “I saw everything.”

“And what do you see now?”

He got up, staggered a little, then found his balance. “I see a courageous woman who should be left alone to get after her housework. Not to mention the rest of her life.”

She also got up. “And the families of the victims? The ones who deserve closure?” She paused, not wanting to say the rest. But she had to. This man had fought considerable pain—maybe even excruciating pain—to come here, and now he was giving her a pass. At least, she thought he was. “Robert Shaverstone’s father?”

“The Shaverstone boy is dead, and his father’s as good as.” Ramsey spoke in a calm, assessing tone Darcy recognized. It was a tone Bob used when he knew a client of the firm was about to be hauled before the IRS, and the meeting

would go badly. “Never takes his mouth off the whiskey bottle from morning til night. Would knowing that his son’s killer—his son’s *mutilator*—was dead change that? I don’t think so. Would it bring any of the victims back? Nawp. Is the killer burning in the fires of hell for his crimes right now, suffering his own mutilations that will bleed for all of eternity? The Bible says he is. The Old Testament part of it, anyway, and since that’s where our laws come from, it’s good enough for me. Thanks for the coffee. I’ll have to stop at every rest area between here and Augusta going back, but it was worth it. You make a good cup.”

Walking him to the door, Darcy realized she felt on the right side of the mirror for the first time since she had stumbled over that carton in the garage. It was good to know he had been close to being caught. That he hadn’t been as smart as he’d assumed he was.

“Thank you for coming to visit,” she said as he set his hat squarely on his head. She opened the door, letting in a breeze of cold air. She didn’t mind. It felt good on her skin. “Will I see you again?”

“Nawp. I’m done as of next week. Full retirement. Going to Florida. I won’t be there long, according to my doctor.”

“I’m sorry to hear th—”

He abruptly pulled her into his arms. They were thin, but sinewy and surprisingly strong. Darcy was startled but not frightened. The brim of his Homburg bumped her temple as he whispered in her ear. “You did the right thing.”

And kissed her cheek.

He went slowly and carefully down the path, minding the ice. An old man's walk. *He should really have a cane*, Darcy thought. He was going around the front of his car, still looking down for ice patches, when she called his name. He turned back, bushy eyebrows raised.

"When my husband was a boy, he had a friend who was killed in an accident."

"Is that so?" The words came out in a puff of winter white.

"Yes," Darcy said. "You could look up what happened. It was very tragic, even though he wasn't a very nice boy, according to my husband."

"No?"

"No. He was the sort of boy who harbors dangerous fantasies. His name was Brian Delahanty, but when they were kids, Bob called him BD."

Ramsey stood by his car for several seconds, working it through. Then he nodded his head. "That's very interesting. I might have a look at the stories about it on my computer. Or maybe not; it was all a long time ago. Thank you for the coffee."

"Thank you for the conversation."

She watched him drive down the street (he drove with the confidence of a much younger man, she noticed—probably because his eyes were still so sharp) and then went inside. She felt younger, lighter. She went to the mirror in the hall. In it she saw nothing but her own reflection, and that was good.

## AFTERWORD

The stories in this book are harsh. You may have found them hard to read in places. If so, be assured that I found them equally hard to write in places. When people ask me about my work, I have developed a habit of skirting the subject with jokes and humorous personal anecdotes (which you can't quite trust; never trust anything a fiction writer says about himself). It's a form of deflection, and a little more diplomatic than the way my Yankee forebears might have answered such questions: *It's none of your business, chummy*. But beneath the jokes, I take what I do very seriously, and have since I wrote my first novel, *The Long Walk*, at the age of eighteen.

I have little patience with writers who *don't* take the job seriously, and none at all with those who see the art of story-fiction as essentially worn out. It's not worn out, and it's not a literary game. It's one of the vital ways in which we try to make sense of our lives, and the often terrible world we see around us. It's the way we answer the question, *How can such things be?* Stories suggest that sometimes—not always, but sometimes—there's a *reason*.

From the start—even before a young man I can now hardly comprehend started writing *The Long Walk* in his college dormitory room—I felt that the best fiction was both propulsive and assaultive. It gets in your face. Sometimes it shouts in your face. I have no quarrel with literary fiction, which usually concerns itself with extraordinary people in ordinary situations, but as both a reader and a writer, I'm much more interested by ordinary people in extraordinary situations. I want to provoke an emotional, even visceral, reaction in my readers. Making them think *as they read* is not my deal. I put that in italics, because if the tale is good enough and the characters vivid enough, thinking will supplant emotion when the tale has been told and the book set aside (sometimes with relief). I can remember reading George Orwell's *1984* at the age of thirteen or so with growing dismay, anger, and outrage, charging through the pages and gobbling up the story as fast as I

could, and what's wrong with that? Especially since I continue to think about it to this day when some politician (I'm thinking of Sarah Palin and her scurrilous "death-panel" remarks) has some success in convincing the public that white is really black, or vice-versa.

Here's something else I believe: if you're going into a very dark place—like Wilf James's Nebraska farmhouse in "1922"—then you should take a bright light, and shine it on everything. If you don't want to see, why in God's name would you dare the dark at all? The great naturalist writer Frank Norris has always been one of my literary idols, and I've kept what he said on this subject in mind for over forty years: "I never truckled; I never took off my hat to Fashion and held it out for pennies. By God, I told them the truth."

But Steve, you say, you've made a great many pennies during your career, and as for truth . . . that's variable, isn't it? Yes, I've made a good amount of money writing my stories, but the money was a side effect, never the goal. Writing fiction for money is a mug's game. And sure, truth is in the eye of the beholder. But when it comes to fiction, the writer's only responsibility is to look for the truth inside his own heart. It won't always be the reader's truth, or the critic's truth, but as long as it's the *writer's* truth—as long as he or she doesn't truckle, or hold out his or her hat to Fashion—all is well. For writers who knowingly lie, for those who substitute unbelievable human behavior for the way people really act, I have nothing but contempt. Bad writing is more than a matter of shit syntax and faulty observation; bad writing usually arises from a stubborn refusal to tell stories about what people actually do—to face the fact, let us say, that murderers sometimes help old ladies cross the street.

I have tried my best in *Full Dark, No Stars* to record what people might do, and how they might behave, under certain dire circumstances. The people in these stories are not without hope, but they acknowledge that even our fondest hopes (and our fondest wishes for our fellowmen and the society in which we live) may sometimes be vain. Often, even. But I think they also say that nobility most fully resides not in success but in trying to do the right thing . . . and that when we fail to do that, or willfully turn away from the challenge, hell follows.

"1922" was inspired by a nonfiction book called *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), written by Michael Lesy and featuring photographs taken in the small

city of Black River Falls, Wisconsin. I was impressed by the rural isolation of these photographs, and the harshness and deprivation in the faces of many of the subjects. I wanted to get that feeling in my story.

In 2007, while traveling on Interstate 84 to an autographing in western Massachusetts, I stopped at a rest area for a typical Steve King Health Meal: a soda and a candybar. When I came out of the refreshment shack, I saw a woman with a flat tire talking earnestly to a long-haul trucker parked in the next slot. He smiled at her and got out of his rig.

“Need any help?” I asked.

“No, no, I got this,” the trucker said.

The lady got her tire changed, I’m sure. I got a Three Musketeers and the story idea that eventually became “Big Driver.”

In Bangor, where I live, a thoroughfare called the Hammond Street Extension skirts the airport. I walk three or four miles a day, and if I’m in town, I often go out that way. There’s a gravel patch beside the airport fence about halfway along the Extension, and there any number of roadside vendors have set up shop over the years. My favorite is known locally as Golf Ball Guy, and he always appears in the spring. Golf Ball Guy goes up to the Bangor Municipal Golf Course when the weather turns warm, and scavenges up hundreds of used golf balls that have been abandoned under the snow. He throws away the really bad ones and sells the rest at the little spot out on the Extension (the windshield of his car is lined with golf balls—a nice touch). One day when I spied him, the idea for “Fair Extension” came into my mind. Of course I set it in Derry, home of the late and unlamented clown Pennywise, because Derry is just Bangor masquerading under a different name.

The last story in this book came to my mind after reading an article about Dennis Rader, the infamous BTK (bind, torture, and kill) murderer who took the lives of ten people—mostly women, but two of his victims were children—over a period of roughly sixteen years. In many cases, he mailed pieces of his victims’ identification to the police. Paula Rader was married to this monster for thirty-four years, and many in the Wichita area, where Rader claimed his victims, refuse to believe that she could live with him and not know what he was doing. I did believe—I *do* believe—and I wrote this story to explore what might happen in such a case if the wife suddenly found out about her

husband's awful hobby. I also wrote it to explore the idea that it's impossible to fully know anyone, even those we love the most.

All right, I think we've been down here in the dark long enough. There's a whole other world upstairs. Take my hand, Constant Reader, and I'll be happy to lead you back into the sunshine. I'm happy to go there, because I believe most people are essentially good. I know that I am.

It's *you* I'm not entirely sure of.

Bangor, Maine  
December 23, 2009

GALLERY BOOKS PRESENTS

"UNDER THE WEATHER"

A NEW STORY FROM  
STEPHEN KING...

I've been having this bad dream for a week now, but it must be one of the lucid ones, because I'm always able to back out before it turns into a nightmare. Only this time it seems to have followed me, because Ellen and I aren't alone. There's something under the bed. I can hear it chewing.

You know how it is when you're really scared, right? Your heart seems to stop, your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth, your skin goes cold and goose bumps rise up all over your body. Instead of meshing, the cogs in your head just spin and the whole engine heats up. I almost scream, I really do. I think, *It's the thing I don't want to look at. It's the thing in the window seat.*

Then I see the fan overhead, the blades turning at their slowest speed. I see a crack of early morning light running down the middle of the pulled drapes. I see the graying milkweed fluff of Ellen's hair on the other side of the bed. I'm here on the Upper East Side, fifth floor, and everything's okay. The dream was just a dream. As for what's under the bed—

I toss back the covers and slide out onto my knees, like a man who means to pray. But instead of that, I lift the flounce and peer under the bed. I only see a dark shape at first. Then the shape's head turns and two eyes gleam at me. It's Lady. She's not supposed to be under there, and I guess she knows it (hard to tell what a dog knows and what it doesn't), but I must have left the door open when I came to bed. Or maybe it didn't quite latch and she pushed it open with her snout. She must have brought one of her toys with her from the basket in the hall. At least it wasn't the blue bone or the red rat. Those have squeakers in them, and would have wakened Ellen for sure. And Ellen needs her rest. She's been under the weather.

"Lady," I whisper. "Lady, come out of there."

She only looks at me. She's getting on in years and not so steady on her pins as she used to be, but—as the saying goes—she ain't stupid. She's under Ellen's side, where I can't reach her. If I raise my voice she'll have to come, but she knows (I'm pretty sure she knows) that I won't do that, because if I raise my voice, that will wake Ellen.

As if to prove this, Lady turns away from me and the chewing recommences.

Well, I can handle that. I've been living with Lady for eleven years, nearly half my married life. There are three things that get her on her feet. One is the rattle of her leash and a call of "Elevator!" One is the thump of her food dish on the floor. The third—

I get up and walk down the short hall to the kitchen. From the cupboard I take the bag of Snackin' Slices, making sure to rattle it. I don't have to wait long for the muted clitter of cockerclaws. Five seconds and she's right there. She doesn't even bother to bring her toy.

I show her one of the little carrot shapes, then toss it into the living room. A little mean, maybe, and I know she didn't mean to scare the life out of me, but she did. Besides, the fat old thing can use the exercise. She chases her treat. I linger long enough to start the coffeemaker, then go back into the bedroom. I'm careful to pull the door all the way shut.

Ellen's still sleeping, and getting up early has one benefit: no need for the alarm. I turn it off. Let her sleep a little later. It's a bronchial infection. I was scared for a while there, but now she's on the mend.

I go into the bathroom and officially christen the day by brushing my teeth (I've read that in the morning a person's mouth is as germicidally dead as it ever gets, but the habits we learn as children are hard to break). I turn on the shower, get it good and hot, and step in.

The shower's where I do my best thinking, and this morning I think about the dream. Five nights in a row I've had it. (But who's counting.) Nothing really awful happens, but in a way that's the worst part. Because in the dream I know—absolutely *know*—that something awful *will* happen. If I let it.

I'm in an airplane, in business class. I'm in an aisle seat, which is where I prefer to be, so I don't have to squeeze past anybody if I have to go to the toilet. My tray table is down. On it is a bag of peanuts and an orange drink that looks like a vodka sunrise, a drink I've never ordered in real life. The ride is smooth. If there are clouds, we're above them. The cabin is filled with sunlight. Someone is sitting in the window seat, and I know if I look at him (or her, or possibly *it*), I'll see something that will turn my bad dream into a nightmare. If I look into the face of my seatmate, I may lose my mind. It could crack open like an egg and all the darkness there is might pour out.

I give my soapy hair a quick rinse, step out, dry off. My clothes are folded on a chair in the bedroom. I take them and my shoes into the kitchen, which is now filling with the smell of coffee. Nice. Lady's curled up by the stove, looking at me reproachfully.

"Don't go giving me the stinkeye," I tell her, and nod toward the closed bedroom door. "You know the rules."

She puts her snout down on the floor between her paws.

\* \* \*

I choose cranberry juice while I wait for the coffee. There's OJ, which is my usual morning drink, but I don't want it. Too much like the drink in the dream, I suppose. I have my coffee in the living room with CNN on mute, just reading the crawl at the bottom, which is all a person really needs. Then I turn it off and have a bowl of All-Bran. Quarter to eight. I decide that if the weather's nice when I walk Lady, I'll skip the cab and walk to work.

The weather's nice all right, spring edging into summer and a shine on everything. Carlo, the doorman, is under the awning, talking on his cell phone. "Yuh," he says. "Yuh, I finally got hold of her. She says go ahead, no problem as long as I'm there. She don't trust nobody, and I don't blame her. She got a lot of nice things up there. You come when? Three? You can't make it earlier?" He tips me a wave with one white-gloved hand as I walk Lady down to the corner.

We've got this down to a science, Lady and I. She does it at pretty much the same place every day, and I'm fast with the poop bag. When I come back, Carlo stoops to give her a pat. Lady waves her tail back and forth most fetchingly, but no treat is forthcoming from Carlo. He knows she's on a diet. Or supposed to be.

"I finally got hold of Mrs. Warshawski," Carlo tells me. Mrs. Warshawski is in 5-C, but only technically. She's been gone for a couple of months now. "She was in Vienna."

"Vienna, is that so," I say.

"She told me to go ahead with the exterminators. She was horrified when I told her. You're the only one on four, five, or six who hasn't complained. The

rest of them . . .” He shakes his head and makes a *who* sound.

“I grew up in a Connecticut mill town. It pretty well wrecked my sinuses. I can smell coffee, and Ellie’s perfume if she puts it on thick, but that’s about all.”

“In this case, that’s probably a blessing. How *is* Mrs. Nathan? Still under the weather?”

“It’ll be a few more days before she’s ready to go back to work, but she’s a hell of a lot better. She gave me a scare for a while.”

“Me, too. She was going out one day—in the rain, naturally—”

“That’s El,” I say. “Nothing stops her. If she feels like she has to go somewhere, she goes.”

“—and I thought to myself, ‘That’s a real graveyard cough.’” He raises one of his gloved hands in a *stop* gesture. “Not that I really thought—”

“It was on the way to being a hospital cough, anyway. But I finally got her to see the doctor, and now . . . road to recovery.”

“Good. Good.” Then, returning to what’s really on his mind: “Mrs. Warshawski was pretty grossed out when I told her. I said we’d probably just find some spoiled food in the fridge, but I know it’s worse than that. So does anybody else on those floors with an intact smeller.” He gives a grim little nod. “They’re going to find a dead rat in there, you mark my words. Food stinks, but not like that. Only dead things stink like that. It’s a rat, all right, maybe a couple of them. She probably put down poison and doesn’t want to admit it.” He bends down to give Lady another pat. “*You* smell it, don’t you, girl? You bet you do.”

\* \* \*

There’s a litter of purple notes around the coffee-maker. I take the purple pad they came from to the kitchen table and write another.

*Ellen: Lady all walked. Coffee ready. If you feel well enough to go out to the park, go! Just not too far. Don’t want you to overdo now that you’re finally on the mend. Carlo told me again that he “smells a rat.” I guess so does everyone else in the neighborhood of 5-C. Lucky for us that you’re plugged up and I’m “olfac’trilly challenged.” Haha! If you hear people in Mrs. W’s, it’s the exterminators. Carlo will*

*be with them, so don't worry. I'm going to walk to work. Need to think summore about the latest male wonder drug. Wish they'd consulted us before they hung that name on it. Remember, DON'T OVERDO. Love you—love you.*

I jot half a dozen *X*'s just to underline the point, and sign it with a *B* in a heart. Then I add it to the other notes around the coffeemaker. I refill Lady's water dish before I leave.

It's twenty blocks or so, and I don't think about the latest male wonder drug. I think about the exterminators, who will be coming at three. Earlier, if they can make it.

\* \* \*

The walk might have been a mistake. The dreams have interrupted my sleep cycle, I guess, and I almost fall asleep during the morning meeting in the conference room. But I come around in a hurry when Pete Wendell shows a mock-up poster for the new Petrov Vodka campaign. I've seen it already, on his office computer while he was fooling with it last week, and looking at it again I know where at least one element of my dream came from.

"Petrov Vodka," Aura McLean says. Her admirable breasts rise and fall in a theatrical sigh. "If that's an example of the new Russian capitalism, it's dead on arrival." The heartiest laughter at this comes from the younger men, who'd like to see Aura's long blond hair spread on a pillow next to them. "No offense to you intended, Pete, it's a great leader."

"None taken," Pete says with a game smile. "We do what we can."

The poster shows a couple toasting each other on a balcony while the sun sinks over a harbor filled with expensive pleasure boats. The cutline beneath reads *SUNSET. THE PERFECT TIME FOR A VODKA SUNRISE.*

There's some discussion about the placement of the Petrov bottle—right? left? center? below?—and Frank Bernstein suggests that actually adding the recipe might prolong the page view, especially in mags like *Playboy* and *Esquire*. I tune out, thinking about the drink sitting on the tray in my airplane dream, until I realize George Slattery is calling on me. I'm able to replay the question, and that's a good thing. You don't ask George to chew his cabbage twice.

“I’m actually in the same boat as Pete,” I say. “The client picked the name, I’m just doing what I can.”

There’s some good-natured laughter. There have been many jokes about Vonnell Pharmaceutical’s newest drug product.

“I may have something to show you by Monday,” I tell them. I’m not looking at George, but he knows where I’m aiming. “By the middle of next week for sure. I want to give Billy a chance to see what he can do.” Billy Ederle is our newest hire, and doing his break-in time as my assistant. He doesn’t get an invite to the morning meetings yet, but I like him. Everybody at Andrews-Slattery likes him. He’s bright, he’s eager, and I bet he’ll start shaving in a year or two.

George considers this. “I was really hoping to see a treatment today. Even rough copy.”

Silence. People study their nails. It’s as close to a public rebuke as George gets, and maybe I deserve it. This hasn’t been my best week, and laying it off on the kid doesn’t look so good. It doesn’t feel so good, either.

“Okay,” George says at last, and you can feel the relief in the room. It’s like a light cool breath of breeze, there and then gone. No one wants to witness a conference room caning on a sunny Friday morning, and I sure don’t want to get one. Not with all the other stuff on my mind.

George smells a rat, I think.

“How’s Ellen doing?” he asks.

“Better,” I tell him. “Thanks for asking.”

There are a few more presentations. Then it’s over. Thank God.

\* \* \*

I’m almost dozing when Billy Ederle comes into my office twenty minutes later. Check that: I *am* dozing. I sit up fast, hoping the kid just thinks he caught me deep in thought. He’s probably too excited to have noticed either way. In one hand he’s holding a piece of poster board. I think he’d look right at home in Podunk High School, putting up a big notice about the Friday night dance.

“How was the meeting?” he asks.

“It was okay.”

“Did they bring us up?”

“You know they did. What have you got for me, Billy?”

He takes a deep breath and turns his poster board around so I can see it. On the left is a prescription bottle of Viagra, either actual size or close enough not to matter. On the right—the power side of the ad, as anyone in advertising will tell you—is a prescription bottle of our stuff, but much bigger. Beneath is the cutline: PO-10S, TEN TIMES MORE EFFECTIVE THAN VIAGRA!

As Billy looks at me looking at it, his hopeful smile starts to fade. “You don’t like it.”

“It’s not a question of like or don’t like. In this business it never is. It’s a question of what works and what doesn’t. This doesn’t.”

Now he’s looking sulky. If George Slattery saw that look, he’d take the kid to the woodshed. I won’t, although it might feel that way to him because it’s my job to teach him. In spite of everything else on my mind, I’ll try to do that. Because I love this business. It gets very little respect, but I love it anyway. Also, I can hear Ellen say, you don’t let go. Once you get your teeth in something, they stay there. Determination like that can be a little scary.

“Sit down, Billy.”

He sits.

“And wipe that pout off your puss, okay? You look like a kid who just dropped his binky in the toilet.”

He does his best. Which I like about him. Kid’s a trier, and if he’s going to work in the Andrews-Slattery shop, he’d better be.

“Good news is I’m not taking it away from you, mostly because it’s not your fault Vonnell Pharmaceutical saddled us with a name that sounds like a multivitamin. But we’re going to make a silk purse out of this sow’s ear. In advertising, that’s the main job seven times out of every ten. Maybe eight. So pay attention.”

He gets a little grin. “Should I take notes?”

“Don’t be a smart-ass. First, when you’re shouting a drug, you *never* show a prescription bottle. The logo, sure. The pill itself, sometimes. It depends. You know why Pfizer shows the Viagra pill? Because it’s blue. Consumers like blue. The shape helps, too. Consumers have a very positive response to the shape of

the Viagra tab. But people *never like to see the prescription bottle their stuff comes in*. Prescription bottles make them think of sickness. Got that?”

“So maybe a little Viagra pill and a big Po-10s pill? Instead of the bottles?” He raises his hands, framing an invisible cutline. “‘Po-10s, ten times bigger, ten times better.’ Get it?”

“Yes, Billy, I get it. The FDA will get it, too, and they won’t like it. In fact, they could make us take ads with a cutline like that out of circulation, which would cost a bundle. Not to mention a very good client.”

“*Why?*” It’s almost a bleat.

“Because it *isn’t* ten times bigger, and it isn’t ten times better. Viagra, Cialis, Levitra, Po-10s, they all have about the same penis-elevation formula. Do your research, kiddo. And a little refresher course in advertising law wouldn’t hurt. Want to say Blowhard’s Bran Muffins are ten times tastier than Bigmouth’s Bran Muffins? Have at it, taste is a subjective judgment. What gets your prick hard, though, and for how long . . .”

“Okay,” he says in a small voice.

“Here’s the other half. ‘Ten times more’ anything is—speaking in erectile dysfunction terms—pretty limp. It went out of vogue around the same time as Two Cs in a K.”

He looks blank.

“Two cunts in a kitchen. It’s how advertising guys used to refer to their TV ads on the soaps back in the fifties.”

“You’re joking!”

“Afraid not. Now here’s something I’ve been playing with.” I jot on a pad, and for a moment I think of all those notes scattered around the coffeemaker back in good old 5-B—why are they still there?

“Can’t you just tell me?” the kid asks from a thousand miles away.

“No, because advertising isn’t an oral medium,” I say. “Never trust an ad that’s spoken out loud. Write it down and show it to someone. Show it to your best friend. Or your . . . you know, your wife.”

“Are you okay, Brad?”

“Fine. Why?”

“I don’t know, you just looked funny for a minute.”

“Just as long as I don’t look funny when I present on Monday. Now—what does this say to you?” I turn the pad around and show him what I’ve printed there: PO-10S . . . FOR MEN WHO WANT TO DO IT THE HARD WAY.

“It’s like a dirty joke!” he objects.

“You’ve got a point, but I’ve printed it in block caps. Imagine it in a soft italic type, almost a girly type. Maybe even in parentheses.” I add them, although they don’t work with the caps. But they will. It’s a thing I just know, because I can see it. “Now, playing off that, think of a photo showing a big, burly guy. In low-slung jeans that show the top of his underwear. And a sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off, let’s say. See him with some grease and dirt on his guns.”

“Guns?”

“Biceps. And he’s standing beside a muscle car with the hood up. Now, is it still a dirty joke?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“Neither do I, not for sure, but my gut tells me it’ll pull the plow. But not quite as is. The cutline still doesn’t work, you’re right about that, and it’s got to, because it’ll be the basis of the TV and ’Net ads. So play with it. Make it work. Just remember the key word . . .”

Suddenly, just like that, I know where the rest of that damn dream came from.

“Brad?”

“The key word is *hard*,” I say. “Because a man . . . when something’s not working—his prick, his plan, his *life*—he *takes* it hard. He doesn’t want to give up. He remembers how it was, and he wants it that way again.”

Yes, I think. Yes he does.

Billy smirks. “I wouldn’t know.”

I manage a smile. It feels god-awful heavy, as if there are weights hanging from the corners of my mouth. All at once it’s like being in the bad dream again. Because there’s something close to me I don’t want to look at. Only this isn’t a lucid dream I can back out of. This is lucid reality.

\* \* \*

After Billy leaves, I go down to the can. It's ten o'clock, and most of the guys in the shop have off-loaded their morning coffee and are taking on more in our little caff, so I have it to myself. I drop my pants so if someone wanders in and happens to look under the door he won't think I'm weird, but the only business I've come in here to do is thinking. Or remembering.

Four years after coming on board at Andrews-Slattery, the Fasprin Pain Reliever account landed on my desk. I've had some special ones over the years, some breakouts, and that was the first. It happened fast. I opened the sample box, took out the bottle, and the basis of the campaign—what admen sometimes call the heartwood—came to me in an instant. I ditzed around a little, of course—you don't want to make it look *too* easy—then did some comps. Ellen helped. This was just after we found out she couldn't conceive. It was something to do with a drug she'd been given when she had rheumatic fever as a kid. She was pretty depressed. Helping with the Fasprin comps took her mind off it, and she really threw herself into the thing.

Al Andrews was still running things back then, and he was the one I took the comps to. I remember sitting in front of his desk in the sweat-seat with my heart in my mouth as he shuffled slowly through the comps we'd worked up. When he finally put them down and raised his shaggy old head to look at me, the pause seemed to go on for at least an hour. Then he said, "These are good, Bradley. More than good, terrific. We'll meet with the client tomorrow afternoon. You do the prez."

I did the prez, and when the Dugan Drug VP saw the picture of the young working woman with the bottle of Fasprin poking out of her rolled-up sleeve, he flipped for it. The campaign brought Fasprin right up there with the big boys—Bayer, Anacin, Bufferin—and by the end of the year we were handling the whole Dugan account. Billing? Seven figures. Not a low seven, either.

I used the bonus to take Ellen to Nassau for ten days. We left from Kennedy, on a morning that was pelting down rain, and I still remember how she laughed and said, "Kiss me, beautiful," when the plane broke through the clouds and the cabin filled with sunlight. I did kiss her, and the couple on the other side of the aisle—we were flying in business class—applauded.

That was the best. The worst came half an hour later, when I turned to her and for a moment thought she was dead. It was the way she was sleeping, with

her head cocked over on her shoulder and her mouth open and her hair kind of sticking to the window. She was young, we both were, but the idea of sudden death had a hideous possibility in Ellen's case.

"They used to call your condition 'barren,' Mrs. Franklin," the doctor said when he gave us the bad news, "but in your case, the condition could more accurately be called a blessing. Pregnancy puts a strain on the heart, and thanks to a disease that was badly treated when you were a child, yours isn't strong. If you did happen to conceive, you'd be in bed for the last four months of the pregnancy, and even then the outcome would be dicey."

She wasn't pregnant when we left on that trip, but she'd been excited about it for the last two weeks. The climb up to cruising altitude had been plenty rough . . . and she didn't look like she was breathing.

Then she opened her eyes. I settled back into my aisle seat, letting out a long and shaky breath.

She looked at me, puzzled. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. The way you were sleeping, that's all."

She wiped at her chin. "Oh God, did I drool?"

"No." I laughed. "But for a minute there you looked . . . well, dead."

She laughed, too. "And if I was, you'd ship the body back to New York, I suppose, and take up with some Bahama mama."

"No," I said. "I'd take you, anyway."

"What?"

"Because I wouldn't accept it. No way would I."

"You'd have to after a few days. I'd get all smelly."

She was smiling. She thought it was still a game, because she hadn't really understood what the doctor was telling her that day. She hadn't—as the saying goes—taken it to heart. And she didn't know how she'd looked, with the sun shining on her winter-pale cheeks and smudged eyelids and slack mouth. But I'd seen, and I'd taken it to heart. She *was* my heart, and I guard what's in my heart. Nobody takes it away from me.

"You wouldn't," I said. "I'd keep you alive."

"Really? How? Necromancy?"

"By refusing to give up. And by using an adman's most valuable asset."

"Which is what, Mr. Fasprin?"

“Imagination. Now can we talk about something more pleasant?”

\* \* \*

The call I’ve been expecting comes around three-thirty. It’s not Carlo. It’s Berk Ostrow, the building super. He wants to know what time I’m going to be home, because the rat everybody’s been smelling isn’t in 5-C, it’s in our place next door. Ostrow says the exterminators have to leave by four to get to another job, but that isn’t the important thing. What’s important is what’s wrong in there, and by the way, Carlo says no one’s seen your wife in over a week. Just you and the dog.

I explain about my deficient sense of smell, and Ellen’s bronchitis. In her current condition, I say, she wouldn’t know the drapes were on fire until the smoke detector went off. I’m sure Lady smells it, I tell him, but to a dog, the stench of a decaying rat probably smells like Chanel No. 5.

“I get all that, Mr. Franklin, but I still need to get in there to see what’s what. And the exterminators will have to be called back. I think you’re probably going to be on the hook for their bill, which is apt to be quite high. I could let myself in with the passkey, but I’d really be more comfortable if you were—”

“Yes, I’d be more comfortable, too. Not to mention my wife.”

“I tried calling her, but she didn’t answer the phone.” I can hear the suspicion creeping back into his voice. I’ve explained everything, advertising men are good at that, but the convincing effect only lasts for sixty seconds or so.

“She’s probably got it on mute. Plus, the medication the doctor gave her makes her sleep quite heavily.”

“What time will you be home, Mr. Franklin? I can stay until seven; after that there’s only Alfredo.” The disparaging note in his voice suggests I’d be better off dealing with a no-English wetback.

Never, I think. I’ll never be home. In fact, I was never there in the first place. Ellen and I enjoyed the Bahamas so much we moved to Cable Beach, and I took a job with a little firm in Nassau. I shouted Cruise Ship Specials,

Stereo Blowout Sales, and supermarket openings. All this New York stuff has just been a lucid dream, one I can back out of at any time.

“Mr. Franklin? Are you there?”

“Sure. Just thinking.” What I’m thinking is that if I leave right now, and take a taxi, I can be there in twenty minutes. “I’ve got one meeting I absolutely can’t miss, but why don’t you meet me in the apartment around six?”

“How about in the lobby, Mr. Franklin? We can go up together.”

I think of asking him how he believes I’d get rid of my murdered wife’s body at rush hour—because that *is* what he’s thinking. Maybe it’s not at the very front of his mind, but it’s not all the way in back, either. Does he think I’d use the service elevator? Or maybe dump her down the incinerator chute?

“The lobby is absolutely okey-fine,” I say. “Six. Quarter of, if I can possibly make it.”

I hang up and head for the elevators. I have to pass the caff to get there. Billy Ederle’s leaning in the doorway, drinking a Nozzy. It’s a remarkably lousy soda, but it’s all we vend. The company’s a client.

“Where are you off to?”

“Home. Ellen called. She’s not feeling well.”

“Don’t you want your briefcase?”

“No.” I don’t expect to be needing my briefcase for a while. In fact, I may never need it again.

“I’m working on the new Po-10s direction. I think it’s going to be a winner.”

“I’m sure,” I say, and I am. Billy Ederle will soon be movin’ on up, and good for him. “I’ve got to get a wiggle on.”

“Sure, I understand.” He’s twenty-four and understands nothing. “Give her my best.”

\* \* \*

We take on half a dozen interns a year at Andrews-Slattery; it’s how Billy Ederle got started. Most are terrific, and at first Fred Willits seemed terrific, too. I took him under my wing, and so it became my responsibility to fire him—I guess you’d say that, although interns are never actually “hired” in the first

place—when it turned out he was a klepto who had decided our supply room was his private game preserve. God knows how much stuff he lifted before Maria Ellington caught him loading reams of paper into his suitcase-sized briefcase one afternoon. Turned out he was a bit of a psycho, too. He went nuclear when I told him he was through. Pete Wendell called security while the kid was yelling at me in the lobby and had him removed forcibly.

Apparently old Freddy had a lot more to say, because he started hanging around my building and haranguing me when I came home. He kept his distance, though, and the cops claimed he was just exercising his right to free speech. But it wasn't his mouth I was afraid of. I kept thinking he might have lifted a box cutter or an X-ACTO knife as well as printer cartridges and about fifty reams of copier paper. That was when I got Alfredo to give me a key to the service entrance, and I started going in that way. All that was in the fall of the year, September or October. Young Mr. Willits gave up and took his issues elsewhere when the weather turned cold, but Alfredo never asked for the return of the key, and I never gave it back. I guess we both forgot.

That's why, instead of giving the taxi driver my address, I get him to let me out on the next block. I pay him, adding a generous tip—hey, it's only money—and then walk down the service alley. I have a bad moment when the key doesn't work, but when I jiggle it a little, it turns. The service elevator has brown quilted movers' pads hanging from the walls. Previews of the padded cell they'll put me in, I think, but of course that's just melodrama. I'll probably have to take a leave of absence from the shop, and what I've done is a lease breaker for sure, but—

What *have* I done, exactly?

For that matter, what have I been doing for the last week?

“Keeping her alive,” I say as the elevator stops at the fifth floor. “Because I couldn't bear for her to be dead.”

She *isn't* dead, I tell myself, just under the weather. It sucks as a cutline, but for the last week it has served me very well, and in the advertising biz the short term is what counts.

I let myself in. The air is still and warm, but I don't smell anything. So I tell myself, and in the advertising biz imagination is *also* what counts.

“Honey, I'm home,” I call. “Are you awake? Feeling any better?”

I guess I forgot to close the bedroom door before I left this morning, because Lady slinks out. She's licking her chops. She gives me a guilty glance, then waddles into the living room with her tail tucked way down low. She doesn't look back.

"Honey? El?"

I go into the bedroom. There's still nothing to be seen of her but the milkweed fluff of her hair and the shape of her body under the quilt. The quilt is slightly rumpled, so I know she's been up—if only to have some coffee—and then gone back to bed again. It was last Friday when I came home and she wasn't breathing and since then she's been sleeping a lot.

I go around to her side and see her hand hanging down. There's not much left of it but bones and hanging strips of flesh. I gaze at this and think there's two ways of seeing it. Look at it one way, and I'll probably have to have my dog—Ellen's dog, really, Lady always loved Ellen best—euthanized. Look at it another way and you could say Lady got worried and was trying to wake her up. Come on, Ellie, I want to go to the park. Come on, Ellie, let's play with my toys.

I tuck the reduced hand under the sheets. That way it won't get cold. Then I wave away some flies. I can't remember ever seeing flies in our apartment before. They probably smelled that dead rat Carlo was talking about.

"You know Billy Ederle?" I say. "I gave him a slant on that damn Po-10s account, and I think he's going to run with it."

Nothing from Ellen.

"You can't be dead," I say. "That's unacceptable."

Nothing from Ellen.

"Do you want coffee?" I glance at my watch. "Something to eat? We've got chicken soup. Just the kind that comes in the pouches, but it's not bad when it's hot. What do you say, El?"

She says nothing.

"All right," I say. "That's all right. Remember when we went to the Bahamas, hon? When we went snorkeling and you had to quit because you were crying? And when I asked why, you said, 'Because it's all so beautiful.'"

Now *I'm* the one who's crying.

“Are you sure you don’t want to get up and walk around a little? I’ll open the windows and let in some fresh air.”

Nothing from Ellen.

I sigh. I stroke that fluff of hair. “All right,” I say, “why don’t you just sleep for a little while longer? I’ll sit here beside you.”



**STEPHEN KING** is the author of more than fifty worldwide bestsellers. He was the recipient of the 2003 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters and the 2007 Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.



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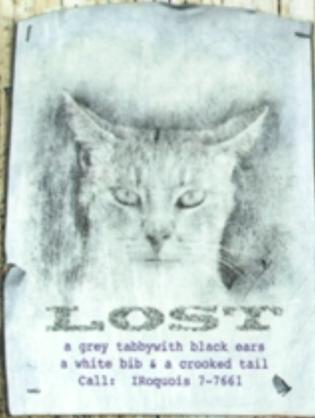
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# STEPHEN KING

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Hearts in  
NEW FICTION  
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STEPHEN  
KING

HEARTS IN  
ATLANTIS



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Author's Note  
About Stephen King

*This is for Joseph and Leanora and Ethan:*

*I told you all that to tell you this.*

Number 6: What do you want?

Number 2: Information.

Number 6: Whose side are you on?

Number 2: That would be telling. We want information.

Number 6: You won't get it!

Number 2: By hook or by crook . . . we will.

*The Prisoner*

Simon stayed where he was, a small brown image, concealed by the leaves. Even if he shut his eyes the sow's head still remained like an after-image. The half-shut eyes were dim with infinite cynicism of adult life. They assured Simon that everything was a bad business.

WILLIAM GOLDING,  
*Lord of the Flies*

“We blew it.”  
*Easy Rider*

**1960: They had a stick sharpened at both ends.**

1960

LOW MEN IN YELLOW COATS

## I. A BOY AND HIS MOTHER. BOBBY'S BIRTHDAY. THE NEW ROOMER. OF TIME AND STRANGERS.

Bobby Garfield's father had been one of those fellows who start losing their hair in their twenties and are completely bald by the age of forty-five or so. Randall Garfield was spared this extremity by dying of a heart attack at thirty-six. He was a real-estate agent, and breathed his last on the kitchen floor of someone else's house. The potential buyer was in the living room, trying to call an ambulance on a disconnected phone, when Bobby's dad passed away. At this time Bobby was three. He had vague memories of a man tickling him and then kissing his cheeks and his forehead. He was pretty sure that man had been his dad. SADLY MISSED, it said on Randall Garfield's gravestone, but his mom never seemed all that sad, and as for Bobby himself . . . well, how could you miss a guy you could hardly remember?

Eight years after his father's death, Bobby fell violently in love with the twenty-six-inch Schwinn in the window of the Harwich Western Auto. He hinted to his mother about the Schwinn in every way he knew, and finally pointed it out to her one night when they were walking home from the movies (the show had been *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, which Bobby didn't understand but liked anyway, especially the part where Dorothy McGuire flopped back in a chair and showed off her long legs). As they passed the hardware store, Bobby mentioned casually that the bike in the window would sure make a great eleventh-birthday present for some lucky kid.

"Don't even think about it," she said. "I can't afford a bike for your birthday. Your father didn't exactly leave us well off, you know."

Although Randall had been dead ever since Truman was President and now Eisenhower was almost done with his eight-year cruise, *Your father didn't exactly leave us well off* was still his mother's most common response to anything Bobby suggested which might entail an expenditure of more than a dollar. Usually the comment was accompanied by a reproachful look, as if the man had run off rather than died.

No bike for his birthday. Bobby pondered this glumly on their walk home, his pleasure at the strange, muddled movie they had seen mostly gone. He

didn't argue with his mother, or try to coax her—that would bring on a counterattack, and when Liz Garfield counterattacked she took no prisoners—but he brooded on the lost bike . . . and the lost father. Sometimes he almost hated his father. Sometimes all that kept him from doing so was the sense, unanchored but very strong, that his mother wanted him to. As they reached Commonwealth Park and walked along the side of it—two blocks up they would turn left onto Broad Street, where they lived—he went against his usual misgivings and asked a question about Randall Garfield.

“Didn't he leave anything, Mom? Anything at all?” A week or two before, he'd read a Nancy Drew mystery where some poor kid's inheritance had been hidden behind an old clock in an abandoned mansion. Bobby didn't really think his father had left gold coins or rare stamps stashed someplace, but if there was *something*, maybe they could sell it in Bridgeport. Possibly at one of the hockshops. Bobby didn't know exactly how hocking things worked, but he knew what the shops looked like—they had three gold balls hanging out front. And he was sure the hockshop guys would be happy to help them. Of course it was just a kid's dream, but Carol Gerber up the street had a whole set of dolls her father, who was in the Navy, had sent from overseas. If fathers *gave* things—which they did—it stood to reason that fathers sometimes *left* things.

When Bobby asked the question, they were passing one of the streetlamps which ran along this side of Commonwealth Park, and Bobby saw his mother's mouth change as it always did when he ventured a question about his late father. The change made him think of a purse she had: when you pulled on the drawstrings, the hole at the top got smaller.

“I'll tell you what he left,” she said as they started up Broad Street Hill. Bobby already wished he hadn't asked, but of course it was too late now. Once you got her started, you couldn't get her stopped, that was the thing. “He left a life insurance policy which lapsed the year before he died. Little did I know that until he was gone and everyone—including the undertaker—wanted their little piece of what I didn't have. He also left a large stack of unpaid bills, which I have now pretty much taken care of—people have been very understanding of my situation, Mr. Biderman in particular, and I'll never say they haven't been.”

All this was old stuff, as boring as it was bitter, but then she told Bobby something new. “Your father,” she said as they approached the apartment house which stood halfway up Broad Street Hill, “never met an inside straight he didn’t like.”

“What’s an inside straight, Mom?”

“Never mind. But I’ll tell you one thing, Bobby-O: you don’t ever want to let me catch you playing cards for money. I’ve had enough of that to last me a lifetime.”

Bobby wanted to enquire further, but knew better; more questions were apt to set off a tirade. It occurred to him that perhaps the movie, which had been about unhappy husbands and wives, had upset her in some way he could not, as a mere kid, understand. He would ask his friend John Sullivan about inside straights at school on Monday. Bobby thought it was poker, but wasn’t completely sure.

“There are places in Bridgeport that take men’s money,” she said as they neared the apartment house where they lived. “Foolish men go to them. Foolish men make messes, and it’s usually the women of the world that have to clean them up later on. Well . . .”

Bobby knew what was coming next; it was his mother’s all-time favorite.

“Life isn’t fair,” said Liz Garfield as she took out her housekey and prepared to unlock the door of 149 Broad Street in the town of Harwich, Connecticut. It was April of 1960, the night breathed spring perfume, and standing beside her was a skinny boy with his dead father’s risky red hair. She hardly ever touched his hair; on the infrequent occasions when she caressed him, it was usually his arm or his cheek which she touched.

“Life isn’t fair,” she repeated. She opened the door and they went in.

• • •

It was true that his mother had not been treated like a princess, and it was certainly too bad that her husband had expired on a linoleum floor in an empty house at the age of thirty-six, but Bobby sometimes thought that things could have been worse. There might have been two kids instead of just one, for instance. Or three. Hell, even four.

Or suppose she had to work some really hard job to support the two of them? Sully's mom worked at the Tip-Top Bakery downtown, and during the weeks when she had to light the ovens, Sully-John and his two older brothers hardly even saw her. Also Bobby had observed the women who came filing out of the Peerless Shoe Company when the three o'clock whistle blew (he himself got out of school at two-thirty), women who all seemed way too skinny or way too fat, women with pale faces and fingers stained a dreadful old-blood color, women with downcast eyes who carried their work shoes and pants in Total Grocery shopping bags. Last fall he'd seen men and women picking apples outside of town when he went to a church fair with Mrs. Gerber and Carol and little Ian (who Carol always called Ian-the-Snot). When he asked about them Mrs. Gerber said they were migrants, just like some kinds of birds—always on the move, picking whatever crops had just come ripe. Bobby's mother could have been one of those, but she wasn't.

What she *was* was Mr. Donald Biderman's secretary at Home Town Real Estate, the company Bobby's dad had been working for when he had his heart attack. Bobby guessed she might first have gotten the job because Donald Biderman liked Randall and felt sorry for her—widowed with a son barely out of diapers—but she was good at it and worked hard. Quite often she worked late. Bobby had been with his mother and Mr. Biderman together on a couple of occasions—the company picnic was the one he remembered most clearly, but there had also been the time Mr. Biderman had driven them to the dentist's in Bridgeport when Bobby had gotten a tooth knocked out during a recess game—and the two grownups had a way of looking at each other. Sometimes Mr. Biderman called her on the phone at night, and during those conversations she called him Don. But “Don” was old and Bobby didn't think about him much.

Bobby wasn't exactly sure what his mom did during her days (and her evenings) at the office, but he bet it beat making shoes or picking apples or lighting the Tip-Top Bakery ovens at four-thirty in the morning. Bobby bet it beat those jobs all to heck and gone. Also, when it came to his mom, if you asked about certain stuff you were asking for trouble. If you asked, for instance, how come she could afford three new dresses from Sears, one of them silk, but not three monthly payments of \$11.50 on the Schwinn in the

Western Auto window (it was red and silver, and just looking at it made Bobby's gut cramp with longing). Ask about stuff like that and you were asking for *real* trouble.

Bobby didn't. He simply set out to earn the price of the bike himself. It would take him until the fall, perhaps even until the winter, and that particular model might be gone from the Western Auto's window by then, but he would keep at it. You had to keep your nose to the grindstone and your shoulder to the wheel. Life wasn't easy, and life wasn't fair.

• • •

When Bobby's eleventh birthday rolled around on the last Tuesday of April, his mom gave him a small flat package wrapped in silver paper. Inside was an orange library card. An *adult* library card. Goodbye Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, and Don Winslow of the Navy. Hello to all the rest of it, stories as full of mysterious muddled passion as *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. Not to mention bloody daggers in tower rooms. (There were mysteries and tower rooms in the stories about Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, but precious little blood and never any passion.)

"Just remember that Mrs. Kelton on the desk is a friend of mine," Mom said. She spoke in her accustomed dry tone of warning, but she was pleased by his pleasure—she could see it. "If you try to borrow anything racy like *Peyton Place* or *Kings Row*, I'll find out."

Bobby smiled. He knew she would.

"If it's that other one, Miss Busybody, and she asks what you're doing with an orange card, you tell her to turn it over. I've put written permission over my signature."

"Thanks, Mom. This is swell."

She smiled, bent, and put a quick dry swipe of the lips on his cheek, gone almost before it was there. "I'm glad you're happy. If I get home early enough, we'll go to the Colony for fried clams and ice cream. You'll have to wait for the weekend for your cake; I don't have time to bake until then. Now put on your coat and get moving, sonnyboy. You'll be late for school."

They went down the stairs and out onto the porch together. There was a Town Taxi at the curb. A man in a poplin jacket was leaning in the passenger

window, paying the driver. Behind him was a little cluster of luggage and paper bags, the kind with handles.

“That must be the man who just rented the room on the third floor,” Liz said. Her mouth had done its shrinking trick again. She stood on the top step of the porch, appraising the man’s narrow fanny, which poked toward them as he finished his business with the taxi driver. “I don’t trust people who move their things in paper bags. To me a person’s things in a paper sack just looks *slutty*.”

“He has suitcases, too,” Bobby said, but he didn’t need his mother to point out that the new tenant’s three little cases weren’t such of a much. None matched; all looked as if they had been kicked here from California by someone in a bad mood.

Bobby and his mom walked down the cement path. The Town Taxi pulled away. The man in the poplin jacket turned around. To Bobby, people fell into three broad categories: kids, grownups, and old folks. Old folks were grownups with white hair. The new tenant was of this third sort. His face was thin and tired-looking, not wrinkled (except around his faded blue eyes) but deeply lined. His white hair was baby-fine and receding from a liverspotted brow. He was tall and stooped-over in a way that made Bobby think of Boris Karloff in the Shock Theater movies they showed Friday nights at 11:30 on WPIX. Beneath the poplin jacket were cheap workingman’s clothes that looked too big for him. On his feet were scuffed cordovan shoes.

“Hello, folks,” he said, and smiled with what looked like an effort. “My name’s Theodore Brautigan. I guess I’m going to live here awhile.”

He held out his hand to Bobby’s mother, who touched it just briefly. “I’m Elizabeth Garfield. This is my son, Robert. You’ll have to pardon us, Mr. Brattigan—”

“It’s Brautigan, ma’am, but I’d be happy if you and your boy would just call me Ted.”

“Yes, well, Robert’s late for school and I’m late for work. Nice to meet you, Mr. Brattigan. Hurry on, Bobby. *Tempus fugit*.”

She began walking downhill toward town; Bobby began walking uphill (and at a slower pace) toward Harwich Elementary, on Asher Avenue. Three or four steps into this journey he stopped and looked back. He felt that his mom

had been rude to Mr. Brautigan, that she had acted stuck-up. Being stuck-up was the worst of vices in his little circle of friends. Carol loathed a stuck-up person; so did Sully-John. Mr. Brautigan would probably be halfway up the walk by now, but if he wasn't, Bobby wanted to give him a smile so he'd know at least one member of the Garfield family wasn't stuck-up.

His mother had also stopped and was also looking back. Not because she wanted another look at Mr. Brautigan; that idea never crossed Bobby's mind. No, it was her son she had looked back at. She'd known he was going to turn around before Bobby knew it himself, and at this he felt a sudden darkening in his normally bright nature. She sometimes said it would be a snowy day in Sarasota before Bobby could put one over on her, and he supposed she was right about that. How old did you have to be to put one over on your mother, anyway? Twenty? Thirty? Or did you maybe have to wait until *she* got old and a little chicken-soupy in the head?

Mr. Brautigan hadn't started up the walk. He stood at its sidewalk end with a suitcase in each hand and the third one under his right arm (the three paper bags he had moved onto the grass of 149 Broad), more bent than ever under this weight. He was right between them, like a tollgate or something.

Liz Garfield's eyes flew past him to her son's. *Go*, they said. *Don't say a word. He's new, a man from anywhere or nowhere, and he's arrived here with half his things in shopping bags. Don't say a word, Bobby, just go.*

But he wouldn't. Perhaps because he had gotten a library card instead of a bike for his birthday. "It was nice to meet you, Mr. Brautigan," Bobby said. "Hope you like it here. Bye."

"Have a good day at school, son," Mr. Brautigan said. "Learn a lot. Your mother's right—*tempus fugit*."

Bobby looked at his mother to see if his small rebellion might be forgiven in light of this equally small flattery, but Mom's mouth was ungiving. She turned and started down the hill without another word. Bobby went on his own way, glad he had spoken to the stranger even if his mother later made him regret it.

As he approached Carol Gerber's house, he took out the orange library card and looked at it. It wasn't a twenty-six-inch Schwinn, but it was still pretty

good. Great, actually. A whole world of books to explore, and so what if it had only cost two or three rocks? Didn't they say it was the thought that counted?

Well . . . it was what his *mom* said, anyway.

He turned the card over. Written on the back in her strong hand was this message: "*To whom it may concern: This is my son's library card. He has my permission to take out three books a week from the adult section of the Harwich Public Library.*" It was signed *Elizabeth Penrose Garfield*.

Beneath her name, like a P.S., she had added this: *Robert will be responsible for his own overdue fines.*

"Birthday boy!" Carol Gerber cried, startling him, and rushed out from behind a tree where she had been lying in wait. She threw her arms around his neck and smacked him hard on the cheek. Bobby blushed, looking around to see if anyone was watching—God, it was hard enough to be friends with a girl without surprise kisses—but it was okay. The usual morning flood of students was moving schoolward along Asher Avenue at the top of the hill, but down here they were alone.

Bobby scrubbed at his cheek.

"Come on, you liked it," she said, laughing.

"Did not," said Bobby, although he had.

"What'd you get for your birthday?"

"A library card," Bobby said, and showed her. "An *adult* library card."

"Cool!" Was that sympathy he saw in her eyes? Probably not. And so what if it was? "Here. For you." She gave him a Hallmark envelope with his name printed on the front. She had also stuck on some hearts and teddy bears.

Bobby opened the envelope with mild trepidation, reminding himself that he could tuck the card deep into the back pocket of his chinos if it was gushy.

It wasn't, though. Maybe a little bit on the baby side (a kid in a Stetson on a horse, HAPPY BIRTHDAY BUCKAROO in letters that were supposed to look like wood on the inside), but not gushy. *Love, Carol* was a little gushy, but of course she was a girl, what could you do?

"Thanks."

"It's sort of a baby card, I know, but the others were even worse," Carol said matter-of-factly. A little farther up the hill Sully-John was waiting for them, working his Bo-lo Bouncer for all it was worth, going under his right arm,

going under his left arm, going behind his back. He didn't try going between his legs anymore; he'd tried it once in the schoolyard and rapped himself a good one in the nuts. Sully had screamed. Bobby and a couple of other kids had laughed until they cried. Carol and three of her girlfriends had rushed over to ask what was wrong, and the boys all said nothing—Sully-John said the same, although he'd been pale and almost crying. *Boys are boogers*, Carol had said on that occasion, but Bobby didn't believe she really thought so. She wouldn't have jumped out and given him that kiss if she did, and it had been a good kiss, a smackeroo. Better than the one his mother had given him, actually.

"It's not a baby card," he said.

"No, but it *almost* is," she said. "I thought about getting you a grownup card, but man, they *are* gushy."

"I know," Bobby said.

"Are you going to be a gushy adult, Bobby?"

"I hope not," he said. "Are you?"

"No. I'm going to be like my mom's friend Rionda."

"Rionda's pretty fat," Bobby said doubtfully.

"Yeah, but she's cool. I'm going to go for the cool without the fat."

"There's a new guy moving into our building. The room on the third floor. My mom says it's really hot up there."

"Yeah? What's he like?" She giggled. "Is he ushy-gushy?"

"He's old," Bobby said, then paused to think. "But he had an interesting face. My mom didn't like him on sight because he had some of his stuff in shopping bags."

Sully-John joined them. "Happy birthday, you bastard," he said, and clapped Bobby on the back. *Bastard* was Sully-John's current favorite word; Carol's was *cool*; Bobby was currently between favorite words, although he thought *ripshit* had a certain ring to it.

"If you swear, I won't walk with you," Carol said.

"Okay," Sully-John said companionably. Carol was a fluffy blonde who looked like a Bobbsey Twin after some growing up; John Sullivan was tall, black-haired, and green-eyed. A Joe Hardy kind of boy. Bobby Garfield walked between them, his momentary depression forgotten. It was his birthday and he

was with his friends and life was good. He tucked Carol's birthday card into his back pocket and his new library card down deep in his front pocket, where it could not fall out or be stolen. Carol started to skip. Sully-John told her to stop.

"Why?" Carol asked. "I *like* to skip."

"I like to say *bastard*, but I don't if you ask me," Sully-John replied reasonably.

Carol looked at Bobby.

"Skipping—at least without a rope—is a little on the baby side, Carol," Bobby said apologetically, then shrugged. "But you can if you want. We don't mind, do we, S-J?"

"Nope," Sully-John said, and got going with the Bo-lo Bouncer again. Back to front, up to down, whap-whap-whap.

Carol didn't skip. She walked between them and pretended she was Bobby Garfield's girlfriend, that Bobby had a driver's license and a Buick and they were going to Bridgeport to see the WKBW Rock and Roll Extravaganza. She thought Bobby was extremely cool. The coolest thing about him was that he didn't know it.

• • •

Bobby got home from school at three o'clock. He could have been there sooner, but picking up returnable bottles was part of his Get-a-Bike-by-Thanksgiving campaign, and he detoured through the brushy area just off Asher Avenue looking for them. He found three Rheingolds and a Nehi. Not much, but hey, eight cents was eight cents. "It all mounts up" was another of his mom's sayings.

Bobby washed his hands (a couple of those bottles had been pretty scurgy), got a snack out of the icebox, read a couple of old *Superman* comics, got another snack out of the icebox, then watched *American Bandstand*. He called Carol to tell her Bobby Darin was going to be on—she thought Bobby Darin was deeply cool, especially the way he snapped his fingers when he sang "Queen of the Hop"—but she already knew. She was watching with three or four of her numbskull girlfriends; they all giggled pretty much nonstop in the background. The sound made Bobby think of birds in a petshop. On TV, Dick

Clark was currently showing how much pimple-grease *just one* Stri-Dex Medicated Pad could sop up.

Mom called at four o'clock. Mr. Biderman needed her to work late, she said. She was sorry, but birthday supper at the Colony was off. There was leftover beef stew in the fridge; he could have that and she would be home by eight to tuck him in. And for heaven's sake, Bobby, remember to turn off the gas-ring when you're done with the stove.

Bobby returned to the television feeling disappointed but not really surprised. On *Bandstand*, Dick was now announcing the Rate-a-Record panel. Bobby thought the guy in the middle looked as if he could use a lifetime supply of Stri-Dex pads.

He reached into his front pocket and drew out the new orange library card. His mood began to brighten again. He didn't need to sit here in front of the TV with a stack of old comic-books if he didn't want to. He could go down to the library and break in his new card—his new *adult* card. Miss Busybody would be on the desk, only her real name was Miss Harrington and Bobby thought she was beautiful. She wore perfume. He could always smell it on her skin and in her hair, faint and sweet, like a good memory. And although Sully-John would be at his trombone lesson right now, after the library Bobby could go up his house, maybe play some pass.

*Also, he thought, I can take those bottles to Spicer's—I've got a bike to earn this summer.*

All at once, life seemed very full.

• • •

Sully's mom invited Bobby to stay for supper, but he told her no thanks, I better get home. He would much have preferred Mrs. Sullivan's pot roast and crispy oven potatoes to what was waiting for him back at the apartment, but he knew that one of the first things his mother would do when she got back from the office was check in the fridge and see if the Tupper-ware with the leftover stew inside was gone. If it wasn't, she would ask Bobby what he'd had for supper. She would be calm about this question, even offhand. If he told her he'd eaten at Sully-John's she would nod, ask him what they'd had and if there had been dessert, also if he'd thanked Mrs. Sullivan; she might even sit on the

couch with him and share a bowl of ice cream while they watched *Sugarfoot* on TV. Everything would be fine . . . except it wouldn't be. Eventually there would be a payback. It might not come for a day or two, even a week, but it *would* come. Bobby knew that almost without knowing he knew it. She undoubtedly *did* have to work late, but eating leftover stew by himself on his birthday was also punishment for talking to the new tenant when he wasn't supposed to. If he tried to duck that punishment, it would mount up just like money in a savings account.

When Bobby came back from Sully-John's it was quarter past six and getting dark. He had two new books to read, a Perry Mason called *The Case of the Velvet Claws* and a science-fiction novel by Clifford Simak called *Ring Around the Sun*. Both looked totally ripshit, and Miss Harrington hadn't given him a hard time at all. On the contrary: she told him he was reading above his level and to keep it up.

Walking home from S-J's, Bobby made up a story where he and Miss Harrington were on a cruise-boat that sank. They were the only two survivors, saved from drowning by finding a life preserver marked S.S. *LUSITANIC*. They washed up on a little island with palm trees and jungles and a volcano, and as they lay on the beach Miss Harrington was shivering and saying she was cold, so cold, couldn't he please hold her and warm her up, which he of course could and did, my pleasure, Miss Harrington, and then the natives came out of the jungle and at first they seemed friendly but it turned out they were cannibals who lived on the slopes of the volcano and killed their victims in a clearing ringed with skulls, so things looked bad but just as he and Miss Harrington were pulled toward the cooking pot the volcano started to rumble and—

“Hello, Robert.”

Bobby looked up, even more startled than he'd been when Carol Gerber raced out from behind the tree to put a birthday smackeroo on his cheek. It was the new man in the house. He was sitting on the top porch step and smoking a cigarette. He had exchanged his old scuffed shoes for a pair of old scuffed slippers and had taken off his poplin jacket—the evening was warm. He looked at home, Bobby thought.

“Oh, Mr. Brautigan. Hi.”

“I didn't mean to startle you.”

“You didn’t—”

“I think I did. You were a thousand miles away. And it’s Ted. Please.”

“Okay.” But Bobby didn’t know if he could stick to Ted. Calling a grownup (especially an *old* grownup) by his first name went against not only his mother’s teaching but his own inclination.

“Was school good? You learned new things?”

“Yeah, fine.” Bobby shifted from foot to foot; swapped his new books from hand to hand.

“Would you sit with me a minute?”

“Sure, but I can’t for long. Stuff to do, you know.” Supper to do, mostly—the leftover stew had grown quite attractive in his mind by now.

“Absolutely. Things to do and *tempus fugit*.”

As Bobby sat down next to Mr. Brautigan—Ted—on the wide porch step, smelling the aroma of his Chesterfield, he thought he had never seen a man who looked as tired as this one. It couldn’t be the moving in, could it? How worn out could you get when all you had to move in were three little suitcases and three carryhandle shopping bags? Bobby supposed there might be men coming later on with stuff in a truck, but he didn’t really think so. It was just a room—a big one, but still just a single room with a kitchen on one side and everything else on the other. He and Sully-John had gone up there and looked around after old Miss Sidley had her stroke and went to live with her daughter.

“*Tempus fugit* means time flies,” Bobby said. “Mom says it a lot. She also says time and tide wait for no man and time heals all wounds.”

“Your mother is a woman of many sayings, is she?”

“Yeah,” Bobby said, and suddenly the idea of all those sayings made him tired. “Many sayings.”

“Ben Jonson called time the old bald cheater,” Ted Brautigan said, drawing deeply on his cigarette and then exhaling twin streams through his nose. “And Boris Pasternak said we are time’s captives, the hostages of eternity.”

Bobby looked at him in fascination, his empty belly temporarily forgotten. He loved the idea of time as an old bald cheater—it was absolutely and completely right, although he couldn’t have said why . . . and didn’t that very inability to say why somehow add to the coolness? It was like a thing inside an egg, or a shadow behind pebbled glass.

“Who’s Ben Jonson?”

“An Englishman, dead these many years,” Mr. Brautigan said. “Self-centered and foolish about money, by all accounts; prone to flatulence as well. But—”

“What’s that? Flatulence?”

Ted stuck his tongue between his lips and made a brief but very realistic farting sound. Bobby put his hands to his mouth and giggled into his cupped fingers.

“Kids think farts are funny,” Ted Brautigan said, nodding. “Yeah. To a man my age, though, they’re just part of life’s increasingly strange business. Ben Jonson said a good many wise things between farts, by the way. Not so many as *Dr. Johnson*—Samuel Johnson, that would be—but still a good many.”

“And Boris . . .”

“Pasternak. A Russian,” Mr. Brautigan said dismissively. “Of no account, I think. May I see your books?”

Bobby handed them over. Mr. Brautigan (*Ted*, he reminded himself, *you’re supposed to call him Ted*) passed the Perry Mason back after a cursory glance at the title. The Clifford Simak novel he held longer, at first squinting at the cover through the curls of cigarette smoke that rose past his eyes, then paging through it. He nodded as he did so.

“I have read this one,” he said. “I had a lot of time to read previous to coming here.”

“Yeah?” Bobby kindled. “Is it good?”

“One of his best,” Mr. Brautigan—Ted—replied. He looked sideways at Bobby, one eye open, the other still squinted shut against the smoke. It gave him a look that was at once wise and mysterious, like a not-quite-trustworthy character in a detective movie. “But are you sure you can read this? You can’t be much more than twelve.”

“I’m eleven,” Bobby said. He was delighted that Ted thought he might be as old as twelve. “Eleven today. I can read it. I won’t be able to understand it all, but if it’s a good story, I’ll like it.”

“Your birthday!” Ted said, looking impressed. He took a final drag on his cigarette, then flicked it away. It hit the cement walk and fountained sparks. “Happy birthday dear Robert, happy birthday to you!”

“Thanks. Only I like Bobby a lot better.”

“Bobby, then. Are you going out to celebrate?”

“Nah, my mom’s got to work late.”

“Would you like to come up to my little place? I don’t have much, but I know how to open a can. Also, I might have a pastry—”

“Thanks, but Mom left me some stuff. I should eat that.”

“I understand.” And, wonder of wonders, he looked as if he actually did. Ted returned Bobby’s copy of *Ring Around the Sun*. “In this book,” he said, “Mr. Simak postulates the idea that there are a number of worlds like ours. Not other planets but other Earths, *parallel* Earths, in a kind of ring around the sun. A fascinating idea.”

“Yeah,” Bobby said. He knew about parallel worlds from other books. From the comics, as well.

Ted Brautigan was now looking at him in a thoughtful, speculative way.

“What?” Bobby asked, feeling suddenly self-conscious. *See something green?* his mother might have said.

For a moment he thought Ted wasn’t going to answer—he seemed to have fallen into some deep and dazing train of thought. Then he gave himself a little shake and sat up straighter. “Nothing,” he said. “I have a little idea. Perhaps you’d like to earn some extra money? Not that I have much, but—”

“Yeah! Cripes, yeah!” *There’s this bike*, he almost went on, then stopped himself. *Best keep yourself to yourself* was yet another of his mom’s sayings. “I’d do just about anything you wanted!”

Ted Brautigan looked simultaneously alarmed and amused. It seemed to open a door to a different face, somehow, and Bobby could see that, yeah, the old guy had once been a young guy. One with a little sass to him, maybe. “That’s a bad thing to tell a stranger,” he said, “and although we’ve progressed to Bobby and Ted—a good start—we’re still really strangers to each other.”

“Did either of those Johnson guys say anything about strangers?”

“Not that I recall, but here’s something on the subject from the Bible: ‘For I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner. Spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence . . .’ ” Ted trailed off for a moment. The fun had gone out of his face and he looked old again. Then his voice firmed and he finished. “ ‘ . . . before I go hence, and be no more.’ Book of Psalms. I can’t remember which one.”

“Well,” Bobby said, “I wouldn’t kill or rob anyone, don’t worry, but I’d sure like to earn some money.”

“Let me think,” Ted said. “Let me think a little.”

“Sure. But if you’ve got chores or something, I’m your guy. Tell you that right now.”

“Chores? Maybe. Although that’s not the word I would have chosen.” Ted clasped his bony arms around his even bonier knees and gazed across the lawn at Broad Street. It was growing dark now; Bobby’s favorite part of the evening had arrived. The cars that passed had their parking lights on, and from somewhere on Asher Avenue Mrs. Sigsby was calling for her twins to come in and get their supper. At this time of day—and at dawn, as he stood in the bathroom, urinating into the bowl with sunshine falling through the little window and into his half-open eyes—Bobby felt like a dream in someone else’s head.

“Where did you live before you came here, Mr. . . . Ted?”

“A place that wasn’t as nice,” he said. “Nowhere near as nice. How long have *you* lived here, Bobby?”

“Long as I can remember. Since my dad died, when I was three.”

“And you know everyone on the street? On this block of the street, anyway?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“You’d know strangers. Sojourners. Faces of those unknown.”

Bobby smiled and nodded. “Uh-huh, I think so.”

He waited to see where this would lead next—it was interesting—but apparently this was as far as it went. Ted stood up, slowly and carefully. Bobby could hear little bones creak in his back when he put his hands around there and stretched, grimacing.

“Come on,” he said. “It’s getting chilly. I’ll go in with you. Your key or mine?”

Bobby smiled. “You better start breaking in your own, don’t you think?”

Ted—it was getting easier to think of him as Ted—pulled a keyring from his pocket. The only keys on it were the one which opened the big front door and the one to his room. Both were shiny and new, the color of bandit gold. Bobby’s own two keys were scratched and dull. How old was Ted? he

wondered again. Sixty, at least. A sixty-year-old man with only two keys in his pocket. That was weird.

Ted opened the front door and they went into the big dark foyer with its umbrella stand and its old painting of Lewis and Clark looking out across the American West. Bobby went to the door of the Garfield apartment and Ted went to the stairs. He paused there for a moment with his hand on the bannister. “The Simak book is a great story,” he said. “Not such great writing, though. Not bad, I don’t mean to say that, but take it from me, there is better.”

Bobby waited.

“There are also books full of great writing that don’t have very good stories. Read sometimes for the story, Bobby. Don’t be like the book-snobs who won’t do that. Read sometimes for the words—the language. Don’t be like the play-it-safers that won’t do *that*. But when you find a book that has both a good story and good words, treasure that book.”

“Are there many of those, do you think?” Bobby asked.

“More than the book-snobs and play-it-safers think. Many more. Perhaps I’ll give you one. A belated birthday present.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“No, but perhaps I will. And do have a happy birthday.”

“Thanks. It’s been a great one.” Then Bobby went into the apartment, heated up the stew (remembering to turn off the gas-ring after the stew started to bubble, also remembering to put the pan in the sink to soak), and ate supper by himself, reading *Ring Around the Sun* with the TV on for company. He hardly heard Chet Huntley and David Brinkley gabbling the evening news. Ted was right about the book; it was a corker. The words seemed okay to him, too, although he supposed he didn’t have a lot of experience just yet.

*I’d like to write a story like this*, he thought as he finally closed the book and flopped down on the couch to watch *Sugarfoot*. *I wonder if I ever could.*

Maybe. Maybe so. *Someone* had to write stories, after all, just like someone had to fix the pipes when they froze or change the streetlights in Commonwealth Park when they burned out.

An hour or so later, after Bobby had picked up *Ring Around the Sun* and begun reading again, his mother came in. Her lipstick was a bit smeared at one corner of her mouth and her slip was hanging a little. Bobby thought of

pointing this out to her, then remembered how much she disliked it when someone told her it was “snowing down south.” Besides, what did it matter? Her working day was over and, as she sometimes said, there was no one here but us chickens.

She checked the fridge to make sure the leftover stew was gone, checked the stove to make sure the gas-ring was off, checked the sink to make sure the pot and the Tupperware storage container were both soaking in soapy water. Then she kissed him on the temple, just a brush in passing, and went into her bedroom to change out of her office dress and hose. She seemed distant, preoccupied. She didn't ask if he'd had a happy birthday.

Later on he showed her Carol's card. His mom glanced at it, not really seeing it, pronounced it “cute,” and handed it back. Then she told him to wash up, brush up, and go to bed. Bobby did so, not mentioning his interesting talk with Ted. In her current mood, that was apt to make her angry. The best thing was to let her be distant, let her keep to herself as long as she needed to, give her time to drift back to him. Yet he felt that sad mood settling over him again as he finished brushing his teeth and climbed into bed. Sometimes he felt almost hungry for her, and she didn't know.

He reached out of bed and closed the door, blocking off the sound of some old movie. He turned off the light. And then, just as he was starting to drift off, she came in, sat on the side of his bed, and said she was sorry she'd been so stand-offy tonight, but there had been a lot going on at the office and she was tired. Sometimes it was a madhouse, she said. She stroked a finger across his forehead and then kissed him there, making him shiver. He sat up and hugged her. She stiffened momentarily at his touch, then gave in to it. She even hugged him back briefly. He thought maybe it would now be all right to tell her about Ted. A little, anyway.

“I talked with Mr. Brautigan when I came home from the library,” he said.

“Who?”

“The new man on the third floor. He asked me to call him Ted.”

“You won't—I should say nitzy! You don't know him from Adam.”

“He said giving a kid an adult library card was a great present.” Ted had said no such thing, but Bobby had lived with his mother long enough to know what worked and what didn't.

She relaxed a little. “Did he say where he came from?”

“A place not as nice as here, I think he said.”

“Well, that doesn’t tell us much, does it?” Bobby was still hugging her. He could have hugged her for another hour easily, smelling her White Rain shampoo and Aqua Net hold-spray and the pleasant odor of tobacco on her breath, but she disengaged from him and laid him back down. “I guess if he’s going to be your friend—your *adult* friend—I’ll have to get to know him a little.”

“Well—”

“Maybe I’ll like him better when he doesn’t have shopping bags scattered all over the lawn.” For Liz Garfield this was downright placatory, and Bobby was satisfied. The day had come to a very acceptable ending after all. “Goodnight, birthday boy.”

“Goodnight, Mom.”

She went out and closed the door. Later that night—much later—he thought he heard her crying in her room, but perhaps that was only a dream.

## II. DOUBTS ABOUT TED. BOOKS ARE LIKE PUMPS. DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT. SULLY WINS A PRIZE. BOBBY GETS A JOB. SIGNS OF THE LOW MEN.

During the next few weeks, as the weather warmed toward summer, Ted was usually on the porch smoking when Liz came home from work. Sometimes he was alone and sometimes Bobby was sitting with him, talking about books. Sometimes Carol and Sully-John were there, too, the three kids playing pass on the lawn while Ted smoked and watched them throw. Sometimes other kids came by—Denny Rivers with a taped-up balsa glider to throw, soft-headed Francis Utterson, always pushing along on his scooter with one overdeveloped leg, Angela Avery and Yvonne Loving to ask Carol if she wanted to go over Yvonne's and play dolls or a game called Hospital Nurse—but mostly it was just S-J and Carol, Bobby's special friends. All the kids called Mr. Brautigan Ted, but when Bobby explained why it would be better if they called him Mr. Brautigan when his mom was around, Ted agreed at once.

As for his mom, she couldn't seem to get *Brautigan* to come out of her mouth. What emerged was always *Brattigan*. That might not have been on purpose, however; Bobby was starting to feel a cautious sense of relief about his mother's view of Ted. He had been afraid that she might feel about Ted as she had about Mrs. Evers, his second-grade teacher. Mom had disliked Mrs. Evers on sight, disliked her *deeply*, for no reason at all Bobby could see or understand, and hadn't had a good word to say about her all year long—Mrs. Evers dressed like a frump, Mrs. Evers dyed her hair, Mrs. Evers wore too much makeup, Bobby had just better tell Mom if Mrs. Evers laid so much as *one finger* on him, because she looked like the kind of woman who would like to pinch and poke. All of this following a single parent-teacher conference in which Mrs. Evers had told Liz that Bobby was doing well in all his subjects. There had been four other parent-teacher conferences that year, and Bobby's mother had found reasons to duck every single one.

Liz's opinions of people hardened swiftly; when she wrote BAD under her mental picture of you, she almost always wrote in ink. If Mrs. Evers had saved six kids from a burning schoolbus, Liz Garfield might well have sniffed and said they probably owed the pop-eyed old cow two weeks' worth of milk-money.

Ted made every effort to be nice without actually sucking up to her (people *did* suck up to his mother, Bobby knew; hell, sometimes he did it himself), and it worked . . . but only to a degree. On one occasion Ted and Bobby's mom had talked for almost ten minutes about how awful it was that the Dodgers had moved to the other side of the country without so much as a faretheewell, but not even both of them being Ebbets Field Dodger fans could strike a real spark between them. They were never going to be pals. Mom didn't dislike Ted Brautigan the way she had disliked Mrs. Evers, but there was still something wrong. Bobby supposed he knew what it was; he had seen it in her eyes on the morning the new tenant had moved in. Liz didn't trust him.

Nor, it turned out, did Carol Gerber. "Sometimes I wonder if he's on the run from something," she said one evening as she and Bobby and S-J walked up the hill toward Asher Avenue.

They had been playing pass for an hour or so, talking off and on with Ted as they did, and were now heading to Moon's Roadside Happiness for ice cream cones. S-J had thirty cents and was treating. He also had his Bo-lo Bouncer, which he now took out of his back pocket. Pretty soon he had it going up and down and all around, whap-whap-whap.

"On the run? Are you kidding?" Bobby was startled by the idea. Yet Carol was sharp about people; even his mother had noticed it. *That girl's no beauty, but she doesn't miss much*, she'd said one night.

" 'Stick em up, McGarrigle!' " Sully-John cried. He tucked his Bo-lo Bouncer under his arm, dropped into a crouch, and fired an invisible tommygun, yanking down the right side of his mouth so he could make the proper sound to go with it, a kind of *eh-eh-eh* from deep in his throat. " 'You'll never take me alive, copper! Blast em, Muggsy! Nobody runs out on Rico! *Ah, jeez, they got me!*' " S-J clutched his chest, spun around, and fell dead on Mrs. Conlan's lawn.

That lady, a grumpy old rhymes-with-witch of seventy-five or so, cried: “Boy! *Youuuu*, boy! Get off there! You’ll mash my flowers!”

There wasn’t a flowerbed within ten feet of where Sully-John had fallen, but he leaped up at once. “Sorry, Mrs. Conlan.”

She flapped a hand at him, dismissing his apology without a word, and watched closely as the children went on their way.

“You don’t really mean it, do you?” Bobby asked Carol. “About Ted?”

“No,” she said, “I guess not. But . . . have you ever watched him watch the street?”

“Yeah. It’s like he’s looking for someone, isn’t it?”

“Or looking *out* for them,” Carol replied.

Sully-John resumed Bo-lo Bouncing. Pretty soon the red rubber ball was blurring back and forth again. Sully paused only when they passed the Asher Empire, where two Brigitte Bardot movies were playing, *Adults Only, Must Have Driver’s License or Birth Certificate, No Exceptions*. One of the pictures was new; the other was that old standby *And God Created Woman*, which kept coming back to the Empire like a bad cough. On the posters, Brigitte was dressed in nothing but a towel and a smile.

“My mom says she’s trashy,” Carol said.

“If she’s trash, I’d love to be the trashman,” S-J said, and wiggled his eyebrows like Groucho.

“Do *you* think she’s trashy?” Bobby asked Carol.

“I’m not sure what that means, even.”

As they passed out from under the marquee (from within her glass ticket-booth beside the doors, Mrs. Godlow—known to the neighborhood kids as Mrs. Godzilla—watched them suspiciously), Carol looked back over her shoulder at Brigitte Bardot in her towel. Her expression was hard to read. Curiosity? Bobby couldn’t tell. “But she’s pretty, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“And you’d have to be brave to let people look at you with nothing on but a towel. That’s what I think, anyway.”

Sully-John had no interest in *la femme Brigitte* now that she was behind them. “Where’d Ted come from, Bobby?”

“I don’t know. He never talks about that.”

Sully-John nodded as if he expected just that answer, and threw his Bo-lo Bouncer back into gear. Up and down, all around, whap-whap-whap.

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In May Bobby's thoughts began turning to summer vacation. There was really nothing in the world better than what Sully called "the Big Vac." He would spend long hours goofing with his friends, both on Broad Street and down at Sterling House on the other side of the park—they had lots of good things to do in the summer at Sterling House, including baseball and weekly trips to Patagonia Beach in West Haven—and he would also have plenty of time for himself. Time to read, of course, but what he really wanted to do with some of that time was find a part-time job. He had a little over seven rocks in a jar marked BIKE FUND, and seven rocks was a start . . . but not what you'd call a *great* start. At this rate Nixon would have been President for two years before he was riding to school.

On one of these vacation's-almost-here days, Ted gave him a paperback book. "Remember I told you that some books have both a good story and good writing?" he asked. "This is one of that breed. A belated birthday present from a new friend. At least, I hope I am your friend."

"You are. Thanks a lot!" In spite of the enthusiasm in his voice, Bobby took the book a little doubtfully. He was accustomed to pocket books with bright, raucous covers and sexy come-on lines ("She hit the gutter . . . *AND BOUNCED LOWER!*"); this one had neither. The cover was mostly white. In one corner of it was sketched—*barely* sketched—a group of boys standing in a circle. The name of the book was *Lord of the Flies*. There was no come-on line above the title, not even a discreet one like "A story you will never forget." All in all, it had a forbidding, unwelcoming look, suggesting that the story lying beneath the cover would be hard. Bobby had nothing in particular against hard books, as long as they were a part of one's schoolwork. His view about reading for pleasure, however, was that such stories should be easy—that the writer should do everything except move your eyes back and forth for you. If not, how much pleasure could there be in it?

He started to turn the book over. Ted gently put his hand on Bobby's, stopping him. "Don't," he said. "As a personal favor to me, don't."

Bobby looked at him, not understanding.

“Come to the book as you would come to an unexplored land. Come without a map. Explore it and draw your own map.”

“But what if I don’t like it?”

Ted shrugged. “Then don’t finish it. A book is like a pump. It gives nothing unless first you give to it. You prime a pump with your own water, you work the handle with your own strength. You do this because you expect to get back more than you give . . . eventually. Do you go along with that?”

Bobby nodded.

“How long would you prime a water-pump and flail the handle if nothing came out?”

“Not too long, I guess.”

“This book is two hundred pages, give or take. You read the first ten percent—twenty pages, that is, I know already your math isn’t as good as your reading—and if you don’t like it by then, if it isn’t giving more than it’s taking by then, put it aside.”

“I wish they’d let you do that in school,” Bobby said. He was thinking of a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson which they were supposed to memorize. “By the rude bridge that arched the flood,” it started. S-J called the poet Ralph Waldo Emerslop.

“School is different.” They were sitting at Ted’s kitchen table, looking out over the back yard, where everything was in bloom. On Colony Street, which was the next street over, Mrs. O’Hara’s dog Bowser barked its endless *roop-roop-roop* into the mild spring air. Ted was smoking a Chesterfield. “And speaking of school, don’t take this book there with you. There are things in it your teacher might not want you to read. There could be a brouhaha.”

“A *what?*”

“An uproar. And if you get in trouble at school, you get in trouble at home—this I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you. And your mother . . .” The hand not holding the cigarette made a little seesawing gesture which Bobby understood at once. *Your mother doesn’t trust me.*

Bobby thought of Carol saying that maybe Ted was on the run from something, and remembered his mother saying Carol didn’t miss much.

“What’s in it that could get me in trouble?” He looked at *Lord of the Flies* with new fascination.

“Nothing to froth at the mouth about,” Ted said dryly. He crushed his cigarette out in a tin ashtray, went to his little refrigerator, and took out two bottles of pop. There was no beer or wine in there, just pop and a glass bottle of cream. “Some talk of putting a spear up a wild pig’s ass, I think that’s the worst. Still, there is a certain kind of grownup who can only see the trees and never the forest. Read the first twenty pages, Bobby. You’ll never look back. This I promise you.”

Ted set the pop down on the table and lifted the caps with his churchkey. Then he lifted his bottle and clinked it against Bobby’s. “To your new friends on the island.”

“What island?”

Ted Brautigan smiled and shot the last cigarette out of a crumpled pack. “You’ll find out,” he said.

• • •

Bobby did find out, and it didn’t take him twenty pages to also find out that *Lord of the Flies* was a hell of a book, maybe the best he’d ever read. Ten pages into it he was captivated; twenty pages and he was lost. He lived on the island with Ralph and Jack and Piggy and the littluns; he trembled at the Beast that turned out to be a rotting airplane pilot caught in his parachute; he watched first in dismay and then in horror as a bunch of harmless schoolboys descended into savagery, finally setting out to hunt down the only one of their number who had managed to remain halfway human.

He finished the book one Saturday the week before school ended for the year. When noon came and Bobby was still in his room—no friends over to play, no Saturday-morning cartoons, not even *Merrie Melodies* from ten to eleven—his mom looked in on him and told him to get off his bed, get his nose out of that book, and go on down to the park or something.

“Where’s Sully?” she asked.

“Dalhouse Square. There’s a school band concert.” Bobby looked at his mother in the doorway and the ordinary stuff around her with dazed,

perplexed eyes. The world of the story had become so vivid to him that this real one now seemed false and drab.

“What about your girlfriend? Take her down to the park with you.”

“Carol’s not my girlfriend, Mom.”

“Well, whatever she is. Goodness sakes, Bobby, I wasn’t suggesting the two of you were going to run off and elope.”

“She and some other girls slept over Angie’s house last night. Carol says when they sleep over they stay up and hen-party practically all night long. I bet they’re still in bed, or eating breakfast for lunch.”

“Then go to the park by yourself. You’re making me nervous. With the TV off on Saturday morning I keep thinking you’re dead.” She came into his room and plucked the book out of his hands. Bobby watched with a kind of numb fascination as she thumbed through the pages, reading random snatches here and there. Suppose she spotted the part where the boys talked about sticking their spears up the wild pig’s ass (only they were English and said “arse,” which sounded even dirtier to Bobby)? What would she make of it? He didn’t know. All his life they had lived together, it had been just the two of them for most of it, and he still couldn’t predict how she’d react to any given situation.

“Is this the one Brattigan gave you?”

“Yeah.”

“As a birthday present?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s it about?”

“Boys marooned on an island. Their ship gets sunk. I think it’s supposed to be after World War III or something. The guy who wrote it never says for sure.”

“So it’s science fiction.”

“Yeah,” Bobby said. He felt a little giddy. He thought *Lord of the Flies* was about as far from *Ring Around the Sun* as you could get, but his mom hated science fiction, and if anything would stop her potentially dangerous thumbing, that would.

She handed the book back and walked over to his window. “Bobby?” Not looking back at him, at least not at first. She was wearing an old shirt and her Saturday pants. The bright noonlight shone through the shirt; he could see her

sides and noticed for the first time how thin she was, as if she was forgetting to eat or something. “What, Mom?”

“Has Mr. Brattigan given you any other presents?”

“It’s *Brautigan*, Mom.”

She frowned at her reflection in the window . . . or more likely it was his reflection she was frowning at. “Don’t correct me, Bobby-O. Has he?”

Bobby considered. A few rootbeers, sometimes a tuna sandwich or a cruller from the bakery where Sully’s mom worked, but no presents. Just the book, which was one of the best presents he had ever gotten. “Jeepers, no, why would he?”

“I don’t know. But then, I don’t know why a man you just met would give you a birthday present in the first place.” She sighed, folded her arms under her small sharp breasts, and went on looking out Bobby’s window. “He told me he used to work in a state job up in Hartford but now he’s retired. Is that what he told you?”

“Something like that.” In fact, Ted had never told Bobby anything about his working life, and asking had never crossed Bobby’s mind.

“What kind of state job? What department? Health and Welfare? Transportation? Office of the Comptroller?”

Bobby shook his head. What in heck was a comptroller?

“I bet it was education,” she said meditatively. “He talks like someone who used to be a teacher. Doesn’t he?”

“Sort of, yeah.”

“Does he have hobbies?”

“I don’t know.” There was reading, of course; two of the three bags which had so offended his mother were full of paperback books, most of which looked *very* hard.

The fact that Bobby knew nothing of the new man’s pastimes for some reason seemed to ease her mind. She shrugged, and when she spoke again it seemed to be to herself rather than to Bobby. “Shoot, it’s only a book. And a paperback, at that.”

“He said he might have a job for me, but so far he hasn’t come up with anything.”

She turned around fast. “Any job he offers you, any chores he asks you to do, you talk to me about it first. Got that?”

“Sure, got it.” Her intensity surprised him and made him a little uneasy.

“Promise.”

“I promise.”

“*Big* promise, Bobby.”

He dutifully crossed his heart and said, “I promise my mother in the name of God.”

That usually finished things, but this time she didn't look satisfied.

“Has he ever . . . does he ever . . .” There she stopped, looking uncharacteristically flustered. Kids sometimes looked that way when Mrs. Bramwell sent them to the blackboard to pick the nouns and verbs out of a sentence and they couldn't.

“Has he ever what, Mom?”

“Never mind!” she said crossly. “Get out of here, Bobby, go to the park or Sterling House, I'm tired of looking at you.”

*Why'd you come in, then?* he thought (but of course did not say). *I wasn't bothering you, Mom. I wasn't bothering you.*

Bobby tucked *Lord of the Flies* into his back pocket and headed for the door. He turned back when he got there. She was still at the window, but now she was watching him again. He never surprised love on her face at such moments; at best he might see a kind of speculation, sometimes (but not always) affectionate.

“Hey Mom?” He was thinking of asking for fifty cents—half a rock. With that he could buy a soda and two hotdogs at the Colony Diner. He loved the Colony's hotdogs, which came in toasted buns with potato chips and pickle slices on the side.

Her mouth did its tightening trick, and he knew this wasn't his day for hotdogs. “Don't ask, Bobby, don't even think about it.” *Don't even think about it*—one of her all-time faves. “I have a ton of bills this week, so get those dollar-signs out of your eyes.”

She *didn't* have a ton of bills, though, that was the thing. Not this week she didn't. Bobby had seen both the electric bill and the check for the rent in its envelope marked *Mr. Monteleone* last Wednesday. And she couldn't claim he

would soon need clothes because this was the end of the school-year, not the beginning. The only dough he'd asked for lately was five bucks for Sterling House—quarterly dues—and she had even been chintzy about that, although she knew it covered swimming and Wolves and Lions Baseball, plus the insurance. If it had been anyone but his mom, he would have thought of this as cheapskate behavior. He couldn't say anything about it to her, though; talking to her about money almost always turned into an argument, and disputing any part of her view on money matters, even in the most tiny particulars, was apt to send her into ranting hysterics. When she got like that she was scary.

Bobby smiled. "It's okay, Mom."

She smiled back and then nodded to the jar marked BIKE FUND. "Borrow a little from there, why don't you? Treat yourself. I'll never tell, and you can always put it back later."

He held onto his smile, but only with an effort. How easily she said that, never thinking of how furious she'd be if Bobby suggested she borrow a little from the electric money, or the phone money, or what she set aside to buy her "business clothes," just so he could get a couple of hotdogs and maybe a pie à la mode at the Colony. If he told her breezily that he'd never tell and she could always put it back later. Yeah, sure, and get his face smacked.

• • •

By the time he got to Commonwealth Park, Bobby's resentment had faded and the word *cheapskate* had left his brain. It was a beautiful day and he had a terrific book to finish; how could you be resentful and pissed off with stuff like that going for you? He found a secluded bench and reopened *Lord of the Flies*. He had to finish it today, had to find out what happened.

The last forty pages took him an hour, and during that time he was oblivious to everything around him. When he finally closed the book, he saw he had a lapful of little white flowers. His hair was full of them, too—he'd been sitting unaware in a storm of apple-blossoms.

He brushed them away, looking toward the playground as he did. Kids were teetertottering and swinging and batting the tetherball around its pole. Laughing, chasing each other, rolling in the grass. Could kids like that ever

wind up going naked and worshipping a rotting pig's head? It was tempting to dismiss such ideas as the imaginings of a grownup who didn't like kids (there were lots who didn't, Bobby knew), but then Bobby glanced into the sandbox and saw a little boy sitting there and wailing as if his heart would break while another, bigger kid sat beside him, unconcernedly playing with the Tonka truck he had yanked out of his friend's hands.

And the book's ending—happy or not? Crazy as such a thing would have seemed a month ago, Bobby couldn't really tell. Never in his life had he read a book where he didn't know if the ending was good or bad, happy or sad. Ted would know, though. He would ask Ted.

• • •

Bobby was still on the bench fifteen minutes later when Sully came bopping into the park and saw him. "Say there, you old bastard!" Sully exclaimed. "I went by your place and your mom said you were down here, or maybe at Sterling House. Finally finish that book?"

"Yeah."

"Was it good?"

"Yeah."

S-J shook his head. "I never met a book I really liked, but I'll take your word for it."

"How was the concert?"

Sully shrugged. "We blew til everyone went away, so I guess it was good for us, anyway. And guess who won the week at Camp Winiwinaia?" Camp Winnie was the YMCA's co-ed camp on Lake George, up in the woods north of Storrs. Each year HAC—the Harwich Activities Committee—had a drawing and gave away a week there.

Bobby felt a stab of jealousy. "Don't tell me."

Sully-John grinned. "Yeah, man! Seventy names in the hat, seventy at *least*, and the one that bald old bastard Mr. Coughlin pulled out was John L. Sullivan, Junior, 93 Broad Street. My mother just about weewee'd her pants."

"When do you go?"

"Two weeks after school lets out. Mom's gonna try and get her week off from the bakery at the same time, so she can go see Gramma and Grampy in

Wisconsin. She's gonna take the Big Gray Dog." The Big Vac was summer vacation; the Big Shew was *Ed Sullivan* on Sunday night; the Big Gray Dog was, of course, a Greyhound bus. The local depot was just up the street from the Asher Empire and the Colony Diner.

"Don't you wish you could go to Wisconsin with her?" Bobby asked, feeling a perverse desire to spoil his friend's happiness at his good fortune just a little.

"Sorta, but I'd rather go to camp and shoot arrows." He slung an arm around Bobby's shoulders. "I only wish you could come with me, you book-reading bastard."

That made Bobby feel mean-spirited. He looked down at *Lord of the Flies* again and knew he would be rereading it soon. Perhaps as early as August, if things got boring (by August they usually did, as hard as that was to believe in May). Then he looked up at Sully-John, smiled, and put his arm around S-J's shoulders. "Well, you're a lucky duck," he said.

"Just call me Donald," Sully-John agreed.

They sat on the bench that way for a little while, arms around each other's shoulders in those intermittent showers of apple-blossoms, watching the little kids play. Then Sully said he was going to the Saturday matinee at the Empire, and he'd better get moving if he didn't want to miss the previews.

"Why don't you come, Bobborino? *The Black Scorpion's* playing. Monsters galore throughout the store."

"Can't, I'm broke," Bobby said. This was the truth (if you excluded the seven dollars in the Bike Fund jar, that was) and he didn't want to go to the movies today anyhow, even though he'd heard a kid at school say *The Black Scorpion* was really great, the scorpions poked their stingers right through people when they killed them and also mashed Mexico City flat.

What Bobby wanted to do was go back to the house and talk to Ted about *Lord of the Flies*.

"Broke," Sully said sadly. "That's a sad fact, Jack. I'd pay your way, but I've only got thirty-five cents myself."

"Don't sweat it. Hey—where's your Bo-lo Bouncer?"

Sully looked sadder than ever. "Rubber band snapped. Gone to Bo-lo Heaven, I guess."

Bobby snickered. Bo-lo Heaven, that was a pretty funny idea. “Gonna buy a new one?”

“I doubt it. There’s a magic kit in Woolworth’s that I want. Sixty different tricks, it says on the box. I wouldn’t mind being a magician when I grow up, Bobby, you know it? Travel around with a carnival or a circus, wear a black suit and a top hat. I’d pull rabbits and shit out of the hat.”

“The rabbits would probably shit *in* your hat,” Bobby said.

Sully grinned. “But I’d be a cool bastard! Wouldn’t I love to be! At anything!” He got up. “Sure you don’t want to come along? You could probably sneak in past Godzilla.”

Hundreds of kids showed up for the Saturday shows at the Empire, which usually consisted of a creature feature, eight or nine cartoons, Prevues of Coming Attractions, and the MovieTone News. Mrs. Godlow went nuts trying to get them to stand in line and shut up, not understanding that on Saturday afternoon you couldn’t get even basically well-behaved kids to act like they were in school. She was also obsessed by the conviction that dozens of kids over twelve were trying to enter at the under-twelve rate; Mrs. G. would have demanded a birth certificate for the Saturday matinees as well as the Brigitte Bardot double features, had she been allowed. Lacking the authority to do that, she settled for barking “WHATYEARYABORN?” to any kid over five and a half feet tall. With all that going on you could sometimes sneak past her quite easily, and there was no ticket-ripper on Saturday afternoons. But Bobby didn’t want giant scorpions today; he had spent the last week with more realistic monsters, many of whom had probably looked pretty much like him.

“Nah, I think I’ll just hang around,” Bobby said.

“Okay.” Sully-John scrummed a few apple-blossoms out of his black hair, then looked solemnly at Bobby. “Call me a cool bastard, Big Bob.”

“Sully, you’re one cool bastard.”

“Yes!” Sully-John leaped skyward, punching at the air and laughing. “Yes I am! A cool bastard today! A great big cool bastard of a magician tomorrow! Pow!”

Bobby collapsed against the back of the bench, legs outstretched, sneakers toed in, laughing hard. S-J was just so funny when he got going.

Sully started away, then turned back. “Man, you know what? I saw a couple of weird guys when I came into the park.”

“What was weird about them?”

Sully-John shook his head, looking puzzled. “Don’t know,” he said. “Don’t really know.” Then he headed off, singing “At the Hop.” It was one of his favorites. Bobby liked it, too. Danny and the Juniors were great.

Bobby opened the paperback Ted had given him (it was now looking exceedingly well thumbed) and read the last couple of pages again, the part where the adults finally showed up. He began to ponder it again—happy or sad?—and Sully-John slipped from his mind. It occurred to him later that if S-J had happened to mention that the weird guys he’d seen were wearing yellow coats, some things might have been quite different later on.

• • •

“William Golding wrote an interesting thing about that book, one which I think speaks to your concern about the ending . . . want another pop, Bobby?”

Bobby shook his head and said no thanks. He didn’t like rootbeer all that much; he mostly drank it out of politeness when he was with Ted. They were sitting at Ted’s kitchen table again, Mrs. O’Hara’s dog was still barking (so far as Bobby could tell, Bowser *never* stopped barking), and Ted was still smoking Chesterfields. Bobby had peeked in at his mother when he came back from the park, saw she was napping on her bed, and then had hastened up to the third floor to ask Ted about the ending of *Lord of the Flies*.

Ted crossed to the refrigerator . . . and then stopped, standing there with his hand on the fridge door, staring off into space. Bobby would realize later that this was his first clear glimpse of something about Ted that wasn’t right; that was in fact wrong and going wronger all the time.

“One feels them first in the back of one’s eyes,” he said in a conversational tone. He spoke clearly; Bobby heard every word.

“Feels what?”

“One feels them first in the back of one’s eyes.” Still staring into space with one hand curled around the handle of the refrigerator, and Bobby began to feel frightened. There seemed to be something in the air, something almost like

pollen—it made the hairs inside his nose tingle, made the backs of his hands itch.

Then Ted opened the fridge door and bent in. “Sure you don’t want one?” he asked. “It’s good and cold.”

“No . . . no, that’s okay.”

Ted came back to the table, and Bobby understood that he had either decided to ignore what had just happened, or didn’t remember it. He also understood that Ted was okay now, and that was good enough for Bobby. Grownups were weird, that was all. Sometimes you just had to ignore the stuff they did.

“Tell me what he said about the ending. Mr. Golding.”

“As best as I can remember, it was something like this: ‘The boys are rescued by the crew of a battle-cruiser, and that is very well for them, but who will rescue the crew?’ ” Ted poured himself a glass of rootbeer, waited for the foam to subside, then poured a little more. “Does that help?”

Bobby turned it over in his mind the way he would a riddle. Hell, it *was* a riddle. “No,” he said at last. “I still don’t understand. They don’t need to be rescued—the crew of the boat, I mean—because they’re not on the island. Also . . .” He thought of the kids in the sandbox, one of them bawling his eyes out while the other played placidly with the stolen toy. “The guys on the cruiser are grownups. Grownups don’t need to be rescued.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Never?”

Bobby suddenly thought of his mother and how she was about money. Then he remembered the night he had awakened and thought he heard her crying. He didn’t answer.

“Consider it,” Ted said. He drew deeply on his cigarette, then blew out a plume of smoke. “Good books are for consideration after, too.”

“Okay.”

“*Lord of the Flies* wasn’t much like the Hardy Boys, was it?”

Bobby had a momentary image, very clear, of Frank and Joe Hardy running through the jungle with homemade spears, chanting that they’d kill the pig and stick their spears up her arse. He burst out laughing, and as Ted joined

him he knew that he was done with the Hardy Boys, Tom Swift, Rick Brant, and Bomba the Jungle Boy. *Lord of the Flies* had finished them off. He was very glad he had an adult library card.

“No,” he said, “it sure wasn’t.”

“And good books don’t give up all their secrets at once. Will you remember that?”

“Yes.”

“Terrific. Now tell me—would you like to earn a dollar a week from me?”

The change of direction was so abrupt that for a moment Bobby couldn’t follow it. Then he grinned and said, “Cripes, yes!” Figures ran dizzily through his mind; Bobby was good enough at math to figure out a dollar a week added up to at least fifteen bucks by September. Put with what he already had, plus a reasonable harvest of returnable bottles and some summer lawn-mowing jobs on the street . . . jeepers, he might be riding a Schwinn by Labor Day. “What do you want me to do?”

“We have to be careful about that. Quite careful.” Ted meditated quietly and for so long Bobby began to be afraid he was going to start talking about feeling stuff in the backs of his eyes again. But when Ted looked up, there was none of that strange emptiness in his gaze. His eyes were sharp, if a little rueful. “I would never ask a friend of mine—especially a young friend—to lie to his parents, Bobby, but in this case I’m going to ask you to join me in a little misdirection. Do you know what that is?”

“Sure.” Bobby thought about Sully and his new ambition to travel around with the circus, wearing a black suit and pulling rabbits out of his hat. “It’s what the magician does to fool you.”

“Doesn’t sound very nice when you put it that way, does it?”

Bobby shook his head. No, take away the spangles and the spotlights and it didn’t sound very nice at all.

Ted drank a little rootbeer and wiped foam from his upper lip. “Your mother, Bobby. She doesn’t quite dislike me, I don’t think it would be fair to say that . . . but I think she *almost* dislikes me. Do you agree?”

“I guess. When I told her you might have a job for me, she got weird about it. Said I had to tell her about anything you wanted me to do before I could do it.”

Ted Brautigan nodded.

“I think it all comes back to you having some of your stuff in paper bags when you moved in. I know that sounds nuts, but it’s all I can figure.”

He thought Ted might laugh, but he only nodded again. “Perhaps that’s all it is. In any case, Bobby, I wouldn’t want you to go against your mother’s wishes.”

That sounded good but Bobby Garfield didn’t entirely believe it. If it was really true, there’d be no need for misdirection.

“Tell your mother that my eyes now grow tired quite easily. It’s the truth.” As if to prove it, Ted raised his right hand to his eyes and massaged the corners with his thumb and forefinger. “Tell her I’d like to hire you to read bits of the newspaper to me each day, and for this I will pay you a dollar a week—what your friend Sully calls a rock?”

Bobby nodded . . . but a buck a week for reading about how Kennedy was doing in the primaries and whether or not Floyd Patterson would win in June? With maybe *Blondie* and *Dick Tracy* thrown in for good measure? His mom or Mr. Biderman down at Home Town Real Estate might believe that, but Bobby didn’t.

Ted was still rubbing his eyes, his hand hovering over his narrow nose like a spider.

“What else?” Bobby asked. His voice came out sounding strangely flat, like his mom’s voice when he’d promised to pick up his room and she came in at the end of the day to find the job still undone. “What’s the real job?”

“I want you to keep your eyes open, that’s all,” Ted said.

“For what?”

“Low men in yellow coats.” Ted’s fingers were still working the corners of his eyes. Bobby wished he’d stop; there was something creepy about it. Did he feel something behind them, was that why he kept rubbing and kneading that way? Something that broke his attention, interfered with his normally sane and well-ordered way of thinking?

“Lo *mein*?” It was what his mother ordered on the occasions when they went out to Sing Lu’s on Barnum Avenue. Lo mein in yellow coats made no sense, but it was all he could think of.

Ted laughed, a sunny, genuine laugh that made Bobby aware of just how uneasy he'd been.

"Low *men*," Ted said. "I use 'low' in the Dickensian sense, meaning fellows who look rather stupid . . . and rather dangerous as well. The sort of men who'd shoot craps in an alley, let's say, and pass around a bottle of liquor in a paper bag during the game. The sort who lean against telephone poles and whistle at women walking by on the other side of the street while they mop the backs of their necks with handkerchiefs that are never quite clean. Men who think hats with feathers in the brims are sophisticated. Men who look like they know all the right answers to all of life's stupid questions. I'm not being terribly clear, am I? Is any of this getting through to you, is any of it ringing a bell?"

Yeah, it was. In a way it was like hearing time described as the old bald cheater: a sense that the word or phrase was exactly right even though you couldn't say just why. It reminded him of how Mr. Biderman always looked unshaven even when you could still smell sweet aftershave drying on his cheeks, the way you somehow knew Mr. Biderman would pick his nose when he was alone in his car or check the coin return of any pay telephone he walked past without even thinking about it.

"I get you," he said.

"Good. I'd never in a hundred lifetimes ask you to speak to such men, or even approach them. But I *would* ask you to keep an eye out, make a circuit of the block once a day—Broad Street, Commonwealth Street, Colony Street, Asher Avenue, then back here to 149—and just see what you see."

It was starting to fit together in Bobby's mind. On his birthday—which had also been Ted's first day at 149—Ted had asked him if he knew everyone on the street, if he would recognize

*(sojourners faces of those unknown)*

strangers, if any strangers showed up. Not three weeks later Carol Gerber had made her comment about wondering sometimes if Ted was on the run from something.

"How many guys are there?" he asked.

"Three, five, perhaps more by now." Ted shrugged. "You'll know them by their long yellow coats and olive skin . . . although that darkish skin is just a disguise."

“What . . . you mean like Man-Tan, or something?”

“I suppose, yes. If they’re driving, you’ll know them by their cars.”

“What makes? What models?” Bobby felt like Darren McGavin on *Mike Hammer* and warned himself not to get carried away. This wasn’t TV. Still, it was exciting.

Ted was shaking his head. “I have no idea. But you’ll know just the same, because their cars will be like their yellow coats and sharp shoes and the greasy perfumed stuff they use to slick back their hair: loud and vulgar.”

“Low,” Bobby said—it was not quite a question.

“Low,” Ted repeated, and nodded emphatically. He sipped rootbeer, looked away toward the sound of the eternally barking Bowser . . . and remained that way for several moments, like a toy with a broken spring or a machine that has run out of gas. “They sense me,” he said. “And I sense them, as well. Ah, what a world.”

“What do they want?”

Ted turned back to him, appearing startled. It was as if he had forgotten Bobby was there . . . or had forgotten for a moment just who Bobby was. Then he smiled and reached out and put his hand over Bobby’s. It was big and warm and comforting; a man’s hand. At the feel of it Bobby’s half-hearted reservations disappeared.

“A certain something I happen to have,” Ted said. “Let’s leave it at that.”

“They’re not cops, are they? Or government guys? Or—”

“Are you asking if I’m one of the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted, or a communist agent like on *I Led Three Lives*? A bad guy?”

“I know you’re not a bad guy,” Bobby said, but the flush mounting into his cheeks suggested otherwise. Not that what he thought changed much. You could like or even love a bad guy; even Hitler had a mother, his own mom liked to say.

“I’m not a bad guy. Never robbed a bank or stole a military secret. I’ve spent too much of my life reading books and scamped on my share of fines—if there were Library Police, I’m afraid they’d be after me—but I’m not a bad guy like the ones you see on television.”

“The men in yellow coats are, though.”

Ted nodded. “Bad through and through. And, as I say, dangerous.”

“Have you seen them?”

“Many times, but not here. And the chances are ninety-nine in a hundred that you won’t, either. All I ask is that you keep an eye out for them. Could you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Bobby? Is there a problem?”

“No.” Yet something nagged at him for a moment—not a connection, only a momentary sense of groping toward one.

“Are you sure?”

“Uh-huh.”

“All right. Now, here is the question: could you in good conscience—in *fair* conscience, at least—neglect to mention this part of your duty to your mother?”

“Yes,” Bobby said at once, although he understood doing such a thing would mark a large change in his life . . . and would be risky. He was more than a little afraid of his mom, and this fear was only partly caused by how angry she could get and how long she could bear a grudge. Mostly it grew from an unhappy sense of being loved only a little, and needing to protect what love there was. But he liked Ted . . . and he had loved the feeling of Ted’s hand lying over his own, the warm roughness of the big palm, the touch of the fingers, thickened almost into knots at the joints. And this wasn’t lying, not really. It was leaving out.

“You’re really sure?”

*If you want to learn to lie, Bobby-O, I suppose leaving things out is as good a place to start as any,* an interior voice whispered. Bobby ignored it. “Yes,” he said, “really sure. Ted . . . are these guys just dangerous to you or to anybody?” He was thinking of his mom, but he was also thinking of himself.

“To me they could be very dangerous indeed. To other people—*most* other people—probably not. Do you want to know a funny thing?”

“Sure.”

“The majority of people don’t even see them unless they’re very, very close. It’s almost as if they have the power to cloud men’s minds, like The Shadow on that old radio program.”

“Do you mean they’re . . . well . . .” He supposed *supernatural* was the word he wasn’t quite able to say.

“No, no, not at all.” Waving his question away before it could be fully articulated. Lying in bed that night and sleepless for longer than usual, Bobby thought that Ted had almost been afraid for it to be spoken aloud. “There are lots of people, quite ordinary ones, we don’t see. The waitress walking home from work with her head down and her restaurant shoes in a paper bag. Old fellows out for their afternoon walks in the park. Teenage girls with their hair in rollers and their transistor radios playing Peter Tripp’s countdown. But children see them. Children see them all. And Bobby, you are still a child.”

“These guys don’t sound exactly easy to miss.”

“The coats, you mean. The shoes. The loud cars. But those are the very things which cause some people—many people, actually—to turn away. To erect little roadblocks between the eye and the brain. In any case, I won’t have you taking chances. If you do see the men in the yellow coats, *don’t approach them*. Don’t speak to them even if they should speak to you. I can’t think why they would, I don’t believe they would even see you—just as most people don’t really see them—but there are plenty of things I don’t know about them. Now tell me what I just said. Repeat it back. It’s important.”

“Don’t approach them and don’t speak to them.”

“Even if they speak to you.” Rather impatiently.

“Even if they speak to me, right. What *should* I do?”

“Come back here and tell me they’re about and where you saw them. Walk until you’re certain you’re out of their sight, then run. Run like the wind. Run like hell was after you.”

“And what will you do?” Bobby asked, but of course he knew. Maybe he wasn’t as sharp as Carol, but he wasn’t a complete dodo, either. “You’ll go away, won’t you?”

Ted Brautigan shrugged and finished his glass of rootbeer without meeting Bobby’s eyes. “I’ll decide when that time comes. *If* it comes. If I’m lucky, the feelings I’ve had for the last few days—my sense of these men—will go away.”

“Has that happened before?”

“Indeed it has. Now why don’t we talk of more pleasant things?”

For the next half an hour they discussed baseball, then music (Bobby was startled to discover Ted not only knew the music of Elvis Presley but actually liked some of it), then Bobby's hopes and fears concerning the seventh grade in September. All this was pleasant enough, but behind each topic Bobby sensed the lurk of the low men. The low men were here in Ted's third-floor room like peculiar shadows which cannot quite be seen.

It wasn't until Bobby was getting ready to leave that Ted raised the subject of them again. "There are things you should look for," he said. "Signs that my . . . my old friends are about."

"What are they?"

"On your travels around town, keep an eye out for lost-pet posters on walls, in shop windows, stapled to telephone poles on residential streets. 'Lost, a gray tabby cat with black ears, a white bib, and a crooked tail. Call IROquois 7-7661.' 'Lost, a small mongrel dog, part beagle, answers to the name of Trixie, loves children, ours want her to come home. Call IROquois 7-0984 or bring to 77 Peabody Street.' That sort of thing."

"What are you saying? Jeepers, are you saying they kill people's *pets*? Do you think . . ."

"I think many of those animals don't exist at all," Ted said. He sounded weary and unhappy. "Even when there is a small, poorly reproduced photograph, I think most are pure fiction. I think such posters are a form of communication, although why the men who put them up shouldn't just go into the Colony Diner and do their communicating over pot roast and mashed potatoes I don't know."

"Where does your mother shop, Bobby?"

"Total Grocery. It's right next door to Mr. Biderman's real-estate agency."

"And do you go with her?"

"Sometimes." When he was younger he met her there every Friday, reading a *TV Guide* from the magazine rack until she showed up, loving Friday afternoons because it was the start of the weekend, because Mom let him push the cart and he always pretended it was a racing car, because he loved *her*. But he didn't tell Ted any of this. It was ancient history. Hell, he'd only been eight.

"Look on the bulletin board every supermarket puts up by the checkout registers," Ted said. "On it you'll see a number of little hand-printed notices

that say things like CAR FOR SALE BY OWNER. Look for any such notices that have been thumbtacked to the board upside down. Is there another supermarket in town?"

"There's the A&P, down by the railroad overpass. My mom doesn't go there. She says the butcher's always giving her the glad-eye."

"Can you check the bulletin board there, as well?"

"Sure."

"Good so far, very good. Now—you know the hopscotch patterns kids are always drawing on the sidewalks?"

Bobby nodded.

"Look for ones with stars or moons or both chalked near them, usually in chalk of a different color. Look for kite tails hanging from telephone lines. Not the kites themselves, but only the tails. And . . ."

Ted paused, frowning, thinking. As he took a Chesterfield from the pack on the table and lit it, Bobby thought quite reasonably, quite clearly, and without the slightest shred of fear: *He's crazy, y'know. Crazy as a loon.*

Yes, of course, how could you doubt it? He only hoped Ted could be careful as well as crazy. Because if his mom heard Ted talking about stuff like this, she'd never let Bobby go near him again. In fact, she'd probably send for the guys with the butterfly nets . . . or ask good old Don Biderman to do it for her.

"You know the clock in the town square, Bobby?"

"Yeah, sure."

"It may begin ringing wrong hours, or between hours. Also, look for reports of minor church vandalism in the paper. My friends dislike churches, but they never do anything too outrageous; they like to keep a—pardon the pun—low profile. There are other signs that they're about, but there's no need to overload you. Personally I believe the posters are the surest clue."

"'If you see Ginger, please bring her home.'"

"That's exactly r—"

"Bobby?" It was his mom's voice, followed by the ascending scuff of her Saturday sneakers. "Bobby, are you up there?"

### III. A MOTHER'S POWER. BOBBY DOES HIS JOB. "DOES HE TOUCH YOU?" THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL.

Bobby and Ted exchanged a guilty look. Both of them sat back on their respective sides of the table, as if they had been doing something crazy instead of just talking about crazy stuff.

*She'll see we've been up to something,* Bobby thought with dismay. *It's all over my face.*

"No," Ted said to him. "It is not. That is her power over you, that you believe it. It's a mother's power."

Bobby stared at him, amazed. *Did you read my mind? Did you read my mind just then?*

Now his mom was almost to the third-floor landing and there was no time for a reply even if Ted had wanted to make one. But there was no look on his face saying he *would* have replied if there had been time, either. And Bobby at once began to doubt what he had heard.

Then his mother was in the open doorway, looking from her son to Ted and back to her son again, her eyes assessing. "So here you are after all," she said. "My goodness, Bobby, didn't you hear me calling?"

"You were up here before I got a chance to say boo, Mom."

She snorted. Her mouth made a small, meaningless smile—her automatic social smile. Her eyes went back and forth between the two of them, back and forth, looking for something out of place, something she didn't like, something wrong. "I didn't hear you come in from outdoors."

"You were asleep on your bed."

"How are you today, Mrs. Garfield?" Ted asked.

"Fine as paint." Back and forth went her eyes. Bobby had no idea what she was looking for, but that expression of dismayed guilt must have left his face. If she had seen it, he would know already; would know that *she* knew.

"Would you like a bottle of pop?" Ted asked. "I have rootbeer. It's not much, but it's cold."

“That would be nice,” Liz said. “Thanks.” She came all the way in and sat down next to Bobby at the kitchen table. She patted him absently on the leg, watching Ted as he opened his little fridge and got out the rootbeer. “It’s not hot up here yet, Mr. Brattigan, but I guarantee you it will be in another month. You want to get yourself a fan.”

“There’s an idea.” Ted poured rootbeer into a clean glass, then stood in front of the fridge holding the glass up to the light, waiting for the foam to go down. To Bobby he looked like a scientist in a TV commercial, one of those guys obsessed with Brand X and Brand Y and how Roloids consumed fifty-seven times its own weight in excess stomach acid, amazing but true.

“I don’t need a full glass, that will be fine,” she said a little impatiently. Ted brought the glass to her, and she raised it to him. “Here’s how.” She took a swallow and grimaced as if it had been rye instead of rootbeer. Then she watched over the top of the glass as Ted sat down, tapped the ash from his smoke, and tucked the stub of the cigarette back into the corner of his mouth.

“You two have gotten thicker than thieves,” she remarked. “Sitting here at the kitchen table, drinking rootbeer—cozy, thinks I! What’ve you been talking about today?”

“The book Mr. Brautigan gave me,” Bobby said. His voice sounded natural and calm, a voice with no secrets behind it. “*Lord of the Flies*. I couldn’t figure out if the ending was happy or sad, so I thought I’d ask him.”

“Oh? And what did he say?”

“That it was both. Then he told me to consider it.”

Liz laughed without a great deal of humor. “I read mysteries, Mr. Brattigan, and save my consideration for real life. But of course I’m not retired.”

“No,” Ted said. “You are obviously in the very prime of life.”

She gave him her *flattery-will-get-you-nowhere* look. Bobby knew it well.

“I also offered Bobby a small job,” Ted told her. “He has agreed to take it . . . with your permission, of course.”

Her brow furrowed at the mention of a job, smoothed at the mention of permission. She reached out and briefly touched Bobby’s red hair, a gesture so unusual that Bobby’s eyes widened a little. Her eyes never left Ted’s face as she did it. Not only did she not trust the man, Bobby realized, she was likely *never* going to trust him. “What sort of job did you have in mind?”

“He wants me to—”

“Hush,” she said, and still her eyes peered over the top of her glass, never leaving Ted.

“I’d like him to read me the paper, perhaps in the afternoons,” Ted said, then explained how his eyes weren’t what they used to be and how he had worse problems every day with the finer print. But he liked to keep up with the news—these were very interesting times, didn’t Mrs. Garfield think so?—and he liked to keep up with the columns, as well, Stewart Alsop and Walter Winchell and such. Winchell was a gossip, of course, but an *interesting* gossip, didn’t Mrs. Garfield agree?

Bobby listened, increasingly tense even though he could tell from his mother’s face and posture—even from the way she sipped her rootbeer—that she believed what Ted was telling her. That part of it was all right, but what if Ted went blank again? Went blank and started babbling about low men in yellow coats or the tails of kites hanging from telephone wires, all the time gazing off into space?

But nothing like that happened. Ted finished by saying he also liked to know how the Dodgers were doing—Maury Wills, especially—even though they had gone to L.A. He said this with the air of one who is determined to tell the truth even if the truth is a bit shameful. Bobby thought it was a nice touch.

“I suppose that would be fine,” his mother said (almost grudgingly, Bobby thought). “In fact it sounds like a plum. I wish *I* could have a plum job like that.”

“I’ll bet you’re excellent at your job, Mrs. Garfield.”

She flashed him her dry *flattery-won’t-work-with-me* expression again. “You’ll have to pay him extra to do the crossword for you,” she said, getting up, and although Bobby didn’t understand the remark, he was astonished by the cruelty he sensed in it, embedded like a piece of glass in a marshmallow. It was as if she wanted to make fun of Ted’s failing eyesight and his intellect at the same time; as if she wanted to hurt him for being nice to her son. Bobby was still ashamed at deceiving her and frightened that she would find out, but now he was also glad . . . almost viciously glad. She deserved it. “He’s good at the crossword, my Bobby.”

Ted smiled. “I’m sure he is.”

“Come on downstairs, Bob. It’s time to give Mr. Brattigan a rest.”

“But—”

“I think I *would* like to lie down awhile, Bobby. I’ve a little bit of a headache. I’m glad you liked *Lord of the Flies*. You can start your job tomorrow, if you like, with the feature section of the Sunday paper. I warn you it’s apt to be a trial by fire.”

“Okay.”

Mom had reached the little landing outside of Ted’s door. Bobby was behind her. Now she turned back and looked at Ted over Bobby’s head. “Why not outside on the porch?” she asked. “The fresh air will be nice for both of you. Better than this stuffy room. And I’ll be able to hear, too, if I’m in the living room.”

Bobby thought some message was passing between them. Not via telepathy, exactly . . . only it *was* telepathy, in a way. The humdrum sort adults practiced.

“A fine idea,” Ted said. “The front porch would be lovely. Good afternoon, Bobby. Good afternoon, Mrs. Garfield.”

Bobby came very close to saying *Seeya, Ted* and substituted “See you, Mr. Brautigan” at the last moment. He moved toward the stairs, smiling vaguely, with the sweaty feeling of someone who has just avoided a nasty accident.

His mother lingered. “How long have you been retired, Mr. Brattigan? Or do you mind me asking?”

Bobby had almost decided she wasn’t mispronouncing Ted’s name deliberately; now he swung the other way. She was. Of course she was.

“Three years.” He crushed his cigarette out in the brimming tin ashtray and immediately lit another.

“Which would make you . . . sixty-eight?”

“Sixty-six, actually.” His voice continued mild and open, but Bobby had an idea he didn’t much care for these questions. “I was granted retirement with full benefits two years early. Medical reasons.”

*Don’t ask him what’s wrong with him, Mom,* Bobby moaned inside his own head. *Don’t you dare.*

She didn’t. She asked what he’d done in Hartford instead.

“Accounting. I was in the Office of the Comptroller.”

“Bobby and I guessed something to do with education. Accounting! That sounds very responsible.”

Ted smiled. Bobby thought there was something awful about it. “In twenty years I wore out three adding machines. If that is responsibility, Mrs. Garfield, why yes—I was responsible. Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees; the typist puts a record on the gramophone with an automatic hand.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“It’s my way of saying that it was a lot of years in a job that never seemed to mean much.”

“It might have meant a good deal if you’d had a child to feed, shelter, and raise.” She looked at him with her chin slightly tilted, the look that meant if Ted wanted to discuss this, she was ready. That she would go to the mat with him on the subject if that was his pleasure.

Ted, Bobby was relieved to find, didn’t want to go to the mat or anywhere near it. “I expect you’re right, Mrs. Garfield. Entirely.”

She gave him a moment more of the lifted chin, asking if he was sure, giving him time to change his mind. When Ted said nothing else, she smiled. It was her victory smile. Bobby loved her, but suddenly he was tired of her as well. Tired of knowing her looks, her sayings, and the adamant cast of her mind.

“Thank you for the rootbeer, Mr. Brattigan. It was very tasty.” And with that she led her son downstairs. When they got to the second-floor landing she dropped his hand and went the rest of the way ahead of him.

Bobby thought they would discuss his new job further over supper, but they didn’t. His mom seemed far away from him, her eyes distant. He had to ask her twice for a second slice of meatloaf and when later that evening the telephone rang, she jumped up from the couch where they had been watching TV to get it. She jumped for it the way Ricky Nelson did when it rang on the *Ozzie and Harriet* show. She listened, said something, then came back to the couch and sat down.

“Who was it?” Bobby asked.

“Wrong number,” Liz said.

• • •

In that year of his life Bobby Garfield still waited for sleep with a child's welcoming confidence: on his back, heels spread to the corners of the bed, hands tucked into the cool under the pillow so his elbows stuck up. On the night after Ted spoke to him about the low men in their yellow coats (*and don't forget their cars*, he thought, *their big cars with the fancy paintjobs*), Bobby lay in this position with the sheet pushed down to his waist. Moonlight fell on his narrow child's chest, squared in four by the shadows of the window muntins.

If he had thought about it (he hadn't), he would have expected Ted's low men to become more real once he was alone in the dark, with only the tick of his wind-up Big Ben and the murmur of the late TV news from the other room to keep him company. That was the way it had always been with him—it was easy to laugh at Frankenstein on Shock Theater, to go fake-swoony and cry “Ohhh, *Frankie!*” when the monster showed up, especially if Sully-John was there for a sleepover. But in the dark, after S-J had started to snore (or worse, if Bobby was alone), Dr. Frankenstein's creature seemed a lot more . . . not real, exactly, but . . . *possible*.

That sense of possibility did not gather around Ted's low men. If anything, the idea that people would communicate with each other via lost-pet posters seemed even crazier in the dark. But not a dangerous crazy. Bobby didn't think Ted was really, deeply crazy, anyhow; just a bit too smart for his own good, especially since he had so few things with which to occupy his time. Ted was a little . . . well . . . cripes, a little *what?* Bobby couldn't express it. If the word *eccentric* had occurred to him he would have seized it with pleasure and relief.

*But . . . it seemed like he read my mind. What about that?*

Oh, he was wrong, that was all, mistaken about what he thought he'd heard. Or maybe Ted *had* read his mind, read it with that essentially uninteresting adult ESP, peeling guilt off his face like a wet decal off a piece of glass. God knew his mother could always do that . . . at least until today.

*But—*

But nothing. Ted was a nice guy who knew a lot about books, but he was no mind-reader. No more than Sully-John Sullivan was a magician, or ever would be.

“It's all misdirection,” Bobby murmured. He slipped his hands out from under his pillow, crossed them at the wrists, wagged them. The shadow of a

dove flew across the moonlight on his chest.

Bobby smiled, closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

• • •

The next morning he sat on the front porch and read several pieces aloud from the Harwich Sunday *Journal*. Ted perched on the porch glider, listening quietly and smoking Chesterfields. Behind him and to his left, the curtains flapped in and out of the open windows of the Garfield front room. Bobby imagined his mom sitting in the chair where the light was best, sewing basket beside her, listening and hemming skirts (hemlines were going down again, she'd told him a week or two before; take them up one year, pick out the stitches the following spring and lower them again, all because a bunch of poofers in New York and London said to, and why she bothered she didn't know). Bobby had no idea if she really was there or not, the open windows and blowing curtains meant nothing by themselves, but he imagined it all the same. When he was a little older it would occur to him that he had *always* imagined her there—outside doors, in that part of the bleachers where the shadows were too thick to see properly, in the dark at the top of the stairs, he had always imagined she was there.

The sports pieces he read were interesting (Maury Wills was stealing up a storm), the feature articles less so, the opinion columns boring and long and incomprehensible, full of phrases like “fiscal responsibility” and “economic indicators of a recessionary nature.” Even so, Bobby didn't mind reading them. He was doing a job, after all, earning dough, and a lot of jobs were boring at least some of the time. “You have to work for your Wheaties,” his mother sometimes said after Mr. Biderman had kept her late. Bobby was proud just to be able to get a phrase like “economic indicators of a recessionary nature” to come off his tongue. Besides, the other job—the hidden job—arose from Ted's crazy idea that some men were out to get him, and Bobby would have felt weird taking money just for doing that one; would have felt like he was tricking Ted somehow even though it had been Ted's idea in the first place.

That was still part of his job, though, crazy or not, and he began doing it that Sunday afternoon. Bobby walked around the block while his mom was napping, looking for either low men in yellow coats or signs of them. He saw a

number of interesting things—over on Colony Street a woman arguing with her husband about something, the two of them standing nose-to-nose like Gorgeous George and Haystacks Calhoun before the start of a rassling match; a little kid on Asher Avenue bashing caps with a smoke-blackened rock; liplocked teenagers outside of Spicer’s Variety Store on the corner of Commonwealth and Broad; a panel truck with the interesting slogan YUMMY FOR THE TUMMY written on the side—but he saw no yellow coats or lost-pet announcements on phone poles; not a single kite tail hung from a single telephone wire.

He stopped in at Spicer’s for a penny gumball and gleepped the bulletin board, which was dominated by photos of this year’s Miss Rheingold candidates. He saw two cards offering car for sale by owner, but neither was upside down. There was another one that said MUST SELL MY BACKYARD POOL, GOOD SHAPE, YOUR KIDS WILL LOVE IT, and that one was crooked, but Bobby didn’t guess crooked counted.

On Asher Avenue he saw a whale of a Buick parked at a hydrant, but it was bottle-green, and Bobby didn’t think it qualified as loud and vulgar in spite of the portholes up the sides of the hood and the grille, which looked like the sneery mouth of a chrome catfish.

On Monday he continued looking for low men on his way to and from school. He saw nothing . . . but Carol Gerber, who was walking with him and S-J, saw him looking. His mother was right, Carol was really sharp.

“Are the commie agents after the plans?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“You keep staring everywhere. Even behind you.”

For a moment Bobby considered telling them what Ted had hired him to do, then decided it would be a bad idea. It might have been a good one if he believed there was really something to look for—three pairs of eyes instead of one, Carol’s sharp little peepers included—but he didn’t. Carol and Sully-John knew that he had a job reading Ted the paper every day, and that was all right. It was enough. If he told them about the low men, it would feel like making fun, somehow. A betrayal.

“Commie agents?” Sully asked, whirling around. “Yeah, I see em, I see em!” He drew down his mouth and made the *eh-eh-eh* noise again (it was his

favorite). Then he staggered, dropped his invisible tommygun, clutched his chest. “They got me! I’m hit bad! Go on without me! Give my love to Rose!”

“I’ll give it to my aunt’s fat fanny,” Carol said, and elbowed him.

“I’m looking for guys from St. Gabe’s, that’s all,” Bobby said.

This was plausible; boys from St. Gabriel the Steadfast Upper and Secondary were always harassing the Harwich Elementary kids as the Elementary kids walked to school—buzzing them on their bikes, shouting that the boys were sissies, that the girls “put out” . . . which Bobby was pretty sure meant tongue-kissing and letting boys touch their titties.

“Nah, those dinkberries don’t come along until later,” Sully-John said. “Right now they’re all still home puttin on their crosses and combin their hair back like Bobby Rydell.”

“Don’t swear,” Carol said, and elbowed him again.

Sully-John looked wounded. “Who swore? I didn’t swear.”

“Yes you did.”

“I did not, Carol.”

“Did.”

“No sir, did not.”

“*Yes* sir, did too, you said dinkberries.”

“That’s not a swear! Dinkberries are *berries!*” S-J looked at Bobby for help, but Bobby was looking up at Asher Avenue, where a Cadillac was cruising slowly by. It was big, and he supposed it was a little flashy, but wasn’t any Cadillac? This one was painted a conservative light brown and didn’t look low to him. Besides, the person at the wheel was a woman.

“Yeah? Show me a picture of a dinkberry in the encyclopedia and maybe I’ll believe you.”

“I ought to poke you,” Sully said amiably. “Show you who’s boss. Me Tarzan, you Jane.”

“Me Carol, you Jughead. Here.” Carol thrust three books—arithmetic, *Adventures in Spelling*, and *The Little House on the Prairie*—into S-J’s hands. “Carry my books cause you swore.”

Sully-John looked more wounded than ever. “Why should I have to carry your stupid books even if I *did* swear, which I didn’t?”

“It’s pennants,” Carol said.

“What the heck is pennants?”

“Making up for something you do wrong. If you swear or tell a lie, you have to do pennants. One of the St. Gabe’s boys told me. Willie, his name is.”

“You shouldn’t hang around with them,” Bobby said. “They can be mean.” He knew this from personal experience. Just after Christmas vacation ended, three St. Gabe’s boys had chased him down Broad Street, threatening to beat him up because he had “looked at them wrong.” They would have done it, too, Bobby thought, if the one in the lead hadn’t slipped in the slush and gone to his knees. The others had tripped over him, allowing Bobby just time enough to nip in through the big front door of 149 and turn the lock. The St. Gabe’s boys had hung around outside for a little while, then had gone away after promising Bobby that they would “see him later.”

“They’re not all hoods, some of them are okay,” Carol said. She looked at Sully-John, who was carrying her books, and hid a smile with one hand. You could get S-J to do anything if you talked fast and sounded sure of yourself. It would have been nicer to have Bobby carry her books, but it wouldn’t have been any good unless he asked her. Someday he might; she was an optimist. In the meantime it was nice to be walking here between them in the morning sunshine. She stole a glance at Bobby, who was looking down at a hopscotch grid drawn on the sidewalk. He was so cute, and he didn’t even know it. Somehow that was the cutest thing of all.

• • •

The last week of school passed as it always did, with a maddening, half-crippled slowness. On those early June days Bobby thought the smell of the paste in the library was almost strong enough to gag a maggot, and geography seemed to last ten thousand years. Who cared how much tin there was in Paraguay?

At recess Carol talked about how she was going to her aunt Cora and uncle Ray’s farm in Pennsylvania for a week in July; S-J went on and on about the week of camp he’d won and how he was going to shoot arrows at targets and go out in a canoe every day he was there. Bobby, in turn, told them about the great Maury Wills, who might set a record for base-stealing that would never be broken in their lifetime.

His mom was increasingly preoccupied, jumping each time the telephone rang and then running for it, staying up past the late news (and sometimes, Bobby suspected, until the Nite-Owl Movie was over), and only picking at her meals. Sometimes she would have long, intense conversations on the phone with her back turned and her voice lowered (as if Bobby wanted to eavesdrop on her conversations, anyway). Sometimes she'd go to the telephone, start to dial it, then drop it back in its cradle and return to the couch.

On one of these occasions Bobby asked her if she had forgotten what number she wanted to call. "Seems like I've forgotten a lot of things," she muttered, and then: "Mind your beeswax, Bobby-O."

He might have noticed more and worried even more than he did—she was getting thin and had picked up the cigarette habit again after almost stopping for two years—if he hadn't had lots of stuff to occupy his own mind and time. The best thing was the adult library card, which seemed like a better gift, a more *inspired* gift, each time he used it. Bobby felt there were a billion science-fiction novels alone in the adult section that he wanted to read. Take Isaac Asimov, for instance. Under the name of Paul French, Mr. Asimov wrote science-fiction novels for kids about a space pilot named Lucky Starr, and they were pretty good. Under his own name he had written other novels, even better ones. At least three of them were about robots. Bobby loved robots. Robby the Robot in *Forbidden Planet* was one of the all-time great movie characters, in his opinion, totally ripshit, and Mr. Asimov's were almost as good. Bobby thought he would be spending a lot of time with them in the summer ahead. (Sully called this great writer Isaac Ass-Move, but of course Sully was almost totally ignorant about books.)

Going to school he looked for the men in the yellow coats, or signs of them; going to the library after school he did the same. Because school and library were in opposite directions, Bobby felt he was covering a pretty good part of Harwich. He never expected to actually see any low men, of course. After supper, in the long light of evening, he would read the paper to Ted, either on the porch or in Ted's kitchen. Ted had followed Liz Garfield's advice and gotten a fan, and Bobby's mom no longer seemed concerned that Bobby should read to "Mr. Brattigan" out on the porch. Some of this was her growing preoccupation with her own adult matters, Bobby felt, but perhaps she was

also coming to trust Ted a little more. Not that trust was the same as liking. Not that it had come easily, either.

One night while they were on the couch watching *Wyatt Earp*, his mom turned to Bobby almost fiercely and said, “Does he ever touch you?”

Bobby understood what she was asking, but not why she was so wound up. “Well, sure,” he said. “He claps me on the back sometimes, and once when I was reading the paper to him and screwed up some really long word three times in a row he gave me a Dutch rub, but he doesn’t roughhouse or anything. I don’t think he’s strong enough for stuff like that. Why?”

“Never mind,” she said. “He’s fine, I guess. Got his head in the clouds, no question about it, but he doesn’t seem like a . . .” She trailed off, watching the smoke from her Kool cigarette rise in the living-room air. It went up from the coal in a pale gray ribbon and then disappeared, making Bobby think of the way the characters in Mr. Simak’s *Ring Around the Sun* followed the spiraling top into other worlds.

At last she turned to him again and said, “If he ever touches you in a way you don’t like, you come and tell me. Right away. You hear?”

“Sure, Mom.” There was something in her look that made him remember once when he’d asked her how a woman knew she was going to have a baby. *She bleeds every month*, his mom had said. *If there’s no blood, she knows it’s because the blood is going into a baby*. Bobby had wanted to ask where this blood came out when there was no baby being made (he remembered a nosebleed his mom had had once, but no other instances of maternal bleeding). The look on her face, however, had made him drop the subject. She wore the same look now.

Actually there *had* been other touches: Ted might run one of his big hands across Bobby’s crewcut, kind of patting the bristles; he would sometimes gently catch Bobby’s nose between his knuckles and intone *Sound it out!* if Bobby mispronounced a word; if they spoke at the same moment he would hook one of his little fingers around one of Bobby’s little fingers and say *Good luck, good will, good fortune, not ill*. Soon Bobby was saying it with him, their little fingers locked, their voices as matter-of-fact as people saying pass the peas or how you doing.

Only once did Bobby feel uncomfortable when Ted touched him. Bobby had just finished the last newspaper piece Ted wanted to hear—some columnist blabbing on about how there was nothing wrong with Cuba that good old American free enterprise couldn't fix. Dusk was beginning to streak the sky. Back on Colony Street, Mrs. O'Hara's dog Bowser barked on and on, *roop-roop-roop*, the sound lost and somehow dreamy, seeming more like something remembered than something happening at that moment.

"Well," Bobby said, folding the paper and getting up, "I think I'll take a walk around the block and see what I see." He didn't want to come right out and say it, but he wanted Ted to know he was still looking for the low men in the yellow coats.

Ted also got up and approached him. Bobby was saddened to see the fear on Ted's face. He didn't want Ted to believe in the low men too much, didn't want Ted to be too crazy. "Be back before dark, Bobby. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you."

"I'll be careful. And I'll be back years before dark."

Ted dropped to one knee (he was too old to just hunker, Bobby guessed) and took hold of Bobby's shoulders. He drew Bobby forward until their brows were almost bumping. Bobby could smell cigarettes on Ted's breath and ointment on his skin—he rubbed his joints with Musterole because they ached. These days they ached even in warm weather, he said.

Being this close to Ted wasn't scary, but it was sort of awful, just the same. You could see that even if Ted wasn't totally old now, he soon would be. He'd probably be sick, too. His eyes were watery. The corners of his mouth were trembling a little. It was too bad he had to be all alone up here on the third floor, Bobby thought. If he'd had a wife or something, he might never have gotten this bee in his bonnet about the low men. Of course if he'd had a wife, Bobby might never have read *Lord of the Flies*. A selfish way to think, but he couldn't help it.

"No sign of them, Bobby?"

Bobby shook his head.

"And you feel nothing? Nothing here?" He took his right hand from Bobby's left shoulder and tapped his own temple, where two blue veins nested, pulsing slightly. Bobby shook his head. "Or here?" Ted pulled down the corner

of his right eye. Bobby shook his head again. "Or here?" Ted touched his stomach. Bobby shook his head a third time.

"Okay," Ted said, and smiled. He slipped his left hand up to the back of Bobby's neck. His right hand joined it. He looked solemnly into Bobby's eyes and Bobby looked solemnly back. "You'd tell me if you did, wouldn't you? You wouldn't try to . . . oh, I don't know . . . to spare my feelings?"

"No," Bobby said. He liked Ted's hands on the back of his neck and didn't like them at the same time. It was where a guy in a movie might put his hands just before he kissed the girl. "No, I'd tell, that's my job."

Ted nodded. He slowly unlaced his hands and let them drop. He got to his feet, using the table for support and grimacing when one knee popped loudly. "Yes, you'd tell me, you're a good kid. Go on, take your walk. But stay on the sidewalk, Bobby, and be home before dark. You have to be careful these days."

"I'll be careful." He started down the stairs.

"And if you see them—"

"I'll run."

"Yeah." In the fading light, Ted's face was grim. "Like hell was after you."

So there had been touching, and perhaps his mother's fears had been justified in a way—perhaps there had been too much touching and some of the wrong sort. Not wrong in whatever way she thought, maybe, but still wrong. Still dangerous.

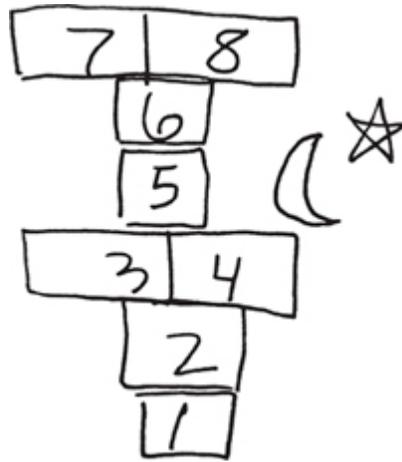
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On the Wednesday before school let out for the summer, Bobby saw a red strip of cloth hanging from somebody's TV antenna over on Colony Street. He couldn't tell for sure, but it looked remarkably like a kite tail. Bobby's feet stopped dead. At the same time his heart accelerated until it was hammering the way it did when he raced Sully-John home from school.

*It's a coincidence even if it is a kite tail, he told himself. Just a lousy coincidence. You know that, don't you?*

Maybe. Maybe he knew. He had almost come to believe it, anyway, when school let out for the summer on Friday. Bobby walked home by himself that day; Sully-John had volunteered to stay and help put books away in the storeroom and Carol was going over to Tina Lebel's for Tina's birthday party.

Just before crossing Asher Avenue and starting down Broad Street Hill, he saw a hopscotch grid drawn on the sidewalk in purple chalk. It looked like this:



“Oh Christ no,” Bobby whispered. “You gotta be kidding.”

He dropped to one knee like a cavalry scout in a western movie, oblivious of the kids passing by him on their way home—some walking, some on bikes, a couple on roller skates, buck-toothed Francis Utterson on his rusty red scooter, honking laughter at the sky as he paddled along. They were almost as oblivious of him; the Big Vac had just started, and most were dazed by all the possibilities.

“Oh no, oh no, I don’t believe it, you *gotta* be kidding.” He reached out toward the star and the crescent moon—they were drawn in yellow chalk, not purple—almost touched them, then drew his hand back. A piece of red ribbon caught on a TV antenna didn’t have to mean anything. When you added this, though, could it still be coincidence? Bobby didn’t know. He was only eleven and there were a bazillion things he didn’t know. But he was afraid . . . afraid that . . .

He got to his feet and looked around, half-expecting to see a whole line of long, overbright cars coming down Asher Avenue, rolling slow the way cars did when they were following a hearse to the graveyard, with their headlights on in the middle of the day. Half-expecting to see men in yellow coats standing beneath the marquee of the Asher Empire or out in front of Sukey’s Tavern, smoking Camels and watching him.

No cars. No men. Just kids heading home from school. The first ones from St. Gabe's, conspicuous in their green uniform pants and skirts, were visible among them.

Bobby turned around and backtracked for three blocks up Asher Avenue, too worried about what he'd seen chalked on the sidewalk to concern himself about bad-tempered St. Gabe's boys. There was nothing on the Avenue telephone poles but a few posters advertising Bingo Nite at the St. Gabriel Parish Hall and one on the corner of Asher and Tacoma announcing a rock-and-roll show in Hartford starring Clyde McPhatter and Duane Eddy, the Man with the Twangy Guitar.

By the time he got to Asher Avenue News, which was almost all the way back to school, Bobby was starting to hope he had overreacted. Still, he went in to look at their bulletin board, then all the way down Broad Street to Spicer's Variety, where he bought another gumball and checked that bulletin board as well. Nothing suspicious on either one. In Spicer's the card advertising the backyard pool was gone, but so what? The guy had probably sold it. Why else had he put the card up in the first place, for God's sake?

Bobby left and stood on the corner, chewing his gumball and trying to make up his mind what to do next.

Adulthood is accretive by nature, a thing which arrives in ragged stages and uneven overlaps. Bobby Garfield made the first adult decision of his life on the day he finished the sixth grade, concluding it would be wrong to tell Ted about the stuff he had seen . . . at least for the time being.

His assumption that the low men didn't exist had been shaken, but Bobby wasn't ready to give it up. Not on the evidence he had so far. Ted would be upset if Bobby told him what he had seen, maybe upset enough to toss his stuff back into his suitcases (plus those carryhandle bags folded up behind his little fridge) and just take off. If there really were bad guys after him, flight would make sense, but Bobby didn't want to lose the only adult friend he'd ever had if there weren't. So he decided to wait and see what, if anything, happened next.

That night Bobby Garfield experienced another aspect of adulthood: he lay awake until well after his Big Ben alarm clock said it was two in the morning, looking up at the ceiling and wondering if he had done the right thing.

#### IV. TED GOES BLANK. BOBBY GOES TO THE BEACH. MCQUOWN. THE WINKLE.

The day after school ended, Carol Gerber's mom crammed her Ford Estate Wagon with kids and took them to Savin Rock, a seaside amusement park twenty miles from Harwich. Anita Gerber had done this three years running, which made it an ancient tradition to Bobby, S-J, Carol, Carol's little brother, and Carol's girlfriends, Yvonne, Angie, and Tina. Neither Sully-John nor Bobby would have gone anywhere with three girls on his own, but since they were together it was okay. Besides, the lure of Savin Rock was too strong to resist. It would still be too cold to do much more than wade in the ocean, but they could goof on the beach and all the rides would be open—the midway, too. The year before, Sully-John had knocked down three pyramids of wooden milk-bottles with just three baseballs, winning his mother a large pink teddy bear which still held pride of place on top of the Sullivan TV. Today S-J wanted to win it a mate.

For Bobby, just getting away from Harwich for a little while was an attraction. He had seen nothing suspicious since the star and the moon scribbled next to the hopscotch grid, but Ted gave him a bad scare while Bobby was reading him the Saturday newspaper, and hard on the heels of that came an ugly argument with his mother.

The thing with Ted happened while Bobby was reading an opinion piece scoffing at the idea that Mickey Mantle would ever break Babe Ruth's home-run record. He didn't have the stamina or the dedication, the columnist insisted. " 'Above all, the character of this man is wrong,' " Bobby read. " 'The so-called Mick is more interested in night-clubbing than—' "

Ted had blanked out again. Bobby knew this, felt it somehow, even before he looked up from the newspaper. Ted was staring emptily out his window toward Colony Street and the hoarse, monotonous barking of Mrs. O'Hara's dog. It was the second time he'd done it this morning, but the first lapse had lasted only a few seconds (Ted bent into the open refrigerator, eyes wide in the frosty light, not moving . . . then giving a jerk, a little shake, and reaching for the orange juice). This time he was totally gone. Wigsville, man, as Kookie

might have said on *77 Sunset Strip*. Bobby rattled the newspaper to see if he could wake him up that way. Nothing.

“Ted? Are you all r—” With sudden dawning horror, Bobby realized something was wrong with the pupils of Ted’s eyes. They were growing and shrinking in his face as Bobby watched. It was as if Ted were plunging rapidly in and out of some abysmally black place . . . and yet all he was doing was sitting there in the sunshine.

“Ted?”

A cigarette was burning in the ashtray, except it was now nothing but stub and ash. Looking at it, Bobby realized Ted must have been out for almost the entire article on Mantle. And that thing his eyes were doing, the pupils swelling and contracting, swelling and contracting . . .

*He’s having an epilepsy attack or something. God, don’t they sometimes swallow their tongues when that happens?*

Ted’s tongue looked to be where it belonged, but his eyes . . . his eyes—

“Ted! Ted, wake up!”

Bobby was around to Ted’s side of the table before he was even aware he was moving. He grabbed Ted by the shoulders and shook him. It was like shaking a piece of wood carved to look like a man. Under his cotton pullover shirt Ted’s shoulders were hard and scrawny and unyielding.

“Wake up! *Wake up!*”

“They draw west now.” Ted continued to look out the window with his strange moving eyes. “That’s good. But they may be back. They . . .”

Bobby stood with his hands on Ted’s shoulders, frightened and awestruck. Ted’s pupils expanded and contracted like a heartbeat you could see. “Ted, what’s wrong?”

“I must be very still. I must be a hare in the bush. They may pass by. There will be water if God wills it, and they may pass by. All things serve . . .”

“Serve what?” Almost whispering now. “Serve what, Ted?”

“All things serve the Beam,” Ted said, and suddenly his hands closed over Bobby’s. They were very cold, those hands, and for a moment Bobby felt nightmarish, fainting terror. It was like being gripped by a corpse that could only move its hands and the pupils of its dead eyes.

Then Ted was looking at him, and although his eyes were frightened, they were almost normal again. Not dead at all.

“Bobby?”

Bobby pulled his hands free and put them around Ted’s neck. He hugged him, and as he did Bobby heard a bell tolling in his head—this was very brief but very clear. He could even hear the pitch of the bell shift, the way the pitch of a train-whistle did if the train was moving fast. It was as if something inside his head were passing at high speed. He heard a rattle of hooves on some hard surface. Wood? No, metal. He smelled dust, dry and thundery in his nose. At the same moment the backs of his eyes began to itch.

“Shhh!” Ted’s breath in his ear was as dry as the smell of that dust, and somehow intimate. His hands were on Bobby’s back, cupping his shoulderblades and holding him still. “Not a word! Not a thought. Except . . . baseball! Yes, baseball, if you like!”

Bobby thought of Maury Wills getting his lead off first, a walking lead, measuring three steps . . . then four . . . Wills bent over at the waist, hands dangling, heels raised slightly off the dirt, he can go either way, it depends on what the pitcher does . . . and when the pitcher goes to the plate Wills heads for second in an explosion of speed and dust and—

Gone. Everything was gone. No bell ringing in his head, no sound of hooves, no smell of dust. No itching behind his eyes, either. Had that itching really ever been there? Or had he just made it up because Ted’s eyes were scaring him?

“Bobby,” Ted said, again directly into Bobby’s ear. The movement of Ted’s lips against his skin made him shiver. Then: “Good God, what am I doing?”

He pushed Bobby away, gently but firmly. His face looked dismayed and a little too pale, but his eyes were back to normal, his pupils holding steady. For the moment that was all Bobby cared about. He felt strange, though—muzzy in the head, as if he’d just woken up from a heavy nap. At the same time the world looked amazingly brilliant, every line and shape perfectly defined.

“Shazam,” Bobby said, and laughed shakily. “What just happened?”

“Nothing to concern you.” Ted reached for his cigarette and seemed surprised to see only a tiny smoldering scrap left in the groove where he had set it. He brushed it into the ashtray with his knuckle. “I went off again, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, *way* off. I was scared. I thought you were having an epilepsy fit or something. Your eyes—”

“It’s not epilepsy,” Ted said. “And it’s not dangerous. But if it happens again, it would be best if you didn’t touch me.”

“Why?”

Ted lit a fresh cigarette. “Just because. Will you promise?”

“Okay. What’s the Beam?”

Ted gazed at him sharply. “I spoke of the Beam?”

“You said ‘All things serve the Beam.’ I think that was it.”

“Perhaps sometime I’ll tell you, but not today. Today you’re going to the beach, aren’t you?”

Bobby jumped, startled. He looked at Ted’s clock and saw it was almost nine o’clock. “Yeah,” he said. “Maybe I ought to start getting ready. I could finish reading you the paper when I get back.”

“Yes, good. A fine idea. I have some letters to write.”

*No you don’t, you just want to get rid of me before I ask any other questions you don’t want to answer.*

But if that was what Ted was doing it was all right. As Liz Garfield so often said, Bobby had his own fish to fry. Still, as he reached the door to Ted’s room, the thought of the red scrap of cloth hanging from the TV aerial and the crescent moon and the star next to the hopscotch grid made him turn reluctantly back.

“Ted, there’s something—”

“The low men, yes, I know.” Ted smiled. “For now don’t trouble yourself about them, Bobby. For now all is well. They aren’t moving this way or even looking this way.”

“They draw west,” Bobby said.

Ted looked at him through a scurf of rising cigarette smoke, his blue eyes steady. “Yes,” he said, “and with luck they’ll *stay* west. Seattle would be fine with me. Have a good time at the seaside, Bobby.”

“But I saw—”

“Perhaps you saw only shadows. In any case, this isn’t the time to talk. Just remember what I said—if I should go blank like that again, just sit and wait

for it to pass. If I should reach for you, stand back. If I should get up, tell me to sit down. In that state I will do as you say. It's like being hypnotized."

"Why do you—"

"No more questions, Bobby. Please."

"You're okay? Really okay?"

"In the pink. Now go. Enjoy your day."

Bobby hurried downstairs, again struck by how sharp everything seemed to be: the brilliance of the light slanting through the window on the second-floor landing, a ladybug crawling around the lip of an empty milk-bottle outside the door of the Proskys' apartment, a sweet high humming in his ears that was like the voice of the day—the first Saturday of summer vacation.

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Back in the apartment, Bobby grabbed his toy cars and trucks from various stashes under his bed and at the back of his closet. A couple of these—a Matchbox Ford and a blue metal dumptruck Mr. Biderman had sent home with his mom a few days after Bobby's birthday—were pretty cool, but he had nothing to rival Sully's gasoline tanker or yellow Tonka bulldozer. The 'dozer was especially good to play with in the sand. Bobby was looking forward to at least an hour's serious roadbuilding while the waves broke nearby and his skin pinkened in the bright coastal sunshine. It occurred to him that he hadn't gathered up his trucks like this since sometime last winter, when he and S-J had spent a happy post-blizzard Saturday afternoon making a road-system in the fresh snow down in Commonwealth Park. He was old now, eleven, almost too old for stuff like this. There was something sad about that idea, but he didn't have to be sad right now, not if he didn't want to. His toy-truck days might be fast approaching their end, but that end wouldn't be today. Nope, not today.

His mother packed him a lunch for the trip, but she wouldn't give him any money when he asked—not even a nickel for one of the private changing-stalls which lined the ocean side of the midway. And almost before Bobby realized it was happening, they were having what he most dreaded: an argument about money.

“Fifty cents’d be enough,” Bobby said. He heard the baby-whine in his voice, hated it, couldn’t stop it. “Just half a rock. Come on, Mom, what do you say? Be a sport.”

She lit a Kool, striking the match so hard it made a snapping sound, and looked at him through the smoke with her eyes narrowed. “You’re earning your own money now, Bob. Most people pay three cents for the paper and you get paid for reading it. A dollar a week! My God! When I was a girl—”

“Mom, that money’s for my bike! You know that.”

She had turned to the mirror, frowning and fussing at the shoulders of her blouse—Mr. Biderman had asked her to come in for a few hours even though it was Saturday. Now she turned back, cigarette still clamped between her lips, and bent her frown on him.

“You’re still asking me to buy you that bike, aren’t you? *Still*. I told you I couldn’t afford it but you’re still asking.”

“No, I’m not! I’m not either!” Bobby’s eyes were wide with anger and hurt. “Just a lousy half a rock for the—”

“Half a buck here, two bits there—it all adds up, you know. What you want is for me to buy you that bike by handing you the money for everything else. Then you don’t have to give up any of the *other* things you want.”

“That’s not fair!”

He knew what she would say before she said it, even had time to think that he had walked right into that one. “*Life’s* not fair, Bobby-O.” Turning back to the mirror for one final pluck at the ghost of a slip-strap hovering beneath the right shoulder of her blouse.

“A nickel for the changing-room?” Bobby asked. “Couldn’t you at least—”

“Yes, probably, oh I imagine,” she said, clipping off each word. She usually put rouge on her cheeks before going to work, but not all the color on her face this morning came out of a powderbox, and Bobby, angry as he was, knew he’d better be careful. If he lost his temper the way she was capable of losing hers, he’d be here in the hot empty apartment all day, forbidden to so much as step out into the hall.

His mother snatched her purse off the table by the end of the couch, butted out her cigarette hard enough to split the filter, then turned and looked at him.

“If I said to you, ‘Gee, we can’t eat this week because I saw a pair of shoes at Hunsicker’s that I just had to have,’ what would you think?”

*I’d think you were a liar, Bobby thought. And I’d say if you’re so broke, Mom, what about the Sears catalogue on the top shelf of your closet? The one with the dollar bills and the five-dollar bills—even a ten or two—taped to the underwear pages in the middle? What about the blue pitcher in the kitchen dish cabinet, the one tucked all the way in the back corner behind the gravy boat with the crack in it, the blue pitcher where you put your spare quarters, where you’ve been putting them ever since my father died? And when the pitcher’s full you roll the quarters and take them to the bank and get bills, and the bills go into the catalogue, don’t they? The bills get taped to the underwear pages of the wishbook.*

But he said none of this, only looked down at his sneakers with his eyes burning.

“I have to make choices,” she said. “And if you’re old enough to work, sonnyboy of mine, you’ll have to make them, too. Do you think I like telling you no?”

*Not exactly, Bobby thought, looking at his sneakers and biting at his lip, which wanted to loosen up and start letting out a bunch of blubbery baby-sounds. Not exactly, but I don’t think you really mind it, either.*

“If we were the Gotrocks, I’d give you five dollars to spend at the beach—hell, ten! You wouldn’t have to borrow from your bike-jar if you wanted to take your little girlfriend on the Loop-the-Loop—”

*She’s not my girlfriend!* Bobby screamed at his mother inside his head. *SHE IS NOT MY LITTLE GIRLFRIEND!*

“—or the Indian Railroad. But of course if we were the Gotrocks, you wouldn’t need to save for a bike in the first place, would you?” Her voice rising, rising. Whatever had been troubling her over the last few months threatening to come rushing out, foaming like sodapop and biting like acid. “I don’t know if you ever noticed this, but your father didn’t exactly leave us well off, and I’m doing the best I can. I feed you, I put clothes on your back, I paid for you to go to Sterling House this summer and play baseball while I push paper in that hot office. You got invited to go to the beach with the other kids, I’m very happy for you, but how you finance your day off is your business. If you want to ride the rides, take some of the money you’ve got in that jar and ride them.

If you don't, just play on the beach or stay home. Makes no difference to me. I just want you to stop whining. I hate it when you whine. It's like . . .” She stopped, sighed, opened her purse, took out her cigarettes. “I hate it when you whine,” she repeated.

*It's like your father.* That was what she had stopped herself from saying.

“So what's the story, morning-glory?” she asked. “Are you finished?”

Bobby stood silent, cheeks burning, eyes burning, looking down at his sneakers and focusing all his will on not blubbering. At this point a single choked sob might be enough to get him grounded for the day; she was really mad, only looking for a reason to do it. And blubbering wasn't the only danger. He wanted to scream at her that he'd rather be like his father than like her, a skinflinty old cheapskate like her, not good for even a lousy nickel, and so what if the late not-so-great Randall Garfield hadn't left them well off? Why did she always make it sound like that was *his* fault? Who had married him?

“You sure, Bobby-O? No more smartass comebacks?” The most dangerous sound of all had come into her voice—a kind of brittle brightness. It sounded like good humor if you didn't know her.

Bobby looked at his sneakers and said nothing. Kept all the blubbering and all the angry words locked in his throat and said nothing. Silence spun out between them. He could smell her cigarette and all of last night's cigarettes behind this one, and those smoked on all the other nights when she didn't so much look at the TV as through it, waiting for the phone to ring.

“All right, I guess we've got ourselves straight,” she said after giving him fifteen seconds or so to open his mouth and stick his big fat foot in it. “Have a nice day, Bobby.” She went out without kissing him.

Bobby went to the open window (tears were running down his face now, but he hardly noticed them), drew aside the curtain, and watched her head toward Commonwealth, high heels tapping. He took a couple of big, watery breaths and then went into the kitchen. He looked across it at the cupboard where the blue pitcher hid behind the gravy boat. He could take some money out of it, she didn't keep any exact count of how much was in there and she'd never miss three or four quarters, but he wouldn't. Spending it would be joyless. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but he did; had known it even at nine, when he first discovered the pitcher of change hidden there. So, with

feelings of regret rather than righteousness, he went into his bedroom and looked at the Bike Fund jar instead.

It occurred to him that she was right—he *could* take a little of his saved dough to spend at Savin Rock. It might take him an extra month to accumulate the price of the Schwinn, but at least spending this money would feel all right. And there was something else, as well. If he refused to take any money out of the jar, to do anything but hoard it and save it, he'd be like *her*.

That decided the matter. Bobby fished five dimes out of the Bike Fund, put them in his pocket, put a Kleenex on top of them to keep them from bouncing out if he ran somewhere, then finished collecting his stuff for the beach. Soon he was whistling, and Ted came downstairs to see what he was up to.

“Are you off, Captain Garfield?”

Bobby nodded. “Savin Rock’s a pretty cool place. Rides and stuff, you know?”

“Indeed I do. Have a good time, Bobby, and don’t fall out of anything.”

Bobby started for the door, then looked back at Ted, who was standing on the bottom step of the stairs in his slippers. “Why don’t you come out and sit on the porch?” Bobby asked. “It’s gonna be hot in the house, I bet.”

Ted smiled. “Perhaps. But I think I’ll stay in.”

“You okay?”

“Fine, Bobby. I’m fine.”

As he crossed to the Gerbers’ side of Broad Street, Bobby realized he felt sorry for Ted, hiding up in his hot room for no reason. And it *had* to be for no reason, didn’t it? Sure it did. Even if there were low men out there, cruising around someplace (*in the west*, he thought, *they draw west*), what could they want of an old retired guy like Ted Brautigam?

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At first the quarrel with his mother weighed him down a little (Mrs. Gerber’s pudgy, pretty friend Rionda Hewson accused him of being “in a brown study,” whatever that was, then began tickling him up the sides and in the armpits until Bobby laughed in self-defense), but after they had been on the beach a little while he began to feel better, more himself.

Although it was still early in the season, Savin Rock was full speed ahead—the merry-go-round turning, the Wild Mouse roaring, the little kids screaming, tinny rock and roll pouring from the speakers outside the funhouse, the barkers hollering from their booths. Sully-John didn't get the teddy bear he wanted, knocking over only two of the last three milk-bottles (Rionda claimed some of them had special weights in the bottom to keep them from going over unless you whacked them just right), but the guy in the baseball-toss booth awarded him a pretty neat prize anyway—a goofy-looking anteater covered with yellow plush. S-J impulsively gave it to Carol's mom. Anita laughed and hugged him and told him he was the best kid in the world, if he was fifteen years older she'd commit bigamy and marry him. Sully-John blushed until he was purple.

Bobby tried the ringtoss and missed with all three throws. At the Shooting Gallery he had better luck, breaking two plates and winning a small stuffed bear. He gave it to Ian-the-Snot, who had actually been good for a change—hadn't thrown any tantrums, wet his pants, or tried to sock either Sully or Bobby in the nuts. Ian hugged the bear and looked at Bobby as if Bobby were God.

"It's great and he loves it," Anita said, "but don't you want to take it home to your mother?"

"Nah—she's not much on stuff like that. I'd like to win her a bottle of perfume, though."

He and Sully-John dared each other to go on the Wild Mouse and finally went together, howling deliriously as their car plunged into each dip, simultaneously sure they were going to live forever and die immediately. They went on the Tilt-a-Whirl and the Krazy Kups. Down to his last fifteen cents, Bobby found himself on the Ferris wheel with Carol. Their car stopped at the top, rocking slightly, making him feel funny in his stomach. To his left the Atlantic stepped shoreward in a series of white-topped waves. The beach was just as white, the ocean an impossible shade of deep blue. Sunlight ran across it like silk. Below them was the midway. Rising up from the speakers came the sound of Freddy Cannon: she comes from Tallahassee, she's got a hi-fi chassis.

"Everything down there looks so little," Carol said. Her voice was also little—uncharacteristically so.

“Don’t be scared, we’re safe as can be. The Ferris wheel would be a kiddie-ride if it didn’t go so high.”

Carol was in many ways the oldest of the three of them—tough and sure of herself, as on the day she had made S-J carry her books for swearing—but now her face had almost become a baby’s face again: round, a little bit pale, dominated by a pair of alarmed blue eyes. Without thinking Bobby leaned over, put his mouth on hers, and kissed her. When he drew back, her eyes were wider than ever.

“Safe as can be,” he said, and grinned.

“Do it again!” It was her first real kiss, she had gotten it at Savin Rock on the first Saturday of summer vacation, and she hadn’t been paying attention. That was what she was thinking, that was why she wanted him to do it again.

“I better not,” Bobby said. Although . . . up here who was there to see and call him a sissy?

“I dare you, and don’t say dares go first.”

“Will you tell?”

“No, swear to God. Go on, hurry up! Before we go down!”

So he kissed her again. Her lips were smooth and closed, hot with the sun. Then the wheel began to move and he stopped. For just a moment Carol laid her head against his chest. “Thank you, Bobby,” she said. “That was nice as could be.”

“I thought so, too.”

They drew apart from each other a little, and when their car stopped and the tattooed attendant swung the safety bar up, Bobby got out and ran without looking back at her to where S-J was standing. Yet he knew already that kissing Carol at the top of the Ferris wheel was going to be the best part of the day. It was his first real kiss, too, and Bobby never forgot the feel of her lips pressing on his—dry and smooth and warmed by the sun. It was the kiss by which all the others of his life would be judged and found wanting.

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Around three o’clock, Mrs. Gerber told them to start gathering their things; it was time to go home. Carol gave a token “Aw, Mom,” and then started picking stuff up. Her girlfriends helped; even Ian helped a little (refusing even as he

fetches and carried to let go of the sand-matted bear). Bobby had half-expected Carol to tag after him for the rest of the day, and he had been sure she'd tell her girlfriends about kissing on the Ferris wheel (he would know she had when he saw them in a little knot, giggling with their hands over their mouths, looking at him with their merry knowing eyes), but she had done neither. Several times he had caught her looking at him, though, and several times he had caught himself sneaking glances at her. He kept remembering her eyes up there. How big and worried they had been. And he had kissed her, just like that. Bingo.

Bobby and Sully toted most of the beachbags. "Good mules! Giddyap!" Rionda cried, laughing, as they mounted the steps between the beach and the boardwalk. She was lobster red under the cold-cream she had smeared over her face and shoulders, and she moaned to Anita Gerber that she wouldn't sleep a wink that night, that if the sunburn didn't keep her awake, the midway food would.

"Well, you didn't have to eat four wieners and two doughboys," Mrs. Gerber said, sounding more irritated than Bobby had ever heard her—she was tired, he reckoned. He felt a little dazed by the sun himself. His back prickled with sunburn and he had sand in his socks. The beachbags with which he was festooned swung and bounced against each other.

"But amusement park food's so *goood*," Rionda protested in a sad voice. Bobby laughed. He couldn't help it.

They walked slowly along the midway toward the dirt parking lot, paying no attention to the rides now. The barkers looked at them, then looked past them for fresh blood. Folks loaded down and trudging back to the parking lot were, by and large, lost causes.

At the very end of the midway, on the left, was a skinny man wearing baggy blue Bermuda shorts, a strap-style undershirt, and a bowler hat. The bowler was old and faded, but cocked at a rakish angle. Also, there was a plastic sunflower stuck in the brim. He was a funny guy, and the girls finally got their chance to put their hands over their mouths and giggle.

He looked at them with the air of a man who has been giggled at by experts and smiled back. This made Carol and her friends giggle harder. The man in the bowler hat, still smiling, spread his hands above the makeshift table behind

which he was standing—a slab of fiberboard on two bright orange sawhorses. On the fiberboard were three redbacked Bicycle cards. He turned them over with quick, graceful gestures. His fingers were long and perfectly white, Bobby saw—not a bit of sun-color on them.

The card in the middle was the queen of hearts. The man in the bowler picked it up, showed it to them, walked it dextrously back and forth between his fingers. “Find the lady in red, *cherchez la femme rouge*, that’s what it’s all about and all you have to do,” he said. “It’s easy as can beezy, easy-Japaneezy, easy as knitting kitten-britches.” He beckoned Yvonne Loving. “Come on over here, dollface, and show em how it’s done.”

Yvonne, still giggling and blushing to the roots of her black hair, shrank back against Rionda and murmured that she had no more money for games, it was all spent.

“Not a problem,” the man in the bowler hat said. “It’s just a demonstration, dollface—I want your mom and her pretty friend to see how easy it is.”

“Neither one’s my mom,” Yvonne said, but she stepped forward.

“We really ought to get going if we’re going to beat the traffic, Evvie,” Mrs. Gerber said.

“No, wait a minute, this is fun,” Rionda said. “It’s three-card monte. Looks easy, just like he says, but if you’re not careful you start chasing and go home dead broke.”

The man in the bowler gave her a reproachful look, then a broad and engaging grin. It was the grin of a low man, Bobby thought suddenly. Not one of those Ted was afraid of, but a low man, just the same.

“It’s obvious to me,” said the man in the bowler, “that at some point in your past you have been the victim of a scoundrel. Although how anyone could be cruel enough to mistreat such a beautiful classy dame is beyond my ability to comprehend.”

The beautiful classy dame—five-five or so, two hundred pounds or so, shoulders and face slathered with Pond’s—laughed happily. “Stow the guff and show the child how it works. And are you really telling me this is legal?”

The man behind the table tossed his head back and also laughed. “At the ends of the midway everything’s legal until they catch you and throw you out . . . as I think you probably know. Now . . . what’s your name, dollface?”

“Yvonne,” she said in a voice Bobby could barely hear. Beside him, Sully-John was watching with great interest. “Sometimes folks call me Evvie.”

“Okay, Evvie, look right here, pretty baby. What do you see? Tell me their names—I know you can, a smart kid like you—and point when you tell. Don’t be afraid to touch, either. There’s nothing crooked here.”

“This one on the end is the jack . . . this one on the other end is the king . . . and this is the queen. She’s in the middle.”

“That’s it, dollface. In the cards as in life, there is so often a woman between two men. That’s their power, and in another five or six years you’ll find it out for yourself.” His voice had fallen into a low, almost hypnotic chanting. “Now watch closely and never take your eyes from the cards.” He turned them over so their backs showed. “Now, dollface, where’s the queen?”

Yvonne Loving pointed at the red back in the middle.

“Is she right?” the man in the bowler asked the little party gathered around his table.

“So far,” Rionda said, and laughed so hard her uncorseted belly jiggled under her sundress.

Smiling at her laughter, the low man in the bowler hat flicked one corner of the middle card, showing the red queen. “One hundred per cent keerect, sweetheart, so far so good. Now watch! Watch close! It’s a race between your eye and my hand! Which will win? That’s the question of the day!”

He began to scramble the three cards rapidly about on his plank table, chanting as he did so.

“Up and down, all around, in and out, all about, to and fro, watch em go, now they’re back, they’re side by side, so tell me, dollface, where’s she hide?”

As Yvonne studied the three cards, which were indeed once more lined up side by side, Sully leaned close to Bobby’s ear and said, “You don’t even have to watch him mix them around. The queen’s got a bent corner. Do you see it?”

Bobby nodded, and thought *Good girl* when Yvonne pointed hesitantly to the card on the far left—the one with the bent corner. The man in the bowler turned it over and revealed the queen of hearts.

“Good job!” he said. “You’ve a sharp eye, dollface, a sharp eye indeed.”

“Thank you,” Yvonne said, blushing and looking almost as happy as Carol had looked when Bobby kissed her.

“If you’d bet me a dime on that go, I’d be giving you back twenty cents right now,” the man in the bowler hat said. “Why, you ask? Because it’s Saturday, and I call Saturday Twoferday! Now would one of you ladies like to risk a dime in a race between your young eyes and my tired old hands? You can tell your husbands—lucky fellas they are to have you, too, may I say—that Mr. Herb McQuown, the Monte Man at Savin Rock, paid for your day’s parking. Or what about a quarter? Point out the queen of hearts and I give you back fifty cents.”

“Half a rock, yeah!” Sully-John said. “I got a quarter, mister, and you’re on.”

“Johnny, it’s gambling,” Carol’s mother said doubtfully. “I don’t really think I should allow—”

“Go on, let the kid learn a lesson,” Rionda said. “Besides, the guy may let him win. Suck the rest of us in.” She made no effort to lower her voice, but the man in the bowler—Mr. McQuown—only looked at her and smiled. Then he returned his attention to S-J.

“Let’s see your money, kid—come on, pony up.”

Sully-John handed over his quarter. McQuown raised it into the afternoon sunlight for a moment, one eye closed.

“Yeh, looks like a good ’un to me,” he said, and planked it down on the board to the left of the three-card lineup. He looked in both directions—for cops, maybe—then tipped the cynically smiling Rionda a wink before turning his attention back to Sully-John. “What’s your name, fella?”

“John Sullivan.”

McQuown widened his eyes and tipped his bowler to the other side of his head, making the plastic sunflower nod and bend comically. “A name of note! You know what I refer to?”

“Sure. Someday maybe I’ll be a fighter, too,” S-J said. He hooked a left and then a right at the air over McQuown’s makeshift table. “Pow, pow!”

“Pow-pow indeed,” said McQuown. “And how’s your eyes, Master Sullivan?”

“Pretty good.”

“Then get them ready, because the race is on! Yes it is! Your eyes against my hands! Up and down, all around, where’d she go, I don’t know.” The cards, which had moved much faster this time, slowed to a stop.

Sully started to point, then drew his hand back, frowning. Now there were *two* cards with little folds in the corner. Sully looked up at McQuown, whose arms were folded across his dingy undershirt. McQuown was smiling. "Take your time, son," he said. "The morning was whizbang, but it's been a slow afternoon."

*Men who think hats with feathers in the brims are sophisticated*, Bobby remembered Ted saying. *The sort of men who'd shoot craps in an alley and pass around a bottle of liquor in a paper bag during the game*. McQuown had a funny plastic flower in his hat instead of a feather, and there was no bottle in evidence . . . but there was one in his pocket. A little one. Bobby was sure of it. And toward the end of the day, as business wound down and totally sharp hand-eye coordination became less of a priority to him, McQuown would take more and more frequent nips from it.

Sully pointed to the card on the far right. *No, S-J*, Bobby thought, and when McQuown turned that card up, it was the king of spades. McQuown turned up the card on the far left and showed the jack of clubs. The queen was back in the middle. "Sorry, son, a little slow that time, it ain't no crime. Want to try again now that you're warmed up?"

"Gee, I . . . that was the last of my dough." Sully-John looked crestfallen.

"Just as well for you, kid," Rionda said. "He'd take you for everything you own and leave you standing here in your shortie-shorts." The girls giggled wildly at this; S-J blushed. Rionda took no notice of either. "I worked at Revere Beach for quite awhile when I lived in Mass," she said. "Let me show you kids how this works. Want to go for a buck, pal? Or is that too sweet for you?"

"In your presence everything would be sweet," McQuown said sentimentally, and snatched her dollar the moment it was out of her purse. He held it up to the light, examined it with a cold eye, then set it down to the left of the cards. "Looks like a good 'un," he said. "Let's play, darling. What's your name?"

"Pudd'ntane," Rionda said. "Ask me again and I'll tell you the same."

"Ree, don't you think—" Anita Gerber began.

"I told you, I'm wise to the gaff," Rionda said. "Run em, my pal."

“Without delay,” McQuown agreed, and his hands blurred the three red-backed cards into motion (up and down, all around, to and fro, watch them go), finally settling them in a line of three again. And this time, Bobby observed with amazement, all three cards had those slightly bent corners.

Rionda’s little smile had gone. She looked from the short row of cards to McQuown, then down at the cards again, and then at her dollar bill, lying off to one side and fluttering slightly in the little seabreeze that had come up. Finally she looked back at McQuown. “You suckered me, pally,” she said. “Didn’t you?”

“No,” McQuown said. “I *raced* you. Now . . . what do you say?”

“I think I say that was a real good dollar that didn’t make no trouble and I’m sorry to see it go,” Rionda replied, and pointed to the middle card.

McQuown turned it over, revealed the king, and made Rionda’s dollar disappear into his pocket. This time the queen was on the far left. McQuown, a dollar and a quarter richer, smiled at the folks from Harwich. The plastic flower tucked into the brim of his hat nodded to and fro in the salt-smelling air. “Who’s next?” he asked. “Who wants to race his eye against my hand?”

“I think we’re all raced out,” Mrs. Gerber said. She gave the man behind the table a thin smile, then put one hand on her daughter’s shoulder and the other on her sleepy-eyed son’s, turning them away.

“Mrs. Gerber?” Bobby asked. For just a moment he considered how his mother, once married to a man who had never met an inside straight he didn’t like, would feel if she could see her son standing here at Mr. McQuown’s slapdash table with that risky Randy Garfield red hair gleaming in the sun. The thought made him smile a little. Bobby knew what an inside straight was now; flushes and full houses, too. He had made inquiries. “May I try?”

“Oh, Bobby, I really think we’ve had enough, don’t you?”

Bobby reached under the Kleenex he had stuffed into his pocket and brought out his last three nickels. “All I have is this,” he said, showing first Mrs. Gerber and then Mr. McQuown. “Is it enough?”

“Son,” McQuown said, “I have played this game for pennies and enjoyed it.”

Mrs. Gerber looked at Rionda.

“Ah, hell,” Rionda said, and pinched Bobby’s cheek. “It’s the price of a haircut, for Christ’s sake. Let him lose it and then we’ll go home.”

“All right, Bobby,” Mrs. Gerber said, and sighed. “If you have to.”

“Put those nickels down here, Bob, where we can all look at em,” said McQuown. “They look like good ’uns to me, yes indeed. Are you ready?”

“I think so.”

“Then here we go. Two boys and a girl go into hiding together. The boys are worthless. Find the girl and double your money.”

The pale dextrous fingers turned the three cards over. McQuown spied and the cards blurred. Bobby watched them move about the table but made no real effort to track the queen. That wasn’t necessary.

“Now they go, now they slow, now they rest, here’s the test.” The three red-backed cards were in a line again. “Tell me, Bobby, where’s she hide?”

“There,” Bobby said, and pointed to the far left.

Sully groaned. “It’s the *middle* card, you jerk. This time I never took my eye off it.”

McQuown took no notice of Sully. He was looking at Bobby. Bobby looked back at him. After a moment McQuown reached out and turned over the card Bobby had pointed at. It was the queen of hearts.

“What the *heck*?” Sully cried.

Carol clapped excitedly and jumped up and down. Rionda Hewson squealed and smacked him on the back. “You took im to school that time, Bobby! Attaboy!”

McQuown gave Bobby a peculiar, thoughtful smile, then reached into his pocket and brought out a fistful of change. “Not bad, son. First time I’ve been beat all day. That I didn’t *let* myself get beat, that is.” He picked out a quarter and a nickel and put them down beside Bobby’s fifteen cents. “Like to let it ride?” He saw Bobby didn’t understand. “Like to go again?”

“May I?” Bobby asked Anita Gerber.

“Wouldn’t you rather quit while you’re ahead?” she asked, but her eyes were sparkling and she seemed to have forgotten all about beating the traffic home.

“I *am* going to quit while I’m ahead,” he told her.

McQuown laughed. “A boastful boy! Won’t be able to grow a single chin-whisker for another five years, but he’s a boastful boy already. Well then, Boastful

Bobby, what do you think? Are we on for the game?”

“Sure,” Bobby said. If Carol or Sully-John had accused him of boasting, he would have protested strongly—all his heroes, from John Wayne to Lucky Starr of the Space Patrol, were modest fellows, the kind to say “Shucks” after saving a world or a wagon train. But he felt no need to defend himself to Mr. McQuown, who was a low man in blue shorts and maybe a card-cheater as well. Boasting had been the furthest thing from Bobby’s mind. He didn’t think this was much like his dad’s inside straights, either. Inside straights were all hope and guesswork—“fool’s poker,” according to Charlie Yearman, the Harwich Elementary janitor, who had been happy to tell Bobby everything about the game that S-J and Denny Rivers hadn’t known—but there was no guesswork about this.

Mr. McQuown looked at him a moment longer; Bobby’s calm confidence seemed to trouble him. Then he reached up, adjusted the slant of his bowler, stretched out his arms, and wiggled his fingers like Bugs Bunny before he played the piano at Carnegie Hall in one of the Merrie Melodies. “Get on your mark, boasty boy. I’m giving you the whole business this time, from the soup to the nuts.”

The cards blurred into a kind of pink film. From behind him Bobby heard Sully-John mutter “Holy crow!” Carol’s friend Tina said “That’s too *fast*” in an amusing tone of prim disapproval. Bobby again watched the cards move, but only because he felt it was expected of him. Mr. McQuown didn’t bother with any patter this time, which was sort of a relief.

The cards settled. McQuown looked at Bobby with his eyebrows raised. There was a little smile on his mouth, but he was breathing fast and there were beads of sweat on his upper lip.

Bobby pointed immediately to the card on the right. “That’s her.”

“How do you know that?” Mr. McQuown asked, his smile fading. “How the hell do you know that?”

“I just do,” Bobby said.

Instead of flipping the card, McQuown turned his head slightly and looked down the midway. The smile had been replaced by a petulant expression—downturned lips and a crease between his eyes. Even the plastic sunflower in

his hat seemed displeased, its to-and-fro bob now sulky instead of jaunty. “No one beats that shuffle,” he said. “No one has *ever* beaten that shuffle.”

Rionda reached over Bobby’s shoulder and flipped the card he had pointed at. It was the queen of hearts. This time all the kids clapped. The sound made the crease between Mr. McQuown’s eyes deepen.

“The way I figure, you owe old Boasty Bobby here ninety cents,” Rionda said. “Are you gonna pay?”

“Suppose I don’t?” Mr. McQuown asked, turning his frown on Rionda. “What are you going to do, tubbo? Call a cop?”

“Maybe we ought to just go,” Anita Gerber said, sounding nervous.

“Call a cop? Not me,” Rionda said, ignoring Anita. She never took her eyes off McQuown. “A lousy ninety cents out of your pocket and you look like Baby Huey with a load in his pants. Jesus wept!”

Except, Bobby knew, it wasn’t the money. Mr. McQuown had lost a lot more than this on occasion. Sometimes when he lost it was a “hustle”; sometimes it was an “out.” What he was steamed about now was the *shuffle*. McQuown hadn’t liked a kid beating his shuffle.

“What I’ll do,” Rionda continued, “is tell anybody on the midway who wants to know that you’re a cheapskate. Ninety-Cent McQuown, I’ll call you. Think that’ll help your business?”

“I’d like to give *you* the business,” Mr. McQuown growled, but he reached into his pocket, brought out another dip of change—a bigger one this time—and quickly counted out Bobby’s winnings. “There,” he said. “Ninety cents. Go buy yourself a martini.”

“I really just guessed, you know,” Bobby said as he swept the coins into his hand and then shoved them into his pocket, where they hung like a weight. The argument that morning with his mother now seemed exquisitely stupid. He was going home with more money than he had come with, and it meant nothing. Nothing. “I’m a good guesser.”

Mr. McQuown relaxed. He wouldn’t have hurt them in any case—he might be a low man but he wasn’t the kind who hurt people; he’d never subject those clever long-fingered hands to the indignity of forming a fist—but Bobby didn’t want to leave him unhappy. He wanted what Mr. McQuown himself would have called an “out.”

“Yeah,” McQuown said. “A good guesser is what you are. Like to try a third guess, Bobby? Riches await.”

“We really have to be going,” Mrs. Gerber said hastily.

“And if I tried again I’d lose,” Bobby said. “Thank you, Mr. McQuown. It was a good game.”

“Yeah, yeah. Get lost, kid.” Mr. McQuown was like all the other midway barkers now, looking farther down the line. Looking for fresh blood.

• • •

Going home, Carol and her girlfriends kept looking at him with awe; Sully-John, with a kind of puzzled respect. It made Bobby feel uncomfortable. At one point Rionda turned around and regarded him closely. “You didn’t just guess,” she said.

Bobby looked at her cautiously, withholding comment.

“You had a wrinkle.”

“What’s a wrinkle?”

“My dad wasn’t much of a betting man, but every now and then he’d get a hunch about a number. He called it a wrinkle. *Then* he’d bet. Once he won fifty dollars. Bought us groceries for a whole month. That’s what happened to you, isn’t it?”

“I guess so,” Bobby said. “Maybe I had a wrinkle.”

• • •

When he got home, his mom was sitting on the porch glider with her legs folded under her. She had changed into her Saturday pants and was looking moodily out at the street. She waved briefly to Carol’s mom as she drove away; watched as Anita turned into her own driveway and Bobby trudged up the walk. He knew what his mom was thinking: Mrs. Gerber’s husband was in the Navy, but at least she *had* a husband. Also, Anita Gerber had an Estate Wagon. Liz had shank’s mare, the bus if she had to go a little farther, or a taxi if she needed to go into Bridgeport.

But Bobby didn’t think she was angry at him anymore, and that was good.

“Did you have a nice time at Savin, Bobby?”

“Super time,” he said, and thought: *What is it, Mom? You don't care what kind of time I had at the beach. What's really on your mind?* But he couldn't tell.

“Good. Listen, kiddo . . . I'm sorry we got into an argument this morning. I *hate* working on Saturdays.” This last came out almost in a spit.

“It's okay, Mom.”

She touched his cheek and shook her head. “That fair skin of yours! You'll never tan, Bobby-O. Not you. Come on in and I'll put some Baby Oil on that sunburn.”

He followed her inside, took off his shirt, and stood in front of her as she sat on the couch and smeared the fragrant Baby Oil on his back and arms and neck—even on his cheeks. It felt good, and he thought again how much he loved her, how much he loved to be touched by her. He wondered what she would think if she knew he had kissed Carol on the Ferris wheel. Would she smile? Bobby didn't think she would smile. And if she knew about McQuown and the cards—

“I haven't seen your pal from upstairs,” she said, recapping the Baby Oil bottle. “I know he's up there because I can hear the Yankees game on his radio, but wouldn't you think he'd go out on the porch where it's cool?”

“I guess he doesn't feel like it,” Bobby said. “Mom, are you okay?”

She looked at him, startled. “Fine, Bobby.” She smiled and Bobby smiled back. It took an effort, because he didn't think his mom was fine at all. In fact he was pretty sure she wasn't.

He just had a wrinkle.

• • •

That night Bobby lay on his back with his heels spread to the corners of the bed, eyes open and looking up at the ceiling. His window was open, too, the curtains drifting back and forth in a breath of a breeze, and from some other open window came the sound of The Platters: “Here, in the afterglow of day, We keep our rendezvous, beneath the blue.” Farther away was the drone of an airplane, the honk of a horn.

Rionda's dad had called it a wrinkle, and once he'd hit the daily number for fifty dollars. Bobby had agreed with her—*a wrinkle, sure, I had a wrinkle*—but he couldn't have picked a lottery number to save his soul. The thing was . . .

*The thing was Mr. McQuown knew where the queen ended up every time, and so I knew.*

Once Bobby realized that, other things fell into place. Obvious stuff, really, but he'd been having fun, and . . . well . . . you didn't question what you knew, did you? You might question a wrinkle—a feeling that came to you right out of the blue—but you didn't question *knowing*.

Except how did he *know* his mother was taping money into the underwear pages of the Sears catalogue on the top shelf of her closet? How did he even know the catalogue was up there? She'd never told him about it. She'd never told him about the blue pitcher where she put her quarters, either, but of course he had known about that for years, he wasn't blind even though he had an idea she sometimes thought he was. But the catalogue? The quarters rolled and changed into bills, the bills then taped into the catalogue? There was no way he could know about a thing like that, but as he lay here in his bed, listening while "Earth Angel" replaced "Twilight Time," he knew that the catalogue was there. He knew because *she* knew, and it had crossed the front part of her mind. And on the Ferris wheel he had known Carol wanted him to kiss her again because it had been her first real kiss from a boy and she hadn't been paying enough attention; it had been over before she was completely aware it was happening. But knowing that wasn't knowing the future.

"No, it's just reading minds," he whispered, and then shivered all over as if his sunburn had turned to ice.

*Watch out, Bobby-O—if you don't watch out you'll wind up as nuts as Ted with his low men.*

Far off, in the town square, the clock began bonging the hour of ten. Bobby turned his head and looked at the alarm clock on his desk. Big Ben claimed it was only nine-fifty-two.

*All right, so the clock downtown is a little fast or mine is a little slow. Big deal, McNeal. Go to sleep.*

He didn't think he could do that for at least awhile, but it had been quite a day—arguments with mothers, money won from three-card monte dealers, kisses at the top of the Ferris wheel—and he began to drift in a pleasant fashion.

*Maybe she is my girlfriend, Bobby thought. Maybe she's my girlfriend after all.*

With the last premature bong of the town square clock still fading in the air, Bobby fell asleep.

## V. BOBBY READS THE PAPER. BROWN, WITH A WHITE BIB. A BIG CHANCE FOR LIZ. CAMP BROAD STREET. AN UNEASY WEEK. OFF TO PROVIDENCE.

On Monday, after his mom had gone to work, Bobby went upstairs to read Ted the paper (although his eyes were actually good enough to do it himself, Ted said he had come to enjoy the sound of Bobby's voice and the luxury of being read to while he shaved). Ted stood in his little bathroom with the door open, scraping foam from his face, while Bobby tried him on various headlines from the various sections.

"VIET SKIRMISHES INTENSIFY?"

"Before breakfast? Thanks but no thanks."

"CARTS CORRALLED, LOCAL MAN ARRESTED?"

"First paragraph, Bobby."

" 'When police showed up at his Pond Lane residence late yesterday, John T. Anderson of Harwich told them all about his hobby, which he claims is collecting supermarket shopping carts. "He was very interesting on the subject," said Officer Kirby Malloy of the Harwich P.D., "but we weren't entirely satisfied that he'd come by some of the carts in his collection honestly." Turns out Malloy was "right with Eversharp." Of the more than fifty shopping carts in Mr. Anderson's back yard, at least twenty had been stolen from the Harwich A&P and Total Grocery. There were even a few carts from the IGA market in Stansbury.' "

"Enough," Ted said, rinsing his razor under hot water and then raising the blade to his lathered neck. "Galumphing small-town humor in response to pathetic acts of compulsive larceny."

"I don't understand you."

"Mr. Anderson sounds like a man suffering from a neurosis—a mental problem, in other words. Do you think mental problems are funny?"

"Gee, no. I feel bad for people with loose screws."

"I'm glad to hear you say so. I've known people whose screws were not just loose but entirely missing. A good many such people, in fact. They are often

pathetic, sometimes awe-inspiring, and occasionally terrifying, but they are not funny. CARTS CORRALLED, indeed. What else is there?”

“STARLET KILLED IN EUROPEAN ROAD ACCIDENT?”

“Ugh, no.”

“YANKEES ACQUIRE INFIELDER IN TRADE WITH SENATORS?”

“Nothing the Yankees do with the Senators interests me.”

“ALBINI RELISHES UNDERDOG ROLE?”

“Yes, please read that.”

Ted listened closely as he painstakingly shaved his throat. Bobby himself found the story less than riveting—it wasn’t about Floyd Patterson or Ingemar Johansson, after all (Sully called the Swedish heavyweight “Ingie-Baby”)—but he read it carefully, nevertheless. The twelve-rounder between Tommy “Hurricane” Haywood and Eddie Albin was scheduled for Madison Square Garden on Wednesday night of the following week. Both fighters had good records, but age was considered an important, perhaps telling factor: Haywood, twenty-three to Eddie Albin’s thirty-six, and a heavy favorite. The winner might get a shot at the heavyweight title in the fall, probably around the time Richard Nixon won the Presidency (Bobby’s mom said that was sure to happen, and a good thing—never mind that Kennedy was a Catholic, he was just too young, and apt to be a hothead).

In the article Albin said he could understand why he was the underdog—he was getting up in years a little and some folks thought he was past it because he’d lost by a TKO to Sugar Boy Masters in his last fight. And sure, he knew that Haywood outreached him and was supposed to be mighty savvy for a younger fellow. But he’d been training hard, Albin said, skipping a lot of rope and sparring with a guy who moved and jabbed like Haywood. The article was full of words like *game* and *determined*; Albin was described as being “full of grit.” Bobby could tell the writer thought Albin was going to get the stuffing knocked out of him and felt sorry for him. Hurricane Haywood hadn’t been available to talk to the reporter, but his manager, a fellow named I. Kleindienst (Ted told Bobby how to pronounce the name), said it was likely to be Eddie Albin’s last fight. “He had his day, but his day is over,” I. Kleindienst said. “If Eddie goes six, I’m going to send my boy to bed without his supper.”

“Irving Kleindienst’s a *ka-mai*,” Ted said.

“A what?”

“A fool.” Ted was looking out the window toward the sound of Mrs. O’Hara’s dog. Not totally blank the way he sometimes went blank, but distant.

“You know him?” Bobby asked.

“No, no,” Ted said. He seemed first startled by the idea, then amused. “Know *of* him.”

“It sounds to me like this guy Albini’s gonna get creamed.”

“You never know. That’s what makes it interesting.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Go to the comics, Bobby. I want Flash Gordon. And be sure to tell me what Dale Arden’s wearing.”

“Why?”

“Because I think she’s a real hotsy-totsy,” Ted said, and Bobby burst out laughing. He couldn’t help it. Sometimes Ted was a real card.

• • •

A day later, on his way back from Sterling House, where he had just filled out the rest of his forms for summer baseball, Bobby came upon a carefully printed poster thumbtacked to an elm in Commonwealth Park.

PLEASE HELP US FIND PHIL!

PHIL is our WELSH CORGI!

PHIL is 7 YRS. OLD!

PHIL is BROWN, with a WHITE BIB!

His EYES are BRIGHT & INTELLIGENT!

The TIPS OF HIS EARS are BLACK!

Will bring you a BALL if you say HURRY UP PHIL!

CALL Housitonic 5-8337!

(OR)

BRING to 745 Highgate Avenue!

Home of THE SAGAMORE FAMILY!

There was no picture of Phil.

Bobby stood looking at the poster for a fair length of time. Part of him wanted to run home and tell Ted—not only about this but about the star and crescent moon he'd seen chalked beside the hopscotch grid. Another part pointed out that there was all sorts of stuff posted in the park—he could see a sign advertising a concert in the town square posted on another elm right across from where he was standing—and he would be *nuts* to get Ted going about this. These two thoughts contended with each other until they felt like two sticks rubbing together and his brain in danger of catching on fire.

*I won't think about it*, he told himself, stepping back from the poster. And when a voice from deep within his mind—a dangerously *adult* voice—protested that he was being *paid* to think about stuff like this, to *tell* about stuff like this, Bobby told the voice to just shut up. And the voice did.

When he got home, his mother was sitting on the porch glider again, this time mending the sleeve of a housedress. She looked up and Bobby saw the puffy skin beneath her eyes, the reddened lids. She had a Kleenex folded into one hand.

“Mom—?”

*What's wrong?* was how the thought finished . . . but finishing it would be unwise. Would likely cause trouble. Bobby had had no recurrence of his brilliant insights on the day of the trip to Savin Rock, but he *knew* her—the way she looked at him when she was upset, the way the hand with the Kleenex in it tensed, almost becoming a fist, the way she drew in breath and sat up straighter, ready to give you a fight if you wanted to go against her.

“What?” she asked him. “Got something on your mind besides your hair?”

“No,” he said. His voice sounded awkward and oddly shy to his own ears. “I was at Sterling House. The lists are up for baseball. I'm a Wolf again this summer.”

She nodded and relaxed a little. “I'm sure you'll make the Lions next year.” She moved her sewing basket from the glider to the porch floor, then patted the empty place. “Sit down here beside me a minute, Bobby. I've got something to tell you.”

Bobby sat with a feeling of trepidation—she'd been crying, after all, and she sounded quite grave—but it turned out not to be a big deal, at least as far as he could see.

“Mr. Biderman—Don—has invited me to go with him and Mr. Cushman and Mr. Dean to a seminar in Providence. It’s a big chance for me.”

“What’s a seminar?”

“A sort of conference—people get together to learn about a subject and discuss it. This one is Real Estate in the Sixties. I was very surprised that Don would invite me. Bill Cushman and Curtis Dean, of course I knew *they’d* be going, they’re agents. But for Don to ask *me* . . .” She trailed off for a moment, then turned to Bobby and smiled. He thought it was a genuine smile, but it went oddly with her reddened lids. “I’ve wanted to become an agent myself for the longest time, and now this, right out of the blue . . . it’s a big chance for me, Bobby, and it could mean a big change for us.”

Bobby knew his mom wanted to sell real estate. She had books on the subject and read a little out of them almost every night, often underlining parts. But if it was such a big chance, why had it made her cry?

“Well, that’s good,” he said. “The ginchiest. I hope you learn a lot. When is it?”

“Next week. The four of us leave early Tuesday morning and get back Thursday night around eight o’clock. All the meetings are at the Warwick Hotel, and that’s where we’ll be staying—Don’s booked the rooms. I haven’t stayed in a hotel room for twelve years, I guess. I’m a little nervous.”

Did nervous make you cry? Bobby wondered. Maybe so, if you were a grownup—especially a *female* grownup.

“I want you to ask S-J if you can stay with him Tuesday and Wednesday night. I’m sure Mrs. Sullivan—”

Bobby shook his head. “That won’t work.”

“Whatever *not?*” Liz bent a fierce look at him. “Mrs. Sullivan hasn’t ever minded you staying over before. You haven’t gotten into her bad books somehow, have you?”

“No, Mom. It’s just that S-J won a week at Camp Winnie.” The sound of all those *W*s coming out of his mouth made him feel like smiling, but he held it in. His mother was still looking at him in that fierce way . . . and wasn’t there a kind of panic in that look? Panic or something like it?

“What’s Camp Winnie? What are you talking about?”

Bobby explained about S-J winning the free week at Camp Winiwinaia and how Mrs. Sullivan was going to visit her parents in Wisconsin at the same time—plans which had now been finalized, Big Gray Dog and all.

“Damn it, that’s just my luck,” his mom said. She almost never swore, said that cursing and what she called “dirty talk” was the language of the ignorant. Now she made a fist and struck the arm of the glider. “*God damn it!*”

She sat for a moment, thinking. Bobby thought, as well. His only other close friend on the street was Carol, and he doubted his mom would call Anita Gerber and ask if he could stay over there. Carol was a girl, and somehow that made a difference when it came to sleepovers. One of his mother’s friends? The thing was she didn’t really *have* any . . . except for Don Biderman (and maybe the other two that were going to the seminar in Providence). Plenty of acquaintances, people she said hi to if they were walking back from the supermarket or going to a Friday-night movie downtown, but no one she could call up and ask to keep her eleven-year-old son for a couple of nights; no relatives, either, at least none that Bobby knew of.

Like people travelling on converging roads, Bobby and his mother gradually drew toward the same point. Bobby got there first, if only by a second or two.

“What about Ted?” he asked, then almost clapped his hand over his mouth. It actually rose out of his lap a little.

His mother watched the hand settle back with a return of her old cynical half-smile, the one she wore when dispensing sayings like *You have to eat a peck of dirt before you die* and *Two men looked out through prison bars, one saw the mud and one saw the stars* and of course that all-time favorite, *Life’s not fair*.

“You think I don’t know you call him Ted when the two of you are together?” she asked. “You must think I’ve been taking stupid-pills, Bobby-O.” She sat and looked out at the street. A Chrysler New Yorker slid slowly past—finny, fenderskirted, and highlighted with chrome. Bobby watched it go by. The man behind the wheel was elderly and white-haired and wearing a blue jacket. Bobby thought he was probably all right. Old but not low.

“Maybe it’d work,” Liz said at last. She spoke musingly, more to herself than to her son. “Let’s go talk to Brautigan and see.”

Following her up the stairs to the third floor, Bobby wondered how long she had known how to say Ted’s name correctly. A week? A month?

*From the start, Dumbo, he thought. From the very first day.*

• • •

Bobby's initial idea was that Ted could stay in his own room on the third floor while Bobby stayed in the apartment on the first floor; they'd both keep their doors open, and if either of them needed anything, they could call.

"I don't believe the Kilgallens or the Proskys would enjoy you yelling up to Mr. Brautigan at three o'clock in the morning that you'd had a nightmare," Liz said tartly. The Kilgallens and the Proskys had the two small second-floor apartments; Liz and Bobby were friendly with neither of them.

"I won't have any nightmares," Bobby said, deeply humiliated to be treated like a little kid. "I mean *jeepers*."

"Keep it to yourself," his mom said. They were sitting at Ted's kitchen table, the two adults smoking, Bobby with a rootbeer in front of him.

"It's just not the right idea," Ted told him. "You're a good kid, Bobby, responsible and levelheaded, but eleven's too young to be on your own, I think."

Bobby found it easier to be called too young by his friend than by his mother. Also he had to admit that it might be spooky to wake up in one of those little hours after midnight and go to the bathroom knowing he was the only person in the apartment. He could do it, he had no doubt he could do it, but yeah, it would be spooky.

"What about the couch?" he asked. "It pulls out and makes a bed, doesn't it?" They had never used it that way, but Bobby was sure she'd told him once that it did. He was right, and it solved the problem. She probably hadn't wanted Bobby in her bed (let alone "Brattigan"), and she *really* hadn't wanted Bobby up here in this hot third-floor room—that he was sure of. He figured she'd been looking so hard for a solution that she'd looked right past the obvious one.

So it was decided that Ted would spend Tuesday and Wednesday nights of the following week on the pull-out couch in the Garfields' living room. Bobby was excited by the prospect: he would have two days on his own—three, counting Thursday—and there would be someone with him at night, when things could get spooky. Not a babysitter, either, but a grownup friend. It

wasn't the same as Sully-John going to Camp Winnie for a week, but in a way it was. *Camp Broad Street*, Bobby thought, and almost laughed out loud.

"We'll have fun," Ted said. "I'll make my famous beans-and-franks casserole." He reached over and ruffled Bobby's crewcut.

"If you're going to have beans and franks, it might be wise to bring *that* down," his mom said, and pointed the fingers holding her cigarette at Ted's fan.

Ted and Bobby laughed. Liz Garfield smiled her cynical half-smile, finished her cigarette, and put it out in Ted's ashtray. When she did, Bobby again noticed the puffiness of her eyelids.

As Bobby and his mother went back down the stairs, Bobby remembered the poster he had seen in the park—the missing Corgi who would bring you a BALL if you said HURRY UP PHIL. He should tell Ted about the poster. He should tell Ted about everything. But if he did that and Ted left 149, who would stay with him next week? What would happen to Camp Broad Street, two fellows eating Ted's famous beans-and-franks casserole for supper (maybe in front of the TV, which his mom rarely allowed) and then staying up as late as they wanted?

Bobby made a promise to himself: he would tell Ted everything next Friday, after his mother was back from her conference or seminar or whatever it was. He would make a complete report and Ted could do whatever he needed to do. He might even stick around.

With this decision Bobby's mind cleared amazingly, and when he saw an upside-down FOR SALE card on the Total Grocery bulletin board two days later—it was for a washer-dryer set—he was able to put it out of his thoughts almost immediately.

• • •

That was nevertheless an uneasy week for Bobby Garfield, very uneasy indeed. He saw two more lost-pet posters, one downtown and one out on Asher Avenue, half a mile beyond the Asher Empire (the block he lived on was no longer enough; he found himself going farther and farther afield in his daily scouting trips). And Ted began to have those weird blank periods with greater frequency. They lasted longer when they came, too. Sometimes he spoke when

he was in that distant state of mind, and not always in English. When he did speak in English, what he said did not always make sense. Most of the time Bobby thought Ted was one of the sanest, smartest, *neatest* guys he had ever met. When he went away, though, it was scary. At least his mom didn't know. Bobby didn't think she'd be too cool on the idea of leaving him with a guy who sometimes flipped out and started talking nonsense in English or gibberish in some other language.

After one of these lapses, when Ted did nothing for almost a minute and a half but stare blankly off into space, making no response to Bobby's increasingly agitated questions, it occurred to Bobby that perhaps Ted wasn't in his own head at all but in some other world—that he had left Earth as surely as those people in *Ring Around the Sun* who discovered they could follow the spirals on a child's top to just about anywhere.

Ted had been holding a Chesterfield between his fingers when he went blank; the ash grew long and eventually dropped off onto the table. When the coal grew unnervingly close to Ted's bunched knuckles, Bobby pulled it gently free and was putting it out in the overflowing ashtray when Ted finally came back.

"Smoking?" he asked with a frown. "Hell, Bobby, you're too young to smoke."

"I was just putting it out for you. I thought . . ." Bobby shrugged, suddenly shy.

Ted looked at the first two fingers of his right hand, where there was a permanent yellow nicotine stain. He laughed—a short bark with absolutely no humor in it. "Thought I was going to burn myself, did you?"

Bobby nodded. "What do you think about when you go off like that? Where do you go?"

"That's hard to explain," Ted replied, and then asked Bobby to read him his horoscope.

Thinking about Ted's trances was distracting. Not talking about the things Ted was paying him to look for was even more distracting. As a result, Bobby—ordinarily a pretty good hitter—struck out four times in an afternoon game for the Wolves at Sterling House. He also lost four straight Battleship games to Sully at S-J's house on Friday, when it rained.

“What the heck’s wrong with you?” Sully asked. “That’s the third time you called out squares you already called out before. Also, I have to practically holler in your ear before you answer me. What’s up?”

“Nothing.” That was what he said. *Everything*. That was what he felt.

Carol also asked Bobby a couple of times that week if he was okay; Mrs. Gerber asked if he was “off his feed”; Yvonne Loving wanted to know if he had mono, and then giggled until she seemed in danger of exploding.

The only person who didn’t notice Bobby’s odd behavior was his mom. Liz Garfield was increasingly preoccupied with her trip to Providence, talking on the phone in the evenings with Mr. Biderman or one of the other two who were going (Bill Cushman was one of them; Bobby couldn’t exactly remember the name of the other guy), laying clothes out on her bed until the spread was almost covered, then shaking her head over them angrily and returning them to the closet, making an appointment to get her hair done and then calling the lady back and asking if she could add a manicure. Bobby wasn’t even sure what a manicure was. He had to ask Ted.

She seemed excited by her preparations, but there was also a kind of grimness to her. She was like a soldier about to storm an enemy beach, or a paratrooper who would soon be jumping out of a plane and landing behind enemy lines. One of her evening telephone conversations seemed to be a whispered argument—Bobby had an idea it was with Mr. Biderman, but he wasn’t sure. On Saturday, Bobby came into her bedroom and saw her looking at two new dresses—*dressy* dresses, one with thin little shoulder straps and one with no straps at all, just a top like a bathing suit. The boxes they had come in lay tumbled on the floor with tissue paper foaming out of them. His mom was standing over the dresses, looking down at them with an expression Bobby had never seen before: big eyes, drawn-together brows, taut white cheeks which flared with spots of rouge. One hand was at her mouth, and he could hear bonelike clittering sounds as she bit at her nails. A Kool smoldered in an ashtray on the bureau, apparently forgotten. Her big eyes shuttled back and forth between the two dresses.

“Mom?” Bobby asked, and she jumped—literally jumped into the air. Then she whirled on him, her mouth drawn down in a grimace.

“Jesus *Christ!*” she almost snarled. “Do you *knock?*”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and began to back out of the room. His mother had never said anything about knocking before. “Mom, are you all right?”

“Fine!” She spied the cigarette, grabbed it, smoked furiously. She exhaled with such force that Bobby almost expected to see smoke come from her ears as well as her nose and mouth. “I’d be finer if I could find a cocktail dress that didn’t make me look like Elsie the Cow. Once I was a size six, do you know that? Before I married your father I was a size six. Now look at me! Elsie the Cow! Moby-damn-*Dick!*”

“Mom, you’re not big. In fact just lately you look—”

“Get out, Bobby. Please let Mother alone. I have a headache.”

That night he heard her crying again. The following day he saw her carefully packing one of the dresses into her luggage—the one with the thin straps. The other went back into its store-box: GOWNS BY LUCIE OF BRIDGEPORT was written across the front in elegant maroon script.

On Monday night, Liz invited Ted Brautigan down to have dinner with them. Bobby loved his mother’s meatloaf and usually asked for seconds, but on this occasion he had to work hard to stuff down a single piece. He was terrified that Ted would trance out and his mother would pitch a fit over it.

His fear proved groundless. Ted spoke pleasantly of his childhood in New Jersey and, when Bobby’s mom asked him, of his job in Hartford. To Bobby he seemed less comfortable talking about accounting than he did reminiscing about sleighing as a kid, but his mom didn’t appear to notice. Ted *did* ask for a second slice of meatloaf.

When the meal was over and the table cleared, Liz gave Ted a list of telephone numbers, including those of Dr. Gordon, the Sterling House Summer Rec office, and the Warwick Hotel. “If there are any problems, I want to hear from you. Okay?”

Ted nodded. “Okay.”

“Bobby? No big worries?” She put her hand briefly on his forehead, the way she used to do when he complained of feeling feverish.

“Nope. We’ll have a blast. Won’t we, Mr. Brautigan?”

“Oh, call him Ted,” Liz almost snapped. “If he’s going to be sleeping in our living room, I guess I better call him Ted, too. May I?”

“Indeed you may. Let it be Ted from this moment on.”

He smiled. Bobby thought it was a sweet smile, open and friendly. He didn't understand how anyone could resist it. But his mother could and did. Even now, while she was returning Ted's smile, he saw the hand with the Kleenex in it tightening and loosening in its old familiar gesture of anxious displeasure. One of her absolute favorite sayings now came to Bobby's mind: *I'd trust him (or her) as far as I could sling a piano.*

"And from now on I'm Liz." She held out a hand across the table and they shook like people meeting for the first time . . . except Bobby knew his mother's mind was already made up on the subject of Ted Brautigan. If her back hadn't been against the wall, she never would have trusted Bobby with him. Not in a million years.

She opened her purse and took out a plain white envelope. "There's ten dollars in here," she said, handing the envelope to Ted. "You boys will want to eat out at least one night, I expect—Bobby likes the Colony Diner, if that's all right with you—and you may want to take in a movie, as well. I don't know what else there might be, but it's best to have a little cushion, don't you think?"

"Always better safe than sorry," Ted agreed, tucking the envelope carefully into the front pocket of his slacks, "but I don't expect we'll go through anything like ten dollars in three days. Will we, Bobby?"

"Gee, no, I don't see how we could."

"Waste not, want not," Liz said—it was another of her favorites, right up there with *the fool and his money soon parted*. She plucked a cigarette out of the pack on the table beside the sofa and lit it with a hand which was not quite steady. "You boys will be fine. Probably have a better time than I will."

Looking at her ragged, bitten fingernails, Bobby thought, *That's for sure.*

• • •

His mom and the others were going to Providence in Mr. Biderman's car, and the next morning at seven o'clock Liz and Bobby Garfield stood on the porch, waiting for it to show up. The air had that early hazy hush that meant the hot days of summer had arrived. From Asher Avenue came the hoot and rumble of heavy going-to-work traffic, but down here on Broad there was only the occasional passing car or delivery truck. Bobby could hear the *hisha-hisha* of lawn-sprinklers, and, from the other side of the block, the endless *roop-roop-*

*roop* of Bowser. Bowser sounded the same whether it was June or January; to Bobby Garfield, Bowser seemed as changeless as God.

“You don’t have to wait out here with me, you know,” Liz said. She was wearing a light coat and smoking a cigarette. She had on a little more makeup than usual, but Bobby thought he could still detect shadows under her eyes—she had passed another restless night.

“I don’t mind.”

“I hope it’s all right, leaving you with him.”

“I wish you wouldn’t worry. Ted’s a good guy, Mom.”

She made a little hmphing noise.

There was a twinkle of chrome from the bottom of the hill as Mr. Biderman’s Mercury (not vulgar, exactly, but a boat of a car all the same) turned onto their street from Commonwealth and came up the hill toward 149.

“There he is, there he is,” his mom said, sounding nervous and excited. She bent down. “Give me a little smooch, Bobby. I don’t want to kiss you and smear my lipstick.”

Bobby put his hand on her arm and lightly kissed her cheek. He smelled her hair, the perfume she was wearing, her face-powder. He would never kiss her with that same unshadowed love again.

She gave him a vague little smile, not looking at him, looking instead at Mr. Biderman’s boat of a Merc, which swerved gracefully across the street and pulled up at the curb in front of the house. She reached for her two suitcases (two seemed a lot for two days, Bobby thought, although he supposed the fancy dress took up a good deal of space in one of them), but he already had them by the handles.

“Those are too heavy, Bobby—you’ll trip on the steps.”

“No,” he said. “I won’t.”

She gave him a distracted look, then waved to Mr. Biderman and went toward the car, high heels clacking. Bobby followed, trying not to grimace at the weight of the suitcases . . . what had she put in them, clothes or bricks?

He got them down to the sidewalk without having to stop and rest, at least. Mr. Biderman was out of the car by then, first putting a casual kiss on his mother’s cheek, then shaking out the key that opened the trunk.

“Howya doin, Sport, howza boy?” Mr. Biderman always called Bobby Sport. “Lug em around back and I’ll slide em in. Women always hafta bring the farm, don’t they? Well, you know the old saying—can’t live with em, can’t shoot em outside the state of Montana.” He bared his teeth in a grin that made Bobby think of Jack in *Lord of the Flies*. “Want me to take one?”

“I’ve got em,” Bobby said. He trudged grimly in Mr. Biderman’s wake, shoulders aching, the back of his neck hot and starting to sweat.

Mr. Biderman opened the trunk, plucked the suitcases from Bobby’s hands, and slid them in with the rest of the luggage. Behind them, his mom was looking in the back window and talking with the other two men who were going. She laughed at something one of them said. To Bobby the laugh sounded about as real as a wooden leg.

Mr. Biderman closed the trunk and looked down at Bobby. He was a narrow man with a wide face. His cheeks were always flushed. You could see his pink scalp in the tracks left by the teeth of his comb. He wore little round glasses with gold rims. To Bobby his smile looked as real as his mother’s laugh had sounded.

“Gonna play some baseball this summer, Sport?” Don Biderman bent his knees a little and cocked an imaginary bat. Bobby thought he looked like a dope.

“Yes, sir. I’m on the Wolves at Sterling House. I was hoping to make the Lions, but . . .”

“Good. Good.” Mr. Biderman made a big deal of looking at his watch—the wide gold Twist-O-Flex band was dazzling in the early sunshine—and then patted Bobby’s cheek. Bobby had to make a conscious effort not to cringe from his touch. “Say, we gotta get this wagon-train rolling! Shake her easy, Sport. Thanks for the loan of your mother.”

He turned away and escorted Liz around the Mercury to the passenger side. He did this with a hand pressed to her back. Bobby liked that even less than watching the guy smooch her cheek. He glanced at the well-padded, business-suited men in the rear seat—Dean was the other guy’s name, he remembered—just in time to see them elbowing each other. Both were grinning.

*Something’s wrong here*, Bobby thought, and as Mr. Biderman opened the passenger door for his mother, as she murmured her thanks and slid in,

gathering her dress a little so it wouldn't wrinkle, he had an urge to tell her not to go, Rhode Island was too far away, *Bridgeport* would be too far away, she needed to stay home.

He said nothing, though, only stood on the curb as Mr. Biderman closed her door and walked back around to the driver's side. He opened that door, paused, and then did his stupid little batter-up pantomime again. This time he added an asinine fanny-wiggle. *What a nimrod*, Bobby thought.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do, Sport," he said.

"But if you do, name it after me," Cushman called from the back seat. Bobby didn't know exactly what that meant but it must have been funny because Dean laughed and Mr. Biderman tipped him one of those just-between-us-guys winks.

His mother was leaning in his direction. "You be a good boy, Bobby," she said. "I'll be back around eight on Thursday night—no later than ten. You're sure you're fine with that?"

*No, I'm not fine with it at all. Don't go off with them, Mom, don't go off with Mr. Biderman and those two grinning dopes sitting behind you. Those two nimrods. Please don't.*

"Sure he is," Mr. Biderman said. "He's a sport. Ain't you, Sport?"

"Bobby?" she asked, not looking at Mr. Biderman. "Are you all set?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'm a sport."

Mr. Biderman bellowed ferocious laughter—*Kill the pig, cut his throat*, Bobby thought—and dropped the Mercury into gear. "Providence or bust!" he cried, and the car rolled away from the curb, swerving across to the other side of Broad Street and heading up toward Asher. Bobby stood on the sidewalk, waving as the Merc passed Carol's house and Sully-John's. He felt as if he had a bone in his heart. If this was some sort of premonition—a wink—he never wanted to have another one.

A hand fell on his shoulder. He looked around and saw Ted standing there in his bathrobe and slippers, smoking a cigarette. His hair, which had yet to make its morning acquaintance with the brush, stood up around his ears in comical sprays of white.

"So that was the boss," he said. "Mr . . . Bidermeyer, is it?"

"*Biderman.*"

“And how do you like him, Bobby?”

Speaking with a low, bitter clarity, Bobby said, “I trust him about as far as I could sling a piano.”

## VI. A DIRTY OLD MAN. TED'S CASSEROLE. A BAD DREAM. *VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED*. DOWN THERE.

An hour or so after seeing his mother off, Bobby went down to Field B behind Sterling House. There were no real games until afternoon, nothing but three-flies-six-grounders or roly-bat, but even roly-bat was better than nothing. On Field A, to the north, the little kids were futzing away at a game that vaguely resembled baseball; on Field C, to the south, some high-school kids were playing what was almost the real thing.

Shortly after the town square clock had bonged noon and the boys broke to go in search of the hotdog wagon, Bill Pratt asked, "Who's that weird guy over there?"

He was pointing to a bench in the shade, and although Ted was wearing a trenchcoat, an old fedora hat, and dark glasses, Bobby recognized him at once. He guessed S-J would've, too, if S-J hadn't been at Camp Winnie. Bobby almost raised one hand in a wave, then didn't, because Ted was in disguise. Still, he'd come out to watch his downstairs friend play ball. Even though it wasn't a real game, Bobby felt an absurdly large lump rise in his throat. His mom had only come to watch him once in the two years he'd been playing—last August, when his team had been in the Tri-Town Championships—and even then she'd left in the fourth inning, before Bobby connected for what proved to be the game-winning triple. *Somebody has to work around here, Bobby-O*, she would have replied had he dared reproach her for that. *Your father didn't exactly leave us well off, you know*. It was true, of course—she had to work and Ted was retired. Except Ted had to stay clear of the low men in the yellow coats, and that was a full-time job. The fact that they didn't exist wasn't the point. Ted *believed* they did . . . but had come out to see him play just the same.

"Probably some dirty old man wanting to put a suckjob on one of the little kids," Harry Shaw said. Harry was small and tough, a boy going through life with his chin stuck out a mile. Being with Bill and Harry suddenly made

Bobby homesick for Sully-John, who had left on the Camp Winnie bus Monday morning (at the brain-numbing hour of five A.M.). S-J didn't have much of a temper and he was kind. Sometimes Bobby thought that was the best thing about Sully—he was kind.

From Field C there came the hefty crack of a bat—an authoritative full-contact sound which none of the Field B boys could yet produce. It was followed by savage roars of approval that made Bill, Harry, and Bobby look a little nervously in that direction.

“St. Gabe's boys,” Bill said. “They think they own Field C.”

“Cruddy Catlicks,” Harry said. “Catlicks are sissies—I could take any one of them.”

“How about fifteen or twenty?” Bill asked, and Harry was silent. Up ahead, glittering like a mirror, was the hotdog wagon. Bobby touched the buck in his pocket. Ted had given it to him out of the envelope his mother had left, then had put the envelope itself behind the toaster, telling Bobby to take what he needed when he needed it. Bobby was almost exalted by this level of trust.

“Look on the bright side,” Bill said. “Maybe those St. Gabe's boys will beat up the dirty old man.”

When they got to the wagon, Bobby bought only one hotdog instead of the two he had been planning on. His appetite seemed to have shrunk. When they got back to Field B, where the Wolves' coaches had now appeared with the equipment cart, the bench Ted had been sitting on was empty.

“Come on, come on!” Coach Terrell called, clapping his hands. “Who wants to play some baseball here?”

• • •

That night Ted cooked his famous casserole in the Garfields' oven. It meant more hotdogs, but in the summer of 1960 Bobby Garfield could have eaten hotdogs three times a day and had another at bedtime.

He read stuff to Ted out of the newspaper while Ted put their dinner together. Ted only wanted to hear a couple of paragraphs about the impending Patterson–Johansson rematch, the one everybody was calling the fight of the century, but he wanted to hear every word of the article about tomorrow night's Albin–Haywood tilt at The Garden in New York. Bobby thought this

moderately weird, but he was too happy to even comment on it, let alone complain.

He couldn't remember ever having spent an evening without his mother, and he missed her, yet he was also relieved to have her gone for a little while. There had been a queer sort of tension running through the apartment for weeks now, maybe even for months. It was like an electrical hum so constant that you got used to it and didn't realize how much a part of your life it had become until it was gone. That thought brought another of his mother's sayings to mind.

"What are you thinking?" Ted asked as Bobby came over to get the plates.

"That a change is as good as a rest," Bobby replied. "It's something my mom says. I hope she's having as good a time as I am."

"So do I, Bobby," Ted said. He bent, opened the oven, checked their dinner. "So do I."

• • •

The casserole was terrific, with canned B&M beans—the only kind Bobby really liked—and exotic spicy hotdogs not from the supermarket but from the butcher just off the town square. (Bobby assumed Ted had bought these while wearing his "disguise.") All this came in a horseradish sauce that zinged in your mouth and then made you feel sort of sweaty in the face. Ted had two helpings; Bobby had three, washing them down with glass after glass of grape Kool-Aid.

Ted blanked out once during the meal, first saying that he could feel *them* in the backs of his eyeballs, then lapsing either into some foreign language or outright gibberish, but the incident was brief and didn't cut into Bobby's appetite in the slightest. The blank-outs were part of Ted, that was all, like his scuffling walk and the nicotine stains between the first two fingers of his right hand.

They cleaned up together, Ted stowing the leftover casserole in the fridge and washing the dishes, Bobby drying and putting things away because he knew where everything went.

"Interested in taking a ride to Bridgeport with me tomorrow?" Ted asked as they worked. "We could go to the movies—the early matinee—and then I

have to do an errand.”

“Gosh, yeah!” Bobby said. “What do you want to see?”

“I’m open to suggestions, but I was thinking perhaps *Village of the Damned*, a British film. It’s based on a very fine science-fiction novel by John Wyndham. Would that suit?”

At first Bobby was so excited he couldn’t speak. He had seen the ads for *Village of the Damned* in the newspaper—all those spooky-looking kids with the glowing eyes—but hadn’t thought he would ever actually get to *see* it. It sure wasn’t the sort of Saturday-matinee movie that would ever play at Harwich on the Square or the Asher Empire. Matinees in those theaters consisted mostly of big-bug monster shows, westerns, or Audie Murphy war movies. And although his mother usually took him if she went to an evening show, she didn’t like science fiction (Liz liked moody love stories like *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*). Also the theaters in Bridgeport weren’t like the antequy old Harwich or the somehow businesslike Empire, with its plain, undecorated marquee. The theaters in Bridgeport were like fairy castles—they had huge screens (swag upon swag of velvety curtains covered them between shows), ceilings where tiny lights twinkled in galactic profusion, brilliant electric wall-sconces . . . and *two* balconies.

“Bobby?”

“You bet!” he said at last, thinking he probably wouldn’t sleep tonight. “I’d love it. But aren’t you afraid of . . . you know . . .”

“We’ll take a taxi instead of the bus. I can phone for another taxi to take us back home later. We’ll be fine. I think they’re moving away now, anyway. I don’t sense them so clearly.”

Yet Ted glanced away when he said this, and to Bobby he looked like a man trying to tell himself a story he can’t quite believe. If the increasing frequency of his blank-outs meant anything, Bobby thought, he had good reason to look that way.

*Stop it, the low men don’t exist, they’re no more real than Flash Gordon and Dale Arden. The things he asked you to look for are just . . . just things. Remember that, Bobby-O: just ordinary things.*

With dinner cleared away, the two of them sat down to watch *Bronco*, with Ty Hardin. Not among the best of the so-called “adult westerns” (*Cheyenne*

and *Maverick* were the best), but not bad, either. Halfway through the show, Bobby let out a moderately loud fart. Ted's casserole had begun its work. He snuck a sideways glance to make sure Ted wasn't holding his nose and grimacing. Nope, just watching the television, seemingly absorbed.

When a commercial came on (some actress selling refrigerators), Ted asked if Bobby would like a glass of rootbeer. Bobby said okay. "I thought I might help myself to one of the Alka-Seltzers I saw in the bathroom, Bobby. I may have eaten a bit too much."

As he got up, Ted let out a long, sonorous fart that sounded like a trombone. Bobby put his hands to his mouth and giggled. Ted gave him a rueful smile and left the room. Bobby's giggling forced out more farts, a little tooting stream of them, and when Ted came back with a fizzy glass of Alka-Seltzer in one hand and a foamy glass of Hires rootbeer in the other, Bobby was laughing so hard that tears streamed down his cheeks and hung off his jawline like raindrops.

"This should help fix us up," Ted said, and when he bent to hand Bobby his rootbeer, a loud honk came from behind him. "Goose just flew out of my ass," he added matter-of-factly, and Bobby laughed so hard that he could no longer sit in his chair. He slithered out of it and lay in a boneless heap on the floor.

"I'll be right back," Ted told him. "There's something else we need."

He left open the door between the apartment and the foyer, so Bobby could hear him going up the stairs. By the time Ted got to the third floor, Bobby had managed to crawl into his chair again. He didn't think he'd ever laughed so hard in his life. He drank some of his rootbeer, then farted again. "Goose just flew . . . flew out . . ." But he couldn't finish. He flopped back in his chair and howled, shaking his head from side to side.

The stairs creaked as Ted came back down. When he reentered the apartment he had his fan, with the electric cord looped neatly around the base, under one arm. "Your mother was right about this," he said. When he bent to plug it in, another goose flew out of his ass.

"She usually is," Bobby said, and that struck them both funny. They sat in the living room with the fan rotating back and forth, stirring the increasingly fragrant air. Bobby thought if he didn't stop laughing soon his head would pop.

When *Bronco* was over (by then Bobby had lost all track of the story), he helped Ted pull out the couch. The bed which had been hiding inside it didn't look all that great, but Liz had made it up with some spare sheets and blankets and Ted said it would be fine. Bobby brushed his teeth, then looked out from the door of his bedroom at Ted, who was sitting on the end of the sofa-bed and watching the news.

"Goodnight," Bobby said.

Ted looked over to him, and for a moment Bobby thought Ted would get up, cross the room, give him a hug and maybe a kiss. Instead of that, he sketched a funny, awkward little salute. "Sleep well, Bobby."

"Thanks."

Bobby closed his bedroom door, turned off the light, got into bed, and spread his heels to the corners of the mattress. As he looked up into the dark he remembered the morning Ted had taken hold of his shoulders, then laced his bunched old hands together behind his neck. Their faces that day had been almost as close as his and Carol's had been on the Ferris wheel just before they kissed. The day he had argued with his mother. The day he had known about the money taped in the catalogue. Also the day he had won ninety cents from Mr. McQuown. *Go buy yourself a martini*, Mr. McQuown had said.

Had it come from Ted? Had the wrinkle come from Ted touching him?

"Yeah," Bobby whispered in the dark. "Yeah, I think it probably did."

*What if he touches me again that way?*

Bobby was still considering this idea when he fell asleep.

• • •

He dreamed that people were chasing his mother through the jungle—Jack and Piggy, the littluns, and Don Biderman, Cushman, and Dean. His mother was wearing her new dress from Gowns by Lucie, the black one with the thin straps, only it had been torn in places by thorns and branches. Her stockings were in tatters. They looked like strips of dead skin hanging off her legs. Her eyes were deep sweatholes gleaming with terror. The boys chasing her were naked. Biderman and the other two were wearing their business suits. All of them had alternating streaks of red and white paint on their faces; all were

brandishing spears and shouting *Kill the pig, slit her throat! Kill the pig, drink her blood! Kill the pig, strew her guts!*

He woke in the gray light of dawn, shivering, and got up to use the bathroom. By the time he went back to bed he could no longer remember precisely what he had dreamed. He slept for another two hours, and woke up to the good smells of bacon and eggs. Bright summer sunshine was slanting in his bedroom window and Ted was making breakfast.

• • •

*Village of the Damned* was the last and greatest movie of Bobby Garfield's childhood; it was the first and greatest movie of what came after childhood—a dark period when he was often bad and always confused, a Bobby Garfield he felt he didn't really know. The cop who arrested him for the first time had blond hair, and what came to Bobby's mind as the cop led him away from the mom 'n pop store Bobby had broken into (by then he and his mother were living in a suburb north of Boston) were all those blond kids in *Village of the Damned*. The cop could have been one of them all grown up.

The movie was playing at the Criterion, the very avatar of those Bridgeport dream-palaces Bobby had been thinking about the night before. It was in black and white, but the contrasts were sharp, not all fuzzy like on the Zenith back in the apartment, and the images were *enormous*. So were the sounds, especially the shivery theremin music that played when the Midwich children really started to use their power.

Bobby was enthralled by the story, understanding even before the first five minutes were over that it was a *real* story, the way *Lord of the Flies* had been a real story. The people seemed like real people, which made the make-believe parts scarier. He guessed that Sully-John would have been bored with it, except for the ending. S-J liked to see giant scorpions crushing Mexico City or Rodan stomping Tokyo; beyond that his interest in what he called "creature features" was limited. But Sully wasn't here, and for the first time since he'd left, Bobby was glad.

They were in time for the one o'clock matinee, and the theater was almost deserted. Ted (wearing his fedora and with his dark glasses folded into the breast pocket of his shirt) bought a big bag of popcorn, a box of Dots, a Coke

for Bobby, and a rootbeer (of course!) for himself. Every now and then he would pass Bobby the popcorn or the candy and Bobby would take some, but he was hardly aware that he was eating, let alone of *what* he was eating.

The movie began with everyone in the British village of Midwich falling asleep (a man who was driving a tractor at the time of the event was killed; so was a woman who fell face-first onto a lighted stove burner). The military was notified, and they sent a reconnaissance plane to take a look. The pilot fell asleep as soon as he was over Midwich airspace; the plane crashed. A soldier with a rope around his middle walked ten or twelve paces into the village, then swooned into a deep sleep. When he was dragged back, he awakened as soon as he was hauled over the “sleep-line” that had been painted across the highway.

*Everyone* in Midwich woke up eventually, and everything seemed to be all right . . . until, a few weeks later, the women in town discovered they were pregnant. Old women, young women, even girls Carol Gerber’s age, all pregnant, and the children they gave birth to were those spooky kids from the poster, the ones with the blond hair and the glowing eyes.

Although the movie never said, Bobby figured the Children of the Damned must have been caused by some sort of outer-space phenomenon, like the pod-people in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. In any case, they grew up faster than normal kids, they were super-smart, they could make people do what they wanted . . . and they were ruthless. When one father tried to discipline his particular Child of the Damned, all the kids clubbed together and directed their thoughts at the offending grownup (their eyes glowing, that theremin music so pulsing and strange that Bobby’s arms broke out in goosebumps as he drank his Coke) until the guy put a shotgun to his head and killed himself (that part wasn’t shown, and Bobby was glad).

The hero was George Sanders. His wife gave birth to one of the blond children. S-J would have scoffed at George, called him a “queer bastard” or a “golden oldie,” but Bobby found him a welcome change from heroes like Randolph Scott, Richard Carlson, and the inevitable Audie Murphy. George was really sort of ripshit, in a weird English way. In the words of Denny Rivers, old George knew how to lay chilly. He wore special cool ties and combed his hair back tight to his skull. He didn’t look as though he could beat up a bunch of saloon baddies or anything, but he was the only guy from Midwich the

Children of the Damned would have anything to do with; in fact they drafted him to be their teacher. Bobby couldn't imagine Randolph Scott or Audie Murphy teaching a bunch of super-smart kids from outer space *anything*.

In the end, George Sanders was also the one who got rid of them. He had discovered he could keep the Children from reading his mind—for a little while, anyway—if he imagined a brick wall in his head, with all his most secret thoughts behind it. And after everyone had decided the Children must go (you could teach them math, but not why it was bad to punish someone by making him drive over a cliff), Sanders put a time-bomb into his briefcase and took it into the schoolroom. That was the only place where the Children—Bobby understood in some vague way that they were only supernatural versions of Jack Merridew and his hunters in *Lord of the Flies*—were all together.

They sensed that Sanders was hiding something from them. In the movie's final excruciating sequence, you could see bricks flying out of the wall Sanders had constructed in his head, flying faster and faster as the Children of the Damned pried into him, trying to find out what he was concealing. At last they uncovered the image of the bomb in the briefcase—eight or nine sticks of dynamite wired up to an alarm clock. You saw their creepy golden eyes widen with understanding, but they didn't have time to do anything. The bomb exploded. Bobby was shocked that the hero died—Randolph Scott never died in the Saturday-matinee movies at the Empire, neither did Audie Murphy or Richard Carlson—but he understood that George Sanders had given his life For the Greater Good of All. He thought he understood something else, as well: Ted's blank-outs.

While Ted and Bobby had been visiting Midwich, the day in southern Connecticut had turned hot and glaring. Bobby didn't like the world much after a really good movie in any case; for a little while it felt like an unfair joke, full of people with dull eyes, small plans, and facial blemishes. He sometimes thought if the world had a *plot* it would be so much better.

"Brautigan and Garfield hit the bricks!" Ted exclaimed as they stepped from beneath the marquee (a banner reading **COME IN IT'S KOOL INSIDE** hung from the marquee's front). "What did you think? Did you enjoy it?"

"It was great," Bobby said. "Fantabulous. Thanks for taking me. It was practically the best movie I ever saw. How about when he had the dynamite?"

Did you think he'd be able to fool them?"

"Well . . . I'd read the book, remember. Will *you* read it, do you think?"

"Yes!" Bobby felt, in fact, a sudden urge to bolt back to Harwich, running the whole distance down the Connecticut Pike and Asher Avenue in the hot sunshine so he could borrow *The Midwich Cuckoos* with his new adult library card at once. "Did he write any other science-fiction stories?"

"John Wyndham? Oh yes, quite a few. And will no doubt write more. One nice thing about science-fiction and mystery writers is that they rarely dither five years between books. That is the prerogative of serious writers who drink whiskey and have affairs."

"Are the others as good as the one we just saw?"

"*The Day of the Triffids* is as good. *The Kraken Wakes* is even better."

"What's a kraken?"

They had reached a streetcorner and were waiting for the light to change. Ted made a spooky, big-eyed face and bent down toward Bobby with his hands on his knees. "It's a *monstah*," he said, doing a pretty good Boris Karloff imitation.

They walked on, talking first about the movie and then about whether or not there really might be life in outer space, and then on to the special cool ties George Sanders had worn in the movie (Ted told him that kind of tie was called an ascot). When Bobby next took notice of their surroundings they had come to a part of Bridgeport he had never been in before—when he came to the city with his mom, they stuck to downtown, where the big stores were. The stores here were small and crammed together. None sold what the big department stores did: clothes and appliances and shoes and toys. Bobby saw signs for locksmiths, check-cashing services, used books. ROD'S GUNS, read one sign. WO FAT NOODLE CO., read another. FOTO FINISHING, read a third. Next to WO FAT was a shop selling SPECIAL SOUVENIRS. There was something weirdly like the Savin Rock midway about this street, so much so that Bobby almost expected to see the Monte Man standing on a streetcorner with his makeshift table and his lobsterback playing cards.

Bobby tried to peer through the SPECIAL SOUVENIRS window when they passed, but it was covered by a big bamboo blind. He'd never heard of a store

covering their show window during business hours. “Who’d want a special souvenir of Bridgeport, do you think?”

“Well, I don’t think they really sell souvenirs,” Ted said. “I’d guess they sell items of a sexual nature, few of them strictly legal.”

Bobby had questions about that—a billion or so—but felt it best to be quiet. Outside a pawnshop with three golden balls hanging over the door he paused to look at a dozen straight-razors which had been laid out on velvet with their blades partly open. They’d been arranged in a circle and the result was strange and (to Bobby) beautiful: looking at them was like looking at something removed from a deadly piece of machinery. The razors’ handles were much more exotic than the handle of the one Ted used, too. One looked like ivory, another like ruby etched with thin gold lines, a third like crystal.

“If you bought one of those you’d be shaving in style, wouldn’t you?” Bobby asked.

He thought Ted would smile, but he didn’t. “When people buy razors like that, they don’t shave with them, Bobby.”

“What do you mean?”

Ted wouldn’t tell him, but he did buy him a sandwich called a gyro in a Greek delicatessen. It came in a folded-over piece of homemade bread and was oozing a dubious white sauce which to Bobby looked quite a lot like pimplepus. He forced himself to try it because Ted said they were good. It turned out to be the best sandwich he’d ever eaten, as meaty as a hotdog or a hamburger from the Colony Diner but with an exotic taste that no hamburger or hotdog had ever had. And it was great to be eating on the sidewalk, strolling along with his friend, looking and being looked at.

“What do they call this part of town?” Bobby asked. “Does it have a name?”

“These days, who knows?” Ted said, and shrugged. “They used to call it Greektown. Then the Italians came, the Puerto Ricans, and now the Negroes. There’s a novelist named David Goodis—the kind the college teachers never read, a genius of the drugstore paperback displays—who calls it ‘down there.’ He says every city has a neighborhood like this one, where you can buy sex or marijuana or a parrot that talks dirty, where the men sit talking on stoops like those men across the street, where the women always seem to be yelling for their kids to come in unless they want a whipping, and where the wine always

comes in a paper sack.” Ted pointed into the gutter, where the neck of a Thunderbird bottle did indeed poke out of a brown bag. “It’s just down there, that’s what David Goodis says, the place where you don’t have any use for your last name and you can buy almost anything if you have cash in your pocket.”

*Down there*, Bobby thought, watching a trio of olive-skinned teenagers in gang jackets watch them as they passed. *This is the land of straight-razors and special souvenirs.*

The Criterion and Muncie’s Department Store had never seemed so far away. And Broad Street? That and all of Harwich could have been in another solar system.

At last they came to a place called The Corner Pocket, Pool and Billiards, Automatic Games, Rhein-gold on Tap. There was also one of those banners reading **COME IN IT’S KOOL INSIDE**. As Bobby and Ted passed beneath it, a young man in a strappy tee-shirt and a chocolate-colored stingybrim like the kind Frank Sinatra wore came out the door. He had a long, thin case in one hand. *That’s his pool-cue*, Bobby thought with fright and amazement. *He’s got his pool-cue in that case like it was a guitar or something.*

“Who a hip cat, Daddy-O?” he asked Bobby, then grinned. Bobby grinned back. The kid with the pool-cue case made a gun with his finger and pointed at Bobby. Bobby made a gun with his own finger and pointed it back. The kid nodded as if to say *Yeah, okay, you hip, we both hip* and crossed the street, snapping the fingers of his free hand and bopping to the music in his head.

Ted looked up the street in one direction, then down in the other. Ahead of them, three Negro children were capering in the spray of a partly opened hydrant. Back the way they had come, two young men—one white, the other maybe Puerto Rican—were taking the hubcaps off an old Ford, working with the rapid seriousness of doctors performing an operation. Ted looked at them, sighed, then looked at Bobby. “The Pocket’s no place for a kid, even in the middle of the day, but I’m not going to leave you out on the street. Come on.” He took Bobby by the hand and led him inside.

## VII. IN THE POCKET. THE SHIRT RIGHT OFF HIS BACK. OUTSIDE THE WILLIAM PENN. THE FRENCH SEX-KITTEN.

What struck Bobby first was the smell of beer. It was impacted, as if folks had been drinking in here since the days when the pyramids were still in the planning stages. Next was the sound of a TV, not turned to *Bandstand* but to one of the late-afternoon soap operas (“Oh John, oh Marsha” shows was what his mother called them), and the click of pool-balls. Only after these things had registered did his eyes chip in their own input, because they’d needed to adjust. The place was very dim.

And it was long, Bobby saw. To their right was an archway, and beyond it a room that appeared almost endless. Most of the pool-tables were covered, but a few stood in brilliant islands of light where men strolled languidly about, pausing every now and then to bend and shoot. Other men, hardly visible, sat in high seats along the wall, watching. One was getting his shoes shined. He looked about a thousand.

Straight ahead was a big room filled with Gottlieb pinball machines: a billion red and orange lights stuttered stomachache colors off a large sign which read IF YOU TILT THE SAME MACHINE TWICE YOU WILL BE ASKED TO LEAVE. A young man wearing another stingybrim hat—apparently the approved headgear for the bad motorscooters residing down there—was bent over Frontier Patrol, working the flippers frantically. A cigarette hung off his lower lip, the smoke rising past his face and the whorls of his combed-back hair. He was wearing a jacket tied around his waist and turned inside-out.

To the left of the lobby was a bar. It was from here that the sound of the TV and the smell of beer was coming. Three men sat there, each surrounded by empty stools, hunched over pilsner glasses. They didn’t look like the happy beer-drinkers you saw in the ads; to Bobby they looked the loneliest people on earth. He wondered why they didn’t at least huddle up and talk a little.

Closer by them was a desk. A fat man came rolling through the door behind it, and for a moment Bobby could hear the low sound of a radio

playing. The fat man had a cigar in his mouth and was wearing a shirt covered with palm trees. He was snapping his fingers like the cool cat with the pool-cue case, and under his breath he was singing like this: “Choo-choo-*chow*, choo-choo-ka-*chow-chow*, choo-choo-*chow-chow*!” Bobby recognized the tune: “Tequila,” by The Champs.

“Who you, buddy?” the fat man asked Ted. “I don’t know you. And he can’t be in here, anyway. Can’tcha read?” He jerked a fat thumb with a dirty nail at another sign, this one posted on the desk: B-21 OR B-GONE!

“You don’t know me, but I think you know Jimmy Girardi,” Ted said politely. “He told me you were the man to see . . . if you’re Len Files, that is.”

“I’m Len,” the man said. All at once he seemed considerably warmer. He held out a hand so white and pudgy that it looked like the gloves Mickey and Donald and Goofy wore in the cartoons. “You know Jimmy Gee, huh? Goddam Jimmy Gee! Why, his grampa’s back there getting a shine. He gets ’is boats shined a lot these days.” Len Files tipped Ted a wink. Ted smiled and shook the guy’s hand.

“That your kid?” Len Files asked, bending over his desk to get a closer look at Bobby. Bobby could smell Sen-Sen mints and cigars on his breath, sweat on his body. The collar of his shirt was speckled with dandruff.

“He’s a friend,” Ted said, and Bobby thought he might actually explode with happiness. “I didn’t want to leave him on the street.”

“Yeah, unless you’re willing to have to pay to get im back,” Len Files agreed. “You remind me of somebody, kid. Now why is that?”

Bobby shook his head, a little frightened to think he looked like anybody Len Files might know.

The fat man barely paid attention to Bobby’s head-shake. He had straightened and was looking at Ted again. “I can’t be having kids in here, Mr . . . .?”

“Ted Brautigan.” He offered his hand. Len Files shook it.

“You know how it is, Ted. People in a business like mine, the cops keep tabs.”

“Of course. But he’ll stand right here—won’t you, Bobby?”

“Sure,” Bobby said.

“And our business won’t take long. But it’s a good little bit of business, Mr. Files—”

“Len.”

Len, of course, Bobby thought. Just Len. Because in here was down there.

“As I say, Len, this is a good piece of business I want to do. I think you’ll agree.”

“If you know Jimmy Gee, you know I don’t do the nickels and dimes,” Len said. “I leave the nickels and dimes to the niggers. What are we talking here? Patterson–Johansson?”

“Albini–Haywood. At The Garden tomorrow night?”

Len’s eyes widened. Then his fat and unshaven cheeks spread in a smile. “Man oh man oh Manischewitz. We need to explore this.”

“We certainly do.”

Len Files came out from around the desk, took Ted by the arm, and started to lead him toward the poolroom. Then he stopped and swung back. “Is it Bobby when you’re home and got your feet up, pal?”

“Yes, sir.” *Yes sir, Bobby Garfield*, he would have said anywhere else . . . but this was down there and he thought just plain Bobby would suffice.

“Well, Bobby, I know those pinball machines prolly look good to ya, and you prolly got a quarter or two in your pocket, but do what Adam dint and resist the temptation. Can you do that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I won’t be long,” Ted told him, and then allowed Len Files to lead him through the arch and into the poolroom. They walked past the men in the high chairs, and Ted stopped to speak to the one getting his shoes shined. Next to Jimmy Gee’s grandfather, Ted Brautigan looked young. The old man peered up and Ted said something; the two men laughed into each other’s faces. Jimmy Gee’s grandfather had a good strong laugh for an old fellow. Ted reached out both hands and patted his sallow cheeks with gentle affection. That made Jimmy Gee’s grandfather laugh again. Then Ted let Len draw him into a curtained alcove past the other men in the other chairs.

Bobby stood by the desk as if rooted, but Len hadn’t said anything about not looking around, and so he did—in all directions. The walls were covered with beer signs and calendars that showed girls with most of their clothes off.

One was climbing over a fence in the country. Another was getting out of a Packard with most of her skirt in her lap and her garters showing. Behind the desk were more signs, most expressing some negative concept (IF YOU DON'T LIKE OUR TOWN LOOK FOR A TIMETABLE, DON'T SEND A BOY TO DO A MAN'S JOB, THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A FREE LUNCH, NO CHECKS ACCEPTED, NO CREDIT, CRYING TOWELS ARE NOT PROVIDED BY THE MANAGEMENT) and a big red button marked **POLICE CALL**. Suspended from the ceiling on a loop of dusty wire were cellophane packages, some marked GINSENG ORIENTAL LOVE ROOT and others SPANISH DELITE. Bobby wondered if they were vitamins of some kind. Why would they sell vitamins in a place like this?

The young guy in the roomful of automatic games whapped the side of Frontier Patrol, stepped back, gave the machine the finger. Then he strolled into the lobby area adjusting his hat. Bobby made his finger into a gun and pointed it at him. The young man looked surprised, then grinned and pointed back as he headed for the door. He loosened the tied arms of his jacket as he went.

"Can't wear no club jacket in here," he said, noting Bobby's wide-eyed curiosity. "Can't even show your fuckin colors. Rules of the house."

"Oh."

The young guy smiled and raised his hand. Traced in blue ink on the back was a devil's pitchfork. "But I got the sign, little brother. See it?"

"Heck, yeah." A tattoo. Bobby was faint with envy. The kid saw it; his smile widened into a grin full of white teeth.

"Fuckin Diablos, *'mano*. Best club. Fuckin Diablos rule the streets. All others are pussy."

"The streets down here."

"Fuckin right down here, where else is there? Rock on, baby brother. I like you. You got a good look on you. Fuckin crewcut sucks, though." The door opened, there was a gasp of hot air and streetlife noise, and the guy was gone.

A little wicker basket on the desk caught Bobby's eye. He tilted it so he could see in. It was full of keyrings with plastic fobs—red and blue and green. Bobby picked one out so he could read the gold printing: THE CORNER POCKET BILLIARDS, POOL, AUTO. GAMES. KENMORE 8-2127.

“Go on, kid, take it.”

Bobby was so startled he almost knocked the basket of keyrings to the floor. The woman had come through the same door as Len Files, and she was even bigger—almost as big as the circus fat lady—but she was as light on her feet as a ballerina; Bobby looked up and she was just there, looming over him. She was Len’s sister, had to be.

“I’m sorry,” Bobby muttered, returning the keyring he’d picked up and pushing the basket back from the edge of the desk with little pats of his fingers. He might have succeeded in pushing it right over the far side if the fat woman hadn’t stopped it with one hand. She was smiling and didn’t look a bit mad, which to Bobby was a tremendous relief.

“Really, I’m not being sarcastic, you should take one.” She held out one of the keyrings. It had a green fob. “They’re just cheap little things, but they’re free. We give em away for the advertising. Like matches, you know, although I wouldn’t give a pack of matches to a kid. Don’t smoke, do you?”

“No, ma’am.”

“That’s making a good start. Stay away from the booze, too. Here. Take. Don’t turn down for free in this world, kid, there isn’t much of it going around.”

Bobby took the keyring with the green fob. “Thank you, ma’am. It’s neat.” He put the keyring in his pocket, knowing he would have to get rid of it—if his mother found such an item, she wouldn’t be happy. She’d have twenty questions, as Sully would say. Maybe even thirty.

“What’s your name?”

“Bobby.”

He waited to see if she would ask for his last name and was secretly delighted when she didn’t. “I’m Alanna.” She held out a hand crusted with rings. They twinkled like the pinball lights. “You here with your dad?”

“With my *friend*,” Bobby said. “I think he’s making a bet on the Haywood–Albini prizefight.”

Alanna looked alarmed and amused at the same time. She leaned forward with one finger to her red lips. She made a *Shhh* sound at Bobby, and blew out a strong liquory smell with it.

“Don’t say ‘bet’ in here,” she cautioned him. “This is a billiard parlor. Always remember that and you’ll always be fine.”

“Okay.”

“You’re a handsome little devil, Bobby. And you look . . .” She paused. “Do I know your father, maybe? Is that possible?”

Bobby shook his head, but doubtfully—he had reminded Len of someone, too. “My dad’s dead. He died a long time ago.” He always added this so people wouldn’t get all gushy.

“What was his name?” But before he could say, Alanna Files said it herself—it came out of her painted mouth like a magic word. “Was it Randy? Randy Garrett, Randy Greer, something like that?”

For a moment Bobby was so flabbergasted he couldn’t speak. It felt as if all the breath had been sucked out of his lungs. “Randall Garfield. But how . . .”

She laughed, delighted. Her bosom heaved. “Well mostly your *hair*. But also the freckles . . . and this here ski-jump . . .” She bent forward and Bobby could see the tops of smooth white breasts that looked as big as waterbarrels. She skidded one finger lightly down his nose.

“He came in here to play pool?”

“Nah. Said he wasn’t much of a stick. He’d drink a beer. Also sometimes . . .” She made a quick gesture then—dealing from an invisible deck. It made Bobby think of McQuown.

“Yeah,” Bobby said. “He never met an inside straight he didn’t like, that’s what I heard.”

“I don’t know about that, but he was a nice guy. He could come in here on a Monday night, when the place is always like a grave, and in half an hour or so he’d have everybody laughing. He’d play that song by Jo Stafford, I can’t remember the name, and make Lennie turn up the jukebox. A real sweetie, kid, that’s mostly why I remember him; a sweetie with red hair is a rare commodity. He wouldn’t buy a drunk a drink, he had a thing about that, but otherwise he’d give you the shirt right off his back. All you had to do was ask.”

“But he lost a lot of money, I guess,” Bobby said. He couldn’t believe he was having this conversation—that he had met someone who had known his father. Yet he supposed a lot of finding out happened like this, completely by

accident. You were just going along, minding your own business, and all at once the past sideswiped you.

“Randy?” She looked surprised. “Nah. He’d come in for a drink maybe three times a week—you know, if he happened to be in the neighborhood. He was in real estate or insurance or selling or some one of those—”

“Real estate,” Bobby said. “It was real estate.”

“—and there was an office down here he’d visit. For the industrial properties, I guess, if it was real estate. You sure it wasn’t medical supplies?”

“No, real estate.”

“Funny how your memory works,” she said. “Some things stay clear, but mostly time goes by and green turns blue. All of the suit-n-tie businesses are gone down here now, anyway.” She shook her head sadly.

Bobby wasn’t interested in how the neighborhood had gone to blazes. “But when he *did* play, he lost. He was always trying to fill inside straights and stuff.”

“Did your mother tell you that?”

Bobby was silent.

Alanna shrugged. Interesting things happened all up and down her front when she did. “Well, that’s between you and her . . . and hey, maybe your dad threw his dough around in other places. All I know is that in here he’d just sit in once or twice a month with guys he knew, play until maybe midnight, then go home. If he left a big winner or a big loser, I’d probably remember. I don’t, so he probably broke even most nights he played. Which, by the way, makes him a pretty good poker-player. Better than most back there.” She rolled her eyes in the direction Ted and her brother had gone.

Bobby looked at her with growing confusion. *Your father didn’t exactly leave us well off*, his mother liked to say. There was the lapsed life insurance policy, the stack of unpaid bills; *Little did I know*, his mother had said just this spring, and Bobby was beginning to think that fit him, as well: *Little did I know*.

“He was such a good-looking guy, your dad,” Alanna said, “Bob Hope nose and all. I’d guess you got that to look forward to—you favor him. Got a girlfriend?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Were the unpaid bills a fiction? Was that possible? Had the life insurance policy actually been cashed and socked away, maybe in a bank account instead of between the pages of the Sears catalogue? It was a horrible thought, somehow. Bobby couldn't imagine why his mother would want him to think his dad was

*(a low man, a low man with red hair)*

a bad guy if he really wasn't, but there was something about the idea that felt . . . true. She could get mad, that was the thing about his mother. She could get *so* mad. And then she might say anything. It was possible that his father—who his mother had never once in Bobby's memory called "Randy"—had given too many people too many shirts right off his back, and consequently made Liz Garfield mad. Liz Garfield didn't give away shirts, not off her back or from anywhere else. You had to save your shirts in this world, because life wasn't fair.

"What's her name?"

"Liz." He felt dazed, the way he'd felt coming out of the dark theater into the bright light.

"Like Liz Taylor." Alanna looked pleased. "That's a nice name for a girlfriend."

Bobby laughed, a little embarrassed. "No, my *mother's* Liz. My girlfriend's name is Carol."

"She pretty?"

"A real hotsy-totsy," he said, grinning and wiggling one hand from side to side. He was delighted when Alanna roared with laughter. She reached over the desk, the flesh of her upper arm hanging like some fantastic wad of dough, and pinched his cheek. It hurt a little but he liked it.

"Cute kid! Can I tell you something?"

"Sure, what?"

"Just because a man likes to play a little cards, that doesn't make him Attila the Hun. You know that, don't you?"

Bobby nodded hesitantly, then more firmly.

"Your ma's your ma, I don't say nothing against anybody's ma because I loved my own, but not everybody's ma approves of cards or pool or . . . places like this. It's a point of view, but that's all it is. Get the picture?"

“Yes,” Bobby said. He did. He got the picture. He felt very strange, like laughing and crying at the same time. *My dad was here*, he thought. This seemed, at least for the time being, much more important than any lies his mother might have told about him. *My dad was here, he might have stood right where I’m standing now*. “I’m glad I look like him,” he blurted.

Alanna nodded, smiling. “You coming in here like that, just walking in off the street. What are the odds?”

“I don’t know. But thanks for telling me about him. Thanks a lot.”

“He’d play that Jo Stafford song all night, if you’d let him,” Alanna said. “Now don’t you go wandering off.”

“No, ma’am.”

“No, *Alanna*.”

Bobby grinned. “*Alanna*.”

She blew him a kiss as his mother sometimes did, and laughed when Bobby pretended to catch it. Then she went back through the door. Bobby could see what looked like a living room beyond it. There was a big cross on one wall.

He reached into his pocket, hooked a finger through the keyring (it was, he thought, a special souvenir of his visit down there), and imagined himself riding down Broad Street on the Schwinn from the Western Auto. He was heading for the park. He was wearing a chocolate-colored stingybrim hat cocked back on his head. His hair was long and combed in a duck’s ass—no more crewcut, later for you, Jack. Tied around his waist was a jacket with his colors on it; riding the back of his hand was a blue tattoo, stamped deep and forever. Outside Field B Carol would be waiting for him. She’d be watching him ride up, she’d be thinking *Oh you crazy boy* as he swung the Schwinn around in a tight circle, spraying gravel toward (but not on) her white sneakers. Crazy, yes. A bad motorscooter and a mean go-getter.

Len Files and Ted were coming back now, both of them looking happy. Len, in fact, looked like the cat that ate the canary (as Bobby’s mother often said). Ted paused to pass another, briefer, word with the old guy, who nodded and smiled. When Ted and Len got back to the lobby area, Ted started toward the telephone booth just inside the door. Len took his arm and steered him toward the desk instead.

As Ted stepped behind it, Len ruffled Bobby's hair. "I know who you look like," he said. "It come to me while I was in the back room. Your dad was—"

"Garfield. Randy Garfield." Bobby looked up at Len, who so resembled his sister, and thought how odd and sort of wonderful it was to be linked that way to your own blood kin. Linked so closely people who didn't even know you could sometimes pick you out of a crowd. "Did you like him, Mr. Files?"

"Who, Randy? Sure, he was a helluva gizmo." But Len Files seemed a little vague. He hadn't noticed Bobby's father in the same way his sister had, Bobby decided; Len probably wouldn't remember about the Jo Stafford song or how Randy Garfield would give you the shirt right off his back. He wouldn't give a drunk a drink, though; he wouldn't do that. "Your pal's all right, too," Len went on, more enthusiastic now. "I like the high class and the high class likes me, but I don't get real shooters like him in here often." He turned to Ted, who was hunting nearsightedly through the phonebook. "Try Circle Taxi. KEnmore 6-7400."

"Thanks," Ted said.

"Don't mention it." Len brushed past Ted and went through the door behind the desk. Bobby caught another brief glimpse of the living room and the big cross. When the door shut, Ted looked over at Bobby and said: "You bet five hundred bucks on a prizefight and you don't have to use the pay phone like the rest of the shmucks. Such a deal, huh?"

Bobby felt as if all the wind had been sucked out of him. "You bet *five hundred dollars* on Hurricane Haywood?"

Ted shook a Chesterfield out of his pack, put it in his mouth, lit it around a grin. "Good God, no," he said. "On Albini."

• • •

After he called the cab, Ted took Bobby over to the bar and ordered them both rootbeers. *He doesn't know I don't really like rootbeer*, Bobby thought. It seemed another piece in the puzzle, somehow—the puzzle of Ted. Len served them himself, saying nothing about how Bobby shouldn't be sitting at the bar, he was a nice kid but just stinking the place up with his under-twenty-oneness; apparently a free phone call wasn't all you got when you bet five hundred dollars on a prizefight. And not even the excitement of the bet could long

distract Bobby from a certain dull certainty which stole much of his pleasure in hearing that his father hadn't been such a bad guy, after all. The bet had been made to earn some runout money. Ted was leaving.

• • •

The taxi was a Checker with a huge back seat. The driver was deeply involved in the Yankees game on the radio, to the point where he sometimes talked back to the announcers.

"Files and his sister knew your father, didn't they?" It wasn't really a question.

"Yeah. Alanna especially. She thought he was a real nice guy." Bobby paused. "But that's not what my mother thinks."

"I imagine your mother saw a side of him Alanna Files never did," Ted replied. "More than one. People are like diamonds in that way, Bobby. They have many sides."

"But Mom said . . ." It was too complicated. She'd never exactly said *anything*, really, only sort of suggested stuff. He didn't know how to tell Ted that his mother had sides, too, and some of them made it hard to believe those things she never quite came out and said. And when you got right down to it, how much did he really want to know? His father was dead, after all. His mother wasn't, and he had to live with her . . . and he had to love her. He had no one else to love, not even Ted. Because—

"When you going?" Bobby asked in a low voice.

"After your mother gets back." Ted sighed, glanced out the window, then looked down at his hands, which were folded on one crossed knee. He didn't look at Bobby, not yet. "Probably Friday morning. I can't collect my money until tomorrow night. I got four to one on Albini; that's two grand. My good pal Lennie will have to phone New York to make the cover."

They crossed a canal bridge, and down there was back there. Now they were in the part of the city Bobby had travelled with his mother. The men on the street wore coats and ties. The women wore hose instead of bobbysocks. None of them looked like Alanna Files, and Bobby didn't think many of them would smell of liquor if they went "Shhh," either. Not at four o'clock in the afternoon.

“I know why you didn’t bet on Patterson–Johansson,” Bobby said. “It’s because you don’t know who’ll win.”

“I *think* Patterson will this time,” Ted said, “because this time he’s prepared for Johansson. I might flutter two dollars on Floyd Patterson, but five hundred? To bet five hundred you must either know or be crazy.”

“The Albini–Haywood fight is fixed, isn’t it?”

Ted nodded. “I knew when you read that Kleindienst was involved, and I guessed that Albini was supposed to win.”

“You’ve made other bets on boxing matches where Mr. Kleindienst was a manager.”

Ted said nothing for a moment, only looked out the window. On the radio, someone hit a comebacker to Whitey Ford. Ford fielded the ball and threw to Moose Skowron at first. Now there were two down in the top of the eighth. At last Ted said, “It *could* have been Haywood. It wasn’t likely, but it could have been. Then . . . did you see the old man back there? The one in the shoeshine chair?”

“Sure, you patted him on the cheeks.”

“That’s Arthur Girardi. Files lets him hang around because he used to be connected. That’s what Files thinks—*used* to be. Now he’s just some old fellow who comes in to get his shoes shined at ten and then forgets and comes in to get them shined again at three. Files thinks he’s just an old fellow who don’t know from nothing, as they say. Girardi lets him think whatever he wants to think. If Files said the moon was green cheese, Girardi wouldn’t say boo. Old Gee, he comes in for the air conditioning. And he’s still connected.”

“Connected to Jimmy Gee.”

“To all sorts of guys.”

“Mr. Files didn’t know the fight was fixed?”

“No, not for sure. I thought he would.”

“But old Gee knew. And he knew which one’s supposed to take the dive.”

“Yes. That was my luck. Hurricane Haywood goes down in the eighth round. Then, next year when the odds are better, the Hurricane gets his payday.”

“Would you have bet if Mr. Girardi hadn’t been there?”

“No,” Ted replied immediately.

“Then what would you have done for money? When you go away?”

Ted looked depressed at those words—*When you go away*. He made as if to put an arm around Bobby’s shoulders, then stopped himself.

“There’s always someone who knows something,” he said.

They were on Asher Avenue now, still in Bridgeport but only a mile or so from the Harwich town line. Knowing what would happen, Bobby reached for Ted’s big, nicotine-stained hand.

Ted swivelled his knees toward the door, taking his hands with them. “Better not.”

Bobby didn’t need to ask why. People put up signs that said WET PAINT DO NOT TOUCH because if you put your hand on something newly painted, the stuff would get on your skin. You could wash it off, or it would wear off by itself in time, but for awhile it would be there.

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know.”

“I feel bad,” Bobby said. He could feel tears prickling at the corners of his eyes. “If something happens to you, it’s my fault. I saw things, the things you told me to look out for, but I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want you to go. So I told myself you were crazy—not about everything, just about the low men you thought were chasing you—and I didn’t say anything. You gave me a job and I muffed it.”

Ted’s arm rose again. He lowered it and settled for giving Bobby a quick pat on the leg instead. At Yankee Stadium Tony Kubek had just doubled home two runs. The crowd was going wild.

“But I knew,” Ted said mildly.

Bobby stared at him. “What? I don’t get you.”

“I felt them getting closer. That’s why my trances have grown so frequent. Yet I lied to myself, just as you did. For the same reasons, too. Do you think I want to leave you now, Bobby? When your mother is so confused and unhappy? In all honesty I don’t care so much for her sake, we don’t get along, from the first second we laid eyes on each other we didn’t get along, but she is your mother, and—”

“What’s wrong with her?” Bobby asked. He remembered to keep his voice low, but he took Ted’s arm and shook it. “Tell me! You know, I know you do!”

Is it Mr. Biderman? Is it something about Mr. Biderman?"

Ted looked out the window, brow furrowed, lips drawn down tightly. At last he sighed, pulled out his cigarettes, and lit one. "Bobby," he said, "Mr. Biderman is not a nice man. Your mother knows it, but she also knows that sometimes we have to go along with people who are not nice. Go along to get along, she thinks, and she has done this. She's done things over the last year that she's not proud of, but she has been careful. In some ways she has needed to be as careful as I have, and whether I like her or not, I admire her for that."

"What did she do? What did he make her do?" Something cold moved in Bobby's chest. "Why did Mr. Biderman take her to Providence?"

"For the real-estate conference."

"Is that all? Is that *all*?"

"I don't know. *She* didn't know. Or perhaps she has covered over what she knows and what she fears with what she hopes. I can't say. Sometimes I can—sometimes I know things very directly and clearly. The first moment I saw you I knew that you wanted a bicycle, that getting one was very important to you, and you meant to earn the money for one this summer if you could. I admired your determination."

"You touched me on purpose, didn't you?"

"Yes indeed. The first time, anyway. I did it to know you a little. But friends don't spy; true friendship is about privacy, too. Besides, when I touch, I pass on a kind of—well, a kind of window. I think you know that. The second time I touched you . . . really touching, holding on, you know what I mean . . . that was a mistake, but not such an awful one; for a little while you knew more than you should, but it wore off, didn't it? If I'd gone on, though . . . touching and touching, the way people do when they're close . . . there'd come a point where things would change. Where it wouldn't wear off." He raised his mostly smoked cigarette and looked at it distastefully. "The way you smoke one too many of these and you're hooked for life."

"Is my mother all right now?" Bobby asked, knowing that Ted couldn't tell him that; Ted's gift, whatever it was, didn't stretch that far.

"I don't know. I—"

Ted suddenly stiffened. He was looking out the window at something up ahead. He smashed his cigarette into the armrest ashtray, doing it hard enough

to send sparks scattering across the back of his hand. He didn't seem to feel them. "Christ," he said. "Oh Christ, Bobby, we're in for it."

Bobby leaned across his lap to look out the window, thinking in the back of his mind about what Ted had just been saying—*touching and touching, the way people do when they're close*—even as he peered up Asher Avenue.

Ahead was a three-way intersection, Asher Avenue, Bridgeport Avenue, and the Connecticut Pike all coming together at a place known as Puritan Square. Trolley-tracks gleamed in the afternoon sun; delivery trucks honked impatiently as they waited their turns to dart through the crush. A sweating policeman with a whistle in his mouth and white gloves on his hands was directing traffic. Off to the left was the William Penn Grille, a famous restaurant which was supposed to have the best steaks in Connecticut (Mr. Biderman had taken the whole office staff there after the agency sold the Waverley Estate, and Bobby's mom had come home with about a dozen William Penn Grille books of matches). Its main claim to fame, his mom had once told Bobby, was that the bar was over the Harwich town line, but the restaurant proper was in Bridgeport.

Parked in front, on the very edge of Puritan Square, was a DeSoto automobile of a purple Bobby had never seen before—had never even *suspected*. The color was so bright it hurt his eyes to look at it. It hurt his whole *head*.

*Their cars will be like their yellow coats and sharp shoes and the greasy perfumed stuff they use to slick back their hair: loud and vulgar.*

The purple car was loaded with swoops and darts of chrome. It had fenderskirts. The hood ornament was huge; Chief DeSoto's head glittered in the hazy light like a fake jewel. The tires were fat whitewalls and the hubcaps were spinners. There was a whip antenna on the back. From its tip there hung a raccoon tail.

"The low men," Bobby whispered. There was really no question. It was a DeSoto, but at the same time it was like no car he had ever seen in his life, something as alien as an asteroid. As they drew closer to the clogged three-way intersection, Bobby saw the upholstery was a metallic dragonfly-green—the color nearly howled in contrast to the car's purple skin. There was white fur around the steering wheel. "Holy crow, it's them!"

“You have to take your mind away,” Ted said. He grabbed Bobby by the shoulders (up front the Yankees blared on and on, the driver paying his two fares in the back seat no attention whatsoever, thank God for that much, at least) and shook him once, hard, before letting him go. “You have to take your mind *away*, do you understand?”

He did. George Sanders had built a brick wall behind which to hide his thoughts and plans from the Children. Bobby had used Maury Wills once before, but he didn’t think baseball was going to cut it this time. What would?

Bobby could see the Asher Empire’s marquee jutting out over the sidewalk, three or four blocks beyond Puritan Square, and suddenly he could hear the sound of Sully-John’s Bo-lo Bouncer: whap-whap-whap. *If she’s trash*, S-J had said, *I’d love to be the trashman*.

The poster they’d seen that day filled Bobby’s mind: Brigitte Bardot (*the French sex-kitten* was what the papers called her) dressed only in a towel and a smile. She looked a little like the woman getting out of the car on one of the calendars back at The Corner Pocket, the one with most of her skirt in her lap and her garters showing. Brigitte Bardot was prettier, though. And she was *real*. She was too old for the likes of Bobby Garfield, of course

(*I’m so young and you’re so old*, Paul Anka singing from a thousand transistor radios, *this my darling I’ve been told*)

but she was still beautiful, and a cat could look at a queen, his mother always said that, too: a cat could look at a queen. Bobby saw her more and more clearly as he settled back against the seat, his eyes taking on that drifty, far-off look Ted’s eyes got when he had one of his blank-outs; Bobby saw her shower-damp puff of blond hair, the slope of her breasts into the towel, her long thighs, her painted toenails standing over the words Adults Only, Must Have Driver’s License or Birth Certificate. He could smell her soap—something light and flowery. He could smell

(*Nuit en Paris*)

her perfume and he could hear her radio in the next room. It was Freddy Cannon, that bebop summertime avatar of Savin Rock: “She’s dancin to the drag, the cha-cha rag-a-mop, she’s stompin to the shag, *rocks* the bunny hop . . .”

He was aware—faintly, far away, in another world farther up along the swirls of the spinning top—that the cab in which they were riding had come to a stop right next to the William Penn Grille, right next to that purple bruise of a DeSoto. Bobby could almost hear the car in his head; if it had had a voice it would have screamed *Shoot me, I'm too purple! Shoot me, I'm too purple!* And not far beyond it he could sense *them*. They were in the restaurant, having an early steak. Both of them ate it the same way, bloody-rare. Before they left they might put up a lost-pet poster in the telephone lounge or a hand-printed CAR FOR SALE BY OWNER card: upside-down, of course. They were in there, low men in yellow coats and white shoes drinking martinis between bites of nearly raw steer, and if they turned their minds out this way . . .

Steam was drifting out of the shower. B.B. raised herself on her bare painted toes and opened her towel, turning it into brief wings before letting it fall. And Bobby saw it wasn't Brigitte Bardot at all. It was Carol Gerber. *You'd have to be brave to let people look at you with nothing on but a towel*, she had said, and now she had let even the towel fall away. He was seeing her as she would look eight or ten years from now.

Bobby looked at her, helpless to look away, helpless in love, lost in the smells of her soap and her perfume, the sound of her radio (Freddy Cannon had given way to The Platters—*heavenly shades of night are falling*), the sight of her small painted toenails. His heart spun as a top did, with its lines rising and disappearing into other worlds. Other worlds than this.

The taxi began creeping forward. The four-door purple horror parked next to the restaurant (parked in a loading zone, Bobby saw, but what did *they* care?) began to slide to the rear. The cab jolted to a stop again and the driver cursed mildly as a trolley rushed clang-a-lang through Puritan Square. The low DeSoto was behind them now, but reflections from its chrome filled the cab with erratic dancing minnows of light. And suddenly Bobby felt a savage itching attack the backs of his eyeballs. This was followed by a fall of twisting black threads across his field of vision. He was able to hold onto Carol, but he now seemed to be looking at her through a field of interference.

*They sense us . . . or they sense something. Please God, get us out of here. Please get us out.*

The cabbie saw a hole in the traffic and squirted through it. A moment later they were rolling up Asher Avenue at a good pace. That itching sensation behind Bobby's eyes began to recede. The black threads across his field of interior vision cleared away, and when they did he saw that the naked girl wasn't Carol at all (not anymore, at least), not even Brigitte Bardot, but only the calendar-girl from The Corner Pocket, stripped mother-naked by Bobby's imagination. The music from her radio was gone. The smells of soap and perfume were gone. The life had gone out of her; she was just a . . . a . . .

"She's just a picture painted on a brick wall," Bobby said. He sat up.

"Say what, kid?" the driver asked, and snapped off the radio. The game was over. Mel Allen was selling cigarettes.

"Nothing," Bobby said.

"Guess youse dozed off, huh? Slow traffic, hot day . . . they'll do it every time, just like Hatlo says. Looks like your pal's still out."

"No," Ted said, straightening. "The doctor is in." He stretched his back and winced when it crackled. "I did doze a little, though." He glanced out the back window, but the William Penn Grille was out of sight now. "The Yankees won, I suppose?"

"Gahdam Injuns, they roont em," the cabbie said, and laughed. "Don't see how youse could sleep with the Yankees playing."

They turned onto Broad Street; two minutes later the cab pulled up in front of 149. Bobby looked at it as if expecting to see a different color paint or perhaps an added wing. He felt like he'd been gone ten years. In a way he supposed he had been—hadn't he seen Carol Gerber all grown up?

*I'm going to marry her*, Bobby decided as he got out of the cab. Over on Colony Street, Mrs. O'Hara's dog barked on and on, as if denying this and all human aspirations: *roop-roop, roop-roop-roop*.

Ted bent down to the driver's-side window with his wallet in his hand. He plucked out two singles, considered, then added a third. "Keep the change."

"You're a gent," the cabbie said.

"He's a *shooter*," Bobby corrected, and grinned as the cab pulled away.

"Let's get inside," Ted said. "It's not safe for me to be out here."

They went up the porch steps and Bobby used his key to open the door to the foyer. He kept thinking about that weird itching behind his eyes, and the

black threads. The threads had been particularly horrible, as if he'd been on the verge of going blind. "Did they see us, Ted? Or sense us, or whatever they do?"

"You know they did . . . but I don't think they knew how close we were." As they went into the Garfield apartment, Ted took off his sunglasses and tucked them into his shirt pocket. "You must have covered up well. Whooo! Hot in here!"

"What makes you think they didn't know we were close?"

Ted paused in the act of opening a window, giving Bobby a level look back over his shoulder. "If they'd known, that purple car would have been right behind us when we pulled up here."

"It wasn't a car," Bobby said, beginning to open windows himself. It didn't help much; the air that came in, lifting the curtains in listless little flaps, felt almost as hot as the air which had been trapped inside the apartment all day. "I don't know what it was, but it only *looked* like a car. And what I felt of *them* —" Even in the heat, Bobby shivered.

Ted got his fan, crossed to the window by Liz's shelf of knickknacks, and set it on the sill. "They camouflage themselves as best they can, but we still feel them. Even people who don't know what they are often feel them. A little of what's under the camouflage seeps through, and what's underneath is ugly. I hope you never know how ugly."

Bobby hoped so, too. "Where do they come from, Ted?"

"A dark place."

Ted knelt, plugged in his fan, flipped it on. The air it pulled into the room was a little cooler, but not so cool as The Corner Pocket had been, or the Criterion.

"Is it in another world, like in *Ring Around the Sun*? It is, isn't it?"

Ted was still on his knees by the electrical plug. He looked as if he were praying. To Bobby he also looked exhausted—done almost to death. How could he run from the low men? He didn't look as if he could make it as far as Spicer's Variety Store without stumbling.

"Yes," he said at last. "They come from another world. Another where and another when. That's all I can tell you. It's not safe for you to know more."

But Bobby had to ask one other question. "Did you come from one of those other worlds?"

Ted looked at him solemnly. "I came from Teaneck."

Bobby gaped at him for a moment, then began to laugh. Ted, still kneeling by the fan, joined him.

"What did you think of in the cab, Bobby?" Ted asked when they were finally able to stop. "Where did you go when the trouble started?" He paused. "What did you see?"

Bobby thought of Carol at twenty with her toenails painted pink, Carol standing naked with the towel at her feet and steam rising around her. Adults Only. Must Have Driver's License. No Exceptions.

"I can't tell," he said at last. "Because . . . well . . ."

"Because some things are private. I understand." Ted got to his feet. Bobby stepped forward to help him but Ted waved him away. "Perhaps you'd like to go out and play for a little while," he said. "Later on—around six, shall we say—I'll put on my dark glasses again and we'll go around the block, have a bite of dinner at the Colony Diner."

"But no beans."

The corners of Ted's mouth twitched in the ghost of a smile. "Absolutely no beans, beans *verboden*. At ten o'clock I'll call my friend Len and see how the fight went. Eh?"

"The low men . . . will they be looking for me now, too?"

"I'd never let you step out the door if I thought that," Ted replied, looking surprised. "You're fine, and I'm going to make sure you *stay* fine. Go on now. Play some catch or ring-a-levio or whatever it is you like. I have some things to do. Only be back by six so I don't worry."

"Okay."

Bobby went into his room and dumped the four quarters he'd taken to Bridgeport back into the Bike Fund jar. He looked around his room, seeing things with new eyes: the cowboy bedspread, the picture of his mother on one wall and the signed photo—obtained by saving cereal boxtops—of Clayton Moore in his mask on another, his roller skates (one with a broken strap) in the corner, his desk against the wall. The room looked smaller now—not so much a place to come to as a place to leave. He realized he was growing into his orange library card, and some bitter voice inside cried out against it. Cried no, no, no.

## VIII. BOBBY MAKES A CONFESSION. THE GERBER BABY AND THE MALTEX BABY. RIONDA. TED MAKES A CALL. CRY OF THE HUNTERS.

In Commonwealth Park the little kids were playing ticky-ball. Field B was empty; on Field C a few teenagers in orange St. Gabriel's tee-shirts were playing scrub. Carol Gerber was sitting on a bench with her jump-rope in her lap, watching them. She saw Bobby coming and began to smile. Then the smile went away.

"Bobby, what's wrong with you?"

Bobby hadn't been precisely aware that *anything* was wrong with him until Carol said that, but the look of concern on her face brought everything home and undid him. It was the reality of the low men and the fright of the close call they'd had on their way back from Bridgeport; it was his concern over his mother; mostly it was Ted. He knew perfectly well why Ted had shooed him out of the house, and what Ted was doing right now: filling his little suitcases and those carryhandle paper bags. His friend was going away.

Bobby began to cry. He didn't want to go all ushy-gushy in front of a girl, particularly *this* girl, but he couldn't help it.

Carol looked stunned for a moment—scared. Then she got off the bench, came to him, and put her arms around him. "That's all right," she said. "That's all right, Bobby, don't cry, everything's all right."

Almost blinded by tears and crying harder than ever—it was as if there were a violent summer storm going on in his head—Bobby let her lead him into a copse of trees where they would be hidden from the baseball fields and the main paths. She sat down on the grass, still holding him, brushing one hand through the sweaty bristles of his crewcut. For a little while she said nothing at all, and Bobby was incapable of speaking; he could only sob until his throat ached and his eyeballs throbbed in their sockets.

At last the intervals between sobs became longer. He sat up and wiped his face with his arm, horrified and ashamed of what he felt: not just tears but snot and spit as well. He must have covered her with mung.

Carol didn't seem to care. She touched his wet face. Bobby pulled back from her fingers, uttering another sob, and looked down at the grass. His eyesight, freshly washed by his tears, seemed almost preternaturally keen; he could see every blade and dandelion.

"It's all right," she said, but Bobby was still too ashamed to look at her.

They sat quietly for a little while and then Carol said, "Bobby, I'll be your girlfriend, if you want."

"You *are* my girlfriend," Bobby said.

"Then tell me what's wrong."

And Bobby heard himself telling her everything, starting with the day Ted had moved in and how his mother had taken an instant dislike to him. He told her about the first of Ted's blank-outs, about the low men, about the signs of the low men. When he got to that part, Carol touched him on the arm.

"What?" he asked. "You don't believe me?" His throat still had that achy too-full feeling it got after a crying fit, but he was getting better. If she didn't believe him, he wouldn't be mad at her. Wouldn't blame her a bit, in fact. It was just an enormous relief to get it off his chest. "That's okay. I know how crazy it must—"

"I've seen those funny hopscotches all over town," she said. "So has Yvonne and Angie. We talked about them. They have little stars and moons drawn next to them. Sometimes comets, too."

He gaped at her. "Are you kidding?"

"No. Girls always look at hopscotches, I don't know why. Close your mouth before a bug flies in."

He closed his mouth.

Carol nodded, satisfied, then took his hand in hers and laced her fingers through his. Bobby was amazed at what a perfect fit all those fingers made. "Now tell me the rest."

He did, finishing with the amazing day he'd just put in: the movie, the trip to The Corner Pocket, how Alanna had recognized his father in him, the close call on the way home. He tried to explain how the purple DeSoto hadn't seemed like a real car at all, that it only looked like a car. The closest he could come was to say it had felt *alive* somehow, like an evil version of the ostrich Dr. Dolittle sometimes rode in that series of talking-animal books they'd all gone

crazy for in the second grade. The only thing Bobby didn't confess was where he'd hidden his thoughts when the cab passed the William Penn Grille and the backs of his eyes began to itch.

He struggled, then blurted the worst as a coda: he was afraid that his mother going to Providence with Mr. Biderman and those other men had been a mistake. A *bad* mistake.

"Do you think Mr. Biderman's sweet on her?" Carol asked. By then they were walking back to the bench where she had left her jump-rope. Bobby picked it up and handed it to her. They began walking out of the park and toward Broad Street.

"Yeah, maybe," Bobby said glumly. "Or at least . . ." And here was part of what he was afraid of, although it had no name or real shape; it was like something ominous covered with a piece of canvas. "At least *she* thinks he is."

"Is he going to ask her to marry him? If he did he'd be your stepdad."

"God!" Bobby hadn't considered the idea of having Don Biderman as a stepfather, and he wished with all his might that Carol hadn't brought such a thing up. It was an awful thought.

"If she loves him you just better get used to the idea." Carol spoke in an older-woman, worldly-wise fashion that Bobby could have done without; he guessed she had already spent too much time this summer watching the oh John, oh Marsha shows on TV with her mom. And in a weird way he wouldn't have cared if his mom loved Mr. Biderman and that was all. It would be wretched, certainly, because Mr. Biderman was a creep, but it would have been understandable. More was going on, though. His mother's miserliness about money—her *cheapskatiness*—was a part of it, and so was whatever had made her start smoking again and caused her to cry in the night sometimes. The difference between his mother's Randall Garfield, the untrustworthy man who left the unpaid bills, and Alanna's Randy Garfield, the nice guy who liked the jukebox turned up loud . . . even that might be a part of it. (Had there really been unpaid bills? Had there really been a lapsed insurance policy? Why would his mother lie about such things?) This was stuff he couldn't talk about to Carol. It wasn't reticence; it was that he didn't know *how*.

They started up the hill. Bobby took one end of her rope and they walked side by side, dragging it between them on the sidewalk. Suddenly Bobby

stopped and pointed. "Look."

There was a yellow length of kite tail hanging from one of the electrical wires crossing the street farther up. It dangled in a curve that looked sort of like a question mark.

"Yeah, I see it," Carol said, sounding subdued. They began to walk again. "He should go today, Bobby."

"He can't. The fight's tonight. If Albini wins Ted's got to get his dough at the billiard parlor tomorrow night. I think he needs it pretty bad."

"Sure he does," Carol said. "You only have to look at his clothes to see he's almost broke. What he bet was probably the last money he had."

*His clothes—that's something only a girl would notice*, Bobby thought, and opened his mouth to tell her so. Before he could, someone behind them said, "Oh looka this. It's the Gerber Baby and the Maltex Baby. Howya doin, babies?"

They looked around. Biking slowly up the hill toward them were three St. Gabe's boys in orange shirts. Piled in their bike-baskets was an assortment of baseball gear. One of the boys, a pimply galoot with a silver cross dangling from his neck on a chain, had a baseball bat in a homemade sling on his back. *Thinks he's Robin Hood*, Bobby thought, but he was scared. They were big boys, high-school boys, *parochial school* boys, and if they decided they wanted to put him in the hospital, then to the hospital he would go. *Low boys in orange shirts*, he thought.

"Hi, Willie," Carol said to one of them—not the galoot with the bat slung on his back. She sounded calm, even cheery, but Bobby could hear fright fluttering underneath like a bird's wing. "I watched you play. You made a good catch."

The one she spoke to had an ugly, half-formed face below a mass of combed-back auburn hair and above a man's body. The Huffy bike beneath him was ridiculously small. Bobby thought he looked like a troll in a fairy-tale. "What's it to you, Gerber Baby?" he asked.

The three St. Gabe's boys pulled up even with them. Then two of them—the one with the dangling cross and the one Carol had called Willie—came a little farther, standing around the forks of their bikes now, walking them. With

mounting dismay Bobby realized he and Carol had been surrounded. He could smell a mixture of sweat and Vitalis coming from the boys in the orange shirts.

“Who are you, Maltex Baby?” the third St. Gabe’s boy asked Bobby. He leaned over the handlebars of his bike for a better look. “Are you Garfield? You are, ain’tcha? Billy Donahue’s still lookin for you from that time last winter. He wants to knock your teeth out. Maybe I ought to knock one or two of em out right here, give im a head start.”

Bobby felt a wretched crawling sensation begin in his stomach—something like snakes in a basket. *I won’t cry again*, he told himself. *Whatever happens I won’t cry again even if they send me to the hospital. And I’ll try to protect her.*

Protect her from big kids like this? It was a joke.

“Why are you being so mean, Willie?” Carol asked. She spoke solely to the boy with the auburn hair. “You’re not mean when you’re by yourself. Why do you have to be mean now?”

Willie flushed. That, coupled with his dark red hair—much darker than Bobby’s—made him look on fire from the neck up. Bobby guessed he didn’t like his friends knowing he could act like a human being when they weren’t around.

“Shut up, Gerber Baby!” he snarled. “Why don’t you just shut up and kiss your boyfriend while he’s still got all his teeth?”

The third boy was wearing a motorcycle belt cinched on the side and ancient Snap-Jack shoes covered with dirt from the baseball field. He was behind Carol. Now he moved in closer, still walking his bike, and grabbed her ponytail with both hands. He pulled it.

“Ow!” Carol almost screamed. She sounded surprised as well as hurt. She pulled away so hard that she almost fell down. Bobby caught her and Willie—who could be nice when he wasn’t with his pals, according to Carol—laughed.

“Why’d you do that?” Bobby yelled at the boy in the motorcycle belt, and as the words came out of his mouth it was as if he had heard them a thousand times before. All of this was like a ritual, the stuff that got said before the *real* yanks and pushes began and the fists began to fly. He thought of *Lord of the Flies* again—Ralph running from Jack and the others. At least on Golding’s island there had been jungle. He and Carol had nowhere to run.

*He says “Because I felt like it.” That’s what comes next.*

But before the boy with the side-cinched belt could say it, Robin Hood with the homemade bat-sling on his back said it for him. "Because he felt like it. Whatcha gonna do about it, Maltex Baby?" He suddenly flicked out one hand, snake-quick, and slapped Bobby across the face. Willie laughed again.

Carol started toward him. "Willie, please don't—"

Robin Hood reached out, grabbed the front of Carol's shirt, and squeezed. "Got any titties yet? Nah, not much. You ain't nothing but a Gerber Baby." He pushed her. Bobby, his head still ringing from the slap, caught her and for the second time kept her from falling down.

"Let's beat this queer up," the kid in the motorcycle belt said. "I hate his face."

They moved in, the wheels of their bikes squeaking solemnly. Then Willie let his drop on its side like a dead pony and reached for Bobby. Bobby raised his fists in a feeble imitation of Floyd Patterson.

"Say, boys, what's going on?" someone asked from behind them.

Willie had drawn one of his own fists back. Still holding it cocked, he looked over his shoulder. So did Robin Hood and the boy with the motorcycle belt. Parked at the curb was an old blue Studebaker with rusty rocker panels and a magnetic Jesus on the dashboard. Standing in front of it, looking extremely busty in the chest and extremely wide in the hip, was Anita Gerber's friend Rionda. Summer clothes were never going to be her friends (even at eleven Bobby understood this), but at that moment she looked like a goddess in pedal pushers.

"Rionda!" Carol yelled—not crying, but almost. She pushed past Willie and the boy in the motorcycle belt. Neither made any effort to stop her. All three of the St. Gabe's boys were staring at Rionda. Bobby found himself looking at Willie's cocked fist. Sometimes Bobby woke up in the morning with his peter just as hard as a rock, standing straight up like a moon rocket or something. As he went into the bathroom to pee, it would soften and wilt. Willie's cocked arm was wilting like that now, the fist at the end of it relaxing back into fingers, and the comparison made Bobby want to smile. He resisted the urge. If they saw him smiling now, they could do nothing. Later, however . . . on another day . . .

Rionda put her arms around Carol and hugged the girl to her large bosom. She surveyed the boys in the orange shirts and *she* was smiling. Smiling and making no effort to hide it.

“Willie Shearman, isn’t it?”

The formerly cocked-back arm dropped to Willie’s side. Muttering, he bent to pick up his bike.

“Richie O’Meara?”

The boy in the motorcycle belt looked at the toes of his dusty Snap-Jacks and also muttered something. His cheeks burned with color.

“*One* of the O’Meara boys, anyway, there’s so damned many of you now I can’t keep track.” Her eyes shifted to Robin Hood. “And who are you, big boy? Are you a Dedham? You look a little bit like a Dedham.”

Robin Hood looked at his hands. He wore a class ring on one of his fingers and now he began to twist it.

Rionda still had an arm around Carol’s shoulders. Carol had one of her own arms as far around Rionda’s waist as she could manage. She walked with Rionda, not looking at the boys, as Rionda stepped up from the street onto the little strip of grass between the curb and the sidewalk. She was still looking at Robin Hood. “You better answer me when I talk to you, sonny. Won’t be hard to find your mother if I want to try. All I have to do is ask Father Fitzgerald.”

“Harry Doolin, that’s me,” the boy said at last. He was twirling his class ring faster than ever.

“Well, but I was close, wasn’t I?” Rionda asked pleasantly, taking another two or three steps forward. They put her on the sidewalk. Carol, afraid to be so close to the boys, tried to hold her back, but Rionda would have none of it. “Dedhams and Doolins, all married together. Right back to County Cork, tra-la-tra-lee.”

Not Robin Hood but a kid named Harry Doolin with a stupid homemade bat-sling strapped to his back. Not Marlon Brando from *The Wild One* but a kid named Richie O’Meara, who wouldn’t have a Harley to go with his motorcycle belt for another five years . . . if ever. And Willie Shearman, who didn’t dare to be nice to a girl when he was with his friends. All it took to shrink them back to their proper size was one overweight woman in pedal pushers and a shell top, who had ridden to the rescue not on a white stallion

but in a 1954 Studebaker. The thought should have comforted Bobby but it didn't. He found himself thinking of what William Golding had said, that the boys on the island were rescued by the crew of a battle-cruiser and good for them . . . but who would rescue the crew?

That was stupid, no one ever looked less in need of rescuing than Rionda Hewson did at that moment, but the words still haunted Bobby. What if there *were* no grownups? Suppose the whole idea of grownups was an illusion? What if their money was really just playground marbles, their business deals no more than baseball-card trades, their wars only games of guns in the park? What if they were all still snotty-nosed kids inside their suits and dresses? Christ, that couldn't be, could it? It was too horrible to think about.

Rionda was still looking at the St. Gabe's boys with her hard and rather dangerous smile. "You three fellas wouldn't've been picking on kids younger and smaller than yourselves, would you? One of them a girl like your own little sisters?"

They were silent, not even muttering now. They only shuffled their feet.

"I'm sure you weren't, because that would be a cowardly thing to do, now wouldn't it?"

Again she gave them a chance to reply and plenty of time to hear their own silence.

"Willie? Richie? Harry? You weren't picking on them, were you?"

"Course not," Harry said. Bobby thought that if he spun that ring of his much faster, his finger would probably catch fire.

"If I thought a thing like that," Rionda said, still smiling her dangerous smile, "I'd have to go talk to Father Fitzgerald, wouldn't I? And the Father, he'd probably feel he had to talk to your folks, and *your* fathers'd probably feel obliged to warm your asses for you . . . and you'd deserve it, boys, wouldn't you? For picking on the weak and small."

Continued silence from the three boys, all now astride their ridiculously undersized bikes again.

"Did they pick on you, Bobby?" Rionda asked.

"No," Bobby said at once.

Rionda put a finger under Carol's chin and turned her face up. "Did they pick on *you*, lovey?"

“No, Rionda.”

Rionda smiled down at her, and although there were tears standing in Carol’s eyes, she smiled back.

“Well, boys, I guess you’re off the hook,” Rionda said. “They say you haven’t done nothing that’ll cause you a single extra uncomfy minute in the confessional. I’d say that you owe them a vote of thanks, don’t you?”

Mutter-mutter-mutter from the St. Gabe’s boys. *Please let it go at that*, Bobby pleaded silently. *Don’t make them actually thank us. Don’t rub their noses in it.*

Perhaps Rionda heard his thought (Bobby now had good reason to believe such things were possible). “Well,” she said, “maybe we can skip that part. Get along home, boys. And Harry, when you see Moira Dedham, tell her Rionda says she still goes to the Bingo over in Bridgeport every week, if she ever wants a ride.”

“I will, sure,” Harry said. He mounted his bike and rode away up the hill, eyes still on the sidewalk. Had there been pedestrians coming the other way, he would likely have run them over. His two friends followed him, standing on their pedals to catch up.

Rionda watched them go, her smile slowly fading. “Shanty Irish,” she said at last, “just trouble waiting to happen. Bah, good riddance to em. Carol, are you really all right?”

Carol said she really was.

“Bobby?”

“Sure, I’m fine.” It was taking him all the discipline he could manage not to start shaking right in front of her like a bowl of cranberry jelly, but if Carol could keep from falling apart, he guessed he could.

“Get in the car,” Rionda said to Carol. “I’ll give you a lift up to your house. You move along yourself, Bobby—scoot across the street and go inside. Those boys will have forgotten all about you and my Carol-girl by tomorrow, but tonight it might be smart for both of you to stay inside.”

“Okay,” Bobby said, knowing they wouldn’t have forgotten by tomorrow, nor by the end of the week, nor by the end of the summer. He and Carol were going to have to watch out for Harry and his friends for a long time. “Bye, Carol.”

“Bye.”

Bobby trotted across Broad Street. On the other side he stood watching Rionda’s old car go up to the apartment house where the Gerbers lived. When Carol got out she looked back down the hill and waved. Bobby waved back, then walked up the porch steps of 149 and went inside.

Ted was sitting in the living room, smoking a cigarette and reading *Life* magazine. Anita Ekberg was on the cover. Bobby had no doubt that Ted’s suitcases and the paper bags were packed, but there was no sign of them; he must have left them upstairs in his room. Bobby was glad. He didn’t want to look at them. It was bad enough just knowing they were there.

“What did you do?” Ted asked.

“Not much,” Bobby said. “I think I’ll lie down on my bed and read until supper.”

He went into his room. Stacked on the floor by his bed were three books from the adult section of the Harwich Public Library—*Cosmic Engineers*, by Clifford D. Simak; *The Roman Hat Mystery*, by Ellery Queen; and *The Inheritors*, by William Golding. Bobby chose *The Inheritors* and lay down with his head at the foot of his bed and his stocking feet on his pillow. There were cave people on the book’s cover, but they were drawn in a way that was almost abstract—you’d never see cave people like that on the cover of a kids’ book. Having an adult library card was very neat . . . but somehow not as neat as it had seemed at first.

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*Hawaiian Eye* was on at nine o’clock, and Bobby ordinarily would have been mesmerized (his mother claimed that shows like *Hawaiian Eye* and *The Untouchables* were too violent for children and ordinarily would not let him watch them), but tonight his mind kept wandering from the story. Less than sixty miles from here Eddie Albin and Hurricane Haywood would be mixing it up; the Gillette Blue Blades Girl, dressed in a blue bathing suit and blue high heels, would be parading around the ring before the start of every round and holding up a sign with a blue number on it. 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . .

By nine-thirty Bobby couldn’t have picked out the private eye on the TV show, let alone guessed who had murdered the blond socialite. *Hurricane*

*Haywood goes down in the eighth round*, Ted had told him; Old Gee knew it. But what if something went wrong? He didn't want Ted to go, but if he had to, Bobby couldn't bear the thought of him going with an empty wallet. Surely that couldn't happen, though . . . or could it? Bobby had seen a TV show where a fighter was supposed to take a dive and then changed his mind. What if that happened tonight? Taking a dive was bad, it was cheating—no shit, Sherlock, what was your first clue?—but if Hurricane Haywood *didn't* cheat, Ted would be in a lot of trouble; “hurtin for certain” was how Sully-John would have put it.

Nine-thirty according to the sunburst clock on the living-room wall. If Bobby's math was right, the crucial eighth round was now underway.

“How do you like *The Inheritors*?”

Bobby was so deep into his own thoughts that Ted's voice made him jump. On TV, Keenan Wynn was standing in front of a bulldozer and saying he'd walk a mile for a Camel.

“It's a lot harder than *Lord of the Flies*,” he said. “It seems like there are these two little families of cave people wandering around, and one family is smarter. But the other family, the dumb family, they're the heroes. I almost gave up, but now it's getting more interesting. I guess I'll stick with it.”

“The family you meet first, the one with the little girl, they're Neanderthals. The second family—only that one's really a tribe, Golding and his tribes—are Cro-Magnons. The Cro-Magnons are the inheritors. What happens between the two groups satisfies the definition of tragedy: events tending toward an unhappy outcome which cannot be avoided.”

Ted went on, talking about plays by Shakespeare and poems by Poe and novels by a guy named Theodore Dreiser. Ordinarily Bobby would have been interested, but tonight his mind kept going to Madison Square Garden. He could see the ring, lit as savagely as the few working pool-tables in The Corner Pocket had been. He could hear the crowd screaming as Haywood poured it on, smacking the surprised Eddie Albini with lefts and rights. Haywood wasn't going to tank the fight; like the boxer in the TV show, he was going to show the other guy a serious world of hurt instead. Bobby could smell sweat and hear the heavy biff and baff of gloves on flesh. Eddie Albini's eyes came up

double zeros . . . his knees buckled . . . the crowd was on its feet, screaming . . .

“—the idea of fate as a force which can't be escaped seems to start with the Greeks. There was a playwright named Euripides who—”

“Call,” Bobby said, and although he'd never had a cigarette in his life (by 1964 he would be smoking over a carton a week), his voice sounded as harsh as Ted's did late at night, after a day's worth of Chesterfields.

“Beg your pardon, Bobby?”

“Call Mr. Files and see about the fight.” Bobby looked at the sunburst clock. Nine-forty-nine. “If it only went eight, it'll be over now.”

“I agree that the fight is over, but if I call Files so soon he may suspect I knew something,” Ted said. “Not from the radio, either—this one isn't on the radio, as we both know. It's better to wait. Safer. Let him believe I am a man of inspired hunches. I'll call at ten, as if I expected the result to be a decision instead of a knockout. And in the meantime, Bobby, don't worry. I tell you it's a stroll on the boardwalk.”

Bobby gave up trying to follow *Hawaiian Eye* at all; he just sat on the couch and listened to the actors quack. A man shouted at a fat Hawaiian cop. A woman in a white bathing suit ran into the surf. One car chased another while drums throbbed on the soundtrack. The hands on the sunburst clock crawled, struggling toward the ten and the twelve like climbers negotiating the last few hundred feet of Mount Everest. The man who'd murdered the socialite was killed himself as he ran around in a pineapple field and *Hawaiian Eye* finally ended.

Bobby didn't wait for the previews of next week's show; he snapped off the TV and said, “Call, okay? *Please* call.”

“In a moment,” Ted said. “I think I went one rootbeer over my limit. My holding-tanks seem to have shrunk with age.”

He shuffled into the bathroom. There was an interminable pause, and then the sound of pee splashing into the bowl. “Aaah!” Ted said. There was considerable satisfaction in his voice.

Bobby could no longer sit. He got up and began pacing around the living room. He was sure that Tommy “Hurricane” Haywood was right now being photographed in his corner at The Garden, bruised but beaming as the

flashbulbs splashed white light over his face. The Gillette Blue Blades Girl would be there with him, her arm around his shoulders, his hand around her waist as Eddie Albin slumped forgotten in his own corner, dazed eyes puffed almost shut, still not completely conscious from the pounding he had taken.

By the time Ted returned, Bobby was in despair. He *knew* that Albin had lost the fight and his friend had lost his five hundred dollars. Would Ted stay when he found out he was broke? He might . . . but if he did and the low men came . . .

Bobby watched, fists clenching and unclenching, as Ted picked up the telephone and dialed.

“Relax, Bobby,” Ted told him. “It’s going to be okay.”

But Bobby couldn’t relax. His guts felt full of wires. Ted held the phone to his ear without saying anything for what seemed like forever.

“Why don’t they *answer?*” Bobby whispered fiercely.

“It’s only rung twice, Bobby. Why don’t you—hello? This is Mr. Brautigan calling. Ted Brautigan? Yes, ma’am, from this afternoon.” Incredibly, Ted tipped Bobby a wink. How could he be so cool? Bobby didn’t think he himself would have been capable of holding the phone up to his ear if he’d been in Ted’s position, let alone winking. “Yes, ma’am, he is.” Ted turned to Bobby and said, without covering the mouthpiece of the phone, “Alanna wants to know how is your girlfriend.”

Bobby tried to speak and could only wheeze.

“Bobby says she’s fine,” Ted told Alanna, “pretty as a summer day. May I speak to Len? Yes, I can wait. But please tell me about the fight.” There was a pause which seemed to go on forever. Ted was expressionless now. And this time when he turned to Bobby he covered the mouthpiece. “She says Albin got knocked around pretty good in the first five, held his own in six and seven, then threw a right hook out of nowhere and put Haywood on the canvas in the eighth. Lights out for the Hurricane. What a surprise, eh?”

“Yes,” Bobby said. His lips felt numb. It was true, all of it. By this time Friday night Ted would be gone. With two thousand rocks in your pocket you could do a lot of running from a lot of low men; with two thousand rocks in your pocket you could ride the Big Gray Dog from sea to shining sea.

Bobby went into the bathroom and squirted Ipana on his toothbrush. His terror that Ted had bet on the wrong fighter was gone, but the sadness of approaching loss was still there, and still growing. He never would have guessed that something that hadn't even happened could hurt so much. *A week from now I won't remember what was so neat about him. A year from now I'll hardly remember him at all.*

Was that true? God, was that true?

*No, Bobby thought. No way. I won't let it be.*

In the other room Ted was conversing with Len Files. It seemed to be a friendly enough palaver, going just as Ted had expected it would . . . and yes, here was Ted saying he'd just played a hunch, a good strong one, the kind you had to bet if you wanted to think of yourself as a sport. Sure, nine-thirty tomorrow night would be fine for the payout, assuming his friend's mother was back by eight; if she was a little late, Len would see him around ten or ten-thirty. Did that suit? More laughter from Ted, so it seemed that it suited fat Lennie Files right down to the ground.

Bobby put his toothbrush back in the glass on the shelf below the mirror, then reached into his pants pocket. There was something in there his fingers didn't recognize, not a part of the usual pocket-litter. He pulled out the keyring with the green fob, his special souvenir of a part of Bridgeport his mother knew nothing about. The part that was down there. THE CORNER POCKET BILLIARDS, POOL, AUTO. GAMES. KENMORE 8-2127.

He probably should have hidden it already (or gotten rid of it entirely), and suddenly an idea came to him. Nothing could have really cheered Bobby Garfield up that night, but this at least came close: he would give the keyring to Carol Gerber, after cautioning her never to tell his mom where she'd gotten it. He knew that Carol had at least two keys she could put on it—her apartment key and the key to the diary Rionda had given her for her birthday. (Carol was three months older than Bobby, but she never lorded it over him on this account.) Giving her the keyring would be a little like asking her to go steady. He wouldn't have to get all gushy and embarrass himself by saying so, either; Carol would know. It was part of what made her cool.

Bobby laid the keyring on the shelf, next to the toothglass, then went into his bedroom to put on his pj's. When he came out, Ted was sitting on the

couch, smoking a cigarette and looking at him.

“Bobby, are you all right?”

“I guess so. I guess I have to be, don’t I?”

Ted nodded. “I guess we both have to be.”

“Will I ever see you again?” Bobby asked, pleading in his mind for Ted not to sound like the Lone Ranger, not to start talking any of that corny *we’ll meet again pard* stuff . . . because it wasn’t *stuff*, that word was too kind. Shit was what it was. He didn’t think Ted had ever lied to him, and he didn’t want him to start now that they were near the end.

“I don’t know.” Ted studied the coal of his cigarette, and when he looked up, Bobby saw that his eyes were swimming with tears. “I don’t think so.”

Those tears undid Bobby. He ran across the room, wanting to hug Ted, *needing* to hug him. He stopped when Ted lifted his arms and crossed them over the chest of his baggy old man’s shirt, his expression a kind of horrified surprise.

Bobby stood where he was, his arms still held out to hug. Slowly he lowered them. No hugging, no touching. It was the rule, but the rule was mean. The rule was wrong.

“Will you write?” he asked.

“I will send you postcards,” Ted replied after a moment’s thought. “Not directly to you, though—that might be dangerous for both of us. What shall I do? Any ideas?”

“Send them to Carol,” Bobby said. He didn’t even stop to think.

“When did you tell her about the low men, Bobby?” There was no reproach in Ted’s voice. Why would there be? He was going, wasn’t he? For all the difference it made, the guy who did the story on the shopping-cart thief could write it up for the paper: CRAZY OLD MAN RUNS FROM INVADING ALIENS. People would read it to each other over their coffee and breakfast cereal and laugh. What had Ted called it that day? Galumphing small-town humor, hadn’t that been it? But if it was so funny, why did it hurt? Why did it hurt so much?

“Today,” he said in a small voice. “I saw her in the park and everything just kind of . . . came out.”

“That can happen,” Ted said gravely. “I know it well; sometimes the dam just bursts. And perhaps it’s for the best. You’ll tell her I may want to get in touch with you through her?”

“Yeah.”

Ted tapped a finger against his lips, thinking. Then he nodded. “At the top, the cards I send will say *Dear C.* instead of *Dear Carol.* At the bottom I’ll sign *A Friend.* That way you’ll both know who writes. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Bobby said. “Cool.” It wasn’t cool, none of this was cool, but it would do.

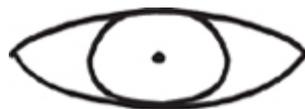
He suddenly lifted his hand, kissed the fingers, and blew across them. Ted, sitting on the couch, smiled, caught the kiss, and put it on his lined cheek. “You better go to bed now, Bobby. It’s been a big day and it’s late.”

Bobby went to bed.

• • •

At first he thought it was the same dream as before—Biderman, Cushman, and Dean chasing his mom through the jungle of William Golding’s island. Then Bobby realized the trees and vines were part of the wallpaper, and that the path under his mother’s flying feet was brown carpet. Not a jungle but a hotel corridor. This was his mind’s version of the Warwick Hotel.

Mr. Biderman and the other two nimrods were still chasing her, though. And now so were the boys from St. Gabe’s—Willie and Richie and Harry Doolin. All of them were wearing those streaks of red and white paint on their faces. And all of them were wearing bright yellow doublets upon which was drawn a brilliant red eye:



Other than the doublets they were naked. Their privates flopped and bobbed in bushy nests of pubic hair. All save Harry Doolin brandished spears; he had his baseball bat. It had been sharpened to a point on both ends.

“Kill the bitch!” Cushman yelled.

“Drink her blood!” Don Biderman cried, and threw his spear at Liz Garfield just as she darted around a corner. The spear stuck, quivering, into one of the jungle-painted walls.

“Stick it up her dirty cunt!” cried Willie—Willie who could be nice when he wasn’t with his friends. The red eye on his chest stared. Below it, his penis also seemed to stare.

*Run, Mom!* Bobby tried to scream, but no words came out. He had no mouth, no body. He was here and yet he wasn’t. He flew beside his mother like her own shadow. He heard her gasping for breath, saw her trembling, terrified mouth and her torn stockings. Her fancy dress was also torn. One of her breasts was scratched and bleeding. One of her eyes was almost closed. She looked as if she had gone a few rounds with Eddie Albin or Hurricane Haywood . . . maybe both at the same time.

“Gonna split you open!” Richie hollered.

“Eat you alive!” agreed Curtis Dean (and at top volume). “Drink your blood, strew your guts!”

His mom looked back at them and her feet (she had lost her shoes somewhere) stuttered against each other. *Don’t do that, Mom,* Bobby moaned. *For cripe’s sake don’t do that.*

As if she had heard him, Liz faced forward again and tried to run faster. She passed a poster on the wall:

PLEASE HELP US FIND OUR PET PIG?

LIZ is our MASCOT!

LIZ IS 34 YRS. OLD!

She is a BAD-TEMPERED SOW but WE LOVE HER!

Will do what you want if you say “I PROMISE”

(OR)

“THERE’S MONEY IN IT”!

CALL Housitonic 5-8337

(OR)

BRING to THE WILLIAM PENN GRILLE!

Ask for THE LOW MEN IN THE YELLOW COATS!

Motto: "WE EAT IT **RARE!**"

His mom saw the poster, too, and this time when her ankles banged together she *did* fall.

*Get up, Mom!* Bobby screamed, but she didn't—perhaps couldn't. She crawled along the brown carpet instead, looking over her shoulder as she went, her hair hanging across her cheeks and forehead in sweaty clumps. The back of her dress had been torn away, and Bobby could see her bare bum—her underpants were gone. Worse, the backs of her thighs were splashed with blood. What had they done to her? Dear God, what had they done to his mother?

Don Biderman came around the corner *ahead* of her—he had found a shortcut and cut her off. The others were right behind him. Now Mr. Biderman's prick was standing straight up the way Bobby's sometimes did in the morning before he got out of bed and went to the bathroom. Only Mr. Biderman's prick was *huge*, it looked like a kraken, a triffid, a *monstah*, and Bobby thought he understood the blood on his mother's legs. He didn't want to but he thought he did.

*Leave her alone!* he tried to scream at Mr. Biderman. *Leave her alone, haven't you done enough?*

The scarlet eye on Mr. Biderman's yellow doublet suddenly opened wider . . . and slithered to one side. Bobby was invisible, his body one world farther down the spinning top from this one . . . but the red eye saw him. The red eye saw *everything*.

"Kill the pig, drink her blood," Mr. Biderman said in a thick, almost unrecognizable voice, and started forward.

"Kill the pig, drink her blood," Bill Cushman and Curtis Dean chimed in.

"Kill the pig, strew her guts, eat her flesh," chanted Willie and Richie, falling in behind the nimrods. Like those of the men, their pricks had turned into spears.

"Eat her, drink her, strew her, *screw* her," Harry chimed in.

*Get up, Mom! Run! Don't let them!*

She tried. But even as she struggled from her knees to her feet, Biderman leaped at her. The others followed, closing in, and as their hands began to tear

the tatters of her clothes from her body Bobby thought: *I want to get out of here, I want to go back down the top to my own world, make it stop and spin it the other way so I can go back down to my own room in my own world . . .*

Except it wasn't a top, and even as the images of the dream began to break up and go dark, Bobby knew it. It wasn't a top but a tower, a still spindle upon which all of existence moved and spun. Then it was gone and for a little while there was a merciful nothingness. When he opened his eyes, his bedroom was full of sunshine—summer sunshine on a Thursday morning in the last June of the Eisenhower Presidency.

## IX. UGLY THURSDAY.

One thing you could say about Ted Brautigan: he knew how to cook. The breakfast he slid in front of Bobby—lightly scrambled eggs, toast, crisp bacon—was a lot better than anything his mother ever made for breakfast (her specialty was huge, tasteless pancakes which the two of them drowned in Aunt Jemima’s syrup), and as good as anything you could get at the Colony Diner or the Harwich. The only problem was that Bobby didn’t feel like eating. He couldn’t remember the details of his dream, but he knew it had been a nightmare, and that he must have cried at some point while it was going on—when he woke up, his pillow had been damp. Yet the dream wasn’t the only reason he felt flat and depressed this morning; dreams, after all, weren’t real. Ted’s going away would be real. And would be forever.

“Are you leaving right from The Corner Pocket?” Bobby asked as Ted sat down across from him with his own plate of eggs and bacon. “You are, aren’t you?”

“Yes, that will be safest.” He began to eat, but slowly and with no apparent enjoyment. So he was feeling bad, too. Bobby was glad. “I’ll say to your mother that my brother in Illinois is ill. That’s all she needs to know.”

“Are you going to take the Big Gray Dog?”

Ted smiled briefly. “Probably the train. I’m quite the wealthy man, remember.”

“Which train?”

“It’s better if you don’t know the details, Bobby. What you don’t know you can’t tell. Or be made to tell.”

Bobby considered this briefly, then asked, “You’ll remember the postcards?”

Ted picked up a piece of bacon, then put it down again. “Postcards, plenty of postcards. I promise. Now don’t let’s talk about it anymore.”

“What should we talk about, then?”

Ted thought about it, then smiled. His smile was sweet and open; when he smiled, Bobby could see what he must have looked like when he was twenty, and strong.

“Books, of course,” Ted said. “We’ll talk about books.”

• • •

It was going to be a crushingly hot day, that was clear by nine o'clock. Bobby helped with the dishes, drying and putting away, and then they sat in the living room, where Ted's fan did its best to circulate the already tired air, and they talked about books . . . or rather *Ted* talked about books. And this morning, without the distraction of the Albini–Haywood fight, Bobby listened hungrily. He didn't understand all of what Ted was saying, but he understood enough to realize that books made their own world, and that the Harwich Public Library wasn't it. The library was nothing but the doorway to that world.

Ted talked of William Golding and what he called "dystopian fantasy," went on to H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, suggesting a link between the Morlocks and the Eloi and Jack and Ralph on Golding's island; he talked about what he called "literature's only excuses," which he said were exploring the questions of innocence and experience, good and evil. Near the end of this impromptu lecture he mentioned a novel called *The Exorcist*, which dealt with both these questions ("in the popular context"), and then stopped abruptly. He shook his head as if to clear it.

"What's wrong?" Bobby took a sip of his rootbeer. He still didn't like it much but it was the only soft drink in the fridge. Besides, it was cold.

"What am I thinking?" Ted passed a hand over his brow, as if he'd suddenly developed a headache. "That one hasn't been written yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I'm rambling. Why don't you go out for awhile? Stretch your legs? I might lie down for a bit. I didn't sleep very well last night."

"Okay." Bobby guessed a little fresh air—even if it was *hot* fresh air—might do him good. And while it was interesting to listen to Ted talk, he had started to feel as if the apartment walls were closing in on him. It was knowing Ted was going, Bobby supposed. Now there was a sad little rhyme for you: knowing he was going.

For a moment, as he went back into his room to get his baseball glove, the keyring from The Corner Pocket crossed his mind—he was going to give it to Carol so she'd know they were going steady. Then he remembered Harry Doolin, Richie O'Meara, and Willie Shearman. They were out there

someplace, sure they were, and if they caught him by himself they'd probably beat the crap out of him. For the first time in two or three days, Bobby found himself wishing for Sully. Sully was a little kid like him, but he was tough. Doolin and his friends might beat him up, but Sully-John would make them pay for the privilege. S-J was at camp, though, and that was that.

Bobby never considered staying in—he couldn't hide all summer from the likes of Willie Shearman, that would be buggy—but as he went outside he reminded himself that he had to be careful, had to be on the lookout for them. As long as he saw them coming, there would be no problem.

With the St. Gabe's boys on his mind, Bobby left 149 with no further thought of the keyfob, his special souvenir of down there. It lay on the bathroom shelf next to the toothglass, right where he had left it the night before.

• • •

He tramped all over Harwich, it seemed—from Broad Street to Commonwealth Park (no St. Gabe's boys on Field C today; the American Legion team was there, taking batting practice and shagging flies in the hot sun), from the park to the town square, from the town square to the railway station. As he stood in the little newsstand kiosk beneath the railway overpass, looking at paperbacks (Mr. Burton, who ran the place, would let you look for awhile as long as you didn't handle what he called "the moichandise"), the town whistle went off, startling them both.

"Mothera God, what's up widdat?" Mr. Burton asked indignantly. He had spilled packs of gum all over the floor and now stooped to pick them up, his gray change-apron hanging down. "It ain't but quarter past eleven!"

"It's early, all right," Bobby agreed, and left the newsstand soon after. Browsing had lost its charms for him. He walked out to River Avenue, stopping at the Tip-Top Bakery to buy half a loaf of day-old bread (two cents) and to ask Georgie Sullivan how S-J was.

"He's fine," S-J's oldest brother said. "We got a postcard on Tuesday says he misses the fambly and wantsa come home. We get one Wednesday says he's learning how to dive. The one this morning says he's having the time of his life, he wantsa stay forever." He laughed, a big Irish boy of twenty with big Irish

arms and shoulders. “He may wanta stay forever, but Ma’d miss im like hell if he stayed up there. You gonna feed the ducks with some of that?”

“Yeah, like always.”

“Don’t let em nibble your fingers. Those damned river ducks carry diseases. They—”

In the town square the Municipal Building clock began to chime noon, although it was still only quarter of.

“What’s going on today?” Georgie asked. “First the whistle blows early, now the damned town clock’s off-course.”

“Maybe it’s the heat,” Bobby said.

Georgie looked at Bobby doubtfully. “Well . . . it’s as good an explanation as any.”

*Yeah, Bobby thought, going out. And quite a bit safer than some.*

• • •

Bobby went down River Avenue, munching his bread as he walked. By the time he found a bench near the Housatonic River, most of the half-loaf had disappeared down his own throat. Ducks came waddling eagerly out of the reeds and Bobby began to scatter the remaining bread for them, amused as always by the greedy way they ran for the chunks and the way they threw their heads back to eat them.

After awhile he began to grow drowsy. He looked out over the river, at the nets of reflected light shimmering on its surface, and grew drowsier still. He had slept the previous night but his sleep hadn’t been restful. Now he dozed off with his hands full of breadcrumbs. The ducks finished with what was on the grass and then drew closer to him, quacking in low, ruminative tones. The clock in the town square bonged the hour of two at twelve-twenty, causing people downtown to shake their heads and ask each other what the world was coming to. Bobby’s doze deepened by degrees, and when a shadow fell over him, he didn’t see or sense it.

“Hey. Kid.”

The voice was quiet and intense. Bobby sat up with a gasp and a jerk, his hands opening and spilling out the remaining bread. Those snakes began to crawl around in his belly again. It wasn’t Willie Shearman or Richie O’Meara

or Harry Doolin—even coming out of a doze he knew that—but Bobby almost wished it had been one of them. Even all three. A beating wasn't the worst thing that could happen to you. No, not the worst. Cripes, why did he have to go and fall *asleep*?

“Kid.”

The ducks were stepping on Bobby's feet, squabbling over the unexpected windfall. Their wings were fluttering against his ankles and his shins, but the feeling was far away, far away. He could see the shadow of a man's head on the grass ahead of him. The man was standing behind him.

“Kid.”

Slowly and creakily, Bobby turned. The man's coat would be yellow and somewhere on it would be an eye, a staring red eye.

But the man who stood there was wearing a tan summer suit, the jacket pooched out by a little stomach that was starting to grow into a big stomach, and Bobby knew at once it wasn't one of *them*, after all. There was no itching behind his eyes, no black threads across his field of vision . . . but the major thing was that this wasn't some *creature* just pretending to be a person; it *was* a person.

“What?” Bobby asked, his voice low and muzzy. He still couldn't believe he'd gone to sleep like that, blanked out like that. “What do you want?”

“I'll give you two bucks to let me blow you,” the man in the tan suit said. He reached into the pocket of his jacket and brought out his wallet. “We can go behind that tree over there. No one'll see us. And you'll like it.”

“No,” Bobby said, getting up. He wasn't completely sure what the man in the tan suit was talking about, but he had a pretty good idea. The ducks scattered backward, but the bread was too tempting to resist and they returned, pecking and dancing around Bobby's sneakers. “I have to go home now. My mother—”

The man came closer, still holding out his wallet. It was as if he'd decided to give the whole thing to Bobby, never mind the two lousy dollars. “You don't have to do it to me, I'll just do it to you. Come on, what do you say? I'll make it three dollars.” The man's voice was trembling now, jiggling and jaggling up and down the scale, at one moment seeming to laugh, at the next almost to weep. “You can go to the movies for a month on three dollars.”

“No, really, I—”

“You’ll like it, all my boys like it.” He reached out for Bobby and suddenly Bobby thought of Ted taking hold of his shoulders, Ted putting his hands behind his neck, Ted pulling him closer until they were almost close enough to kiss. That wasn’t like this . . . and yet it was. Somehow it was.

Without thinking about what he was doing, Bobby bent and grabbed one of the ducks. He lifted it in a surprised squawking flurry of beak and wings and paddling feet, had just a glimpse of one black bead of an eye, and then threw it at the man in the tan suit. The man yelled and put his hands up to shield his face, dropping his wallet.

Bobby ran.

• • •

He was passing through the square, headed back home, when he saw a poster on a telephone pole outside the candy store. He walked over to it and read it with silent horror. He couldn’t remember his dream of the night before, but something like this had been in it. He was positive.

HAVE YOU SEEN BRAUTIGAN!

He is an OLD MONGREL but WE LOVE HIM!

BRAUTIGAN has WHITE FUR and BLUE EYES!

He is FRIENDLY!

Will EAT SCRAPS FROM YOUR HAND!

We will pay A VERY LARGE REWARD

(\$ \$ \$ \$)

IF YOU HAVE SEEN BRAUTIGAN!

CALL HOUSITONIC 5-8337!

(OR)

BRING BRAUTIGAN to 745 Highgate Avenue!

Home of the SAGAMORE FAMILY!

*This isn't a good day*, Bobby thought, watching his hand reach out and pull the poster off the telephone pole. Beyond it, hanging from a bulb on the marquee of the Harwich Theater, he saw a dangling blue kite tail. *This isn't a good day at all. I never should have gone out of the apartment. In fact, I should have stayed in bed.*

HOusitonic 5-8337, just like on the poster about Phil the Welsh Corgi . . . except if there was a HOusitonic exchange in Harwich, Bobby had never heard of it. Some of the numbers were on the HARwich exchange. Others were COMmonwealth. But HOusitonic? No. Not here, not in Bridgeport, either.

He crumpled the poster up and threw it in the KEEP OUR TOWN CLEAN N GREEN basket on the corner, but on the other side of the street he found another just like it. Farther along he found a third pasted to a corner mailbox. He tore these down, as well. The low men were either closing in or desperate. Maybe both. Ted couldn't go out at all today—Bobby would have to tell him that. And he'd have to be ready to run. He'd tell him that, too.

Bobby cut through the park, almost running himself in his hurry to get home, and he barely heard the small, gasping cry which came from his left as he passed the baseball fields: “Bobby . . .”

He stopped and looked toward the grove of trees where Carol had taken him the day before when he started to bawl. And when the gasping cry came again, he realized it was *her*.

“Bobby if it's you please help me . . .”

He turned off the cement path and ducked into the copse of trees. What he saw there made him drop his baseball glove on the ground. It was an Alvin Dark model, that glove, and later it was gone. Someone came along and just kified it, he supposed, and so what? As that day wore on, his lousy baseball glove was the very least of his concerns.

Carol sat beneath the same elm tree where she had comforted him. Her knees were drawn up to her chest. Her face was ashy gray. Black shock-circles ringed her eyes, giving her a raccoony look. A thread of blood trickled from one of her nostrils. Her left arm lay across her midriff, pulling her shirt tight against the beginning nubs of what would be breasts in another year or two. She held the elbow of that arm cupped in her right hand.

She was wearing shorts and a smock-type blouse with long sleeves—the kind of thing you just slipped on over your head. Later, Bobby would lay much of the blame for what happened on that stupid shirt of hers. She must have worn it to protect against sunburn; it was the only reason he could think of to wear long sleeves on such a murderously hot day. Had she picked it out herself or had Mrs. Gerber forced her into it? And did it matter? *Yes*, Bobby would think when there was time to think. *It mattered, you're damned right it mattered.*

But for now the blouse with its long sleeves was peripheral. The only thing he noticed in that first instant was Carol's upper left arm. It seemed to have not one shoulder but two.

"Bobby," she said, looking at him with shining dazed eyes. "They hurt me."

She was in shock, of course. He was in shock himself by then, running on instinct. He tried to pick her up and she screamed in pain—dear God, what a sound.

"I'll run and get help," he said, lowering her back. "You just sit there and try not to move."

She was shaking her head—carefully, so as not to joggle her arm. Her blue eyes were nearly black with pain and terror. "No, Bobby, no, don't leave me here, what if they come back? What if they come back and hurt me worse?" Parts of what happened on that long hot Thursday were lost to him, lost in the shockwave, but that part always stood clear: Carol looking up at him and saying *What if they come back and hurt me worse?*

"But . . . Carol . . ."

"I can walk. If you help me, I can walk."

Bobby put a tentative arm around her waist, hoping she wouldn't scream again. That had been bad.

Carol got slowly to her feet, using the trunk of the tree to support her back. Her left arm moved a little as she rose. That grotesque double shoulder bulged and flexed. She moaned but didn't scream, thank God.

"You better stop," Bobby said.

"No, I want to get out of here. Help me. Oh God, it hurts."

Once she was all the way up it seemed a little better. They made their way out of the grove with the slow side-by-side solemnity of a couple about to be

married. Beyond the shade of the trees the day seemed even hotter than before and blindingly bright. Bobby looked around and saw no one. Somewhere, deeper in the park, a bunch of little kids (probably Sparrows or Robins from Sterling House) were singing a song, but the area around the baseball fields was utterly deserted: no kids, no mothers wheeling baby carriages, no sign of Officer Raymer, the local cop who would sometimes buy you an ice cream or a bag of peanuts if he was in a good mood. Everyone was inside, hiding from the heat.

Still moving slowly, Bobby with his arm around Carol's waist, they walked along the path which came out on the corner of Commonwealth and Broad. Broad Street Hill was as deserted as the park; the paving shimmered like the air over an incinerator. There wasn't a single pedestrian or moving car in sight.

They stepped onto the sidewalk and Bobby was about to ask if she could make it across the street when Carol said in a high, whispery voice: "Oh Bobby I'm fainting."

He looked at her in alarm and saw her eyes roll up to glistening whites. She swayed back and forth like a tree which has been cut almost all the way through. Bobby bent, moving without thinking, catching her around the thighs and the back as her knees unlocked. He had been standing to her right and was able to do this without hurting her left arm any more than it already had been hurt; also, even in her faint, Carol kept her right hand cupped over her left elbow, holding the arm mostly steady.

Carol Gerber was Bobby's height, perhaps even a little taller, and close to his weight. He should have been incapable of even staggering up Broad Street with her in his arms, but people in shock are capable of amazing bursts of strength. Bobby carried her, and not at a stagger; under that burning June sun he ran. No one stopped him, no one asked him what was wrong with the little girl, no one offered to help. He could hear cars on Asher Avenue, but this part of the world seemed eerily like Midwich, where everyone had gone to sleep at once.

Taking Carol to her mother never crossed his mind. The Gerber apartment was farther up the hill, but that wasn't the reason. Ted was all Bobby could think of. He had to take her to Ted. Ted would know what to do.

His preternatural strength began to give out as he climbed the steps to the front porch of his building. He staggered, and Carol's grotesque double shoulder bumped against the railing. She stiffened in his arms and cried out, her half-lidded eyes opening wide.

"Almost there," he told her in a panting whisper that didn't sound much like his own voice. "Almost there, I'm sorry I bumped you but we're almost—"

The door opened and Ted came out. He was wearing gray suit pants and a strap-style undershirt. Suspenders hung down to his knees in swinging loops. He looked surprised and concerned but not frightened.

Bobby managed the last porch step and then swayed backward. For one terrible moment he thought he was going to go crashing down, maybe splitting his skull on the cement walk. Then Ted grabbed him and steadied him.

"Give her to me," he said.

"Get over on her other side first," Bobby panted. His arms were twanging like guitar strings and his shoulders seemed to be on fire. "That's the bad side."

Ted came around and stood next to Bobby. Carol was looking up at them, her sandy-blond hair hanging down over Bobby's wrist. "They hurt me," she whispered to Ted. "Willie . . . I asked him to make them stop but he wouldn't."

"Don't talk," Ted said. "You're going to be all right."

He took her from Bobby as gently as he could, but they couldn't help joggling her left arm a little. The double shoulder moved under the white smock. Carol moaned, then began to cry. Fresh blood trickled from her right nostril, one brilliant red drop against her skin. Bobby had a momentary flash from his dream of the night before: the eye. The red eye.

"Hold the door for me, Bobby."

Bobby held it wide. Ted carried Carol through the foyer and into the Garfield apartment. At that same moment Liz Garfield was descending the iron steps leading from the Harwich stop of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad to Main Street, where there was a taxi stand. She moved with the slow deliberation of a chronic invalid. A suitcase dangled from each hand. Mr. Burton, proprietor of the newsstand kiosk, happened to be standing in his doorway and having a smoke. He watched Liz reach the bottom of the

steps, turn back the veil of her little hat, and gingerly dab at her face with a bit of handkerchief. She winced at each touch. She was wearing makeup, a lot, but the makeup didn't help. The makeup only drew attention to what had happened to her. The veil was better, even though it only covered the upper part of her face, and now she lowered it again. She approached the first of three idling taxis, and the driver got out to help her with her bags.

Burton wondered who had given her the business. He hoped whoever it had been was currently getting his head massaged by big cops with hard hickories. A person who would do something like that to a woman deserved no better. A person who would do something like that to a woman had no business running around loose. That was Burton's opinion.

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Bobby thought Ted would put Carol on the couch, but he didn't. There was one straight-backed chair in the living room and that was where he sat, holding her on his lap. He held her the way the Grant's department store Santa Claus held the little kids who came up to him as he sat on his throne.

"Where else are you hurt? Besides the shoulder?"

"They hit me in the stomach. And on my side."

"Which side?"

"The right one."

Ted gently pulled her blouse up on that side. Bobby hissed in air over his lower lip when he saw the bruise which lay diagonally across her ribcage. He recognized the baseball-bat shape of it at once. He knew whose bat it had been: Harry Doolin's, the pimply galoot who saw himself as Robin Hood in whatever stunted landscape passed for his imagination. He and Richie O'Meara and Willie Shearman had come upon her in the park and Harry had worked her over with his ball-bat while Richie and Willie held her. All three of them laughing and calling her the Gerber Baby. Maybe it had started as a joke and gotten out of hand. Wasn't that pretty much what had happened in *Lord of the Flies*? Things had just gotten a little out of hand?

Ted touched Carol's waist; his bunched fingers spread and then slowly slid up her side. He did this with his head cocked, as if he were listening rather than touching. Maybe he was. Carol gasped when he reached the bruise.

“Hurt?” Ted asked.

“A little. Not as bad as my sh-shoulder. They broke my arm, didn’t they?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Ted replied.

“I heard it pop. So did they. That’s when they ran.”

“I’m sure you did hear it. Yes indeed.”

Tears were running down her cheeks and her face was still ashy, but Carol seemed calmer now. Ted held her blouse up against her armpit and looked at the bruise. *He knows what that shape is just as well as I do*, Bobby thought.

“How many were there, Carol?”

*Three*, Bobby thought.

“Th-three.”

“Three boys?”

She nodded.

“Three boys against one little girl. They must have been afraid of you. They must have thought you were a lion. Are you a lion, Carol?”

“I wish I was,” Carol said. She tried to smile. “I wish I could have roared and made them go away. They h-h-*hurt* me.”

“I know they did. I know.” His hand slid down her side and cupped the bat-bruise on her ribcage. “Breathe in.”

The bruise swelled against Ted’s hand; Bobby could see its purple shape between his nicotine-stained fingers. “Does *that* hurt?”

She shook her head.

“Not to breathe?”

“No.”

“And not when your ribs go against my hand?”

“No. Only sore. What hurts is . . .” She glanced quickly at the terrible shape of her double shoulder, then away.

“I know. Poor Carol. Poor darling. We’ll get to that. Where else did they hit you? In the stomach, you said?”

“Yes.”

Ted pulled her blouse up in front. There was another bruise, but this one didn’t look so deep or so angry. He prodded gently with his fingers, first above her bellybutton and then below it. She said there was no pain like in her shoulder, that her belly was only sore like her ribs were sore.

“They didn’t hit you in your back?”

“N-no.”

“In your head or your neck?”

“Uh-uh, just my side and my stomach and then they hit me in the shoulder and there was that pop and they heard it and they ran. I used to think Willie Shearman was nice.” She gave Ted a woeful look.

“Turn your head for me, Carol . . . good . . . now the other way. It doesn’t hurt when you turn it?”

“No.”

“And you’re sure they never hit your head.”

“No. I mean yes, I’m sure.”

“Lucky girl.”

Bobby wondered how in the hell Ted could think Carol was *lucky*. Her left arm didn’t look just broken to him; it looked half torn off. He suddenly thought of a roast-chicken Sunday dinner, and the sound the drumstick made when you pulled it loose. His stomach knotted. For a moment he thought he was going to vomit up his breakfast and the day-old bread which had been his only lunch.

*No, he told himself. Not now, you can’t. Ted’s got enough problems without adding you to the list.*

“Bobby?” Ted’s voice was clear and sharp. He sounded like a guy with more solutions than problems, and what a relief that was. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” And he thought it was true. His stomach was starting to settle.

“Good. You did well to get her up here. Can you do well a little longer?”

“Yeah.”

“I need a pair of scissors. Can you find one?”

Bobby went into his mother’s bedroom, opened the top drawer of her dresser, and got out her wicker sewing basket. Inside was a medium-sized pair of shears. He hurried back into the living room with them and showed them to Ted. “Are these all right?”

“Fine,” he said, taking them. Then, to Carol: “I’m going to spoil your blouse, Carol. I’m sorry, but I have to look at your shoulder now and I don’t want to hurt you any more than I can help.”

“That’s okay,” she said, and again tried to smile. Bobby was a little in awe of her bravery; if *his* shoulder had looked like that, he probably would have been blatting like a sheep caught in a barbed-wire fence.

“You can wear one of Bobby’s shirts home. Can’t she, Bobby?”

“Sure, I don’t mind a few cooties.”

“Fun-*nee*,” Carol said.

Working carefully, Ted cut the smock up the back and then up the front. With that done he pulled the two pieces off like the shell of an egg. He was very careful on the left side, but Carol uttered a hoarse scream when Ted’s fingers brushed her shoulder. Bobby jumped and his heart, which had been slowing down, began to race again.

“I’m sorry,” Ted murmured. “Oh my. Look at this.”

Carol’s shoulder was ugly, but not as bad as Bobby had feared—perhaps few things were once you were looking right at them. The second shoulder was higher than the normal one, and the skin there was stretched so tight that Bobby didn’t understand why it didn’t just split open. It had gone a peculiar lilac color, as well.

“How bad is it?” Carol asked. She was looking in the other direction, across the room. Her small face had the pinched, starved look of a UNICEF child. So far as Bobby knew she never looked at her hurt shoulder after that single quick peek. “I’ll be in a cast all summer, won’t I?”

“I don’t think you’re going to be in a cast at all.”

Carol looked up into Ted’s face wonderingly.

“It’s not broken, child, only dislocated. Someone hit you on the shoulder —”

“Harry Doolin—”

“—and hard enough to knock the top of the bone in your upper left arm out of its socket. I can put it back in, I think. Can you stand one or two moments of quite bad pain if you know things may be all right again afterward?”

“Yes,” she said at once. “Fix it, Mr. Brautigan. Please fix it.”

Bobby looked at him a little doubtfully. “Can you really do that?”

“Yes. Give me your belt.”

“*Hub?*”

“Your belt. Give it to me.”

Bobby slipped his belt—a fairly new one he’d gotten for Christmas—out of its loops and handed it to Ted, who took it without ever shifting his eyes from Carol’s. “What’s your last name, honey?”

“Gerber. They called me the Gerber Baby, but I’m not a baby.”

“I’m sure you’re not. And this is where you prove it.” He got up, settled her in the chair, then knelt before her like a guy in some old movie getting ready to propose. He folded Bobby’s belt over twice in his big hands, then poked it at her good hand until she let go of her elbow and closed her fingers over the loops. “Good. Now put it in your mouth.”

“Put Bobby’s *belt* in my *mouth*?”

Ted’s gaze never left her. He began stroking her unhurt arm from the elbow to the wrist. His fingers trailed down her forearm . . . stopped . . . rose and went back to her elbow . . . trailed down her forearm again. *It’s like he’s hypnotizing her*, Bobby thought, but there was really no “like” about it; Ted *was* hypnotizing her. His pupils had begun to do that weird thing again, growing and shrinking . . . growing and shrinking . . . growing and shrinking. Their movement and the movement of his fingers were exactly in rhythm. Carol stared into his face, her lips parted.

“Ted . . . your *eyes* . . .”

“Yes, yes.” He sounded impatient, not very interested in what his eyes were doing. “Pain rises, Carol, did you know that?”

“No . . .”

Her eyes on his. His fingers on her arm, going down and rising. Going down . . . and rising. His pupils like a slow heartbeat. Bobby could see Carol relaxing in the chair. She was still holding the belt, and when Ted stopped his finger-stroking long enough to touch the back of her hand, she lifted it toward her face with no protest.

“Oh yes,” he said, “pain rises from its source to the brain. When I put your shoulder back in its socket, there will be a lot of pain—but you’ll catch most of it in your mouth as it rises toward your brain. You will bite it with your teeth and hold it against Bobby’s belt so that only a little of it can get into your head, which is where things hurt the most. Do you understand me, Carol?”

“Yes . . .” Her voice had grown distant. She looked very small sitting there in the straight-backed chair, wearing only her shorts and her sneakers. The pupils of Ted’s eyes, Bobby noticed, had grown steady again.

“Put the belt in your mouth.”

She put it between her lips.

“Bite when it hurts.”

“When it hurts.”

“Catch the pain.”

“I’ll catch it.”

Ted gave a final stroke of his big forefinger from her elbow to her wrist, then looked at Bobby. “Wish me luck,” he said.

“Luck,” Bobby replied fervently.

Distant, dreaming, Carol Gerber said: “Bobby threw a duck at a man.”

“Did he?” Ted asked. Very, very gently he closed his left hand around Carol’s left wrist.

“Bobby thought the man was a low man.”

Ted glanced at Bobby.

“Not that kind of low man,” Bobby said. “Just . . . oh, never mind.”

“All the same,” Ted said, “they are very close. The town clock, the town whistle—”

“I heard,” Bobby said grimly.

“I’m not going to wait until your mother comes back tonight—I don’t dare. I’ll spend the day in a movie or a park or somewhere else. If all else fails, there are flophouses in Bridgeport. Carol, are you ready?”

“Ready.”

“When the pain rises, what will you do?”

“Catch it. Bite it into Bobby’s belt.”

“Good girl. Ten seconds and you are going to feel a lot better.”

Ted drew in a deep breath. Then he reached out with his right hand until it hovered just above the lilac-colored bulge in Carol’s shoulder. “Here comes the pain, darling. Be brave.”

It wasn’t ten seconds; not even five. To Bobby it seemed to happen in an instant. The heel of Ted’s right hand pressed directly against that knob rising out of Carol’s stretched flesh. At the same time he pulled sharply on her wrist.

Carol's jaws flexed as she clamped down on Bobby's belt. Bobby heard a brief creaking sound, like the one his neck sometimes made when it was stiff and he turned his head. And then the bulge in Carol's arm was gone.

"Bingo!" Ted cried. "Looks good! Carol?"

She opened her mouth. Bobby's belt fell out of it and onto her lap. Bobby saw a line of tiny points embedded in the leather; she had bitten nearly all the way through.

"It doesn't hurt anymore," she said wonderingly. She ran her right hand up to where the skin was now turning a darker purple, touched the bruise, winced.

"That'll be sore for a week or so," Ted warned her. "And you mustn't throw or lift with that arm for at least two weeks. If you do, it may pop out again."

"I'll be careful." Now Carol could look at her arm. She kept touching the bruise with light, testing fingers.

"How much of the pain did you catch?" Ted asked her, and although his face was still grave, Bobby thought he could hear a little smile in his voice.

"Most of it," she said. "It hardly hurt at all." As soon as these words were out, however, she slumped back in the chair. Her eyes were open but unfocused. Carol had fainted for the second time.

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Ted told Bobby to wet a cloth and bring it to him. "Cold water," he said. "Wring it out, but not too much."

Bobby ran into the bathroom, got a facecloth from the shelf by the tub, and wet it in cold water. The bottom half of the bathroom window was frosted glass, but if he had looked out the top half he would have seen his mother's taxi pulling up out front. Bobby didn't look; he was concentrating on his chore. He never thought of the green keyfob, either, although it was lying on the shelf right in front of his eyes.

When Bobby came back into the living room, Ted was sitting in the straight-backed chair with Carol in his lap again. Bobby noticed how tanned her arms had already become compared to the rest of her skin, which was a pure, smooth white (except for where the bruises stood out). *She looks like she's wearing nylon stockings on her arms*, he thought, a little amused. Her eyes had

begun to clear and they tracked Bobby when he moved toward her, but Carol still didn't look exactly great—her hair was mussed, her face was all sweaty, and there was that drying trickle of blood between her nostril and the corner of her mouth.

Ted took the cloth and began to wipe her cheeks and forehead with it. Bobby knelt by the arm of the chair. Carol sat up a little, raising her face gratefully against the cool and the wet. Ted wiped away the blood under her nose, then put the facecloth aside on the endtable. He brushed Carol's sweaty hair off her brow. When some of it flopped back, he moved his hand to brush it away again.

Before he could, the door to the porch banged open. Footfalls crossed the foyer. The hand on Carol's damp forehead froze. Bobby's eyes met Ted's and a single thought flowed between them, strong telepathy consisting of a single word: *Them*.

"No," Carol said, "*not* them, Bobby, it's your m—"

The apartment door opened and Liz stood there with her key in one hand and her hat—the one with the veil on it—in the other. Behind her and beyond the foyer the door to all the hot outside world stood open. Side by side on the porch welcome mat were her two suitcases, where the cab driver had put them.

"Bobby, how many times have I told you to lock this damn—"

She got that far, then stopped. In later years Bobby would replay that moment again and again, seeing more and more of what his mother had seen when she came back from her disastrous trip to Providence: her son kneeling by the chair where the old man she had never liked or really trusted sat with the little girl in his lap. The little girl looked dazed. Her hair was in sweaty clumps. Her blouse had been torn off—it lay in pieces on the floor—and even with her own eyes puffed mostly shut, Liz would have seen Carol's bruises: one on the shoulder, one on the ribs, one on the stomach.

And Carol and Bobby and Ted Brautigan saw her with that same amazed stop-time clarity: the two black eyes (Liz's right eye was really nothing but a glitter deep in a puffball of discolored flesh); the lower lip which was swelled and split in two places and still wearing flecks of dried blood like old ugly lipstick; the nose which lay askew and had grown a misbegotten hook, making it almost into a caricature Witch Hazel nose.

Silence, a moment's considering silence on a hot summer afternoon. Somewhere a car backfired. Somewhere a kid shouted "*Come on, you guys!*" And from behind them on Colony Street came the sound Bobby would identify most strongly with his childhood in general and that Thursday in particular: Mrs. O'Hara's Bowser barking his way ever deeper into the twentieth century: *roop-roop, roop-roop-roop.*

*Jack got her, Bobby thought. Jack Merridew and his nimrod friends.*

"Oh jeez, what happened?" he asked her, breaking the silence. He didn't want to know; he had to know. He ran to her, starting to cry out of fright but also out of grief: her face, her poor face. She didn't look like his mom at all. She looked like some old woman who belonged not on shady Broad Street but down there, where people drank wine out of bottles in paper sacks and had no last names. "What did he do? What did that bastard do to you?"

She paid no attention, seemed not to hear him at all. She laid hold of him, though; laid hold of his shoulders hard enough for him to feel her fingers sinking into his flesh, hard enough to hurt. She laid hold and then set him aside without a single look. "Let her go, you filthy man," she said in a low and rusty voice. "Let her go right now."

"Mrs. Garfield, please don't misunderstand." Ted lifted Carol off his lap—careful even now to keep his hand well away from her hurt shoulder—and then stood up himself. He shook out the legs of his pants, a fussy little gesture that was all Ted. "She was hurt, you see. Bobby found her—"

"*BASTARD!*" Liz screamed. To her right was a table with a vase on it. She grabbed the vase and threw it at him. Ted ducked, but too slowly to avoid it completely; the bottom of the vase struck the top of his head, skipped like a stone on a pond, hit the wall and shattered.

Carol screamed.

"Mom, no!" Bobby shouted. "He didn't do anything bad! He didn't do anything bad!"

Liz took no notice. "How dare you touch her? Have you been touching my son the same way? You have, haven't you? You don't care which flavor they are, just as long as they're *young!*"

Ted took a step toward her. The empty loops of his suspenders swung back and forth beside his legs. Bobby could see blooms of blood in the scant hair on

top of his head where the vase had clipped him.

“Mrs. Garfield, I assure you—”

“*Assure this, you dirty bastard!*” With the vase gone, there was nothing left on the table and so she picked up the table itself and threw it. It struck Ted in the chest and drove him backward; would have floored him if not for the straight-backed chair. Ted flopped into it, looking at her with wide, incredulous eyes. His mouth was trembling.

“Was he helping you?” Liz asked. Her face was dead white. The bruises on it stood out like birthmarks. “*Did you teach my son to help?*”

“Mom, he didn’t hurt her!” Bobby shouted. He grabbed her around the waist. “He didn’t hurt her, he—”

She picked him up like the vase, like the table, and he would think later she had been as strong as he had been, carrying Carol up the hill from the park. She threw him across the room. Bobby struck the wall. His head snapped back and connected with the sunburst clock, knocking it to the floor and stopping it forever. Black dots flocked across his vision, making him think briefly and confusedly

*(coming closing in now the posters have his name on them)*

of the low men. Then he slid to the floor. He tried to stop himself but his knees wouldn’t lock.

Liz looked at him, seemingly without much interest, then back at Ted, who sat in the straight-backed chair with the table in his lap and the legs poking at his face. Blood was dripping down one of his cheeks now, and his hair was more red than white. He tried to speak and what came out instead was a dry and flailing old man’s cigarette cough.

“Filthy man. Filthy filthy man. For two cents I’d pull your pants down and yank that filthy thing right off you.” She turned and looked at her huddled son again, and the expression Bobby now saw in the one eye he could really see—the contempt, the accusation—made him cry harder. She didn’t say *You too*, but he saw it in her eye. Then she turned back to Ted.

“Know what? You’re going to jail.” She pointed a finger at him, and even through his tears Bobby saw the nail that had been on it when she left in Mr. Biderman’s Merc was gone; there was a bloody-ragged weal where it had been. Her voice was mushy, seeming to spread out somehow as it crossed her

oversized lower lip. "I'm going to call the police now. If you're wise you'll sit still while I do it. Just keep your mouth shut and sit still." Her voice was rising, rising. Her hands, scratched and swelled at the knuckles as well as broken at the nails, curled into fists which she shook at him. "If you run I'll chase you and carve you up with my longest butcher knife. See if I don't. I'll do it right on the street for everyone to see, and I'll start with the part of you that seems to give you . . . you *boys* . . . so much trouble. So sit still, *Brattigan*. If you want to live long enough to go to jail, don't you move."

The phone was on the table by the couch. She went to it. Ted sat with the table in his lap and blood flowing down his cheek. Bobby huddled next to the fallen clock, the one his mother had gotten with trading stamps. Drifting in the window on the breeze of Ted's fan came Bowser's cry: *roop-roop-roop*.

"You don't know what happened here, Mrs. Garfield. What happened to you was terrible and you have all my sympathy . . . but what happened to you is not what happened to Carol."

"Shut up." She wasn't listening, didn't even look in his direction.

Carol ran to Liz, reached out for her, then stopped. Her eyes grew large in her pale face. Her mouth dropped open. "They pulled your dress off?" It was half a whisper, half a moan. Liz stopped dialing and turned slowly to look at her. "Why did they pull your dress off?"

Liz seemed to think about how to answer. She seemed to think hard. "Shut up," she said at last. "Just shut up, okay?"

"Why did they chase you? Who's hitting?" Carol's voice had become uneven. "Who's *hitting*?"

"*Shut up!*" Liz dropped the telephone and put her hands to her ears. Bobby looked at her with growing horror.

Carol turned to him. Fresh tears were rolling down her cheeks. There was knowing in her eyes—*knowing*. The kind, Bobby thought, that he had felt while Mr. McQuown had been trying to fool him.

"They chased her," Carol said. "When she tried to leave they chased her and made her come back."

Bobby knew. They had chased her down a hotel corridor. He had seen it. He couldn't remember where, but he had.

*“Make them stop doing it! Make me stop seeing it!”* Carol screamed. *“She’s hitting them but she can’t get away! She’s hitting them but she can’t get away!”*

Ted tipped the table out of his lap and struggled to his feet. His eyes were blazing. “Hug her, Carol! Hug her tight! That will make it stop!”

Carol threw her good arm around Bobby’s mother. Liz staggered backward a step, almost falling when one of her shoes hooked the leg of the sofa. She stayed up but the telephone tumbled to the rug beside one of Bobby’s outstretched sneakers, burring harshly.

For a moment things stayed that way—it was as if they were playing Statues and “it” had just yelled *Freeze!* It was Carol who moved first, releasing Liz Garfield’s waist and stepping back. Her sweaty hair hung in her eyes. Ted went toward her and reached out to put a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t touch her,” Liz said, but she spoke mechanically, without force. Whatever had flashed inside her at the sight of the child on Ted Brautigan’s lap had faded a little, at least temporarily. She looked exhausted.

Nonetheless, Ted dropped his hand. “You’re right,” he said.

Liz took a deep breath, held it, let it out. She looked at Bobby, then away. Bobby wished with all his heart that she would put her hand out to him, help him a little, help him get up, just that, but she turned to Carol instead. Bobby got to his feet on his own.

“What happened here?” Liz asked Carol.

Although she was still crying and her words kept hitching as she struggled for breath, Carol told Bobby’s mom about how the three big boys had found her in the park, and how at first it had seemed like just another one of their jokes, a bit meaner than most but still just a joke. Then Harry had really started hitting her while the others held her. The popping sound in her shoulder scared them and they ran away. She told Liz how Bobby had found her five or ten minutes later—she didn’t know how long because the pain had been so bad—and carried her up here. And how Ted had fixed her arm, after giving her Bobby’s belt to catch the pain with. She bent, picked up the belt, and showed Liz the tiny tooth-marks in it with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. “I didn’t catch all of it, but I caught a lot.”

Liz only glanced at the belt before turning to Ted. “Why’d you tear her top off, chief?”

“It’s *not* torn!” Bobby cried. He was suddenly furious with her. “He *cut* it off so he could look at her shoulder and fix it without hurting her! I brought him the scissors, for cripe’s sake! Why are you so stupid, Mom? Why can’t you see—”

She swung without turning, catching Bobby completely by surprise. The back of her open hand connected with the side of his face; her forefinger actually poked into his eye, sending a zag of pain deep into his head. His tears stopped as if the pump controlling them had suddenly shorted out.

“Don’t you call me stupid, Bobby-O,” she said. “Not on your ever-loving tintage.”

Carol was looking fearfully at the hook-nosed witch who had come back in a taxi wearing Mrs. Garfield’s clothes. Mrs. Garfield who had run and who had fought when she couldn’t run anymore. But in the end they had taken what they wanted from her.

“You shouldn’t hit Bobby,” Carol said. “He’s not like those men.”

“Is he your boyfriend?” She laughed. “Yeah? Good for you! But I’ll let you in on a secret, sweetheart—he’s just like his daddy and your daddy and all the rest of them. Go in the bathroom. I’ll clean you up and find something for you to wear. *Christ* what a mess!”

Carol looked at her a moment longer, then turned and went into the bathroom. Her bare back looked small and vulnerable. And white. So white in contrast to her brown arms.

“Carol!” Ted called after her. “Is it better now?” Bobby didn’t think he was talking about her arm. Not this time.

“Yes,” she said without turning. “But I can still hear her, far away. She’s screaming.”

“Who’s screaming?” Liz asked. Carol didn’t answer her. She went into the bathroom and closed the door. Liz looked at it for a moment, as if to make sure Carol wasn’t going to pop back out again, then turned to Ted. “Who’s screaming?”

Ted only looked at her warily, as if expecting another ICBM attack at any moment.

Liz began to smile. It was a smile Bobby knew: her I’m-losing-my-temper smile. Was it possible she had any left to lose? With her black eyes, broken

nose, and swollen lip, the smile made her look horrid: not his mother but some lunatic.

“Quite the Good Samaritan, aren’t you? How many feels did you cop while you were fixing her up? She hasn’t got much, but I bet you checked what you could, didn’t you? Never miss an opportunity, right? Come on and fess up to your mamma.”

Bobby looked at her with growing despair. Carol had told her everything—all of the truth—*and it made no difference*. No difference! God!

“There is a dangerous adult in this room,” Ted said, “but it isn’t me.”

She looked first uncomprehending, then incredulous, then furious. “How dare you? *How dare you?*”

“*He didn’t do anything!*” Bobby screamed. “*Didn’t you hear what Carol said? Didn’t you—*”

“Shut your mouth,” she said, not looking at him. She looked only at Ted. “The cops are going to be very interested in you, I think. Don called Hartford on Friday, before . . . before. I asked him to. He has friends there. You never worked for the State of Connecticut, not in the Office of the Comptroller, not anywhere else. You were in jail, weren’t you?”

“In a way I suppose I was,” Ted said. He seemed calmer now in spite of the blood flowing down the side of his face. He took the cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, looked at them, put them back. “But not the kind you’re thinking of.”

*And not in this world*, Bobby thought.

“What was it for?” she asked. “Making little girls feel better in the first degree?”

“I have something valuable,” Ted said. He reached up and tapped his temple. The finger he tapped with came away dotted with blood. “There are others like me. And there are people whose job it is to catch us, keep us, and use us for . . . well, use us, leave it at that. I and two others escaped. One was caught, one was killed. Only I remain free. If, that is . . .” He looked around. “. . . you call this freedom.”

“You’re crazy. Crazy old Brattigan, nuttier than a holiday fruitcake. I’m calling the police. Let them decide if they want to put you back in the jail you broke out of or in Danbury Asylum.” She bent, reached for the spilled phone.

“No, Mom!” Bobby said, and reached for her. “Don’t—”

“*Bobby, no!*” Ted said sharply.

Bobby pulled back, looking first at his mom as she scooped up the phone, then at Ted.

“Not as she is now,” Ted told him. “As she is now, she can’t stop biting.”

Liz Garfield gave Ted a brilliant, almost unspeakable smile—*Good try, you bastard*—and took the receiver off the cradle.

“What’s happening?” Carol cried from the bathroom. “Can I come out now?”

“Not yet, darling,” Ted called back. “A little longer.”

Liz poked the telephone’s cutoff buttons up and down. She stopped, listened, seemed satisfied. She began to dial. “We’re going to find out who you are,” she said. She spoke in a strange, confiding tone. “That should be pretty interesting. And what you’ve done. That might be even more interesting.”

“If you call the police, they’ll also find out who *you* are and what *you’ve* done,” Ted said.

She stopped dialing and looked at him. It was a cunning sideways stare Bobby had never seen before. “What in God’s name are you talking about?”

“A foolish woman who should have chosen better. A foolish woman who had seen enough of her boss to know better—who had overheard him and his cronies often enough to know better, to know that any ‘seminar’ they attended mostly had to do with booze and sex-parties. Maybe a little reefer, as well. A foolish woman who let her greed overwhelm her good sense—”

“What do you know about being alone?” she cried. “*I have a son to raise!*” She looked at Bobby, as if remembering the son she had to raise for the first time in a little while.

“How much of this do you want him to hear?” Ted asked.

“You don’t know anything. You can’t.”

“I know *everything*. The question is, how much do you want Bobby to know? How much do you want your neighbors to know? If the police come and take me, they’ll know what I know, that I promise you.” He paused. His pupils remained steady but his eyes seemed to grow. “I know *everything*. Believe me—don’t put it to the test.”

“Why would you hurt me that way?”

“Given a choice I wouldn’t. You have been hurt enough, by yourself as well as by others. Let me leave, that’s all I’m asking you to do. I was leaving anyway. Let me leave. I did nothing but try to help.”

“Oh yes,” she said, and laughed. “*Help*. Her sitting on you practically naked. *Help*.”

“I would help *you* if I—”

“Oh yeah, and I know how.” She laughed again.

Bobby started to speak and saw Ted’s eyes warning him not to. Behind the bathroom door, water was now running into the sink. Liz lowered her head, thinking. At last she raised it again.

“All right,” she said, “here’s what I’m going to do. I’ll help Bobby’s little *girlfriend* get cleaned up. I’ll give her an aspirin and find something for her to wear home. While I’m doing those things, I’ll ask her a few questions. If the answers are the right answers, you can go. Good riddance to bad rubbish.”

“Mom—”

Liz held up a hand like a traffic cop, silencing him. She was staring at Ted, who was looking back at her.

“I’ll walk her home, I’ll watch her go through her front door. What she decides to tell her mother is between the two of them. My job is to see her home safe, that’s all. When it’s done I’ll walk down to the park and sit in the shade for a little while. I had a rough night last night.” She drew in breath and let it out in a dry and rueful sigh. “Very rough. So I’ll go to the park and sit in the shade and think about what comes next. How I’m going to keep him and me out of the poorhouse.

“If I find you still here when I get back from the park, sweetheart, I *will* call the police . . . and don’t you put *that* to the test. Say whatever you want. None of it’s going to matter much to anyone if I say I walked into my apartment a few hours sooner than you expected and found you with your hand inside an eleven-year-old girl’s shorts.”

Bobby stared at his mother in silent shock. She didn’t see the stare; she was still looking at Ted, her swollen eyes fixed on him intently.

“If, on the other hand, I came back and you’re gone, bag and baggage, I won’t have to call anyone or say anything. *Tout fini*.”

*I'll go with you!* Bobby thought at Ted. *I don't care about the low men. I'd rather have a thousand low men in yellow coats looking for me—a million—than have to live with her anymore. I hate her!*

“Well?” Liz asked.

“It’s a deal. I’ll be gone in an hour. Probably less.”

“No!” Bobby cried. When he’d awakened this morning he had been resigned to Ted’s going—sad but resigned. Now it hurt all over again. Worse than before, even. “No!”

“Be quiet,” his mother said, still not looking at him.

“It’s the only way, Bobby. You know that.” Ted looked up at Liz. “Take care of Carol. I’ll talk to Bobby.”

“You’re in no position to give orders,” Liz said, but she went. As she crossed to the bathroom, Bobby saw she was limping. A heel had broken off one of her shoes, but he didn’t think that was the only reason she couldn’t walk right. She knocked briefly on the bathroom door and then, without waiting for a response, slipped inside.

Bobby ran across the room, but when he tried to put his arms around Ted, the old man took his hands, squeezed them once briefly, then put them against Bobby’s chest and let go.

“Take me with you,” Bobby said fiercely. “I’ll help you look for them. Two sets of eyes are better than one. Take me with you!”

“I can’t do that, but you can come with me as far as the kitchen, Bobby. Carol isn’t the only one who needs to do some cleaning up.”

Ted rose from the chair and swayed on his feet for a moment. Bobby reached out to steady him and Ted once more pushed his hand gently but firmly away. It hurt. Not as much as his mother’s failure to help him up (or even look at him) after she had thrown him against the wall, but enough.

He walked with Ted to the kitchen, not touching him but close enough to grab him if he fell. Ted didn’t fall. He looked at the hazy reflection of himself in the window over the sink, sighed, then turned on the water. He wet the dishcloth and began to wipe the blood off his cheek, checking his window-reflection every now and then for reference.

“Your mother needs you more now than she ever has before,” he said. “She needs someone she can trust.”

“She doesn’t trust me. I don’t think she even likes me.”

Ted’s mouth tightened, and Bobby understood he had struck upon some truth Ted had seen in his mother’s mind. Bobby *knew* she didn’t like him, he *knew* that, so why were the tears threatening again?

Ted reached out for him, seemed to remember that was a bad idea, and went back to work with the dishcloth instead. “All right,” he said. “Perhaps she *doesn’t* like you. If that’s true, it isn’t because of anything you did. It’s because of what you *are*.”

“A boy,” he said bitterly. “A fucking *boy*.”

“And your father’s son, don’t forget that. But Bobby . . . whether she likes you or not, she loves you. Such a greeting-card that sounds, I know, but it’s true. She loves you and she needs you. You’re what she has. She’s badly hurt right now—”

“Getting hurt was her own fault!” he burst out. “She knew something was wrong! You said so yourself! She’s known for weeks! *Months!* But she wouldn’t leave that job! She knew and she still went with them to Providence! *She went with them anyway!*”

“A lion-tamer knows, but he still goes into the cage. He goes in because that’s where his paycheck is.”

“She’s got money,” Bobby almost spat.

“Not enough, apparently.”

“She’ll never have enough,” Bobby said, and knew it was the truth as soon as it was out of his mouth.

“She loves you.”

“I don’t care! I don’t love her!”

“But you do. You will. You must. It is *ka*.”

“*Ka?* What’s that?”

“Destiny.” Ted had gotten most of the blood out of his hair. He turned off the water and made one final check of his ghost-image in the window. Beyond it lay all of that hot summer, younger than Ted Brautigan would ever be again. Younger than Bobby would ever be again, for that matter. “*Ka* is destiny. Do you care for me, Bobby?”

“You know I do,” Bobby said, beginning to cry again. Lately crying was all he seemed to do. His eyes ached from it. “Lots and lots.”

“Then try to be your mother’s friend. For my sake if not your own. Stay with her and help this hurt of hers to heal. And every now and then I’ll send you a postcard.”

They were walking back into the living room again. Bobby was starting to feel a little bit better, but he wished Ted could have put his arm around him. He wished that more than anything.

The bathroom door opened. Carol came out first, looking down at her own feet with uncharacteristic shyness. Her hair had been wetted, combed back, and rubber-banded into a ponytail. She was wearing one of Bobby’s mother’s old blouses; it was so big it came almost down to her knees, like a dress. You couldn’t see her red shorts at all.

“Go out on the porch and wait,” Liz said.

“Okay.”

“You won’t go walking home without me, will you?”

“No!” Carol said, and her downcast face filled with alarm.

“Good. Stand right by my suitcases.”

Carol started out to the foyer, then turned back. “Thanks for fixing my arm, Ted. I hope you don’t get in trouble for it. I didn’t want—”

“Go out on the damned *porch*,” Liz snapped.

“—anyone to get in trouble,” Carol finished in a tiny voice, almost the whisper of a mouse in a cartoon. Then she went out, Liz’s blouse flapping around her in a way that would have been comical on another day. Liz turned to Bobby and when he got a good look at her, his heart sank. Her fury had been refreshed. A bright red flush had spread over her bruised face and down her neck.

*Oh cripes, what now?* Bobby thought. Then she held up the green keyfob, and he knew.

“Where did you get this, Bobby-O?”

“I . . . it . . .” But he could think of nothing to say: no fib, no outright lie, not even the truth. Suddenly Bobby felt very tired. The only thing in the world he wanted to do was creep into his bedroom and hide under the covers of his bed and go to sleep.

“I gave it to him,” Ted said mildly. “Yesterday.”

“You took my son to a bookie joint in Bridgeport? A *poker-parlor* in Bridgeport?”

*It doesn't say bookie joint on the keyfob, Bobby thought. It doesn't say poker-parlor, either . . . because those things are against the law. She knows what goes on there because my father went there. And like father like son. That's what they say, like father like son.*

"I took him to a movie," Ted said. "*Village of the Damned*, at the Criterion. While he was watching, I went to The Corner Pocket to do an errand."

"What sort of errand?"

"I placed a bet on a prizefight." For a moment Bobby's heart sank even lower and he thought, *What's wrong with you? Why didn't you lie? If you knew how she felt about stuff like that—*

But he *did* know. Of course he did.

"A bet on a prizefight." She nodded. "Uh-huh. You left my son alone in a Bridgeport movie theater so you could go make a bet on a prizefight." She laughed wildly. "Oh well, I suppose I should be grateful, shouldn't I? You brought him such a nice souvenir. If he decides to ever make a bet himself, or lose his money playing poker like his father did, he'll know where to go."

"I left him for two hours in a movie theater," Ted said. "You left him with me. He seems to have survived both, hasn't he?"

Liz looked for a moment as if she had been slapped, then for a moment as if she would cry. Then her face smoothed out and became expressionless. She curled her fist around the green keyfob and slipped it into her dress pocket. Bobby knew he would never see it again. He didn't mind. He didn't *want* to see it again.

"Bobby, go in your room," she said.

"No."

*"Bobby, go in your room!"*

"No! I won't!"

Standing in a bar of sunlight on the welcome mat by Liz Garfield's suitcases, floating in Liz Garfield's old blouse, Carol began to cry at the sound of the raised voices.

"Go in your room, Bobby," Ted said quietly. "I have enjoyed meeting you and knowing you."

*"Knowing you,"* Bobby's mom said in an angry, insinuating voice, but Bobby didn't understand her and Ted took no notice of her.

“Go in your room,” he repeated.

“Will you be all right? You know what I mean.”

“Yes.” Ted smiled, kissed his fingers, and blew the kiss toward Bobby. Bobby caught it and made a fist around it, holding it tight. “I’m going to be just fine.”

Bobby walked slowly toward his bedroom door, his head down and his eyes on the toes of his sneakers. He was almost there when he thought *I can’t do this, I can’t let him go like this.*

He ran to Ted, threw his arms around him, and covered his face with kisses—forehead, cheeks, chin, lips, the thin and silky lids of his eyes. “Ted, I love you!”

Ted gave up and hugged him tight. Bobby could smell a ghost of the lather he shaved with, and the stronger aroma of his Chesterfield cigarettes. They were smells he would carry with him a long time, as he would the memories of Ted’s big hands touching him, stroking his back, cupping the curve of his skull. “Bobby, I love you too,” he said.

“Oh for *Christ’s sake!*” Liz nearly screamed. Bobby turned toward her and what he saw was Don Biderman pushing her into a corner. Somewhere the Benny Goodman Orchestra was playing “One O’Clock Jump” on a hi-fi turned all the way up. Mr. Biderman had his hand out as if to slap. Mr. Biderman was asking her if she wanted a little more, was that the way she liked it, she could have a little more if that was the way she liked it. Bobby could almost taste her horrified understanding.

“You really *didn’t* know, did you?” he said. “At least not all of it, all they wanted. They thought you did, but you didn’t.”

“Go in your room right now or I’m calling the police and telling them to send a squad-car,” his mother said. “I’m not joking, Bobby-O.”

“I know you’re not,” Bobby said. He went into his bedroom and closed the door. He thought at first he was all right and then he thought that he was going to throw up, or faint, or do both. He walked across to his bed on tottery, unstable legs. He only meant to sit on it but he lay back on it crosswise instead, as if all the muscles had gone out of his stomach and back. He tried to lift his feet up but his legs only lay there, the muscles gone from them, too. He had a sudden image of Sully-John in his bathing suit, climbing the ladder of a

swimming float, running to the end of the board, diving off. He wished he was with S-J now. Anywhere but here. Anywhere but here. Anywhere at all but here.

• • •

When Bobby woke up, the light in his room had grown dim and when he looked at the floor he could barely see the shadow of the tree outside his window. He had been out—asleep or unconscious—for three hours, maybe four. He was covered with sweat and his legs were numb; he had never pulled them up onto the bed.

Now he tried, and the burst of pins and needles which resulted almost made him scream. He slid onto the floor instead, and the pins and needles ran up his thighs to his crotch. He sat with his knees up around his ears, his back throbbing, his legs buzzing, his head cottony. Something terrible had happened, but at first he couldn't remember what. As he sat there propped against the bed, looking across at Clayton Moore in his Lone Ranger mask, it began to come back. Carol's arm dislocated, his mother beaten up and half-crazy as well, shaking that green keyfob in his face, furious with him. And Ted

...

Ted would be gone by now, and that was probably for the best, but how it hurt to think of.

He got to his feet and walked twice around the room. The second time he stopped at the window and looked out, rubbing his hands together at the back of his neck, which was stiff and sweaty. A little way down the street the Sigsby twins, Dina and Dianne, were jumping rope, but the other kids had gone in, either for supper or for the night. A car slid by, showing its parking lights. It was even later than he had at first thought; heavenly shades of night were falling.

He made another circuit of his room, working the tingles out of his legs, feeling like a prisoner pacing his cell. The door had no lock on it—no more than his mom's did—but he felt like a jailbird just the same. He was afraid to go out. She hadn't called him for supper, and although he was hungry—a little, anyway—he was afraid to go out. He was afraid of how he might find her . . . or of not finding her at all. Suppose she had decided she'd finally had

enough of Bobby-O, stupid lying little Bobby-O, his father's son? Even if she was here, and seemingly back to normal . . . was there even such a thing as normal? People had terrible things behind their faces sometimes. He knew that now.

When he reached the closed door of his room, he stopped. There was a scrap of paper lying there. He bent and picked it up. There was still plenty of light and he could read it easily.

*Dear Bobby—*

*By the time you read this, I'll be gone . . . but I'll take you with me in my thoughts. Please love your mother and remember that she loves you. She was afraid and hurt and ashamed this afternoon, and when we see people that way, we see them at their worst. I have left you something in my room. I will remember my promise.*

*All my love,  
Ted*

*The postcards, that's what he promised. To send me postcards.*

Feeling better, Bobby folded up the note Ted had slipped into his room before leaving and opened his bedroom door.

The living room was empty, but it had been set to rights. It looked almost okay if you didn't know there was supposed to be a sunburst clock on the wall beside the TV; now there was just the little screw where it had hung, jutting out and holding nothing.

Bobby realized he could hear his mother snoring in her room. She always snored, but this was a heavy snore, like an old person or a drunk snoring in a movie. *That's because they hurt her*, Bobby thought, and for a moment he thought of

*(Howya doin Sport howza boy)*

Mr. Biderman and the two nimrods elbowing each other in the back seat and grinning. *Kill the pig, cut her throat*, Bobby thought. He didn't want to think it but he did.

He tiptoed across the living room as quietly as Jack in the giant's castle, opened the door to the foyer, and went out. He tiptoed up the first flight of

stairs (walking on the bannister side, because he'd read in one of the Hardy Boys mysteries that if you walked that way the stairs didn't creak so much), and ran up the second.

Ted's door stood open; the room beyond it was almost empty. The few things of his own he'd put up—a picture of a man fishing at sunset, a picture of Mary Magdalene washing Jesus' feet, a calendar—were gone. The ashtray on the table was empty, but sitting beside it was one of Ted's carryhandle bags. Inside it were four paperback books: *Animal Farm*, *The Night of the Hunter*, *Treasure Island*, and *Of Mice and Men*. Written on the side of the paper bag in Ted's shaky but completely legible handwriting was: *Read the Steinbeck first. "Guys like us," George says when he tells Lennie the story Lennie always wants to hear. Who are guys like us? Who were they to Steinbeck? Who are they to you? Ask yourself this.*

Bobby took the paperbacks but left the bag—he was afraid that if his mom saw one of Ted's carryhandle bags she would go crazy all over again. He looked in the refrigerator and saw nothing but a bottle of French's mustard and a box of baking soda. He closed the fridge again and looked around. It was as if no one had ever lived here at all. Except—

He went to the ashtray, held it to his nose, and breathed in deeply. The smell of Chesterfields was strong, and it brought Ted back completely, Ted sitting here at his table and talking about *Lord of the Flies*, Ted standing at his bathroom mirror, shaving with that scary razor of his, listening through the open door as Bobby read him opinion pieces Bobby himself didn't understand.

Ted leaving one final question on the side of a paper bag: Guys like us. Who are guys like us?

Bobby breathed in again, sucking up little flakes of ash and fighting back the urge to sneeze, holding the smell in, fixing it in his memory as best he could, closing his eyes, and in through the window came the endless ineluctable cry of Bowser, now calling down the dark like a dream: *roop-roop-roop, roop-roop-roop.*

He put the ashtray down again. The urge to sneeze had passed. *I'm going to smoke Chesterfields*, he decided. *I'm going to smoke them all my life.*

He went back downstairs, holding the paperbacks in front of him and walking on the outside of the staircase again as he went from the second floor

to the foyer. He slipped into the apartment, tiptoed across the living room (his mother was still snoring, louder than ever), and into his bedroom. He put the books under his bed—*deep* under. If his mom found them he would say Mr. Burton had given them to him. That was a lie, but if he told the truth she'd take the books away. Besides, lying no longer seemed so bad. Lying might become a necessity. In time it might even become a pleasure.

What next? The rumble in his stomach decided him. A couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were next.

He started for the kitchen, tiptoeing past his mother's partly open bedroom door without even thinking about it, then paused. She was shifting around on her bed. Her snores had become ragged and she was talking in her sleep. It was a low, moaning talk Bobby couldn't make out, but he realized he didn't *have* to make it out. He could hear her anyway. And he could see stuff. Her thoughts? Her dreams? Whatever it was, it was awful.

He managed three more steps toward the kitchen, then caught a glimpse of something so terrible his breath froze in his throat like ice: HAVE YOU SEEN BRAUTIGAN! He is an OLD MONGREL but WE LOVE HIM!

"No," he whispered. "Oh Mom, no."

He didn't want to go in there where she was, but his feet turned in that direction anyway. He went with them like a hostage. He watched his hand reach out, the fingers spread, and push her bedroom door open all the way.

Her bed was still made. She lay on top of the coverlet in her dress, one leg drawn up so her knee almost touched her chest. He could see the top of her stocking and her garter, and that made him think of the lady in the calendar picture at The Corner Pocket, the one getting out of the car with most of her skirt in her lap . . . except the lady getting out of the Packard hadn't had ugly bruises above the top of her stocking.

Liz's face was flushed where it wasn't bruised; her hair was matted with sweat; her cheeks were smeary with tears and gooey with makeup. A board creaked under Bobby's foot as he stepped into the room. She cried out and he froze, sure her eyes would open.

Instead of awakening she rolled away from him toward the wall. Here, in her room, the jumble of thoughts and images coming out of her was no clearer but ranker and more pungent, like sweat pouring off a sick person. Running

through everything was the sound of Benny Goodman playing “One O’Clock Jump” and the taste of blood running down the back of her throat.

*Have you seen Brautigan, Bobby thought. He is an old mongrel but we love him. Have you seen . . .*

She had pulled her shades before lying down and the room was very dark. He took another step, then stopped again by the table with the mirror where she sometimes sat to do her makeup. Her purse was there. Bobby thought of Ted hugging him—the hug Bobby had wanted, needed, so badly. Ted stroking his back, cupping the curve of his skull. *When I touch, I pass on a kind of window*, Ted had told him while they were coming back from Bridgeport in the cab. And now, standing by his mother’s makeup table with his fists clenched, Bobby looked tentatively through that window into his mother’s mind.

He caught a glimpse of her coming home on the train, huddling by herself, looking into ten thousand back yards between Providence and Harwich so as few people as possible would see her face; he saw her spying the bright green keyfob on the shelf by the toothglass as Carol slipped into her old blouse; saw her walking Carol home, asking her questions the whole way, one after another, firing them like bullets out of a machine-gun. Carol, too shaken and worn out to dissemble, had answered them all. Bobby saw his mother walking—*limping*—down to Commonwealth Park, heard her thinking *If only some good could be salvaged from this nightmare, if only some good, anything good—*

He saw her sit on a bench in the shade and then get up after awhile, walking toward Spicer’s for a headache powder and a Nehi to wash it down with before going back home. And then, just before leaving the park, Bobby saw her spy something tacked to a tree. These somethings were tacked up all over town; she might have passed a couple on her way to the park, so lost in thought she never noticed.

Once again Bobby felt like a passenger in his own body, no more than that. He watched his hand reach out, saw two fingers (the ones that would bear the yellow smudges of the heavy smoker in another few years) make a scissoring motion and catch what was protruding from the mouth of her purse. Bobby pulled the paper free, unfolded it, and read the first two lines in the faint light from the bedroom doorway:

HAVE YOU SEEN BRAUTIGAN!  
He is an OLD MONGREL but WE LOVE HIM!

His eyes skipped halfway down to the lines that had no doubt riveted his mother and driven every other thought from her head:

We will pay A VERY LARGE REWARD  
(\$ \$ \$ \$)

Here was the something good she had been wishing for, hoping for, praying for; here was A VERY LARGE REWARD.

And had she hesitated? Had the thought “Wait a minute, my kid loves that old bastard-ball!” even crossed her mind?

Nah.

You *couldn't* hesitate. Because life was full of Don Bidermans, and life wasn't fair.

Bobby left the room on tiptoe with the poster still in his hand, mincing away from her in big soft steps, freezing when a board creaked under his feet, then moving on. Behind him his mom's muttering talk had subsided into low snores again. Bobby made it into the living room and closed her door behind him, holding the knob at full cock until the door was shut tight, not wanting the latch to click. Then he hurried across to the phone, aware only now that he was away from her that his heart was racing and his throat was lined with a taste like old pennies. Any vestige of hunger had vanished.

He picked up the telephone's handset, looked around quickly and narrowly to make sure his mom's door was still shut, then dialed without referring to the poster. The number was burned into his mind: HOusitonic 5-8337.

There was only silence when he finished dialing. That wasn't surprising, either, because there was no HOusitonic exchange in Harwich. And if he felt cold all over (except for his balls and the soles of his feet, which were strangely hot), that was just because he was afraid for Ted. That was all. Just—

There was a stonelike click as Bobby was about to put the handset down. And then a voice said, “Yeah?”

*It's Biderman!* Bobby thought wildly. *Cripes, it's Biderman!*

“Yeah?” the voice said again. No, not Biderman’s. Too low for Biderman’s. But it was a nimrod voice, no doubt about that, and as his skin temperature continued to plummet toward absolute zero, Bobby knew that the man on the other end of the line had some sort of yellow coat in his wardrobe.

Suddenly his eyes grew hot and the backs of them began itching. *Is this the Sagamore Family?* was what he’d meant to ask, and if whoever answered the phone said yes, he’d meant to beg them to leave Ted alone. To tell them he, Bobby Garfield, would do something for them if they’d just leave Ted be—he’d do anything they asked. But now that his chance had arrived he could say nothing. Until this moment he still hadn’t completely believed in the low men. Now something was on the other end of the line, something that had nothing in common with life as Bobby Garfield understood it.

“Bobby?” the voice said, and there was a kind of insinuate pleasure in the voice, a sensuous recognition. “Bobby,” it said again, this time without the question-mark. The flecks began to stream across Bobby’s vision; the living room of the apartment suddenly filled with black snow.

“Please . . .” Bobby whispered. He gathered all of his will and forced himself to finish. “Please let him go.”

“No can do,” the voice from the void told him. “He belongs to the King. Stay away, Bobby. Don’t interfere. Ted’s our dog. If you don’t want to be our dog, too, stay away.”

*Click.*

Bobby held the telephone to his ear a moment longer, needing to tremble and too cold to do it. The itching behind his eyes began to fade, though, and the threads falling across his vision began to merge into the general murk. At last he took the phone away from the side of his head, started to put it down, then paused. There were dozens of little red circles on the handset’s perforated earpiece. It was as if the voice of the thing on the other end had caused the telephone to bleed.

Panting in soft and rapid little whimpers, Bobby put it back in its cradle and went into his room. *Don’t interfere*, the man at the Sagamore Family number had told him. *Ted’s our dog*. But Ted wasn’t a dog. He was a man, and he was Bobby’s friend.

*She could have told them where he'll be tonight, Bobby thought. I think Carol knew. If she did, and if she told Mom—*

Bobby grabbed the Bike Fund jar. He took all the money out of it and left the apartment. He considered leaving his mother a note but didn't. She might call HOusitonic 5-8337 again if he did, and tell the nimrod with the low voice what her Bobby-O was doing. That was one reason for not leaving a note. The other was that if he could warn Ted in time, he'd go with him. Now Ted would *have* to let him come. And if the low men killed him or kidnapped him? Well, those things were almost the same as running away, weren't they?

Bobby took a final look around the apartment, and as he listened to his mother snore he felt an involuntary tugging at his heart and mind. Ted was right: in spite of everything, he loved her still. If there was *ka*, then loving her was part of his.

Still, he hoped to never see her again.

"Bye, Mom," Bobby whispered. A minute later he was running down Broad Street Hill into the deepening gloom, one hand wrapped around the wad of money in his pocket so none of it would bounce out.

## X. DOWN THERE AGAIN. CORNER BOYS. LOW MEN IN YELLOW COATS. THE PAYOUT.

He called a cab from the pay telephone at Spicer's, and while he waited for his ride he took down a BRAUTIGAN lost-pet poster from the outside bulletin board. He also removed an upside-down file-card advertising a '57 Rambler for sale by the owner. He crumpled them up and threw them in the trash barrel by the door, not even bothering to look back over his shoulder to see if old man Spicer, whose foul temper was legendary among the kids on the west side of Harwich, had seen him do it.



The Sigsby twins were down here now, their jump-ropes put aside so they could play hopscotch. Bobby walked over to them and observed the shapes —drawn beside the grid. He got down on his knees, and Dina Sigsby, who had been about to toss her stone at the 7, stopped to watch him. Dianne put her grimy fingers over her mouth and giggled. Ignoring them, Bobby used both of his hands to sweep the shapes into chalk blurs. When he was done he stood up and dusted his hands off. The pole-light in Spicer's tiny three-car parking lot came on; Bobby and the girls grew sudden shadows much longer than they were.

"Why'd you do that, stupid old Bobby Garfield?" Dina asked. "They were pretty."

"They're bad luck," Bobby said. "Why aren't you at home?" Not that he didn't have a good idea; it was flashing in their heads like the beer-signs in Spicer's window.

"Mumma-Daddy havin a fight," Dianne said. "She says he got a girlfriend." She laughed and her sister joined in, but their eyes were frightened. They reminded Bobby of the littluns in *Lord of the Flies*.

"Go home before it gets all the way dark," he said.

“Mumma said stay out,” Dina told him.

“Then she’s stupid and so is your father. Go on!”

They exchanged a glance and Bobby understood that he had scared them even more. He didn’t care. He watched them grab their jump-ropes and go running up the hill. Five minutes later the cab he’d called pulled into the parking area beside the store, its headlights fanning the gravel.

“Huh,” the cabbie said. “I dunno about taking any little kid to Bridgeport after dark, even if you do got the fare.”

“It’s okay,” Bobby said, getting in back. If the cabbie meant to throw him out now, he’d better have a crowbar in the trunk to do it with. “My grandfather will meet me.” But not at The Corner Pocket, Bobby had already decided; he wasn’t going to pull up to the place in a Checker. Someone might be watching for him. “At the Wo Fat Noodle Company. That’s on Narragansett Avenue.” The Corner Pocket was also on Narragansett. He hadn’t remembered the street-name but had found it easily enough in the Yellow Pages after calling the cab.

The driver had started to back out into the street. Now he paused again. “Nasty Gansett Street? Christ, that’s no part of town for a kid. Not even in broad daylight.”

“My grandfather’s meeting me,” Bobby repeated. “He said to tip you half a rock. You know, fifty cents.”

For a moment the cabbie teetered. Bobby tried to think of some other way to persuade him and couldn’t think of a thing. Then the cabbie sighed, dropped his flag, and got rolling. As they passed his building, Bobby looked to see if there were any lights on in their apartment. There weren’t, not yet. He sat back and waited for Harwich to drop behind them.

• • •

The cabbie’s name was Roy DeLois, it was on his taxi-meter. He didn’t say a word on the ride to Bridgeport. He was sad because he’d had to take Pete to the vet and have him put down. Pete had been fourteen. That was old for a Collie. He had been Roy DeLois’s only real friend. *Go on, big boy, eat up, it’s on me*, Roy DeLois would say when he fed Pete. He said the same thing every night. Roy DeLois was divorced. Sometimes he went to a stripper club in

Hartford. Bobby could see ghost-images of the dancers, most of whom wore feathers and long white gloves. The image of Pete was sharper. Roy DeLois had been okay coming back from the vet's, but when he saw Pete's empty dish in the pantry at home, he had broken down crying.

They passed The William Penn Grille. Bright light streamed from every window and the street was lined with cars on both sides for three blocks, but Bobby saw no crazy DeSotos or other cars that felt like thinly disguised living creatures. The backs of his eyes didn't itch; there were no black threads.

The cab crossed the canal bridge and then they were down there. Loud Spanish-sounding music played from apartment houses with fire escapes zigzagging up the sides like iron lightning. Clusters of young men with gleaming combed-back hair stood on some streetcorners; clusters of laughing girls stood on others. When the Checker stopped at a red light, a brown-skinned man sauntered over, hips seeming to roll like oil in gabardine slacks that hung below the waistband of his bright white underwear shorts, and offered to wash the cabbie's windshield with a filthy rag he held. Roy DeLois shook his head curtly and squirted away the instant the light changed.

"Goddam spics," he said. "They should be barred from the country. Ain't we got enough niggers of our own?"

Narragansett Street looked different at night—slightly scarier, slightly more fabulous as well. Locksmiths . . . check-cashing services . . . a couple of bars spilling out laughter and jukebox music and guys with beer bottles in their hands . . . ROD'S GUNS . . . and yes, just beyond Rod's and next to the shop selling SPECIAL SOUVENIRS, the WO FAT NOODLE CO. From here it couldn't be more than four blocks to The Corner Pocket. It was only eight o'clock. Bobby was in plenty of time.

When Roy DeLois pulled up to the curb, there was eighty cents on his meter. Add in a fifty-cent tip and you were talking about a big hole in the old Bike Fund, but Bobby didn't care. He was never going to make a big deal out of money the way *she* did. If he could warn Ted before the low men could grab him, Bobby would be content to walk forever.

"I don't like leaving you off here," Roy DeLois said. "Where's your grandpa?"

“Oh, he’ll be right along,” Bobby said, striving for a cheerful tone and almost making it. It was really amazing what you could do when your back was against the wall.

He held out the money. For a moment Roy DeLois hesitated instead of taking the dough; thought about driving him back to Spicer’s, but *if the kid’s not telling the truth about his grandpa what’s he doing down here?* Roy DeLois thought. *He’s too young to want to get laid.*

*I’m fine*, Bobby sent back . . . and yes, he thought he could do that, too—a little, anyway. *Go on, stop worrying, I’m fine.*

Roy DeLois finally took the crumpled dollar and the trio of dimes. “This is really too much,” he said.

“My grandpa told me to never be stingy like some people are,” Bobby said, getting out of the cab. “Maybe you ought to get a new dog. You know, a puppy.”

Roy DeLois was maybe fifty, but surprise made him look much younger. “How . . .”

Then Bobby heard him decide he didn’t care how. Roy DeLois put his cab in gear and drove away, leaving Bobby in front of the Wo Fat Noodle Company.

He stood there until the cab’s taillights disappeared, then began walking slowly in the direction of The Corner Pocket, pausing long enough to look through the dusty window of SPECIAL SOUVENIRS. The bamboo blind was up but the only special souvenir on display was a ceramic ashtray in the shape of a toilet. There was a groove for a cigarette in the seat. PARK YOUR BUTT was written on the tank. Bobby considered this quite witty but not much of a window display; he had sort of been hoping for items of a sexual nature. Especially now that the sun had gone down.

He walked on, past B’PORT PRINTING and SHOES REPAIRED WHILE U WAIT and SNAPPY KARDS FOR ALL OKASIONS. Up ahead was another bar, more young men on the corner, and the sound of The Cadillacs: *Brrrrrr, black slacks, make ya cool, Daddy-O, when ya put em on you’re a-rarin to go*. Bobby crossed the street, trotting with his shoulders hunched, his head down, and his hands in his pockets.

Across from the bar was an out-of-business restaurant with a tattered awning still overhanging its soaped windows. Bobby slipped into its shadow and kept going, shrinking back once when someone shouted and a bottle shattered. When he reached the next corner he re-crossed Nasty Gansett Street on the diagonal, getting back to the side The Corner Pocket was on.

As he went, he tried to tune his mind outward and pick up some sense of Ted, but there was nothing. Bobby wasn't all that surprised. If *he* had been Ted, he would have gone someplace like the Bridgeport Public Library where he could hang around without being noticed. Maybe after the library closed he'd get a bite to eat, kill a little more time that way. Eventually he'd call another cab and come to collect his money. Bobby didn't think he was anywhere close yet, but he kept listening for him. He was listening so hard that he walked into a guy without even seeing him.

"Hey, *cabron!*" the guy said—laughing, but not in a nice way. Hands grabbed Bobby's shoulders and held him. "Where was you think you goin, *putino?*"

Bobby looked up and saw four young guys, what his mom would have called corner boys, standing in front of a place called BODEGA. They were Puerto Ricans, he thought, and all wearing sharp-creased slacks. Black boots with pointed toes poked out from beneath their pants cuffs. They were also wearing blue silk jackets with the word DIABLOS written on the back. The I was a devil's pitchfork. Something seemed familiar about the pitchfork, but Bobby had no time to think about that. He realized with a sinking heart that he had wandered into four members of some gang.

"I'm sorry," he said in a dry voice. "Really, I . . . 'scuse me."

He pulled back from the hands holding his shoulders and started around the guy. He made just a single step before one of the others grabbed him. "Where you goin, *tío?*" this one asked. "Where you goin, *tío mío?*"

Bobby pulled free, but the fourth guy pushed him back at the second. The second guy grabbed him again, not so gently this time. It was like being surrounded by Harry and his friends, only worse.

"You got any money, *tío?*" asked the third guy. "Cause this a toll-road, you know."

They all laughed and moved in closer. Bobby could smell their spicy aftershaves, their hair tonics, his own fear. He couldn't hear their mind-voices, but did he need to? They were probably going to beat him up and steal his money. If he was lucky that was all they'd do . . . but he might not be lucky.

"Little boy," the fourth guy almost sang. He reached out a hand, gripped the bristles of Bobby's crewcut, and pulled hard enough to make tears well up in Bobby's eyes. "Little *muchacho*, what you got for money, huh? How much of the good old *dinero*? You have something and we going to let you go. You have nothing and we going to bust your balls."

"Leave him alone, Juan."

They looked around—Bobby too—and here came a fifth guy, also wearing a Diablos jacket, also wearing slacks with a sharp crease; he had on loafers instead of pointy-toed boots, and Bobby recognized him at once. It was the young man who had been playing the Frontier Patrol game in The Corner Pocket when Ted was making his bet. No wonder that pitchfork shape had looked familiar—it was tattooed on the guy's hand. His jacket had been tied inside-out around his waist (*no club jacket in here*, he had told Bobby), but he wore the sign of the Diablos just the same.

Bobby tried to look into the newcomer's mind and saw only dim shapes. His ability was fading again, as it had on the day Mrs. Gerber took them to Savin Rock; shortly after they left McQuown's stand at the end of the midway, it had been gone. This time the winkle had lasted longer, but it was going now, all right.

"Hey Dee," said the boy who had pulled Bobby's hair. "We just gonna shake this little guy out a little. Make him pay his way across Diablo turf."

"Not this one," Dee said. "I know him. He's my *compadre*."

"He look like a pansy uptown boy to me," said the one who had called Bobby *cabrón* and *putino*. "I teach im a little respect."

"He don't need no lesson from you," Dee said. "You want one from me, Moso?"

Moso stepped back, frowning, and took a cigarette out of his pocket. One of the others snapped him a light, and Dee drew Bobby a little farther down the street.

“What you doing down here, *amigo?*” he asked, gripping Bobby’s shoulder with the tattooed hand. “You stupid to be down here alone and you fuckin *loco* to be down here at *night* alone.”

“I can’t help it,” Bobby said. “I have to find the guy I was with yesterday. His name is Ted. He’s old and thin and pretty tall. He walks kinda hunched over, like Boris Karloff—you know, the guy in the scary movies?”

“I know Boris Karloff but I don’t know no fuckin Ted,” Dee said. “I don’t ever see him. Man, you ought to get outta here.”

“I have to go to The Corner Pocket,” Bobby said.

“I was just there,” Dee said. “I didn’t see no guy like Boris Karloff.”

“It’s still too early. I think he’ll be there between nine-thirty and ten. I have to be there when he comes, because there’s some men after him. They wear yellow coats and white shoes . . . they drive big flashy cars . . . one of them’s a purple DeSoto, and—”

Dee grabbed him and spun him against the door of a pawnshop so hard that for a moment Bobby thought he had decided to go along with his corner-boy friends after all. Inside the pawnshop an old man with a pair of glasses pushed up on his bald head looked around, annoyed, then back down at the newspaper he was reading.

“The *jefes* in the long yellow coats,” Dee breathed. “I seen those guys. Some of the others seen em, too. You don’t want to mess with boys like that, *chico*. Something wrong with those boys. They don’t look right. Make the bad boys hang around Mallory’s Saloon look like good boys.”

Something in Dee’s expression reminded Bobby of Sully-John, and he remembered S-J saying he’d seen a couple of weird guys outside Commonwealth Park. When Bobby asked what was weird about them, Sully said he didn’t exactly know. Bobby knew, though. Sully had seen the low men. Even then they had been sniffing around.

“When did you see them?” Bobby asked. “Today?”

“Cat, give me a break,” Dee said. “I ain’t been up but two hours, and most of that I been in the bathroom, makin myself pretty for the street. I seen em comin out of The Corner Pocket, a pair of em—day before yesterday, I think. And that place funny lately.” He thought for a moment, then called, “Yo, Juan, get your ass over here.”

The crewcut-puller came trotting over. Dee spoke to him in Spanish. Juan spoke back and Dee responded more briefly, pointing to Bobby. Juan leaned over Bobby, hands on the knees of his sharp pants.

“You seen ’ese guys, huh?”

Bobby nodded.

“One bunch in a big purple DeSoto? One bunch in a Cri’sler? One bunch in an Olds 98?”

Bobby only knew the DeSoto, but he nodded.

“Those cars ain’t real cars,” Juan said. He looked sideways at Dee to see if Dee was laughing. Dee wasn’t; he only nodded for Juan to keep going. “They something else.”

“I think they’re alive,” Bobby said.

Juan’s eyes lit up. “Yeah! Like alive! And ’ose men—”

“What did they look like? I’ve seen one of their cars, but not *them*.”

Juan tried but couldn’t say, at least not in English. He lapsed into Spanish instead. Dee translated some of it, but in an absent fashion; more and more he was conversing with Juan and ignoring Bobby. The other corner boys—and boys were what they really were, Bobby saw—drew close and added their own contributions. Bobby couldn’t understand their talk, but he thought they were scared, all of them. They were tough enough guys—down here you had to be tough just to make it through the day—but the low men had frightened them all the same. Bobby caught one final clear image: a tall striding figure in a calf-length mustard-colored coat, the kind of coat men sometimes wore in movies like *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* and *The Magnificent Seven*.

“I see four of em comin out of that barber shop with the horseparlor in the back,” the one who seemed to be named Filio said. “That’s what they do, those guys, go into places and ask questions. Always leave one of their big cars runnin at the curb. You’d think it’d be crazy to do that down here, leave a car runnin at the curb, but who’d steal one of *those* goddam things?”

No one, Bobby knew. If you tried, the steering wheel might turn into a snake and strangle you; the seat might turn into a quicksand pool and drown you.

“They come out all in a bunch,” Filio went on, “all wearin ’ose long yellow coats even though the day’s so hot you coulda fried a egg on the fuckin

sidewalk. They was all wearin these nice white shoes—sharp, you know how I always notice what people got on their feet, I get hard for that shit—and I don't think . . . I don't think . . .” He paused, gathered himself, and said something to Dee in Spanish.

Bobby asked what he'd said.

“He sayin their shoes wasn' touchin the ground,” Juan replied. His eyes were big. There was no scorn or disbelief in them. “He sayin they got this big red Cri'sler, and when they go back to it, their fuckin shoes ain't quite touchin the ground.” Juan forked two fingers in front of his mouth, spat through them, then crossed himself.

No one said anything for a moment or two after that, and then Dee bent gravely over Bobby again. “These are the guys lookin for your frien'?”

“That's right,” Bobby said. “I have to warn him.”

He had a mad idea that Dee would offer to go with him to The Corner Pocket, and then the rest of the Diablos would join in; they would walk up the street snapping their fingers in unison like the Jets in *West Side Story*. They would be his friends now, gang guys who happened to have really good hearts.

Of course nothing of the sort happened. What happened was Moso wandered off, back toward the place where Bobby had walked into him. The others followed. Juan paused long enough to say, “You run into those *caballeros* and you gonna be one dead *putino, tío mío*.” Only Dee was left and Dee said, “He's right. You ought to go back to your own part of the worl', my frien'. Let your *amigo* take care of himself.”

“I can't,” Bobby said. And then, with genuine curiosity: “Could you?”

“Not against ordinary guys, maybe, but these ain't ordinary guys. Was you just lissen?”

“Yes,” Bobby said. “But.”

“You crazy, little boy. *Poco loco*.”

“I guess so.” He *felt* crazy, all right. *Poco loco* and then some. Crazy as a shithouse mouse, his mother would have said.

Dee started away and Bobby felt his heart cramp. The big boy got to the corner—his buddies were waiting for him on the other side of the street—then wheeled back, made his finger into a gun, and pointed it at Bobby. Bobby grinned and pointed his own back.

“*Vaya con Dios, mi amigo loco,*” Dee said, then sauntered across the street with the collar of his gang jacket turned up against the back of his neck.

Bobby turned the other way and started walking again, detouring around the pools of light cast by fizzing neon signs and trying to keep in the shadows as much as he could.

• • •

Across the street from The Corner Pocket was a mortuary—DESPEGNI FUNERAL PARLOR, it said on the green awning. Hanging in the window was a clock whose face was outlined in a chilly circle of blue neon. Below the clock was a sign which read TIME AND TIDE WAIT FOR NO MAN. According to the clock it was twenty past eight. He was still in time, in plenty of time, and he could see an alley beyond the Pocket where he might wait in relative safety, but Bobby couldn't just park himself and wait, even though he knew that would be the smart thing to do. If he'd really been smart, he never would have come down here in the first place. He wasn't a wise old owl; he was a scared kid who needed help. He doubted if there was any in The Corner Pocket, but maybe he was wrong.

Bobby walked under the banner reading **COME IN IT'S KOOL INSIDE**. He had never felt less in need of air conditioning in his life; it was a hot night but he was cold all over.

*God, if You're there, please help me now. Help me to be brave . . . and help me to be lucky.*

Bobby opened the door and went in.

• • •

The smell of beer was much stronger and much fresher, and the room with the pinball machines in it banged and jangled with lights and noise. Where before only Dee had been playing pinball, there now seemed to be at least two dozen guys, all of them smoking, all of them wearing strap-style undershirts and Frank Sinatra hello-young-lovers hats, all of them with bottles of Bud parked on the glass tops of the Gottlieb machines.

The area by Len Files's desk was brighter than before because there were more lights on in the bar (where every stool was taken) as well as in the pinball room. The poolhall itself, which had been mostly dark on Wednesday, was now lit like an operating theater. There were men at every table bending and circling and making shots in a blue fog of cigarette smoke; the chairs along the walls were all taken. Bobby could see Old Gee with his feet up on the shoeshine posts, and—

“What the fuck are *you* doing here?”

Bobby turned, startled by the voice and shocked by the sound of that word coming out of a woman's mouth. It was Alanna Files. The door to the living-room area behind the desk was just swinging shut behind her. Tonight she was wearing a white silk blouse that showed her shoulders—pretty shoulders, creamy-white and as round as breasts—and the top of her prodigious bosom. Below the white blouse were the largest pair of red slacks Bobby had ever seen. Yesterday, Alanna had been kind, smiling . . . almost laughing at him, in fact, although in a way Bobby hadn't minded. Tonight she looked scared to death.

“I'm sorry . . . I know I'm not supposed to be in here, but I need to find my friend Ted and I thought . . . thought that . . .” He heard his voice shrinking like a balloon that's been let loose to fly around the room.

Something was horribly wrong. It was like a dream he sometimes had where he was at his desk studying spelling or science or just reading a story and everyone started laughing at him and he realized he had forgotten to put his pants on before coming to school, he was sitting at his desk with everything hanging out for everyone to look at, girls and teachers and just everyone.

The beat of the bells in the gameroom hadn't completely quit, but it had slowed down. The flood of conversation and laughter from the bar had dried up almost entirely. The click of pool and billiard balls had ceased. Bobby looked around, feeling those snakes in his stomach again.

They weren't all looking at him, but most were. Old Gee was staring with eyes that looked like holes burned in dirty paper. And although the window in Bobby's mind was almost opaque now—soaped over—he felt that a lot of the people in here had sort of been expecting him. He doubted if they knew it, and even if they did they wouldn't know why. They were kind of asleep, like the people of Midwich. The low men had been in. The low men had—

“Get out, Randy,” Alanna said in a dry little whisper. In her distress she had called Bobby by his father’s name. “Get out while you still can.”

Old Gee had slid out of the shoeshine chair. His wrinkled seersucker jacket caught on one of the foot-pedestals and tore as he started forward, but he paid no attention as the silk lining floated down beside his knee like a toy parachute. His eyes looked more like burned holes than ever. “Get him,” Old Gee said in a wavery voice. “Get that kid.”

Bobby had seen enough. There was no help here. He scrambled for the door and tore it open. Behind him he had the sense of people starting to move, but slowly. Too slowly.

Bobby Garfield ran out into the night.

• • •

He ran almost two full blocks before a stitch in his side forced him to first slow down, then stop. No one was following and that was good, but if Ted went into The Corner Pocket to collect his money he was finished, done, *kaput*. It wasn’t just the low men he had to worry about; now there was Old Gee and the rest of them to worry about, too, and Ted didn’t know it. The question was, what could Bobby do about it?

He looked around and saw the storefronts were gone; he’d come to an area of warehouses. They loomed like giant faces from which most of the features had been erased. There was a smell of fish and sawdust and some vague rotted perfume that might have been old meat.

There was *nothing* he could do about it. He was just a kid and it was out of his hands. Bobby realized that, but he also realized he couldn’t let Ted walk into The Corner Pocket without at least trying to warn him. There was nothing Hardy Boys–heroic about this, either; he simply couldn’t leave without making the effort. And it was his mother who had put him in this position. *His own mother*.

“I hate you, Mom,” he whispered. He was still cold, but sweat was pouring out of his body; every inch of his skin felt wet. “I don’t care what Don Biderman and those other guys did to you, you’re a bitch and I hate you.”

Bobby turned and began to trot back the way he had come, keeping to the shadows. Twice he heard people coming and crouched in doorways, making

himself small until they had passed by. Making himself small was easy. He had never felt smaller in his life.

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This time he turned into the alley. There were garbage cans on one side and a stack of cartons on the other, full of returnable bottles that smelled of beer. This cardboard column was half a foot taller than Bobby, and when he stepped behind it he was perfectly concealed from the street. Once during his wait something hot and furry brushed against his ankle and Bobby started to scream. He stifled most of it before it could get out, looked down, and saw a scruffy alleycat looking back up at him with green headlamp eyes.

“Scat, Pat,” Bobby whispered, and kicked at it. The cat revealed the needles of its teeth, hissed, then did a slow strut back down the alley, weaving around the clots of refuse and strewn pieces of broken glass, its tail lifted in what looked like disdain. Through the brick wall beside him Bobby could hear the dull throb of The Corner Pocket’s juke. Mickey and Sylvia were singing “Love Is Strange.” It was strange, all right. A big strange pain in the ass.

From his place of concealment Bobby could no longer see the mortuary clock and he’d lost any sense of how much or how little time was passing. Beyond the beer-and-garbage reek of the alley a summer streetlife opera was going on. People shouted out to each other, sometimes laughing, sometimes angry, sometimes in English, sometimes in one of a dozen other languages. There was a rattle of explosions that made him stiffen—gunshots was his first idea—and then he recognized the sound as firecrackers, probably ladyfingers, and relaxed a little again. Cars blasted by, many of them brightly painted railjobs and jackjobs with chrome pipes and glasspack mufflers. Once there was what sounded like a fistfight with people gathered around yelling encouragement to the scufflers. Once a lady who sounded both drunk and sad went by singing “Where the Boys Are” in a beautiful slurry voice. Once there were police sirens which approached and then faded away again.

Bobby didn’t doze, exactly, but fell into a kind of daydream. He and Ted were living on a farm somewhere, maybe in Florida. They worked long hours, but Ted could work pretty hard for an old guy, especially now that he had quit smoking and had some of his wind back. Bobby went to school under another

name—Ralph Sullivan—and at night they sat on the porch, eating Ted’s cooking and drinking iced tea. Bobby read to him from the newspaper and when they went in to bed they slept deeply and their sleep was peaceful, interrupted by no bad dreams. When they went to the grocery store on Fridays, Bobby would check the bulletin board for lost-pet posters or upside-down file-cards advertising items for sale by owner, but he never found any. The low men had lost Ted’s scent. Ted was no longer anyone’s dog and they were safe on their farm. Not father and son or grandfather and grandson, but only friends.

*Guys like us*, Bobby thought drowsily. He was leaning against the brick wall now, his head slipping downward until his chin was almost on his chest. *Guys like us, why shouldn’t there be a place for guys like us?*

Lights splashed down the alley. Each time this had happened Bobby had peered around the stack of cartons. This time he almost didn’t—he wanted to close his eyes and think about the farm—but he forced himself to look, and what he saw was the stubby yellow tailfin of a Checker cab, just pulling up in front of The Corner Pocket.

Adrenaline flooded Bobby and turned on lights in his head he hadn’t even known about. He dodged around the stack of boxes, spilling the top two off. His foot struck an empty garbage can and knocked it against the wall. He almost stepped on a hissing furry something—the cat again. Bobby kicked it aside and ran out of the alley. As he turned toward The Corner Pocket he slipped on some sort of greasy goo and went down on one knee. He saw the mortuary clock in its cool blue ring: 9:45. The cab was idling at the curb in front of The Corner Pocket’s door. Ted Brautigan was standing beneath the banner reading **COME IN IT’S KOOL INSIDE**, paying the driver. Bent down to the driver’s open window like that, Ted looked more like Boris Karloff than ever.

Across from the cab, parked in front of the mortuary, was a huge Oldsmobile as red as Alanna’s pants. It hadn’t been there earlier, Bobby was sure of that. Its shape wasn’t quite solid. Looking at it didn’t just make your eyes want to water; it made your *mind* want to water.

*Ted!* Bobby tried to yell, but no yell came out—all he could produce was a strawlike whisper. *Why doesn’t he feel them?* Bobby thought. *How come he doesn’t*

*know?*

Maybe because the low men could block him out somehow. Or maybe the people inside The Corner Pocket were doing the blocking. Old Gee and all the rest. The low men had perhaps turned them into human sponges that could soak up the warning signals Ted usually felt.

More lights splashed the street. As Ted straightened and the Checker pulled away, the purple DeSoto sprang around the corner. The cab had to swerve to avoid it. Beneath the streetlights the DeSoto looked like a huge blood-clot decorated with chrome and glass. Its headlights were moving and shimmering like lights seen underwater . . . and then they *blinked*. They weren't headlights at all. They were eyes.

*Ted!* Still nothing but that dry whisper came out, and Bobby couldn't seem to get back on his feet. He was no longer sure he even *wanted* to get back on his feet. A terrible fear, as disorienting as the flu and as debilitating as a cataclysmic case of the squitters, was enveloping him. Passing the blood-clot DeSoto outside the William Penn Grille had been bad; to be caught in its oncoming eyelights was a thousand times worse. No—a *million* times.

He was aware that he had torn his pants and scraped blood out of his knee, he could hear Little Richard howling from someone's upstairs window, and he could still see the blue circle around the mortuary clock like a flashbulb afterimage tattooed on the retina, but none of that seemed real. Nasty Gansett Avenue suddenly seemed no more than a badly painted backdrop. Behind it was some unsuspected reality, and reality was *dark*.

The DeSoto's grille was moving. *Snarling*. *Those cars ain't real cars*, Juan had said. *They something else*.

They were something else, all right.

"Ted . . ." A little louder this time . . . and Ted heard. He turned toward Bobby, eyes widening, and then the DeSoto bounced up over the curb behind him, its blazing unsteady headlights pinning Ted and making his shadow grow as Bobby's and the Sigsby girls' shadows had grown when the pole-light came on in Spicer's little parking lot.

Ted wheeled back toward the DeSoto, raising one hand to shield his eyes from the glare. More light swept the street. This time it was a Cadillac coming up from the warehouse district, a snot-green Cadillac that looked at least a

mile long, a Cadillac with fins like grins and sides that moved like the lobes of a lung. It thumped up over the curb just behind Bobby, stopping less than a foot from his back. Bobby heard a low panting sound. The Cadillac's motor, he realized, was breathing.

Doors were opening in all three cars. Men were getting out—or things that looked like men at first glance. Bobby counted six, counted eight, stopped counting. Each of them wore a long mustard-colored coat—the kind that was called a duster—and on the right front lapel of each was the staring crimson eye Bobby remembered from his dream. He supposed the red eyes were badges. The creatures wearing them were . . . what? Cops? No. A posse, like in a movie? That was a little closer. Vigilantes? Closer still but still not right. They were—

*They're regulators. Like in that movie me and S-J saw at the Empire last year, the one with John Payne and Karen Steele.*

That was it—oh yes. The regulators in the movie had turned out to be just a bunch of bad guys, but at first you thought they were ghosts or monsters or something. Bobby thought that these regulators really *were* monsters.

One of them grasped Bobby under the arm. Bobby cried out—the contact was quite the most horrible thing he had ever experienced in his life. It made being thrown against the wall by his mother seem like very small change indeed. The low man's touch was like being grasped by a hot-water bottle that had grown fingers . . . only the feel of them kept shifting. It would feel like fingers in his armpit, then like claws. Fingers . . . claws. Fingers . . . claws. That unspeakable touch buzzed into his flesh, reaching both up and down. *It's Jack's stick*, he thought crazily. *The one sharpened at both ends.*

Bobby was pulled toward Ted, who was surrounded by the others. He stumbled along on legs that were too weak to walk. Had he thought he would be able to warn Ted? That they would run away together down Narragansett Avenue, perhaps even skipping a little, the way Carol used to? That was quite funny, wasn't it?

Incredibly, Ted didn't seem afraid. He stood in the semicircle of low men and the only emotion on his face was concern for Bobby. The thing gripping Bobby—now with a hand, now with loathsome pulsing rubber fingers, now with a clutch of talons—suddenly let him go. Bobby staggered, reeled. One of

the others uttered a high, barking cry and pushed him in the middle of the back. Bobby flew forward and Ted caught him.

Sobbing with terror, Bobby pressed his face against Ted's shirt. He could smell the comforting aromas of Ted's cigarettes and shaving soap, but they weren't strong enough to cover the stench that was coming from the low men—a meaty, garbagey smell—and a higher smell like burning whiskey that was coming from their cars.

Bobby looked up at Ted. "It was my mother," he said. "It was my mother who told."

"This isn't her fault, no matter what you may think," Ted replied. "I simply stayed too long."

"But was it a nice vacation, Ted?" one of the low men asked. His voice had a gruesome buzz, as if his vocal cords were packed with bugs—locusts or maybe crickets. He could have been the one Bobby spoke to on the phone, the one who'd said Ted was their dog . . . but maybe they all sounded the same. *If you don't want to be our dog, too, stay away*, the one on the phone had said, but he had come down here anyway, and now . . . oh now . . .

"Wasn't bad," Ted replied.

"I hope you at least got laid," another said, "because you probably won't get another chance."

Bobby looked around. The low men stood shoulder to shoulder, surrounding them, penning them in their smell of sweat and maggoty meat, blocking off any sight of the street with their yellow coats. They were dark-skinned, deep-eyed, red-lipped (as if they had been eating cherries) . . . but they weren't what they looked like. They weren't what they looked like at all. Their faces wouldn't stay in their faces, for one thing; their cheeks and chins and hair kept trying to spread outside the lines (it was the only way Bobby could interpret what he was seeing). Beneath their dark skins were skins as white as their pointed reet-petite shoes. *But their lips are still red*, Bobby thought, *their lips are always red*. As their eyes were always black, not really eyes at all but caves. *And they are so tall*, he realized. *So tall and so thin. There are no thoughts like our thoughts in their brains, no feelings like our feelings in their hearts.*

From across the street there came a thick slobbering grunt. Bobby looked in that direction and saw that one of the Oldsmobile's tires had turned into a blackish-gray tentacle. It reached out, snared a cigarette wrapper, and pulled it back. A moment later the tentacle was a tire again, but the cigarette wrapper was sticking out of it like something half swallowed.

"Ready to come back, hoss?" one of the low men asked Ted. He bent toward him, the folds of his yellow coat rustling stiffly, the red eye on the lapel staring. "Ready to come back and do your duty?"

"I'll come," Ted replied, "but the boy stays here."

More hands settled on Bobby, and something like a living branch caressed the nape of his neck. It set off that buzzing again, something that was both an alarm and a sickness. It rose into his head and hummed there like a hive. Within that lunatic hum he heard first one bell, tolling rapidly, then many. A world of bells in some terrible black night of hot hurricane winds. He supposed he was sensing wherever the low men had come from, an alien place trillions of miles from Connecticut and his mother. Villages were burning under unknown constellations, people were screaming, and that touch on his neck . . . that awful touch . . .

Bobby moaned and buried his head against Ted's chest again.

"He wants to be with you," an unspeakable voice crooned. "I think we'll bring him, Ted. He has no natural ability as a Breaker, but still . . . all things serve the King, you know." The unspeakable fingers caressed again.

"All things serve the *Beam*," Ted said in a dry, correcting voice. His teacher's voice.

"Not for much longer," the low man said, and laughed. The sound of it loosened Bobby's bowels.

"Bring him," said another voice. It held a note of command. They *did* all sound sort of alike, but this was the one he had spoken to on the phone; Bobby was sure.

"No!" Ted said. His hands tightened on Bobby's back. "He stays here!"

"Who are you to give us orders?" the low man in charge asked. "How proud you have grown during your little time of freedom, Ted! How *haughty*! Yet soon you'll be back in the same room where you have spent so many years, with the others, and if I say the boy *comes*, then the boy *comes*."

“If you bring him, you’ll have to go on taking what you need from me,” Ted said. His voice was very quiet but very strong. Bobby hugged him as tight as he could and shut his eyes. He didn’t want to look at the low men, not ever again. The worst thing about them was that their touch was like Ted’s, in a way: it opened a window. But who would want to look through such a window? Who would want to see the tall, red-lipped scissor-shapes as they really were? Who would want to see the owner of that red Eye?

“You’re a Breaker, Ted. You were made for it, born to it. And if we tell you to break, you’ll break, by God.”

“You can force me, I’m not so foolish as to think you can’t . . . but if you leave him here, I’ll give what I have to you freely. And I have more to give than you could . . . well, perhaps you *could* imagine it.”

“I want the boy,” the low man in charge said, but now he sounded thoughtful. Perhaps even doubtful. “I want him as a pretty, something to give the King.”

“I doubt if the Crimson King will thank you for a meaningless pretty if it interferes with his plans,” Ted said. “There is a gunslinger—”

“Gunslinger, pah!”

“Yet he and his friends have reached the borderland of End-World,” Ted said, and now he was the one who sounded thoughtful. “If I give you what you want instead of forcing you to take it, I may be able to speed things up by fifty years or more. As you say, I’m a Breaker, made for it and born to it. There aren’t many of us. You need every one, and most of all you need me. Because I’m the best.”

“You flatter yourself . . . and you overestimate your importance to the King.”

“Do I? I wonder. Until the Beams break, the Dark Tower stands—surely I don’t need to remind you of that. Is one boy worth the risk?”

Bobby hadn’t the slightest idea what Ted was talking about and didn’t care. All he knew was that the course of his life was being decided on the sidewalk outside a Bridgeport billiard parlor. He could hear the rustle of the low men’s coats; he could smell them; now that Ted had touched him again he could feel them even more clearly. That horrible itching behind his eyes had begun again, too. In a weird way it harmonized with the buzzing in his head. The black

specks drifted across his vision and he was suddenly sure what they meant, what they were for. In Clifford Simak's book *Ring Around the Sun*, it was a top that took you off into other worlds; you followed the rising spirals. In truth, Bobby suspected, it was the specks that did it. The black specks. They were alive . . .

And they were hungry.

"Let the boy decide," the leader of the low men said at last. His living branch of a finger caressed the back of Bobby's neck again. "He loves you so much, Teddy. You're his *te-ka*. Aren't you? That means destiny's friend, Bobby-O. Isn't that what this old smoky-smelling Teddy-bear is to you? Your destiny's friend?"

Bobby said nothing, only pressed his cold throbbing face against Ted's shirt. He now repented coming here with all his heart—would have stayed home hiding under his bed if he had known the truth of the low men—but yes, he supposed Ted was his *te-ka*. He didn't know about stuff like destiny, he was only a kid, but Ted was his friend. *Guys like us*, Bobby thought miserably. *Guys like us*.

"So how do you feel now that you see us?" the low man asked. "Would you like to come with us so you can be close to good old Ted? Perhaps see him on the odd weekend? Discuss *literature* with your dear old *teka*? Learn to eat what we eat and drink what we drink?" The awful fingers again, caressing. The buzzing in Bobby's head increased. The black specks fattened and now *they* looked like fingers—beckoning fingers. "We eat it hot, Bobby," the low man whispered. "And drink it hot as well. Hot . . . and sweet. Hot . . . and sweet."

"Stop it," Ted snapped.

"Or would you rather stay with your mother?" the crooning voice went on, ignoring Ted. "Surely not. Not a boy of your principles. Not a boy who has discovered the joys of friendship and *literature*. Surely you'll come with this wheezy old *ka-mai*, won't you? Or will you? Decide, Bobby. Do it now, and knowing that what you decide is what will bide. Now and forever."

Bobby had a delirious memory of the lobsterback cards blurring beneath McQuown's long white fingers: *Now they go, now they slow, now they rest, here's the test*.

*I fail*, Bobby thought. *I fail the test*.

“Let me go, mister,” he said miserably. “Please don’t take me with you.”

“Even if it means your *te-ka* has to go on without your wonderful and revivifying company?” The voice was smiling, but Bobby could almost taste the knowing contempt under its cheery surface, and he shivered. With relief, because he understood he was probably going to be let free after all, with shame because he knew what he was doing—crawling, chintzing, chickening out. All the things the good guys in the movies and books he loved never did. But the good guys in the movies and books never had to face anything like the low men in the yellow coats or the horror of the black specks. And what Bobby saw of those things here, outside The Corner Pocket, was not the worst of it either. What if he saw the rest? What if the black specks drew him into a world where he saw the men in the yellow coats as they really were? What if he saw the shapes inside the ones they wore in this world?

“Yes,” he said, and began to cry.

“Yes what?”

“Even if he has to go without me.”

“Ah. And even if it means going back to your mother?”

“Yes.”

“You perhaps understand your bitch of a mother a little better now, do you?”

“Yes,” Bobby said for the third time. By now he was nearly moaning. “I guess I do.”

“That’s enough,” Ted said. “Stop it.”

But the voice wouldn’t. Not yet. “You’ve learned how to be a coward, Bobby . . . haven’t you?”

“*Yes!*” he cried, still with his face against Ted’s shirt. “*A baby, a little chickenshit baby, yes yes yes! I don’t care! Just let me go home!*” He drew in a great long unsteady breath and let it out in a scream. “I WANT MY MOTHER!” It was the howl of a terrified littlun who has finally glimpsed the beast from the water, the beast from the air.

“All right,” the low man said. “Since you put it *that* way. Assuming your Teddy-bear confirms that he’ll go to work with a will and not have to be chained to his oar as previously.”

“I promise.” Ted let go of Bobby. Bobby remained as he was, clutching Ted with panicky tightness and pushing his face against Ted’s chest, until Ted pushed him gently away.

“Go inside the poolhall, Bobby. Tell Files to give you a ride home. Tell him if he does that, my friends will leave *him* alone.”

“I’m sorry, Ted. I wanted to come with you. I *meant* to come with you. But I can’t. I’m so sorry.”

“You shouldn’t be hard on yourself.” But Ted’s look was heavy, as if he knew that from tonight on Bobby would be able to be nothing else.

Two of the yellowcoats grasped Ted’s arms. Ted looked at the one standing behind Bobby—the one who had been caressing the nape of Bobby’s neck with that horrible sticklike finger. “They don’t need to do that, Cam. I’ll walk.”

“Let him go,” Cam said. The low men holding Ted released his arms. Then, for the last time, Cam’s finger touched the back of Bobby’s neck. Bobby uttered a choked wail. He thought, *If he does it again I’ll go crazy, I won’t be able to help it. I’ll start to scream and I won’t be able to stop. Even if my head bursts open I’ll go on screaming.* “Get inside there, little boy. Do it before I change my mind and take you anyway.”

Bobby stumbled toward The Corner Pocket. The door stood open but empty. He climbed the single step, then turned back. Three of the low men were clustered around Ted, but Ted was walking toward the blood-clot DeSoto on his own.

“Ted!”

Ted turned, smiled, started to wave. Then the one called Cam leaped forward, seized him, whirled him, and thrust him into the car. As Cam swung the De-Soto’s back door shut Bobby saw, for just an instant, an incredibly tall, incredibly scrawny being standing inside a long yellow coat, a thing with flesh as white as new snow and lips as red as fresh blood. Deep in its eyesockets were savage points of light and dancing flecks of darkness in pupils which swelled and contracted as Ted’s had done. The red lips peeled back, revealing needly teeth that put the alleycat’s to shame. A black tongue lolled out from between those teeth and wagged an obscene goodbye. Then the creature in the yellow coat sprinted around the hood of the purple DeSoto, thin legs gnashing, thin knees pumping, and plunged in behind the wheel. Across the street the Olds

started up, its engine sounding like the roar of an awakening dragon. Perhaps it *was* a dragon. From its place skewed halfway across the sidewalk, the Cadillac's engine did the same. Living headlights flooded this part of Narragansett Avenue in a pulsing glare. The DeSoto skidded in a U-turn, one fenderskirt scraping up a brief train of sparks from the street, and for a moment Bobby saw Ted's face in the DeSoto's back window. Bobby raised his hand and waved. He thought Ted raised his own in return but could not be sure. Once more his head filled with a sound like hoofbeats.

He never saw Ted Brautigan again.

• • •

"Bug out, kid," Len Files said. His face was cheesy-white, seeming to hang off his skull the way the flesh hung off his sister's upper arms. Behind him the lights of the Gottlieb machines in the little arcade flashed and flickered with no one to watch them; the cool cats who made an evening specialty of Corner Pocket pinball were clustered behind Len Files like children. To Len's right were the pool and billiard players, many of them clutching cues like clubs. Old Gee stood off to one side by the cigarette machine. He didn't have a pool-cue; from one gnarled old hand there hung a small automatic pistol. It didn't scare Bobby. After Cam and his yellowcoat friends, he didn't think anything would have the power to scare him right now. For the time being he was all scared out.

"Put an egg in your shoe and beat it, kid. Now."

"Better do it, kiddo." That was Alanna, standing behind the desk. Bobby glanced at her and thought, *If I was older I bet I'd give you something. I bet I would.* She saw his glance—the quality of his glance—and looked away, flushed and frightened and confused.

Bobby looked back at her brother. "You want those guys back here?"

Len's hanging face grew even longer. "You kidding?"

"Okay then," Bobby said. "Give me what I want and I'll go away. You'll never see me again." He paused. "Or *them.*"

"Whatchu want, kid?" Old Gee asked in his wavering voice. Bobby was going to get whatever he asked for; it was flashing in Old Gee's mind like a big bright sign. That mind was as clear now as it had been when it had belonged to

Young Gee, cold and calculating and unpleasant, but it seemed innocent after Cam and his regulators. Innocent as ice cream.

“A ride home,” Bobby said. “That’s number one.” Then—speaking to Old Gee rather than Len—he gave them number two.

• • •

Len’s car was a Buick: big, long, and new. Vulgar but not low. Just a car. The two of them rode to the sound of danceband music from the forties. Len spoke only once during the trip to Harwich. “Don’t you go tuning that to no rock and roll. I have to listen to enough of that shit at work.”

They drove past the Asher Empire, and Bobby saw there was a life-sized cardboard cutout of Brigitte Bardot standing to the left of the ticket booth. He glanced at it without very much interest. He felt too old for B.B. now.

They turned off Asher; the Buick slipped down Broad Street Hill like a whisper behind a cupped hand. Bobby pointed out his building. Now the apartment was lit up, all right; every light was blazing. Bobby looked at the clock on the Buick’s dashboard and saw it was almost eleven P.M.

As the Buick pulled to the curb Len Files found his tongue again. “Who were they, kid? Who were those *gonifs*?”

Bobby almost grinned. It reminded him of how, at the end of almost every *Lone Ranger* episode, someone said *Who was that masked man?*

“Low men,” he told Len. “Low men in yellow coats.”

“I wouldn’t want to be your pal right now.”

“No,” Bobby said. A shudder shook through him like a gust of wind. “Me neither. Thanks for the ride.”

“Don’t mention it. Just stay the fuck clear of my felts and greens from now on. You’re banned for life.”

The Buick—a boat, a Detroit cabin-cruiser, but not low—drew away. Bobby watched as it turned in a driveway across the street and then headed back up the hill past Carol’s building. When it had disappeared around the corner, Bobby looked up at the stars—stacked billions, a spilled bridge of light. Stars and more stars beyond them, spinning in the black.

*There is a Tower, he thought. It holds everything together. There are Beams that protect it somehow. There is a Crimson King, and Breakers working to destroy the*

*Beams . . . not because the Breakers want to but because it wants them to. The Crimson King.*

Was Ted back among the rest of the Breakers yet? Bobby wondered. Back and pulling his oar?

*I'm sorry*, he thought, starting up the walk to the porch. He remembered sitting there with Ted, reading to him from the newspaper. Just a couple of guys. *I wanted to go with you but I couldn't. In the end I couldn't.*

He stopped at the bottom of the porch steps, listening for Bowser around on Colony Street. There was nothing. Bowser had gone to sleep. It was a miracle. Smiling wanly, Bobby got moving again. His mother must have heard the creak of the second porch step—it was pretty loud—because she cried out his name and then there was the sound of her running footsteps. He was on the porch when the door flew open and she ran out, still dressed in the clothes she had been wearing when she came home from Providence. Her hair hung around her face in wild curls and tangles.

“Bobby!” she cried. “Bobby, oh Bobby! Thank God! Thank God!”

She swept him up, turning him around and around in a kind of dance, her tears wetting one side of his face.

“I wouldn't take their money,” she babbled. “They called me back and asked for the address so they could send a check and I said never mind, it was a mistake, I was hurt and upset, I said no, Bobby, I said no, I said I didn't want their money.”

Bobby saw she was lying. Someone had pushed an envelope with her name on it under the foyer door. Not a check, three hundred dollars in cash. Three hundred dollars for the return of their best Breaker; three hundred lousy rocks. They were even bigger cheapskates than she was.

“I said I didn't want it, did you hear me?”

Carrying him into the apartment now. He weighed almost a hundred pounds and was too heavy for her but she carried him anyway. As she babbled on, Bobby realized they wouldn't have the police to contend with, at least; she hadn't called them. Mostly she had just been sitting here, plucking at her wrinkled skirt and praying incoherently that he would come home. She loved him. That beat in her mind like the wings of a bird trapped in a barn. She

loved him. It didn't help much . . . but it helped a little. Even if it was a trap, it helped a little.

"I said I didn't want it, we didn't need it, they could keep their money. I said . . . I told them . . ."

"That's good, Mom," he said. "That's good. Put me down."

"Where have you been? Are you all right? Are you hungry?"

He answered her questions back to front. "I'm hungry, yeah, but I'm fine. I went to Bridgeport. I got this."

He reached into his pants pocket and brought out the remains of the Bike Fund money. His ones and change were mixed into a messy green wad of tens and twenties and fifties. His mother stared at the money as it rained down on the endtable by the sofa, her good eye growing bigger and bigger until Bobby was afraid it might tumble right out of her face. The other eye remained squinched down in its thundercloud of blue-black flesh. She looked like a battered old pirate gloating over freshly unburied treasure, an image Bobby could have done without . . . and one which never entirely left him during the fifteen years between that night and the night of her death. Yet some new and not particularly pleasant part of him *enjoyed* that look—how it rendered her old and ugly and comic, a person who was stupid as well as avaricious. *That's my ma*, he thought in a Jimmy Durante voice. *That's my ma. We both gave him up, but I got paid better than you did, Ma, didn't I? Yeah! Hotcha!*

"Bobby," she whispered in a trembly voice. She looked like a pirate and sounded like a winning contestant on that Bill Cullen show, *The Price Is Right*. "Oh Bobby, so much *money!* Where did it come from?"

"Ted's bet," Bobby said. "This is the payout."

"But Ted . . . won't he—"

"He won't need it anymore."

Liz winced as if one of her bruises had suddenly twinged. Then she began sweeping the money together, sorting the bills even as she did so. "I'm going to get you that bike," she said. Her fingers moved with the speed of an experienced three-card monte dealer. *No one beats that shuffle*, Bobby thought. *No one has ever beaten that shuffle*. "First thing in the morning. Soon as the Western Auto opens. Then we'll—"

"I don't want a bike," he said. "Not from that. And not from you."

She froze with her hands full of money and he felt her rage bloom at once, something red and electrical. “No thanks from you, are there? I was a fool to ever expect any. God damn you if you’re not the spitting image of your father!” She drew back her hand again with the fingers open. The difference this time was that he knew it was coming. She had blindsided him for the last time.

“How would you know?” Bobby asked. “You’ve told so many lies about him you don’t remember the truth.”

And this was so. He had looked into her and there was almost no Randall Garfield there, only a box with his name on it . . . his name and a faded image that could have been almost anyone. This was the box where she kept the things that hurt her. She didn’t remember about how he liked that Jo Stafford song; didn’t remember (if she had ever known) that Randy Garfield had been a real sweetie who’d give you the shirt right off his back. There was no room for things like that in the box she kept. Bobby thought it must be awful to need a box like that.

“He wouldn’t buy a drunk a drink,” he said. “Did you know that?”

“What are you *talking* about?”

“You can’t make me hate him . . . and you can’t make me into him.” He turned his right hand into a fist and cocked it by the side of his head. “I won’t be his ghost. Tell yourself as many lies as you want to about the bills he didn’t pay and the insurance policy he lost out on and all the inside straights he tried to fill, but don’t tell them to me. Not anymore.”

“Don’t raise your hand to me, Bobby-O. Don’t you ever raise your hand to me.”

In answer he held up his other hand, also fisted. “Come on. You want to hit me? I’ll hit you back. You can have some more. Only this time you’ll deserve it. Come on.”

She faltered. He could feel her rage dissipating as fast as it had come, and what replaced it was a terrible blackness. In it, he saw, was fear. Fear of her son, fear that he might hurt her. Not tonight, no—not with those grimy little-boy fists. But little boys grew up.

And was he so much better than her that he could look down his nose and give her the old la-de-dah? Was he *any* better? In his mind he heard the unspeakable crooning voice asking if he wanted to go back home even though

it meant Ted would have to go on without him. *Yes*, Bobby had said. Even if it meant going back to his bitch of a mother? *Yes*, Bobby had said. You understand her a little bit better now, do you? Cam had asked, and once again Bobby had said yes.

And when she recognized his step on the porch, there had at first been nothing in her mind but love and relief. Those things had been real.

Bobby unmade his fists. He reached up and took her hand, which was still held back to slap . . . although now without much conviction. It resisted at first, but Bobby at last soothed the tension from it. He kissed it. He looked at his mother's battered face and kissed her hand again. He knew her so well and he didn't want to. He longed for the window in his mind to close, longed for the opacity that made love not just possible but necessary. The less you knew, the more you could believe.

"It's just a bike I don't want," he said. "Okay? Just a bike."

"What *do* you want?" she asked. Her voice was uncertain, dreary. "What *do* you want from me, Bobby?"

"Pancakes," he said. "Lots." He tried a smile. "I am *so-ooo* hungry."

She made enough pancakes for both of them and they ate breakfast at midnight, sitting across from each other at the kitchen table. He insisted on helping her with the dishes even though it was going on toward one by then. Why not? he asked her. There was no school the next day, he could sleep as late as he wanted.

As she was letting the water out of the sink and Bobby was putting the last of their silverware away, Bowser began barking over on Colony Street: *roop-roop-roop* into the dark of a new day. Bobby's eyes met his mother's, they laughed, and for a moment knowing was all right.

• • •

At first he lay in bed the old way, on his back with his heels spread to the lower corners of the mattress, but the old way no longer felt right. It felt exposed, as if anything that wanted to bag a boy could simply burst out of his closet and unzip his upturned belly with one claw. He rolled over on his side and wondered where Ted was now. He reached out, feeling for something that might be Ted, and there was nothing. Just as there had been nothing earlier, on

Nasty Gansett Street. Bobby wished he could cry for Ted, but he couldn't. Not yet.

Outside, crossing the dark like a dream, came the sound of the clock in the town square: one single *bong*. Bobby looked at the luminous hands of the Big Ben on his desk and saw they were standing at one o'clock. That was good.

"They're gone," Bobby said. "The low men are gone."

But he slept on his side with his knees drawn up to his chest. His nights of sleeping wide open on his back were over.

## XI. WOLVES AND LIONS. BOBBY AT BAT. OFFICER RAYMER. BOBBY AND CAROL. BAD TIMES. AN ENVELOPE.

Sully-John returned from camp with a tan, ten thousand healing mosquito bites, and a million tales to tell . . . only Bobby didn't hear many of them. That was the summer the old easy friendship among Bobby and Sully and Carol broke up. The three of them sometimes walked down to Sterling House together, but once they got there they went to different activities. Carol and her girlfriends were signed up for crafts and softball and badminton, Bobby and Sully for Junior Safaris and baseball.

Sully, whose skills were already maturing, moved up from the Wolves to the Lions. And while all the boys went on the swimming and hiking safaris together, sitting in the back of the battered old Sterling House panel truck with their bathing suits and their lunches in paper sacks, S-J more and more often sat with Ronnie Olmquist and Duke Wendell, boys with whom he had been at camp. They told the same old stories about short-sheeting beds and sending the little kids on snipe hunts until Bobby was bored with them. You'd think Sully had been at camp for fifty years.

On the Fourth of July the Wolves and Lions played their annual head-to-head game. In the decade and a half going back to the end of World War II the Wolves had never won one of these matches, but in the 1960 contest they at least made a game of it—mostly because of Bobby Garfield. He went three-for-three and even without his Alvin Dark glove made a spectacular diving catch in center field. (Getting up and hearing the applause, he wished only briefly for his mother, who hadn't come to the annual holiday outing at Lake Canton.)

Bobby's last hit came during the Wolves' final turn at bat. They were down by two with a runner at second. Bobby drove the ball deep to left field, and as he took off toward first he heard S-J grunt "Good hit, Bob!" from his catcher's position behind the plate. It *was* a good hit, but he was the potential tying run and should have stopped at second base. Instead he tried to stretch it. Kids under the age of thirteen were almost never able to get the ball back into the

infield accurately, but this time Sully's Camp Winnie friend Duke Wendell threw a bullet from left field to Sully's *other* Camp Winnie friend, Ronnie Olmquist. Bobby slid but felt Ronnie's glove slap his ankle a split second before his sneaker touched the bag.

"*Yerrrrrr*-ROUT!" cried the umpire, who had raced up from home plate to be on top of the play. On the sidelines, the friends and relatives of the Lions cheered hysterically.

Bobby got up glaring at the ump, a Sterling House counsellor of about twenty with a whistle and a white smear of zinc oxide on his nose. "I was safe!"

"Sorry, Bob," the kid said, dropping his ump impersonation and becoming a counsellor again. "It was a good hit and a great slide but you were out."

"Was not! You cheater! Why do you want to cheat?"

"Throw im out!" someone's dad called. "There's no call for guff like that!"

"Go sit down, Bobby," the counsellor said.

"I was *safe!*" Bobby shouted. "Safe by a mile!" He pointed at the man who had advised he be tossed from the game. "Did he pay you to make sure we lost? That fatso there?"

"Quit it, Bobby," the counsellor said. How stupid he looked with his little beanie hat from some nimrod college fraternity and his whistle! "I'm warning you."

Ronnie Olmquist turned away as if disgusted by the argument. Bobby hated him, too.

"You're nothing but a cheater," Bobby said. He could hold back the tears pricking the corners of his eyes but not the waver in his voice.

"That's the last I'll take," the counsellor said. "Go sit down and cool off. You —"

"Cheating *cocksucker*. That's what *you* are."

A woman close to third gasped and turned away.

"That's it," the counsellor said in a toneless voice. "Get off the field. Right now."

Bobby walked halfway down the baseline between third and home, his sneakers scuffling, then turned back. "By the way, a bird shit on your nose. I guess you're too dumb to figure that out. Better go wipe it off."

It sounded funny in his head but stupid when it came out and nobody laughed. Sully was straddling home plate, big as a house and serious as a heart attack in his ragtags of catching gear. His mask, mended all over with black tape, dangled from one hand. He looked flushed and angry. He also looked like a kid who would never be a Wolf again. S-J had been to Camp Winnie, had short-sheeted beds, had stayed up late telling ghost stories around a campfire. He would be a Lion forever and Bobby hated him.

“What’s wrong with you?” Sully asked as Bobby plodded by. Both benches had fallen silent. All the kids were looking at him. All the parents were looking at him, too. Looking at him as though he was something disgusting. Bobby guessed he probably was. Just not for the reasons they thought.

*Guess what, S-J, maybe you been to Camp Winnie, but I been down there. Way down there.*

“Bobby?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me,” he said without looking up. “Who cares? I’m moving to Massachusetts. Maybe there’s less twinkydink cheaters there.”

“Listen, man—”

“Oh, shut up,” Bobby said without looking at him. He looked at his sneakers instead. Just looked at his sneakers and kept on walking.

• • •

Liz Garfield didn’t make friends (“I’m a plain brown moth, not a social butterfly,” she sometimes told Bobby), but during her first couple of years at Home Town Real Estate she had been on good terms with a woman named Myra Calhoun. (In Liz-ese she and Myra saw eye to eye, marched to the same drummer, were tuned to the same wavelength, etc., etc.) In those days Myra had been Don Biderman’s secretary and Liz had been the entire office pool, shuttling between agents, making their appointments and their coffee, typing their correspondence. Myra had left the agency abruptly, without much explanation, in 1955. Liz had moved up to her job as Mr. Biderman’s secretary in early 1956.

Liz and Myra had remained in touch, exchanging holiday cards and the occasional letter. Myra—who was what Liz called “a maiden lady”—had moved to Massachusetts and opened her own little real-estate firm. In late June

of 1960 Liz wrote her and asked if she could become a partner—a junior one to start with, of course—in Calhoun Real Estate Solutions. She had some capital she could bring with her; it wasn't a lot, but neither was thirty-five hundred dollars a spit in the ocean.

Maybe Miss Calhoun had been through the same wringer his mom had been through, maybe not. What mattered was that she said yes—she even sent his mom a bouquet of flowers, and Liz was happy for the first time in weeks. Perhaps truly happy for the first time in years. What mattered was they were moving from Harwich to Danvers, Massachusetts. They were going in August, so Liz would have plenty of time to get her Bobby-O, her newly quiet and often glum Bobby-O, enrolled in a new school.

What also mattered was that Liz Garfield's Bobby-O had a piece of business to take care of before leaving Harwich.

• • •

He was too young and small to do what needed doing in a straightforward way. He would have to be careful, and he'd have to be sneaky. Sneaky was all right with Bobby; he no longer had much interest in acting like Audie Murphy or Randolph Scott in the Saturday-matinee movies, and besides, some people needed ambushing, if only to find out what it felt like. The hiding-place he picked was the little copse of trees where Carol had taken him on the day he went all ushy-gushy and started crying; a fitting spot in which to wait for Harry Doolin, old Mr. Robin Hood, Robin Hood, riding through the glen.

Harry had gotten a part-time stockboy job at Total Grocery. Bobby had known that for weeks, had seen him there when he went shopping with his mom. Bobby had also seen Harry walking home after his shift ended at three o'clock. Harry was usually with one or more of his friends. Richie O'Meara was his most common sidekick; Willie Shearman seemed to have dropped out of old Robin Hood's life just as Sully had pretty much dropped out of Bobby's. But whether alone or in company, Harry Doolin always cut across Commonwealth Park on his way home.

Bobby started to drift down there in the afternoons. There was only morning baseball now that it was really hot and by three o'clock Fields A, B, and C were deserted. Sooner or later Harry would walk back from work and

past those deserted fields without Richie or any of his other Merrie Men to keep him company. Meanwhile, Bobby spent the hour between three and four P.M. each day in the copse of trees where he had cried with his head in Carol's lap. Sometimes he read a book. The one about George and Lennie made him cry again. *Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world.* That was how George saw it. *Guys like us got nothing to look ahead to.* Lennie thought the two of them were going to get a farm and raise rabbits, but long before Bobby got to the end of the story he knew there would be no farms and no rabbits for George and Lennie. Why? Because people needed a beast to hunt. They found a Ralph or a Piggy or a big stupid hulk of a Lennie and then they turned into low men. They put on their yellow coats, they sharpened a stick at both ends, and then they went hunting.

*But guys like us sometimes get a little of our own back,* Bobby thought as he waited for the day when Harry would show up alone. *Sometimes we do.*

August sixth turned out to be the day. Harry strolled through the park toward the corner of Broad and Commonwealth still wearing his red Total Grocery apron—what a fucking nimrod—and singing “Mack the Knife” in a voice that could have melted screws. Careful not to rustle the branches of the close-growing trees, Bobby stepped out behind him and closed in, walking softly on the path and not cocking back his baseball bat until he was close enough to be sure. As he raised it he thought of Ted saying *Three boys against one little girl. They must have thought you were a lion.* But of course Carol wasn't a lion; neither was he. It was Sully who was the Lion and Sully hadn't been there, wasn't here now. The one creeping up behind Harry Doolin wasn't even a Wolf. He was just a hyena, but so what? Did Harry Doolin deserve any better?

*Nope,* Bobby thought, and swung the bat. It connected with the same satisfying thud he'd felt at Lake Canton when he'd gotten his third and best hit, the one to deep left. Connecting with the small of Harry Doolin's back was even better.

Harry screamed with pain and surprise and went sprawling. When he rolled over, Bobby brought the bat down on his leg at once, the blow this time landing just below the left knee. “*Owwwwuuuu!*” Harry screamed. It was most

satisfying to hear Harry Doolin scream; close to bliss, in fact. “*Owwwwuuu, that hurts! That hurrts!*”

*Can't let him get up*, Bobby thought, picking his next spot with a cold eye. *He's twice as big as me, if I miss once and let him get up, he'll tear me limb from limb. He'll fucking kill me.*

Harry was trying to retreat, digging at the gravel path with his sneakers, dragging a groove with his butt, paddling with his elbows. Bobby swung the bat and hit him in the stomach. Harry lost his air and his elbows and sprawled on his back. His eyes were dazed, filled with sunbright tears. His pimples stood out in big purple and red dots. His mouth—thin and mean on the day Rionda Hewson had rescued them—was now a big loose quiver. “*Owwwwuuu, stop, I give, I give, oh Jeezis!*”

*He doesn't recognize me*, Bobby realized. *The sun's in his eyes and he doesn't even know who it is.*

That wasn't good enough. “Not satisfactory, boys!” was what the Camp Winnie counsellors said after a bad cabin inspection—Sully had told him that, not that Bobby cared; who gave a shit about cabin inspections and making bead wallets?

But he gave a shit about *this*, yes indeed, and he leaned close to Harry's agonized face. “Remember me, Robin Hood?” he asked. “You remember me, don't you? I'm the Maltex Baby.”

Harry stopped screaming. He stared up at Bobby, finally recognizing him. “Get . . . you . . .” he managed.

“You won't get shit,” Bobby said, and when Harry tried to grab his ankle Bobby kicked him in the ribs.

“*Ouuuuuuu!*” Harry Doolin cried, reverting to his former scripture. What a creep! Nimrod Infants on Parade! *That probably hurt me more than it hurt you*, Bobby thought. *Kicking people when you're wearing sneakers is for dumbbells.*

Harry rolled over. As he scrambled for his feet Bobby uncoiled a home-run swing and drove the bat squarely across Harry's buttocks. The sound was like a carpet-beater hitting a heavy rug—a *wonderful* sound! The only thing that could have improved this moment would have been Mr. Biderman also sprawled on the path. Bobby knew exactly where he'd like to hit *him*.

Half a loaf was better than none, though. Or so his mother always said.

“That was for the Gerber Baby,” Bobby said. Harry was lying flat on the path again, sobbing. Snot was running from his nose in thick green streams. With one hand he was feebly trying to rub some feeling back into his numb ass.

Bobby’s hands tightened on the taped handle of the bat again. He wanted to lift it and bring it down one final time, not on Harry’s shin or Harry’s backside but on Harry’s head. He wanted to hear the crunch of Harry’s skull, and really, wouldn’t the world be a better place without him? Little Irish shit. Low little—

*Steady on, Bobby, Ted’s voice spoke up. Enough is enough, so just steady on. Control yourself.*

“Touch her again and I’ll kill you,” Bobby said. “Touch *me* again and I’ll burn your house down. Fucking nimrod.”

He had squatted by Harry to say this last. Now he got up, looked around, and walked away. By the time he met the Sigsby twins halfway up Broad Street Hill, he was whistling.

• • •

In the years which followed, Liz Garfield almost got used to seeing policemen at her door. The first to show up was Officer Raymer, the fat local cop who would sometimes buy the kids peanuts from the guy in the park. When he rang the doorbell of the ground-floor apartment at 149 Broad Street on the evening of August sixth, Officer Raymer didn’t look happy. With him was Harry Doolin, who would not be able to sit in an uncushioned seat for a week or more, and his mother, Mary Doolin. Harry mounted the porch steps like an old man, with his hands planted in the small of his back.

When Liz opened the front door, Bobby was by her side. Mary Doolin pointed at him and cried: “That’s him, that’s the boy who beat up my Harry! Arrest him! Do your duty!”

“What’s this about, George?” Liz asked.

For a moment Officer Raymer didn’t reply. He looked from Bobby (five feet four inches tall, ninety-seven pounds) to Harry (six feet one inch tall, one hundred and seventy-five pounds), instead. His large moist eyes were doubtful.

Harry Doolin was stupid, but not so stupid he couldn't read that look. "He snuck up on me. Got me from behind."

Raymer bent down to Bobby with his chapped, red-knuckled hands on the shiny knees of his uniform pants. "Harry Doolin here claims you beat im up in the park whilst he was on his way home from work." Raymer pronounced *work* as *rurrk*. Bobby never forgot that. "Says you hid and then lumped im up widda ball-bat before he could even turn around. What do you say, laddie? Is he telling the truth?"

Bobby, not stupid at all, had already considered this scene. He wished he could have told Harry in the park that paid was paid and done was done, that if Harry tattled to anyone about Bobby beating him up, then Bobby would tattle right back—would tell about Harry and his friends hurting Carol, which would look much worse. The trouble with that was that Harry's friends would deny it; it would be Carol's word against Harry's, Richie's, and Willie's. So Bobby had walked away without saying anything, hoping that Harry's humiliation—beat up by a little kid half his size—would keep his mouth shut. It hadn't, and looking at Mrs. Doolin's narrow face, pinched paintless lips, and furious eyes, Bobby knew why. She had gotten it out of him, that was all. Nagged it out of him, more than likely.

"I never touched him," Bobby told Raymer, and met Raymer's gaze firmly with his own as he said it.

Mary Doolin gasped, shocked. Even Harry, to whom lying must have been a way of life by the age of sixteen, looked surprised.

"Oh, the straight-out bare-facedness of it!" Mrs. Doolin cried. "You let me talk to him, Officer! I'll get the truth out of him, see if I don't!"

She started forward. Raymer swept her back with one hand, not rising or even taking his eyes from Bobby.

"Now, lad—why would a galoot the size of Harry Doolin say such a thing about a shrimp the size of you if it wasn't true?"

"Don't you be calling my boy a galoot!" Mrs. Doolin shrilled. "Ain't it enough he's been beat within an inch of his life by this coward? Why—"

"Shut up," Bobby's mom said. It was the first time she'd spoken since asking Officer Raymer what this was about, and her voice was deadly quiet. "Let him answer the question."

“He’s still mad at me from last winter, that’s why,” Bobby told Raymer. “He and some other big kids from St. Gabe’s chased me down the hill. Harry slipped on the ice and fell down and got all wet. He said he’d get me. I guess he thinks this is a good way to do it.”

“You liar!” Harry shouted. “That wasn’t me who chased you, that was Billy Donahue! That—”

He stopped, looked around. He’d put his foot in it somehow; a dim appreciation of the fact was dawning on his face.

“It wasn’t me,” Bobby said. He spoke quietly, holding Raymer’s eyes. “If I tried to beat up a kid his size, he’d total me.”

“Liars go to hell!” Mary Doolin shouted.

“Where were you around three-thirty this afternoon, Bobby?” Raymer asked. “Can you answer me that?”

“Here,” Bobby said.

“Miz Garfield?”

“Oh yes,” she said calmly. “Right here with me all afternoon. I washed the kitchen floor and Bobby cleaned the baseboards. We’re getting ready to move, and I want the place to look nice when we do. Bobby complained a little—as boys will do—but he did his chore. And afterward we had iced tea.”

“Liar!” Mrs. Doolin cried. Harry only looked stunned. “*Shocking* liar!” She lunged forward again, hands reaching in the general direction of Liz Garfield’s neck. Once more Officer Raymer pushed her back without looking at her. A bit more roughly this time.

“You tell me on your oath that he was with you?” Officer Raymer asked Liz.

“On my oath.”

“Bobby, you never touched him? On your oath?”

“On my oath.”

“On your oath before God?”

“On my oath before God.”

“I’m gonna get you, Garfield,” Harry said. “I’m gonna fix your little red w  
—”

Raymer swung around so suddenly that if his mother hadn’t seized him by one elbow, Harry might have tumbled down the porch steps, reinjuring himself in old places and opening fresh wounds in new ones.

“Shut your ugly stupid pot,” Raymer said, and when Mrs. Doolin started to speak, Raymer pointed at her. “Shut yours as well, Mary Doolin. Maybe if you want to bring beatin charges against someone, you ought to start with yer own damned husband. There’d be more witnesses.”

She gawped at him, furious and ashamed.

Raymer dropped the hand he’d been pointing with, as if it had suddenly gained weight. He gazed from Harry and Mary (neither full of grace) on the porch to Bobby and Liz in the foyer. Then he stepped back from all four, took off his uniform cap, scratched his sweaty head, and put his cap back on. “Something’s rotten in the state of Denmark,” he said at last. “Someone here’s lyin faster’n a hoss can trot.”

“He—” “You—” Harry and Bobby spoke together, but Officer George Raymer was interested in hearing from neither.

“*Shut up!*” he roared, loud enough to make an old couple strolling past on the other side of the street turn and look. “I’m declarin the case closed. But if there’s any more trouble between the two of you”—pointing at the boys—“or *you*”—pointing at the mothers—“there’s going to be woe for someone. A word to the wise is sufficient, they say. Harry, will you shake young Robert’s hand and say all’s well? Do the manly thing? . . . Ah, I thought not. The world’s a sad goddamned place. Come on, Doolins. I’ll see you home.”

Bobby and his mother watched the three of them go down the steps, Harry’s limp now exaggerated to the point of a sailor’s stagger. At the foot of the walk Mrs. Doolin suddenly cuffed him on the back of the neck. “Don’t make it worse’n it is, you little shite!” she said. Harry did better after that, but he still rolled from starboard to port. To Bobby the boy’s residual limp looked like the goods. Probably *was* the goods. That last lick, the one across Harry’s ass, had been a grand slam.

Back in the apartment, speaking in that same calm voice, Liz asked: “Was he one of the boys that hurt Carol?”

“Yes.”

“Can you stay out of his way until we move?”

“I think so.”

“Good,” she said, and then kissed him. She hardly ever kissed him, and it was wonderful when she did.

• • •

Less than a week before they moved—the apartment had by then begun to fill up with cardboard boxes and to take on a strange denuded look—Bobby caught up to Carol Gerber in the park. She was walking along by herself for a change. He had seen her out walking with her girlfriends plenty of times, but that wasn't good enough, wasn't what he wanted. Now she was finally alone, and it wasn't until she looked over her shoulder at him and he saw the fear in her eyes that he knew she had been avoiding him.

"Bobby," she said. "How are you?"

"I don't know," he said. "Okay, I guess. I haven't seen you around."

"You haven't come up my house."

"No," he said. "No, I—" What? How was he supposed to finish? "I been pretty busy," he said lamely.

"Oh. Uh-huh." He could have handled her being cool to him. What he couldn't handle was the fear she was trying to hide. The fear of him. As if he was a dog that might bite her. Bobby had a crazy image of himself dropping down on all fours and starting to go *roop-roop-roop*.

"I'm moving away."

"Sully told me. But he didn't know exactly where. I guess you guys don't chum like you used to."

"No," Bobby said. "Not like we used to. But here." He reached into his back pocket and brought out a piece of folded-over paper from a school notebook. Carol looked at it doubtfully, reached for it, then pulled her hand back.

"It's just my address," he said. "We're going to Massachusetts. A town named Danvers."

Bobby held out the folded paper but she still wasn't taking it and he felt like crying. He remembered being at the top of the Ferris wheel with her and how it was like being at the top of the whole lighted world. He remembered a towel opening like wings, feet with tiny painted toes pivoting, and the smell of perfume. "She's dancin to the drag, the cha-cha rag-a-mop," Freddy Cannon sang from the radio in the other room, and it was Carol, it was Carol, it was Carol.

“I thought you might write,” he said. “I’ll probably be homesick, a new town and all.”

Carol took the paper at last and put it into the pocket of her shorts without looking at it. *Probably throw it away when she gets home*, Bobby thought, but he didn’t care. She had taken it, at least. That would be enough springboard for those times when he needed to take his mind away . . . and there didn’t have to be any low men in the vicinity for you to need to do that, he had discovered.

“Sully says you’re different now.”

Bobby didn’t reply.

“*Lots* of people say that, actually.”

Bobby didn’t reply.

“Did you beat Harry Doolin up?” she asked, and gripped Bobby’s wrist with a cold hand. “Did you?”

Bobby slowly nodded his head.

Carol threw her arms around his neck and kissed him so hard their teeth clashed. Their mouths parted with an audible smack. Bobby didn’t kiss another girl on the mouth for three years . . . and never in his life did he have one kiss *him* like that.

“Good!” she said in a low fierce voice. It was almost a growl. “*Good!*”

Then she ran toward Broad Street, her legs—browned with summer and scabbed by many games and many sidewalks—flashing.

“Carol!” he called after her. “Carol, wait!”

She ran.

“Carol, I love you!”

She stopped at that . . . or maybe it was just that she’d reached Commonwealth Avenue and had to look for traffic. In any case she paused a moment, head lowered, and then looked back. Her eyes were wide and her lips were parted.

“Carol!”

“I have to go home, I have to make the salad,” she said, and ran away from him. She ran across the street and out of his life without looking back a second time. Perhaps that was just as well.

• • •

He and his mom moved to Danvers. Bobby went to Danvers Elementary, made some friends, made even more enemies. The fights started, and not long after, so did the truancies. On the **Comments** section of his first report card, Mrs. Rivers wrote: “*Robert is an extremely bright boy. He is also extremely troubled. Will you come and see me about him, Mrs. Garfield?*”

Mrs. Garfield went, and Mrs. Garfield helped as much as she could, but there were too many things about which she could not speak: Providence, a certain lost-pet poster, and how she’d come by the money she’d used to buy into a new business and a new life. The two women agreed that Bobby was suffering from growing pains; that he was missing his old town and old friends as well. He would eventually outlast his troubles. He was too bright and too full of potential not to.

Liz prospered in her new career as a real-estate agent. Bobby did well enough in English (he got an A-plus on a paper in which he compared Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* to Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*) and did poorly in the rest of his classes. He began to smoke cigarettes.

Carol *did* write from time to time—hesitant, almost tentative notes in which she talked about school and friends and a weekend trip to New York City with Rionda. Appended to one that arrived in March of 1961 (her letters always came on deckle-edged paper with teddy bears dancing down the sides) was a stark P.S.: *I think my mom & dad are going to get a divorce. He signed up for another “hitch” and all she does is cry.* Mostly, however, she stuck to brighter things: she was learning to twirl, she had gotten new ice skates on her birthday, she still thought Fabian was cute even if Yvonne and Tina didn’t, she had been to a twist party and danced every dance.

As he opened each of her letters and pulled it out Bobby would think, *This is the last. I won’t hear from her again. Kids don’t write letters for long even if they promise they will. There are too many new things coming along. Time goes by so fast. Too fast. She’ll forget me.*

But he would not help her to do so. After each of her letters came he would sit down and write a response. He told her about the house in Brookline his mother sold for twenty-five thousand dollars—six months’ salary at her old job in a single commission. He told her about the A-plus on his English theme. He told her about his friend Morrie, who was teaching him to play chess. He

didn't tell her that sometimes he and Morrie went on window-breaking expeditions, riding their bikes (Bobby had finally saved up enough to buy one) as fast as they could past the scuzzy old apartment houses on Plymouth Street and throwing rocks out of their baskets as they went. He skipped the story of how he had told Mr. Hurley, the assistant principal at Danvers Elementary, to kiss his rosy red ass and how Mr. Hurley had responded by slapping him across the face and calling him an insolent, wearisome little boy. He didn't confide that he had begun shoplifting or that he had been drunk four or five times (once with Morrie, the other times by himself) or that sometimes he walked over to the train tracks and wondered if getting run over by the South Shore Express would be the quickest way to finish the job. Just a whiff of diesel fuel, a shadow falling over your face, and then blooey. Or maybe not that quick.

Each letter he wrote to Carol ended the same way:

*You are sadly missed by  
Your friend,  
Bobby*

Weeks would pass with no mail—not for him—and then there would be another envelope with hearts and teddy bears stuck to the back, another sheet of deckle-edged paper, more stuff about skating and baton twirling and new shoes and how she was still stuck on fractions. Each letter was like one more labored breath from a loved one whose death now seems inevitable. One more breath.

Even Sully-John wrote him a few letters. They stopped early in 1961, but Bobby was amazed and touched that Sully would try at all. In S-J's childish big handwriting and painful misspellings Bobby could make out the approach of a good-hearted teenage boy who would play sports and lay cheerleaders with equal joy, a boy who would become lost in the thickets of punctuation as easily as he would weave through the defensive lines of opposing football teams. Bobby thought he could even see the man who was waiting for Sully up ahead in the seventies and eighties, waiting for him the way you'd wait for a taxi to arrive: a car salesman who'd eventually own his own dealership. Honest John's, of course; Honest John's Harwich Chevrolet. He'd have a big stomach hanging

over his belt and lots of plaques on the wall of his office and he'd coach youth sports and start every peptalk with *Listen up guys* and go to church and march in parades and be on the city council and all that. It would be a good life, Bobby reckoned—the farm and the rabbits instead of the stick sharpened at both ends. Although for Sully the stick turned out to be waiting after all; it was waiting in Dong Ha Province along with the old *mamasan*, the one who would never completely go away.

• • •

Bobby was fourteen when the cop caught him coming out of the convenience store with two six-packs of beer (Narragansett) and three cartons of cigarettes (Chesterfields, naturally; twenty-one great tobaccos make twenty wonderful smokes). This was the blond *Village of the Damned* cop.

Bobby told the cop he hadn't broken in, that the back door was open and he'd just *walked* in, but when the cop shone his flashlight on the lock it hung askew in the old wood, half gouged out. *What about this?* the cop asked, and Bobby shrugged. Sitting in the car (the cop let Bobby sit in the front seat with him but wouldn't let him have a butt when Bobby asked), the cop began filling out a form on a clipboard. He asked the sullen, skinny kid beside him what his name was. Ralph, Bobby said. Ralph Garfield. But when they pulled up in front of the house where he now lived with his mom—a whole house, upstairs and downstairs both, times were good—he told the cop he had lied.

“My name's really Jack,” he said.

“Oh yeah?” the blond *Village of the Damned* cop said.

“Yes,” Bobby said, nodding. “Jack Merridew Garfield. That's me.”

• • •

Carol Gerber's letters stopped coming in 1963, which happened to be the year of Bobby's first school expulsion and also the year of his first visit to Massachusetts Youth Correctional in Bedford. The cause of this visit was possession of five marijuana cigarettes, which Bobby and his friends called joysticks. Bobby was sentenced to ninety days, the last thirty forgiven for good behavior. He read a lot of books. Some of the other kids called him Professor. Bobby didn't mind.

When he got out of Bedbug Correctional, Officer Grandelle—the Danvers Juvenile Officer—came by and asked if Bobby was ready to straighten up and fly right. Bobby said he was, he had learned his lesson, and for awhile that seemed to be true. Then in the fall of 1964 he beat a boy so badly that the boy had to go to the hospital and there was some question of whether or not he would completely recover. The kid wouldn't give Bobby his guitar, so Bobby beat him up and took it. Bobby was playing the guitar (not very well) in his room when he was arrested. He had told Liz he'd bought the guitar, a Silvertone acoustic, in a pawnshop.

Liz stood weeping in the doorway as Officer Grandelle led Bobby to the police car parked at the curb. "I'm going to wash my hands of you if you don't stop!" she cried after him. "I mean it! I do!"

"Wash em," he said, getting in the back. "Go ahead, Ma, wash em now and save time."

Driving downtown, Officer Grandelle said, "I thought you was gonna straighten up and fly right, Bobby."

"Me too," Bobby said. That time he was in Bedbug for six months.

• • •

When he got out he cashed in his Trailways ticket and hitched home. When he let himself into the house, his mother didn't come out to greet him. "You got a letter," she said from her darkened bedroom. "It's on your desk."

Bobby's heart began to bang hard against his ribs as soon as he saw the envelope. The hearts and teddy bears were gone—she was too old for them now—but he recognized Carol's handwriting at once. He picked up the letter and tore it open. Inside was a single sheet of paper—deckle-edged—and another, smaller, envelope. Bobby read Carol's note, the last he ever received from her, quickly.

*Dear Bobby,*

*How are you. I am fine. You got something from your old friend, the one who fixed my arm that time. It came to me because I guess he didn't know where you were. He put a note in asking me to send it along. So I am. Say hi to your mom.*

Carol

No news of her adventures in twirling. No news of how she was doing with math. No news of boyfriends, either, but Bobby guessed she probably had had a few.

He picked up the sealed envelope with hands that were shaky and numb. His heart was pounding harder than ever. On the front, written in soft pencil, was a single word: his name. It was Ted's handwriting. He knew it at once. Dry-mouthed, unaware that his eyes had filled with tears, Bobby tore open the envelope, which was no bigger than the ones in which children send their first-grade valentines.

What came out first was the sweetest smell Bobby had ever experienced. It made him think of hugging his mother when he was small, the smell of her perfume and deodorant and the stuff she put on her hair; it made him think of how Commonwealth Park smelled in the summer; it made him think of how the Harwich Library stacks had smelled, spicy and dim and somehow explosive. The tears in his eyes overspilled and began to run down his cheeks. He'd gotten used to feeling old; feeling young again—knowing he *could* feel young again—was a terrible disorienting shock.

There was no letter, no note, no writing of any kind. When Bobby tilted the envelope, what showered down on the surface of his desk were rose petals of the deepest, darkest red he had ever seen.

*Heart's blood*, he thought, exalted without knowing why. All at once, and for the first time in years, he remembered how you could take your mind away, how you could just put it on parole. And even as he thought of it he felt his thoughts lifting. The rose petals gleamed on the scarred surface of his desk like rubies, like secret light spilled from the world's secret heart.

*Not just one world*, Bobby thought. *Not just one. There are other worlds than this, millions of worlds, all turning on the spindle of the Tower.*

And then he thought: *He got away from them again. He's free again.*

The petals left no room for doubt. They were all the yes anyone could ever need; all the you-may, all the you-can, all the it's-true.

*Now they go, now they slow*, Bobby thought, knowing he had heard those words before, not remembering where or knowing why they had recurred to

him now. Not caring, either.

Ted was free. Not in this world and time, this time he had run in another direction . . . but in *some* world.

Bobby scooped up the petals, each one like a tiny silk coin. He cupped them like palmfuls of blood, then raised them to his face. He could have drowned in their sweet reek. Ted was in them, Ted clear as day with his funny stooped way of walking, his baby-fine white hair, and the yellow nicotine spots tattooed on the first two fingers of his right hand. Ted with his carryhandle shopping bags.

As on the day when he had punished Harry Doolin for hurting Carol, he heard Ted's voice. Then it had been mostly imagination. This time Bobby thought it was real, something which had been embedded in the rose petals and left for him.

*Steady on, Bobby. Enough is enough, so just steady on. Control yourself.*

He sat at his desk for a long time with the rose petals pressed to his face. At last, careful not to lose a single one, he put them back into the little envelope and folded down the torn top.

*He's free. He's . . . somewhere. And he remembered.*

"He remembered me," Bobby said. "He remembered *me*."

He got up, went into the kitchen, and put on the tea kettle. Then he went into his mother's room. She was on her bed, lying there in her slip with her feet up, and he could see she had started to look old. She turned her face away from him when he sat down next to her, a boy now almost as big as a man, but she let him take her hand. He held it and stroked it and waited for the kettle to whistle. After awhile she turned to look at him. "Oh Bobby," she said. "We've made such a mess of things, you and me. What are we going to do?"

"The best we can," he said, still stroking her hand. He raised it to his lips and kissed the palm where her lifeline and heartline tangled briefly before wandering away from each other again. "The best we can."

**1966: Man, we just couldn't stop laughing.**

1966

HEARTS IN ATLANTIS

When I came to the University of Maine in 1966, there was still a Goldwater sticker, tattered and faded but perfectly readable (AuH<sub>2</sub>O-4-USA), on the old station wagon I inherited from my brother. When I left the University in 1970, I had no car. What I did have was a beard, hair down to my shoulders, and a backpack with a sticker on it reading RICHARD NIXON IS A WAR CRIMINAL. The button on the collar of my denim jacket read I AIN'T NO FORTUNATE SON. College is always a time of change, I guess, the last major convulsion of childhood, but I doubt there were ever changes of such magnitude as those faced by the students who came to their campuses in the late sixties.

Most of us don't say much about those years now, not because we don't remember them but because the language which we spoke back then has been lost. When I try to talk about the sixties—when I even try to *think* about them—I am overcome by horror and hilarity. I see bell-bottom pants and Earth Shoes. I smell pot and patchouli, incense and peppermints. And I hear Donovan Leitch singing his sweet and stupid song about the continent of Atlantis, lyrics that still seem profound to me in the watches of the night, when I can't sleep. The older I get, the harder it is to let go of that song's stupidity and hold onto its sweetness. I have to remind myself that we were smaller then, small enough to live our brightly hued lives under the mushrooms, all the time believing them to be trees, shelter from the sheltering sky. I know that doesn't make any real sense, but it's the best I can do: hail Atlantis.

I finished my senior year living off-campus in LSD Acres, the rotting cabins down by the Stillwater River, but when I came to U of M in 1966 I lived in Chamberlain Hall, which was part of a three-dorm complex: Chamberlain (men), King (men), and Franklin (women). There was also a dining hall, Holyoke Commons, which stood a little apart from the dorms—not far, perhaps only an eighth of a mile, but it seemed far on winter nights when the wind was strong and the temperature dipped below zero. Far enough so that Holyoke was known as the Palace on the Plains.

I learned a lot in college, the very least of it in the classrooms. I learned how to kiss a girl and put on a rubber at the same time (a necessary but often overlooked skill), how to chug a sixteen-ounce can of beer without throwing up, how to make extra cash in my spare time (writing term papers for kids with more money than I, which was most of them), how not to be a Republican even though I had sprung from a long line of them, how to go into the streets with a sign held up over my head, chanting *One two three four we won't fight your fucking war* and *Hey hey LBJ how many kids did you kill today*. I learned that you should try to get downwind of teargas and breathe slowly through a handkerchief or a bandanna if you couldn't do that. I learned that when the nightsticks come out, you want to fall on your side, draw your knees up to your chest, and cover the back of your head with your hands. In Chicago, in 1968, I learned that cops can beat the shit out of you no matter how well you cover up.

But before I learned any of those things, I learned about the pleasures and dangers of Hearts. There were sixteen rooms holding thirty-two boys on the third floor of Chamberlain Hall in the fall of 1966; by January of 1967, nineteen of those boys had either moved or flunked out, victims of Hearts. It swept through us that fall like a virulent strain of influenza. Only three of the young men on Three were completely immune, I think. One was my roommate, Nathan Hoppenstand. One was David “Dearie” Dearborn, the floor-proctor. The third was Stokely Jones III, soon to be known to the citizenry of Chamberlain Hall as Rip-Rip. Sometimes I think it's Rip-Rip I

want to tell you about; sometimes I think it's Skip Kirk (later known as Captain Kirk, of course), who was my best friend during those years; sometimes I think it's Carol. Often I believe it's the sixties themselves I want to talk about, impossible as that has always seemed to me. But before I talk about any of those things, I better tell you about Hearts.

Skip once said that Whist is Bridge for dopes and Hearts is Bridge for *real* dopes. You'll get no argument from me, although that kind of misses the point. Hearts is fun, that's the point, and when you play it for money—a nickel a point was the going rate on Chamberlain Three—it quickly becomes compulsive. The ideal number of players is four. All the cards are dealt out and then played in tricks. Each hand amounts to twenty-six total points: thirteen hearts at a point each, and the queen of spades (which we called The Bitch), worth thirteen points all by herself. The game ends when one of the four players tops a hundred points. The winner is the player with the lowest score.

In our marathons, each of the other three players would cough up based on the difference between his score and the winner's score. If, for example, the difference between my score and Skip's was twenty points at the end of the game, I had to pay him a dollar at the going rate of a nickel a point. Chump-change, you'd say now, but this was 1966, and a dollar wasn't just change to the work-study chumps who lived on Chamberlain Three.

I recall quite clearly when the Hearts epidemic started: the first weekend in October. I remember because the semester's initial round of prelims had just ended and I had survived. Survival was an actual issue for most of the boys on Chamberlain Three; we were at college thanks to a variety of scholarships, loans (most, including my own, courtesy of the National Education Defense Act), and work-study jobs. It was like riding in a Soapbox Derby car which had been put together with paste instead of nails, and while our arrangements varied—mostly according to how crafty we were when it came to filling out forms and how diligently our high-school guidance counselors had worked for us—there was one hard fact of life. It was summed up by a sampler which hung in the third-floor lounge, where our marathon Hearts tournaments were played. Tony DeLucca's mother made it, told him to hang it someplace where he'd see it every day, and sent him off to college with it. As the fall of 1966 wore out and winter replaced it, Mrs. DeLucca's sampler seemed to glare bigger and brighter with each passing hand, each fall of *The Bitch*, each night I rolled into bed with my textbooks unopened, my notes unstudied, my papers unwritten. Once or twice I even dreamed about it:

## 2.5.

That's what the sampler said, in big red crocheted numerals. Mrs. DeLucca understood what it meant, and so did we. If you lived in one of the ordinary dorms—Jacklin or Dunn or Pease or Chadbourne—you could keep your place in the Class of 1970 with a 1.6 average . . . if, that was, Daddy and Mummy continued to pay the bills. This was the state land-grant college, remember; we are not talking about Harvard or Wellesley. For students trying to stagger through on scholarship-and-loan packages, however, 2.5 was the line drawn in the dust. Score below a 2.5—drop from a C average to a C-minus, in other words—and your little soapbox racer was almost certain to fall apart. “Be in touch, baby, seeya,” as Skip Kirk used to say.

I did okay on that first round of prelims, especially for a boy who was almost ill with homesickness (I had never been away from home in my life except for a single week at basketball camp, from which I returned with a sprained wrist and an odd fungal growth between my toes and under my testes). I was carrying five subjects and got B's in everything except Freshman English. On that one I got an A. My instructor, who would later divorce his wife and wind up busking in Sproul Plaza on the Berkeley campus, wrote "Your example of onomatopoeia is actually quite brilliant" beside one of my answers. I sent that test back home to my mother and father. My mother returned a postcard with one word—"Bravo!"—scrawled fervently across the back. Remembering that causes an unexpected pang, something actually close to physical pain. It was, I suppose, the last time I dragged home a school paper with a gold star pasted in the corner.

After that first round of prelims I complacently calculated my GPA-in-progress and came out with a 3.3. It never got near that again, and by late December I realized that the choices had become very simple: quit playing cards and maybe survive to the next semester with my fragile financial-aid package intact, or continue Bitch-hunting beneath Mrs. DeLucca's sampler in the third-floor lounge until Christmas and then head back to Gates Falls for good.

I'd be able to get a job at Gates Falls Mills and Weaving; my father had been there for twenty years, right up until the accident that cost him his sight, and he'd get me in. My mother would hate it, but she wouldn't stand in the way if I told her it was what I wanted. At the end of the day she was always the realist of the family. Even when her hopes and disappointments ran her half-mad, she was a realist. For awhile she'd be grief-stricken at my failure to make a go of it at the University, and for awhile I'd be guilt-ridden, but we'd both get over it. I wanted to be a writer, after all, not a damned English teacher, and I had an idea that only pompous writers needed college to do what they did.

Yet I didn't want to flunk out, either. It seemed the wrong way to start my life as a grownup. It smelled like failure, and all my Whitmanesque ruminations about how a writer should do his work among the people smelled like a rationalization for that failure. And still the third-floor lounge called to me—the snap of the cards, someone asking if this hand was pass left or pass

right, someone else asking who had The Douche (a hand of Hearts begins by playing the two of clubs, a card known to us third-floor addicts as The Douche). I had dreams in which Ronnie Malenfant, the first true bred-in-the-bone asshole I had met since escaping the bullies of junior high, began to play spades one after another, screaming “Time to go Bitch-huntin! We chasin The Cunt!” in his high-pitched, reedy voice. We almost always see where our best interest lies, I think, but sometimes what we see means very little compared to what we feel. Tough but true.

My roommate didn't play Hearts. My roommate didn't have any use for the undeclared war in Vietnam. My roommate wrote home to his girlfriend, a senior at Wisdom Consolidated High School, every day. Put a glass of water next to Nate Hoppenstand and it was the water that looked vivacious.

He and I lived in Room 302, next to the stairwell, across from the Proctor's Suite (lair of the hideous Dearie) and all the way down the hall from the lounge with its card-tables, stand-up ashtrays, and its view of the Palace on the Plains. Our pairing suggested—to me, at least—that everyone's most macabre musings about the University Housing Office might well be true. On the questionnaire which I had returned to Housing in April of '66 (when my biggest concern was deciding where I should take Annmarie Soucie to eat after the Senior Prom), I had said that I was A. a smoker; B. a Young Republican; C. an aspiring folk guitarist; D. a night owl. In its dubious wisdom, the Housing Office paired me with Nate, a non-smoking dentist-in-progress whose folks were Aroostook County Democrats (the fact that Lyndon Johnson was a Democrat made Nate feel no better about U.S. soldiers running around South Vietnam). I had a poster of Humphrey Bogart above my bed; above his, Nate hung photos of his dog and his girl. The girl was a sallow creature dressed in a Wisdom High majorette's uniform and clutching a baton like a cudgel. She was Cindy. The dog was Rinty. Both the girl and the dog were sporting identical grins. It was fucking surreal.

Nate's worst failing, as far as Skip and I were concerned, was the collection of record albums he kept carefully shelved in alphabetical order below Cindy and Rinty and just above his nifty little RCA Swingline phonograph. He had three Mitch Miller records (*Sing Along with Mitch*, *More Sing Along with Mitch*, *Mitch and the Gang Sing John Henry and Other American Folk Favorites*), *Meet Trini Lopez*, a Dean Martin LP (*Dino Swings Vegas!*), a Gerry and the Pacemakers LP, the first Dave Clark Five album—perhaps the noisiest bad rock record ever made—and many others of the same ilk. I can't remember them all. It's probably a good thing.

“Nate, no,” Skip said one evening. “Oh please, no.” This was shortly before the onset of Hearts mania—perhaps only days.

“Oh please no what?” Nate asked without looking up from what he was doing at his desk. He seemed to spend all his waking hours either in class or at that desk. Sometimes I would catch him picking his nose and surreptitiously wiping the gleanings (after careful and thorough inspections) under the middle drawer. It was his only vice . . . if you excepted his horrible taste in music, that was.

Skip had been inspecting Nate’s albums, something he did with absolutely no self-consciousness in every kid’s room he visited. Now he was holding one up. He had the look of a doctor studying a bad X-ray . . . one that shows a juicy (and almost certainly malignant) tumor. He was standing between Nate’s bed and mine, wearing his high-school letter jacket and a Dexter High School baseball cap. Never in college and rarely since have I met a man I thought so American Pie handsome as the Captain. Skip seemed unaware of his good looks, but he couldn’t have been, not entirely, or he wouldn’t have gotten laid as often as he did. It was a time when almost *anybody* could get laid, of course, but even by the standards of the time Skip was busy. None of that had started in the fall of ’66, though; in the fall of ’66 Skip’s heart, like mine, would belong to Hearts.

“This is bad, little buddy,” Skip said in a gentle, chiding voice. “Sorry, but this *bites*.”

I was sitting at my own desk, smoking a Pall Mall and looking for my meal ticket. I was always losing the fucking thing.

“What bites? Why are you looking at my records?” Nate’s botany text was open in front of him. He was drawing a leaf on a piece of graph paper. His blue freshman beanie was cocked back on his head. Nate Hoppenstand was, I believe, the only member of the freshman class who actually wore that stupid blue dishrag until Maine’s hapless football team finally scored a touchdown . . . a week or so before Thanksgiving, that was.

Skip went on studying the record album. “This sucks the rigid cock of Satan. It really does.”

“I hate it when you talk that way!” Nate exclaimed, but still too stubborn to actually look up. Skip *knew* Nate hated him to talk that way, which was why

he did it. “What are you talking *about*, anyway?”

“I’m sorry my language offends you, but I don’t withdraw the comment. I can’t. ’Cause this is bad. It hurts me, little buddy. It fuckin *hurts* me.”

“*What?*” Nate finally looked up, irritated away from his leaf, which was marked as carefully as a map in a Rand McNally road atlas. “WHAT?”

“This.”

On the album cover Skip was holding, a girl with a perky face and perky little breasts poking out the front of a middy blouse appeared to be dancing on the deck of a PT boat. One hand was raised, palm out, in a perky little wave. Cocked on her head was a perky little sailor’s hat.

“I bet you’re the only college student in America that brought *Diane Renay Sings Navy Blue* to school with him,” Skip said. “It’s wrong, Nate. This belongs back in your attic, along with the wiener pants I bet you wore to all the high-school pep rallies and church socials.”

If wiener pants meant polyester Sansabelt slacks with that weird and purposeless little buckle in the back, I suspected Nate had brought most of his collection with him . . . was, in fact, wearing a pair at that very moment. I said nothing, though. I picked up a framed picture of my own girlfriend and spied my meal ticket behind it. I grabbed it and stuffed it in the pocket of my Levi’s.

“That’s a good record,” Nate said with dignity. “That’s a very good record. It . . . *swings*.”

“Swings, does it?” Skip asked, tossing it back onto Nate’s bed. (He refused to reshelve Nate’s records because he knew it drove Nate bugfuck.) “ ‘My steady boy said ship ahoy and joined the Nay-yay-vee’? If that fits your definition of good, remind me never to let you give me a fuckin physical.”

“I’m going to be a dentist, not a doctor,” Nate said, clipping off each word. Cords were beginning to stand out on his neck. So far as I know, Skip Kirk was the only person in Chamberlain Hall, maybe on the whole campus, who could get under my roomie’s thick Yankee skin. “I’m in pre-dent, do you know what the dent in pre-dent means? It means *teeth*, Skip! It means—”

“Remind me to never let you fill one of my fuckin cavities.”

“Why do you have to say that all the time?”

“What?” Skip asked, knowing but wanting Nate to say it. Nate eventually would, and his face always turned bright red when he finally did. This

fascinated Skip. Everything about Nate fascinated Skip; the Captain once told me he was pretty sure Nate was an alien, beamed down from the planet Good Boy.

“Fuck,” Nate Hoppenstand said, and immediately his cheeks became rosy. In a few moments he looked like a Dickens character, some earnest young man sketched by Boz. “*That.*”

“I had bad role models,” Skip said. “I dread to think about your future, Nate. What if Paul Anka makes a fuckin comeback?”

“You’ve never heard this record,” Nate said, snatching up *Diane Renay Sings Navy Blue* from the bed and putting it back between Mitch Miller and *Stella Stevens Is in Love!*

“Never fuckin want to, either,” Skip said. “Come on, Pete, let’s eat. I’m fuckin starving.”

I picked up my geology text—there was a quiz coming up the following Tuesday. Skip took it out of my hand and slung it back onto the desk, knocking over the picture of my girlfriend, who wouldn’t fuck but who would give a slow, excruciatingly pleasant handjob when she was in the mood. Nobody gives a handjob like a Catholic girl. I’ve changed my mind about a lot of things in the course of my life, but never about that.

“What did you do that for?” I asked.

“You don’t read at the fuckin table,” he said. “Not even when you’re eating Commons slop. What kind of barn were you born in?”

“Actually, Skip, I was born into a family where people *do* read at the table. I know it’s hard for you to believe there could be any way of doing things except for the Kirk way of doing them, but there is.”

He looked unexpectedly grave. He took me by the forearms, looked into my eyes, and said, “At least don’t study when you eat. Okay?”

“Okay.” Mentally reserving the right to study whenever I fucking well pleased, or felt I needed to.

“Get into all that ram-drive behavior and you’ll get ulcers. Ulcers are what killed my old man. He just couldn’t stop ramming and driving.”

“Oh,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry, it was a long time ago. Now come on. Before all the fucking tuna surprise is gone. Coming, Natebo?”

“I have to finish this leaf.”

“Fuck the leaf.”

If anyone else had said this to him, Nate would have looked at him as at something uncovered beneath a rotted log, and turned silently back to his work. In this case, Nate considered for a moment, then got up and took his jacket carefully off the back of the door, where he always hung it. He put it on. He adjusted the beanie on his head. Not even Skip dared to say much about Nate’s stubborn refusal to stop wearing his freshman beanie. (When I asked Skip where his own had disappeared to—this was our third day at UM, and the day after I met him—he said, “Wiped my ass with it and threw the fucker up a tree.” This was probably not the truth, but I never completely ruled it out, either.)

We clattered down the three flights of stairs and went out into the mild October dusk. From all three dorms students were headed toward Holyoke Commons, where I worked nine meals a week. I was a dishline boy, recently promoted from silverware boy; if I kept my nose clean, I’d be a stackboy before the Thanksgiving break. Chamberlain, King, and Franklin Halls were on high ground. So was the Palace on the Plains. To reach it, students took asphalt paths that dipped into a hollow like a long trough, then joined into one broad brick way and climbed again. Holyoke was the biggest of the four buildings, shining in the gloom like a cruise-ship on the ocean.

The dip where the asphalt paths met was known as Bennett’s Run—if I ever knew why I have long since forgotten. Boys from King and Chamberlain came along two of these paths, girls from Franklin along the other. Where the paths joined, boys and girls did likewise, talking and laughing and exchanging looks both frank and shy. From there they moved together up the wide brick path known as Bennett’s Walk to the Commons building.

Coming the other way, cutting back through the crowd with his head down and the usual closed-off expression on his pale, harsh face, was Stokely Jones III. He was tall, but you hardly realized it because he was always hunched over his crutches. His hair, a perfect glossy black with not so much as a single observable strand of anything lighter, spilled over his forehead in spikes, hid his ears, inked a few stray strands diagonally across his pale cheeks.

This was the heyday of the Beatle haircut, which for most boys consisted of no more than combing carefully down instead of carefully up, thus hiding the forehead (and a good crop of pimples, more often than not). Stoke Jones was capped off by nothing so prissy. His medium-length hair just went where it wanted to. His back was hunched in a way that would soon be permanent, if it wasn't already. His eyes were usually cast down, seeming to trace the arcs of his crutches. If those eyes happened to rise and meet your own, you were apt to be startled by their wild intelligence. He was a New England Heathcliff, only wasted away to a bare scrawn from the hips down. His legs, which were usually encased in huge metal braces when he went to class, could move, but only feebly, like the tentacles of a dying squid. His upper body was brawny by comparison. The combination was bizarre. Stoke Jones was a Charles Atlas ad in which BEFORE and AFTER had somehow been melted into the same body. He ate every meal as soon as Holyoke opened, and even three weeks into our first semester we all knew he did it not because he was one of the handicaps but because he wanted, like Greta Garbo, to be alone.

“Fuck him,” Ronnie Malenfant said while we were on our way to breakfast one day—he'd just said hello to Jones and Jones had simply crutched his way past without even a nod. He'd been muttering under his breath, though; we all heard it. “Crippled-up hopping asshole.” That was Ronnie, always sympathetic. I guess it was growing up amid the puke-in-the-corner beerjoints on lower Lisbon Street in Lewiston that gave him his grace and charm and *joie de vivre*.

“Stoke, what's up?” Skip asked on this particular evening as Jones plunged toward us on his crutches. Stoke went everywhere at that same controlled plunge, always with his Bluto Blutarsky upper half leaning forward so that he looked like a ship's figurehead, Stoke continually saying fuck you to whatever it was that had creamed his lower half, Stoke continually giving it the finger, Stoke looking at you with his smart wild eyes and saying fuck you too, stick it up your ass, sit on it and spin, eat me raw through a Flav'r Straw.

He didn't respond but did raise his head for a moment and locked eyes with Skip. Then he dropped his chin and hurried on past us. Sweat was running out of his crazed hair and down the sides of his face. Under his breath he was muttering “Rip-rip, rip-rip, rip-rip,” as if keeping time . . . or articulating what he'd like to do to the whole walking bunch of us . . . or maybe both. You could

smell him: the sour acrid tang of sweat, there was always that because he wouldn't go slow, it seemed to *offend* him to go slow, but there was something else, too. The sweat was pungent but not offensive. The undersmell was a lot less pleasant. I ran track in high school (forced as a college freshman to choose between Pall Malls and the four-forty, I chose the coffin-nails) and had smelled that particular combination before, usually when some kid with the flu or the grippe or a strep throat forced himself to run anyway. The only smell like it is an electric-train transformer that's been run too hard for too long.

Then he was past us. Stoke Jones, soon to be dubbed Rip-Rip by Ronnie Malenfant, free of his huge leg-braces for the evening and on his way back to the dorm.

"Hey, what's that?" Nate asked. He had stopped and was looking over his shoulder. Skip and I also stopped and looked back. I started to ask Nate what he meant, then saw. Jones was wearing a jeans jacket. On the back of it, drawn in what looked like black Magic Marker and just visible in the declining light of that early autumn evening, was a shape in a circle.

"Dunno," Skip said. "It looks like a sparrow-track."

The boy on the crutches merged into the crowds on their way to another Commons dinner on another Thursday night in another October. Most of the boys were clean-shaven; most of the girls wore skirts and Ship 'n' Shore blouses with Peter Pan collars. The moon was rising almost full, casting orange light on them. The full-blown Age of Freaks was still two years away, and none of the three of us realized we had seen the peace sign for the first time.

Saturday-morning breakfast was one of my meals to work the dishline in Holyoke. It was a good meal to have because the Commons was never busy on Saturday mornings. Carol Gerber, the silverware girl, stood at the head of the conveyor belt. I was next; my job was to grab the plates as the trays came down the belt, rinse them, and stack them on the trolley beside me. If traffic on the conveyor belt was busy, as it was at most weekday evening meals, I just stacked the plates up, shit and all, and rinsed them later on when things slowed down. Next in line to me was the glassboy or -girl, who grabbed the glasses and cups and popped them into special dishwasher grids. Holyoke wasn't a bad place to work. Every now and then some wit of the Ronnie Malenfant sensibility would return an uneaten kielbasa or breakfast sausage with a Trojan fitted over the end or the oatmeal would come back with I GO TO FUCK U written in carefully torn-up strips of napkin (once, pasted on the surface of a soup-bowl filled with congealing meatloaf gravy, was the message HELP I AM BEING HELD PRISONER IN A COW COLLEGE), and you wouldn't believe what pigs some kids can be—plates filled with ketchup, milk-glasses filled with mashed potatoes, splattered vegetables—but it really wasn't such a bad job, especially on Saturday mornings.

I looked out once past Carol (who was looking extraordinarily pretty for so early in the morning) and saw Stoke Jones. His back was to the pass-through window, but you couldn't miss the crutches leaning next to his place, or that peculiar shape drawn on the back of his jacket. Skip had been right; it looked like a sparrow-track (it was almost a year later when I first heard some guy on TV refer to it as "the track of the great American chicken").

"Do you know what that is?" I asked Carol, pointing.

She looked for a long time, then shook her head. "Nope. Must be some kind of in-joke."

"Stoke doesn't joke."

"Oh my, you're a poet and you don't know it."

"Quit it, Carol, you're killing me."

When our shift was over, I walked her back to her dorm (telling myself I was just being nice, that walking Carol Gerber back to Franklin Hall in no way made me unfaithful to Annmarie Soucie back in Gates Falls), then ambled toward Chamberlain, wondering who might know what that sparrow-track was. It occurs to me only at this late date that I never thought of asking Jones himself. And when I reached my floor, I saw something that changed the direction of my thoughts entirely. Since I'd gone out at six-thirty A.M. with one eye open to take my place behind Carol on the dishline, someone had shaving-creamed David Dearborn's door—all around the sides, on the doorknob, and with an extra-thick line along the bottom. In this lower deposit was a bare foot-track that made me smile. Dearie opens his door, clad only in a towel, on his way to the shower, and *poosh!*, howaya.

Still smiling, I went into 302. Nate was writing at his desk. Observing the way he kept one arm curled protectively around his notebook, I deduced it was that day's letter to Cindy.

"Someone shaving-creamed Dearie's door," I said, crossing to my shelves and grabbing my geology book. My plan was to head down to the third-floor lounge and do a little studying for the quiz on Tuesday.

Nate tried to look serious and disapproving, but couldn't help smiling himself. He was always trying for self-righteousness in those days and always falling just a little bit short. I suppose he's gotten better at it over the years, more's the pity.

"You should have heard him yell," Nate said. He snorted laughter, then put one small fist up to his mouth to stifle any further impropriety. "And *swear*—for a minute there he was in Skip's league."

"When it comes to swearing, I don't think anyone's in Skip's league."

Nate was looking at me with a worried furrow between his eyes. "You didn't do it, did you? Because I know you were up early—"

"If I was going to decorate Dearie's door, I would have used toilet paper," I said. "All my shaving cream goes on my own face. I'm a low-budget student, just like you. Remember?"

The worry-furrow smoothed out and Nate once more looked like a choirboy. For the first time I realized he was sitting there in nothing but his Jockey shorts and that stupid blue beanie. "That's good," he said, "because

David was yelling that he'd get whoever did it and see that the guy was put on disciplinary pro."

"D.P. for creaming his fucking door? I doubt it, Nate."

"It's weird but I think he meant it," Nate said. "Sometimes David Dearborn reminds me of that movie about the crazy ship-captain. Humphrey Bogart was in it. Do you know the one I mean?"

"Yeah, *The Caine Mutiny*."

"Uh-huh. And David . . . well, let's just say that for him, handing out D.P. is what being floor-proctor is all about."

In the University's code of rules and behavior, expulsion was the big gun, reserved for offenses like theft, assault, and possession/use of drugs. Disciplinary probation was a step below that, punishment for such offenses as having a girl in your room (having one in your room after Women's Curfew could tilt the penalty toward expulsion, hard as that is to believe now), having alcohol in your room, cheating on exams, plagiarism. Any of these latter offenses could theoretically result in expulsion, and in cheating cases often did (especially if the cases involved mid-term or final exams), but mostly it was disciplinary pro, which you carried with you for an entire semester. I didn't like to believe a dorm proctor would try to get a D.P. from Dean of Men Garretsen for a few harmless bursts of shaving cream . . . but this was Dearie, a prig who had so far insisted on weekly room inspections and carried a little stool with him so he could check the top shelves of the thirty-two closets which he seemed to feel were a part of his responsibility. This was probably an idea he got in ROTC, a program he loved as fervently as Nate loved Cindy and Rinty. Also he had gigged kids—this practice was still an official part of school policy, although it had been largely forgotten outside the ROTC program—who didn't keep up with their housework. Enough gigs and you landed on D.P. You could in theory flunk out of school, lose your deferment, get drafted, and wind up dodging bullets in Vietnam because you repeatedly forgot to empty the trash or sweep under the bed.

David Dearborn was a loan-and-scholarship boy himself, and his proctor's job was—also in theory—no different from my dishline job. That wasn't Dearie's theory, though. Dearie considered himself A Cut Above the Rest, one of the few, the proud, the brave. His family came from the coast, you see; from

Falmouth, where in 1966 there were still over fifty Blue Laws inherited from the Puritans on the books. Something had happened to his family, had Brought Them Low like a family in an old stage melodrama, but Dearie still dressed like a Falmouth Prep School graduate, wearing a blazer to classes and a suit on Sundays. No one could have been more different from Ronnie Malenfant, with his gutter mouth, his prejudices, and his brilliance with numbers. When they passed in the hall you could almost see Dearie shrinking from Ronnie, whose red hair kinked over a face that seemed to run away from itself, bulging brow to almost nonexistent chin. In between were Ronnie's perpetually gum-caked eyes and perpetually dripping nose . . . not to mention lips so red he always seemed to be wearing something cheap and garish from the five-and-dime.

Dearie didn't like Ronnie, but Ronnie didn't have to face this disapproval alone; Dearie didn't seem to like *any* of the boys he was proctoring. We didn't like him, either, and Ronnie outright hated him. Skip Kirk's dislike was edged with contempt. He was in ROTC with Dearie (at least until November, when Skip dropped the course), and he said Dearie was bad at everything except kissing ass. Skip, who had narrowly missed being named to the All-State baseball team as a high-school senior, had one specific bitch about our floor-proctor—Dearie, Skip said, didn't put out. To Skip it was the worst sin. You had to put out. Even if you were just slopping the hogs, you had to fuckin put out.

I disliked Dearie as much as anyone. I can put up with a great many human failings, but I loathe a prig. Yet I harbored a bit of sympathy for him, as well. He had no sense of humor, for one thing, and I believe that is as much a crippling defect as whatever had gone wrong with Stoke Jones's bottom half. For another, I don't think Dearie liked himself much.

"D.P. won't be an issue if he never finds the culprit," I told Nate. "Even if he does, I doubt like hell if Dean Garretsen would agree to slap it on someone for creaming the proctor's door." Still, Dearie could be persuasive. He might have been Brought Low, but he had that something which said he was still upper crust. That was, of course, just one more thing the rest of us had to dislike about him. "Trotboy" was what Skip called him, because he wouldn't really run laps on the football field during ROTC workouts, but only go at a rapid jog.

“Just as long as you didn’t do it,” Nate said, and I almost laughed. Nate Hoppenstand sitting there in his underpants and beanie, his child’s chest narrow, hairless, and dusted with freckles. Nate looking at me earnestly over his prominent case of slender ribs. Nate playing Dad.

Lowering his voice, he said: “Do you think Skip did it?”

“No. If I had to guess who on this floor would think shave-creaming the proctor’s door was a real hoot, I’d say—”

“Ronnie Malenfant.”

“Right.” I pointed my finger at Nate like a gun and winked.

“I saw you walking back to Franklin with the blond girl,” he said. “Carol. She’s pretty.”

“Just keeping her company,” I said.

Nate sat there in his underpants and his beanie, smiling as if he knew better. Perhaps he did. I liked her, all right, although I didn’t know much about her—only that she was from Connecticut. Not many work-study kids came from out of state.

I headed down the hall to the lounge, my geology book under my arm. Ronnie was there, wearing his beanie with the front pinned up so it looked sort of like a newspaper reporter’s fedora. Sitting with him were two other guys from our floor, Hugh Brennan and Ashley Rice. None of them looked as if they were having the world’s most exciting Saturday morning, but when Ronnie saw me, his eyes brightened.

“Pete Riley!” he said. “Just the man I was looking for! Do you know how to play Hearts?”

“Yes. Lucky for me, I also know how to study.” I raised my geology book, already thinking that I’d probably end up in the second-floor lounge . . . if, that was, I really meant to get anything done. Because Ronnie never shut up. Was apparently *incapable* of shutting up. Ronnie Malenfant was the original motor-mouth.

“Come on, just one game to a hundred,” he wheedled. “We’re playing nickel a point, and these two guys play Hearts like old people fuck.”

Hugh and Ashley grinned foolishly, as if they had just been complimented. Ronnie’s insults were so raw and out front, so bulging with vitriol, that most

guys took them as jokes, perhaps even as veiled compliments. They were neither. Ronnie meant every unkind word he ever said.

“Ronnie, I got a quiz Tuesday, and I don’t really understand this geosyncline stuff.”

“Shit on the geosyncline,” Ronnie said, and Ashley Rice tittered. “You’ve still got the rest of today, all of tomorrow, and all of Monday for the geofuckin-syncline.”

“I have classes Monday and tomorrow Skip and I were going to go up to Oldtown. They’re having an open hoot at the Methodist church and we—”

“Stop it, quit it, spare my achin scrote and don’t talk to me about that folkie shit. Michael can row his fuckin boat right up my ass, okay? Listen, Pete—”

“Ronnie, I really—”

“You two dimbulbs stay right the fuck there.” Ronnie gave Ashley and Hugh a baleful look. Neither argued with him about it. They were probably eighteen like the rest of us, but anyone who’s ever been to college will tell you that some very young eighteen-year-olds show up each September, especially in the rural states. It was the young ones with whom Ronnie succeeded. They were in awe of him. He borrowed their meal tickets, snapped them with towels in the shower, accused them of supporting the goals of the Reverend Martin Luther Coon (who, Ronnie would tell you, drove to protest rallies in his Jiguar), borrowed their money, and would respond to any request for a match with “My ass and your face, monkeymeat.” They loved Ronnie in spite of it all . . . *because* of it all. They loved him because he was just so . . . *college*.

Ronnie grabbed me around the neck and tried to yank me out into the hall so he could talk to me in private. I, not at all in awe of him and a bit repelled by the jungle aroma drifting out of his armpits, clamped down on his fingers, bent them back, and removed his hand. “Don’t do that, Ronnie.”

“Ow, yow, ow, okay, okay, okay! Just come out here a minute, wouldja? And quit that, it hurts! Besides, it’s the hand I jerk off with! Jesus! Fuck!”

I let go of his hand (wondering if he’d washed it since the last time he jerked off) but let him pull me out into the hall. Here he took hold of me by the arms, speaking to me earnestly, his gummy eyes wide.

“These guys can’t play,” he said in a breathless, confidential whisper. “They’re a couple of afterbirths, Petesky, but they love the game. Fuckin love

the game, you know? I don't love it, but unlike them, I can *play* it. Also I'm broke and there's a couple of Bogart movies tonight at Hauck. If I can squeeze em for two bucks—"

"Bogart movies? Is one of them *The Caine Mutiny*?"

"That's right, *The Caine Mutiny* and *The Maltese Falcon*, Bogie at his fuckin' finest, here's lookin' at *you*, shweetheart. If I can squeeze those two afterbirths for two bucks, I can go. Squeeze em for four, I call some scagola from Franklin, take her with me, maybe get a blowjob later." That was Ronnie, always the gosh-darned romantic. I had an image of him as Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, telling Mary Astor to drop and gobble. The idea was enough to make my sinuses swell shut.

"But there's a big problem, Pete. Three-handed Hearts is risky. Who dares shoot the moon when you got that one fucking leftover card to worry about?"

"How are you playing? Game over at a hundred, all losers pay the winner?"

"Yeah. And if you come in, I'll kick back half what I win. Plus *I give back what you lose*." He sunned me with a saintlike smile.

"Suppose *I* beat *you*?"

Ronnie looked momentarily startled, then smiled wider than ever. "Not in this life, shweetheart. I'm a scientist at cards."

I glanced at my watch, then in at Ashley and Hugh. They really didn't look much like real competition, God love them. "Tell you what," I said. "One game straight up to a hundred. Nickel a point. Nobody kicks back anything. We play, then I study, and everyone has a nice weekend."

"You're on." As we went back into the lounge he added: "I like you, Pete, but business is business—your homo boyfriends back in high school never gave you a fucking like I'm going to give you this morning."

"I didn't have any homo boyfriends in high school," I said. "I spent most of my weekends hitching up to Lewiston to ass-bang your sister."

Ronnie smiled widely, sat down, picked up the deck of cards, began to shuffle. "I broke her in pretty good, didn't I?"

You couldn't get lower than Mrs. Malenfant's little boy, that was the thing. Many tried, but to the best of my knowledge no one ever actually succeeded.

Ronnie was a bigot with a foul mouth, a cringing personality, and that constant monkey-fungus stink, but he could play cards, I give him that. He wasn't the genius he claimed to be, at least not in Hearts, where luck is a big part of the game, but he was good. When he was concentrating full on he could remember almost every card that had been played . . . which was why, I suppose, he didn't like three-handed Hearts, with that extra card. With the kicker card gone, Ronnie was tough.

Still, I did all right that first morning. When Hugh Brennan went over a hundred in the first game we played, I had thirty-three points to Ronnie's twenty-eight. It had been two or three years since I'd played Hearts, it was the first time in my life I'd played it for money, and I thought two bits a small price to pay for such unexpected entertainment. That round cost Ashley two dollars and fifty cents; the unfortunate Hugh had to cough up three-sixty. It seemed Ronnie had won the price of a date after all, although I thought the girl would have to be a real Bogart fan to give him a blowjob. Or even a kiss goodnight, for that matter.

Ronnie puffed up like a crow guarding a fresh piece of roadkill. "I got it," he said. "I'm sorry for guys like you who don't, but I got it, Riley. It's like it says in the song, the men don't know but the little girls understand."

"You're ill, Ronnie," I said.

"I wanna go again," Hugh said. I think P. T. Barnum was right, there really *is* one like Hugh born every minute. "I wanna get my money back."

"Well," Ronnie said, revealing his dingy teeth in a big smile, "I'm willing to at least give you a chance." He looked my way. "What do you say, sporty?"

My geology text lay forgotten on the sofa behind me. I wanted my quarter back, and a few more to jingle beside it. What I wanted even more was to school Ronnie Malenfant. "Run em," I said, and then, for the first of at least a thousand times I'd speak the same words in the troubled weeks ahead: "Is this a pass left or pass right?"

"New game, pass right. What a dorkus." Ronnie cackled, stretched, and watched happily as the cards spun out of the deck. "God, I love this game!"

That second game was the one that really hooked me. This time it was Ashley instead of Hugh who went skyrocketing toward one hundred points, enthusiastically helped along by Ronnie, who dumped The Bitch on Ash's hapless head at every opportunity. I was dealt the queen only twice that game. The first time I held it for four consecutive tricks when I could have bombed Ashley with it. Finally, just as I was starting to think I'd end up eating it myself, Ashley lost the lead to Hugh Brennan, who promptly led a diamond. He should have known I was void in that suit, had been since the start of the hand, but the Hughs of the world know little. That is, I suppose, why the Ronnies of the world so love to play cards with them. I topped the trick with The Bitch, held my nose, and honked at Hugh. That was how we said "Booya!" in the quaint old days of the sixties.

Ronnie scowled. "Why'd you do that? You could have put that dicksnacker out!" He nodded at Ashley, who was looking at us rather vacantly.

"Yeah, but I'm not quite that stupid." I tapped the score sheet. Ronnie had taken thirty points as of then; I had taken thirty-four. The other two were far beyond that. The question wasn't which of Ronnie's marks would lose, but which of the two who knew how to play the game would win. "I wouldn't mind seeing those Bogie movies myself, you know. *Shweetheart*."

Ronnie showed his questionable teeth in a grin. He was playing to a gallery by then; we had attracted about half a dozen spectators. Skip and Nate were among them. "Want to play it that way, do you? Okay. Spread your cheeks, moron; you're about to be cornholed."

Two hands later, I cornholed him. Ashley, who started that last hand with ninety-eight points, went over the top in a hurry. The spectators were dead quiet, waiting to see whether I could actually hit Ronnie with six—the number of hearts he'd need to take for me to beat him by one.

Ronnie looked good at first, playing under everything that was led, staying away from the lead himself. When you have good low cards in Hearts, you're practically bulletproof. "Riley's cooked!" he informed the audience. "I mean fucking *toasty!*"

I thought so, too, but at least I had the queen of spades in my hand. If I could drop it on him, I'd still win. I wouldn't make much from Ronnie, but the other two would be coughing up blood: over five bucks between them. And I'd get to see Ronnie's face change. That's what I wanted most, to see the gloat go out and the goat come in. I wanted to shut him up.

It came down to the last three tricks. Ashley played the six of hearts. Hugh played the five. I played the three. I saw Ronnie's smile fade as he played the nine and took the trick. It dropped his edge to a mere three points. Better still, he finally had the lead. I had the jack of clubs and the queen of spades left in my hand. If Ronnie had a low club and played it, I was going to eat The Bitch and have to endure his crowing, which would be caustic. If, on the other hand . . .

He played the five of diamonds. Hugh played the two of diamonds, getting under, and Ashley, smiling in a puzzled way that suggested he didn't know just what the fuck he was doing, played void.

Dead silence in the room.

Then, smiling, I completed the trick—*Ronnie's* trick—by dropping the queen of spades on top of the other three cards. There was a soft sigh from around the card-table, and when I looked up I saw that the half-dozen spectators had become nearly a full dozen. David Dearborn leaned in the doorway, arms folded, frowning at us. Behind him, in the hall, was someone else. Someone leaning on a pair of crutches.

I suppose Dearie had already checked his well-thumbed book of rules—*Dormitory Regulations at the University of Maine, 1966–1967 Edition*—and had been disappointed to find there was none against playing cards, even when there was a stake involved. But you must believe me when I say his disappointment was nothing compared to Ronnie's.

There are good losers in this world, there are sore losers, sulky losers, defiant losers, weepy losers . . . and then there are your down-and-out fuckhead losers. Ronnie was of the down-and-out fuckhead type. His cheeks flushed pink on the skin and almost purple around his blemishes. His mouth thinned to a shadow, and I could see his jaws working as he chewed his lips.

“Oh gosh,” Skip said. “Look who got hit with the shit.”

“Why’d you do that?” Ronnie burst out, ignoring Skip—ignoring everyone in the room but me. “Why’d you do that, you numb fuck?”

I was bemused by the question and—let me admit this—absolutely delighted by his rage. “Well,” I said, “according to Vince Lombardi, winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing. Pay up, Ronnie.”

“You’re queer,” he said. “You’re a fucking homo majordomo. Who dealt that?”

“Ashley,” I said. “And if you want to call me a cheater, say it right out loud. Then I’m going to come around this table, grab you before you can run, and beat the snot out of you.”

“No one’s beating the snot out of anyone on my floor!” Dearie said sharply from the doorway, but everyone ignored him. They were watching Ronnie and me.

“I didn’t call you a cheater, I just asked who dealt,” Ronnie said. I could almost see him making the effort to pull himself together, to swallow the lump I’d fed him and smile as he did it, but there were tears of rage standing in his eyes (big and bright green, those eyes were Ronnie’s one redeeming feature), and beneath his earlobes the points of his jaw went on bulging and relaxing. It was like watching twin hearts beat in the sides of his face. “Who gives a shit, you beat me by ten points. That’s fifty cents, big fucking deal.”

I wasn’t a big jock in high school like Skip Kirk—debate and track had been my only extracurricular activities—and I’d never told anyone in my life that I’d beat the snot out of them. Ronnie seemed like a good place to start, though, and God knows I meant it. I think everyone else knew it, too. There was a huge wallop of adolescent adrenaline in the room; you could smell it, almost taste it. Part of me—a big part—wanted him to give me some more grief. Part of me wanted to stick it to him, wanted to stick it right up his ass.

Money appeared on the table. Dearie took a step closer, frowning more ponderously than ever, but he said nothing . . . at least not about that. Instead he asked if anyone in the room had shaving-creamed his door, or knew who had. We all turned to look at him, and saw that Stoke Jones had moved into the doorway when Dearie stepped into the room. Stoke hung on his crutches, watching us all with his bright eyes.

There was a moment of silence and then Skip said, “You sure you didn’t maybe go walking in your sleep and do it yourself, David?” A burst of laughter greeted this, and it was Dearie’s turn to flush. The color started at his neck and worked its way up his cheeks and forehead to the roots of his flattop—no faggy Beatle haircut for Dearie, thank you very much.

“Pass the word that it better not happen again,” Dearie said. Doing his own little Bogie imitation without realizing it. “I’m not going to have my authority mocked.”

“Oh blow it out,” Ronnie muttered. He had picked up the cards and was disconsolately shuffling them.

Dearie took three large steps into the room, grabbed Ronnie by the shoulders of his Ivy League shirt, and pulled him. Ronnie got up on his own so the shirt would not be torn. He didn’t have a lot of good shirts; none of us did.

“What did you say to me, Malenfant?”

Ronnie looked around and saw what I imagine he’d been seeing for most of his life: no help, no sympathy. As usual, he was on his own. And he had no idea why.

“I didn’t say anything. Don’t be so fuckin paranoid, Dearborn.”

“Apologize.”

Ronnie wriggled in his grasp. “I didn’t *say* nothing, why should I apologize for nothing?”

“Apologize anyway. And I want to hear true regret.”

“Oh quit it,” Stoke Jones said. “All of you. You should see yourselves. Stupidity to the *n*<sup>th</sup> power.”

Dearie looked at him, surprised. We were all surprised, I think. Maybe Stoke was surprised himself.

“David, you’re just pissed off that someone creamed your door,” Skip said.

“You’re right. I’m pissed off. And I want an apology from you, Malenfant.”

“Let it go,” Skip said. “Ronnie just got a little hot under the collar because he lost a close one. He didn’t shaving-cream your fucking door.”

I looked at Ronnie to see how he was taking the rare experience of having someone stand up for him and saw a telltale shift in his green eyes—almost a flinch. In that moment I was almost positive Ronnie *had* shaving-creamed Dearie’s door. Who among my acquaintances was more likely?

If Dearie had noticed that guilty little blink, I believe he would have reached the same conclusion. But he was looking at Skip. Skip looked back at him calmly, and after a few more seconds to make it seem (to himself if not to the rest of us) like his own idea, Dearie let go of Ronnie's shirt. Ronnie shook himself, brushed at the wrinkles on his shoulders, then began digging in his pockets for small change to pay me with.

"I'm sorry," Ronnie said. "Whatever has got your panties in a bunch, I'm sorry. I'm sorry as hell, sorry as shit, I'm so sorry my ass hurts. Okay?"

Dearie took a step back. I had been able to feel the adrenaline; I suspected Dearie could feel the waves of dislike rolling in his direction just as clearly. Even Ashley Rice, who looked like a roly-poly bear in a kids' cartoon, was looking at Dearie in a flat-eyed, unfriendly way. It was a case of what the poet Gary Snyder might have called bad-karma baseball. Dearie was the proctor—strike one. He tried to run our floor as though it were an adjunct to his beloved ROTC program—strike two. And he was a jerkwad sophomore at a time when sophomores still believed that harassing freshmen was part of their bounden duty. Strike three, Dearie, you're out.

"Spread the word that I'm not going to put up with a lot of high-school crap on my floor," Dearie said (*his* floor, if you could dig it). He stood ramrod-straight in his U of M sweatshirt and khaki pants—*pressed* khaki pants, although it was Saturday. "This is *not* high school, gentlemen; this is Chamberlain Hall at the University of Maine. Your bra-snapping days are over. The time has come for you to behave like college men."

I guess there was a reason I was voted Class Clown in the '66 Gates Falls yearbook. I clicked my heels together and snapped off a pretty fair British-style salute, the kind with the palm turned mostly outward. "Yes *sir!*" I cried. There was nervous laughter from the gallery, a dirty guffaw from Ronnie, a grin from Skip. Skip gave Dearie a shrug, eyebrows lifted, hands up to the sky. *See what you get?* it said. *Act like an asshole and that's how people treat you.* Perfect eloquence is, I think, almost always mute.

Dearie looked at Skip, also mute. Then he looked at me. His face was expressionless, almost dead, but I wished I had for once forgone the smartass impulse. The trouble is, for the born smartass, the impulse has nine times out of ten been acted upon before the brain can even engage first gear. I bet that in

days of old when knights were bold, more than one court jester was hung upside down by his balls. You don't read about it in the *Morte D'Arthur*, but I think it must be true—laugh *this* one off, ya motley motherfucker. In any case, I knew I had just made an enemy.

Dearie spun in a nearly perfect about-face and went marching out of the lounge. Ronnie's mouth drew down in a grimace that made his ugly face even uglier; the leer of the villain in a stage melodrama. He made a jacking-off gesture at Dearie's stiff retreating back. Hugh Brennan giggled a little, but no one really laughed. Stoke Jones had disappeared, apparently disgusted with the lot of us.

Ronnie looked around, eyes bright. "So," he said. "I'm still up for it. Nickel a point, who wants to play?"

"I will," Skip said.

"I will, too," I said, never once glancing in the direction of my geology book.

"Hearts?" Kirby McClendon asked. He was the tallest boy on the floor, maybe one of the tallest boys at school—six-seven at least, and possessed of a long, mournful bloodhound's face. "Sure. Good choice."

"What about us?" Ashley squeaked.

"Yeah!" Hugh said. Talk about your gluttons for punishment.

"You're outclassed at this table," Ronnie said, speaking with what was for him almost kindness. "Why don't you start up your own?"

Ashley and Hugh did just that. By four o'clock all of the lounge tables were occupied by quartets of third-floor freshmen, ragtag scholarship boys who had to buy their texts in the Used section of the bookstore playing Hearts at a nickel a point. In our dorm, the mad season had begun.

Saturday night was another of my meals on the Holyoke dishline. In spite of my awakening interest in Carol Gerber, I tried to get Brad Witherspoon to switch with me—Brad had Sunday breakfast and he hated to get up early almost as badly as Skip did—but Brad refused. By then he was playing, too, and two bucks out of pocket. He was crazy to catch up. He just shook his head at me and led a spade out of his hand. “Let’s go Bitch-huntin!” he cried, sounding eerily like Ronnie Malenfant. The most insidious thing about Ronnie was that weak minds found him worth imitating.

I left my seat at the original table, where I had spent the balance of the day, and my place was immediately taken by a young man named Kenny Auster. I was nearly nine dollars ahead (mostly because Ronnie had moved to another table so I wouldn’t cut into his profits) and should have been feeling good, but I wasn’t. It wasn’t the money, it was the game. I wanted to keep on playing.

I walked disconsolately down the hall, checked the room, and asked Nate if he wanted to eat early with the kitchen crew. He simply shook his head and waved me on without looking up from his history book. When people talk about student activism in the sixties, I have to remind myself that the majority of kids went through that mad season the way Nate did. They kept their heads down and their eyes on their history books while history happened all around them. Not that Nate was completely unaware, or completely dedicated to the study carrels on the sidelines, for that matter. You shall hear.

I walked toward the Palace on the Plains, zipping my jacket against the air, which had turned frosty. It was quarter past four. The Commons didn’t officially open until five, so the paths which met in Bennett’s Run were almost deserted. Stoke Jones was there, though, hunched over his crutches and brooding down at something on the path. I wasn’t surprised to see him; if you had some sort of physical disability, you could chow an hour earlier than the rest of the students. As far as I remember, that was about the only special treatment the handicapped got. If you were physically fucked up, you got to eat with the kitchen help. That sparrow-track on the back of his coat was very clear and very black in the late light.

As I got closer to him I saw what he was looking down at—*Introduction to Sociology*. He had dropped it on the faded red bricks of Bennett’s Walk and was trying to figure a way he could pick it up again without landing on his face. He kept poking at the book with the tip of one crutch. Stoke had two, maybe even three different pairs of crutches; these were the ones that fitted over his forearms in a series of ascending steel collars. I could hear him muttering “Rip-rip, rip-rip” under his breath as he prodded the book uselessly from place to place. When he was plunging along on his crutches, “Rip-rip” had a determined sound. In this situation it sounded frustrated. At the time I knew Stoke (I will not call him Rip-Rip, although many Ronnie-imitators had taken to doing so by the end of the semester), I was fascinated by how many different nuances there could be to any given “Rip-rip.” That was before I found out the Navajos have forty different ways of saying their word for *cloud*. That was before I found out a lot of things, actually.

He heard me coming and snapped his head around so fast he almost fell over anyway. I reached out to steady him. He jerked back, seeming to swim in the old army duffle coat he was wearing.

“Get away from me!” As if he expected me to give him a shove. I raised my hands to show him I was harmless and bent over. “And get your hands off my book!”

This I didn’t dignify, only picked up the text and stuffed it under his arm like a newspaper.

“I don’t need your help!”

I was about to reply sharply, but I noticed again how white his cheeks were around the patches of red in their centers, and how his hair was damp with perspiration. Once again I could smell him—that overworked-transformer aroma—and realized I could also *hear* him: his breathing had a raspy, snotty sound. If Stoke Jones hadn’t found out where the infirmary was yet, I had an idea he would before long.

“I didn’t offer you a piggyback, for God’s sake.” I tried to paste a smile on my puss and managed something or other. Hell, why shouldn’t I smile? Didn’t I have nine bucks in my pocket that I hadn’t started the day with? By the standards of Chamberlain Three, I was rich.

Jones looked at me with those dark eyes of his. His lips thinned, but after a moment he nodded. “Okay. Point taken. Thanks.” Then he resumed his breakneck pace up the hill. At first he was well ahead of me, but then the grade began to work on him and he slowed down. His snotty-sounding breathing got louder and quicker. I heard it clearly as I caught up to him.

“Why don’t you take it easy?” I asked.

He gave me an impatient are-you-still-here glance. “Why don’t you eat me?”

I pointed to his soash book. “That’s sliding again.”

He stopped, adjusted it under his arm, then fixed himself on his crutches again, hunched like a bad-tempered heron, glaring at me through his black tumbles of hair. “Go on,” he said. “I don’t need a minder.”

I shrugged. “I wasn’t babysitting you, just wanted some company.”

“I don’t.”

I started on my way, nettled in spite of my nine bucks. Us class clowns aren’t wild about making friends—two or three are apt to do us for a lifetime—but we don’t react very well to the bum’s rush, either. Our goal is vast numbers of acquaintances whom we can leave laughing.

“Riley,” he said from behind me.

I turned. He’d decided to thaw a little after all, I thought. How wrong I was.

“There are gestures and gestures,” he said. “Putting shaving cream on the proctor’s door is about one step above wiping snot on the seat of Little Susie’s desk because you can’t think of another way to say you love her.”

“I didn’t shaving-cream Dearie’s door,” I said, more nettled than ever.

“Yeah, but you’re playing cards with the asshole who did. Lending him credibility.” I think it was the first time I heard that word, which went on to have an incredibly sleazy career in the seventies and coke-soaked eighties. Mostly in politics. I think *credibility* died of shame around 1986, just as all those sixties war protesters and fearless battlers for racial equality were discovering junk bonds, *Martha Stewart Living*, and the StairMaster. “Why do you waste your time?”

That was direct enough to rattle me, and I said what seems to me now, looking back, an incredibly stupid thing. “I’ve got plenty of time to waste.”

Jones nodded as if he had expected no more and no better. He got going again and passed me at his accustomed plunge, head down, back humped, sweaty hair swinging, soash book clamped tight under his arm. I waited, expecting it to squirt free again. This time when it did, I'd leave him to poke it with his crutch.

But it didn't get away from him, and after I'd seen him reach the door of Holyoke, grapple with it, and finally lurch inside, I went on my own way. When I'd filled my tray I sat with Carol Gerber and the rest of the kids on the dishline crew. That was about as far from Stoke Jones as it was possible to get, which suited me fine. He also sat apart from the other handicapped kids, I remember. Stoke Jones sat apart from everybody. Clint Eastwood on crutches.

The regular diners began to show up at five o'clock. By quarter past, the dishline crew was in full swing and stayed that way for an hour. Lots of dorm kids went home for the weekend, but those who stayed all showed up on Saturday night, which was beans and franks and cornbread. Dessert was Jell-O. At the Palace on the Plains, dessert was almost always Jell-O. If Cook was feeling frisky, you might get Jell-O with little pieces of fruit suspended in it.

Carol was doing silverware, and just as the rush began to subside, she wheeled away from the pass-through, shaking with laughter. Her cheeks were bright crimson. What came rolling along the belt was Skip's work. He admitted it later that night, but I knew right away. Although he was in the College of Education and probably destined to teach history and coach baseball at good old Dexter High until he dropped dead of a booze-fueled heart attack at the age of fifty-nine or so, Skip by rights should have been in fine arts . . . probably would have been if he hadn't come from five generations of farmers who said *ayuh* and *coss 'twill* and *sh'd smile n kiss a pig*. He was only the second or third in his sprawling family (their religion, Skip once said, was Irish Alcoholic) to ever go to college. Clan Kirk could visualize a teacher in the family—barely—but not a painter or a sculptor. And at eighteen, Skip could see no further than they could. He only knew he didn't quite fit the hole he was trying to slide into, and it made him restless. It made him wander into rooms other than his own, check the LPs, and criticize almost everyone's taste in music.

By 1969 he had a better idea of who and what he was. That was the year he constructed a *papier-mâché* Vietnamese family tableau that was set on fire at the end of a peace rally in front of the Fogler Library while The Youngbloods played "Get Together" from a borrowed set of amps and part-time hippies worked out to the beat like tribal warriors after a hunt. You see how jumbled it all is in my mind? It was Atlantis, that's all I know for sure, way down below the ocean. The paper family burned, the hippie protesters chanted "Napalm! Napalm! Scum from the skies!" as they danced, and after awhile the jocks and the frat boys began to throw stuff. Eggs at first. Then stones.

It was no *papier-mâché* family that sent Carol laughing and reeling away from the dishline that night in the fall of 1966; it was a horny hotdog man standing atop a Matterhorn of Holyoke Commons baked beans. A pipe-cleaner wiener jutted jauntily from the appropriate spot. In his hand was a little University of Maine pennant, on his head a scrap of blue hanky folded to look like a freshman beanie. Along the front of the tray, carefully spelled out in crumbled cornbread, was the message EAT MORE MAINE BEANS!

A good deal of edible artwork came along the conveyor belt during my time on the Palace dishline, but I think that one was the all-time champ. Stoke Jones would no doubt have called it a waste of time, but I think in that case he would have been wrong. Anything with the power to make you laugh over thirty years later isn't a waste of time. I think something like that is very close to immortality.

I punched out at six-thirty, walked down the ramp behind the kitchen with one last bag of garbage, and dropped it into one of the four Dumpsters lined up behind the Commons like snubby steel boxcars.

When I turned around, I saw Carol Gerber and a couple of other kids standing by the corner of the building, smoking and watching the moon rise. The other two started away just as I walked over, pulling my Pall Malls out of my jacket pocket.

“Hey, Pete, eat more Maine beans,” Carol said, and laughed.

“Yeah.” I lit my cigarette. Then, without thinking about it much one way or the other, I said: “There’s a couple of Bogart movies playing at Hauck tonight. They start at seven. We’ve got time to walk over. Want to go?”

She smoked, not answering me for a moment, but she was still smiling and I knew she was going to say yes. Earlier, all I’d wanted was to get back to the third-floor lounge and play Hearts. Now that I was away from the game, however, the game seemed a lot less important. Had I been hot enough to say something about beating the snot out of Ronnie Malenfant? It seemed I had—the memory was clear enough—but standing out here in the cool air with Carol, it was hard for me to understand why.

“I’ve got a boyfriend back home,” she said at last.

“Is that a no?”

She shook her head, still with the little smile. The smoke from her cigarette drifted across her face. Her hair, free of the net the girls had to wear on the dishline, blew lightly across her brow. “That’s information. Remember that show *The Prisoner*? ‘Number Six, we want . . . *information.*’ ”

“I’ve got a girlfriend back home,” I said. “More information.”

“I’ve got another job, tutoring math. I promised to spend an hour tonight with this girl on the second floor. Calculus. Ag. She’s hopeless and she whines, but it’s six dollars an hour.” Carol laughed. “This is getting good, we’re exchanging information like mad.”

“It doesn’t look good for Bogie, though,” I said. I wasn’t worried. I knew we were going to see Bogie. I think I also knew there was romance in our future.

It gave me an oddly light feeling, a lifting-off sensation in my midsection.

“I could call Esther from Hauck and tell her calc at ten o’clock instead of nine,” Carol said. “Esther’s a sad case. She never goes out. What she does mostly is sit around with her hair in curlers and write letters home about how hard college is. We could see the first movie, at least.”

“That sounds good,” I said.

We started walking toward Hauck. Those were the days, all right; you didn’t have to hire a babysitter, put out the dog, feed the cat, or set the burglar alarm. You just went.

“Is this like a date?” she asked after a little bit.

“Well,” I said, “I guess it could be.” We were walking past East Annex by then, and other kids were filling up the paths, heading toward the auditorium.

“Good,” she said, “because I left my purse back in my room. I can’t go dutch.”

“Don’t worry, I’m rich. Won big playing cards today.”

“Poker?”

“Hearts. Do you know it?”

“Are you kidding? I spent three weeks at Camp Winiwinaia on Lake George the summer I was twelve. YMCA camp—poor kids’ camp, my mom called it. It rained practically every day and all we did was play Hearts and hunt The Bitch.” Her eyes had gone far away, the way people’s eyes do when they trip over some memory like a shoe in the dark. “Find the lady in black. *Cherchez la femme noire.*”

“That’s the game, all right,” I said, knowing that for a moment I wasn’t there for her at all. Then she came back, gave me a grin, and took her cigarettes out of her jeans pocket. We smoked a lot back then. All of us. Back then you could smoke in hospital waiting rooms. I told my daughter that and at first she didn’t believe me.

I took out my own cigarettes and lit us both. It was a good moment, the two of us looking at each other in the Zippo’s flame. Not as sweet as a kiss, but nice. I felt that lightness inside me again, that sense of lifting off. Sometimes your view widens and grows hopeful. Sometimes you think you can see around corners, and maybe you can. Those are good moments. I snapped my lighter

shut and we walked on, smoking, the backs of our hands close but not quite brushing.

“How much money are we talking about?” she asked. “Enough to run away to California on, or maybe not quite that much?”

“Nine dollars.”

She laughed and took my hand. “It’s a date, all right,” she said. “You can buy me popcorn, too.”

“All right. Do you care which movie plays first?”

She shook her head. “Bogie’s Bogie.”

“That’s true,” I said, but I hoped it would be *The Maltese Falcon*.

It was. Halfway through it, while Peter Lorre was doing his rather ominous gay turn and Bogie was gazing at him with polite, amused incredulity, I looked at Carol. She was looking at me. I bent and kissed her popcorn-buttery mouth by the black-and-white moonlight of John Huston’s inspired first film. Her lips were sweet and responsive. I pulled back a little. She was still looking at me. The little smile was back. Then she offered me her bag of popcorn, I reciprocated with my box of Dots, and we watched the rest of the movie.

Walking back to the Chamberlain-King-Franklin complex of dorms, I took her hand almost without thinking about it. She curled her fingers through mine naturally enough, but I thought I could feel a reserve now.

“Are you going to go back for *The Caine Mutiny*?” she asked. “You could, if you’ve still got your ticket stub. Or I could give you mine.”

“Nah, I’ve got geology to study.”

“Bet you wind up playing cards all night instead.”

“I can’t afford to,” I said. And I meant it; I meant to go back and study. I really did.

“*Lonely Struggles, or A Scholarship Boy’s Life*,” Carol said. “A heartbreaking novel by Charles Dickens. You’ll weep as plucky Peter Riley throws himself into the river after finding that the Financial Aid Office has revoked his grant package.”

I laughed. She was very sharp.

“I’m in the same boat, you know. If we screw up, maybe we can make it a double suicide. Into the Penobscot with us. Goodbye cruel world.”

“What’s a Connecticut girl doing at the University of Maine, anyway?” I asked.

“That’s a little complicated. And if you ever plan on asking me out again, you should know you’re robbing the cradle. I won’t actually be eighteen until November. I skipped the seventh grade. That was the year my parents got divorced, and I was miserable. It was either study all the time or turn into one of the Harwich Junior High corner girls. They’re the ones who major in French-kissing and usually wind up pregnant at sixteen. You know the kind I mean?”

“Sure.” In Gates you saw them in giggling little groups outside Frank’s Fountain or the Dairy Delish, waiting for the boys to come by in their dropped Fords and Plymouth hemis, fast cars with the fenderskirts and the decals saying FRAM and QUAKER STATE in the back windows. You could see those girls as women down at the other end of Main Street, ten years older and forty pounds heavier, drinking beers and shots in Chucky’s Tavern.

“I turned into a study-grind. My father was in the Navy. He got out on a disability and moved here to Maine . . . Damariscotta, down on the coast?”

I nodded, thinking of Diane Renay’s steady boy, the one who said ship ahoy and joined the Nay-yay-vee.

“I was living in Connecticut with my mother and going to Harwich High. I applied to sixteen different schools and got accepted by all but three . . . but . . .”

“But they expected you to pay your own way and you couldn’t.”

She nodded. “I think I missed the plum scholarships by maybe twenty SAT-points. An extracurricular activity or two probably wouldn’t have hurt, either, but I was too busy grinding away at the books. And by then I was pretty hot and heavy with Sully-John . . .”

“The boyfriend, right?”

She nodded, but not as though this Sully-John interested her. “The only two schools offering realistic financial aid packages were Maine and UConn. I decided on Maine because by then I wasn’t getting along very well with my mother. Lots of fights.”

“You get along better with your father?”

“Hardly ever see him,” she said in a dry, businesslike tone. “He lives with this woman who . . . well, they drink a lot and fight a lot, let’s leave it at that. But he’s a resident of the state, I’m his daughter, and this is a land-grant college. I didn’t get everything I needed—UConn offered the better deal, frankly—but I’m not afraid of a little work. It’s worth it, just to get away.”

She took a deep breath of the night air and let it out, faintly white. We were almost back to Franklin. Inside the lobby I could see guys sitting in the hard plastic contour chairs, waiting for their girls to come down from upstairs. It looked like quite a rogues’ gallery. *Worth it just to get away*, she had said. Did that mean the mother, the town, and the high school, or was the boyfriend included?

When we got to the wide double doors at the front of her dorm, I put my arms around her and bent to kiss her again. She put her hands on my chest, stopping me. Not pulling back, just stopping me. She looked up into my face, smiling that little smile of hers. I could get to love that smile, I thought—it was the kind of smile you might wake up thinking of in the middle of the

night. The blue eyes and the blond hair too, but mostly the smile. The lips only curved a little, but the corners of the mouth deepened to dimples all the same.

“My boyfriend’s real name is John Sullivan,” she said. “Like the fighter. Now tell me the name of your girlfriend.”

“Annmarie,” I said, not much caring for the sound of it as it came out of my mouth. “Annmarie Soucie. She’s a senior at Gates Falls High this year.” I let Carol go. When I did, she took her hands off my chest and grabbed mine.

“This is information,” she said. “Information, that’s all. Still want to kiss me?”

I nodded. I wanted to more than ever.

“Okay.” She tilted her face up, closed her eyes, opened her lips a little. She looked like a kid waiting at the foot of the stairs for her goodnight kiss from Papa. It was so cute I almost laughed. Instead I bent and kissed her. She kissed back with pleasure and enthusiasm. There were no tongues touching, but it was a thorough, searching kiss just the same. When she drew back, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright. “Goodnight. Thanks for the movie.”

“Want to do it again?”

“I have to think about that,” she said. She was smiling but her eyes were serious. I suppose her boyfriend was on her mind; I know that Annmarie was on mine. “Maybe you better, too. I’ll see you on the dishline Monday. What do you have?”

“Lunch and dinner.”

“I have breakfast and lunch. So I’ll see you at lunch.”

“Eat more Maine beans,” I said. That made her laugh. She went inside. I watched her go, standing outside with my collar turned up and my hands in my pockets and a cigarette between my lips, feeling like Bogie. I watched her say something to the girl on the reception desk and then hurry upstairs, still laughing.

I walked back to Chamberlain in the moonlight, determined to get serious about the geosyncline.

I only went into the third-floor lounge to get my geology book; I swear it's true. When I got there, every table—plus one or two which must have been hijacked from other floors—was occupied by a quartet of Hearts-playing fools. There was even a group in the corner, sitting cross-legged on the floor and staring intently at their cards. They looked like half-assed yogis. “We chasin The Cunt!” Ronnie Malenfant yelled to the room at large. “We gonna bust that bitch out, boys!”

I picked up my geology text from the sofa where it had lain all day and night (someone had sat on it, pushing it most of the way down between two cushions, but that baby was too big to hide entirely), and looked at it the way you might look at some artifact of unknown purpose. In Hauck Auditorium, sitting beside Carol Gerber, this crazy card-party had seemed like a dream. Now it was Carol who seemed dreamlike—Carol with her dimples and her boyfriend with the boxer's name. I still had six bucks in my pocket and it was absurd to feel disappointed just because there was no place for me in any of the games currently going on.

Study, that was what I had to do. Make friends with the geosyncline. I'd camp out in the second-floor lounge or maybe find a quiet corner in the basement rec.

Just as I was leaving with *Historical Geology* under my arm, Kirby McClendon tossed down his cards and cried, “Fuck this! I'm tapped! All because I keep getting hit with that fucking queen of spades! I'll give you guys IOUs, but I am honest-to-God tapped out.” He went out past me without looking back, ducking his head as he went through the door—I've always thought that being that tall must be a kind of curse. A month later Kirby would be tapped out in a much larger sense, withdrawn from the University by his frightened parents after a mental breakdown and a half-assed suicide attempt. Not the first victim of Hearts-mania that fall, nor the last, but the only one to try and off himself by eating two bottles of orange-flavored baby aspirin.

Lennie Doria didn't even bother looking after him. He looked over at me instead. "You want to sit in, Riley?"

A brief but perfectly genuine struggle for my soul went on. I needed to study. I had *planned* on studying, and for a financial-aid boy like me, that was a good plan, certainly more sensible than sitting here in this smoky room and adding the effluent from my own Pall Malls to the general fug.

So I said "Yeah, why not?" and sat down and played Hearts until almost one in the morning. When I finally shambled back to my room, Nate was lying on his bed reading his Bible. That was the last thing he did every night before going to sleep. This was his third trip through what he always called The Word of God, he'd told me. He had reached the Book of Nehemiah. He looked up at me with an expression of calm enquiry—a look that never changed much. Now that I think about it, *Nate* never changed much. He was in pre-dent, and he stayed with it; tucked into his last Christmas card to me was a photo of his new office in Houlton. In the photo there are three Magi standing around a straw-filled cradle on the snowy office lawn. Behind Mary and Joseph you can read the sign on the door: NATHANIEL HOPPENSTAND, D.D.S. He married Cindy. They are still married, and their three children are mostly grown up. I imagine Rinty died and got replaced.

"Did you win?" Nate asked. He spoke in almost the same tone of voice my wife would use some years later, when I came home half-drunk after a Thursday-night poker game.

"Actually I did." I had gravitated to a table where Ronnie was playing and had lost three of my remaining six dollars, then drifted to another one where I won them back, and a couple of more besides. But I had never gotten around to the geosyncline or the mysteries of tectonic plates.

Nate was wearing red-and-white-striped pajamas. He was, I think, the only person I ever shared a room with in college, male or female, who wore pajamas. Of course he was also the only one who owned *Diane Renay Sings Navy Blue*. As I began undressing, Nate slipped between the covers of his bed and reached behind him to turn off the study lamp on his desk.

"Get your geology all studied up?" he asked as the shadows swallowed his half of the room.

“I’m in good shape with it,” I said. Years later, when I came in from those late poker games and my wife would ask me how drunk I was, I’d say “I only had a couple” in that same chipper tone of voice.

I swung into my own bed, turned off my own light, and was asleep almost immediately. I dreamed I was playing Hearts. Ronnie Malenfant was dealing; Stoke Jones stood in the lounge doorway, hunched over his crutches and eyeing me—eyeing all of us—with the dour disapproval of a Massachusetts Bay Colony Puritan. In my dream there was an enormous amount of money lying on the table, hundreds of dollars in crumpled fives and ones, money orders, even a personal check or two. I looked at this, then back at the doorway. Carol Gerber was now standing on one side of Stokely. Nate, dressed in his candy-cane pajamas, was on the other side.

“We want information,” Carol said.

“You won’t get it,” I replied—in the TV show, that was always Patrick McGoohan’s reply to Number Two.

Nate said, “You left your window open, Pete. The room’s cold and your papers blew everywhere.”

I couldn’t think of an adequate reply to this, so I picked up the hand I’d been dealt and fanned it open. Thirteen cards, and every one was the queen of spades. Every one was *la femme noire*. Every one was The Bitch.

In Vietnam the war was going well—Lyndon Johnson, on a swing through the South Pacific, said so. There *were* a few minor setbacks, however. The Viet Cong shot down three American Hueys practically in Saigon’s back yard; a little farther out from Big S, an estimated one thousand Viet Cong soldiers kicked the shit out of at least twice that number of South Vietnamese regulars. In the Mekong Delta, U.S. gunships sank a hundred and twenty Viet Cong river patrol boats which turned out to contain—whoops—large numbers of refugee children. America lost its four hundredth plane of the war that October, an F-105 Thunderchief. The pilot parachuted to safety. In Manila, South Vietnam’s Prime Minister, Nguyen Cao Ky, insisted that he was not a crook. Neither were the members of his cabinet, he said, and the fact that a dozen or so cabinet members resigned while Ky was in the Philippines was just coincidence.

In San Diego, Bob Hope did a show for Army boys headed in-country. “I wanted to call Bing and send him along with you,” Bob said, “but that pipe-smoking son of a gun has unlisted his number.” The Army boys roared with laughter.

? and the Mysterians ruled the radio. Their song, “96 Tears,” was a monster hit. They never had another one.

In Honolulu hula-hula girls greeted President Johnson.

At the U.N., Secretary General U Thant was pleading with American representative Arthur Goldberg to stop, at least temporarily, the bombing of North Vietnam. Arthur Goldberg got in touch with the Great White Father in Hawaii to relay Thant’s request. The Great White Father, perhaps still wearing his lei, said no way, we’d stop when the Viet Cong stopped, but in the meantime they were going to cry 96 tears. At *least* 96. (Johnson did a brief, clumsy shimmy with the hula-hula girls; I remember watching that on *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and thinking he danced like every other white guy I knew . . . which was, incidentally, *all* the guys I knew.)

In Greenwich Village a peace march was broken up by the police. The marchers had no permit, the police said. In San Francisco war protesters

carrying plastic skulls on sticks and wearing whiteface like a troupe of mimes were dispersed by teargas. In Denver police tore down thousands of posters advertising an antiwar rally at Chautauqua Park in Boulder. The police had discovered a statute forbidding the posting of such bills. The statute did not, the Denver Chief said, forbid posted bills which advertised movies, old clothes drives, VFW dances, or rewards for information leading to the recovery of lost pets. *Those* posters, the chief explained, were not political.

On our own little patch, there was a sit-in at East Annex, where Coleman Chemicals was holding job interviews. Coleman, like Dow, made napalm. Coleman also made Agent Orange, botulin compound, and anthrax, it turned out, although no one knew that until the company went bankrupt in 1980. In the Maine *Campus* there was a small picture of the protesters being led away. A larger photo showed one protester being pulled out of the East Annex doorway by a campus cop while another cop stood by, holding the protester's crutches—said protester was Stoke Jones, of course, wearing his duffle coat with the sparrow-track on the back. The cops were treating him kindly enough, I'm sure—at that point war protesters were still more novelty than nuisance—but the combination of the big cop and the staggering boy made the picture creepy, somehow. I thought of it many times between 1968 and 1971, years when, in the words of Bob Dylan, “the game got rough.” The largest photo in that issue, the only one above the fold, showed ROTC guys in uniform marching on the sunny football field while large crowds watched. MANEUVERS DRAW RECORD CROWD, read the headline.

Closer to home still, one Peter Riley got a D on his Geology quiz and a D-plus on a Sociology quiz two days later. On Friday I got back a one-page “essay of opinion” I had scribbled just before Intro English (Writing) on Monday morning. The subject was Ties (**Should/Should Not**) Be Required for Men in Restaurants. I had chosen Should Not. This little expository exercise had been marked with a big red C, the first C I'd gotten in English since arriving at U of M with my straight A's in high-school English and my 740 score on the SAT Verbals. That red hook shocked me in a way the quiz D's hadn't, and angered me as well. Across the top Mr. Babcock had written, “Your usual clarity is present, but in this case serves only to show what a meatless meal this is. Your

humor, although facile, falls far short of wit. The C is actually something of a gift. Sloppy work.”

I thought of approaching him after class, then rejected the idea. Mr. Babcock, who wore bowties and big hornrimmed glasses, had made it clear in just four weeks that he considered grade-grubbers the lowest form of academic life. Also, it was noon. If I grabbed a quick bite at the Palace on the Plains, I could be back on Chamberlain Three by one. All the tables in the lounge (and all four corners of the room) would be filled by three o'clock that afternoon, but at one I'd still be able to find a seat. I was almost twenty dollars to the good by then, and planned to spend a profitable late-October weekend lining my pockets. I was also planning on the Saturday-night dance in Lengyll Gym. Carol had agreed to go with me. The Cumberlands, a popular campus group, were playing. At some point (more likely at *several* points) they would do their version of “96 Tears.”

The voice of conscience, already speaking in the tones of Nate Hoppenstand, suggested I'd do well to spend at least part of the weekend hitting the books. I had two chapters of geology to read, two chapters of sociology, forty pages of history (the Middle Ages at a gulp), plus a set of questions to answer concerning trade routes.

I'll get to it, don't worry, I'll get to it, I told that voice. Sunday's my day to study. You can count on it, you can take it to the bank. And for awhile on Sunday I actually did read about in-groups, out-groups, and group sanctions. Between hands of cards I read about them. Then things got interesting and my soash book ended up on the floor under the couch. Going to bed on Sunday night—*late* Sunday night—it occurred to me that not only had my winnings shrunk instead of grown (Ronnie now seemed actually to be seeking me out), but I hadn't really gotten very far with my studying. Also, I hadn't made a certain phone-call.

*If you really want to put your hand there*, Carol said, and she had been smiling that funny little smile when she said it, that smile which was mostly dimples and a look in the eyes. *If you really want to put your hand there*.

About halfway through the Saturday-night dance, she and I had gone out for a smoke. It was a mild night, and along Lengyll's brick north side maybe twenty couples were hugging and kissing by the light of the moon rising over

Chadbourne Hall. Carol and I joined them. Before long I had my hand inside her sweater. I rubbed my thumb over the smooth cotton of her bra-cup, feeling the stiff little rise of her nipple. My temperature was also rising. I could feel hers rising, as well. She looked into my face with her arms still locked around my neck and said, "If you really want to put your hand there, I think you owe somebody a phone-call, don't you?"

*There's time*, I told myself as I drifted toward sleep. *There's plenty of time for studying, plenty of time for phone-calls. Plenty of time.*

Skip Kirk blew an Anthropology quiz—ended up guessing at half of the answers and getting a fifty-eight. He got a C-minus on an Advanced Calc quiz, and only did that well because his last math course in high school had covered some of the same concepts. We were in the same Sociology course and he got a D-minus on the quiz, scoring a bare seventy.

We weren't the only ones with problems. Ronnie was a winner at Hearts, better than fifty bucks up in ten days of play, if you believed him (no one completely did, although we knew he was winning), but a loser in his classes. He flunked a French quiz, blew off the little English paper in the class we shared ("Who gives a fuck about ties, I eat at McDonald's" he said), and scraped through a quiz in some other history division by scanning an admirer's notes just before class.

Kirby McClendon had quit shaving and began gnawing his fingernails between deals. He also began cutting significant numbers of classes. Jack Frady convinced his advisor to let him drop Statistics I even though add-drop was officially over. "I cried a little," he told me matter-of-factly one night in the lounge as we Bitch-hunted our way toward the wee hours. "It's something I learned to do in Dramatics Club." Lennie Doria tapped on my door a couple of nights later while I was cramming (Nate had been in the rack for an hour or more, sleeping the sleep of the just and the caught-up) and asked me if I had any interest in writing a paper about Crispus Atticus. He had heard I could do such things. He'd pay a fair price, Lennie said; he was currently ten bucks up in the game. I said I was sorry but I couldn't help him. I was behind a couple of papers myself. Lennie nodded and slipped out.

Ashley Rice broke out in horrible oozing acne all over his face, Mark St. Pierre had a sleepwalking interlude after losing almost twenty bucks in one catastrophic night, and Brad Witherspoon got into a fight with a guy on the first floor. The guy made some innocuous little crack—later on Brad himself admitted it had been innocuous—but Brad, who'd just been hit with The Bitch three times in four hands and only wanted a Coke out of the first-floor machine to soothe his butt-parched throat, wasn't in an innocuous mood. He

turned, dropped his unopened soda into the sandwell of a nearby cigarette urn, and started punching. Broke the kid's glasses, loosened one of his teeth. So Brad Witherspoon, ordinarily about as dangerous as a library mimeograph, was the first of us to go on disciplinary pro.

I thought about calling Annmarie and telling her I had met someone and was dating, but it seemed like a lot of work—a lot of psychic effort—on top of everything else. I settled for hoping that she'd write me a letter saying she thought it was time we started seeing other people. Instead I got one saying how much she missed me and that she was making me “something special” for Christmas. Which probably meant a sweater, one with reindeer on it. Reindeer sweaters were an Annmarie specialty (those slow, stroking handjobs were another). She enclosed a picture of herself in a short skirt. Looking at it made me feel not horny but tired and guilty and put-upon. Carol also made me feel put-upon. I had wanted to cop a feel, that was all, not change my whole fucking life. Or hers, for that matter. But I liked her, that was true. A lot. That smile of hers, and her sharp wit. *This is getting good*, she had said, *we're exchanging information like mad*.

A week or so later I returned from Holyoke, where I'd worked lunch with her on the dishline, and saw Frank Stuart walking slowly down the third-floor hallway with his trunk hung from his hands. Frank was from western Maine, one of those little unincorporated townships that are practically all trees, and had a Yankee accent so thick you could slice it. He was just a so-so Hearts player, usually ducking in second or a close third when someone else went over the hundred-point mark, but a hell of a nice guy. He always had a smile on his face . . . at least until the afternoon I came upon him headed for the stairwell with his trunk.

“You moving rooms, Frank?” I asked, but even then I thought I knew better—it was in the look on his face, serious and pale and downcast.

He shook his head. “Goin back home. Got a letter from my ma. She says they need a caretaker at one of the big lake resorts we got over our way. I said sure. I'm just wastin my time here.”

“You are not!” I said, a little shocked. “Christ, Frankie, you're getting a college education!”

“I ain’t, though, that’s the thing.” The hall was gloomy and choked with shadows; it was raining outside. Still, I think I saw color come flushing into Frank’s cheeks. I think he was ashamed. I think that was why he’d arranged to leave in the middle of a weekday, when the dorm was at its emptiest. “I ain’t doin nothin but playin cards. Not very well, either. Also, I’m behind in all my classes.”

“You can’t be *that* far behind! It’s only October twenty-fifth!”

Frank nodded. “I know. But I ain’t quick like some. Wasn’t quick in high school, either. I got to set my feet and bore in, like with an ice-auger. I ain’t been doin it, and if you ain’t got a hole in the ice you can’t catch any perch. I’m goin, Pete. Gonna quit before they fire me in January.”

He went on, plodding down the first of the three flights with his trunk held in front of him by the handles. His white tee-shirt floated in the gloom; when he passed a window running with rain his crewcut glimmered like gold.

As he reached the second-floor landing and his footfalls began to take on an echoey beat, I rushed to the stairwell and looked down. “Frankie! Hey, Frank!”

The footfalls stopped. In the shadows I could see his round face looking up at me and the dim held shape of his trunk.

“Frank, what about the draft? If you drop out of school the draft’ll get you!”

A long pause, as if he was thinking how to answer. He never did, not with his mouth. He answered with his feet. Their echoey sound resumed. I never saw Frank again.

I remember standing by the stairwell, scared, thinking *That could happen to me . . . maybe is happening to me*, then pushing the thought away.

Seeing Frank with his trunk was a warning, I decided, and I would heed it. I would do better. I had been coasting, and it was time to turn on the jets again. But from down the hall I could hear Ronnie yelling gleefully that he was Bitch-hunting, that he meant to have that whore out of hiding, and I decided I would do better starting tonight. Tonight would be time enough to re-light those fabled jets. This afternoon I’d play my farewell game of Hearts. Or two. Or forty.

It was years before I isolated the key part of my final conversation with Frank Stuart. I had told him he couldn't be so far behind so soon, and he had replied that it happened because he wasn't a quick study. We were both wrong. It *was* possible to fall catastrophically behind in a short period of time, and it happened to the quick studies like me and Skip and Mark St. Pierre as well as to the plodders. In the backs of our minds we must have been holding onto the idea that we'd be able to loaf and then spurt, loaf and then spurt, which was the way most of us had gone through our dozy hometown high schools. But as Dearie Dearborn had pointed out, this wasn't high school.

I told you that of the thirty-two students who began the fall semester on our floor of Chamberlain (thirty-three, if you also count Dearie . . . but he was immune to the charms of Hearts), only fifteen remained to start the spring semester. That doesn't mean the nineteen who left were all dopes, though; not by any means. In fact, the smartest fellows on Chamberlain Three in the fall of 1966 were probably the ones who transferred before flunking out became a real possibility. Steve Ogg and Jack Frady, who had the room just up the hall from Nate and me, went to Chadbourne the first week in November, citing "distractions" on their joint application. When the Housing Officer asked what sort of distractions, they said it was the usual—all-night bull sessions, toothpaste ambushes in the head, abrasive relations with a couple of the guys. As an afterthought, both added they were probably playing cards in the lounge a little too much. They'd heard Chad was a quieter environment, one of the campus's two or three "brain dorms."

The Housing Officer's question had been anticipated, the answer as carefully rehearsed as an oral presentation in a speech class. Neither Steve nor Jack wanted the nearly endless Hearts game shut down; that might cause them all sorts of grief from people who believed folks should mind their own business. All they wanted was to get the fuck off Chamberlain Three while there was still time to salvage their scholarships.

The bad quizzes and unsuccessful little papers were nothing but unpleasant skirmishes. For Skip and me and too many of our cardplaying buddies, our second round of prelims was a full-fledged disaster. I got an A-minus on my in-class English theme and a D in European History, but flunked the Sociology multiple-choicer and the Geology multiple-choicer—soash by a little and geo by a lot. Skip flunked his Anthropology prelim, his Colonial History prelim, and the soash prelim. He got a C on the Calculus test (but the ice was getting pretty thin there, too, he told me) and a B on his in-class essay. We agreed that life would be much simpler if it were all a matter of in-class essays, writing assignments which necessarily took place far from the third-floor lounge. We were wishing for high school, in other words, without even knowing it.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Skip said to me that Friday night. “I’m buckling down, Peter. I don’t give a shit about being a college man or having a diploma to hang over the mantel in my rumpus room, but I’ll be fucked if I want to go back to Dexter and hang around fuckin Bowlarama with the rest of the retards until Uncle Sam calls me.”

He was sitting on Nate’s bed. Nate was across the way at the Palace on the Plains, chowing down on Friday-night fish. It was nice to know somebody on Chamberlain Three had an appetite. This was a conversation we couldn’t have around Nate in any case; my country-mouse roommate thought he’d done pretty well on the latest round of prelims, all C’s and B’s. He wouldn’t have *said* anything if he’d heard us talking, but would have looked at us in a way that said we lacked gumption. That, although it might not be our fault, we were morally weak.

“I’m with you,” I said, and then, from down the hall, came an agonized cry (“*Ohhhhhhh . . . . FUCK ME!*”) that we recognized instantly: someone had just taken The Bitch. Our eyes met. I can’t say about Skip, not for sure (even though he was my best friend in college), but I was still thinking that there was time . . . and why wouldn’t I think that? For me there always had been.

Skip began to grin. I began to grin. Skip began to giggle. I began to giggle right along with him.

“What the fuck,” he said.

“Just tonight,” I said. “We’ll go over to the library together tomorrow.”

“Hit the books.”

“All day. But right now . . .”

He stood up. “Let’s go Bitch-hunting.”

We did. And we weren’t the only ones. That’s no explanation, I know; it’s only what happened.

At breakfast the next morning, as we worked side by side on the dishline, Carol said: “I’m hearing there’s some kind of big card-game going on in your dorm. Is that true?”

“I guess it is,” I said.

She looked at me over her shoulder, giving me that smile—the one I always thought about when I thought about Carol. The one I think about still. “Hearts? Hunting The Bitch?”

“Hearts,” I agreed. “Hunting The Bitch.”

“I heard that some of the guys are getting in over their heads. Getting in grades trouble.”

“I guess that might be,” I said. Nothing was coming down the conveyor belt, not so much as a single tray. There’s never a rush when you need one, I’ve noticed.

“How are *your* grades?” she asked. “I know it’s none of my business, but I want—”

“Information, yeah, I know. I’m doing okay. Besides, I’m getting out of the game.”

She just gave me the smile, and sure I still think about it sometimes; you would, too. The dimples, the slightly curved lower lip that knew so many nice things about kissing, the dancing blue eyes. Those were days when no girl saw further into a boys’ dorm than the lobby . . . and vice-versa, of course. Still, I have an idea that for a little while in October and November of 1966 Carol saw plenty, more than I did. But of course, she wasn’t insane—at least not then. The war in Vietnam became *her* insanity. Mine as well. And Skip’s. And Nate’s. Hearts were nothing, really, only a few tremors in the earth, the kind that flap the screen door on its hinges and rattle the glasses on the shelves. The killer earthquake, the apocalyptic continent-drowner, was still on its way.

Barry Margeaux and Brad Witherspoon both got the Derry *News* delivered to their rooms, and the two copies had usually made the rounds of the third floor by the end of the day—we'd find the remnants in the lounge when we took our seats for the evening session of Hearts, the pages torn and out of order, the crossword filled in by three or four different hands. There would be mustaches inked on the photodot faces of Lyndon Johnson and Ramsey Clark and Martin Luther King (someone, I never found out who, would invariably put large smoking horns on Vice President Humphrey and print HUBERT THE DEVIL underneath in tiny anal capital letters). The *News* was hawkish on the war, putting the most positive spin on each day's military events and relegating any protest news to the depths . . . usually beneath the Community Calendar.

Yet more and more we found ourselves discussing not movies or dates or classes as the cards were shuffled and dealt; more and more it was Vietnam. No matter how good the news or how high the Cong body count, there always seemed to be at least one picture of agonized U.S. soldiers after an ambush or crying Vietnamese children watching their village go up in smoke. There was always some unsettling detail tucked away near the bottom of what Skip called "the daily kill-column," like the thing about the kids who got wasted when we hit the Cong PT boats in the Delta.

Nate, of course, didn't play cards. He wouldn't debate the pros and cons of the war, either—I doubt if he knew, any more than I did, that Vietnam had once been under the French, or what had happened to the *monsieurs* unlucky enough to have been in the fortress city of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, let alone who might've decided it was time for President Diem to go to that big rice-paddy in the sky so Nguyen Cao Ky and the generals could take over. Nate only knew that he had no quarrel with those Congs, that they weren't going to be in Mars Hill or Presque Isle in the immediate future.

"Haven't you ever heard about the domino theory, shitbird?" a banty little freshman named Nicholas Prouty asked Nate one afternoon. My roommate rarely came down to the third-floor lounge now, preferring the quieter one on Two, but that day he had dropped in for a few moments.

Nate looked at Nick Prouty, a lobsterman's son who had become a devout disciple of Ronnie Malenfant, and sighed. "When the dominoes come out, I leave the room. I think it's a boring game. That's *my* domino theory." He shot me a glance. I got my eyes away as fast as I could, but not quite in time to avoid the message: what in hell's *wrong* with you? Then he left, scuffing back down to Room 302 in his fuzzy slippers to do some more studying—to resume his charted course from pre-dent to dent, in other words.

"Riley, your roommate's fucked, you know that?" Ronnie said. He had a cigarette tucked in the corner of his mouth. Now he scratched a match one-handed, a specialty of his—college guys too ugly and abrasive to get girls have all sorts of specialties—and lit up.

*No, man*, I thought, *Nate's doing fine. We're the ones who are fucked up*. For a second I felt real despair. In that second I realized I was in a terrible jam and had no idea at all of how to extricate myself. I was aware of Skip looking at me, and it occurred to me that if I snatched up the cards, sprayed them in Ronnie's face, and walked out of the room, Skip would join me. Likely with relief. Then the feeling passed. It passed as rapidly as it had come.

"Nate's okay," I said. "He's got some funny ideas, that's all."

"Some funny *communist* ideas is what he's got," Hugh Brennan said. His older brother was in the Navy and was most recently heard from in the South China Sea. Hugh had no use for peaceniks. As a Goldwater Republican I should have felt the same, but Nate had started getting to me. I had all sorts of canned knowledge, but no real arguments in favor of the war . . . nor time to work any up. I was too busy to study my sociology, let alone to bone up on U.S. foreign policy.

I'm pretty sure that was the night I almost called Annmarie Soucie. The phone-booth across from the lounge was empty, I had a pocketful of change from my latest victory in the Hearts wars, and I suddenly decided *The Time Had Come*. I dialed her number from memory (although I had to think for a moment about the last four digits—were they 8146 or 8164?) and plugged in three quarters when the operator asked for them. I let the phone ring a single time, then racked the receiver with a bang and retrieved my quarters when I heard them rattle into the return.

A day or two later—shortly before Halloween—Nate got an album by a guy I'd only vaguely heard of: Phil Ochs. A folkie, but not the blunk-blunk banjo kind who used to show up on *Hootenanny*. The album cover, which showed a rumpled troubadour sitting on a curb in New York City, went oddly with the covers of Nate's other records—Dean Martin looking tipsy in a tux, Mitch Miller with his sing-along smile, Diane Renay in her middy blouse and perky sailor cap. The Ochs record was called *I Ain't Marchin' Anymore*, and Nate played it a lot as the days shortened and turned chilly. I took to playing it myself, and Nate didn't seem to mind.

There was a kind of baffled anger in Ochs's voice. I suppose I liked it because most of the time I felt pretty baffled myself. He was like Dylan, but less complicated in his expression and clearer in his rage. The best song on the album—also the most troubling—was the title song. In that song Ochs didn't just suggest but came right out and said that war wasn't worth it, war was never worth it. Even when it was worth it, it wasn't worth it. This idea, coupled with the image of young men just walking away from Lyndon and his Vietnam obsession by the thousands and tens of thousands, excited my imagination in a way that had nothing to do with history or policy or rational thought. I must have killed a million men and now they want me back again but I ain't marchin' anymore, Phil Ochs sang through the speaker of Nate's nifty little Swingline phono. Just quit it, in other words. Quit doing what they say, quit doing what they want, quit playing their game. It's an old game, and in this one The Bitch is hunting *you*.

And maybe to show you mean it, you start wearing a symbol of your resistance—something others will first wonder about and then perhaps rally to. It was a couple of days after Halloween that Nate Hoppenstand showed us what the symbol was going to be. Finding out started with one of those crumpled leftover newspapers in the third-floor lounge.

“Son of a bitch, look at this,” Billy Marchant said.

Harvey Twiller was shuffling the cards at Billy’s table, Lennie Doria was adding up the current score, and Billy was taking the opportunity to do a quick scan-through of the *News’s* Local section. Kirby McClendon—unshaven, tall n twitchy, well on his way to his date with all those baby aspirins—leaned in to take a look.

Billy drew back from him, fluttering a hand in front of his face. “Jesus, Kirb, when did you take your last shower? Columbus Day? Fourth of July?”

“Let me see,” Kirby said, ignoring him. He snatched the paper away. “Fuck, that’s Rip-Rip!”

Ronnie Malenfant got up so fast his chair fell over, entranced by the idea that Stoke had made the paper. When college kids showed up in the *Derry News* (except on the sports page, of course) it was always because they were in trouble. Others gathered around Kirby, Skip and me among them. It was Stokely Jones III, all right, and not just him. Standing in the background, their faces almost but not quite lost in the clusters of dots . . .

“Christ,” Skip said, “I think that’s Nate.” He sounded amused and astonished.

“And that’s Carol Gerber just up ahead of him,” I said in a funny, shocked voice. I knew the jacket with HARWICH HIGH SCHOOL on the back; knew the blond hair hanging over the jacket’s collar in a ponytail; knew the faded jeans. And I knew the face. Even half-turned away and shadowed by a sign reading U.S. OUT OF VIETNAM NOW!, I knew the face. “That’s my girlfriend.” It was the first time the word *girlfriend* had come out of my mouth tied to Carol’s name, although I had been thinking of her that way for a couple of weeks at least.

POLICE BREAK UP DRAFT PROTEST, the photo caption read. No names were given. According to the accompanying story, a dozen or so protesters from the University of Maine had gathered in front of the Federal Building in downtown Derry. They had carried signs and marched around the entrance to the Selective Service office for about an hour, singing songs and “chanting

slogans, some obscene.” Police had been called and had at first only stood by, intending to allow the demonstration to run its course, but then an opposing group of demonstrators had turned up—mostly construction workers on their lunch break. They had begun chanting their own slogans, and although the *News* didn’t mention if they were obscene or not, I could guess there had been invitations to go back to Russia, suggestions as to where the demonstrators could store their signs while not in use, and directions to the nearest barber shop.

When the protesters began to shout back at the construction workers and the construction workers began firing pieces of fruit from their dinner-buckets at the protesters, the police had stepped in. Citing the protesters’ lack of a permit (the Derry cops had apparently never heard about the right of Americans to assemble peaceably), they rounded up the kids and took them to the police substation on Witcham Street. There they were simply released. “We only wanted to get them out of a bad atmosphere,” one cop was quoted as saying. “If they go back down there, they’re even dumber than they look.”

The photo really wasn’t much different from the one taken at East Annex during the Coleman Chemicals protest. It showed the cops leading the protesters away while construction workers (a year or so later they would all be sporting small American flags on their hardhats) jeered and grinned and shook their fists. One cop was frozen in the act of reaching out toward Carol’s arm; Nate, standing behind her, had not attracted their attention, it seemed. Two more cops were escorting Stoke Jones, who was back to the camera but unmistakable on his crutches. If any further aid to identification was needed, there was that hand-drawn sparrow-track on his jacket.

“Look at that dumb fuck!” Ronnie crowed. (Ronnie, who had flunked two of four on the last round of prelims, had a nerve calling anyone a dumb fuck.) “Like he didn’t have anything better to do!”

Skip ignored him. So did I. For us Ronnie’s bluster was already fading into insignificance no matter what the subject. We were fascinated by the sight of Carol . . . and of Nate Hoppenstand behind her, watching as the demonstrators were led away. Nate as neat as ever in an Ivy League shirt and jeans with cuffs and creases, Nate standing near the jeering, fist-shaking construction workers but totally ignored by them. Ignored by the cops, too.

Neither group knew my roommate had lately become a fan of the subversive Mr. Phil Ochs.

I slipped out to the telephone booth and called Franklin Hall, second floor. Someone from the lounge answered and when I asked for Carol, the girl said Carol wasn't there, she'd gone over to the library to study with Libby Sexton. "Is this Pete?"

"Yeah," I said.

"There's a note here for you. She left it on the glass." This was common practice in the dorms at that time. "It says she'll call you later."

"Okay. Thanks."

Skip was outside the telephone booth, motioning impatiently for me to come. We walked down the hall to see Nate, even though we knew we'd both lose our places at the tables where we'd been playing. In this case, curiosity outweighed obsession.

Nate's face didn't change much when we showed him the paper and asked him about the demonstration the day before, but his face never changed much. All the same, I sensed that he was unhappy, perhaps even miserable. I couldn't understand why that would be—everything had ended well, after all; no one had gone to jail or even been named in the paper.

I'd just about decided I was reading too much into his usual quietness when Skip said, "What's eating you?"

There was a kind of rough concern in his voice. Nate's lower lip trembled and then firmed at the sound of it. He leaned over the neat surface of his desk (my own was already covered in about nineteen layers of junk) and snagged a Kleenex from the box he kept by his record-player. He blew his nose long and hard. When he was finished he was under control again, but I could see the baffled unhappiness in his eyes. Part of me—a mean part—was glad to see it. Glad to know that you didn't have to turn into a Hearts junkie to have problems. Human nature can be so shitty sometimes.

"I rode up with Stoke and Harry Swidrowski and a few other guys," Nate said.

"Was Carol with you?" I asked.

Nate shook his head. "I think she was with George Gilman's bunch. There were five carloads of us in all." I didn't know George Gilman from Adam, but

that did not prevent me from directing a dart of fairly sick jealousy at him. “Harry and Stoke are on the Committee of Resistance. Gilman, too. Anyway, we—”

“Committee of Resistance?” Skip asked. “What’s that?”

“A club,” Nate said, and sighed. “They think it’s something more—especially Harry and George, they’re real firebrands—but it’s just another club, really, like the Maine Masque or the pep squad.”

Nate said he himself had gone along because it was a Tuesday and he didn’t have any classes on Tuesday afternoons. No one gave orders; no one passed around loyalty oaths or even sign-up sheets; there was no real pressure to march and none of the paramilitary beret-wearing fervor that crept into the antiwar movement later on. Carol and the kids with her had been laughing and bopping each other with their signs when they left the gym parking lot, according to Nate. (Laughing. Laughing with George Gilman. I threw another one of those germ-laden jealousy-darts.)

When they got to the Federal Building, some people demonstrated, marching around in circles in front of the Selective Service office door, and some people didn’t. Nate was one of those who didn’t. As he told us that, his usually smooth face tightened in another brief cramp of something that might have been real misery in a less settled boy.

“I *meant* to march with them,” he said. “All the way up I expected to march with them. It was exciting, six of us crammed into Harry Swidrowski’s Saab. A real trip. Hunter McPhail . . . do you guys know him?”

Skip and I shook our heads. I think both of us were a little awestruck to discover the owner of *Meet Trini Lopez* and *Diane Renay Sings Navy Blue* had what amounted to a secret life, including connections to the sort of people who attracted both cops and newspaper coverage.

“He and George Gilman started the Committee. Anyway, Hunter was holding Stoke’s crutches out the window of the Saab because we couldn’t fit them inside and we sang ‘I Ain’t Marchin’ Anymore’ and talked about how maybe we could really stop the war if enough of us got together—that is, all of us talked about stuff like that except Stoke. He keeps pretty quiet.”

So, I thought. Even with them he keeps quiet . . . except, presumably, when he decides a little credibility lecture is in order. But Nate wasn’t thinking about

Stoke; Nate was thinking about Nate. Brooding over his feet's inexplicable refusal to carry his heart where it had clearly wanted to go.

"All the way up I'm thinking, 'I'll march with them, I'll march with them because it's right . . . at least *I* think it's right . . . and if someone takes a swing at me I'll be nonviolent, just like the guys in the lunchroom sit-ins. Those guys won, maybe we can win, too.'" He looked at us. "I mean, it was never a question in my mind. You know?"

"Yeah," Skip said. "I know."

"But when we got there, I couldn't do it. I helped hand out signs saying STOP THE WAR and U.S. OUT OF VIETNAM NOW and BRING THE BOYS HOME . . . Carol and I helped Stoke fix his so he could march with it and still use his crutches . . . but I couldn't take one myself. I stood on the sidewalk with Bill Shadwick and Kerry Morin and a girl named Lorlie McGinnis . . . she's my partner in Botany Lab . . ." He took the sheet of newspaper out of Skip's hand and studied it, as if to confirm again that yes, it had all really happened; the master of Rinty and the boyfriend of Cindy had actually gone to an antiwar demonstration. He sighed and then let the piece of newspaper drift to the floor. This was so unlike him it kind of hurt my head.

"I thought I would march with them. I mean, why else did I come? All the way down from Orono it was never, you know, a question in my mind."

He looked at me, kind of pleading. I nodded as if I understood.

"But then I didn't. I don't know why."

Skip sat down next to him on his bed. I found the Phil Ochs album and put it on the turntable. Nate looked at Skip, then looked away. Nate's hands were as small and neat as the rest of him, except for the nails. The nails were ragged, bitten right down to the quick.

"Okay," he said as if Skip had asked out loud. "*I do* know why. I was afraid they'd get arrested and I'd get arrested with them. That my picture would be in the paper getting arrested and my folks would see it." There was a long pause. Poor old Nate was trying to say the rest. I held the needle over the first groove of the spinning record, waiting to see if he could. At last he did. "That my *mother* would see it."

"It's okay, Nate," Skip said.

“I don’t think so,” Nate replied in a trembling voice. “I really don’t.” He wouldn’t meet Skip’s eyes, only sat there on his bed with his prominent chicken-ribs and bare white Yankee skin between his pajama bottoms and his freshman beanie, looking down at his gnawed cuticles. “I don’t like to argue about the war. Harry does . . . and Lorlie . . . George Gilman, gosh, you can’t get George to shut up about it, and most of the others on the Committee are the same. But when it comes to talking, I’m more like Stoke than them.”

“No one’s like Stoke,” I said. I remembered the day I met him on Bennett’s Walk. *Why don’t you take it easy?* I’d asked. *Why don’t you eat me?* Mr. Credibility had replied.

Nate was still studying his cuticles. “What I *think* is that Johnson is sending American boys over there to die for no reason. It isn’t imperialism or colonialism, like Harry Swidrowski believes, it’s not any *ism* at all. Johnson’s got it all mixed up in his mind with Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone and the New York Yankees, that’s all. And if I think that, I ought to *say* that. I ought to try to stop it. That’s what I learned in church, in school, even in the darned *Boy Scouts of America*. You’re supposed to stand up. If you see something happening that’s wrong, like a big guy beating up a little guy, you’re supposed to stand up and at least try to stop it. But I was afraid my mother’d see a picture of me getting arrested and cry.”

Nate raised his head and we saw he was crying himself. Just a little; wet lids and lashes, no more than that. For him that was a big deal, though.

“I found out one thing,” he said. “What that is on the back of Stoke Jones’s jacket.”

“What?” Skip asked.

“A combination of two British Navy semaphore letters. Look.” Nate stood up with his bare heels together. He lifted his left arm straight up toward the ceiling and dropped his right down to the floor, making a straight line. “That’s N.” Next he held his arms out at forty-five-degree angles to his body. I could see how the two shapes, when superimposed, would make the shape Stoke had inked on the back of his old duffle coat. “This one’s D.”

“N-D,” Skip said. “So?”

“The letters stand for nuclear disarmament. Bertrand Russell invented the symbol in the fifties.” He drew it on the back of his notebook: ☺ “He called it a peace sign.”

“Cool,” Skip said.

Nate smiled and wiped under his eyes with his fingers. “That’s what I thought,” he agreed. “It’s a groove thing.”

I dropped the needle on the record and we listened to Phil Ochs sing. Grooved to it, as we Atlanteans used to say.

The lounge in the middle of Chamberlain Three had become my Jupiter—a scary planet with a huge gravitational pull. Still, I resisted it that night, slipping back into the phone-booth instead and calling Franklin again. This time I got Carol.

“I’m all right,” she said, laughing a little. “I’m fine. One of the cops even called me little lady. Sheesh, Pete, such concern.”

*How much concern did this guy Gilman show you?* I felt like asking, but even at eighteen I knew that wasn’t the way to go.

“You should have given me a call,” I said. “Maybe I would have gone with you. We could have taken my car.”

Carol began to giggle, a sweet sound but puzzling.

“What?”

“I was thinking about riding to an antiwar demonstration in a station wagon with a Goldwater sticker on the bumper.”

I guessed that *was* sort of funny.

“Besides,” she said, “I imagine you had other things to do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” As if I didn’t know. Through the glass of the phone-booth and that of the lounge, I could see most of my floor-mates playing cards in a fume of cigarette smoke. And even in here with the door closed I could hear Ronnie Malenfant’s high-pitched cackle. We’re chasing The Bitch, boys, we are *cherchez-ing la cunt noire*, and we’re going to have her out of the bushes.

“Studying or Hearts,” she said. “Studying, I hope. One of the girls on my floor goes out with Lennie Doria—or did, when he still had the time to go out. She calls it the card-game from hell. Am I being a nag yet?”

“No,” I said, not knowing if she was or not. Maybe I needed to be nagged. “Carol, are you okay?”

There was a long pause. “Yeah,” she said at last. “Sure I am.”

“The construction workers who showed up—”

“Mostly mouth,” she said. “Don’t worry. Really.”

But she didn't sound right to me, not quite right . . . and there was George Gilman to worry about. I worried about him in a way I didn't about Sully, the boyfriend back home.

"Are you on this Committee Nate told me about?" I asked her. "This Committee of Resistance whatsit?"

"No," she said. "Not yet, at least. George has asked me to join. He's this guy from my Polysci course. George Gilman. Do you know him?"

"Heard of him," I said. I was clutching the phone too tightly and couldn't seem to loosen up.

"He was the one who told me about the demonstration. I rode up with him and some others. I . . ." She broke off for a moment, then said with honest curiosity: "You're not jealous of him, are you?"

"Well," I said carefully, "he got to spend an afternoon with you. I'm jealous of *that*, I guess."

"Don't be. He's got brains, plenty of them, but he's also got a wiffle haircut and great big shifty eyes. He shaves, but it seems like he always misses a big patch. *He's* not the attraction, believe me."

"Then what is?"

"Can I see you? I want to show you something. It won't take long. But it might help if I could just *explain* . . ." Her voice wavered on the word and I realized she was close to tears.

"What's wrong?"

"You mean other than that my father probably won't let me back into his house once he's seen me in the *News*? He'll have the locks changed by this weekend, I bet. That's if he hasn't changed them already."

I thought of Nate saying he was afraid his mother would see a picture of him getting arrested. Mommy's good little pre-dent pinched down in Derry for parading in front of the Federal Building without a permit. Ah, the shame, the shame. And Carol's dad? Not quite the same deal, but close. Carol's dad was a steady boy who said ship ahoy and joined the Nay-yay-vee, after all.

"He may not see the story," I said. "Even if he does, the paper didn't use any names."

"The *picture*." She spoke patiently, as if to someone who can't help being dense. "Didn't you see the picture?"

I started to say that her face was mostly turned away from the camera and what you could see was in shadow. Then I remembered her high-school jacket with HARWICH HIGH SCHOOL blaring across the back. Also, he was her *father*, for Christ's sake. Even half-turned away from the camera, her father would know her.

"He may not see the picture, either," I said lamely. "Damariscotta's at the far edge of the *News's* area."

"Is that how you want to live your life, Pete?" She still sounded patient, but now it was patience with an edge. "Doing stuff and then hoping people won't find out?"

"No," I said. And could I get mad at her for saying that, considering that Annmarie Soucie still didn't have the slightest idea that Carol Gerber was alive? I didn't think so. Carol and I weren't married or anything, but marriage wasn't the issue. "No, I don't. But Carol . . . you don't have to shove the damned newspaper under his nose for him, do you?"

She laughed. The sound had none of the brightness I had heard in her earlier giggle, but I thought even a rueful laugh was better than none at all. "I won't have to. He'll find it. That's just the way he is. But I had to go, Pete. And I'll probably join the Committee of Resistance even though George Gilman always looks like a little kid who just got caught eating boogers and Harry Swidrowski has the world's worst breath. Because it's . . . the thing of it is . . . you see . . ." She blew a frustrated I-can't-explain sigh into my ear. "Listen, you know where we go out for smoke-breaks?"

"At Holyoke? By the Dumpsters, sure."

"Meet me there," Carol said. "In fifteen minutes. Can you?"

"Yes."

"I have a lot more studying to do so I can't stay long, but I . . . I just . . ."

"I'll be there."

I hung up the phone and stepped out of the booth. Ashley Rice was standing in the doorway of the lounge, smoking and doing a little shuffle-step. I deduced that he was between games. His face was too pale, the black stubble on his cheeks standing out like pencil-marks, and his shirt had gone beyond simply soiled; it looked lived-in. He had a wide-eyed Danger High Voltage

look that I later came to associate with heavy cocaine users. And that's what the game really was; a kind of drug. Not the kind that mellowed you out, either.

"What do you say, Pete?" he asked. "Want to play a few hands?"

"Maybe later," I said, and started down the hall. Stoke Jones was thumping back from the bathroom in a frayed old robe. His crutches left round wet tracks on the dark red linoleum. His long, crazy hair was wet. I wondered how he did in the shower; certainly there were none of the railings and grab-handles that later became standard in public washing facilities. He didn't look as though he would much enjoy discussing the subject, however. That or any other subject.

"How you doing, Stoke?" I asked.

He went by without answering, head down, dripping hair plastered to his cheeks, soap and towel clamped under one arm, muttering "*Rip-rip, rip-rip*" under his breath. He never even looked up at me. Say whatever you wanted about Stoke Jones, you could depend on him to put a little fuck-you into your day.

Carol was already at Holyoke when I got there. She had brought a couple of milk-boxes from the area where the Dumpsters were lined up and was sitting on one of them, legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. I sat down on the other one, put my arm around her, and kissed her. She put her head on my shoulder for a moment, not saying anything. This wasn't much like her, but it was nice. I kept my arm around her and looked up at the stars. The night was mild for so late in the season, and lots of people—couples, mostly—were out walking, taking advantage of the weather. I could hear their murmured conversations. From above us, in the Commons dining room, a radio was playing “Hang On, Sloopy.” One of the janitors, I suppose.

Carol raised her head at last and moved away from me a little—just enough to let me know I could take my arm back. That was more like her, actually. “Thanks,” she said. “I needed a hug.”

“My pleasure.”

“I'm a little scared about facing my dad. Not real scared, but a little.”

“It'll be all right.” Not saying it because I really thought it would be—I couldn't know a thing like that—but because it's what you say, isn't it? Just what you say.

“My dad's not the reason I went with Harry and George and the rest. It's no big Freudian rebellion, or anything like that.”

She flicked her cigarette away and we watched it fountain sparks when it struck the bricks of Bennett's Walk. Then she took her little clutch purse out of her lap, opened it, found her wallet, opened *that*, and thumbed through a selection of snapshots stuck in those small celluloid windows. She stopped, slipped one out, and handed it to me. I leaned forward so I could see it by the light falling through the dining-hall windows, where the janitors were probably doing the floors.

The picture showed three kids of eleven or twelve, a girl and two boys. They were all wearing blue tee-shirts with the words STERLING HOUSE on them in red block letters. They were standing in a parking lot somewhere and had their

arms around each other—an easy pals-forever pose that was sort of beautiful. The girl was in the middle. The girl was Carol, of course.

“Which one is Sully-John?” I asked. She looked at me, a little surprised . . . but with the smile. In any case, I thought I already knew. Sully-John would be the one with the broad shoulders, the wide grin, and the tumbled black hair. It reminded me of Stoke’s hair, although the boy had obviously run a comb through his thatch. I tapped him. “This one, right?”

“That’s Sully,” she agreed, then touched the face of the other boy with her fingernail. He had a sunburn rather than a tan. His face was narrower, the eyes a little closer together, the hair a carrot red and mowed in a crewcut that made him look like a kid on a Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* cover. There was a faint frown-line on his brow. Sully’s arms were already muscular for a kid’s; this other boy had thin arms, thin stick arms. They were probably still thin stick arms. On the hand not slung around Carol’s shoulders he was wearing a big brown baseball glove.

“This one’s Bobby,” she said. Her voice had changed, somehow. There was something in it I’d never heard before. Sorrow? But she was still smiling. If it was sorrow she felt, why was she smiling? “Bobby Garfield. He was my first boyfriend. My first love, I guess you could say. He and Sully and I were best friends back then. Not so long ago, 1960, but it *seems* long ago.”

“What happened to him?” I was somehow sure she was going to tell me he had died, this boy with the narrow face and the crewcut carrot-top.

“He and his mom moved away. We wrote back and forth for awhile, and then we lost touch. You know how kids are.”

“Nice baseball glove.”

Carol still with the smile. I could see the tears that had come into her eyes as we sat looking down at the snapshot, but still with the smile. In the white light of the fluorescents from the dining hall, her tears looked silver—the tears of a princess in a fairy-tale.

“That was Bobby’s favorite thing. There’s a baseball player named Alvin Dark, right?”

“There was.”

“That’s what kind of a glove Bobby had. An Alvin Dark model.”

“Mine was a Ted Williams. I think my mom rummage-saled it a couple of years ago.”

“Bobby’s got stolen,” Carol said. I’m not sure she knew I was there anymore. She kept touching that narrow, slightly frowning face with her fingertip. It was as if she had regressed into her own past. I’ve heard that hypnotists can do that with good subjects. “Willie took it.”

“Willie?”

“Willie Shearman. I saw him playing ball with it a year later, down at Sterling House. I was so mad. My mom and dad were always fighting then, working up to the divorce, I guess, and I was mad all the time. Mad at them, mad at my math teacher, mad at the whole world. I was still scared of Willie, but mostly I was mad at him . . . and besides, I wasn’t by myself, not that day. So I marched right up to him and said I knew that was Bobby’s glove and he ought to give it to me. I said I had Bobby’s address in Massachusetts and I’d send it to him. Willie said I was crazy, it was *his* glove, and he showed me his name on the side. He’d erased Bobby’s—best as he could, anyway—and printed his own over where it had been. But I could still see the *bby*, from Bobby.”

A creepy sort of indignation had crept into her voice. It made her sound younger. And *look* younger. I suppose my memory could be wrong about that, but I don’t think it is. Sitting there on the edge of the white light from the dining hall, I think she looked about twelve. Thirteen at the most.

“He couldn’t erase the Alvin Dark signature in the pocket, though, or write over it . . . and he blushed. Dark red. Red as roses. Then—do you know what?—he apologized for what he and his two friends did to me. He was the only one who ever did, and I think he meant it. But he lied about the glove. I don’t think he wanted it, it was old and the webbing was all broken out and it looked all wrong on his hand, but he lied so he could keep it. I don’t understand why. I never have.”

“I’m not following this,” I said.

“Why should you? It’s all jumbled up in *my* mind and I was *there*. My mother told me once that happens to people who are in accidents or fights. I remember some of it pretty well—mostly the parts with Bobby in them—but almost everything else comes from what people told me later on.

“I was in the park down the street from my house, and these three boys came along—Harry Doolin, Willie Shearman, and another one. I can’t remember the other one’s name. It doesn’t matter, anyway. They beat me up. I was only eleven but that didn’t stop them. Harry Doolin hit me with a baseball bat. Willie and the other one held me so I couldn’t run away.”

“A baseball bat? Are you shitting me?”

She shook her head. “At first they were joking, I think, and then . . . they weren’t. My arm got dislocated. I screamed and I guess they ran away. I sat there, holding my arm, too hurt and too . . . too shocked I guess . . . to know what to do. Or maybe I tried to get up and get help for myself and couldn’t. Then Bobby came along. He walked me out of the park and then he picked me up and carried me back to his apartment. All the way up Broad Street Hill on one of the hottest days of the year. He carried me in his arms.”

I took the snapshot from her, held it in the light, and bent over it, looking at the boy with the crewcut. Looking at his thin stick arms, then looking at the girl. She was an inch or two taller than he was, and broader in the shoulders. I looked at the other boy, Sully. He of the tumbled black hair and the All-American grin. Stoke Jones’s hair; Skip Kirk’s grin. I could see Sully carrying her in his arms, yeah, but the other kid—

“I know,” she said. “He doesn’t look big enough, does he? But he carried me. I started to faint and he carried me.” She took the picture back.

“And while he was doing that, this kid Willie who helped beat you up came back and stole his glove?”

She nodded. “Bobby took me to his apartment. There was this old guy who lived in a room upstairs, Ted, who seemed to know a little bit about everything. He popped my arm back into its socket. I remember he gave me his belt to bite on when he did it. Or maybe it was Bobby’s belt. He said I could catch the pain, and I did. After that . . . after that, something bad happened.”

“Worse than getting lumped up with a baseball bat?”

“In a way. I don’t want to talk about it.” She wiped her tears away with one hand, first one side and then the other, still looking at the snapshot. “Later on, before he and his mother left Harwich, Bobby beat up the boy who actually used the bat. Harry Doolin.”

Carol put her photograph back in its little compartment.

“What I remember best about that day—the only thing about it *worth* remembering—is that Bobby Garfield stood up for me. Sully was bigger, and Sully *might* have stood up for me if he’d been there, but he wasn’t. Bobby was there, and he carried me all the way up the hill. He did what was right. It’s the best thing, the most important thing, anyone has ever done for me in my life. Do you see that, Pete?”

“Yeah. I do.”

I saw something else, too: she was saying almost exactly what Nate had said not an hour before . . . only she *had* marched. Had taken one of the signs and marched with it. Of course Nate Hoppenstand had never been beaten up by three boys who started out joking and then decided they were serious. And maybe that was the difference.

“He carried me up that hill,” she said. “I always wanted to tell him how much I loved him for that, and how much I loved him for showing Harry Doolin that there’s a price to pay for hurting people, especially people who are smaller than you and don’t mean you any harm.”

“So you marched.”

“I marched. I wanted to tell someone why. I wanted to tell someone who’d understand. My father won’t and my mother can’t. Her friend Rionda called me and said . . .” She didn’t finish, only sat there on the milk-box, fidgeting with her little bag.

“Said what?”

“Nothing.” She sounded exhausted, forlorn. I wanted to kiss her, at least put my arm around her, but I was afraid doing either would spoil what had just happened. Because something *had* happened. There was magic in her story. Not in the middle, but somewhere out around the edges. I felt it.

“I marched, and I guess I’ll join the Committee of Resistance. My roommate says I’m crazy, I’ll never get a job if a commie student group’s part of my college records, but I think I’m going to do it.”

“And your father? What about him?”

“Fuck him.”

There was a semi-shocked moment when we considered what she had just said, and then Carol giggled. “Now *that’s* Freudian.” She stood up. “I have to

go back and study. Thanks for coming out, Pete. I haven't ever shown that picture to anyone. I haven't looked at it myself in who knows how long. I feel better. Lots."

"Good." I got up myself. "Before you go in, will you help *me* do something?"

"Sure, what?"

"I'll show you. It won't take long."

I walked her down the side of Holyoke and then we started up the hill behind it. About two hundred yards away was the Steam Plant parking lot, where undergrads ineligible for parking stickers (freshmen, sophomores, and most juniors) had to keep their cars. It was the prime makeout spot on campus once it got cold, but making out in my car wasn't on my mind that night.

"Did you ever tell Bobby about who got his baseball glove?" I asked. "You said you wrote to him."

"I didn't see the point."

We walked in silence for a little while. Then I said: "I'm going to call it off with Annmarie over Thanksgiving. I started to phone her, then didn't. If I'm going to do it, I guess I better find the guts to do it face to face." I hadn't been aware of coming to any such decision, not consciously, but it seemed I had. Certainly it wasn't something I was saying just to please Carol.

She nodded, scuffing through the leaves in her sneakers, holding her little bag in one hand, not looking at me. "I had to use the phone. Called S-J and told him I was seeing a guy."

I stopped. "When?"

"Last week." Now she looked up at me. Dimples; slightly curved lower lip; the smile.

"Last *week*? And you didn't tell me?"

"It was my business," she said. "Mine and Sully's. I mean, it isn't like he's going to come after you with a . . ." She paused long enough for both of us to think *with a baseball bat* and then went on, "That he's going to come after you, or anything. Come on, Pete. If we're going to do something, let's do it. I'm not going riding with you, though. I really have to study."

"No rides."

We got walking again. The Steam Plant lot seemed huge to me in those days—hundreds of cars parked in dozens of moonlit rows. I could hardly ever remember where I left my brother's old Ford wagon. The last time I was back at UM, the lot was three, maybe even four times as big, with space for a thousand cars or more. Time passes and everything gets bigger except us.

“Hey Pete?” Walking. Looking down at her sneakers again even though we were on the asphalt now and there were no more leaves to scuff.

“Uh-huh.”

“I don't want you to go breaking up with Ann-marie because of me. Because I have an idea we're . . . temporary. All right?”

“Yeah.” What she said made me unhappy—it was what the citizens of Atlantis referred to as *a bummer*—but it didn't really surprise me. “I guess it'll have to be.”

“I like you, and I like being with you now, but it's just liking you, that's all it is, and it's best to be honest. So if you want to keep your mouth shut when you go home for the holiday—”

“Kind of keep her around at home? Sort of like a spare tire in case we get a flat here at school?”

She looked startled, then laughed. “*Touché*,” she said.

“*Touché* for what?”

“I don't even know, Pete . . . but I *do* like you.”

She stopped, turned to me, slipped her arms around my neck. We kissed for a little while between two rows of cars, kissed until I got a pretty decent bone on, one I'm sure she could feel. Then she gave me a final peck on the lips and we started walking again.

“What did Sully say when you told him? I don't know if I'm supposed to ask, but—”

“—but you want *information*,” she said in a brusque Number Two voice. Then she laughed. It was the rueful one. “I was expecting he'd be angry, or that he might even cry. Sully's big and he scares the devil out of the football players he matches up against, but his feelings are always close to the skin. What I *didn't* expect was relief.”

“Relief?”

“Relief. He’s been seeing this girl in Bridgeport for a month or more . . . except my mom’s friend Rionda told me she’s actually a woman, maybe twenty-four or -five.”

“Sounds like a recipe for disaster,” I said, hoping I sounded measured and thoughtful. I was actually delighted. Of course I was. And if pore ole gosh-darned tender-hearted John Sullivan stumbled into the plot of a country-western Merle Haggard song, well, four hundred million Red Chinese wouldn’t give a shit, and that went double for me.

We had almost arrived at my car. It was just one more old heap among all the others, but, courtesy of my brother, it was mine. “He’s got more on his mind than his new love interest,” Carol said. “He’s going into the Army when he finishes high school next June. He’s already talked to the recruiter and got it arranged. He can’t wait to get over there in Vietnam and start making the world safe for democracy.”

“Did you have a fight with him about the war?”

“Nope. What would be the use? For that matter, what would I tell him? That for me it’s all about Bobby Garfield? That all the stuff Harry Swidrowski and George Gilman and Hunter McPhail say seems like smoke and mirrors compared to Bobby carrying me up Broad Street Hill? Sully would think I was crazy. Or say it’s because I’m too smart. Sully feels sorry for people who are too smart. He says being too smart is a disease. And maybe he’s right. I kind of love him, you know. He’s sweet. He’s also the kind of guy who needs someone to take care of him.”

And I hope he finds someone, I thought. Just as long as it’s not you.

She looked judiciously at my car. “Okay,” she said. “It’s ugly, it *desperately* needs a wash, but it’s transportation. The question is, what’re we doing here when I should be reading a Flannery O’Connor story?”

I took out my pocket-knife and opened it. “Got a nail-file in your bag?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Are we going to fight? Number Two and Number Six go at it in the Steam Plant parking lot?”

“Don’t be a smartass. Just get it out and follow me.”

By the time we got around to the back of the station wagon, she was laughing—not the rueful laugh but the full-out guffaw I’d first heard when

Skip's horny hotdog man came down the dishline conveyor belt. She finally understood why we were here.

Carol took one side of the bumper sticker; I took the other; we met in the middle. Then we watched the shreds blow away across the macadam. *Au revoir*, AuH<sub>2</sub>O-4-USA. Bye-bye, Barry. And we laughed. Man, we just couldn't stop laughing.

A couple of days later my friend Skip, who'd come to college with the political awareness of a mollusk, put up a poster on his side of the room he shared with Brad Witherspoon. It showed a smiling businessman in a three-piece suit. One hand was extended to shake. The other was hidden behind his back, but something clutched in it was dripping blood between his shoes. WAR IS GOOD BUSINESS, the poster said. INVEST YOUR SON.

Dearie was horrified.

"So you're against Vietnam now?" he asked when he saw it. Below his chin-out truculence I think our beloved floor-proctor was badly shocked by that poster. Skip, after all, had been a first-class high-school baseball player. Was expected to play college ball, too. Had been courted by both Delta Tau Delta and Phi Gam, the jock frats. Skip was no sickly cripple like Stoke Jones (Dearie Dearborn had also taken to calling Stoke Rip-Rip), no frog-eyed weirdo like George Gilman.

"Hey, all this poster means is that a lot of people are making money out of a big bloody mess," Skip said. "McDonnell-Douglas. Boeing. GE. Dow Chemical and Coleman Chemicals. Pepsi Fuckin Cola. Lots more."

Dearie's gimlet gaze conveyed (or tried to) the idea that he had thought about such issues more deeply than Skip Kirk ever could. "Let me ask you something—do you think we should just stand back and let Uncle Ho take over down there?"

"I don't know *what* I think," Skip said, "not yet. I only started getting interested in the subject a couple of weeks ago. I'm still playing catch-up."

This was at seven-thirty in the morning, and a little group outbound for eight o'clock classes had gathered around Skip's door. I saw Ronnie (plus Nick Prouty; by this point the two of them had become inseparable), Ashley Rice, Lennie Doria, Billy Marchant, maybe four or five others. Nate was leaning in the doorway of 302, wearing a tee-shirt and his pj bottoms. In the stairwell, Stoke Jones leaned on his crutches. He had apparently been on his way out and had turned back to monitor the discussion.

Dearie said, “When the Viet Cong come into a South Viet ’ville, the first thing they look for are people wearing crucifixes, St. Christopher medals, Mary medals, anything of that nature. Catholics are killed. People who believe in *God* are killed. Do you think we should stand back while the commies kill people who believe in God?”

“Why not?” Stoke said from the stairwell. “We stood back and let the Nazis kill the Jews for six years. Jews believe in God, or so I’m told.”

“Fucking Rip-Rip!” Ronnie shouted. “Who the fuck asked you to play the piano?”

But by then Stoke Jones, aka Rip-Rip, was making his way down the stairs. The echoey sound of his crutches made me think of the recently departed Frank Stuart.

Dearie turned back to Skip. His hands were fisted on his hips. Lying against the front of his white tee-shirt was a set of dogtags. His father had worn them in France and Germany, he told us; had been wearing them as he lay behind a tree, hiding from the machine-gun fire that had killed two men in his company and wounded four more. What this had to do with the Vietnam conflict none of us quite knew, but it was clearly a big deal to Dearie, so none of us asked. Even Ronnie had sense enough to keep his trap shut.

“If we let them take South Vietnam, they’ll take Cambodia.” Dearie’s eyes moved from Skip to me to Ronnie . . . to all of us. “Then Laos. Then the Philippines. One after the other.”

“If they can do that, maybe they deserve to win,” I said.

Dearie looked at me, shocked. I was sort of shocked myself, but I didn’t take it back.

There was one more round of prelims before the Thanksgiving break, and for the young scholars of Chamberlain Three, it was a disaster. By then most of us understood that *we* were a disaster, that we were committing a kind of group suicide. Kirby McClendon did his freak-out thing and disappeared like a rabbit in a magic trick. Kenny Auster, who usually sat in the corner during the marathon games and picked his nose when he couldn't decide what card to play next, simply bugged out one day. He left a queen of spades with the words "I quit" written across it on his pillow. George Lessard joined Steve Ogg and Jack Frady in Chad, the brain dorm.

Six down, thirteen to go.

It should have been enough. Hell, just what happened to poor old Kirby should have been enough; in the last three or four days before he freaked, his hands were trembling so badly he had trouble picking up his cards and he jumped in his seat if someone slammed a door in the hall. Kirby should have been enough but he wasn't. Nor was my time with Carol the answer. When I was actually with her, yes, I was fine. When I was with her all I wanted was information (and maybe to ball her socks off). When I was in the dorm, though, especially in that goddamned third-floor lounge, I became another version of Peter Riley. In the third-floor lounge I was a stranger to myself.

As Thanksgiving approached, a kind of blind fatalism set in. None of us talked about it, though. We talked about the movies, or sex ("I get more ass than a merry-go-round pony!" Ronnie used to crow, usually with no warning or conversational lead-in of any kind), but mostly we talked about Vietnam . . . and Hearts. Our Hearts discussions were about who was ahead, who was behind, and who couldn't seem to master the few simple strategic ploys of the game: void yourself in at least one suit; pass midrange hearts to someone who likes to shoot the moon; if you have to take a trick, always take it high.

Our only real response to the looming third round of prelims was to organize the game into a kind of endless, revolving tournament. We were still playing nickel-a-point, but we were now also playing for "match points." The

system for awarding match points was quite complex, but Randy Echolls and Hugh Brennan worked out a good formula in two feverish late-night sessions. Both of them, incidentally, were flunking their introductory math courses; neither was invited back at the conclusion of the fall semester.

Thirty-three years have passed since that pre-Thanksgiving round of exams, and the man that boy became still winces at the memory of them. I flunked everything but Sociology and Intro English. I didn't have to see the grades to know it, either. Skip said he'd flagged the board except for Calc, and there he barely squeaked by. I was taking Carol out to a movie that night, our one pre-break date (and our last, although I didn't know that then), and saw Ronnie Malenfant on my way to get my car. I asked him how he thought he'd done on his tests; Ronnie smiled and winked and said, "Aced everything, champ. Just like on fuckin' *College Bowl*. I'm not worried." But in the light of the parking lot I could see his smile wavering minutely at the corners. His skin was too pale, and his acne, bad when we started school in September, was worse than ever. "How 'bout you?"

"They're going to make me Dean of Arts and Sciences," I said. "That tell you anything?"

Ronnie burst out laughing. "You fuckin' pisspot!" He clapped me on the shoulder. The cocky look in his eyes had been replaced by fright that made him look younger. "Goin' out?"

"Yeah."

"Carol?"

"Yeah."

"Good for you. She's a great-lookin' chick." For Ronnie, this was nearly heartrending sincerity. "And if I don't see you in the lounge later on, have a great turkey-day."

"You too, Ronnie."

"Yeah. Sure." Looking at me from the corners of his eyes rather than straight on. Trying to hold the smile. "One way or another, I guess we're both gonna eat the bird, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah. I guess that pretty well sums it up."

It was hot, even with the engine off and the heater off it was hot, we had warmed up the whole inside of the car with our bodies, the windows steamed so that the light from the parking lot came in all diffused, like light through a pebbled-glass bathroom window, and the radio was on, Mighty John Marshall making with the oldies, The Humble Yet Nonetheless Mighty playing The Four Seasons and The Dovells and Jack Scott and Little Richard and Freddie “Boom Boom” Cannon, all those oldies, and her sweater was open and her bra was draped over the seat with one strap hanging down, a thick white strap, bra-technology in those days hadn’t yet taken that next great leap forward, and oh man her skin was warm, her nipple rough in my mouth, and she still had her panties on but only sort of, they were all pushed and bunched to one side and I had first one finger in her and then two fingers, Chuck Berry singing “Johnny B. Goode” and The Royal Teens singing “Short Shorts,” and her hand was inside my fly, fingers pulling at the elastic of my own short-shorts, and I could smell her, the perfume on her neck and the sweat on her temples just below where her hair started, and I could hear her, hear the live pulse of her breath, wordless whispers in my mouth as we kissed, all of this with the front seat of my car pushed back as far as it would go, me not thinking of flunked prelims or the war in Vietnam or LBJ wearing a lei or Hearts or anything, only wanting her, wanting her right here and right now, and then suddenly she was straightening up and straightening *me* up, both hands planted on my chest, splayed fingers pushing me back toward the steering wheel. I moved toward her again, slipping one of my own hands up her thigh, and she said “Pete, *no!*” in a sharp voice and closed her legs, the knees coming together loud enough so I could hear the sound they made, that locking sound that means you’re done making out, like it or not. I didn’t like it but I stopped.

I leaned my head back against the fogged-up window on the driver’s side, breathing hard. My cock was an iron bar stuffed down the front of my underwear, so hard it hurt. That would go away soon enough—no hardon lasts forever, I think Benjamin Disraeli said that—but even after the erection’s gone, the blue balls linger on. It’s just a fact of guy life.

We had left the movie—some really terrible good-ole-boy thang with Burt Reynolds in it—early and had come back to the Steam Plant parking lot with the same thing on our minds . . . or so I'd hoped. I guess it *was* the same thing, except I had been hoping for a little more of it than I'd gotten.

Carol had pulled the sides of her sweater together but her bra still hung over the back of the seat and she looked madly desirable with her breasts trying to tumble out through the gap and half an areola visible in the dim light. She had her purse open and was fumbling her cigarettes out with shaky hands.

“Whooo,” she said. Her voice was as shaky as her hands. “I mean holy cow.”

“You look like Brigitte Bardot with your sweater open like that,” I told her.

She looked up, surprised and—I thought—pleased. “Do you really think so? Or is it just the blond hair?”

“The hair? Shit, no. Mostly it's . . .” I gestured toward her front. She looked down at herself and laughed. She didn't do the buttons, though, or try to pull the sides any more closely together. I'm not sure she could have, anyway—as I remember, that sweater was a wonderfully tight fit.

“There was a theater up the street from us when I was a kid, the Asher Empire. It's torn down now, but when we were kids—Bobby and Sully-John and me—it seemed they were always showing her pictures. I think that one of them, *And God Created Woman*, must have played there for about a thousand years.”

I burst out laughing and took my own cigarettes off the dashboard. “That was always the third feature at the Gates Falls Drive-In on Friday and Saturday nights.”

“Did you ever see it?”

“Are you kidding? I wasn't even *allowed* to go to the drive-in unless it was a Disney double feature. I think I must have seen *Tonka* with Sal Mineo at least seven times. But I remember the previews. Brigitte in her towel.”

“I'm not coming back to school,” she said, and lit her cigarette. She spoke so calmly that at first I thought we were still talking about old movies, or midnight in Calcutta, or whatever it took to persuade our bodies that it was time to go back to sleep, the action was over. Then it clicked in my head.

“You . . . did you say . . . ?”

“I said I’m not coming back after break. And it’s not going to be much of a Thanksgiving at home, as far as that goes, but what the hell.”

“Your father?”

She shook her head, drawing on her cigarette. In the light of its coal her face was all orange highlights and crescents of gray shadow. She looked older. Still beautiful, but older. On the radio Paul Anka was singing “Diana.” I snapped it off.

“My father’s got nothing to do with it. I’m going back to Harwich. Do you remember me mentioning my mother’s friend Rionda?”

I sort of did, so I nodded.

“Rionda took the picture I showed you, the one of me with Bobby and S-J. She says . . .” Carol looked down at her skirt, which was still hiked most of the way to her waist, and began plucking at it. You can never tell what’s going to embarrass people; sometimes it’s toilet functions, sometimes it’s the sexual hijinks of relatives, sometimes it’s show-off behavior. And sometimes, of course, it’s drink.

“Let’s put it this way, my dad’s not the only one in the Gerber family with a booze problem. He taught my mother how to tip her elbow, and she was a good student. For a long time she laid off—she went to AA meetings, I think—but Rionda says she’s started again. So I’m going home. I don’t know if I can take care of her or not, but I’m going to try. For my brother as much as my mother. Rionda says Ian doesn’t know if he’s coming or going. Of course he never did.” She smiled.

“Carol, that’s maybe not such a good idea. To shoot your education that way—”

She looked up angrily. “You want to talk about shooting *my* education? You know what I’m hearing about that fucking Hearts game on Chamberlain Three these days? That *everyone on the floor* is going to flunk out by Christmas, including you. Penny Lang says that by the start of spring semester there won’t be anyone left up there but that shithead proctor of yours.”

“Nah,” I said, “that’s an exaggeration. Nate’ll be left. Stokely Jones, too, if he doesn’t break his neck going downstairs some night.”

“You act as though it’s funny,” she said.

“It’s not funny,” I said. No, it wasn’t funny.

“Then why don’t you quit it?”

Now *I* was the one starting to feel angry. She had pushed me away and clapped her knees shut, had told me she was going away just when I was starting to not only want her around but need her around, she had left me with what was soon going to be a world-class case of blue balls . . . and now it was all about me. Now it was all about cards.

“I don’t *know* why I don’t quit it,” I said. “Why don’t you find someone else to take care of your mother? Why doesn’t this friend of hers, Rawanda—”

“*Ri-on-da.*”

“—take care of her? I mean, is it your fault your mother’s a lush?”

“*My mother is not a lush! Don’t you call her that!*”

“Well, she’s sure something, if you’re going to drop out of college on her account. If it’s that serious, Carol, it’s sure something.”

“Rionda has a job and a mother of her own to worry about,” Carol said. The anger had gone out of her. She sounded deflated, dispirited. I could remember the laughing girl who had stood beside me, watching the shreds of Goldwater bumper sticker blow away across the macadam, but this didn’t seem like the same one. “My mother is my mother. There’s only Ian and me to take care of her, and Ian’s barely making it in high school. Besides, there’s always UConn.”

“You want some *information?*” I asked her. My voice was trembling, thickening. “I’ll give you some whether you want it or not. Okay? You’re breaking my heart here. That’s the *information*. You’re breaking my goddam heart.”

“I’m not, though,” she said. “Hearts are tough, Pete. Most times they don’t break. Most times they only bend.”

Yeah, yeah, and Confucius say woman who fly upside down have crackup. I began to cry. Not a lot, but they were tears, all right. Mostly I think it was being caught so utterly unprepared. And okay, maybe I was crying for myself, as well. Because I was scared. I was now flunking or in danger of flunking all but a single subject, one of my friends was planning to push the EJECT button, and I couldn’t seem to stop playing cards. Nothing was going the way I had expected it would once I got to college, and I was terrified.

“I don’t want you to go,” I said. “I love you.” Then I tried to smile. “Just a little more information, okay?”

She looked at me with an expression I couldn’t read, then cranked down her window and tossed out her cigarette. She rolled the window back up and held out her arms to me. “Come here.”

I put out my own cigarette in the overflowing ashtray and slipped across to her side of the seat. Into her arms. She kissed me, then looked into my eyes. “Maybe you love me and maybe you don’t. I’d never try to talk anyone out of loving me, I can tell you that much, because there’s never enough loving to go around. But you’re confused, Pete. About school, about Hearts, about Annmarie, and about me, too.”

I started to say I wasn’t, but of course I was.

“I can go to UConn,” she said. “If my mother shapes up, I *will* go to UConn. If that doesn’t work out, I can take courses part-time at Pennington in Bridgeport, or even CED courses at night in Stratford or Harwich. I can do those things, I have the luxury of doing those things, because I’m a girl. This is a good time to be a girl, believe me. Lyndon Johnson has seen to that.”

“Carol—”

She put her hand gently against my mouth. “If you flunk out this December, you’re apt to be in the jungle next December. You need to think about that, Pete. It’s one thing for Sully. He thinks it’s right and he *wants* to go. You don’t know what you want or what you think, and you won’t as long as you keep running those cards.”

“Hey, I took the Goldwater sticker off my car, didn’t I?” It sounded foolish to my own ears.

She said nothing.

“When are you going?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. I have a ticket on the four o’clock Trailways bus to New York. The Harwich stop isn’t more than three blocks from my front door.”

“Are you leaving from Derry?”

“Yes.”

“Can I drive you to the depot? I could pick you up at your dorm around three.”

She considered it, then nodded . . . but I saw a shaded look in her eyes. It was hard to miss, because those eyes were usually so wide and guileless. “That would be good,” she said. “Thank you. And I didn’t lie to you, did I? I told you we might be temporary.”

I sighed. “Yeah.” Only this was a lot more temporary than I had been expecting.

“Now, Number Six: We want . . . *information.*”

“You won’t get it.” It was hard to sound as tough as Patrick McGooohan in *The Prisoner* when you still felt like crying, but I did my best.

“Even if I ask pretty please?” She took my hand, slipped it inside her sweater, placed it on her left breast. The part of me which had begun to swoon snapped immediately back to attention.

“Well . . .”

“Have you ever done it before? I mean, all the way? That’s the information I want.”

I hesitated. It’s a question most boys find difficult, I imagine, and one most lie about. I didn’t want to lie to Carol. “No,” I said.

She slipped daintily out of her panties, tossed them over into the back seat, and laced her fingers together behind my neck. “I have. Twice. With Sully. I don’t think he was very good at it . . . but he’d never been to college. You have.”

My mouth felt very dry, but that must have been an illusion, because when I kissed her our mouths were wet; they slipped all around, tongues and lips and nipping teeth. When I could talk I said, “I’ll do my best to share my college education.”

“Put on the radio,” she said, unbuckling my belt and unsnapping my jeans. “Put on the radio, Pete, I like the oldies.”

So I put on the radio and I kissed her and there was a spot, a certain spot, her fingers guided me to it and there was a moment when I was the same old same old and then there was a new place to be. She was very warm in there. Very warm and very tight. She whispered in my ear, her lips tickling against the skin: “Slow. Eat every one of your vegetables and maybe you’ll get dessert.”

Jackie Wilson sang “Lonely Teardrops” and I went slow. Roy Orbison sang “Only the Lonely” and I went slow. Wanda Jackson sang “Let’s Have a Party”

and I went slow. Mighty John did an ad for Brannigan's, Derry's hottest bottle club, and I went slow. Then she began to moan and it wasn't her fingers on my neck but her nails digging into it, and when she began to move her hips up against me in short hard thrusts I couldn't go slow and then The Platters were on the radio, The Platters were singing "Twilight Time" and she began to moan that she hadn't known, hadn't had a *clue*, oh gee, oh Pete, oh *gee*, oh *Jesus*, *Jesus Christ*, Pete, and her lips were all over my mouth and my chin and my jaw, she was frantic with kisses. I could hear the seat creaking, I could smell cigarette smoke and the pine air-freshener hanging from the rearview mirror, and by then *I* was moaning, too, I don't know what, The Platters were singing "Each day I pray for evening just to be with you," and then it started to happen. The pump turns on in ecstasy. I closed my eyes, I held her with my eyes closed and went into her that way, that way you do, shaking all over, hearing the heel of my shoe drumming against the driver's-side door in a spastic tattoo, thinking that I could do this even if I was dying, even if I was dying, even if I was dying; thinking also that it was information. The pump turns on in ecstasy, the cards fall where they fall, the world never misses a beat, the queen hides, the queen is found, and it was all information.

The next morning I had a brief meeting with my Geology instructor, who told me I was “edging into a grave situation.” *That is not exactly new information, Number Six*, I thought of telling him, but didn’t. The world looked different this morning—both better and worse.

When I got back to Chamberlain I found Nate getting ready to leave for home. He had his suitcase in one hand. There was a sticker on it that said I CLIMBED MT. WASHINGTON. Slung over his shoulder was a duffel full of dirty clothes. Like everything else, Nate looked different now.

“Have a good Thanksgiving, Nate,” I said, opening my closet and starting to yank out pants and shirts at random. “Eat lots of stuffing. You’re too fuckin’ skinny.”

“I will. Cranberry dressing, too. When I was at my most homesick that first week, my mom’s dressing was practically all I could think about.”

I filled my own suitcase, thinking that I could take Carol to the bus depot in Derry and then just keep on going. If the traffic on Route 136 wasn’t too heavy, I could be home before dark. Maybe even stop in Frank’s Fountain for a mug of rootbeer before heading up Sabbatus Road to the house. Suddenly being out of this place—away from Chamberlain Hall and Holyoke Commons, away from the whole damned University—was my number-one priority. *You’re confused, Pete*, Carol had said in the car last night. *You don’t know what you want or what you think, and you won’t as long as you keep running those cards.*

Well, this was my chance to get away from the cards. It hurt to know Carol was leaving, but I’d be lying if I said that was foremost in my mind right then. At that moment, getting away from the third-floor lounge was. Getting away from The Bitch. *If you flunk out this December, you’re apt to be in the jungle next December.* Be in touch, baby, seeya, as Skip Kirk usually put it.

When I latched the suitcase shut and looked around, Nate was still standing in the doorway. I jumped and let out a little squeak of surprise. It was like being visited by Banquo’s fucking ghost.

“Hey, go on, bug out,” I said. “Time and tide wait for no man, not even one in pre-dent.”

Nate only stood there, looking at me. “You’re going to flunk out,” he said.

Again I thought of how weirdly alike Nate and Carol were, almost male and female sides of the same coin. I tried to smile, but Nate didn’t smile back. His face was small and white and pinched. The perfect Yankee face. You see a skinny guy who always burns instead of tanning, whose idea of dressing up includes a string tie and a liberal application of Vitalis, a guy who looks like he hasn’t had a decent shit in three years, and that guy was most likely born and raised north of White River, New Hampshire. And on his deathbed his last words are apt to be “Cranberry dressing.”

“Nah,” I said. “Don’t sweat it, Natie. All’s cool.”

“You’re going to flunk out,” he repeated. Dull, bricky color was rising in his cheeks. “You and Skip are the best guys I know, there wasn’t anybody in high school like you guys, not in *my* high school at least, and you’re going to flunk out and it’s so *stupid*.”

“I’m *not* going to flunk out,” I said . . . but since last night I had found myself accepting the idea that I *could*. I wasn’t just *edging* into a grave situation; man, I was there. “Skip, either. It’s under control.”

“The world’s falling down and you two are flunking out of school over Hearts! Over a *stupid fuckin card-game!*”

Before I could say anything else he was gone, headed back up the county for turkey and his mom’s stuffing. Maybe even a through-the-pants handjob from Cindy. Hey, why not? It was Thanksgiving.

I don't read my horoscope, have rarely watched *The X-Files*, have *never* called the Psychic Friends Hotline, but I nevertheless believe that we all get glimpses of the future from time to time. I got one that afternoon, when I pulled up in front of Franklin Hall in my brother's old station wagon: she was already gone.

I went inside. The lobby, where there were usually eight or nine gentlemen callers sitting in the plastic chairs, looked oddly empty. A housekeeper in a blue uniform was vacuuming the industrial-strength rug. The girl behind the counter was reading a copy of *McCall's* and listening to the radio. ? and The Mysterians, as a matter of fact. Cry cry cry, baby, 96 tears.

"Pete Riley for Carol Gerber," I said. "Can you buzz her?"

She looked up, put her magazine aside, and gave me a sweet, sympathetic look. It was the look of a doctor who has to tell you gee, sorry, the tumor's inoperable. Bad luck, man, better make friends with Jesus. "Carol said she had to leave early. She took the Black Bear Shuttle to Derry. But she told me you'd be by and asked me to give you this."

She handed me an envelope with my name written across the front. I thanked her and left Franklin with it in my hand. I went down the walk and stood for a moment by my car, looking across toward Holyoke Commons, fabled Palace on the Plains and home of the horny hotdog man. Below it, in Bennett's Run, leaves flew before the wind in rattling drifts. The bright colors had gone out of them; only November's dark brown was left. It was the day before Thanksgiving, the doorstep of winter in New England. The world was all wind and cold sunshine. I had started crying again. I could tell by the warmth on my cheeks. 96 tears, baby; cry cry cry.

I got into the car where I had lost my virginity the night before and opened the envelope. There was a single sheet of paper inside. Brevity is the soul of wit, according to Shakespeare. If it's true, then Carol's letter was witty as hell.

*Dear Pete,*

*I think we ought to let last night be our goodbye—how could we do any better? I may write to you at school or I may not, right now I'm so confused I*

*just don't know (hey, I may even change my mind and come back!). But please let me be the one to get in touch, okay? You said you loved me. If you do, let me be the one to get in touch. I will, I promise.*

*Carol*

*P.S. Last night was the sweetest thing that's ever happened to me. If it gets any better than that, I don't see how people can live thru it.*

*P.P.S. Get out of that stupid card-game.*

She said it was the sweetest thing that had ever happened to her, but she hadn't put "love" at the bottom of the note, only her signature. Still . . . *If it gets any better than that, I don't see how people can live thru it.* I knew what she meant. I reached over and touched the side of the seat where she had lain. Where we had lain together.

*Put on the radio, Pete, I like the oldies.*

I looked at my watch. I had gotten to the dorm early (that half-conscious premonition at work, maybe), and it had just gone three now. I could easily get to the Trailways depot before she left for Connecticut . . . but I wasn't going to do it. She was right, we had said a brilliant goodbye in my old station wagon; anything more would be a step down. At best we would find ourselves going over the same ground; at worst, we'd splash mud over last night with an argument.

*We want information.*

Yes. And we had gotten it. God knew we had.

I folded her letter, stuck it into the back pocket of my jeans, and drove home to Gates Falls. At first my eyes kept blurring and I had to keep wiping at them. Then I turned on the radio and the music made things a little better. The music always does. I'm past fifty now, and the music still makes things better; it's the fabled automatic.

I got back to Gates around five-thirty, slowed as I drove past Frank's, then kept on going. By then I wanted to get home a lot more than I wanted a draft Hires and a gossip with Frank Parmeleau. Mom's way of saying welcome home was to tell me I was too skinny, my hair was too long, and I hadn't been "standing close enough to the razor." Then she sat in her rocking chair and had a little weep over the return of the prodigal son. My dad put a kiss on my cheek, hugged me with one arm, and then shuffled to the fridge for a glass of Mom's red tea, his head poking forward out of the neck of his old brown sweater like the head of a curious turtle.

We—my mom and me, that is—thought he had twenty per cent of his eyesight left, maybe a bit more. It was hard to tell, because he so rarely talked. It was a bagging-room accident that did for him, a terrible two-story fall. He had scars on the left side of his face and his neck; there was a dented-in patch of skull where the hair never grew back. The accident pretty much blacked out his vision, and it did something to his mind, as well. But he was not a "total ijit," as I once heard some asshole down at Gendron's Barber Shop say, nor was he mute, as some people seemed to think. He was in a coma for nineteen days. After he woke up he became mostly silent, that much is true, and he was often terribly confused in his mind, but sometimes he was still there, all present and accounted for. He was there enough when I came home to give me a kiss and that strong one-armed hug, his way of hugging for as long as I could remember. I loved my old man a lot . . . and after a semester of playing cards with Ronnie Malenfant, I had learned that talking is a wildly overrated skill.

I sat with them for awhile, telling them some of my college stories (not about chasing The Bitch, though), then went outside. I raked fallen leaves in the twilight—the frosty air on my cheeks felt like a blessing—waved at the passing neighbors, and ate three of my mom's hamburgers for supper. After, she told me she was going down to the church, where the Ladies' Aid was preparing Thanksgiving meals for shut-ins. She didn't think I'd want to spend my first evening home with a bunch of old hens, but I was welcome to attend

the cluckfest if I wanted. I thanked her and said I thought I'd give Annmarie a call instead.

"Now why doesn't that surprise me?" she said, and went out. I heard the car start and then, with no great joy, I dragged myself to the telephone and called Annmarie Soucie. An hour later she drove over in her father's pickup, smiling, her hair down on her shoulders, mouth radiant with lipstick. The smile didn't last long, as I guess you can probably figure out for yourself, and fifteen minutes after she came in, Annmarie was out of the house and out of my life. Be in touch, baby, seeya. Right around the time of Woodstock, she married an insurance agent from Lewiston and became Annmarie Jalbert. They had three kids, and they're still married. I guess that's good, isn't it? Even if it isn't, you have to admit it's pretty goddam American.

I stood at the window over the kitchen sink, watching the taillights of Mr. Soucie's truck disappear down the road. I felt ashamed of myself—Christ, the way her eyes had widened, the way her smile had faded and begun to tremble—but I also felt shittily happy, disgustingly relieved; light enough to dance up the walls and across the ceiling like Fred Astaire.

There were shuffling steps from behind me. I turned and there was my dad, doing his slow turtle-walk across the linoleum in his slippers. He went with one hand held out before him. The skin on it was beginning to look like a big loose glove.

"Did I just hear a young lady call a young gentleman a fucking jerk?" he asked in a mild just-passing-the-time voice.

"Well . . . yeah." I shuffled my feet. "I guess maybe you did."

He opened the fridge, groped, and brought out the jug of red tea. He drank it without sugar. I have taken it that same way on occasion, and can tell you it tastes like almost nothing at all. My theory is that my dad always went for the red tea because it was the brightest thing in the icebox, and he always knew what it was.

"Soucie girl, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, Dad. Annmarie."

"All them Soucies have the distemper, Pete. Slammed the door, didn't she?"

I was smiling. I couldn't help it. It was a wonder the glass was still in that poor old door. "I guess she did."

“You trade her in for a newer model up there t’the college, did you?”

That was a fairly complicated question. The simple answer—and maybe the truest, in the end—was no I hadn’t. That was the answer I gave.

He nodded, set out the biggest glass in the cabinet next to the fridge, and then looked like he was getting ready to pour the tea all over the counter and his own feet, anyway.

“Let me do that for you,” I said. “Okay?”

He made no reply but stood back and let me pour the tea. I put the three-quarters-full glass into his hands and the jug back in the fridge.

“Is it good, Dad?”

Nothing. He only stood there with the glass in both hands, the way a child holds a glass, drinking in little sips. I waited, decided he wasn’t going to reply, and fetched my suitcase out of the corner. I’d thrown my textbooks in on top of my clothes and now took them out.

“Studying on the first night of break,” Dad said, startling me—I’d almost forgotten he was there. “Gorry.”

“Well, I’m a little behind in a couple of classes. The teachers move a lot faster than the ones in high school.”

“College,” he said. A long pause. “You’re in college.”

It seemed almost to be a question, so I said, “That’s right, Dad.”

He stood there awhile longer, seeming to watch me as I stacked my books and notebooks. Maybe he was watching. Or maybe he was just standing there. You couldn’t tell, not for sure. At last he began to shuffle toward the door, neck stretched out, that defensive hand slightly raised, his other hand—the one with the glass of red tea in it—now curled against his chest. At the door he stopped. Without looking around, he said: “You’re well shut of that Soucie girl. All Soucies has got bad tempers. You can dress em up but you can’t take em out. You can do better.”

He went out, holding his glass of tea curled to his chest.

Until my brother and his wife showed up from New Gloucester, I actually did study, half caught up on my sociology, and slogged through forty pages of geology, all in three brain-busting hours. By the time I stopped to make coffee, I'd begun to feel faint stirrings of hope. I was behind, disastrously behind, but maybe not quite *fatally* behind. I felt like an outfielder who has tracked a ball back and back to the left-field wall; he stands there looking up but not *giving* up, knowing that the ball's going to carry over but also knowing that if he times his leap just right, he can catch it as it does. I could do that.

If, that was, I could stay out of the third-floor lounge in the future.

At quarter of ten my brother, who arrives nowhere while the sun is still up if he can help it, drove in. His wife of eight months, glamorous in a coat with a real mink collar, was carrying a bread pudding; Dave had a bowl of butter-beans. Only my brother of all people on earth would think of transporting butter-beans across county lines for Thanksgiving purposes. He's a good guy, Dave, my elder by six years and in 1966 an accountant for a small hamburger chain with half a dozen "shoppes" in Maine and New Hampshire. By 1996 there were eighty "shoppes" and my brother, along with three partners, owned the company. He's worth three million dollars—on paper, at least—and has had a triple bypass. One bypass for each million, I guess you could say.

Hard on Dave and Katie's heels came Mom from the Ladies' Aid, dusted with flour, exhilarated from good works, and overjoyed to have both of her sons in the house. There was a lot of cheerful babble. Our dad sat in the corner listening to it without adding anything . . . but he was smiling, his odd, big-pupiled eyes going from Dave's face to mine and then back to Dave's. It was actually our voices his eyes were responding to, I suppose. Dave wanted to know where Annmarie was. I said Annmarie and I had decided to cool it for awhile. Dave started to ask if that meant we were—

Before he could finish the question, both his mother and his wife gave him those sharp little female pokes that mean *not now, buddy, not now*. Looking at Mom's wide eyes, I guessed she would have her own questions for me later on. Probably quite a few of them. Mom wanted *information*. Moms always do.

Other than being called a fucking jerk by Annmarie and wondering from time to time how Carol Gerber was doing (mostly if she had changed her mind about coming back to school and if she was sharing her Thanksgiving with old Army-bound Sully-John), that was a pretty great holiday. The whole family showed up at one time or another on Thursday or Friday, it seemed, wandering through the house and gnawing on turkey-legs, watching football games on TV and roaring at the big plays, chopping wood for the kitchen stove (by Sunday night Mom had enough stovelengths to heat the house all winter with just the Franklin, if she'd wanted). After supper we ate pie and played Scrabble. Most entertaining of all, Dave and Katie had a huge fight over the house they were planning to buy, and Katie hucked a Tupperware dish of leftovers at my brother. I had taken a few lumps at Dave's hands over the years, and I liked watching that plastic container of squash bounce off the side of his head. Man, that was fun.

But underneath all the good stuff, the ordinary joy you feel when your whole family's there, was my fear of what was going to happen when I went back to school. I found an hour to study late Thursday night, after the fridge had been stuffed full of leftovers and everyone else had gone to bed, and two more hours on Friday afternoon, when there was a lull in the flow of relatives and Dave and Katie, their differences temporarily resolved, retired for what I thought was an extremely noisy "nap."

I still felt I could catch up—knew it, actually—but I also knew I couldn't do it alone, or with Nate. I had to buddy up with someone who understood the suicidal pull of that third-floor lounge, and how the blood surged when someone started playing spades in an effort to force The Bitch. Someone who understood the primitive joy of managing to sock Ronnie with *la femme noire*.

It would have to be Skip, I thought. Even if Carol were to come back, she would never be able to understand in the same way. It had to be Skip and me, swimming out of deep water and in toward the shore. I thought if we stuck together, we could both pull through. Not that I cared so much about him. Admitting that feels scuzzy, but it's the truth. By Saturday of Thanksgiving break I'd done lots of soul-searching and understood I was mostly concerned about myself, mostly looking out for Number Six. If Skip wanted to use me, that was fine. Because I sure wanted to use him.

By noon Saturday I'd read enough geology to know I needed help on some of the concepts, and fast. There were only two more big test-periods in the semester: a set of prelims and then final exams. I would have to do really well on both to keep my scholarships.

Dave and Katie left at around seven on Saturday night, still bickering (but more good-naturedly) about the house they planned to buy in Pownal. I settled down at the kitchen table and started reading about out-group sanctions in my soash book. What it seemed to amount to was that even nerds have to have someone to shit on. A depressing concept.

At some point I became aware I wasn't alone. I looked up and saw my mother standing there in her old pink housecoat, her face ghostly with Pond's Cold Cream. I wasn't surprised that I hadn't heard her; after twenty-five years in the same little house, she knew where all the creaks and groans were. I thought she had finally gotten around to her questions about Annmarie, but it turned out that my love-life was the last thing on her mind.

"How much trouble are you in, Peter?" she asked.

I thought of about a hundred different answers, then settled for the truth. "I don't really know."

"Is it any one thing in particular?"

This time I didn't tell the truth, and looking back on it I realize how telling that lie was: some part of me, alien to my best interests but very powerful, still reserved the right to frog-march me to the cliff . . . and over the edge.

*Yeah, Mom, the third-floor lounge is the problem, cards are the problem—just a few hands is what I tell myself every time, and when I look up at the clock it's quarter of midnight and I'm too tired to study. Hell, too wired to study. Other than play Hearts, all I've really managed to do this fall is lose my virginity.*

If I could have said at least the first part of that, I think it would have been like guessing Rumpelstiltskin's name and then speaking it out loud. But I didn't say any of it. I told her it was just the pace of college; I had to redefine what studying meant, learn some new habits. But I could do it. I was sure I could.

She stood there a moment longer, her arms crossed and her hands deep in her housecoat sleeves—she looked sort of like a Chinese Mandarin when she

stood that way—and then she said, “I’ll always love you, Pete. Your father, too. He doesn’t say it, but he feels it. We both do. You know that.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know that.” I got up and hugged her. Pancreatic cancer was what got her. That one’s quick, at least, but it wasn’t quick enough. I guess none of them are when it’s someone you love.

“But you have to work hard at your studies. Boys who don’t work hard at them have been dying.” She smiled. There wasn’t much humor in it. “Probably you knew that.”

“I heard a rumor.”

“You’re still growing,” she said, tilting her head up.

“I don’t think so.”

“Yes. At least an inch since summer. And your hair! Why don’t you cut your hair?”

“I like it the way it is.”

“It’s as long as a girl’s. Take my advice, Pete, cut your hair. Look decent. You’re not one of those Rolling Stones or a Herman’s Hermit, after all.”

I burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it. “I’ll think about it, Mom, okay?”

“You do that.” She gave me another hard hug, then let me go. She looked tired, but I thought she also looked rather beautiful. “They’re killing boys across the sea,” she said. “At first I thought there was a good reason for it, but your father says it’s crazy and I’m not so sure he isn’t right. You study hard. If you need a little extra for books—or a tutor—we’ll scrape it up.”

“Thanks, Mom. You’re a peach.”

“Nope,” she said. “Just an old mare with tired feet. I’m going to bed.”

I studied another hour, then all the words started to double and triple in front of my eyes. I went to bed myself but couldn’t sleep. Every time I started to drift I saw myself picking up a Hearts hand and beginning to arrange it in suits. Finally I let my eyes roll open and just stared up at the ceiling. *Boys who don’t work hard at their studies have been dying*, my mother had said. And Carol telling me that this was a good time to be a girl, Lyndon Johnson had seen to that.

*We chasin The Bitch!*

*Pass left or right?*

*Jesus Christ, fuckin Riley’s shootin the moon!*

Voices in my head. Voices seeming to seep out of the very air.

Quitting the game was the only sane solution to my problems, but even with the third-floor lounge a hundred and thirty miles north of where I was lying, it had a hold on me, one which had little to do with sanity or rationality. I'd amassed twelve points in the *uber tourney*; only Ronnie, with fifteen, was now ahead of me. I didn't see how I could give those twelve points up, just walk away and leave that windbag Malenfant with a clear field. Carol had helped me keep Ronnie in some sort of perspective, allowed me to see him for the creepy, small-minded, bad-complexioned gnome that he was. Now that she was gone—

*Ronnie's also going to be gone before long, the voice of reason interposed. If he lasts to the end of the semester it'll be a blue-eyed miracle. You know that.*

True. And in the meantime, Ronnie had nothing else but Hearts, did he? He was clumsy, potbellied, and thin-armed, an old man waiting to happen. He wore a chip on his shoulder to at least partially hide his massive feelings of inferiority. His boasting about girls was ludicrous. Also, he wasn't really smart, like some of the kids currently in danger of flunking out (Skip Kirk, for instance). Hearts and empty brag were the only things Ronnie was good at, so far as I'd been able to tell, so why not just stand back and let him run the cards and run his mouth while he still could?

Because I didn't want to, that was why. Because I wanted to wipe the smirk off his hollow, pimply face and silence his grating blare of a laugh. It was mean but it was true. I liked Ronnie best when he was sulking, when he was glowering at me with his greasy hair tumbled down over his forehead and his lower lip pushed out.

Also, there was the game itself. I loved playing. I couldn't even stop thinking about it here, in my childhood bed, so how was I supposed to stay away from the lounge when I got back? How was I supposed to ignore Mark St. Pierre yelling at me to hurry up, there was a seat empty, everyone stood at zero on the scorepad and the game was about to commence? Christ!

I was still awake when the cuckoo clock in the parlor below me sang two o'clock. I got up, threw on my old tartan robe over my skivvies, and went downstairs. I got myself a glass of milk and sat at the kitchen table to drink it. There were no lights on except for the fluorescent bar over the stove, no sounds

except for the sough of the furnace through the floor-grates and my father's soft snores from the back bedroom. I felt a little nutso, as if the combination of turkey and cramming had set off a minor earthquake in my head. And as if I might next fall asleep around, oh, say St. Patrick's Day.

I happened to glance into the entry. There, hung on one of the hooks above the woodbox, was my high-school jacket, the one with the big white GF entwined on the breast. Nothing else but the initials; I hadn't been much of a jock. When Skip asked me, shortly after we met at the University, if I'd lettered in anything, I'd told him I had the big M for masturbation—first team, the short overhand stroke my specialty. Skip had laughed until he cried, and maybe that was when we'd started being friends. Actually, I guess I could have gotten a D for debate or dramatics, but they don't give letters in those things, do they? Not then and not now.

High school seemed far in the past to me on that night, almost in another planetary system . . . but there was the jacket, a birthday present from my folks the year I turned sixteen. I crossed to the entry and took it off the hook. I put it up to my face and smelled it and thought of Period 5 study-hall with Mr. Mezensik—the bitter aroma of pencil-shavings, the girls whispering and giggling under their breath, faint shouts from outside as the phys ed kids played what the jocks called Remedial Volleyball. I saw that the place where the jacket had hung on the hook continued to stick up in a kind of dimple; the damned thing probably hadn't been worn, even by my mother to go out to grab the mail in her nightgown, since the previous April or May.

I thought of seeing Carol frozen in newsprint dots, her face shadowed by a sign reading U.S. OUT OF VIETNAM NOW!, her ponytail lying against the collar of her own high-school jacket . . . and I had an idea.

Our telephone, a Bakelite dinosaur with a rotary dial, was on a table in the front hall. In the drawer beneath it was the Gates Falls phonebook, my mom's address book, and a litter of writing implements. One was a black laundry-marker. I took it back to the kitchen table and sat down again. I spread my high-school jacket over my knees, then used the marker to make a large sparrow-track on the back. As I worked I felt the nervous tension draining out of my muscles. It occurred to me that I could award myself my own letter if I wanted, and that was sort of what I was doing.

When I was done I held the jacket up and took a look. In the faint white light of the fluorescent bar, what I'd drawn looked harsh and declamatory and somehow childish:



But I liked it. I liked that motherfucker. I wasn't sure what I thought about the war even then, but I liked that sparrow-track quite a lot. And I felt as if I could finally go to sleep; drawing it had done that much for me, anyway. I rinsed out my milk-glass and went upstairs with my jacket under my arm. I stuck it in the closet and then lay down. I thought of Carol putting my hand inside her sweater and the taste of her breath in my mouth. I thought of how we had been only ourselves behind the fogged-up windows of my old station wagon, maybe our best selves. And I thought of how we had laughed as we stood watching the tatters of my Goldwater sticker blow away across the Steam Plant parking lot. I was thinking about that when I fell asleep.

I took my modified high-school jacket back to school on Sunday packed into my suitcase—despite her freshly voiced doubts about Mr. Johnson's and Mr. McNamara's war, my mom would have had lots of questions about the sparrow-track, and I didn't have answers to give, not yet.

I felt equipped to wear the jacket, though, and I did. I spilled beer and cigarette ashes on it, puked on it, bled on it, got teargassed in Chicago while wearing it and screaming "The whole world is watching!" at the top of my lungs. Girls cried on the entwined GF on the left breast (by my senior year those letters were dingy gray instead of white), and one girl lay on it while we made love. We did it with no protection, so probably there's a trace of semen on the quilted lining, too. By the time I packed up and left LSD Acres in 1970, the peace sign I drew on the back in my mother's kitchen was only a shadow. But the shadow remained. Others might not see it, but I always knew what it was.

We came back to school on the Sunday after Thanksgiving in this order: Skip at five (he lived in Dexter, the closest of the three of us), me at seven, Nate at around nine.

I called Franklin Hall even before I unpacked my suitcase. No, the girl on the desk said, Carol Gerber wasn't back. She was plainly reluctant to say more, but I badgered her. There were two pink LEFT SCHOOL cards on the desk, she said. One of them had Carol's name and room number on it.

I thanked her and hung up. I stood there a minute, fogging up the booth with my cigarette smoke, then turned around. Across the hall I could see Skip sitting at one of the card-tables, just picking up a spilled trick.

I sometimes wonder if things might have been different if Carol *had* come back, or even if I'd beaten Skip back, had a chance to get to him before the third-floor lounge got to him. I didn't, though.

I stood there in the phone-booth, smoking a Pall Mall and feeling sorry for myself. Then, from across the way, someone screamed: "*Oh shit no! I don't fuckin BELIEVE IT!*"

To which Ronnie Malenfant (from where I stood in the phone-booth he was out of my view, but his voice was as unmistakable as the sound of a saw ripping through a knot in a pine-branch) hollered gleefully back: "Whoa, look at this—*Randy Echolls takes the first Bitch of the post-Thanksgiving era!*"

*Don't go in there*, I told myself. *You are absolutely fucked if you do, fucked once and for all.*

But of course I did. The tables were all taken, but there were three other guys—Billy Marchant, Tony DeLuca, and Hugh Brennan—standing around. We could snag a corner, if we so chose.

Skip looked up from his hand and shot me a high five in the smoky air. "Welcome back to the loonybin, Pete."

"Hey!" Ronnie said, looking around. "Look who's here! The only asshole in the place who can almost play the game! Where you been, Chuckles?"

"Lewiston," I said, "fucking your grandmother."

Ronnie cackled, his pimply cheeks turning red.

Skip was looking at me seriously, and maybe there was something in his eyes. I can't say for sure. Time goes by, Atlantis sinks deeper and deeper into the ocean, and you have a tendency to romanticize. To mythologize. Maybe I saw that he had given up, that he intended to stay here and play cards and then go on to whatever was next; maybe he was giving me permission to go in my own direction. But I was eighteen, and more like Nate in many ways than I liked to admit. I had also never had a friend like Skip. Skip was fearless, Skip said fuck every other word, when Skip was eating at the Palace the girls couldn't keep their eyes off him. He was the kind of babe magnet Ronnie could be only in his dampest dreams. But Skip also had something adrift inside of him, something like a bit of bone which may, after years of harmless wandering, pierce the heart or clog the brain. He knew it, too. Even then, with high school still sticking all over him like afterbirth, even then when he still thought he'd somehow wind up teaching school and coaching baseball, he knew it. And I loved him. The look of him, the smile of him, the walk and talk of him. I loved him and I would not leave him.

"So," I said to Billy, Tony, and Hugh. "You guys want a lesson?"

"Nickel a point!" Hugh said, laughing like a loon. Shit, he *was* a loon. "Let's go! Wheel em and deal em!"

Pretty soon we were in the corner, all four of us smoking furiously and the cards flying. I remembered the desperate cramming I'd done over the holiday weekend; remembered my mother saying that boys who didn't work hard in school were dying these days. I remembered those things, but they seemed as distant as making love to Carol in my car while The Platters sang "Twilight Time."

I looked up once and saw Stoke Jones in the doorway, leaning on his crutches and looking at us with his usual distant contempt. His black hair was thicker than ever, the corkscrews crazier over his ears and heavier against the collar of his sweatshirt. He sniffed steadily, his nose dripped and his eyes were running, but otherwise he didn't seem any sicker than before the break.

"Stoke!" I said. "How are you doing?"

"Oh well, who knows," he said. "Better than you, maybe."

"Come on in, Rip-Rip, drag up a milking-stool," Ronnie said. "We'll teach you the game."

“You know nothing I want to learn,” Stoke said, and went thumping away. We listened to his receding crutches and a brief coughing fit.

“That crippled-up queer loves me,” Ronnie said. “He just can’t show it.”

“I’ll show you something if you don’t deal some fuckin cards,” Skip said.

“I’m bewwy, bewwy scared,” Ronnie said in an Elmer Fudd voice which only he found amusing. He laid his head on Mark St. Pierre’s arm to show how terrified he was.

Mark lifted the arm, hard. “The fuck off me. This is a new shirt, Malenfant, I don’t want your pimple-pus all over it.”

Before Ronnie’s face lit with amusement and he cawed laughter, I saw a moment of desperate hurt there. It left me unmoved. Ronnie’s problems might be genuine, but they didn’t make him any easier to like. To me he was just a blowhard who could play cards.

“Come on,” I said to Billy Marchant. “Hurry up and deal. I want to get some studying done later.” But of course there was no studying done by any of us that night. Instead of burning out over the holiday, the fever was stronger and hotter than ever.

I went down the hall around quarter of ten to get a fresh pack of smokes and knew Nate was back while I was still six doors away. “Love Grows Where My Rosemary Goes” was coming from the room Nick Prouty shared with Barry Margeaux, but from farther down I could hear Phil Ochs singing “The Draft Dodger Rag.”

Nate was deep in his closet, hanging up his clothes. Not only was he the only person I ever knew in college who wore pajamas, he was the only one who ever used the hangers. The only thing I myself had hung up was my high-school jacket. Now I took it out and began to rummage in the pockets for my cigarettes.

“Hey, Nate, how you doing? Get enough of that cranberry dressing to hold you?”

“I’m—” he began, then saw what was on the back of my jacket and burst out laughing.

“What?” I asked. “Is it *that* funny?”

“In a way,” he said, and leaned deeper into his closet. “Look.” He reappeared with an old Navy pea coat in his hands. He turned it around so I

could see the back. On it, much neater than my freehand work, was the sparrow-track. Nate had rendered his in bright silver duct tape. This time we both laughed.

“Ike and Mike, they think alike,” I said.

“Nonsense. Great minds run in the same channel.”

“Is that what it is?”

“Well . . . what I like to think, anyway. Does this mean you’ve changed your mind about the war, Pete?”

“What mind?” I asked.

Andy White and Ashley Rice never came back to college at all—eight down, now. For the rest of us, there was an obvious change for the worse in the three days before that winter's first storm. Obvious, that was, to anyone else. If you were inside the thing, burning with the fever, it all seemed just a step or two north of normal.

Before Thanksgiving break, the card quartets in the lounge had a tendency to break up and re-form during the school-week; sometimes they died out altogether for awhile as kids went off to classes. Now the groups became almost static, the only changes occurring when someone staggered off to bed or table-hopped to escape Ronnie's skills and constant abrasive chatter. This settling occurred because most of the third-floor players hadn't returned to continue furthering their educations; Barry, Nick, Mark, Harvey, and I don't know how many others had pretty much given up on the education part. They had returned in order to resume the quest for totally valueless "match points." Many of the boys on Chamberlain Three were in fact now majoring in Hearts. Skip Kirk and I, sad to say, were among them. I made a couple of classes on Monday, then said fuck it and cut the rest. I cut everything on Tuesday, played Hearts in my dreams on Tuesday night (in one fragment I remember dropping The Bitch and seeing that her face was Carol's), then spent all day Wednesday playing it for real. Geology, sociology, history . . . all concepts without meaning.

In Vietnam, a fleet of B-52s hit a Viet Cong staging area outside Dong Ha. They also managed to hit a company of U.S. Marines, killing twelve and wounding forty—whoops, shit. And the forecast for Thursday was heavy snow turning to rain and freezing rain in the afternoon. Very few of us took note of this; certainly I had no reason to think that storm would change the course of my life.

I went to bed at midnight on Wednesday and slept heavily. If I had dreams of Hearts or Carol Gerber, I don't remember them. When I woke up at eight o'clock on Thursday morning, it was snowing so heavily I could barely see the lights of Franklin Hall across the way. I showered, then padded down the hall

to see if the game had started yet. There was one table going—Lennie Doria, Randy Echolls, Billy Marchant, and Skip. They looked pale and stubbly and tired, as if they had been there all night. Probably had been. I leaned in the doorway, watching the game. Outside in the snow, something quite a bit more interesting than cards was going on, but none of us knew it until later.

Tom Huckabee lived in King, the other boys' dorm in our complex. Becca Aubert lived in Franklin. They had become quite cozy in the last three or four weeks, and that included taking their meals together. They were coming back from breakfast on that snowy late-November morning when they saw something printed on the north side of Chamberlain Hall. That was the side which faced the rest of the campus . . . which faced East Annex in particular, where the big corporations held their job interviews.

They walked closer, stepping off the path and into the new snow—by then about four inches had fallen.

“Look,” Becca said, pointing down at the snow. There were queer tracks there—not footprints but drag-marks, almost, and deep punched holes running in lines outside them. Tom Huckabee said they reminded him of tracks made by a person wearing skis and wielding ski-poles. Neither of them thought that someone using crutches might have made such tracks. Not then.

They drew closer to the side of the dorm. The letters there were big and black, but by then the snow was so heavy that they had to get within ten feet of the wall before they could read the words, which had been posted by someone with a can of spray-paint . . . and in a state of total piss-off, from the jagged look of the message. (Again, neither of them considered that someone trying to spray-paint a message while at the same time maintaining his balance on a set of crutches might not be able to manage much in the way of neatness.)

The message read:

☮ F\*CK JOHNSON! KILLER PRESIDENT  
U.S. OUT OF VIETNAM NOW! ☮

I've read that some criminals—perhaps a great many criminals—actually want to be caught. I think that was the case with Stoke Jones. Whatever he had come to the University of Maine looking for, he wasn't finding it. I believe he'd decided it was time to leave . . . and if he was going, he would make the grandest gesture a guy on crutches could manage before he did.

Tom Huckabee told dozens of kids about what was spray-painted on our dorm; so did Becka Aubert. One of the people she told was Franklin's second-floor proctor, a skinny self-righteous girl named Marjorie Stuttenheimer. Marjorie became quite a figure on campus by 1969, as founder and president of Christians for College America. The CCA supported the war in Vietnam and at their booth in the Memorial Union sold the little lapel flag-pins which Richard Nixon made so popular.

I was scheduled to work Thursday lunch at the Palace on the Plains, and while I might cut classes, it never crossed my mind to cut my job—I wasn't made that way. I gave my seat in the lounge to Tony DeLucca and started over to Holyoke at about eleven o'clock to do my dishly duty. I saw a fairly large group of students gathered in the snow, looking at something on the north side of my dorm. I walked over, read the message, and knew at once who'd put it there.

On Bennett Road, a blue University of Maine sedan and one of the University's two police cars were drawn up by the path leading to Chamberlain's side door. Margie Stuttenheimer was there, part of a little group that consisted of four campus cops, the Dean of Men, and Charles Ebersole, the University's Disciplinary Officer.

There were perhaps fifty people in the crowd when I joined it at the rear; in the five minutes I stood there rubbernecking, it swelled to seventy-five. By the time I finished wipedown-shutdown at one-fifteen and headed back to Chamberlain, there were probably two hundred people gawping in little clusters. I suppose it's hard to believe now that any graffiti could have such a draw, especially on a shitty day like that one, but we are talking about a far different world, one where no magazine in America (except, very occasionally,

*Popular Photography*) would show a nude so nude that the subject's pubic hair was on view, where no newspaper would dare so much as a whisper about any political figure's sex-life. This was before Atlantis sank; this was long ago and far away in a world where at least one comedian was jailed for uttering "fuck" in public and another observed that on *The Ed Sullivan Show* you could prick your finger but not finger your prick. It was a world where some words were still shocking.

Yes, we knew fuck. Of course we did. We *said* fuck all the time: fuck you, fuck your dog, go take a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut, fuck a duck, hey, go fuck your sister, the rest of us did. But there, written in black letters five feet high, were the words FUCK JOHNSON. Fuck *the President of the United States!* And KILLER PRESIDENT! Someone had called *the President of the United States of America* a murderer! We couldn't believe it.

When I came back from Holyoke, the other campus police car had arrived, and there were six campus cops—almost the whole damned force, I calculated—trying to put up a big rectangle of yellow canvas over the message. The crowd muttered, then started booing. The cops looked at them, annoyed. One shouted for them to break it up, go on, they all had places to go. That might have been true, but apparently most of them liked it right there, because the crowd didn't thin out much.

The cop holding the far left end of the canvas drop-cloth slipped in the snow and nearly fell. A few onlookers applauded. The cop who had slipped looked toward the sound with an expression of blackest hate momentarily congesting his face, and for me that's when things really started to change, when the generations really started to gap.

The cop who'd slipped turned away and began to struggle with the piece of canvas again. In the end they settled for covering the first peace sign and the FUCK of FUCK JOHNSON! And once the Really Bad Word was hidden, the crowd *did* begin to break up. The snow was changing to sleet and standing around had become uncomfortable.

"Better not let the cops see the back of your jacket," Skip said, and I looked around. He was standing beside me in a hooded sweatshirt, his hands plunged deep into the pouch in front. His breath came out of his mouth in frozen plumes; his eyes never left the campus cops and the part of the message which

still remained: JOHNSON! KILLER PRESIDENT! U.S. OUT OF VIETNAM NOW!  
“They’ll think you did it. Or me.”

Smiling a little, Skip turned around. On the back of his sweatshirt, drawn in bright red ink, was another of those sparrow-tracks.

“Jesus,” I said. “When did you do that?”

“This morning,” he said. “I saw Nate’s.” He shrugged. “It was too cool not to copy.”

“They won’t think it was us. Not for a minute.”

“No, I suppose not.”

The only question was why they weren’t questioning Stoke already . . . not that they’d have to ask many questions to get the truth out of him. But if Ebersole, the Disciplinary Officer, and Garretsen, the Dean of Men, *weren’t* talking to him, it was only because they hadn’t yet talked to—

“Where’s Dearie?” I asked. “Do you know?” The sleet was falling hard now, rattling through the trees and pinging every inch of exposed skin.

“The young and heroic Mr. Dearborn is out sanding sidewalks and paths with a dozen or so of his ROTC buddies,” Skip said. “We saw them from the lounge. They’re driving around in a real army truck. Malenfant said their pricks are probably so hard they won’t be able to sleep on their stomachs for a week. I thought that was pretty good, for Ronnie.”

“When Dearie comes back—”

“Yeah, when he comes back.” Skip shrugged, as if to say all that was beyond our control. “Meantime, let’s get out of this slop and play some cards, what do you say?”

I wanted to say a lot of stuff about a lot of things . . . but then again I didn’t. We went back inside, and by mid-afternoon the game was in full swing once more. There were five four-handed “sub-games” going on, the room was blue with smoke, and someone had dragged in a phonograph so we could listen to the Beatles and the Stones. Someone else produced a scratched-up Cameo forty-five of “96 Tears” and that spun for at least an hour non-stop: cry cry cry. The windows gave a good view on Bennett’s Run and Bennett’s Walk, and I kept looking out there, expecting to see David Dearborn and some of his khaki buddies staring at the north side of the dorm, perhaps discussing if they should go after Stoke Jones with their carbines or just chase him with their

bayonets. Of course they wouldn't do anything of the sort. They might chant "Kill Cong! Go U.S.!" while drilling on the football field, but Stoke was a cripple. They would happily settle for seeing his commie-loving ass busted out of the University of Maine.

I didn't want that to happen, but I didn't see any way it wouldn't. Stoke had had a sparrow-track on the back of his coat since the beginning of school, long before the rest of us were hip to what it meant, and Dearie knew it. Plus, Stoke *would* admit it. He'd deal with the Dean and the Disciplinary Officer's questions the same way he dealt with his crutches—at a full-out plunge.

And anyway, the whole thing began to seem distant, okay? The way classes did. The way Carol did, now that I understood she was really gone. The way the concept of being drafted and sent away to die in the jungle did. What seemed real and immediate was hunting out that bad Bitch, or shooting the moon and hitting everyone else at your table with twenty-six points at a whack. What seemed real was Hearts.

But then something happened.

Around four o'clock the sleet changed to rain, and by four-thirty, when it began to get dark, we could see that Bennett's Run was under three or four inches of water. Most of the Walk looked like a canal. Below the water was an icy, melting slush Jell-O.

The pace of the games slowed as we watched those unfortunates who were working the dishline cross from the dorms to the Palace on the Plains. Some of them—the wiser ones—cut across the slope of the hillside, making their way through the rapidly melting snow. The others came down the paths, slipping and sliding on their treacherous, icy surfaces. A thick mist had begun to rise from the wet ground, making it even harder for people to see where they were going. One guy from King met a girl from Franklin at the place where the paths converged. When they started up Bennett's Walk together the guy slipped and grabbed the girl. They almost went down together, but managed to keep their combined balance. We all applauded.

At my table we began a hold hand. Ronnie's weaselly little friend Nick dealt me an incredible thirteen cards, maybe the best pat hand I'd ever gotten. It was a shoot-the-moon opportunity if ever I had one: six high hearts and no really low ones, the king and queen of spades, plus court-cards in the other two suits, as well. I had the seven of hearts, a borderline card, but you can catch people napping in a hold hand; no one expects you to shoot the moon in a situation where you can't improve your original draw.

Lennie Doria played *The Douche* to start us off. Ronnie immediately played void, ridding himself of the ace of spades. He thought that was great. So did I; my two court spades were now both winners. The queen was thirteen points, but if I got all the hearts, I wouldn't eat those points; Ronnie, Nick, and Lennie would.

I let Nick take the trick. We spilled three more tricks uneventfully—first Nick and then Lennie mined for diamonds—and then I took the ten of hearts mixed into a club trick.

"Hearts have been broken and Riley eats the first one!" Ronnie bugled gleefully. "You're goin down, country boy!"

“Maybe,” I said. And maybe, I thought, Ronnie Malenfant would soon be smiling on the other side of his face. With a successful shoot, I could put the idiotic Nick Prouty over a hundred and cost Ronnie a game he’d been on his way to winning.

Three tricks later what I was doing became almost obvious. As I’d hoped, Ronnie’s smirk became the expression I most enjoyed seeing on his face—the disgruntled pout.

“You can’t,” he said. “I don’t believe it. Not in a hold hand. You ain’t got the fuckin horses.” Yet he knew it was possible. It was in his voice.

“Well, let’s see,” I said, and played the ace of hearts. I was running in the open now, but why not? If the hearts were spread evenly, I could win the game right here. “Let’s just see what we—”

“Look!” Skip called from the table nearest the window. His voice held disbelief and a kind of awe. “Jesus Christ, it’s fuckin Stokely!”

Play stopped. We all swivelled in our chairs to look out the window at the darkening, dripping world below us. The quartet of boys in the corner stood up to see. The old wrought-iron lamps on Bennett’s Walk cast weak electric beams through the groundmist, making me think of London and Tyne Street and Jack the Ripper. From its place on the hill, Holyoke Commons looked more like an ocean liner than ever. Its shape wavered as rain streamed down the lounge windows.

“Fuckin Rip-Rip, out in *this* crap—I don’t believe it,” Ronnie breathed.

Stoke came rapidly down the path which led from the north entrance of Chamberlain to the place where all the asphalt paths joined in the lowest part of Bennett’s Run. He was wearing his old duffle coat, and it was clear he hadn’t just come from the dorm; the coat was soaked through. Even through the streaming glass we could see the peace sign on his back, as black as the words which were now partly covered by a rectangle of yellow canvas (if it was still up). His wild hair was soaked into submission.

Stoke never looked toward his KILLER PRESIDENT graffiti, just thumped on toward Bennett’s Walk. He was going faster than I’d ever seen him, paying no heed to the driving rain, the rising mist, or the slop under his crutches. Did he want to fall? Was he daring the slushy crap to take him down? I don’t know. Maybe he was just too deep in his own thoughts to have any idea of how fast

he was moving or how bad the conditions were. Either way, he wasn't going to get far if he didn't cool it.

Ronnie began to giggle, and the sound spread the way a little flame spreads through dry tinder. I didn't want to join in but was helpless to stop. So, I saw, was Skip. Partly because giggling is contagious, but also because it really was funny. I know how unkind that sounds, of course I do, but I've come too far not to tell the truth about that day . . . and *this* day, almost half a lifetime later. Because it still seems funny to me, I still smile when I think back to how he looked, a frantic clockwork toy in a duffle coat thudding along through the pouring rain, his crutches splashing up water as he went. You knew what was going to happen, you just *knew* it, and that was the funniest part of all—the question of just how far he could make it before the inevitable wipeout.

Lennie was roaring with one hand clutched to his face, staring out between his splayed fingers, his eyes streaming. Hugh Brennan was holding his not inconsiderable gut and braying like a donkey stuck in a mudhole. Mark St. Pierre was howling uncontrollably and saying he was gonna piss himself, he'd drunk too many Cokes and he was gonna spray his fuckin jeans. I was laughing so hard I couldn't hold my cards; the nerves in my right hand went dead, my fingers relaxed, and those last few winning tricks fluttered into my lap. My head was pounding and my sinuses were full.

Stoke made the bottom of the dip, where the Walk started. There he paused and for some reason did a crazed three-sixty spin, seeming to balance on one crutch. The other crutch he held out like a machine-gun, as if in his mind he was spraying the whole campus—Kill Cong! Slaughter proctors! Bayonet those upperclassmen!

*“Annnd . . . the Olympic judges give him . . . ALL TENS!”* Tony DeLucca called in a perfect sports announcer's voice. It was the final touch; the place turned into bedlam on the spot. Cards flew everywhere. Ashtrays spilled, and one of the glass ones (most were just those little aluminum Table Talk pie-dishes) broke. Someone fell out of his chair and began to roll around, bellowing and kicking his legs. Man, we just couldn't stop laughing.

“That's it!” Mark was howling. “I just drowned my Jockeys! I couldn't help it!” Behind him Nick Prouty was crawling toward the window on his knees with tears coursing down his burning face and his hands held out, the wordless

begging gesture of a man who wants to say make it stop, make it stop before I burst a fuckin blood-vessel in the middle of my brain and die right here.

Skip got up, overturning his chair. I got up. Laughing our brains out, we groped for one another and staggered toward the window with our arms slung around each other's back. Below, unaware that he was being watched and laughed at by two dozen or so freaked-out cardplayers, Stoke Jones was still, amazingly, on his feet.

"Go Rip-Rip!" Ronnie began to chant. "Go Rip-Rip!" Nick joined in. He had reached the window and was leaning his forehead against it, still laughing.

"Go, Rip-Rip!"

"Go, baby!"

"Go!"

"On, Rip-Rip! Mush those huskies!"

"Work those crutches, big boy!"

*"Go you fuckin Rip-Rip!"*

It was like the last play of a close football game, except everyone was chanting *Go Rip-Rip* instead of *Hold that line* or *Block that kick*. Almost everyone; I wasn't chanting, and I don't think Skip was, either, but we were laughing. We were laughing just as hard as the rest.

Suddenly I thought of the night Carol and I had sat on the milk-boxes beside Holyoke, the night she had shown me the snapshot of herself and her childhood friends . . . and then told me the story of what those other boys had done to her. What they had done with a baseball bat. *At first they were joking, I think*, Carol had said. And had they been laughing? Probably, yeah. Because that's what you did when you were joking around, having a good time, you laughed.

Stoke stood where he was for a moment, hanging from his crutches with his head down . . . and then he attacked the hill like the Marines going ashore at Tarawa. He went tearing up Bennett's Walk, spraying water everywhere with his flying crutches; it was like watching a duck with rabies.

The chant became deafening: *"GO RIP-RIP! GO RIP-RIP! GO RIP-RIP!"*

*At first they were joking*, she had said as we sat there on the milk-boxes, smoking our cigarettes. By then she was crying, her tears silver in the white

light from the dining hall above us. *At first they were joking and then . . . they weren't.*

That thought ended the joke of Stoke for me—I swear to you that it did. And still I couldn't stop laughing.

Stokely made it about a third of the way up the hill toward Holyoke, almost back to the visible bricks, before the slippery-slop finally got him. He planted his crutches far in advance of his body—too far for even dry conditions—and when he swung forward, both sticks flew out from under him. His legs flipped up like the legs of a gymnast doing some fabulous trick on the balance beam, and he went down on his back with a tremendous splash. We could hear it even from the third-floor lounge. It was the final perfect touch.

The lounge looked like a lunatic asylum where the inmates had all come down with food-poisoning at the same time. We staggered aimlessly about, laughing and clutching at our throats, our eyes spouting tears. I was hanging onto Skip because my legs would no longer support me; my knees felt like noodles. I was laughing harder than I ever had in my life, harder than I ever have since, I think, and still I kept thinking about Carol sitting there on the milk-box beside me, legs crossed, cigarette in one hand, snapshot in the other, Carol saying *Harry Doolin hit me . . . Willie and the other one held me so I couldn't run away . . . at first they were joking, I think, and then . . . they weren't.*

Out on Bennett's Walk, Stoke tried to sit up. He got his upper body partway out of the water . . . and then lay back, full length, as if that icy, slushy water were a bed. He lifted both arms skyward in a gesture which was almost invocatory, then let them fall again. It was every surrender ever given summed up in three motions: the lying back, the lifting of the arms, the double splash as they fell back wide to either side. It was the ultimate fuck it, do what you want, I quit.

"Come on," Skip said. He was still laughing but he was also completely serious. I could hear the seriousness in his laughing voice and see it in his hysterically contorted face. I was glad it was there, God I was glad. "Come on, before the stupid motherfuck drowns."

Skip and I crammed through the doorway of the lounge shoulder to shoulder and sprinted down the third-floor hall, bouncing off each other like pinballs, reeling, almost as out of control as Stoke had been on the path. Most

of the others followed us. The only one I know for sure who didn't was Mark; he went down to his room to change out of his soaked jeans.

We met Nate on the second-floor landing—damned near ran him down. He was standing there with an armload of books in a plastic sack, looking at us with some alarm.

“Good grief,” he said. That was Nate at his strongest, *good grief*. “What’s wrong with *you*?”

“Come on,” Skip said. His throat was so choked the words came out in a growl. If I hadn’t been with him earlier, I’d have thought he’d just finished a fit of weeping. “It’s not us, it’s fuckin Jones. He fell down. He needs—” Skip broke off as laughter—great big belly-gusts of it—overtook him and shook him once again. He fell back against the wall, rolling his eyes in a kind of hilarious exhaustion. He shook his head as if to deny it, but of course you can’t deny laughter; when it comes, it plops down in your favorite chair and stays as long as it wants. Above us, the stairs began to thunder with descending third-floor cardplayers. “He needs help,” Skip finished, wiping his eyes.

Nate looked at me in growing bewilderment. “If he needs help, why are you guys laughing?”

I couldn’t explain it to him. Hell, I couldn’t explain it to myself. I grabbed Skip by the arm and yanked. We started down the steps to the first floor. Nate followed us. So did the rest.

The first thing I saw when we banged out through the north door was that rectangle of yellow canvas. It was lying on the ground, full of water and floating lumps of slush. Then the water on the path started pouring in through my sneakers and I forgot all about sightseeing. It was freezing. The rain drove down on my exposed skin in needles that were not quite ice.

In Bennett's Run the water was ankle-deep, and my feet went from cold to numb. Skip slipped and I grabbed his arm. Nate steadied us both from behind and kept us from tumbling over backward. Ahead of us I could hear a nasty sound that was half coughing and half choking. Stoke lay in the water like a sodden log, his duffle coat floating around his body and those masses of black hair floating around his face. The cough was deep and bronchial. Fine droplets sprayed from his lips with each gagging, choking outburst. One of his crutches lay next to him, caught between his arm and his side. The other was floating away in the direction of Bennett Hall.

Water slopped over Stoke's pale face. His coughing took on a strangled, gargling quality. His eyes stared straight up into the rain and fog. He gave no sign that he heard us coming, but when I knelt on one side of him and Skip on the other, he tried to beat us away with his hands. Water ran into his mouth and he began to thrash. He was drowning in front of us. I no longer felt like laughing, but I might still have been doing it. At first they were joking, Carol said. At first they were joking. Put on the radio, Pete, I like the oldies.

"Pick him up," Skip said, and grabbed one of Stoke's shoulders. Stoke slapped at him weakly with one wax-dummy hand. Skip ignored this, might not even have felt it. "Hurry, for Christ's sake."

I grabbed Stoke's other shoulder. He splashed water in my face as though we were fucking around in someone's backyard pool. I had thought he'd be as cold as I was, but there was a sickish heat coming off his skin. I looked across his waterlogged body to Skip.

Skip nodded back at me. "Ready . . . set . . . *now*."

We heaved. Stoke came partly out of the water—from the waist up—but that was all. I was astounded by the weight of him. His shirt had come

untucked from his pants and floated around his middle like a ballerina's tutu. Below it I could see his white skin and the black bullethole of his navel. There were scars there, too, healed scars wavering every whichway like snarls of knotted string.

"Help out, Natie!" Skip grunted. "Prop him up, for fuck's sake!"

Nate dropped to his knees, splashing all three of us, and grabbed Stoke in a kind of backwards hug. We struggled to get him all the way up and out of the soup, but the slush on the bricks kept us off-balance, made it impossible for us to work together. And Stoke, although still coughing and half-drowned, was also working against us, struggling as best he could to be free of us. Stoke wanted to go back in the water.

The others arrived, Ronnie in the lead. "Fucking Rip-Rip," he breathed. He was still giggling, but he looked slightly awestruck. "You screwed up big this time, Rip. No doubt."

"Don't just stand there, you numb tool!" Skip cried. "Help us!"

Ronnie paused a moment longer, not angry, just assessing how this might best be done, then turned to see who else was there. He slipped on the slush and Tony DeLucca—also still giggling—grabbed him and steadied him. They were crowded together on the drowned Walk, all my cardplaying buddies from the third-floor lounge, and most of them still couldn't stop laughing. They looked like something, but I didn't know what. I might never have known, if not for Carol's Christmas present . . . but of course that came later.

"You, Tony," Ronnie said. "Brad, Lennie, Barry. Let's get his legs."

"What about me, Ronnie?" Nick asked. "What about me?"

"You're too small to help lift him," Ronnie said, "but it might cheer him up to get his dick sucked."

Nick stood back.

Ronnie, Tony, Brad, Lennie, and Barry Margeaux slipped past us on either side. Ronnie and Tony got Stoke by the calves.

"Christ Jesus!" Tony cried, disgusted and still half-laughing. "Nothing to him! Legs like on a scarecrow!"

" 'Legs like on a scarecrow, legs like on a scarecrow!' " Ronnie cried, viciously mimicking. "Pick him the fuck up, you wop nimrod, this isn't art

appreciation! Lennie and Barry, get under his deprived ass when they do. Then you come up—”

“—when the rest of you guys lift him,” Lennie finished. “Got it. And don’t call my *paisan* a wop.”

“Leave me alone,” Stoke coughed. “Stop it, get away from me . . . fucking losers . . .” The coughing overtook him again. He began to make gruesome retching sounds. In the lamplight his lips looked gray and slick.

“Look who’s talkin about being a loser,” Ronnie said. “Fuckin half-drowned crippled-up Jerry’s Kid homo.” He looked at Skip, water running out of his wavy hair and over his pimply face. “Count us off, Kirk.”

“One . . . two . . . three . . . *now!*”

We lifted. Stoke Jones came out of the water like a salvaged ship. We staggered back and forth with him. One of his arms flopped in front of me; it hung there for a moment and then the hand attached to the end of it arced up and slapped me hard across the face. Whacko! I started laughing again.

“*Put me down! Motherfuckers, put me DOWN!*”

We staggered, dancing on the slush, water pouring off him, water pouring off us. “Echolls!” Ronnie bawled. “Marchant! Brennan! *Jesus Christ, little help here you fuckin brain-dead ringmeats, what do you say?*”

Randy and Billy splashed forward. Others—three or four drawn by the shouts and splashing, most still from the third-floor Hearts group—took hold of Stoke as well. We turned him awkwardly, probably looking like the world’s most spastic cheerleading squad, for some reason out practicing in the downpour. Stoke had quit struggling. He lay in our grip, arms hanging out to either side, palms up and filling with little cups of rain. Diminishing waterfalls ran out of his sodden jacket and from the seat of his pants. *He picked me up and carried me*, Carol had said. Talking about the boy with the crewcut, the boy who had been her first love. *All the way up Broad Street on one of the hottest days of the year. He carried me in his arms.* I couldn’t get her voice out of my head. In a way I never have.

“The dorm?” Ronnie asked Skip. “We takin him into the dorm?”

“Jeepers, no,” Nate said. “The infirmary.”

Since we’d managed to get him out of the water—that was the hardest part and it was behind us—the infirmary made sense. It was a small brick building

just beyond Bennett Hall, no more than three or four hundred yards away. Once we got off the path and onto the road, the footing would be good.

So we carried him to the infirmary—bore him up at shoulder height like a slain hero being ceremonially removed from the field of battle. Some of us were still laughing in little snorts and giggles. I was one of them. Once I saw Nate looking at me as if I was a thing almost below contempt, and I tried to stop the sounds that were coming out of me. I'd do okay for a little while, then I'd think of him spinning on the pivot of his crutch ("*The Olympic judges give him . . . ALL TENS!*") and I'd start in again.

Stoke only spoke once as we carried him up the walk to the infirmary door. "Let me die," he said. "For once in your stupid greedy-me-me lives do something worthwhile. Put me down and let me die."

The waiting room was empty, the television in the corner showing an old episode of *Bonanza* to no one at all. In those days they hadn't really found the handle on color TV yet, and Pa Cartwright's face was the color of a fresh avocado. We must have sounded like a herd of hippopotami just out of the watering-hole, and the duty-nurse came on the run. Following her was a candystriper (probably a work-study kid like me) and a little guy in a white coat. He had a stethoscope hung around his neck and a cigarette poked in the corner of his mouth. In Atlantis even the doctors smoked.

"What's the trouble with him?" The doc asked Ronnie, either because Ronnie had an in-charge look or because he was the closest at hand.

"Took a header in Bennett's Run while he was on his way to Holyoke," Ronnie said. "Damned near drowned himself." He paused, then added: "He's a cripple."

As if to underline this point, Billy Marchant waved one of Stoke's crutches. Apparently no one had bothered to salvage the other one.

"Put that thing down, you want to fuckin bonk my brains out?" Nick Prouty asked waspishly, ducking.

"What brains?" Brad responded, and we all laughed so hard we nearly dropped Stoke.

"Suck me sideways, ass-breath," Nick said, but he was laughing, too.

The doctor was frowning. "Bring him in here, and save that language for your bull sessions." Stoke began coughing again, a deep, ratcheting sound. You expected to see blood and filaments of tissue come popping out of his mouth, that cough was so heavy.

We carried Stoke down the infirmary hallway in a conga-line, but we couldn't get him through the door that way. "Let me," Skip said.

"You'll drop him," Nate said.

"No," Skip said. "I won't. Just let me get a good hold."

He stepped up beside Stoke, then nodded first to me on his right, then to Ronnie on his left.

“Lower him down,” Ronnie said. We did. Skip grunted once as he took Stoke’s weight, and I saw the veins pop out in his neck. Then we stood back and Skip carried Stoke into the room and laid him on the exam table. The thin sheet of paper covering the leather was immediately soaked. Skip stepped back. Stoke was staring up at him, his face dead pale except for two red patches high on his cheekbones—red as rouge, those patches were. Water ran out of his hair in rivulets.

“Sorry, man,” Skip said.

Stoke turned his head away and closed his eyes.

“Out,” the doctor told Skip. He had ditched the cigarette somewhere. He looked around at us, a gaggle of perhaps a dozen boys, most still grinning, all dripping on the hall’s tile floor. “Does anyone know the nature of his disability? It can make a difference in how we treat him.”

I thought of the scars I’d seen, those tangles of knotted string, but said nothing. I didn’t really know anything. And now that the uncontrollable urge to laugh had passed, I felt too ashamed of myself to speak up.

“It’s just one of those cripple things, isn’t it?” Ronnie asked. Actually faced with an adult, he had lost his shrill cockiness. He sounded unsure, perhaps even uneasy. “Muscular palsy or cerebral dystrophy?”

“You clown,” Lennie said. “It’s muscular dystrophy and cerebral—”

“He was in a car accident,” Nate said. We all looked around at him. Nate still looked neat and totally put together in spite of the soaking he’d taken. This afternoon he was wearing a Fort Kent High School ski-hat. The Maine football team had finally scored a touchdown and freed Nate from his beanie; go you Black Bears. “Four years ago. His father, mother, and older sister were killed. He was the only family survivor.”

There was silence. I looked between Skip and Tony’s shoulders and into the examination room. Stoke still lay streaming on the table, his head turned to the side, his eyes shut. The nurse was taking his blood pressure. His pants clung to his legs and I thought of the Fourth of July parade they used to have back home in Gates Falls when I was just a little kid. Uncle Sam would come striding along between the school band and the Anah Temple Shrine guys on their midget motorcycles, looking at least ten feet tall in his starry blue hat, but when the wind blew his pants against his legs you could see the trick. That’s

what Stoke Jones's legs looked like inside his wet pants: a trick, a bad joke, sawed-off stilts with sneakers poked onto the ends of them.

"How do you know that?" Skip asked. "Did he tell you, Natie?"

"No." Nate looked ashamed. "He told Harry Swidrowski, after a Committee of Resistance meeting. They—we—were in the Bear's Den. Harry asked him right out what happened to his legs and Stoke told him."

I thought I understood the look on Nate's face. After the meeting, he had said. *After*. Nate didn't know what had been said *at* the meeting, because Nate hadn't been there. Nate wasn't a member of the Committee of Resistance; Nate was strictly a sidelines boy. He might agree with the C.R.'s goals and tactics . . . but he had his mother to think about. And his future as a dentist.

"Spinal injury?" the doctor asked. Brisker than ever.

"I think so, yeah," Nate said.

"All right." Doc began to make shooing gestures with his hands as if we were a flock of geese. "Go on back to your dorms. We'll take good care of him."

We began to back up toward the reception area.

"Why were you boys laughing when you brought him in?" the nurse asked suddenly. She stood by the doctor with the blood-pressure cuff in her hands. "Why are you grinning now?" She sounded angry. Hell, she sounded *furious*. "What was so funny about this boy's misfortune that it made you laugh?"

I didn't think anyone would answer. We'd just stand there and look down at our shuffling feet, realizing that we were still a lot closer to the fourth grade than we had perhaps thought. But someone *did* answer. Skip answered. He even managed to look at her as he did.

"His misfortune, ma'am," he said. "That was what it was, you're right. It was his misfortune that was funny."

"How terrible," she said. There were tears of rage standing in the corners of her eyes. "How terrible you are."

"Yes, ma'am," Skip said. "I guess you're right about that, too." He turned away from her.

We followed him back to the reception area in a wet and beaten little group. I can't say that being called terrible was the low point of my college career ("If you can remember much of the sixties, you weren't there," the

hippie known as Wavy Gravy once said), but it may have been. The waiting room was still empty. Little Joe Cartwright was on the tube now, and just as green as his dad. Pancreatic cancer was what got Michael Landon, too—he and my mother had that in common.

Skip stopped. Ronnie, head down, pushed past him toward the door, followed by Nick, Billy, Lennie, and the rest.

“Hold it,” Skip said, and they turned. “I want to talk to you guys about something.”

We gathered around him. Skip glanced once toward the door leading back to the exam area, verified that we were alone, then began to talk.

Ten minutes later Skip and I walked back to the dorm by ourselves. The others had gone ahead. Nate hung with us for a little bit, then must have picked up a vibe that I wanted to talk privately to Skip. Nate was always good at picking up the vibe. I bet he's a good dentist, that the children in particular like him.

"I'm done playing Hearts," I said.

Skip said nothing.

"I don't know if it's too late to pull up my grades enough to keep my scholarship or not, but I'm going to try. And I don't care much, one way or the other. The fucking scholarship's not the point."

"No. *They're* the point, right? Ronnie and the rest of them."

"I think they're only part of it." It was so cold out there as that day turned to dark—cold and damp and evil. It seemed that it would never be summer again. "Man, I miss Carol. Why'd she have to go?"

"I don't know."

"When he fell over it sounded like a nuthouse up there," I said. "Not a college dorm, a fucking *nuthouse*."

"You laughed too, Pete. So did I."

"I know," I said. I might not have if I'd been alone, and Skip and I might not have if it had just been the two of us, but how could you tell? You were stuck with the way things played out. I kept thinking of Carol and those boys with their baseball bat. And I thought of the way Nate had looked at me, as if I were a thing below contempt. "I know."

We walked in silence for awhile.

"I can live with laughing at him, I guess," I said, "but I don't want to wake up forty with my kids asking me what college was like and not be able to remember anything but Ronnie Malenfant telling Polish jokes and that poor fucked-up asshole McClendon trying to kill himself with baby aspirin." I thought about Stoke Jones twirling on his crutch and felt like laughing; thought of him lying beached on the exam table in the infirmary and felt like crying. And you know what? It was, as far as I could tell, exactly the same feeling. "I just feel bad about it. I feel like shit."

“So do I,” Skip said. The rain poured down around us, soaking and cold. The lights of Chamberlain Hall were bright but not particularly comforting. I could see the yellow canvas the cops had put up lying on the grass, and above it the dim shapes of the spray-painted letters. They were running in the rain; by the following day they would be all but unreadable.

“When I was a little kid, I always pretended I was the hero,” Skip said.

“Fuck yeah, me too. What little kid ever pretended to be part of the lynch-mob?”

Skip looked down at his soaked shoes, then up at me. “Could I study with you for the next couple of weeks?”

“Any time you want.”

“You really don’t mind?”

“Why would I fuckin mind?” I made myself sound irritated because I didn’t want him to hear how relieved I was, how almost thrilled I was. Because it might work. I paused, then said, “This other . . . do you think we can pull it off?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

We had almost reached the north entrance, and I pointed to the running letters just before we went in. “Maybe Dean Garretsen and that guy Ebersole will let the whole thing drop. The paint Stoke used didn’t get a chance to set. It’ll be gone by morning.”

Skip shook his head. “They won’t let it drop.”

“Why not? How can you be so sure?”

“Because Dearie won’t let them.”

And of course he was right.

For the first time in weeks the third-floor lounge was empty for awhile as drenched cardplayers dried themselves off and put on fresh clothes. Many of them also took care of some stuff Skip Kirk had suggested in the infirmary waiting room. When Nate and Skip and I came back from dinner, however, it was business as usual in the lounge—three tables were up and going.

“Hey, Riley,” Ronnie said. “Twiller here says he’s got a study date. If you want his seat, I’ll teach you how to play the game.”

“Not tonight,” I said. “Got studying to do myself.”

“Yeah,” Randy Echolls said. “The Art of Self-Abuse.”

“That’s right, honey, a couple more weeks of hard work and I’ll be able to switch hands without missing a stroke, just like you.”

As I started away, Ronnie said, “I had you stopped, Riley.”

I turned around. Ronnie was leaning back in his chair, smiling that unpleasant smile of his. For a short period of time, out there in the rain, I had glimpsed a different Ronnie, but that young man had gone back into hiding.

“No,” I said, “you didn’t. It was a done deal.”

“No one shoots the moon on a hold hand,” Ronnie said, leaning back farther than ever. He scratched one cheek, busting the heads off a couple of pimples. They oozed tendrils of yellow-white cream. “Not at my table they don’t. I had you stopped in clubs.”

“You were *void* in clubs, unless you reneged on the first trick. You played the ace of spades when Lennie played The Douche. And in hearts I had the whole court.”

Ronnie’s smile faltered for just a moment, then came back strong. He waved a hand at the floor, from which all the spilled cards had been picked up (the butty remains of the overturned ashtrays still remained; most of us had been raised in homes where moms cleaned up such messes). “All the high hearts, huh? Too bad we can’t check and see.”

“Yeah. Too bad.” I started away again.

“You’re going to fall behind on match points!” he called after me. “You know that, don’t you?”

“You can have mine, Ronnie. I don’t want them anymore.”

I never played another hand of Hearts in college. Many years later I taught my kids the game, and they took to it like ducks to water. We have a tournament at the summer cottage every August. There are no match points, but there’s a trophy from Atlantic Awards—a loving cup. I won it one year, and kept it on my desk where I could see it. I shot the moon twice in the championship round, but neither was a hold hand. Like my old school buddy Ronnie Malenfant once said, no one shoots the moon on a hold hand. You might as well expect Atlantis to rise from the ocean, palm trees waving.

At eight o'clock that night, Skip Kirk was at my desk and deep in his anthro text. His hands were plunged into his hair, as if he had a bad headache. Nate was at his desk, doing a botany paper. I was sprawled on my bed, struggling with my old friend geology. On the stereo Bob Dylan sang: "She was the funniest woman I ever seen, the great-grandmother of Mr. Clean."

There was a hard double rap on the door: *pow-pow*. So must the Gestapo have rapped on the doors of Jews in 1938 and 1939. "Floor meeting!" Dearie called. "Floor meeting in the rec at nine o'clock! Attendance mandatory!"

"Oh Christ," I said. "Burn the secret papers and eat the radio."

Nate turned down Dylan, and we heard Dearie going on up the hall, rapping that *pow-pow* on every door and yelling about the floor meeting in the rec. Most of the rooms he was hailing were probably empty, but no problem; he'd find the occupants down in the lounge, chasing The Bitch.

Skip was looking at me. "Told you," he said.

Each dorm in our complex had been built at the same time, and each had a big common area in the basement as well as the lounges in the center of each floor. There was a TV alcove which filled up mostly for weekend sports events and a vampire soap opera called *Dark Shadows* during the week; a canteen corner with half a dozen vending machines; a Ping-Pong table and a number of chess- and checkerboards. There was also a meeting area with a podium standing before several rows of folding wooden chairs. We'd had a floor-meeting there at the beginning of the year, at which Dearie had explained the dorm rules and the dire consequences of unsatisfactory room inspections. I'd have to say that room inspections were Dearie's big thing. That and ROTC, of course.

He stood behind the little wooden podium, upon which he had laid a thin file-folder. I supposed it contained his notes. He was still dressed in his damp and muddy ROTC fatigues. He looked exhausted from his day of shovelling and sanding, but he also looked excited . . . "turned on" is how we'd put it a year or two later.

Dearie had been on his own at the first floor-meeting; this time he had backup. Sitting against the green cinderblock wall, hands folded in his lap and knees primly together, was Sven Garretsen, the Dean of Men. He said almost nothing during that meeting, and looked benign even when the air grew stormy. Standing beside Dearie, wearing a black topcoat over a charcoal-gray suit and looking very can-do, was Ebersole, the Disciplinary Officer.

After we had settled in the chairs and those of us who smoked had lit up, Dearie looked first over his shoulder at Garretsen, then at Ebersole. Ebersole gave him a little smile. "Go ahead, David. Please. They're your boys."

I felt a rankle of irritation. I might be a lot of things, including a creep who laughed at cripples when they fell down in the pouring rain, but I was not Dearie Dearborn's boy.

Dearie gripped the podium and looked at us solemnly, perhaps thinking (far back in the part of his mind reserved expressly for dreamy dreams) that a day would come when he would address his staff officers this way, setting some great tide of Hanoi-bound troops into motion.

“Jones is missing,” he said finally. It came out sounding portentous and corny, like a line in a Charles Bronson movie.

“He’s in the infirmary,” I said, and enjoyed the surprise on Dearie’s face. Ebersole looked surprised, too. Garretsen just went on gazing benignly into the middle distance, like a man on a three-pipe high.

“What happened to him?” Dearie asked. This wasn’t in the script—either the one he had worked out or the one he and Ebersole had prepared together—and Dearie began to frown. He was also gripping the podium more tightly, as if afraid it might fly away.

“Faw down go boom,” Ronnie said, and puffed up when the people around him laughed. “Also, I think he’s got pneumonia or double bronchitis or something like that.” He caught Skip’s eye and I thought Skip nodded slightly. This was Skip’s show, not Dearie’s, but if we were lucky—if *Stoke* was lucky—the three at the front of the room would never know it.

“Tell me this from the beginning,” Dearie said. The frown was becoming a glower. It was the way he’d looked after discovering his door had been shaving-creamed.

Skip told Dearie and Dearie’s new friends how we’d seen Stoke heading toward the Palace on the Plains from the third-floor lounge windows, how he’d fallen into the water, how we’d rescued him and taken him to the infirmary, how the doctor had said Stoke was one sick puppy. The doc hadn’t said any such thing, but he didn’t need to. Those of us who had touched Stoke’s skin knew that he was running a fever, and all of us had heard that horrible deep cough. Skip said nothing about how fast Stoke had been moving, as if he wanted to kill the whole world and then die himself, and he said nothing about how we’d laughed, Mark St. Pierre so hard he’d wet his pants.

When Skip finished, Dearie glanced uncertainly at Ebersole. Ebersole looked back blandly. Behind them, Dean Garretsen continued to smile his little Buddha smile. The implication was clear. It was Dearie’s show. He’d better have a show to put on.

Dearie took a deep breath and looked back at us. “We believe Stokely Jones was responsible for the act of vandalism and public obscenity which was perpetrated on the north end of Chamberlain Hall at a time we don’t know when this morning.”

I'm telling you exactly what he said, not making a single word of it up. Other than "It became necessary to destroy the village in order to save it," that was perhaps the most sublime example of honchospeak I ever heard in my life.

I believe Dearie expected us to ooh and aah like the extras in a *Perry Mason* courtroom finale, where the revelations start coming thick and fast. Instead we were silent. Skip watched closely, and when he saw Dearie draw in another deep breath for the next pronouncement, he said: "What makes you think it was him, Dearie?"

Although I'm not completely sure—I never asked him—I believe Skip used the nickname purposely, to throw Dearie even further off his stride. In any case it worked. Dearie started to go off, looked at Ebersole, and recalculated his options. A red line was rising out of his collar. I watched it climb, fascinated. It was a little like watching a Disney cartoon where Donald Duck is trying to control his temper. You know he can't possibly do it; the suspense comes from not knowing how long he can maintain even a semblance of reason.

"I think you know the answer to that, Skip," Dearie finally said. "Stokely Jones wears a coat with a very particular symbol on the back." He picked up the folder he had carried in, removed a sheet of paper, looked at it, then turned it around so we could look at it, too. None of us was very surprised by what was there. "*This* symbol. It was invented by the Communist Party shortly after the end of the Second World War. It means 'victory through infiltration' and is commonly called the Broken Cross by subversives. It has also become popular with such inner-city radical groups as the Black Muslims and the Black Panthers. Since this symbol was visible on Stoke Jones's coat long before it appeared on the side of our dorm, I hardly think it takes a rocket scientist to —"

"David, that is such bullshit!" Nate said, standing up. He was pale and trembling, but with anger rather than fear. Had I ever heard him say the word *bullshit* in public before? I don't think so.

Garretsen smiled his benign smile at my roommate. Ebersole raised his eyebrows, expressing polite interest. Dearie looked stunned. I suppose the last person he expected trouble from was Nate Hoppenstand.

"That symbol is based on British semaphore and stands for nuclear disarmament. It was invented by a famous British philosopher. I think he

might even be a knight. To say the Russians made it up! Goodness' sake! Is that what they teach you in ROTC? Bullshit like that?"

Nate was staring at Dearie angrily, his hands planted on his hips. Dearie gaped at him, now completely knocked off his stride. Yes, they had taught him that in ROTC, and he had swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. It made you wonder what else the ROTC kids were swallowing.

"I'm sure these facts about the Broken Cross are very interesting," Ebersole cut in smoothly, "and it's certainly information worth having—if it's true, of course—"

"It's true," Skip said. "Bert Russell, not Joe Stalin. British kids were wearing it five years ago when they marched to protest U.S. nuclear subs operating out of ports in the British Isles."

"Fuckin A!" Ronnie cried, and pumped his fist in the air. A year or so later the Panthers—who never had much use for Bertrand Russell's peace sign, so far as I know—were doing that same thing at their rallies. And, of course, twenty years or so further on down the line, all us cleaned-up sixties babies were doing it at rock concerts. *Brooooo-ooooce! Brooooo-ooooce!*

"Go, baby!" Hugh Brennan chimed in, laughing. "Go, Skip! Go, big Nate!"

"Watch your language while the Dean's here!" Dearie shouted at Ronnie.

Ebersole ignored the profanity and the cross-talk from the peanut gallery. He kept his interested, skeptical gaze trained on my roommate and on Skip.

"Even if all that's true," he said, "we still have a problem, don't we? I think so. We have an act of vandalism and public obscenity. This comes at a time when the tax-paying public is looking at University youth with an ever more critical eye. And this institution depends upon the tax-paying public, gentlemen. I think it behooves us all—"

"To think about this!" Dearie suddenly shouted. His cheeks were now almost purple; his forehead swarmed with weird red spots like brands, and right between his eyes a big vein was pulsing rapidly.

Before Dearie could say more—and he clearly had a lot to say—Ebersole put a hand out to his chest, shushing him. Dearie seemed to deflate. He'd had his chance and fluffed it. Later he'd perhaps tell himself it was because he was tired; while we'd spent the day in the nice warm lounge, playing cards and shooting holes in our future, Dearie had been outside shovelling snow and

sanding walks so brittle old psychology professors wouldn't fall down and break their hips. He was tired, a little slow on the draw, and in any case, that prick Ebersole hadn't given him a fair chance to prove himself. All of which probably didn't help much with what was happening right then: he had been set aside. The grownup was back in charge. Poppa would fix.

"I think it behooves us all to identify the fellow who did this and see he's punished with some severity," Ebersole continued. Mostly it was Nate he was looking at; amazing as it seemed to me at the time, he had identified Nate Hoppenstand as the center of the resistance he felt in the room.

Nate, God bless his molars and wisdom teeth, was more than up to the likes of Ebersole. He remained standing with his hands on his hips and his eyes never wavered, let alone dropped from Ebersole's. "How do you propose doing that?" Nate asked.

"What is your name, young man? Please."

"Nathan Hoppenstand."

"Well, Nathan, I think the perpetrator has already been singled out, don't you?" Ebersole spoke in a patient, teacherly way. "Or rather singled himself out. I'm told this unfortunate fellow Stokely Jones has been a walking billboard for the Broken Cross symbol since—"

"Quit calling it that!" Skip said, and I jumped a little at the raw anger in his voice. "It's not a broken anything! It's a damn *peace* sign!"

"What is *your* name, sir?"

"Stanley Kirk. Skip to my friends. You can call me Stanley." There was a tense little titter at this, which Ebersole seemed not to hear.

"Well, Mr. Kirk, your semantic quibble is noted, but it doesn't change the fact that Stokely Jones—and Stokely Jones *alone*—has been displaying that particular symbol all over campus since the first day of the semester. Mr. Dearborn tells me—"

Nate said, " 'Mr. Dearborn' doesn't even know what the peace sign is or where it came from, so I think you'd be sort of unwise to trust what he tells you very far. It just so happens I've got a peace sign on the back of my own jacket, Mr. Ebersole. So how do you know *I* wasn't the one with the spray-paint?"

Ebersole's mouth dropped open. Not much, but enough to spoil his sympathetic smile and magazine-ad good looks. And Dean Garretsen frowned, as if presented with some concept he couldn't understand. One very rarely sees a good politician or college administrator caught completely by surprise. They are moments to treasure. I treasured that one then, and find I still do today.

"That's a lie!" Dearie said. He sounded more wounded than angry. "Why would you lie that way, Nate? You're the last person on Three I'd expect to—"

"It's *not* a lie," Nate said. "Go on up to my room and pull the pea coat out of my closet if you don't believe me. Check."

"Yeah, and check mine while you're at it," I said, standing up next to Nate. "My old high-school jacket. You can't miss it. It's the one with the peace sign on the back."

Ebersole studied us through slightly narrowed eyes. Then he asked, "Exactly when did you put this so-called peace sign on the backs of your jackets, young fellows?"

This time Nate did lie. I knew him well enough by then to know it must have hurt . . . but he did it like a champ. "September."

That was it for Dearie. *He went nuclear* is how my own kids might express it, only that wouldn't be accurate. Dearie went Donald Duck. He didn't quite jump up and down, flapping his arms and going *wak-wak-waugh-wak* like Donald does when he's mad, but he *did* give a howl of outrage and smacked his mottled forehead with the heels of his palms. Ebersole stilled him again, this time by gripping his arm.

"Who are you?" Ebersole asked me. More curt than courteous by now.

"Pete Riley. I put a peace sign on the back of my jacket because I liked the look of Stoke's. Also to show I've got some big questions about what we're doing over there in Vietnam."

Dearie pulled away from Ebersole. His chin was thrust out, his lips pulled back enough to show a complete set of teeth. "*Helping our allies is what we're doing, you doofus!*" he shouted. "If you're too stupid to see that on your own, I suggest you take Colonel Anderson's Intro Military History Class! Or maybe you're just another chickenguts who won't—"

"Hush, Mr. Dearborn," Dean Garretsen said. His quiet was somehow louder than Dearie's shouting. "This is not the place for a foreign policy

debate, nor is it the time for personal aspersions. Quite the contrary.”

Dearie dropped his burning face, studied the floor, and began to gnaw at his own lips.

“And when, Mr. Riley, did you put the peace sign symbol on *your* jacket?” Ebersole asked. His voice remained courteous, but there was an ugly look in his eyes. He knew by then, I think, that Stoke was going to squiggle away, and Ebersole was *very* unhappy about that. Dearie was small change next to this guy, who was in 1966 a new type on the college campuses of America. Times call the men, Lao-tzu said, and the late sixties called Charles Ebersole. He wasn’t an educator; he was an enforcer minoring in public relations.

*Don’t lie to me, his eyes said. Don’t lie to me, Riley. Because if you do and I find out, I’ll turn you into salad.*

But what the hell. I’d probably be gone come January 15th, anyway; by Christmas of 1967 I might be in Phu Bai, keeping the place warm for Dearie.

“October,” I said. “Put it on my jacket right around Columbus Day.”

“I’ve got it on my jacket and some sweatshirts,” Skip said. “All that stuff’s in my room. I’ll show it to you, if you want.”

Dearie, still looking down at the floor and red to the roots of his hair, was shaking his head monotonously back and forth.

“I’ve got it on a couple of my sweatshirts, too,” Ronnie said. “I’m no peacenik, but it’s a cool sign. I like it.”

Tony DeLuca said he also had one on the back of a sweatshirt.

Lennie Doria told Ebersole and Garretsen he had doodled it on the endpapers of several different textbooks; it was on the front of his general assignments notebook as well. He’d show them, if they wanted to see.

Billy Marchant had it on his jacket.

Brad Witherspoon had inked it on his freshman beanie. The beanie was in the back of his closet somewhere, probably beneath the underwear he’d forgotten to take home for his mom to wash.

Nick Prouty said he’d drawn peace signs on his favorite record albums: *Meet the Beatles* and *Wayne Fontana and the Mindbenders*. “You ain’t got any mind to bend, dinkleballs,” Ronnie muttered, and there was laughter from behind cupped hands.

Several others reported having the peace sign on books or items of clothing. All claimed to have done this long before the discovery of the graffiti on the north end of Chamberlain Hall. In a final surreal touch, Hugh stood up, stepped into the aisle, and hiked the legs of his jeans so we could see the yellowing athletic socks climbing his hairy shins. A peace sign had been drawn on both with the laundry-marker Mrs. Brennan had sent to school with her baby boy—it was probably the first time the fuckin thing had been used all semester.

“So you see,” Skip said when show-and-tell was over, “it could have been any of us.”

Dearie slowly raised his head. All that remained of his flush was a single red patch over his left eye. It looked like a blister.

“Why are you lying for him?” he asked. He waited, but no one answered. “Not one of you had a peace sign on a single thing before Thanksgiving break, I’d swear to it, and I bet most of you never had one on anything before tonight. Why are you lying for him?”

No one answered. The silence spun out. In it there grew a sense of power, an unmistakable force we all felt. But who did it belong to? Them or us? There was no way of saying. All these years later there’s still no real way of saying.

Then Dean Garretsen stepped to the podium. Dearie moved aside without even seeming to see him. The Dean looked at us with a small and cheerful smile. “This is foolishness,” he said. “What Mr. Jones wrote on the wall was foolishness, and this lying is more foolishness. Tell the truth, men. ’Fess up.”

No one said anything.

“We’ll be speaking to Mr. Jones in the morning,” Ebersole said. “Perhaps after we do, some of you fellows may want to change your stories a bit.”

“Oh man, I wouldn’t put too much trust in anything Stoke might tell you,” Skip said.

“Right, old Rip-Rip’s crazy as a shithouse rat,” Ronnie said.

There was strangely affectionate laughter at this. “Shithouse rat!” Nick cried, eyes shining. He was as joyful as a poet who has finally found *le mot juste*. “Shithouse rat, yeah, that’s Old Rip!” And, in what was probably that day’s final triumph of lunacy over rational discourse, Nick Prouty fell into an eerily perfect Foghorn Leghorn imitation: “Ah say, Ah say the boy’s *craizy!*”

Missin a wheel off his *baiby*-carriage! Lost two-three *cabds* out'n his *deck*! Fella's a beer shote of a *six*-pack! He's . . ."

Nick gradually realized that Ebersole and Garretsen were looking at him, Ebersole with contempt, Garretsen almost with interest, as at a new bacterium glimpsed through the lens of a microscope.

". . . you know, a little sick in the head," Nick finished, losing the imitation as self-consciousness, that bane of all great artists, set in. He quickly sat down.

"That's not the kind of sick I meant, exactly," Skip said. "I'm not talking about him being a cripple, either. He's been sneezing, coughing, and running at the nose ever since he got here. Even you must have noticed that, Dearie."

Dearie didn't reply, didn't even react to the use of the nickname this time. He must have been pretty tired, all right.

"All I'm saying is that he might claim a whole lot of stuff," Skip said. "He might even believe some of it. But he's out of it."

Ebersole's smile had resurfaced, no humor in it now. "I believe I grasp the thrust of your argument, Mr. Kirk. You want us to believe that Mr. Jones was not responsible for the writing on the wall, but if he does confess to having done it, we should not credit his statement."

Skip also smiled—the thousand-watt smile that made the girls' hearts go giddyup. "That's it," he said, "that's the thrust of my argument, all right."

There was a moment's silence, and then Dean Garretsen spoke what could have been the epitaph of our brief age. "You fellows have disappointed me," he said. "Come on, Charles, we have no further business here." Garretsen hoisted his briefcase, turned on his heel, and headed for the door.

Ebersole looked surprised but hurried after him. Which left Dearie and his third-floor charges to stare at each other with mingled expressions of distrust and reproach.

"Thanks, guys." David was almost crying. "Thanks a fucking *pantload*." He stalked out with his head down and his folder clutched in one hand. The following semester he left Chamberlain and joined a frat. All things considered, that was probably for the best. As Stoke might have said, Dearie had lost his credibility.

“So you stole that, too,” Stoke Jones said from his bed in the infirmary when he could finally talk. I had just told him that almost everyone in Chamberlain Hall was now wearing the sparrow-track on at least one article of clothing, thinking this news would cheer him up. I had been wrong.

“Settle down, man,” Skip said, patting his shoulder. “Don’t have a hemorrhage.”

Stoke never so much as glanced at him. His black, accusing eyes remained on me. “You took the credit, then you took the peace sign. Did any of you check my wallet? I think there were nine or ten dollars in there. You could have had that, too. Made it a clean sweep.” He turned his head aside and began to cough weakly. On that cold day in early December of ’66 he looked one fuck of a lot older than eighteen.

This was four days after Stoke went swimming in Bennett’s Run. The doctor—Carbury, his name was—seemed by the second of those days to accept that most of us were Stoke’s friends no matter how oddly we’d acted when we brought him in, because we kept stopping by to ask after him. Carbury had been at the college infirmary, prescribing for strep throats and splinting wrists dislocated in softball games, for donkey’s years and probably knew there was no accounting for the behavior of young men and women homing in on their majority; they might look like adults, but most retained plenty of their childhood weirdnesses, as well. Nick Prouty auditioning Foghorn Leghorn for the Dean of Men, for instance—I rest my case.

Carbury never told us how bad things had been with Stoke. One of the candystripers (half in love with Skip by the second time she saw him, I believe) gave us a clearer picture, not that we really needed one. The fact that Carbury stuck him in a private room instead of on Men’s Side told us something; the fact that we weren’t allowed to so much as peek in on him for the first forty-eight hours of his stay told us more; the fact that he hadn’t been moved to Eastern Maine, which was only ten miles up the road, told us most of all. Carbury hadn’t *dared* move him, not even in the University ambulance. Stoke Jones had been in bad straits indeed. According to the candystriper, he had

pneumonia, incipient hypothermia from his dunk, and a temperature which crested at a hundred and five degrees. She'd overheard Carbury talking with someone on the phone and saying that if Jones's lung capacity had been any further reduced by his disability—or if he'd been in his thirties or forties instead of his late teens—he almost certainly would have died.

Skip and I were the first visitors he was allowed. Any other kid in the dorm probably would have been visited by at least one parent, but that wasn't going to happen in Stoke's case, we knew that now. And if there were other relatives, they hadn't bothered to put in an appearance.

We told him everything that had happened that night, with one exception: the laugh-in which had begun in the lounge when we saw him spraying his way through Bennett's Run and continued until we delivered him, semi-conscious, to the infirmary. He listened silently as I told him about Skip's idea to put peace signs on our books and clothes so Stoke couldn't be hung out all by himself. Even Ronnie Malenfant had gone along, I said, and without a single quibble. We told him so he could jibe his story with ours; we also told him so he'd understand that by trying to take the blame/credit for the graffiti now, he'd get us in trouble as well as himself. And we told him without ever coming right out and telling him. We didn't need to. His legs didn't work, but the stuff between his ears was just fine.

"Get your hand off me, Kirk." Stoke hunched as far away from us as his narrow bed would allow, then began to cough again. I remember thinking he looked like he had about four months to live, but I was wrong about that; Atlantis sank but Stoke Jones is still in the swim, practicing law in San Francisco. His black hair has gone silver and is prettier than ever. He's got a red wheelchair. It looks great on CNN.

Skip sat back and folded his arms. "I didn't expect wild gratitude, but this is too much," he said. "You've outdone yourself this time, Rip-Rip."

His eyes flashed. "Don't call me that!"

"Then don't call us thieves just because we tried to save your scrawny ass. Hell, we *did* save your scrawny ass!"

"No one asked you to."

"No," I said. "You don't ask anyone for anything, do you? I think you're going to need bigger crutches to haul around the chip on your shoulder before

long.”

“That chip’s what I’ve got, shithead. What have you got?”

A lot of catching-up to do, that’s what I had. But I didn’t tell Stoke that. Somehow I didn’t think he’d exactly melt with sympathy. “How much of that day do you remember?” I asked him.

“I remember putting the FUCK JOHNSON thing on the dorm—I’d been planning that for a couple of weeks—and I remember going to my one o’clock class. I spent most of it thinking about what I was going to say in the Dean’s office when he called me in. What kind of a *statement* I was going to make. After that, everything fades into little fragments.” He uttered a sardonic laugh and rolled his eyes in their bruised-looking sockets. He’d been in bed for the best part of a week and still looked unutterably tired. “I think I remember telling you guys I wanted to die. Did I say that?”

I didn’t answer. He gave me all the time in the world, but I stood on my right to remain silent.

At last Stoke shrugged, the kind of shrug that says okay, let’s drop it. It pulled the johnny he was wearing off one bony shoulder. He tugged it back into place, using his hand carefully—there was an I.V. drip in it. “So you guys discovered the peace sign, huh? Great. You can wear it when you go to see Neil Diamond or fucking Petula Clark at Winter Carnival. Me, I’m out of here. This is over for me.”

“If you go to school on the other side of the country, do you think you’ll be able to throw the crutches away?” Skip asked. “Maybe run track?”

I was a little shocked, but Stoke smiled. It was a real smile, too, sunny and unaffected. “The crutches aren’t relevant,” he said. “Time’s too short to waste, *that’s* relevant. People around here don’t know what’s happening, and they don’t care. They’re gray people. Just-getting-by people. In Orono, Maine, buying a Rolling Stones record passes for a revolutionary act.”

“Some people know more than they did,” I said . . . but I was troubled by thoughts of Nate, who had been worried his mother might see a picture of him getting arrested and had stayed on the curb in consequence. A face in the background, the face of a gray boy on the road to dentistry in the twentieth century.

Dr. Carbury stuck his head in the door. "Time you were on your way, men. Mr. Jones has a lot of rest to catch up on."

We stood. "When Dean Garretsen comes to talk to you," I said, "or that guy Ebersole . . ."

"As far as they'll ever know, that whole day is a blank," Stoke said. "Carbury can tell them I had bronchitis since October and pneumonia since Thanksgiving, so they'll have to accept it. I'll say I could have done anything that day. Except, you know, drop the old crutches and run the four-forty."

"We really didn't steal your sign, you know," Skip said. "We just borrowed it."

Stoke appeared to think this over, then sighed. "It's not my sign," he said.

"No," I agreed. "Not anymore. So long, Stoke. We'll come back and see you."

"Don't make it a priority," he said, and I guess we took him at his word, because we never did. I saw him back at the dorm a few times, but only a few, and I was in class when he moved out without bothering to finish the semester. The next time I saw him was on the TV news almost twenty years later, speaking at a Greenpeace rally just after the French blew up the *Rainbow Warrior*, 1984 or '85, that would've been. Since then I've seen him on the tube quite a lot. He raises money for environmental causes, speaks on college campuses from that snazzy red wheelchair, defends the eco-activists in court when they need defending. I've heard him called a tree-hugger, and I bet he sort of enjoys that. He's still carrying the chip. I'm glad. Like he said, it's what he's got.

As we reached the door he called, "Hey?"

We looked back at a narrow white face on a white pillow above a white sheet, the only real color about him those masses of black hair. The shapes of his legs under the sheet again made me think of Uncle Sam in the Fourth of July parade back home. And again I thought that he looked like a kid with about four months to live. But add some white teeth to the picture, as well, because Stoke was smiling.

"Hey what?" Skip said.

"You two were so concerned with what I was going to say to Garretsen and Ebersole . . . maybe I've got an inferiority complex or something, but I have

trouble believing all that concern is for me. Have you two decided to actually try going to school for a change?"

"If we did, do you think we'd make it?" Skip asked.

"You might," Stoke said. "There is one thing I remember about that night. Pretty clearly, too."

I thought he'd say he remembered us laughing at him—Skip thought so, too, he told me later—but that wasn't it.

"You carried me through the doorway of the exam room by yourself," he said to Skip. "Didn't drop me, either."

"No chance of that. You don't weigh much."

"Still . . . dying's one thing, but no one likes the idea of being dropped on the floor. It's undignified. Because you didn't, I'll give you some good advice. Get out of the sports programs, Kirk. Unless, that is, you've got some kind of athletic scholarship you can't do without."

"Why?"

"Because they'll turn you into someone else. It may take a little longer than it took ROTC to turn David Dearborn into Dearie, but they'll get you there in the end."

"What do you know about sports?" Skip asked gently. "What do you know about being on a team?"

"I know it's a bad time for boys in uniforms," Stoke said, then lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes. But a good time to be a girl, Carol had said. 1966 was a good time to be a girl.

We returned to the dorm and went to my room to study. Down the hall Ronnie and Nick and Lennie and most of the others were chasing The Bitch. After awhile Skip shut the door to block the sound of them out, and when that didn't entirely work I turned on Nate's little RCA Swingline and we listened to Phil Ochs. Ochs is dead now—as dead as my mother and Michael Landon. He hanged himself with his belt. The suicide rate among surviving Atlanteans has been pretty high. No surprise there, I guess; when your continent sinks right out from under your feet, it does a number on your head.

A day or two after that visit to Stoke in the infirmary, I called my mother and said that if she could really afford to send a little extra cash my way, I'd like to take her up on her idea about getting a tutor. She didn't ask many questions and didn't scold—you knew you were in serious trouble with my mom when she didn't scold—but three days later I had a money order for three hundred dollars. To this I added my Hearts winnings—I was astonished to find they came to almost eighty bucks. That's a lot of nickels.

I never told my mom, but I actually hired *two* tutors with her three hundred, one a grad student who helped me with the mysteries of tectonic plates and continental drift, the other a pot-smoking senior from King Hall who helped Skip with his anthropology (and might have written a paper or two for him, although I don't know that for sure). This second fellow's name was Harvey Brundage, and he was the first person to ever say “Wow, man, bummer!” in my presence.

Together Skip and I went to the Dean of Arts and Sciences—there was no way we were going to go to Garretsen, not after that November meeting in the Chamberlain rec—and laid out the problems we were facing. Technically neither of us belonged to A and S; as freshmen we weren't yet eligible to declare majors, but Dean Randle listened to us. He recommended that we go around to each of our instructors and explain the problem . . . more or less throw ourselves on their mercy.

We did it, loathing every minute of the process; one of the factors that made us powerful friends in those years was being raised with the same Yankee ideas, one of which was that you didn't ask for help unless you absolutely had to, and maybe not even then. The only thing that got us through that embarrassing round of calls was the buddy system. When Skip was in with his teachers I waited for him out in the hall, smoking one cigarette after another. When it was my turn, he waited for me.

As a group, the instructors were a lot more sympathetic than I ever would have guessed; most bent over backwards to help us not only pass, but pass high enough to hold onto our scholarships. Only Skip's calculus teacher was

completely unreceptive, and Skip was doing well enough there to skate by without any special help. Years later I realized that for many of the instructors it was a moral issue rather than an academic one: they didn't want to read their ex-students' names in a casualty list and have to wonder if they had been partially responsible; that the difference between a D and a C-minus had also been the difference between a kid who could see and hear and one sitting senseless in a V.A. hospital somewhere.

After one of these meetings, and with the end-of-semester exams looming, Skip went to the Bear's Den to meet his Anthro tutor for a coffee-fueled cram session. I had dishline at Holyoke. When the conveyor finally shut down for the afternoon, I went back to the dorm to resume my own studies. I stopped in the lobby to check my mailbox, and there was a pink package-slip in it.

The package was brown paper and string, but livened up with some stick-on Christmas bells and holly. The return address hit me in the stomach like an unexpected sucker-punch: Carol Gerber, 172 Broad Street, Harwich, Connecticut.

I hadn't tried to call her, and not just because I was busy trying to save my ass. I don't think I realized the real reason until I saw her name on that package. I'd been convinced she'd gone back to Sully-John. That the night we'd made love in my car while the oldies played was ancient history to her now. That *I* was ancient history.

Phil Ochs was playing on Nate's record-player, but Nate himself was snoozing on his bed with a copy of *Newsweek* lying open on his face. General William Westmoreland was on the cover. I sat down at my desk, put the package in front of me, reached for the string, then paused. My fingers were trembling. *Hearts are tough*, she had said. *Most times they don't break. Most times they only bend*. She was right, of course . . . but mine hurt as I sat there looking at the Christmas package she had sent me; it hurt plenty. Phil Ochs was on the record-player, but in my mind I was hearing older, sweeter music. In my mind I was hearing The Platters.

I snapped the string, tore the tape, removed the brown paper, and eventually liberated a small white department-store box. Inside was a gift wrapped in shiny red paper and white satin ribbon. There was also a square envelope with my name written on it in her familiar hand. I opened the envelope and pulled out a Hallmark card—when you care enough to send the very best, and all that. There were foil snowflakes and foil angels blowing foil trumpets. When I opened the card, a newspaper clipping fell out onto the present she'd sent me. It was from a newspaper called the *Harwich Journal*. In

the top margin, above the headline, Carol had written: *This time I made it—Purple Heart! Don't worry, 5 stitches at the Emerg. Room & I was home for supper.*

The story's headline read: 6 INJURED, 14 ARRESTED AS DRAFT OFFICE PROTEST TURNS INTO MELEE. The photo was in stark contrast to the one in the Derry *News* where everyone, even the cops and the construction workers who had started their own impromptu counter-protest, looked sort of relaxed. In the Harwich *Journal* photo, folks looked raw-nerved, confused, and about two thousand light-years from relaxed. There were hardhat types with tattoos on their bulging arms and hateful grimaces on their faces; there were long-haired kids staring back at them with angry defiance. One of the latter was holding his arms out to a jeering trio of men as if to say *Come on, you want a piece of me?* There were cops between the two groups, looking strained and tense.

To the left (Carol had drawn an arrow to this part of the photo, as if I might have missed it otherwise) was a familiar jacket with HARWICH HIGH SCHOOL printed on the back. Once more her head was turned, but this time toward the camera instead of away from it. I could see the blood running down her cheek much more clearly than I wanted to. She could draw joke arrows and write all the breezy comments she wanted to in the margin; I was not amused. That was not chocolate syrup on her face. A cop had her by one arm. The girl in the news photo didn't seem to mind either that or the fact that her head was bleeding (if she even *knew* her head was bleeding at that point). The girl in the news photo was smiling. In one of her hands was a sign reading STOP THE MURDER. The other was held out toward the camera, the first two fingers making a V. V-for-victory, I thought then, but of course it wasn't. By 1969, that V went with the sparrow-track the way ham went with eggs.

I scanned the text of the clipping, but there was nothing there of any particular interest. Protest . . . counter-protest . . . epithets . . . thrown rocks . . . a few fistfights . . . police arrive on the scene. The story's tone was lofty and disgusted and patronizing all at the same time; it reminded me of how Ebersole and Garretsen had looked that night in the rec. *You fellows have disappointed me.* All but three of the protesters who had been arrested were released later that day and none were named, so presumably they were all under twenty-one.

Blood on her face. And yet she was smiling . . . triumphant, in fact. I became aware Phil Ochs was still singing—I must have killed a million men and now they want me back again—and a shake of gooseflesh went up my back.

I turned to the card. It bore the typical rhymed sentiments; they always come to about the same, don't they? Merry Christmas, sure hope you don't die in the New Year. I barely read them. On the blank side facing the verse, she had written me a note. It was long enough to use up most of the white space.

*Dear Number Six,*

*I just wanted to wish you the merriest of merry Christmases, and to tell you I'm okay. I'm not back in school, although I have been associating with certain school types (see enclosed clipping) and expect I will return eventually, probably fall semester next year. My mom is not doing too well, but she is trying, and my brother is getting his act back together. Rionda helps, too. I've seen Sully a couple of times, but it's not the same. He came over to watch TV one night and we are like strangers . . . or maybe what I really mean is that we're like old acquaintances on trains going in different directions.*

*I miss you, Pete. I think our trains are going in different directions, too, but I'll never forget the time we spent together. It was the sweetest and the best (especially the last night). You can write me if you want, but I sort of wish you wouldn't. It might not be good for either of us. This doesn't mean I don't care or remember but that I do.*

*Remember the night I showed you that picture and told you about how I got beaten up? How my friend Bobby took care of me? He had a book that summer. The man upstairs gave it to him. Bobby said it was the best book he ever read. Not saying much when you're just eleven, I know, but I saw it again in the high-school library when I was a senior and read it, just to see what it was like. And I thought it was pretty great. Not the best book I ever read, but pretty great. I thought you might like a copy. Although it was written twelve years ago, I sort of think it's about Vietnam. Even if it's not, it's full of information.*

*I love you, Pete. Merry Christmas.*

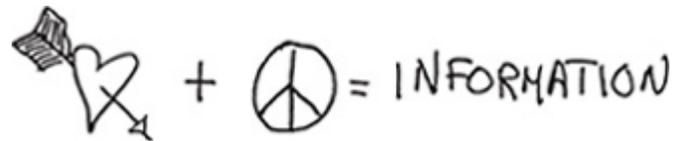
*Carol*

*P.S. Get out of that stupid card-game.*

I read it twice, then folded the clipping carefully and put it back in the card, my hands still shaking. Somewhere I think I still have that card . . . as I'm sure that somewhere "Red Carol" Gerber has still got her little snapshot of her childhood friends. If she's still alive, that is. Not exactly a sure thing; a lot of her last-known bunch of friends are not.

I opened the package. Inside it—and in jarring contrast to the cheery Christmas paper and white satin ribbon—was a paperback copy of *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding. I had somehow missed it in high school, opting for *A Separate Peace* in Senior Lit instead because *Peace* looked a little shorter.

I opened it, thinking there might be an inscription. There was, but not the sort I had expected, not at all. This was what I found in the white space on the title page:



My eyes filled with sudden unexpected tears. I put my hands over my mouth to hold in the sob that wanted to come out. I didn't want to wake Nate up, didn't want him to see me crying. But I cried, all right. I sat there at my desk and cried for her, for me, for both of us, for all of us. I can't remember hurting any more ever in my life than I did then. Hearts are tough, she said, most times hearts don't break, and I'm sure that's right . . . but what about then? What about who we were then? What about hearts in Atlantis?

In any case, Skip and I survived. We did the makeup work, squeaked through the finals, and returned to Chamberlain Hall in mid-January. Skip told me he'd written a letter to John Winkin, the baseball coach, over the holiday, saying he'd changed his mind about coming out for the team.

Nate was back on Chamberlain Three. So, amazingly, was Lennie Doria—on academic pro but there. His *paisan* Tony DeLuca was gone, though. So were Mark St. Pierre, Barry Margeaux, Nick Prouty, Brad Witherspoon, Harvey Twiller, Randy Echolls . . . and Ronnie, of course. We got a card from him in March. It was postmarked Lewiston and simply addressed to The Yo-Yo's Of Chamberlain Three. We taped it up in the lounge, over the chair where Ronnie had most often sat during the games. On the front was Alfred E. Neuman, the *Mad* magazine cover-boy. On the back Ronnie had written: "Uncle Sam calls and I gotta go. Palm trees in my future and who gives a f—k. What me worry. I finished with 21 match points. That makes me the winner." It was signed "RON." Skip and I had a laugh at that. As far as we were concerned, Mrs. Malenfant's foul-mouthed little boy was going to be a Ronnie until the day he died.

Stoke Jones, aka Rip-Rip, was also gone. I didn't think of him much for awhile, but his face and memory came back to me with startling (if brief) vividness a year and a half later. I was in jail at the time, in Chicago. I don't know how many of us the cops swept up outside the convention center on the night Hubert Humphrey was nominated, but there were a lot, and a lot of us were hurt—a blue-ribbon commission would a year later designate the event a "police riot" in its report.

I ended up in a holding cell meant for fifteen prisoners—twenty, max—with about sixty gassed-out, punched-out, drugged-out, beat-up, messed-up, worked-over, fucked-over, blood-all-over hippies, some smoking joints, some crying, some puking, some singing protest songs (from far over in the corner, issuing from some guy I never even saw, came a stoned-out version of "I'm Not Marchin' Anymore"). It was like some weird penal version of telephone-booth cramming.

I was jammed up against the bars, trying to protect my shirt pocket (Pall Malls), and my hip pocket (the copy of *Lord of the Flies* Carol had given me, now very battered, missing half its front cover, and falling out of its binding), when all at once Stoke's face flashed into my mind as bright and complete as a high-resolution photograph. It came from nowhere, it seemed, perhaps the product of a dormant memory circuit which had gone momentarily hot, joggled by either a nightstick to the head or a revivifying whiff of teargas. And a question came with it.

"What the *fuck* was a cripple doing on the third floor?" I asked out loud.

A little guy with a huge mass of golden hair—a kind of Peter Frampton dwarf, if you could dig that—looked around. His face was pale and pimply. Blood was drying beneath his nose and on one cheek. "What, man?" he asked.

"What the fuck was a cripple doing on the third floor of a college dorm? One with no elevator? Wouldn't they have put him on the first floor?" Then I remembered Stoke plunging toward Holyoke with his head down and his hair hanging in his eyes, Stoke muttering "Rip-rip, rip-rip, rip-rip" under his breath. Stoke going everywhere as if everything was his enemy; give him a quarter and he'd try to shoot down the whole world.

"Man, I'm not following you. What—"

"Unless he asked them to," I said. "Unless he maybe right out *demand*ed it."

"Bingo," said the little guy with the Peter Frampton hair. "Got a joint, man? I want to get high. This place sucks. I want to go to Hobbiton."

Skip became an artist, and he's famous in his own way. Not like Norman Rockwell, and you'll never see a reproduction of one of *Skip's* sculptures on a plate offered by the Franklin Mint, but he's had plenty of shows—London, Rome, New York, last year in Paris—and he's reviewed regularly. There are plenty of critics who call him jejune, the flavor of the month (some have been calling him the flavor of the month for twenty-five years), a trite mind communicating via low imagery with other trite minds. Other critics have praised him for his honesty and energy. I tend in this direction, but I suppose I would; I knew him back in the day, we escaped the great sinking continent together, and he has remained my friend; in a distant way he has remained my *paisan*.

There are also critics who have commented on the rage his work so often expresses, the rage I first saw clearly in the *papier-mâché* Vietnamese family tableau he set afire in front of the school library to the amplified pulse of *The Youngbloods* back in 1969. And yeah. Yeah, there's something to that. Some of Skip's stuff is funny and some of it's sad and some of it's bizarre, but most of it looks angry, most of his stiff-shouldered plaster and paper and clay people seem to whisper *Light me, oh light me and listen to me scream, it's really still 1969, it's still the Mekong and always will be*. "It is Stanley Kirk's anger which makes his work worthy," a critic wrote during an exhibition in Boston, and I suppose it was that same anger which contributed to his heart attack two months ago.

His wife called and said Skip wanted to see me. The doctors believed it hadn't been a serious cardiac event, but the Captain begged to disagree. My old *paisan* Captain Kirk thought he was dying.

I flew down to Palm Beach, and when I saw him—white face below mostly white hair on a white pillow—it called up a memory I could not at first pin down.

"You're thinking of Jones," he said in a husky voice, and of course he was right. I grinned, and at the same moment a cold chill traced a finger down the

middle of my back. Sometimes things come back to you, that's all. Sometimes they come back.

I came in and sat down beside him. "Not bad, O swami."

"Not hard, either," he said. "It's that day at the infirmary all over again, except that Carbury's probably dead and this time I'm the one with a tube in the back of my hand." He raised one of his talented hands, showed me the tube, then lowered it again. "I don't think I'm going to die anymore. At least not yet."

"Good."

"You still smoking?"

"I've retired. As of last year."

He nodded. "My wife says she'll divorce me if I don't do the same . . . so I guess I better try."

"It's the worst habit."

"Actually, I think living's the worst habit."

"Save the phrase-making shit for the *Reader's Digest*, Cap."

He laughed, then asked if I'd heard from Natie.

"A Christmas card, like always. With a photo."

"Fuckin Nate!" Skip was delighted. "Was it his office?"

"Yeah. He's got a Nativity scene out front this year. The Magi all look like they need dental work."

We looked at each other and began to giggle. Before Skip could really get going, he began to cough. It was eerily like Stoke—for a moment he even *looked* like Stoke—and I felt that shiver slide down my back again. If Stoke had been dead I'd have thought he was haunting us, but he wasn't. And in his own way Stoke Jones was as much of a sellout as every retired hippie who progressed from selling cocaine to selling junk bonds over the phone. He loves his TV coverage, does Stoke; when O.J. Simpson was on trial you could catch Stoke somewhere on the dial every night, just another vulture circling the carrion.

Carol was the one who didn't sell out, I guess. Carol and her friends, and what about the chem students they killed with their bomb? It was a mistake, I believe that with all my heart—the Carol Gerber I knew would have no patience with the idea that all power comes out of the barrel of a gun. The

Carol I knew would have understood that was just another fucked-up way of saying we had to destroy the village in order to save it. But do you think the relatives of those kids care that it was a mistake, the bomb didn't go off when it was supposed to, sorry? Do you think questions of who sold out and who didn't matter to the mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, lovers, friends? Do you think it matters to the people who have to pick up the pieces and somehow go on? Hearts can break. Yes. Hearts can break. Sometimes I think it would be better if we died when they did, but we don't.

Skip worked on getting his breath back. The monitor beside his bed was beeping in a worried way. A nurse looked in and Skip waved her off. The beeps were settling back to their previous rhythm, so she went. When she was gone, Skip said: "Why did we laugh so hard when he fell down that day? That question has never entirely left me."

"No," I said. "Me either."

"So what's the answer? Why did we laugh?"

"Because we're human. For awhile, I think it was between Woodstock and Kent State, we thought we were something else, but we weren't."

"We thought we were stardust," Skip said. Almost with a straight face.

"We thought we were golden," I agreed, laughing. "And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden."

"Lean over, hippie-boy," Skip said, and I did. I saw that my old friend, who had outfoxed Dearie and Ebersole and the Dean of Men, who had gone around and begged his teachers to help him, who had taught me to drink beer by the pitcher and say fuck in a dozen different intonations, was crying a little bit. He reached up his arms to me. They had gotten thin over the years, and now the muscles hung rather than bunched. I bent down and hugged him.

"We tried," he said in my ear. "Don't you ever forget that, Pete. *We tried.*"

I suppose we did. In her way, Carol tried harder than any of us and paid the highest price . . . except, that is, for the ones who died. And although we've forgotten the language we spoke in those years—it is as lost as the bell-bottom jeans, home-tie-dyed shirts, Nehru jackets, and signs that said KILLING FOR PEACE IS LIKE FUCKING FOR CHASTITY—sometimes a word or two comes back. Information, you know. Information. And sometimes, in my dreams and memories (the older I get the more they seem to be the same), I smell the place

where I spoke that language with such easy authority: a whiff of earth, a scent of oranges, and the fading smell of flowers.

**1983: Gobless us every one.**

1983

BLIND WILLIE

6:15 A.M.

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

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

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

• • •

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

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

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

"Christmas," he says, checking his hair carefully in the mirror. He no longer looks like the glaring, bewildered man who sits up in bed to the sound of

music five mornings a week—sometimes six. Now he looks like all the other people who will ride into New York with him on the seven-forty, and that is just what he wants.

“What about Christmas?” she asks with a sleepy smile. “Humbug, right?”

“Right,” he agrees.

“If you remember, get some cinnamon, too—”

“Okay.”

“—but if you forget the eggnog, I’ll *slaughter* you, Bill.”

“I’ll remember.”

“I know. You’re very dependable. Look nice, too.”

“Thanks.”

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

“Mmmm?”

“The *tinsel*,” she says. “It’s on the kitchen table.”

“Oh.” Now he remembers. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” She’s back down and already starting to drift off again. He doesn’t envy the fact that she can stay in bed until nine—hell, until eleven, if she wants—but he envies that ability of hers to wake up, talk, then drift off again. He had that when he was in the bush—most guys did—but the bush was a long time ago. *In country* was what the new guys and the correspondents always said; if you’d been there awhile it was just the bush, or sometimes the green.

In the green, yeah.

She says something else, but now she’s back to ugga-wugga. He knows what it is just the same, though: have a good day, hon.

“Thanks,” he says, kissing her cheek. “I will.”

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

“Love you, too,” he says and goes out.

• • •

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

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

8:15 A.M.

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

The train-car reeks of morning coffee, morning deodorant, morning aftershave, morning perfume, and morning stomachs. There is a tie in almost every seat—even some of the women wear them these days. The faces have that puffy eight o'clock look, the eyes both introspective and defenseless, the conversations half-hearted. This is the hour at which even people who don't drink look hungover. Most folks just stick to their newspapers. Why not? Reagan is king of America, stocks and bonds have turned to gold, the death penalty is back in vogue. Life is good.

He himself has the *Times* crossword open in front of him, and although he's filled in a few squares, it's mostly a defensive measure. He doesn't like to talk to people on the train, doesn't like loose conversation of any sort, and the last thing in the world he wants is a commuter buddy. When he starts seeing the same faces in any given car, when people start to nod to him or say "How you doin today?" as they go to their seats, he changes cars. It's not that hard to remain unknown, just another commuter from suburban Connecticut, a man conspicuous only in his adamant refusal to wear a red tie. Maybe he was once a parochial-school boy, maybe once he held a weeping little girl while one of his friends struck her repeatedly with a baseball bat, and maybe he once spent time in the green. Nobody on the train has to know these things. That's the good thing about trains.

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

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

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

8:40 A.M.

He comes out of Grand Central with a thousand other topcoated men and women, mid-level executives for the most part, sleek gerbils who will be running full tilt on their exercise wheels by noon. He stands still for a moment, breathing deep of the cold gray air. Lexington Avenue is dressed in its Christmas lights, and a little distance away a Santa Claus who looks Puerto Rican is ringing a bell. He's got a pot for contributions with an easel set up beside it. HELP THE HOMELESS THIS CHRISTMAS, the sign on the easel says, and the man in the blue tie thinks, *How about a little truth in advertising, Santa? How about a sign that says HELP ME SUPPORT MY COKE HABIT THIS CHRISTMAS?* Nevertheless, he drops a couple of dollar bills into the pot as he walks past. He has a good feeling about today. He's glad Sharon reminded him of the tinsel—he would have forgotten to bring it, probably; in the end he always forgets stuff like that, the grace notes.

• • •

A walk of ten minutes takes him to his building. Standing outside the door is a black youth, maybe seventeen, wearing black jeans and a dirty red hooded sweatshirt. He jives from foot to foot, blowing puffs of steam out of his mouth, smiling frequently, showing a gold tooth. In one hand he holds a partly crushed styrofoam coffee cup. There's some change in it, which he rattles constantly.

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

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

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

"You, too," he says.

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

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

He enters the lobby with a stream of others, stares briefly after the opinionated bitch as she heads for the newsstand, then goes to the elevators with their old-fashioned floor dials and their art deco numbers. Here several people nod to him, and he exchanges a few words with a couple of them as they wait—it's not like the train, after all, where you can change cars. Plus, the building is an old one; the elevators are slow and cranky.

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

"Carol's fine."

"Kids?"

"Both good." He has no kids and his wife's name isn't Carol. His wife is the former Sharon Anne Donahue, St. Gabriel the Steadfast Secondary Parochial School, Class of 1964, but that's something the scrawny, constantly grinning man will never know.

"Bet they can't wait for the big day," the scrawny man says, his grin widening and becoming something unspeakable. To Bill Shearman he looks like an editorial cartoonist's conception of Death, all big eyes and huge teeth and stretched shiny skin. That grin makes him think of Tam Boi, in the A Shau Valley. Those guys from 2nd Battalion went in looking like the kings of the world and came out looking like singed escapees from hell's half acre. They came out with those big eyes and huge teeth. They still looked like that in Dong Ha, where they all got kind of mixed together a few days later. A lot of mixing-together went on in the bush. A lot of shake-and-bake, too.

"Absolutely can't wait," he agrees, "but I think Sarah's getting kind of suspicious about the guy in the red suit." Hurry up, elevator, he thinks, Jesus, save me from these stupidities.

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

"Eight."

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

“You can say that again,” he says, fervently hoping the scrawny man *won't* say it again. At that moment one of the four elevators finally gasps open its doors and they herd themselves inside.

• • •

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

“Have a good day, Bill.”

“You too.”

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

9:05 A.M.

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

A desk stands in the center of the room, and it is cluttered with papers, but none of them mean anything; they are simply window dressing for the cleaning service. Every so often he throws them all out and redistributes a fresh batch. In the center of the desk is a telephone on which he makes occasional random calls so that the phone company won't register the line as totally inactive. Last year he purchased a copier, and it looks very businesslike over in its corner by the door to the office's little second room, but it has never been used.

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

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

Above is a dark area which cannot quite be called a utility space, although a few pipes and wires do run through it. There's no dust up here, at least not in this immediate area, and no rodent droppings, either—he uses D-Con Mouse-Prufe once a month. He wants to keep his clothes nice as he goes back and forth, of course, but that's not really the important part. The important part is

to respect your work and your field. This he learned in the Army, during his time in the green, and he sometimes thinks it is the second most important thing he's ever learned in his life. The most important is that only penance replaces confession, and only penance defines identity. This is a lesson he began learning in 1960, when he was fourteen. That was the last year he could go into the booth and say "Bless me father for I have sinned" and then tell everything.

Penance is important to him.

*Gobless*, he thinks there in the stale-smelling darkness of the utility space. *Gobless you, gobless me, gobless us every one.*

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

He flips the trapdoor up, letting in muted light from above, then grabs his briefcase by the handle. As he sticks his head into the space between floors, water rushes gustily down the fat bathroom conduit twenty or thirty feet north of his present position. An hour from now, when the people in the building start their coffee breaks, that sound will be as constant and as rhythmic as waves breaking on a beach. Bill hardly notices this or any of the other interfloor sounds; he's used to them.

He climbs carefully to the top of the stepladder, then boosts himself through into his sixth-floor office, leaving Bill down on Five. Up here he is Willie again, just as he was in high school. Just as he was in Vietnam, where he was sometimes known as Baseball Willie.

This upper office has a sturdy workshop look, with coils and motors and vents stacked neatly on metal shelves and what looks like a filter of some kind squatting on one corner of the desk. It *is* an office, however; there's a typewriter, a Dictaphone, an IN/OUT basket full of papers (also window dressing, which he periodically rotates like a farmer rotating crops), and file-cabinets. Lots of file-cabinets.

On one wall is a Norman Rockwell painting of a family praying over Thanksgiving dinner. Behind the desk is a framed studio portrait of Willie in

his first lieutenant's uniform (taken in Saigon shortly before he won his Silver Star for action at the site of the helicopter crash outside of Dong Ha) and next to it is a blow-up of his honorable discharge, also framed; the name on the sheet is William Shearman, and here his decorations are duly noted. He saved Sullivan's life on the trail outside the 'ville. The citation accompanying the Silver Star says so, the men who survived Dong Ha said so, and more important than either of those, Sullivan said so. It's the first thing he said when they wound up in San Francisco together at the hospital known as the Pussy Palace: *You saved my life, man.* Willie sitting on Sullivan's bed, Willie with one arm still bandaged and salve all around his eyes, but really okay, yeah, he was cruisin, it was Sullivan who had been badly hurt. That was the day the AP photographer took their picture, the photo that appeared in newspapers all over the country . . . including the Harwich *Journal*.

*He took my hand,* Willie thinks as he stands there in his sixth-floor office with Bill Shearman now a floor down. Above the studio portrait and his discharge is a poster from the sixties. This item, not framed and starting to yellow at the edges, shows the peace sign. Below it, in red, white, and blue, is this punchline: TRACK OF THE GREAT AMERICAN CHICKEN.

*He took my hand,* he thinks again. Yes, Sullivan had done that, and Willie had come within an ace of leaping to his feet and running back down the ward, screaming. He had been positive that Sullivan would say *I know what you did, you and your friends Doolin and O'Meara. Did you think she wouldn't tell me?*

Sullivan had said nothing like that. What he'd said was, *You saved my life, man, from the old home town and you saved my life. Shit, what are the odds? And we used to be so scared of the boys from St. Gabe's.* When he said that, Willie had known for sure that Sullivan had no idea of what Doolin, O'Meara, and he had done to Carol Gerber. There was no relief in knowing he was safe, however. None. And as he smiled and squeezed Sullivan's hand, he had thought: *You were right to be scared, Sully. You were right to be.*

Willie puts Bill's briefcase on the desk, then lies down on his stomach. He pokes his head and arms into the windy, oil-smelling darkness between floors and replaces the ceiling panel of the fifth-floor office. It's locked up tight; he

doesn't expect anyone anyway (he never does; Western States Land Analysts has never had a single customer), but it's better to be safe. Always safe, never sorry.

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

He gets to his feet, dusts off his hands, then turns to the briefcase and opens it. He takes out the ball of tinsel and puts it on top of the Dictaphone which stands on the desk.

"Good one," he says, thinking again that Sharon can be a real peach when she sets her mind to it . . . and she often does. He relatches the briefcase and then begins to undress, doing it carefully and methodically, reversing the steps he took at six-thirty, running the film backward. He strips off everything, even his undershorts and his black knee-high socks. Naked, he hangs his topcoat, suit jacket, and shirt carefully in the closet where only one other item hangs—a heavy red jacket, not quite thick enough to be termed a parka. Below it is a boxlike thing, a little too bulky to be termed a briefcase. Willie puts his Mark Cross case next to it, then places his slacks in the pants press, taking pains with the crease. The tie goes on the rack screwed to the back of the closet door, where it hangs all by itself like a long blue tongue.

He pads barefoot-naked across to one of the file-cabinet stacks. On top of it is an ashtray embossed with a pissed-off-looking eagle and the words IF I DIE IN A COMBAT ZONE. In the ashtray are a pair of dog-tags on a chain. Willie slips the chain over his head, then slides out the bottom drawer of the cabinet stack. Inside are underclothes. Neatly folded on top are a pair of khaki boxer shorts. He slips them on. Next come white athletic socks, followed by a white cotton tee-shirt—roundneck, not strappy. The shapes of his dogtags stand out against it, as do his biceps and quads. They aren't as good as they were in A Shau and Dong Ha, but they aren't bad for a guy who is closing in on forty.

Now, before he finishes dressing, it is time for penance.

He goes to another stack of cabinets and rolls out the second drawer. He thumbs rapidly through the bound ledgers there, passing those for late 1982, then thumbing through those from this year: Jan–April, May–June, July, August (he always feels compelled to write more in the summer), September–October, and at last the current volume: November–December. He sits at his

desk, opens the ledger, and flicks rapidly through pages of densely packed writing. There are small variations in the writing, but the essence is always the same: *I am heartily sorry*.

He only writes for ten minutes or so this morning, pen scratching busily, sticking to the basic fact of the matter: *I am heartily sorry*. He has, to the best of his reckoning, written this over two million times . . . and is just getting started. Confession would be quicker, but he is willing to take the long way around.

He finishes—no, he never finishes, but he finishes for today—and puts the current ledger back between those finished and all those yet to be filled. Then he returns to the stack of file-cabinets which serve as his chest of drawers. As he opens the one above his socks and skivvies, he begins to hum under his breath—not “Do You Hear What I Hear” but The Doors, the one about how the day destroys the night, the night divides the day.

He slips on a plain blue chambray shirt, then a pair of fatigue pants. He rolls this middle drawer back in and opens the top one. Here there is a scrapbook and a pair of boots. He takes the scrapbook out and looks at its red leather cover for a moment. The word MEMORIES is stamped on the front in flaking gold. It’s a cheap thing, this book. He could afford better, but you don’t always have a right to what you can afford.

In the summer he writes more sorries but memory seems to sleep. It is in winter, especially around Christmas, that memory awakens. Then he wants to look in this book, which is full of clippings and photos where everyone looks impossibly young.

Today he puts the scrapbook back into the drawer unopened and takes out the boots. They are polished to a high sheen and look as if they might last until the trump of judgment. Maybe even longer. They aren’t standard Army issue, not these—these are jump-boots, 101st Airborne stuff. But that’s all right. He isn’t actually trying to dress like a soldier. If he wanted to dress like a soldier, he would.

Still, there is no more reason to look sloppy than there is to allow dust to collect in the pass-through, and he’s careful about the way he dresses. He does not tuck his pants into his boots, of course—he’s headed for Fifth Avenue in December, not the Mekong in August, snakes and poppy-bugs are not apt to

be a problem—but he intends to look squared away. Looking good is as important to him as it is to Bill, maybe even more important. Respecting one's work and one's field begins, after all, with respecting one's self.

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

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

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

Humming (we chased our pleasures here, dug our treasures there), he opens the wide drawer above the kneehole, paws past the pencils and Chap Sticks

and paperclips and memo pads, and finally finds his stapler. He then unrolls the ball of tinsel, placing it carefully around the rectangle of his sign. He snips off the extra and staples the shiny stuff firmly into place. He holds it up for a moment, first assessing the effect, then admiring it.

“Perfect!” he says.

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

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

*Bee-eep.*

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

“Hi, this is Ed, from the NYNEX Yellow Pages,” the voice from the machine says, and Willie lets out a breath he hasn’t known he was holding. His hands begin to loosen. “Please have your company rep call me at 1-800-555-1000 for information on how you can increase your ad space in both versions of the Yellow Pages, and at the same time save big money on your yearly bill. Happy holidays to all! Thanks.”

*Click.*

Willie looks at the answering machine a moment longer, almost as if he expects it to speak again—to threaten him, perhaps to accuse him of all the crimes of which he accuses himself—but nothing happens.

“Squared away,” he murmurs, putting the decorated sign back into the case. This time when he closes it, he latches it. Across the front is a bumper sticker, its message flanked by small American flags. I WAS PROUD TO SERVE, it reads.

“Squared away, baby, you better believe it.”

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

9:45 A.M.

Halfway down the hall, he sees Ralph Williamson, one of the tubby accountants from Garowicz Financial Planning (all the accountants at Garowicz are tubby, from what Willie has been able to observe). There's a key chained to an old wooden paddle in one of Ralph's pink hands, and from this Willie deduces that he is looking at an accountant in need of a wee. Key on a paddle! If a fuckin key on a fuckin paddle won't make you remember the joys of parochial school, remember all those hairy-chin nuns and all those knuckle-whacking wooden rulers, then nothing will, he thinks. And you know what? Ralph Williamson probably likes having that key on a paddle, just like he likes having a soap on a rope in the shape of a bunny rabbit or a circus clown hanging from the HOT faucet in his shower at home. And so what if he does? Judge not, lest ye be fuckin judged.

"Hey, Ralphie, what's doin'?"

Ralph turns, sees Willie, brightens. "Hey, hi, merry Christmas!"

Willie grins at the look in Ralph's eyes. Tubby little fucker worships him, and why not? Ralph is looking at a guy so squared away it hurts. Gotta like it, sweetheart, *gotta* like that.

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

Smiling shyly, Ralph does.

"Gimme ten!"

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

"So goddam good I gotta do it again!" Willie exclaims, and gives Ralph five more. "Got your Christmas shopping done, Ralphie?"

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

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

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

“A whole day’s worth. ’Tis the season, you know.”

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

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

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

Willie goes on down to the elevators, carrying his case in hand and checking to make sure his glasses are still in his jacket pocket with the other. They are. The envelope is in there, too, thick and crackling with twenty-dollar bills. Fifteen of them. It’s time for a little visit from Officer Wheelock; Willie expected him yesterday. Maybe he won’t show until tomorrow, but Willie is betting on today . . . not that he likes it. He knows it’s the way of the world, you have to grease the wheels if you want your wagon to roll, but he still has a resentment. There are lots of days when he thinks about how pleasant it would be to put a bullet in Jasper Wheelock’s head. It was the way things happened in the green, sometimes. The way things *had* to happen. That thing with Malenfant, for instance. That crazy motherfucker, him with his pimples and his deck of cards.

Oh yes, in the bush things were different. In the bush you sometimes had to do something wrong to prevent an even greater wrong. Behavior like that shows that you’re in the wrong place to start with, no doubt, but once you’re in the soup, you just have to swim. He and his men from Bravo Company were only with the Delta Company boys a few days, so Willie didn’t have much experience with Malenfant, but his shrill, grating voice is hard to forget, and he remembers something Malenfant would yell during his endless Hearts games if someone tried to take back a card after it was laid down: *No way, fuckwad! Once it’s laid, it’s played!*

Malenfant might have been an asshole, but he had been right about that. In life as well as in cards, once it’s laid, it’s played.

• • •

The elevator doesn’t stop on Five, but the thought of that happening no longer makes him nervous. He has ridden down to the lobby many times with people who work on the same floor as Bill Shearman—including the scrawny drink of

water from Consolidated Insurance—and they don't recognize him. They should, he knows they *should*, but they don't. He used to think it was the change of clothes and the makeup, then he decided it was the hair, but in his heart he knows that none of those things can account for it. Not even their numb-hearted insensitivity to the world they live in can account for it. What he's doing just isn't that radical—fatigue pants, billyhop boots, and a little brown makeup don't make a disguise. No way do they make a disguise. He doesn't know exactly how to explain it, and so mostly leaves it alone. He learned this technique, as he learned so many others, in Vietnam.

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

"Spare a lil?" he asks Mr. Repairman. "What do you say, my man?"

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

10:00 A.M.

He goes into the Whitmore Hotel, crosses the lobby, and takes the escalator up to the mezzanine, where the public restrooms are. This is the only part of the day he ever feels nervous about, and he can't say why; certainly nothing has ever happened before, during, or after one of his hotel bathroom stops (he rotates among roughly two dozen of them in the midtown area). Still, he is somehow certain that if things *do* turn dinky-dau on him, it will happen in a hotel shithouse. Because what happens next is not like transforming from Bill Shearman to Willie Shearman; Bill and Willie are brothers, perhaps even fraternal twins, and the switch from one to the other feels clean and perfectly normal. The workday's final transformation, however—from Willie Shearman to Blind Willie Garfield—has never felt that way. The last change always feels murky, furtive, almost werewolfy. Until it's done and he's on the street again, tapping his white cane in front of him, he feels as a snake must after it's shed its old skin and before the new one works in and grows tough.

He looks around and sees the men's bathroom is empty except for a pair of feet under the door of the second stall in a long row of them—there must be a dozen in all. A throat clears softly. A newspaper rattles. There is the *fffft* sound of a polite little midtown fart.

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

Willie hangs the coat on the hook, drops trou, sits, then picks up his case and settles it on his thighs. He opens it, takes out the disassembled cane, and quickly screws the two pieces together. Holding it far down the shaft, he reaches up from his sitting position and hooks the handle over the top of his jacket. Then he relatches the case, pulls a little paper off the roll in order to create the proper business-is-finished sound effect (probably unnecessary, but always safe, never sorry), and flushes the john.

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

Willie Shearman stays behind in the mezzanine restroom of the Whitmore just as Bill Shearman stays behind in the fifth-floor office of Western States Land Analysts. The man who comes out—a man wearing an old fatigue jacket, shades, and tapping a white cane lightly before him—is Blind Willie, a Fifth Avenue fixture since the days of Gerald Ford.

As he crosses the small mezzanine lobby toward the stairs (unaccompanied blind men never use escalators), he sees a woman in a red blazer coming toward him. With the heavily tinted lenses between them, she looks like some sort of exotic fish swimming in muddy water. And of course it is not just the glasses; by two this afternoon he really *will* be blind, just as he kept screaming he was when he and John Sullivan and God knows how many others were medevacked out of Dong Ha Province back in '70. *I'm blind*, he was yelling it even as he picked Sullivan up off the path, but he hadn't been, exactly; through the throbbing post-flash whiteness he had seen Sullivan rolling around and trying to hold his bulging guts in. He had picked Sullivan up and ran with him clasped clumsily over one shoulder. Sullivan was bigger than Willie, a lot bigger, and Willie had no idea how he could possibly have carried such a weight but somehow he had, all the way to the clearing where Hueys like God's mercy had taken them off—gobless you Hueys, gobless, oh gobless you every one. He had run to the clearing and the copters with bullets whicking all around him and body-parts made in America lying on the trail where the mine or the booby-trap or whatever the fuck it was had gone off.

*I'm blind*, he had screamed, carrying Sullivan, feeling Sullivan's blood drenching his uniform, and Sullivan had been screaming, too. If Sullivan had stopped screaming, would Willie have simply rolled the man off his shoulder and gone on alone, trying to outrun the ambush? Probably not. Because by then he knew who Sullivan was, exactly who he was, he was Sully from the old home town, Sully who had gone out with Carol Gerber from the old home town.

*I'm blind, I'm blind, I'm blind!* That's what Willie Shearman was screaming as he toted Sullivan, and it's true that much of the world was blast-white, but he still remembers seeing bullets twitch through leaves and thud into the trunks of trees; remembers seeing one of the men who had been in the 'ville earlier that day clap his hand to his throat. He remembers seeing the blood come bursting through that man's fingers in a flood, drenching his uniform. One of the other men from Delta Company two-two—Pagano, his name had been—grabbed this fellow around the middle and hustled him past the staggering Willie Shearman, who really *couldn't* see very much. Screaming *I'm blind I'm blind I'm blind* and smelling Sullivan's blood, the stink of it. And in the copter that whiteness had started to come on strong. His face was burned, his hair was burned, his scalp was burned, the world was white. He was scorched and smoking, just one more escapee from hell's half acre. He had believed he would never see again, and that had actually been a relief. But of course he had.

In time, he had.

The woman in the red blazer has reached him. "Can I help you, sir?" she asks.

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

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

story.

10:15 A.M.

Fifth Avenue is decked out for the holiday season—glitter and finery he can barely see. Streetlamps wear garlands of holly. The big stores have become garish Christmas packages, complete with gigantic red bows. A wreath which must be forty feet across graces the staid beige facade of Brooks Brothers. Lights twinkle everywhere. In Saks' show-window, a high-fashion mannequin (haughty fuck-you-Jack expression, almost no tits or hips) sits astride a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. She is wearing a Santa hat, a fur-trimmed motorcycle jacket, thigh-high boots, and nothing else. Silver bells hang from the cycle's handlebars. Somewhere nearby, carolers are singing "Silent Night," not exactly Blind Willie's favorite tune, but a good deal better than "Do You Hear What I Hear."

He stops where he always stops, in front of St. Patrick's, across the street from Saks, allowing the package-laden shoppers to flood past in front of him. His movements now are simple and dignified. His discomfort in the men's room—that feeling of gawky nakedness about to be exposed—has passed. He never feels more Catholic than when he arrives on this spot. He was a St. Gabe's boy, after all; wore the cross, wore the surplice and took his turn as altar-boy, knelt in the booth, ate the hated haddock on Fridays. He is in many ways still a St. Gabe's boy, all three versions of him have that in common, that part crossed the years and got over, as they used to say. Only these days he does penance instead of confession, and his certainty of heaven is gone. These days all he can do is hope.

He squats, unlatches the case, and turns it so those approaching from uptown will be able to read the sticker on the top. Next he takes out the third glove, the baseball glove he has had since the summer of 1960. He puts the glove beside the case. Nothing breaks more hearts than a blind man with a baseball glove, he has found; gobless America.

Last but not least, he takes out the sign with its brave skirting of tinsel, and ducks under the string. The sign comes to rest against the front of his field jacket.

FORMER 1 LT. WILLIAM J. GARFIELD, U.S. ARMY  
SERVED QUANG TRI, THUA THIEN, TAM BOI, A SHAU  
LOST MY SIGHT DONG HA PROVINCE 1970  
ROBBED OF BENEFITS BY A GRATEFUL GOVERNMENT 1973  
LOST HOME 1975  
ASHAMED TO BEG BUT HAVE A SON IN SCHOOL  
THINK WELL OF ME IF YOU CAN

He raises his head so that the white light of this cold, almost-ready-to-snow day slides across the blind bulbs of his dark glasses. Now the work begins, and it is harder work than anyone will ever know. There is a way to stand, not quite the military posture which is called parade rest, but close to it. The head must stay up, looking both at and through the people who pass back and forth in their thousands and tens of thousands. The hands must hang straight down in their black gloves, never fiddling with the sign or with the fabric of his pants or with each other. He must continue to project that sense of hurt, humbled pride. There must be no sense of shame or shaming, and most of all no taint of insanity. He never speaks unless spoken to, and only then when he is spoken to in kindness. He does not respond to people who ask him angrily why he doesn't get a real job, or what he means about being robbed of his benefits. He does not argue with those who accuse him of fakery or speak scornfully of a son who would allow his father to put him through school by begging on a streetcorner. He remembers breaking this ironclad rule only once, on a sweltering summer afternoon in 1981. What school does your son go to? a woman asked him angrily. He doesn't know what she looked like, by then it was four o'clock and he had been as blind as a bat for at least two hours, but he had felt anger exploding out of her in all directions, like bedbugs exiting an old mattress. In a way she had reminded him of Malenfant with his shrill you-can't-not-hear-it voice. Tell me which one, I want to mail him a dog turd. Don't bother, he replied, turning toward the sound of her voice. If you've got a dog turd you want to mail somewhere, send it to LBJ. Federal Express must deliver to hell, they deliver everywhere else.

“God bless you, man,” a guy in a cashmere overcoat says, and his voice trembles with surprising emotion. Except Blind Willie Garfield isn’t surprised. He’s heard it all, he reckons, and a bit more. A surprising number of his customers put their money carefully and reverently in the pocket of the baseball glove. The guy in the cashmere coat drops his contribution into the open case, however, where it properly belongs. A five. The workday has begun.

10:45 A.M.

So far, so good. He lays his cane down carefully, drops to one knee, and dumps the contents of the baseball glove into the box. Then he sweeps a hand back and forth through the bills, although he can still see them pretty well. He picks them up—there's four or five hundred dollars in all, which puts him on the way to a three-thousand-dollar day, not great for this time of year, but not bad, either—then rolls them up and slips a rubber band around them. He then pushes a button on the inside of the case, and the false floor drops down on springs, dumping the load of change all the way to the bottom. He adds the roll of bills, making no attempt to hide what he's doing, but feeling no qualms about it, either; in all the years he has been doing this, no one has ever taken him off. God help the asshole who ever tries.

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

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

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

“In the pink, motherfucker,” Wheelock says. “You know me, always in the pink.”

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

“Dong Ha?” he asks suddenly, speaking not as a man does when naming a place but as one does when recognizing an old acquaintance on a busy street.

“Yes, sir,” Blind Willie says.

“Who was your CO?”

“Captain Bob Brissum—with a *u*, not an *o*—and above him, Colonel Andrew Shelf, sir.”

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

“Toward the end of my run, we didn’t see anyone with much rank, sir.”

“If you came out of the A Shau Valley, I’m not surprised. Are we on the same page here, soldier?”

“Yes, sir. There wasn’t much command structure left by the time we hit Dong Ha. I pretty much rolled things along with another lieutenant. His name was Dieffenbaker.”

The man in the red ski sweater is nodding slowly. “You boys were there when those helicopters came down, if I’ve got this placed right.”

“That’s affirmative, sir.”

“Then you must have been there later, when . . .”

Blind Willie does not help him finish. He can smell Wheelock’s cologne, though, stronger than ever, and the man is practically panting in his ear, sounding like a horny kid at the end of a hot date. Wheelock has never bought his act, and although Blind Willie pays for the privilege of being left alone on this corner, and quite handsomely by going rates, he knows that part of Wheelock is still cop enough to hope he’ll fuck up. Part of Wheelock is actively rooting for that. But the Wheelocks of the world never understand that what looks fake isn’t always fake. Sometimes the issues are a little more complicated than they appear at first glance. That was something else Vietnam had to teach him, back in the years before it became a political joke and a crutch for hack filmwriters.

“Sixty-nine and seventy were the hard years,” the graying man says. He speaks in a slow, heavy voice. “I was at Hamburger Hill with the 3/187, so I know the A Shau and Tam Boi. Do you remember Route 922?”

“Ah, yes, sir, Glory Road,” Blind Willie says. “I lost two friends there.”

“Glory Road,” the man in the open coat says, and all at once he looks a thousand years old, the bright red ski sweater an obscenity, like something hung on a museum mummy by cutup kids who believe they are exhibiting a sense of humor. His eyes are off over a hundred horizons. Then they come back

here, to this street where a nearby carillon is playing the one that goes I hear those sleighbells jingling, ring-ting-tingling too. He sets his bags down between his expensive shoes and takes a pigskin wallet out from an inner pocket. He opens it, riffles through a neat thickness of bills.

“Son all right, Garfield?” he asks. “Making good grades?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How old?”

“Fifteen, sir.”

“Public school?”

“Parochial, sir.”

“Excellent. And God willing, he’ll never see Glory Fuckin Road.” The man in the open topcoat takes a bill out of his wallet. Blind Willie feels as well as hears Wheelock’s little gasp and hardly has to look at the bill to know it is a hundred.

“Yes, sir, that’s affirmative, God willing.”

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

“Put it in my case or my ball-glove, sir, if you would,” Blind Willie says.

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

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

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

“Tried most of them?”

“Tried some, yes, sir.”

“Where’d you V.A.?”

“San Francisco, sir.” He hesitates, then adds, “The Pussy Palace, sir.”

The man in the topcoat laughs heartily at this, and when his face crinkles, the tears which have been standing in his eyes run down his weathered cheeks.

“Pussy Palace!” he cries. “I haven’t heard that in ten years! Christ! A bedpan under every bed and a naked nurse between every set of sheets, right? Naked except for the lovebeads, which they left on.”

“Yes, sir, that about covers it, sir.”

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

“Merry Christmas to you, sir.”

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

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

Willie says nothing.

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

The shadow of a woman, a dark shape in a darkening day, bends over the open case and drops something in. A gloved hand touches Willie’s gloved hand and squeezes briefly. “God bless you, my friend,” she says.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

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

“You got something for me, pal?” Wheelock asks.

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

“You asshole!” There’s fear as well as anger in the cop’s voice. “How many times have I told you, palm it, *palm* it!”

Blind Willie says nothing. He is thinking of the baseball glove, how he erased BOBBY GARFIELD—as well as you could erase ink from leather, anyway—and then printed Willie Shearman’s name in its place. Later, after Vietnam and just as he was starting his new career, he erased a second time and printed a single name, GARFIELD, in big block letters. The place on the side of the old

Alvin Dark glove where all these changes have been made looks flayed and raw. If he thinks of the glove, if he concentrates on that scuffed place and its layer of names, he can probably keep from doing something stupid. That's what Wheelock wants, of course, what he wants a lot more than his shitty little payoff: for Willie to do something stupid, to give himself away.

"How much?" Wheelock asks after a moment.

"Three hundred," Blind Willie says. "Three hundred dollars, Officer Wheelock."

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

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

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

"Actually, the cabana isn't the important part," Wheelock goes on. "The important thing is I need a little better compensation if I have to deal with a lowlife fuck like you." Genuine anger is creeping into his voice. "How you can do this every day—even at *Christmas*—man, I don't know. People who beg, that's one thing, but a guy like you . . . you're no more blind than I am."

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

"And you're doing okay, aren't you? Probably not as good as those PTL fucks on the tube, but you must clear . . . what? A grand a day, this time a year? Two grand?"

He is way low, but the miscalculation is music to Blind Willie Garfield's ears. It means that his silent partner is not watching him too closely or too frequently . . . not yet, anyway. But he doesn't like the anger in Wheelock's voice. Anger is like a wild card in a poker game.

"You're no more blind than I am," Wheelock repeats. Apparently this is the part that really gets him. "Hey, pal, you know what? I ought to follow you

some night when you get off work, you know? See what you do.” He pauses. “Who you turn into.”

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

“You wouldn’t want to do that, Officer Wheelock,” he says.

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

*Jesus, Willie thinks. Good Jesus, he sounds serious.*

“Says Garfield on your glove there, but I’d bet Garfield ain’t your name. I’d bet dollars to doughnuts.”

“That’s a bet you’d lose.”

“Says you . . . but the side of that glove looks like it’s seen more than one name written there.”

“It was stolen when I was a kid.” Is he talking too much? It’s hard to say. Wheelock has managed to catch him by surprise, the bastard. First the phone rings while he’s in his office—good old Ed from NYNEX—and now this. “The boy who stole it from me wrote his name in it while he had it. When I got it back, I erased his and put mine on again.”

“And it went to Vietnam with you?”

“Yes.” It’s the truth. If Sullivan had seen that battered Alvin Dark fielder’s mitt, would he have recognized it as his old friend Bobby’s? Unlikely, but who could know? Sullivan never *had* seen it, not in the green, at least, which made the whole question moot. Officer Jasper Wheelock, on the other hand, was posing all sorts of questions, and *none* of them were moot.

“Went to this Achoo Valley with you, did it?”

Blind Willie doesn’t reply. Wheelock is trying to lead him on now, and there’s noplac Wheelock can lead that Willie Garfield wants to go.

“Went to this Tomboy place with you?”

Willie says nothing.

“Man, I thought a tomboy was a chick that liked to climb trees.”

Willie continues to say nothing.

“The *Post*,” Wheelock says, and Willie dimly sees the asshole raise his hands slightly apart, as if framing a picture. “HERO COP.” He might just be teasing . . . but Willie can’t tell.

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

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

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

*Better be careful, Officer Wheelock, he thinks. The ice under you is getting thin. I may be blind, but you must be deaf if you can’t hear the sound of it cracking under your feet.*

The hand on his arm shakes him slightly. Wheelock’s fingers are digging in. “You got a friend? Is that it, you son of a bitch? Is that why you hold the envelope out that way half the damned time? You got a friend taking my picture? Is that it?”

Blind Willie goes on saying nothing; to Jasper the Police-Smurf he is now giving a sermon of silence. People like Officer Wheelock will always think the worst if you let them. You only have to give them time to do it.

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

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

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

Blind Willie thinks of a jacket Willie and Bill Shearman sometimes see on the street. There is a map of Vietnam on the back, usually the years the wearer of the jacket spent there, and this message: WHEN I DIE I’M GOING STRAIGHT TO HEAVEN, BECAUSE I SPENT MY TIME IN HELL. He could mention this sentiment to Officer Wheelock, but it would do no good. Silence is better.

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

1:40 P.M.

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

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

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

And through it all, he thinks about Wheelock.

The cop before Wheelock was easy; the one who comes when Wheelock either quits the force or gets moved out of Midtown may also be easy. Wheelock will shake, bake, or flake eventually, that's something else he learned in the bush, and in the meantime, he, Blind Willie, must bend like a reed in a windstorm. Except even the limberest reed breaks if the wind blows hard enough.

Wheelock wants more money, but that isn't what bothers the man in the dark glasses and the army coat; sooner or later they all want more money. When he started on this corner, he paid Officer Hanratty a hundred and a quarter. Hanratty was a live-and-let-live type of guy who smelled of Old Spice and whiskey just like George Raymer, the neighborhood beat-cop of Willie Shearman's childhood, but easygoing Eric Hanratty'd still had Blind Willie up to two hundred a month by the time he retired in 1978. And the thing is—dig it, my brothers—Wheelock was angry this morning, *angry*, and Wheelock talked about having consulted a priest. These things worry him, but what worries him most of all is what Wheelock said about following him. *See what you do. Who you turn into. Garfield ain't your name. I'd bet dollars to doughnuts.*

*It's a mistake to fuck with the truly penitential, Officer Wheelock, Blind Willie thinks. You'd be safer fucking with my wife than with my name, believe me. Safer by far.*

Wheelock could do it, though—what could be simpler than shadowing a blind man, or even one who can see little more than shadows? Simpler than watching him turn into some hotel and enter the public men's room? Watching him go into a stall as Blind Willie Garfield and come out as Willie Shearman? Suppose Wheelock was even able to backtrail him from Willie to Bill?

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

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

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

And the day goes on.

4:25 P.M.

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

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

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

"Watch it, my man," the longhair says. "Traffic's on the way."

"Thank you, sir," Blind Willie says.

"Don't mention it—merry Christmas."

Blind Willie crosses, passes the lions standing sentry at the Public Library, and goes down two more blocks, where he turns toward Sixth Avenue. No one accosts him; no one has loitered, watching him collect all day long, and then followed, waiting for the opportunity to bag the case and run (not that many thieves *could* run with it, not *this* case). Once, back in the summer of '79, two or three young guys, maybe black (he couldn't say for sure; they *sounded* black, but his vision had been slow returning that day, it was always slower in warm weather, when the days stayed bright longer), had accosted him and begun talking to him in a way he didn't quite like. It wasn't like the kids this

afternoon, with their jokes about reading the waffle iron and what does a *Playboy* centerfold look like in Braille. It was softer than that, and in some weird fashion almost kind—questions about how much he took in by St. Pat's back there, and would he perchance be generous enough to make a contribution to something called the Polo Recreational League, and did he want a little protection getting to his bus stop or train station or whatever. One, perhaps a budding sexologist, had asked if he liked a little young pussy once in awhile. "It pep you up," the voice on his left said softly, almost longingly. "Yessir, you must believe *that* shit."

He had felt the way he imagined a mouse must feel when the cat is just pawing at it, claws not out yet, curious about what the mouse will do, and how fast it can run, and what sorts of noises it will make as its terror grows. Blind Willie had not been terrified, however. Scared, yes indeed, you could fairly say he had been scared, but he has not been out-and-out terrified since his last week in the green, the week that had begun in the A Chau Valley and ended in Dong Ha, the week the Viet Cong had harried them steadily west at what was not quite a full retreat, at the same time pinching them on both sides, driving them like cattle down a chute, always yelling from the trees, sometimes laughing from the jungle, sometimes shooting, sometimes screaming in the night. The little men who ain't there, Sullivan called them. There is nothing like them here, and his blindest day in Manhattan is not as dark as those nights after they lost the Captain. Knowing this had been his advantage and those young fellows' mistake. He had simply raised his voice, speaking as a man might speak to a large room filled with old friends. "Say!" he had exclaimed to the shadowy phantoms drifting slowly around him on the sidewalk. "Say, does anyone see a policeman? I believe these young fellows here mean to take me off." And that did it, easy as pulling a segment from a peeled orange; the young fellows bracketing him were suddenly gone like a cool breeze.

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

4:40 P.M.

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

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

Well, in New York, hardly anyone notices anything that isn't his or her own business—in their own way, they are all as blind as Blind Willie. Out of their offices, flooding down the sidewalks, thronging in the subway stations and cheap restaurants, there is something both repulsive and sad about them; they are like nests of moles turned up by a farmer's harrow. He has seen this blindness over and over again, and he knows that it is one reason for his success . . . but surely not the only reason. They are not *all* moles, and he has been rolling the dice for a long time now. He takes precautions, of course he does, many of them, but there are still those moments (like now, sitting here with his pants down, unscrewing the white cane and stowing it back in his case) when he would be easy to catch, easy to rob, easy to expose. Wheelock is right about the *Post*; they would love him. They would hang him higher than Haman. They would never understand, never even *want* to understand, or hear his side of it. *What* side? And why has none of this ever happened?

Because of God, he believes. Because God is good. God is hard but God is good. He cannot bring himself to confess, but God seems to understand.

Atonement and penance take time, but he has been given time. God has gone with him every step of the way.

In the stall, still between identities, he closes his eyes and prays—first giving his thanks, then making a request for guidance, then giving more thanks. He finishes as he always does, in a whisper only he and God can hear: “If I die in a combat zone, bag me up and ship me home. If I die in a state of sin, close Your eyes and take me in. Yeah. Amen.”

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

It has started to snow. He walks slowly through it, Willie Shearman again now, switching the case frequently from hand to hand, just one more tired guy at the end of the day. He continues to think about his inexplicable success as he goes. There’s a verse from the Book of Matthew which he has committed to memory. *They be blind leaders of the blind, it goes. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.* Then there’s the old saw that says in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. Is *he* the one-eyed man? God aside, has that been the *practical* secret of his success all these years?

Perhaps so, perhaps not. In any case, he *has* been protected . . . and in no case does he believe he can put God aside. God is in the picture. God marked him in 1960, when he first helped Harry Doolin tease Carol and then helped Harry beat her. That occasion of sin has never left his mind. What happened in the grove of trees near Field B stands for everything else. He even has Bobby Garfield’s glove to help him remember. Willie doesn’t know where Bobby is these days and doesn’t care. He kept track of Carol as long as he could, but Bobby doesn’t matter. Bobby ceased to matter when he helped her. Willie saw him help her. He didn’t dare come out and help her himself—he was afraid of what Harry might do to him, afraid of all the kids Harry might tell, afraid of being marked—but *Bobby* dared. Bobby helped her then, Bobby punished Harry Doolin later that summer, and by doing these things (probably just for doing the first of them), Bobby got well, Bobby got over. He did what Willie didn’t dare to do, he rolled with it and got over, got well, and now Willie has

to do all the rest. And that's a lot to do. Sorry is a full-time job and more. Why, even with three of him working at it, he can barely keep up.

Still, he can't say he lives in regret. Sometimes he thinks of the good thief, the one who joined Christ in Paradise that very night. Friday afternoon you're bleeding on Golgotha's stony hill; Friday night you're having tea and crumpets with the King. Sometimes someone kicks him, sometimes someone pushes him, sometimes he worries about being taken off. So what? Doesn't he stand for all those who can only stand in the shadows, watching while the damage is done? Doesn't he beg for them? Didn't he take Bobby's Alvin Dark-model baseball glove for them in 1960? He did. Gobless him, he did. And now they put their money in it as he stands eyeless outside the cathedral. He begs for them.

Sharon knows . . . exactly what *does* Sharon know? Some of it, yes. Just how much he can't say. Certainly enough to provide the tinsel; enough to tell him he looks nice in his Paul Stuart suit and blue Sulka tie; enough to wish him a good day and remind him to get the eggnog. It is enough. All is well in Willie's world except for Jasper Wheelock. What is he going to do about Jasper Wheelock?

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

What, exactly, is he going to do about Jasper the Police-Smurf? What *can* he do?

He doesn't know.

5:15 P.M.

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

"Hey, Ralphie!" he cries.

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

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

"Like a house afire," Willie says, approaching Ralph with an easy grin on his face. He sets his case down with a grunt, feels in his pants pocket, finds a buck for Santa's pot. Probably just another crook, and his hat's a moth-eaten piece of shit, but what the hell.

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

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

"You working right up until Christmas?"

"Yeah," he says, and suddenly has a glimmer of an idea about Wheelock. Just a twinkle, here and gone, but hey, it's a start. "Yeah, right up until Christmas. No rest for the wicked, you know."

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

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

"Go south? Florida, maybe?"

"South?" Willie looks startled, then laughs. "Oh, no," he says. "Not *this* kid. I've got plenty to do around the house. A person's got to keep their house in order. Else it might come right down around their ears someday when the wind blows."

“I suppose.” Ralph bundles the scarf higher around his ears. “See you tomorrow?”

“You bet,” Willie says and holds out his gloved hand. “Gimme five.”

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

Willie gives him ten. “How good is that, Ralphie-baby?”

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

Willie laughs. “You the man, Ralph. You get *over*.”

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

“Right back atcha.”

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

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

He goes inside.

5:25 P.M.

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

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

But not *every* day, he thinks, now undressing. I don't have to be there *every* day, and he thinks again that maybe Bill, Willie, and Blind Willie Garfield will take the week after Christmas off. In that week there might be a way to handle Officer Wheelock. To make him go away. Except . . .

"I can't kill him," he says in a low, nagging voice. "I'll be fucked if I kill him." Only fucked isn't what he's worried about. *Damned* is what he's worried about. Killing was different in Vietnam, or seemed different, but this isn't Vietnam, isn't the green. Has he built these years of penance just to tear them down again? God is testing him, testing him, testing him. There is an answer here. He knows there is, there must be. He is just—ha-ha, pardon the pun—too blind to see it.

Can he even *find* the self-righteous son of a bitch? Shit yeah, that's not the problem. He can find Jasper the Police-Smurf, all right. Just about any old time he wants. Trail him right to wherever it is that he takes off his gun and his shoes and puts his feet up on the hassock. But then what?

He worries at this as he uses cold cream to remove his makeup, and then he puts his worries away. He takes the Nov–Dec ledger out of its drawer, sits at his

desk, and for twenty minutes he writes *I am heartily sorry for hurting Carol*. He fills an entire page, top to bottom and margin to margin. He puts it back, then dresses in Bill Shearman's clothes. As he is putting away Blind Willie's boots, his eye falls on the scrapbook with its red leather cover. He takes it out, puts it on top of the file-cabinet, and flips back the cover with its single word—MEMORIES—stamped in gold.

On the first page is the certificate of a live birth—William Robert Shearman, born January 4th, 1946—and his tiny footprints. On the following pages are pictures of him with his mother, pictures of him with his father (Pat Shearman smiling as if he had never pushed his son over in his high chair or hit his wife with a beer bottle), pictures of him with his friends. Harry Doolin is particularly well represented. In one snapshot eight-year-old Harry is trying to eat a piece of Willie's birthday cake with a blindfold on (a forfeit in some game, no doubt). Harry's got chocolate smeared all over his cheeks, he's laughing and looks as if he doesn't have a mean thought in his head. Willie shivers at the sight of that laughing, smeary, blindfolded face. It almost always makes him shiver.

He flips away from it, toward the back of the book, where he's put the pictures and clippings of Carol Gerber he has collected over the years: Carol with her mother, Carol holding her brand-new baby brother and smiling nervously, Carol and her father (him in Navy dress blue and smoking a cigarette, her looking up at him with big wonderstruck eyes), Carol on the j.v. cheering squad at Harwich High her freshman year, caught in midleap with one hand waving a pom-pom and the other holding down her pleated skirt, Carol and John Sullivan on tinfoil thrones at Harwich High in 1965, the year they were elected Snow Queen and Snow King at the Junior-Senior prom. They look like a couple on a wedding cake, Willie thinks this every time he looks at the old yellow newsprint. Her gown is strapless, her shoulders flawless. There is no sign that for a little while, once upon a time, the left one was hideously deformed, sticking up in a witchlike double hump. She had cried before that last hit, cried plenty, but mere crying hadn't been enough for Harry Doolin. That last time he had swung from the heels, and the smack of the bat hitting her had been like the sound of a mallet hitting a half-thawed roast, and *then* she had screamed, screamed so loud that Harry had fled without even

looking back to see if Willie and Richie O'Meara were following him. Took to his heels, had old Harry Doolin, ran like a jackrabbit. But if he hadn't? Suppose that, instead of running, Harry had said *Hold her, guys, I ain't listening to that, I'm going to shut her up*, meaning to swing from the heels again, this time at her head? *Would they have held her? Would they have held her for him even then?*

*You know you would have*, he thinks dully. *You do penance as much for what you were spared as for what you actually did. Don't you?*

Here's Carol Gerber in her graduation gown; *Spring 1966*, it's marked. On the next page is a news clipping from the Harwich *Journal* marked *Fall 1966*. The accompanying picture is her again, but this version of Carol seems a million years removed from the young lady in the graduation gown, the young lady with the diploma in her hand, the white pumps on her feet, and her eyes demurely downcast. This girl is fiery and smiling, these eyes look straight into the camera. She seems unaware of the blood coursing down her left cheek. She is flashing the peace sign. This girl is on her way to Danbury already, this girl has got her Danbury dancing shoes on. People died in Danbury, the guts flew, baby, and Willie does not doubt that he is partly responsible. He touches the fiery smiling bleeding girl with her sign that says STOP THE MURDER (only instead of stopping it she became a part of it) and knows that in the end her face is the only one that matters, her face is the spirit of the age. 1960 is smoke; here is fire. Here is Death with blood on her cheek and a smile on her lips and a sign in her hand. Here is that good old Danbury dementia.

The next clipping is the entire front page of the Danbury paper. He has folded it three times so it will fit in the book. The biggest of four photos shows a screaming woman standing in the middle of a street and holding up her bloody hands. Behind her is a brick building which has been cracked open like an egg. *Summer 1970*, he has written beside it.

**6 DEAD, 14 INJURED IN DANBURY BOMB ATTACK**  
**Radical Group Claims Responsibility**  
**"No One Meant to Be Hurt," Female Caller Tells Police**

The group—Militant Students for Peace, they called themselves—planted the bomb in a lecture hall on the Danbury UConn campus. On the day of the

explosion, Coleman Chemicals was holding job interviews there between ten A.M. and four P.M. The bomb was apparently supposed to go off at six in the morning, when the building was empty. It failed to do so. At eight o'clock, then again at nine, someone (presumably someone from the MSP) called Campus Security and reported the presence of a bomb in the first-floor lecture hall. There were cursory searches and no evacuation. "This was our eighty-third bomb-threat of the year," an unidentified Campus Security officer was quoted as saying. No bomb was found, although the MSP later claimed vehemently that the exact location—the air-conditioning duct on the left side of the hall—had been given. There was evidence (persuasive evidence, to Willie Shearman if to no one else) that at quarter past noon, while the job interviews were in recess for lunch, a young woman made an effort—at considerable risk to her own life and limb—to retrieve the UXB herself. She spent perhaps ten minutes in the then-vacant lecture hall before being led away, protesting, by a young man with long black hair. The janitor who saw them later identified the man as Raymond Fiegler, head of the MSP. He identified the young woman as Carol Gerber.

At ten minutes to two that afternoon, the bomb finally went off. Gobless the living; gobless the dead.

Willie turns the page. Here is a headline from the Oklahoma City *Oklahoman*. April of 1971.

**3 RADICALS KILLED IN ROADBLOCK SHOOTOUT**  
**"Big Fish" May Have Escaped by Minutes,**  
**Says FBI SAC Thurman**

The big fish were John and Sally McBride, Charlie "Duck" Golden, the elusive Raymond Fiegler . . . and Carol. The remaining members of the MSP, in other words. The McBrides and Golden died in Los Angeles six months later, someone in the house still shooting and tossing grenades even as the place burned down. Neither Fiegler nor Carol was in the burned-out shell, but the police techs found large quantities of spilled blood which had been typed AB Positive. A rare blood-type. Carol Gerber's blood-type.

Dead or alive? Alive or dead? Not a day goes by that Willie doesn't ask himself this question.

He turns to the next page of the scrapbook, knowing he should stop, he should get home, Sharon will worry if he doesn't at least call (he *will* call, from downstairs he will call, she's right, he's very dependable), but he doesn't stop just yet.

The headline over the photo showing the charred skull of the house on Benefit Street is from the Los Angeles *Times*:

**3 OF "DANBURY 12" DIE IN EAST L.A.  
Police Speculate Murder-Suicide Pact  
Only Fiegler, Gerber Unaccounted For**

Except the cops believed Carol, at least, was dead. The piece made that clear. At the time, Willie had also been convinced it was so. All that blood. Now, however . . .

Dead or alive? Alive or dead? Sometimes his heart whispers to him that the blood doesn't matter, that she got away from that small frame house long before the final acts of insanity were committed there. At other times he believes what the police believe—that she and Fiegler slipped away from the others only after the first shootout, before the house was surrounded; that she either died of wounds suffered in that shootout or was murdered by Fiegler because she was slowing him down. According to this scenario the fiery girl with the blood on her face and the sign in her hand is probably now just a bag of bones cooking in the desert someplace east of the sun and west of Tonopah.

Willie touches the photo of the burned-out house on Benefit Street . . . and suddenly a name comes to him, the name of the man who maybe stopped Dong Ha from becoming another My Lai or My Khe. Slocum. That was his name, all right. It's as if the blackened beams and broken windows have whispered it to him.

Willie closes the scrapbook and puts it away, feeling at peace. He finishes squaring up what needs to be squared up in the offices of Midtown Heating and Cooling, then steps carefully through the trapdoor and finds his footing on top of the stepladder below. He takes the handle of his briefcase and pulls it through. He descends to the third step, then lowers the trapdoor into place and slides the ceiling panel back where it belongs.

He cannot do anything . . . anything *permanent* . . . to Officer Jasper Wheelock . . . but Slocum could. Yes indeed, *Slocum* could. Of course Slocum was black, but what of that? In the dark, all cats are gray . . . and to the blind, they're no color at all. Is it really much of a reach from Blind Willie Garfield to Blind Willie Slocum? Of course not. Easy as breathing, really.

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

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

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

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

## MIDNIGHT

"Share?"

"Hmmm?"

Her voice is sleepy, distant. They have made long, slow love after the Dubrays finally left at eleven o'clock, and now she is drifting away. That's all right; he is drifting too. He has a feeling that all of his problems are solving themselves . . . or that God is solving them.

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

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

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

“The Allens are all right, but the Dubrays are boring, aren't they?” she asks.

“A little,” he allows.

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

He says nothing to that, but grins again.

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

“Yes, excellent.”

“Did you have a good day? I didn't have a chance to ask.”

“Fine day, Share.”

“I love you, Bill.”

“Love you, too.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

As he drifts toward sleep he thinks about the man in the bright red ski sweater. He crosses over without knowing it, thought melting effortlessly into dream. “Sixty-nine and seventy were the hard years,” the man in the red sweater says. “I was at Hamburger Hill with the 3/187. We lost a lot of good men.” Then he brightens. “But I got this.” From the lefthand pocket of his topcoat he takes a white beard hanging on a string. “And this.” From the righthand pocket he takes a crumpled styrofoam cup, which he shakes. A few loose coins rattle in the bottom like teeth. “So you see,” he says, fading now, “there are compensations for even the blindest life.”

Then the dream itself fades and Bill Shearman sleeps deeply until six-fifteen the next morning, when the clock-radio wakes him to the sound of “The Little Drummer Boy.”

**1999: When someone dies, you think about the past.**

1999

WHY WE'RE IN VIETNAM

When someone dies, you think about the past. Sully had probably known this for years, but it was only on the day of Pags's funeral that it formed in his mind as a conscious postulate.

It was twenty-six years since the helicopters took their last loads of refugees (some dangling photogenically from the landing skids) off the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon and almost thirty since a Huey evacked John Sullivan, Willie Shearman, and maybe a dozen others out of Dong Ha Province. Sully-John and his magically refound childhood acquaintance had been heroes that morning when the choppers fell out of the sky; they'd been something else come afternoon. Sully could remember lying there on the Huey's throbbing floor and screaming for someone to kill him. He could remember Willie screaming as well. *I'm blind* was what Willie had been screaming. *Ah Jesus-fuck, I'm blind!*

Eventually it had become clear to him—even with some of his guts hanging out of his belly in gray ropes and most of his balls blown off—that no one was going to do what he asked and he wasn't going to be able to do the job on his own. Not soon enough to suit him, anyway. So he asked someone to get rid of the *mamasan*, they could do that much, couldn't they? Land her or just dump her the fuck out, why not? Wasn't she dead already? Thing was, she wouldn't stop *looking* at him, and enough was enough.

By the time they swapped him and Shearman and half a dozen others—the worst ones—to a Medevac at the rally-point everyone called Peepee City (the chopper-jockeys were probably damned glad to see them go, all that screaming), Sully had started to realize none of the others could see old *mamasan* squatting there in the cockpit, old white-haired *mamasan* in the green pants and orange top and those weird bright Chinese sneakers, the ones that looked like Chuck Taylor hightops, bright red, wow. Old *mamasan* had been Malenfant's date, old Mr. Card-Shark's big date. Earlier that day Malenfant had run into the clearing along with Sully and Dieffenbaker and Sly Slocum and the others, never mind the gooks firing at them out of the bush, never mind the terrible week of mortars and snipers and ambushes, Malenfant had been hero-bound and Sully had been hero-bound too, and now oh hey look at this, Ronnie Malenfant was a murderer, the kid Sully had been so afraid of back in the old days had saved his life and been blinded, and Sully

himself was lying on the floor of a helicopter with his guts waving in the breeze. As Art Linkletter always said, it just proved that people are funny.

*Somebody kill me*, he had screamed on that bright and terrible afternoon. *Somebody shoot me, for the love of God just let me die.*

But he hadn't died, the doctors had managed to save one of his mangled testicles, and now there were even days when he felt more or less glad to be alive. Sunsets made him feel that way. He liked to go out to the back of the lot, where the cars they'd taken in trade but hadn't yet fixed up were stored, and stand there watching the sun go down. Corny shit, granted, but it was still the good part.

In San Francisco Willie was on the same ward and visited him a lot until the Army in its wisdom sent First Lieutenant Shearman somewhere else; they had talked for hours about the old days in Harwich and people they knew in common. Once they'd even gotten their picture taken by an AP news photographer—Willie sitting on Sully's bed, both of them laughing. Willie's eyes had been better by then but still not right; Willie had confided to Sully that he was afraid they never *would* be right. The story that went with the picture had been pretty dopey, but had it brought them letters? Holy Christ! More than either of them could read! Sully had even gotten the crazy idea that he might hear from Carol, but of course he never did. It was the spring of 1970 and Carol Gerber was undoubtedly busy smoking pot and giving blowjobs to end-the-war hippies while her old high-school boyfriend was getting his balls blown off on the other side of the world. That's right, Art, people are funny. Also, kids say the darndest things.

When Willie shipped out, old *mamasan* stayed. Old *mamasan* hung right in there. During the seven months Sully spent in San Francisco's Veterans Hospital she had come every day and every night, his most constant visitor in that endless time when the whole world seemed to smell of piss and his heart hurt like a headache. Sometimes she showed up in a *muumuu* like the hostess at some nutty *luau*, sometimes she came wearing one of those grisly green golf-skirts and a sleeveless top that showed off her scrawny arms . . . but mostly she wore what she had been wearing on the day Malenfant killed her—the green pants, the orange smock, the red sneakers with the Chinese symbols on them.

One day that summer he unfolded the San Francisco *Chronicle* and saw his old girlfriend had made the front page. His old girlfriend and her hippie pals had killed a bunch of kids and job-recruiters back in Danbury. His old girlfriend was now “Red Carol.” His old girlfriend was a celebrity. “You cunt,” he had said as the paper first doubled, then trebled, then broke up into prisms. “You stupid fucked-up *cunt*.” He had balled the paper up, meaning to throw it across the room, and there was his *new* girlfriend, there was old *mamasan* sitting on the next bed, looking at Sully with her black eyes, and Sully had broken down completely at the sight of her. When the nurse came Sully either couldn’t or wouldn’t tell her what he was crying about. All he knew was that the world had gone insane and he wanted a shot and eventually the nurse found a doctor to give him one and the last thing he saw before he passed out was *mamasan*, old fuckin *mamasan* sitting there on the next bed with her yellow hands in her green polyester lap, sitting there and watching him.

She made the trip across the country with him, too, had come all the way back to Connecticut with him, deadheading across the aisle in the tourist cabin of a United Airlines 747. She sat next to a businessman who saw her no more than the crew of the Huey had, or Willie Shearman, or the staff at the Pussy Palace. She had been Malenfant’s date in Dong Ha, but she was John Sullivan’s date now and never took her black eyes off him. Her yellow, wrinkled fingers always stayed folded in her lap and her eyes always stayed on him.

Thirty years. Man, that was a long time.

But as those years went by, Sully had seen her less and less. When he returned to Harwich in the fall of ’70, he still saw old *mamasan* just about every day—eating a hotdog in Commonwealth Park by Field B, or standing at the foot of the iron steps leading up to the railway station where the commuters ebbed and flowed, or just walking down Main Street. Always looking at him.

Once, not long after he’d gotten his first post-Vietnam job (selling cars, of course; it was the only thing he really knew how to do) he had seen old *mamasan* sitting in the passenger seat of a 1968 Ford LTD with PRICED TO SELL! soaped on the windshield.

*You’ll start to understand her in time*, the headshrinker in San Francisco had told him, and refused to say much more no matter how hard Sully pressed

him. The shrink wanted to hear about the helicopters that had collided and fell out of the sky; the headshrinker wanted to know why Sully so often referred to Malenfant as “that cardplaying bastard” (Sully wouldn’t tell him); the headshrinker wanted to know if Sully still had sexual fantasies, and if so, had they become noticeably violent. Sully had sort of liked the guy—Conroy, his name was—but that didn’t change the fact that he was an asshole. Once, near the end of his time in San Francisco, he had come close to telling Dr. Conroy about Carol. On the whole he was glad he hadn’t. He didn’t know how to *think* about his old girlfriend, let alone talk about her (*conflicted* was Conroy’s word for this state). He had called her a stupid fucked-up cunt, but the whole damn world was sort of fucked-up these days, wasn’t it? And if anyone knew how easily violent behavior could break its leash and just run away, John Sullivan did. All he was sure of was that he hoped the police wouldn’t kill her when they finally caught up to her and her friends.

Asshole or not, Dr. Conroy hadn’t been entirely wrong about Sully coming to understand old *mamasan* as time went by. The most important thing was understanding—on a gut level—that old *mamasan* wasn’t there. Head-knowledge of that basic fact was easy, but his gut was slower to learn, possibly because his gut had been torn open in Dong Ha and a thing like that just had to slow the understanding process down.

He had borrowed some of Dr. Conroy’s books, and the hospital librarian had gotten him a couple of others on inter-library loan. According to the books, old *mamasan* in her green pants and orange top was “an externalized fantasy” which served as a “coping mechanism” to help him deal with his “survivor guilt” and “post-traumatic stress syndrome.” She was a daydream, in other words.

Whatever the reasons, his attitude about her changed as her appearances became less frequent. Instead of feeling revulsion or a kind of superstitious dread when she turned up, he began to feel almost happy when he saw her. The way you felt when you saw an old friend who had left town but sometimes came back for a little visit.

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He lived in Milford now, a town about twenty miles north of Harwich on I-95 and light-years away in most other senses. Harwich had been a pleasant, tree-filled suburb when Sully lived there as a kid, chumming with Bobby Garfield and Carol Gerber. Now his old home town was one of those places you didn't go at night, just a grimy adjunct to Bridgeport. He still spent most of his days there, on the lot or in his office (Sullivan Chevrolet had been a Gold Star dealership four years running now), but he was gone by six o'clock most evenings, seven for sure, tooling north to Milford in his Caprice demonstrator. He usually went with an unacknowledged but very real sense of gratitude.

On this particular summer day he had gone south from Milford on I-95 as usual, but at a later hour and without getting off at Exit 9, ASHER AVENUE HARWICH. Today he had kept the new demo pointed south (it was blue with blackwall tires, and watching people's brakelights go on when they saw him in their rearview mirrors never failed to amuse him—they thought he was a cop) and drove all the way into New York City.

He left the car at Arnie Mossberg's dealership on the West Side (when you were a Chevy dealer there was never a parking problem; that was one of the nice things about it), did some window-shopping on his way across town, had a steak at Palm Too, then went to Pagano's funeral.

Pags had been one of the guys at the chopper crash-site that morning, one of the guys in the 'ville that afternoon. Also one of the guys caught in the final ambush on the trail, the ambush which had begun when Sully himself either stepped on a mine or broke a wire and popped a satchel-charge strapped to a tree. The little men in the black pajamas had been in the high toolies and man, they had opened up. On the trail, Pags had grabbed Wollensky when Wollensky got shot in the throat. He got Wollensky into the clearing, but by then Wollensky was dead. Pags would have been covered with Wollensky's blood (Sullivan didn't actually remember seeing that; he had been in his own hell by then), but that was probably something of a relief to the man because it covered up the other blood, still not entirely dry. Pagano had been standing close enough to get splattered when Slocum shot Malenfant's buddy. Splattered with Clemson's blood, splattered with Clemson's brains.

Sully had never said a word about what happened to Clemson in the 'ville, not to Dr. Conroy or anyone else. He had dummied up. All of them had

dummied up.

Pags had died of cancer. Whenever one of Sully's old Nam buddies died (well okay, they weren't *buddies*, exactly, most of them dumb as stone boats and not what Sully would really call *buddies*, but it was the word they used because there was no word invented for what they had really been to each other), it always seemed to be cancer or drugs or suicide. Usually the cancer started in the lung or the brain and then just ran everywhere, as if these men had left their immune systems back in the green. With Dick Pagano it had been pancreatic cancer—him and Michael Landon. It was the disease of the stars. The coffin was open and old Pags didn't look too shabby. His wife had had the undertaker dress him in an ordinary business suit, not a uniform. She probably hadn't even considered the uniform option, despite the decorations Pagano had won. Pags had worn a uniform for only two or three years, those years like an aberration, like time spent in some county joint because you did something entirely out of character on one bad-luck occasion, probably while you were drunk. Killed a guy in a barroom fight, say, or took it into your head to burn down the church where your ex-wife taught Sunday school. Sully couldn't think of a single man he'd served with, including himself, who would want to be buried in an Army uniform.

Dieffenbaker—Sully still thought of him as the new lieutenant—came to the funeral. Sully hadn't seen Dieffenbaker in a long time, and they had had themselves quite a talk . . . although Dieffenbaker actually did most of the talking. Sully wasn't sure talking ever made a difference, but he kept thinking about the stuff Dieffenbaker said. How *mad* Dieffenbaker had sounded, mostly. All the way back to Connecticut he kept thinking about it.

He was on the Triborough Bridge heading north again by two o'clock, in plenty of time to beat the rush-hour traffic. "Smooth movement across the Triborough and at key points along the LIE," was how the traffic-reporter in the WINS copter put it. That's what copters were for these days; gauging the flow of traffic in and out of America's cities.

When the traffic started to slow just north of Bridgeport, Sully didn't notice. He had switched from news to oldies and had fallen to thinking about Pags and his harmonicas. It was a war-movie cliché, the grizzled G.I. with the mouth-harp, but Pagano, dear God, Pagano could drive you out of your ever-

fuckin mind. Night and day he had played em, until one of the guys—it might have been Hexley or even Garrett Slocum—told him that if he didn't quit it, he was apt to wake up one morning with the world's first whistling rectal implant.

The more he considered it, the more Sully thought Sly Slocum had been the one to threaten the rectal implant. Big black man from Tulsa, thought Sly and the Family Stone was the best group on earth, hence the nickname, and refused to believe that another group he admired, Rare Earth, was white. Sully remembered Deef (this was before Dieffenbaker became the new lieutenant and gave Slocum that nod, probably the most important gesture Dieffenbaker had ever made or ever would make in his life) telling Slocum that those guys were just as white as fuckin Bob Dylan (“the folksingin honky” was what Slocum called Dylan). Slocum thought this over, then replied with what was for him rare gravity. *The fuck you say. Rare Earth, man, those guys black. They record on fuckin Motown, and all Motown groups are black, everyone know that. Supremes, fuckin Temps, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. I respect you, Deef, you bad and you nationwide, without a doubt, man, but if you persist in your bullshit, I going to knock you down.*

Slocum hated harmonica music. Harmonica music made him think of the folksingin honky. If you tried to tell him that Dylan cared about the war, Slocum asked then how come the mulebray muthafucka didn't come on over here with Bob Hope one time. *I tell you why, Slocum said. He scared, that's why. Fuckin candyass harmonica-blowin mulebray muthafucka!*

Musing on Dieffenbaker rapping about the sixties. Thinking of those old names and old faces and old days. Not noticing as the Caprice's speedometer dropped from sixty to fifty to forty, the traffic starting to stack up in all four northbound lanes. He remembered how Pags had been over there in the green—skinny, black-haired, his cheeks still dotted with the last of his post-adolescent acne, a rifle in his hands and two Hohner harmonicas (one key of C, one key of G) stuffed into the waistband of his camo trousers. Thirty years ago, that had been. Roll back ten more and Sully was a kid growing up in Harwich, palling with Bobby Garfield and wishing that Carol Gerber would look at him, John Sullivan, just once the way she always looked at Bobby.

In time she *had* looked at him of course, but never in quite the same way. Was it because she was no longer eleven or because he wasn't Bobby? Sully didn't know. The look itself had been a mystery. It seemed to say that Bobby was killing her and she was glad, she would die that way until the stars fell from the sky and the rivers ran uphill and all the words to "Louie Louie" were known.

What had happened to Bobby Garfield? Had he gone to Vietnam? Joined the flower children? Married, fathered children, died of pancreatic cancer? Sully didn't know. All he knew for sure was that Bobby had changed somehow in the summer of 1960—the summer Sully had won a free week at the YMCA camp on Lake George—and had left town with his mother. Carol had stayed through high school, and even if she had never looked at him quite the way she had looked at Bobby, he had been her first, and she his. One night out in the country behind some Newburg dairy-farmer's barnful of lowing cattle. Sully remembered smelling sweet perfume on her throat as he came.

Why that odd cross-connection between Pagano in his coffin and the friends of his childhood? Perhaps because Pags had looked a little bit like Bobby had looked in those bygone days. Bobby's hair had been dark red instead of black, but he'd had that same skinny build and angular face . . . and the same freckles. Yeah! Both Pags and Bobby with that Opie Taylor spray of freckles across the cheeks and the bridge of the nose! Or maybe it was just because when someone dies, you think about the past, the past, the fuckin past.

Now the Caprice was down to twenty miles an hour and the traffic stopped dead farther up, just shy of Exit 9, but Sully still didn't notice. On WKND, the oldies station, ? and The Mysterians were singing "96 Tears" and he was thinking about walking down the center aisle of the chapel with Dieffenbaker in front of him, walking up to the coffin for his first look at Pagano while the canned hymns played. "Abide with Me" was the current ditty wafting through the air above Pagano's corpse—Pags, who had been perfectly happy to sit for hours with the .50-caliber propped up beside him and his pack on his lap and a deck of Winstons parked in the strap of his helmet, playing "Goin' Up the Country" over and over again.

Any resemblance to Bobby Garfield was long gone, Sully saw as he looked into the coffin. The mortician had done a job good enough to justify the open coffin, but Pags still had the loose-skinned, sharp-chinned look of a fat man who has spent his final months on the Cancer Diet, the one they never write up in the *National Enquirer*, the one that consists of radiation, injected chemical poisons, and all the potato chips you want.

“Remember the harmonicas?” Dieffenbaker asked.

“I remember,” Sully said. “I remember everything.” It came out sounding weird, and Dieffenbaker glanced at him.

Sully had a clear, fierce flash of how Deef had looked on that day in the 'ville when Malenfant, Clemson, and those other nimrods had all of a sudden started paying off the morning's terror . . . the whole last week's terror. They wanted to put it somewhere, the howls in the night and the sudden mortar-shots and finally the burning copters that had fallen with their rotors still turning, dispersing the smoke of their own deaths as they dropped. Down they came, whacko! And the little men in the black pajamas were shooting at Delta two-two and Bravo two-one from the bush just as soon as the Americans ran out into the clearing. Sully had run with Willie Shearman beside him on the right and Lieutenant Packer in front of him; then Lieutenant Packer took a round in the face and no one was in front of him. Ronnie Malenfant was on his left and Malenfant had been yelling in his high-pitched voice, on and on and on, he was like some mad high-pressure telephone salesman gourdied out on amphetamines: *Come on, you fuckin ringmeats! Come on, you slopey Joes! Shoot me, ya fucks! You fuckin fucks! Can't shoot fa shit!* Pagano was behind them, and Slocum was beside Pags. Some Bravo guys but mostly Delta boys, that was his memory. Willie Shearman yelled for his own guys, but a lot of them hung back. Delta two-two didn't hang back. Clemson was there, and Wollensky, and Hackermeyer, and it was amazing how he could remember their names; their names and the smell of that day. The smell of the green and the smell of the kerosene. The sight of the sky, blue on green, and oh man how they would shoot, how those little fuckers would *shoot*, you never forgot how they would shoot or the feel of a round passing close beside you, and Malenfant was screaming *Shoot me, ya deadass ringmeats! Can't! Fuckin blind! Come on, I'm right here! Fuckin blindeye homo slopehead assholes, I'm right here!* And the men

in the downed helicopters were screaming, so they pulled them out, got the foam on the fire and pulled them out, only they weren't men anymore, not what you'd call men, they were screaming TV dinners for the most part, TV dinners with eyes and belt-buckles and these clittery reaching fingers with smoke rising from the melted nails, yeah, like that, not stuff you could tell people like Dr. Conroy, how when you pulled them parts of them came off, kind of *slid* off the way the baked skin of a freshly cooked turkey will slide along the hot liquefied fat just beneath, like that, and all the time you're smelling the green and the kerosene, it's all happening, it's a rilly rilly big shew, as Ed Sullivan used to say, and it's all happening on *our* stage, and all you can do is roll with it, try to get over.

That was the morning, that was the helicopters, and something like that had to go *somewhere*. When they got to the shitty little 'ville that afternoon they still had the stink of charred helicopter crewmembers in their noses, the old lieutenant was dead, and some of the men—Ronnie Malenfant and his friends, if you wanted to get right down to particulars—had gone a little bughouse. Dieffenbaker was the new lieutenant, and all at once he had found himself in charge of crazy men who wanted to kill everyone they saw—children, old men, old *mamasans* in red Chinese sneakers.

The copters crashed at ten. At approximately two-oh-five, Ronnie Malenfant first stuck his bayonet into the old woman's stomach and then announced his intention of cutting off the fuckin pig's head. At approximately four-fifteen, less than four clicks away, the world blew up in John Sullivan's face. That had been his big day in Dong Ha Province, his rilly big shew.

Standing there between two shacks at the head of the 'ville's single street, Dieffenbaker had looked like a scared sixteen-year-old kid. But he hadn't been sixteen, he'd been twenty-five, years older than Sully and most of the others. The only other man there of Deef's age and rank was Willie Shearman, and Willie seemed reluctant to step in. Perhaps the rescue operation that morning had exhausted him. Or perhaps he had noticed that once again it was the Delta two-two boys who were leading the charge. Malenfant was screaming that when the fuckin slopehead Cong saw a few dozen heads up on sticks, they'd think twice about fucking with Delta Lightning. On and on in that shrill, drilling phone salesman's voice of his. The cardplayer. Mr. Card-Shark. Pags

had his harmonicas; Malenfant had his deck of fuckin Bikes. Hearts, that was Malenfant's game. A dime a point if he could get it, nickel a point if he couldn't. *Come on, boys!* he'd yell in that shrill voice of his, a voice Sully swore could cause nosebleeds and kill locusts on the wing. *Come on, pony up, we huntin The Bitch!*

Sully remembered standing in the street and looking at the new lieutenant's pale, exhausted, confused face. He remembered thinking, *He can't do it. Whatever needs to be done to stop this before it really gets going, he can't do it.* But then Dieffenbaker got it together and gave Sly Slocum the nod. Slocum didn't hesitate a moment. Slocum, standing there in the street beside an overturned kitchen chair with chrome legs and a red seat, had shouldered his rifle, sighted in, and blown Ralph Clemson's head clean off. Pagano, standing nearby and gaping at Malenfant, hardly seemed aware that he had been splattered pretty much from head to toe. Clemson fell dead in the street and that stopped the party. Game over, baby.

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These days Dieffenbaker had a substantial golf-gut and wore bifocals. Also, he'd lost most of his hair. Sully was amazed at this, because Deef had had a pretty full head of it five years ago, at the unit's reunion on the Jersey shore. That was the last time, Sully had vowed to himself, that he would party with those guys. They didn't get better. They didn't fuckin mellow. Each reunion was more like the cast of *Seinfeld* on a really mean batch of crank.

"Want to come outside and have a smoke?" the new lieutenant asked. "Or did you give that up when everyone else did?"

"Gave it up like everyone else, that's affirmative." They had been standing a little to the left of the coffin by then so the rest of the mourners could get a look and then get past them. Talking in low tones, the taped music rolling easily over their voices, the draggy salvation soundtrack. The current tune was "The Old Rugged Cross," Sully believed.

He said, "I think Pags would've preferred—"

" 'Goin' Up the Country' or 'Let's Work Together,' " Dieffenbaker finished, grinning.

Sully grinned back. It was one of those unexpected moments, like a brief sunny break in a day-long spell of rain, when it was okay to remember something—one of those moments when you were, amazingly, almost glad you had been there. “Or maybe ‘Boom Boom,’ that one by The Animals,” he said.

“Remember Sly Slocum telling Pags he’d stuff that harmonica up his ass if Pags didn’t give it a rest?”

Sully had nodded, still grinning. “Said if he shoved it up there far enough, Pags could play ‘Red River Valley’ when he farted.” He had glanced fondly back at the coffin, as if expecting Pagano would also be grinning at the memory. Pagano wasn’t. Pagano was just lying there with makeup on his face. Pagano had gotten over. “Tell you what—I’ll come outside and watch *you* smoke.”

“Done deal.” Dieffenbaker, who had once given the okay for one of his soldiers to kill another of his soldiers, had started up the chapel’s side aisle, his bald head lighting up with mixed colors as he passed beneath each stained-glass window. Limping after him—he had been limping over half his life now and never noticed anymore—came John Sullivan, Gold Star Chevrolet dealer.

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The traffic on I-95 slowed to a crawl and then came to a complete stop, except for the occasional forward twitch in one of the lanes. On the radio ? and The Mysterians had given way to Sly and the Family Stone—“Dance to the Music.” Fuckin Slocum would have been seat-bopping for sure, seat-bopping to the max. Sully put the Caprice demonstrator in Park and tapped in time on the steering wheel.

As the song began to wind down he looked to his right and there was old *mamasan* in the shotgun seat, not seat-bopping but just sitting there with her yellow hands folded in her lap and her crazy-bright sneakers, those Chuck Taylor knockoffs, planted on the disposable plastic floormat with SULLIVAN CHEVROLET APPRECIATES YOUR BUSINESS printed on it.

“Hello, you old bitch,” Sully said, pleased rather than disturbed. When was the last time she’d shown her face? The Tacklins’ New Year’s Eve party, perhaps,

the last time Sully had gotten really drunk. “Why weren’t you at Pags’s funeral? The new lieutenant asked after you.”

She made no reply, but hey, when did she ever? She only sat there with her hands folded and her black eyes on him, a Halloween vision in green and orange and red. Old *mamasan* was like no ghost in a Hollywood movie, though; you couldn’t see through her, she never changed her shape, never faded away. She wore a woven piece of twine on one scrawny yellow wrist like a junior-high-school kid’s friendship bracelet. And although you could see every twist of the twine and every wrinkle on her ancient face, you couldn’t smell her and the one time Sully tried to touch her she had disappeared on him. She was a ghost and his head was the haunted house she lived in. Only every now and then (usually without pain and always without warning), his head would vomit her out where he had to look at her.

She didn’t change. She never went bald or got gallstones or needed bifocals. She didn’t die as Clemson and Pags and Packer and the guys in the crashed helicopters had died (even the two they had taken from the clearing covered in foam like snowmen had died, they were too badly burned to live and it had all been for nothing). She didn’t disappear as Carol had done, either. No, old *mamasan* continued to pop in for the occasional visit, and she hadn’t changed a bit since the days when “Instant Karma” was a top-ten hit. She had to die once, that was true, had to lie there in the mud while Malenfant first drove his bayonet into her belly and then announced his intention of removing her head, but since then she had been absolutely cruisin.

“Where you been, darlin?” If anyone in another car happened to look over (his Caprice was surrounded on all four sides now, boxed in) and saw his lips moving, they’d just assume he was singing along with the radio. Even if they thought anything else, who gave a fuck? Who gave a fuck what any of them thought? He had seen things, *terrible* things, not the least of them a roll of his own intestines lying in the bloody mat of his pubic hair, and if he sometimes saw this old ghost (and talked to her), so fuckin what? Whose business was it but his own?

Sully looked up the road, trying to spy what had plugged the traffic (he couldn’t, you never could, you just had to wait and creep forward a little when the guy in front of you crept forward), and then looked back. Sometimes when

he did that she was gone. Not this time; this time she had just changed her clothes. The red sneakers were the same but now she was wearing a nurse's uniform: white nylon pants, white blouse (with a small gold watch pinned to it, what a nice touch), white cap with a little black stripe. Her hands were still folded in her lap, though, and she was still looking at him.

"Where you been, Mama? I missed you. I know that's weird but it's true. Mama, you been on my mind. You should have seen the new lieutenant. Really, it's amazing. He's entered the solar sex-panel phase. Totally bald on top, I mean *shiny*."

Old *mamasan* said nothing. Sully wasn't surprised.

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There was an alley beside the funeral parlor with a green-painted bench placed against one side. At either end of the bench was a butt-studded bucket of sand. Dieffenbaker sat beside one of the buckets, stuck a cigarette in his mouth (it was a Dunhill, Sully observed, pretty impressive), then offered the pack to Sully.

"No, I really quit."

"Excellent." Dieffenbaker lit up with a Zippo, and Sully realized an odd thing: he had never seen anyone who'd been in Vietnam light his cigarette with matches or those disposable butane lighters; Nam vets all seemed to carry Zippos. Of course that couldn't really be true. Could it?

"You've still got quite a limp on you," Dieffenbaker said.

"Yeah."

"On the whole, I'd call it an improvement. The last time I saw you it was almost a lurch. Especially after you got a couple of drinks down the hatch."

"You still go to the reunions? Do they still *have* them, the picnics and shit?"

"I think they still have them, but I haven't been in three years. Got too depressing."

"Yeah. The ones who don't have cancer are raving alcoholics. The ones who have managed to kick the booze are on Prozac."

"You noticed."

"Fucking yeah I noticed."

“I guess I’m not surprised. You were never the smartest guy in the world, Sully-John, but you were a perceptive son of a bitch. Even back then. Anyway, you nailed it—booze, cancer, and depression, those’re the main problems, it seems like. Oh, and teeth. I never met a Vietnam vet who wasn’t having the veriest shitpull with his teeth . . . if he has any left, that is. What about you, Sully? How’s the old toofers?”

Sully, who’d had six out since Vietnam (plus root canals almost beyond numbering), wiggled his hand from side to side in a *comme ci, comme ça* gesture.

“And the other problem?” Dieffenbaker asked. “How’s that?”

“Depends,” Sully said.

“On what?”

“On what I described as my problem. We were at three of those fuckin reunion picnics together—”

“Four. There was also at least one I went to that you didn’t. The year after the one on the Jersey shore? That was the one where Andy Hackermeyer said he was going to kill himself by jumping from the top of the Statue of Liberty.”

“Did he ever do it?”

Dieffenbaker dragged deeply on his cigarette and gave Sully what was still a Lieutenant Look. Even after all these years he could muster that up. Sort of amazing. “If he’d done it, you would have read about it in the *Post*. Don’t you read the *Post*?”

“Religiously.”

Dieffenbaker nodded. “Vietnam vets all have trouble with their teeth and they all read the *Post*. If they’re in the *Post*’s fallout area, that is. What do you suppose they do if they’re not?”

“Listen to Paul Harvey,” Sully said promptly, and Dieffenbaker laughed.

Sully was remembering Hack, who’d also been there the day of the helicopters and the ’ville and the ambush. Blond kid with an infectious laugh. Had a picture of his girlfriend laminated so it wouldn’t rot in the damp and then wore it around his neck on a little silver chain. Hackermeyer had been right next to Sully when they came into the ’ville and the shooting started. Both of them watching as the old *mamasan* came running out of her hooch with her hands raised, jabbering six licks to the dozen, jabbering at Malenfant

and Clemson and Peasley and Mims and the other ones who were shooting the place up. Mims had put a round through a little boy's calf, maybe by accident. The boy was lying in the dirt outside one of the shitty little shacks, screaming. Old *mamasan* decided Malenfant was the one in charge—why not? Malenfant was the one doing all the yelling—and ran up to him, still waving her hands in the air. Sully could have told her that was a bad mistake, old Mr. Card-Shark had had himself a morning and a half, they all had, but Sully never opened his mouth. He and Hack stood there watching as Malenfant raised the butt of his rifle and drove it down into her face, knocking her flat and stopping her jabber. Willie Shearman had been standing twenty yards or so away, Willie Shearman from the old home town, one of the Catholic boys he and Bobby had been sort of scared of, and there was nothing readable on Willie's face. Willie Baseball, some of his men called him, and always affectionately.

“So what about your problem, Sully-John?”

Sully came back from the 'ville in Dong Ha to the alley beside the funeral parlor in New York . . . but slowly. Some memories were like the Tar-Baby in that old story about Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit; you got stuck on them. “I guess it all depends. What problem did I say I had?”

“You said you got your balls blown off when they hit us outside the 'ville. You said it was God punishing you for not stopping Malenfant before he went all dinky-dau and killed the old lady.”

Dinky-dau didn't begin to cover it, Malenfant standing with his legs planted on either side of the old lady, bringing the bayonet down and still running his mouth the whole time. When the blood started to come out it made her orange top look like tie-dye.

“I exaggerated a trifle,” Sully said, “as drunks tend to do. Part of the old scrotal sack is still present and accounted for and sometimes the pump still turns on. Especially since Viagra. God bless that shit.”

“Have you quit the booze as well as the cigarettes?”

“I take the occasional beer,” Sully said.

“Prozac?”

“Not yet.”

“Divorced?”

Sully nodded. “You?”

“Twice. Thinking about taking the plunge again, though. Mary Theresa Charlton, how sweet she is. Third time lucky, that’s my motto.”

“You know something, Loot?” Sully asked. “We’ve uncovered some clear legacies of the Vietnam experience here.” He popped up a finger. “Vietnam vets get cancer, usually of the lung or the brain, but other places, too.”

“Like Pags. Pags was the pancreas, wasn’t it?”

“Right.”

“All that cancer’s because of the Orange,” Dieffenbaker said. “Nobody can prove it but we all know it. Agent Orange, the gift that keeps on giving.”

Sully popped up a second finger—yer fuckfinger, Ronnie Malenfant would undoubtedly have called it. “Vietnam vets get depressed, get drunk at parties, threaten to jump off national landmarks.” Out with the third finger. “Vietnam vets have bad teeth.” Pinky finger. “Vietnam vets get divorced.”

Sully had paused at that point, vaguely hearing canned organ music coming through a partially opened window, looking at his four popped fingers and then at the thumb still tucked against his palm. Vets were drug addicts. Vets were bad loan risks, by and large; any bank officer would tell you so (in the years when Sully had been getting the dealership up and running a number of bankers had told *him* so). Vets maxed out their credit cards, got thrown out of gambling casinos, wept over songs by George Strait and Patty Loveless, knifed each other over shuffleboard bowling games in bars, bought muscle cars on credit and then wrecked them, beat their wives, beat their kids, beat their fuckin *dogs*, and probably cut themselves shaving more often than people who had never been closer to the green than *Apocalypse Now* or that fucking piece of shit *The Deer Hunter*.

“What’s the thumb?” Dieffenbaker asked. “Come on, Sully, you’re killing me here.”

Sully looked at his folded thumb. Looked at Dieffenbaker, who now wore bifocals and carried a potbelly (what Vietnam vets usually called “the house that Bud built”) but who still might have that skinny young man with the wax-candle complexion somewhere inside of him. Then he looked back at his thumb and popped it out like a guy trying to hitch a ride.

“Vietnam vets carry Zippos,” he said. “At least until they stop smoking.”

“Or until they get cancer,” Dieffenbaker said. “At which point their wives no doubt pry em out of their weakening palsied hands.”

“Except for all the ones who’re divorced,” Sully said, and they both laughed. It had been good outside the funeral parlor. Well, maybe not *good*, exactly, but better than inside. The organ music in there was bad, the sticky smell of the flowers was worse. The smell of the flowers made Sully think of the Mekong Delta. “In country,” people said now, but he didn’t remember ever having heard that particular phrase back then.

“So you didn’t entirely lose your balls after all,” Dieffenbaker said.

“Nope, never quite made it into Jake Barnes country.”

“Who?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Sully wasn’t much of a book-reader, never had been (his friend Bobby had been the book-reader), but the rehab librarian had given him *The Sun Also Rises* and Sully had read it avidly, not once but three times. Back then it had seemed very important—as important as that book *Lord of the Flies* had been to Bobby when they were kids. Now Jake Barnes seemed remote, a tin man with fake problems. Just one more made-up thing.

“No?”

“No. I can have a woman if I really want to have one—not kids, but I can have a woman. There’s a fair amount of preparation involved, though, and mostly it seems like too much trouble.”

Dieffenbaker said nothing for several moments. He sat looking at his hands. When he looked up, Sully thought he’d say something about how he had to get moving, a quick goodbye to the widow and then back to the wars (Sully thought that in the new lieutenant’s case the wars these days involved selling computers with something magical called Pentium inside them), but Dieffenbaker didn’t say that. He asked, “And what about the old lady? Do you still see her, or is she gone?”

Sully had felt dread—unformed but vast—stir at the back of his mind. “What old lady?” He couldn’t remember telling Dieffenbaker, couldn’t remember telling *anybody*, but of course he must have. Shit, he could have told Dieffenbaker anything at those reunion picnics; they were nothing but liquor-smelling black holes in his memory, every one of them.

“Old *mamasan*,” Dieffenbaker said, and brought out his cigarettes again. “The one Malenfant killed. You said you used to see her. ‘Sometimes she wears different clothes, but it’s always her,’ you said. Do you still see her?”

“Can I have one of those?” Sully asked. “I never had a Dunhill.”

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On WKND Donna Summer was singing about a bad girl, bad girl, you’re such a naughty bad girl, beep-beep. Sully turned to old *mamasan*, who was in her orange top and her green pants again, and said: “Malenfant was never obviously crazy. No crazier than anyone else, anyway . . . except maybe about Hearts. He was always looking for three guys to play Hearts with him, and that isn’t really crazy, would you say? No crazier than Pags with his harmonicas and a lot less than the guys who spent their nights snorting heroin. Also, Ronnie helped yank those guys out of the choppers. There must’ve been a dozen gooks in the bush, maybe two dozen, all of them shooting away like mad, they wasted Lieutenant Packer and Malenfant must have seen it happen, he was right there, but he never hesitated.” Nor had Fowler or Hack or Slocum or Peasley or Sully himself. Even after Packer went down they had kept going. They were brave kids. And if their bravery had been wasted in a war made by pigheaded old men, did that mean the bravery was of no account? For that matter, was Carol Gerber’s cause wrong because a bomb had gone off at the wrong time? Shit, lots of bombs had gone off at the wrong time in Vietnam. What was Ronnie Malenfant, when you got right down to it, but a bomb that had gone off at the wrong time?

Old *mamasan* went on looking at him, his ancient white-haired date sitting there in the passenger seat with her hands in her lap—yellow hands folded where the orange smock met the green polyester pants.

“They’d been shooting at us for almost two weeks,” Sully said. “Ever since we left the A Shau Valley. We won at Tam Boi and when you win you’re supposed to roll, at least that’s what I always thought, but what we were doing was a retreat, not a roll. Shit, one step from a rout is what it was, and we sure didn’t feel like winners for long. There was no support, we were just hung out to dry. Fuckin Vietnamization! What a joke that was!”

He fell silent for a moment or two, looking at her while she looked calmly back. Beyond them, the halted traffic glittered like a fever. Some impatient trucker hit his airhorn and Sully jumped like a man suddenly awakened from a doze.

“That’s when I met Willie Shearman, you know—falling back from the A Shau Valley. I knew he looked familiar and I was sure I’d met him someplace, but I couldn’t think where. People change a hell of a lot between fourteen and twenty-four, you know. Then one afternoon he and a bunch of the other Bravo Company guys were sitting around and bullshitting, talking about girls, and Willie said that the first time he ever got French-kissed, it was at a St. Theresa of Avila Sodality dance. And I think, ‘Holy shit, those were the St. Gabe’s girls.’ I walked up to him and said, ‘You Steadfast guys might have been the kings of Asher Avenue, but we whipped your pansy asses every time you came down to Harwich High to play football.’ Hey, you talk about a gotcha! Fuckin Willie jumped up so fast I thought he was gonna run away like the Gingerbread Man. It was like he’d seen a ghost, or something. Then he laughed and stuck out his hand and I saw he was still wearing his St. Gabe’s high-school ring! And you know what it all goes to prove?”

Old *mamasan* didn’t say anything, she never did, but Sully could see in her eyes that she *did* know what it all went to prove: people were funny, kids say the darndest things, winners never quit and quitters never win. Also God bless America.

“Anyway, that whole week they chased us, and it started to get obvious that they were bearing down . . . squeezing the sides . . . our casualties kept going up and you couldn’t get any sleep because of the flares and the choppers and the howling they’d do at night, back there in the toolies. And then they’d come at you, see . . . twenty of them, three dozen of them . . . poke and pull back, poke and pull back, like that . . . and they had this thing they’d do . . .”

Sully licked his lips, aware that his mouth had gone dry. Now he wished he hadn’t gone to Pags’s funeral. Pags had been a good guy, but not good enough to justify the return of such memories.

“They’d set up four or five mortars in the bush . . . on one of our flanks, you know . . . and beside each mortar they’d line up eight or nine guys, each one with a shell. The little men in the black pajamas, all lined up like kids at the

drinking fountain back in grammar school. And when the order came, each guy would drop his shell into the mortar-tube and then run forward just as fast as he could. Running that way, they'd engage the enemy—us—at about the same time their shells came down. It always made me think of something the guy who lived upstairs from Bobby Garfield told us once when we were playing pass on Bobby's front lawn. It was about some baseball player the Dodgers used to have. Ted said this guy was so fuckin fast he could hit a fungo pop fly at home plate, then run out to shortstop and catch it himself. It was . . . sort of unnerving."

Yes. The way he was sort of unnerved right now, sort of freaked out, like a kid who makes the mistake of telling himself ghost stories in the dark.

"The fire they poured into that clearing where the choppers went down was only more of the same, believe you me." Except that wasn't exactly true. The Cong had let it all hang out that morning; turned the volume up to eleven and then pulled the knobs off, as Mims liked to say. The shooting from the bush around the burning choppers had been like a steady downpour instead of a shower.

There were cigarettes in the Caprice's glove compartment, an old pack of Winstons Sully kept for emergencies, transferring from one car to the next whenever he switched rides. That one cigarette he'd bummed from Dieffenbaker had awakened the tiger and now he reached past old *mamasan*, opened the glove-box, pawed past all the paperwork, and found the pack. The cigarette would taste stale and hot in his throat, but that was okay. That was sort of what he wanted.

"Two weeks of shooting and squeezing," he told her, pushing in the lighter. "Shake and bake and don't look for the fuckin ARVN, baby, because they always seemed to have better things to do. Bitches, barbecues, and bowling tournaments, Malenfant used to say. We kept taking casualties, the air cover was never there when it was supposed to be, no one was getting any sleep, and it seemed like the more other guys from the A Shau linked up with us the worse it got. I remember one of Willie's guys—Havers or Haber, something like that—got it right in the head. Got it in the fuckin head and then just lay there on the path with his eyes open, trying to talk. Blood pouring out of this hole right here . . ." Sully tapped a finger against his skull just over his ear.

“ . . . and we couldn't believe he was still alive, let alone trying to talk. Then the thing with the choppers . . . *that* was like something out of a movie, all the smoke and shooting, *bup-bup-bup-bup*. That was the lead-in for us—you know, into your 'ville. We came up on it and boy . . . there was this one chair, like a kitchen chair with a red seat and steel legs pointing up at the sky, in the street. It just looked *crapass*, I'm sorry but it did, not worth living in, let alone dying for. Your guys, the ARVN, *they* didn't want to die for places like that, why would we? The place stank, it smelled like shit, but they all did. That's how it seemed. I didn't care so much about the smell, anyway. Mostly I think it was the chair that got to me. That one chair said it all.”

Sully pulled out the lighter, started to apply the cherry-red coil to the tip of his cigarette, and then remembered he was in a demonstrator. He could smoke in a demo—hell, it was off his own lot—but if one of the salesmen smelled the smoke and concluded that the boss was doing what was a firing offense for anyone else, it wouldn't be good. You had to walk the walk as well as talk the talk . . . at least you did if you wanted to get a little respect.

“*Excusez-moi*,” he told the old *mamasan*. He got out of the car, which was still running, lit his cigarette, then bent in the window to slide the lighter back into its dashboard receptacle. The day was hot, and the four-lane sea of idling cars made it seem even hotter. Sully could sense the impatience all around him, but his was the only radio he could hear; everyone else was under glass, buttoned into their little air-conditioned cocoons, listening to a hundred different kinds of music, from Liz Phair to William Ackerman. He guessed that any vets caught in the jam who didn't have the Allman Brothers on CD or Big Brother and the Holding Company on tape were probably also listening to WKND, where the past had never died and the future never came. Toot-toot, beep-beep.

Sully hitch-stepped to the hood of his car and stood on tiptoe, shading his eyes against the glare of sun on chrome and looking for the problem. He couldn't see it, of course.

*Bitches, barbecues, and bowling tournaments*, he thought, and the thought came in Malenfant's squealing, drilling voice. That nightmare voice under the blue and out of the green. *Come on, boys, who's got The Douche? I'm down to ninety and a wakeup, time's short, let's get this fuckin show on the fuckin road!*

He took a deep drag on the Winston, then coughed out stale hot smoke. Black dots began a sudden dance in the afternoon brightness, and he looked down at the cigarette between his fingers with an expression of nearly comic horror. What was he doing, starting up with this shit again? Was he crazy? Well yes, of *course* he was crazy, anyone who saw dead old ladies sitting beside them in their cars *had* to be crazy, but that didn't mean he had to start up with this shit again. Cigarettes were Agent Orange that you paid for. Sully threw the Winston away. It felt like the right decision, but it didn't slow the accelerating beat of his heart or his sense—so well remembered from the patrols he'd been on—that the inside of his mouth was drying out and pulling together, puckering and crinkling like burned skin. Some people were afraid of crowds—agoraphobia, it was called, fear of the marketplace—but the only time Sully ever had that sense of *too much* and *too many* was at times like this. He was okay in elevators and crowded lobbies at intermission and on rush-hour train platforms, but when traffic clogged to a stop all around him, he got dinky-dau. There was, after all, nowhere to run, baby, nowhere to hide.

A few other folks were emerging from their air-conditioned lifepods. A woman in a severe brown business suit standing by a severe brown BMW, a gold bracelet and silver earrings summarizing the summer sunlight, all but tapping one cordovan high heel with impatience. She caught Sully's eye, rolled her own heavenward as if to say *Isn't this typical*, and glanced at her wristwatch (also gold, also gleaming). A man astride a green Yamaha crotchrocket killed his bike's raving engine, put the bike on its kickstand, removed his helmet, and placed it on the oilstained pavement next to one footpedal. He was wearing black bike-shorts and a sleeveless shirt with PROPERTY OF THE NEW YORK KNICKS printed on the front. Sully estimated this gentleman would lose approximately seventy per cent of his skin if he happened to dump the crotchrocket at a speed greater than five miles an hour while wearing such an outfit.

"Bummer, man," the crotchrocket guy said. "Must be an accident. Hope it's nothing radioactive." And laughed to show he was joking.

Up ahead in the far left lane—what would be the fast lane when traffic was actually moving on this stretch of highway—a woman in tennis whites was standing beside a Toyota with a NO NUKES bumper sticker on the left side of the license plate and one reading HOUSECAT: THE OTHER WHITE MEAT on the right. Her

skirt was very short, her thighs were very long and brown, and when she pushed her sunglasses up, propping them in her blond-streaked hair, Sully got a look at her eyes. They were wide and blue and somehow alarmed. It was a look that made you want to stroke her cheek (or perhaps give her a one-armed brother-hug) and tell her not to worry, everything was going to be all right. It was a look Sully remembered well. It was the one that had turned him inside out. It was Carol Gerber up there, Carol Gerber in sneakers and a tennis dress. He hadn't seen her since one night in late 1966 when he'd gone over to her house and they'd sat on the sofa (along with Carol's mother, who had smelled strongly of wine) watching TV. They had ended up arguing about the war and he had left. *I'll go back and see her again when I'm sure I can stay cool*, he remembered thinking as he drove away in his old Chevrolet (even back then he'd been a Chevrolet man). But he never had. By late '66 she was already up to her ass in antiwar shit—that much she'd learned during her semester in Maine, if nothing else—and just thinking about her was enough to make him furious. Fucking little empty-headed idiot was what she was, she'd swallowed all that communist antiwar propaganda hook, line, and sinker. Then, of course, she'd joined that nutty group, that MSP, and had high-sided it completely.

“Carol!” he called, starting toward her. He passed the snot-green crotchrocket, cut between the rear bumper of a van and a sedan, temporarily lost sight of her as he hurried along the side of a rumbling sixteen-wheeler, then saw her again. “Carol! Hey Carol!” Yet when she turned toward him he wondered what the hell was wrong with him, what had possessed him. If Carol was still alive she had to be pushing fifty now, just as he was. This woman looked maybe thirty-five.

Sully stopped, still a lane away. Cars and trucks rumbling everywhere. And an odd whickering sound in the air, which he at first thought was the wind, although the afternoon was hot and perfectly still.

“Carol? Carol Gerber?”

The whicker was louder, a sound like someone flicking his tongue repeatedly through his pursed lips, a sound like a helicopter five clicks away. Sully looked up and saw a lampshade tumbling out of the hazy blue sky, directly at him. He dodged backward in an instinctive startle reflex, but he had spent his entire school career playing athletic sports of one kind or another,

and even as he was pulling back his head he was reaching with his hand. He caught the lampshade quite deftly. On it was a paddleboat churning downriver against a lurid red sunset. WE'RE DOING FINE ON THE MISSISSIPPI was written above the boat in scrolly, old-fashioned letters. Below it, in the same scrolly caps: HOW'S BAYOU?

*Where the fuck did this come from?* Sully thought, and then the woman who looked like an all-grown-up version of Carol Gerber screamed. Her hands rose as if to adjust the sunglasses propped in her hair and then just hung beside her shoulders, shaking like the hands of a distraught symphony conductor. It was how old *mamasan* had looked as she came running out of her shitty fucked-up hooch and into the shitty fucked-up street of that shitty fucked-up little 'ville in Dong Ha Province. Blood spilled down over the shoulders of the tennis woman's white dress, first in spatters, then in a flood. It ran down her tanned upper arms and dripped from her elbows.

"Carol?" Sully asked stupidly. He was standing between a Dodge Ram pickup and a Mack semi, dressed in a dark blue suit, the one he wore to funerals, holding a lampshade souvenir of the Mississippi River (how's bayou) and looking at a woman who now had something sticking out of her head. As she staggered a step forward, blue eyes still wide, hands still shaking in the air, Sully realized it was a cordless phone. He could tell by the stub of aerial, which jiggled with each step she took. A cordless phone had fallen out of the sky, had fallen God knew how many thousands of feet, and now it was in her head.

She took another step, struck the hood of a dark green Buick, and began to sink slowly behind it as her knees buckled. It was like watching a submarine go down, Sully thought, only instead of a periscope all that would be sticking up after she was out of sight would be the stubby antenna of that cordless phone.

"Carol?" he whispered, but it couldn't be her; no one he'd known as a kid, no one he'd ever slept with, had been destined to die from injuries inflicted by a falling telephone, surely.

People were starting to scream and yell and shout. Mostly the shouts seemed to be questions. Horns were honking. Engines were revving, just as if there were someplace to go. Beside Sully, the driver of the Mack sixteen-wheeler was goosing his power-plant in big, rhythmic snorts. A car alarm began to wobble-wobble. Someone howled in either pain or surprise.

A single trembling white hand clutched at the hood of the dark green Buick. There was a tennis bracelet on the wrist. Slowly the hand and the bracelet slid away from Sully. The fingers of the woman who had looked like Carol gripped at the edge of the hood for a moment, then disappeared. Something else fell, whistling, out of the sky.

“*Get down!*” Sully screamed. “*Ah fuck, get down!*”

The whistling rose to a shrill, earsplitting pitch, then stopped as the falling object struck the hood of the Buick, bashing it downward like a fist and popping it up from beneath the windshield. The thing poking out of the Buick’s engine compartment appeared to be a microwave oven.

From all around him there now came the sound of falling objects. It was like being caught in an earthquake that was somehow going on above the ground instead of in it. A harmless shower of magazines fell past him—*Seventeen* and *GQ* and *Rolling Stone* and *Stereo Review*. With their open fluttering pages they looked like shot birds. To his right an office chair dropped out of the blue, spinning on its base as it came. It struck the roof of a Ford station wagon. The wagon’s windshield blew out in milky chunks. The chair rebounded into the air, tilted, and came to rest on the station wagon’s hood. Beyond that a portable TV, a plastic clothes basket, what looked like a clutch of cameras with the straps all tangled together, and a rubber home plate fell on the slow lane and into the breakdown lane. The home plate was followed by what looked like a Louisville Slugger baseball bat. A theater-size popcorn popper shattered into glittering shards when it hit the road.

The guy in the Knicks shirt, the one with the snot-green crotchrocket, had seen enough. He started running up the narrow corridor between the traffic stalled in the third lane and the traffic stalled in the fast lane, twisting like a slalom skier to avoid the jutting side mirrors, holding one hand over his head like a man crossing the street during a spring shower. Sully, still clutching the lampshade, thought the guy would have done a lot better to have grabbed his helmet and put it back on, but of course when things started falling all around you you got forgetful and the first thing you were apt to forget was where your best interests lay.

Something else was coming down now, falling close and falling big—bigger than the microwave oven that had bashed in the Buick’s hood, certainly. This

time the sound wasn't a whistle, like a bomb or a mortar-shell, but the sound of a falling plane or helicopter or even a house. In Vietnam Sully had been around when all those things fell out of the sky (the house had been in pieces, granted), and yet this sound was different in one crucial way: it was also *musical*, like the world's biggest windchime.

It was a grand piano, white with gold chasing, the sort of piano on which you'd expect a long cool woman in a black dress to tinkle out "Night and Day"—in the traffic's boom, in the silence of my lonely room, toot-toot, beep-beep. A white grand piano falling out of the Connecticut sky, turning over and over, making a shadow like a jellyfish on the jammed-up cars, making windy music in its cables as air blew through its rolling chest, its keys rippling like the keys of a player piano, the hazy sun winking on the pedals.

It fell in lazy revolutions, and the fattening sound of its drop was like the sound of something vibrating endlessly in a tin tunnel. It fell toward Sully, its uneasy shadow now starting to focus and shrink, his upturned face its seeming target.

"*INCOMING!*" Sully screamed, and began to run. "*INNCOMMING!*"

The piano plummeted toward the turnpike, the white bench falling right behind it, and behind the bench came a comet's tail of sheet music, 45-rpm records with fat holes in the middle, small appliances, a flapping yellow coat that looked like a duster, a Goodyear Wide Oval tire, a barbecue grill, a weathervane, a file-cabinet, and a teacup with WORLD'S GREATEST GRANDMA printed on the side.

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"Can I have one of those?" Sully had asked Dieffenbaker outside the funeral parlor where Pags was lying in his silk-lined box. "I never had a Dunhill."

"Whatever floats your boat." Dieffenbaker sounded amused, as if he had never been shit-scared in his life.

Sully could still remember Dieffenbaker standing in the street by that overturned kitchen chair: how pale he had been, how his lips had trembled, how his clothes still smelled of smoke and spilled copter fuel. Dieffenbaker looking around from Malenfant and the old woman to the others who were starting to pour fire into the hooches to the howling kid Mims had shot; he

could remember Deef looking at Lieutenant Shearman but there was no help there. No help from Sully himself, for that matter. He could also remember how Slocum was staring at Deef, Deef the lieutenant now that Packer was dead. And finally Deef had looked back at Slocum. Sly Slocum was no officer—not even one of those bigmouth bush generals who were always second-guessing everything—and never would be. Slocum was just your basic E-3 or E-4 who thought that a group who sounded like Rare Earth had to be black. Just a grunt, in other words, but one prepared to do what the rest of them weren't. Never losing hold of the new lieutenant's distraught eye, Slocum had turned his head back the other way just a little, toward Malenfant and Clemson and Peasley and Mims and the rest, self-appointed regulators whose names Sully no longer remembered. Then Slocum was back to total eye-contact with Dieffenbaker again. There were six or eight men in all who had gone loco, trotting down the muddy street past the screaming bleeding kid and into that scurgy little 'ville, shouting as they went—football cheers, basic-training cadences, the chorus to "Hang On Sloopy," shit like that—and Slocum was saying with his eyes *Hey, what you want? You the boss now, what you want?*

And Dieffenbaker had nodded.

Sully wondered if he could have given that nod himself. He thought not. He thought if it had come down to him, Clemson and Malenfant and those other fuckheads would have killed until their ammo ran out—wasn't that pretty much what the men under Calley and Medina had done? But Dieffenbaker was no William Calley, give him that. Dieffenbaker had given the little nod. Slocum nodded back, then raised his rifle and blew off Ralph Clemson's head.

At the time Sully had thought Clemson got the bullet because Slocum knew Malenfant too well, Slocum and Malenfant had smoked more than a few loco-leaves together and Slocum had also been known to spend at least some of his spare time hunting The Bitch with the other Hearts players. But as he sat here rolling Dieffenbaker's Dunhill cigarette between his fingers, it occurred to Sully that Slocum didn't give a shit about Malenfant and his loco-leaves; Malenfant's favorite card-game, either. There was no shortage of *bhang* or card-games in Vietnam. Slocum picked Clemson because shooting Malenfant

wouldn't have worked. Malenfant, screaming all his bullshit about putting heads up on sticks to show the Cong what happened to people who fucked with Delta Lightning, was too far away to get the attention of the men splashing and squashing and shooting their way down that muddy street. Plus old *mamasan* was already dead, so what the fuck, let him carve on her.

Now Deef was Dieffenbaker, a bald computer salesman who had quit going to the reunions. He gave Sully a light with his Zippo, then watched as Sully drew the smoke deep and coughed it back out.

"Been awhile, hasn't it?" Dieffenbaker asked.

"Two years, give or take."

"You want to know the scary thing? How fast you get back into practice."

"I told you about the old lady, huh?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"I think it was the last reunion you came to . . . the one on the Jersey shore, the one when Durgin ripped that waitress's top off. That was an ugly scene, man."

"Was it? I don't remember."

"You were shitfaced by then."

Of course he had been, that part was always the same. Come to think of it, all parts of the reunions were always the same. There was a dj who usually left early because someone wanted to beat him up for playing the wrong records. Until that happened the speakers blasted out stuff like "Bad Moon Rising" and "Light My Fire" and "Gimme Some Lovin' " and "My Girl," songs from the soundtracks of all those Vietnam movies that were made in the Philippines. The truth about the music was that most of the grunts Sully remembered used to get choked up over The Carpenters or "Angel of the Morning." That stuff was the real bush soundtrack, always playing as the men passed around fatties and pictures of their girlfriends, getting stoned and all weepy-goopy over "One Tin Soldier," popularly known in the green as "The Theme from Fuckin *Billy Jack*." Sully couldn't remember hearing The Doors once in Vietnam; it was always The Strawberry Alarm Clock singing "Incense and Peppermints." On some level he had known the war was lost the first time he heard that fuckin piece of shit on the commissary jukebox.

The reunions started with music and the smell of barbecues (a smell that always vaguely reminded Sully of burning helicopter fuel) and with cans of beer in pails of chipped ice and that part was all right, that part was actually pretty nice, but then all at once it was the next morning and the light burned your eyes and your head felt like a tumor and your stomach was full of poison. On one of those mornings-after Sully had had a vague sick memory of making the dj play "Oh! Carol" by Neil Sedaka over and over again, threatening to kill him if he stopped. On another Sully awoke next to Frank Peasley's ex-wife. She was snoring because her nose was broken. Her pillow was covered with blood, her cheeks covered with blood too, and Sully couldn't remember if he had broken her nose or if fuckin Peasley had done it. Sully wanted it to be Peasley but knew it could have been him; sometimes, especially in those days B.V. (Before Viagra) when he failed at sex almost as often as he succeeded, he got mad. Fortunately, when the lady awoke, she couldn't remember, either. She remembered what he'd looked like with his underwear off, though. "How come you only have one?" she'd asked him.

"I'm lucky to have that," Sully had replied. His headache had been bigger than the world.

"What'd I say about the old lady?" he asked Dieffenbaker as they sat smoking in the alley beside the chapel.

Dieffenbaker shrugged. "Just that you used to see her. You said sometimes she put on different clothes but it was always her, the old *mamasan* Malenfant wasted. I had to shush you up."

"Fuck," Sully said, and put the hand not holding the cigarette in his hair.

"You also said it was better once you got back to the East Coast," Dieffenbaker said. "And look, what's so bad about seeing an old lady once in awhile? Some people see flying saucers."

"Not people who owe two banks almost a million dollars," Sully said. "If they knew . . ."

"If they knew, what? I'll tell you what. Nothing. As long as you keep making the payments, Sully-John, keep bringing them that fabled monthly cashew, no one cares what you see when you turn out the light . . . or what you see when you leave it on, for that matter. They don't care if you dress in ladies'

underwear or if you beat your wife and hump the Labrador. Besides, don't you think there are guys in those banks who spent time in the green?"

Sully took a drag on the Dunhill and looked at Dieffenbaker. The truth was that he never *had* considered such a thing. He dealt with two loan officers who were the right age, but they never talked about it. Of course, neither did he. *Next time I see them, he thought, I'll have to ask if they carry Zippos. You know, be subtle.*

"What are you smiling about?" Dieffenbaker asked.

"Nothing. What about you, Deef? Do you have an old lady? I don't mean your girlfriend, I mean an old lady. A *mamasan*."

"Hey man, don't call me Deef. Nobody calls me that now. I never liked it."

"Do you have one?"

"Ronnie Malenfant's my *mamasan*," Dieffenbaker said. "Sometimes I see him. Not the way you said you see yours, like she's really there, but memory's real too, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

Dieffenbaker shook his head slowly. "If memory was all. You know? If memory was *all*."

Sully sat silent. In the chapel the organ was now playing something that didn't sound like a hymn but just music. The recessional, he thought they called it. A musical way of telling the mourners to get lost. Get back, Jo-Jo. Your mama's waitin.

Dieffenbaker said: "There's memory and then there's what you actually see in your mind. Like when you read a book by a really good author and he describes a room and you see that room. I'll be mowing the lawn or sitting at our conference table listening to a presentation or reading a story to my grandson before putting him in bed or maybe even smooching with Mary on the sofa, and boom, there's Malenfant, goddam little acne-head with that wavy hair. Remember how his hair used to wave?"

"Yeah."

"Ronnie Malenfant, always talking about the fuckin this and the fuckin that and the fuckin other thing. Ethnic jokes for every occasion. And the poke. You remember that?"

“Sure. Little leather poke he wore on his belt. He kept his cards in it. Two decks of Bikes. ‘Hey, we’re goin Bitch-huntin, boys! Nickel a point! Who’s up for it?’ And out they’d come.”

“Yeah. You remember. *Remember*. But I *see* him, Sully, right down to the whiteheads on his chin. I hear him, I can smell the fucking *dope* he smoked . . . but mostly I see him, how he knocked her over and she was lying there on the ground, still shaking her fists at him, still running her mouth—”

“Stop it.”

“—and I couldn’t believe it was going to happen. At first I don’t think Malenfant could believe it, either. He just jabbed the bayonet at her a couple of times to begin with, pricking her with the tip of it like the whole thing was a goof . . . but then he went and did it, he stuck it in her. Fuckin A, Sully; I mean *fuck-in-A*. She screamed and started jerking all around and he had his feet, remember, on either side of her, and the rest of them were running, Ralph Clemson and Mims and I don’t know who else. I always hated that little fuck Clemson, even worse than Malenfant because at least Ronnie wasn’t sneaky, with him what you saw was what you got. Clemson was crazy *and* sneaky. I was scared to death, Sully, scared to fucking death. I knew I was supposed to put a stop to it, but I was afraid they’d scrag me if I tried, all of them, all of *you*, because at that precise moment there was all you guys and then there was me. Shearman . . . nothing against him, he went into that clearing where the copters came down like there was no tomorrow, but in that ’ville . . . I looked at him and there was nothing there.”

“He saved my life later on, when we got ambushed,” Sully said quietly.

“I know. Picked you up and carried you like fucking Superman. He had it in the clearing, he got it back on the trail, but in between, in the ’ville . . . nothing. In the ’ville it was down to me. It was like I was the only grownup, only I didn’t feel like a grownup.”

Sully didn’t bother telling him to stop again. Dieffenbaker meant to have his say. Nothing short of a punch in the mouth would stop him from having it.

“You remember how she screamed when he stuck it in? That old lady? And Malenfant standing over her and running his mouth, slopehead this and gook

that and slant the other thing. Thank God for Slocum. He looked at me and that made me do something . . . except all I did was tell him to shoot.”

*No, Sully thought, you didn't even do that, Deef. You just nodded your head. If you're in court they don't let you get away with shit like that; they make you speak out loud. They make you state it for the record.*

“I think Slocum saved our souls that day,” Dieffenbaker said. “You knew he offered himself, didn't you? Yeah. In '86.”

“I thought it was a car accident.”

“If driving into a bridge abutment at seventy miles an hour on a clear evening is an accident, it was an accident.”

“What about Malenfant? Any idea?”

“Well, he never came to any of the reunions, of course, but he was alive the last I knew. Andy Brannigan saw him in southern California.”

“Hedgehog saw him?”

“Yeah, Hedgehog. You know where it was?”

“No, course not.”

“It's going to kill you, Sully-John, it's going to blow your mind. Brannigan's in Alcoholics Anonymous. It's his religion. He says it saved his life, and I suppose it did. He used to drink fiercer than any of us, maybe fiercer than all of us put together. So now he's addicted to AA instead of tequila. He goes to about a dozen meetings a week, he's a GSR—don't ask me, it's some sort of political position in the group—he mans a hotline telephone. And every year he goes to the National Convention. Five years or so ago the drunks got together in San Diego. Fifty thousand alxies all standing in the San Diego Convention Center, chanting the Serenity Prayer. Can you picture it?”

“Sort of,” Sully said.

“Fucking Brannigan looks to his left and who does he see but Ronnie Malenfant. He can hardly believe it, but it's Malenfant, all right. After the big meeting, he grabs Malenfant and the two of them go out for a drink.” Dieffenbaker paused. “Alcoholics do that too, I guess. Lemonades and Cokes and such. And Malenfant tells Hedgehog he's almost two years clean and sober, he's found a higher power he chooses to call God, he's had a rebirth, everything is five by fucking five, he's living life on life's terms, he's letting go and letting God, all that stuff they talk. And Brannigan, he can't help it. He asks

Malenfant if he's taken the Fifth Step, which is confessing the stuff you've done wrong and becoming entirely ready to make amends. Malenfant doesn't bat an eyelash, just says he took the Fifth a year ago and he feels a lot better."

"Hot damn," Sully said, surprised at the depth of his anger. "Old *mamasan* would certainly be glad to know that Ronnie's gotten past it. I'll tell her the next time I see her." Not knowing he would see her later that day, of course.

"You do that."

They sat without talking much for a little while. Sully asked Dieffenbaker for another cigarette and Dieffenbaker gave him one, also another flick of the old Zippo. From around the corner came tangles of conversation and some low laughter. Pags's funeral was over. And somewhere in California Ronnie Malenfant was perhaps reading his AA Big Book and getting in touch with that fabled higher power he chose to call God. Maybe Ronnie was also a GSR, whatever the fuck that was. Sully wished Ronnie was dead. Sully wished Ronnie Malenfant had died in a Viet Cong spiderhole, his nose full of sores and the smell of ratshit, bleeding internally and puking up chunks of his own stomach lining. Malenfant with his poke and his cards, Malenfant with his bayonet, Malenfant with his feet planted on either side of the old *mamasan* in her green pants and orange top and red sneakers.

"Why were we in Vietnam to begin with?" Sully asked. "Not to get all philosophical or anything, but have you ever figured that out?"

"Who said 'He who does not learn from the past is condemned to repeat it'?"

"Richard Dawson, the host of *Family Feud*."

"Fuck you, Sullivan."

"I don't know who said it. Does it matter?"

"Fuckin yeah," Dieffenbaker said. "Because we never got out. We never got out of the green. Our generation died there."

"That sounds a little—"

"A little what? A little pretentious? You bet. A little silly? You bet. A little self-regarding? Yes sir. But that's us. That's us all over. What have we done since Nam, Sully? Those of us who went, those of us who marched and protested, those of us who just sat home watching the Dallas Cowboys and drinking beer and farting into the sofa cushions?"

Color was seeping into the new lieutenant's cheeks. He had the look of a man who has found his hobby-horse and is now climbing on, helpless to do anything but ride. He held up his hands and began popping fingers the way Sully had when talking about the legacies of the Vietnam experience.

"Well, let's see. We're the generation that invented Super Mario Brothers, the ATV, laser missile-guidance systems, and crack cocaine. We discovered Richard Simmons, Scott Peck, and *Martha Stewart Living*. Our idea of a major lifestyle change is buying a dog. The girls who burned their bras now buy their lingerie from Victoria's Secret and the boys who fucked fearlessly for peace are now fat guys who sit in front of their computer screens late at night, pulling their puddings while they look at pictures of naked eighteen-year-olds on the Internet. That's us, brother, we like to watch. Movies, video games, live car-chase foot-age, fistfights on *The Jerry Springer Show*, Mark McGwire, World Federation Wrestling, impeachment hearings, we don't care, we just like to watch. But there was a time . . . don't laugh, but there was a time when it was really all in our hands. Do you know that?"

Sully nodded, thinking of Carol. Not the version of her sitting on the sofa with him and her wine-smelling mother, not the one flipping the peace sign at the camera while the blood ran down the side of her face, either—that one was already too late and too crazy, you could see it in her smile, read it in the sign, where screaming words forbade all discussion. Rather he thought of Carol on the day her mother had taken all of them to Savin Rock. His friend Bobby had won some money from a three-card monte dealer that day and Carol had worn her blue bathing suit on the beach and sometimes she'd give Bobby that look, the one that said he was killing her and death was sweet. It *had* been in their hands then; he was quite sure of it. But kids lose everything, kids have slippery fingers and holes in their pockets and they lose everything.

"We filled up our wallets on the stock market and went to the gym and booked therapy sessions to get in touch with ourselves. South America is burning, Malaysia's burning, fucking *Vietnam* is burning, but we finally got past that self-hating thing, finally got to like ourselves, so *that's* okay."

Sully thought of Malenfant getting in touch with himself, learning to like the inner Ronnie, and suppressed a shudder.

All of Dieffenbaker's fingers were held up in front of his face and poked out; to Sully he looked like Al Jolson getting ready to sing "Mammy." Dieffenbaker seemed to become aware of this at the same moment Sully did, and lowered his hands. He looked tired and distracted and unhappy.

"I like lots of people our age when they're one by one," he said, "but I loathe and despise my generation, Sully. We had an opportunity to change everything. We actually did. Instead we settled for designer jeans, two tickets to Mariah Carey at Radio City Music Hall, frequent-flier miles, James Cameron's *Titanic*, and retirement portfolios. The only generation even close to us in pure, selfish self-indulgence is the so-called Lost Generation of the twenties, and at least most of them had the decency to stay drunk. We couldn't even do that. Man, we suck."

The new lieutenant was close to tears, Sully saw. "Deef—"

"You know the price of selling out the future, Sully-John? You can never really leave the past. You can never get over. My thesis is that you're really not in New York at all. You're in the Delta, leaning back against a tree, stoned and rubbing bug-dope on the back of your neck. Packer's still the man because it's still 1969. Everything you think of as 'your later life' is a big fucking pot-bubble. And it's better that way. Vietnam is better. That's why we stay there."

"You think?"

"Absolutely."

A dark-haired, brown-eyed woman in a blue dress peeked around the corner and said, "So there you are."

Dieffenbaker stood up as she came toward them, walking slow and pretty on her high heels. Sully stood up, too.

"Mary, this is John Sullivan. He served with me and Pags. Sully, this is my good friend Mary Theresa Charlton."

"Pleased to meet you," Sully said, and put out his hand.

Her grip was firm and sure, long cool fingers in his own, but she was looking at Dieffenbaker. "Mrs. Pagano wants to see you, hon. Please?"

"You bet," Dieffenbaker said. He started toward the front of the building, then turned back to Sully. "Hang in a little bit," he said. "We'll go for a drink. I promise not to preach." But his eyes shifted from Sully's when he said this, as if they knew it was a promise he couldn't keep.

“Thanks, Loot, but I really ought to get back. I want to beat the rush-hour traffic.”

• • •

But he hadn't beaten the traffic after all and now a piano was falling toward him, gleaming in the sun and humming to itself as it came. Sully fell flat on his stomach and rolled under a car. The piano came down less than five feet away, detonating and throwing up rows of keys like teeth.

Sully slid back out from beneath the car, burning his back on the hot tailpipe, and struggled to his feet. He looked north along the turnpike, eyes wide and unbelieving. A vast rummage sale was falling out of the sky: tape recorders and rugs and a riding lawnmower with the grass-caked blade whirling in its housing and a black lawn-jockey and an aquarium with the fish still swimming in it. He saw an old man with a lot of theatrical gray hair running up the breakdown lane and then a flight of steps fell on him, tearing off his left arm and sending him to his knees. There were clocks and desks and coffee tables and a plummeting elevator with its cable uncoiling into the air behind it like a greasy severed umbilicus. A squall of ledgers fell in the parking lot of a nearby industrial complex; their clapping covers sounded like applause. A fur coat fell on a running woman, trapping her, and then a sofa landed on her, crushing her. The air filled with a storm of light as large panes of greenhouse glass dropped out of the blue. A statue of a Civil War soldier smashed through a panel truck. An ironing board hit the railing of the overpass up ahead and then fell into the stalled traffic below like a spinning propeller. A stuffed lion dropped into the back of a pickup truck. Everywhere were running, screaming people. Everywhere were cars with dented roofs and smashed windows; Sully saw a Mercedes with the unnaturally pink legs of a department-store mannequin sticking up from the sunroof. The air shook with whines and whistles.

Another shadow fell on him and even as he ducked and raised his hand he knew it was too late, if it was an iron or a toaster or something like that it would fracture his skull. If it was something bigger he'd be nothing but a grease-spot on the highway.

The falling object struck his hand without hurting it in the slightest, bounced, and landed at his feet. He looked down at it first with surprise, then with dawning wonder. “Holy shit,” he said.

Sully bent over and picked up the baseball glove which had fallen from the sky, recognizing it at once even after all these years: the deep scratch down the last finger and the comically tangled knots in the rawhide laces of the webbing were as good as fingerprints. He looked on the side, where Bobby had printed his name. It was still there, but the letters looked fresher than they should have, and the leather here looked frayed and faded and whipsawed, as if other names had been inked in the same spot and then erased.

Closer to his face, the smell of the glove was both intoxicating and irresistible. Sully slipped it onto his hand, and when he did something crackled beneath his little finger—a piece of paper shoved in there. He paid no attention. Instead he put the glove over his face, closed his eyes, and inhaled. Leather and neat’s-foot oil and sweat and grass. All the summers that were. The summer of 1960, for instance, when he had come back from his week at camp to find everything changed—Bobby sullen, Carol distant and palely thoughtful (at least for awhile), and the cool old guy who’d lived on the third floor of Bobby’s building—Ted—gone. Everything had changed . . . but it was still summer, he had still been eleven, and everything had still seemed . . .

“Eternal,” he murmured into the glove, and inhaled deeply of its aroma again as, nearby, a glass case filled with butterflies shattered on the roof of a bread-van and a stop-sign stuck, quivering, into the breakdown lane like a thrown spear. Sully remembered his Bo-lo Bouncer and his black Keds and the taste of Pez straight out of the gun, how the pieces of candy would hit the roof of your mouth and then ricochet onto your tongue; he remembered the way his catcher’s mask felt when it sat on his face just right and the *hisha-hisha-hisha* of the lawn-sprinklers on Broad Street and how mad Mrs. Conlan got if you walked too close to her precious flowers and Mrs. Godlow at the Asher Empire wanting to see your birth certificate if she thought you were too big to be still under twelve and the poster of Brigitte Bardot

*(if she’s trash I’d love to be the trashman)*

in her towel and playing guns and playing pass and playing Careers and making arm-farts in the back of Mrs. Sweetser’s fourth-grade classroom and—

“Hey, American.” Only she said it *Amellican* and Sully knew who he was going to see even before he raised his head from Bobby’s Alvin Dark–model glove. It was old *mamasan*, standing there between the crotchrocket, which had been crushed by a freezer (wrapped meat was spilling out of its shattered door in frosty blocks), and a Subaru with a lawn-flamingo punched through its roof. Old *mamasan* in her green pants and orange smock and red sneakers, old *mamasan* lit up like a bar-sign in hell.

“Hey, American, you come me, I keep safe.” And she held out her arms.

Sully walked toward her through the noisy hail of falling televisions and backyard pools and cartons of cigarettes and high-heeled shoes and a great big pole hairdryer and a pay telephone that hit and vomited a jackpot of quarters. He walked toward her with a feeling of relief, that feeling you get only when you are coming home.

“I keep safe.” Holding out her arms now. “Poor boy, I keep safe.” Sully stepped into the dead circle of her embrace as people screamed and ran and all things American fell out of the sky, blitzing I-95 north of Bridgeport with their falling glitter. She put her arms around him.

“I keep safe,” she said, and Sully was in his car. Traffic was stopped all around him, four lanes of it. The radio was on, tuned to WKND. The Platters were singing “Twilight Time” and Sully couldn’t breathe. Nothing appeared to have fallen out of the sky, except for the traffic tie-up everything seemed to be in good order, but how could that be? How could it be when he still had Bobby Garfield’s old baseball glove on his hand?

“I keep safe,” old *mamasan* was saying. “Poor boy, poor American boy, I keep safe.”

Sully couldn’t breathe. He wanted to smile at her. He wanted to tell her he was sorry, that some of them had at least meant well, but he had no air and he was very tired. He closed his eyes and tried to raise Bobby’s glove one final time, get one final shallow whiff of that oily, summery smell, but it was too heavy.

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Dieffenbaker was standing at the kitchen counter the next morning, wearing a pair of jeans and nothing else, pouring himself a cup of coffee, when Mary

came in from the living room. She was wearing her PROPERTY OF THE DENVER BRONCOS sweatshirt and had the New York *Post* in her hand.

“I think I have some bad news for you,” she said, then seemed to reconsider. “*Moderately* bad news.”

He turned to her warily. Bad news should always come after lunch, he thought. At least a person was halfway prepared for bad news after lunch. First thing in the morning everything left a bruise. “What is it?”

“The man you introduced me to yesterday at your buddy’s funeral—you said he was a car dealer in Connecticut, right?”

“Right.”

“I wanted to be sure because John Sullivan isn’t, you know, the world’s most striking and uncommon—”

“What are you talking about, Mary?”

She handed him the paper, which was folded open to a page about halfway into the tabloid. “They say it happened while he was on his way home. I’m sorry, hon.”

She had to be wrong, that was his first thought; people couldn’t die just after you’d seen them and talked to them, it seemed like a basic rule, somehow.

But it was him, all right, and in triplicate: Sully in a high-school baseball uniform with a catcher’s mask pushed back to the top of his head, Sully in an Army uniform with sergeant’s stripes on the sleeve, and Sully in a business suit that had to hail from the late seventies. Beneath the row of pictures was the sort of headline you found only in the *Post*:

**JAMBO!**  
**SILVER STAR VIET VET DIES IN CONN. TRAFFIC JAM**

Dieffenbaker scanned the story quickly, feeling the sense of unease and betrayal he always felt these days when he read the death-notice of someone his own age, someone he knew. *We are still too young for natural deaths*, he always thought, knowing that it was a foolish idea.

Sully had died of an apparent heart attack while stuck in a traffic tie-up caused by a jackknifed tractor-trailer truck. He might well have died within sight of his own dealership’s Chevrolet sign, the article lamented. Like the JAMBO! headline, such epiphanies could be found only in the *Post*. The *Times*

was a good paper if you were smart; the *Post* was the newspaper of drunks and poets.

Sully had left an ex-wife and no children. Funeral arrangements were being made by Norman Oliver, of First Connecticut Bank and Trust.

*Buried by his bank!* Dieffenbaker thought, his hands beginning to shake. He had no idea why this thought filled him with such horror, but it did. *By his fucking bank! Oh man!*

“Honey?” Mary was looking at him a little nervously. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he said. “He died in a traffic jam. Maybe they couldn’t even get an ambulance to him. Maybe they never even found him until the traffic started moving again. Christ.”

“Don’t,” she said, and took the paper away from him again.

Sully had won the Silver Star for the rescue, of course—the helicopter rescue. The gooks had been shooting but Packer and Shearman had led in a bunch of American soldiers, mostly Delta two-tvos, just the same. Ten or twelve of the Bravo Company soldiers had laid down a confused and probably not very effective covering fire as the rescue operation took place . . . and for a wonder two of the men from the tangled copters had actually been alive, at least when they came out of the clearing. John Sullivan had carried one of them to cover all by himself, the chopper guy shrieking in his arms and covered with fire-retardant foam.

Malenfant had gone running into the clearing, too—Malenfant clutching one of the extinguisher cannisters like a big red baby and screaming at the Cong in the bush to shoot him if they could, except they couldn’t, he knew they couldn’t, they were just a bunch of blind slopehead syphilitic fucks and they couldn’t hit him, couldn’t hit the broad side of a fuckin barn. Malenfant had also been put up for the Silver Star, and although Dieffenbaker couldn’t say for sure, he supposed the pimply little murdering asshole had probably won one. Had Sully known or guessed? Wouldn’t he have mentioned it while they were sitting together outside the funeral parlor? Maybe; maybe not. Medals had a way of seeming less important as time passed, more and more like the award you got in junior high for memorizing a poem or the letter you got in high school for running track and blocking home plate when the throw came home. Just something you kept on a shelf. They were the things old men

used to jazz the kids. The things they held out to make you jump higher, run faster, fling yourself forward. Dieffenbaker thought the world would probably be a better place without old men (this revelation coming just as he was getting ready to be one himself). Let the old women live, old women never hurt anyone as a rule, but old men were more dangerous than rabid dogs. Shoot all of them, then douse their bodies with gasoline, then light them on fire. Let the children join hands and dance around the blaze, singing corny old Crosby, Stills and Nash songs.

“Are you really okay?” Mary asked.

“About Sully? Sure. I hadn’t seen him in years.”

He sipped his coffee and thought about the old lady in the red sneakers, the one Malenfant had killed, the one who came to visit Sully. She wouldn’t be visiting Sully anymore; there was that much, at least. Old *mamasan*’s visiting days were done. It was how wars really ended, Dieffenbaker supposed—not at truce tables but in cancer wards and office cafeterias and traffic jams. Wars died one tiny piece at a time, each piece something that fell like a memory, each lost like an echo that fades in winding hills. In the end even war ran up the white flag. Or so he hoped. He hoped that in the end even war surrendered.

**1999: Come on, you bastard, come on home.**

1999

HEAVENLY SHADES OF NIGHT ARE FALLING

On an afternoon in the last summer before the year 2000, Bobby Garfield came back to Harwich, Connecticut. He went to West Side Cemetery first, where the actual memorial service took place at the Sullivan family plot. Old Sully-John got a good crowd; the *Post* story had brought them out in droves. Several small children were startled into tears when the American Legion honor-guard fired their guns. After the graveside service there was a reception at the local Amvets Hall. Bobby made a token appearance—long enough to have a slice of cake and a cup of coffee and say hello to Mr. Oliver—but he saw no one he knew, and there were places he wanted to go while there was still plenty of good daylight. He hadn't been back to Harwich in almost forty years.

The Nutmeg Mall stood where St. Gabriel the Steadfast Upper and Secondary Schools had been. The old post office was now a vacant lot. The railway station continued to overlook the Square, but the stone overpass support-posts were covered with graffiti and Mr. Burton's newsstand kiosk was boarded up. There were still grassy swards between River Avenue and the Housatonic, but the ducks were gone. Bobby remembered throwing one of those ducks at a man in a tan suit—improbable but true. *I'll give you two bucks to let me blow you*, the man had said, and Bobby had hucked a duck at him. He could grin about it now, but that nimrod had scared the hell out of him, and for all sorts of reasons.

There was a great beige UPS warehouse where the Asher Empire had stood. Farther along toward Bridgeport, where Asher Avenue emptied into Puritan Square, the William Penn Grille was also gone, replaced by a Pizza Uno. Bobby thought about going in there, but not very seriously. His stomach was fifty, just like the rest of him, and it didn't do so well with pizza anymore.

Except that wasn't really the reason. It would be too easy to imagine things, that was the real reason—too easy to envision big vulgar cars out front, the paintjobs so bright they seemed to howl.

So he had driven back to Harwich proper, and damned if the Colony Diner wasn't still where it had always been, and damned if there weren't still grilled hotdogs on the menu. Hotdogs were as bad as fuckin pizza, maybe worse, but what the hell was Prilosec for, if not the occasional gastronomic ramble down memory lane? He had swallowed one, and chased it with two hotdogs. They

still came in those little grease-spotted cardboard sleeves, and they still tasted like heaven.

He tamped the hotdogs down with pie à la mode, then went out and stood by his car for a moment. He decided to leave it where it was—there were only two more stops he wanted to make, and both were within walking distance. He took the gym bag off the passenger seat and walked slowly past Spicer's, which had evolved into a 7-Eleven store with gas-pumps out front. Voices came to him as he passed, 1960 ghost-voices, voices of the Sigsby twins.

*Mumma-Daddy havin a fight.*

*Mumma said stay out.*

*Why'd you do that, stupid old Bobby Garfield?*

Stupid old Bobby Garfield, yes, that had been him. He might have gotten a little smarter over the years, but probably not that much.

Halfway up Broad Street Hill he spied a faded hopscotch grid on the sidewalk. He dropped to one knee and looked at it closely in the latening light, brushing at the squares with the tips of his fingers.

“Mister? You all right?” It was a young woman with a 7-Eleven bag in her arms. She was looking at Bobby with equal parts concern and mistrust.

“I’m fine,” he said, getting to his feet and dusting off his hands. He was, too. Not a single moon or star beside the grid, let alone a comet. Nor had he seen any lost-pet posters in his rambles around town. “I’m fine.”

“Well, good for you,” the young woman said, and hurried on her way. She did not smile. Bobby watched her go and then started walking again himself, wondering what had happened to the Sigsby twins, where they were now. He remembered Ted Brautigan talking about time once, calling it the old bald cheater.

Until he actually saw 149 Broad Street, Bobby hadn't realized how sure he'd been that it would have become a video-rental store or a sandwich shop or maybe a condominium. Instead it was exactly the same except for the trim, now cream instead of green. There was a bike on the porch, and he thought of how desperately he had wanted a bike that last summer in Harwich. He'd even had a jar to save money in, with a label on it that said Bike Account, or something.

More ghost-voices as he stood there with his shadow lengthening into the street.

*If we were the Gotrocks, you wouldn't have to borrow from your bike-jar if you wanted to take your little girlfriend on the Loop-the-Loop.*

*She's not my girlfriend! She is not my little girlfriend!*

In his memory he had said that out loud to his mother, *screamed* it at her, in fact . . . but he doubted the accuracy of that memory. He hadn't had the kind of mother you could scream at. Not if you wanted to keep your scalp.

And besides. Carol *had* been his little girlfriend, hadn't she? She *had* been.

He had one more stop to make before returning to his car, and after a final long look at the house where he had lived with his mother until August of 1960, Bobby started back down Broad Street Hill, swinging the gym bag in one hand.

There had been magic that summer, even at the age of fifty he did not question that, but he no longer knew of what sort it had been. Perhaps he had experienced only the Ray Bradbury kind of childhood so many smalltown kids had, or at least remembered having; the kind where the real world and that of dreams sometimes overlapped, creating a kind of magic.

Yes, but . . . well . . .

There were the rose petals, of course, the ones which had come by way of Carol . . . but had they meant anything? Once it had seemed so—to the lonely, almost lost boy he had been, it had seemed so—but the rose petals were long gone. He had lost them right around the time he'd seen the photograph of that burned-out house in Los Angeles and realized that Carol Gerber was dead.

Her death cancelled not only the idea of magic but, it seemed to Bobby, the very purpose of childhood. What good was it if it brought you to such things? Bad eyes and bad blood-pressure were one thing; bad ideas, bad dreams, and bad ends were another. After awhile you wanted to say to God, ah, come on, Big Boy, *quit* it. You lost your innocence when you grew up, all right, everyone knew that, but did you have to lose your hope, as well? What good was it to kiss a girl on the Ferris wheel when you were eleven if you were to open the paper eleven years later and learn that she had burned to death in a slummy little house on a slummy little dead-end street? What good was it to remember her beautiful alarmed eyes or the way the sun had shone in her hair?

He would have said all of this and more a week ago, but then a tendril of that old magic had reached out and touched him. *Come on*, it had whispered. *Come on, Bobby, come on, you bastard, come home*. So here he was, back in Harwich. He had honored his old friend, he had had himself a little sightseeing tour of the old town (and without misting up a single time), and now it was almost time to go. He had, however, one more stop to make before he did.

It was the supper hour and Commonwealth Park was nearly empty. Bobby walked to the wire backstop behind the Field B home plate as three dawdling players went past him in the other direction. Two were carrying equipment in big red duffel bags; the third had a boombox from which The Offspring blasted at top volume. All three boys gave him mistrustful looks, which Bobby found unsurprising. He was an adult in the land of children, living in a time when all such as he were suspect. He avoided making things worse by giving them a nod or a wave or saying something stupid like *How was the game, fellas?* They passed on their way.

He stood with his fingers hooked into the wire diamonds of the backstop, watching the late red light slant across the outfield grass, reflecting from the scoreboard and the signs reading STAY IN SCHOOL and WHY DO YOU THINK THEY CALL IT DOPE. And again he felt that breathless sense of magic, that sense of the world as a thin veneer stretched over something else, something both brighter and darker. The voices were everywhere now, spinning like the lines on a top.

*Don't you call me stupid, Bobby-O.*

*You shouldn't hit Bobby, he's not like those men.*

*A real sweetie, kid, he'd play that song by Jo Stafford.*

*It's ka . . . and ka is destiny.*

*I love you, Ted . . .*

"I love you, Ted." Bobby spoke the words, not declaiming them but not whispering them, either. Trying them on for size. He couldn't even remember what Ted Brautigan had looked like, not with any real clarity (only the Chesterfields, and the endless bottles of rootbeer), but saying it still made him feel warm.

There was another voice here, too. When it spoke, Bobby felt tears sting the corners of his eyes for the first time since coming back.

*I wouldn't mind being a magician when I grow up, Bobby, you know it? Travel around with a carnival or a circus, wear a black suit and a top hat . . .*

“And pull rabbits and shit out of the hat,” Bobby said, turning away from Field B. He laughed, wiped his eyes, then ran one hand over the top of his head. No hair up there; he'd lost the last of it right on schedule, about fifteen years ago. He crossed one of the paths (gravel in 1960, now asphalt and marked with little signs reading BIKES ONLY NO ROLLERBLADES!) and sat down on one of the benches, possibly the same one where he'd sat on the day Sully had asked him to come to the movies and Bobby had turned him down, wanting to finish *Lord of the Flies* instead. He put his gym bag on the bench next to him.

Directly ahead was a grove of trees. Bobby was pretty sure it was the one where Carol had taken him when he started to cry. She did it so no one would see him bawling like a baby. No one but her. Had she taken him in her arms until it was cried out of him? He wasn't sure, but he thought she had. What he remembered more clearly was how the three St. Gabe's boys had almost beaten them up later. Carol's mother's friend had saved them. He couldn't remember her name, but she'd come along just in the nick of time . . . the way the Navy guy came along just in time to save Ralph's bacon at the end of *Lord of the Flies*.

*Rionda, that was her name. She told them she'd tell the priest, and the priest would tell their folks.*

But Rionda hadn't been around when those boys found Carol again. Would Carol have burned to death in Los Angeles if Harry Doolin and his friends had left her alone? You couldn't say for sure, of course, but Bobby thought the answer was probably no. And even now he felt his hands clenching as he thought: *But I got you, Harry, didn't I? Yes indeed.*

Too late by then, though. By then everything had changed.

He unzipped the gym bag, rummaged, and brought out a battery radio. It was nowhere as big as the boombox which had just gone past him toward the equipment sheds, but big enough for his purposes. All he had to do was turn it on; it was already tuned to WKND, Southern Connecticut's Home of the Oldies. Troy Shondell was singing “This Time.” That was fine with Bobby.

“Sully,” he said, looking into the grove of trees, “you were one cool bastard.”

From behind him, very prim, a woman said: "If you swear, I won't walk with you."

Bobby swivelled around so rapidly that the radio fell out of his lap and tumbled into the grass. He couldn't see the woman's face; she was nothing but a silhouette with red sky spread out on either side of her like wings. He tried to speak and couldn't. His breathing had come to a dead stop and his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. Far back in his brain a voice mused: *So this is what seeing a ghost is like.*

"Bobby, are you all right?"

She moved fast, coming around the bench, and the red setting sun smacked him full in the eyes when she did. Bobby gasped, raised a hand, shut his eyes. He smelled perfume . . . or was it summer grass? He didn't know. And when he opened his eyes again, he could still see nothing but the woman's shape; there was a hanging green afterimage of the sun where her face belonged.

"Carol?" he asked. His voice was hoarse and uneven. "Dear God, is it really you?"

"Carol?" the woman asked. "I don't know any Carol. My name is Denise Schoonover."

Yet it was her. She'd only been eleven the last time he had seen her, but he knew. He rubbed his eyes frantically. From the radio on the grass the dj said, "This is WKND, where your past is always present. Here's Clyde McPhatter. He's got 'A Lover's Question.' "

*You knew if she was alive she'd come. You knew that.*

Of course; wasn't that why he had come himself? Surely not for Sully, or not just for Sully. And yet at the same time he had been so sure she was dead. From the instant he'd seen the picture of that burned-out house in Los Angeles, he had been positive. And how that had hurt his heart, not as if he had last seen her forty years before, running across Commonwealth Avenue, but as if she had always remained his friend, as close as a phone-call or a trip up the street.

While he was still trying to blink away the floating sunspot afterimage hanging before his eyes, the woman kissed him firmly on the mouth, and then whispered in his ear: "I have to go home. I have to make the salad. What's that?"

“The last thing you ever said to me when we were kids,” he replied, and turned to her. “You came. You’re alive and you came.”

The sunset light fell on her face, and the afterimage had diminished enough for him to see her. She was beautiful in spite of the scar which began at the corner of her right eye and ran down to her chin in a cruel fishhook . . . or perhaps because of it. There were tiny sprays of crow’s-feet beside her eyes, but no lines on her forehead or bracketing her paintless mouth.

Her hair, Bobby saw with wonder, was almost entirely gray.

As if reading his mind, she reached out and touched his head. “I’m so sorry,” she said . . . but he thought he saw her old merriness dancing in her eyes. “You had the most gorgeous hair. Rionda used to say that was half of what I was in love with.”

“Carol—”

She reached out and put her fingers over his lips. There were scars on her hand, as well, Bobby saw, and her little finger was misshapen, almost melted. These were burn scars.

“I told you, I don’t know anyone named Carol. My name is Denise. Like in the old Randy and The Rainbows song?” She hummed a snatch of it. Bobby knew it well. He knew all the oldies. “If you were to check my ID, you’d see Denise Schoonover all up and down the line. I saw you at the service.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“I’m good at not being seen,” she said. “It’s a trick someone taught me a long time ago. The trick of being *dim*.” She shuddered a little. Bobby had read of people shuddering—mostly in bad novels—but had never actually seen it done. “And when it comes to crowd scenes, I’m good at standing all the way at the back. Poor old Sully-John. Do you remember his Bo-lo Bouncer?”

Bobby nodded, starting to smile. “I remember one time when he tried to get extra-cool with it, hit it between his legs as well as between his arms and behind his back? He bopped himself a good one in the balls and we all just about killed ourselves laughing. A bunch of girls ran over—you were one of them, I’m pretty sure—wanting to know what happened, and we wouldn’t tell you. You were pretty mad.”

She smiled, a hand going to her mouth, and in that old gesture Bobby could see the child she had been with complete clarity.

“How did you know he died?” Bobby asked.

“Read it in the New York *Post*. There was one of those horrible headlines that are their specialty—JAMBO!, it said—and pictures of him. I live in Poughkeepsie, where the *Post* is regularly available.” She paused. “I teach at Vassar.”

“You teach at Vassar and you read the *Post*?”

She shrugged, smiling. “Everyone has their vices. How about you, Bobby? Did you read it in the *Post*?”

“I don’t get the *Post*. Ted told me. Ted Brautigan.”

She only sat there looking at him, her smile fading.

“You remember Ted?”

“I thought I’d never be able to use my arm again and Ted fixed it like magic. Of course I remember him. But Bobby—”

“He knew you’d be here. I thought that as soon as I opened the package, but I don’t think I believed it until I saw you.” He reached out to her and with the unself-consciousness of a child traced the course of the scar on her face. “You got this in L.A., didn’t you? What happened? How did you get out?”

She shook her head. “I don’t talk about any of that. I’ve never talked about what went on in that house. I never will. That was a different life. That was a different girl. That girl died. She was very young, very idealistic, and she was tricked. Do you remember the Monte Man at Savin Rock?”

He nodded, smiling a little. He took her hand and she gripped his own tightly. “Now they go, now they slow, now they rest, here’s the test. His name was McCann or McCausland or something like that.”

“The name doesn’t matter. What matters is that he always let you think you knew where the queen was. He always let you think you could win. Right?”

“Right.”

“This girl got involved with a man like that. A man who could always move the cards just a little faster than you thought he could. He was looking for some confused, angry kids, and he found them.”

“Did he have a yellow coat?” Bobby asked. He didn’t know if he was joking or not.

She looked at him, frowning a little, and he understood she didn’t remember that part. Had he even told her about the low men? He thought so,

he thought he had told her just about everything, but she didn't remember. Perhaps what had happened to her in L.A. had burned a few holes in her memory. Bobby could see how a thing like that might happen. And it wouldn't exactly make her unique, would it? A lot of people their age had worked very hard to forget who they had been and what they had believed during those years between the murder of John Kennedy in Dallas and the murder of John Lennon in New York City.

"Never mind," he said. "Go on."

She shook her head. "I've said all I'm going to about that part. All I can. Carol Gerber died on Benefit Street in Los Angeles. Denise Schoonover lives in Poughkeepsie. Carol hated math, couldn't even get fractions, but Denise *teaches* math. How could they be the same person? It's a ridiculous idea. Case closed. I want to know what you mean about Ted. He *can't* still be alive, Bobby. He'd be over a hundred. Well over."

"I don't think time means much if you're a Breaker," Bobby said. Nor did it mean much on WKND, where Jimmy Gilmer was now singing about the Sugar Shack to the tooting accompaniment of what sounded like a sweet potato.

"A Breaker? What's—"

"I don't know and it doesn't matter," Bobby said. "This part might, so listen closely. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I live in Philadelphia. I've got a lovely wife who's a professional photographer, three lovely grown children, a lovely old dog with bad hips and a good disposition, and an old house which is always in desperate need of repairs. My wife says that's because the shoemaker's kids always go barefoot and the carpenter's house always has a leaky roof."

"Is that what you are? A carpenter?"

He nodded. "I live in Redmont Hills, and when I remember to get a paper, the Philly *Inquirer* is the one I buy."

"A carpenter," she mused. "I always thought you'd wind up a writer, or something."

"I did, too. But I also went through a period when I thought I'd wind up in Connecticut State Prison and *that* never happened, so I guess things have a

way of balancing out.”

“What was in the package you mentioned? And what does it have to do with Ted?”

“The package came FedEx, from a guy named Norman Oliver. A banker. He was Sully-John’s executor. This was inside.”

He reached into the gym bag again and brought out a battered old baseball glove. He laid it in the lap of the woman sitting next to him on the bench. She tipped it at once and looked at the name inked on the side.

“My God,” she said. Her voice was flat, shocked.

“I haven’t seen this baby since the day I found you over there in those trees with your arm dislocated. I suppose some kid came along, saw it lying on the grass, and just gleepped it. Although it wasn’t in very good shape, even then.”

“Willie stole it,” she said, almost inaudibly. “Willie Shearman. I thought he was nice. You see what a fool I was about people? Even back then.”

He looked at her in silent surprise, but she didn’t see his look; she was gazing down at the old Alvin Dark-model glove, plucking at the tangle of rawhide strings somehow still holding the webbing in place. And then she delighted and touched him by doing what he had done as soon as he opened the box and saw what was there: she lifted the baseball glove to her face and smelled the sweet oil-and-leather aroma of the pocket. Only he had slipped it on his hand first, without even thinking about it. It was a baseball-player thing to do, a kid-thing, automatic as breathing. Norman Oliver must have been a kid at some point, but he’d apparently never been a ballplayer, because he hadn’t found the piece of paper poked deep into the last finger of the glove—the finger with the deep scratch in the old cowhide. Bobby was the one who found the paper. The nail of his little finger poked against it and made it crackle.

Carol put the glove down again. Gray hair or no gray hair, she looked young again, and fully alive. “Tell me.”

“It was on Sully’s hand when they found him sitting dead in his car.”

Her eyes went huge and round. In that instant she did not just look like the little girl who had ridden the Ferris wheel with him at Savin Rock; she *was* that little girl.

“Look on the heel of the glove, there by Alvin Dark’s signature. Do you see?”

The light was fading fast now, but she saw, all right.

*B.G.*

*1464 Dupont Circle Road*

*Redmont Hills, Pennsylvania*

*Zone 11*

“Your address,” she murmured. “Your address *now*.”

“Yes, but look at this.” He tapped the words *Zone 11*. “The post office quit zoning mail in the sixties. I checked. Ted either didn’t know or forgot.”

“Maybe he put it that way on purpose.”

Bobby nodded. “It’s possible. In any case, Oliver read the address and sent me the glove—said he saw no need to put an old fielder’s mitt through probate. He mostly wanted me to know that Sully had died, if I didn’t know already, and that there was going to be a memorial service in Harwich. I believe he wanted me to come so he could hear the story of the glove. I couldn’t help him much with that, though. Carol, are you sure Willie—”

“I saw him wearing it. I told him to give it back so I could send it to you, but he wouldn’t.”

“Do you suppose he gave it to Sully-John later?”

“He must have.” Yet it did not ring true to her, somehow; she felt the truth must be stranger than that. Willie’s attitude to the glove itself had been strange, although she could no longer exactly remember how.

“Anyway,” he said, tapping the address on the heel of the glove, “that’s Ted’s printing. I’m sure it is. Then I put my hand up inside the glove, and I found something. It’s really why I came.”

He reached into the gym bag a third time. The redness was going out of the light now; the remains of the day were a fading pink, the color of wild roses.

The radio, still lying in the grass, played “Don’tcha Just Know It,” by Huey “Piano” Smith and The Clowns.

Bobby brought out a crumpled piece of paper. It had been stained in a couple of places by the glove’s sweaty innards, but otherwise it looked remarkably white and fresh. He handed it to Carol.

She held it up to the light and slightly away from her face—her eyes, Bobby saw, were not as good as they once had been. “It’s the title-page from a book,” she said, and then laughed. “*Lord of the Flies*, Bobby! Your favorite!”

“Look at the bottom,” he said. “Read what’s there.”

“Faber and Faber, Limited . . . 24 Russell Square . . . London.” She looked at him questioningly.

“It’s from the Faber paperback edition published in 1960,” Bobby said. “That’s on the back. But look at it, Carol! It looks brand-new. I think the book this page came from might have been in 1960 only *weeks* ago. Not the glove, that’s a *lot* more beat-up than when I found it, but the title-page.”

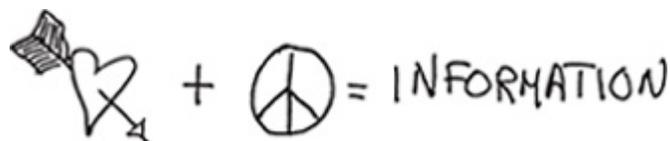
“Bobby, not all old books turn yellow if they’re kept well. Even an old paperback might—”

“Turn it over,” he said. “Take a look at the other side.”

Carol did. Printed below the line reading *All rights reserved* was this: *Tell her she was as brave as a lion.*

“That’s when I knew I had to come because *he* thought you’d be here, that you were still alive. I couldn’t believe that, it was easier to believe in him than it was to believe—Carol? What’s wrong? Is it the thing at the very bottom? What *is* that thing at the very bottom?”

She was crying now, and crying hard, holding the torn-out title-page in her hand and looking at what had been placed there on the back, squeezed into the scant white space below the conditions of sale:



“What does it mean? Do you know? You do, don’t you?”

Carol shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s special to me, that’s all. Special to me the way the glove is special to you. For an old guy, he sure knows how to

push the right buttons, doesn't he?"

"I guess so. Maybe that's what a Breaker does."

She looked at him. She was still weeping but was not, Bobby thought, truly unhappy. "Bobby, why would he do this? And how did he know we'd come? Forty years is a long time. People grow up, they grow up and leave the kids they were behind."

"Do they?"

She continued to look at him in the darkening day. Beyond them, the shadows of the grove deepened. In there—in the trees where he had wept on one day and found her, hurt and alone, the next—dark had almost come.

"Sometimes a little of the magic sticks around," Bobby said. "That's what I think. We came because we still hear some of the right voices. Do you hear them? The voices?"

"Sometimes," she said, almost reluctantly. "Sometimes I do."

Bobby took the glove from her. "Will you excuse me for a second?"

"Sure."

Bobby went to the grove of trees, dropped down on one knee to get beneath a low-hanging branch, and placed his old baseball glove on the grass with the pocket up to the darkening sky. Then he came back to the bench and sat down beside Carol again. "That's where it belongs," he said.

"Some kid'll just come along tomorrow and pick it up, you know that, don't you?" She laughed and wiped her eyes.

"Maybe," he agreed. "Or maybe it'll be gone. Back to wherever it came from."

As the day's last pink faded to ash, Carol put her head on Bobby's shoulder and he put an arm around her. They sat that way without speaking, and from the radio at their feet, The Platters began to sing.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

There is a University of Maine in Orono, of course. I know because I went there from 1966 to 1970. The characters in this story are completely fictional, however, and a good deal of the campus geography I have described never existed. Harwich is similarly fictional, and although Bridgeport is real, my version of it is not. Although it is difficult to believe, the sixties are not fictional; they actually happened.

I've also taken chronological liberties, the most noticeable being my use of "The Prisoner" two years before it actually telecast in the United States—but I have tried to remain true to the spirit of the age. Is that really possible? I don't know, but I have tried.

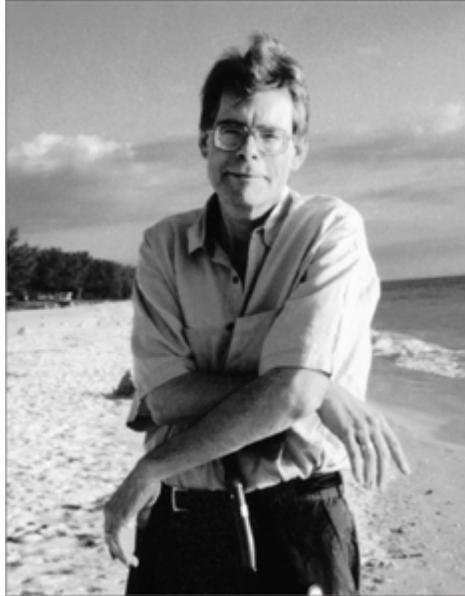
An earlier and very different version of "Blind Willie" appeared in the magazine *Antaeus*. It was published in 1994.

I want to thank Chuck Verrill, Susan Moldow, and Nan Graham for helping me find the courage to write this book. I also want to thank my wife. Without her, I never would have gotten over.

S.K.

December 22, 1998

A hand-drawn equation consisting of a heart with an arrow passing through it, followed by a plus sign, a peace symbol, an equals sign, and the word "INFORMATION" in all caps.



Tabitha King

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STEPHEN KING is the author of more than fifty books, all of them worldwide bestsellers. Among his most recent are *Hearts in Atlantis*, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *Bag of Bones*, the screenplay *Storm of the Century*, and *The Green Mile*. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

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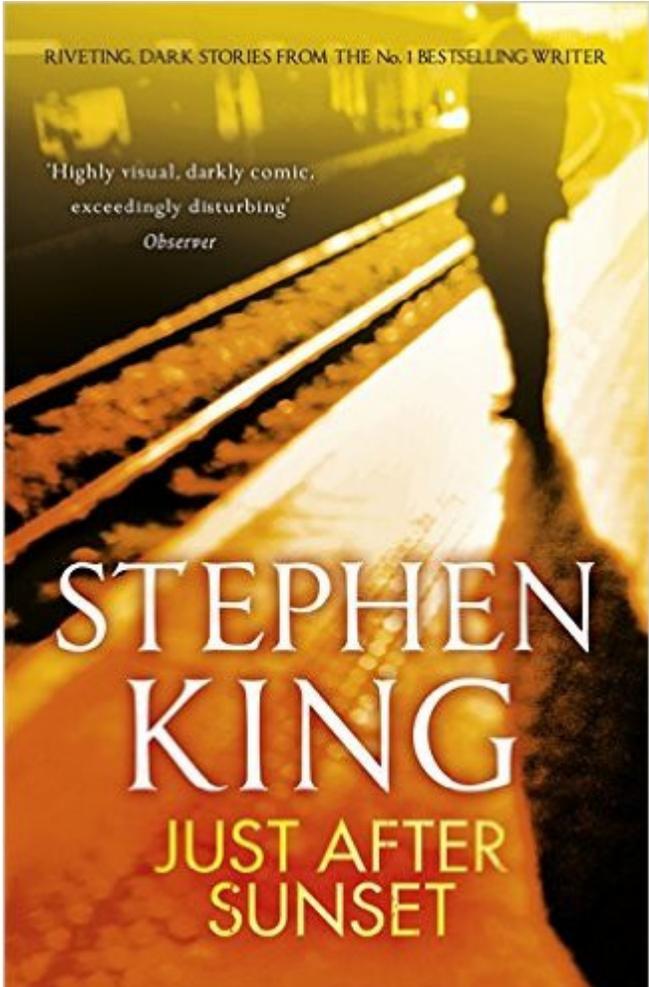
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# STEPHEN KING

## JUST AFTER SUNSET

STORIES

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“I can fancy what you saw. Yes; it is horrible enough; but after all, it is an old story, an old mystery played . . . . Such forces cannot be named, cannot be spoken, cannot be imagined except under a veil and a symbol, a symbol to the most of us appearing a quaint, poetic fancy, to some a foolish tale. But you and I, at all events, have known something of the terror that may dwell in the secret place of life, manifested under human flesh; that which is without form taking to itself a form. Oh, Austin, how can it be? How is it that the very sunlight does not turn to blackness before this thing, the hard earth melt and boil beneath such a burden?”

Arthur Machen  
*The Great God Pan*

# Introduction

One day in 1972, I came home from work and found my wife sitting at the kitchen table with a pair of gardening shears in front of her. She was smiling, which suggested I wasn't in *too* much trouble; on the other hand, she said she wanted my wallet. That didn't sound good.

Nevertheless, I handed it over. She rummaged out my Texaco gasoline credit card—such things were routinely sent to young marrieds then—and proceeded to cut it into three large pieces. When I protested that the card had been very handy, and we always made at least the minimum payment at the end of the month (sometimes more), she only shook her head and told me that the interest charges were more than our fragile household economy could bear.

“Better to remove the temptation,” she said. “I already cut up mine.”

And that was that. Neither of us carried a credit card for the next two years.

She was right to do it, *smart* to do it, because at the time we were in our early twenties and had two kids to take care of; financially, we were just keeping our heads above water. I was teaching high school English and working at an industrial laundry during the summer, washing motel sheets and occasionally driving a delivery truck around to those same motels. Tabby was taking care of the kids during her days, writing poems when they took their naps, and working a full shift at Dunkin' Donuts after I came home from school. Our combined income was enough to pay the rent, buy groceries, and keep diapers on our infant son, but not enough to manage a phone; we let that go the way of the Texaco card. Too much temptation to call someone long distance. There was enough left over to occasionally buy books—neither of us could live without those—and to pay for my bad habits (beer and cigarettes), but very little beyond that. Certainly there wasn't money to pay finance charges for the privilege of carrying that convenient but ultimately dangerous rectangle of plastic.

What left-over income we did have usually went for things like car repairs, doctor bills, or what Tabby and I called “kidshit”: toys, a second-hand playpen, a few of those maddening Richard Scarry books. And that little bit of extra often came from the short stories I was able to sell to men’s magazines like *Cavalier*, *Dude*, and *Adam*. In those days it was never about writing literature, and any discussion of my fiction’s “lasting value” would have been as much a luxury as that Texaco card. The stories, when they sold (they didn’t always), were simply a welcome bit of found money. I viewed them as a series of *piñatas* I banged on, not with a stick but my imagination. Sometimes they broke and showered down a few hundred bucks. Other times, they didn’t.

Luckily for me—and believe me when I say that I have led an extremely lucky life, in more ways than this one—my work was also my joy. I was knocking myself out with most of those stories, having a blast. They came one after another, like the hits from the AM rock radio station that was always playing in the combination study-and-laundry-room where I wrote them.

I wrote them fast and hard, rarely looking back after the second rewrite, and it never crossed my mind to wonder where they were coming from, or how the structure of a good short story differed from the structure of a novel, or how one manages issues of character development, backstory, and time-frame. I was flying entirely by the seat of my pants, running on nothing but intuition and a kid’s self-confidence. All I cared about was that they were coming. That was all I had to care about. Certainly it never occurred to me that writing short stories is a fragile craft, one that can be forgotten if it isn’t used almost constantly. It didn’t feel fragile to me then. Most of those stories felt like bulldozers.

Many bestselling novelists in America don’t write short stories. I doubt if it’s a money issue; financially successful writers don’t need to think about that part of it. It might be that when the world of the full-time novelist shrinks to below, say, seventy thousand words, a kind of creative claustrophobia sets in. Or maybe it’s just that the knack of miniaturization gets lost along the way. There are lots of things in life that are like riding a bike, but writing short stories isn’t one of them. You *can* forget how.

During the late eighties and nineties, I wrote fewer and fewer stories, and the ones I did write were longer and longer (and there are a couple of the longer ones in this book). That was okay. But there were also short stories I

wasn't writing because I had some novel or other to finish, and that wasn't so okay—I could feel those ideas in the back of my head crying to be written. Some eventually were; others, I'm sad to say, died and blew away like dust.

Worst of all, there were stories I no longer knew how to write, and that was dismaying. I knew I could have written them in that laundry room, on Tabby's little Olivetti portable, but as a much older man, even with my craft more honed and my tools—this Macintosh I'm writing on tonight, for instance—much more pricey, those stories were eluding me. I remember messing one up and thinking of an aging sword-maker, looking helplessly at a fine Toledo blade and musing, *I used to know how to make this stuff*.

Then one day three or four years ago, I got a letter from Katrina Kenison, who edited the annual *Best American Short Stories* series (she has since been succeeded by Heidi Pitlor, to whom the book you are holding is dedicated). Ms. Kenison asked if I'd be interested in editing the 2006 volume. I didn't need to sleep on it, or even think it over on an afternoon walk. I said yes immediately. For all sorts of reasons, some even altruistic, but I would be a black liar indeed if I didn't admit self-interest played a part. I thought if I read enough short fiction, immersed myself in the best the American literary magazines had to offer, I might be able to recapture some of the effortlessness that had been slipping away. Not because I needed those checks—small but very welcome when you're just starting out—to buy a new muffler for a used car or a birthday present for my wife, but because I didn't see losing my ability to write short stories as a fair exchange for a walletload of credit cards.

I read hundreds of stories during my year as guest editor, but I won't go into that here; if you're interested, buy the book and read the introduction (you'll also be treating yourself to twenty swell short stories, which is no poke in the eye with a sharp stick). The important thing as it affects the stories that follow is that I got excited all over again, and I started writing stories again in the old way. I had hoped for that, but had hardly dared believe it would happen. The first of those “new” stories was “Willa,” which is also the first story in this book.

Are these stories any good? I hope so. Will they help you pass a dull airplane flight (if you're reading) or a long car trip (if you're listening on CD)? I *really* hope so, because when that happens, it's a kind of magic spell.

I loved writing these, I know that. And I hope you like reading them, I know that, too. I hope they take you away. And as long as I remember how to do it, I'll keep at it.

Oh, and one more thing. I know some readers like to hear something about how or why certain stories came to be written. If you are one of those people, you'll find my "liner notes" at the back. But if you go there before you read the stories themselves, shame on you.

And now, let me get out of your way. But before I go, I want to thank you for coming. Would I still do what I do if you didn't? Yes, indeed I would. Because it makes me happy when the words fall together and the picture comes and the make-believe people do things that delight me. But it's better with you, Constant Reader.

Always better with you.

Sarasota, Florida  
February 25, 2008

# Willa

You don't see what's right in front of your eyes, she'd said, but sometimes he did. He supposed he wasn't entirely undeserving of her scorn, but he wasn't entirely blind, either. And as the dregs of sunset faded to bitter orange over the Wind River Range, David looked around the station and saw that Willa was gone. He told himself he wasn't sure, but that was only his head—his sinking stomach was sure enough.

He went to find Lander, who liked her a bit. Who called her spunky when Willa said Amtrak was full of shit for leaving them stranded like this. A lot of them didn't care for her at all, stranded by Amtrak or not.

"It smells like wet crackers in here!" Helen Palmer shouted at him as David walked past. She had found her way to the bench in the corner, as she always did, eventually. The Rhinehart woman was minding her for the time being, giving the husband a little break, and she gave David a smile.

"Have you seen Willa?" David asked.

The Rhinehart woman shook her head, still smiling.

"We got fish for supper!" Mrs. Palmer burst out furiously. A knuckle of blue veins beat in the hollow of her temple. A few people looked around. "First one t'ing an' den anudder!"

"Hush, Helen," the Rhinehart woman said. Maybe her first name was Sally, but David thought he would have remembered a name like that; there were so few Sallys these days. Now the world belonged to the Ambers, Ashleys, and Tiffanys. Willa was another endangered species, and just thinking that made his stomach sink down again.

"Like crackers!" Helen spat. "Them dirty old crackers up to camp!"

Henry Lander was sitting on a bench under the clock. He had his arm around his wife. He glanced up and shook his head before David could ask.

“She’s not here. Sorry. Gone into town if you’re lucky. Bugged out for good if you’re not.” And he made a hitchhiking gesture.

David didn’t believe his fiancée would hitchhike west on her own—the idea was crazy—but he believed she wasn’t here. Had known even before counting heads, actually, and a snatch of some old book or poem about winter occurred to him: A cry of absence, absence in the heart.

The station was a narrow wooden throat. Down its length, people either strolled aimlessly or simply sat on benches under the fluorescent lights. The shoulders of the ones who sat had that special slump you saw only in places like this, where people waited for whatever had gone wrong to be made right so the broken journey could be mended. Few people came to places like Crowheart Springs, Wyoming on purpose.

“Don’t you go haring after her, David,” Ruth Lander said. “It’s getting dark, and there’s plenty of critters out there. Not just coyotes, either. That book salesman with the limp says he saw a couple of wolves on the other side of the tracks, where the freight depot is.”

“Biggers,” Henry said. “That’s his name.”

“I don’t care if his name is Jack D. Ripper,” Ruth said. “The point is, you’re not in Kansas anymore, David.”

“But if she went—”

“She went while it was still daylight,” Henry Lander said, as if daylight would stop a wolf (or a bear) from attacking a woman on her own. For all David knew, it might. He was an investment banker, not a wildlife expert. A young investment banker, at that.

“If the pick-up train comes and she’s gone, she’ll miss it.” He couldn’t seem to get this simple fact into their heads. It wasn’t getting traction, in the current lingo of his office back in Chicago.

Henry raised his eyebrows. “Are you telling me that both of you missing it will improve things somehow?”

If they both missed it, they’d either catch a bus or wait for the next train together. Surely Henry and Ruth Lander saw that. Or maybe not. What David mostly saw when he looked at them—what was right in front of his eyes—was that special weariness reserved for people temporarily stuck in West Overalls. And who else cared for Willa? If she dropped out of sight in the High Plains,

who besides David Sanderson would spare a thought? There was even some active dislike for her. That bitch Ursula Davis had told him once that if Willa's mother had left the *a* off the end of her name, "it would have been just about perfect."

"I'm going to town and look for her," he said.

Henry sighed. "Son, that's very foolish."

"We can't be married in San Francisco if she gets left behind in Crowheart Springs," he said, trying to make a joke of it.

Dudley was walking by. David didn't know if Dudley was the man's first or last name, only that he was an executive with Staples office supply and had been on his way to Missoula for some sort of regional meeting. He was ordinarily very quiet, so the donkey heehaw of laughter he expelled into the growing shadows was beyond surprising; it was shocking. "If the train comes and you miss it," he said, "you can hunt up a justice of the peace and get married right here. When you get back east, tell all your friends you had a real Western shotgun wedding. Yeehaw, partner."

"Don't do this," Henry said. "We won't be here much longer."

"So I should leave her? That's nuts."

He walked on before Lander or his wife could reply. Georgia Andreeson was sitting on a nearby bench and watching her daughter caper up and down the dirty tile floor in her red traveling dress. Pammy Andreeson never seemed to get tired. David tried to remember if he had seen her asleep since the train derailed at the Wind River junction point and they had wound up here like someone's forgotten package in the dead letter office. Once, maybe, with her head in her mother's lap. But that might be a false memory, created out of his belief that five-year-olds were supposed to sleep a lot.

Pammy hopped from tile to tile, a prank in motion, seeming to use the squares as a giant hopscotch board. Her red dress jumped around her plump knees. "I knew a man, his name was Danny," she chanted in a monotonous one-note holler. It made David's fillings ache. "He tripped and fell, on his fanny. I knew a man, his name was David. He tripped and fell, on his bavid." She giggled and pointed at David.

"Pammy, stop," Georgia Andreeson said. She smiled at David and brushed her hair from the side of her face. He thought the gesture unutterably weary,

and thought she had a long road ahead with the high-spirited Pammy, especially with no Mr. Andreeson in evidence.

“Did you see Willa?” he asked.

“Gone,” she said, and pointed to the door with the sign over it reading TO SHUTTLE, TO TAXIS, CALL AHEAD FROM COURTESY PHONE FOR HOTEL VACANCIES.

Here was Biggers, limping toward him. “I’d avoid the great outdoors, unless armed with a high-powered rifle. There are wolves. I’ve seen them.”

“I knew a girl, her name was Willa,” Pammy chanted. “She had a headache, and took a pilla.” She collapsed to the floor, shouting with laughter.

Biggers, the salesman, hadn’t waited for a reply. He was limping back down the length of the station. His shadow grew long, shortened in the glow of the hanging fluorescents, then grew long again.

Phil Palmer was leaning in the doorway beneath the sign about the shuttle and the taxis. He was a retired insurance man. He and his wife were on their way to Portland. The plan was to stay with their oldest son and his wife for a while, but Palmer had confided to David and Willa that Helen would probably never be coming back east. She had cancer as well as Alzheimer’s. Willa called it a twofer. When David told her that was a little cruel, Willa had looked at him, started to say something, and then had only shaken her head.

Now Palmer asked, as he always did: “Hey, mutt—got a butt?”

To which David answered, as he always did: “I don’t smoke, Mr. Palmer.”

And Palmer finished: “Just testing you, kiddo.”

As David stepped out onto the concrete platform where detraining passengers waited for the shuttle to Crowheart Springs, Palmer frowned. “Not a good idea, my young friend.”

Something—it might have been a large dog but probably wasn’t—lifted a howl from the other side of the railway station, where the sage and broom grew almost up to the tracks. A second voice joined it, creating harmony. They trailed off together.

“See what I mean, jellybean?” And Palmer smiled as if he’d conjured those howls just to prove his point.

David turned, his light jacket rippling around him in the keen breeze, and started down the steps. He went fast, before he could change his mind, and only the first step was really hard. After that he just thought about Willa.

“David,” Palmer said, not joshing now, not joking around. “Don’t.”

“Why not? She did. Besides, the wolves are over there.” He jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. “If that’s what they are.”

“Course that’s what they are. And no, they probably won’t come at you—I doubt if they’re specially hungry this time of year. But there’s no need for both of you to spend another God-knows-how-long in the middle of nowhere just because she got to missing the bright lights.”

“You don’t seem to understand—she’s my girl.”

“I’m going to tell you a hard truth, my friend: If she really considered herself your girl, she wouldn’t have done what she did. You think?”

At first David said nothing, because he wasn’t sure what he thought. Possibly because he often didn’t see what was right in front of his eyes. Willa had said so. Finally he turned back to look at Phil Palmer leaning in the doorway above him. “I think you don’t leave your fiancée stranded in the middle of nowhere. That’s what I think.”

Palmer sighed. “I almost hope one of those trash-pine lobos does decide to put the bite on your city ass. It might smarten you up. Little Willa Stuart cares for nobody but herself, and everyone sees it but you.”

“If I pass a Nite Owl store or a 7-Eleven, you want me to pick you up a pack of cigarettes?”

“Why the fuck not?” Palmer said. Then, just as David was walking across NO PARKING TAXI ZONE painted on the empty curbless street: “David!”

David turned back.

“The shuttle won’t be back until tomorrow, and it’s three miles to town. Says so, right on the back wall of the information booth. That’s six miles, round-trip. On foot. Take you two hours, and that’s not counting the time it might take you to track her down.”

David raised his hand to indicate he heard, but kept going. The wind was off the mountains, and cold, but he liked the way it rippled his clothes and combed back his hair. At first he watched for wolves, scanning one side of the road and then the other, but when he saw none, his thoughts returned to Willa. And really, his mind had been fixed on little else since the second or third time he had been with her.

She'd gotten to missing the bright lights; Palmer was almost certainly right about that much, but David didn't believe she cared for nobody but herself. The truth was she'd just gotten tired of waiting around with a bunch of sad old sacks moaning about how they were going to be late for this, that, and the other. The town over yonder probably didn't amount to much, but in her mind it must have held some possibility for fun, and that had outweighed the possibility of Amtrak sending a special to pick them up while she was gone.

And where, exactly, would she have gone looking for fun?

He was sure there were no what you'd call nightclubs in Crowheart Springs, where the passenger station was just a long green shed with WYOMING and "THE EQUALITY STATE" painted on the side in red, white, and blue. No nightclubs, no discos, but there were undoubtedly bars, and he thought she'd settle for one of those. If she couldn't go clubbin', she'd go jukin'.

Night came on and the stars unrolled across the sky from east to west like a rug with spangles in it. A half-moon rose between two peaks and sat there, casting a sickroom glow over this stretch of the highway and the open land on both sides of it. The wind whistled beneath the eaves of the station, but out here it made a strange open humming that was not quite a vibration. It made him think of Pammy Andreeson's hopscotch chant.

He walked listening for the sound of an oncoming train behind him. He didn't hear that; what he heard when the wind dropped was a minute but perfectly audible click-click-click. He turned and saw a wolf standing about twenty paces behind him on the broken passing line of Route 26. It was almost as big as a calf, its coat as shaggy as a Russian hat. In the starshine its fur looked black, its eyes a dark urine yellow. It saw David looking and stopped. Its mouth dropped open in a grin, and it began to pant, the sound of a small engine.

There was no time to be afraid. He took a step toward it, clapped his hands, and shouted, "Get out of here! Go on, now!"

The wolf turned tail and fled, leaving a pile of steaming droppings behind on Route 26. David grinned but managed to keep from laughing out loud; he thought that would be tempting the gods. He felt both scared and absurdly, totally cool. He thought of changing his name from David Sanderson to Wolf Frightener. That would be quite the name for an investment banker.

Then he did laugh a little—he couldn't help it—and turned toward Crowheart Springs again. This time he walked looking over his shoulder as well as from side to side, but the wolf didn't come back. What came was a certainty that he would hear the shriek of the special coming to pick up the others; the part of their train that was still on the tracks would have been cleared away from the junction, and soon the people waiting in the station back there would be on their way again—the Palmers, the Landers, the limping Biggers, the dancing Pammy, and all the rest.

Well, so what? Amtrak would hold their luggage in San Francisco; surely they could be trusted to get that much right. He and Willa could find the local bus station. Greyhound must have discovered Wyoming.

He came upon a Budweiser can and kicked it awhile. Then he kicked it crooked, off into the scrub, and as he was debating whether or not to go after it, he heard faint music: a bass line and the cry of a pedal steel guitar, which always sounded to him like chrome teardrops. Even in happy songs.

She was there, listening to that music. Not because it was the closest place with music, but because it was the right place. He knew it. So he left the beer can and walked on toward the pedal steel, his sneakers scuffing up dust that the wind whipped away. The sound of the drum kit came next, then a red neon arrow below a sign that just read 26. Well, why not? This was Route 26, after all. It was a perfectly logical name for a honky-tonk.

It had two parking lots, the one in front paved and packed with pickup trucks and cars, most American and most at least five years old. The lot on the left was gravel. In that one, ranks of long-haul semis stood under brilliant blue-white arc sodiums. By now David could also hear the rhythm and lead guitars, and read the marquee over the door: ONE NIGHT ONLY THE DERAILERS \$5 COVER SORRY.

The Derailers, he thought. Well, she certainly found the right group.

David had a five in his wallet, but the foyer of 26 was empty. Beyond it, a big hardwood dance floor was crammed with slow-dancing couples, most wearing jeans and cowboy boots and clutching each other's butts as the band worked its way deeper into "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights." It was loud, lachrymose, and—as far as David Sanderson could tell—note perfect. The smells of beer, sweat, Brut, and Wal-Mart perfume hit him like a punch in the

nose. The laughter and conversation—even a footloose yeehaw cry from the far side of the dance floor—were like sounds heard in a dream you have again and again at certain critical turns of life: the dream of being unprepared for a big exam, the dream of being naked in public, the dream of falling, the dream in which you hurry toward a corner in some strange city, sure your fate lies on the far side.

David considered putting his five back in his wallet, then leaned into the ticket booth and dropped it on the desk in there, which was bare except for a pack of Lucky Strikes sitting on a Danielle Steel paperback. Then he went into the crowded main room.

The Derailers swung their way into something upbeat and the younger dancers began to pogo like kids at a punk show. To David's left, two dozen or so older couples began a pair of line dances. He looked again and realized there was only one line-dancing group, after all. The far wall was a mirror, making the dance floor look twice as big as it really was.

A glass shattered. "You pay, partner!" the lead singer called as The Derailers hit the instrumental break, and the dancers applauded his wit, which probably seemed fairly sparkling, David thought, if you were running hot on the tequila highway.

The bar was a horseshoe with a neon replica of the Wind River Range floating overhead. It was red, white, and blue; in Wyoming, they did seem to love their red, white, and blue. A neon sign in similar colors proclaimed YOU ARE IN GOD'S COUNTRY PARTNER. It was flanked by the Budweiser logo on the left and the Coors logo on the right. The crowd waiting to be served was four-deep. A trio of bartenders in white shirts and red vests flashed cocktail shakers like six-guns.

It was a barn of a place—there had to be five hundred people whooping it up—but he had no concerns about finding Willa. My mojo's working, he thought as he cut a corner of the dance floor, almost dancing himself as he avoided various gyrating cowboys and cowgirls.

Beyond the bar and the dance floor was a dark little lounge with high-backed booths. Quartets were crammed into most of these, usually with a pitcher or two for sustenance, their reflections in the mirrored wall turning each party of four into eight. Only one of the booths wasn't full up. Willa sat

by herself, her high-necked flower-print dress looking out of place among the Levi's, denim skirts, and pearl-button shirts. Nor had she bought herself a drink or anything to eat—the table was bare.

She didn't see him at first. She was watching the dancers. Her color was high, and there were deep dimples at the corners of her mouth. She looked nine miles out of place, but he had never loved her more. This was Willa on the edge of a smile.

"Hi, David," she said as he slid in beside her. "I was hoping you'd come. I thought you would. Isn't the band great? They're so loud!" She almost had to yell to be heard, but he could see she liked that, too. And after her initial glance at him, she went back to looking at the dancers.

"They're good, all right," he said. They were, too. He could feel himself responding in spite of his anxiety, which had returned. Now that he'd actually found her, he was worried all over again about missing that damned pick-up train. "The lead singer sounds like Buck Owens."

"Does he?" She looked at him, smiling. "Who's Buck Owens?"

"It doesn't matter. We ought to go back to the station. Unless you want to be stranded here another day, that is."

"That might not be so bad. I kind of like this pla—whoa, look out!"

A glass arched across the dance floor, sparkling briefly green and gold in the stage gels, and shattered somewhere out of sight. There were cheers and some applause—Willa was also applauding—but David saw a couple of beefcakes with the words SECURITY and SERENITY printed on their T-shirts moving in on the approximate site of the missile launch.

"This is the kind of place where you can count on four fistfights in the parking lot before eleven," David said, "and often one free-for-all inside just before last call."

She laughed, pointed her forefingers at him like guns. "Good! I want to see!"

"And I want us to go back," he said. "If you want to go honky-tonking in San Francisco, I'll take you. It's a promise."

She stuck out her lower lip and shook back her sandy-blond hair. "It wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't, and you know it. In San Francisco they probably drink. . . I don't know . . . macrobiotic beer."

That made him laugh. As with the idea of an investment banker named Wolf Frightener, the idea of macrobiotic beer was just too rich. But the anxiety was there, under the laughter; in fact, wasn't it fueling the laughter?

"We're gonna take a short break and be right back," the lead singer said, wiping his brow. "Y'all drink up, now, and remember—I'm Tony Villanueva, and we are The Derailers."

"That's our cue to put on our diamond shoes and depart," David said, and took her hand. He slid out of the booth, but she didn't come. She didn't let go of his hand, either, though, and he sat down again feeling a touch of panic. Thinking he now knew how a fish felt when it realized it couldn't throw the hook, that old hook was in good and tight and Mr. Trout was bound for the bank, where he would flop his final flop. She was looking at him with those same killer blue eyes and deep dimples: Willa on the edge of a smile, his wife-to-be, who read novels in the morning and poetry at night and thought the TV news was . . . what did she call it? Ephemera.

"Look at us," she said, and turned her head away from him.

He looked at the mirrored wall on their left. There he saw a nice young couple from the East Coast, stranded in Wyoming. In her print dress she looked better than he did, but he guessed that was always going to be the case. He looked from the mirror-Willa to the real thing with his eyebrows raised.

"No, look again," she said. The dimples were still there, but she was serious now—as serious as she could be in this party atmosphere, anyway. "And think about what I told you."

It was on his lips to say, You've told me many things, and I think about all of them, but that was a lover's reply, pretty and essentially meaningless. And because he knew what thing she meant, he looked again without saying anything. This time he really looked, and there was no one in the mirror. He was looking at the only empty booth in 26. He turned to Willa, flabbergasted . . . yet somehow not surprised.

"Didn't you even wonder how a presentable female could be sitting here all by herself when the place is juiced and jumping?" she asked.

He shook his head. He hadn't. There were quite a few things he hadn't wondered, at least until now. When he'd last had something to eat or drink, for instance. Or what time it was, or when it had last been daylight. He didn't

even know exactly what had happened to them. Only that the Northern Flyer had left the tracks and now they were by some coincidence here listening to a country-western group called—

“I kicked a can,” he said. “Coming here I kicked a can.”

“Yes,” she said, “and you saw us in the mirror the first time you looked, didn’t you? Perception isn’t everything, but perception and expectation together?” She winked, then leaned toward him. Her breast pressed against his upper arm as she kissed his cheek, and the sensation was lovely—surely the feel of living flesh. “Poor David. I’m sorry. But you were brave to come. I really didn’t think you would, that’s the truth.”

“We need to go back and tell the others.”

Her lips pressed together. “Why?”

“Because—”

Two men in cowboy hats led two laughing women in jeans, Western shirts, and ponytails toward their booth. As they neared it, an identical expression of puzzlement—not quite fear—touched their faces, and they headed back toward the bar instead. They feel us, David thought. Like cold air pushing them away—that’s what we are now.

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

Willa laughed. It was a weary sound. “You remind me of the old guy who used to sell the oatmeal on TV.”

“Hon, they think they’re waiting for a train to come and pick them up!”

“Well, maybe there is!” He was almost frightened by her sudden ferocity. “Maybe the one they’re always singing about, the gospel train, the train to glory, the one that don’t carry no gamblers or midnight rambles . . . .”

“I don’t think Amtrak runs to heaven,” David said. He was hoping to make her laugh, but she looked down at her hands almost sullenly, and he had a sudden intuition. “Is there something else you know? Something we should tell them? There is, isn’t there?”

“I don’t know why we should bother when we can just stay here,” she said, and was that petulance in her voice? He thought it was. This was a Willa he had never even suspected. “You may be a little nearsighted, David, but at least you came. I love you for that.” And she kissed him again.

“There was a wolf, too,” he said. “I clapped my hands and scared it off. I’m thinking of changing my name to Wolf Frightener.”

She stared at him for a moment with her mouth open, and David had time to think: I had to wait until we were dead to really surprise the woman I love. Then she dropped against the padded back of the booth, roaring with laughter. A waitress who happened to be passing dropped a full tray of beers with a crash and swore colorfully.

“Wolf Frightener!” Willa cried. “I want to call you that in bed! ‘Oh, oh, Wolf Frightener, you so big! You so hairy!’”

The waitress was staring down at the foaming mess, still cursing like a sailor on shore leave. All the while keeping well away from that one empty booth.

David said, “Do you think we still can? Make love, I mean?”

Willa wiped at her streaming eyes and said, “Perception and expectation, remember? Together they can move mountains.” She took his hand again. “I still love you, and you still love me. Don’t you?”

“Am I not Wolf Frightener?” he asked. He could joke, because his nerves didn’t believe he was dead. He looked past her, into the mirror, and saw them. Then just himself, his hand holding nothing. Then they were both gone. And still . . . he breathed, he smelled beer and whiskey and perfume.

A busboy had come from somewhere and was helping the waitress mop up the mess. “Felt like I stepped down,” David heard her saying. Was that the kind of thing you heard in the afterlife?

“I guess I’ll go back with you,” she said, “but I’m not staying in that boring station with those boring people when this place is around.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Who’s Buck Owens?”

“I’ll tell you all about him,” David said. “Roy Clark, too. But first tell me what else you know.”

“Most of them I don’t even care about,” she said, “but Henry Lander’s nice. So’s his wife.”

“Phil Palmer’s not bad, either.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Phil the Pill.”

“What do you know, Willa?”

“You’ll see for yourself, if you really look.”

“Wouldn’t it be simpler if you just—”

Apparently not. She rose until her thighs pressed against the edge of the table, and pointed. “Look! The band is coming back!”

• • •

The moon was high when he and Willa walked back to the road, holding hands. David didn’t see how that could be—they had stayed for only the first two songs of the next set—but there it was, floating all the way up there in the spangled black. That was troubling, but something else troubled him even more.

“Willa,” he said, “what year is it?”

She thought it over. The wind rippled her dress as it would the dress of any live woman. “I don’t exactly remember,” she said at last. “Isn’t that odd?”

“Considering I can’t remember the last time I ate a meal or drank a glass of water? Not too odd. If you had to guess, what would you say? Quick, without thinking.”

“Nineteen . . . eighty-eight?”

He nodded. He would have said 1987 himself. “There was a girl in there wearing a T-shirt that said CROWHEART SPRINGS HIGH SCHOOL, CLASS OF ’03. And if she was old enough to be in a roadhouse—”

“Then ’03 must have been at least three years ago.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” He stopped. “It can’t be 2006, Willa, can it? I mean, the twenty-first century?”

Before she could reply, they heard the click-click-click of toenails on asphalt. This time more than just one set; this time there were four wolves behind them on the highway. The biggest, standing in front of the others, was the one that had come up behind David on his walk toward Crowheart Springs. He would have known that shaggy black pelt anywhere. Its eyes were brighter now. A half-moon floated in each like a drowned lamp.

“They see us!” Willa cried in a kind of ecstasy. “David, they see us!” She dropped to one knee on a white dash of the broken passing line and held out her right hand. She made a clucking noise and said, “Here, boy! Come on!”

“Willa, I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

She paid no attention, a very Willa thing to do. Willa had her own ideas about things. It was she who had wanted to go from Chicago to San Francisco by rail—because, she said, she wanted to know what it felt like to fuck on a train. Especially one that was going fast and rocking a little.

“Come on, big boy, come to your mama!”

The big lobo came, trailed by its mate and their two . . . did you call them yearlings? As it stretched its muzzle (and all those shining teeth) toward the slim outstretched hand, the moon filled its eyes perfectly for a moment, turning them silver. Then, just before its long snout could touch her skin, the wolf uttered a series of piercing yips and flung itself backward so sharply that for a moment it rose on its rear legs, front paws boxing the air and the white plush on its belly exposed. The others scattered. The big lobo executed a midair twist and ran into the scrubland to the right of the road, still yipping, with his tail tucked. The rest followed.

Willa rose and looked at David with an expression of hard grief that was too much to bear. He dropped his eyes to his feet instead. “Is this why you brought me out into the dark when I was listening to music?” she asked. “To show me what I am now? As if I didn’t know!”

“Willa, I’m sorry.”

“Not yet, but you will be.” She took his hand again. “Come on, David.”

Now he risked a glance. “You’re not mad at me?”

“Oh, a little—but you’re all I’ve got now, and I’m not letting you go.”

Shortly after seeing the wolves, David spied a Budweiser can lying on the shoulder of the road. He was almost positive it was the one he had kicked along ahead of him until he’d kicked it crooked, out into the sage. Here it was again, in its original position . . . because he had never kicked it at all, of course. Perception isn’t everything, Willa had said, but perception and expectation together? Put them together and you had a Reese’s peanut butter cup of the mind.

He kicked the can out into the scrubland, and when they were past that spot, he looked back and there it lay, right where it had been since some cowboy—maybe on his way to 26—had chucked it from the window of his pickup truck. He remembered that on *Hee Haw*—that old show starring Buck Owens and Roy Clark—they used to call pickup trucks cowboy Cadillacs.

“What are you smiling about?” Willa asked him.

“Tell you later. Looks like we’re going to have plenty of time.”

• • •

They stood outside the Crowheart Springs railway station, holding hands in the moonlight like Hansel and Gretel outside the candy house. To David the long building’s green paint looked ashy gray in the moonlight, and although he knew WYOMING and “THE EQUALITY STATE” were printed in red, white, and blue, they could have been any colors at all. He noticed a sheet of paper, protected from the elements by plastic, stapled to one of the posts flanking the wide steps leading up to the double doors. Phil Palmer still leaned there.

“Hey, mutt!” Palmer called down. “Got a butt?”

“Sorry, Mr. Palmer,” David said.

“Thought you were going to bring me back a pack.”

“I didn’t pass a store,” David said.

“They didn’t sell cigarettes where you were, doll?” Palmer asked. He was the kind of man who called all women of a certain age doll; you knew that just looking at him, as you knew that if you happened to pass the time of day with him on a steamy August afternoon, he’d tip his hat back on his head to wipe his brow and tell you it wasn’t the heat, it was the humidity.

“I’m sure they did,” Willa said, “but I would have had trouble buying them.”

“Want to tell me why, sugarpie?”

“Why do you think?”

But Palmer crossed his arms over his narrow chest and said nothing. From somewhere inside, his wife cried, “We got fish for supper! First one t’ing an’ den anudder! I hate the smell of this place! Crackers!”

“We’re dead, Phil,” David said. “That’s why. Ghosts can’t buy cigarettes.”

Palmer looked at him for several seconds, and before he laughed, David saw that Palmer more than believed him: Palmer had known all along. “I’ve heard plenty of reasons for not bringing someone what he asked for,” he said, “but I have to think that takes the prize.”

“Phil—”

From inside: “Fish for supper! Oh, gah-dammit!”

“Excuse me, kiddies,” Palmer said. “Duty calls.” And he was gone. David turned to Willa, thinking she’d ask him what else he had expected, but Willa was looking at the notice posted beside the stairs.

“Look at that,” she said. “Tell me what you see.”

At first he saw nothing, because the moon was shining on the protective plastic. He took a step closer, then one to the left, moving Willa aside to do it.

“At the top it says NO SOLICITING BY ORDER OF SUBLETTE COUNTY SHERIFF, then some fine print—blah-blah-blah—and at the bottom—”

She gave him an elbow. Not gently, either. “Stop shitting around and look at it, David. I don’t want to be here all night.”

*You don’t see what’s right in front of your eyes.*

He turned away from the station and stared at the railroad tracks shining in the moonlight. Beyond them was a thick white neck of stone with a flat top—that thar’s a mesa, pardner, jest like in them old John Ford movies.

He looked back at the posted notice, and wondered how he ever could have mistaken TRESPASSING for SOLICITING, a big bad investment banker like Wolf Frightener Sanderson.

“It says NO TRESPASSING BY ORDER OF SUBLETTE COUNTY SHERIFF,” he said.

“Very good. And under the blah-blah-blah, what about there?”

At first he couldn’t read the two lines at the bottom at all; at first those two lines were just incomprehensible symbols, possibly because his mind, which wanted to believe none of this, could find no innocuous translation. So he looked away to the railroad tracks once more and wasn’t exactly surprised to see that they no longer gleamed in the moonlight; now the steel was rusty, and weeds were growing between the ties. When he looked back again, the railway station was a slumped derelict with its windows boarded up and most of the shingles on its roof gone. NO PARKING TAXI ZONE had disappeared from the asphalt, which was crumbling and full of potholes. He could still read WYOMING and “THE EQUALITY STATE” on the side of the building, but now the words were ghosts. Like us, he thought.

“Go on,” Willa said—Willa, who had her own ideas about things, Willa who saw what was in front of her eyes and wanted you to see too, even when

seeing was cruel. “That’s your final exam. Read those two lines at the bottom and then we can get this show on the road.”

He sighed. “It says THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED. And then DEMOLITION SCHEDULED IN JUNE 2007.”

“You get an A. Now let’s go see if anyone else wants to go to town and hear The Derailers. I’ll tell Palmer to look on the bright side—we can’t buy cigarettes, but for people like us there’s never a cover charge.”

• • •

Only nobody wanted to go to town.

“What does she mean, we’re dead? Why does she want to say an awful thing like that?” Ruth Lander asked David, and what killed him (so to speak) wasn’t the reproach in her voice but the look in her eyes before she pressed her face against the shoulder of Henry’s corduroy jacket. Because she knew too.

“Ruth,” he said, “I’m not telling you this to upset you—”

“Then stop!” she cried, her voice muffled.

David saw that all of them but Helen Palmer were looking at him with anger and hostility. Helen was nodding and muttering between her husband and the Rhinehart woman, whose first name was probably Sally. They were standing under the fluorescents in little groups . . . only when he blinked, the fluorescents were gone. Then the stranded passengers were just dim figures standing in the shattered moonlight that managed to find its way in through the boarded-up windows. The Landers weren’t sitting on a bench; they were sitting on a dusty floor near a little cluster of empty crack vials—yes, it seemed that crack had managed to find its way even out here to John Ford country—and there was a faded circle on one wall not far from the corner where Helen Palmer squatted and muttered. Then David blinked again and the fluorescents were back. So was the big clock, hiding that faded circle.

Henry Lander said, “Think you better go along now, David.”

“Listen a minute, Henry,” Willa said.

Henry switched his gaze to her, and David had no trouble reading the distaste that was there. Any liking Henry might once have had for Willa Stuart was gone now.

“I don’t want to listen,” Henry said. “You’re upsetting my wife.”

“Yeah,” a fat young man in a Seattle Mariners cap said. David thought his name was O’Casey. Something Irish with an apostrophe in it, anyway. “Zip it, baby girl!”

Willa bent toward Henry, and Henry recoiled from her slightly, as if her breath were bad. “The only reason I let David drag me back here is because they are going to demolish this place! Can you say wrecking ball, Henry? Surely you’re bright enough to get your head around that concept.”

“Make her stop!” Ruth cried, her voice muffled.

Willa leaned even closer, eyes bright in her narrow, pretty face. “And when the wrecking ball leaves and the dump trucks haul away the crap that used to be this railway station—this old railway station—where will you be?”

“Leave us alone, please,” Henry said.

“Henry—as the chorus girl said to the archbishop, denial is not a river in Egypt.”

Ursula Davis, who had disliked Willa from the first, stepped forward, leading with her chin. “Fuck off, you troublesome bitch.”

Willa swung around. “Don’t any of you get it? You’re dead, we’re all dead, and the longer you stay in one place, the harder it’s going to be to ever go anywhere else!”

“She’s right,” David said.

“Yeah, and if she said the moon was cheese, you’d say provolone,” Ursula said. She was a tall, forbiddingly handsome woman of about forty. “Pardon my French, but she’s got you so pussy-whipped it isn’t funny.”

Dudley let out that startling donkey bray again, and the Rhinehart woman began to snifle.

“You’re upsetting the passengers, you two.” This was Rattner, the little conductor with the apologetic face. He hardly ever spoke. David blinked, the station lensed dark and moonlit again for another moment, and he saw that half of Rattner’s head was gone. The rest of his face had been burned black.

“They’re going to demolish this place and you’ll have nowhere to go!” Willa cried. “Fucking . . . nowhere!” She dashed angry tears from her cheeks with both fists. “Why don’t you come to town with us? We’ll show you the way. At least there are people . . . and lights . . . and music.”

“Mumma, I want to hear some music,” Pammy Andreeson said.

“Hush,” her mother said.

“If we were dead, we’d know it,” Biggers said.

“He’s got you there, son,” Dudley said, and dropped David a wink. “What happened to us? How did we get dead?”

“I . . . don’t know,” David said. He looked at Willa. Willa shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

“You see?” Rattner said. “It was a derailment. Happens . . . well, I was going to say all the time, but that’s not true, even out here where the rail system needs a fair amount of work, but every now and then, at one of the junction points—”

“We faw down,” Pammy Andreeson said. David looked at her, really looked, and for a moment saw a corpse, burned bald, in a rotting rag of a dress. “Down and down and down. Then—” She made a growling, rattling sound in her throat, put her small, grimy hands together, and tossed them apart: every child’s sign language for explosion.

She seemed about to say something more, but before she could, her mother suddenly slapped her across the face hard enough to expose her teeth in a momentary sneer and drive spit from the corner of her mouth. Pammy stared up for a moment in shocked disbelief, then broke into a strident, one-note wail even more painful than her hopscotch chant.

“What do we know about lying, Pamela?” Georgia Andreeson yelled, grabbing the child by her upper arm. Her fingers sank in almost out of sight.

“She’s not lying!” Willa said. “We went off the tracks and into the gorge! Now I remember, and you do too! Don’t you? Don’t you? It’s on your face! It’s on your fucking face!”

Without looking in her direction, Georgia Andreeson flipped Willa the bird. Her other hand shook Pammy back and forth. David saw a child flop in one direction, a charred corpse in the other. What had caught fire? Now he remembered the drop, but what had caught fire? He didn’t remember, perhaps because he didn’t want to remember.

“What do we know about lying?” Georgia Andreeson shouted.

“It’s wrong, Mama!” the child blubbered.

The woman dragged her off into the darkness, the child still screaming that one monotonous note.

There was a moment of silence in their wake—all of them listening to Pammy being dragged into exile—and then Willa turned to David. “Had enough?”

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Don’t let the doorknob hitcha where the good Lord splitcha!” Biggers advised, madly exuberant, and Dudley yodeled laughter.

David let Willa lead him toward the double doors, where Phil was leaning just inside, his arms still crossed on his chest. Then David pulled free of Willa’s hand and went to Helen Palmer sitting in the corner, rocking back and forth. She looked up at him with dark, bewildered eyes. “We got fish for supper,” she said in what was little more than a whisper.

“I don’t know about that,” he said, “but you were right about the smell of the place. Old dirty crackers.” He looked back and saw the rest of them staring at him and Willa in the moonlit dimness that could be fluorescent light if you wanted it to be badly enough. “It’s the smell places get when they’ve been closed up a long time, I guess,” he said.

“Better buzz, cuz,” Phil Palmer said. “No one wants to buy what you’re selling.”

“Don’t I know it,” David said, and followed Willa into the moonlit dark. Behind him, like a rueful whisper of wind, he heard Helen Palmer say, “First one t’ing an’ den anudder.”

• • •

The miles back to 26 made their score nine for the night, but David wasn’t a bit tired. He supposed ghosts didn’t get tired, just as they didn’t get hungry or thirsty. Besides, it was a different night. The moon was full now, shining like a silver dollar high in the sky, and 26’s front parking lot was empty. In the gravel lot around to the side, a few semis stood silent, and one rumbled sleepily with its running lights glowing. The marquee sign now read: COMING THIS WEEKEND THE NIGHTHAWKS BRING YOUR HONEY SPEND YOUR MONEY.

“That’s cute,” Willa said. “Will you bring me, Wolf Frightener? Am I not your honey?”

“You are and I will,” David said. “The question is what do we do now? Because the honky-tonk is closed.”

“We go in anyway, of course,” she said.

“It’ll be locked up.”

“Not if we don’t want it to be. Perception, remember? Perception and expectation.”

He remembered, and when he tried the door, it opened. The barroom smells were still there, now mixed with the pleasant odor of some pine-scented cleaner. The stage was empty and the stools were on the bar with their legs sticking up, but the neon replica of the Wind River Range was still on, either because the management left it that way after closing or because that was the way he and Willa wanted it. That seemed more likely. The dance floor seemed very big now that it was empty, especially with the mirror wall to double it. The neon mountains shimmered upside down in its polished depths.

Willa breathed deep. “I smell beer and perfume,” she said. “A hot rod smell. It’s lovely.”

“You’re lovely,” he said.

She turned to him. “Then kiss me, cowboy.”

He kissed her there on the edge of the dance floor, and judging by what he was feeling, lovemaking wasn’t out of the question. Not at all.

She kissed both corners of his mouth, then stepped back. “Put a quarter in the jukebox, would you? I want to dance.”

David went over to the juke at the end of the bar, dropped a quarter, and played D19—“Wasted Days and Wasted Nights,” the Freddy Fender version. Out in the parking lot, Chester Dawson, who had decided to lay over here a few hours before resuming his journey to Seattle with a load of electronics, raised his head, thinking he heard music, decided it was part of a dream he’d been having, and went back to sleep.

David and Willa moved slowly around the empty floor, sometimes reflected in the mirror wall and sometimes not.

“Willa—”

“Hush a little, David. Baby wants to dance.”

David hushed. He put his face in her hair and let the music take him. He thought they would stay here now, and that from time to time people would see them. 26 might even get a reputation for being haunted, but probably not; people didn't think of ghosts much while they were drinking, unless they were drinking alone. Sometimes when they were closing up, the bartender and the last waitress (the one with the most seniority, the one responsible for splitting the tips) might have an uneasy sense of being watched. Sometimes they'd hear music even after the music had stopped, or catch movement in the mirror next to the dance floor or the one in the lounge. Usually just from the tail of the eye. David thought they could have finished up in better places, but on the whole, 26 wasn't bad. Until closing there were people. And there would always be music.

He did wonder what would become of the others when the wrecking ball tore apart their illusion—and it would. Soon. He thought of Phil Palmer trying to shield his terrified, howling wife from falling debris that couldn't hurt her because she was not, properly speaking, even there. He thought of Pammy Andreeson cowering in her shrieking mother's arms. Rattner, the soft-spoken conductor, saying, Just be calm, folks, in a voice that couldn't be heard over the roar of the big yellow machines. He thought of the book salesman, Biggers, trying to run away on his bad leg, lurching and finally falling while the wrecking ball swung and the dozers snarled and bit and the world came down.

He liked to think their train would come before then—that their combined expectation would make it come—but he didn't really believe it. He even considered the idea that the shock might extinguish them and they'd simply whiff out like candle flames in a strong gust of wind, but he didn't believe that, either. He could see them too clearly after the bulldozers and dump trucks and back-end loaders were gone, standing by the rusty disused railway tracks in the moonlight while a wind blew down from the foothills, whining around the mesa and beating at the broomgrass. He could see them huddled together under a billion High Country stars, still waiting for their train.

“Are you cold?” Willa asked him.

“No—why?”

“You shivered.”

“Maybe a goose walked over my grave,” he said. He closed his eyes, and they danced together on the empty floor. Sometimes they were in the mirror, and when they slipped from view there was only a country song playing in an empty room lit by a neon mountain range.

# The Gingerbread Girl

– 1 –

## **Only fast running would do.**

After the baby died, Emily took up running. At first it was just down to the end of the driveway, where she would stand bent over with her hands clutching her legs just above the knees, then to the end of the block, then all the way to Kozy's Qwik-Pik at the bottom of the hill. There she would pick up bread or margarine, maybe a Ho Ho or a Ring Ding if she could think of nothing else. At first she only walked back, but later she ran that way, too. Eventually she gave up the snack foods. It was surprisingly hard to do. She hadn't realized that sugar eased grief. Or maybe the snacks had become a fetish. Either way, in the end the Ho Hos had to go go. And did. Running was enough. Henry called the *running* a fetish, and she supposed he was right.

"What does Dr. Steiner say about it?" he asked.

"Dr. Steiner says run your ass off, get those endorphins going." She hadn't mentioned the running to Susan Steiner, hadn't even seen her since Amy's funeral. "She says she'll put it on a prescription pad, if you want."

Emily had always been able to bluff Henry. Even after Amy died. *We can have another one*, she had said, sitting beside him on the bed as he lay there with his ankles crossed and tears streaming down the sides of his face.

It eased him and that was good, but there was never going to be another baby, with the attendant risk of finding said infant gray and still in its crib. Never again the fruitless CPR, or the screaming 911 call with the operator saying *Lower your voice, ma'am, I can't understand you*. But Henry didn't need to know that, and she was willing to comfort him, at least at the start. She believed that comfort, not bread, was the staff of life. Maybe eventually she

would be able to find some for herself. In the meantime, she had produced a defective baby. That was the point. She would not risk another.

Then she started getting headaches. Real blinders. So she *did* go to a doctor, but it was Dr. Mendez, their general practitioner, not Susan Steiner. Mendez gave her a prescription for some stuff called Zomig. She took the bus to the family practice where Mendez hung out, then ran to the drugstore to get the scrip filled. After that she jogged home—it was two miles—and by the time she got there, she had what felt like a steel fork planted high up in her side, between the top of her ribs and her armpit. She didn't let it concern her. That was pain that would go away. Besides, she was exhausted and felt as if she could sleep for a while.

She did—all afternoon. On the same bed where Amy had been made and Henry had cried. When she woke up, she could see ghostly circles floating in the air, a sure sign that she was getting one of what she liked to call Em's Famous Headaches. She took one of her new pills, and to her surprise—almost shock—the headache turned tail and slunk away. First to the back of her head, then gone. She thought there ought to be a pill like that for the death of a child.

She thought she needed to explore the limits of her endurance, and she suspected the exploration would be a long one. There was a JuCo with a cinder track not too far from the house. She began to drive over there in the early mornings just after Henry left for work. Henry didn't understand the running. Jogging, sure—lots of women jogged. Keep those extra four pounds off the old fanny, keep those extra two inches off the old waistline. But Em didn't have an extra four pounds on her backside, and besides, jogging was no longer enough. She had to run, and fast. Only fast running would do.

She parked at the track and ran until she could run no more, until her sleeveless FSU sweatshirt was dark with sweat down the front and back and she was shambling and sometimes puking with exhaustion.

Henry found out. Someone saw her there, running all by herself at eight in the morning, and told him. They had a discussion about it. The discussion escalated into a marriage-ending argument.

“It's a hobby,” she said.

“Jodi Anderson said you ran until you fell down. She was afraid you’d had a heart attack. That’s not a hobby, Em. Not even a fetish. It’s an obsession.”

And he looked at her reproachfully. It would be a little while yet before she picked up the book and threw it at him, but that was what really tore it. That reproachful look. She could no longer stand it. Given his rather long face, it was like having a sheep in the house. *I married a Dorset gray*, she thought, *and now it’s just baa-baa-baa, all day long.*

But she tried one more time to be reasonable about something she knew in her heart had no reasonable core. There was magical thinking; there was also magical doing. Running, for instance.

“Marathoners run until they fall down,” she said.

“Are you planning to run in a marathon?”

“Maybe.” But she looked away. Out the window, at the driveway. The driveway called her. The driveway led to the sidewalk, and the sidewalk led to the world.

“No,” he said. “You’re not going to run in a marathon. You have no plans to run in a marathon.”

It occurred to her—with that sense of brilliant revelation the obvious can bring—that this was the essence of Henry, the fucking *apotheosis* of Henry. During the six years of their marriage he had always been perfectly aware of what she was thinking, feeling, planning.

*I comforted you*, she thought—not furious yet but beginning to be furious. *You lay there on the bed, leaking, and I comforted you.*

“The running is a classic psychological response to the pain you feel,” he was saying in that same earnest way. “It’s called avoidance. But, honey, if you don’t feel your pain, you’ll never be able to—”

That’s when she grabbed the object nearest at hand, which happened to be a paperback copy of *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter*. This was a book she had tried and rejected, but Henry had picked it up and was now about three quarters of the way through, judging from the bookmark. *He even has the reading tastes of a Dorset gray*, she thought, and hucked it at him. It struck him on the shoulder. He stared at her with wide, shocked eyes, then grabbed at her. Probably just to hug her, but who knew? Who really knew anything?

If he had grabbed a moment earlier, he might have caught her by the arm or the wrist or maybe just the back of her T-shirt. But that moment of shock undid him. He missed, and she was running, slowing only to snatch her fanny pack off the table by the front door. Down the driveway, to the sidewalk. Then down the hill, where she had briefly pushed a pram with other mothers who now shunned her. This time she had no intention of stopping or even slowing. Dressed only in shorts, sneakers, and a T-shirt reading SAVE THE CHEERLEADER, Emily ran out into the world. She put her fanny pack around her waist and snapped the catch as she pelted down the hill. And the feeling?

Exhilaration. Pure pow.

She ran downtown (two miles, twenty-two minutes), not even stopping when the light was against her; when that happened, she jogged in place. A couple of boys in a top-down Mustang—it was just getting to be top-down weather—passed her at the corner of Main and Eastern. One whistled. Em gave him the finger. He laughed and applauded as the Mustang accelerated down Main.

She didn't have much cash, but she had a pair of credit cards. The American Express was the prize, because with it she could get traveler's checks.

She realized she wasn't going home, not for a while. And when the realization caused a feeling of relief—maybe even fugitive excitement—instead of sorrow, she suspected this was not a temporary thing.

She went into the Morris Hotel to use the phone, then decided on the spur of the moment to take a room. Did they have anything for just the one night? They did. She gave the desk clerk her AmEx card.

"It doesn't look like you'll need a bellman," the clerk said, taking in her shorts and T-shirt.

"I left in a hurry."

"I see." Spoken in the tone of voice that said he didn't see at all. She took the key he slid to her and hurried across the wide lobby to the elevators, restraining the urge to run.

**You sound like you might be crying.**

She wanted to buy some clothes—a couple of skirts, a couple of shirts, two pairs of jeans, another pair of shorts—but before shopping she had calls to make: one to Henry and one to her father. Her father was in Tallahassee. She decided she had better call him first. She couldn't recall the number of his office phone in the motor pool but had his cell-phone number memorized. He answered on the first ring. She could hear engines revving in the background.

“Em! How are you?”

That should have been a complex question, but wasn't. “I'm fine, Dad. But I'm in the Morris Hotel. I guess I've left Henry.”

“Permanently or just a kind of trial balloon?” He didn't sound surprised—he took things in stride; she loved that about him—but the sound of the revving motors first faded, then disappeared. She imagined him going into his office, closing the door, perhaps picking up the picture of her that stood on his cluttered desk.

“Can't say yet. Right now it doesn't look too good.”

“What was it about?”

“Running.”

“*Running?*”

She sighed. “Not really. You know how sometimes a thing is about something else? Or a whole bunch of something elses?”

“The baby.” Her father had not called her Amy since the crib death. Now it was always just *the baby*.

“And the way I'm handling it. Which is not the way Henry wants me to. It occurred to me that I'd like to handle things in my own way.”

“Henry's a good man,” her father said, “but he has a way of seeing things. No doubt.”

She waited.

“What can I do?”

She told him. He agreed. She knew he would, but not until he heard her all the way out. The hearing out was the most important part, and Rusty Jackson was good at it. He hadn't risen from one of three mechanics in the motor pool to maybe one of the four most important people at the Tallahassee campus (and she hadn't heard that from him; he'd never say something like that to her or anyone else) by not listening.

"I'll send Mariette in to clean the house," he said.

"Dad, you don't need to do that. I can clean."

"I want to," he said. "A total top-to-bottom is overdue. Damn place has been closed up for almost a year. I don't get down to Vermillion much since your mother died. Seems like I can always find some more to do up here."

Em's mother was no longer Debra to him, either. Since the funeral (ovarian cancer), she was just *your mother*.

Em almost said, *Are you sure you don't mind this?* but that was the kind of thing you said when a stranger offered to do you a favor. Or a different kind of father.

"You going there to run?" he asked. She could hear a smile in his voice. "There's plenty of beach to run on, and a good long stretch of road, too. As you well know. And you won't have to elbow people out of your way. Between now and October, Vermillion is as quiet as it ever gets."

"I'm going there to think. And—I guess—to finish mourning."

"That's all right, then," he said. "Want me to book your flight?"

"I can do that."

"Sure you can. Emmy, are you okay?"

"Yes," she said.

"You sound like you might be crying."

"A little bit," she said, and wiped her face. "It all happened very fast." *Like Amy's death*, she could have added. She had done it like a little lady; never a peep from the baby monitor. *Leave quietly, don't slam the door*, Em's own mother often said when Em was a teenager.

"Henry won't come there to the hotel and bother you, will he?"

She heard a faint, delicate hesitation before he chose *bother*, and smiled in spite of her tears, which had pretty well run their course, anyway. "If you're asking if he's going to come and beat me up . . . that's not his style."

"A man sometimes finds a different style when his wife up and leaves him—just takes off running."

"Not Henry," she said. "He's not a man to cause trouble."

"You sure you don't want to come to Tallahassee first?"

She hesitated. Part of her did, but—

“I need a little time on my own. Before anything else.” And she repeated, “All this happened very fast.” Although she suspected it had been building for quite some time. It might even have been in the DNA of the marriage.

“All right. Love you, Emmy.”

“Love you, too, Dad. Thank you.” She swallowed. “So much.”

• • •

Henry didn't cause trouble. Henry didn't even ask where she was calling from. Henry said, “Maybe you're not the only one who needs a little time apart. Maybe this is for the best.”

She resisted an urge—it struck her as both normal and absurd—to thank him. Silence seemed like the best option. What he said next made her glad she'd chosen it.

“Who'd you call for help? The Motor-Pool King?”

This time the urge she resisted was to ask if he'd called his mother yet. Tit for tat never solved anything.

She said—evenly, she hoped: “I'm going to Vermillion Key. My dad's place there.”

“The conch shack.” She could almost hear him sniff. Like Ho Hos and Twinkies, houses with only three rooms and no garage were not a part of Henry's belief system.

Em said, “I'll call you when I get there.”

A long silence. She imagined him in the kitchen, head leaning against the wall, hand gripping the handset of the phone tight enough to turn his knuckles white, fighting to reject anger. Because of the six mostly good years they'd had together. She hoped he would make it. If that was indeed what was going on.

When he spoke next, he sounded calm but tired out. “Got your credit cards?”

“Yes. And I won't overuse them. But I want my half of—” She broke off, biting her lip. She had almost called their dead child *the baby*, and that wasn't right. Maybe it was for her father, but not for her. She started again.

“My half of Amy’s college money,” she said. “I don’t suppose there’s much, but—”

“There’s more than you think,” he said. He was starting to sound upset again. They had begun the fund not when Amy was born, or even when Em got pregnant, but when they first started trying. Trying had been a four-year process, and by the time Emily finally kindled, they were talking about fertility treatments. Or adoption. “Those investments weren’t just good, they were blessed by heaven—especially the software stocks. Mort got us in at the right time and out at the absolute golden moment. Emmy, you don’t want to take the eggs out of that nest.”

There he was again, telling her what she wanted to do.

“I’ll give you an address as soon as I have one,” she said. “Do whatever you want with your half, but make mine a cashier’s check.”

“Still running,” he said, and although that professorial, observational tone made her wish he was here so she could throw another book at him—a hardcover this time—she held her silence.

At last he sighed. “Listen, Em, I’m going to clear out of here for a few hours. Come on in and get your clothes or your whatever. And I’ll leave some cash for you on the dresser.”

For a moment she was tempted; then it occurred to her that leaving money on the dresser was what men did when they went to whores.

“No,” she said. “I want to start fresh.”

“Em.” There was a long pause. She guessed he was struggling with his emotions, and the thought of it caused her own eyes to blur over again. “Is this the end of us, kiddo?”

“I don’t know,” she said, working to keep her own voice straight. “Too soon to tell.”

“If I had to guess,” he said, “I’d guess yes. Today proves two things. One is that a healthy woman can run a long way.”

“I’ll call you,” she said.

“The other is that living babies are glue when it comes to marriage. Dead ones are acid.”

That hurt more than anything else he might have said, because it reduced Amy to an ugly metaphor. Em couldn’t do that. She didn’t think she’d ever be

able to do that. "I'll call you," she said, and hung up.

– 3 –

**Vermillion Key lay dazed and all but deserted.**

So Emily Owensby ran down to the end of the driveway, then down the hill to Kozy's Qwik-Pik, and then at the Cleveland South Junior College track. She ran to the Morris Hotel. She ran out of her marriage the way a woman can run out of a pair of sandals when she decides to let go and really dash. Then she ran (with the help of Southwest Airlines) to Fort Myers, Florida, where she rented a car and drove south toward Naples. Vermillion Key lay dazed and all but deserted under the baking June light. Two miles of road ran along Vermillion Beach from the drawbridge to the stub of her father's driveway. At the end of the driveway stood the unpainted conch shack, a slummy-looking thing with a blue roof and peeling blue shutters on the outside, air-conditioned and comfy on the inside.

When she turned off the engine of her Avis Nissan, the only sounds were waves crashing on the empty beach, and, somewhere nearby, an alarmed bird shouting *Uh-oh! Uh-oh!* over and over.

Em lowered her head against the steering wheel and cried for five minutes, letting out all the strain and horror of the last half year. Trying to, anyway. There was no one in earshot except for the uh-oh bird. When she was finally done, she took off her T-shirt and wiped everything away: the snot, the sweat, the tears. She wiped herself clean all the way down to the top of her plain gray sports bra. Then she walked to the house, shells and bits of coral crunching under her sneakers. As she bent to get the key from the Sucrets box hidden beneath the charming-in-spite-of-itself lawn gnome with its faded red hat, it occurred to her that she hadn't had one of her headaches in over a week. Which was a good thing, since her Zomig was more than a thousand miles away.

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in shorts and one of her father's old shirts, she was running on the beach.

• • •

For the next three weeks, her life became one of stark simplicity. She drank coffee and orange juice for breakfast, ate huge green salads for lunch, and devoured Stouffer's cuisine for dinner, usually macaroni and cheese or boil-in-the-bag chipped beef on toast—what her dad called shit on a shingle. The carbs came in handy. In the morning, when it was cool, she ran barefoot on the beach, down close to the water where the sand was firm and wet and mostly free of shells. In the afternoon, when it was hot (and frequently showery), she ran on the road, which was shady for most of its length. Sometimes she got soaked. On these occasions she ran on through the rain, often smiling, sometimes even laughing, and when she got back, she stripped in the foyer and dumped her soaking clothes in the washer, which was—conveniently—only three steps from the shower.

At first she ran two miles on the beach and a mile on the road. After three weeks, she was doing three miles on the beach and two on the road. Rusty Jackson was pleased to call his getaway place the Little Grass Shack, after some old song or other. It was at the extreme north end, and there was nothing like it on Vermillion; everything else had been taken over by the rich, the superrich, and, at the extreme south end, where there were three McMansions, the absurdly rich. Trucks filled with groundskeeping gear sometimes passed Em on her road runs, but rarely a car. The houses she passed were all closed up, their driveways chained, and they would stay that way until at least October, when the owners started to trickle back. She began to make up names for them in her head: the one with the columns was Tara, the one behind the high, barred iron fence was Club Fed, the big one hiding behind an ugly gray concrete wall was the Pillbox. The only other small one, mostly screened by palmettos and traveler palms, was the Troll House—where, she imagined, the in-season inhabitants subsisted on Troll House cookies.

On the beach, she sometimes saw volunteers from Turtle Watch, and soon came to hail them by name. They would give her a “Yo, Em!” in return as she ran past. There was rarely anyone else, although once a helicopter buzzed her. The passenger—a young man—leaned out and waved. Em waved back, her face safely masked by the shadow of her FSU 'Noles cap.

She shopped at the Publix five miles north on U.S. 41. Often on her ride home, she would stop at Bobby Trickett's Used Books, which was far bigger than her dad's little retreat but still your basic conch shack. There she bought old paperback mysteries by Raymond Chandler and Ed McBain, their pages dark brown at the edges and yellow inside, their smell sweet and as nostalgic as the old Ford woody station wagon she sighted one day tooling down 41 with two lawn chairs strapped to the roof and a beat-to-shit surfboard sticking out the back. There was no need to buy any John D. MacDonalds; her father had the whole set packed into his orange-crate bookcases.

By the end of July she was running six and sometimes seven miles a day, her boobs no more than nubs, her butt mostly nonexistent, and she had lined two of her dad's empty shelves with books that had titles like *Dead City* and *Six Bad Things*. The TV never went on at night, not even for the weather. Her father's old PC stayed dark. She never bought a newspaper.

Her father called her every second day, but stopped asking if she wanted him to "yank free" and come on down after she told him that when she was ready to see him, she'd tell him so. In the meantime, she said, she wasn't suicidal (true), not even depressed (not true), and she was eating. That was good enough for Rusty. They had always been straight up with each other. She also knew that summer was a busy time for him—everything that couldn't be done when kids were crawling all over the campus (which he always called *the plant*) had to be done between June 15 and September 15, when there was nobody around but summer students and whatever academic conferences the administration could pull in.

Also, he had a lady friend. Melody, her name was. Em didn't like to go there—it made her feel funny—but she knew Melody made her dad happy, so she always asked after her. *Fine*, her dad invariably replied. *Mel's as dandy as a peach*.

Once she called Henry, and once Henry called her. The night he called her, Em was pretty sure he was drunk. He asked her again if they were over, and she told him again that she didn't know, but that was a lie. *Probably* a lie.

Nights, she slept like a woman in a coma. At first she had bad dreams—reliving the morning they had found Amy dead over and over again. In some of the dreams, her baby had turned as black as a rotten strawberry. In others—

these were worse—she found Amy struggling for breath and saved her by administering mouth-to-mouth. They were worse because she woke to the realization that Amy was actually the same old dead. She came from one of these latter dreams during a thunderstorm and slid naked from the bed to the floor, crying with her elbows propped on her knees and her palms pushing her cheeks up in a smile while lightning flashed over the Gulf and made momentary blue patterns on the wall.

As she extended herself—exploring those fabled limits of endurance—the dreams either ceased or played themselves out far below the eye of her memory. She began to awaken feeling not so much refreshed as unwound all the way to the core of herself. And although each day was essentially the same as the day before, each began to seem like a new thing—its own thing—instead of an extension of the old thing. One day she woke realizing that Amy’s death had begun to be something that *had* happened instead of something that *was* happening.

She decided she would ask her father to come down—and bring Melody if he wanted to. She would give them a nice dinner. They could stay over (what the hell, it *was* his house). And then she’d start thinking about what she wanted to do with her real life, the one she would soon resume on the other side of the drawbridge: what she wanted to keep and what she wanted to cast away.

She would make that call soon, she thought. In a week. Two, at the most. It wasn’t quite time yet, but almost. Almost.

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### **Not a very nice man.**

One afternoon not long after July became August, Deke Hollis told her she had company on the island. He called it *the island*, never the key.

Deke was a weathered fifty, or maybe seventy. He was tall and rangy and wore a battered old straw hat that looked like an inverted soup bowl. From seven in the morning until seven at night, he ran the drawbridge between Vermillion and the mainland. This was Monday to Friday. On weekends, “the

kid” took over (said kid being about thirty). Some days when Em ran up to the drawbridge and saw the kid instead of Deke in the old cane chair outside the gatehouse, reading *Maxim* or *Popular Mechanics* rather than *The New York Times*, she was startled to realize that Saturday had come around again.

This afternoon, though, it was Deke. The channel between Vermillion and the mainland—which Deke called *the thrut* (throat, she assumed)—was deserted and dark under a dark sky. A heron stood on the drawbridge’s Gulf-side rail, either meditating or looking for fish.

“Company?” Em said. “I don’t have any company.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. Pickering’s back. At 366? Brought one of his ‘nieces.’” The punctuation for *nieces* was provided by a roll of Deke’s eyes, of a blue so faded they were nearly colorless.

“I didn’t see anyone,” Em said.

“No,” he agreed. “Crossed over in that big red M’cedes of his about an hour ago, while you were probably still lacin’ up your tennies.” He leaned forward over his newspaper; it crackled against his flat belly. She saw he had the crossword about half completed. “Different niece every summer. Always young.” He paused. “Sometimes *two* nieces, one in August and one in September.”

“I don’t know him,” Em said. “And I didn’t see any red Mercedes.” Nor did she know which house belonged to 366. She noticed the houses themselves, but rarely paid attention to the mailboxes. Except, of course, for 219. That was the one with the little line of carved birds on top of it. (The house behind it was, of course, Birdland.)

“Just as well,” Deke said. This time instead of rolling his eyes, he twitched down the corners of his mouth, as if he had something bad tasting in there. “He brings ’em down in the M’cedes, then takes ’em back to St. Petersburg in his boat. Big white yacht. The *Playpen*. Went through this morning.” The corners of his mouth did that thing again. In the far distance, thunder mumbled. “So the nieces get a tour of the house, then a nice little cruise up the coast, and we don’t see Pickering again until January, when it gets cold up in Chicagoland.”

Em thought she might have seen a moored white pleasure craft on her morning beach run but wasn’t sure.

“Day or two from now—maybe a week—he’ll send out a couple of fellas, and one will drive the M’cedes back to wherever he keeps it stored away. Near the private airport in Naples, I imagine.”

“He must be very rich,” Em said. This was the longest conversation she’d ever had with Deke, and it was interesting, but she started jogging in place just the same. Partly because she didn’t want to stiffen up, mostly because her body was calling on her to run.

“Rich as Scrooge McDuck, but I got an idea Pickering actually *spends* his. Probably in ways Uncle Scrooge never imagined. Made it off some kind of computer thing, I heard.” The eye roll. “Don’t they all?”

“I guess,” she said, still jogging in place. The thunder cleared its throat with a little more authority this time.

“I know you’re anxious to be off, but I’m talking to you for a reason,” Deke said. He folded up his newspaper, put it beside the old cane chair, and stuck his coffee cup on top of it as a paperweight. “I don’t ordinarily talk out of school about folks on the island—a lot of ’em’s rich and I wouldn’t last long if I did—but I like you, Emmy. You keep yourself to yourself, but you ain’t a bit snooty. Also, I like your father. Him and me’s lifted a beer, time to time.”

“Thanks,” she said. She was touched. And as a thought occurred to her, she smiled. “Did my dad ask you to keep an eye on me?”

Deke shook his head. “Never did. Never would. Not R. J.’s style. He’d tell you the same as I am, though—Jim Pickering’s not a very nice man. I’d steer clear of him. If he invites you in for a drink or even just a cup of coffee with him and his new ‘niece,’ I’d say no. And if he were to ask you to go cruising with him, I would *definitely* say no.”

“I have no interest in cruising anywhere,” she said. What she was interested in was finishing her work on Vermillion Key. She felt it was almost done. “And I better get back before the rain starts.”

“Don’t think it’s coming until five, at least,” Deke said. “Although if I’m wrong, I think you’ll still be okay.”

She smiled again. “Me too. Contrary to popular opinion, women don’t melt in the rain. I’ll tell my dad you said hello.”

“You do that.” He bent down to get his paper, then paused, looking at her from beneath that ridiculous hat. “How’re you doing, anyway?”

“Better,” she said. “Better every day.” She turned and began her road run back to the Little Grass Shack. She raised her hand as she went, and as she did, the heron that had been perched on the drawbridge rail flapped past her with a fish in its long bill.

• • •

Three sixty-six turned out to be the Pillbox, and for the first time since she'd come to Vermillion, the gate was standing ajar. Or had it been ajar when she ran past it toward the bridge? She couldn't remember—but of course she had taken up wearing a watch, a clunky thing with a big digital readout, so she could time herself. She had probably been looking at that when she went by.

She almost passed without slowing—the thunder was closer now—but she wasn't exactly wearing a thousand-dollar suede skirt from Jill Anderson, only an ensemble from the Athletic Attic: shorts and a T-shirt with the Nike swoosh on it. Besides, what had she said to Deke? *Women don't melt in the rain*. So she slowed, swerved, and had a peek. It was simple curiosity.

She thought the Mercedes parked in the courtyard was a 450 SL, because her father had one like it, although his was pretty old now and this one looked brand-new. It was candy-apple red, its body brilliant even under the darkening sky. The trunk was open. A sheaf of long blond hair hung from it. There was blood in the hair.

Had Deke said the girl with Pickering was a blond? That was her first question, and she was so shocked, so fucking *amazed*, that there was no surprise in it. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable question, and the answer was Deke hadn't said. Only that she was young. And a niece. With the eye roll.

Thunder rumbled. Almost directly overhead now. The courtyard was empty except for the car (and the blond in the trunk, there was her). The house looked deserted, too: buttoned up and more like a pillbox than ever. Even the palms swaying around it couldn't soften it. It was too big, too stark, too gray. It was an ugly house.

Em thought she heard a moan. She ran through the gate and across the yard to the open trunk without even thinking about it. She looked in. The girl in

the trunk hadn't moaned. Her eyes were open, but she had been stabbed in what looked like dozens of places, and her throat was cut ear to ear.

Em stood looking in, too shocked to move, too shocked to even breathe. Then it occurred to her that this was a *fake* dead girl, a movie prop. Even as her rational mind was telling her that was bullshit, the part of her that specialized in rationalization was nodding frantically. Even making up a story to backstop the idea. Deke didn't like Pickering, and Pickering's choice of female companionship? Well guess what, Pickering didn't like Deke, either! This was nothing but an elaborate practical joke. Pickering would go back across the bridge with the trunk deliberately ajar, that fake blond hair fluttering, and—

But there were smells rising out of the trunk now. They were the smells of shit and blood. Em reached forward and touched the cheek below one of those staring eyes. It was cold, but it was skin. Oh God, it was human skin.

There was a sound behind her. A footstep. She started to turn, and something came down on her head. There was no pain, but brilliant white seemed to leap across the world. Then the world went dark.

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### **He looked like he was trying to play creep-mouse with her.**

When she woke up, she was duct-taped to a chair in a big kitchen filled with terrible steel objects: sink, fridge, dishwasher, a stove that looked like it belonged in the kitchen of a restaurant. The back of her head was sending long, slow waves of pain toward the front of her head, each one seeming to say *Fix this! Fix this!*

Standing at the sink was a tall, slender man in khaki shorts and an old Izod golf shirt. The kitchen's fluorescent fixtures sent down a merciless light, and Em could see the deepening crow's-foot at the corner of his eye, the smattering of gray along the side of his short power haircut. She put him at about fifty. He was washing his arm in the sink. There appeared to be a puncture wound in it, just below the elbow.

He snapped his head around. There was an animal quickness to him that made her stomach sink. His eyes were of a blue much more vivid than Deke

Hollis's. She saw nothing in them she recognized as sanity, and her heart sank further. On the floor—the same ugly gray as the outside of the house, only tile instead of cement—there was a dark, filmy track about nine inches wide. Em thought it was probably blood. It was very easy to imagine the blond girl's hair making it as Pickering dragged her through the room by her feet, to some unknown destination.

"You're awake," he said. "Good deal. *Awesome*. Think I wanted to kill her? I didn't want to kill her. She had a knife in her gosh-damn *sock*! I pinched her on the arm, that's all." He seemed to consider this, and while he did, he blotted the dark, blood-filled gash below his elbow with a wad of paper towels. "Well, also on the tit. But all girls expect that. Or should. It's called *FORE-play*. Or in this case, *WHORE-play*."

He made quotation marks with the first and second fingers of his hands each time. To Em, he looked like he was trying to play creep-mouse with her. He also looked crazy. In fact, there was no doubt about his state of mind. Thunder crashed overhead, loud as a load of dropped furniture. Em jumped—as well as she could, bound to a kitchen chair—but the man standing by the stainless-steel double-basin sink didn't glance up at the sound. It was as though he hadn't heard. His lower lip was thrust out.

"So I took it away from her. And then I lost my head. I admit it. People think I'm Mr. Cool, and I try to live up to that. I do. I try to live up to that. But any man can lose his head. That's what they don't realize. Any man. Under the right set of circumstances."

Rain poured down as if God had pulled the chain up there in His own personal WC.

"Who could reasonably assume you're here?"

"Lots of people." This answer came without hesitation.

He was across the room in a flash. *Flash* was the word. At one moment he was by the sink, at the next beside her and whacking her face hard enough to make white spots explode in front of her eyes. These shot around the room, drawing bright cometary tails after them. Her head snapped to the side. Her hair flew against her cheek, and she felt blood begin to flow into her mouth as her lower lip burst. The inner lining had been cut by her teeth, and deep. Almost all the way through, it felt like. Outside, the rain rushed down. *I'm*

*going to die while it's raining*, Em thought. But she didn't believe it. Maybe no one did, when the deal actually came down.

"*Who knows?*" He was leaning over, bellowing into her face.

"*Lots of people*," she reiterated, and the words came out *losh of people* because her lower lip was swelling. And she felt blood spilling down her chin in a small stream. Still, her *mind* wasn't swelling, in spite of the pain and fear. It knew her one chance at life was making this man believe he'd be caught if he killed her. Of course he would also be caught if he let her go, but she would deal with that later. One nightmare at a time.

"*Losh of people!*" she said again, defiantly.

He flashed back to the sink and when he returned, he had a knife in his hand. A little one. Very likely the one the dead girl had taken from her sock. He put the tip on Em's lower eyelid and pulled it down. That was when her bladder let go, all at once, in a rush.

An expression of somehow prissy disgust momentarily tightened Pickering's face, yet he also seemed delighted. Some part of Em's mind wondered how any person could hold two such conflicting emotions in his mind at the same time. He took a half step back, but the point of the knife didn't waver. It still dimpled into her skin, simultaneously pulling down her lower eyelid and pushing her eyeball up gently in its socket.

"Nice," he said. "Another mess to clean up. Not unexpected, though. No. And like the man said, there's more room out than there is in. That's what the man said." He actually laughed, one quick yip, and then he leaned forward, his vivid blue eyes staring into her hazel ones. "Tell me one person who knows you're here. Don't hesitate. Do *not* hesitate. If you hesitate I'll know you're making something up and I'll lift your eye right out of its socket and flip it into the sink. I can do it. So tell me. *Now.*"

"Deke Hollis," she said. It was tattling, *bad* tattling, but it was also nothing but reflex. She didn't want to lose her eye.

"Who else?"

No name occurred to her—her mind was a roaring blank—and she believed him when he said hesitating would cost her her left eye. "*No one, okay?*" she cried. And surely Deke would be enough. Surely one person would be enough, unless he was so crazy that—

He drew the knife away, and although her peripheral vision couldn't quite pick it up, she felt a tiny seed pearl of blood blooming there. She didn't care. She was just glad to still *have* peripheral vision.

"Okay," Pickering said. "Okay, okay, good, okay." He walked back to the sink and tossed the little knife into it. She started to be relieved. Then he opened one of the drawers beside the sink and brought out a bigger one: a long, pointed butcher knife.

"Okay." He came back to her. There was no blood on him that she could see, not even a spot. How was that possible? How long had she been out?

"Okay, okay." He ran the hand not holding the knife through the short, stupidly expensive tailoring of his hair. It sprang right back into place. "Who's Deke Hollis?"

"The drawbridge keeper," she said. Her voice was unsteady, wavering. "We *talked* about you. That's why I stopped to look in." She had a burst of inspiration. "He saw the girl! Your niece, he called her!"

"Yeah, yeah, the girls always go back by boat, that's all he knows. That's all he knows in the world. Are people ever nosy! Where's your car? Answer me *now* or you get the new special, a breast amputation. Quick but *not* painless."

"The Grass Shack!" It was all she could think of to say.

"What's that?"

"The little conch house at the end of the key. It's my dad's." She had another burst of inspiration. "*He* knows I'm here!"

"Yeah, yeah." This didn't seem to interest Pickering. "Yeah, okay. Right, big-time. Are you saying you *live* here?"

"Yes . . ."

He looked down at her shorts, now a darker blue. "Runner, are you?" She didn't answer this, but Pickering didn't seem to care. "Yeah, you're a runner, damn right you are. Look at those legs." Incredibly, he bowed at the waist—as if meeting royalty—and with a loud smack kissed her left thigh just below the hem of her shorts. When he straightened up, she observed with a sinking heart that the front of his pants was sticking out. Not good.

"You run up, you run back." He flicked the blade of the butcher knife in an arc, like a conductor with a baton. It was hypnotic. Outside, the rain continued to pour down. It would go on that way for forty minutes, maybe an

hour, and then the sun would come back out. Em wondered if she would be alive to see it. She didn't think so. Yet this was still hard to believe. Impossible, really.

"You run up, you run back. Up and back. Sometimes you pass the time of day with that old man in the straw hat, but you don't pass it with anyone else." She was scared, but not too scared to realize he wasn't talking to her. "Right. Not with anyone else. Because there's nobody else here. If any of the tree-planting, grass-cutting beaners who work down here saw you on your afternoon run, will they remember? Will they?"

The knife blade ticked back and forth. He eyed the tip, seeming to depend on this for an answer.

"No," he said. "No, and I'll tell you why. Because you're just another rich gringa running her buns off. They're everywhere. See 'em every day. Health nuts. Have to kick 'em out of your way. If not running, on bikes. Wearing those dumb little potty helmets. Okay? Okay. Say your prayers, Lady Jane, but make it quick. I'm in a hurry. Big, big hurry."

He raised the knife to his shoulder. She saw his lips tighten down in anticipation of the killing stroke. For Em, the whole world suddenly came clear; everything stood out with exclamatory brilliance. She thought: *I'm coming, Amy*. And then, absurdly, something she might have heard on ESPN: *Be there, baby*.

But then he paused. He looked around, exactly as if someone had spoken. "Yeah," he said. Then: "Yeah?" And then: "Yeah." There was a Formica-topped island in the middle of the room, for food preparation. He dropped the knife on it with a clatter instead of sticking it into Emily.

He said, "Sit there. I'm not going to kill you. I changed my mind. Man can change his mind. I got nothing from Nicole but a poke in the arm."

There was a depleted roll of duct tape on the island. He picked it up. A moment later he was kneeling in front of her, the back of his head and the naked nape of his neck exposed and vulnerable. In a better world—a fairer world—she could have laced her hands together and brought them down on that exposed nape, but her hands were bound at the wrists to the chair's heavy maple arms. Her torso was bound to the back by more duct tape, thick corsets of the stuff at the waist and just below her breasts. Her legs were bound to the

chair's legs at the knees, the upper calves, the lower calves, and the ankles. He had been very thorough.

The legs of the chair were taped to the floor, and now he put on fresh layers, first in front of her, then behind. When he was finished, all the tape was gone. He stood up and put the empty cardboard core on the Formica island. "There," he said. "Not bad. Okay. All set. You wait here." He must have found something funny in this, because he cocked his head upward and loosed another of those brief, yapping laughs. "Don't get bored and run off, okay? I need to go take care of your nosy old friend, and I want to do it while it's still raining."

This time he flashed to a door that proved to be a closet. He yanked out a yellow slicker. "Knew this was in here somewhere. Everybody trusts a guy in a raincoat. I don't know why. It's just one of those mystery facts. Okay, girlfriend, sit tight." He uttered another of those laughs that sounded like the bark of an angry poodle, and then he was gone.

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### **Still 9:15.**

When the front door slammed and Em knew he had really left, that abnormal brightness in the world started to turn gray, and she realized she was on the verge of fainting. She could not afford to faint. If there was an afterlife and she eventually saw her father there, how could she explain to Rusty Jackson that she had wasted her last minutes on earth in unconsciousness? He would be disappointed in her. Even if they met in heaven, standing ankle-deep in clouds while angels all around them played the music of the spheres (arranged for harp), he would be disappointed in her for wasting her only chance in a Victorian swoon.

Em deliberately ground the lacerated lining of her lower lip against her teeth . . . then bit down, bringing fresh blood. The world jumped back to brightness. The sound of the wind and down-rushing rain swelled like strange music.

How long did she have? It was a quarter of a mile from the Pillbox to the drawbridge. Because of the slicker, and because she hadn't heard the Mercedes start up, she had to think he was running. She knew she might not have heard the engine over the rain and thunder, but she just didn't believe he would take his car. Deke Hollis knew the red Mercedes and didn't like the man who drove it. The red Mercedes might put Deke on his guard. Emily believed Pickering would know that. Pickering was crazy—part of the time he'd been talking to himself, but at least some of the time he'd been talking to someone he could see but she couldn't, an invisible partner in crime—but he wasn't stupid. Neither was Deke, of course, but he would be alone in his little gatehouse. No cars passing, no boats waiting to go through, either. Not in this downpour.

Plus, he was old.

"I have maybe fifteen minutes," she said to the empty room—or perhaps it was the bloodstain on the floor she was talking to. He hadn't gagged her, at least; why bother? There would be no one to hear her scream, not in this ugly, boxy, concrete fortress. She thought she could have stood in the middle of the road, screaming at the top of her lungs, and *still* no one would have heard her. Right now even the Mexican groundskeepers would be under cover, sitting in the cabs of their trucks drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes.

"Fifteen minutes at most."

Yes. Probably. Then Pickering would come back and rape her, as he had been planning to rape Nicole. After that he would kill her, as he had already killed Nicole. Her and how many other "nieces"? Em didn't know, but she felt certain this was not—as Rusty Jackson might have said—his first rodeo.

Fifteen minutes. Maybe just ten.

She looked down at her feet. They weren't duct-taped to the floor, but the feet of the chair were. Still . . .

You're a runner; damn right you are. Look at those legs.

They were good legs, all right, and she didn't need anyone to kiss them to make her aware of it. Especially not a lunatic like Pickering. She didn't know if they were good in the sense of being beautiful, or sexy, but in utilitarian terms, they were very good. They had carried her a long way since the morning she and Henry had found Amy dead in her crib. Pickering clearly had great faith in the powers of duct tape, had probably seen it employed by dozens of psycho

killers in dozens of movies, and none of his “nieces” had given him any cause to doubt its efficacy. Maybe because he hadn’t given them a chance, maybe because they were too frightened. But maybe . . . especially on a wet day, in an unaired house so damp she could smell the mildew . . .

Em leaned forward as far as the corsets binding her would allow and gradually began to flex the muscles of her thighs and calves: those new runner’s muscles the lunatic had so admired. First just a little flex, then up to half. She was approaching full flex, and starting to lose hope, when she heard a sucking sound. It was low at first, barely more than a wish, but it got louder. The tape had been wrapped and then rewrapped in crisscrossing layers, it was hellishly strong, but it was pulling free of the floor just the same. But slowly. Dear God, so slowly.

She relaxed, breathing hard, sweat now breaking on her forehead, under her arms, between her breasts. She wanted to go again at once, but her experience running the Cleveland South track told her she must wait and let her rapidly pumping heart flush the lactic acid from her muscles. Her next effort would generate less force and be less successful if she didn’t. But it was hard. Waiting was hard. She had no idea how long he had been gone. There was a clock on the wall—a sunburst executed in stainless steel (like seemingly everything else in this horrible, heartless room, except the red maple chair she was bound to)—but it had stopped at 9:15. Probably it was a battery job and its battery had died.

She tried to remain still until she had counted to thirty (with a *delightful Maisie* after each number), and could only hold out to seventeen. Then she flexed again, pushing down with all her might. This time the sucking sound was immediate and louder. She felt the chair begin to *lift*. Just a little, but it was definitely rising.

Em strained, her head thrown back, her teeth bared, fresh blood running down her chin from her swollen lip. The cords on her neck stood out. The sucking sound became louder still, and now she also heard a low ripping sound.

Hot pain bloomed suddenly in her right calf, tightening it. For a moment Em almost kept on straining—the stakes were high, after all, the stakes were

her *life*—but then she relaxed within her bonds again, gasping for air. And counting.

“*One, delightful Maisie. Two, delightful Maisie. Three . . .*”

Because she could probably pull the chair free of the floor in spite of that warning tightness. She was almost sure she could. But if she did so at the expense of a charley horse in her right calf (she’d had them there before; on a couple of occasions they’d hit so hard the muscle had felt like stone rather than flesh), she would lose more time than she gained. And she’d still be bound to the fucking chair. *Glued* to the fucking chair.

She knew the clock on the wall was dead, but she looked at it anyway. It was a reflex. Still 9:15. Was he at the drawbridge yet? She had a sudden wild hope: Deke would blow the warning horn and scare him off. Could a thing like that happen? She thought it could. She thought Pickering was like a hyena, only dangerous when he was sure he had the upper hand. And, probably like a hyena, wasn’t able to imagine not having it.

She listened. She heard thunder, and steadily whooshing rain, but not the blare of the air horn mounted beside the drawbridge keeper’s cabin.

She tried pulling the chair off the floor again, and almost went catapulting facefirst into the stove when it came free almost at once. She staggered, tottered, almost fell over, and backed against the Formica-topped service island in the middle of the kitchen to keep from doing so. Her heart was now running so fast, she couldn’t detect the individual beats; it seemed to be just a steady hard hum in her chest and high in her neck, below the points of her jaw. If she had fallen over, she would have been like a turtle lying on its back. There wouldn’t have been a chance in the world of getting up again.

*I’m all right, she thought. It didn’t happen.*

No. But she could see herself lying there all the same, and with hellish clarity. Lying there with only the swash of blood made by Nicole’s hair for company. Lying there and waiting for Pickering to come back and have his fun with her before ending her life. And he would be back when? In seven minutes? Five? Only three?

She looked at the clock. It was 9:15.

She hunched beside the counter, gasping for breath, a woman who had grown a chair out of her back. There was the butcher knife on the counter, but

she couldn't reach it with her hands bound to the chair's arms. Even if she could have grasped it, what then? Just stand there, hunched over, with it in her hand. There was nothing she could reach with it, nothing she could cut with it.

She looked at the stove, and wondered if she could turn on one of the burners. If she could do that, then maybe . . .

Another hellish vision came to her: trying to burn through the tape and having her clothes catch on fire from the gas ring instead. She wouldn't risk it. If someone had offered her pills (or even a bullet in the head) to escape the possibility of rape, torture, and death—likely a slow one, preceded by unspeakable mutilations—she might have overcome the dissenting voice of her father (*“Never give up, Emmy, good things are always just around some corner or other”*) and gone for it. But risking the possibility of third-degree burns all over the upper half of her body? Lying half-baked on the floor, waiting for Pickering to come back, *praying* for him to come back and put her out of her misery?

No. She wouldn't do that. But what did that leave? She could feel time fleeting, fleeting. The clock on the wall still said 9:15, but she thought the beat of the rain had slacked off a bit. The idea filled her with horror. She pushed it back. Panic would get her killed.

The knife was a can't and the stove was a won't. What did that leave?

The answer was obvious. It left the chair. There weren't any others in the kitchen, only three high stools like barstools. She guessed he must have imported this one from a dining room she hoped never to see. Had he bound other women—other “nieces”—to heavy red maple chairs that belonged around a dining-room table? Maybe to this very one? In her heart she was sure he had. And he trusted it even though it was wood instead of metal. What had worked once must work again; she was sure he thought like a hyena in that way, too.

She had to demolish the prison that held her. It was the only way, and she had only minutes to do it.

**It's probably going to hurt.**

She was close to the center island, but the counter stuck out slightly, creating a kind of lip, and she didn't trust it. She didn't want to move—didn't want to risk falling over and becoming a turtle—but she did want a surface wider than that projecting lip to beat against. And so she started toward the refrigerator, which was also stainless steel . . . and big. All the beating surface a girl could want.

She shuffled along with the chair bound to her back and bottom and legs. Her progress was agonizingly slow. It was like trying to walk with a weird, form-fitting coffin strapped to her back. And it *would* be her coffin, if she fell over. Or if she was still whacking it fruitlessly against the front of the KitchenAid when the man of the house returned.

Once she tottered on the edge of falling over—on her face—and managed to keep her balance by what seemed like willpower alone. The pain in her calf came back, once more threatening to become a charley horse and render her right leg useless. She willed that away, too, closing her eyes to do it. Sweat rolled down her face, washing away dried tears she did not remember crying.

How much time was passing? How much? The rain had slackened still more. Soon she would start to hear dripping instead of raining. Maybe Deke was putting up a fight. Maybe he even had a gun in a drawer of his cluttered old desk and had shot Pickering the way you'd shoot a rabid dog. Would she hear a gunshot in here? She didn't think so; the wind was still blowing pretty hard. More likely Pickering—twenty years younger than Deke, and obviously in shape—would take away any weapon Deke might produce and use it on the old man.

She tried to sweep all these thoughts away, but it was hard. It was hard even though they were useless. She shuffled forward with her eyes still closed and her pale face—swollen at the mouth—drawn down in effort. One baby step, two baby steps. *May I take another six baby steps?* Yes, you may. But on the fourth one, her knees—bent almost into a squat—bumped against the front of the refrigerator.

Em opened her eyes, unable to believe she had actually made this arduous safari safely—a distance an unbound person could have covered in three ordinary steps, but a safari for her. A fucking *trek*.

There was no time to waste congratulating herself, and not just because she might hear the Pillbox's front door open anytime. She had other problems. Her muscles were strained and trembling from trying to walk in what was almost a sitting position; she felt like an out-of-condition amateur attempting some outrageous tantra yoga position. If she didn't do this at once, she wouldn't be able to do it at all. And if the chair was as strong as it looked—

But she pushed this thought away.

"It's probably going to hurt," she panted. "You know that, don't you?" She knew, but thought Pickering might have even worse things in mind for her.

"Please," she said, turning sideways to the refrigerator, giving it her profile. If that was praying, she had an idea it was her dead daughter she was praying to. "*Please*," she said again, and swung her hips sideways, smacking the parasite she was wearing against the front of the fridge.

She wasn't as surprised as when the chair had come free of the floor all at once, almost causing her to flip headfirst onto the stove, but almost. There was a loud cracking sound from the chair back, and the seat slewed sideways on her bottom. Only the legs held firm.

"It's *rotten!*" she cried to the empty kitchen. "The damn thing's *rotten!*" Maybe not actually, but—God bless the Florida climate—it sure wasn't as strong as it looked. Finally, a little stroke of luck . . . and if he came in now, just as she'd had it, Emily thought she would go insane.

How long now? How long had he been gone? She had no idea. She had always had a fairly accurate clock in her head, but now it was as useless as the one on the wall. It was uniquely horrible to have lost track of time so completely. She remembered her big clunky watch and looked down, but the watch was gone. There was just a pale patch where it had been. He must have taken it.

She almost swung sideways into the fridge again, then had a better idea. Her bottom was partly free of the chair seat now, and that gave her extra leverage. She strained with her back as she had strained with her thighs and calves while working to free the chair from the floor, and this time when she felt a warning pain way down low, just above the base of her spine, she didn't relax and wait and recycle. She didn't think she had the luxury of waiting anymore. She could see him coming back, running right down the center of

the deserted road, his feet spitting up sprays of water, the yellow slicker flapping. And, in one hand, some sort of a tool. A tire iron, perhaps, that he had snatched from the bloodstained trunk of his Mercedes.

Em strained upward. The pain in the small of her back deepened, took on a glassy intensity. But she could hear that ripping sound again as duct tape let go—not of the chair, but of itself. Of the overlapping layers of itself. Loosening. Loosening wasn't as good as freeing, but it was still good. It gave her more leverage.

She swung her hips against the refrigerator again, letting out a little scream of effort. The shock jarred through her. This time the chair didn't move. The chair clung to her like a limpet. She swung her hips again, harder, screaming louder: tantra yoga meets S&M disco. There was another *crack*, and this time the chair slewed to the right on her back and hips.

She swung again . . . again . . . again, pivoting on her increasingly tired hips and *smashing*. She lost count. She was crying again. She had split her shorts up the back. They had slid down crooked over one hip, and the hip itself was bleeding. She thought she had taken a splinter in it.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her runaway heart (small chance of that), and whacked herself and her wooden prison into the refrigerator again, as hard as she could. This time she finally struck the lever of the recessed automatic ice dispenser, releasing a jackpot of cubes onto the tiled floor. There was another crack, a sag, and all at once her left arm was free. She looked down at it, stupid-eyed with amazement. The arm of the chair was still bound to her forearm, but now the body of the chair hung askew on that side, held to her by long gray strips of duct tape. It was like being caught in a cobweb. And of course she was; the crazy bastard in the khaki shorts and Izod shirt was the spider. She still wasn't free, but now she could use the knife. All she had to do was shuffle back to the center island and get it.

“Don't step on the cubes,” she advised herself in a ragged voice. She sounded—to her own ears, at least—like a manic grad student who had studied herself to the edge of a nervous breakdown. “This would be a very bad time to go skating.”

She avoided the ice, but as she bent for the knife, her overstrained back gave a warning creak. The chair, much looser now but still bound to her midsection

by those corsets of tape (and at the legs, as well), banged into the side of the island. She paid no attention. She was able to grasp the knife with her newly freed left hand and use it to saw through the tape binding her right arm, sobbing for breath and casting small darting glances at the swing door between the kitchen and whatever lay beyond—the dining room and the front hall, she assumed; it was the way he had gone out, and the way he would probably come back in. When her right hand was free, she tore off the broken chunk of chair still bound to her left arm and tossed it on the center island.

“Stop looking for him,” she told herself in the gray, shadowy kitchen. “Just do your work.” It was good advice, but hard to follow when you knew your death might come through that door, and soon.

She sawed through the band of tape just below her breasts. This should have been slow, careful work, but she couldn't afford to go slow and nicked herself repeatedly with the tip of the knife. She could feel blood spreading on her skin.

The knife was sharp. The bad news about that were those repeated nicks just below her breastbone. The good news was that the duct tape split away without much argument, layer after layer. Finally it was cut through from top to bottom, and the chair sagged away from her back a little more. She set to work on the wide band of tape around her waist. Now she could bend further, and the work went faster, with less damage to her body. She cut all the way through at last, and the chair fell backward. But its legs were still bound to her legs, and the wooden feet suddenly shifted, digging in low on her calves where the Achilles tendons surfaced like cables just below the skin. The pain was excruciating, and she moaned miserably.

Em reached around and used her left hand to push the chair against her back again, relieving that horrible, digging pressure. It was a filthy angle, all wrong for her arm, but she continued to press the chair to her while she shuffled around so she was once more facing the stove. Then she leaned back, using the center island to relieve the pressure. Gasping for breath, crying again (she wasn't aware of the tears), she leaned forward and began to saw through the tape binding her ankles. Her exertions had loosened these bands and the others binding her lower body to the fucking chair; consequently the work went faster and she cut herself less frequently, although she managed to give herself a fairly good slash on the right calf—as if some mad part of her were

trying to punish it for seizing up while she was trying to push the chair free of the floor.

She was working on the tape holding her knees—the last ones left—when she heard the front door open and close. “I’m home, honey!” Pickering called cheerfully. “Miss me?”

Em froze, bent over with her hair hanging in her face, and it took every last scrap of will to get moving again. No time for finesse now; she jammed the blade of the butcher knife under the belt of gray tape binding her right knee, miraculously avoided stabbing the tip into her own kneecap, and hauled upward with all her strength.

In the hall, there was a heavy *cluck* sound, and she knew he had just turned a key in a lock—a big lock, from the sound. Pickering wanted no interruptions, probably thought there had been interruptions enough for one day. He started up the hall. He must have been wearing sneakers (she hadn’t noticed before), because she could hear them squelching.

He was whistling “O Susanna.”

The tape holding her right knee parted, bottom to top, and the chair fell backward against the counter with a noisy clatter, now bound to her only at the left knee. For a moment the footsteps beyond the swing door—very close, now—stopped, and then they broke into a run. After that it all happened very, very fast.

He hit the door two-handed, and it burst open with a loud thump; those hands were still outstretched as he came racing into the kitchen. They were empty—no sign of the tire iron she had imagined. The sleeves of the yellow slicker were pulled halfway up his arms, and Em had time to think, *That’s too small for you, asshole—a wife would tell you, but you don’t have a wife, do you?*

The hood of the slicker was pushed back. His power haircut was finally in disarray—*mild* disarray; it was too short for anything else—and rainwater dripped down the sides of his face and into his eyes. He took in the situation at a glance, seemed to understand everything. “*Oh, you annoying bitch!*” he bellowed, and ran around the counter to grab her.

She stabbed out with the butcher knife. The blade shot between the first and second fingers of his splayed right hand and sawed deep into the flesh at the bottom of the V. Blood poured down. Pickering screamed in pain and

surprise—mostly surprise, she thought. Hyenas don't expect their victims to turn on th—

He reached out with his left hand, grabbed her wrist, twisted it. Something creaked. Or maybe snapped. Either way, pain bolted up her arm, as bright as light. She tried to hold on to the knife, but there was no chance. It went flying all the way across the room, and when he let go of her wrist, her right hand flopped, fingers splayed.

He bored in on her and Em pushed him backward, using both hands and ignoring the fresh scream of pain from her strained wrist. It was instinct only. Her rational mind would have told her that a push wasn't going to stop this guy, but her rational mind was now cringing in a corner of her head, able to do nothing but hope for the best.

He outweighed her, but her bottom was pressed against the chipped lip of the center island. He went staggering backward with a look of startlement that would have been comical in other circumstances, and came down on either one ice cube or a bunch of them. For a moment he looked like a cartoon character—Road Runner, perhaps—sprinting in place in an effort to stay on his feet. Then he stepped on more ice cubes (she saw them go spinning and glinting across the floor), went down hard, and rapped the back of his head against his newly dented refrigerator.

He held up his bleeding hand and looked at it. Then he looked at her. “You *cut* me,” he said. “You bitch, you dumb bitch, look at this, you *cut* me. Why did you cut me?”

He tried to scramble to his feet, but more ice cubes went zipping out from beneath him and he thumped down again. He pivoted on one knee, meaning to rise that way, and for a moment his back was to her. Em seized the chair's broken left arm from the center island. Ragged strands of duct tape still dangled from it. Pickering got to his feet and turned toward her. Emily was waiting. She brought the arm down on his forehead using both hands—her right one didn't want to close, but she made it. Some atavistic, survival-oriented part of her even remembered to choke up on the red maple rod, knowing it would maximize the force, and maximum force was good. It was a chair arm, after all, not a baseball bat.

There was a thump. It wasn't as loud as the swing door had been when he hit it coming in, but it still sounded loud enough, perhaps because the rain had slackened even more. For a moment nothing else happened, and then blood began to run out of his power haircut and over his forehead. She stared at him, into his eyes. He stared back with dazed incomprehension.

"Don't," he said feebly, and reached out one hand to take the chair arm from her.

"Yes," she said, and swung again, this time from the side: a slicing two-handed blow, her right hand giving up and letting go at the last moment, her left one holding firm. The end of the arm—ragged where it had broken, splinters sticking out—hammered into Pickering's right temple. This time the blood burst at once as his head snapped to the side, all the way to his left shoulder. Bright drops ran down his cheek and pattered onto the gray tile.

"Stop," he said thickly, pawing at the air with one hand. He looked like a drowning man begging for rescue.

"No," she said, and brought the arm down on his head again.

Pickering screamed and staggered away from her in a head-tucked hunch, trying to put the center island between them. He stepped on more ice cubes and skidded, but this time managed to stay upright. Only by luck, she had to believe, since he had to be all but out on his feet.

For a moment she almost let him go, thinking he would run out through the swing door. It was what she would have done. Then her dad spoke up, very calmly, in her head: "*He's after the knife, sweetie.*"

"No," she said, snarling it this time. "No, you *won't.*"

She tried to run around the other side of the island and head him off, but she couldn't run, not while she was dragging the shattered remains of the chair behind her like a ball and fucking chain—it was still duct-taped to her left knee. It banged against the island, slammed her in the butt, tried to get between her legs and trip her. The chair seemed to be on *his* side, and she was glad she had broken it.

Pickering got to the knife—it was lying against the bottom of the swing door—and fell on it like a football tackle covering a loose ball. He was making a guttural wheezing sound deep in his throat. Em reached him just as he started to turn over. She hammered him with the chair arm again and again,

shrieking, aware in some part of her mind that it wasn't heavy enough and she wasn't generating anywhere near the amount of force she *wanted* to generate. She could see her right wrist, already puffing up, trying to address the outrage perpetrated on it just as if it expected to survive this day.

Pickering collapsed on the knife and lay still. She backed away a little, gasping for breath, those little white comets once more flying across her field of vision.

Men spoke in her mind. This was not uncommon with her, and not always unwelcome. Sometimes, but not always.

Henry: *"Get that damned knife and put it right between his shoulder blades."*

Rusty: *"No, honey. Don't go close to him. That's what he expects. He's playing possum."*

Henry: *"Or the back of his neck. That's good, too. His stinking neck."*

Rusty: *"Reaching under him would be like sticking your hand into a hay baler, Emmy. You've got two choices. Beat him to death—"*

Henry, sounding reluctant but convinced: *"—or run."*

Well, maybe. And maybe not.

There was a drawer on this side of the island. She yanked it open, hoping for another knife—for *lots* of them: carving knives, filleting knives, steak knives, serrated bread knives. She would settle for a goddam *butter* knife. What she saw was mostly an array of fancy black plastic cooking tools: a pair of spatulas, a ladle, and one of those big serving spoons full of holes. There was some other bric-a-brac, but the most dangerous-looking thing her eye fell on was a potato peeler.

"Listen to me," she said. Her voice was hoarse, almost guttural. Her throat was dry. "I don't want to kill you, but I will if you make me. I've got a meat fork here. If you try to turn over, I'll stick it in the back of your neck and keep pushing until it comes out the front."

Did he believe her? That was one question. She was sure he'd removed all the knives except for the one underneath him on purpose, but could he be sure he'd gotten all the other sharp objects? Most men had no idea what was in the drawers of their kitchens—she knew this from life with Henry, and before Henry from life with father—but Pickering wasn't most men and this wasn't most kitchens. She had an idea it was more like an operating theater. Still,

given how dazed he was (*was* he dazed?), and how he must surely believe that a lapse of memory could get him killed, she thought the bluff might run. Only there was another question: Was he even hearing her? Or understanding her if he did? A bluff couldn't work if the person you were trying to bluff didn't understand the stakes.

But she wasn't going to stand here debating. That would be the worst thing she could do. She bent over, never taking her eyes from Pickering, and hooked her fingers under the last band of tape still binding her to the chair. The fingers of her right hand wanted even less to work now, but she made them. And her sweat-drenched skin helped. She shoved downward, and the tape started coming free with another ill-tempered ripping sound. She supposed it hurt, it left a bright-red band across her kneecap (for some reason the word *Jupiter* floated randomly through her mind), but she was far past feeling such things. It let go all at once and slid down to her ankle, wrinkled and twisted and sticking to itself. She shook it off her foot and sidled backward, free. Her head was pounding, either from exertion or from where he'd hit her while she was looking at the dead girl in the trunk of his Mercedes.

"Nicole," she said. "Her name was Nicole."

Naming the dead girl seemed to bring Em back to herself a little. Now the idea of trying to get the butcher knife out from under him seemed like madness. The part of herself that sometimes talked in her father's voice was right—just staying in the same room with Pickering was pressing her luck. Which left leaving. Only that.

"I'm going now," she said. "Do you hear me?"

He didn't move.

"I've got the meat fork. If you come after me, I'll stab you with it. I'll . . . I'll poke your eyes out. What you want to do is stay right where you are. Have you got that?"

He didn't move.

Emily backed away from him, then turned and left the kitchen by the door on the other side of the room. She was still holding the bloody chair arm.

## **There was a photograph on the wall by the bed.**

It was the dining room on the other side. There was a long table with a glass top. Around it were seven red maple chairs. The spot where the eighth belonged was vacant. Of course. As she studied the empty place at the “mother” end of the table, a memory came to her: blood blooming in a tiny seed pearl below her eye as Pickering said, *Okay, good, okay*. He had believed her when she said only Deke could know she might be inside the Pillbox, so he had thrown the little knife—Nicole’s little knife, she had thought then—into the sink.

So there had been a knife to threaten him with all along. Still was. In the sink. But she wasn’t going back in there now. No way.

She crossed the room and went down a hall with five doors, two on each side and one at the end. The first two doors she passed were open, on her left a bathroom and on her right a laundry room. The washing machine was a top loader, its hatch open. A box of Tide stood on the shelf next to it. A bloodstained shirt was lying halfway in and halfway out of the hatch. Nicole’s shirt, Emily was quite sure, although she couldn’t be positive. And if it *was* hers, why had Pickering been planning to wash it? Washing wouldn’t take out the holes. Emily remembered thinking there had been dozens, although that surely wasn’t possible. Was it?

She thought it was, actually: Pickering in a frenzy.

She opened the door beyond the bathroom and saw a guest room. It was nothing but a dark and sterile box starring a king bed so stringently neat, you could no doubt bounce a nickel on the counterpane. And had a maid made up that bed? *Our survey says no*, Em thought. *Our survey says no maid has ever set foot in this house. Only “nieces.”*

The door across from the guest room gave way to a study. It was every bit as sterile as the room it faced across the hall. There were two filing cabinets in one corner. There was a big desk with nothing on it but a Dell PC hooded with a transparent plastic dust cover. The floor was plain oak planks. There was no rug. There were no pictures on the wall. The single big window was shuttered, admitting only a few dull spokes of light. Like the guest room, this place looked dim and forgotten.

*He has never worked in here*, she thought, and knew it was true. It was stage dressing. The whole house was, including the room from which she had escaped—the room that looked like a kitchen but was actually an operating theater, complete with easy-clean counters and floors.

The door at the end of the hall was closed, and as she approached it, she knew it would be locked. She would be trapped at the end of this corridor if he entered it from the kitchen/dining-room end. Trapped with nowhere to run, and these days running was the only thing she was good at, the only thing she was good *for*.

She hitched up her shorts—they felt like they were floating on her now, with the back seam split open—and grasped the knob. She was so full of her premonition that for a moment she couldn't believe it when the knob turned in her hand. She pushed the door open and stepped into what had to be Pickering's bedroom. It was almost as sterile as the guest room, but not quite. For one thing, there were two pillows instead of just one, and the counterpane of the bed (which looked like a twin of the guest-room bed) had been turned back in a neat triangle, ready to admit the owner to the comfort of fresh sheets after a hard day's work. And there was a carpet on the floor. Just a cheap nylon-pile thing, but wall-to-wall. Henry no doubt would have called it a Carpet Barn special, but it matched the blue walls and made the room look less skeletal than the others. There was also a small desk—it looked like an old school desk—and a plain wooden chair. And although this was pretty small shakes compared to the study setup, with its big (and unfortunately shuttered) window and expensive computer, she had a feeling this desk had been *used*. That Pickering sat there writing longhand, hunched over like a child in a country schoolroom. Writing what she did not like to think.

The window in here was also big. And unlike the windows in the study and the guest room, it wasn't shuttered. Before Em could look out and see what lay beyond, her attention was drawn to a photograph on the wall by the bed. Not hung and certainly not framed, only tacked there with a pushpin. There were other tiny holes on the wall around it, as if other pictures had been pinned there over the years. This one was a color shot with 4-19-07 printed digitally in the right corner. Taken by an old-fashioned camera rather than a digital one, by the look of the paper, and not by anyone with much flair for photography.

On the other hand, perhaps the photographer had been excited. The way hyenas might get excited, she supposed, when sundown comes and there's fresh prey in the offing. It was blurry, as if taken with a telephoto lens, and the subject wasn't centered. The subject was a long-legged young woman wearing denim shorts and a cropped top that said BEER O'CLOCK BAR. She had a tray balanced on the fingers of her left hand, like a waitress in a jolly old Norman Rockwell painting. She was laughing. Her hair was blond. Em couldn't be sure it was Nicole, not from this blurred photo and those few shocked instants when she had been looking down at the dead girl in the trunk of the Mercedes . . . but she *was* sure. Her heart was sure.

Rusty: "*It doesn't matter, sweetie. You have to get out of here. You have to get yourself some running room.*"

As if to prove it, the door between the kitchen and the dining room banged open—almost hard enough to tear it from the hinges, it sounded like.

*No*, she thought. All the sensation went out of her middle. She didn't think she wet herself again, but wouldn't have been able to tell if she had. *No, it can't be.*

"Want to play rough?" Pickering called. His voice sounded dazed and cheerful. "Okay, I can play rough. Sure. Not a problem. You want it? You bet. Daddy's gonna bring it."

Coming. Crossing the dining room. She heard a thump followed by a rough clatter as he stumbled into one of the other chairs (perhaps the one at the "father" end of the table) and shoved it aside. The world swam away from her, growing gray even though this room was relatively bright now that the storm was unraveling.

She bit down on her split lip. This sent a fresh stream of blood down her chin, but it also brought color and reality back into the world. She slammed the door and grabbed for the lock. There *was* no lock. She looked around and spied the humble wooden chair sitting before the humble wooden desk. As Pickering broke into a shambling run past his laundry room and study—and did he have the butcher knife clutched in one hand? Of course he did—she snatched the chair, placed it under the knob, and tilted it. Only an instant later, he hit the door with both hands.

She thought that if this floor had also been oak planking, the chair would have skidded away like a shuffleboard weight. Perhaps she would have grabbed it and stood him off with it: Em the Fearless Lion Tamer. She didn't think so. In any case, there was that carpet. Cheap nylon pile, but deep—it had that going for it, at least. The tilted legs of the chair dug in and held, although she saw a ripple go through the carpet.

Pickering roared and began to beat on the door with his fists. She hoped he was still holding on to the knife as he did it; maybe he would inadvertently cut his own throat.

“Open this door!” he shouted. “Open it! You're only making it worse for yourself!”

*Like I could*, Emily thought, backing away. And looking around. What now? The window? What else? There was only the one door, so it had to be the window.

“You're making me mad, Lady Jane!”

*No, you were already mad. As in hatter.*

She could see the window was a Florida special, the kind made only for looking out of, not for opening. Because of the air-conditioning. So what was next? Hurtle through it like Clint Eastwood in one of those old spaghetti westerns? Sounded possible; it was certainly the kind of thing that had appealed to her as a kid, but she had an idea she'd cut herself to ribbons if she actually tried it. Clint Eastwood and The Rock and Steven Seagal had stuntmen going for them when it came to things like the old through-the-saloon-window sequences. And the stuntmen had special glass going for *them*.

She heard the rapid thump of footfalls beyond the door as he first backed up and then ran at it again. It was a heavy door, but Pickering wasn't kidding, and it shuddered in its frame. This time the chair jerked backward an inch or two before holding. Worse, that ripple went through the rug again and she heard a tearing sound that was not unlike the sound of duct tape letting go. He was remarkably lively for someone who had been beaten about the head and shoulders with a stout piece of red maple, but of course he was both crazy and just sane enough to know that if she got away, he wouldn't. She supposed that was a strong motivator.

*I should have used the whole fucking chair on him*, she thought.

“Want to play?” he panted. “*I’ll* play. Sure. Bet your butt. But you’re on *my* playground, okay? And here . . . I . . . *come!*” He hit the door again. It bucked in its frame, loose on its hinges now, and the chair jumped back another two or three inches. Em could see dark teardrop shapes between the tilted legs and the door: rips in the cheap carpet.

Out the window then. If she was going to die bleeding from Christ alone knew how many wounds, she would rather inflict them herself. Maybe . . . if she wrapped herself in the coverlet . . .

Then her eye fell on the desk.

“Mr. Pickering!” she called, grasping the desk by the sides. “Wait! I want to make a deal with you!”

“No deals with bitches, okay?” he said petulantly, but he had stopped for a moment—perhaps to get his breath back—and it gave her time. Time was all she wanted. Time was all she could possibly get from him; she didn’t really need him to tell her he wasn’t the sort of man who made deals with bitches. “What’s your big plan? Tell Daddy Jim.”

Currently the desk was her plan. She picked it up, half certain her strained lower back would just pop like a balloon. But the desk was light, and lighter still when several rubber-banded stacks of what looked like university blue books came tumbling out.

“What are you doing?” he asked sharply, and then: “Don’t do that!”

She ran at the window, then stopped short and threw the desk. The sound of the breaking glass was enormous. Without pausing to think or look—thinking would do her no good at this point, and looking would only scare her if the drop was far—she yanked the coverlet from the bed.

Pickering hit the door again, and although the chair held again (she knew this; if it let go he would have been running across the room and grabbing for her), something gave a loud wooden crack.

Em wrapped the coverlet around her from chin to feet, for a moment looking like an N.C. Wyeth Indian woman about to set off into a snowstorm. Then she leaped through the jagged hole in the window just as the door crashed open behind her. Several arrows of glass sticking out of the frame wounded the coverlet, but not a single one touched Em.

“*Oh, you fucking annoying bitch!*” Pickering screamed behind her—*close* behind her—and then she was sailing.

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### **Gravity is everyone’s mother.**

She had been a tomboy as a kid, preferring boy’s games (the best one was simply called Guns) in the woods behind their house in suburban Chicago to goofing around with Barbie and Ken on the front porch. She lived in her Toughskins and shell tops, hair scooped back behind her head in a ponytail. She and her bestfriend Becka watched old Eastwood and Schwarzenegger movies on TV instead of the Olsen twins, and when they watched *Scooby-Doo*, they identified with the dog rather than Velma or Daphne. For two years in grammar school, their lunches were Scooby Snacks.

And they climbed trees, of course. Emily seemed to remember her and Becka hanging out in the trees in their respective backyards for one whole summer. They might have been nine that year. Other than her father’s lesson on how to fall, the only thing Em remembered clearly about the tree-climbing summer was her mother putting some kind of white cream on her nose every morning and telling her, “*Don’t wipe that off, Emmy!*” in her obey-me-or-die voice.

One day, Becka lost her balance and came very close to falling fifteen feet to the Jackson lawn (maybe only ten, but at the time it had looked to the girls like twenty-five . . . even fifty). She saved herself by grabbing a branch, but then hung there, wailing for help.

Rusty had been mowing the lawn. He strolled over—yes, strolled; he even took time to kill the Briggs & Stratton—and held out his arms. “Drop,” he said, and Becka, only two years past her belief in Santa and still sublimely trusting, dropped. Rusty caught her easily, then called Em down from the tree. He made both girls sit at the base. Becka was crying a little, and Em was scared—mostly that tree climbing would now become an act that was *forbidden*, like walking down to the corner store alone after seven P.M.

Rusty did not forbid them (although Emily's mother might have, if she had been looking out the kitchen window). What he did was teach them how to fall. And then they practiced for almost an hour.

What a cool day that had been.

• • •

As she went out through the window, Emily saw it was a damned good distance to the flagged patio below. Maybe only ten feet, but it looked like twenty-five as she dropped with the shredded coverlet fluttering around her. Or fifty.

*Let your knees give way,* Rusty had told them sixteen or seventeen years before, during Tree-Climbing Summer, also known as the Summer of the White Nose. *Don't ask them to take the shock. They will—in nine cases out of ten, if the drop isn't too far, they will—but you could end up with a broken bone. Hip, leg, or ankle. Ankle, most likely. Remember that gravity is everyone's mother. Give in to her. Let her hug you. Let your knees give way, then tuck and roll.*

Em hit the red Spanish-style flagstones and let her knees give way. At the same time she shoulder-checked the air, throwing her weight to the left. She tucked her head and rolled. There was no pain—no *immediate* pain—but a vast jarring went through her, as if her body had become an empty shaft and someone had dropped some large piece of furniture right down the center. But she kept her head from rapping the flagstones. And she didn't think she had broken either leg, although only standing would prove her right.

She struck a metal patio table hard enough to knock it over. Then she got to her feet, still not entirely sure her body was intact enough to do this until it actually did. She looked up and saw Pickering peering out the broken window. His face was cramped into a grimace, and he was brandishing the knife.

*"Stop it!"* he shouted. *"Stop running away and hold still!"*

*As if,* Em thought. The last of that afternoon's rain had turned to fog, dotting her upturned face with dew. It felt heavenly. She gave him the finger, then shook it for emphasis.

Pickering roared, *"Don't you flip me the bird, you cunt!"* and threw the knife at her. It didn't even come close. It struck the flagstones with a clang and

skittered away beneath his gas grill in two pieces, blade and handle. When she looked up again, the shattered window was vacant.

Her dad's voice told her Pickering was coming, but Em hardly needed that update. She went to the edge of the patio—walking easily, not limping, although she supposed she might owe that to the adrenaline surge—and looked down. Three measly feet to the sand and sea oats. A bunny compared to the drop she had just survived. Beyond the patio was the beach, where she had done so many morning runs.

She looked the other way, toward the road, but that was no good. The ugly concrete wall was too high. And Pickering was coming. Of course he was.

She braced one hand on the ornamental brickwork, then dropped to the sand. Sea oats tickled her thighs. She hurried up the dune between the Pillbox and the beach, hitching at her ruined shorts and looking repeatedly back over her shoulder. Nothing . . . still nothing . . . and then Pickering burst out through the back door, yelling at her to stop right where she was. He had ditched the yellow slicker and had grabbed some other sharp object. He was waving it in his left hand as he ran down the walk to the patio. She couldn't see what it was, and didn't want to. She didn't want him that close.

She could outrun him. Something in his gait said he would be fast for a little while and then flag, no matter how strongly his insanity and his fear of exposure pricked him on.

She thought: *It's as if I was in training for this all along.*

Yet she almost made a crucial mistake when she got to the beach, almost turned south. That would have taken her to the end of Vermillion Key in less than a quarter of a mile. Of course she could hail the drawbridge gatehouse when she got there (scream her lungs out for help, actually), but if Pickering had done something to Deke Hollis—and she was afraid that was the case—she would then be toast. There might be a passing boat she could scream to, but she had an idea Pickering was far past any restraint; at this point he would probably be willing to stab her to death on the stage of Radio City Music Hall as the Rockettes looked on.

So she turned north instead, where almost two miles of empty beach lay between her and the Grass Shack. She stripped off her sneakers and began to run.

**What she had not expected was the beauty.**

This wasn't the first time she had run on the beach after one of these brief but powerful afternoon storms, and the feeling of wetness accumulating on her face and arms was familiar. So was the heightened sound of the surf (the tide was on the come now, the beach narrowing to a stripe) and the heightened aromas: salt, seaweed, flowers, even wet wood. She had expected to be frightened—the way she supposed people in combat were frightened while doing dangerous jobs that usually (but not always) came out all right. What she had not expected was the beauty.

The fog had come in from the Gulf. The water was a dull green phantom, heaving shoreward through the white. The fish must have been running, because it was a pelican all-you-can-eat buffet out there. She saw most as projected shadows, folding their wings and plummeting at the water. A few others bobbed up and down on the waves closer in, seemingly as dead as decoys, but watching her. Out there to her left, the sun was a small orange-yellow coin peering dully.

She was afraid her calf would cramp up again—if that happened, she was done, finished. But this was work it had become used to, and it felt loose enough, if a little too warm. Her lower back was more worrisome, broadcasting a twinge with every third or fourth stride and sending out a heavier flash of pain every two dozen or so. But she talked to it inside her head, babied it, promised it hot baths and shiatsu massages when this was over and the feral creature behind her was safely incarcerated in the Collier County jail. It seemed to work. Either that or running was itself a kind of massage. She had reasons to think this was so.

Pickering bellowed twice more for her to stop, then fell silent, saving his breath for the chase. She looked back once and thought he was perhaps seventy yards behind, the only thing about him standing out in the misty late afternoon his red Izod shirt. She looked again and he was clearer; she could see his blood-splattered khaki shorts. Fifty yards behind. But panting. Good. Panting was good.

Emily leaped over a tangle of driftwood and her shorts slid down, threatening to hobble or even trip her up. She didn't have time to stop and take them off so she yanked them up savagely, wishing there was a drawstring she could pull, maybe even clutch in her teeth.

There was a yell from behind her and she thought there was fear as well as fury in it. It sounded as though Pickering was finally realizing this might not go his way. She risked another look back, hoping, and her hope was not in vain. He had tripped over the driftwood she had skipped over and gone to his knees. His new weapon lay before him, making an X in the sand. Scissors, then. Kitchen scissors. The big kind cooks used to snip gristle and bone. He snatched them up and scrambled to his feet.

Emily ran on, increasing her speed a little bit at a time. She didn't plan on doing this, but she didn't think it was her body taking over, either. There was something between body and mind, some interface. That was the part of her that wanted to be in charge now, and Em let it take over. That part wanted her to turn it on just bit by bit, almost gently, so that the animal behind her wouldn't realize what she was doing. That part wanted to tease Pickering into increasing his own speed to keep up with her, maybe even close the gap a little. That part wanted to use him up and blow him out. That part wanted to hear him gasping and wheezing. Maybe even coughing, if he was a smoker (although that seemed too much to hope for). Then she would put herself into the overdrive gear she now had but rarely used; that gear always seemed like tempting fate, somehow—like donning wax wings on a sunny day. But now she had no choice. And if she had tempted fate, it had been when she'd swerved to look into the Pillbox's flagged courtyard in the first place.

*And what choice did I have, once I saw her hair? Maybe it was fate that tempted me.*

She ran on, her feet printing the sand with her passing. She looked back again and saw Pickering only forty yards behind, but forty yards was okay. Given how red and strained his face was, forty was very okay.

To the west and directly overhead, the clouds tore open with tropical suddenness, instantly brightening the fog from dreary gray to dazzling white. Patches of sun dotted the beach with spotlights; Em ran into one and then out in a single stride, feeling the temperature spike with returning humidity and

then drop again as the fog once more took her in. It was like running past an open Laundromat door on a cold day. Ahead of her, hazy blue opened in a long cat's eye. A double rainbow leaped out above it, each color blazing and distinct. The westward legs plunged into the unraveling fog and doused themselves in the water; those curving down toward the mainland disappeared into the palms and waxy fiddlewoods.

Her right foot clipped her left ankle and she stumbled. For a moment she was on the verge of falling, and then she regained her balance. But now he was just thirty yards behind, and thirty was too close. No more looking at rainbows. If she didn't take care of business, the ones up ahead would be her last.

She faced forward again and there was a man there, standing ankle-deep in the surf and staring at them. He was wearing nothing but a pair of cutoff denim shorts and a sopping red neckerchief. His skin was brown; his hair and eyes were dark. He was short, but his body was as trim as a glove. He walked out of the water, and she could see the concern on his face. Oh, thank God, she could see the concern.

"Help!" she screamed. *"Help me!"*

The look of concern deepened. *"Señora? Qué ha pasado? Qué es lo que va mal?"*

She knew some Spanish—driblets and drablets—but at the sound of his, all of hers went out of her mind. It didn't matter. This was almost certainly one of the groundskeepers from one of the big houses. He had taken advantage of the rain to cool off in the Gulf. He might not have a green card, but he didn't need one to save her life. He was a man, he was clearly strong, and he was concerned. She threw herself into his arms and felt the water on him soak onto her skin and shirt.

"He's crazy!" she shouted into his face. She could do this because they were almost exactly the same height. And at least one Spanish word came back to her. A valuable one, she thought, in this situation. *"Loco! Loco, loco!"*

The guy turned, one arm firmly around her. Emily looked where he was looking and saw Pickering. Pickering was grinning. It was an easy grin, rather apologetic. Even the blood spattered on his shorts and swelling face didn't render the grin entirely unconvincing. And there was no sign of the scissors,

that was the worst. His hands—the right one slashed and now clotting between the first two fingers—were empty.

“*Es mi esposa,*” he said. His tone was as apologetic—and as convincing—as his grin. Even the fact that he was panting seemed all right. “*No te preocupes. Ella tiene . . .*” His Spanish either failed him or seemed to fail him. He spread his hands, still grinning. “Problems? She has problems?”

The Latino’s eyes lit with comprehension and relief. “*Problemas?*”

“*Sí,*” Pickering agreed. Then one of his spread hands went to his mouth and made a bottle-tipping gesture.

“Ah!” the Latino said, nodding. “*Dreenk!*”

“No!” Em cried, sensing the guy was about to actually push her into Pickering’s arms, wanting to be free of this unexpected *problema*, this unexpected *señora*. She blew breath into the man’s face to show there was no liquor on it. Then inspiration struck and she tapped her swollen mouth. “*Loco!* He did this!”

“Nah, she did it to herself, mate,” Pickering said. “Okay?”

“Okay,” the Latino said, and nodded, but he didn’t push Emily toward Pickering after all. Now he seemed undecided. And another word came to Emily, something dredged up from some educational children’s show she had watched—probably with the faithful Becka—when she wasn’t watching *Scooby-Doo*.

“*Peligro,*” she said, forcing herself not to shout. Shouting was what crazy *esposas* did. She pinned the Latino swimmer’s eyes with her own. “*Peligro. Him! Señor Peligro!*”

Pickering laughed and reached for her. Panicked at how close he was (it was like having a hay baler suddenly grow hands), she pushed him. He wasn’t expecting it, and he was still out of breath. He didn’t fall down but did stagger back a step, eyes widening. And the scissors fell out from between the waistband of his shorts and the small of his back, where he had stashed them. For a moment all three of them stared at the metal X on the sand. The waves roared monotonously. Birds cried from inside the unraveling fog.

### **Then she was up and running again.**

Pickering's easy grin—the one he must have used on so many “nieces”—resurfaced. “I can explain that, but I don't have enough of the lingo. Perfectly good explanation, okay?” He tapped his chest like Tarzan. “*No Señor Loco, no Señor Peligro, okay?*” And it might have flown. But then, still smiling, pointing at Em, he said: “*Ella es bobo perra.*”

She had no idea what *bobo perra* was, but she saw the way Pickering's face changed when he said it. Mostly it had to do with his upper lip, which wrinkled and then lifted, as the top half of a dog's snout does when it snarls. The Latino pushed Em a step backward with a sweep of his arm. Not completely behind him, but almost, and the meaning was clear: protection. Then he bent down, reaching for the metal X on the sand.

If he had reached before pushing Em back, things might still have worked out. But Pickering saw things tilting away from him and went for the scissors himself. He got them first, fell on his knees, and stabbed the points through the Latino's sand-caked left foot. The Latino shrieked, his eyes flying wide open.

He reached for Pickering, but Pickering first fell to one side, then got up (*Still so quick*, Em thought) and danced away. Then he moved back in. He curled an arm around the Latino's trim shoulders in a just-pals embrace, and drove the scissors into the Latino's chest. The Latino tried to back away, but Pickering held him fast, stabbing and stabbing. None of the strokes went deep—Pickering was working too fast for that—but blood flowed everywhere.

“*No!*” Emily screamed. “*No, stop it!*”

Pickering turned toward her for just an instant, eyes bright and unspeakable, then stabbed the Latino in the mouth, the scissors going deep enough for the steel finger loops to clash on the man's teeth. “Okay?” he asked. “Okay? That okay? That work for you, you fucking beaner?”

Emily looked around for anything, a single piece of driftwood to strike him with, and there was nothing. When she looked back, the scissors were sticking out of the Latino's eye. He crumpled slowly, almost seeming to bow from the waist, and Pickering bent with him, trying to pull the scissors free.

Em ran at him, screaming. She lowered her shoulder and hit him in the gut, realizing in some distant part of her consciousness that it was a soft gut—a lot of good meals had been stored there.

Pickering went sprawling on his back, panting for breath, glaring at her. When she tried to pull away, he grasped her left leg and dug in with his fingernails. Beside her, the Latino man lay on his side, twitching and covered with blood. The only feature she could still make out on a face that had been handsome thirty seconds before was his nose.

“Come here, Lady Jane,” Pickering said, and pulled her toward him. “Let me entertain you, okay? Entertainment okay with you, you useless bitch?” He was strong, and although she clawed at the sand, he was winning. She felt hot breath on the ball of her foot, and then his teeth sank gum-deep into her heel.

There had never been such pain; it made every grain on the beach jump clear in her wide eyes. Em screamed and lashed out with her right foot. Mostly by luck—she was far beyond such things as aim—she struck him, and hard. He howled (a muffled howl), and the needling agony in her left heel stopped as suddenly as it had begun, leaving only a burning hurt. Something had snapped in Pickering’s face. She both felt it and heard it. She thought his cheekbone. Maybe his nose.

She rolled to her hands and knees, her swollen wrist bellowing with pain that almost rivaled the pain in her foot. For a moment she looked, even with her torn shorts once more sagging from her hips, like a runner in the blocks, waiting for the gun. Then she was up and running again, only now at a kind of skipping limp. She angled closer to the water. Her head was roaring with incoherencies (that she must look like the limping deputy in some old TV western or other, for instance—the thought just whipping through her head, there and then gone), but the survival-oriented part of her was still lucid enough to want packed sand to run on. She yanked frantically at her shorts, and saw that her hands were covered with sand and blood. With a sob, she wiped first one and then the other against her T-shirt. She threw one glance back over her right shoulder, hoping against hope, but he was coming again.

She tried as hard as she could, *ran* as hard as she could, and the sand—cold and wet where she was running—soothed her fiery heel a little, but she could still get into nothing resembling her old gait. She looked back and saw him

gaining, putting everything he had into a final sprint. Ahead of her the rainbows were fading as the day grew relentlessly brighter and hotter.

She tried as hard as she could and knew it wasn't going to be enough. She could outrun an old lady, she could outrun an old man, she could outrun her poor sad husband, but she couldn't outrun the mad bastard behind her. He was going to catch her. She looked for a weapon to hit him with when he did, but there was still nothing. She saw the charred remains of someone's beach-party campfire, but it was too far ahead and too far inland, just below the place where the dunes and sea oats took over from the beach. He would catch her even sooner if she diverted in that direction, where the sand was soft and treacherous. Things were bad enough down here by the water. She could hear him closing in, panting harshly and snorting back blood from his broken nose. She could even hear the rapid whack of his sneakers on the damp sand. She wished so hard for someone else on the beach that for a moment she hallucinated a tall, white-haired guy with a big bent nose and rough dark skin. Then she realized her yearning mind had conjured her own father—a last hope—and the illusion blew away.

He got close enough to reach out for her. His hand batted the back of her shirt, almost caught the fabric, fell away. Next time it wouldn't. She swerved into the water, splashing in first to her ankles, then to her calves. It was the only thing she could think of, the last thing. She had an idea—unformed, inarticulate—of either swimming away from him or at least facing him in the water, where they might be on more even terms; if nothing else, water might slow the strokes of the awful scissors. If she could get deep enough.

Before she could throw herself forward and begin stroking—before she could even get as far in as her thighs—he grabbed her by the neck of her shirt and pulled her backward, dragging her toward the shore again.

Em saw the scissors appear over her left shoulder and grabbed them. She tried to twist, but it was hopeless. Pickering had braced himself in knee-deep water, his legs apart, his feet planted firmly against the sand-sucking rush of the retreating waves. She tripped over one of them and fell against him. They splashed down together.

Pickering's reaction was fast and unmistakable, even in the wet confusion: pushing and bucking and convulsive thrashing. Truth lit up in her head like

fireworks on a dark night. He couldn't swim. Pickering couldn't swim. He had a house by the Gulf of Mexico, but he couldn't swim. And it made perfect sense. His visits to Vermillion Key had been dedicated to indoor sports.

She rolled away from him and he didn't try to grab her. He was sitting chest-deep in the rolling boil of the waves, which were still agitated from the storm, and all his efforts were focused on scrambling up and getting his precious respiration away from a medium it had never learned how to cope with.

Em would have spoken to him if she could have wasted the breath. Would have said, *If I'd known, we could have ended this right away. And that poor man would still be alive.*

Instead, she waded forward, reached out, and grabbed him.

"No!" he screamed. He beat at her with both hands. They were empty—he must have lost the scissors when he fell—and he was too scared and disorganized to even make fists. *"No, don't! Let go, you bitch!"*

Em didn't. She dragged him deeper instead. He could have broken her hold, and easily, if he had been able to control his panic, but he couldn't. And she realized it was probably more than the inability to swim; he was having some sort of phobic reaction.

*What kind of a man with a water phobia would own a house on the Gulf? He'd have to be crazy.*

That actually got her laughing, although he was beating on her, his madly waving hands slapping first her right cheek then hard on the left side of her head. A surge of green water slopped into her mouth and she spluttered it back out. She dragged him deeper, saw a big wave coming—smooth and glassy, just a little foam starting to break at the top—and shoved him into it, facefirst. His screams became choked gurgles that disappeared as he went under. He thrust and bucked and twisted in her grip. The big wave washed over her and she held her breath. For a moment they were both under and she could see him, his face contorted into a pale mask of fear and horror that rendered it inhuman, and so turned him into what he really was. A galaxy of grit lazed between them in the green. One small, clueless fish zipped past. Pickering's eyes bulged from their sockets. His power haircut wafted, and this was what she watched. She watched it closely as a silver track of bubbles drifted up from

her nose. And when the strands of hair reversed direction, drifting in the direction of Texas rather than that of Florida, she shoved him with all of her might and let him go. Then she planted her feet on the sandy bottom and pistoned upward.

She rose into brilliant air, gasping. She tore breath after breath out of it, then began to walk backward a step at a time. It was hard going, even in close to shore. The retreating wave sucking past her hips and between her legs was almost strong enough to qualify as an undertow. A little farther out, it *would* be. Farther out still it would become a rip, and there even a strong swimmer would have little chance, unless he kept his head and stroked sideways, cutting a long slow angle back to safety.

She floundered, lost her balance, sat down, and another wave drenched her. It felt wonderful. Cold and wonderful. For the first time since Amy's death, she had a moment of feeling good. Better than good, actually; every part of her hurt, and she understood that she was crying again, but she felt divine.

Em struggled to her feet, shirt sopping and stuck to her midriff. She saw some faded blue thing floating away, looked down at herself, looked back, and realized she had lost her shorts.

"That's all right, they were ruined anyway," she said, and began to laugh as she backed toward the beach: now kneedeep, now shin-deep, now with only her feet in the boil. She could have stood there for a long time. The cold water almost doused the pain in her burning heel, and she was sure the salt was good for the wound; didn't they say the human mouth was the most germ-laden living thing on earth?

"Yes," she said, still laughing, "but who the hell is th—"

Then Pickering surfaced, screaming. He was now about twenty-five feet out. He waved wildly with both hands. "*Help me!*" he screamed. "*I can't swim!*"

"I know," Em said. She raised one hand in a bon voyage wave and twiddled the fingers. "And you may even meet a shark. Deke Hollis told me last week they're running."

"*Help—*" A wave buried him. She thought he might not emerge, but he did. He was now thirty feet out. Thirty, at least. "*—me! Please!*"

His vitality was nothing short of amazing, especially since what he was doing—flailing his arms at the water, mostly, as if he thought he could fly away

like a seagull—was counterproductive, but he was drifting out farther all the time, and there was no one on the beach to save him.

No one but her.

There was really no way he could get back in, she was sure of it, but she limped her way up to the remains of the beach-party campfire and plucked up the largest of the charred logs, just the same. Then she stood there with her shadow trailing out behind her and just watched.

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### **I suppose I prefer to think that.**

He lasted a long time. She had no idea exactly how long, because he had taken her watch. After a while he stopped screaming. Then he was just a white circle above the dark red blot of his Izod shirt, and pale arms that were trying to fly. Then all at once he was gone. She thought there might be one more sighting of an arm, surfacing like a periscope and waving around, but there wasn't. He was just gone. *Glub*. She was actually disappointed. Later she would be her real self again—a better self, maybe—but right now she wanted him to keep suffering. She wanted him to die in terror, and not quickly. For Nicole and all the other nieces there might have been before Nicole.

Am I a niece now?

She supposed in a way she was. The last niece. The one who had run as fast as she could. The one who had survived. She sat down by the ruins of the campfire and cast the burned butt end of log away. It probably wouldn't have made a very good weapon, anyhow; probably would have shattered like an artist's charcoal stick when she fetched him the first lick. The sun was a deepening orange, kindling the western horizon. Soon the horizon would catch fire.

She thought about Henry. She thought about Amy. There was nothing there, but there had been once—something as beautiful as a double rainbow over the beach—and that was nice to know, nice to remember. She thought of her father. Soon she would get up, and trudge down to the Grass Shack, and

call him. But not yet. Not quite yet. For now it was all right to sit with her feet planted in the sand and her aching arms around her drawn-up knees.

The waves came in. There was no sign of her torn blue shorts or Pickering's red golf shirt. The Gulf had taken them both. Had he drowned? She supposed that was the likeliest thing, but the way he had gone down so suddenly, without so much as a final wave . . .

"I think something got him," she said to the deepening air. "I suppose I prefer to think that. God knows why."

*"Because you're human, sweetie,"* her father said. *"Only that."* And she supposed it was that true and that simple.

In a horror movie, Pickering would make one last stand: either come roaring out of the surf or be waiting for her, dripping but still his old lively self, in the bedroom closet when she got back. But this wasn't a horror movie, it was her life. Her own little life. She would live it, starting with the long, limping walk back to where there was a house and a key to fit it hidden in a Sucrets box under the old ugly gnome with the faded red hat. She would use it, and she would use the telephone, too. She would call her father. Then she would call the police. Later, she supposed, she would call Henry. She guessed Henry still had a right to know she was all right, although he would not have it always. Or, she guessed, even want to have it.

On the Gulf, three pelicans swooped low, skimming the water, then rose, looking down. She watched them, holding her breath, as they reached a point of perfect equilibrium in the orange air. Her face—mercifully she didn't know this—was that of the child who might have lived to climb trees.

The three birds folded their wings and dove in formation.

Emily applauded, even though it hurt her swollen right wrist, and cried, *"Yo, pelicans!"*

Then she wiped her arm across her eyes, pushed back her hair, got to her feet, and began to walk home.

# Harvey's Dream

Janet turns from the sink and, boom, all at once her husband of nearly thirty years is sitting at the kitchen table in a white T-shirt and a pair of Big Dog boxers, watching her.

More and more often she has found this weekday commodore of Wall Street in just this place and dressed in just this fashion come Saturday morning: slumped at the shoulder and blank in the eye, a white scruff showing on his cheeks, man-tits sagging out the front of his T, hair standing up in back like Alfalfa of the Little Rascals grown old and stupid. Janet and her friend Hannah have frightened each other lately (like little girls telling ghost stories during a sleepover) by swapping Alzheimer's tales: who can no longer recognize his wife, who can no longer remember the names of her children.

But she doesn't really believe these silent Saturday-morning appearances have anything to do with early-onset Alzheimer's; on any given weekday morning Harvey Stevens is ready and raring to go by six-forty-five, a man of sixty who looks fifty (well, fifty-four) in either of his best suits, and who can still cut a trade, buy on margin, or sell short with the best of them.

No, she thinks, this is merely practicing to be old, and she hates it. She's afraid that when he retires it will be this way every morning, at least until she gives him a glass of orange juice and asks him (with an increasing impatience she won't be able to help) if he wants cereal or just toast. She's afraid she'll turn from whatever she's doing and see him sitting there in a bar of far too brilliant morning sun, Harvey in the morning, Harvey in his T-shirt and his boxer shorts, legs spread apart so she can view the meagre bulge of his basket (should she care to) and see the yellow calluses on his great toes, which always make her think of Wallace Stevens having on about the Emperor of Ice Cream. Sitting there silent and dopyly contemplative instead of ready and raring, psyching himself up for the day. God, she hopes she's wrong. It makes life seem

so thin, so stupid somehow. She can't help wondering if this is what they fought through for, raised and married off their three girls for, got past his inevitable middle-aged affair for, worked for, and sometimes (let's face it) grabbed for. If this is where you come out of the deep dark woods, Janet thinks, this . . . this parking lot . . . then why does anyone do it?

But the answer is easy. Because you didn't know. You discarded most of the lies along the way but held on to the one that said life *mattered*. You kept a scrapbook devoted to the girls, and in it they were still young and still interesting in their possibilities: Trisha, the eldest, wearing a top hat and waving a tinfoil wand over Tim, the cocker spaniel; Jenna, frozen in mid-jump halfway through the lawn sprinkler, her taste for dope, credit cards, and older men still far over the horizon; Stephanie, the youngest, at the county spelling bee, where *cantaloupe* turned out to be her Waterloo. Somewhere in most of these pictures (usually in the background) were Janet and the man she had married, always smiling, as if it were against the law to do anything else.

Then one day you made the mistake of looking over your shoulder and discovered that the girls were grown and that the man you had struggled to stay married to was sitting with his legs apart, his fish-white legs, staring into a bar of sun, and by God maybe he looked fifty-four in either of his best suits, but sitting there at the kitchen table like that he looked seventy. Hell, seventy-five. He looked like what the goons on *The Sopranos* called a mope.

She turns back to the sink and sneezes delicately, once, twice, a third time.

"How are they this morning?" he asks, meaning her sinuses, meaning her allergies. The answer is not very good, but, like a surprising number of bad things, her summer allergies have their sunny side. She no longer has to sleep with him and fight for her share of the covers in the middle of the night; no longer has to listen to the occasional muffled fart as Harvey soldiers ever deeper into sleep. Most nights during the summer she gets six, even seven hours, and that's more than enough. When fall comes and he moves back in from the guest room, it will drop to four, and much of that will be troubled.

One year, she knows, he won't move back in. And although she doesn't tell him so—it would hurt his feelings, and she still doesn't like to hurt his feelings; this is what now passes for love between them, at least going from her direction to his—she will be glad.

She sighs and reaches into the pot of water in the sink. Gropes around in it. “Not so bad,” she says.

And then, just when she is thinking (and not for the first time) about how this life holds no more surprises, no unplumbed marital depths, he says in a strangely casual voice, “It’s a good thing you weren’t sleeping with me last night, Jax. I had a bad dream. I actually screamed myself awake.”

She’s startled. How long has it been since he called her Jax instead of Janet or Jan? The last is a nickname she secretly hates. It makes her think of that syrupy-sweet actress on *Lassie* when she was a kid, the little boy (Timmy, his name was Timmy) always fell down a well or got bitten by a snake or trapped under a rock, and what kind of parents put a kid’s life in the hands of a fucking collie?

She turns to him again, forgetting the pot with the last egg still in it, the water now long enough off the boil to be lukewarm. He had a bad dream? Harvey? She tries to remember when Harvey has mentioned having had any kind of dream and has no luck. All that comes is a vague memory of their courtship days, Harvey saying something like “I dream of you,” she herself young enough to think it sweet instead of lame.

“You what?”

“Screamed myself awake,” he says. “Did you not hear me?”

“No.” Still looking at him. Wondering if he’s kidding her. If it’s some kind of bizarre morning joke. But Harvey is not a joking man. His idea of humor is telling anecdotes at dinner about his Army days. She has heard all of them at least a hundred times.

“I was screaming words, but I wasn’t really able to say them. It was like . . . I don’t know . . . I couldn’t close my mouth around them. I sounded like I’d had a stroke. And my voice was lower. Not like my own voice at all.” He pauses. “I heard myself, and made myself stop. But I was shaking all over, and I had to turn on the light for a little while. I tried to pee, and I couldn’t. These days it seems like I can always pee—a little, anyway—but not this morning at two-forty-seven.” He pauses, sitting there in his bar of sun. She can see dust motes dancing in it. They seem to give him a halo.

“What was your dream?” she asks, and here is an odd thing: for the first time in maybe five years, since they stayed up until midnight discussing

whether to hold the Motorola stock or sell it (they wound up selling), she's interested in something he has to say.

"I don't know if I want to tell you," he says, sounding uncharacteristically shy. He turns, picks up the pepper mill, and begins to toss it from hand to hand.

"They say if you tell your dreams they won't come true," she says to him, and here is Odd Thing No. 2: all at once Harvey looks there, in a way he hasn't looked to her in years. Even his shadow on the wall above the toaster oven looks somehow more there. She thinks, He looks as though he matters, and why should that be? Why, when I was just thinking that life is thin, should it seem thick? This is a summer morning in late June. We are in Connecticut. When June comes we are always in Connecticut. Soon one of us will get the newspaper, which will be divided into three parts, like Gaul.

"Do they say so?" He considers the idea, eyebrows raised (she needs to pluck them again, they are getting that wild look, and he never knows), tossing the pepper mill from hand to hand. She would like to tell him to stop doing that, it's making her nervous (like the exclamatory blackness of his shadow on the wall, like her very beating heart, which has suddenly begun to accelerate its rhythm for no reason at all), but she doesn't want to distract him from whatever is going on in his Saturday-morning head. And then he puts the pepper mill down anyway, which should be all right but somehow isn't, because it has its own shadow—it runs out long on the table like the shadow of an oversized chess piece, even the toast crumbs lying there have shadows, and she has no idea why that should frighten her but it does. She thinks of the Cheshire Cat telling Alice, "We're all mad here," and suddenly she doesn't want to hear Harvey's stupid dream, the one from which he awakened himself screaming and sounding like a man who has had a stroke. Suddenly she doesn't want life to be anything but thin. Thin is okay, thin is good, just look at the actresses in the movies if you doubt it.

Nothing must announce itself, she thinks feverishly. Yes, feverishly; it's as if she's having a hot flash, although she could have sworn all that nonsense ended two or three years ago. Nothing must announce itself, it's Saturday morning and nothing must announce itself.

She opens her mouth to tell him she got it backward, what they really say is that if you tell your dreams they will come true, but it's too late, he's already talking, and it occurs to her that this is her punishment for dismissing life as thin. Life is actually like a Jethro Tull song, thick as a brick, how could she have ever thought otherwise?

"I dreamed it was morning and I came down to the kitchen," he says. "Saturday morning, just like this, only you weren't up yet."

"I'm always up before you on Saturday morning," she says.

"I know, but this was a dream," he says patiently, and she can see the white hairs on the insides of his thighs, where the muscles are wasted and starved. Once he played tennis, but those days are done. She thinks, with a viciousness that is entirely unlike her, You will have a heart attack, white man, that's what will finish you, and maybe they'll discuss giving you an obit in the *Times*, but if a B-movie actress from the fifties died that day, or a semi-famous ballerina from the forties, you won't even get that.

"But it was like this," he says. "I mean, the sun was shining in." He raises a hand and stirs the dust motes into lively life around his head and she wants to scream at him not to do that.

"I could see my shadow on the floor and it never looked so bright or so thick." He pauses, then smiles, and she sees how cracked his lips are. "*Bright's* a funny word to use for a shadow, isn't it? *Thick*, too."

"Harvey—"

"I crossed to the window," he says, "and I looked out, and I saw there was a dent in the side of the Friedmans' Volvo, and I knew—somehow—that Frank had been out drinking and that the dent happened coming home."

She suddenly feels that she will faint. She saw the dent in the side of Frank Friedman's Volvo herself, when she went to the door to see if the newspaper had come (it hadn't), and she thought the same thing, that Frank had been out at the Gourd and scraped something in the parking lot. How does the other guy look? had been her exact thought.

The idea that Harvey has also seen this comes to her, that he is goofing with her for some strange reason of his own. Certainly it's possible; the guest room where he sleeps on summer nights has an angle on the street. Only Harvey isn't that sort of man. "Goofing" is not Harvey Stevens's "thing."

There is sweat on her cheeks and brow and neck, she can feel it, and her heart is beating faster than ever. There really is a sense of something looming, and why should this be happening now? Now, when the world is quiet, when prospects are tranquil? If I asked for this, I'm sorry, she thinks . . . or maybe she's actually praying. Take it back, please take it back.

"I went to the refrigerator," Harvey is saying, "and I looked inside, and I saw a plate of devilled eggs with a piece of Saran wrap over them. I was delighted—I wanted lunch at seven in the morning!"

He laughs. Janet—Jax that was—looks down into the pot sitting in the sink. At the one hard-boiled egg left in it. The others have been shelled and neatly sliced in two, the yolks scooped out. They are in a bowl beside the drying rack. Beside the bowl is the jar of mayonnaise. She has been planning to serve the devilled eggs for lunch, along with a green salad.

"I don't want to hear the rest," she says, but in a voice so low she can barely hear it herself. Once she was in the Dramatics Club and now she can't even project across the kitchen. The muscles in her chest feel all loose, the way Harvey's legs would if he tried to play tennis.

"I thought I would have just one," Harvey says, "and then I thought, No, if I do that she'll yell at me. And then the phone rang. I dashed for it because I didn't want it to wake you up, and here comes the scary part. Do you want to hear the scary part?"

No, she thinks from her place by the sink. I don't want to hear the scary part. But at the same time she does want to hear the scary part, everyone wants to hear the scary part, we're all mad here, and her mother really did say that if you told your dreams they wouldn't come true, which meant you were supposed to tell the nightmares and save the good ones for yourself, hide them like a tooth under the pillow. They have three girls. One of them lives just down the road, Jenna the gay divorcée, same name as one of the Bush twins, and doesn't Jenna hate that; these days she insists that people call her Jen. Three girls, which meant a lot of teeth under a lot of pillows, a lot of worries about strangers in cars offering rides and candy, which had meant a lot of precautions, and oh how she hopes her mother was right, that telling a bad dream is like putting a stake in a vampire's heart.

“I picked up the phone,” Harvey says, “and it was Trisha.” Trisha is their oldest daughter, who idolized Houdini and Blackstone before discovering boys. “She only said one word at first, just ‘Dad,’ but I knew it was Trisha. You know how you always know?”

Yes. She knows how you always know. How you always know your own, from the very first word, at least until they grow up and become someone else’s.

“I said, ‘Hi, Trish, why you calling so early, hon? Your mom’s still in the sack.’ And at first there was no answer. I thought we’d been cut off, and then I heard these whispering whimpering sounds. Not words but half-words. Like she was trying to talk but hardly anything could come out because she wasn’t able to muster any strength or get her breath. And that was when I started being afraid.”

Well, then, he’s pretty slow, isn’t he? Because Janet—who was Jax at Sarah Lawrence, Jax in the Dramatics Club, Jax the truly excellent French-kisser, Jax who smoked Gitanes and affected enjoyment of tequila shooters—Janet has been scared for quite some time now, was scared even before Harvey mentioned the dent in the side of Frank Friedman’s Volvo. And thinking of that makes her think of the phone conversation she had with her friend Hannah not even a week ago, the one that eventually progressed to Alzheimer’s ghost stories. Hannah in the city, Janet curled up on the window seat in the living room and looking out at their one-acre share of Westport, at all the beautiful growing things that make her sneeze and water at the eyes, and before the conversation turned to Alzheimer’s they had discussed first Lucy Friedman and then Frank, and which one of them had said it? Which one of them had said, “If he doesn’t do something about his drinking and driving, he’s eventually going to kill somebody”?

“And then Trish said what sounded like ‘lees’ or ‘least,’ but in the dream I knew she was . . . eliding? . . . is that the word? Eliding the first syllable, and that what she was really saying was ‘police.’ I asked her what about the police, what was she trying to say about the police, and I sat down. Right there.” He points to the chair in what they call the telephone nook. “There was some more silence, then a few more of those half-words, those whispered half-words. She was making me so mad doing that, I thought, Drama queen, same as it

ever was, but then she said, ‘number,’ just as clear as a bell. And I knew—the way I knew she was trying to say ‘police’—that she was trying to tell me the police had called her because they didn’t have our number.”

Janet nods numbly. They decided to unlist their number two years ago because reporters kept calling Harvey about the Enron mess. Usually at dinnertime. Not because he’d had anything to do with Enron per se but because those big energy companies were sort of a specialty of his. He’d even served on a Presidential commission a few years earlier, when Clinton had been the big kahuna and the world had been (in her humble opinion, at least) a slightly better, slightly safer place. And while there were a lot of things about Harvey she no longer liked, one thing she knew perfectly well was that he had more integrity in his little finger than all those Enron sleazebags put together. She might sometimes be bored by integrity, but she knows what it is.

But don’t the police have a way of getting unlisted numbers? Well, maybe not if they’re in a hurry to find something out or tell somebody something. Plus, dreams don’t have to be logical, do they? Dreams are poems from the subconscious.

And now, because she can no longer bear to stand still, she goes to the kitchen door and looks out into the bright June day, looks out at Sewing Lane, which is their little version of what she supposes is the American dream. How quiet this morning lies, with a trillion drops of dew still sparkling on the grass! And still her heart hammers in her chest and the sweat rolls down her face and she wants to tell him he must stop, he must not tell this dream, this terrible dream. She must remind him that Jenna lives right down the road—Jen, that is, Jen who works at the Video Stop in the village and spends all too many weekend nights drinking at the Gourd with the likes of Frank Friedman, who is old enough to be her father. Which is undoubtedly part of the attraction.

“All these whispered little half-words,” Harvey is saying, “and she would not speak up. Then I heard ‘killed,’ and I knew that one of the girls was dead. I just knew it. Not Trisha, because it was Trisha on the phone, but either Jenna or Stephanie. And I was so scared. I actually sat there wondering which one I wanted it to be, like Sophie’s fucking Choice. I started to shout at her. ‘Tell me which one! Tell me which one! For God’s sake, Trish, tell me which one!’ Only

then the real world started to bleed through . . . always assuming there is such a thing . . . .”

Harvey utters a little laugh, and in the bright morning light Janet sees there is a red stain in the middle of the dent on the side of Frank Friedman’s Volvo, and in the middle of the stain is a dark smutch that might be dirt or even hair. She can see Frank pulling up crooked to the curb at two in the morning, too drunk even to try the driveway, let alone the garage—strait is the gate, and all that. She can see him stumbling to the house with his head down, breathing hard through his nose. Viva ze bool.

“By then I knew I was in bed, but I could hear this low voice that didn’t sound like mine at all, it sounded like some stranger’s voice, and it couldn’t put corners on any of the words it was saying. ‘Ell-ee-itch-un, ell-ee itch-un,’ that’s what it sounded like. ‘Ell-ee itch-un, Ish!’”

Tell me which one. Tell me which one, Trish.

Harvey falls silent, thinking. Considering. The dust motes dance around his face. The sun makes his T-shirt almost too dazzling to look at; it is a T-shirt from a laundry-detergent ad.

“I lay there waiting for you to run in and see what was wrong,” he finally says. “I lay there all over goosebumps, and trembling, telling myself it was just a dream, the way you do, of course, but also thinking how real it was. How marvelous, in a horrible way.”

He stops again, thinking how to say what comes next, unaware that his wife is no longer listening to him. Jax-that-was is now employing all her mind, all her considerable powers of thought, to make herself believe that what she is seeing is not blood but just the Volvo’s undercoating where the paint has been scraped away. *Undercoating* is a word her subconscious has been more than eager to cast up.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it, how deep imagination goes?” he says finally. “A dream like that is how a poet—one of the really great ones—must see his poem. Every detail so clear and so bright.”

He falls silent and the kitchen belongs to the sun and the dancing motes; outside, the world is on hold. Janet looks at the Volvo across the street; it seems to pulse in her eyes, thick as a brick. When the phone rings, she would scream

if she could draw breath, cover her ears if she could lift her hands. She hears Harvey get up and cross to the nook as it rings again, and then a third time.

It is a wrong number, she thinks. It has to be, because if you tell your dreams they don't come true.

Harvey says, "Hello?"

# Rest Stop

He supposed that at some point between Jacksonville and Sarasota he did a literary version of the old Clark-Kent-in-the-phone-booth routine, but he wasn't sure just where or how. Which suggested it wasn't very dramatic. So did it even matter?

Sometimes he told himself the answer to that was no, the whole Rick Hardin/John Dykstra thing was nothing but an artificial construct, pure press agency, no different from Archibald Bloggert (or whatever his real name might have been) performing as Cary Grant, or Evan Hunter (whose actual birth name had been Salvatore something-or-other) writing as Ed McBain. And those guys had been his inspiration . . . along with Donald E. Westlake, who wrote hard-boiled "caper" novels as Richard Stark, and K. C. Constantine, who was actually . . . well, no one really knew, did they? As was the case with the mysterious Mr. B. Traven, who had written *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. No one really knew, and that was a large part of the fun.

Name, name, what's in a name?

Who, for instance, was he on his biweekly ride back to Sarasota? He was Hardin when he left the Pot o' Gold in Jax, for sure, no doubt. And Dykstra when he let himself into his canal-side house on Macintosh Road, certainly. But who was he on Route 75, as he flowed from one town to the other beneath the bright turnpike lights? Hardin? Dykstra? No one at all? Was there maybe a magic moment when the literary werewolf who earned the big bucks turned back into the inoffensive English professor whose specialty was twentieth-century American poets and novelists? And did it matter as long as he was right with God, the IRS, and the occasional football players who took one of his two survey courses?

None of that mattered just south of Ocala. What did was that he had to piss like a racehorse, whoever he was. He'd gone two beers over his usual limit

at the Pot o' Gold (maybe three) and had set the Jag's cruise control at sixty-five, not wanting to see any strobing red lights in his rearview mirror tonight. He might have paid for the Jag with books written under the Hardin name, but it was as John Andrew Dykstra that he lived the majority of his life, and that was the name the flashlight would shine on if he was asked for his operator's license. And *Hardin* might have drunk the beers in the Pot o' Gold, but if a Florida state trooper produced the dreaded Breathalyzer kit in its little blue plastic case, it was Dykstra's intoxicated molecules that would wind up inside the gadget's educated guts. And on a Thursday night in June, he would be easy pickings no matter who he was, because all the snowbirds had gone back to Michigan and he had I-75 pretty much to himself.

Yet there was a fundamental problem with beer any undergraduate understood: You couldn't buy it, only rent it. Luckily, there was a rest stop just six or seven miles south of Ocala, and there he would make a little room.

Meanwhile, though, who was he?

Certainly he had come to Sarasota sixteen years before as John Dykstra, and it was under that name that he had taught English at the Sarasota branch of FSU since 1990. Then, in 1994, he'd decided to skip teaching summer classes and have a fling at writing a suspense novel instead. This had not been his idea. He had an agent in New York, not one of the superstuds, but an honest enough guy with a reasonable track record, who had been able to sell four of his new client's short stories (under the Dykstra name) to various literary magazines that paid in the low hundreds. The agent's name was Jack Golden, and while he had nothing but praise for the stories, he dismissed the resulting checks as "grocery money." It had been Jack who'd pointed out that all John Dykstra's published stories had "a high narrative line" (which was agentese for a plot, as far as Johnny could tell) and suggested his new client might be able to make \$40,000 or \$50,000 a whack writing suspense novels of a hundred thousand words.

"You could do that in a summer if you found a hook to hang your hat on and then stuck to it," he'd told Dykstra in a letter. (They hadn't progressed to using the phone and the fax at that point.) "And it would be twice as much as you'd make teaching classes in the June and August sessions down there at

Mangrove U. If you're going to try it, my friend, now is the time—before you find yourself with a wife and two-point-five children.”

There had been no potential wife on the horizon (nor was there now), but Dykstra had taken Jack's point; rolling the dice did not get easier as one grew older. And a wife and kids weren't the only responsibilities one took on as time slipped quietly by. There was always the lure of the credit cards, for instance. Credit cards put barnacles on your hull and slowed you down. Credit cards were agents of the norm and worked in favor of the sure thing.

When the summer-teaching contract came in January of '94, he had returned it unsigned to the department head with a brief explanatory note: *I thought this summer I'd try to write a novel instead.*

Eddie Wasserman's reply had been friendly but firm: *That's fine, Johnny, but I can't guarantee the position will be there next summer. The man in the chair always gets right of first refusal.*

Dykstra had considered this, but only briefly; by then he had an idea. Better still, he had a *character*: The Dog, literary father of Jaguars and houses on Macintosh Road, was waiting to be born, and God bless the Dog's homicidal heart.

• • •

Ahead of him was the white arrow on the blue sign twinkling in his headlights, and the ramp curving off to the left, and the high-intensity arc-sodium lights illuminating the pavement so brightly that the ramp looked like part of a stage set. He put on his blinker, slowed to forty, and left the interstate.

Halfway up, the ramp branched: trucks and Winnebagos to the right, folks in Jaguars straight ahead. Fifty yards beyond the split was the rest stop, a low building of beige cinder block that also looked like a stage set under the brilliant lights. What would it be in a movie? A missile-command center, maybe? Sure, why not. A missile-command center way out in the boonies, and the guy in charge is suffering from some sort of carefully concealed (but progressive) mental illness. He's seeing Russians everywhere, Russians coming out of the damn woodwork . . . or make it Al Qaeda terrorists, that was probably more au courant. The Russians were sort of out as potential villains

these days unless they were pushing dope or teenage hookers. And the villain doesn't matter anyway, it's all a fantasy, but the guy's finger is nevertheless itching to push the red button, and . . .

And he needed to pee, so put the imagination on the back burner for a while, please and thank you. Besides, there was no place for the Dog in a story like that. The Dog was more of an urban warrior, as he'd said at the Pot o' Gold earlier tonight. (Nice phrase, too.) Still, the idea of that crazy missile-silo commander had some power, didn't it? A handsome guy . . . the men love him . . . looks perfectly normal on the outside . . .

There was only one other car in the sprawling parking area at this hour, one of those PT Cruisers that never failed to amuse him—they looked like toy gangster cars out of the 1930s.

He parked four or five slots down from it, turned off the engine, then paused to give the deserted parking lot a quick scan before getting out. This wasn't the first time he'd stopped at this particular rest area on his way back from the Pot, and once he'd been both amused and horrified to see an alligator lumbering across the deserted pavement toward the sugar pines beyond the rest area, looking somehow like an elderly, overweight businessman on his way to a meeting. There was no gator tonight, and he got out, cocking his key-pak over his shoulder and pushing the padlock icon. Tonight there was only him and Mr. PT Cruiser. The Jag gave an obedient twitter, and for a moment he saw his shadow in the brief flash of its headlights . . . only whose shadow was it? Dykstra's or Hardin's?

Johnny Dykstra's, he decided. Hardin was gone now, left behind thirty or forty miles back. But this had been his night to give the brief (and mostly humorous) after-dinner presentation to the rest of the Florida Thieves, and he thought Mr. Hardin had done a fairly good job, ending with a promise to send the Dog after anyone who didn't contribute generously to this year's charity, which happened to be Sunshine Readers, a non-profit that provided audiotope texts and articles for blind scholars.

He walked across the parking lot to the building, the heels of his cowboy boots clocking. John Dykstra never would have worn faded jeans and cowboy boots to a public function, especially one where he was the featured speaker,

but Hardin was a different breed of hot rod. Unlike Dykstra (who could be fussy), Hardin didn't care much what people thought of his appearance.

The rest-area building was divided into three parts: the women's room on the left, the men's room on the right, and a big porchlike portico in the middle where you could pick up pamphlets on various central- and south-Florida attractions. There were also snack machines, two soft-drink machines, and a coin-op map dispenser that took a ridiculous number of quarters. Both sides of the short cinder-block entryway were papered with missing-child posters that always gave Dykstra a chill. How many of the kids in the photos, he always wondered, were buried in the damp, sandy soil or feeding the gators in the Glades? How many of them were growing up in the belief that the drifters who had snatched them (and from time to time sexually molested them or rented them out) were their mothers or fathers? Dykstra did not like to look at their open, innocent faces or consider the desperation underlying the absurd reward numbers—\$10,000, \$20,000, \$50,000, in one case \$100,000 (that last one for a smiling towheaded girl from Fort Myers who had disappeared in 1980 and would now be a woman in young middle age, if she was still alive at all . . . which she almost certainly was not). There was also a sign informing the public that barrel-picking was prohibited, and another stating that loitering longer than an hour in this rest area was prohibited—POLICE TAKE NOTICE.

*Who'd want to loiter here?* Dykstra thought, and listened to the night wind rustle through the palms. A crazy person, that was who. A person to whom a red button would start to look good as the months and years snored past with the sound of sixteen-wheelers in the passing lane at one in the morning.

He turned toward the men's room and then froze in midstep as a woman's voice, slightly distorted by echo but dismayingly close, spoke unexpectedly from behind him.

"No, Lee," she said. "No, honey, don't."

There was a slap, followed by a thump, a muffled meat thump. Dykstra realized he was listening to the unremarkable sounds of abuse. He could actually see the red hand shape on the woman's cheek and her head, only slightly cushioned by her hair (blond? dark?), bouncing off the wall of beige tile. She began to cry. The arc sodiums were bright enough for Dykstra to see that his arms had broken out in gooseflesh. He began to bite his lower lip.

“Fuckin’ hoor.”

Lee’s voice was flat, declamatory. Hard to tell how you could know immediately that he was drunk, because each word was perfectly articulated. But you did know, because you had heard men speak that way before—at ballparks, at carnivals, sometimes through a thin motel-room wall (or drifting down through the ceiling) late at night, after the moon was down and the bars were closed. The female half of the conversation—could you call it a conversation?—might be drunk, too, but mostly she sounded scared.

Dykstra stood there in the little notch of an entryway, facing the men’s room, his back turned toward the couple in the women’s room. He was in shadow, surrounded on both sides by pictures of missing children that rustled faintly, like the fronds of the palm trees, in the night breeze. He stood there waiting, hoping there would be no more. But of course there was. The words of some country-music singer came to him, nonsensical and portentous: “By the time I found out I was no good, I was too rich to quit.”

There was another meaty smack and another cry from the woman. There was a beat of silence, and then the man’s voice came again, and you knew he was uneducated as well as drunk; it was the way he said *hoor* when he meant *whore*. You knew all sorts of things about him actually: that he’d sat at the back of the room in his high school English classes, that he drank milk straight out of the carton when he got home from school, that he’d dropped out in his sophomore or junior year, that he did the sort of job for which he needed to wear gloves and carry an X-Acto knife in his back pocket. You weren’t supposed to make such generalizations—it was like saying all African-Americans had natural rhythm, that all Italians cried at the opera—but here in the dark at eleven o’clock, surrounded by posters of missing children, for some reason always printed on pink paper, as if that were the color of the missing, you knew it was true.

“Fuckin’ little hoor.”

*He has freckles, Dykstra thought. And he sunburns easily. The sunburn makes him look like he’s always mad, and usually he is mad. He drinks Kahlúa when he’s in funds, as we say, but mostly he drinks b—*

“Lee, don’t,” came the voice of the woman. She was crying now, pleading, and Dykstra thought: *Don’t do that, lady. Don’t you know that only makes it*

worse? *Don't you know he sees that runner of snot hanging out of your nose, and it makes him madder than ever?* "Don't hit me no more, I'm s—"

*Whap!*

It was followed by another thump and a sharp cry, almost a dog's yelp, of pain. Old Mr. PT Cruiser had once more smoked her hard enough to bounce the back of her head off the tiled bathroom wall, and what was that old joke? Why are there three hundred thousand cases of spousal abuse in America each year? *Because they won't . . . fuckin' . . . listen.*

"Fuckin' hoor." That was Lee's scripture tonight, right out of Second Drunkalonians, and what was scary in that voice—what Dykstra found utterly terrifying—was the lack of emotion. Anger would have been better. Anger would have been safer for the woman. Anger was like a flammable vapor—a spark could ignite it and burn it off in a single quick and gaudy burst—but this guy was just . . . dedicated. He wasn't going to hit her again and then apologize, perhaps starting to cry as he did so. Maybe he had on other nights, but not tonight. Tonight he was going for the long bomb. Hail Mary fulla grace, help me win this stock-car race.

*So what do I do? What's my place in it? Do I have one?*

He certainly wasn't going to go into the men's room and take the long, leisurely piss he had planned and looked forward to; his nuts were drawn up like a couple of hard little stones, and the pressure in his kidneys had spread both up his back and down his legs. His heart was hurrying in his chest, thudding along at a rapid jog-trot that would probably become a sprint at the sound of the next blow. It would be an hour or more before he'd be able to piss again, no matter how badly he had to, and then it would come in a series of unsatisfying little squirts. And God, how he wished that hour had already gone by, that he was sixty or seventy miles down the road from here!

*What do you do if he hits her again?*

Another question occurred: What would he do if the woman took to her heels and Mr. PT Cruiser followed her? There was only one way out of the women's room, and John Dykstra was standing in the middle of it. John Dykstra in the cowboy boots Rick Hardin had worn to Jacksonville, where once every two weeks a group of mystery writers—many of them plump

women in pastel pantsuits—met to discuss techniques, agents, and sales, and to gossip about one another.

“Lee-Lee, don’t hurt me, okay? Please don’t hurt me. Please don’t hurt the baby.”

Lee-Lee. Jesus wept.

Oh, and another one; score one more. *The baby. Please don’t hurt the baby.* Welcome to the fucking Lifetime Channel.

Dykstra’s rapidly beating heart seemed to sink an inch in his chest. It felt as if he had been standing here in this little cinder-block notch between the men’s room and the women’s for at least twenty minutes, but when he looked at his watch, he wasn’t surprised to see that not even forty seconds had passed since the first slap. It was the subjective nature of time and the eerie speed of thought when the mind was suddenly put under pressure. He had written about both many times. He supposed most quote-unquote suspense novelists had. It was a goddam staple. The next time it was his turn to address the Florida Thieves, perhaps he would take that as his subject and begin by telling them about this incident. About how he’d had time to think, *Second Drunkalonians*. Although he supposed it might be a little heavy for their biweekly get-togethers, a little—

A perfect flurry of blows interrupted this train of thought. Lee-Lee had snapped. Dykstra listened to the particular sound of these blows with the dismay of a man who understands he’s hearing sounds he will never forget, not movie-soundtrack Foleys but a fists-hitting-a-feather-pillow sound, surprisingly light, actually almost delicate. The woman screamed once in surprise and once in pain. After that she was reduced to puffing little cries of pain and fear. Outside in the dark, Dykstra thought of all the public-service spots he’d seen about preventing domestic violence. They did not hint at this, how you could hear the wind in the palm trees in one ear (and the rustle of the missing-child posters, don’t forget that) and those little groaning sounds of pain and fear in the other.

He heard shuffling feet on the tiles and knew Lee (Lee-Lee, the woman had called him, as if a pet name might defuse his rage) was closing in. Like Rick Hardin, Lee was boots. The Lee-Lees of the world tended to be Georgia Giant

guys. They were Dingo men. The woman was in sneakers, white low-tops. He knew it.

“Bitch, you fuckin’ bitch, I seen you talkin’ to him, tossin’ your tits at him, you fuckin’ hoor—”

“No, Lee-Lee, I never—”

The sound of another blow, and then a hoarse expectoration that was neither male nor female. Retching. Tomorrow, whoever cleaned these restrooms would find vomit drying on the floor and one of the tiled walls in the women’s, but Lee and his wife or girlfriend would be long departed, and to the cleaner it would be just another mess to clean up, the story of the puke both unclear and uninteresting, and what was Dykstra supposed to do? Jesus, did he have the sack to go in there? If he didn’t, Lee might finish beating her up and call it good, but if a stranger interfered—

*He could kill both of us.*

But . . .

*The baby. Please don’t hurt the baby.*

Dykstra clenched his fists and thought, *Fucking Lifetime Channel!*

The woman was still retching.

“Stop that, Ellen.”

*“I can’t!”*

“No? Okay, good. I’ll stop it for you. Fuckin’ . . . hoor.”

Another *whap!* punctuated *hoor*. Dykstra’s heart sank even lower. He would not have thought it possible. Soon it would be beating in his belly. If only he could channel the Dog! In a story it would work—he’d even been thinking about identity before making the evening’s great mistake of turning into this rest area, and if that wasn’t what the writing manuals called foreshadowing, then what was?

Yes, he would turn into his hit man, stride into the women’s room, beat the living shit out of Lee, then go on his way. Like Shane in that old movie with Alan Ladd.

The woman retched again, the sound of a machine turning stones into gravel, and Dykstra knew he wasn’t going to channel the Dog. The Dog was make-believe. This was reality, rolling out right here in front of him like a drunk’s tongue.

“Do it again and see what it gets you,” Lee invited, and now there was something deadly in his voice. He was getting ready to go all the way. Dykstra was sure of it.

*I'll testify in court. And when they ask me what I did to stop it, I'll say nothing. I'll say that I listened. That I remembered. That I was a witness. And then I will explain that that is what writers do when they're not actually writing.*

Dykstra thought of running back to his Jag—quietly!—and using the phone in the console to call the state police. \*99 was all it took. The signs saying so were posted every ten miles or so: IN CASE OF ACCIDENT DIAL \*99 ON CELLULAR. Except there was never a cop around when you needed one. The closest tonight would turn out to be in Bradenton or maybe Ybor City, and by the time the trooper got here, this little red rodeo would be over.

From the women's room there now came a series of thick hiccuping sounds, interspersed with low gagging noises. One of the stall doors banged. The woman knew that Lee meant it just as surely as Dykstra knew it. Just vomiting again would likely be enough to set him off. He would go crazy on her and finish the job. And if they caught him? Second degree. No premeditation. He could be out in fifteen months and dating this one's kid sister.

*Go back to your car, John. Go back to your car, get in behind the wheel, and drive away from here. Start working on the idea that this never happened. And make sure you don't read the paper or watch the TV news for the next couple of days. That'll help. Do it. Do it now. You're a writer, not a fighter. You stand five-nine, you weigh 162 pounds, you've got a bad shoulder, and the only thing you can do here is make things worse. So get back in your car and send up a little prayer to whatever God looks out for women like Ellen.*

And he actually turned away before an idea occurred to him.

The Dog wasn't real, but Rick Hardin *was*.

• • •

Ellen Whitlow of Nokomis had fallen into one of the toilets and landed on the hopper with her legs spread and her skirt up, just like the hoor she was, and Lee started in there after her, meaning to grab her by the ears and start

slamming her dumb head against the tiles. He'd had enough. He was going to teach her a lesson she'd never forget.

Not that these thoughts went through his mind in any coherent fashion. What was in his mind now was mostly red. Under it, over it, seeping through it was a chanting voice that sounded like Steven Tyler of Aerosmith: *Ain't my baby anyway, ain't mine, ain't mine, you ain't pinning it on me, you fuckin' hoor.*

He took three steps, and that was when a car horn began to blat rhythmically somewhere close by, spoiling his own rhythm, spoiling his concentration, taking him out of his head, making him look around: *Bamp! Bamp! Bamp!*

*Car alarm*, he thought, and looked from the entrance to the women's room back to the woman sitting in the stall. From the door to the hoor. His fists began to clench in indecision. Suddenly he pointed at her with his right index finger, the nail long and dirty.

"Move and you're dead, bitch," he told her, and started for the door.

It was brightly lit in the shithouse and almost as brightly lit in the rest-area parking lot, but in the notch between the two wings it was dark. For a moment he was blind, and that was when something hit him high up on the back, driving him forward in a stumbling run that took him only two steps forward before he tripped over something else—a leg—and went sprawling on the concrete.

There was no pause, no hesitation. A boot kicked him in the thigh, freezing the big muscle there, and then high up on his blue-jeaned ass, almost to the small of his back. He started to scramble—

A voice above him said, "Don't roll over, Lee. I've got a tire iron in my hand. Stay on your stomach or I'll beat your head in."

Lee lay where he was with his hands out in front of him, almost touching.

"Come out of there, Ellen," said the man who had hit him. "We have no time to fool around. Come out right now."

There was a pause. Then the hoor's voice, trembling and thick: "Did you hurt him? Don't you hurt him!"

"He's okay, but if you don't come out right now, I'm going to hurt him bad. I'll have to." A pause, then: "And it'll be your fault."

Meanwhile, the car horn, beating monotonously into the night—*Bamp! Bamp! Bamp! Bamp!*

Lee started to turn his head on the pavement. It hurt. What had the fucker hit him with? Had he said a tire iron? He couldn't remember.

The boot slammed into his ass again. Lee yelled and turned his face back to the pavement.

“Come out, lady, or I'm going to open up his head! I have no choice here!”

When she spoke again, she was closer. Her voice was unsteady, but now tending toward outrage: “Why did you *do* that? You didn't have to do that!”

“I called the police on my cell,” the man standing above him said. “There was a trooper at mile 140. So we've got ten minutes, maybe a little less. Mr. Lee-Lee, do you have the car keys or does she?”

Lee had to think about it.

“She does,” he said at last. “She said I was too drunk to drive.”

“All right. Ellen, you go down there and get in that PT Cruiser, and you drive away. You keep going until you get to Lake City, and if you've got the brains God gave a duck, you won't turn around there, either.”

“I ain't leaving him with you!” She sounded very angry now. “Not when you got that thing!”

“Yes, you are. You do it right now or I'll fuck him up royally.”

“You bully!”

The man laughed, and the sound frightened Lee more than the fellow's speaking voice. “I'll count to thirty. If you're not driving southbound out of the rest area by then, I'll take his head right off his shoulders. I'll drive it like a golf ball.”

“You can't—”

“Do it, Ellie. Do it, honey.”

“You heard him,” the man said. “Your big old teddy bear wants you to go. If you want to let him finish beating the shit out of you tomorrow night—and the baby—that's fine with me. I won't be around tomorrow night. But right now I'm done fucking with you; *so you put your dumb ass in gear.*”

This was a command she understood, delivered in language familiar to her, and Lee saw her bare legs and sandals moving past his lowered line of vision.

The man who'd sandbagged him started counting loudly: "*One, two, three, four . . .*"

"Hurry the hell *up!*" Lee shouted, and the boot was on his ass, but more gently now, rocking him rather than whacking him. But it still hurt. Meanwhile, *Bamp! Bamp! Bamp!* into the night. "Get your ass in *gear!*"

At that her sandals began to run. Her shadow ran beside them. The man had reached twenty when the PT Cruiser's little sewing-machine engine started up, had reached thirty when Lee saw its taillights backing into the parking area. Lee waited for the man to start whacking and was relieved when he didn't.

Then the PT Cruiser started down the exit lane and the engine sound began to fade, and then the man standing over him spoke with a kind of perplexity.

"Now," the man who'd sandbagged him said, "what am I going to do with *you?*"

"Don't hurt me," Lee said. "Don't hurt me, mister."

• • •

Once the PT Cruiser's taillights were out of sight, Hardin shifted the tire iron from one hand to the other. His palms were sweaty and he almost dropped it. That would have been bad. The tire iron would have clanged loudly on the concrete if he'd dropped it, and Lee would have been up in a flash. He wasn't as big as Dykstra had imagined, but he was dangerous. He'd already proved that.

*Sure, dangerous to pregnant women.*

But that was no way to think. If he let old Lee-Lee get up on his feet, this would be a whole new ball game. He could feel Dykstra trying to come back, wanting to discuss this and perhaps a few other points. Hardin pushed him away. This was not the time or place for a college English instructor.

"Now, what am I going to do with *you?*" he asked, the question one of honest perplexity.

"Don't hurt me," the man on the ground said. He was wearing glasses. That had been a major surprise. No way had either Hardin or Dykstra seen this man wearing glasses. "Don't hurt me, mister."

“I got an idea.” Dykstra would have said *I have an idea*. “Take your glasses off and put them beside you.”

“Why—”

“Save the lip, just do it.”

Lee, who was wearing faded Levi’s and a Western-style shirt (now pulled out in the back and hanging over his butt), started to take off his wire-rimmed glasses with his right hand.

“No, do it with your other one.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask me questions. Just do it. Take ’em off with your left hand.”

Lee took off the queerly delicate spectacles and put them on the pavement. Hardin immediately stepped on them with the heel of one boot. There was a little snapping sound and the delicious grind of glass.

“Why’d you do that?” Lee cried.

“Why do you think? Have you got a gun or anything?”

“No! Jesus, *no!*”

And Hardin believed him. If there’d been one, it would have been a gator gun in the PT Cruiser’s trunk. But he didn’t think even that was likely. Standing outside the women’s room, Dykstra had been imagining some big hulk of a construction worker. This guy looked like an accountant who worked out three times a week at Gold’s Gym.

“I think I’ll walk back to my car now,” Hardin said. “Turn off the alarm and drive away.”

“Yeah. Yeah, why don’t you do th—”

Hardin put a warning foot on the man’s butt again, this time rocking it back and forth a little more roughly.

“Why don’t you just shut up? What did you think you were doing in there anyway?”

“Teaching her a fucking les—”

Hardin kicked him in the hip almost as hard as he could, pulling the blow a little bit at the last second. But only a little. Lee cried out in pain and fear. Hardin was dismayed at what he’d just done and how he’d done it, absolutely without thought. What dismayed him even more was that he wanted to do it

again, and harder. He liked that cry of pain and fear, could do with hearing it again.

So how far was he from Shithouse Lee, lying out here with the shadow of the entryway running up his back on a crisp black diagonal? Not very, it seemed. But so what? It was a tiresome question, a movie-of-the-week question. A much more interesting one occurred to him. This question was how hard he could kick old Lee-Lee in the left ear without sacrificing accuracy for force. Square in the ear, *ka-pow*. He also wondered what kind of a sound it would make. A satisfying one, would be his guess. Of course he might kill the man doing that, but how much loss to the world would that be? And who would ever know? Ellen? Fuck her.

“You better shut up, my friend,” Hardin said. “That would be your best course of action right about now. Just shut up. And when the state trooper gets here, you tell him whatever the fuck you want.”

“Why don’t you go? Just go and leave me alone. You broke my glasses, isn’t that enough?”

“No,” Hardin said truthfully. He thought a second. “You know what?”

Lee didn’t ask him what.

“I’m going to walk slow to my car. You come on and come after me if you want. We’ll do it face-to-face.”

“Yeah, right!” Lee laughed tearfully. “I can’t see shit without my glasses!”

Hardin pushed his own up on his nose. He didn’t have to pee anymore. What a weird thing! “Look at you,” he said. “Just look at you.”

Lee must have heard something in his voice, because Hardin saw him start to tremble by the light of the silvery moon. But he didn’t say anything, which was probably wise under the circumstances. And the man standing over him, who had never been in a fight in his whole life before this, not in high school, not even in *grammar* school, understood that this was really all over. If Lee had had a gun, he might have tried to shoot him in the back as he walked away. But otherwise, no. Lee was . . . what was the word?

Buffaloed.

Old Lee-Lee was buffaloed.

Hardin was struck by an inspiration. “I got your license number,” he said. “And I know your name. Yours and hers. I’ll be watching the papers, asshole.”

Nothing from Lee. He just lay on his stomach with his broken glasses twinkling in the moonlight.

“Goodnight, asshole,” Hardin said. He walked down to the parking lot and drove away. Shane in a Jaguar.

• • •

He was okay for ten minutes, maybe fifteen. Long enough to try the radio and then decide on the Lucinda Williams disc in the CD player instead. Then, all at once, his stomach was in his throat, still full of the chicken and potatoes he had eaten at the Pot o’ Gold.

He pulled over into the breakdown lane, threw the Jag’s transmission into park, started to get out, and realized there wasn’t time for that. So he just leaned out instead with the seat belt still fastened and vomited onto the pavement beside the driver’s-side door. He was shaking all over. His teeth were chattering.

Headlights appeared and swept toward him. They slowed down. Dykstra’s first thought was that it was a state cop, finally a state cop. They always showed up when you didn’t need them, didn’t want them. His second one—a cold certainty—was that it was the PT Cruiser, Ellen at the wheel, Lee-Lee in the passenger seat, now with a tire iron of his own in his lap.

But it was just an old Dodge full of kids. One of them—a moronic-looking boy with what was probably red hair—poked his bepimpled moon of a face out the window and shouted, “*Throw it to your heeeels!*” This was followed by laughter, and the car accelerated away.

Dykstra closed the driver’s-side door, put his head back, closed his eyes, and waited for the shakes to abate. After a while they did, and his stomach settled along the way. He realized he needed to pee again and took it as a good sign.

He thought of wanting to kick Lee-Lee in the ear—how hard? what sound?—and tried to force his mind away from it. Thinking about wanting to do that made him feel sick all over again.

Where his mind (his mostly obedient mind) went was to that missile-silo commander stationed out in Lonesome Crow, North Dakota (or maybe it was Dead Wolf, Montana). The one who was going quietly crazy. Seeing terrorists

under every bush. Piling up badly written pamphlets in his locker, spending many a late night in front of the computer screen, exploring the paranoid back alleys of the Internet.

*And maybe the Dog's on his way to California to do a job . . . driving instead of flying because he's got a couple of special guns in the trunk of his Plymouth Road Runner . . . and he has car trouble . . .*

Sure. Sure, that was good. Or it could be, with a little more thought. Had he thought there was no place for the Dog out in the big empty of the American heartland? That was narrow thinking, wasn't it? Because under the right circumstances, anyone could end up anywhere, doing anything.

The shakes were gone. Dykstra put the Jag back in gear and got rolling. At Lake City he found an all-night gas station and convenience store, and there he stopped to empty his bladder and fill his gas tank (after checking the lot and the four pump islands for the PT Cruiser and not seeing it). Then he drove the rest of the way home, thinking his Rick Hardin thoughts, and let himself into his John Dykstra house by the canal. He always set the burglar alarm before leaving—it was the prudent thing to do—and he turned it off before setting it again for the rest of the night.

# Stationary Bike

## I. Metabolic Workmen

A week after the physical he had put off for a year (he'd actually been putting it off for three years, as his wife would have pointed out if she had still been alive), Richard Sifkitz was invited by Dr. Brady to view and discuss the results. Since the patient could detect nothing overtly ominous in his doctor's voice, he went willingly enough.

The results were rendered as numeric values on a sheet of paper headed METROPOLITAN HOSPITAL, New York City. All the test names and numbers were in black except for one line. This one line was rendered in red, and Sifkitz was not very surprised to see that it was marked CHOLESTEROL. The number, which really stood out in that red ink (as was undoubtedly the intention), read 226.

Sifkitz started to enquire if that was a bad number, then asked himself if he wanted to start off this interview by asking something stupid. It would not have been printed in red, he reasoned, if it had been a good number. The rest of them were undoubtedly good numbers, or at least acceptable numbers, which was why they were printed in black. But he wasn't here to discuss them. Doctors were busy men, disinclined to waste time in head-patting. So instead of something stupid, he asked how bad a number two-twenty-six was.

Dr. Brady leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together on his damnably skinny chest. "To tell you the truth," he said, "it's not a bad number at all." He raised a finger. "Considering what you eat, that is."

"I know I weigh too much," Sifkitz said humbly. "I've been meaning to do something about it." In fact, he had been meaning to do no such thing.

"To tell you more of the truth," Dr. Brady went on, "your weight is not so bad, either. Again, considering what you eat. And now I want you to listen closely, because this is a conversation I only have with my patients once. My

male patients, that is; when it comes to weight, my female patients would talk my ear off, if I let them. Are you ready?"

"Yes," Sifkitz said, attempting to lace his fingers across his own chest and discovering he could not do it. What he discovered—or rediscovered, more properly put—was that he had a pretty good set of breasts. Not, so far as he was aware, part of the standard equipment for men in their late thirties. He gave up his attempt to lace and folded, instead. In his lap. The sooner the lecture was begun, the sooner it would be done.

"You're six feet tall and thirty-eight years old," Dr. Brady said. "Your weight should be about a hundred and ninety, and your cholesterol should be just about the same. Once upon a time, back in the seventies, you could get away with a cholesterol reading of two-forty, but of course back in the seventies, you could still smoke in the waiting rooms at hospitals." He shook his head. "No, the correlation between high cholesterol and heart disease was simply too clear. The two-forty number consequently went by the boards.

"You are the sort of man who has been blessed with a good metabolism. Not a great one, mind you, but good? Yes. How many times do you eat at McDonald's or Wendy's, Richard? Twice a week?"

"Maybe once," Sifkitz said. He thought the average week actually brought four to six fast-food meals with it. Not counting the occasional weekend trip to Arby's.

Dr. Brady raised a hand as if to say *Have it your way . . .* which was, now that Sifkitz thought of it, the Burger King motto.

"Well, you're certainly eating somewhere, as the scales tell us. You weighed in on the day of your physical at two-twenty-three . . . once again, and not coincidentally, very close to your cholesterol number."

He smiled a little at Sifkitz's wince, but at least it was not a smile devoid of sympathy.

"Here is what has happened so far in your adult life," Brady said. "In it, you have continued to eat as you did when you were a teenager, and to this point your body—thanks to that good-if-not-extraordinary metabolism—has pretty much kept up with you. It helps at this point to think of the metabolic process as a work-crew. Men in chinos and Doc Martens."

It may help you, Sifkitz thought, it doesn't do a thing for me. Meanwhile, his eyes kept being drawn back to that red number, that 226.

"Their job is to grab the stuff you send down the chute and dispose of it. Some they send on to the various production departments. The rest they burn. If you send them more than they can deal with, you put on weight. Which you have been doing, but at a relatively slow pace. But soon, if you don't make some changes, you're going to see that pace speed up. There are two reasons. The first is that your body's production facilities need less fuel than they used to. The second is that your metabolic crew—those fellows in the chinos with the tattoos on their arms—aren't getting any younger. They're not as efficient as they used to be. They're slower when it comes to separating the stuff to be sent on and the stuff that needs to be burned. And sometimes they bitch."

"Bitch?" Sifkitz asked.

Dr. Brady, hands still laced across his narrow chest (the chest of a consumptive, Sifkitz decided—certainly no breasts there), nodded his equally narrow head. Sifkitz thought it almost the head of a weasel, sleek and sharp-eyed. "Yes indeed. They say stuff like, 'Isn't he ever gonna slow down?' and 'Who does he think we are, the Marvel Comics superheroes?' and 'Cheezis, don't he ever give it a rest?' And one of them—the malingerer, every work-crew's got one—probably says, 'What the fuck does he care about us, anyway? He's on top, ain't he?'"

"And sooner or later, they'll do what any bunch of working joes will do if they're forced to go on too long and do too much, without so much as a lousy weekend off, let alone a paid vacation: they'll get sloppy. Start goofing off and lying down on the job. One day one of 'em won't come in at all, and there'll come another—if you live long enough—when one of 'em can't come in, because he'll be lying home dead of a stroke or a heart attack."

"That's pleasant. Maybe you could take it on the road. Hit the lecture circuit. Oprah, even."

Dr. Brady unlaced his fingers and leaned forward across his desk. He looked at Richard Sifkitz, unsmiling. "You've got a choice to make and my job is to make you aware of it, that's all. Either you change your habits or you're going to find yourself in my office ten years from now with some serious problems—weight pushing three hundred pounds, maybe, Type Two diabetes, varicose

veins, a stomach ulcer, and a cholesterol number to match your weight. At this point you can still turn around without crash-diets, tummy-tucks, or a heart attack to get your attention. Later on doing that'll get harder. Once you're past forty, it gets harder every year. After forty, Richard, the weight sticks to your ass like babyshit sticks to a bedroom wall."

"Elegant," Sifkitz said, and burst out laughing. He couldn't help it.

Brady didn't laugh, but he smiled, at least, and leaned back in his chair. "There's nothing elegant about where you're headed. Doctors don't usually talk about it any more than State Troopers talk about the severed head they found in a ditch near the car accident, or the blackened child they found in the closet the day after the Christmas tree lights caught the house on fire, but we know lots about the wonderful world of obesity, from women who grow mold in flaps of fat that haven't been washed all the way to the bottom in years to men who go everywhere in a cloud of stench because they haven't been able to wipe themselves properly in a decade or more."

Sifkitz winced and made a waving-away gesture.

"I don't say you're going there, Richard—most people don't, they have a kind of built-in limiter, it seems—but there is some truth to that old saying about so-and-so digging his grave with a fork and spoon. Keep it in mind."

"I will."

"Good. That's the speech. Or sermon. Or whatever it is. I won't tell you to go your way and sin no more, I'll just say 'over to you.'"

Although he had filled in the OCCUPATION blank on his income tax return with the words FREELANCE ARTIST for the last twelve years, Sifkitz did not think of himself as a particularly imaginative man, and he hadn't done a painting (or even a drawing, really) just for himself since the year he graduated from DePaul. He did book jackets, some movie posters, a lot of magazine illustrations, the occasional cover for a trade-show brochure. He'd done one CD cover (for Slobberbone, a group he particularly admired) but would never do another one, he said, because you couldn't see the detail in the finished product without a magnifying glass. That was as close as he had ever come to what is called "artistic temperament."

If asked to name his favorite piece of work, he likely would have looked blank. If pressed, he might have said it was the painting of the young blond

woman running through the grass that he had done for Downy Fabric Softener, but even that would have been a lie, something told just to make the question go away. In truth, he wasn't the kind of artist who had (or needed to have) favorites. It had been a long time since he'd picked up a brush to paint anything other than what someone commissioned him to paint, usually from a detailed ad agency memo or from a photograph (as had been the case with the woman running through the grass, evidently overjoyed that she had finally managed to beat static cling).

But, as surely as inspiration strikes the best of us—the Picassos, the Van Goghs, the Salvador Dalís—so it must eventually strike the rest of us, if only once or twice in a lifetime. Sifkitz took the crosstown bus home (he'd not owned a car since college), and as he sat looking out the window (the medical report with its one line of red type was folded into his back pocket), he found his eye again and again going to the various work-crews and construction gangs the bus rolled past: guys in hardhats tromping across a building site, some with buckets, some with boards balanced on their shoulders; Con Ed guys half-in and half-out of manholes surrounded by yellow tape stamped with the words WORK AREA; three guys erecting a scaffold in front of a department store display window while a fourth talked on his cell phone.

Little by little he realized a picture was forming in his mind, one which demanded its place in the world. When he was back to the SoHo loft that served as both his home and his studio, he crossed to the littered nest beneath the skylight without even bothering to pick the mail up off the floor. He dropped his jacket on top of it, as a matter of fact.

He paused only long enough to look at a number of blank canvases leaning in the corner, and dismiss them. He took a piece of plain white pressboard instead, and set to work with a charcoal pencil. The phone rang twice over the course of the next hour. He let the answering machine pick up both times.

He worked at this picture off and on—but rather more on than off, especially as time passed and he came to realize how good it was—over the next ten days, moving from the pressboard to a piece of canvas that was four feet long and three feet high when it seemed natural to do so. It was the biggest surface he'd worked on in over a decade.

The picture showed four men—workmen in jeans, poplin jackets, and big old workboots—standing at the side of a country road which had just emerged from a deep stand of forest (this he rendered in shades of dark green and streaks of gray, working in a splashy, speedy, exuberant style). Two of the men had shovels; one had a bucket in each hand; the fourth was in the process of pushing his cap back from his forehead in a gesture that perfectly caught his end-of-the-day weariness and his growing realization that the job would never be done; that there was, in fact, more of the job needing to be done at the end of each day than there had been at the beginning. This fourth guy, wearing a battered old gimme-cap with the word LIPID printed above the bill, was the foreman. He was talking to his wife on his cell phone. Coming home, honey, nah, don't want to go out, not tonight, too tired, want to get an early start in the morning. The guys bitched about that but I brought 'em around. Sifkitz didn't know how he knew all this, but he did. Just as he knew that the man with the buckets was Freddy, and he owned the truck in which the men had come. It was parked just outside the picture on the right; you could see the top of its shadow. One of the shovel guys, Carlos, had a bad back and was seeing a chiropractor.

There was no sign of what job the men had been doing in the picture, that was a little beyond the left side, but you could see how exhausted they were. Sifkitz had always been a detail-man (that green-gray blur of forest was very unlike him), and you could read how weary these men were in every feature of their faces. It was even in the sweat-stains on the collars of their shirts.

Above them, the sky was a queer organic red.

Of course he knew what the picture represented and understood that queer sky perfectly. This was the work-crew of which his doctor had spoken, at the end of their day. In the real world beyond that organic red sky, Richard Sifkitz, their employer, had just eaten his bed-time snack (a left-over piece of cake, maybe, or a carefully hoarded Krispy Kreme) and laid his head down on his pillow. Which meant they were finally free to go home for the day. And would they eat? Yes, but not as much as he did. They would be too tired to eat much, it was on their faces. Instead of eating a big meal they'd put their feet up, these guys who worked for The Lipid Company, and watch TV for a little while. Maybe fall asleep in front of it and then wake up a couple of hours later, with

the regular shows gone and Ron Popeil on, showing his latest invention to an adoring studio audience. And they'd turn it off with the remote and shuffle away to bed, shedding clothes as they went without so much as a backward look.

All of this was in the picture, although none of it was in the picture. Sifkitz was not obsessed with it, it did not become his life, but he understood it was something *new* in his life, something good. He had no idea what he could do with such a thing once it was finished, and didn't really care. For the time being he just liked getting up in the morning and looking at it with one eye open as he picked the cloth of his Big Dog boxers out of the crack of his ass. He supposed when it was done, he would have to name it. So far he had considered and rejected "Quittin' Time," "The Boys Call It a Day," and "Berkowitz Calls It a Day." Berkowitz being the boss, the foreman, the one with the Motorola cell phone, the guy in the LIPID cap. None of those names were quite right, and that was okay. He'd know the right name for the picture when it finally occurred to him. It would make a *cling!* sound in his head. In the meantime there was no hurry. He wasn't even sure the picture was the point. While painting it, he had lost fifteen pounds. Maybe that was the point.

Or maybe it wasn't.

## II. Stationary Bike

Somewhere—maybe at the end of a Salada tea-bag string—he had read that, for the person who aspires to lose weight, the most effective exercise is pushing back from the table. Sifkitz had no doubt this was true, but as time passed he more and more came to believe that losing weight wasn't his goal. Nor was getting buffed up his goal, although both of those things might be side-effects. He kept thinking of Dr. Brady's metabolic working stiffs, ordinary joes who were really trying their best to do their job but getting no help from him. He could hardly not think of them when he was spending an hour or two every day painting them and their workaday world.

He fantasized quite a lot about them. There was Berkowitz, the foreman, who aspired to have his own construction company someday. Freddy, who owned the truck (a Dodge Ram) and fancied himself a fancy carpenter. Carlos,

the one with the bad back. And Whelan, who was actually sort of a goldbrick. These were the guys whose job it was to keep him from having a heart attack or a stroke. They had to clean up the shit that kept bombing down from that queer red sky before it blocked the road into the woods.

A week after he began the painting (and about a week before he would finally decide it was done), Sifkitz went to The Fitness Boys on Twenty-ninth Street, and, after considering both a treadmill and a StairMaster (attractive but too expensive), bought a stationary bike. He paid an extra forty dollars to have it assembled and delivered.

“Use this every day for six months and your cholesterol number’s down thirty points,” said the salesman, a brawny young fellow in a Fitness Boys T-shirt. “I practically guarantee it.”

The basement of the building where Sifkitz lived was a rambling, multi-room affair, dark and shadowy, bellowing with furnace noise and crammed with tenants’ possessions in stalls marked with the various apartment numbers. There was an alcove at the far end, however, that was almost magically empty. As if it had been waiting for him all along. Sifkitz had the deliverymen set up his new exercise machine on the concrete floor facing a bare beige wall.

“You gonna bring down a TV?” one of them asked.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Sifkitz said, although he had.

He rode the stationary bike in front of one bare beige wall for fifteen minutes or so every day until the painting was finished, knowing that fifteen minutes was probably not enough (although certainly better than nothing) but also knowing it was about all he could stand for the time being. Not because he got tired; fifteen minutes wasn’t enough to tire him out. It was just boring in the basement. The whine of the wheels combined with the steady roar of the furnace quickly got on his nerves. He was all too aware of what he was doing, which was, basically, going nowhere in a basement under two bare lightbulbs that cast his double shadow on the wall in front of him. He also knew that things would improve once the picture upstairs was done and he could start on the one down here.

It was the same picture but he executed it much more quickly. He could do this because there was no need to put Berkowitz, Carlos, Freddy, and Whelan-the-goldbrick in this one. In this one they were gone for the day and he simply

painted the country road on the beige wall, using forced perspective so that when he was mounted on the stationary bike, the track seemed to wind away from him and into that dark green and gray blur of forest. Riding the bike became less boring immediately, but after two or three sessions, he realized that he still wasn't done because what he was doing was still only exercise. He needed to put in the red sky, for one thing, but that was easy, nothing but slop work. He wanted to add more detail to both shoulders of the road "up front," and some litter, as well, but those things were also easy (and fun). The real problem had nothing to do with the picture at all. With either picture. The problem was that he had no goal, and that had always bugged him about exercise that existed for nothing more than its own sake. That kind of workout might tone you up and improve your health, but it was essentially meaningless while it was going on. Existential, even. That kind of workout was only about the next thing, for instance some pretty lady from some magazine's art department coming up to you at a party and asking if you'd lost weight. That wasn't even close to real motivation. He wasn't vain enough (or horny enough) for such possibilities to keep him going over the long haul. He'd eventually get bored, and lapse into his old Krispy Kreme ways. No, he had to decide where the road was, and where it was going. Then he could pretend to ride there. The idea excited him. Maybe it was silly—loony, even—but to Sifkitz that excitement, though mild, felt like the real deal. And he didn't have to tell anyone what he was up to, did he? Absolutely not. He could even get a Rand-McNally Road Atlas and mark his daily progress on one of the maps.

He was not an introspective man by nature, but on his walk back from Barnes & Noble with his new book of roadmaps under his arm, he found himself wondering exactly what had galvanized him so. A moderately high cholesterol number? He doubted it. Dr. Brady's solemn proclamation that he would find this battle much harder to fight once he was post-forty? That might have had something to do with it, but probably not all that much. Was he just ready for a change? That felt like getting warmer.

Trudy had died of a particularly ravenous blood-cancer, and Sifkitz had been with her, in her hospital room, when she passed on. He remembered how deep her last breath had been, how her sad and wasted bosom had heaved upward as she drew it in. As if she had known this was it, this was the one for

the ages. He remembered how she'd let it out, and the sound it had made—*shaaaah!* And how after that her chest had just stayed where it was. In a way he had lived the last four years in just that sort of breathless hiatus. Only now the wind was blowing again, filling his sails.

Yet there was something else, something even more to the point: the work-crew Brady had summoned up and Sifkitz himself had named. There was Berkowitz, Whelan, Carlos, and Freddy. Dr. Brady hadn't cared about them; for Brady, the metabolic work-crew was just a metaphor. His job was to make Sifkitz care a little more about what was going on inside him, that was all, his metaphor not much different from the mommy who tells her toddler that "little men" are working to heal the skin on his scraped knee.

Sifkitz's focus, though . . .

Not on myself at all, he thought, shaking out the key that opened the lobby door. Never was. I cared about those guys, stuck doing a never-ending clean-up job. And the road. Why should they work so hard to keep it clear? Where did it go?

He decided it went to Herkimer, which was a small town up by the Canadian border. He found a skinny and unmarked blue line on the roadmap of upstate New York that rambled there all the way from Poughkeepsie, which was south of the state capital. Two, maybe three hundred miles. He got a more detailed plat map of upstate New York and thumbtacked the square where this road began on the wall beside his hasty . . . his hasty what-would-you-call-it? Mural wasn't right. He settled on "projection."

And that day when he mounted the stationary bike, he imagined that Poughkeepsie was behind him, not the stored television from 2-G, the stack of trunks from 3-F, the tarped dirt-bike from 4-A, but Po'-town. Ahead of him stretched the country road, just a blue squiggle to Monsieur Rand McNally, but the Old Rhinebeck Road according to the more detailed plat map. He zeroed the odometer on the bike, fixed his eyes firmly on the dirt that started where the concrete floor met the wall, and thought: It's really the road to good health. If you keep that somewhere in the back of your mind, you won't have to wonder if maybe a few of your screws got loose since Trudy died.

But his heart was beating a little too fast (as if he'd already started pedaling), and he felt the way he supposed most people did before setting out on a trip to

a new place, where one might encounter new people and even new adventures. There was a can-holder above the stationary bike's rudimentary control panel, and into this he'd slipped a can of Red Bull, which purported to be a power drink. He was wearing an old Oxford shirt over his exercise shorts, because it had a pocket. Into this he'd placed two oatmeal-raisin cookies. Oatmeal and raisins were both supposed to be lipid-scrubbers.

And, speaking of them, The Lipid Company was gone for the day. Oh, they were still on duty in the painting upstairs—the useless, marketless painting that was so unlike him—but down here they'd piled back into Freddy's Dodge, had headed back to . . . to . . .

“Back to Poughkeepsie,” he said. “They're listening to Kateem on WPDH and drinking beers out of paper bags. Today they . . . what did you do today, boys?”

Put in a couple of culverts, a voice whispered. Spring runoff damn near washed the road out near Priceville. Then we knocked off early.

Good. That was good. He wouldn't have to dismount his bike and walk around the washouts.

Richard Sifkitz fixed his eyes on the wall and began to pedal.

### III. On the Road to Herkimer

That was in the fall of 2002, a year after the Twin Towers had fallen into the streets of the Financial District, and life in New York City was returning to a slightly paranoid version of normal . . . except in New York, slightly paranoid *was* normal.

Richard Sifkitz had never felt saner or happier. His life fell into an orderly four-part harmony. In the morning he worked on whatever assignment was currently paying for his room and board, and there were more of these than ever, it seemed. The economy stank, all the newspapers said so, but for Richard Sifkitz, Freelance Commercial Artist, the economy was good.

He still ate lunch at Dugan's on the next block, but now usually a salad instead of a greasy double cheeseburger, and in the afternoon he worked on a new picture for himself: to begin with, a more detailed version of the projection on the wall of the basement alcove. The picture of Berkowitz and

his crew had been set aside and covered with an old piece of sheet. He was done with it. Now he wanted a better image of what served him well enough downstairs, which was the road to Herkimer with the work-crew gone. And why shouldn't they be gone? Wasn't he maintaining the road himself these days? He was, and doing a damned good job. He'd gone back to Brady in late October to have his cholesterol re-tested, and the number this time had been written in black instead of red: 179. Brady had been more than respectful; he'd actually been a little jealous.

"This is better than mine," he said. "You really took it to heart, didn't you?"

"I guess I did," Sifkitz agreed.

"And that potbelly of yours is almost gone. Been working out?"

"As much as I can," Sifkitz agreed, and said no more on the subject. By then his workouts had gotten odd. Some people would consider them odd, anyway.

"Well," said Brady, "if you got it, flaunt it. That's my advice."

Sifkitz smiled at this, but it wasn't advice he took to heart.

His evenings—the fourth part of an Ordinary Sifkitz Day—he spent either watching TV or reading a book, usually sipping a tomato juice or a V-8 instead of a beer, feeling tired but contented. He was going to bed an hour earlier, too, and the extra rest agreed with him.

The heart of his days was part three, from four until six. Those were the two hours he spent on his stationary bike, riding the blue squiggle between Poughkeepsie and Herkimer. On the plat maps, it changed from the Old Rhinebeck Road to the Cascade Falls Road to the Woods Road; for awhile, north of Penniston, it was even the Dump Road. He could remember how, back at the beginning, even fifteen minutes on the stationary bike had seemed like an eternity. Now he sometimes had to force himself to quit after two hours. He finally got an alarm clock and started setting it for six P.M. The thing's aggressive bray was just about enough to . . . well . . .

• • •

It was just enough to wake him up.

Sifkitz found it hard to believe that he was falling asleep down in the alcove while riding the stationary bike at a steady fifteen miles per hour, but he didn't

like the alternative, which was to think that he had gone a little crazy on the road to Herkimer. Or in his SoHo basement, if you liked that better. That he was having delusions.

One night while channel-surfing, he came across a program about hypnosis on A&E. The fellow being interviewed, a hypnotist who styled himself Joe Saturn, was saying that everyone practiced self-hypnosis every day. We used it to enter a work-oriented frame of mind in the morning; we used it to help us “get into the story” when reading novels or watching movies; we used it to get to sleep at night. This last was Joe Saturn’s favorite example, and he talked at length about the patterns “successful sleepers” followed every night: checking the locks on the doors and windows, maybe, drawing a glass of water, maybe saying a little prayer or indulging in a spot of meditation. He likened these to the passes a hypnotist makes in front of his subject, and to his line of patter—counting back from ten to zero, for instance, or assuring the subject that he or she was “getting very sleepy.” Sifkitz seized on this gratefully, deciding on the spot that he was spending his daily two hours on the stationary bike in a state of light to medium hypnosis.

Because, by the third week in front of the wall-projection, he was no longer spending those two hours in the basement alcove. By the third week, he was actually spending them on the road to Herkimer.

He would pedal contentedly enough along the packed dirt track that wound through the forest, smelling the odor of pine, hearing the cries of the crows or the crackle of leaves when he rolled through occasional drifts of them. The stationary bike became the three-speed Raleigh he’d owned as a twelve-year-old in suburban Manchester, New Hampshire. By no means the only bike he’d had before getting his driver’s license at seventeen, but inarguably the best bike. The plastic cup-holder became a clumsily made but effective hand-welded ring of metal jutting over the bike-basket, and instead of Red Bull it contained a can of Lipton iced tea. Unsweetened.

On the road to Herkimer, it was always late October and just an hour before sunset. Although he rode two hours (both the alarm clock and the stationary bike’s odometer confirmed this each time he finished), the sun never changed its position; it always laid the same long shadows across the dirt road and flickered at him through the trees from the same quadrant of the sky as he

traveled along with the manufactured wind of his passage blowing the hair back from his brow.

Sometimes there were signs nailed to trees where other roads crossed the one he was on. CASCADE ROAD, one said. HERKIMER, 120 MI., read another, this one pocked with old bullet-holes. The signs always corresponded to the information on the plat map currently tacked to the alcove wall. He had already decided that, once he reached Herkimer, he'd push on into the Canadian wilderness without even a stop to buy souvenirs. The road stopped there, but that was no problem; he'd already gotten a book titled *Plat Maps of Eastern Canada*. He would simply draw his own road on the plats, using a fine blue pencil and putting in lots of squiggles. Squiggles added miles.

He could go all the way to the Arctic Circle, if he wanted to.

One evening, after the alarm went off and startled him out of his trance, he approached the projection and looked at it for several long, considering moments, head cocked to one side. Anyone else would have seen very little; up that close the picture's trick of forced perspective ceased working and to the untrained eye the woodland scene collapsed into nothing but blobs of color—the light brown of the road's surface, the darker brown that was a shallow drift of leaves, the blue- and gray-streaked green of the firs, the bright yellow-white of the westering sun to the far left, perilously close to the door into the furnace-room. Sifkitz, however, still saw the picture perfectly. It was fixed firmly in his mind now and never changed. Unless he was riding, of course, but even then he was aware of an underlying sameness. Which was good. That essential sameness was a kind of touchstone, a way of assuring himself this was still no more than an elaborate mind-game, something plugged into his subconscious that he could unplug whenever he wanted.

He had brought down a box of colors for the occasional touch-up, and now, without thinking too much about it, he added several blobs of brown to the road, mixing them with black to make them darker than the drifted leaves. He stepped back, looked at the new addition, and nodded. It was a small change but in its way, perfect.

The following day, as he rode his three-speed Raleigh through the woods (he was less than sixty miles from Herkimer now and only eighty from the Canadian border), he came around a bend and there was a good-sized buck

deer standing in the middle of the road, looking at him with startled dark velvet eyes. It flipped up the white flag of its tail, dropped a pile of scat, and was then off into the woods again. Sifkitz saw another flip of its tail and then the deer was gone. He rode on, giving the deer-shit a miss, not wanting it in the treads of his tires.

That night he silenced the alarm and approached the painting on the wall, wiping sweat from his forehead with a bandanna he took from the back pocket of his jeans. He looked at the projection critically, hands on hips. Then, moving with his usual confident speed—he'd been doing this sort of work for almost twenty years, after all—he painted the scat out of the picture, replacing it with a clutch of rusty beer cans undoubtedly left by some upstate hunter in search of pheasant or turkey.

"You missed those, Berkowitz," he said that night as he sat drinking a beer instead of a V-8 juice. "I'll pick 'em up myself tomorrow, but don't let it happen again."

Except when he went down the next day, there was no need to paint the beer cans out of the picture; they were already gone. For a moment he felt real fright prod his belly like a blunt stick—what had he done, sleepwalked down here in the middle of the night, picked up his trusty can of turp and a brush?—and then put it out of his mind. He mounted the stationary bike and was soon riding his old Raleigh, smelling the clean smells of the forest, relishing the way the wind blew his hair back from his forehead. And yet wasn't that the day things began to change? The day he sensed he might not be alone on the road to Herkimer? One thing was beyond doubt: it was the day after the disappearing beer cans that he had the really terrible dream and then drew the picture of Carlos's garage.

#### IV. Man with Shotgun

It was the most vivid dream he'd had since the age of fourteen, when three or four brilliant wet-dreams had ushered him into physical manhood. It was the most horrible dream ever, hands down, nothing else even close. What made it horrible was the sense of impending doom that ran through it like a red thread. This was true even though the dream had a weird thinness: he knew he

was dreaming but could not quite escape it. He felt as if he'd been wrapped in some terrible gauze. He knew his bed was near and he was in it—struggling—but he couldn't quite break through to the Richard Sifkitz who lay there, trembling and sweaty in his Big Dog sleep-shorts.

He saw a pillow and a beige telephone with a crack in the case. Then a hallway filled with pictures that he knew were of his wife and three daughters. Then a kitchen, the microwave oven flashing 4:16. A bowl of bananas (they filled him with grief and horror) on the Formica counter. A breezeway. And here lay Pepe the dog with his muzzle on his paws, and Pepe did not raise his head but rolled his eyes up to look at him as he passed, revealing a gruesome, blood-threaded crescent of white, and that was when Sifkitz began to weep in the dream, understanding that all was lost.

Now he was in the garage. He could smell oil. He could smell old sweet grass. The LawnBoy stood in the corner like a suburban god. He could see the vise clamped to the work-table, old and dark and flecked with tiny splinters of wood. Next, a closet. His girls' ice-skates were piled on the floor, their laces as white as vanilla ice cream. His tools hung from pegs on the walls, arranged neatly, mostly yard-tools, a bear for working in his yard was

(Carlos. I am Carlos.)

On the top shelf, far out of the girls' reach, was a .410 shotgun, not used for years, nearly forgotten, and a box of shells so dark you could barely read the word Winchester on the side, only you could read it, just enough, and that was when Sifkitz came to understand that he was being carried along in the brain of a potential suicide. He struggled furiously to either stop Carlos or escape him and could do neither, even though he sensed his bed so near, just on the other side of the gauze that wrapped him from head to foot.

Now he was at the vise again, and the .410 was clamped in the vise, and the box of shells was on the work-table beside the vise, and here was a hacksaw, he was hacksawing off the barrel of the shotgun because that would make it easier to do what he had to do, and when he opened the box of shells there were two dozen of them, fat green buggers with brass bottoms, and the sound the gun made when Carlos snapped it closed wasn't cling! but CLACK! and the taste in his mouth was oily and dusty, oily on his tongue and dusty on the insides of his cheeks and his teeth, and his back hurt, it hurt LAMF, that was how they

had tagged abandoned buildings (and sometimes ones that weren't abandoned) when he was a teenager and running with the Deacons in Po'-town, stood for LIKE A MOTHERFUCKER, and that was how his back hurt, but now that he was laid off the benefits were gone, Jimmy Berkowitz could no longer afford the bennies and so Carlos Martinez could no longer afford the drugs that made the pain a little less, could no longer afford the chiropractor that made the pain a little less, and the house-payments—ay, caramba, they used to say, joking, but he sure wasn't joking now, ay, caramba they were going to lose the house, less than five years from the finish-line but they were going to lose it, si-si, señor, and it was all that fuck Sifkitz's fault, him with his fucking road-maintenance hobby, and the curve of the trigger underneath his finger was like a crescent, like the unspeakable crescent of his dog's peering eye.

That was when Sifkitz woke up, sobbing and shaking, legs still in bed, head out and almost touching the floor, hair hanging. He crawled all the way out of the bedroom and started crawling across the main room to the easel under the skylight. Halfway there he found himself able to walk.

The picture of the empty road was still on the easel, the better and more complete version of the one downstairs on the alcove wall. He flung it away without a second look and set up a piece of two-foot-by-two pressboard in its place. He seized the nearest implement which would make a mark (this happened to be a UniBall Vision Elite pen) and began to draw. He drew for hours. At one point (he remembered this only vaguely) he needed to piss and could feel it running hot down his leg. The tears didn't stop until the picture was finished. Then, thankfully dry-eyed at last, he stood back and looked at what he had done.

It was Carlos's garage on an October afternoon. The dog, Pepe, stood in front of it with his ears raised. The dog had been drawn by the sound of the gunshot. There was no sign of Carlos in the picture, but Sifkitz knew exactly where the body lay, on the left, beside the work-table with the vise clamped to the edge. If his wife was home, she would have heard the shot. If she was out—perhaps shopping, more likely at work—it might be another hour or two before she came home and found him.

Beneath the image he had scrawled the words MAN WITH SHOTGUN. He couldn't remember doing this, but it was his printing and the right name

for the picture. There was no man visible in it, no shotgun, either, but it was the right title.

Sifkitz went to his couch, sat down on it, and put his head in his hands. His right hand ached fiercely from clutching the unfamiliar, too-small drawing implement. He tried to tell himself he'd just had a bad dream, the picture the result of that dream. That there had never been any Carlos, never any Lipid Company, both of them were figments of his own imagination, drawn from Dr. Brady's careless metaphor.

But dreams faded, and these images—the phone with the crack in its beige case, the microwave, the bowl of bananas, the dog's eye—were as clear as ever. Clearer, even.

One thing was sure, he told himself. He was done with the goddam stationary bike. This was just a little too close to lunacy. If he kept on this way, soon he'd be cutting off his ear and mailing it not to his girlfriend (he didn't have one) but to Dr. Brady, who was surely responsible for this.

“Done with the bike,” he said, with his head still in his hands. “Maybe I'll get a membership down at Fitness Boys, something like that, but I'm done with that fucking stationary bike.”

Only he didn't get a membership at The Fitness Boys, and after a week without real exercise (he walked, but it wasn't the same—there were too many people on the sidewalks and he longed for the peace of the Herkimer Road), he could no longer stand it. He was behind on his latest project, which was an illustration a la Norman Rockwell for Fritos Corn Chips, and he'd had a call from both his agent and the guy in charge of the Fritos account at the ad agency. This had never happened to him before.

Worse, he wasn't sleeping.

The urgency of the dream had faded a little, and he decided it was only the picture of Carlos's garage, glaring at him from the corner of the room, that kept bringing it back, refreshing the dream the way a squirt of water from a mister may refresh a thirsty plant. He couldn't bring himself to destroy the picture (it was too damned good), but he turned it around so that the image faced nothing but the wall.

That afternoon he rode the elevator down to the basement and remounted the stationary bike. It turned into the old three-speed Raleigh almost as soon as

he'd fixed his eyes on the wall-projection, and he resumed his ride north. He tried to tell himself that his sense of being followed was bogus, just something left over from his dream and the frenzied hours at the easel afterward. For a little while this actually did the job even though he knew better. He had reasons to make it do the job. The chief ones were that he was sleeping through the night again and had resumed working on his current assignment.

He finished the painting of the boys sharing a bag of Fritos on an idyllic suburban pitcher's mound, shipped it off by messenger, and the following day a check for ten thousand, two hundred dollars came with a note from Barry Casselman, his agent. You scared me a little, hon, the note said, and Sifkitz thought: You're not the only one. Hon.

Every now and then during the following week it occurred to him that he should tell someone about his adventures under the red sky, and each time he dismissed the idea. He could have told Trudy, but of course if Trudy had been around, things would never have gotten this far in the first place. The idea of telling Barry was laughable; the idea of telling Dr. Brady actually a little frightening. Dr. Brady would be recommending a good psychiatrist before you could say Minnesota Multiphasic.

The night he got the Fritos check, Sifkitz noticed a change in the basement wall-mural. He paused in the act of setting his alarm and approached the projection (can of Diet Coke in one hand, reliable little Brookstone desk-clock in the other, oatmeal-raisin cookies tucked away safely in the old shirt pocket). Something was up in there, all right, something was different, but at first he was damned if he could tell what it was. He closed his eyes, counted to five (clearing his mind as he did so, an old trick), then sprang them open again, so wide that he looked like a man burlesquing fright. This time he saw the change at once. The bright yellow marquise shape over by the door to the furnace room was as gone as the clutch of beer cans. And the color of the sky above the trees was a deeper, darker red. The sun was either down or almost down. On the road to Herkimer, night was coming.

You have to stop this, Sifkitz thought, and then he thought: Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow.

With that he mounted up and started riding. In the woods around him, he could hear the sound of birds settling down for the night.

## V. The Screwdriver Would Do for a Start

Over the next five or six days, the time Sifkitz spent on the stationary bike (and his childhood three-speed) was both wonderful and terrible. Wonderful because he had never felt better; his body was operating at absolute peak performance levels for a man his age, and he knew it. He supposed that there were pro athletes in better shape than he was, but by thirty-eight they would be approaching the end of their careers, and whatever joy they were able to take in the tuned condition of their bodies would necessarily be tainted by that knowledge. Sifkitz, on the other hand, might go on creating commercial art for another forty years, if he chose to. Hell, another fifty. Five full generations of football players and four of baseball players would come and go while he stood peacefully at his easel, painting book covers, automotive products, and Five New Logos for Pepsi-Cola.

Except . . .

Except that wasn't the ending folks familiar with this sort of story would expect, was it? Nor the sort of ending he expected himself.

The sense of being followed grew stronger with every ride, especially after he took down the last of the New York State plat maps and put up the first of the Canadian ones. Using a blue pen (the same one he'd used to create MAN WITH SHOTGUN), he drew an extension of the Herkimer Road on the previously roadless plat, adding lots of squiggles. By now he was pedaling faster, looking over his shoulder often, and finishing his rides covered with sweat, at first too out of breath to dismount the bike and turn off the braying alarm.

That looking-back-over-the-shoulder thing, now—that was interesting. At first when he did it he'd catch a glimpse of the basement alcove, and the doorway leading to the basement's larger rooms with its mazy arrangement of storage stalls. He'd see the Pomona Oranges crate by the door with the Brookstone desk alarm on it, marking off the minutes between four and six. Then a kind of red blur wiped across everything, and when it drained away he was looking at the road behind him, the autumn-bright trees on both sides (only not so bright now, not with twilight starting to thicken), and the darkening red sky overhead. Later, he didn't see the basement at all when he

looked back, not even a flash of it. Just the road leading back to Herkimer, and eventually to Poughkeepsie.

He knew perfectly well what he was looking back over his shoulder for: headlights.

The headlights of Freddy's Dodge Ram, if you wanted to get specific about it. Because for Berkowitz and his crew, bewildered resentment had given way to anger. Carlos's suicide was what had tipped them over the edge. They blamed him and they were after him. And when they caught him, they'd—

What? They'd what?

Kill me, he thought, pedaling grimly on into the twilight. No need to be coy about it. They catch up, they'll kill me. I'm in the serious williwags now, not a town on that whole damn plat map, not so much as a village. I could scream my head off and no one would hear me except Barry the Bear, Debby the Doe, and Rudy the Raccoon. So if I see those headlights (or hear the motor, because Freddy might be running without lights), I would do well to get the hell back to SoHo, alarm or no alarm. I'm crazy to be here in the first place.

But he was having trouble getting back now. When the alarm went off the Raleigh would remain a Raleigh for thirty seconds or more, the road ahead would remain a road instead of reverting to blobs of color on cement, and the alarm itself sounded distant and strangely mellow. He had an idea that eventually he would hear it as the drone of a jet airplane high overhead, an American Airlines 767 out of Kennedy, perhaps, headed over the North Pole to the far side of the world.

He would stop, squeeze his eyes shut, then pop them wide open again. That did the trick, but he had an idea it might not work for long. Then what? A hungry night spent in the woods, looking up at a full moon that looked like a bloodshot eye?

No, they'd catch up to him before then, he reckoned. The question was, did he intend to let that happen? Incredibly, part of him wanted to do just that. Part of him was angry at them. Part of him wanted to confront Berkowitz and the remaining members of his crew, ask them What did you expect me to do, anyway? Just go on the way things were, gobbling Krispy Kreme donuts,

paying no attention to the washouts when the culverts plugged up and overflowed? Is that what you wanted?

But there was another part of him that knew such a confrontation would be madness. He was in tiptop shape, yes, but you were still talking three against one, and who was to say Mrs. Carlos hadn't loaned the boys her husband's shotgun, told them yeah, go get the bastard, and be sure to tell him the first one's from me and my girls.

Sifkitz had had a friend who'd beaten a bad cocaine addiction in the eighties, and he remembered this fellow saying the first thing you had to do was get it out of the house. You could always buy more, sure, that shit was everywhere now, on every streetcorner, but that was no excuse for keeping it where you could grab it any time your will weakened. So he'd gathered it all up and flushed it down the toilet. And once it was gone, he'd thrown his works out with the trash. That hadn't been the end of his problem, he'd said, but it had been the beginning of the end.

One night Sifkitz entered the alcove carrying a screwdriver. He had every intention of dismantling the stationary bike, and never mind the fact that he'd set the alarm for six P.M., as he always did, that was just habit. The alarm clock (like the oatmeal-raisin cookies) was part of his works, he supposed; the hypnotic passes he made, the machinery of his dream. And once he was done reducing the bike to unrideable components, he'd put the alarm clock out with the rest of the trash, just as his friend had done with his crack-pipe. He'd feel a pang, of course—the sturdy little Brookstone certainly wasn't to blame for the idiotic situation into which he'd gotten himself—but he would do it. Cowboy up, they'd told each other as kids; quit whining and just cowboy up.

He saw that the bike was comprised of four main sections, and that he'd also need an adjustable wrench to dismantle the thing completely. That was all right, though; the screwdriver would do for a start. He could use it to take off the pedals. Once that was done he'd borrow the adjustable wrench from the super's toolbox.

He dropped to one knee, slipped the tip of the borrowed tool into the slot of the first screw, and hesitated. He wondered if his friend had smoked one more rock before turning the rest of them down the toilet, just one more rock for old times' sake. He bet the guy had. Being a little stoned had probably

stilled the cravings, made the disposal job a little easier. And if he had one more ride, then knelt here to take off the pedals with the endorphins flowing, wouldn't he feel a little less depressed about it? A little less likely to imagine Berkowitz, Freddy, and Whelan retiring to the nearest roadside bar, where they would buy first one pitcher of Rolling Rock and then another, toasting each other and Carlos's memory, congratulating each other on how they had beaten the bastard?

"You're crazy," he murmured to himself, and slipped the tip of the driver back into the notch of the screw. "Do it and be done."

He actually turned the screwdriver once (and it was easy; whoever had put this together in the back room of The Fitness Boys obviously hadn't had his heart in it), but when he did, the oatmeal-raisin cookies shifted a little in his pocket and he thought how good they always tasted when you were riding along. You just took your right hand off the handlebar, dipped it into your pocket, had a couple of bites, then chased it with a swallow of iced tea. It was the perfect combination. It just felt so good to be speeding along, having a little picnic as you went, and those sons of bitches wanted to take it away from him.

A dozen turns of the screw, maybe even less, and the pedal would drop off onto the concrete floor—clunk. Then he could move on to the other one, and then he could move on with his life.

This is not fair, he thought.

One more ride, just for old times' sake, he thought.

And, swinging his leg over the fork and settling his ass (firmer and harder by far than it had been on the day of the red cholesterol number) onto the seat, he thought: This is the way stories like this always go, isn't it? The way they always end, with the poor schmuck saying this is the last time, I'll never do this again.

Absolutely true, he thought, but I'll bet in real life, people get away with it. I bet they get away with it all the time.

Part of him was murmuring that real life had never been like this, what he was doing (and what he was experiencing) bore absolutely no resemblance whatever to real life as he understood it. He pushed the voice away, closed his ears to it.

It was a beautiful evening for a ride in the woods.

## VI. Not Quite the Ending Everyone Expected

And still, he got one more chance.

That was the night he heard the revving engine behind him clearly for the first time, and just before the alarm clock went off, the Raleigh he was riding suddenly grew an elongated shadow on the road ahead of him—the sort of shadow that could only have been created by headlights.

Then the alarm did go off, not a bray but a distant purring sound that was almost melodic.

The truck was closing in. He didn't need to turn his head to see it (nor does one ever want to turn and see the frightful fiend that close behind him treads, Sifkitz supposed later that night, lying awake in his bed and still wrapped in the cold-yet-hot sensation of disaster avoided by mere inches or seconds). He could see the shadow, growing longer and darker.

Hurry up, please, gentlemen, it's time, he thought, and squeezed his eyes closed. He could still hear the alarm, but it was still no more than that almost soothing purr, it was certainly no louder; what was louder was the engine, the one inside Freddy's truck. It was almost on him, and suppose they didn't want to waste so much as a New York minute in conversation? Suppose the one currently behind the wheel just mashed the pedal to the metal and ran him down? Turned him into roadkill?

He didn't bother to open his eyes, didn't waste time confirming that it was still the deserted road instead of the basement alcove. Instead he squeezed them even more tightly shut, focused all his attention on the sound of the alarm, and this time turned the polite voice of the barman into an impatient bellow:

**HURRY UP PLEASE GENTLEMEN IT'S TIME!**

And suddenly, thankfully, it was the sound of the engine that was fading and the sound of the Brookstone alarm that was swelling, taking on its old familiar rough get-up-get-up-get-up bray. And this time when he opened his eyes, he saw the projection of the road instead of the road itself.

But now the sky was black, its organic redness hidden by nightfall. The road was brilliantly lit, the shadow of the bike—a Raleigh—a clear black on the leaf-littered hardpack. He could tell himself he had dismounted the stationary bike and painted those changes while in his nightly trance, but he knew better, and not only because there was no paint on his hands.

This is my last chance, he thought. My last chance to avoid the ending everyone expects in stories like this.

But he was simply too tired, too shaky, to take care of the stationary bike now. He would take care of it tomorrow. Tomorrow morning, in fact, first thing. Right now all he wanted was to get out of this awful place where reality had worn so thin. And with that firmly in mind, Sifkitz staggered to the Pomona crate beside the doorway (rubber-legged, covered with a thin slime of sweat—the smelly kind that comes from fear rather than exertion) and shut the alarm off. Then he went upstairs and lay down on his bed. Some very long time later, sleep came.

The next morning he went down the cellar stairs, eschewing the elevator and walking firmly, with his head up and his lips pressed tightly together, A Man On A Mission. He went directly to the stationary bike, ignoring the alarm clock on the crate, dropped to one knee, picked up the screwdriver. He slipped it once more into the slot of a screw, one of the four that held the left-hand pedal . . .

. . . and the next thing he knew, he was speeding giddily along the road again, with the headlights brightening around him until he felt like a man on a stage that's dark save for one single spotlight. The truck's engine was too loud (something wrong with the muffler or the exhaust system), and it was out of tune, as well. He doubted if old Freddy had bothered with the last maintenance go-round. No, not with house-payments to make, groceries to buy, the kiddies still needing braces, and no weekly paycheck coming in.

He thought: I had my chance. I had my chance last night and I didn't take it.

He thought: Why did I do this? Why, when I knew better?

He thought: Because they made me, somehow. They made me.

He thought: They're going to run me down and I'll die in the woods.

But the truck did not run him down. It hurtled past him on the right instead, left-side wheels rumbling in the leaf-choked ditch, and then it swung across the road in front of him, blocking the way.

Panicked, Sifkitz forgot the first thing his father had taught him when he brought the three-speed home: When you stop, Richie, reverse the pedals. Brake the bike's rear wheel at the same time you squeeze the handbrake that controls the front wheel. Otherwise—

This was otherwise. In his panic he turned both hands into fists, squeezing the handbrake on the left, locking the front wheel. The bike bucked him off and sent him flying at the truck with LIPID COMPANY printed on the driver's-side door. He threw his hands out and they struck the top of the truck's bed hard enough to numb them. Then he collapsed in a heap, wondering how many bones were broken.

The doors opened above him and he heard the crackle of leaves as men in workboots got out. He didn't look up. He waited for them to grab him and make him get up, but no one did. The smell of the leaves was like old dry cinnamon. The footsteps passed him on either side, and then the crackle abruptly stopped.

Sifkitz sat up and looked at his hands. The palm of the right one was bleeding and the wrist of the left one was already swelling, but he didn't think it was broken. He looked around and the first thing he saw—red in the glow of the Dodge's taillights—was his Raleigh. It had been beautiful when his Dad brought it home from the bike-shop, but it wasn't beautiful any longer. The front wheel was warped out of true, and the rear tire had come partly off the rim. For the first time he felt something other than fear. This new emotion was anger.

He got shakily to his feet. Beyond the Raleigh, back the way he'd come, was a hole in reality. It was strangely organic, as if he were looking through the hole at the end of some duct in his own body. The edges wavered and bulged and flexed. Beyond it, three men were standing around the stationary bike in the basement alcove, standing in postures he recognized from every work-crew he'd ever seen in his life. These were men with a job to do. They were deciding how to do it.

And suddenly he knew why he'd named them as he had. It was really idiotically simple. The one in the LIPID cap, Berkowitz, was David Berkowitz, the so-called Son of Sam and a New York *Post* staple the year Sifkitz had come to Manhattan. Freddy was Freddy Albemarle, this kid he'd known in high school—they'd been in a band together, and had become friends for a simple enough reason: they both hated school. And Whelan? An artist he'd met at a conference somewhere. Michael Whelan? Mitchell Whelan? Sifkitz couldn't quite remember, but he knew the guy specialized in fantasy art, dragons and such. They had spent a night in the hotel bar, telling stories about the comic-horrible world of movie-poster art.

Then there was Carlos, who'd committed suicide in his garage. Why, he had been a version of Carlos Delgado, also known as the Big Cat. For years Sifkitz had followed the fortunes of the Toronto Blue Jays, simply because he didn't want to be like every other American League baseball fan in New York and root for the Yankees. The Cat had been one of Toronto's very few stars.

"I made you all," he said in a voice that was little more than a croak. "I created you out of memories and spare parts." Of course he had. Nor had it been for the first time. The boys on the Norman Rockwell pitcher's mound in the Fritos ad, for instance—the ad agency had, at his request, provided him with photographs of four boys of the correct age, and Sifkitz had simply painted them in. Their mothers had signed the necessary waivers; it had been business as usual.

If they heard him speak, Berkowitz, Freddy, and Whelan gave no sign. They spoke a few words among themselves that Sifkitz could hear but not make out; they seemed to come from a great distance. Whatever they were, they got Whelan moving out of the alcove while Berkowitz knelt by the stationary bike, just as Sifkitz himself had done. Berkowitz picked up the screwdriver and in no time at all the left-hand pedal dropped off onto the concrete—clunk. Sifkitz, still on the deserted road, watched through the queer organic hole as Berkowitz handed the screwdriver to Freddy Albemarle—who, with Richard Sifkitz, had played lousy trumpet in the equally lousy high school band. They had played a hell of a lot better when they were rocking. Somewhere in the Canadian woods an owl hooted, the sound inexpressibly lonely. Freddy went to work

unscrewing the other pedal. Whelan, meanwhile, returned with the adjustable wrench in his hand. Sifkitz felt a pang at the sight of it.

Watching them, the thought that went through Sifkitz's mind was: If you want something done right, hire a professional. Certainly Berkowitz and his boys wasted no time. In less than four minutes the stationary bike was nothing but two wheels and three disconnected sections of frame laid on the concrete, and so neatly that the parts looked like one of those diagrams called "exploded schematics."

Berkowitz himself dropped the screws and bolts into the front pockets of his Dickies, where they bulged like handfuls of spare change. He gave Sifkitz a meaningful look as he did this, one that made Sifkitz angry all over again. By the time the work-crew came back through the odd, ductlike hole (dropping their heads as they did so, like men passing through a low doorway), Sifkitz's fists were clenched again, even though doing that made the wrist of the left one throb like hell.

"You know what?" he asked Berkowitz. "I don't think you can hurt me. I don't think you can hurt me, because then what happens to you? You're nothing but a . . . a sub-contractor!"

Berkowitz looked at him levelly from beneath the bent bill of his LIPID cap.

"I made you up!" Sifkitz said, and counted them off, poking the index finger out of his right fist and pointing it at each one in turn like the barrel of a gun. "You're the Son of Sam! You're nothing but a grown-up version of this kid I played the horn with at Sisters of Mercy High! You couldn't play E-flat to save your life! And you're an artist specializing in dragons and enchanted maidens!"

The remaining members of The Lipid Company were singularly unimpressed.

"What does that make you?" Berkowitz asked. "Did you ever think of that? Are you going to tell me there might not be a larger world out there someplace? For all you know, you're nothing but a random thought going through some unemployed Certified Public Accountant's head while he sits on the jakes, reading the paper and taking his morning dump."

Sifkitz opened his mouth to say that was ridiculous, but something in Berkowitz's eyes made him shut it again. Go on, his eyes said. Ask a question. I'll tell you more than you ever wanted to know.

What Sifkitz said instead was, "Who are you to tell me I can't get fit? Do you want me to die at fifty? Jesus Christ, what's wrong with you?"

Freddy said, "I ain't no philosopher, Mac. All I know is that my truck needs a tune-up I can't afford."

"And I've got one kid who needs orthopedic shoes and another one who needs speech therapy," Whelan added.

"The guys working on the Big Dig in Boston have got a saying," Berkowitz said. "'Don't kill the job, let it die on its own.' That's all we're asking, Sifkitz. Let us dip our beaks. Let us earn our living."

"This is crazy," Sifkitz muttered. "Totally—"

"I don't give a shit how you feel about it, you motherfucker!" Freddy shouted, and Sifkitz realized the man was almost crying. This confrontation was as stressful for them as it was for him. Somehow realizing that was the worst shock of all. "I don't give a shit about you, you ain't nothing, you don't work, you just piddle around and make your little pitchers, but don't you take the bread out of my kids' mouths, you hear? Don't you do it!"

He started forward, hands rolling into fists and coming up in front of his face: an absurd John L. Sullivan boxing pose. Berkowitz put a hand on Freddy's arm and pulled him back.

"Don't be a hardass about it, man," Whelan said. "Live and let live, all right?"

"Let us dip our beaks," Berkowitz repeated, and of course Sifkitz recognized the phrase; he'd read *The Godfather* and seen all the movies. Could any of these guys use a word or a slang phrase that wasn't in his own vocabulary? He doubted it. "Let us keep our dignity, man. You think we can go to work drawing pictures, like you?" He laughed. "Yeah, right. If I draw a cat, I gotta write CAT underneath so people know what it is."

"You killed Carlos," Whelan said, and if there had been accusation in his voice, Sifkitz had an idea he might have been angry all over again. But all he heard was sorrow. "We told him, 'Hold on, man, it'll get better,' but he wasn't strong. He could never, you know, look ahead. He lost all his hope." Whelan

paused, looked up at the dark sky. Not far off, Freddy's Dodge rumbled roughly. "He never had much to start with. Some people don't, you know."

Sifkitz turned to Berkowitz. "Let me get this straight. What you want—"

"Just don't kill the job," Berkowitz said. "That's all we want. Let the job die on its own."

Sifkitz realized he could probably do as this man was asking. It might even be easy. Some people, if they ate one Krispy Kreme, they had to go and finish the whole box. If he'd been that type of man, they would have a serious problem here . . . but he wasn't.

"Okay," he said. "Why don't we give it a try." And then an idea struck him. "Do you think I could have a company hat?" He pointed to the one Berkowitz was wearing.

Berkowitz gave a smile. It was brief, but more genuine than the laugh when he'd said he couldn't draw a cat without having to write the word under it. "That could be arranged."

Sifkitz had an idea Berkowitz would stick out his hand then, but Berkowitz didn't. He just gave Sifkitz a final measuring glance from beneath the bill of his cap and then started toward the cab of the truck. The other two followed.

"How long before I decide none of this happened?" Sifkitz asked. "That I took the stationary bike apart myself because I just . . . I don't know . . . just got tired of it?"

Berkowitz paused, hand on the doorhandle, and looked back. "How long do you want it to be?" he asked.

"I don't know," Sifkitz said. "Hey, it's beautiful out here, isn't it?"

"It always was," Berkowitz said. "We always kept it nice." There was an undertone of defensiveness in his voice that Sifkitz chose to ignore. It occurred to him that even a figment of one's imagination could have its pride.

For a few moments they stood there on the road, which Sifkitz had lately come to think of as The Great Trans-Canadian Lost Highway, a pretty grand name for a no-name dirt track through the woods, but also pretty nice. None of them said anything. Somewhere the owl hooted again.

"Indoors, outdoors, it's all the same to us," Berkowitz said. Then he opened the door and swung up behind the wheel.

"Take care of yourself," Freddy said.

“But not too much,” Whelan added.

Sifkitz stood there while the truck made an artful three-point turn on the narrow road and started back the way it came. The ductlike opening was gone, but Sifkitz didn't worry about that. He didn't think he'd have any trouble getting back when the time came. Berkowitz made no effort to avoid the Raleigh but ran directly over it, finishing a job that was already finished. There were sproinks and goinks as the spokes in the wheels broke. The tail-lights dwindled, then disappeared around a curve. Sifkitz could hear the thump of the motor for quite awhile, but that faded, too.

He sat down on the road, then lay down on his back, cradling his throbbing left wrist against his chest. There were no stars in the sky. He was very tired. Better not go to sleep, he advised himself, something's likely to come out of the woods—a bear, maybe—and eat you. Then he fell asleep anyway.

When he woke up, he was on the cement floor of the alcove. The dismantled pieces of the stationary bike, now screwless and boltless, lay all around him. The Brookstone alarm clock on the crate read 8:43 P.M. One of them had apparently turned off the alarm.

I took this thing apart myself, he thought. That's my story, and if I stick to it I'll believe it soon enough.

He climbed the stairs to the building's lobby and decided he was hungry. He thought maybe he'd go out to Dugan's and get a piece of apple pie. Apple pie wasn't the world's most unhealthy snack, was it? And when he got there, he decided to have it a la mode.

“What the hell,” he told the waitress. “You only live once, don't you?”

“Well,” she replied, “that's not what the Hindus say, but whatever floats your boat.”

Two months later, Sifkitz got a package.

It was waiting for him in the lobby of his building when he got back from having dinner with his agent (Sifkitz had fish and steamed vegetables, but followed it with a *crème brûlée*). There was no postage on it, no Federal Express, Airborne Express, or UPS logo, no stamps. Just his name, printed in ragged block letters: RICHARD SIFKITZ. That's a man who'd have to print CAT underneath his drawing of one, he thought, and had no idea at all why he'd thought it. He took the box upstairs and used an X-Acto knife from his

work-table to slice it open. Inside, beneath a big wad of tissue paper, was a brand-new gimme cap, the kind with the plastic adjustable band in back. The tag inside read Made In Bangladesh. Printed above the bill in a dark red that made him think of arterial blood was one word: LIPID.

“What’s that?” he asked the empty studio, turning the cap over and over in his hands. “Some kind of blood component, isn’t it?”

He tried the hat on. At first it was too small, but when he adjusted the band at the back, the fit was perfect. He looked at it in his bedroom mirror and still didn’t quite like it. He took it off, bent the bill into a curve, and tried it again. Now it was almost right. It would look better still when he got out of his going-to-lunch clothes and into a pair of paint-splattered jeans. He’d look like a real working stiff . . . which he was, in spite of what some people might think.

Wearing the LIPID cap while he painted eventually became a habit with him, like allowing himself seconds on days of the week that started with S, and having pie a la mode at Dugan’s on Thursday nights. Despite whatever the Hindu philosophy might be, Richard Sifkitz believed you only went around once. That being the case, maybe you should allow yourself a little bit of everything.

# The Things They Left Behind

The things I want to tell you about—the ones they left behind—showed up in my apartment in August of 2002. I'm sure of that, because I found most of them not long after I helped Paula Robeson with her air conditioner. Memory always needs a marker, and that's mine. She was a children's book illustrator, good-looking (hell, *fine*-looking), husband in import-export. A man has a way of remembering occasions when he's actually able to help a good-looking lady in distress (even one who keeps assuring you she's "very married"); such occasions are all too few. These days the would-be knight errant usually just makes matters worse.

She was in the lobby, looking frustrated, when I came down for an afternoon walk. I said *Hi, howya doin'*, the way you do to other folks who share your building, and she asked me in an exasperated tone that stopped just short of querulousness why the super had to be on vacation *now*. I pointed out that even cowgirls get the blues and even supers go on vacation; that August, furthermore, was an extremely logical month to take time off. August in New York (and in Paris, *mon ami*) finds psychoanalysts, trendy artists, and building superintendents mighty thin on the ground.

She didn't smile. I'm not sure she even got the Tom Robbins reference (obliqueness is the curse of the reading class). She said it might be true about August being a good month to take off and go to the Cape or Fire Island, but her damned apartment was just about burning *up* and the damned air conditioner wouldn't so much as burp. I asked her if she'd like me to take a look, and I remember the glance she gave me—those cool, assessing gray eyes. I remember thinking that eyes like that probably saw quite a lot. And I remember smiling at what she asked me: *Are you safe?* It reminded me of that movie, not *Lolita* (thinking about *Lolita*, sometimes at two in the morning,

came later) but the one where Laurence Olivier does the impromptu dental work on Dustin Hoffman, asking him over and over again, *Is it safe?*

*I'm safe,* I said. *Haven't attacked a woman in over a year. I used to attack two or three a week, but the meetings are helping.*

A giddy thing to say, but I was in a fairly giddy mood. A *summer* mood. She gave me another look, and then *she* smiled. Put out her hand. *Paula Robeson,* she said. It was the left hand she put out—not normal, but the one with the plain gold band on it. I think that was probably on purpose, don't you? But it was later that she told me about her husband being in import-export. On the day when it was my turn to ask *her* for help.

In the elevator, I told her not to expect too much. Now, if she'd wanted a man to find out the underlying causes of the New York City Draft Riots, or to supply a few amusing anecdotes about the creation of the small-pox vaccine, or even to dig up quotes on the sociological ramifications of the TV remote control (the most important invention of the last fifty years, in my 'umble opinion), I was the guy.

*Research is your game, Mr. Staley?* she asked as we went up in the slow and clattery elevator.

I admitted that it was, although I didn't add that I was still quite new to it. Nor did I ask her to call me Scott—that would have spooked her all over again. And I certainly didn't tell her that I was trying to forget all I'd once known about rural insurance. That I was, in fact, trying to forget quite a lot of things, including about two dozen faces.

You see, I may be trying to forget, but I still remember quite a lot. I think we all do when we put our minds to it (and sometimes, rather more nastily, when we don't). I even remember something one of those South American novelists said—you know, the ones they call the Magical Realists? Not the guy's name, that's not important, but this quote: *As infants, our first victory comes in grasping some bit of the world, usually our mothers' fingers. Later we discover that the world, and the things of the world, are grasping us, and have been all along.* Borges? Yes, it might have been Borges. Or it might have been Márquez. That I *don't* remember. I just know I got her air conditioner running, and when cool air started blowing out of the convector, it lit up her whole face. I also know it's true, that thing about how perception switches around and we come to

realize that the things we thought we were holding are actually holding us. Keeping us prisoner, perhaps—Thoreau certainly thought so—but also holding us in place. That’s the trade-off. And no matter what Thoreau might have thought, I believe the trade is mostly a fair one. Or I did then; now, I’m not so sure.

And I know these things happened in late August of 2002, not quite a year after a piece of the sky fell down and everything changed for all of us.

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On an afternoon about a week after Sir Scott Staley donned his Good Samaritan armor and successfully battled the fearsome air conditioner, I took my afternoon walk to the Staples on 83rd Street to get a box of Zip discs and a ream of paper. I owed a fellow forty pages of background on the development of the Polaroid camera (which is more interesting a story than you might think). When I got back to my apartment, there was a pair of sunglasses with red frames and very distinctive lenses on the little table in the foyer where I keep bills that need to be paid, claim checks, overdue-book notices, and things of that nature. I recognized the glasses at once, and all the strength went out of me. I didn’t fall, but I dropped my packages on the floor and leaned against the side of the door, trying to catch my breath and staring at those sunglasses. If there had been nothing to lean against, I believe I would have swooned like a miss in a Victorian novel—one of those where the lustful vampire appears at the stroke of midnight.

Two related but distinct emotional waves struck me. The first was that sense of horrified shame you feel when you know you’re about to be caught in some act you will never be able to explain. The memory that comes to mind in this regard is of a thing that happened to me—or almost happened—when I was sixteen.

My mother and sister had gone shopping in Portland and I supposedly had the house to myself until evening. I was reclining naked on my bed with a pair of my sister’s underpants wrapped around my cock. The bed was scattered with pictures I’d clipped from magazines I’d found in the back of the garage—the previous owner’s stash of *Penthouse* and *Gallery* magazines, very likely. I heard a

car come crunching into the driveway. No mistaking the sound of that motor; it was my mother and sister. Peg had come down with some sort of flu bug and started vomiting out the window. They'd gotten as far as Poland Springs and turned around.

I looked at the pictures scattered all over the bed, my clothes scattered all over the floor, and the foam of pink rayon in my left hand. I remember how the strength flowed out of my body, and the terrible sense of lassitude that came in its place. My mother was yelling for me—"Scott, Scott, come down and help me with your sister, she's sick"—and I remember thinking, "What's the use? I'm caught. I might as well accept it, I'm caught and this is the first thing they'll think of when they think about me for the rest of my life: Scott, the jerk-off artist."

But more often than not a kind of survival overdrive kicks in at such moments. That's what happened to me. I might go down, I decided, but I wouldn't do so without at least an effort to save my dignity. I threw the pictures and the panties under the bed. Then I jumped into my clothes, moving with numb but sure-fingered speed, all the time thinking of this crazy old game show I used to watch, *Beat the Clock*.

I can remember how my mother touched my flushed cheek when I got downstairs, and the thoughtful concern in her eyes. "Maybe you're getting sick, too," she said.

"Maybe I am," I said, and gladly enough. It was half an hour before I discovered I'd forgotten to zip my fly. Luckily, neither Peg nor my mother noticed, although on any other occasion one or both of them would have asked me if I had a license to sell hot dogs (this was what passed for wit in the house where I grew up). That day one of them was too sick and the other was too worried to be witty. So I got a total pass.

Lucky me.

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What followed the first emotional wave that August day in my apartment was much simpler: I thought I was going out of my mind. Because those glasses couldn't be there. Absolutely could not. No way.

Then I raised my eyes and saw something else that had most certainly not been in my apartment when I left for Staples half an hour before (locking the door behind me, as I always did). Leaning in the corner between the kitchenette and the living room was a baseball bat. Hillerich & Bradsby, according to the label. And while I couldn't see the other side, I knew what was printed there well enough: CLAIMS ADJUSTOR, the words burned into the ash with the tip of a soldering iron and then colored deep blue.

Another sensation rushed through me: a third wave. This was a species of surreal dismay. I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm sure that at that moment I looked as though I had just seen one.

I felt that way, too. Yes indeed. Because those sunglasses had to be gone—long-time gone, as the Dixie Chicks say. Ditto Cleve Farrell's Claims Adjustor. ("Besboll been bery-bery good to mee," Cleve would sometimes say, waving the bat over his head as he sat at his desk. "In-SHOO-rance been bery-bery bad.")

I did the only thing I could think of, which was to grab up Sonja D'Amico's shades and trot back down to the elevator with them, holding them out in front of me the way you might hold out something nasty you found on your apartment floor after a week away on vacation—a piece of decaying food, or the body of a poisoned mouse. I found myself remembering a conversation I'd had about Sonja with a fellow named Warren Anderson. *She must have looked like she thought she was going to pop back up and ask somebody for a Coca-Cola*, I had thought when he told me what he'd seen. Over drinks in the Blarney Stone Pub on Third Avenue, this had been, about six weeks after the sky fell down. After we'd toasted each other on not being dead.

Things like that have a way of sticking, whether you want them to or not. Like a musical phrase or the nonsense chorus to a pop song that you just can't get out of your head. You wake up at three in the morning, needing to take a leak, and as you stand there in front of the bowl, your cock in your hand and your mind about ten percent awake, it comes back to you: *Like she thought she was going to pop back up. Pop back up and ask for a Coke*. At some point during that conversation Warren had asked me if I remembered her funny sunglasses, and I said I did. Sure I did.

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Four floors down, Pedro the doorman was standing in the shade of the awning and talking with Rafe the FedEx man. Pedro was a serious hardboyc when it came to letting deliverymen stand in front of the building—he had a seven-minute rule, a pocket watch with which to enforce it, and all the beat cops were his buddies—but he got on with Rafe, and sometimes the two of them would stand there for twenty minutes or more with their heads together, doing the old New York Yak. Politics? Baseball? The Gospel According to Henry David Thoreau? I didn't know and never cared less than on that day. They'd been there when I went up with my office supplies, and were still there when a far less carefree Scott Staley came back down. A Scott Staley who had discovered a small but noticeable hole in the column of reality. Just the two of them being there was enough for me. I walked up and held my right hand, the one with the sunglasses in it, out to Pedro.

“What would you call these?” I asked, not bothering to excuse myself or anything, just butting in headfirst.

He gave me a considering stare that said, “I am surprised at your rudeness, Mr. Staley, truly I am,” then looked down at my hand. For a long moment he said nothing, and a horrible idea took possession of me: he saw nothing because there was nothing to see. Only my hand outstretched, as if this were Turnabout Tuesday and I expected *him* to tip *me*. My hand was empty. Sure it was, had to be, because Sonja D'Amico's sunglasses no longer existed. Sonja's joke shades were a long time gone.

“I call them sunglasses, Mr. Staley,” Pedro said at last. “What else would I call them? Or is this some sort of trick question?”

Rafe the FedEx man, clearly more interested, took them from me. The relief of seeing him holding the sunglasses and looking at them, almost *studying* them, was like having someone scratch that exact place between your shoulder blades that itches. He stepped out from beneath the awning and held them up to the day, making a sun-star flash off each of the heart-shaped lenses.

“They're like the ones the little girl wore in that porno movie with Jeremy Irons,” he said at last.

I had to grin in spite of my distress. In New York, even the deliverymen are film critics. It's one of the things to love about the place.

"That's right, *Lolita*," I said, taking the glasses back. "Only the heart-shaped sunglasses were in the version Stanley Kubrick directed. Back when Jeremy Irons was still nothing but a putter." That one hardly made sense (even to me), but I didn't give Shit One. Once again I was feeling giddy . . . but not in a good way. Not this time.

"Who played the pervo in that one?" Rafe asked.

I shook my head. "I'll be damned if I can remember right now."

"If you don't mind me saying," Pedro said, "you look rather pale, Mr. Staley. Are you coming down with something? The flu, perhaps?"

*No, that was my sister*, I thought of saying. *The day I came within about twenty seconds of getting caught masturbating into her panties while I looked at a picture of Miss April*. But I hadn't been caught. Not then, not on 9/11, either. Fooled ya, beat the clock again. I couldn't speak for Warren Anderson, who told me in the Blarney Stone that he'd stopped on the third floor that morning to talk about the Yankees with a friend, but not getting caught had become quite a specialty of mine.

"I'm all right," I told Pedro, and while that wasn't true, knowing I wasn't the only one who saw Sonja's joke shades as a thing that actually existed in the world made me feel better, at least. If the sunglasses were in the world, probably Cleve Farrell's Hillerich & Bradsby was, too.

"Are those *the* glasses?" Rafe suddenly asked in a respectful, ready-to-be-awestruck voice. "The ones from the first *Lolita*?"

"Nope," I said, folding the bows behind the heart-shaped lenses, and as I did, the name of the girl in the Kubrick version of the film came to me: Sue Lyon. I still couldn't remember who played the pervo. "Just a knock-off."

"Is there something special about them?" Rafe asked. "Is that why you came rushing down here?"

"I don't know," I said. "Someone left them behind in my apartment."

I went upstairs before they could ask any more questions and looked around, hoping there was nothing else. But there was. In addition to the sunglasses and the baseball bat with CLAIMS ADJUSTOR burned into the side, there was a Howie's Laff-Riot Farting Cushion, a conch shell, a steel penny

suspended in a Lucite cube, and a ceramic mushroom (red with white spots) that came with a ceramic Alice sitting on top of it. The Farting Cushion had belonged to Jimmy Eagleton and got a certain amount of play every year at the Christmas party. The ceramic Alice had been on Maureen Hannon's desk—a gift from her granddaughter, she'd told me once. Maureen had the most beautiful white hair, which she wore long, to her waist. You rarely see that in a business situation, but she'd been with the company for almost forty years and felt she could wear her hair any way she liked. I remembered both the conch shell and the steel penny, but not in whose cubicles (or offices) they had been. It might come to me; it might not. There had been lots of cubicles (and offices) at Light and Bell, Insurers.

The shell, the mushroom, and the Lucite cube were on the coffee table in my living room, gathered in a neat pile. The Farting Cushion was—quite rightly, I thought—lying on top of my toilet tank, beside the current issue of Spenc's Rural Insurance Newsletter. Rural insurance used to be my specialty, as I think I told you. I knew all the odds.

What were the odds on this?

• • •

When something goes wrong in your life and you need to talk about it, I think that the first impulse for most people is to call a family member. This wasn't much of an option for me. My father put an egg in his shoe and beat it when I was two and my sister was four. My mother, no quitter she, hit the ground running and raised the two of us, managing a mail-order clearinghouse out of our home while she did so. I believe this was a business she actually created, and she made an adequate living at it (only the first year was really scary, she told me later). She smoked like a chimney, however, and died of lung cancer at the age of forty-eight, six or eight years before the Internet might have made her a dot-com millionaire.

My sister Peg was currently living in Cleveland, where she had embraced Mary Kay cosmetics, the Indians, and fundamentalist Christianity, not necessarily in that order. If I called and told Peg about the things I'd found in my apartment, she would suggest I get down on my knees and ask Jesus to

come into my life. Rightly or wrongly, I did not feel Jesus could help me with my current problem.

I was equipped with the standard number of aunts, uncles, and cousins, but most lived west of the Mississippi, and I hadn't seen any of them in years. The Killians (my mother's side of the family) have never been a reuning bunch. A card on one's birthday and at Christmas were considered sufficient to fulfill all familial obligations. A card on Valentine's Day or at Easter was a bonus. I called my sister on Christmas or she called me, we muttered the standard crap about getting together "sometime soon," and hung up with what I imagine was mutual relief.

The next option when in trouble would probably be to invite a good friend out for a drink, explain the situation, and then ask for advice. But I was a shy boy who grew into a shy man, and in my current research job I work alone (out of preference) and thus have no colleagues apt to mature into friends. I made a few in my last job—Sonja and Cleve Farrell, to name two—but they're dead, of course.

• • •

I reasoned that if you don't have a friend you can talk to, the next-best thing would be to rent one. I could certainly afford a little therapy, and it seemed to me that a few sessions on some psychiatrist's couch (four might do the trick) would be enough for me to explain what had happened and to articulate how it made me feel. How much could four sessions set me back? Six hundred dollars? Maybe eight? That seemed a fair price for a little relief. And I thought there might be a bonus. A disinterested outsider might be able to see some simple and reasonable explanation I was just missing. To my mind the locked door between my apartment and the outside world seemed to do away with most of those, but it was *my* mind, after all; wasn't that the point? And perhaps the problem?

I had it all mapped out. During the first session I'd explain what had happened. When I came to the second one, I'd bring the items in question—sunglasses, Lucite cube, conch shell, baseball bat, ceramic mushroom, the ever-popular Farting Cushion. A little show-and-tell, just like in grammar school.

That left two more during which my rent-a-pal and I could figure out the cause of this disturbing tilt in the axis of my life and set things straight again.

A single afternoon spent riffling the Yellow Pages and dialing the telephone was enough to prove to me that the idea of psychiatry was unworkable in fact, no matter how good it might be in theory. The closest I came to an actual appointment was a receptionist who told me that Dr. Jauss might be able to work me in the following January. She intimated even that would take some inspired shoehorning. The others held out no hope whatsoever. I tried half a dozen therapists in Newark and four in White Plains, even a hypnotist in Queens, with the same result. Mohammed Atta and his Suicide Patrol might have been very bery-bery bad for the city of New York (not to mention for the in-SHOO-rance business), but it was clear to me from that single fruitless afternoon on the telephone that they had been a boon to the psychiatric profession, much as the psychiatrists themselves might wish otherwise. If you wanted to lie on some professional's couch in the summer of 2002, you had to take a number and wait in line.

• • •

I could sleep with those things in my apartment, but not well. They whispered to me. I lay awake in my bed, sometimes until two, thinking about Maureen Hannon, who felt she had reached an age (not to mention a level of indispensability) at which she could wear her amazingly long hair any way she damn well liked. Or I'd recall the various people who'd gone running around at the Christmas party, waving Jimmy Eagleton's famous Farting Cushion. It was, as I may have said, a great favorite once people got two or three drinks closer to New Year's. I remembered Bruce Mason asking me if it didn't look like an enema bag for elves—"elves," he said—and by a process of association remembered that the conch shell had been his. Of course. Bruce Mason, Lord of the Flies. And a step further down the associative food chain I found the name and face of James Mason, who had played Humbert Humbert back when Jeremy Irons was still just a putter. The mind is a wily monkey; sometime him take-a de banana, sometime him don't. Which is why I'd brought the sunglasses downstairs, although I'd been aware of no deductive

process at the time. I'd only wanted confirmation. There's a George Seferis poem that asks, *Are these the voices of our dead friends, or is it just the gramophone?* Sometimes it's a good question, one you have to ask someone else. Or . . . listen to this.

Once, in the late eighties, near the end of a bitter two-year romance with alcohol, I woke up in my study after dozing off at my desk in the middle of the night. I staggered off to my bedroom, where, as I reached for the light switch, I saw someone moving around. I flashed on the idea (the near *certainty*) of a junkie burglar with a cheap pawnshop .32 in his trembling hand, and my heart almost came out of my chest. I turned on the light with one hand and was grabbing for something heavy off the top of my bureau with the other—anything, even the silver frame holding the picture of my mother, would have done—when I saw the prowler was me. I was staring wild-eyed back at myself from the mirror on the other side of the room, my shirt half-untucked and my hair standing up in the back. I was disgusted with myself, but I was also relieved.

I wanted this to be like that. I wanted it to be the mirror, the gramophone, even someone playing a nasty practical joke (maybe someone who knew why I hadn't been at the office on that day in September). But I knew it was none of those things. The Farting Cushion was there, an actual guest in my apartment. I could run my thumb over the buckles on Alice's ceramic shoes, slide my finger down the part in her yellow ceramic hair. I could read the date on the penny inside the Lucite cube.

Bruce Mason, alias Conch Man, alias Lord of the Flies, took his big pink shell to the company shindig at Jones Beach one July and blew it, summoning people to a jolly picnic lunch of hotdogs and hamburgers. Then he tried to show Freddy Lounds how to do it. The best Freddy had been able to muster was a series of weak honking sounds like . . . well, like Jimmy Eagleton's Farting Cushion. Around and around it goes. Ultimately, every associative chain forms a necklace.

• • •

In late September I had a brainstorm, one of those ideas so simple you can't believe you didn't think of it sooner. Why was I holding onto this unwelcome crap, anyway? Why not just get rid of it? It wasn't as if the items were in trust; the people who owned them weren't going to come back at some later date and ask for them to be returned. The last time I'd seen Cleve Farrell's face it had been on a poster, and the last of those had been torn down by November of '01. The general (if unspoken) feeling was that such homemade homages were bumming out the tourists, who'd begun to creep back to Fun City. What had happened was horrible, most New Yorkers opined, but America was still here and Matthew Broderick would only be in *The Producers* for so long.

I'd gotten Chinese that night, from a place I like two blocks over. My plan was to eat it as I usually ate my evening meal, watching Chuck Scarborough explain the world to me. I was turning on the television when the epiphany came. They *weren't* in trust, these unwelcome souvenirs of the last safe day, nor were they evidence. There had been a crime, yes—everyone agreed to that—but the perpetrators were dead and the ones who'd set them on their crazy course were on the run. There might be trials at some future date, but Scott Staley would never be called to the stand, and Jimmy Eagleton's Farting Cushion would never be marked Exhibit A.

I left my General Tso's chicken sitting on the kitchen counter with the cover still on the aluminum dish, got a laundry bag from the shelf above my seldom-used washing machine, put the things into it (sacking them up, I couldn't believe how light they were, or how long I'd waited to do such a simple thing), and rode down in the elevator with the bag sitting between my feet. I walked to the corner of 75th and Park, looked around to make sure I wasn't being watched (God knows why I felt so furtive, but I did), then put litter in its place. I took one look back over my shoulder as I walked away. The handle of the bat poked out of the basket invitingly. Someone would come along and take it, I had no doubt. Probably before Chuck Scarborough gave way to John Seigenthaler or whoever else was sitting in for Tom Brokaw that evening.

On my way back to my apartment, I stopped at Fun Choy for a fresh order of General Tso's. "Last one no good?" asked Rose Ming, at the cash register. She spoke with some concern. "You tell why."

“No, the last one was fine,” I said. “Tonight I just felt like two.”

She laughed as though this were the funniest thing she’d ever heard, and I laughed, too. Hard. The kind of laughter that goes well beyond giddy. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d laughed like that, so loudly and so naturally. Certainly not since Light and Bell, Insurers, fell into West Street.

I rode the elevator up to my floor and walked the twelve steps to 4-B. I felt the way seriously ill people must when they awaken one day, assess themselves by the sane light of morning, and discover that the fever has broken. I tucked my takeout bag under my left arm (an awkward maneuver but workable in the short run) and then unlocked my door. I turned on the light. There, on the table where I leave bills that need to be paid, claim checks, and overdue-book notices, were Sonja D’Amico’s joke sunglasses, the ones with the red frames and the heart-shaped Lolita lenses. Sonja D’Amico who had, according to Warren Anderson (who was, so far as I knew, the only other surviving employee of Light and Bell’s home office), jumped from the one hundred and tenth floor of the stricken building.

He claimed to have seen a photo that caught her as she dropped, Sonja with her hands placed primly on her skirt to keep it from skating up her thighs, her hair standing up against the smoke and blue of that day’s sky, the tips of her shoes pointed down. The description made me think of “Falling,” the poem James Dickey wrote about the stewardess who tries to aim the plummeting stone of her body for water, as if she could come up smiling, shaking beads of water from her hair and asking for a Coca-Cola.

“I vomited,” Warren told me that day in the Blarney Stone. “I never want to look at a picture like that again, Scott, but I know I’ll never forget it. You could see her face, and I think she believed that somehow . . . yeah, that somehow she was going to be all right.”

• • •

I’ve never screamed as an adult, but I almost did so when I looked from Sonja’s sunglasses to Cleve Farrell’s CLAIMS ADJUSTOR, the latter once more leaning nonchalantly in the corner by the entry to the living room. Some part of my mind must have remembered that the door to the hallway was open and both

of my fourth-floor neighbors would hear me if I did scream; then, as the saying is, I would have some 'splainin to do.

I clapped my hand over my mouth to hold it in. The bag with the General Tso's chicken inside fell to the hardwood floor of the foyer and split open. I could barely bring myself to look at the resulting mess. Those dark chunks of cooked meat could have been anything.

I plopped into the single chair I keep in the foyer and put my face in my hands. I didn't scream and I didn't cry, and after a while I was able to clean up the mess. My mind kept trying to go toward the things that had beaten me back from the corner of 75th and Park, but I wouldn't let it. Each time it tried to lunge in that direction, I grabbed its leash and forced it away again.

That night, lying in bed, I listened to conversations. First the things talked (in low voices), and then the people who had owned the things replied (in slightly louder ones). Sometimes they talked about the picnic at Jones Beach—the coconut odor of suntan lotion and Lou Bega singing “Mambo No. 5” over and over from Misha Bryzinski's boom box. Or they talked about Frisbees sailing under the sky while dogs chased them. Sometimes they discussed children puddling along the wet sand with the seats of their shorts and their bathing suits sagging. Mothers in swimsuits ordered from the Lands' End catalogue walking beside them with white gloop on their noses. How many of the kids that day had lost a guardian Mom or a Frisbee-throwing Dad? Man, that was a math problem I didn't want to do. But the voices I heard in my apartment *did* want to do it. They did it over and over.

I remembered Bruce Mason blowing his conch shell and proclaiming himself the Lord of the Flies. I remembered Maureen Hannon once telling me (not at Jones Beach, not this conversation) that *Alice in Wonderland* was the first psychedelic novel. Jimmy Eagleton telling me one afternoon that his son had a learning disability to go along with his stutter, two for the price of one, and the kid was going to need a tutor in math and another one in French if he was going to get out of high school in the foreseeable future. “Before he's eligible for the AARP discount on textbooks” was how Jimmy had put it. His cheeks pale and a bit stubbly in the long afternoon light, as if that morning the razor had been dull.

I'd been drifting toward sleep, but this last one brought me fully awake again with a start, because I realized the conversation must have taken place not long before September Eleventh. Maybe only days. Perhaps even the Friday before, which would make it the last day I'd ever seen Jimmy alive. And the l'il putter with the stutter and the learning disability: had his name actually been Jeremy, as in Jeremy Irons? Surely not, surely that was just my mind (sometime him take-a de banana) playing its little games, but it had been *close* to that, by God. Jason, maybe. Or Justin. In the wee hours everything grows, and I remember thinking that if the kid's name *did* turn out to be Jeremy, I'd probably go crazy. Straw that broke the camel's back, baby.

Around three in the morning I remembered who had owned the Lucite cube with the steel penny in it: Roland Abelson, in Liability. He called it his retirement fund. It was Roland who had a habit of saying "Lucy, you got some 'splainin to do." One night in the fall of '01, I had seen his widow on the six o'clock news. I had talked with her at one of the company picnics (very likely the one at Jones Beach) and thought then that she was pretty, but widowhood had refined that prettiness, winnowed it into severe beauty. On the news report she kept referring to her husband as "missing." She would not call him "dead." And if he *was* alive—if he ever turned up—he would have some 'splainin to do. You bet. But of course, so would she. A woman who has gone from pretty to beautiful as the result of a mass murder would certainly have some 'splainin to do.

Lying in bed and thinking of this stuff—remembering the crash of the surf at Jones Beach and the Frisbees flying under the sky—filled me with an awful sadness that finally emptied in tears. But I have to admit it was a learning experience. That was the night I came to understand that *things*—even little ones, like a penny in a Lucite cube—can get heavier as time passes. But because it's a weight of the mind, there's no mathematical formula for it, like the ones you can find in an insurance company's Blue Books, where the rate on your whole life policy goes up  $x$  if you smoke and coverage on your crops goes up  $y$  if your farm's in a tornado zone. You see what I'm saying?

It's a weight of the mind.

• • •

The following morning I gathered up all the items again, and found a seventh, this one under the couch. The guy in the cubicle next to mine, Misha Bryzinski, had kept a small pair of Punch and Judy dolls on his desk. The one I spied under my sofa with my little eye was Punch. Judy was nowhere to be found, but Punch was enough for me. Those black eyes, staring out from amid the ghost bunnies, gave me a terrible sinking feeling of dismay. I fished the doll out, hating the streak of dust it left behind. A thing that leaves a trail is a real thing, a thing with weight. No question about it.

I put Punch and all the other stuff in the little utility closet just off the kitchenette, and there they stayed. At first I wasn't sure they would, but they did.

• • •

My mother once told me that if a man wiped his ass and saw blood on the toilet tissue, his response would be to shit in the dark for the next thirty days and hope for the best. She used this example to illustrate her belief that the cornerstone of male philosophy was “If you ignore it, maybe it'll go away.”

I ignored the things I'd found in my apartment, I hoped for the best, and things actually got a little better. I rarely heard those voices whispering in the utility closet (except late at night), although I was more and more apt to take my research chores out of the house. By the middle of November, I was spending most of my days in the New York Public Library. I'm sure the lions got used to seeing me there with my PowerBook.

Then, just before Thanksgiving, I happened to be going out of my building one day and met Paula Robeson, the maiden fair whom I'd rescued by pushing the reset button on her air conditioner, coming in.

With absolutely no forethought whatsoever—if I'd had time to think about it, I'm convinced I never would have said a word—I asked her if I could buy her lunch and talk to her about something.

“The fact is,” I said, “I have a problem. Maybe you could push my reset button.”

We were in the lobby. Pedro the doorman was sitting in the corner, reading the *Post* (and listening to every word, I have no doubt—to Pedro, his tenants

were the world's most interesting daytime drama). She gave me a smile both pleasant and nervous. "I guess I owe you one," she said, "but . . . you know I'm married, don't you?"

"Yes," I said, not adding that she'd shaken with me wrong-handed so I could hardly fail to notice the ring.

She nodded. "Sure, you must've seen us together at least a couple of times, but he was in Europe when I had all that trouble with the air conditioner, and he's in Europe now. Edward, that's his name. Over the last two years he's been in Europe more than he's here, and although I don't like it, I'm very married in spite of it." Then, as a kind of afterthought, she added: "Edward is in import-export."

*I used to be in insurance, but then one day the company exploded,* I thought of saying. In the end, I managed something a little more sane.

"I don't want a date, Ms. Robeson," no more than I wanted to be on a first-name basis with her, and was that a wink of disappointment I saw in her eyes? By God, I thought it was. But at least it convinced her. I was still *safe*.

She put her hands on her hips and looked at me with mock exasperation. Or maybe not so mock. "Then what *do* you want?"

"Just someone to talk to. I tried several shrinks, but they're . . . busy."

"*All* of them?"

"It would appear so."

"If you're having problems with your sex life or feeling the urge to race around town killing men in turbans, I don't want to know about it."

"It's nothing like that. I'm not going to make you blush, I promise." Which wasn't quite the same as saying *I promise not to shock you* or *You won't think I'm crazy*. "Just lunch and a little advice, that's all I'm asking. What do you say?"

I was surprised—almost flabbergasted—by my own persuasiveness. If I'd planned the conversation in advance, I almost certainly would have blown the whole deal. I suppose she was curious, and I'm sure she heard a degree of sincerity in my voice. She may also have surmised that if I was the sort of man who liked to try his hand picking up women, I would have had a go on that day in August when I'd actually been alone with her in her apartment, the elusive Edward in France or Germany. And I have to wonder how much actual desperation she saw in my face.

In any case, she agreed to have lunch with me on Friday at Donald's Grill down the street. Donald's may be the least romantic restaurant in all of Manhattan—good food, fluorescent lights, waiters who make it clear they'd like you to hurry. She did so with the air of a woman paying an overdue debt about which she's nearly forgotten. This was not exactly flattering, but it was good enough for me. Noon would be fine for her, she said. If I'd meet her in the lobby, we could walk down there together. I told her that would be fine for me, too.

That night was a good one for me. I went to sleep almost immediately, and there were no dreams of Sonja D'Amico going down beside the burning building with her hands on her thighs, like a stewardess looking for water.

• • •

As we strolled down 86th Street the following day, I asked Paula where she'd been when she heard.

"San Francisco," she said. "Fast asleep in a Wradling Hotel suite with Edward beside me, undoubtedly snoring as usual. I was coming back here on September twelfth and Edward was going on to Los Angeles for meetings. The hotel management actually rang the fire alarm."

"That must have scared the hell out of you."

"It did, although my first thought wasn't fire but earthquake. Then this disembodied voice came through the speakers, telling us that there was no fire in the hotel, but a hell of a big one in New York."

"Jesus."

"Hearing it like that, in bed in a strange room . . . hearing it come down from the ceiling like the voice of God . . ." She shook her head. Her lips were pressed so tightly together that her lipstick almost disappeared. "That was very frightening. I suppose I understand the urge to pass on news like that, and immediately, but I still haven't entirely forgiven the management of the Wradling for doing it that way. I don't think I'll be staying there again."

"Did your husband go on to his meetings?"

"They were canceled. I imagine a lot of meetings were canceled that day. We stayed in bed with the TV on until the sun came up, trying to get our heads

around it. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes.”

“We talked about who might have been there that we knew. I suppose we weren’t the only ones doing that, either.”

“Did you come up with anyone?”

“A broker from Shearson Lehman and the assistant manager of the Borders book store in the mall,” she said. “One of them was all right. One of them . . . well, you know, one of them wasn’t. What about you?”

So I didn’t have to sneak up on it, after all. We weren’t even at the restaurant yet and here it was.

“*I would have been there,*” I said. “*I should have been there.* It’s where I worked. In an insurance company on the hundred and tenth floor.”

She stopped dead on the sidewalk, looking up at me, eyes wide. I suppose to the people who had to veer around us, we must have looked like lovers. “Scott, *no!*”

“Scott, yes,” I said. And finally told someone about how I woke up on September Eleventh expecting to do all the things I usually did on weekdays, from the cup of black coffee while I shaved all the way to the cup of cocoa in front of the midnight news summary on Channel Thirteen. A day like any other day, that was what I had in mind. I think that is what Americans had come to expect as their right. Well, guess what? That’s an airplane! Flying into the side of a skyscraper! Ha-ha, asshole, the joke’s on you, and half the goddam world’s laughing!

I told her about looking out my apartment window and seeing the seven A.M. sky was perfectly cloudless, the sort of blue so deep you think you can almost see through it to the stars beyond. Then I told her about the voice. I think everyone has various voices in their heads and we get used to them. When I was sixteen, one of mine spoke up and suggested it might be quite a kick to masturbate into a pair of my sister’s underpants. *She has about a thousand pairs and surely won’t miss one, y’all,* the voice opined. (I did not tell Paula Robeson about this particular adolescent adventure.) I’d have to call that the voice of utter irresponsibility, more familiarly known as Mr. Yow, Git Down.

“Mr. Yow, Git Down?” Paula asked doubtfully.

“In honor of James Brown, the King of Soul.”

“If you say so.”

Mr. Yow, Git Down had had less and less to say to me, especially since I'd pretty much given up drinking, and on that day he awoke from his doze just long enough to speak a dozen words, but they were life-changers. *Life-savers*.

The first five (that's me, sitting on the edge of the bed): *Yow, call in sick, y'all!* The next seven (that's me, plodding toward the shower and scratching my left buttock as I go): *Yow, spend the day in Central Park!* There was no premonition involved. It was clearly Mr. Yow, Git Down, not the voice of God. It was just a version of my very own voice (as they all are), in other words, telling me to play hooky. *Do a little suffin fo' yo'self, Gre't God!* The last time I could recall hearing this version of my voice, the subject had been a karaoke contest at a bar on Amsterdam Avenue: *Yow, sing along wit' Neil Diamond, fool—git up on stage and git ya bad self down!*

“I guess I know what you mean,” she said, smiling a little.

“Do you?”

“Well . . . I once took off my shirt in a Key West bar and won ten dollars dancing to ‘Honky Tonk Women.’” She paused. “Edward doesn't know, and if you ever tell him, I'll be forced to stab you in the eye with one of his tie tacks.”

“Yow, you go, girl,” I said, and her smile became a rather wistful grin. It made her look younger. I thought this had a chance of working.

We walked into Donald's. There was a cardboard turkey on the door, cardboard Pilgrims on the green tile wall above the steam table.

“I listened to Mr. Yow, Git Down and I'm here,” I said. “But some other things are here, too, and he can't help with them. They're things I can't seem to get rid of. Those are what I want to talk to you about.”

“Let me repeat that I'm no shrink,” she said, and with more than a trace of uneasiness. The grin was gone. “I majored in German and minored in European history.”

*You and your husband must have a lot to talk about*, I thought. What I said out loud was that it didn't have to be her, necessarily, just someone.

“All right. Just as long as you know.”

A waiter took our drink orders, decaf for her, regular for me. Once he went away she asked me what things I was talking about.

“This is one of them.” From my pocket I withdrew the Lucite cube with the steel penny suspended inside it and put it on the table. Then I told her about the other things, and to whom they had belonged. Cleve “Besboll been bery-berly good to me” Farrell. Maureen Hannon, who wore her hair long to her waist as a sign of her corporate indispensability. Jimmy Eagleton, who had a divine nose for phony accident claims, a son with learning disabilities, and a Farting Cushion he kept safely tucked away in his desk until the Christmas party rolled around each year. Sonja D’Amico, Light and Bell’s best accountant, who had gotten the Lolita sunglasses as a bitter divorce present from her first husband. Bruce “Lord of the Flies” Mason, who would always stand shirtless in my mind’s eye, blowing his conch on Jones Beach while the waves rolled up and expired around his bare feet. Last of all, Misha Bryzinski, with whom I’d gone to at least a dozen Mets games. I told her about putting everything but Misha’s Punch doll in a trash basket on the corner of Park and 75th, and how they had beaten me back to my apartment, possibly because I had stopped for a second order of General Tso’s chicken. During all of this, the Lucite cube stood on the table between us. We managed to eat at least some of our meal in spite of his stern profile.

When I was finished talking, I felt better than I’d dared to hope. But there was a silence from her side of the table that felt terribly heavy.

“So,” I said, to break it. “What do you think?”

She took a moment to consider that, and I didn’t blame her. “I think that we’re not the strangers we were,” she said finally, “and making a new friend is never a bad thing. I think I’m glad I know about Mr. Yow, Git Down and that I told you what I did.”

“I am, too.” And it was true.

“Now may I ask you two questions?”

“Of course.”

“How much of what they call ‘survivor guilt’ are you feeling?”

“I thought you said you weren’t a shrink.”

“I’m not, but I read the magazines and have even been known to watch *Oprah*. That my husband *does* know, although I prefer not to rub his nose in it. So . . . how much, Scott?”

I considered the question. It was a good one—and, of course, it was one I'd asked myself on more than one of those sleepless nights. "Quite a lot," I said. "Also, quite a lot of relief, I won't lie about that. If Mr. Yow, Git Down was a real person, he'd never have to pick up another restaurant tab. Not when I was with him, at least." I paused. "Does that shock you?"

She reached across the table and briefly touched my hand. "Not even a little."

Hearing her say that made me feel better than I would have believed. I gave her hand a brief squeeze and then let it go. "What's your other question?"

"How important to you is it that I believe your story about these things coming back?"

I thought this was an excellent question, even though the Lucite cube was right there next to the sugar bowl. Such items are not exactly rare, after all. And I thought that if she *had* majored in psychology rather than German, she probably would have done fine.

"Not as important as I thought an hour ago," I said. "Just telling it has been a help."

She nodded and smiled. "Good. Now here's my best guess: someone is very likely playing a game with you. Not a nice one."

"Trickin' on me," I said. I tried not to show it, but I'd rarely been so disappointed. Maybe a layer of disbelief settles over people in certain circumstances, protecting them. Or maybe—probably—I hadn't conveyed my own sense that this thing was just . . . happening. *Still* happening. The way avalanches do.

"Trickin' on you," she agreed, and then: "But you don't believe it."

More points for perception. I nodded. "I locked the door when I went out, and it was locked when I came back from Staples. I heard the clunk the tumblers make when they turn. They're loud. You can't miss them."

"Still . . . survivor guilt is a funny thing. And powerful, at least according to the magazines."

"This . . ." *This isn't survivor guilt* was what I meant to say, but it would have been the wrong thing. I had a fighting chance to make a new friend here, and having a new friend would be good, no matter how the rest of this came out. So I amended it. "I don't think this is survivor guilt." I pointed to the Lucite

cube. “It’s right there, isn’t it? Like Sonja’s sunglasses. You see it. I do, too. I suppose I could have bought it myself, but . . .” I shrugged, trying to convey what we both surely knew: *anything* is possible.

“I don’t think you did that. But neither can I accept the idea that a trapdoor opened between reality and the twilight zone and these things fell out.”

Yes, that was the problem. For Paula the idea that the Lucite cube and the other things which had appeared in my apartment had some supernatural origin was automatically off-limits, no matter how much the facts might seem to support the idea. What I needed to do was to decide if I needed to argue the point more than I needed to make a friend.

I decided I did not.

“All right,” I said. I caught the waiter’s eye and made a check-writing gesture in the air. “I can accept your inability to accept.”

“Can you?” she asked, looking at me closely.

“Yes.” And I thought it was true. “If, that is, we could have a cup of coffee from time to time. Or just say hi in the lobby.”

“Absolutely.” But she sounded absent, not really in the conversation. She was looking at the Lucite cube with the steel penny inside it. Then she looked up at me. I could almost see a lightbulb appearing over her head, like in a cartoon. She reached out and grasped the cube with one hand. I could never convey the depth of the dread I felt when she did that, but what could I say? We were New Yorkers in a clean, well-lighted place. For her part, she’d already laid down the ground rules, and they pretty firmly excluded the supernatural. The supernatural was out of bounds. Anything hit there was a do-over.

And there was a light in Paula’s eyes. One that suggested Ms. Yow, Git Down was in the house, and I know from personal experience that’s a hard voice to resist.

“Give it to me,” she proposed, smiling into my eyes. When she did that I could see—for the first time, really—that she was sexy as well as pretty.

“Why?” As if I didn’t know.

“Call it my fee for listening to your story.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good—”

“It is, though,” she said. She was warming to her own inspiration, and when people do that, they rarely take no for an answer. “It’s a *great* idea. I’ll make

sure this piece of memorabilia at least doesn't come back to you, wagging its tail behind it. We've got a safe in the apartment." She made a charming little pantomime gesture of shutting a safe door, twirling the combination, and then throwing the key back over her shoulder.

"All right," I said. "It's my gift to you." And I felt something that might have been mean-spirited gladness. Call it the voice of Mr. Yow, You'll Find Out. Apparently just getting it off my chest wasn't enough, after all. She hadn't believed me, and at least part of me *did* want to be believed and resented Paula for not getting what it wanted. That part knew that letting her take the Lucite cube was an absolutely terrible idea, but was glad to see her tuck it away in her purse, just the same.

"There," she said briskly. "Mama say bye-bye, make all gone. Maybe when it doesn't come back in a week—or two, I guess it all depends on how stubborn your subconscious wants to be—you can start giving the rest of the things away." And her saying that was her real gift to me that day, although I didn't know it then.

"Maybe so," I said, and smiled. Big smile for the new friend. Big smile for pretty Mama. All the time thinking, You'll find out.

Yow.

• • •

She did.

Three nights later, while I was watching Chuck Scarborough explain the city's latest transit woes on the six o'clock news, my doorbell rang. Since no one had been announced, I assumed it was a package, maybe even Rafe with something from FedEx. I opened the door and there stood Paula Robeson.

This was not the woman with whom I'd had lunch. Call this version of Paula Ms. Yow, Ain't That Chemotherapy *Nasty*. She was wearing a little lipstick but nothing else in the way of makeup, and her complexion was a sickly shade of yellow-white. There were dark brownish purple arcs under her eyes. She might have given her hair a token swipe with the brush before coming down from the fifth floor, but it hadn't done much good. It looked like straw and stuck out on either side of her head in a way that would have been

comic-strip funny under other circumstances. She was holding the Lucite cube up in front of her breasts, allowing me to note that the well-kept nails on that hand were gone. She'd chewed them away, right down to the quick. And my first thought, God help me, was *yep, she found out*.

She held it out to me. "Take it back," she said.

I did so without a word.

"His name was Roland Abelson," she said. "Wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"He had red hair."

"Yes."

"Not married but paying child support to a woman in Rahway."

I hadn't known that—didn't believe *anyone* at Light and Bell had known that—but I nodded again, and not just to keep her rolling. I was sure she was right. "What was her name, Paula?" Not knowing why I was asking, not yet, just knowing I had to know.

"Tonya Gregson." It was as if she was in a trance. There was something in her eyes, though, something so terrible I could hardly stand to look at it. Nevertheless, I stored the name away. *Tonya Gregson, Rahway*. And then, like some guy doing stockroom inventory: *One Lucite cube with penny inside*.

"He tried to crawl under his desk, did you know that? No, I can see you didn't. His hair was on fire and he was crying. Because in that instant he understood he was never going to own a catamaran or even mow his lawn again." She reached out and put a hand on my cheek, a gesture so intimate it would have been shocking even if her hand had not been so cold. "At the end, he would have given every cent he had, and every stock option he held, just to be able to mow his lawn again. Do you believe that?"

"Yes."

"The place was full of screams, he could smell jet fuel, and *he understood it was his dying hour*. Do you understand that? Do you understand the *enormity* of that?"

I nodded. I couldn't speak. You could have put a gun to my head and I still wouldn't have been able to speak.

"The politicians talk about memorials and courage and wars to end terrorism, but burning hair is apolitical." She bared her teeth in an unspeakable

grin. A moment later it was gone. “He was trying to crawl under his desk with his hair on fire. There was a plastic thing under his desk, a what-do-you-call it —”

“Mat—”

“Yes, a mat, a plastic mat, and his hands were on that and he could feel the ridges in the plastic and smell his own burning hair. Do you understand that?”

I nodded. I started to cry. It was Roland Abelson we were talking about, this guy I used to work with. He was in Liability and I didn’t know him very well. To say hi to is all; how was I supposed to know he had a kid in Rahway? And if I hadn’t played hooky that day, my hair probably would have burned, too. I’d never really understood that before.

“I don’t want to see you again,” she said. She flashed her gruesome grin once more, but now she was crying, too. “I don’t care about your problems. I don’t care about any of the shit you found. We’re quits. From now on you leave me alone.” She started to turn away, then turned back. She said: “They did it in the name of God, but there is no God. If there was a God, Mr. Staley, He would have struck all eighteen of them dead in their boarding lounges with their boarding passes in their hands, but no God did. They called for passengers to get on and those fucks just got on.”

I watched her walk back to the elevator. Her back was very stiff. Her hair stuck out on either side of her head, making her look like a girl in a Sunday funnies cartoon. She didn’t want to see me anymore, and I didn’t blame her. I closed the door and looked at the steel Abe Lincoln in the Lucite cube. I looked at him for quite a long time. I thought about how the hair of his beard would have smelled if U.S. Grant had stuck one of his everlasting cigars in it. That unpleasant frying aroma. On TV, someone was saying that there was a mattress blowout going on at Sleepy’s. After that, Len Berman came on and talked about the Jets.

• • •

That night I woke up at two in the morning, listening to the voices whisper. I hadn’t had any dreams or visions of the people who owned the objects, hadn’t seen anyone with their hair on fire or jumping from the windows to escape the

burning jet fuel, but why would I? I knew who they were, and the things they left behind had been left for me. Letting Paula Robeson take the Lucite cube had been wrong, but only because she was the wrong person.

And speaking of Paula, one of the voices was hers. *You can start giving the rest of the things away*, it said. And it said, *I guess it all depends on how stubborn your subconscious wants to be.*

I lay back down and after a while I was able to go to sleep. I dreamed I was in Central Park, feeding the ducks, when all at once there was a loud noise like a sonic boom and smoke filled the sky. In my dream, the smoke smelled like burning hair.

• • •

I thought about Tonya Gregson in Rahway—Tonya and the child who might or might not have Roland Abelson's eyes—and thought I'd have to work up to that one. I decided to start with Bruce Mason's widow.

I took the train to Dobbs Ferry and called a taxi from the station. The cabbie took me to a Cape Cod house on a residential street. I gave him some money, told him to wait—I wouldn't be long—and rang the doorbell. I had a box under one arm. It looked like the kind that contains a bakery cake.

I only had to ring once because I'd called ahead and Janice Mason was expecting me. I had my story carefully prepared and told it with some confidence, knowing that the taxi sitting in the driveway, its meter running, would forestall any detailed cross-examination.

On September seventh, I said—the Friday before—I had tried to blow a note from the conch Bruce kept on his desk, as I had heard Bruce himself do at the Jones Beach picnic. (Janice, Mrs. Lord of the Flies, nodding; she had been there, of course.) Well, I said, to make a long story short, I had persuaded Bruce to let me have the conch shell over the weekend so I could practice. Then, on Tuesday morning, I'd awakened with a raging sinus infection and a horrible headache to go with it. (This was a story I had already told several people.) I'd been drinking a cup of tea when I heard the boom and saw the rising smoke. I hadn't thought of the conch shell again until just this week. I'd been cleaning out my little utility closet and by damn, there it was. And I just

thought . . . well, it's not much of a keepsake, but I just thought maybe you'd like to . . . you know . . .

Her eyes filled up with tears just as mine had when Paula brought back Roland Abelson's "retirement fund," only these weren't accompanied by the look of fright that I'm sure was on my own face as Paula stood there with her stiff hair sticking out on either side of her head. Janice told me she would be glad to have any keepsake of Bruce.

"I can't get over the way we said good-bye," she said, holding the box in her arms. "He always left very early because he took the train. He kissed me on the cheek and I opened one eye and asked him if he'd bring back a pint of half-and-half. He said he would. That's the last thing he ever said to me. When he asked me to marry him, I felt like Helen of Troy—stupid but absolutely true—and I wish I'd said something better than 'Bring home a pint of half-and-half.' But we'd been married a long time, and it seemed like business as usual that day, and . . . we don't know, do we?"

"No."

"Yes. Any parting could be forever, and we don't know. Thank you, Mr. Staley. For coming out and bringing me this. That was very kind." She smiled a little then. "Do you remember how he stood on the beach with his shirt off and blew it?"

"Yes," I said, and looked at the way she held the box. Later she would sit down and take the shell out and hold it on her lap and cry. I knew that the conch, at least, would never come back to my apartment. It was home.

• • •

I returned to the station and caught the train back to New York. The cars were almost empty at that time of day, early afternoon, and I sat by a rain- and dirt-streaked window, looking out at the river and the approaching skyline. On cloudy and rainy days, you almost seem to be creating that skyline out of your own imagination, a piece at a time.

Tomorrow I'd go to Rahway, with the penny in the Lucite cube. Perhaps the child would take it in his or her chubby hand and look at it curiously. In any case, it would be out of my life. I thought the only difficult thing to get rid of

would be Jimmy Eagleton's Farting Cushion—I could hardly tell Mrs. Eagleton I'd brought it home for the weekend in order to practice using it, could I? But necessity is the mother of invention, and I was confident that I would eventually think of some halfway plausible story.

It occurred to me that other things might show up, in time. And I'd be lying if I told you I found that possibility entirely unpleasant. When it comes to returning things which people believe have been lost forever, things that have *weight*, there are compensations. Even if they're only little things, like a pair of joke sunglasses or a steel penny in a Lucite cube . . . yeah. I'd have to say there are compensations.

# Graduation Afternoon

Janice has never settled on the right word for the place where Buddy lives. It's too big to be called a house, too small to be an estate, and the name on the post at the foot of the driveway, Harborlights, gags her. It sounds like the name of a restaurant in New London, the kind where the special is always fish. She usually winds up just calling it "your place," as in "Let's go to your place and play tennis" or "Let's go to your place and go swimming."

It's pretty much the same deal with Buddy himself, she thinks, watching him trudge up the lawn toward the sound of shouts on the other side of the house, where the pool is. You didn't want to call your boyfriend Buddy, but when reverting to his real name meant Bruce, it left you with no real ground to stand on.

Or expressing feelings, that was that. She knew he wanted to hear her say she loved him, especially on his graduation day—surely a better present than the silver medallion she'd given him, although the medallion had set her back a teeth-clenching amount—but she couldn't do it. She couldn't bring herself to say, "I love you, Bruce." The best she could manage (and again with that interior clench) was "I'm awfully fond of you, Buddy." And even that sounded like a line out of a British musical comedy.

"You don't mind what she said, do you?" That was the last thing he'd asked her before heading up the lawn to change into his swim trunks. "That isn't why you're staying behind, is it?"

"No, just want to hit a few more. And look at the view." The house did have that going for it, and she could never get enough. Because you could see the whole New York cityscape from this side of the house, the buildings reduced to blue toys with sun gleaming on the highest windows. Janice thought that when it came to NYC, you could only get that sense of exquisite stillness from a distance. It was a lie she loved.

“Because she’s just my gran,” he went on. “You know her by now. If it enters her head, it exits her mouth.”

“I know,” Janice said. And she liked Buddy’s gran, who made no effort to hide her snobbery. There it was, out and beating time to the music. They were the Hopes, came to Connecticut along with the rest of the Heavenly Host, thank you so much. She is Janice Gandolewski, who will have her own graduation day—from Fairhaven High—two weeks from now, after Buddy has left with his three best buddies to hike the Appalachian Trail.

She turns to the basket of balls, a slender girl of good height in denim shorts, sneakers, and a shell top. Her legs flex as she rises on tiptoe with each serve. She’s good-looking and knows it, her knowing of the functional and non-fussy sort. She’s smart, and knows it. Very few Fairhaven girls manage relationships with boys from the Academy—other than the usual we-all-know-where-we-are, quick-and-dirty Winter Carnival or Spring Fling weekends, that is—and she has done so in spite of the *ski* that trails after her wherever she goes, like a tin can tied to the bumper of a family sedan. She has managed this social hat-trick with Bruce Hope, also known as Buddy.

And when they were coming up from the basement media room after playing video games—most of the others still down there, and still with their mortarboards cocked back on their heads—they had overheard his gran, in the parlor with the other adults (because this was really *their* party; the kids would have their own tonight, first at Holy Now! out on Route 219, which had been fourwalled for the occasion by Jimmy Frederick’s dad and mom, pursuant to the mandatory designated-driver rule, and then later, at the beach, under a full June moon, could you give me spoon, do I hear swoon, is there a swoon in the house).

“That was Janice-Something-Unpronounceable,” Gran was saying in her oddly piercing, oddly toneless deaf-lady voice. “She’s very pretty, isn’t she? A townie. Bruce’s friend for now.” She didn’t quite call Janice Bruce’s starter-model, but of course it was all in the tone.

She shrugs and hits a few more balls, legs flexing, racket reaching. The balls fly hard and true across the net, each touching down deep in the receiver’s box on the far side.

They have in fact learned from each other, and she suspects that's what these things are about. What they are for. And Buddy has not, in truth, been that hard to teach. He respected her from the first—maybe a little too much. She had to teach him out of that—the pedestal-worship part of that. And she thinks he hasn't been that bad a lover, given the fact that kids are denied the finest of accommodations and the luxury of time when it comes to giving their bodies the food they come to want.

“We did the best we could,” she says, and decides to go and swim with the others, let him show her off one final time. He thinks they'll have all summer before he goes off to Princeton and she goes to State, but she thinks not; she thinks part of the purpose of the upcoming Appalachian hike is to separate them as painlessly but as completely as possible. In this Janice senses not the hand of the hale-and-hearty, good-fellows-every-one father, or the somehow endearing snobbery of the grandmother—a *townie*, *Bruce's friend for now*—but the smiling and subtle practicality of the mother, whose one fear (it might as well be stamped on her lovely, unlined forehead) is that the townie girl with the tin can tied to the end of her name will get pregnant and trap her boy into the wrong marriage.

“It would be wrong, too,” she murmurs as she wheels the basket of balls into the shed and flips the latch. Her friend Marcy keeps asking her what she sees in him at all—*Buddy*, she all but sneers, wrinkling her nose. *What do you do all weekend? Go to garden parties? To polo matches?*

In fact, they have been to a couple of polo matches, because Tom Hope still rides—although, Buddy confided, this was apt to be his last year if he didn't stop putting on weight. But they have also made love, some of it sweaty and intense. Sometimes, too, he makes her laugh. Less often, now—she has an idea that his capacity to surprise and amuse is far from infinite—but yes, he still does. He's a lean and narrow-headed boy who breaks the rich-kid-geek mold in interesting and sometimes very unexpected ways. Also he thinks the world of her, and that isn't entirely bad for a girl's self-image.

Still, she doesn't think he will resist the call of his essential nature forever. By the age of thirty-five or so, she guesses he will have lost most or all of his enthusiasm for eating pussy and will be more interested in collecting coins. Or

refinishing Colonial rockers, like his father does out in the—ahem—carriage-house.

She walks slowly up the long acre of green grass, looking out toward the blue toys of the city dreaming in the far distance. Closer at hand are the sounds of shouts and splashing from the pool. Inside, Bruce's mother and father and gran and closest friends will be celebrating the one chick's high school graduation in their own way, at a formal tea. Tonight the kids will go out and party down in a more righteous mode. Alcohol and not a few tabs of X will be ingested. Club music will throb through big speakers. No one will play the country stuff Janice grew up with, but that's all right; she still knows where to find it.

When she graduates there will be a much smaller party, probably at Aunt Kay's restaurant, and of course she is bound for educational halls far less grand or traditional, but she has plans to go farther than she suspects Buddy goes even in his dreams. She will be a journalist. She will begin on the campus newspaper, and then will see where that takes her. One rung at a time, that's the way to do it. There are plenty of rungs on the ladder. She has talent to go along with her looks and unshowy self-confidence. She doesn't know how much, but she will find out. And there's luck. That, too. She knows enough not to count on it, but also enough to know it tends to come down on the side of the young.

She reaches the stone-flagged patio and looks down the rolling acre of lawn to the double tennis court. It all looks very big and very rich, very *special*, but she is wise enough to know she is only eighteen. There may come a time when it all looks quite ordinary to her, even in the eye of her memory. Quite small. It is this sense of perspective before the fact that makes it all right for her to be Janice-Something-Unpronounceable, and a townie, and Bruce's friend for now. Buddy, with his narrow head and fragile ability to make her laugh at unexpected times. *He* has never made her feel small, probably knows she'd leave him the first time he ever tried.

She can go directly through the house to the pool and the changing rooms on the far side, but first she turns slightly to her left to once again look at the city across all those miles of blue afternoon distance. She has time to think, *It*

*could be my city someday, I could call it home*, before an enormous spark lights up there, as if some God deep in the machinery had suddenly flicked His Bic.

She winces from the brilliance, which is at first like a thick, isolated stroke of lightning. And then the entire southern sky lights up a soundless lurid red. Formless bloodglare obliterates the buildings. Then for a moment they are there again, but ghostlike, as if seen through an interposing lens. A second or a tenth of a second after that they are gone forever, and the red begins to take on the shape of a thousand newsreels, climbing and boiling.

It is silent, silent.

Bruce's mother comes out on the patio and stands next to her, shading her eyes. She is wearing a new blue dress. A tea-dress. Her shoulder brushes Janice's and they look south at the crimson mushroom climbing, eating up the blue. Smoke is rising from around the edges—dark purple in the sunshine—and then being pulled back in. The red of the fireball is too intense to look at, it will blind her, but Janice cannot look away. Water is gushing down her cheeks in broad warm streams, but she cannot look away.

“What's that?” Bruce's mother asks. “If it's some kind of advertising, it's in very poor taste!”

“It's a bomb,” Janice says. Her voice seems to be coming from somewhere else. On a live feed from Hartford, maybe. Now huge black blisters are erupting in the red mushroom, giving it hideous features that shift and change—now a cat, now a dog, now Bobo the Demon Clown—grimacing across the miles above what used to be New York and is now a smelting furnace. “A nuke. And an almighty big one. No little dirty backpack model, or—”

Whap! Heat spreads upward and downward on the side of her face, and water flies from both of her eyes, and her head rocks. Bruce's Mom has just slapped her. And hard.

“Don't you even joke about that!” Bruce's mother commands. “There's nothing funny about that!”

Other people are joining them on the patio now, but they are little more than shades; Janice's vision has either been stolen by the brightness of the fireball, or the cloud has blotted out the sun. Maybe both.

“That's in very . . . poor . . . *TASTE!*” Each word rising. *Taste* comes out in a scream.

Someone says, “It’s some kind of special effect, it has to be, or else we’d hear —”

But then the sound reaches them. It’s like a boulder running down an endless stone flume. It shivers the glass along the south side of the house and sends birds up from the trees in whirling squadrons. It fills the day. And it doesn’t stop. It’s like an endless sonic boom. Janice sees Bruce’s gran go walking slowly down the path that leads to the multi-car garage with her hands to her ears. She walks with her head down and her back bent and her butt sticking out, like a dispossessed warhag starting down a long refugee road. Something hangs down on the back of her dress, swinging from side to side, and Janice isn’t surprised to note (with what vision she has left) that it’s Gran’s hearing aid.

“I want to wake up,” a man says from behind Janice. He speaks in a querulous, pestering tone. “I want to wake up. Enough is enough.”

Now the red cloud has grown to its full height and stands in boiling triumph where New York was ninety seconds ago, a dark red and purple toadstool that has burned a hole straight through this afternoon and all the afternoons to follow.

A breeze begins to push through. It is a hot breeze. It lifts the hair from the sides of her head, freeing her ears to hear that endless grinding boom even better. Janice stands watching, and thinks about hitting tennis balls, one after the other, all of them landing so close together you could have caught them in a roasting pan. That is pretty much how she writes. It is her talent. Or was.

She thinks about the hike Bruce and his friends won’t be taking. She thinks about the party at Holy Now! they won’t be attending tonight. She thinks about the records by Jay-Z and Beyoncé and The Fray they won’t be listening to—no loss there. And she thinks of the country music her dad listens to in his pickup truck on his way to and from work. That’s better, somehow. She will think of Patsy Cline or Skeeter Davis and in a little while she may be able to teach what is left of her eyes not to look.

# N.

## 1. The Letter

May 28, 2008

Dear Charlie,

It seems both strange and perfectly natural to call you that, although when I last saw you I was nearly half the age I am now. I was sixteen and had a terrible crush on you. (Did you know? Of course you did.) Now I'm a happily married woman with a little boy, and I see you all the time on CNN, talking about Things Medical. You are as handsome now (well, almost!) as you were "back in the day," when the three of us used to go fishing and to movies at The Railroad in Freeport.

Those summers seem like a long time ago—you and Johnny inseparable, me tagging along whenever you'd let me. Which was probably more often than I deserved! Yet your note of condolence brought it all back to me, and how I cried. Not just for Johnny, but for all three of us. And, I suppose, for how simple and uncomplicated life seemed. How golden we were!

You saw his obituary, of course. "Accidental death" can cover such a multitude of sins, can't it? In the news story, Johnny's death was reported as the result of a fall, and of course he *did* fall—at a spot we all knew well, one he had asked me about only last Christmas—but it was no accident. There was a good deal of sedative in his bloodstream. Not nearly enough to kill him, but according to the coroner it could have been enough to disorient him, especially if he was looking over the railing. Hence, "accidental death."

But I know it was suicide.

There was no note at home or on his body, but that might have been Johnny's idea of a kindness. And you, as a doctor yourself, will know that psychiatrists have an extremely high rate of suicide. It's as if the patients' woes

are a kind of acid, eating away at the psychic defenses of their therapists. In the majority of cases, those defenses are thick enough to remain intact. In Johnny's? I think not . . . thanks to one unusual patient. And he wasn't sleeping much during the last two or three months of his life; such terrible dark circles under his eyes! Also, he was canceling appointments right & left. Going on long drives. He would not say where, but I think I may know.

That brings me to the enclosure, which I hope you will look at when you finish this letter. I know you are busy, but—if it will help!—think of me as the love-struck girl I was, with my hair tied back in a ponytail that was always coming loose, forever tagging along!

Although Johnny was on his own, he had formed a loose affiliation with two other “shrinks” in the last four years of his life. His current case files (not many, due to his cutting back) went to one of these Drs. following his death. Those files were in his office. But when I was cleaning out his study at home, I came upon the little manuscript I have enclosed. They are case notes for a patient he calls “N.,” but I have seen his more formal case notes on a few occasions (not to snoop, but only because a folder happened to be open on his desk), and I know this is not like those. For one thing, they weren't done in his office, because there is no heading, as on the other case notes I have seen, and there is no red CONFIDENTIAL stamp at the bottom. Also, you will notice a faint vertical line on the pages. His home printer does this.

But there was something else, which you will see when you unwrap the box. He has printed two words on the cover in thick black strokes: BURN THIS. I almost did, without looking inside. I thought, God help me, it might be his private stash of drugs or print-outs of some weird strain of Internet pornography. In the end, daughter of Pandora that I am, my curiosity got the best of me. I wish it hadn't.

Charlie, I have an idea my brother may have been planning a book, something popular in the style of Oliver Sacks. Judging by this piece of manuscript, it was obsessive-compulsive behavior he was initially focused on, and when I add in his suicide (if it *was* suicide!), I wonder if his interest didn't spring from that old adage “Physician, Heal Thyself!”

In any case, I found the account of N., and my brother's increasingly fragmentary notes, disturbing. How disturbing? Enough so I'm forwarding the

manuscript—which I have not copied, by the way, this is the only one—to a friend he hadn't seen in ten years and I haven't seen in fourteen. Originally I thought, "Perhaps this could be published. It could serve as a kind of living memorial to my brother."

But I no longer think that. The thing is, the manuscript seems *alive*, and not in a good way. I know the places that are mentioned, you see (I'll bet you know some of them, too—the field N. speaks of, as Johnny notes, must have been close to where we went to school as children), and since reading the pages, I feel a strong desire to see if I can find it. Not in spite of the manuscript's disturbing nature but because of it—and if *that* isn't *obsessional*, what is?!?

I don't think finding it would be a good idea.

But Johnny's death haunts me, and not just because he was my brother. So does the enclosed manuscript. Would you read it? Read it and tell me what you think? Thank you, Charlie. I hope this isn't too much of an intrusion. And . . . if *you* should decide to honor Johnny's request and burn it, you would never hear a murmur of protest from me.

Fondly,  
From Johnny Bonsaint's "little sis,"

Sheila Bonsaint LeClaire  
964 Lisbon Street  
Lewiston, Maine 04240

PS—Oy, such a crush I had on you!

## 2. The Case Notes

June 1, 2007

N. is 48 years old, a partner in a large Portland accounting firm, divorced, the father of two daughters. One is doing postgraduate work in California, the other is a junior at a college here in Maine. He describes his current relationship with his ex-wife as "distant but amicable."

He says, “I know I look older than 48. It’s because I haven’t been sleeping. I’ve tried Ambien and the other one, the green moth one, but they only make me feel groggy.”

When I ask how long he’s been suffering from insomnia, he needs no time to think it over.

“Ten months.”

I ask him if it’s the insomnia that brought him to me. He smiles up at the ceiling. Most patients choose the chair, at least on their first visit—one woman told me that lying on the couch would make her feel like “a joke neurotic in a *New Yorker* cartoon”—but N. has gone directly to the couch. He lies there with his hands laced tightly together on his chest.

“I think we both know better than that, Dr. Bonsaint,” he says.

I ask him what he means.

“If I only wanted to get rid of the bags under my eyes, I’d either see a plastic surgeon or go to my family doctor—who recommended you, by the way, he says you’re very good—and ask for something stronger than Ambien or the green moth pills. There must be stronger stuff, right?”

I say nothing to this.

“As I understand it, insomnia’s always a symptom of something else.”

I tell him that isn’t always so, but in most cases it is. And, I add, if there is another problem, insomnia is rarely the only symptom.

“Oh, I have others,” he says. “Tons. For instance, look at my shoes.”

I look at his shoes. They are lace-up brogans. The left one is tied at the top, but the right has been tied at the bottom. I tell him that’s very interesting.

“Yes,” he says. “When I was in high school, it was the fashion of girls to tie their sneakers at the bottom if they were going steady. Or if there was a boy they liked and they *wanted* to go steady.”

I ask him if he’s going steady, thinking this may break the tension I see in his posture—the knuckles of his laced-together hands are white, as if he fears they might fly away unless he exerts a certain amount of pressure to keep them where they are—but he doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t even smile.

“I’m a little past the going-steady stage of life,” he says, “but there *is* something I want.”

He considers.

“I tried tying *both* of my shoes at the bottom. It didn’t help. But one up and one down—that actually seems to do some good.” He frees his right hand from the deathgrip his left has on it and holds it up with the thumb and forefinger almost touching. “About this much.”

I ask him what he wants.

“For my mind to be right again. But trying to cure one’s mind by tying one’s shoelaces according to some high school code of communication . . . slightly adjusted to fit the current situation . . . that’s crazy, wouldn’t you say? And crazy people should seek help. If they have any sanity left at all—which I flatter myself I do—they know that. So here I am.”

He slides his hands together again and looks at me with defiance and fright. Also, I think, with some relief. He’s lain awake trying to imagine what it will be like to tell a psychiatrist that he fears for his sanity, and when he did it, I neither ran shrieking from the room nor called for the men in the white coats. Some patients imagine I have a posse of such white-coated men in the very next room, equipped with butterfly nets and straitjackets.

I ask him to give me some instances of his current mental wrongness, and he shrugs.

“The usual OCD shit. You’ve heard it all a hundred times before. It’s the underlying cause I came here to deal with. What happened in August of last year. I thought maybe you could hypnotize me and make me forget it.” He looks at me hopefully.

I tell him that, while nothing is impossible, hypnotism works better when it’s employed as an aid to memory rather than as a block.

“Ah,” he says. “I didn’t know that. Shit.” He looks up at the ceiling again. The muscles in the side of his face are working, and I think he has something more to say. “It could be dangerous, you know.” He stops, but this is only a pause; the muscles along his jaw are still flexing and relaxing. “What’s wrong with me could be very dangerous.” Another pause. “To me.” Another pause. “Possibly to others.”

Every therapy session is a series of choices; branching roads with no signposts. Here I could ask him what *it* is—the dangerous thing—but I elect not to. Instead I ask him what sort of OCD shit he’s talking about. Other than

the one-up, one-down tying thing, which is a pretty damn good example. (I do not say this.)

“You know it all,” he says, and gives me a sly look that makes me a bit uncomfortable. I don’t show it; he isn’t the first patient who has made me uncomfortable. Psychiatrists are spelunkers, really, and any spelunker will tell you that caves are full of bats and bugs. Not nice, but most are essentially harmless.

I ask him to humor me. And to remember that we are still just getting to know each other.

“Not going steady just yet, eh?”

No, I tell him, not quite yet.

“Well, we better be soon,” he says, “because I’m at Condition Orange here, Dr. Bonsaint. Edging into Condition Red.”

I ask him if he counts things.

“Of course I do,” he says. “The number of clues in the New York *Times* crossword puzzles . . . and on Sundays I count twice, because those puzzles are bigger and double-checking seems in order. Necessary, in fact. My own footsteps. Number of telephone rings when I call someone. I eat at the Colonial Diner on most workdays, it’s three blocks from the office, and on my way there I’ll count black shoes. On my way back, I’ll count brown ones. I tried red once, but that was ridiculous. Only women wear red shoes, and not many, at that. Not in the daytime. I only counted three pair, so I went back to the Colonial and started again, only the second time I counted brown shoes.”

I ask him if he has to count a certain number of shoes in order to achieve satisfaction.

“Thirty’s good,” he says. “Fifteen pair. Most days, that’s no problem.”

And why is it necessary to reach a certain number?

He considers, then looks at me. “If I say ‘you know,’ will you just ask me to explain what it is you’re supposed to know? I mean, you’ve dealt with OCD before and I’ve researched it—exhaustively—both in my own head and on the Internet, so can’t we just cut to the chase?”

I say that most counters feel that reaching a certain total, known as “the goal number,” is necessary to maintain order. To keep the world spinning on its axis, so to speak.

He nods, satisfied, and the floodgates break.

“One day, when I was counting my way back to the office, I passed a man with one leg cut off at the knee. He was on crutches, with a sock on his stump. If he’d been wearing a black shoe, it would have been no problem. Because I was on my way *back*, you see. But it was brown. That threw me off for the whole day, and that night I couldn’t sleep at all. Because odd numbers are bad.” He taps the side of his head. “At least up here they are. There’s a rational part of my mind that knows it’s all bullshit, but there’s another part that knows it absolutely isn’t, and that part rules. You’d think that when nothing bad happened—in fact something *good* happened that day, an IRS audit we were worried about was canceled for absolutely no reason—the spell would break, but it didn’t. I’d counted thirty-seven brown shoes instead of thirty-eight, and when the world didn’t end, that irrational part of my mind said it was because I not only got above thirty, I got *well* above thirty.

“When I load the dishwasher, I count plates. If there’s an even number above ten in there, all is well. If not, I add the correct number of clean ones to make it right. Same with forks and spoons. There has to be at least twelve pieces in the little plastic caddy at the front of the dishwasher. Which, since I live alone now, usually means adding clean ones.”

What about knives, I ask, and he shakes his head at once.

“Never knives. Not in the dishwasher.”

When I ask why not, he says he doesn’t know. Then, after a pause, he gives me a guilty sideways look. “I always wash the knives by hand, in the sink.”

Knives in the silverware caddy would disturb the order of the world, I suggest.

“No!” he exclaims. “You understand, Dr. Bonsaint, but you don’t understand *completely*.”

Then you have to help me, I say.

“The order of the world is already disturbed. *I* disturbed it last summer, when I went to Ackerman’s Field. Only I didn’t understand. Not then.”

But you do now? I ask.

“Yes. Not everything, but enough.”

I ask him if he is trying to fix things or only trying to keep the situation from getting worse.

A look of unutterable relief fills his face, relaxing all the muscles there. Something that has been crying out for articulation has finally been spoken aloud. These are the moments I live for. It's not a cure, far from it, but for the time being N. has gotten some relief. I doubt if he expected it. Most patients do not.

"I can't fix it," he whispers. "But I can keep things from getting worse. Yes. I *have* been."

Again I have come to one of those branching points. I could ask him what happened last summer—last August, I presume—in Ackerman's Field, but it is probably still too early. Better to loosen the roots of this infected tooth a little more first. And I really doubt that the source of the infection can be so recent. More likely, whatever happened to him last summer was only a kind of firing pin.

I ask him to tell me about his other symptoms.

He laughs. "That would take all day, and we only have . . ." He glances at his wrist. ". . . twenty-two minutes left. Twenty-two is a good number, by the way."

Because it's even? I ask.

His nod suggests I am wasting time with the obvious.

"My . . . my *symptoms*, as you call them . . . come in clusters." Now he's looking up at the ceiling. "There are three of these clusters. They poke out of me . . . the sane part of me . . . like rocks . . . rocks, you know . . . oh God, dear God . . . like the fucking *rocks* in that fucking *field* . . ."

Tears are coursing down his cheeks. At first he doesn't seem to notice, only lies on the couch with his fingers laced together, looking up at the ceiling. But then he reaches for the table beside him, where sits what Sandy, my receptionist, calls The Eternal Box of Kleenex. He takes two, wipes his cheeks, then crumples the tissue. It disappears into the lace of his fingers.

"There are three clusters," he resumes, speaking in a voice that isn't quite steady. "Counting is the first. It's important, but not so important as touching. There are certain things I need to touch. Stove-burners, for instance. Before leaving the house in the morning or going to bed at night. I might be able to see they're off—all the dials pointing straight up, all the burners dark—but I still have to touch them to be absolutely sure. And the front of the oven door,

of course. Then I started touching the light switches before leaving the house or the office. Just a quick double-tap. Before I get into my car, I have to tap four times on the roof. And six times when I get to where I'm going. Four's a good number, and six is an *okay* number, but ten . . . ten is like . . ." I can see one tear-track he's missed, running a zigzag course from the corner of his right eye to the lobe of his ear.

Like going steady with the girl of your dreams? I suggest.

He smiles. He has a lovely, weary smile—a smile that's finding it increasingly hard to get up in the morning.

"That's right," he says. "And she's got her sneaker laces tied at the bottom so everyone knows it."

You touch other things? I ask, knowing the answer to this. I have seen many cases like N. during the five years I've been in practice. I sometimes picture these unfortunates as men and women being pecked to death by predatory birds. The birds are invisible—at least until a psychiatrist who is good, or lucky, or both, sprays them with his version of Luminol and shines the right light on them—but they are nevertheless very real. The wonder is that so many OCDs manage to live productive lives, just the same. They work, they eat (often not enough or too much, it's true), they go to movies, they make love to their girlfriends and boyfriends, their wives and husbands . . . and all the time those birds are there, clinging to them and pecking away little bits of flesh.

"I touch many things," he says, and again favors the ceiling with his weary, charming smile. "You name it, I touch it."

So counting is important, I say, but touching is more important. What is above touching?

"*Placing*," he says, and suddenly begins to shiver all over, like a dog that's been left out in a cold rain. "Oh God."

He suddenly sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the couch. On the table beside him there is a vase of flowers in addition to The Eternal Box of Kleenex. Moving very quickly, he shifts the box and the vase so they are diagonal to each other. Then he takes two of the tulips from the vase and lays them stem to stem so that one blossom touches the Kleenex box and the other the vase.

“That makes it safe,” he says. He hesitates, then nods as if he’s confirmed in his mind that what he’s thinking is the right thing. “It preserves the world.” He hesitates again. “For now.”

I glance down at my watch. Time is up, and we’ve done quite enough for one day.

“Next week,” I say. “Same bat-time, same bat-station.” Sometimes I turn this little joke into a question, but not with N. He needs to come back, and knows it.

“No magical cure, huh?” he asks. This time the smile is almost too sad to look at.

I tell him that he may feel better. (This sort of positive suggestion never hurts, as all psychiatrists know.) Then I tell him to throw away his *Ambien* and “the green moth pills”—*Lunesta*, I assume. If they don’t work at night, all they can do is cause trouble for him during his waking hours. Falling asleep on the 295 Connector won’t solve any of his problems.

“No,” he says. “I suppose not. Doc, we never discussed the root cause. I know what it is—”

Next week we may get to that, I tell him. In the meantime, I want him to keep a chart divided into three sections: counting, touching, and placing. Will he do that?

“Yes,” he says.

I ask him, almost casually, if he feels suicidal.

“The thought has crossed my mind, but I have a great deal to do.”

This is an interesting and rather troubling response.

I give him my card and tell him to call—day or night—if the idea of suicide begins to seem more attractive. He says he will. But then, almost all of them promise.

“In the meantime,” I say at the door, putting my hand on his shoulder, “keep going steady with life.”

He looks at me, pale and not smiling now, a man being pecked to pieces by invisible birds. “Have you ever read ‘The Great God Pan,’ by Arthur Machen?”

I shake my head.

“It’s the most terrifying story ever written,” he says. “In it, one of the characters says ‘lust always prevails.’ But lust isn’t what he means. What he

means is compulsion.”

Paxil? Perhaps Prozac. But neither until I get a better fix on this interesting patient.

June 7, 2007

June 14, 2007

June 28, 2007

N. brings his “homework” to our next session, as I fully expected he would. There are many things in this world you can’t depend on, and many people you can’t trust, but OCDs, unless they are dying, almost always complete their tasks.

In a way his charts are comical; in another way, sad; in another, frankly horrible. He is an accountant, after all, and I assume he’s used one of his accounting programs to create the contents of the folder he hands me before proceeding to the couch. They are spreadsheets. Only instead of investments and income-flow, these charts detail the complex terrain of N.’s obsessions. The top two sheets are headed **COUNTING**; the next two **TOUCHING**; the final six **PLACING**. Thumbing through them, I’m hard put to understand how he finds time for any other activities. Yet OCDs almost always find a way. The idea of invisible birds recurs to me; I see them roosting all over N., pecking away his flesh in bloody nibbles.

When I look up, he’s on the couch, once more with his hands laced together tightly on his chest. And he’s rearranged the vase and the tissue-box so they are again connected on a diagonal. The flowers are white lilies today. Seeing them that way, laid out on the table, makes me think of funerals.

“Please don’t ask me to put them back,” he says, apologetic but firm. “I’ll leave before I do that.”

I tell him I have no intention of asking him to put them back. I hold up the spreadsheets and compliment him on how professional they look. He shrugs. I then ask him if they represent an overview or if they only cover the last week.

“Just the last week,” he says. As if the matter is of no interest to him. I suppose it is not. A man being pecked to death by birds can have little interest in last year’s insults and injuries, or even last week’s; he’s got today on his mind. And, God help him, the future.

“There must be two or three thousand items here,” I say.

“Call them events. That’s what I call them. There are six hundred and four counting events, eight hundred and seventy-eight touching events, and twenty-two hundred and forty-six placing events. All even numbers, you’ll notice. They add up to thirty-seven hundred and twenty-eight, also an even number. If you add the individual numbers in that total—3728—you come out with twenty, also even. A good number.” He nods, as if confirming this to himself. “Divide 3728 by two and you come out with eighteen-hundred and sixty-four. 1864 adds up to nineteen, a powerful odd number. Powerful and *bad*.” He actually shivers a little.

“You must be very tired,” I say.

To this he makes no verbal reply, nor does he nod, but he answers, all the same. Tears trickle down his cheeks toward his ears. I am reluctant to add to his burden, but I recognize one fact: if we don’t begin this work soon—“no ditzing around,” as Sister Sheila would say—he won’t be capable of the work at all. I can already see a deterioration in his appearance (wrinkled shirt, indifferent shave, hair badly in need of a trim), and if I asked his colleagues about him, I would almost surely see those quick exchanged glances that tell so much. The spreadsheets are amazing in their way, but N. is clearly running out of strength. It seems to me that there is no choice but to fly directly to the heart of the matter, and until that heart is reached, there will be no Paxil or Prozac or anything else.

I ask if he is ready to tell me what happened last August.

“Yes,” he says. “It’s what I came to do.” He takes some tissues from the Eternal Box and wipes his cheeks. Wearily. “But Doc . . . are you sure?”

I have never had a patient ask me that, or speak to me in quite that tone of reluctant sympathy. But I tell him yes, I’m sure. My job is to help him, but in order for me to do that, he must be willing to help himself.

“Even if it puts you at risk of winding up like I am now? Because it could happen. I’m lost, but I think—I hope—that I haven’t gotten to the drowning-man state, so panicky I’d be willing to pull down anyone who was trying to save me.”

I tell him I don’t quite understand.

“I’m here because all this may be in my head,” he says, and knocks his knuckles against his temple, as if he wants to make sure I know where his head

is at. “But it might not be. I can’t really tell. That’s what I mean when I say I’m lost. And if it’s not mental—if what I saw and sensed in Ackerman’s Field is real—then I’m carrying a kind of infection. Which I could pass on to you.”

*Ackerman’s Field.* I make a note of it, although everything will be on the tapes. When we were children, my sister and I went to Ackerman School, in the little town of Harlow, on the banks of the Androscoggin. Which is not far from here; thirty miles at most.

I tell him I’ll take my chances, and say that in the end—more positive reinforcement—I’m sure we’ll both be fine.

He utters a hollow, lonely laugh. “Wouldn’t that be nice,” he says.

“Tell me about Ackerman’s Field.”

He sighs and says, “It’s in Motton. On the east side of the Androscoggin.”

Motton. One town over from Chester’s Mill. Our mother used to buy milk and eggs at Boy Hill Farm in Motton. N. is talking about a place that cannot be more than seven miles from the farmhouse where I grew up. I almost say, *I knew it!*

I don’t, but he looks over at me sharply, almost as if he caught my thought. Perhaps he did. I don’t believe in ESP, but I don’t entirely discount it, either.

“Don’t ever go there, Doc,” he says. “Don’t even look for it. Promise me.”

I give my promise. In fact, I haven’t been back to that broken-down part of Maine in over fifteen years. It’s close in miles, distant in desire. Thomas Wolfe made a characteristically sweeping statement when he titled his magnum opus *You Can’t Go Home Again*; it’s not true for everyone (Sister Sheila often goes back; she’s still close to several of her childhood friends), but it’s true for me. Although I suppose I’d title my own book *I Won’t Go Home Again*. What I remember are bullies with harelips dominating the playground, empty houses with staring glassless windows, junked-out cars, and skies that always seemed white and cold and full of fleeing crows.

“All right,” N. says, and bares his teeth for a moment at the ceiling. Not in aggression; it is, I’m quite sure, the expression of a man preparing to do a piece of heavy lifting that will leave him aching the next day. “I don’t know if I can express it very well, but I’ll do my best. The important thing to remember is that up til that day in August, the closest thing to OCD behavior I exhibited

was popping back into the bathroom before going to work to make sure I'd gotten all the nose hairs."

Maybe this is true; more likely it isn't. I don't pursue the subject. Instead, I ask him to tell me what happened that day. And he does.

For the next three sessions, he does. At the second of those sessions—June 15th—he brings me a calendar. It is, as the saying goes, Exhibit A.

### 3. N.'s Story

I'm an accountant by trade, a photographer by inclination. After my divorce—and the children growing up, which is a divorce of a different kind, and almost as painful—I spent most of my weekends rambling around, taking landscape shots with my Nikon. It's a film camera, not a digital. Toward the end of every year, I took the twelve best pix and turned them into a calendar. I had them printed at a little place in Freeport called The Windhover Press. It's pricey, but they do good work. I gave the calendars to my friends and business associates for Christmas. A few clients, too, but not many—clients who bill five or six figures usually appreciate something that's silver-plated. Myself, I prefer a good landscape photo every time. I have no pictures of Ackerman's Field. I took some, but they never came out. Later on I borrowed a digital camera. Not only did the pictures not come out, I fried the camera's insides. I had to buy a new one for the guy I borrowed it from. Which was all right. By then I think I would have destroyed any pictures I took of *that* place, anyway. If *it* allowed me, that is.

[*I ask him what he means by "it."* N. ignores the question as if he hasn't heard it.]

I've taken pictures all over Maine and New Hampshire, but tend to stick pretty much to my own patch. I live in Castle Rock—up on the View, actually—but I grew up in Harlow, like you. And don't look so surprised, Doc, I Googled you after my GP suggested you—everybody Googles everybody these days, don't they?

Anyway, that part of central Maine is where I've done my best work: Harlow, Motton, Chester's Mill, St. Ives, Castle-St.-Ives, Canton, Lisbon Falls. All along the banks of the mighty Androscoggin, in other words. Those

pictures look more . . . *real*, somehow. The '05 calendar's a good example. I'll bring you one and you can decide for yourself. January through April and September through December were all taken close to home. May through August are . . . let's see . . . Old Orchard Beach . . . Pemaquid Point, the lighthouse, of course . . . Harrison State Park . . . and Thunder Hole in Bar Harbor. I thought I was really getting something at Thunder Hole, I was excited, but when I saw the proofs, reality came crashing back down. It was just another tourist-snap. Good composition, but so what, right? You can find good composition in any shitshop tourist calendar.

Want my opinion, just as an amateur? I think photography's a much artier art than most people believe. It's logical to think that, if you've got an eye for composition—plus a few technical skills you can learn in any photography class—one pretty place should photograph as well as any other, especially if you're just into landscapes. Harlow, Maine or Sarasota, Florida, just make sure you've got the right filter, then point and shoot. Only it's not like that. Place matters in photography just like it does in painting or writing stories or poetry. I don't know *why* it does, but . . .

[*There is a long pause.*]

Actually I do. Because an artist, even an amateur one like me, puts his soul into the things he creates. For some people—ones with the vagabond spirit, I imagine—the soul is portable. But for me, it never seemed to travel even as far as Bar Harbor. The snaps I've taken along the Androscoggin, though . . . those speak to me. And they do to others, too. The guy I do business with at Windhover said I could probably get a book deal out of New York, end up getting paid for my calendars rather than paying for them myself, but that never interested me. It seemed a little too . . . I don't know . . . public? Pretentious? I don't know, something like that. The calendars are little things, just between friends. Besides, I've got a job. I'm happy crunching numbers. But my life sure would have been dimmer without my hobby. I was happy just knowing a few friends had my calendars hung in their kitchens or living rooms. Even in their damn mudrooms. The irony is I haven't taken many pictures since the ones I took in Ackerman's Field. I think that part of my life may be over, and it leaves a hole. One that whistles in the middle of the night,

as if there was a wind way down inside. A wind trying to fill up what's no longer there. Sometimes I think life is a sad, bad business, Doc. I really do.

On one of my rambles last August, I came to a dirt road in Motton that I didn't remember ever seeing before. I'd just been riding, listening to tunes on the radio, and I'd lost track of the river, but I knew it couldn't be far, because it has a smell. It's kind of dank and fresh at the same time. You know what I'm talking about, I'm sure. It's an *old* smell. Anyway, I turned up that road.

It was bumpy, almost washed out in a couple of places. Also, it was getting late. It must have been around seven in the evening, and I hadn't stopped anywhere for supper. I was hungry. I almost turned around, but then the road smoothed out and started going uphill instead of down. That smell was stronger, too. When I turned off the radio, I could hear the river as well as smell it—not loud, not close, but it was there.

Then I came to a tree down across the road, and I almost went back. I could have, even though there was no place to turn around. I was only a mile or so in from Route 117, and I could have backed out in five minutes. I think now that something, some force that exists on the bright side of our lives, was giving me that opportunity. I think the last year would have been a lot different if I'd just thrown the transmission in reverse. But I didn't. Because that smell . . . it's always reminded me of childhood. Also, I could see a lot more sky at the crest of the hill. The trees—some pine, mostly junk birch—drew back up there, and I thought, "There's a field." It occurred to me that if there was, it probably looked down on the river. It also occurred to me that there might be a good spot to turn around up there, but that was very secondary to the idea that I might be able to take a picture of the Androscoggin at sunset. I don't know if you remember that we had some spectacular sunsets last August, but we did.

So I got out and moved the tree. It was one of those junk birches, so rotted it almost came apart in my hands. But when I got back into my car, I still almost went back instead of forward. There really is a force on the bright side of things; I believe that. But it seemed like the sound of the river was clearer with the tree out of the way—stupid, I know, but it really seemed that way—so I threw the transmission into low and drove my little Toyota 4Runner the rest of the way up.

I passed a little sign tacked to a tree. ACKERMAN'S FIELD, NO HUNTING, KEEP OUT, it said. Then the trees drew back, first on the left, then on the right, and there it was. It took my breath away. I barely remember turning off the car and getting out, and I don't remember grabbing my camera, but I must have, because I had it in my hand when I got to the edge of the field, with the strap and lens-bag knocking against my leg. I was struck to my heart and through my heart, knocked clean out of my ordinary life.

Reality is a mystery, Dr. Bonsaint, and the everyday texture of things is the cloth we draw over it to mask its brightness and darkness. I think we cover the faces of corpses for the same reason. We see the faces of the dead as a kind of gate. It's shut against us . . . but we know it won't *always* be shut. Someday it will swing open for each of us, and each of us will go through.

But there are places where the cloth gets ragged and reality is thin. The face beneath peeps through . . . but not the face of a corpse. It would almost be better if it was. Ackerman's Field is one of those places, and no damn wonder whoever owns it put up a KEEP OUT sign.

The day was fading. The sun was a ball of red gas, flattened at the top and bottom, sitting above the western horizon. The river was a long, bloody snake in its reflected glow, eight or ten miles distant, but the sound of it carrying to me on the still evening air. Blue-gray woods rose behind it in a series of ridges to the far horizon. I couldn't see a single house or road. Not a bird sang. It was as if I'd been tumbled back four hundred years in time. Or four million. The first white streamers of groundmist were rising out of the hay—which was high. Nobody had been in there to cut it, although that was a big field, and good graze. The mist came out of the darkening green like breath. As if the earth itself was alive.

I think I staggered a little. It wasn't the beauty, although it was beautiful; it was how everything that lay before me seemed *thin*, almost to the point of hallucination. And then I saw those damned rocks rising out of the uncut hay.

There were seven, or so I thought—the tallest two about five feet high, the shortest only three or so, the rest in between. I remember walking down to the closest of them, but it's like remembering a dream after it starts to decompose in the morning light—you know how they do that? Of course you do, dreams must be a big part of your workday. Only this was no dream. I could hear the

hay whickering against my pants, could feel the khaki getting damp from the mist and starting to stick to my skin below the knees. Every now and then a bush—clumps of sumac were growing here and there—would pull my lens-bag back and then drop it again so it would thump harder than usual against my thigh.

I got to the nearest of the rocks and stopped. It was one of the five-footers. At first I thought there were faces carved in it—not human faces, either; the faces of beasts and monsters—but then I shifted my position a little and saw it was just a trick of the evening light, which thickens shadows and makes them look like . . . well, like anything. In fact, after I stood in my new position for awhile, I saw new faces. Some of these looked human, but they were just as horrible. *More* horrible, really, because human is always more horrible, don't you think? Because we *know* human, we *understand* human. Or think we do. And these looked like they were either screaming or laughing. Maybe both at the same time.

I thought it was the quiet screwing with my imagination, and the isolation, and the *bigness* of it—how much of the world I could see laid out in front of me. And how time seemed to be holding its breath. As if everything would stay the way it was forever, with sunset not more than forty minutes away and the sun sitting red over the horizon and that faded clarity in the air. I thought it was those things that were making me see faces where there was nothing but coincidence. I think differently now, but now it's too late.

I snapped some pictures. Five, I think. A bad number, although I didn't know that yet. Then I stood back, wanting to get all seven of them in one picture, and when I framed the shot, I saw that there were really eight, standing in a kind of rough ring. You could tell—when you really looked, you could—that they were part of some underlying geological formation that had either poked out of the ground eons ago, or had maybe been exposed more recently by flooding (the field had a fairly steep downward slope, so I thought that was very possible), but they also looked *planned*, like stones in a Druid's circle. There was no carving in them, though. Except for what the elements had done. I know, because I went back in daylight and made sure of it. Chips and folds in the stone. No more than that.

I took another four shots—which makes a total of nine, another bad number, although slightly better than five—and when I lowered the camera and looked again with my naked eye, I saw the faces, leering and grinning and grunting. Some human, some bestial. And I counted seven stones.

But when I looked into the viewfinder again, there were eight.

I started to feel dizzy and scared. I wanted to be out of there before full dark came—away from that field and back on Route 117, with loud rock and roll on the radio. But I couldn't just leave. Something deep inside me—as deep as the instinct that keeps us drawing in breaths and letting them out—insisted on that. I felt that if I left, something terrible would happen, and perhaps not just to me. That sense of *thinness* swept over me again, as if the world was fragile at this particular place, and one person would be enough to cause an unimaginable cataclysm. If he weren't very, very careful.

That's when my OCD shit started. I went from stone to stone, touching each one, counting each one, and marking each in its place. I wanted to be gone—desperately wanted to be gone—but I did it and I didn't skimp the job. Because I *had* to. I knew that the way I know I have to keep breathing if I want to stay alive. By the time I got back to where I'd started, I was trembling and wet with sweat as well as mist and dew. Because touching those stones . . . it wasn't nice. It caused . . . ideas. And raised images. Ugly ones. One was of chopping up my ex-wife with an axe and laughing while she screamed and raised her bloody hands to ward off the blows.

But there were eight. Eight stones in Ackerman's Field. A good number. A *safe* number. I knew that. And it no longer mattered if I looked at them through the camera's viewfinder or with my naked eyes; after touching them, they were *fixed*. It was getting darker, the sun was halfway over the horizon (I must have spent twenty minutes or more going around that rough circle, which was maybe forty yards across), but I could see well enough—the air was weirdly clear. I still felt afraid—there was something wrong there, everything screamed it, the very silence of the birds screamed it—but I felt relieved, too. The wrong had been put at least partly right by touching the stones . . . and *looking* at them again. Getting their places in the field set into my mind. That was as important as the touching.

[*A pause to think.*]

No, *more* important. Because it's how we see the world that keeps the darkness beyond the world at bay. Keeps it from pouring through and drowning us. I think all of us might know that, way down deep. So I turned to go, and I was most of the way back to my car—I might even have been touching the doorhandle—when something turned me around again. And that was when I *saw*.

[*He is silent for a long time. I notice he is trembling. He has broken out in a sweat. It gleams on his forehead like dew.*]

There was something in the *middle* of the stones. In the middle of the circle they made, either by chance or design. It was black, like the sky in the east, and green like the hay. It was turning very slowly, but it never took its eyes off me. It *did* have eyes. Sick pink ones. I knew—my *rational* mind knew—that it was just light in the sky I was seeing, but at the same time I knew it was something more. That something was *using* that light. Something was using the sunset to see with, and what it was seeing was *me*.

[*He's crying again. I don't offer him the Kleenex, because I don't want to break the spell. Although I'm not sure I could have offered them in any case, because he's cast a spell over me, too. What he's articulating is a delusion, and part of him knows it—"shadows that looked like faces," etc.—but it's very strong, and strong delusions travel like cold germs on a sneeze.*]

I must have kept backing up. I don't remember doing it; I just remember thinking that I was looking at the head of some grotesque monster from the outer darkness. And thinking that where there was one, there would be more. Eight stones would keep them captive—barely—but if there were only seven, they'd come flooding through from the darkness on the other side of reality and overwhelm the world. For all I knew, I was looking at the least and smallest of them. For all I knew, that flattened snakehead with the pink eyes and what looked like great long quills growing out of its snout was only a *baby*.

It saw me looking.

The fucking thing *grinned* at me, and its teeth were heads. Living human heads.

Then I stepped on a dead branch. It snapped with a sound like a firecracker, and the paralysis broke. I don't think it's impossible that that thing floating

inside the circle of stones was hypnotizing me, the way a snake is supposed to be able to do with a bird.

I turned and ran. My lens-bag kept smacking my leg, and each smack seemed to be saying *Wake up! Wake up! Get out! Get out!* I pulled open the door of my 4Runner, and I heard the little bell dinging, the one that means you left your key in the ignition. I thought of some old movie where William Powell and Myrna Loy are at the desk of a fancy hotel and Powell rings the bell for service. Funny what goes through your mind at moments like that, isn't it? There's a gate in our heads, too—that's what I think. One that keeps the insanity in all of us from flooding our intellects. And at critical moments, it swings open and all kinds of weird shit comes flooding through.

I started the engine. I turned on the radio, turned it up loud, and rock music came roaring out of the speakers. It was The Who, I remember that. And I remember popping on the headlights. When I did, those stones seemed to *jump toward me*. I almost screamed. But there were eight, I counted them, and eight is safe.

[*There's another long pause here. Almost a full minute.*]

The next thing I remember, I was back on Route 117. I don't know how I got there, if I turned around or backed out. I don't know how long it took me, but The Who song was over and I was listening to The Doors. God help me, it was "Break On Through to the Other Side." I turned the radio off.

I don't think I can tell you any more, Doc, not today. I'm exhausted.

[*And he looks it.*]

[Next Session]

I thought the effect the place had had on me would dissipate on the drive home—just a bad moment out in the woods, right?—and surely by the time I was in my own living room, with the lights and TV on, I'd be okay again. But I wasn't. If anything, that feeling of dislocation—of having touched some other universe that was inimical to ours—seemed to be stronger. The conviction remained that I'd seen a face—worse, the suggestion of some huge reptilian body—in that circle of stones. I felt . . . *infected*. Infected by the thoughts in my own head. I felt *dangerous*, too—as if I could summon that thing just by thinking about it too much. And it wouldn't be alone. That whole other

cosmos would come spilling through, like vomit through the bottom of a wet paper bag.

I went around and locked all the doors. Then I was sure that I'd forgotten a couple, so I went around and checked them all again. This time I counted: front door, back door, pantry door, bulkhead door, garage overhead door, back garage door. That was six, and it came to me that six was a good number. Like eight is a good number. They're friendly numbers. Warm. Not cold, like five or . . . you know, seven. I relaxed a little, but I still went around one last time. Still six. "Six is a fix," I remember saying. After that I thought I'd be able to sleep, but I couldn't. Not even with an Ambien. I kept seeing the setting sun on the Androscoggin, turning it into a red snake. The mist coming out of the hay like tongues. And the thing in the stones. That most of all.

I got up and counted all the books in my bedroom bookcase. There were ninety-three. That's a bad number, and not just because it's odd. Divide ninety-three by three and you come out with thirty-one: thirteen backwards. So I got a book from the little bookcase in the hall. But ninety-four is only a little better, because nine and four add up to thirteen. There are thirteens everywhere in this world of ours, Doc. You don't know. Anyway, I added six more books to the bedroom case. I had to cram, but I got them in. A hundred is okay. Fine, in fact.

I was heading back to bed, then started wondering about the hall bookcase. If I'd, you know, robbed Peter to pay Paul. So I counted those, and that was all right: fifty-six. The numbers add to eleven, which is odd but not the *worst* odd, and fifty-six divides to twenty-eight—a good number. After that I could sleep. I think I had bad dreams, but I don't remember them.

Days went by, and my mind kept going back to Ackerman's Field. It was like a shadow had fallen over my life. I was counting lots of things by then, and touching things—to make sure I understood their places in the world, the real world, *my* world—and I'd started to place things, too. Always even numbers of things, and usually in a circle or on a diagonal line. Because circles and diagonals keep things out.

Usually, that is. And never permanently. One small accident and fourteen becomes thirteen, or eight becomes seven.

In early September, my younger daughter visited and commented on how tired I looked. She wanted to know if I was overworking. She also noticed that all the living-room knickknacks—stuff her mom hadn't taken after the divorce—had been placed in what she called “crop circles.” She said, “You're getting a little wiggy in your old age, aren't you, Dad?” And that was when I decided I had to go back to Ackerman's Field, this time in full daylight. I thought if I saw it in daylight, saw just a few meaningless rocks standing around in an uncut hayfield, I'd realize how foolish the whole thing was, and my obsessions would blow away like a dandelion puff in a strong breeze. I wanted that. Because counting, touching, and placing—those things are a lot of work. A lot of responsibility.

On my way, I stopped at the place where I got my pictures developed and saw the ones I'd taken that evening in Ackerman's Field hadn't come out. They were just gray squares, as if they'd been fogged by some strong radiation. That gave me pause, but it didn't stop me. I borrowed a digital camera from one of the guys at the photo shop—that's the one I fried—and drove out to Motton again, and fast. You want to hear something stupid? I felt like a man with a bad case of poison ivy going to the drugstore for a bottle of Calamine Lotion. Because that was what it was like—an itch. Counting and touching and placing could scratch it, but scratching affords only temporary relief at best. It's more likely to spread whatever's causing the itch. What I wanted was a cure. Going back to Ackerman's Field wasn't it, but I didn't know that, did I? Like the man said, we learn by doing. And we learn even more by trying and failing.

It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. The leaves were still green, but the air had that brilliant clarity you only get when the seasons change. My ex-wife used to say that early fall days like that are our reward for putting up with the tourists and summer people for three months, standing in line while they use their credit cards to buy beer. I felt good, I remember that. I felt certain I was going to put all the crazy shit to rest. I was listening to a greatest-hits compilation by Queen and thinking how fine Freddie Mercury sounded, how *pure*. I sang along. I drove over the Androscoggin in Harlow—the water on either side of the old Bale Road Bridge bright enough to knock your eyes out—and I saw a fish jump. It made me laugh out loud. I hadn't laughed like that since the evening in Ackerman's Field, and it sounded so good I did it again.

Then up over Boy Hill—I bet you know where that is—and past the Serenity Ridge Cemetery. I’ve taken some good photos in there, although I never put one in a calendar. I came to the dirt byroad not five minutes later. I started to turn in, then jammed on the brakes. Just in time, too. If I’d been any slower, I would have ripped my 4Runner’s grille in two. There was a chain across the road, and a new sign hanging from it: ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING.

Now I could have told myself it was just a coincidence, that the person who owned those woods and that field—not necessarily a guy named Ackerman, but maybe—put up that chain and that sign every fall, to discourage hunters. But deer season doesn’t start until November first. Even bird season doesn’t start til October. I think someone watches that field. With binocs, maybe, but maybe with some less normal form of sight. Someone knew I’d been there, and that I might be back.

“Leave it alone, then!” I told myself. “Unless you want to risk getting arrested for trespassing, maybe get your picture in the *Castle Rock Call*. That would be good for business, wouldn’t it?”

But there was no way I was going to stop, not if there was a chance I could go up to that field, see nothing, and consequently feel better. Because—dig this—at the same time I was telling myself that if someone wanted me off his property I ought to respect that person’s wishes, I was counting the letters in that sign and coming out with twenty-three, which is a *terrible* number, far worse than thirteen. I knew it was crazy to think that way, but I *was* thinking that way, and some part of me knew it wasn’t a bit crazy.

I stashed my 4Runner in the Serenity Ridge parking lot, then walked back to the dirt road with the borrowed camera slung over my shoulder in its little zippered case. I went around the chain—it was easy—and walked up the road to the field. Turned out I would’ve had to walk even if the chain *hadn’t* been there, because there were half a dozen trees lying across the road this time, and not just trashwood birches. Five were good-sized pines, and the last one was a mature oak. They hadn’t just fallen over, either; those babies had been dropped with a chainsaw. They didn’t even slow me down. I climbed over the pines and detoured around the oak. Then I was on the hill climbing to the field. I barely gave the other sign—ACKERMAN’S FIELD, NO HUNTING, KEEP OUT—a glance. I could see the trees drawing back at the crest of the hill, I could see dusty beams

of sun shining between the ones nearest the top, and I could see acres and acres of blue sky up there, looking jolly and optimistic. It was midday. There would be no giant riversnake bleeding in the distance, only the Androscoggin I grew up with and have always loved—blue and beautiful, the way ordinary things can be when we see them at their best. I broke into a run. My feeling of crazy optimism lasted all the way to the top, but the minute I saw those stones standing there like fangs, my good feelings fell away. What replaced them was dread and horror.

There were seven stones again. Just seven. And in the middle of them—I don't know just how to explain this so you'll understand—there was a *faded* place. It wasn't like a shadow, exactly, but more like . . . you know how the blue will fade out of your favorite jeans over time? Especially at stress-points like the knees? It was like that. The color of the hay was washed to a greasy lime color, and instead of blue, the sky above that circle of stones looked *grayish*. I felt that if I walked in there—and part of me wanted to—I could punch out with one fist and tear right through the fabric of reality. And if I did, something would grab me. Something on the other side. I was sure of it.

Still, something in me *wanted to do it*. It wanted to . . . I don't know . . . quit the foreplay and get right to the fucking.

I could see—or thought I could, I'm still not sure about this part—the place where the eighth stone belonged, and I could see that . . . that *fadedness* . . . bulging toward it, trying to get through where the protection of the stones was thin. I was terrified! Because if it got out, every unnamable thing on the other side would be born into our world. The sky would turn black, and it would be full of new stars and insane constellations.

I unslung the camera, but dropped it on the ground when I tried to unzip the bag it was in. My hands were shaking as if I was having some kind of seizure. I picked up the camera case and unzipped it, and when I looked at the stones again, I saw that the space inside them wasn't just faded anymore. It was turning black. And I could see *eyes* again. Peering out of the darkness. This time they were yellow, with narrow black pupils. Like cat's eyes. Or snake eyes.

I tried to lift the camera, but I dropped it again. And when I reached for it, the hay closed over it, and I had to tug it free. No, I had to *rip* it free. I was on my knees by then, yanking on the strap with both hands. And a breeze started

to blow out of the gap where the eighth stone should have been. It blew the hair off my forehead. It stank. It smelled of carrion. I raised the camera to my face, but at first I could see nothing. I thought, *It's blinded the camera, it's somehow blinded the camera*, and then I remembered it was a digital Nikon, and you have to turn it on. I did that—I heard the beep—but I still could see nothing.

The breeze was a wind by then. It sent the hay rippling down the length of the field in big waves of shadow. The smell was worse. And the day was darkening. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, it was pure blue, but the day was darkening, just the same. As if some great invisible planet was eclipsing the sun.

Something spoke. Not English. Something that sounded like “Cthun, cthun, deeyanna, deyanna.” But then . . . Christ, then it said my *name*. It said, “Cthun, N., deeyanna, N.” I think I screamed, but I'm not sure, because by then the wind had become a gale that was roaring in my ears. I *should* have screamed. I had every right to scream. Because *it knew my name!* That grotesque, unnamable thing *knew my name*. And then . . . the camera . . . do you know what I realized?

[*I ask him if he left the lens cap on, and he utters a shrill laugh that runs up my nerves and makes me think of rats scampering over broken glass.*]

Yes! Right! The lens cap! The fucking lens cap! I tore it off and raised the camera to my eye—it's a wonder I didn't drop it again, my hands were shaking so badly, and the hay never would have let it go again, no, never, because the second time it would have been ready. But I didn't drop it, and I could see through the viewfinder, and there were eight stones. Eight. Eight keeps things straight. That darkness was still swirling in the middle, but it was retreating. And the wind blowing around me was diminishing.

I lowered the camera and there were seven. Something was bulging out of the darkness, something I can't describe to you. I can see it—I see it in my dreams—but there are no words for that kind of blasphemy. A pulsing leather helmet, that's as close as I can get. One with yellow goggles on each side. Only the goggles . . . I think they were eyes, and I know they were looking at me.

I raised the camera again, and saw eight stones. I snapped off six or eight shots as if to mark them, to fix them in place forever, but of course that didn't

work, I only fixed the camera. Lenses can see those stones, Doc—I'm pretty sure a person could see them in a mirror, too, maybe even through a plain pane of glass—but they can't record them. The only thing that can record them, hold them in place, is the human mind, the human memory. And even that's undependable, as I've found out. Counting, touching, and placing works for awhile—it's ironic to think that behaviors we consider neurotic are actually holding the world in place—but sooner or later whatever protection they offer decays. And it's so much work.

So damn much work.

I wonder if we could be done for today. I know it's early, but I'm very tired.

*[I tell him I will prescribe a sedative, if he wants—mild, but more reliable than Ambien or Lunesta. It will work if he doesn't overdo it. He gives me a grateful smile.]*

That would be good, very good. But can I ask you a favor?

*[I tell him that of course he can.]*

Prescribe either twenty, forty, or sixty. Those are all good numbers.

[Next Session]

*[I tell him he looks better, although this is far from true. What he looks like is a man who will be institutionalized soon, if he doesn't find a way to get back to his personal Highway 117. Turn around or back up, it doesn't matter which, but he has to get away from that field. So do I, actually. I've been dreaming about N.'s field, which I'm sure I could find if I wanted to. Not that I do—that would be too much like sharing my patient's delusion—but I'm sure I could find it. One night this weekend (while I was having trouble finding sleep myself), it occurred to me that I must have driven past it, not just once but hundreds of times. Because I've been over the Bale Road Bridge hundreds of times, and past Serenity Ridge Cemetery thousands of times; that was on the schoolbus route to James Lowell Elementary, where Sheila and I went. So sure, I could find it. If I wanted to. If it exists.]*

*[I ask if the prescription helps, if he's been sleeping. The dark circles under his eyes tell me he hasn't been, but I'm curious to hear how he responds.]*

Much better. Thanks. And the OCD's a little better, too.

*[As he says this, his hands—more prone to tell the truth—are stealthily placing the vase and the Kleenex box at opposing corners of the table by the couch. Today*

*Sandy has put out roses. He arranges them so they link the box and the vase. I ask him what happened after he went up to Ackerman's Field with the borrowed camera. He shrugs.]*

Nothing. Except of course I paid for the photoshop guy's Nikon. Pretty soon it really *was* hunting season, and those woods get dangerous, even if you're wearing blaze orange from head to toe. Although I somehow doubt if there are many deer in that area; I imagine they steer clear.

The OCD shit smoothed out, and I started sleeping through the night again.

Well . . . some of the nights. There were dreams, of course. In the dreams I was always in that field, trying to pull the camera out of the hay, but the hay wouldn't let go. The blackness spilled out of the circle like oil, and when I looked up I saw the sky had cracked open from east to west and a terrible black light was pouring out . . . light that was alive. And hungry. That's when I'd wake up, drenched with sweat. Sometimes screaming.

Then, in early December, I got a letter at the office. It was marked PERSONAL with a small object inside. I tore it open and what fell out onto my desk was a little key with a tag on it. The tag said A.F. I knew what it was, and what it meant. If there'd been a letter, it would have said, "I tried to keep you out. It's not my fault, and maybe not yours, but either way this key, and all it opens, is yours now. Take good care of it."

That weekend I drove back out to Motton, but I didn't bother parking in the lot at Serenity Ridge. I didn't need to anymore, you see. The Christmas decorations were up in Portland and the other small towns I passed along the way. It was bitterly cold, but there wasn't any snow yet. You know how it's always colder just before the snow comes? That's how it was that day. But the sky was overcast, and the snow *did* come, a blizzard that very night. It was a big one. Do you remember?

*[I tell him I do. I have reason to remember (although I don't tell him this). Sheila and I were snowed in at the home place, where we'd gone to check on some repair work. We got squiffy and danced to old Beatles and Rolling Stones records. It was pleasant.]*

The chain was still across the road, but the A.F. key fit the lock. And the downed trees had been hauled to one side. As I'd known they would be. It was

no good blocking the road anymore, because that field is now *my* field, those stones are now *my* stones, and whatever it is they're keeping in is my responsibility.

*[I ask him if he was frightened, sure the answer must be yes. But N. surprises me.]*

Not much, no. Because the place was different. I knew it even from the end of the road, where it T's into 117. I could feel it. And I could hear crows cawing as I opened the lock with my new key. Ordinarily I think that's an ugly sound, but that day it sounded very sweet. At the risk of sounding pretentious, it sounded like redemption.

I knew there'd be eight stones in Ackerman's Field, and I was right. I knew they wouldn't look so much like a circle, and I was right about that, too; they looked like random outcroppings again, part of the underlying bedrock that had been exposed by a tectonic shift, or a withdrawing glacier eighty thousand years ago, or a flood of more recent vintage.

I understood other things, too. One was that I had activated the place *just by looking at it*. Human eyes take away the eighth stone. A camera lens will put it back, but won't lock it in place. I had to keep renewing the protection with symbolic acts.

*[He pauses, thinking, and when he speaks again he seems to have changed the subject.]*

Did you know that Stonehenge may have been a combination clock and calendar?

*[I tell him I've read this somewhere.]*

The people who built that place, and others like it, must have known they could tell time with no more than a sundial, and as for the calendar—we know that prehistoric people in Europe and Asia told the days simply by making marks on sheltered rock walls. So what does that make Stonehenge, if it *is* a gigantic clock/calendar? A monument to OCD behavior, that's what I think—a gigantic neurosis standing in a Salisbury field.

Unless it's protecting something as well as keeping track of hours and months. Locking out an insane universe that happens to lie right next door to ours. I have days—many of them, especially last winter, when I felt pretty much like my old self again—when I'm sure that's bullshit, that everything I

thought I saw in Ackerman's Field was in my own head. That all this OCD crap is just a mental stutter.

Then I have other days—they started again this spring—when I'm sure it's all true: I activated something. And in so doing, I became the latest baton carrier in a long, long line of them, maybe going all the way back to prehistoric times. I know that sounds crazy—why else would I be telling it to a psychiatrist?—and I have whole days when I'm sure it *is* crazy . . . even when I'm counting things, going around my house at night touching light switches and stove burners, I'm sure it's all just . . . you know . . . bad chemicals in my head that a few of the right pills will fix.

I especially thought that last winter, when things were good. Or at least better. Then, in April of this year, things started getting bad again. I was counting more, touching more, and placing just about everything that wasn't nailed down in circles or diagonals. My daughter—the one who's going to school near here—again expressed concerns about how I looked and how jumpy I seemed. She asked if it was the divorce, and when I said it wasn't, she looked as if she didn't believe me. She asked if I'd consider “seeing someone,” and by God, here I am.

I started having nightmares again. One night in early May I woke on my bedroom floor, screaming. In my dream I'd seen a huge gray-black monstrosity, a winged gargoyle-thing with a leathery head like a helmet. It was standing in the ruins of Portland, a thing a mile high at least—I could see wisps of cloud floating around its plated arms. There were screaming people struggling in its taloned fists. And I knew—*knew*—it had escaped from the standing stones in Ackerman's Field, that it was only the first and least of the abominations to be released from that other world, and it was my fault. Because I had failed in my responsibilities.

I stumbled through the house, putting things in circles and then counting them to make sure the circles contained only even numbers, and it came to me that I wasn't too late, that it had only started to come awake.

[*I ask him what he means by “it.”*]

The force! Remember *Star Wars*? “Use the force, Luke”?

[*He laughs wildly.*]

Except this is a case of *don't* use the force! *Stop* the force! *Imprison* the force! The chaotic something that keeps driving at that thin place—and all the thin places of the world, I imagine. Sometimes I think there's a whole chain of ruined universes behind that force, stretching back untold eons in time like monstrous footprints . . .

[*He says something under his breath that I don't catch. I ask him to repeat, but he shakes his head.*]

Hand me your pad, Doc. I'll write it. If what I'm telling you is true and not just in my fucked-up head, it's not safe to say the name aloud.

[*He prints CTHUN in large capital letters. He shows it to me, and when I nod, he tears the sheet to shreds, counts the shreds—to make sure the number is even, I suppose—and then deposits them in the wastebasket near the couch.*]

The key, the one I got in the mail, was in my home safe. I got it out and drove back to Motton—over the bridge, past the cemetery, up that damned dirt track. I didn't think about it, because it wasn't the sort of decision you have to consider. It would be like sitting down to consider whether or not you should put out the drapes in your living room if you came in and saw them on fire. No—I just went.

But I took my camera. You better believe *that*.

My nightmare woke me at five or so, and it was still early morning when I got to Ackerman's Field. The Androscoggin was beautiful—it looked like a long silver mirror instead of a snake, with fine tendrils of mist rising from its surface and then spreading above it in a, I don't know, temperature inversion, or something. That spreading cloud exactly mimicked the river's bends and turns, so it looked like a ghost-river in the sky.

The hay was growing up in the field again, and most of the sumac bushes were turning green, but I saw a scary thing. And no matter how much of this other stuff is in my head (and I'm perfectly willing to acknowledge it might be), this was real. I've got pictures that show it. They're foggy, but in a couple you can see the mutations in the sumac bushes closest to the stones. The leaves are black instead of green, and the branches are *twisted* . . . they seem to make letters, and the letters seem to spell . . . you know . . . *its* name.

[*He gestures to the wastebasket where the shreds of paper lie.*]

The darkness was back inside the stones—there were only seven, of course, that’s why I’d been drawn out there—but I saw no eyes. Thank God, I was still in time. There was just the darkness, turning and turning, seeming to mock the beauty of that silent spring morning, seeming to exult in the fragility of our world. I could see the Androscoggin through it, but the darkness—it was almost Biblical, a pillar of smoke—turned the river to a filthy gray smear.

I raised my camera—I had the strap around my neck, so even if I dropped it, it wouldn’t fall into the clutch of the hay—and looked through the viewfinder. Eight stones. I lowered it and there were seven again. Looked through the viewfinder and saw eight. The second time I lowered the camera, it stayed eight. But that wasn’t enough, and I knew it. I knew what I had to do.

Forcing myself to go down to that ring of stones was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. The sound of the hay brushing against the cuffs of my pants was like a voice—low, harsh, protesting. Warning me to keep away. The air began to taste diseased. Full of cancer and things that are maybe even worse, germs that don’t exist in our world. My skin began to thrum, and I had an idea—truth is, I *still* have this idea—that if I stepped between two of those stones and into the circle, my flesh would liquefy and go dripping off my bones. I could hear the wind that sometimes blows out of there, turning in its own private cyclone. And I knew *it* was coming. The thing with the helmet-head.

*[He gestures again to the scraps in the wastebasket.]*

It was coming, and if I saw it this close up, it would drive me mad. I’d end my life inside that circle, taking pictures that would show nothing but clouds of gray. But something drove me onward. And when I got there, I . . .

*[N. stands up and walks slowly around the couch in a deliberate circle. His steps—both grave and prancing, like the steps of a child playing ring-a-rosie—are somehow awful. As he circles, he reaches out to touch stones I cannot see. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . seven . . . eight. Because eight keeps things straight. Then he stops and looks at me. I have had patients in crisis—many—but I have never seen such a haunted stare. I see horror, but not insanity; I see clarity rather than confusion. It must all be a delusion, of course, but there can be no doubt that he understands it completely.]*

*[I say, “When you got there, you touched them.”]*

Yes, I touched them, one after the other. And I can't say I felt the world grow safer—more solid, more *there*—with every stone I touched, because that wouldn't be true. It was every *two* stones. Just the even numbers, do you see? That turning darkness began to recede with each pair, and by the time I got to eight, it was gone. The hay inside the stones was yellow and dead, but the darkness was gone. And somewhere—far off—I heard a bird sing.

I stepped back. The sun was fully up by then, and the ghost-river over the real one had entirely disappeared. The stones looked like stones again. Eight granite outcroppings in a field, not even a circle, unless you worked to imagine one. And I felt myself *divide*. One part of my mind knew the whole thing was just a product of my imagination, and that my imagination had some kind of disease. The other part knew it was all true. That part even understood why things had gotten better for awhile.

It's the solstice, do you see? You see the same patterns repeated all over the world—not just at Stonehenge, but in South America and Africa, even the Arctic! You see it in the American midwest—my daughter even saw it, and she knows nothing about this! *Crop circles*, she said! It *is* a calendar—Stonehenge and all the others, marking not just days and months but times of greater and lesser danger.

That split in my mind was tearing me apart. *Is* tearing me apart. I've been out there a dozen more times since that day, and on the twenty-first—the day of the appointment with you I had to cancel, do you remember?

[*I tell him I do, of course I do.*]

I spent that whole day in Ackerman's Field, watching and counting. Because the twenty-first was the summer solstice. The day of *highest* danger. Just as the winter solstice in December is the day when the danger is lowest. It was last year, it will be again this year, it has been every year since the beginning of time. And in the months ahead—until fall, at least—I've got my work cut out for me. The twenty-first . . . I can't tell you how awful it was out there. The way that eighth stone kept shimmering out of existence. How hard it was to concentrate it back into the world. The way the darkness would gather and recede . . . gather and recede . . . like the tide. Once I dozed off and when I looked up there was an inhuman eye—a hideous three-lobed eye—looking back at me. I screamed, but I didn't run. Because the world was depending on

me. Depending on me and not even knowing it. Instead of running, I raised my camera and looked through the viewfinder. Eight stones. No eye. But after that I stayed awake.

Finally the circle steadied, and I knew I could go. At least for that day. By then the sun was setting again, as it had on the first evening; a ball of fire sitting on the horizon, turning the Androscoggin into a bleeding snake.

And Doc—whether it's real or just a delusion, the work is just as hard. And the responsibility! I'm so tired. Talk about having the weight of the world on your shoulders . . .

*[He's back on the couch again. He is a big man, but now he looks small and shriveled. Then he smiles.]*

At least I'll get a break come winter. If I make it that far. And you know what? I think we've finished, you and I. As they used to say on the radio, "This concludes today's program." Although . . . who knows? You may see me again. Or at least hear from me.

*[I tell him on the contrary, we have a lot more work to do. I tell him he is carrying a weight; an invisible eight-hundred-pound gorilla on his back, and that together we can persuade it to climb down. I say we can do it, but it will take time. I say all these things, and I write him two prescriptions, but in my heart I fear that he means it; he's done. He takes the prescriptions, but he's done. Perhaps only with me; perhaps with life itself.]*

Thank you, Doc. For everything. For *listening*. And those?

*[He points to the table beside the couch, with its careful arrangement.]*

I wouldn't move them, if I were you.

*[I give him an appointment card, and he tucks it carefully away in his pocket. And when he pats the pocket with his hand to make sure it's safe, I think perhaps I am wrong, and I will actually see him on July 5th. I have been wrong before. I have come to like N., and I don't want him to step into that ring of stones for good. It only exists in his mind, but that doesn't mean it's not real.]*

[Final Session Ends]

#### 4. Dr. Bonsaint's Manuscript (Fragmentary)

July 5, 2007

I called his home phone number when I saw the obituary. Got C., the daughter who goes to school here in Maine. She was remarkably composed, saying that in her heart she was not surprised. She told me she was the first to arrive at N.'s Portland home (her summer job is in Camden, not that far distant), but I could hear others in the house. That's good. The family exists for many reasons, but its most basic function may be to draw together when a member dies, and that is particularly important when the death is violent and unexpected—murder or suicide.

She knew who I was. Talked freely. Yes, it was suicide. His car. The garage. Towels laid along the bottoms of the doors, and I am sure an even number of them. Ten or twenty; both good numbers, according to N. Thirty not so good, but do people—especially men living on their own—have as many as thirty towels in their homes? I'm pretty sure they don't. I know I don't.

There will be an inquest, she said. They will find drugs—the very ones I prescribed, I have no doubt—in his system, but probably not in lethal amounts. Not that it matters, I suppose; N. is just as dead, no matter what the cause.

She asked me if I would come to the funeral. I was touched. To the point of tears, in fact. I said I would, if the family would have me. Sounding surprised, she said of course they would . . . why not?

“Because in the end I couldn't help him,” I said.

“You tried,” she said. “That's the important thing.” And I felt the stinging in my eyes again. Her kindness.

Before hanging up, I asked her if he left a note. She said yes. Three words. *Am so tired.*

He should have added his name. That would have made four.

July 7, 2007

At both the church and cemetery, N.'s people—especially C.—took me in and made me welcome. The miracle of family, which can open its circle even at such critical times. Even to take in a stranger. There were close to a hundred people, many from the extended family of his professional life. I wept at the graveside. Am neither surprised nor ashamed: identification between analyst and patient can be a powerful thing. C. took my hand, hugged me, and

thanked me for trying to help her father. I told her she was welcome, but I felt like an imposter, a failure.

Beautiful summer day. What mockery.

Tonight I have been playing the tapes of our sessions. I think I will transcribe them. There is surely at least an article in N.'s story—a small addition to the literature of obsessive-compulsive disorder—and perhaps something larger. A book. Yet I am hesitant. What holds me back is knowing I'd have to visit that field, and compare N.'s fantasy to the reality. His world to mine. That the field exists I am quite sure. And the stones? Yes, probably there are stones. With no meaning beyond those his compulsions lent them.

Beautiful red sunset this evening.

July 17, 2007

I took the day off and went out to Motton. It has been on my mind, and in the end I saw no reason not to go. I was “dither-dathering,” our mother would have said. If I intend to write up N.'s case, such dither-dathering must stop. No excuses. With markers from my childhood to guide me—the Bale Road Bridge (which Sheila and I used to call, for reasons I can no longer remember, the Fail Road Bridge), Boy Hill, and especially the Serenity Ridge Cemetery—I thought I would find N.'s road without too much trouble, and I did. There could be little question, because it was the only dirt track with a chain across it and a NO TRESPASSING sign.

I parked in the cemetery lot, as N. had done before me. Although it was a bright hot summer midday, I could hear only a few birds singing, and those very distant. No cars passed on Route 117, only one overloaded pulp-truck that went droning past at seventy miles an hour, blowing my hair back from my forehead in a blast of hot air and oily exhaust. After that it was just me. I thought of childhood walks taken to the Fail Road Bridge with my little Zebco fishing rod propped on my shoulder like a soldier's carbine. I was never afraid then, and told myself I wasn't afraid on this day.

But I was. Nor do I count that fear as completely irrational. Backtrailing a patient's mental illness to its source is never comfortable.

I stood at the chain, asking myself if I really wanted to do this—if I wanted to trespass, not just on land that wasn't mine, but on an obsessive-compulsive fantasy that had very likely killed its possessor. (Or—this is probably closer—

its possessed.) The choice didn't seem as clear as it had in the morning, when I put on my jeans and old red hiking boots. This morning it seemed simple: "Go out and compare the reality to N.'s fantasy, or give up the idea of the article (or book)." But what is reality? Who am I to insist that the world perceived by Dr. B.'s senses is more "real" than that which was perceived by those of the late Accountant N.?

The answer to that seemed clear enough: Dr. B. is a man who has not committed suicide, a man who does not count, touch, or place, a man who believes that numbers, whether odd or even, are just numbers. Dr. B. is a man who is able to cope with the world. Ultimately, Accountant N. was not. Therefore, Dr. B.'s perception of reality is more viable than Accountant N.'s.

But once I was there, and sensed the quiet power of the place (even at the foot of the road, while still outside the chain), it occurred to me that the choice was really much simpler: walk up that deserted road to Ackerman's Field or turn around and walk back down the blacktop to my car. Drive away. Forget the possible book, forget the rather more probable article. Forget N. and get on with my own life.

Except. Except.

Driving away might (I only say *might*) mean that on some level, one deep in my subconscious, where all the old superstitions still live (going hand in hand with all the old red urges), I had accepted N.'s belief that Ackerman's Field contains a thin place protected by magic ringstones, and that if I were to go there, I might re-activate some terrible process, some terrible *struggle*, which N. felt his suicide could halt (at least temporarily). It would mean I had accepted (in that same deep part of me where we are all nearly as similar as ants toiling in an underground nest) the idea that I was to be the next guardian. That I had been called. And if I gave in to such notions . . .

"My life would never be the same." I said that aloud. "I could never look at the world in the same way."

All at once the business seemed very serious. Sometimes we drift, do we not? Into places where the choices are no longer simple, and the consequences of picking the wrong option become grave. Perhaps life- or sanity-threatening.

Or . . . what if they aren't choices at all? What if they only *look* like choices?

I pushed the idea aside and squeezed past one of the posts holding the chains. I have been called a witch-doctor both by patients and (jokingly, I assume) by my peers, but I had no wish to think of myself that way; to look at myself in the shaving-mirror and think, *There is a man who was influenced at a critical moment not by his own thought-processes but by a dead patient's delusion.*

There were no trees across the road, but I saw several—birches and pines, mostly—lying in the ditch on the uphill side. They might have fallen this year and been dragged aside, or last year, or the year before. It was impossible for me to tell. I'm no woodsman.

I came to a rising hill and saw the woods pull away on either side, opening a vast stretch of hot summer sky. It was like walking into N.'s head. I stopped halfway up the hill, not because I was out of breath, but to ask myself one final time if this was what I wanted. Then I continued on.

I wish I hadn't.

The field was there, and the view opening to the west was every bit as spectacular as N. had suggested—breathtaking, really. Even with the sun high and yellow instead of sitting red above the horizon. The stones were there, too, about forty yards down the slope. And yes, they *do* suggest circularity, although they are in no sense the sort of circle one sees at Stonehenge. I counted them. There were eight, just as N. said.

(Except when he said there were seven.)

The grass inside that rough grouping did look a bit patchy and yellow compared to the thigh-high greenery in the rest of the field (it stretches down to a wide acreage of mixed oaks, firs, and birches), but it was by no means dead. What caught my attention closer by was a little cluster of sumac bushes. Those weren't dead, either—at least I don't think so, but the leaves were black instead of green-streaked-with-red, and they had no shape. They were ill-formed things, somehow hard to look at. They offended the order the eye expected. I can't put it any better than that.

About ten yards down from where I stood, I saw something white caught in one of those bushes. I walked toward it, saw it was an envelope, and knew N. had left it for me. If not on the day of his suicide, then not long before. I felt a terrible sinking in my stomach. A clear sense that in deciding to come here (if I *did* decide), I had made the wrong choice. That I had been certain to make the

wrong choice, in fact, having been educated to trust my intellect over my instincts.

Rubbish. I know I shouldn't be thinking this way.

Of course (here's a point!), N. knew, too, and went on thinking that way just the same. No doubt counting the towels even as he prepared for his own . . .

To make sure it was an even number.

Shit. The mind gets up to funny tricks, doesn't it? Shadows grow faces.

The envelope was wrapped in a clear plastic Baggie to keep it dry. The printing on the front was perfectly firm, perfectly clear: **DR. JOHN BONSAINT.**

I took it out of the Baggie, then looked down the slope at the stones again. Still eight. Of course there were. But not a bird sang, not a cricket creaked. The day held its breath. Every shadow was carved. I know now what N. meant about feeling cast back in time.

There was something in the envelope; I could feel it sliding back and forth, and my fingers knew it for what it was even before I tore off the end of the envelope and dumped it into the palm of my hand. A key.

Also a note. Just two words. *Sorry, Doc.* And his name, of course. First name only. That makes three words, in all. Not a good number. At least according to N.

I put the key in my pocket and stood beside a sumac bush that didn't look like a sumac bush—black leaves, branches twisted until they almost looked like runes, or letters . . .

Not *CTHUN!*

. . . and decided, *Time to leave. That's enough. If something has mutated the bushes, some environmental condition that's poisoned the ground, so be it. The bushes are not the important part of this landscape; the stones are the important part. There are eight. You have tested the world and found it as you hoped it would be, as you knew it would be, as it always was. If this field seems too quiet—fraught, somehow—that is undoubtedly the lingering effect of N.'s story on your own mind. Not to mention his suicide. Now go back to your life. Never mind the silence, or the sense—in your mind like a thundercloud—that something is lurking in that silence. Go back to your life, Dr. B.*

*Go back while you still can.*

I returned to the end of the road. The high green hay whickering against my jeans like a low, gasping voice. The sun beating on my neck and shoulders.

I felt an urge to turn and look again. Strong urge. I fought it and lost.

When I turned around I saw seven stones. Not eight, but seven. I counted them twice to make sure. And it *did* seem darker inside the stones, as if a cloud had passed over the sun. One so small it made shade only in that place. Only it didn't look like a shadow. It looked like *a particular* darkness, one that was moving over the yellow, matted grass, circling in on itself and then belling out again toward the gap where, I was sure (*almost* sure; that's the hell of it) an eighth stone had been standing when I arrived.

I thought, *I have no camera to look through and make it come back.*

I thought, *I have to make this stop while I can still tell myself nothing is happening.* Right or wrong, I was less concerned with the fate of the world than with losing hold of my own perceptions; losing hold of my *idea* of the world. I did not believe in N.'s delusion for even a moment, but that darkness . . .

I didn't want it to get a foothold, do you see? Not even a *toehold*.

I had put the key back into the torn envelope and tucked the envelope into my hip pocket, but I was still holding the Baggie. Without really thinking about what I was doing, I raised it in front of my eyes and looked at the stones through it. They were a little distorted, a little bleary even when I pulled the plastic tight, but still clear enough. There were eight again, right enough, and that perceived darkness . . .

That funnel

Or tunnel

. . . was gone. (Of course it was never there to begin with.) I lowered the Baggie—not without some trepidation, I admit it—and looked at the stones dead-on. Eight. Solid as the foundation of the Taj Mahal. Eight.

I walked back down the road, successfully fighting the compulsion to take one more look. Why look again? Eight is eight. Let's get that straight. (My little joke.)

I have decided against the article. Best to put the whole business of N. behind me. The important thing is that I actually *went* there, and faced—I am

quite sure this is true—the insanity that is in all of us, the Dr. B.'s of the world as well as the N.'s. What did they call it in WWI? “Going to see the elephant.” I went to see the elephant, but that does not mean I have to *draw* the elephant. Or in my case write a description of the elephant.

And if I thought I saw more? If for a few seconds . . .

Well, yes. But wait. That only shows the strength of the delusion that captured poor N. Explains his suicide in a way no note can. Yet some things are best left alone. This is probably just such a case. That darkness . . .

That funnel-tunnel, that *perceived*—

In any case, I'm done with N. No book, no article. “Turn the page.” The key undoubtedly opens the lock on the chain at the end of the road, but I'll never use it. I threw it away.

“And so to bed,” as the late great Sammy Pepys used to say.

Red sun tonight, sailor's delight shining over that field. Mist rising from the hay? Perhaps. From the green hay. Not the yellow.

The Androscoggin will be red tonight, a long snake bleeding in a dead birth canal. (Fancy!) I would like to see that. For whatever reason. I admit it.

This is just tiredness. It will be gone tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning I may even want to reconsider the article. Or the book. But not tonight.

And so to bed.

July 18, 2007

Fished the key out of the trash this morning and put it in my desk drawer. Throwing it away seems too much like admitting something might be. You know.

Well. And anyway: it's just a key.

July 27, 2007

All right, yes, I admit it. I have been counting a few things and making sure there are even numbers around me. Paper clips. Pencils in the jar. Things of that nature. Doing this is strangely soothing. I have caught N.'s cold for sure. (My little joke, but not a joke.)

My mentor-psychiatrist is Dr. J. in Augusta, now Chief of Staff at Serenity Hill. I called him and we had a general discussion—which I framed as research for a paper I might deliver this winter at the Chicago convention—a lie, of

course, but sometimes, you know, it's easier to—about the transitive nature of OCD symptoms, from patient to analyst. J. confirmed my own researches. The phenomena isn't common, but it's not a complete rarity, either.

He said, "This doesn't have any personal concern for you, Johnny, does it?"

Keen. Perceptive. Always was. And has lots of info about yours truly!

"No," I said. "I've just gotten interested in the subject. In fact, it's become something of a compulsion."

We ended the conversation laughing and then I went to the coffee table and counted the books there. Six. That's good. Six is a fix. (N.'s little rhyme.) I checked my desk to make sure the key was there and of course it is, where else would it be? One key. Is one good or bad? "The cheese stands alone," you know. Probably not germane, but something to think about!

I started out of the room, then remembered there were magazines on the coffee table as well as books and counted those, as well. Seven! I took the *People* with Brad Pitt on the cover and threw it in the trash.

Look, if it makes me feel better, what harm? And it was only Brad Pitt!

And if this gets worse, I *will* come clean with J. This is a promise I make to myself.

I think a Neurontin scrip might help. Although it's an anti-seizure medication, strictly speaking, in cases like mine it's been known to help. Of course . . .

August 3, 2007

Who am I kidding? There *are* no cases like this, and Neurontin doesn't help. Tits on a bull.

But counting helps. Strangely soothing. And something else. *The key was on the wrong side of the drawer I put it in!* That was intuition but intuition is not to be SNEEZED AT. I moved it. Better. Then put another key (safe-deposit box) on the other side. Seems to balance it. Six is a fix but two is true (joke). Good sleep last night.

Well, no. Nightmares. The Androscoggin at sunset. A red wound. A birth canal. But dead.

August 10, 2007

Something is wrong out there. The eighth stone is weakening. There is no sense telling myself this isn't so, because every nerve in my body—*every cell in*

*my skin!*—proclaims it's true. Counting books (and shoes, yes, that's true, N.'s intuition and not to be "sneezed at") helps, but does not fix THE BASIC PROBLEM. Not even Placing Diagonals helps too much, although it certainly . . .

Toast crumbs on the kitchen counter, for instance. You line them up with the blade of a knife. Line of sugar on the table, HA! But who knows how many crumbs? How many grains of sugar? Too many to count!!

This must end. I'm going out there.

I will take a camera.

August 11, 2007

The darkness. Dear Christ. It *was almost complete*. And something else.

*The darkness had an eye.*

August 12

Did I see anything? Actually?

I don't know. I think I did, but I don't know.

There are 23 words in this entry.

26 is better.

August 19

I picked up the phone to call J., tell him what's going on with me, then put it down. What would I tell him? Besides: 1-207-555-1863=11. A bad number.

Valium helps more than Neurontin. I think. As long as I don't overdue it

Sept 16

Back from Motown. Covered with sweat. Shaking. But eight again. I fixed it. I! Fixed it! IT! Thank God. But . . .

But!

*I cannot live my life this way.*

No, but—I WAS JUST IN TIME. *IT WAS ON THE VERGE OF GETTING OUT*. The protections only hold so long and then a house-call is necessary! (My little joke.)

I saw the 3-lobed eye N. spoke of. It belongs to nothing from this world or this universe.

*It is trying to eat its way thru.*

Except I don't accept this. I let N.'s obsession get a finger in my psyche (it's playing stinkyfinger with me if you get my little joke) and it has continued to

widen the gap, slipping in a second finger, a third, a whole pulling hand.  
Opening me up. Opening up my

But!

*I saw with my own eyes.* There is a world behind this world, filled with  
monsters

Gods

*HATEFUL GODS!*

One thing. If I kill myself, what? If it's not real, the torment still ends. If it  
is real, the eighth stone out there solidifies again. At least until someone else—  
the next "CARETAKER"—goes heedlessly prospecting up that road and sees  
. . .

Makes suicide almost look good!

October 9, 2007

Better lately. My ideas seem more my own. And when I last went out to  
Ackerman's Field (2 days ago), my worries were all for naught. There were 8  
stones there. I looked at them—solid as houses—and saw a crow in the sky. It  
swerved to avoid the airspace over the stones, "ziss is true," (joke) but it was  
there. And as I stood at the end of the road with my camera hung over my  
neck (nix pix in Motton stix, those stones don't photograph, N. was right  
about that much, anyway; possibly radon??), I wondered how I ever could have  
thought there were only 7. I admit that I counted my steps back to my car  
(and then paced around a little when an odd number brought me to the  
driver's door), but these things do not let go all at once. They are CRAMPS in  
the MIND! Yet maybe . . .

Do I dare hope I'm getting better?

October 10, 2007

Of course there is another possibility, loath as I am to admit it: that N. was  
right about the solstices. We are moving away from one and toward the other  
now. Summer gone; winter ahead. Which, if true, is good news only in the  
short term. If I should have to deal with such wracking mental spasms next  
spring . . . and the spring after that . . .

I couldn't, that's all.

How that eye haunts me. Floating in the gathering darkness.

Other things behind it

*CTHUN!*

November 16, 2007

Eight. Always were. I'm sure now. Today the field was silent, the hay dead, the trees at the foot of the slope bare, the Androscoggin gray steel beneath an iron sky. The world waiting for snow.

And my God, best of all: a bird roosting on one of those stones!

A BIRD!

Realized only when I was driving back to Lewiston that I didn't bother counting my steps when going back to the car.

Here is the truth. What must be the truth. I caught a cold from one of my patients, but now I'm getting better. Cough gone, sniffles drying up.

The little joke was on me all along.

December 25, 2007

I shared Christmas dinner and the ritual exchange of presents with Sheila and her family. When Don took Seth to the candlelight ritual at the church (I'm sure the good Methodists would be shocked if they knew the pagan roots of such rites), Sheila squeezed my hand and said, "You're back. That's good. I was worried."

Well, you can't fool your own flesh and blood, it seems. Dr. J. may only have suspected something was wrong, but Sheila knew. Dear Sheila.

"I had a sort of crisis this summer and fall," I said. "A crisis of the spirit, you might call it."

Although it was more a crisis of the psyche. When a man begins to think the only purpose served by his perceptions is to mask the knowledge of terrible other worlds—that is a crisis of the psyche.

Sheila, always practical, said: "As long as it wasn't cancer, Johnny. That's what I was afraid of."

Dear Sheila! I laughed and hugged her.

Later on, while we were doing a final polish on the kitchen (and sipping eggnog), I asked her if she remembered why we used to call the Bale Road Bridge the *Fail* Road Bridge. She cocked her head and laughed.

"It was your old friend who thought that up. The one I had such a crush on."

“Charlie Keen,” I said. “I haven’t seen him in a dog’s age. Except on TV. The poor man’s Sanjay Gupta.”

She whacked my arm. “Jealousy doesn’t become you, dear. Anyway, we were fishing from the bridge one day—you know, with those little poles we all had—and Charlie peered over the side and said, ‘You know, anyone who fell off this thing could not fail to kill themselves.’ It just struck us funny, and we laughed like maniacs. You don’t remember that?”

But then I did. Bale Road Bridge became Fail Road Bridge from that day on. And what old Charlie said was true enough. Bale Stream is very shallow at that point. Of course it flows into the Androscoggin (probably you can see the merging-point from Ackerman’s Field, although I never noticed), which is a lot deeper. And the Androscoggin flows to the sea. World leads onto world, doesn’t it? Each deeper than the last; this is a design all the earth proclaims.

Don and Seth came back in, Sheila’s big guy and her little guy, all dusted with snow. We had a group hug, very New Age, and then I drove home listening to Christmas carols. Really happy for the first time in ever so long.

I believe these notes . . . this diary . . . this chronicle of madness avoided (perhaps by bare inches, I think I really did almost “go over the bridge”) . . . can end now.

Thank God, and merry Christmas to me.

April 1, 2008

It’s April Fool’s, and the fool is me. I woke from a dream of Ackerman’s Field.

In it the sky was blue, the river was a darker blue in its valley, the snow was melting, the first green grass was poking through the remaining ribbons of white, and once more there were only seven stones. Once more there was darkness in the circle. Only a smudge for now, but it will deepen unless I take care of it.

I counted books after waking (sixty-four, a good number, even and divisible all the way down to 1—think about it), and when that didn’t turn the trick I spilled coffee onto the kitchen counter and made a diagonal. That fixed things—for now—but I will have to go out there and make another “house call.” Must not dither-dather.

Because it’s starting again.

The snow is almost gone, the summer solstice is approaching (still over the horizon but approaching), and it has started again.

I feel

God help me, I feel like a cancer patient who has been in remission and wakes one morning to discover a big fat lump in his armpit.

I can't do this.

I must do this.

[Later]

There was still snow on the road, but I got up to "AF" all right. Left my car in the cemetery parking lot and walked. There were indeed only seven stones, as in my dream. Looked thru the viewfinder of my camera. 8 again. 8 is fate and keeps the world strait. Good deal.

For the world!

*Not* such a good deal for Dr. Bonsaint.

That this should be happening again; my mind groans at the prospect.

Please God don't let it be happening again.

April 6, 2008

Took longer today to make 7 into 8, and I know I have much "long distance" work ahead of me, i.e. counting things and making diagonals and—not placing, N. was wrong about that—it's *balancing* that needs to be done. It's symbolic, like the break and whine in communion.

I'm tired, though. And the solstitch is so far away.

Its still gathering its power and the solstit is so far away.

I wish N. had dyed before coming into my office. That selfish bastard.

May 2, 2008

I thought it would kill me this time. Or break my mind. *Is* my mind broken? My God how can I tell? There is no God, there can be no God in the face of that darkness, and the EYE that peers from it. And something else.

*THE THING WITH THE HELMET HEAD. BORN OUT OF LIVING UNSANE DARKNESS.*

There was chanting. Chanting from deep inside the ringstones, deep inside the darkness. But I made 7 into 8 once again, although it took a long long long lung long time. Many loox thru the vufinder, also making circles and counting paces, widening the circle to 64 paces and that did it, thank god.

“The widening gyre”—Yeets! Then I looked up. Looked around. And saw *its* name woven into every sumac bush and every tree at the foot of that hellish field: *Cthun, Cthun, Cthun, Cthun*. I looked into the sky for releef and saw the clods spelling it out as they traversed the blue: *CTHUN* in the sky. Looked at the river and saw its curves spell out a giant **C. C** for Cthun.

How can I be responsible for the world? How can this be?  
Its not fare!!!!!!!

May 4, 2008

If I can close the door by killing myself  
And the peace, even if it is only the peece of oblitsion  
I am going out there again, but this time not all the way. Just to the Fail Road Bridge. The water there is shallow, the bed lined with rocks.  
The drop must be 30 feet.  
Not the best number but still  
Anyone who falls off that thing cannot fail to  
Cannot fail  
I cant stop thinking about that hideous 3-lobe eye  
The thing with the helmet head  
The screaming faces in the stones  
*CTHUN!*

[Dr. Bonsaint’s manuscript ends here.]

## 5. The Second Letter

June 8, 2008

Dear Charlie,

I haven’t heard from you about Johnny’s manuscript, and that is good. Please ignore my last letter, and if you still have the pages, burn them. That was Johnny’s request, and I should have honored it myself.

I told myself I was only going out as far as the Fail Road Bridge—to see the place where we all had so many happy times as kids, the place where he ended his life when the happy times ran out. I told myself it might bring closure (that’s the word Johnny would have used). But of course the mind under my

mind—where, I’m sure Johnny would claim, we are all pretty much alike—knew better. Why else did I take the key?

Because it was there, in his study. Not in the same drawer where I found the manuscript, but in the top one—the one above the kneehole. With another key to “balance it,” just as he said.

Would I have sent you the key with the manuscript, if I’d found them both in the same place? I don’t know. I don’t. But I’m glad, on the whole, at the way things turned out. Because you might’ve been tempted to go out there. Simple curiosity might have drawn you, or possibly something else. Something stronger.

Or possibly that’s so much bullshit. Possibly I only took the key and went out to Motton and found that road because I am what I said I was in my first letter: a daughter of Pandora. How can I tell for sure? N. couldn’t. Neither could my brother, not even at the very end, and as he used to say, “I’m a professional, don’t try this at home.”

In any case, don’t worry about me. I’m fine. And even if I’m not, I can do the math. Sheila LeClaire has 1 husband and 1 child. Charlie Keen—according to what I read in Wikipedia—has 1 wife and 3 children. Hence, you have more to lose. And besides, maybe I never got over that crush I had on you.

*Under no circumstances come back here.* Keep doing your reports on obesity and prescription drug abuse and heart attacks in men under 50 and things like that. Normal things like that.

And if you haven’t read that manuscript (I can hope for this, but doubt it; I’m sure Pandora also had sons), ignore that, too. Put all this down to a woman hysterical over the unexpected loss of her brother.

There’s nothing out there.

Just some rocks.

I saw with my own eyes.

I swear there’s nothing out there, *so stay away.*

## 6. The Newspaper Article

[From the Chester’s Mill *Democrat*: June 12, 2008]

# WOMAN JUMPS FROM BRIDGE, MIMICS BROTHER'S SUICIDE

By **Julia Shumway**

MOTTON—After prominent psychiatrist John Bonsaint committed suicide by jumping from the Bale River Bridge in this little central Maine town a little over a month ago, friends said that his sister, Sheila LeClaire, was confused and depressed. Her husband, Donald LeClaire, said she was “totally devastated.” No one, he went on, thought she was contemplating suicide.

But she was.

“Although there was no note,” County Coroner Richard Chapman said, “all the signs are there. Her car was parked neatly and considerately off the road on the Harlow side of the bridge. It had been locked, and her purse was on the passenger seat, with her driver’s license laid on top.” He went on to say that LeClaire’s shoes were found on the railing itself, placed carefully side by side. Chapman said only an inquest would show if she drowned or died on impact.

In addition to her husband, Sheila LeClaire leaves a seven-year-old son. Services have not yet been set.

## 7. The E-Mail

**keen1981**  
**3:44 PM**  
**June 15 '08**

**Chrissy—**

**Please cancel all appointments for the next week. I know this is short notice, and I know how much flak you are going to catch, but it cannot be helped. There is a matter I have to tend to back home in Maine. Two old friends, brother and sister, have committed suicide under peculiar circumstances . . . and in the**

same f—king place! Given the extremely odd manuscript the sister sent me before copying (*apparently* copying) her brother's suicide, I believe this bears investigation. The brother, John Bonsaint, was my best friend when I was growing up; we saved each other from more than a few schoolyard beatings!

Hayden can do the blood-sugar story. I know he thinks he can't, but he can. And even if he can't, I have to go. Johnny and Sheila were close to family.

And besides: I don't mean to be a Philistine about it, but there might be a story in this. On obsessive-compulsive disorder. Not as big a blip on the radar as cancer, maybe, but sufferers will tell you it's still some mighty scary shit.

Thanx, Chrissy—  
Charlie

# The Cat from Hell

Halston thought the old man in the wheelchair looked sick, terrified, and ready to die. He had experience in seeing such things. Death was Halston's business; he had brought it to eighteen men and six women in his career as an independent hitter. He knew the death look.

The house—mansion, actually—was cold and quiet. The only sounds were the low snap of the fire on the big stone hearth and the low whine of the November wind outside.

"I want you to make a kill," the old man said. His voice was quavery and high, peevish. "I understand that is what you do."

"Who did you talk to?" Halston asked.

"With a man named Saul Loggia. He says you know him."

Halston nodded. If Loggia was the go-between, it was all right. And if there was a bug in the room, anything the old man—Drogan—said was entrapment.

"Who do you want hit?"

Drogan pressed a button on the console built into the arm of his wheelchair and it buzzed forward. Close-up, Halston could smell the yellow odors of fear, age, and urine all mixed. They disgusted him, but he made no sign. His face was still and smooth.

"Your victim is right behind you," Drogan said softly.

Halston moved quickly. His reflexes were his life and they were always set on a filed pin. He was off the couch, falling to one knee, turning, hand inside his specially tailored sport coat, gripping the handle of the short-barrelled .45 hybrid that hung below his armpit in a spring-loaded holster that laid it in his palm at a touch. A moment later it was out and pointed at . . . a cat.

For a moment Halston and the cat stared at each other. It was a strange moment for Halston, who was an unimaginative man with no superstitions. For that one moment as he knelt on the floor with the gun pointed, he felt

that he knew this cat, although if he had ever seen one with such unusual markings he surely would have remembered.

Its face was an even split: half black, half white. The dividing line ran from the top of its flat skull and down its nose to its mouth, straight-arrow. Its eyes were huge in the gloom, and caught in each nearly circular black pupil was a prism of firelight, like a sullen coal of hate.

And the thought echoed back to Halston: *We know each other, you and I.*

Then it passed. He put the gun away and stood up. "I ought to kill you for that, old man. I don't take a joke."

"And I don't make them," Drogan said. "Sit down. Look in here." He had taken a fat envelope out from beneath the blanket that covered his legs.

Halston sat. The cat, which had been crouched on the back of the sofa, jumped lightly down into his lap. It looked up at Halston for a moment with those huge dark eyes, the pupils surrounded by thin green-gold rings, and then it settled down and began to purr.

Halston looked at Drogan questioningly.

"He's very friendly," Drogan said. "At first. Nice friendly pussy has killed three people in this household. That leaves only me. I am old, I am sick . . . but I prefer to die in my own time."

"I can't believe this," Halston said. "You hired me to hit a cat?"

"Look in the envelope, please."

Halston did. It was filled with hundreds and fifties, all of them old. "How much is it?"

"Six thousand dollars. There will be another six when you bring me proof that the cat is dead. Mr. Loggia said twelve thousand was your usual fee?"

Halston nodded, his hand automatically stroking the cat in his lap. It was asleep, still purring. Halston liked cats. They were the only animals he did like, as a matter of fact. They got along on their own. God—if there was one—had made them into perfect, aloof killing machines. Cats were the hitters of the animal world, and Halston gave them his respect.

"I need not explain anything, but I will," Drogan said. "Forewarned is forearmed, they say, and I would not want you to go into this lightly. And I seem to need to justify myself. So you'll not think I'm insane."

Halston nodded again. He had already decided to make this peculiar hit, and no further talk was needed. But if Drogan wanted to talk, he would listen.

“First of all, you know who I am? Where the money comes from?”

“Drogan Pharmaceuticals.”

“Yes. One of the biggest drug companies in the world. And the cornerstone of our financial success has been this.” From the pocket of his robe he handed Halston a small, unmarked vial of pills. “Tri-Dormal-phenobarbin, compound G. Prescribed almost exclusively for the terminally ill. It’s extremely habit-forming, you see. It’s a combination pain-killer, tranquilizer, and mild hallucinogen. It is remarkable in helping the terminally ill face their conditions and adjust to them.”

“Do you take it?” Halston asked.

Drogan ignored the question. “It is widely prescribed throughout the world. It’s a synthetic, was developed in the fifties at our New Jersey labs. Our testing was confined almost solely to cats, because of the unique quality of the feline nervous system.”

“How many did you wipe out?”

Drogan stiffened. “That is an unfair and prejudicial way to put it.”

Halston shrugged.

“In the four-year testing period which led to FDA approval of Tri-Dormal-G, about fifteen thousand cats . . . uh, expired.”

Halston whistled. About four thousand cats a year. “And now you think this one’s back to get you, huh?”

“I don’t feel guilty in the slightest,” Drogan said, but that quavering, petulant note was back in his voice. “Fifteen thousand test animals died so that hundreds of thousands of human beings—”

“Never mind that,” Halston said. Justifications bored him.

“That cat came here seven months ago. I’ve never liked cats. Nasty, disease-bearing animals . . . always out in the fields . . . crawling around in barns . . . picking up God knows what germs in their fur . . . always trying to bring something with its insides falling out into the house for you to look at . . . it was my sister who wanted to take it in. She found out. She paid.” He looked at the cat sleeping on Halston’s lap with dead hate.

“You said the cat killed three people.”

Drogan began to speak. The cat dozed and purred on Halston's lap under the soft, scratching strokes of Halston's strong and expert killer's fingers. Occasionally a pine knot would explode on the hearth, making it tense like a series of steel springs covered with hide and muscle. Outside the wind whined around the big stone house far out in the Connecticut countryside. There was winter in that wind's throat. The old man's voice droned on and on.

Seven months ago there had been four of them here—Drogan, his sister Amanda, who at seventy-four was two years Drogan's elder, her lifelong friend Carolyn Broadmoor ("of the Westchester Broadmoors," Drogan said), who was badly afflicted with emphysema, and Dick Gage, a hired man who had been with the Drogan family for twenty years. Gage, who was past sixty himself, drove the big Lincoln Mark IV, cooked, served the evening sherry. A day-maid came in. The four of them had lived this way for nearly two years, a dull collection of old people and their family retainer. Their only pleasures were *The Hollywood Squares* and waiting to see who would outlive whom.

Then the cat had come.

"It was Gage who saw it first, whining and skulking around the house. He tried to drive it away. He threw sticks and small rocks at it, and hit it several times. But it wouldn't go. It smelled the food, of course. It was little more than a bag of bones. People put them out beside the road to die at the end of the summer season, you know. A terrible, inhumane thing."

"Better to fry their nerves?" Halston asked.

Drogan ignored that and went on. He hated cats. He always had. When the cat refused to be driven away, he had instructed Gage to put out poisoned food. Large, tempting dishes of Calo cat food spiked with Tri-Dormal-G, as a matter of fact. The cat ignored the food. At that point Amanda Drogan had noticed the cat and had insisted they take it in. Drogan had protested vehemently, but Amanda had gotten her way. She always did, apparently.

"But she found out," Drogan said. "She brought it inside herself, in her arms. It was purring, just as it is now. But it wouldn't come near me. It never has . . . yet. She poured it a saucer of milk. 'Oh, look at the poor thing, it's starving,' she cooed. She and Carolyn both cooed over it. Disgusting. It was their way of getting back at me, of course. They knew the way I've felt about felines ever since the Tri-Dormal-G testing program twenty years ago. They

enjoyed teasing me, baiting me with it.” He looked at Halston grimly. “But they paid.”

In mid-May, Gage had gotten up to set breakfast and had found Amanda Drogan lying at the foot of the main stairs in a litter of broken crockery and Little Friskies. Her eyes bulged sightlessly up at the ceiling. She had bled a great deal from the mouth and nose. Her back was broken, both legs were broken, and her neck had been literally shattered like glass.

“It slept in her room,” Drogan said. “She treated it like a baby . . . ‘Is oo hungry, darwing? Does oo need to go out and do poopos?’ Obscene, coming from an old battle-axe like my sister. I think it woke her up, meowing. She got his dish. She used to say that Sam didn’t really like his Friskies unless they were wetted down with a little milk. So she was planning to go downstairs. The cat was rubbing against her legs. She was old, not too steady on her feet. Half-asleep. They got to the head of the stairs and the cat got in front of her . . . tripped her . . .”

Yes, it could have happened that way, Halston thought. In his mind’s eye he saw the old woman falling forward and outward, too shocked to scream. The Friskies spraying out as she tumbled head over heels to the bottom, the bowl smashing. At last she comes to rest at the bottom, the old bones shattered, the eyes glaring, the nose and ears trickling blood. And the purring cat begins to work its way down the stairs, contentedly munching Little Friskies . . .

“What did the coroner say?” he asked Drogan.

“Death by accident, of course. But I knew.”

“Why didn’t you get rid of the cat then? With Amanda gone?”

Because Carolyn Broadmoor had threatened to leave if he did, apparently. She was hysterical, obsessed with the subject. She was a sick woman, and she was nutty on the subject of spiritualism. A Hartford medium had told her (for a mere twenty dollars) that Amanda’s soul had entered Sam’s feline body. Sam had been Amanda’s, she told Drogan, and if Sam went, *she* went.

Halston, who had become something of an expert at reading between the lines of human lives, suspected that Drogan and the old Broadmoor bird had been lovers long ago, and the old dude was reluctant to let her go over a cat.

“It would have been the same as suicide,” Drogan said. “In her mind she was still a wealthy woman, perfectly capable of packing up that cat and going

to New York or London or even Monte Carlo with it. In fact she was the last of a great family, living on a pittance as a result of a number of bad investments in the sixties. She lived on the second floor here in a specially controlled, super-humidified room. The woman was seventy, Mr. Halston. She was a heavy smoker until the last two years of her life, and the emphysema was very bad. I wanted her here, and if the cat had to stay . . .”

Halston nodded and then glanced meaningfully at his watch.

“Near the end of June, she died in the night. The doctor seemed to take it as a matter of course . . . just came and wrote out the death certificate and that was the end of it. But the cat was in the room. Gage told me.”

“We all have to go sometime, man,” Halston said.

“Of course. That’s what the doctor said. But I knew. I remembered. Cats like to get babies and old people when they’re asleep. And steal their breath.”

“An old wives’ tale.”

“Based on fact, like most so-called old wives’ tales,” Drogan replied. “Cats like to knead soft things with their paws, you see. A pillow, a thick shag rug . . . or a blanket. A crib blanket or an old person’s blanket. The extra weight on a person who’s weak to start with . . .”

Drogan trailed off, and Halston thought about it. Carolyn Broadmoor asleep in her bedroom, the breath rasping in and out of her damaged lungs, the sound nearly lost in the whisper of special humidifiers and air conditioners. The cat with the queer black-and-white markings leaps silently onto her spinster’s bed and stares at her old and wrinkle-grooved face with those lambent, black-and-green eyes. It creeps onto her thin chest and settles its weight there, purring . . . and the breathing slows . . . and the cat purrs as the old woman slowly smothers beneath its weight on her chest.

He was not an imaginative man, but Halston shivered a little.

“Drogan,” he said, continuing to stroke the purring cat. “Why don’t you just have it put away? A vet would give it the gas for twenty dollars.”

Drogan said, “The funeral was on the first of July. I had Carolyn buried in our cemetery plot next to my sister. The way she would have wanted it. Only July third I called Gage to this room and handed him a wicker basket . . . a picnic hamper sort of thing. Do you know what I mean?”

Halston nodded.

“I told him to put the cat in it and take it to a vet in Milford and have it put to sleep. He said, ‘Yes, sir,’ took the basket, and went out. Very like him. I never saw him alive again. There was an accident on the turnpike. The Lincoln was driven into a bridge abutment at better than sixty miles an hour. Dick Gage was killed instantly. When they found him there were scratches on his face.”

Halston was silent as the picture of how it might have been formed in his brain again. No sound in the room but the peaceful crackle of the fire and the peaceful purr of the cat in his lap. He and the cat together before the fire would make a good illustration for that Edgar Guest poem, the one that goes: “The cat on my lap, the hearth’s good fire / . . . A happy man, should you enquire.”

Dick Gage moving the Lincoln down the turnpike toward Milford, beating the speed limit by maybe five miles an hour. The wicker basket beside him—a picnic hamper sort of thing. The chauffeur is watching traffic, maybe he’s passing a big cab-over Jimmy and he doesn’t notice the peculiar black-on-one-side, white-on-the-other face that pokes out of one side of the basket. Out of the driver’s side. He doesn’t notice because he’s passing the big trailer truck and that’s when the cat jumps onto his face, spitting and clawing, its talons raking into one eye, puncturing it, deflating it, blinding it. Sixty and the hum of the Lincoln’s big motor and the other paw is hooked over the bridge of the nose, digging in with exquisite, damning pain—maybe the Lincoln starts to veer right, into the path of the Jimmy, and its airhorn blares ear-shatteringly, but Gage can’t hear it because the cat is yowling, the cat is spread-eagled over his face like some huge furry black spider, ears laid back, green eyes glaring like spotlights from hell, back legs jittering and digging into the soft flesh of the old man’s neck. The car veers wildly back the other way. The bridge abutment looms. The cat jumps down and the Lincoln, a shiny black torpedo, hits the cement and goes up like a bomb.

Halston swallowed hard and heard a dry click in his throat.

“And the cat came back?”

Drogan nodded. “A week later. On the day Dick Gage was buried, as a matter of fact. Just like the old song says. The cat came back.”

“It survived a car crash at sixty? Hard to believe.”

“They say each one has nine lives. When it comes back . . . that’s when I started to wonder if it might not be a . . . a . . .”

“Hellcat?” Halston suggested softly.

“For want of a better word, yes. A sort of demon sent . . .”

“To punish you.”

“I don’t know. But I’m afraid of it. I feed it, or rather, the woman who comes in to do for me feeds it. She doesn’t like it either. She says that face is a curse of God. Of course, she’s local.” The old man tried to smile and failed. “I want you to kill it. I’ve lived with it for the last four months. It skulks around in the shadows. It looks at me. It seems to be . . . waiting. I lock myself in my room every night and still I wonder if I’m going to wake up one early morning and find it . . . curled up on my chest . . . and purring.”

The wind whined lonesomely outside and made a strange hooting noise in the stone chimney.

“At last I got in touch with Saul Loggia. He recommended you. He called you a stick, I believe.”

“A one-stick. That means I work on my own.”

“Yes. He said you’d never been busted, or even suspected. He said you always seem to land on your feet . . . like a cat.”

Halston looked at the old man in the wheelchair. And suddenly his long-fingered, muscular hands were lingering just above the cat’s neck.

“I’ll do it now, if you want me to,” he said softly. “I’ll snap its neck. It won’t even know—”

“No!” Drogan cried. He drew in a long, shuddering breath. Color had come up in his sallow cheeks. “Not . . . not here. Take it away.”

Halston smiled humorlessly. He began to stroke the sleeping cat’s head and shoulders and back very gently again. “All right,” he said. “I accept the contract. Do you want the body?”

“No. Kill it. Bury it.” He paused. He hunched forward in the wheelchair like some ancient buzzard. “Bring me the tail,” he said. “So I can throw it in the fire and watch it burn.”

• • •

Halston drove a 1973 Plymouth with a custom Cyclone Spoiler engine. The car was jacked and blocked, and rode with the hood pointing down at the road at a twenty-degree angle. He had rebuilt the differential and the rear end himself. The shift was a Pensy, the linkage was Hearst. It sat on huge Bobby Unser Wide Ovals and had a top end of a little past one-sixty.

He left the Drogan house at a little past 9:30. A cold rind of crescent moon rode overhead through the tattering November clouds. He rode with all the windows open, because that yellow stench of age and terror seemed to have settled into his clothes and he didn't like it. The cold was hard and sharp, eventually numbing, but it was good. It was blowing that yellow stench away.

He got off the turnpike at Placer's Glen and drove through the silent town, which was guarded by a single yellow blinker at the intersection, at a thoroughly respectable thirty-five. Out of town, moving up S.R. 35, he opened the Plymouth up a little, letting her walk. The tuned Spoiler engine purred like the cat had purred on his lap earlier this evening. Halston grinned at the simile. They moved between frost-white November fields full of skeleton cornstalks at a little over seventy.

The cat was in a double-thickness shopping bag, tied at the top with heavy twine. The bag was in the passenger bucket seat. The cat had been sleepy and purring when Halston put it in, and it had purred through the entire ride. It sensed, perhaps, that Halston liked it and felt at home with it. Like himself, the cat was a one-stick.

Strange hit, Halston thought, and was surprised to find that he was taking it seriously *as* a hit. Maybe the strangest thing about it was that he actually liked the cat, felt a kinship with it. If it had managed to get rid of those three old crocks, more power to it . . . especially Gage, who had been taking it to Milford for a terminal date with a crewcut veterinarian who would have been more than happy to bundle it into a ceramic-lined gas chamber the size of a microwave oven. He felt a kinship, but no urge to renege on the hit. He would do it the courtesy of killing it quickly and well. He would park off the road beside one of these November-barren fields and take it out of the bag and stroke it and then snap its neck and sever its tail with his pocket knife. And, he thought, the body I'll bury honorably, saving it from the scavengers. I can't save it from the worms, but I can save it from the maggots.

He was thinking these things as the car moved through the night like a dark blue ghost and that was when the cat walked in front of his eyes, up on the dashboard, tail raised arrogantly, its black-and-white face turned toward him, its mouth seeming to grin at him.

“Sssshhhh—” Halston hissed. He glanced to his right and caught a glimpse of the double-thickness shopping bag, a hole chewed—or clawed—in its side. Looked ahead again . . . and the cat lifted a paw and batted playfully at him. The paw skidded across Halston’s forehead. He jerked away from it and the Plymouth’s big tires wailed on the road as it swung erratically from one side of the narrow blacktop to the other.

Halston batted at the cat on the dashboard with his fist. It was blocking his field of vision. It spat at him, arching its back, but it didn’t move. Halston swung again, and instead of shrinking away, it leaped at him.

*Gage*, he thought. *Just like Gage—*

He stamped the brake. The cat was on his head, blocking his vision with its furry belly, clawing at him, gouging at him. Halston held the wheel grimly. He struck the cat once, twice, a third time. And suddenly the road was gone, the Plymouth was running down into the ditch, thudding up and down on its shocks. Then, impact, throwing him forward against his seat belt, and the last sound he heard was the cat yowling inhumanly, the voice of a woman in pain or in the throes of sexual climax.

He struck it with his closed fist and felt only the springy, yielding flex of its muscles.

Then, second impact. And darkness.

• • •

The moon was down. It was an hour before dawn.

The Plymouth lay in a ravine curdled with groundmist. Tangled in its grille was a snarled length of barbed wire. The hood had come unlatched, and tendrils of steam from the breached radiator drifted out of the opening to mingle with the mist.

No feeling in his legs.

He looked down and saw that the Plymouth's firewall had caved in with the impact. The back of that big Cyclone Spoiler engine block had smashed into his legs, pinning them.

Outside, in the distance, the predatory squawk of an owl dropping onto some small, scurrying animal.

Inside, close, the steady purr of the cat.

It seemed to be grinning, like Alice's Cheshire had in Wonderland.

As Halston watched it stood up, arched its back, and stretched. In a sudden limber movement like rippled silk, it leaped to his shoulder. Halston tried to lift his hands to push it off.

His arms wouldn't move.

*Spinal shock, he thought. Paralyzed. Maybe temporary. More likely permanent.*

The cat purred in his ear like thunder.

"Get off me," Halston said. His voice was hoarse and dry. The cat tensed for a moment and then settled back. Suddenly its paw batted Halston's cheek, and the claws were out this time. Hot lines of pain down to his throat. And the warm trickle of blood.

Pain.

*Feeling.*

He ordered his head to move to the right, and it complied. For a moment his face was buried in smooth, dry fur. Halston snapped at the cat. It made a startled, disgruntled sound in its throat—*yowk!*—and leaped onto the seat. It stared up at him angrily, ears laid back.

"Wasn't supposed to do that, was I?" Halston croaked.

The cat opened its mouth and hissed at him. Looking at that strange, schizophrenic face, Halston could understand how Drogan might have thought it was a hellcat. It—

His thoughts broke off as he became aware of a dull, tingling feeling in both hands and forearms.

*Feeling. Coming back. Pins and needles.*

The cat leaped at his face, claws out, spitting.

Halston shut his eyes and opened his mouth. He bit at the cat's belly and got nothing but fur. The cat's front claws were clasped on his ears, digging in.

The pain was enormous, brightly excruciating. Halston tried to raise his hands. They twitched but would not quite come out of his lap.

He bent his head forward and began to shake it back and forth, like a man shaking soap out of his eyes. Hissing and squalling, the cat held on. Halston could feel blood trickling down his cheeks. It was hard to get his breath. The cat's chest was pressed over his nose. It was possible to get some air in by mouth, but not much. What he did get came through fur. His ears felt as if they had been doused with lighter fluid and then set on fire.

He snapped his head back, and cried out in agony—he must have sustained a whiplash when the Plymouth hit. But the cat hadn't been expecting the reverse and it flew off. Halston heard it thud down in the backseat.

A trickle of blood ran in his eye. He tried again to move his hands, to raise one of them and wipe the blood away.

They trembled in his lap, but he was still unable to actually move them. He thought of the .45 special in its holster under his left arm.

*If I can get to my piece, kitty, the rest of your nine lives are going in a lump sum.*

More tingles now. Dull throbs of pain from his feet, buried and surely shattered under the engine block, zips and tingles from his legs—it felt exactly the way a limb that you've slept on does when it's starting to wake up. At that moment Halston didn't care about his feet. It was enough to know that his spine wasn't severed, that he wasn't going to finish out his life as a dead lump of body attached to a talking head.

*Maybe I had a few lives left myself.*

Take care of the cat. That was the first thing. *Then get out of the wreck*—maybe someone would come along, that would solve both problems at once. Not likely at 4:30 in the morning on a back road like this one, but barely possible. And—

And what was the cat doing back there?

He didn't like having it on his face, but he didn't like having it behind him and out of sight, either. He tried the rear-view mirror, but that was useless. The crash had knocked it awry and all it reflected was the grassy ravine he had finished up in.

A sound from behind him, like low, ripping cloth.

Purring.

*Hellcat my ass. It's gone to sleep back there.*

And even if it hadn't, even if it was somehow planning murder, what could it do? It was a skinny little thing, probably weighed all of four pounds soaking wet. And soon . . . soon he would be able to move his hands enough to get his gun. He was sure of it.

Halston sat and waited. Feeling continued to flood back into his body in a series of pins-and-needles incursions. Absurdly (or maybe in instinctive reaction to his close brush with death) he got an erection for a minute or so. *Be kind of hard to beat off under present circumstances*, he thought.

A dawn-line was appearing in the eastern sky. Somewhere a bird sang.

Halston tried his hands again and got them to move an eighth of an inch before they fell back.

*Not yet. But soon.*

A soft thud on the seatback beside him. Halston turned his head and looked into the black-white face, the glowing eyes with their huge dark pupils.

Halston spoke to it.

"I have never blown a hit once I took it on, kitty. This could be a first. I'm getting my hands back. Five minutes, ten at most. You want my advice? Go out the window. They're all open. Go out and take your tail with you."

The cat stared at him.

Halston tried his hands again. They came up, trembling wildly. Half an inch. An inch. He let them fall back limply. They slipped off his lap and thudded to the Plymouth's seat. They glimmered there palely, like large tropical spiders.

The cat was grinning at him.

*Did I make a mistake?* he wondered confusedly. He was a creature of hunch, and the feeling that he had made one was suddenly overwhelming. Then the cat's body tensed, and even as it leaped, Halston knew what it was going to do and he opened his mouth to scream.

The cat landed on Halston's crotch, claws out, digging.

At that moment, Halston wished he *had* been paralyzed. The pain was gigantic, terrible. He had never suspected that there could be such pain in the world. The cat was a spitting coiled spring of fury, clawing at his balls.

Halston *did* scream, his mouth yawning open, and that was when the cat changed direction and leaped at his face, leaped at his mouth. And at that moment Halston knew that it was something more than a cat. It was something possessed of a malign, murderous intent.

He caught one last glimpse of that black-and-white face below the flattened ears, its eyes enormous and filled with lunatic hate. It had gotten rid of the three old people and now it was going to get rid of John Halston.

It rammed into his mouth, a furry projectile. He gagged on it. Its front claws pinwheeled, tattering his tongue like a piece of liver. His stomach recoiled and he vomited. The vomit ran down into his windpipe, clogging it, and he began to choke.

In this extremity, his will to survive overcame the last of the impact paralysis. He brought his hands up slowly to grasp the cat. *Oh my God*, he thought.

The cat was forcing its way into his mouth, flattening its body, squirming, working itself further and further in. He could feel his jaws creaking wider and wider to admit it.

He reached to grab it, yank it out, destroy it . . . and his hands clasped only the cat's tail.

Somehow it had gotten its entire body into his mouth. Its strange, black-and-white face must be crammed into his very throat.

A terrible thick gagging sound came from Halston's throat, which was swelling like a flexible length of garden hose.

His body twitched. His hands fell back into his lap and the fingers drummed senselessly on his thighs. His eyes sheened over, then glazed. They stared out through the Plymouth's windshield blankly at the coming dawn.

Protruding from his open mouth was two inches of bushy tail . . . half-black, half-white. It switched lazily back and forth.

It disappeared.

A bird cried somewhere again. Dawn came in breathless silence then, over the frost-rimmed fields of rural Connecticut.

• • •

The farmer's name was Will Reuss.

He was on his way to Placer's Glen to get the inspection sticker renewed on his farm truck when he saw the late morning sun twinkle on something in the ravine beside the road. He pulled over and saw the Plymouth lying at a drunken, canted angle in the ditch, barbed wire tangled in its grille like a snarl of steel knitting.

He worked his way down, and then sucked in his breath sharply. "Holy moley," he muttered to the bright November day. There was a guy sitting bolt upright behind the wheel, eyes open and glaring emptily into eternity. The Roper organization was never going to include him in its presidential poll again. His face was smeared with blood. He was still wearing his seat belt.

The driver's door had been crimped shut, but Reuss managed to get it open by yanking with both hands. He leaned in and unstrapped the seat belt, planning to check for ID. He was reaching for the coat when he noticed that the dead guy's shirt was rippling, just above the belt buckle. Rippling . . . and bulging. Splotches of blood began to bloom there like sinister roses.

"What the Christ?" He reached out, grasped the dead man's shirt, and pulled it up.

Will Reuss looked—and screamed.

Above Halston's navel, a ragged hole had been clawed in his flesh. Looking out was the gore-streaked black-and-white face of a cat, its eyes huge and glaring.

Reuss staggered back, shrieking, hands clapped to his face. A score of crows took cawing wing from a nearby field.

The cat forced its body out and stretched in obscene languor.

Then it leaped out the open window. Reuss caught sight of it moving through the high dead grass and then it was gone.

It seemed to be in a hurry, he later told a reporter from the local paper.

As if it had unfinished business.

# *The New York Times* at Special Bargain Rates

She's fresh out of the shower when the phone begins to ring, but although the house is still full of relatives—she can hear them downstairs, it seems they will never go away, it seems she never had so many—no one picks up. Nor does the answering machine, as James programmed it to do after the fifth ring.

Anne goes to the extension on the bed-table, wrapping a towel around her, her wet hair thwacking unpleasantly on the back of her neck and bare shoulders. She picks it up, she says hello, and then he says her name. It's James. They had thirty years together, and one word is all she needs. He says *Annie* like no one else, always did.

For a moment she can't speak or even breathe. He has caught her on the exhale and her lungs feel as flat as sheets of paper. Then, as he says her name again (sounding uncharacteristically hesitant and unsure of himself), the strength slips from her legs. They turn to sand and she sits on the bed, the towel falling off her, her wet bottom dampening the sheet beneath her. If the bed hadn't been there, she would have gone to the floor.

Her teeth click together and that starts her breathing again.

"James? Where *are* you? *What happened?*" In her normal voice, this might have come out sounding shrewish—a mother scolding her wayward eleven-year-old who's come late to the supper-table yet again—but now it emerges in a kind of horrified growl. The murmuring relatives below her are, after all, planning his funeral.

James chuckles. It is a bewildered sound. "Well, I tell you what," he says. "I don't exactly know where I am."

Her first confused thought is that he must have missed the plane in London, even though he called her from Heathrow not long before it took off. Then a clearer idea comes: although both the *Times* and the TV news say there were no survivors, there was at least one. Her husband crawled from the wreckage of the burning plane (and the burning apartment building the plane hit, don't forget that, twenty-four more dead on the ground and the number apt to rise before the world moved on to the next tragedy) and has been wandering around Brooklyn ever since, in a state of shock.

"Jimmy, are you all right? Are you . . . are you burned?" The truth of what that would mean occurs after the question, thumping down with the heavy weight of a dropped book on a bare foot, and she begins to cry. "Are you in the hospital?"

"Hush," he says, and at his old kindness—and at that old word, just one small piece of their marriage's furniture—she begins to cry harder. "Honey, hush."

"But I don't *understand!*"

"I'm all right," he says. "Most of us are."

"Most—? There are *others?*"

"Not the pilot," he says. "He's not so good. Or maybe it's the co-pilot. He keeps screaming. 'We're going down, there's no power, oh my God.' Also 'This isn't my fault, don't let them blame it on me.' He says that, too."

She's cold all over. "Who is this really? Why are you being so horrible? I just lost my husband, you asshole!"

"Honey—"

"Don't call me that!" There's a clear strand of mucus hanging from one of her nostrils. She wipes it away with the back of her hand and then flings it into the wherever, a thing she hasn't done since she was a child. "Listen, mister—I'm going to star-sixty-nine this call and the police will come and slam your ass . . . your ignorant, unfeeling *ass* . . ."

But she can go no farther. It's his voice. There's no denying it. The way the call rang right through—no pickup downstairs, no answering machine—suggests this call was just for her. And . . . *honey, hush*. Like in the old Carl Perkins song.

He has remained quiet, as if letting her work these things through for herself. But before she can speak again, there's a beep on the line.

"James? *Jimmy?* Are you still there?"

"Yeah, but I can't talk long. I was trying to call you when we went down, and I guess that's the only reason I was able to get through at all. Lots of others have been trying, we're lousy with cell phones, but no luck." That beep again. "Only now my phone's almost out of juice."

"Jimmy, did you know?" This idea has been the hardest and most terrible part for her—that he might have known, if only for an endless minute or two. Others might picture burned bodies or dismembered heads with grinning teeth; even light-fingered first responders filching wedding rings and diamond ear-clips, but what has robbed Annie Driscoll's sleep is the image of Jimmy looking out his window as the streets and cars and the brown apartment buildings of Brooklyn swell closer. The useless masks flopping down like the corpses of small yellow animals. The overhead bins popping open, carry-ons starting to fly, someone's Norelco razor rolling up the tilted aisle.

"Did you know you were going down?"

"Not really," he says. "Everything seemed all right until the very end—maybe the last thirty seconds. Although it's hard to keep track of time in situations like that, I always think."

*Situations like that.* And even more telling: *I always think.* As if he has been aboard half a dozen crashing 767s instead of just the one.

"In any case," he goes on, "I was just calling to say we'd be early, so be sure to get the FedEx man out of bed before I got there."

Her absurd attraction for the FedEx man has been a joke between them for years. She begins to cry again. His cell utters another of those beeps, as if scolding her for it.

"I think I died just a second or two before it rang the first time. I think that's why I was able to get through to you. But this thing's gonna give up the ghost pretty soon."

He chuckles as if this is funny. She supposes that in a way it is. She may see the humor in it herself, eventually. *Give me ten years or so,* she thinks.

Then, in that just-talking-to-myself voice she knows so well: "Why didn't I put the tiresome motherfucker on charge last night? Just forgot, that's all. Just

forgot.”

“James . . . honey . . . the plane crashed two days ago.”

A pause. Mercifully with no beep to fill it. Then: “Really? Mrs. Corey *said* time was funny here. Some of us agreed, some of us disagreed. I was a disagreeer, but looks like she was right.”

“Hearts?” Annie asks. She feels now as if she is floating outside and slightly above her plump damp middle-aged body, but she hasn’t forgotten Jimmy’s old habits. On a long flight he was always looking for a game. Cribbage or canasta would do, but hearts was his true love.

“Hearts,” he agrees. The phone beeps again, as if seconding that.

“Jimmy . . .” She hesitates long enough to ask herself if this is information she really wants, then plunges with that question still unanswered. “Where *are* you, exactly?”

“Looks like Grand Central Station,” he says. “Only bigger. And emptier. As if it wasn’t really Grand Central at all but only . . . mmm . . . a movie-set of Grand Central. Do you know what I’m trying to say?”

“I . . . I think so . . .”

“There certainly aren’t any trains . . . and we can’t hear any in the distance . . . but there are doors going everywhere. Oh, and there’s an escalator, but it’s broken. All dusty, and some of the treads are broken.” He pauses, and when he speaks again he does so in a lower voice, as if afraid of being overheard. “People are leaving. Some climbed the escalator—I saw them—but most are using the doors. I guess I’ll have to leave, too. For one thing, there’s nothing to eat. There’s a candy machine, but that’s broken, too.”

“Are you . . . honey, are you hungry?”

“A little. Mostly what I’d like is some water. I’d *kill* for a cold bottle of Dasani.”

Annie looks guiltily down at her own legs, still beaded with water. She imagines him licking off those beads and is horrified to feel a sexual stirring.

“I’m all right, though,” he adds hastily. “For now, anyway. But there’s no sense staying here. Only . . .”

“What? What, Jimmy?”

“I don’t know which door to use.”

Another beep.

“I wish I knew which one Mrs. Corey took. She’s got my damn cards.”

“Are you . . .” She wipes her face with the towel she wore out of the shower; then she was fresh, now she’s all tears and snot. “Are you scared?”

“Scared?” he asks thoughtfully. “No. A little worried, that’s all. Mostly about which door to use.”

*Find your way home*, she almost says. *Find the right door and find your way home*. But if he did, would she want to see him? A ghost might be all right, but what if she opened the door on a smoking cinder with red eyes and the remains of jeans (he always traveled in jeans) melted into his legs? And what if Mrs. Corey was with him, his baked deck of cards in one twisted hand?

*Beep.*

“I don’t need to tell you to be careful about the FedEx man anymore,” he says. “If you really want him, he’s all yours.”

She shocks herself by laughing.

“But I did want to say I love you—”

“Oh honey I love you t—”

“—and not to let the McCormack kid do the gutters this fall, he works hard but he’s a risk-taker, last year he almost broke his fucking neck. And don’t go to the bakery anymore on Sundays. Something’s going to happen there, and I know it’s going to be on a Sunday, but I don’t know which Sunday. Time really *is* funny here.”

The McCormack kid he’s talking about must be the son of the guy who used to be their caretaker in Vermont . . . only they sold that place ten years ago, and the kid must be in his mid-twenties by now. And the bakery? She supposes he’s talking about Zoltan’s, but what on *earth*—

*Beep.*

“Some of the people here were on the ground, I guess. That’s very tough, because they don’t have a clue how they got here. And the pilot keeps screaming. Or maybe it’s the co-pilot. I think he’s going to be here for quite awhile. He just wanders around. He’s very confused.”

The beeps are coming closer together now.

“I have to go, Annie. I can’t stay here, and the phone’s going to shit the bed any second now, anyway.” Once more in that I’m-scolding-myself voice (impossible to believe she will never hear it again after today; impossible *not* to

believe) he mutters, “It would have been so simple just to . . . well, never mind. I love you, sweetheart.”

“Wait! Don’t go!”

“I c—”

“I love you, too! Don’t go!”

But he already has. In her ear there is only black silence.

She sits there with the dead phone to her ear for a minute or more, then breaks the connection. The non-connection. When she opens the line again and gets a perfectly normal dial tone, she touches star-sixty-nine after all. According to the robot who answers her page, the last incoming call was at nine o’clock that morning. She knows who that one was: her sister Nell, calling from New Mexico. Nell called to tell Annie that her plane had been delayed and she wouldn’t be in until tonight. Nell told her to be strong.

All the relatives who live at a distance—James’s, Annie’s—flew in. Apparently they feel that James used up all the family’s Destruction Points, at least for the time being.

There is no record of an incoming call at—she glances at the bedside clock and sees it’s now 3:17 P.M.—at about ten past three, on the third afternoon of her widowhood.

Someone raps briefly on the door and her brother calls, “Anne? Annie?”

“Dressing!” she calls back. Her voice sounds like she’s been crying, but unfortunately, no one in this house would find that strange. “Privacy, please!”

“You okay?” he calls through the door. “We thought we heard you talking. And Ellie thought she heard you call out.”

“Fine!” she calls, then wipes her face again with the towel. “Down in a few!”

“Okay. Take your time.” Pause. “We’re here for you.” Then he clumps away.

“Beep,” she whispers, then covers her mouth to hold in laughter that is some emotion even more complicated than grief finding the only way out it has. “Beep, beep. Beep, beep, beep.” She lies back on the bed, laughing, and above her cupped hands her eyes are large and awash with tears that overspill down her cheeks and run all the way to her ears. “Beep-fucking-beepity-beep.”

She laughs for quite awhile, then dresses and goes downstairs to be with her relatives, who have come to share their grief with hers. Only they feel apart

from her, because he didn't call any of them. He called her. For better or worse, he called her.

• • •

During the autumn of that year, with the blackened remains of the apartment building the jet crashed into still closed off from the rest of the world by yellow police tape (although the taggers have been inside, one leaving a spray-painted message reading CRISPY CRITTERS STOP HERE), Annie receives the sort of e-blast computer-addicts like to send to a wide circle of acquaintances. This one comes from Gert Fisher, the town librarian in Tilton, Vermont. When Annie and James summered there, Annie used to volunteer at the library, and although the two women never got on especially well, Gert has included Annie in her quarterly updates ever since. They are usually not very interesting, but halfway through the weddings, funerals, and 4-H winners in this one, Annie comes across a bit of news that makes her catch her breath. Jason McCormack, the son of old Hughie McCormack, was killed in an accident on Labor Day. He fell from the roof of a summer cottage while cleaning the gutters and broke his neck.

“He was only doing a favor for his dad, who as you may remember had a stroke the year before last,” Gert wrote before going on to how it rained on the library's end-of-summer lawn sale, and how disappointed they all were.

Gert doesn't say in her three-page compendium of breaking news, but Annie is quite sure Jason fell from the roof of what used to be their cottage. In fact, she is positive.

• • •

Five years after the death of her husband (and the death of Jason McCormack not long after), Annie remarries. And although they relocate to Boca Raton, she gets back to the old neighborhood often. Craig, the new husband, is only semi-retired, and his business takes him to New York every three or four months. Annie almost always goes with him, because she still has family in Brooklyn and on Long Island. More than she knows what to do with, it sometimes seems. But she loves them with that exasperated affection that

seems to belong, she thinks, only to people in their fifties and sixties. She never forgets how they drew together for her after James's plane went down, and made the best cushion for her that they could. So she wouldn't crash, too.

When she and Craig go back to New York, they fly. About this she never has a qualm, but she stops going to Zoltan's Family Bakery on Sundays when she's home, even though their raisin bagels are, she is sure, served in heaven's waiting room. She goes to Froger's instead. She is actually there, buying doughnuts (the doughnuts are at least passable), when she hears the blast. She hears it clearly even though Zoltan's is eleven blocks away. LP gas explosion. Four killed, including the woman who always passed Annie her bagels with the top of the bag rolled down, saying, "Keep it that way until you get home or you lose the freshness."

People stand on the sidewalks, looking east toward the sound of the explosion and the rising smoke, shading their eyes with their hands. Annie hurries past them, not looking. She doesn't want to see a plume of rising smoke after a big bang; she thinks of James enough as it is, especially on the nights when she can't sleep. When she gets home she can hear the phone ringing inside. Either everyone has gone down the block to where the local school is having a sidewalk art sale, or no one can hear that ringing phone. Except for her, that is. And by the time she gets her key turned in the lock, the ringing has stopped.

Sarah, the only one of her sisters who never married, *is* there, it turns out, but there is no need to ask her why she didn't answer the phone; Sarah Bernicke, the one-time disco queen, is in the kitchen with the Village People turned up, dancing around with the O-Cedar in one hand, looking like a chick in a TV ad. She missed the bakery explosion, too, although their building is even closer to Zoltan's than Froger's.

Annie checks the answering machine, but there's a big red zero in the MESSAGES WAITING window. That means nothing in itself, lots of people call without leaving a message, but—

Star-sixty-nine reports the last call at eight-forty last night. Annie dials it anyway, hoping against hope that somewhere outside the big room that looks like a Grand Central Station movie-set he found a place to re-charge his phone. To him it might seem he last spoke to her yesterday. Or only minutes

ago. *Time is funny here*, he said. She has dreamed of that call so many times it now almost seems like a dream itself, but she has never told anyone about it. Not Craig, not even her own mother, now almost ninety but alert and with a firmly held belief in the afterlife.

In the kitchen, the Village People advise that there is no need to feel down. There isn't, and she doesn't. She nevertheless holds the phone very tightly as the number she has star-sixty-nined rings once, then twice. Annie stands in the living room with the phone to her ear and her free hand touching the brooch above her left breast, as if touching the brooch could still the pounding heart beneath it. Then the ringing stops and a recorded voice offers to sell her the *New York Times* at special bargain rates that will not be repeated.

# Mute

– 1 –

There were three confession booths. The light over the door of the middle one was on. No one was waiting. The church was empty. Colored light came in through the windows and made squares on the central aisle. Monette thought about leaving and didn't. Instead he walked to the booth that was open for business and went inside. When he closed the door and sat down, the little slider on his right opened. In front of him, tacked to the wall with a blue pushpin, was a file card. Typed on it was FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF GOD'S GLORY. It had been a long time, but Monette didn't think that was standard equipment. He didn't even think it was Baltimore Catechism.

From the other side of the mesh screen, the priest spoke. "How you doing, my son?"

Monette didn't think that was standard, either. But it was all right. Just the same, he couldn't reply at first. Not a word. And that was sort of funny, considering what he had to say.

"Son? Cat got your tongue?"

Still nothing. The words were there, but they were all blocked up. Absurd or not, Monette had a sudden image of a clogged toilet.

The blur beyond the screen shifted. "Been a while?"

"Yes," Monette said. It was something.

"Want me to give you a hint?"

"No, I remember. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

"Uh-huh, and how long has it been since your last confession?"

"I don't remember. A long time. Not since I was a kid."

"Well, take it easy—it's like riding a bike."

But for a moment he could still say nothing. He looked at the typed message on the pushpin and his throat worked. His hands were kneading themselves, tighter and tighter, until they made a big fist that was rocking back and forth between his thighs.

“Son? The day is rolling by, and I have company coming for lunch. Actually, my company is *bringing* lu—”

“Father, I may have committed a terrible sin.”

Now the priest was silent for a while. *Mute*, Monette thought. There was a white word if there ever was one. Type it on a file card and it ought to disappear.

When the priest on the other side of the screen spoke again, his voice was still friendly but more grave. “What’s your sin, my son?”

And Monette said, “I don’t know. You’ll have to tell me.”

– 2 –

It was starting to rain when Monette came up on the northbound entrance ramp to the turnpike. His suitcase was in the trunk, and his sample cases—big boxy things, the kind lawyers tote when they’re taking evidence into court—were in the backseat. One was brown, one black. Both were embossed with the Wolfe & Sons logo: a timber wolf with a book in its mouth. Monette was a salesman. He covered all of northern New England. It was Monday morning. It had been a bad weekend, very bad. His wife had moved out to a motel, where she was probably not alone. Soon she might go to jail. Certainly there would be a scandal, and infidelity was going to be the least of it.

On the lapel of his jacket, he wore a button reading, ASK ME ABOUT THE BEST FALL LIST EVER!!

There was a man standing at the foot of the ramp. He was wearing old clothes and holding up a sign as Monette approached and the rain grew stronger. There was a battered brown knapsack between feet dressed in dirty sneakers. The Velcro closure of one sneaker had come loose and stuck up like a cockeyed tongue. The hitchhiker had no cap, let alone an umbrella.

At first all Monette could make out of the sign were crudely drawn red lips with a black slash drawn diagonally through them. When he got a little closer,

he saw the words above the slashed mouth read I AM MUTE! Below the slashed mouth was this: WILL YOU GIVE ME A RIDE???

Monette put on his blinker to make his turn onto the ramp. The hitchhiker flipped the sign over. On the other side was an ear, just as crudely drawn, with a slash through it. Above the ear: I AM DEAF! Below it: PLEASE MAY I HAVE A RIDE???

Monette had driven millions of miles since he was sixteen, most of them in the dozen years he had been repping for Wolfe & Sons, selling one best fall list ever after another, and during that time he had never picked up a single hitchhiker. Today he swerved over at the edge of the ramp with no hesitation and came to a stop. The St. Christopher's medal looped over the rearview mirror was still swinging back and forth when he used the button on his door to pop open the locks. Today he felt he had nothing to lose.

The hitchhiker slid in and put his battered little pack between his damp and dirty sneakers. Monette had thought, looking at him, that the fellow would smell bad, and he wasn't wrong. He said, "How far you going?"

The hitchhiker shrugged and pointed up the ramp. Then he bent and carefully put his sign on top of his pack. His hair was stringy and thin. There was some gray in it.

"I know which way, but . . ." Monette realized the man wasn't hearing him. He waited for him to straighten up. A car blew past and up the ramp, honking even though Monette had left him plenty of room to get by. Monette gave him the finger. This he *had* done before, but never for such minor annoyances.

The hitchhiker fastened his seat belt and looked at Monette, as if to ask what the holdup was. There were lines on his face, and stubble. Monette couldn't even begin to guess his age. Somewhere between old and not old, that was all he knew.

"How far are you going?" Monette asked, this time enunciating each word, and when the guy still only looked at him—average height, skinny, no more than a hundred and fifty pounds—he said, "Can you read lips?" He touched his own.

The hitchhiker shook his head and made some hand gestures.

Monette kept a pad in the console. While he wrote *How far?* on it, another car cruised past, now pulling up a fine rooster tail of moisture. Monette was

going all the way to Derry, a hundred and sixty miles, and these were the kind of driving conditions he usually loathed, second only to heavy snow. But today he reckoned it would be all right. Today the weather—and the big rigs, pulling up their secondary storms of flying water as they droned past—would keep him occupied.

Not to mention this guy. His new passenger. Who looked at the note, then back at Monette. It occurred to Monette later that maybe the guy couldn't read, either—learning to read when you're a deaf-mute had to be damn hard—but understood the question mark. The man pointed through the windshield and up the ramp. Then he opened and closed his hands eight times. Or maybe it was ten. Eighty miles. Or a hundred. If he knew at all.

“Waterville?” Monette guessed.

The hitchhiker looked at him blankly.

“Okay,” Monette said. “Whatever. Just tap me on the shoulder when we get where you're going.”

The hitchhiker looked at him blankly.

“Well, I guess you will,” Monette said. “Assuming you've even got a destination in mind, that is.” He checked his rearview, then got rolling. “You're pretty much cut off, aren't you?”

The guy was still looking at him. He shrugged and put his palms over his ears.

“I know,” Monette said, and merged. “Pretty much cut off. Phone lines down. But today I almost wish I was you and you were me.” He paused. “Almost. Mind some music?”

And when the hitchhiker just turned his head away and looked out the window, Monette had to laugh at himself. Debussy, AC/DC, or Rush Limbaugh, it was all the same to this guy.

He had bought the new Josh Ritter CD for his daughter—it was her birthday in a week—but hadn't remembered to send it to her yet. Too many other things going on just lately. He set the cruise control once they'd cleared Portland, slit the wrapping with his thumb, and stuck the CD in the player. He supposed it was now technically a used CD, not the kind of thing you give your beloved only child. Well, he could always buy her another one. Assuming, that was, he still had money to buy one with.

Josh Ritter turned out to be pretty good. Kind of like early Dylan, only with a better attitude. As he listened, he mused on money. Affording a new CD for Kelsie's birthday was the least of his problems. The fact that what she really wanted—and needed—was a new laptop wasn't very high on the list either. If Barb had done what she said she had done—what the SAD office *confirmed* that she'd done—he didn't know how he was going to afford the kid's last year at Case Western. Even assuming he still had a job himself. *That* was a problem.

He turned the music up to drown the problem out and partially succeeded, but by the time they reached Gardiner, the last chord had died out. The hitchhiker's face and body were turned away to the passenger window. Monette could see only the back of his stained and faded duffle coat, with too-thin hair straggling down over the collar in bunches. It looked like there had been something printed on the back of the coat once, but now it was too faded to make out.

*That's the story of this poor schmo's life,* Monette thought.

At first Monette couldn't decide if the hitchhiker was dozing or looking at the scenery. Then he noted the slight downward tilt of the man's head and the way his breath was fogging the glass of the passenger window, and decided dozing was more likely. And why not? The only thing more boring than the Maine Turnpike south of Augusta was the Maine Turnpike south of Augusta in a cold spring rain.

Monette had other CDs in the center console, but instead of rummaging through them, he turned off the car's sound system. And after he'd passed through the Gardiner toll station—not stopping, only slowing, the wonders of E-ZPass—he began to talk.

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Monette stopped talking and checked his watch. It was quarter to noon, and the priest had said he had company coming for lunch. That the company was bringing lunch, actually.

“Father, I'm sorry this is taking so long. I'd speed it up if I knew how, but I don't.”

“That’s all right, son. I’m interested now.”

“Your company—”

“Will wait while I’m doing the Lord’s work. Son, did this man rob you?”

“No,” Monette said. “Unless you count my peace of mind. Does that count?”

“Most assuredly. What *did* he do?”

“Nothing. Looked out the window. I thought he was dozing, but later I had reasons to think I was wrong about that.”

“What did *you* do?”

“Talked about my wife,” Monette said. Then he stopped and considered. “No, I didn’t. I *vented* about my wife. I *ranted* about my wife. I *spewed* about my wife. I . . . you see . . .” He struggled with it, lips pressed tightly together, looking down at that big twisting fist of hands between his thighs. Finally he burst out, “He was a *deaf-mute*, don’t you see? I could say anything and not have to listen to him make an analysis, give an opinion, or offer me sage advice. He was *deaf*, he was *mute*, hell, I thought he was probably *asleep*, and I could say any fucking thing I wanted to!”

In the booth with the file card pinned to the wall, Monette winced.

“Sorry, Father.”

“What exactly did you say about her?” the priest asked.

“I told him she was fifty-four,” Monette said. “That was how I started. Because that was the part . . . you know, that was the part I just couldn’t swallow.”

After the Gardiner tolls, the Maine Turnpike becomes a free road again, running through three hundred miles of fuck-all: woods, fields, the occasional house trailer with a satellite dish on the roof and a truck on blocks in the side yard. Except in the summer, it is sparsely traveled. Each car becomes its own little world. It occurred to Monette even then (perhaps it was the St. Christopher’s medal swinging from the rearview, a gift from Barb in better, saner days) that it was like being in a rolling confessional. Still, he started slowly, as so many confessors do.

“I’m married,” he said. “I’m fifty-five and my wife is fifty-four.”

He considered this while the windshield wipers ticked back and forth.

“Fifty-four, Barbara’s fifty-four. We’ve been married twenty-six years. One kid. A daughter. A lovely daughter. Kelsie Ann. She goes to school in Cleveland, and I don’t know how I’m going to keep her there, because two weeks ago, with no warning, my wife turned into Mount St. Helens. Turns out she’s got a boyfriend. Has had a boyfriend for almost two years. He’s a teacher—well, of course he is, what else would he be?—but she calls him Cowboy Bob. Turns out a lot of those nights I thought she was at Cooperative Extension or Book Circle, she was drinking tequila shooters and line dancing with Cowboy Fucking Bob.”

It was funny. Anyone could see that. It was sitcom shit if there had ever been sitcom shit. But his eyes—although tearless—were stinging as if they were full of poison ivy. He glanced to his right, but the hitchhiker was still mostly turned away, and now his forehead was leaning against the glass of the passenger window. Sleeping for sure.

*Almost* for sure.

Monette hadn’t spoken of her betrayal aloud. Kelsie still didn’t know, although the bubble of her ignorance would pop soon. The straws were flying in the wind—he’d hung up on three different reporters before leaving on this trip—but there was nothing they could print or broadcast yet. That would change soon, but Monette would go on getting by with *No comment* for as long as possible, mostly to spare himself embarrassment. In the meantime, though, he was commenting plenty, and doing so brought a great, angry relief. In a way it was like singing in the shower. Or vomiting there.

“She’s fifty-four,” he said. “That’s what I can’t get over. It means she started up with this guy, whose real name is Robert Yandowsky—how’s that for a cowboy name—when she was fifty-two. *Fifty-two!* Would you say that’s old enough to know better, my friend? Old enough to have sowed your wild oats, then ripped them up again and planted a more useful crop? My God, she wears *bifocals!* She’s had her gallbladder out! And she’s boffing this guy! In the Grove Motel, where the two of them have set up housekeeping! I gave her a nice house in Buxton, a two-car garage, she’s got an Audi on long lease, and she threw it all away to get drunk on Thursday nights in Range Riders, then shag

this guy until the dawn's early light—or however long they can manage—and she's fifty-four! Not to mention Cowboy Bob, *who is fucking sixty!*"

He heard himself ranting, told himself to stop, saw the hitchhiker hadn't moved (unless he'd sunk a little deeper into the collar of his duffle coat—that might have happened), and realized he didn't *have* to stop. He was in a car. He was on I-95, somewhere east of the sun and west of Augusta. His passenger was a deaf-mute. He could rant if he wanted to rant.

He ranted.

"Barb spilled everything. She wasn't defiant about it, and she wasn't ashamed. She seemed . . . serene. Shell-shocked, maybe. Or still living in a fantasy world."

And she'd said it was partly his fault.

"I'm on the road a lot, that much is true. Over three hundred days last year. She was on her own—we only had the one chick, you know, and that one finished with high school and flown the coop. So it was my fault. Cowboy Bob and all the rest of it."

His temples were throbbing, and his nose was almost shut. He sniffed back hard enough to make black dots fly before his eyes and got no relief. Not in his nose, anyway. In his head he finally felt better. He was very glad he'd picked the hitchhiker up. He could have spoken these things aloud in the empty car, but—

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"But it wouldn't have been the same," he told the shape on the other side of the confessional wall. He looked straight ahead as he said it, right at FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF GOD'S GLORY. "Do you understand that, Father?"

"Of course I do," the priest replied—and rather cheerfully. "Even though you've clearly fallen away from Mother Church—except for a few superstitious remnants like your St. Christopher's medal—you shouldn't even have to ask. Confession is good for the soul. We've known that for two thousand years."

Monette had taken to wearing the St. Christopher's medal that had once upon a time swung from his rearview mirror. Perhaps it was just superstition,

but he had driven millions of miles in all kinds of shit weather with that medal for company and had never so much as dented a fender.

“Son, what else did she do, your wife? Besides sinning with Cowboy Bob?”

Monette surprised himself by laughing. And on the other side of the screen, the priest laughed, too. The difference was the quality of the laughter. The priest saw the funny side. Monette supposed he was still trying to ward off insanity.

“Well, there was the underwear,” he said.

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“She bought underwear,” he told the hitchhiker, who still sat slumped and mostly turned away, with his forehead against the window and his breath fogging the glass. Pack between his feet, sign resting on top with the side reading I AM MUTE! facing up. “She showed me. It was in the guest room closet. It damn near *filled* the guest room closet. Bustiers and camisoles and bras and silk stockings still in their packages, dozens of pairs. What looked like about a thousand garter belts. But mostly there were panties, panties, panties. She said Cowboy Bob was ‘a real panty man.’ I think she would have gone on, told me just how that worked, but I got the picture. I got it a lot better than I wanted to. I said, ‘Of course he’s a panty man, he grew up jerking off to PLAYBOY, he’s fucking *sixty*.’”

They were passing the Fairfield sign now. Green and smeary through the windshield, with a wet crow hunched on top.

“It was the good stuff, too,” Monette said. “A lot was Victoria’s Secret from the mall, but there was also stuff from a high-priced underwear boutique called Sweets. In Boston. I didn’t even know there *were* underwear boutiques, but I have since been educated. Had to’ve been thousands of dollars’ worth piled up in that closet. Also shoes. High heels, for the most part. You know, stilettos. She had that hot-babe thing down pat. Although I imagine she took off her bifocals when she put on her latest Wonderbra and tap pants. But—”

A semi droned by. Monette had his headlights on and automatically flicked his high beams for a moment when the rig was past. The driver flicked a thank-you with his taillights. Sign language of the road.

“But a lot of it hadn’t even been *worn*. That was the thing. It was just . . . just pack-ratted away. I asked her why she’d bought so goddam much, and she either didn’t know or couldn’t explain. ‘We just got into the habit,’ she said. ‘It was like foreplay, I guess.’ Not ashamed. Not defiant. Like she was thinking, *This is all a dream I’ll wake up from soon*. The two of us standing there are looking at that rummage sale of slips and skivvies and shoes and God knows what else piled in the back. Then I asked her where she got the money—I mean, I see the credit-card slips at the end of each month, and there weren’t any from Sweets of Boston—and we got to the real problem. Which was embezzlement.”

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“Embezzlement,” the priest said. Monette wondered if the word had ever been spoken in this confessional before and decided it probably had been. *Theft* for sure.

“She worked for MSAD 19,” Monette said. “MSAD stands for Maine School Administrative District. It’s one of the big ones, just south of Portland. Based in Dowrie, as a matter of fact, home of both Range Riders—the line-dancing joint—and the historic Grove Motel, just down the road from there. Convenient. Get your dancing and your fuh . . . your lovemaking all in the same area. Why, you wouldn’t even have to drive your car if you happened to have a snootful. Which on most evenings they did have. Tequila shooters for her, whiskey for him. Jack, naturally. She told me. She told me everything.”

“Was she a teacher?”

“Oh no—teachers don’t have access to that kind of money; she never could have embezzled over a hundred and twenty thousand dollars if she’d been a teacher. We’ve had the district superintendent and his wife over to the house for dinner, and of course I saw him at all the end-of-school-year picnics, usually at the Dowrie Country Club. Victor McCrea. University of Maine graduate. Played football. Majored in phys ed. Crew cut. Probably floated through on gift Cs, but a nice man, the kind who knows fifty different guy-walks-into-a-bar jokes. In charge of a dozen schools, from the five elementaries

to Muskie High. Very large annual budget, might be able to add four and four on his own in a pinch. Barb was his executive secretary for twelve years.”

Monette paused.

“Barb had the checkbook.”

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The rain was getting heavier. Now it was just short of a downpour. Monette slowed to fifty without even thinking about it, while other cars buzzed blithely past him in the left lane, each dragging up its own cloud of water. Let them buzz. He himself had had a long and accident-free career selling the best fall list ever (not to mention the best spring list ever and a few Summer Surprise lists, which mostly consisted of cookbooks, diet books, and *Harry Potter* knockoffs), and he wanted to keep it that way.

On his right, the hitchhiker stirred a little.

“You awake, buddy?” Monette asked. A useless question, but natural.

The hitchhiker uttered a comment from the end of him that apparently wasn’t mute: *Phweeet*. Small, polite, and—best of all—odorless.

“I take that as a yes,” Monette said, returning his attention to his driving. “Where was I?”

The underwear, that’s where he was. He could still see it. Piled up in the closet like a teenager’s wet dream. Then the confession of the embezzlement: that staggering figure. After he’d taken time to consider the possibility that she might be lying for some crazy reason (but of course it was *all* crazy), he had asked her how much was left, and she said—in that same calm and dazed manner—that there was nothing left, really, although she supposed she could get more. For a while, at least.

“‘But they’re going to find out soon now,’ she said. ‘If it was just poor old clueless Vic, I suppose I could go on forever, but the state auditors were in last week. They asked too many questions, and they took copies of the records. It won’t be long now.’”

“So I asked her how she could spend well over a hundred thousand dollars on knickers and garter belts,” Monette told his silent companion. “I didn’t feel angry—at least not then, I guess I was too shocked—but I was honestly

curious. And she said—in that same way, not ashamed, not defiant, like she was sleep-walking: ‘Well, we got interested in the lottery. I suppose we thought we could make it back that way.’”

Monette paused. He watched the windshield wipers go back and forth. He briefly considered the idea of twisting the wheel to the right and sending the car into one of the concrete overpass supports just ahead. He rejected the idea. He would later tell the priest part of the reason was that ancient childhood prohibition against suicide, but mostly he was thinking he’d like to hear the Josh Ritter album at least one more time before he died.

Plus, he was no longer alone.

Instead of committing suicide (and taking his passenger with him), he drove beneath the overpass at that steady, moderate fifty (for maybe two seconds the windshield was clear, then the wipers once more found work to do) and resumed his story.

“They must have bought more lottery tickets than anyone in history.” He thought it over, then shook his head. “Well . . . probably not. But they bought ten thousand for sure. She said that last November—I was in New Hampshire and Massachusetts almost that whole month, plus the sales conference in Delaware—they bought over two thousand. Powerball, Megabucks, Paycheck, Pick 3, Pick 4, Triple Play, they hit them all. At first they chose the numbers, but Barb said after a while that took too long and they went to the EZ Pick option.”

Monette pointed to the white plastic box glued to his windshield, just below the stem of the rearview mirror.

“All these gadgets speed up the world. Maybe that’s a good thing, but I sort of doubt it. She said, ‘We went the EZ Pick route because the people standing in line behind you get impatient if you take too long to pick your own numbers, especially when the jackpot’s over a hundred million.’ She said sometimes she and Yandowsky split up and hit different stores, as many as two dozen in an evening. And of course they sold them right there at the place where they went to line dance.

“She said, ‘The first time Bob played, we won five hundred dollars on a Pick 3. It was so romantic.’” Monette shook his head. “After that, the romance stayed, but the winning pretty much stopped. That was what she said. She said

once they won a thousand, but by then they were already thirty thousand in the bucket. *In the bucket* is what she called it.

“One time—this was in January, while I was out on the road trying to earn back the price of the cashmere coat I got her for Christmas—she said they went up to Derry and spent a couple of days. I don’t know if they’ve got line dancing up there or not, I never checked, but they’ve got a place called Hollywood Slots. They stayed in a suite, ate high off the hog—she said *high off the hog*—and dropped seventy-five hundred playing video poker. But, she said, they didn’t like that so much. Mostly they just stuck to the lottery, plugging in more and more of the SAD’s dough, trying to get even before the state auditors came and the roof fell in. And every now and then, of course, she’d buy some new underwear. A girl wants to be fresh when she’s buying Powerball tix at the local 7-Eleven.

“You all right, buddy?”

There was no response from his passenger—of course not—so Monette reached out and shook the man’s shoulder. The hitcher lifted his head from the window (his forehead had left a greasy mark on the glass) and looked around, blinking his red-rimmed eyes as if he had been asleep. Monette didn’t think he’d been asleep. No reason why, just a feeling.

He made a thumb-and-forefinger circle at the hitchhiker, then raised his eyebrows.

For a moment the hitcher only looked blank, giving Monette time to think the guy was bull-stupid as well as deaf-mute. Then he smiled and nodded and returned the circle.

“Okay,” Monette said. “Just checking.”

The man leaned his head back against the window again. In the meantime, the guy’s presumed destination, Waterville, had slid behind them and into the rain. Monette didn’t notice. He was still living in the past.

“If it had been just lingerie and the kind of lottery games where you pick a bunch of numbers, the damage might have been limited,” he said. “Because playing the lottery that way takes time. It gives you a chance to come to your senses, always presuming you have any to come to. You have to stand in line and collect the slips and save them in your wallet. Then you have to watch TV or check the paper for the results. It might still have been okay. If, that is, you

can call anything okay about your wife catting around with a stoneboat-dumb history teacher and flushing thirty or forty thousand dollars' worth of the school district's money down the shitter. But thirty grand I might have been able to cover. I could have taken out a second mortgage on the house. Not for Barb, no way, but for Kelsie Ann. A kid just starting out in life doesn't need a stinking fish like that around her neck. Restitution is what they call it. I would have made restitution even if it meant living in a two-bedroom apartment. You know?"

The hitchhiker obviously *didn't* know—not about beautiful young daughters just starting out in life, or second mortgages, or restitution. He was warm and dry in his dead-silent world, and that was probably better.

Monette plowed forward nonetheless.

"Thing is, there are quicker ways to chuck your money, and it's as legal as . . . as buying underwear."

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"They moved on to scratch tickets, didn't they?" the priest asked. "What the Lottery Commission calls instant winners."

"You speak like a man who's had a flutter himself," Monette said.

"From time to time," the priest agreed, and with an admirable lack of hesitation. "I always tell myself that if I should ever get a real golden ticket, I'd put all the money into the church. But I never risk more than five dollars a week." This time there *was* hesitation. "Sometimes ten." Another pause. "And once I bought a twenty-dollar scratch, back when they were new. But that was a momentary madness. I never did it again."

"At least not so far," Monette said.

The priest chuckled. "The words of a man who has truly had his fingers burned, son." He sighed. "I'm fascinated by your story, but I wonder if we could move it along a bit faster? My company will wait while I do the Lord's work, but not forever. And I believe we're having chicken salad, heavy on the mayo. A favorite of mine."

"There's not much more," Monette said. "If you've played, you've got the gist of it. You can buy the scratch tickets at all the same places you can buy the

Powerball and Megabucks tickets, but you can also buy them at a lot of other places, including turnpike rest stops. You don't even need to do business with a clerk; you can get them from a machine. The machines are always green, the color of money. By the time Barb came clean—

“By the time she confessed,” the priest said, with what might have been a touch of actual slyness.

“Yes, by the time she *confessed*, they'd pretty much settled on the twenty-dollar scratch-offs. Barb said she never bought any when she was on her own, but when she was with Cowboy Bob, they'd buy a lot. Hoping for that big score, you know. Once she said they bought a hundred of those puppies in a single night. That's two thousand dollars' worth. They got back eighty. They each had their own little plastic ticket scratcher. They look like snow scrapers for elves and have MAINE STATE LOTTERY written on the handle. They're green, like the vending machines that sell the tickets. She showed me hers—it was under the guest room bed. You couldn't make out anything except TERY on it. Could have been MYSTERY instead of LOTTERY. The sweat from her palm had wiped out all the rest.”

“Son, did you strike her? Is that why you're here?”

“No,” Monette said. “I wanted to *kill* her for it—the money, not the cheating, the cheating part just seemed unreal, even with all that fuh . . . all that underwear right in front of my eyes. But I didn't lay so much as a finger on her. I think it was because I was too tired. All that information had just tired me out. What I wanted to do was take a nap. A long one. Maybe a couple of days long. Is that strange?”

“No,” the priest said.

“I asked her how she could do something like that to me. Did she care so little? And *she* asked—”

“She asked me how come I didn't know,” Monette told the hitchhiker. “And before I could say anything, she answered herself, so I guess it was a whatchacallit, a rhetorical question. She said, ‘You didn't know because you didn't care. You were almost always on the road, and when you weren't on the

road, you *wanted* to be on the road. It's been ten years since you cared what underwear I have on—why would you, when you don't care about the woman inside it? But you care now, don't you? You do now.'

"Man, I just looked at her. I was too tired to kill her—or even slap her—but I was mad, all right. Even through the shock, I was mad. She was trying to make it my fault. You see that, don't you? Trying to lay it all off on my fucking *job*, as if I could get another one that paid even half as much. I mean, at my age what else am I qualified for? I guess I could get a job as school crossing guard—I don't have any morals busts in my past—but that would be about it."

He paused. Far down the road, still mostly hidden by a shifting camisole of rain, was a blue sign.

He considered, then said, "But even that wasn't the real point. You want to know the point? Her point? I was supposed to feel guilty for *liking* my job. For not drudging through my days until I found the right person to go *absolutely fucking bombers* with!"

The hitcher stirred a little, probably only because they'd hit a bump (or run over some roadkill), but it made Monette realize he was shouting. And hey, the guy might not be completely deaf. Even if he was, he might feel vibrations in the bones of his face once sounds passed a certain decibel level. Who the fuck knew?

"I didn't get into it with her," Monette said in a lower voice. "I *refused* to get into it with her. I think I knew that if I did, if we really started to argue, anything might happen. I wanted to get out of there while I was still in shock . . . because that was protecting her, see?"

The hitchhiker said nothing, but Monette saw for both of them.

"I said, 'What happens now?' and she said, 'I suppose I'll go to jail.' And you know what? If she'd started to cry then, I might have held her. Because after twenty-six years of marriage, things like that get to be a reflex. Even when most of the feeling's gone. But she didn't cry, so I walked out. Just turned around and walked out. And when I came back, there was a note saying she'd *moved* out. That was almost two weeks ago, and I haven't seen her since. Talked to her on the phone a few times, that's all. Talked to a lawyer, too. Froze all our accounts, not that it'll do any good once the legal wheels start turning. Which will be soon. The caca is going to clog the air-cooling system, if you take my

meaning. Then I suppose I'll see her again. In court. Her and Cowboy Fucking Bob."

Now he could read the blue sign: PITTSFIELD REST AREA 2 MI.

"Ah, shit!" he cried. "Waterville's fifteen miles back thataway, partner." And when the deaf-mute didn't stir (of course not), Monette realized he didn't know the guy had been going to the Ville anyway. Not for sure. In any case, it was time to get this straightened out. The rest area would do for that, but for a minute or two longer they would remain enclosed in this rolling confessional, and he felt he had one more thing to say.

"It's true that I haven't felt much for her in a very long time," he said. "Sometimes love just runs out. And it's also true that I haven't been entirely faithful—I've taken a little road comfort from time to time. But does *that* warrant *this*? Does it justify a woman blowing up a life the way a kid would blow up a rotten apple with a firecracker?"

He pulled into the rest area. There were maybe four cars in the lot, huddled up against the brown building with the vending machines in the front. To Monette the cars looked like cold children left out in the rain. He parked. The hitchhiker looked at him questioningly.

"Where are you going?" Monette asked, knowing it was hopeless.

The deaf-mute considered. He looked around and saw where they were. He looked back at Monette as if to say, *Not here*.

Monette pointed back south and raised his eyebrows. The deaf-mute shook his head, then pointed north. Opened and closed his fists, showing his fingers six times . . . eight . . . ten. Same as before, basically. But this time Monette got it. He thought life might have been simpler for this guy if someone had taught him the sideways figure-eight symbol that means *infinity*.

"You're basically just rambling, aren't you?" Monette asked.

The deaf-mute only looked at him.

"Yeah you are," Monette said. "Well, I tell you what. You listened to my story—even though you didn't know you were listening to it—and I'll get you as far as Derry." An idea struck him. "In fact, I'll drop you at the Derry Shelter. You can get a hot and a cot, at least for one night. I have to take a leak. You need to take a leak?"

The deaf-mute looked at him with patient blankness.

“A leak,” Monette said. “A *piss*.” He started to point at his crotch, realized where they were, and decided a road bum would think he was signing for a blowjob right here beside the Hav-A-Bite machines. He pointed toward the silhouettes on the side of the building instead—black cutout man, black cutout woman. The man had his legs apart, the woman had hers together. Pretty much the story of the human race in sign language.

This his passenger got. He shook his head decisively, then made another thumb-and-forefinger circle for good measure. Which left Monette with a delicate problem: leave Mr. Silent Vagabond in the car while he did his business or turn him out into the rain to wait . . . in which case the guy would almost certainly know why he was being put out.

Only it wasn't a problem at all, he decided. There was no money in the car, and his personal luggage was locked in the trunk. There were his sample cases in the backseat, but he somehow didn't think the guy was going to steal two seventy-pound cases and go trotting down the rest area's exit ramp with them. For one thing, how would he hold up his I AM MUTE! sign?

“I'll be right back,” Monette said, and when the hitchhiker only looked at him with those redrimmed eyes, Monette pointed to himself, to the restroom icons, then back to himself. This time the hitchhiker nodded and made another thumb-and-forefinger circle.

Monette went to the toilet and pissed for what felt like twenty minutes. The relief was exquisite. He felt better than he had since Barb had dropped her bombshell. It occurred to him for the first time that he was going to get through this. And he would help Kelsie get through it. He remembered a quote from some old German (or maybe a Russian, it certainly sounded like the Russian view of life): Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger.

He went back to his car, whistling. He even gave the coin-op lottery-ticket machine a comradely slap as he went by. At first he thought maybe he couldn't see his passenger because the guy was lying down . . . in which case, Monette would have to shoo him upright again so he could get behind the wheel. But the hitchhiker wasn't lying down. The hitchhiker was gone. Had taken his pack and his sign and decamped.

Monette checked the backseat and saw his Wolfe & Sons cases undisturbed. Looked into the glove compartment and saw the paltry identification kept

within—registration, insurance card, AAA card—was still there. All that was left of the bum was a lingering smell, not entirely unpleasant: sweat and faint pine, as if the guy had been sleeping rough.

He thought he'd see the guy at the foot of the ramp, holding up his sign and patiently switching it from side to side so that potential Good Samaritans got the complete lowdown on his defects. If so, Monette would stop and pick him up again. The job didn't feel done, somehow. Delivering the guy to the Derry Shelter—that would make the job feel done. That would close the deal, and close the book. Whatever other failings he might have, he liked to finish things.

But the guy wasn't at the foot of the ramp; the guy was completely AWOL. And it wasn't until Monette was passing a sign reading DERRY 10 MI. that he looked up at the rearview mirror and saw that his St. Christopher's medal, companion of all those millions of miles, was gone. The deaf-mute had stolen it. But not even that could break Monette's new optimism. Maybe the deaf-mute needed it more than he did. Monette hoped it would bring him good luck.

Two days later—by then he was selling the best fall list ever in Presque Isle—he got a call from the Maine State Police. His wife and Bob Yandowsky had been beaten to death in the Grove Motel. The killer had used a piece of pipe wrapped in a motel towel.

– 11 –

“My . . . dear . . . *God!*” the priest breathed.

“Yes,” Monette agreed, “that's pretty much what I thought.”

“Your daughter . . . ?”

“Heartbroken, of course. She's with me, at home. We'll get through this, Father. She's tougher than I thought. And of course, she doesn't know about the other. The embezzlement. With luck, she never will. There's going to be a very large insurance payment, what they call double indemnity. Given everything that went on before, I think I would be in moderate to serious trouble with the police now if I didn't have a cast-iron alibi. And if there hadn't been . . . developments. As it is, I've been questioned several times.”

“Son, you didn’t pay someone to—”

“I’ve been asked that, too. The answer is no. I’ve thrown my bank accounts open to anyone who wants a look. Every penny is accounted for, both in my half of the wedded partnership and in Barb’s. She was financially very responsible. At least in the sane part of her life.

“Father, can you open up on your side? I want to show you something.”

Instead of replying, the priest opened his door. Monette slipped the St. Christopher’s medal from around his neck, then reached around from his side. Their fingers touched briefly as the medal and its little pile of steel chain passed from hand to hand.

There was silence for five seconds as the priest considered it. Then he said, “This was returned to you when? Was it at the motel where—”

“No,” Monette said. “Not the motel. The house in Buxton. On the dresser in what used to be our bedroom. Next to our wedding picture, actually.”

“Dear God,” the priest said.

“He could have gotten the address from my car registration when I was in the john.”

“And of course you mentioned the name of the motel . . . and the town . . . .”

“Dowrie,” Monette agreed.

For the third time the priest invoked the name of his Boss. Then he said, “The fellow wasn’t deaf-mute at all, was he?”

“I’m almost positive he was mute,” Monette said, “but he sure wasn’t deaf. There was a note beside the medal, on a piece of paper he tore off the phone pad. All this must have happened while my daughter and I were at the funeral home, picking out a casket. The back door was open but not jimmed. He might have been smart enough to trig the lock, but I think I just forgot and left it open when we went out.”

“The note said what?”

“Thank you for the ride,” Monette said.

“I’ll be damned.” Thoughtful silence, then a soft knocking just outside the door of the confessional in which Monette sat, contemplating FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF GOD’S GLORY. Monette took back his medal.

“Have you told the police?”

“Yes, of course, the whole story. They think they know who the guy is. They’re familiar with the sign. His name is Stanley Doucette. He’s spent years rambling around New England with that sign of his. Sort of like me, now that I think of it.”

“Prior crimes of violence on his record?”

“A few,” Monette said. “Fights, mostly. Once he beat a man pretty badly in a bar, and he’s been in and out of mental institutions, including Serenity Hill, in Augusta. I don’t think the police told me everything.”

“Do you want to know everything?”

Monette considered, then said, “No.”

“They haven’t caught this fellow.”

“They say it’s only a matter of time. They say he’s not bright. But he was bright enough to fool me.”

“*Did* he fool you, son? Or did you know you were speaking to a listening ear? It seems to me that is the key question.”

Monette was quiet for a long time. He didn’t know if he had honestly searched his heart before, but he felt he was searching it now, and with a bright light. Not liking everything he found there but searching, yes. Not overlooking what he saw there. At least not on purpose.

“I did not,” he said.

“And are you glad your wife and her lover are dead?”

In his heart, Monette instantly said *yes*. Aloud he said, “I’m relieved. I’m sorry to say that, Father, but considering the mess she made—and how it’s apt to work out, with no trial and quiet restitution made out of the insurance money—I am relieved. Is that a sin?”

“Yes, my son. Sorry to break the news, but it is.”

“Can you give me absolution?”

“Ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys,” the priest said briskly. “The Our Fathers are for lack of charity—a serious sin but not mortal.”

“And the Hail Marys?”

“Foul language in the confessional. At some point the adultery issue—yours, not hers—needs to be addressed, but now—”

“You have a lunch date. I understand.”

“In truth, I’ve lost my appetite for lunch, although I should certainly greet my company. The main thing is, I think I’m a little too . . . too overwhelmed to go into your so-called road comfort just now.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now son?”

“Yes?”

“Not to belabor the point, but are you *sure* you didn’t give this man permission? Or encourage him in any way? Because then I think we’d be talking mortal sin instead of venial. I’d have to check with my own spiritual advisor to make sure, but—”

“No, Father. But do you think . . . is it possible that God put that guy in my car?”

In his heart, the priest instantly said *yes*. Aloud he said, “That’s blasphemy, good for ten more Our Fathers. I don’t know how long you’ve been outside the doors, but even you should know better. Now do you want to say something else and try for more Hail Marys, or are we done here?”

“We’re done, Father.”

“Then you’re shriven, as we say in the trade. Go your way and sin no more. And take care of your daughter, son. Children only have one mother, no matter how she may have behaved.”

“Yes, Father.”

Behind the screen, the form shifted. “Can I ask you one more question?”

Monette settled back, reluctantly. He wanted to be gone. “Yes.”

“You say the police think they will catch this man.”

“They tell me it’s only a matter of time.”

“My question is, do you *want* the police to catch this man?”

And because what he really wanted was to be gone and say his atonement in the even more private confessional of his car, Monette said, “Of course I do.”

On his way back home, he added two extra Hail Marys and two extra Our Fathers.

# Ayana

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

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

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

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

• • •

My father was dying of pancreatic cancer. I think you can tell a lot about people by listening to how they speak about that sort of situation (and the fact that I describe cancer as "that sort of situation" probably tells you something

about your narrator, who spent his life teaching English to boys and girls whose most serious health problems were acne and sports injuries).

Ralph said, “He’s nearly finished his journey.”

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

Ruth said, “He’s down for the count.”

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

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

• • •

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

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

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

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

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

The pain settled in, first in the midsection and then radiating outward until he would complain that even his eyelids and fingertips hurt. The painkillers stopped working. The nurse could have given him more, but that might have killed him and she refused. I wanted to give him more even if it did kill him.

And I might have, with support from Ruth, but my wife wasn't the sort to provide that kind of prop.

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

"He's my dad!"

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

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

That girl—I remember her as if it were this morning. I think she might have been seven, although extremely small for her age. Tiny, really. She was wearing a pink dress that stopped above her knobby knees. There was a Band-Aid printed with Warner Bros. cartoon characters on one equally knobby shin; I remember Yosemite Sam, with his long red mustache and a pistol in each hand. The dark glasses looked like a yard-sale consolation prize. They were far too big and had slid down to the end of the kid's snub nose, revealing eyes that were fixed, heavy-lidded, sheathed in blue-white film. Her hair was in cornrows. Over one arm was a pink plastic child's purse split down the side. On her feet were dirty sneakers. Her skin wasn't really black at all but a soapy gray. She was on her feet, but otherwise looked almost as sick as my father.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ayana,” the child said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Who was that child?” he asked.

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

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

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

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

the warm pressure of her palm on my mouth.

“Oh, don’t bother! I already did.”

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

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

“Testify to what?” Ralph asked.

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

“I want another kiss,” my father said.

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

• • •

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

• • •

He was better. When we got there fifteen minutes later, he was sitting on the living-room sofa and watching the Pirates on the house's larger TV—no technological marvel, but at least colorfast. He was sipping a protein shake through a straw. He had some color. His cheeks seemed plumper, perhaps because he was freshly shaved. He had regained himself. That was what I thought then; the impression has only grown stronger with the passage of time. And one other thing, which we all agreed on—even the doubting Thomasina to whom I was married: the yellow smell that had hung around him like ether ever since the doctors sent him home to die was gone.

He greeted us all by name, and told us that Willie Stargell had just hit a home run for the Buckos. Ralph and I looked at each other, as if to confirm we

were actually there. Trudy sat on the couch beside Doc, only it was more of a whooping down. Ruth went into the kitchen and got herself a beer. A miracle in itself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Bolsheveky!” Ruth cried.

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

• • •

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

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

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

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

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

• • •

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

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

Dr. Zamachowski said it was a simple case of organ malformation. “I was never comfortable with the original diagnosis,” he confided. I talked to Retif

on the phone, Zamachowski in person. He was wearing a white lab coat with a red T-shirt beneath that appeared to read I'D RATHER BE GOLFING. "I always thought it was Von Hippel-Lindau."

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

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

When I talked to the chief of radiology, he spread his hands. "Here we are responsible for photography, not interpretation," he said. "In another ten years, we will be using equipment that will make such misinterpretations as this one all but impossible. In the meantime, why not just be glad your pop is alive? Enjoy him."

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

• • •

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

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

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

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

I was still in considerable pain but able to read a magazine while waiting for my follow-up doctor’s appointment, and I considered this a great improvement. Someone sat down beside me and said, “Come on now, it’s time.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sorry, mate, wrong floor,” the ex-marine said.

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

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

“Yes, I suppose you will.”

“Will I see you again?”

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

• • •

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

• • •

“You’ve got blood on the back of your hand,” the ex-marine said as we drove back to my house. We were in his car, a nondescript Chevrolet sedan. There was a dog leash lying on the backseat and a St. Christopher’s medal hanging from the rearview mirror on a silver chain. “You ought to wash it off when you get home.”

I said I would.

“You won’t be seeing me again,” he said.

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

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

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

“Those people I kiss—do they go on to other people? Kiss their boo-boos and make them all gone?”

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

“Do you know a little girl named Ayana? Although I suppose she’d be a big girl now.”

“She’s dead.”

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

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

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

An idea occurred to me. It seemed like a good one, God knows why. “Come for Christmas,” I said. “Come for Christmas dinner. We have plenty. I’ll tell Ruth you’re my cousin from New Mexico.” Because I had never told her about the ex-marine. Knowing about my father was enough for her. Too much, really.

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

• • •

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

I kissed the corner of her mouth before I left, but of course nothing happened. A miracle is no good without a miracle worker, and my miracle days are behind me now. Except late at night when I can’t sleep. Then I can come downstairs and watch almost any movie I want. Even skin flicks. I have a satellite dish, you see, and something called Global Movies. I could even get the Pirates, if I wanted to order the MLB package. But I live on a fixed income

these days, and while I'm comfortable, I also have to keep an eye on my discretionary spending. I can read about the Pirates on the Internet. All those movies are miracle enough for me.

# A Very Tight Place

Curtis Johnson rode his bike five miles every morning. He had stopped for a while after Betsy died, but found that without his morning exercise he was sadder than ever. So he took it up again. The only difference was that he stopped wearing his bike helmet. He rode two and a half miles down Gulf Boulevard, then turned around and rode back. He always kept to the bike lanes. He might not care if he lived or died, but he respected the rule of law.

Gulf Boulevard was the only road on Turtle Island. It ran past a lot of homes owned by millionaires. Curtis didn't notice them. For one thing, he was a millionaire himself. He had made his money the old-fashioned way, in the stock market. For another, he had no problem with any of the people living in the houses he passed. The only one he had a problem with was Tim Grunwald, alias The Motherfucker, and Grunwald lived in the other direction. Not the last lot on Turtle Island before Daylight Channel, but the second-to-last. It was the last lot that was the problem between them (*one* of the problems). That lot was the biggest, with the best view of the Gulf, and the only one without a house on it. The only things on it were scrub grass, sea oats, stunted palms, and a few Australian pines.

The nicest thing, the very nicest, about his morning rides was no phone. He was officially off the grid. Once he got back, the phone would seldom leave his hand, especially while the market was open. He was athletic; he would stride around the house using the cordless, occasionally returning to his office, where his computer would be scrolling the numbers. Sometimes he left the house to walk out to the road, and then he took his cell phone. Usually he would turn right, toward the stub end of Gulf Boulevard. Toward The Motherfucker's house. But he wouldn't go so far that Grunwald could see him; Curtis wouldn't give the man that satisfaction. He just went far enough to make sure Grunwald wasn't trying to pull a fast one with the Vinton Lot. Of course there was no

way The Motherfucker could get heavy machinery past him, not even at night—Curtis slept lightly since there was no Betsy lying beside him. But he still checked, usually standing behind the last palm in a shady stretch of two dozen. Just to be sure. Because destroying empty lots, burying them under tons of concrete, was Grunwald's goddam *business*.

And The Motherfucker was sly.

So far, though, all was well. If Grunwald *did* try to pull a fast one, Curtis was ready to empty the holes (legally speaking). Meanwhile, Grunwald had Betsy to answer for, and answer he would. Even if Curtis had largely lost his taste for the fray (he denied this to himself, but knew it was true), he would see that Grunwald answered for her. The Motherfucker would discover that Curtis Johnson had jaws of chrome . . . jaws of *chrome steel* . . . and when he took hold of a thing, he did not let go.

When he returned to his home on this particular Tuesday morning, with ten minutes still to go before the opening bell on Wall Street, Curtis checked his cell phone for messages, as he always did. Today there were two. One was from Circuit City, probably some salesman trying to sell him something under the guise of checking his satisfaction with the wall-hung flatscreen he'd purchased the month before.

When he scrolled down to the next message, he read this: *383-0910 TMF*.

The Motherfucker. Even his Nokia knew who Grunwald was, because Curtis had taught it to remember. The question was, what did The Motherfucker want with him on a Tuesday morning in June?

Maybe to settle, and on Curtis's terms.

He allowed himself a laugh at this idea, then played the message. He was stunned to hear that was exactly what Grunwald *did* want—or *appeared* to want. Curtis supposed it could be some sort of ploy, but he didn't understand what Grunwald stood to gain by such a thing. And then there was the tone: heavy, deliberate, almost plodding. Maybe it wasn't sorrow, but it surely *sounded* like sorrow. It was the way Curtis himself sounded all too often on the phone these days, as he tried to get his head back in the game.

"Johnson . . . Curtis," Grunwald said in his plodding voice. His recorded voice paused longer, as if debating the use of Curtis's given name, then moved on in the same dead and lightless way. "I can't fight a war on two fronts. Let's

end this. I've lost my taste for it. If I ever had a taste for it. I'm in a very tight place, neighbor."

He sighed.

"I'm prepared to give up the lot, and for no financial consideration. I'll also compensate you for your . . . for Betsy. If you're interested, you can find me at Durkin Grove Village. I'll be there most of the day." A long pause. "I go out there a lot now. In a way I still can't believe the financing fell apart, and in a way I'm not surprised at all." Another long pause. "Maybe you know what I mean."

Curtis thought he did. He seemed to have lost his nose for the market. More to the point, he didn't seem to care. He caught himself feeling something suspiciously like sympathy for The Motherfucker. That plodding voice.

"We used to be friends," Grunwald went on. "Do you remember that? I do. I don't think we can be friends again—things went too far for that, I guess—but maybe we could be neighbors again. Neighbor." Another of those pauses. "If I don't see you out at Grunwald's Folly, I'll just instruct my lawyer to settle. On your terms. But . . ."

Silence, except for the sound of The Motherfucker breathing. Curtis waited. He was sitting at the kitchen table now. He didn't know what he felt. In a little while he might, but for the time being, no.

"But I'd like to shake your hand and tell you I'm sorry about your damn dog." There was a choked sound that might have been—incredible!—the sound of a sob, and then a click, followed by the phone-robot telling him there were no more messages.

Curtis sat where he was for a moment longer, in a bright bar of Florida sun that the air conditioner couldn't quite cool out, not even at this hour. Then he went into his study. The market was open; on his computer screen, the numbers had begun their endless crawl. He realized they meant nothing to him. He left it running but wrote a brief note for Mrs. Wilson—*Had to go out*—before leaving the house.

There was a motor scooter parked in the garage beside his BMW, and on the spur of the moment he decided to take it. He would have to nip across the main highway on the other side of the bridge, but it wouldn't be the first time.

He felt a pang of hurt and grief as he took the scooter's key from the peg and the other attachment on the ring jingled. He supposed that feeling would pass in time, but now it was almost welcome. Almost like welcoming a friend.

• • •

The troubles between Curtis and Tim Grunwald had started with Ricky Vinton, who had once been old and rich and then progressed to old and senile. Before progressing to dead, he'd sold his undeveloped lot at the end of Turtle Island to Curtis Johnson for one-point-five million dollars, taking Curtis's personal check for a hundred and fifty thousand as earnest money and in return writing Curtis a bill of sale on the back of an advertising circular.

Curtis felt a little like a hound for taking advantage of the old fellow, but it wasn't as if Vinton—owner of Vinton Wire and Cable—was going away to starve. And while a million-five might be considered ridiculously low for such a prime piece of Gulfside real estate, it wasn't *insanely* low, given current market conditions.

Well . . . yes it was, but he and the old man had liked one another, and Curtis was one of those who believed all was fair in love and war, and that business was a subsidiary of the latter. The man's housekeeper—the same Mrs. Wilson who kept house for Curtis—witnessed the signatures. In retrospect Curtis realized he should have known better than that, but he was excited.

A month or so after selling the undeveloped lot to Curtis Johnson, Vinton sold it to Tim Grunwald, alias The Motherfucker. This time the price was a more lucid five-point-six million, and this time Vinton—perhaps not such a fool after all, perhaps actually sort of a con man, even if he was dying—got half a million in earnest money.

Grunwald's bill of sale had been witnessed by The Motherfucker's yardman (who also happened to be Vinton's yardman). Also pretty shaky, but Curtis supposed Grunwald had been as excited as he, Curtis, had been. Only Curtis's excitement proceeded from the idea that he would be able to keep the end of Turtle Island clean, pristine, and quiet. Exactly the way he liked it.

Grunwald, on the other hand, saw it as the perfect site for development: one condominium or perhaps even two (when Curtis thought of two, he

thought of them as The Motherfucker Twin Towers). Curtis had seen such developments before—in Florida they popped up like dandelions on an indifferently maintained lawn—and he knew what The Motherfucker would be inviting in: idiots who mistook retirement funds for the keys to the kingdom of heaven. There would be four years of construction, followed by decades of old men on bicycles with pee bags strapped to their scrawny thighs. And old women who wore sun visors, smoked Parliaments, and didn't pick up the droppings after their designer dogs shat on the beach. Plus, of course, ice cream—slathered grandbrats with names like Lindsay and Jayson. If he let it happen, Curtis knew, he would die with their howls of discontent—“*You said we'd go to Disney World today!*”—in his ears.

He would not let it happen. And it turned out to be easy. Not pleasant, and the lot didn't belong to him, might *never* belong to him, but at least it wasn't Grunwald's. It didn't even belong to the relatives who had appeared (like roaches in a Dumpster when a bright light is suddenly turned on), disputing the signatures of the witnesses on both agreements. It belonged to the lawyers and the courts.

Which was like saying it belonged to nobody.

Curtis could work with nobody.

The wrangling had gone on for two years now, and Curtis's legal fees were approaching a quarter of a million dollars. He tried to think of the money as a contribution to some particularly nice environmental group—Johnsonpeace instead of Greenpeace—but of course he couldn't deduct *these* contributions on his income tax. And Grunwald pissed him off. Grunwald made it personal, partly because he hated to lose (Curtis hated it, too, in those days; not so much now), and partly because he had personal problems.

Grunwald's wife had divorced him; that was Personal Problem Number One. She was Mrs. Motherfucker no more. Then, Personal Problem Number Two, Grunwald had needed some sort of operation. Curtis didn't know for sure it was cancer, he only knew that The Motherfucker came out of Sarasota Memorial twenty or thirty pounds lighter, and in a wheelchair. He had eventually discarded the wheelchair, but hadn't been able to put the weight back on. Wattles hung from his formerly firm neck.

There were also problems with his once fearsomely healthy company. Curtis had seen that for himself at the site of The Motherfucker's current scorched-earth campaign. That would be Durkin Grove Village, located on the mainland twenty miles east of Turtle Island. The place was a half-constructed ghost town. Curtis had parked on a knoll overlooking the silent suspension, feeling like a general surveying the ruins of an enemy encampment. Feeling that life was, all in all, his very own shiny red apple.

Betsy had changed everything. She was—had been—a Lowchen, elderly but still spry. When Curtis walked her on the beach, she always carried her little red rubber bone in her mouth. When Curtis wanted the TV remote, he only had to say "Fetch the idiot stick, Betsy," and she would pluck it from the coffee table and bring it to him in her mouth. It was her pride. And his, of course. She had been his best friend for seventeen years. The French lion-dogs usually lived to no more than fifteen.

Then Grunwald had put in an electric fence between his property and Curtis's.

That Motherfucker.

It wasn't especially high voltage, Grunwald said he could prove that and Curtis believed him, but it had been of a voltage high enough to do for a slightly overweight old dog with a bad heart. And why an electric fence in the first place? The Motherfucker had spouted a lot of bullshit having to do with discouraging potential home-breakers—presumably creeping from Curtis's property to that upon which *La Maison Motherfuckair* reared its purple stucco head—but Curtis didn't believe it. Dedicated home-breakers would come in a boat, from the Gulf side. What he believed was that Grunwald, disgruntled about the Vinton Lot, had put in the electric fence for the express purpose of annoying Curtis Johnson. And perhaps hurting his beloved dog. As for actually *killing* his beloved dog? Curtis believed that had been a bonus.

He was not a weeping man, but he had wept when, prior to her cremation, he had removed Betsy's dog tag from her collar.

Curtis sued The Motherfucker for the price of the dog—twelve hundred dollars. If he could have sued for ten million—that was roughly how much pain he felt when he looked at the idiot stick lying, innocent of dogspit now and forever, on the coffee table—he would have done so in a heartbeat, but his

lawyer told him that pain and suffering wouldn't fly in a civil suit. Those things were for divorces, not dogs. He would have to settle for the twelve hundred, and he meant to have it.

The Motherfucker's lawyers responded that the electric fence had been strung a full ten yards on Grunwald's side of the property line, and the battle—the *second* battle—was on. It had been raging for eight months now. Curtis believed the delaying tactics being employed by The Motherfucker's lawyers suggested that they knew Curtis had a case. He also believed that their failure to propose a settlement, and Grunwald's failure to just cough up the twelve hundred, suggested that it had become as personal to Grunwald as it was to him. These lawyers were also costing them plenty. But of course, the matter was no longer about money.

Riding out along Route 17, through what had once been ranchland and was now just overgrown scrub ground (*Grunwald had been raving mad to build out here*, Curtis thought), Curtis only wished he felt happier about this turn of events. Victory was supposed to make your heart leap, and his wasn't. All he seemed to want was to see Grunwald, hear what he was actually proposing, and put all this shit behind them if the proposal wasn't too ridiculous. Of course that would probably mean the roach-relatives would get the Vinton Lot, and they might well decide to put up their own condo development, but did it even matter? It didn't seem to.

Curtis had his own problems to deal with, although his were mental rather than marital (God forbid), financial, or physical. They had begun not long after finding Betsy stiff and cold in the side yard. Others might have called these problems neuroses, but Curtis preferred to think of them as angst.

His current disenchantment with the stock market, which had fascinated him ceaselessly since he had discovered it at sixteen, was the most identifiable component of this angst, but by no means the only one. He had begun taking his pulse and counting his toothbrush strokes. He could no longer wear dark shirts, because he was plagued with dandruff for the first time since junior high school. Dead white crap plated up on his scalp and drifted down to his shoulders. If he scraped with the teeth of a comb, it came down in ghastly snow flurries. He hated this, but still sometimes found himself doing it while

sitting at the computer, or while talking on the phone. Once or twice he'd scraped until he drew blood.

Scraping and scraping. Excavating that white deadness. Sometimes looking at the idiot stick on the coffee table and thinking (of course) of how happy Betsy was when she brought it to him. Human eyes hardly ever looked that happy, especially not when the humans in question were doing chores.

A midlife crisis, Sammy said (Sammy was his once-a-week masseur). You need to get laid, Sammy said, but he didn't offer his own services, Curtis noticed.

Still, the phrase rang true—as true as any twenty-first-century newspeak, he supposed. Whether the Vinton Lot fuck-a-monkey show had provoked the crisis or the crisis had provoked the Vinton mess, he didn't know. What he *did* know was that he had come to think *heart attack* instead of *indigestion* each time he felt a transient, stabbing pain in his chest, that he had become obsessed with the notion that his teeth were going to fall out (even though they had never given him any particular trouble), and that when he'd gotten a cold in April, he had diagnosed himself as being on the verge of a complete immunological breakdown.

Plus this other little problem. This compulsion, which he hadn't told his doctor about. Or even Sammy, and he told Sammy *everything*.

It was on him now, fifteen miles inland on seldom-traveled Route 17, which had never been particularly busy and had now been rendered all but obsolescent by the 375 Extension. Right here with the green scrub pressing in on both sides (the man had been *bonkers* to build out here), with the bugs singing in high grass no cows had grazed for ten years or more and the power lines buzzing and the sun beating down like a padded hammer on his helmetless head.

He knew just thinking of the compulsion summoned it, but that was of no particular help. None at all, in fact.

He pulled over where a track marked DURKIN GROVE VILLAGE ROAD shot off to the left (grass was now growing up the center hump, an arrow pointing the way to failure) and put the Vespa in neutral. Then, while it purred contentedly between his legs, he forked the first two fingers of his right hand into a V and stuck them down his throat. His gag reflex had grown numb over the last two

or three months, and his hand was in almost all the way to the bracelets of fortune on his wrist before it finally happened.

Curtis leaned to one side and ejected his breakfast. It wasn't getting rid of the food that interested him; he was many things, but bulimic wasn't one of them. It wasn't even the vomiting part that he liked. What he liked was the *gagging*: that hard rejecting clench of the midsection, plus the accompanying yaw of the mouth and throat. The body was totally in gear, determined to oust the intruder.

The smells—green bushes, wild honeysuckle—were suddenly stronger. The light was brighter. The sun beat down more heavily than ever; the pad was off the hammer and he could feel the skin on the nape of his neck sizzling, the cells there maybe at this very moment turning outlaw and heading for the chaotic land of melanoma.

He didn't care. He was alive. He rammed his spread fingers down his throat again, scraping the sides. The rest of breakfast yurped up. The third time he produced only long strings of spittle, stained faintly pink with his throat's blood. Then he felt satisfied. Then he could go on toward Durkin Grove Village, The Motherfucker's half-built Xanadu out here in the silent bee-buzzing wilds of Charlotte County.

It occurred to him, as he putted modestly along the overgrown lane in the right-hand wheelrut, that Grunwald might not be the only one who was in a tight place these days.

• • •

Durkin Grove Village was a mess.

There were puddles in the ruts of the not-yet-paved streets and in the cellar holes of unfinished (in some cases not yet even framed) buildings. What Curtis saw below—half-built shops, a few pieces of shabby-looking construction equipment here and there, sagging yellow caution tape—was surely a blueprint for deep financial trouble, perhaps even ruin. Curtis didn't know if The Motherfucker's preoccupation with the Vinton Lot—not to mention the decampment of his wife, his illness, and his legal problems concerning Curtis's dog—had been the cause of the man's current overextension or not, but he

knew overextension was what it was. Even before continuing down to the open gate and seeing the sign posted there, he knew.

THIS SITE HAS BEEN CLOSED BY  
THE CHARLOTTE COUNTY DEPT  
OF BUILDING AND PLANNING  
THE CHARLOTTE COUNTY BUREAU OF TAXATION  
THE FLORIDA BUREAU OF TAXATION  
UNITED STATES INTERNAL REVENUE  
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CALL 941-555-1800

Below this, some exuberant wit had spray-painted: *DIAL EXTENSION 69 AND ASK FOR THE CUNT-LICKER GENERAL!*

The tar ended and the potholes began after the only three buildings that looked completed: two shops on one side of the street and a model home on the other. The model home was a faux Cape Cod that made Curtis's blood run cold. He didn't trust the Vespa on the unpaved surface, so he turned in beside a payloader that looked as if it had been parked there for a century or more—grass was growing in the dirt at the bottom of its partially raised scoop—put down the stand, and turned off the engine.

Silence poured in to fill the socket which had been occupied by the Vespa's fat purr. Then a crow cawed. It was answered by another. Curtis looked up and saw a trio of them poised on a scaffolding that enshrouded a partially finished brick building. Maybe it had been intended as a bank. *Now it's Grunwald's tombstone*, he thought, but the idea didn't even bring a smile to his lips. He felt like gagging himself again, and might even have done it, but farther down the deserted dirt street—at the far end, in fact—he saw a man standing beside a white sedan with a green palm tree on it. Above the palm tree: GRUNWALD. Below it: CONTRACTORS & BUILDERS. The man was waving to him. Grunwald was for some reason driving a company car today instead of his Porsche. Curtis supposed it wasn't impossible that Grunwald had sold the Porsche. It wasn't impossible to think the IRS had seized it, and might even seize Grunwald's Turtle Island property. Then the Vinton Lot would be the least of his worries.

*I just hope they leave him enough to pay for my dog,* Curtis thought. He waved back to Grunwald, flicked the red alarm switch below the ignition after removing the key (these things were only reflex; he did not think the Vespa was in any danger of being stolen, not out here, but he had been taught to take care of his things), and put the key in his pocket with his cell phone. Then he started down the dirt street—a Main Street that never was, and, it now seemed certain, never would be—to meet his neighbor and settle the trouble between them once and for all, if that were possible. He was careful to avoid the puddles left from the previous night's shower.

“Yo, neighbor!” Grunwald said as Curtis approached. He was wearing khakis and a T-shirt with his company's palm-tree logo on it. The shirt bagged on him. Except for hectic blotches of red high on his cheekbones and dark—almost black—circles under his eyes, his face was pale. And although he sounded cheerful, he looked sicker than ever. *Whatever they tried to cut out of him,* Curtis thought, *they failed.* Grunwald had one hand behind him. Curtis assumed it was in his back pocket. This turned out not to be true.

A little farther down the rutted and puddled dirt road was a trailer up on blocks. The on-site office, Curtis supposed. There was a notice encased in a protective plastic sleeve, hanging from a little plastic suction cup. There was a lot printed on it, but all Curtis could read (all he needed to read) were the words at the top: NO ENTRY.

Yes, The Motherfucker had fallen on hard times. Hard cheese on Tony, as Evelyn Waugh might have said.

“Grunwald?” It was enough to start with; considering what had happened to Betsy, it was all The Motherfucker deserved. Curtis stopped about ten feet from him, his legs slightly spread to avoid a puddle. Grunwald's legs were spread, too. It occurred to Curtis that this was a classic pose: gunfighters about to do their deal on the only street of a ghost town.

“Yo, neighbor!” Grunwald repeated, and this time he actually laughed. There was something familiar about his laugh. And why not? Surely he had heard The Motherfucker laugh before. He couldn't remember just when, but surely he must have.

Behind Grunwald, across from the trailer and not far from the company car Grunwald had driven out here, stood a line of four blue Port-O-Sans. Weeds

and nodding wedelia sprouted around their bases. The runoff from frequent June thunderstorms (such afternoon tantrums were a Gulf Coast specialty) had undercut the ground in front of them and turned it into a ditch. Almost a creek. It was filled with standing water now, the surface dusty and bleared with pollen, so that it cast back only a vague blue intimation of sky. The quartet of shithouses leaned forward like frost-heaved old gravestones. There must have been quite a crew out here at one time, because there was also a fifth. That one had actually fallen over and lay door-down in the ditch. It was the final touch, underlining the fact that this project—crazy to begin with—was now a dead letter.

One of the crows took off from the scaffolding around the unfinished bank and flapped across the hazy blue sky, cawing at the two men facing each other below. The bugs buzzed unconcernedly in the high grass. Curtis realized he could smell the Port-O-Sans; they must not have been pumped out in some time.

“Grunwald?” he said again. And then (because now something more seemed to be required): “How can I help you? Do we have something to discuss?”

“Well, neighbor, it’s how I can help *you*. It’s strictly down to that.” He started to laugh again, then choked it off. And Curtis knew why the sound was familiar. He’d heard it on his cell phone, at the end of The Motherfucker’s message. It hadn’t been a choked-off sob, after all. And the man didn’t look sick—or not *just* sick. He looked mad.

*Of course he’s mad. He’s lost everything. And you let him get you out here alone. Not wise, buddy. You didn’t think it through.*

No. Since Betsy’s death, he had neglected to think a great many things through. Hadn’t seemed worth the trouble. But this time he should have taken the time.

Grunwald was smiling. Or at least showing his teeth. “I notice you didn’t wear your helmet, neighbor.” He shook his head, still smiling that cheery sick man’s smile. His hair flapped against his ears. It looked as if it hadn’t been washed in a while. “A wife wouldn’t let you get away with careless shit like that, I bet, but of course guys like you don’t have wives, do they? They have *dogs*.”

He stretched it out, turning it into something from *The Dukes of Hazzard: dawwwgs*.

“Fuck this, I’m taillights,” Curtis said. His heart was hammering, but he didn’t think it showed in his voice. He hoped not. All at once it seemed very important that Grunwald not know he was scared. He started to turn around, back the way he’d come.

“I thought the Vinton Lot *might* get you out here,” Grunwald said, “but I *knew* you’d come if I added in that butt-ugly dog of yours. I heard her yelp, you know. When she ran into the fence. Trespassing bitch.”

Curtis turned back, unbelieving.

The Motherfucker was nodding, his lank hair framing his pale smiling face. “Yes,” he said. “I went over and saw her lying on her side. Little ragbag with eyes. I watched her die.”

“You said you were away,” Curtis said. His voice sounded small in his own ears, a child’s voice.

“Well, neighbor, I sure did lie about that. I was back early from my doctor’s, and feeling sad that I had to turn him down after he’d worked so hard at persuading me to take the chemo, and then I saw that ragbag of yours lying in a puddle of her own puke, panting, flies all around her, and I cheered right up. I thought, ‘Goddam, there *is* justice. There is justice after all.’ It was only a low-voltage, low-current cattle fence—I was absolutely honest about that—but it certainly did the job, didn’t it?”

Curtis Johnson got the full sense of this after a moment of utter, perhaps willful, incomprehension. Then he started forward, rolling his hands into fists. He hadn’t hit anyone since a playground scuffle when he was in the third grade, but he meant to hit someone now. He meant to hit The Motherfucker. The bugs still buzzed obliviously in the grass, and the sun still hammered down—nothing in the essential world had changed except for him. The uncaring listlessness was gone. He cared about at least one thing: beating Grunwald until he cried and bled and crawfished. And he thought he could do it. Grunwald was twenty years older, and not well. And when The Motherfucker was on the ground—hopefully with his newly broken nose in one of those nasty puddles—Curtis would say, *That was for my ragbag. Neighbor.*

Grunwald took one compensatory step backward. Then he brought his hand out from behind his back. In it was a large handgun. “Stop right there, neighbor, or I’ll put an extra hole in your head.”

Curtis almost didn’t stop. The gun seemed unreal. Death, out of that black eyehole? Surely not possible. But—

“It’s a .45 AMT Hardballer,” Grunwald said, “loaded with soft-point ammo. I got it the last time I was in Vegas. At a gun show. Just after Ginny left, that was. I thought I might shoot her, but I find I’ve lost all interest in Ginny. Basically, she’s just another anorexic Suncoast cunt with Styrofoam tits. You, however—you’re something different. You’re *malevolent*, Johnson. You’re a fucking gay witch.”

Curtis stopped. He believed.

“But now you’re in my power, as they say.” The Motherfucker laughed, once more choking it off so it sounded strangely like a sob. “I don’t even have to hit you dead on. This is a powerful gun, or so I was told. Even a hit in the hand would render you dead, because it would tear your hand right off. And in the midsection? Your guts’d fly forty feet. So do you want to try it? Do you feel lucky, punk?”

Curtis did not want to try it. He did not feel lucky. The truth was belated but obvious: he had been cozened out here by a complete barking lunatic.

“What do you want? I’ll give you what you want.” Curtis swallowed. There was an insectile click in his throat. “Do you want me to call off the suit about Betsy?”

“Don’t call her Betsy,” The Motherfucker said. He had the gun—the Hardballer, what a grotesque name—pointed at Curtis’s face, and now the hole looked very big indeed. Curtis realized he would probably be dead before he heard the gun’s report, although he might see flame—or the beginning of flame—spurt from the barrel. He also realized that he was perilously close to pissing himself. “Call her ‘my ass-faced ragbag bitch.’”

“My ass-faced ragbag bitch,” Curtis repeated at once, and didn’t feel the slightest twinge of disloyalty to Betsy’s memory.

“Now say, ‘And how I loved to lick her smelly cunt,’” The Motherfucker further instructed.

Curtis was silent. He was relieved to discover there were still limits. Besides, if he said that, The Motherfucker would only want him to say something else.

Grunwald did not seem particularly disappointed. He wagged the gun. “Just joking about that one, anyway.”

Curtis was silent. Part of his mind was roaring with panic and confusion, but another part seemed clearer than it had been since Betsy died. Maybe clearer than it had been in years. That part was musing on the fact that he really could die out here.

He thought, *What if I never get to eat another slice of bread?*, and for a moment his mind united—the confused part and the clear part—in a desire to live so strong it was terrible.

“What do you want, Grunwald?”

“For you to get into one of those Port-O-Sans. The one on the end.” He wagged the gun again, this time to the left.

Curtis turned to look, feeling a small thread of hope. If Grunwald intended to lock him up . . . that was good, right? Maybe now that he’d scared Curtis and blown off a little steam, Grunwald intended to stash him and make his getaway. *Or maybe he’ll go home and shoot himself*, Curtis thought. *Take that old .45 Hardballer cancer cure. A well-known folk remedy.*

He said, “All right. I can do that.”

“But first I want you to empty your pockets. Dump them right out on the ground.”

Curtis pulled out his wallet, then, reluctantly, his cell phone. A little sheaf of bills in a money clip. His dandruff-flecked comb.

“That it?”

“Yes.”

“Turn those pocketsets inside out, Precious. I want to see for myself.”

Curtis turned out his left front pocket, then his right. A few coins and the key to his motor scooter fell to the ground, where they glittered in the hazy sun.

“Good,” Grunwald said. “Now the back ones.”

Curtis turned out his rear pockets. There was an old shopping list jotted on a scrap of paper. Nothing else.

Grunwald said, “Kick your cell phone over here.”

Curtis tried, and missed completely.

“You asshole,” Grunwald said, and laughed. The laugh ended in that same choking, sobbing sound, and for the first time in his life, Curtis completely understood murder. The clear part of his mind registered this as a wonderful thing, because murder—previously inconceivable to him—turned out to be as simple as reducing fractions.

“Hurry the fuck up,” Grunwald said. “I want to go home and get in the hot tub. Forget the painkillers, that hot tub is the only thing that works. I’d *live* in that baby if I could.” But he did not look particularly anxious to be gone. His eyes were sparkling.

Curtis kicked at the phone again and this time connected, sending it skittering all the way to Grunwald’s feet.

“He shoots, he scores!” The Motherfucker cried. He dropped to one knee, picked up the Nokia (never taking the gun off Curtis), then straightened up with a small, effortful grunt. He slipped Curtis’s phone into the right pocket of his pants. He pointed the muzzle of the gun briefly at the litter lying on the road. “Now pick up the rest of your crap and put it back in your pockets. Get all the change. Who knows, you might find a snack machine in there.”

Curtis did it silently, again feeling a little pang as he looked at the attachment on the Vespa’s keyring. Some things didn’t change even in extremis, it seemed.

“You forgot your shopping list, Fucko. You don’t want to forget that. Everything back in your pockets. As for your phone, I’m going to put that back on its little charger in your little housie. After I delete the message I left you, that is.”

Curtis picked up the scrap of paper—*OJ, Roloids, pce of fish, Eng muffins*, it said—and stuffed it back into one of his rear pockets. “You can’t do that,” he said.

The Motherfucker raised his bushy old-man eyebrows. “Want to share?”

“The house alarm’s set.” Curtis couldn’t remember if he had set it or not. “Also, Mrs. Wilson will be there by the time you get back to Turtle.”

Grunwald gave him an indulgent look. The fact that it was *mad* indulgence made it terrifying instead of just infuriating. “It’s *Thursday*, neighbor. Your housekeeper only comes in during the afternoons on Thursdays and Fridays.

Did you think I wasn't keeping an eye on you? Just like you've been keeping one on me?"

"I don't—"

"Oh, I see you, peeking from behind your favorite palm tree on the road—did you think I didn't?—but you never saw *me*, did you? Because you're lazy. And lazy people are blind people. Lazy people get what they deserve." His voice lowered confidentially. "All gay people are lazy; it's been scientifically proven. The gay lobby tries to cover it up, but you can find the studies on the Internet."

In his mounting dismay, Curtis hardly noticed this last. *If he's been charting Mrs. Wilson . . . Christ, how long has he been brooding and planning?*

At least since Curtis had sued him over Betsy. Maybe even before.

"As for your alarm code . . ." The Motherfucker loosed his sobbing laugh again. "I'll let you in on a little secret: your system was put in by Hearn Security, and I've been working with them for almost thirty years. I could have the security codes for any Hearn-serviced home on the Island, if I wanted. But, as it happens, the only one I wanted was yours." He sniffed, spat on the ground, then coughed a loose rumbling cough that came from deep in his chest. It sounded as if it hurt (Curtis hoped so), but the gun never wavered. "I don't think you set it, anyway. Got your mind on blowjobs and such."

"Grunwald, can't we—"

"No. We can't. You deserve this. You earned it, you bought it, you got it. Get in the fucking shithouse."

Curtis started toward the Port-O-Sans, but aimed for the one on the far right instead of the far left.

"Nope, nope," Grunwald said. Patiently, as if speaking to a child. "The one on the *other* end."

"That one's leaning too far," Curtis said. "If I get in, it might fall over."

"Nope," Grunwald said. "That thing's as solid as your beloved stock market. Special sides is why. But I'm sure you'll enjoy the smell. Guys like you spend a lot of time in crappers, you must like the smell. You must *love* the smell." Suddenly the gun poked into Curtis's buttocks. Curtis gave a small, startled scream, and Grunwald laughed. That Motherfucker. "Now get in there before I decide to turn your old tan track into a brand-new superhighway."

Curtis had to lean across the ditch of still, scummy water, and because the Port-O-San was leaning, the door swung out and almost hit him in the face when it came off the latch. This occasioned another burst of laughter from Grunwald, and at the sound, Curtis was once more visited with thoughts of murder. All the same, it was amazing how engaged he felt. How suddenly in love with the green smells of the foliage and the hazy look of the blue Florida sky. How much he longed to eat a piece of bread—even a slice of Wonder Bread would be a gourmet treat; he would eat it with a napkin in his lap and choose a complementary vintage from his little wine closet. He had gained a whole new perspective on life. He only hoped he would live to enjoy it. And if The Motherfucker just intended to lock him in, maybe he would.

He thought (it was as random and as unprompted as his thought about the bread): *If I get out of this, I'm going to start giving money to Save the Children.*

“Get in there, Johnson.”

“I tell you it’ll fall over!”

“Who’s the construction guy here? It won’t fall over if you’re careful. Get in.”

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this!”

Grunwald laughed unbelievably. Then he said, “You get your ass in there or I will blow it off, so help me God.”

Curtis stepped across the ditch and into the Port-O-San. It rocked forward alarmingly under his weight. He cried out and leaned over the bench with the closed toilet seat in it, splaying his hands against the back wall. And while he was standing there like a suspect about to be frisked, the door slammed shut behind him. The sunlight was gone. He was suddenly in hot, deep shadows. He looked back over his shoulder and the Port-O-San rocked again, on the very edge of balance.

There was a knock on the door. Curtis could imagine The Motherfucker out there, leaning over the ditch, one hand braced on the blue siding, the other fisted up to knock with. “Comfy in there? Snug?”

Curtis made no reply. At least with Grunwald leaning on the Port-O-San’s door, the damned thing had steadied.

“Sure you are. Snug as a bug in a whatever.”

There was another thump, and then the toilet rocked forward again. Grunwald had removed his weight from it. Curtis once more assumed the position, standing on the balls of his feet, bending all his will to keeping the stinking cubicle more or less upright. Sweat was trickling down his face, stinging a shaving cut on the left jawline. This made him think of his own bathroom, usually taken for granted, with loving nostalgia. He would give every dollar in his retirement fund to be there, razor in his right hand, watching blood trickle through the shaving cream on the left-hand side while some stupid pop song played from the clock radio beside his bed. Something by The Carpenters or Don Ho.

*It's going over this time, going over for sure, that was his plan all along—*

But the Port-O-San steadied instead of tumbling over. All the same it was close to going, very close. Curtis stood on tiptoe with his hands braced against the wall and his midsection arched over the bench seat, becoming aware now of how badly the hot little cubicle smelled, even with the seat closed. There was the odor of disinfectant—it would be the blue stuff, of course—mingling with the stench of decaying human waste, and that made it somehow even worse.

When Grunwald spoke again, his voice came from beyond the rear wall. He had stepped over the ditch and circled around to the back of the Port-O-San. Curtis was so surprised he almost recoiled, but managed not to. Still, he couldn't suppress a jerk. His splayed hands momentarily left the wall. The Port-O-San tottered. He brought his hands back to the wall again, leaning forward as far as he could, and it steadied.

"How you doing, neighbor?"

"Scared to death," Curtis said. His hair had fallen onto his forehead, it was sticking in the sweat there, but he was afraid to flick it back. Even that much extra movement might send the Port-O-San tumbling. "Let me out. You've had your fun."

"If you think I'm having fun, you're very much mistaken," The Motherfucker said in a pedantic voice. "I've thought about this a long time, neighbor, and finally decided it was necessary—the only course of action. And it had to be now, because if I waited much longer, I'd no longer be able to trust my body to do what I needed it to do."

"Grunwald, we can settle this like men. I swear we can."

“Swear all you like, I would never take the word of a man like you,” he said in that same pedantic voice. “Any man who takes the word of a faggot deserves what he gets.” And then, yelling so loud his voice broke into splinters: “*YOU GUYS THINK YOU’RE SO SMART! HOW SMART DO YOU FEEL NOW?*”

Curtis said nothing. Each time he thought he was getting a handle on The Motherfucker’s madness, new vistas opened before him.

At last, in a calmer tone, Grunwald went on.

“You want an explanation. You think you *deserve* one. Possibly you do.”

Somewhere a crow cawed. To Curtis, in his hot little box, it sounded like laughter.

“Did you think I was joking when I called you a gay witch? I was not. Does that mean you *know* you’re a, well, a malevolent supernatural force sent to try me and test me? I don’t know. I don’t. I’ve spent many a sleepless night since my wife took her jewelry and left thinking about this question—among others—and I still don’t. *You* probably don’t.”

“Grunwald, I assure you I’m not—”

“Shut up. I’m talking here. And of course, that’s what you’d *say*, isn’t it? Regardless of whether you knew or not, it’s what you’d *say*. Look at the testimonies of various witches in Salem. Go on, look. I have. It’s all on the Internet. They swore they weren’t witches, and when they thought it would get them out of death’s receiving room they swore they *were*, but very few of them actually *knew for sure themselves!* That becomes clear when you look at it with your enlightened . . . you know, enlightened . . . your enlightened whatever. Mind or whatever. Hey neighbor, how is it when I do this?”

Suddenly The Motherfucker—sick but apparently still quite strong—began to rock the Port-O-San. Curtis was almost thrown against the door, which would have resulted in disaster for sure.

“*Stop it!*” he roared. “*Stop doing that!*”

Grunwald laughed indulgently. The Port-O-San stopped rocking. But Curtis thought the angle of the floor was steeper than it had been. “What a baby you are. It’s as solid as the stock market, I tell you!”

A pause.

“Of course . . . there *is* this: all faggots are liars, but not all liars are faggots. It’s not a balancing equation, if you see what I mean. I’m as straight as an

arrow, always have been, I'd fuck the Virgin Mary and then go to a barn dance, but I lied to get you out here, I freely admit it, and I might be lying now."

That cough again—deep and dark and almost certainly painful.

"Let me out, Grunwald. I beg you. I am begging you."

A long pause, as if The Motherfucker were considering this. Then he resumed his previous scripture.

"In the end—when it comes to witches—we can't rely on confessions," he said. "We can't even rely on *testimony*, because it might be cocked. When you're dealing with witches, the subjective gets all . . . it gets all . . . you know. We can only rely on the *evidence*. So I considered the evidence in *my* case. Let's look at the facts. First, you fucked me on the Vinton Lot. That was the first thing."

"Grunwald, I never—"

"Shut up, neighbor. Unless you want me to tip over your happy little home, that is. In that case, you can talk all you want. Is that what you want?"

"No!"

"Good call. I don't know exactly *why* you fucked me, but I *believe* you did it because you were afraid I meant to stick a couple of condos out there on Turtle Point. In any case, the *evidence*—namely, your ridiculous so-called bill of sale—indicates that fuckery was what it was, pure and simple. You claim that Ricky Vinton meant to sell you that lot for one million, five hundred thousand dollars. Now, neighbor, I ask you. Would any judge and jury in the world believe that?"

Curtis didn't reply. He was afraid to even clear his throat now, and not just because it might set The Motherfucker off; it might tip the precariously balanced Port-O-San over. He was afraid it might go over if he so much as lifted a little finger from the back wall. Probably that was stupid, but maybe it wasn't.

"Then the relatives swooped in, complicating a situation that was already complicated enough—*by your gayboy meddling!* And you were the one who called them. You or your lawyer. That's obvious, a, you know, QED type of situation. Because you like things just the way they are."

Curtis remained silent, letting this go unchallenged.

"That's when you threw your curse. Must have been. Because the evidence bears it out. 'You don't need to see Pluto to deduce Pluto is there.' Some

scientist said that. He figured out Pluto existed by observing the irregularities in some other planet's orbit, did you know that? Deducing witchcraft is like that, Johnson. You have to check the evidence and look for irregularities in the orbit of your, you know, your whatever. Life. Plus, your spirit darkens. It *darkens*. I felt that happening. Like an eclipse. It—”

He coughed some more. Curtis stood in the ready-to-be-frisked position, butt out, stomach arched over the toilet where Grunwald's carpenters had once sat down to take care of business after their morning coffee kicked in.

“Next, Ginny left me,” The Motherfucker said. “She's currently living on Cape Cod. She says she's there by herself, of course she does, because she wants that alimony—they all do—but I know better. If that randy bitch didn't have a cock to pole-vault on twice a day, she'd eat chocolate truffles in front of *American Idol* until she exploded.

“Then the IRS. Those bastards came next, with their laptops and questions. ‘Did you do this, did you do that, where's the paperwork on the other?’ Was that witchcraft, Johnson? Or maybe fuckery of a more, I don't know, ordinary kind? Like you picking up the telephone and saying, ‘Audit this guy, he's got a lot more cake in his pantry than he's letting on.’”

“Grunwald, I never called—”

The Port-O-San shook. Curtis rocked backward, sure that *this* time . . .

But once more the Port-O-San settled. Curtis was starting to feel woozy. Woozy and pukey. It wasn't just the smell; it was the *heat*. Or maybe it was both together. He could feel his shirt sticking to his chest.

“I'm laying out the evidence,” Grunwald said. “You shut up when I'm laying out the evidence. Order in the fucking court.”

*Why* was it so hot in here? Curtis looked up and saw no roof vents. Or—there were, but they were covered over. By what looked like a piece of sheet metal. Three or four holes had been punched into it, letting in some light but absolutely no breeze. The holes were bigger than quarters, smaller than silver dollars. He looked over his shoulder and saw another line of holes, but the two door vents were also almost completely covered.

“They've frozen my assets,” Grunwald said in a heavy put-upon voice. “Did an audit first, said it was all just routine, but I know what they do, and I knew what was coming.”

*Of course you did, because you were guilty as hell.*

“But even before the audit, I developed this cough. That was your work, too, of course. Went to the doctor. Lung cancer, neighbor, and it’s spread to my liver and stomach and fuck knows what else. All the soft parts. Just what a witch would go for. I’m surprised you didn’t put it in my balls and up my ass as well, although I’m sure it’ll get there in good time. If I let it. But I won’t. That’s why, although I think I’ve got this business out here covered, my, you know, ass in diapers, it doesn’t matter even if I don’t. I’m going to put a bullet through my head pretty soon. From this very gun, neighbor. While I’m in my hot tub.”

He sighed sentimentally.

“That’s the only place I’m happy anymore. In my hot tub.”

Curtis realized something. Maybe it was hearing The Motherfucker say *I think I’ve got this business out here covered*, but more likely he had known for some time now. The Motherfucker meant to tip the Port-O-San over. He was going to do that if Curtis blubbered and protested; he was going to do it if Curtis held his peace. It didn’t really matter. But for the time being, he held his peace anyway. Because he wanted to stay upright as long as possible—yes, of course—but also out of dreadful fascination. Grunwald wasn’t speaking metaphorically; Grunwald actually believed Curtis Johnson was some kind of sorcerer. His brain had to be rotting along with the rest of him.

“*LUNG CANCER!*” Grunwald proclaimed to his empty, deserted development—and then began coughing again. Crows cawed in protest. “I quit smoking *thirty years ago, and I get lung cancer NOW?*”

“You’re crazy,” Curtis said.

“Sure, the world would say so. That was the plan, wasn’t it? That was the fucking *PLAAAAAN*. And then, on top of everything else, you sue me over your damn ass-faced *dog?* Your damn dog that was on *MY PROPERTY?* And what was the purpose of that? After you’d taken my lot, my wife, my business, and my life, what possible purpose? Humiliation, of course! Insult to injury! Coals to Newcastle! Witchcraft! And do you know what the Bible says? *Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!* Everything that’s happened to me is your fault, and *thou shalt not suffer a witch . . . TO LIVE!*”

Grunwald shoved the Port-O-San. He must have really put his shoulder into it, because there was no hesitation this time, no tottering. Curtis, momentarily weightless, fell backward. The latch should have broken under his weight, but didn't. The Motherfucker must have done something to that, too.

Then his weight returned and he crashed down on his back as the portable toilet hit the ground door-first. His teeth snapped shut on his tongue. The back of his head connected with the door and he saw stars. The lid of the toilet opened like a mouth. Brown-black fluid, thick as syrup, vomited out. A decomposing turd landed on his crotch. Curtis gave a cry of revulsion, batted it aside, then wiped his hand on his shirt, leaving a brown stain. A vile creek was spilling out of the gaping toilet seat. It ran down the side of the bench seat and pooled around his sneakers. A Reese's Peanut Butter Cup wrapper floated in it. Streamers of toilet paper hung out of the toilet's mouth. It looked like New Year's Eve in hell. This absolutely could not be happening. It was a nightmare left over from childhood.

"How's the smell in there now, neighbor?" The Motherfucker called. He was laughing and coughing. "Just like home, isn't it? Think of it as a twenty-first-century gayboy ducking stool, why don't you? All you need is that gayboy Senator and a pile of Victoria's Secret undies and you could have a lingerie party!"

Curtis's back was wet, too. He realized the Port-O-San must have landed in or just bridged the water-filled ditch. Water was seeping in through the holes in the door.

"Mostly these portable toilets are just thin molded plastic—you know, the ones you see at truck stops or turnpike rest areas—and you could punch right through the walls or the roof, if you were dedicated. But at construction sites, we sheet-metal the sides. Cladding, it's called. Otherwise, people come along and punch holes through them. Vandals, just for fun, or gayboys like you. To make what they call 'glory holes.' Oh yes, I know about those things. I have all the information, neighbor. Or kids will come along and huck rocks through the roofs, just to hear the sound it makes. It's a popping sound, like popping a great big paper bag. So we sheet those, too. Of course it makes it hotter, but that's actually an efficiency thing. Nobody wants to spend fifteen minutes reading a magazine in a shithouse as hot as a Turkish prison cell."

Curtis turned over. He was lying in a brackish, smelly puddle. There was a piece of toilet paper wrapped around his wrist, and he stripped it away. He saw a brown smear—some long-since-laid-off construction worker’s leavings—on the paper and began to cry. He was lying in shit and toilet paper, more water was bubbling in through the door, and it wasn’t a dream. Somewhere not too far distant his Macintosh was scrolling up numbers from Wall Street, and here he lay in a puddle of pisswater with an old black turd curled in the corner and a gaping toilet seat not far above his heels, and it wasn’t a dream. He would have sold his soul to wake up in his own bed, clean and cool.

*“Let me out! GRUNWALD, PLEASE!”*

“Can’t. It’s all arranged,” The Motherfucker said in a businesslike voice. “You came out here to do a little sightseeing—a little gloating. You felt a call of nature, and there were the porta-potties. You stepped into the one on the end and it fell over. End of story. When you’re found—when you’re *finally* found—the cops will see they’re all leaning, because the afternoon rains have undercut them. They’ll have no way of knowing your current abode was leaning a little more than the others. Or that I took your cell phone. They’ll just assume you left it at home, you silly sissy. The situation will look very clear to them. The *evidence*, you know—it always comes back to the evidence.”

He laughed. No coughing this time, just the warm, self-satisfied laugh of a man who has covered all the bases. Curtis lay in filthy water that was now two inches deep, felt it soaking through his shirt and pants to his skin, and wished The Motherfucker would die of a sudden stroke or heart attack. Fuck the cancer; let him drop right out there on the unpaved street of his stupid bankrupt development. Preferably on his back, so the birds could peck out his eyes.

*If that happened, I’d die in here.*

True, but that was what Grunwald had planned from the first, so what difference?

“They’ll see there was no robbery; your money is still in your pocket. So’s the key to your motor scooter. Those things are very unsafe, by the way; almost as bad as ATVs. And without a helmet! Shame on you, neighbor. I noticed you set the alarm, though, and that’s fine. A nice touch, in fact. You don’t even

have a pen to write a note on the wall with. If you'd had one, I would have taken that, too, but you don't. It's going to look like a tragic accident."

He paused. Curtis could picture him out there with hellish clarity. Standing there in his too-big clothes with his hands stuffed in his pockets and his unwashed hair clumping over his ears. Ruminating. Talking to Curtis but also talking to himself, looking for loopholes even now, even after what must have been weeks of sleepless nights spent planning this.

"Of course, a person can't plan for everything. There are always wild cards in the deck. Deuces and jacks, man with the axe, natural sevens take all. That kind of thing. And chances of anyone coming out here and finding you? While you're still alive, that is? Low, I'd say. Very low. And what have I got to lose?" He laughed, sounding delighted with himself. "Are you lying in the shit, Johnson? I hope so."

Curtis looked at the coil of excrement he had shoved off his pants, but said nothing. There was a low buzzing. Flies. Only a few, but even a few was too many, in his opinion. They were escaping from the gaping toilet seat. They must have been trapped in the collection tank that should have been below him instead of lying at his feet.

"I'm going now, neighbor, but consider this: you are suffering a true, you know, witchly fate. And like the man said: in the shithouse, no one can hear you scream."

Grunwald started away. Curtis could track him by the diminishing sound of his coughing laughter.

"Grunwald! Grunwald, come back!"

Grunwald called: "Now *you're* the one in a tight place. A very tight place indeed."

Then—he should have expected it, *did* expect it, but it was still unbelievable—he heard the company car with the palm tree on the side starting up.

*"Come back, you Motherfucker!"*

But now it was the sound of the car that was diminishing, as Grunwald drove first up the unpaved street (Curtis could hear the wheels splashing through the puddles), then up the hill, past where a very different Curtis Johnson had parked his Vespa. The Motherfucker gave a single blip of his horn—cruel and cheery—and then the sound of the engine merged with the sound

of the day, which was nothing but the buzz of the insects in the grass and the hum of the flies that had escaped from the waste tank and the drone of a far-off plane where the people in first class might be eating Brie on crackers.

A fly lit on Curtis's arm. He brushed it away. It landed on the coil of turd and commenced its lunch. Suddenly the stench of the disturbed waste tank seemed like a living thing, like a brown-black hand crawling down Curtis's throat. But the smell of old decaying crap wasn't the worst; the worst was the smell of the disinfectant. It was the blue stuff. He knew it was the blue stuff.

He did a sit-up—there was just room—and vomited between his spread knees, into the puddled water and floating strands of toilet paper. After his earlier adventures in regurgitation there wasn't much left but bile. He sat bent over and panting, hands behind him and braced against the door he was now sitting on, the shaving cut by his jawline throbbing and stinging. Then he heaved again, this time producing only a belch that sounded like the buzz of a cicada.

And, oddly enough, he felt better. Somehow *honest*. That had been *earned* vomiting. No fingers down the throat needed. As far as his dandruff went, who knew? Perhaps he could gift the world with a new treatment: the Aged Urine Rinse. He would be sure to check his scalp for improvement when he got out of here. *If* he got out of here.

Sitting up, at least, was no problem. It was fearsomely hot, and the stench was terrible (he didn't want to think what might have been stirred up in the holding tank, and at the same time couldn't push such thoughts away), but at least there was headroom.

"Must count blessings," he muttered. "Must count those sons of bitches carefully."

Yes, and take stock. That would be good, too. The water he was sitting in wasn't getting any deeper, and that was probably another blessing. He wasn't going to drown. Not, that was, unless the afternoon showers turned into downpours. He had seen it happen. And it was no good telling himself he'd be out of here by afternoon, of *course* he would, because that kind of magical thinking would be playing right into The Motherfucker's hands. He couldn't just sit here, thanking God he at least had some headroom, and waiting for rescue.

*Maybe someone from the Charlotte County Department of Building and Planning will come out. Or a team of headhunters from the IRS.*

Nice to imagine, but he had an idea it wasn't going to happen. The Motherfucker would have taken those possibilities into consideration, too. Of course some bureaucrat or team of them might take an unscheduled swing by here, but counting on it would be as stupid as hoping that Grunwald would have a change of heart. And Mrs. Wilson would assume he'd gone to an afternoon movie in Sarasota, as he often did.

He rapped on the walls, first the left, then the right. On both sides he felt hard metal just beyond the thin and yielding plastic. Cladding. He got up on his knees, and this time he did bump his head, but hardly noticed. What he saw was not encouraging: the flat ends of the screws holding the unit together. The heads were on the outside. This wasn't a shithouse; it was a coffin.

At this thought, his moment of clarity and calm vanished. Panic descended in its place. He began to hammer on the walls of the toilet, screaming to be let out. He threw himself from side to side like a child having a tantrum, trying to roll the Port-O-San over so he could at least free the door, but the fucking thing hardly moved at all. The fucking thing was heavy. The cladding that sheathed it made it heavy.

*Heavy like a coffin!* his mind shrieked. In his panic, every other thought had been banished. *Heavy like a coffin! Like a coffin! A coffin!*

He didn't know how long he went on like that, but at some point he tried to stand up, as if he could burst through the wall now facing the sky like Superman. He hit his head again, this time much harder. He fell forward on his stomach. His hand splatted into something gooey—something that smeared—and he wiped it on the seat of his jeans. He did this without looking. His eyes were squeezed shut. Tears trickled from the corners. In the blackness behind his lids, stars zoomed and exploded. He wasn't bleeding—he supposed that was good, one more goddam blessing to count—but he had almost knocked himself out.

“Calm down,” he said. He got up on his knees again. His head was down, his hair hanging, his eyes closed. He looked like a man who was praying, and he supposed he was. A fly did a touch-and-go on the nape of his neck. “Going nuts won't help, he'd love it if he heard you screaming and carrying on, so calm

down, don't give him what he'd love, just calm the fuck down and think about this."

What was there to think about? He was trapped.

Curtis sat back against the door and put his face in his hands.

• • •

Time passed and the world went on.

The world did its thing.

On Route 17, a few vehicles—mostly workhorses; farm trucks bound for either the markets in Sarasota or the whole-foods store in Nokomis, the occasional tractor, the postman's station wagon with the yellow lights on the roof—trundled by. None took the turnoff to Durkin Grove Village.

Mrs. Wilson arrived at Curtis's house, let herself in, read the note Mr. Johnson had left on the kitchen table, and began to vacuum. Then she ironed clothes in front of the afternoon soap operas. She made a macaroni casserole, stuck it in the fridge, then jotted simple instructions concerning its preparation—*Bake 350, 45 mins*—and left them on the table where Curtis's note had been. When thunder began to mutter out over the Gulf of Mexico, she left early. She often did this when it rained. Nobody down here knew how to drive in the rain, they treated every shower like a nor'easter in Vermont.

In Miami, the IRS agent assigned to the Grunwald case ate a Cuban sandwich. Instead of a suit, he wore a tropical shirt with parrots on it. He was sitting under an umbrella at a sidewalk restaurant. There was no rain in Miami. He was on vacation. The Grunwald case would still be there when he got back; the wheels of government ground slow but exceedingly fine.

Grunwald relaxed in his patio hot tub, dozing, until the approaching afternoon storm woke him with the sound of thunder. He hauled himself out and went inside. As he closed the sliding glass door between the patio and the living room, the rain began to fall. Grunwald smiled. "This'll cool you off, neighbor," he said.

The crows had once more taken up station on the scaffolding which clasped the half-finished bank on three sides, but when thunder cracked almost

directly overhead and the rain began to fall they took wing and sought shelter in the woods, cawing their displeasure at being disturbed.

In the Port-O-San—it seemed he'd been locked in here for at least three years—Curtis listened to the rain on the roof of his prison. The roof that had been the rear side until The Motherfucker tipped it over. The rain tapped at first, then beat, then roared. At the height of the storm, it was like being in a telephone booth lined with stereo speakers. Thunder exploded overhead. He had a momentary vision of being struck by lightning and cooked like a capon in a microwave. He found this didn't disturb him much. It would be quick, at least, and what was happening now was slow.

The water began to rise again, but not fast. Curtis was actually glad about this, now that he had determined there was no actual risk of drowning like a rat that has tumbled into a toilet bowl. At least it *was* water, and he was very thirsty. He lowered his head to one of the holes in the steel cladding. Water from the overflowing ditch was bubbling up through it. He drank like a horse at a trough, sucking it up. The water was gritty, but he drank until his belly sloshed, constantly reminding himself that it *was* water, it *was*.

“There may be a certain piss content, but I'm sure it's low,” he said, and began to laugh. The laughter turned to sobbing, then back to laughter again.

The rain ended around six P.M., as it usually did this time of year. The sky cleared in time to provide a grade-A Florida sunset. The few summer residents of Turtle Island gathered on the beach to watch it, as they usually did. No one commented on Curtis Johnson's absence. Sometimes he was there, sometimes he wasn't. Tim Grunwald was there, and several of the sunsetters remarked that he seemed exceptionally cheery that evening. Mrs. Peebles told her husband, as they walked home hand in hand along the beach, that she believed Mr. Grunwald was finally getting over the shock of losing his wife. Mr. Peebles told her she was a romantic. “Yes, dear,” she said, momentarily putting her head on his shoulder, “that's why I married you.”

When Curtis saw the light coming through the holes in the cladding—the few that weren't facedown in the ditch—fading from peach to gray, he realized he was actually going to spend the night in this stinking coffin with two inches of water on the floor and a half-closed toilet hole at his feet. He was probably going to *die* in here, but that seemed academic. To spend the *night* in here,

however—hours stacked on more hours, piles of hours like piles of great black books—that was real and unavoidable.

The panic pounced again. He once more began to scream and pound the walls, this time turning around and around on his knees, first beating his right shoulder against one wall and then his left against the other. *Like a bird caught in a church steeple*, he thought, but could not stop. One flailing foot splattered the escaped turd against the bottom of the bench seat. He tore his pants. He first bruised his knuckles, then split them. At last he stopped, weeping and sucking at his hands.

*Got to stop. Got to save my strength.*

Then he thought: *For what?*

By eight o'clock, the air had begun to cool. By ten o'clock, the puddle in which Curtis was lying had also cooled—seemed cold, in fact—and he began to tremble. He clutched his arms around himself and drew his knees up to his chest.

*I'll be all right as long as my teeth don't chatter*, he thought. *I can't bear to hear my teeth chatter.*

At eleven o'clock, Grunwald went to bed. He lay there in his pajamas under the revolving fan, looking up into the dark and smiling. He felt better than he had felt for months. He was gratified but not surprised. "Goodnight, neighbor," he said, and closed his eyes. He slept through the night without waking for the first time in six months.

At midnight, not far away from Curtis's makeshift cell, some animal—probably just a wild dog, but to Curtis it sounded like a hyena—let out a long, screaming howl. His teeth began to chatter. The sound was every bit as awful as he had feared.

Some unimaginable time later, he slept.

• • •

When he woke up, he was shivering all over. Even his feet were jerking, tapdancing like the feet of a junkie in withdrawal. *I'm getting sick, I'll have to go to the damn doctor, I ache all over*, he thought. Then he opened his eyes, saw

where he was, *remembered* where he was, and gave a loud, desolate cry: “*Ohhhh . . . no! NO!*”

But it was oh yes. At least the Port-O-San wasn't entirely dark anymore. Light was coming through the circular holes: the pale rose glow of morning. It would soon strengthen as the day brightened and heated up. Before long he would be steam-cooking again.

*Grunwald will come back. He's had a night to think it over, he'll realize how insane this is, and he'll come back. He'll let me out.*

Curtis did not believe this. He wanted to, but didn't.

He needed to take a leak in the worst way, but he was damned if he was going to piss in the corner, even though there was crap and used toilet paper everywhere from yesterday's overturning. He felt somehow that if he did that—a nasty thing like that—it would be the same as announcing to himself that he had given up hope.

*I have given up hope.*

But he hadn't. Not completely. As tired and achey as he was, as frightened and dispirited, part of him still hadn't given up hope. And there was a bright side: he felt no urge to gag himself, and he hadn't spent even a single minute of the night just gone by, nearly eternal though it had been, scourging his scalp with his comb.

There was no need to piss in the corner, anyway. He would just raise the toilet seat lid with one hand, aim with the other, and let fly. Of course, given the Port-O-San's new configuration, that would mean pissing horizontally instead of at a downward-pointing angle. The current throb in his bladder suggested that would be absolutely no problem. Of course the final squirt or two would probably go on the floor, but—

“But them's are the fortunes of war,” he said, and surprised himself with a croaky laugh. “And as far as the toilet seat goes . . . fuck holding it up. I can do better than that.”

He was no Mr. Hercules, but both the half-ajar toilet seat and the flanges holding it to the bench were plastic—the seat and ring black, the flanges white. This whole goddam box was really just a cheap plastic prefab job, you didn't have to be a big-time construction contractor to see that, and unlike the walls and the door, there was no cladding on the seat and its fastenings. He thought

he could tear it off pretty easily, and if he could he would—if only to vent some of his anger and terror.

Curtis seized the seat and lifted it, meaning to grip the ring just beneath and pull sideways. Instead he paused, looking through the circular hole and into the tank beneath, trying to make sense of what he saw.

It looked like a thin seam of daylight.

He looked at this with perplexity into which hope came stealing slowly—not dawning, exactly, but seeming to rise through his sweaty, ordure-streaked skin. At first he thought it was either a swatch of fluorescent paint or an out-and-out optical illusion. This latter idea was reinforced when the line of light began to fade away. Little . . . less . . . least . . .

But then, just before it could disappear completely, it began to brighten again, a line of light so brilliant he could see it floating behind his lids when he closed his eyes.

*That's sunlight. The bottom of the toilet—what was the bottom before Grunwald tipped it over—is facing east, where the sun just rose.*

And when it faded?

“Sun went behind a cloud,” he said, and shoved his sweat-clumped hair back from his forehead with the hand not holding the toilet seat. “Now it’s out again.”

He examined this idea for the deadly pollution of wishful thinking and found none. The evidence was before his eyes: sunlight shining through a thin crack in the bottom of the Port-O-San’s holding tank. Or perhaps it was a split. If he could get in there and widen that split, that glowing aperture into the outside world—

*Don't count on it.*

And to get to it, he would have to—

*Impossible, he thought. If you're thinking of wriggling into the holding tank through the toilet seat—like Alice into some shit-splattered Wonderland—think again. Maybe if you were the skinny kid you used to be, but that kid was thirty-five years ago.*

That was true. But he was still slim—he supposed his daily bicycle rides were mostly responsible for that—and the thing was, he thought he *could*

wriggle in through the hole under the toilet seat's ring. It might not even be that tough.

*What about getting back out?*

Well . . . if he could do something about that seam of light, maybe he wouldn't have to leave the same way he went in.

"Assuming I can even *get* in," he said. His empty stomach was suddenly full of butterflies, and for the first time since arriving here at scenic Durkin Grove Village, he felt an urge to gag himself. He would be able to think more clearly about this if he just stuck his fingers down his throat and—

"No," he said curtly, and yanked the toilet seat and ring sideways with his left hand. The flanges creaked but didn't let go. He applied his other hand to the task. His hair fell back down on his forehead, and he gave an impatient snap of his head to flop it aside. He yanked again. The seat and ring held a moment longer, then tore free. One of the two white plastic dowels fell into the waste tank. The other, cracked down the middle, spun across the door Curtis was kneeling on.

He tossed the seat and ring aside and peered into the tank, hands braced on the bench. The first whiff of the poisoned atmosphere down there caused him to recoil, wincing. He thought he'd gotten used to the smell (or numbed to it), but that wasn't the case, at least not this close to the source. He wondered again when the damned thing had last been pumped.

*Look on the bright side; it's been a long time since it was used, too.*

Maybe, *probably*, but Curtis wasn't sure that made things any better. There was still a lot of stuff down there—a lot of *crap* down there, floating in whatever remained of the disinfected water. Dim as the light was, there was enough to be sure of that. Then there was the matter of getting back out again. He could probably do it—if he could go one way, he could almost certainly go the other—but it was all too easy to imagine how he'd look, a stinking creature being born from the ooze, not a mudman but a shit-man.

The question was, did he have another choice?

Well, yes. He could sit here, trying to persuade himself that rescue probably *would* come after all. The cavalry, like in the last reel of an old western. Only he thought it was more likely that The Motherfucker would come back,

wanting to make sure he was still . . . what had he said? Snug in his little housie. Something like that.

That decided him. He looked at the hole in the bench, the dark hole with its evil aroma drifting out, the dark hole with its one hopeful seam of light. A hope as thin as the light itself. He calculated. First his right arm, then his head. Left arm pressed against his body until he had wriggled in as far as his waist. Then, when his left arm was free . . .

Only what if he wasn't able to *get* it free? He saw himself stuck, right arm in the tank, left arm pinned against his body, his midsection blocking the hole, blocking the *air*, dying a dog's death, flailing at the sludge just below him while he strangled, the last thing he saw the mocking bright stitch that had lured him on.

He saw someone finding his body half-plugged into the toilet hole with his ass sticking up and his legs splayed, smeary brown sneaker prints stamped on the goddam toilet cubicle from his final dying kicks. He could hear someone—perhaps the IRS agent who was The Motherfucker's *bête noire*—saying “Holy shit, he must have dropped something really valuable down there.”

It was funny, but Curtis didn't feel like laughing.

How long had he been kneeling there, peering into the tank? He didn't know—his watch was back in his study, sitting by his computer's mousepad—but the ache in his thighs suggested quite awhile. And the light had brightened considerably. The sun would be entirely over the horizon now, and soon his prison would once more turn into a steam room.

“Gotta go,” he said, and wiped sweat from his cheeks with the palms of his hands. “It's the only thing.” But he paused again, because another thought had occurred to him.

What if there was a snake in there?

What if The Motherfucker, imagining that his witchly enemy might try this very thing, had *put* a snake in there? A copperhead, perhaps, for the time being fast asleep under a layer of cool human mud? A copperhead bite on the arm and he would die slowly and painfully, his arm swelling even as the temperature climbed. A bite from a coral snake would take him more quickly but even more painfully: his heart lunging, stopping, lunging again, then finally giving up.

*There are no snakes in there. Bugs, maybe, but no snakes. You saw him, you heard him. He wasn't thinking that far ahead. He was too sick, too crazy.*

Perhaps, perhaps not. You couldn't really gauge crazy people, could you? They were wild cards.

"Deuces and jacks, man with the axe, natural sevens take all," Curtis said. The Tao of The Motherfucker. All he knew for sure was that if he didn't try it down there, he was almost certainly going to die up here. And in the end, a snakebite might be quicker and more merciful.

"Gotta," he said, once more wiping his cheeks. "*Gotta.*"

As long as he didn't get stuck halfway in and halfway out of the hole. That would be a terrible way to die.

"Not going to get stuck," he said. "Look how big it is. That thing was built for the asses of doughnut-eating long-haul truckers."

This made him giggle. The sound contained more hysteria than humor. The toilet hole did not look big to him; it looked small. Almost tiny. He knew that was only his nervous perception of it—hell, his *scared* perception, his *frightened to death* perception—but knowing that didn't help much.

"Gotta do it, though," he said. "There's really nothing else."

And in the end it would probably *be* for nothing . . . but he doubted anyone had bothered to add a steel outer layer to the holding tank, and that decided him.

"God help me," he said. It was his first prayer in almost forty years. "God, please help me not get stuck."

He poked his right arm through the hole, then his head (first taking one more deep breath of the better air in the cubicle). He pressed his left arm to his side and slithered into the hole. His left shoulder caught, but before he could panic and draw back—this was, part of him understood, the critical moment, the point of no return—he shimmied it like a man doing the Watusi. His shoulder popped through. He jackknifed into the stinking tank up to his waist. With his hips—slim, but not nonexistent—plugging the hole, it was now as black as pitch. That seam of light seemed to float mockingly just before his eyes. Like a mirage.

*Oh God, please don't let it be a mirage.*

The tank was maybe four feet deep, maybe a trifle more. Bigger than the trunk of a car, but not—unfortunately—the size of a pickup truck’s bed. There was no way to tell for sure, but he thought his hanging hair was touching the disinfected water, and that the top of his head must be within inches of the muck filling the bottom. His left arm was still pinned against his body. Pinned at the wrist now. He couldn’t get it free. He shimmied from one side to the other. His arm stayed where it was. His worst nightmare: caught. Caught after all. Caught head down in stinking blackness.

Panic flared. He reached out with his free hand, not thinking about it, just doing it. For a moment he could see his fingers outlined by the scant light coming in through the bottom of the tank, which was now facing the sunrise instead of the ground. The light was right there, right in front of him. He grabbed for it. The first three fingers of his flailing hand were too big to fit through the narrow gap, but he was able to hook his pinky into the split. He pulled, feeling the ragged edge—metal or plastic, he didn’t know which—first dig into the skin of his finger and then tear it open. Curtis didn’t care. He pulled harder.

His hips popped through the hole like a cork coming out of a bottle. His wrist came free, but too late for him to lift his left arm and help break his fall. He crashed headfirst into the shit.

Curtis came up choking and flailing, his nose plugged with wet stink. He coughed and spat, aware that he was in a very tight place now, oh for sure. Had he thought the toilet was tight? Ridiculous. The toilet was the wide-open spaces. The toilet was the American west, the Australian Outback, the Great Horsehead Nebula. And he had given it up to crawl into a dark womb half-filled with rotting shit.

He wiped his face, then flung his hands to either side. Ribbons of dark stuff flew from his fingertips. His eyes were stinging, blurring. He wiped them with first one arm, then the other. His nose was plugged. He stuck his pinky fingers up them—he could feel blood running down the right one—and cleared his nostrils as best he could. He got enough out so he could breathe again, but when he did, the stench of the tank seemed to leap down his throat and sink claws into his stomach. He retched, a deep growling sound.

*Get hold of yourself. Just get hold, or it’s for nothing.*

He leaned back against the caked side of the tank, dragging in deep gasps of air through his mouth, but that was almost as bad. Just above him was a large pearl of oval light. The toilet hole he had, in his madness, wriggled through. He retched again. To his own ears he sounded like a bad-tempered dog on a hot day, trying to bark while half-strangled by a too-tight collar.

*What if I can't stop? What if I can't stop doing that? I'll have a seizure.*

He was too frightened and overwhelmed to think, so his body thought for him. He turned on his knees, which was hard—the side wall of the holding tank, which was now the floor, was slippery—but just possible. He applied his mouth to the split in the floor of the tank and breathed through it. As he did, a memory of some story he'd heard or read in grammar school came back to him: Indians hiding from their enemies by lying on the bottom of a shallow pond. Lying there and breathing through hollow reeds. You could do that. You could do that if you remained calm.

He closed his eyes. He breathed, and the air coming in through the split was blessedly sweet. Little by little, his runaway heartbeat began to slow.

*You can go back up. If you can go one way, you can go the other. And going back up will be easier, because now you're . . .*

“Now I'm greasy,” he said, and managed a shaky laugh . . . even though the dull, closed-in sound of his own voice frightened him all over again.

When he felt he had some control, he opened his eyes. They had adjusted to the deeper gloom of the tank. He could see his shit-caked arms, and a matted ribbon of paper hanging from his right hand. He plucked it off and dropped it. He supposed he was getting used to such things. He supposed people could get used to anything, if they had to. This wasn't a particularly comforting thought.

He looked at the split. He looked at it for some time, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. It was like a split along the seam of a badly sewn garment. Because there *was* a seam here. The tank was plastic after all—a plastic shell—but it wasn't a single piece; it was two. It was held together by a line of screws that glimmered in the dark. They glimmered because they were white. Curtis tried to remember if he had ever seen white screws before. He couldn't. Several of them at the lowest point of the tank had broken off,

creating that split. Waste and wastewater must have been dribbling out and onto the ground beneath for some time.

*If the EPA knew about this. Motherfucker, you'd have them on your back, too,* Curtis thought. He touched one of the screws still holding, the one just to the left of where the split ended. He couldn't be sure, but he thought it was hard plastic rather than metal. The same kind of plastic the toilet-ring flanges were made of, probably.

So. Two-piece construction. The tanks put together on some portable-toilet assembly line in Defiance, Missouri, Magic City, Idaho, or—who knew?—What Cheer, Iowa. Screwed together with hard plastic screws, the seam running across the bottom and up the sides like a big old smile. The screws tightened with some special long-barreled screwdriver, probably air-driven, like the gadget they used in garages to loosen the lug-nuts holding on your tires. And why put these screwheads on the inside? That was easy. So some merry prankster couldn't come along with his own screwdriver and open a full tank from the outside, of course.

The screws were placed about two inches apart along the seam, and the split was about six inches long, causing Curtis to deduce that three of the plastic screws had snapped. Bad materials, or bad design? Who gave a shit?

"To coin a phrase," he said, and laughed again.

The screws still holding to the left and right of the split were sticking up a little way, but he could neither unscrew them nor snap them off as he had the toilet seat. He couldn't get enough purchase. The one on the right was a little loose, and he supposed that if he worked at it, he might be able to get it started and then unscrew it the rest of the way. It would take hours, and his fingers would probably be bleeding by the time he managed the job, but it could probably be done. And what would he gain? Another two inches of breathing space through the seam. No more than that.

The screws beyond the ones bordering the split in the seam were firm and tight.

Curtis could stay up on his knees no longer; the muscles in his thighs were burning. He sat down against the curved side of the tank, forearms on his knees, filthy hands dangling. He looked at the brightening oval of the toilet hole. That was the overworld, he supposed, only his share of it had grown very

small. It smelled better, though, and when his legs felt a little stronger, he supposed he would clamber back through the hole. He wasn't going to stay in here, sitting in shit, if there was nothing to be gained by it. And it seemed there was not.

A jumbo cockroach, made bold by Curtis's new stillness, scuttled up his filthy pant leg. He flapped a hand at it and it was gone. "That's right," he said, "run. Why don't you squeeze out through the hole? You'd probably fit." He brushed his hair out of his eyes, knowing he was smearing his forehead, not caring. "Nah, you like it in here. You probably think you died and went to cockroach heaven."

He would rest, let his throbbing legs calm a little, then climb out of Wonderland and back into his phone-booth-sized piece of the overworld. Just a short rest; he wasn't staying down here any longer than he had to, that was for sure.

Curtis closed his eyes and tried to center himself.

He saw numbers scrolling up on a computer screen. The stock market wouldn't be open yet in New York, so these numbers must be from overseas. Probably the Nikkei. Most of the numbers were green. That was good.

"Metals and industrials," he said. "And Takeda Pharmaceutical—that's a buy. Anyone can see . . ."

Curled against the wall in what was almost a fetal position, his drawn face streaked with brown warpaint, his butt sunk almost to the hips in muck, his filth-caked hands still dangling from his drawn-up knees, Curtis slept. And dreamed.

Betsy was alive and Curtis was in his living room. She was lying on her side in her accustomed place between the coffee table and the TV, snoozing with her latest half-chewed tennis ball near to hand. Or paw, in Betsy's case.

"Bets!" he said. "Wake up and fetch the idiot stick!"

She struggled to her feet—of course she struggled, she was old now—and as she did, the tags on her collar jingled.

The tags jingled.

The tags.

• • •

He woke up gasping, listing to the left as he leaned against the holding tank's greasy bottom, one hand outstretched, either to take the TV controller or to touch his dead dog.

He lowered his hand to his knee. He wasn't surprised to find he was crying. Had probably started even before the dream began to unravel. Betsy was dead and he was sitting in shit. If that wasn't reason enough to cry, he didn't know what was.

He looked again at the oval light across from and slightly above him, and saw it was quite a lot brighter. Hard to believe he'd been asleep for any length of time, but it seemed he had been. An hour at least. God knew how much poison he was breathing, but—

“Don't worry, I can deal with poison air,” he said. “After all, I'm a witch.”

And, bad air or no bad air, the dream had been very sweet. Very *vivid*. The jingling of those tags—

“Fuck,” he whispered, and his hand flew to his pocket. He was terribly sure he must have lost the Vespa key in his tumble and would have to feel around for it down here, sifting through the shit with nothing but the scant light coming in through the split seam and the toilet hole to help him, but the key was still there. So was his money, but money would do him no good down here and the clip wouldn't, either. It was gold, and valuable, but too thick to qualify as an escape aid. So was the key to the Vespa. But there was something else on the keyring. Something that made him feel simultaneously bad and good every time he looked at it, or heard it jingle. It was Betsy's ID tag.

She had worn two, but this was the one he'd slipped off her collar before giving her a final hug goodbye and turning her body over to the vet. The other one, state-required, certified that she'd had all her shots. This one was more personal. It was rectangular, like a GI's dog tag. Stamped on it was

BETSY

IF LOST CALL 941-555-1954

CURTIS JOHNSON

19 GULF BOULEVARD

TURTLE ISLAND, FLA. 34274

It wasn't a screwdriver, but it was thin, it was made of stainless steel, and Curtis thought it just might serve. He said another prayer—he didn't know if what they said about no atheists in foxholes was true, but there seemed to be none in shitholes—then slipped the end of Betsy's ID tag into the slot of the screw just to the right of where the split ended. The screw that was a little loose to begin with.

He expected resistance, but under the edge of the ID tag the screw turned almost at once. He was so surprised he dropped his keyring and had to feel around for it. He slotted the end of the tag into the screwhead again, and turned it twice. The rest of the length he was able to loosen by hand. He did it with a big, unbelieving grin on his face.

Before beginning on the screw at the left end of the split—a split that was now two inches wider—he wiped the metal tag clean on his shirt (or as clean as he could; the shirt was as filthy as the rest of him, sticking to his skin) and kissed it gently.

“If this works, I'll frame you.” He hesitated, then added: “*Please* work, okay?”

He slipped the end of the ID tag into the screwhead and turned. This one was tighter than the first . . . but not *that* tight. And once it started turning, it came out in a hurry.

“Jesus,” Curtis whispered. He was crying yet again; he'd turned into a regular leaky faucet. “Am I gonna get out of here, Bets? Am I really?”

He moved back to the right and started on the next screw. He went on that way, right-left, right-left, right-left, resting when his hand got tired, flexing and shaking it until it felt loose again. He had spent going on twenty-four hours in here; he wasn't going to hurry now. He especially didn't want to drop his keyring again. He supposed he could find it, the area was small, but he still didn't want to risk it.

Right-left, right-left, right-left.

And slowly, as the morning passed and the holding tank heated up, making the smell ever thicker and more noisomely rich, the split in the bottom of the tank widened. He was doing it, closing in on getting out, but he refused to hurry. It was important not to hurry, not to bolt like a frightened horse.

Because he might fuck up, yes, but also because his pride and self-esteem—his essential sense of self—had taken a beating.

Questions of self-esteem aside, slow and steady won the race.

Right-left, right-left, right-left.

• • •

Shortly before noon, the seam in the dirt-caked bottom of the Port-O-San bulged open, then closed, then bulged and closed again. There was a pause. Then it split open along four feet of its length, and the crown of Curtis Johnson's head appeared. It drew back, and there were clatters and scratches as he went to work again, removing more screws: three on the left, three on the right.

The next time the seam spread apart, the matted, brown-streaked crown of his head continued to thrust forward. It pushed slowly through, the cheeks and mouth drawn down as if by terrible G-force, one ear scraped and bleeding. He cried out, shoving with his feet, terrified that now he *was* going to get stuck half in and half out of the holding tank. Still, even in his fear, he registered the sweetness of the air: hot and humid, the best he had ever breathed.

When he was outside to his shoulders, he rested, panting, looking at a crushed beer can twinkling in the weeds not ten feet from his sweating, bleeding head. It looked like a miracle. Then he pushed again, head lifted, mouth snarling, cords on his neck standing out. There was a ripping sound as the gaping split in the tank tore the shirt off his back. He hardly noticed. Just ahead of him was a baby scrub pine no more than four feet high. He stretched, got one hand on the base of its thin and sappy trunk, then the other. He rested for another moment, aware that both of his shoulder blades were scraped and bleeding, then pulled on the tree and pushed one final time with his feet.

He thought he might pull the small pine right out by the roots, but he didn't. There was a searing pain in his buttocks as the seam through which he was wriggling tore his pants down, bunching them around his sneakers. In order to get all the way out, he had to keep pulling and twisting until the sneakers finally came off. And when the tank finally let go of his left foot, he found it almost impossible to believe he was actually free.

He rolled over on his back, naked save for his underpants (askew, the elastic hanging in a limp flap, the seat torn open to reveal badly bleeding buttocks) and one white sock. He stared up at the blue sky, eyes wide. And began to scream. He had screamed himself almost hoarse before he realized he was screaming actual words: *I'm alive! I'm alive! I'm alive! I'm alive!*

• • •

Twenty minutes later, he got to his feet and limped to the defunct construction trailer sitting on its concrete blocks, a large puddle from yesterday's shower hiding in its shadow. The door was locked, but there were more blocks lying to one side of the raw wooden steps. One was cracked in two pieces. Curtis picked up the smaller chunk and bashed it against the lock until the door shuddered open, letting out a puff of hot, stale air.

He turned before going in and for a moment surveyed the toilets on the other side of the road, where pothole puddles flashed back the bright blue sky like shards of a dirty mirror. Five Port-O-Sans, three standing, two lying face-down in the ditch. He had almost died in the one on the left. And although he was standing here in nothing but a pair of tattered underpants and one sock, shit-streaked and bleeding in what felt like a hundred places, that idea already seemed unreal. A bad dream.

The office was partially empty—or partially ransacked, probably only a day or two ahead of the final project shutdown. There were no partitions; it was one long room with a desk, two chairs, and a discount-store couch in the front half. In the back half there was a stack of cartons filled with papers, a dusty adding machine sitting on the floor, a small unplugged fridge, a radio, and a swivel chair with a note taped to the back. *SAVE FOR JIMMY*, the note said.

There was also a closet door standing ajar, but before checking it, Curtis opened the little fridge. Inside were four bottles of Zephyr spring water, one of them opened and three-quarters empty. Curtis seized one of the full bottles and drank the entire thing down. It was warm, but it tasted like the kind of water that might flow in the rivers of heaven. When it was gone, his stomach clenched. He rushed to the door, hung out by the jamb, and vomited the water back up to one side of the steps.

“Look, Ma, no gagging necessary!” he cried, with tears running down his filthy face. He supposed he could have vomited the water right onto the deserted trailer’s floor, but he didn’t want to be in the same room with his own waste. Not after what had happened.

*In fact, I intend never to take another dump,* he thought. *From now on I’m going to empty myself the religious way: immaculate evacuation.*

He drank the second bottle of water more slowly, and it stayed down. While he sipped, he looked into the closet. There were two pairs of dirty pants and some equally dirty shirts piled in one corner. Curtis guessed that at one point there might have been a washer-dryer back there, where the cartons were stacked. Or maybe there had been another trailer, one that had been hitched up and hauled away. He didn’t care. What he cared about was the two pair of discount-store overalls, one on a wire hanger, the other dangling from a wall hook. The pair on the hook looked much too big, but the one on the hanger might fit. And did, more or less. He had to roll the cuffs up two turns, and he supposed he looked more like Farmer John after slopping the hogs than a successful stock trader, but they would serve.

He could call the police, but he felt he had a right to more satisfaction than that after what he had been through. Quite a lot more.

“Witches don’t call the police,” he said. “Especially not us gay ones.”

His motor scooter was still out there, but he had no intention of riding back just yet. For one thing, too many people would see the mud-man on the red Vespa Granturismo. He didn’t think anyone would call the cops . . . but they’d laugh. Curtis didn’t want to be noticed, and he didn’t want to be laughed at. Not even behind his back.

Also, he was tired. More tired than he’d ever been in his life.

He lay down on the discount-store sofa and put one of the pillows behind his head. He had left the trailer door open and a little breeze frisked through, stroking his dirty skin with delicious fingers. He was wearing nothing but the overalls now. He had stripped off his filthy undershorts and the remaining sock before putting them on.

*I don’t smell myself at all,* he thought. *Isn’t that amazing?*

Then he fell asleep, deeply and completely. He dreamed of Betsy bringing him the idiot stick, the tags on her collar jingling. He took the controller from

her, and when he pointed it at the TV, he saw The Motherfucker peering in the window.

• • •

Curtis woke four hours later, sweating and stiff and stinging all over. Outside, thunder was rumbling as that afternoon's storm approached, right on schedule. He made his way down the makeshift trailer steps sidesaddle, like an old man with arthritis. He *felt* like an old man with arthritis. Then he sat down, looking alternately at the darkening sky and at the portable toilet from which he had escaped.

When the rain began, he stepped out of the overalls, threw them back into the trailer to keep them dry, and then stood there naked in the downpour, his face turned upward, smiling. That smile didn't falter even when a stroke of lightning forked down on the far side of Durkin Grove Village, close enough to fill the air with the tang of ozone. He felt perfectly, deliciously safe.

The cold rain sluiced him relatively clean, and when it began to let up, he slowly climbed the trailer steps again. When he was dry, he put the overalls back on. And when late-day sun began to spoke through the unraveling clouds, he walked slowly up the hill to where his Vespa was parked. The key was clutched in his right hand, Betsy's now-battered ID tag pressed between the first two fingers.

The Vespa wasn't used to being left out in the rain, but it was a good pony and started after only two cranks of the engine, settling at once into its usual good-natured purr. Curtis mounted up, barefooted and helmetless, a blithe spirit. He rode back to Turtle Island that way, with the wind blowing his filthy hair and belling the overalls out around his legs. He saw few cars, and got across the main road with no problems at all.

He thought he could use a couple of aspirins before going to see Grunwald, but otherwise he had never felt better in his life.

• • •

By seven o'clock that evening, the afternoon shower was just a memory. The Turtle Island sunsetters would gather on the beach in another hour or so for

the usual end-of-day show, and Grunwald expected to be among them. For now, however, he lay in his patio hot tub with his eyes closed, a weak gin and tonic near to hand. He had taken a Percocet prior to climbing into the tub, knowing it would be a help when it came to the short walk down to the beach, but his sense of almost dreamy satisfaction persisted. He hardly needed the painkillers. That might change, but for the time being, he hadn't felt so well in years. Yes, he was facing financial ruin, but he had enough cash socked away to keep him comfortable for the time he had left. More important, he had taken care of the queer who had been the author of all his misery. Ding-dong, the wicked witch was d—

“Hello, Grunwald. Hello, you motherfucker.”

Grunwald's eyes flew open. A dark shape was standing between him and the westering sun, looking cut from black paper. Or funeral crepe. It looked like Johnson, but surely it could not be; Johnson was locked in the overturned toilet, Johnson was a shithouse mouse either dying or dead. Also, a smarmy little bandbox dresser like Johnson would never have been caught dead looking like an extra from that old *Hee-Haw* show. It was a dream, it had to be. But—

“You awake? Good. I want you to be awake for this.”

“Johnson?” Just a whisper. It was all he could manage. “That's not really you, is it?” But now the figure moved a little—just enough to allow the late-day sun to strike across his scratched face—and Grunwald saw that it was. And what was that he had in his hand?

Curtis saw what The Motherfucker was looking at, and considerately turned a little more, so that the sun struck across it, too. It was a hair dryer, Grunwald realized. It was a hair dryer, and he was sitting chest-deep in a hot tub.

He grabbed the side, meaning to pull himself out, and Johnson stepped on his hand. Grunwald cried out and jerked his hand back. Johnson's foot was bare, but he had brought it down heel first, and hard.

“I like you right where you are,” Curtis said, smiling. “I'm sure you felt the same about me, but I got out, didn't I? And I even brought you a present. Stopped by my house to get it. Don't refuse it on that account; it's only slightly used, and I blew off all the gay-dust on my way over here. By way of the backyard, actually. Convenient that the power's off in the stupid cattle-fence

you used to kill my dog. Here you go.” And he dropped the hair dryer into the hot tub.

Grunwald screamed and tried to catch it, but he missed. The hair dryer splashed, then sank. One of the water jets turned it over and over on the bottom. It bumped Grunwald’s scrawny legs and he jerked away from it, still screaming, sure he was being electrocuted.

“Take it easy,” Johnson said. He was still smiling. He unsnapped first one strap of the overalls he was wearing, then the other. They dropped to his ankles. He was naked beneath, with faint streaks of filth from the holding tank still on the insides of his arms and thighs. There was a nasty brown clot of something in his navel. “It wasn’t plugged in. I don’t even know if that old hair-dryer-in-the-tub thing works. Although I must admit that if I’d had an extension cord, I might have made the experiment.”

“Get away from me,” Grunwald rasped.

“Nah,” Johnson said. “Don’t think so.” Smiling, always smiling. Grunwald wondered if the man had gone mad. *He* would have gone mad in circumstances similar to those in which he’d left Johnson. How had he gotten out? *How*, in God’s name?

“The rain shower this afternoon washed off most of the shit, but I’m still quite dirty. As you see.” Johnson spied the nasty wad in his navel, pried it out with a finger, and flicked it casually into the hot tub like a booger.

It landed on Grunwald’s cheek. Brown and stinking. Starting to run. Good God, it was shit. He cried out again, this time in revulsion.

“He shoots, he scores,” Johnson said, smiling. “Not very nice, is it? And although I don’t exactly *smell* it anymore, I’m very tired of *looking* at it. So be a neighbor, would you, and share your hot tub.”

“No! No, you can’t—”

“Thanks!” Johnson said, smiling, and jumped in. There was a great splash. Grunwald could smell him. He *reeked*. Grunwald floundered for the other side of the hot tub, skinny shanks flashing white above the bubbling water, the tan on his equally skinny legs looking like taupe nylon stockings. He flung one arm over the edge of the tub. Then Johnson grabbed him around the neck with one badly scratched but horribly strong arm and hauled him back into the water.

“No no no no *no!*” Johnson said, smiling. He pulled Grunwald against him. Little brown-black flecks danced on the surface of the bubbling water. “Us gay guys rarely bathe alone. Surely you came across that fact in your Internet researches. And gay *witches*? Never!”

“Let me go!”

“Maybe.” But Johnson hugged him closer, horribly intimate, still stinking of the Port-O-San. “First, though, I think you need to visit the gayboy ducking stool. Kind of a baptism. Wash away your sins.” The smile became a grin, the grin a rictus. Grunwald realized he was going to die. Not in his bed, in some misty, medicated future, but right here. Johnson was going to drown him in his own hot tub, and the last thing he’d see would be little particles of filth floating in the previously clean water.

Curtis grabbed Grunwald’s naked, scrawny shoulders and shoved him under. Grunwald struggled, his legs kicking, his scant hair floating, little silver bubbles twisting up from his big old beak of a nose. The urge to just hold him there was strong . . . and Curtis could do it because *he* was strong. Once upon a time, Grunwald would have been able to take him with one hand tied behind his back, age difference or not, but those days were gone. This was one sick Motherfucker. Which was why Curtis let him go.

Grunwald surged for the surface, coughing and choking.

“You’re right!” Curtis cried. “This baby *is* good for aches and pains! But never mind *me*; what about *you*? Want to go under again? Submersion is good for the soul, all the best religions say so.”

Grunwald shook his head furiously. Drops of water flew from his thinning hair and more luxuriant eyebrows.

“Then just sit there,” Curtis said. “Sit there and listen. And I don’t think we need this, do we?” He reached under Grunwald’s leg—Grunwald jerked and uttered a small scream—and snagged the hair dryer. Curtis tossed it over his shoulder. It skittered beneath Grunwald’s patio chair.

“I’ll be leaving you soon,” Curtis said. “Going back to my own place. You can go down and watch the sunset if you still want to. Do you still want to?”

Grunwald shook his head.

“No? I didn’t think so. I think you’ve had your last good sunset, neighbor. In fact, I think you’ve had your last good day, and that’s why I’m letting you

live. And do you want to know the irony? If you'd let me alone, you would have gotten exactly what you wanted. Because I was locked in the shithouse already and didn't even know it. Isn't that funny?"

Grunwald said nothing, only looked at him with his terrified eyes. His *sick* and terrified eyes. Curtis could almost have felt sorry for him, if the memory of the Port-O-San was not still so vivid. The lid of the toilet flopping open like a mouth. The turd landing in his lap like a dead fish.

"Answer, or you get another baptismal dunk."

"It's funny," Grunwald rasped. And then began to cough.

Curtis waited until he stopped. He wasn't smiling anymore.

"Yes, it is," he said. "It is funny. The whole thing's funny, if you see it from the right perspective. And I believe I do."

He boosted himself out of the hot tub, aware that he was moving with a liteness The Motherfucker would never again be able to match. There was a cabinet under the porch overhang. There were towels inside. Curtis took one and began to dry off.

"Here's the thing. You can call the police and tell them I tried to drown you in your hot tub, but if you do that, everything else comes out. You'll spend the rest of your life fighting a criminal case as well as dealing with your other woes. But if you let it go, it's a reset. Odometer back to zero. Only—here's the thing—I get to watch you rot. There will come a day when you smell just like the shithouse you locked me in. When other people smell you that way, and you smell that way to yourself."

"I'll kill myself first," Grunwald rasped.

Curtis was pulling the overalls on again. He had decided he sort of liked them. They might be the perfect garment to wear while watching the stock quotes on one's computer in one's cozy little study. He might go out to Target and buy half a dozen pairs. The new, non-compulsive Curtis Johnson: an overall kind of guy.

He paused in the act of buckling the second shoulder strap. "You could do that. You have that gun, the—what did you call it?—the Hardballer." He finished with the buckle, then leaned toward Grunwald, who was still marinating in the hot tub and looking at him fearfully. "That would be acceptable, too. You might even have the guts, although, when it comes right

down to it . . . you might not. In any case, I'll listen with great interest for the bang."

He left Grunwald then, but not the way he had come. He went around to the road. A left turn would have taken him back to his house, but he turned right, toward the beach. For the first time since Betsy died, he felt like watching the sunset.

• • •

Two days later, while sitting at his computer (he was watching General Electric with especial interest), Curtis heard a loud bang from next door. He didn't have his music on, and the sound rolled through the humid, almost-July air with perfect clarity. He sat where he was, head cocked, still listening. Although there would be no second bang.

*Us witches just know shit like that*, he thought.

Mrs. Wilson came rushing in, holding a dishtowel in one hand. "That sounded like a gunshot!"

"Probably just a backfire," he said, smiling. He had been smiling a lot since his adventure at Durkin Grove Village. He thought it wasn't the same sort of smile as the one he had worn during the Betsy Era, but any smile was better than none. Surely that was true?

Mrs. Wilson was looking at him doubtfully. "Well . . . I guess." She turned to go.

"Mrs. Wilson?"

She turned back.

"Would you quit me if I got another dog? A puppy?"

"Me, quit over a puppy? It'd take more than a pup to drive *me* out."

"They tend to chew, you know. And they don't always—" He broke off for a moment, seeing the dark and nasty landscape of the holding tank. The underworld.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Wilson was looking at him curiously.

"They don't always use the bathroom," he finished.

"Once you teach them, they usually go where they're supposed to," she said. "Especially in a warm climate like this one. And you need some

companionship, Mr. Johnson. I've been . . . to tell the truth, I've been a little worried about you."

He nodded. "Yes, I've kind of been in the shit." He laughed, saw her looking at him strangely, and made himself stop. "Excuse me."

She flapped her dishtowel at him to show he was excused.

"Not a purebred, this time. I was thinking maybe the Venice Animal Shelter. Someone's little castoff. What they call a rescue dog."

"That would be very nice," she said. "I look forward to the patter of little feet."

"Good."

"Do you really think that was a backfire?"

Curtis sat back in his chair and pretended to consider. "Probably . . . but you know, Mr. Grunwald next door has been pretty sick." He lowered his voice to a sympathetic whisper. "Cancer."

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Wilson said.

Curtis nodded.

"You don't think he'd . . . ?"

The marching numbers on his computer screen melted into the screen saver: aerial photos and beach scenes, all featuring Turtle Island. Curtis stood up, walked to Mrs. Wilson, and took the dishtowel from her hand. "No, not really, but we could go next door and check. After all, what are neighbors for?"

## Sunset Notes

According to one school of thought, notes such as these are unnecessary at best, and suspect at worst. The argument against is that stories which need explanation are probably not very good stories. I have some sympathy with the idea, which is one reason to put this little addendum at the back of the book (putting it here also avoids those tiresome cries of “spoiler,” which are most commonly uttered by spoiled people). The reason to include them is simply that many readers like them. They want to know what caused a story to be written, or what the author was thinking when he wrote it. This author doesn't necessarily know either of those things, but he can offer some random thoughts that may or may not be of interest.

“**Willa**” This probably isn't the best story in the book, but I love it very much, because it ushered in a new period of creativity for me—as regards the short story, at least. Most of the stories in *Just After Sunset* were written subsequent to “Willa,” and in fairly quick succession (over a period of not quite two years). As to the story itself . . . one of the great things about fantasy is that it gives writers a chance to explore what might (or might not) happen after we shuffle off this mortal coil. There are two tales of that sort in *Just After Sunset* (the other is “*The New York Times* at Special Bargain Rates”). I was raised as a perfectly conventional Methodist, and although I rejected organized religion and most of its hard and fast assertions long ago, I hold to the main idea, which is that we survive death in some fashion or other. It's hard for me to believe that such complicated and occasionally wonderful beings are in the end simply wasted, tossed away like litter on the roadside. (Probably I just don't want to believe it.) What that survival might be like, though . . . I'll just have to wait and find out. My best guess is that we might be confused, and not very willing to accept our new state. My best hope is that love survives even death

(I'm a romantic, so fucking sue me). If so, it might be a bewildered love . . . and a little bit sad. When love and sadness occur to my mind at the same time, I put on the country music: people like George Strait, BR549, Marty Stuart . . . and the Derailers. It's the latter who are playing in this story, of course, and I think they're going to have a *very* long engagement.

**“The Gingerbread Girl”** My wife and I live in Florida for part of the year now, near the barrier islands just off the Gulf of Mexico. There are a lot of very large estates there—some old and gracious, some of the bloated *nouveau* sort. I was walking with a friend on one of these islands a couple of years ago. He gestured at a line of these McMansions as we walked and said, “Most of these places stand empty six or even eight months of the year, can you imagine that?” I could . . . and I thought it would make a wonderful story. It grew out of a very simple premise: a bad guy chasing a girl along an empty beach. But, I thought, she'd have to be running away from something else to start with. A gingerbread girl, in other words. Only sooner or later even the fastest runners have to stand and fight. Also, I like suspense stories that turn on crucial little details. This one had a lot of them.

**“Harvey's Dream”** I can only tell you one thing about this story, because it's the only thing I know (and probably the only thing that matters): it came to me in a dream. I wrote it in a single sitting, doing little more than transcribing the tale my subconscious had already told. There's another dream-story in this book, but I know a little more about that one.

**“Rest Stop”** One night about six years ago, I did a reading at a college in St. Petersburg. I stayed late, and ended up driving home on the Florida Turnpike, after midnight. I stopped at a rest area to tap a kidney on the way back. You'll know what it looked like if you've read this story: a cellblock in a medium-security prison. Anyway, I paused outside the men's room, because a man and a woman were in the ladies', having a bitter argument. They both sounded tight and on the verge of getting physical. I wondered what in the world I'd do if that happened, and thought: *I'll have to summon my inner Richard Bachman, because he's tougher than me.* They emerged without coming to blows—

although the lady in the case was crying—and I drove home without further incident. Later that week I wrote this story.

**“Stationary Bike”** If you’ve ever ridden on one of those things, you know how bitterly boring they can be. And if you’ve ever tried to get yourself back into a daily exercise regimen, you know how difficult *that* can be (my motto: “Eating Is Easier”—but yes, I do work out). This story came out of my hate/hate relationship not just with stationary bikes but with every treadmill I ever trudged and every Stairmaster I ever climbed.

**“The Things They Left Behind”** Like almost everyone else in America, I was deeply and fundamentally affected by 9/11. Like a great many writers of fiction both literary and popular, I felt a reluctance to say *anything* about an event that has become as much an American touchstone as Pearl Harbor or the assassination of John Kennedy. But writing stories is what I *do*, and this story came to me about a month after the fall of the Twin Towers. I might still not have written it if I had not recalled a conversation I had with a Jewish editor over twenty-five years before. He was unhappy with me about a story called “Apt Pupil.” It was wrong for me to write about the concentration camps, he said, because I was not a Jew. I replied that made writing the story all the more important—because writing is an act of willed understanding. Like every other American who watched the New York skyline burning that morning, I wanted to understand both the event and the scars such an event must inevitably leave behind. This story was my effort to do so.

**“Graduation Afternoon”** For years following an accident in 1999, I took an anti-depressant drug called Doxepin—not because I was depressed (he said glumly) but because Doxepin was supposed to have a beneficial effect on chronic pain. It worked, but by November of 2006, when I went to London to promote my novel *Lisey’s Story*, I felt the time had come to give the stuff up. I didn’t consult the doctor who prescribed it; I just went cold turkey. The side-effects of this sudden stoppage were . . . interesting.<sup>1</sup> For about a week, when I closed my eyes at night, I saw vivid panning shots, as in a movie—woods, fields, ridges, rivers, fences, railroad tracks, men swinging picks and shovels on a stretch of road construction . . . and then the whole thing would start over

again until I fell asleep. There was never any story attached; they were simply these brilliantly detailed panning shots. I was sort of sorry when they went away. I also experienced a series of vivid post-Doxepin dreams. One of them—a vast mushroom cloud blossoming over New York—became the subject of this story. I wrote it even knowing that the image has been used in countless movies (not to mention the TV series *Jericho*), because the dream had a documentary matter-of-factness to it; I woke with my heart pounding, thinking *This could happen. And sooner or later, it almost certainly will happen.* Like “Harvey’s Dream,” this story is more dictation than fiction.

“N.” This is the newest story in the book, and published for the first time here. It was strongly influenced by Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan*, a story that (like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*) surmounts its rather clumsy prose and works its way relentlessly into the reader’s terror-zone. How many sleepless nights has it caused? God knows, but a few of them were mine. I think “Pan” is as close as the horror genre comes to a great white whale, and that sooner or later every writer who takes the form seriously must try to tackle its theme: that reality is thin, and the *true* reality beyond is a limitless abyss filled with monsters. My idea was to try and wed Machen’s theme to the idea of obsessive-compulsive disorder . . . partly because I think everyone suffers OCD to one degree or another (haven’t we all turned around from at least one trip to make sure we turned off the oven or the stove burners?) and partly because obsession and compulsion are almost always unindicted co-conspirators in the tale of horror. Can you think of a single successful scary tale that doesn’t contain the idea of going back to what we hate and loathe? The best overt example of that might be “The Yellow Wallpaper,” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. If you ever read it in college, you were probably taught that it’s a feminist story. That is true, but it’s also a story of a mind crumbling under the weight of its own obsessive thought. That element is also present in “N.”

“**The Cat from Hell**” If *Just After Sunset* has the equivalent of a hidden track on a CD, I guess this would be it. And I have my long-time assistant, Marsha DeFilippo, to thank. When I told her I was going to do another collection, she asked me if I was finally going to include “The Cat from Hell,” a story from

my men's magazine days. I responded that I surely must have tucked that story—which was actually filmed as part of *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* in 1990—into one of the previous four collections. Marsha provided tables of contents to show that I had not. So here it is, finally between hardcovers, over thirty years after it was originally published in *Cavalier*. It came about in an amusing way. The fiction editor of *Cavalier* back then, a nice guy named Nye Willden, sent me a close-up photograph of a hissing cat. What made it unusual—other than the cat's rage—was the way its face was split down the middle, the fur on one side white and glossy black on the other. Nye wanted to run a short story contest. He proposed that I write the first five hundred words of a story about the cat; they would then ask readers to finish it, and the best completion would be published. I agreed, but got interested enough in the story to write the entire thing. I can't remember if my version was published in the same issue as the contest winner or later on, but it has since been anthologized a number of times.

**“*The New York Times* at Special Bargain Rates”** In the summer of 2007, I went to Australia, leased a Harley-Davidson, and drove it from Brisbane to Perth (well . . . I stuck the bike in the back of a Toyota Land Cruiser for part of the Great Australian Desert, where roads like The Gunbarrel Highway are what I imagine the highways look like in hell). It was a good trip; I had lots of adventures and ate a lot of dust. But getting over the jet-lag after twenty-one hours in the air is a bitch. And I don't sleep on planes. Just can't do it. If the stewardess shows up at my seat with those funky pajamas, I make the sign of the cross and tell her to go away. When I arrived in Oz after the San Francisco to Brisbane leg, I pulled the blinds, crashed out, slept for ten hours, and woke up bright-eyed and ready to go. The only problem was that it was two A.M. local time, nothing on TV, and I'd finished all my reading matter on the plane. Luckily, I had a notebook, and I wrote this story at my little hotel desk. By the time the sun came up, it was done and I was able to sleep for another couple of hours. A story should entertain the writer, too—that's my opinion, we welcome yours.

**“Mute”** I read a story in my local newspaper about a high school secretary who embezzled over sixty-five thousand dollars in order to play the lottery. My first question was how her husband felt about that, and I wrote this story to find out. It reminds me of the poison bon-bons I used to sample weekly on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

**“Ayana”** The subject of the afterlife, as I have said earlier in these notes, has always been fertile soil for writers who are comfortable with the fantastic. God—in any of His supposed forms—is another subject for which tales of the fantastic were made. And when we ask questions about God, one near the top of every list is why some people live and some die; why some get well and some do not. I asked it myself in the wake of the injuries I suffered in 1999, as the result of an accident that could have easily killed me if my position had been different by only inches (on the other hand, if my position had been different by other inches, I might have escaped completely). If a person lives, we say “It’s a miracle.” If he or she dies, we say “It was God’s will.” There is no rational response to miracles, and no way to understand the will of God—who, if He is there at all, may have no more interest in us than I do in the microbes now living on my skin. But miracles do happen, it seems to me; each breath is another one. Reality is thin but not always dark. I didn’t want to write about answers, I wanted to write about questions. And suggest that miracles may be a burden as well as a blessing. And maybe it’s all bullshit. I like the story, though.

**“A Very Tight Place”** Everyone has used one of those roadside porta-potties from time to time, if only at a turnpike rest area in the summertime, when state Highway Departments have to put out extra bathrooms to cope with the increased flow of travelers (I’m smiling as I write this, thinking how marvelously excretory it sounds). Gosh, there’s nothing like stepping into one of those dim little roomettes on a hot August afternoon, is there? Toasty-warm, and the smell is *divine*. In truth, I have never used one without thinking of Poe’s “The Premature Burial” and wondering what would happen to me if the shithouse fell over on its door. Especially if no one was around to help me get out. Finally I wrote this story, for the same reason I have written so many

rather unpleasant tales, Constant Reader: to pass on what frightens me to you. And I cannot close without telling you what childish fun this tale was. I even grossed myself out.

Well.

A little.

And with that, I bid you a fond farewell, at least for the time being. If the miracles keep happening, we will meet again. In the meantime, thank you for reading my stories. I hope at least one of them keeps you awake for awhile after the lights are out.

Take care of yourself . . . and say! Did you maybe leave the oven on? Or forget to turn off the gas under your patio barbecue? What about the lock on the back door? Did you remember to give it a twist? Things like that are so easy to forget, and someone could be slipping in right now. A lunatic, perhaps. One with a knife. So, OCD behavior or not . . .

Better go check, don't you think?

Stephen King  
March 8, 2008

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<sup>1</sup> Do I know for a fact that quitting the Doxepin was responsible? I do not. Hey, maybe it was the English water.

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# THE AIRPLANE AND THE WOODCHUCK

– 1 –

From two thousand feet, where Claudette Sanders was taking a flying lesson, the town of Chester's Mill gleamed in the morning light like something freshly made and just set down. Cars trundled along Main Street, flashing up winks of sun. The steeple of the Congo Church looked sharp enough to pierce the unblemished sky. The sun raced along the surface of Prestile Stream as the Seneca V overflowed it, both plane and water cutting the town on the same diagonal course.

"Chuck, I think I see two boys beside the Peace Bridge! Fishing!" Her very delight made her laugh. The flying lessons were courtesy of her husband, who was the town's First Selectman. Although of the opinion that if God had wanted man to fly, He would have given him wings, Andy was an extremely coaxable man, and eventually Claudette had gotten her way. She had enjoyed the experience from the first. But this wasn't mere enjoyment; it was exhilaration. Today was the first time she had really understood what made flying great. What made it cool.

Chuck Thompson, her instructor, touched the control yoke gently, then pointed at the instrument panel. "I'm sure," he said, "but let's keep the shiny side up, Claudie, okay?"

"Sorry, sorry."

"Not at all." He had been teaching people to do this for years, and he liked students like Claudie, the ones who were eager to learn something new. She might cost Andy Sanders some real money before long; she loved the Seneca, and had expressed a desire to have one just like it, only new. That would run

somewhere in the neighborhood of a million dollars. Although not exactly spoiled, Claudie Sanders had undeniably expensive tastes which, lucky man, Andy seemed to have no trouble satisfying.

Chuck also liked days like this: unlimited visibility, no wind, perfect teaching conditions. Nevertheless, the Seneca rocked slightly as she overcorrected.

“You’re losing your happy thoughts. Don’t do that. Come to one-twenty. Let’s go out Route 119. And drop on down to nine hundred.”

She did, the Seneca’s trim once more perfect. Chuck relaxed.

They passed above Jim Rennie’s Used Cars, and then the town was behind them. There were fields on either side of 119, and trees burning with color. The Seneca’s cruciform shadow fled up the blacktop, one dark wing briefly brushing over an ant-man with a pack on his back. The ant-man looked up and waved. Chuck waved back, although he knew the guy couldn’t see him.

“*Beautiful* goddam day!” Claudie exclaimed. Chuck laughed.

Their lives had another forty seconds to run.

– 2 –

The woodchuck came bumbling along the shoulder of Route 119, headed in the direction of Chester’s Mill, although the town was still a mile and a half away and even Jim Rennie’s Used Cars was only a series of twinkling sunflashes arranged in rows at the place where the highway curved to the left. The chuck planned (so far as a woodchuck can be said to plan anything) to head back into the woods long before he got that far. But for now, the shoulder was fine. He’d come farther from his burrow than he meant to, but the sun had been warm on his back and the smells were crisp in his nose, forming rudimentary images—not quite pictures—in his brain.

He stopped and rose on his back paws for an instant. His eyes weren’t as good as they used to be, but good enough to make out a human up there, walking in his direction on the other shoulder.

The chuck decided he’d go a little farther anyway. Humans sometimes left behind good things to eat.

He was an old fellow, and a fat fellow. He had raided many garbage cans in his time, and knew the way to the Chester's Mill landfill as well as he knew the three tunnels of his own burrow; always good things to eat at the landfill. He waddled a complacent old fellow's waddle, watching the human walking on the other side of the road.

The man stopped. The chuck realized he had been spotted. To his right and just ahead was a fallen birch. He would hide under there, wait for the man to go by, then investigate for any tasty—

The chuck got that far in his thoughts—and another three waddling steps—although he had been cut in two. Then he fell apart on the edge of the road. Blood squirted and pumped; guts tumbled into the dirt; his rear legs kicked rapidly twice, then stopped.

His last thought before the darkness that comes to us all, chucks and humans alike: *What happened?*

– 3 –

All the needles on the control panel dropped dead.

“What the *hell?*” Claudie Sanders said. She turned to Chuck. Her eyes were wide, but there was no panic in them, only bewilderment. There was no time for panic.

Chuck never saw the control panel. He saw the Seneca's nose crumple toward him. Then he saw both propellers disintegrate.

There was no time to see more. No time for anything. The Seneca exploded over Route 119 and rained fire on the countryside. It also rained body parts. A smoking forearm—Claudette's—landed with a thump beside the neatly divided woodchuck.

It was October twenty-first.

# BARBIE

– 1 –

Barbie started feeling better as soon as he passed Food City and left downtown behind. When he saw the sign reading YOU ARE LEAVING THE VILLAGE OF CHESTER’S MILL **COME BACK REAL SOON!**, he felt better still. He was glad to be on his way, and not just because he had taken a pretty good beating in The Mill. It was plain old moving on that had lightened him up. He had been walking around under his own little gray cloud for at least two weeks before getting his shit handed to him in the parking lot of Dipper’s.

“Basically, I’m just a ramblin guy,” he said, and laughed. “A ramblin guy on his way to the Big Sky.” And hell, why not? Montana! Or Wyoming. Fucking Rapid City, South Dakota. Anyplace but here.

He heard an approaching engine, turned around—walking backward now—and stuck out his thumb. What he saw was a lovely combination: a dirty old Ford pickemup with a fresh young blonde behind the wheel. *Ash* blonde, his favorite blonde of all. Barbie offered his most engaging smile. The girl driving the pickemup responded with one of her own, and oh my Lord if she was a ticktock over nineteen, he’d eat his last paycheck from Sweetbriar Rose. Too young for a gentleman of thirty summers, no doubt, but perfectly street-legal, as they’d said back in the days of his cornfed Iowa youth.

The truck slowed, he started toward it . . . and then it sped up again. She gave him one more brief look as she went past. The smile was still on her face, but it had turned regretful. *I had a brain-cramp there for a minute*, the smile said, *but now sanity has reasserted itself*.

And Barbie thought he recognized her a little, although it was impossible to say with certainty; Sunday mornings in Sweetbriar were always a madhouse. But he thought he’d seen her with an older man, probably her dad, both of

them with their faces mostly buried in sections of the *Sunday Times*. If he could have spoken to her as she rolled past, Barbie would have said: *If you trusted me to cook your sausage and eggs, surely you can trust me for a few miles in the shotgun seat.*

But of course he didn't get the chance, so he simply raised his hand in a little no-offense-taken salute. The truck's taillights flickered, as if she were reconsidering. Then they went out and the truck sped up.

During the following days, as things in The Mill started going from bad to worse, he would replay this little moment in the warm October sun again and again. It was that second reconsidering flicker of the taillights he thought of . . . as if she had recognized him, after all. *That's the cook from Sweetbriar Rose, I'm almost sure. Maybe I ought to—*

But maybe was a gulf better men than him had fallen into. If she *had* reconsidered, everything in his life thereafter would have changed. Because she must have made it out; he never saw the fresh-faced blonde or the dirty old Ford F-150 again. She must have crossed over the Chester's Mill town line minutes (or even seconds) before the border slammed shut. If he'd been with her, he would have been out and safe.

*Unless, of course, he'd think later, when sleep wouldn't come, the stop to pick me up was just long enough to be too long. In that case, I probably still wouldn't be here. And neither would she. Because the speed limit out that way on 119 is fifty miles an hour. And at fifty miles an hour . . .*

At this point he would always think of the plane.

– 2 –

The plane flew over him just after he passed Jim Rennie's Used Cars, a place for which Barbie had no love. Not that he'd bought a lemon there (he hadn't owned a car in over a year, had sold the last one in Punta Gorda, Florida). It was just that Jim Rennie Jr. had been one of the fellows that night in Dipper's parking lot. A frat boy with something to prove, and what he could not prove alone he would prove as part of a group. That was the way the Jim Juniors of the world did business, in Barbie's experience.

But it was behind him now. Jim Rennie's, Jim Junior, Sweetbriar Rose (Fried Clams Our Specialty! Always "Whole" Never "Strips"), Angie Mc-Cain, Andy Sanders. The whole deal, including Dipper's. (Beatings Administered in the Parking Lot Our Specialty!) All behind him. And ahead of him? Why, the gates of America. Goodbye smalltown Maine, hello Big Sky.

Or maybe, hell, he'd head down south again. No matter how beautiful this particular day, winter was lurking a page or two over on the calendar. The south might be good. He'd never been to Muscle Shoals, and he liked the sound of the name. That was goddam poetry, Muscle Shoals was, and the idea so cheered him that when he heard the little plane approaching, he looked up and gave a big old exuberant wave. He hoped for a wing-waggle in return, but didn't get one, although the plane was slowpoking at low altitude. Barbie's guess was sightseers—this was a day for them, with the trees in full flame—or maybe some young kid on his learner's permit, too worried about screwing up to bother with groundlings like Dale Barbara. But he wished them well. Sightseers or a kid still six weeks from his first solo cruise, Barbie wished them very well. It was a good day, and every step away from Chester's Mill made it better. Too many assholes in The Mill, and besides: travel was good for the soul.

*Maybe moving on in October should be a law, he thought. New national motto: EVERYBODY LEAVES IN OCTOBER. You get your Packing Permit in August, give your required week's notice in mid-September, then—*

He stopped. Not too far ahead of him, on the other side of the blacktop highway, was a woodchuck. A damned fat one. Sleek and sassy, too. Instead of scurrying off into the high grass, it was coming on ahead. There was a fallen birch sticking its top half out onto the shoulder of the road, and Barbie was betting the woodchuck would scurry under there and wait for the big bad Two-Legs to go by. If not, they would pass each other like the ramblin guys they were, the one on four legs headed north, the one on two headed south. Barbie hoped that would happen. It would be cool.

These thoughts went through Barbie's mind in seconds; the shadow of the airplane was still between him and the chuck, a black cross racing along the highway. Then two things happened almost simultaneously.

The first was the woodchuck. It was whole, then it was in two pieces. Both were twitching and bleeding. Barbie stopped, mouth hanging open on the suddenly lax hinge of his lower jaw. It was as if an invisible guillotine blade had dropped. And that was when, directly above the severed woodchuck, the little airplane exploded.

– 3 –

Barbie looked up. Falling from the sky was a squashed Bizarro World version of the pretty little airplane that had passed over him seconds before. Twisting orange-red petals of fire hung above it in the air, a flower that was still opening, an American Disaster rose. Smoke billowed from the plummeting plane.

Something clanged to the road and sprayed up clods of asphalt before spinning drunkenly into the high grass to the left. A propeller.

*If that had bounced my way—*

Barbie had a brief image of being cut in two—like the unfortunate woodchuck—and turned to run. Something thudded down in front of him and he screamed. But it wasn't the other propeller; it was a man's leg dressed in denim. He could see no blood, but the side seam had been blown wide open, revealing white flesh and wiry black hair.

There was no foot attached.

Barbie ran in what felt like slow motion. He saw one of his own feet, clad in an old scuffed workboot, stride out and clop down. Then it disappeared behind him as his other foot strode out. All slow, slow. Like watching the baseball replay of a guy trying to steal second.

There was a tremendous hollow clang from behind him, followed by the boom of a secondary explosion, followed by a blast of heat that struck him from heels to nape. It shoved him on his way like a warm hand. Then all thoughts blew away and there was nothing but the body's brute need to survive.

Dale Barbara ran for his life.

– 4 –

A hundred yards or so down the road, the big warm hand became a ghost hand, although the smell of burning gas—plus a sweeter stench that had to be a mixture of melting plastic and roasting flesh—was strong, carried to him on a light breeze. Barbie ran another sixty yards, then stopped and turned around. He was panting. He didn't think it was the running; he didn't smoke, and he was in good shape (well . . . fair; his ribs on the right side still hurt from the beating in Dipper's parking lot). He thought it was terror and dismay. He could have been killed by falling pieces of airplane—not just the runaway propeller—or burned to death. It was only blind luck that he hadn't been.

Then he saw something that made his rapid breathing stop in mid-gasp. He straightened up, looking back at the site of the accident. The road was littered with debris—it really was a wonder that he hadn't been struck and at least wounded. A twisted wing lay on the right; the other wing was poking out of the uncut timothy grass on the left, not far from where the runaway propeller had come to rest. In addition to the bluejeans-clad leg, he could see a severed hand and arm. The hand seemed to be pointing at a head, as if to say *That's mine*. A woman's head, judging from the hair. The power lines running beside the highway had been severed. They lay crackling and twisting on the shoulder.

Beyond the head and arm was the twisted tube of the airplane's fuselage. Barbie could read **NJ3**. If there was more, it was torn away.

But none of this was what had caught his eye and stopped his breath. The Disaster Rose was gone now, but there was still fire in the sky. Burning fuel, certainly. But . . .

But it was running down the air in a thin sheet. Beyond it and through it, Barbie could see the Maine countryside—still peaceful, not yet reacting, but in motion nevertheless. Shimmering like the air over an incinerator or a burning-barrel. It was as if someone had splashed gasoline over a pane of glass and then set it alight.

Almost hypnotized—that was what it felt like, anyway—Barbie started walking back toward the scene of the crash.

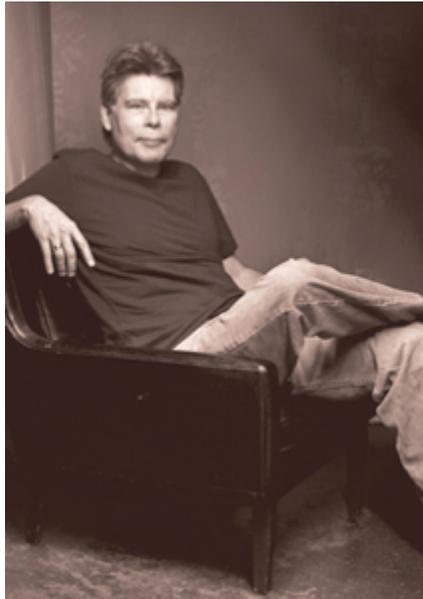
His first impulse was to cover the body parts, but there were too many. Now he could see another leg (this one in green slacks), and a female torso caught in a clump of juniper. He could pull off his shirt and drape it over the woman's head, but after that? Well, there were two extra shirts in his backpack—

Here came a car came from the direction of Motton, the next town to the south. One of the smaller SUVs, and moving fast. Someone had either heard the crash or seen the flash. Help. Thank God for help. Straddling the white line and standing well clear of the fire that was still running down from the sky in that weird water-on-a-windowpane way, Barbie waved his arms over his head, crossing them in big Xs.

The driver honked once in acknowledgment, then slammed on his brakes, laying forty feet of rubber. He was out almost before his little green Toyota had stopped, a big, rangy fellow with long gray hair cascading out from under a Sea Dogs baseball cap. He ran toward the side of the road, meaning to skirt the main firefall.

“What happened?” he cried. “What in the blue fu—”

Then he struck something. Hard. There was nothing there, but Barbie saw the guy's nose snap to the side as it broke. The man rebounded from the nothing, bleeding from the mouth, nose, and forehead. He fell on his back, then struggled to a sitting position. He stared at Barbie with dazed, wondering eyes as blood from his nose and mouth cascaded down the front of his workshirt, and Barbie stared back.



**STEPHEN KING** is the author of more than fifty books, all of them worldwide bestsellers. Among his most recent are *Just After Sunset*, *Duma Key*, *Lisey's Story*, the Dark Tower novels, *Cell*, *From a Buick 8*, *Everything's Eventual*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, and *Bag of Bones*. His classic story collection *Nightmares & Dreams-capes* was recently republished by Pocket Books. In *Stephen King Goes to the Movies*, he reflects on the filming of five of his most popular short stories, including the making of *The Shawshank Redemption* and *1408*. His acclaimed nonfiction book, *On Writing*, was also a bestseller. He was the recipient of the 2003 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters and the 2007 Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

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RIVETING, DARK STORIES FROM THE No. 1 BESTSELLING WRITER

# STEPHEN KING NIGHT SHIFT

Nothing is ever quite as it seems





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NIGHT  
SHIFT



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# **NIGHT SHIFT**

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The Woman in the Room

*By Stephen King*

*Copyright*

# INTRODUCTION

I am often given the big smiling handshake at parties (which I avoid attending whenever possible) by someone who then, with an air of gleeful conspiracy, will say, "You know, I've always wanted to write."

I used to try to be polite.

These days I reply with the same jubilant excitement: "You know, I've always wanted to be a brain surgeon."

They look puzzled. It doesn't matter. There are a lot of puzzled people wandering around lately.

If you want to write, you write.

The only way to learn to write is by writing. And that would not be a useful approach to brain surgery.

Stephen King always wanted to write and he writes.

So he wrote *Carrie* and *'Salem's Lot* and *The Shining*, and the good short stories you can read in this book, and a stupendous number of other stories and books and fragments and poems and essays and other unclassifiable things, most of them too wretched to ever publish.

Because that is the way it is done.

Because there is no other way to do it. Not one other way.

Compulsive diligence is almost enough. But not quite. You have to have a taste for words. Gluttony. You have to want to roll in them. You have to read millions of them written by other people.

You read everything with grinding envy or a weary contempt.

You save the most contempt for the people who conceal ineptitude with long words, Germanic sentence structure, obtrusive symbols, and no sense of story, pace, or character.

Then you have to start knowing yourself so well that you begin to know other people. A piece of us is in every person we can ever meet.

Okay, then. Stupendous diligence, plus word-love, plus empathy, and out of that can come, painfully, some objectivity.

Never total objectivity.

At this frangible moment in time I am typing these words on my blue machine, seven lines down from the top of my page two of this introduction, knowing clearly the flavor and meaning I am hunting for, but not at all certain I am getting it.

Having been around twice as long as Stephen King, I have a little more objectivity about my work than he has about his.

It comes so painfully and so slowly.

You send books out into the world and it is very hard to shuck them out of the spirit. They are tangled children, trying to make their way in spite of the handicaps you have imposed on them. I would give a pretty to get them all back home and take one last good swing at every one of them. Page by page. Digging and cleaning, brushing and furbishing. Tidying up.

Stephen King is a far, far better writer at thirty than I was at thirty, or at forty.

I am entitled to hate him a little bit for this.

And I think I know of a dozen demons hiding in the bushes where his path leads, and even if I had a way to warn him, it would do no good. He whips them or they whip him.

It is exactly that simple.

Are we all together so far?

Diligence, word-lust, empathy equal growing objectivity and then what?

Story. Story. Dammit, story!

Story is something happening to someone you have been led to care about. It can happen in any dimension—physical, mental, spiritual—and in combinations of those dimensions.

Without author intrusion.

Author intrusion is: “My God, Mama, look how *nice* I'm writing!”

Another kind of intrusion is a grotesquerie. Here is one of my favorites, culled from a Big Best Seller of yesteryear: “His eyes slid down the front of her dress.”

Author intrusion is a phrase so inept the reader suddenly realizes he is reading, and he backs out of the story. He is shocked back out of the story.

Another author intrusion is the mini-lecture embedded in the story. This is one of my most grievous failings.

An image can be neatly done, be unexpected, and not break the spell. In a story in this book called "Trucks," Stephen King is writing about a tense scene of waiting in a truck stop, describing the people: "He was a salesman and he kept his display bag close to him, like a pet dog that had gone to sleep."

I find that neat.

In another story he demonstrates his good ear, the ring of exactness and truth he can give dialogue. A man and his wife are on a long trip. They are traveling a back road. She says: "Yes, Burt. I know we're in Nebraska, Burt. But where the hell *are* we?" He says: "You've got the road atlas. Look it up. Or can't you read?"

Nice. It looks so simple. Just like brain surgery. The knife has an edge. You hold it so. And cut.

Now at risk of being an iconoclast I will say that I do not give a diddly-whoop what Stephen King chooses as an area in which to write. The fact that he presently enjoys writing in the field of spooks and spells and slitherings in the cellar is to me the least important and useful fact about the man anyone can relate.

There are a lot of slitherings in here, and there is a maddened pressing machine that haunts me, as it will you, and there are enough persuasively evil children to fill Disney World on any Sunday in February, but the main thing is story.

One is led to care.

Note this. Two of the most difficult areas to write in are humor and the occult. In clumsy hands the humor turns to dirge and the occult turns funny.

But once you know how, you can write in any area.

Stephen King is not going to restrict himself to his present field of intense interest.

One of the most resonant and affecting stories in this book is "The Last Rung on the Ladder." A gem. Nary a rustle nor breath of other

worlds in it.

Final word.

He does not write to please you. He writes to please himself. I write to please myself. When that happens, you will like the work too. These stories pleased Stephen King and they pleased me.

By strange coincidence on the day I write this, Stephen King's novel *The Shining* and my novel *Condominium* are both on the Best Seller List. We are not in competition for your attention with each other. We are in competition, I suppose, with the inept and pretentious and sensational books published by household names who have never really bothered to learn their craft.

Insofar as story is concerned, and pleasure is concerned, there are not enough Stephen Kings to go around.

If you have read this whole thing, I hope you have plenty of time. You could have been reading the stories.

JOHN D. MACDONALD

# FOREWORD

Let's talk, you and I. Let's talk about fear.

The house is empty as I write this; a cold February rain is falling outside. It's night. Sometimes when the wind blows the way it's blowing now, we lose the power. But for now it's on, and so let's talk very honestly about fear. Let's talk very rationally about moving to the rim of madness . . . and perhaps over the edge.

My name is Stephen King. I am a grown man with a wife and three children. I love them, and I believe that the feeling is reciprocated. My job is writing, and it's a job I like very much. The stories—*Carrie*, *'Salem's Lot*, and *The Shining*—have been successful enough to allow me to write full-time, which is an agreeable thing to be able to do. At this point in my life I seem to be reasonably healthy. In the last year I have been able to reduce my cigarette habit from the unfiltered brand I had smoked since I was eighteen to a low nicotine and tar brand, and I still hope to be able to quit completely. My family and I live in a pleasant house beside a relatively unpolluted lake in Maine; last fall I awoke one morning and saw a deer standing on the back lawn by the picnic table. We have a good life.

Still . . . let's talk about fear. We won't raise our voices and we won't scream; we'll talk rationally, you and I. We'll talk about the way the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unraveling with shocking suddenness.

At night, when I go to bed I still am at pains to be sure that my legs are under the blankets after the lights go out. I'm not a child anymore but . . . I don't like to sleep with one leg sticking out. Because if a cool hand ever reached out from under the bed and grasped my ankle, I might scream. Yes, I might scream to wake the dead. That sort of thing doesn't happen, of course, and we all know that. In the stories that follow you will encounter all manner of night creatures;

vampires, demon lovers, a thing that lives in the closet, all sorts of other terrors. None of them are real. The thing under my bed waiting to grab my ankle isn't real. I know that, and I also know that if I'm careful to keep my foot under the covers, it will never be able to grab my ankle.

Sometimes I speak before groups of people who are interested in writing or in literature, and before the question-and-answer period is over, someone always rises and asks this question: Why do you choose to write about such gruesome subjects?

I usually answer this with another question: *Why do you assume that I have a choice?*

Writing is a catch-as-catch-can sort of occupation. All of us seem to come equipped with filters on the floors of our minds, and all the filters have differing sizes and meshes. What catches in my filter may run right through yours. What catches in yours may pass through mine, no sweat. All of us seem to have a built-in obligation to sift through the sludge that gets caught in our respective mind-filters, and what we find there usually develops into some sort of sideline. The accountant may also be a photographer. The astronomer may collect coins. The school-teacher may do gravestone rubbings in charcoal. The sludge caught in the mind's filter, the stuff that refuses to go through, frequently becomes each person's private obsession. In civilized society we have an unspoken agreement to call our obsessions "hobbies."

Sometimes the hobby can become a full-time job. The accountant may discover that he can make enough money to support his family taking pictures; the schoolteacher may become enough of an expert on grave rubbings to go on the lecture circuit. And there are some professions which begin as hobbies and remain hobbies even after the practitioner is able to earn his living by pursuing his hobby; but because "hobby" is such a bumpy, common-sounding little word, we also have an unspoken agreement that we will call our professional hobbies "the arts."

Painting. Sculpture. Composing. Singing. Acting. The playing of a musical instrument. Writing. Enough books have been written on these seven subjects alone to sink a fleet of luxury liners. And the only thing we seem to be able to agree upon about them is this: that those who practice these arts honestly would continue to practice them even if they were not paid for their efforts; even if their efforts were criticized or even reviled; even on pain of imprisonment or death. To me, that seems to be a pretty fair definition of obsessional behavior. It applies to the plain hobbies as well as the fancy ones we call "the arts"; gun collectors sport bumper stickers reading YOU WILL TAKE MY GUN ONLY WHEN YOU PRY MY COLD DEAD FINGERS FROM IT, and in the suburbs of Boston, housewives who discovered political activism during the busing furor often sported similar stickers reading YOU'LL TAKE ME TO PRISON BEFORE YOU TAKE MY CHILDREN OUT OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD on the back bumpers of their station wagons. Similarly, if coin collecting were outlawed tomorrow, the astronomer very likely wouldn't turn in his steel pennies and buffalo nickels; he'd wrap them carefully in plastic, sink them to the bottom of his toilet tank, and gloat over them after midnight.

We seem to be wandering away from the subject of fear, but we really haven't wandered very far. The sludge that catches in the mesh of my drain is often the stuff of fear. My obsession is with the macabre. I didn't write any of the stories which follow for money, although some of them were sold to magazines before they appeared here and I never once returned a check uncashed. I may be obsessional but I'm not *crazy*. Yet I repeat: I didn't write them for money; I wrote them because it occurred to me to write them. I have a marketable obsession. There are madmen and madwomen in padded cells the world over who are not so lucky.

I am not a great artist, but I have always felt impelled to write. So each day I sift the sludge anew, going through the cast-off bits and pieces of observation, of memory, of speculation, trying to make something out of the stuff that didn't go through the filter and down the drain into the subconscious.

Louis L'Amour, the Western writer, and I might both stand at the edge of a small pond in Colorado, and we both might have an idea at

exactly the same time. We might both feel the urge to sit down and try to work it out in words. His story might be about water rights in a dry season, my story would more likely be about some dreadful, hulking thing rising out of the still waters to carry off sheep . . . and horses . . . and finally people. Louis L'Amour's "obsession" centers on the history of the American West; I tend more toward things that slither by starlight. He writes Westerns; I write fearsomes. We're both a little bit nuts.

The arts are obsessional, and obsession is dangerous. It's like a knife in the mind. In some cases—Dylan Thomas comes to mind, and Ross Lockridge and Hart Crane and Sylvia Plath—the knife can turn savagely upon the person wielding it. Art is a localized illness, usually benign—creative people tend to live a long time—sometimes terribly malignant. You use the knife carefully, because you know it doesn't care who it cuts. And if you are wise you sift the sludge carefully . . . because some of that stuff may not be dead.

After the *why do you write that stuff* question has been disposed of, the companion question comes up: *Why do people read that stuff? What makes it sell?* This question carries a hidden assumption with it, and the assumption is that the story about fear, the story about horror, is an unhealthy taste. People who write me often begin by saying, "I suppose you will think I'm strange, but I really liked 'Salem's Lot" or "Probably I'm morbid, but I enjoyed every page of *The Shining* . . ."

I think the key to this may lie in a line of movie criticism from *Newsweek* magazine. The review was of a horror film, not a very good one, and it went something like this: ". . . a wonderful movie for people who like to slow down and look at car accidents." It's a good snappy line, but when you stop and think about it, it applies to all horror films and stories. *The Night of the Living Dead*, with its gruesome scenes of human cannibalism and matricide, was certainly a film for people who like to slow down and look at car accidents; and how about that little girl puking pea soup all over the priest in *The Exorcist*? Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, often a basis of comparison

for the modern horror story (as it should be; it is the first with unabashedly psycho-Freudian overtones), features a maniac named Renfield who gobbles flies, spiders, and finally a bird. He regurgitates the bird, having eaten it feathers and all. The novel also features the impalement—the ritual penetration, one could say—of a young and lovely female vampire and the murder of a baby and the baby's mother.

The great literature of the supernatural often contains the same “let's slow down and look at the accident” syndrome: Beowulf slaughtering Grendel's mother; the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” dismembering his cataract-stricken benefactor and putting the pieces under the floorboards; the Hobbit Sam's grim battle with Shelob the spider in the final book of Tolkien's Rings trilogy.

There will be some who will object strenuously to this line of thought, saying that Henry James is not showing us a car accident in *The Turn of the Screw*; they will claim that Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories of the macabre, such as “Young Goodman Brown” and “The Minister's Black Veil,” are also rather more tasteful than *Dracula*. It's a nonsensical idea. They are still showing us the car accident; the bodies have been removed but we can still see the twisted wreckage and observe the blood on the upholstery. In some ways the delicacy, the lack of melodrama, the low and studied tone of rationality that pervades a story like “The Minister's Black Veil” is even more terrible than Lovecraft's batrachian monstrosities or the auto-da-fé of Poe's “The Pit and the Pendulum.”

The fact is—and most of us know this in our hearts—that very few of us can forgo an uneasy peek at the wreckage bracketed by police cars and road flares on the turnpike at night. Senior citizens pick up the paper in the morning and immediately turn to the obituary column so they can see who they outlived. All of us are uneasily transfixed for a moment when we hear that a Dan Blocker has died, a Freddie Prinze, a Janis Joplin. We feel terror mixed with an odd sort of glee when we hear Paul Harvey on the radio telling us that a woman walked into a propeller blade during a rain squall at a small country airport or that a man in a giant industrial blender was vaporized immediately when a co-worker stumbled against the controls. No

need to belabor the obvious; life is full of horrors small and large, but because the small ones are the ones we can comprehend, they are the ones that smack home with all the force of mortality.

Our interest in these pocket horrors is undeniable, but so is our own revulsion. The two of them mix uneasily, and the by-product of the mix seems to be guilt . . . a guilt which seems not much different from the guilt that used to accompany sexual awakening.

It is not my business to tell you not to feel guilty, any more than it is my business to justify my novels or the short stories which follow. But an interesting parallel between sex and fear can be observed. As we become capable of having sexual relationships, our interest in those relationships awakens; the interest, unless perverted somehow, tends naturally toward copulation and the continuance of the species. As we become aware of our own unavoidable termination, we become aware of the fear-emotion. And I think that, as copulation tends toward self-preservation, all fear tends toward a comprehension of the final ending.

There is an old fable about seven blind men who grabbed seven different parts of an elephant. One of them thought he had a snake, one of them thought he had a giant palm leaf, one of them thought he was touching a stone pillar. When they got together, they decided they had an elephant.

Fear is the emotion that makes us blind. How many things are we afraid of? We're afraid to turn off the lights when our hands are wet. We're afraid to stick a knife into the toaster to get the stuck English muffin without unplugging it first. We're afraid of what the doctor may tell us when the physical exam is over; when the airplane suddenly takes a great unearthly lurch in midair. We're afraid that the oil may run out, that the good air will run out, the good water, the good life. When the daughter promised to be in by eleven and it's now quarter past twelve and sleet is spitting against the window like dry sand, we sit and pretend to watch Johnny Carson and look occasionally at the mute telephone and we feel the emotion that makes us blind, the emotion that makes a stealthy ruin of the thinking process.

The infant is a fearless creature only until the first time the mother isn't there to pop the nipple into his mouth when he cries. The toddler

quickly discovers the blunt and painful truths of the slamming door, the hot burner, the fever that goes with the croup or the measles. Children learn fear quickly; they pick it up off the mother or father's face when the parent comes into the bathroom and sees them with the bottle of pills or the safety razor.

Fear makes us blind, and we touch each fear with all the avid curiosity of self-interest, trying to make a whole out of a hundred parts, like the blind men with their elephant.

We sense the shape. Children grasp it easily, forget it, and relearn it as adults. The shape is there, and most of us come to realize what it is sooner or later: it is the shape of a body under a sheet. All our fears add up to one great fear, all our fears are part of that great fear—an arm, a leg, a finger, an ear. We're afraid of the body under the sheet. It's our body. And the great appeal of horror fiction through the ages is that it serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths.

The field has never been highly regarded; for a long time the only friends that Poe and Lovecraft had were the French, who have somehow come to an arrangement with both sex and death, an arrangement that Poe and Lovecraft's fellow Americans certainly had no patience with. The Americans were busy building railroads, and Poe and Lovecraft died broke. Tolkien's Middle-Earth fantasy went kicking around for twenty years before it became an aboveground success, and Kurt Vonnegut, whose books so often deal with the death-rehearsal idea, has faced a steady wind of criticism, much of it mounting to hysterical pitch.

It may be because the horror writer always brings bad news: you're going to die, he says; he's telling you to never mind Oral Roberts and his “something *good* is going to happen to *you*” because something *bad* is also going to happen to *you*, and it may be cancer and it may be a stroke, and it may be a car accident, but it's going to happen. And he takes your hand and he enfolds it in his own, and he takes you into the room and he puts your hands on the shape under the sheet. . . and tells you to touch it here . . . here . . . and *here* . . .

Of course, the subjects of death and fear are not the horror writer's exclusive province. Plenty of so-called “mainstream” writers have

dealt with these themes, and in a variety of different ways—from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to Ross Mac-Donald's Lew Archer stories. Fear has always been big. Death has always been big. They are two of the human constants. But only the writer of horror and the supernatural gives the reader such an opportunity for total identification and catharsis. Those working in the genre with even the faintest understanding of what they are doing know that the entire field of horror and the supernatural is a kind of filter screen between the conscious and the subconscious; horror fiction is like a central subway station in the human psyche between the blue line of what we can safely internalize and the red line of what we need to get rid of in some way or another.

When you read horror, you don't really believe what you read. You don't believe in vampires, werewolves, trucks that suddenly start up and drive themselves. The horrors that we all do believe in are of the sort that Dostoyevsky and Albee and MacDonald write about: hate, alienation, growing lovelessly old, tottering out into a hostile world on the unsteady legs of adolescence. We are, in our real everyday worlds, often like the masks of Comedy and Tragedy, grinning on the outside, grimacing on the inside. There's a central switching point somewhere inside, a transformer, maybe, where the wires leading from those two masks connect. And that is the place where the horror story so often hits home.

The horror-story writer is not so different from the Welsh sin-eater, who was supposed to take upon himself the sins of the dear departed by partaking of the dear departed's food. The tale of monstrosity and terror is a basket loosely packed with phobias; when the writer passes by, you take one of his imaginary horrors out of the basket and put one of your real ones in—at least for a time.

Back in the 1950s there was a tremendous surge of giant bug movies—*Them!*, *The Beginning of the End*, *The Deadly Mantis*, and so on. Almost without fail, as the movie progressed, we found out that these gigantic, ugly mutants were the results of A-bomb tests in New Mexico or on deserted Pacific atolls (and in the more recent *Horror of Party Beach*, which might have been subtitled *Beach*

*Blanket Armageddon*; the culprit was nuclear-reactor waste). Taken together, the big-bug movies form an undeniable pattern, an uneasy gestalt of a whole country's terror of the new age that the Manhattan Project had rung in. Later in the fifties there was a cycle of "teen-age" horror movies, beginning with *I Was a Teen-Age Werewolf* and culminating with such epics as *Teen-Agers from Outer Space* and *The Blob*, in which a beardless Steve McQueen battled a sort of Jell-O mutant with the help of his teen-aged friends. In an age when every weekly magazine contained at least one article on the rising tide of juvenile delinquency, the teen-ager fright films expressed a whole country's uneasiness with the youth revolution even then brewing; when you saw Michael Landon turn into a werewolf in a high-school letter jacket, a connection happened between the fantasy on the screen and your own floating anxieties about the nerd in the hot rod that your daughter was dating. To the teen-agers themselves (I was one of them and speak from experience), the monsters spawned in the leased American-International studios gave them a chance to see someone even uglier than they felt themselves to be; what were a few pimples compared to the shambling *thing* that used to be a high-school kid in *I Was a Teen-Age Frankenstein*? This same cycle also expressed the teen-agers' own feeling that they were being unfairly put upon and put down by their elders, that their parents just "did not understand." The movies are formulaic (as so much of horror fiction is, written or filmed), and what the formula expresses most clearly is a whole generation's paranoia—a paranoia no doubt caused in part by all the articles their parents were reading. In the films, some terrible, warty horror is menacing Elmville. The kids know, because the flying saucer landed near lovers' lane. In the first reel, the warty horror kills an old man in a pickup truck (the old man was unfailingly played by Elisha Cook, Jr.). In the next three reels, the kids try to convince their elders that the warty horror is indeed slinking around. "Get outta here before I lock you all up for violating the curfew!" Elmville's police chief growls just before the monster slithers down Main Street, laying waste in all directions. In the end it is the quick-thinking kids who put an end to the warty horror, and then go off to the local hangout to suck up

chocolate malteds and jitterbug to some forgettable tune as the end credits run.

That's three separate opportunities for catharsis in one cycle of movies—not bad for a bunch of low-budget epics that were usually done in under ten days. It didn't happen because the writers and producers and directors of those films wanted it to happen; it happened because the horror tale lives most naturally at that connection point between the conscious and the subconscious, the place where both image and allegory occurs most naturally and with the most devastating effect. There is a direct line of evolution between *I Was a Teen-Age Werewolf* and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and between *Teen-Age Monster* and Brian De Palma's film *Carrie*.

Great horror fiction is almost always allegorical; sometimes the allegory is intended, as in *Animal Farm* and *1984*, and sometimes it just happens—J. R. R. Tolkien swore up and down that the Dark Lord of Mordor was not Hitler in fantasy dress, but the theses and term papers to just that effect go on and on . . . maybe because, as Bob Dylan says, when you got a lot of knives and forks, you gotta cut something.

The works of Edward Albee, of Steinbeck, Camus, Faulkner—they deal with fear and death, sometimes with horror, but usually these mainstream writers deal with it in a more normal, real-life way. Their work is set in the frame of a rational world; they are stories that “could happen.” They are on that subway line that runs through the external world. There are other writers—James Joyce, Faulkner again, poets such as T. S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton—whose work is set in the land of the symbolic unconsciousness. They are on the subway line running into the internal landscape. But the horror writer is almost always at the terminal joining the two, at least if he is on the mark. When he is at his best we often have that weird sensation of being not quite asleep or awake, when time stretches and skews, when we can hear voices but cannot make out the words or the intent, when the dream seems real and the reality dreamlike.

That is a strange and wonderful terminal. Hill House is there, in that place where the trains run both ways, with its doors that swing

sensibly shut; the woman in the room with the yellow wallpaper is there, crawling along the floor with her head pressed against that faint grease mark; the barrow-wights that menaced Frodo and Sam are there; and Pickman's model; the wendigo; Norman Bates and his terrible mother. No waking or dreaming in this terminal, but only the voice of the writer, low and rational, talking about the way the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unraveling with shocking suddenness. He's telling you that you want to see the car accident, and yes, he's right—you do. There's a dead voice on the phone . . . something behind the walls of the old house that sounds bigger than a rat . . . movement at the foot of the cellar stairs. He wants you to see all of those things, and more; he wants you to put your hands on the shape under the sheet. And you want to put your hands there. Yes.

These are some of the things I feel that the horror story does, but I am firmly convinced that it must do one more thing, this above all others: It must tell a tale that holds the reader or the listener spellbound for a little while, lost in a world that never was, never could be. It must be like the wedding guest that stoppeth one of three. All my life as a writer I have been committed to the idea that in fiction the story value holds dominance over every other facet of the writer's craft; characterization, theme, mood, none of those things is anything if the story is dull. And if the story does hold you, all else can be forgiven. My favorite line to that effect came from the pen of Edgar Rice Burroughs, no one's candidate for Great World Writer, but a man who understood story values completely. On page one of *The Land That Time Forgot*, the narrator finds a manuscript in a bottle; the rest of the novel is the presentation of that manuscript. The narrator says, "Read one page, and I will be forgotten." It's a pledge that Burroughs makes good on—many writers with talents greater than his have not.

In fine, gentle reader, here is a truth that makes the strongest writer gnash his teeth: with the exception of three small groups of people,

no one reads a writer's preface. The exceptions are: one, the writer's close family (usually his wife and his mother); two, the writer's accredited representative (and the editorial people and assorted munchkins), whose chief interest is to find out if anyone has been libeled in the course of the writer's wanderings; and three, those people who have had a hand in helping the writer on his way. These are the people who want to know whether or not the writer's head has gotten so big that he has managed to forget that he didn't do it by himself.

Other readers are apt to feel, with perfect justification, that the author's preface is a gross imposition, a multi-page commercial for himself, even more offensive than the cigarette ads that have proliferated in the center section of the paperback books. Most readers come to see the show, not to watch the stage manager take bows in front of the footlights. Again, with perfect justification.

I'm leaving now. The show is going to start soon. We're going to go into that room and touch the shape under the sheet. But before I leave, I want to take just two or three more minutes of your time to thank some people from each of the three groups above—and from a fourth. Bear with me as I say a few thank-you's:

To my wife, Tabitha, my best and most trenchant critic. When she feels the work is good, she says so; when she feels I've put my foot in it, she sets me on my ass as kindly and lovingly as possible. To my kids, Naomi, Joe, and Owen, who have been very understanding about their father's peculiar doings in the downstairs room. And to my mother, who died in 1973, and to whom this book is dedicated. Her encouragement was steady and unwavering, she always seemed able to find forty or fifty cents for the obligatory stamped, self-addressed return envelope, and no one—including myself—was more pleased than she when I “broke through.”

In that second group, particular thanks are due my editor, William G. Thompson of Doubleday & Company, who has worked with me patiently, who has suffered my daily phone calls with constant good cheer, and who showed kindness to a young writer with no

credentials some years ago, and who has stuck with that writer since then.

In the third group are the people who first bought my work: Mr. Robert A. W. Lowndes, who purchased the first two stories I ever sold; Mr. Douglas Allen and Mr. Nye Willden of the Dugent Publishing Corporation, who bought so many of the ones that followed for *Cavalier* and *Gent*, back in the scuffling days when the checks sometimes came just in time to avoid what the power companies euphemistically call “an interruption in service”; to Elaine Geiger and Herbert Schnall and Carolyn Stromberg of the New American Library; to Gerard Van der Leun of *Penthouse* and Harris Deinstfrey of *Cosmopolitan*. Thanks to all of you.

There's one final group that I'd like to thank, and that is each and every reader who ever unlimbered his or her wallet to buy something that I wrote. In a great many ways, this is your book because it sure never would have happened without you. So thanks.

Where I am, it's still dark and raining. We've got a fine night for it. There's something I want to show you, something I want you to touch. It's in a room not far from here—in fact, it's almost as close as the next page.

Shall we go?

*Bridgton, Maine*  
*February 27, 1977*

# JERUSALEM'S LOT

Oct. 2, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

How good it was to step into the cold, draughty hall here at Chapelwaite, every bone in an ache from that abominable coach, in need of instant relief from my distended bladder—and to see a letter addressed in your own inimitable scrawl propped on the obscene little cherry-wood table beside the door! Be assured that I set to deciphering it as soon as the needs of the body were attended to (in a coldly ornate downstairs bathroom where I could see my breath rising before my eyes).

I'm glad to hear that you are recovered from the *miasma* that has so long set in your lungs, although I assure you that I do sympathize with the moral dilemma the cure has affected you with. An ailing abolitionist healed by the sunny climes of slave-struck Florida! Still and all, Bones, I ask you as a friend who has also walked in the valley of the shadow, *to take all care of yourself* and venture not back to Massachusetts until your body gives you leave. Your fine mind and incisive pen cannot serve us if you are clay, and if the Southern zone is a healing one, is there not poetic justice in that?

Yes, the house is quite as fine as I had been led to believe by my cousin's executors, but rather more sinister. It sits atop a huge and jutting point of land perhaps three miles north of Falmouth and nine miles north of Portland. Behind it are some four acres of grounds, gone back to the wild in the most formidable manner imaginable—junipers, scrub vines, bushes, and various forms of creeper climb wildly over the picturesque stone walls that separate the estate from the town domain. Awful imitations of Greek statuary peer blindly through the wrack from atop various hillocks—they seem, in most cases, about to lunge at the passer-by. My cousin Stephen's tastes

seem to have run the gamut from the unacceptable to the downright horrific. There is an odd little summer house which has been nearly buried in scarlet sumac and a grotesque sundial in the midst of what must once have been a garden. It adds the final lunatic touch.

But the view from the parlour more than excuses this; I command a dizzying view of the rocks at the foot of Chapelwaite Head and the Atlantic itself. A huge, bellied bay window looks out on this, and a huge, toadlike secretary stands beside it. It will do nicely for the start of that novel which I have talked of so long [and no doubt tiresomely].

To-day has been gray with occasional splatters of rain. As I look out all seems to be a study in slate—the rocks, old and worn as Time itself, the sky, and of course the sea, which crashes against the granite fangs below with a sound which is not precisely sound but vibration—I can feel the waves with my feet even as I write. The sensation is not a wholly unpleasant one.

I know you disapprove my solitary habits, dear Bones, but I assure you that I am fine and happy. Calvin is with me, as practical, silent, and as dependable as ever, and by midweek I am sure that between the two of us we shall have straightened our affairs and made arrangement for necessary deliveries from town—and a company of cleaning women to begin blowing the dust from this place!

I will close—there are so many things as yet to be seen, rooms to explore, and doubtless a thousand pieces of execrable furniture to be viewed by these tender eyes. Once again, my thanks for the touch of familiar brought by your letter, and for your continuing regard.

Give my love to your wife, as you both have mine.

CHARLES.

Oct. 6, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

Such a place this is!

It continues to amaze me—as do the reactions of the townfolk in the closest village to my occupancy. That is a queer little place with

the picturesque name of Preacher's Corners. It was there that Calvin contracted for the weekly provisions. The other errand, that of securing a sufficient supply of cordwood for the winter, was likewise taken care of. But Cal returned with gloomy countenance, and when I asked him what the trouble was, he replied grimly enough:

“They think you mad, Mr. Boone!”

I laughed and said that perhaps they had heard of the brain fever I suffered after my Sarah died—certainly I spoke madly enough at that time, as you could attest.

But Cal protested that no-one knew anything of me except through my cousin Stephen, who contracted for the same services as I have now made provision for. “What was said, sir, was that anyone who would live in Chapelwaite must be either a lunatic or run the risk of becoming one.”

This left me utterly perplexed, as you may imagine, and I asked who had given him this amazing communication. He told me that he had been referred to a sullen and rather besotted pulp-logger named Thompson, who owns four hundred acres of pine, birch, and spruce, and who logs it with the help of his five sons, for sale to the mills in Portland and to householders in the immediate area.

When Cal, all unknowing of his queer prejudice, gave him the location to which the wood was to be brought, this Thompson stared at him with his mouth ajar and said that he would send his sons with the wood, in the good light of the day, and by the sea road.

Calvin, apparently misreading my bemusement for distress hastened to say that the man reeked of cheap whiskey and that he had then lapsed into some kind of nonsense about a deserted village and cousin Stephen's relations—and worms! Calvin finished his business with one of Thompson's boys, who, I take it, was rather surly and none too sober or freshly-scented himself. I take it there has been some of this reaction in Preacher's Corners itself, at the general store where Cal spoke with the shop-keeper, although this was more of the gossipy, behind-the-hand type.

None of this has bothered me much; we know how rustics dearly love to enrich their lives with the smell of scandal and myth, and I suppose poor Stephen and his side of the family are fair game. As I

told Cal, a man who has fallen to his death almost from his own front porch is more than likely to stir talk.

The house itself is a constant amazement. Twenty-three rooms, Bones! The wainscotting which panels the upper floors and the portrait gallery is mildewed but still stout. While I stood in my late cousin's upstairs bedroom I could hear the rats scuttering behind it, and big ones they must be, from the sound they make—almost like people walking there. I should hate to encounter one in the dark; or even in the light, for that matter. Still, I have noted neither holes nor droppings. Odd.

The upper gallery is lined with bad portraits in frames which must be worth a fortune. Some bear a resemblance to Stephen as I remember him. I believe I have correctly identified my Uncle Henry Boone and his wife Judith; the others are unfamiliar. I suppose one of them may be my own notorious grandfather, Robert. But Stephen's side of the family is all but unknown to me, for which I am heartily sorry. The same good humour that shone in Stephen's letters to Sarah and me, the same light of high intellect, shines in these portraits, bad as they are. For what foolish reasons families fall out! A rifled *escritoire*, hard words between brothers now dead three generations, and blameless descendants are needlessly estranged. I cannot help reflecting upon how fortunate it was that you and John Petty succeeded in contacting Stephen when it seemed I might follow my Sarah through the Gates—and upon how unfortunate it was that chance should have robbed us of a face-to-face meeting. How I would have loved to hear him defend the ancestral statuary and furnishings!

But do not let me denigrate the place to an extreme. Stephen's taste was not my own, true, but beneath the veneer of his additions there are pieces [a number of them shrouded by dust-covers in the upper chambers] which are true master-works. There are beds, tables, and heavy, dark scrollings done in teak and mahogany, and many of the bedrooms and receiving chambers, the upper study and small parlour, hold a somber charm. The floors are rich pine that glow with an inner and secret light. There is dignity here; dignity and the weight of years. I cannot yet say I like it, but I do respect it. I am

eager to watch it change as we revolve through the changes of this northern clime.

Lord, I run on! Write soon, Bones. Tell me what progress you make, and what news you hear from Petty and the rest. And please do not make the mistake of trying to persuade any new Southern acquaintances as to your views *too forcibly*—I understand that not all are content to answer merely with their mouths, as is our long-winded *friend*, Mr. Calhoun.

Yr. affectionate friend,  
CHARLES.

Oct. 16, 1850.

DEAR RICHARD,

Hello, and how are you? I have thought about you often since I have taken up residence here at Chapelwaite, and had half-expected to hear from you—and now I receive a letter from Bones telling me that I'd forgotten to leave my address at the club! Rest assured that I would have written eventually anyway, as it sometimes seems that my true and loyal friends are all I have left in the world that is sure and completely normal. And, Lord, how spread we've become! You in Boston, writing faithfully for *The Liberator* [to which I have also sent my address, incidentally], Hanson in England on another of his confounded *jaunts*, and poor old Bones in the very *lions' lair*, recovering his lungs.

It goes as well as can be expected here, Dick, and be assured I will render you a full account when I am not quite as pressed by certain events which are extant here—I think your legal mind may be quite intrigued by certain happenings at Chapelwaite and in the area about it.

But in the meantime I have a favour to ask, if you will entertain it. Do you remember the historian you introduced me to at Mr. Clary's fund-raising dinner for the cause? I believe his name was Bigelow. At any rate, he mentioned that he made a hobby of collecting odd bits of historical lore which pertained to the very area in which I am now living. My favour, then, is this: Would you contact him and ask him

what facts, bits of folklore, or *general rumour*—if any—he may be conversant with about a small, deserted village called JERUSALEM'S LOT, near a town-ship called Preacher's Corners, on the Royal River? The stream itself is a tributary of the Androscoggin, and flows into that river approximately eleven miles above that river's emptying place near Chapelwaite. It would gratify me intensely, and, more important, may be a matter of some moment.

In looking over this letter I feel I have been a bit short with you, Dick, for which I am heartily sorry. But be assured I will explain myself shortly, and until that time I send my warmest regards to your wife, two fine sons, and, of course, to yourself.

Yr. affectionate friend,  
CHARLES.

Oct. 16, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

I have a tale to tell you which seems a little strange [and even disquieting] to both Cal and me—see what you think. If nothing else, it may serve to amuse you while you battle the mosquitoes!

Two days after I mailed my last to you, a group of four young ladies arrived from the Corners under the supervision of an elderly lady of intimidatingly-competent visage named Mrs. Cloris, to set the place in order and to remove some of the dust that had been causing me to sneeze seemingly at every other step. They all seemed a little nervous as they went about their chores; indeed, one flighty miss uttered a small screech when I entered the upstairs parlour as she dusted.

I asked Mrs. Cloris about this [she was dusting the downstairs hall with grim determination that would have quite amazed you, her hair done up in an old faded bandanna], and she turned to me and said with an air of determination: “They don't like the house, and I don't like the house, sir, because it has always been a *bad* house.”

My jaw dropped at this unexpected bit, and she went on in a kindlier tone: “I do not mean to say that Stephen Boone was not a fine man, for he was; I cleaned for him every second Thursday all

the time he was here, as I cleaned for his father, Mr. Randolph Boone, until he and his wife disappeared in eighteen and sixteen. Mr. Stephen was a good and kindly man, and so you seem, sir (if you will pardon my bluntness; I know no other way to speak), but the house is *bad* and it always *has been*, and no Boone has ever been happy here since your grandfather Robert and his brother Philip fell out over stolen [and here she paused, almost guiltily] items in seventeen and eighty-nine.”

Such memories these folks have, Bones!

Mrs. Cloris continued: “The house was built in unhappiness, has been lived in with unhappiness, there has been blood spilt on its floors [as you may or may not know, Bones, my Uncle Randolph was involved in an accident on the cellar stairs which took the life of his daughter Marcella; he then took his own life in a fit of remorse. The incident is related in one of Stephen's letters to me, on the sad occasion of his dead sister's birthday], there has been disappearance and accident.

“I have worked here, Mr. Boone, and I am neither blind nor deaf. I've heard awful sounds in the walls, sir, awful sounds—thumpings and crashings and once a strange wailing that was half-laughter. It fair made my blood curdle. It's a dark place, sir.” And there she halted, perhaps afraid she had spoken too much.

As for myself, I hardly knew whether to be offended or amused, curious or merely matter-of-fact. I'm afraid that amusement won the day. “And what do you suspect, Mrs. Cloris? Ghosts rattling chains?”

But she only looked at me oddly. “Ghosts there may be. But it's not ghosts in the walls. It's not ghosts that wail and blubber like the damned and crash and blunder away in the darkness. It's—”

“Come, Mrs. Cloris,” I prompted her. “You've come this far. Now can you finish what you've begun?”

The strangest expression of terror, pique, and—I would swear to it—religious awe passed over her face. “Some die not,” she whispered. “Some live in the twilight shadows Between to serve—Him!”

And that was the end. For some minutes I continued to tax her, but she grew only more obstinate and would say no more. At last I

desisted, fearing she might gather herself up and quit the premises.

This is the end of one episode, but a second occurred the following evening. Calvin had laid a fire downstairs and I was sitting in the living-room, drowsing over a copy of *The Intelligencer* and listening to the sound of wind-driven rain on the large bay window. I felt comfortable as only one can on such a night, when all is miserable outside and all is warmth and comfort inside; but a moment later Cal appeared at the door, looking excited and a bit nervous.

“Are you awake, sir?” he asked.

“Barely,” I said. “What is it?”

“I've found something upstairs I think you should see,” he responded, with the same air of suppressed excitement.

I got up and followed him. As we climbed the wide stairs, Calvin said: “I was reading a book in the upstairs study—a rather strange one—when I heard a noise in the wall.”

“Rats,” I said. “Is that all?”

He paused on the landing, looking at me solemnly. The lamp he held cast weird, lurking shadows on the dark draperies and on the half-seen portraits that seemed now to leer rather than smile. Outside the wind rose to a brief scream and then subsided grudgingly.

“Not rats,” Cal said. “There was a kind of blundering, thudding sound from behind the book-cases, and then a horrible gurgling—horrible, sir. And scratching, as if something were struggling to get out . . . to get at me!”

You can imagine my amazement, Bones. Calvin is not the type to give way to hysterical flights of imagination. It began to seem that there was a mystery here after all—and perhaps an ugly one indeed.

“What then?” I asked him. We had resumed down the hall, and I could see the light from the study spilling forth onto the floor of the gallery. I viewed it with some trepidation; the night seemed no longer comfortable.

“The scratching noise stopped. After a moment the thudding, shuffling sounds began again, this time moving away from me. It paused once, and I swear I heard a strange, almost inaudible laugh!

I went to the book-case and began to push and pull, thinking there might be a partition, or a secret door.”

“You found one?”

Cal paused at the door to the study. “No—but I found this!”

We stepped in and I saw a square black hole in the left case. The books at that point were nothing but dummies, and what Cal had found was a small hiding place. I flashed my lamp within it and saw nothing but a thick fall of dust, dust which must have been decades old.

“There was only this,” Cal said quietly, and handed me a yellowed foolscap. The thing was a map, drawn in spider-thin strokes of black ink—the map of a town or village. There were perhaps seven buildings, and one, clearly marked with a steeple, bore this legend beneath it: *The Worm That Doth Corrupt*.

In the upper left corner, to what would have been the northwest of this little village, an arrow pointed. Inscribed beneath it: *Chapelwaite*.

Calvin said: “In town, sir, someone rather superstitiously mentioned a deserted village called Jerusalem's Lot. It's a place they steer clear of.”

“But this?” I asked, fingering the odd legend below the steeple.

“I don't know.”

A memory of Mrs. Cloris, adamant yet fearful, passed through my mind. “The Worm . . .” I muttered.

“Do you know something, Mr. Boone?”

“Perhaps . . . it might be amusing to have a look for this town tomorrow, do you think, Cal?”

He nodded, eyes lighting. We spent almost an hour after this looking for some breach in the wall behind the cubby-hole Cal had found, but with no success. Nor was there a recurrence of the noises Cal had described.

We retired with no further adventure that night.

On the following morning Calvin and I set out on our ramble through the woods. The rain of the night before had ceased, but the sky was somber and lowering. I could see Cal looking at me with some doubtfulness and I hastened to reassure him that should I tire, or the journey prove too far, I would not hesitate to call a halt to the

affair. We had equipped ourselves with a picnic lunch, a fine Buckwhite compass, and, of course, the odd and ancient map of Jerusalem's Lot.

It was a strange and brooding day; not a bird seemed to sing nor an animal to move as we made our way through the great and gloomy stands of pine to the south and east. The only sounds were those of our own feet and the steady pound of the Atlantic against the headlands. The smell of the sea, almost preternaturally heavy, was our constant companion.

We had gone no more than two miles when we struck an overgrown road of what I believe were once called the "corduroy" variety; this tended in our general direction and we struck off along it, making brisk time. We spoke little. The day, with its still and ominous quality, weighed heavily on our spirits.

At about eleven o'clock we heard the sound of rushing water. The remnant of road took a hard turn to the left, and on the other side of a boiling, slaty little stream, like an apparition, was Jerusalem's Lot!

The stream was perhaps eight feet across, spanned by a moss-grown footbridge. On the far side, Bones, stood the most perfect little village you might imagine, understandably weathered, but amazingly preserved. Several houses, done in that austere yet commanding form for which the Puritans were justly famous, stood clustered near the steeply-sheared bank. Further beyond, along a weed-grown thoroughfare, stood three or four of what might have been primitive business establishments, and beyond that, the spire of the church marked on the map, rising up to the gray sky and looking grim beyond description with its peeled paint and tarnished, leaning cross.

"The town is well named," Cal said softly beside me.

We crossed to the town and began to poke through it—and this is where my story grows slightly amazing, Bones, so prepare yourself!

The air seemed leaden as we walked among the buildings; weighted, if you will. The edifices were in a state of decay—shutters torn off, roofs crumbled under the weight of heavy snows gone by, windows dusty and leering. Shadows from odd corners and warped angles seemed to sit in sinister pools.

We entered an old and rotting tavern first—somehow it did not seem right that we should invade any of those houses to which people had retired when they wished privacy. An old and weather-scrubbed sign above the splintered door announced that this had been the BOAR'S HEAD INN AND TAVERN. The door creaked hellishly on its one remaining hinge, and we stepped into the shadowed interior. The smell of rot and mould was vaporous and nearly overpowering. And beneath it seemed to lie an even deeper smell, a slimy and pestiferous smell, a smell of ages and the decay of ages. Such a stench as might issue from corrupt coffins or violated tombs. I held my handkerchief to my nose and Cal did likewise. We surveyed the place.

“My God, sir—” Cal said faintly.

“It's never been touched,” I finished for him.

As indeed it had not. Tables and chairs stood about like ghostly guardians of the watch, dusty, warped by the extreme changes in temperature which the New England climate is known for, but otherwise perfect—as if they had waited through the silent, echoing decades for those long gone to enter once more, to call for a pint or a dram, to deal cards and light clay pipes. A small square mirror hung beside the rules of the tavern, *unbroken*. Do you see the significance, Bones? Small boys are noted for exploration and vandalism; there is not a “haunted” house which stands with windows intact, no matter how fearsome the eldritch inhabitants are rumoured to be; not a shadowy graveyard without at least one tombstone upended by young pranksters. Certainly there must be a score of young pranksters in Preacher's Corners, not two miles from Jerusalem's Lot. Yet the inn-keeper's glass [which must have cost him a nice sum] was intact—as were the other fragile items we found in our pokings. The only damage in Jerusalem's Lot has been done by impersonal Nature. The implication is obvious: Jerusalem's Lot is a shunned town. But why? I have a notion, but before I even dare hint at it, I must proceed to the unsettling conclusion of our visit.

We went up to the sleeping quarters and found beds made up, pewter water-pitchers neatly placed beside them. The kitchen was likewise untouched by anything save the dust of the years and that

horrible, sunken stench of decay. The tavern alone would be an antiquarian's paradise; the wondrously queer kitchen stove alone would fetch a pretty price at Boston auction.

"What do you think, Cal?" I asked when we had emerged again into the uncertain daylight.

"I think it's bad business, Mr. Boone," he replied in his doleful way, "and that we must see more to know more."

We gave the other shops scant notice—there was a hostelry with mouldering leather goods still hung on rusted flatnails, a chandler's, a warehouse with oak and pine still stacked within, a smithy.

We entered two houses as we made our way toward the church at the center of the village. Both were perfectly in the Puritan mode, full of items a collector would give his arm for, both deserted and full of the same rotten scent.

Nothing seemed to live or move in all of this but ourselves. We saw no insects, no birds, not even a cobweb fashioned in a window corner. Only dust.

At last we reached the church. It reared above us, grim, uninviting, cold. Its windows were black with the shadows inside, and any Godliness or sanctity had departed from it long ago. Of that I am certain. We mounted the steps, and I placed my hand on the large iron door-pull. A set, dark look passed from myself to Calvin and back again. I opened the portal. How long since that door had been touched? I would say with confidence that mine was the first in fifty years; perhaps longer. Rust-clogged hinges screamed as I opened it. The smell of rot and decay which smote us was nearly palpable. Cal made a gagging sound in his throat and twisted his head involuntarily for clearer air.

"Sir," he asked, "are you sure that you are—?"

"I'm fine," I said calmly. But I did not feel calm, Bones, no more than I do now. I believe, with Moses, with Jereboam, with Increase Mather, and with our own Hanson [when he is in a philosophical *temperament*], that there are spiritually noxious places, buildings where the milk of the cosmos has become sour and rancid. This church is such a place; I would swear to it.

We stepped into a long vestibule equipped with a dusty coat rack and shelved hymnals. It was windowless. Oil-lamps stood in niches here and there. An unremarkable room, I thought, until I heard Calvin's sharp gasp and saw what he had already noticed.

It was an obscenity.

I daren't describe that elaborately-framed picture further than this: that it was done after the fleshy style of Rubens; that it contained a grotesque travesty of a madonna and child; that strange, half-shadowed creatures sported and crawled in the background.

"Lord," I whispered.

"There's no Lord here," Calvin said, and his words seemed to hang in the air. I opened the door leading into the church itself, and the odor became a miasma, nearly overpowering.

In the glimmering half-light of afternoon the pews stretched ghostlike to the altar. Above them was a high, oaken pulpit and a shadow-struck narthex from which gold glimmered.

With a half-sob Calvin, that devout Protestant, made the Holy Sign, and I followed suit. For the gold was a large, beautifully-wrought cross—but it was hung upside-down, symbol of Satan's Mass.

"We must be calm," I heard myself saying. "We must be calm, Calvin. We must be calm."

But a shadow had touched my heart, and I was afraid as I had never been. I have walked beneath death's umbrella and thought there was none darker. But there is. There is.

We walked down the aisle, our footfalls echoing above and around us. We left tracks in the dust. And at the altar there were other tenebrous *objets d'art*. I will not, cannot, let my mind dwell upon them.

I began to mount to the pulpit itself.

"Don't, Mr. Boone!" Cal cried suddenly. "I'm afraid—"

But I had gained it. A huge book lay open upon the stand, writ both in Latin and crabbed runes which looked, to my unpractised eye, either Druidic or pre-Celtic. I enclose a card with several of the symbols, redrawn from memory.

I closed the book and looked at the words stamped into the leather: *De Vermis Mysteriis*, My Latin is rusty, but serviceable enough to translate: *The Mysteries of the Worm*.

As I touched it, that accursed church and Calvin's white, upturned face seemed to swim before me. It seemed that I heard low, chanting voices, full of hideous yet eager fear—and below that sound, another, filling the bowels of the earth. An hallucination, I doubt it not—but at the same moment, the church was filled with a very real sound, which I can only describe as a huge and macabre *turning* beneath my feet. The pulpit trembled beneath my fingers; the desecrated cross trembled on the wall.

We exited together, Cal and I, leaving the place to its own darkness, and neither of us dared look back until we had crossed the rude planks spanning the stream. I will not say we defiled the nineteen hundred years man has spent climbing upward from a hunkering and superstitious savage by actually running; but I would be a liar to say that we strolled.

That is my tale. You mustn't shadow your recovery by fearing that the fever has touched me again; Cal can attest to all in these pages, up to and including the hideous *noise*.

So I close, saying only that I wish I might see you [knowing that much of my bewilderment would drop away immediately], and that I remain your friend and admirer,

CHARLES.

Oct. 17, 1850.

DEAR GENTLEMEN:

In the most recent edition of your catalogue of household items (i.e., Summer, 1850), I noticed a preparation which is titled Rat's Bane. I should like to purchase one (1) 5-pound tin of this preparation at your stated price of thirty cents (\$.30). I enclose return postage. Please mail to: Calvin McCann, Chapelwaite, Preacher's Corners, Cumberland County, Maine.

Thank you for your attention in this matter.

I remain, dear Gentlemen,  
CALVIN McCANN.

Oct. 19, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

Developments of a disquieting nature.

The noises in the house have intensified, and I am growing more to the conclusion that rats are not all that move within our walls. Calvin and I went on another fruitless search for hidden crannies or passages, but found nothing. How poorly we would fit into one of Mrs. Radcliffe's romances! Cal claims, however, that much of the sound emanates from the cellar, and it is there we intend to explore tomorrow. It makes me no easier to know that Cousin Stephen's sister met her unfortunate end there.

Her portrait, by the by, hangs in the upstairs gallery. Marcella Boone was a sadly pretty thing, if the artist got her right, and I do know she never married. At times I think that Mrs. Cloris was right, that it *is* a bad house. It has certainly held nothing but gloom for its past inhabitants.

But I have more to say of the redoubtable Mrs. Cloris, for I have had this day a second interview with her. As the most level-headed person from the Corners that I have met thus far, I sought her out this afternoon, after an unpleasant interview which I will relate.

The wood was to have been delivered this morning, and when noon came and passed and no wood with it, I decided to take my daily walk into the town itself. My object was to visit Thompson, the man with whom Cal did business.

It has been a lovely day, full of the crisp snap of bright autumn, and by the time I reached the Thompsons' homestead [Cal, who remained home to poke further through Uncle Stephen's library, gave me adequate directions] I felt in the best mood that these last few days have seen, and quite prepared to forgive Thompson's tardiness with the wood.

The place was a massive tangle of weeds and fallen-down buildings in need of paint; to the left of the barn a huge sow, ready

for November butchering, grunted and wallowed in a muddy sty, and in the littered yard between house and outbuildings a woman in a tattered gingham dress was feeding chickens from her apron. When I hailed her, she turned a pale and vapid face toward me.

The sudden change in expression from utter, doltish emptiness to one of frenzied terror was quite wonderful to behold. I can only think she took me for Stephen himself, for she raised her hand in the prong-fingered sign of the evil eye and screamed. The chicken-feed scattered on the ground and the fowls fluttered away, squawking.

Before I could utter a sound, a huge, hulking figure of a man clad only in long-handled underwear lumbered out of the house with a squirrel-rifle in one hand and a jug in the other. From the red light in his eye and unsteady manner of walking, I judged that this was Thompson the Woodcutter himself.

“A Boone!” he roared. “G—d—n your eyes!” He dropped the jug a-rolling and also made the Sign.

“I’ve come,” I said with as much equanimity as I could muster under the circumstances, “because the wood has not. According to the agreement you struck with my man—”

“G—d—n your man too, say I!” And for the first time I noticed that beneath his bluff and bluster he was deadly afraid. I began seriously to wonder if he mightn’t actually use his rifle against me in his excitement.

I began carefully: “As a gesture of courtesy, you might—”

“G—d—n your courtesy!”

“Very well, then,” I said with as much dignity as I could muster. “I bid you good day until you are more in control of yourself.” And with this I turned away and began down the road to the village.

“Don’tchee come back!” he screamed after me. “Stick wi’ your evil up there! Cursed! Cursed! Cursed!” He pelted a stone at me, which struck my shoulder. I would not give him the satisfaction of dodging.

So I sought out Mrs. Cloris, determined to solve the mystery of Thompson’s enmity, at least. She is a widow [and none of your confounded *matchmaking*, Bones; she is easily fifteen years my senior, and I’ll not see forty again] and lives by herself in a charming little cottage at the ocean’s very doorstep. I found the lady hanging

out her wash, and she seemed genuinely pleased to see me. I found this a great relief; it is vexing almost beyond words to be branded pariah for no understandable reason.

“Mr. Boone,” said she, offering a half-curtsey. “If you've come about washing, I take none in past September. My rheumatiz pains me so that it's trouble enough to do my own.”

“I wish laundry *was* the subject of my visit. I've come for help, Mrs. Cloris. I must know all you can tell me about Chapelwaite and Jerusalem's Lot and why the townfolk regard me with such fear and suspicion!”

“Jerusalem's Lot! You know about *that*, then.”

“Yes,” I replied, “and visited it with my companion a week ago.”

“God!” She went pale as milk, and tottered. I put out a hand to steady her. Her eyes rolled horribly, and for a moment I was sure she would swoon.

“Mrs. Cloris, I am sorry if I have said anything to—”

“Come inside,” she said. “You must know. Sweet Jesu, the evil days have come again!”

She would not speak more until she had brewed strong tea in her sunshiny kitchen. When it was before us, she looked pensively out at the ocean for a time. Inevitably, her eyes and mine were drawn to the jutting brow of Chapelwaite Head, where the house looked out over the water. The large bay window glittered in the rays of the westering sun like a diamond. The view was beautiful but strangely disturbing. She suddenly turned to me and declared vehemently:

“Mr. Boone, you must leave Chapelwaite immediately!”

I was flabbergasted.

“There has been an evil breath in the air since you took up residence. In the last week—since you set foot in the accursed place—there have been omens and portents. A caul over the face of the moon; flocks of whippoorwills which roost in the cemeteries; an unnatural birth. You *must* leave!”

When I found my tongue, I spoke as gently as I could. “Mrs. Cloris, these things are dreams. You must know that.”

“Is it a dream that Barbara Brown gave birth to a child with no eyes? Or that Clifton Brockett found a flat, pressed trail five feet wide

in the woods beyond Chapelwaite *where all had withered and gone white?* And can you, who have visited Jerusalem's Lot, say with truth that nothing still lives there?"

I could not answer; the scene in that hideous church sprang before my eyes.

She clamped her gnarled hands together in an effort to calm herself. "I know of these things only from my mother and her mother before her. Do you know the history of your family as it applies to Chapelwaite?"

"Vaguely," I said. "The house has been the home of Philip Boone's line since the 1780s; his brother Robert, my grandfather, located in Massachusetts after an argument over stolen papers. Of Philip's side I know little, except that an unhappy shadow fell over it, extending from father to son to grand-children—Marcella died in a tragic accident and Stephen fell to his death. It was his wish that Chapelwaite become the home of me and mine, and that the family rift thus be mended."

"Never to be mended," she whispered. "You know nothing of the original quarrel?"

"Robert Boone was discovered rifling his brother's desk."

"Philip Boone was mad," she said. "A man who trafficked with the unholy. The thing which Robert Boone *attempted* to remove was a profane Bible writ in the old tongues—Latin, Druidic, others. A hell-book."

*"De Vermis Mysteriis."*

She recoiled as if struck. "You know of it?"

"I have seen it . . . touched it." It seemed again she might swoon. A hand went to her mouth as if to stifle an outcry. "Yes; in Jerusalem's Lot. On the pulpit of a corrupt and desecrated church."

"Still there; still there, then." She rocked in her chair. "I had hoped God in His wisdom had cast it into the pit of hell."

"What relation had Philip Boone to Jerusalem's Lot?"

"Blood relation," she said darkly. "The Mark of the Beast was on him, although he walked in the clothes of the Lamb. And on the night of October 31, 1789, Philip Boone disappeared . . . and the entire populace of that damned village with him."

She would say little more; in fact, seemed to know little more. She would only reiterate her pleas that I leave, giving as reason something about “blood calling to blood” and muttering about “those who *watch* and those who *guard*.” As twilight drew on she seemed to grow more agitated rather than less, and to placate her I promised that her wishes would be taken under strong consideration.

I walked home through lengthening, gloomy shadows, my good mood quite dissipated and my head spinning with questions which still plague me. Cal greeted me with the news that our noises in the walls have grown worse still—as I can attest at this moment. I try to tell myself that I hear only rats, but then I see the terrified, earnest face of Mrs. Cloris.

The moon has risen over the sea, bloated, full, the colour of blood, staining the ocean with a noxious shade. My mind turns to that church again and

(here a line is struck out)

But you shall not see that, Bones. It is too mad. It is time I slept, I think. My thoughts go out to you.

Regards,  
CHARLES.

• • •

(The following is from the pocket journal of Calvin McCann.)

Oct. 20, '50

Took the liberty this morning of forcing the lock which binds the book closed; did it before Mr. Boone arose. No help; it is all in cypher. A simple one, I believe. Perhaps I may break it as easily as the lock. A diary, I am certain, the hand oddly like Mr. Boone's own. Whose book, shelved in the most obscure corner of this library and locked across the pages? It seems old, but how to tell? The corrupting air has largely been kept from its pages. More later, if time; Mr. Boone set upon looking about the cellar. Am afraid these

dreadful goings-on will be too much for his chancy health yet. I must try to persuade him—

But he comes.

Oct. 20, 1850.

BONES,

I can't write I cant [*sic*] write of this I I I

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

Oct. 20, '50.

As I had feared, his health has broken—

Dear God, our Father Who art in Heaven!

Cannot bear to think of it; yet it is planted, burned on my brain like a tin-type; that horror in the cellar—!

Alone now; half-past eight o'clock; house silent but—

Found him swooned over his writing table; he still sleeps; yet for those few moments how nobly he acquitted himself while I stood paralyzed and shattered!

His skin is waxy, cool. Not the fever again, God be thanked. I daren't move him or leave him to go to the village. And if I did go, who would return with me to aid him? Who would come to this cursed house?

O, the cellar! The things in the cellar that have haunted our walls!

• • •

Oct. 22, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

I am myself again, although weak, after thirty-six hours of unconsciousness. Myself again . . . what a grim and bitter joke! I shall never be myself again, never. I have come face to face with an insanity and a horror beyond the limits of human expression. And the end is not yet.

If it were not for Cal, I believe I should end my life this minute. He is one island of sanity in all this madness.

You shall know it all.

We had equipped ourselves with candles for our cellar exploration, and they threw a strong glow that was quite adequate—hellishly adequate! Calvin tried to dissuade me, citing my recent illness, saying that the most we should probably find would be some healthy rats to mark for poisoning.

I remained determined, however; Calvin fetched a sigh and answered: “Have it as you must, then, Mr. Boone.”

The entrance to the cellar is by means of a trap in the kitchen floor [which Cal assures me he has since stoutly boarded over], and we raised it only with a great deal of straining and lifting.

A foetid, overpowering smell came up out of the darkness, not unlike that which pervaded the deserted town across the Royal River. The candle I held shed its glow on a steeply-slanting flight of stairs leading down into darkness. They were in a terrible state of repair—in one place an entire riser missing, leaving only a black hole—and it was easy enough to see how the unfortunate Marcella might have come to her end there.

“Be careful, Mr. Boone!” Cal said; I told him I had no intention of being anything but, and we made the descent.

The floor was earthen, the walls of stout granite, and hardly wet. The place did not look like a rat haven at all, for there were none of the things rats like to make their nests in, such as old boxes, discarded furniture, piles of paper, and the like. We lifted our candles, gaining a small circle of light, but still able to see little. The floor had a gradual slope which seemed to run beneath the main living-room and the dining-room—i.e., to the west. It was in this direction we walked. All was in utter silence. The stench in the air grew steadily stronger, and the dark about us seemed to press like wool, as if jealous of the light which had temporarily deposed it after so many years of undisputed dominion.

At the far end, the granite walls gave way to a polished wood which seemed totally black and without reflective properties. Here the cellar ended, leaving what seemed to be an alcove off the main

chamber. It was positioned at an angle which made inspection impossible without stepping around the corner.

Calvin and I did so.

It was as if a rotten spectre of this dwelling's sinister past had risen before us. A single chair stood in this alcove, and above it, fastened from a hook in one of the stout overhead beams, was a decayed noose of hemp.

"Then it was here that he hung himself," Cal muttered. "God!"

"Yes . . . with the corpse of his daughter lying at the foot of the stairs behind him."

Cal began to speak; then I saw his eyes jerked to a spot behind me; then his words became a scream.

How, Bones, can I describe the sight which fell upon our eyes? How can I tell you of the hideous tenants within our walls?

The far wall swung back, and from that darkness a face leered—a face with eyes as ebon as the Styx itself. Its mouth yawned in a toothless, agonized grin; one yellow, rotted hand stretched itself out to us. It made a hideous, mewling sound and took a shambling step forward. The light from my candle fell upon it—

*And I saw the livid rope-burn about its neck!*

From beyond it something else moved, something I shall dream of until the day when all dreams cease: a girl with a pallid, mouldering face and a corpse-grin; a girl whose head lolled at a lunatic angle.

They wanted us; I know it. And I know they would have drawn us into that darkness and made us their own, had I not thrown my candle directly at the thing in the partition, and followed it with the chair beneath that noose.

After that, all is confused darkness. My mind has drawn the curtain. I awoke, as I have said, in my room with Cal at my side.

If I could leave, I should fly from this house of horror with my nightdress flapping at my heels. But I cannot. I have become a pawn in a deeper, darker drama. Do not ask how I know; I only do. Mrs. Cloris was right when she spoke of blood calling to blood; and how horribly right when she spoke of those who *watch* and those who *guard*. I fear that I have wakened a Force which has slept in the tenebrous village of 'Salem's Lot for half a century, a Force which

has slain my ancestors and taken them in unholy bondage as *nosferatu*—the Undead. And I have greater fears than these, Bones, but I still see only in part. If I knew . . . if I only knew all!

CHARLES.

*Postscriptum*—And of course I write this only for myself; we are isolated from Preacher's Corners. I daren't carry my taint there to post this, and Calvin will not leave me. Perhaps, if God is good, this will reach you in some manner.

C.

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

Oct. 23, '50

He is stronger to-day; we talked briefly of the *apparitions* in the cellar; agreed they were neither hallucinations or of an *ectoplasmic* origin, but *real*. Does Mr. Boone suspect as I do, that they have gone? Perhaps; the noises are still; yet all is ominous yet, o'ercast with a dark pall. It seems we wait in the deceptive Eye of the Storm .

. . .

Have found a packet of papers in an upstairs bedroom, lying in the bottom drawer of an old roll-top desk. Some correspondence & receipted bills lead me to believe the room was Robert Boone's. Yet the most interesting document is a few jottings on the back of an advertisement for gentlemen's beaver hats. At the top is writ:

Blessed are the meek.

Below, the following apparent nonsense is writ:

bke dshdermthes eak  
elmsoerare shamed

I believe 'tis the key of the locked and coded book in the library. The cypher above is certainly a rustic one used in the War for

Independence known as the *Fence-Rail*. When one removes the “nulls” from the second bit of scribble, the following is obtained:

besdrteek  
lseaehme

Read up and down rather than across, the result is the original quotation from the Beatitudes.

Before I dare show this to Mr. Boone, I must be sure of the book's contents . . .

Oct. 24, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

An amazing occurrence—Cal, always close-mouthed until absolutely sure of himself [a rare and admirable human trait!], has found the diary of my grandfather Robert. The document was in a code which Cal himself has broken. He modestly declares that the discovery was an accident, but I suspect that perseverance and hard work had rather more to do with it.

At any rate, what a somber light it sheds on our mysteries here!

The first entry is dated June 1, 1789, the last October 27, 1789—four days before the cataclysmic disappearance of which Mrs. Cloris spoke. It tells a tale of deepening obsession—nay, of madness—and makes hideously clear the relationship between Great-uncle Philip, the town of Jerusalem's Lot, and the book which rests in that desecrated church

The town itself, according to Robert Boone, pre-dates Chapelwaite (built in 1782) and Preacher's Corners (known in those days as Preacher's Rest and founded in 1741); it was founded by a splinter group of the Puritan faith in 1710, a sect headed by a dour religious fanatic named James Boon. What a start that name gave me! That this Boon bore relation to my family can hardly be doubted, I believe. Mrs. Cloris could not have been more right in her superstitious belief that familial bloodline is of crucial importance in this matter; and I recall with terror her answer to my question about Philip and *his*

relationship to 'Salem's Lot. "Blood relation," said she, and I fear that it is so.

The town became a settled community built around the church where Boon preached—or held court. My grandfather intimates that he also held commerce with any number of ladies from the town, assuring them that this was God's way and will. As a result, the town became an anomaly which could only have existed in those isolated and queer days when belief in witches and the Virgin Birth existed hand in hand: an interbred, rather degenerate religious village controlled by a half-mad preacher whose twin gospels were the Bible and de Goudge's sinister *Demon Dwellings*; a community in which rites of exorcism were held regularly; a community of incest and the insanity and physical defects which so often accompany that sin. I suspect [and believe Robert Boone must have also] that one of Boon's bastard offspring must have left [or have been spirited away from] Jerusalem's Lot to seek his fortune to the south—and thus founded our present lineage. I do know, by my own family reckoning, that our clan supposedly originated in that part of Massachusetts which has so lately become this Sovereign State of Maine. My great-grandfather, Kenneth Boone, became a rich man as a result of the then-flourishing fur trade. It was his money, increased by time and wise investment, which built this ancestral home long after his death in 1763. His sons, Philip and Robert, built Chapelwaite. *Blood calls to blood*, Mrs. Cloris said. Could it be that Kenneth was born of James Boon, fled the madness of his father and his father's town, only to have his sons, all-unknowing, build the Boone home *not two miles from the Boon beginnings*? If 'tis true, does it not seem that some huge and invisible Hand has guided us?

According to Robert's diary, James Boon was ancient in 1789—and he must have been. Granting him an age of twenty-five in the year of the town's founding, he would have been one hundred and four, a prodigious age. The following is quoted direct from Robert Boone's diary:

August 4, 1789.

To-day for the first time I met this Man with whom my Brother has been so unhealthily taken; I must admit this Boon controls a strange Magnetism which upset me Greatly. He is a veritable Ancient, white-bearded, and dresses in a black Cassock which struck me as somehow obscene. More disturbing yet was the Fact that he was surrounded by Women, as a Sultan would be surrounded by his Harem; and P. assures me he is active yet, although at least an Octogenarian . . .

The Village itself I had visited only once before, and will not visit again; its Streets are silent and filled with the Fear the old Man inspires from his Pulpit: I fear also that Like has mated with Like, as so many of the Faces are similar. It seemed that each way I turned I beheld the old Man's Visage . . . all are so wan; they seem Lack-Luster, as if sucked dry of all Vitality, I beheld Eyeless and Noseless Children, Women who wept and gibbered and pointed at the Sky for no Reason, and garbled talk from the Scriptures with talk of Demons;

. . .

P. wished me to stay for Services, but the thought of that sinister Ancient in the Pulpit before an Audience of this Town's interbred Populace repulsed me and I made an Excuse . . .

The entries preceding and following this tell of Philip's growing fascination with James Boon. On September 1, 1789, Philip was baptized into Boon's church. His brother says: "I am aghast with Amaze and Horror—my Brother has changed before my very Eyes—he even seems to grow to resemble the wretched Man."

First mention of the book occurs on July 23. Robert's diary records it only briefly: "P. returned from the smaller Village to-night with, I thought, a rather wild Visage. Would not speak until Bedtime, when he said that Boon had enquired after a Book titled *Mysteries of the Worm*. To please P. I promised to write Johns & Goodfellow a letter of enquiry; P. almost fawningly Grateful."

On August 12, this notation: "Rec'd two Letters in the Post to-day . . . one from Johns & Goodfellow in Boston. They have Note of the Tome in which P. has expressed an Interest. Only five Copies extant

in this Country. The Letter is rather cool; odd indeed. Have known Henry Goodfellow for Years.”

August 13:

P. insanely excited by Goodfellow's letter; refuses to say why. He would only say that Boon is *exceedingly anxious* to obtain a Copy. Cannot think why, since by the Title it seems only a harmless gardening Treatise . . .

Am worried for Philip; he grows stranger to me Daily. I wish now we had not returned to Chapelwaite. The Summer is hot, oppressive, and filled with Omens . . .

There are only two further mentions of the infamous book in Robert's diary [he seems not to have realized the true importance of it, even at the end]. From the entry of September 4:

I have petitioned Goodfellow to act as P.'s Agent in the matter of the Purchase, although my better Judgement cries against It. What use to demur? Has he not his own Money, should I refuse? And in return I have extracted a Promise from Philip to recant this noisome Baptism . . . yet he is so Hectic; nearly Feverish; I do not trust him. I am hopelessly *at Sea* in this Matter . . .

Finally, September 16:

The Book arrived to-day, with a note from Goodfellow saying he wishes no more of my Trade . . . P. was excited to an unnatural Degree; all but snatched the Book from my Hands. It is writ in bastard Latin and a Runic Script of which I can read Nothing. The Thing seemed almost warm to the Touch, and to vibrate in my Hands, as if it contained a huge Power . . . I reminded P. of his Promise to Recant and he only laughed in an ugly, crazed Fashion

and waved that Book in my Face, crying over and over again: "We have it! We have it! The Worm! The Secret of the Worm!" He is now fled, I suppose to his mad Benefactor, and I have not seen him more this Day . . .

Of the book there is no more, but I have made certain deductions which seem at least probable. First, that this book was, as Mrs. Cloris has said, the subject of the falling-out between Robert and Philip; second, that it is a repository of unholy incantation, possibly of Druidic origin [many of the Druidic blood-rituals were preserved in print by the Roman conquerors of Britain in the name of scholarship, and many of these infernal cook-books are among the world's forbidden literature]; third, that Boon and Philip intended to use the book for their own ends. Perhaps, in some twisted way, they intended good, but I do not believe it. I believe they had long before bound themselves over to whatever faceless powers exist beyond the rim of the Universe; powers which may exist beyond the very fabric of Time. The last entries of Robert Boone's diary lend a dim glow of approbation to these speculations, and I allow them to speak for themselves:

October 26, 1789

A terrific Babble in Preacher's Corners to-day; Frawley, the Blacksmith, seized my Arm and demanded to know "What your Brother and that mad Antichrist are into up there." Goody Randall claims there have been *Signs* in the Sky of *great impending Disaster*. A Cow has been born with two Heads.

As for Myself, I know not what impends; perhaps 'tis my Brother's Insanity. His Hair has gone Gray almost Overnight, his Eyes are great bloodshot Circles from which the pleasing light of Sanity seems to have departed. He grins and whispers, and, for some Reason of his Own, has begun to haunt our Cellar when not in Jerusalem's Lot. The Whippoorwills congregate about the House and upon the Grass; their combined Calling from the Mist blends with the Sea into an unearthly Shriek that precludes all thought of Sleep.

October 27, 1789

Followed P. this Evening when he departed for Jerusalem's Lot, keeping a safe Distance to avoid Discovery. The cursed Whippoorwills flock through the Woods, filling all with a deathly, psycho-pompotic Chant. I dared not cross the Bridge; the Town all dark except for the Church, which was litten with a ghastly red Glare that seemed to transform the high, peak'd Windows into the Eyes of the Inferno. Voices rose and fell in a Devil's Litany, sometimes laughing, sometimes sobbing. The very Ground seem'd to swell and groan beneath me, as if it bore an awful Weight, and I fled, amaz'd and full of Terror, the hellish, screaming Cries of the Whippoorwills dinning in my ears as I ran through those shadow-riven Woods.

All tends to the Climax, yet unforeseen. I dare not sleep for the Dreams that come, yet not remain awake for what lunatic Terrors may come. The night is full of awful Sounds and I fear—

And yet I feel the urge to go again, to watch, *to see*. It seems that Philip himself calls me, and the old Man.

The Birds

cursed cursed cursed

Here the diary of Robert Boone ends.

Yet you must notice, Bones, near the conclusion, that he claims Philip himself seemed to call him. My final conclusion is formed by these lines, by the talk of Mrs. Cloris and the others, but most of all by those terrifying figures in the cellar, dead yet alive. Our line is yet an unfortunate one, Bones. There is a curse over us which refuses to be buried; it lives a hideous shadow-life in this house and that town. And the culmination of the cycle is drawing close again. I am the last of the Boone blood. I fear that something knows this, and that I am at the nexus of an evil endeavor beyond all sane understanding. The anniversary is All Saints' Eve, one week from today.

How shall I proceed? If only you were here to counsel me, to help me! If only you were here!

I must know all; I must return to the shunned town. May God support me!

CHARLES.

• • •

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

Oct. 25, '50

Mr. Boone has slept nearly all this day. His face is pallid and much thinner. I fear recurrence of his fever is inevitable.

While refreshing his water carafe I caught sight of two unmailed letters to Mr. Granson in Florida. He plans to return to Jerusalem's Lot; 'twill be the killing of him if I allow it. Dare I steal away to Preacher's Corners and hire a buggy? I must, and yet what if he wakes? If I should return and find him gone?

The noises have begun in our walls again. Thank God he still sleeps! My mind shudders from the import of this.

*Later*

I brought him his dinner on a tray. He plans on rising later, and despite his evasions, I know what he plans; yet I go to Preacher's Corners. Several of the sleeping-powders prescribed to him during his late illness remained with my things; he drank one with his tea, all-unknowing. He sleeps again.

To leave him with the Things that shamble behind our walls terrifies me; to let him continue even one more day within these walls terrifies me even more greatly. I have locked him in.

God grant he should still be there, safe and sleeping, when I return with the buggy!

*Still later*

Stoned me! Stoned me like a wild and rabid dog! Monsters and fiends! These, that call themselves *men!* We are prisoners here—  
The birds, the whippoorwills, have begun to gather.

October 26, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

It is nearly dusk, and I have just wakened, having slept nearly the last twenty-four hours away. Although Cal has said nothing, I suspect he put a sleeping-powder in my tea, having gleaned my intentions. He is a good and faithful friend, intending only the best, and I shall say nothing.

Yet my mind is set. Tomorrow is the day. I am calm, resolved, but also seem to feel the subtle onset of the fever again. If it is so, it *must* be tomorrow. Perhaps tonight would be better still; yet not even the fires of Hell itself could induce me to set foot in that village by shadowlight.

Should I write no more, may God bless and keep you, Bones.

CHARLES.

*Postscriptum*—The birds have set up their cry, and the horrible shuffling sounds have begun again. Cal does not think I hear, but I do.

C.

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

Oct. 27, '50  
5 AM

He is impersuadable. Very well. I go with him.

November 4, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

Weak, yet lucid. I am not sure of the date, yet my almanac assures me by tide and sunset that it must be correct. I sit at my desk, where

I sat when I first wrote you from Chapelwaite, and look out over the dark sea from which the last of the light is rapidly fading. I shall never see more. This night is my night; I leave it for whatever shadows be.

How it heaves itself at the rocks, this sea! It throws clouds of sea-foam at the darkling sky in banners, making the floor beneath me tremble. In the window-glass I see my reflection, pallid as any vampire's. I have been without nourishment since the twenty-seventh of October, and should have been without water, had not Calvin left the carafe beside my bed on that day.

O, Cal! He is no more, Bones. He is gone in my place, in the place of this wretch with his pipestem arms and skull face who I see reflected back in the darkened glass. And yet he may be the more fortunate; for no dreams haunt him as they have haunted me these last days—twisted shapes that lurk in the nightmare corridors of delirium. Even now my hands tremble; I have splotted the page with ink.

Calvin confronted me on that morning just as I was about to slip away—and I thinking I had been so crafty. I had told him that I had decided we must leave, and asked him if he would go to Tandrell, some ten miles distant, and hire a trap where we were less notorious. He agreed to make the hike and I watched him leave by the sea-road. When he was out of sight I quickly made myself ready, donning both coat and muffler [for the weather had turned frosty; the first touch of coming winter was on that morning's cutting breeze]. I wished briefly for a gun, then laughed at myself for the wish. What avails guns in such a matter?

I let myself out by the pantry-way, pausing for a last look at sea and sky; for the smell of the fresh air against the putrescence I knew I should smell soon enough; for the sight of a foraging gull wheeling below the clouds.

I turned—and there stood Calvin McCann.

“You shall not go alone,” said he; and his face was as grim as ever I have seen it.

“But Calvin—” I began.

“No, not a word! We go together and do what we must, or I return you bodily to the house. You are not well. You shall not go alone.”

It is impossible to describe the conflicting emotions that swept over me: confusion, pique, gratefulness—yet the greatest of them was love.

We made our way silently past the summer house and the sundial, down the weed-covered verge and into the woods. All was dead still—not a bird sang nor a wood-cricket chirruped. The world seemed cupped in a silent pall. There was only the ever-present smell of salt, and from far away, the faint tang of woodsmoke. The woods were a blazoned riot of colour, but, to my eye, scarlet seemed to predominate all.

Soon the scent of salt passed, and another, more sinister odour took its place; that rottenness which I have mentioned. When we came to the leaning bridge which spanned the Royal, I expected Cal to ask me again to defer, but he did not. He paused, looked at that grim spire which seemed to mock the blue sky above it, and then looked at me. We went on.

We proceeded with quick yet dread footsteps to James Boon's church. The door still hung ajar from our latter exit, and the darkness within seemed to leer at us. As we mounted the steps, brass seemed to fill my heart; my hand trembled as it touched the doorhandle and pulled it. The smell within was greater, more noxious than ever.

We stepped into the shadowy anteroom and, with no pause, into the main chamber.

It was a shambles.

Something vast had been at work in there, and a mighty destruction had taken place. Pews were overturned and heaped like jackstraws. The wicked cross lay against the east wall, and a jagged hole in the plaster above it testified to the force with which it had been hurled. The oil-lamps had been ripped from their high fixtures, and the reek of whale-oil mingled with the terrible stink which pervaded the town. And down the center aisle, like a ghastly bridal path, was a trail of black ichor, mingled with sinister tendrils of blood. Our eyes followed it to the pulpit—the only untouched thing in view. Atop it, staring at us from across that blasphemous Book with glazed eyes, was the butchered body of a lamb.

“God,” Calvin whispered.

We approached, keeping clear of the slime on the floor. The room echoed back our footsteps and seemed to transmute them into the sound of gigantic laughter.

We mounted the narthex together. The lamb had not been torn or eaten; it appeared, rather, to have been *squeezed* until its blood-vessels had forcibly ruptured. Blood lay in thick and noisome puddles on the lectern itself, and about the base of it . . . *yet on the book it was transparent, and the crabbed runes could be read through it, as through coloured glass!*

“Must we touch it?” Cal asked, unfaltering.

“Yes. I must have it.”

“What will you do?”

“What should have been done sixty years ago. I am going to destroy it.”

We rolled the lamb's corpse away from the book; it struck the floor with a hideous, lolling thud. The blood-stained pages now seemed alive with a scarlet glow of their own.

My ears began to ring and hum; a low chant seemed to emanate from the walls themselves. From the twisted look on Cal's face I knew he heard the same. The floor beneath us trembled, as if the familiar which haunted this church came now unto us, to protect its own. The fabric of sane space and time seemed to twist and crack; the church seemed filled with spectres and litten with the hell-glow of eternal cold fire. It seemed that I saw James Boon, hideous and misshapen, cavorting around the supine body of a woman, and my Grand-uncle Philip behind him, an acolyte in a black, hooded cassock, who held a knife and a bowl.

*“Deum vobiscum magna vermis—”*

The words shuddered and writhed on the page before me, soaked in the blood of sacrifice, prize of a creature that shambles beyond the stars—

A blind, interbred congregation swaying in mindless, daemoniac praise; deformed faces filled with hungering, nameless anticipation—

And the Latin was replaced by an older tongue, ancient when Egypt was young and the Pyramids unbuilt, ancient when this Earth still hung in an unformed, boiling firmament of empty gas:

*“Gyyagin vardar Yogsoggoth! Verminis! Gyyagin! Gyyagin! Gyyagin!”*

The pulpit began to rend and split, pushing upward—

Calvin screamed and lifted an arm to shield his face. The narthex trembled with a huge, tenebrous motion like a ship wracked in a gale. I snatched up the book and held it away from me; it seemed filled with the heat of the sun and I felt that I should be cindered, blinded.

“Run!” Calvin screamed. “Run!”

But I stood frozen and the alien presence filled me like an ancient vessel that had waited for years—for generations!

“Gyyagin vardar!” I screamed. “Servant of Yogsoggoth, the Nameless One! The Worm from beyond Space! Star-Eater! Blinder of Time! Verminis! Now comes the Hour of Filling, the Time of Rending! Verminis! Alyah! Alyah! Gyyagin!”

Calvin pushed me and I tottered, the church whirling before me, and fell to the floor. My head crashed against the edge of an upturned pew, and red fire filled my head—yet seemed to clear it.

I groped for the sulphur matches I had brought.

Subterranean thunder filled the place. Plaster fell. The rusted bell in the steeple pealed a choked devil's carillon in sympathetic vibration.

My match flared. I touched it to the book just as the pulpit exploded upward in a rending explosion of wood. A huge black maw was discovered beneath; Cal tottered on the edge his hands held out, his face distended in a wordless scream that I shall hear forever.

And then there was a huge surge of gray, vibrating flesh. The smell became a nightmare tide. It was a huge outpouring of a viscid, pustulant jelly, a huge and awful form that seemed to skyrocket from the very bowels of the ground. And yet, with a sudden horrible comprehension which no man can have known, I perceived *that it was but one ring, one segment, of a monster worm that had existed eyeless for years in the chambered darkness beneath that abominated church!*

The book flared alight in my hands, and the Thing seemed to scream soundlessly above me. Calvin was struck glancingly and

flung the length of the church like a doll with a broken neck.

It subsided—the thing subsided, leaving only a huge and shattered hole surrounded with black slime, and a great screaming, mewling sound that seemed to fade through colossal distances and was gone.

I looked down. The book was ashes.

I began to laugh, then to howl like a struck beast.

All sanity left me, and I sat on the floor with blood streaming from my temple, screaming and gibbering into those unhallowed shadows while Calvin sprawled in the far corner, staring at me with glazing, horror-struck eyes.

I have no idea how long I existed in that state. It is beyond all telling. But when I came again to my faculties, shadows had drawn long paths around me and I sat in twilight. Movement had caught my eye, movement from the shattered hole in the narthex floor.

A hand groped its way over the riven floorboards.

My mad laughter choked in my throat. All hysteria melted into numb bloodlessness.

With terrible, vengeful slowness, a wracked figure pulled itself up from darkness, and a half-skull peered at me. Beetles crawled over the fleshless forehead. A rotted cassock clung to the askew hollows of mouldered collarbones. Only the eyes lived—red, insane pits that glared at me with more than lunacy; they glared with the empty life of the pathless wastes beyond the edges of the Universe.

It came to take me down to darkness.

That was when I fled, screeching, leaving the body of my lifelong friend unheeded in that place of dread. I ran until the air seemed to burst like magma in my lungs and brain. I ran until I had gained this possessed and tainted house again, and my room, where I collapsed and have lain like a dead man until to-day. I ran because even in my crazed state, and even in the shattered ruin of that dead-yet-animated shape, *I had seen the family resemblance*. Yet not of Philip or of Robert, whose likenesses hang in the upstairs gallery. *That rotted visage belonged to James Boon, Keeper of the Worm!*

He still lives somewhere in the twisted, lightless wanderings beneath Jerusalem's Lot and Chapelwaite—and *It* still lives. The

burning of the book thwarted *It*, but there are other copies.

Yet I am the gateway, and I am the last of the Boone blood. For the good of all humanity I must die . . . and break the chain forever.

I go to the sea now, Bones. My journey, like my story, is at an end. May God rest you and grant you all peace.

CHARLES.

The odd series of papers above was eventually received by Mr. Everett Granson, to whom they had been addressed. It is assumed that a recurrence of the unfortunate brain fever which struck him originally following the death of his wife in 1848 caused Charles Boone to lose his sanity and murder his companion and longtime friend, Mr. Calvin McCann.

The entries in Mr. McCann's pocket journal are a fascinating exercise in forgery, undoubtedly perpetrated by Charles Boone in an effort to reinforce his own paranoid delusions.

In at least two particulars, however, Charles Boone is proved wrong. First, when the town of Jerusalem's Lot was "rediscovered" (I use the term historically, of course), the floor of the narthex, although rotted, showed no sign of explosion or huge damage. Although the ancient pews *were* overturned and several windows shattered, this can be assumed to be the work of vandals from neighboring towns over the years. Among the older residents of Preacher's Corners and Tandrell there is still some idle rumor about Jerusalem's Lot (perhaps, in his day, it was this kind of harmless folk legend which started Charles Boone's mind on its fatal course), but this seems hardly relevant.

Second, Charles Boone was not the last of his line. His grandfather, Robert Boone, sired at least two bastards. One died in infancy. The second took the Boone name and located in the town of Central Falls, Rhode Island. I am the final descendant of this offshoot of the Boone line; Charles Boone's second cousin, removed by three generations. These papers have been in my committal for ten years. I offer them for publication on the occasion of my residence in the Boone ancestral home, Chapelwaite, in the hope

that the reader will find sympathy in his heart for Charles Boone's poor, misguided soul. So far as I can tell, he was correct about only one thing: this place badly needs the services of an exterminator.

There are some huge rats in the walls, by the sound.

Signed,  
James Robert Boone  
October 2, 1971.

# GRAVEYARD SHIFT

Two A.M., Friday.

Hall was sitting on the bench by the elevator, the only place on the third floor where a working joe could catch a smoke, when Warwick came up. He wasn't happy to see Warwick. The foreman wasn't supposed to show up on three during the graveyard shift; he was supposed to stay down in his office in the basement drinking coffee from the urn that stood on the corner of his desk. Besides, it was hot.

It was the hottest June on record in Gates Falls, and the Orange Crush thermometer which was also by the elevator had once rested at 94 degrees at three in the morning. God only knew what kind of hellhole the mill was on the three-to-eleven shift.

Hall worked the picker machine, a balky gadget manufactured by a defunct Cleveland firm in 1934. He had only been working in the mill since April, which meant he was still making minimum \$1.78 an hour, which was still all right. No wife, no steady girl, no alimony. He was a drifter, and during the last three years he had moved on his thumb from Berkeley (college student) to Lake Tahoe (busboy) to Galveston (stevedore) to Miami (short-order cook) to Wheeling (taxi driver and dish-washer) to Gates Falls, Maine (picker-machine operator). He didn't figure on moving again until the snow fell. He was a solitary person and he liked the hours from eleven to seven when the blood flow of the big mill was at its coolest, not to mention the temperature.

The only thing he did not like was the rats.

The third floor was long and deserted, lit only by the sputtering glow of the fluorescents. Unlike the other levels of the mill, it was relatively silent and unoccupied—at least by the humans. The rats were another matter. The only machine on three was the picker; the

rest of the floor was storage for the ninety-pound bags of fiber which had yet to be sorted by Hall's long gear-toothed machine. They were stacked like link sausages in long rows, some of them (especially the discontinued meltons and irregular slipes for which there were no orders) years old and dirty gray with industrial wastes. They made fine nesting places for the rats, huge, fat-bellied creatures with rabid eyes and bodies that jumped with lice and vermin.

Hall had developed a habit of collecting a small arsenal of soft-drink cans from the trash barrel during his break. He pegged them at the rats during times when work was slow, retrieving them later at his leisure. Only this time Mr. Foreman had caught him, coming up the stairs instead of using the elevator like the sneaky sonofabitch everyone said he was.

"What are you up to, Hall?"

"The rats," Hall said, realizing how lame that must sound now that all the rats had snuggled safely back into their houses. "I peg cans at 'em when I see 'em."

Warwick nodded once, briefly. He was a big beefy man with a crew cut. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and his tie was pulled down. He looked at Hall closely. "We don't pay you to chuck cans at rats, mister. Not even if you pick them up again."

"Harry hasn't sent down an order for twenty minutes," Hall answered, thinking: *Why couldn't you stay the hell put and drink your coffee?* "I can't run it through the picker if I don't have it."

Warwick nodded as if the topic no longer interested him.

"Maybe I'll take a walk up and see Wisconsky," he said. "Five to one he's reading a magazine while the crap piles up in his bins."

Hall didn't say anything.

Warwick suddenly pointed. "There's one! Get the bastard!"

Hall fired the Nehi can he had been holding with one whistling, overhand motion. The rat, which had been watching them from atop one of the fabric bags with its bright buckshot eyes, fled with one faint squeak. Warwick threw back his head and laughed as Hall went after the can.

"I came to see you about something else," Warwick said.

"Is that so?"

“Next week's Fourth of July week.” Hall nodded. The mill would be shut down Monday to Saturday—vacation week for men with at least one year's tenure. Layoff week for men with less than a year. “You want to work?”

Hall shrugged. “Doing what?”

“We're going to clean the whole basement level. Nobody's touched it for twelve years. Helluva mess. We're going to use hoses.”

“The town zoning committee getting on the board of directors?”

Warwick looked steadily at Hall. “You want it or not? Two an hour, double time on the fourth. We're working the graveyard shift because it'll be cooler.”

Hall calculated. He could clear maybe seventy-five bucks after taxes. Better than the goose egg he had been looking forward to.

“All right.”

“Report down by the dye house next Monday.”

Hall watched him as he started back to the stairs. Warwick paused halfway there and turned back to look at Hall. “You used to be a college boy, didn't you?”

Hall nodded.

“Okay, college boy, I'm keeping it in mind.”

He left. Hall sat down and lit another smoke, holding a soda can in one hand and watching for the rats. He could just imagine how it would be in the basement—the sub-basement, actually, a level below the dye house. Damp, dark, full of spiders and rotten cloth and ooze from the river—and rats. Maybe even bats, the aviators of the rodent family. *Gah.*

Hall threw the can hard, then smiled thinly to himself as the faint sound of Warwick's voice came down through the overhead ducts, reading Harry Wisconsky the riot act.

*Okay, college boy, I'm keeping it in mind.*

He stopped smiling abruptly and butted his smoke. A few moments later Wisconsky started to send rough nylon down through the blowers, and Hall went to work. And after a while the rats came out and sat atop the bags at the back of the long room watching him with their unblinking black eyes. They looked like a jury.

Eleven P.M., Monday.

There were about thirty-six men sitting around when Warwick came in wearing a pair of old jeans tucked into high rubber boots. Hall had been listening to Harry Wisconsky, who was enormously fat, enormously lazy, and enormously gloomy.

"It's gonna be a mess," Wisconsky was saying when Mr. Foreman came in. "You wait and see, we're all gonna go home blacker'n midnight in Persia."

"Okay!" Warwick said. "We strung sixty lightbulbs down there, so it should be bright enough for you to see what you're doing. You guys"—he pointed to a bunch of men that had been leaning against the drying spools—"I want you to hook up the hoses over there to the main water conduit by the stairwell. You can unroll them down the stairs. We got about eighty yards for each man, and that should be plenty. Don't get cute and spray one of your buddies or you'll send him to the hospital. They pack a wallop."

"Somebody'll get hurt," Wisconsky prophesied sourly. "Wait and see."

"You other guys," Warwick said pointing to the group that Hall and Wisconsky were a part of. "You're the crap crew tonight. You go in pairs with an electric wagon for each team. There's old office furniture, bags of cloth, hunks of busted machinery, you name it. We're gonna pile it by the airshaft at the west end. Anyone who doesn't know how to run a wagon?"

No one raised a hand. The electric wagons were battery-driven contraptions like miniature dump trucks. They developed a nauseating stink after continual use that reminded Hall of burning power lines.

"Okay," Warwick said. "We got the basement divided up into sections, and we'll be done by Thursday. Friday we'll chain-hoist the crap out. Questions?"

There were none. Hall studied the foreman's face closely, and he had a sudden premonition of a strange thing coming. The idea pleased him. He did not like Warwick very much.

“Fine,” Warwick said. “Let's get at it.”

Two A.M., Tuesday.

Hall was bushed and very tired of listening to Wisconsky's steady patter of profane complaints. He wondered if it would do any good to belt Wisconsky. He doubted it. It would just give Wisconsky something else to bitch about.

Hall had known it would be bad, but this was murder. For one thing, he hadn't anticipated the smell. The polluted stink of the river, mixed with the odor of decaying fabric, rotting masonry, vegetable matter. In the far corner, where they had begun, Hall discovered a colony of huge white toadstools poking their way up through the shattered cement. His hands had come in contact with them as he pulled and yanked at a rusty gear-toothed wheel, and they felt curiously warm and bloated, like the flesh of a man afflicted with dropsy

The bulbs couldn't banish the twelve-year darkness; it could only push it back a little and cast a sickly yellow glow over the whole mess. The place looked like the shattered nave of a desecrated church, with its high ceiling and mammoth discarded machinery that they would never be able to move, its wet walls overgrown with patches of yellow moss, and the atonal choir that was the water from the hoses, running in the half-clogged sewer network that eventually emptied into the river below the falls.

And the rats—huge ones that made those on third look like dwarfs. God knew what they were eating down here. They were continually overturning boards and bags to reveal huge nests of shredded newspaper, watching with atavistic loathing as the pups fled into the cracks and crannies, their eyes huge and blind with the continuous darkness.

“Let's stop for a smoke,” Wisconsky said. He sounded out of breath, but Hall had no idea why; he had been goldbricking all night. Still, it was about that time, and they were currently out of sight of everyone else.

“All right.” He leaned against the edge of the electric wagon and lit up.

“I never should've let Warwick talk me into this,” Wisconsky said dolefully. “This ain't work for a *man*. But he was mad the other night when he caught me in the crapper up on four with my pants up. Christ, was he mad.”

Hall said nothing. He was thinking about Warwick, and about the rats. Strange, how the two things seemed tied together. The rats seemed to have forgotten all about men in their long stay under the mill; they were impudent and hardly afraid at all. One of them had sat up on its hind legs like a squirrel until Hall had gotten in kicking distance, and then it had launched itself at his boot, biting at the leather. Hundreds, maybe thousands. He wondered how many varieties of disease they were carrying around in this black sumphole. And Warwick. Something about him—

“I need the money,” Wisconsky said. “But Christ Jesus, buddy, this ain't no work for a *man*. Those rats.” He looked around fearfully. “It almost seems like they think. You ever wonder how it'd be, if we was little and they were big—”

“Oh, shut up,” Hall said.

Wisconsky looked at him, wounded. “Say, I'm sorry, buddy. It's just that . . .” He trailed off. “Jesus, this place stinks!” he cried. “This ain't no kind of *work for a man!*” A spider crawled off the edge of the wagon and scrambled up his arm. He brushed it off with a choked sound of disgust.

“Come on,” Hall said, snuffing his cigarette. “The faster, the quicker.”

“I suppose,” Wisconsky said miserably. “I suppose.”

Four A.M., Tuesday.

Lunch time.

Hall and Wisconsky sat with three or four other men, eating their sandwiches with black hands that not even the industrial detergent could clean. Hall ate looking into the foreman's little glass office.

Warwick was drinking coffee and eating cold hamburgers with great relish.

“Ray Upson had to go home,” Charlie Brochu said.

“He puke?” someone asked. “I almost did.”

“Nuh. Ray'd eat cowflop before he'd puke. Rat bit him.”

Hall looked up thoughtfully from his examination of Warwick. “Is that so?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Brochu shook his head. “I was teaming with him. Goddamndest thing I ever saw. Jumped out of a hole in one of those old cloth bags. Must have been big as a cat. Grabbed onto his hand and started chewing.”

“Jee-sus,” one of the men said, looking green.

“Yeah,” Brochu said. “Ray screamed just like a woman, and I ain't blamin' him. He bled like a pig. Would that thing let go? No sir. I had to belt it three or four times with a board before it would. Ray was just about crazy. He stomped it until it wasn't nothing but a mess of fur. Damndest thing I ever saw. Warwick put a bandage on him and sent him home. Told him to go to the doctor tomorrow.”

“That was big of the bastard,” somebody said.

As if he had heard, Warwick got to his feet in his office, stretched, and then came to the door. “Time we got back with it.”

The men got to their feet slowly, eating up all the time they possibly could stowing their dinner buckets, getting cold drinks, buying candy bars. Then they started down, heels clanking dispiritedly on the steel grillwork of the stair risers.

Warwick passed Hall, clapping him on the shoulder. “How's it going, college boy?” He didn't wait for an answer.

“Come on,” Hall said patiently to Wisconsky, who was tying his shoelace. They went downstairs.

Seven A.M., Tuesday.

Hall and Wisconsky walked out together; it seemed to Hall that he had somehow inherited the fat Pole. Wisconsky was almost comically dirty, his fat moon face smeared like that of a small boy who has just been thrashed by the town bully.

There was none of the usual rough banter from the other men, the pulling of shirttails, the cracks about who was keeping Tony's wife warm between the hours of one and four. Nothing but silence and an occasional hawking sound as someone spat on the dirty floor.

"You want a lift?" Wisconsky asked him hesitantly.

"Thanks."

They didn't talk as they rode up Mill Street and crossed the bridge. They exchanged only a brief word when Wisconsky dropped him off in front of his apartment.

Hall went directly to the shower, still thinking about Warwick, trying to place whatever it was about Mr. Foreman that drew him, made him feel that somehow they had become tied together.

He slept as soon as his head hit the pillow, but his sleep was broken and restless: he dreamed of rats.

One A.M., Wednesday.

It was better running the hoses.

They couldn't go in until the crap crews had finished a section, and quite often they were done hosing before the next section was clear—which meant time for a cigarette. Hall worked the nozzle of one of the long hoses and Wisconsky pattered back and forth, unsnagging lengths of the hose, turning the water on and off, moving obstructions.

Warwick was short-tempered because the work was proceeding slowly. They would never be done by Thursday, the way things were going.

Now they were working on a helter-skelter jumble of nineteenth-century office equipment that had been piled in one corner—smashed rolltop desks, moldy ledgers, reams of invoices, chairs with broken seats—and it was rat heaven. Scores of them squeaked and ran through the dark and crazy passages that honeycombed the heap, and after two men were bitten, the others refused to work until Warwick sent someone upstairs to get heavy rubberized gloves, the kind usually reserved for the dye-house crew, which had to work with acids.

Hall and Wisconsky were waiting to go in with their hoses when a sandy-haired bullneck named Carmichael began howling curses and backing away, slapping at his chest with his gloved hands.

A huge rat with gray-streaked fur and ugly, glaring eyes had bitten into his shirt and hung there, squeaking and kicking at Carmichael's belly with its back paws. Carmichael finally knocked it away with his fist, but there was a huge hole in his shirt, and a thin line of blood trickled from above one nipple. The anger faded from his face. He turned away and retched.

Hall turned the hose on the rat, which was old and moving slowly, a snatch of Carmichael's shirt still caught in its jaws. The roaring pressure drove it backward against the wall, where it smashed limply.

Warwick came over, an odd, strained smile on his lips. He clapped Hall on the shoulder. "Damn sight better than throwing cans at the little bastards, huh, college boy?"

"Some little bastard," Wisconsky said. "It's a foot long."

"Turn that hose over there." Warwick pointed at the jumble of furniture. "You guys, get out of the way!"

"With pleasure," someone muttered.

Carmichael charged up to Warwick, his face sick and twisted. "I'm gonna have compensation for this! I'm gonna—"

"Sure," Warwick said, smiling. "You got bit on the titty. Get out of the way before you get pasted down by this water."

Hall pointed the nozzle and let it go. It hit with a white explosion of spray, knocking over a desk and smashing two chairs to splinters. Rats ran everywhere, bigger than any Hall had ever seen. He could hear men crying out in disgust and horror as they fled, things with huge eyes and sleek, plump bodies. He caught a glimpse of one that looked as big as a healthy six-week puppy. He kept on until he could see no more, then shut the nozzle down.

"Okay!" Warwick called. "Let's pick it up!"

"I didn't hire out as no exterminator!" Cy Ippleston called mutinously. Hall had tipped a few with him the week before. He was a young guy, wearing a smut-stained baseball cap and a T-shirt.

"That you, Ippleston?" Warwick asked genially.

Ippeston looked uncertain, but stepped forward. "Yeah. I don't want no more of these rats. I hired to clean up, not to maybe get rabies or typhoid or somethin'. Maybe you best count me out."

There was a murmur of agreement from the others. Wisconsky stole a look at Hall, but Hall was examining the nozzle of the hose he was holding. It had a bore like a .45 and could probably knock a man twenty feet.

"You saying you want to punch your clock, Cy?"

"Thinkin' about it," Ippeston said.

Warwick nodded. "Okay. You and anybody else that wants. But this ain't no unionized shop, and never has been. Punch out now and you'll never punch back in. I'll see to it."

"Aren't you some hot ticket," Hall muttered.

Warwick swung around. "Did you say something, college boy?"

Hall regarded him blandly. "Just clearing my throat, Mr. Foreman."

Warwick smiled. "Something taste bad to you?"

Hall said nothing.

"All right, let's pick it up!" Warwick bawled.

They went back to work.

Two A.M., Thursday.

Hall and Wisconsky were working with the trucks again, picking up junk. The pile by the west airshaft had grown to amazing proportions, but they were still not half done.

"Happy Fourth," Wisconsky said when they stopped for a smoke. They were working near the north wall, far from the stairs. The light was extremely dim, and some trick of acoustics made the other men seem miles away.

"Thanks." Hall dragged on his smoke. "Haven't seen many rats tonight."

"Nobody has," Wisconsky said. "Maybe they got wise."

They were standing at the end of a crazy, zigzagging alley formed by piles of old ledgers and invoices, moldy bags of cloth, and two huge flat looms of ancient vintage. "Gah," Wisconsky said, spitting. "That Warwick—"

“Where do you suppose all the rats got to?” Hall asked, almost to himself. “Not into the walls—” He looked at the wet and crumbling masonry that surrounded the huge foundation stones. “They’d drown. The river’s saturated everything.”

Something black and flapping suddenly dive-bombed them. Wisconsky screamed and put his hands over his head.

“A bat,” Hall said, watching after it as Wisconsky straightened up.

“A bat! A bat!” Wisconsky raved. “What’s a bat doing in the cellar? They’re supposed to be in trees and under eaves and—”

“It was a big one,” Hall said softly. “And what’s a bat but a rat with wings?”

“Jesus,” Wisconsky moaned. “How did it—”

“Get in? Maybe the same way the rats got out.”

“What’s going on back there?” Warwick shouted from somewhere behind them. “Where are you?”

“Don’t sweat it,” Hall said softly. His eyes gleamed in the dark.

“Was that you, college boy?” Warwick called. He sounded closer.

“It’s okay!” Hall yelled. “I barked my shin!”

Warwick’s short, barking laugh. “You want a Purple Heart?”

Wisconsky looked at Hall. “Why’d you say that?”

“Look.” Hall knelt and lit a match. There was a square in the middle of the wet and crumbling cement. “Tap it.”

Wisconsky did. “It’s wood.”

Hall nodded. “It’s the top of a support. I’ve seen some other ones around here. There’s another level under this part of the basement.”

“God,” Wisconsky said with utter revulsion.

Three-thirty A.M., Thursday.

They were in the northeast corner, Ippeston and Brochu behind them with one of the high-pressure hoses, when Hall stopped and pointed at the floor. “There I thought we’d come across it.”

There was a wooden trapdoor with a crusted iron ringbolt set near the center.

He walked back to Ippeston and said, “Shut it off for a minute.” When the hose was choked to a trickle, he raised his voice to a

shout. "Hey! Hey, Warwick! Better come here a minute!"

Warwick came splashing over, looking at Hall with that same hard smile in his eyes. "Your shoelace come untied, college boy?"

"Look," Hall said. He kicked the trapdoor with his foot. "Sub-cellar."

"So what?" Warwick asked. "This isn't break time, col—"

"That's where your rats are," Hall said. "They're breeding down there. Wisconsky and I even saw a bat earlier."

Some of the other men had gathered around and were looking at the trapdoor.

"I don't care," Warwick said. "The job was the basement not—"

"You'll need about twenty exterminators, trained ones," Hall was saying. "Going to cost the management a pretty penny. Too bad."

Someone laughed. "Fat chance."

Warwick looked at Hall as if he were a bug under glass. "You're really a case, you are," he said, sounding fascinated. "Do you think I give a good goddamn how many rats there are under there?"

"I was at the library this afternoon and yesterday," Hall said. "Good thing you kept reminding me I was a college boy. I read the town zoning ordinances, Warwick—they were set up in 1911, before this mill got big enough to co-opt the zoning board. Know what I found?"

Warwick's eyes were cold. "Take a walk, college boy. You're fired."

"I found out," Hall plowed on as if he hadn't heard, "I found out that there is a zoning law in Gates Falls about vermin. You spell that v-e-r-m-i-n, in case you wondered. It means disease-carrying animals such as bats, skunks, unlicensed dogs—and rats. Especially rats. Rats are mentioned fourteen times in two paragraphs, Mr. Foreman. So you just keep in mind that the minute I punch out I'm going straight to the town commissioner and tell him what the situation down here is."

He paused, relishing Warwick's hate-congested face. "I think that between me, him, and the town committee, we can get an injunction slapped on this place. You're going to be shut down a lot longer than just Saturday, Mr. Foreman. And I got a good idea what *your* boss is going to say when he turns up. Hope your unemployment insurance is paid up, Warwick."

Warwick's hands formed into claws. "You damned snot-nose, I ought to—" He looked down at the trapdoor, and suddenly his smile reappeared. "Consider yourself rehired, college boy."

"I thought you might see the light."

Warwick nodded, the same strange grin on his face. "You're just so smart. I think maybe you ought to go down there, Hall, so we got somebody with a college education to give us an informed opinion. You and Wisconsky."

"Not me!" Wisconsky exclaimed. "Not me, I—"

Warwick looked at him. "You what?"

Wisconsky shut up.

"Good," Hall said cheerfully. "We'll need three flashlights. I think I saw a whole rack of those six-battery jobs in the main office, didn't I?"

"You want to take somebody else?" Warwick asked expansively. "Sure, pick your man."

"You," Hall said gently. The strange expression had come into his face again. "After all, the management should be represented, don't you think? Just so Wisconsky and I don't see *too* many rats down there?"

Someone (it sounded like Ippeston) laughed loudly.

Warwick looked at the men carefully. They studied the tips of their shoes. Finally he pointed at Brochu. "Brochu, go up to the office and get three flashlights. Tell the watchman I said to let you in."

"Why'd you get me into this?" Wisconsky moaned to Hall. "You know I hate those—"

"It wasn't me," Hall said, and looked at Warwick.

Warwick looked back at him, and neither would drop his eyes.

Four A.M., Thursday.

Brochu returned with the flashlights. He gave one to Hall, one to Wisconsky, one to Warwick.

"Ippeston! Give the hose to Wisconsky." Ippeston did so. The nozzle trembled delicately between the Pole's hands.

“All right” Warwick said to Wisconsky. “You're in the middle. If there are rats, you let them have it.”

Sure, Hall thought. And if there are rats, Warwick won't see them. And neither will Wisconsky, after he finds an extra ten in his pay envelope.

Warwick pointed at two of the men. “Lift it.”

One of them bent over the ringbolt and pulled. For a moment Hall didn't think it was going to give, and then it yanked free with an odd, crunching snap. The other man put his fingers on the underside to help pull, then withdrew with a cry. His hands were crawling with huge and sightless beetles.

With a convulsive grunt the man on the ringbolt pulled the trap back and let it drop. The underside was black with an odd fungus that Hall had never seen before. The beetles dropped off into the darkness below or ran across the floor to be crushed.

“Look,” Hall said.

There was a rusty lock bolted on the underside, now broken. “But it shouldn't be underneath,” Warwick said. “It should be on top. Why —”

“Lots of reasons,” Hall said. “Maybe so nothing on this side could open it—at least when the lock was new. Maybe so nothing on that side could get up.”

“But who locked it?” Wisconsky asked.

“Ah,” Hall said mockingly, looking at Warwick. “A mystery.”

“Listen,” Brochu whispered.

“Oh, God,” Wisconsky sobbed. “I ain't going down there!”

It was a soft sound, almost expectant; the whisk and patter of thousands of paws, the squeaking of rats.

“Could be frogs,” Warwick said.

Hall laughed aloud.

Warwick shone his light down. A sagging flight of wooden stairs led down to the black stones of the floor beneath. There was not a rat in sight.

“Those stairs won't hold us,” Warwick said with finality.

Brochu took two steps forward and jumped up and down on the first step. It creaked but showed no sign of giving way.

"I didn't ask you to do that," Warwick said.

"You weren't there when that rat bit Ray," Brochu said softly.

"Let's go," Hall said.

Warwick took a last sardonic look around at the circle of men, then walked to the edge with Hall. Wisconsky stepped reluctantly between them. They went down one at a time. Hall, then Wisconsky, then Warwick. Their flashlight beams played over the floor, which was twisted and heaved into a hundred crazy hills and valleys. The hose thumped along behind Wisconsky like a clumsy serpent.

When they got to the bottom, Warwick flashed his light around. It picked out a few rotting boxes, some barrels, little else. The seep from the river stood in puddles that came to ankle depth on their boots.

"I don't hear them anymore," Wisconsky whispered.

They walked slowly away from the trapdoor, their feet shuffling through the slime. Hall paused and shone his light on a huge wooden box with white letters on it. "Elias Varney," he read, "1841. Was the mill here then?"

"No," Warwick said. "It wasn't built until 1897. What difference?"

Hall didn't answer. They walked forward again. The sub-cellar was longer than it should have been, it seemed. The stench was stronger, a smell of decay and rot and things buried. And still the only sound was the faint, cavelike drip of water.

"What's that?" Hall asked, pointing his beam at a jut of concrete that protruded perhaps two feet into the cellar. Beyond it, the darkness continued and it seemed to Hall that he could now hear sounds up there, curiously stealthy.

Warwick peered at it. "It's . . . no, that can't be right."

"Outer wall of the mill, isn't it? And up ahead . . ."

"I'm going back," Warwick said, suddenly turning around.

Hall grabbed his neck roughly. "You're not going anywhere, Mr. Foreman."

Warwick looked up at him, his grin cutting the darkness. "You're crazy, college boy. Isn't that right? Crazy as a loon."

"You shouldn't push people, friend. Keep going."

Wisconsky moaned. "Hall—"

“Give me that.” Hall grabbed the hose. He let go of Warwick's neck and pointed the hose at his head. Wisconsky turned abruptly and crashed back toward the trapdoor. Hall did not even turn. “After you, Mr. Foreman.”

Warwick stepped forward, walking under the place where the mill ended above them. Hall flashed his light about, and felt a cold satisfaction—premonition fulfilled. The rats had closed in around them, silent as death. Crowded in, rank on rank. Thousands of eyes looked greedily back at him. In ranks to the wall, some fully as high as a man's shin.

Warwick saw them a moment later and came to a full stop. “They're all around us, college boy.” His voice was still calm, still in control, but it held a jagged edge.

“Yes,” Hall said. “Keep going.”

They walked forward, the hose dragging behind. Hall looked back once and saw the rats had closed the aisle behind them and were gnawing at the heavy canvas hosing. One looked up and almost seemed to grin at him before lowering his head again. He could see the bats now, too. They were roosting from the roughhewn overheads, huge, the size of crows or rooks.

“Look,” Warwick said, centering his beam about five feet ahead.

A skull, green with mold, laughed up at them. Further on Hall could see an ulna, one pelvic wing, part of a ribcage. “Keep going,” Hall said. He felt something bursting up inside him, something lunatic and dark with colors. *You are going to break before I do, Mr. Foreman, so help me God.*

They walked past the bones. The rats were not crowding them; their distances appeared constant. Up ahead Hall saw one cross their path of travel. Shadows hid it, but he caught sight of a pink twitching tail as thick as a telephone cord.

Up ahead the flooring rose sharply, then dipped. Hall could hear a stealthy rustling sound, a big sound. Something that perhaps no living man had ever seen. It occurred to Hall that he had perhaps been looking for something like this through all his days of crazy wandering.

The rats were moving in, creeping on their bellies, forcing them forward. "Look," Warwick said coldly.

Hall saw. Something had happened to the rats back here, some hideous mutation that never could have survived under the eye of the sun; nature would have forbidden it. But down here, nature had taken on another ghastly face.

The rats were gigantic, some as high as three feet. But their rear legs were gone and they were blind as moles, like their flying cousins. They dragged themselves forward with hideous eagerness.

Warwick turned and faced Hall, the smile hanging on by brute willpower. Hall really had to admire him. "We can't go on, Hall. You must see that."

"The rats have business with you, I think," Hall said.

Warwick's control slipped. "Please," he said. "Please."

Hall smiled. "Keep going."

Warwick was looking over his shoulder. "They're gnawing into the hose. When they get through it, we'll never get back."

"I know. Keep going."

"You're insane—" A rat ran across Warwick's shoe and he screamed. Hall smiled and gestured with his light. They were all around, the closest of them less than a foot away now.

Warwick began to walk again. The rats drew back.

They topped the miniature rise and looked down. Warwick reached it first, and Hall saw his face go white as paper. Spit ran down his chin. "Oh, my God. Dear Jesus."

And he turned to run.

Hall opened the nozzle of the hose and the high-pressure rush of water struck Warwick squarely on the chest, knocking him back out of sight. There was a long scream that rose over the sound of the water. Thrashing sounds.

"*Hall!*" Grunts. A huge, tenebrous squeaking that seemed to fill the earth.

"HALL, FOR GOD'S SAKE—"

A sudden wet ripping noise. Another scream, weaker. Something huge shifted and turned. Quite distinctly Hall heard the wet snap that a fractured bone makes.

A legless rat, guided by some bastard form of sonar, lunged against him, biting. Its body was flabby, warm. Almost absently Hall turned the hose on it, knocking it away. The hose did not have quite so much pressure now.

Hall walked to the brow of the wet hill and looked down.

The rat filled the whole gully at the far end of that noxious tomb. It was a huge and pulsating gray, eyeless, totally without legs. When Hall's light struck it, it made a hideous mewling noise. Their queen, then, the *magna mater*. A huge and nameless thing whose progeny might someday develop wings. It seemed to dwarf what remained of Warwick, but that was probably just illusion. It was the shock of seeing a rat as big as a Holstein calf.

"Goodbye, Warwick," Hall said. The rat crouched over Mr. Foreman jealously, ripping at one limp arm.

Hall turned away and began to make his way back rapidly, halting the rats with his hose, which was growing less and less potent. Some of them got through and attacked his legs above the tops of his boots with biting lunges. One hung stubbornly on at his thigh, ripping at the cloth of his corduroy pants. Hall made a fist and smashed it aside.

He was nearly three-quarters of the way back when the huge whirring filled the darkness. He looked up and the gigantic flying form smashed into his face.

The mutated bats had not lost their tails yet. It whipped around Hall's neck in a loathsome coil and squeezed as the teeth sought the soft spot under his neck. It wriggled and flapped with its membranous wings, clutching the tatters of his shirt for purchase.

Hall brought the nozzle of the hose up blindly and struck at its yielding body again and again. It fell away and he trampled it beneath his feet, dimly aware that he was screaming. The rats ran in a flood over his feet, up his legs.

He broke into a staggering run, shaking some off. The others bit at his belly, his chest. One ran up his shoulder and pressed its questing muzzle into the cup of his ear.

He ran into the second bat. It roosted on his head for a moment, squealing, and then ripped away a flap of Hall's scalp.

He felt his body growing numb. His ears filled with the screech and yammer of many rats. He gave one last heave, stumbled over furry bodies, fell to his knees. He began to laugh, a high, screaming sound.

Five A.M., Thursday.

“Somebody better go down there,” Brochu said tentatively.

“Not me,” Wisconsky whispered. “Not me.”

“No, not you, jelly belly,” Ippeston said with contempt.

“*Well, let's go,*” Brogan said, bringing up another hose. “Me, Ippeston, Dangerfield, Nedeau. Stevenson, go up to the office and get a few more lights.”

Ippeston looked down into the darkness thoughtfully. “Maybe they stopped for a smoke,” he said. “A few rats, what the hell.”

Stevenson came back with the lights; a few moments later they started down.

# NIGHT SURF

After the guy was dead and the smell of his burning flesh was off the air, we all went back down to the beach. Corey had his radio, one of those suitcase-sized transistor jobs that take about forty batteries and also make and play tapes. You couldn't say the sound reproduction was great, but it sure was loud. Corey had been well-to-do before A6, but stuff like that didn't matter anymore. Even his big radio/tape-player was hardly more than a nice-looking hunk of junk. There were only two radio stations left on the air that we could get. One was WKDM in Portsmouth—some backwoods deejay who had gone nutty-religious. He'd play a Perry Como record, say a prayer, bawl, play a Johnny Ray record, read from Psalms (complete with each “selah,” just like James Dean in *East of Eden*), then bawl some more. Happy-time stuff like that. One day he sang “Bringing in the Sheaves” in a cracked, moldy voice that sent Needles and me into hysterics.

The Massachusetts station was better, but we could only get it at night. It was a bunch of kids. I guess they took over the transmitting facilities of WRKO or WBZ after everybody left or died. They only gave gag call letters, like WDOPE or KUNT or WA6 or stuff like that. Really funny, you know—you could die laughing. That was the one we were listening to on the way back to the beach. I was holding hands with Susie; Kelly and Joan were ahead of us, and Needles was already over the brow of the point and out of sight. Corey was bringing up the rear, swinging his radio. The Stones were singing “Angie.”

“Do you *love* me?” Susie was asking. “That's all I want to know, do you *love* me?” Susie needed constant reassurance. I was her teddy bear.

“No,” I said. She was getting fat, and if she lived long enough, which wasn't likely, she would get really flabby. She was already mouthy.

“You're rotten,” she said, and put a hand to her face. Her lacquered fingernails twinkled dimly with the half-moon that had risen about an hour ago.

“Are you going to cry again?”

“Shut up!” She sounded like she was going to cry again, all right.

We came over the ridge and I paused. I always have to pause. Before A6, this had been a public beach. Tourists, picnickers, runny-nosed kids and fat baggy grandmothers with sunburned elbows. Candy wrappers and popsicle sticks in the sand, all the beautiful people necking on their beach blankets, intermingled stench of exhaust from the parking lot, seaweed, and Coppertone oil.

But now all the dirt and all the crap was gone. The ocean had eaten it, all of it, as casually as you might eat a handful of Cracker Jacks. There were no people to come back and dirty it again. Just us, and we weren't enough to make much mess. We loved the beach too, I guess—hadn't we just offered it a kind of sacrifice? Even Susie, little bitch Susie with her fat ass and her cranberry bellbottoms.

The sand was white and duned, marked only by the high-tide line—twisted skein of seaweed, kelp, hunks of driftwood. The moonlight stitched inky crescent-shaped shadows and folds across everything. The deserted lifeguard tower stood white and skeletal some fifty yards from the bathhouse, pointing toward the sky like a finger bone.

And the surf, the night surf, throwing up great bursts of foam, breaking against the headlands for as far as we could see in endless attacks. Maybe that water had been halfway to England the night before.

“‘Angie,’ by the Stones,” the cracked voice on Corey's radio said. “I'm sureya dug that one, a blast from the past that's a golden gas, straight from the grooveyard, a platta that mattas. I'm Bobby. This was supposed to be Fred's night, but Fred got the flu. He's all swelled up.” Susie giggled then, with the first tears still on her eyelashes. I started toward the beach a little faster to keep her quiet.

“Wait up!” Corey called. “Bernie? Hey, Bernie, wait up!”

The guy on the radio was reading some dirty limericks, and a girl in the background asked him where did he put the beer. He said something back, but by that time we were on the beach. I looked back to see how Corey was doing. He was coming down on his backside, as usual, and he looked so ludicrous I felt a little sorry for him.

“Run with me,” I said to Susie.

“Why?”

I slapped her on the can and she squealed. “Just because it feels good to run.”

We ran. She fell behind, panting like a horse and calling for me to slow down, but I put her out of my head. The wind rushed past my ears and blew the hair off my forehead. I could smell the salt in the air, sharp and tart. The surf pounded. The waves were like foamed black glass. I kicked off my rubber sandals and pounded across the sand barefoot, not minding the sharp digs of an occasional shell. My blood roared.

And then there was the lean-to with Needles already inside and Kelly and Joan standing beside it, holding hands and looking at the water. I did a forward roll, feeling sand go down the back of my shirt, and fetched up against Kelly's legs. He fell on top of me and rubbed my face in the sand while Joan laughed.

We got up and grinned at each other. Susie had given up running and was plodding toward us. Corey had almost caught up to her.

“Some fire,” Kelly said.

“Do you think he came all the way from New York, like he said?” Joan asked.

“I don't know.” I couldn't see that it mattered anyway. He had been behind the wheel of a big Lincoln when we found him, semi-conscious and raving. His head was bloated to the size of a football and his neck looked like a sausage. He had Captain Trips and not far to go, either. So we took him up to the Point that overlooks the beach and burned him. He said his name was Alvin Sackheim. He kept calling for his grandmother. He thought Susie was his grandmother.

This struck her funny, God knows why. The strangest things strike Susie funny.

It was Corey's idea to burn him up, but it started off as a joke. He had read all those books about witchcraft and black magic at college, and he kept leering at us in the dark beside Alvin Sackheim's Lincoln and telling us that if we made a sacrifice to the dark gods, maybe the spirits would keep protecting us against A6.

Of course none of us really believed that bullshit, but the talk got more and more serious. It was a new thing to do, and finally we went ahead and did it. We tied him to the observation gadget up there—you put a dime in it and on a clear day you can see all the way to Portland Headlight. We tied him with our belts, and then we went rooting around for dry brush and hunks of driftwood like kids playing a new kind of hide-and-seek. All the time we were doing it Alvin Sackheim just sort of leaned there and mumbled to his grandmother. Susie's eyes got very bright and she was breathing fast. It was really turning her on. When we were down in the ravine on the other side of the outcrop she leaned against me and kissed me. She was wearing too much lipstick and it was like kissing a greasy plate.

I pushed her away and that was when she started pouting.

We went back up, all of us, and piled dead branches and twigs up to Alvin Sackheim's waist. Needles lit the pyre with his Zippo, and it went up fast. At the end, just before his hair caught on fire, the guy began to scream. There was a smell just like sweet Chinese pork.

“Got a cigarette, Bernie?” Needles asked.

“There's about fifty cartons right behind you.”

He grinned and slapped a mosquito that was probing his arm. “Don't want to move.”

I gave him a smoke and sat down. Susie and I met Needles in Portland. He was sitting on the curb in front of the State Theater, playing Leadbelly tunes on a big old Gibson guitar he had looted someplace. The sound had echoed up and down Congress Street as if he were playing in a concert hall.

Susie stopped in front of us, still out of breath. “You're rotten, Bernie.”

“Come on, Sue. Turn the record over. That side stinks.”

“Bastard. Stupid, unfeeling son of a bitch. *Creep!*”

“Go away,” I said “or I'll black your eye, Susie. See if I don't.”

She started to cry again. She was really good at it. Corey came up and tried to put an arm around her. She elbowed him in the crotch and he spit in her face.

“I'll *kill* you!” She came at him, screaming and weeping, making propellers with her hands. Corey backed off, almost fell, then turned tail and ran. Susie followed him, hurling hysterical obscenities. Needles put back his head and laughed. The sound of Corey's radio came back to us faintly over the surf.

Kelly and Joan had wandered off. I could see them down by the edge of the water, walking with their arms around each other's waist. They looked like an ad in a travel agent's window—*Fly to Beautiful St. Lorca*. It was all right. They had a good thing.

“Bernie?”

“What?” I sat and smoked and thought about Needles flipping back the top of his Zippo, spinning the wheel, making fire with flint and steel like a caveman.

“I've got it,” Needles said.

“Yeah?” I looked at him. “Are you sure?”

“Sure I am. My head aches. My stomach aches. Hurts to piss.”

“Maybe it's just Hong Kong flu. Susie had Hong Kong flu. She wanted a Bible.” I laughed. That had been while we were still at the University, about a week before they closed it down for good, a month before they started carrying bodies away in dump trucks and burying them in mass graves with payloaders.

“Look.” He lit a match and held it under the angle of his jaw. I could see the first triangular smudges, the first swelling. It was A6, all right.

“Okay,” I said.

“I don't feel so bad,” he said. “In my mind, I mean. You, though. You think about it a lot. I can tell.”

“No I don't.” A lie.

“Sure you do. Like that guy tonight. You're thinking about that, too. We probably did him a favor, when you get right down to it. I don't think he even knew it was happening.”

“He knew.”

He shrugged and turned on his side. "It doesn't matter.

We smoked and I watched the surf come in and go out. Needles had Captain Trips. That made everything real all over again. It was late August already, and in a couple of weeks the first chill of fall would be creeping in. Time to move inside someplace. Winter. Dead by Christmas, maybe, all of us. In somebody's front room with Corey's expensive radio/tape-player on top of a bookcase full of Reader's Digest Condensed Books and the weak winter sun lying on the rug in meaningless windowpane patterns.

The vision was clear enough to make me shudder. Nobody should think about winter in August. It's like a goose walking over your grave.

Needles laughed. "See? You *do* think about it."

What could I say? I stood up. "Going to look for Susie."

"Maybe we're the last people on earth, Bernie. Did you ever think of that?" In the faint moonlight he already looked half dead, with circles under his eyes and pallid, unmoving fingers like pencils.

I walked down to the water and looked out across it. There was nothing to see but the restless, moving humps of the waves, topped by delicate curls of foam. The thunder of the breakers was tremendous down here, bigger than the world. Like standing inside a thunderstorm. I closed my eyes and rocked on my bare feet. The sand was cold and damp and packed. And if we were the last people on earth, so what? This would go on as long as there was a moon to pull the water.

Susie and Corey were up the beach. Susie was riding him as if he were a bucking bronc, pounding his head into the running boil of the water. Corey was flailing and splashing. They were both soaked. I walked down and pushed her off with my foot. Corey splashed away on all fours, spluttering and whoofing.

"I *hate you!*" Susie screamed at me. Her mouth was a dark grinning crescent. It looked like the entrance to a fun house. When I was a kid my mother used to take us kids to Harrison State Park and there was a fun house with a big clown face on the front, and you walked in through the mouth.

“Come on, Susie. Up, Fido.” I held out my hand. She took it doubtfully and stood up. There was damp sand clotted on her blouse and skin.

“You didn't have to push me, Bernie. You don't ever—”

“Come on.” She wasn't like a jukebox; you never had to put in a dime and she never came unplugged.

We walked up the beach toward the main concession. The man who ran the place had had a small overhead apartment. There was a bed. She didn't really deserve a bed, but Needles was right about that. It didn't matter. No one was really scoring the game anymore.

The stairs went up the side of the building, but I paused for just a minute to look in the broken window at the dusty wares inside that no one had cared enough about to loot—stacks of sweatshirts (“Anson Beach” and a picture of sky and waves printed on the front), glittering bracelets that would green the wrist on the second day, bright junk earrings, beachballs, dirty greeting cards, badly painted ceramic madonnas, plastic vomit (*So realistic! Try it on your wife!*), Fourth of July sparklers for a Fourth that never was, beach towels with a voluptuous girl in a bikini standing amid the names of a hundred famous resort areas, pennants (*Souvenir of Anson Beach and Park*), balloons, bathing suits. There was a snack bar up front with a big sign saying TRY OUR CLAM CAKE SPECIAL.

I used to come to Anson Beach a lot when I was still in high school. That was seven years before A6, and I was going with a girl named Maureen. She was a big girl. She had a pink checked bathing suit. I used to tell her it looked like a tablecloth. We had walked along the boardwalk in front of this place, barefoot, the boards hot and sandy beneath our heels. We had never tried the clam cake special.

“What are you looking at?”

“Nothing. Come on.”

I had sweaty, ugly dreams about Alvin Sackheim. He was propped behind the wheel of his shiny yellow Lincoln, talking about his grandmother. He was nothing but a bloated, blackened head and a

charred skeleton. He smelled burnt. He talked on and on, and after a while I couldn't make out a single word. I woke up breathing hard.

Susie was sprawled across my thighs, pale and bloated. My watch said 3:50, but it had stopped. It was still dark out. The surf pounded and smashed. High tide. Make it 4:15. Light soon. I got out of bed and went to the doorway. The sea breeze felt fine against my hot body. In spite of it all I didn't want to die.

I went over in the corner and grabbed a beer. There were three or four cases of Bud stacked against the wall. It was warm, because there was no electricity. I don't mind warm beer like some people do, though. It just foams a little more. Beer is beer. I went back out on the landing and sat down and pulled the ring tab and drank up.

So here we were, with the whole human race wiped out, not by atomic weapons or bio-warfare or pollution or anything *grand* like that. *Just the flu*. I'd like to put down a huge plaque somewhere, in the Bonneville Salt Flats, maybe. Bronze Square. Three miles on a side. And in big raised letters it would say, for the benefit of any landing aliens: JUST THE FLU.

I tossed the beer can over the side. It landed with a hollow clank on the cement walk that went around the building. The lean-to was a dark triangle on the sand. I wondered if Needles was awake. I wondered if I would be.

"Bernie?"

She was standing in the doorway wearing one of my shirts. I hate that. She sweats like a pig.

"You don't like me much anymore, do you, Bernie?"

I didn't say anything. There were times when I could still feel sorry for everything. She didn't deserve me any more than I deserved her.

"Can I sit down with you?"

"I doubt if it would be wide enough for both of us."

She made a choked hiccupping noise and started to go back inside.

"Needles has got A6," I said.

She stopped and looked at me. Her face was very still. "Don't joke, Bernie."

I lit a cigarette.

“He can't! He had—”

“Yes, he had A2. Hong Kong flu. Just like you and me and Corey and Kelly and Joan.”

“But that would mean he isn't—”

“Immune.”

“Yes. Then we could get it.”

“Maybe he lied when he said he had A2. So we'd take him along with us that time,” I said.

Relief spilled across her face. “Sure, that's it. I would have lied if it had been me. Nobody likes to be alone, do they?” She hesitated.

“Coming back to bed?”

“Not just now.”

She went inside. I didn't have to tell her that A2 was no guarantee against A6. She knew that. She had just blocked it out. I sat and watched the surf. It was really up. Years ago, Anson had been the only halfway decent surfing spot in the state. The Point was a dark, jutting hump against the sky. I thought I could see the upright that was the observation post, but it probably was just imagination. Sometimes Kelly took Joan up to the point. I didn't think they were up there tonight.

I put my face in my hands and clutched it, feeling the skin, its grain and texture. It was all narrowing so swiftly, and it was all so mean—there was no dignity in it.

The surf coming in, coming in, coming in. Limitless. Clean and deep. We had come here in the summer, Maureen and I, the summer after high school, the summer before college and reality and A6 coming out of Southeast Asia and covering the world like a pall, July, we had eaten pizza and listened to her radio, I had put oil on her back, she had put oil on mine, the air had been hot, the sand bright, the sun like a burning glass.

# I AM THE DOORWAY

Richard and I sat on my porch, looking out over the dunes to the Gulf. The smoke from his cigar drifted mellowly in the air, keeping the mosquitoes at a safe distance. The water was a cool aqua, the sky a deeper, truer blue. It was a pleasant combination.

“You are the doorway,” Richard repeated thoughtfully. “You are sure you killed the boy—you didn't just dream it?”

“I didn't dream it. And I didn't kill him, either—I told you that. They did. I am the doorway.”

Richard sighed. “You buried him?”

“Yes.”

“You remember where?”

“Yes.” I reached into my breast pocket and got a cigarette. My hands were awkward with their covering of bandages. They itched abominably. “If you want to see it, you'll have to get the dune buggy. You can't roll this”—I indicated my wheelchair—“through the sand.” Richard's dune buggy was a 1959 VW with pillow-sized tires. He collected driftwood in it. Ever since he retired from the real estate business in Maryland he had been living on Key Caroline and building driftwood sculptures which he sold to the winter tourists at shameless prices.

He puffed his cigar and looked out at the Gulf. “Not yet. Will you tell me once more?”

I sighed and tried to light my cigarette. He took the matches away from me and did it himself. I puffed twice, dragging deep. The itch in my fingers was maddening.

“All right” I said. “Last night at seven I was out here, looking at the Gulf and smoking, just like now, and—”

“Go further back,” he invited.

“Further?”

“Tell me about the flight.”

I shook my head. “Richard, we've been through it and through it. There's nothing—”

The seamed and fissured face was as enigmatic as one of his own driftwood sculptures. “You may remember,” he said. “Now you may remember.”

“Do you think so?”

“Possibly. And when you're through, we can look for the grave.”

“The grave,” I said. It had a hollow, horrible ring, darker than anything, darker even than all that terrible ocean Cory and I had sailed through five years ago. Dark, dark, dark.

Beneath the bandages, my new eyes stared blindly into the darkness the bandages forced on them. They itched.

Cory and I were boosted into orbit by the Saturn 16, the one all the commentators called the Empire State Building booster. It was a big beast, all right. It made the old Saturn 1-B look like a Redstone, and it took off from a bunker two hundred feet deep—it had to, to keep from taking half of Cape Kennedy with it.

We swung around the earth, verifying all our systems, and then did our inject. Headed out for Venus. We left a Senate fighting over an appropriations bill for further deep-space exploration, and a bunch of NASA people praying that we would find something, anything.

“It don't matter what,” Don Lovinger, Project Zeus's private whiz kid, was very fond of saying when he'd had a few. “You got all the gadgets, plus five souped-up TV cameras and a nifty little telescope with a zillion lenses and filters. Find some gold or platinum. Better yet, find some nice, dumb little blue men for us to study and exploit and feel superior to. Anything. Even the ghost of Howdy Doody would be a start.”

Cory and I were anxious enough to oblige, if we could. Nothing had worked for the deep-space program. From Borman, Anders, and

Lovell, who orbited the moon in '68 and found an empty, forbidding world that looked like dirty beach sand, to Markhan and Jacks, who touched down on Mars eleven years later to find an arid wasteland of frozen sand and a few struggling lichens, the deep-space program had been an expensive bust. And there had been casualties—Pedersen and Lederer, eternally circling the sun when all at once nothing worked on the second-to-last Apollo flight. John Davis, whose little orbiting observatory was holed by a meteoroid in a one-in-a-thousand fluke. No, the space program was hardly swinging along. The way things looked, the Venus orbit might be our last chance to say we told you so.

It was sixteen days out—we ate a lot of concentrates, played a lot of gin, and swapped a cold back and forth—and from the tech side it was a milk run. We lost an air-moisture converter on the third day out, went to backup, and that was all, except for nits and nats, until re-entry. We watched Venus grow from a star to a quarter to a milky crystal ball, swapped jokes with Huntsville Control, listened to tapes of Wagner and the Beatles, tended to automated experiments which had to do with everything from measurements of the solar wind to deep-space navigation. We did two midcourse corrections, both of them infinitesimal, and nine days into the flight Cory went outside and banged on the retractable DESA until it decided to operate. There was nothing else out of the ordinary until . . .

“DESA,” Richard said. “What's that?”

“An experiment that didn't pan out. NASA-ese for Deep Space Antenna—we were broadcasting pi in high-frequency pulses for anyone who cared to listen.” I rubbed my fingers against my pants, but it was no good; if anything, it made it worse. “Same idea as that radio telescope in West Virginia—you know, the one that listens to the stars. Only instead of listening, we were transmitting, primarily to the deeper space planets—Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus. If there's any intelligent life out there, it was taking a nap.”

“Only Cory went out?”

“Yes. And if he brought in any interstellar plague, the telemetry didn't show it.”

“Still—”

“It doesn't matter,” I said crossly. “Only the here and now matters. They killed the boy last night, Richard. It wasn't a nice thing to watch—or feel. His head . . . it exploded. As if someone had scooped out his brains and put a hand grenade in his skull.”

“Finish the story,” he said.

I laughed hollowly. “What's to tell?”

We went into an eccentric orbit around the planet. It was radical and deteriorating, three twenty by seventy-six miles. That was on the first swing. The second swing our apogee was even higher, the perigee lower. We had a max of four orbits. We made all four. We got a good look at the planet. Also over six hundred stills and God knows how many feet of film.

The cloud cover is equal parts methane, ammonia, dust, and flying shit. The whole planet looks like the Grand Canyon in a wind tunnel. Cory estimated windspeed at about 600 mph near the surface. Our probe beeped all the way down and then went out with a squawk. We saw no vegetation and no sign of life. Spectroscope indicated only traces of the valuable minerals. And that was Venus. Nothing but nothing—except it scared me. It was like circling a haunted house in the middle of deep space. I know how unscientific that sounds, but I was scared gutless until we got out of there. I think if our rockets hadn't gone off, I would have cut my throat on the way down. It's not like the moon. The moon is desolate but somehow antiseptic. That world we saw was utterly unlike anything that anyone has ever seen. Maybe it's a good thing that cloud cover is there. It was like a skull that's been picked clean—that's the closest I can get.

On the way back we heard the Senate had voted to halve space-exploration funds. Cory said something like “looks like we're back in the weather-satellite business, Artie.” But I was almost glad. Maybe we don't belong out there.

Twelve days later Cory was dead and I was crippled for life. We bought all our trouble on the way down. The chute was fouled. How's that for life's little ironies? We'd been in space for over a month, gone

further than any humans had ever gone, and it all ended the way it did because some guy was in a hurry for his coffee break and let a few lines get fouled.

We came down hard. A guy that was in one of the copters said it looked like a gigantic baby falling out of the sky, with the placenta trailing after it. I lost consciousness when we hit.

I came to when they were taking me across the deck of the *Portland*. They hadn't even had a chance to roll up the red carpet we were supposed to've walked on. I was bleeding. Bleeding and being hustled up to the infirmary over a red carpet that didn't look anywhere near as red as I did . . .

“. . . I was in Bethesda for two years. They gave me the Medal of Honor and a lot of money and this wheelchair. I came down here the next year. I like to watch the rockets take off.”

“I know,” Richard said. He paused. “Show me your hands.”

“No.” It came out very quickly and sharply. “I can't let them see. I've told you that.”

“It's been five years,” Richard said. “Why now, Arthur? Can you tell me that?”

“I don't know. I don't know! Maybe whatever it is has a long gestation period. Or who's to say I even got it out there? Whatever it was might have entered me in Fort Lauderdale. Or right here on this porch, for all I know.”

Richard sighed and looked out over the water, now reddish with the late-evening sun. “I'm trying. Arthur, I don't want to think that you are losing your mind.”

“If I have to, I'll show you my hands,” I said. It cost me an effort to say it. “But only if I have to.”

Richard stood up and found his cane. He looked old and frail. “I'll get the dune buggy. We'll look for the boy.”

“Thank you, Richard.”

He walked out toward the rutted dirt track that led to his cabin—I could just see the roof of it over the Big Dune, the one that runs almost the whole length of Key Caroline. Over the water toward the

Cape, the sky had gone an ugly plum color, and the sound of thunder came faintly to my ears.

• • •

I didn't know the boy's name but I saw him every now and again, walking along the beach at sunset, with his sieve under his arm. He was tanned almost black by the sun, and all he was ever clad in was a frayed pair of denim cutoffs. On the far side of Key Caroline there is a public beach, and an enterprising young man can make perhaps as much as five dollars on a good day, patiently sieving the sand for buried quarters or dimes. Every now and then I would wave to him and he would wave back, both of us noncommittal, strangers yet brothers, year-round dwellers set against a sea of money spending, Cadillac-driving, loud-mouthed tourists. I imagine he lived in the small village clustered around the post office about a half mile further down.

When he passed by that evening I had already been on the porch for an hour, immobile, watching. I had taken off the bandages earlier. The itching had been intolerable, and it was always better when they could look through their eyes.

It was a feeling like no other in the world—as if I were a portal just slightly ajar through which they were peeking at a world which they hated and feared. But the worst part was that I could see, too, in a way. Imagine your mind transported into a body of a housefly, a housefly looking into your own face with a thousand eyes. Then perhaps you can begin to see why I kept my hands bandaged even when there was no one around to see them.

It began in Miami. I had business there with a man named Cresswell, an investigator from the Navy Department. He checks up on me once a year—for a while I was as close as anyone ever gets to the classified stuff our space program has. I don't know just what it is he looks for; a shifty gleam in the eye, maybe, or maybe a scarlet letter on my forehead. God knows why. My pension is large enough to be almost embarrassing.

Cresswell and I were sitting on the terrace of his hotel room, sipping drinks and discussing the future of the U.S. space program. It was about three-fifteen. My fingers began to itch. It wasn't a bit gradual. It was switched on like electric current. I mentioned it to Cresswell.

"So you picked up some poison ivy on that scrofulous little island," he said, grinning.

"The only foliage on Key Caroline is a little palmetto scrub,"

I said. "Maybe it's the seven-year itch." I looked down at my hands. Perfectly ordinary hands. But itchy.

Later in the afternoon I signed the same old paper ("I do solemnly swear that I have neither received nor disclosed and divulged information which would . . .") and drove myself back to the Key. I've got an old Ford, equipped with hand-operated brake and accelerator. I love it—it makes me feel self-sufficient.

It's a long drive back, down Route 1, and by the time I got off the big road and onto the Key Caroline exit ramp, I was nearly out of my mind. My hands itched maddeningly. If you have ever suffered through the healing of a deep cut or a surgical incision, you may have some idea of the kind of itch I mean. Live things seemed to be crawling and boring in my flesh.

The sun was almost down and I looked at my hands carefully in the glow of the dash lights. The tips of them were red now, red in tiny, perfect circlets, just above the pad where the fingerprint is, where you get calluses if you play guitar. There were also red circles of infection on the space between the first and second joint of each thumb and finger, and on the skin between the second joint and the knuckle. I pressed my right fingers to my lips and withdrew them quickly, with a sudden loathing. A feeling of dumb horror had risen in my throat, woolen and choking. The flesh where the red spots had appeared was hot, feverish, and the flesh was soft and gelid, like the flesh of an apple gone rotten.

I drove the rest of the way trying to persuade myself that I had indeed caught poison ivy somehow. But in the back of my mind there was another ugly thought. I had an aunt, back in my childhood, who lived the last ten years of her life closed off from the world in an

upstairs room. My mother took her meals up, and her name was a forbidden topic. I found out later that she had Hansen's disease—leprosy.

When I got home I called Dr. Flanders on the mainland. I got his answering service instead. Dr. Flanders was on a fishing cruise, but if it was urgent, Dr. Ballanger—

“When will Dr. Flanders be back?”

“Tomorrow afternoon at the latest. Would that—”

“Sure.”

I hung up slowly, then dialed Richard. I let it ring a dozen times before hanging up. After that I sat indecisive for a while. The itching had deepened. It seemed to emanate from the flesh itself.

I rolled my wheelchair over to the bookcase and pulled down the battered medical encyclopedia that I'd had for years. The book was maddeningly vague. It could have been anything, or nothing.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. I could hear the old ship's clock ticking on the shelf across the room. There was the high, thin drone of a jet on its way to Miami. There was the soft whisper of my own breath.

I was still looking at the book.

The realization crept on me, then sank home with a frightening rush. My eyes were closed, but I was still looking at the book. What I was seeing was smeary and monstrous, the distorted, fourth-dimensional counterpart of a book, yet unmistakable for all that.

And I was not the only one watching.

I snapped my eyes open, feeling the constriction of my heart. The sensation subsided a little, but not entirely. I was looking at the book, seeing the print and diagrams with my own eyes, perfectly normal everyday experience, and I was also seeing it from a different, lower angle and seeing it with other eyes. Seeing not a book but an alien thing, something of monstrous shape and ominous intent.

I raised my hands slowly to my face, catching an eerie vision of my living room turned into a horror house.

I screamed.

There were eyes peering up at me through splits in the flesh of my fingers. And even as I watched the flesh was dilating, retreating, as

they pushed their mindless way up to the surface.

But that was not what made me scream. I had looked into my own face and seen a monster.

The dune buggy nosed over the hill and Richard brought it to a halt next to the porch. The motor gunned and roared choppily. I rolled my wheelchair down the inclined plane to the right of the regular steps and Richard helped me in.

“All right, Arthur,” he said. “It’s your party. Where to?”

I pointed down toward the water, where the Big Dune finally begins to peter out. Richard nodded. The rear wheels spun sand and we were off. I usually found time to rib Richard about his driving, but I didn’t bother tonight. There was too much else to think about—and to feel: they didn’t want the dark, and I could feel them straining to see through the bandages, willing me to take them off.

The dune buggy bounced and roared through the sand toward the water, seeming almost to take flight from the tops of the small dunes. To the left the sun was going down in bloody glory. Straight ahead and across the water, the thunderclouds were beating their way toward us. Lightning forked at the water.

“Off to your right,” I said. “By that lean-to.”

Richard brought the dune buggy to a sand-spraying halt beside the rotted remains of the lean-to, reached into the back, and brought out a spade. I winced when I saw it. “Where?” Richard asked expressionlessly.

“Right there.” I pointed to the place.

He got out and walked slowly through the sand to the spot, hesitated for a second, then plunged the shovel into the sand. It seemed that he dug for a very long time. The sand he was throwing back over his shoulder looked damp and moist. The thunderheads were darker, higher, and the water looked angry and implacable under their shadow and the reflected glow of the sunset.

I knew long before he stopped digging that he was not going to find the boy. They had moved him. I hadn’t bandaged my hands last

night, so they could see—and act. If they had been able to use me to kill the boy, they could use me to move him, even while I slept.

“There's no boy, Arthur.” He threw the dirty shovel into the dune buggy and sat tiredly on the seat. The coming storm cast marching, crescent-shaped shadows along the sand. The rising breeze rattled sand against the buggy's rusted body. My fingers itched.

“They used me to move him,” I said dully. “They're getting the upper hand, Richard. They're forcing their doorway open, a little at a time. A hundred times a day I find myself standing in front of some perfectly familiar object—a spatula, a picture, even a can of beans—with no idea how I got there, holding my hands out, showing it to them, seeing it as they do, as an obscenity, something twisted and grotesque—”

“Arthur,” he said. “Arthur, don't. Don't.” In the failing light his face was wan with compassion. “*Standing* in front of something, you said. *Moving* the boy's body, you said. *But you can't walk, Arthur.* You're dead from the waist down.”

I touched the dashboard of the dune buggy. “This is dead, too. But when you enter it, you can make it go. You could make it kill. It couldn't stop you even if it wanted to.” I could hear my voice rising hysterically. “I am the doorway, can't you understand that? They killed the boy, Richard! They moved the body!”

“I think you'd better see a medical man,” he said quietly. “Let's go back. Let's—”

“Check! Check on the boy, then! Find out—”

“You said you didn't even know his name.”

“He must have been from the village. It's a small village. Ask—”

“I talked to Maud Harrington on the phone when I got the dune buggy. If anyone in the state has a longer nose, I've not come across her. I asked if she'd heard of anyone's boy not coming home last night. She said she hadn't.”

“But he's a local! He has to be!”

He reached for the ignition switch, but I stopped him. He turned to look at me and I began to unwrap my hands.

From the Gulf, thunder muttered and growled.

I didn't go to the doctor and I didn't call Richard back. I spent three weeks with my hands bandaged every time I went out. Three weeks just blindly hoping it would go away. It wasn't a rational act; I can admit that. If I had been a whole man who didn't need a wheelchair for legs or who had spent a normal life in a normal occupation, I might have gone to Doc Flanders or to Richard. I still might have, if it hadn't been for the memory of my aunt, shunned, virtually a prisoner, being eaten alive by her own failing flesh. So I kept a desperate silence and prayed that I would wake up some morning and find it had been an evil dream.

And little by little, I felt them. Them. An anonymous intelligence. I never really wondered what they looked like or where they had come from. It was moot. I was their doorway, and their window on the world. I got enough feedback from them to feel their revulsion and horror, to know that our world was very different from theirs. Enough feedback to feel their blind hate. But still they watched. Their flesh was embedded in my own. I began to realize that they were using me, actually manipulating me.

When the boy passed, raising one hand in his usual noncommittal salute, I had just about decided to get in touch with Cresswell at his Navy Department number. Richard had been right about one thing—I was certain that whatever had gotten hold of me had done it in deep space or in that weird orbit around Venus. The Navy would study me, but they would not freakify me. I wouldn't have to wake up anymore into the creaking darkness and stifle a scream as I felt them watching, watching, watching.

My hands went out toward the boy and I realized that I had not bandaged them. I could see the eyes in the dying light, watching silently. They were large, dilated, golden-irised. I had poked one of them against the tip of a pencil once, and had felt excruciating agony slam up my arm. The eye seemed to glare at me with a chained hatred that was worse than physical pain. I did not poke again.

And now they were watching the boy. I felt my mind side-slip. A moment later my control was gone. The door was open. I lurched

across the sand toward him, legs scissoring nervelessly, so much driven deadwood. My own eyes seemed to close and I saw only with those alien eyes—saw a monstrous alabaster sea-scape overtopped with a sky like a great purple way, saw a leaning, eroded shack that might have been the carcass of some unknown, flesh-devouring creature, saw an abominated creature that moved and respired and carried a device of wood and wire under its arm, a device constructed of geometrically impossible right angles.

I wonder what he thought, that wretched, unnamed boy with his sieve under his arm and his pockets bulging with an odd conglomerate of sandy tourist coins, what he thought when he saw me lurching at him like a blind conductor stretching out his hands over a lunatic orchestra, what he thought as the last of the light fell across my hands, red and split and shining with their burden of eyes, what he thought when the hands made that sudden, flailing gesture in the air, just before his head burst.

I know what I thought.

I thought I had peeked over the rim of the universe and into the fires of hell itself.

The wind pulled at the bandages and made them into tiny, whipping streamers as I unwrapped them. The clouds had blottered the red remnants of the sunset, and the dunes were dark and shadow-cast. The clouds raced and boiled above us.

“You must promise me one thing, Richard,” I said over the rising wind. “You must run if it seems I might try . . . to hurt you. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.” His open-throated shirt whipped and rippled with the wind. His face was set, his own eyes little more than sockets in early dark.

The last of the bandages fell away.

I looked at Richard and they looked at Richard. I saw a face I had known for five years and come to love. They saw a distorted, living monolith.

“You see them,” I said hoarsely. “Now you see them.”

He took an involuntary step backward. His face became stained with a sudden unbelieving terror. Lightning slashed out of the sky. Thunder walked in the clouds and the water had gone black as the river Styx.

“Arthur—”

How hideous he was! How could I have lived near him, spoken with him? He was not a creature, but mute pestilence. He was—

“Run! Run, Richard!”

And he did run. He ran in huge, bounding leaps. He became a scaffold against the looming sky. My hands flew up, flew over my head in a screaming, orlesque gesture, the fingers reaching to the only familiar thing in this nightmare world—reaching to the clouds.

And the clouds answered.

There was a huge, blue-white streak of lightning that seemed like the end of the world. It struck Richard, it enveloped him. The last thing I remember is the electric stench of ozone and burnt flesh.

When I awoke I was sitting calmly on my porch, looking out toward the Big Dune. The storm had passed and the air was pleasantly cool. There was a tiny sliver of moon. The sand was virginal—no sign of Richard or of the dune buggy.

I looked down at my hands. The eyes were open but glazed. They had exhausted themselves. They dozed.

I knew well enough what had to be done. Before the door could be wedged open any further, it had to be locked. Forever. Already I could notice the first signs of structural change in the hands themselves. The fingers were beginning to shorten . . . and to change.

There was a small hearth in the living room, and in season I had been in the habit of lighting a fire against the damp Florida cold. I lit one now, moving with haste. I had no idea when they might wake up to what I was doing.

When it was burning well I went out back to the kerosene drum and soaked both hands. They came awake immediately, screaming with agony. I almost didn't make it back to the living room, and to the fire.

But I did make it.

That was all seven years ago.

I'm still here, still watching the rockets take off. There have been more of them lately. This is a space-minded administration. There has even been talk of another series of manned Venus probes.

I found out the boy's name, not that it matters. He was from the village, just as I thought. But his mother had expected him to stay with a friend on the mainland that night, and the alarm was not raised until the following Monday. Richard—well, everyone thought Richard was an odd duck, anyway. They suspect he may have gone back to Maryland or taken up with some woman.

As for me, I'm tolerated, although I have quite a reputation for eccentricity myself. After all, how many ex-astronauts regularly write their elected Washington officials with the idea that space-exploration money could be better spent elsewhere?

I get along just fine with these hooks. There was terrible pain for the first year or so, but the human body can adjust to almost anything. I shave with them and even tie my own shoe-laces. And as you can see, my typing is nice and even. I don't expect to have any trouble putting the shotgun into my mouth or pulling the trigger. It started again three weeks ago, you see.

There is a perfect circle of twelve golden eyes on my chest.

# THE MANGLER

Officer Hunton got to the laundry just as the ambulance was leaving—slowly, with no siren or flashing lights. Ominous. Inside, the office was stuffed with milling, silent people, some of them weeping. The plant itself was empty; the big automatic washers at the far end had not even been shut down. It made Hunton very wary. The crowd should be at the scene of the accident, not in the office. It was the way things worked—the human animal had a built-in urge to view the remains. A very bad one, then. Hunton felt his stomach tighten as it always did when the accident was very bad. Fourteen years of cleaning human litter from highways and streets and the sidewalks at the bases of very tall buildings had not been able to erase that little hitch in the belly, as if something evil had clotted there.

A man in a white shirt saw Hunton and walked toward him reluctantly. He was a buffalo of a man with head thrust forward between shoulders, nose and cheeks vein-broken either from high blood pressure or too many conversations with the brown bottle. He was trying to frame words, but after two tries Hunton cut him off briskly:

“Are you the owner? Mr. Gartley?”

“No . . . no. I'm Stanner. The foreman. God, this—”

Hunton got out his notebook. “Please show me the scene of the accident, Mr. Stanner, and tell me what happened.”

Stanner seemed to grow even more white; the blotches on his nose and cheeks stood out like birthmarks. “D-do I have to?”

Hunton raised his eyebrows. “I'm afraid you do. The call I got said it was serious.”

“Serious—” Stanner seemed to be battling with his gorge; for a moment his Adam's apple went up and down like a monkey on a stick. “Mrs. Frawley is dead. Jesus, I wish Bill Gartley was here.”

“What happened?”

Stanner said, “You better come over here.”

He led Hunton past a row of hand presses, a shirt-folding unit, and then stopped by a laundry-marking machine. He passed a shaky hand across his forehead. “You’ll have to go over by yourself, Officer. I can’t look at it again. It makes me . . . I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Hunton walked around the marking machine with a mild feeling of contempt for the man. They run a loose shop, cut corners, run live steam through home-welded pipes, they work with dangerous cleaning chemicals without the proper protection, and finally, someone gets hurt. Or gets dead. Then they can’t look. They can’t—

Hunton saw it.

The machine was still running. No one had shut it off. The machine he later came to know intimately: the Hadley-Watson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder. A long and clumsy name. The people who worked here in the steam and the wet had a better name for it. The mangler.

Hunton took a long, frozen look, and then he performed a first in his fourteen years as a law-enforcement officer: he turned around, put a convulsive hand to his mouth, and threw up.

“You didn’t eat much,” Jackson said.

The women were inside, doing dishes and talking babies while John Hunton and Mark Jackson sat in lawn chairs near the aromatic barbecue. Hunton smiled slightly at the understatement. He had eaten nothing.

“There was a bad one today,” he said. “The worst.”

“Car crash?”

“No. Industrial.”

“Messy?”

Hunton did not reply immediately, but his face made an involuntary, writhing grimace. He got a beer out of the cooler between them, opened it, and emptied half of it. “I suppose you college profs don’t know anything about industrial laundries?”

Jackson chuckled. "This one does. I spent a summer working in one as an undergraduate."

"Then you know the machine they call the speed ironer?"

Jackson nodded. "Sure. They run damp flatwork through them, mostly sheets and linen. A big, long machine."

"That's it," Hunton said. "A woman named Adelle Frawley got caught in it at the Blue Ribbon Laundry crosstown. It sucked her right in."

Jackson looked suddenly ill. "But . . . that can't happen, Johnny. There's a safety bar. If one of the women feeding the machine accidentally gets a hand under it, the bar snaps up and stops the machine. At least that's how I remember it."

Hunton nodded. "It's a state law. But it happened."

Hunton closed his eyes and in the darkness he could see the Hadley-Watson speed ironer again, as it had been that afternoon. It formed a long, rectangular box in shape, thirty feet by six. At the feeder end, a moving canvas belt moved under the safety bar, up at a slight angle, and then down. The belt carried the damp-dried, wrinkled sheets in continuous cycle over and under sixteen huge revolving cylinders that made up the main body of the machine. Over eight and under eight, pressed between them like thin ham between layers of superheated bread. Steam heat in the cylinders could be adjusted up to 300 degrees for maximum drying. The pressure on the sheets that rode the moving canvas belt was set at 800 pounds per square foot to get out every wrinkle.

And Mrs. Frawley, somehow, had been caught and dragged in. The steel, asbestos-jacketed pressing cylinders had been as red as barn paint, and the rising steam from the machine had carried the sickening stench of hot blood. Bits of her white blouse and blue slacks, even ripped segments of her bra and panties, had been torn free and ejected from the machine's far end thirty feet down, the bigger sections of cloth folded with grotesque and bloodstained neatness by the automatic folder. But not even that was the worst.

• • •

"It tried to fold everything," he said to Jackson, tasting bile in his throat. "But a person isn't a sheet, Mark. What I saw . . . what was left of her . . ." Like Stanner, the hapless foreman, he could not finish. "They took her out in a basket," he said softly.

Jackson whistled. "Who's going to get it in the neck? The laundry or the state inspectors?"

"Don't know yet," Hunton said. The malign image still hung behind his eyes, the image of the mangler wheezing and thumping and hissing, blood dripping down the green sides of the long cabinet in runnels, the burning *stink* of her . . . "It depends on who okayed that goddamn safety bar and under what circumstances."

"If it's the management, can they wiggle out of it?"

Hunton smiled without humor. "The woman died, Mark. If Gartley and Stanner were cutting corners on the speed ironer's maintenance, they'll go to jail. No matter who they know on the City Council."

"Do you think they were cutting corners?"

Hunton thought of the Blue Ribbon Laundry, badly lighted, floors wet and slippery, some of the machines incredibly ancient and creaking. "I think it's likely," he said quietly.

They got up to go in the house together. "Tell me how it comes out, Johnny," Jackson said. "I'm interested."

Hunton was wrong about the mangler; it was clean as a whistle.

Six state inspectors went over it before the inquest, piece by piece. The net result was absolutely nothing. The inquest verdict was death by misadventure.

Hunton, dumbfounded, cornered Roger Martin, one of the inspectors, after the hearing. Martin was a tall drink of water with glasses as thick as the bottoms of shot glasses. He fidgeted with a ball-point pen under Hunton's questions.

"Nothing? Absolutely nothing doing with the machine?"

"Nothing," Martin said. "Of course, the safety bar was the guts of the matter. It's in perfect working order. You heard that Mrs. Gillian

testify. Mrs. Frawley must have pushed her hand too far. No one saw that; they were watching their own work. She started screaming. Her hand was gone already, and the machine was taking her arm. They tried to pull her out instead of shutting it down—pure panic. Another woman, Mrs. Keene, said she *did* try to shut it off, but it's a fair assumption that she hit the start button rather than the stop in the confusion. By then it was too late.”

“Then the safety bar malfunctioned,” Hunton said flatly. “Unless she put her hand over it rather than under?”

“You can't. There's a stainless-steel facing above the safety bar. And the bar itself didn't malfunction. It's circuited into the machine itself. If the safety bar goes on the blink, the machine shuts down.”

“Then how did it happen, for Christ's sake?”

“We don't know. My colleagues and I are of the opinion that the only way the speed ironer could have killed Mrs. Frawley was for her to have fallen into it from above. And she had both feet on the floor when it happened. A dozen witnesses can testify to that.”

“You're describing an impossible accident,” Hunton said.

“No. Only one we don't understand.” He paused, hesitated, and then said: “I will tell you one thing, Hunton, since you seem to have taken this case to heart. If you mention it to anyone else, I'll deny I said it. But I didn't like that machine. It seemed . . . almost to be mocking us. I've inspected over a dozen speed ironers in the last five years on a regular basis. Some of them are in such bad shape that I wouldn't leave a dog unleashed around them—the state law is lamentably lax. But they were only machines for all that. But this one . . . it's a spook. I don't know why, but it is. I think if I'd found one thing, even a technicality, that was off whack, I would have ordered it shut down. Crazy, huh?”

“I felt the same way,” Hunton said.

“Let me tell you about something that happened two years ago in Milton,” the inspector said. He took off his glasses and began to polish them slowly on his vest. “Fella had parked an old icebox out in his backyard. The woman who called us said her dog had been caught in it and suffocated. We got the state police-man in the area to inform him it had to go to the town dump. Nice enough fella, sorry

about the dog. He loaded it into his pickup and took it to the dump the next morning. That afternoon a woman in the neighborhood reported her son missing.”

“God,” Hunton said.

“The icebox was at the dump and the kid was in it, dead. A smart kid, according to his mother. She said he'd no more play in an empty icebox than he would take a ride with a strange man. Well, he did. We wrote it off. Case closed?”

“I guess,” Hunton said.

“No. The dump caretaker went out next day to take the door off the thing. City Ordinance No. 58 on the maintenance of public dumping places.” Martin looked at him expressionlessly. “He found six dead birds inside. Gulls, sparrows, a robin. And he said the door closed on his arm while he was brushing them out. Gave him a hell of a jump. That mangler at the Blue Ribbon strikes me like that, Hunton. I don't like it.”

They looked at each other wordlessly in the empty inquest chamber, some six city blocks from where the Hadley-Watson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder sat in the busy laundry, steaming and fuming over its sheets.

The case was driven out of his mind in the space of a week by the press of more prosaic police work. It was only brought back when he and his wife dropped over to Mark Jackson's house for an evening of bid whist and beer.

Jackson greeted him with: “Have you ever wondered if that laundry machine you told me about is haunted, Johnny?”

Hunton blinked, at a loss. “What?”

“The speed ironer at the Blue Ribbon Laundry, I guess you didn't catch the squeal this time.”

“What squeal?” Hunton asked, interested.

Jackson passed him the evening paper and pointed to an item at the bottom of page two. The story said that a steam line had let go on the large speed ironer at the Blue Ribbon Laundry, burning three of the six women working at the feeder end. The accident had

occurred at 3:45 P.M. and was attributed to a rise in steam pressure from the laundry's boiler. One of the women, Mrs. Annette Gillian, had been held at City Receiving Hospital with second-degree burns.

“Funny coincidence,” he said, but the memory of Inspector Martin's words in the empty inquest chamber suddenly recurred: *It's a spook* . . . And the story about the dog and the boy and the birds caught in the discarded refrigerator.

He played cards very badly that night.

Mrs. Gillian was propped up in bed reading *Screen Secrets* when Hunton came into the four-bed hospital room. A large bandage blanketed one arm and the side of her neck. The room's other occupant, a young woman with a pallid face, was sleeping.

Mrs. Gillian blinked at the blue uniform and then smiled tentatively. “If it was for Mrs. Cherinikov, you'll have to come back later. They just gave her medication.”

“No, it's for you, Mrs. Gillian.” Her smile faded a little. “I'm here unofficially—which means I'm curious about the accident at the laundry. John Hunton.” He held out his hand.

It was the right move. Mrs. Gillian's smile became brilliant and she took his grip awkwardly with her unburnt hand. “Anything I can tell you, Mr. Hunton. God, I thought my Andy was in trouble at school again.”

“What happened?”

“We was running sheets and the ironer just blew up—or it seemed that way. I was thinking about going home an' getting off my dogs when there's this great big bang, like a bomb. Steam is everywhere and this hissing noise . . . awful.” Her smile trembled on the verge of extinction. “It was like the ironer was breathing. Like a dragon, it was. And Alberta—that's Alberta Keene—shouted that something was exploding and everyone was running and screaming and Ginny Jason started yelling she was burnt. I started to run away and I fell down. I didn't know I got it worst until then. God forbid it was no worse than it was. That live steam is three hundred degrees.”

“The paper said a steam line let go. What does that mean?”

“The overhead pipe comes down into this kinda flexible line that feeds the machine. George—Mr. Stanner—said there must have been a surge from the boiler or something. The line split wide open.”

Hunton could think of nothing else to ask. He was making ready to leave when she said reflectively:

“We never used to have these things on that machine. Only lately. The steam line breaking. That awful, awful accident with Mrs. Frawley, God rest her. And little things. Like the day Essie got her dress caught in one of the drive chains. That could have been dangerous if she hadn't ripped it right out. Bolts and things fall off. Oh, Herb Diment—he's the laundry repairman—has had an awful time with it. Sheets get caught in the folder. George says that's because they're using too much bleach in the washers, but it never used to happen. Now the girls hate to work on it. Essie even says there are still little bits of Adelle Frawley caught in it and it's sacrilege or something. Like it had a curse. It's been that way ever since Sherry cut her hand on one of the clamps.”

“Sherry?” Hunton asked.

“Sherry Ouelette. Pretty little thing, just out of high school. Good worker. But clumsy sometimes. You know how young girls are.”

“She cut her hand on something?”

“Nothing strange about *that*. There are clamps to tighten down the feeder belt, see. Sherry was adjusting them so we could do a heavier load and probably dreaming about some boy. She cut her finger and bled all over everything.” Mrs. Gillian looked puzzled. “It wasn't until after that the bolts started falling off. Adelle was . . . you know . . . about a week later. As if the machine had tasted blood and found it liked it. Don't women get funny ideas sometimes, Officer Hinton?”

“Hunton,” he said absently, looking over her head and into space.

Ironically, he had met Mark Jackson in a washateria in the block that separated their houses, and it was there that the cop and the English professor still had their most interesting conversations.

Now they sat side by side in bland plastic chairs, their clothes going round and round behind the glass portholes of the coin-op washers. Jackson's paperback copy of Milton's collected works lay neglected beside him while he listened to Hunton tell Mrs. Gillian's story.

When Hunton had finished, Jackson said, "I asked you once if you thought the mangler might be haunted. I was only half joking. I'll ask you again now."

"No," Hunton said uneasily. "Don't be stupid."

Jackson watched the turning clothes reflectively. "Haunted is a bad word. Let's say possessed. There are almost as many spells for casting demons in as there are for casting them out. Frazier's *Golden Bough* is replete with them. Druidic and Aztec lore contain others. Even older ones, back to Egypt. Almost all of them can be reduced to startlingly common denominators. The most common, of course, is the blood of a virgin." He looked at Hunton. "Mrs. Gillian said the trouble started after this Sherry Ouelette accidentally cut herself."

"Oh, come on," Hunton said.

"You have to admit she sounds just the type," Jackson said.

"I'll run right over to her house," Hunton said with a small smile. "I can see it. 'Miss Ouelette, I'm Officer John Hunton. I'm investigating an ironer with a bad case of demon possession and would like to know if you're a virgin.' Do you think I'd get a chance to say goodbye to Sandra and the kids before they carted me off to the booby hatch?"

"I'd be willing to bet you'll end up saying something just like that," Jackson said without smiling. "I'm serious, Johnny. That machine scares the hell out of me and I've never seen it."

"For the sake of conversation," Hunton said, "what are some of the other so-called common denominators?"

Jackson shrugged. "Hard to say without study. Most Anglo-Saxon hex formulas specify graveyard dirt or the eye of a toad. European spells often mention the hand of glory, which can be interpreted as the actual hand of a dead man or one of the hallucinogenics used in

connection with the Witches' Sabbath—usually belladonna or a psilocybin derivative. There could be others.”

“And you think all those things got into the Blue Ribbon ironer? Christ, Mark, I'll bet there isn't any belladonna within a five-hundred-mile radius. Or do you think someone whacked off their Uncle Fred's hand and dropped it in the folder?”

“If seven hundred monkeys typed for seven hundred years—”

“One of them would turn out the works of Shakespeare,” Hunton finished sourly. “Go to hell. Your turn to go across to the drugstore and get some dimes for the dryers.”

• • •

It was very funny how George Stanner lost his arm in the mangler.

Seven o'clock Monday morning the laundry was deserted except for Stanner and Herb Diment, the maintenance man. They were performing the twice-yearly function of greasing the mangler's bearings before the laundry's regular day began at seven-thirty. Diment was at the far end, greasing the four secondaries and thinking of how unpleasant this machine made him feel lately, when the mangler suddenly roared into life.

He had been holding up four of the canvas exit belts to get at the motor beneath and suddenly the belts were running in his hands, ripping the flesh off his palms, dragging him along.

He pulled free with a convulsive jerk seconds before the belts would have carried his hands into the folder.

“What the Christ, George!” he yelled. “Shut the frigging thing *off!*”

George Stanner began to scream.

It was a high, wailing, blood-maddened sound that filled the laundry, echoing off the steel faces of the washers, the grinning mouths of the steam presses, the vacant eyes of the industrial dryers. Stanner drew in a great, whooping gasp of air and screamed again: “*Oh God of Christ I'm caught I'M CAUGHT—*”

The rollers began to produce rising steam. The folder gnashed and thumped. Bearings and motors seemed to cry out with a hidden

life of their own.

Diment raced to the other end of the machine.

The first roller was already going a sinister red. Diment made a moaning, gobbling noise in his throat. The mangler howled and thumped and hissed.

A deaf observer might have thought at first that Stanner was merely bent over the machine at an odd angle. Then even a deaf man would have seen the pallid, eye-bulging rictus of his face, mouth twisted open in a continuous scream. The arm was disappearing under the safety bar and beneath the first roller; the fabric of his shirt had torn away at the shoulder seam and his upper arm bulged grotesquely as the blood was pushed steadily backward.

“Turn it off!” Stanner screamed. There was a snap as his elbow broke.

Diment thumbed the off button.

The mangler continued to hum and growl and turn.

Unbelieving, he slammed the button again and again—nothing. The skin of Stanner's arm had grown shiny and taut. Soon it would split with the pressure the roll was putting on it; and still he was conscious and screaming. Diment had a nightmare cartoon image of a man flattened by a steamroller, leaving only a shadow.

“Fuses—” Stanner screeched. His head was being pulled down, down, as he was dragged forward.

Diment whirled and ran to the boiler room, Stanner's screams chasing him like lunatic ghosts. The mixed stench of blood and steam rose in the air.

On the left wall were three heavy gray boxes containing all the fuses for the laundry's electricity. Diment yanked them open and began to pull the long, cylindrical fuses like a crazy man, throwing them back over his shoulders. The overhead lights went out; then the air compressor; then the boiler itself, with a huge dying whine.

And still the mangler turned. Stanner's screams had been reduced to bubbly moans.

Diment's eye happened on the fire ax in its glassed-in box. He grabbed it with a small, gagging whimper and ran back. Stanner's

arm was gone almost to the shoulder. Within seconds his bent and straining neck would be snapped against the safety bar.

"I can't," Diment blubbered, holding the ax. "Jesus, George, I can't, I can't, I—"

The machine was an abattoir now. The folder spat out pieces of shirt sleeve, scraps of flesh, a finger. Stanner gave a huge, whooping scream and Diment swung the ax up and brought it down in the laundry's shadowy lightlessness. Twice. Again.

Stanner fell away, unconscious and blue, blood jetting from the stump just below the shoulder. The mangler sucked what was left into itself . . . and shut down.

Weeping, Diment pulled his belt out of its loops and began to make a tourniquet.

Hunton was talking on the phone with Roger Martin, the inspector. Jackson watched him while he patiently rolled a ball back and forth for three-year-old Patty Hunton to chase.

"He pulled *all* the fuses?" Hunton was asking. "And the off button just didn't function, huh? . . . Has the ironer been shut down? . . . Good. Great. Huh? . . . No, not official." Hunton frowned, then looked sideways at Jackson. "Are you still reminded of that refrigerator, Roger? . . . Yes. Me too. Goodbye."

He hung up and looked at Jackson. "Let's go see the girl, Mark."

She had her own apartment (the hesitant yet proprietary way she showed them in after Hunton had flashed his buzzer made him suspect that she hadn't had it long), and she sat uncomfortably across from them in the carefully decorated, postage-stamp living room.

"I'm Officer Hunton and this is my associate, Mr. Jackson. It's about the accident at the laundry." He felt hugely uncomfortable with this dark, shyly pretty girl.

"Awful," Sherry Ouelette murmured. "It's the only place I've ever worked. Mr. Gartley is my uncle. I liked it because it let me have this place and my own friends. But now . . . it's so *spooky*."

“The State Board of Safety has shut the ironer down pending a full investigation,” Hunton said. “Did you know that?”

“Sure.” She sighed restlessly. “I don’t know what I’m going to do—”

“Miss Ouelette,” Jackson interrupted, “you had an accident with the ironer, didn’t you? Cut your hand on a clamp, I believe?”

“Yes, I cut my finger.” Suddenly her face clouded. “That was the first thing.” She looked at them woefully. “Sometimes I feel like the girls don’t like me so much anymore . . . as if I were to blame.”

“I have to ask you a hard question,” Jackson said slowly. “A question you won’t like. It seems absurdly personal and off the subject, but I can only tell you it is not. Your answers won’t ever be marked down in a file or record.”

She looked frightened. “D-did I do something?”

Jackson smiled and shook his head; she melted. *Thank God for Mark*, Hunton thought.

“I’ll add this, though: the answer may help you keep your nice little flat here, get your job back, and make things at the laundry the way they were before.”

“I’d answer anything to have that,” she said.

“Sherry, are you a virgin?”

She looked utterly flabbergasted, utterly shocked, as if a priest had given communion and then slapped her. Then she lifted her head, made a gesture at her neat efficiency apartment, as if asking them how they could believe it might be a place of assignation.

“I’m saving myself for my husband,” she said simply.

Hunton and Jackson looked calmly at each other, and in that tick of a second, Hunton knew that it was all true: a devil had taken over the inanimate steel and cogs and gears of the mangler and had turned it into something with its own life.

“Thank you,” Jackson said quietly.

“What now?” Hunton asked bleakly as they rode back. “Find a priest to exorcise it?”

Jackson snorted. “You’d go a far piece to find one that wouldn’t hand you a few tracts to read while he phoned the booby hatch. It

has to be our play, Johnny.”

“Can we do it?”

“Maybe. The problem is this: We know something is in the mangler. We don't know *what*.” Hunton felt cold, as if touched by a fleshless finger. “There are a great many demons. Is the one we're dealing with in the circle of Bubastis or Pan? Baal? Or the Christian deity we call Satan? We don't know. If the demon had been deliberately cast, we would have a better chance. But this seems to be a case of random possession.”

Jackson ran his fingers through his hair. “The blood of a virgin, yes. But that narrows it down hardly at all. We have to be sure, very sure.”

“Why?” Hunton asked bluntly. “Why not just get a bunch of exorcism formulas together and try them out?”

Jackson's face went cold. “This isn't cops ‘n’ robbers, Johnny. For Christ's sake, don't think it is. The rite of exorcism is horribly dangerous. It's like controlled nuclear fission, in a way. We could make a mistake and destroy ourselves. The demon is caught in that piece of machinery. But give it a chance and—”

“It could get out?”

“It would love to get out,” Jackson said grimly. “And it likes to kill.”

When Jackson came over the following evening, Hunton had sent his wife and daughter to a movie. They had the living room to themselves, and for this Hunton was relieved. He could still barely believe what he had become involved in.

“I canceled my classes,” Jackson said, “and spent the day with some of the most god-awful books you can imagine. This afternoon I fed over thirty recipes for calling demons into the tech computer. I've got a number of common elements. Surprisingly few.”

He showed Hunton the list: blood of a virgin, graveyard dirt, hand of glory, bat's blood, night moss, horse's hoof, eye of toad.

There were others, all marked secondary.

“Horse's hoof,” Hunton said thoughtfully. “Funny—”

“Very common. In fact—”

“Could these things—any of them—be interpreted loosely?”  
Hunton interrupted.

“If lichens picked at night could be substituted for night moss, for instance?”

“Yes.”

“It's very likely,” Jackson said. “Magical formulas are often ambiguous and elastic. The black arts have always allowed plenty of room for creativity.”

“Substitute Jell-O for horse's hoof,” Hunton said. “Very popular in bag lunches. I noticed a little container of it sitting under the ironer's sheet platform on the day the Frawley woman died. Gelatin is made from horses' hooves.”

Jackson nodded. “Anything else?”

“Bat's blood . . . well, it's a big place. Lots of unlighted nooks and crannies. Bats seem likely, although I doubt if the management would admit to it. One could conceivably have been trapped in the mangler.”

Jackson tipped his head back and knuckled bloodshot eyes. “It fits . . . it all fits.”

“It does?”

“Yes. We can safely rule out the hand of glory, I think. Certainly no one dropped a hand into the ironer *before* Mrs. Frawley's death, and belladonna is definitely not indigenous to the area.”

“Graveyard dirt?”

“What do you think?”

“It would have to be a hell of a coincidence,” Hunton said. “Nearest cemetery is Pleasant Hill, and that's five miles from the Blue Ribbon.”

“Okay,” Jackson said. “I got the computer operator—who thought I was getting ready for Halloween—to run a positive breakdown of all the primary and secondary elements on the list. Every possible combination. I threw out some two dozen which were completely meaningless. The others fall into fairly clear-cut categories. The elements we've isolated are in one of those.”

“What is it?”

Jackson grinned. “An easy one. The mythos centers in South America with branches in the Caribbean. Related to voodoo. The

literature I've got looks on the deities as strictly bush league, compared to some of the real heavies, like Saddath or He-Who-Cannot-Be-Named. The thing in that machine is going to slink away like the neighborhood bully.”

“How do we do it?”

“Holy water and a smidgen of the Holy Eucharist ought to do it. And we can read some of the Leviticus to it. Strictly Christian white magic.”

“You're sure it's not worse?”

“Don't see how it can be,” Jackson said pensively. “I don't mind telling you I was worried about that hand of glory. That's very black juju. Strong magic.”

“Holy water wouldn't stop it?”

“A demon called up in conjunction with the hand of glory could eat a stack of Bibles for breakfast. We would be in bad trouble messing with something like that at all. Better to pull the goddamn thing apart.”

“Well, are you completely sure—”

“No, but fairly sure. It all fits too well.”

“When?”

“The sooner, the better,” Jackson said. “How do we get in? Break a window?”

Hunton smiled, reached into his pocket, and dangled a key in front of Jackson's nose.

“Where'd you get that? Gartley?”

“No,” Hunton said. “From a state inspector named Martin.”

“He know what we're doing?”

“I think he suspects. He told me a funny story a couple of weeks ago.”

“About the mangler?”

“No,” Hunton said. “About a refrigerator. Come on.”

Adelle Frawley was dead; sewed together by a patient undertaker, she lay in her coffin. Yet something of her spirit perhaps remained in the machine, and if it did, it cried out. She would have known, could

have warned them. She had been prone to indigestion, and for this common ailment she had taken a common stomach tablet called E-Z Gel, purchasable over the counter of any drugstore for seventy-nine cents. The side panel holds a printed warning: People with glaucoma must not take E-Z Gel, because the active ingredient causes an aggravation of that condition. Unfortunately, Adelle Frawley did not have that condition. She might have remembered the day, shortly before Sherry Ouelette cut her hand, that she had dropped a full box of E-Z Gel tablets into the mangler by accident. But she was dead, unaware that the active ingredient which soothed her heartburn was a chemical derivative of belladonna, known quaintly in some European countries as the hand of glory.

There was a sudden ghastly burping noise in the spectral silence of the Blue Ribbon Laundry—a bat fluttered madly for its hole in the insulation above the dryers where it had roosted, wrapping wings around its blind face.

It was a noise almost like a chuckle.

The mangler began to run with a sudden, lurching grind—belts hurrying through the darkness, cogs meeting and meshing and grinding, heavy pulverizing rollers rotating on and on.

It was ready for them.

When Hunton pulled into the parking lot it was shortly after midnight and the moon was hidden behind a raft of moving clouds. He jammed on the brakes and switched off the lights in the same motion; Jackson's forehead almost slammed against the padded dash.

He switched off the ignition and the steady thump-hiss-thump became louder. "It's the mangler," he said slowly. "It's the mangler. Running by itself. In the middle of the night."

They sat for a moment in silence, feeling the fear crawl up their legs.

Hunton said, "All right. Let's do it."

They got out and walked to the building, the sound of the mangler growing louder. As Hunton put the key into the lock of the service

door, he thought that the machine *did* sound alive—as if it were breathing in great hot gasps and speaking to itself in hissing, sardonic whispers.

“All of a sudden I'm glad I'm with a cop,” Jackson said. He shifted the brown bag he held from one arm to the other. Inside was a small jelly jar filled with holy water wrapped in waxed paper, and a Gideon Bible.

They stepped inside and Hunton snapped up the light switches by the door. The fluorescents flickered into cold life. At the same instant the mangler shut off.

A membrane of steam hung over its rollers. It waited for them in its new ominous silence.

“God, it's an ugly thing,” Jackson whispered.

“Come on,” Hunton said. “Before we lose our nerve.”

They walked over to it. The safety bar was in its down position over the belt which fed the machine.

Hunton put out a hand. “Close enough, Mark. Give me the stuff and tell me what to do.”

“But—”

“No argument.”

Jackson handed him the bag and Hunton put it on the sheet table in front of the machine. He gave Jackson the Bible.

“I'm going to read,” Jackson said. “When I point at you, sprinkle the holy water on the machine with your fingers. You say: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, get thee from this place, thou unclean. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“The second time I point, break the wafer and repeat the incantation again.”

“How will we know if it's working?”

“You'll know. The thing is apt to break every window in the place getting out. If it doesn't work the first time, we keep doing it until it does.”

“I'm scared green,” Hunton said.

“As a matter of fact, so am I.”

“If we're wrong about the hand of glory—”

“We're not,” Jackson said. “Here we go.”

He began. His voice filled the empty laundry with spectral echoes. “Turnest not thou aside to idols, nor make molten gods for yourself. I am the Lord thy God . . .” The words fell like stones into a silence that had suddenly become filled with a creeping, tomblike cold. The mangler remained still and silent under the fluorescents, and to Hunton it still seemed to grin.

“. . . and the land will vomit you out for having defiled it, as it vomited out nations before you.” Jackson looked up, his face strained, and pointed.

Hunton sprinkled holy water across the feeder belt.

There was a sudden, gnashing scream of tortured metal. Smoke rose from the canvas belts where the holy water had touched and took on writhing, red-tinged shapes. The mangler suddenly jerked into life.

“We've got it!” Jackson cried above the rising clamor. “It's on the run!”

He began to read again, his voice rising over the sound of the machinery. He pointed to Hunton again, and Hunton sprinkled some of the host. As he did so he was suddenly swept with a bone-freezing terror, a sudden vivid feeling that it had gone wrong, that the machine had called their bluff—and was the stronger.

Jackson's voice was still rising, approaching climax.

Sparks began to jump across the arc between the main motor and the secondary; the smell of ozone filled the air, like the copper smell of hot blood. Now the main motor was smoking; the mangler was running at an insane, blurred speed: a finger touched to the central belt would have caused the whole body to be hauled in and turned to a bloody rag in the space of five seconds. The concrete beneath their feet trembled and thrummed.

A main bearing blew with a searing flash of purple light, filling the chill air with the smell of thunderstorms, and still the mangler ran, faster and faster, belts and rollers and cogs moving at a speed that made them seem to blend and merge, change, melt, transmute—

Hunton, who had been standing almost hypnotized, suddenly took a step backward. “Get away!” he screamed over the blaring racket.

“We've almost got it!” Jackson yelled back. “Why—”

There was a sudden indescribable ripping noise and a fissure in the concrete floor suddenly raced toward them and past, widening. Chips of ancient cement flew up in a starburst.

Jackson looked at the mangler and screamed.

It was trying to pull itself out of the concrete, like a dinosaur trying to escape a tar pit. And it wasn't precisely an ironer anymore. It was still changing, melting. The 550-volt cable fell, spitting blue fire, into the rollers and was chewed away. For a moment two fireballs glared at them like lambent eyes, eyes filled with a great and cold hunger.

Another fault line tore open. The mangler leaned toward them, within an ace of being free of the concrete moorings that held it. It leered at them; the safety bar had slammed up and what Hunton saw was a gaping, hungry mouth filled with steam.

They turned to run and another fissure opened at their feet. Behind them, a great screaming roar as the thing came free. Hunton leaped over, but Jackson stumbled and fell sprawling.

Hunton turned to help and a huge, amorphous shadow fell over him, blocking the fluorescents.

It stood over Jackson, who lay on his back, staring up in a silent rictus of terror—the perfect sacrifice. Hunton had only a confused impression of something black and moving that bulked to a tremendous height above them both, something with glaring electric eyes the size of footballs, an open mouth with a moving canvas tongue.

He ran; Jackson's dying scream followed him.

When Roger Martin finally got out of bed to answer the doorbell, he was still only a third awake; but when Hunton reeled in, shock slapped him fully into the world with a rough hand.

Hunton's eyes bulged madly from his head, and his hands were claws as he scratched at the front of Martin's robe. There was a small oozing cut on his cheek and his face was splashed with dirty gray specks of powdered cement.

His hair had gone dead white.

“Help me . . . for Jesus’ sake, help me. Mark is dead. Jackson is dead.”

“Slow down,” Martin said. “Come in the living room.”

Hunton followed him, making a thick whining noise in his throat, like a dog.

Martin poured him a two-ounce knock of Jim Beam and Hunton held the glass in both hands, downing the raw liquor in a choked gulp. The glass fell unheeded to the carpet and his hands, like wandering ghosts, sought Martin's lapels again.

“The mangler killed Mark Jackson. It . . . it . . . oh God, it might get out! We can't let it get out! We can't . . . we . . . oh—” He began to scream, a crazy, whooping sound that rose and fell in jagged cycles.

Martin tried to hand him another drink but Hunton knocked it aside. “We have to burn it,” he said. “Burn it before it can get out. Oh, what if it gets out? Oh Jesus, what if—” His eyes suddenly flickered, glazed, rolled up to show the whites, and he fell to the carpet in a stonelike faint.

Mrs. Martin was in the doorway, clutching her robe to her throat. “Who is he, Rog? Is he crazy? I thought—” She shuddered.

“I don't think he's crazy.” She was suddenly frightened by the sick shadow of fear on her husband's face. “God, I hope he came quick enough.”

He turned to the telephone, picked up the receiver, froze.

There was a faint, swelling noise from the east of the house, the way that Hunton had come. A steady, grinding clatter, growing louder. The living-room window stood half open and now Martin caught a dark smell on the breeze. An odor of ozone . . . or blood.

He stood with his hand on the useless telephone as it grew louder, louder, gnashing and fuming, something in the streets that was hot and steaming. The blood stench filled the room.

His hand dropped from the telephone.

It was already out.

# THE BOOGEYMAN

"I came to you because I want to tell my story," the man on Dr. Harper's couch was saying. The man was Lester Billings from Waterbury, Connecticut. According to the history taken from Nurse Vickers, he was twenty-eight, employed by an industrial firm in New York, divorced, and the father of three children. All deceased.

"I can't go to a priest because I'm not Catholic. I can't go to a lawyer because I haven't done anything to consult a lawyer about. All I did was kill my kids. One at a time. Killed them all."

Dr. Harper turned on the tape recorder.

Billings lay straight as a yardstick on the couch, not giving it an inch of himself. His feet protruded stiffly over the end. Picture of a man enduring necessary humiliation. His hands were folded corpselike on his chest. His face was carefully set. He looked at the plain white composition ceiling as if seeing scenes and pictures played out there.

"Do you mean you actually killed them, or—"

"No." Impatient flick of the hand. "But I was responsible. Denny in 1967. Shirl in 1971. And Andy this year. I want to tell you about it."

Dr. Harper said nothing. He thought that Billings looked haggard and old. His hair was thinning, his complexion sallow. His eyes held all the miserable secrets of whiskey.

"They were murdered, see? Only no one believes that. If they would, things would be all right."

"Why is that?"

"Because . . ."

Billings broke off and darted up on his elbows, staring across the room. "What's that?" he barked. His eyes had narrowed to black slots.

"What's what?"

“That door.”

“The closet,” Dr. Harper said. “Where I hang my coat and leave my overshoes.”

“Open it. I want to see.”

Dr. Harper got up wordlessly, crossed the room, and opened the closet. Inside, a tan raincoat hung on one of four or five hangers. Beneath that was a pair of shiny galoshes. The *New York Times* had been carefully tucked into one of them. That was all.

“All right?” Dr. Harper said.

“All right.” Billings removed the props of his elbows and returned to his previous position.

“You were saying,” Dr. Harper said as he went back to his chair, “that if the murder of your three children could be proved, all your troubles would be over. Why is that?”

“I'd go to jail,” Billings said immediately. “For life. And you can see into all the rooms in a jail. All the rooms.” He smiled at nothing.

“How were your children murdered?”

“Don't try to jerk it out of me!”

Billings twitched around and stared balefully at Harper.

“I'll tell you, don't worry. I'm not one of your freaks strutting around and pretending to be Napoleon or explaining that I got hooked on heroin because my mother didn't love me. I know you won't believe me. I don't care. It doesn't matter. Just to tell will be enough.”

“All right.” Dr. Harper got out his pipe.

“I married Rita in 1965—I was twenty-one and she was eighteen. She was pregnant. That was Denny.” His lips twisted in a rubbery, frightening grin that was gone in a wink. “I had to leave college and get a job, but I didn't mind. I loved both of them. We were very happy.

“Rita got pregnant just a little while after Denny was born, and Shirl came along in December of 1966. Andy came in the summer of 1969, and Denny was already dead by then. Andy was an accident. That's what Rita said. She said sometimes that birth-control stuff doesn't work. I think that it was more than an accident. Children tie a man down, you know. Women like that, especially when the man is brighter than they. Don't you find that's true?”

Harper grunted noncommittally.

"It doesn't matter, though. I loved him anyway." He said it almost vengefully, as if he had loved the child to spite his wife.

"Who killed the children?" Harper asked.

"The boogeyman," Lester Billings answered immediately. "The boogeyman killed them all. Just came out of the closet and killed them." He twisted around and grinned. "You think I'm crazy, all right. It's written all over you. But I don't care. All I want to do is tell you and then get lost."

"I'm listening," Harper said.

"It started when Denny was almost two and Shirl was just an infant. He started crying when Rita put him to bed. We had a two-bedroom place, see. Shirl slept in a crib in our room. At first I thought he was crying because he didn't have a bottle to take to bed anymore. Rita said don't make an issue of it, let it go, let him have it and he'll drop it on his own. But that's the way kids start off bad. You get permissive with them, spoil them. Then they break your heart. Get some girl knocked up, you know, or start shooting dope. Or they get to be sissies. Can you imagine waking up some morning and finding your kid—your *son*—is a sissy?"

"After a while, though, when he didn't stop, I started putting him to bed myself. And if he didn't stop crying I'd give him a whack. Then Rita said he was saying light' over and over again. Well, I didn't know. Kids that little, how can you tell what they're saying. Only a mother can tell.

"Rita wanted to put in a nightlight. One of those wall-plug things with Mickey Mouse or Huckleberry Hound or something on it. I wouldn't let her. If a kid doesn't get over being afraid of the dark when he's little, he never gets over it.

"Anyway, he died the summer after Shirl was born. I put him to bed that night and he started to cry right off. I heard

what he said that time. He pointed right at the closet when he said it. 'Boogeyman,' the kid says. 'Boogeyman, Daddy.'

"I turned off the light and went into our room and asked Rita why she wanted to teach the kid a word like that. I was tempted to slap

her around a little, but I didn't. She said she never taught him to say that. I called her a goddamn liar.

"That was a bad summer for me, see. The only job I could get was loading Pepsi-Cola trucks in a warehouse, and I was tired all the time. Shirl would wake up and cry every night and Rita would pick her up and sniffle. I tell you, sometimes I felt like throwing them both out a window. Christ, kids drive you crazy sometimes. You could kill them.

"Well, the kid woke me at three in the morning, right on schedule. I went to the bathroom, only a quarter awake, you know, and Rita asked me if I'd check on Denny. I told her to do it herself and went back to bed. I was almost asleep when she started to scream.

"I got up and went in. The kid was dead on his back. Just as white as flour except for where the blood had . . . had sunk. Back of the legs, the head, the a—the buttocks. His eyes were open. That was the worst, you know. Wide open and glassy, like the eyes you see on a moosehead some guy put over his mantel. Like pictures you see of those gook kids over in Nam. But an American kid shouldn't look like that. Dead on his back. Wearing diapers and rubber pants because he'd been wetting himself again the last couple of weeks. Awful, I loved that kid."

Billings shook his head slowly, then offered the rubbery, frightening grin again. "Rita was screaming her head off. She tried to pick Denny up and rock him, but I wouldn't let her. The cops don't like you to touch any of the evidence. I know that—"

"Did you know it was the boogeyman then?" Harper asked quietly.

"Oh, no. Not then. But I did see one thing. It didn't mean anything to me then, but my mind stored it away."

"What was that?"

"The closet door was open. Not much. Just a crack. But I knew I left it shut, see. There's dry-cleaning bags in there. A kid messes around with one of those and bango. Asphyxiation. You know that?"

"Yes. What happened then?"

Billings shrugged. "We planted him." He looked morbidly at his hands, which had thrown dirt on three tiny coffins.

"Was there an inquest?"

“Sure.” Billings eyes flashed with sardonic brilliance. “Some back-country fuckhead with a stethoscope and a black bag full of Junior Mints and a sheepskin from some cow college. Crib death, he called it! You ever hear such a pile of yellow manure? The kid was three years old!”

“Crib death is most common during the first year,” Harper said carefully, “but that diagnosis has gone on death certificates for children up to age five for want of a better—”

“*Bullshit!*” Billings spat out violently.

Harper relit his pipe.

“We moved Shirl into Denny's old room a month after the funeral. Rita fought it tooth and nail, but I had the last word. It hurt me, of course it did. Jesus, I loved having the kid in with us. But you can't get overprotective. You make a kid a cripple that way. When I was a kid my mom used to take me to the beach and then scream herself hoarse. ‘Don't go out so far! Don't go there! It's got an undertow! You only ate an hour ago! Don't go over your head!’ Even to watch out for sharks, before God. So what happens? I can't even go near the water now. It's the truth. I get the cramps if I go near a beach. Rita got me to take her and the kids to Savin Rock once when Denny was alive. I got sick as a dog. I know, see? You can't overprotect kids. And you can't coddle yourself either. Life goes on. Shirl went right into Denny's crib. We sent the old mattress to the dump, though. I didn't want my girl to get any germs.

“So a year goes by. And one night when I'm putting Shirl into her crib she starts to yowl and scream and cry. ‘Boogeyman, Daddy, boogeyman, boogeyman!’

“That threw a jump into me. It was just like Denny. And I started to remember about that closet door, open just a crack when we found him. I wanted to take her into our room for the night.”

“Did you?”

“No.” Billings regarded his hands and his face twitched. “How could I go to Rita and admit I was wrong? I *had* to be strong. She was always such a jellyfish . . . look how easy she went to bed with me when we weren't married.”

Harper said, "On the other hand, look how easily *you* went to bed with *her*."

Billings froze in the act of rearranging his hands and slowly turned his head to look at Harper. "Are you trying to be a wise guy?"

"No, indeed," Harper said.

"Then let me tell it my way," Billings snapped. "I came here to get this off my chest. To tell my story. I'm not going to talk about my sex life, if that's what you expect. Rita and I had a very normal sex life, with none of that dirty stuff. I know it gives some people a charge to talk about that, but I'm not one of them."

"Okay," Harper said.

"Okay," Billings echoed with uneasy arrogance. He seemed to have lost the thread of his thought, and his eyes wandered uneasily to the closet door, which was firmly shut.

"Would you like that open?" Harper asked.

"No!" Billings said quickly. He gave a nervous little laugh. "What do I want to look at your overshoes for?"

"The boogeyman got her, too," Billings said. He brushed at his forehead, as if sketching memories. "A month later. But something happened before that. I heard a noise in there one night. And then she screamed. I opened the door real quick—the hall light was on—and . . . she was sitting up in the crib crying and . . . something *moved*. Back in the shadows, by the closet. Something *slithered*"

"Was the closet door open?"

"A little. Just a crack." Billings licked his lips. "Shirl was screaming about the boogeyman. And something else that sounded like 'claws.' Only she said 'craws,' you know. Little kids have trouble with that 'I' sound. Rita ran upstairs and asked what the matter was. I said she got scared by the shadows of the branches moving on the ceiling."

"Crawset?" Harper said.

"Huh?"

"Crawset . . . closet. Maybe she was trying to say 'closet.'" "

"Maybe," Billings said. "Maybe that was it. But I don't think so. I think it was 'claws.'" His eyes began seeking the closet door again. "Claws, long claws." His voice had sunk to a whisper.

"Did you look in the closet?"

“Y-yes.” Billings’ hands were laced tightly across his chest, laced tightly enough to show a white moon at each knuckle.

“Was there anything in there? Did you see the—”

“*I didn’t see anything!*” Billings screamed suddenly. And the words poured out as if a black cork had been pulled from the bottom of his soul: “When she died I found her, see. And she was black. All black. She swallowed her own tongue and she was just as black as a nigger in a minstrel show and she was staring at me. Her eyes, they looked like those eyes you see on stuffed animals, all shiny and awful, like live marbles, and they were saying it got me, Daddy, you let it get me, you killed me, you helped it kill me . . .” His words trailed off. One single tear very large and silent, ran down the side of his cheek.

“It was a brain convulsion, see? Kids get those sometimes. A bad signal from the brain. They had an autopsy at Hartford Receiving and they told us she choked on her tongue from the convulsion. And I had to go home alone because they kept Rita under sedation. She was out of her mind. I had to go back to that house all alone, and I know a kid don’t just get convulsions because their brain friggged up. You can scare a kid into convulsions. And I had to go back to the house where *it* was.”

He whispered, “I slept on the couch. With the light on.”

“Did anything happen?”

“I had a dream,” Billings said. “I was in a dark room and there was something I couldn’t . . . couldn’t quite see, in the closet. It made a noise . . . a squishy noise. It reminded me of a comic book I read when I was a kid. *Tales from the Crypt*, you remember that? Christ! They had a guy named Graham Ingles; he could draw every god-awful thing in the world—and some out of it. Anyway, in this story this woman drowned her husband, see? Put cement blocks on his feet and dropped him into a quarry. Only he came back. He was all rotted and black-green and the fish had eaten away one of his eyes and there was seaweed in his hair. He came back and killed her. And when I woke up in the middle of the night, I thought that would be leaning over me. With claws . . . long claws . . .”

Dr. Harper looked at the digital clock inset into his desk. Lester Billings had been speaking for nearly half an hour. He said, “When your wife came back home, what was her attitude toward you?”

“She still loved me,” Billings said with pride. “She still wanted to do what I told her. That's the wife's place, right? This women's lib only makes sick people. The most important thing in life is for a person to know his place. His . . . his . . . uh . . .”

“Station in life?”

“That's it!” Billings snapped his fingers. “That's it exactly. And a wife should follow her husband. Oh, she was sort of colorless the first four or five months after—dragged around the house, didn't sing, didn't watch the TV, didn't laugh. I knew she'd get over it. When they're that little, you don't get so attached to them. After a while you have to go to the bureau drawer and look at a picture to even remember exactly what they looked like.

“She wanted another baby,” he added darkly. “I told her it was a bad idea. Oh, not forever, but for a while. I told her it was a time for us to get over things and begin to enjoy each other. We never had a chance to do that before. If you wanted to go to a movie, you had to hassle around for a baby-sitter. You couldn't go into town to see the Mets unless her folks would take the kids, because my mom wouldn't have anything to do with us. Denny was born too soon after we were married, see? She said Rita was just a tramp, a common little corner-walker. Corner-walker is what my mom always called them. Isn't that a sketch? She sat me down once and told me diseases you can get if you went to a cor . . . to a prostitute. How your pri . . . your penis has just a little tiny sore on it one day and the next day it's rotting right off. She wouldn't even come to the wedding.”

Billings drummed his chest with his fingers.

“Rita's gynecologist sold her on this thing called an IUD—interuterine device. Foolproof, the doctor said. He just sticks it up the woman's . . . her place, and that's it. If there's anything in there, the egg can't fertilize. You don't even know it's there.” He smiled at the ceiling with dark sweetness. “No one knows if it's there or not. And next year she's pregnant again. Some foolproof.”

“No birth-control method is perfect,” Harper said. “The pill is only ninety-eight percent. The IUD may be ejected by cramps, strong menstrual flow, and, in exceptional cases, by evacuation.”

“Yeah. Or you can take it out.”

“That's possible.”

“So what's next? She's knitting little things, singing in the shower, and eating pickles like crazy. Sitting on my lap and saying things about how it must have been God's will. *Piss.*”

“The baby came at the end of the year after Shirl's death?”

“That's right. A boy. She named it Andrew Lester Billings. I didn't want anything to do with it, at least at first. My motto was she screwed up, so let her take care of it. I know how that sounds but you have to remember that I'd been through a lot.

“But I warmed up to him, you know it? He was the only one of the litter that looked like me, for one thing. Denny looked like his mother, and Shirl didn't look like anybody, except maybe my Grammy Ann. But Andy was the spitting image of me.

“I'd get to playing around with him in his playpen when I got home from work. He'd grab only my finger and smile and gurgle. Nine weeks old and the kid was grinning up at his old dad. You believe that?

“Then one night, here I am coming out of a drugstore with a mobile to hang over the kid's crib. Me! Kids don't appreciate presents until they're old enough to say thank you, that was always my motto. But there I was, buying him silly crap and all at once I realize I love him the most of all. I had another job by then, a pretty good one, selling drill bits for Cluett and Sons. I did real well, and when Andy was one, we moved to Waterbury. The old place had too many bad memories.

“And too many closets.

“That next year was the best one for us. I'd give every finger on my right hand to have it back again. Oh, the war in Vietnam was still going on, and the hippies were still running around with no clothes on, and the niggers were yelling a lot, but none of that touched us. We were on a quiet street with nice neighbors. We were happy,” he summed up simply. “I asked Rita once if she wasn't worried. You

know, bad luck comes in threes and all that. She said not for us. She said Andy was special. She said God had drawn a ring around him.”

Billings looked morbidly at the ceiling.

“Last year wasn't so good. Something about the house changed. I started keeping my boots in the hall because I didn't like to open the closet door anymore. I kept thinking: Well, what if it's in there? All crouched down and ready to spring the second I open the door? And I'd started thinking I could hear squishy noises, as if something black and green and wet was moving around in there just a little.

“Rita asked me if I was working too hard, and I started to snap at her, just like the old days. I got sick to my stomach leaving them alone to go to work, but I was glad to get out. God help me, I was glad to get out. I started to think, see, that it lost us for a while when we moved. It had to hunt around, slinking through the streets at night and maybe creeping in the sewers. Smelling for us. It took a year, but it found us. It's back. It wants Andy and it wants me. I started to think, maybe if you think of a thing long enough, and believe in it, it gets real. Maybe all the monsters we were scared of when we were kids, Frankenstein and Wolfman and Mummy, maybe they were real. Real enough to kill the kids that were supposed to have fallen into gravel pits or drowned in lakes or were just never found. Maybe . . .”

“Are you backing away from something, Mr. Billings?”

Billings was silent for a long time—two minutes clicked off the digital clock. Then he said abruptly; “Andy died in February. Rita wasn't there. She got a call from her father. Her mother had been in a car crash the day after New Year's and wasn't expected to live. She took a bus back that night.

“Her mother didn't die, but she was on the critical list for a long time—two months. I had a very good woman who stayed with Andy days. We kept house nights. And closet doors kept coming open.”

Billings licked his lips. “The kid was sleeping in the room with me. It's funny, too. Rita asked me once when he was two if I wanted to move him into another room. Spock or one of those other quacks claims it's bad for kids to sleep with their parents, see? Supposed to give them traumas about sex and all that. But we never did it unless

the kid was asleep. And I didn't want to move him. I was afraid to, after Denny and Shirk”

“But you did move him, didn't you?” Dr. Harper asked.

“Yeah,” Billings said. He smiled a sick, yellow smile. “I did.”

Silence again. Billings wrestled with it.

“I had to!” he barked finally. “I had to! It was all right when Rita was there, but when she was gone, it started to get bolder. It started . . .” He rolled his eyes at Harper and bared his teeth in a savage grin. “Oh, you won't believe it. I know what you think, just another goofy for your casebook, I know that, but you weren't there, you lousy smug head-peeper.

“One night every door in the house blew wide open. One morning I got up and found a trail of mud and filth across the hall between the coat closet and the front door. Was it going out? Coming in? I don't know! Before Jesus, I just don't know! Records all scratched up and covered with slime, mirrors broken . . . and the sounds . . . the sounds . . .”

He ran a hand through his hair. “You'd wake up at three in the morning and look into the dark and at first you'd say, It's only the clock.’ But underneath it you could hear something moving in a stealthy way. But not too stealthy, because it wanted you to hear it. A slimy sliding sound like something from the kitchen drain. Or a clicking sound, like claws being dragged lightly over the staircase banister. And you'd close your eyes, knowing that hearing it was bad, but if you saw it . . .

“And always you'd be afraid that the noises might stop for a little while, and then there would be a laugh right over your face and a breath of air like stale cabbage on your face, and then hands on your throat.”

Billings was pallid and trembling.

“So I moved him. I knew it would go for him, see. Because he was weaker. And it did. That very first night he screamed in the middle of the night and finally, when I got up the cojones to go in, he was standing up in bed and screaming. The boogeyman, Daddy . . . boogeyman . . . wanna go wif Daddy, go wif Daddy.” Billings' voice

had become a high treble, like a child's. His eyes seemed to fill his entire face; he almost seemed to shrink on the couch.

"But I couldn't," the childish breaking treble continued, "I couldn't. And an hour later there was a scream. An awful, gurgling scream. And I knew how much I loved him because I ran in, I didn't even turn on the light, I ran, ran, *ran*, oh, Jesus God Mary, it had him; it was shaking him, shaking him just like a terrier shakes a piece of cloth and I could see something with awful slumped shoulders and a scarecrow head and I could smell something like a dead mouse in a pop bottle and I heard . . ." He trailed off, and then his voice clicked back into an adult range. "I heard it when Andy's neck broke." Billings' voice was cool and dead. "It made a sound like ice cracking when you're skating on a country pond in winter."

"Then what happened?"

"Oh, I ran," Billings said in the same cool, dead voice. "I went to an all-night diner. How's that for complete cowardice? Ran to an all-night diner and drank six cups of coffee. Then I went home. It was already dawn. I called the police even before I went upstairs. He was lying on the floor and staring at me. Accusing me. A tiny bit of blood had run out of one ear. Only a drop, really. And the closet door was open—but just a crack."

The voice stopped. Harper looked at the digital clock. Fifty minutes had passed.

"Make an appointment with the nurse," he said. "In fact, several of them. Tuesdays and Thursdays?"

"I only came to tell my story," Billings said. "To get it off my chest. I lied to the police, see? Told them the kid must have tried to get out of his crib in the night and . . . they swallowed it. Course they did. That's just what it looked like. Accidental, like the others. But Rita knew. Rita . . . finally . . . knew . . ."

He covered his eyes with his right arm and began to weep.

"Mr. Billings, there is a great deal to talk about," Dr. Harper said after a pause. "I believe we can remove some of the guilt you've been carrying, but first you have to want to get rid of it."

"Don't you believe I *do*?" Billings cried, removing his arm from his eyes. They were red, raw, wounded.

“Not yet,” Harper said quietly. “Tuesdays and Thursdays?”

After a long silence, Billings muttered, “Goddamn shrink. All right. All right.”

“Make an appointment with the nurse, Mr. Billings. And have a good day.”

Billings laughed emptily and walked out of the office quickly, without looking back.

The nurse's station was empty. A small sign on the desk blotter said: “Back in a Minute.”

Billings turned and went back into the office. “Doctor, your nurse is —”

The room was empty.

But the closet door was open. Just a crack.

“So nice,” the voice from the closet said. “So nice.” The words sounded as if they might have come through a mouthful of rotted seaweed.

Billings stood rooted to the spot as the closet door swung open. He dimly felt warmth at his crotch as he wet himself.

“So nice,” the boogeyman said as it shambled out.

It still held its Dr. Harper mask in one rotted, spade-claw hand.

# GRAY MATTER

They had been predicting a norther all week and along about Thursday we got it, a real screamer that piled up eight inches by four in the afternoon and showed no signs of slowing down. The usual five or six were gathered around the Reliable in Henry's Nite-Owl, which is the only little store on this side of Bangor that stays open right around the clock.

Henry don't do a huge business—mostly, it amounts to selling the college kids their beer and wine—but he gets by and it's a place for us old duffers on Social Security to get together and talk about who's died lately and how the world's going to hell.

This afternoon Henry was at the counter; Bill Pelham, Bertie Connors, Carl Littlefield, and me was tipped up by the stove. Outside, not a car was moving on Ohio Street, and the plows was having hard going. The wind was socking drifts across that looked like the backbone on a dinosaur.

Henry'd only had three customers all afternoon—that is, if you want to count in blind Eddie. Eddie's about seventy, and he ain't completely blind. Runs into things, mostly. He comes in once or twice a week and sticks a loaf of bread under his coat and walks out with an expression on his face like: *there, you stupid sonsabitches, fooled you again*

Bertie once asked Henry why he never put a stop to it.

"I'll tell you," Henry said. "A few years back the Air Force wanted twenty million dollars to rig up a flyin' model of an airplane they had planned out. Well, it cost them seventy-five million and then the damn thing wouldn't fly. That happened ten years ago, when blind Eddie and myself were considerably younger, and I voted for the woman who sponsored that bill. Blind Eddie voted against her. And since then I've been buyin' his bread,"

Bertie didn't look like he quite followed all of that, but he sat back to muse over it.

Now the door opened again, letting in a blast of the cold gray air outside, and a young kid came in, stamping snow off his boots. I placed him after a second. He was Richie Grenadine's kid, and he looked like he'd just kissed the wrong end of the baby. His Adam's apple was going up and down and his face was the color of old oilcloth.

"Mr. Parmalee," he says to Henry, his eyeballs rolling around in his head like ball bearings, "you got to come. You got to take him his beer and come. I can't stand to go back there. I'm scared."

"Now slow down," Henry says, taking off his white butcher's apron and coming around the counter. "What's the matter? Your dad been on a drunk?"

I realized when he said that that Richie hadn't been in for quite some time. Usually he'd be by once a day to pick up a case of whatever beer was going cheapest at that time, a big fat man with jowls like pork butts and ham-hock arms. Richie always was a pig about his beer, but he handled it okay when he was working at the sawmill out in Clifton. Then something happened—a pulper piled a bad load, or maybe Richie just made it out that way—and Richie was off work, free an' easy, with the sawmill company paying him compensation. Something in his back. Anyway, he got awful fat. He hadn't been in lately, although once in a while I'd seen his boy come in for Richie's nightly case. Nice enough boy. Henry sold him the beer, for he knew it was only the boy doing as his father said.

"He's been on a drunk," the boy was saying now, "but that ain't the trouble. It's . . . it's . . . oh Lord, it's *awful!*"

Henry saw he was going to bawl, so he says real quick; "Carl, will you watch things for a minute?"

"Sure."

"Now, Timmy, you come back into the stockroom and tell me what's what."

He led the boy away, and Carl went around behind the counter and sat on Henry's stool. No one said anything for quite a while. We could hear 'em back there, Henry's deep, slow voice and then Timmy

Grenadine's high one, speaking very fast. Then the boy commenced to cry, and Bill Pelham cleared his throat and started filling up his pipe.

"I ain't seen Richie for a couple months," I said.

Bill grunted. "No loss."

"He was in . . . oh, near the end of October," Carl said. "Near Halloween. Bought a case of Schlitz beer. He was gettin' awful meaty."

There wasn't much more to say. The boy was still crying, but he was talking at the same time. Outside the wind kept on whooping and yowling and the radio said we'd have another six inches or so by morning. It was mid-January and it made me wonder if anyone had seen Richie since October—besides his boy, that is.

The talking went on for quite a while, but finally Henry and the boy came back out. The boy had taken his coat off, but Henry had put his on. The boy was kinda hitching in his chest the way you do when the worst is past, but his eyes was red and when he glanced at you, he'd look down at the floor.

Henry looked worried. "I thought I'd send Timmy here upstairs an' have my wife cook him up a toasted cheese or somethin'. Maybe a couple of you fellas'd like to go around to Richie's place with me. Timmy says he wants some beer. He gave me the money." He tried to smile, but it was a pretty sick affair and he soon gave up.

"Sure," Bertie says. "What kind of beer? I'll go fetch her."

"Get Harrow's Supreme," Henry said. "We got some cut-down boxes back there."

I got up, too. It would have to be Bertie and me. Carl's arthritis gets something awful on days like this, and Billy Pelham don't have much use of his right arm anymore.

Bertie got four six-packs of Harrow's and I packed them into a box while Henry took the boy upstairs to the apartment, overhead.

Well, he straightened that out with his missus and came back down, looking over his shoulder once to make sure the upstairs door was closed. Billy spoke up, fairly busting: "What's up? Has Richie been workin' the kid over?"

“No,” Henry said. “I’d just as soon not say anything just yet. It’d sound crazy. I will show you somethin’, though. The money Timmy had to pay for the beer with.” He shed four dollar bills out of his pocket, holding them by the corner, and I don’t blame him. They was all covered with a gray, slimy stuff that looked like the scum on top of bad preserves. He laid them down on the counter with a funny smile and said to Carl; “Don’t let anybody touch ‘em. Not if what the kid says is even half right!”

And he went around to the sink by the meat counter and washed his hands.

I got up, put on my pea coat and scarf and buttoned up. It was no good taking a car; Richie lived in an apartment building down on Curve Street, which is as close to straight up an’ down as the law allows, and it’s the last place the plows touch.

As we were going out, Bill Pelham called after us: “Watch out, now.”

Henry just nodded and put the case of Harrow’s on the little handcart he keeps by the door, and out we trundled.

The wind hit us like a sawblade, and right away I pulled my scarf up over my ears. We paused in the doorway just for a second while Bertie pulled on his gloves. He had a pained sort of a wince on his face, and I knew how he felt. It’s all well for younger fellows to go out skiing all day and running those goddamn wasp-wing snowmobiles half the night, but when you get up over seventy without an oil change, you feel that north-east wind around your heart.

“I don’t want to scare you boys,” Henry said, with that queer, sort of revolted smile still on his mouth, “but I’m goin’ to show you this all the same. And I’m goin’ to tell you what the boy told me while we walk up there . . . because I want you to know, you see!”

And he pulled a .45-caliber hogleg out of his coat pocket—the pistol he’d kept loaded and ready under the counter ever since he went to twenty-four hours a day back in 1958. I don’t know where he got it, but I do know the one time he flashed it at a stickup guy, the fella just turned around and bolted right out the door. Henry was a cool one, all right. I saw him throw out a college kid that came in one

time and gave him a hard time about cashing a check. That kid walked away like his ass was on sideways and he had to crap.

Well, I only tell you that because Henry wanted Bertie and me to know he meant business, and we did, too.

So we set out, bent into the wind like washerwomen, Henry trundling that cart and telling us what the boy had said. The wind was trying to rip the words away before we could hear 'em, but we got most of it—more'n we wanted to. I was damn glad Henry had his Frenchman's pecker stowed away in his coat pocket.

The kid said it must have been the beer—you know how you can get a bad can every now and again. Flat or smelly or green as the peestains in an Irishman's underwear. A fella once told me that all it takes is a tiny hole to let in bacteria that'll do some damn strange things. The hole can be so small that the beer won't hardly dribble out, but the bacteria can get in. And beer's good food for some of those bugs.

Anyway, the kid said Richie brought back a case of Golden Light just like always that night in October and sat down to polish it off while Timmy did his homework.

Timmy was just about ready for bed when he hears Richie say, "Christ Jesus, that ain't right."

And Timmy says, "What's that, Pop?"

"That beer," Richie says. "God, that's the *worst* taste I ever had in my mouth."

Most people would wonder why in the name of God he drank it if it tasted so bad, but then, most people have never seen Richie Grenadine go to his beer. I was down in Wally's Spa one afternoon, and I saw him win the goddamndest bet. He bet a fella he could drink twenty two-bit glasses of beer in one minute. Nobody local would take him up, but this salesman from Montpelier laid down a twenty-dollar bill and Richie covered him. He drank all twenty with seven seconds to spare—although when he walked out he was more'n three sails into the wind. So I expect Richie had most of that bad can in his gut before his brain could warn him.

"I'm gonna puke," Richie says. "Look out!"

But by the time he got to the head it had passed off, and that was the end of it. The boy said he smelt the can, and it smelt like something crawled in there and died. There was a little gray dribble around the top, too.

Two days later the boy comes home from school and there's Richie sitting in front of the TV and watching the afternoon tearjerkers with every goddamn shade in the place pulled down.

"What's up?" Timmy asks, for Richie don't hardly ever roll in before nine.

"I'm watchin' the TV," Richie says. "I didn't seem to want to go out today."

Timmy turned on the light over the sink, and Richie yelled at him: "And turn off that friggin' light!"

So Timmy did, not asking how he's gonna do his homework in the dark. When Richie's in that mood, you don't ask him nothing.

"An' go out an' get me a case," Richie says. "Money's on the table."

When the kid gets back, his dad's still sitting in the dark, only now it's dark outside, too. And the TV's off. The kid starts getting the creeps—well, who wouldn't? Nothing but a dark flat and your daddy setting in the corner like a big lump.

So he puts the beer on the table, knowing that Richie don't like it so cold it spikes his forehead, and when he gets close to his old man he starts to notice a kind of rotten smell, like an old cheese someone left standing on the counter over the weekend. He don't say shit or go blind, though, as the old man was never what you'd call a cleanly soul. Instead he goes into his room and shuts the door and does his homework, and after a while he hears the TV start to go and Richie's popping the top in his first of the evening.

And for two weeks or so, that's the way things went. The kid got up in the morning and went to school an' when he got home Richie'd be in front of the television, and beer money on the table.

The flat was smelling ranker and ranker, too. Richie wouldn't have the shades up at all, and about the middle of November he made Timmy stop studying in his room. Said he couldn't abide the light

under the door. So Timmy started going down the block to a friend's house after getting his dad the beer.

Then one day when Timmy came home from school—it was four o'clock and pretty near dark already—Richie says, “Turn on the light.”

The kid turns on the light over the sink, and damn if Richie ain't all wrapped up in a blanket.

“Look,” Richie says, and one hand creeps out from under the blanket. Only it ain't a hand at all. *Something gray*, is all the kid could tell Henry. *Didn't look like a hand at all. Just a gray lump.*

Well, Timmy Grenadine was scared bad. He says, “Pop, what's happening to you?”

And Richie says, “I dunno. But it don't hurt. It feels . . . kinda nice.”

So, Timmy says, “I'm gonna call Dr. Westphail.”

And the blanket starts to tremble all over, like something awful was shaking—*all over*—under there. And Richie says, “Don't you dare. If you do I'll touch ya and you'll end up just like this.” And he slides the blanket down over his face for just a minute.

By then we were up to the corner of Harlow and Curve Street, and I was even colder than the temperature had been on Henry's Orange Crush thermometer when we came out. A person doesn't hardly want to believe such things, and yet there's still strange things in the world.

I once knew a fella named George Kelso, who worked for the Bangor Public Works Department. He spent fifteen years fixing water mains and mending electricity cables and all that, an' then one day he just up an' quit, not two years before his retirement. Frankie Haldeman, who knew him, said George went down into a sewer pipe on Essex laughing and joking just like always and came up fifteen minutes later with his hair just as white as snow and his eyes staring like he just looked through a window into hell. He walked straight down to the BPW garage and punched his clock and went down to Wally's Spa and started drinking. It killed him two years later. Frankie said he tried to talk to him about it and George said something one time, and that was when he was pretty well blotto. Turned around on his stool, George did, an' asked Frankie Haldeman if he'd ever seen

a spider as big as a good-sized dog setting in a web full of kitties an' such all wrapped up in silk thread. Well, what could he say to that? I'm not saying there's any truth in it, but I am saying that there's things in the corners of the world that would drive a man insane to look 'em right in the face.

So we just stood on the corner a minute, in spite of the wind that was whooping up the street.

"What'd he see?" Bertie asked.

"He said he could still see his dad," Henry answered, "but he said it was like he was buried in gray jelly . . . and it was all kinda mashed together. He said his clothes were all stickin' in and out of his skin, like they was melted to his body."

"Holy Jesus," Bertie said.

"Then he covered right up again and started screaming at the kid to turn off the light."

"Like he was a fungus," I said.

"Yes," Henry said. "Sorta like that."

"You keep that pistol handy," Bertie said.

"Yes, I think I will." And with that, we started to trundle up Curve Street.

The apartment house where Richie Grenadine had his flat was almost at the top of the hill, one of those big Victorian monsters that were built by the pulp an' paper barons at the turn of the century. They've just about all been turned into apartment houses now. When Bertie got his breath he told us Richie lived on the third floor under that top gable that juttet out like an eyebrow. I took the chance to ask Henry what happened to the kid after that.

Along about the third week in November the kid came back one afternoon to find Richie had gone one further than just pulling the shades down. He'd taken and nailed blankets across every window in the place. It was starting to stink worse, too—kind of a mushy stink, the way fruit gets when it goes to ferment with yeast.

A week or so after that, Richie got the kid to start heating his beer on the stove. Can you feature that? The kid all by himself in that apartment with his dad turning into . . . well, into something . . . an' heating his beer and then having to listen to him—it—drinking it with

awful thick slurping sounds, the way an old man eats his chowder: Can you imagine it?

And that's the way things went on until today, when the kid's school let out early because of the storm.

"The boy says he went right home," Henry told us. "There's no light in the upstairs hall at all—the boy claims his dad musta snuck out some night and broke it—so he had to sort of creep down to his door.

"Well, he heard somethin' moving around in there, and it suddenly pops into his mind that he don't know what Richie does all day through the week. He ain't seen his dad stir out of that chair for almost a month, and a man's got to sleep and go to the bathroom sometime.

"There's a Judas hole in the middle of the door, and it's supposed to have a latch on the inside to fasten it shut, but it's been busted ever since they lived there. So the kid slides up to the door real easy and pushed it open a bit with his thumb and pokes his eye up to it."

By now we were at the foot of the steps and the house was looming over us like a high, ugly face, with those windows on the third floor for eyes. I looked up there and sure enough those two windows were just as black as pitch. Like somebody'd put blankets over 'em or painted 'em up.

"It took him a minute to get his eye adjusted to the gloom. An' then he seen a great big gray lump, not like a man at all, slitherin' over the floor, leavin' a gray, slimy trail behind it. An' then it sort of snaked out an arm—or something like an arm—and pried a board off'n the wall. And took out a cat." Henry stopped for a second. Bertie was beating his hands together and it was god-awful cold out there on the street, but none of us was ready to go up just yet. "A dead cat," Henry recommenced, "that had putrefacted. The boy said it looked all swole up stiff . . . and there was little white things crawlin' all over it . . ."

"Stop," Bertie said. "For Christ's sake."

"And then his dad ate it."

I tried to swallow and something tasted greasy in my throat.

"That's when Timmy closed the peephole." Henry finished softly. "And ran."

"I don't think I can go up there," Bertie said.

Henry didn't say nothing, just looked from Bertie to me and back again.

"I guess we better," I said. "We got Richie's beer."

Bertie didn't say anything to that, so we went up the steps and in through the front hall door. I smelled it right off.

Do you know how a cider house smells in summer? You never get the smell of apples out, but in the fall it's all right because it smells tangy and sharp enough to ream your nose right out. But in the summer, it just smells mean, this smell was like that, but a little bit worse.

There was one light on in the lower hall, a mean yellow thing in a frosted glass that threw a glow as thin as buttermilk. And those stairs that went up into the shadows.

Henry bumped the cart to a stop, and while he was lifting out the case of beer, I thumbed the button at the foot of the stairs that controlled the second-floor-landing bulb. But it was busted, just as the boy said.

Bertie quavered: "I'll lug the beer. You just take care of that pistol."

Henry didn't argue. He handed it over and we started up, Henry first, then me, then Bertie with the case in his arms. By the time we had fetched the second-floor landing, the stink was just that much worse. Rotted apples, all fermented, and under that an even uglier stink.

When I lived out in Levant I had a dog one time—Rex, his name was—and he was a good mutt but not very wise about cars. He got hit a lick one afternoon while I was at work and he crawled under the house and died there. My Christ, what a stink. I finally had to go under and haul him out with a pole. That other stench was like that; flyblown and putrid and just as dirty as a borin' cob.

Up till then I had kept thinking that maybe it was some sort of joke, but I saw it wasn't. "Lord, why don't the neighbors kick up Harry?" I asked.

"What neighbors?" Henry asked, and he was smiling that queer smile again.

I looked around and saw that the hall had a sort of dusty, unused look and the door of all three second-floor apartments was closed and locked up.

“Who's the landlord, I wonder?” Bertie asked, resting the case on the newel post and getting his breath. “Gaiteau? Surprised he don't kick 'im out.”

“Who'd go up there and evict him?” Henry asked. “You?”

Bertie didn't say nothing.

Presently we started up the next flight, which was even narrower and steeper than the last. It was getting hotter, too. It sounded like every radiator in the place was clanking and hissing. The smell was awful, and I started to feel like someone was stirring my guts with a stick.

At the top was a short hall, and one door with a little Judas hole in the middle of it.

Bertie made a soft little cry an' whispered out: “Look what we're walkin' in!”

I looked down and saw all this slimy stuff on the hall floor, in little puddles. It looked like there'd been a carpet once, but the gray stuff had eaten it all away.

Henry walked down to the door, and we went after him. I don't know about Bertie, but I was shaking in my shoes. Henry never hesitated, though; he raised up that gun and beat on the door with the butt of it.

“Richie?” he called, and his voice didn't sound a bit scared, although his face was deadly pale. “This is Henry Parmalee from down at the Nite-Owl. I brought your beer.”

There wasn't any answer for p'raps a full minute, and then a voice said, “Where's Timmy? Where's my boy?”

I almost ran right then. That voice wasn't human at all. It was queer an' low an' bubbly, like someone talking through a mouthful of suet.

“He's at my store,” Henry said, “havin' a decent meal. He's just as skinny as a slat cat, Richie.”

There wasn't nothing for a while, and then some horrible squishing noises, like a man in rubber boots walking through mud. Then that

decayed voice spoke right through the other side of the door.

“Open the door an’ shove that beer through,” it said. “Only you got to pull all the ring tabs first. I can’t.”

“In a minute,” Henry said. “What kind of shape you in, Richie?”

“Never mind that,” the voice said, and it was horribly eager. “Just push in the beer and go!”

“It ain’t just dead cats anymore, is it?” Henry said, and he sounded sad. He wasn’t holdin’ the gun butt-up anymore; now it was business end first.

And suddenly, in a flash of light, I made the mental connection Henry had already made, perhaps even as Timmy was telling his story. The smell of decay and rot seemed to double in my nostrils when I remembered. Two young girls and some old Salvation Army wino had disappeared in town during the last three weeks or so—all after dark.

“Send it in or I’ll come out an’ get it,” the voice said.

Henry gestured us back, and we went.

“I guess you better, Richie.” He cocked his piece.

There was nothing then, not for a long time. To tell the truth, I began to feel as if it was all over. Then that door burst open, so sudden and so hard that it actually *bulged* before slamming out against the wall. And out came Richie.

It was just a second, just a second before Bertie and me was down those stairs like schoolkids, four an’ five at a time, and out the door into the snow, slipping an’ sliding.

Going down we heard Henry fire three times, the reports loud as grenades in the closed hallways of that empty, cursed house.

What we saw in that one or two seconds will last me a lifetime—or whatever’s left of it. It was like a huge gray wave of jelly, jelly that looked like a man, and leaving a trail of slime behind it.

But that wasn’t the worst. Its eyes were flat and yellow and wild, with no human soul in ‘em. Only there wasn’t two. There were four, an’ right down the center of the thing, betwixt the two pairs of eyes, was a white, fibrous line with a kind of pulsing pink flesh showing through like a slit in a hog’s belly.

It was dividing, you see. Dividing in two.

Bertie and I didn't say nothing to each other going back to the store. I don't know what was going through his mind, but I know well enough what was in mine: the multiplication table. Two times two is four, four times two is eight, eight times two is sixteen, sixteen times two is—

We got back. Carl and Bill Pelham jumped up and started asking questions right off. We wouldn't answer, neither of us. We just turned around and waited to see if Henry was gonna walk in outta the snow. I was up to 32,768 times two is the end of the human race and so we sat there cozied up to all that beer and waited to see which one was going to finally come back; and here we still sit.

I hope it's Henry. I surely do.

# BATTLEGROUND

“Mr. Renshaw?”

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

“What is it?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*It was a bomb.*

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

If it was a bomb, it was clockless. It sat utterly silent; bland and enigmatic. Plastique was more likely these days, anyway. Less

temperamental than the clocksprings manufactured by Westclox and Big Ben.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Renshaw picked one of the large pillows off the couch and began to walk toward them. The commanding officer turned and gestured. The others whirled and unslung their carbines. There were tiny, almost delicate popping sounds, and Renshaw felt suddenly as if he had been stung by bees.

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

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

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

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

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

*The little bastard shot me!*

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

The gun beneath his pillow was a .44 Magnum, big enough to put a hole the size of two fists through anything it hit. Renshaw turned, holding the pistol in both hands. He realized coolly that he would be shooting at a moving target not much bigger than a flying light bulb.

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

. .

*It jiggled! Goddamnit, it jiggled!*

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

*My eyes, the bastard was going for my eyes!*

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

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

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

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

They were bivouacking by the footlocker, damned if they weren't. Miniature soldiers ran hither and thither, setting up tents. Jeeps two inches high raced about importantly. A medic was working over the soldier Renshaw had kicked. The remaining eight copters flew in a protective swarm overhead, at coffee-table level.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The remaining six split into two retreating wings. His face was wet with blood and he swiped at it with his forearm. He was ready to start firing again when he paused. The soldiers who had retreated inside

the footlocker were trundling something out. Something that looked like . . .

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

*. . . a rocket launcher!*

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

*I'm losing!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was one tiny word written on the paper:

### *Surrender*

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

NUTS

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

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

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

bright, winking lights of the city glittered madly below him like thrown jewels.

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

None did.

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

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

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

Now to get around the goddamn corner.

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

His left foot slipped.

For a weird, timeless moment he tottered over the brink, right arm backwatering madly for balance, and then he was clutching the two sides of the building in a lover's embrace, face pressed against the hard corner, breath shuddering in and out of his lungs.

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

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

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

Then he was there, gripping the ornamented iron railings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The tiny foot soldiers scattered into the footlocker.

After that, it all happened very rapidly.

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

He never knew what hit him.

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

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

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

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

“What's that?” his girl asked.

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

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

“Sure, yeah.”

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

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

*Hey, kids! Special in this Vietnam Footlocker!*

(For a Limited Time Only)

1 Rocket Launcher

20 Surface-to-Air “Twister” Missiles

1 Scale-Model Thermonuclear Weapon

# TRUCKS

The guy's name was Snodgrass and I could see him getting ready to do something crazy. His eyes had gotten bigger, showing a lot of the whites, like a dog getting ready to fight. The two kids who had come skidding into the parking lot in the old Fury were trying to talk to him, but his head was cocked as though he was hearing other voices. He had a tight little pot-belly encased in a good suit that was getting a little shiny in the seat. He was a salesman and he kept his display bag close to him, like a pet dog that had gone to sleep.

“Try the radio again,” the truck driver at the counter said.

The short-order cook shrugged and turned it on. He flipped it across the band and got nothing but static.

“You went too fast,” the trucker protested. “You might have missed something.”

“Hell,” the short-order cook said. He was an elderly black man with a smile of gold and he wasn't looking at the trucker. He was looking through the diner-length picture window at the parking lot.

Seven or eight heavy trucks were out there, engines rumbling in low, idling roars that sounded like big cats purring. There were a couple of Macks, a Hemingway, and four or five Reos. Trailer trucks, interstate haulers with a lot of license plates and CB whip antennas on the back.

The kids' Fury was lying on its roof at the end of long, looping skid marks in the loose crushed rock of the parking lot. It had been battered into senseless junk. At the entrance to the truck stop's turnaround, there was a blasted Cadillac. Its owner stared out of the star-shattered windshield like a gutted fish. Horn-rimmed glasses hung from one ear.

Halfway across the lot from it lay the body of a girl in a pink dress. She had jumped from the Caddy when she saw it wasn't going to

make it. She had hit running but never had a chance. She was the worst, even though she was face down. There were flies around her in clouds.

Across the road an old Ford station wagon had been slammed through the guardrails. That had happened an hour ago. No one had been by since then. You couldn't see the turnpike from the window and the phone was out.

"You went too fast," the trucker was protesting. "You oughta—"

That was when Snodgrass bolted. He turned the table over getting up, smashing coffee cups and sending sugar in a wild spray. His eyes were wilder than ever, and his mouth hung loosely and he was blabbering: "We gotta get outta here we gotta getouttahere wegottagetouttahere—"

The kid shouted and his girl friend screamed.

I was on the stool closest to the door and I got a handful of his shirt, but he tore loose. He was cranked up all the way. He would have gone through a bank-vault door.

He slammed out the door and then he was sprinting across the gravel toward the drainage ditch on the left. Two of the trucks lunged after him, smokestacks blowing diesel exhaust dark brown against the sky, huge rear wheels machine-gunning gravel up in sprays.

He couldn't have been any more than five or six running steps from the edge of the flat parking lot when he turned back to look, fear scrawled on his face. His feet tangled each other and he faltered and almost fell down. He got his balance again, but it was too late.

One of the trucks gave way and the other charged down, huge front grill glittering savagely in the sun. Snodgrass screamed, the sound high and thin, nearly lost under the Reo's heavy diesel roar.

It didn't drag him under. As things turned out, it would have been better if it had. Instead it drove him up and out, the way a punter kicks a football. For a moment he was silhouetted against the hot afternoon sky like a crippled scarecrow, and then he was gone into the drainage ditch.

The big truck's brakes hissed like dragon's breath, its front wheels locked, digging grooves into the gravel skin of the lot, and it stopped inches from jackknifing in. The bastard.

The girl in the booth screamed. Both hands were clamped into her cheeks, dragging the flesh down, turning it into a witch's mask.

Glass broke. I turned my head and saw that the trucker had squeezed his glass hard enough to break it. I don't think he knew it yet. Milk and a few drops of blood fell onto the counter.

The black counterman was frozen by the radio, a dishcloth in hand, looking amazed. His teeth glittered. For a moment there was no sound but the buzzing Westclox and the rumbling of the Reo's engine as it returned to its fellows. Then the girl began to cry and it was all right—or at least better.

My own car was around the side, also battered to junk. It was a 1971 Camaro and I had still been paying on it, but I didn't suppose that mattered now.

There was no one in the trucks.

The sun glittered and flashed on empty cabs. The wheels turned themselves. You couldn't think about it too much. You'd go insane if you thought about it too much. Like Snodgrass.

Two hours passed. The sun began to go down. Outside, the trucks patrolled in slow circles and figure eights. Their parking lights and running lights had come on.

I walked the length of the counter twice to get the kinks out of my legs and then sat in a booth by the long front window. It was a standard truck stop, close to the major thruway, a complete service facility out back, gas and diesel fuel both. The truckers came here for coffee and pie.

“Mister?” The voice was hesitant.

I looked around. It was the two kids from the Fury. The boy looked about nineteen. He had long hair and a beard that was just starting to take hold. His girl looked younger.

“Yeah?”

“What happened to you?”

I shrugged. “I was coming up the interstate to Pelson,” I said. “A truck came up behind me—I could see it in the mirror a long way off—really highballing. You could hear it a mile down the road. It whipped out around a VW Beetle and just snapped it off the road with the whiplash of the trailer, the way you'd snap a ball of paper off

a table with your finger. I thought the truck would go, too. No driver could have held it with the trailer whipping that way. But it didn't go. The VW flopped over six or seven times and exploded. And the truck got the next one coming up the same way. It was coming up on me and I took the exit ramp in a hurry." I laughed but my heart wasn't in it. "Right into a truck stop, of all places. From the frying pan into the fire."

The girl swallowed. "We saw a Greyhound going north in the southbound lane. It was . . . plowing . . . through cars. It exploded and burned but before it did . . . slaughter."

A Greyhound bus. That was something new. And bad.

Outside, all the headlights suddenly popped on in unison, bathing the lot in an eerie, depthless glare. Growling, they cruised back and forth. The headlights seemed to give them eyes, and in the growing gloom, the dark trailer boxes looked like the hunched, squared-off shoulders of prehistoric giants.

The counterman said, "Is it safe to turn on the lights?"

"Do it," I said, "and find out."

He flipped the switches and a series of flyspecked globes overhead came on. At the same time a neon sign out front stuttered into life: "Conant's Truck Stop & Diner—Good Eats." Nothing happened. The trucks continued their patrol.

"I can't understand it," the trucker said. He had gotten down from his stool and was walking around, his hand wrapped in a red engineer's bandanna. "I ain't had no problems with my rig. She's a good old girl. I pulled in here a little past one for a spaghetti dinner and this happens." He waved his arms and the bandanna flapped. "My own rig's out there right now, the one with the weak left taillight. Been driving her for six years. But if I stepped out that door—"

"It's just starting," the counterman said. His eyes were hooded and obsidian. "It must be bad if that radio's gone. It's just starting."

The girl had drained as pale as milk. "Never mind that," I said to the counterman. "Not yet."

"What would do it?" The trucker was worrying. "Electrical storms in the atmosphere? Nuclear testing? What?"

"Maybe they're mad," I said.

Around seven o'clock I walked over to the counterman. "How are we fixed here? I mean, if we have to stay awhile?"

His brow wrinkled. "Not so bad. Yest'y was delivery day. We got two-three hunnert hamburg patties, canned fruit and vegetables, dry cereal, aigs . . . no more milk than what's in the cooler, but the water's from the well. If we had to, the five of us cud get on for a month or more."

The trucker came over and blinked at us. "I'm dead out of cigarettes. Now that cigarette machine . . ."

"It ain't my machine," the counterman said. "No sir."

The trucker had a steel pinch bar he'd gotten in the supply room out back. He went to work on the machine.

The kid went down to where the jukebox glittered and flashed and plugged in a quarter. John Fogarty began to sing about being born on the bayou.

I sat down and looked out the window. I saw something I didn't like right away. A Chevy light pickup had joined the patrol, like a Shetland pony amid Percherons. I watched it until it rolled impartially over the body of the girl from the Caddy and then I looked away.

"We *made* them!" the girl cried out with sudden wretchedness. "They *can't!*"

Her boy friend told her to hush. The trucker got the cigarette machine open and helped himself to six or eight packs of Viceroy's. He put them in different pockets and then ripped one pack open. From the intent expression on his face, I wasn't sure if he was going to smoke them or eat them up.

Another record came on the juke. It was eight o'clock.

At eight-thirty the power went off.

When the lights went, the girl screamed, a cry that stopped suddenly, as if her boy friend had put his hand over her mouth. The jukebox died with a deepening, unwinding sound.

"What the *Christ!*" the trucker said.

"Counterman!" I called. "You got any candles?"

"I think so. Wait . . . yeah. Here's a few."

I got up and took them. We lit them and started placing them around. "Be careful," I said. "If we burn the place down there's the devil to pay."

He chuckled morosely. "You know it."

When we were done placing the candles, the kid and his girl were huddled together and the trucker was by the back door, watching six more heavy trucks weaving in and out between the concrete fuel islands. "This changes things, doesn't it?" I said.

"Damn right, if the power's gone for good."

"How bad?"

"Hamburg'll go over in three days. Rest of the meat and aigs'll go by about as quick. The cans will be okay, an' the dry stuff. But that ain't the worst. We ain't gonna have no water without the pump."

"How long?"

"Without no water? A week."

"Fill every empty jug you've got. Fill them till you can't draw anything but air. Where are the toilets? There's good water in the tanks."

"Employees' res'room is in the back. But you have to go outside to get to the lady's and gent's."

"Across to the service building?" I wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

"No. Out the side door an' up a ways."

"Give me a couple of buckets."

He found two galvanized pails. The kid strolled up.

"What are you doing?"

"We have to have water. All we can get."

"Give me a bucket then."

I handed him one.

"Jerry!" the girl cried. "You—"

He looked at her and she didn't say anything else, but she picked up a napkin and began to tear at the corners. The trucker was smoking another cigarette and grinning at the floor. He didn't speak up.

We walked over to the side door where I'd come in that afternoon and stood there for a second, watching the shadows wax and wane as the trucks went back and forth.

“Now?” the kid said. His arm brushed mine and the muscles were jumping and humming like wires. If anyone bumped him he'd go straight up to heaven.

“Relax,” I said.

He smiled a little. It was a sick smile, but better than none.

“Okay.”

We slipped out.

The night air had cooled. Crickets chirred in the grass, and frogs thumped and croaked in the drainage ditch. Out here the rumble of the trucks was louder, more menacing, the sound of beasts. From inside it was a movie. Out here it was real, you could get killed.

We slid along the tiled outer wall. A slight overhang gave us some shadow. My Camaro was huddled against the cyclone fence across from us, and faint light from the roadside sign glinted on broken metal and puddles of gas and oil.

“You take the lady's,” I whispered. “Fill your bucket from the toilet tank and wait.”

Steady diesel rumblings. It was tricky; you thought they were coming, but it was only echoes bouncing off the building's odd corners. It was only twenty feet, but it seemed much farther.

He opened the lady's-room door and went in. I went past and then I was inside the gent's. I could feel my muscles loosen and a breath whistled out of me. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, strained white face with dark eyes.

I got the porcelain tank cover off and dunked the bucket full. I poured a little back to keep from sloshing and went to the door. “Hey?”

“Yeah,” he breathed.

“You ready?”

“Yeah.”

We went out again. We got maybe six steps before lights blared in our faces. It had crept up, big wheels barely turning on the gravel. It had been lying in wait and now it leaped at us, electric headlamps glowing in savage circles, the huge chrome grill seeming to snarl.

The kid froze, his face stamped with horror, his eyes blank, the pupils dilated down to pinpricks. I gave him a hard shove, spilling

half his water.

“Go!”

The thunder of that diesel engine rose to a shriek. I reached over the kid's shoulder to yank the door open, but before I could it was shoved from inside. The kid lunged in and I dodged after him. I looked back to see the truck—a big cab-over Peterbilt—kiss off the tiled outside wall, peeling away jagged hunks of tile. There was an ear-grinding squealing noise, like gigantic fingers scraping a blackboard. Then the right mudguard and the corners of the grill smashed into the still-open door, sending glass in a crystal spray and snapping the door's steel-gauge hinges like tissue paper. The door flew into the night like something out of a Dali painting and the truck accelerated toward the front parking lot, its exhaust racketing like machine-gun fire. It had a disappointed, angry sound.

The kid put his bucket down and collapsed into the girl's arms, shuddering.

My heart was thudding heavily in my chest and my calves felt like water. And speaking of water, we had brought back about a bucket and a quarter between us. It hardly seemed worth it.

“I want to block up that doorway,” I said to the counterman. “What will do the trick?”

“Well—”

The trucker broke in: “Why? One of those big trucks couldn't get a wheel in through there.”

“It's not the big trucks I'm worried about.”

The trucker began hunting for a smoke.

“We got some sheet sidin' out in the supply room,” the counterman said. “Boss was gonna put up a shed to store butane gas.”

“We'll put them across and prop them with a couple of booths.”

“It'll help,” the trucker said.

It took about an hour and by the end we'd all gotten into the act, even the girl. It was fairly solid. Of course, fairly solid wasn't going to be good enough, not if something hit it at full speed. I think they all knew that.

There were still three booths ranged along the big glass picture window and I sat down in one of them. The clock behind the counter

had stopped at 8:32, but it felt like ten. Outside the trucks prowled and growled. Some left, hurrying off to unknown missions, and others came. There were three pickup trucks now, circling importantly amid their bigger brothers.

I was starting to doze, and instead of counting sheep I counted trucks. How many in the state, how many in America? Trailer trucks, pickup trucks, flatbeds, day-haulers, three-quarter-tons, army convoy trucks by the tens of thousands, and buses. Nightmare vision of a city bus, two wheels in the gutter and two wheels on the pavement roaring along and plowing through screaming pedestrians like ninepins.

I shook it off and fell into a light, troubled sleep.

It must have been early morning when Snodgrass began to scream. A thin new moon had risen and was shining icily through a high scud of cloud. A new clattering note had been added, counterpointing the throaty, idling roar of the big rigs. I looked for it and saw a hay baler circling out by the darkened sign. The moonlight glanced off the sharp, turning spokes of its packer.

The scream came again, unmistakably from the drainage ditch: "Help . . . *meeeeee* . . ."

"What was that?" It was the girl. In the shadows her eyes were wide and she looked horribly frightened.

"Nothing," I said.

"Help . . . *meeeeee* . . ."

"He's alive," she whispered. "Oh, God. *Alive.*"

I didn't have to see him. I could imagine it all too well. Snodgrass lying half in and half out of the drainage ditch, back and legs broken, carefully-pressed suit caked with mud, white, gasping face turned up to the indifferent moon . . .

"I don't hear anything," I said. "Do you?"

She looked at me. "How can you? How?"

"Now if you woke him up," I said, jerking a thumb at the kid, "*he* might hear something. He might go out there. Would you like that?"

Her face began to twitch and pull as if stitched by invisible needles. “Nothing,” she whispered. “Nothing out there.”

She went back to her boy friend and pressed her head against his chest. His arms came up around her in his sleep.

No one else woke up. Snodgrass cried and wept and screamed for a long time, and then he stopped.

Dawn.

Another truck had arrived, this one a flatbed with a giant rack for hauling cars. It was joined by a bulldozer. That scared me.

The trucker came over and twitched my arm. “Come on back,” he whispered excitedly. The others were still sleeping. “Come look at this.”

I followed him back to the supply room. About ten trucks were patrolling out there. At first I didn't see anything new.

“See?” he said, and pointed. “Right there.”

Then I saw. One of the pickups was stopped dead. It was sitting there like a lump, all of the menace gone out of it.

“Out of gas?”

“That's right, buddy. *And they can't pump their own.* We got it knocked. All we have to do is wait.” He smiled and fumbled for a cigarette.

It was about nine o'clock and I was eating a piece of yesterday's pie for breakfast when the air horn began—long, rolling blasts that rattled your skull. We went over to the windows and looked out. The trucks were sitting still, idling. One trailer truck, a huge Reo with a red cab, had pulled up almost to the narrow verge of grass between the restaurant and the parking lot. At this distance the square grill was huge and murderous. The tires would stand to a man's chest cavity.

The horn began to blare again; hard, hungry blasts that traveled off in straight, flat lines and echoed back. There was a pattern. Shorts and longs in some kind of rhythm.

“That's Morse!” the kid, Jerry, suddenly exclaimed.

The trucker looked at him. “How would you know?”

The kid went a little red. "I learned it in the Boy Scouts."

"You?" the trucker said. "*You?* Wow." He shook his head.

"Never mind," I said. "Do you remember enough to—"

"Sure. Let me listen. Got a pencil?"

The counterman gave him one, and the kid began to write letters on a napkin. After a while he stopped. "It's just saying 'Attention' over and over again. Wait."

We waited. The air horn beat its longs and shorts into the still morning air. Then the pattern changed and the kid started to write again. We hung over his shoulders and watched the message form. "Someone must pump fuel. Someone will not be harmed. All fuel must be pumped. This shall be done now. Now someone will pump fuel."

The air blasts kept up, but the kid stopped writing. "It's just repeating 'Attention' again," he said.

The truck repeated its message again and again. I didn't like the look of the words, printed on the napkin in block style. They looked machinelike, ruthless. There would be no compromise with those words. You did or you didn't.

"Well," the kid said, "what do we do?"

"Nothing," the trucker said. His face was excited and working. "All we have to do is wait. They must all be low on fuel. One of the little ones out back has already stopped. All we have to do—"

The air horn stopped. The truck backed up and joined its fellows. They waited in a semicircle, headlights pointed in toward us.

"There's a bulldozer out there," I said.

Jerry looked at me. "You think they'll rip the place down?"

"Yes."

He looked at the counterman. "They couldn't do that, could they?"

The counterman shrugged.

"We oughta vote," the trucker said. "No blackmail, damn it. All we gotta do is wait." He had repeated it three times now, like a charm.

"Okay," I said. "Vote."

"Wait," the trucker said immediately.

"I think we ought to fuel them," I said. "We can wait for a better chance to get away. Counterman?"

“Stay in here,” he said. “You want to be their slaves? That's what it'll come to. You want to spend the rest of your life changin' oil filters every time one of those . . . *things* blats its horn? Not me.” He looked darkly out the window. “Let them starve.”

I looked at the kid and the girl.

“I think he's right,” he said. “That's the only way to stop them. If someone was going to rescue us, they would have. God knows what's going on in other places.” And the girl, with Snodgrass in her eyes, nodded and stepped closer to him.

“That's it then,” I said.

I went over to the cigarette machine and got a pack without looking at the brand. I'd stopped smoking a year ago, but this seemed like a good time to start again. The smoke rasped harsh in my lungs.

Twenty minutes crawled by. The trucks out front waited. In back, they were lining up at the pumps.

“I think it was all a bluff,” the trucker said. “Just—”

Then there was a louder, harsher, choppiest note, the sound of an engine revving up and falling off, then revving up again. The bulldozer.

It glittered like a yellowjacket in the sun, a Caterpillar with clattering steel treads. Black smoke belched from its short stack as it wheeled around to face us.

“It's going to charge,” the trucker said. There was a look of utter surprise on his face. “It's going to charge!”

“Get back,” I said. “Behind the counter.”

The bulldozer was still revving. Gear-shift levers moved themselves. Heat shimmer hung over its smoking stack. Suddenly the dozer blade lifted, a heavy steel curve clotted with dried dirt. Then, with a screaming howl of power, it roared straight at us.

“The *counter!*” I gave the trucker a shove, and that started them.

There was a small concrete verge between the parking lot and the grass. The dozer charged over it, blade lifting for a moment, and then it rammed the front wall head on. Glass exploded inward with a heavy, coughing roar and the wood frame crashed into splinters. One of the overhead light globes fell, splashing more glass. Crockery

fell from the shelves. The girl was screaming but the sound was almost lost beneath the steady, pounding roar of the Cat's engine.

It reversed, clanked across the chewed strip of lawn, and lunged forward again, sending the remaining booths crashing and spinning. The pie case fell off the counter, sending pie wedges skidding across the floor.

The counterman was crouching with his eyes shut, and the kid was holding his girl. The trucker was walleed with fear.

"We gotta stop it," he gibbered. "Tell 'em we'll do it, we'll do anything—"

"A little late, isn't it?"

The Cat reversed and got ready for another charge. New nicks in its blade glittered and heliographed in the sun. It lurched forward with a bellowing roar and this time it took down the main support to the left of what had been the window. That section of the roof fell in with a grinding crash. Plaster dust billowed up.

The dozer pulled free. Beyond it I could see the group of trucks, waiting.

I grabbed the counterman. "Where are the oil drums?" The cookstoves ran on butane gas, but I had seen vents for a warm-air furnace.

"Back of the storage room," he said.

I grabbed the kid. "Come on."

We got up and ran into the storage room. The bulldozer hit again and the building trembled. Two or three more hits and it would be able to come right up to the counter for a cup of coffee.

There were two large fifty-gallon drums with feeds to the furnace and turn spigots. There was a carton of empty ketchup bottles near the back door. "Get those, Jerry."

While he did, I pulled off my shirt and yanked it to rags. The dozer hit again and again, and each hit was accompanied by the sound of more breakage.

I filled four of the ketchup bottles from the spigots, and he stuffed rags into them. "You play football?" I asked him.

"In high school."

"Okay. Pretend you're going in from the five."

We went out into the restaurant. The whole front wall was open to the sky. Sprays of glass glittered like diamonds. One heavy beam had fallen diagonally across the opening. The dozer was backing up to take it out and I thought that this time it would keep coming, ripping through the stools and then demolishing the counter itself.

We knelt down and thrust the bottles out. "Light them up," I said to the trucker.

He got his matches out, but his hands were shaking too badly and he dropped them. The counterman picked them up, struck one, and the hunks of shirt blazed greasily alight.

"Quick," I said.

We ran, the kid a little in the lead. Glass crunched and gritted underfoot. There was a hot, oily smell in the air. Everything was very loud, very bright.

The dozer charged.

The kid dodged out under the beam and stood silhouetted in front of that heavy tempered steel blade. I went out to the right. The kid's first throw fell short. His second hit the blade and the flame splashed harmlessly.

He tried to turn and then it was on him, a rolling juggernaut, four tons of steel. His hands flew up and then he was gone, chewed under.

I buttonhooked around and lobbed one bottle into the open cab and the second right into the works. They exploded together in a leaping shout of flame.

For a moment the dozer's engine rose in an almost human squeal of rage and pain. It wheeled in a maddened half-circle, ripping out the left corner of the diner, and rolled drunkenly toward the drainage ditch.

The steel treads were streaked and dotted with gore and where the kid had been there was something that looked like a crumpled towel.

The dozer got almost to the ditch, flames boiling from under its cowling and from the cockpit, and then it exploded in a geyser.

I stumbled backward and almost fell over a pile of rubble. There was a hot smell that wasn't just oil. It was burning hair. I was on fire.

I grabbed a tablecloth, jammed it on my head, ran behind the counter, and plunged my head into the sink hard enough to crack it on the bottom. The girl was screaming Jerry's name over and over in a shrieking insane litany.

I turned around and saw the huge car-carrier slowly rolling toward the defenseless front of the diner.

The trucker screamed and broke for the side door.

“Don't!” the counterman cried. “Don't do that—”

But he was out and sprinting for the drainage ditch and the open field beyond.

The truck must have been standing sentry just out of sight of that side door—a small panel job with “Wong's Cash-and-Carry Laundry” written on the side. It ran him down almost before you could see it happen. Then it was gone and only the trucker was left, twisted into the gravel. He had been knocked out of his shoes.

The car-carrier rolled slowly over the concrete verge, onto the grass, over the kid's remains, and stopped with its huge snout poking into the diner.

Its air horn let out a sudden, shattering honk, followed by another, and another.

“Stop!” the girl whimpered. “Stop, oh stop, please—”

But the honks went on a long time. It took only a minute to pick up the pattern. It was the same as before. It wanted someone to feed it and the others.

“I'll go,” I said. “Are the pumps unlocked?”

The counterman nodded. He had aged fifty years.

“No!” the girl screamed. She threw herself at me. “You've got to stop them! Beat them, burn them, break them—” Her voice wavered and broke into a harsh bray of grief and loss.

The counterman held her. I went around the corner of the counter, picking my way through the rubble, and out through the supply room. My heart was thudding heavily when I stepped out into the warm sun. I wanted another cigarette, but you don't smoke around fuel islands.

The trucks were still lined up. The laundry truck was crouched across the gravel from me like a hound dog, growling and rasping. A

funny move and it would cream me. The sun glittered on its blank windshield and I shuddered. It was like looking into the face of an idiot.

I switched the pump to “on” and pulled out the nozzle; unscrewed the first gas cap and began to pump fuel.

It took me half an hour to pump the first tank dry and then I moved on to the second island. I was alternating between gas and diesel. Trucks marched by endlessly. I was beginning to understand now. I was beginning to see. People were doing this all over the country or they were lying dead like the trucker, knocked out of their boots with heavy treadmarks mashed across their guts.

The second tank was dry then and I went to the third. The sun was like a hammer and my head was starting to ache with the fumes. There were blisters in the soft webbing between thumb and index finger. But they wouldn't know about that. They would know about leaky manifolds and bad gaskets and frozen universal joints, but not about blisters or sunstroke or the need to scream. They needed to know only one thing about their late masters, and they knew it. We bleed.

The last tank was sucked dry and I threw the nozzle on the ground. Still there were more trucks, lined up around the corner. I twisted my head to relieve a crick in my neck and stared. The line went out of the front parking lot and up the road and out of sight, two and three lanes deep. It was like a nightmare of the Los Angeles Freeway at rush hour. The horizon shimmered and danced with their exhaust; the air stank of carburization.

“No,” I said. “Out of gas. All gone, fellas.”

And there was a heavier rumble, a bass note that shook the teeth. A huge silvery truck was pulling up, a tanker. Written on the side was: “Fill Up with Phillips 66—The Jetport Fuel”!

A heavy hose dropped out of the rear.

I went over, took it, flipped up the feeder plate on the first tank, and attached the hose. The truck began to pump. The stench of petroleum sank into me—the same stink that the dinosaurs must have died smelling as they went down into the tar pits. I filled the other two tanks and then went back to work.

Consciousness twinkled away to a point where I lost track of time and trucks. I unscrewed, rammed the nozzle into the hole, pumped until the hot, heavy liquid splurged out, then replaced the cap. My blisters broke, trickling pus down to my wrists. My head was pounding like a rotted tooth and my stomach rolled helplessly with the stench of hydrocarbons.

I was going to faint. I was going to faint and that would be the end of it. I would pump until I dropped.

Then there were hands on my shoulders, the dark hands of the counterman. "Go in," he said. "Rest yourself. I'll take over till dark. Try to sleep."

I handed him the pump.

But I can't sleep.

The girl is sleeping. She's sprawled over in the corner with her head on a tablecloth and her face won't unknot itself even in sleep. It's the timeless, ageless face of the warhag. I'm going to get her up pretty quick. It's twilight and the counterman has been out there for five hours.

Still they keep coming. I look out through the wrecked window and their headlights stretch for a mile or better, twinkling like yellow sapphires in the growing darkness. They must be backed up all the way to the turnpike, maybe further.

The girl will have to take her turn. I can show her how. She'll say she can't, but she will. She wants to live.

*You want to be their slaves?* the counterman had said. *That's what it'll come to. You want to spend the rest of your life changin' oil filters every time one of those things blats its horn?*

We could run, maybe. It would be easy to make the drainage ditch now, the way they're stacked up. Run through the fields, through the marshy places where trucks would bog down like mastodons and go

—

—*back to the caves.*

Drawing pictures in charcoal. This is the moon god. This is a tree. This is a Mack semi overwhelming a hunter.

Not even that. So much of the world is paved now. Even the playgrounds are paved. And for the fields and marshes and deep woods there are tanks, half-tracks, flatbeds equipped with lasers, masers, heat-seeking radar. And little by little, they can make it into the world they want.

I can see great convoys of trucks filling the Okefenokee Swamp with sand, the bulldozers ripping through the national parks and wildlands, grading the earth flat, stamping it into one great flat plain. And then the hot-top trucks arriving.

But they're machines. No matter what's happened to them, what mass consciousness we've given them, *they can't reproduce*. In fifty or sixty years they'll be rusting hulks with all menace gone out of them, moveless carcasses for free men to stone and spit at.

And if I close my eyes I can see the production lines in Detroit and Dearborn and Youngstown and Mackinac, new trucks being put together by blue-collar workers who no longer even punch a clock but only drop and are replaced.

The counterman is staggering a little now. He's an old bastard, too. I've got to wake the girl.

Two planes are leaving silver contrails etched across the darkening eastern horizon.

I wish I could believe there are people in them.

# SOMETIMES THEY COME BACK

Jim Norman's wife had been waiting for him since two, and when she saw the car pull up in front of their apartment building, she came out to meet him. She had gone to the store and bought a celebration meal—a couple of steaks, a bottle of Lancer's, a head of lettuce, and Thousand Island dressing. Now, watching him get out of the car, she found herself hoping with some desperation (and not for the first time that day) that there was going to be something to celebrate.

He came up the walk, holding his new briefcase in one hand and four texts in the other. She could see the title of the top one—*Introduction to Grammar*. She put her hands on his shoulder and asked, “How did it go?”

And he smiled.

But that night, he had the old dream for the first time in a very long time and woke up sweating, with a scream behind his lips.

His interview had been conducted by the principal of Harold Davis High School and the head of the English Department. The subject of his breakdown had come up. He had expected it would.

The principal, a bald and cadaverous man named Fenton, had leaned back and looked at the ceiling. Simmons, the English head, lit his pipe.

“I was under a great deal of pressure at the time,” Jim Norman said. His fingers wanted to twist about in his lap, but he wouldn't let them.

“I think we understand that,” Fenton said, smiling. “And while we have no desire to pry, I'm sure we'd all agree that teaching is a

pressure occupation, especially at the high-school level. You're onstage five periods out of seven, and you're playing to the toughest audience in the world. That's why," he finished with some pride, "teachers have more ulcers than any other professional group, with the exception of air-traffic controllers."

Jim said, "The pressures involved in my breakdown were . . . extreme."

Fenton and Simmons nodded noncommittal encouragement, and Simmons clicked his lighter open to rekindle his pipe. Suddenly the office seemed very tight, very close. Jim had the queer sensation that someone had just turned on a heat lamp over the back of his neck. His fingers were twisting in his lap, and he made them stop.

"I was in my senior year and practice teaching. My mother had died the summer before—cancer—and in my last conversation with her, she asked me to go right on and finish. My brother, my older brother, died when we were both quite young. He had been planning to teach and she thought . . ."

He could see from their eyes that he was wandering and thought: *God, I'm making a botch of this.*

"I did as she asked," he said, leaving the tangled relationship of his mother and his brother Wayne—poor, murdered Wayne—and himself behind. "During the second week of my intern teaching, my fiancée was involved in a hit-and-run accident. She was the hit part of it. Some kid in a hot rod . . . they never caught him."

Simmons made a soft noise of encouragement.

"I went on. There didn't seem to be any other course. She was in a great deal of pain—a badly broken leg and four fractured ribs—but no danger. I don't think I really knew the pressure I was under."

*Careful now. This is where the ground slopes away.*

"I interned at Center Street Vocational Trades High," Jim said.

"Garden spot of the city," Fenton said. "Switchblades, motor-cycle boots, zip guns in the lockers, lunch-money protection rackets, and every third kid selling dope to the other two. I know about Trades."

"There was a kid named Mack Zimmerman," Jim said. "Sensitive boy. Played the guitar. I had him in a composition class, and he had talent. I came in one morning and two boys were holding him while a

third smashed his Yamaha guitar against the radiator. Zimmerman was screaming. I yelled for them to stop and give me the guitar. I started for them and someone slugged me.” Jim shrugged. “That was it. I had a breakdown. No screaming meemies or crouching in the corner. I just couldn't go back. When I got near Trades, my chest would tighten up. I couldn't breathe right, I got cold sweat—”

“That happens to me, too,” Fenton said amiably.

“I went into analysis. A community therapy deal. I couldn't afford a psychiatrist. It did me good. Sally and I are married. She has a slight limp and a scar, but otherwise, good as new.” He looked at them squarely. “I guess you could say the same for me.”

Fenton said, “You actually finished your practice teaching requirement at Cortez High School, I believe.”

“That's no bed of roses, either,” Simmons said.

“I wanted a hard school,” Jim said. “I swapped with another guy to get Cortez.”

“A's from your supervisor and critic teacher,” Fenton commented.

“Yes.”

“And a four-year average of 3.88. Damn close to straight A's.”

“I enjoyed my college work.”

Fenton and Simmons glanced at each other, then stood up. Jim got up.

“We'll be in touch, Mr. Norman,” Fenton said. “We do have a few more applicants to interview—”

“Yes, of course.”

“—but speaking for myself, I'm impressed by your academic records and personal candor.”

“It's nice of you to say so.”

“Sim, perhaps Mr. Norman would like a coffee before he goes.”

They shook hands.

In the hall, Simmons said, “I think you've got the job if you want it. That's off the record, of course.”

Jim nodded. He had left a lot off the record himself.

Davis High was a forbidding rockpile that housed a remarkably modern plant—the science wing alone had been funded at 1.5 million in last year's budget. The classrooms, which still held the ghosts of the WPA workers who had built them and the postwar kids who had first used them, were furnished with modern desks and soft-glare blackboards. The students were clean, well dressed, vivacious, affluent. Six out of ten seniors owned their own cars. All in all, a good school. A fine school to teach in during the Sickie Seventies. It made Center Street Vocational Trades look like darkest Africa.

But after the kids were gone, something old and brooding seemed to settle over the halls and whisper in the empty rooms. Some black, noxious beast, never quite in view. Sometimes, as he walked down the Wing 4 corridor toward the parking lot with his new briefcase in one hand, Jim Norman thought he could almost hear it breathing.

He had the dream again near the end of October, and that time he did scream. He clawed his way into waking reality to find Sally sitting up in bed beside him, holding his shoulder. His heart was thudding heavily.

“God” he said, and scrubbed a hand across his face.

“Are you all right?”

“Sure. I yelled, didn't I?”

“Boy, did you. Nightmare?”

“Yes.”

“Something from when those boys broke that fellow's guitar?”

“No,” he said. “Much older than that. Sometimes it comes back, that's all. No sweat.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want a glass of milk?” Her eyes were dark with concern.

He kissed her shoulder. “No. Go to sleep.”

She turned off the light and he lay there, looking into the darkness.

He had a good schedule for the new teacher on the staff. Period one was free. Two and three were freshman comp, one group dull, one

kind of fun. Period four was his best class: American Lit with college-bound seniors who got a kick out of bashing the ole masters around for a period each day. Period five was a “consultation period,” when he was supposed to see students with personal or academic problems. There were very few who seemed to have either (or who wanted to discuss them with him), and he spent most of those periods with a good novel. Period six was a grammar course, dry as chalkdust.

Period seven was his only cross. The class was called Living with Literature, and it was held in a small box of a classroom on the third floor. The room was hot in the early fall and cold as the winter approached. The class itself was an elective for what school catalogues coyly call “the slow learner.”

There were twenty-seven “slow learners” in Jim's class, most of them school jocks. The kindest thing you could accuse them of would be disinterest, and some of them had a streak of outright malevolence. He walked in one day to find an obscene and cruelly accurate caricature of himself on the board, with “Mr. Norman” unnecessarily chalked under it. He wiped it off without comment and proceeded with the lesson in spite of the snickers.

He worked up interesting lesson plans, included a/v materials, and ordered several high-interest, high-comprehension texts—all to no avail. The classroom mood veered between unruly hilarity and sullen silence. Early in November, a fight broke out between two boys during a discussion of *Of Mice and Men*. Jim broke it up and sent both boys to the office. When he opened his book to where he had left off, the words “Bite It” glared up at him.

He took the problem to Simmons, who shrugged and lit his pipe. “I don't have any real solution, Jim. Last period is always a bitch. And for some of them, a D grade in your class means no more football or basketball. And they've had the other gut English courses, so they're stuck with it.”

“And me, too,” Jim said glumly.

Simmons nodded. “Show them you mean business, and they'll buckle down, if only to keep their sports eligibility.”

But period seven remained a constant thorn in his side.

One of the biggest problems in Living with Lit was a huge, slow-moving moose named Chip Osway. In early December, during the brief hiatus between football and basketball (Osway played both), Jim caught him with a crib sheet and ran him out of the classroom.

“If you flunk me, we'll get you, you son of a bitch!” Osway yelled down the dim third-floor corridor. “You hear me?”

“Go on,” Jim said. “Don't waste your breath.”

“We'll get you, creepo!”

Jim went back into the classroom. They looked up at him blandly, faces betraying nothing. He felt a surge of unreality, like the feeling that had washed over him before . . . before . . .

*We'll get you, creepo.*

He took his grade book out of his desk, opened it to the page titled “Living with Literature,” and carefully lettered an F in the exam slot next to Chip Osway's name.

That night he had the dream again.

The dream was always cruelly slow. There was time to see and feel everything. And there was the added horror of reliving events that were moving toward a known conclusion, as helpless as a man strapped into a car going over a cliff.

In the dream he was nine and his brother Wayne was twelve. They were going down Broad Street in Stratford, Connecticut, bound for the Stratford Library. Jim's books were two days overdue, and he had hooked four cents from the cupboard bowl to pay the fine. It was summer vacation. You could smell the freshly cut grass. You could hear a ballgame floating out of some second-floor apartment window, Yankees leading the Red Sox six to nothing in the top of the eighth, Ted Williams batting, and you could see the shadows from the Burrets Building Company slowly lengthening across the street as the evening turned slowly toward dark.

Beyond Teddy's Market and Burrets, there was a railroad overpass, and on the other side, a number of the local losers hung around a closed gas station—five or six boys in leather jackets and pegged jeans. Jim hated to go by them. They yelled out hey four-

eyes and hey shit-heels and hey you got an extra quarter and once they chased them half a block. But Wayne would not take the long way around. That would be chicken.

In the dream, the overpass loomed closer and closer, and you began to feel dread struggling in your throat like a big black bird. You saw everything: the Burrets neon sign, just starting to stutter on and off; the flakes of rust on the green overpass; the glitter of broken glass in the cinders of the railroad bed; a broken bike rim in the gutter.

You try to tell Wayne you've been through this before, a hundred times. The local losers aren't hanging around the gas station this time; they're hidden in the shadows under the trestle. But it won't come out. You're helpless.

Then you're underneath, and some of the shadows detach themselves from the walls and a tall kid with a blond crew cut and a broken nose pushes Wayne up against the sooty cinderblocks and says: *Give us some money.*

*Let me alone.*

You try to run, but a fat guy with greasy black hair grabs you and throws you against the wall next to your brother. His left eyelid is jittering up and down nervously and he says: *Come on, kid, how much you got?*

*F-four cents.*

*You fuckin' liar.*

Wayne tries to twist free and a guy with odd, orange-colored hair helps the blond one to hold him. The guy with the jittery eyelid suddenly bashes you one in the mouth. You feel a sudden heaviness in your groin, and a dark patch appears on your jeans.

*Look, Vinnie, he wet himself!*

Wayne's struggles become frenzied, and he almost—not quite — gets free. Another guy, wearing black chinos and a white T-shirt, throws him back. There is a small strawberry birthmark on his chin. The stone throat of the overpass is beginning to tremble. The metal girders pick up a thrumming vibration. Train coming.

Someone strikes the books out of your hands and the kid with the birthmark on his chin kicks them into the gutter. Wayne suddenly

kicks out with his right foot, and it connects with the crotch of the kid with the jittery face. He screams.

*Vinnie, he's gettin' away!*

The kid with the jittery face is screaming about his nuts, but even his howls are lost in the gathering, shaking roar of the approaching train. Then it is over them, and its noise fills the world.

Light flashes on switchblades. The kid with the blond crew cut is holding one and Birthmark has the other. You can't hear Wayne, but his words are in the shape of his lips:

*Run Jimmy run.*

You slip to your knees and the hands holding you are gone and you skitter between a pair of legs like a frog. A hand slaps down on your back, groping for purchase, and gets none. Then you are running back the way you came, with all of the horrible sludgy slowness of dreams. You look back over your shoulder and see—

He woke in the dark, Sally sleeping peacefully beside him. He bit back the scream, and when it was throttled, he fell back.

When he had looked back, back into the yawning darkness of the overpass, he had seen the blond kid and the birth-marked kid drive their knives into his brother—Blondie's below the breastbone, and Birthmark's directly into his brother's groin.

He lay in the darkness, breathing harshly, waiting for that nine-year-old ghost to depart, waiting for honest sleep to blot it all away.

An unknown time later, it did.

The Christmas vacation and semester break were combined in the city's school district, and the holiday was almost a month long. The dream came twice, early on, and did not come again. He and Sally went to visit her sister in Vermont, and skied a great deal. They were happy.

Jim's Living with Lit problem seemed inconsequential and a little foolish in the open, crystal air. He went back to school with a winter tan, feeling cool and collected.

Simmons caught him on the way to his period-two class and handed him a folder. "New student, period seven. Name is Robert Lawson. Transfer."

"Hey, I've got twenty-seven in there right now, Sim. I'm overloaded."

"You've still got twenty-seven. Bill Stearns got killed the Tuesday after Christmas. Car accident. Hit-and-run."

"*Billy?*"

The picture formed in his mind in black and white, like a senior photograph. William Stearns, Key Club 1, Football 1, 2, *Pen & Lance*, 2. He had been one of the few good ones in Living with Lit. Quiet, consistent A's and B's on his exams. Didn't volunteer often, but usually summoned the correct answers (laced with a pleasing dry wit) when called on. Dead? Fifteen years old. His own mortality suddenly whispered through his bones like a cold draft under a door.

"Christ, that's awful. Do they know what happened?"

"Cops are checking into it. He was downtown exchanging a Christmas present. Started across Rampart Street and an old Ford sedan hit him. No one got the license number, but the words 'Snake Eyes' were written on the side door . . . the way a kid would do it."

"Christ," Jim said again.

"There's the bell," Simmons said.

He hurried away, pausing to break up a crowd of kids around a drinking fountain. Jim went toward his class, feeling empty.

During his free period he flipped open Robert Lawson's folder. The first page was a green sheet from Milford High, which Jim had never heard of. The second was a student personality profile. Adjusted IQ of 78. Some manual skills, not many. Antisocial answers to the Barnett-Hudson personality test. Poor aptitude scores. Jim thought sourly that he was a Living with Lit kid all the way.

The next page was a disciplinary history, the yellow sheet. The Milford sheet was white with a black border, and it was depressingly well filled. Lawson had been in a hundred kinds of trouble.

He turned the next page, glanced down at a school photo of Robert Lawson, then looked again. Terror suddenly crept into the pit of his belly and coiled there, warm and hissing.

Lawson was staring antagonistically into the camera, as if posing for a police mug shot rather than a school photographer. There was a small strawberry birthmark on his chin.

By period seven, he had brought all the civilized rationalizations into play. He told himself there must be thousands of kids with red birthmarks on their chins. He told himself that the hood who had stabbed his brother that day sixteen long dead years ago would now be at least thirty-two.

But, climbing to the third floor, the apprehension remained. And another fear to go with it: *This is how you felt when you were cracking up*. He tasted the bright steel of panic in his mouth.

The usual group of kids was horsing around the door of Room 33, and some of them went in when they saw Jim coming. A few hung around, talking in undertones and grinning. He saw the new boy standing beside Chip Osway. Robert Lawson was wearing blue jeans and heavy yellow tractor boots—all the rage this year.

“Chip, go on in.”

“That an order?” He smiled vacuously over Jim's head.

“Sure.”

“You flunk me on that test?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah, that's . . .” The rest was an under-the-breath mumble.

Jim turned to Robert Lawson. “You're new,” he said. “I just wanted to tell you how we run things around here.”

“Sure, Mr. Norman.” His right eyebrow was split with a small scar, a scar Jim knew. There could be no mistake. It was crazy, it was lunacy, but it was also a fact. Sixteen years ago, this kid had driven a knife into his brother.

Numbly, as if from a great distance, he heard himself beginning to outline the class rules and regulations. Robert Lawson hooked his thumbs into his garrison belt, listened, smiled, and began to nod, as if they were old friends.

“Jim?”

“Hmmm?”

“Is something wrong?”

“No.”

“Those Living with Lit boys still giving you a hard time?”

No answer.

“Jim?”

“No.”

“Why don't you go to bed early tonight?”

But he didn't.

The dream was very bad that night. When the kid with the strawberry birthmark stabbed his brother with his knife, he called after Jim: “You next, kid. Right through the bag.”

He woke up screaming.

He was teaching *Lord of the Flies* that week, and talking about symbolism when Lawson raised his hand.

“Robert?” he said evenly.

“Why do you keep starin’ at me?” Jim blinked and felt his mouth go dry.

“You see somethin’ green? Or is my fly unzipped?”

A nervous titter from the class.

Jim replied evenly: “I wasn't staring at you, Mr. Lawson. Can you tell us why Ralph and Jack disagreed over—”

“You were *starin’* at me.”

“Do you want to talk about it with Mr. Fenton?”

Lawson appeared to think it over. “Naw.”

“Good. Now can you tell us why Ralph and Jack—”

“I didn't read it. I think it's a dumb book.”

Jim smiled tightly. “Do you, now? You want to remember that while you're judging the book, the book is also judging you. Now can anyone else tell me why they disagreed over the existence of the beast?”

Kathy Slavin raised her hand timidly, and Lawson gave her a cynical once-over and said something to Chip Osway. The words leaving his lips looked like “nice tits.” Chip nodded.

“Kathy?”

“Isn't it because Jack wanted to hunt the beast?”

“Good.” He turned and began to write on the board. At the instant his back was turned, a grapefruit smashed against the board beside his head.

He jerked backward and wheeled around. Some class members laughed, but Osway and Lawson only looked at Jim innocently.

Jim stooped and picked up the grapefruit. “Someone,” he said, looking toward the back of the room, “ought to have this jammed down his goddamn throat.”

Kathy Slavin gasped.

He tossed the grapefruit in the wastebasket and turned back to the blackboard.

He opened the morning paper, sipping his coffee, and saw the headline about halfway down. “God!” he said, splitting his wife's easy flow of morning chatter. His belly felt suddenly filled with splinters—

“Teen-Age Girl Falls to Her Death: Katherine Slavin, a seventeen-year-old junior at Harold Davis High School, either fell or was pushed from the roof of her downtown apartment house early yesterday evening. The girl, who kept a pigeon coop on the roof, had gone up with a sack of feed, according to her mother.

“Police said an unidentified woman in a neighboring development had seen three young boys running across the roof at 6:45 P.M., just minutes after the girl's body (continued page 3—”

“Jim, was she one of yours?”

But he could only look at her mutely.

Two weeks later, Simmons met him in the hall after the lunch bell with a folder in his hand, and Jim felt a terrible sinking in his belly.

“New student,” he said flatly to Simmons. “Living with Lit.”

Sim's eyebrows went up. “How did you know that?”

Jim shrugged and held his hand out for the folder.

"Got to run," Simmons said. "Department heads are meeting on course evaluations. You look a little run-down. Feeling okay?"

*That's right, a little run-down. Like Billy Stearns.*

"Sure," he said.

"That's the stuff," Simmons said, and clapped him on the back.

When he was gone, Jim opened the folder to the picture, wincing in advance, like a man about to be hit.

But the face wasn't instantly familiar. Just a kid's face. Maybe he'd seen it before, maybe not. The kid, David Garcia, was a hulking, dark-haired boy with rather negroid lips and dark, slumbering eyes. The yellow sheet said he was also from Mil-ford High and that he had spent two years in Granville Reformatory. Car theft.

Jim closed the folder with hands that trembled slightly.

"Sally?"

She looked up from her ironing. He had been staring at a TV basketball game without really seeing it.

"Nothing," he said. "Forgot what I was going to say."

"Must have been a lie."

He smiled mechanically and looked at the TV again. It had been on the tip of his tongue to spill everything. But how could he? It was worse than crazy. Where would you start? The dream? The breakdown? The appearance of Robert Lawson?

*No. With Wayne—your brother.*

But he had never told anyone about that, not even in analysis. His thoughts turned to David Garcia, and the dreamy terror that had washed over him when they had looked at each other in the hall. Of course, he had only looked vaguely familiar in the picture. Pictures don't move . . . or twitch.

Garcia had been standing with Lawson and Chip Osway, and when he looked up and saw Jim Norman, he smiled and his eyelids began to jitter up and down and voices spoke in Jim's mind with unearthly clarity:

*Come on, kid, how much you got?*

*F-four cents.*

*You fuckin' liar . . . look, Vinnie, he wet himself!"*

"Jim? Did you say something?"

"No." But he wasn't sure if he had or not. He was getting very scared.

• • •

One day after school in early February there was a knock on the teachers'-room door, and when Jim opened it, Chip Osway stood there. He looked frightened. Jim was alone; it was ten after four and the last of the teachers had gone home an hour before. He was correcting a batch of American Lit themes.

"Chip?" he said evenly.

Chip shuffled his feet. "Can I talk to you for a minute, Mr. Norman?"

"Sure. But if it's about that test, you're wasting your—"

"It's not about that. Uh, can I smoke in here?"

"Go ahead."

He lit his cigarette with a hand that trembled slightly. He didn't speak for perhaps as long as a minute. It seemed that he couldn't. His lips twitched, his hands came together, and his eyes slitted, as if some inner self was struggling to find expression.

He suddenly burst out: "If they do it, I want you to know I wasn't in on it! I don't like those guys! They're creeps!"

"What guys, Chip?"

"Lawson and that Garcia creep."

"Are they planning to get me?" The old dreamy terror was on him, and he knew the answer.

"I liked them at first," Chip said. "We went out and had a few beers. I started bitchin' about you and that test. About how I was gonna get you. But that was just talk! I swear it!"

"What happened?"

"They took me right up on it. Asked what time you left school, what kind of car you drove, all that stuff. I said what have you got against

him and Garcia said they knew you a long time ago . . . hey, are you all right?"

"The cigarette," he said thickly. "Haven't ever gotten used to the smoke."

Chip ground it out. "I asked them when they knew you and Bob Lawson said I was still pissin' my didies then. But they're seventeen, the same as me."

"Then what?"

"Well, Garcia leans over the table and says you can't want to get him very bad if you don't even know when he leaves the fuckin' school. What was you gonna do? So I says I was gonna matchstick your tires and leave you with four flats." He looked at Jim with pleading eyes. "I wasn't even gonna do that. I said it because . . ."

"You were scared?" Jim asked quietly.

"Yeah, and I'm still scared."

"What did they think of your idea?"

Chip shuddered. "Bob Lawson says, is that what you was gonna do, you cheap prick? And I said, tryin' to be tough, what was you gonna do, off him? And Garcia—his eyelids start to go up and down—he takes something out of his pocket and clicked it open and it's a switchknife. That's when I took off."

"When was this, Chip?"

"Yesterday. I'm scared to sit with those guys now, Mr. Norman."

"Okay," Jim said. "Okay." He looked down at the papers he had been correcting without seeing them.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Jim said. "I really don't."

On Monday morning he still didn't know. His first thought had been to tell Sally everything, starting with his brother's murder sixteen years ago. But it was impossible. She would be sympathetic but frightened and unbelieving.

Simmons? Also impossible. Simmons would think he was mad. And maybe he was. A man in a group encounter session he had attended had said having a breakdown was like breaking a vase and

then gluing it back together. You could never trust yourself to handle that vase again with any surety. You couldn't put a flower in it because flowers need water and water might dissolve the glue.

*Am I crazy, then?*

If he was, Chip Osway was, too. That thought came to him as he was getting into his car, and a bolt of excitement went through him.

Of course! Lawson and Garcia had threatened him in Chip Osway's presence. That might not stand up in court, but it would get the two of them suspended if he could get Chip to repeat his story in Fenton's office. And he was almost sure he could get Chip to do that. Chip had his own reasons for wanting them far away.

He was driving into the parking lot when he thought about what had happened to Billy Stearns and Kathy Slavin.

During his free period, he went up to the office and leaned over the registration secretary's desk. She was doing the absence list.

"Chip Osway here today?" he asked casually.

"Chip . . . ?" She looked at him doubtfully.

"Charles Osway," Jim amended. "Chip's a nickname."

She leafed through a pile of slips, glanced at one, and pulled it out. "He's absent, Mr. Norman."

"Can you get me his phone number?"

She pushed her pencil into her hair and said, "Certainly." She dug it out of the O file and handed it to him. Jim dialed the number on an office phone.

The phone rang a dozen times and he was about to hang up when a rough, sleep-blurred voice said, "Yeah?"

"Mr. Osway?"

"Barry Osway's been dead six years. I'm Gary Denkinger."

"Are you Chip Osway's stepfather?"

"What'd he do?"

"Pardon?"

"He's run off. I want to know what he did."

"So far as I know, nothing. I just wanted to talk with him. Do you have any idea where he might be?"

"Naw, I work nights. I don't know none of his friends."

"Any idea at a—"

“Nope. He took the old suitcase and fifty bucks he saved up from stealin’ car parts or sellin’ dope or whatever these kids do for money. Gone to San Francisco to be a hippie for all I know.”

“If you hear from him, will you call me at school? Jim Norman, English wing.”

“Sure will.”

Jim put the phone down. The registration secretary looked up and offered a quick meaningless smile. Jim didn't smile back.

Two days later, the words “left school” appeared after Chip Osway's name on the morning attendance slip. Jim began to wait for Simmons to show up with a new folder. A week later he did.

He looked dully down at the picture. No question about this one. The crew cut had been replaced by long hair, but it was still blond. And the face was the same, Vincent Corey. Vinnie, to his friends and intimates. He stared up at Jim from the picture, an insolent grin on his lips.

When he approached his period-seven class, his heart was thudding gravely in his chest. Lawson and Garcia and Vinnie Corey were standing by the bulletin board outside the door—they all straightened when he came toward them.

Vinnie smiled his insolent smile, but his eyes were as cold and dead as ice floes. “You must be Mr. Norman. Hi, Norm.”

Lawson and Garcia tittered.

“I'm Mr. Norman,” Jim said, ignoring the hand that Vinnie had put out. “You'll remember that?”

“Sure, I'll remember it. How's your brother?”

Jim froze. He felt his bladder loosen, and as if from far away, from down a long corridor somewhere in his cranium, he heard a ghostly voice: *Look, Vinnie, he wet himself!*

“What do you know about my brother?” he asked thickly.

“Nothin’,” Vinnie said. “Nothin’ much.” They smiled at him with their empty dangerous smiles.

The bell rang and they sauntered inside.

Drugstore phone booth, ten o'clock that night.

"Operator, I want to call the police station in Stratford, Connecticut. No, I don't know the number."

Clickings on the line. Conferences.

The policeman had been Mr. Nell. In those days he had been white-haired, perhaps in his mid-fifties. Hard to tell when you were just a kid. Their father was dead, and somehow Mr. Nell had known that.

*Call me Mr. Nell, boys.*

Jim and his brother met at lunchtime every day and they went into the Stratford Diner to eat their bag lunches. Mom gave them each a nickel to buy milk—that was before school milk programs started. And sometimes Mr. Nell would come in, his leather belt creaking with the weight of his belly and his .38 revolver, and buy them each a pie a la mode.

*Where were you when they stabbed my brother, Mr. Nell?*

A connection was made. The phone rang once.

"Stratford Police."

"Hello. My name is James Norman, Officer. I'm calling long-distance." He named the city. "I want to know if you can give me a line on a man who would have been on the force around 1957."

"Hold the line a moment, Mr. Norman."

A pause, then a new voice.

"I'm Sergeant Morton Livingston, Mr. Norman. Who are you trying to locate?"

"Well," Jim said, "us kids just called him Mr. Nell. Does that—"

"Hell, yes! Don Nell's retired now. He's seventy-three or -four."

"Does he still live in Stratford?"

"Yes, over on Barnum Avenue. Would you like the address?"

"And the phone number, if you have it."

"Okay. Did you know Don?"

"He used to buy my brother and me apple pie a la mode down at the Stratford Diner."

"Christ, that's been gone ten years. Wait a minute." He came back on the phone and read an address and a phone number. Jim jotted them down, thanked Livingston, and hung up.

He dialed O again, gave the number, and waited. When the phone began to ring, a sudden hot tension filled him and he leaned forward, turning instinctively away from the drugstore soda fountain, although there was no one there but a plump teen-age girl reading a magazine.

The phone was picked up and a rich, masculine voice, sounding not at all old, said, "Hello?" That single word set off a dusty chain reaction of memories and emotions, as startling as the Pavlovian reaction that can be set off by hearing an old record on the radio.

"Mr. Nell? Donald Nell?"

"Yes."

"My name is James Norman, Mr. Nell. Do you remember me, by any chance?"

"Yes," the voice responded immediately. "Pie à la mode. Your brother was killed . . . knifed. A shame. He was a lovely boy."

Jim collapsed against one of the booth's glass walls. The tension's sudden departure left him as weak as a stuffed toy. He found himself on the verge of spilling everything, and he bit the urge back desperately.

"Mr. Nell, those boys were never caught."

"No," Nell said. "We did have suspects. As I recall, we had a lineup at a Bridgeport police station."

"Were those suspects identified to me by name?"

"No. The procedure at a police showup was to address the participants by number. What's your interest in this now, Mr. Norman?"

"Let me throw some names at you," Jim said. "I want to know if they ring a bell in connection with the case."

"Son, I wouldn't—"

"You might," Jim said, beginning to feel a trifle desperate. "Robert Lawson, David Garcia, Vincent Corey. Do any of those—"

"Corey," Mr. Nell said flatly. "I remember him. Vinnie the Viper. Yes, we had him up on that. His mother alibied him. I don't get anything from Robert Lawson. That could be anyone's name. But Garcia . . . that rings a bell. I'm not sure why. Hell. I'm old." He sounded disgusted.

“Mr. Nell, is there any way you could check on those boys?”

“Well, of course, they wouldn't be boys anymore.”

*Oh, yeah?*

“Listen, Jimmy. Has one of those boys popped up and started harassing you?”

“I don't know. Some strange things have been happening. Things connected with the stabbing of my brother.”

“What things?”

“Mr. Nell, I can't tell you. You'd think I was crazy.”

His reply, quick, firm, interested: “Are you?”

Jim paused. “No,” he said.

“Okay, I can check the names through Stratford R&I. Where can I get in touch?”

Jim gave his home number. “You'd be most likely to catch me on Tuesday night.” He was in almost every night, but on Tuesday evenings Sally went to her pottery class.

“What are you doing these days, Jimmy?”

“Teaching school.”

“Good. This might take a few days, you know. I'm retired now.”

“You sound just the same.”

“Ah, but if you could see me!” He chuckled. “D'you still like a good piece of pie a la mode, Jimmy?”

“Sure,” Jim said. It was a lie. He hated pie a la mode.

“I'm glad to hear that. Well, if there's nothing else, I'll—”

“There is one more thing. Is there a Milford High in Stratford?”

“Not that I know of.”

“That's what I—”

“Only thing name of Milford around here is Milford Cemetery out on the Ash Heights Road. And no one ever graduated from there.” He chuckled dryly, and to Jim's ears it sounded like the sudden rattle of bones in a pit.

“Thank you,” he heard himself saying. “Goodbye.”

Mr. Nell was gone. The operator asked him to deposit sixty cents, and he put it in automatically. He turned, and stared into a horrid, squashed face plastered up against the glass, framed in two spread

hands, the splayed fingers flattened white against the glass, as was the tip of the nose.

It was Vinnie, grinning at him.

Jim screamed.

Class again.

Living with Lit was doing a composition, and most of them were bent sweatily over their papers, putting their thoughts grimly down on the page, as if chopping wood. All but three. Robert Lawson, sitting in Billy Stearns's seat, David Garcia in Kathy Slavin's, Vinnie Corey in Chip Osway's. They sat with their blank papers in front of them, watching him.

A moment before the bell, Jim said softly, "I want to talk to you for a minute after class, Mr. Corey."

"Sure, Norm."

Lawson and Garcia tittered noisily, but the rest of the class did not. When the bell rang, they passed in their papers and fairly bolted through the door. Lawson and Garcia lingered, and Jim felt his belly tighten.

*Is it going to be now?*

Then Lawson nodded at Vinnie. "See you later."

"Yeah."

They left. Lawson closed the door, and from beyond the frosted glass, David Garcia suddenly yelled hoarsely, "*Norm eats it!*" Vinnie looked at the door, then back at Jim. He smiled.

He said, "I was wondering if you'd ever get down to it."

"Really?" Jim said.

"Scared you the other night in the phone booth, right, dad?"

"No one says dad anymore, Vinnie. It's not cool. Like cool's not cool. It's as dead as Buddy Holly."

"I talk the way I want," Vinnie said.

"Where's the other one? The guy with the funny red hair."

"Split, man." But under his studied unconcern, Jim sensed a wariness.

“He's alive, isn't he? That's why he's not here. He's alive and he's thirty-two or -three, the way you would be if—”

“Bleach was always a drag. He's nothin’.” Vinnie sat up behind his desk and put his hands down flat on the old graffiti. His eyes glittered. “Man, I remember you at that lineup. You looked ready to piss your little old corduroy pants. I seen you lookin’ at me and Davie. I put the hex on you.”

“I suppose you did,” Jim said. “You gave me sixteen years of bad dreams. Wasn't that enough? Why now? Why me?”

Vinnie looked puzzled, and then smiled again. “Because you're unfinished business, man. You got to be cleaned up.”

“Where were you?” Jim asked. “Before.”

Vinnie's lips thinned. “We ain't talkin’ about that. Dig?”

“They dug *you* a hole, didn't they, Vinnie? Six feet deep. Right in the Milford Cemetery. Six feet of—”

*“You shut up!”*

He was on his feet. The desk fell over in the aisle.

“It's not going to be easy,” Jim said. “I'm not going to make it easy for you.”

“We're gonna kill you, dad. You'll find out about that hole.”

“Get out of here.”

“Maybe that little wifey of yours, too.”

“You goddamn punk, if you touch her—” He started forward blindly, feeling violated and terrified by the mention of Sally.

Vinnie grinned and started for the door. “Just be cool. Cool as a fool.” He tittered.

“If you touch my wife, I'll kill you.”

Vinnie's grin widened. “Kill me? Man, I thought you knew, I'm already dead.”

He left. His footfalls echoed in the corridor for a long time.

“What are you reading, hon?”

Jim held the binding of the book, *Raising Demons*, out for her to read.

“Yuck.” She turned back to the mirror to check her hair.

“Will you take a taxi home?” he asked.

“It's only four blocks. Besides, the walk is good for my figure.”

“Someone grabbed one of my girls over on Summer Street,” he lied. “She thinks the object was rape.”

“Really? Who?”

“Dianne Snow,” he said, making a name up at random. “She's a levelheaded girl. Treat yourself to a taxi, okay?”

“Okay,” she said. She stopped at his chair, knelt, put her hands on his cheeks and looked into his eyes. “What's the matter, Jim?”

“Nothing.”

“Yes. Something is.”

“Nothing I can't handle.”

“Is it something . . . about your brother?”

A draft of terror blew over him, as if an inner door had been opened. “Why do you say that?”

“You were moaning his name in your sleep last night. *Wayne, Wayne, you were saying. Run, Wayne.*”

“It's nothing.”

But it wasn't. They both knew it. He watched her go.

Mr. Nell called at quarter past eight. “You don't have to worry about those guys,” he said. “They're all dead.”

“Is that so?” He was holding his place in *Raising Demons* with his index finger as he talked.

“Car smash. Six months after your brother was killed. A cop was chasing them. Frank Simon was the cop, as a matter of fact. He works out at Sikorsky now. Probably makes a lot more money.”

“And they crashed.”

“The car left the road at more than a hundred miles an hour and hit a main power pole. When they finally got the power shut off and scraped them out, they were cooked medium rare.”

Jim closed his eyes. “You saw the report?”

“Looked at it myself.”

“Anything on the car?”

“It was a hot rod.”

“Any description?”

“Black 1954 Ford sedan with ‘Snake Eyes’ written on the side. Fitting enough. They really crapped out.”

“They had a sidekick, Mr. Nell. I don't know his name, but his nickname was Bleach.”

“That would be Charlie Sponder,” Mr. Nell said without hesitation. “He bleached his hair with Clorox one time. I remember that. It went streaky-white, and he tried to dye it back. The streaks went orange.”

“Do you know what he's doing now?”

“Career army man. Joined up in fifty-eight or -nine, after he got a local girl pregnant.”

“Could I get in touch with him?”

“His mother lives in Stratford. She'd know.”

“Can you give me her address?”

“I won't, Jimmy. Not until you tell me what's eating you.”

“I can't, Mr. Nell. You'd think I was crazy.”

“Try me.”

“I can't.”

“All right, son.”

“Will you—” But the line was dead.

“You bastard,” Jim said, and put the phone in the cradle. It rang under his hand and he jerked away from it as if it had suddenly burned him. He looked at it, breathing heavily. It rang three times, four. He picked it up. Listened. Closed his eyes.

A cop pulled him over on his way to the hospital, then went ahead of him, siren screaming. There was a young doctor with a toothbrush mustache in the emergency room. He looked at Jim with dark, emotionless eyes.

“Excuse me, I'm James Norman and—”

“I'm sorry, Mr. Norman. She died at 9:04 P.M.

He was going to faint. The world went far away and swimmy, and there was a high buzzing in his ears. His eyes wandered without purpose, seeing green tiled walls, a wheeled stretcher glittering under the overhead fluorescents, a nurse with her cap on crooked. *Time to freshen up, honey.* An orderly was leaning against the wall

outside Emergency Room No. 1. Wearing dirty whites with a few drops of drying blood splattered across the front. Cleaning his fingernails with a knife. The orderly looked up and grinned into Jim's eyes. The orderly was David Garcia.

Jim fainted.

Funeral. Like a dance in three acts. The house. The funeral parlor. The graveyard. Faces coming out of nowhere, whirling close, whirling off into the darkness again. Sally's mother, her eyes streaming tears behind a black veil. Her father, looking shocked and old. Simmons. Others. They introduced themselves and shook his hand. He nodded, not remembering their names. Some of the women brought food, and one lady brought an apple pie and someone ate a piece and when he went out in the kitchen he saw it sitting on the counter, cut wide open and drooling juice into the pie plate like amber blood and he thought: *Should have a big scoop of vanilla ice cream right on top.*

He felt his hands and legs trembling, wanting to go across to the counter and throw the pie against the wall.

And then they were going and he was watching himself, the way you watch yourself in a home movie, as he shook hands and nodded and said: Thank you . . . Yes, I will. . . Thank you . . . I'm sure she is . . . Thank you . . .

When they were gone, the house was his again. He went over to the mantel. It was cluttered with souvenirs of their marriage. A stuffed dog with jeweled eyes that she had won at Coney Island on their honeymoon. Two leather folders—his diploma from B.U. and hers from U. Mass. A giant pair of styrofoam dice she had given him as a gag after he had dropped sixteen dollars in Pinky Silverstein's poker game a year or so before. A thin china cup she had bought in a Cleveland junk shop last year. In the middle of the mantel, their wedding picture. He turned it over and then sat down in his chair and looked at the blank TV set. An idea began to form behind his eyes.

An hour later the phone rang, jolting him out of a light doze. He groped for it.

“You're next, Norm.”

“Vinnie?”

“Man, she was like one of those clay pigeons in a shooting gallery. Wham and splatter.”

“I'll be at the school tonight, Vinnie. Room 33. I'll leave the lights off. It'll be just like the overpass that day. I think I can even provide the train.”

“Just want to end it all, is that right?”

“That's right,” Jim said. “You be there.”

“Maybe.”

“You'll be there,” Jim said, and hung up.

It was almost dark when he got to the school. He parked in his usual slot, opened the back door with his passkey, and went first to the English Department office on the second floor. He let himself in, opened the record cabinet, and began to flip through the records. He paused about halfway through the stack and took out one called *Hi-Fi Sound Effects*. He turned it over. The third cut on the A side was “Freight Train: 3:04.” He put the album on top of the department's portable stereo and took *Raising Demons* out of his overcoat pocket. He turned to a marked passage, read something, and nodded. He turned out the lights.

Room 33.

He set up the stereo system, stretching the speakers to their widest separation, and then put on the freight-train cut. The sound came swelling up out of nothing until it filled the whole room with the harsh clash of diesel engines and steel on steel.

With his eyes closed, he could almost believe he was under the Broad Street trestle, driven to his knees, watching as the savage little drama worked to its inevitable conclusion . . .

He opened his eyes, rejected the record, then reset it. He sat behind his desk and opened *Raising Demons* to a chapter entitled “Malefic Spirits and How to Call Them.” His lips moved as he read,

and he paused at intervals to take objects out of his pocket and lay them on his desk.

First, an old and creased Kodak of him and his brother, standing on the lawn in front of the Broad Street apartment house where they had lived. They both had identical crew cuts, and both of them were smiling shyly into the camera. Second, a small bottle of blood. He had caught a stray alley cat and slit its throat with his pocketknife. Third, the pocketknife itself. Last, a sweatband ripped from the lining of an old Little League baseball cap. Wayne's cap. Jim had kept it in secret hopes that someday he and Sally would have a son to wear it.

He got up, went to the window, looked out. The parking lot was empty.

He began to push the school desks toward the walls, leaving a rough circle in the middle of the room. When that was done he got chalk from his desk drawer and, following the diagram in the book exactly and using a yardstick, he drew a pentagram on the floor.

His breath was coming harder now. He turned off the lights, gathered his objects in one hand, and began to recite.

“Dark Father, hear me for my soul's sake. I am one who promises sacrifice. I am one who begs a dark boon for sacrifice. I am one who seeks vengeance of the left hand. I bring blood in promise of sacrifice.”

He screwed the cap off the jar, which had originally held peanut butter, and splashed it within the pentagram.

Something happened in the darkened schoolroom. It was not possible to say exactly what, but the air became heavier. There was a thickness in it that seemed to fill the throat and the belly with gray steel. The deep silence grew, swelled with something unseen.

He did as the old rites instructed.

Now there was a feeling in the air that reminded Jim of the time he had taken a class to visit a huge power station—a feeling that the very air was crammed with electric potential and was vibrating. And then a voice, curiously low and unpleasant, spoke to him.

“What do you require?”

He could not tell if he was actually hearing it or only thinking that he did. He spoke two sentences.

“It is a small boon. What do you offer?”

Jim spoke two words.

“Both,” the voice whispered. “Right and left. Agreed?”

“Yes.”

“Then give me what is mine.”

He opened his pocketknife, turned to his desk, laid his right hand down flat, and hacked off his right index finger with four hard chops. Blood flew across the blotter in dark patterns. It didn't hurt at all. He brushed the finger aside and switched the pocketknife to his right hand. Cutting off the left finger was harder. His right hand felt awkward and alien with the missing finger, and the knife kept slipping. At last, with an impatient grunt, he threw the knife away, snapped the bone, and ripped the finger free. He picked them both up like breadsticks and threw them into the pentagram. There was a bright flash of light, like an old-fashioned photographer's flashpowder. No smoke, he noted. No smell of brimstone.

“What objects have you brought?”

“A photograph. A band of cloth that has been dipped in his sweat.”

“Sweat is precious,” the voice remarked, and there was a cold greed in the tone that made Jim shiver. “Give them to me.”

Jim threw them into the pentagram. The light flashed.

“It is good,” the voice said.

“If they come,” Jim said.

There was no response. The voice was gone—if it had ever been there. He leaned closer to the pentagram. The picture was still there, but blackened and charred. The sweatband was gone.

In the street there was a noise, faint at first, then swelling. A hot rod equipped with glasspack mufflers, first turning onto Davis Street, then approaching. Jim sat down, listening to hear if it would go by or turn in.

It turned in.

Footfalls on the stairs, echoing.

Robert Lawson's high-pitched giggle, then someone going “Shhhhh!” and then Lawson's giggle again. The footfalls came closer, lost their echo, and then the glass door at the head of the stairs banged open.

“Yoo-hoo, Normie!” David Garcia called, falsetto.

“You there, Normie?” Lawson whispered, and then giggled. “Vas you dere, Cholly?”

Vinnie didn't speak, but as they advanced up the hall, Jim could see their shadows. Vinnie's was the tallest, and he was holding a long object in one hand. There was a light snick of sound, and the long object became longer still.

They were standing by the door, Vinnie in the middle. They were all holding knives.

“Here we come, man,” Vinnie said softly. “Here we come for your ass.”

Jim turned on the record player.

“Jesus!” Garcia called out, jumping. “What's that?”

The freight train was coming closer. You could almost feel the walls thrumming with it.

The sound no longer seemed to be coming out of the speakers but from down the hall, from down tracks someplace far away in time as well as space.

“I don't like this, man,” Lawson said.

“It's too late,” Vinnie said. He stepped forward and gestured with the knife. “Give us your money, dad.”

. . . *let us go* . . .

Garcia recoiled. “What the hell—”

But Vinnie never hesitated. He motioned the others to spread out, and the thing in his eyes might have been relief.

“Come on, kid, how much you got?” Garcia asked suddenly.

“Four cents,” Jim said. It was true. He had picked them out of the penny jar in the bedroom. The most recent date was 1956.

“You fuckin' liar.”

. . . *leave him alone* . . .

Lawson glanced over his shoulder and his eyes widened. The walls had become misty, insubstantial. The freight train wailed. The light from the parking-lot streetlamp had reddened, like the neon Burrets Building Company sign, stuttering against the twilight sky.

Something was walking out of the pentagram, something with the face of a small boy perhaps twelve years old. A boy with a crew cut.

Garcia darted forward and punched Jim in the mouth. He could smell mixed garlic and pepperoni on his breath. It was all slow and painless.

Jim felt a sudden heaviness, like lead, in his groin, and his bladder let go. He looked down and saw a dark patch appear and spread on his pants.

“Look, Vinnie, he wet himself!” Lawson cried out. The tone was right, but the expression on his face was one of horror—the expression of a puppet that has come to life only to find itself on strings.

“Let him alone,” the Wayne-thing said, but it was not Wayne's voice—it was the cold, greedy voice of the thing from the pentagram. “Run, Jimmy! Run! Run! Run!”

Jim slipped to his knees and a hand slapped down on his back, groping for purchase, and found none.

He looked up and saw Vinnie, his face stretched into a caricature of hatred, drive his knife into the Wayne-thing just below the breastbone . . . and then scream, his face collapsing in on itself, charring, blackening, becoming awful.

Then he was gone.

Garcia and Lawson struck a moment later, writhed, charred, and disappeared.

Jim lay on the floor, breathing harshly. The sound of the freight train faded.

His brother was looking down at him.

“Wayne?” he breathed.

And the face changed. It seemed to melt and run together. The eyes went yellow, and a horrible, grinning malignancy looked out at him.

“I'll come back, Jim,” the cold voice whispered.

And it was gone.

He got up slowly and turned off the record player with one mangled hand. He touched his mouth. It was bleeding from Garcia's punch. He went over and turned on the lights. The room was empty. He looked out into the parking lot and that was empty, too, except for one hubcap that reflected the moon in idiot pantomime. The

classroom air smelled old and stale—the atmosphere of tombs. He erased the pentagram on the floor and then began to straighten up the desks for the substitute the next day. His fingers hurt very badly—*what fingers?* He would have to see a doctor. He closed the door and went downstairs slowly, holding his hands to his chest. Halfway down, something—a shadow, or perhaps only an intuition—made him whirl around.

Something unseen seemed to leap back.

Jim remembered the warning in *Raising Demons*—the danger involved. You could perhaps summon them, perhaps cause them to do your work. You could even get rid of them.

But sometimes they come back.

He walked down the stairs again, wondering if the nightmare was over after all.

# STRAWBERRY SPRING

*Springheel Jack . . .*

I saw those two words in the paper this morning and my God, how they take me back. All that was eight years ago, almost to the day. Once, while it was going on, I saw myself on nationwide TV—the Walter Cronkite Report. Just a hurrying face in the general background behind the reporter, but my folks picked me out right away. They called long-distance. My dad wanted my analysis of the situation; he was all bluff and hearty and man-to-man. My mother just wanted me to come home. But I didn't want to come home. I was enchanted.

Enchanted by that dark and mist-blown strawberry spring, and by the shadow of violent death that walked through it on those nights eight years ago. The shadow of Springheel Jack.

In New England they call it a strawberry spring. No one knows why; it's just a phrase the old-timers use. They say it happens once every eight or ten years. What happened at New Sharon Teachers' College that particular strawberry spring . . . there may be a cycle for that, too, but if anyone has figured it out, they've never said.

At New Sharon, the strawberry spring began on March 16, 1968. The coldest winter in twenty years broke on that day. It rained and you could smell the sea twenty miles west of the beaches. The snow, which had been thirty-five inches deep in places, began to melt and the campus walks ran with slush. The Winter Carnival snow sculptures, which had been kept sharp and clearcut for two months by the subzero temperatures, at last began to sag and slouch. The caricature of Lyndon Johnson in front of the Tep fraternity house

cried melted tears. The dove in front of Prashner Hall lost its frozen feathers and its plywood skeleton showed sadly through in places.

And when night came the fog came with it, moving silent and white along the narrow college avenues and thoroughfares. The pines on the mall poked through it like counting fingers and it drifted, slow as cigarette smoke, under the little bridge down by the Civil War cannons. It made things seem out of joint, strange, magical. The unwary traveler would step out of the juke-thumping, brightly lit confusion of the Grinder, expecting the hard clear starriness of winter to clutch him . . . and instead he would suddenly find himself in a silent, muffled world of white drifting fog, the only sound his own footsteps and the soft drip of water from the ancient gutters. You half expected to see Gollum or Frodo and Sam go hurrying past, or to turn and see that the Grinder was gone, vanished, replaced by a foggy panorama of moors and yew trees and perhaps a Druid-circle or a sparkling fairy ring.

The jukebox played “Love Is Blue” that year. It played “Hey, Jude” endlessly, endlessly. It played “Scarborough Fair.”

And at ten minutes after eleven on that night a junior named John Dancey on his way back to his dormitory began screaming into the fog, dropping books on and between the sprawled legs of the dead girl lying in a shadowy corner of the Animal Sciences parking lot, her throat cut from ear to ear but her eyes open and almost seeming to sparkle as if she had just successfully pulled off the funniest joke of her young life—Dancey, an education major and a speech minor, screamed and screamed and screamed.

The next day was overcast and sullen, and we went to classes with questions eager in our mouths—who? why? when do you think they'll get him? And always the final thrilled question: Did you know her? Did you know her?

*Yes, I had an art class with her.*

*Yes, one of my roommate's friends dated her last term.*

*Yes, she asked me for a light once in the Grinder. She was at the next table.*

*Yes,*

*Yes, I*

*Yes . . . yes . . . oh yes, I*

We all knew her. Her name was Gale Cerman (pronounced Kerrman), and she was an art major. She wore granny glasses and had a good figure. She was well liked but her roommates had hated her. She had never gone out much even though she was one of the most promiscuous girls on campus. She was ugly but cute. She had been a vivacious girl who talked little and smiled seldom. She had been pregnant and she had had leukemia. She was a lesbian who had been murdered by her boyfriend. It was strawberry spring, and on the morning of March 17 we all knew Gale Cerman.

Half a dozen State Police cars crawled onto the campus, most of them parked in front of Judith Franklin Hall, where the Cerman girl had lived. On my way past there to my ten o'clock class I was asked to show my student ID. I was clever. I showed him the one without the fangs.

"Do you carry a knife?" the policeman asked cunningly.

"Is it about Gale Cerman?" I asked, after I told him that the most lethal thing on my person was a rabbit's-foot key chain.

"What makes you ask?" He pounced.

I was five minutes late to class.

It was strawberry spring and no one walked by themselves through the half-academical, half-fantastical campus that night. The fog had come again, smelling of the sea, quiet and deep.

Around nine o'clock my roommate burst into our rom, where I had been busting my brains on a Milton essay since seven. "They caught him," he said. "I heard it over at the Grinder."

"From who?"

"I don't know. Some guy. Her boyfriend did it. His name is Carl Amalara."

I settled back, relieved and disappointed. With a name like that it had to be true. A lethal and sordid little crime of passion.

"Okay," I said. "That's good."

He left the room to spread the news down the hall. I reread my Milton essay, couldn't figure out what I had been trying to say, tore it up and started again.

It was in the papers the next day. There was an incongruously neat picture of Amalara—probably a high-school graduation picture—and it showed a rather sad-looking boy with an olive complexion and dark eyes and pockmarks on his nose. The boy had not confessed yet, but the evidence against him was strong. He and Gale Cerman had argued a great deal in the last month or so, and had broken up the week before. Amalara's roomie said he had been “despondent.” In a foot-locker under his bed, police had found a seven-inch hunting knife from L. L. Bean's and a picture of the girl that had apparently been cut up with a pair of shears.

Beside Amalara's picture was one of Gale Cerman. It blurrily showed a dog, a peeling lawn flamingo, and a rather mousy blond girl wearing spectacles. An uncomfortable smile had turned her lips up and her eyes were squinted. One hand was on the dog's head. It was true then. It had to be true.

The fog came again that night, not on little cat's feet but in an improper silent sprawl. I walked that night. I had a headache and I walked for air, smelling the wet, misty smell of the spring that was slowly wiping away the reluctant snow, leaving lifeless patches of last year's grass bare and uncovered, like the head of a sighing old grandmother.

For me, that was one of the most beautiful nights I can remember. The people I passed under the haloed streetlights were murmuring shadows, and all of them seemed to be lovers, walking with hands and eyes linked. The melting snow dripped and ran, dripped and ran, and from every dark storm drain the sound of the sea drifted up, a dark winter sea now strongly ebbing.

I walked until nearly midnight, until I was thoroughly mildewed, and I passed many shadows, heard many footfalls clicking dreamily off down the winding paths. Who is to say that one of those shadows was not the man or the thing that came to be known as Springheel Jack? Not I, for I passed many shadows but in the fog I saw no faces.

The next morning the clamor in the hall woke me. I blundered out to see who had been drafted, combing my hair with both hands and running the fuzzy caterpillar that had craftily replaced my tongue across the dry roof of my mouth.

“He got another one,” someone said to me, his face pallid with excitement. “They had to let him go.”

“Who go?”

“Amalara!” someone else said gleefully. “He was sitting in jail when it happened.”

“When what happened?” I asked patiently. Sooner or later I would get it. I was sure of that.

“The guy killed somebody else last night. And now they're hunting all over for it.”

“For what?”

The pallid face wavered in front of me again. “Her head. Whoever killed her took her head with him.”

New Sharon isn't a big school now, and was even smaller then—the kind of institution the public relations people chummily refer to as a “community college.” And it really was like a small community, at least in those days; between you and your friends, you probably had at least a nodding acquaintance with everybody else and their friends. Gale Cerman had been the type of girl you just nodded to, thinking vaguely that you had seen her around.

We all knew Ann Bray. She had been the first runner-up in the Miss New England pageant the year before, her talent performance consisting of twirling a flaming baton to the tune of “Hey, Look Me Over.” She was brainy, too; until the time of her death she had been editor of the school newspaper (a once-weekly rag with a lot of political cartoons and bombastic letters), a member of the student dramatics society, and president of the National Service Sorority, New Sharon Branch. In the hot, fierce bubblings of my freshman youth I had submitted a column idea to the paper and asked for a date—turned down on both counts.

And now she was dead . . . worse than dead.

I walked to my afternoon classes like everyone else, nodding to people I knew and saying hi with a little more force than usual, as if that would make up for the close way I studied their faces. Which was the same way they were studying mine. There was someone dark among us, as dark as the paths which twisted across the mall or wound among the hundred-year-old oaks on the quad in back of the gymnasium. As dark as the hulking Civil War cannons seen through a drifting membrane of fog. We looked into each other's faces and tried to read the darkness behind one of them.

This time the police arrested no one. The blue beetles patrolled the campus ceaselessly on the foggy spring nights of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth, and spotlights stabbed into dark nooks and crannies with erratic eagerness. The administration imposed a mandatory nine o'clock curfew. A foolhardy couple discovered necking in the landscaped bushes north of the Tate Alumni Building were taken to the New Sharon police station and grilled unmercifully for three hours.

There was a hysterical false alarm on the twentieth when a boy was found unconscious in the same parking lot where the body of Gale Cerman had been found. A gibbering campus cop loaded him into the back of his cruiser and put a map of the county over his face without bothering to hunt for a pulse and started toward the local hospital, siren wailing across the deserted campus like a seminar of banshees.

Halfway there the corpse in the back seat had risen and asked hollowly, "Where the hell am I?" The cop shrieked and ran off the road. The corpse turned out to be an undergrad named Donald Morris who had been in bed the last two days with a pretty lively case of flu—was it Asian that year? I can't remember. Anyway, he fainted in the parking lot on his way to the Grinder for a bowl of soup and some toast.

The days continued warm and overcast. People clustered in small groups that had a tendency to break up and re-form with surprising speed. Looking at the same set of faces for too long gave you funny ideas about some of them. And the speed with which rumors swept from one end of the campus to the other began to approach the

speed of light; a well-liked history professor had been overheard laughing and weeping down by the small bridge; Gale Cerman had left a cryptic two-word message written in her own blood on the blacktop of the Animal Sciences parking lot; both murders were actually political crimes, ritual murders that had been performed by an offshoot of the SDS to protest the war. This was really laughable. The New Sharon SDS had seven members. One fair-sized offshoot would have bankrupted the whole organization. This fact brought an even more sinister embellishment from the campus right-wingers: outside agitators. So during those queer, warm days we all kept our eyes peeled for them.

The press, always fickle, ignored the strong resemblance our murderer bore to Jack the Ripper and dug further back—all the way to 1819. Ann Bray had been found on a soggy path of ground some twelve feet from the nearest sidewalk, and yet there were no footprints, not even her own. An enterprising New Hampshire newsman with a passion for the arcane christened the killer Springheel Jack, after the infamous Dr. John Hawkins of Bristol, who did five of his wives to death with odd pharmaceutical knickknacks. And the name, probably because of that soggy yet unmarked ground, stuck.

On the twenty-first it rained again, and the mall and quadrangle became quagmires. The police announced that they were salting plainclothes detectives, men and women, about, and took half the police cars off duty.

The campus newspaper published a strongly indignant, if slightly incoherent, editorial protesting this. The upshot of it seemed to be that, with all sorts of cops masquerading as students, it would be impossible to tell a real outside agitator from a false one.

Twilight came and the fog with it, drifting up the tree-lined avenues slowly, almost thoughtfully, blotting out the buildings one by one. It was soft, insubstantial stuff, but somehow implacable and frightening. Springheel Jack was a man, no one seemed to doubt that, but the fog was his accomplice and it was female . . . or so it seemed to me. It was as if our little school was caught between them, squeezed in some crazy lovers' embrace, part of a marriage

that had been consummated in blood. I sat and smoked and watched the lights come on in the growing darkness and wondered if it was all over. My roommate came in and shut the door quietly behind him.

“It's going to snow soon,” he said.

I turned around and looked at him. “Does the radio say that?”

“No,” he said. “Who needs a weatherman? Have you ever heard of strawberry spring?”

“Maybe,” I said. “A long time ago. Something grandmothers talk about, isn't it?”

He stood beside me, looking out at the creeping dark.

“Strawberry spring is like Indian summer,” he said, “only much more rare. You get a good Indian summer in this part of the country once every two or three years. A spell of weather like we've been having is supposed to come only every eight or ten. It's a false spring, a lying spring, like Indian summer is a false summer. My own grandmother used to say strawberry spring means the worst norther of the winter is still on the way—and the longer this lasts, the harder the storm.

“Folk tales,” I said. “Never believe a word.” I looked at him. “But I'm nervous. Are you?”

He smiled benevolently and stole one of my cigarettes from the open pack on the window ledge. “I suspect everyone but me and thee,” he said, and then the smile faded a little. “And sometimes I wonder about thee. Want to go over to the Union and shoot some eight-ball? I'll spot you ten.”

“Trig prelim next week. I'm going to settle down with a magic marker and a hot pile of notes.”

For a long time after he was gone, I could only look out the window. And even after I had opened my book and started in, part of me was still out there, walking in the shadows where something dark was now in charge.

That night Adelle Parkins was killed. Six police cars and seventeen collegiate-looking plainclothesmen (eight of them were women imported all the way from Boston) patrolled the campus. But Springheel Jack killed her just the same, going unerringly for one of

our own. The false spring, the lying spring, aided and abetted him—he killed her and left her propped behind the wheel of her 1964 Dodge to be found the next morning and they found part of her in the back seat and part of her in the trunk. And written in blood on the windshield—this time fact instead of rumor—were two words: HA! HA!

The campus went slightly mad after that; all of us and none of us had known Adelle Parkins. She was one of those nameless, harried women who worked the break-back shift in the Grinder from six to eleven at night, facing hordes of hamburger-happy students on study break from the library across the way. She must have had it relatively easy those last three foggy nights of her life; the curfew was being rigidly observed, and after nine the Grinder's only patrons were hungry cops and happy janitors—the empty buildings had improved their habitual bad temper considerably.

There is little left to tell. The police, as prone to hysteria as any of us and driven against the wall, arrested an innocuous homosexual sociology graduate student named Hanson Gray, who claimed he “could not remember” where he had spent several of the lethal evenings. They charged him, arraigned him, and let him go to scamper hurriedly back to his native New Hampshire town after the last unspeakable night of strawberry spring when Marsha Curran was slaughtered on the mall.

Why she had been out and alone is forever beyond knowing—she was a fat, sadly pretty thing who lived in an apartment in town with three other girls. She had slipped on campus as silently and as easily as Springheel Jack himself. What brought her? Perhaps her need was as deep and as ungovernable as her killer's, and just as far beyond understanding. Maybe a need for one desperate and passionate romance with the warm night, the warm fog, the smell of the sea, and the cold knife.

That was on the twenty-third. On the twenty-fourth the president of the college announced that spring break would be moved up a week, and we scattered, not joyfully but like frightened sheep before a

storm, leaving the campus empty and haunted by the police and one dark specter.

I had my own car on campus, and I took six people down-state with me, their luggage crammed in helter-skelter. It wasn't a pleasant ride. For all any of us knew, Springheel Jack might have been in the car with us.

That night the thermometer dropped fifteen degrees, and the whole northern New England area was belted by a shrieking norther that began in sleet and ended in a foot of snow. The usual number of old duffers had heart attacks shoveling it away—and then, like magic, it was April. Clean showers and starry nights.

They called it strawberry spring, God knows why, and it's an evil, lying time that only comes once every eight or ten years. Springheel Jack left with the fog, and by early June, campus conversation had turned to a series of draft protests and a sit-in at the building where a well-known napalm manufacturer was holding job interviews. By June, the subject of Springheel Jack was almost unanimously avoided—at least aloud. I suspect there were many who turned it over and over privately, looking for the one crack in the seamless egg of madness that would make sense of it all.

That was the year I graduated, and the next year was the year I married. A good job in a local publishing house. In 1971 we had a child, and now he's almost school age. A fine and questing boy with my eyes and her mouth.

Then, today's paper.

Of course I knew it was here. I knew it yesterday morning when I got up and heard the mysterious sound of snowmelt running down the gutters, and smelled the salt tang of the ocean from our front porch, nine miles from the nearest beach. I knew strawberry spring had come again when I started home from work last night and had to turn on my headlights against the mist that was already beginning to creep out of the fields and hollows, blurring the lines of the buildings and putting fairy haloes around the streetlamps.

This morning's paper says a girl was killed on the New Sharon campus near the Civil War cannons. She was killed last night and found in a melting snowbank. She was not . . . she was not all there.

My wife is upset. She wants to know where I was last night. I can't tell her because I don't remember. I remember starting home from work, and I remember putting my headlights on to search my way through the lovely creeping fog, but that's all I remember.

I've been thinking about that foggy night when I had a headache and walked for air and passed all the lovely shadows without shape or substance. And I've been thinking about the trunk of my car—such an ugly word, *trunk*—and wondering why in the world I should be afraid to open it.

I can hear my wife as I write this, in the next room, crying. She thinks I was with another woman last night.

And oh dear God, I think so too.

# THE LEDGE

“Go on,” Cressner said again. “Look in the bag.”

We were in his penthouse apartment, forty-three stories up. The carpet was deep-cut pile, burnt orange. In the middle, between the Basque sling chair where Cressner sat and the genuine leather couch where no one at all sat, there was a brown shopping bag.

“If it's a payoff, forget it,” I said. “I love her.”

“It's money, but it's not a payoff. Go on. Look.” He was smoking a Turkish cigarette in an onyx holder. The air-circulation system allowed me just a dry whiff of the tobacco and then whipped it away. He was wearing a silk dressing gown on which a dragon was embroidered. His eyes were calm and intelligent behind his glasses. He looked just like what he was: an A-number-one, 500-carat, dyed-in-the-wool son of a bitch. I loved his wife, and she loved me. I had expected him to make trouble, and I knew this was it, but I just wasn't sure what brand it was.

I went to the shopping bag and tipped it over. Banded bundles of currency tumbled out on the rug. All twenties. I picked one of the bundles up and counted. Ten bills to a bundle. There were a lot of bundles.

“Twenty thousand dollars,” he said, and puffed on his cigarette.

I stood up. “Okay.”

“It's for you.”

“I don't want it.”

“My wife comes with it.”

I didn't say anything. Marcia had warned me how it would be. He's like a cat, she had said. An old tom full of meanness. He'll try to make you a mouse.

“So you're a tennis pro,” he said. “I don't believe I've ever actually seen one before.”

“You mean your detectives didn't get any pictures?”

“Oh, yes.” He waved the cigarette holder negligently. “Even a motion picture of the two of you in that Bayside Motel. A camera was behind the mirror. But pictures are hardly the same, are they?”

“If you say so.”

He'll keep changing tacks, Marcia had said. It's the way he puts people on the defensive. Pretty soon he'll have you hitting out at where you think he's going to be, and he'll get you someplace else. Say as little as possible, Stan. And remember that I love you.

“I invited you up because I thought we should have a little man-to-man chat, Mr. Norris. Just a pleasant conversation between two civilized human beings, one of whom has made off with the other's wife.”

I started to answer but decided not to.

“Did you enjoy San Quentin?” Cressner said, puffing lazily.

“Not particularly.”

“I believe you passed three years there. A charge of breaking and entering, if I'm correct.”

“Marcia knows about it,” I said, and immediately wished I hadn't. I was playing his game, just what Marcia had warned against. Hitting soft lobs for him to smash back.

“I've taken the liberty of having your car moved,” he said, glancing out the window at the far end of the room. It really wasn't a window at all: the whole wall was glass. In the middle was a sliding-glass door. Beyond it, a balcony the size of a postage stamp. Beyond that, a very long drop. There was something strange about the door. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

“This is a very pleasant building,” Cressner said. “Good security. Closed-circuit TV and all that. When I knew you were in the lobby, I made a telephone call. An employee then hot-wired the ignition of your car and moved it from the parking area here to a public lot several blocks away.” He glanced up at the modernistic sunburst clock above the couch. It was 8:05. “At 8:20 the same employee will call the police from a public phone booth concerning your car. By 8:30, at the latest, the minions of the law will have discovered over

six ounces of heroin hidden in the spare tire of your trunk. You will be eagerly sought after, Mr. Norris.”

He had set me up. I had tried to cover myself as well as I could, but in the end I had been child's play for him.

“These things will happen unless I call my employee and tell him to forget the phone call.”

“And all I have to do is tell you where Marcia is,” I said. “No deal, Cressner, I don't know. We set it up this way just for you.”

“My men had her followed.”

“I don't think so. I think we lost them at the airport.”

Cressner sighed, removed the smoldering cigarette holder, and dropped it into a chromium ashtray with a sliding lid. No fuss, no muss. The used cigarette and Stan Norris had been taken care of with equal ease.

“Actually,” he said, “you're right. The old ladies'-room vanishing act. My operatives were extremely vexed to have been taken in by such an ancient ruse. I think it was so old they never expected it.”

I said nothing. After Marcia had ditched Cressner's operatives at the airport, she had taken the bus shuttle back to the city and then to the bus station; that had been the plan. She had two hundred dollars, all the money that had been in my savings account. Two hundred dollars and a Greyhound bus could take you anyplace in the country.

“Are you always so uncommunicative?” Cressner asked, and he sounded genuinely interested.

“Marcia advised it.”

A little more sharply, he said: “Then I imagine you'll stand on your rights when the police take you in. And the next time you see my wife could be when she's a little old grandmother in a rocker. Have you gotten that through your head? I understand that possession of six ounces of heroin could get you forty years.”

“That won't get you Marcia back.”

He smiled thinly. “And that's the nub of it, isn't it? Shall I review where we are? You and my wife have fallen in love. You have had an affair . . . if you want to call a series of one-nighters in cheap motels

an affair. My wife has left me. However, I have you. And you are in what is called a bind. Does that summarize it adequately?"

"I can understand why she got tired of you," I said.

To my surprise, he threw back his head and laughed. "You know, I rather like you, Mr. Norris. You're vulgar and you're a piker, but you seem to have heart. Marcia said you did. I rather doubted it. Her judgment of character is lax. But you do have a certain . . . verve. Which is why I've set things up the way I have. No doubt Marcia has told you that I am fond of wagering."

"Yes." Now I knew what was wrong with the door in the middle of the glass wall. It was the middle of winter, and no one was going to want to take tea on a balcony forty-three stories up. The balcony had been cleared of furniture. And the screen had been taken off the door. Now why would Cressner have done that?

"I don't like my wife very much," Cressner said, fixing another cigarette carefully in the holder. "That's no secret. I'm sure she's told you as much. And I'm sure a man of your . . . experience knows that contented wives do not jump into the hay with the local tennis-club pro at the drop of a racket. In my opinion, Marcia is a prissy, whey-faced little prude, a whiner, a weeper, a bearer of tales, a—"

"That's about enough," I said.

He smiled coldly. "I beg your pardon. I keep forgetting we are discussing your beloved. It's 8:16. Are you nervous?"

I shrugged.

"Tough to the end," he said, and lit his cigarette. "At any rate, you may wonder why, if I dislike Marcia so much, I do not simply give her her freedom—"

"No, I don't wonder at all."

He frowned at me.

"You're a selfish, grasping, egocentric son of a bitch. That's why. No one takes what's yours. Not even if you don't want it anymore."

He went red and then laughed. "One for you, Mr. Norris. Very good."

I shrugged again.

"I'm going to offer you a wager. If you win, you leave here with the money, the woman, and your freedom. On the other hand, if you

lose, you lose your life.”

I looked at the clock. I couldn't help it. It was 8:19.

“All right,” I said. What else? It would buy time, at least. Time for me to think of some way to beat it out of here, with or without the money.

Cressner picked up the telephone beside him and dialed a number.

“Tony? Plan two. Yes.” He hung up.

“What's plan two?” I asked.

“I'll call Tony back in fifteen minutes, and he will remove the . . . offending substance from the trunk of your car and drive it back here. If I don't call, he will get in touch with the police.”

“Not very trusting, are you?”

“Be sensible, Mr. Norris. There is twenty thousand dollars on the carpet between us. In this city murder has been committed for twenty cents.”

“What's the bet?”

He looked genuinely pained. “Wager, Mr. Norris, wager. Gentlemen make wagers. Vulgarians place bets.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Excellent. I've seen you looking at my balcony.”

“The screen's off the door.”

“Yes. I had it taken off this afternoon. What I propose is this: that you walk around my building on the ledge that juts out just below the penthouse level. If you circumnavigate the building successfully, the jackpot is yours.”

“You're crazy.”

“On the contrary. I have proposed this wager six times to six different people during my dozen years in this apartment. Three of the six were professional athletes, like you—one of them a notorious quarterback more famous for his TV Commercials than his passing game, one a baseball player, one a rather famous jockey who made an extraordinary yearly salary and who was also afflicted with extraordinary alimony problems. The other three were more ordinary citizens who had differing professions but two things in common: a need for money and a certain degree of body grace.” He puffed his

cigarette thoughtfully and then continued. "The wager was declined five times out of hand. On the other occasion, it was accepted. The terms were twenty thousand dollars against six months' service to me. I collected. The fellow took one look over the edge of the balcony and nearly fainted." Cressner looked amused and contemptuous. "He said everything down there looked so small. That was what killed his nerve."

"What makes you think—"

He cut me off with an annoyed wave of his hand. "Don't bore me, Mr. Norris. I think you will do it because you have no choice. It's my wager on the one hand or forty years in San Quentin on the other. The money and my wife are only added fillips, indicative of my good nature."

"What guarantee do I have that you won't double-cross me? Maybe I'd do it and find out you'd called Tony and told him to go ahead anyway."

He sighed. "You are a walking case of paranoia, Mr. Norris. I don't love my wife. It is doing my storied ego no good at all to have her around. Twenty thousand dollars is a pittance to me. I pay four times that every week to be given to police bagmen. As for the wager, however . . ." His eyes gleamed. "That is beyond price."

I thought about it, and he left me. I suppose he knew that the real mark always convinces himself. I was a thirty-six-year-old tennis bum, and the club had been thinking of letting me go when Marcia applied a little gentle pressure. Tennis was the only profession I knew, and without it, even getting a job as a janitor would be tough—especially with a record. It was kid stuff, but employers don't care.

And the funny thing was that I really loved Marcia Cressner. I had fallen for her after two nine-o'clock tennis lessons, and she had fallen for me just as hard. It was a case of Stan Norris luck, all right. After thirty-six years of happy bachelorhood, I had fallen like a sack of mail for the wife of an Organization overlord.

The old tom sitting there and puffing his imported Turkish cigarette knew all that, of course. And something else, as well. I had no guarantee that he wouldn't turn me in if I accepted his wager and won, but I knew damn well that I'd be in the cooler by ten o'clock if I

didn't. And the next time I'd be free would be at the turn of the century.

"I want to know one thing," I said.

"What might that be, Mr. Norris?"

"Look me right in the face and tell me if you're a welsher or not."

He looked at me directly. "Mr. Norris," he said quietly, "I never welsh."

"All right," I said. What other choice was there?

He stood up, beaming. "Excellent! Really excellent! Approach the door to the balcony with me, Mr. Norris."

We walked over together. His face was that of a man who had dreamed this scene hundreds of times and was enjoying its actuality to the fullest.

"The ledge is five inches wide," he said dreamily. "I've measured it myself. In fact, I've stood on it, holding on to the balcony, of course. All you have to do is lower yourself over the wrought-iron railing. You'll be chest-high. But, of course, beyond the railing there are no handgrips. You'll have to inch your way along, being very careful not to overbalance."

My eye had fastened on something else outside the window . . . something that made my blood temperature sink several degrees. It was a wind gauge. Cressner's apartment was quite close to the lake, and it was high enough so there were no higher buildings to act as a windbreak. That wind would be cold, and it would cut like a knife. The needle was standing at ten pretty steadily, but a gust would send the needle almost up to twenty-five for a few seconds before dropping off.

"Ah, I see you've noticed my wind gauge," Cressner said jovially. "Actually, it's the other side which gets the prevailing wind; so the breeze may be a little stronger on that side. But actually this is a fairly still night. I've seen evenings when the wind has gusted up to eighty-five . . . you can actually feel the building rock a little. A bit like being on a ship, in the crow's nest. And it's quite mild for this time of year."

He pointed, and I saw the lighted numerals atop a bank skyscraper to the left. They said it was forty-four degrees. But with

the wind, that would have made the chill factor somewhere in the mid-twenties.

“Have you got a coat?” I asked. I was wearing a light jacket.

“Alas, no.” The lighted figures on the bank switched to show the time. It was 8:32. “And I think you had better get started, Mr. Norris, so I can call Tony and put plan three into effect. A good boy but apt to be impulsive. You understand.”

I understood, all right. Too damn well.

But the thought of being with Marcia, free from Cressner's tentacles and with enough money to get started at something made me push open the sliding-glass door and step out onto the balcony. It was cold and damp; the wind ruffled my hair into my eyes.

“Bon soir,” Cressner said behind me, but I didn't bother to look back. I approached the railing, but I didn't look down. Not yet. I began to do deep-breathing.

It's not really an exercise at all but a form of self-hypnosis. With every inhale-exhale, you throw a distraction out of your mind, until there's nothing left but the match ahead of you. I got rid of the money with one breath and Cressner himself with two. Marcia took longer—her face kept rising in my mind, telling me not to be stupid, not to play his game, that maybe Cressner never welshed, but he always hedged his bets. I didn't listen. I couldn't afford to. If I lost this match, I wouldn't have to buy the beers and take the ribbing; I'd be so much scarlet sludge splattered for a block of Deakman Street in both directions.

When I thought I had it, I looked down.

The building sloped away like a smooth chalk cliff to the street far below. The cars parked there looked like those match-box models you can buy in the five-and-dime. The ones driving by the building were just tiny pinpoints of light. If you fell that far, you would have plenty of time to realize just what was happening, to see the wind blowing your clothes as the earth pulled you back faster and faster. You'd have time to scream a long, long scream. And the sound you made when you hit the pavement would be like the sound of an overripe watermelon.

I could understand why that other guy had chickened out. But he'd only had six months to worry about. I was staring forty long, gray, Marcia-less years in the eye.

I looked at the ledge. It looked small, I had never seen five inches that looked so much like two. At least the building was fairly new; it wouldn't crumble under me.

I hoped.

I swung over the railing and carefully lowered myself until I was standing on the ledge. My heels were out over the drop. The floor on the balcony was about chest-high, and I was looking into Cressner's penthouse through the wrought-iron ornamental bars. He was standing inside the door, smoking, watching me the way a scientist watches a guinea pig to see what the latest injection will do.

"Call," I said, holding on to the railing.

"What?"

"Call Tony. I don't move until you do."

He went back into the living room—it looked amazingly warm and safe and cozy—and picked up the phone. It was a worthless gesture, really. With the wind, I couldn't hear what he was saying. He put the phone down and returned. "Taken care of, Mr. Norris."

"It better be."

"Goodbye, Mr. Norris. I'll see you in a bit . . . perhaps."

It was time to do it. Talking was done. I let myself think of Marcia one last time, her light-brown hair, her wide gray eyes, her lovely body, and then put her out of my mind for good. No more looking down, either. It would have been too easy to get paralyzed, looking down through that space. Too easy to just freeze up until you lost your balance or just fainted from fear. It was time for tunnel vision. Time to concentrate on nothing but left foot, right foot.

I began to move to the right, holding on to the balcony's railing as long as I could. It didn't take long to see I was going to need all the tennis muscle my ankles had. With my heels beyond the edge, those tendons would be taking all my weight.

I got to the end of the balcony, and for a moment I didn't think I was going to be able to let go of that safety. I forced myself to do it. Five inches, hell, that was plenty of room. If the ledge were only a

foot off the ground instead of 400 feet, you could breeze around this building in four minutes flat, I told myself. So just pretend it is.

Yeah, and if you fall from a ledge a foot off the ground, you just say rats, and try again. Up here you get only one chance.

I slid my right foot farther and then brought my left foot next to it. I let go of the railing. I put my open hands up, allowing the palms to rest against the rough stone of the apartment building. I caressed the stone. I could have kissed it.

A gust of wind hit me, snapping the collar of my jacket against my face, making my body sway on the ledge. My heart jumped into my throat and stayed there until the wind had died down. A strong enough gust would have peeled me right off my perch and sent me flying down into the night. And the wind would be stronger on the other side.

I turned my head to the left, pressing my cheek against the stone. Cressner was leaning over the balcony, watching me.

“Enjoying yourself?” he asked affably.

He was wearing a brown camel's-hair overcoat.

“I thought you didn't have a coat,” I said.

“I lied,” he answered equably. “I lie about a lot of things.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing . . . nothing at all. Or perhaps it does mean something. A little psychological warfare, eh, Mr. Norris? I should tell you not to linger overlong. The ankles grow tired, and if they should give way . . .” He took an apple out of his pocket, bit into it, and then tossed it over the edge. There was no sound for a long time. Then, a faint and sickening plop. Cressner chuckled.

He had broken my concentration, and I could feel panic nibbling at the edges of my mind with steel teeth. A torrent of terror wanted to rush in and drown me. I turned my head away from him and did deep-breathing, flushing the panic away. I was looking at the lighted bank sign, which now said: 8:46, Time to Save at Mutual!

By the time the lighted numbers read 8:49, I felt that I had myself under control again. I think Cressner must have decided I'd frozen, and I heard a sardonic patter of applause when I began to shuffle toward the corner of the building again.

I began to feel the cold. The lake had whetted the edge of the wind; its clammy dampness bit at my skin like an auger. My thin jacket billowed out behind me as I shuffled along. I moved slowly, cold or not. If I was going to do this, I would have to do it slowly and deliberately. If I rushed, I would fall.

The bank clock read 8:52 when I reached the corner. It didn't appear to be a problem—the ledge went right around, making a square corner—but my right hand told me that there was a crosswind. If I got caught leaning the wrong way, I would take a long ride very quickly.

I waited for the wind to drop, but for a long time it refused to, almost as though it were Cressner's willing ally. It slapped against me with vicious, invisible fingers, prying and poking and tickling. At last, after a particularly strong gust had made me rock on my toes, I knew that I could wait forever and the wind would never drop all the way off.

So the next time it sank a little, I slipped my right foot around and, clutching both walls with my hands, made the turn. The crosswind pushed me two ways at once, and I tottered. For a second I was sickeningly sure that Cressner had won his wager. Then I slid a step farther along and pressed myself tightly against the wall, a held breath slipping out of my dry throat.

That was when the raspberry went off, almost in my ear.

Startled, I jerked back to the very edge of balance. My hands lost the wall and pinwheeled crazily for balance. I think that if one of them had hit the stone face of the building, I would have been gone. But after what seemed an eternity, gravity decided to let me return to the wall instead of sending me down to the pavement forty-three stories below.

My breath sobbed out of my lungs in a pained whistle. My legs were rubbery. The tendons in my ankles were humming like high-voltage wires. I had never felt so mortal. The man with the sickle was close enough to read over my shoulder.

I twisted my neck, looked up, and there was Cressner, leaning out of his bedroom window four feet above me. He was smiling, in his right hand he held a New Year's Eve noisemaker.

“Just keeping you on your toes,” he said.

I didn't waste my breath. I couldn't have spoken above a croak anyway. My heart was thudding crazily in my chest. I sidled five or six feet along, just in case he was thinking about leaning out and giving me a good shove. Then I stopped and closed my eyes and deep-breathed until I had my act back together again.

I was on the short side of the building now. On my right only the highest towers of the city bulked above me. On the left, only the dark circle of the lake, with a few pinpricks of light which floated on it. The wind whooped and moaned.

The crosswind at the second corner was not so tricky, and I made it around with no trouble. And then something bit me.

I gasped and jerked. The shift of balance scared me, and I pressed tightly against the building. I was bitten again. No . . . not bitten but pecked. I looked down.

There was a pigeon standing on the ledge, looking up with bright, hateful eyes.

You get used to pigeons in the city; they're as common as cab drivers who can't change a ten. They don't like to fly, and they give ground grudgingly, as if the sidewalks were theirs by squatters' rights. Oh, yes, and you're apt to find their calling cards on the hood of your car. But you never take much notice. They may be occasionally irritating, but they're interlopers in our world.

But I was in his, and I was nearly helpless, and he seemed to know it. He pecked my tired right ankle again, sending a bright dart of pain up my leg.

“Get,” I snarled at it. “Get out.”

The pigeon only pecked me again. I was obviously in what he regarded as his home; this section of the ledge was covered with droppings, old and new.

A muted cheeping from above.

I cricked my neck as far back as it would go and looked up. A beak darted at my face, and I almost recoiled. If I had, I might have become the city's first pigeon-induced casualty. It was Mama Pigeon, protecting a bunch of baby pigeons just under the slight overhang of the roof. Too far up to peck my head, thank God.

Her husband pecked me again, and now blood was flowing. I could feel it. I began to inch my way along again, hoping to scare the pigeon off the ledge. No way. Pigeons don't scare, not city pigeons, anyway. If a moving van only makes them amble a little faster, a man pinned on a high ledge isn't going to upset them at all.

The pigeon backpedaled as I shuffled forward, his bright eyes never leaving my face except when the sharp beak dipped to peck my ankle. And the pain was getting more intense now; the bird was pecking at raw flesh . . . and eating it, for all I knew.

I kicked at it with my right foot. It was a weak kick, the only kind I could afford. The pigeon only fluttered its wings a bit and then returned to the attack. I, on the other hand, almost went off the side.

The pigeon pecked me again, again, again. A cold blast of wind struck me, rocking me to the limit of balance; pads of my fingers scraped at the bland stone, and I came to rest with my left cheek pressed against the wall, breathing heavily.

Cressner couldn't have conceived of worse torture if he had planned it for ten years. One peck was not so bad. Two or three were little more. But that damned bird must have pecked me sixty times before I reached the wrought-iron railing of the penthouse opposite Cressner's.

Reaching that railing was like reaching the gates of heaven. My hands curled sweetly around the cold uprights and held on as if they would never let go.

Peck.

The pigeon was staring up at me almost smugly with its bright eyes, confident of my impotence and its own invulnerability. I was reminded of Cressner's expression when he had ushered me out onto the balcony on the other side of the building.

Gripping the iron bars more tightly, I lashed out with a hard, strong kick and caught the pigeon squarely. It emitted a wholly satisfying squawk and rose into the air, wings flapping. A few feathers, dove gray, settled back to the ledge or disappeared slowly down into the darkness, swan-boating back and forth in the air.

Gasping, I crawled up onto the balcony and collapsed there. Despite the cold, my body was dripping with sweat. I don't know how

long I lay there, recuperating. The building hid the bank clock, and I don't wear a watch.

I sat up before my muscles could stiffen up on me and gingerly rolled down my sock. The right ankle was lacerated and bleeding, but the wound looked superficial. Still, I would have to have it taken care of, if I ever got out of this. God knows what germs pigeons carry around. I thought of bandaging the raw skin but decided not to. I might stumble on a tied bandage. Time enough later. Then I could buy twenty thousand dollars' worth of bandages.

I got up and looked longingly into the darkened penthouse opposite Cressner's. Barren, empty, unlivable. The heavy storm screen was over this door. I might have been able to break in, but that would have been forfeiting the bet. And I had more to lose than money.

When I could put it off no longer, I slipped over the railing and back onto the ledge. The pigeon, a few feathers worse for wear, was standing below his mate's nest, where the guano was thickest, eyeing me balefully. But I didn't think he'd bother me, not when he saw I was moving away.

It was very hard to move away—much harder than it had been to leave Cressner's balcony. My mind knew I had to, but my body, particularly my ankles, was screaming that it would be folly to leave such a safe harbor. But I did leave, with Marcia's face in the darkness urging me on.

I got to the second short side, made it around the corner, and shuffled slowly across the width of the building. Now that I was getting close, there was an almost ungovernable urge to hurry, to get it over with. But if I hurried, I would die. So I forced myself to go slowly.

The crosswind almost got me again on the fourth corner, and I slipped around it thanks to luck rather than skill. I rested against the building, getting my breath back. But for the first time I knew that I was going to make it, that I was going to win. My hands felt like half-frozen steaks, my ankles hurt like fire (especially the pigeon-pecked right ankle), sweat kept trickling in my eyes, but I knew I was going to make it. Halfway down the length of the building, warm yellow light

spilled out on Cressner's balcony. Far beyond I could see the bank sign glowing like a welcome-home banner. It was 10:48, but it seemed that I had spent my whole life on those five inches of ledge.

And God help Cressner if he tried to welsh. The urge to hurry was gone. I almost lingered. It was 11:09 when I put first my right hand on the wrought-iron balcony railing and then my left. I hauled myself up, wriggled over the top, collapsed thankfully on the floor . . . and felt the cold steel muzzle of a .45 against my temple.

I looked up and saw a goon ugly enough to stop Big Ben dead in its clockwork. He was grinning.

"Excellent!" Cressner's voice said from within. "I applaud you, Mr. Norris!" He proceeded to do just that. "Bring him in, Tony."

Tony hauled me up and set me on my feet so abruptly that my weak ankles almost buckled. Going in, I staggered against the balcony door.

Cressner was standing by the living-room fireplace, sipping brandy from a goblet the size of a fishbowl. The money had been replaced in the shopping bag. It still stood in the middle of the burnt-orange rug.

I caught a glimpse of myself in a small mirror on the other side of the room. The hair was disheveled, the face pallid except for two bright spots of color on the cheeks. The eyes looked insane.

I got only a glimpse, because the next moment I was flying across the room. I hit the Basque chair and fell over it, pulling it down on top of me and losing my wind.

When I got some of it back, I sat up and managed: "You lousy welsher. You had this planned."

"Indeed I did," Cressner said, carefully setting his brandy on the mantel. "But I'm not a welsher, Mr. Norris. Indeed no. Just an extremely poor loser. Tony is here only to make sure you don't do anything . . . ill-advised." He put his fingers under his chin and tittered a little. He didn't look like a poor loser. He looked more like a cat with canary feathers on its muzzle. I got up, suddenly feeling more frightened than I had on the ledge.

"You fixed it," I said slowly. "Somehow, you fixed it."

“Not at all. The heroin has been removed from your car. The car itself is back in the parking lot. The money is over there. You may take it and go.”

“Fine,” I said.

Tony stood by the glass door to the balcony, still looking like a leftover from Halloween. The .45 was in his hand. I walked over to the shopping bag, picked it up, and walked toward the door on my jittery ankles, fully expecting to be shot down in my tracks. But when I got the door open, I began to have the same feeling that I'd had on the ledge when I rounded the fourth corner: I was going to make it.

Cressner's voice, lazy and amused, stopped me.

“You don't really think that old lady's-room dodge fooled anyone, do you?”

I turned back slowly, the shopping bag in my arms. “What do you mean?”

“I told you I never welsh, and I never do. You won three things, Mr. Norris. The money, your freedom, my wife. You have the first two. You can pick up the third at the county morgue.”

I stared at him, unable to move, frozen in a soundless thunderclap of shock.

“You didn't really think I'd let you have her?” he asked me pityingly. “Oh, no. The money, yes. Your freedom, yes. But not Marcia. Still, I don't welsh. And after you've had her buried—”

I didn't go near him. Not then. He was for later. I walked toward Tony, who looked slightly surprised until Cressner said in a bored voice: “Shoot him, please.”

I threw the bag of money. It hit him squarely in the gun hand, and it struck him hard. I hadn't been using my arms and wrists out there, and they're the best part of any tennis player. His bullet went into the burnt-orange rug, and then I had him.

His face was the toughest part of him. I yanked the gun out of his hand and hit him across the bridge of the nose with the barrel. He went down with a single very weary grunt, looking like Rondo Hatton.

Cressner was almost out the door when I snapped a shot over his shoulder and said, “Stop right there, or you're dead.”

He thought about it and stopped. When he turned around, his cosmopolitan world-weary act had curdled a little around the edges. It curdled a little more when he saw Tony lying on the floor and choking on his own blood.

"She's not dead," he said quickly. "I had to salvage something, didn't I?" He gave me a sick, cheese-eating grin.

"I'm a sucker, but I'm not that big a sucker," I said. My voice sounded lifeless, dead. Why not? Marcia had been my life, and this man had put her on a slab.

With a finger that trembled slightly, Cressner pointed at the money tumbled around Tony's feet. "That," he said, "that's chickenfeed. I can get you a hundred thousand. Or five. Or how about a million, all of it in a Swiss bank account? How about that? How about—"

"I'll make you a bet," I said slowly.

He looked from the barrel of the gun to my face. "A—"

"A bet," I repeated. "Not a wager. Just a plain old bet. I'll bet you can't walk around this building on the ledge out there."

His face went dead pale. For a moment I thought he was going to faint. "You . . ." he whispered.

"These are the stakes," I said in my dead voice. "If you make it, I'll let you go. How's that?"

"No," he whispered. His eyes were huge, staring.

"Okay," I said, and cocked the pistol.

"No!" he said, holding his hands out. "No! Don't! I . . . all right." He licked his lips.

I motioned with the gun, and he preceded me out onto the balcony. "You're shaking," I told him. "That's going to make it harder."

"Two million," he said, and he couldn't get his voice above a husky whine. "Two million in unmarked bills."

"No," I said. "Not for ten million. But if you make it, you go free. I'm serious."

A minute later he was standing on the ledge. He was shorter than I; you could just see his eyes over the edge, wide and beseeching, and his white-knuckled hands gripping the iron rail like prison bars.

"Please," he whispered. "Anything."

"You're wasting time," I said. "It takes it out of the ankles."

But he wouldn't move until I had put the muzzle of the gun against his forehead. Then he began to shuffle to the right, moaning. I glanced up at the bank clock. It was 11:29.

I didn't think he was going to make it to the first corner. He didn't want to budge at all, and when he did, he moved jerkily, taking risks with his center of gravity, his dressing gown billowing into the night.

He disappeared around the corner and out of sight at 12:01, almost forty minutes ago. I listened closely for the diminishing scream as the crosswind got him, but it didn't come. Maybe the wind had dropped. I do remember thinking the wind was on his side, when I was out there. Or maybe he was just lucky. Maybe he's out on the other balcony now, quivering in a heap, afraid to go any farther.

But he probably knows that if I catch him there when I break into the other penthouse, I'll shoot him down like a dog. And speaking of the other side of the building, I wonder how he likes that pigeon.

Was that a scream? I don't know. It might have been the wind. It doesn't matter. The bank clock says 12:44. Pretty soon I'll break into the other apartment and check the balcony, but right now I'm just sitting here on Cressner's balcony with Tony's .45 in my hand. Just on the off chance that he might come around that last corner with his dressing gown billowing out behind him.

Cressner said he's never welshed on a bet.

But I've been known to.

# THE LAWNMOWER MAN

In previous years, Harold Parkette had always taken pride in his lawn. He had owned a large silver Lawnboy and paid the boy down the block five dollars per cutting to push it. In those days Harold Parkette had followed the Boston Red Sox on the radio with a beer in his hand and the knowledge that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world, including his lawn. But last year, in mid-October, fate had played Harold Parkette a nasty trick. While the boy was mowing the grass for the last time of the season, the Castonmeyers' dog had chased the Smiths' cat under the mower.

Harold's daughter had thrown up half a quart of cherry Kool-Aid into the lap of her new jumper, and his wife had nightmares for a week afterward. Although she had arrived after the fact, she *had* arrived in time to see Harold and the green-faced boy cleaning the blades. Their daughter and Mrs. Smith stood over them, weeping, although Alicia had taken time enough to change her jumper for a pair of blue jeans and one of those disgusting skimpy sweaters. She had a crush on the boy who mowed the lawn.

After a week of listening to his wife moan and gobble in the next bed, Harold decided to get rid of the mower. He didn't really *need* a mower anyway, he supposed. He had hired a boy this year; next year he would just hire a boy *and* a mower. And maybe Carla would stop moaning in her sleep. He might even get laid again.

So he took the silver Lawnboy down to Phil's Sunoco, and he and Phil dickered over it. Harold came away with a brand-new Kelly blackwall tire and a tankful of hi-test, and Phil put the silver Lawnboy

out on one of the pump islands with a hand-lettered FOR SALE sign on it.

And this year, Harold just kept putting off the necessary hiring. When he finally got around to calling last year's boy, his mother told him Frank had gone to the state university. Harold shook his head in wonder and went to the refrigerator to get a beer. Time certainly flew, didn't it? My God, yes.

He put off hiring a new boy as first May and then June slipped past him and the Red Sox continued to wallow in fourth place. He sat on the back porch on the weekends and watched glumly as a never ending progression of young boys he had never seen before popped out to mutter a quick hello before taking his buxom daughter off to the local passion pit. And the grass thrived and grew in a marvelous way. It was a good summer for grass; three days of shine followed by one of gentle rain, almost like clockwork.

By mid-July, the lawn looked more like a meadow than a suburbanite's backyard, and Jack Castonmeyer had begun to make all sorts of extremely unfunny jokes, most of which concerned the price of hay and alfalfa. And Don Smith's four-year-old daughter Jenny had taken to hiding in it when there was oatmeal for breakfast or spinach for supper.

One day in late July, Harold went out on the patio during the seventh-inning stretch and saw a woodchuck sitting perkily on the overgrown back walk. The time had come, he decided. He flicked off the radio, picked up the paper, and turned to the classifieds. And half way down the Part Time column, he found this: *Lawns mowed. Reasonable. 776-2390*

Harold called the number, expecting a vacuuming house-wife who would yell outside for her son. Instead, a briskly professional voice said, "Pastoral Greenery and Outdoor Services . . . how may we help you?"

Cautiously, Harold told the voice how Pastoral Greenery could help him. Had it come to this, then? Were lawncutters starting their own businesses and hiring office help? He asked the voice about rates, and the voice quoted him a reasonable figure.

Harold hung up with a lingering feeling of unease and went back to the porch. He sat down, turned on the radio, and stared out over his glandular lawn at the Saturday clouds moving slowly across the Saturday sky. Carla and Alicia were at his mother-in-law's and the house was his. It would be a pleasant surprise for them if the boy who was coming to cut the lawn finished before they came back.

He cracked a beer and sighed as Dick Drago was touched for a double and then hit a batter. A little breeze shuffled across the screened-in porch. Crickets hummed softly in the long grass. Harold grunted something unkind about Dick Drago and then dozed off.

He was jarred awake a half hour later by the doorbell. He knocked over his beer getting up to answer it.

A man in grass-stained denim overalls stood on the front stoop, chewing a toothpick. He was fat. The curve of his belly pushed his faded blue overall out to a point where Harold half suspected he had swallowed a basketball.

"Yes?" Harold Parkette asked, still half asleep.

The man grinned, rolled his toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other, tugged at the seat of his overalls, and then pushed his green baseball cap up a notch on his forehead. There was a smear of fresh engine oil on the bill of his cap. And there he was, smelling of grass, earth, and oil, grinning at Harold Parkett.

"Pastoral sent me, buddy," he said jovially, scratching his crotch. "You called, right? Right, buddy?" He grinned on endlessly.

"Oh. The lawn. You?" Harold stared stupidly.

"Yep, me." The lawnmower man bellowed fresh laughter into Harold's sleep-puffy face.

Harold stood helplessly aside and the lawnmower man tromped ahead of him down the hall, through the living room and kitchen, and onto the back porch. Now Harold had placed the man and everything was all right. He had seen the type before, working for the sanitation department and the highway repair crews out on the turnpike. Always with a spare minute to lean on their shovels and smoke Lucky Strikes or Camels, looking at you as if they were the salt of the earth, able to hit you for five or sleep with your wife anytime they wanted to. Harold had always been slightly afraid of men like this;

they were always tanned dark brown, there were always nets of wrinkles around their eyes, and they always knew what to do.

“The back lawn's the real chore,” he told the man, unconsciously deepening his voice. “It's square and there are no obstructions, but it's pretty well grown up.” His voice faltered back into its normal register and he found himself apologizing: “I'm afraid I've let it go.”

“No sweat, buddy. No strain. Great-great-great.” The lawnmower man grinned at him with a thousand traveling-salesman jokes in his eyes. “The taller, the better. Healthy soil, that's what you got there, by Circe. That's what I always say.”

*By Circe?*

The lawnmower man cocked his head at the radio. Yastrzemski had just struck out. “Red Sox fan? I'm a Yankees man, myself.” He clumped back into the house and down the front hall. Harold watched him bitterly.

He sat back down and looked accusingly for a moment at the puddle of beer under the table with the overturned Coors can in the middle of it. He thought of getting the mop from the kitchen and decided it would keep.

*No sweat. No strain.*

He opened his paper to the financial section and cast a judicious eye at the closing stock quotations. As a good Republican, he considered the Wall Street executives behind the columned type to be at least minor demigods—

*(By Circe??)*

—and he had wished many times that he could better understand the Word, as handed down from the mount not on stone tablets but in such enigmatic abbreviations as pct. and Kdk and 3.28 up 2/3. He had once bought a judicious three shares in a company called Midwest Bisonburgers, Inc., that had gone broke in 1968. He had lost his entire seventy-five-dollar investment. Now, he understood, bisonburgers were quite the coming thing. The wave of the future. He had discussed this often with Sonny, the bartender down at the Goldfish Bowl. Sonny told Harold his trouble was that he was five years ahead of his time, and he should . . .

A sudden racketing roar startled him out of the new doze he had just been slipping into.

Harold jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over and staring around wildly.

“That’s a lawnmower?” Harold Parkette asked the kitchen. “My God, *that’s a lawnmower?*”

He rushed through the house and stared out the front door. There was nothing out there but a battered green van with the words PASTORAL GREENERY, INC. painted on the side. The roaring sound was in back now. Harold rushed through his house again, burst onto the back porch, and stood frozen.

It was obscene.

It was a travesty.

The aged red power mower the fat man had brought in his van was running on its own. No one was pushing it; in fact, no one was within five feet of it. It was running at a fever pitch, tearing through the unfortunate grass of Harold Parkette’s back lawn like an avenging red devil straight from hell. It screamed and bellowed and farted oily blue smoke in a crazed kind of mechanical madness that made Harold feel ill with terror. The overripe smell of cut grass hung in the air like sour wine.

But the lawnmower man was the true obscenity.

The lawnmower man had removed his clothes—every stitch. They were folded neatly in the empty birdbath that was at the center of the back lawn. Naked and grass-stained, he was crawling along about five feet behind the mower, eating the cut grass. Green juice ran down his chin and dripped onto his pendulous belly. And every time the lawnmower whirled around a corner, he rose and did an odd, skipping jump before prostrating himself again.

“*Stop!*” Harold Parkette screamed. “*Stop that!*”

But the lawnmower man took no notice, and his screaming scarlet familiar never slowed. If anything, it seemed to speed up. Its nicked steel grill seemed to grin sweatily at Harold as it raved by.

Then Harold saw the mole. It must have been hiding in stunned terror just ahead of the mower, in the swath of grass about to be

slaughtered. It bolted across the cut band of lawn toward safety under the porch, a panicky brown streak.

The lawnmower swerved.

Blatting and howling, it roared over the mole and spat it out in a string of fur and entrails that reminded Harold of the Smiths' cat. The mole destroyed, the lawnmower rushed back to the main job.

The lawnmower man crawled rapidly by, eating grass. Harold stood paralyzed with horror, stocks, bonds, and bisonburgers completely forgotten. He could actually see that huge, pendulous belly expanding. *The lawnmower man swerved and ate the mole.*

That was when Harold Parkette leaned out the screen door and vomited into the zinnias. The world went gray, and suddenly he realized he was fainting, *had* fainted. He collapsed backward onto the porch and closed his eyes . . .

Someone was shaking him. Carla was shaking him. He hadn't done the dishes or emptied the garbage and Carla was going to be very angry but that was all right. As long as she was waking him up, taking him out of the horrible dream he had been having, back into the normal world, nice normal Carla with her Playtex Living Girdle and her buck teeth—

Buck teeth, yes. But not Carla's buck teeth. Carla had weak-looking chipmunk buck teeth. But these teeth were—

Hairy.

Green hair was growing on these buck teeth. It almost looked like

—  
*Grass'?*

"Oh my God," Harold said.

"You fainted, buddy, right, huh?" The lawnmower man was bending over him, grinning with his hairy teeth. His lips and chin were hairy, too. Everything was hairy. And green. The yard stank of grass and gas and too sudden silence.

Harold bolted up to a sitting position and stared at the dead mower. All the grass had been neatly cut. And there would be no need to rake this job, Harold observed sickly. If the lawnmower man

had missed a single cut blade, he couldn't see it. He squinted obliquely at the lawnmower man and winced. He was still naked, still fat, still terrifying. Green trickles ran from the corners of his mouth.

"What is this?" Harold begged.

The man waved an arm benignly at the lawn. "This? Well, it's a new thing the boss has been trying. It works out real good. Real good, buddy. We're killing two birds with one stone. We keep getting along toward the final stage, and we're making money to support our other operations to boot. See what I mean? Of course every now and then we run into a customer who doesn't understand—some people got no respect for efficiency, right?—but the boss is always agreeable to a sacrifice. Sort of keeps the wheels greased, if you catch me."

Harold said nothing. One word knelled over and over in his mind, and that word was "sacrifice." In his mind's eye he saw the mole spewing out from under the battered red mower.

He got up slowly, like a palsied old man. "Of course," he said, and could only come up with a line from one of Alicia's folk-rock records. "God bless the grass."

The lawnmower man slapped one summer-apple-colored thigh. "That's pretty good, buddy. In fact, that's damned good. I can see you got the right spirit. Okay if I write that down when I get back to the office? Might mean a promotion."

"Certainly," Harold said, retreating toward the back door and striving to keep his melting smile in place. "You go right ahead and finish. I think I'll take a little nap—"

"Sure, buddy," the lawnmower man said, getting ponderously to his feet. Harold noticed the unusually deep split between the first and second toes, almost as if the feet were . . . well, cloven.

"It hits everybody kinda hard at first," the lawnmower man said. "You'll get used to it." He eyed Harold's portly figure shrewdly. "In fact, you might even want to give it a whirl yourself. The boss has always got an eye out for new talent."

"The boss," Harold repeated faintly.

The lawnmower man paused at the bottom of the steps and gazed tolerantly up at Harold Parkette. "Well, say, buddy. I figured you must

have guessed . . . God bless the grass and all.”

Harold shook his head carefully and the lawnmower man laughed.

“Pan. Pan's the boss.” And he did a half hop, half shuffle in the newly cut grass and the lawnmower screamed into life and began to trundle around the house.

“The neighbors—” Harold began, but the lawnmower man only waved cheerily and disappeared.

Out front the lawnmower blatted and howled. Harold Parkette refused to look, as if by refusing he could deny the grotesque spectacle that the Castonmeyers and Smiths—wretched Democrats both—were probably drinking in with horrified but no doubt righteously I-told-you-so eyes.

Instead of looking, Harold went to the telephone, snatched it up, and dialed police headquarters from the emergency decal pasted on the phone's handset.

“Sergeant Hall,” the voice at the other end said.

Harold stuck a finger in his free ear and said, “My name is Harold Parkette. My address is 1421 East Endicott Street. I'd like to report . . .” What? What would he like to report? A man is in the process of raping and murdering my lawn and he works for a fellow named Pan and has cloven feet?

“Yes, Mr. Parkette?”

Inspiration struck. “I'd like to report a case of indecent exposure.”

“Indecent exposure,” Sergeant Hall repeated.

“Yes. There's a man mowing my lawn. He's in the, uh, altogether.”

“You mean he's naked?” Sergeant Hall asked, politely incredulous.

“Naked!” Harold agreed, holding tightly to the frayed ends of his sanity. “Nude. Unclothed. Bare-assed. On my front lawn. Now will you get somebody the hell over here?”

“That address was 1421 West Endicott?” Sergeant Hall asked bemusedly.

“East!” Harold yelled. “For God's sake—”

“And you say he's definitely naked? You are able to observe his, uh, genitals and so on?”

Harold tried to speak and could only gargle. The sound of the insane lawnmower seemed to be growing louder and louder,

drowning out everything in the universe. He felt his gorge rise.

“Can you speak up?” Sergeant Hall buzzed. “There's an awfully noisy connection there at your end—”

The front door crashed open.

Harold looked around and saw the lawnmower man's mechanized familiar advancing through the door. Behind it came the lawnmower man himself, still quite naked. With something approaching true insanity, Harold saw the man's pubic hair was a rich fertile green. He was twirling his baseball cap on one finger.

“That was a mistake, buddy,” the lawnmower man said reproachfully. “You shoulda stuck with God bless the grass.”

“Hello? Hello, Mr. Parkette—”

The telephone dropped from Harold's nerveless fingers as the lawnmower began to advance on him, cutting through the nap of Carla's new Mohawk rug and spitting out brown hunks of fiber as it came.

Harold stared at it with a kind of bird-and-snake fascination until it reached the coffee table. When the mower shunted it aside, shearing one leg into sawdust and splinters as it did so, he climbed over the back of his chair and began to retreat toward the kitchen, dragging the chair in front of him.

“That won't do any good, buddy,” the lawnmower man said kindly. “Apt to be messy, too. Now if you was just to show me where you keep your sharpest butcher knife, we could get this sacrifice business out of the way real painless . . . I think the birdbath would do . . . and then—”

Harold shoved the chair at the lawnmower, which had been craftily flanking him while the naked man drew his attention, and bolted through the doorway. The lawnmower roared around the chair, jetting out exhaust, and as Harold smashed open the porch screen door and leaped down the steps, he heard it—smelled it, felt it—right at his heels.

The lawnmower roared off the top step like a skier going off a jump. Harold sprinted across his newly cut back lawn, but there had been too many beers, too many afternoon naps. He could sense it

nearing him, then on his heels, and then he looked over his shoulder and tripped over his own feet.

The last thing Harold Parkette saw was the grinning grill of the charging lawnmower, rocking back to reveal its flashing, green-stained blades, and above it the fat face of the lawnmower man, shaking his head in good-natured reproof.

“Hell of a thing,” Lieutenant Goodwin said as the last of the photographs were taken. He nodded to the two men in white, and they trundled their basket across the lawn. “He reported some naked guy on his lawn not two hours ago.”

“Is that so?” Patrolman Cooley asked.

“Yeah. One of the neighbors called in, too. Guy named Castonmeyer. He thought it was Parkette himself. Maybe it was, Cooley. Maybe it was.”

“Sir?”

“Crazy with the heat,” Lieutenant Goodwin said gravely, and tapped his temple. “Schizo-fucking-phrenia.”

“Yes sir,” Cooley said respectfully.

“Where's the rest of him?” one of the white-coats asked.

“The birdbath,” Goodwin said. He looked profoundly up at the sky.

“Did you say the birdbath?” the white-coat asked.

“Indeed I did,” Lieutenant Goodwin agreed. Patrolman Cooley looked at the birdbath and suddenly lost most of his tan.

“Sex maniac,” Lieutenant Goodwin said. “Must have been.”

“Prints?” Cooley asked thickly.

“You might as well ask for footprints,” Goodwin said. He gestured at the newly cut grass.

Patrolman Cooley made a strangled noise in his throat.

Lieutenant Goodwin stuffed his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “The world,” he said gravely, “is full of nuts. Never forget that, Cooley. Schizos. Lab boys say somebody chased Parkette through his own living room with a lawnmower. Can you imagine that?”

“No sir,” Cooley said.

Goodwin looked out over Harold Parkette's neatly manicured lawn. "Well, like the man said when he saw the black-haired Swede, it surely is a Norse of a different color."

Goodwin strolled around the house and Cooley followed him. Behind them, the scent of newly mown grass hung pleasantly in the air.

# QUITTERS, INC.

Morrison was waiting for someone who was hung up in the air traffic jam over Kennedy International when he saw a familiar face at the end of the bar and walked down.

“Jimmy? Jimmy McCann?”

It was. A little heavier than when Morrison had seen him at the Atlanta Exhibition the year before, but otherwise he looked awesomely fit. In college he had been a thin, pallid chain smoker buried behind huge horn-rimmed glasses. He had apparently switched to contact lenses.

“Dick Morrison?”

“Yeah. You look great.” He extended his hand and they shook.

“So do you,” McCann said, but Morrison knew it was a lie. He had been overworking, overeating, and smoking too much. “What are you drinking?”

“Bourbon and bitters,” Morrison said. He hooked his feet around a bar stool and lighted a cigarette. “Meeting someone, Jimmy?”

“No. Going to Miami for a conference. A heavy client. Bills six million. I'm supposed to hold his hand because we lost out on a big special next spring.”

“Are you still with Crager and Barton?”

“Executive veep now.”

“Fantastic! Congratulations! When did all this happen?” He tried to tell himself that the little worm of jealousy in his stomach was just acid indigestion. He pulled out a roll of antacid pills and crunched one in his mouth.

“Last August. Something happened that changed my life.” He looked speculatively at Morrison and sipped his drink. “You might be interested.”

My God, Morrison thought with an inner wince. Jimmy McCann's got religion.

“Sure,” he said, and gulped at his drink when it came.

“I wasn't in very good shape,” McCann said. “Personal problems with Sharon, my dad died—heart attack—and I'd developed this hacking cough. Bobby Crager dropped by my office one day and gave me a fatherly little pep talk. Do you remember what those are like?”

“Yeah.” He had worked at Crager and Barton for eighteen months before joining the Morton Agency. “Get your butt in gear or get your butt out.”

McCann laughed. “You know it. Well, to put the capper on it, the doc told me I had an incipient ulcer. He told me to quit smoking.” McCann grimaced. “Might

as well tell me to quit breathing.”

Morrison nodded in perfect understanding. Nonsmokers could afford to be smug. He looked at his own cigarette with distaste and stubbed it out, knowing he would be lighting another in five minutes.

“Did you quit?” He asked.

“Yes, I did. At first I didn't think I'd be able to—I was cheating like hell. Then I met a guy who told me about an outfit over on Forty-sixth Street. Specialists. I said what do I have to lose and went over. I haven't smoked since.”

Morrison's eyes widened. “What did they do? Fill you full of some drug?”

“No.” He had taken out his wallet and was rummaging through it. “Here it is. I knew I had one kicking around.” He laid a plain white business card on the bar between them.

QUITTERS, INC.

*Stop Going Up in Smoke!*

237 East 46th Street

Treatments by Appointment

“Keep it, if you want,” McCann said. “They'll cure you. Guaranteed.”

“How?”

“I can't tell you,” McCann said.

“Huh? Why not?”

“It's part of the contract they make you sign. Anyway, they tell you how it works when they interview you.”

“You signed a *contract*?”

McCann nodded.

“And on the basis of that—”

“Yep.” He smiled at Morrison, who thought: Well, it's happened. Jim McCann has joined the smug bastards.

“Why the great secrecy if this outfit is so fantastic? How come I've never seen any spots on TV, billboards, magazine ads—”

“They get all the clients they can handle by word of mouth.”

“You're an advertising man, Jimmy. You can't believe that.”

“I do,” McCann said. “They have a ninety-eight percent cure rate.”

“Wait a second,” Morrison said. He motioned for another drink and lit a cigarette. “Do these guys strap you down and make you smoke until you throw up?”

“No.”

“Give you something so that you get sick every time you light—”

“No, it's nothing like that. Go and see for yourself.” He gestured at Morrison's cigarette. “You don't really like that, do you?”

“Nooo, but—”

“Stopping really changed things for me,” McCann said. “I don’t suppose it’s the same for everyone, but with me it was just like dominoes falling over. I felt better and my relationship with Sharon improved. I had more energy, and my job performance picked up.”

“Look, you’ve got my curiosity aroused. Can’t you just—”

“I’m sorry, Dick. I really can’t talk about it.” His voice was firm.

“Did you put on any weight?”

For a moment he thought Jimmy McCann looked almost grim. “Yes. A little too much, in fact. But I took it off again. I’m about right now. I was skinny before.”

“Flight 206 now boarding at Gate 9,” the loudspeaker announced.

“That’s me,” McCann said, getting up. He tossed a five on the bar. “Have another, if you like. And think about what I said, Dick. Really.” And then he was gone, making his way through the crowd to the escalators. Morrison picked up the card, looked at it thoughtfully, then tucked it away in his wallet and forgot it.

The card fell out of his wallet and onto another bar a month later. He had left the office early and had come here to drink the afternoon away. Things had not been going so well at the Morton Agency. In fact, things were bloody horrible.

He gave Henry a ten to pay for his drink, then picked up the small card and reread it—237 East Forty-sixth Street was only two blocks over; it was a cool, sunny October day outside, and maybe, just for chuckles—

When Henry brought his change, he finished his drink and then went for a walk.

Quitters, Inc., was in a new building where the monthly rent on office space was probably close to Morrison’s yearly salary. From the directory in the lobby, it looked to him like their offices took up one whole floor, and that spelled money. Lots of it.

He took the elevator up and stepped off into a lushly carpeted foyer and from there into a gracefully appointed reception room with a wide window that looked out on the scurrying bugs below. Three men and one woman sat in the chairs along the walls, reading magazines. Business types, all of them. Morrison went to the desk.

“A friend gave me this,” he said, passing the card to the receptionist. “I guess you’d say he’s an alumnus.”

She smiled and rolled a form into her typewriter. “What is your name, sir?”

“Richard Morrison.”

*Clack-clackety-clack.* But very muted clacks; the typewriter was an IBM.

“Your address?”

“Twenty-nine Maple Lane, Clinton, New York.”

“Married?”

“Yes.”

“Children?”

“One.” He thought of Alvin and frowned slightly. “One” was the wrong word. “A half” might be better. His son was mentally retarded and lived at a special school in New Jersey.

“Who recommended us to you, Mr. Morrison?”

“An old school friend. James McCann.”

“Very good. Will you have a seat? It’s been a very busy day.”

“All right.”

He sat between the woman, who was wearing a severe blue suit, and a young executive type wearing a herringbone jacket and modish sideburns. He took out his pack of cigarettes, looked around, and saw there were no ashtrays.

He put the pack away again. That was all right. He would see this little game through and then light up while he was leaving. He might even tap some ashes on their maroon shag rug if they made him wait long enough. He picked up a copy of *Time* and began to leaf through it.

He was called a quarter of an hour later, after the woman in the blue suit. His nicotine center was speaking quite loudly now. A man who had come in after him took out a cigarette case, snapped it open, saw there were no ashtrays, and put it away—looking a little guilty, Morrison thought. It made him feel better.

At last the receptionist gave him a sunny smile and said, “Go right in, Mr. Morrison.”

Morrison walked through the door beyond her desk and found himself in an indirectly lit hallway. A heavyset man with white hair that looked phony shook his hand, smiled affably, and said, “Follow me, Mr. Morrison.”

He led Morrison past a number of closed, unmarked doors and then opened one of them about halfway down the hall with a key. Beyond the door was an austere little room walled with drilled white cork panels. The only furnishings were a desk with a chair on either side. There was what appeared to be a small oblong window in the wall behind the desk, but it was covered with a short green curtain. There was a picture on the wall to Morrison’s left—a tall man with iron-gray hair. He was holding a sheet of paper in one hand. He looked vaguely familiar.

"I'm Vic Donatti," the heavysset man said. "If you decide to go ahead with our program, I'll be in charge of your case."

"Pleased to know you," Morrison said. He wanted a cigarette very badly.

"Have a seat."

Donatti put the receptionist's form on the desk, and then drew another form from the desk drawer. He looked directly into Morrison's eyes. "Do you want to quit smoking?"

Morrison cleared his throat, crossed his legs, and tried to think of a way to equivocate. He couldn't. "Yes," he said.

"Will you sign this?" He gave Morrison the form. He scanned it quickly. The undersigned agrees not to divulge the methods or techniques or et cetera, et cetera.

"Sure," he said, and Donatti put a pen in his hand. He scratched his name, and Donatti signed below it. A moment later the paper disappeared back into the desk drawer. Well, he thought ironically, I've taken the pledge. He had taken it before. Once it had lasted for two whole days.

"Good," Donatti said. "We don't bother with propaganda here, Mr. Morrison. Questions of health or expense or social grace. We have no interest in why you want to stop smoking. We are pragmatists."

"Good," Morrison said blankly.

"We employ no drugs. We employ no Dale Carnegie people to sermonize you. We recommend no special diet. And we accept no payment until you have stopped smoking for one year."

"My God," Morrison said.

"Mr. McCann didn't tell you that?"

"No."

"How is Mr. McCann, by the way? Is he well?"

"He's fine."

"Wonderful. Excellent. Now . . . just a few questions, Mr. Morrison. These are somewhat personal, but I assure you that your answers will be held in strictest confidence."

"Yes?" Morrison asked noncommittally.

"What is your wife's name?"

"Lucinda Morrison. Her maiden name was Ramsey."

"Do you love her?"

Morrison looked up sharply, but Donatti was looking at him blandly. "Yes, of course," he said.

"Have you ever had marital problems? A separation, perhaps?"

"What has that got to do with kicking the habit?" Morrison asked. He sounded a little angrier than he had intended, but he wanted—hell, he *needed*

—a cigarette.

“A great deal,” Donatti said. “Just bear with me.”

“No. Nothing like that.” Although things *had* been a little tense just lately.

“You just have the one child?”

“Yes. Alvin. He's in a private school.”

“And which school is it?”

“That,” Morrison said grimly, “I'm not going to tell you.”

“All right,” Donatti said agreeably. He smiled disarmingly at Morrison. “All your questions will be answered tomorrow at your first treatment.”

“How nice,” Morrison said, and stood.

“One final question,” Donatti said. “You haven't had a cigarette for over an hour. How do you feel?”

“Fine,” Morrison lied. “Just fine.”

“Good for you!” Donatti exclaimed. He stepped around the desk and opened the door. “Enjoy them tonight. After tomorrow, you'll never smoke again.”

“Is that right?”

“Mr. Morrison,” Donatti said solemnly, “we guarantee it.”

He was sitting in the outer office of Quitters, Inc., the next day promptly at three. He had spent most of the day swinging between skipping the appointment the receptionist had made for him on the way out and going in a spirit of mulish cooperation—*Throw your best pitch at me, buster*.

In the end, something Jimmy McCann had said convinced him to keep the appointment—*It changed my whole life*. God knew his own life could do with some changing. And then there was his own curiosity. Before going up in the elevator, he smoked a cigarette down to the filter. Too damn bad if it's the last one, he thought. It tasted horrible.

The wait in the outer office was shorter this time. When the receptionist told him to go in, Donatti was waiting. He offered his hand and smiled, and to Morrison the smile looked almost predatory. He began to feel a little tense, and that made him want a cigarette.

“Come with me,” Donatti said, and led the way down to the small room. He sat behind the desk again, and Morrison took the other chair.

“I'm very glad you came,” Donatti said. “A great many prospective clients never show up again after the initial interview. They discover they don't want to quit as badly as they thought. It's going to be a pleasure to work with you on this.”

“When does the treatment start?” Hypnosis, he was thinking. It must be hypnosis.

“Oh, it already has. It started when we shook hands in the hall. Do you have cigarettes with you, Mr. Morrison?”

“Yes.”

“May I have them, please?”

Shrugging, Morrison handed Donatti his pack. There were only two or three left in it, anyway.

Donatti put the pack on the desk. Then, smiling into Morrison's eyes, he curled his right hand into a fist and began to hammer it down on the pack of cigarettes, which twisted and flattened. A broken cigarette end flew out. Tobacco crumbs spilled. The sound of Donatti's fist was very loud in the closed room. The smile remained on his face in spite of the force of the blows, and Morrison was chilled by it. Probably just the effect they want to inspire, he thought.

At last Donatti ceased pounding. He picked up the pack, a twisted and battered ruin. “You wouldn't believe the pleasure that gives me,” he said, and dropped the pack into the waste-basket. “Even after three years in the business, it still pleases me.”

“As a treatment, it leaves something to be desired,” Morrison said mildly. “There's a newsstand in the lobby of this very building. And they sell all brands.”

“As you say,” Donatti said. He folded his hands. “Your son, Alvin Dawes Morrison, is in the Paterson School for Handicapped Children. Born with cranial brain damage. Tested IQ of 46. Not quite in the educable retarded category. Your wife—”

“How did you find that out?” Morrison barked. He was startled and angry. “You've got no goddamn right to go poking around my—”

“We know a lot about you,” Donatti said smoothly. “But, as I said, it will all be held in strictest confidence.”

“I'm getting out of here,” Morrison said thinly. He stood up.

“Stay a bit longer.”

Morrison looked at him closely. Donatti wasn't upset. In fact, he looked a little amused. The face of a man who has seen this reaction scores of times—maybe hundreds.

“All right. But it better be good.”

“Oh, it is.” Donatti leaned back. “I told you we were pragmatists here. As pragmatists, we have to start by realizing how difficult it is to cure an addiction to tobacco. The relapse rate is almost eighty-five percent. The relapse rate for heroin addicts is lower than that. It is an extraordinary problem. *Extraordinary.*”

Morrison glanced into the wastebasket. One of the cigarettes, although twisted, still looked smokeable. Donatti laughed good-naturedly, reached into

the wastebasket, and broke it between his fingers.

“State legislatures sometimes hear a request that the prison systems do away with the weekly cigarette ration. Such proposals are invariably defeated. In a few cases where they have passed, there have been fierce prison riots. *Riots*, Mr. Morrison. Imagine it.”

“I,” Morrison said, “am not surprised.”

“But consider the implications. When you put a man in prison you take away any normal sex life, you take away his liquor, his politics, his freedom of movement. No riots—or few in comparison to the number of prisons. But when you take away his *cigarettes*—wham! bam!” He slammed his fist on the desk for emphasis.

“During World War I, when no one on the German home front could get cigarettes, the sight of German aristocrats picking butts out of the gutter was a common one. During World War II, many American women turned to pipes when they were unable to obtain cigarettes. A fascinating problem for the true pragmatist, Mr. Morrison.”

“Could we get to the treatment?”

“Momentarily. Step over here, please.” Donatti had risen and was standing by the green curtains Morrison had noticed yesterday. Donatti drew the curtains, discovering a rectangular window that looked into a bare room. No, not quite bare. There was a rabbit on the floor, eating pellets out of a dish.

“Pretty bunny,” Morrison commented.

“Indeed. Watch him.” Donatti pressed a button by the windowsill. The rabbit stopped eating and began to hop about crazily. It seemed to leap higher each time its feet struck the floor. Its fur stood out spikily in all directions. Its eyes were wild.

“Stop that! You're electrocuting him!”

Donatti released the button. “Far from it. There's a very low-yield charge in the floor. Watch the rabbit, Mr. Morrison!”

The rabbit was crouched about ten feet away from the dish of pellets. His nose wriggled. All at once he hopped away into a corner.

“If the rabbit gets a jolt often enough while he's eating,” Donatti said, “he makes the association very quickly. Eating causes pain. Therefore, he won't eat. A few more shocks, and the rabbit will starve to death in front of his food. It's called aversion training.”

Light dawned in Morrison's head.

“No, thanks.” He started for the door.

“Wait, please, Mr. Morrison.”

Morrison didn't pause. He grasped the doorknob . . . and felt it slip solidly through his hand. “Unlock this.”

“Mr. Morrison, if you'll just sit down—”

“Unlock this door or I'll have the cops on you before you can say Marlboro Man.”

“*Sit down.*” The voice was as cold as shaved ice.

Morrison looked at Donatti. His brown eyes were muddy and frightening. My God, he thought, I'm locked in here with a psycho. He licked his lips. He wanted a cigarette more than he ever had in his life.

“Let me explain the treatment in more detail,” Donatti said.

“You don't understand,” Morrison said with counterfeit patience. “I don't want the treatment. I've decided against it.”

“No, Mr. Morrison. *You're* the one who doesn't understand. You don't have any choice. When I told you the treatment had already begun, I was speaking the literal truth. I would have thought you'd tipped to that by now.”

“You're crazy,” Morrison said wonderingly.

“No. Only a pragmatist. Let me tell you all about the treatment.”

“Sure,” Morrison said. “As long as you understand that as soon as I get out of here I'm going to buy five packs of cigarettes and smoke them all on the way to the police station.” He suddenly realized he was biting his thumbnail, sucking on it, and made himself stop.

“As you wish. But I think you'll change your mind when you see the whole picture.”

Morrison said nothing. He sat down again and folded his hands.

“For the first month of the treatment, our operatives will have you under constant supervision,” Donatti said. “You'll be able to spot some of them. Not all. But they'll always be with you. *Always.* If they see you smoke a cigarette, I get a call.”

“And I suppose you bring me here and do the old rabbit trick,” Morrison said. He tried to sound cold and sarcastic, but he suddenly felt horribly frightened. This was a nightmare.

“Oh, no,” Donatti said. “Your wife gets the rabbit trick, not you.”

Morrison looked at him dumbly.

Donatti smiled. “You,” he said, “get to watch.”

After Donatti let him out, Morrison walked for over two hours in a complete daze. It was another fine day, but he didn't notice. The monstrousness of Donatti's smiling face blotted out all else.

“You see,” he had said, “a pragmatic problem demands pragmatic solutions. You must realize we have your best interests at heart.”

Quitters, Inc., according to Donatti, was a sort of foundation—a nonprofit organization begun by the man in the wall portrait. The gentleman had been

extremely successful in several family businesses—including slot machines, massage parlors, numbers, and a brisk (although clandestine) trade between New York and Turkey. Mort “Three-Fingers” Minelli had been a heavy smoker—up in the three-pack-a-day range. The paper he was holding in the picture was a doctor’s diagnosis: lung cancer. Mort had died in 1970, after endowing Quitters, Inc., with family funds.

“We try to keep as close to breaking even as possible,” Donatti had said. “But we’re more interested in helping our fellow man. And of course, it’s a great tax angle.”

The treatment was chillingly simple. A first offense and Cindy would be brought to what Donatti called “the rabbit room.” A second offense, and Morrison would get the dose. On a third offense, both of them would be brought in together. A fourth offense would show grave cooperation problems and would require sterner measures. An operative would be sent to Alvin’s school to work the boy over.

“Imagine,” Donatti said, smiling, “how horrible it will be for the boy. He wouldn’t understand it even if someone explained. He’ll only know someone is hurting him because Daddy was bad. He’ll be very frightened.”

“You bastard,” Morrison said helplessly. He felt close to tears. “You dirty, filthy bastard.”

“Don’t misunderstand,” Donatti said. He was smiling sympathetically. “I’m sure it won’t happen. Forty percent of our clients never have to be disciplined at all—and only ten percent have more than three falls from grace. Those are reassuring figures, aren’t they?”

Morrison didn’t find them reassuring. He found them terrifying.

“Of course, if you transgress a *fifth* time—”

“What do you mean?”

Donatti beamed. “The room for you and your wife, a second beating for your son, and a beating for your wife.”

Morrison, driven beyond the point of rational consideration, lunged over the desk at Donatti. Donatti moved with amazing speed for a man who had apparently been completely relaxed. He shoved the chair backward and drove both of his feet over the desk and into Morrison’s belly. Gagging and coughing, Morrison staggered backward.

“Sit down, Mr. Morrison,” Donatti said benignly. “Let’s talk this over like rational men.”

When he could get his breath, Morrison did as he was told. Nightmares had to end sometime, didn’t they?

Quitters, Inc., Donatti had explained further, operated on a ten-step punishment scale. Steps six, seven, and eight consisted of further trips to the rabbit room (and increased voltage) and more serious beatings. The ninth step would be the breaking of his son's arms.

"And the tenth?" Morrison asked, his mouth dry.

Donatti shook his head sadly. "Then we give up, Mr. Morrison. You become part of the unregenerate two percent."

"You really give up?"

"In a manner of speaking." He opened one of the desk drawers and laid a silenced .45 on the desk. He smiled into Morrison's eyes. "But even the unregenerate two percent never smoke again. We guarantee it."

The Friday Night Movie was *Bullitt*, one of Cindy's favorites, but after an hour of Morrison's mutterings and fidgetings, her concentration was broken.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked during station identification.

"Nothing . . . everything," he growled. "I'm giving up smoking."

She laughed. "Since when? Five minutes ago?"

"Since three o'clock this afternoon."

"You really haven't had a cigarette since then?"

"No," he said, and began to gnaw his thumbnail. It was ragged, down to the quick.

"That's wonderful! What ever made you decide to quit?"

"You," he said. "And . . . and Alvin."

Her eyes widened, and when the movie came back on, she didn't notice. Dick rarely mentioned their retarded son. She came over, looked at the empty ashtray by his right hand, and then into his eyes. "Are you really trying to quit, Dick?"

"Really." And if I go to the cops, he added mentally, the local goon squad will be around to rearrange your face, Cindy.

"I'm glad. Even if you don't make it, we both thank you for the thought, Dick."

"Oh, I think I'll make it," he said, thinking of the muddy, homicidal look that had come into Donatti's eyes when he kicked him in the stomach.

He slept badly that night, dozing in and out of sleep. Around three o'clock he woke up completely. His craving for a cigarette was like a low-grade fever. He went downstairs and to his study. The room was in the middle of the house.

No windows. He slid open the top drawer of his desk and looked in, fascinated by the cigarette box. He looked around and licked his lips.

Constant supervision during the first month, Donatti had said. Eighteen hours a day during the next two—but he would never know *which* eighteen. During the fourth month, the month when most clients backslid, the “service” would return to twenty-four hours a day. Then twelve hours of broken surveillance each day for the rest of the year. After that? Random surveillance for the rest of the client's life.

*For the rest of his life.*

“We may audit you every other month,” Donatti said. “Or every other day. Or constantly for one week two years from now. The point is, *you won't know*. If you smoke, you'll be gambling with loaded dice. Are they watching? Are they picking up my wife or sending a man after my son right now? Beautiful, isn't it? And if you do sneak a smoke, it'll taste awful. It will taste like your son's blood.”

But they couldn't be watching now, in the dead of night, in his own study. The house was grave-quiet.

He looked at the cigarettes in the box for almost two minutes, unable to tear his gaze away. Then he went to the study door, peered out into the empty hall, and went back to look at the cigarettes some more. A horrible picture came: his life stretching before him and not a cigarette to be found. How in the name of God was he ever going to be able to make another tough presentation to a wary client, without that cigarette burning nonchalantly between his fingers as he approached the charts and layouts? How would he be able to endure Cindy's endless garden shows without a cigarette? How could he even get up in the morning and face the day without a cigarette to smoke as he drank his coffee and read the paper?

He cursed himself for getting into this. He cursed Donatti. And most of all, he cursed Jimmy McCann. How could he have done it? The son of a bitch had *known*. His hands trembled in their desire to get hold of Jimmy Judas McCann.

Stealthily, he glanced around the study again. He reached into the drawer and brought out a cigarette. He caressed it, fondled it. What was that old slogan? *So round, so firm, so fully packed*. Truer words had never been spoken. He put the cigarette in his mouth and then paused, cocking his head.

Had there been the slightest noise from the closet? A faint shifting? Surely not. But—

Another mental image—that rabbit hopping crazily in the grip of electricity. The thought of Cindy in that room—



as before. Hugging his son tightly, realizing what Donatti and his colleagues had so cynically realized before him: love is the most pernicious drug of all. Let the romantics debate its existence. Pragmatists accept it and use it.

Morrison losing the physical compulsion to smoke little by little, but never quite losing the psychological craving, or the need to have something in his mouth—cough drops, Life Savers, a toothpick. Poor substitutes, all of them.

And finally, Morrison hung up in a colossal traffic jam in the Midtown Tunnel. Darkness. Horns blaring. Air stinking. Traffic hopelessly snarled. And suddenly, thumbing open the glove compartment and seeing the half-open pack of cigarettes in there. He looked at them for a moment, then snatched one and lit it with the dashboard lighter. If anything happens, it's Cindy's fault, he told himself defiantly. I told her to get rid of all the damn cigarettes.

The first drag made him cough smoke out furiously. The second made his eyes water. The third made him feel lightheaded and swoony. It tastes awful, he thought.

And on the heels of that: My God, what am I doing?

Horns blatted impatiently behind him. Ahead, the traffic had begun to move again. He stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray, opened both front windows, opened the vents, and then fanned the air helplessly like a kid who has just flushed his first butt down the john.

He joined the traffic flow jerkily and drove home.

“Cindy?” he called. “I'm home.”

No answer.

“Cindy? Where are you, hon?”

The phone rang, and he pounced on it. “Hello? Cindy?”

“Hello, Mr. Morrison,” Donatti said. He sounded pleasantly brisk and businesslike. “It seems we have a small business matter to attend to. Would five o'clock be convenient?”

“Have you got my wife?”

“Yes, indeed.” Donatti chuckled indulgently.

“Look, let her go,” Morrison babbled. “It won't happen again. It was a slip, just a slip, that's all. I only had three drags and for God's sake *it didn't even taste good!*”

“That's a shame. I'll count on you for five then, shall I?”

“Please,” Morrison said, close to tears. “Please—”

He was speaking to a dead line.

At 5 P.M. the reception room was empty except for the secretary, who gave him a twinkly smile that ignored Morrison's pallor and disheveled appearance. “Mr.

Donatti?" she said into the intercom. "Mr. Morrison to see you." She nodded to Morrison. "Go right in."

Donatti was waiting outside the unmarked room with a man who was wearing a SMILE sweatshirt and carrying a .38. He was built like an ape.

"Listen," Morrison said to Donatti. "We can work something out, can't we? I'll pay you. I'll—"

"Shaddap," the man in the SMILE sweatshirt said.

"It's good to see you," Donatti said. "Sorry it has to be under such adverse circumstances. Will you come with me? We'll make this as brief as possible. I can assure you your wife won't be hurt . . . this time."

Morrison tensed himself to leap at Donatti.

"Come, come," Donatti said, looking annoyed. "If you do that, Junk here is going to pistol-whip you and your wife is still going to get it. Now where's the percentage in that?"

"I hope you rot in hell," he told Donatti.

Donatti sighed. "If I had a nickel for every time someone expressed a similar sentiment, I could retire. Let it be a lesson to you, Mr. Morrison. When a romantic tries to do a good thing and fails, they give him a medal. When a pragmatist succeeds, they wish him in hell. Shall we go?"

Junk motioned with the pistol.

Morrison preceded them into the room. He felt numb. The small green curtain had been pulled. Junk prodded him with the gun. This is what being a witness at the gas chamber must have been like, he thought.

He looked in. Cindy was there, looking around bewilderedly.

"Cindy!" Morrison called miserably. "Cindy, they—"

"She can't hear or see you," Donatti said. "One-way glass. Well, let's get it over with. It really was a very small slip. I believe thirty seconds should be enough. Junk?"

Junk pressed the button with one hand and kept the pistol jammed firmly into Morrison's back with the other.

It was the longest thirty seconds of his life.

When it was over, Donatti put a hand on Morrison's shoulder and said, "Are you going to throw up?"

"No," Morrison said weakly. His forehead was against the glass. His legs were jelly. "I don't think so." He turned around and saw that Junk was gone.

"Come with me," Donatti said.

"Where?" Morrison asked apathetically.

"I think you have a few things to explain, don't you?"

"How can I face her? How can I tell her that I . . . I . . ."

"I think you're going to be surprised," Donatti said.

The room was empty except for a sofa. Cindy was on it, sobbing helplessly.

“Cindy?” he said gently.

She looked up, her eyes magnified by tears. “Dick?” she whispered. “Dick? Oh . . . Oh God . . .” He held her tightly. “Two men,” she said against his chest. “In the house and at first I thought they were burglars and then I thought they were going to rape me and then they took me someplace with a blindfold over my eyes and . . . and . . . oh it was *h-horrible*—”

“Shhh,” he said. “Shhh.”

“But why?” she asked, looking up at him. “Why would they—”

“Because of me,” he said. “I have to tell you a story, Cindy—”

When he had finished he was silent a moment and then said, “I suppose you hate me. I wouldn't blame you.”

He was looking at the floor, and she took his face in both hands and turned it to hers. “No,” she said. “I don't hate you.”

He looked at her in mute surprise.

“It was worth it,” she said. “God bless these people. They've let you out of prison.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Yes,” she said, and kissed him. “Can we go home now? I feel much better. Ever so much.”

The phone rang one evening a week later, and when Morrison recognized Donatti's voice, he said, “Your boys have got it wrong. I haven't even been near a cigarette.”

“We know that. We have a final matter to talk over. Can you stop by tomorrow afternoon?”

“Is it—”

“No, nothing serious. Bookkeeping really. By the way, congratulations on your promotion.”

“How did you know about that?”

“We're keeping tabs,” Donatti said noncommittally, and hung up.

When they entered the small room, Donatti said, “Don't look so nervous. No one's going to bite you. Step over here, please.”

Morrison saw an ordinary bathroom scale. “Listen, I've gained a little weight, but—”

“Yes, seventy-three percent of our clients do. Step up, please.”

Morrison did, and tipped the scales at one seventy-four.

“Okay, fine. You can step off. How tall are you, Mr. Morrison?”

“Five-eleven.”

“Okay, let's see.” He pulled a small card laminated in plastic from his breast pocket. “Well, that's not too bad. I'm going to write you a prescrip for some highly illegal diet pills. Use them sparingly and according to directions. And I'm going to set your maximum weight at. . . let's see . . .” He consulted the card again. “One eighty-two, how does that sound? And since this is December first, I'll expect you the first of every month for a weigh-in. No problem if you can't make it, as long as you call in advance.”

“And what happens if I go over one-eighty-two?”

Donatti smiled. “We'll send someone out to your house to cut off your wife's little finger,” he said. “You can leave through this door, Mr. Morrison. Have a nice day.”

Eight months later:

Morrison runs into the crony from the Larkin Studios at Dempsey's bar. Morrison is down to what Cindy proudly calls his fighting weight: one sixty-seven. He works out three times a week and looks as fit as whipcord. The crony from Larkin, by comparison, looks like something the cat dragged in.

Crony: Lord, how'd you ever stop? I'm locked into this damn habit tighter than Tillie. The crony stubs his cigarette out with real revulsion and drains his scotch.

Morrison looks at him speculatively and then takes a small white business card out of his wallet. He puts it on the bar between them. You know, he says, these guys changed my life.

Twelve months later:

Morrison receives a bill in the mail. The bill says:

QUITTERS, INC.  
237 East 46th Street  
New York, N.Y. 10017

1	
Treatment	\$2500.00
Counselor	\$2500.00
(Victor	

Donatti)		
Electricity	\$	.50
TOTAL		
(Please pay this amount	\$5000.50	

Those sons of bitches! he explodes. They charged me for the electricity they used to . . . to . . .

Just pay it. she says, and kisses him.

Twenty months later:

Quite by accident, Morrison and his wife meet the Jimmy McCanns at the Helen Hayes Theatre. Introductions are made all around. Jimmy looks as good, if not better than he did on that day in the airport terminal so long ago. Morrison has never met his wife. She is pretty in the radiant way plain girls sometimes have when they are very, very happy.

She offers her hand and Morrison shakes it. There is something odd about her grip, and halfway through the second act, he realizes what it was. The little finger on her right hand is missing.

# I KNOW WHAT YOU NEED

“I know what you need.”

Elizabeth looked up from her sociology text, startled, and saw a rather nondescript young man in a green fatigue jacket. For a moment she thought he looked familiar, as if she had known him before; the feeling was close to *déjà vu*. Then it was gone. He was about her height, skinny, and . . . twitchy. That was the word. He wasn't moving, but he seemed to be twitching inside his skin, just out of sight. His hair was black and unkempt. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses that magnified his dark brown eyes, and the lenses looked dirty. No, she was quite sure she had never seen him before.

“You know,” she said, “I doubt that.”

“You need a strawberry double-dip cone. Right?”

She blinked at him, frankly startled. Somewhere in the back of her mind she *had* been thinking about breaking for an ice cream. She was studying for finals in one of the third-floor carrels of the Student Union, and there was still a woefully long way to go.

“Right?” he persisted, and smiled. It transformed his face from something over-intense and nearly ugly into something else that was oddly appealing. The word “cute” occurred to her, and that wasn't a good word to afflict a boy with, but this one was when he smiled. She smiled back before she could road block it behind her lips. This she didn't need, to have to waste time brushing off some weirdo who had decided to pick the worst time of the year to try to make an impression. She still had sixteen chapters of *Introduction to Sociology* to wade through.

“No thanks,” she said.

“Come on, if you hit them any harder you'll give yourself a headache. You've been at it two hours without a break.”

“How would you know that?”

“I've been watching you,” he said promptly, but this time his gamin grin was lost on her. She already had a headache.

“Well, you can stop,” she said, more sharply than she had intended. “I don't like people staring at me.”

“I'm sorry.” She felt a little sorry for him, the way she sometimes felt sorry for stray dogs. He seemed to float in the green fatigue jacket and . . . yes, he had on mismatched socks. One black, one brown. She felt herself getting ready to smile again and held it back.

“I've got these finals,” she said gently.

“Sure,” he said. “Okay.”

She looked after him for a moment pensively. Then she lowered her gaze to her book, but an afterimage of the encounter remained: *strawberry double-dip*.

When she got back to the dorm it was 11:15 P.M. and Alice was stretched out on her bed, listening to Neil Diamond and reading *The Story of O*.

“I didn't know they assigned that in Eh-17,” Elizabeth said.

Alice sat up. “Broadening my horizons, darling. Spreading my intellectual wings. Raising my . . . Liz?”

“Hmmm?”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“No, sorry, I—”

“You look like somebody conked you one, kid.”

“I met a guy tonight. Sort of a funny guy, at that.”

“Oh? He must be something if he can separate the great Rogan from her beloved texts.”

“His name is Edward Jackson Hamner, Junior, no less. Short. Skinny. Looks like he washed his hair last around Washington's birthday. Oh, and mismatched socks. One black, one brown.”

“I thought you were more the fraternity type.”

“It's nothing like that, Alice. I was studying at the Union on the third floor—the Think Tank—and he invited me down to the Grinder for an ice-cream cone. I told him no and he sort of slunk off. But once he

started me thinking about ice cream, I couldn't stop. I'd just decided to give up and take a break and there he was, holding a big, drippy strawberry double-dip in each hand."

"I tremble to hear the denouement."

Elizabeth snorted. "Well, I couldn't really say no. So he sat down, and it turns out he had sociology with Professor Branner last year."

"Will wonders never cease, lawd a mercy. Goshen to Christmas—"

"Listen, this is really amazing. You know the way I've been sweating that course?"

"Yes. You talk about it in your sleep, practically."

"I've got a seventy-eight average. I've got to have an eighty to keep my scholarship, and that means I need at least an eighty-four on the final. Well, this Ed Hamner says Branner uses almost the same final every year. And Ed's eidetic."

"You mean he's got a whatzit . . . photographic memory?"

"Yes. Look at this." She opened her sociology book and took out three sheets of notebook paper covered with writing.

Alice took them. "This looks like multiple-choice stuff."

"It is. Ed says it's Branner's last year's final *word for word*."

Alice said flatly, "I don't believe it."

"But it covers all the material!"

"Still don't believe it." She handed the sheets back. "Just because this spook—"

"He isn't a spook. Don't call him that."

"Okay. This little *guy* hasn't got you bamboozled into just memorizing this and not studying at all, has he?"

"Of course not," she said uneasily.

"And even if this is like the exam, do you think it's exactly ethical?"

Anger surprised her and ran away with her tongue before she could hold it. "That's great for you, sure. Dean's List every semester and your folks paying your way. You aren't . . . Hey, I'm sorry. There was no call for that."

Alice shrugged and opened *O* again, her face carefully neutral. "No, you're right. Not my business. But why don't you study the book, too . . . just to be safe?"

"Of course I will."

But mostly she studied the exam notes provided by Edward Jackson Hamner, Jr.

When she came out of the lecture hall after the exam he was sitting in the lobby, floating in his green army fatigue coat. He smiled tentatively at her and stood up. "How'd it go?"

Impulsively, she kissed his cheek. She could not remember such a blessed feeling of relief. "I think I aced it."

"Really? That's great. Like a burger?"

"Love one," she said absently. Her mind was still on the exam. It was the one Ed had given her, almost word for word, and she had sailed through.

Over hamburgers, she asked him how his own finals were going.

"Don't have any. I'm in Honors, and you don't take them unless you want to. I was doing okay, so I didn't."

"Then why are you still here?"

"I had to see how you did, didn't I?"

"Ed, you didn't. That's sweet, but—" The naked look in his eyes troubled her. She had seen it before. She was a pretty girl.

"Yes," he said softly. "Yes, I did."

"Ed, I'm grateful. I think you saved my scholarship. I really do. But I have a boyfriend, you know."

"Serious?" he asked, with a poor attempt to speak lightly.

"Very," she said, matching his tone. "Almost engaged."

"Does he know he's lucky? Does he know how lucky?"

"I'm lucky, too," she said, thinking of Tony Lombard.

"Beth," he said suddenly.

"What?" she asked, startled.

"Nobody calls you that, do they?"

"Why . . . no. No, they don't."

"Not even this guy?"

"No—" Tony called her Liz. Sometimes Lizzie, which was even worse.

He leaned forward. "But Beth is what you like best, isn't it?"

She laughed to cover her confusion. "Whatever in the world—"

“Never mind.” He grinned his gamin grin. “I’ll call you Beth. That’s better. Now eat your hamburger.”

Then her junior year was over, and she was saying goodbye to Alice. They were a little stiff together, and Elizabeth was sorry. She supposed it was her own fault; she *had* crowed a little loudly about her sociology final when grades were posted. She had scored a ninety-seven—highest in the division.

Well, she told herself as she waited at the airport for her flight to be called, it wasn’t any more unethical than the cramming she had been resigned to in that third-floor carrel. Cramming wasn’t real studying at all; just rote memorization that faded away to nothing as soon as the exam was over.

She fingered the envelope that poked out of her purse. Notice of her scholarship-loan package for her senior year—two thousand dollars. She and Tony would be working together in Boothbay, Maine, this summer, and the money she would earn there would put her over the top. And thanks to Ed Hamner, it was going to be a beautiful summer. Clear sailing all the way.

But it was the most miserable summer of her life.

June was rainy, the gas shortage depressed the tourist trade, and her tips at the Boothbay Inn were mediocre. Even worse, Tony was pressing her on the subject of marriage. He could get a job on or near campus, he said, and with her Student Aid grant, she could get her degree in style. She was surprised to find that the idea scared rather than pleased her.

Something was *wrong*.

She didn’t know what, but something was missing, out of whack, out of kilter. One night late in July she frightened herself by going on a hysterical crying jag in her apartment. The only good thing about it was that her roommate, a mousy little girl named Sandra Ackerman, was out on a date.

The nightmare came in early August. She was lying in the bottom of an open grave, unable to move. Rain fell from a white sky onto her

upturned face. Then Tony was standing over her, wearing his yellow high-impact construction helmet.

“Marry me, Liz,” he said, looking down at her expressionlessly. “Marry me or else.”

She tried to speak, to agree; she would do anything if only he would take her out of this dreadful muddy hole. But she was paralyzed.

“All right,” he said. “It's or else, then.”

He went away. She struggled to break out of her paralysis and couldn't.

Then she heard the bulldozer.

A moment later she saw it, a high yellow monster, pushing a mound of wet earth in front of the blade. Tony's merciless face looked down from the open cab.

He was going to bury her alive.

Trapped in her motionless, voiceless body, she could only watch in dumb horror. Trickle of dirt began to run down the sides of the hole —

A familiar voice cried, “Go! Leave her now! Go!”

Tony stumbled down from the bulldozer and ran.

Huge relief swept her. She would have cried had she been able. And her savior appeared, standing at the foot of the open grave like a sexton. It was Ed Hamner, floating in his green fatigue jacket, his hair awry, his horn-rims slipped down to the small bulge at the end of his nose. He held his hand out to her.

“Get up,” he said gently. “I know what you need. Get up, Beth.”

And she could get up. She sobbed with relief. She tried to thank him; her words spilled out on top of each other. And Ed only smiled gently and nodded. She took his hand and looked down to see her footing. And when she looked up again, she was holding the paw of a huge, slavering timber wolf with red hurricane-lantern eyes and thick, spiked teeth open to bite.

She woke up sitting bolt upright in bed, her nightgown drenched with sweat. Her body was shaking uncontrollably. And even after a warm shower and a glass of milk, she could not reconcile herself to the dark. She slept with the light on.

A week later Tony was dead.

She opened the door in her robe, expecting to see Tony, but it was Danny Kilmer, one of the fellows he worked with. Danny was a fun guy; she and Tony had doubled with him and his girl a couple of times. But standing in the doorway of her second-floor apartment, Danny looked not only serious but ill.

“Danny?” she said. “What—”

“Liz,” he said. “Liz, you've got to hold onto yourself. You've . . . *ah, God!*” He pounded the jamb of the door with one big-knuckled, dirty hand, and she saw he was crying.

“Danny, is it Tony? Is something—”

“Tony's dead,” Danny said. “He was—” But he was talking to air. She had fainted.

The next week passed in a kind of dream. The story pieced itself together from the woefully brief newspaper account and from what Danny told her over a beer in the Harbor Inn.

They had been repairing drainage culverts on Route 16. Part of the road was torn up, and Tony was flagging traffic. A kid driving a red Fiat had been coming down the hill. Tony had flagged him, but the kid never even slowed. Tony had been standing next to a dump truck, and there was no place to jump back. The kid in the Fiat had sustained head lacerations and a broken arm; he was hysterical and also cold sober. The police found several holes in his brake lines, as if they had overheated and then melted through. His driving record was A-1; he had simply been unable to stop. Her Tony had been a victim of that rarest of automobile mishaps: an honest accident.

Her shock and depression were increased by guilt. The fates had taken out of her hands the decision on what to do about Tony. And a sick, secret part of her was glad it was so. Because she hadn't wanted to marry Tony . . . not since the night of her dream.

She broke down the day before she went home.

She was sitting on a rock outcropping by herself, and after an hour or so the tears came. They surprised her with their fury. She cried until her stomach hurt and her head ached, and when the tears passed she felt not better but at least drained and empty.

And that was when Ed Hamner said, "Beth?"

She jerked around, her mouth filled with the copper taste of fear, half expecting to see the snarling wolf of her dream. But it was only Ed Hamner, looking sunburned and strangely defenseless without his fatigue jacket and blue jeans. He was wearing red shorts that stopped just ahead of his bony knees, a white T-shirt that billowed on his thin chest like a loose sail in the ocean breeze, and rubber thongs. He wasn't smiling and the fierce sun glitter on his glasses made it impossible to see his eyes.

"Ed?" she said tentatively, half convinced that this was some grief-induced hallucination. "Is that really—"

"Yes, it's me."

"How—"

"I've been working at the Lakewood Theater in Skowhegan. I ran into your roommate . . . Alice, is that her name?"

"Yes."

"She told me what happened. I came right away. Poor Beth." He moved his head, only a degree or so, but the sun glare slid off his glasses and she saw nothing wolfish, nothing predatory, but only a calm, warm sympathy.

She began to weep again, and staggered a little with the unexpected force of it. Then he was holding her and then it was all right.

They had dinner at the Silent Woman in Waterville, which was twenty-five miles away; maybe exactly the distance she needed. They went in Ed's car, a new Corvette, and he drove well—neither showily nor fussily, as she guessed he might. She didn't want to talk and she didn't want to be cheered up. He seemed to know it, and played quiet music on the radio.

And he ordered without consulting her—seafood. She thought she wasn't hungry, but when the food came she fell to ravenously.

When she looked up again her plate was empty and she laughed nervously. Ed was smoking a cigarette and watching her.

"The grieving damsel ate a hearty meal," she said. "You must think I'm awful."

"No," he said. "You've been through a lot and you need to get your strength back. It's like being sick, isn't it?"

"Yes. Just like that."

He took her hand across the table, squeezed it briefly, then let it go. "But now it's recuperation time, Beth."

"Is it? Is it really?"

"Yes," he said. "So tell me. What are your plans?"

"I'm going home tomorrow. After that, I don't know."

"You're going back to school, aren't you?"

"I just don't know. After this, it seems so . . . so trivial. A lot of the purpose seems to have gone out of it. And all the fun."

"It'll come back. That's hard for you to believe now, but it's true. Try it for six weeks and see. You've got nothing better to do." The last seemed a question.

"That's true, I guess. But . . . Can I have a cigarette?"

"Sure. They're menthol, though. Sorry."

She took one. "How did you know I didn't like menthol cigarettes?"

He shrugged. "You just don't look like one of those, I guess."

She smiled. "You're funny, do you know that?"

He smiled neutrally.

"No, really. For you of all people to turn up . . . I thought I didn't want to see anyone. But I'm really glad it was you, Ed."

"Sometimes it's nice to be with someone you're not involved with."

"That's it, I guess." She paused. "Who are you, Ed, besides my fairy godfather? Who are you really?" It was suddenly important to her that she know.

He shrugged. "Nobody much. Just one of the sort of funny-looking guys you see creeping around campus with a load of books under one arm—"

"Ed, you're not funny-looking."

“Sure I am,” he said, and smiled. “Never grew all the way out of my high-school acne, never got rushed by a big frat, never made any kind of splash in the social whirl. Just a dorm rat making grades, that's all. When the big corporations interview on campus next spring, I'll probably sign on with one of them and Ed Hamner will disappear forever.”

“That would be a great shame,” she said softly.

He smiled, and it was a very peculiar smile. Almost bitter.

“What about your folks?” she asked. “Where you live, what you like to do—”

“Another time,” he said. “I want to get you back. You've got a long plane ride tomorrow, and a lot of hassles.”

The evening left her relaxed for the first time since Tony's death, without that feeling that somewhere inside a mainspring was being wound and wound to the breaking point. She thought sleep would come easily, but it did not.

Little questions nagged.

*Alice told me . . . poor Beth.*

But Alice was summering in Kittery, eighty miles from Skowhegan. She must have been at Lakewood for a play.

The Corvette, this year's model. Expensive. A backstage job at Lakewood hadn't paid for that. Were his parents rich?

He had ordered just what she would have ordered herself. Maybe the only thing on the menu she would have eaten enough of to discover that she was hungry.

The menthol cigarettes, the way he had kissed her good night, exactly as she had wanted to be kissed. And—

*You've got a long plane ride tomorrow.*

He knew she was going home because she had told him. But how had he known she was going by plane? Or that it was a long ride?

It bothered her. It bothered her because she was halfway to being in love with Ed Hamner.

*I know what you need.*

Like the voice of a submarine captain tolling off fathoms, the words he had greeted her with followed her down to sleep.

He didn't come to the tiny Augusta airport to see her off, and waiting for the plane, she was surprised by her own disappointment. She was thinking about how quietly you could grow to depend on a person, almost like a junkie with a habit. The hype fools himself that he can take this stuff or leave it, when really—

“Elizabeth Rogan,” the PA blared. “Please pick up the white courtesy phone.”

She hurried to it. And Ed's voice said, “Beth?”

“Ed! It's good to hear you. I thought maybe . . .”

“That I'd meet you?” He laughed. “You don't need me for that. You're a big strong girl. Beautiful, too. You can handle this. Will I see you at school?”

“I . . . yes, I think so.”

“Good.” There was a moment of silence. Then he said, “Because I love you. I have from the first time I saw you.”

Her tongue was locked. She couldn't speak. A thousand thoughts whirled through her mind.

He laughed again, gently. “No, don't say anything. Not now. I'll see you. There'll be time then. All the time in the world. Good trip, Beth. Goodbye.”

And he was gone, leaving her with a white phone in her hand and her own chaotic thoughts and questions.

September.

Elizabeth picked up the old pattern of school and classes like a woman who has been interrupted at knitting. She was rooming with Alice again, of course; they had been roomies since freshman year, when they had been thrown together by the housing-department computer. They had always gotten along well, despite differing interests and personalities. Alice was the studious one, a chemistry major with a 3.6 average. Elizabeth was more social, less bookish, with a split major in education and math.

They still got on well, but a faint coolness seemed to have grown up between them over the summer. Elizabeth chalked it up to the difference of opinion over the sociology final, and didn't mention it.

The events of the summer began to seem dreamlike. In a funny way it sometimes seemed that Tony might have been a boy she had known in high school. It still hurt to think about him, and she avoided the subject with Alice, but the hurt was an old-bruise throb and not the bright pain of an open wound.

What hurt more was Ed Hamner's failure to call.

A week passed, then two, then it was October. She got a student directory from the Union and looked up his name. It was no help; after his name were only the words "Mill St." And Mill was a very long street indeed. And so she waited, and when she was called for dates—which was often—she turned them down. Alice raised her eyebrows but said nothing; she was buried alive in a six-week biochem project and spent most of her evenings at the library. Elizabeth noticed the long white envelopes that her roommate was receiving once or twice a week in the mail—since she was usually back from class first but thought nothing of them. The private detective agency was discreet; it did not print its return address on its envelopes.

When the intercom buzzed, Alice was studying. "You get it, Liz. Probably for you anyway."

Elizabeth went to the intercom. "Yes?"

"Gentleman door-caller, Liz."

*Oh, Lord.*

"Who is it?" she asked, annoyed, and ran through her tattered stack of excuses. Migraine headache. She hadn't used that one this week.

The desk girl said, amused, "His name is Edward Jackson Hamner. *Junior*, no less." Her voice lowered. "His socks don't match."

Elizabeth's hand flew to the collar of her robe. "Oh, God. Tell him I'll be right down. No, tell him it will be just a minute. No, a couple of minutes, okay?"

“Sure,” the voice said dubiously. “Don't have a hemorrhage.”

Elizabeth took a pair of slacks out of her closet. Took out a short denim skirt. Felt the curlers in her hair and groaned. Began to yank them out.

Alice watched all this calmly, without speaking, but she looked speculatively at the door for a long time after Elizabeth had left.

He looked just the same; he hadn't changed at all. He was wearing his green fatigue jacket, and it still looked at least two sizes too big. One of the bows of his horn-rimmed glasses had been mended with electrician's tape. His jeans looked new and stiff, miles from the soft and faded “in” look that Tony had achieved effortlessly. He was wearing one green sock, one brown sock.

And she knew she loved him.

“Why didn't you call before?” she asked, going to him.

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket and grinned shyly. “I thought I'd give you some time to date around. Meet some guys. Figure out what you want.”

“I think I know that.”

“Good. Would you like to go to a movie?”

“Anything,” she said. “Anything at all.”

As the days passed it occurred to her that she had never met anyone, male or female, that seemed to understand her moods and needs so completely or so wordlessly. Their tastes coincided. While Tony had enjoyed violent movies of the *Godfather* type, Ed seemed more into comedy or nonviolent dramas. He took her to the circus one night when she was feeling low and they had a hilariously wonderful time. Study dates were real study dates, not just an excuse to grope on the third floor of the Union. He took her to dances and seemed especially good at the old ones, which she loved. They won a fifties Stroll trophy at a Homecoming Nostalgia Dance. More important, he seemed to understand when she wanted to be passionate. He didn't force her or hurry her; she never got the feeling that she had with some of the other boys she had gone out

with—that there was an inner timetable for sex, beginning with a kiss good night on Date 1 and ending with a night in some friend's borrowed apartment on Date 10. The Mill Street apartment was Ed's exclusively, a third-floor walk-up. They went there often, and Elizabeth went without the feeling that she was walking into some minor-league Don Juan's passion pit. He didn't push. He honestly seemed to want what she wanted, when she wanted it. And things progressed.

When school reconvened following the semester break, Alice seemed strangely preoccupied. Several times that afternoon before Ed came to pick her up—they were going out to dinner—Elizabeth looked up to see her roommate frowning down at a large manila envelope on her desk. Once Elizabeth almost asked about it, then decided not to. Some new project probably.

• • •

It was snowing hard when Ed brought her back to the dorm.

“Tomorrow?” he asked. “My place?”

“Sure. I'll make some popcorn.”

“Great,” he said, and kissed her. “I love you, Beth.”

“Love you, too.”

“Would you like to stay over?” Ed asked evenly. “Tomorrow night?”

“All right, Ed.” She looked into his eyes. “Whatever you want.”

“Good,” he said quietly. “Sleep well, kid.”

“You, too.”

She expected that Alice would be asleep and entered the room quietly, but Alice was up and sitting at her desk.

“Alice, are you okay?”

“I have to talk to you, Liz. About Ed.”

“What about him?”

Alice said carefully, “I think that when I finish talking to you we're not going to be friends anymore. For me, that's giving up a lot. So I want you to listen carefully.”

“Then maybe you better not say anything.”

“I have to try.”

Elizabeth felt her initial curiosity kindle into anger. “Have you been snooping around Ed?”

Alice only looked at her.

“Were you jealous of us?”

“No. If I'd been jealous of you and your dates, I would have moved out two years ago.”

Elizabeth looked at her, perplexed. She knew what Alice said was the truth. And she suddenly felt afraid.

“Two things made me wonder about Ed Hamner,” Alice said. “First, you wrote me about Tony's death and said how lucky it was that I'd seen Ed at the Lakewood Theater . . . how he came right over to Boothbay and really helped you out. But I never saw him, Liz. I was never near the Lakewood Theater last summer.”

“But . . .”

“But how did he know Tony was dead? I have no idea. I only know he didn't get it from me. The other thing was that eidetic-memory business. My God, Liz, he can't even remember which socks he's got on!”

“That's a different thing altogether,” Liz said stiffly. “It—”

“Ed Hamner was in Las Vegas last summer,” Alice said softly. “He came back in mid-July and took a motel room in Pemaquid. That's just across the Boothbay Harbor town line. Almost as if he were waiting for you to need him.”

“That's crazy! And how would you know Ed was in Las Vegas?”

“I ran into Shirley D'Antonio just before school started. She worked in the Pines Restaurant, which is just across from the playhouse. She said she never saw anybody who looked like Ed Hamner. So I've known he's been lying to you about several things. And so I went to my father and laid it out and he gave me the go-ahead.”

“To do what?” Elizabeth asked, bewildered.

“To hire a private detective agency.”

Elizabeth was on her feet. “No more, Alice. That's it.” She would catch the bus into town, spend tonight at Ed's apartment. She had only been waiting for him to ask her, anyway.

“At least *know*,” Alice said. “Then make your own decision.”

“I don't have to know anything except he's kind and good and—”

“Love is blind, huh?” Alice said, and smiled bitterly. “Well, maybe I happen to love you a little, Liz. Have you ever thought of that?”

Elizabeth turned and looked at her for a long moment. “If you do, you've got a funny way of showing it,” she said. “Go on, then. Maybe you're right. Maybe I owe you that much. Go on.”

“You knew him a long time ago,” Alice said quietly.

“I . . . what?”

“P.S. 119, Bridgeport, Connecticut.”

Elizabeth was struck dumb. She and her parents had lived in Bridgeport for six years, moving to their present home the year after she had finished the second grade. She *had* gone to P.S. 119, but—

“Alice, are you sure?”

“Do you remember him?”

“No, of course not!” But she *did* remember the feeling she'd had the first time she had seen Ed—the feeling of *déjà vu*.

“The pretty ones never remember the ugly ducklings, I guess. Maybe he had a crush on you. You were in the first grade with him, Liz. Maybe he sat in the back of the room and just . . . watched you. Or on the playground. Just a little nothing kid who already wore glasses and probably braces and you couldn't even remember him, but I'll bet he remembers you.”

Elizabeth said, “What else?”

“The agency traced him from school fingerprints. After that it was just a matter of finding people and talking to them. The operative assigned to the case said he couldn't understand some of what he was getting. Neither do I. Some of it's scary.”

“It better be,” Elizabeth said grimly.

“Ed Hamner, Sr., was a compulsive gambler. He worked for a top-line advertising agency in New York and then moved to Bridgeport sort of on the run. The operative says that almost every big-money poker game and high-priced book in the city was holding his markers.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “These people really saw you got a full measure of dirt for your dollar, didn't they?”

“Maybe. Anyway, Ed's father got in another jam in Bridgeport. It was gambling again, but this time he got mixed up with a big-time loan shark. He got a broken leg and a broken arm somehow. The operative says he doubts it was an accident.”

“Anything else?” Elizabeth asked. “Child beating? Embezzlement?”

“He landed a job with a two-bit Los Angeles ad agency in 1961. That was a little too close to Las Vegas. He started to spend his weekends there, gambling heavily . . . and losing. Then he started taking Ed Junior with him. And he started to win.”

“You're making all of this up. You must be.”

Alice tapped the report in front of her. “It's all here, Liz. Some of it wouldn't stand up in court, but the operative says none of the people he talked with would have a reason to lie. Ed's father called Ed his ‘good luck charm.’ At first, nobody objected to the boy even though it was illegal for him to be in the casinos. His father was a prize fish. But then the father started sticking just to roulette, playing only odd-even and red-black. By the end of the year the boy was off-limits in every casino on the strip. And his father took up a new kind of gambling.”

“What?”

“The stock market. When the Hamners moved to L.A. in the middle of 1961, they were living in a ninety-dollar-a-month cheese box and Mr. Hamner was driving a '52 Chevrolet. At the end of 1962, just sixteen months later, he had quit his job and they were living in their own home in San Jose. Mr. Hamner was driving a brand-new Thunderbird and Mrs. Hamner had a Volkswagen. You see, it's against the law for a small boy to be in the Nevada casinos, but no one could take the stock-market page away from him.”

“Are you implying that Ed . . . that he could . . . Alice, you're crazy!”

“I'm not implying anything. Unless maybe just that he knew what his daddy needed.”

*I know what you need.*

It was almost as if the words had been spoken into her ear, and she shuddered.

“Mrs. Hamner spent the next six years in and out of various mental institutions. Supposedly for nervous disorders, but the operative talked to an orderly who said she was pretty close to psychotic. She claimed her son was the devil's henchman. She stabbed him with a pair of scissors in 1964. Tried to kill him. She . . . Liz? Liz, what is it?”

“The scar,” she muttered. “We went swimming at the University pool on an open night about a month ago. He's got a deep, dimpled scar on his shoulder . . . here.” She put her hand just above her left breast. “He said . . .” A wave of nausea tried to climb up her throat and she had to wait for it to recede before she could go on. “He said he fell on a picket fence when he was a little boy.”

“Shall I go on?”

“Finish, why not? What can it hurt now?”

“His mother was released from a very plush mental institution in the San Joaquin Valley in 1968. The three of them went on a vacation. They stopped at a picnic spot on Route 101. The boy was collecting firewood when she drove the car right over the edge of the dropoff above the ocean with both her and her husband in it. It might have been an attempt to run Ed down. By then he was nearly eighteen. His father left him a million-dollar stock portfolio. Ed came east a year and a half later and enrolled here. And that's the end.”

“No more skeletons in the closet?”

“Liz, aren't there enough?”

She got up. “No wonder he never wants to mention his family. But you had to dig up the corpse, didn't you?”

“You're blind,” Alice said. Elizabeth was putting on her coat. “I suppose you're going to him.”

“Right.”

“Because you love him.”

“Right.”

Alice crossed the room and grabbed her arm. “Will you get that sulky, petulant look off your face for a second and *think!* Ed Hamner is able to do things the rest of us only dream about. He got his father a stake at roulette and made him rich playing the stock market. He seems to be able to will winning. Maybe he's some kind of low-grade psychic. Maybe he's got precognition. I don't know. There are people

who seem to have a dose of that. Liz, hasn't it ever occurred to you that he's forced you to love him?"

Liz turned to her slowly. "I've never heard anything so ridiculous in my life."

"Is it? He gave you that sociology test the same way he gave his father the right side of the roulette board! He was never enrolled in any sociology course! I checked. He did it because it was the only way he could make you take him seriously!"

"Stop it!" Liz cried. She clapped her hands over her ears.

"He knew the test, and he knew when Tony was killed, and he knew you were going home on a plane! He even knew just the right psychological moment to step back into your life last October."

Elizabeth pulled away from her and opened the door.

"Please," Alice said. "Please, Liz, listen. I don't know how he can do those things. I doubt if even *he* knows for sure. He might not mean to do you any harm, but he already is. He's made you love him by knowing every secret thing you want and need, and that's not love at all. That's rape."

Elizabeth slammed the door and ran down the stairs.

She caught the last bus of the evening into town. It was snowing more heavily than ever, and the bus lumbered through the drifts that had blown across the road like a crippled beetle. Elizabeth sat in the back, one of only six or seven passengers, a thousand thoughts in her mind.

Menthol cigarettes. The stock exchange. The way he had known her mother's nickname was Deedee. A little boy sitting at the back of a first-grade classroom, making sheep's eyes at a vivacious little girl too young to understand that—

*I know what you need.*

*No. No. No. I do love him!*

Did she? Or was she simply delighted at being with someone who always ordered the right thing, took her to the right movie, and did not want to go anywhere or do anything she didn't? Was he just a kind of psychic mirror, showing her only what she wanted to see?

The presents he gave were always the right presents. When the weather had turned suddenly cold and she had been longing for a hair dryer, who gave her one? Ed Hamner, of course. Just happened to see one on sale in Day's, he had said. She, of course, had been delighted.

*That's not love at all. That's rape.*

The wind clawed at her face as she stepped out on the corner of Main and Mill, and she winced against it as the bus drew away with a smooth diesel growl. Its taillights twinkled briefly in the snowy night for a moment and were gone.

She had never felt so lonely in her life.

He wasn't home.

She stood outside his door after five minutes of knocking, nonplussed. It occurred to her that she had no idea what Ed did or whom he saw when he wasn't with her. The subject had never come up.

*Maybe he's raising the price of another hair dryer in a poker game.*

With sudden decision she stood on her toes and felt along the top of the doorjamb for the spare key she knew he kept there. Her fingers stumbled over it and it fell to the hall floor with a clink.

She picked it up and used it in the lock.

The apartment looked different with Ed gone—artificial, like a stage set. It had often amused her that someone who cared so little about his personal appearance should have such a neat, picture-book domicile. Almost as if he had decorated it for her and not himself. But of course that was crazy. Wasn't it?

It occurred to her again, as if for the first time, how much she liked the chair she sat in when they studied or watched TV. It was just right, the way Baby Bear's chair had been for Goldilocks. Not too hard, not too soft. Just right. Like everything else she associated with Ed.

There were two doors opening off the living room. One went to the kitchenette, the other to his bedroom.

The wind whistled outside, making the old apartment building creak and settle.

In the bedroom, she stared at the brass bed. It looked neither too hard nor too soft, but just right. An insidious voice smirked: *It's almost too perfect, isn't it?*

She went to the bookcase and ran her eye aimlessly over the titles. One jumped at her eyes and she pulled it out: *Dance crazes of the Fifties*. The book opened cleanly to a point some three-quarters through. A section titled "The Stroll" had been circled heavily in red grease pencil and in the margin the word BETH had been written in large, almost accusatory letters.

I ought to go now, she told herself. I can still save something. If he came back now I could never look him in the face again and Alice would win. Then she'd really get her money's worth.

But she couldn't stop, and knew it. Things had gone too far.

She went to the closet and turned the knob, but it didn't give. Locked.

On the off chance, she stood on tiptoe again and felt along the top of the door. And her fingers felt a key. She took it down and somewhere inside a voice said very clearly: *Don't do this*. She thought of Bluebeard's wife and what she had found when she opened the wrong door. But it was indeed too late; if she didn't proceed now she would always wonder. She opened the closet.

And had the strangest feeling that this was where the real Ed Hamner, Jr., had been hiding all the time.

The closet was a mess—a jumbled rickrack of clothes, books, an unstrung tennis racket, a pair of tattered tennis shoes, old prelims and reports tossed helter-skelter, a spilled pouch of Borkum Riff pipe tobacco. His green fatigue jacket had been flung in the far corner.

She picked up one of the books and blinked at the title. *The Golden Bough*. Another. *Ancient Rites, Modern Mysteries*. Another. *Haitian Voodoo*. And a last one, bound in old, cracked leather, the title almost rubbed off the binding by much handling, smelling vaguely like rotted fish: *Necronomicon*. She opened it at random, gasped, and flung it away, the obscenity still hanging before her eyes.

More to regain her composure than anything else, she reached for the green fatigue jacket, not admitting to herself that she meant to go through its pockets. But as she lifted it she saw something else. A small tin box . . .

Curiously, she picked it up and turned it over in her hands, hearing things rattle inside. It was the kind of box a young boy might choose to keep his treasures in. Stamped in raised letters on the tin bottom were the words "Bridgeport Candy Co." She opened it.

The doll was on top. The Elizabeth doll.

She looked at it and began to shudder.

The doll was dressed in a scrap of red nylon, part of a scarf she had lost two or three months back. At a movie with Ed. The arms were pipe cleaners that had been draped in stuff that looked like blue moss. Graveyard moss, perhaps. There was hair on the doll's head, but that was wrong. It was fine white flax, taped to the doll's pink gum-eraser head. Her own hair was sandy blond and coarser than this. This was more the way her hair had been—

*When she was a little girl*

She swallowed and there was a clicking in her throat. Hadn't they all been issued scissors in the first grade, tiny scissors with rounded blade, just right for a child's hand? Had that long-ago little boy crept up behind her, perhaps at nap time, and—

Elizabeth put the doll aside and looked in the box again. There was a blue poker chip with a strange six-sided pattern drawn on it in red ink. A tattered newspaper obituary—Mr. and Mrs. Edward Hamner. The two of them smiled meaninglessly out of the accompanying photo, and she saw that the same six-sided pattern had been drawn across their faces, this time in black ink, like a pall. Two more dolls, one male, one female. The similarity to the faces in the obituary photograph was hideous, unmistakable.

And something else.

She fumbled it out, and her fingers shook so badly she almost dropped it. A tiny sound escaped her.

It was a model car, the sort small boys buy in drugstores and hobby shops and then assemble with airplane glue. This one was a

Fiat. It had been painted red. And a piece of what looked like one of Tony's shirts had been taped to the front.

She turned the model car upside down. Someone had hammered the underside to fragments.

"So you found it, you ungrateful bitch."

She screamed and dropped the car and the box. His foul treasures sprayed across the floor.

He was standing in the doorway, looking at her. She had never seen such a look of hate on a human face.

She said, "You killed Tony."

He grinned unpleasantly. "Do you think you could prove it?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, surprised at the steadiness of her own voice. "I know. And I never want to see you again. Ever. And if you do . . . anything . . . to anyone else, I'll know. And I'll fix you. Somehow."

His face twisted. "That's the thanks I get. I gave you everything you ever wanted. Things no other man could have. Admit it. I made you perfectly happy."

"*You killed Tony!*" She screamed it at him.

He took another step into the room. "Yes, and I did it for you. And what are you, Beth? You don't know what love is. I loved you from the first time I saw you, over seventeen years ago. Could Tony say that? It's never been hard for you. You're *pretty*. You never had to think about wanting or needing or about being lonely. You never had to find . . . other ways to get the things you had to have. There was always a Tony to give them to you. All you ever had to do was smile and say please." His voice rose a note. "*I* could never get what I wanted that way. Don't you think I tried? It didn't work with my father. He just wanted more and more. He never even kissed me good night or gave me a hug until I made him rich. And my mother was the same way. I gave her her marriage back, but was that enough for her? She hated me! She wouldn't come near me! She said I was unnatural! I gave her nice things but . . . Beth, don't do that! Don't . . . *doon't*—

She stepped on the Elizabeth doll and crushed it, turning her heel on it. Something inside her flared in agony, and then was gone. She

wasn't afraid of him now. He was just a small, shrunken boy in a young man's body. And his socks didn't match.

"I don't think you can do anything to me now, Ed," she told him. "Not now. Am I wrong?"

He turned from her. "Go on," he said weakly. "Get out. But leave my box. At least do that."

"I'll leave the box. But not the things in it." She walked past him. His shoulders twitched, as if he might turn and try to grab her, but then they slumped.

As she reached the second-floor landing, he came to the top of the stairs and called shrilly after her: "Go on then! But you'll never be satisfied with any man after me! And when your looks go and men stop trying to give you anything you want, you'll wish for me! You'll think of what you threw away!"

She went down the stairs and out into the snow. Its coldness felt good against her face. It was a two-mile walk back to the campus, but she didn't care. She wanted the walk, wanted the cold. She wanted it to make her clean.

In a queer, twisted way she felt sorry for him—a little boy with a huge power crammed inside a dwarfed spirit. A little boy who tried to make humans behave like toy soldiers and then stamped on them in a fit of temper when they wouldn't or when they found out.

And what was she? Blessed with all the things he was not, through no fault of his or effort of her own? She remembered the way she had reacted to Alice, trying blindly and jealously to hold onto something that was easy rather than good, not caring, not caring.

*When your looks go and men stop trying to give you anything you want, you'll wish for me! . . . I know what you need.*

But was she so small that she actually needed so little?

Please, dear God, no.

On the bridge between the campus and town she paused and threw Ed Hamner's scraps of magic over the side, piece by piece. The red-painted model Fiat went last, falling end over end into the driven snow until it was lost from sight. Then she walked on.

# CHILDREN OF THE CORN

Burt turned the radio on too loud and didn't turn it down because they were on the verge of another argument and he didn't want it to happen. He was desperate for it not to happen.

Vicky said something.

“What?” he shouted.

“Turn it down! Do you want to break my eardrums?”

He bit down hard on what might have come through his mouth and turned it down.

Vicky was fanning herself with her scarf even though the T-Bird was air-conditioned. “Where are we, anyway?”

“Nebraska.”

She gave him a cold, neutral look. “Yes, Burt. I know we're in Nebraska, Burt. But where the hell *are* we?”

“You've got the road atlas. Look it up. Or can't you read?”

“Such wit. This is why we got off the turnpike. So we could look at three hundred miles of corn. And enjoy the wit and wisdom of Burt Robeson.”

He was gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white. He decided he was holding it that tightly because if he loosened up, why, one of those hands might just fly off and hit the ex-Prom Queen beside him right in the chops. We're saving our marriage, he told himself. Yes. We're doing it the same way us grunts went about saving villages in the war.

“Vicky,” he said carefully. “I have driven fifteen hundred miles on turnpikes since we left Boston. I did all that driving myself because you refused to drive. Then—”

“I did not refuse!” Vicky said hotly. “Just because I get migraines when I drive for a long time—”

“Then when I asked you if you'd navigate for me on some of the secondary roads, you said sure, Burt. Those were your exact words. Sure, Burt. Then—”

“Sometimes I wonder how I ever wound up married to you.”

“By saying two little words.”

She stared at him for a moment, white-lipped, and then picked up the road atlas. She turned the pages savagely.

It *had* been a mistake leaving the turnpike, Burt thought morosely. It was a shame, too, because up until then they had been doing pretty well, treating each other almost like human beings. It had sometimes seemed that this trip to the coast, ostensibly to see Vicky's brother and his wife but actually a last-ditch attempt to patch up their own marriage, was going to work.

But since they left the pike, it had been bad again. How bad? Well, terrible, actually.

“We left the turnpike at Hamburg, right?”

“Right.”

“There's nothing more until Gatlin,” she said. “Twenty miles. Wide place in the road. Do you suppose we could stop there and get something to eat? Or does your almighty schedule say we have to go until two o'clock like we did yesterday?”

He took his eyes off the road to look at her. “I've about had it, Vicky. As far as I'm concerned, we can turn around right here and go home and see that lawyer you wanted to talk to. Because this isn't working at—”

She had faced forward again, her expression stonily set. It suddenly turned to surprise and fear. “*Burt look out you're going to —*”

He turned his attention back to the road just in time to see something vanish under the T-Bird's bumper. A moment later, while he was only beginning to switch from gas to brake, he felt something thump sickeningly under the front and then the back wheels. They were thrown forward as the car braked along the centerline, decelerating from fifty to zero along black skidmarks.

“A dog,” he said. “Tell me it was a dog, Vicky.”

Her face was a pallid, cottage-cheese color. “A boy. A little boy. He just ran out of the corn and . . . congratulations, tiger.”

She fumbled the car door open, leaned out, threw up.

Burt sat straight behind the T-Bird's wheel, hands still gripping it loosely. He was aware of nothing for a long time but the rich, dark smell of fertilizer.

Then he saw that Vicky was gone and when he looked in the outside mirror he saw her stumbling clumsily back toward a heaped bundle that looked like a pile of rags. She was ordinarily a graceful woman but now her grace was gone, robbed.

*It's manslaughter. That's what they call it. I took my eyes off the road.*

He turned the ignition off and got out. The wind rustled softly through the growing man-high corn, making a weird sound like respiration. Vicky was standing over the bundle of rags now, and he could hear her sobbing.

He was halfway between the car and where she stood and something caught his eye on the left, a gaudy splash of red amid all the green, as bright as barn paint.

He stopped, looking directly into the corn. He found himself thinking (anything to untrack from those rags that were not rags) that it must have been a fantastically good growing season for corn. It grew close together, almost ready to bear. You could plunge into those neat, shaded rows and spend a day trying to find your way out again. But the neatness was broken here. Several tall cornstalks had been broken and leaned askew. And what was that further back in the shadows?

“Burt!” Vicky screamed at him. “Don't you want to come see? So you can tell all your poker buddies what you bagged in Nebraska? Don't you—” But the rest was lost in fresh sobs. Her shadow was puddled starkly around her feet. It was almost noon.

Shade closed over him as he entered the corn. The red barn paint was blood. There was a low, somnolent buzz as flies lit, tasted, and buzzed off again . . . maybe to tell others. There was more blood on the leaves further in. Surely it couldn't have splattered this far? And

then he was standing over the object he had seen from the road. He picked it up.

The neatness of the rows was disturbed here. Several stalks were canted drunkenly, two of them had been broken clean off. The earth had been gouged. There was blood. The corn rustled. With a little shiver, he walked back to the road.

Vicky was having hysterics, screaming unintelligible words at him, crying, laughing. Who would have thought it could end in such a melodramatic way? He looked at her and saw he wasn't having an identity crisis or a difficult life transition or any of those trendy things. He hated her. He gave her a hard slap across the face.

She stopped short and put a hand against the reddening impression of his fingers. "You'll go to jail, Burt," she said solemnly.

"I don't think so," he said, and put the suitcase he had found in the corn at her feet.

"What—?"

"I don't know. I guess it belonged to him." He pointed to the sprawled, face-down body that lay in the road. No more than thirteen, from the look of him.

The suitcase was old. The brown leather was battered and scuffed. Two hanks of clothesline had been wrapped around it and tied in large, clownish grannies. Vicky bent to undo one of them, saw the blood greased into the knot, and withdrew.

Burt knelt and turned the body over gently.

"I don't want to look," Vicky said, staring down helplessly anyway. And when the staring, sightless face flopped up to regard them, she screamed again. The boy's face was dirty, his expression a grimace of terror. His throat had been cut.

Burt got up and put his arms around Vicky as she began to sway. "Don't faint," he said very quietly. "Do you hear me, Vicky? Don't faint."

He repeated it over and over and at last she began to recover and held him tight. They might have been dancing, there on the noon-struck road with the boy's corpse at their feet.

"Vicky?"

"What?" Muffled against his shirt.

“Go back to the car and put the keys in your pocket. Get the blanket out of the back seat, and my rifle. Bring them here.”

“The rifle?”

“Someone cut his throat. Maybe whoever is watching us.”

Her head jerked up and her wide eyes considered the corn. It marched away as far as the eye could see, undulating up and down small dips and rises of land.

“I imagine he's gone. But why take chances? Go on. Do it.”

She walked stiltedly back to the car, her shadow following, a dark mascot who stuck close at this hour of the day. When she leaned into the back seat, Burt squatted beside the boy. White male, no distinguishing marks. Run over, yes, but the T-Bird hadn't cut the kid's throat. It had been cut raggedly and inefficiently—no army sergeant had shown the killer the finer points of hand-to-hand assassination—but the final effect had been deadly. He had either run or been pushed through the last thirty feet of corn, dead or mortally wounded. And Burt Robeson had run him down. If the boy had still been alive when the car hit him, his life had been cut short by thirty seconds at most.

Vicky tapped him on the shoulder and he jumped.

She was standing with the brown army blanket over her left arm, the cased pump shotgun in her right hand, her face averted. He took the blanket and spread it on the road. He rolled the body onto it. Vicky uttered a desperate little moan.

“You okay?” He looked up at her. “Vicky?”

“Okay,” she said in a strangled voice.

He flipped the sides of the blanket over the body and scooped it up, hating the thick, dead weight of it. It tried to make a U in his arms and slither through his grasp. He clutched it tighter and they walked back to the T-Bird.

“Open the trunk,” he grunted.

The trunk was full of travel stuff, suitcases and souvenirs. Vicky shifted most of it into the back seat and Burt slipped the body into the made space and slammed the trunklid down. A sigh of relief escaped him.

Vicky was standing by the driver's side door, still holding the cased rifle.

“Just put it in the back and get in.”

He looked at his watch and saw only fifteen minutes had passed. It seemed like hours.

“What about the suitcase?” she asked.

He trotted back down the road to where it stood on the white line, like the focal point in an Impressionist painting. He picked it up by its tattered handle and paused for a moment. He had a strong sensation of being watched. It was a feeling he had read about in books, mostly cheap fiction, and he had always doubted its reality. Now he didn't. It was as if there were people in the corn, maybe a lot of them, coldly estimating whether the woman could get the gun out of the case and use it before they could grab him, drag him into the shady rows, cut his throat—

Heart beating thickly, he ran back to the car, pulled the keys out of the trunk lock, and got in.

Vicky was crying again. Burt got them moving, and before a minute had passed, he could no longer pick out the spot where it had happened in the rearview mirror.

“What did you say the next town was?” he asked.

“Oh.” She bent over the road atlas again. “Gatlin. We should be there in ten minutes.”

“Does it look big enough to have a police station?”

“No. It's just a dot.”

“Maybe there's a constable.”

They drove in silence for a while. They passed a silo on the left. Nothing else but corn. Nothing passed them going the other way, not even a farm truck.

“Have we passed anything since we got off the turnpike, Vicky?”

She thought about it. “A car and a tractor. At that intersection.”

“No, since we got on this road. Route 17.”

“No. I don't think we have.” Earlier this might have been the preface to some cutting remark. Now she only stared out of her half of the windshield at the unrolling road and the endless dotted line.

“Vicky? Could you open the suitcase?”

“Do you think it might matter?”

“Don't know. It might.”

While she picked at the knots (her face was set in a peculiar way—expressionless but tight-mouthed—that Burt remembered his mother wearing when she pulled the innards out of the Sunday chicken), Burt turned on the radio again.

The pop station they had been listening to was almost obliterated in static and Burt switched, running the red marker slowly down the dial. Farm reports. Buck Owens. Tammy Wynette. All distant, nearly distorted into babble. Then, near the end of the dial, one single word blared out of the speaker, so loud and clear that the lips which uttered it might have been directly beneath the grill of the dashboard speaker.

“*ATONEMENT!*” this voice bellowed.

Burt made a surprised grunting sound. Vicky jumped.

“*ONLY BY THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB ARE WE SAVED!*” the voice roared, and Burt hurriedly turned the sound down. This station was close, all right. So close that . . . yes, there it was. Poking out of the corn at the horizon, a spidery red tripod against the blue. The radio tower.

“Atonement is the word, brothers ‘n’ sisters,” the voice told them, dropping to a more conversational pitch. In the background, offmike, voices murmured amen. “There's some that thinks it's okay to get out in the world, as if you could work and walk in the world without being smirched by the world. Now is that what the word of God teaches us?”

Offmike but still loud: “No!”

“*HOLY JESUS!*” the evangelist shouted, and now the words came in a powerful, pumping cadence, almost as compelling as a driving rock-and-roll beat: “When they gonna know that way is death? When they gonna know that the wages of the world are paid on the other side? Huh? Huh? The Lord has said there's many mansions in His house. But there's no room for the fornicator. No room for the coveter. No room for the defiler of the corn. No room for the hommasexshul. No room—”

Vicky snapped it off. “That drivel makes me sick.”

“What did he say?” Burt asked her. “What did he say about corn?”

“I didn't hear it.” She was picking at the second clothesline knot.

“He said something about corn. I know he did.”

“I got it!” Vicky said, and the suitcase fell open in her lap. They were passing a sign that said: GATLIN 5 MI. DRIVE CAREFULLY PROTECT OUR CHILDREN. The sign had been put up by the Elks. There were .22 bullet holes in it.

“Socks,” Vicky said. “Two pairs of pants . . . a shirt . . . a belt . . . a string tie with a—” She held it up, showing him the peeling gilt neck clasp. “Who's that?”

Burt glanced at it. “Hopalong Cassidy, I think.”

“Oh.” She put it back. She was crying again.

After a moment, Burt said; “Did anything strike you funny about that radio sermon?”

“No. I heard enough of that stuff as a kid to last me forever. I told you about it.”

“Didn't you think he sounded kind of young? That preacher?”

She uttered a mirthless laugh. “A teen-ager, maybe, so what? That's what's so monstrous about that whole trip. They like to get hold of them when their minds are still rubber. They know how to put all the emotional checks and balances in. You should have been at some of the tent meetings my mother and father dragged me to . . . some of the ones I was ‘saved’ at.

“Let's see. There was Baby Hortense, the Singing Marvel. She was eight. She'd come on and sing ‘Leaning on the Ever-lasting Arms’ while her daddy passed the plate, telling everybody to ‘dig deep, now, let's not let this little child of God down.’ Then there was Norman Staunton. He used to preach hellfire and brimstone in this Little Lord Fauntleroy suit with short pants. He was only seven.”

She nodded at his look of unbelief.

“They weren't the only two, either. There were plenty of them on the circuit. They were good *draws*.” She spat the word. “Ruby Stampnell. She was a ten-year-old faith healer. The Grace Sisters. They used to come out with little tin-foil haloes over their heads and —*oh!*”

“What is it?” He jerked around to look at her, and what she was holding in her hands. Vicky was staring at it raptly. Her slowly seining hands had snagged it on the bottom of the suitcase and had brought it up as she talked. Burt pulled over to take a better look. She gave it to him wordlessly.

It was a crucifix that had been made from twists of corn husk, once green, now dry. Attached to this by woven cornsilk was a dwarf corncob. Most of the kernels had been carefully removed, probably dug out one at a time with a pocketknife. Those kernels remaining formed a crude cruciform figure in yellowish bas-relief. Corn-kernel eyes, each slit longways to suggest pupils. Outstretched kernel arms, the legs together, terminating in a rough indication of bare feet. Above, four letters also raised from the bone-white cob: I N R I.

• • •

“That's a fantastic piece of workmanship,” he said.

“It's hideous,” she said in a flat, strained voice. “Throw it out.”

“Vicky, the police might want to see it.”

“Why?”

“Well, I don't know why. Maybe—”

“Throw it out. Will you please do that for me? I don't want it in the car.”

“I'll put it in back. And as soon as we see the cops, we'll get rid of it one way or the other. I promise. Okay?”

“Oh, do whatever you want with it!” she shouted at him. “You will anyway!”

Troubled, he threw the thing in back, where it landed on a pile of clothes. Its corn-kernel eyes stared raptly at the T-Bird's dome light. He pulled out again, gravel splurting from beneath the tires.

“We'll give the body and everything that was in the suitcase to the cops,” he promised. “Then we'll be shut of it.”

Vicky didn't answer. She was looking at her hands.

A mile further on, the endless cornfields drew away from the road, showing farmhouses and outbuildings. In one yard they saw dirty

chickens pecking listlessly at the soil. There were faded cola and chewing-tobacco ads on the roofs of barns. They passed a tall billboard that said: ONLY JESUS SAVES. They passed a café with a Conoco gas island, but Burt decided to go on into the center of town, if there was one. If not, they could come back to the café. It only occurred to him after they had passed it that the parking lot had been empty except for a dirty old pickup that had looked like it was sitting on two flat tires.

Vicky suddenly began to laugh, a high, giggling sound that struck Burt as being dangerously close to hysteria.

“What's so funny?”

“The signs,” she said, gasping and hiccupping. “Haven't you been reading them? When they called this the Bible Belt, they sure weren't kidding. Oh Lordy, there's another bunch.” Another burst of hysterical laughter escaped her, and she clapped both hands over her mouth.

Each sign had only one word. They were leaning on white-washed sticks that had been implanted in the sandy shoulder, long ago by the looks; the whitewash was flaked and faded. They were coming up at eighty-foot intervals and Burt read:

A . . . CLOUD . . . BY . . . DAY . . . A . . . PILLAR . . . OF . . . FIRE . . . BY . . . NIGHT

“They only forgot one thing,” Vicky said, still giggling helplessly.

“What?” Burt asked, frowning.

“Burma Shave.” She held a knuckled fist against her open mouth to keep in the laughter, but her semi-hysterical giggles flowed around it like effervescent ginger-ale bubbles.

“Vicky, are you all right?”

“I will be. Just as soon as we're a thousand miles away from here, in sunny sinful California with the Rockies between us and Nebraska.”

Another group of signs came up and they read them silently.

TAKE . . . THIS . . . AND . . . EAT . . . SAITH . . . THE . . . LORD . . . GOD

Now why, Burt thought, should I immediately associate that indefinite pronoun with corn? Isn't that what they say when they give you communion? It had been so long since he had been to church that he really couldn't remember. He wouldn't be surprised if they

used cornbread for holy wafer around these parts. He opened his mouth to tell Vicky that, and then thought better of it.

They breasted a gentle rise and there was Gatlin below them, all three blocks of it, looking like a set from a movie about the Depression.

“There'll be a constable,” Burt said, and wondered why the sight of that hick one-timetable town dozing in the sun should have brought a lump of dread into his throat.

They passed a speed sign proclaiming that no more than thirty was now in order, and another sign, rust-flecked, which said: YOU ARE NOW ENTERING GATLIN, NICEST LITTLE TOWN IN NEBRASKA—OR ANYWHERE ELSE! POP. 5431.

Dusty elms stood on both sides of the road, most of them diseased. They passed the Gatlin Lumberyard and a 76 gas station, where the price signs swung slowly in a hot noon breeze: REG 35.9 HI-TEST 38.9, and another which said: HI TRUCKERS DIESEL FUEL AROUND BACK.

They crossed Elm Street, then Birch Street, and came up on the town square. The houses lining the streets were plain wood with screened porches. Angular and functional. The lawns were yellow and dispirited. Up ahead a mongrel dog walked slowly out into the middle of Maple Street, stood looking at them for a moment, then lay down in the road with its nose on its paws.

“Stop,” Vicky said. “Stop right here.”

Burt pulled obediently to the curb.

“Turn around. Let's take the body to Grand Island. That's not too far, is it? Let's do that.”

“Vicky, what's wrong?”

“What do you mean, what's wrong?” she asked, her voice rising thinly. “This town is empty, Burt. There's nobody here but us. Can't you feel that?”

He had felt something, and still felt it. But—

“It just seems that way,” he said. “But it sure is a one-hydrant town. Probably all up in the square, having a bake sale or a bingo game.”

“*There's no one here*” She said the words with a queer, strained emphasis. “Didn't you see that 76 station back there?”

“Sure, by the lumberyard, so what?” His mind was elsewhere, listening to the dull buzz of a cicada burrowing into one of the nearby elms. He could smell corn, dusty roses, and fertilizer—of course. For the first time they were off the turnpike and in a town. A town in a state he had never been in before (although he had flown over it from time to time in United Airlines 747s) and somehow it felt all wrong but all right. Somewhere up ahead there would be a drugstore with a soda fountain, a movie house named the Bijou, a school named after JFK.

“Burt, the prices said thirty-five-nine for regular and thirty-eight-nine for high octane. Now how long has it been since anyone in this country paid those prices?”

“At least four years,” he admitted. “But, Vicky—”

“We're right in town, Burt, and there's not a car! *Not one car!*”

“Grand Island is seventy miles away. It would look funny if we took him there.”

“I don't care.”

“Look, let's just drive up to the courthouse and—”

“*No!*”

There, damn it, there. Why our marriage is falling apart, in a nutshell. No I won't. No sir. And furthermore, I'll hold my breath till I turn blue if you don't let me have my way.

“Vicky,” he said.

“I want to get out of here, Burt.”

“Vicky, listen to me.”

“Turn around. Let's go.”

“Vicky, will you stop a minute?”

“I'll stop when we're driving the other way. Now let's go.”

“*We have a dead child in the trunk of our car!*” he roared at her, and took a distinct pleasure at the way she flinched, the way her face crumbled. In a slightly lower voice he went on: “His throat was cut and he was shoved out into the road and I ran him over. Now I'm going to drive up to the courthouse or whatever they have here, and I'm going to report it. If you want to start walking back toward the pike, go to it. I'll pick you up. But don't you tell me to turn around and drive seventy miles to Grand Island like we had nothing in the trunk

but a bag of garbage. He happens to be some mother's son, and I'm going to report it before whoever killed him gets over the hills and far away."

"You bastard," she said, crying. "What am I doing with you?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know anymore. But the situation can be remedied, Vicky."

He pulled away from the curb. The dog lifted its head at the brief squeal of the tires and then lowered it to its paws again.

They drove the remaining block to the square. At the corner of Main and Pleasant, Main Street split in two. There actually was a town square, a grassy park with a bandstand in the middle. On the other end, where Main Street became one again, there were two official-looking buildings. Burt could make out the lettering on one: GATLIN MUNICIPAL CENTER.

"That's it," he said. Vicky said nothing.

Halfway up the square, Burt pulled over again. They were beside a lunch room, the Gatlin Bar and Grill.

"Where are you going?" Vicky asked with alarm as he opened his door.

"To find out where everyone is. Sign in the window there says 'open.' "

"You're not going to leave me here alone."

"So come. Who's stopping you?"

She unlocked her door and stepped out as he crossed in front of the car. He saw how pale her face was and felt an instant of pity. Hopeless pity.

"Do you hear it?" she asked as he joined her.

"Hear what?"

"The nothing. No cars. No people. No tractors. Nothing."

And then, from a block over, they heard the high and joyous laughter of children.

"I hear kids," he said. "Don't you?"

She looked at him, troubled.

He opened the lunchroom door and stepped into dry, antiseptic heat. The floor was dusty. The sheen on the chrome was dull. The wooden blades of the ceiling fans stood still. Empty tables. Empty

counter stools. But the mirror behind the counter had been shattered and there was something else . . . in a moment he had it. All the beer taps had been broken off. They lay along the counter like bizarre party favors.

Vicky's voice was gay and near to breaking. "Sure. Ask anybody. Pardon me, sir, but could you tell me—"

"Oh, shut up." But his voice was dull and without force. They were standing in a bar of dusty sunlight that fell through the lunchroom's big plate-glass window and again he had that feeling of being watched and he thought of the boy they had in their trunk, and of the high laughter of children. A phrase came to him for no reason, a legal-sounding phrase, and it began to repeat mystically in his mind: *Sight unseen. Sight unseen. Sight unseen.*

His eyes traveled over the age-yellowed cards thumbtacked up behind the counter: CHEESEBURG 35¢ WORLD'S BEST JOE 10¢ STRAWBERRY RHUBARB PIE 25¢ TODAY'S SPECIAL HAM & RED EYE GRAVY W/ MASHED POT 80¢.

How long since he had seen lunchroom prices like that?

Vicky had the answer. "Look at this," she said shrilly. She was pointing at the calendar on the wall. "They've been at that bean supper for twelve years, I guess." She uttered a grinding laugh.

He walked over. The picture showed two boys swimming in a pond while a cute little dog carried off their clothes. Below the picture was the legend: COMPLIMENTS OF GATLIN LUMBER & HARDWARE *You Breakum, We Fixum.* The month on view was August 1964.

"I don't understand," he faltered, "but I'm sure—"

"You're sure!" she cried hysterically. "Sure, you're sure! That's part of your trouble, Burt, you've spent your whole life being *sure!*"

He turned back to the door and she came after him.

"Where are you going?"

"To the Municipal Center."

"Burt, why do you have to be so stubborn? You know something's wrong here. Can't you just admit it?"

"I'm not being stubborn. I just want to get shut of what's in that trunk."

They stepped out onto the sidewalk, and Burt was struck afresh with the town's silence, and with the smell of fertilizer. Somehow you never thought of that smell when you buttered an ear and salted it and bit in. Compliments of sun, rain, all sorts of man-made phosphates, and a good healthy dose of cow shit. But somehow this smell was different from the one he had grown up with in rural upstate New York. You could say whatever you wanted to about organic fertilizer, but there was something almost fragrant about it when the spreader was laying it down in the fields. Not one of your great perfumes, God no, but when the late-afternoon spring breeze would pick up and waft it over the freshly turned fields, it was a smell with good associations. It meant winter was over for good. It meant that school doors were going to bang closed in six weeks or so and spill everyone out into summer. It was a smell tied irrevocably in his mind with other aromas that *were* perfume: timothy grass, clover, fresh earth, hollyhocks, dogwood.

But they must do something different out here, he thought. The smell was close but not the same. There was a sickish-sweet undertone. Almost a death smell. As a medical orderly in Vietnam, he had become well versed in that smell.

Vicky was sitting quietly in the car, holding the corn crucifix in her lap and staring at it in a rapt way Burt didn't like.

"Put that thing down," he said.

"No," she said without looking up. "You play your games and I'll play mine."

He put the car in gear and drove up to the corner. A dead stoplight hung overhead, swinging in a faint breeze. To the left was a neat white church. The grass was cut. Neatly kept flowers grew beside the flagged path up to the door. Burt pulled over.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to go in and take a look," Burt said. "It's the only place in town that looks as if there isn't ten years' dust on it. And look at the sermon board."

She looked. Neatly pegged white letters under glass read: THE POWER AND GRACE OF HE WHO WALKS BEHIND THE ROWS. The date was July 24, 1976—the Sunday before.

“He Who Walks Behind the Rows,” Burt said, turning off the ignition. “One of the nine thousand names of God only used in Nebraska, I guess. Coming?”

She didn't smile. “I'm not going in with you.”

“Fine. Whatever you want.”

“I haven't been in a church since I left home and I don't want to be in *this* church and I don't want to be in *this town*, Burt. I'm scared out of my mind, can't we just *go*?”

“I'll only be a minute.”

“I've got my keys, Burt. If you're not back in five minutes, I'll just drive away and leave you here.”

“Now just wait a minute, lady.”

“That's what I'm going to do. Unless you want to assault me like a common mugger and take my keys. I suppose you could do that.”

“But you don't think I will.”

“No.”

Her purse was on the seat between them. He snatched it up. She screamed and grabbed for the shoulder strap. He pulled it out of her reach. Not bothering to dig, he simply turned the bag upside down and let everything fall out. Her keyring glittered amid tissues, cosmetics, change, old shopping lists. She lunged for it but he beat her again and put the keys in his own pocket.

“You didn't have to do that,” she said, crying. “Give them to me.”

“No,” he said, and gave her a hard, meaningless grin. “No way.”

“*Please, Burt! I'm scared!*” She held her hand out, pleading now.

“You'd wait two minutes and decide that was long enough.”

“I wouldn't—”

“And then you'd drive off laughing and saying to yourself, That'll teach Burt to cross me when I want something.’ Hasn't that pretty much been your motto during our married life? That'll teach Burt to cross me?”

He got out of the car.

“Please, Burt!” she screamed, sliding across the seat. “Listen . . . I know . . . we'll drive out of town and call from a phone booth, okay? I've got all kinds of change. I just . . . we can . . . *don't leave me alone, Burt, don't leave me out here alone!*”

He slammed the door on her cry and then leaned against the side of the T-Bird for a moment, thumbs against his closed eyes. She was pounding on the driver's side window and calling his name. She was going to make a wonderful impression when he finally found someone in authority to take charge of the kid's body. Oh yes.

He turned and walked up the flagstone path to the church doors. Two or three minutes, just a look-around, and he would be back out. Probably the door wasn't even unlocked.

But it pushed in easily on silent, well-oiled hinges (reverently oiled, he thought, and that seemed funny for no really good reason) and he stepped into a vestibule so cool it was almost chilly. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness.

The first thing he noticed was a pile of wooden letters in the far corner, dusty and jumbled indifferently together. He went to them, curious. They looked as old and forgotten as the calendar in the bar and grill, unlike the rest of the vestibule, which was dust-free and tidy. The letters were about two feet high, obviously part of a set. He spread them out on the carpet—there were eighteen of them—and shifted them around like anagrams, HURT BITE CRAG CHAP CS. Nope, CRAP TARGET CHIBS HUC. That wasn't much good either. Except for the CH in CHIBS. He quickly assembled the word CHURCH and was left looking at RAP TAGET CIBS. Foolish. He was squatting here playing idiot games with a bunch of letters while Vicky was going nuts out in the car. He started to get up, and then saw it. He formed BAPTIST, leaving RAG EC—and by changing two letters he had GRACE. GRACE BAPTIST CHURCH. The letters must have been out front. They had taken them down and had thrown them indifferently in the corner, and the church had been painted since then so that you couldn't even see where the letters had been.

Why?

It wasn't the Grace Baptist Church anymore, that was why. So what kind of church was it? For some reason that question caused a trickle of fear and he stood up quickly, dusting his fingers. So they had taken down a bunch of letters, so what? Maybe they had changed the place into Flip Wilson's Church of What's Happening Now.

But what had happened then?

He shook it off impatiently and went through the inner doors. Now he was standing at the back of the church itself, and as he looked toward the nave, he felt fear close around his heart and squeeze tightly. His breath drew in, loud in the pregnant silence of this place.

The space behind the pulpit was dominated by a gigantic portrait of Christ, and Burt thought: If nothing else in this town gave Vicky the screaming meemies, this would.

The Christ was grinning, vulpine. His eyes were wide and staring, reminding Burt uneasily of Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera*. In each of the wide black pupils someone (a sinner, presumably) was drowning in a lake of fire. But the oddest thing was that this Christ had green hair . . . hair which on closer examination revealed itself to be a twining mass of early-summer corn. The picture was crudely done but effective. It looked like a comic-strip mural done by a gifted child—an Old Testament Christ, or a pagan Christ that might slaughter his sheep for sacrifice instead of leading them.

At the foot of the left-hand rank of pews was a pipe organ, and Burt could not at first tell what was wrong with it. He walked down the left-hand aisle and saw with slowly dawning horror that the keys had been ripped up, the stops had been pulled out. . . and the pipes themselves filled with dry cornhusks. Over the organ was a carefully lettered plaque which read: MAKE NO MUSIC EXCEPT WITH HUMAN TONGUE SAITH THE LORD GOD.

Vicky was right. Something was terribly wrong here. He debated going back to Vicky without exploring any further, just getting into the car and leaving town as quickly as possible, never mind the Municipal Building. But it grated on him. Tell the truth, he thought. You want to give her Ban 5000 a work-out before going back and admitting she was right to start with.

He would go back out in a minute or so.

He walked toward the pulpit, thinking: People must go through Gatlin all the time. There must be people in the neighboring towns who have friends and relatives here. The Nebraska SP must cruise through from time to time. And what about the power company? The

stoplight had been dead. Surely they'd know if the power had been off for twelve long years. Conclusion: What seemed to have happened in Gatlin was impossible.

Still, he had the creeps.

He climbed the four carpeted steps to the pulpit and looked out over the deserted pews, glimmering in the half-shadows. He seemed to feel the weight of those eldritch and decidedly unchristian eyes boring into his back.

There was a large Bible on the lectern, opened to the thirty-eighth chapter of Job. Burt glanced down at it and read: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? . . . Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding." The lord. He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Declare if thou hast understanding. And please pass the corn.

He fluttered the pages of the Bible, and they made a dry whispering sound in the quiet—the sound that ghosts might make if there really were such things. And in a place like this you could almost believe it. Sections of the Bible had been chopped out. Mostly from the New Testament, he saw. Someone had decided to take on the job of amending Good King James with a pair of scissors.

But the Old Testament was intact.

He was about to leave the pulpit when he saw another book on a lower shelf and took it out, thinking it might be a church record of weddings and confirmations and burials.

He grimaced at the words stamped on the cover, done inexpertly in gold leaf: THUS LET THE INIQUITOUS BE CUT DOWN SO THAT THE GROUND MAY BE FERTILE AGAIN SAITH THE LORD GOD OF HOSTS.

There seemed to be one train of thought around here, and Burt didn't care much for the track it seemed to ride on.

He opened the book to the first wide, lined sheet. A child had done the lettering, he saw immediately. In places an ink eraser had been carefully used, and while there were no misspellings, the letters were large and childishly made, drawn rather than written. The first column read:

Amos Deigan (Richard), b. Sept. 4, 1945	Sept. 4, 1964
Isaac Renfrew (William), b. Sept. 19, 1945	Sept. 19, 1964
Zepeniah Kirk (George), b. Oct. 14, 1945	Oct. 14, 1964
Mary Wells (Roberta), b. Nov. 12, 1945	Nov. 12, 1964
Yemen Hollis (Edward), b. Jan. 5, 1946	Jan. 5, 1965

Frowning, Burt continued to turn through the pages. Three-quarters of the way through, the double columns ended abruptly:

Rachel Stigman (Donna), b. June 21, 1957	June 21, 1976
Moses Richardson (Henry), b. July 29, 1957	

Malachi  
Boardman  
(Craig), b. August  
15, 1957

The last entry in the book was for Ruth Clawson (Sandra), b. April 30, 1961. Burt looked at the shelf where he had found this book and came up with two more. The first had the same INIQUITOUS BE CUT DOWN logo, and it continued the same record, the single column tracing birth dates and names. In early September of 1964 he found Job Gilman (Clayton), b. September 6, and the next entry was Eve Tobin, b. June 16, 1965. No second name in parentheses.

The third book was blank.

Standing behind the pulpit, Burt thought about it.

Something had happened in 1964. Something to do with religion, and corn . . . and children.

*Dear God we beg thy blessing on the crop. For Jesus' sake, amen.*

And the knife raised high to sacrifice the lamb—but had it been a lamb? Perhaps a religious mania had swept them. Alone, all alone, cut off from the outside world by hundreds of square miles of the rustling secret corn. Alone under seventy million acres of blue sky. Alone under the watchful eye of God, now a strange green God, a God of corn, grown old and strange and hungry. He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

Burt felt a chill creep into his flesh.

Vicky, let me tell you a story. It's about Amos Deigan, who was born Richard Deigan on September 4, 1945. He took the name Amos in 1964, fine Old Testament name, Amos, one of the minor prophets. Well, Vicky, what happened—don't laugh—is that Dick Deigan and his friends—Billy Renfrew, George Kirk, Roberta Wells, and Eddie Hollis among others—they got religion and they killed off their parents. All of them. Isn't that a scream? Shot them in their beds, knifed them in their bathtubs, poisoned their suppers, hung them, or disemboweled them, for all I know.

Why? The corn. Maybe it was dying. Maybe they got the idea somehow that it was dying because there was too much sinning. Not enough sacrifice. They would have done it in the corn, in the rows.

And somehow, Vicky, I'm quite sure of this, somehow they decided that nineteen was as old as any of them could live. Richard "Amos" Deigan, the hero of our little story, had his nineteenth birthday on September 4, 1964—the date in the book. I think maybe they killed him. Sacrificed him in the corn. Isn't that a silly story?

But let's look at Rachel Stigman, who was Donna Stigman until 1964. She turned nineteen on June 21, just about a month ago. Moses Richardson was born on July 29—just three days from today he'll be nineteen. Any idea what's going to happen to ole Mose on the twenty-ninth?

I can guess.

Burt licked his lips, which felt dry.

One other thing, Vicky. Look at this. We have Job Gilman (Clayton) born on September 6, 1964. No other births until June 16, 1965. A gap of ten months. Know what I think? They killed all the parents, even the pregnant ones, that's what I think. And one of *them* got pregnant in October of 1964 and gave birth to Eve. Some sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl. *Eve. The first woman.*

He thumbed back through the book feverishly and found the Eve Tobin entry. Below it: "Adam Greenlaw, b. July 11, 1965."

They'd be just eleven now, he thought, and his flesh began to crawl. And maybe they're out there. Someplace.

But how could such a thing be kept secret? How could it go on?

How unless the God in question approved?

"Oh Jesus," Burt said into the silence, and that was when the T-Bird's horn began to blare into the afternoon, one long continuous blast.

Burt jumped from the pulpit and ran down the center aisle. He threw open the outer vestibule door, letting in hot sunshine, dazzling. Vicky was bolt upright behind the steering wheel, both hands plastered on the horn ring, her head swiveling wildly. From all around the children were coming. Some of them were laughing gaily. They held knives, hatchets, pipes, rocks, hammers. One girl, maybe eight,

with beautiful long blond hair, held a jackhandle. Rural weapons. Not a gun among them. Burt felt a wild urge to scream out: *Which of you is Adam and Eve? Who are the mothers? Who are the daughters? Fathers? Sons?*

Declare, if thou hast understanding.

They came from the side streets, from the town green, through the gate in the chain-link fence around the school playground a block further west. Some of them glanced indifferently at Burt, standing frozen on the church steps, and some nudged each other and pointed and smiled . . . the sweet smiles of children.

The girls were dressed in long brown wool and faded sunbonnets. The boys, like Quaker parsons, were all in black and wore round-crowned flat-brimmed hats. They streamed across the town square toward the car, across lawns, a few came across the front yard of what had been the Grace Baptist Church until 1964. One or two of them almost close enough to touch.

“The shotgun!” Burt yelled. “Vicky, get the shotgun!”

But she was frozen in her panic, he could see that from the steps. He doubted if she could even hear him through the closed windows.

They converged on the Thunderbird. The axes and hatchets and chunks of pipe began to rise and fall. My God, am I seeing this? he thought frozenly. An arrow of chrome fell off the side of the car. The hood ornament went flying. Knives scrawled spirals through the sidewalls of the tires and the car settled. The horn blared on and on. The windshield and side windows went opaque and cracked under the onslaught . . . and then the safety glass sprayed inward and he could see again. Vicky was crouched back, only one hand on the horn ring now, the other thrown up to protect her face. Eager young hands reached in, fumbling for the lock/unlock button. She beat them away wildly. The horn became intermittent and then stopped altogether.

The beaten and dented driver's side door was hauled open. They were trying to drag her out but her hands were wrapped around the steering wheel. Then one of them leaned in, knife in hand, and—

His paralysis broke and he plunged down the steps, almost falling, and ran down the flagstone walk, toward them. One of them, a boy

of about sixteen with long red hair spilling out from beneath his hat, turned toward him, almost casually, and something flicked through the air. Burt's left arm jerked backward, and for a moment he had the absurd thought that he had been punched at long distance. Then the pain came, so sharp and sudden that the world went gray.

He examined his arm with a stupid sort of wonder. A buck and a half Pency jackknife was growing out of it like a strange tumor. The sleeve of his J. C. Penney sport shirt was turning red. He looked at it for what seemed like forever, trying to understand how he could have grown a jackknife . . . was it possible?

When he looked up, the boy with the red hair was almost on top of him. He was grinning, confident.

"Hey, you bastard," Burt said. His voice was creaking, shocked.

"Remand your soul to God, for you will stand before His throne momentarily," the boy with the red hair said, and clawed for Burt's eyes.

Burt stepped back, pulled the Pency out of his arm, and stuck it into the red-haired boy's throat. The gush of blood was immediate, gigantic. Burt was splashed with it. The red-haired boy began to gobble and walk in a large circle. He clawed at the knife, trying to pull it free, and was unable. Burt watched him, jaw hanging agape. None of this was happening. It was a dream. The red-haired boy gobbled and walked. Now his sound was the only one in the hot early afternoon. The others watched, stunned.

This part of it wasn't in the script, Burt thought numbly. Vicky and I, we were in the script. And the boy in the corn, who was trying to run away. But not one of their own. He stared at them savagely, wanting to scream, *How do you like it?*

The red-haired boy gave one last weak gobble, and sank to his knees. He stared up at Burt for a moment, and then his hands dropped away from the haft of the knife, and he fell forward.

A soft sighing sound from the children gathered around the Thunderbird. They stared at Burt. Burt stared back at them, fascinated . . . and that was when he noticed that Vicky was gone.

"Where is she?" he asked. "Where did you take her?"

One of the boys raised a blood-streaked hunting knife toward his throat and made a sawing motion there. He grinned. That was the only answer.

From somewhere in back, an older boy's voice, soft: "Get him."

The boys began to walk toward him. Burt backed up. They began to walk faster. Burt backed up faster. The shotgun, the goddamned shotgun! Out of reach. The sun cut their shadows darkly on the green church lawn . . . and then he was on the sidewalk. He turned and ran.

*"Kill him!"* someone roared, and they came after him.

He ran, but not quite blindly. He skirted the Municipal Building—no help there, they would corner him like a rat—and ran on up Main Street, which opened out and became the highway again two blocks further up. He and Vicky would have been on that road now and away, if he had only listened.

His loafers slapped against the sidewalk. Ahead of him he could see a few more business buildings, including the Gatlin Ice Cream Shoppe and—sure enough—the Bijou Theater. The dust-clotted marquee letters read NOW HOWING L MITED EN AGEMEN ELI A TH TAYLOR CLEOPA RA. Beyond the next cross street was a gas station that marked the edge of town. And beyond that the corn, closing back in to the sides of the road. A green tide of corn.

Burt ran. He was already out of breath and the knife wound in his upper arm was beginning to hurt. And he was leaving a trail of blood. As he ran he yanked his handkerchief from his back pocket and stuck it inside his shirt.

He ran. His loafers pounded the cracked cement of the sidewalk, his breath rasped in his throat with more and more heat. His arm began to throb in earnest. Some mordant part of his brain tried to ask if he thought he could run all the way to the next town, if he could run twenty miles of two-lane blacktop.

He ran. Behind him he could hear them, fifteen years younger and faster than he was, gaining. Their feet slapped on the pavement. They whooped and shouted back and forth to each other. They're having more fun than a five-alarm fire, Burt thought disjointedly. They'll talk about it for years.

Burt ran.

He ran past the gas station marking the edge of town. His breath gasped and roared in his chest. The sidewalk ran out under his feet. And now there was only one thing to do, only one chance to beat them and escape with his life. The houses were gone, the town was gone. The corn had surged in a soft green wave back to the edges of the road. The green, swordlike leaves rustled softly. It would be deep in there, deep and cool, shady in the rows of man-high corn.

He ran past a sign that said: YOU ARE NOW LEAVING GATLIN, NICEST LITTLE TOWN IN NEBRASKA—OR ANYWHERE ELSE! DROP IN ANYTIME!

I'll be sure to do that, Burt thought dimly.

He ran past the sign like a sprinter closing on the tape and then swerved left, crossing the road, and kicked his loafers away. Then he was in the corn and it closed behind him and over him like the waves of a green sea, taking him in. Hiding him. He felt a sudden and wholly unexpected relief sweep him, and at the same moment he got his second wind. His lungs, which had been shallowing up, seemed to unlock and give him more breath.

He ran straight down the first row he had entered, head ducked, his broad shoulders swiping the leaves and making them tremble. Twenty yards in he turned right, parallel to the road again, and ran on, keeping low so they wouldn't see his dark head of hair bobbing amid the yellow corn tassels. He doubled back toward the road for a few moments, crossed more rows, and then put his back to the road and hopped randomly from row to row, always delving deeper and deeper into the corn.

At last, he collapsed onto his knees and put his forehead against the ground. He could only hear his own taxed breathing, and the thought that played over and over in his mind was: *Thank God I gave up smoking, thank God I gave up smoking, thank God—*

Then he could hear them, yelling back and forth to each other, in some cases bumping into each other (“Hey, this is my row!”), and the sound heartened him. They were well away to his left and they sounded very poorly organized.

He took his handkerchief out of his shirt, folded it, and stuck it back in after looking at the wound. The bleeding seemed to have

stopped in spite of the workout he had given it.

He rested a moment longer, and was suddenly aware that he felt *good*, physically better than he had in years . . . excepting the throb of his arm. He felt well exercised, and suddenly grappling with a clearcut (no matter how insane) problem after two years of trying to cope with the incubotic gremlins that were sucking his marriage dry.

It wasn't right that he should feel this way, he told himself. He was in deadly peril of his life, and his wife had been carried off. She might be dead now. He tried to summon up Vicky's face and dispel some of the odd good feeling by doing so, but her face wouldn't come. What came was the red-haired boy with the knife in his throat.

He became aware of the corn fragrance in his nose now, all around him. The wind through the tops of the plants made a sound like voices. Soothing. Whatever had been done in the name of this corn, it was now his protector.

But they were getting closer.

Running hunched over, he hurried up the row he was in, crossed over, doubled back, and crossed over more rows. He tried to keep the voices always on his left, but as the afternoon progressed, that became harder and harder to do. The voices had grown faint, and often the rustling sound of the corn obscured them altogether. He would run, listen, run again. The earth was hard-packed, and his stockinged feet left little or no trace.

When he stopped much later the sun was hanging over the fields to his right, red and inflamed, and when he looked at his watch he saw that it was quarter past seven. The sun had stained the corntops a reddish gold, but here the shadows were dark and deep. He cocked his head, listening. With the coming of sunset the wind had died entirely and the corn stood still, exhaling its aroma of growth into the warm air. If they were still in the corn they were either far away or just hunkered down and listening. But Burt didn't think a bunch of kids, even crazy ones, could be quiet for that long. He suspected they had done the most kidlike thing, regardless of the consequences for them: they had given up and gone home.

He turned toward the setting sun, which had sunk between the raftered clouds on the horizon, and began to walk. If he cut on a

diagonal through the rows, always keeping the setting sun ahead of him, he would be bound to strike Route 17 sooner or later.

The ache in his arm had settled into a dull throb that was nearly pleasant, and the good feeling was still with him. He decided that as long as he was here, he would let the good feeling exist in him without guilt. The guilt would return when he had to face the authorities and account for what had happened in Gatlin. But that could wait.

He pressed through the corn, thinking he had never felt so keenly aware. Fifteen minutes later the sun was only a hemisphere poking over the horizon and he stopped again, his new awareness clicking into a pattern he didn't like. It was vaguely . . . well, vaguely frightening.

He cocked his head. The corn was rustling.

Burt had been aware of that for some time, but he had just put it together with something else. The wind was still. How could that be?

He looked around warily, half expecting to see the smiling boys in their Quaker coats creeping out of the corn, their knives clutched in their hands. Nothing of the sort. There was still that rustling noise. Off to the left.

He began to walk in that direction, not having to bull through the corn anymore. The row was taking him in the direction he wanted to go, naturally. The row ended up ahead. Ended? No, emptied out into some sort of clearing. The rustling was there.

He stopped, suddenly afraid.

The scent of the corn was strong enough to be cloying. The rows held onto the sun's heat and he became aware that he was plastered with sweat and chaff and thin spider strands of cornsilk. The bugs ought to be crawling all over him . . . but they weren't.

He stood still, staring toward that place where the corn opened out onto what looked like a large circle of bare earth.

There were no minges or mosquitoes in here, no blackflies or chiggers—what he and Vicky had called “drive-in bugs” when they had been courting, he thought with sudden and unexpectedly sad nostalgia. And he hadn't seen a single crow. How was that for weird, a cornpatch with no crows?

In the last of the daylight he swept his eyes closely over the row of corn to his left. And saw that every leaf and stalk was perfect, which was just not possible. No yellow blight. No tattered leaves, no caterpillar eggs, no burrows, no—

His eyes widened.

*My God, there aren't any weeds!*

Not a single one. Every foot and a half the corn plants rose from the earth. There was no witchgrass, jimson, pikeweed, whore's hair, or poke salad. Nothing.

Burt stared up, eyes wide. The light in the west was fading. The raftered clouds had drawn back together. Below them the golden light had faded to pink and ocher. It would be dark soon enough.

It was time to go down to the clearing in the corn and see what was there—hadn't that been the plan all along? All the time he had thought he was cutting back to the highway, hadn't he been being led to this place?

Dread in his belly, he went on down to the row and stood at the edge of the clearing. There was enough light left for him to see what was here. He couldn't scream. There didn't seem to be enough air left in his lungs. He tottered in on legs like slats of splintery wood. His eyes bulged from his sweaty face.

"Vicky," he whispered. "Oh, Vicky, my God—"

She had been mounted on a crossbar like a hideous trophy, her arms held at the wrists and her legs at the ankles with twists of common barbed wire, seventy cents a yard at any hardware store in Nebraska. Her eyes had been ripped out. The sockets were filled with the moonflax of cornsilk. Her jaws were wrenched open in a silent scream, her mouth filled with cornhusks.

On her left was a skeleton in a moldering surplice. The nude jawbone grinned. The eye sockets seemed to stare at Burt jocularly, as if the onetime minister of the Grace Baptist Church was saying: *It's not so bad, being sacrificed by pagan devil-children in the corn is not so bad, having your eyes ripped out of your skull according to the Laws of Moses is not so bad—*

To the left of the skeleton in the surplice was a second skeleton, this one dressed in a rotting blue uniform. A hat hung over the skull,

shading the eyes, and on the peak of the cap was a greenish-tinged badge reading POLICE CHIEF.

That was when Burt heard it coming: not the children but something much larger, moving through the corn and toward the clearing. Not the children, no. The children wouldn't venture into the corn at night. This was the holy place, the place of He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

Jerkily Burt turned to flee. The row he had entered the clearing by was gone. Closed up. All the rows had closed up. It was coming closer now and he could hear it, pushing through the corn. He could hear it breathing. An ecstasy of superstitious terror seized him. It was coming. The corn on the far side of the clearing had suddenly darkened, as if a gigantic shadow had blotted it out.

Coming.

He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

It began to come into the clearing. Burt saw something huge, bulking up to the sky . . . something green with terrible red eyes the size of footballs.

Something that smelled like dried cornhusks years in some dark barn.

He began to scream. But he did not scream long.

Some time later, a bloated orange harvest moon came up.

The children of the corn stood in the clearing at midday, looking at the two crucified skeletons and the two bodies . . . the bodies were not skeletons yet, but they would be. In time. And here, in the heartland of Nebraska, in the corn, there was nothing but time.

“Behold, a dream came to me in the night, and the Lord did shew all this to me.”

They all turned to look at Isaac with dread and wonder, even Malachi. Isaac was only nine, but he had been the Seer since the corn had taken David a year ago. David had been nineteen and he had walked into the corn on his birthday, just as dusk had come drifting down the summer rows.

Now, small face grave under his round-crowned hat, Isaac continued:

“And in my dream the Lord was a shadow that walked behind the rows, and he spoke to me in the words he used to our older brothers years ago. He is much displeased with this sacrifice.”

They made a sighing, sobbing noise and looked at the surrounding walls of green.

“And the Lord did say: Have I not given you a place of killing, that you might make sacrifice there? And have I not shewn you favor? But this man has made a blasphemy within me, and I have completed this sacrifice myself. Like the Blue Man and the false minister who escaped many years ago.”

“The Blue Man . . . the false minister,” they whispered, and looked at each other uneasily.

“So now is the Age of Favor lowered from nineteen plantings and harvestings to eighteen,” Isaac went on relentlessly. “Yet be fruitful and multiply as the corn multiplies, that my favor may be shewn you, and be upon you.”

Isaac ceased.

The eyes turned to Malachi and Joseph, the only two among this party who were eighteen. There were others back in town, perhaps twenty in all.

They waited to hear what Malachi would say, Malachi who had led the hunt for Japheth, who evermore would be known as Ahaz, cursed of God. Malachi had cut the throat of Ahaz and had thrown his body out of the corn so the foul body would not pollute it or blight it.

“I obey the word of God,” Malachi whispered.

The corn seemed to sigh its approval.

In the weeks to come the girls would make many corncob crucifixes to ward off further evil.

And that night all of those now above the Age of Favor walked silently into the corn and went to the clearing, to gain the continued favor of He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

“Goodbye, Malachi,” Ruth called. She waved disconsolately. Her belly was big with Malachi's child and tears coursed silently down her

cheeks. Malachi did not turn. His back was straight. The corn swallowed him.

Ruth turned away, still crying. She had conceived a secret hatred for the corn and sometimes dreamed of walking into it with a torch in each hand when dry September came and the stalks were dead and explosively combustible. But she also feared it. Out there, in the night, something walked, and it saw everything . . . even the secrets kept in human hearts.

Dusk deepened into night. Around Gatlin the corn rustled and whispered secretly. It was well pleased.

# THE LAST RUNG ON THE LADDER

I got Katrina's letter yesterday, less than a week after my father and I got back from Los Angeles. It was addressed to Wilmington, Delaware, and I'd moved twice since then. People move around so much now, and it's funny how those crossed-off addresses and change-of-address stickers can look like accusations. Her letter was rumpled and smudged, one of the corners dog-eared from handling. I read what was in it and the next thing I knew I was standing in the living room with the phone in my hand, getting ready to call Dad. I put the phone down with something like horror. He was an old man, and he'd had two heart attacks. Was I going to call him and tell about Katrina's letter so soon after we'd been in L.A.? To do that might very well have killed him.

So I didn't call. And I had no one I could tell . . . a thing like that letter, it's too personal to tell anyone except a wife or a very close friend. I haven't made many close friends in the last few years, and my wife Helen and I divorced in 1971. What we exchange now are Christmas cards. How are you? How's the job? Have a happy New Year.

I've been awake all night with it, with Katrina's letter. She could have put it on a postcard. There was only a single sentence below the "Dear Larry." But a sentence can mean enough. It can do enough.

I remembered my dad on the plane, his face seeming old and wasted in the harsh sunlight at 18,000 feet as we went west from New York. We had just passed over Omaha, according to the pilot, and Dad said, "It's a lot further away than it looks, Larry." There was a heavy sadness in his voice that made me uncomfortable because I

couldn't understand it. I understood it better after getting Katrina's letter.

We grew up eighty miles west of Omaha in a town called Hemingford Home—my dad, my mom, my sister Katrina, and me, I was two years older than Katrina, whom everyone called Kitty. She was a beautiful child and a beautiful woman—even at eight, the year of the incident in the barn, you could see that her cornsilk hair was never going to darken and that those eyes would always be a dark, Scandinavian blue. A look in those eyes and a man would be gone.

I guess you'd say we grew up hicks. My dad had three hundred acres of flat, rich land, and he grew feed corn and raised cattle. Everybody just called it “the home place.” In those days all the roads were dirt except Interstate 80 and Nebraska Route 96, and a trip to town was something you waited three days for.

Nowadays I'm one of the best independent corporation lawyers in America, so they tell me—and I'd have to admit for the sake of honesty that I think they're right. A president of a large company once introduced me to his board of directors as his hired gun. I wear expensive suits and my shoelace is the best. I've got three assistants on full-time pay, and I can call in another dozen if I need them. But in those days I walked up a dirt road to a one-room school with books tied in a belt over my shoulder, and Katrina walked with me. Sometimes, in the spring, we went barefoot. That was in the days before you couldn't get served in a diner or shop in a market unless you were wearing shoes.

Later on, my mother died—Katrina and I were in high school up at Columbia City then—and two years after that my dad lost the place and went to work selling tractors. It was the end of the family, although that didn't seem so bad then. Dad got along in his work, bought himself a dealership, and got tapped for a management position about nine years ago. I got a football scholarship to the University of Nebraska and managed to learn something besides how to run the ball out of a slot-right formation.

And Katrina? But it's her I want to tell you about.

It happened, the barn thing, one Saturday in early November. To tell you the truth I can't pin down the actual year, but Ike was still

President. Mom was at a bake fair in Columbia City, and Dad had gone over to our nearest neighbor's (and that was seven miles away) to help the man fix a hayrake. There was supposed to be a hired man on the place, but he had never showed up that day, and my dad fired him not a month later.

Dad left me a list of chores to do (and there were some for Kitty, too) and told us not to get to playing until they were all done. But that wasn't long. It was November, and by that time of year the make-or-break time had gone past. We'd made it again that year. We wouldn't always.

I remember that day very clearly. The sky was overcast and while it wasn't cold, you could feel it *wanting* to be cold, wanting to get down to the business of frost and freeze, snow and sleet. The fields were stripped. The animals were sluggish and morose. There seemed to be funny little drafts in the house that had never been there before.

On a day like that, the only really nice place to be was the barn. It was warm, filled with a pleasant mixed aroma of hay and fur and dung, and with the mysterious chuckling, cooing sounds of the barnswallows high up in the third loft. If you cricked your neck up, you could see the white November light coming through the chinks in the roof and try to spell your name. It was a game that really only seemed agreeable on over-cast autumn days.

There was a ladder nailed to a crossbeam high up in the third loft, a ladder that went straight down to the main barn floor. We were forbidden to climb on it because it was old and shaky. Dad had promised Mom a thousand times that he would pull it down and put up a stronger one, but something else always seemed to come up when there was time . . . helping a neighbor with his hayrake, for instance. And the hired man was just not working out.

If you climbed up that rickety ladder—there were exactly forty-three rungs, Kitty and I had counted them enough to know—you ended up on a beam that was seventy feet above the straw-littered barn floor. And then if you edged out along the beam about twelve feet, your knees jittering, your ankle joints creaking, your mouth dry and tasting like a used fuse, you stood over the haymow. And then

you could jump off the beam and fall seventy feet straight down, with a horrible hilarious dying swoop, into a huge soft bed of lush hay. It has a sweet smell, hay does, and you'd come to rest in that smell of reborn summer with your stomach left behind you way up there in the middle of the air, and you'd feel . . . well, like Lazarus must have felt. You had taken the fall and lived to tell the tale.

It was a forbidden sport, all right. If we had been caught, my mother would have shrieked blue murder and my father would have laid on the strap, even at our advanced ages. Because of the ladder, and because if you happened to lose your balance and topple from the beam before you had edged out over the loose fathoms of hay, you would fall to utter destruction on the hard planking of the barn floor.

But the temptation was just too great. When the cats are away . . . well, you know how that one goes.

That day started like all the others, a delicious feeling of dread mixed with anticipation. We stood at the foot of the ladder, looking at each other. Kitty's color was high, her eyes darker and more sparkling than ever.

"Dare you," I said.

Promptly from Kitty: "Dares go first."

Promptly from me: "Girls go before boys."

"Not if it's dangerous," she said, casting her eyes down demurely, as if everybody didn't know she was the second-biggest tomboy in Hemingford. But that was how she was about it. She would go, but she wouldn't go first.

"Okay," I said. "Here I go."

I was ten that year, and thin as Scratch-the-demon, about ninety pounds. Kitty was eight, and twenty pounds lighter. The ladder had always held us before, we thought it would always hold us again, which is a philosophy that gets men and nations in trouble time after time.

I could feel it that day, beginning to shimmy around a little bit in the dusty barn air as I climbed higher and higher. As always, about halfway up, I entertained a vision of what would happen to me if it suddenly let go and gave up the ghost. But I kept going until I was

able to clap my hands around the beam and boost myself up and look down.

Kitty's face, turned up to watch me, was a small white oval. In her faded checked shirt and blue denims, she looked like a doll. Above me still higher, in the dusty reaches of the eaves, the swallows cooed mellowly.

Again, by rote:

“Hi, down there!” I called, my voice floating down to her on motes of chaff.

“Hi, up there!”

I stood up. Swayed back and forth a little. As always, there seemed suddenly to be strange currents in the air that had not existed down below. I could hear my own heartbeat as I began to inch along with my arms held out for balance. Once, a swallow had swooped close by my head during this part of the adventure, and in drawing back I had almost lost my balance. I lived in fear of the same thing happening again.

But not this time. At last I stood above the safety of the hay. Now looking down was not so much frightening as sensual. There was a moment of anticipation. Then I stepped off into space, holding my nose for effect, and as it always did, the sudden grip of gravity, yanking me down brutally, making me plummet, made me feel like yelling: *Oh, I'm sorry, I made a mistake, let me back up!*

Then I hit the hay, shot into it like a projectile, its sweet and dusty smell billowing up around me, still going down, as if into heavy water, coming slowly to rest buried in the stuff. As always, I could feel a sneeze building up in my nose. And hear a frightened field mouse or two fleeing for a more serene section of the haymow. And feel, in that curious way, that I had been reborn. I remember Kitty telling me once that after diving into the hay she felt fresh and new, like a baby. I shrugged it off at the time—sort of knowing what she meant, sort of not knowing—but since I got her letter I think about that, too.

I climbed out of the hay, sort of swimming through it, until I could climb out onto the barn floor. I had hay down my pants and down the back of my shirt. It was on my sneakers and sticking to my elbows. Hayseeds in my hair? You bet.

She was halfway up the ladder by then, her gold pigtails bouncing against her shoulderblades, climbing through a dusty shaft of light. On other days that light might have been as bright as her hair, but on this day her pigtails had no competition—they were easily the most colorful thing up there.

I remember thinking that I didn't like the way the ladder was swaying back and forth. It seemed like it had never been so loosey-goosey.

Then she was on the beam, high above me—now I was the small one, my face was the small white upturned oval as her voice floated down on errant chaff stirred up by my leap:

“Hi, down there!”

“Hi, up there!”

She edged along the beam, and my heart loosened a little in my chest when I judged she was over the safety of the hay. It always did, although she was always more graceful than I was . . . and more athletic, if that doesn't sound like too strange a thing to say about your kid sister.

She stood, poising on the toes of her old low-topped Keds, hands out in front of her. And then she swanned. Talk about things you can't forget, things you can't describe. Well, I can describe it . . . in a way. But not in a way that will make you understand how beautiful that was, how perfect, one of the few things in my life that seem utterly real, utterly true. No, I can't tell you like that. I don't have the skill with either my pen or my tongue.

For a moment she seemed to hang in the air, as if borne up by one of those mysterious updrafts that only existed in the third loft, a bright swallow with golden plumage such as Nebraska has never seen since. She was Kitty, my sister, her arms swept behind her and her back arched, and how I loved her for that beat of time!

Then she came down and plowed into the hay and out of sight. An explosion of chaff and giggles rose out of the hole she made. I'd forgotten about how rickety the ladder had looked with her on it, and by the time she was out, I was halfway up again.

I tried to swan myself, but the fear grabbed me the way it always did, and my swan turned into a cannonball. I think I never believed

the hay was there the way Kitty believed it.

How long did the game go on? Hard to tell. But I looked up some ten or twelve dives later and saw the light had changed. Our mom and dad were due back and we were all covered with chaff . . . as good as a signed confession. We agreed on one more turn each.

Going up first, I felt the ladder moving beneath me and I could hear—very faintly—the whining rasp of old nails loosening up in the wood. And for the first time I was really, actively scared. I think if I'd been closer to the bottom I would have gone down and that would have been the end of it, but the beam was closer and seemed safer. Three rungs from the top the whine of pulling nails grew louder and I was suddenly cold with terror, with the certainty that I had pushed it too far.

Then I had the splintery beam in my hands, taking my weight off the ladder, and there was a cold, unpleasant sweat matting the twigs of hay to my forehead. The fun of the game was gone.

I hurried out over the hay and dropped off. Even the pleasurable part of the drop was gone. Coming down, I imagined how I'd feel if that was solid barn planking coming up to meet me instead of the yielding give of the hay.

I came out to the middle of the barn to see Kitty hurrying up the ladder. I called: “Hey, come down! It's not safe!”

“It'll hold me!” she called back confidently. “I'm lighter than you!”

“Kitty—”

But that never got finished. Because that was when the ladder let go.

It went with a rotted, splintering crack. I cried out and Kitty screamed. She was about where I had been when I'd become convinced I'd pressed my luck too far.

The rung she was standing on gave way, and then both sides of the ladder split. For a moment the ladder below her, which had broken entirely free, looked like a ponderous insect—a praying mantis or a ladderbug—which had just decided to walk off.

Then it toppled, hitting the barn floor with a flat clap that raised dust and caused the cows to moo worriedly. One of them kicked at its stall door.

Kitty uttered a high, piercing scream.

*"Larry! Larry! Help me!"*

I knew what had to be done, I saw right away. I was terribly afraid, but not quite scared out of my wits. She was better than sixty feet above me, her blue-jeaned legs kicking wildly at the blank air, then barnswallows cooing above her. I was scared, all right. And you know, I still can't watch a circus aerial act, not even on TV. It makes my stomach feel weak.

But I knew what had to be done.

"Kitty!" I bawled up at her. "Just hold still! *Hold still!*"

She obeyed me instantly. Her legs stopped kicking and she hung straight down, her small hands clutching the last rung on the ragged end of the ladder like an acrobat whose trapeze has stopped.

I ran to the haymow, clutched up a double handful of the stuff, ran back, and dropped it. I went back again. And again. And again.

I really don't remember it after that, except the hay got up my nose and I started sneezing and couldn't stop. I ran back and forth, building a haystack where the foot of the ladder had been. It was a very small haystack. Looking at it, then looking at her hanging so far above it, you might have thought of one of those cartoons where the guy jumps three hundred feet into a water glass.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

"Larry, I can't hold on much longer!" Her voice was high and despairing.

"Kitty, you've got to! You've got to hold on!"

Back and forth. Hay down my shirt. Back and forth. The haystack was as high as my chin now, but the haymow we had been diving into was twenty-five feet deep. I thought that if she only broke her legs it would be getting off cheap. And I knew if she missed the hay altogether, she would be killed. Back and forth.

*"Larry! The rung! It's letting go!"*

I could hear the steady, rasping cry of the rung pulling free under her weight. Her legs began to kick again in panic, but if she was thrashing like that, she would surely miss the hay.

"No!" I yelled. "No! Stop that! Just let go! Let go, Kitty!" Because it was too late for me to get any more hay. Too late for anything except

blind hope.

She let go and dropped the second I told her to. She came straight down like a knife. It seemed to me that she dropped forever, her gold pigtailed standing straight up from her head, her eyes shut, her face as pale as china. She didn't scream. Her hands were locked in front of her lips, as if she was praying.

And she struck the hay right in the center. She went down out of sight in it—hay flew up all around as if a shell had struck—and I heard the thump of her body hitting the boards. The sound, a loud thud, sent a deadly chill into me. It had been too loud, much too loud. But I had to see.

Starting to cry, I pounced on the haystack and pulled it apart, flinging the straw behind me in great handfuls. A blue-jeaned leg came to light, then a plaid shirt . . . and then Kitty's face. It was deadly pale and her eyes were shut. She was dead, I knew it as I looked at her. The world went gray for me, November gray. The only things in it with any color were her pigtailed, bright gold.

And then the deep blue of her irises as she opened her eyes.

"Kitty?" My voice was hoarse, husky, unbelieving. My throat was coated with haychaff. "Kitty?"

"Larry?" she asked, bewildered. "Am I alive?"

I picked her out of the hay and hugged her and she put her arms around my neck and hugged me back.

"You're alive," I said. "You're alive, you're alive."

She had broken her left ankle and that was all. When Dr. Pedersen, the GP from Columbia City, came out to the barn with my father and me, he looked up into the shadows for a long time. The last rung on the ladder still hung there, aslant, from one nail.

He looked, as I said, for a long time. "A miracle," he said to my father, and then kicked disdainfully at the hay I'd put down. He went out to his dusty DeSoto and drove away.

My father's hand came down on my shoulder. "We're going to the woodshed, Larry," he said in a very calm voice. "I believe you know what's going to happen there."

"Yes, sir," I whispered.

"Every time I whack you, Larry, I want you to thank God your sister is still alive."

"Yes, sir."

Then we went. He whacked me plenty of times, so many times I ate standing up for a week and with a cushion on my chair for two weeks after that. And every time he whacked me with his big red callused hand, I thanked God.

In a loud, loud voice. By the last two or three whacks, I was pretty sure He was hearing me.

They let me in to see her just before bedtime. There was a catbird outside her window, I remember that. Her foot, all wrapped up, was propped on a board.

She looked at me so long and so lovingly that I was uncomfortable. Then she said, "Hay. You put down hay."

"Course I did," I blurted. "What else would I do? Once the ladder broke there was no way to get up there."

"I didn't know what you were doing," she said.

"You must have! I was right under you, for cripe's sake!"

"I didn't dare look down," she said. "I was too scared. I had my eyes shut the whole time."

I stared at her, thunderstruck.

"You didn't know? Didn't know what I was doing?"

She shook her head.

"And when I told you to let go you . . . you just *did it*?"

She nodded.

"Kitty, how could you do that?"

She looked at me with those deep blue eyes. "I knew you must have been doing something to fix it," she said. "You're my big brother. I knew you'd take care of me."

"Oh, Kitty, you don't know how close it was."

I had put my hands over my face. She sat up and took them away. She kissed my cheek. "No," she said. "But I knew you were down

there. Gee, am I sleepy. I'll see you tomorrow, Larry. I'm going to have a cast, Dr. Pedersen says.”

She had the cast on for a little less than a month, and all her classmates signed it—she even got me to sign it. And when it came off, that was the end of the barn incident. My father replaced the ladder up to the third loft with a new strong one, but I never climbed up to the beam and jumped off into the haymow again. So far as I know, Kitty didn't either.

It was the end, but somehow not the end. Somehow it never ended until nine days ago, when Kitty jumped from the top story of an insurance building in Los Angeles. I have the clipping from The L.A. *Times* in my wallet. I guess I'll always carry it, not in the good way you carry snapshots of people you want to remember or theater tickets from a really good show or part of the program from a World Series game. I carry that clipping the way you carry something heavy, because carrying it is your work. The headline reads: *CALL GIRL SWAN-DIVES TO HER DEATH.*

We grew up. That's all I know, other than facts that don't mean anything. She was going to go to business college in Omaha, but in the summer after she graduated from high school, she won a beauty contest and married one of the judges. It sounds like a dirty joke, doesn't it? My Kitty.

While I was in law school she got divorced and wrote me a long letter, ten pages or more, telling me how it had been, how messy it had been, how it might have been better if she could have had a child. She asked me if I could come. But losing a week in law school is like losing a term in liberal-arts undergraduate. Those guys are greyhounds. If you lose sight of the little mechanical rabbit, it's gone forever.

She moved to L.A. and got married again. When that one broke up I was out of law school. There was another letter, a shorter one, more bitter. She was never going to get stuck on *that* merry-go-round, she told me. It was a fix job. The only way you could catch the brass ring was to tumble off the horse and crack your skull. If that

was what the price of a free ride was, who wanted it? PS, Can you come, Larry? It's been a while.

I wrote back and told her I'd love to come, but I couldn't. I had landed a job in a high-pressure firm, low guy on the totem pole, all the work and none of the credit. If I was going to make it up to the next step, it would have to be that year. That was *my* long letter, and it was all about my career.

I answered all of her letters. But I could never really believe that it was really Kitty who was writing them, you know, no more than I could really believe that the hay was really there . . . until it broke my fall at the bottom of the drop and saved my life. I couldn't believe that my sister and the beaten woman who signed "Kitty" in a circle at the bottom of her letters were really the same person. My sister was a girl with pigtails, still without breasts.

She was the one who stopped writing. I'd get Christmas cards, birthday cards, and my wife would reciprocate. Then we got divorced and I moved and just forgot. The next Christmas and the birthday after, the cards came through the forwarding address. The first one. And I kept thinking: Gee, I've got to write Kitty and tell her that I've moved. But I never did.

But as I've told you, those are facts that don't mean anything. The only things that matter are that we grew up and she swanned from that insurance building, and that Kitty was the one who always believed the hay would be there. Kitty was the one who had said, "I knew you must be doing something to fix it." Those things matter. And Kitty's letter.

People move around so much now, and it's funny how those crossed-off addresses and change-of-address stickers can look like accusations. She'd printed her return address in the upper left corner of the envelope, the place she'd been staying at until she jumped. A very nice apartment building on Van Nuys. Dad and I went there to pick up her things. The landlady was nice. She had liked Kitty.

The letter was postmarked two weeks before she died. It would have gotten to me a long time before, if not for the forwarding

addresses. She must have gotten tired of waiting.

*Dear Larry,*

*I've been thinking about it a lot lately . . . and what I've decided is that it would have been better for me if that last rung had broken before you could put the hay down.*

*Your,  
Kitty*

Yes, I guess she must have gotten tired of waiting. I'd rather believe that than think of her deciding I must have forgotten. I wouldn't want her to think that, because that one sentence was maybe the only thing that would have brought me on the run.

But not even that is the reason sleep comes so hard now. When I close my eyes and start to drift off, I see her coming down from the third loft, her eyes wide and dark blue, her body arched, her arms swept up behind her.

She was the one who always knew the hay would be there.

# THE MAN WHO LOVED FLOWERS

On an early evening in May of 1963, a young man with his hand in his pocket walked briskly up New York's Third Avenue. The air was soft and beautiful, the sky was darkening by slow degrees from blue to the calm and lovely violet of dusk. There are people who love the city, and this was one of the nights that made them love it. Everyone standing in the doorways of the delicatessens and dry-cleaning shops and restaurants seemed to be smiling. An old lady pushing two bags of groceries in an old baby pram grinned at the young man and hailed him: "Hey, beautiful!" The young man gave her a half-smile and raised his hand in a wave.

*She passed on her way, thinking: He's in love.*

He had that look about him. He was dressed in a light gray suit, the narrow tie pulled down a little, his top collar button undone. His hair was dark and cut short. His complexion was fair, his eyes a light blue. Not an extraordinary face, but on this soft spring evening, on this avenue, in May of 1963, he was beautiful, and the old woman found herself thinking with a moment's sweet nostalgia that in spring anyone can be beautiful . . . if they're hurrying to meet the one of their dreams for dinner and maybe dancing after. Spring is the only season when nostalgia never seems to turn bitter, and she went on her way glad that she had spoken to him and glad he had returned the compliment by raising his hand in half-salute.

The young man crossed Sixty-third Street, walking with a bounce in his step and that same half-smile on his lips. Partway up the block, an old man stood beside a chipped green handcart filled with flowers—the predominant color was yellow; a yellow fever of jonquils and late crocuses. The old man also had carnations and a few hothouse

tea roses, mostly yellow and white. He was eating a pretzel and listening to a bulky transistor radio that was sitting kitty-corner on his handcart.

The radio poured out bad news that no one listened to: a hammer murderer was still on the loose; JFK had declared that the situation in a little Asian country called Vietnam (“Vitenum” the guy reading the news call it) would bear watching; an unidentified woman had been pulled from the East River; a grand jury had failed to indict a crime overlord in the current city administration's war on heroin; the Russians had exploded a nuclear device. None of it seemed real, none of it seemed to matter. The air was soft and sweet. Two men with beer bellies stood outside a bakery, pitching nickels and ribbing each other. Spring trembled on the edge of summer, and in the city, summer is the season of dreams.

The young man passed the flower stand and the sound of the bad news faded. He hesitated, looked over his shoulder, and thought it over. He reached into his coat pocket and touched the something in there again. For a moment his face seemed puzzled, lonely, almost haunted, and then, as his hand left the pocket, it regained its former expression of eager expectation.

He turned back to the flower stand, smiling. He would bring her some flowers, that would please her. He loved to see her eyes light up with surprise and joy when he brought her a surprise—little things, because he was far from rich. A box of candy. A bracelet. Once only a bag of Valencia oranges, because he knew they were Norma's favorite.

“My young friend,” the flower vendor said, as the man in the gray suit came back, running his eyes over the stock in the handcart. The vendor was maybe sixty-eight, wearing a torn gray knitted sweater and a soft cap in spite of the warmth of the evening. His face was a map of wrinkles, his eyes were deep in pouches, and a cigarette jittered between his fingers. But he also remembered how it was to be young in the spring—young and so much in love that you practically zoomed everywhere. The vendor's face was normally sour, but now he smiled a little, just as the old woman pushing the groceries had, because this guy was such an obvious case. He

brushed pretzel crumbs from the front of his baggy sweater and thought: If this kid were sick, they'd have him in intensive care right now.

“How much are your flowers?” the young man asked.

“I'll make you up a nice bouquet for a dollar. Those tea roses, they're hothouse. Cost a little more, seventy cents apiece. I sell you half a dozen for three dollars and fifty cents.”

“Expensive,” the young man said.

“Nothing good comes cheap, my young friend. Didn't your mother ever teach you that?”

The young man grinned. “She might have mentioned it at that.”

“Sure. Sure she did. I give you half a dozen, two red, two yellow, two white. Can't do no better than that, can I? Put in some baby's breath—they love that—and fill it out with some fern. Nice. Or you can have the bouquet for a dollar.”

“They?” the young man asked, still smiling.

“My young friend,” the flower vendor said, flicking his cigarette butt into the gutter and returning the smile, “no one buys flowers for themselves in May. It's like a national law, you understand what I mean?”

The young man thought of Norma, her happy, surprised eyes and her gentle smile, and he ducked his head a little. “I guess I do at that,” he said.

“Sure you do. What do you say?”

“Well, what do *you* think?”

“I'm gonna tell you what I think. Hey! Advice is still free, isn't it?”

The young man smiled and said, “I guess it's the only thing left that is.”

“You're damn tooting it is,” the flower vendor said. “Okay, my young friend. If the flowers are for your mother, you get her the bouquet. A few jonquils, a few crocuses, some lily of the valley. She don't spoil it by saying, ‘Oh Junior I love them how much did they cost oh that's too much don't you know enough not to throw your money around?’ “

The young man threw his head back and laughed.

The vendor said, "But if it's your girl, that's a different thing, my son, and you know it. You bring her the tea roses and she don't turn into an accountant, you take my meaning? Hey! She's gonna throw her arms around your neck—"

"I'll take the tea roses," the young man said, and this time it was the flower vendor's turn to laugh. The two men pitching nickels glanced over, smiling.

"Hey, kid!" one of them called. "You wanna buy a weddin' ring cheap? I'll sell you mine . . . I don't want it no more."

The young man grinned and blushed to the roots of his dark hair.

The flower vendor picked out six tea roses, snipped the stems a little, spritzed them with water, and wrapped them in a large conical spill.

"Tonight's weather looks just the way you'd want it," the radio said. "Fair and mild, temps in the mid to upper sixties, perfect for a little rooftop stargazing, if you're the romantic type. Enjoy, Greater New York, enjoy!"

The flower vendor Scotch-taped the seam of the paper spill and advised the young man to tell his lady that a little sugar added to the water she put them in would preserve them longer.

"I'll tell her," the young man said. He held out a five-dollar bill. "Thank you."

"Just doing the job, my young friend," the vendor said, giving him a dollar and two quarters. His smile grew a bit sad. "Give her a kiss for me."

On the radio, the Four Seasons began singing "Sherry." The young man pocketed his change and went on up the street, eyes wide and alert and eager, looking not so much around him at the life ebbing and flowing up and down Third Avenue as inward and ahead, anticipating. But certain things did impinge: a mother pulling a baby in a wagon, the baby's face comically smeared with ice cream; a little girl jumping rope and singsonging out her rhyme: "Betty and Henry up in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G! First comes love, then comes marriage, here comes Henry with a baby carriage!" Two women stood outside a washateria, smoking and comparing pregnancies. A group of men were looking in a hardware-store window at a gigantic color TV with

a four-figure price tag—a baseball game was on, and all the players' faces looked green. The playing field was a vague strawberry color, and the New York Mets were leading the Phillies by a score of six to one in the top of the ninth.

He walked on, carrying the flowers, unaware that the two women outside the washateria had stopped talking for a moment and had watched him wistfully as he walked by with his paper of tea roses; their days of receiving flowers were long over. He was unaware of a young traffic cop who stopped the cars at the intersection of Third and Sixty-ninth with a blast on his whistle to let him cross; the cop was engaged himself and recognized the dreamy expression on the young man's face from his own shaving mirror, where he had often seen it lately. He was unaware of the two teen-aged girls who passed him going the other way and then clutched themselves and giggled.

At Seventy-third Street he stopped and turned right. This street was a little darker, lined with brownstones and walk-down restaurants with Italian names. Three blocks down, a stickball game was going on in the fading light. The young man did not go that far; half a block down he turned into a narrow lane.

Now the stars were out, gleaming softly, and the lane was dark and shadowy, lined with vague shapes of garbage cans. The young man was alone now—no, not quite. A wavering yowl rose in the purple gloom, and the young man frowned. It was some tomcat's love song, and there was nothing pretty about *that*.

He walked more slowly, and glanced at his watch. It was quarter of eight and Norma should be just—

Then he saw her, coming toward him from the courtyard, wearing dark blue slacks and a sailor blouse that made his heart ache. It was always a surprise seeing her for the first time, it was always a sweet shock—she looked so *young*.

Now his smile shone out—*radiated* out, and he walked faster.

“Norma!” he said.

She looked up and smiled . . . but as they drew together, the smile faded.

His own smile trembled a little, and he felt a moment's disquiet. Her face over the sailor blouse suddenly seemed blurred. It was getting dark now . . . could he have been mistaken? Surely not. It was Norma.

"I brought you flowers," he said in a happy relief, and handed the paper spill to her.

She looked at them for a moment, smiled—and handed them back.

"Thank you, but you're mistaken," she said. "My name is—"

"Norma," he whispered, and pulled the short-handled hammer out of his coat pocket where it had been all along. "They're for you, Norma . . . it was always for you . . . all for you."

She backed away, her face a round white blur, her mouth an opening black O of terror, and she wasn't Norma, Norma was dead, she had been dead for ten years, and it didn't matter because she was going to scream and he swung the hammer to stop the scream, to kill the scream, and as he swung the hammer the spill of flowers fell out of his hand, the spill spilled and broke open, spilling red, white, and yellow tea roses beside the dented trash cans where cats made alien love in the dark, screaming in love, screaming, screaming.

He swung the hammer and she didn't scream, but she might scream because she wasn't Norma, none of them were Norma, and he swung the hammer, swung the hammer, swung the hammer. She wasn't Norma and so he swung the hammer, as he had done five other times.

Some unknown time later he slipped the hammer back into his inner coat pocket and backed away from the dark shadow sprawled on the cobblestones, away from the litter of tea roses by the garbage cans. He turned and left the narrow lane. It was full dark now. The stickball players had gone in. If there were bloodstains on his suit, they wouldn't show, not in the dark, not in the soft late spring dark, and her name had not been Norma but he knew what his name was. It was . . . was . . .

*Love.*

His name was love, and he walked these dark streets because Norma was waiting for him. And he would find her. Someday soon.

He began to smile. A bounce came into his step as he walked on down Seventy-third Street. A middle-aged married couple sitting on the steps of their building watched him go by, head cocked, eyes far away, a half-smile on his lips. When he had passed by the woman said, "How come *you* never look that way anymore?"

"Huh?"

"Nothing," she said, but she watched the young man in the gray suit disappear into the gloom of the encroaching night and thought that if there was anything more beautiful than springtime, it was young love.

# ONE FOR THE ROAD

It was quarter past ten and Herb Tooklander was thinking of closing for the night when the man in the fancy overcoat and the white, staring face burst into Tookey's Bar, which lies in the northern part of Falmouth. It was the tenth of January, just about the time most folks are learning to live comfortably with all the New Year's resolutions they broke, and there was one hell of a northeaster blowing outside. Six inches had come down before dark and it had been going hard and heavy since then. Twice we had seen Billy Larribee go by high in the cab of the town plow, and the second time Tookey ran him out a beer—an act of pure charity my mother would have called it, and my God knows she put down enough of Tookey's beer in her time. Billy told him they were keeping ahead of it on the main road, but the side ones were closed and apt to stay that way until next morning. The radio in Portland was forecasting another foot and a forty-mile-an-hour wind to pile up the drifts.

There was just Tookey and me in the bar, listening to the wind howl around the eaves and watching it dance the fire around on the hearth. “Have one for the road, Booth,” Tookey says, “I'm gonna shut her down.”

He poured me one and himself one and that's when the door cracked open and this stranger staggered in, snow up to his shoulders and in his hair, like he had rolled around in confectioner's sugar. The wind billowed a sand-fine sheet of snow in after him.

“Close the door!” Tookey roars at him. “Was you born in a barn?”

I've never seen a man who looked that scared. He was like a horse that's spent an afternoon eating fire nettles. His eyes rolled

toward Tookey and he said, "My wife—my daughter—" and he collapsed on the floor in a dead faint.

"Holy Joe," Tookey says. "Close the door, Booth, would you?"

I went and shut it, and pushing it against the wind was something of a chore. Tookey was down on one knee holding the fellow's head up and patting his cheeks. I got over to him and saw right off that it was nasty. His face was fiery red, but there were gray blotches here and there, and when you've lived through winters in Maine since the time Woodrow Wilson was President, as I have, you know those gray blotches mean frostbite.

"Fainted," Tookey said. "Get the brandy off the backbar, will you?"

I got it and came back. Tookey had opened the fellow's coat. He had come around a little; his eyes were half open and he was muttering something too low to catch.

"Pour a capful," Tookey says.

"Just a cap?" I asks him.

"That stuffs dynamite," Tookey says. "No sense overloading his carb."

I poured out a capful and looked at Tookey. He nodded. "Straight down the hatch."

I poured it down. It was a remarkable thing to watch. The man trembled all over and began to cough. His face got redder. His eyelids, which had been at half-mast, flew up like window shades. I was a bit alarmed, but Tookey only sat him up like a big baby and clapped him on the back.

The man started to retch, and Tookey clapped him again.

"Hold onto it," he says, "that brandy comes dear."

The man coughed some more, but it was diminishing now. I got my first good look at him. City fellow, all right, and from somewhere south of Boston, at a guess. He was wearing kid gloves, expensive but thin. There were probably some more of those grayish-white patches on his hands, and he would be lucky not to lose a finger or two. His coat was fancy, all right; a three-hundred-dollar job if ever I'd seen one. He was wearing tiny little boots that hardly came up over his ankles, and I began to wonder about his toes.

"Better," he said.

“All right,” Tookey said. “Can you come over to the fire?”

“My wife and my daughter,” he said. “They're out there . . . in the storm.”

“From the way you came in, I didn't figure they were at home watching the TV,” Tookey said. “You can tell us by the fire as easy as here on the floor. Hook on, Booth.”

He got to his feet, but a little groan came out of him and his mouth twisted down in pain. I wondered about his toes again, and I wondered why God felt he had to make fools from New York City who would try driving around in southern Maine at the height of a northeast blizzard. And I wondered if his wife and his little girl were dressed any warmer than him.

We hiked him across to the fireplace and got him sat down in a rocker that used to be Missus Tookey's favorite until she passed on in '74. It was Missus Tookey that was responsible for most of the place, which had been written up in *Down East* and the *Sunday Telegram* and even once in the Sunday supplement of the *Boston Globe*. It's really more of a public house than a bar, with its big wooden floor, pegged together rather than nailed, the maple bar, the old barn-raftered ceiling, and the monstrous big fieldstone hearth. Missus Tookey started to get some ideas in her head after the *Down East* article came out, wanted to start calling the place Tookey's Inn or Tookey's Rest, and I admit it has sort of a Colonial ring to it, but I prefer plain old Tookey's Bar. It's one thing to get uppish in the summer, when the state's full of tourists, another thing altogether in the winter, when you and your neighbors have to trade together. And there had been plenty of winter nights, like this one, that Tookey and I had spent all alone together, drinking scotch and water or just a few beers. My own Victoria passed on in '73, and Tookey's was a place to go where there were enough voices to mute the steady ticking of the deathwatch beetle—even if there was just Tookey and me, it was enough. I wouldn't have felt the same about it if the place had been Tookey's Rest. It's crazy but it's true.

We got this fellow in front of the fire and he got the shakes harder than ever. He hugged onto his knees and his teeth clattered together and a few drops of clear mucus spilled off the end of his nose. I think

he was starting to realize that another fifteen minutes out there might have been enough to kill him. It's not the snow, it's the wind-chill factor. It steals your heat.

"Where did you go off the road?" Tookey asked him.

"S-six miles s-s-south of h-here," he said.

Tookey and I stared at each other, and all of a sudden I felt cold. Cold all over.

"You sure?" Tookey demanded. "You came six miles through the snow?"

He nodded. "I checked the odometer when we came through town. I was following directions . . . going to see my wife's s-sister . . . in Cumberland . . . never been there before . . . we're from New Jersey . . ."

New Jersey. If there's anyone more purely foolish than a New Yorker it's a fellow from New Jersey.

"Six miles, you're sure?" Tookey demanded.

"Pretty sure, yeah. I found the turnoff but it was drifted in . . . it was . . ."

Tookey grabbed him. In the shifting glow of the fire his face looked pale and strained, older than his sixty-six years by ten. "You made a right turn?"

"Right turn, yeah. My wife—"

"Did you see a sign?"

"Sign?" He looked up at Tookey blankly and wiped the end of his nose. "Of course I did. It was on my instructions. Take Jointner Avenue through Jerusalem's Lot to the 295 entrance ramp." He looked from Tookey to me and back to Tookey again. Outside, the wind whistled and howled and moaned through the eaves. "Wasn't that right, mister?"

"The Lot," Tookey said, almost too soft to hear. "Oh my God."

"What's wrong?" the man said. His voice was rising. "Wasn't that right? I mean, the road looked drifted in, but I thought . . . if there's a town there, the plows will be out and . . . and then I . . ."

He just sort of tailed off.

"Booth," Tookey said to me, low. "Get on the phone. Call the sheriff."

“Sure,” this fool from New Jersey says, “that's right. What's wrong with you guys, anyway? You look like you saw a ghost.”

Tookey said, “No ghosts in the Lot, mister. Did you tell them to stay in the car?”

“Sure I did,” he said, sounding injured. “I'm not crazy.”

Well, you couldn't have proved it by me.

“What's your name?” I asked him. “For the sheriff.”

“Lumley,” he says. “Gerard Lumley.”

He started in with Tookey again, and I went across to the telephone. I picked it up and heard nothing but dead silence. I hit the cutoff buttons a couple of times. Still nothing.

I came back. Tookey had poured Gerard Lumley another tot of brandy, and this one was going down him a lot smoother.

“Was he out?” Tookey asked.

“Phone's dead.”

“Hot damn,” Tookey says, and we look at each other. Outside the wind gusted up, throwing snow against the windows.

Lumley looked from Tookey to me and back again.

“Well, haven't either of you got a car?” he asked. The anxiety was back in his voice. “They've got to run the engine to run the heater. I only had about a quarter of a tank of gas, and it took me an hour and a half to . . . Look, will you *answer* me?” He stood up and grabbed Tookey's shirt.

“Mister,” Tookey says, “I think your hand just ran away from your brains, there.”

Lumley looked at his hand, at Tookey, then dropped it. “Maine,” he hissed. He made it sound like a dirty word about somebody's mother. “All right,” he said. “Where's the nearest gas station? They must have a tow truck—”

“Nearest gas station is in Falmouth Center,” I said. “That's three miles down the road from here.”

“Thanks,” he said, a bit sarcastic, and headed for the door, buttoning his coat.

“Won't be open, though,” I added.

He turned back slowly and looked at us.

“What are you talking about, old man?”

“He's trying to tell you that the station in the Center belongs to Billy Larribee and Billy's out driving the plow, you damn fool,” Tookey says patiently. “Now why don't you come back here and sit down, before you bust a gut?”

He came back, looking dazed and frightened. “Are you telling me you can't . . . that there isn't . . . ?”

“I ain't telling you nothing,” Tookey says. “You're doing all the telling, and if you stopped for a minute, we could think this over.”

“What's this town, Jerusalem's Lot?” he asked. “Why was the road drifted in? And no lights on anywhere?”

I said, “Jerusalem's Lot burned out two years back.”

“And they never rebuilt?” He looked like he didn't believe it.

“It appears that way,” I said, and looked at Tookey. “What are we going to do about this?”

“Can't leave them out there,” he said.

I got closer to him. Lumley had wandered away to look out the window into the snowy night.

“What if they've been got at?” I asked.

“That may be,” he said. “But we don't know it for sure. I've got my Bible on the shelf. You still wear your Pope's medal?”

I pulled the crucifix out of my shirt and showed him. I was born and raised Congregational, but most folks who live around the Lot wear something—crucifix, St. Christopher's medal, rosary, something. Because two years ago, in the span of one dark October month, the Lot went bad. Sometimes, late at night, when there were just a few regulars drawn up around Tookey's fire, people would talk it over. Talk around it is more like the truth. You see, people in the Lot started to disappear. First a few, then a few more, than a whole slew. The schools closed. The town stood empty for most of a year. Oh, a few people moved in—mostly damn fools from out of state like this fine specimen here—drawn by the low property values, I suppose. But they didn't last. A lot of them moved out a month or two after they'd moved in. The others . . . well, they disappeared. Then the town burned flat. It was at the end of a long dry fall. They figure it started up by the Marsten House on the hill that overlooked Jointner Avenue, but no one knows how it started, not to this day. It burned

out of control for three days. After that, for a time, things were better. And then they started again.

I only heard the word “vampires” mentioned once. A crazy pulp truck driver named Richie Messina from over Freeport way was in Tookey’s that night, pretty well liquored up. “Jesus Christ,” this stampeder roars, standing up about nine feet tall in his wool pants and his plaid shirt and his leather-topped boots. “Are you all so damn afraid to say it out? Vampires! That’s what you’re all thinking, ain’t it? Jesus-jumped-up-Christ in a chariot-driven sidecar! Just like a bunch of kids scared of the movies! You know what there is down there in ‘Salem’s Lot? Want me to tell you? Want me to tell you?”

“Do tell, Richie,” Tookey says. It had got real quiet in the bar. You could hear the fire popping, and outside the soft drift of November rain coming down in the dark. “You got the floor.”

“What you got over there is your basic wild dog pack,” Richie Messina tells us. “That’s what you got. That and a lot of old women who love a good spook story. Why, for eighty bucks I’d go up there and spend the night in what’s left of that haunted house you’re all so worried about. Well, what about it? Anyone want to put it up?”

But nobody would. Richie was a loudmouth and a mean drunk and no one was going to shed any tears at his wake, but none of us were willing to see him go into ‘Salem’s Lot after dark.

“Be screwed to the bunch of you,” Richie says. “I got my four-ten in the trunk of my Chevy, and that’ll stop anything in Falmouth, Cumberland, *or* Jerusalem’s Lot. And that’s where I’m goin’.”

He slammed out of the bar and no one said a word for a while. Then Lamont Henry says, real quiet, “That’s the last time anyone’s gonna see Richie Messina. Holy God.” And Lamont, raised to be a Methodist from his mother’s knee, crossed himself.

“He’ll sober off and change his mind,” Tookey said, but he sounded uneasy. “He’ll be back by closin’ time, makin’ out it was all a joke.”

But Lamont had the right of that one, because no one ever saw Richie again. His wife told the state cops she thought he’d gone to Florida to beat a collection agency, but you could see the truth of the thing in her eyes—sick, scared eyes. Not long after, she moved away to Rhode Island. Maybe she thought Richie was going to come

after her some dark night. And I'm not the man to say he might not have done.

Now Tookey was looking at me and I was looking at Tookey as I stuffed my crucifix back into my shirt. I never felt so old or so scared in my life.

Tookey said again, "We can't just leave them out there, Booth."

"Yeah. I know."

We looked at each other for a moment longer, and then he reached out and gripped my shoulder. "You're a good man, Booth." That was enough to buck me up some. It seems like when you pass seventy, people start forgetting that you are a man, or that you ever were.

Tookey walked over to Lumley and said, "I've got a four-wheel-drive Scout. I'll get it out."

"For God's sake, man, why didn't you say so before?" He had whirled around from the window and was staring angrily at Tookey. "Why'd you have to spend ten minutes beating around the bush?"

Tookey said, very softly, "Mister, you shut your jaw. And if you get urge to open it, you remember who made that turn onto an unplowed road in the middle of a goddamned blizzard."

He started to say something, and then shut his mouth. Thick color had risen up in his cheeks. Tookey went out to get his Scout out of the garage. I felt around under the bar for his chrome flask and filled it full of brandy. Figured we might need it before this night was over.

Maine blizzard—ever been out in one?

The snow comes flying so thick and fine that it looks like sand and sounds like that, beating on the sides of your car or pickup. You don't want to use your high beams because they reflect off the snow and you can't see ten feet in front of you. With the low beams on, you can see maybe fifteen feet. But I can live with the snow. It's the wind I don't like, when it picks up and begins to howl, driving the snow into a hundred weird flying shapes and sounding like all the hate and pain and fear in the world. There's death in the throat of a snowstorm wind, white death—and maybe something beyond death. That's no sound to hear when you're tucked up all cozy in your own bed with

the shutters bolted and the doors locked. It's that much worse if you're driving. And we were driving smack into 'Salem's Lot.

"Hurry up a little, can't you?" Lumley asked.

I said, "For a man who came in half frozen, you're in one hell of a hurry to end up walking again."

He gave me a resentful, baffled look and didn't say anything else. We were moving up the highway at a steady twenty-five miles an hour. It was hard to believe that Billy Larabee had just plowed this stretch an hour ago; another two inches had covered it, and it was drifting in. The strongest gusts of wind rocked the Scout on her springs. The headlights showed a swirling white nothing up ahead of us. We hadn't met a single car.

About ten minutes later Lumley gasps: "Hey! What's that?"

He was pointing out my side of the car; I'd been looking dead ahead. I turned, but was a shade too late. I thought I could see some sort of slumped form fading back from the car, back into the snow, but that could have been imagination.

"What was it? A deer?" I asked.

"I guess so," he says, sounding shaky. "But its eyes—they looked red." He looked at me. "Is that how a deer's eyes look at night?" He sounded almost as if he were pleading.

"They can look like anything," I says, thinking that might be true, but I've seen a lot of deer at night from a lot of cars, and never saw any set of eyes reflect back red.

Tookey didn't say anything.

About fifteen minutes later, we came to a place where the snowbank on the right of the road wasn't so high because the plows are supposed to raise their blades a little when they go through an intersection.

"This looks like where we turned," Lumley said, not sounding too sure about it. "I don't see the sign—"

"This is it," Tookey answered. He didn't sound like himself at all. "You can just see the top of the signpost."

"Oh. Sure." Lumley sounded relieved. "Listen, Mr. Tooklander, I'm sorry about being so short back there. I was cold and worried and

calling myself two hundred kinds of fool. And I want to thank you both—”

“Don't thank Booth and me until we've got them in this car,” Tookey said. He put the Scout in four-wheel drive and slammed his way through the snowbank and onto Jointner Avenue, which goes through the Lot and out to 295. Snow flew up from the mudguards. The rear end tried to break a little bit, but Tookey's been driving through snow since Hector was a pup. He jockeyed it a bit, talked to it, and on we went. The headlights picked out the bare indication of other tire tracks from time to time, the ones made by Lumley's car, and then they would disappear again. Lumley was leaning forward, looking for his car. And all at once Tookey said, “Mr. Lumley.”

“What?” He looked around at Tookey.

“People around these parts are kind of superstitious about 'Salem's Lot,” Tookey says, sounding easy enough—but I could see the deep lines of strain around his mouth, and the way his eyes kept moving from side to side. “If your people are in the car, why, that's fine. We'll pack them up, go back to my place, and tomorrow, when the storm's over, Billy will be glad to yank your car out of the snowbank. But if they're not in the car—”

“Not in the car?” Lumley broke in sharply. “Why wouldn't they be in the car?”

“If they're not in the car,” Tookey goes on, not answering, “we're going to turn around and drive back to Falmouth Center and whistle for the sheriff. Makes no sense to go wallowing around at night in a snowstorm anyway, does it?”

“They'll be in the car. Where else would they be?”

I said, “One other thing, Mr. Lumley. If we should see anybody, we're not going to talk to them. Not even if they talk to us. You understand that?”

Very slow, Lumley says, “Just what are these superstitions?”

Before I could say anything—God alone knows what I would have said—Tookey broke in. “We're there.”

We were coming up on the back end of a big Mercedes. The whole hood of the thing was buried in a snowdrift, and another drift

had socked in the whole left side of the car. But the taillights were on and we could see exhaust drifting out of the tailpipe.

“They didn't run out of gas, anyway,” Lumley said.

Tookey pulled up and pulled on the Scout's emergency brake. “You remember what Booth told you, Lumley.”

“Sure, sure.” But he wasn't thinking of anything but his wife and daughter. I don't see how anybody could blame him, either.

“Ready, Booth?” Tookey asked me. His eyes held on mine, grim and gray in the dashboard lights.

“I guess I am,” I said.

We all got out and the wind grabbed us, throwing snow in our faces. Lumley was first, bending into the wind, his fancy topcoat billowing out behind him like a sail. He cast two shadows, one from Tookey's headlights, the other from his own taillights. I was behind him, and Tookey was a step behind me. When I got to the trunk of the Mercedes, Tookey grabbed me.

“Let him go,” he said.

“Janey! Francie!” Lumley yelled. “Everything okay?” He pulled open the driver's-side door and leaned in. “Everything—”

He froze to a dead stop. The wind ripped the heavy door right out of his hand and pushed it all the way open.

“Holy God, Booth,” Tookey said, just below the scream of the wind. “I think it's happened again.”

Lumley turned back toward us. His face was scared and bewildered, his eyes wide. All of a sudden he lunged toward us through the snow, slipping and almost falling. He brushed me away like I was nothing and grabbed Tookey.

“How did you know?” he roared. “Where are they? What the hell is going on here?”

Tookey broke his grip and shoved past him. He and I looked into the Mercedes together. Warm as toast it was, but it wasn't going to be for much longer. The little amber low-fuel light was glowing. The big car was empty. There was a child's Barbie doll on the passenger's floormat. And a child's ski parka was crumpled over the seatback.

Tookey put his hands over his face . . . and then he was gone. Lumley had grabbed him and shoved him right back into the snowbank. His face was pale and wild. His mouth was working as if he had chewed down on some bitter stuff he couldn't yet unpucker enough to spit out. He reached in and grabbed the parka.

"Francie's coat?" he kind of whispered. And then loud, bellowing: "*Francie's coat!*" He turned around, holding it in front of him by the little fur-trimmed hood. He looked at me, blank and unbelieving. "She can't be out without her coat on, Mr. Booth. Why . . . why . . . she'll freeze to death."

"Mr. Lumley—"

He blundered past me, still holding the parka, shouting: "*Francie! Janey! Where are you? Where are youuu?*"

I gave Tookey my hand and pulled him onto his feet. "Are you all —"

"Never mind me," he says. "We've got to get hold of him, Booth."

We went after him as fast as we could, which wasn't very fast with the snow hip-deep in some places. But then he stopped and we caught up to him.

"Mr. Lumley—" Tookey started, laying a hand on his shoulder.

"This way," Lumley said. "This is the way they went. Look!"

We looked down. We were in a kind of dip here, and most of the wind went right over our heads. And you could see two sets of tracks, one large and one small, just filling up with snow. If we had been five minutes later, they would have been gone.

He started to walk away, his head down, and Tookey grabbed him back. "No! No, Lumley!"

Lumley turned his wild face up to Tookey's and made a fist. He drew it back . . . but something in Tookey's face made him falter. He looked from Tookey to me and then back again.

"She'll freeze," he said, as if we were a couple of stupid kids. "Don't you get it? She doesn't have her jacket on and she's only seven years old—"

"They could be anywhere," Tookey said. "You can't follow those tracks. They'll be gone in the next drift."

“What do you suggest?” Lumley yells, his voice high and hysterical. “If we go back to get the police, she'll freeze to death! Francie *and* my wife!”

“They may be frozen already,” Tookey said. His eyes caught Lumley's. “Frozen, or something worse.”

“What do you mean?” Lumley whispered. “Get it straight, goddamn it! Tell me!”

“Mr. Lumley,” Tookey says, “there's something in the Lot—”

But I was the one who came out with it finally, said the word I never expected to say. “Vampires, Mr. Lumley. Jerusalem's Lot is full of vampires. I expect that's hard for you to swallow—”

He was staring at me as if I'd gone green. “Loonies,” he whispers. “You're a couple of loonies.” Then he turned away, cupped his hands around his mouth, and bellowed, “*FRANCIE! JANEY!*” He started floundering off again. The snow was up to the hem of his fancy coat.

I looked at Tookey. “What do we do now?”

“Follow him,” Tookey says. His hair was plastered with snow, and he *did* look a little bit loony. “I can't just leave him out here. Booth. Can you?”

“No,” I says. “Guess not.”

So we started to wade through the snow after Lumley as best we could. But he kept getting further and further ahead. He had his youth to spend, you see. He was breaking the trail, going through that snow like a bull. My arthritis began to bother me something terrible, and I started to look down at my legs, telling myself: A little further, just a little further, keep goin', damn it, keep goin' . . .

I piled right into Tookey, who was standing spread-legged in a drift. His head was hanging and both of his hands were pressed to his chest.

“Tookey,” I says, “you okay?”

“I'm all right,” he said, taking his hands away. “We'll stick with him, Booth, and when he fags out he'll see reason.”

We topped a rise and there was Lumley at the bottom, looking desperately for more tracks. Poor man, there wasn't a chance he was going to find them. The wind blew straight across down there

where he was, and any tracks would have been rubbed out three minutes after they were made, let alone a couple of hours.

He raised his head and screamed into the night: "*FRANCIE! JANEY! FOR GOD'S SAKE!*" And you could hear the desperation in his voice, the terror, and pity him for it. The only answer he got was the freight-train wail of the wind. It almost seemed to be laughin' at him, saying: *I took them Mister New Jersey with your fancy car and camel's-hair topcoat. I took them and I rubbed out their tracks and by morning I'll have them just as neat and frozen as two strawberries in a deepfreeze . . .*

"Lumley!" Tookey bawled over the wind. "Listen, you never mind vampires or boogies or nothing like that, but you mind this! You're just making it worse for them! We got to get the—"

And then there *was* an answer, a voice coming out of the dark like little tinkling silver bells, and my heart turned cold as ice in a cistern.

*"Jerry . . . Jerry, is that you?"*

Lumley wheeled at the sound. And then *she* came, drifting out of the dark shadows of a little copse of trees like a ghost. She was a city woman, all right, and right then she seemed like the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I felt like I wanted to go to her and tell her how glad I was she was safe after all. She was wearing a heavy green pullover sort of thing, a poncho, I believe they're called. It floated all around her, and her dark hair streamed out in the wild wind like water in a December creek, just before the winter freeze stills it and locks it in.

Maybe I did take a step toward her, because I felt Tookey's hand on my shoulder, rough and warm. And still—how can I say it?—I *yearned* after her, so dark and beautiful with that green poncho floating around her neck and shoulders, as exotic and strange as to make you think of some beautiful woman from a Walter de la Mare poem.

"Janey!" Lumley cried. "*Janey!*" He began to struggle through the snow toward her, his arms outstretched.

"No!" Tookey cried. "*No, Lumley!*"

He never even looked . . . but she did. She looked up at us and grinned. And when she did, I felt my longing, my yearning turn to

horror as cold as the grave, as white and silent as bones in a shroud. Even from the rise we could see the sullen red glare in those eyes. They were less human than a wolf's eyes. And when she grinned you could see how long her teeth had become. She wasn't human anymore. She was a dead thing somehow come back to life in this black howling storm.

Tookey made the sign of the cross at her. She flinched back . . . and then grinned at us again. We were too far away, and maybe too scared.

"Stop it!" I whispered. "Can't we stop it?"

"Too late, Booth!" Tookey says grimly.

Lumley had reached her. He looked like a ghost himself, coated in snow like he was. He reached for her . . . and then he began to scream. I'll hear that sound in my dreams, that man screaming like a child in a nightmare. He tried to back away from her, but her arms, long and bare and as white as the snow, snaked out and pulled him to her. I could see her cock her head and then thrust it forward—

"Booth!" Tookey said hoarsely. "We've got to get out of here!"

And so we ran. Ran like rats, I suppose some would say, but those who would weren't there that night. We fled back down along our own backtrail, falling down, getting up again, slipping and sliding. I kept looking back over my shoulder to see if that woman was coming after us, grinning that grin and watching us with those red eyes.

We got back to the Scout and Tookey doubled over, holding his chest. "Tookey!" I said, badly scared. "What—"

"Ticker," he said. "Been bad for five years or more. Get me around in the shotgun seat, Booth, and then get us the hell out of here."

I hooked an arm under his coat and dragged him around and somehow boosted him up and in. He leaned his head back and shut his eyes. His skin was waxy-looking and yellow.

I went back around the hood of the truck at a trot, and I damned near ran into the little girl. She was just standing there beside the driver's-side door, her hair in pigtails, wearing nothing but a little bit of a yellow dress.

"Mister," she said in a high, clear voice, as sweet as morning mist, "won't you help me find my mother? She's gone and I'm so cold—"

“Honey,” I said, “honey, you better get in the truck. Your mother's —”

I broke off, and if there was ever a time in my life I was close to swooning, that was the moment. She was standing there, you see, but she was standing *on top* of the snow and there were no tracks, not in any direction.

She looked up at me then, Lumley's daughter Francie. She was no more than seven years old, and she was going to be seven for an eternity of nights. Her little face was a ghastly corpse white, her eyes a red and silver that you could fall into. And below her jaw I could see two small punctures like pinpricks, their edges horribly mangled.

She held out her arms at me and smiled. “Pick me up, mister,” she said softly. “I want to give you a kiss. Then you can take to my mommy.”

I didn't want to, but there was nothing I could do. I was leaning forward, my arms outstretched. I could see her mouth opening, I could see the little fangs inside the pink ring of her lips. Something slipped down her chin, bright and silvery, and with a dim, distant, faraway horror, I realized she was drooling.

Her small hands clasped themselves around my neck and I was thinking: Well, maybe it won't be so bad, not so bad, maybe it won't be so awful after a while—when something black flew out of the Scout and struck her on the chest. There was a puff of strange-smelling smoke, a flashing glow that was gone an instant later, and then she was backing away, hissing. Her face was twisted into a vulpine mask of rage, hate, and pain. She turned sideways and then . . . and then she was gone. One moment she was there, and the next there was a twisting knot of snow that looked a little bit like a human shape. Then the wind tattered it away across the fields.

“Booth!” Tookey whispered. “Be quick, now!”

And I was. But not so quick that I didn't have time to pick up what he had thrown at that little girl from hell. His mother's Douay Bible.

That was some time ago. I'm a sight older now, and I was no chicken then. Herb Tooklander passed on two years ago. He went peaceful,

in the night. The bar is still there, some man and his wife from Waterville bought it, nice people, and they've kept it pretty much the same. But I don't go by much. It's different somehow with Tookey gone.

Things in the Lot go on pretty much as they always have. The sheriff found that fellow Lumley's car the next day, out of gas, the battery dead. Neither Tookey nor I said anything about it. What would have been the point? And every now and then a hitchhiker or a camper will disappear around there someplace, up on Schoolyard Hill or out near the Harmony Hill cemetery. They'll turn up the fellow's packsack or a paper-back book all swollen and bleached out by the rain or snow, or some such. But never the people.

I still have bad dreams about that stormy night we went out there. Not about the woman so much as the little girl, and the way she smiled when she held her arms up so I could pick her up. So she could give me a kiss. But I'm an old man and the time comes soon when dreams are done.

You may have an occasion to be traveling in southern Maine yourself one of these days. Pretty part of the countryside. You may even stop by Tookey's Bar for a drink. Nice place. They kept the name just the same. So have your drink, and then my advice to you is to keep right on moving north. Whatever you do, don't go up that road to Jerusalem's Lot.

Especially not after dark.

There's a little girl somewhere out there. And I think she's still waiting for her good-night kiss.

# THE WOMAN IN THE ROOM

The question is: Can he do it?

He doesn't know. He knows that she chews them sometimes, her face wrinkling at the awful orange taste, and a sound comes from her mouth like splintering popsicle sticks. But these are different pills . . . gelatin capsules. The box says DARVON COMPLEX on the outside. He found them in her medicine cabinet and turned them over in his hands, thinking. Something the doctor gave her before she had to go back to the hospital. Something for the ticking nights. The medicine cabinet is full of remedies, neatly lined up like a voodoo doctor's cures. Gris-gris of the Western world. FLEET SUPPOSITORIES. He has never used a suppository in his life and the thought of putting a waxy something in his rectum to soften by body heat makes him feel ill. There is no dignity in putting things up your ass. PHILLIPS MILK OF MAGNESIA. ANACIN ARTHRITIS PAIN FORMULA. PEPTO-BISMOL. More. He can trace the course of her illness through the medicines.

But these pills are different. They are like regular Darvon only in that they are gray gelatin capsules. But they are bigger, what his dead father used to call hosscock pills. The box says Asp. 350 gr, Darvon 100 gr, and could she chew them even if he was to give them to her? *Would* she? The house is still running; the refrigerator runs and shuts off, the furnace kicks in and out, every now and then the cuckoo bird pokes grumpily out of the clock to announce an hour or a half. He supposes that after she dies it will fall to Kevin and him to break up housekeeping. She's gone, all right. The whole house says so. She

is in the Central Maine Hospital, in Lewiston. Room 312. She went when the pain got so bad she could no longer go out to the kitchen and make her own coffee. At times, when he visited, she cried without knowing it.

The elevator creaks going up, and he finds himself examining the blue elevator certificate. The certificate makes it clear that the elevator is safe, creaks or no creaks. She has been here for nearly three weeks now and today they gave her an operation called a "cortotomy." He is not sure if that is how it's spelled, but that is how it sounds. The doctor has told her that the "cortotomy" involves sticking a needle into her neck and then into her brain. The doctor has told her that this is like sticking a pin into an orange and spearing a seed. When the needle has poked into her pain center, a radio signal will be sent down to the tip of the needle and the pain center will be blown out. Like unplugging a TV. Then the cancer in her belly will stop being such a nuisance.

The thought of this operation makes him even more uneasy than the thought of suppositories melting warmly in his anus. It makes him think of a book by Michael Crichton called *The Terminal Man*, which deals with putting wires in people's heads. According to Crichton, this can be a very bad scene. You better believe it.

The elevator door opens on the third floor and he steps out. This is the old wing of the hospital, and it smells like the sweet-smelling sawdust they sprinkle over puke at a county fair. He has left the pills in the glove compartment of his car. He has not had anything to drink before this visit.

The walls up here are two-tone: brown on the bottom and white on top. He thinks that the only two-tone combination in the whole world that might be more depressing than brown and white would be pink and black. Hospital corridors like giant Good 'n' Plentys. The thought makes him smile and feel nauseated at the same time.

Two corridors meet in a T in front of the elevator, and there is a drinking fountain where he always stops to put things off a little. There are pieces of hospital equipment here and there, like strange playground toys. A litter with chrome sides and rubber wheels, the sort of thing they use to wheel you up to the "OR" when they are

ready to give you your “cortotomy.” There is a large circular object whose function is unknown to him. It looks like the wheels you sometimes see in squirrel cages. There is a rolling IV tray with two bottles hung from it, like a Salvador Dali dream of tits. Down one of the two corridors is the nurses’ station, and laughter fueled by coffee drifts out to him.

He gets his drink and then saunters down toward her room. He is scared of what he may find and hopes she will be sleeping. If she is, he will not wake her up.

Above the door of every room there is a small square light. When a patient pushes his call button this light goes on, glowing red. Up and down the hall patients are walking slowly, wearing cheap hospital robes over their hospital underwear. The robes have blue and white pinstripes and round collars. The hospital underwear is called a “johnny.” The “johnnies” look all right on the women but decidedly strange on the men because they are like knee-length dresses or slips. The men always seem to wear brown imitation-leather slippers on their feet. The women favor knitted slippers with balls of yarn on them. His mother has a pair of these and calls them “mules.”

The patients remind him of a horror movie called *The Night of the Living Dead*. They all walk slowly, as if someone had unscrewed the tops of their organs like mayonnaise jars and liquids were sloshing around inside. Some of them use canes. Their slow gait as they promenade up and down the halls is frightening but also dignified. It is the walk of people who are going nowhere slowly, the walk of college students in caps and gowns filing into a convocation hall.

Ectoplasmic music drifts everywhere from transistor radios. Voices babble. He can hear Black Oak Arkansas singing “Jim Dandy” (“Go Jim Dandy, go Jim Dandy!” a falsetto voice screams merrily at the slow hall walkers). He can hear a talk-show host discussing Nixon in tones that have been dipped in acid like smoking quills. He can hear a polka with French lyrics—Lewiston is still a French-speaking town and they love their jigs and reels almost as much as they love to cut each other in the bars on lower Lisbon Street.

He pauses outside his mother's room and

for a while there he was freaked enough to come drunk. It made him ashamed to be drunk in front of his mother even though she was too doped and full of Elavil to know. Elavil is a tranquilizer they give to cancer patients so it won't bother them so much that they're dying.

The way he worked it was to buy two six-packs of Black Label beer at Sonny's Market in the afternoon. He would sit with the kids and watch their afternoon programs on TV. Three beers with "Sesame Street," two beers during "Mister Rogers," one beer during "Electric Company." Then one with supper.

He took the other five beers in the car. It was a twenty-two-mile drive from Raymond to Lewiston, via Routes 302 and 202, and it was possible to be pretty well in the bag by the time he got to the hospital, with one or two beers left over. He would bring things for his mother and leave them in the car so there would be an excuse to go back and get them and also drink another half beer and keep the high going.

It also gave him an excuse to piss outdoors, and somehow that was the best of the whole miserable business. He always parked in the side lot, which was rutted, frozen November dirt, and the cold night air assured full bladder contraction. Pissing in one of the hospital bathrooms was too much like an apotheosis of the whole hospital experience: the nurse's call button beside the hopper, the chrome handle bolted at a 45-degree angle, the bottle of pink disinfectant over the sink. Bad news. You better believe it.

The urge to drink going home was nil. So leftover beers collected in the icebox at home and when there were six of them, he would

never have come if he had known it was going to be this bad. The first thought that crosses his mind is *She's no orange* and the second thought is *She's really dying quick now*, as if she had a train to catch out there in nullity. She is straining in the bed, not moving except for her eyes, but straining inside her body, something is moving in there. Her neck has been smeared orange with stuff that looks like Mercurochrome, and there is a bandage below her left ear where

some humming doctor put the radio needle in and blew out 60 per cent of her motor controls along with the pain center. Her eyes follow him like the eyes of a paint-by-the-numbers Jesus.

—I don't think you better see me tonight, Johnny. I'm not so good. Maybe I'll be better tomorrow.

—What is it?

—It itches. I itch all over. Are my legs together?

He can't see if her legs are together. They are just a raised V under the ribbed hospital sheet. It's very hot in the room. No one is in the other bed right now. He thinks: Roommates come and roommates go, but my mom stays on forever. Christ!

—They're together, Mom.

—Move them down, can you, Johnny? Then you better go. I've never been in a fix like this before. I can't move anything. My nose itches. Isn't that a pitiful way to be, with your nose itching and not able to scratch it?

He scratches her nose and then takes hold of her calves through the sheet and pulls them down. He can put one hand around both calves with no trouble at all, although his hands are not particularly large. She groans. Tears are running down her cheeks to her ears.

—Momma?

—Can you move my legs down?

—I just did.

—Oh. That's all right, then. I think I'm crying. I don't mean to cry in front of you. I wish I was out of this. I'd do anything to be out of this.

—Would you like a smoke?

—Could you get me a drink of water first, Johnny? I'm as dry as an old chip.

—Sure.

He takes her glass with a flexible straw in it out and around the corner to the drinking fountain. A fat man with an elastic bandage on one leg is sailing slowly down the corridor. He isn't wearing one of the pinstriped robes and is holding his "johnny" closed behind him.

He fills the glass from the fountain and goes back to Room 312 with it. She has stopped crying. Her lips grip the straw in a way that reminds him of camels he has seen in travelogues. Her face is

scrawny. His most vivid memory of her in the life he lived as her son is of a time when he was twelve. He and his brother Kevin and this woman had moved to Maine so that she could take care of her parents. Her mother was old and bedridden. High blood pressure had made his grandmother senile, and, to add insult to injury, had struck her blind. Happy eighty-sixth birthday. Here's one to grow on. And she lay in a bed all day long, blind and senile, wearing large diapers and rubber pants, unable to remember what breakfast had been but able to recite all the Presidents right up to Ike. And so the three generations of them had lived together in that house where he had so recently found the pills (although both grandparents are now long since dead) and at twelve he had been lipping off about something at the breakfast table, he doesn't remember what, but something, and his mother had been washing out her mother's pissy diapers and then running them through the wringer of her ancient washing machine, and she had turned around and laid into him with one of them, and the first snap of the wet, heavy diaper had upset his bowl of Special K and sent it spinning wildly across the table like a large blue tiddlywink, and the second blow had stropped his back, not hurting but stunning the smart talk out of his mouth and the woman now lying shrunken in this bed in this room had whopped him again and again, saying: You keep your big mouth *shut*, theres nothing big about you right now but your *mouth* and so you keep it shut until the rest of you grows the same *size*, and each italicized word was accompanied by a strop of his grandmother's wet diaper—*WHACKO!*—and any other smart things he might have had to say just evaporated. There was not a chance in the world for smart talk. He had discovered on that day and for all time that there is nothing in the world so perfect to set a twelve-year-old's impression of his place in the scheme of things into proper perspective as being beaten across the back with a wet grandmother-diaper. It had taken four years after that day to relearn the art of smarting off.

She chokes on the water a little and it frightens him even though he has been thinking about giving her pills. He asks her again if she would like a cigarette and she says:

—If it's not any trouble. Then you better go. Maybe I'll be better tomorrow.

He shakes a Kool out of one of the packages scattered on the table by her bed and lights it. He holds it between the first and second fingers of his right hand, and she puffs it, her lips stretching to grasp the filter. Her inhale is weak. The smoke drifts from her lips.

—I had to live sixty years so my son could hold my cigarettes for me.

—I don't mind.

She puffs again and holds the filter against her lips so long that he glances away from it to her eyes and sees they are closed.

—Mom?

The eyes open a little, vaguely.

—Johnny?

—Right.

—How long have you been here?

—Not long. I think I better go. Let you sleep.

—Hnnnnn.

He snuffs the cigarette in her ashtray and slinks from the room, thinking: I want to talk to that doctor. Goddamn it, I want to talk to the doctor who did that.

Getting into the elevator he thinks that the word “doctor” becomes a synonym for “man” after a certain degree of proficiency in the trade has been reached, as if it was an expected, provisioned thing that doctors must be cruel and thus attain a special degree of humanity. But

“I don't think she can really go on much longer,” he tells his brother later that night. His brother lives in Andover, seventy miles west. He only gets to the hospital once or twice a week.

“But is her pain better?” Kev asks.

“She says she itches.” He has the pills in his sweater pocket. His wife is safely asleep. He takes them out, stolen loot from his mother's empty house, where they all once lived with the

grandparents. He turns the box over and over in his hand as he talks, like a rabbit's foot.

"Well then, she's better." For Kev everything is always better, as if life moved toward some sublime vertex. It is a view the younger brother does not share.

"She's paralyzed."

"Does it matter at this point?"

"Of course it *matters!*" he bursts out, thinking of her legs under the white ribbed sheet.

"John, she's dying."

"She's not dead yet." This in fact is what horrifies him. The conversation will go around in circles from here, the profits accruing to the telephone company, but this is the nub. Not dead yet. Just lying in that room with a hospital tag on her wrist, listening to phantom radios up and down the hall. And

she's going to have to come to grips with time, the doctor says. He is a big man with a red, sandy beard. He stands maybe six foot four, and his shoulders are heroic. The doctor led him tactfully out into the hall when she began to nod off.

The doctor continues:

—You see, some motor impairment is almost unavoidable in an operation like the "cortotomy." Your mother has some movement in the left hand now. She may reasonably expect to recover her right hand in two to four weeks.

—Will she walk?

The doctor looks at the drilled-cork ceiling of the corridor judiciously. His beard crawls all the way down to the collar of his plaid shirt, and for some ridiculous reason Johnny thinks of Algernon Swinburne; why, he could not say. This man is the opposite of poor Swinburne in every way.

—I should say not. She's lost too much ground.

—She's going to be bedridden for the rest of her life?

—I think that's a fair assumption, yes.

He begins to feel some admiration for this man who he hoped would be safely hateful. Disgust follows the feeling; must he accord admiration for the simple truth?

—How long can she live like that?

—It's hard to say. (That's more like it.) The tumor is blocking one of her kidneys now. The other one is operating fine. When the tumor blocks it, she'll go to sleep.

—A uremic coma?

—Yes, the doctor says, but a little more cautiously. “Uremia” is a techno-pathological term, usually the property of doctors and medical examiners alone. But Johnny knows it because his grandmother died of the same thing, although there was no cancer involved. Her kidneys simply packed it in and she died floating in internal piss up to her ribcage. She died in bed, at home, at dinnertime. Johnny was the one who first suspected she was truly dead this time, and not just sleeping in the comatose, open-mouthed way that old people have. Two small tears had squeezed out of her eyes. Her old toothless mouth was drawn in, reminding him of a tomato that has been hollowed out, perhaps to hold egg salad, and then left forgotten on the kitchen shelf for a stretch of days. He held a round cosmetic mirror to her mouth for a minute, and when the glass did not fog and hide the image of her tomato mouth, he called for his mother. All of that had seemed as right as this did wrong.

—She says she still has pain. And that she itches.

The doctor taps his head solemnly, like Victor DeGroot in the old psychiatrist cartoons.

—She *imagines* the pain. But it is nonetheless real. Real to her. That is why time is so important. Your mother can no longer count time in terms of seconds and minutes and hours. She must restructure those units into days and weeks and months.

He realizes what this burly man with the beard is saying, and it boggles him. A bell dings softly. He cannot talk more to this man. He is a technical man. He talks smoothly of time, as though he has gripped the concept as easily as a fishing rod. Perhaps he has.

—Can you do anything more for her?

—Very little.

But his manner is serene, as if this were right. He is, after all, “not offering false hope.”

—Can it be worse than a coma?

—Of course it *can*. We can't chart these things with any real degree of accuracy. It's like having a shark loose in your body. She may bloat.

—Bloat?

—Her abdomen may swell and then go down and then swell again. But why dwell on such things now? I believe we can safely say

that they would do the job, but suppose they don't? Or suppose they catch me? I don't want to go to court on a mercy-killing charge. Not even if I can beat it. I have no causes to grind. He thinks of newspaper headlines screaming MATRICIDE and grimaces.

Sitting in the parking lot, he turns the box over and over in his hands. DARVON COMPLEX. The question still is: *Can he do it?* Should he? She has said: *I wish I were out of this. I'd do anything to be out of this.* Kevin is talking of fixing her a room at his house so she won't die in the hospital. The hospital wants her out. They gave her some new pills and she went on a raving bummer. That was four days after the “cortotomy.” They'd like her someplace else because no one has perfected a really fool-proof “cancerectomy” yet. And at this point if they got it all out of her she'd be left with nothing but her legs and her head.

He has been thinking of how time must be for her, like something that has gotten out of control, like a sewing basket full of threaded spools spilled all over the floor for a big mean tomcat to play with. The days in Room 312. The night in Room 312. They have run a string from the call button and tied it to her left index finger because she can no longer move her hand far enough to press the button if she thinks she needs the bedpan.

It doesn't matter too much anyway because she can't feel the pressure down there; her midsection might as well be a sawdust pile. She moves her bowels in the bed and pees in the bed and only

knows when she smells it. She is down to ninety-five pounds from one-fifty and her body's muscles are so unstrung that it's only a loose bag tied to her brain like a child's sack puppet. Would it be any different at Kev's? Can he do murder? He knows it is murder. The worst kind, matricide, as if he were a sentient fetus in an early Ray Bradbury horror story, determined to turn the tables and abort the animal that has given it life. Perhaps it is his fault anyway. He is the only child to have been nurtured inside her, a change-of-life baby. His brother was adopted when another smiling doctor told her she would never have any children of her own. And of course, the cancer now in her began in the womb like a second child, his own darker twin. His life and her death began in the same place. Should he not do what the other is doing already, so slowly and clumsily?

He has been giving her aspirin on the sly for the pain she *imagines* she has. She has them in a Sucrets box in her hospital-table drawer, along with her get-well cards and her reading glasses that no longer work. They have taken away her dentures because they are afraid she might pull them down her throat and choke on them, so now she simply sucks the aspirin until her tongue is slightly white.

Surely he could give her the pills; three or four would be enough. Fourteen hundred grains of aspirin and four hundred grains of Darvon administered to a woman whose body weight has dropped 33 per cent over five months.

No one knows he has the pills, not Kevin, not his wife. He thinks that maybe they've put someone else in Room 312's other bed and he won't have to worry about it. He can cop out safely. He wonders if that wouldn't be best, really. If there is another woman in the room, his options will be gone and he can regard the fact as a nod from Providence. He thinks

—You're looking better tonight.

—Am I?

—Sure. How do you feel?

—Oh, not so good. Not so good tonight.

—Let's see you move your right hand.

She raises it off the counterpane. It floats splay-fingered in front of her eyes for a moment, then drops. Thump. He smiles and she smiles back. He asks her,

—Did you see the doctor today?

—Yes, he came in. He's good to come every day. Will you give me a little water, John?

He gives her some water from the flexible straw.

—You're good to come as often as you do, John. You're a good son.

She's crying again. The other bed is empty, accusingly so. Every now and then one of the blue and white pinstriped bath-robos sails by them up the hall. The door stands open halfway. He takes the water gently away from her, thinking idiotically: Is this glass half empty or half full?

—How's your left hand?

—Oh, pretty good.

—Let's see.

She raises it. It has always been her smart hand, and perhaps that is why it has recovered as well as it has from the devastating effects of the "cortotomy." She clenches it. Flexes it. Snaps the fingers weakly. Then it falls back to the counterpane. Thump. She complains,

—But there's no feeling in it.

—Let me see something.

He goes to her wardrobe, opens it, and reaches behind the coat she came to the hospital in to get at her purse. She keeps it in here because she is paranoid about robbers; she has heard that some of the orderlies are rip-off artists who will lift anything they can get their hands on. She has heard from one of her roommates who has since gone home that a woman in the new wing lost five hundred dollars which she kept in her shoe. His mother is paranoid about a great many things lately, and has once told him a man sometimes hides under her bed in the late-at-night. Part of it is the combination of drugs they are trying on her. They make the bennies he occasionally dropped in college look like Excedrin. You can have your pick from the locked drug cabinet at the end of the corridor just past the

nurses' station: ups and downs, highs and bummers. Death, maybe, merciful death like a sweet black blanket. The wonders of modern science.

He takes the purse back to her bed and opens it.

—Can you take something out of here?

—Oh, Johnny, I don't know . . .

He says persuasively:

—Try it. For me.

The left hand rises from the counterpane like a crippled helicopter. It cruises. Dives. Comes out of the purse with a single wrinkled Kleenex. He applauds:

—Good! Good!

—But she turns her face away.

—Last year I was able to pull two full dish trucks with these hands.

If there's to be a time, it's now. It is very hot in the room but the sweat on his forehead is cold. He thinks: If she doesn't ask for aspirin, I won't. Not tonight. And he knows if it isn't tonight it's never. Okay.

Her eyes flick to the half-open door slyly.

—Can you sneak me a couple of my pills, Johnny?

It is how she always asks. She is not supposed to have any pills outside of her regular medication because she has lost so much body weight and she has built up what his druggie friends of his college days would have called “a heavy thing.” The body's immunity stretches to within a fingernail's breadth of lethal dosage. One more pill and you're over the edge. They say it is what happened to Marilyn Monroe.

—I brought some pills from home.

—Did you?

—They're good for pain.

He holds the box out to her. She can only read very close. She frowns over the large print and then says,

—I had some of that Darvon stuff before. It didn't help me.

—This is stronger.

Her eyes rise from the box to his own. Idly she says,

—Is it?

He can only smile foolishly. He cannot speak. It is like the first time he got laid, it happened in the back of some friend's car and when he came home his mother asked him if he had a good time and he could only smile this same foolish smile.

—Can I chew them?

—I don't know. You could try one.

—All right. Don't let them see.

He opens the box and pries the plastic lid off the bottle. He pulls the cotton out of the neck. Could she do all that with the crippled helicopter of her left hand? Would they believe it? He doesn't know. Maybe they don't either. Maybe they wouldn't even care.

He shakes six of the pills into his hand. He watches her watching him. It is many too many, even she must know that. If she says anything about it, he will put them all back and offer her a single Arthritis Pain Formula.

A nurse glides by outside and his hand twitches, clicking the gray capsules together, but the nurse doesn't look in to see how the "cortotomy kid" is doing.

His mother doesn't say anything, only looks at the pills like they were perfectly ordinary pills (if there is such a thing). But on the other hand, she has never liked ceremony; she would not crack a bottle of champagne on her own boat.

—Here you go,

he says in a perfectly natural voice, and pops the first one into her mouth.

She gums it reflectively until the gelatin dissolves, and then she winces.

—Taste bad? I won't . . .

—No, not too bad.

He gives her another. And another. She chews them with that same reflective look. He gives her a fourth. She smiles at him and he sees with horror that her tongue is yellow. Maybe if he hits her in the belly she will bring them up. But he can't. He could never hit his mother.

—Will you see if my legs are together?

—Just take these first.

He gives her a fifth. And a sixth. Then he sees if her legs are together. They are. She says,

—I think I'll sleep a little now.

—All right. I'm going to get a drink.

—You've always been a good son, Johnny.

He puts the bottle in the box and tucks the box into her purse, leaving the plastic top on the sheet beside her. He leaves the open purse beside her and thinks: *She asked for her purse. I brought it to her and opened it just before I left. She said she could get what she wanted out of it. She said she'd get the nurse to put it back in the wardrobe.*

He goes out and gets his drink. There is a mirror over the fountain, and he runs out his tongue and looks at it.

When he goes back into the room, she is sleeping with her hands pressed together. The veins in them are big, rambling. He gives her a kiss and her eyes roll behind their lids, but do not open.

Yes.

He feels no different, either good or bad.

He starts out of the room and thinks of something else. He goes back to her side, takes the bottle out of the box, and rubs it all over his shirt. Then he presses the limp fingertips of her sleeping left hand on the bottle. Then he puts it back and goes out of the room quickly, without looking back.

He goes home and waits for the phone to ring and wishes he had given her another kiss. While he waits, he watches TV and drinks a lot of water.

*BY STEPHEN KING*

NOVELS

Carrie

'Salem's Lot

The Shining

The Stand

The Dead Zone

Firestarter

Cujo

The Dark Tower:

The

Gunslinger

Christine

Pet Sematary

The Talisman

(with

Peter Straub)

It

The Eyes of the

Dragon

Misery

AS RICHARD

BACHMAN

Range

The Long Walk

Roadwork

The Running  
man

Thinner

COLLECTIONS

Night Shift

Different

Seasons

Skeleton Crew

NONFICTION

Danse Macabre

SCREENPLAYS

Creepshow

The  
Tommyknockers  
The Dark Tower II:  
Drawing  
of the Three  
The Dark Half  
The Stand: The  
Complete &  
Uncut  
Edition

Cat's Eye

Silver Bullet

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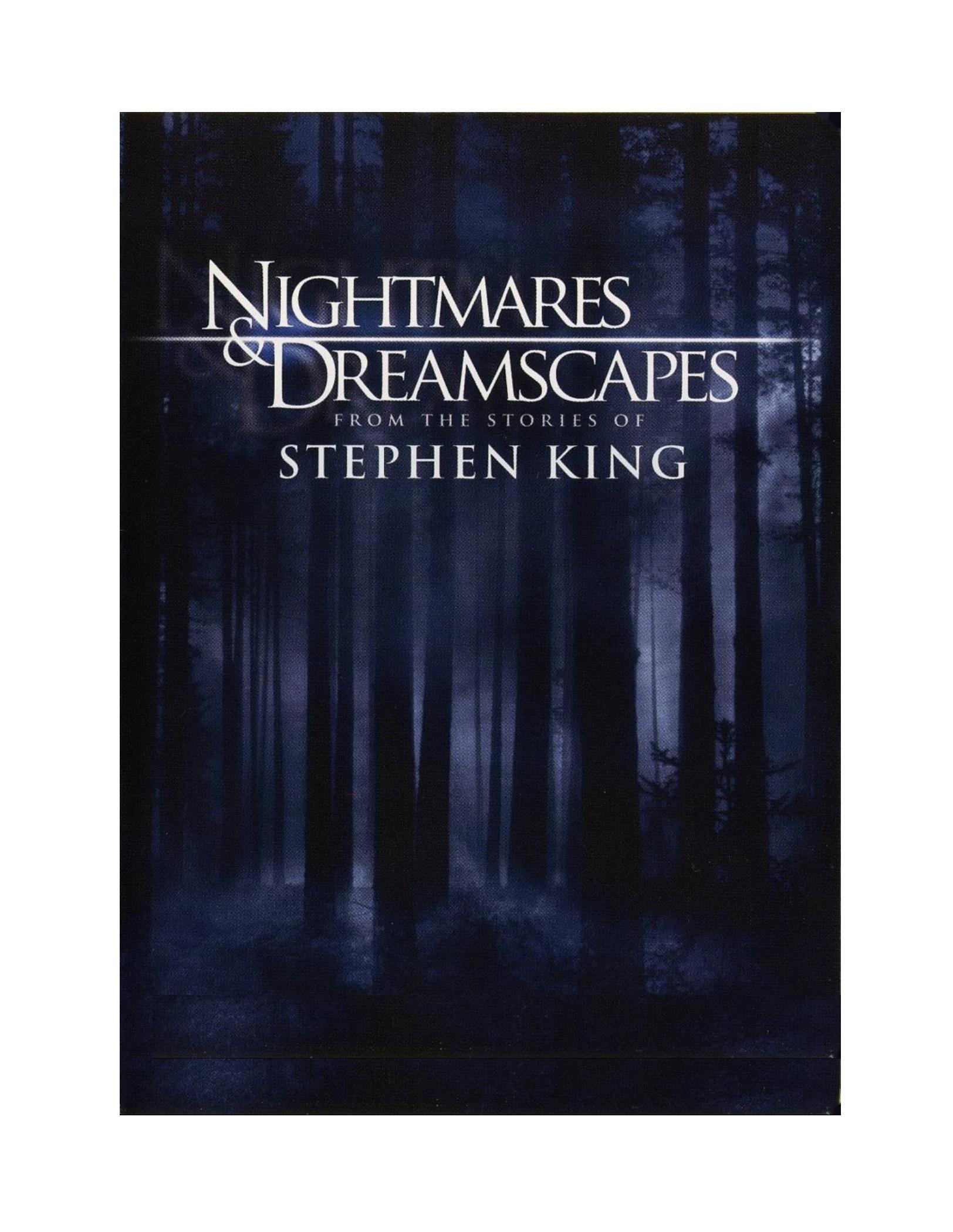
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NIGHTMARES  
& DREAMSCAPES  
FROM THE STORIES OF  
STEPHEN KING



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STEPHEN  
KING

**Nightmares  
&  
Dreamscapes**



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THOMAS WILLIAMS,  
1926–1990:  
poet, novelist, and  
great American storyteller.

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## INTRODUCTION

# Myth, Belief, Faith, and Ripley's *Believe It or Not!*

When I was a kid I believed everything I was told, everything I read, and every dispatch sent out by my own overheated imagination. This made for more than a few sleepless nights, but it also filled the world I lived in with colors and textures I would not have traded for a lifetime of restful nights. I knew even then, you see, that there were people in the world—too many of them, actually—whose imaginative senses were either numb or completely deadened, and who lived in a mental state akin to color-blindness. I always felt sorry for them, never dreaming (at least then) that many of these unimaginative types either pitied me or held me in contempt, not just because I suffered from any number of irrational fears but because I was deeply and unreservedly credulous on almost every subject. “There’s a boy,” some of them must have thought (I know my mother did), “who will buy the Brooklyn Bridge not just once but over and over again, all his life.”

There was some truth to that then, I suppose, and if I am to be honest, I suppose there’s some truth to it now. My wife still delights in telling people that her husband cast his first Presidential ballot, at the tender age of twenty-one, for Richard Nixon. “Nixon said he had a plan to get us out of Vietnam,” she says, usually with a gleeful gleam in her eye, “*and Steve believed him!*”

That’s right; Steve believed him. Nor is that all Steve has believed during the often-eccentric course of his forty-five years. I was, for example, the last kid in my neighborhood to decide that all those street-corner Santas meant there was no *real* Santa (I still find no logical merit in the idea; it’s like saying that a million disciples prove there is no master). I never questioned my Uncle Oren’s assertion that you could tear off a person’s shadow with a steel tent-peg (if you struck precisely at high noon, that was) or his wife’s claim that every time you shivered, a goose was walking over the place where your grave would someday

be. Given the course of *my* life, that must mean I'm slated to end up buried behind Aunt Rhody's barn out in Goose Wallow, Wyoming.

I also believed everything I was told in the schoolyard; little minnows and whale-sized whoppers went down my throat with equal ease. One kid told me with complete certainty that if you put a dime down on a railroad track, the first train to come along would be derailed by it. Another kid told me that a dime left on a railroad track would be perfectly smooshed (that was exactly how he put it—*perfectly smooshed*) by the next train, and what you took off the rail after the train had passed would be a flexible and nearly transparent coin the size of a silver dollar. My own belief was that both things were true: that dimes left on railroad tracks were perfectly smooshed before they derailed the trains which did the smooshing.

Other fascinating schoolyard facts which I absorbed during my years at Center School in Stratford, Connecticut, and Durham Elementary School in Durham, Maine, concerned such diverse subjects as golf-balls (poisonous and corrosive at the center), miscarriages (sometimes born alive, as malformed monsters which had to be killed by health-care individuals ominously referred to as "the special nurses"), black cats (if one crossed your path, you had to fork the sign of the evil eye at it quickly or risk almost certain death before the end of the day), and sidewalk cracks. I probably don't have to explain the potentially dangerous relationship of these latter to the spinal columns of completely innocent mothers.

My primary sources of wonderful and amazing facts in those days were the paperback compilations from *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* which were issued by Pocket Books. It was in *Ripley's* that I discovered you could make a powerful explosive by scraping the celluloid off the backs of playing cards and then tamping the stuff into a length of pipe, that you could drill a hole in your own skull and then plug it with a candle, thereby turning yourself into a kind of human night-light (why anyone would want to do such a thing was a question which never occurred to me until years later), that there were actual giants (one man well over eight feet tall), actual elves (one woman barely eleven inches tall), and actual MONSTERS TOO HORRIBLE TO DESCRIBE . . . except *Ripley's* described them all, in loving detail, and usually with a picture (if I live to be a

hundred, I'll never forget the one of the guy with the candle stuck in the center of his shaved skull).

That series of paperbacks was—to me, at least—the world's most wonderful sideshow, one I could carry around in my back pocket and curl up with on rainy weekend afternoons, when there were no baseball games and everyone was tired of Monopoly. Were all of Ripley's fabulous curiosities and human monsters real? In this context that hardly seems relevant. They were real to *me*, and that probably is—during the years from six to eleven, crucial years in which the human imagination is largely formed, they were *very* real to me. I believed them just as I believed you could derail a freight-train with a dime or that the drippy goop in the center of a golf-ball would eat the hand right off your arm if you were careless and got some of it on you. It was in *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* that I first began to see how fine the line between the fabulous and the humdrum could sometimes be, and to understand that the juxtaposition of the two did as much to illuminate the ordinary aspects of life as it did to illuminate its occasional weird outbreaks. Remember it's *belief* we're talking about here, and belief is the cradle of myth. What about reality, you ask? Well, as far as I'm concerned, reality can go take a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut. I've never held much of a brief for reality, at least in my written work. All too often it is to the imagination what ash stakes are to vampires.

I think that myth and imagination are, in fact, nearly interchangeable concepts, and that belief is the wellspring of both. Belief in what? I don't think it matters very much, to tell you the truth. One god or many. Or that a dime can derail a freight-train.

These beliefs of mine had nothing to do with faith; let's be very clear on that subject. I was raised Methodist and hold onto enough of the fundamentalist teachings of my childhood to believe that such a claim would be presumptuous at best and downright blasphemous at worst. I believed all that weird stuff because I was *built* to believe in weird stuff. Other people run races because they were built to run fast, or play basketball because God made them six-foot-ten, or solve long, complicated equations on blackboards because they were built to see the places where the numbers all lock together.

Yet faith comes into it someplace, and I think that place has to do with going back to do the same thing again and again even though you believe in

your deepest, truest heart that you will never be able to do it any better than you already have, and that if you press on, there's really no place to go but downhill. You don't have anything to lose when you take your first whack at the *piñata*, but to take a second one (and a third. . . and a fourth. . . and a thirty-fourth) is to risk failure, depression, and, in the case of the short-story writer who works in a pretty well defined genre, self-parody. But we do go on, most of us, and that gets to be hard. I never would have believed that twenty years ago, or even ten, but it does. It gets hard. And I have days when I think this old Wang word-processor stopped running on electricity about five years ago; that from *The Dark Half* on, it's been running completely on faith. But that's okay; whatever gets the words across the screen, right?

The idea for each of the stories in this book came in a moment of belief and was written in a burst of faith, happiness, and optimism. Those positive feelings have their dark analogues, however, and the fear of failure is a long way from the worst of them. The worst—for me, at least—is the gnawing speculation that I may have already said everything I have to say, and am now only listening to the steady quacking of my own voice because the silence when it stops is just too spooky.

The leap of faith necessary to make the short stories happen has gotten particularly tough in the last few years; these days it seems that everything wants to be a novel, and every novel wants to be approximately four thousand pages long. A fair number of critics have mentioned this, and usually not favorably. In reviews of every long novel I have written, from *The Stand* to *Needful Things*, I have been accused of overwriting. In some cases the criticisms have merit; in others they are just the ill-tempered yappings of men and women who have accepted the literary anorexia of the last thirty years with a puzzling (to me, at least) lack of discussion and dissent. These self-appointed deacons in the Church of Latter-Day American Literature seem to regard generosity with suspicion, texture with dislike, and any broad literary stroke with outright hate. The result is a strange and arid literary climate where a meaningless little fingernail-paring like Nicholson Baker's *Vox* becomes an object of fascinated debate and dissection, and a truly ambitious American novel like Greg Matthews's *Heart of the Country* is all but ignored.

But all that is by the by, not only off the subject but just a tiny bit whimpery, too—after all, was there ever a writer who didn't feel that he or she had been badly treated by the critics? All I started to say before I so rudely interrupted myself was that the act of faith which turns a moment of belief into a real object—i.e., a short story that people will actually want to read—has been a little harder for me to come by in the last few years.

“Well then, don't write them,” someone might say (only it's usually a voice I hear inside my own head, like the ones Jessie Burlingame hears in *Gerald's Game*). “After all, you don't need the money they bring in the way you once did.”

That's true enough. The days when a check for some four-thousand-word wonder would buy penicillin for one of the kids' ear infections or help meet the rent are long gone. But the logic is more than spurious; it's dangerous. I don't exactly need the money the *novels* bring in, either, you see. If it was just the money, I could hang up my jock and hit the showers. . . or spend the rest of my life on some Caribbean island, catching the rays and seeing how long I could grow my fingernails.

But it *isn't* about the money, no matter what the glossy tabloids may say, and it's not about selling out, as the more arrogant critics really seem to believe. The fundamental things still apply as time goes by, and for me the object hasn't changed—the job is still getting to *you*, Constant Reader, getting you by the short hairs and, hopefully, scaring you so badly you won't be able to go to sleep without leaving the bathroom light on. It's still about first seeing the impossible . . . and then saying it. It's still about making you believe what I believe, at least for a little while.

I don't talk about this much, because it embarrasses me and it sounds pompous, but I still see stories as a great thing, something which not only enhances lives but actually saves them. Nor am I speaking metaphorically. Good writing—good *stories*—are the imagination's firing pin, and the purpose of the imagination, I believe, is to offer us solace and shelter from situations and life-passages which would otherwise prove unendurable. I can only speak from my own experience, of course, but for me, the imagination which so often kept me awake and in terror as a child has seen me through some terrible bouts of stark raving reality as an adult. If the stories which have resulted from

that imagination have done the same for some of the people who've read them, then I am perfectly happy and perfectly satisfied—feelings which cannot, so far as I know, be purchased with rich movie deals or multi-million-dollar book contracts.

Still, the short story is a difficult and challenging literary form, and that's why I was so delighted—and so surprised—to find I had enough of them to issue a third collection. It has come at a propitious time, as well, because one of those facts of which I was so sure as a kid (I probably picked it up in *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*, too) was that people completely renew themselves every seven years: every tissue, every organ, every muscle replaced by entirely new cells. I am drawing *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* together in the summer of 1992, seven years after the publication of *Skeleton Crew*, my last collection of short stories, and *Skeleton Crew* was published seven years after *Night Shift*, my first collection. The greatest thing is knowing that, although the leap of faith necessary to translate an idea into reality has become harder (the jumping muscles get a little older every day, you know), it's still perfectly possible. The next greatest thing is knowing that someone still wants to read them—that's you, Constant Reader, should you wonder.

The oldest of these stories (my versions of the killer golf-ball goop and monster miscarriages, if you will) is "It Grows on You," originally published in a University of Maine literary magazine called *Marshroots* . . . although it has been considerably revised for this book, so it could better be what it apparently wanted to be—a final look back at the doomed little town of Castle Rock. The most recent, "The Ten O'Clock People," was written in three fevered days during the summer of 1992.

There are some genuine curiosities here—the first version of my only original teleplay; a Sherlock Holmes story in which Dr. Watson steps forward to solve the case; a Cthulhu Mythos story set in the suburb of London where Peter Straub lived when I first met him; a hardboiled "caper" story of the Richard Bachman stripe; and a slightly different version of a story called "My Pretty Pony," which was originally done as a limited edition from the Whitney Museum, with artwork by Barbara Kruger.

After a great deal of thought, I've also decided to include a lengthy non-fiction piece, "Head Down," which concerns kids and baseball. It was

originally published in *The New Yorker*, and I probably worked harder on it than anything else I've written over the last fifteen years. That doesn't make it good, of course, but I know that writing and publishing it gave me enormous satisfaction, and I'm passing it along for that reason. It doesn't really fit in a collection of stories which concern themselves mostly with suspense and the supernatural. . . except somehow it does. The texture is the same. See if you don't think so.

What I've tried hardest to do is to steer clear of the old chestnuts, the trunk stories, and the bottom-of-the-drawer stuff. Since 1980 or so, some critics have been saying I could publish my laundry list and sell a million copies or so, but these are for the most part critics who think that's what I've been doing all along. The people who read my work for pleasure obviously feel differently, and I have made this book with those readers, not the critics, in the forefront of my mind. The result, I think, is an uneven Aladdin's cave of a book, one which completes a trilogy of which *Night Shift* and *Skeleton Crew* are the first two volumes. All the good short stories have now been collected; all the bad ones have been swept as far under the rug as I could get them, and there they will stay. If there is to be another collection, it will consist entirely of stories which have not as yet been written or even considered (stories which have not yet been *believed*, if you will), and I'd guess it will show up in a year which begins with a 2.

Meantime, there are these twenty-odd (and some, I should warn you, are *very* odd). Each contains something I believed for awhile, and I know that some of these things—the finger poking out of the drain, the man-eating toads, the hungry teeth—are a little frightening, but I think we'll be all right if we go together. First, repeat the catechism after me:

I believe a dime can derail a freight-train.

I believe there are alligators in the New York City sewer system, not to mention rats as big as Shetland ponies.

I believe that you can tear off someone's shadow with a steel tent-peg.

I believe that there really *is* a Santa Claus, and that all those red-suited guys you see at Christmastime really are his helpers.

I believe there is an unseen world all around us.

I believe that tennis balls are full of poison gas, and if you cut one in two and breathe what comes out, it'll kill you.

Most of all, I *do* believe in spooks, I *do* believe in spooks, I *do* believe in spooks.

Okay? Ready? Fine. Here's my hand. We're going now. I know the way. All you have to do is hold on tight . . . and *believe*.

Bangor, Maine

November 6, 1992

## Dolan's Cadillac

Revenge is a dish best eaten cold.

—Spanish proverb

I waited and watched for seven years. I saw him come and go—Dolan. I watched him stroll into fancy restaurants dressed in a tuxedo, always with a different woman on his arm, always with his pair of bodyguards bookending him. I watched his hair go from iron-gray to a fashionable silver while my own simply receded until I was bald. I watched him leave Las Vegas on his regular pilgrimages to the West Coast; I watched him return. On two or three occasions I watched from a side road as his Sedan DeVille, the same color as his hair, swept by on Route 71 toward Los Angeles. And on a few occasions I watched him leave his place in the Hollywood Hills in the same gray Cadillac to return to Las Vegas—not often, though. I am a schoolteacher. Schoolteachers and high-priced hoodlums do not have the same freedom of movement; it's just an economic fact of life.

He did not know I was watching him—I never came close enough for him to know that. I was careful.

He killed my wife or had her killed; it comes to the same, either way. Do you want details? You won't get them from me. If you want them, look them up in the back issues of the papers. Her name was Elizabeth. She taught in the same school where I taught and where I teach still. She taught first-graders. They loved her, and I think that some of them may not have forgotten their love still, although they would be teenagers now. *I* loved her and love her still, certainly. She was not beautiful but she was pretty. She was quiet, but she could laugh. I dream of her. Of her hazel eyes. There has never been another woman for me. Nor ever will be.

He slipped—Dolan. That's all you have to know. And Elizabeth was there, at the wrong place and the wrong time, to see the slip. She went to the police, and the police sent her to the FBI, and she was questioned, and she said yes,

she would testify. They promised to protect her, but they either slipped or they underestimated Dolan. Maybe it was both. Whatever it was, she got into her car one night and the dynamite wired to the ignition made me a widower. *He* made me a widower—Dolan.

With no witness to testify, he was let free.

He went back to his world, I to mine. The penthouse apartment in Vegas for him, the empty tract home for me. The succession of beautiful women in furs and sequined evening dresses for him, the silence for me. The gray Cadillacs, four of them over the years, for him, and the aging Buick Riviera for me. His hair went silver while mine just went.

But I watched.

I was careful—oh, yes! Very careful. I knew what he was, what he could do. I knew he would step on me like a bug if he saw or sensed what I meant for him. So I was careful.

During my summer vacation three years ago I followed him (at a prudent distance) to Los Angeles, where he went frequently. He stayed in his fine house and threw parties (I watched the comings and goings from a safe shadow at the end of the block, fading back when the police cars made their frequent patrols), and I stayed in a cheap hotel where people played their radios too loud and neon light from the topless bar across the street shone in the window. I fell asleep on those nights and dreamed of Elizabeth's hazel eyes, dreamed that none of it had ever happened, and woke up sometimes with tears drying on my face.

I came close to losing hope.

He was well guarded, you see; so well guarded. He went nowhere without those two heavily armed gorillas with him, and the Cadillac itself was armor plated. The big radial tires it rolled on were of the self-sealing type favored by dictators in small, uneasy countries.

Then, that last time, I saw how it could be done—but I did not see it until after I'd had a very bad scare.

I followed him back to Las Vegas, always keeping at least a mile between us, sometimes two, sometimes three. As we crossed the desert heading east his car was at times no more than a sun-flash on the horizon and I thought about Elizabeth, how the sun looked on her hair.

I was far behind on this occasion. It was the middle of the week, and traffic on U.S. 71 was very light. When traffic is light, tailing becomes dangerous—even a grammar-school teacher knows that. I passed an orange sign which read DETOUR 5 MILES and dropped back even farther. Desert detours slow traffic to a crawl, and I didn't want to chance coming up behind the gray Cadillac as the driver babied it over some rutted secondary road.

DETOUR 3 MILES, the next sign read, and below that: BLASTING AREA AHEAD • TURN OFF 2-WAY RADIO.

I began to muse on some movie I had seen years before. In this film a band of armed robbers had tricked an armored car into the desert by putting up false detour signs. Once the driver fell for the trick and turned off onto a deserted dirt road (there are thousands of them in the desert, sheep roads and ranch roads and old government roads that go nowhere), the thieves had removed the signs, assuring isolation, and then had simply laid siege to the armored car until the guards came out.

They killed the guards.

I remembered that.

They killed the guards.

I reached the detour and turned onto it. The road was as bad as I had imagined—packed dirt, two lanes wide, filled with potholes that made my old Buick jounce and groan. The Buick needed new shock absorbers, but shocks are an expense a schoolteacher sometimes has to put off, even when he is a widower with no children and no hobbies except his dream of revenge.

As the Buick bounced and wallowed along, an idea occurred to me. Instead of following Dolan's Cadillac the next time it left Vegas for L.A. or L.A. for Vegas, I would pass it—get ahead of it. I would create a false detour like the one in the movie, luring it out into the wastes that exist, silent and rimmed by mountains, west of Las Vegas. Then I would remove the signs, as the thieves had done in the movie—

I snapped back to reality suddenly. Dolan's Cadillac was ahead of me, *directly ahead of me*, pulled off to one side of the dusty track. One of the tires, self-sealing or not, was flat. No—not just flat. It was exploded, half off the rim. The culprit had probably been a sharp wedge of rock stuck in the hardpan like a miniature tank-trap. One of the two bodyguards was working a jack under

the front end. The second—an ogre with a pig-face streaming sweat under his brush cut—stood protectively beside Dolan himself. Even in the desert, you see, they took no chances.

Dolan stood to one side, slim in an open-throated shirt and dark slacks, his silver hair blowing around his head in the desert breeze. He was smoking a cigarette and watching the men as if he were somewhere else, a restaurant or a ballroom or a drawing room perhaps.

His eyes met mine through the windshield of my car and then slid off with no recognition at all, although he had seen me once, seven years ago (when I had hair!), at a preliminary hearing, sitting beside my wife.

My terror at having caught up with the Cadillac was replaced with an utter fury.

I thought of leaning over and unrolling the passenger window and shrieking: *How dare you forget me? How dare you dismiss me?* Oh, but that would have been the act of a lunatic. It was *good* that he had forgotten me, it was *fine* that he had dismissed me. Better to be a mouse behind the wainscoting, nibbling at the wires. Better to be a spider, high up under the eaves, spinning its web.

The man sweating the jack flagged me, but Dolan wasn't the only one capable of dismissal. I looked indifferently beyond the arm-waver, wishing him a heart attack or a stroke or, best of all, both at the same time. I drove on—but my head pulsed and throbbed, and for a few moments the mountains on the horizon seemed to double and even treble.

*If I'd had a gun!* I thought. *If only I'd had a gun! I could have ended his rotten, miserable life right then if I'd only had a gun!*

Miles later some sort of reason reasserted itself. If I'd had a gun, the only thing I could have been sure of was getting myself killed. If I'd had a gun I could have pulled over when the man using the bumper-jack beckoned me, and gotten out, and begun spraying bullets wildly around the deserted landscape. I might have wounded someone. Then I would have been killed and buried in a shallow grave, and Dolan would have gone on escorting the beautiful women and making pilgrimages between Las Vegas and Los Angeles in his silver Cadillac while the desert animals unearthed my remains and

fought over my bones under the cold moon. For Elizabeth there would have been no revenge—none at all.

The men who travelled with him were trained to kill. I was trained to teach third-graders.

This was not a movie, I reminded myself as I returned to the highway and passed an orange END CONSTRUCTION • THE STATE OF NEVADA THANKS YOU! sign. And if I ever made the mistake of confusing reality with a movie, of thinking that a balding third-grade teacher with myopia could ever be Dirty Harry anywhere outside of his own daydreams, there would never be any revenge, ever.

But *could* there be revenge, ever? *Could* there be?

My idea of creating a fake detour was as romantic and unrealistic as the idea of jumping out of my old Buick and spraying the three of them with bullets—me, who had not fired a gun since the age of sixteen and who had never fired a handgun.

Such a thing would not be possible without a band of conspirators—even the movie I had seen, romantic as it had been, had made that clear. There had been eight or nine of them in two separate groups, staying in touch with each other by walkie-talkie. There had even been a man in a small plane cruising above the highway to make sure the armored car was relatively isolated as it approached the right spot on the highway.

A plot no doubt dreamed up by some overweight screenwriter sitting by his swimming pool with a piña colada by one hand and a fresh supply of Pentel pens and an Edgar Wallace plot-wheel by the other. And even that fellow had needed a small army to fulfill his idea. I was only one man.

It wouldn't work. It was just a momentary false gleam, like the others I'd had over the years—the idea that maybe I could put some sort of poison gas in Dolan's air-conditioning system, or plant a bomb in his Los Angeles house, or perhaps obtain some really deadly weapon—a bazooka, let us say—and turn his damned silver Cadillac into a fireball as it raced east toward Vegas or west toward L.A. along 71.

Best to dismiss it.

But it wouldn't go.

*Cut him out, the voice inside that spoke for Elizabeth kept whispering. Cut him out the way an experienced sheep-dog cuts a ewe out of the flock when his master points. Detour him out into the emptiness and kill him. Kill them all.*

Wouldn't work. If I allowed no other truth, I would at least have to allow that a man who had stayed alive as long as Dolan must have a carefully honed sense of survival—honed to the point of paranoia, perhaps. He and his men would see through the detour trick in a minute.

*They turned down this one today, the voice that spoke for Elizabeth responded. They never even hesitated. They went just like Mary's little lamb.*

But I knew—yes, somehow I did!—that men like Dolan, men who are really more like wolves than men, develop a sort of sixth sense when it comes to danger. I could steal genuine detour signs from some road department shed and set them up in all the right places; I could even add fluorescent orange road cones and a few of those smudge-pots. I could do all that and Dolan would still smell the nervous sweat of my hands on the stage dressing. Right through his bullet-proof windows he would smell it. He would close his eyes and hear Elizabeth's name far back in the snake-pit that passed for his mind.

The voice that spoke for Elizabeth fell silent, and I thought it had finally given up for the day. And then, with Vegas actually in sight—blue and misty and wavering on the far rim of the desert—it spoke up again.

*Then don't try to fool him with a fake detour, it whispered. Fool him with a real one.*

I swerved the Buick over to the shoulder and shuddered to a stop with both feet on the brake-pedal. I stared into my own wide, startled eyes in the rear-view mirror.

Inside, the voice that spoke for Elizabeth began to laugh. It was wild, mad laughter, but after a few moments I began to laugh along with it.

• • •

The other teachers laughed at me when I joined the Ninth Street Health Club. One of them wanted to know if someone had kicked sand in my face. I laughed along with them. People don't get suspicious of a man like me as long as he keeps laughing along with them. And why shouldn't I laugh? My wife

had been dead seven years, hadn't she? Why, she was no more than dust and hair and a few bones in her coffin! So why shouldn't I laugh? It's only when a man like me stops laughing that people wonder if something is wrong.

I laughed along with them even though my muscles ached all that fall and winter. I laughed even though I was constantly hungry—no more second helpings, no more late-night snacks, no more beer, no more before-dinner gin and tonic. But lots of red meat and greens, greens, greens.

I bought myself a Nautilus machine for Christmas.

No—that's not quite right. *Elizabeth* bought me a Nautilus machine for Christmas.

I saw Dolan less frequently; I was too busy working out, losing my pot belly, building up my arms and chest and legs. But there were times when it seemed I could not go on with it, that recapturing anything like real physical fitness was going to be impossible, that I could not live without second helpings and pieces of coffee cake and the occasional dollop of sweet cream in my coffee. When those times came I would park across from one of his favorite restaurants or perhaps go into one of the clubs he favored and wait for him to show up, stepping from the fog-gray Cadillac with an arrogant, icy blonde or a laughing redhead on his arm—or one on each. There he would be, the man who had killed my Elizabeth, there he would be, resplendent in a formal shirt from Bijan's, his gold Rolex winking in the nightclub lights. When I was tired and discouraged I went to Dolan as a man with a raging thirst might seek out an oasis in the desert. I drank his poisoned water and was refreshed.

In February I began to run every day, and then the other teachers laughed at my bald head, which peeled and pinked and then peeled and pinked again, no matter how much sunblock I smeared on it. I laughed right along with them, as if I had not twice nearly fainted and spent long, shuddering minutes with cramps stabbing the muscles of my legs at the end of my runs.

When summer came, I applied for a job with the Nevada Highway Department. The municipal employment office stamped a tentative approval on my form and sent me along to a district foreman named Harvey Blocker. Blocker was a tall man, burned almost black by the Nevada sun. He wore jeans, dusty workboots, and a blue tee-shirt with cut-off sleeves. BAD ATTITUDE, the shirt proclaimed. His muscles were big rolling slabs under his skin. He

looked at my application. Then he looked at me and laughed. The application looked very puny rolled up in one of his huge fists.

“You got to be kidding, my friend. I mean, you have *got* to be. We talkin desert sun and desert heat here—none of that yuppie tanning-salon shit. What are you in real life, bubba? An accountant?”

“A teacher,” I said. “Third grade.”

“Oh, *honey*,” he said, and laughed again. “Get out of my face, okay?”

I had a pocket watch—handed down from my great-grandfather, who worked on the last stretch of the great transcontinental railroad. He was there, according to family legend, when they hammered home the golden spike. I took the watch out and dangled it in Blocker’s face on its chain.

“See this?” I said. “Worth six, maybe seven hundred dollars.”

“This a bribe?” Blocker laughed again. A great old laugher was he. “Man, I’ve heard of people making deals with the devil, but you’re the first one I ever met who wanted to *bribe* himself into hell.” Now he looked at me with something like compassion. “You may *think* you understand what you’re tryin to get yourself into, but I’m here to tell you you don’t have the slightest idea. In July I’ve seen it go a hundred and seventeen degrees out there west of Indian Springs. It makes strong men cry. And you ain’t strong, bubba. I don’t have to see you with your shirt off to know you ain’t got nothin on your rack but a few yuppie health-club muscles, and they won’t cut it out in the Big Empty.”

I said, “The day you decide I can’t cut it, I’ll walk off the job. You keep the watch. No argument.”

“You’re a fucking liar.”

I looked at him. He looked back for some time.

“You’re *not* a fucking liar.” He said this in tones of amazement.

“No.”

“You’d give the watch to Tinker to hold?” He cocked his thumb at a humongous black man in a tie-dyed shirt who was sitting nearby in the cab of a bulldozer, eating a fruit-pie from McDonald’s and listening.

“Is he trustworthy?”

“You’re damned tooting.”

“Then he can hold it until you tell me to take a hike or until I have to go back to school in September.”

“And what do *I* put up?”

I pointed to the employment application in his fist. “Sign that,” I said. “That’s what you put up.”

“You’re crazy.”

I thought of Dolan and of Elizabeth and said nothing.

“You’d start on shit-work,” Blocker warned. “Shovelling hot-patch out of the back of a truck and into potholes. Not because I want your damned watch—although I’ll be more than happy to take it—but because that’s where everyone starts.”

“All right.”

“As long as you understand, bubba.”

“I do.”

“No,” Blocker said, “you don’t. But you will.”

And he was right.

• • •

I remember next to nothing about the first couple of weeks—just shovelling hot-top and tamping it down and walking along behind the truck with my head down until the truck stopped at the next pothole. Sometimes we worked on the Strip and I’d hear the sound of jackpot bells ringing in the casinos. Sometimes I think the bells were just ringing in my head. I’d look up and I’d see Harvey Blocker looking at me with that odd look of compassion, his face shimmering in the heat baking off the road. And sometimes I’d look over at Tinker, sitting under the canvas parasol which covered the cab of his ’dozer, and Tinker would hold up my great-granddad’s watch and swing it on the chain so it kicked off sunflashes.

The big struggle was not to faint, to hold onto consciousness no matter what. All through June I held on, and the first week of July, and then Blocker sat down next to me one lunch hour while I was eating a sandwich with one shaking hand. I shook sometimes until ten at night. It was the heat. It was either shake or faint, and when I thought of Dolan I somehow managed to keep shaking.

“You still ain’t strong, bubba,” he said.

“No,” I said. “But like the man said, you should have seen the materials I had to start with.”

“I keep expecting to look around and see you passed out in the middle of the roadbed and you keep not doing it. But you gonna.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. If you stay behind the truck with a shovel, you gonna.”

“No.”

“Hottest part of the summer still coming on, bubba. Tink calls it cookie-sheet weather.”

“I’ll be fine.”

He pulled something out of his pocket. It was my great-granddad’s watch. He tossed it in my lap. “Take this fucking thing,” he said, disgusted. “I don’t want it.”

“You made a deal with me.”

“I’m calling it off.”

“If you fire me, I’ll take you to arbitration,” I said. “You signed my form. You—”

“I ain’t firing you,” he said, and looked away. “I’m going to have Tink teach you how to run a front-end loader.”

I looked at him for a long time, not knowing what to say. My third-grade classroom, so cool and pleasant, had never seemed so far away . . . and still I didn’t have the slightest idea of how a man like Blocker thought, or what he meant when he said the things he said. I knew that he admired me and held me in contempt at the same time, but I had no idea why he felt either way. *And you don’t need to care, darling*, Elizabeth spoke up suddenly inside my mind. *Dolan is your business. Remember Dolan.*

“Why do you want to do that?” I asked at last.

He looked back at me then, and I saw he was both furious and amused. But the fury was the emotion on top, I think. “What is it with you, bubba? What do you think I am?”

“I don’t—”

“You think I want to kill you for your fucking watch? That what you think?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, you are. Sorriest little motherfucker *I* ever saw.”

I put my great-granddad’s watch away.

“You ain’t *never* gonna be strong, bubba. Some people and plants take hold in the sun. Some wither up and die. You dyin. You know you are, and still you won’t move into the shade. Why? Why you pulling this crap on your system?”

“I’ve got my reasons.”

“Yeah, I bet you do. And God help anyone who gets in your way.”

He got up and walked off.

Tinker came over, grinning.

“You think you can learn to run a front-end loader?”

“I think so,” I said.

“I think so, too,” he said. “Ole Blockhead there likes you—he just don’t know how to say so.”

“I noticed.”

Tink laughed. “Tough little motherfucker, ain’t you?”

“I hope so,” I said.

I spent the rest of the summer driving a front-end loader, and when I went back to school that fall, almost as black as Tink himself, the other teachers stopped laughing at me. Sometimes they looked at me out of the corners of their eyes after I passed, but they had stopped laughing.

*I’ve got my reasons.* That’s what I told him. And I did. I did not spend that season in hell just on a whim. I had to get in shape, you see. Preparing to dig a grave for a man or a woman may not require such drastic measures, but it was not just a man or woman I had in mind.

It was that damned Cadillac I meant to bury.

• • •

By April of the following year I was on the State Highway Commission’s mailing list. Every month I received a bulletin called *Nevada Road Signs*. I skimmed most of the material, which concerned itself with pending highway-improvement bills, road equipment that had been bought and sold, State Legislature action on such subjects as sand dune control and new anti-erosion techniques. What I was interested in was always on the last page or two of the

bulletin. This section, simply titled The Calendar, listed the dates and sites of roadwork in each coming month. I was especially interested in sites and dates followed by a simple four-letter abbreviation: RPAV. This stood for repaving, and my experience on Harvey Blocker's crew had showed me that these were the operations which most frequently called for detours. But not *always*—no indeed. Closing a section of road is a step the Highway Commission never takes unless there is no other choice. But sooner or later, I thought, those four letters might spell the end for Dolan. Just four letters, but there were times when I saw them in my dreams: RPAV.

Not that it would be easy, or perhaps even soon—I knew I might have to wait for years, and that someone else might get Dolan in the meantime. He was an evil man, and evil men live dangerous lives. Four loosely related vectors would have to come together, like a rare conjunction of the planets: travel for Dolan, vacation time for me, a national holiday, and a three-day weekend.

Years, maybe. Or maybe never. But I felt a kind of serenity—a surety that it *would* happen, and that when it did I would be prepared. And eventually it did happen. Not that summer, not that fall, and not the following spring. But in June of last year, I opened *Nevada Road Signs* and saw this in The Calendar:

JULY 1–JULY 22 (TENT.): U.S. 71 MI 440–472 (WESTBND) RPAV
--

Hands shaking, I paged through my desk calendar to July and saw that July 4th fell on a Monday.

So here were three of the four vectors, for surely there would be a detour somewhere in the middle of such an extensive repaving job.

But Dolan. . . what about Dolan? What about the fourth vector?

Three times before I could remember him going to L.A. during the week of the Fourth of July—a week which is one of the few slow ones in Las Vegas. I could remember three other times when he had gone somewhere else—once to New York, once to Miami, once all the way to London—and a fourth time when he had simply stayed put in Vegas.

*If* he went . . .

Was there a way I could find out?

I thought on this long and hard, but two visions kept intruding. In the first I saw Dolan's Cadillac speeding west toward L.A. along U.S. 71 at dusk, casting a long shadow behind it. I saw it passing DETOUR AHEAD signs, the last of them warning CB owners to turn off their sets. I saw the Cadillac passing abandoned road equipment—bulldozers, graders, front-end loaders. Abandoned not just because it was after knocking-off time but because it was a weekend, a three-day weekend.

In the second vision everything was the same except the detour signs were gone.

They were gone because I had taken them down.

It was on the last day of school when I suddenly realized how I might be able to find out. I had been nearly drowsing, my mind a million miles away from both school and Dolan, when I suddenly sat bolt-upright, knocking a vase on the side of my desk (it contained some pretty desert flowers my students had brought me as an end-of-school present) to the floor, where it shattered. Several of my students, who had *also* been drowsing, also sat bolt-upright, and perhaps something on my face frightened one of them, because a little boy named Timothy Urich burst into tears and I had to soothe him.

*Sheets, I thought, comforting Timmy. Sheets and pillowcases and bedding and silverware; the rugs; the grounds. Everything has to look just so. He'll want everything just so.*

Of course. Having things just so was as much a part of Dolan as his Cadillac.

I began to smile, and Timmy Urich smiled back, but it wasn't Timmy I was smiling at.

I was smiling at Elizabeth.

• • •

School finished on June 10th that year. Twelve days later I flew to Los Angeles. I rented a car and checked into the same cheap hotel I had used on other occasions. On each of the next three days I drove into the Hollywood Hills and mounted a watch on Dolan's house. It could not be a *constant* watch; that

would have been noticed. The rich hire people to notice interlopers, because all too often they turn out to be dangerous.

Like me.

At first there was nothing. The house was not boarded up, the lawn was not overgrown—heaven forbid!—the water in the pool was doubtless clean and chlorinated. But there was a look of emptiness and disuse all the same—shades pulled against the summer sun, no cars in the central turnaround, no one to use the pool that a young man with a ponytail cleaned every other morning.

I became convinced it was a bust. Yet I stayed, wishing and hoping for the final vector.

On the 29th of June, when I had almost consigned myself to another year of watching and waiting and exercising and driving a front-end loader in the summer for Harvey Blocker (if he would have me again, that was) a blue car marked LOS ANGELES SECURITY SERVICES pulled up at the gate of Dolan's house. A man in a uniform got out and used a key to open the gate. He drove his car in and around the corner. A few moments later he came back on foot, closed the gate, and relocked it.

This was at least a break in the routine. I felt a dim flicker of hope.

I drove off, managed to make myself stay away for nearly two hours, and then drove back, parking at the head of the block instead of the foot this time. Fifteen minutes later a blue van pulled up in front of Dolan's house. Written on the side were the words BIG JOE'S CLEANING SERVICE. My heart leaped up in my chest. I was watching in the rear-view mirror, and I remember how my hands clamped down on the steering wheel of the rental car.

Four women got out of the van, two white, one black, one Chicana. They were dressed in white, like waitresses, but they were not waitresses, of course; they were cleaning women.

The security guard answered when one of them buzzed at the gate, and unlocked it. The five of them talked and laughed together. The security guard attempted to goose one of the women and she slapped his hand aside, still laughing.

One of the women went back to the van and drove it into the turnaround. The others walked up, talking among themselves as the guard closed the gate and locked it again.

Sweat was pouring down my face; it felt like grease. My heart was triphammering.

They were out of my field of vision in the rear-view mirror. I took a chance and looked around.

I saw the back doors of the van swing open.

One of them carried a neat stack of sheets; another had towels; another had a pair of vacuum cleaners.

They trooped up to the door and the guard let them inside.

I drove away, shaking so badly I could hardly steer the car.

They were opening the house. He was coming.

• • •

Dolan did not trade in his Cadillac every year, or even every two—the gray Sedan DeVille he was driving as that June neared its end was three years old. I knew its dimensions exactly. I had written the GM company for them, pretending to be a research writer. They had sent me an operator’s manual and spec sheet for that year’s model. They even returned the stamped, self-addressed envelope I had enclosed. Big companies apparently maintain their courtesy even when they’re running in the red.

I had then taken three figures—the Cadillac’s width at its widest point, height at its tallest, and length at its longest—to a friend of mine who teaches mathematics at Las Vegas High School. I have told you, I think, that I had prepared for this, and not all my preparation was physical. Most assuredly not.

I presented my problem as a purely hypothetical one. I was trying to write a science fiction story, I said, and I wanted to have my figures exactly right. I even made up a few plausible plot fragments—my own inventiveness rather astonished me.

My friend wanted to know how fast this alien scout vehicle of mine would be going. It was a question I had not expected, and I asked him if it mattered.

“Of course it matters,” he said. “It matters a lot. If you want the scout vehicle in your story to fall directly *into* your trap, the trap has to be exactly the right size. Now this figure you’ve given me is seventeen feet by five feet.”

I opened my mouth to say that wasn't exactly right, but he was already holding up his hand.

"Just an approximation," he said. "Makes it easier to figure the arc."

"The what?"

"The arc of descent," he repeated, and I cooled off. That was a phrase with which a man bent on revenge could fall in love. It had a dark, smoothly portentous sound. *The arc of descent.*

I'd taken it for granted that if I dug the grave so that the Cadillac could fit, it *would* fit. It took this friend of mine to make me see that before it could serve its purpose as a grave, it had to work as a trap.

The shape itself was important, he said. The sort of slit-trench I had been envisioning might not work—in fact, the odds of its not working were greater than the odds that it would. "If the vehicle doesn't hit the start of the trench dead-on," he said, "it may not go all the way in at all. It would just slide along on an angle for awhile and when it stopped all the aliens would climb out the passenger door and zap your heroes." The answer, he said, was to widen the entrance end, giving the whole excavation a funnel-shape.

Then there was this problem of speed.

If Dolan's Cadillac was going too fast and the hole was too short, it would fly across, sinking a bit as it went, and either the frame or the tires would strike the lip of the hole on the far side. It would flip over on its roof—but without falling in the hole at all. On the other hand, if the Cadillac was going too slowly and the hole was too long, it might land at the bottom on its nose instead of its wheels, and that would never do. You couldn't bury a Cadillac with the last two feet of its trunk and its rear bumper sticking out of the ground any more than you could bury a man with his legs sticking up.

"So how fast will your scout vehicle be going?"

I calculated quickly. On the open highway, Dolan's driver kept it pegged between sixty and sixty-five. He would probably be driving a little slower than that where I planned to make my try. I could take away the detour signs, but I couldn't hide the road machinery or erase all the signs of construction.

"About twenty rull," I said.

He smiled. "Translation, please?"

"Say fifty earth-miles an hour."

“Ah-hah.” He set to work at once with his slip-stick while I sat beside him, bright-eyed and smiling, thinking about that wonderful phrase: *arc of descent*.

He looked up almost at once. “You know,” he said, “you might want to think about changing the dimensions of the vehicle, buddy.”

“Oh? Why do you say that?”

“Seventeen by five is pretty big for a scout vehicle.” He laughed. “That’s damn near the size of a Lincoln Mark IV.”

I laughed, too. We laughed together.

• • •

After I saw the women going into the house with the sheets and towels, I flew back to Las Vegas.

I unlocked my house, went into the living room, and picked up the telephone. My hand trembled a little. For nine years I had waited and watched like a spider in the eaves or a mouse behind a baseboard. I had tried never to give Dolan the slightest clue that Elizabeth’s husband was still interested in him—the totally empty look he had given me that day as I passed his disabled Cadillac on the way back to Vegas, furious as it had made me at the time, was my just reward.

But now I would have to take a risk. I would have to take it because I could not be in two places at the same time and it was imperative that I know *if* Dolan was coming, and *when* to make the detour temporarily disappear.

I had figured out a plan coming home on the plane. I thought it would work. I would *make* it work.

I dialed Los Angeles directory assistance and asked for the number of Big Joe’s Cleaning Service. I got it and dialed it.

“This is Bill at Rennie’s Catering,” I said. “We got a party Saturday night at 1121 Aster Drive in Hollywood Hills. I wanted to know if one of your girls would check for Mr. Dolan’s big punch-bowl in the cabinet over the stove. Could you do that for me?”

I was asked to hold on. I did, somehow, although with the passing of each endless second I became more and more sure that he had smelled a rat and was calling the phone company on one line while I held on the other.

At last—at long, *long* last—he came back on. He sounded upset, but that was all right. That was just how I wanted him to sound.

“*Saturday* night?”

“Yes, that’s right. But I don’t have a punch-bowl as big as they’re going to want unless I call across town, and my impression was that he already has one. I’d just like to be sure.”

“Look, mister, my call-sheet says Mr. Dolan ain’t expected in until three P.M. *Sunday* afternoon. I’ll be glad to have one of my girls check out your punch-bowl, but I want to straighten this other business out first. Mr. Dolan is not a man to fuck around with, if you’ll pardon my French—”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” I said.

“—and if he’s going to show up a day early, I got to send some more girls out there right away.”

“Let me double-check,” I said. The third-grade reading textbook I use, *Roads to Everywhere*, was on the table beside me. I picked it up and riffled some of the pages close to the phone.

“Oh, boy,” I said. “It’s my mistake. He’s having people in *Sunday* night. I’m really sorry. You going to hit me?”

“Nah. Listen, let me put you on hold again—I’ll get one of the girls and have her check on the—”

“No need, if it’s *Sunday*,” I said. “My big punch-bowl’s coming back from a wedding reception in Glendale *Sunday* morning.”

“Okay. Take it easy.” Comfortable. Unsuspicious. The voice of a man who wasn’t going to think twice.

I hoped.

I hung up and sat still, working it out in my head as carefully as I could. To get to L.A. by three, he would be leaving Vegas about ten o’clock *Sunday* morning. And he would arrive in the vicinity of the detour between eleven-fifteen and eleven-thirty, when traffic was apt to be almost non-existent anyway.

I decided it was time to stop dreaming and start acting.

I looked through the want ads, made some telephone calls, and then went out to look at five used vehicles that were within my financial reach. I settled for a battered Ford van that had rolled off the assembly line the same year

Elizabeth was killed. I paid cash. I was left with only two hundred and fifty-seven dollars in my savings account, but this did not disturb me in the slightest. On my way home I stopped at a rental place the size of a discount department store and rented a portable air compressor, using my MasterCard as collateral.

Late Friday afternoon I loaded the van: picks, shovels, compressor, a hand-dolly, a toolbox, binoculars, and a borrowed Highway Department jackhammer with an assortment of arrowhead-shaped attachments made for slicing through asphalt. A large square piece of sand-colored canvas, plus a long roll of canvas—this latter had been a special project of mine last summer—and twenty-one thin wooden struts, each five feet long. Last but not least, a big industrial stapler.

On the edge of the desert I stopped at a shopping center and stole a pair of license plates and put them on my van.

Seventy-six miles west of Vegas, I saw the first orange sign: CONSTRUCTION AHEAD • PASS AT YOUR OWN RISK. Then, a mile or so beyond that, I saw the sign I had been waiting for since. . . well, ever since Elizabeth died, I suppose, although I hadn't always known it.

DETOUR AHEAD 6 MILES

Dusk was deepening toward dark as I arrived and surveyed the situation. It could have been better if I'd planned it, but not much.

The detour was a right turn between two rises. It looked like an old fence-line road which the Highway Department had smoothed and widened to temporarily accommodate the heavier traffic flow. It was marked by a flashing arrow powered by a buzzing battery in a padlocked steel box.

Just beyond the detour, as the highway rose toward the crest of that second rise, the road was blocked off by a double line of road cones. Beyond them (if one was so extraordinarily stupid as to have, first, missed the flashing arrow and, second, run over the road cones without realizing it—I suppose some drivers were) was an orange sign almost as big as a billboard, reading ROAD CLOSED • USE DETOUR.

Yet the *reason* for the detour was not visible from here, and that was good. I didn't want Dolan to have the slightest chance of smelling the trap before he fell into it.

Moving quickly—I didn't want to be seen at this—I got out of the van and quickly stacked up some dozen of the road cones, creating a lane wide enough for the van. I dragged the ROAD CLOSED sign to the right, then ran back to the van, got in, and drove through the gap.

Now I could hear an approaching motor.

I grabbed the cones again, replacing them as fast as I could. Two of them spilled out of my hands and rolled down into the gully. I chased after them, panting. I tripped over a rock in the dark, fell sprawling, and got up quickly with dust on my face and blood dripping from one palm. The car was closer now; soon it would appear over the last rise before the detour-junction and in the glow thrown by his high beams the driver would see a man in jeans and a tee-shirt trying to replace road cones while his van stood idling where no vehicle that didn't belong to the Nevada State Highway Department was supposed to be. I got the last cone in place and ran back to the sign. I tugged too hard. It swayed and almost fell over.

As the approaching car's headlights began to brighten on the rise to the east, I suddenly became convinced it was a Nevada State Trooper.

The sign was back where it had been—and if it wasn't, it was close enough. I sprinted for the van, got in, and drove over the next rise. Just as I cleared it, I saw headlights splash over the rise behind me.

Had he seen me in the dark, with my own lights out?

I didn't think so.

I sat back against the seat, eyes closed, waiting for my heart to slow down. At last, as the sound of the car bouncing and bucketing its way down the detour faded out, it did.

I was here—safe behind the detour.

It was time to get to work.

• • •

Beyond the rise, the road descended to a long, straight flat. Two-thirds of the way along this straight stretch the road simply ceased to exist—it was replaced by piles of dirt and a long, wide stretch of crushed gravel.

Would they see that and stop? Turn around? Or would they keep on going, confident that there must be an approved way through since they had not seen any detour signs?

Too late to worry about it now.

I picked a spot about twenty yards into the flat, but still a quarter of a mile short of the place where the road dissolved. I pulled over to the side of the road, worked my way into the back of the van, and opened the back doors. I slid out a couple of boards and muscled the equipment. Then I rested and looked up at the cold desert stars.

“Here we go, Elizabeth,” I whispered to them.

It seemed I felt a cold hand stroke the back of my neck.

• • •

The compressor made a racket and the jackhammer was even worse, but there was no help for it—the best I could hope for was to be done with the first stage of the work before midnight. If it went on much longer than that I was going to be in trouble anyway, because I had only a limited quantity of gasoline for the compressor.

Never mind. Don't think of who might be listening and wondering what fool would be running a jackhammer in the middle of the night; think about Dolan. Think about the gray Sedan DeVille.

Think about the arc of descent.

I marked off the dimensions of the grave first, using white chalk, the tape measure from my toolbox, and the figures my mathematician friend had worked out. When I was done, a rough rectangle not quite five feet wide by forty-two feet long glimmered in the dark. At the nearer end it flared wide. In the gloom that flare did not look so much like a funnel as it had on the graph paper where my mathematician friend first sketched it. In the gloom it looked like a gaping mouth at the end of a long, straight windpipe. *All the better to eat you with, my dear*, I thought, and smiled in the dark.

I drew twenty more lines across the box, making stripes two feet wide. Last, I drew a single vertical line down the middle, creating a grid of forty-two near-

squares, two feet by two and a half. The forty-third segment was the shovel-shaped flare at the end.

Then I rolled up my sleeves, pull-started the compressor, and went back to square one.

The work went faster than I had any right to hope, but not as fast as I had dared to dream—does it ever? It would have been better if I could have used the heavy equipment, but that would come later. The first thing was to carve up the squares of paving. I was not done by midnight and not by three in the morning, when the compressor ran out of gas. I had anticipated this might happen, and was equipped with a siphon for the van's gas tank. I got as far as unscrewing the gas-cap, but when the smell of the gasoline hit me, I simply screwed the cap back on and lay down flat in the back of the van.

No more, not tonight I couldn't. In spite of the work-gloves I had worn, my hands were covered with big blisters, many of them now weeping. My whole body seemed to vibrate from the steady, punishing beat of the jackhammer, and my arms felt like tuning forks gone mad. My head ached. My *teeth* ached. My back tormented me; my spine felt as if it had been filled with ground glass.

I had cut my way through twenty-eight squares.

Twenty-eight.

Fourteen to go.

And that was only the start.

*Never*, I thought. *It's impossible. Can't be done.*

That cold hand again.

*Yes, my darling. Yes.*

The ringing in my ears was subsiding a little now; every once in awhile I could hear an approaching engine . . . and then it would subside to a drone on the right as it turned onto the detour and started around the loop the Highway Department had created to bypass the construction.

Tomorrow was Saturday. . . sorry, today. *Today* was Saturday. Dolan was coming on Sunday. No time.

*Yes, my darling.*

The blast had torn her to pieces.

My darling had been torn to pieces for telling the truth to the police about what she had seen, for refusing to be intimidated, for being brave, and Dolan

was still driving around in his Cadillac and drinking twenty-year-old Scotch while his Rolex glimmered on his wrist.

*I'll try*, I thought, and then I fell into a dreamless sleep that was like death.

• • •

I woke up with the sun, already hot at eight o'clock, shining in my face. I sat up and screamed, my throbbing hands flying to the small of my back. Work? Cut up another fourteen chunks of asphalt? I couldn't even *walk*.

But I could walk, and I did.

Moving like a very old man on his way to a shuffleboard game, I worked my way to the glove compartment and opened it. I had put a bottle of Empirin there in case of such a morning after.

Had I thought I was in shape? Had I *really*?

Well! That was quite funny, wasn't it?

I took four of the Empirin with water, waited fifteen minutes for them to dissolve in my stomach, and then wolfed a breakfast of dried fruit and cold Pop-Tarts.

I looked over to where the compressor and the jackhammer waited. The yellow skin of the compressor already seemed to sizzle in the morning sunshine. Leading up to it on either side of my incision were the neatly cut squares of asphalt.

I didn't want to go over there and pick up that jackhammer. I thought of Harvey Blocker saying, *You ain't never gonna be strong, bubba. Some people and plants take hold in the sun. Some wither up and die . . . Why you pulling this crap on your system?*

"She was in pieces," I croaked. "I loved her and she was in pieces."

As a cheer it was never going to replace "Go, Bears!" or "Hook em, horns!" but it got me moving. I siphoned gas from the van's tank, gagging at the taste and the stink, holding onto my breakfast only by a grim act of will. I wondered briefly what I was going to do if the road-crew had drained the diesel from their machines before going home for the long weekend, and quickly shoved the thought out of my mind. It made no sense to worry over things I couldn't

control. More and more I felt like a man who has jumped out of the bay of a B-52 with a parasol in his hand instead of a parachute on his back.

I carried the gasoline can over to the compressor and poured it into the tank. I had to use my left hand to curl the fingers of my right around the handle of the compressor's starter-cord. When I pulled, more blisters broke, and as the compressor started up, I saw thick pus dripping out of my fist.

*Never make it.*

*Please, darling.*

I walked over to the jackhammer and started in again.

The first hour was the worst, and then the steady pounding of the jackhammer combined with the Empirin seemed to numb everything—my back, my hands, my head. I finished cutting out the last block of asphalt by eleven. It was time to see how much I remembered of what Tinker had told me about jump-starting road equipment.

I went staggering and flapping back to my van and drove a mile and a half down the road to where the road construction was going on. I saw my machine almost at once: a big Case-Jordan bucket-loader with a grapple-and-pincers attachment on the back. \$135,000 worth of rolling stock. I had driven a Caterpillar for Blocker, but this one would be pretty much the same.

I hoped.

I climbed up into the cab and looked at the diagram printed on the head of the stick-shift. It looked just the same as the one on my Cat. I ran the pattern once or twice. There was some resistance at first because some grit had found its way into the gearbox—the guy who drove this baby hadn't put down his sand-flaps and his foreman hadn't checked him. Blocker would have checked. And docked the driver five bucks, long weekend or not.

His eyes. His half-admiring, half-contemptuous eyes. What would he think of an errand like this?

Never mind. This was no time to be thinking of Harvey Blocker; this was a time to be thinking of Elizabeth. And Dolan.

There was a piece of burlap on the steel floor of the cab. I lifted it, looking for the key. There was no key there, of course.

Tink's voice in my mind: *Shit, a kid could jump-start one of these babies, whitebread. Ain't nothin' to it. At least a car's got a ignition lock on it—new ones*

*do, anyway. Look here. No, not where the key goes, you ain't got no key, why you want to look where the key goes? Look under here. See these wires hangin' down?*

I looked now and saw the wires hanging down, looking just as they had when Tinker pointed them out to me: red, blue, yellow, and green. I pared the insulation from an inch of each and then took a twist of copper wire from my back pocket.

*Okay, whitebread, lissen up 'cause we maybe goan give Q and A later, you dig me? You gonna wire the red and the green. You won't forget that, 'cause it's like Christmas. That takes care of your ignition.*

I used my wire to hold the bare places on the red and green wires of the Case-Jordan's ignition together. The desert wind hooted, thin, like the sound of someone blowing over the top of a soda bottle. Sweat ran down my neck and into my shirt, where it caught and tickled.

*Now you just got the blue and the yellow. You ain't gonna wire em; you just gonna touch em together and you gonna make sho you ain't touchin' no bare wire wither own self when you do it neither, 'less you wanna make some hot electrified water in your Jockeys, m'man. The blue and the yellow the ones turn the starter. Off you go. When you feel like you had enough of a joyride, you just pull the red and green wires apart. Like turnin' off the key you don't have.*

I touched the blue and yellow wires together. A big yellow spark jumped up and I recoiled, striking the back of my head on one of the metal posts at the rear of the cab. Then I leaned forward and touched them together again. The motor turned over, coughed, and the bucket-loader took a sudden spasmodic lurch forward. I was thrown into the rudimentary dashboard, the left side of my face striking the steering bar. I had forgotten to put the damned transmission in neutral and had almost lost an eye as a result. I could almost hear Tink laughing.

I fixed that and then tried the wires again. The motor turned over and turned over. It coughed once, puffing a dirty brown smoke signal into the air to be torn away by the ceaseless wind, and then the motor just went on cranking. I kept trying to tell myself the machine was just in rough shape—a man who'd go off without putting the sand-flaps down, after all, was apt to forget anything—but I became more and more sure that they had drained the diesel, just as I had feared.

And then, just as I was about to give up and look for something I could use to dipstick the loader's fuel tank (*all the better to read the bad news with, my dear*), the motor bellowed into life.

I let the wires go—the bare patch on the blue one was smoking—and goosed the throttle. When it was running smoothly, I geared it into first, swung it around, and started back toward the long brown rectangle cut neatly into the westbound lane of the highway.

• • •

The rest of the day was a long bright hell of roaring engine and blazing sun. The driver of the Case-Jordan had forgotten to mount his sand-flaps, but he had remembered to take his sun umbrella. Well, the old gods laugh sometimes, I guess. No reason why. They just do. And I guess the old gods have a twisted sense of humor.

It was almost two o'clock before I got all of the asphalt chunks down into the ditch, because I had never achieved any real degree of delicacy with the pincers. And with the spade-shaped piece at the end, I had to cut it in two and then drag each of the chunks down into the ditch by hand. I was afraid that if I used the pincers I would break them.

When all the asphalt pieces were down in the ditch, I drove the bucket-loader back down to the road equipment. I was getting low on fuel; it was time to siphon. I stopped at the van, got the hose . . . and found myself staring, hypnotized, at the big jerrican of water. I tossed the siphon away for the time being and crawled into the back of the van. I poured water over my face and neck and chest and screamed with pleasure. I knew that if I drank I would vomit, but I had to drink. So I did and I vomited, not getting up to do it but only turning my head to one side and then crab-crawling as far away from the mess as I could.

Then I slept again and when I woke up it was nearly dusk and somewhere a wolf was howling at a new moon rising in the purple sky.

• • •

In the dying light the cut I had made really did look like a grave—the grave of some mythical ogre. Goliath, maybe.

*Never*, I told the long hole in the asphalt.

*Please*, Elizabeth whispered back. *Please . . . for me.*

I got four more Empirin out of the glove compartment and swallowed them down. “For you,” I said.

• • •

I parked the Case-Jordan with its fuel tank close to the tank of a bulldozer, and used a crowbar to pry off the caps on both. A 'dozer-jockey on a state crew might get away with forgetting to drop the sand-flaps on his vehicle, but with forgetting to lock the fuel-cap, in these days of \$1.05 diesel? Never.

I got the fuel running from the 'dozer into my loader and waited, trying not to think, watching the moon rise higher and higher in the sky. After awhile I drove back to the cut in the asphalt and started to dig.

Running a bucket-loader by moonlight was a lot easier than running a jackhammer under the broiling desert sun, but it was still slow work because I was determined that the floor of my excavation should have exactly the right slant. As a consequence, I frequently consulted the carpenter's level I'd brought with me. That meant stopping the loader, getting down, measuring, and climbing up into the peak-seat again. No problem ordinarily, but by midnight my body had stiffened up and every movement sent a shriek of pain through my bones and muscles. My back was the worst; I began to fear I had done something fairly unpleasant to it.

But that—like everything else—was something I would have to worry about later.

If a hole five feet deep as well as forty-two feet long and five feet wide had been required, it really *would* have been impossible, of course, bucket-loader or not—I might just as well have planned to send him into outer space, or drop the Taj Mahal on him. The total yield on such dimensions is over a thousand cubic feet of earth.

“You've got to create a funnel shape that will suck your bad aliens in,” my mathematician friend had said, “and then you've got to create an inclined plane

that pretty much mimes the arc of descent.”

He drew one on another sheet of graph paper.

“That means that your intergalactic rebels or whatever they are only need to remove *half* as much earth as the figures initially show. In this case—” He scribbled on a work sheet, and beamed. “Five hundred and twenty-five cubic feet. Chicken-feed. One man could do it.”

I had believed so, too, once upon a time, but I had not reckoned on the heat . . . the blisters . . . the exhaustion . . . the steady pain in my back.

Stop for a minute, but not too long. Measure the slant of the trench.

*It's not as bad as you thought, is it, darling? At least it's roadbed and not desert hardpan—*

I moved more slowly along the length of the grave as the hole got deeper. My hands were bleeding now as I worked the controls. Ram the drop-lever all the way forward until the bucket lay on the ground. Pull back on the drop-lever and shove the one that extended the armature with a high hydraulic whine. Watch as the bright oiled metal slid out of the dirty orange casing, pushing the bucket into the dirt. Every now and then a spark would flash as the bucket slid over a piece of flint. Now raise the bucket . . . swivel it, a dark oblong shape against the stars (and try to ignore the steady throbbing pain in your neck the way you're trying to ignore the even deeper throb of pain in your back) . . . and dump it down in the ditch, covering the chunks of asphalt already there.

*Never mind, darling—you can bandage your hands when it's done. When he's done.*

“She was in pieces,” I croaked, and jockeyed the bucket back into place so I could take another two hundred pounds of dirt and gravel out of Dolan's grave.

How the time flies when you are having a good time.

• • •

Moments after I had noticed the first faint streaks of light in the east I got down to take another measurement of the floor's incline with the carpenter's level. I was actually getting near the end; I thought I might just make it. I

knelt, and as I did I felt something in my back let go. It went with a dull little snap.

I uttered a guttural cry and collapsed on my side on the narrow, slanted floor of the excavation, lips pulled back from my teeth, hands pressing into the small of my back.

Little by little the very worst of the pain passed and I was able to get to my feet.

*All right, I thought. That's it. It's over. It was a good try, but it's over.*

*Please, darling,* Elizabeth whispered back—impossible as it would have been to believe once upon a time, that whispering voice had begun to take on unpleasant undertones in my mind; there was a sense of monstrous implacability about it. *Please don't give up. Please go on.*

*Go on digging? I don't even know if I can walk!*

*But there's so little left to do!* the voice wailed—it was no longer just the voice that *spoke* for Elizabeth, if it had ever been; it *was* Elizabeth. *So little left, darling!*

I looked at my excavation in the growing light and nodded slowly. She was right. The bucket-loader was only five feet from the end; seven at most. But it was the *deepest* five or seven, of course; the five or seven with the most dirt in it.

*You can do it, darling—I know you can.* Softly cajoling.

But it was not really her voice that persuaded me to go on. What really turned the trick was an image of Dolan lying asleep in his penthouse while I stood here in this hole beside a stinking, rumbling bucket-loader, covered with dirt, my hands in flaps and ruins. Dolan sleeping in silk pajama bottoms with one of his blondes asleep beside him, wearing only the top.

Downstairs, in the glassed-in executive section of the parking garage, the Cadillac, already loaded with luggage, would be gassed and ready to go.

“All right, then,” I said. I climbed slowly back into the bucket-loader’s seat and revved the engine.

• • •

I kept on until nine o'clock and then I quit—there were other things to do, and I was running out of time. My angled hole was forty feet long. It would have to be enough.

I drove the bucket-loader back to its original spot and parked it. I would need it again, and that would mean siphoning more gas, but there was no time for that now. I wanted more Empirin, but there weren't many left in the bottle and I would need them all later today . . . and tomorrow. Oh, yes, tomorrow—Monday, the glorious Fourth.

Instead of Empirin I took a fifteen-minute rest. I could ill-afford the time, but I forced myself to take it just the same. I lay on my back in the van, my muscles jumping and twitching, imagining Dolan.

He would be packing a few last-minute items in a Travel-All now—some papers to look over, a toilet kit, maybe a paperback book or a deck of cards.

*Suppose he flies this time?* a malicious voice deep inside me whispered, and I couldn't help it—a moan escaped me. He had never flown to L.A. before—always it had been the Cadillac. I had an idea he didn't *like* to fly. Sometimes he did, though—he had flown all the way to London once—and the thought lingered, itching and throbbing like a scaly patch of skin.

• • •

It was nine-thirty when I took out the roll of canvas and the big industrial stapler and the wooden struts. The day was overcast and a little cooler—God sometimes grants a favor. Up until then I'd forgotten my bald head in consideration of larger agonies, but now, when I touched it with my fingers, I drew them away with a little hiss of pain. I looked at it in the outside passenger mirror and saw that it was a deep, angry red—almost a plum color.

Back in Vegas Dolan would be making last-minute phone calls. His driver would be bringing the Cadillac around front. There were only about seventy-five miles between me and it, and soon the Cadillac would start to close that distance at sixty miles an hour. I had no time to stand around bemoaning my sunburned pate.

*I love your sunburned pate, dear,* Elizabeth said beside me.

“Thank you, Beth,” I said, and began taking the struts over to the hole.

• • •

The work was now light compared to the digging I'd done earlier, and the almost unbearable agony in my back subsided to a steady dull throb.

*But what about later?* that insinuating voice asked. *What about that, hmmmm?*

Later would have to take care of itself, that was all. It was beginning to look as if the trap was going to be ready, and that was the important thing.

The struts spanned the hole with just enough extra length to allow me to seat them tightly in the sides of the asphalt which formed the top layer of my excavation. This was a job that would have been tougher at night, when the asphalt was hard, but now, at mid-morning, the stuff was sludgy-pliable, and it was like sticking pencils in wads of cooling taffy.

When I had all the struts in, the hole had taken on the look of my original chalk diagram, minus the line down the middle. I positioned the heavy roll of canvas next to the shallow end of the hole and removed the hanks of rope that had tied it shut.

Then I unrolled forty-two feet of Route 71.

Close up, the illusion was not perfect—as stage make-up and set-decoration is never perfect from the first three rows. But from even a few yards away, it was virtually undetectable. It was a dark-gray strip which matched the actual surface of Route 71 exactly. On the far left of the canvas strip (as you faced west) was a broken yellow passing line.

I settled the long strip of canvas over the wooden understructure, then went slowly along the length of it, stapling the canvas to the struts. My hands didn't want to do the work but I coaxed them.

With the canvas secured, I returned to the van, slid behind the wheel (sitting down caused another brief but agonizing muscle spasm), and drove back to the top of the rise. I sat there for a full minute, looking down at my lumpy, wounded hands as they lay in my lap. Then I got out and looked back down Route 71, almost casually. I didn't want to focus on any one thing, you see; I wanted the whole picture—a gestalt, if you will. I wanted, as much as possible, to see the scene as Dolan and his men were going to see it when they

came over the rise. I wanted to get an idea of how right—or how wrong—it was going to feel to them.

What I saw looked better than I could have hoped.

The road machinery at the far end of the straight stretch justified the piles of dirt that had come from my excavation. The asphalt chunks in the ditch were mostly buried. Some still showed—the wind was picking up, and it had blown the dirt around—but that looked like the remnants of an old paving job. The compressor I'd brought in the back of the van looked like Highway Department equipment.

And from here the illusion of the canvas strip was perfect—Route 71 appeared to be utterly untouched down there.

Traffic had been heavy Friday and fairly heavy on Saturday—the drone of motors heading into the detour loop had been almost constant. This morning, however, there was hardly any traffic at all; most people had gotten to wherever they intended to spend the Fourth, or were taking the Interstate forty miles south to get there. That was fine with me.

I parked the van just out of sight over the brow of the rise and lay on my belly until ten-forty-five. Then, after a big milk-truck had gone lumbering slowly up the detour, I backed the van down, opened the rear doors, and threw all the road cones inside.

The flashing arrow was a tougher proposition—at first I couldn't see how I was going to unhook it from the locked battery box without electrocuting myself. Then I saw the plug. It had been mostly hidden by a hard rubber O-ring on the side of the sign-case . . . a little insurance policy against vandals and practical jokers who might find pulling the plug on such a highway sign an amusing prank, I supposed.

I found a hammer and chisel in my toolbox, and four hard blows were sufficient to split the O-ring. I yanked it off with a pair of pliers and pulled the cable free. The arrow stopped flashing and went dark. I pushed the battery box into the ditch and buried it. It was strange to stand there and hear it humming down there in the sand. But it made me think of Dolan, and that made me laugh.

I didn't think Dolan would hum.

He might *scream*, but I didn't think he would *hum*.

Four bolts held the arrow in a low steel cradle. I loosened them as fast as I could, ears cocked for another motor. It was time for one—but not time for Dolan yet, surely.

That got the interior pessimist going again.

*What if he flew?*

*He doesn't like to fly.*

*What if he's driving but going another way? Going by the Interstate, for instance? Today everyone else is . . .*

*He always goes by 71.*

*Yes, but what if—*

“Shut up,” I hissed. “Shut up, damn you, just *shut the fuck up!*”

*Easy, darling—easy! Everything will be all right.*

I got the arrow into the back of the van. It crashed against the sidewall and some of the bulbs broke. More of them broke when I tossed the cradle in after it.

With that done, I drove back up the rise, pausing at the top to look behind me. I had taken away the arrow and the cones; all that remained now was that big orange warning: ROAD CLOSED • USE DETOUR

There was a car coming. It occurred to me that if Dolan was early, it had all been for nothing—the goon driving would simply turn down the detour, leaving me to go mad out here in the desert.

It was a Chevrolet.

My heart slowed down and I let out a long, shuddering breath. But there was no more time for nerves.

I drove back to where I had parked to look at my camouflage job and parked there again. I reached under the jumble of stuff in the back of the van and got the jack. Grimly ignoring my screaming back, I jacked up the rear end of the van, loosened the lug-nuts on the back tire they would see when

*(if)*

they came, and tossed it into the back of the van. More glass broke, and I would just have to hope there had been no damage done to the tire. I didn't have a spare.

I went back to the front of the van, got my old binoculars, and then headed back toward the detour. I passed it and got to the top of the next rise as fast as

I could—a shambling trot was really all I could manage by this time.

Once at the top, I trained my binoculars east.

I had a three-mile field of vision, and could see snatches of the road for two miles east of that. Six vehicles were currently on the way, strung out like random beads on a long string. The first was a foreign car, Datsun or Subaru, I thought, less than a mile away. Beyond that was a pick-up, and beyond the pick-up was what looked like a Mustang. The others were just desert-light flashing on chrome and glass.

When the first car neared—it was a Subaru—I stood up and stuck my thumb out. I didn't expect a ride looking the way I did, and I wasn't disappointed. The expensively coiffed woman behind the wheel took one horrified glance and her face snapped shut like a fist. Then she was gone, down the hill and onto the detour.

“Get a bath, buddy!” the driver of the pick-up yelled at me half a minute later.

The Mustang actually turned out to be an Escort. It was followed by a Plymouth, the Plymouth by a Winnebago that sounded as if it were full of kids having a pillow-fight.

No sign of Dolan.

I looked at my watch. 11:25 A.M. If he was going to show up, it ought to be very soon. This was prime time.

The hands on my watch moved slowly around to 11:40 and there was still no sign of him. Only a late-model Ford and a hearse as black as a raincloud.

*He's not coming. He went by the Interstate. Or he flew.*

*No. He'll come.*

*He won't, though. You were afraid he'd smell you, and he did. That's why he changed his pattern.*

There was another twinkle of light on chrome in the distance. This car was a big one. Big enough to be a Cadillac.

I lay on my belly, elbows propped in the grit of the shoulder, binoculars to my eyes. The car disappeared behind a rise . . . reemerged. . . slipped around a curve. . . and then came out again.

It was a Cadillac, all right, but it wasn't gray—it was a deep mint green.

What followed was the most agonizing thirty seconds of my life; thirty seconds that seemed to last for thirty years. Part of me decided on the spot, completely and irrevocably, that Dolan had traded in his old Cadillac for a new one. Certainly he had done this before, and although he had never traded for a green one before, there was certainly no law against it.

The other half argued vehemently that Cadillacs were almost a dime a dozen on the highways and byways between Vegas and L.A., and the odds against the green Caddy's being Dolan's Cadillac were a hundred to one.

Sweat ran into my eyes, blurring them, and I put the binoculars down. They weren't going to help me solve this one, anyhow. By the time I was able to see the passengers, it would be too late.

*It's almost too late now! Go down there and dump the detour sign! You're going to miss him!*

*Let me tell you what you're going to catch in your trap if you hide that sign now: two rich old people going to L.A. to see their children and take their grandkids to Disneyland.*

*Do it! It's him! It's the only chance you're going to have!*

*That's right. The only chance. So don't blow it by catching the wrong people.*

*It's Dolan!*

*It's not!*

"Stop it," I moaned, holding my head. "Stop it, stop it."

I could hear the motor now.

*Dolan.*

*The old people.*

*The lady.*

*The tiger.*

*Dolan.*

*The old—*

"Elizabeth, help me!" I groaned.

*Darling, that man has never owned a green Cadillac in his life. He never would. Of course it's not him.*

The pain in my head cleared away. I was able to get to my feet and get my thumb out.

It wasn't the old people, and it wasn't Dolan, either. It was what looked like twelve Vegas chorines crowded in with one old boy who was wearing the biggest cowboy hat and the darkest Foster Grants I'd ever seen. One of the chorines mooned me as the green Cadillac went fishtailing onto the detour.

Slowly, feeling entirely washed out, I raised the binoculars again.

And saw him coming.

There was no mistaking *that* Cadillac as it came around the curve at the far end of my uninterrupted view of the road—it was as gray as the sky overhead, but it stood out with startling clarity against the dull brown rises of land to the east.

It was him—Dolan. My long moments of doubt and indecision seemed both remote and foolish in an instant. It was Dolan, and I didn't have to see that gray Cadillac to know it.

I didn't know if he could smell me, but *I* could smell *him*.

• • •

Knowing he was on the way made it easier to pick up my aching legs and run.

I got back to the big DETOUR sign and shoved it facedown into the ditch. I shook a sand-colored piece of canvas over it, then pawed loose sand over its support posts. The overall effect wasn't as good as the fake strip of road, but I thought it would serve.

Now I ran up the second rise to where I had left the van, which was just another part of the picture now—a vehicle temporarily abandoned by the owner, who had gone off somewhere to either get a new tire or have an old one fixed.

I got into the cab and stretched out across the seat, my heart thumping.

Again, time seemed to stretch out. I lay there listening for the engine and the sound didn't come and didn't come and didn't come.

*They turned off. He caught wind of you at the last moment anyway. . . or something looked hinky, either to him or to one of his men . . . and they turned off.*

I lay on the seat, my back throbbing in long, slow waves, my eyes squinched tightly shut as if that would somehow help me hear better.

Was that an engine?

No—just the wind, now blowing hard enough to drive an occasional sheet of sand against the side of the van.

*Not coming. Turned off or turned back.*

Just the wind.

*Turned off or turned b—*

No, it was *not* just the wind. It was a motor, the sound of it was swelling, and a few seconds later a vehicle—one single vehicle—rushed past me.

I sat up and grabbed the wheel—I had to grab *something*—and stared out through the windshield, my eyes bulging, my tongue caught between my teeth.

The gray Cadillac floated down the hill toward the flat stretch, doing fifty or maybe a little more. The brake lights never went on. Not even at the end. They never saw it; never had so much as the slightest idea.

What happened was this: all at once the Cadillac seemed to be driving *through* the road instead of *on* it. This illusion was so persuasive that I felt a moment of confused vertigo even though I had created the illusion myself. Dolan's Cadillac was hubcap-deep in Route 71, and then it was up to the door-panels. A bizarre thought occurred to me: if the GM company made luxury submarines, this is what they would look like going down.

I could hear thin snapping sounds as the struts supporting the canvas broke under the car. I could hear the sound of canvas rippling and ripping.

All of it happened in only three seconds, but they are three seconds I will remember my whole life.

I had an impression of the Cadillac now running with only its roof and the top two or three inches of the polarized windows visible, and then there was a big toneless thud and the sound of breaking glass and crimping metal. A large puff of dust rose in the air and the wind pulled it apart.

I wanted to go down there—wanted to go down right away—but first I had to put the detour to rights. I didn't want us to be interrupted.

I got out of the van, went around to the back, and pulled the tire back out. I put it on the wheel and tightened the six lug-nuts as fast as I could, using only my fingers. I could do a more thorough job later; in the meantime I only needed to back the van down to the place where the detour diverged from Highway 71.

I jacked the bumper down and hurried back to the cab of the van at a limping run. I paused there for a moment, listening, head cocked.

I could hear the wind.

And from the long, rectangular hole in the road, the sound of someone shouting . . . or maybe screaming.

Grinning, I got back in the van.

• • •

I backed rapidly down the road, the van swinging drunkenly back and forth. I got out, opened the back doors, and put out the traffic cones again. I kept my ear cocked for approaching traffic, but the wind had gotten too strong to make that very worthwhile. By the time I heard an approaching vehicle, it would be practically on top of me.

I started down into the ditch, tripped, landed on my prat, and slid to the bottom. I pushed away the sand-colored piece of canvas and dragged the big detour sign up to the top. I set it up again, then went back to the van and slammed the rear doors closed. I had no intention of trying to set the arrow sign up again.

I drove back over the next rise, stopped in my old place just out of sight of the detour, got out, and tightened the lug-nuts on the van's back wheel, using the tire-iron this time. The shouting had stopped, but there was no longer any question about the screaming; it was much louder.

I took my time tightening the nuts. I wasn't worried that they were going to get out and either attack me or run away into the desert, because they couldn't get out. The trap had worked perfectly. The Cadillac was now sitting squarely on its wheels at the far end of the excavation, with less than four inches of clearance on either side. The three men inside couldn't open their doors wide enough to do more than stick out a foot, if that. They couldn't open their windows because they were power-drive and the battery would be so much squashed plastic and metal and acid somewhere in the wreck of the engine.

The driver and the man in the shotgun seat might also be squashed in the wreckage, but this did not concern me; I knew that *someone* was still alive in

there, just as I knew that Dolan always rode in back and wore his seatbelt as good citizens are supposed to do.

The lug-nuts tightened to my satisfaction, I drove the van down to the wide, shallow end of the trap and got out.

Most of the struts were completely gone, but I could see the splintered butt ends of a few, still sticking out of the tar. The canvas “road” lay at the bottom of the cut, crumpled and ripped and twisted. It looked like a shed snakeskin.

I walked up to the deep end and here was Dolan’s Cadillac.

The front end was utterly trashed. The hood had accordioned upward in a jagged fan shape. The engine compartment was a jumble of metal and rubber and hoses, all of it covered with sand and dirt that had avalanched down in the wake of the impact. There was a hissing sound and I could hear fluids running and dripping down there someplace. The chilly alcohol aroma of antifreeze was pungent in the air.

I had been worried about the windshield. There was always a chance that it could have broken inward, allowing Dolan space enough to wriggle up and out. But I hadn’t been too worried; I told you that Dolan’s cars were built to the sorts of specifications required by tinpot dictators and despotic military leaders. The glass was not supposed to break, and it had not.

The Caddy’s rear window was even tougher because its area was smaller. Dolan couldn’t break it—not in the time *I* was going to give him, certainly—and he would not dare try to shoot it out. Shooting at bullet-proof glass from close up is another form of Russian Roulette. The slug would leave only a small white fleck on the glass and then ricochet back into the car.

I’m sure he could have found an out, given world enough and time, but I was here now, and I would give him neither.

I kicked a shower of dirt across the Cadillac’s roof.

The response was immediate.

“We need some help, please.

We’re stuck in here.”

Dolan’s voice. He sounded unhurt and eerily calm. But I sensed the fear underneath, held rigidly in check, and I came as close to feeling sorry for him right then as it was possible for me to come. I could imagine him sitting in the

back seat of his telescoped Cadillac, one of his men injured and moaning, probably pinned by the engine block, the other either dead or unconscious.

I imagined it and felt a jittery moment of what I can only term sympathetic claustrophobia. Push the window-buttons—nothing. Try the doors, even though you can see they're going to clunk to a full stop long before you could squeeze through.

Then I stopped trying to imagine, because he was the one who had bought this, wasn't he? Yes. He had bought his own ticket and paid a full fare.

"Who's there?"

"Me," I said, "but I'm not the help you're looking for, Dolan."

I kicked another fan of grit and pebbles across the gray Cadillac's roof. The screamer started doing his thing again as the second bunch of pebbles rattled across the roof.

*"My legs! Jim, my legs!"*

Dolan's voice was suddenly wary. The man outside, the man on top, knew his name. Which meant this was an extremely dangerous situation.

*"Jimmy, I can see the bones in my legs!"*

"Shut up," Dolan said coldly. It was eerie to hear their voices drifting up like that. I suppose I could have climbed down onto the Cadillac's back deck and looked in the rear window, but I would not have seen much, even with my face pressed right against it. The glass was polarized, as I may already have told you.

I didn't want to see him, anyway. I knew what he looked like. What would I want to see him for? To find out if he was wearing his Rolex and his designer jeans?

"Who are you, buddy?" he asked.

"I'm nobody," I said. "Just a nobody who had a good reason to put you where you are right now."

And with an eerie, frightening suddenness, Dolan said: "Is your name Robinson?"

I felt as if someone had punched me in the stomach. He had made the connection that fast, winnowing through all the half-remembered names and faces and coming up with exactly the right one. Had I thought him an animal, with the instincts of an animal? I hadn't known the half of it, and it was really

just as well I had not, or I never would have had the guts to do what I had done.

I said, “My name doesn’t matter. But you know what happens now, don’t you?”

The screamer began again—great bubbling, liquid bellows.

*“Get me outta here, Jimmy! Get me outta here! For the luvva Jaysus! My legs’re broke!”*

“Shut up,” Dolan said. And then, to me: “I can’t hear you, man, the way he’s screaming.”

I got down on my hands and knees and leaned over. “I said you know what h—”

I suddenly had an image of the wolf dressed up as Gramma telling Red Riding Hood, *All the better to hear you with, my dear. . . come a little closer.* I recoiled, and just in time. The revolver went off four times. The shots were loud where I was; they must have been deafening in the car. Four black eyes opened in the roof of Dolan’s Cadillac, and I felt something split the air an inch from my forehead.

“Did I get you, cocksucker?” Dolan asked.

“No,” I said.

The screamer had become the weeper. He was in the front seat. I saw his hands, as pale as the hands of a drowned man, slapping weakly at the windshield, and the slumped body next to him. Jimmy had to get him out, he was bleeding, the pain was bad, the pain was *terrible*, the pain was more than he could take, for the luvva Jaysus he was sorry, heartily sorry for his sins, but this was more than—

There was another pair of loud reports. The man in the front seat stopped screaming. The hands dropped away from the windshield.

“There,” Dolan said in a voice that was almost reflective. “He ain’t hurting anymore and we can hear what we say to each other.”

I said nothing. I felt suddenly dazed and unreal. He had killed a man just now. *Killed* him. The feeling that I had underestimated him in spite of all my precautions and was lucky to be alive recurred.

“I want to make you a proposal,” Dolan said.

I continued to hold my peace—

“My friend?”

—and to hold it some more.

“Hey! You!” His voice trembled minutely. “If you’re still up there, talk to me! What can that hurt?”

“I’m here,” I said. “I was just thinking you fired six times. I was thinking you may wish you’d saved one for yourself before long. But maybe there’s eight in the clip, or you have reloads.”

Now it was his turn to fall silent. Then:

“What are you planning?”

“I think you’ve already guessed,” I said. “I have spent the last thirty-six hours digging the world’s longest grave, and now I’m going to bury you in your fucking Cadillac.”

The fear in his voice was still reined in. I wanted that rein to snap.

“You want to hear my proposition first?”

“I’ll listen. In a few seconds. First I have to get something.”

I walked back to the van and got my shovel.

• • •

When I got back he was saying “Robinson? Robinson? Robinson?” like a man speaking into a dead phone.

“I’m here,” I said. “You talk. I’ll listen. And when you’re finished I may make a counter-proposal.”

When he spoke, he sounded more cheerful. If I was talking counter-proposals, I was talking deal. And if I was talking deal, he was already halfway to being out.

“I’m offering you a million dollars to let me out of here. But, just as important—”

I tossed a shovelful of gritty till down on the rear deck of the Cadillac. Pebbles bounced and rattled off the small rear window. Dirt sifted into the line of the trunk-lid.

“What are you doing?” His voice was sharp with alarm.

“Idle hands do the devil’s work,” I said. “I thought I’d keep mine busy while I listened.”

I dug into the dirt again and threw in another shovelful.

Now Dolan spoke faster, his voice more urgent.

“A million dollars and my personal guarantee that no one will ever touch you . . . not me, not my men, not anyone else’s men.”

My hands didn’t hurt anymore. It was amazing. I shoveled steadily, and in no more than five minutes, the Cadillac’s rear deck was drifted deep in dirt. Putting it in, even by hand, was certainly easier than taking it out.

I paused, leaning on the shovel for a moment.

“Keep talking.”

“Look, this is crazy,” he said, and now I could hear bright splinters of panic in his voice. “I mean it’s just *crazy*.”

“You got *that* right,” I said, and shoveled in more dirt.

• • •

He held on longer than I thought any man could, talking, reasoning, cajoling—yet becoming more and more disjointed as the sand and dirt piled up over the rear window, repeating himself, backtracking, beginning to stutter. At one point the passenger door opened as far as it could and banged into the sidewall of the excavation. I saw a hand with black hair on the knuckles and a big ruby ring on the second finger. I sent down a quick four shovelfuls of loose earth into the opening. He screamed curses and yanked the door shut again.

He broke not long after. It was the sound of the dirt coming down that finally got to him, I think. Sure it was. The sound would have been very loud inside the Cadillac. The dirt and stones rattling onto the roof and falling past the window. He must have finally realized he was sitting in an upholstered eight-cylinder fuel-injected coffin.

“*Get me out!*” he shrieked. “*Please! I can’t stand it! Get me out!*”

“You ready for that counter-proposal?” I asked.

“*Yes! Yes! Christ! Yes! Yes! Yes!*”

“Scream. That’s the counter-proposal. That’s what I want. Scream for me. If you scream loud enough, I’ll let you out.”

He screamed piercingly.

“That was *good!*” I said, and I meant it. “But it was nowhere near good enough.”

I began to dig again, throwing fan after fan of dirt over the roof of the Cadillac. Disintegrating clods ran down the windshield and filled the windshield-wiper slot.

He screamed again, even louder, and I wondered if it was possible for a man to scream loud enough to rupture his own larynx.

“Not bad!” I said, redoubling my efforts. I was smiling in spite of my throbbing back. “You might get there, Dolan—you really might.”

“Five million.” It was the last coherent thing he said.

“I think not,” I replied, leaning on the shovel and wiping sweat off my forehead with the heel of one grimy hand. The dirt covered the roof of the car almost from side to side now. It looked like a starburst . . . or a large brown hand clasping Dolan’s Cadillac. “But if you can make a sound come out of your mouth which is as loud, let us say, as eight sticks of dynamite taped to the ignition switch of a 1968 Chevrolet, then I will get you out, and you may count on it.”

So he screamed, and I shoveled dirt down on the Cadillac. For some time he did indeed scream very loudly, although I judged he never screamed louder than two sticks of dynamite taped to the ignition switch of a 1968 Chevrolet. Three, at most. And by the time the last of the Cadillac’s brightwork was covered and I rested to look down at the dirt-shrouded hump in the hole, he was producing no more than a series of hoarse and broken grunts.

I looked at my watch. It was just past one o’clock. My hands were bleeding again, and the handle of the shovel was slippery. A sheaf of gritty sand flew into my face and I recoiled from it. A high wind in the desert makes a peculiarly unpleasant sound—a long, steady drone that simply goes on and on. It is like the voice of an idiot ghost.

I leaned over the hole. “Dolan?”

No answer.

“Scream, Dolan.”

No answer at first—then a series of harsh barks.

Satisfactory!

• • •

I went back to the van, started it up, and drove the mile and a half back down to the road construction. On the way I tuned to WKXR, Las Vegas, the only station the van's radio would pull in. Barry Manilow told me he wrote the songs that make the whole world sing, a statement I greeted with some skepticism, and then the weather report came on. High winds were forecast; a travellers' advisory had been posted on the main roads between Vegas and the California line. There were apt to be visibility problems because of sheeting sand, the disc jockey said, but the thing to really watch out for was wind-shear. I knew what he was talking about, because I could feel it whipsawing the van.

Here was my Case-Jordan bucket-loader; already I thought of it as mine. I got in, humming the Barry Manilow tune, and touched the blue and yellow wires together again. The loader started up smoothly. This time I'd remembered to take it out of gear. *Not bad, white boy*, I could hear Tink saying in my head. *You learnin*.

Yes I was. Learning all the time.

I sat for a minute, watching membranes of sand skirl across the desert, listening to the bucket-loader's engine rumble and wondering what Dolan was up to. This was, after all, his Big Chance. Try to break the rear window, or crawl over into the front seat and try to break the windshield. I had put a couple of feet of sand and dirt over each, but it was still possible. It depended on how crazy he was by now, and that wasn't a thing I could know, so it really didn't bear thinking about. Other things did.

I geared the bucket-loader and drove back up the highway to the trench. When I got there I trotted anxiously over and looked down, half-expecting to see a man-sized gopher hole at the front or rear of the Cadillac-mound where Dolan had broken some glass and crawled out.

My spadework had not been disturbed.

"Dolan," I said, cheerfully enough, I thought.

There was no answer.

"Dolan!"

No answer.

*He's killed himself*, I thought, and felt a sick-bitter disappointment. *Killed himself somehow or died of fright.*

"Dolan?"

Laughter drifted up from the mound; bright, irrepressible, totally genuine laughter. I felt my flesh lift itself into large hard lumps. It was the laughter of a man whose mind has broken.

He laughed and he laughed in his hoarse voice. Then he screamed; then he laughed again. Finally he did both together.

For awhile I laughed with him, or screamed, or whatever, and the wind laughed and screamed at both of us.

Then I went back to the Case-Jordan, lowered the blade, and began to cover him up for real.

• • •

In four minutes even the shape of the Cadillac was gone. There was just a hole filled with dirt.

I thought I could hear something, but with the sound of the wind and the steady grumble of the loader's engine, it was hard to tell. I got down on my knees; then I lay down full-length with my head hanging into what remained of the hole.

Far down, underneath all that dirt, Dolan was still laughing. They were sounds like something you might read in a comic book: *Hee-hee-hee, aaah-hah-hah-hah*. There might have been some words, too. It was hard to tell. I smiled and nodded, though.

"Scream," I whispered. "Scream, if you want." But that faint sound of laughter just went on, seeping up from the dirt like a poisonous vapor.

A sudden dark terror seized me—Dolan was behind me! Yes, somehow Dolan had gotten behind me! And before I could turn around he would tumble *me* into the hole and—

I jumped up and whirled around, my mangled hands making rough approximations of fists.

Wind-driven sand smacked me.

There was nothing else.

I wiped my face with my dirty bandanna and got back into the cab of the bucket-loader and went back to work.

The cut was filled in again long before dark. There was even dirt left over, in spite of what the wind had whipped away, because of the area displaced by the Cadillac. It went quickly. . . so quickly.

The tone of my thoughts was weary, confused, and half-delirious as I piloted the loader back down the road, driving it directly over the spot where Dolan was buried.

I parked it in its original place, removed my shirt, and rubbed all of the metal in the cab with it in an effort to remove fingerprints. I don't know exactly why I did that, even to this day, since I must have left them in a hundred other places around the site. Then, in the deep brownish-gray gloom of that stormy dusk, I went back to the van.

I opened one of the rear doors, observed Dolan crouched inside, and staggered back, screaming, one hand thrown up to shield my face. It seemed to me that my heart must explode in my chest.

Nothing—no one—came out of the van. The door swung and banged in the wind like the last shutter on a haunted house. At last I crept back, heart pounding, and peered inside. There was nothing but the jumble of stuff I had left in there—the road-arrow with the broken bulbs, the jack, my toolbox.

“You have got to get hold of yourself,” I said softly. “Get hold of yourself.”

I waited for Elizabeth to say, *You'll be all right, darling* . . . something like that . . . but there was only the wind.

I got back into the van, started it, and drove halfway back to the excavation. That was as far as I could make myself go. Although I knew it was utterly foolish, I became more and more convinced that Dolan was lurking in the van. My eyes kept going to the rear-view mirror, trying to pick his shadow out of the others.

The wind was stronger than ever, rocking the van on its springs. The dust it pulled up from the desert and drove before it looked like smoke in the headlights.

At last I pulled over to the side of the road, got out, and locked all the doors. I knew I was crazy to even try sleeping outside in this, but I couldn't sleep in there. I just couldn't. So I crawled under the van with my sleeping bag.

I was asleep five seconds after I zipped myself into it.

• • •

When I woke up from a nightmare I could not remember—except there had been hands in it, clutching at my throat—I found that *I* had been buried alive. There was sand up my nose, sand in my ears. It was down my throat, choking me.

I screamed and struggled upward, at first convinced that the confining sleeping bag was earth. Then I banged my head on the van's undercarriage and saw flakes of rust silting down.

I rolled out from under into a dawn the color of smutty pewter. My sleeping bag blew away like a tumbleweed the moment my weight was off it. I gave a surprised yell and chased twenty feet after it before realizing it would be the world's worst mistake. Visibility was down to no more than twenty yards, and maybe less. The road was totally gone in places. I looked back at the van and it looked washed-out, barely there, a sepia photograph of a ghost-town relic.

I staggered back to it, found my keys, and got inside. I was still spitting sand and coughing dryly. I got the motor going and drove slowly back the way I had come. There was no need to wait for a weather report; the weather was all the jock could talk about this morning. The worst desert windstorm in Nevada history. All roads closed. Stay home unless you absolutely have to go out, and then stay home anyway.

The glorious Fourth.

*Stay in. You're crazy if you go out there. You'll go sandblind.*

That I would chance. This was a golden opportunity to cover it up forever—never in my wildest imaginings had I suspected I might get such a chance, but it was here, and I was taking it.

I had brought three or four extra blankets. I tore a long, wide strip from one of them and tied it around my head. Looking like some sort of crazed Bedouin, I stepped out.

• • •

I spent all morning carrying chunks of asphalt up from the ditch and placing them back into the trench, trying to be as neat as a mason laying a wall . . . or bricking up a niche. The actual fetching and carrying was not terribly difficult, although I had to unearth most of the asphalt blocks like an archaeologist hunting for artifacts, and every twenty minutes or so I had to repair to the van to get out of the blowing sand and rest my stinging eyes.

I worked slowly west from what had been the shallow end of the excavation, and by quarter past noon—I had started at six—I had reached the final seventeen feet or so. By then the wind had begun to die and I could see occasional ragged patches of blue above me.

I fetched and placed, fetched and placed. Now I was over the spot where I calculated Dolan must be. Was he dead yet? How many cubic feet of air could a Cadillac hold? How soon would that space become unable to support human life, assuming that neither of Dolan's two companions was still breathing?

I knelt by the bare earth. The wind had eroded the impressions of the Case-Jordan's treads but not quite erased them; somewhere beneath those faint indentations was a man wearing a Rolex.

"Dolan," I said chummily, "I've changed my mind and decided to let you out."

Nothing. No sound at all. Dead for sure this time.

I went back and got another square of asphalt. I placed it, and as I started to rise, I heard faint, cackling laughter seeping up through the earth.

I sank back into a crouch with my head forward—if I'd still had hair, it would have been hanging in my face—and remained in that position for some time, listening as he laughed. The sound was faint and without timbre.

When it stopped, I went back and got another asphalt square. There was a piece of the broken yellow line on this one. It looked like a hyphen. I knelt with it.

"For the love of God!" he shrieked. "For the love of God, Robinson!"

"Yes," I said, smiling. "For the love of God."

I put the chunk of asphalt in neatly next to its neighbor, and although I listened, I heard him no more.

• • •

I got back to my place in Vegas that night at eleven o'clock. I slept for sixteen hours, got up, walked toward the kitchen to make coffee, and then collapsed, writhing, on the hall floor as a monstrous back spasm racked me. I scrabbled at the small of my back with one hand while I chewed on the other to stifle the screams.

After awhile I crawled into the bathroom—I tried standing once, but this resulted in another thunderbolt—and used the washstand to pull myself up enough so I could get the second bottle of Empirin in the medicine cabinet.

I chewed three and drew a bath. I lay on the floor while I waited for the tub to fill. When it was, I wriggled out of my pajamas and managed to get into the tub. I lay there for five hours, dozing most of the time. When I got out, I could walk.

A little.

I went to a chiropractor. He told me I had three slipped discs and had suffered a serious lower spinal dislocation. He wanted to know if I had decided to sub for the circus strongman.

I told him I did it digging in my garden.

He told me I was going to Kansas City.

I went.

They operated.

When the anesthesiologist put the rubber cup over my face, I heard Dolan laughing from the hissing blackness inside and knew I was going to die.

• • •

The recovery room was a watery tiled green.

“Am I alive?” I croaked.

A nurse laughed. “Oh, yes.” His hand touched my brow—my brow that went all the way around my head. “What a sunburn you have! My God! Did that hurt, or are you still too doped up?”

“Still too doped up,” I said. “Did I talk while I was under?”

“Yes,” he said.

I was cold all over. Cold to the bones of me.

“What did I say?”

“You said, ‘It’s dark in here. Let me out!’” And he laughed again.

“Oh,” I said.

• • •

They never found him—Dolan.

It was the storm. That flukey storm. I’m pretty sure I know what happened, although I think you’ll understand when I tell you I never checked too closely.

RPAV—remember that? They were repaving. The storm almost buried the section of 71 which the detour had closed. When they went back to work, they didn’t bother to remove the new dunes all at once but only as they went along—why do otherwise? There was no traffic to worry about. So they plowed sand and routed up old paving at the same time. And if the ’dozer operator happened to notice that the sand-crusting asphalt in one section—a section about forty feet long—was breaking in front of his blade in neat, almost geometric pieces, he never said anything. Maybe he was stoned. Or maybe he was just dreaming of stepping out with his baby that evening.

Then came the dumpsters with their fresh loads of gravel, followed by the spreaders and rollers. After them the big tankers would arrive, the ones with the wide sprayer attachments on the backs and their smell of hot tar, so like melting shoe-leather. And when the fresh asphalt had dried, along would come the lining machine, the driver under his big canvas parasol looking back frequently to make sure the broken yellow line was perfectly straight, unaware that he was passing over a fog-gray Cadillac with three people inside, unaware that down in the darkness there was a ruby ring and a gold Rolex that might still be marking off the hours.

One of those heavy vehicles would almost surely have collapsed an ordinary Cadillac; there would have been a lurch, a crunch, and then a bunch of men digging to see what—or who—they had found. But it really *was* more tank than car, and Dolan’s very carefulness has so far kept anyone from finding him.

Sooner or later the Cadillac will collapse of course, probably under the weight of a passing semi, and the next vehicle along will see a big broken dent in the westbound lane, and the Highway Department will be notified, and there will be another RPAV. But if there aren’t Highway Department workers

right there to see what happens, to observe that the heavy weight of a passing truck has caused some hollow object under the road to collapse, I think they will assume the “marsh-hole” (that is what they call them) has been caused by either frost, or a collapsed salt-dome, or possibly a desert temblor. They will repair it and life will go on.

• • •

He was reported missing—Dolan.

A few tears were shed.

A columnist in the *Las Vegas Sun* suggested that he might be playing dominos or shooting pool somewhere with Jimmy Hoffa.

Perhaps that is not so far from the truth.

• • •

I'm fine.

My back is pretty much okay again. I'm under strict orders not to lift anything which weighs over thirty pounds without help, but I've got a good bunch of third-graders this year, and all the help I could want.

I've driven back and forth over that stretch of road several times in my new Acura automobile. Once I even stopped, got out, and (after checking in both directions to make sure the road was deserted) took a piss on what I was pretty sure was the spot. But I couldn't produce much of a flow, even though my kidneys felt full, and when I drove on I kept checking the rear-view mirror: I had this funny idea, you see, that he was going to rise up from the back seat, his skin charred to a cinnamon color and stretched over his skull like the skin of a mummy, his hair full of sand, his eyes and his Rolex watch glittering.

That was the *last* time I was on 71, actually. Now I take the Interstate when I need to head west.

And Elizabeth? Like Dolan, she has fallen silent. I find that is a relief.

## The End of the Whole Mess

I want to tell you about the end of war, the degeneration of mankind, and the death of the Messiah—an epic story, deserving thousands of pages and a whole shelf of volumes, but you (if there are any “you” later on to read this) will have to settle for the freeze-dried version. The direct injection works very fast. I figure I’ve got somewhere between forty-five minutes and two hours, depending on my blood-type. I think it’s A, which should give me a little more time, but I’ll be goddamned if I can remember for sure. If it turns out to be O, you could be in for a lot of blank pages, my hypothetical friend.

In any event, I think maybe I’d better assume the worst and go as fast as I can.

I’m using the electric typewriter—Bobby’s word-processor is faster, but the genny’s cycle is too irregular to be trusted, even with the line suppressor. I’ve only got one shot at this; I can’t risk getting most of the way home and then seeing the whole thing go to data heaven because of an oHm drop, or a surge too great for the suppressor to cope with.

My name is Howard Fornoy. I was a freelance writer. My brother, Robert Fornoy, was the Messiah. I killed him by shooting him up with his own discovery four hours ago. *He* called it The Calmative. A Very Serious Mistake might have been a better name, but what’s done is done and can’t be undone, as the Irish have been saying for centuries . . . which *proves* what assholes they are.

Shit, I can’t afford these digressions.

After Bobby died I covered him with a quilt and sat at the cabin’s single living-room window for some three hours, looking out at the woods. Used to be you could see the orange glow of the hi-intensity arc-sodiums from North Conway, but no more. Now there’s just the White Mountains, looking like dark triangles of crepe paper cut out by a child, and the pointless stars.

I turned on the radio, dialed through four bands, found one crazy guy, and shut it off. I sat there thinking of ways to tell this story. My mind kept sliding away toward all those miles of dark pinewoods, all that nothing. Finally I realized I needed to get myself off the dime and shoot myself up. Shit. I never *could* work without a deadline.

And I've sure-to-God got one now.

• • •

Our parents had no reason to expect anything other than what they got: bright children. Dad was a history major who had become a full professor at Hofstra when he was thirty. Ten years later he was one of six vice-administrators of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and in line for the top spot. He was a helluva good guy, too—had every record Chuck Berry ever cut and played a pretty mean blues guitar himself. My dad filed by day and rocked by night.

Mom graduated magna cum laude from Drew. Got a Phi Beta Kappa key she sometimes wore on this funky fedora she had. She became a successful CPA in D.C., met my dad, married him, and took in her shingle when she became pregnant with yours truly. I came along in 1980. By '84 she was doing taxes for some of my dad's associates—she called this her “little hobby.” By the time Bobby was born in 1987, she was handling taxes, investment portfolios, and estate-planning for a dozen powerful men. I could name them, but who gives a wad? They're either dead or driveling idiots by now.

I think she probably made more out of “her little hobby” each year than my dad made at his job, but that never mattered—they were happy with what they were to themselves and to each other. I saw them squabble lots of times, but I never saw them fight. When I was growing up, the only difference I saw between my mom and my playmates' moms was that their moms used to read or iron or sew or talk on the phone while the soaps played on the tube, and my mom used to run a pocket calculator and write down numbers on big green sheets of paper while the soaps played on the tube.

I was no disappointment to a couple of people with Mensa Gold Cards in their wallets. I maintained A's and B's through my public-school career (the idea that either I or my brother might go to a private school was never even

discussed so far as I know). I also wrote well early, with no effort at all. I sold my first magazine piece when I was twenty—it was on how the Continental Army wintered at Valley Forge. I sold it to an airline magazine for four hundred fifty dollars. My dad, whom I loved deeply, asked me if he could buy that check from me. He gave me his own personal check and had the check from the airline magazine framed and hung it over his desk. A romantic genius, if you will. A romantic *blues-playing* genius, if you will. Take it from me, a kid could do a lot worse. Of course he and my mother both died raving and pissing in their pants late last year, like almost everyone else on this big round world of ours, but I never stopped loving either of them.

I was the sort of child they had every reason to expect—a good boy with a bright mind, a talented boy whose talent grew to early maturity in an atmosphere of love and confidence, a faithful boy who loved and respected his mom and dad.

Bobby was different. *Nobody*, not even Mensa types like our folks, *ever* expects a kid like Bobby. Not *ever*.

• • •

I potty-trained two full years earlier than Bob, and that was the only thing in which I ever beat him. But I never felt jealous of him; that would have been like a fairly good American Legion League pitcher feeling jealous of Nolan Ryan or Roger Clemens. After a certain point the comparisons that cause feelings of jealousy simply cease to exist. I've been there, and I can tell you: after a certain point you just stand back and shield your eyes from the flashburns.

Bobby read at two and began writing short essays (“Our Dog,” “A Trip to Boston with Mother”) at three. His printing was the straggling, struggling galvanic constructions of a six-year-old, and that was startling enough in itself, but there was more: if transcribed so that his still-developing motor control no longer became an evaluative factor, you would have thought you were reading the work of a bright, if extremely naive, fifth-grader. He progressed from simple sentences to compound sentences to complex ones with dizzying rapidity, grasping clauses, sub-clauses, and modifying clauses with an

intuitiveness that was eerie. Sometimes his syntax was garbled and his modifiers misplaced, but he had such flaws—which plague most writers all their lives—pretty well under control by the age of five.

He developed headaches. My parents were afraid he had some sort of physical problem—a brain-tumor, perhaps—and took him to a doctor who examined him carefully, listened to him even more carefully, and then told my parents there was nothing wrong with Bobby except stress: he was in a state of extreme frustration because his writing-hand would not work as well as his brain.

“You got a kid trying to pass a mental kidney stone,” the doctor said. “I could prescribe something for his headaches, but I think the drug he really needs is a typewriter.” So Mom and Dad gave Bobby an IBM. A year later they gave him a Commodore 64 with WordStar for Christmas and Bobby’s headaches stopped. Before going on to other matters, I only want to add that he believed for the next three years or so that it was Santa Claus who had left that word-cruncher under our tree. Now that I think of it, that was another place where I beat Bobby: I Santa-trained earlier, too.

• • •

There’s so much I could tell you about those early days, and I suppose I’ll have to tell you a little, but I’ll have to go fast and make it brief. The deadline. Ah, the deadline. I once read a very funny piece called “The Essential *Gone with the Wind*” that went something like this:

“‘A war?’ laughed Scarlett. ‘Oh, fiddle-de-dee!’

“Boom! Ashley went to war! Atlanta burned! Rhett walked in and then walked out!

“‘Fiddle-de-dee,’ said Scarlett through her tears, ‘I will think about it tomorrow, for tomorrow is another day.’”

I laughed heartily over that when I read it; now that I’m faced with doing something similar, it doesn’t seem quite so funny. But here goes:

“A child with an IQ immeasurable by any existing test?” smiled India Fornoy to her devoted husband, Richard. “Fiddle-de-dee! We’ll provide an atmosphere where

*his intellect—not to mention that of his not-exactly-stupid older brother—can grow. And we'll raise them as the normal all-American boys they by gosh are!"*

*Boom! The Fornoy boys grew up! Howard went to the University of Virginia, graduated cum laude, and settled down to a freelance writing career! Made a comfortable living! Stepped out with a lot of women and went to bed with quite a few of them! Managed to avoid social diseases both sexual and pharmacological! Bought a Mitsubishi stereo system! Wrote home at least once a week! Published two novels that did pretty well! "Fiddle-de-dee," said Howard, "this is the life for me!"*

And so it was, at least until the day Bobby showed up unexpectedly (in the best mad-scientist tradition) with his two glass boxes, a bees' nest in one and a wasps' nest in the other, Bobby wearing a Mumford Phys Ed tee-shirt inside-out, on the verge of destroying human intellect and just as happy as a clam at high tide.

• • •

Guys like my brother Bobby come along only once every two or three generations, I think—guys like Leonardo da Vinci, Newton, Einstein, maybe Edison. They all seem to have one thing in common: they are like huge compasses which swing aimlessly for a long time, searching for some true north and then homing on it with fearful force. Before that happens such guys are apt to get up to some weird shit, and Bobby was no exception.

When he was eight and I was fifteen, he came to me and said he had invented an airplane. By then I knew Bobby too well to just say "Bullshit" and kick him out of my room. I went out to the garage, where there was this weird plywood contraption sitting on his American Flyer red wagon. It looked a little like a fighter plane, but the wings were raked forward instead of back. He had mounted the saddle from his rocking horse on the middle of it with bolts. There was a lever on the side. There was no motor. He said it was a glider. He wanted me to push him down Carrigan's Hill, which was the steepest grade in D.C.'s Grant Park—there was a cement path down the middle of it for old folks. That, Bobby said, would be his runway.

"Bobby," I said, "you got this puppy's wings on backward."

“No,” he said. “This is the way they’re supposed to be. I saw something on *Wild Kingdom* about hawks. They dive down on their prey and then reverse their wings coming up. They’re double-jointed, see? You get better lift this way.”

“Then why isn’t the Air Force building them this way?” I asked, blissfully unaware that both the American and the Russian air forces had plans for such forward-wing fighter planes on their drawing boards.

Bobby just shrugged. He didn’t know and didn’t care.

We went over to Carrigan’s Hill and he climbed into the rocking-horse saddle and gripped the lever. “Push me *hard*,” he said. His eyes were dancing with that crazed light I knew so well—Christ, his eyes used to light up that way in his cradle sometimes. But I swear to God I never would have pushed him down the cement path as hard as I did if I thought the thing would actually work.

But I *didn’t* know, and I gave him one hell of a shove. He went freewheeling down the hill, whooping like a cowboy just off a traildrive and headed into town for a few cold beers. An old lady had to jump out of his way, and he just missed an old geezer leaning over a walker. Halfway down he pulled the handle and I watched, wide-eyed and bullshit with fear and amazement, as his splintery plywood plane separated from the wagon. At first it only hovered inches above it, and for a second it looked like it was going to settle back. Then there was a gust of wind and Bobby’s plane took off like someone had it on an invisible cable. The American Flyer wagon ran off the concrete path and into some bushes. All of a sudden Bobby was ten feet in the air, then twenty, then fifty. He went gliding over Grant Park on a steepening upward plane, whooping cheerily.

I went running after him, screaming for him to come down, visions of his body tumbling off that stupid rocking-horse saddle and impaling itself on a tree, or one of the park’s many statues, standing out with hideous clarity in my head. I did not just imagine my brother’s funeral; I tell you I *attended* it.

“*BOBBY!*” I shrieked. “*COME DOWN!*”

“*WHEEEEEEEEE!*” Bobby screamed back, his voice faint but clearly ecstatic. Startled chess-players, Frisbee-throwers, book-readers, lovers, and joggers stopped whatever they were doing to watch.

“BOBBY THERE’S NO SEATBELT ON THAT FUCKING THING!” I screamed. It was the first time I ever used that particular word, so far as I can remember.

“lyyyy’ll beeee all riyyyyht . . .” He was screaming at the top of his lungs, but I was appalled to realize I could barely hear him. I went running down Carrigan’s Hill, shrieking all the way. I don’t have the slightest memory of just what I was yelling, but the next day I could not speak above a whisper. I *do* remember passing a young fellow in a neat three-piece suit standing by the statue of Eleanor Roosevelt at the foot of the hill. He looked at me and said conversationally, “Tell you what, my friend, I’m having one *hell* of an acid flashback.”

I remember that odd misshapen shadow gliding across the green floor of the park, rising and rippling as it crossed park benches, litter baskets, and the upturned faces of the watching people. I remember chasing it. I remember how my mother’s face crumpled and how she started to cry when I told her that Bobby’s plane, which had no business flying in the first place, turned upside down in a sudden eddy of wind and Bobby finished his short but brilliant career splattered all over D Street.

The way things turned out, it might have been better for everyone if things had actually turned out that way, but they didn’t.

Instead, Bobby banked back toward Carrigan’s Hill, holding nonchalantly onto the tail of his own plane to keep from falling off the damned thing, and brought it down toward the little pond at the center of Grant Park. He went air-sliding five feet over it, then four . . . and then he was skiing his sneakers along the surface of the water, sending back twin white wakes, scaring the usually complacent (and overfed) ducks up in honking indignant flurries before him, laughing his cheerful laugh. He came down on the far side, exactly between two park benches that snapped off the wings of his plane. He flew out of the saddle, thumped his head, and started to bawl.

That was life with Bobby.

• • •

Not everything was that spectacular—in fact, I don’t think *anything* was . . . at least until *The Calmative*. But I told you the story because I think, this time at

least, the extreme case best illustrates the norm: life with Bobby was a constant mind-fuck. By the age of nine he was attending quantum physics and advanced algebra classes at Georgetown University. There was the day he blanked out every radio and TV on our street—and the surrounding four blocks—with his own voice; he had found an old portable TV in the attic and turned it into a wide-band radio broadcasting station. One old black-and-white Zenith, twelve feet of hi-fi flex, a coathanger mounted on the roofpeak of our house, and presto! For about two hours four blocks of Georgetown could receive only WBOB. . . which happened to be my brother, reading some of my short stories, telling moron jokes, and explaining that the high sulfur content in baked beans was the reason our dad farted so much in church every Sunday morning. “But he gets most of em off pretty quiet,” Bobby told his listening audience of roughly three thousand, “or sometimes he holds the real bangers until it’s time for the hymns.”

My dad, who was less than happy about all this, ended up paying a seventy-five-dollar FCC fine and taking it out of Bobby’s allowance for the next year.

Life with Bobby, oh yeah. . . and look here, I’m crying. Is it honest sentiment, I wonder, or the onset? The former, I think—Christ knows how much I loved him—but I think I better try to hurry up a little just the same.

• • •

Bobby had graduated high school, for all practical purposes, by the age of ten, but he never got a B.A. or B.S., let alone any advanced degree. It was that big powerful compass in his head, swinging around and around, looking for some true north to point at.

He went through a physics period, and a shorter period when he was nutty for chemistry . . . but in the end, Bobby was too impatient with mathematics for either of those fields to hold him. He could do it, but it—and ultimately all so-called hard science—bored him.

By the time he was fifteen, it was archaeology—he combed the White Mountain foothills around our summer place in North Conway, building a history of the Indians who had lived there from arrowheads, flints, even the

charcoal patterns of long-dead campfires in the mesolithic caves in the mid-New Hampshire regions.

But that passed, too, and he began to read history and anthropology. When he was sixteen my father and my mother gave their reluctant approval when Bobby requested that he be allowed to accompany a party of New England anthropologists on an expedition to South America.

He came back five months later with the first real tan of his life; he was also an inch taller, fifteen pounds lighter, and much quieter. He was still cheerful enough, or could be, but his little-boy exuberance, sometimes infectious, sometimes wearisome, but always there, was gone. He had grown up. And for the first time I remember him talking about the news . . . how bad it was, I mean. That was 2003, the year a PLO splinter group called the Sons of the Jihad (a name that always sounded to me hideously like a Catholic community service group somewhere in western Pennsylvania) set off a Squirt Bomb in London, polluting sixty per cent of it and making the rest of it extremely unhealthy for people who ever planned to have children (or to live past the age of fifty, for that matter). The year we tried to blockade the Philippines after the Cedeño administration accepted a “small group” of Red Chinese advisors (fifteen thousand or so, according to our spy satellites), and only backed down when it became clear that (a) the Chinese weren’t kidding about emptying the holes if we didn’t pull back, and (b) the American people weren’t all that crazy about committing mass suicide over the Philippine Islands. That was also the year some other group of crazy motherfuckers—Albanians, I think—tried to air-spray the AIDS virus over Berlin.

This sort of stuff depressed everybody, but it depressed the *shit* out of Bobby.

“Why are people so goddam mean?” he asked me one day. We were at the summer place in New Hampshire, it was late August, and most of our stuff was already in boxes and suitcases. The cabin had that sad, deserted look it always got just before we all went our separate ways. For me it meant back to New York, and for Bobby it meant Waco, Texas, of all places. . . he had spent the summer reading sociology and geology texts—how’s that for a crazy salad?—and said he wanted to run a couple of experiments down there. He said it in a casual, offhand way, but I had seen my mother looking at him with a peculiar

thoughtful scrutiny in the last couple of weeks we were all together. Neither Dad nor I suspected, but I think my mom knew that Bobby's compass needle had finally stopped swinging and had started pointing.

"Why are they so mean?" I asked. "I'm supposed to answer that?"

"*Someone* better," he said. "Pretty soon, too, the way things are going."

"They're going the way they always went," I said, "and I guess they're doing it because people were built to be mean. If you want to lay blame, blame God."

"That's bullshit. I don't believe it. Even that double-X-chromosome stuff turned out to be bullshit in the end. And don't tell me it's just economic pressures, the conflict between the haves and have-nots, because that doesn't explain all of it, either."

"Original sin," I said. "It works for me—it's got a good beat and you can dance to it."

"Well," Bobby said, "maybe it *is* original sin. But what's the instrument, big brother? Have you ever asked yourself that?"

"Instrument? What instrument? I'm not following you."

"I think it's the water," Bobby said moodily.

"Say *what?*"

"The water. Something in the water."

He looked at me.

"Or something that *isn't*."

The next day Bobby went off to Waco. I didn't see him again until he showed up at my apartment wearing the inside-out Mumford shirt and carrying the two glass boxes. That was three years later.

• • •

"Howdy, Howie," he said, stepping in and giving me a nonchalant swat on the back as if it had been only three days.

"Bobby!" I yelled, and threw both arms around him in a bear-hug. Hard angles bit into my chest, and I heard an angry hive-hum.

"I'm glad to see you too," Bobby said, "but you better go easy. You're upsetting the natives."

I stepped back in a hurry. Bobby set down the big paper bag he was carrying and unslung his shoulder-bag. Then he carefully brought the glass boxes out of the bag. There was a beehive in one, a wasps' nest in the other. The bees were already settling down and going back to whatever business bees have, but the wasps were clearly unhappy about the whole thing.

"Okay, Bobby," I said. I looked at him and grinned. I couldn't seem to stop grinning. "What are you up to this time?"

He unzipped the tote-bag and brought out a mayonnaise jar which was half-filled with a clear liquid.

"See this?" he said.

"Yeah. Looks like either water or white lightning."

"It's actually both, if you can believe that. It came from an artesian well in La Plata, a little town forty miles east of Waco, and before I turned it into this concentrated form, there were five gallons of it. I've got a regular little distillery running down there, Howie, but I don't think the government will ever bust me for it." He was grinning, and now the grin broadened. "Water's all it is, but it's still the goddamndest popskull the human race has ever seen."

"I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"I know you don't. But you will. You know what, Howie?"

"What?"

"If the idiotic human race can manage to hold itself together for another six months, I'm betting it'll hold itself together for all time."

He lifted the mayonnaise jar, and one magnified Bobby-eye stared at me through it with huge solemnity. "This is the big one," he said. "The cure for the worst disease to which *Homo sapiens* falls prey."

"Cancer?"

"Nope," Bobby said. "War. Barroom brawls. Drive-by shootings. The whole mess. Where's your bathroom, Howie? My back teeth are floating."

When he came back he had not only turned the Mumford tee-shirt right-side out, he had combed his hair—nor had his method of doing this changed, I saw. Bobby just held his head under the faucet for awhile then raked everything back with his fingers.

He looked at the two glass boxes and pronounced the bees and wasps back to normal. "Not that a wasps' nest ever approaches anything even closely

resembling 'normal,' Howie. Wasps are social insects, like bees and ants, but unlike bees, which are almost always sane, and ants, which have occasional schizoid lapses, wasps are total full-bore lunatics." He smiled. "Just like us good old *Homo saps*." He took the top off the glass box containing the beehive.

"Tell you what, Bobby," I said. I was smiling, but the smile felt much too wide. "Put the top back on and just *tell* me about it, what do you say? Save the demonstration for later. I mean, my landlord's a real pussycat, but the super's this big bull dyke who smokes Odie Perode cigars and has thirty pounds on me. She—"

"You'll like this," Bobby said, as if I hadn't spoken at all—a habit as familiar to me as his Ten Fingers Method of Hair Grooming. He was never impolite but often totally absorbed. And could I stop him? Aw shit, no. It was too good to have him back. I mean I think I knew even then that something was going to go totally wrong, but when I was with Bobby for more than five minutes, he just hypnotized me. He was Lucy holding the football and promising me this time *for sure*, and I was Charlie Brown, rushing down the field to kick it. "In fact, you've probably seen it done before—they show pictures of it in magazines from time to time, or in TV wildlife documentaries. It's nothing very special, but it *looks* like a big deal because people have got these totally irrational prejudices about bees."

And the weird thing was, he was right—I *had* seen it before.

He stuck his hand into the box between the hive and the glass. In less than fifteen seconds his hand had acquired a living black-and-yellow glove. It brought back an instant of total recall: sitting in front of the TV, wearing footie pajamas and clutching my Paddington Bear, maybe half an hour before bedtime (and surely years before Bobby was born), watching with mingled horror, disgust, and fascination as some beekeeper allowed bees to cover his entire face. They had formed a sort of executioner's hood at first, and then he had brushed them into a grotesque living beard.

Bobby winced suddenly, sharply, then grinned.

"One of em stung me," he said. "They're still a little upset from the trip. I hooked a ride with the local insurance lady from La Plata to Waco—she's got an old Piper Cub—and flew some little commuter airline, Air Asshole, I think it was, up to New Orleans from there. Made about forty connections, but I

swear to God it was the cab ride from LaGarbage that got em crazy. Second Avenue's still got more potholes than the Bergenstrasse after the Germans surrendered."

"You know, I think you really ought to get your hand out of there, Bobs," I said. I kept waiting for some of them to fly out—I could imagine chasing them around with a rolled-up magazine for hours, bringing them down one by one, as if they were escapees in some old prison movie. But none of them had escaped. . . at least so far.

"Relax, Howie. You ever see a bee sting a flower? Or even hear of it, for that matter?"

"You don't look like a flower."

He laughed. "Shit, you think *bees* know what a flower looks like? Un-uh! No way, man! They don't know what a flower looks like any more than you or I know what a cloud sounds like. They know I'm sweet because I excrete sucrose dioxin in my sweat . . . along with thirty-seven other dioxins, and those're just the ones we know about."

He paused thoughtfully.

"Although I must confess I *was* careful to, uh, sweeten myself up a little tonight. Ate a box of chocolate-covered cherries on the plane—"

"Oh Bobby, Jesus!"

"—and had a couple of MallowCremes in the taxi coming here."

He reached in with his other hand and carefully began to brush the bees away. I saw him wince once more just before he got the last of them off, and then he eased my mind considerably by replacing the lid on the glass box. I saw a red swelling on each of his hands: one in the cup of the left palm, another high up on the right, near what the palmists call the Bracelets of Fortune. He'd been stung, but I saw well enough what he'd set out to show me: what looked like at least four hundred bees had investigated him. Only two had stung.

He took a pair of tweezers out of his jeans watch-pocket, and went over to my desk. He moved the pile of manuscript beside the Wang Micro I was using in those days and trained my Tensor lamp on the place where the pages had been—fiddling with it until it formed a tiny hard spotlight on the cherry wood.

“Writin anything good, Bowwow?” he asked casually, and I felt the hair stiffen on the back of my neck. When was the last time he’d called me Bowwow? When he was four? Six? Shit, man, I don’t know. He was working carefully on his left hand with the tweezers. I saw him extract a tiny something that looked like a nostril hair and place it in my ashtray.

“Piece on art forgery for *Vanity Fair*,” I said. “Bobby, what in hell are you up to this time?”

“You want to pull the other one for me?” he asked, offering me the tweezers, his right hand, and an apologetic smile. “I keep thinking if I’m so goddam smart I ought to be ambidextrous, but my left hand has still got an IQ of about six.”

Same old Bobby.

I sat down beside him, took the tweezers, and pulled the bee stinger out of the red swelling near what in his case should have been the Bracelets of Doom, and while I did it he told me about the differences between bees and wasps, the difference between the water in La Plata and the water in New York, and how, goddam! everything was going to be all right with his water and a little help from me.

And oh shit, I ended up running at the football while my laughing, wildly intelligent brother held it, one last time.

• • •

“Bees don’t sting unless they have to, because it kills them,” Bobby said matter-of-factly. “You remember that time in North Conway, when you said we kept killing each other because of original sin?”

“Yes. Hold still.”

“Well, if there *is* such a thing, if there’s a God who could simultaneously love us enough to serve us His own Son on a cross and send us all on a rocket-sled to hell just because one stupid bitch bit a bad apple, then the curse was just this: He made us like wasps instead of bees. *Shit*, Howie, what are you doing?”

“Hold still,” I said, “and I’ll get it out. If you want to make a lot of big gestures, I’ll wait.”

“Okay,” he said, and after that he held relatively still while I extracted the stinger. “Bees are nature’s kamikaze pilots, Bowwow. Look in that glass box, you’ll see the two who stung me lying dead at the bottom. Their stingers are barbed, like fishhooks. They slide in easy. When they pull out, they disembowel themselves.”

“Gross,” I said, dropping the second stinger in the ashtray. I couldn’t see the barbs, but I didn’t have a microscope.

“It makes them particular, though,” he said.

“I bet.”

“Wasps, on the other hand, have smooth stingers. They can shoot you up as many times as they like. They use up the poison by the third or fourth shot, but they can go right on making holes if they like . . . and usually they do. Especially wall-wasps. The kind I’ve got over there. You gotta sedate em. Stuff called Noxon. It must give em a hell of a hangover, because they wake up madder than ever.”

He looked at me somberly, and for the first time I saw the dark brown wheels of weariness under his eyes and realized my kid brother was more tired than I had ever seen him.

“*That’s* why people go on fighting, Bowwow. On and on and on. We got smooth stingers. Now watch this.”

He got up, went over to his tote-bag, rummaged in it, and came up with an eye-dropper. He opened the mayonnaise jar, put the dropper in, and drew up a tiny bubble of his distilled Texas water.

When he took it over to the glass box with the wasps’ nest inside, I saw the top on this one was different—there was a tiny plastic slide-piece set into it. I didn’t need him to draw me a picture: with the bees, he was perfectly willing to remove the whole top. With the wasps, he was taking no chances.

He squeezed the black bulb. Two drops of water fell onto the nest, making a momentary dark spot that disappeared almost at once. “Give it about three minutes,” he said.

“What—”

“No questions,” he said. “You’ll see. Three minutes.”

In that period, he read my piece on art forgery . . . although it was already twenty pages long.

“Okay,” he said, putting the pages down. “That’s pretty good, man. You ought to read up a little on how Jay Gould furnished the parlor-car of his private train with fake Manets, though—that’s a hoot.” He was removing the cover of the glass box containing the wasps’ nest as he spoke.

“Jesus, Bobby, cut the comedy!” I yelled.

“Same old wimp,” Bobby laughed, and pulled the nest, which was dull gray and about the size of a bowling ball, out of the box. He held it in his hands. Wasps flew out and lit on his arms, his cheeks, his forehead. One flew across to me and landed on my forearm. I slapped it and it fell dead to the carpet. I was scared—I mean really scared. My body was wired with adrenaline and I could feel my eyes trying to push their way out of their sockets.

“Don’t kill em,” Bobby said. “You might as well be killing babies, for all the harm they can do you. That’s the whole *point*.” He tossed the nest from hand to hand as if it were an overgrown softball. He lobbed it in the air. I watched, horrified, as wasps cruised the living room of my apartment like fighter planes on patrol.

Bobby lowered the nest carefully back into the box and sat down on my couch. He patted the place next to him and I went over, nearly hypnotized. They were everywhere: on the rug, the ceiling, the drapes. Half a dozen of them were crawling across the front of my big-screen TV.

Before I could sit down, he brushed away a couple that were on the sofa cushion where my ass was aimed. They flew away quickly. They were *all* flying easily, crawling easily, moving fast. There was nothing drugged about their behavior. As Bobby talked, they gradually found their way back to their spit-paper home, crawled over it, and eventually disappeared inside again through the hole in the top.

“I wasn’t the first one to get interested in Waco,” he said. “It just happens to be the biggest town in the funny little nonviolent section of what is, per capita, the most violent state in the union. Texans *love* to shoot each other, Howie—I mean, it’s like a state hobby. Half the male population goes around armed. Saturday night in the Fort Worth bars is like a shooting gallery where you get to plonk away at drunks instead of clay ducks. There are more NRA card-carriers than there are Methodists. Not that Texas is the only place where people shoot each other, or carve each other up with straight-razors, or stick

their kids in the oven if they cry too long, you understand, but they sure do like their firearms.”

“Except in Waco,” I said.

“Oh, they like em there, too,” he said. “It’s just that they use em on each other a hell of a lot less often.”

• • •

Jesus. I just looked up at the clock and saw the time. It feels like I’ve been writing for fifteen minutes or so, but it’s actually been over an hour. That happens to me sometimes when I’m running at white-hot speed, but I can’t allow myself to be seduced into these specifics. I feel as well as ever—no noticeable drying of the membranes in the throat, no groping for words, and as I glance back over what I’ve done I see only the normal typos and strikeouts. But I can’t kid myself. I’ve got to hurry up. “Fiddle-de-dee,” said Scarlett, and all of that.

The non-violent atmosphere of the Waco area had been noticed and investigated before, mostly by sociologists. Bobby said that when you fed enough statistical data on Waco and similar areas into a computer—population density, mean age, mean economic level, mean educational level, and dozens of other factors—what you got back was a whopper of an anomaly. Scholarly papers are rarely jocular, but even so, several of the better than fifty Bobby had read on the subject suggested ironically that maybe it was “something in the water.”

“I decided maybe it was time to take the joke seriously,” Bobby said. “After all, there’s something in the water of a lot of places that prevents tooth decay. It’s called fluoride.”

He went to Waco accompanied by a trio of research assistants: two sociology grad-students and a full professor of geology who happened to be on sabbatical and ready for adventure. Within six months, Bobby and the sociology guys had constructed a computer program which illustrated what my brother called the world’s only calmquake. He had a slightly ruffled printout in his tote. He gave it to me. I was looking at a series of forty concentric rings. Waco was in the eighth, ninth, and tenth as you moved in toward the center.

“Now look at this,” he said, and put a transparent overlay on the printout. More rings; but in each one there was a number. Fortieth ring: 471. Thirty-ninth: 420. Thirty-eighth: 418. And so on. In a couple of places the numbers went up instead of down, but only in a couple (and only by a little).

“What are they?”

“Each number represents the incidence of violent crime in that particular circle,” Bobby said. “Murder, rape, assault and battery, even acts of vandalism. The computer assigns a number by a formula that takes population density into account.” He tapped the twenty-seventh circle, which held the number 204, with his finger. “There’s less than nine hundred people in this whole area, for instance. The number represents three or four cases of spouse abuse, a couple of barroom brawls, an act of animal cruelty—some senile farmer got pissed at a pig and shot a load of rock-salt into it, as I recall—and one involuntary manslaughter.”

I saw that the numbers in the central circles dropped off radically: 85, 81, 70, 63, 40, 21, 5. At the epicenter of Bobby’s calmquake was the town of La Plata. To call it a sleepy little town seems more than fair.

The numeric value assigned to La Plata was zero.

“So here it is, Bowwow,” Bobby said, leaning forward and rubbing his long hands together nervously, “my nominee for the Garden of Eden. Here’s a community of fifteen thousand, twenty-four per cent of which are people of mixed blood, commonly called Indios. There’s a moccasin factory, a couple of little motor courts, a couple of scrub farms. That’s it for work. For play there’s four bars, a couple of dance-halls where you can hear any kind of music you want as long as it sounds like George Jones, two drive-ins, and a bowling alley.” He paused and added, “There’s also a still. I didn’t know anybody made whiskey that good outside of Tennessee.”

In short (and it is now too late to be anything else), La Plata should have been a fertile breeding-ground for the sort of casual violence you can read about in the Police Blotter section of the local newspaper every day. Should have been but wasn’t. There had been only one murder in La Plata during the five years previous to my brother’s arrival, two cases of assault, no rapes, no reported incidents of child abuse. There had been four armed robberies, but all four turned out to have been committed by transients . . . as the murder and

one of the assaults had been. The local Sheriff was a fat old Republican who did a pretty fair Rodney Dangerfield imitation. He had been known, in fact, to spend whole days in the local coffee shop, tugging the knot in his tie and telling people to take his wife, please. My brother said he thought it was a little more than lame humor; he was pretty sure the poor guy was suffering first-stage Alzheimer's Disease. His only deputy was his nephew. Bobby told me the nephew looked quite a lot like Junior Samples on the old *Hee-Haw* show.

"Put those two guys in a Pennsylvania town similar to La Plata in every way but the geographical," Bobby said, "and they would have been out on their asses fifteen years ago. But in La Plata, they're gonna go on until they die . . . which they'll probably do in their sleep."

"What did you do?" I asked. "How did you proceed?"

"Well, for the first week or so after we got our statistical shit together, we just sort of sat around and stared at each other," Bobby said. "I mean, we were prepared for *something*, but nothing quite like this. Even Waco doesn't prepare you for La Plata." Bobby shifted restlessly and cracked his knuckles.

"Jesus, I hate it when you do that," I said.

He smiled. "Sorry, Bowwow. Anyway, we started geological tests, then microscopic analysis of the water. I didn't expect a hell of a lot; everyone in the area has got a well, usually a deep one, and they get their water tested regularly to make sure they're not drinking borax, or something. If there had been something obvious, it would have turned up a long time ago. So we went on to submicroscopy, and that was when we started to turn up some pretty weird stuff."

"What kind of weird stuff?"

"Breaks in chains of atoms, subdynamic electrical fluctuations, and some sort of unidentified protein. Water ain't really H<sub>2</sub>O, you know—not when you add in the sulfides, irons, God knows what else happens to be in the aquifer of a given region. And La Plata water—you'd have to give it a string of letters like the ones after a professor emeritus's name." His eyes gleamed. "But the protein was the most interesting thing, Bowwow. So far as we know, it's only found in one other place: the human brain."

• • •

Uh-oh.

It just arrived, between one swallow and the next: the throat-dryness. Not much as yet, but enough for me to break away and get a glass of ice-water. I've got maybe forty minutes left. And oh Jesus, there's so much I want to tell! About the wasps' nests they found with wasps that wouldn't sting, about the fender-bender Bobby and one of his assistants saw where the two drivers, both male, both drunk, and both about twenty-four (sociological bull moose, in other words), got out, shook hands, and exchanged insurance information amicably before going into the nearest bar for another drink.

Bobby talked for hours—more hours than I have. But the upshot was simple: the stuff in the mayonnaise jar.

"We've got our own still in La Plata now," he said. "This is the stuff we're brewing, Howie; pacifist white lightning. The aquifer under that area of Texas is deep but amazingly large; it's like this incredible Lake Victoria driven into the porous sediment which overlays the Moho. The water is potent, but we've been able to make the stuff I squirted on the wasps even more potent. We've got damn near six thousand gallons now, in these big steel tanks. By the end of the year, we'll have fourteen thousand. By next June we'll have thirty thousand. But it's not enough. We need more, we need it faster . . . and then we need to transport it."

"Transport it where?" I asked him.

"Borneo, to start with."

I thought I'd either lost my mind or misheard him. I really did.

"Look, Bowwow . . . sorry. Howie." He was scrumming through his tote-bag again. He brought out a number of aerial photographs and handed them over to me. "You see?" he asked as I looked through them. "You see how fucking perfect it is? It's as if God Himself suddenly busted through our business-as-usual transmissions with something like 'And now we bring you a special bulletin! This is your last chance, assholes! And now we return you to *Days of Our Lives.*'"

"I don't get you," I said. "And I have no idea what I'm looking at." Of course I knew; it was an island—not Borneo itself but an island lying to the west of Borneo identified as Gulantio—with a mountain in the middle and a lot of muddy little villages lying on its lower slopes. It was hard to see the

mountain because of the cloud cover. What I meant was that I didn't know what I was looking *for*.

"The mountain has the same name as the island," he said. "Gulandio. In the local patois it means *grace*, or *fate*, or *destiny*, or take your pick. But Duke Rogers says it's really the biggest time-bomb on earth . . . and it's wired to go off by October of next year. Probably earlier."

• • •

The crazy thing's this: the story's only crazy if you try to tell it in a speed-rap, which is what I'm trying to do now. Bobby wanted me to help him raise somewhere between six hundred thousand and a million and a half dollars to do the following: first, to synthesize fifty to seventy thousand gallons of what he called "the high-test"; second, to airlift all of this water to Borneo, which had landing facilities (you could land a hang-glider on Gulandio, but that was about all); third, to ship it over to this island named Fate, or Destiny, or Grace; fourth, to truck it up the slope of the volcano, which had been dormant (save for a few puffs in 1938) since 1804, and then to drop it down the muddy tube of the volcano's caldera. Duke Rogers was actually John Paul Rogers, the geology professor. He claimed that Gulandio was going to do more than just erupt; he claimed that it was going to explode, as Krakatoa had done in the nineteenth century, creating a bang that would make the Squirt Bomb that poisoned London look like a kid's firecracker.

The debris from the Krakatoa blow-up, Bobby told me, had literally encircled the globe; the observed results had formed an important part of the Sagan Group's nuclear winter theory. For three months afterward sunsets and sunrises half a world away had been grotesquely colorful as a result of the ash whirling around in both the jet stream and the Van Allen Currents, which lie forty miles below the Van Allen Belt. There had been global changes in climate which lasted five years, and nipa palms, which previously had grown only in eastern Africa and Micronesia, suddenly showed up in both South and North America.

"The North American nipas all died before 1900," Bobby said, "but they're alive and well below the equator. Krakatoa seeded them there, Howie. . . the

way I want to seed La Plata water all over the earth. I want people to go out in La Plata water when it rains—and it's going to rain a lot after Gulandio goes bang. I want them to drink the La Plata water that falls in their reservoirs, I want them to wash their hair in it, bathe in it, soak their contact lenses in it. I want whores to *douche* in it."

"Bobby," I said, knowing he was not, "you're crazy."

He gave me a crooked, tired grin. "I ain't crazy," he said. "You want to see crazy? Turn on CNN, Bow . . . Howie. You'll see crazy in living color."

• • •

But I didn't need to turn on Cable News (what a friend of mine had taken to calling The Organ-Grinder of Doom) to know what Bobby was talking about. The Indians and the Pakistanis were poised on the brink. The Chinese and the Afghans, ditto. Half of Africa was starving, the other half on fire with AIDS. There had been border skirmishes along the entire Tex-Mex border in the last five years, since Mexico went Communist, and people had started calling the Tijuana crossing point in California Little Berlin because of the wall. The saber-rattling had become a din. On the last day of the old year the Scientists for Nuclear Responsibility had set their black clock to fifteen seconds before midnight.

"Bobby, let's suppose it could be done and everything went according to schedule," I said. "It probably couldn't and wouldn't, but let's suppose. You don't have the slightest idea what the long-term effects might be."

He started to say something and I waved it away.

"Don't even suggest that you do, because you don't! You've had time to find this calmquake of yours and isolate the cause, I'll give you that. But did you ever hear about thalidomide? That nifty little acne-stopper and sleeping pill that caused cancer and heart attacks in thirty-year-olds? Don't you remember the AIDS vaccine in 1997?"

"Howie?"

"*That* one stopped the disease, except it turned the test subjects into incurable epileptics who all died within eighteen months."

"Howie?"

“Then there was—”

“Howie?”

I stopped and looked at him.

“The world,” Bobby said, and then stopped. His throat worked. I saw he was struggling with tears. “The world needs heroic measures, man. I don’t know about long-term effects, and there’s no time to study them, because there’s no long-term prospect. Maybe we can cure the whole mess. Or maybe —”

He shrugged, tried to smile, and looked at me with shining eyes from which two single tears slowly tracked.

“Or maybe we’re giving heroin to a patient with terminal cancer. Either way, it’ll stop what’s happening now. It’ll end the world’s pain.” He spread out his hands, palms up, so I could see the stings on them. “Help me, Bowwow. Please help me.”

So I helped him.

And we fucked up. In fact I think you could say we fucked up big-time. And do you want the truth? I don’t give a shit. We killed all the plants, but at least we saved the greenhouse. Something will grow here again, someday. I hope.

Are you reading this?

• • •

My gears are starting to get a little sticky. For the first time in years I’m having to think about what I’m doing. The motor-movements of writing. Should have hurried more at the start.

Never mind. Too late to change things now.

We did it, of course: distilled the water, flew it in, transported it to Gulandio, built a primitive lifting system—half motor-winch and half cog railway—up the side of the volcano, and dropped over twelve thousand five-gallon containers of La Plata water—the brain-buster version—into the murky misty depths of the volcano’s caldera. We did all of this in just eight months. It didn’t cost six hundred thousand dollars, or a million and a half; it cost over four million, still less than a sixteenth of one per cent of what America spent

on defense that year. You want to know how we razed it? I'd tell you if I had more thyme, but my head's falling apart so never mend. I raised most of it myself if it matters to you. Some by hoof and some by croof. Tell you the truth, I din't know I could do it muself until I did. But we did it and somehow the world held together and that volcano—whatever its name wuz, I can't exactly remember now and there izzunt time to go back over the manuscript—it blue just when it was spo

• • •

Wait

• • •

Okay. A little better. Digitalin. Bobby had it. Heart's beating like crazy but I can think again.

The volcano—Mount Grace, we called it—blue just when Dook Rogers said it would. Everything when skihi and for awhile everyone's attention turned away from whatever and toward the skys. And bimmel-dee-dee, said Strapless!

It happened pretty fast like sex and checks and special effex and everybody got healthy again. I mean

wait

• • •

Jesus please let me finish this.

I mean that everybody stood down. Everybody started to get a little purstective on the situation. The wurld started to get like the wasps in Bobbys nest the one he showed me where they didn't stink too much. There was three yerz like an Indian sumer. People getting together like in that old Youngbloods song that went cmon everybody get together rite now, like what all the hippeez wanted, you no, peets and luv and

wt

• • •

Big blast. Feel like my heart is coming out thru my ears. But if I concentrate every bit of my force, my *concentration*—

• • •

It was like an Indian summer, that's what I meant to say, like three years of Indian summer. Bobby went on with his resurch. La Plata. Sociological background etc. You remember the local Sheriff? Fat old Republican with a good Rodney Youngblood imitashun? How Bobby said he had the preliminary simptoms of Rodney's Disease?

• • •

concentrate asshole

• • •

Wasn't just him; turned out like there was a lot of that going around in that part of Texas. All's Hallows Disease is what I meen. For three yerz me and Bobby were down there. Created a new program. New graff of circkles. I saw what was happen and came back here. Bobby and his to asistants stayed on. One shot hissself Boby said when he showed up here.

Wait one more blas

• • •

All right. Last time. Heart beating so fast I can hardly breeve. The new graph, the *last* graph, really only whammed you when it was laid over the calmquake graft. The calmquake graff showed ax of vilence going down as you approached La Plata in the muddle; the Alzheimer's graff showed incidence of premature seenullity going *up* as you approached La Plata. People there were getting very silly very yung.

Me and Bobo were careful as we could be for next three years, drink only Parrier Water and wor big long sleekers in the ran. so no war and when

everybobby started to get seely we din and I came back here because he my brother I cant remember what his name

Bobby

Bobby when he came here tonight cryeen and I sed Bobby I luv you Bobby sed Ime sorry Bowwow Ime sorry I made the hole world ful of foals and dumbbels and I sed better fouls and bells than a big black sinder in spaz and he cryed and I cryed Bobby I luv you and he sed will you give me a shot of the spacial wadder and I sed yez and he said wil you ride it down and I sed yez an I think I did but I cant reely remember I see wurds but dont no what they mean

I have a Bobby his nayme is bruther and I then I an dun riding and I have a bocks to put this into thats Bobby sd full of quiyet air to last a milyun yrz so gudboy gudboy everybrother, Im goin to stob gudboy bobby i love you it wuz not yor falt i love you

forgivyu

love yu

sinned (for the wurld),

BOWWOW FOR YOU

## Suffer the Little Children

Miss Sidley was her name, and teaching was her game.

She was a small woman who had to stretch to write on the highest level of the blackboard, which she was doing now. Behind her, none of the children giggled or whispered or munched on secret sweets held in cupped hands. They knew Miss Sidley's deadly instincts too well. Miss Sidley could always tell who was chewing gum at the back of the room, who had a beanshooter in his pocket, who wanted to go to the bathroom to trade baseball cards rather than use the facilities. Like God, she seemed to know everything all at once.

She was graying, and the brace she wore to support her failing back was limned clearly against her print dress. Small, constantly suffering, gimlet-eyed woman. But they feared her. Her tongue was a schoolyard legend. The eyes, when focused on a giggler or a whisperer, could turn the stoutest knees to water.

Now, writing the day's list of spelling words on the board, she reflected that the success of her long teaching career could be summed and checked and proven by this one everyday action: she could turn her back on her pupils with confidence.

"Vacation," she said, pronouncing the word as she wrote it in her firm, non-nonsense script. "Edward, please use the word *vacation* in a sentence."

"I went on a vacation to New York City," Edward piped. Then, as Miss Sidley had taught, he repeated the word carefully. "Vay-cay-shun."

"Very good, Edward." She began on the next word.

She had her little tricks, of course; success, she firmly believed, depended as much on the little things as on the big ones. She applied the principle constantly in the classroom, and it never failed.

"Jane," she said quietly.

Jane, who had been furtively perusing her Reader, looked up guiltily.

"Close that book right now, please." The book shut; Jane looked with pale, hating eyes at Miss Sidley's back. "And you will remain at your desk for fifteen

minutes after the final bell.”

Jane’s lips trembled. “Yes, Miss Sidley.”

One of her little tricks was the careful use of her glasses. The whole class was reflected in their thick lenses and she had always been thinly amused by their guilty, frightened faces when she caught them at their nasty little games. Now she saw a phantomish, distorted Robert in the first row wrinkle his nose. She did not speak. Not yet. Robert would hang himself if given just a little more rope.

“Tomorrow,” she pronounced clearly. “Robert, you will please use the word *tomorrow* in a sentence.”

Robert frowned over the problem. The classroom was hushed and sleepy in the late-September sun. The electric clock over the door buzzed a rumor of three o’clock dismissal just a half-hour away, and the only thing that kept young heads from drowsing over their spellers was the silent, ominous threat of Miss Sidley’s back.

“I am waiting, Robert.”

“Tomorrow a bad thing will happen,” Robert said. The words were perfectly innocuous, but Miss Sidley, with the seventh sense that all strict disciplinarians have, didn’t like them a bit. “Too-mor-row,” Robert finished. His hands were folded neatly on the desk, and he wrinkled his nose again. He also smiled a tiny side-of-the-mouth smile. Miss Sidley was suddenly, unaccountably sure Robert knew about her little trick with the glasses.

All right; very well.

She began to write the next word with no word of commendation for Robert, letting her straight body speak its own message. She watched carefully with one eye. Soon Robert would stick out his tongue or make that disgusting finger-gesture they all knew (even the girls seemed to know it these days), just to see if she really knew what he was doing. Then he would be punished.

The reflection was small, ghostly, and distorted. And she had all but the barest corner of her eye on the word she was writing.

Robert changed.

She caught just a flicker of it, just a frightening glimpse of Robert’s face changing into something . . . different.

She whirled around, face white, barely noticing the protesting stab of pain in her back.

Robert looked at her blandly, questioningly. His hands were neatly folded. The first signs of an afternoon cowlick showed at the back of his head. He did not look frightened.

*I imagined it, she thought. I was looking for something, and when there was nothing, my mind just made something up. Very cooperative of it. However—*

“Robert?” She meant to be authoritative; meant for her voice to make the unspoken demand for confession. It did not come out that way.

“Yes, Miss Sidley?” His eyes were a very dark brown, like the mud at the bottom of a slow-running stream.

“Nothing.”

She turned back to the board. A little whisper ran through the class.

“*Be quiet!*” she snapped, and turned again to face them. “One more sound and we will all stay after school with Jane!” She addressed the whole class, but looked most directly at Robert. He looked back with childlike innocence: *Who, me? Not me, Miss Sidley.*

She turned to the board and began to write, not looking out of the corners of her glasses. The last half-hour dragged, and it seemed that Robert gave her a strange look on the way out. A look that said, *We have a secret, don't we?*

The look wouldn't leave her mind. It was stuck there, like a tiny string of roast beef between two molars—a small thing, actually, but feeling as big as a cinderblock.

She sat down to her solitary dinner at five (poached eggs on toast) still thinking about it. She knew she was getting older and accepted the knowledge calmly. She was not going to be one of those old-maid schoolmarms dragged kicking and screaming from their classes at the age of retirement. They reminded her of gamblers unable to leave the tables while they were losing. But *she* was not losing. She had always been a winner.

She looked down at her poached eggs.

Hadn't she?

She thought of the well-scrubbed faces in her third-grade classroom, and found Robert's face most prominent among them.

She got up and switched on another light.

Later, just before she dropped off to sleep, Robert's face floated in front of her, smiling unpleasantly in the darkness behind her lids. The face began to change—

But before she saw exactly what it was changing into, darkness overtook her.

• • •

Miss Sidley spent an unrestful night and consequently the next day her temper was short. She waited, almost hoping for a whisperer, a giggler, perhaps a note-passer. But the class was quiet—very quiet. They all stared at her unresponsively, and it seemed that she could feel the weight of their eyes on her like blind, crawling ants.

*Stop that!* she told herself sternly. *You're acting like a skittish girl just out of teachers college!*

Again the day seemed to drag, and she believed she was more relieved than the children when the last bell rang. The children lined up in orderly rows at the door, boys and girls by height, hands dutifully linked.

"Dismissed," she said, and listened sourly as they shrieked their way down the hall and into the bright sunlight.

*What was it I saw when he changed? Something bulbous. Something that shimmered. Something that stared at me, yes, stared and grinned and wasn't a child at all. It was old and it was evil and—*

"Miss Sidley?"

Her head jerked up and a little *Oh!* hiccupped involuntarily from her throat.

It was Mr. Manning. He smiled apologetically. "Didn't mean to disturb you."

"Quite all right," she said, more curtly than she had intended. What had she been thinking? What was wrong with her?

"Would you mind checking the paper towels in the girls' lav?"

"Surely." She got up, placing her hands against the small of her back. Mr. Manning looked at her sympathetically. *Save it*, she thought. *The old maid is not amused. Or even interested.*

She brushed by Mr. Hanning and started down the hall to the girls' lavatory. A snigger of boys carrying scratched and pitted baseball equipment grew silent at the sight of her and leaked guiltily out the door, where their cries began again.

Miss Sidley frowned after them, reflecting that children had been different in her day. Not more polite—children have never had time for that—and not exactly more respectful of their elders; it was a kind of hypocrisy that had never been there before. A smiling quietness around adults that had never been there before. A kind of quiet contempt that was upsetting and unnerving. As if they were . . .

*Hiding behind masks? Is that it?*

She pushed the thought away and went into the lavatory. It was a small, L-shaped room. The toilets were ranged along one side of the longer bar, the sinks along both sides of the shorter one.

As she checked the paper-towel containers, she caught a glimpse of her face in one of the mirrors and was startled into looking at it closely. She didn't care for what she saw—not a bit. There was a look that hadn't been there two days before, a frightened, watching look. With sudden shock she realized that the blurred reflection in her glasses of Robert's pale, respectful face had gotten inside her and was festering.

The door opened and she heard two girls come in, giggling secretly about something. She was about to turn the corner and walk out past them when she heard her own name. She turned back to the washbowls and began checking the towel holders again.

“And then he—”

Soft giggles.

“She knows, but—”

More giggles, soft and sticky as melting soap.

“Miss Sidley is—”

*Stop it! Stop that noise!*

By moving slightly she could see their shadows, made fuzzy and ill-defined by the diffuse light filtering through the frosted windows, holding onto each other with girlish glee.

Another thought crawled up out of her mind.

*They knew she was there.*

Yes. Yes they did. The little bitches knew.

She would shake them. Shake them until their teeth rattled and their giggles turned to wails, she would thump their heads against the tile walls and she would make them *admit* that they knew.

That was when the shadows changed. They seemed to elongate, to flow like dripping tallow, taking on strange hunched shapes that made Miss Sidley cringe back against the porcelain washstands, her heart swelling in her chest.

But they went on giggling.

The voices changed, no longer girlish, now sexless and soulless, and quite, quite evil. A slow, turgid sound of mindless humor that flowed around the corner to her like sewage.

She stared at the hunched shadows and suddenly screamed at them. The scream went on and on, swelling in her head until it attained a pitch of lunacy. And then she fainted. The giggling, like the laughter of demons, followed her down into darkness.

• • •

She could not, of course, tell them the truth.

Miss Sidley knew this even as she opened her eyes and looked up at the anxious faces of Mr. Hanning and Mrs. Crossen. Mrs. Crossen was holding the bottle of smelling salts from the gymnasium first-aid kit under her nose. Mr. Hanning turned around and told the two little girls who were looking curiously at Miss Sidley to go home now, please.

They both smiled at her—slow, we-have-a-secret smiles—and went out.

Very well, she would keep their secret. For awhile. She would not have people thinking her insane, or that the first feelers of senility had touched her early. She would play their game. Until she could expose their nastiness and rip it out by the roots.

“I’m afraid I slipped,” she said calmly, sitting up and ignoring the excruciating pain in her back. “A patch of wetness.”

“This is awful,” Mr. Hanning said. “Terrible. Are you—”

“Did the fall hurt your back, Emily?” Mrs. Crossen interrupted. Mr. Hanning looked at her gratefully.

Miss Sidley got up, her spine screaming in her body.

“No,” she said. “In fact, the fall seems to have worked some minor chiropractic miracle. My back hasn’t felt this well in years.”

“We can send for a doctor—” Mr. Hanning began.

“Not necessary.” Miss Sidley smiled at him coolly.

“I’ll call you a taxi from the office.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Miss Sidley said, walking to the door of the girls’ lav and opening it. “I always take the bus.”

Mr. Hanning sighed and looked at Mrs. Crossen. Mrs. Crossen rolled her eyes and said nothing.

• • •

The next day Miss Sidley kept Robert after school. He did nothing to warrant the punishment, so she simply accused him falsely. She felt no qualms; he was a monster, not a little boy. She must make him admit it.

Her back was in agony. She realized Robert knew; he expected that would help him. But it wouldn’t. That was another of her little advantages. Her back had been a constant pain to her for the last twelve years, and there had been many times when it had been this bad—well, *almost* this bad.

She closed the door, shutting the two of them in.

For a moment she stood still, training her gaze on Robert. She waited for him to drop his eyes. He didn’t. He looked back at her, and presently a little smile began to play around the corners of his mouth.

“Why are you smiling, Robert?” she asked softly.

“I don’t know,” Robert said, and went on smiling.

“Tell me, please.”

Robert said nothing.

And went on smiling.

The outside sounds of children at play were distant, dreamy. Only the hypnotic buzz of the wall clock was real.

“There’s quite a few of us,” Robert said suddenly, as if he were commenting on the weather.

It was Miss Sidley’s turn to be silent.

“Eleven right here in this school.”

*Quite evil*, she thought, amazed. *Very, incredibly evil.*

“Little boys who tell stories go to hell,” she said clearly. “I know many parents no longer make their . . . their *spawn* . . . aware of that fact, but I assure you that it is a *true* fact, Robert. Little boys who tell stories go to hell. Little girls too, for that matter.”

Robert’s smile grew wider; it became vulpine. “Do you want to see me change, Miss Sidley? Do you want a really good look?”

Miss Sidley felt her back prickle. “Go away,” she said curtly. “And bring your mother or your father to school with you tomorrow. We’ll get this business straightened out.” There. On solid ground again. She waited for his face to crumple, waited for the tears.

Instead, Robert’s smile grew wider—wide enough to show his teeth. “It will be just like Show and Tell, won’t it, Miss Sidley? Robert—the *other* Robert—he liked Show and Tell. He’s still hiding way, way down in my head.” The smile curled at the corners of his mouth like charring paper. “Sometimes he runs around . . . it itches. He wants me to let him out.”

“Go away,” Miss Sidley said numbly. The buzzing of the clock seemed very loud.

Robert changed.

His face suddenly ran together like melting wax, the eyes flattening and spreading like knife-struck egg yolks, nose widening and yawning, mouth disappearing. The head elongated, and the hair was suddenly not hair but straggling, twitching growths.

Robert began to chuckle.

The slow, cavernous sound came from what had been his nose, but the nose was eating into the lower half of his face, nostrils meeting and merging into a central blackness like a huge, shouting mouth.

Robert got up, still chuckling, and behind it all she could see the last shattered remains of the other Robert, the real little boy this alien thing had usurped, howling in maniac terror, screeching to be let out.

She ran.

She fled screaming down the corridor, and the few late-leaving pupils turned to look at her with large and uncomprehending eyes. Mr. Hanning jerked open his door and looked out just as she plunged through the wide glass front doors, a wild, waving scarecrow silhouetted against the bright September sky.

He ran after her, Adam's apple bobbing. "Miss Sidley! *Miss Sidley!*"

Robert came out of the classroom and watched curiously.

Miss Sidley neither heard nor saw. She clattered down the steps and across the sidewalk and into the street with her screams trailing behind her. There was a huge, blating horn and then the bus was looming over her, the bus driver's face a plaster mask of fear. Air brakes whined and hissed like angry dragons.

Miss Sidley fell, and the huge wheels shuddered to a smoking stop just eight inches from her frail, brace-armored body. She lay shuddering on the pavement, hearing the crowd gather around her.

She turned over and the children were staring down at her. They were ringed in a tight little circle, like mourners around an open grave. And at the head of the grave was Robert, a small sober sexton ready to shovel the first spade of dirt into her face.

From far away, the bus driver's shaken babble: ". . . crazy or somethin. . . my God, another half a foot . . ."

Miss Sidley stared at the children. Their shadows covered her. Their faces were impassive. Some of them were smiling little secret smiles, and Miss Sidley knew that soon she would begin to scream again.

Then Mr. Hanning broke their tight noose, shooed them away, and Miss Sidley began to sob weakly.

• • •

She didn't go back to her third grade for a month. She told Mr. Hanning calmly that she had not been feeling herself, and Mr. Hanning suggested that she see a reputable doctor and discuss the matter with him. Miss Sidley agreed that this was the only sensible and rational course. She also said that if the school board wished for her resignation she would tender it immediately

although doing so would hurt her very much. Mr. Hanning, looking uncomfortable, said he doubted if that would be necessary. The upshot was that Miss Sidley came back in late October, once again ready to play the game and now knowing how to play it.

For the first week she let things go on as ever. It seemed the whole class now regarded her with hostile, shielded eyes. Robert smiled distantly at her from his front-row seat, and she did not have the courage to take him to task.

Once, while she was on playground duty, Robert walked over to her, holding a dodgem ball, smiling. "There's so many of us now you wouldn't believe it," he said. "And neither would anyone else." He stunned her by dropping a wink of infinite slyness. "If you, you know, tried to tell em."

A girl on the swings looked across the playground into Miss Sidley's eyes and laughed at her.

Miss Sidley smiled serenely down at Robert. "Why, Robert, whatever do you mean?"

But Robert only continued smiling as he went back to his game.

• • •

Miss Sidley brought the gun to school in her handbag. It had been her brother's. He had taken it from a dead German shortly after the Battle of the Bulge. Jim had been gone ten years now. She hadn't opened the box that held the gun in at least five, but when she did it was still there, gleaming dully. The clips of ammunition were still there, too, and she loaded the gun carefully, just as Jim had shown her.

She smiled pleasantly at her class; at Robert in particular. Robert smiled back and she could see the murky alienness swimming just below his skin, muddy, full of filth.

She had no idea what was now living inside Robert's skin, and she didn't care; she only hoped that the real little boy was entirely gone by now. She did not wish to be a murderess. She decided the real Robert must have died or gone insane, living inside the dirty, crawling thing that had chuckled at her in the classroom and sent her screaming into the street. So even if he was still alive, putting him out of his misery would be a mercy.

“Today we’re going to have a Test,” Miss Sidley said.

The class did not groan or shift apprehensively; they merely looked at her. She could feel their eyes, like weights. Heavy, smothering.

“It’s a very special Test. I will call you down to the mimeograph room one by one and give it to you. Then you may have a candy and go home for the day. Won’t that be nice?”

They smiled empty smiles and said nothing.

“Robert, will you come first?”

Robert got up, smiling his little smile. He wrinkled his nose quite openly at her. “Yes, Miss Sidley.”

Miss Sidley took her bag and they went down the empty, echoing corridor together, past the sleepy drone of classes reciting behind closed doors. The mimeograph room was at the far end of the hall, past the lavatories. It had been soundproofed two years ago; the big machine was very old and very noisy.

Miss Sidley closed the door behind them and locked it.

“No one can hear you,” she said calmly. She took the gun from her bag. “You or this.”

Robert smiled innocently. “There are lots of us, though. Lots more than here.” He put one small scrubbed hand on the paper-tray of the mimeograph machine. “Would you like to see me change again?”

Before she could speak, Robert’s face began to shimmer into the grotesqueness beneath and Miss Sidley shot him. Once. In the head. He fell back against the paper-lined shelves and slid down to the floor, a little dead boy with a round black hole above his right eye.

He looked very pathetic.

Miss Sidley stood over him, panting. Her cheeks were pale.

The huddled figure didn’t move.

It was human.

*It was Robert.*

No!

*It was all in your mind, Emily. All in your mind.*

No! No, no, *no!*

She went back up to the room and began to lead them down, one by one. She killed twelve of them and would have killed them all if Mrs. Crossen

hadn't come down for a package of composition paper.

Mrs. Crossen's eyes got very big; one hand crept up and clutched her mouth. She began to scream and she was still screaming when Miss Sidley reached her and put a hand on her shoulder. "It had to be done, Margaret," she told the screaming Mrs. Crossen. "It's terrible, but it had to. They are all monsters."

Mrs. Crossen stared at the gaily clothed little bodies scattered around the mimeograph and continued to scream. The little girl whose hand Miss Sidley was holding began to cry steadily and monotonously: "Waahhh . . . waahhh . . . waahhh."

"Change," Miss Sidley said. "Change for Mrs. Crossen. Show her it had to be done."

The girl continued to weep uncomprehendingly.

"Damn you, *change!*" Miss Sidley screamed. "Dirty bitch, dirty crawling, filthy unnatural *bitch!* Change! God damn you, *change!*" She raised the gun. The little girl cringed, and then Mrs. Crossen was on her like a cat, and Miss Sidley's back gave way.

• • •

No trial.

The papers screamed for one, bereaved parents swore hysterical oaths against Miss Sidley, and the city sat back on its haunches in numb shock, but in the end, cooler heads prevailed and there was no trial. The State Legislature called for more stringent teacher exams, Summer Street School closed for a week of mourning, and Miss Sidley went quietly to Juniper Hill in Augusta. She was put in deep analysis, given the most modern drugs, introduced into daily work-therapy sessions. A year later, under strictly controlled conditions, Miss Sidley was put in an experimental encounter-therapy situation.

• • •

Buddy Jenkins was his name, psychiatry was his game.

He sat behind a one-way glass with a clipboard, looking into a room which had been outfitted as a nursery. On the far wall, the cow was jumping over the

moon and the mouse ran up the clock. Miss Sidley sat in her wheelchair with a story book, surrounded by a group of trusting, drooling, smiling, cataclysmically retarded children. They smiled at her and drooled and touched her with small wet fingers while attendants at the next window watched for the first sign of an aggressive move.

For a time Buddy thought she responded well. She read aloud, stroked a girl's head, consoled a small boy when he fell over a toy block. Then she seemed to see something which disturbed her; a frown creased her brow and she looked away from the children.

"Take me away, please," Miss Sidley said, softly and tonelessly, to no one in particular.

And so they took her away. Buddy Jenkins watched the children watch her go, their eyes wide and empty, but somehow deep. One smiled, and another put his fingers in his mouth slyly. Two little girls clutched each other and giggled.

That night Miss Sidley cut her throat with a bit of broken mirror-glass, and after that Buddy Jenkins began to watch the children more and more. In the end, he was hardly able to take his eyes off them.

# The Night Flier

## 1

In spite of his pilot's license, Dees didn't really get interested until the murders at the airport in Maryland—the third and fourth murders in the series. Then he smelled that special combination of blood and guts which readers of *Inside View* had come to expect. Coupled with a good dime-store mystery like this one, you were looking at the likelihood of an explosive circulation boost, and in the tabloid business, increased circulation was more than the name of the game; it was the Holy Grail.

For Dees, however, there was bad news as well as good. The good news was that he had gotten to the story ahead of the rest of the pack; he was still undefeated, still champion, still top hog in the sty. The bad news was that the roses really belonged to Morrison . . . so far, at least. Morrison, the freshman editor, had gone on picking away at the damned thing even after Dees, the veteran reporter, had assured him there was nothing there but smoke and echoes. Dees didn't like the idea that Morrison had smelled blood first—hated it, in fact—and this left him with a completely understandable urge to piss the man off. And he knew just how to do it.

“Duffrey, Maryland, huh?”

Morrison nodded.

“Anyone in the straight press pick up on it yet?” Dees asked, and was gratified to see Morrison bristle at once.

“If you mean has anyone suggested there's a serial killer out there, the answer is no,” he said stiffly.

But it won't be long, Dees thought.

“But it won't be long,” Morrison said. “If there's another one—”

“Gimme the file,” Dees said, pointing to the buff-colored folder lying on Morrison's eerily neat desk.

The balding editor put a hand on it instead, and Dees understood two things: Morrison *was* going to give it to him, but not until he had been made to pay a little for his initial unbelief. . . and his lofty I'm-the-veteran-around-here attitude. Well, maybe that was all right. Maybe even the top hog in the sty needed to have his curly little tail twisted every now and then, just to refresh his memory on his place in the scheme of things.

"I thought you were supposed to be over at the Museum of Natural History, talking to the penguin guy," Morrison said. The corners of his mouth curved up in a small but undeniably evil smile. "The one who thinks they're smarter than people *and* dolphins."

Dees pointed to the only other thing on Morrison's desk besides the folder and the pictures of his nerdy-looking wife and three nerdy-looking kids: a large wire basket labelled DAILY BREAD. It currently contained a single thin sheaf of manuscript, six or eight pages held together with one of Dees's distinctive magenta paper-clips, and an envelope marked CONTACT SHEETS DO NOT BEND.

Morrison took his hand off the folder (looking ready to slap it back on if Dees so much as twitched), opened the envelope, and shook out two sheets covered with black-and-white photos not much bigger than postage stamps. Each photo showed long files of penguins staring silently out at the viewer. There was something undeniably creepy about them—to Merton Morrison they looked like George Romero zombies in tuxedos. He nodded and slipped them back into the envelope. Dees disliked all editors on principle, but he had to admit that this one at least gave credit where credit was due. It was a rare attribute, one Dees suspected would cause the man all sorts of medical problems in later life. Or maybe the problems had already started. There he sat, surely not thirty-five yet, with at least seventy per cent of his skull exposed.

"Not bad," Morrison said. "Who took them?"

"I did," Dees said. "I *always* take the pix that go with my stories. Don't you ever look at the photo credits?"

"Not usually, no," Morrison said, and glanced at the temp headline Dees had slugged at the top of his penguin story. Libby Grannit in Comp would come up with a punchier, more colorful one, of course—that was, after all, her job—but Dees's instincts were good all the way up to headlines, and he usually found the right street, if not often the actual address and apartment number.

ALIEN INTELLIGENCE AT NORTH POLE, this one read. Penguins weren't aliens, of course, and Morrison had an idea that they actually lived at the *South* Pole, but those things hardly mattered. *Inside View* readers were crazy about both Aliens and Intelligence (perhaps because a majority of them felt like the former and sensed in themselves a deep deficiency of the latter), and *that* was what mattered.

"The headline's a little lacking," Morrison began, "but—"

"—that's what Libby's for," Dees finished for him. "So. . ."

"So?" Morrison asked. His eyes were wide and blue and guileless behind his gold-rimmed glasses. He put his hand back down on top of the folder, smiled at Dees, and waited.

"So what do you want me to say? That I was wrong?"

Morrison's smile widened a millimeter or two. "Just that you *might* have been wrong. That'd do, I guess—you know what a pussycat I am."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Dees said, but he was relieved. He could take a little abasement; it was the actual crawling around on his belly that he didn't like.

Morrison sat looking at him, right hand splayed over the file.

"Okay; I might have been wrong."

"How large-hearted of you to admit it," Morrison said, and handed the file over.

Dees snatched it greedily, took it over to the chair by the window, and opened it. What he read this time—it was no more than a loose assemblage of wire-service stories and clippings from a few small-town weeklies—blew his mind.

I didn't see this before, he thought, and on the heels of that: *Why* didn't I see this before?

He didn't know . . . but he *did* know he might have to rethink that idea of being top hog in the tabloid sty if he missed many more stories like this. He knew something else, as well: if his and Morrison's positions had been reversed (and Dees had turned down the editor's chair at *Inside View* not once but twice over the last seven years), he would have made Morrison crawl on his belly like a reptile before giving him the file.

Fuck that, he told himself. You would have fired his ass right out the door.

The idea that he might be burning out fluttered through his mind. The burnout rate was pretty high in this business, he knew. Apparently you could spend only so many years writing about flying saucers carrying off whole Brazilian villages (usually illustrated by out-of-focus photographs of lightbulbs hanging from strands of thread), dogs that could do calculus, and out-of-work daddies chopping their kids up like kindling wood. Then one day you suddenly snapped. Like Dottie Walsh, who had gone home one night and taken a bath with a dry-cleaning bag wrapped around her head.

Don't be a fool, he told himself, but he was uneasy just the same. The story was sitting there, *right there*, big as life and twice as ugly. How in the hell could he have missed it?

He looked up at Morrison, who was rocked back in his desk chair with his hands laced together over his stomach, watching him. "Well?" Morrison asked.

"Yeah," he said. "This could be big. And that's not all. I think it's the real goods."

"I don't care if it's the real goods or not," Morrison said, "as long as it sells papers. And it's going to sell *lots* of papers, isn't it, Richard?"

"Yes." He got to his feet and tucked the folder under his arm. "I want to run this guy's backtrail, starting with the first one we know about, up in Maine."

"Richard?"

He turned back at the door and saw Morrison was looking at the contact sheets again. He was smiling.

"What do you think if we run the best of these next to a photo of Danny DeVito in that Batman movie?"

"It works for me," Dees said, and went out. Questions and self-doubts were suddenly, blessedly set aside; the old smell of blood was back in his nose, strong and bitterly compelling, and for the time being he only wanted to follow it all the way to the end. The end came a week later, not in Maine, not in Maryland, but much farther south, in North Carolina.

It was summertime, which meant the living should have been easy and the cotton high, but nothing was coming easy for Richard Dees as that long day wound its way down toward dark.

The major problem was his inability—at least so far—to get into the small Wilmington airport, which served only one major carrier, a few commuter airlines, and a lot of private planes. There were heavy thunderstorm cells in the area and Dees was circling ninety miles from the airfield, pogoing up and down in the unsteady air and cursing as the last hour of daylight began to slip away. It was 7:45 P.M. by the time he was given landing clearance. That was less than forty minutes before official sundown. He didn't know if the Night Flier stuck to the traditional rules or not, but if he did, it was going to be a close thing.

And the Flier *was* here; of that Dees was sure. He had found the right place, the right Cessna Skymaster. His quarry could have picked Virginia Beach, or Charlotte, or Birmingham, or some point even farther south, but he hadn't. Dees didn't know where he had hidden between leaving Duffrey, Maryland, and arriving here, and didn't care. It was enough to know that his intuition had been correct—his boy had continued to work the windsock circuit. Dees had spent a good part of the last week calling all the airports south of Duffrey that seemed right for the Flier's M.O., making the rounds again and again, using his finger on the Touch-Tone in his Days Inn motel room until it was sore and his contacts on the other end had begun to express their irritation with his persistence. Yet in the end persistence had paid off, as it so often did.

Private planes had landed the night before at all of the most likely airfields, and Cessna Skymaster 337s at all of them. Not surprising, since they were the Toyotas of private aviation. But the Cessna 337 that had landed last night in Wilmington was the one he was looking for; no question about it. He was on the guy.

Dead on the guy.

"N471B, vector ILS runway 34," the radio voice drawled laconically into his earphones. "Fly heading 160. Descend and maintain 3,000."

"Heading 160. Leaving 6 for 3,000, roger."

"And be aware we still got some nasty weather down here."

“Roger,” Dees said, thinking that ole Farmer John, down there in whatever beer-barrel passed for Air Traffic Control in Wilmington, was sure one hell of a sport to tell him that. He *knew* there was still nasty weather in the area; he could see the thunderheads, some with lightning still going off inside them like giant fireworks, and he had spent the last forty minutes or so circling and feeling more like a man in a blender than one in a twin-engine Beechcraft.

He flicked off the autopilot, which had been taking him around and around the same stupid patch of now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t North Carolina farmland for far too long, and grabbed a handful of wheel. No cotton down there, high or otherwise, that he could see. Just a bunch of used-up tobacco patches now overgrown with kudzu. Dees was happy to point his plane’s nose toward Wilmington and start down the ramp, monitored by pilot, ATC, and tower, for the ILS approach.

He picked up the microphone, thought about giving ole Farmer John there a yell, asking him if there happened to be anything weird going on downstairs—the dark-and-stormy-night kind of stuff *Inside View* readers loved, perhaps—then racked the mike again. It was still awhile until sunset; he had verified the official Wilmington time on his way down from Washington National. No, he thought, maybe he’d just keep his questions to himself for a little while longer.

Dees believed the Night Flier was a real vampire about as much as he believed it was the Tooth Fairy who had put all those quarters under his pillow when he was a kid, but if the guy *thought* he was a vampire—and this guy, Dees was convinced, really did—that would probably be enough to make him conform to the rules.

Life, after all, imitates art.

Count Dracula with a private pilot’s license.

You had to admit, Dees thought, it was a lot better than killer penguins plotting the overthrow of the human race.

The Beech jounced as he passed through a thick membrane of cumulus on his steady downward course. Dees cursed and trimmed the plane, which seemed increasingly unhappy with the weather.

*You and me both, babes,* Dees thought.

When he came into the clear again, he could see the lights of Wilmington and Wrightsville Beach clearly.

*Yes, sir, the fatties who shop at 7-Eleven are gonna love this one,* he thought as lightning flashed on the port side. *They're gonna pick up about seventy zillion copies of this baby when they go out for their nightly ration of Twinkies and beer.*

But there was more, and he knew it.

This one could be . . . well . . . just so goddam good.

This one could be *legitimate*.

There was a time when a word like that never would have crossed your mind, ole buddy, he thought. Maybe you *are* burning out.

Still, big stacked headlines danced in his head like sugarplums: INSIDE VIEW REPORTER APPREHENDS CRAZED NIGHT FLIER EXCLUSIVE STORY ON HOW BLOOD-DRINKING NIGHT FLIER WAS FINALLY CAUGHT. "NEEDED TO HAVE IT," DEADLY DRACULA DECLARES.

It wasn't exactly grand opera—Dees had to admit that—but he thought it sang just the same. He thought it sang like a boid.

He picked up the mike after all and depressed the button. He knew his blood-buddy was still down there, but he also knew he wasn't going to be comfortable until he had made absolutely sure.

"Wilmington, this is N471B. You still got a Skymaster 337 from Maryland down there on the ramp?"

Through static: "Looks like it, old hoss. Can't talk just now. I got air traffic."

"Has it got red piping?" Dees persisted.

For a moment he thought he would get no answer, then: "Red piping, roger. Kick it off, N471B, if you don't want me to see it I can slap an FCC fine on y'all. I got too many fish to fry tonight and not enough skilletts."

"Thanks, Wilmington," Dees said in his most courteous voice. He hung up the mike and then gave it the finger, but he was grinning, barely noticing the jolts as he passed through another membrane of cloud. Skymaster, red piping, and he was willing to bet next year's salary that if the doofus in the tower hadn't been so busy, he would have been able to confirm the tail-number as well: N101BL.

One week, by Christ, one little week. That was all it had taken. He had found the Night Flier, it wasn't dark yet, and as impossible as it seemed, there

were no police on the scene. If there *had* been cops, and if they had been there concerning the Cessna, Farmer John almost certainly would have said so, sky-jam and bad weather or not. Some things were just too good not to gossip about.

I want your picture, you bastard, Dees thought. Now he could see the approach lights, flashing white in the dusk. I'll get your story in time, but first, the picture. Just one, but I gotta have it.

Yes, because it was the picture that made it real. No fuzzy out-of-focus lightbulbs; no "artist's conception"; a real by-God photo in living black-and-white. He headed down more steeply, ignoring the descent beep. His face was pale and set. His lips were pulled back slightly, revealing small, gleaming white teeth.

In the combined light of dusk and the instrument panel, Richard Dees looked quite a little bit like a vampire himself.

### 3

There were many things *Inside View* was not—literate, for one, overconcerned with such minor matters as accuracy and ethics, for another—but one thing was undeniable: it was exquisitely attuned to horrors. Merton Morrison was a bit of an asshole (although not as much of one as Dees had thought when he'd first seen the man smoking that dumb fucking pipe of his), but Dees had to give him one thing—he had remembered the things that had made *Inside View* a success in the first place: buckets of blood and guts by the handful.

Oh, there were still pictures of cute babies, plenty of psychic predictions, and Wonder Diets featuring such unlikely ingestibles as beer, chocolate, and potato chips, but Morrison had sensed a sea-change in the temper of the times, and had never once questioned his own judgement about the direction the paper should take. Dees supposed that confidence was the main reason Morrison had lasted as long as he had, in spite of his pipe and his tweed jackets from Asshole Brothers of London. What Morrison knew was that the flower children of the sixties had grown into the cannibals of the nineties. Huggy therapy, political correctness, and "the language of feelings" might be big deals

among the intellectual upper class, but the ever-popular common man was still a lot more interested in mass murders, buried scandals in the lives of the stars, and just how Magic Johnson had gotten AIDS.

Dees had no doubt there was still an audience for *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, but the one for *All Shit Grim and Gory* had become a growth stock again as the Woodstock Generation began to discover gray in its hair and lines curving down from the corners of its petulant self-indulgent mouth. Merton Morrison, whom Dees now recognized as a kind of intuitive genius, had made his own inside view clear in a famous memo issued to all staff and stringers less than a week after he and his pipe had taken up residence in the corner office. By all means, stop and smell the roses on your way to work, this memo suggested, but once you get to there, spread those nostrils—spread them *wide*—and start sniffing for blood and guts.

Dees, who had been *made* for sniffing blood and guts, had been delighted. His nose was the reason he was here, flying into Wilmington. There was a human monster down there, a man who thought he was a vampire. Dees had a name all picked out for him; it burned in his mind as a valuable coin might burn in a man's pocket. Soon he would take the coin out and spend it. When he did, the name would be plastered across the tabloid display racks of every supermarket checkout counter in America, screaming at the patrons in unignorable sixty-point type.

Look out, ladies and sensation seekers, Dees thought. You don't know it, but a very bad man is coming your way. You'll read his real name and forget it, but that's okay. What you'll remember is *my* name for him, the name that's going to put him right up there with Jack the Ripper and the Cleveland Torso Murderer and the Black Dahlia. You'll remember the Night Flier, coming soon to a checkout counter near you. The exclusive story, the exclusive interview . . . but what I want most of all is the exclusive *picture*.

He checked his watch again and allowed himself to relax the tiniest bit (which was all he *could* relax). He still had almost half an hour till dark, and he would be parking next to the white Skymaster with red piping (and N101BL on the tail in a similar red) in less than fifteen minutes.

Was the Flier sleeping in town or in some motel on the way into town? Dees didn't think so. One of the reasons for the Skymaster 337's popularity,

besides its relatively low price, was that it was the only plane its size with a belly-hold. It wasn't much bigger than the trunk of an old VW Beetle, true, but it was roomy enough for three big suitcases or five small ones . . . and it could certainly hold a man, provided he wasn't the size of a pro basketball player. The Night Flier could be in the Cessna's belly-hold, provided he was (a) sleeping in the fetal position with his knees drawn up to his chin; or (b) crazy enough to think he was a real vampire; or (c) both of the above.

Dees had his money on (c).

Now, with his altimeter winding down from four to three thousand feet, Dees thought: Nope, no hotel or motel for you, my friend, am I right? When *you* play vampire, you're like Frank Sinatra—you do it your way. Know what I think? I think when the belly-hold of that plane opens, the first thing I'm gonna see is a shower of graveyard earth (even if it isn't, you can bet your upper incisors it will be when the story comes out), and then I'm gonna see first one leg in a pair of tuxedo pants, and then the other, because you are gonna be *dressed*, aren't you? Oh, dear man, I think you are gonna be dressed to the *nines*, dressed to *kill*, and the auto-winder is already on my camera, and when I see that cloak flap in the breeze—

But that was where his thoughts stopped, because that was when the flashing white lights on both runways below him went out.

## 4

*I want to run this guy's backtrail*, he had told Merton Morrison, *starting with the first one we know about, up in Maine.*

Less than four hours later he had been at Cumberland County Airport, talking to a mechanic named Ezra Hannon. Mr. Hannon looked as if he had recently crawled out of a gin-bottle, and Dees wouldn't have let him within shouting distance of his own plane, but he gave the fellow his full and courteous attention just the same. Of course he did; Ezra Hannon was the first link in what Dees was beginning to think might prove to be a very important chain.

Cumberland County Airport was a dignified-sounding name for a country landing-field which consisted of two Quonset huts and two crisscrossing runways. One of these runways was actually tarred. Because Dees had never landed on a dirt runway, he requested the tarred one. The bouncing his Beech 55 (for which he was in hock up to his eyebrows and beyond) took when he landed convinced him to try the dirt when he took off again, and when he did he had been delighted to find it as smooth and firm as a coed's breast. The field also had a windsock, of course, and of course it was patched like a pair of old Dad's underdrawers. Places like CCA *always* had a windsock. It was part of their dubious charm, like the old biplane that always seemed to be parked in front of the single hangar.

Cumberland County was the most populous in Maine, but you never would have known it from its cow-patty airport, Dees thought. . . or from Ezra the Amazing Gin-Head Mechanic, for that matter. When he grinned, displaying all six of his remaining teeth, he looked like an extra from the film version of James Dickey's *Deliverance*.

The airport sat on the outskirts of the much plusher town of Falmouth, existing mostly on landing fees paid by rich summer residents. Claire Bowie, the Night Flier's first victim, had been CCA's night traffic controller and owned a quarter interest in the airfield. The other employees had consisted of two mechanics and a second ground controller (the ground controllers also sold chips, cigarettes, and sodas; further, Dees had learned, the murdered man had made a pretty mean cheeseburger).

Mechanics and controllers also served as pump jockeys and custodians. It wasn't unusual for the controller to have to rush back from the bathroom, where he had been swabbing out the john with Janitor-in-a-Drum, to give landing clearance and assign a runway from the challenging maze of two at his disposal. The operation was so high-pressure that during the airport's peak summer season the night controller sometimes got only six hours' worth of good sleep between midnight and 7:00 A.M.

Claire Bowie had been killed almost a month prior to Dees's visit, and the picture the reporter put together was a composite created from the news stories in Morrison's thin file and Ezra the Amazing Gin-Head Mechanic's much more colorful embellishments. And even when he had made the necessary

allowances for his primary source, Dees remained sure that something very strange had happened at this dipshit little airport in early July.

The Cessna 337, tail-number N101BL, had radioed the field for landing clearance shortly before dawn on the morning of July 9th. Claire Bowie, who had been working the night shift at the airfield since 1954, when pilots sometimes had to abort their approaches (a maneuver in those days known simply as “pulling up”) because of the cows that sometimes wandered onto what was then the single runway, logged the request at 4:32 A.M. The time of landing he noted as 4:49 A.M.; he recorded the pilot’s name as Dwight Renfield, and the point of N101BL’s origination as Bangor, Maine. The times were undoubtedly correct. The rest was bullshit (Dees had checked Bangor, and wasn’t surprised to find they had never heard of N101BL), but even if Bowie had *known* it was bullshit, it probably wouldn’t have made much difference; at CCA, the atmosphere was loose, and a landing fee was a landing fee.

The name the pilot had given was a bizarre joke. Dwight just happened to be the first name of an actor named Dwight Frye, and Dwight Frye had just happened to play, among a plethora of other parts, the role of Renfield, a slaving lunatic whose idol had been the most famous vampire of all time. But radioing UNICOM and asking for landing clearance in the name of Count Dracula might have raised suspicion even in a sleepy little place like this, Dees supposed.

*Might* have; Dees wasn’t really sure. After all, a landing fee was a landing fee, and “Dwight Renfield” had paid his promptly, in cash, as he had also paid to top off his tanks—the money had been in the register the next day, along with a carbon of the receipt Bowie had written out.

Dees knew about the casual, hipshot way private air-traffic had been controlled at the smaller fields in the fifties and sixties, but he was still astonished by the informal treatment the Night Flier’s plane had received at CCA. It wasn’t the fifties or sixties anymore, after all; this was the era of drug paranoia, and most of the shit to which you were supposed to just say no came into small harbors in small boats, or into small airports in small planes . . . planes like “Dwight Renfield’s” Cessna Skymaster. A landing fee was a landing fee, sure, but Dees would have expected Bowie to give Bangor a

shout about the missing flight-plan just the same, if only to cover his own ass. But he hadn't. The idea of a bribe had occurred to Dees at this point, but his gin-soaked informant claimed that Claire Bowie was as honest as the day was long, and the two Falmouth cops Dees talked to later on had confirmed Hannon's judgement.

Negligence seemed a likelier answer, but in the end it didn't really matter; *Inside View* readers weren't interested in such esoteric questions as how or why things happened. *Inside View* readers were content to know *what* had happened, and how long it took, and if the person it happened to had had time to scream. And pictures, of course. They wanted pictures. Great big hi-intensity black-and-whites, if possible—the kind that seemed to leap right off the page in a swarm of dots and nail you in the forebrain.

Ezra the Amazing Gin-Head Mechanic had looked surprised and considering when Dees asked where he thought "Renfield" might have gone after landing.

"Dunno," he said. "Motel, I s'pose. Musta taken a cab."

"You came in at . . . what time did you say? Seven o'clock that morning? July ninth?"

"Uh-huh. Just before Claire left to go home."

"And the Cessna Skymaster was parked and tied down and empty?"

"Yep. Parked right where yours is now." Ezra pointed, and Dees pulled back a little. The mechanic smelled quite a little bit like a very old Roquefort cheese which had been pickled in Gilbey's Gin.

"Did Claire happen to *say* if he called a cab for the pilot? To take him to a motel? Because there don't seem to be any in easy walking distance."

"There ain't," Ezra agreed. "Closest one's the Sea Breeze, and that's two mile away. Maybe more." He scratched his stubbly chin. "But I don't remember Claire saying ary word about callin the fella a cab."

Dees made a mental note to call the cab companies in the area just the same. At that time he was going on what seemed like a reasonable assumption: that the guy he was looking for slept in a bed, like almost everyone else.

"What about a limo?" he asked.

"Nope," Ezra said more positively, "Claire didn't say nothing about no limbo, and he *woulda* mentioned that."

Dees nodded and decided to call the nearby limo companies, too. He would also question the rest of the staff, but he expected no light to dawn there; this old boozehound was about all there was. He'd had a cup of coffee with Claire before Claire left for the day, and another with him when Claire came back on duty that night, and it looked like that was all she wrote. Except for the Night Flier himself, Ezra seemed to have been the last person to see Claire Bowie alive.

The subject of these ruminations looked slyly off into the distance, scratched the wattles below his chin, then shifted his bloodshot gaze back to Dees. "Claire didn't say nothing about no cab or limbo, but he *did* say something else."

"That so?"

"Yep," Ezra said. He unzipped a pocket of his grease-stained coverall, removed a pack of Chesterfields, lit one up, and coughed a dismal old man's cough. He looked at Dees through the drifting smoke with an expression of half-baked craftiness. "Might not mean nothing, but then again, it might. It sure struck Claire perculyer, though. Must have, because most of the time old Claire wouldn't say shit if he had a mouthful."

"What was it he said?"

"Don't quite remember," Ezra said. "Sometimes, you know, when I forget things, a picture of Alexander Hamilton sorta refreshes my memory."

"How about one of Abe Lincoln?" Dees asked dryly.

After a moment's consideration—a short one—Hannon agreed that sometimes Lincoln also did the trick, and a portrait of this gentleman consequently passed from Dees's wallet to Ezra's slightly palsied hand. Dees thought that a portrait of George Washington *might* have turned the trick, but he wanted to make sure the man was entirely on his side . . . and besides, it all came out of the expense account.

"So give."

"Claire said the guy looked like he must be goin to one hell of a fancy party," Ezra said.

"Oh? Why was that?" Dees was thinking he should have stuck with Washington after all.

“Said the guy looked like he just stepped out of a bandbox. Tuxedo, silk tie, all that stuff.” Ezra paused. “Claire said the guy was even wearin a big cloak. Red as a fire engine inside, black as a woodchuck’s asshole outside. Said when it spread out behind him, it looked like a goddam bat’s wing.”

A large word lit in red neon suddenly flashed on in Dees’s mind, and the word was BINGO.

*You don’t know it, my gin-soaked friend, Dees thought, but you may have just said the words that are going to make you famous.*

“All these questions about Claire,” Ezra said, “and you ain’t never once ast if I saw anything funny.”

“Did you?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.”

“What was that, my friend?”

Ezra scratched his stubbly chin with long, yellow nails, looked wisely at Dees from the corners of his bloodshot eyes, and then took another puff on his cigarette.

“Here we go again,” Dees said, but he produced another picture of Abe Lincoln and was careful to keep his voice and face amiable. His instincts were wide awake now, and they were telling him that Mr. Ginhead wasn’t quite squeezed dry. Not yet, anyway.

“That don’t seem like enough for all I’m tellin you,” Ezra said reproachfully. “Rich city fella like you ought to be able to do better’n ten bucks.”

Dees looked at his watch—a heavy Rolex with diamonds gleaming on the face. “Gosh!” he said. “Look how late it’s getting! And I haven’t even been over to talk with the Falmouth police yet!”

Before he could do more than start to get up, the five had disappeared from between his fingers and had joined its mate in the pocket of Harmon’s coverall.

“All right, if you’ve got something else to tell, tell it,” Dees said. The amiability was gone now. “I’ve got places to go and people to see.”

The mechanic thought it over, scratching his wattles and sending out little puffs of ancient, cheesy smell. Then he said, almost reluctantly: “Seen a big pile of dirt under that Skymaster. Right under the luggage bay, it was.”

“That so?”

“Ayuh. Kicked it with my boot.”

Dees waited. He could do that.

“Nasty stuff. Full of worms.”

Dees waited. This was good, useful stuff, but he didn’t think the old man was wrung completely dry even yet.

“And maggots,” Ezra said. “There was maggots, too. Like where something died.”

Dees stayed that night at the Sea Breeze Motel, and was winging his way to the town of Alderton in upstate New York by eight o’clock the next morning.

## 5

Of all the things Dees didn’t understand about his quarry’s movements, the thing which puzzled him the most was how *leisurely* the Flier had been. In Maine and in Maryland, he had actually lingered before killing. His only one-night stand had been in Alderton, which he had visited two weeks after doing Claire Bowie.

Lakeview Airport in Alderton was even smaller than CCA—a single unpaved runway and a combined Ops/UNICOM that was no more than a shed with a fresh coat of paint. There was no instrument approach; there was, however, a large satellite dish so none of the flying farmers who used the place would have to miss *Murphy Brown* or *Wheel of Fortune* or anything really important like that.

One thing Dees liked a lot: the unpaved Lakeview runway was just as silky-smooth as the one in Maine had been. I could get used to this, Dees thought as he dropped the Beech neatly onto the surface and began to slow it down. No big thuds over asphalt patches, no potholes that want to ground-loop you after you come in . . . yeah, I could get used to this real easy.

In Alderton, nobody had asked for pictures of Presidents or friends of Presidents. In Alderton, the whole town—a community of just under a thousand souls—was in shock, not merely the few part-timers who, along with the late Buck Kendall, had run Lakeview Airport almost as a charity (and certainly in the red). There was really no one to talk to, anyway, not even a

witness of the Ezra Hannon caliber. Hannon had been bleary, Dees reflected, but at least he had been quotable.

“Must have been a mighty man,” one of the part-timers told Dees. “Ole Buck, he dressed out right around two-twenty, and he was easy most of the time, but if you *did* get him riled, he made you sorry. Seen him box down a fella in a carny show that came through P’keepsie two years ago. That kind of fightin ain’t legal, accourse, but Buck was short a payment on that little Piper of his, so he boxed that carny fighter down. Collected two hundred dollars and got it to the loan comp’ny about two days before they was gonna send out someone to repo his ride, I guess.”

The part-timer shook his head, looking genuinely distressed, and Dees wished he’d thought to uncase his camera. *Inside View* readers would have lapped up that long, lined, mournful face. Dees made a mental note to find out if the late Buck Kendall had had a dog. *Inside View* readers also lapped up pictures of the dead man’s dog. You posed it on the porch of the deceased’s house and captioned it BUFFY’S LONG WAIT BEGINS, or something similar.

“It’s a damn shame,” Dees said sympathetically.

The part-timer sighed and nodded. “Guy musta got him from behind. That’s the only way I can figger it.”

Dees didn’t know from which direction Gerard “Buck” Kendall had been gotten, but he knew that this time the victim’s throat had not been ripped out. This time there were holes, holes from which “Dwight Renfield” had presumably sucked his victim’s blood. Except, according to the coroner’s report, the holes were on opposite sides of the neck, one in the jugular vein and the other in the carotid artery. They weren’t the discreet little bite marks of the Bela Lugosi era or the slightly gorier ones of the Christopher Lee flicks, either. The coroner’s report spoke in centimeters, but Dees could translate well enough, and Morrison had the indefatigable Libby Grannit to explain what the coroner’s dry language only partially revealed: the killer either had teeth the size of one of *View*’s beloved Bigfeet, or he had made the holes in Kendall’s neck in a much more prosaic fashion with a hammer and a nail.

*DEADLY NIGHT FLIER SPIKED VICTIMS, DRANK THEIR BLOOD*, both men thought at different places on the same day. *Not bad.*

The Night Flier had requested permission to land at Lake-view Airport shortly after 10:30 P.M. on the night of July 23rd. Kendall had granted permission and had noted a tail-number with which Dees had become very familiar: N101BL. Kendall had noted “name of pilot” as “Dwite Renfield” and the “make and model of aircraft” as “Cessna Skymaster 337.” No mention of the red piping, and of course no mention of the sweeping bat-wing cloak that was as red as a fire engine on the inside and as black as a woodchuck’s asshole on the outside, but Dees was positive of both, just the same.

The Night Flier had flown into Alderton’s Lakeview Airport shortly after ten-thirty, killed that strapping fellow Buck Kendall, drunk his blood, and flown out again in his Cessna sometime before Jenna Kendall came by at five o’clock on the morning of the twenty-fourth to give her husband a fresh-made waffle and discovered his exsanguinated corpse instead.

As Dees stood outside the ramshackle Lakeview hangar/tower mulling these things over, it occurred to him that if you *gave* blood, the most you could expect was a cup of orange juice and a word of thanks. If you *took* it, however—*sucked* it, to be specific—you got headlines. As he turned the rest of a bad cup of coffee out on the ground and headed toward his plane, ready to fly south to Maryland, it occurred to Richard Dees that God’s hand might have shaken just a tiny bit when He was finishing off the supposed masterwork of His creative empire.

## 6

Now, two bad hours after leaving Washington National, things had suddenly gotten a lot worse, and with shocking suddenness. The runway lights had gone out, but Dees now saw that wasn’t all that had gone out—half of Wilmington and all of Wrightsville Beach were also dark. ILS was still there, but when Dees snatched the mike and screamed, “What happened? *Talk* to me, Wilmington!” he got nothing back but a screech of static in which a few voices babbled like distant ghosts.

He jammed the mike back, missing the prong. It thudded to the cockpit floor at the end of its curled wire, and Dees forgot it. The grab and the yell had

been pure pilot's instinct and no more. He knew what had happened as surely as he knew the sun set in the west . . . which it would do very soon now. A stroke of lightning must have scored a direct hit on a power substation near the airport. The question was whether or not to go in anyway.

"You had clearance," one voice said. Another immediately (and correctly) replied that that was so much bullshit rationalization. You learned what you were supposed to do in a situation like this when you were still the equivalent of a student driver. Logic and the book tell you to head for your alternate and try to contact ATC. Landing under snafu conditions such as these could cost him a violation and a hefty fine.

On the other hand, *not* landing now—*right* now—could lose him the Night Flier. It might also cost a life (or lives), but Dees barely factored this into the equation . . . until an idea went off like a flashbulb in his mind, an inspiration that occurred, as most of his inspirations did, in huge tabloid type:

HEROIC REPORTER SAVES (fill in a number, as large as possible, which was pretty large, given the amazingly generous borders that mark the range of human credulity) FROM CRAZED NIGHT FLIER.

Eat *that*, Farmer John, Dees thought, and continued his descent toward Runway 34.

The runway lights down there suddenly flashed on, as if approving his decision, then went out again, leaving blue afterimages on his retinas that turned the sick green of spoiled avocados a moment later. Then the weird static coming from the radio cleared and Farmer John's voice screamed: "*Haul port, N471B: Piedmont, haul starboard: Jesus, oh Jesus, midair, I think we got a midair —*"

Dees's self-preservation instincts were every bit as well honed as those which smelled blood in the bush. He never even saw the Piedmont Airlines 727's strobe lights. He was too busy banking as tightly to port as the Beech could bank—which was as tight as a virgin's cooze, and Dees would be happy to testify to that fact if he got out of this shitstorm alive—as soon as the second word was out of Farmer John's mouth. He had a momentary sight/sense of something huge only inches above him, and then the Beech 55 was taking a beating that made the previous rough air seem like glass. His cigarettes flew out of his breast pocket and streamed everywhere. The half-dark Wilmington

skyline tilted crazily. His stomach seemed to be trying to squeeze his heart all the way up his throat and into his mouth. Spit ran up one cheek like a kid whizzing along a greased slide. Maps flew like birds. The air outside now raved with jet thunder as well as the kind nature made. One of the windows in the four-seat passenger compartment imploded, and an asthmatic wind whooped in, skirling everything not tied down back there into a tornado.

*“Resume your previous altitude assignment, N471B!”* Farmer John was screaming. Dees was aware that he’d just ruined a two-hundred-dollar pair of pants by spraying about a pint of hot piss into them, but he was partially soothed by a strong feeling that old Farmer John had just loaded his Jockey shorts with a truckload or so of fresh Mars Bars. Sounded that way, anyhow.

Dees carried a Swiss Army knife. He took it from his right pants pocket and, holding the wheel with his left hand, cut through his shirt just above the left elbow, bringing blood. Then with no pause, he made another cut, shallow, just below his left eye. He folded the knife shut and stuffed it into the elasticized map pocket in the pilot’s door. Gotta clean it later, he thought. And if I forget it, I could be in deep shit. But he knew he wouldn’t forget, and considering the things the Night Flier had gotten away with, he thought he’d be okay.

The runway lights came on again, this time for good, he hoped, although their pulsing quality told him they were being powered by a generator. He homed the Beech in again on Runway 34. Blood ran down his left cheek to the corner of his mouth. He sucked some in and then spat a pink mixture of blood and spit onto his IVSI. Never miss a trick; just keep following those instincts and they’d always take you home.

He looked at his watch. Sunset was only fourteen minutes away now. This was cutting it much too close to the bone.

*“Pull up, Beech!”* Farmer John yelled. *“Are you deaf?”*

Dees groped for the mike’s kinked wire without ever taking his eyes from the runway lights. He pulled the wire through his fingers until he got the mike itself. He palmed it and depressed the send button.

“Listen to me, you chicken-fried son of a bitch,” he said, and now his lips were pulled all the way back to the gum line. “I missed getting turned into strawberry jam by that 727 because your shit genny didn’t kick in when it was

supposed to; as a result I had no ATC comm. I don't know how many people on the *airliner* just missed getting turned into strawberry jam, but I bet *you* do, and I know the cockpit crew does. The only reason those guys are still alive is because the captain of that boat was bright enough to allemande right, and I was bright enough to do-si-do, but I have sustained both structural and physical damage. If you don't give me a landing clearance right now, I'm going to land anyway. The only difference is that if I have to land without clearance, I'm going to have you up in front of an FAA hearing. But first I will personally see to it that your head and your asshole change places. Have you got that, *hoss?*"

A long, static-filled silence. Then a very small voice, utterly unlike Farmer John's previous hearty "Hey bo'!" delivery, said, "You're cleared to land Runway 34, N471B."

Dees smiled and homed in on the runway.

He depressed the mike button and said, "I got mean and yelling. I'm sorry. It only happens when I almost die."

No response from the ground.

"Well, fuck you very much," Dees said, and then headed on down, resisting the impulse to take a quick glance at his watch as he did so.

## 7

Dees was case-hardened and proud of it, but there was no use kidding himself; what he found in Duffrey gave him the creeps. The Night Flier's Cessna had spent another entire day—July 31st—on the ramp, but that was really only where the creeps began. It was the blood his loyal *Inside View* readers would care about, of course, and that was just as it should be, world without end, amen, amen, but Dees was increasingly aware that blood (or, in the case of good old Ray and Ellen Sarch, the *lack* of blood) was only where this story started. Below the blood were caverns dark and strange.

Dees arrived in Duffrey on August 8th, by then barely a week behind the Night Flier. He wondered again where his batty buddy went between strikes. Disney World? Busch Gardens? Atlanta, maybe, to check out the Braves? Such

things were relatively small potatoes right now, with the chase still on, but they would be valuable later on. They would become, in fact, the journalistic equivalent of Hamburger Helper, stretching the leftovers of the Night Flier story through a few more issues, allowing readers to resavor the flavor even after the biggest chunks of raw meat had been digested.

Still, there *were* caverns in this story—dark places into which a man might drop and be lost forever. That sounded both crazy and corny, but by the time Dees began to get a picture of what had gone on in Duffrey, he had actually begun to believe it . . . which meant *that* part of the story would never see print, and not just because it was personal. It violated Dees's single ironclad rule: Never believe what you publish, and never publish what you believe. It had, over the years, allowed him to keep his sanity while those all about him had been losing theirs.

He had landed at Washington National—a *real* airport for a change—and rented a car to take him the sixty miles to Duffrey, because without Ray Sarch and his wife, Ellen, there *was* no Duffrey Airfield. Aside from Ellen's sister, Raylene, who was a pretty fair Socket Wrench Susie, the two of them had been the whole shebang. There was a single oiled-dirt runway (oiled both to lay the dust and to discourage the growth of weeds) and a control booth not much bigger than a closet attached to the JetAire trailer where the Sarch couple lived. They were both retired, both fliers, both reputedly as tough as nails, and still crazy in love with each other even after almost five decades of marriage.

Further, Dees learned, the Sarches watched the private air-traffic in and out of their field with a close eye; they had a personal stake in the war on drugs. Their only son had died in the Florida Everglades, trying to land in what looked like a clear stretch of water with better than a ton of Acapulco Gold packed into a stolen Beech 18. The water *had* been clear . . . except for a single stump, that was. The Beech 18 hit it, water-looped, and exploded. Doug Sarch had been thrown clear, his body smoking and singed but probably still alive, as little as his grieving parents would want to believe such a thing. He had been eaten by gators, and all that remained of him when the DEA guys finally found him a week later was a dismembered skeleton, a few maggoty scraps of flesh, a charred pair of Calvin Klein jeans, and a sport coat from Paul Stuart in New York. One of the sport-coat pockets had contained better than twenty

thousand dollars in cash; another had yielded nearly an ounce of Peruvian flake cocaine.

“It was drugs and the motherfuckers who run em killed my boy,” Ray Sarch had said on several occasions, and Ellen Sarch was willing to double and redouble on that one. Her hatred of drugs and drug dealers, Dees was told again and again (he was amused by the nearly unanimous feeling in Duffrey that the murder of the elderly Sarches had been a “gangland hit”), was exceeded only by her grief and bewilderment over the seduction of her son by those very people.

Following the death of their son, the Sarches had kept their eyes peeled for anything or anyone who looked even remotely like a drug transporter. They had brought the Maryland State Police out to the field four times on false alarms, but the State Bears hadn’t minded because the Sarches had also blown the whistle on three small transporters and two very big ones. The last had been carrying thirty pounds of pure Bolivian cocaine. That was the kind of bust that made you forget a few false alarms, the sort of bust that made promotions.

So very late in the evening of July 30th comes this Cessna Skymaster with a number and description that had gone out to every airfield and airport in America, including the one in Duffrey; a Cessna whose pilot had identified himself as Dwight Renfield, point of origination, Bayshore Airport, Delaware, a field which had never heard of “Renfield” or a Skymaster with tail-number N101BL; the plane of a man who was almost surely a murderer.

“If he’d flown in here, he’d be in the stir now,” one of the Bayshore controllers had told Dees over the phone, but Dees wondered. Yes. He wondered very much.

The Night Flier had landed in Duffrey at 11:27 P.M., and “Dwight Renfield” had not only signed the Sarches’ logbook but also had accepted Ray Sarch’s invitation to come into the trailer, have a beer, and watch a rerun of *Gunsmoke* on TNT. Ellen Sarch had told all of this to the proprietor of the Duffrey Beauty Bar the following day. This woman, Selida McCammon, had identified herself to Dees as one of the late Ellen Sarch’s closest friends.

When Dees asked how Ellen had seemed, Selida had paused and then said, “Dreamy, somehow. Like a high-school girl with a crush, almost seventy years

old or not. Her color was so high I thought it was make-up, until I started in on her perm. Then I saw that she was just . . . you know . . .” Selida McCammon shrugged. She knew what she meant but not how to say it.

“Het up,” Dees suggested, and that made Selida McCammon laugh and clap her hands.

“Het up! That’s it! You’re a writer, all right!”

“Oh, I write like a boid,” Dees said, and offered a smile he hoped looked good-humored and warm. This was an expression he had once practiced almost constantly and continued to practice with fair regularity in the bedroom mirror of the New York apartment he called his home, and in the mirrors of the hotels and motels that were *really* his home. It seemed to work—Selida McCammon answered it readily enough—but the truth was that Dees had never felt good-humored and warm in his life. As a kid he had believed these emotions didn’t really exist at all; they were just a masquerade, a social convention. Later on he decided he had been wrong about that; most of what he thought of as “*Reader’s Digest* emotions” *were* real, at least for most people. Perhaps even love, the fabled Big Enchilada, was real. That he himself could not feel these emotions was undoubtedly a shame, but hardly the end of the world. There were, after all, people out there with cancer, and AIDS, and the memory-spans of brain-damaged parakeets. When you looked at it that way, you quickly realized that being deprived of a few huggy-kissy emotions was fairly small beans. The important thing was that if you could manage to stretch the muscles of your face in the right directions every now and then, you were fine. It didn’t hurt and it was easy; if you could remember to zip up your fly after you took a leak, you could remember to smile and look warm when it was expected of you. And an understanding smile, he had discovered over the years, was the world’s best interview tool. Once in awhile a voice inside asked him what his *own* inside view was, but Dees didn’t *want* an inside view. He only wanted to write and to take photographs. He was better at the writing, always had been and always would be, and he knew it, but he liked the photographs better just the same. He liked to touch them. To see how they froze people either with their real faces hung out for the whole world to see or with their masks so clearly apparent that they were beyond denial. He liked

how, in the best of them, people always looked surprised and horrified. How they looked caught.

If pressed, he would have said the photographs provided all the inside view he needed, and the subject had no relevance here, anyway. What *did* was the Night Flier, his little batty buddy, and how he had waltzed into the lives of Ray and Ellen Sarch a week or so earlier.

The Flier had stepped out of his plane and walked into an office with a red-bordered FAA notice on the wall, a notice which suggested there was a dangerous guy out there driving a Cessna Skymaster 337, tail-number N101BL, who might have murdered two men. This guy, the notice went on, might or might not be calling himself Dwight Renfield. The Skymaster had landed, Dwight Renfield had signed in and had almost surely spent the following day in the belly-hold of his plane. And what about the Sarches, those two sharp-eyed old folks?

The Sarches had said nothing; the Sarches had *done* nothing.

Except that latter wasn't quite right, Dees had discovered. Ray Sarch had certainly done something; he had invited the Night Flier in to watch an old *Gunsmoke* episode and drink a beer with his wife. They had treated him like an old friend. And then, the next day, Ellen Sarch had made an appointment at the Beauty Bar, which Selida McCammon had found surprising; Ellen's visits were usually as regular as clockwork, and this one was at least two weeks before Selida would next have expected her. Her instructions had been unusually explicit; she had wanted not just the usual cut but a perm . . . and a little color, too.

"She wanted to look younger," Selida McCammon told Dees, and then wiped a tear from one cheek with the side of her hand.

But Ellen Sarch's behavior had been pedestrian compared to that of her husband. He had called the FAA at Washington National and told them to issue a NOTAM, removing Duffrey from the active-airfield grid, at least for the time being. He had, in other words, pulled down the shades and closed up the shop.

On his way home, he'd stopped for gas at the Duffrey Texaco and told Norm Wilson, the proprietor, that he thought he was coming down with the

flu. Norm told Dees that he thought Ray was probably right about that—he'd looked pale and wan, suddenly even older than his years.

That night, the two vigilant fire wardens had, in effect, burned to death. Ray Sarch was found in the little control room, his head torn off and cast into the far corner, where it sat on a ragged stump of neck, staring toward the open doorway with wide, glazed eyes, as if there were actually something there to see.

His wife had been found in the bedroom of the Sarch trailer. She was in bed. She was dressed in a peignoir so new it might never have been worn before that night. She was old, a deputy had told Dees (at twenty-five dollars he was a more expensive fuck than Ezra the Amazing Gin-Head Mechanic, but worth it), but you still only had to take one look to know that there was a woman who'd dressed for bed with loving on her mind. Dees had liked the c & w twang so much that he wrote it down in his notebook. Those huge, spike-sized holes were driven into her neck, one in the carotid, the other in the jugular. Her face was composed, her eyes closed, her hands on her bosom.

Although she had lost almost every drop of blood in her body, there were only spots on the pillows beneath her, and a few more spots on the book which lay open on her stomach: *The Vampire Lestat*, by Anne Rice.

And the Night Flier?

Sometime just before midnight on July 31st, or just after it on the morning of August 1st, he had simply flown away. Like a boid.

Or a bat.

## 8

Dees touched down in Wilmington seven minutes before official sunset. While he was throttling back, still spitting blood out of his mouth from the cut below his eye, he saw lightning strike down with blue-white fire so intense that it nearly blinded him. On the heels of the light came the most deafening thunderclap he had ever heard. His subjective opinion of the sound was confirmed when another window in the passenger compartment, stellated by

the near miss with the Piedmont 727, now coughed inward in a spray of junk-shop diamonds.

In the brilliant glare he saw a squat, cubelike building on the port side of Runway 34 impaled by the bolt. It exploded, shooting fire into the sky in a column that, although brilliant, did not even come close to the power of the bolt that had ignited it.

Like lighting a stick of dynamite with a baby nuke, Dees thought confusedly, and then: The genny. That was the genny.

The lights—all of them, the white lights that marked the edges of the runway and the bright red bulbs that marked its end—were suddenly gone, as if they had been no more than candles puffed out by a strong gust of wind. All at once Dees was rushing at better than eighty miles an hour from dark into dark.

The concussive force of the explosion which had destroyed the airport's main generator struck the Beech like a fist—did more than strike it, hammered it like a looping haymaker. The Beech, still hardly knowing it had become a ground-bound creature again, skittered affrightedly to starboard, rose, and came down with the right wheel pogoing up and down over something—*some things*—that Dees vaguely realized were landing lights.

Go port! his mind screamed. Go port, you asshole!

He almost did before his colder mind asserted itself. If he hauled the wheel to port at this speed, he would ground-loop. Probably wouldn't explode, considering how little fuel was left in the tanks, but it was possible. Or the Beech might simply twist apart, leaving Richard Dees from the gut on down twitching in his seat, while Richard Dees from the gut on up went in a different direction, trailing severed intestines like party-favors and dropping his kidneys on the concrete like a couple of oversized chunks of birdshit.

Ride it out! he screamed at himself. Ride it out, you son of a bitch, ride it out!

Something—the genny's secondary LP tanks, he guessed when he had time for guessing—exploded then, buffeting the Beech even farther to starboard, but that was okay, it got him off the dead landing lights, and all at once he was running with relative smoothness again, port wheel on the edge of Runway 34, starboard wheel on the spooky verge between the lights and the ditch he had

observed on the right of the runway. The Beech was still shuddering, but not badly, and he understood that he was running on one flat, the starboard tire shredded by the landing lights it had crushed.

He was slowing down, that was what mattered, the Beech finally beginning to understand that it had become a different thing, a thing that belonged to the land again. Dees was starting to relax when he saw the wide-body Learjet, the one the pilots called Fat Albert, looming ahead of him, parked insanely across the runway where the pilot had stopped on his taxi out to Runway 5.

Dees bore down on it, saw lighted windows, saw faces staring out at him with the gape of idiots in an asylum watching a magic trick, and then, without thinking, he pushed full right rudder, bouncing the Beech off the runway and into the ditch, missing the Lear by approximately an inch and a half. He heard faint screams but was really aware of nothing but the *now* exploding in front of him like a string of firecrackers as the Beech tried to become a thing of the air again, helpless to do so with the flaps down and the engines dropping revs but trying anyway; there was a leap like a convulsion in the dying light of the secondary explosion, and then he was skidding across a taxiway, seeing the General Aviation Terminal for a moment with its corners lit by emergency lights that ran on storage batteries, seeing the parked planes—one of them almost surely the Night Flier's Skymaster—as dark crepe-paper silhouettes against a baleful orange light that was the sunset, now revealed by the parting thunderheads.

*I'm going over!* he screamed to himself, and the Beech *did* try to roll; the port wing struck a fountain of sparks from the taxiway nearest the terminal and its tip actually broke free, wheeling off into the scrub where friction-heat awoke a dim fire in the wet weeds.

Then the Beech was still, and the only sounds were the snowy roar of static from the radio, the sound of broken bottles fizzing their contents onto the carpet of the passenger compartment, and the frenzied hammering of Dees's own heart. He slammed the pop release on his harness and headed for the pressurized hatch even before he was totally sure he was alive.

What happened later he remembered with eidetic clarity, but from the moment the Beech skidded to a stop on the taxiway, ass-end to the Lear and tilted to one side, to the moment he heard the first screams from the terminal,

all he remembered for sure was swinging back to get his camera. He couldn't leave the plane without his camera; the Nikon was the closest thing Dees had to a wife. He'd bought it in a Toledo hockshop when he was seventeen and kept it with him ever since. He had added lenses, but the basic box was about the same now as it had been then; the only modifications had been the occasional scratch or dent that came with the job. The Nikon was in the elasticized pocket behind his seat. He pulled it out, looked at it to make sure it was intact, saw that it was. He slung it around his neck and bent over the hatch.

He threw the lever, jumped out and down, staggered, almost fell, and caught his camera before it could strike the concrete of the taxiway. There was another growl of thunder, but *only* a growl this time, distant and unthreatening. A breeze touched him like the caressing touch of a kind hand on his face. . . but more icily below the belt. Dees grimaced. How he had pissed his pants when his Beech and the Piedmont jet had barely scraped by each other would *also* not be in the story.

Then a thin, drilling shriek came from the General Aviation Terminal—a scream of mingled agony and horror. It was as if someone had slapped Dees across the face. He came back to himself. He centered on his goal again. He looked at his watch. It wasn't working. Either the concussion had broken it or it had stopped. It was one of those amusing antiques you had to wind up, and he couldn't remember when he had last done it.

Was it sunset? It was fucking dark out, yes, but with all the thunderheads massed around the airport, it was hard to tell how much that meant. *Was* it?

Another scream came—no, not a scream, a screech—and the sound of breaking glass.

Dees decided sunset no longer mattered.

He ran, vaguely aware that the genny's auxiliary tanks were still burning and that he could smell gas in the air. He tried to increase his speed but it seemed he was running in cement. The terminal was getting closer, but not very fast. Not fast enough.

*"Please, no! Please, no! PLEASE NO! OH PLEASE, NO!"*

This scream, spiraling up and up, was suddenly cut off by a terrible, inhuman howl. Yet there *was* something human in it, and that was perhaps the

most terrible thing of all. In the chancy light of the emergency lamps mounted on the corners of the terminal, Dees saw something dark and flailing shatter more glass in the wall of the terminal that faced the parking area—that wall was almost entirely glass—and come flying out. It landed on the ramp with a soggy thud, rolled, and Dees saw it was a man.

The storm was moving away but lightning still flickered fitfully, and as Dees ran into the parking area, panting now, he finally saw the Night Flier's plane, N101BL painted boldly on the tail. The letters and numbers looked black in this light, but he knew they were red and it didn't matter, anyway. The camera was loaded with fast black-and-white film and armed with a smart flash which would fire only when the light was too low for the film's speed.

The Skymaster's belly-hold hung open like the mouth of a corpse. Below it was a large pile of earth in which things squirmed and moved. Dees saw this, did a double-take, and skidded to a stop. Now his heart was filled not just with fright but with a wild, capering happiness. How good it was that everything had come together like this!

Yes, he thought, but don't you call it luck—don't you *dare* call it luck. Don't you even call it hunch.

Correct. It wasn't luck that had kept him holed up in that shitty little motel room with the clanky air-conditioner, not hunch—not *precisely* hunch, anyway—that had tied him to the phone hour after hour, calling fly speck airports and giving the Night Flier's tail-number over and over again. That was pure reporter's instinct, and here was where it all started paying off. Except this was no ordinary payoff; this was the jackpot, El Dorado, that fabled Big Enchilada.

He skidded to a stop in front of the yawning belly-hold and tried to bring the camera up. Almost strangled himself on the strap. Cursed. Unwound the strap. Aimed.

From the terminal came another scream—that of a woman or a child. Dees barely noticed. The thought that there was a slaughter going on in there was followed by the thought that slaughter would only fatten the story, and then both thoughts were gone as he snapped three quick shots of the Cessna, making sure to get the gaping belly-hold and the number on the tail. The auto-winder hummed.

Dees ran on. More glass smashed. There was another thud as another body was ejected onto the cement like a rag doll that had been stuffed full of some thick dark liquid like cough-syrup. Dees looked, saw confused movement, the billowing of something that *might* have been a cape . . . but he was still too far away to tell. He turned. Snapped two more pictures of the plane, these shots dead-on. The gaping belly-hold and the pile of earth would be stark and undeniable in the print.

Then he whirled and ran for the terminal. The fact that he was armed with only an old Nikon never crossed his mind.

He stopped ten yards away. Three bodies out here, two adults, one of each sex, and one that might have been either a small woman or a girl of thirteen or so. It was hard to tell with the head gone.

Dees aimed the camera and fired off six quick shots, the flash flickering its own white lightning, the auto-winder making its contented little whizzing sound.

His mind never lost count. He was loaded with thirty-six shots. He had taken eleven. That left twenty-five. There was more film stuffed into the deep pockets of his slacks, and that was great . . . if he got a chance to reload. You could never count on that, though; with photographs like these, you had to grab while the grabbing was good. It was strictly a fast-food banquet.

Dees reached the terminal and yanked open the door.

## 9

He thought he had seen everything there was to see, but he had *never* seen anything like this. *Never*.

How many? his mind yammered. How many you got? Six? Eight? Maybe a dozen?

He couldn't tell. The Night Flier had turned the little private terminal into a knacker's shop. Bodies and parts of bodies lay everywhere. Dees saw a foot clad in a black Converse sneaker; shot it. A ragged torso; shot it. Here was a man in a greasy mechanic's coverall who was still alive, and for a weird moment he thought it was Ezra the Amazing Gin-Head Mechanic from Cumberland

County Airport, but this guy wasn't just going bald; this guy had entirely made the grade. His face had been chopped wide open from forehead to chin. His nose lay in halves, reminding Dees for some mad reason of a grilled frankfurter, split and ready for the bun.

Dees shot it.

And suddenly, just like that, something inside him rebelled and screamed *No more!* in an imperative voice it was impossible to ignore, let alone deny.

*No more, stop, it's over!*

He saw an arrow painted on the wall, with the words THIS WAY TO COMFORT STATIONS below it. Dees ran in the direction the arrow pointed, his camera flapping.

The men's room happened to be the first one he came to, but Dees wouldn't have cared if it was the aliens' room. He was weeping in great, harsh, hoarse sobs. He could barely credit the fact that these sounds were coming from him. It had been years since he had wept. He'd been a kid the last time.

He slammed through the door, skidded like a skier almost out of control, and grabbed the edge of the second basin in line.

He leaned over it, and everything came out in a rich and stinking flood, some of it splattering back onto his face, some landing in brownish clots on the mirror. He smelled the takeout chicken Creole he'd eaten hunched over the phone in the motel room—this had been just before he'd hit pay dirt and gone racing for his plane—and threw up again, making a huge grating sound like overstressed machinery about to strip its gears.

Jesus, he thought, dear Jesus, it's not a man, it can't be a man—

That was when he heard the sound.

It was a sound he had heard at least a thousand times before, a sound that was commonplace in any American man's life . . . but now it filled him with a dread and a creeping terror beyond all his experience or belief.

It was the sound of a man voiding into a urinal.

But although he could see all three of the bathroom's urinals in the vomit-splattered mirror, he could see no one at any of them.

Dees thought: Vampires don't cast reflec—

Then he saw reddish liquid striking the porcelain of the center urinal, saw it running down that porcelain, saw it swirling into the geometric arrangement

of holes at the bottom.

There was no stream in the air; he saw it only when it struck the dead porcelain.

That was when it became visible.

He was frozen. He stood, hands on the edge of the basin, his mouth and throat and nose and sinuses thick with the taste and smell of chicken Creole, and watched the incredible yet prosaic thing that was happening just behind him.

I am, he thought dimly, watching a vampire take a piss.

It seemed to go on forever—the bloody urine striking the porcelain, becoming visible, and swirling down the drain. Dees stood with his hands planted on the sides of the basin into which he had thrown up, gazing at the reflection in the mirror, feeling like a frozen gear in some vast jammed machine.

*I'm almost certainly dead meat*, he thought.

In the mirror he saw the chromed handle go down by itself. Water roared.

Dees heard a rustle and flap and knew it was a cape, just as he knew that if he turned around, he could strike the “almost certainly” from his last thought. He stayed where he was, palms biting the edge of the basin.

A low, ageless voice spoke from directly behind him. The owner of the voice was so close Dees could feel its cold breath on his neck.

“You have been following me,” the ageless voice said.

Dees moaned.

“Yes,” the ageless voice said, as if Dees had disagreed with him. “I know you, you see. I know all about you. Now listen closely, my inquisitive friend, because I say this only once: don't follow me anymore.”

Dees moaned again, a doglike sound, and more water ran into his pants.

“Open your camera,” the ageless voice said.

*My film!* part of Dees cried. *My film! All I've got! All I've got! My pictures!*

Another dry, batlike flap of the cape. Although Dees could see nothing, he sensed the Night Flier had moved even closer.

*Now.*”

His film *wasn't* all he had.

There was his life.

Such as it was.

He saw himself whirling and seeing what the mirror would not, could not, show him; saw himself seeing the Night Flier, his batty buddy, a grotesque thing splattered with blood and bits of flesh and clumps of torn-out hair; saw himself snapping shot after shot while the auto-winder hummed . . . but there would be nothing.

Nothing at all.

Because you couldn't take their pictures, either.

"You're real," he croaked, never moving, his hands seemingly welded to the edge of the basin.

"So are you," the ageless voice rasped, and now Dees could smell ancient crypts and sealed tombs on its breath. "For now, at least. This is your last chance, my inquisitive would-be biographer. Open your camera . . . or I'll do it."

With hands that seemed totally numb, Dees opened his Nikon.

Air hummed past his chilly face; it felt like moving razor blades. For a moment he saw a long white hand, streaked with blood; saw ragged nails silted with filth.

Then his film parted and spooled spinelessly out of his camera.

There was another dry flap. Another stinking breath. For a moment he thought the Night Flier would kill him anyway. Then in the mirror he saw the door of the men's room open by itself.

*He doesn't need me,* Dees thought. *He must have eaten very well tonight.* He immediately threw up again, this time directly onto the reflection of his own staring face.

The door wheezed shut on its pneumatic elbow.

Dees stayed right where he was for the next three minutes or so; stayed there until the approaching sirens were almost on top of the terminal; stayed there until he heard the cough and roar of an airplane engine.

The engine of a Cessna Skymaster 337, almost undoubtedly.

Then he walked out of the bathroom on legs like stilts, struck the far wall of the corridor outside, rebounded, and walked back into the terminal. He slid in a pool of blood, and almost fell.

*“Hold it mister!”* a cop screamed behind him. *“Hold it right there! One move and you’re dead!”*

Dees didn’t even turn around.

“Press, dickface,” he said, holding up his camera in one hand and his ID card in the other. He went to one of the shattered windows with exposed film still straggling from his camera like long strips of brown confetti, and stood there watching the Cessna accelerate down Runway 5. For a moment it was a black shape against the billowing fire of the genny and the auxiliary tanks, a shape that looked quite a lot like a bat, and then it was up, it was gone, and the cop was slamming Dees up against the wall hard enough to make his nose bleed and he didn’t care, he didn’t care about anything, and when the sobs began to tear their way out of his chest again he closed his eyes, and still he saw the Night Flier’s bloody urine striking the porcelain, becoming visible, and swirling down the drain.

He thought he would see it forever.

## Popsy

Sheridan was cruising slowly down the long blank length of the shopping mall when he saw the little kid push out through the main doors under the lighted sign which read COUSINTOWN. It was a boy-child, perhaps a big three and surely no more than five. On his face was an expression to which Sheridan had become exquisitely attuned. He was trying not to cry but soon would.

Sheridan paused for a moment, feeling the familiar soft wave of self-disgust . . . though every time he took a child, that feeling grew a little less urgent. The first time he hadn't slept for a week. He kept thinking about that big greasy Turk who called himself Mr. Wizard, kept wondering what he did with the children.

"They go on a boat-ride, Mr. Sheridan," the Turk told him, only it came out *Dey goo on a bot-rahd, Messtair Shurdunn*. The Turk smiled. *And if you know what's good for you, you won't ask any more about it*, that smile said, and it said it loud and clear, without an accent.

Sheridan *hadn't* asked any more, but that didn't mean he hadn't kept wondering. Especially afterward. Tossing and turning, wishing he had the whole thing to do over again so he could turn it around, so he could walk away from temptation. The second time had been almost as bad. . . the third time a little less . . . and by the fourth time he had almost stopped wondering about the bot-rahd, and what might be at the end of it for the little kids.

Sheridan pulled his van into one of the handicap parking spaces right in front of the mall. He had one of the special license plates the state gave to crips on the back of his van. That plate was worth its weight in gold, because it kept any mall security cop from getting suspicious, and those spaces were so convenient and almost always empty.

*You always pretend you're not going out looking, but you always lift a crip plate a day or two before.*

Never mind all that bullshit; he was in a jam and that kid over there could solve some very big problems.

He got out and walked toward the kid, who was looking around with increasing panic. Yes, Sheridan thought, he was five all right, maybe even six—just very frail. In the harsh fluorescent glare thrown through the glass doors the boy looked parchment-white, not just scared but perhaps physically ill. Sheridan reckoned it was just big fear, however. Sheridan usually recognized that look when he saw it, because he'd seen a lot of big fear in his own mirror over the last year and a half or so.

The kid looked up hopefully at the people passing around him, people going into the mall eager to buy, coming out laden with packages, their faces dazed, almost drugged, with something they probably thought was satisfaction.

The kid, dressed in Tuffskin jeans and a Pittsburgh Penguins tee-shirt, looked for help, looked for somebody to look at him and see something was wrong, looked for someone to ask the right question—*You get separated from your dad, son?* would do—looking for a friend.

*Here I am,* Sheridan thought, approaching. *Here I am, sonny—I'll be your friend.*

He had almost reached the kid when he saw a mall rent-a-cop ambling slowly up the concourse toward the doors. He was reaching in his pocket, probably for a pack of cigarettes. He would come out, see the boy, and there would go Sheridan's sure thing.

*Shit,* he thought, but at least he wouldn't be seen talking to the kid when the cop came out. That would have been worse.

Sheridan drew back a little and made a business of feeling in his own pockets, as if to make sure he still had his keys. His glance flicked from the boy to the security cop and back to the boy. The boy had started to cry. Not all-out bawling, not yet, but great big tears that looked pinkish in the reflected glow of the red COUSINTOWN sign as they tracked down his smooth cheeks.

The girl in the information booth flagged down the cop and said something to him. She was pretty, dark-haired, about twenty-five; he was sandy-blond with a moustache. As the cop leaned on his elbows, smiling at her, Sheridan thought they looked like the cigarette ads you saw on the backs of magazines. Salem Spirit. Light My Lucky. He was dying out here and they were in there making chit-chat—whatcha doin after work, ya wanna go and get a drink at

that new place, and blah-blah-blah. Now she was also batting her eyes at him. How cute.

Sheridan abruptly decided to take the chance. The kid's chest was hitching, and as soon as he started to bawl out loud, someone would notice him. Sheridan didn't like moving in with a cop less than sixty feet away, but if he didn't cover his markers at Mr. Reggie's within the next twenty-four hours, he thought a couple of very large men would pay him a visit and perform impromptu surgery on his arms, adding several elbow-bends to each.

He walked up to the kid, a big man dressed in an ordinary Van Heusen shirt and khaki pants, a man with a broad, ordinary face that looked kind at first glance. He bent over the little boy, hands on his legs just above the knees, and the boy turned his pale, scared face up to Sheridan's. His eyes were as green as emeralds, their color accentuated by the light-reflecting tears that washed them.

"You get separated from your dad, son?" Sheridan asked.

"My *Popsy*," the kid said, wiping his eyes. "I . . . I can't find my P-P-Popsy!"

Now the kid *did* begin to sob, and a woman headed in glanced around with some vague concern.

"It's all right," Sheridan said to her, and she went on. Sheridan put a comforting arm around the boy's shoulders and drew him a little to the right. . . in the direction of the van. Then he looked back inside.

The rent-a-cop had his face right down next to the information girl's now. Looked like maybe more than that little girl's Lucky was going to get lit tonight. Sheridan relaxed. At this point there could be a stick-up going on at the bank just up the concourse and the cop wouldn't notice a thing. This was starting to look like a cinch.

"I want my Popsy!" the boy wept.

"Sure you do, of course you do," Sheridan said. "And we're going to find him. Don't you worry."

He drew him a little more to the right.

The boy looked up at him, suddenly hopeful.

"Can you? Can you, mister?"

"Sure!" Sheridan said, and grinned heartily. "Finding lost Popsys . . . well, you might say it's kind of a specialty of mine."

“It is?” The kid actually smiled a little, although his eyes were still leaking.

“It sure is,” Sheridan said, glancing inside again to make sure the cop, whom he could now barely see (and who would barely be able to see Sheridan and the boy, should he happen to look up), was still enthralled. He was. “What was your Popsy wearing, son?”

“He was wearing his suit,” the boy said. “He almost always wears his suit. I only saw him once in jeans.” He spoke as if Sheridan should know all these things about his Popsy.

“I bet it was a black suit,” Sheridan said.

The boy’s eyes lit up. “You *saw* him! Where?”

He started eagerly back toward the doors, tears forgotten, and Sheridan had to restrain himself from grabbing the pale-faced little brat right then and there. That type of thing was no good. Couldn’t cause a scene. Couldn’t do anything people would remember later. Had to get him in the van. The van had sun-filter glass everywhere except in the windshield; it was almost impossible to see inside unless you had your face smashed right up against it.

Had to get him in the van first.

He touched the boy on the arm. “I didn’t see him inside, son. I saw him right over there.”

He pointed across the huge parking lot with its endless platoons of cars. There was an access road at the far end of it, and beyond that were the double yellow arches of McDonald’s.

“Why would Popsy go over *there?*” the boy asked, as if either Sheridan or Popsy—or maybe both of them—had gone utterly mad.

“I don’t know,” Sheridan said. His mind was working fast, clicking along like an express train as it always did when it got right down to the point where you had to stop shitting and either do it up right or fuck it up righteously. Popsy. Not Dad or Daddy but Popsy. The kid had corrected him on it. Maybe Popsy meant Granddad, Sheridan decided. “But I’m pretty sure that was him. Older guy in a black suit. White hair . . . green tie . . .”

“Popsy had his blue tie on,” the boy said. “He knows I like it the best.”

“Yeah, it could have been blue,” Sheridan said. “Under these lights, who can tell? Come on, hop in the van, I’ll run you over there to him.”

“Are you *sure* it was Popsy? Because I don’t know why he’d go to a place where they—”

Sheridan shrugged. “Look, kid, if you’re sure that wasn’t him, maybe you better look for him on your own. You might even find him.” And he started brusquely away, heading back toward the van.

The kid wasn’t biting. He thought about going back, trying again, but it had already gone on too long—you either kept observable contact to a minimum or you were asking for twenty years in Hammerton Bay. He’d better go on to another mall. Scoterville, maybe. Or—

“Wait, mister!” It was the kid, with panic in his voice. There was the light thud of running sneakers. “Wait up! I told him I was thirsty, he must have thought he had to go way over there to get me a drink. Wait!”

Sheridan turned around, smiling. “I wasn’t really going to leave you anyway, son.”

He led the boy to the van, which was four years old and painted a nondescript blue. He opened the door and smiled at the kid, who looked up at him doubtfully, his green eyes swimming in that pallid little face, as huge as the eyes of a waif in a velvet painting, the kind they advertised in the cheap weekly tabloids like *The National Enquirer* and *Inside View*.

“Step into my parlor, little buddy,” Sheridan said, and produced a grin which looked almost entirely natural. It was really sort of creepy, how good he’d gotten at this.

The kid did, and although he didn’t know it, his ass belonged to Briggs Sheridan the minute the passenger door swung shut.

• • •

There was only one problem in his life. It wasn’t broads, although he liked to hear the swish of a skirt or feel the smooth smoke of silken hose as well as any man, and it wasn’t booze, although he had been known to take a drink or three of an evening. Sheridan’s problem—his fatal flaw, you might even say—was cards. Any kind of cards, as long as it was the kind of game where wagers were allowed. He had lost jobs, credit cards, the home his mother had left him. He

had never, at least so far, been in jail, but the first time he got in trouble with Mr. Reggie, he'd thought jail would be a rest-cure by comparison.

He had gone a little crazy that night. It was better, he had found, when you lost right away. When you lost right away you got discouraged, went home, watched Letterman on the tube, and then went to sleep. When you won a little bit at first, you chased. Sheridan had chased that night and had ended up owing seventeen thousand dollars. He could hardly believe it; he went home dazed, almost elated, by the enormity of it. He kept telling himself in the car on the way home that he owed Mr. Reggie not seven hundred, not seven *thousand*, but *seventeen thousand* iron men. Every time he tried to think about it he giggled and turned up the volume on the radio.

But he wasn't giggling the next night when the two gorillas—the ones who would make sure his arms bent in all sorts of new and interesting ways if he didn't pay up—brought him into Mr. Reggie's office.

"I'll pay," Sheridan began babbling at once. "I'll pay, listen, it's no problem, couple of days, a week at the most, two weeks at the outside—"

"You bore me, Sheridan," Mr. Reggie said.

"I—"

"Shut up. If I give you a week, don't you think I know what you'll do? You'll tap a friend for a couple of hundred if you've got a friend left to tap. If you can't find a friend, you'll hit a liquor store . . . if you've got the guts. I doubt if you do, but anything is possible." Mr. Reggie leaned forward, propped his chin on his hands, and smiled. He smelled of Ted Lapidus cologne. "And if you do come up with two hundred dollars, what will you do with it?"

"Give it to you," Sheridan had babbled. By then he was very close to tears. "I'll give it to you, right away!"

"No you won't," Mr. Reggie said. "You'll take it to the track and try to make it grow. What you'll give me is a bunch of shitty excuses. You're in over your head this time, my friend. Way over your head."

Sheridan could hold back the tears no longer; he began to blubber.

"These guys could put you in the hospital for a long time," Mr. Reggie said reflectively. "You would have a tube in each arm and another one coming out of your nose."

Sheridan began to blubber louder.

“I’ll give you this much,” Mr. Reggie said, and pushed a folded sheet of paper across his desk to Sheridan. “You might get along with this guy. He calls himself Mr. Wizard, but he’s a shitbag just like you. Now get out of here. I’m gonna have you back in here in a week, though, and I’ll have your markers on this desk. You either buy them back or I’m going to have my friends tool up on you. And like Booker T. says, once they start, they do it until they’re satisfied.”

The Turk’s real name was written on the folded sheet of paper. Sheridan went to see him, and heard about the kids and the bot-rahds. Mr. Wizard also named a figure which was a fairish bit larger than the markers Mr. Reggie was holding. That was when Sheridan started cruising the malls.

• • •

He pulled out of the Cousintown Mall’s main parking lot, looked for traffic, then drove across the access road and into the McDonald’s in-lane. The kid was sitting all the way forward on the passenger seat, hands on the knees of his Tuffskins, eyes agonizingly alert. Sheridan drove toward the building, swung wide to avoid the drive-thru lane, and kept on going.

“Why are you going around the back?” the kid asked.

“You have to go around to the other doors,” Sheridan said. “Keep your shirt on, kid. I think I saw him in there.”

“You did? You really did?”

“I’m pretty sure, yeah.”

Sublime relief washed over the kid’s face, and for a moment Sheridan felt sorry for him—hell, he wasn’t a monster or a maniac, for Christ’s sake. But his markers had gotten a little deeper each time, and that bastard Mr. Reggie had no compunctions at all about letting him hang himself. It wasn’t seventeen thousand this time, or twenty thousand, or even twenty-five thousand. This time it was thirty-five grand, a whole damn marching battalion of iron men, if he didn’t want a few new sets of elbows by next Saturday.

He stopped in the back by the trash-compactor. Nobody was parked back here. Good. There was an elasticized pouch on the side of the door for maps and things. Sheridan reached into it with his left hand and brought out a pair of blued-steel Kreig handcuffs. The loop-jaws were open.

“Why are we stopping here, mister?” the kid asked. The fear was back in his voice, but the quality of it had changed; he had suddenly realized that maybe getting separated from good old Popsy in the busy mall wasn’t the worst thing that could happen to him, after all.

“We’re not, not really,” Sheridan said easily. He had learned the second time he’d done this that you didn’t want to underestimate even a six-year-old once he had his wind up. The second kid had kicked him in the balls and had damn near gotten away. “I just remembered I forgot to put my glasses on when I started driving. I could lose my license. They’re in that glasses-case on the floor there. They slid over to your side. Hand em to me, would you?”

The kid bent over to get the glasses-case, which was empty. Sheridan leaned over and snapped one of the cuffs on the kid’s reaching hand as neat as you please. And then the trouble started. Hadn’t he just been thinking it was a bad mistake to underestimate even a six-year-old? The brat fought like a timberwolf pup, twisting with a powerful muscularity Sheridan would not have credited had he not been experiencing it. He bucked and fought and lunged for the door, panting and uttering weird birdlike cries. He got the handle. The door swung open, but no domelight came on—Sheridan had broken it after that second outing.

Sheridan got the kid by the round collar of his Penguins tee-shirt and hauled him back in. He tried to clamp the other cuff on the special strut beside the passenger seat and missed. The kid bit his hand twice, bringing blood. God, his teeth were like razors. The pain went deep and sent a steely ache all the way up his arm. He punched the kid in the mouth. The kid fell back into the seat, dazed, Sheridan’s blood on his lips and chin and dripping onto the ribbed neck of the tee-shirt. Sheridan locked the other cuff onto the strut and then fell back into his own seat, sucking the back of his right hand.

The pain was really bad. He pulled his hand away from his mouth and looked at it in the weak glow of the dashlights. Two shallow, ragged tears, each maybe two inches long, ran up toward his wrist from just above the knuckles. Blood pulsed in weak little rills. Still, he felt no urge to pop the kid again, and that had nothing to do with damaging the Turk’s merchandise, in spite of the almost fussy way the Turk had warned him against that—*demmege the goots end you demmege the velue*, the Turk had said in his greasy accent.

No, he didn't blame the kid for fighting—he would have done the same. He would have to disinfect the wound as soon as he could, though, might even have to have a shot; he had read somewhere that human bites were the worst kind. Still, he couldn't help but admire the kid's guts.

He dropped the transmission into drive and pulled around the hamburger stand, past the drive-thru window, and back onto the access road. He turned left. The Turk had a big ranch-style house in Taluda Heights, on the edge of the city. Sheridan would go there by secondary roads, just to be safe. Thirty miles. Maybe forty-five minutes, maybe an hour.

He passed a sign which read THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING THE BEAUTIFUL COUSINTOWN MALL, turned left, and let the van creep up to a perfectly legal forty miles an hour. He fished a handkerchief out of his back pocket, folded it over the back of his right hand, and concentrated on following his headlights to the forty grand the Turk had promised for a boy-child.

• • •

“You'll be sorry,” the kid said.

Sheridan looked impatiently around at him, pulled from a dream in which he had just won twenty straight hands and had Mr. Reggie grovelling at *his* feet for a change, sweating bullets and begging him to stop, what did he want to do, break him?

The kid was crying again, and his tears still had that odd pinkish cast, even though they were now well away from the bright lights of the mall. Sheridan wondered for the first time if the kid might have some sort of communicable disease. He supposed it was a little late to start worrying about such things, so he put it out of his mind.

“When my *Popsy* finds you you'll be sorry,” the kid elaborated.

“Yeah,” Sheridan said, and lit a cigarette. He turned off State Road 28 and onto an unmarked stretch of two-lane blacktop. There was a long marshy area on the left, unbroken woods on the right.

The kid pulled at the handcuffs and made a sobbing noise.

“Quit it. Won't do you any good.”

Nevertheless, the kid pulled again. And this time there was a groaning, protesting sound Sheridan didn't like at *all*. He looked around and was amazed to see that the metal strut on the side of the seat—a strut he had welded in place himself—was twisted out of shape. *Shit!* he thought. *He's got teeth like razors and now I find out he's also strong as a fucking ox. If this is what he's like when he's sick, God forbid I should have grabbed him on a day when he was feeling well.*

He pulled over onto the soft shoulder and said, "Stop it!"

"I *won't!*"

The kid yanked at the handcuff again and Sheridan saw the metal strut bend a little more. Christ, how could *any* kid do that?

*It's panic,* he answered himself. *That's how he can do it.*

But none of the others had been able to do it, and many of them had been a lot more terrified than this kid by this stage of the game.

He opened the glove compartment in the center of the dash. He brought out a hypodermic needle. The Turk had given it to him, and cautioned him not to use it unless he absolutely had to. Drugs, the Turk said (pronouncing it *drock*s) could demerge the merchandise.

"See this?"

The kid gave the hypo a glimmering sideways glance and nodded.

"You want me to use it?"

The kid shook his head at once. Strong or not, he had any kid's instant terror of the needle, Sheridan was happy to see.

"That's very smart. It would put out your lights." He paused. He didn't want to say it—hell, he was a nice guy, really, when he didn't have his ass in a sling—but he had to. "Might even kill you."

The kid stared at him, lips trembling, cheeks papery with fear.

"You stop yanking the cuff, I put away the needle. Deal?"

"Deal," the kid whispered.

"You promise?"

"Yes." The kid lifted his lip, showing white teeth. One of them was spotted with Sheridan's blood.

"You promise on your mother's name?"

"I never had a mother."

“Shit,” Sheridan said, disgusted, and got the van rolling again. He moved a little faster now, and not only because he was finally off the main road. The kid was a spook. Sheridan wanted to turn him over to the Turk, get his money, and split.

“My Popsy’s really strong, mister.”

“Yeah?” Sheridan asked, and thought: *I bet he is, kid. Only guy in the old folks’ home who can bench-press his own truss, right?*

“He’ll find me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He can smell me.”

Sheridan believed it. *He* could smell the kid. That fear had an odor was something he had learned on his previous expeditions, but this was unreal—the kid smelled like a mixture of sweat, mud, and slowly cooking battery acid. Sheridan was becoming more and more sure that something was seriously wrong with the kid . . . but soon that would be Mr. Wizard’s problem, not his, and *caveat emptor*, as those old fellows in the togas used to say; *caveat* fucking *emptor*.

Sheridan cracked his window. On the left, the marsh went on and on. Broken slivers of moonlight glimmered in the stagnant water.

“Popsy can fly.”

“Yeah,” Sheridan said, “after a couple of bottles of Night Train. I bet he flies like a sonofabitchin eagle.”

“Popsy—”

“Enough of the Popsy shit, kid—okay?”

The kid shut up.

• • •

Four miles farther on, the marsh on the left broadened into a wide empty pond. Sheridan made a turn onto a stretch of hardpan dirt that skirted the pond’s north side. Five miles west of here he would turn right onto Highway 41, and from there it would be a straight shot into Taluda Heights.

He glanced toward the pond, a flat silver sheet in the moonlight. . . and then the moonlight was gone. Blotted out.

Overhead there was a flapping sound like big sheets on a clothesline.

“Popsy!” the kid cried.

“Shut up. It was only a bird.”

But suddenly he was spooked, very spooked. He looked at the kid. The kid’s lip was drawn back from his teeth again. His teeth were very white, very big.

No. . . not big. Big wasn’t the right word. *Long* was the right word. Especially the two at the top at each side. The . . . what did you call them? The canines.

His mind suddenly started to fly again, clicking along as if he were on speed.

*I told him I was thirsty.*

*Why would Popsy go to a place where they—*

*(?eat was he going to say eat?)*

*He’ll find me.*

*He can smell me.*

*Popsy can fly.*

Something landed on the roof of the van with a heavy clumsy thump.

“Popsy!” the kid screamed again, almost delirious with delight, and suddenly Sheridan could not see the road anymore—a huge membranous wing, pulsing with veins, covered the windshield from side to side.

*Popsy can fly.*

Sheridan screamed and jumped on the brake, hoping to tumble the thing on the roof off the front. There was that groaning, protesting sound of metal under stress from his right again, this time followed by a short bitter snap. A moment later the kid’s fingers were clawing into his face, pulling open his cheek.

“*He stole me, Popsy!*” the kid was screeching at the roof of the van in that birdlike voice. “*He stole me, he stole me, the bad man stole me!*”

*You don’t understand, kid,* Sheridan thought. He groped for the hypo and found it. *I’m not a bad guy, I just got in a jam.*

Then a hand, more like a talon than a real hand, smashed through the side window and ripped the hypo from Sheridan’s grasp—along with two of his fingers. A moment later Popsy peeled the entire driver’s-side door out of its frame, the hinges now bright twists of meaningless metal. Sheridan saw a

billowing cape, black on the outside, lined with red silk on the inside, and the creature's tie . . . and although it was actually a cravat, it was blue all right—just as the boy had said.

Popsy yanked Sheridan out of the car, talons sinking through his jacket and shirt and deep into the meat of his shoulders; Popsy's green eyes suddenly turned as red as blood-roses.

"We came to the mall because my grandson wanted some Ninja Turtle figures," Popsy whispered, and his breath was like flyblown meat. "The ones they show on TV. All the children want them. You should have left him alone. You should have left *us* alone."

Sheridan was shaken like a rag doll. He shrieked and was shaken again. He heard Popsy asking solicitously if the kid was still thirsty; heard the kid saying yes, very, the bad man had scared him and his throat was *so* dry. He saw Popsy's thumbnail for just a second before it disappeared under the shelf of his chin, the nail ragged and thick. His throat was cut with that nail before he realized what was happening, and the last things he saw before his sight dimmed to black were the kid, cupping his hands to catch the flow the way Sheridan himself had cupped his hands under the backyard faucet for a drink on a hot summer day when he was a kid, and Popsy, stroking the boy's hair gently, with grandfatherly love.

## It Grows on You

New England autumn and the thin soil now shows in patches through the ragweed and goldenrod, waiting for snow still four weeks distant. The culverts are clogged with leaves, the sky has gone a perpetual gray, and cornstalks stand in leaning rows like soldiers who have found some fantastic way to die on their feet. Pumpkins, sagging inward now with softrot, are piled against crepuscular sheds, smelling like the breath of old women. There is no heat and no cold at this time of year, only pallid air which is never still, beating through the bare fields under white skies where birds fly south in chevron shapes. That wind blows dust up from the soft shoulders of back roads in dancing dervishes, parts the played-out fields as a comb parts hair, and sniffs its way into junked cars up on blocks in back yards.

The Newall house out on Town Road #3 overlooks that part of Castle Rock known as the Bend. It is somehow impossible to sense anything good about this house. It has a deathly look which can be only partially explained by its lack of paint. The front lawn is a mass of dried hummocks which the frost will soon heave into even more grotesque postures. Thin smoke rises from Brownie's Store at the foot of the hill. Once the Bend was a fairly important part of Castle Rock, but that time passed around the time Korea got over. On the old bandstand across the road from Brownie's two small children roll a red firetruck between them. Their faces are tired and washed out, the faces of old men, almost. Their hands actually seem to cut the air as they roll the truck between them, pausing only to swipe at their endlessly running noses every now and again.

In the store Harley McKissick is presiding, corpulent and red-faced, while old John Clutterbuck and Lenny Partridge sit by the stove with their feet up. Paul Corliss is leaning against the counter. The store has a smell that is ancient—a smell of salami and flypaper and coffee and tobacco; of sweat and dark brown Coca-Cola; of pepper and cloves and O'Dell Hair Tonic, which looks like semen and turns hair into sculpture. A flyspecked poster advertising a

beanhole bean supper held in 1986 still leans in the window next to one advertising an appearance of “Country” Ken Corriveau at the 1984 Castle County Fair. The light and heat of almost ten summers has fallen on this latter poster, and now Ken Corriveau (who has been out of the country-music business for at least half of those ten years and now sells Fords over in Chamberlain) looks simultaneously faded and toasted. At the back of the store is a huge glass freezer that came out of New York in 1933, and everywhere hangs the vague but tremendous smell of coffee-beans.

The old men watch the children and speak in low, desultory tones. John Clutterbuck, whose grandson, Andy, is busy drinking himself to death this fall, has been talking about the town landfill. The landfill stinks like a bugger in the summertime, he says. No one disputes this—it’s true—but no one is very interested in the subject, either, because it’s *not* summer, it’s autumn, and the huge range-oil stove is throwing off a stuporous glow of heat. The Winston thermometer behind the counter says 82. Clutterbuck’s forehead has a huge dent above his left eyebrow where he struck his head in a car accident in 1963. Small children sometimes ask to touch it. Old Clut has won a great deal of money from summer people who don’t believe the dent in his head will hold the contents of a medium-sized water tumbler.

“Paulson,” Harley McKissick says quietly.

An old Chevrolet has pulled in behind Lenny Partridge’s oil-burner. On the side is a cardboard sign held with heavy masking tape. GARY PAULSON CHAIR’S CANED ANTIQUE’S BOUGHT & SOLD, the sign reads, with the telephone number to call beneath the words. Gary Paulson gets out of his car slowly, an old man in faded green pants with a huge satchel seat. He drags a knurled cane out after him, holding to the doorframe tightly until he has the cane planted just the way he likes it. The cane has the white plastic handgrip from a child’s bike affixed over its dark tip like a condom. It makes small circles in the lifeless dust as Paulson begins his careful trip from his car to the door of Brownie’s.

The children on the bandstand look up at him, then follow his glance (fearfully, it seems) to the leaning, crepitating bulk of the Newall house on the ridge above them. Then they go back to their firetruck.

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Joe Newall bought in Castle Rock in 1904 and owned in Castle Rock until 1929, but his fortune was made in the nearby mill town of Gates Falls. He was a scrawny man with an angry, hectic face and eyes with yellow corneas. He bought a great parcel of open land out in the Bend—this was when it was quite a thriving village, complete with a profitable little combined wood-milling operation and furniture factory—from The First National Bank of Oxford. The bank got it from Phil Budreau in a foreclosure assisted by County Sheriff Nickerson Campbell. Phil Budreau, well-liked but considered something of a fool by his neighbors, slunk away to Kittery and spent the next twelve years or so tinkering with cars and motorcycles. Then he went off to France to fight the Heinies, fell out of an airplane while on a reconnaissance mission (or so the story has it), and was killed.

The Budreau patch lay silent and fallow for most of those years, while Joe Newall lived in a rented house in Gates Falls and saw to the making of his fortune. He was known more for his employee-severance policies than for the way he'd turned around a mill which had been tottering on the brink of ruination when he'd bought it for a song back in '02. The millworkers called him Firing Joe, because if you missed a single shift you were sent down the road, no excuses accepted or even listened to.

He married Cora Leonard, niece of Carl Stowe, in 1914. The marriage had great merit—in Joe Newall's eyes, certainly—because Cora was Carl's only living relative, and she would no doubt come into a nice little bundle when Carl passed on (as long as Joe remained on good terms with him, that was, and he had no intentions of being on anything less with the old fellow, who had been Damned Shrewd in his day but was considered to have become Rather Soft in his declining years). There were other mills in the area that could be bought for a song and then turned around . . . if, that was, a man had a little capital to use as a lever. Joe soon had his lever; his wife's rich uncle died within a year of the wedding.

So the marriage had merit—oh yes, no doubt about it. Cora herself did not have merit, however. She was a grainbag of a woman, incredibly wide across the hips, incredibly full in the butt, yet almost as flat chested as a boy and possessed of an absurd little pipestem neck upon which her oversized head nodded like a strange pale sunflower. Her cheeks hung like dough, her lips like

strips of liver; her face was as silent as a full moon on a winter night. She sweated huge dark patches around the armholes of her dresses even in February, and she carried a dank smell of perspiration with her always.

Joe began a house for his wife on the Budreau patch in 1915, and a year later it seemed finished. It was painted white and enclosed twelve rooms that sprouted from many strange angles. Joe Newall was not popular in Castle Rock, partly because he made his money out of town, partly because Budreau, his predecessor, had been such an all-around nice fellow (though a fool, they always reminded each other, as if foolishness and niceness went together and it would be death to forget it), but mostly because his damned house was built with out-of-town labor. Shortly before the gutters and downspouts were hung, an obscene drawing accompanied by a one-syllable Anglo-Saxon word was scrawled on the fanlighted front door in soft yellow chalk.

By 1920 Joe Newall was a rich man. His three Gates Falls mills were going like a house afire, stuffed with the profits of a world war and comfortable with the orders of the newly arisen or (arising) middle class. He began to build a new wing on his house. Most folks in the village pronounced it unnecessary—after all, there were just the two of them up there—and almost all opined it added nothing but ugly to a house most of them already considered ugly beyond almost all measure. This new wing towered one story above the main house and looked blindly down the ridge, which had in those days been covered with straggling pines.

The news that just the two of them were soon to become just the three of them trickled in from Gates Falls, the source most likely being Doris Gingercroft, who was Dr. Robertson's nurse in those days. So the added wing was in the nature of a celebration, it seemed. After six years of wedded bliss and four years of living in the Bend, during which she had been seen only at a distance as she crossed her dooryard, or occasionally picking flowers—crocuses, wild roses, Queen Anne's lace, lady's slipper, paintbrush—in the field beyond the buildings, after all that time, Cora Leonard Newall had Kindled.

She never shopped at Brownie's. Cora did her marketing at the Kitty Korner Store over in Gates Center every Thursday afternoon.

In January of 1921, Cora gave birth to a monster with no arms and, it was said, a tiny clutch of perfect fingers sticking out of one eyesocket. It died less

than six hours after mindless contractions had pushed its red and senseless face into the light. Joe Newall added a cupola to the wing seventeen months later, in the late spring of 1922 (in western Maine there is no early spring; only late spring and winter before it). He continued to buy out of town and would have nothing to do with Bill “Brownie” McKissick’s store. He also never crossed the threshold of the Bend Methodist Church. The deformed infant which had slid from his wife’s womb was buried in the Newall plot in Gates rather than in Homeland. The inscription on the tiny headstone read

SARAH TAMSON TABITHA FRANCINE NEWALL  
JANUARY 14, 1921  
GOD GRANT SHE LIE STILL.

In the store they talked about Joe Newall and Joe’s wife and Joe’s house as Brownie’s kid Harley, still not old enough to shave (but with his senescence buried inside just the same, hibernating, waiting, perhaps dreaming) but old enough to stack vegetables and haul pecks of potatoes out to the roadside stand whenever called upon to do so, stood by and listened. Mostly it was the house of which they spoke; it was considered to be an affront to the sensibilities and an offense to the eye. “But it grows on you,” Clayton Clutterbuck (father of John) sometimes remarked. There was never any answer to this. It was a statement with absolutely no meaning . . . yet at the same time it was a patent fact. If you were standing in the yard at Brownie’s, maybe just looking at the berries for the best box when berry-season was on, you sooner or later found your eyes turning up to the house on the ridge the way a weathervane turns to the nor’east before a March blizzard. Sooner or later you had to look, and as time went by, it got to be sooner for most people. Because, as Clayt Clutterbuck said, the Newall place grew on you.

In 1924, Cora fell down the stairs between the cupola and the new wing, breaking her neck and her back. A rumor went through town (it probably originated at a Ladies Aid Bake Sale) that she had been stark naked at the time. She was interred next to her ill-formed, short-lived daughter.

Joe Newall—who, most folks now agreed, undoubtedly contained a touch of the kike—continued to make money hand over fist. He built two sheds and a barn up on the ridge, all of them connected to the main house by way of the

new wing. The barn was completed in 1927, and its purpose became clear almost at once—Joe had apparently decided to become a gentleman farmer. He bought sixteen cows from a fellow in Mechanic Falls. He bought a shiny new milking machine from the same fellow. It looked like a metal octopus to those who glanced into the back of the delivery truck and saw it when the driver stopped at Brownie's for a cold bottle of ale before going on up the hill.

With the cows and the milking machine installed, Joe hired a halfwit from Motton to take care of his investment. How this supposedly hard-fisted and tough-minded mill-owner could have done such a thing perplexed everyone who turned his mind to the question—that Newall was slipping seemed to be the only answer—but he did, and of course the cows all died.

The county health officer showed up to look at the cows, and Joe showed him a signed statement from a veterinarian (a *Gates Falls* veterinarian, folks said ever after, raising their brows significantly as they said it) certifying that the cows had died of bovine meningitis.

"That means bad luck in English," Joe said.

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"Take it the way you want to take it," said Joe. "That's all right."

"Make that idiot shut up, why don't you?" the county health officer said. He was looking down the driveway at the halfwit, who was leaning against the Newall R.F.D. box and howling. Tears ran down his pudgy, dirty cheeks. Every now and then he would draw back and slap himself a good one, like he knew the whole thing was his fault.

"He's all right, too."

"Nothing up here seems all right to me," said the county health man, "least of all sixteen cows layin dead on their backs with their legs stickin up like fence-posts. I can see em from here."

"Good," said Joe Newall, "because it's as close as you'll get."

The county health officer threw the *Gates Falls* vet's paper down and stamped one of his boots on it. He looked at Joe Newall, his face flushed so bright that the burst squiggles of veins on the sides of his nose stood out purple. "I want to see those cows. Haul one away, if it comes to that."

"No."

"You don't own the world, Newall—I'll get a court order."

“Let’s see if you can.”

The health officer drove away. Joe watched him. Down at the end of the driveway the halfwit, clad in dung-splattered bib overalls from the Sears and Roebuck mail-order catalogue, went on leaning against the Newall R.F.D. box and howling. He stayed there all that hot August day, howling at the top of his lungs with his flat mongoloid face turned up to the yellow sky. “Bellerin like a calf in the moonlight” was how young Gary Paulson put it.

The county health officer was Clem Upshaw, from Sirois Hill. He might have dropped the matter once his thermostat went down a little, but Brownie McKissick, who had supported him for the office he held (and who let him charge a fair amount of beer), urged him not to. Harley McKissick’s dad was not the kind of man who usually resorted to cat’s paws—or had to—but he’d wanted to make a point concerning private property with Joe Newall. He wanted Joe to understand that private property is a great thing, yes, an *American* thing, but private property is still stitched to the town, and in Castle Rock people still believed the community came first, even with rich folks that could build a little more house on their house whenever the whim took them. So Clem Upshaw went on down to Lackery, which was the county seat in those days, and got the order.

While he was getting it, a large van drove up past the howling moron and to the barn. When Clem Upshaw returned with his order, only one cow remained, gazing at him with black eyes which had grown dull and distant beneath their covering of hay chaff. Clem determined that this cow at least had died of bovine meningitis, and then he went away. When he was gone, the remover’s van returned for the last cow.

In 1928 Joe began another wing. That was when the men who gathered at Brownie’s decided the man was crazy. Smart, yes, but crazy. Benny Ellis claimed that Joe had gouged out his daughter’s one eye and kept it in a jar of what Benny called “fubbledehyde” on the kitchen table, along with the amputated fingers which had been poking out of the other socket when the baby was born. Benny was a great reader of the horror pulps, magazines that showed naked ladies being carried off by giant ants and similar bad dreams on their covers, and his story about Joe Newall’s jar was clearly inspired by his reading matter. As a result, there were soon people all over Castle Rock—not

just the Bend—who claimed every word of it was true. Some claimed Joe kept even less mentionable things in the jar.

The second wing was finished in August of 1929 and two nights later a fast-moving jalopy with great sodium circles for eyes screamed juddering into Joe Newall's driveway and the stinking, flyblown corpse of a large skunk was thrown at the new wing. The animal splattered above one of the windows, throwing a fan of blood across the panes in a pattern almost like a Chinese ideogram.

In September of that year a fire swept the carding room of Newall's flagship mill in Gates Falls, causing fifty thousand dollars' worth of damage. In October the stock market crashed. In November Joe Newall hanged himself from a rafter in one of the unfinished rooms—probably a bedroom, it was meant to be—of the newest wing. The smell of sap in the fresh wood was still strong. He was found by Cleveland Torbutt, the assistant manager of Gates Mills and Joe's partner (or so it was rumored) in a number of Wall Street ventures that were now not worth the puke of a tubercular cocker spaniel. The body was cut down by the county coroner, who happened to be Clem Upshaw's brother Noble.

Joe was buried next to his wife and child on the last day of November. It was a hard, brilliant day and the only person from Castle Rock to attend the service was Alvin Coy, who drove the Hay & Peabody funeral hack. Alvin reported that one of the spectators was a young, shapely woman in a raccoon coat and a black cloche hat. Sitting in Brownie's and eating a pickle straight out of the barrel, Alvin would smile mordantly and tell his cronies that she was a jazz baby if he had ever seen one. She bore not one whit of resemblance to Cora Leonard Newall's side of the family, and she hadn't closed her eyes during the prayer.

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Gary Paulson enters the store with exquisite slowness, closing the door carefully behind him.

“Afternoon,” Harley McKissick says neutrally.

“Heard you won a turkey down to the Grange last night,” says Old Clut as he prepares to light his pipe.

“Yuh,” Gary says. He’s eighty-four and, like the others, can remember when the Bend was a damned sight livelier than it is now. He lost two sons in two wars—the two before that mess in Viet Nam—and that was a hard thing. His third, a good boy, died in a collision with a pulpwood truck up around Presque Isle—back in 1973, that was. Somehow that one was easier to take, God knows why. Gary sometimes drools from the corners of his lips these days, and makes frequent smacking sounds as he tries to suck the drool back into his mouth before it can get away and start running down his chin. He doesn’t know a whole hell of a lot lately, but he knows getting old is a lousy way to spend the last years of your life.

“Coffee?” Harley asks.

“Guess not.”

Lenny Partridge, who will probably never recover from the broken ribs he suffered in a strange road-accident two autumns ago, pulls his feet back so the older man can pass by him and lower himself carefully into the chair in the corner (Gary caned the seat of this chair himself, back in ’82). Paulson smacks his lips, sucks back spit, and folds his lumpy hands over the head of his cane. He looks tired and haggard.

“It is going to rain a pretty bitch,” he says finally. “I’m aching that bad.”

“It’s a bad fall,” Paul Corliss says.

There is silence. The heat from the stove fills the store that will go out of business when Harley dies or maybe even before he dies if his youngest daughter has her way, it fills the store and coats the bones of the old men, tries to, anyway, and sniffs up against the dirty glass with its ancient posters looking out at the yard where there were gas-pumps until Mobil took them out in 1977. They are old men who have, for the most part, seen their children go away to more profitable places. The store does no business to speak of now, except for a few locals and the occasional through-going summer tourists who think old men like these, old men who sit by the stove in their thermal undershirts even in July, are quaint. Old Clut has always claimed that new people are going to come to this part of the Rock, but the last couple of years things have been worse than ever—it seems the whole goddam town is dying.

“Who is building the new wing on that Christly Newall house?” Gary asks finally.

They look around at him. For a moment the kitchen match Old Clut has just scratched hangs mystically over his pipe, burning down the wood, turning it black. The sulfur node at the end turns gray and curls up. At last, Old Clut dips the match into the bowl and puffs.

“New wing?” Harley asks.

“Yuh.”

A blue membrane of smoke from Old Clut’s pipe drifts up over the stove and spreads there like a delicate fisherman’s net. Lenny Partridge tilts his chin up to stretch the wattles of his neck taut and then runs his hand slowly down his throat, producing a dry rasp.

“No one that *I* know of,” Harley says, somehow indicating by his tone of voice that this includes anyone of any consequence, at least in this part of the world.

“They ain’t had a buyer on that place since nineteen n eighty-one,” Old Clut says. When Old Clut says *they*, he means both Southern Maine Weaving and The Bank of Southern Maine, but he means more: he means The Massachusetts Wops. Southern Maine Weaving came into ownership of Joe’s three mills—and Joe’s house on the ridge—about a year after Joe took his own life, but as far as the men gathered around the stove in Brownie’s are concerned, that name’s just a smokescreen. . . or what they sometimes call The Legal, as in *She swore out a pertection order on him n now he can’t even see his own kids because of The Legal*. These men hate The Legal as it impinges upon their lives and the lives of their friends, but it fascinates them endlessly when they consider how some people put it to work in order to further their own nefarious money-making schemes.

Southern Maine Weaving, aka The Bank of Southern Maine, aka The Massachusetts Wops, enjoyed a long and profitable run with the mills Joe Newall saved from extinction, but it’s the way they have been unable to get rid of the house that fascinates the old men who spend their days in Brownie’s. “It’s like a booger you can’t flick off the end of your finger,” Lenny Partridge said once, and they all nodded. “Not even those spaghetti-suckers from Maiden n Revere can get rid of *that* millstone.”

Old Clut and his grandson, Andy, are currently estranged, and it is the ownership of Joe Newall's ugly house which has caused it . . . although there are other, more personal issues swirling around just below the surface, no doubt—there almost always are. The subject came up one night after grandfather and grandson—both widowers now—had enjoyed a pretty decent dinner at Young Clut's house in town.

Young Andy, who had not yet lost his job on the town's police-force, tried (rather self-indulgently) to explain to his grandfather that Southern Maine Weaving had had nothing to do with any of the erstwhile Newall holdings for years, that the actual owner of the house in the Bend was The Bank of Southern Maine, and that the two companies had nothing whatever to do with each other. Old John told Andy he was a fool if he believed that; everyone knew, he said, that both the bank and the textile company were fronts for The Massachusetts Wops, and that the only difference between them was a couple of words. They just hid the more obvious connections with great bunches of paperwork, Old Clut explained—The Legal, in other words.

Young Clut had the bad taste to laugh at that. Old Clut turned red, threw his napkin onto his plate, and got to his feet. *Laugh*, he said. *You just go on. Why not? The only thing a drunk does better'n laugh at what he don't understand is cry over he don't know what.* That made *Andy* mad, and he said something about Melissa being the reason why he drank, and John asked his grandson how long he was going to blame a dead wife for his boozing. Andy turned white when the old man said that, and told him to get out of his house, and John did, and he hasn't been back since. Nor does he want to. Harsh words aside, he can't bear to see Andy going to hell on a handcart like he is.

Speculation or not, this much cannot be denied: the house on the ridge has been empty for eleven years now, no one has ever lived there for long, and The Bank of Southern Maine is usually the organization that ends up trying to sell it through one of the local real estate firms.

"The last people to buy it come from uppa state New York, didn't they?" Paul Corliss asks, and he speaks so rarely they all turn toward him. Even Gary does.

"Yessir," Lenny says. "They was a nice couple. The man was gonna paint the barn red and turn it into some sort of antique store, wasn't he?"

“Ayuh,” Old Clut says. “Then their boy got the gun they kep—”

“People are so goddam *careless*—” Harley puts in.

“Did he die?” Lenny asks. “The boy?”

Silence greets the question. It seems no one knows. Then, at last—almost reluctantly—Gary speaks up. “No,” he said. “But it blinded him. They moved up to Auburn. Or maybe it was Leeds.”

“They was likely people,” Lenny said. “I really thought they might make a go of it. But they was set on that house. Believed everybody was pullin their leg about how it was bad luck, on account of they was from Away.” He pauses meditatively. “Maybe they think better now . . . wherever they are.”

There’s silence as the old men think of the people from uppa state New York, or maybe of their own failing organs and sensory equipment. In the dimness behind the stove, oil gurgles. Somewhere beyond it, a shutter claps heavily back and forth in the restless autumn air.

“There’s a new wing going up on it, all right,” Gary says. He speaks quietly but emphatically, as if one of the others has contradicted this statement. “I saw it comin down the River Road. Most of the framing’s already done. Damn thing looks like it wants to be a hundred feet long and thirty feet wide. Never noticed it before. Nice maple, looks like. Where does anybody get nice maple like that in this day n age?”

No one answers. No one knows.

At last, very tentatively, Paul Corliss says, “Sure you’re not thinking of another house, Gary? Could be you—”

“Could be *shit*,” Gary says, just as quietly but even more forcefully. “It’s the *Newall* place, a *new wing* on the *Newall* place, already framed up, and if you still got doubts, just step outside and have a look for yourself.”

With that said, there is nothing left to say—they believe him. Neither Paul nor anyone else rushes outside to crane up at the new wing being added to the *Newall* house, however. They consider it a matter of some importance, and thus nothing to hurry over. More time passes—Harley McKissick has reflected more than once that if time was pulpwood, they’d all be rich. Paul goes to the old water-cooled soft-drink chest and gets an Orange Crush. He gives Harley sixty cents and Harley rings up the purchase. When he slams the cash-drawer

shut again, he realizes the atmosphere in the store has changed somehow. There are other matters to discuss.

Lenny Partridge coughs, winces, presses his hands lightly against his chest where the broken ribs have never really healed, and asks Gary when they are going to have services for Dana Roy.

“Tomorrow,” Gary says, “down Gorham. That’s where his wife is laid to rest.”

Lucy Roy died in 1968; Dana, who was until 1979 an electrician for U.S. Gypsum over in Gates Falls (these men routinely and with no prejudice refer to the company as U.S. Gyp Em), died of intestinal cancer two days before. He lived in Castle Rock all his life, and liked to tell people that he’d only been out of Maine three times in his eighty years, once to visit an aunt in Connecticut, once to see the Boston Red Sox play at Fenway Park (“And they lost, those bums,” he always added at this point), and once to attend an electricians’ convention in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. “Damn waste of time,” he always said of the convention. “Nothin but drinkin and wimmin, and none of the wimmin even worth lookin at, let alone that other thing.” He was a crony of these men, and in his passing they feel a queer mixture of sorrow and triumph.

“They took out four feet of his underpinnin,” Gary tells the other men. “Didn’t do no good. It was all through him.”

“*He* knew Joe Newall,” Lenny says suddenly. “He was up there with his dad when his dad was puttin in Joe’s lectricity—couldn’t have been more’n six or eight, I’d judge. I remember he said Joe give him a sucker one time, but he pitched it out’n his daddy’s truck on the ride home. Said it tasted sour and funny. Then, later, after they got all the mills runnin again—the late thirties, that would’ve been—he was in charge of the rewirin. You member that, Harley?”

“Yup.”

Now that the subject has come back to Joe Newall by way of Dana Roy, the men sit quietly, conning their brains for anecdotes concerning either man. But when Old Clut finally speaks, he says a startling thing.

“It was Dana Roy’s big brother, Will, who throwed that skunk at the side of the house that time. I’m almost sure ’twas.”

“Will?” Lenny raises his eyebrows. “Will Roy was too steady to do a thing like that, I would have said.”

Gary Paulson says, very quietly: “Ayuh, it *was* Will.”

They turn to look at him.

“And ’twas the wife that give Dana a sucker that day he came with his dad,” Gary says. “Cora, not Joe. And Dana wa’ant no six or eight; the skunk was thrown around the time of the Crash, and Cora was dead by then. No, Dana maybe remembered some of it, but he couldn’t have been no more than two. It was around 1916 that he got that sucker, because it was in ’16 that Eddie Roy wired the house. He was never up there again. *Frank*—the middle boy, he’s been dead ten or twelve year now—*he* would have been six or eight then, maybe. Frank seen what Cora done to the little one, that much I know, but not when he told Will. It don’t matter. Finally Will decided to do somethin about it. By then the woman was dead, so he took it out on the house Joe built for her.”

“Never mind that part,” Harley says, fascinated. “What’d she do to Dana? That’s what *I* want to know.”

Gary speaks calmly, almost judiciously. “What Frank told me one night when he’d had a few was that the woman give him the sucker with one hand and reached into his didies with the other. Right in front of the older boy.”

“She never!” Old Clut says, shocked in spite of himself.

Gary only looks at him with his yellowed, fading eyes and says nothing.

Silence again, except for the wind and the clapping shutter. The children on the bandstand have taken their firetruck and gone somewhere else with it and still the depthless afternoon continues on and on, the light that of an Andrew Wyeth painting, white and still and full of idiot meaning. The ground has given up its meager yield and waits uselessly for snow.

Gary would like to tell them of the sickroom at Cumberland Memorial Hospital where Dana Roy lay dying with black snot caked around his nostrils and smelling like a fish left out in the sun. He would like to tell them of the cool blue tiles and of nurses with their hair drawn back in nets, young things for the most part with pretty legs and firm young breasts and no idea that 1923 was a real year, as real as the pains which haunt the bones of old men. He feels he would like to sermonize on the evil of time and perhaps even the evil

of certain places, and explain why Castle Rock is now like a dark tooth which is finally ready to fall out. Most of all he would like to inform them that Dana Roy sounded as if someone had stuffed his chest full of hay and he was trying to breathe through it, and that he looked as if he had already started to rot. Yet he can say none of these things because he doesn't know how, and so he only sucks back spit and says nothing.

"No one liked old Joe much," Old Clut says . . . and then his face brightens suddenly. "But by God, he grew on you!"

The others do not reply.

• • •

Nineteen days later, a week before the first snow comes to cover the useless earth, Gary Paulson has a surprisingly sexual dream. . . except it is mostly a memory.

On August 14, 1923, while driving by the Newall house in his father's farm truck, thirteen-year-old Gary Martin Paulson happened to observe Cora Leonard Newall turning away from her mailbox at the end of the driveway. She had the newspaper in one hand. She saw Gary and reached down with her free hand to grasp the hem of her housedress. She did not smile. That tremendous moon of a face was pallid and empty as she raised the dress, revealing her sex to him—it was the first time he had ever seen that mystery so avidly discussed by the boys he knew. And, still not smiling but only looking at him gravely, she pistoned her hips at his gaping, amazed face as he passed her by. And as he passed, his hand dropped into his lap and moments later he ejaculated into his flannel pants.

It was his first orgasm. In the years since, he has made love to a good many women, beginning with Sally Ouelette underneath the Tin Bridge back in '26, and every time he has neared the moment of orgasm—every single one—he has seen Cora Leonard Newall: has seen her standing beside her mailbox under a hot gunmetal sky, has seen her lifting her dress to reveal an almost non-existent thatch of gingery hair beneath the creamy ground-swell of her belly, has seen the exclamatory slit with its red lips tinting toward what he knows would be the most deliciously delicate coral

*(Cora)*

pink. Yet it is not the sight of her vulva below that somehow promiscuous swell of gut that has haunted him through all the years, so that every woman became Cora at the moment of release; or it is not *just* that. What always drove him mad with lust when he remembered (and when he made love he was helpless not to) was the way she had pumped her hips at him. . . once, twice, three times. That, and the lack of expression on her face, a neutrality so deep it seemed more like idiocy, as if she were the sum of every very young man's limited sexual understanding and desire—a tight and yearning darkness, no more than that, a limited Eden glowing Cora-pink.

His sex-life has been both delineated and delimited by that experience—a seminal experience if ever there was one—but he has never mentioned it, although he has been tempted more than once when in his cups. He has hoarded it. And it is of this incident that he is dreaming, penis perfectly erect for the first time in almost nine years, when a small blood vessel in his cerebellum ruptures, forming a clot which kills him quietly, considerately sparing him four weeks or four months of paralysis, the flexible tubes in the arms, the catheter, the noiseless nurses with their hair in nets and their fine high breasts. He dies in his sleep, penis wilting, the dream fading like the afterimage of a television picture tube switched off in a dark room. His cronies would be puzzled, however, if any of them were there to hear the last two words he speaks—gaspd out but still clear enough:

*“The moon!”*

The day after he is laid to rest in Homeland, a new cupola starts to go up on the new wing on the Newall house.

## Chatterly Teeth

Looking into the display case was like looking through a dirty pane of glass into the middle third of his boyhood, those years from seven to fourteen when he had been fascinated by stuff like this. Hogan leaned closer, forgetting the rising whine of the wind outside and the gritty *spick-spack* sound of sand hitting the windows. The case was full of fabulous junk, most of it undoubtedly made in Taiwan and Korea, but there was no doubt at all about the pick of the litter. They were the largest Chatterly Teeth he'd ever seen. They were also the only ones he'd ever seen with feet—big orange cartoon shoes with white spats. A real scream.

Hogan looked up at the fat woman behind the counter. She was wearing a tee-shirt that said NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY on top (the words swelling and receding across her enormous breasts) and about an acre of jeans on the bottom. She was selling a pack of cigarettes to a pallid young man whose long blonde hair had been tied back in a ponytail with a sneaker shoelace. The young man, who had the face of an intelligent lab-rat, was paying in small change, counting it laboriously out of a grimy hand.

"Pardon me, ma'am?" Hogan asked.

She looked at him briefly, and then the back door banged open. A skinny man wearing a bandanna over his mouth and nose came in. The wind swirled desert grit around him in a cyclone and rattled the pin-up cutie on the Valvoline calendar thumbtacked to the wall. The newcomer was pulling a handcart. Three wire-mesh cages were stacked on it. There was a tarantula in the one on top. In the cages below it were a pair of rattlesnakes. They were coiling rapidly back and forth and shaking their rattles in agitation.

"Shut the damn door, Scooter, was you born in a barn?" the woman behind the counter bawled.

He glanced at her briefly, eyes red and irritated from the blowing sand. "Gimme a chance, woman! Can't you see I got my hands full here? Ain't you got *eyes*? Christ!" He reached over the dolly and slammed the door. The

dancing sand fell dead to the floor and he pulled the dolly toward the storeroom at the back, still muttering.

“That the last of em?” the woman asked.

“All but Wolf.” He pronounced it *Woof*. “I’m gonna stick him in the lean-to back of the gas-pumps.”

“You ain’t not!” the big woman retorted. “Wolf’s our star attraction, in case you forgot. You get him in here. Radio says this is gonna get worse before it gets better. A lot worse.”

“Just who do you think you’re foolin’?” The skinny man (her husband, Hogan supposed) stood looking at her with a kind of weary truculence, his hands on his hips. “Damn thing ain’t nothin but a Minnesota coydog, as anyone who took more’n half a look could plainly see.”

The wind gusted, moaning along the eaves of Scooter’s Grocery & Roadside Zoo, throwing sheaves of dry sand against the windows. It *was* getting worse, and Hogan could only hope he would be able to drive out of it. He had promised Lita and Jack he’d be home by seven, eight at the latest, and he was a man who liked to keep his promises.

“Just take care of him,” the big woman said, and turned irritably back to the rat-faced boy.

“Ma’am?” Hogan said again.

“Just a minute, hold your water,” Mrs. Scooter said. She spoke with the air of one who is all but drowning in impatient customers, although Hogan and the rat-faced boy were in fact the only ones present.

“You’re a dime short, Sunny Jim,” she told the blonde kid after a quick glance at the coins on the counter-top.

The boy regarded her with wide, innocent eyes. “I don’t suppose you’d trust me for it?”

“I doubt if the Pope of Rome smokes Merit 100’s, but if he did, I wouldn’t trust *him* for it.”

The look of wide-eyed innocence disappeared. The rat-faced boy looked at her with an expression of sullen dislike for a moment (this expression looked much more at home on the kid’s face, Hogan thought), and then slowly began to investigate his pockets again.

*Just forget it and get out of here, Hogan thought. You'll never make it to L.A. by eight if you don't get moving, windstorm or no windstorm. This is one of those places that have only two speeds—slow and stop. You got your gas and paid for it, so just count yourself ahead of the game and get back on the road before the storm gets any worse.*

He almost followed his left brain's good advice . . . and then he looked at the Chatterry Teeth in the display case again, the Chatterry Teeth standing there on those big orange cartoon shoes. And white spats! They were the real killer. *Jack would love them, his right brain told him. And tell the truth, Bill, old buddy; if it turns out Jack doesn't want them, you do. You may see another set of Jumbo Chatterry Teeth at some point in your life, anything's possible, but ones that also walk on big orange feet? Huh-uh. I really doubt it.*

It was the right brain he listened to that time . . . and everything else followed.

• • •

The kid with the ponytail was still going through his pockets; the sullen expression on his face deepened each time he came up dry. Hogan was no fan of smoking—his father, a two-pack-a-day man, had died of lung cancer—but he had visions of still waiting to be waited on an hour from now. “Hey! Kid!”

The kid looked around and Hogan flipped him a quarter.

“Hey! Thanks, m'man!”

“Think nothing of it.”

The kid concluded his transaction with the beefy Mrs. Scooter, put the cigarettes in one pocket, and dropped the remaining fifteen cents in another. He made no offer of the change to Hogan, who hadn't really expected it. Boys and girls like this were legion these days—they cluttered the highways from coast to coast, blowing along like tumbleweeds. Perhaps they had always been there, but to Hogan the current breed seemed both unpleasant and a little scary, like the rattlers Scooter was now storing in the back room.

The snakes in pissant little roadside menageries like this one couldn't kill you; their venom was milked twice a week and sold to clinics that made drugs with it. You could count on that just as you could count on the winos to show

up at the local plasma bank every Tuesday and Thursday. But the snakes could still give you one hell of a painful bite if you got too close and then made them mad. That, Hogan thought, was what the current breed of road-kids had in common with them.

Mrs. Scooter came drifting down the counter, the words on her tee-shirt drifting up and down and side to side as she did. “What-cha need?” she asked. Her tone was still truculent. The West had a reputation for friendliness, and during the twenty years he had spent selling there Hogan had come to feel the reputation was more often than not deserved, but this woman had all the charm of a Brooklyn shopkeeper who has been stuck up three times in the last two weeks. Hogan supposed that her kind was becoming as much a part of the scene in the New West as the road-kids. Sad but true.

“How much are these?” Hogan asked, pointing through the dirty glass at what the sign identified as JUMBO CHATTERY TEETH—*THEY WALK!* The case was filled with novelty items—Chinese finger-pullers, Pepper Gum, Dr. Wacky’s Sneezing Powder, cigarette loads (A Laff Riot! according to the package—Hogan guessed they were more likely a great way to get your teeth knocked out), X-ray glasses, plastic vomit (*So Realistic!*), joy-buzzers.

“I dunno,” Mrs. Scooter said. “Where’s the box, I wonder?”

The teeth were the only item in the case that wasn’t packaged, but they certainly *were* jumbo, Hogan thought—*super-* jumbo, in fact, five times the size of the sets of wind-up teeth which had so amused him as a kid growing up in Maine. Take away the joke feet and they would look like the teeth of some fallen Biblical giant—the cuspids were big white blocks and the canine teeth looked like tent-pegs sunk in the improbably red plastic gums. A key jutted from one gum. The teeth were held together in a clench by a thick rubber band.

Mrs. Scooter blew the dust from the Chatterry Teeth, then turned them over, looking on the soles of the orange shoes for a price sticker. She didn’t find one. “I don’t know,” she said crossly, eyeing Hogan as if he might have taken the sticker off himself. “Only Scooter’d buy a piece of trash like this here. Been around since Noah got off the boat. I’ll have to ask him.”

Hogan was suddenly tired of the woman and of Scooter’s Grocery & Roadside Zoo. They were great Chatterry Teeth, and Jack would undoubtedly

love them, but he had promised—eight at the latest.

“Never mind,” he said. “It was just an—”

“Them teeth was supposed to go for \$15.95, if you c’n believe it,” Scooter said from behind them. “They ain’t just plastic—those’re metal teeth painted white. They could give you a helluva bite if they worked. . . but she dropped em on the floor two-three years ago when she was dustin the inside of the case and they’re busted.”

“Oh,” Hogan said, disappointed. “That’s too bad. I never saw a pair with, you know, feet.”

“There are lots of em like that now,” Scooter said. “They sell em at the novelty stores in Vegas and Dry Springs. But I never saw a set as big as those. It was funnier’n hell to watch em walk across the floor, snappin like a crocodile. Shame the old lady dropped em.”

Scooter glanced at her, but his wife was looking out at the blowing sand. There was an expression on her face which Hogan couldn’t quite decipher—was it sadness, or disgust, or both?

Scooter looked back at Hogan. “I could let em go for three-fifty, if you wanted em. We’re gettin rid of the novelties, anyway. Gonna put rental videotapes in that counter.” He closed the storeroom door. The bandanna was now pulled down, lying on the dusty front of his shirt. His face was haggard and too thin. Hogan saw what might have been the shadow of serious illness lurking just beneath his desert tan.

“You could do no such a thing, Scooter!” the big woman snapped, and turned toward him . . . almost turned *on* him.

“Shutcha head,” Scooter replied. “You make my fillins ache.”

“I told you to get Wolf—”

“Myra, if you want him back there in the storeroom, go get him yourself.” He began to advance on her, and Hogan was surprised—almost wonder-struck, in fact—when she gave ground. “Ain’t nothin but a Minnesota coydog anyway. Three dollars even, friend, and those Chatterry Teeth are yours. Throw in another buck and you can take Myra’s Woof, too. If you got five, I’ll deed the whole place to you. Ain’t worth a dogfart since the turnpike went through, anyway.”

The long-haired kid was standing by the door, tearing the top from the pack of cigarettes Hogan had helped buy and watching this small comic opera with an expression of mean amusement. His small gray-green eyes gleamed, flicking back and forth between Scooter and his wife.

“Hell with you,” Myra said gruffly, and Hogan realized she was close to tears. “If you won’t get my sweet baby, I will.” She stalked past him, almost striking him with one boulder-sized breast. Hogan thought it would have knocked the little man flat if it had connected.

“Look,” Hogan said, “I think I’ll just shove along.”

“Aw, hell,” Scooter said. “Don’t mind Myra. I got cancer and she’s got the change, and it ain’t my problem she’s havin the most trouble livin with. Take the darn teeth. Bet you got a boy might like em. Besides, it’s probably just a cog knocked a little off-track. I bet a man who was handy could get em walkin and chompin again.”

He looked around, his expression helpless and musing. Outside, the wind rose to a brief, thin shriek as the kid opened the door and slipped out. He had decided the show was over, apparently. A cloud of fine grit swirled down the middle aisle, between the canned goods and the dog food.

“I was pretty handy myself, at one time,” Scooter confided.

Hogan did not reply for a long moment. He could not think of anything—quite literally not one single thing—to say. He looked down at the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth standing on the scratched and cloudy display case, nearly desperate to break the silence (now that Scooter was standing right in front of him, he could see that the man’s eyes were huge and dark, glittering with pain and some heavy dope . . . Darvon, or perhaps morphine), and he spoke the first words that popped into his head: “Gee, they don’t *look* broken.”

He picked the teeth up. They were metal, all right—too heavy to be anything else—and when he looked through the slightly parted jaws, he was surprised at the size of the mainspring that ran the thing. He supposed it would take one that size to make the teeth not only chatter but walk, as well. What had Scooter said? *They could give you a helluva bite if they worked.* Hogan gave the thick rubber band an experimental tweak, then stripped it off. He was still looking at the teeth so he wouldn’t have to look into Scooter’s dark, pain-

haunted eyes. He grasped the key and at last he risked a look up. He was relieved to see that now the thin man was smiling a little.

“Do you mind?” Hogan asked.

“Not me, pilgrim—let er rip.”

Hogan grinned and turned the key. At first it was all right; there was a series of small, ratcheting clicks, and he could see the mainspring winding up. Then, on the third turn, there was a *spronk!* noise from inside, and the key simply slid bonelessly around in its hole.

“See?”

“Yes,” Hogan said. He set the teeth down on the counter. They stood there on their unlikely orange feet and did nothing.

Scooter poked the clenched molars on the lefthand side with the tip of one horny finger. The jaws of the teeth opened. One orange foot rose and took a dreamy half-step forward. Then the teeth stopped moving and the whole rig fell sideways. The Chatterly Teeth came to rest on the wind-up key, a slanted, disembodied grin out here in the middle of no-man’s-land. After a moment or two, the big teeth came together again with a slow click. That was all.

Hogan, who had never had a premonition in his life, was suddenly filled with a clear certainty that was both eerie and sickening. *A year from now, this man will have been eight months in his grave, and if someone exhumed his coffin and pried off the lid, they’d see teeth just like these poking out of his dried-out dead face like an enamel trap.*

He glanced up into Scooter’s eyes, glittering like dark gems in tarnished settings, and suddenly it was no longer a question of *wanting* to get out of here; he *had* to get out of here.

“Well,” he said (hoping frantically that Scooter would not stick out his hand to be shaken), “gotta go. Best of luck to you, sir.”

Scooter *did* put his hand out, but not to be shaken. Instead, he snapped the rubber band back around the Chatterly Teeth (Hogan had no idea why, since they didn’t work), set them on their funny cartoon feet, and pushed them across the scratched surface of the counter. “Thank you kindly,” he said. “And take these teeth. No charge.”

“Oh. . . well, thanks, but I couldn’t . . .”

“Sure you can,” Scooter said. “Take em and give em to your boy. He’ll get a kick out of em standin on the shelf in his room even if they don’t work. I know a little about boys. Raised up three of em.”

“How did you know I had a son?” Hogan asked.

Scooter winked. The gesture was terrifying and pathetic at the same time. “Seen it in your face,” he said. “Go on, take em.”

The wind gusted again, this time hard enough to make the boards of the building moan. The sand hitting the windows sounded like fine snow. Hogan picked the teeth up by the plastic feet, surprised all over again by how heavy they were.

“Here.” Scooter produced a paper bag, almost as wrinkled and crumpled about the edges as his own face, from beneath the counter. “Stick em in here. That’s a real nice sportcoat you got there. If you carry them choppers in the pocket, it’ll get pulled out of shape.”

He put the bag on the counter as if he understood how little Hogan wanted to touch him.

“Thanks,” Hogan said. He put the Chatterey Teeth in the bag and rolled down the top. “Jack thanks you, too—he’s my son.”

Scooter smiled, revealing a set of teeth just as false (but nowhere near as large) as the ones in the paper bag. “My pleasure, mister. You drive careful until you get out of the blow. You’ll be fine once you get in the foothills.”

“I know.” Hogan cleared his throat “Thanks again. I hope you. . . uh. . . recover soon.”

“That’d be nice,” Scooter said evenly, “but I don’t think it’s in the cards, do you?”

“Uh. Well.” Hogan realized with dismay that he didn’t have the slightest idea how to conclude this encounter. “Take care of yourself.”

Scooter nodded. “You too.”

Hogan retreated toward the door, opened it, and had to hold on tight as the wind tried to rip it out of his hand and bang the wall. Fine sand scoured his face and he slitted his eyes against it.

He stepped out, closed the door behind him, and pulled the lapel of his real nice sportcoat over his mouth and nose as he crossed the porch, descended the steps, and headed toward the customized Dodge camper-van parked just

beyond the gas-pumps. The wind pulled his hair and the sand stung his cheeks. He was going around to the driver's-side door when someone tugged his arm.

"Mister! Hey, mister!"

He turned. It was the blonde-haired boy with the pale, ratty face. He hunched against the wind and blowing sand, wearing nothing but a tee-shirt and a pair of faded 501 jeans. Behind him, Mrs. Scooter was dragging a mangy beast on a choke-chain toward the back door of the store. Wolf the Minnesota coydog looked like a half-starved German shepherd pup—and the runt of the litter, at that.

"What?" Hogan shouted, knowing very well what.

"Can I have a ride?" the kid shouted back over the wind.

Hogan did not ordinarily pick up hitchhikers—not since one afternoon five years ago. He had stopped for a young girl on the outskirts of Tonopah. Standing by the side of the road, the girl had resembled one of those sad-eyed waifs in the UNICEF posters, a kid who looked like her mother and her last friend had both died in the same housefire about a week ago. Once she was in the car, however, Hogan had seen the bad skin and mad eyes of the long-time junkie. By then it was too late. She'd stuck a pistol in his face and demanded his wallet. The pistol was old and rusty. Its grip was wrapped in tattered electrician's tape. Hogan had doubted that it was loaded, or that it would fire if it was . . . but he had a wife and a kid back in L.A., and even if he had been single, was a hundred and forty bucks worth risking your life over? He hadn't thought so even then, when he had just been getting his feet under him in his new line of work and a hundred and forty bucks had seemed a lot more important than it did these days. He gave the girl his wallet. By then her boyfriend had been parked beside the van (in those days it had been a Ford Econoline, nowhere near as nice as the custom Dodge XRT) in a dirty blue Chevy Nova. Hogan asked the girl if she would leave him his driver's license, and the pictures of Lita and Jack. "Fuck you, sugar," she said, and slapped him across the face, hard, with his own wallet before getting out and running to the blue car.

Hitchhikers were trouble.

But the storm was getting worse, and the kid didn't even have a jacket. What was he supposed to tell him? Fuck you, sugar, crawl under a rock with

the rest of the lizards until the wind drops?

“Okay,” Hogan said.

“Thanks, man! Thanks a lot!”

The kid ran toward the passenger door, tried it, found it locked, and just stood there, waiting to be let in, hunching his shoulders up around his ears. The wind billowed out the back of his shirt like a sail, revealing glimpses of his thin, pimple-studded back.

Hogan glanced back at Scooter’s Grocery & Roadside Zoo as he went around to the driver’s door. Scooter was standing at the window, looking out at him. He raised his hand, solemnly, palm out. Hogan raised his own in return, then slipped his key into the lock and turned it. He opened the door, pushed the unlock button next to the power window switch, and motioned for the kid to get in.

He did, then had to use both hands to pull the door shut again. The wind howled around the van, actually making it rock a little from side to side.

“*Wow!*” the kid gasped, and rubbed his fingers briskly through his hair (he’d lost the sneaker lace and the hair now lay on his shoulders in lank clots). “Some storm, huh? Big-time!”

“Yeah,” Hogan said. There was a console between the two front seats—the kind of seats the brochures liked to call “captain’s chairs”—and Hogan placed the paper bag in one of the cup-holders. Then he turned the ignition key. The engine started at once with a good-tempered rumble.

The kid twisted around in his seat and looked appreciatively into the back of the van. There was a bed (now folded back into a couch), a small LP gas stove, several storage compartments where Hogan kept his various sample cases, and a toilet cubicle at the rear.

“Not too tacky, m’man!” the kid said. “All the comforts.” He glanced back at Hogan. “Where you headed?”

“Los Angeles.”

The kid grinned. “Hey, great! So’m I!” He took out his just-purchased pack of Merits and tapped one loose.

Hogan had put on his headlights and dropped the transmission into drive. Now he shoved the gearshift back into park and turned to the kid. “Let’s get a couple of things straight,” he said.

The kid gave Hogan his wide-eyed innocent look. “Sure, dude—no prob.”

“First, I don’t pick up hitchhikers as a rule. I had a bad experience with one a few years back. It vaccinated me, you might say. I’ll take you through the Santa Clara foothills, but that’s all. There’s a truckstop on the other side—Sammy’s. It’s close to the turnpike. That’s where we part company. Okay?”

“Okay. Sure. You bet.” Still with the wide-eyed look.

“Second, if you really have to smoke, we part company right now. *That* okay?”

For just a moment Hogan saw the kid’s other look (and even on short acquaintance, Hogan was almost willing to bet he only had two): the mean, watchful look. Then he was all wide-eyed innocence again, just a harmless refugee from Wayne’s World. He tucked the cigarette behind his ear and showed Hogan his empty hands. As he raised them, Hogan noticed the hand-lettered tattoo on the kid’s left bicep: DEFLEPPARD 4-EVER.

“No cigs,” the kid said. “I got it.”

“Fine. Bill Hogan.” He held out his hand.

“Bryan Adams,” the kid said, and shook Hogan’s hand briefly.

Hogan dropped the transmission into drive again and began to roll slowly toward Route 46. As he did, his eyes dropped briefly to a cassette box lying on the dashboard. It was *Reckless*, by Bryan Adams.

*Sure*, he thought. *You’re Bryan Adams and I’m really Don Henley. We just stopped by Scooter’s Grocery & Roadside Zoo to get a little material for our next albums, right, dude?*

As he pulled out onto the highway, already straining to see through the blowing dust, he found himself thinking of the girl again, the one outside of Tonopah who had slapped him across the face with his own wallet before fleeing. He was starting to get a very bad feeling about this.

Then a hard gust of wind tried to push him into the eastbound lane, and he concentrated on his driving.

• • •

They rode in silence for awhile. When Hogan glanced once to his right he saw the kid was lying back with his eyes closed—maybe asleep, maybe dozing,

maybe just pretending because he didn't want to talk. That was okay; Hogan didn't want to talk, either. For one thing, he didn't know what he might have to say to Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A. It was a cinch young Mr. Adams wasn't in the market for labels or Universal Product Code readers, which was what Hogan sold. For another, just keeping the van on the road had become something of a challenge.

As Mrs. Scooter had warned, the storm was intensifying. The road was a dim phantom crossed at irregular intervals by tan ribs of sand. These drifts were like speed-bumps, and they forced Hogan to creep along at no more than twenty-five. He could live with that. At some points, however, the sand had spread more evenly across the road's surface, camouflaging it, and then Hogan had to drop down to fifteen miles an hour, navigating by the dim bounceback of his headlights from the reflector-posts which marched along the side of the road.

Every now and then an approaching car or truck would loom out of the blowing sand like a prehistoric phantom with round blazing eyes. One of these, an old Lincoln Mark IV as big as a cabin cruiser, was driving straight down the center of 46. Hogan hit the horn and squeezed right, feeling the suck of the sand against his tires, feeling his lips peel away from his teeth in a helpless snarl. Just as he became sure the oncomer was going to force him into the ditch, the Lincoln swerved back onto its own side just enough for Hogan to make it by. He thought he heard the metallic click of his bumper kissing off the Mark IV's rear bumper, but given the steady shriek of the wind, that was almost certainly his own imagination. He *did* catch just a glimpse of the driver—an old bald-headed man sitting bolt-upright behind the wheel, peering into the blowing sand with a concentrated glare that was almost maniacal. Hogan shook his fist at him, but the old codger did not so much as glance at him. *Probably didn't even realize I was there, Hogan thought, let alone how close he came to hitting me.*

For a few seconds he was very close to going off the road anyway. He could feel the sand sucking harder at the rightside wheels, felt the van trying to tip. His instinct was to twist the wheel hard to the left. Instead, he fed the van gas and only urged it in that direction, feeling sweat dampen his last good shirt at

the armpits. At last the suck on the tires diminished and he began to feel in control of the van again. Hogan blew his breath out in a long sigh.

“Good piece of driving, man.”

His attention had been so focused he had forgotten his passenger, and in his surprise he almost twisted the wheel all the way to the left, which would have put them in trouble again. He looked around and saw the blonde kid watching him. His gray-green eyes were unsettlingly bright; there was no sign of sleepiness in them.

“It was really just luck,” Hogan said. “If there was a place to pull over, I would . . . but I know this piece of road. It’s Sammy’s or bust. Once we’re in the foothills, it’ll get better.”

He did not add that it might take them three hours to cover the seventy miles between here and there.

“You’re a salesman, right?”

“As rain.”

He wished the kid wouldn’t talk. He wanted to concentrate on his driving. Up ahead, fog-lights loomed out of the murk like yellow ghosts. They were followed by an Iroc Z with California plates. The van and the Z crept past each other like old ladies in a nursing-home corridor. In the corner of his eye, Hogan saw the kid take the cigarette from behind his ear and begin to play with it. Bryan Adams indeed. Why had the kid given him a false name? It was like something out of an old Republic movie, the kind of thing you could still see on the late-late show, a black-and-white crime movie where the travelling salesman (probably played by Ray Milland) picks up the tough young con (played by Nick Adams, say) who has just broken out of jail in Gabbs or Deeth or some place like that—

“What do you sell, dude?”

“Labels.”

“Labels?”

“That’s right. The ones with the Universal Product Code on them. It’s a little block with a pre-set number of black bars in it.”

The kid surprised Hogan by nodding. “Sure—they whip em over an electric-eye gadget in the supermarket and the price shows up on the cash register like magic, right?”

“Yes. Except it’s not magic, and it’s not an electric eye. It’s a laser reader. I sell those, too. Both the big ones and the portables.”

“Far out, dude-mar.” The tinge of sarcasm in the kid’s voice was faint . . . but it was there.

“Bryan?”

“Yeah?”

“The name’s Bill, not m’man, not dude, and most certainly not dude-mar.”

He found himself wishing more and more strongly that he could roll back in time to Scooter’s, and just say no when the kid asked him for a ride. The Scooters weren’t bad sorts; they would have let the kid stay until the storm blew itself out this evening. Maybe Mrs. Scooter would even have given him five bucks to babysit the tarantula, the rattlers, and Woof, the Amazing Minnesota Coydog. Hogan found himself liking those gray-green eyes less and less. He could feel their weight on his face, like small stones.

“Yeah—Bill. Bill the Label Dude.”

Bill didn’t reply. The kid laced his fingers together and bent his hands backward, cracking the knuckles.

“Well, it’s like my old mamma used to say—it may not be much, but it’s a living. Right, Label Dude?”

Hogan grunted something noncommittal and concentrated on his driving. The feeling that he had made a mistake had grown to a certainty. When he’d picked up the girl that time, God had let him get away with it. *Please*, he prayed. *One more time, okay, God? Better yet, let me be wrong about this kid—let it just be paranoia brought on by low barometer, high winds, and the coincidence of a name that can’t, after all, be that uncommon.*

Here came a huge Mack truck from the other direction, the silver bulldog atop the grille seeming to peer into the flying grit. Hogan squeezed right until he felt the sand piled up along the edge of the road grabbing greedily at his tires again. The long silver box the Mack was pulling blotted out everything on Hogan’s left side. It was six inches away—maybe even less—and it seemed to pass forever.

When it was finally gone, the blonde kid asked: “You look like you’re doin pretty well, Bill—rig like this must have set you back at least thirty big ones. So why—”

“It was a lot less than that.” Hogan didn’t know if “Bryan Adams” could hear the edgy note in his voice, but *he* sure could. “I did a lot of the work myself.”

“All the same, you sure ain’t staggerin around hungry. So why aren’t you up above all this shit, flyin the friendly skies?”

It was a question Hogan sometimes asked himself in the long empty miles between Tempe and Tucson or Las Vegas and Los Angeles, the kind of question you *had* to ask yourself when you couldn’t find anything on the radio but crappy synthpop or threadbare oldies and you’d listened to the last cassette of the current best-seller from Recorded Books, when there was nothing to look at but miles of gullywashes and scrubland, all of it owned by Uncle Sam.

He could say that he got a better feel for his customers and their needs by travelling through the country where they lived and sold their goods, and it was true, but it wasn’t the reason. He could say that checking his sample cases, which were much too bulky to fit under an airline seat, was a pain in the ass and waiting for them to show up on the conveyor belt at the other end was always an adventure (he’d once had a packing case filled with five thousand soft-drink labels show up in Hilo, Hawaii, instead of Hillside, Arizona). That was *also* true, but it also wasn’t the reason.

The reason was that in 1982 he had been on board a Western Pride commuter flight which had crashed in the high country seventeen miles north of Reno. Six of the nineteen passengers on board and both crew-members had been killed. Hogan had suffered a broken back. He had spent four months in bed and another ten in a heavy brace his wife Lita called the Iron Maiden. They (whoever *they* were) said that if you got thrown from a horse, you should get right back on. William I. Hogan said that was bullshit, and with the exception of a white-knuckle, two-Valium flight to attend his father’s funeral in New York, he had never been on a plane since.

He came out of these thoughts all at once, realizing two things: he had had the road to himself since the passage of the Mack, and the kid was still looking at him with those unsettling eyes, waiting for him to answer the question.

“I had a bad experience on a commuter flight once,” he said. “Since then, I’ve pretty much stuck to transport where you can coast into the breakdown

lane if your engine quits.”

“You sure have had a lot of bad experiences, Bill-dude,” the kid said. A tone of bogus regret crept into his voice. “And now, so sorry, you’re about to have another one.” There was a sharp metallic click. Hogan looked over and was not very surprised to see the kid was holding a switchknife with a glittering eight-inch blade.

*Oh shit*, Hogan thought. Now that it was here, now that it was right in front of him, he didn’t feel very scared. Only tired. *Oh shit, and only four hundred miles from home. Goddam.*

“Pull over, Bill-dude. Nice and slow.”

“What do you want?”

“If you really don’t know the answer to that one, you’re even dumber than you look.” A little smile played around the corners of the kid’s mouth. The homemade tattoo on the kid’s arm rippled as the muscle beneath it twitched. “I want your dough, and I guess I want your rolling whorehouse too, at least for awhile. But don’t worry—there’s this little truckstop not too far from here. Sammy’s. Close to the turnpike. Someone’ll give you a ride. The people who don’t stop will look at you like you’re dogshit they found on their shoes, of course, and you might have to beg a little, but I’m sure you’ll get a ride in the end. Now *pull over.*”

Hogan was a little surprised to find that he felt angry as well as tired. Had he been angry that other time, when the road-girl had stolen his wallet? He couldn’t honestly remember.

“Don’t pull that shit on me,” he said, turning to the kid. “I gave you a ride when you needed one, and I didn’t make you beg for it. If it wasn’t for me, you’d still be eating sand with your thumb out. So why don’t you just put that thing away. We’ll—”

The kid suddenly lashed forward with the knife, and Hogan felt a thread of burning pain across his right hand. The van swerved, then shuddered as it passed over another of those sandy speed-bumps.

“Pull *over*, I said. You’re either walking, Label Dude, or you’re lying in the nearest gully with your throat cut and one of your own price-reading gadgets jammed up your ass. And you wanna know something? I’m gonna chain-

smoke all the way to Los Angeles, and every time I finish a cigarette I'm gonna butt it out on your fuckin dashboard."

Hogan glanced down at his hand and saw a diagonal line of blood which stretched from the last knuckle of his pinky to the base of his thumb. And here was the anger again . . . only now it was really rage, and if the tiredness was still there, it was buried somewhere in the middle of that irrational red eye. He tried to summon a mental picture of Lita and Jack to damp that feeling down before it got the better of him and made him do something crazy, but the images were fuzzy and out of focus. There *was* a clear image in his mind, but it was the wrong one—it was the face of the girl outside of Tonopah, the girl with the snarling mouth below the sad poster-child eyes, the girl who had said *Fuck you, sugar* before slapping him across the face with his own wallet.

He stepped down on the gas-pedal and the van began to move faster. The red needle moved past thirty.

The kid looked surprised, then puzzled, then angry. "What are you doing? I told you to pull over! Do you want your guts in your lap, or what?"

"I don't know," Hogan said. He kept his foot on the gas. Now the needle was trembling just above forty. The van ran across a series of dunelets and shivered like a dog with a fever. "What do *you* want, kid? How about a broken neck? All it takes is one twist of the wheel. I fastened *my* seatbelt. I notice you forgot yours."

The kid's gray-green eyes were huge now, glittering with a mixture of fear and fury. You're supposed to pull over, those eyes said. That's the way it's supposed to work when I'm holding a knife on you—don't you *know* that?

"You won't wreck us," the kid said, but Hogan thought he was trying to convince himself.

"Why not?" Hogan turned toward the kid again. "After all, I'm pretty sure I'll walk away, and the van's insured. You call the play, asshole. What about that?"

"You—" the kid began, and then his eyes widened and he lost all interest in Hogan. "*Look out!*" he screamed.

Hogan snapped his eyes forward and saw four huge white head-lamps bearing down on him through the flying wrack outside. It was a tanker truck,

probably carrying gasoline or propane. An air-horn beat the air like the cry of a gigantic, enraged goose: *WHONK! WHONK! WHONNNK!*

The van had drifted while Hogan was trying to deal with the kid; now *he* was the one halfway across the road. He yanked the wheel hard to the right, knowing it would do no good, knowing it was already too late. But the approaching truck was also moving, squeezing over just as Hogan had tried to squeeze over in order to accommodate the Mark IV. The two vehicles danced past each other through the blowing sand with less than a gasp between them. Hogan felt his rightside wheels bite into the sand again and knew that this time he didn't have a chance in hell of holding the van on the road—not at forty-plus miles an hour. As the dim shape of the big steel tank (CARTER'S FARM SUPPLIES & ORGANIC FERTILIZER was painted along the side) slid from view, he felt the steering wheel go mushy in his hands, dragging farther to the right. And from the corner of his eye, he saw the kid leaning forward with his knife.

*What's the matter with you, are you crazy?* he wanted to scream at the kid, but it would have been a stupid question even if he'd had time enough to articulate it. Sure the kid was crazy—you only had to take a good look into those gray-green eyes to see it. Hogan must have been crazy himself to give the kid a ride in the first place, but none of that mattered now; he had a situation to cope with here, and if he allowed himself the luxury of believing this couldn't be happening to him—if he allowed himself to think that for even a single second—he would probably be found tomorrow or the next day with his throat cut and his eyes nibbled out of their sockets by the buzzards. This was really happening; it was a true thing.

The kid tried his level best to plant the blade in Hogan's neck, but the van had begun to tilt by then, running deeper and deeper into the sand-choked gully. Hogan recoiled back from the blade, letting go of the wheel entirely, and thought he had gotten clear until he felt the wet warmth of blood drench the side of his neck. The knife had unzipped his right cheek from jaw to temple. He flailed with his right hand, trying to get the kid's wrist, and then the van's left front wheel struck a rock the size of a pay telephone and the van flipped high and hard, like a stunt vehicle in one of those movies this rootless kid undoubtedly loved. It rolled in mid-air, all four wheels turning, still doing thirty miles an hour according to the speedometer, and Hogan felt his seatbelt

lock painfully across his chest and belly. It was like reliving the plane-crash—now, as then, he could not get it through his head that this was really happening.

The kid was thrown upward and forward, still holding onto the knife. His head bounced off the roof as the van's top and bottom swapped places. Hogan saw his left hand waving wildly, and realized with amazement that the kid was *still* trying to stab him. He was a rattler, all right, Hogan had been right about that, but no one had milked his poison sacs.

Then the van struck the desert hardpan, peeling off the luggage racks, and the kid's head connected with the roof again, much harder this time. The knife was jolted from his hand. The cabinets at the rear of the van sprang open, spraying sample-books and laser label-readers everywhere. Hogan was dimly aware of an inhuman screaming sound—the long, drawn-out squall of the XRT's roof sliding across the gravelly desert surface on the far side of the gully—and thought: *So this is what it would be like to be inside a tin can when someone was using the opener.*

The windshield shattered, blowing inward in a sagging shield clouded by a million zig-zagging cracks. Hogan shut his eyes and threw his hands up to shield his face as the van continued to roll, thumping down on Hogan's side long enough to shatter the driver's-side window and admit a rattle of rocks and dusty earth before staggering upright again. It rocked as if meaning to go over on the kid's side . . . and then came to rest.

Hogan sat where he was without moving for perhaps five seconds, eyes wide, hands gripping the armrests of his chair, feeling a little like Captain Kirk in the aftermath of a Klingon attack. He was aware there was a lot of dirt and crumbled glass in his lap, and something else as well, but not what the something else was. He was also aware of the wind, blowing more dirt through the van's broken windows.

Then his vision was temporarily blocked by a swiftly moving object. The object was a mottle of white skin, brown dirt, raw knuckles, and red blood. It was a fist, and it struck Hogan squarely in the nose. The agony was immediate and intense, as if someone had fired a flare-gun directly into his brain. For a moment his vision was gone, swallowed in a vast white flash. It had just begun

to come back when the kid's hands suddenly clamped around his neck and he could no longer breathe.

The kid, Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A., was leaning over the console between the front seats. Blood from perhaps half a dozen different scalp-wounds had flowed over his cheeks and forehead and nose like warpaint. His gray-green eyes stared at Hogan with fixed, lunatic fury.

*"Look what you did, you fuck!"* the kid shouted. *"Look what you did to me!"*

Hogan tried to pull back, and got half a breath when the kid's hold slipped momentarily, but with his seatbelt still buckled—and still locked down as well, from the feel—there was really nowhere he could go. The kid's hands were back almost at once, and this time his thumbs were pressing into his windpipe, pinching it shut.

Hogan tried to bring his own hands up, but the kid's arms, as rigid as prison bars, blocked him. He tried to knock the kid's arms away, but they wouldn't budge. Now he could hear another wind—a high, roaring wind inside his own head.

*"Look what you did, you stupid shit! I'm bleedin!"*

The kid's voice, but farther away than it had been.

*He's killing me,* Hogan thought, and a voice replied: *Right—fuck you, sugar.*

That brought the anger back. He groped in his lap for whatever was there besides dirt and glass. It was a paper bag with some bulky object—Hogan couldn't remember exactly what—inside it. Hogan closed his hand around it and pistoned his fist upward toward the shelf of the kid's jaw. It connected with a heavy thud. The kid screamed in surprised pain, and his grip on Hogan's throat was suddenly gone as he fell over backward.

Hogan pulled in a deep, convulsive breath and heard a sound like a teakettle howling to be taken off the burner. *Is that me, making that sound? My God, is that me?*

He dragged in another breath. It was full of flying dust, it hurt his throat and made him cough, but it was heaven all the same. He looked down at his fist and saw the shape of the Chatterbox clearly outlined against the brown bag.

And suddenly felt them *move*.

There was something so shockingly human in this movement that Hogan shrieked and dropped the bag at once; it was as if he had picked up a human jawbone which had tried to speak to his hand.

The bag hit the kid's back and then tumbled to the van's carpeted floor as "Bryan Adams" pushed himself groggily to his knees. Hogan heard the rubber band snap . . . and then the unmistakable click-and-chutter of the teeth themselves, opening and closing.

*It's probably just a cog knocked a little off-track, Scooter had said. I bet a man who was handy could get em walkin and chompin again.*

*Or maybe just a good knock would do it, Hogan thought. If I live through this and ever get back that way, I'll have to tell Scooter that all you have to do to fix a pair of malfunctioning Chatterry Teeth is roll your van over and then use them to hit a psychotic hitchhiker who's trying to strangle you: so simple even a child could do it.*

The teeth clattered and smacked inside the torn brown bag; the sides fluttered, making it look like an amputated lung which refused to die. The kid crawled away from the bag without even looking at it—crawled toward the back of the van, shaking his head from side to side, trying to clear it. Blood flew from the clots of his hair in a fine spray.

Hogan found the clasp of his seatbelt and pushed the pop-release. Nothing happened. The square in the center of the buckle did not give even a little and the belt itself was still locked as tight as a cramp, cutting into the middle-aged roll of fat above the waistband of his trousers and pushing a hard diagonal across his chest. He tried rocking back and forth in the seat, hoping that would unlock the belt. The flow of blood from his face increased, and he could feel his cheek flapping back and forth like a strip of dried wallpaper, but that was all. He felt panic struggling to break through amazed shock, and twisted his head over his right shoulder to see what the kid was up to.

It turned out to be no good. He had spotted his knife at the far end of the van, lying atop a litter of instructional manuals and brochures. He grabbed it, flicked his hair away from his face, and peered back over his own shoulder at Hogan. He was grinning, and there was something in that grin that made Hogan's balls simultaneously tighten and shrivel until it felt as if someone had tucked a couple of peach-pits into his Jockey shorts.

*Ah, here it is!* the kid's grin said. *For a minute or two there I was worried—quite seriously worried—but everything is going to come out all right after all. Things got a little improvisational there for awhile, but now we're back to the script.*

“You stuck, Label Dude?” the kid asked over the steady shriek of the wind. “You are, ain't you? Good thing you buckled your belt, right? Good thing for me.”

The kid tried to get up, almost made it, and then his knees gave way. An expression of surprise so magnified it would have been comic under other circumstances crossed his face. Then he flicked his blood-greasy hair out of his face again and began to crawl toward Hogan, his left hand wrapped around the imitation-bone handle of the knife. The Def Leppard tattoo ebbed and flowed with each flex of his impoverished bicep, making Hogan think of the way the words on Myra's tee-shirt—NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY—had rippled when she moved.

Hogan grasped the seatbelt buckle with both hands and drove his thumbs against the pop-release as enthusiastically as the kid had driven his into Hogan's windpipe. There was absolutely no response. The belt was frozen. He craned his neck to look at the kid again.

The kid had made it as far as the fold-up bed and then stopped. That expression of large, comic surprise had resurfaced on his face. He was staring straight ahead, which meant he was looking at something on the floor, and Hogan suddenly remembered the teeth. They were still chattering away.

He looked down in time to see the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth march from the open end of the torn paper bag on their funny orange shoes. The molars and the canines and the incisors chopped rapidly up and down, producing a sound like ice in a cocktail-shaker. The shoes, dressed up in their tony white spats, almost seemed to *bounce* along the gray carpet. Hogan found himself thinking of Fred Astaire tap-dancing his way across a stage and back again, Fred Astaire with a cane tucked under his arm and a straw boater tipped saucily forward over one eye.

“Oh shit!” the kid said, half-laughing. “Is *that* what you were dickerin for back there? Oh, man! I kill *you*, Label Dude, I'm gonna be doin the world a favor.”

*The key, Hogan thought. The key on the side of the teeth, the one you use to wind them up . . . it isn't turning.*

And he suddenly had another of those precognitive flashes; he understood exactly what was going to happen. The kid was going to reach for them.

The teeth abruptly stopped walking and chattering. They simply stood there on the slightly tilted floor of the van, jaws slightly agape. Eyeless, they still seemed to peer quizzically up at the kid.

“Chatterry Teeth,” Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A., marvelled. He reached out and curled his right hand around them, just as Hogan had known he would.

“Bite him!” Hogan shrieked. “Bite his fucking fingers *right off!*”

The kid’s head snapped up, the gray-green eyes wide with startlement. He gaped at Hogan for a moment—that big expression of totally dumb surprise—and then he began to laugh. His laughter was high and shrieky, a perfect complement to the wind howling through the van and billowing the curtains like long ghost-hands.

“Bite me! *Bite me! Biiiite me!*” the kid chanted, as if it were the punchline to the funniest joke he’d ever heard. “Hey, Label Dude! I thought *I* was the one who bumped my head!”

The kid clamped the handle of the switchblade in his own teeth and stuck the forefinger of his left hand between the Jumbo Chatterry Teeth. “*Ite ee!*” he said around the knife. He giggled and wiggled his finger between the oversized jaws. “*Ite ee! Oh on, ite ee!*”

The teeth didn’t move. Neither did the orange feet. Hogan’s premonition collapsed around him the way dreams do upon waking. The kid wiggled his finger between the Chatterry Teeth one more time, began to pull it out . . . then began screaming at the top of his lungs. “*Oh shit! SHIT! Mother FUCKER!*”

For a moment Hogan’s heart leaped in his chest, and then he realized that, although the kid was still screaming, what he was really doing was *laughing*. Laughing at him. The teeth had remained perfectly still the whole time.

The kid lifted the teeth up for a closer look as he grasped his knife again. He shook the long blade at the Chatterry Teeth like a teacher shaking his pointer at a naughty student. “You shouldn’t bite,” he said. “That’s very bad behav—”

One of the orange feet took a sudden step forward on the grimy palm of the kid's hand. The jaws opened at the same time, and before Hogan was fully aware of what was happening, the Chatterly Teeth had closed on the kid's nose.

This time Bryan Adams's scream was real—a thing of agony and ultimate surprise. He flailed at the teeth with his right hand, trying to bat them away, but they were locked on his nose as tightly as Hogan's seatbelt was locked around his middle. Blood and filaments of torn gristle burst out between the canines in red strings. The kid jackknifed backward and for a moment Hogan could see only his flailing body, lashing elbows, and kicking feet. Then he saw the glitter of the knife.

The kid screamed again and bolted into a sitting position. His long hair had fallen over his face in a curtain; the clamped teeth stuck out like the rudder of some strange boat. The kid had somehow managed to insert the blade of his knife between the teeth and what remained of his nose.

"Kill him!" Hogan shouted hoarsely. He had lost his mind; on some level he understood that he *must* have lost his mind, but for the time being, that didn't matter. "*Go on, kill him!*"

The kid shrieked—a long, piercing firewhistle sound—and twisted the knife. The blade snapped, but not before it had managed to pry the disembodied jaws at least partway open. The teeth fell off his face and into his lap. Most of the kid's nose fell off with them.

The kid shook his hair back. His gray-green eyes were crossed, trying to look down at the mangled stump in the middle of his face. His mouth was drawn down in a rictus of pain; the tendons in his neck stood out like pulley-wires.

The kid reached for the teeth. The teeth stepped nimbly backward on their orange cartoon feet. They were nodding up and down, marching in place, grinning at the kid, who was now sitting with his ass on his calves. Blood drenched the front of his tee-shirt.

The kid said something then that confirmed Hogan's belief that he, Hogan, had lost his mind; only in a fantasy born of delirium would such words be spoken.

"Give bme bag by *dose*, you sud-of-a-biditch!"

The kid reached for the teeth again and this time they ran *forward*, under his snatching hand, between his spread legs, and there was a meaty *chump!* sound as they closed on the bulge of faded blue denim just below the place where the zipper of the kid's jeans ended.

Bryan Adams's eyes flew wide open. So did his mouth. His hands rose to the level of his shoulders, springing wide open, and for a moment he looked like some strange Al Jolson imitator preparing to sing "Mammy." The switchknife flew over his shoulder to the back of the van.

*"Jesus! Jesus! Jeeeeeee—"*

The orange feet were pumping rapidly, as if doing a Highland Fling. The pink jaws of the Jumbo Chatter Teeth nodded rapidly up and down, as if saying *yes! yes! yes!* and then shook back and forth, just as rapidly, as if saying *no! no! no!*

*"—eeeeeeEEEEEEEE—"*

As the cloth of the kid's jeans began to rip—and that was not all that was ripping, by the sound—Bill Hogan passed out.

• • •

He came to twice. The first time must have been only a short while later, because the storm was still howling through and around the van, and the light was about the same. He started to turn around, but a monstrous bolt of pain shot up his neck. Whiplash, of course, and probably not as bad as it could have been. . . or would be tomorrow, for that matter.

Always supposing he lived until tomorrow.

*The kid. I have to look and make sure he's dead.*

*No, you don't. Of course he's dead. If he wasn't, you would be.*

Now he began to hear a new sound from behind him—the steady chutter-click-chutter of the teeth.

*They're coming for me. They've finished with the kid, but they're still hungry, so they're coming for me.*

He placed his hands on the seatbelt buckle again, but the pop-release was still hopelessly jammed, and his hands seemed to have no strength, anyway.

The teeth grew steadily closer—they were right in back of his seat, now, from the sound—and Hogan's confused mind read a rhyme into their ceaseless chomping: *Clickety-clickety-clickety-clack! We are the teeth, and we're coming back! Watch us walk, watch us chew, we ate him, now we'll eat you!*

Hogan closed his eyes.

The clittering sound stopped.

Now there was only the ceaseless whine of the wind and the *spick-spack* of sand striking the dented side of the XRT van.

Hogan waited. After a long, long time, he heard a single click, followed by the minute sound of tearing fibers. There was a pause, then the click and the tearing sound was repeated.

*What's it doing?*

The third time the click and the small tearing sound came, he felt the back of his seat moving a little and understood. The teeth were pulling themselves up to where he was. Somehow they were pulling themselves up to him.

Hogan thought of the teeth closing on the bulge below the zipper of the kid's jeans and willed himself to pass out again. Sand flew in through the broken windshield, tickled his cheeks and forehead.

*Click. . . rip. Click . . . rip. Click . . . rip.*

The last one was very close. Hogan didn't want to look down, but he was unable to help himself. And beyond his right hip, where the seat-cushion met the seat's back, he saw a wide white grin. It moved upward with agonizing slowness, pushing with the as-yet-unseen orange feet as it nipped a small fold of gray seat-cover between its incisors . . . then the jaws let go and it lurched convulsively upward.

This time what the teeth fastened on was the pocket of Hogan's slacks, and he passed out again.

• • •

When he came to the second time, the wind had dropped and it was almost dark; the air had taken on a queer purple shade Hogan could not remember ever having seen in the desert before. The skirls of sand running across the

desert floor beyond the sagging ruin of the windshield looked like fleeing ghost-children.

For a moment he could remember nothing at all of what had happened to land him here; the last clear memory he could touch was of looking at his gas-gauge, seeing it was down to an eighth, then looking up and seeing a sign at the side of the road which said SCOOTER'S GROCERY & ROADSIDE ZOO • GAS • SNAX • COLD BEER • *SEE LIVE RATLLESNAKE'S!*

He understood that he could hold onto this amnesia for awhile, if he wanted to; given a little time, his subconscious might even be able to wall off certain dangerous memories permanently. But it could also be dangerous *not* to remember. *Very* dangerous. Because—

The wind gusted. Sand rattled against the badly dented driver's side of the van. It sounded almost like

*(teeth! teeth! teeth!)*

The fragile surface of his amnesia shattered, letting everything pour through, and all the heat fell from the surface of Hogan's skin. He uttered a rusty squawk as he remembered the sound

*(chump!)*

the Chatterly Teeth had made as they closed on the kid's balls, and he closed his hands over his own crotch, eyes rolling fearfully in their sockets as he looked for the runaway teeth.

He didn't see them, but the ease with which his shoulders followed the movement of his hands was new. He looked down at his lap and slowly removed his hands from his crotch. His seatbelt was no longer holding him prisoner. It lay on the gray carpet in two pieces. The metal tongue of the pull-up section was still buried inside the buckle, but beyond it there was only ragged red fabric. The belt had not been cut; it had been gnawed through.

He looked up into the rear-view mirror and saw something else: the back doors of the van were standing open, and there was only a vague, man-shaped red outline on the gray carpet where the kid had been. Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A., was gone.

So were the Chatterly Teeth.

• • •

Hogan got out of the van slowly, like an old man afflicted with a terrible case of arthritis. He found that if he held his head perfectly level, it wasn't too bad . . . but if he forgot and moved it in any direction, a series of exploding bolts went off in his neck, shoulders, and upper back. Even the thought of allowing his head to roll backward was unbearable.

He walked slowly to the rear of the van, running his hand lightly over the dented, paint-peeled surface, hearing and feeling the glass as it crunched under his feet. He stood at the far end of the driver's side for a long time. He was afraid to turn the corner. He was afraid that, when he did, he would see the kid squatting on his hunkers, holding the knife in his left hand and grinning that empty grin. But he couldn't just stand here, holding his head on top of his strained neck like a big bottle of nitroglycerine, while it got dark around him, so at last Hogan went around.

Nobody. The kid was really gone. Or so it seemed at first.

The wind gusted, blowing Hogan's hair around his bruised face, then dropped away completely. When it did, he heard a harsh scraping noise coming from about twenty yards beyond the van. He looked in that direction and saw the soles of the kid's sneakers just disappearing over the top of a dry-wash. The sneakers were spread in a limp V. They stopped moving for a moment, as if whatever was hauling the kid's body needed a few moments' rest to recoup its strength, and then they began to move again in little jerks.

A picture of terrible, unendurable clarity suddenly rose in Hogan's mind. He saw the Jumbo Chatterry Teeth standing on their funny orange feet just over the edge of that wash, standing there in spats so cool they made the coolest of the California Raisins look like hicks from Fargo, North Dakota, standing there in the electric purple light which had overspread these empty lands west of Las Vegas. They were clamped shut on a thick wad of the kid's long blonde hair.

The Chatterry Teeth were backing up.

The Chatterry Teeth were dragging Mr. Bryan Adams away to Nowhere, U.S.A.

Hogan turned in the other direction and walked slowly toward the road, holding his nitro head straight and steady on top of his neck. It took him five minutes to negotiate the ditch and another fifteen to flag a ride, but he

eventually managed both things. And during that time, he never looked back once.

• • •

Nine months later, on a clear hot summer day in June, Bill Hogan happened by Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo again. . . except the place had been renamed. MYRA'S PLACE, the sign now said. GAS • COLD BEER • VIDEO'S. Below the words was a picture of a wolf—or maybe just a Woof—snarling at the moon. Wolf himself, the Amazing Minnesota Coydog, was lying in a cage in the shade of the porch overhang. His back legs were sprawled extravagantly, and his muzzle was on his paws. He did not get up when Hogan got out of his car to fill the tank. Of the rattlesnakes and the tarantula there was no sign.

“Hi, Woof,” he said as he went up the steps. The cage's inmate rolled over onto his back and allowed his long red tongue to dangle enticingly from the side of his mouth as he stared up at Hogan.

The store looked bigger and cleaner inside. Hogan guessed this was partly because the day outside was not so threatening, but that wasn't all; the windows had been washed, for one thing, and that made a big difference. The board walls had been replaced with pine-panelling that still smelled fresh and sappy. A snackbar with five stools had been added at the back. The novelty case was still there, but the cigarette loads, the joy-buzzers, and Dr. Wacky's Sneezing Powder were gone. The case was filled with videotape boxes. A hand-lettered sign read X-RATED IN BACK ROOM • “B 18 OR B GONE.”

The woman at the cash register was standing in profile to Hogan, looking down at a calculator and running numbers on it. For a moment Hogan was sure this was Mr. and Mrs. Scooter's daughter—the female complement to those three boys Scooter had talked about raising. Then she lifted her head and Hogan saw it was Mrs. Scooter herself. It was hard to believe this could be the woman whose mammoth bosom had almost burst the seams of her NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY tee-shirt, but it was. Mrs. Scooter had lost at least fifty pounds and dyed her hair a sleek and shiny walnut-brown. Only the sun-wrinkles around the eyes and mouth were the same.

“Getcha gas?” she asked.

“Yep. Fifteen dollars’ worth.” He handed her a twenty and she rang it up. “Place looks a lot different from the last time I was in.”

“Been a lot of changes since Scooter died, all right,” she agreed, and pulled a five out of the register. She started to hand it over, really looked at him for the first time, and hesitated. “Say. . . ain’t you the guy who almost got killed the day we had that storm last year?”

He nodded and stuck out his hand. “Bill Hogan.”

She didn’t hesitate; simply reached over the counter and gave his hand a single strong pump. The death of her husband seemed to have improved her disposition . . . or maybe it was just that her change of life was finally over.

“I’m sorry about your husband. He seemed like a good sort.”

“Scoot? Yeah, he was a fine fella before he took ill,” she agreed. “And what about you? You all recovered?”

Hogan nodded. “I wore a neck-brace for about six weeks—not for the first time, either—but I’m okay.”

She was looking at the scar which twisted down his right cheek. “He do that? That kid?”

“Yeah.”

“Stuck you pretty bad.”

“Yeah.”

“I heard he got busted up in the crash, then crawled into the desert to die.” She was looking at Hogan shrewdly. “That about right?”

Hogan smiled a little. “Near enough, I guess.”

“J.T.—he’s the State Bear around these parts—said the animals worked him over pretty good. Desert rats are awful impolite that way.”

“I don’t know anything about that part.”

“J.T. said the kid’s own mother wouldn’t have reckanized him.” She put a hand on her reduced bosom and looked at him earnestly. “If I’m lyin, I’m dyin.”

Hogan laughed out loud. In the weeks and months since the day of the storm, this was something he found himself doing more often. He had come, it sometimes seemed to him, to a slightly different arrangement with life since that day.

“Lucky he didn’t kill you,” Mrs. Scooter said. “You had a helluva narrow escape. God musta been with you.”

“That’s right,” Hogan agreed. He looked down at the video case. “I see you took out the novelties.”

“Them nasty old things? You bet! That was the first thing I did after—” Her eyes suddenly widened. “Oh, say! Jeepers! I got sumpin belongs to you! If I was to forget, I reckon Scooter’d come back and haunt me!”

Hogan frowned, puzzled, but the woman was already going behind the counter. She stood on tiptoe and brought something down from a high shelf above the rack of cigarettes. It was, Hogan saw with absolutely no surprise at all, the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth. The woman set them down beside the cash register.

Hogan stared at that frozen, insouciant grin with a deep sense of *déjà vu*. There they were, the world’s biggest set of Chatterly Teeth, standing on their funny orange shoes beside the Slim Jim display, cool as a mountain breeze, grinning up at him as if to say, *Hello, there! Did you forget me? I didn’t forget YOU, my friend. Not at all.*

“I found em on the porch the next day, after the storm blew itself out,” Mrs. Scooter said. She laughed. “Just like old Scoot to give you somethin for free, then stick it in a bag with a hole in the bottom. I was gonna throw em out, but he said he give em to you, and I should stick em on a shelf someplace. He said a travelling man who came in once’d most likely come in again. . . and here you are.”

“Yes,” Hogan agreed. “Here I am.”

He picked up the teeth and slipped his finger between the slightly gaping jaws. He ran the pad of the finger along the molars at the back, and in his mind he heard the kid, Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A., chanting *Bite me! Bite me! Biiiiite me!*

Were the back teeth still streaked with the dull rust of the boy’s blood? Hogan thought he could see *something* way back in there, but perhaps it was only a shadow.

“I saved it because Scooter said you had a boy.”

Hogan nodded. “I do.” *And, he thought, the boy still has a father. I’m holding the reason why. The question is, did they walk all the way back here on their little*

*orange feet because this was home . . . or because they somehow knew what Scooter knew? That sooner or later, a travelling man always comes back to where he's been, the way a murderer is supposed to revisit the scene of his crime?*

“Well, if you still want em, they’re still yours,” she said. For a moment she looked solemn . . . and then she laughed. “Shit, I probably would have thrown em out anyway, except I forgot about em. Course, they’re still broken.”

Hogan turned the key jutting out of the gum. It went around twice, making little wind-up clicks, then simply turned uselessly in its socket. Broken. Of course they were. And would be until they decided they didn’t *want* to be broken for awhile. And the question wasn’t how they had gotten back here, and the question wasn’t even *why*.

The question was this: What did they want?

He poked his finger into the white steel grin again and whispered, “Bite me—do you want to?”

The teeth only stood there on their supercool orange feet and grinned.

“They ain’t talking, seems like,” Mrs. Scooter said.

“No,” Hogan said, and suddenly he found himself thinking of the kid. Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A. A lot of kids like him now. A lot of grownups, too, blowing along the highways like tumbleweed, always ready to take your wallet, say *Fuck you, sugar*, and run. You could stop picking up hitchhikers (he had), and you could put a burglar-alarm system in your home (he’d done that, too), but it was still a hard world where planes sometimes fell out of the sky and the crazies were apt to turn up anyplace and there was always room for a little more insurance. He had a wife, after all.

And a son.

It might be nice if Jack had a set of Jumbo Chatterly Teeth sitting on his desk. Just in case something happened.

Just in case.

“Thank you for saving them,” he said, picking the Chatterly Teeth up carefully by the feet. “I think my kid will get a kick out of them even if they are broken.”

“Thank Scoot, not me. You want a bag?” She grinned. “I got a plastic one—no holes, guaranteed.”

Hogan shook his head and slipped the Chatterly Teeth into his sportcoat pocket. "I'll carry them this way," he said, and grinned right back at her. "Keep them handy."

"Suit yourself." As he started for the door, she called after him: "Stop back again! I make a damn good chicken salad sandwich!"

"I'll bet you do, and I will," Hogan said. He went out, down the steps, and stood for a moment in the hot desert sunshine, smiling. He felt good—he felt good a lot these days. He had come to think that was just the way to be.

To his left, Woof the Amazing Minnesota Coydog got to his feet, poked his snout through the crisscross of wire on the side of his cage, and barked. In Hogan's pocket, the Chatterly Teeth clicked together once. The sound was soft, but Hogan heard it . . . and felt them move. He patted his pocket. "Easy, big fella," he said softly.

He walked briskly across the yard, climbed behind the wheel of his new Chevrolet van, and drove away toward Los Angeles. He had promised Lita and Jack he would be home by seven, eight at the latest, and he was a man who liked to keep his promises.

## Dedication

Around the corner from the doormen, the limos, the taxis, and the revolving doors at the entrance to Le Palais, one of New York's oldest and grandest hotels, there is another door, this one small, unmarked, and—for the most part—unremarked.

Martha Rosewall approached it one morning at a quarter of seven, her plain blue canvas tote-bag in one hand and a smile on her face. The tote was usual, the smile much more rarely seen. She was not unhappy in her work—being the Chief Housekeeper of floors ten through twelve of Le Palais might not seem an important or rewarding job to some, but to a woman who had worn dresses made out of rice- and flour-sacks as a girl growing up in Babylon, Alabama, it seemed very important indeed, and very rewarding as well. Yet no matter what the job, mechanic or movie-star, on ordinary mornings a person arrives at work with an ordinary expression on his or her face; a look that says *Most of me is still in bed* and not much more. For Martha Rosewall, however, this was no ordinary morning.

Things had begun being not ordinary for her when she arrived home from work the previous afternoon and found the package her son had sent from Ohio. The long-expected and long-awaited had finally come. She had slept only in snatches last night—she had to keep getting up and checking to make sure the thing he had sent was real, and that it was still there. Finally she had slept with it under her pillow, like a bridesmaid with a piece of wedding cake.

Now she used her key to open the small door around the corner from the hotel's main entrance and went down three steps to a long hallway painted flat green and lined with Dandux laundry carts. They were piled high with freshly washed and ironed bed-linen. The hallway was filled with its clean smell, a smell that Martha always associated, in some vague way, with the smell of freshly baked bread. The faint sound of Muzak drifted down from the lobby, but these days Martha heard it no more than she heard the hum of the service elevators or the rattle of china in the kitchen.

Halfway down the hall was a door marked CHIEFS OF HOUSEKEEPING. She went in, hung up her coat, and passed through the big room where the Chiefs—there were eleven in all—took their coffee-breaks, worked out problems of supply and demand, and tried to keep up with the endless paperwork. Beyond this room with its huge desk, wall-length bulletin board, and perpetually overflowing ashtrays was a dressing room. Its walls were plain green cinderblock. There were benches, lockers, and two long steel rods festooned with the kind of coathangers you can't steal.

At the far end of the dressing room was the door leading into the shower and bathroom area. This door now opened and Darcy Sagamore appeared, wrapped in a fluffy Le Palais bathrobe and a plume of warm steam. She took one look at Martha's bright face and came to her with her arms out, laughing. "It came, didn't it?" she cried. "You got it! It's written all over your face! Yes sir and yes ma'am!"

Martha didn't know she was going to weep until the tears came. She hugged Darcy and put her face against Darcy's damp black hair.

"That's all right, honey," Darcy said. "You go on and let it all out."

"It's just that I'm so proud of him, Darcy—so damn *proud*."

"Of course you are. That's why you're crying, and that's fine. . . but I want to see it as soon as you stop." She grinned then. "You can hold it, though. If I dripped on *that* baby, I gotta believe you might poke my eye out."

So, with the reverence reserved for an object of great holiness (which, to Martha Rosewall, it was), she removed her son's first novel from the blue canvas tote. She had wrapped it carefully in tissue paper and put it under her brown nylon uniform. She now carefully removed the tissue so that Darcy could view the treasure.

Darcy looked carefully at the cover, which showed three Marines, one with a bandage wrapped around his head, charging up a hill with their guns firing. *Blaze of Glory*, printed in fiery red-orange letters, was the title. And below the picture was this: *A Novel by Peter Rosewall*.

"All right, that's good, *wonderful*, but now show me the other!" Darcy spoke in the tones of a woman who wants to dispense with the merely interesting and go directly to the heart of the matter.

Martha nodded and turned unhesitatingly to the dedication page, where Darcy read: *"This book is dedicated to my mother, MARTHA ROSEWALL. Mom, I couldn't have done it without you."* Below the printed dedication this was added in a thin, sloping, and somehow old-fashioned script: *"And that's no lie. Love you, Mom! Pete."*

"Why, isn't that just the sweetest thing?" Darcy asked, and swiped at her dark eyes with the heel of her hand.

"It's more than sweet," Martha said. She re-wrapped the book in the tissue paper. "It's true." She smiled, and in that smile her old friend Darcy Sagamore saw something more than love. She saw triumph.

• • •

After punching out at three o'clock, Martha and Darcy frequently stopped in at La Pâtisserie, the hotel's coffee shop. On rare occasions they went into Le Cinq, the little pocket bar just off the lobby, for something a little stronger, and this day was a Le Cinq occasion if there had ever been one. Darcy got her friend comfortably situated in one of the booths, and left her there with a bowl of Goldfish crackers while she spoke briefly to Ray, who was tending bar that afternoon. Martha saw him grin at Darcy, nod, and make a circle with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. Darcy came back to the booth with a look of satisfaction on her face. Martha regarded her with some suspicion.

"What was *that* about?"

"You'll see."

Five minutes later Ray came over with a silver ice-bucket on a stand and placed it beside them. In it was a bottle of Perrier-Jouët champagne and two chilled glasses.

"Here, now!" Martha said in a voice that was half-alarmed, half-laughing. She looked at Darcy, startled.

"Hush," Darcy said, and to her credit, Martha did.

Ray uncorked the bottle, placed the cork beside Darcy, and poured a little into her glass. Darcy waved at it and winked at Ray.

"Enjoy, ladies," Ray said, and then blew a little kiss at Martha. "And congratulate your boy for me, sweetie." He walked away before Martha, who

was still stunned, could say anything.

Darcy poured both glasses full and raised hers. After a moment Martha did the same. The glasses clinked gently. “Here’s to the start of your son’s career,” Darcy said, and they drank. Darcy tipped the rim of her glass against Martha’s a second time. “And to the boy himself,” she said. They drank again, and Darcy touched their glasses together yet a third time before Martha could set hers down. “And to a mother’s love.”

“Amen, honey,” Martha said, and although her mouth smiled, her eyes did not. On each of the first two toasts she had taken a discreet sip of champagne. This time she drained the glass.

• • •

Darcy had gotten the bottle of champagne so that she and her best friend could celebrate Peter Rosewall’s breakthrough in the style it seemed to deserve, but that was not the only reason. She was curious about what Martha had said—*It’s more than sweet, it’s true*. And she was curious about that expression of triumph.

She waited until Martha had gotten through her third glass of champagne and then she said, “What did you mean about the dedication, Martha?”

“What?”

“You said it wasn’t just sweet, it was true.”

Martha looked at her so long without speaking that Darcy thought she was not going to answer at all. Then she uttered a laugh so bitter it was shocking—at least to Darcy it was. She’d had no idea that cheerful little Martha Rosewall could be so bitter, in spite of the hard life she had led. But that note of triumph was still there, too, an unsettling counterpoint.

“His book is going to be a best-seller and the critics are going to eat it up like ice cream,” Martha said. “I believe that, but not because Pete says so . . . although he does, of course. I believe it because that’s what happened with *him*.”

“Who?”

“Pete’s father,” Martha said. She folded her hands on the table and looked at Darcy calmly.

“But—” Darcy began, then stopped. Johnny Rosewall had never written a book in his life, of course. IOUs and the occasional *I fucked yo momma* in spray-paint on brick walls were more Johnny’s style. It seemed as if Martha was saying . . .

*Never mind the fancy stuff,* Darcy thought. *You know perfectly well what she’s saying: She might have been married to Johnny when she got pregnant with Pete, but someone a little more intellectual was responsible for the kid.*

Except it didn’t fit. Darcy had never met Johnny, but she had seen half a dozen photos of him in Martha’s albums, and she’d gotten to know Pete well—so well, in fact, that during his last two years of high school and first two years of college she’d come to think of him as partly her own. And the physical resemblance between the boy who’d spent so much time in her kitchen and the man in the photo albums . . .

“Well, Johnny was Pete’s *biological* father,” Martha said, as if reading her mind. “Only have to look at his nose and eyes to see *that*. Just wasn’t his *natural* one . . . any more of that bubbly? It goes down so smooth.” Now that she was tiddly, the South had begun to resurface in Martha’s voice like a child creeping out of its hiding place.

Darcy poured most of the remaining champagne into Martha’s glass. Martha held it up by the stem, looking through the liquid, enjoying the way it turned the subdued afternoon light in Le Cinq to gold. Then she drank a little, set the glass down, and laughed that bitter, jagged laugh again.

“You don’t have the slightest idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

“No, honey, I don’t.”

“Well, I’m going to tell you,” Martha said. “After all these years I have to tell someone—now more’n ever, now that he’s published his book and broken through after all those years of gettin ready for it to happen. God knows I can’t tell *him*—him least of all. But then, lucky sons never know how much their mothers love them, or the sacrifices they make, do they?”

“I guess not,” Darcy said. “Martha, hon, maybe you ought to think about if you really want to tell me whatever it is you—”

“No, they don’t have a clue,” Martha said, and Darcy realized her friend hadn’t heard a single word she’d said. Martha Rosewall was off in some world of her own. When her eyes came back to Darcy, a peculiar little smile—one

Darcy didn't like much—touched the corners of her mouth. “Not a clue,” she repeated. “If you want to know what that word *dedication* really means, I think you have to ask a mother. What do *you* think, Darcy?”

But Darcy could only shake her head, unsure what to say. Martha nodded, however, as if Darcy had agreed completely, and then she began to speak.

• • •

There was no need for her to go over the basic facts. The two women had worked together at Le Palais for eleven years and had been close friends for most of that time.

The most basic of those basic facts, Darcy would have said (at least until that day in Le Cinq she would have said it), was that Marty had married a man who wasn't much good, one who was a lot more interested in his booze and his dope—not to mention just about any woman who happened to flip a hip in his direction—than he was in the woman he had married.

Martha had been in New York only a few months when she met him, just a babe in the woods, and she had been two months pregnant when she said *I do*. Pregnant or not, she had told Darcy more than once, she had thought carefully before agreeing to marry Johnny. She was grateful he wanted to stick by her (she was wise enough, even then, to know that many men would have been down the road and gone five minutes after the words “I'm pregnant” were out of the little lady's mouth), but she was not entirely blind to his shortcomings. She had a good idea what her mother and father—especially her father—would make of Johnny Rosewall with his black T-Bird and his tu-tone airtip shoes, bought because Johnny had seen Memphis Slim wearing a pair exactly like them when Slim played the Apollo.

That first child Martha had lost in the third month. After another five months or so, she had decided to chalk the marriage up to profit and loss—mostly loss. There had been too many late nights, too many weak excuses, too many black eyes. Johnny, she said, fell in love with his fists when he was drunk.

“He always looked good,” she told Darcy once, “but a good-lookin shitheel is still a shitheel.”

Before she could pack her bags, Martha discovered she was pregnant again. Johnny's reaction this time was immediate and hostile: he socked her in the belly with the handle of a broom in an effort to make her miscarry. Two nights later he and a couple of his friends—men who shared Johnny's affection for bright clothes and tu-tone shoes—tried to stick up a liquor store on East 116th Street. The proprietor had a shotgun under the counter. He brought it out. Johnny Rosewall was packing a nickel-plated .32 he'd gotten God knew where. He pointed it at the proprietor, pulled the trigger, and the pistol blew up. One of the fragments of the barrel entered his brain by way of his right eye, killing him instantly.

Martha had worked on at Le Palais until her seventh month (this was long before Darcy Sagamore's time, of course), and then Mrs. Proulx told her to go home before she dropped the kid in the tenth-floor corridor or maybe the laundry elevator. You're a good little worker and you can have your job back later on if you want it, Roberta Proulx told her, but for right now you get yourself gone, girl.

Martha did, and two months later she had borne a seven-pound boy whom she had named Peter, and Peter had, in the fullness of time, written a novel called *Blaze of Glory*, which everyone—including the Book-of-the-Month Club and Universal Pictures—thought destined for fame and fortune.

All this Darcy had heard before. The rest of it—the *unbelievable* rest of it—she heard about that afternoon and evening, beginning in Le Cinq, with champagne glasses before them and the advance copy of Pete's novel in the canvas tote by Martha Rosewall's feet.

• • •

"We were living uptown, of course," Martha said, looking down at her champagne glass and twirling it between her fingers. "On Stanton Street, up by Station Park. I've been back since. It's worse than it was—a lot worse—but it was no beauty spot even back then.

"There was a spooky old woman who lived at the Station Park end of Stanton Street back then—folks called her Mama Delorme and lots of them swore she was a *bruja* woman. I didn't believe in anything like that myself, and

once I asked Octavia Kinsolving, who lived in the same building as me and Johnny, how people could go on believing such trash in a day when space satellites went whizzing around the earth and there was a cure for just about every disease under the sun. 'Tavia was an educated woman—had been to Juilliard—and was only living on the fatback side of 110th because she had her mother and three younger brothers to support. I thought she would agree with me but she only laughed and shook her head.

“ ‘Are you telling me you believe in *bruja*? ’ ” I asked her.

“ ‘No,’ she said, ‘but I believe in *her*. She is different. Maybe for every thousand—or ten thousand—or million—women who claim to be witchy, there’s one who really is. If so, Mama Delorme’s the one.’

“I just laughed. People who don’t need *bruja* can afford to laugh at it, the same way that people who don’t need prayer can afford to laugh at *that*. I’m talkin ’bout when I was first married, you know, and in those days I still thought I could straighten Johnny out. Can you dig it?”

Darcy nodded.

“Then I had the miscarriage. Johnny was the main reason I had it, I guess, although I didn’t like to admit that even to myself back then. He was beating on me most the time, and drinking *all* the time. He’d take the money I gave him and then he’d take more out of my purse. When I told him I wanted him to quit hooking from my bag he’d get all woundy faced and claim he hadn’t done any such thing. That was if he was sober. If he was drunk he’d just laugh.

“I wrote my momma down home—it hurt me to write that letter, and it shamed me, and I cried while I was writing it, but I had to know what she thought. She wrote back and told me to get out of it, to go right away before he put me in the hospital or even worse. My older sister, Cassandra (we always called her Kissy), went that one better. She sent me a Greyhound bus ticket with two words written on the envelope in pink lipstick—GO NOW, it said.”

Martha took another small sip of her champagne.

“Well, I didn’t. I liked to think I had too much dignity. I suppose it was nothing but stupid pride. Either way, it turned out the same. I stayed. Then, after I lost the baby, I went and got pregnant again—only I didn’t know at first. I didn’t have any morning sickness, you see . . . but then, I never did with the first one, either.”

“You didn’t go to this Mama Delorme because you were pregnant?” Darcy asked. Her immediate assumption had been that Martha had thought maybe the witch-woman would give her something that would make her miscarry . . . or that she’d decided on an out-and-out abortion.

“No,” Martha said. “I went because ’Tavia said Mama Delorme could tell me for sure what the stuff was I found in Johnny’s coat pocket. White powder in a little glass bottle.”

“Oh-oh,” Darcy said.

Martha smiled without humor. “You want to know how bad things can get?” she asked. “Probably you don’t but I’ll tell you anyway. Bad is when your man drinks and don’t have no steady job. *Really* bad is when he drinks, don’t have no job, and beats on you. Even worse is when you reach into his coat pocket, hoping to find a dollar to buy toilet paper with down at the Sunland Market, and find a little glass bottle with a spoon on it instead. And do you know what’s worst of all? Looking at that little bottle and just hoping the stuff inside it is cocaine and not horse.”

“You took it to Mama Delorme?”

Martha laughed pityingly.

“The whole *bottle*? No *ma’am*. I wasn’t getting much fun out of life, but I didn’t want to *die*. If he’d come home from wherever he was at and found that two-gram bottle gone, he would have plowed me like a pea-field. What I did was take a little and put it in the cellophane from off a cigarette pack. Then I went to ’Tavia and ’Tavia told me to go to Mama Delorme and I went.”

“What was she like?”

Martha shook her head, unable to tell her friend exactly what Mama Delorme had been like, or how strange that half-hour in the woman’s third-floor apartment had been, or how she’d nearly run down the crazily leaning stairs to the street, afraid that the woman was following her. The apartment had been dark and smelly, full of the smell of candles and old wallpaper and cinnamon and soured sachet. There had been a picture of Jesus on one wall, Nostradamus on another.

“She was a weird sister if there ever was one,” Martha said finally. “I don’t have any idea even today how old she was; she might have been seventy, ninety, or a hundred and ten. There was a pink-white scar that went up one side of her

nose and her forehead and into her hair. Looked like a burn. It had pulled her right eye down in a kind of droop that looked like a wink. She was sitting in a rocker and she had knitting in her lap. I came in and she said, ‘I have three things to tell you, little lady. The first is that you don’t believe in me. The second is the bottle you found in your husband’s coat is full of White Angel heroin. The third is you’re three weeks gone with a boy-child you’ll name after his natural father.’ ”

• • •

Martha looked around to make sure no one had taken a seat at one of the nearby tables, satisfied herself that they were still alone, and then leaned toward Darcy, who was looking at her with silent fascination.

“Later, when I could think straight again, I told myself that as far as those first two things went, she hadn’t done anything that a good stage magician couldn’t do—or one of those mentalist fellows in the white turbans. If Tavia Kinsolving had called the old lady to say I was coming, she might have told her *why* I was coming, too. You see how simple it could have been? And to a woman like Mama Delorme, those little touches would be important, because if you want to be *known* as a *bruja* woman, you have to *act* like a *bruja* woman.”

“I suppose that’s right,” Darcy said.

“As for her telling me that I was pregnant, that might have been just a lucky guess. Or. . . well. . . some ladies just *know*.”

Darcy nodded. “I had an aunt who was damned good at knowing when a woman had caught pregnant. She’d know sometimes before the woman knew, and sometimes before the woman had any *business* being pregnant, if you see what I mean.”

Martha laughed and nodded.

“She said their smell changed,” Darcy went on, “and sometimes you could pick up that new smell as soon as a day after the woman in question had caught, if your nose was keen.”

“Uh-huh,” Martha said. “I’ve heard the same thing, but in my case none of that applied. She just *knew*, and down deep, underneath the part of me that

was trying to make believe it was all just a lot of hokum, I *knew* she knew. To be with her was to believe in *bruja*—her *bruja*, anyway. And it didn't go away, that feeling, the way a dream does when you wake up, or the way your belief in a good faker goes away when you're out of his spell."

"What did you do?"

"Well, there was a chair with a saggy old cane seat near the door and I guess that was lucky for me, because when she said what she did, the world kind of grayed over and my knees came unbolted. I was going to sit down no matter what, but if the chair hadn't been there I would have sat on the floor.

"She just waited for me to get myself back together and went on knitting. It was like she had seen it all a hundred times before. I suppose she had.

"When my heart finally began to slow down I opened my mouth and what came out was 'I'm going to leave my husband.'

" 'No,' she came back right away, 'he gonna leave *you*. You gonna see him out, is all. Stick around, woman. There be a little money. You gonna think he hoit the baby but he dint be doin it.'

" 'How,' I said, but that was all I *could* say, it seemed like, and so I kept saying it over and over. 'How-how-how,' just like John Lee Hooker on some old blues record. Even now, twenty-six years later, I can smell those old burned candles and kerosene from the kitchen and the sour smell of dried wallpaper, like old cheese. I can see her, small and frail in this old blue dress with little polka-dots that used to be white but had gone the yellowy color of old newspapers by the time I met her. She was so *little*, but there was such a feeling of power that came from her, like a bright, bright light—"

Martha got up, went to the bar, spoke with Ray, and came back with a large glass of water. She drained most of it at a draught.

"Better?" Darcy asked.

"A little, yeah." Martha shrugged, then smiled. "It doesn't do to go on about it, I guess. If you'd been there, you'd've felt it. You'd've felt *her*."

" 'How I do anythin or why you married that country piece of shit in the first place ain't neither of them important now,' Mama Delorme said to me. 'What's important now is you got to find the child's natural father.'

"Anyone listening would have thought she was as much as saying I'd been screwing around on my man, but it never even occurred to me to be mad at

her; I was too confused to be mad. ‘What do you mean?’ I asked. ‘*Johnny’s* the child’s natural father.’

“She kind of snorted and flapped her hand at me, like she was saying *Pshaw*. ‘Ain’t nothin natural about *that* man.’

“Then she leaned in closer to me and I started to feel a little scared. There was so much *knowing* in her, and it felt like not very much of it was nice.

“ ‘Any child a woman get, the man shoot it out’n his pecker, girl,’ she said. ‘You know that, don’t you?’

“I didn’t think that was the way they put it in the medical books, but I felt my head going up n down just the same, as if she’d reached across the room with hands I couldn’t see and nodded it for me.

“ ‘That’s right,’ she said, nodding her ownself. ‘That’s the way God planned it to be. . . like a seesaw. A man shoots cheerun out’n his pecker, so them cheerun mostly his. But it’s a woman who carries em and bears em and has the raisin of em, so them cheerun mostly *hers*. That’s the way of the world, but there’s a ’ception to every rule, one that *proves* the rule, and this is one of em. The man who put you with child ain’t gonna be no natural father to that child—he wouldn’t be no natural father to it even if he was gonna be around. He’d hate it, beat it to death before its foist birthday, mos’ likely, because he’d know it wasn’t his. A man can’t always smell that out, or see it, but he will if the child is different enough . . . and this child goan be as different from piss-ignorant Johnny Rosewall as day is from night. So tell me, girl: who *is* the child’s natural father?’ And she kind of leaned toward me.

“All I could do was shake my head and tell her I didn’t know what she was talking about. But I think that something in me—something way back in that part of your mind that only gets a real chance to think in your dreams—*did* know. Maybe I’m only making that up because of all I know now, but I don’t think so. I think that for just a moment or two *his* name fluttered there in my head.

“I said, ‘I don’t know what it is you want me to say—I don’t know anything about natural fathers or unnatural ones. I don’t even know for sure if I’m pregnant, but if I am it *has* to be Johnny’s, because he’s the only man I’ve ever slept with!’

“Well, she sat back for a minute, and then she smiled. Her smile was like sunshine, and it eased me a little. ‘I didn’t mean to scare you, honey,’ she said. ‘That wasn’t none of what I had in my mind at all. It’s just that I got the sight, and sometime it’s strong. I’ll just brew us a cup of tea, and that’ll calm you down. You’ll like it. It’s special to me.’

“I wanted to tell her I didn’t want any tea, but it seemed like I couldn’t. Seemed like too much of an effort to open my mouth, and all the strength had gone out of my legs.

“She had a greasy little kitchenette that was almost as dark as a cave. I sat in the chair by the door and watched her spoon loose tea into an old chipped china pot and put a kettle on the gas ring. I sat there thinking I didn’t want *anything* that was special to her, nor anything that came out of that greasy little kitchenette either. I was thinking I’d take just a little sip to be mannerly and then get my ass out of there as fast as I could and never come back.

“But then she brought over two little china cups just as clean as snow and a tray with sugar and cream and fresh-baked bread-rolls. She poured the tea and it smelled good and hot and strong. It kind of waked me up and before I knew it I’d drunk two cups and eaten one of the bread-rolls, too.

“She drank a cup and ate a roll and we got talking along on more natural subjects—who we knew on the street, whereabouts in Alabama I came from, where I liked to shop, and all that. Then I looked at my watch and seen over an hour and a half had gone by. I started to get up and a dizzy feeling ran through me and I plopped right back in my chair again.”

Darcy was looking at her, eyes round.

“ ‘You doped me,’ I said, and I was scared, but the scared part of me was way down inside.

“ ‘Girl, I want to help you,’ she said, ‘but you don’t want to give up what I need to know and I know damn well you ain’t gonna do what you need to do even once you *do* give it up—not without a push. So I fixed her. You gonna take a little nap, is all, but before you do you’re gonna tell me the name of your babe’s natural father.’

“And, sitting there in that chair with its saggy cane bottom and hearing all of uptown roaring and racketing just outside her living-room window, I saw him as clear as I’m seeing you now, Darcy. His name was Peter Jefferies, and he

was just as white as I am black, just as tall as I am short, just as educated as I am ignorant. We were as different as two people could be except for one thing—we both come from Alabama, me from Babylon down in the toolies by the Florida state line, him from Birmingham. He didn't even know I was alive—I was just the nigger woman who cleaned the suite where he always stayed on the eleventh floor of this hotel. And as for me, I only thought of him to stay out of his way because I'd heard him talk and seen him operate and I knew well enough what sort of man he was. It wasn't just that he wouldn't use a glass a black person had used before him without it had been washed; I've seen too much of that in my time to get worked up about it. It was that once you got past a certain point in that man's character, white and black didn't have anything to do with what he was. He belonged to the son-of-a-bitch tribe, and that particular bunch comes in all skin-colors.

“You know what? He was like Johnny in a lot of ways, or the way Johnny would have been if he'd been smart and had an education and if God had thought to give Johnny a great big slug of talent inside of him instead of just a head for dope and a nose for wet pussy.

“I thought nothing of him but to steer clear of him, nothing at all. But when Mama Delorme leaned over me, so close I felt like the smell of cinnamon comin out of her pores was gonna suffocate me, it was his name that came out with never a pause. ‘Peter Jefferies,’ I said. ‘Peter Jefferies, the man who stays in 1163 when he ain't writing his books down there in Alabama. He's the natural father. But he's *white!*’

“She leaned closer and said, ‘No he ain't, honey. No man's white. Inside where they live, they's all black. You don't believe it, but that's true. It's midnight inside em all, any hour of God's day. But a man can make light out of night, and that's why what comes out of a man to make a baby in a woman is white. Natural got nothing to do with color. Now you close your eyes, honey, because you tired—you *so* tired. Now! Say! Now! Don't you fight! Mama Delorme ain't goan put nothin over on you, child! Just got somethin I goan to put in your hand. Now—no, don't look, just close your hand over it.’ I did what she said and felt something square. Felt like glass or plastic.

“ ‘You gonna remember everythin when it's time for you to remember. For now, just go on to sleep. Shhh . . . go to sleep. . . shhh. . . ’

“And that’s just what I did,” Martha said. “Next thing I remember, I was running down those stairs like the devil was after me. I didn’t remember what I was running *from*, but that didn’t make any difference; I ran anyway. I only went back there one more time, and I didn’t see her when I did.”

Martha paused and they both looked around like women freshly awakened from a shared dream. Le Cinq had begun to fill up—it was almost five o’clock and executives were drifting in for their after-work drinks. Although neither wanted to say so out loud, both suddenly wanted to be somewhere else. They were no longer wearing their uniforms but neither felt she belonged among these men with their briefcases and their talk of stocks, bonds, and debentures.

“I’ve got a casserole and a six-pack at my place,” Martha said, suddenly timid. “I could warm up the one and cool down the other . . . if you want to hear the rest.”

“Honey, I think I *got* to hear the rest,” Darcy said, and laughed a little nervously.

“And I think I’ve got to tell it,” Martha replied, but she did not laugh. Or even smile.

“Just let me call my husband. Tell him I’ll be late.”

“You do that,” Martha said, and while Darcy used the telephone, Martha checked in her bag one more time just to make sure the precious book was still there.

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The casserole—as much of it as the two of them could use, anyway—was eaten, and they had each had a beer. Martha asked Darcy again if she was sure she wanted to hear the rest. Darcy said she did.

“Because some of it ain’t very nice. I got to be up front with you about that. Some of it’s worse’n the sort of magazines the single men leave behind em when they check out.”

Darcy knew the sort of magazines she meant, but could not imagine her trim, clean little friend in connection with any of the things pictured in them. She got them each a fresh beer, and Martha began to speak again.

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“I was back home before I woke up all the way, and because I couldn’t remember hardly any of what had gone on at Mama Delorme’s, I decided the best thing—the safest thing—was to believe it had all been a dream. But the powder I’d taken from Johnny’s bottle wasn’t a dream; it was still in my dress pocket, wrapped up in the cellophane from the cigarette pack. All I wanted to do right then was get rid of it, and never mind all the *bruja* in the world. Maybe I didn’t make a business of going through Johnny’s pockets, but he surely made a business of going through mine, ’case I was holding back a dollar or two he might want.

“But that wasn’t all I found in my pocket—there was something else, too. I took it out and looked at it and then I knew for sure I’d seen her, although I still couldn’t remember much of what had passed between us.

“It was a little square plastic box with a top you could see through and open. There wasn’t nothing in it but an old dried-up mushroom—except after hearing what Tavia had said about that woman, I thought maybe it might be a toadstool instead of a mushroom, and probably one that would give you the night-gripes so bad you’d wish it had just killed you outright like some of em do.

“I decided to flush it down the commode along with that powder he’d been sniffing up his nose, but when it came right down to it, I couldn’t. Felt like she was right there in the room with me, telling me not to. I was even scairt to look into the livin-room mirror, case I might see her standin behind me.

“In the end, I dumped the little bit of powder I’d taken down the kitchen sink, and I put the little plastic box in the cabinet over the sink. I stood on tiptoe and pushed it in as far as I could—all the way to the back, I guess. Where I forgot all about it.”

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She stopped for a moment, drumming her fingers nervously on the table, and then said, “I guess I ought to tell you a little more about Peter Jefferies. *My Pete’s* novel is about Viet Nam and what he knew of the Army from his own hitch; Peter Jefferies’s books were about what he always called Big Two, when he was drunk and partying with his friends. He wrote the first one while he

was still in the service, and it was published in 1946. It was called *Blaze of Heaven*.”

Darcy looked at her for a long time without speaking and then said, “Is that so?”

“Yes. Maybe you see where I’m going now. Maybe you get a little more what I mean about natural fathers. *Blaze of Heaven, Blaze of Glory*.”

“But if your Pete had read this Mr. Jefferies’s book, isn’t it possible that—”

“Course it’s *possible*,” Martha said, making that *pshaw* gesture herself this time, “but that ain’t what *happened*. I ain’t going to try and convince you of that, though. You’ll either be convinced when I get done or you won’t. I just wanted to tell you about the man, a little.”

“Go to it,” Darcy said.

“I saw him pretty often from 1957 when I started working at Le Palais right through until 1968 or so, when he got in trouble with his heart and liver. The way the man drank and carried on, I was only surprised he didn’t get in trouble with himself earlier on. He was only in half a dozen times in 1969, and I remember how bad he looked—he was never fat, but he’d lost enough weight by then so he wasn’t no more than a stuffed string. Went right on drinking, though, yellow face or not. I’d hear him coughing and puking in the bathroom and sometimes crying with the pain and I’d think, *Well, that’s it; that’s all; he’s got to see what he’s doing to himself; he’ll quit now*. But he never. In 1970 he was only in twice. He had a man with him that he leaned on and who took care of him. He was still drinking, too, although anybody who took even half a glance at him knew he had no business doing it.

“The last time he came was in February of 1971. It was a different man he had with him, though; I guess the first one must have played out. Jefferies was in a wheelchair by then. When I come in to clean and looked in the bathroom, I seen what was hung up to dry on the shower-curtain rail—continence pants. He’d been a handsome man, but those days were long gone. The last few times I saw him, he just looked *raddled*. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

Darcy nodded. You saw such creatures creeping down the street sometimes, with their brown bags under their arms or tucked into their shabby old coats.

“He always stayed in 1163, one of those corner suites with the view that looks toward the Chrysler Building, and I always used to do for him. After

awhile, it got so's he would even call me by name, but it didn't really signify—I wore a name-tag and he could read, that was all. I don't believe he ever once really *saw* me. Until 1960 he always left two dollars on top of the television when he checked out. Then, until '64, it was three. At the very end it was five. Those were very good tips for those days, but he wasn't really tipping me; he was following a custom. Custom's important for people like him. He tipped for the same reason he'd hold the door for a lady; for the same reason he no doubt used to put his milk-teeth under his pillow when he was a little fellow. Only difference was, I was the Cleanin Fairy instead of the Tooth Fairy.

“He'd come in to talk to his publishers or sometimes movie and TV people, and he'd call up his friends—some of them were in publishing, too, others were agents or writers like him—and there'd be a party. Always a party. Most I just knew about by the messes I had to clean up the next day—dozens of empty bottles (mostly Jack Daniel's), millions of cigarette butts, wet towels in the sinks and the tub, leftover room service everywhere. Once I found a whole platter of jumbo shrimp turned into the toilet bowl. There were glass-rings on everything, and people snoring on the sofa and floors, like as not.

“That was mostly, but sometimes there were parties still going on when I started to clean at ten-thirty in the morning. He'd let me in and I'd just kinda clean up around em. There weren't any women at those parties; those ones were strictly stag, and all they ever did was drink and talk about the war. How they got to the war. Who they knew in the war. Where they went in the war. Who got killed in the war. What they saw in the war they could never tell their wives about (although it was all right if a black maid happened to pick up on some of it). Sometimes—not too often—they'd play high-stakes poker as well, but they talked about the war even while they were betting and raising and bluffing and folding. Five or six men, their faces all flushed the way white men's faces get when they start really socking it down, sitting around a glass-topped table with their shirts open and their ties pulled way down, the table heaped with more money than a woman like me will make in a lifetime. And how they did talk about their war! They talked about it the way young women talk about their lovers and their boyfriends.”

Darcy said she was surprised the management hadn't kicked Jefferies out, famous writer or not—they were fairly stiff about such goings-on now and had

been even worse in years gone by, or so she had heard.

“No, no, no,” Martha said, smiling a little. “You got the wrong impression. You’re thinking the man and his friends carried on like one of those rock-groups that like to tear up their suites and throw the sofas out the windows. Jefferies wasn’t no ordinary grunt, like my Pete; he’d been to West Point, went in a Lieutenant and came out a Major. He was *quality*, from one of those old Southern families who have a big house full of old paintings where everyone’s ridin hosses and looking noble. He could tie his tie four different ways and he knew how to bend over a lady’s hand when he kissed it. He was *quality*, I tell you.”

Martha’s smile took on a little twist as she spoke the word; the twist had a look both bitter and derisive.

“He and his friends sometimes got a little loud, I guess, but they rarely got rowdy—there’s a difference, although it’s hard to explain—and they *never* got out of control. If there was a complaint from the neighboring room—because it was a corner suite he stayed in, there was only the one—and someone from the front desk had to call Mr. Jefferies’s room and ask him and his guests to tone it down a little, why, they always did. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s not all. A quality hotel can work *for* people like Mr. Jefferies. It can protect them. They can go right on partying and having a good time with their booze and their cards or maybe their drugs.”

“Did he take drugs?”

“Hell, I don’t know. He had plenty of them at the end, God knows, but they were all the kind with prescription labels on them. I’m just saying that quality—it’s that white Southern gentleman’s idea of quality I’m talking about now, you know—calls to quality. He’d been coming to Le Palais a long time, and you may think it was important to the management that he was a big famous author, but that’s only because you haven’t been at Le Palais as long as I have. Him being famous *was* important to them, but it was really just the icing on the cake. What was more important was that he’d been coming there a long time, and his father, who was a big landowner down around Porterville, had been a regular guest before him. The people who ran the hotel back then were people who believed in tradition. I know the ones who run it now *say* they

believe in it, and maybe they do when it suits them, but in those days they *really* believed in it. When they knew Mr. Jefferies was coming up to New York on the Southern Flyer from Birmingham, you'd see the room right next to that corner suite sort of empty out, unless the hotel was full right up to the scuppers. They never charged him for the empty room next door; they were just trying to spare him the embarrassment of having to tell his cronies to keep it down to a dull roar."

Darcy shook her head slowly. "That's amazing."

"You don't believe it, honey?"

"Oh yes—I believe it, but it's still amazing."

That bitter, derisive smile resurfaced on Martha Rosewall's face. "Ain't nothing too much for *quality* . . . for that Robert E. Lee Stars and Bars *charm* . . . or didn't used to be. Hell, even *I* recognized that he was quality, no sort of a man to go hollering *Yee-haw* out the window or telling Rastus P. Coon jokes to his friends.

"He hated blacks just the same, though, don't be thinking different . . . but remember what I said about him belonging to the son-of-a-bitch tribe? Fact was, when it came to hate, Peter Jefferies was an equal-opportunity employer. When John Kennedy died, Jefferies happened to be in the city and he threw a party. All of his friends were there, and it went on into the next day. I could barely stand to be in there, the things they were saying—about how things would be perfect if only someone would get that brother of his who wouldn't be happy until every decent white kid in the country was fucking while the Beatles played on the stereo and the colored (that's what they called black folks, mostly, 'the colored,' I used to hate that sissy, pantywaist way of saying so much) were running wild through the streets with a TV under each arm.

"It got so bad that I knew I was going to scream at him. I just kept telling myself to be quiet and do my job and get out as fast as I could; I kept telling myself to remember the man was my Pete's natural father if I couldn't remember anything else; I kept telling myself that Pete was only three years old and I needed my job and I would lose it if I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

"Then one of em said, 'And after we get Bobby, let's go get his candy-ass kid brother!' and one of the others said, 'Then we'll get all the male children and *really* have a party!'

“ ‘That’s right!’ Mr. Jefferies said. ‘And when we’ve got the last head up on the last castle wall we’re going to have a party so big I’m going to hire Madison Square Garden!’

“I had to leave then. I had a headache and belly-cramps from trying so hard to keep my mouth shut. I left the room half-cleaned, which is something I never did before nor have since, but sometimes being black has its advantages; he didn’t know I was there, and he sure didn’t know when I was gone. Wasn’t none of them did.”

That bitter derisive smile was on her lips again.

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“I don’t see how you can call a man like that quality, even as a joke,” Darcy said, “or call him the natural father of your unborn child, whatever the circumstances might have been. To me he sounds like a beast.”

“No!” Martha said sharply. “He *wasn’t* a beast. He was a man. In some ways—in *most* ways—he was a bad man, but a man is what he was. And he *did* have that something you could call ‘quality’ without a smirk on your face, although it only came out completely in the things he wrote.”

“Huh!” Darcy looked disdainfully at Martha from below drawn-together brows. “You read one of his books, did you?”

“Honey, I read them *all*. He’d only written three by the time I went to Mama Delorme’s with that white powder in late 1959, but I’d read two of them. In time I got all the way caught up, because he wrote even slower than I read.” She grinned. “And that’s pretty slow!”

Darcy looked doubtfully toward Martha’s bookcase. There were books there by Alice Walker and Rita Mae Brown, *Linden Hills* by Gloria Naylor and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* by Ishmael Reed, but the three shelves were pretty much dominated by paperback romances and Agatha Christie mystery stories.

“Stories about war don’t hardly seem like your pick an glory, Martha, if you know what I mean.”

“Of course I know,” Martha said. She got up and brought them each a fresh beer. “I’ll tell you a funny thing, Dee: if he’d been a nice man, I probably never

would have read even one of them. And I'll tell you an even funnier one: if he'd been a nice man, I don't think they would have been as good as they were."

"What are you talking about, woman?"

"I don't know, exactly. Just listen, all right?"

"All right."

"Well, it didn't take me until the Kennedy assassination to figure out what kind of man he was. I knew that by the summer of '58. By then I'd seen what a low opinion he had of the human race in general—not his friends, he would've died for them, but everyone else. Everyone was out looking for a buck to stroke, he used to say—stroking the buck, stroking the buck, everyone was stroking the buck. It seemed like him and his friends thought stroking the buck was a real bad thing, unless they were playing poker and had a whole mess of em spread out on the table. Seemed to me like they stroked them then, all right. Seemed to me like then they stroked them plenty, him included.

"There was a lot of big ugly under his Southern-gentleman top layer—he thought people who were trying to do good or improve the world were about the funniest things going, he hated the blacks and the Jews, and he thought we ought to H-bomb the Russians out of existence before they could do it to us. Why not? he'd say. They were part of what he called 'the sub-human strain of the race.' To him that seemed to mean Jews, blacks, Italians, Indians, and anyone whose family didn't summer on the Outer Banks.

"I listened to him spout all that ignorance and high-toned filth, and naturally I started to wonder about *why* he was a famous writer. . . how he *could* be a famous writer. I wanted to know what it was the critics saw in him, but I was a lot more interested in what ordinary folks like me saw in him—the people who made his books best-sellers as soon as they came out. Finally I decided to find out for myself. I went down to the Public Library and borrowed his first book, *Blaze of Heaven*.

"I was expecting it'd turn out to be something like in the story of the Emperor's new clothes, but it didn't. The book was about these five men and what happened to them in the war, and what happened to their wives and girlfriends back home at the same time. When I saw on the jacket it was about

the war, I kind of rolled my eyes, thinking it would be like all those boring stories they told each other.”

“It wasn’t?”

“I read the first ten or twenty pages and thought, *This ain’t so good. It ain’t as bad as I thought it’d be, but nothing’s happening.* Then I read another thirty pages and I kind of . . . well, I kind of lost myself. Next time I looked up it was almost midnight and I was two hundred pages into that book. I thought to myself, *You got to go to bed, Martha. You got to go right now, because five-thirty comes early.* But I read another forty pages in spite of how heavy my eyes were getting, and it was quarter to one before I finally got up to brush my teeth.”

Martha stopped, looking off toward the darkened window and all the miles of night outside it, her eyes hazed with remembering, her lips pressed together in a light frown. She shook her head a little.

“I didn’t know how a man who was so boring when you had to listen to him could write so you didn’t never want to close the book, nor ever see it end, either. How a nasty, cold-hearted man like him could still make up characters so real you wanted to cry over em when they died. When Noah got hit and killed by a taxi-cab near the end of *Blaze of Heaven*, just a month after his part of the war was over, I *did* cry. I didn’t know how a sour, cynical man like Jefferies could make a body care so much about things that weren’t real at all—about things he’d made up out of his own head. And there was something else in that book . . . a kind of sunshine. It was full of pain and bad things, but there was sweetness in it, too. . . and love. . . .”

She startled Darcy by laughing out loud.

“There was a fella worked at the hotel back then named Billy Beck, a nice young man who was majoring in English at Fordham when he wasn’t on the door. He and I used to talk sometimes—”

“Was he a brother?”

“God, no!” Martha laughed again. “Wasn’t no black doormen at Le Palais until 1965. Black porters and bellboys and car-park valets, but no black doormen. Wasn’t considered right. Quality people like Mr. Jefferies wouldn’t have liked it.

“Anyway, I asked Billy how the man’s books could be so wonderful when he was such a booger in person. Billy asked me if I knew the one about the fat

disc jockey with the thin voice, and I said I didn't know what he was talking about. Then he said he didn't know the answer to my question, but he told me something a prof of his had said about Thomas Wolfe. This prof said that some writers—and Wolfe was one of them—were no shakes at all until they sat down to a desk and took up pens in their hands. He said that a pen to fellows like that was like a telephone booth is to Clark Kent. He said that Thomas Wolfe was like a . . .” She hesitated, then smiled. “. . . that he was like a divine wind-chime. He said a wind-chime isn't nothing on its own, but when the wind blows through it, it makes a lovely noise.

“I think Peter Jefferies was like that. He *was* quality, he had been raised quality and he *was*, but the quality in him wasn't nothing he could take credit for. It was like God banked it for him and he just spent it. I'll tell you something you probably won't believe: after I'd read a couple of his books, I started to feel sorry for him.”

“*Sorry?*”

“Yes. Because the books were beautiful and the man who made em was ugly as sin. He really *was* like my Johnny, but in a way Johnny was luckier, because he never dreamed of a better life, and Mr. Jefferies did. His *books* were his dreams, where he let himself believe in the world he laughed at and sneered at when he was awake.”

She asked Darcy if she wanted another beer. Darcy said she would pass.

“Well if you change your mind, just holler. And you might change it because right about here is where the water gets murky.”

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“One other thing about the man,” Martha said. “He wasn't a sexy man. At least not the way you usually think about a man being sexy.”

“You mean he was a—”

“No, he wasn't a homosexual, or a gay, or whatever it is you're supposed to call them these days. He wasn't sexy for men, but he wasn't what you could call sexy for women, either. There were two, maybe three times in all the years I did for him when I seen cigarette butts with lipstick on them in the bedroom ashtrays when I cleaned up, and smelled perfume on the pillows. One of those

times I also found an eyeliner pencil in the bathroom—it had rolled under the door and into the corner. I reckon they were call-girls (the pillows never smelled like the kind of perfume decent women wear), but two or three times in all those years isn't much, is it?"

"It sure isn't," Darcy said, thinking of all the panties she had pulled out from under beds, all the condoms she had seen floating in unflushed toilets, all the false eyelashes she had found on and under pillows.

Martha sat without speaking for a few moments, lost in thought, then looked up. "I tell you what!" she said. "That man was sexy for himself! It sounds crazy but it's true. There sure wasn't any shortage of jizz in him—I know that from all the sheets I changed."

Darcy nodded.

"And there'd always be a little jar of cold cream in the bathroom, or sometimes on the table by his bed. I think he used it when he pulled off. To keep from getting chapped skin."

The two women looked at each other and suddenly began giggling hysterically.

"You sure he wasn't the other way, honey?" Darcy asked finally.

"I said *cold* cream, not *Vas eline*," Martha said, and that did it; for the next five minutes the two women laughed until they cried.

• • •

But it wasn't really funny, and Darcy knew it. And when Martha went on, she simply listened, hardly believing what she was hearing.

"It was maybe a week after that time at Mama Delorme's, or maybe it was two," Martha said. "I don't remember. It's been a long time since it all happened. By then I was pretty sure I was pregnant—I wasn't throwing up or nothing, but there's a *feeling* to it. It don't come from places you'd think. It's like your gums and your toenails and the bridge of your nose figure out what's going on before the rest of you. Or you want something like chop suey at three in the afternoon and you say, 'Whoa, now! What's *this*?' But you know what it is. I didn't say a word to Johnny, though—I knew I'd have to, eventually, but I was scared to."

“I don’t blame you,” Darcy said.

“I was in the bedroom of Jefferies’s suite one late morning, and while I did the neatening up I was thinking about Johnny and how I might break the news about the baby to him. Jefferies had gone out someplace—to one of his publishers’ meetings, likely as not. The bed was a double, messed up on both sides, but that didn’t mean nothing; he was just a restless sleeper. Sometimes when I came in the groundsheet would be pulled right out from underneath the mattress.

“Well, I stripped off the coverlet and the two blankets underneath—he was thin-blooded and always slept under all he could—and then I started to strip the top sheet off backward, and I seen it right away. It was his spend, mostly dried on there.

“I stood there looking at it for . . . oh, I don’t know how long. It was like I was hypnotized. I saw him, lying there all by himself after his friends had gone home, lying there smelling nothing but the smoke they’d left behind and his own sweat. I saw him lying there on his back and then starting to make love to Mother Thumb and her four daughters. I saw that as clear as I see you now, Darcy; the only thing I didn’t see is what he was thinking about, what sort of pictures he was making in his head. . . and considering the way he talked and how he was when he wasn’t writing his books, I’m *glad* I didn’t.”

Darcy was looking at her, frozen, saying nothing.

“Next thing I knew, this . . . this feeling came over me.” She paused, thinking, then shook her head slowly and deliberately. “This *compulsion* came over me. It was like wanting chop suey at three in the afternoon, or ice cream and pickles at two in the morning, or . . . what did *you* want, Darcy?”

“Rind of bacon,” Darcy said through lips so numb she could hardly feel them. “My husband went out and couldn’t find me any, but he brought back a bag of those pork rinds and I just *gobbled* them.”

Martha nodded and began to speak again. Thirty seconds later Darcy bolted for the bathroom, where she struggled briefly with her gorge and then vomited up all the beer she’d drunk.

*Look on the bright side*, she thought, fumbling weakly for the flush. *No hangover to worry about*. And then, on the heels of that: *How am I going to look her in the eyes? Just how am I supposed to do that?*

It turned out not to be a problem. When she turned around, Martha was standing in the bathroom doorway and looking at her with warm concern.

“You all right?”

“Yes.” Darcy tried a smile, and to her immense relief it felt genuine on her lips. “I . . . I just . . .”

“I know,” Martha said. “Believe me, I do. Should I finish, or have you heard enough?”

“Finish,” Darcy said decisively, and took her friend by the arm. “But in the living room. I don’t even want to look at the refrigerator, let alone open the door.”

“Amen to that.”

A minute later they were settled on opposite ends of the shabby but comfortable living-room couch.

“You *sure*, honey?”

Darcy nodded.

“All right.” But Martha sat quiet a moment longer, looking down at the slim hands clasped in her lap, conning the past as a submarine commander might con hostile waters through his periscope. At last she raised her head, turned to Darcy, and resumed her story.

• • •

“I worked the rest of that day in kind of a daze. It was like I was hypnotized. People talked to me, and I answered them, but I seemed to be hearing them through a glass wall and speaking back to them the same way. *I’m hypnotized, all right*, I remember thinking. *She hypnotized me. That old woman. Gave me one of those post-hypnotic suggestions, like when a stage hypnotist says, ‘Someone says the word Chiclets to you, you’re gonna get down on all fours and bark like a dog,’ and the guy who was hypnotized does it even if no one says Chiclets to him for the next ten years. She put something in that tea and hypnotized me and then told me to do that. That nasty thing.*

“I knew why she would, too—an old woman superstitious enough to believe in stump-water cures, and how you could witch a man into love by putting a little drop of blood from your period onto the heel of his foot while

he was sleeping, and cross-tie walkers, and God alone knows what else . . . if a woman like that with a bee in her bonnet about natural fathers could do hypnotism, hypnotizing a woman like me into doing what I did might be just what she would do. Because she would *believe* it. And I had named him to her, hadn't I? Yes indeed.

"It never occurred to me then that I hadn't remembered hardly anything at all about going to Mama Delorme's until after I did what I did in Mr. Jefferies's bedroom. It did that night, though.

"I got through the day all right. I mean, I didn't cry or scream or carry on or anything like that. My sister Kissy acted worse the time she was drawing water from the old well round dusk and a bat flew up from it and got caught in her hair. There was just that feeling that I was behind a wall of glass, and I figured if that was all, I could get along with it.

"Then, when I got home, I all at once got thirsty. I was thirstier than ever in my life—it felt like a sandstorm was going on in my throat. I started to drink water. It seemed like I just couldn't drink enough. And I started to spit. I just spit and spit and spit. Then I started to feel sick to my stomach. I ran down to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror and stuck out my tongue to see if I could see anything there, any sign of what I'd done, and of course I couldn't. I thought, *There! Do you feel better now?*

"But I didn't. I felt worse. I knelt down in front of the toilet and I did what you did, Darcy, only I did a lot more of it. I vomited until I thought I was going to pass out. I was crying and begging God to please forgive me, to let me stop puking before I lost the baby, if I really was quick with one. And then I remembered myself standing there in his bedroom with my fingers in my mouth, not even thinking about what I was doing—I tell you I could *see* myself doing it, as if I was looking at myself in a movie. And then I vomited again.

"Mrs. Parker heard me and came to the door and asked if I was all right. That helped me get hold of myself a little, and by the time Johnny came in that night, I was over the worst of it. He was drunk, spoiling for a fight. When I wouldn't give him one he hit me in the eye anyway and walked out. I was almost glad he hit me, because it gave me something else to think about.

“The next day when I went into Mr. Jefferies’s suite he was sitting in the parlor, still in his pajamas, scribbling away on one of his yellow legal pads. He always travelled with a bunch of them, held together with a big red rubber band, right up until the end. When he came to Le Palais that last time and I didn’t see them, I knew he’d made up his mind to die. I wasn’t a bit sorry, neither.”

Martha looked toward the living-room window with an expression which held nothing of mercy or forgiveness; it was a cold look, one which reported an utter absence of the heart.

“When I saw he hadn’t gone out I was relieved, because it meant I could put off the cleaning. He didn’t like the maids around when he was working, you see, and so I figured he might not want housekeeping service until Yvonne came on at three.

“I said, ‘I’ll come back later, Mr. Jefferies.’

“ ‘Do it now,’ he said. ‘Just keep quiet while you do. I’ve got a bitch of a headache and a hell of an idea. The combination is killing me.’

“Any other time he would have told me to come back, I swear it. It seemed like I could almost hear that old black mama laughing.

“I went into the bathroom and started tidying around, taking out the used towels and putting up fresh ones, replacing the soap with a new bar, putting fresh matches out, and all the time I’m thinking, *You can’t hypnotize someone who doesn’t want to be hypnotized, old woman. Whatever it was you put in the tea that day, whatever it was you told me to do or how many times you told me to do it, I’m wise to you—wise to you and shut of you.*

“I went into the bedroom and I looked at the bed. I expected it would look to me like a closet does to a kid who’s scared of the bogeyman, but I saw it was just a bed. I knew I wasn’t going to do anything, and it was a relief. So I stripped it and there was another of those sticky patches, still drying, as if he’d woke up horny an hour or so before and just took care of himself.

“I seen it and waited to see if I was going to feel anything about it. I didn’t. It was just the leftovers of a man with a letter and no mailbox to put it in, like you and I have seen a hundred times before. That old woman was no more a *bruja* woman than I was. I might be pregnant or I might not be, but if I was, it was Johnny’s child. He was the only man I’d ever lain with, and nothin I found

on that white man's sheets—or anywhere else, for that matter—was gonna change that.

“It was a cloudy day, but at the second I thought that, the sun came out like God had put His final amen on the subject. I don't recall ever feeling so relieved. I stood there thanking God everything was all right, and all the time I was sayin that prayer of gratitude I was scoopin that stuff up off the sheet—all of it I could get, anyway—and stickin it in my mouth and swallowin it down.

“It was like I was standing outside myself and watching again. And a part of me was saying, *You're crazy to be doing that, girl, but you're even crazier to be doing it with him right there in the next room; he could get up any second and come in here to use the bathroom and see you. Rugs as thick as they are in this place, you'd never hear him coming. And that would be the end of your job at Le Palais—or any other big hotel in New York, most likely. A girl caught doing a thing like what you're doing would never work in this city again as a chambermaid, at least not in any half-decent hotel.*

“But it didn't make any difference. I went on until I was done—or until some part of me was satisfied—and then I just stood there a minute, looking down at the sheet. I couldn't hear nothing at all from the other room, and it came to me that he was right behind me, standing in the doorway. I knew just what the expression on his face'd be. Used to be a travelling show that came to Babylon every August when I was a girl, and they had a man with it—I *guess* he was a man—that geeked out behind the tent-show. He'd be down a hole and some fella would give a spiel about how he was the missing link and then throw a live chicken down. The geek'd bite the head off it. Once my oldest brother—Bradford, who died in a car accident in Biloxi—said he wanted to go and see the geek. My dad said he was sorry to hear it, but he didn't outright forbid Brad, because Brad was nineteen and almost a man. He went, and me and Kissy meant to ask him what it was like when he came back, but when we saw the expression on his face we never did. That's the expression I thought I'd see on Jefferies's face when I turned around and saw him in the doorway. Do you see what I'm sayin?”

Darcy nodded.

“I *knew* he was there, too—I just knew it. Finally I mustered up enough courage to turn around, thinking I'd beg him not to tell the Chief

Housekeeper—beg him on my knees, if I had to—and he wasn't there. It had just been my guilty heart all along. I walked to the door and looked out and seen he was still in the parlor, writing on his yellow pad faster than ever. So I went ahead and changed the bed and freshened the room just like always, but that feeling that I was behind a glass wall was back, stronger than ever.

"I took care of the soiled towels and bed-linen like you're supposed to—out to the hall through the bedroom door. First thing I learned when I came to work at the hotel is you don't *ever* take dirty linen through the sitting room of a suite. Then I came back in to where he was. I meant to tell him I'd do the parlor later, when he wasn't working. But when I saw the way he was acting, I was so surprised that I stopped right there in the doorway, looking at him.

"He was walking around the room so fast that his yellow silk pajamas were whipping around his legs. He had his hands in his hair and he was twirling it every which way. He looked like one of those brainy mathematicians in the old *Saturday Evening Post* cartoons. His eyes were all wild, like he'd had a bad shock. First thing I thought was that he'd seen what I did after all and it had, you know, made him feel so sick it'd driven him half-crazy.

"Turned out it didn't have nothing to do with me at all . . . at least *he* didn't think so. That was the only time he talked to me, other than to ask me if I'd get some more stationery or another pillow or change the setting on the air-conditioner. He talked to me because he *had* to. Something had happened to him—something very big—and he had to talk to somebody or go crazy, I guess.

" 'My head is splitting,' he said.

" 'I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Jefferies,' I said. 'I can get you some aspirin—'

" 'No,' he said. 'That's not it. It's this idea. It's like I went fishing for trout and hooked a marlin instead. I write books for a living, you see. Fiction.'

" 'Yes, sir, Mr. Jefferies,' I said, 'I have read two of them and thought they were fine.'

" '*Did* you,' he said, looking at me as if maybe I'd gone crazy. 'Well, that's very kind of you to say, anyway. I woke up this morning and I had an idea.'

" *Yes, sir, I was thinking to myself, you had an idea, all right, one so hot and so fresh it just kinda spilled out all over the sheet. But it ain't there no more, so you*

*don't have to worry.* And I almost laughed out loud. Only, Darcy, I don't think he would have noticed if I had.

“ ‘I ordered up some breakfast,’ he said, and pointed at the room-service trolley by the door, ‘and as I ate it I thought about this little idea. I thought it might make a short story. There’s this magazine, you know . . . *The New Yorker* . . . well, never mind.’ He wasn’t going to explain *The New Yorker* magazine to a pickaninny like me, you know.”

Darcy grinned.

“ ‘But by the time I’d finished breakfast,’ he went on, ‘it began to seem more like a novelette. And then . . . as I started to rough out some ideas . . .’ He gave out this shrill little laugh. ‘I don’t think I’ve had an idea this good in ten years. Maybe never. Do you think it would be possible for twin brothers—fraternal, not identical—to end up fighting on opposite sides during World War II?’

“ ‘Well, maybe not in the *Pacific*,’ I said. Another time I don’t think I would have had nerve enough to speak to him at all, Darcy—I would have just stood there and gawped. But I still felt like I was under glass, or like I’d had a shot of novocaine at the dentist’s and it hadn’t quite worn off yet.

“He laughed like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard and said, ‘Ha-ha! No, not *there*, it couldn’t happen *there*, but it might be possible in the ETO. And they could come face-to-face during the Battle of the Bulge.’

“ ‘Well, maybe—’ I started, but by then he was walking fast around the parlor again, running his hands through his hair and making it look wilder and wilder.

“ ‘I know it sounds like Orpheum Circuit melodrama,’ he said, ‘some silly piece of claptrap like *Under Two Flags* or *Armada*, but the concept of twins . . . and it could be explained rationally . . . I see just how. . .’ He whirled on me. ‘Would it have dramatic impact?’

“ ‘Yes, sir,’ I said. ‘*Everyone* likes stories about brothers that don’t know they’re brothers.’

“ ‘Sure they do,’ he said. ‘And I’ll tell you something else—’ Then he stopped and I saw the queerest expression come over his face. It was queer, but I could read it letter-perfect. It was like he was waking up to doing something foolish, like a man suddenly realizing he’s spread his face with shaving cream

and then taken his electric razor to it. He was talking to a nigger hotel maid about what was maybe the best idea he'd ever had—a nigger hotel maid whose idea of a really good story was probably *The Edge of Night*. He'd forgot me saying I'd read two of his books—”

“Or thought it was just flattery to get a bigger tip,” Darcy murmured.

“Yeah, that'd fit his concept of human nature like a glove, all right. Anyway, that expression said he'd just realized who he was talking to, that was all.

“ ‘I think I'm going to extend my stay,’ he said. ‘Tell them at the desk, would you?’ He spun around to start walking again and his leg whanged against the room-service cart. ‘And get this fucking thing out of here, all right?’

“ ‘Would you want me to come back later and—’ I started.

“ ‘Yes, yes, yes,’ he says, ‘come back later and do whatever you like, but for now just be my good little sweetheart and make everything all gone . . . including yourself.’

“I did just that, and I was never so relieved in my life as when the parlor door shut behind me. I wheeled the room-service trolley over to the side of the corridor. He'd had juice and scrambled eggs and bacon. I started to walk away and then I seen there was a mushroom on his plate, too, pushed aside with the last of the eggs and a little bit of bacon. I looked at it and it was like a light went on in my head. I remembered the mushroom *she'd* given me—old Mama Delorme—in the little plastic box. Remembered it for the first time since that day. I remembered finding it in my dress pocket, and where I'd put it. The one on his plate looked just the same—wrinkled and sort of dried up, like it might be a toadstool instead of a mushroom, and one that would make you powerful sick.”

She looked at Darcy steadily.

“He'd eaten part of it, too. More than half, I'd say.”

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“Mr. Buckley was on the desk that day and I told him Mr. Jefferies was thinking of extending his stay. Mr. Buckley said he didn't think that would present a problem even though Mr. Jefferies had been planning to check out that very afternoon.

“Then I went down to the room-service kitchen and talked with Bedelia Aaronson—you must remember Bedelia—and asked her if she’d seen anyone out of the ordinary around that morning. Bedelia asked who I meant and I said I didn’t really know. She said ‘Why you asking, Marty?’ and I told her I’d rather not say. She said there hadn’t been nobody, not even the man from the food service who was always trying to date up the short-order girl.

“I started away and she said, ‘Unless you mean the old Negro lady.’

“I turned back and asked what old Negro lady that was.

“ ‘Well,’ Bedelia said, ‘I imagine she came in off the street, looking for the john. Happens once or twice a day. Negroes sometimes won’t ask the way because they’re afraid the hotel people will kick them out even if they’re well-dressed . . . which, as I’m sure you know, they often do. Anyway, this poor old soul wandered down here . . .’ She stopped and got a look at me. ‘Are you all right, Martha? You look like you’re going to faint!’

“ ‘I’m not going to faint,’ I said. ‘What was she doing?’

“ ‘Just wandering around, looking at the breakfast trolleys like she didn’t know where she was,’ she said. ‘Poor old thing! She was eighty if she was a day. Looked like a strong gust of wind would blow her right up into the sky like a kite . . . Martha, you come over here and sit down. You look like the picture of Dorian Gray in that movie.’

“ ‘What did she look like? Tell me!’

“ ‘I *did* tell you—an old woman. They all look about the same to me. The only thing different about this one was the scar on her face. It ran all the way up into her hair. It—’

“ ‘But I didn’t hear any more because that was when I *did* faint.

“ ‘They let me go home early and I’d no more than got there than I started feeling like I wanted to spit again, and drink a lot of water, and probably end up in the john like before, sicking my guts out. But for the time being I just sat there by the window, looking out into the street, and gave myself a talking-to.

“ ‘What she’d done to me wasn’t just hypnosis; by then I knew that. It was more powerful than hypnosis. I still wasn’t sure if I believed in any such thing as witchcraft, but she’d done *something* to me, all right, and whatever it was, I was just going to have to ride with it. I couldn’t quit my job, not with a husband that wasn’t turning out to be worth salt and a baby most likely on the

way. I couldn't even request to be switched to a different floor. A year or two before I could have, but I knew there was talk about making me Assistant Chief Housekeeper for Ten to Twelve, and that meant a raise in pay. More'n that, it meant they'd most likely take me back at the same job after I had the baby.

"My mother had a saying: *What can't be cured must be endured*. I thought about going back to see that old black mama and asking her to take it off, but I knew somehow she wouldn't—she'd made up her mind it was best for me, what she was doing, and one thing I've learned as I've made my way through this world, Darcy, is that the only time you can never hope to change someone's mind is when they've got it in their head that they're doing you a help.

"I sat there thinking all that and looking out at the street, all the people coming and going, and I kind of dozed off. Couldn't have been for much more than fifteen minutes, but when I woke up again I knew something else. That old woman wanted me to keep on doing what I'd already done twice, and I couldn't do that if Peter Jefferies went back to Birmingham. So she got into the room-service kitchen and put that mushroom on his tray and he ate part of it and it gave him that idea. Turned out to be a whale of a story, too—*Boys in the Mist*, it was called. It was about just what he told me that day, twin brothers, one of them an American soldier and the other a German one, that meet at the Battle of the Bulge. It turned out to be the biggest seller he ever had."

She paused and added, "I read that in his obituary."

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"He stayed another week. Every day when I went in he'd be bent over the desk in the parlor, writing away on one of his yellow pads, still wearing his pajamas. Every day I'd ask him if he wanted me to come back later and he'd tell me to go ahead and make up the bedroom but be quiet about it. Never looking up from his writing while he talked. Every day I went in telling myself that this time I wasn't going to do it, and every day that stuff was there on the sheet, still fresh, and every day every prayer and every promise I'd made myself went flying out the window and I found myself doing it again. It really *wasn't* like

fighting a compulsion, where you argue it back and forth and sweat and shiver; it was more like blinking for a minute and finding out it had already happened. Oh, and every day when I came in he'd be holding his head like it was just killing him. What a pair we were! He had my morning-sickness and I had his night-sweats!"

"What do you mean?" Darcy asked.

"It was at night I'd really brood about what I was doing, and spit and drink water and maybe have to throw up a time or two. Mrs. Parker got so concerned that I finally told her I thought I was pregnant but I didn't want my husband to know until I was sure.

"Johnny Rosewall was one self-centered son of a bitch, but I think even he would have known something was wrong with me if he hadn't had fish of his own to fry, the biggest trout in the skillet being the liquor store holdup he and his friends were plannin. Not that I knew about that, of course; I was just glad he was keepin out of my way. It made life at least a little easier.

"Then I let myself into 1163 one morning and Mr. Jefferies was gone. He'd packed his bags and headed back to Alabama to work on his book and think about his war. Oh, Darcy, I can't tell you how happy I was! I felt like Lazarus must have when he found out he was going to have a second go at life. It seemed to me that morning like everything might come right after all, like in a story—I would tell Johnny about the baby and he would straighten up, throw out his dope, and get a regular job. He'd be a proper husband to me and a good father to his son—I was already sure it was going to be a boy.

"I went into the bedroom of Mr. Jefferies's suite and seen the bedclothes messed up like always, the blankets kicked off the end and the sheet all tangled up in a ball. I walked over there feeling like I was in a dream again and pulled the sheet back. I was thinking, *Well, all right, if I have to . . . but it's for the last time.*

"Turned out the last time had already happened. There wasn't a trace of him on that sheet. Whatever spell that old *bruja* woman had put on us, it had run its course. *That's good enough*, I thought. *I'm gonna have the baby, he's gonna have the book, and we're both shut of her magic. I don't care a fig about natural fathers, either, as long as Johnny will be a good dad to the one I've got coming.*"

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“I told Johnny that same night,” Martha said, then added dryly: “He didn’t cotton onto the idea, as I think you already know.”

Darcy nodded.

“Whopped me with the end of that broomstick about five times and then stood over me where I lay crying in the corner and yelled, ‘What are you, crazy? We ain’t having no *kid!* I think you stone crazy, woman!’ Then he turned around and walked out.

“I laid there for awhile, thinking of the first miscarriage and scared to death the pains would start any minute, and I’d be on my way to having another one. I thought of my momma writing that I ought to get away from him before he put me in the hospital, and of Kissy sending me that Greyhound ticket with GO NOW written on the folder. And when I was sure that I wasn’t going to miscarry the baby, I got up to pack a bag and get the hell out of there—right away, before he could come back. But I was no more than opening the closet door when I thought of Mama Delorme again. I remembered telling her I was going to leave Johnny, and what she said to me: ‘No—he gonna leave *you*. You gonna see him out, is all. Stick around, woman. There be a little money. You gonna think he hoit the baby but he dint be doin it.’

“It was like she was right there, telling me what to look for and what to do. I went into the closet, all right, but it wasn’t my own clothes I wanted anymore. I started going through his, and I found a couple of things in that same damned sportcoat where I’d found the bottle of White Angel. That coat was his favorite, and I guess it really said everything anyone needed to know about Johnny Rosewall. It was bright satin. . . cheap-looking. I hated it. Wasn’t no bottle of dope I found this time. Was a straight-razor in one pocket and a cheap little pistol in the other. I took the gun out and looked at it, and that same feeling came over me that came over me those times in the bedroom of Mr. Jefferies’s suite—like I was doing something just after I woke up from a heavy sleep.

“I walked into the kitchen with the gun in my hand and set it down on the little bit of counter I had beside the stove. Then I opened the overhead cupboard and felt around in back of the spices and the tea. At first I couldn’t

find what she'd given me and this awful stifflin panic came over me—I was scared the way you get scared in dreams. Then my hand happened on that plastic box and I drew it down.

“I opened it and took out the mushroom. It was a repulsive thing, too heavy for its size, and *warm*. It was like holding a lump of flesh that hasn't quite died. That thing I did in Mr. Jefferies's bedroom? I tell you right now I'd do it two hundred more times before I'd pick up that mushroom again.

“I held it in my right hand and I picked up that cheap little .32 in my left. And then I squeezed my right hand as hard as I could, and I felt the mushroom squelch in my fist, and it sounded. . . well, I know it's almost impossible to believe . . . but it sounded like it screamed. Do you believe that could be?”

Slowly, Darcy shook her head. She did not, in fact, know if she believed it or not, but she was absolutely sure of one thing: she did not *want* to believe it.

“Well, I don't believe it, either. But that's what it sounded like. And one other thing you won't believe, but I do, because I saw it: it bled. That mushroom bled. I saw a little stream of blood come out of my fist and splash onto the gun. But the blood disappeared as soon as it hit the barrel.

“After awhile it stopped. I opened my hand, expecting it would be full of blood, but there was only the mushroom, all wrinkled up, with the shapes of my fingers mashed into it. Wasn't no blood on the mushroom, in my hand, on his gun, nor anywhere. And just as I started to think I'd done nothing but somehow have a dream on my feet, the damned thing twitched in my hand. I looked down at it and for a second or two it didn't look like a mushroom at all—it looked like a little tiny penis that was still alive. I thought of the blood coming out of my fist when I squeezed it and I thought of her saying, 'Any child a woman get, the man shoot it out'n his pecker, girl.' It twitched again—I tell you it *did*—and I screamed and threw it in the trash. Then I heard Johnny coming back up the stairs and I grabbed his gun and ran back into the bedroom with it and put it back into his coat pocket. Then I climbed into bed with all my clothes on, even my shoes, and pulled the blanket up to my chin. He come in and I seen he was bound to make trouble. He had a rug-beater in one hand. I don't know where he got it from, but I knew what he meant to do with it.

“ ‘Ain’t gonna be no baby,’ he said. ‘You get on over here.’

“ ‘No,’ I told him, ‘there ain’t going to be a baby. You don’t need that thing, either, so put it away. You already took care of the baby, you worthless piece of shit.’

“I knew it was a risk, calling him that, but I thought maybe it would make him believe me, and it did. Instead of beating me up, this big goony stoned grin spread over his face. I tell you, I never hated him so much as I did then.

“ ‘Gone?’ he asked.

“ ‘Gone,’ I said.

“ ‘Where’s the mess?’ he asked.

“ ‘Where do you think?’ I said. ‘Halfway to the East River by now, most likely.’

“He came over then and tried to kiss me, for Jesus’ sake. *Kiss* me! I turned my face away and he went upside my head, but not hard.

“ ‘You’re gonna see I know best,’ he says. ‘There’ll be time enough for kids later on.’

“Then he went out again. Two nights later him and his friends tried to pull that liquor store job and his gun blew up in his face and killed him.”

“You think you witched that gun, don’t you?” Darcy said.

“No,” Martha said calmly. “*She* did . . . by way of me, you could say. She saw I wouldn’t help myself, and so she *made* me help myself.”

“But you *do* think the gun was witched.”

“I don’t just *think* so,” Martha said calmly.

Darcy went into the kitchen for a glass of water. Her mouth was suddenly very dry.

“That’s really the end,” Martha said when she came back. “Johnny died and I had Pete. Wasn’t until I got too pregnant to work that I found out just how many friends I had. If I’d known sooner, I think I would have left Johnny sooner . . . or maybe not. None of us really knows the way the world works, no matter what we think or say.”

“But that’s not everything, is it?” Darcy asked.

“Well, there *are* two more things,” Martha said. “Little things.” But she didn’t look as if they were little, Darcy thought.

“I went back to Mama Delorme’s about four months after Pete was born. I didn’t want to but I did. I had twenty dollars in an envelope. I couldn’t afford it but I knew, somehow, that it belonged to her. It was dark. Stairs seemed even narrower than before, and the higher I climbed the more I could smell her and the smells of her place: burned candles and dried wallpaper and the cinnamony smell of her tea.

“That feeling of doing something in a dream—of being behind a glass wall—came over me for the last time. I got up to her door and knocked. There was no answer, so I knocked again. There was still no answer, so I knelt down to slip the envelope under the door. And her voice came from *right on the other side*, as if *she* was knelt down, too. I was never so scared in my life as I was when that papery old voice came drifting out of the crack under that door—it was like hearing a voice coming out of a grave.

“ ‘He goan be a fine boy,’ she said. ‘Goan be just like he father. Like he *natural* father.’

“ ‘I brought you something,’ I said. I could barely hear my own voice.

“ ‘Slip it through, dearie,’ she whispered. I slipped the envelope halfway under and she pulled it the rest of the way. I heard her tear it open and I waited. I just waited.

“ ‘It’s enough,’ she whispered. ‘You get on out of here, dearie, and don’t you ever come back to Mama Delorme’s again, you hear?’

“I got up and ran out of there just as fast as I could.”

• • •

Martha went over to the bookcase, and came back a moment or two later with a hardcover. Darcy was immediately struck by the similarity between the artwork on this jacket and that on the jacket of Peter Rosewall’s book. This one was *Blaze of Heaven* by Peter Jefferies, and the cover showed a pair of GIs charging an enemy pillbox. One of them had a grenade; the other was firing an M-1.

Martha rummaged in her blue canvas tote-bag, brought out her son’s book, removed the tissue paper in which it was wrapped, and laid it tenderly next to

the Jefferies book. *Blaze of Heaven; Blaze of Glory*. Side by side, the points of comparison were inescapable.

“*This* was the other thing,” Martha said.

“Yes,” Darcy said doubtfully. “They *do* look similar. What about the stories? Are they . . . well . . .”

She stopped in some confusion and looked up at Martha from beneath her lashes. She was relieved to see Martha was smiling.

“You askin if my boy copied that nasty honky’s book?” Martha asked without the slightest bit of rancor.

“No!” Darcy said, perhaps a little too vehemently.

“Other than that they’re both about war, they’re nothing alike,” Martha said. “They’re as different as . . . well, as different as black and white.” She paused and then added: “But there’s a feel about them every now and then that’s the same. . . somethin you seem to almost catch around corners. It’s that sunshine I told you about—that feeling that the world is mostly a lot better than it looks, especially better than it looks to those people who are too smart to be kind.”

“Then isn’t it possible that your son was *inspired* by Peter Jefferies. . . that he read him in college and . . .”

“Sure,” Martha said. “I suppose my Peter did read Jefferies’s books—that’d be more likely than not even if it was just a case of like calling to like. But there’s something else—something that’s a little harder to explain.”

She picked up the Jefferies novel, looked at it reflectively for a moment, then looked at Darcy.

“I went and bought this copy about a year after my son was born,” she said. “It was still in print, although the bookstore had to special-order it from the publisher. When Mr. Jefferies was in on one of his visits, I got up my courage and asked if he would sign it for me. I thought he might be put out by me asking, but I think he was actually a little flattered. Look here.”

She turned to the dedication page of *Blaze of Heaven*.

Darcy read what was printed there and felt an eerie doubling in her mind. *This book is dedicated to my mother, ALTHEA DIXMONT JEFFERIES, the finest woman I have ever known.* And below that, Jefferies had written in black fountain-pen

ink that was now fading, "For Martha Rosewall, who cleans up my clutter and never complains." Below this he had signed his name and jotted *August '61*.

The wording of the penned dedication struck her first as contemptuous . . . then as eerie. But before she had a chance to think about it, Martha had opened her son's book, *Blaze of Glory*, to the dedication page and placed it beside the Jefferies book. Once again Darcy read the printed matter: *This book is dedicated to my mother, MARTHA ROSEWALL. Mom, I couldn't have done it without you.* Below that he had written in a pen which looked like a fine-line Flair: *"And that's no lie. Love you, Mom! Pete."*

But she didn't really read this; she only looked at it. Her eyes went back and forth, back and forth, between the dedication page which had been inscribed in August of 1961 and the one which had been inscribed in April of 1985.

"You see?" Martha asked softly.

Darcy nodded. She saw.

The thin, sloping, somehow old-fashioned backhand script was the same in both books . . . and so, given the variations afforded by love and familiarity, were the signatures themselves. Only the tone of the written messages varied, Darcy thought, and there the difference was as clear as the difference between black and white.

## The Moving Finger

When the scratching started, Howard Mitla was sitting alone in the Queens apartment where he lived with his wife. Howard was one of New York's lesser-known certified public accountants. Violet Mitla, one of New York's lesser-known dental assistants, had waited until the news was over before going down to the store on the corner to get a pint of ice cream. *Jeopardy* was on after the news, and she didn't care for that show. She said it was because Alex Trebek looked like a crooked evangelist, but Howard knew the truth: *Jeopardy* made her feel dumb.

The scratching sound was coming from the bathroom just off the short squib of hall that led to the bedroom. Howard tightened up as soon as he heard it. It wasn't a junkie or a burglar in there, not with the heavy-gauge mesh he had put over all the windows two years ago at his own expense. It sounded more like a mouse in the basin or the tub. Maybe even a rat.

He waited through the first few questions, hoping the scratching sound would go away on its own, but it didn't. When the commercial came on, he got reluctantly up from his chair and walked to the bathroom door. It was standing ajar, allowing him to hear the scratching sound even better.

Almost certainly a mouse or a rat. Little paws clicking against the porcelain.

"Damn," Howard said, and went into the kitchen.

Standing in the little space between the gas stove and the refrigerator were a few cleaning implements—a mop, a bucket filled with old rags, a broom with a dustpan snugged down over the handle. Howard took the broom in one hand, holding it well down toward the bristles, and the dustpan in the other. Thus armed, he walked reluctantly back through the small living room to the bathroom door. He cocked his head forward. Listened.

Scratch, scratch, scritch-scratch.

A very small sound. Probably not a rat. Yet that was what his mind insisted on conjuring up. Not just a rat but a *New York* rat, an ugly, bushy thing with

tiny black eyes and long whiskers like wire and snaggle teeth protruding from below its V-shaped upper lip. A rat with attitude.

The sound was tiny, almost delicate, but nevertheless—

Behind him, Alex Trebek said, “This Russian madman was shot, stabbed, and strangled . . . all in the same night.”

“Who was Lenin?” one of the contestants responded.

“Who was *Rasputin*, peabrain,” Howard Mitla murmured. He transferred the dustpan to the hand holding the broom, then snaked his free hand into the bathroom and turned on the light. He stepped in and moved quickly to the tub crammed into the corner below the dirty, mesh-covered window. He hated rats and mice, hated all little furry things that squeaked and scuttered (and sometimes bit), but he had discovered as a boy growing up in Hell’s Kitchen that if you had to dispatch one of them, it was best to do it quickly. It would do him no good to sit in his chair and ignore the sound; Vi had helped herself to a couple of beers during the news, and the bathroom would be her first stop when she returned from the market. If there was a mouse in the tub, she would raise the roof . . . and demand he do his manly duty and dispatch it anyway. Posthaste.

The tub was empty save for the hand-held shower attachment. Its hose lay on the enamel like a dead snake.

The scratching had stopped either when Howard turned on the light or when he entered the room, but now it started again. Behind him. He turned and took three steps toward the bathroom basin, raising the broomhandle as he moved.

The fist wrapped around the handle got to the level of his chin and then froze. He stopped moving. His jaw came unhinged. If he had looked at himself in the toothpaste-spotted mirror over the basin, he would have seen shiny strings of spittle, as gossamer as strands of spiderweb, gleaming between his tongue and the roof of his mouth.

A finger had poked its way out of the drain-hole in the basin.

A human finger.

For a moment it froze, as if aware it had been discovered. Then it began to move again, feeling its wormlike way around the pink porcelain. It reached the white rubber plug, felt its way over it, then descended to the porcelain again.

The scratching noise hadn't been made by the tiny claws of a mouse after all. It was the nail on the end of that finger, tapping the porcelain as it circled and circled.

Howard gave voice to a rusty, bewildered scream, dropped the broom, and ran for the bathroom door. He hit the tile wall with his shoulder instead, rebounded, and tried again. This time he got out, swept the door shut behind him, and only stood there with his back pressed against it, breathing hard. His heartbeat was hard, toneless Morse code high up in one side of his throat.

He couldn't have stood there for long—when he regained control of his thoughts, Alex Trebek was still guiding that evening's three contestants through Single Jeopardy—but while he did, he had no sense of time passing, where he was, or even who he was.

What brought him out of it was the electronic whizzing sound that signalled a Daily Double square. "The category is Space and Aviation," Alex was saying. "You currently have seven hundred dollars, Mildred—how much do you wish to wager?" Mildred, who did not have game-show-host projection, muttered something inaudible in response.

Howard moved away from the door and back into the living room on legs which felt like pogo-sticks. He still had the dustpan in one hand. He looked at it for a moment and then let it fall to the carpet. It hit with a dusty little thump.

"I didn't see that," Howard Mitla said in a trembling little voice, and collapsed into his chair.

"All right, Mildred—for five hundred dollars: This Air Force test site was originally known as Miroc Proving Ground."

Howard peered at the TV. Mildred, a mousy little woman with a hearing aid as big as a clock-radio screwed into one ear, was thinking deeply.

"I didn't *see* that," he said with a little more conviction.

"What is . . . Vandenberg Air Base?" Mildred asked.

"What is *Edwards* Air Base, birdbrain," Howard said. And, as Alex Trebek confirmed what Howard Mitla already knew, Howard repeated: "I didn't see that *at all*."

But Violet would be back soon, and he had left the broom in the bathroom.

• • •

Alex Trebek told the contestants—and the viewing audience—that it was still anybody’s game, and they would be back to play Double Jeopardy, where the scores could *really* change, in two shakes of a lamb’s tail. A politician came on and began explaining why he should be re-elected. Howard got reluctantly to his feet. His legs felt a little more like legs and a little less like pogo-sticks with metal fatigue now, but he still didn’t want to go back into the bathroom.

*Look, he told himself, this is perfectly simple. Things like this always are. You had a momentary hallucination, the sort of thing that probably happens to people all the time. The only reason you don’t hear about them more often is because people don’t like to talk about them . . . having hallucinations is embarrassing. Talking about them makes people feel the way you’re going to feel if that broom is still on the floor in there when Vi comes back and asks what you were up to.*

“Look,” the politician on TV was saying in rich, confidential tones. “When you get right down to cases, it’s perfectly simple: do you want an honest, competent man running the Nassau County Bureau of Records, or do you want a man from upstate, a hired gun who’s never even—”

“It was air in the pipes, I bet,” Howard said, and although the sound which had taken him into the bathroom in the first place had not sounded the slightest bit like air in the pipes, just hearing his own voice—reasonable, under control again—got him moving with a little more authority.

And besides—Vi would be home soon. Any minute, really.

He stood outside the door, listening.

*Scratch, scratch, scratch.* It sounded like the world’s smallest blind man tapping his cane on the porcelain in there, feeling his way around, checking out the old surroundings.

“Air in the pipes!” Howard said in a strong, declamatory voice, and boldly threw the bathroom door open. He bent low, grabbed the broomhandle, and snatched it back out the door. He did not have to take more than two steps into the little room with its faded, lumpy linoleum and its dingy, mesh-crisscrossed view on the airshaft, and he most certainly did not look into the bathroom sink.

He stood outside, listening.

*Scratch, scratch. Scritch-scratch.*

He returned the broom and dustpan to the little nook in the kitchen between the stove and the refrigerator and then returned to the living room. He stood there for a moment, looking at the bathroom door. It stood ajar, spilling a fan of yellow light into the little squib of hall.

*You better go turn off the light. You know how Vi raises the roof about stuff like that. You don't even have to go in. Just reach through the door and flick it off.*

But what if something touched his hand while he was reaching for the light switch?

What if another finger touched *his* finger?

How about *that*, fellows and girls?

He could still hear that sound. There was something terribly relentless about it. It was maddening.

*Scratch. Scritch. Scratch.*

On the TV, Alex Trebek was reading the Double Jeopardy categories. Howard went over and turned up the sound a little. Then he sat down in his chair again and told himself he didn't hear anything from the bathroom, not a single thing.

Except maybe a little air in the pipes.

• • •

Vi Mitla was one of those women who move with such dainty precision that they seem almost fragile. . . but Howard had been married to her for twenty-one years, and he knew there was nothing fragile about her at all. She ate, drank, worked, danced, and made love in exactly the same way: *con brio*. She came into the apartment like a pocket hurricane. One large arm curled a brown paper sack against the right side of her bosom. She carried it through into the kitchen without pausing. Howard heard the bag crackle, heard the refrigerator door open and then close again. When she came back, she tossed Howard her coat. "Hang this up for me, will you?" she asked. "I've got to pee. Do I ever! Whew!"

*Whew!* was one of Vi's favorite exclamations. Her version rhymed with P.U., the child's exclamation for something smelly.

“Sure, Vi,” Howard said, and rose slowly to his feet with Vi’s dark-blue coat in his arms. His eyes never left her as she went down the hall and through the bathroom door.

“Con Ed loves it when you leave the lights on, Howie,” she called back over her shoulder.

“I did it on purpose,” he said. “I knew that’d be your first stop.”

She laughed. He heard the rustle of her clothes. “You know me too well—people will say we’re in love.”

*You ought to tell her—warn her,* Howard thought, and knew he could do nothing of the kind. What was he supposed to say? Watch out, Vi, there’s a finger coming out of the basin drain-hole, don’t let the guy it belongs to poke you in the eye if you bend over to get a glass of water?

Besides, it had just been a hallucination, one brought on by a little air in the pipes and his fear of rats and mice. Now that some minutes had gone by, this seemed almost plausible to him.

Just the same, he only stood there with Vi’s coat in his arms, waiting to see if she would scream. And, after ten or fifteen endless seconds, she did.

*“My God, Howard!”*

Howard jumped, hugging the coat more tightly to his chest. His heart, which had begun to slow down, began to do its Morse-code number again. He struggled to speak, but at first his throat was locked shut.

*“What?”* he managed finally. *“What, Vi? What is it?”*

*“The towels! Half of em are on the floor! Sheesh! What happened?”*

“I don’t know,” he called back. His heart was thumping harder than ever, and it was impossible to tell if the sickish, pukey feeling deep down in his belly was relief or terror. He supposed he must have knocked the towels off the shelf during his first attempt to exit the bathroom, when he had hit the wall.

“It must be spookies,” she said. “Also, I don’t mean to nag, but you forgot to put the ring down again.”

“Oh—sorry,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s what you always say,” her voice floated back. “Sometimes I think you want me to fall in and drown. I really *do!*” There was a clunk as she put it down herself. Howard waited, heart thumping away, her coat still hugged against his chest.

“He holds the record for the most strikeouts in a single game,” Alex Trebek read.

“Who was Tom Seaver?” Mildred snapped right back.

“Roger Clemens, you nitwit,” Howard said.

*Pwoosh!* There went the flush. And the moment he was waiting for (Howard had just realized this consciously) was now at hand. The pause seemed almost endless. Then he heard the squeak of the washer in the bathroom faucet marked H (he kept meaning to replace that washer and kept forgetting), followed by water flowing into the basin, followed by the sound of Vi briskly washing her hands.

No screams.

Of course not, because there was no *finger*.

“Air in the pipes,” Howard said with more assurance, and went to hang up his wife’s coat.

• • •

She came out, adjusting her skirt. “I got the ice cream,” she said, “cherry-vanilla, just like you wanted. But before we try it, why don’t you have a beer with me, Howie? It’s this new stuff. American Grain, it’s called. I never heard of it, but it was on sale so I bought a six-pack. Nothing ventured, nothing grained, am I right?”

“Hardy-har,” he said, wrinkling his nose. Vi’s penchant for puns had struck him as cute when he first met her, but it had staled somewhat over the years. Still, now that he was over his fright, a beer sounded like just the thing. Then, as Vi went out into the kitchen to get him a glass of her new find, he realized he wasn’t over his fright at all. He supposed that having a hallucination was better than seeing a real finger poking out of the drain of the bathroom basin, a finger that was alive and moving around, but it wasn’t exactly an evening-maker, either.

Howard sat down in his chair again. As Alex Trebek announced the Final Jeopardy category—it was The Sixties—he found himself thinking of various TV shows he’d seen where it turned out that a character who was having

hallucinations either had (a) epilepsy or (b) a brain tumor. He found he could remember a lot of them.

“You know,” Vi said, coming back into the room with two glasses of beer, “I don’t like the Vietnamese people who run that market. I don’t think I’ll *ever* like them. I think they’re sneaky.”

“Have you ever *caught* them doing anything sneaky?” Howard asked. He himself thought the Lahs were exceptional people. . . but tonight he didn’t care much one way or the other.

“No,” Vi said, “not a thing. And that makes me all the more suspicious. Also, they *smile* all the time. My father used to say, ‘Never trust a smiling man.’ He also said . . . Howard, are you feeling all right?”

“He said *that*?” Howard asked, making a rather feeble attempt at levity.

“*Très amusant, cheri*. You look as pale as milk. Are you coming down with something?”

*No*, he thought of saying, *I’m not coming down with something—that’s too mild a term for it. I think I might have epilepsy or maybe a brain tumor, Vi—how’s that for coming down with something?*

“It’s just work, I guess,” he said. “I told you about the new tax account. St. Anne’s Hospital.”

“What about it?”

“It’s a rat’s nest,” he said, and that immediately made him think of the bathroom again—the sink and the drain. “Nuns shouldn’t be allowed to do bookkeeping. Someone ought to have put it in the Bible just to make sure.”

“You let Mr. Lathrop push you around too much,” Vi told him firmly. “It’s going to go on and on unless you stand up for yourself. Do you want a heart attack?”

“No.” *And I don’t want epilepsy or a brain tumor, either. Please, God, make it a one-time thing. Okay? Just some weird mental burp that happens once and never again. Okay? Please? Pretty please? With some sugar on it?*

“You bet you don’t,” she said grimly. “Arlene Katz was saying just the other day that when men under fifty have heart attacks, they almost never come out of the hospital again. And you’re only forty-one. You have to stand up for yourself, Howard. Stop being such a pushover.”

“I guess so,” he said glumly.

Alex Trebek came back on and gave the Final Jeopardy answer: “This group of hippies crossed the United States in a bus with writer Ken Kesey.” The Final Jeopardy music began to play. The two men contestants were writing busily. Mildred, the woman with the microwave oven in her ear, looked lost. At last she began to scratch something. She did it with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

Vi took a deep swallow from her glass. “Hey!” she said. “Not bad! And only two-sixty-seven a six-pack!”

Howard drank some himself. It was nothing special, but it was wet, at least, and cool. Soothing.

Neither of the male contestants was even close. Mildred was also wrong, but she, at least, was in the ball-park. “Who were the Merry Men?” she had written.

“Merry *Pranksters*, you dope,” Howard said.

Vi looked at him admiringly. “You know all the answers, Howard, don’t you?”

“I only wish I did,” Howard said, and sighed.

• • •

Howard didn’t care much for beer, but that night he helped himself to three cans of Vi’s new find nevertheless. Vi commented on it, said that if she had known he was going to like it that much, she would have stopped by the drugstore and gotten him an IV hookup. Another time-honored Vi-ism. He forced a smile. He was actually hoping the beer would send him off to sleep quickly. He was afraid that, without a little help, he might be awake for quite awhile, thinking about what he had imagined he’d seen in the bathroom sink. But, as Vi had often informed him, beer was full of vitamin P, and around eight-thirty, after she had retired to the bedroom to put on her nightgown, Howard went reluctantly into the bathroom to relieve himself.

First he walked over to the bathroom sink and forced himself to look in.

Nothing.

This was a relief (in the end, a hallucination was still better than an actual finger, he had discovered, despite the possibility of a brain tumor), but he still didn’t like looking down the drain. The brass cross-hatch inside that was

supposed to catch things like clots of hair or dropped bobby-pins had disappeared years ago, and so there was only a dark hole rimmed by a circle of tarnished steel. It looked like a staring eyesocket.

Howard took the rubber plug and stuck it into the drain.

That was better.

He stepped away from the sink, put up the toilet ring (Vi complained bitterly if he forgot to put it down when he was through, but never seemed to feel any pressing need to put it back up when *she* was), and addressed the john. He was one of those men who only began to urinate immediately when the need was extreme (and who could not urinate at all in crowded public lavatories—the thought of all those men standing in line behind him just shut down his circuits), and he did now what he almost always did in the few seconds between the aiming of the instrument and the commencement of target practice: he recited prime numbers in his mind.

He had reached thirteen and was on the verge of flowing when there was a sudden sharp sound from behind him: *pwuck!* His bladder, recognizing the sound of the rubber plug being forced sharply out of the drain even before his brain did, clamped shut immediately (and rather painfully).

A moment later that sound—the sound of the nail clipping lightly against the porcelain as the questing finger twisted and turned—began again. Howard's skin went cold and seemed to shrink until it was too small to cover the flesh beneath. A single drop of urine spilled from him and plinked in the bowl before his penis actually seemed to shrink in his hand, retreating like a turtle seeking the safety of its shell.

Howard walked slowly and not quite steadily over to the washbasin. He looked in.

The finger was back. It was a very long finger, but seemed otherwise normal. Howard could see the nail, which was neither bitten nor abnormally long, and the first two knuckles. As he watched, it continued to tap and feel its way around the basin.

Howard bent down and looked under the sink. The pipe which came out of the floor was no more than three inches in diameter. It was not big enough for an arm. Besides, it made a severe bend at the place where the sink trap was. So just what was that finger attached to? What *could* it be attached to?

Howard straightened up again, and for one alarming moment he felt that his head might simply detach itself from his neck and float away. Small black specks flocked across his field of vision.

*I'm going to faint!* he thought. He grabbed his right earlobe and yanked it once, hard, the way a frightened passenger who has seen trouble up the line might yank the Emergency Stop cord of a railroad car. The dizziness passed . . . but the finger was still there.

It was *not* a hallucination. How could it be? He could see a tiny bead of water on the nail, and a tiny thread of whiteness beneath it—soap, almost surely soap. Vi had washed her hands after using the john.

*It could be a hallucination, though. It still could be. Just because you see soap and water on it, does that mean you can't be imagining it? And listen, Howard—if you're not imagining it, what's it doing in there? How did it get there in the first place? And how come Vi didn't see it?*

*Call her, then—call her in!* his mind instructed, and in the next microsecond countermanded its own order. *No! Don't do that! Because if you go on seeing it and she doesn't—*

Howard shut his eyes tight and for a moment lived in a world where there were only red flashes of light and his own crazy heartbeat.

When he opened them again, the finger was still there.

“What are you?” he whispered through tightly stretched lips. “*What* are you, and what are you doing here?”

The finger stopped its blind explorations at once. It swivelled—and then pointed directly at Howard. Howard blundered a step backward, his hands rising to his mouth to stifle a scream. He wanted to tear his eyes away from the wretched, awful thing, wanted to flee the bathroom in a rush (and never mind what Vi might think or say or see) . . . but for the moment he was paralyzed and unable to tear his gaze away from the pink-white digit, which now resembled nothing so much as an organic periscope.

Then it curled at the second knuckle. The end of the finger dipped, touched the porcelain, and resumed its tapping circular explorations once more.

“Howie?” Vi called. “Did you fall in?”

“Be right out!” he called back in an insanely cheery voice.

He flushed away the single drop of pee which had fallen into the toilet, then moved toward the door, giving the sink a wide berth. He *did* catch sight of himself in the bathroom mirror, however; his eyes were huge, his skin wretchedly pale. He gave each of his cheeks a brisk pinch before leaving the bathroom, which had become, in the space of one short hour, the most horrible and inexplicable place he had ever visited in his life.

• • •

When Vi came out into the kitchen to see what was taking him so long, she found Howard looking into the refrigerator.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“A Pepsi. I think I’ll go down to Lah’s and get one.”

“On top of three beers and a bowl of cherry-vanilla ice cream? You’ll *bust*, Howard!”

“No, I won’t,” he said. But if he wasn’t able to offload what his kidneys were holding, he might.

“Are you *sure* you feel all right?” Vi was looking at him critically, but her tone was gentler now—tinged with real concern. “Because you look terrible. Really.”

“Well,” he said reluctantly, “there’s been some flu going around the office. I suppose—”

“I’ll go get you the damned soda, if you really need it,” she said.

“No you won’t,” Howard interposed hastily. “You’re in your nightgown. Look—I’ll put on my coat.”

“When was the last time you had a soup-to-nuts physical, Howard? It’s been so long I’ve forgotten.”

“I’ll look it up tomorrow,” he said vaguely, going into the little foyer where their coats were hung. “It must be in one of the insurance folders.”

“Well you *better!* And if you insist on being crazy and going out, wear my scarf!”

“Okay. Good idea.” He pulled on his topcoat and buttoned it facing away from her, so she wouldn’t see how his hands were shaking. When he turned around, Vi was just disappearing back into the bathroom. He stood there in

fascinated silence for several moments, waiting to hear if she would scream *this* time, and then the water began to run in the basin. This was followed by the sound of Vi brushing her teeth in her usual manner: *con brio*.

He stood there a moment longer, and his mind suddenly offered its verdict in four flat, non-nonsense words: *I'm losing my grip*.

It might be . . . but that didn't change the fact that if he didn't take a whiz very soon, he was going to have an embarrassing accident. That, at least, was a problem he could solve, and Howard took a certain comfort in the fact. He opened the door, began to step out, then paused to pull Vi's scarf off the hook.

*When are you going to tell her about this latest fascinating development in the life of Howard Mitla?* his mind inquired suddenly.

Howard shut the thought out and concentrated on tucking the ends of the scarf into the lapels of his overcoat.

• • •

The Mitla apartment was on the fourth floor of a nine-story building on Hawking Street. To the right and half a block down, on the corner of Hawking and Queens Boulevard, was Lah's Twenty-Four-Hour Delicatessen and Convenience Market. Howard turned left and walked to the end of the building. Here was a narrow alleyway which gave on the airshaft at the rear of the building. Trash-bins lined both sides of the alley. Between them were littery spaces where homeless people—some but by no means all of them winos—often made their comfortless newspaper beds. No one seemed to have taken up residence in the alley this evening, for which Howard was profoundly grateful.

He stepped between the first and second bins, unzipped, and urinated copiously. At first the relief was so great that he felt almost blessed in spite of the evening's trials, but as the flow slackened and he began to consider his position again, anxiety started creeping back in.

His position was, in a word, untenable.

Here he was, peeing against the wall of the building in which he had a warm, safe apartment, looking over his shoulder all the while to see if he was being observed. The arrival of a junkie or a mugger while he was in such a

defenseless position would be bad, but he wasn't sure that the arrival of someone he knew—the Fensters from 2C, for instance, or the Dattlebaums from 3F—wouldn't be even worse. What could he say? And what might that motormouth Alicia Fenster say to Vi?

He finished, zipped his pants, and walked back to the mouth of the alley. After a prudent look in both directions, he proceeded down to Lah's and bought a can of Pepsi-Cola from the smiling, olive-skinned Mrs. Lah.

"You look pale tonight, Mr. Mit-ra," she said through her constant smile. "Feering all right?"

*Oh yes, he thought. I'm fearing just fine, thank you, Mrs. Lah. Never better on that score.*

"I think I might have caught a little bug at the sink," he told her. She began to frown through her smile and he realized what he had said. "At the office, I mean."

"Better bunder up walm," she said. The frown line had smoothed out of her almost ethereal forehead. "Radio say cold weather is coming."

"Thank you," he said, and left. On his way back to the apartment, he opened the Pepsi and poured it out on the sidewalk. Considering the fact that his bathroom had apparently become hostile territory, the last thing he needed tonight was any more to drink.

When he let himself in again, he could hear Vi snoring softly in the bedroom. The three beers had sent her off quickly and efficiently. He put the empty soda can on the counter in the kitchen, then paused outside the bathroom door. After a moment or two, he tilted his head against the wood.

*Scratch-scratch. Scritch-scratch-scratch.*

"Dirty son of a bitch," he whispered.

He went to bed without brushing his teeth for the first time since his two-week stint at Camp High Pines, when he had been twelve and his mother had forgotten to pack his toothbrush.

• • •

And lay in bed beside Vi, wakeful.

He could hear the sound of the finger making its ceaseless exploratory rounds in the bathroom sink, the nail clicking and tap-dancing. He couldn't *really* hear it, not with both doors closed, and he knew this, but he *imagined* he heard it, and that was just as bad.

*No, it isn't*, he told himself. *At least you know you're imagining it. With the finger itself you're not sure.*

This was but little comfort. He still wasn't able to get to sleep, and he was no closer to solving his problem. He *did* know he couldn't spend the rest of his life making excuses to go outside and pee in the alley next to the building. He doubted if he could manage that for even forty-eight hours. And what was going to happen the next time he had to take a dump, friends and neighbors? *There* was a question he'd never seen asked in a round of Final Jeopardy, and he didn't have a clue what the answer might be. Not the alley, though—he was sure of that much, at least.

*Maybe*, the voice in his head suggested cautiously, *you'll get used to the damned thing.*

No. The idea was insane. He had been married to Vi for twenty-one years, and he still found it impossible to go to the bathroom when she was in there with him. Those circuits just overloaded and shut down. She could sit there cheerily on the john, peeing and talking to him about her day at Dr. Stone's while he shaved, but he could not do the same. He just wasn't built that way.

*If that finger doesn't go away on its own, you better be prepared to make some changes in the way you're built, then*, the voice told him, *because I think you're going to have to make some modifications in the basic structure.*

He turned his head and glanced at the clock on the bed-table. It was quarter to two in the morning . . . and, he realized dolefully, he had to pee again.

He got up carefully, stole from the bedroom, passed the closed bathroom door with the ceaseless scratching, tapping sounds still coming from behind it, and went into the kitchen. He moved the step-stool in front of the kitchen sink, mounted it, and aimed carefully into the drain, ears cocked all the while for the sound of Vi getting out of bed.

He finally managed . . . but not until he had reached three hundred and forty-seven in his catalogue of prime numbers. It was an all-time record. He

replaced the step-stool and shuffled back to bed, thinking: *I can't go on like this. Not for long. I just can't.*

He bared his teeth at the bathroom door as he passed it.

• • •

When the alarm went off at six-thirty the next morning, he stumbled out of bed, shuffled down to the bathroom, and went inside.

The drain was empty.

“Thank God,” he said in a low, trembling voice. A sublime gust of relief—relief so great it felt like some sort of sacred revelation—blew through him. “Oh, thank G—”

The finger popped up like a Jack popping out of a Jack-in-the-box, as if the sound of his voice had called it. It spun around three times, fast, and then bent as stiffly as an Irish setter on point. And it was pointing straight at him.

Howard retreated, his upper lip rising and falling rapidly in an unconscious snarl.

Now the tip of the finger curled up and down, up and down. . . as if it were waving at him. Good morning, Howard, so nice to be here.

“Fuck you,” he muttered. He turned and faced the toilet. He tried resolutely to pass water . . . and nothing. He felt a sudden lurid rush of rage . . . an urge to simply whirl and pounce on the nasty intruder in the sink, to rip it out of its cave, throw it on the floor, and stamp on it in his bare feet.

“Howard?” Vi asked blearily. She knocked on the door. “Almost done?”

“Yes,” he said, trying his best to make his voice normal. He flushed the toilet.

It was clear that Vi would not have known or much cared if he sounded normal or not, and she took very little interest in how he looked. She was suffering from an unplanned hangover.

“Not the worst one I ever had, but still pretty bad,” she mumbled as she brushed past him, hiked her nightdress, and plopped onto the jakes. She propped her forehead in one hand. “No more of *that* stuff, please and thank you. American Grain, my rosy red ass. Someone should have told those babies you put the fertilizer on the hops *before* you grow em, not after. A headache on

three lousy beers! Gosh! Well—you buy cheap, you get cheap. Especially when it's those creepy Lahs doing the selling. Be a dollface and get me some aspirin, will you, Howie?"

"Sure," he said, and approached the sink carefully. The finger was gone again. Vi, it seemed, had once more frightened it off. He got the aspirin out of the medicine cabinet and removed two. When he reached to put the bottle back, he saw the tip of the finger protrude momentarily from the drain. It came out no more than a quarter of an inch. Again it seemed to execute that miniature wave before diving back out of sight.

*I'm going to get rid of you, my friend,* he thought suddenly. The feeling that accompanied the thought was anger—pure, simple anger—and it delighted him. The emotion cruised into his battered, bewildered mind like one of those huge Soviet ice-breakers that crush and slice their way through masses of pack-ice with almost casual ease. *I am going to get you. I don't know how yet, but I will.*

He handed Vi the aspirin and said, "Just a minute—I'll get you a glass of water."

"Don't bother," Vi said drearily, and crunched both tablets between her teeth. "Works faster this way."

"I'll bet it plays hell on your insides, though," Howard said. He found he didn't mind being in the bathroom very much at all, as long as Vi was in here with him.

"Don't care," she said, more drearily still. She flushed the toilet. "How are you this morning?"

"Not great," he said truthfully.

"You got one, too?"

"A hangover? No. I think it's that flu-bug I told you about. My throat's sore, and I think I'm running a fever."

"What?"

"*Fever,*" he said. "Fever's what I meant to say."

"Well, you better stay home." She went to the sink, selected her toothbrush from the holder, and began to brush vigorously.

"Maybe *you* better, too," he said. He did not want Vi to stay home, however; he wanted her right by Dr. Stone's side while Dr. Stone filled cavities

and did root canals, but it would have been unfeeling not to have said *something*.

She glanced up at him in the mirror. Already a little color was returning to her cheeks, a little sparkle to her eye. Vi also recovered *con brio*. “The day I call in sick at work because I’ve got a hangover will be the day I quit drinking altogether,” she said. “Besides, the doc’s gonna need me. We’re pulling a complete set of uppers. Dirty job, but somebody’s gotta do it.”

She spat directly into the drain and Howard thought, fascinated: *The next time it pops up, it’ll have toothpaste on it. Jesus!*

“You stay home and keep warm and drink plenty of fluids,” Vi said. She had adopted her Head Nurse Tone now, the tone which said *If you’re not taking all this down, be it on your own head*. “Catch up on your reading. And, by the bye, show that Mr. Hot Shit Lathrop what he’s missing when you don’t come in. Make him think twice.”

“That’s not a bad idea at all,” Howard said.

She kissed him on the way by and dropped him a wink. “Your Shrinking Violet knows a few of the answers, too,” she said. By the time she left to catch her bus half an hour later, she was singing lustily, her hangover forgotten.

• • •

The first thing Howard did following Vi’s departure was to haul the step-stool over to the kitchen sink and whiz into the drain again. It was easier with Vi out of the house; he had barely reached twenty-three, the ninth prime number, before getting down to business.

With *that* problem squared away—at least for the next few hours—he walked back into the hall and poked his head through the bathroom door. He saw the finger at once, and that was wrong. It was *impossible*, because he was way over here, and the basin should have cut off his view. But it didn’t and that meant—

“What are you doing, you bastard?” Howard croaked, and the finger, which had been twisting back and forth as if to test the wind, turned toward him. There was toothpaste on it, just as he had known there would be. It bent in his direction . . . only now it bent in *three places*, and *that* was impossible, too,

quite impossible, because when you got to the third knuckle of any given finger, you were up to the back of the hand.

*It's getting longer, his mind gibbered. I don't know how that can happen, but it is—if I can see it over the top of the basin from here, it must be at least three inches long . . . maybe more!*

He closed the bathroom door gently and staggered back into the living room. His legs had once again turned into malfunctioning pogo-sticks. His mental ice-breaker was gone, flattened under a great white weight of panic and bewilderment. No iceberg this; it was a whole glacier.

Howard Mitla sat down in his chair and closed his eyes. He had never felt more alone, more disoriented, or more utterly powerless in his entire life. He sat that way for quite some time, and at last his fingers began to relax on the arms of his chair. He had spent most of the previous night wide awake. Now he simply drifted off to sleep while the lengthening finger in his bathroom drain tapped and circled, circled and tapped.

• • •

He dreamed he was a contestant on *Jeopardy*—not the new, big-money version but the original daytime show. Instead of computer screens, a stagehand behind the game-board simply pulled up a card when a contestant called for a particular answer. Alex Trebek had been replaced by Art Fleming with his slicked-back hair and somehow prissy poor-boy-at-the-party smile. The woman in the middle was still Mildred, and she still had a satellite downlink in her ear, but her hair was teased up into a Jacqueline Kennedy bouffant and her wire-rimmed glasses had been replaced by a pair of cat's-eye frames.

And everyone was in black and white, him included.

“Okay, Howard,” Art said, and pointed at him. His index finger was a grotesque thing, easily a foot long; it stuck out of his loosely curled fist like a pedagogue's pointer. There was dried toothpaste on the nail. “It's your turn to select.”

Howard looked at the board and said, “I'd like Pests and Vipers for one hundred, Art.”

The square with \$100 on it was removed, revealing an answer which Art now read: “The best way to get rid of those troublesome fingers in your bathroom drain.”

“What is . . .” Howard said, and then came up blank. A black-and-white studio audience stared silently at him. A black-and-white camera man dollied in for a close-up of his sweat-streaked black-and-white face. “What is . . . um . . .”

“Hurry up, Howard, you’re almost out of time,” Art Fleming cajoled, waving his grotesquely elongated finger at Howard, but Howard was a total blank. He was going to miss the question, the hundred bucks would be deducted from his score, he was going to go into the minus column, he was going to be a complete loser, they probably wouldn’t even give him the lousy set of encyclopedias . . .

• • •

A delivery truck on the street below backfired loudly. Howard sat up with a jerk which almost pitched him out of his chair.

“*What is liquid drain-cleaner?*” he screamed. “*What is liquid drain-cleaner?*”

It was, of course, the answer. The *correct* answer.

He began to laugh. He was still laughing five minutes later, as he shrugged into his topcoat and stepped out the door.

• • •

Howard picked up the plastic bottle the toothpick-chewing clerk in the Queens Boulevard Happy Handyman Hardware Store had just set down on the counter. There was a cartoon woman in an apron on the front. She stood with one hand on her hip while she used the other hand to pour a gush of drain-cleaner into something that was either an industrial sink or Orson Welles’s bidet. DRAIN-EYE the label proclaimed. *TWICE the strength of most leading brands! Opens bathroom sinks, showers, and drains IN MINUTES! Dissolves hair and organic matter!*

“Organic matter,” Howard said. “Just what does that mean?”

The clerk, a bald man with a lot of warts on his forehead, shrugged. The toothpick poking out between his lips rolled from one side of his mouth to the other. “Food, I guess. But I wouldn’t stand the bottle next to the liquid soap, if you know what I mean.”

“Would it eat holes in your *hands?*” Howard asked, hoping he sounded properly horrified.

The clerk shrugged again. “I guess it ain’t as powerful as the stuff we used to sell—the stuff with lye in it—but that stuff ain’t legal anymore. At least I don’t *think* it is. But you see that, don’tcha?” He tapped the skull-and-crossbones poison logo with one short, stubby finger. Howard got a good look at that finger. He had found himself noticing a lot of fingers on his walk down to the Happy Handyman.

“Yes,” Howard said. “I see it.”

“Well, they don’t put that on just because it looks, you know, sporty. If you got kids, keep it out of their reach. And don’t gargle with it.” He burst out laughing, the toothpick riding up and down on his lower lip.

“I won’t,” Howard said. He turned the bottle and read the fine print. *Contains sodium hydroxide and potassium hydroxide. Causes severe burns on contact.* Well, that was pretty good. He didn’t know if it was good enough, but there was a way to find out, wasn’t there?

The voice in his head spoke up dubiously. *What if you only make it mad, Howard? What then?*

Well. . . so what? It was in the drain, wasn’t it?

*Yes. . . but it appears to be growing.*

Still—what choice did he have? On this subject the little voice was silent.

“I hate to hurry you over such an important purchase,” the clerk said, “but I’m by myself this morning and I have some invoices to go over, so—”

“I’ll take it,” Howard said, reaching for his wallet. As he did so, his eye caught something else—a display below a sign which read FALL CLEARANCE SALE. “What are those?” he asked. “Over there?”

“Those?” the clerk asked. “Electric hedge-clippers. We got two dozen of em last June, but they didn’t move worth a damn.”

“I’ll take a pair,” said Howard Mitla. He began to smile, and the clerk later told police he didn’t like that smile. Not one little bit.

• • •

Howard put his new purchases on the kitchen counter when he got home, pushing the box containing the electric hedgeclippers over to one side, hoping it would not come to *those*. Surely it wouldn't. Then he carefully read the instructions on the bottle of Drain-Eze.

*Slowly pour ¼ bottle into drain . . . let stand fifteen minutes. Repeat application if necessary.*

But surely it wouldn't come to *that*, either . . . would it?

To make sure it wouldn't, Howard decided he would pour *half* the bottle into the drain. Maybe a little bit more.

He struggled with the safety cap and finally managed to get it off. He then walked through the living room and into the hall with the white plastic bottle held out in front of him and a grim expression—the expression of a soldier who knows he will be ordered over the top of the trench at any moment—on his usually mild face.

*Wait a minute!* the voice in his head cried out as he reached for the doorknob, and his hand faltered. *This is crazy! You KNOW it's crazy! You don't need drain-cleaner, you need a psychiatrist! You need to lie down on a couch somewhere and tell someone you imagine—that's right, that's the word, IMAGINE—there's a finger stuck in the bathroom sink, a finger that's growing!*

“Oh no,” Howard said, shaking his head firmly back and forth. “No way.”

He could not—absolutely could not—visualize himself telling this story to a psychiatrist . . . to *anyone*, in fact. Suppose Mr. Lathrop got wind of it? He might, too, through Vi's father. Bill DeHorne had been a CPA in the firm of Dean, Green, and Lathrop for thirty years. He had gotten Howard his initial interview with Mr. Lathrop, had written him a glowing recommendation. . . had, in fact, done everything but give him the job himself. Mr. DeHorne was retired now, but he and John Lathrop still saw a lot of each other. If Vi found out her Howie was going to see a shrink (and how could he keep it from her, a thing like that?), she would tell her mother—Vi told her mother *everything*. Mrs. DeHorne would tell her husband, of course. And Mr. DeHorne—

Howard found himself imagining the two men, his father-in-law and his boss, sitting in leather wingback chairs in some mythic club or other, the kind

of wingback chairs that were studded with little gold nailheads. He saw them sipping sherry in this vision; the cut-glass decanter stood on the little table by Mr. Lathrop's right hand. (Howard had never seen either man actually drink sherry, but this morbid fantasy seemed to demand it.) He saw Mr. DeHorne—who was now doddering into his late seventies and had all the discretion of a housefly—lean confidentially forward and say, *You'll never believe what my son-in-law Howard's up to, John. He's going to see a psychiatrist! He thinks there's a finger in his bathroom sink, you see. Do you suppose he might be taking drugs of some sort?*

And maybe Howard didn't really think all that would happen. He thought there was a possibility it might—if not in just that way then in some other—but suppose it didn't? He *still* couldn't see himself going to a psychiatrist. Something in him—a close neighbor of that something that would not allow him to urinate in a public bathroom if there was a line of men behind him, no doubt—simply refused the idea. He would not get on one of those couches and supply the answer—*There's a finger sticking out of the bathroom sink*—so that some goatee-wearing head-shrinker could pelt him with questions. It would be like *Jeopardy* in hell.

He reached for the knob again.

*Call a plumber, then!* the voice yelled desperately. *At least do that much! You don't have to tell him what you see! Just tell him the pipe's clogged! Or tell him your wife lost her wedding ring down the drain! Tell him ANYTHING!*

But that idea was, in a way, even more useless than the idea of calling a shrink. This was New York, not Des Moines. You could lose the Hope Diamond down your bathroom sink and still wait a week for a plumber to make a housecall. He did not intend to spend the next seven days slinking around Queens, looking for gas stations where an attendant would accept five dollars for the privilege of allowing Howard Mitla to move his bowels in a dirty men's room underneath this year's Bardahl calendar.

*Then do it fast,* the voice said, giving up. *At least do it fast.*

On this Howard's two minds were united. He was, in truth, afraid that if he didn't act fast—and keep on acting—he would not act at all.

*And surprise it, if you can. Take off your shoes.*

Howard thought this was an extremely useful idea. He acted upon it at once, easing off first one loafer and then the other. He found himself wishing he had thought to put on some rubber gloves in case of backsplatter, and wondered if Vi still kept a pair under the kitchen sink. Never mind, though. He was screwed up to the sticking point. If he paused to go back for the rubber gloves now, he might lose his courage . . . maybe temporarily, maybe for good.

He eased open the bathroom door and slipped inside.

The Mitla bathroom was never what one would call a cheery place, but at this time of day, almost noon, it was at least fairly bright. Visibility wouldn't be a problem . . . and there was no sign of the finger. At least, not yet. Howard tiptoed across the room with the bottle of drain-cleaner clutched tightly in his right hand. He bent over the sink and looked into the round black hole in the center of the faded pink porcelain.

Except it *wasn't* dark. Something was rushing up through that blackness, hurrying up that small-bore, oozy pipe to greet him, to greet its good friend Howard Mitla.

*"Take this!"* Howard screamed, and tilted the bottle of Drain-Eze over the sink. Greenish-blue sludge spilled out and struck the drain just as the finger emerged.

The result was immediate and terrifying. The glop coated the nail and the tip of the finger. It went into a frenzy, whirling like a dervish around and around the limited circumference of the drain, spraying off small blue-green fans of Drain-Eze. Several droplets struck the light-blue cotton shirt Howard was wearing and immediately ate holes in it. These holes fizzed brown lace at the edges, but the shirt was rather too large for him, and none of the stuff got through to his chest or belly. Other drops stippled the skin of his right wrist and palm, but he did not feel these until later. His adrenaline was not just flowing; it was at flood tide.

The finger blurted up from the drain—joint after impossible joint of it. It was now smoking, and it smelled like a rubber boot sizzling on a hot barbecue grill.

*"Take this! Lunch is served, you bastard!"* Howard screamed, continuing to pour as the finger rose to a height of just over a foot, rising out of the drain like

a cobra from a snake-charmer's basket. It had almost reached the mouth of the plastic bottle when it wavered, seemed to shudder, and suddenly reversed its field, zipping back down into the drain. Howard leaned farther over the basin to watch it go and saw just a retreating flash of white far down in the dark. Lazy tendrils of smoke drifted up.

He drew a deep breath, and this was a mistake. He inhaled a great double lungful of Drain-Eze fumes. He was suddenly, violently sick. He vomited forcefully into the basin and then staggered away, still gagging and trying to retch.

*"I did it!"* he shouted deliriously. His head swam with the combined stench of corrosive chemicals and burned flesh. Still, he felt almost exalted. He had met the enemy and the enemy, by God and all the saints, was his. *His!*

*"Hidey-ho! Hidey-fucking-ho! I did it! I—"*

His gorge rose again. He half-knelt, half-swooned in front of the toilet, the bottle of Drain-Eze still held stiffly out in his right hand, and realized too late that Vi had put both the ring and the lid down this morning when she vacated the throne. He vomited all over the fuzzy pink toilet-seat cover and then fell forward into his own gloop in a dead faint.

• • •

He could not have been unconscious for long, because the bathroom enjoyed full daylight for less than half an hour even in the middle of summer—then the other buildings cut off the direct sunlight and plunged the room into gloom again.

Howard raised his head slowly, aware he was coated from hairline to chinline with sticky, foul-smelling stuff. He was even more aware of something else. A clittering sound. It was coming from behind him, and it was getting closer.

He turned his head, which felt like an overfilled sandbag, slowly to his left. His eyes slowly widened. He hitched in breath and tried to scream, but his throat locked.

The finger was coming for him.

It was easily seven feet long now, and getting longer all the time. It curved out of the sink in a stiff arc made by perhaps a dozen knuckles, descended to the floor, then curved again (*Doublejointed!* some distant commentator in his disintegrating mind reported with interest). Now it was tapping and feeling its way across the tile floor toward him. The last nine or ten inches were discolored and smoking. The nail had turned a greenish-black color. Howard thought he could see the whitish shine of bone just below the first of its knuckles. It was quite badly burned, but it was not by any stretch of the imagination dissolved.

“Get away,” Howard whispered, and for a moment the entire grotesque, jointed contraption came to a halt. It looked like a lunatic’s conception of a New Year’s Eve party-favor. Then it slithered straight toward him. The last half a dozen knuckles flexed and the tip of the finger wrapped itself around Howard Mitla’s ankle.

“*No!*” he screamed as the smoking Hydroxide Twins—Sodium and Potassium—ate through his nylon sock and sizzled his skin. He gave his foot a tremendous yank. For a moment the finger held—it was very strong—and then he pulled free. He crawled toward the door with a huge clump of vomit-loaded hair hanging in his eyes. As he crawled he tried to look back over his shoulder, but he could see nothing through his coagulated hair. Now his chest had unlocked and he gave voice to a series of barking, frightful screams.

He could not *see* the finger, at least temporarily, but he could *hear* the finger, and now it was coming *fast, tictictictictic* right behind him. Still trying to look back over his shoulder, he ran into the wall to the left of the bathroom door with his shoulder. The towels fell off the shelf again. He went sprawling and at once the finger was around his *other* ankle, flexing tight with its charred and burning tip.

It began to pull him back toward the sink. It actually began to *pull him back*.

Howard uttered a deep and primitive howl—a sound such as had never before escaped his polite set of CPA vocal cords—and flailed at the edge of the door. He caught it with his right hand and gave a huge, panicky yank. His shirttail pulled free all the way around and the seam under his right arm tore

loose with a low purring sound, but he managed to get free, losing only the ragged lower half of one sock.

He stumbled to his feet, turned, and saw the finger feeling its way toward him again. The nail at the end was now deeply split and bleeding.

*Need a manicure, bud,* Howard thought, and uttered an anguished laugh. Then he ran for the kitchen.

• • •

Someone was pounding on the door. Hard.

“Mitla! Hey, Mitla! What’s going on in there?”

Feeney, from down the hall. A big loud Irish drunk. Correction: a big loud *nosy* Irish drunk.

“Nothing I can’t handle, my bog-trotting friend!” Howard shouted as he went into the kitchen. He laughed again and tossed his hair off his forehead. It went, but fell back in exactly the same jellied clump a second later. “Nothing I can’t handle, you better believe that! You can take that right to the bank and put it in your NOW account!”

“*What* did you call me?” Feeney responded. His voice, which had been truculent, now became ominous as well.

“Shut up!” Howard yelled. “I’m busy!”

“I want the yelling to stop or I’m calling the cops!”

“*Fuck off!*” Howard screamed at him. Another first. He tossed his hair off his forehead, and *clump!* Back down it fell.

“I don’t have to listen to your shit, you little four-eyes creep!”

Howard raked his hands through his vomit-loaded hair and then flung them out in front of him in a curiously Gallic gesture—*Et voilà!* it seemed to say. Warm juice and shapeless gobbets splattered across Vi’s white kitchen cabinets. Howard didn’t even notice. The hideous finger had seized each of his ankles once, and they burned as if they were wearing circlets of fire. Howard didn’t care about that, either. He seized the box containing the electric hedge-clippers. On the front, a smiling dad with a pipe parked in his gob was trimming the hedge in front of an estate-sized home.

“You having a little drug-party in there?” Feeney inquired from the hall.

“You better get out of here, Feeney, or I’ll introduce you to a friend of mine!” Howard yelled back. This struck him as incredibly witty. He threw his head back and yodeled at the kitchen ceiling, his hair standing up in strange jags and quills and glistening with stomach juices. He looked like a man who has embarked upon a violent love-affair with a tube of Brylcreem.

“Okay, that’s it,” Feeney said. “That’s *it*. I’m callin the cops.”

Howard barely heard him. Dennis Feeney would have to wait; he had bigger fish to fry. He had ripped the electric hedge-clippers from the box, examined them feverishly, saw the battery compartment, and pried it open.

“C-cells,” he muttered, laughing. “Good! That’s good! No problem there!”

He yanked open one of the drawers to the left of the sink, pulling with such force that the stop broke off and the drawer flew all the way across the kitchen, striking the stove and landing upside down on the linoleum floor with a bang and a clatter. Amid the general rick-rack—tongs, peelers, graters, paring knives, and garbage-bag ties—was a small treasure-trove of batteries, mostly C-cells and square nine-volts. Still laughing—it seemed he could no longer *stop* laughing—Howard fell on his knees and grubbed through the litter. He succeeded in cutting the pad of his right palm quite badly on the blade of a paring knife before seizing two of the C-cells, but he felt this no more than he felt the burns he had sustained when he had been backsplashed. Now that Feeney had at last shut his braying Irish donkey’s mouth, Howard could hear the tapping again. Not coming from the sink now, though—huh-uh, no way. The ragged nail was tapping on the bathroom door . . . or maybe the hall floor. He had neglected to close the door, he now remembered.

“Who gives a fuck?” Howard asked, and then he screamed: “*WHO GIVES A FUCK, I SAID! I’M READY FOR YOU, MY FRIEND! I’M COMING TO KICK ASS AND CHEW BUBBLEGUM, AND I’M ALL OUT OF BUBBLEGUM! YOU’LL WISH YOU’D STAYED DOWN THE DRAIN!*”

He slammed the batteries into the compartment set into the handle of the hedge-clippers and tried the power switch. Nothing.

“Bite my crank!” Howard muttered. He pulled one of the batteries out, reversed it, and put it back in. This time the blades buzzed to life when he pushed the switch, snicking back and forth so rapidly they were only a blur.

He started for the kitchen door, then made himself switch the gadget off and go back to the counter. He didn't want to waste time putting the battery cover back in place—not when he was primed for battle—but the last bit of sanity still flickering in his mind assured him that he had no choice. If his hand slipped while he was dealing with the thing, the batteries might pop out of the open compartment, and then where would he be? Why, facing the James Gang with an unloaded gun, of course.

So he fiddled the battery cover back on, cursing when it wouldn't fit and turning it in the other direction.

"You wait for me, now!" he called back over his shoulder. "I'm coming! We're not done yet!"

At last the battery cover snapped down. Howard strode briskly back through the living room with the hedge-clippers held at port arms. His hair still stood up in punk-rock quills and spikes. His shirt—now torn out under one arm and burned in several places—flapped against his round, tidy stomach. His bare feet slapped on the linoleum. The tattered remains of his nylon socks swung and dangled about his ankles.

Feeney yelled through the door, "I called them, birdbrain! You got that? I called the cops, and I hope the ones who show up are all bog-trotting Irishmen, just like me!"

"Blow it out your old tan tailpipe," Howard said, but he was really paying no attention to Feeney. Dennis Feeney was in another universe; this was just his quacking, unimportant voice coming in over the sub-etheric.

Howard stood to one side of the bathroom door, looking like a cop in a TV show . . . only someone had handed him the wrong prop and he was packing a hedge-clipper instead of a .38. He pressed his thumb firmly on the power button set high on the handle of the hedge-clippers. He took a deep breath. . . and the voice of sanity, now down to a mere gleam, offered a final thought before packing up for good.

*Are you sure you want to trust your life to a pair of electric hedge-clippers you bought on sale?*

"I have no choice," Howard muttered, smiling tightly, and lunged inside.

• • •

The finger was still there, still arced out of the sink in that stiff curve that reminded Howard of a New Year's Eve party-favor, the kind that makes a farting, honking sound and then unrolls toward the unsuspecting bystander when you blow on it. It had filched one of Howard's loafers. It was picking the shoe up and slamming it petulantly down on the tiles again and again. From the look of the towels scattered about, Howard guessed the finger had tried to kill several of those before finding the shoe.

A weird joy suddenly suffused Howard—it felt as if the inside of his aching, woozy head had been filled with green light.

*"Here I am, you nitwit!"* he yelled. *"Come and get me!"*

The finger popped out of the shoe, rose in a monstrous ripple of joints (Howard could actually hear some of its many knuckles cracking), and floated rapidly through the air toward him. Howard turned on the hedge-clippers and they buzzed into hungry life. So far, so good.

The burned, blistered tip of the finger wavered in front of his face, the split nail weaving mystically back and forth. Howard lunged for it. The finger feinted to the left and slipped around his left ear. The pain was amazing. Howard simultaneously felt and heard a grisly ripping sound as the finger tried to tear his ear from the side of his head. He sprang forward, seized the finger in his left fist, and sheared through it. The clippers lugged down as the blades hit the bone, the high buzzing of the motor becoming a rough growl, but it had been built to clip through small, tough branches and there was really no problem. No problem at all. This was Round Two, this was Double Jeopardy, where the scores could *really* change, and Howard Mitla was racking up a bundle. Blood flew in a fine haze and then the stump pulled back. Howard blundered after it, the last ten inches of the finger hanging from his ear like a coathanger for a moment before dropping off.

The finger lunged at him. Howard ducked and it went over his head. It was blind, of course. That was his advantage. Grabbing his ear like that had just been a lucky shot. He lunged with the clippers, a gesture which looked almost like a fencing thrust, and sheared off another two feet of the finger. It thumped to the tiles and lay there, twitching.

Now the rest of it was trying to pull back.

"No you don't," Howard panted. "No you don't, not at *all!*"

He ran for the sink, slipped in a puddle of blood, almost fell, then caught his balance. The finger was blurring back down the drain, knuckle after knuckle, like a freight-train going into a tunnel. Howard seized it, tried to hold it, and couldn't—it went sliding through his hand like a greased and burning length of clothesline. He sliced forward again nevertheless, and managed to cut off the last three feet of the thing just above the point where it was whizzing through his fist.

He leaned over the sink (holding his breath this time) and stared down into the blackness of the drain. Again he caught just a glimpse of retreating white.

*“Come on back anytime!”* Howard Mitla shouted. *“Come back anytime at all! I’ll be right here, waiting for you!”*

He turned around, releasing his breath in a gasp. The room still smelled of drain-cleaner. Couldn't have that, not while there was still work to do. There was a wrapped cake of Dial soap behind the hot-water tap. Howard picked it up and threw it at the bathroom window. It broke the glass and bounced off the crisscross of mesh behind it. He remembered putting that mesh in—remembered how proud of it he had been. He, Howard Mitla, mild-mannered accountant, had been TAKING CARE OF THE OLD HOMESTEAD. Now he knew what TAKING CARE OF THE OLD HOMESTEAD was really all about. Had there been a time when he had been afraid to go into the bathroom because he thought there might be a mouse in the tub, and he would have to beat it to death with a broomhandle? He believed so, but that time—and that version of Howard Mitla—seemed long ago now.

He looked slowly around the bathroom. It was a mess. Pools of blood and two chunks of finger lay on the floor. Another leaned askew in the basin. Fine sprays of blood fanned across the walls and stippled the bathroom mirror. The basin was streaked with it.

“All right,” Howard sighed. “Clean-up time, boys and girls.” He turned the hedge-clippers on again and began to saw the various lengths of finger he had cut off into pieces small enough to flush down the toilet.

• • •

The policeman was young and he *was* Irish—O'Bannion was his name. By the time he finally arrived at the closed door of the Mitla apartment, several tenants were standing behind him in a little knot. With the exception of Dennis Feeney, who wore an expression of high outrage, they all looked worried.

O'Bannion knocked on the door, then rapped, and finally hammered.

"You better break it down," Mrs. Javier said. "I heard him all the way up on the seventh floor."

"The man's insane," Feeney said. "Probably killed his wife."

"No," said Mrs. Dattlebaum. "I saw her leave this morning, just like always."

"Doesn't mean she didn't come back again, does it?" Mr. Feeney asked truculently, and Mrs. Dattlebaum subsided.

"Mr. Mitter?" O'Bannion called.

"It's *Mitla*," Mrs. Dattlebaum said. "With an *l*."

"Oh, crap," O'Bannion said, and hit the door with his shoulder. It burst open and he went inside, closely followed by Mr. Feeney. "You stay here, sir," O'Bannion instructed.

"The hell I will," Feeney said. He was looking into the kitchen, with its strew of implements on the floor and the splatters of vomit on the kitchen cabinets. His eyes were small and bright and interested. "The guy's my neighbor. And after all, I was the one who made the call."

"I don't care if you made the call on your own private hotline to the Commish," O'Bannion said. "Get the hell out of here or you're going down to the station with this guy Mittle."

"*Mitla*," Feeney said, and slunk unwillingly toward the door to the hallway, casting glances back at the kitchen as he went.

O'Bannion had sent Feeney back mostly because he didn't want Feeney to see how nervous he was. The mess in the kitchen was one thing. The way the place smelled was another—some sort of chemistry-lab stink on top, some other smell underneath it. He was afraid the underneath smell might be blood.

He glanced behind him to make sure that Feeney had gone back all the way—that he was not lingering in the foyer where the coats were hung—and then he advanced slowly across the living room. When he was beyond the view of

the onlookers, he unsnapped the strap across the butt of his pistol and drew it. He went to the kitchen and looked all the way in. Empty. A mess, but empty. And . . . what was that splattered across the cabinets? He wasn't sure, but judging by the smell—

A noise from behind him, a little shuffling sound, broke the thought off and he turned quickly, bringing his gun up.

“Mr. Mitla?”

There was no answer, but the little shuffling sound came again. From down the hall. That meant the bathroom or the bedroom. Officer O'Bannion advanced in that direction, raising his gun and pointing its muzzle at the ceiling. He was now carrying it in much the same way Howard had carried the hedge-clippers.

The bathroom door was ajar. O'Bannion was quite sure this was where the sound had come from, and he knew it was where the worst of the smell was coming from. He crouched, then pushed the door open with the muzzle of his gun.

“Oh my God,” he said softly.

The bathroom looked like a slaughterhouse after a busy day. Blood sprayed the walls and ceiling in scarlet bouquets of spatter. There were puddles of blood on the floor, and more blood had run down the inside and outside curves of the bathroom basin in thick trails; that was where the worst of it appeared to be. He could see a broken window, a discarded bottle of what appeared to be drain-cleaner (which would explain the awful smell in here), and a pair of men's loafers lying quite a distance apart from each other. One of them was quite badly scuffed.

And, as the door swung wider, he saw the man.

Howard Mitla had crammed himself as far into the space between the bathtub and the wall as he could get when he had finished his disposal operation. He held the electric hedge-clippers on his lap, but the batteries were flat; bone was a little tougher than branches after all, it seemed. His hair still stood up in its wild spikes. His cheeks and brow were smeared with bright streaks of blood. His eyes were wide but almost totally empty—it was an expression Officer O'Bannion associated with speed-freaks and crackheads.

*Holy Jesus, he thought. The guy was right—he did kill his wife. He killed somebody, at least. So where’s the body?*

He glanced toward the tub but couldn’t see in. It was the most likely place, but it also seemed to be the one object in the room which wasn’t streaked and splattered with gore.

“Mr. Mitla?” he asked. He wasn’t pointing his gun directly at Howard, but the muzzle was most certainly in the neighborhood.

“Yes, that’s my name,” Howard said in a hollow, courteous voice. “Howard Mitla, CPA, at your service. Did you come to use the toilet? Go right ahead. There’s nothing to disturb you now. I think that problem’s been taken care of. At least for the time being.”

“Uh, would you mind getting rid of the weapon, sir?”

“Weapon?” Howard looked at him vacantly for a moment, then seemed to understand. “These?” He raised the hedge-clippers, and the muzzle of Officer O’Bannion’s gun for the first time came to rest on Howard himself.

“Yes, sir.”

“Sure,” Howard said. He tossed the clippers indifferently into the bathtub. There was a clatter as the battery-hatch popped out. “Doesn’t matter. The batteries are flat, anyway. But . . . what I said about using the toilet? On more mature consideration, I guess I’d advise against it.”

“You would?” Now that the man was disarmed, O’Bannion wasn’t sure exactly how to proceed. It would have been a lot easier if the victim were on view. He supposed he’d better cuff the guy and then call for backup. All he knew for sure was that he wanted to get out of this smelly, creepy bathroom.

“Yes,” Howard said. “After all, consider this, Officer: there are five fingers on a hand . . . just *one* hand, mind you . . . and. . . have you ever thought about how many holes to the underworld there are in an ordinary bathroom? Counting the holes in the faucets, that is? I make it seven.” Howard paused and then added, “Seven is a prime—which is to say, a number divisible only by one and itself.”

“Would you want to hold out your hands for me, sir?” Officer O’Bannion said, taking his handcuffs from his belt.

“Vi says I know all the answers,” Howard said, “but Vi’s wrong.” He slowly held out his hands.

O'Bannion knelt before him and quickly snapped a cuff on Howard's right wrist. "Who's Vi?"

"My wife," Howard said. His blank, shining eyes looked directly into Officer O'Bannion's. "She's never had any problem going to the bathroom while someone else is in the room, you know. She could probably go while *you* were in the room."

Officer O'Bannion began to have a terrible yet weirdly plausible idea: that this strange little man had killed his wife with a pair of hedge-clippers and then somehow dissolved her body with drain-cleaner—and all because she wouldn't get the hell out of the bathroom while he was trying to drain the dragon.

He snapped the other cuff on.

"Did you kill your wife, Mr. Mitla?"

For a moment Howard looked almost surprised. Then he lapsed back into that queer, plastic state of apathy again. "No," he said. "Vi's at Dr. Stone's. They're pulling a complete set of uppers. Vi says it's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it. Why would I kill Vi?"

Now that he had the cuffs on the guy, O'Bannion felt a little better, a little more in control of the situation. "Well, it looks like you offed *someone*."

"It was just a finger," Howard said. He was still holding his hands out in front of him. Light twinkled and ran along the chain between the handcuffs like liquid silver. "But there are more fingers than one on a hand. And what about the hand's *owner*?" Howard's eyes shifted around the bathroom, which had now gone well beyond gloom; it was filling up with shadows again. "I told it to come back anytime," Howard whispered, "but I was hysterical. I have decided I . . . I am not capable. It grew, you see. It grew when it hit the air."

Something suddenly splashed inside the closed toilet. Howard's eyes shifted in that direction. So did Officer O'Bannion's. The splash came again. It sounded as if a trout had jumped in there.

"No, I most definitely *wouldn't* use the toilet," Howard said. "I'd hold it, if I were you, Officer. I'd hold it just as long as I possibly could, and then use the alley beside the building."

O'Bannion shivered.

*Get hold of yourself, boyo*, he told himself sternly. *You get hold of yourself, or you'll wind up as nutty as this guy.*

He got up to check the toilet.

“Bad idea,” Howard said. “A *really* bad idea.”

“What exactly happened in here, Mr. Mitla?” O’Bannion asked. “And what have you stored in the toilet?”

“What happened? it was like . . . like . . .” Howard trailed off, and then began to smile. It was a relieved smile. . . but his eyes kept creeping back to the closed lid of the toilet. “It was like *Jeopardy*,” he said. “In fact, it was like *Final Jeopardy*. The category is The Inexplicable. The Final Jeopardy answer is, ‘Because they can.’ Do you know what the Final Jeopardy *question* is, Officer?”

Fascinated, unable to take his eyes from Howard’s, Officer O’Bannion shook his head.

“The Final Jeopardy question,” Howard said in a voice that was cracked and roughened from screaming, “is: ‘Why do terrible things sometimes happen to the nicest people?’ *That’s* the Final Jeopardy question. It’s all going to take a lot of thought. But I have plenty of time. As long as I stay away from the . . . the holes.”

The splash came again. It was heavier this time. The vomitous toilet seat bumped sharply up and down. Officer O’Bannion got up, walked over, and bent down. Howard looked at him with some interest.

“Final Jeopardy, Officer,” said Howard Mitla. “How much do you wish to wager?”

O’Bannion thought about it for a moment . . . then grasped the toilet seat and wagered it all.

## Sneakers

John Tell had been working at Tabori Studios just over a month when he first noticed the sneakers. Tabori was in a building which had once been called Music City and had been, in the early days of rock and roll and top-forty rhythm and blues, a very big deal. Back then you never would have seen a pair of sneakers (unless they were on the feet of a delivery boy) above lobby-level. Those days were gone, though, and so were the big-money producers with their reet pleats and pointy-toed snakeskin shoes. Sneakers were now just another part of the Music City uniform, and when Tell first glimpsed these, he made no negative assumptions about their owner. Well, maybe one: the guy really could have used a new pair. These had been white when they were new, but from the look of them new had been a long time ago.

That was all he noticed when he first saw the sneakers in the little room where you so often ended up judging your neighbor by his footwear because that was all you ever saw of him. Tell spied this pair under the door of the first toilet-stall in the third-floor men's room. He passed them on his way to the third and last stall. He came out a few minutes later, washed and dried his hands, combed his hair, and then went back to Studio F, where he was helping to mix an album by a heavy-metal group called The Dead Beats. To say Tell had already forgotten the sneakers would be an overstatement, because they had hardly registered on his mental radar screen to begin with.

Paul Jannings was producing The Dead Beats' sessions. He wasn't famous in the way the old be-bop kings of Music City had been famous—Tell thought rock-and-roll music was no longer strong enough to breed such mythic royalty—but he was fairly well-known, and Tell himself thought he was the best producer of rock-and-roll records currently active in the field; only Jimmy Iovine could come close.

Tell had first seen him at a party following the premiere of a concert film; had, in fact, recognized him from across the room. The hair was graying now, and the sharp features of Jannings's handsome face had become almost gaunt,

but there was no mistaking the man who had recorded the legendary Tokyo Sessions with Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, John Lennon, and Al Kooper some fifteen years earlier. Other than Phil Spector, Jannings was the only record producer Tell could have recognized by sight as well as by the distinctive sound of his recordings—crystal-clear top ends underscored by percussion so heavy it shook your clavicle. It was that Don McLean clarity you heard first on the Tokyo Sessions recordings, but if you wiped the treble, what you heard pulsing along through the underbrush was pure Sandy Nelson.

Tell's natural reticence was overcome by admiration and he had crossed the room to where Jannings was standing, temporarily unengaged. He introduced himself, expecting a quick handshake and a few perfunctory words at most. Instead, the two of them had fallen into a long and interesting conversation. They worked in the same field and knew some of the same people, but even then Tell had known there was more to the magic of that initial meeting than those things; Paul Jannings was just one of those rare men to whom he found he could talk, and for John Tell, talking really was akin to magic.

Toward the end of the conversation, Jannings had asked him if he was looking for work.

“Did you ever know anyone in this business who wasn't?” Tell asked.

Jannings laughed and asked for his phone number. Tell had given it to him, not attaching much importance to the request—it was most likely a gesture of politeness on the other man's part, he'd thought. But Jannings had called him three days later to ask if Tell would like to be part of the three-man team mixing The Dead Beats' first album. “I don't know if it's really possible to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear,” Jannings had said, “but since Atlantic Records is footing the bills, why not have a good time trying?” John Tell saw no reason at all why not, and signed on for the cruise immediately.

• • •

A week or so after he first saw the sneakers, Tell saw them again. He only registered the fact that it was the same guy because the sneakers were in the same place—under the door of stall number one in the third-floor men's. There was no question that they *were* the same ones; white (once, anyway) hightops

with dirt in the deep creases. He noticed an empty eyelet and thought, *Must not have had your own eyes all the way open when you laced that one up, friend.* Then he went on down to the third stall (which he thought of, in some vague way, as “his”). This time he glanced at the sneakers on his way out, as well, and saw something odd when he did: there was a dead fly on one of them. It lay on the rounded toe of the left sneaker, the one with the empty eyelet, with its little legs sticking up.

When he got back to Studio F, Jannings was sitting at the board with his head clutched in his hands.

“You okay, Paul?”

“No.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Me. *I* was wrong. I *am* wrong. My career is finished. I’m washed up. Eighty-sixed. Over-done-with-gone.”

“What are you talking about?” Tell looked around for Georgie Ronkler and didn’t see him anywhere. It didn’t surprise him. Jannings had periodic fugues and Georgie always left when he saw one coming on. He claimed his karma didn’t allow him to deal with strong emotion. “I cry at supermarket openings,” Georgie said.

“You *can’t* make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear,” Jannings said. He pointed with his fist at the glass between the mixing room and the performance studio. He looked like a man giving the old Nazi *Heil Hitler* salute. “At least not out of pigs like those.”

“Lighten up,” Tell said, although he knew Jannings was perfectly right. The Dead Beats, composed of four dull bastards and one dull bitch, were personally repulsive and professionally incompetent.

“Lighten *this* up,” Jannings said, and flipped him the bird.

“God, I hate temperament,” Tell said.

Jannings looked up at him and giggled. A second later they were both laughing. Five minutes after that they were back to work.

The mix—such as it was—ended a week later. Tell asked Jannings for a recommendation and a tape.

“Okay, but you know you’re not supposed to play the tape for anyone until the album comes out,” Jannings said.

“I know.”

“And why you’d ever want to, for *anyone*, is beyond me. These guys make The Butthole Surfers sound like The Beatles.”

“Come on, Paul, it wasn’t *that* bad. And even if it was, it’s over.”

He smiled. “Yeah. There’s that. And if I ever work in this business again, I’ll give you a call.”

“That would be great.”

They shook hands. Tell left the building which had once been known as Music City, and the thought of the sneakers under the door of stall number one in the third-floor men’s john never crossed his mind.

• • •

Jannings, who had been in the business twenty-five years, had once told him that when it came to mixing bop (he never called it rock and roll, only bop), you were either shit or Superman. For the two months following the Beats’ mixing session, John Tell was shit. He didn’t work. He began to get nervous about the rent. Twice he almost called Jannings, but something in him thought that would be a mistake.

Then the music mixer on a film called *Karate Masters of Massacre* died of a massive coronary and Tell got six weeks’ work at the Brill Building (which had been known as Tin Pan Alley back in the heyday of Broadway and the Big Band sound), finishing the mix. It was library stuff in the public domain—and a few plinking sitars—for the most part, but it paid the rent. And following his last day on the show, Tell had no more than walked into his apartment before the phone rang. It was Paul Jannings, asking him if he had checked the *Billboard* pop chart lately. Tell said he hadn’t.

“It came on at number seventy-nine.” Jannings managed to sound simultaneously disgusted, amused, and amazed. “With a *bullet*.”

“What did?” But he knew as soon as the question was out of his mouth.

“ ‘Diving in the Dirt.’ ”

It was the name of a cut on The Dead Beats’ forthcoming *Beat It ’Til It’s Dead* album, the only cut which had seemed to Tell and Jannings remotely like single material.

“Shit!”

“Indeed it is, but I have a crazy idea it’s gonna go top ten. Have you seen the video?”

“No.”

“What a scream. It’s mostly Ginger, the chick in the group, playing mudhoney in some generic bayou with a guy who looks like Donald Trump in overalls. It sends what my intellectual friends like to call ‘mixed cultural messages.’ ” And Jannings laughed so hard Tell had to hold the phone away from his ear.

When Jannings had himself under control again, he said, “Anyway, it probably means the album’ll go top ten, too. A platinum-plated dog-turd is still a dog-turd, but a platinum reference is platinum all the way through—you understand dis t’ing, Bwana?”

“Indeed I do,” Tell said, pulling open his desk drawer to make sure his Dead Beats cassette, unplayed since Jannings had given it to him on the last day of the mix, was still there.

“So what are you doing?” Jannings asked him.

“Looking for a job.”

“You want to work with me again? I’m doing Roger Daltrey’s new album. Starts in two weeks.”

“Christ, yes!”

The money would be good, but it was more than that; following The Dead Beats and six weeks of *Karate Masters of Massacre*, working with the ex-lead singer of The Who would be like coming into a warm place on a cold night. Whatever he might turn out to be like personally, the man could *sing*. And working with Jannings again would be good, too. “Where?”

“Same old stand. Tabori at Music City.”

“I’m there.”

• • •

Roger Daltrey not only could sing, he turned out to be a tolerably nice guy in the bargain. Tell thought the next three or four weeks would be good ones. He had a job, he had a production credit on an album that had popped onto the

*Billboard* charts at number forty-one (and the single was up to number seventeen and still climbing), and he felt safe about the rent for the first time since he had come to New York from Pennsylvania four years ago.

It was June, trees were in full leaf, girls were wearing short skirts again, and the world seemed a fine place to be. Tell felt this way on his first day back at work for Paul Jannings until approximately 1:45 P.M. Then he walked into the third-floor bathroom, saw the same once-white sneakers under the door of stall one, and all his good feelings suddenly collapsed.

*They are not the same. Can't be the same.*

They were, though. That single empty eyelet was the clearest point of identification, but everything else about them was also the same. *Exactly* the same, and that included their positions. There was only one real difference that Tell could see: there were more dead flies around them now.

He went slowly into the third stall, "his" stall, lowered his pants, and sat down. He wasn't surprised to find that the urge which had brought him here had entirely departed. He sat still for a little while just the same, however, listening for sounds. The rattle of a newspaper. The clearing of a throat. Hell, even a fart.

No sounds came.

*That's because I'm in here alone,* Tell thought. *Except, that is, for the dead guy in the first stall.*

The bathroom's outer door banged briskly open. Tell almost screamed. Someone hummed his way over to the urinals, and as water began to splash out there, an explanation occurred to Tell and he relaxed. It was so simple it was absurd . . . and undoubtedly correct. He glanced at his watch and saw it was 1:47.

*A regular man is a happy man,* his father used to say. Tell's dad had been a taciturn fellow, and that saying (along with *Clean your hands before you clean your plate*) had been one of his few aphorisms. If regularity really *did* mean happiness, then Tell supposed he was a happy man. His need to visit the bathroom came on at about the same time every day, and he supposed the same must be true of his pal Sneakers, who favored Stall #1 just as Tell himself favored Stall #3.

*If you needed to pass the stalls to get to the urinals, you would have seen that stall empty lots of times, or with different shoes under it. After all, what are the chances a body could stay undiscovered in a men's-room toilet-stall for . . .*

He worked out in his mind the time he'd last been there.

*. . . four months, give or take?*

No chance at all was the answer to that one. He could believe the janitors weren't too fussy about cleaning the stalls—all those dead flies—but they would have to check on the toilet-paper supply every day or two, right? And even if you left those things out, dead people started to smell after awhile, right? God knew this wasn't the sweetest-smelling place on earth—and following a visit from the fat guy who worked down the hall at Janus Music it was almost uninhabitable—but surely the stink of a dead body would be a lot louder. A lot *gaudier*.

*Gaudy? Gaudy? Jesus, what a word. And how would you know? You never smelled a decomposing body in your life.*

True, but he was pretty sure he'd know what he was smelling if he did. Logic was logic and regularity was regularity and that was the end of it. The guy was probably a pencil-pusher from Janus or a writer for Snappy Kards, on the other side of the floor. For all John Tell knew, the guy was in there composing greeting-card verse right now:

*Roses are red and violets are blue,  
You thought I was dead but that wasn't true;  
I just deliver my mail at the same time as you!*

*That sucks*, Tell thought, and uttered a wild little laugh. The fellow who had banged the door open, almost startling him into a scream, had progressed to the wash-basins. Now the splashing-lathering sound of him washing his hands stopped briefly. Tell could imagine the newcomer listening, wondering who was laughing behind one of the closed stall doors, wondering if it was a joke, a dirty picture, or if the man was just crazy. There were, after all, lots of crazy people in New York. You saw them all the time, talking to themselves and laughing for no appreciable reason . . . the way Tell had just now.

Tell tried to imagine Sneakers also listening and couldn't.

Suddenly he didn't feel like laughing anymore.

Suddenly he just felt like getting out of there.

He didn't want the man at the basin to see him, though. The man would look at him. Just for a moment, but that would be enough to know what he was thinking. People who laughed behind closed toilet-stall doors were not to be trusted.

*Click-clack* of shoes on the old white hexagonal bathroom tiles, *whooze* of the door being opened, *hisshh* of it settling slowly back into place. You could bang it open but the pneumatic elbow-joint kept it from banging shut. That might upset the third-floor receptionist as he sat smoking Camels and reading the latest issue of *Krrang!*

*God, it's so silent in here! Why doesn't the guy move? At least a little?*

But there was just the silence, thick and smooth and total, the sort of silence the dead would hear in their coffins if they could still hear, and Tell again became convinced that Sneakers was dead, fuck logic, he was dead and *had* been dead for who knew how long, he was sitting in there and if you opened the door you would see some slumped mossy thing with its hands dangling between its thighs, you would see—

For a moment he was on the verge of calling, *Hey Sneaks! You all right?*

But what if Sneakers answered, not in a questioning or irritated voice but in a froggy grinding croak? Wasn't there something about waking the dead? About—

Suddenly Tell was up, up fast, flushing the toilet and buttoning his pants, out of the stall, zipping his fly as he headed for the door, aware that in a few seconds he was going to feel silly but not caring. Yet he could not forbear one glance under the first stall as he passed. Dirty white mislaced sneakers. And dead flies. Quite a few of them.

*Weren't any dead flies in my stall. And just how is it that all this time has gone by and he still hasn't noticed that he missed one of the eyelets? Or does he wear em that way all the time, as some kind of artistic statement?*

Tell hit the door pretty hard coming out. The receptionist just up the hall glanced at him with the cool curiosity he saved for beings merely mortal (as opposed to such deities in human form as Roger Daltrey).

Tell hurried down the hall to Tabori Studios.

• • •

“Paul?”

“What?” Jannings answered without looking up from the board. Georgie Ronkler was standing off to one side, watching Jannings closely and nibbling a cuticle—cuticles were all he had left to nibble; his fingernails simply did not exist above the point where they parted company with live flesh and hot nerve-endings. He was close to the door. If Jannings began to rant, Georgie would slip through it.

“I think there might be something wrong in—”

Jannings groaned. “Something *else*?”

“What do you mean?”

“This drum track is what I mean. It’s *badly* botched, and I don’t know what we can do about it.” He flicked a toggle, and drums crashed into the studio. “You hear it?”

“The snare, you mean?”

“Of *course* I mean the snare! It stands out a mile from the rest of the percussion, but it’s *married* to it!”

“Yes, but—”

“Yes but Jesus bloody *fuck*, I hate shit like this! Forty tracks I got here, *forty goddam tracks to record a simple bop tune and some IDIOT technician—*”

From the tail of his eye Tell saw Georgie disappear like a cool breeze.

“But look, Paul, if you lower the equalization—”

“The eq’s got nothing to do with—”

“Shut up and listen a minute,” Tell said soothingly—something he could have said to no one else on the face of the earth—and slid a switch. Jannings stopped ranting and started listening. He asked a question. Tell answered it. Then he asked one Tell *couldn’t* answer, but Jannings was able to answer it himself, and all of a sudden they were looking at a whole new spectrum of possibilities for a song called “Answer to You, Answer to Me.”

After awhile, sensing that the storm had passed, Georgie Ronkler crept back in.

And Tell forgot all about the sneakers.

• • •

They returned to his mind the following evening. He was at home, sitting on the toilet in his own bathroom, reading *Wise Blood* while Vivaldi played mildly from the bedroom speakers (although Tell now mixed rock and roll for a living, he owned only four rock records, two by Bruce Springsteen and two by John Fogerty).

He looked up from his book, somewhat startled. A question of cosmic ludicrousness had suddenly occurred to him: *How long has it been since you took a crap in the evening, John?*

He didn't know, but he thought he might be taking them then quite a bit more frequently in the future. At least one of his habits might change, it seemed.

Sitting in the living room fifteen minutes later, his book forgotten in his lap, something else occurred to him: he hadn't used the third-floor rest room once that day. They had gone across the street for coffee at ten, and he had taken a whiz in the men's room of Donut Buddy while Paul and Georgie sat at the counter, drinking coffee and talking about overdubs. Then, on his lunch hour, he had made a quick pit-stop at the Brew 'n Burger . . . and another on the first floor late that afternoon when he had gone down to drop off a bunch of mail that he could have just as easily stuffed into the mail-slot by the elevators.

Avoiding the third-floor men's? Was that what he'd been doing today without even realizing it? You bet your Reeboks it was. Avoiding it like a scared kid who goes a block out of his way coming home from school so he won't have to go past the local haunted house. Avoiding it like the plague.

"Well, so what?" he said out loud.

He couldn't exactly articulate the so-what, but he knew there was one; there was something just a little too existential, even for New York, about getting spooked out of a public bathroom by a pair of dirty sneakers.

Aloud, very clearly, Tell said: "This has got to stop."

• • •

But that was Thursday night and something happened on Friday night that changed everything. That was when the door closed between him and Paul Jannings.

Tell was a shy man and didn't make friends easily. In the rural Pennsylvania town where he had gone to high school, a quirk of fate had put Tell up on stage with a guitar in his hands—the last place he'd ever expected to be. The bassist of a group called The Satin Saturns fell ill with salmonella the day before a well-paying gig. The lead guitarist, who was also in the school band, knew John Tell could play both bass and rhythm. This lead guitarist was big and potentially violent. John Tell was small, humble, and breakable. The guitarist offered him a choice between playing the ill bassist's instrument and having it rammed up his ass to the fifth fret. This choice had gone a long way toward clarifying his feelings about playing in front of a large audience.

But by the end of the third song, he was no longer frightened. By the end of the first set he knew he was home. Years after that first gig, Tell heard a story about Bill Wyman, bassist of The Rolling Stones. According to the story, Wyman actually nodded off during a performance—not in some tiny club, mind you, but in a huge hall—and fell from the stage, breaking his collarbone. Tell supposed lots of people thought the story was apocryphal, but he himself had an idea it was true . . . and he was, after all, in a unique position to understand how something like that could happen. Bassists were the invisible men of the rock world. There were exceptions—Paul McCartney, for one—but they only proved the rule.

Perhaps because of the job's very lack of glamor, there was a chronic shortage of bass players. When The Satin Saturns broke up a month later (the lead guitarist and the drummer got into a fist-fight over a girl), Tell joined a band formed by the Saturns' rhythm man, and his life's course was chosen, as simply and quietly as that.

Tell liked playing in the band. You were up front, looking down on everyone else, not just *at* the party but making the party happen; you were simultaneously almost invisible and absolutely essential. Every now and then you had to sing a little backup, but nobody expected you to make a *speech* or anything.

He had lived that life—part-time student and full-time band gypsy—for ten years. He was good, but not ambitious—there was no fire in his belly. Eventually he drifted into session work in New York, began fooling with the boards, and discovered he liked life even better on the far side of the glass window. During all that time he had made one good friend: Paul Jannings. That had happened fast, and Tell supposed the unique pressures that went with the job had had something to do with it. . . but not everything. Mostly, he suspected, it had been a combination of two factors: his own essential loneliness and Jannings’s personality, which was so powerful it was almost overwhelming. And it wasn’t so different for Georgie, Tell came to realize following what happened on that Friday night.

He and Paul were having a drink at one of the back tables in McManus’s Pub, talking about the mix, the biz, the Mets, whatever, when all of a sudden Jannings’s right hand was under the table and gently squeezing Tell’s crotch.

Tell moved away so violently that the candle in the center of the table fell over and Jannings’s glass of wine spilled. A waiter came over and righted the candle before it could scorch the tablecloth, then left. Tell stared at Jannings, his eyes wide and shocked.

“I’m sorry,” Jannings said, and he *did* look sorry . . . but he also looked unperturbed.

“Jesus *Christ*, Paul!” It was all he could think of to say, and it sounded hopelessly inadequate.

“I thought you were ready, that’s all,” Jannings said. “I suppose I should have been a little more subtle.”

“Ready?” Tell repeated. “What do you mean? Ready for *what*?”

“To come out. To give yourself permission to come out.”

“I’m not that way,” Tell said, but his heart was pounding very hard and fast. Part of it was outrage, part was fear of the implacable certainty he saw in Jannings’s eyes, most of it was dismay. What Jannings had done had shut him out.

“Let’s let it go, shall we? We’ll just order and make up our minds that it never happened.” *Until you want it to*, those implacable eyes added.

*Oh, it happened, all right*, Tell wanted to say, but didn’t. The voice of reason and practicality would not allow it. . . would not allow him to risk lighting

Paul Jannings's notoriously short fuse. This was, after all, a good job . . . and the job *per se* wasn't all. He could use Roger Daltrey's tape in his portfolio even more than he could use two more weeks' salary. He would do well to be diplomatic and save the outraged-young-man act for another time. Besides, did he really have anything to feel outraged about? It wasn't as if Jannings had raped him, after all.

And that was really just the tip of the iceberg. The rest was this: his mouth closed because that was what his mouth had always done. It did more than close—it snapped shut like a bear-trap, with all his heart below those interlocked teeth and all his head above.

"All right," was all he said, "it never happened."

• • •

Tell slept badly that night, and what sleep he did get was haunted by bad dreams: one of Jannings groping him in McManus's was followed by one of the sneakers under the stall door, only in this one Tell opened the door and saw Paul Jannings sitting there. He had died naked, and in a state of sexual excitement that somehow continued even in death, even after all this time. Paul's mouth dropped open with an audible creak. "That's right; I *knew* you were ready," the corpse said on a puff of greenly rotten air, and Tell woke himself up by tumbling onto the floor in a tangle of coverlet. It was four in the morning. The first touches of light were just creeping through the chinks between the buildings outside his window. He dressed and sat smoking one cigarette after another until it was time to go to work.

• • •

Around eleven o'clock on that Saturday—they were working six-day weeks to make Daltrey's deadline—Tell went into the third-floor men's room to urinate. He stood just inside the door, rubbing his temples, and then looked around at the stalls.

He couldn't see. The angle was wrong.

*Then never mind! Fuck it! Take your piss and get out of here!*

He walked slowly over to one of the urinals and unzipped. It took a long time to get going.

On his way out he paused again, head cocked like Nipper the Dog's on the old RCA Victor record labels, and then turned around. He walked slowly back around the corner, stopping as soon as he could see under the door of the first stall. The dirty white sneakers were still there. The building which used to be known as Music City was almost completely empty, Saturday-morning-empty, but the sneakers were still there.

Tell's eyes fixed upon a fly just outside the stall. He watched with an empty sort of avidity as it crawled beneath the stall door and onto the dirty toe of one of the sneakers. There it stopped and simply fell dead. It tumbled into the growing pile of insect corpses around the sneakers. Tell saw with no surprise at all (none he felt, anyway) that among the flies were two small spiders and one large cockroach, lying on its back like an upended turtle.

Tell left the men's room in large painless strides, and his progress back to the studios seemed most peculiar; it was as if, instead of him walking, the building was flowing past him, around him, like river-rapids around a rock.

*When I get back I'll tell Paul I don't feel well and take the rest of the day off,* he thought, but he wouldn't. Paul had been in an erratic, unpleasant mood all morning, and Tell knew he was part (or maybe all) of the reason why. Might Paul fire him out of spite? A week ago he would have laughed at such an idea. But a week ago he had still believed what he had come to believe in his growing-up: friends were real and ghosts were make-believe. Now he was starting to wonder if maybe he hadn't gotten those two postulates turned around somehow.

"The prodigal returns," Jannings said without looking around as Tell opened the second of the studio's two doors—the one that was called the "dead air" door. "I thought you died in there, Johnny."

"No," Tell said. "Not me."

• • •

It *was* a ghost, and Tell found out whose a day before the Daltrey mix—and his association with Paul Jannings—ended, but before that happened a great

many other things did. Except they were all the same thing, just little mile-markers, like the ones on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, announcing John Tell's steady progress toward a nervous breakdown. He knew this was happening but could not keep it from happening. It seemed he was not driving this particular road but being chauffeured.

At first his course of action had seemed clear-cut and simple: avoid that particular men's room, and avoid all thoughts and questions about the sneakers. Simply turn that subject off. Make it dark.

Except he couldn't. The image of the sneakers crept up on him at odd moments and pounced like an old grief. He would be sitting home, watching CNN or some stupid chat-show on the tube, and all at once he'd find himself thinking about the flies, or about what the janitor who replaced the toilet paper was obviously not seeing, and then he would look at the clock and see an hour had passed. Sometimes more.

For awhile he was almost convinced it was some sort of malevolent joke. Paul was in on it, of course, and probably the fat guy from Janus Music—Tell had seen them talking together quite frequently, and hadn't they looked at him once and laughed? The receptionist was also a good bet, him with his Camels and his dead, skeptical eyes. Not Georgie, Georgie couldn't have kept the secret even if Paul had hectored him into going along, but anyone else was possible. For a day or two Tell even speculated on the possibility that Roger Daltrey himself might have taken a turn wearing the misplaced white sneakers.

Although he recognized these thoughts as paranoid fantasies, recognition did not lead to dispersion. He would tell them to go away, would insist there was no Jannings-led cabal out to get him, and his mind would say *Yeah, okay, makes sense to me*, and five hours later—or maybe only twenty minutes—he would imagine a bunch of them sitting around Desmond's Steak House two blocks downtown: Paul, the chain-smoking receptionist with the taste for heavy-metal, heavy-leather groups, maybe even the skinny guy from Snappy Kards, all of them eating shrimp cocktails and drinking. And laughing, of course. Laughing at *him*, while the dirty white sneakers they took turns wearing sat under the table in a crumpled brown bag.

Tell could *see* that brown bag. That was how bad it had gotten.

But that short-lived fantasy wasn't the worst. The worst was simply this: the third-floor men's room had acquired a *pull*. It was as if there were a powerful magnet in there and his pockets were full of iron filings. If someone had *told* him something like that he would have laughed (maybe just inside, if the person making the metaphor seemed very much in earnest), but it was really there, a feeling like a swerve every time he passed the men's on his way to the studios or to the elevators. It was a terrible feeling, like being pulled toward an open window in a tall building or watching helplessly, as if from outside yourself, as you raised a pistol to your mouth and sucked the barrel.

He wanted to look again. He realized that one more look was about all it would take to finish him off, but it made no difference. He wanted to look again.

Each time he passed, that mental swerve.

In his dreams he opened that stall door again and again. Just to get a look.

A really *good* look.

And he couldn't seem to tell anyone. He knew it would be better if he did, understood that if he poured it into someone else's ear it would change its shape, perhaps even grow a handle with which he could hold it. Twice he went into bars and managed to strike up conversations with the men next to him. Because bars, he thought, were the places where talk was at its absolute cheapest. Bargain-basement rates.

He had no more than opened his mouth on the first occasion when the man he had picked began to sermonize on the subject of the Yankees and George Steinbrenner. Steinbrenner had gotten under this man's skin in a big way, and it was impossible to get a word in edgeways with the fellow on any other subject. Tell soon gave up trying.

The second time, he managed to strike up a fairly casual conversation with a man who looked like a construction worker. They talked about the weather, then about baseball (but this man, thankfully, was not nuts on the subject), and progressed to how tough it was to find a good job in New York. Tell was sweating. He felt as if he were doing some heavy piece of manual labor—pushing a wheelbarrow filled with cement up a slight grade, maybe—but he also felt that he wasn't doing too badly.

The guy who looked like a construction worker was drinking Black Russians. Tell stuck to beer. It felt as if he was sweating it out as fast as he put it in, but after he had bought the guy a couple of drinks and the guy had bought Tell a couple of schooners, he nerved himself to begin.

“You want to hear something really strange?” he said.

“You queer?” the guy who looked like a construction worker asked him before Tell could get any further. He turned on his stool and looked at Tell with amiable curiosity. “I mean, it’s nothin to me whether y’are or not, but I’m gettin those vibes and I just thought I’d tell you I don’t go for that stuff. Have it up front, you know?”

“I’m not queer,” Tell said.

“Oh. What’s really strange?”

“Huh?”

“You said something was really strange.”

“Oh, it really wasn’t that strange,” Tell said. Then he glanced down at his watch and said it was getting late.

• • •

Three days before the end of the Daltrey mix, Tell left Studio F to urinate. He now used the bathroom on the sixth floor for this purpose. He had first used the one on four, then the one on five, but these were stacked directly above the one on three, and he had begun to feel the owner of the sneakers radiating silently up through the floors, seeming to suck at him. The men’s room on six was on the opposite side of the building, and that seemed to solve the problem.

He breezed past the reception desk on his way to the elevators, blinked, and suddenly, instead of being in the elevator car, he was in the third-floor bathroom with the door *hisshhing* softly shut behind him. He had never been so afraid. Part of it was the sneakers, but most of it was knowing he had just dropped three to six seconds of consciousness. For the first time in his life his mind had simply shorted out.

He had no idea how long he might have stood there if the door hadn’t suddenly opened behind him, cracking him painfully in the back. It was Paul

Jannings. “Excuse me, Johnny,” he said. “I had no idea you came in here to meditate.”

He passed Tell without waiting for a response (he wouldn't have got one in any case, Tell thought later; his tongue had been frozen to the roof of his mouth), and headed for the stalls. Tell was able to walk over to the first urinal and unzip his fly, doing these things only because he thought Paul might enjoy it too much if he turned and scurried out. There had been a time not so long ago when he had considered Paul a friend—maybe his *only* friend, at least in New York. Times had certainly changed.

Tell stood at the urinal for ten seconds or so, then flushed it. He headed for the door, then stopped. He turned around, took two quiet on-tiptoe steps, bent, and looked under the door of the first stall. The sneakers were still there, now surrounded by mounds of dead flies.

So were Paul Jannings's Gucci loafers.

What Tell was seeing looked like a double exposure, or one of the hokey ghost effects from the old *Topper* TV program. First he would be seeing Paul's loafers through the sneakers; then the sneakers would seem to solidify and he would be seeing them through the loafers, as if Paul were the ghost. Except, even when he was seeing through them, Paul's loafers made little shifts and movements, while the sneakers remained as immobile as always.

Tell left. For the first time in two weeks he felt calm.

• • •

The next day he did what he probably should have done at once: he took Georgie Ronkler out to lunch and asked him if he had ever heard any strange tales or rumors about the building which used to be called Music City. Why he hadn't thought of doing this earlier was a puzzle to him. He only knew that what had happened yesterday seemed to have cleared his mind somehow, like a brisk slap or a faceful of cold water. Georgie might not know anything, but he might; he had been working with Paul for at least seven years, and a lot of that work had been done at Music City.

“Oh, the ghost, you mean?” Georgie asked, and laughed. They were in Cartin's, a deli-restaurant on Sixth Avenue, and the place was noon-noisy.

Georgie bit into his corned-beef sandwich, chewed, swallowed, and sipped some of his cream soda through the two straws poked into the bottle. “Who told you ’bout that, Johnny?”

“Oh, one of the janitors, I guess,” Tell said. His voice was perfectly even.

“You sure you didn’t see him?” Georgie asked, and winked. This was as close as Paul’s long-time assistant could get to teasing.

“Nope.” Nor had he, actually. Just the sneakers. And some dead bugs.

“Yeah, well, it’s pretty much died down now, but for awhile it was all anybody ever talked about—how the guy was haunting the place. He got it right up there on the third floor, you know. In the john.” Georgie raised his hands, trembled them beside his peach-fuzzy cheeks, hummed a few bars of *The Twilight Zone* theme, and tried to look ominous. This was an expression he was incapable of achieving.

“Yes,” Tell said. “That’s what I heard. But the janitor wouldn’t tell me any more, or maybe he didn’t know any more. He just laughed and walked away.”

“It happened before I started to work with Paul. Paul was the one who told me about it.”

“He never saw the ghost himself?” Tell asked, knowing the answer. Yesterday Paul had been *sitting* in it. *Shitting* in it, to be perfectly vulgarly truthful.

“No, he used to laugh about it.” Georgie put his sandwich down. “You know how he can be sometimes. Just a little m-mean.” If forced to say something even slightly negative about someone, Georgie developed a mild stutter.

“I know. But never mind Paul; who was this ghost? What happened to him?”

“Oh, he was just some dope pusher,” Georgie said. “This was back in 1972 or ’73, I guess, when Paul was just starting out—he was only an assistant mixer himself, back then. Just before the slump.”

Tell nodded. From 1975 until 1980 or so, the rock industry had lain becalmed in the horse latitudes. Kids spent their money on video games instead of records. For perhaps the fiftieth time since 1955, the pundits announced the death of rock and roll. And, as on other occasions, it proved to be a lively corpse. Video games topped out; MTV checked in; a fresh wave of

stars arrived from England; Bruce Springsteen released *Born in the U.S.A.*; rap and hip-hop began to turn some numbers as well as heads.

“Before the slump, record-company execs used to deliver coke backstage in their attaché cases before big shows,” Georgie said. “I was concert-mixing back then, and I saw it happen. There was one guy—he’s been dead since 1978, but you’d know his name if I said it—who used to get a jar of olives from his label before every gig. The jar would come wrapped up in pretty paper with bows and ribbon and everything. Only instead of water, the olives came packed in cocaine. He used to put them in his drinks. Called them b-b-blast-off martinis.”

“I bet they were, too,” Tell said.

“Well, back then lots of people thought cocaine was almost like a vitamin,” Georgia said. “They said it didn’t hook you like heroin or f-fuck you over the next day like booze. And this building, man, this building was a regular snowstorm. Pills and pot and hash too, but cocaine was the hot item. And this guy—”

“What was his name?”

Georgie shrugged. “I don’t know. Paul never said and I never heard it from anyone in the building—not that I remember, anyway. But he was s-supposed to be like one of the deli delivery boys you see going up and down in the elevators with coffee and doughnuts and b-bagels. Only instead of delivering coffee-and, this guy delivered dope. You’d see him two or three times a week, riding all the way up and then working his way down. He’d have a topcoat slung over his arm and an alligator-skin briefcase in that hand. He kept the overcoat over his arm even when it was hot. That was so people wouldn’t see the cuff. But I guess sometimes they did a-a-anyway.”

“The *what?*”

“*C-C-Cuff,*” Georgie said, spraying out bits of bread and corned beef and immediately going crimson. “Gee, Johnny, I’m sorry.”

“No problem. You want another cream soda?”

“Yes, thanks,” Georgie said gratefully.

Tell signalled the waitress.

“So he was a delivery boy,” he said, mostly to put Georgie at his ease again—Georgie was still patting his lips with his napkin.

“That’s right.” The fresh cream soda arrived and Georgie drank some. “When he got off the elevator on the eighth floor, the briefcase chained to his wrist would be full of dope. When he got off it on the ground floor again, it would be full of money.”

“Best trick since lead into gold,” Tell said.

“Yeah, but in the end the magic ran out. One day he only made it down to the third floor. Someone offed him in the men’s room.”

“Knifed him?”

“What I heard was that someone opened the door of the stall where he was s-sitting and stuck a pencil in his eye.”

For just a moment Tell saw it as vividly as he had seen the crumpled bag under the imagined conspirators’ restaurant table: a Berol Black Warrior, sharpened to an exquisite point, sliding forward through the air and then shearing into the startled circle of pupil. The pop of the eyeball. He winced.

Georgia nodded. “G-G-Gross, huh? But it’s probably not true. I mean, not that part. Probably someone just, you know, stuck him.”

“Yes.”

“But whoever it was must have had *something* sharp with him, all right,” Georgie said.

“He did?”

“Yes. Because the briefcase was gone.”

Tell looked at Georgie. He could see this, too. Even before Georgie told him the rest he could see it.

“When the cops came and took the guy off the toilet, they found his left hand in the b-bowl.”

“Oh,” Tell said.

Georgie looked down at his plate. There was still half a sandwich on it. “I guess maybe I’m f-f-full,” he said, and smiled uneasily.

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On their way back to the studio, Tell asked, “So the guy’s ghost is supposed to haunt . . . what, that bathroom?” And suddenly he laughed, because, gruesome

as the story had been, there was something comic in the idea of a ghost haunting a shithouse.

Georgie smiled. “You know people. At first that was what they said. When I started in working with Paul, guys would tell me they’d *seen* him in there. Not *all* of him, just his sneakers under the stall door.”

“Just his sneakers, huh? What a hoot.”

“Yeah. That’s how you’d know they were making it up, or imagining it, because you only heard it from guys who knew him when he was alive. From guys who knew he wore sneakers.”

Tell, who had been a know-nothing kid still living in rural Pennsylvania when the murder happened, nodded. They had arrived at Music City. As they walked across the lobby toward the elevators, Georgie said, “But you know how fast the turnover is in this business. Here today and gone tomorrow. I doubt if there’s anybody left in the building who was working here then, except maybe for Paul and a few of the j-janitors, and none of *them* would have bought from the guy.”

“Guess not.”

“No. So you hardly ever hear the story anymore, and no one *s-sees* the guy anymore.”

They were at the elevators.

“Georgie, why do you stick with Paul?”

Although Georgie lowered his head and the tips of his ears turned a bright red, he did not sound really surprised at this abrupt shift in direction. “Why not? He takes care of me.”

*Do you sleep with him, Georgie?* The question occurred at once, a natural outgrowth, Tell supposed, of the previous question, but he wouldn’t ask. Didn’t really *dare* to ask. Because he thought Georgie would give him an honest answer.

Tell, who could barely bring himself to talk to strangers and hardly ever made friends, suddenly hugged Georgie Ronkler. Georgie hugged him back without looking up at him. Then they stepped away from each other, and the elevator came, and the mix continued, and the following evening, at six-fifteen, as Jannings was picking up his papers (and pointedly not looking in Tell’s

direction), Tell stepped into the third-floor men's room to get a look at the owner of the white sneakers.

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Talking with Georgie, he'd had a sudden revelation . . . or perhaps you called something this strong an epiphany. It was this: sometimes you could get rid of the ghosts that were haunting your life if you could only work up enough courage to face them.

There was no lapse in consciousness this time, nor any sensation of fear. . . only that slow steady deep drumming in his chest. All his senses had been heightened. He smelled chlorine, the pink disinfectant cakes in the urinals, old farts. He could see minute cracks in the paint on the wall, and chips on the pipes. He could hear the hollow click of his heels as he walked toward the first stall.

The sneakers were now almost buried in the corpses of dead spiders and flies.

*There were only one or two at first. Because there was no need for them to die until the sneakers were there, and they weren't there until I saw them there.*

"Why me?" he asked clearly in the stillness.

The sneakers didn't move and no voice answered.

"I didn't *know* you, I never *met* you, I don't take the kind of stuff you sold and never did. So why me?"

One of the sneakers twitched. There was a papery rustle of dead flies. Then the sneaker—it was the misplaced one—settled back.

Tell pushed the stall door open. One hinge shrieked in properly gothic fashion. And there it was. *Mystery guest, sign in, please*, Tell thought.

The mystery guest sat on the john with one hand lying limply on his thigh. He was much as Tell had seen him in his dreams, with this difference: there was only the single hand. The other arm ended in a dusty maroon stump to which several more flies had adhered. It was only now that Tell realized he had never noticed Sneakers's pants (and didn't you always notice the way lowered pants bunched up over the shoes if you happened to glance under a bathroom stall? something helplessly comic, or just defenseless, or one on account of the

other?). He hadn't because they were up, belt buckled, fly zipped. They were bell-bottoms. Tell tried to remember when bells had gone out of fashion and couldn't.

Above the bells Sneakers wore a blue chambray work-shirt with an appliquéd peace symbol on each flap pocket. He had parted his hair on the right. Tell could see dead flies in the part. From the hook on the back of the door hung the topcoat of which Georgie had told him. There were dead flies on its slumped shoulders.

There was a grating sound not entirely unlike the one the hinge had made. It was the tendons in the dead man's neck, Tell realized. Sneakers was raising his head. Now he looked at him, and Tell saw with no sense of surprise whatever that, except for the two inches of pencil protruding from the socket of his right eye, it was the same face that looked out of the shaving mirror at him every day. Sneakers was him and he was Sneakers.

"I *knew* you were ready," he told himself in the hoarse toneless voice of a man who has not used his vocal cords in a long time.

"I'm not," Tell said. "Go away."

"To know the truth of it, I mean," Tell told Tell, and the Tell standing in the stall doorway saw circles of white powder around the nostrils of the Tell sitting on the john. He had been using as well as pushing, it seemed. He had come in here for a short snort; someone had opened the stall door and stuck a pencil in his eye. But who committed murder by pencil? Maybe only someone who committed the crime on . . .

"Oh, call it impulse," Sneakers said in his hoarse and toneless voice. "The world-famous impulse crime."

And Tell—the Tell standing in the stall doorway—understood that was exactly what it had been, no matter what Georgie might think. The killer hadn't looked under the door of the stall and Sneakers had forgotten to flip the little hinged latch. Two converging vectors of coincidence that, under other circumstances, would have called for no more than a mumbled "Excuse me" and a hasty retreat. This time, however, something different had happened. This time it had led to a spur-of-the-moment murder.

"I didn't forget the latch," Sneakers told him in his toneless husk of a voice. "It was broken."

Yes, all right, the latch had been broken. It didn't make any difference. And the pencil? Tell was positive the killer had been holding it in his hand when he pushed open the stall door, but not as a murder weapon. He had been holding it only because sometimes you wanted something to hold—a cigarette, a bunch of keys, a pen or pencil to fiddle with. Tell thought maybe the pencil had been in Sneakers's eye before either of them had any idea that the killer was going to put it there. Then, probably because the killer had also been a customer who knew what was in the briefcase, he had closed the door again, leaving his victim seated on the john, had exited the building, got . . . well, got *something* . . .

"He went to a hardware store five blocks over and bought a hacksaw," Sneakers said in his toneless voice, and Tell suddenly realized it wasn't *his* face anymore; it was the face of a man who looked about thirty, and vaguely Native American. Tell's hair was gingery-blonde, and so had this man's been at first, but now it was a coarse, dull black.

He suddenly realized something else—realized it the way you realize things in dreams: when people see ghosts, they *always* see themselves first. Why? For the same reason deep divers pause on their way to the surface, knowing that if they rise too fast they will get nitrogen bubbles in their blood and suffer, perhaps die, in agony. There were *reality* bends, as well.

"Perception changes once you get past what's natural, doesn't it?" Tell asked hoarsely. "And that's why life has been so weird for me lately. Something inside me's been gearing up to deal with . . . well, to deal with you."

The dead man shrugged. Flies tumbled dryly from his shoulders. "You tell *me*, Cabbage—you got the head on you."

"All right," Tell said. "I *will*. He bought a hacksaw and the clerk put it in a bag for him and he came back. He wasn't a bit worried. After all, if someone had already found you, he'd know; there'd be a big crowd around the door. That's the way he'd figure. Maybe cops already, too. If things looked normal, he'd go on in and get the briefcase."

"He tried the chain first," the harsh voice said. "When that didn't work, he used the saw to cut off my hand."

They looked at each other. Tell suddenly realized he could see the toilet seat and the dirty white tiles of the back wall behind the corpse. . . the corpse that

was, finally, becoming a real ghost.

“You know now?” it asked Tell. “Why it was you?”

“Yes. You had to tell someone.”

“No—history is shit,” the ghost said, and then smiled a smile of such sunken malevolence that Tell was struck by horror. “But *knowing* sometimes does some good . . . if you’re still alive, that is.” It paused. “You forgot to ask your friend Georgie something important, Tell. Something he might not have been so honest about.”

“What?” he asked, but was no longer sure he really wanted to know.

“Who my biggest third-floor customer was in those days. Who was into me for almost eight thousand dollars. Who had been cut off. Who went to a rehab in Rhode Island and got clean two months after I died. Who won’t even go near the white powder these days. Georgie wasn’t here back then, but I think he knows the answer to all those questions just the same. Because he hears people talk. Have you ever noticed the way people talk around Georgie, as if he isn’t there?”

Tell nodded.

“And there’s no stutter in his *brain*. I think he knows, all right. He’d never tell, Tell, but I think he knows.”

The face began to change again, and now the features swimming out of that primordial fog were saturnine and finely chiseled. Paul Jannings’s features.

“No,” Tell whispered.

“He got better than thirty grand,” the dead man with Paul’s face said. “It’s how he paid for rehab . . . with plenty left over for all the vices he *didn’t* give up.”

And suddenly the figure on the toilet seat was fading out entirely. A moment later it was gone. Tell looked down at the floor and saw the flies were gone, too.

He no longer needed to go to the bathroom. He went back into the control room, told Paul Jannings he was a worthless bastard, paused just long enough to relish the expression of utter stunned surprise on Paul’s face, and then walked out the door. There would be other jobs; he was good enough at what he did to be able to count on that. Knowing it, however, was something of a revelation. Not the day’s first, but definitely the day’s best.

When he got back to his apartment, he went straight through the living room and to the john. His need to relieve himself had returned—had become rather pressing, in fact—but that was all right; that was just another part of being alive. “A regular man is a happy man,” he said to the white tile walls. He turned a little, grabbed the current issue of *Rolling Stone* from where he’d left it on the toilet tank, opened it to the Random Notes column, and began to read.

## You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

When Mary woke up, they were lost. She knew it, and Clark knew it, too, although he didn't want to admit it at first; he was wearing his I'm Pissed So Don't Fuck with Me look, where his mouth kept getting smaller and smaller until you thought it might disappear altogether. And "lost" wasn't how Clark would put it; Clark would say they had "taken a wrong turn somewhere," and it would just about kill him to go even that far.

They'd set off from Portland the day before. Clark worked for a computer company—one of the giants—and it had been his idea that they should see something of the Oregon which lay outside the pleasant but humdrum upper-middle-class suburb of Portland where they lived—an area that was known to its inhabitants as Software City. "They say it's beautiful out there in the boonies," he had told her. "You want to go take a look? I've got a week, and the transfer rumors have already started. If we don't see some of the real Oregon, I think the last sixteen months are going to be nothing but a black hole in my memory."

She had agreed willingly enough (school had let out ten days before and she had no summer classes to teach), enjoying the pleasantly haphazard, catch-as-catch-can feel of the trip, forgetting that spur-of-the-moment vacations often ended up just like this, with the vacationers lost along some back road which blundered its way up the overgrown butt-crack of nowhere. It was an adventure, she supposed—at least you could look at it that way if you wanted—but she had turned thirty-two in January, and she thought thirty-two was maybe just a little too old for adventures. These days her idea of a really nice vacation was a motel with a clean pool, bathrobes on the beds, and a hair-dryer that worked in the bathroom.

Yesterday had been fine, though, the countryside so gorgeous that even Clark had several times been awed to an unaccustomed silence. They had spent

the night at a nice country inn just west of Eugene, had made love not once but twice (something she was most definitely *not* too old to enjoy), and this morning had headed south, meaning to spend the night in Klamath Falls. They had begun the day on Oregon State Highway 58, and *that* was all right, but then, over lunch in the town of Oakridge, Clark had suggested they get off the main highway, which was pretty well clogged with RVs and logging trucks.

“Well, I don’t know . . .” Mary spoke with the dubiousness of a woman who has heard many such proposals from her man, and endured the consequences of a few. “I’d hate to get lost out there, Clark. It looks pretty empty.” She had tapped one neatly shaped nail on a spot of green marked Boulder Creek Wilderness Area. “That word is *wilderness*, as in no gas stations, no rest rooms, and no motels.”

“Aw, come on,” he said, pushing aside the remains of his chicken-fried steak. On the juke, Steve Earle and the Dukes were singing “Six Days on the Road,” and outside the dirt-streaked windows, a bunch of bored-looking kids were doing turns and pop-outs on their skateboards. They looked as if they were just marking time out there, waiting to be old enough to blow this town for good, and Mary knew exactly how they felt. “Nothing to it, babe. We take 58 a few more miles east . . . then turn south on State Road 42 . . . see it?”

“Uh-huh.” She also saw that, while Highway 58 was a fat red line, State Road 42 was only a squiggle of black thread. But she’d been full of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and hadn’t wanted to argue with Clark’s pioneering instinct while she felt like a boa constrictor that has just swallowed a goat. What she’d wanted, in fact, was to tilt back the passenger seat of their lovely old Mercedes and take a snooze.

“Then,” he pushed on, “there’s this road here. It’s not numbered, so it’s probably only a county road, but it goes right down to Toketee Falls. And from there it’s only a hop and a jump over to U.S. 97. So—what do you think?”

“That you’ll probably get us lost,” she’d said—a wisecrack she rather regretted later. “But I guess we’ll be all right as long as you can find a place wide enough to turn the Princess around in.”

“Sold American!” he said, beaming, and pulled his chicken-fried steak back in front of him. He began to eat again, congealed gravy and all.

“Uck-a-doo,” she said, holding one hand up in front of her face and wincing. “How *can* you?”

“It’s good,” Clark said in tones so muffled only a wife could have understood him. “Besides, when one is travelling, one should eat the native dishes.”

“It looks like someone sneezed a mouthful of snuff onto a very old hamburger,” she said. “I repeat: uck-a-doo.”

They left Oakridge in good spirits, and at first all had gone swimmingly. Trouble hadn’t set in until they turned off S.R. 42 and onto the unmarked road, the one Clark had been so sure was going to breeze them right into Toketee Falls. It hadn’t seemed like trouble at first; county road or not, the new way had been a lot better than Highway 42, which had been potholed and frost-heaved, even in summer. They had gone along famously, in fact, taking turns plugging tapes into the dashboard player. Clark was into people like Wilson Pickett, Al Green, and Pop Staples. Mary’s taste lay in entirely different directions.

“What do you see in all these white boys?” he asked as she plugged in her current favorite—Lou Reed’s *New York*.

“Married one, didn’t I?” she asked, and that made him laugh.

The first sign of trouble came fifteen minutes later, when they came to a fork in the road. Both forks looked equally promising.

“Holy crap,” Clark said, pulling up and popping the glove compartment open so he could get at the map. He looked at it for a long time. “*That* isn’t on the map.”

“Oh boy, here we go,” Mary said. She had been on the edge of a doze when Clark pulled up at the unexpected fork, and she was feeling a little irritated with him. “Want my advice?”

“No,” he said, sounding a little irritated himself, “but I suppose I’ll get it. And I *hate* it when you roll your eyes at me that way, in case you didn’t know.”

“What way is that, Clark?”

“Like I was an old dog that just farted under the dinner table. Go on, tell me what you think. Lay it on me. It’s your nickel.”

“Go back while there’s still time. That’s my advice.”

“Uh-huh. Now if you only had a sign that said REPENT.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“I don’t know, Mare,” he said in a glum tone of voice, and then just sat there, alternating looks through the bugsplattered windshield with a close examination of the map. They had been married for almost fifteen years, and Mary knew him well enough to believe he would almost certainly insist on pushing on . . . not in spite of the unexpected fork in the road, but *because* of it.

*When Clark Willingham’s balls are on the line, he doesn’t back down*, she thought, and then put a hand over her mouth to hide the grin that had surfaced there.

She was not quite quick enough. Clark glanced at her, one eyebrow raised, and she had a sudden discomfiting thought: if she could read *him* as easily as a child’s storybook after all this time, then maybe he could do the same with her. “Something?” he asked, and his voice was just a little too thin. It was at that moment—even *before* she had fallen asleep, she now realized—that his mouth had started to get smaller. “Want to share, sweetheart?”

She shook her head. “Just clearing my throat.”

He nodded, pushed his glasses up on his ever-expanding forehead, and brought the map up until it was almost touching the tip of his nose. “Well,” he said, “it’s *got* to be the left-hand fork, because that’s the one that goes south, toward Toketee Falls. The other one heads east. It’s probably a ranch road, or something.”

“A ranch road with a yellow line running down the middle of it?”

Clark’s mouth grew a little smaller. “You’d be surprised how well-off some of these ranchers are,” he said.

She thought of pointing out to him that the days of the scouts and pioneers were long gone, that his testicles were not *actually* on the line, and then decided she wanted a little doze-off in the afternoon sun a lot more than she wanted to squabble with her husband, especially after the lovely double feature last night. And, after all, they were bound to come out *somewhere*, weren’t they?

With that comforting thought in her mind and Lou Reed in her ears, singing about the last great American whale, Mary Willingham dozed off. By the time the road Clark had picked began to deteriorate, she was sleeping

shallowly and dreaming that they were back in the Oakridge café where they had eaten lunch. She was trying to put a quarter in the jukebox, but the coin-slot was plugged with something that looked like flesh. One of the kids who had been outside in the parking lot walked past her with his skateboard under his arm and his Trailblazers hat turned around on his head.

*What's the matter with this thing?* Mary asked him.

The kid came over, took a quick look, and shrugged. *Aw, that ain't nothing,* he said. *That's just some guy's body, broken for you and for many. This is no rinky-dink operation we got here; we're talking mass culture, sugar-muffin.*

Then he reached up, gave the tip of her right breast a tweak—not a very friendly one, either—and walked away. When she looked back at the jukebox, she saw it had filled up with blood and shadowy floating things that looked suspiciously like human organs.

*Maybe you better give that Lou Reed album a rest,* she thought, and within the pool of blood behind the glass, a record floated down onto the turntable—as if at her thought—and Lou began to sing “Busload of Faith.”

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While Mary was having this steadily more unpleasant dream, the road continued to worsen, the patches spreading until it was really *all* patch. The Lou Reed album—a long one—came to an end, and began to recycle. Clark didn't notice. The pleasant look he had started the day with was entirely gone. His mouth had shrunk to the size of a rosebud. If Mary had been awake, she would have coaxed him into turning around miles back. He knew this, just as he knew how she would look at him if she woke up now and saw this narrow swatch of crumbling hot-top—a road only if one thought in the most charitable of terms—with piney woods pressing in close enough on both sides to keep the patched tar in constant shadow. They had not passed a car headed in the other direction since leaving S.R. 42.

He knew he *should* turn around—Mary *hated* it when he got into shit like this, always forgetting the many times he had found his way unerringly along strange roads to their planned destinations (Clark Willingham was one of those millions of American men who are firmly convinced they have a compass

in their heads)—but he continued to push on, at first stubbornly convinced that they *must* come out in Toketee Falls, then just hoping. Besides, there really *was* no place to turn around. If he tried to do it, he would mire the Princess to her hubcaps in one of the marshy ditches which bordered this miserable excuse for a road . . . and God knew how long it would take to get a tow-truck in here, or how far he'd have to walk just to call one.

Then, at last, he *did* come to a place where he could have turned around—another fork in the road—and elected not to do so. The reason was simple: although the right fork was rutted gravel with grass growing up the middle, the leftward-tending branch was once again wide, well-paved, and divided by a bright stroke of yellow. According to the compass in Clark's head, this fork headed due south. He could all but *smell* Toketee Falls. Ten miles, maybe fifteen, twenty at the outside.

He did at least *consider* turning back, however. When he told Mary so later, he saw doubt in her eyes, but it was true. He decided to go on because Mary was beginning to stir, and he was quite sure that the bumpy, potholed stretch of road he'd just driven would wake her up if he turned back . . . and then she would look at him with those wide, beautiful blue eyes of hers. Just look. That would be enough.

Besides, why should he spend an hour and a half going back when Toketee Falls was just a spin and a promise away? *Look at that road*, he thought. *You think a road like that is going to just peter out?*

He put the Princess back in gear, started down the left fork, and sure enough, the road petered out. Over the first hill, the yellow line disappeared again. Over the second, the paving gave out and they were on a rutted dirt track with the dark woods pressing even closer on either side and the sun—Clark was aware of this for the first time—now sliding down the wrong side of the sky.

The pavement ended too suddenly for Clark to brake and baby the Princess onto the new surface, and there was a hard, spring-jarring thud that woke Mary. She sat up with a jerk and looked around with wide eyes. “Where—” she began, and then, to make the afternoon utterly perfect and complete, the smoky voice of Lou Reed sped up until he was gabbling out the lyrics to “Good Evening, Mr. Waldheim” at the speed of Alvin and the Chipmunks.

“*Oh!*” she said, and punched the eject button. The tape belched out, followed by an ugly brown afterbirth—coils of shiny tape.

The Princess hit a nearly bottomless pothole, lurched hard to the left, and then threw herself up and out like a clipper ship corkscrewing through a stormwave.

“Clark?”

“Don’t say anything,” he said through clenched teeth. “We’re *not* lost. This will turn back to tar in just a minute or two—probably over the next hill. *We are not lost.*”

Still upset by her dream (even though she could not quite remember what it had been), Mary held the ruined tape in her lap, mourning it. She supposed she could buy another one. . . but not out here. She looked at the brooding trees which seemed to belly right up to the road like starving guests at a banquet and guessed it was a long way to the nearest Tower Records.

She looked at Clark, noted his flushed cheeks and nearly nonexistent mouth, and decided it would be politic to keep her own mouth shut, at least for the time being. If she was quiet and nonaccusatory, he would be more likely to come to his senses before this miserable excuse for a road petered out in a gravel pit or quicksand bog.

“Besides, I can’t very well turn around,” he said, as if she had suggested that very thing.

“I can see that,” she replied neutrally.

He glanced at her, perhaps wanting to fight, perhaps just feeling embarrassed and hoping to see she wasn’t too pissed at him—at least not yet—and then looked back through the windshield. Now there were weeds and grass growing up the center of this road, too, and the way was so narrow that if they *did* happen to meet another car, one of them would have to back up. Nor was that the end of the fun. The ground beyond the wheelruts looked increasingly untrustworthy; the scrubby trees seemed to be jostling each other for position in the wet ground.

There were no power-poles on either side of the road. She almost pointed this out to Clark, then decided it might be smarter to hold her tongue about that, too. He drove on in silence until they came around a down-slanting curve. He was hoping against hope that they would see a change for the better

on the far side, but the overgrown track only went on as it had before. It was, if anything, a little fainter and a little narrower, and had begun to remind Clark of roads in the fantasy epics he liked to read—stories by people like Terry Brooks, Stephen Donaldson, and, of course, J. R. R. Tolkien, the spiritual father of them all. In these tales, the characters (who usually had hairy feet and pointed ears) took these neglected roads in spite of their own gloomy intuitions, and usually ended up battling trolls or boggarts or mace-wielding skeletons.

“Clark—”

“I know,” he said, and hammered the wheel suddenly with his left hand—a short, frustrated stroke that succeeded only in honking the horn. “I *know*.” He stopped the Mercedes, which now straddled the entire road (road? hell, *lane* was now too grand a word for it), slammed the transmission into park, and got out. Mary got out on the other side, more slowly.

The balsam smell of the trees was heavenly, and she thought there was something beautiful about the silence, unbroken as it was by the sound of any motor (even the far-off drone of an airplane) or human voice . . . but there was something spooky about it, as well. Even the sounds she *could* hear—the *tu-whit!* of a bird in the shadowy firs, the sough of the wind, the rough rumble of the Princess’s diesel engine—served to emphasize the wall of quiet encircling them.

She looked across the Princess’s gray roof at Clark, and it was not reproach or anger in her gaze but appeal: *Get us out of this, all right? Please?*

“Sorry, hon,” he said, and the worry she saw in his face did nothing to soothe her. “Really.”

She tried to speak, but at first no sound came out of her dry throat. She cleared it and tried again. “What do you think about backing up, Clark?”

He considered it for several moments—the *tu-whit!* bird had time to call again and be answered from somewhere deeper in the forest—before shaking his head. “Only as a last resort. It’s at least two miles back to the last fork in the road—”

“You mean there was *another* one?”

He winced a little, dropped his eyes, and nodded. “Backing up . . . well, you see how narrow the road is, and how mucky the ditches are. If we went

off . . .” He shook his head and sighed.

“So we go on.”

“I think so. If the road goes entirely to hell, of course, I’ll *have* to try it.”

“But by then we’ll be in even deeper, won’t we?” So far she was managing, and quite well, she thought, to keep a tone of accusation from creeping into her voice, but it was getting harder and harder to do. She was pissed at him, quite severely pissed, and pissed at herself, as well—for letting him get them into this in the first place, and then for coddling him the way she was now.

“Yes, but I like the odds on finding a wide place up ahead better than I like the odds on reversing for a couple of miles along this piece of crap. If it turns out we *do* have to back out, I’ll take it in stages—back up for five minutes, rest for ten, back up for five more.” He smiled lamely. “It’ll be an adventure.”

“Oh yes, it’ll be that, all right,” Mary said, thinking again that her definition for this sort of thing was not *adventure* but *pain in the ass*. “Are you sure you aren’t pressing on because you believe in your heart that we’re going to find Toketee Falls right over the next hill?”

For a moment his mouth seemed to disappear entirely and she braced for an explosion of righteous male wrath. Then his shoulders sagged and he only shook his head. In that moment she saw what he was going to look like thirty years from now, and that frightened her a lot more than getting caught on a back road in the middle of nowhere.

“No,” he said. “I guess I’ve given up on Toketee Falls. One of the great rules of travel in America is that roads without electrical lines running along at least one side of them don’t go anywhere.”

So he had noticed, too.

“Come on,” he said, getting back in. “I’m going to try like hell to get us out of this. And next time I’ll listen to you.”

*Yeah, yeah*, Mary thought with a mixture of amusement and tired resentment. *I’ve heard that one before*. But before he could pull the transmission stick on the console down from park to drive, she put her hand over his. “I *know* you will,” she said, turning what he’d said into a promise. “Now get us out of this mess.”

“Count on it,” Clark said.

“And be careful.”

“You can count on that, too.” He gave her a small smile that made her feel a little better, then engaged the Princess’s transmission. The big gray Mercedes, looking very out of place in these deep woods, began to creep down the shadowy track again.

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They drove another mile by the odometer and nothing changed but the width of the cart-track they were on: it grew narrower still. Mary thought the scruffy firs now looked not like hungry guests at a banquet but morbidly curious spectators at the site of a nasty accident. If the track got any narrower, they would begin to hear the squall of branches along the sides of the car. The ground *under* the trees, meanwhile, had gone from mucky to swampy; Mary could see patches of standing water, dusty with pollen and fallen pine needles, in some of the dips. Her heart was beating much too fast, and twice she had caught herself gnawing at her nails, a habit she thought she had given up for good the year before she married Clark. She had begun to realize that if they got stuck now, they would almost certainly spend the night camped out in the Princess. And there were animals in these woods—she had heard them crashing around out there. Some of them sounded big enough to be bears. The thought of meeting a bear while they stood looking at their hopelessly mired Mercedes made her swallow something that felt and tasted like a large lintball.

“Clark, I think we’d better give it up and try backing. It’s already past three o’clock and—”

“Look,” he said, pointing ahead. “Is it a sign?”

She squinted. Ahead, the lane rose toward the crest of a deeply wooded hill. There was a bright blue oblong standing near the top. “Yes,” she said. “It’s a sign, all right.”

“Great! Can you read it?”

“Uh-huh—it says IF YOU CAME THIS FAR, YOU REALLY FUCKED UP.”

He shot her a complex look of amusement and irritation. “Very funny, Mare.”

“Thank you, Clark. I try.”

“We’ll go to the top of the hill, read the sign, and see what’s over the crest. If we don’t see anything hopeful, we’ll try backing. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

He patted her leg, then drove cautiously on. The Mercedes was moving so slowly now that they could hear the soft sound of the weeds on the crown of the road whickering against the undercarriage. Mary really could make out the words on the sign now, but at first she rejected them, thinking she had to be mistaken—it was just too crazy. But they drew closer still, and the words didn’t change.

“Does it say what I think it does?” Clark asked her.

Mary gave a short, bewildered laugh. “Sure . . . but it must be someone’s idea of a joke. Don’t you think?”

“I’ve given up thinking—it keeps getting me into trouble. But I see something that *isn’t* a joke. Look, Mary!”

Twenty or thirty feet beyond the sign—just before the crest of the hill—the road widened dramatically and was once more both paved and lined. Mary felt worry roll off her heart like a boulder.

Clark was grinning. “Isn’t that *beautiful?*”

She nodded happily, grinning herself.

They reached the sign and Clark stopped. They read it again:

**Welcome to  
Rock and Roll Heaven, Ore.**

**WE COOK WITH GAS! SO WILL YOU!**

**Jaycees • Chamber of Commerce • Lions • Elks**

“It’s *got* to be a joke,” she repeated.

“Maybe not.”

“A town called Rock and Roll Heaven? Puh-*leeze*, Clark.”

“Why not? There’s Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Dry Shark, Nevada, and a town in Pennsylvania called Intercourse. So why not a Rock and Roll Heaven in Oregon?”

She laughed giddily. The sense of relief was really incredible. “You made that up.”

“What?”

“Intercourse, Pennsylvania.”

“I didn’t. Ralph Ginzberg once tried to send a magazine called *Eros* from there. For the postmark. The Feds wouldn’t let him. Swear. And who knows? Maybe the town was founded by a bunch of communal back-to-the-land hippies in the sixties. They went establishment—Lions, Elks, Jaycees—but the original name stayed.” He was quite taken with the idea; he found it both funny and oddly sweet. “Besides, I don’t think it matters. What matters is we found some honest-to-God pavement again, honey. The stuff you drive on.”

She nodded. “So drive on it . . . but be careful.”

“You bet.” The Princess nosed up onto the pavement, which was not asphalt but a smooth composition surface without a patch or expansion-joint to be seen. “Careful’s my middle n—”

Then they reached the crest of the hill and the last word died in his mouth. He stamped on the brake-pedal so hard that their seatbelts locked, then jammed the transmission lever back into park.

“Holy wow!” Clark said.

They sat in the idling Mercedes, open-mouthed, looking down at the town below.

• • •

It was a perfect jewel of a town nestled in a small, shallow valley like a dimple. Its resemblance to the paintings of Norman Rockwell and the small-town illustrations of Currier & Ives was, to Mary, at least, inescapable. She tried to tell herself it was just the geography; the way the road wound down into the valley, the way the town was surrounded by deep green-black forest—leagues of old, thick firs growing in unbroken profusion beyond the outlying fields—but it was more than the geography, and she supposed Clark knew it as well as she did. There was something too sweetly balanced about the church steeples, for instance—one on the north end of the town common and the other on the south end. The barn-red building off to the east had to be the school-house,

and the big white one off to the west, the one with the bell-tower on top and the satellite dish to one side, had to be the town hall. The homes all looked impossibly neat and cozy, the sorts of domiciles you saw in the house-beautiful ads of pre-World War II magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *American Mercury*.

*There should be smoke curling from a chimney or two*, Mary thought, and after a little examination, she saw that there was. She suddenly found herself remembering a story from Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*. "Mars Is Heaven," it had been called, and in it the Martians had cleverly disguised the slaughterhouse so it had looked like everybody's fondest hometown dream.

"Turn around," she said abruptly. "It's wide enough here, if you're careful."

He turned slowly to look at her, and she didn't care much for the expression on his face. He was eyeing her as if he thought she had gone crazy. "Honey, what are you—"

"I don't like it, that's all." She could feel her face growing warm, but she pushed on in spite of the heat. "It makes me think of a scary story I read when I was a teenager." She paused. "It also makes me think of the candy-house in 'Hansel and Gretel.'"

He went on giving her that patented I Just Don't Believe It stare of his, and she realized he meant to go down there—it was just another part of the same wretched testosterone blast that had gotten them off the main road in the first place. He wanted to *explore*, by Christ. And he wanted a souvenir, of course. A tee-shirt bought in the local drugstore would do, one that said something cute like I'VE BEEN TO ROCK AND ROLL HEAVEN AND YOU KNOW THEY GOT A HELL OF A BAND

"Honey—" It was the soft, tender voice he used when he intended to jolly her into something or die trying.

"Oh, stop. If you want to do something nice for me, turn us around and drive us back to Highway 58. If you do that, you can have some more sugar tonight. Another double helping, even, if you're up to it."

He fetched a deep sigh, hands on the steering wheel, eyes straight ahead. At last, not looking at her, he said: "Look across the valley, Mary. Do you see the road going up the hill on the far side?"

"Yes, I do."

“Do you see how wide it is? How smooth? How nicely paved?”

“Clark, that is hardly—”

“Look! I believe I even see an honest-to-God *bus* on it.” He pointed at a yellow bug trundling along the road toward town, its metal hide glittering hotly in the afternoon sunlight. “That’s one more vehicle than we’ve seen on *this* side of the world.”

“I still—”

He grabbed the map which had been lying on the console, and when he turned to her with it, Mary realized with dismay that the jolly, coaxing voice had temporarily concealed the fact that he was seriously pissed at her. “Listen, Mare, and pay attention, because there may be questions later. Maybe I can turn around here and maybe I can’t—it’s wider, but I’m not as sure as you are that it’s wide enough. And the ground *still* looks pretty squelchy to me.”

“Clark, please don’t yell at me. I’m getting a headache.”

He made an effort and moderated his voice. “If we *do* get turned around, it’s twelve miles back to Highway 58, over the same shitty road we just travelled—”

“Twelve miles isn’t so much.” She tried to sound firm, if only to herself, but she could feel herself weakening. She hated herself for it, but that didn’t change it. She had a horrid suspicion that this was how men almost *always* got their way: not by being right but by being relentless. They argued like they played football, and if you hung in there, you almost always finished the discussion with cleat-marks all over your psyche.

“No, twelve miles isn’t so much,” he was saying in his most sweetly reasonable I-am-trying-not-to-strangle-you-Mary voice, “but what about the fifty or so we’ll have to tack on going around this patch of woods once we get back on 58?”

“You make it sound as if we had a train to catch, Clark!”

“It just pisses me off, that’s all. You take one look down at a nice little town with a cute little name and say it reminds you of *Friday the 13th, Part XX* or some damn thing and you want to go back. And that road over there”—he pointed across the valley—“heads *due south*. It’s probably less than half an hour from here to Toketee Falls by that road.”

“That’s about what you said back in Oakridge—before we started off on the Magical Mystery Tour segment of our trip.”

He looked at her a moment longer, his mouth tucked in on itself like a cramp, then grabbed the transmission lever. “Fuck it,” he snarled. “We’ll go back. But if we meet one car on the way, Mary, just one, we’ll end up *backing* into Rock and Roll Heaven. So—”

She put her hand over his before he could disengage the transmission for the second time that day.

“Go on,” she said. “You’re probably right and I’m probably being silly.” *Rolling over like this has got to be bred in the goddam bone*, she thought. *Either that, or I’m just too tired to fight.*

She took her hand away, but he paused a moment longer, looking at her. “Only if you’re sure,” he said.

And that was really the most ludicrous thing of all, wasn’t it? Winning wasn’t enough for a man like Clark; the vote also had to be unanimous. She had voiced that unanimity many times when she didn’t feel very unanimous in her heart, but she discovered that she just wasn’t capable of it this time.

“But I’m *not* sure,” she said. “If you’d been *listening* to me instead of just putting up with me, you’d know that. *Probably* you’re right and *probably* I’m just being silly—your take on it makes more sense than mine does, I admit that much, at least, and I’m willing to soldier along—but that doesn’t change the way I feel. So you’ll just have to excuse me if I decline to put on my little cheerleader’s skirt and lead the Go Clark Go cheer this time.”

“Jesus!” he said. His face was wearing an uncertain expression that made him look uncharacteristically—and somehow hatefully—boyish. “You’re in some mood, aren’t you, honey-bunch?”

“I guess I am,” she said, hoping he couldn’t see how much that particular term of endearment grated on her. She was thirty-two, after all, and he was almost forty-one. She felt a little too old to be anyone’s honeybunch and thought Clark was a little too old to need one.

Then the troubled look on his face cleared and the Clark she liked—the one she really believed she could spend the second half of her life with—was back. “You’d look cute in a cheerleader’s skirt, though,” he said, and appeared to measure the length of her thigh. “You would.”

“You’re a fool, Clark,” she said, and then found herself smiling at him almost in spite of herself.

“That’s correct, ma’am,” he said, and put the Princess in gear.

• • •

The town had no outskirts, unless the few fields which surrounded it counted. At one moment they were driving down a gloomy, tree-shaded lane; at the next there were broad tan fields on either side of the car; at the next they were passing neat little houses.

The town was quiet but far from deserted. A few cars moved lazily back and forth on the four or five intersecting streets that made up downtown, and a handful of pedestrians strolled the sidewalks. Clark lifted a hand in salute to a bare-chested, potbellied man who was simultaneously watering his lawn and drinking a can of Olympia. The potbellied man, whose dirty hair straggled to his shoulders, watched them go by but did not raise his own hand in return.

Main Street had that same Norman Rockwell ambience, and here it was so strong that it was almost a feeling of *déjà vu*. The walks were shaded by robust, mature oaks, and that was somehow just right. You didn’t have to see the town’s only watering hole to know that it would be called The Dew Drop Inn and that there would be a lighted clock displaying the Budweiser Clydesdales over the bar. The parking spaces were the slanting type; there was a red-white-and-blue barber pole turning outside The Cutting Edge; a mortar and pestle hung over the door of the local pharmacy, which was called The Tuneful Druggist. The pet shop (with a sign in the window saying WE HAVE SIAMESE IF YOU PLEASE) was called White Rabbit. Everything was so right you could just shit. Most right of all was the town common at the center of town. There was a sign hung on a guy-wire above the bandshell, and Mary could read it easily, although they were a hundred yards away. CONCERT TONIGHT, it said.

She suddenly realized that she *knew* this town—had seen it many times on late-night TV. Never mind Ray Bradbury’s hellish vision of Mars or the candy-house in “Hansel and Gretel”; what this place resembled more than either was The Peculiar Little Town people kept stumbling into in various episodes of *The Twilight Zone*.

She leaned toward her husband and said in a low, ominous voice: “We’re travelling not through a dimension of sight and sound, Clark, but of *mind*. Look!” She pointed at nothing in particular, but a woman standing outside the town’s Western Auto saw the gesture and gave her a narrow, mistrustful glance.

“Look at what?” he asked. He sounded irritated again, and she guessed that this time it was because he knew *exactly* what she was talking about.

“There’s a signpost up ahead! We’re entering—”

“Oh, cut it out, Mare,” he said, and abruptly swung into an empty parking slot halfway down Main Street.

“*Clark!*” she nearly screamed. “What are you *doing?*”

He pointed through the windshield at an establishment with the somehow not-cute name of The Rock-a-Boogie Restaurant.

“I’m thirsty. I’m going in there and getting a great big Pepsi to go. You don’t have to come. You can sit right here. Lock all the doors, if you want.” So saying, he opened his own door. Before he could swing his legs out, she grabbed his shoulder.

“Clark, please don’t.”

He looked back at her, and she saw at once that she should have canned the crack about *The Twilight Zone*—not because it was wrong but because it was right. It was that macho thing again. He wasn’t stopping because he was thirsty, not really; he was stopping because this freaky little burg had scared him, too. Maybe a little, maybe a lot, she didn’t know that, but she *did* know that he had no intention of going on until he had convinced himself he *wasn’t* afraid, not one little bit.

“I won’t be a minute. Do you want a ginger ale, or something?”

She pushed the button that unlocked her seatbelt. “What I want is not to be left alone.”

He gave her an indulgent, I-knew-you’d-come look that made her feel like tearing out a couple of swatches of his hair.

“And what I *also* want is to kick your *ass* for getting us into this situation in the first place,” she finished, and was pleased to see the indulgent expression turn to one of wounded surprise. She opened her own door. “Come on. Piddle on the nearest hydrant, Clark, and then we’ll get out of here.”

“Piddle . . . ? Mary, what in the hell are you *talking* about?”

“Sodas!” she nearly screamed, all the while thinking that it was really amazing how fast a good trip with a good man could turn bad. She glanced across the street and saw a couple of longhaired young guys standing there. They were also drinking Olly and checking out the strangers in town. One was wearing a battered top-hat. The plastic daisy stuck in the band nodded back and forth in the breeze. His companion’s arms crawled with faded blue tattoos. To Mary they looked like the sort of fellows who dropped out of high school their third time through the tenth grade in order to spend more time meditating on the joys of drive-train linkages and date rape.

Oddly enough, they also looked somehow familiar to her.

They saw her looking. Top-Hat solemnly raised his hand and twiddled his fingers at her. Mary looked away hurriedly and turned to Clark. “Let’s get our cold drinks and get the hell out of here.”

“Sure,” he said. “And you didn’t need to shout at me, Mary. I mean, I was right *beside* you, and—”

“Clark, do you see those two guys across the street?”

“What two guys?”

She looked back in time to see Top-Hat and Tattoos slipping through the barber-shop doorway. Tattoos glanced back over his shoulder, and although Mary wasn’t sure, she thought he tipped her a wink.

“They’re just going into the barber shop. See them?”

Clark looked, but only saw a closing door with the sun reflecting eye-watering shards of light from the glass: “What about them?”

“They looked familiar to me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But I find it somehow hard to believe that any of the people I know moved to Rock and Roll Heaven, Oregon, to take up rewarding, high-paying jobs as street-corner hoodlums.”

Clark laughed and took her elbow. “Come on,” he said, and led her into The Rock-a-Boogie Restaurant.

• • •

The Rock-a-Boogie went a fair distance toward allaying Mary's fears. She had expected a greasy spoon, not much different from the dim (and rather dirty) pit-stop in Oakridge where they'd eaten lunch. They entered a sun-filled, agreeable little diner with a funky fifties feel instead: blue-tiled walls; chrome-chased pie case; tidy yellow-oak floor; wooden paddle fans turning lazily overhead. The face of the wall-clock was circled with thin tubes of red and blue neon. Two waitresses in aqua-colored rayon uniforms that looked to Mary like costumes left over from *American Graffiti* were standing by the stainless-steel pass-through between the restaurant and the kitchen. One was young—no more than twenty and probably not that—and pretty in a washed-out way. The other, a short woman with a lot of frizzy red hair, had a brassy look that struck Mary as both harsh and desperate . . . and there was something else about her, as well: for the second time in as many minutes, Mary had the strong sensation that she *knew* someone in this town.

A bell over the door tinkled as she and Clark entered. The waitresses glanced over. "Hi, there," the younger one said. "Be right with you."

"Naw; might take awhile," the redhead disagreed. "We're awful busy. See?" She swept an arm at the room, deserted as only a small-town restaurant can be as the afternoon balances perfectly between lunch and dinner, and laughed cheerily at her own witticism. Like her voice, the laugh had a husky, splintered quality that Mary associated with Scotch and cigarettes. *But it's a voice I know*, she thought. *I'd swear it is.*

She turned to Clark and saw he was staring at the waitresses, who had resumed their conversation, as if hypnotized. She had to tug his sleeve to get his attention, then tug it again when he headed for the tables grouped on the left side of the room. She wanted them to sit at the counter. She wanted to get their damned sodas in take-out cups and then blow this joint.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Nothing," he said. "I guess."

"You looked like you swallowed your tongue, or something."

"For a second or two it felt like I had," he said, and before she could ask him to explain, he had diverted to look at the jukebox.

Mary sat down at the counter.

“Be right with you, ma’am,” the younger waitress repeated, and then bent closer to hear something else her whiskey-voiced colleague was saying. Looking at her face, Mary guessed the younger woman wasn’t really very interested in what the older one had to say.

“Mary, this is a great juke!” Clark said, sounding delighted. “It’s all fifties stuff! The Moonglows . . . The Five Satins . . . Shep and the Limelites . . . La Vern Baker! Jeez, La Vern Baker singing ‘Tweedlee Dee’! I haven’t heard that one since I was a kid!”

“Well, save your money. We’re just getting take-out drinks, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He gave the Rock-Ola one last look, blew out an irritated breath, and then joined her at the counter. Mary pulled a menu out of the bracket by the salt and pepper shakers, mostly so she wouldn’t have to look at the frown-line between his eyes and the way his lower lip stuck out. *Look*, he was saying without saying a word (this, she had discovered, was one of the more questionable long-term effects of being married). *I won our way through the wilderness while you slept, killed the buffalo, fought the Injuns, brought you safe and sound to this nifty little oasis in the wilderness, and what thanks do I get? You won’t even let me play “Tweedlee Dee” on the jukebox!*

*Never mind*, she thought. *We’ll be gone soon, so never mind.*

Good advice. She followed it by turning her full attention to the menu. It harmonized with the rayon uniforms, the neon clock, the juke, and the general decor (which, while admirably subdued, could still only be described as Mid-Century Rebop). The hot dog wasn’t a hot dog; it was a Hound Dog. The cheeseburger was a Chubby Checker and the double cheeseburger was a Big Bopper. The specialty of the house was a loaded pizza; the menu promised “Everything on It But the (Sam) Cooke!”

“Cute,” she said. “Poppa-ooo-mow-mow, and all that.”

“What?” Clark asked, and she shook her head.

The young waitress came over, taking her order pad out of her apron pocket. She gave them a smile, but Mary thought it was perfunctory; the woman looked both tired and unwell. There was a cold sore perched above her upper lip, and her slightly bloodshot eyes moved restlessly about the room. They touched on everything, it seemed, but her customers.

“Help you folks?”

Clark moved to take the menu from Mary’s hand. She held it away from him and said, “A large Pepsi and a large ginger ale. To go, please.”

“Y’all oughtta try the cherry pie!” the redhead called over in her hoarse voice. The younger woman flinched at the sound of it. “Rick just made it! You gonna think you died and went to heaven!” She grinned at them and placed her hands on her hips. “Well, y’all *are* in Heaven, but you know what I mean.”

“Thank you,” Mary said, “but we’re really in a hurry, and—”

“Sure, why not?” Clark said in a musing, distant voice. “Two pieces of cherry pie.”

Mary kicked his ankle—*hard*—but Clark didn’t seem to notice. He was staring at the redhead again, and now his mouth was hung on a spring. The redhead was clearly aware of his gaze, but she didn’t seem to mind. She reached up with one hand and lazily fluffed her improbable hair.

“Two sodas to go, two pieces of pie for here,” the young waitress said. She gave them another nervous smile while her restless eyes examined Mary’s wedding ring, the sugar shaker, one of the overhead fans. “You want that pie à la mode?” She bent and put two napkins and two forks on the counter.

“Y—” Clark began, and Mary overrode him firmly and quickly. “*No.*”

The chrome pie case was behind the far end of the counter. As soon as the waitress walked away in that direction, Mary leaned over and hissed: “Why are you doing this to me, Clark? You *know* I want to get out of here!”

“That waitress. The redhead. Is she—”

“And stop staring at her!” Mary whispered fiercely. “You look like a kid trying to peek up some girl’s skirt in study hall!”

He pulled his eyes away . . . but with an effort. “Is she the spit-image of Janis Joplin, or am I crazy?”

Startled, Mary cast another glance at the redhead. She had turned away slightly to speak to the short-order cook through the pass-through, but Mary could still see at least two-thirds of her face, and that was enough. She felt an almost audible click in her head as she superimposed the face of the redhead over the face on record albums she still owned—vinyl albums pressed in a year when nobody owned Sony Walkmen and the concept of the compact disc would have seemed like science fiction, record albums now packed away in

cardboard boxes from the neighborhood liquor mart and stowed in some dusty attic alcove; record albums with names like *Big Brother and the Holding Company*, *Cheap Thrills*, and *Pearl*. And the face of Janis Joplin—that sweet, homely face which had grown old and harsh and wounded far too soon. Clark was right; this woman’s face was the spitting image of the face on those old albums.

Except it was more than the face, and Mary felt fear swarm into her chest, making her heart feel suddenly light and stuttery and dangerous.

It was the *voice*.

In the ear of her memory she heard Janis’s chilling, spiraling howl at the beginning of “Piece of My Heart.” She laid that bluesy, boozy shout over the redhead’s Scotch-and-Marlboros voice, just as she had laid one face over the other, and knew that if the waitress began to sing that song, her voice would be identical to the voice of the dead girl from Texas.

*Because she is the dead girl from Texas. Congratulations, Mary—you had to wait until you were thirty-two, but you’ve finally made the grade; you’ve finally seen your first ghost.*

She tried to dispute the idea, tried to suggest to herself that a combination of factors, not the least of them being the stress of getting lost, had caused her to make too much of a chance resemblance, but these rational thoughts had no chance against the dead certainty in her guts: she was seeing a ghost.

Life within her body underwent a strange and sudden sea-change. Her heart sped up from a beat to a sprint; it felt like a pumped-up runner bursting out of the blocks in an Olympic heat. Adrenaline dumped, simultaneously tightening her stomach and heating her diaphragm like a swallow of brandy. She could feel sweat in her armpits and moisture at her temples. Most amazing of all was the way color seemed to pour into the world, making everything—the neon around the clock-face, the stainless-steel pass-through to the kitchen, the sprays of revolving color behind the juke’s facade—seem simultaneously unreal and *too* real. She could hear the fans paddling the air overhead, a low, rhythmic sound like a hand stroking silk, and smell the aroma of old fried meat rising from the unseen grill in the next room. And at the same time, she suddenly felt herself on the edge of losing her balance on the stool and swooning to the floor in a dead faint.

*Get hold of yourself, woman!* she told herself frantically. *You're having a panic attack, that's all—no ghosts, no goblins, no demons, just a good old-fashioned whole-body panic attack, you've had them before, at the start of big exams in college, the first day of teaching at school, and that time before you had to speak to the P.T.A. You know what it is and you can deal with it. No one's going to do any fainting around here, so just get hold of yourself, do you hear me?*

She crossed her toes inside her low-topped sneakers and squeezed them as hard as she could, concentrating on the sensation, using it in an effort to draw herself back to reality and away from that too-bright place she knew was the threshold of a faint.

“Honey?” Clark’s voice, from far away. “You all right?”

“Yes, fine.” Her voice was also coming from far away . . . but she knew it was closer than it would have been if she’d tried to speak even fifteen seconds ago. Still pressing her crossed toes tightly together, she picked up the napkin the waitress had left, wanting to feel its texture—it was another connection to the world and another way to break the panicky, irrational (it *was* irrational, wasn’t it? surely it was) feeling which had gripped her so strongly. She raised it toward her face, meaning to wipe her brow with it, and saw there was something written on the underside in ghostly pencil strokes that had torn the fragile paper into little puffs. Mary read this message, printed in jagged capital letters:

GET OUT WHILE YOU STILL CAN.

“Mare? What is it?”

The waitress with the cold sore and the restless, scared eyes was coming back with their pie. Mary dropped the napkin into her lap. “Nothing,” she said calmly. As the waitress set the plates in front of them, Mary forced herself to catch the girl’s eyes with her own. “Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t mention it,” the girl mumbled, looking directly at Mary for only a moment before her eyes began to skate aimlessly around the room again.

“Changed your mind about the pie, I see,” her husband was saying in his most infuriatingly indulgent Clark Knows Best voice. *Women!* this tone said. *Gosh, aren't they something? Sometimes just leading them to the waterhole isn't enough—you gotta hold their heads down to get em started. All part of the job. It isn't easy being a man, but I do my goldurn best.*

“Well, it looks awfully good,” she said, marvelling at the even tone of her voice. She smiled at him brightly, aware that the redhead who looked like Janis Joplin was keeping an eye on them.

“I can’t get over how much she looks like—” Clark began, and this time Mary kicked his ankle as hard as she could, no fooling around. He drew in a hurt, hissing breath, eyes popping wide, but before he could say anything, she shoved the napkin with its penciled message into his hand.

He bent his head. Looked at it. And Mary found herself praying—really, really praying—for the first time in perhaps twenty years. *Please, God, make him see it’s not a joke. Make him see it’s not a joke because that woman doesn’t just look like Janis Joplin, that woman is Janis Joplin, and I’ve got a horrible feeling about this town, a really horrible feeling.*

He raised his head and her heart sank. There was confusion on his face, and exasperation, but nothing else. He opened his mouth to speak . . . and it went right on opening until it looked as if someone had removed the pins from the place where his jaws connected.

Mary turned in the direction of his gaze. The short-order cook, dressed in immaculate whites and wearing a little paper cap cocked over one eye, had come out of the kitchen and was leaning against the tiled wall with his arms folded across his chest. He was talking to the redhead while the younger waitress stood by, watching them with a combination of terror and weariness.

*If she doesn’t get out of here soon, it’ll just be weariness, Mary thought. Or maybe apathy.*

The cook was almost impossibly handsome—so handsome that Mary found herself unable to accurately assess his age. Between thirty-five and forty-five, probably, but that was the best she could do. Like the redhead, he looked familiar. He glanced up at them, disclosing a pair of wide-set blue eyes fringed with gorgeous thick lashes, and smiled briefly at them before returning his attention to the redhead. He said something that made her caw raucous laughter.

“My God, that’s Rick Nelson,” Clark whispered. “It can’t be, it’s impossible, he died in a plane crash six or seven years ago, but it *is*.”

Mary opened her mouth to say he must be mistaken, ready to brand such an idea ludicrous even though she herself now found it impossible to believe

that the redheaded waitress was anyone but the years-dead blues shouter Janis Joplin. Before she could say anything, that click—the one which turned vague resemblance into positive identification—came again. Clark had been able to put the name to the face first because Clark was nine years older, Clark had been listening to the radio and watching *American Bandstand* back when Rick Nelson had been Ricky Nelson and songs like “Be-Bop Baby” and “Lonesome Town” were happening hits, not just dusty artifacts restricted to the golden oldie stations which catered to the now-graying baby boomers. Clark saw it first, but now that he had pointed it out to her, she could not unsee it.

What had the redheaded waitress said? *Y'all oughtta try the cherry pie! Rick just made it!*

There, not twenty feet away, the fatal plane crash victim was telling a joke—probably a dirty one, from the looks on their faces—to the fatal drug o.d.

The redhead threw back her head and bellowed her rusty laugh at the ceiling again. The cook smiled, the dimples at the corners of his full lips deepening prettily. And the younger waitress, the one with the coldsore and the haunted eyes, glanced over at Clark and Mary, as if to ask *Are you watching this? Are you seeing this?*

Clark was still staring at the cook and the waitress with that alarming expression of dazed knowledge, his face so long and drawn that it looked like something glimpsed in a funhouse mirror.

*They'll see that, if they haven't already, Mary thought, and we'll lose any chance we still have of getting out of this nightmare. I think you better take charge of this situation, kiddo, and quick. The question is, what are you going to do?*

She reached for his hand, meaning to grab it and squeeze it, then decided that wouldn't do enough to alter his slack-jawed expression. She reached further and squeezed his balls instead. . . as hard as she dared. Clark jerked as if someone had zapped him with a laser and swung toward her so fast he almost fell off his stool.

“I left my wallet in the car,” she said. Her voice sounded brittle and too loud in her own ears. “Would you get it for me, Clark?”

She looked at him, lips smiling, eyes locked on his with complete concentration. She had read, probably in some shit-intensive woman's magazine while waiting to get her hair done, that when you lived with the

same man for ten or twenty years, you forged a low-grade telepathic link with your partner. This link, the article went on to suggest, came in mighty handy when your hubby was bringing the boss home to dinner without phoning ahead or when you wanted him to bring a bottle of Amaretto from the liquor store and a carton of whipping cream from the supermarket. Now she tried—tried with all her might—to send a far more important message.

*Go, Clark. Please go. I'll give you ten seconds, then come on the run. And if you're not in the driver's seat with the key in the ignition, I have a feeling we could be seriously fucked here.*

And at the same time, a deeper Mary was saying timidly: *This is all a dream, isn't it? I mean . . . it is, isn't it?*

Clark was looking at her carefully, his eyes watering from the tweak she had given him . . . but at least he wasn't complaining about it. His eyes shifted to the redhead and the short-order cook for a moment, saw they were still deep in their own conversation (now *she* appeared to be the one who was telling a joke), and then shifted back to her.

"It might have slid under the seat," she said in her too-loud, too-brittle voice before he could reply. "It's the red one."

After another moment of silence—one that seemed to last forever—Clark nodded slightly. "Okay," he said, and she could have blessed him for his nicely normal tone, "but no fair stealing my pie while I'm gone."

"Just get back before I finish mine and you'll be okay," she said, and tucked a forkful of cherry pie into her mouth. It had absolutely no taste at all to her, but she smiled. God, yes. Smiled like the Miss New York Apple Queen she had once been.

Clark started to get off his stool, and then, from somewhere outside, came a series of amplified guitar chops—not chords but only open strums. Clark jerked, and Mary shot out one hand to clutch his arm. Her heart, which had been slowing down, broke into that nasty, scary sprint again.

The redhead and the cook—even the younger waitress, who, thankfully, didn't look like anyone famous—glanced casually toward the plate-glass windows of the Rock-a-Boogie.

"Don't let it get you, hon," the redhead said. "They're just startin to tune up for the concert tonight."

“That’s right,” the short-order cook said. He regarded Mary with his drop-dead blue eyes. “We have a concert here in town most every night.”

*Yes, Mary thought. Of course. Of course you do.*

A voice both toneless and godlike rolled across from the town common, a voice almost loud enough to rattle the windows. Mary, who had been to her share of rock shows, was able to place it in a clear context at once—it called up images of bored, long-haired roadies strolling around the stage before the lights went down, picking their way with easy grace between the forests of amps and mikes, kneeling every now and then to patch two power-cords together.

*“Test!”* this voice cried. *“Test-one, test-one, test-one!”*

Another guitar chop, still not a chord but close this time. Then a drum-run. Then a fast trumpet riff lifted from the chorus of “Instant Karma,” accompanied by a light rumble of bongos. CONCERT TONIGHT, the Norman Rockwell sign over the Norman Rockwell town common had said, and Mary, who had grown up in Elmira, New York, had been to quite a few free concerts-on-the-green as a child. Those really *had* been Norman Rockwell concerts, with the band (made up of guys wearing their Volunteer Fire Department kit in lieu of the band uniforms they couldn’t afford) tootling their way through slightly off-key Sousa marches and the local Barber Shop Quartet (Plus Two) harmonizing on things like “Shenandoah” and “I’ve Got a Gal from Kalamazoo.”

She had an idea that the concerts in Rock and Roll Heaven might be quite different from those childhood musicales where she and her friends had run around waving sparklers as twilight drew on for night.

She had an idea that *these* concerts-on-the-green might be closer to Goya than to Rockwell.

“I’ll go get your wallet,” he said. “Enjoy your pie.”

“Thank you, Clark.” She put another tasteless forkful of pie in her mouth and watched him head for the door. He walked in an exaggerated slow-motion saunter that struck her feverish eye as absurd and somehow horrid: *I don’t have the slightest idea that I’m sharing this room with a couple of famous corpses*, Clark’s ambling, sauntering stride was saying. *What, me worry?*

*Hurry up!* she wanted to scream. *Forget about the gunslinger strut and move your ass!*

The bell jingled and the door opened as Clark reached for the knob, and two more dead Texans came in. The one wearing the dark glasses was Roy Orbison. The one wearing the hornrims was Buddy Holly.

*All my exes come from Texas*, Mary thought wildly, and waited for them to lay their hands on her husband and drag him away.

“ ‘Scuse me, sir,” the man in the dark glasses said politely, and instead of grabbing Clark, he stepped aside for him. Clark nodded without speaking—Mary was suddenly quite sure he *couldn't* speak—and stepped out into the sunshine.

Leaving her alone in here with the dead. And that thought seemed to lead naturally to another one, even more horrible: Clark was going to drive off without her. She was suddenly sure of it. Not because he wanted to, and certainly not because he was a coward—this situation went beyond questions of courage and cowardice, and she supposed that the only reason they both weren't gibbering and drooling on the floor was because it had developed so *fast*—but because he just wouldn't be able to *do* anything else. The reptile that lived on the floor of his brain, the one in charge of self-preservation, would simply slither out of its hole in the mud and take charge of things.

*You've got to get out of here, Mary*, the voice in her mind—the one that belonged to her own reptile—said, and the tone of that voice frightened her. It was more reasonable than it had any right to be, given the situation, and she had an idea that sweet reason might give way to shrieks of madness at any moment.

Mary took one foot off the rail under the counter and put it on the floor, trying to ready herself mentally for flight as she did so, but before she could gather herself, a narrow hand fell on her shoulder and she looked up into the smiling, knowing face of Buddy Holly.

He had died in 1959, a piece of trivia she remembered from that movie where he had been played by Gary Busey. 1959 was over thirty years gone, but Buddy Holly was still a gawky twenty-three-year-old who looked seventeen, his eyes swimming behind his glasses and his adam's apple bobbing up and down like a monkey on a stick. He was wearing an ugly plaid jacket and a string tie. The tie's clasp was a large chrome steer-head. The face and the taste of a country bumpkin, you would have said, but there was something in the set of

the mouth that was too wise, somehow, too *dark*, and for a moment the hand gripped her shoulder so tightly she could feel the tough pads of callus on the ends of the fingers—guitar calluses.

“Hey there, sweet thang,” he said, and she could smell clove gum on his breath. There was a silvery crack, hair-thin, zigzagging across the left lens of his glasses. “Ain’t seen *you* roun’ these parts before.”

Incredibly, she was lifting another forkful of pie toward her mouth, her hand not hesitating even when a clot of cherry filling plopped back onto her plate. More incredibly, she was slipping the fork through a small, polite smile.

“No,” she said. She was somehow positive that she couldn’t let this man see she had recognized him; if he did, any small chance she and Clark might still have would evaporate. “My husband and I are just . . . you know, passing through.”

And was Clark passing through even now, desperately keeping to the posted speed limit while the sweat trickled down his face and his eyes rolled back and forth from the mirror to the windshield and back to the mirror again? Was he?

The man in the plaid sportcoat grinned, revealing teeth that were too big and much too sharp. “Yep, I know how that is, all right—y’all seen hoot, n now you’re on your way to holler. That about the size of it?”

“I thought *this* was hoot,” Mary said primly, and that made the newcomers first look at each other, eyebrows raised, and then shout with laughter. The young waitress looked from one to the other with her frightened, bloodshot eyes.

“That ain’t half-bad,” Buddy Holly said. “You and y’man ought to think about hangin on a little while, though. Stay for the concert tonight, at least. We put on one heckuva show, if I do say so myself.” Mary suddenly realized that the eye behind the cracked lens had filled up with blood. As Holly’s grin widened, pushing the corners of his eyes into a squint, a single scarlet drop spilled over his lower lid and tracked down his cheek like a tear. “Isn’t that right, Roy?”

“Yes, ma’am, it is,” the man in the shades said. “You have to see it to believe it.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” Mary said faintly. Yes, Clark was gone. She was sure of it now. The Testosterone Kid had run like a rabbit, and she supposed that soon

enough the frightened young girl with the cold sore would lead her into the back room, where her own rayon uniform and order pad would be waiting.

“It’s somethin to write home about,” Holly told her proudly. “I mean to *say*.” The drop of blood fell from his face and pinked onto the seat of the stool Clark had so recently vacated. “Stick around. You’ll be glad y’did.” He looked to his friend for support.

The man in the dark glasses had joined the cook and the waitresses; he dropped his hand onto the hip of the redhead, who put her own hand over it and smiled up at him. Mary saw that the nails on the woman’s short, stubby fingers had been gnawed to the quick. A Maltese cross hung in the open V of Roy Orbison’s shirt. He nodded and flashed a smile of his own. “Love to have you, ma’am, and not just for the night, either—draw up and set a spell, we used to say down home.”

“I’ll ask my husband,” she heard herself saying, and completed the thought in her mind: *If I ever see him again, that is.*

“You do that, sugarpie!” Holly told her. “You just do that very thing!” Then, incredibly, he was giving her shoulder one final squeeze and walking away, leaving her a clear path to the door. Even more incredibly, she could see the Mercedes’s distinctive grille and peace-sign hood ornament still outside.

Buddy joined his friend Roy, winked at him (producing another bloody tear), then reached behind Janis and goosed her. She screamed indignantly, and as she did, a flood of maggots flew from her mouth. Most struck the floor between her feet, but some clung to her lower lip, squirming obscenely.

The young waitress turned away with a sad, sick grimace, raising one blocking hand to her face. And for Mary Willingham, who suddenly understood they had very likely been playing with her all along, running ceased to be something she had planned and became an instinctive reaction. She was up and off the stool like a shot and sprinting for the door.

“Hey!” the redhead screamed. “Hey, you didn’t pay for the pie! Or the sodas, either! This ain’t no Dine and Dash, you crotch! Rick! Buddy! Get her!”

Mary grabbed for the doorknob and felt it slip through her fingers. Behind her, she heard the thump of approaching feet. She grabbed the knob again, succeeded in turning it this time, and yanked the door open so hard she tore off the overhead bell. A narrow hand with hard calluses on the tips of the

fingers grabbed her just above the elbow. This time the fingers were not just squeezing but pinching; she felt a nerve suddenly go critical, first sending a thin wire of pain from her elbow all the way up to the left side of her jaw and then numbing her arm.

She swung her right fist back like a short-handled croquet mallet, connecting with what felt like the thin shield of pelvic bone above a man's groin. There was a pained snort—they could feel pain, apparently, dead or not—and the hand holding her arm loosened. Mary tore free and bolted through the doorway, her hair standing out around her head in a bushy corona of fright.

Her frantic eyes locked on the Mercedes, still parked on the street. She blessed Clark for staying. And he had caught *all* of her brainwave, it seemed; he was sitting behind the wheel instead of grovelling under the passenger seat for her wallet, and he keyed the Princess's engine the moment she came flying out of the Rock-a-Boogie.

The man in the flower-decorated top-hat and his tattooed companion were standing outside the barber shop again, watching expressionlessly as Mary yanked open the passenger door. She thought she now recognized Top-Hat—she had three Lynyrd Skynyrd albums, and she was pretty sure he was Ronnie Van Zant. No sooner had she realized that than she knew who his illustrated companion was: Duane Allman, killed when his motorcycle skidded beneath a tractor-trailer rig twenty years ago. He took something from the pocket of his denim jacket and bit into it. Mary saw with no surprise at all that it was a peach.

Rick Nelson burst out of the Rock-a-Boogie. Buddy Holly was right behind him, the entire left side of his face now drenched in blood.

*"Get in!"* Clark screamed at her. *"Get in the fucking car, Mary!"*

She threw herself into the passenger bucket head-first and he was backing out before she could even make a try at slamming the door. The Princess's rear tires howled and sent up clouds of blue smoke. Mary was thrown forward with neck-snapping force when Clark stamped the brake, and her head connected with the padded dashboard. She groped behind her for the open door as Clark cursed and yanked the transmission down into drive.

Rick Nelson threw himself onto the Princess's gray hood. His eyes blazed. His lips were parted over impossibly white teeth in a hideous grin. His cook's hat had fallen off, and his dark-brown hair hung around his temples in oily snags and corkscrews.

"You're coming to the show!" he yelled.

"*Fuck you!*" Clark yelled back. He found drive and floored the accelerator. The Princess's normally sedate diesel engine gave a low scream and shot forward. The apparition continued to cling to the hood, snarling and grinning in at them.

"*Buckle your seatbelt!*" Clark bellowed at Mary as she sat up.

She snatched the buckle and jammed it home, watching with horrified fascination as the thing on the hood reached forward with its left hand and grabbed the windshield wiper in front of her. It began to haul itself forward. The wiper snapped off. The thing on the hood glanced at it, tossed it overboard, and reached for the wiper on Clark's side.

Before he could get it, Clark tramped on the brake again—this time with both feet. Mary's seatbelt locked, biting painfully into the underside of her left breast. For a moment there was a terrible feeling of *pressure* inside her, as if her guts were being shoved up into the funnel of her throat by a ruthless hand. The thing on the hood was thrown clear of the car and landed in the street. Mary heard a brittle crunching sound, and blood splattered the pavement in a starburst pattern around its head.

She glanced back and saw the others running toward the car. Janis was leading them, her face twisted into a haglike grimace of hate and excitement.

In front of them, the short-order cook sat up with the boneless ease of a puppet. The big grin was still on his face.

"*Clark, they're coming!*" Mary screamed.

He glanced briefly into the rear-view, then floored the accelerator again. The Princess leaped ahead. Mary had time to see the man sitting in the street raise one arm to shield his face, and wished that was all she'd had time to see, but there was something else, as well, something worse: beneath the shadow of his raised arm, she saw he was still grinning.

Then two tons of German engineering hit him and bore him under. There were crackling sounds that reminded her of a couple of kids rolling in a pile of

autumn leaves. She clapped her hands over her ears—too late, too late—and screamed.

“Don’t bother,” Clark said. He was looking grimly into the rear-view mirror. “We couldn’t have hurt him too badly—he’s getting up again.”

“*What?*”

“Except for the tire-track across his shirt, he’s—” He broke off abruptly, looking at her. “Who hit you, Mary?”

“What?”

“Your mouth is bleeding. Who hit you?”

She put a finger to the corner of her mouth, looked at the red smear on it, then tasted it. “Not blood—pie,” she said, and uttered a desperate, cracked laugh. “Get us out of here, Clark, please get us out.”

“You bet,” he said, and turned his attention back to Main Street, which was wide and—for the time being, at least—empty. Mary noticed that, guitars and amps on the town common or not, there were no power-lines on Main Street, either. She had no idea where Rock and Roll Heaven was getting its power (well . . . maybe *some* idea), but it certainly wasn’t from Central Oregon Power and Light.

The Princess was gaining speed as all diesels seem to—not fast, but with a kind of relentless strength—and chumming a dark brown cloud of exhaust behind her. Mary caught a blurred glimpse of a department store, a bookstore, and a maternity shop called Rock and Roll Lullabye. She saw a young man with shoulder-length brown curls standing outside The Rock Em & Sock Em Billiards Emporium, his arms folded across his chest and one snakeskin boot propped against the whitewashed brick. His face was handsome in a heavy, pouting way, and Mary recognized him at once.

So did Clark. “That was the Lizard King himself,” he said in a dry, emotionless voice.

“I know. I saw.”

Yes—she saw, but the images were like dry paper bursting into flame under a relentless, focused light which seemed to fill her mind; it was as if the intensity of her horror had turned her into a human magnifying glass, and she understood that if they got out of here, no memories of this Peculiar Little Town would remain; the memories would be just ashes blowing in the wind.

That was the way these things worked, of course. A person could not retain such hellish images, such hellish *experiences*, and remain rational, so the mind turned into a blast-furnace, crisping each one as soon as it was created.

*That must be why most people can still afford the luxury of disbelieving in ghosts and haunted houses, she thought. Because when the mind is turned toward the terrifying and the irrational, like someone who is turned and made to look upon the face of Medusa, it forgets. It has to forget. And God! Except for getting out of this hell, forgetting is the only thing in the world I want.*

She saw a little cluster of people standing on the tarmac of a Cities Service station at an intersection near the far end of town. They wore frightened, ordinary faces above faded ordinary clothes. A man in an oil-stained mechanic's coverall. A woman in a nurse's uniform—white once, maybe, now a dingy gray. An older couple, she in orthopedic shoes and he with a hearing aid in one ear, clinging to each other like children who fear they are lost in the deep dark woods. Mary understood without needing to be told that these people, along with the younger waitress, were the *real* residents of Rock and Roll Heaven, Oregon. They had been caught the way a pitcher-plant catches bugs.

"*Please* get us out of here, Clark," she said. "*Please.*" Something tried to come up her throat and she clapped her hands over her mouth, sure she was going to upchuck. Instead of vomiting, she uttered a loud belch that burned her throat like fire and tasted of the pie she had eaten in the Rock-a-Boogie.

"We'll be okay. Take it easy, Mary."

The road—she could no longer think of it as Main Street now that she could see the end of town just ahead—ran past the Rock and Roll Heaven Municipal Fire Department on the left and the school on the right (even in her heightened state of terror, there seemed something existential about a citadel of learning called the Rock and Roll Grammar School). Three children stood in the playground adjacent to the school, watching with apathetic eyes as the Princess tore past. Up ahead, the road curved around an outcrop with a guitar-shaped sign planted on it: YOU ARE NOW LEAVING ROCK AND ROLL HEAVEN • GOODNIGHT SWEETHEART GOODNIGHT.

Clark swung the Princess into the curve without slowing, and on the far side, there was a bus blocking the road.

It was no ordinary yellow schoolbus like the one they had seen in the distance as they entered town; this one raved and rioted with a hundred colors and a thousand psychedelic swoops, an oversized souvenir of the Summer of Love. The windows flocked with butterfly decals and peace signs, and even as Clark screamed and brought his feet down on the brake, she read, with a fatalistic lack of surprise, the words floating up the painted side like overfilled dirigibles: THE MAGIC BUS.

Clark gave it his best, but wasn't quite able to stop. The Princess slid into The Magic Bus at ten or fifteen miles an hour, her wheels locked and her tires smoking fiercely. There was a hollow bang as the Mercedes hit the tie-dyed bus amidships. Mary was thrown forward against her safety harness again. The bus rocked on its springs a little, but that was all.

"Back up and go around!" she screamed at Clark, but she was nearly overwhelmed by a suffocating intuition that it was all over. The Princess's engine sounded choppy, and Mary could see steam escaping from around the front of her crumpled hood; it looked like the breath of a wounded dragon. When Clark dropped the transmission lever down into reverse, the car backfired twice, shuddered like an old wet dog, and stalled.

Behind them, they could hear an approaching siren. She wondered who the town constable would turn out to be. Not John Lennon, whose life's motto had been Question Authority, and not the Lizard King, who was clearly one of the town's pool-shooting bad boys. Who? And did it really matter? *Maybe*, she thought, *it'll turn out to be Jimi Hendrix*. That sounded crazy, but she knew her rock and roll, probably better than Clark, and she remembered reading somewhere that Hendrix had been a jump-jockey in the 101st Airborne. And didn't they say that ex-service people often made the best law-enforcement officials?

*You're going crazy*, she told herself, then nodded. Sure she was. In a way it was a relief. "What now?" she asked Clark dully.

He opened his door, having to put his shoulder into it because it had crimped a little in the frame. "We run," he said.

"What's the point?"

"You saw them; do you want to *be* them?"

That rekindled some of her fear. She released the clasp of her seatbelt and opened her own door. Clark came around the Princess and took her hand. As they turned back toward The Magic Bus, his grip tightened painfully as he saw who was stepping off—a tall man in an open-throated white shirt, dark dungarees, and wrap-around sunglasses. His blue-black hair was combed back from his temples in a lush and impeccable duck's ass 'do. There was no mistaking those impossible, almost hallucinatory good looks; not even sunglasses could hide them. The full lips parted in a small, sly smile.

A blue-and-white police cruiser with ROCK AND ROLL HEAVEN P.D. written on the doors came around the curve and screeched to a stop inches from the Princess's back bumper. The man behind the wheel was black, but he wasn't Jimi Hendrix after all. Mary couldn't be sure, but she thought the local law was Otis Redding.

The man in the shades and black jeans was now standing directly in front of them, his thumbs hooked into his belt-loops, his pale hands dangling like dead spiders. "How y'all t'day?" There was no mistaking that slow, slightly sardonic Memphis drawl, either. "Want to welcome you both to town. Hope you can stay with us for awhile. Town ain't much to look at, but we're neighborly, and we take care of our own." He stuck out a hand on which three absurdly large rings glittered. "I'm the mayor round these parts. Name's Elvis Presley."

• • •

Dusk, of a summer night.

As they walked onto the town common, Mary was again reminded of the concerts she had attended in Elmira as a child, and she felt a pang of nostalgia and sorrow penetrate the cocoon of shock which her mind and emotions had wrapped around her. So similar . . . but so different, too. There were no children waving sparklers; the only kids present were a dozen or so huddled together as far from the bandshell as they could get, their pale faces strained and watchful. The kids she and Clark had seen in the grammar-school play-yard when they made their abortive run for the hills were among them.

And it was no quaint brass band that was going to play in fifteen minutes or half an hour, either—spread across the band-shell (which looked almost as big

as the Hollywood Bowl to Mary's eyes) were the implements and accessories of what had to be the world's biggest—and loudest, judging from the amps—rock-and-roll band, an apocalyptic bebop combination that would, at full throttle, probably be loud enough to shatter window-glass five miles away. She counted a dozen guitars on stands and stopped counting. There were four full drum-sets . . . bongos . . . congas . . . a rhythm section . . . circular stage pop-ups where the backup singers would stand . . . a steel grove of mikes.

The common itself was filled with folding chairs—Mary estimated somewhere between seven hundred and a thousand—but she thought there were no more than fifty spectators actually present, and probably less. She saw the mechanic, now dressed in clean jeans and a Perma-Pressed shirt; the pale, once-pretty woman sitting next to him was probably his wife. The nurse was sitting all by herself in the middle of a long empty row. Her face was turned upward and she was watching the first few glimmering stars come out. Mary looked away from this one; she felt if she looked at that sad, longing face too deeply, her heart would break.

Of the town's more famous residents there was currently no sign. Of course not; their day-jobs were behind them now and they would all be backstage, duding up and checking their cues. Getting ready for tonight's rilly big shew.

Clark paused about a quarter of the way down the grassy central aisle. A puff of evening breeze tousled his hair, and Mary thought it looked as dry as straw. There were lines carved into Clark's forehead and around his mouth that she had never seen before. He looked as if he had lost thirty pounds since lunch in Oakridge. The Testosterone Kid was nowhere in evidence, and Mary had an idea he might be gone for good. She found she didn't care much, one way or the other.

*And by the way, sugarpie-honeybunch, how do you think you look?*

"Where do you want to sit?" Clark asked. His voice was thin and uninterested—the voice of a man who still believes he might be dreaming.

Mary spotted the waitress with the coldsore. She was on the aisle about four rows down, now dressed in a light-gray blouse and cotton skirt. She had thrown a sweater over her shoulders. "There," Mary said, "beside her." Clark led her in that direction without question or objection.

The waitress looked around at Mary and Clark, and Mary saw that her eyes had at least settled down tonight, which was something of a relief. A moment later she realized why: the girl was cataclysmically stoned. Mary looked down, not wanting to meet that dusty stare any longer, and when she did, she saw that the waitress's left hand was wrapped in a bulky white bandage. Mary realized with horror that at least one finger and perhaps two were gone from the girl's hand.

"Hi," the girl said. "I'm Sissy Thomas."

"Hello, Sissy. I'm Mary Willingham. This is my husband, Clark."

"Pleased to meet you," the waitress said.

"Your hand . . ." Mary trailed off, not sure how to go on.

"Frankie did it." Sissy spoke with the deep indifference of one who is riding the pink horse down Dream Street. "Frankie Lymon. Everyone says he was the sweetest guy you'd ever want to meet when he was alive and he only turned mean when he came here. He was one of the first ones . . . the pioneers, I guess you'd say. I don't know about that. If he was sweet before, I mean. I only know he's meaner than cat-dirt now. I don't care. I only wish you'd gotten away, and I'd do it again. Besides, Crystal takes care of me."

Sissy nodded toward the nurse, who had stopped looking at the stars and was now looking at them.

"Crystal takes real good care. She'll fix you up, if you want—you don't need to lose no fingers to want to get stoned in this town."

"My wife and I don't use drugs," Clark said, sounding pompous.

Sissy regarded him without speaking for a few moments. Then she said, "You will."

"When does the show start?" Mary could feel the cocoon of shock starting to dissolve, and she didn't much care for the feeling.

"Soon."

"How long do they go on?"

Sissy didn't answer for nearly a minute, and Mary was getting ready to restate the question, thinking the girl either hadn't heard or hadn't understood, when she said: "A long time. I mean, the show will be over by midnight, they always are, it's a town ordinance, but still . . . they go on a long time. Because

time is different here. It might be . . . oh, I dunno . . . I think when the guys really get cooking, they sometimes go on for a year or more.”

A cold gray frost began creeping up Mary’s arms and back. She tried to imagine having to sit through a year-long rock show and couldn’t do it. *This is a dream and you’ll wake up*, she told herself, but that thought, persuasive enough as they stood listening to Elvis Presley in the sunlight by The Magic Bus, was now losing a lot of its force and believability.

“Drivin out this road here wouldn’t do you no good nohow,” Elvis had told them. “It don’t go noplac but Umpqua Swamp. No roads in there, just a lot of polk salad. And quicksand.” He had paused then, the lenses of his shades glittering like dark furnaces in the late-afternoon sun. “And other things.”

“Bears,” the policeman who might be Otis Redding had volunteered from behind them.

“Bears, yep,” Elvis agreed, and then his lips had curled up in the too-knowing smile Mary remembered so well from TV and the movies. “And other things.”

Mary had begun: “If we stay for the show . . .”

Elvis nodded emphatically. “The show! Oh yeah, you *gotta* stay for the show! We really rock. You just see if we don’t.”

“Ain’t nothin but a stone fact,” the policeman had added.

“If we stay for the show . . . can we go when it’s over?”

Elvis and the cop had exchanged a glance that had looked serious but felt like a smile. “Well, you know, ma’am,” the erstwhile King of Rock and Roll said at last, “we’re real far out in the boonies here, and attractin an audience is kinda slow work. . . although once they hear us, *ever* body stays around for more . . . and we was kinda hopin you’d stick around yourselves for awhile. See a few shows and kind of enjoy our hospitality.” He had pushed his sunglasses up on his forehead then, for a moment revealing wrinkled, empty eyesockets. Then they were Elvis’s dark-blue eyes again, regarding them with somber interest.

“I think,” he had said, “you might even decide you want to settle down.”

• • •

There were more stars in the sky now; it was almost full dark. Over the stage, orange spots were coming on, soft as night-blooming flowers, illuminating the mike-stands one by one.

“They gave us jobs,” Clark said dully. “*He* gave us jobs. The mayor. The one who looks like Elvis Presley.”

“He *is* Elvis,” Sissy Thomas said, but Clark just went on staring at the stage. He was not prepared to even *think* this yet, let alone hear it.

“Mary is supposed to go to work in the Be-Bop Beauty Bar tomorrow,” he went on. “She has an English degree and a teacher’s certificate, but she’s supposed to spend the next God-knows-how-long as a shampoo girl. Then he looked at me and he says, ‘Whuh bou-*chew*, sir? Whuh-*chore* speciality?’ ” Clark spoke in a vicious imitation of the mayor’s Memphis drawl, and at last a genuine expression began to show in the waitress’s stoned eyes. Mary thought it was fear.

“You hadn’t ought to make fun,” she said. “Makin fun can get you in trouble around here . . . and you don’t want to get in trouble.” She slowly raised her bandage-wrapped hand. Clark stared at it, wet lips quivering, until she lowered it into her lap again, and when he spoke again, it was in a lower voice.

“I told him I was a computer software expert, and he said there weren’t any computers in town. . . although they ‘sho would admiah to git a Ticketron outlet or two.’ Then the other guy laughed and said there was a stockboy’s job open down at the superette, and—”

A bright white spotlight speared the forestage. A short man in a sportcoat so wild it made Buddy Holly’s look tame strode into its beam, his hands raised as if to stifle a huge comber of applause.

“Who’s that?” Mary asked Sissy.

“Some oldtime disc jockey who used to run a lot of these shows. His name is Alan Tweed or Alan Breed or something like that. We hardly ever see him except here. I think he drinks. He sleeps all day—that I *do* know.”

And as soon as the name was out of the girl’s mouth, the cocoon which had sheltered Mary disappeared and the last of her disbelief melted away. She and Clark *had* stumbled into Rock and Roll Heaven, but it was actually Rock and Roll Hell. This had not happened because they were evil people; it had not

happened because the old gods were punishing them; it had happened because they had gotten lost in the woods, that was all, and getting lost in the woods was a thing that could happen to anybody.

“*Got a great show forya tonight!*” the emcee was shouting enthusiastically into his mike. “*We got the Big Bopper. . . Freddie Mercury, just in from London-Town . . . Jim Croce . . . my main man Johnny Ace . . .*”

Mary leaned toward the girl. “How long have you been here, Sissy?”

“I don’t know. It’s easy to lose track of time. Six years at least. Or maybe it’s eight. Or nine.”

“. . . *Keith Moon of The Who . . . Brian Jones of the Stones . . . that cute li’l Florence Ballard of the Supremes . . . Mary Wells . . .*”

Articulating her worst fear, Mary asked: “How old were you when you came?”

“*Cass Elliot . . . Janis Joplin . . .*”

“Twenty-three.”

“*King Curtis . . . Johnny Burnette . . .*”

“And how old are you now?”

“*Slim Harpo . . . Bob ‘Bear’ Hite . . . Stevie Ray Vaughan . . .*”

“Twenty-three,” Sissy told her, and on stage Alan Freed went on screaming names at the almost empty town common as the stars came out, first a hundred stars, then a thousand, then too many to count, stars that had come out of the blue and now glittered everywhere in the black; he tolled the names of the drug o.d.’s, the alcohol o.d.’s, the plane crash victims and the shooting victims, the ones who had been found in alleys and the ones who had been found in swimming pools and the ones who had been found in roadside ditches with steering columns poking out of their chests and most of their heads torn off their shoulders; he chanted the names of the young ones and the old ones, but mostly they were the young ones, and as he spoke the names of Ronnie Van Zant and Steve Gaines, she heard the words of one of their songs tolling in her mind, the one that went *Oooh, that smell, can’t you smell that smell*, and yes, you bet she certainly *could* smell that smell; even out here, in the clear Oregon air, she could smell it and when she took Clark’s hand it was like taking the hand of a corpse.

*“Awwwwwwlllll RIIIIYYYYYGHT!”* Alan Freed was screaming. Behind him, in the darkness, scores of shadows were trooping onto the stage, lit upon their way by roadies with Penlites. *“Are you ready to PAAAARTY?”*

No answer from the scattered spectators on the common, but Freed was waving his hands and laughing as if some vast audience were going crazy with assent. There was just enough light left in the sky for Mary to see the old man reach up and turn off his hearing aid.

*“Are you ready to BOOOOOGIE?”*

This time he *was* answered—by a demonic shriek of saxophones from the shadows behind him.

*“Then let’s go . . . BECAUSE ROCK AND ROLL WILL NEVER DIE!”*

As the show-lights came up and the band swung into the first song of that night’s long, long concert—“I’ll Be Doggone,” with Marvin Gaye doing the vocal—Mary thought: *That’s what I’m afraid of. That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.*

## Home Delivery

Considering that it was probably the end of the world, Maddie Pace thought she was doing a good job. *Hell* of a good job. She thought, in fact, that she just might be coping with the End of Everything better than anyone else on earth. And she was *positive* she was coping better than any other *pregnant* woman on earth.

*Coping.*

Maddie Pace, of all people.

Maddie Pace, who sometimes couldn't sleep if, after a visit from Reverend Johnson, she spied a single speck of dust under the dining-room table. Maddie Pace, who, as Maddie Sullivan, used to drive her fiancé, Jack, crazy when she froze over a menu, debating entrées sometimes for as long as half an hour.

"Maddie, why don't you just flip a coin?" he'd asked her once after she had managed to narrow it down to a choice between the braised veal and the lamb chops, and then could get no further. "I've had five bottles of this goddam German beer already, and if you don't make up y'mind pretty damn quick, there's gonna be a drunk lobsterman *under* the table before we ever get any food *on* it!"

So she had smiled nervously, ordered the braised veal, and spent most of the ride home wondering if the chops might not have been tastier, and therefore a better bargain despite their slightly higher price.

She'd had no trouble coping with Jack's proposal of marriage, however; she'd accepted it—and him—quickly, and with tremendous relief. Following the death of her father, Maddie and her mother had lived an aimless, cloudy sort of life on Little Tall Island, off the coast of Maine. "If I wasn't around to tell them women where to squat and lean against the wheel," George Sullivan had been fond of saying while in his cups and among his friends at Fudgy's Tavern or in the back room of Prout's Barber Shop, "I don't know what'n hell they'd do."

When her father died of a massive coronary, Maddie was nineteen and minding the town library weekday evenings at a salary of \$41.50 a week. Her mother minded the house—or did, that was, when George reminded her (sometimes with a good hard shot to the ear) that she had a house which needed minding.

When the news of his death came, the two women had looked at each other with silent, panicky dismay, two pairs of eyes asking the same question: *What do we do now?*

Neither of them knew, but they both felt—felt strongly—that he had been right in his assessment of them: they needed him. They were just women, and they needed him to tell them not just what to do, but how to do it, as well. They didn't speak of it because it embarrassed them, but there it was—they hadn't the slightest clue as to what came next, and the idea that they were prisoners of George Sullivan's narrow ideas and expectations did not so much as cross their minds. They were not stupid women, either of them, but they *were* island women.

Money wasn't the problem; George had believed passionately in insurance, and when he dropped down dead during the tiebreaker frame of the League Bowl-Offs at Big Duke's Big Ten in Machias, his wife had come into better than a hundred thousand dollars. And island life was cheap, if you owned your place and kept your garden tended and knew how to put by your own vegetables come fall. The *problem* was having nothing to focus on. The *problem* was how the center seemed to have dropped out of their lives when George went facedown in his Island Amoco bowling shirt just over the foul line of lane nineteen (and goddam if he hadn't picked up the spare his team had needed to win, too). With George gone their lives had become an eerie sort of blur.

*It's like being lost in a heavy fog,* Maddie thought sometimes. *Only instead of looking for the road, or a house, or the village, or just some landmark like that lightning-struck pine out on the point, I am looking for the wheel. If I can ever find it, maybe I can tell myself to squat and lean my shoulder to it.*

At last she found her wheel: it turned out to be Jack Pace. Women marry their fathers and men their mothers, some say, and while such a broad statement can hardly be true all of the time, it was close enough for government work in Maddie's case. Her father had been looked upon by his

peers with fear and admiration—“Don’t fool with George Sullivan, dear,” they’d say. “He’ll knock the nose off your face if you so much as look at him wrong.”

It was true at home, too. He’d been domineering and sometimes physically abusive, but he’d also known things to want and work for, like the Ford pick-up, the chainsaw, or those two acres that bounded their place to the south. Pop Cook’s land. George Sullivan had been known to refer to Pop Cook as one armpit-stinky old bastid, but the old man’s aroma didn’t change the fact that there was quite a lot of good hardwood left on those two acres. Pop didn’t know it because he had gone to living across the reach in 1987, when his arthritis really went to town on him, and George let it be known on Little Tall that what that bastid Pop Cook didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him none, and furthermore, he would disjunct the man or woman that let light into the darkness of Pop’s ignorance. No one did, and eventually the Sullivans got the land, and the hardwood on it. Of course the good wood was all logged off inside of three years, but George said that didn’t matter a tinker’s damn; land always paid for itself in the end. That was what George said and they believed him, believed *in* him, and they worked, all three of them. He said: You got to put your shoulder to this wheel and *push* the bitch, you got to push ha’ad because she don’t move easy. So that was what they did.

In those days Maddie’s mother had kept a produce stand on the road from East Head, and there were always plenty of tourists who bought the vegetables she grew (which were the ones George *told* her to grow, of course), and even though they were never exactly what her mother called “the Gotrocks family,” they made out. Even in years when lobstering was bad and they had to stretch their finances even further in order to keep paying off what they owed the bank on Pop Cook’s two acres, they made out.

Jack Pace was a sweeter-tempered man than George Sullivan had ever thought of being, but his sweet temper only stretched so far, even so. Maddie suspected that he might get around to what was sometimes called home correction—the twisted arm when supper was cold, the occasional slap or downright paddling—in time; when the bloom was off the rose, so as to speak. There was even a part of her that seemed to expect and look forward to that. The women’s magazines said marriages where the man ruled the roost were a

thing of the past, and that a man who put a hard hand on a woman should be arrested for assault, even if the man in question was the woman in question's lawful wedded husband. Maddie sometimes read articles of this sort down at the beauty shop, but doubted if the women who wrote them had the slightest idea that places like the outer islands even existed. Little Tall *had* produced one writer, as a matter of fact—Selena St. George—but she wrote mostly about politics and hadn't been back to the island, except for a single Thanksgiving dinner, in years.

"I'm not going to be a lobsterman all my life, Maddie," Jack told her the week before they were married, and she believed him. A year before, when he had asked her out for the first time (she'd said yes almost before all the words could get out of his mouth, and she had blushed to the roots of her hair at the sound of her own naked eagerness), he would have said, "I *ain't* going to be a lobsterman all my life." A small change . . . but all the difference in the world. He had been going to night school three evenings a week, taking the old *Island Princess* over and back. He would be dog-tired after a day of pulling pots, but off he'd go just the same, pausing only long enough to shower off the powerful smells of lobster and brine and to gulp two No Dōz with hot coffee. After awhile, when she saw he really meant to stick to it, Maddie began putting up hot soup for him to drink on the ferry-ride over. Otherwise he would have had nothing but one of those nasty red hot dogs they sold in the *Princess's* snack-bar.

She remembered agonizing over the canned soups in the store—there were so *many!* Would he want tomato? Some people didn't like tomato soup. In fact, some people *hated* tomato soup, even if you made it with milk instead of water. Vegetable soup? Turkey? Cream of chicken? Her helpless eyes roved the shelf display for nearly ten minutes before Charlene Nedeau asked if she could help her with something—only Charlene said it in a sarcastic way, and Maddie guessed she would tell all her friends at high school tomorrow, and they would giggle about it in the girls' room, knowing exactly what was wrong with her—poor mousy little Maddie Sullivan, unable to make up her mind over so simple a thing as a can of *soup*. How she had ever been able to decide to accept Jack Pace's proposal was a wonder and a marvel to all of them . . . but of course they didn't know about the wheel you had to find, and about how, once you found

it, you had to have someone to tell you when to stoop and where exactly to push the damned thing.

Maddie had left the store with no soup and a throbbing headache.

When she worked up nerve enough to ask Jack what his favorite soup was, he had said: “Chicken noodle. Kind that comes in the can.”

Were there any others he specially liked?

The answer was no, just chicken noodle—the kind that came in the can. That was all the soup Jack Pace needed in his life, and all the answer (on that particular subject, at least) that Maddie needed in hers. Light of step and cheerful of heart, Maddie climbed the warped wooden steps of the store the next day and bought the four cans of chicken noodle soup that were on the shelf. When she asked Bob Nedeau if he had any more, he said he had a whole damn *case* of the stuff out back.

She bought the entire case and left him so flabbergasted that he actually carried the carton out to the truck for her and forgot all about asking why she wanted so *much*—a lapse for which his long-nosed wife and daughter took him sharply to task that evening.

“You just better believe it and never forget,” Jack had said that time not long before they tied the knot (she *had* believed it, and had never forgotten). “More than a lobsterman. My dad says I’m full of shit. He says if draggin pots was good enough for his old man, and his old man’s old man and all the way back to the friggin Garden of Eden to hear *him* tell it, it ought to be good enough for me. But it ain’t—*isn’t*, I mean—and I’m going to do better.” His eye fell on her, and it was a stern eye, full of resolve, but it was a loving eye, full of hope and confidence, too. “More than a lobsterman is what I mean to be, and more than a lobsterman’s wife is what I intend for you to be. You’re going to have a house on the mainland.”

“Yes, Jack.”

“And I’m not going to have any friggin Chevrolet.” He drew in a deep breath and took her hands in his. “I’m going to have an *Oldsmobile*.”

He looked her dead in the eye, as if daring her to scoff at this wildly upscale ambition. She did no such thing, of course; she said yes, Jack, for the third or fourth time that evening. She had said it to him thousands of times over the year they had spent courting, and she confidently expected to say it a million

times before death ended their marriage by taking one of them—or, better, both of them together. *Yes, Jack*; had there ever in the history of the world been two words which made such beautiful music when laid side by side?

“More than a friggin lobsterman, no matter what my old man thinks or how much he laughs.” He pronounced this last word in the deeply downcast way: *loffs*. “I’m going to do it, and do you know who’s going to help me?”

“Yes,” Maddie had responded calmly. “*I am.*”

He had laughed and swept her into his arms. “You’re damned tooting, my little sweetheart,” he’d told her.

And so they were wed, as the fairytales usually put it, and for Maddie those first few months—months when they were greeted almost everywhere with jovial cries of “Here’s the newlyweds!”—*were* a fairytale. She had Jack to lean on, Jack to help her make decisions, and that was the best of it. The most difficult household choice thrust upon her that first year was which curtains would look best in the living room—there were so *many* in the catalogue to choose from, and her mother was certainly no help. Maddie’s mother had a hard time deciding between different brands of toilet paper.

Otherwise, that year consisted mostly of joy and security—the joy of loving Jack in their deep bed while the winter wind scraped over the island like the blade of a knife across a breadboard, the security of having Jack to tell her what it was they wanted, and how they were going to get it. The loving was good—so good that sometimes when she thought of him during the days her knees would feel weak and her stomach fluttery—but his way of knowing things and her growing trust in his instincts were even better. So for awhile it *was* a fairytale, yes.

Then Jack died and things started getting weird. Not just for Maddie, either.

For everybody.

• • •

Just before the world slid into its incomprehensible nightmare, Maddie discovered she was what her mother had always called “preg,” a curt word that was like the sound you made when you had to rasp up a throatful of snot (that,

at least, was how it had always sounded to Maddie). By then she and Jack had moved next to the Pulsifers on Gennesault Island, which was known simply as Jenny by its residents and those of nearby Little Tall.

She'd had one of her agonizing interior debates when she missed her second period, and after four sleepless nights she made an appointment with Dr. McElwain on the mainland. Looking back, she was glad. If she'd waited to see if she was going to miss a third period, Jack would not have had even one month of joy and she would have missed the concerns and little kindnesses he had showered upon her.

Looking back—now that she was *coping*—her indecision seemed ludicrous, but her deeper heart knew that going to have the test had taken tremendous courage. She had wanted to be more convincingly sick in the mornings so she could be surer; she had longed for nausea to drag her from her dreams. She made the appointment when Jack was out at work, and she went while he was out, but there was no such thing as *sneaking* over to the mainland on the ferry; too many people from both islands saw you. Someone would mention casually to Jack that he or she had seen his wife on the *Princess* t'other day, and then Jack would want to know what it was all about, and if she'd made a mistake, he would look at her like she was a goose.

But it hadn't been a mistake; she was with child (and never mind that word that sounded like someone with a bad cold trying to clear his throat), and Jack Pace had had exactly twenty-seven days to look forward to his first child before a bad swell had caught him and knocked him over the side of *My Lady-Love*, the lobster boat he had inherited from his Uncle Mike. Jack could swim, and he had popped to the surface like a cork, Dave Eamons had told her miserably, but just as he did, another heavy swell came, slewing the boat directly into him, and although Dave would say no more, Maddie had been born and brought up an island girl, and she knew: could, in fact, *hear* the hollow thud as the boat with its treacherous name smashed its way into her husband's head, letting out blood and hair and bone and perhaps the part of his brain that had made him say her name over and over again in the dark of night, when he came into her.

Dressed in a heavy hooded parka and down-filled pants and boots, Jack Pace had sunk like a stone. They had buried an empty casket in the little

cemetery at the north end of Jenny Island, and the Reverend Johnson (on Jenny and Little Tall you had your choice when it came to religion: you could be a Methodist, or if that didn't suit you, you could be a lapsed Methodist) had presided over this empty coffin as he had so many others. The service ended, and at the age of twenty-two Maddie had found herself a widow with a bun in the oven and no one to tell her where the wheel was, let alone when to put her shoulder to it or how far to push it.

She thought at first she'd go back to Little Tall, back to her mother, to wait her time, but a year with Jack had given her a little perspective and she knew her mother was as lost—maybe even *more* lost—than she was herself, and that made her wonder if going back would be the right thing to do.

“Maddie,” Jack told her again and again (he was dead in the world but not, it seemed, inside her head; inside her head he was as lively as any dead man could possibly get . . . or so she had thought *then*), “the only thing you can ever decide on is not to decide.”

Nor was her mother any better. They talked on the phone and Maddie waited and hoped for her mother to just *tell* her to come back home, but Mrs. Sullivan could tell no one over the age of ten anything. “Maybe you ought to come on back over here,” she had said once in a tentative way, and Maddie couldn't tell if that meant *please come home* or *please don't take me up on an offer which was really just made for form's sake*. She spent long, sleepless nights trying to decide which it had been and succeeded only in confusing herself more.

Then the weirdness started, and the greatest mercy was that there was only the one small graveyard on Jenny (and so many of the graves filled with those empty coffins—a thing which had once seemed pitiful to her now seemed another blessing, a grace). There were two on Little Tall, both fairly large, and so it began to seem so much safer to stay on Jenny and wait.

She would wait and see if the world lived or died.

If it lived, she would wait for the baby.

• • •

And now she was, after a life of passive obedience and vague resolves that usually passed like dreams an hour or two after she got out of bed, finally

*coping*. She knew that part of this was nothing more than the effect of being slammed with one massive shock after another, beginning with the death of her husband and ending with one of the last broadcasts the Pulsifers' high-tech satellite dish had picked up: a horrified young boy who had been pressed into service as a CNN reporter saying that it seemed certain that the President of the United States, the first lady, the Secretary of State, the honorable senior senator from Oregon, and the emir of Kuwait had been eaten alive in the White House East Room by zombies.

"I want to repeat this," the accidental reporter had said, the firespots of his acne standing out on his forehead and chin like stigmata. His mouth and cheeks had begun to twitch; his hands shook spastically. "I want to repeat that a bunch of corpses have just lunched up on the President and his wife and a whole lot of other political hotshots who were at the White House to eat poached salmon and cherries jubilee." Then the kid had begun to laugh maniacally and to scream *Go, Yale! Boola-boola!* at the top of his voice. At last he bolted out of the frame, leaving a CNN news-desk untenanted for the first time in Maddie's memory. She and the Pulsifers sat in dismayed silence as the news-desk disappeared and an ad for Boxcar Willie records—not available in any store, you could get this amazing collection only by dialing the 800 number currently appearing on the bottom of your screen—came on. One of little Cheyne Pulsifer's crayons was on the end table beside the chair Maddie was sitting in, and for some crazy reason she picked it up and wrote the number down on a sheet of scrap paper before Mr. Pulsifer got up and turned off the TV without a single word.

Maddie told them good night and thanked them for sharing their TV and their Jiffy Pop.

"Are you sure you're all right, Maddie dear?" Candi Pulsifer asked her for the fifth time that night, and Maddie said she was fine for the fifth time that night, that she was *coping*, and Candi said she *knew* she was, but she was welcome to the upstairs bedroom that used to be Brian's anytime she wanted. Maddie hugged Candi, kissed her cheek, declined with the most graceful thanks she could find, and was at last allowed to escape. She had walked the windy half mile back to her own house and was in her own kitchen before she realized that she still had the scrap of paper on which she had jotted the 800

number. She had dialed it, and there was nothing. No recorded voice telling her all circuits were currently busy or that the number was out of service; no wailing siren sound that indicated a line interruption; no boops or beeps or clicks or clacks. Just smooth silence. That was when Maddie knew for sure that the end had either come or was coming. When you could no longer call the 800 number and order the Boxcar Willie records that were not available in any store, when there were for the first time in her living memory no Operators Standing By, the end of the world was a foregone conclusion.

She felt her rounding stomach as she stood there by the phone on the wall in the kitchen and said it out loud for the first time, unaware that she had spoken: “It will have to be a home delivery. But that’s all right, as long as you get ready and stay ready, kiddo. You have to remember that there just isn’t any other way. It *has* to be a home delivery.”

She waited for fear and none came.

“I can cope with this just fine,” she said, and this time she heard herself and was comforted by the sureness of her own words.

A baby.

When the baby came, the end of the world would itself end.

“Eden,” she said, and smiled. Her smile was sweet, the smile of a madonna. It didn’t matter how many rotting dead people (maybe Boxcar Willie among them, for all she knew) were shambling around the face of the earth.

She would have a baby, she would accomplish her home delivery, and the possibility of Eden would remain.

• • •

The first reports came from an Australian hamlet on the edge of the outback, a place with the memorable name of Fiddle Dee. The name of the first American town where the walking dead were reported was perhaps even more memorable: Thumper, Florida. The first story appeared in America’s favorite supermarket tabloid, *Inside View*.

DEAD COME TO LIFE IN SMALL FLORIDA TOWN! the headline screamed. The story began with a recap of a film called *Night of the Living Dead*, which Maddie had never seen, and went on to mention another—*Macumba Love*—

which she had also never seen. The article was accompanied by three photos. One was a still from *Night of the Living Dead*, showing what appeared to be a bunch of escapees from a loonybin standing outside an isolated farmhouse at night. One was from *Macumba Love*, showing a blonde whose bikini top appeared to be holding breasts the size of prize-winning gourds. The blonde was holding up her hands and screaming in horror at what could have been a black man in a mask. The third purported to be a picture taken in Thumper, Florida. It was a blurred, grainy shot of a person of indeterminate sex standing in front of a video arcade. The article described the figure as being “wrapped in the cerements of the grave,” but it could have been someone in a dirty sheet.

No big deal. BIGFOOT RAPES CHOIR BOY last week, dead people coming back to life this week, the dwarf mass murderer next week.

No big deal, at least, until they started to come out in other places, as well. No big deal until the first news film (“You may want to ask your children to leave the room,” Tom Brokaw introduced gravely) showed up on network TV, decayed monsters with naked bone showing through their dried skin, traffic accident victims, the morticians’ concealing make-up sloughed away so that the ripped faces and bashed-in skulls showed, women with their hair teased into dirt-clogged beehives where worms and beetles still squirmed and crawled, their faces alternately vacuous and informed with a kind of calculating, idiotic intelligence. No big deal until the first horrible stills in an issue of *People* magazine that had been sealed in shrink-wrap and sold with an orange sticker that read NOT FOR SALE TO MINORS!

Then it was a big deal.

When you saw a decaying man still dressed in the mud-streaked remnants of the Brooks Brothers suit in which he had been buried tearing at the throat of a screaming woman in a tee-shirt that read PROPERTY OF THE HOUSTON OILERS, you suddenly realized it might be a very big deal indeed.

That was when the accusations and saber rattling had started, and for three weeks the entire world had been diverted from the creatures escaping their graves like grotesque moths escaping diseased cocoons by the spectacle of the two great nuclear powers on what appeared to be an undivertible collision course.

There were no zombies in the United States, Communist Chinese television commentators declared; this was a self-serving lie to camouflage an unforgivable act of chemical warfare against the People's Republic of China, a more horrible (and deliberate) version of what had happened in Bhopal, India. Reprisals would follow if the dead comrades coming out of their graves did not fall down decently dead within ten days. All U.S. diplomatic people were expelled from the mother country and there were several incidents of American tourists being beaten to death.

The President (who would not long after become a Zombie Blue Plate Special himself) responded by becoming a pot (which he had come to resemble, having put on at least fifty pounds since his second-term election) calling a kettle black. The U.S. government, he told the American people, had incontrovertible evidence that the only walking-dead people in China had been set loose deliberately, and while the Head Panda might stand there with his slanty-eyed face hanging out, claiming there were over eight thousand lively corpses striding around in search of the ultimate collectivism, *we* had definite proof that there were less than forty. It was the *Chinese* who had committed an act—a *heinous* act—of chemical warfare, bringing loyal Americans back to life with no urge to consume anything but other loyal Americans, and if these Americans—some of whom had been good Democrats—did not lie down decently dead within the next *five* days, Red China was going to be one large slag pit.

NORAD was at DEFCON-2 when a British astronomer named Humphrey Dagbolt spotted the satellite. Or the spaceship. Or the creature. Or whatever in hell's name it was. Dagbolt was not even a professional astronomer but only an amateur star-gazer from the west of England—no one in particular, you would have said—and yet he almost certainly saved the world from some sort of thermonuclear exchange, if not flat-out atomic war. All in all not a bad week's work for a man with a deviated septum and a bad case of psoriasis.

At first it seemed that the two nose-to-nose political systems did not *want* to believe in what Dagbolt had found, even after the Royal Observatory in London had pronounced his photographs and data authentic. Finally, however, the missile silos closed and telescopes all over the world homed in, almost grudgingly, on Star Wormwood.

The joint American/Chinese space mission to investigate the unwelcome newcomer lifted off from the Lanzhou Heights less than three weeks after the first photographs had appeared in the *Guardian*, and everyone's favorite amateur astronomer was aboard, deviated septum and all. In truth, it would have been hard to have kept Dagbolt off the mission—he had become a worldwide hero, the most renowned Briton since Winston Churchill. When asked by a reporter on the day before lift-off if he was frightened, Dagbolt had brayed his oddly endearing Robert Morley laugh, rubbed the side of his truly enormous nose, and exclaimed, "Petrified, dear boy! Utterly pet-trified!"

As it turned out, he had every reason to be petrified.

They all did.

• • •

The final sixty-one seconds of received transmission from the *Xiaoping/Truman* were considered too horrible for release by all three governments involved, and so no formal communiqué was ever issued. It didn't matter, of course; nearly twenty thousand ham operators had been monitoring the craft, and it seemed that at least nineteen thousand of them had been rolling tape when the craft had been—well, was there really any other word for it?—invaded.

*Chinese voice:* Worms! It appears to be a massive ball of—

*American voice:* Christ! Look out! It's coming for us!

*Dagbolt:* Some sort of extrusion is occurring. The portside window is—

*Chinese voice:* Breach! Breach! To your suits, my friends! (Indecipherable gabble.)

*American voice:*—and appears to be eating its way in—

*Female Chinese voice* (Ching-Ling Soong): Oh stop it stop the eyes—

(Sound of an explosion.)

*Dagbolt:* Explosive decompression has occurred. I see three—er, four—dead, and there are worms . . . everywhere there are worms—

*American voice:* Faceplate! Faceplate! *Faceplate!*

(Screaming.)

*Chinese voice:* Where is my mamma? Oh dear, where is my mamma?

(Screams. Sounds like a toothless old man sucking up mashed potatoes.)

*Dagbolt:* The cabin is full of worms—what appear to be worms, at any rate—which is to say that they really *are* worms, one realizes—that have apparently extruded themselves from the main satellite—what we took to be—which is to say one means—the cabin is full of floating body parts. These space-worms apparently excrete some sort of acid—

(Booster rockets fired at this point; duration of the burn is 7.2 seconds. This may have been an attempt to escape or possibly to ram the central object. In either case, the maneuver did not work. It seems likely that the blast-chambers themselves were clogged with worms and Captain Lin Yang—or whichever officer was then in charge—believed an explosion of the fuel tanks themselves to be imminent as a result of the clog. Hence the shutdown.)

*American voice:* Oh my Christ they're in my head, *they're eating my fuckin br*  
—

(Static.)

*Dagbolt:* I believe that prudence dictates a strategic retreat to the aft storage compartment; the rest of the crew is dead. No question about that. Pity. Brave bunch. Even that fat American who kept rooting around in his nose. But in another sense I don't think—

(Static.)

*Dagbolt:*—dead after all because Ching-Ling Soong—or rather, Ching-Ling Soong's severed head, one means to say—just floated past me, and her eyes were open and blinking. She appeared to recognize me, and to—

(Static.)

*Dagbolt:*—keep you—

(Explosion. Static.)

*Dagbolt:*—around me. I repeat, all around me. Squirming things. They—I say, does anyone know if—

(Dagbolt, screaming and cursing, then just screaming. Sounds of toothless old man again.)

(Transmission ends.)

The *Xiaoping/Truman* exploded three seconds later. The extrusion from the rough ball nicknamed Star Wormwood had been observed from better than three hundred telescopes earthside during the short and rather pitiful conflict. As the final sixty-one seconds of transmission began, the craft began to be

obscured by something that certainly *looked* like worms. By the end of the final transmission, the craft itself could not be seen at all—only the squirming mass of things that had attached themselves to it. Moments after the final explosion, a weather satellite snapped a single picture of floating debris, some of which was almost certainly chunks of the worm-things. A severed human leg clad in a Chinese space suit floating among them was a good deal easier to identify.

And in a way, none of it even mattered. The scientists and political leaders of both countries knew exactly where Star Wormwood was located: above the expanding hole in earth's ozone layer. It was sending something down from there, and it was not Flowers by Wire.

Missiles came next. Star Wormwood jiggled easily out of their way and then returned to its place over the hole.

On the Pulsifers' satellite-assisted TV, more dead people got up and walked, but now there was a crucial change. In the beginning the zombies had only bitten living people who got too close, but in the weeks before the Pulsifers' high-tech Sony started showing only broad bands of snow, the dead folks started *trying* to get close to the living folks.

They had, it seemed, decided they *liked* what they were biting.

The final effort to destroy the thing was made by the United States. The President approved an attempt to destroy Star Wormwood with a number of orbiting nukes, stalwartly ignoring his previous statements that America had never put atomic SDI weapons in orbit and never would. Everyone else ignored them, as well. Perhaps they were too busy praying for success.

It was a good idea, but not, unfortunately, a workable one. Not a single missile from a single SDI orbiter fired. This was a total of twenty-four flat-out failures.

So much for modern technology.

• • •

And then, after all these shocks on earth and in heaven, there was the business of the one little graveyard right here on Jenny. But even that didn't seem to count much for Maddie because, after all, she had not been there. With the end of civilization now clearly at hand and the island cut off—*thankfully* cut

off, in the opinion of the residents—from the rest of the world, old ways had reasserted themselves with unspoken but inarguable force. By then they all knew what was going to happen; it was only a question of when. That, and being ready when it did.

Women were excluded.

• • •

It was Bob Daggett, of course, who drew up the watch roster. That was only right, since Bob had been head selectman on Jenny for about a thousand years. The day after the death of the President (the thought of him and the first lady wandering witlessly through the streets of Washington, D.C., gnawing on human arms and legs like people eating chicken legs at a picnic was not mentioned; it was a little much to bear, even if the bastard and his blonde wife *were* Democrats), Bob Daggett called the first men-only Town Meeting on Jenny since sometime before the Civil War. Maddie wasn't there, but she heard. Dave Eamons told her all she needed to know.

"You men all know the situation," Bob said. He looked as yellow as a man with jaundice, and people remembered his daughter, the one still living at home on the island, was only one of four. The other three were other places . . . which was to say, on the mainland.

But hell, if it came down to that, they *all* had folks on the mainland.

"We got one boneyard here on Jenny," Bob continued, "and nothin ain't happened there yet, but that don't mean nothin *will*. Nothin ain't happened yet lots of places . . . but it seems like once it starts, nothin turns to somethin pretty goddam quick."

There was a rumble of assent from the men gathered in the grammar-school gymnasium, which was the only place big enough to hold them. There were about seventy of them in all, ranging in age from Johnny Crane, who had just turned eighteen, to Bob's great-uncle Frank, who was eighty, had a glass eye, and chewed tobacco. There was no spittoon in the gym, of course, so Frank Daggett had brought an empty mayonnaise jar to spit his juice into. He did so now.

“Git down to where the cheese binds, Bobby,” he said. “You ain’t got no office to run for, and time’s a-wastin.”

There was another rumble of agreement, and Bob Daggett flushed. Somehow his great-uncle always managed to make him look like an ineffectual fool, and if there was anything in the world he hated worse than looking like an ineffectual fool, it was being called Bobby. He owned property, for Chrissake! And he *supported* the old fart—bought him his goddam chew!

But these were not things he could say; old Frank’s eyes were like pieces of flint.

“Okay,” Bob said curtly. “Here it is. We want twelve men to a watch. I’m gonna set a roster in just a couple minutes. Four-hour shifts.”

“I can stand watch a helluva lot longer’n four hours!” Matt Arsenault spoke up, and Davey told Maddie that Bob said after the meeting that no welfare-slacker like Matt Arsenault would have had the nerve to speak up like that in a meeting of his betters if that old man hadn’t called him Bobby, like he was a kid instead of a man three months shy of his fiftieth birthday, in front of all the island men.

“Maybe you can n maybe you can’t,” Bob said, “but we got plenty of warm bodies, and nobody’s gonna fall asleep on sentry duty.”

“I ain’t gonna—”

“I didn’t say *you*,” Bob said, but the way his eyes rested on Matt Arsenault suggested that he might have *meant* him. “This is no kid’s game. Sit down and shut up.”

Matt Arsenault opened his mouth to say something more, then looked around at the other men—including old Frank Daggett—and wisely held his peace.

“If you got a rifle, bring it when it’s your trick,” Bob continued. He felt a little better with Arsenault more or less back in his place. “Unless it’s a twenty-two, that is. If you ain’t got somethin bigger’n that, come n get one here.”

“I didn’t know the school kep a supply of em handy,” Cal Partridge said, and there was a ripple of laughter.

“It don’t now, but it will,” Bob said, “because every man jack of you with more than one rifle bigger than a twenty-two is gonna bring it here.” He

looked at John Wirley, the school principal. “Okay if we keep em in your office, John?”

Wirley nodded. Beside him, Reverend Johnson was drywashing his hands in a distraught way.

“Shit on that,” Orrin Campbell said. “I got a wife and two kids at home. Am I s’posed to leave em with nothin to defend themselves with if a bunch of cawpses come for an early Thanksgiving dinner while I’m on watch?”

“If we do our job at the boneyard, none will,” Bob replied stonily. “Some of you got handguns. We don’t want none of those. Figure out which women can shoot and which can’t and give em the pistols. We’ll put em together in bunches.”

“They can play Beano,” old Frank cackled, and Bob smiled, too. That was more like it, by the Christ.

“Nights, we’re gonna want trucks posted around so we got plenty of light.” He looked over at Sonny Dotson, who ran Island Amoco, the only gas station on Jenny. Sonny’s main business wasn’t gassing cars and trucks—shit, there was no place much on the island to drive, and you could get your go ten cents cheaper on the mainland—but filling up lobster boats and the motorboats he ran out of his jackleg marina in the summer. “You gonna supply the gas, Sonny?”

“Am I gonna get cash slips?”

“You’re gonna get your ass saved,” Bob said. “When things get back to normal—if they ever do—I guess you’ll get what you got coming.”

Sonny looked around, saw only hard eyes, and shrugged. He looked a bit sullen, but in truth he looked more confused than anything, Davey told Maddie the next day.

“Ain’t got n’more’n four hunnert gallons of gas,” he said. “Mostly diesel.”

“There’s five generators on the island,” Burt Dorfman said (when Burt spoke everyone listened; as the only Jew on the island, he was regarded as a creature both quixotic and fearsome, like an oracle that works about half the time). “They all run on diesel. I can rig lights if I have to.”

Low murmurs. If Burt said he could do it, he could. He was a Jewish electrician, and there was a feeling on the outer islands, unarticulated but powerful, that that was the best kind.

“We’re gonna light that graveyard up like a friggin stage,” Bob said.

Andy Kingsbury stood up. “I heard on the news that sometimes you can shoot one of them things in the head and it’ll stay down, and sometimes it won’t.”

“We’ve got chainsaws,” Bob said stonily, “and what won’t stay dead . . . why, we can make sure it won’t move too far alive.”

And, except for making out the duty roster, that was pretty much that.

• • •

Six days and nights passed and the sentries posted around the little graveyard on Jenny were starting to feel a wee bit silly (“I dunno if I’m standin guard or pullin my pud,” Orrin Campbell said one afternoon as a dozen men stood around the cemetery gate, playing Liars’ Poker) when it happened . . . and when it happened, it happened fast.

Dave told Maddie that he heard a sound like the wind wailing in the chimney on a gusty night, and then the gravestone marking the final resting place of Mr. and Mrs. Fournier’s boy Michael, who had died of leukemia at seventeen (bad go, that had been, him being their only child and them being such nice people and all), fell over. A moment later a shredded hand with a moss-caked Yarmouth Academy class ring on one finger rose out of the ground, shoving through the tough grass. The third finger had been torn off in the process.

The ground heaved like (like the belly of a pregnant woman getting ready to drop her load, Dave almost said, and hastily reconsidered) a big wave rolling into a close cove, and then the boy himself sat up, only he wasn’t anything you could really recognize, not after almost two years in the ground. There were little splinters of wood sticking out of what was left of his face, Davey said, and pieces of shiny blue cloth in the draggles of his hair. “That was coffin-linin,” Davey told her, looking down at his restlessly twining hands. “I know that as well’s I know m’own name.” He paused, then added: “Thank Christ Mike’s dad dint have that trick.”

Maddie had nodded.

The men on guard, bullshit-scared as well as revolted, opened fire on the reanimated corpse of the former high-school chess champion and All-Star second baseman, tearing him to shreds. Other shots, fired in wild panic, blew chips off his marble gravestone, and it was just luck that the armed men had been loosely grouped together when the festivities commenced; if they had been divided up into two wings, as Bob Daggett had originally intended, they would very likely have slaughtered each other. As it was, not a single islander was hurt, although Bud Meechum found a rather suspicious-looking hole torn in the sleeve of his shirt the next day.

“Prob’ly wa’ant nothin but a blackberry thorn, just the same,” he said. “There’s an almighty lot of em out at that end of the island, you know.” No one would dispute that, but the black smudges around the hole made his frightened wife think that his shirt had been torn by a thorn with a pretty large caliber.

The Fournier kid fell back, most of him lying still, other parts of him still twitching . . . but by then the whole graveyard seemed to be rippling, as if an earthquake were going on there—but *only* there, noplacelikeelse.

Just about an hour before dusk, this had happened.

Burt Dorfman had rigged up a siren to a tractor battery, and Bob Daggett flipped the switch. Within twenty minutes, most of the men in town were at the island cemetery.

Goddam good thing, too, Dave Eamons said, because a few of the deaders almost got away. Old Frank Daggett, still two hours from the heart attack that would carry him off just as the excitement was dying down, organized the new men so they wouldn’t shoot each other, either, and for the final ten minutes the Jenny boneyard sounded like Bull Run. By the end of the festivities, the powder smoke was so thick that some men choked on it. The sour smell of vomit was almost heavier than the smell of gunsmoke . . . it was sharper, too, and lingered longer.

• • •

And still some of them wriggled and squirmed like snakes with broken backs—the fresher ones, for the most part.

“Burt,” Frank Daggett said. “You got them chainsaws?”

“I got em,” Burt said, and then a long, buzzing sound came out of his mouth, a sound like a cicada burrowing its way into tree bark, as he dry-heaved. He could not take his eyes from the squirming corpses, the overturned gravestones, the yawning pits from which the dead had come. “In the truck.”

“Gassed up?” Blue veins stood out on Frank’s ancient, hairless skull.

“Yeah.” Burt’s hand was over his mouth. “I’m sorry.”

“Work y’fuckin gut all you want,” Frank said briskly, “but toddle off n get them saws while you do. And you . . . you . . . you. . . you. . .”

The last “you” was his grandnephew Bob.

“I can’t, Uncle Frank,” Bob said sickly. He looked around and saw five or six of his friends and neighbors lying crumpled in the tall grass. They had not died; they had swooned. Most of them had seen their own relatives rise out of the ground. Buck Harkness over there lying by an aspen tree had been part of the crossfire that had cut his late wife to ribbons; he had fainted after observing her decayed, worm-riddled brains exploding from the back of her head in a grisly gray splash. “I can’t. I c—”

Frank’s hand, twisted with arthritis but as hard as stone, cracked across his face.

“You can and you will, chummy,” he said.

Bob went with the rest of the men.

Frank Daggett watched them grimly and rubbed his chest, which had begun to send cramped throbs of pain all the way down his left arm to the elbow. He was old but he wasn’t stupid, and he had a pretty good idea what those pains were, and what they meant.

• • •

“He told me he thought he was gonna have a blow-out, and he tapped his chest when he said it,” Dave went on, and placed his hand on the swell of muscle over his own left nipple to demonstrate.

Maddie nodded to show she understood.

“He said, ‘If anything happens to me before this mess is cleaned up, Davey, you and Burt and Orrin take over. Bobby’s a good boy, but I think he may

have lost his guts for at least a little while . . . and you know, sometimes when a man loses his guts, they don't come back.' ”

Maddie nodded again, thinking how grateful she was—how very, very grateful—that she was not a man.

“So then we did it,” Dave said. “We cleaned up the mess.”

Maddie nodded a third time, but this time she must have made some sound, because Dave told her he would stop if she couldn't bear it; he would gladly stop.

“I can bear it,” she said quietly. “You might be surprised how much I can bear, Davey.” He looked at her quickly, curiously, when she said that, but Maddie had averted her eyes before he could see the secret in them.

• • •

Dave didn't know the secret because no one on Jenny knew. That was the way Maddie wanted it, and the way she intended to keep it. There had been a time when she had, perhaps, in the blue darkness of her shock, pretended to be coping. And then something happened that *made* her cope. Four days before the island cemetery vomited up its corpses, Maddie Pace was faced with a simple choice: cope or die.

She had been sitting in the living room, drinking a glass of the blueberry wine she and Jack had put up during August of the previous year—a time that now seemed impossibly distant—and doing something so trite it was laughable. She was Knitting Little Things. Booties, in fact. But what else *was* there to do? It seemed that no one would be going across the reach to the Wee Folks store at the Ellsworth Mall for quite some time.

Something had thumped against the window.

A bat, she thought, looking up. Her needles paused in her hands, though. It seemed that something bigger had moved jerkily out there in the windy dark. The oil lamp was turned up high and kicking too much reflection off the panes for her to be sure. She reached to turn it down and the thump came again. The panes shivered. She heard a little pattering of dried putty falling on the sash. Jack had been planning to reglaze all the windows this fall, she remembered,

and then thought, *Maybe that's what he came back for.* That was crazy, he was on the bottom of the ocean, but . . .

She sat with her head cocked to one side, her knitting now motionless in her hands. A little pink bootie. She had already made a blue set. All of a sudden it seemed she could hear so *much*. The wind. The faint thunder of surf on Cricket Ledge. The house making little groaning sounds, like an elderly woman making herself comfortable in bed. The tick of the clock in the hallway.

“Jack?” she asked the silent night that was now no longer silent. “Is it you, dear?” Then the living-room window burst inward and what came through was not really Jack but a skeleton with a few mouldering strings of flesh hanging from it.

His compass was still around his neck. It had grown a beard of moss.

• • •

The wind flapped the curtains in a cloud above him as he sprawled, then got up on his hands and knees and looked at her from black sockets in which barnacles had grown.

He made grunting sounds. His fleshless mouth opened and the teeth chomped down. He was hungry . . . but this time chicken noodle soup would not serve. Not even the kind that came in the can.

Gray stuff hung and swung beyond those dark barnacle-encrusted holes, and she realized she was looking at whatever remained of Jack's brain. She sat where she was, frozen, as he got up and came toward her, leaving black kelpy tracks on the carpet, fingers reaching. He stank of salt and fathoms. His hands stretched. His teeth chomped mechanically up and down. Maddie saw he was wearing the remains of the black-and-red-checked shirt she had bought him at L. L. Bean's last Christmas. It had cost the earth, but he had said again and again how warm it was, and look how well it had lasted, how much of it was left even after being under water all this time.

The cold cobwebs of bone which were all that remained of his fingers touched her throat before the baby kicked in her stomach—for the first time—

and her shocked horror, which she had believed to be calmness, fled, and she drove one of the knitting needles into the thing's eye.

Making horrid thick choking noises that sounded like the suck of a swill pump, he staggered backward, clawing at the needle, while the half-made pink bootie swung in front of the cavity where his nose had been. She watched as a sea slug squirmed from that nasal cavity and onto the bootie, leaving a trail of slime behind it.

Jack fell over the end table she'd gotten at a yard sale just after they had been married—she hadn't been able to make her mind up about it, had been in agonies about it, until Jack finally said either she was going to buy it for their living room or he was going to give the biddy running the sale twice what she was asking for the goddam thing and then bust it up into firewood with—

—with the—

He struck the floor and there was a brittle, cracking sound as his febrile, fragile form broke in two. The right hand tore the knitting needle, slimed with decaying brain tissue, from his eye-socket and tossed it aside. His top half crawled toward her. His teeth gnashed steadily together.

She thought he was trying to grin, and then the baby kicked again and she remembered how uncharacteristically tired and out of sorts he'd sounded at Mabel Hanratty's yard-sale that day: *Buy it, Maddie, for Chrissake! I'm tired! Want to go home and get m'dinner! If you don't get a move on, I'll give the old bat twice what she wants and bust it up for firewood with my—*

Cold, dank hand clutching her ankle; polluted teeth poised to bite. To kill her and kill the baby. She tore loose, leaving him with only her slipper, which he chewed on and then spat out.

When she came back from the entry, he was crawling mindlessly into the kitchen—at least the top half of him was—with the compass dragging on the tiles. He looked up at the sound of her, and there seemed to be some idiot question in those black eye-sockets before she brought the ax whistling down, cleaving his skull as he had threatened to cleave the end table.

His head fell in two pieces, brains dribbling across the tile like spoiled oatmeal, brains that squirmed with slugs and gelatinous sea worms, brains that smelled like a woodchuck exploded with gassy decay in a high-summer meadow.

Still his hands clashed and clattered on the kitchen tiles, making a sound like beetles.

She chopped . . . chopped . . . chopped.

At last there was no more movement.

A sharp pain rippled across her midsection and for a moment she was gripped by terrible panic: *Is it a miscarriage? Am I going to have a miscarriage?* But the pain left and the baby kicked again, more strongly than before.

She went back into the living room, carrying an ax that now smelled like tripe.

His legs had somehow managed to stand.

“Jack, I loved you so much,” she said, “but this isn’t you.” She brought the ax down in a whistling arc that split him at the pelvis, sliced the carpet, and drove deep into the solid oak floor beneath.

The legs separated, trembled wildly for almost five minutes, and then began to grow quiet. At last even the toes stopped twitching.

She carried him down to the cellar piece by piece, wearing her oven gloves and wrapping each piece with the insulating blankets Jack had kept in the shed and which she had never thrown away—he and the crew threw them over the pots on cold days so the lobsters wouldn’t freeze.

Once a severed hand closed upon her wrist. She stood still and waited, her heart drumming heavily in her chest, and at last it loosened again. And that was the end of it. The end of *him*.

There was an unused cistern, polluted, below the house—Jack had been meaning to fill it in. Maddie slid the heavy concrete cover aside so that its shadow lay on the earthen floor like a partial eclipse and then threw the pieces of him down, listening to the splashes. When everything was gone, she worked the heavy cover back into place.

“Rest in peace,” she whispered, and an interior voice whispered back that her husband was resting in *pieces*, and then she began to cry, and her cries turned to hysterical shrieks, and she pulled at her hair and tore at her breasts until they were bloody, and she thought, *I am insane, this is what it’s like to be insa—*

But before the thought could be completed, she had fallen down in a faint, and the faint became a deep sleep, and the next morning she felt all right.

She would never tell, though.  
Never.

• • •

“I can bear it,” she told Dave Eamons again, thrusting aside the image of the knitting needle with the bootie swinging from the end of it jutting out of the kelp-slimed eye-socket of the thing which had once been her husband, and co-creator of the child in her womb. “Really.”

So he told her, perhaps because he had to tell someone or go mad, but he glossed over the worst parts. He told her that they had chainsawed the corpses that absolutely refused to return to the land of the dead, but he did not tell her that some parts had continued to squirm—hands with no arms attached to them clutching mindlessly, feet divorced from their legs digging at the bullet-chewed earth of the graveyard as if trying to run away—and that these parts had been doused with diesel fuel and set afire. Maddie did not have to be told this part. She had seen the pyre from the house.

Later, Gennesault Island’s one firetruck had turned its hose on the dying blaze, although there wasn’t much chance of the fire spreading, with a brisk easterly blowing the sparks off Jenny’s seaward edge. When there was nothing left but a stinking, tallowy lump (and still there were occasional bulges in this mass, like twitches in a tired muscle), Matt Arsenault fired up his old D-9 Caterpillar—above the nicked steel blade and under his faded pillowtick engineer’s cap, Matt’s face had been as white as cottage cheese—and plowed the whole hellacious mess under.

• • •

The moon was coming up when Frank took Bob Daggett, Dave Eamons, and Cal Partridge aside. It was Dave he spoke to.

“I knew it was coming, and here it is,” he said.

“What are you talking about, Unc?” Bob asked.

“My heart,” Frank said. “Goddam thing has thrown a rod.”

“Now, Uncle Frank—”

“Never mind Uncle Frank this n Uncle Frank that,” the old man said. “I ain’t got time to listen to you play fiddlyfuck on the mouth-organ. Seen half my friends go the same way. It ain’t no day at the races, but it could be worse; beats hell out of getting whacked with the cancer-stick.

“But now there’s this other sorry business to mind, and all I got to say on that subject is, when I go down I intend to *stay* down. Cal, stick that rifle of yours in my left ear. Dave, when I raise my left arm, you sock yours into my armpit. And Bobby, you put yours right over my heart. I’m gonna say the Lord’s Prayer, and when I hit amen, you three fellows are gonna pull your triggers at the same time.”

“Uncle Frank—” Bob managed. He was reeling on his heels.

“I told you not to start in on that,” Frank said. “And don’t you *dare* faint on me, you friggin pantywaist. Now get your country butt over here.”

Bob did.

Frank looked around at the three men, their faces as white as Matt Arsenault’s had been when he drove the ’dozer over men and women he had known since he was a kid in short pants and Buster Browns.

“Don’t you boys frig this up,” Frank said. He was speaking to all of them, but his eye might have been particularly trained on his grandnephew. “If you feel like maybe you’re gonna backslide, just remember I’d’a done the same for any of you.”

“Quit with the speech,” Bob said hoarsely. “I love you, Uncle Frank.”

“You ain’t the man your father was, Bobby Daggett, but I love you, too,” Frank said calmly, and then, with a cry of pain, he threw his left hand up over his head like a guy in New York who has to have a cab in a rip of a hurry, and started in with his last prayer. “Our Father who art in heaven—*Christ*, that hurts!—hallow’d be Thy name—oh, son of a *gun!*—Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it . . . as it . . .”

Frank’s upraised left arm was wavering wildly now. Dave Eamons, with his rifle socked into the old geezer’s armpit, watched it as carefully as a logger would watch a big tree that looked like it meant to do evil and fall the wrong way. Every man on the island was watching now. Big beads of sweat had formed on the old man’s pallid face. His lips had pulled back from the even,

yellowy-white of his Roebuckers, and Dave had been able to smell the Polident on his breath.

“. . . as it is in heaven!” the old man jerked out. “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evilohshiton it forever and everAMEN!”

All three of them fired, and both Cal Partridge and Bob Daggett fainted, but Frank never did try to get up and walk.

Frank Daggett had meant to *stay* dead, and that was just what he did.

• • •

Once Dave started that story he had to go on with it, and so he cursed himself for ever starting. He'd been right the first time; it was no story for a pregnant woman.

But Maddie had kissed him and told him she thought he had done wonderfully, and that Frank Daggett had done wonderfully, too. Dave went out feeling a little dazed, as if he had just been kissed on the cheek by a woman he had never met before.

In a very real sense, that was true.

She watched him go down the path to the dirt track that was one of Jenny's two roads and turn left. He was weaving a little in the moonlight, weaving with tiredness, she thought, but reeling with shock, as well. Her heart went out to him . . . to all of them. She had wanted to tell Dave she loved him and kiss him squarely on the mouth instead of just skimming his cheek with her lips, but he might have taken the wrong meaning from something like that, even though he was bone-weary and she was almost five months pregnant.

But she *did* love him, loved *all* of them, because they had gone through hell in order to make this little lick of land forty miles out in the Atlantic safe for her.

And safe for her baby.

“It will be a home delivery,” she said softly as Dave went out of sight behind the dark hulk of the Pulsifers' satellite dish. Her eyes rose to the moon. “It will be a home delivery . . . and it will be fine.”

## Rainy Season

It was half past five in the afternoon by the time John and Elise Graham finally found their way into the little village that lay at the center of Willow, Maine, like a fleck of grit at the center of some dubious pearl. The village was less than five miles from the Hempstead Place, but they took two wrong turns on the way. When they finally arrived on Main Street, both of them were hot and out of sorts. The Ford's air-conditioner had dropped dead on the trip from St. Louis, and it felt about a hundred and ten outside. Of course it wasn't anything at all like that, John Graham thought. As the old-timers said, it wasn't the heat, it was the humidity. He felt that today it would be almost possible to reach out and wring warm dribbles of water from the air itself. The sky overhead was a clear and open blue, but that high humidity made it feel as if it were going to rain any minute. Fuck that—it felt as if it were raining *already*.

“There's the market Milly Cousins told us about,” Elise said, and pointed.

John grunted. “Doesn't exactly look like the supermarket of the future.”

“No,” Elise agreed carefully. They were both being careful. They had been married almost two years and they still loved each other very much, but it had been a long trip across country from St. Louis, especially in a car with a broken radio and air-conditioner. John had every hope they would enjoy the summer here in Willow (they ought to, with the University of Missouri picking up the tab), but he thought it might take as long as a week for them to settle in and settle down. And when the weather turned yellow-dog hot like this, an argument could spin itself out of thin air. Neither of them wanted that kind of start to their summer.

John drove slowly down Main Street toward the Willow General Mercantile and Hardware. There was a rusty sign with a blue eagle on it hanging from one corner of the porch, and he understood this was also the postal substation. The General Mercantile looked sleepy in the afternoon light, with one single car, a beat-to-shit Volvo, parked beside the sign advertising ITALIAN SANDWICHES • PIZZA • GROCS • FISHING LICENCES, but compared with the rest of the town, it

seemed to be all but bursting with life. There was a neon beer sign fizzing away in the window, although it would not be dark for almost three hours yet. *Pretty radical*, John thought. *Sure hope the owner cleared that sign with the Board of Selectmen before he put it in.*

“I thought Maine turned into Vacationland in the summer,” Elise murmured.

“Judging from what we’ve seen so far, I think Willow must be a little off the tourist track,” he replied.

They got out of the car and mounted the porch steps. An elderly man in a straw hat sat in a rocker with a cane seat, looking at them from shrewd little blue eyes. He was fiddling a home-made cigarette together and dribbling little bits of tobacco on the dog which lay crashed out at his feet. It was a big yellow dog of no particular make or model. Its paws lay directly beneath one of the rocker’s curved runners. The old man took no notice of the dog, seemed not even to realize it was there, but the runner stopped a quarter of an inch from the vulnerable paws each time the old man rocked forward. Elise found this unaccountably fascinating.

“Good day to ye, lady n man,” the old gentleman said.

“Hello,” Elise answered, and offered him a small, tentative smile.

“Hi,” John said. “I’m—”

“Mr. Graham,” the old man finished placidly. “Mr. and Missus Graham. Ones that took the Hempstead Place for the summer. Heard you was writin some kind of book.”

“On the in-migration of the French during the seventeenth century,” John agreed. “Word sure gets around, doesn’t it?”

“It do travel,” the old party agreed. “Small town, don’tcha know.” He stuck the cigarette in his mouth, where it promptly fell apart, sprinkling tobacco all over his legs and the dog’s limp hide. The dog didn’t stir. “Aw, flapdoodle,” the old man said, and peeled the uncoiling paper from his lower lip. “Wife doesn’t want me to smoke nummore anyway. She says she read it’s givin her cancer as well as m’ownself.”

“We came into town to get a few supplies,” Elise said. “It’s a wonderful old house, but the cupboard is bare.”

“Ayuh,” the old man said. “Good to meet you folks. I’m Henry Eden.” He hung one bunched hand out in their direction. John shook with him, and Elise followed suit. They both did so with care, and the old man nodded as if to say he appreciated it. “I expected you half an hour ago. Must have taken a wrong turn or two, I guess. Got a lot of roads for such a small town, you know.” He laughed. It was a hollow, bronchial sound that turned into a phlegmy smoker’s cough. “Got a power of roads in Willow, oh, ayuh!” And laughed some more.

John was frowning a little. “Why would you be expecting us?”

“Lucy Doucette called, said she saw the new folks go by,” Eden said. He took out his pouch of Top tobacco, opened it, reached inside, and fished out a packet of rolling papers. “You don’t know Lucy, but she says you know her grandniece, Missus.”

“This is Milly Cousins’s great-aunt we’re talking about?” Elise asked.

“Yessum,” Eden agreed. He began to sprinkle tobacco. Some of it landed on the cigarette paper, but most went onto the dog below. Just as John Graham was beginning to wonder if maybe the dog was dead, it lifted its tail and farted. So much for *that* idea, he thought. “In Willow, just about everybody’s related to everybody else. Lucy lives down at the foot of the hill. I was gonna call you m’self, but since she said you was comin in anyway . . .”

“How did you know we’d be coming *here*?” John asked.

Henry Eden shrugged, as if to say *Where else is there to go?*

“Did you want to talk to us?” Elise asked.

“Well, I kinda have to,” Eden said. He sealed his cigarette and stuck it in his mouth. John waited to see if it would fall apart, as the other one had. He felt mildly disoriented by all this, as if he had walked unknowingly into some bucolic version of the CIA.

The cigarette somehow held together. There was a charred scrap of sandpaper tacked to one of the arms of the rocker. Eden struck the match on it and applied the flame to his cigarette, half of which incinerated on contact.

“I think you and Missus might want to spend tonight out of town,” he finally said.

John blinked at him. “Out of town? Why would we want to do that? We just got here.”

“Good idea, though, mister,” a voice said from behind Eden.

The Grahams looked around and saw a tall woman with slumped shoulders standing inside the Mercantile's rusty screen door. Her face looked out at them from just above an old tin sign advertising Chesterfield cigarettes—TWENTY-ONE GREAT TOBACCOS MAKE TWENTY WONDERFUL SMOKES. She opened the door and came out on the porch. Her face looked sallow and tired but not stupid. She had a loaf of bread in one hand and a six-pack of Dawson's Ale in the other.

"I'm Laura Stanton," she said. "It's very nice to meet you. We don't like to seem unsociable in Willow, but it's the rainy season here tonight."

John and Elise exchanged bewildered glances. Elise looked at the sky. Except for a few small fair-weather clouds, it was a lucid, unblemished blue.

"I know how it looks," the Stanton woman said, "but that doesn't mean anything, does it, Henry?"

"No'm," Eden said. He took one giant drag on his eroded cigarette and then pitched it over the porch rail.

"You can feel the humidity in the air," the Stanton woman said. "*That's* the key, isn't it, Henry?"

"Well," Eden allowed, "ayuh. But it *is* seven years. To the day."

"The very day," Laura Stanton agreed.

They both looked expectantly at the Grahams.

"Pardon me," Elise said at last. "I don't understand any of this. Is it some sort of local joke?"

This time Henry Eden and Laura Stanton exchanged the glances, then sighed at exactly the same moment, as if on cue.

"I *hate* this," Laura Stanton said, although whether to the old man or to herself John Graham had no idea.

"Got to be done," Eden replied.

She nodded, then sighed. It was the sigh of a woman who has set down a heavy burden and knows she must now pick it up again.

"This doesn't come up very often," she said, "because the rainy season only comes in Willow every seven years—"

"June seventeenth," Eden put in. "Rainy season every seven years on June seventeenth. Never changes, not even in leap-year. It's only one night, but

rainy season's what it's always been called. Damned if I know why. Do you know why, Laura?"

"No," she said, "and I wish you'd stop interrupting, Henry. I think you're getting senile."

"Well, pardon me for livin, I just fell off the hearse," the old man said, clearly nettled.

Elise threw John a glance that was a little frightened. *Are these people having us on? it asked. Or are they both crazy?*

John didn't know, but he wished heartily that they had gone to Augusta for their supplies; they could have gotten a quick supper at one of the clam-stands along Route 17.

"Now listen," the Stanton woman said kindly. "We reserved a room for you at the Wonderview Motel out on the Woolwich Road, if you want it. The place was full, but the manager's my cousin, and he was able to clear one room out for me. You could come back tomorrow and spend the rest of the summer with us. We'd be glad to have you."

"If this *is* a joke, I'm not getting the point," John said.

"No, it's not a joke," she said. She glanced at Eden, who gave her a brisk little nod, as if to say *Go on, don't quit now*. The woman looked back at John and Elise, appeared to steel herself, and said, "You see, folks, it rains toads here in Willow every seven years. There. Now you know."

"Toads," Elise said in a distant, musing, Tell-me-I'm-dreaming-all-this voice.

"Toads, ayuh!" Henry Eden affirmed cheerfully.

John was looking cautiously around for help, if help should be needed. But Main Street was utterly deserted. Not only that, he saw, but *shuttered*. Not a car moved on the road. Not a single pedestrian was visible on either sidewalk.

*We could be in trouble here*, he thought. *If these people are as nutty as they sound, we could be in real trouble*. He suddenly found himself thinking of Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" for the first time since he'd read it in junior high school.

"Don't you get the idea that I'm standin here and soundin like a fool 'cause I *want* to," Laura Stanton said. "Fact is, I'm just doin my duty. Henry, too. You see, it doesn't just *sprinkle* toads. It *pours*."

“Come on,” John said to Elise, taking her arm above the elbow. He gave them a smile that felt as genuine as a six-dollar bill. “Nice to meet you folks.” He guided Elise down the porch steps, looking back over his shoulder at the old man and the slump-shouldered, pallid woman two or three times as he did. It didn’t seem like a good idea to turn his back on them completely.

The woman took a step toward them, and John almost stumbled and fell off the last step.

“It *is* a little hard to believe,” she agreed. “You probably think I am just as nutty as a fruitcake.”

“Not at all,” John said. The large, phony smile on his face now felt as if it were approaching the lobes of his ears. Dear Jesus, why had he ever left St. Louis? He had driven nearly fifteen hundred miles with a busted radio and air-conditioner to meet Farmer Jekyll and Missus Hyde.

“That’s all right, though,” Laura Stanton said, and the weird serenity in her face and voice made him stop by the ITALIAN SANDWICHES sign, still six feet from the Ford. “Even people who have heard of rains of frogs and toads and birds and such don’t have a very clear idea of what happens in Willow every seven years. Take a little advice, though: if you *are* going to stay, you’d be well off to stay in the house. You’ll most likely be all right in the house.”

“Might want to close y’shutters, though,” Eden added. The dog lifted his tail and articulated another long and groaning dog-fart, as if to emphasize the point.

“We’ll. . . we’ll do that,” Elise said faintly, and then John had the Ford’s passenger door open and was nearly shovelling her inside.

“You bet,” he said through his large frozen grin.

“And come back and see us tomorrow,” Eden called as John hurried around the front of the Ford to his side. “You’ll feel a mite safer around us tomorrow, I think.” He paused, then added: “If you’re still around at all, accourse.”

John waved, got behind the wheel, and pulled out.

• • •

There was silence on the porch for a moment as the old man and the woman with the pale, unhealthy skin watched the Ford head back up Main Street. It

left at a considerably higher speed than that at which it had come.

“Well, we done it,” the old man said contentedly.

“Yes,” she agreed, “and I feel like a horse’s ass. I *always* feel like a horse’s ass when I see the way they look at us. At me.”

“Well,” he said, “it’s only once every seven years. And it has to be done just that way. Because—”

“Because it’s part of the ritual,” she said glumly.

“Ayuh. It’s the ritual.”

As if agreeing it was so, the dog flipped up his tail and farted once more.

The woman booted it and then turned to the old man with her hands clamped on her hips. “That is the *stinkiest* mutt in four towns, Henry Eden!”

The dog arose with a grunt and staggered down the porch stairs, pausing only long enough to favor Laura Stanton with a reproachful gaze.

“He can’t help it,” Eden said.

She sighed, looking up the road after the Ford. “It’s too bad,” she said. “They seem like such *nice* people.”

“Nor can *we* help *that*,” Henry Eden said, and began to roll another smoke.

• • •

So the Grahams ended up eating dinner at a clam-stand after all. They found one in the neighboring town of Woolwich (“Home of the scenic Wonderview Motel,” John pointed out to Elise in a vain effort to raise a smile) and sat at a picnic table under an old, overspreading blue spruce. The clam-stand was in sharp, almost jarring contrast to the buildings on Willow’s Main Street. The parking lot was nearly full (most of the cars, like theirs, had out-of-state licence plates), and yelling kids with ice cream on their faces chased after one another while their parents strolled about, slapped blackflies, and waited for their numbers to be announced over the loudspeaker. The stand had a fairly wide menu. In fact, John thought, you could have just about anything you wanted, as long as it wasn’t too big to fit in a deep-fat fryer.

“I don’t know if I can spend two *days* in that town, let alone two months,” Elise said. “The bloom is off the rose for this mother’s daughter, Johnny.”

“It was a joke, that’s all. The kind the natives like to play on the tourists. They just went too far with it. They’re probably kicking themselves for that right now.”

“They looked serious,” she said. “How am I supposed to go back there and face that old man after that?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it—judging from his cigarettes, he’s reached the stage of life where he’s meeting *everyone* for the first time. Even his oldest friends.”

Elise tried to control the twitching corners of her mouth, then gave up and burst out laughing. “You’re evil!”

“Honest, maybe, but not evil. I won’t say he had Alzheimer’s, but he *did* look as if he might need a roadmap to find his way to the bathroom.”

“Where do you suppose everyone else was? The town looked totally deserted.”

“Bean supper at the Grange or a card-party at the Eastern Star, probably,” John said, stretching. He peeked into her clam basket. “You didn’t eat much, love.”

“Love wasn’t very hungry.”

“I tell you it was just a *joke*,” he said, taking her hands. “Lighten up.”

“You’re really, really sure that’s all it was?”

“Really-really. I mean, hey—every seven years it rains toads in Willow, Maine? It sounds like an outtake from a Steven Wright monologue.”

She smiled wanly. “It doesn’t rain,” she said, “it pours.”

“They subscribe to the old fisherman’s credo, I guess—if you’re going to tell one, tell a whopper. When I was a kid at sleep-away camp, it used to be snipe hunts. This really isn’t much different. And when you stop to think about it, it really isn’t that surprising.”

“What isn’t?”

“That people who make most of their yearly income dealing with summer people should develop a summer-camp mentality.”

“That woman didn’t *act* like it was a joke. I’ll tell you the truth, Johnny—she sort of scared me.”

John Graham’s normally pleasant face grew stern and hard. The expression did not look at home on his face, but neither did it look faked or insincere.

“I know,” he said, picking up their wrappings and napkins and plastic baskets. “And there’s going to be an apology made for that. I find foolishness for the sake of foolishness agreeable enough, but when someone scares my wife—hell, they scared *me* a little, too—I draw the line. Ready to go back?”

“Can you find it again?”

He grinned, and immediately looked more like himself. “I left a trail of breadcrumbs.”

“How wise you are, my darling,” she said, and got up. She was smiling again, and John was glad to see it. She drew a deep breath—it did wonders for the front of the blue chambray work-shirt she was wearing—and let it out. “The humidity seems to have dropped.”

“Yeah.” John deposited their waste into a trash basket with a left-handed hook shot and then winked at her. “So much for rainy season.”

• • •

But by the time they turned onto the Hempstead Road, the humidity had returned, and with a vengeance. John felt as if his own tee-shirt had turned into a clammy mass of cobweb clinging to his chest and back. The sky, now turning a delicate shade of evening primrose, was still clear, but he felt that, if he’d had a straw, he could have drunk directly from the air.

There was only one other house on the road, at the foot of the long hill with the Hempstead Place at the top. As they drove past it, John saw the silhouette of a woman standing motionless at one of the windows and looking out at them.

“Well, there’s your friend Milly’s great-aunt,” John said. “She sure was a sport to call the local crazies down at the general store and tell them we were coming. I wonder if they would have dragged out the whoopee cushions and joy-buzzers and chattery teeth if we’d stayed a little longer.”

“That dog had his own built-in joy-buzzer.”

John laughed and nodded.

Five minutes later they were turning into their own driveway. It was badly overgrown with weeds and dwarf bushes, and John intended to take care of *that* little situation before the summer got much older. The Hempstead Place

itself was a rambling country farmhouse, added to by succeeding generations whenever the need—or maybe just the urge—to do some building happened to strike. A barn stood behind it, connected to the house by three rambling, zig-zag sheds. In this flush of early summer, two of the three sheds were almost buried in fragrant drifts of honeysuckle.

It commanded a gorgeous view of the town, especially on a clear night like this one. John wondered briefly just how it could *be* so clear when the humidity was so high. Elise joined him in front of the car and they stood there for a moment, arms around each other's waists, looking at the hills which rolled gently off in the direction of Augusta, losing themselves in the shadows of evening.

"It's beautiful," she murmured.

"And listen," he said.

There was a marshy area of reeds and high grass fifty yards or so behind the barn, and in it a chorus of frogs sang and thumped and snapped the elastics God had for some reason stretched in their throats.

"Well," she said, "the frogs are all present and accounted for, anyway."

"No toads, though." He looked up at the clear sky, in which Venus had now opened her coldly burning eye. "There they are, Elise! Up there! Clouds of toads!"

She giggled.

" 'Tonight in the small town of Willow,' " he intoned, " 'a cold front of toads met a warm front of newts, and the result was—' "

She elbowed him. "*You*," she said. "Let's go in."

They went in. And did not pass Go. And did not collect two hundred dollars.

They went directly to bed.

• • •

Elise was startled out of a satisfying drowse an hour or so later by a thump on the roof. She got up on her elbows. "What was that, Johnny?"

"Huzz," John said, and turned over on his side.

*Toads*, she thought, and giggled . . . but it was a nervous giggle. She got up and went to the window, and before she looked for anything which might have fallen on the ground, she found herself looking up at the sky.

It was still cloudless, and now shot with a trillion spangled stars. She looked at them, for a moment hypnotized by their simple silent beauty.

*Thud.*

She jerked back from the window and looked up at the ceiling. Whatever it was, it had hit the roof just overhead.

“John! Johnny! Wake up!”

“Huh? What?” He sat up, his hair all tangled tufts and clock-springs.

“It’s started,” she said, and giggled shrilly. “The rain of frogs.”

“Toads,” he corrected. “Ellie, what are you talking ab—”

*Thud-thud.*

He looked around, then swung his feet out of bed.

“This is ridiculous,” he said softly and angrily.

“What do you m—”

*Thud-CRASH!* There was a tinkle of glass downstairs.

“Oh, goddam,” he said, getting up and yanking on his blue-jeans. “Enough. This is just . . . fucking . . . *enough.*”

Several soft thuds hit the side of the house and the roof. She cringed against him, frightened now. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that crazy woman and probably the old man and some of their friends are out there throwing things at the house,” he said, “and I am going to put a stop to it right now. Maybe they’ve held onto the custom of shivareeing the new folks in this little town, but—”

*THUD! SMASH!* From the kitchen.

“*God-DAMN!*” John yelled, and ran out into the hall.

“Don’t leave me!” Elise cried, and ran after him.

He flicked up the hallway light-switch before plunging downstairs. Soft thumps and thuds struck the house in an increasing rhythm, and Elise had time to think, *How many people from town are out there? How many does it take to do that? And what are they throwing? Rocks wrapped in pillow-cases?*

John reached the foot of the stairs and went into the living room. There was a large window in there which gave on the same view which they had admired

earlier. The window was broken. Shards and splinters of glass lay scattered across the rug. He started toward the window, meaning to yell something at them about how he was going to get his shotgun. Then he looked at the broken glass again, remembered that his feet were bare, and stopped. For a moment he didn't know what to do. Then he saw a dark shape lying in the broken glass—the rock one of the imbecilic, interbred bastards had used to break the window, he assumed—and saw red. He might have charged to the window anyway, bare feet or no bare feet, but just then the rock twitched.

*That's no rock*, he thought. *That's a—*

“John?” Elise asked. The house rang with those soft thuds now. It was as if they were being bombarded with large, rotten-soft hailstones. “John, what is it?”

“A toad,” he said stupidly. He was still looking at the twitching shape in the litter of broken glass, and spoke more to himself than to his wife.

He raised his eyes and looked out the window. What he saw out there struck him mute with horror and incredulity. He could no longer see the hills or the horizon—hell, he could barely see the barn, and that was less than forty feet away.

The air was stuffed with falling shapes.

Three more of them came in through the broken window. One landed on the floor, not far from its twitching mate. It came down on a sharp sliver of window-glass and black fluid burst from its body in thick ropes.

Elise screamed.

The other two caught in the curtains, which began to twist and jerk as if in a fitful breeze. One of them managed to disentangle itself. It struck the floor and then hopped toward John.

He groped at the wall with a hand which felt as if it were no part of him at all. His fingers stumbled across the light-switch and flipped it up.

The thing hopping across the glass-littered floor toward him was a toad, but it was also not a toad. Its green-black body was too large, too lumpy. Its black-and-gold eyes bulged like freakish eggs. And bursting from its mouth, unhinging the jaw, was a bouquet of large, needle-sharp teeth.

It made a thick croaking noise and bounded at John as if on springs. Behind it, more toads were falling in through the window. The ones which

struck the floor had either died outright or been crippled, but many others—too many others—used the curtains as a safety-net and tumbled to the floor unharmed.

“*Get out of here!*” John yelled to his wife, and kicked at the toad which—it was insane, but it was true—was attacking him. It did not flinch back from his foot but sank that mouthful of crooked needles first over and then into his toes. The pain was immediate, fiery, and immense. Without thinking, he made a half-turn and kicked the wall as hard as he could. He felt his toes break, but the toad broke as well, splattering its black blood onto the wainscoting in a half-circle, like a fan. His toes had become a crazy road-sign, pointing in all directions at once.

Elise was standing frozen in the hall doorway. She could now hear window-glass shattering all over the house. She had put on one of John’s tee-shirts after they had finished making love, and now she was clutching the neck of it with both hands. The air was full of ugly croaking sounds.

“*Get out, Elise!*” John screamed. He turned, shaking his bloody foot. The toad which had bitten him was dead, but its huge and improbable teeth were still caught in his flesh like a tangle of fishhooks. This time he kicked at the air, like a man punting a football, and the toad finally flew free.

The faded living-room carpet was now covered with bloated, hopping bodies. And they were all hopping at *them*.

John ran to the doorway. His foot came down on one of the toads and burst it open. His heel skidded in the cold jelly which popped out of its body and he almost fell. Elise relinquished her death-grip on the neck of her tee-shirt and grabbed him. They stumbled into the hall together and John slammed the door, catching one of the toads in the act of hopping through. The door cut it in half. The top half twitched and juddered on the floor, its toothy, black-lipped mouth opening and closing, its black-and-golden pop-eyes goggling at them.

Elise clapped her hands to the sides of her face and began to wail hysterically. John reached out to her. She shook her head and cringed away from him, her hair falling over her face.

The sound of the toads hitting the roof was bad, but the croakings and chirrupings were worse, because these latter sounds were coming from inside

the house . . . and *all over* the house. He thought of the old man sitting on the porch of the General Mercantile in his rocker, calling after them: *Might want to close y'shutters.*

*Christ, why didn't I believe him?*

And, on the heels of that: *How was I supposed to believe him? Nothing in my whole life prepared me to believe him!*

And, below the sound of toads thudding onto the ground outside and toads squashing themselves to guts and goo on the roof, he heard a more ominous sound: the chewing, splintering sound of the toads in the living room starting to bite their way through the door. He could actually see it settling more firmly against its hinges as more and more toads crowded their weight against it.

He turned around and saw toads hopping down the main staircase by the dozens.

"Elise!" He grabbed at her. She kept shrieking and pulling away from him. A sleeve of the tee-shirt tore free. He looked at the ragged chunk of cloth in his hand with perfect stupidity for a moment and then let it flutter down to the floor.

*"Elise, goddammit!"*

She shrieked and drew back again.

Now the first toads had reached the hall floor and were hopping eagerly toward them. There was a brittle tinkle as the fanlight over the door shattered. A toad whizzed through it, struck the carpet, and lay on its back, mottled pink belly exposed, webbed feet twitching in the air.

He grabbed his wife, shook her. *"We have to go down cellar! We'll be safe in the cellar!"*

"No!" Elise screamed at him. Her eyes were giant floating zeros, and he understood she was not refusing his idea of retreating to the cellar but refusing *everything*.

There was no time for gentle measures or soothing words. He bunched the front of the shirt she was wearing in his fist and yanked her down the hall like a cop dragging a recalcitrant prisoner to a squad-car. One of the toads which had been in the vanguard of those hurrying down the stairs leaped gigantically and snicked its mouthful of darning-needles shut around a chunk of space occupied by Elise's bare heel a second before.

Halfway down the hall, she got the idea and began to come with him of her own accord. They reached the door. John turned the knob and yanked it, but the door wouldn't move.

*"Goddam!"* he cried, and yanked it again. No good. Nothing.

*"John, hurry!"*

She looked back over her shoulder and saw toads flooding down the hall toward them, taking huge crazy sproings over each other's back, falling on each other, striking the faded rambler-rose wallpaper, landing on their backs and being overrun by their mates. They were all teeth and gold-black eyes and heaving, leathery bodies.

*"JOHN, PLEASE! PL—"*

Then one of them leaped and batted on her left thigh just above the knee. Elise screamed and seized it, her fingers punching through its skin and into its dark liquid workings. She tore it free and for a moment, as she raised her arms, the horrid thing was right in front of her eyes, its teeth gnashing like a piece of some small but homicidal factory machine. She threw it as hard as she could. It cartwheeled in the air and then splattered against the wall just opposite the kitchen door. It did not fall but stuck fast in the glue of its own guts.

*"JOHN! OH JESUS, JOHN!"*

John Graham suddenly realized what he was doing wrong. He reversed the direction of his effort, pushing the door instead of pulling it. It flew open, almost spilling him forward and down the stairs, and he wondered briefly if his mother had had any kids that lived. He flailed at the railing, caught hold of it, and then Elise almost knocked him down again, bolting past him and down the stairs, screaming like a firebell in the night.

*Oh she's going to fall, she can't help but fall, she's going to fall and break her neck—*

But somehow she did not. She reached the cellar's earth floor and collapsed in a sobbing heap, clutching at her torn thigh.

Toads were leaping and hopping in through the open cellar doorway.

John caught his balance, turned, and slapped the door shut. Several of the toads caught on their side of the door leaped right off the landing, struck the stairs, and fell through the spaces between the risers. Another took an almost vertical leap straight up, and John was suddenly shaken by wild laughter—a

sudden bright image of Mr. Toad of Toad Hall on a pogo-stick instead of in a motor-car had come to him. Still laughing, he balled his right hand into a fist and punched the toad dead center in its pulsing, flabby chest at the top of its leap, while it hung in perfect equilibrium between gravity and its own expended energy. It zoomed off into the shadows, and John heard a soft *bonk!* as it struck the furnace.

He scrabbled at the wall in the dark, and his fingers found the raised cylinder which was the old-fashioned toggle light-switch. He flipped it, and that was when Elise began to scream again. A toad had gotten tangled in her hair. It croaked and twisted and turned and bit at her neck, rolling itself into something which resembled a large, misshapen curler.

Elise lurched to her feet and ran in a large circle, miraculously avoiding a tumble over the boxes which had been stacked and stored down here. She struck one of the cellar's support posts, rebounded, then turned and banged the back of her head twice, briskly, against it. There was a thick gushing sound, a squirt of black fluid, and then the toad fell out of her hair, tumbling down the back of her tee-shirt, leaving dribbles of ichor.

She screamed, and the lunacy in that sound chilled John's blood. He half-ran, half-stumbled down the cellar stairs and enfolded her in his arms. She fought him at first and then surrendered. Her screams gradually dissolved into steady weeping.

Then, over the soft thunder of the toads striking the house and the grounds, they heard the croaking of the toads which had fallen down here. She drew away from him, her eyes shifting wildly from side to side in their shiny-white sockets.

"Where are they?" she panted. Her voice was hoarse, almost a bark, from all the screaming she had done. "Where are they, John?"

But they didn't have to look; the toads had already seen *them*, and came hopping eagerly toward them.

The Grahams retreated, and John saw a rusty shovel leaning against the wall. He grabbed it and beat the toads to death with it as they came. Only one got past him. It leaped from the floor to a box and from the box it jumped at Elise, catching the cloth of her shirt in its teeth and dangling there between her breasts, legs kicking.

“Stand still!” John barked at her. He dropped the shovel, took two steps forward, grabbed the toad, and hauled it off her shirt. It took a chunk of cloth with it. The cotton strip hung from one of its fangs as it twisted and pulsed and wriggled in John’s hands. Its hide was warty, dry but horridly warm and somehow *busy*. He snapped his hands into fists, popping the toad. Blood and slime squirted out from between his fingers.

Less than a dozen of the little monsters had actually made it through the cellar door, and soon they were all dead. John and Elise clung to each other, listening to the steady rain of toads outside.

John looked over at the low cellar windows. They were packed and dark, and he suddenly saw the house as it must look from the outside, buried in a drift of squirming, lunging, leaping toads.

“We’ve got to block the windows,” he said hoarsely. “Their weight is going to break them, and if that happens, they’ll *pour* in.”

“With what?” Elise asked in her hoarse bark of a voice. “What can we use?”

He looked around and saw several sheets of plywood, elderly and dark, leaning against one wall. Not much, perhaps, but something.

“That,” he said. “Help me to break it up into smaller pieces.”

• • •

They worked quickly and frantically. There were only four windows in the cellar, and their very narrowness had caused the panes to hold longer than the larger windows upstairs had done. They were just finishing the last when they heard the glass of the first shatter behind the plywood . . . but the plywood held.

They staggered into the middle of the cellar again, John limping on his broken foot.

From the top of the stairway came the sound of the toads eating their way through the cellar door.

“What do we do if they eat all the way through it?” Elise whispered.

“I don’t know,” he said . . . and that was when the door of the coal-chute, unused for years but still intact, suddenly swung open under the weight of all

the toads which had fallen or hopped into it, and hundreds of them poured out in a high-pressure jet.

This time Elise could not scream. She had damaged her vocal cords too badly for that.

It did not last long for the Grahams in the cellar after the coal-chute door gave way, but until it was over, John Graham screamed quite adequately for both of them.

• • •

By midnight, the downpour of toads in Willow had slackened off to a mild, croaking drizzle.

At one-thirty in the morning, the last toad fell out of the dark, starry sky, landed in a pine tree near the lake, hopped to the ground, and disappeared into the night. It was over for another seven years.

Around quarter past five, the first light began to creep into the sky and over the land. Willow was buried beneath a writhing, hopping, complaining carpet of toads. The buildings on Main Street had lost their angles and corners; everything was rounded and hunched and twitching. The sign on the highway which read WELCOME TO WILLOW, MAINE, THE *FRIENDLY* PLACE! looked as if someone had put about thirty shotgun shells through it. The holes, of course, had been made by flying toads. The sign in front of the General Mercantile which advertised ITALIAN SANDWICHES • PIZZA • GROCS • FISHING LICENCES had been knocked over. Toads played leapfrog on and around it. There was a small toad convention going on atop each of the gas-pumps at Donny's Sunoco. Two toads sat upon the slowly swinging iron arm of the weathervane atop the Willow Stove Shop like small misshapen children on a merry-go-round.

At the lake, the few floats which had been put out this early (only the hardest swimmers dared the waters of Lake Willow before July 4th, however, toads or no toads) were piled high with toads, and the fish were going crazy with so much food almost within reach. Every now and then there was a *plip!* *plip!* sound as one or two of the toads jostling for place on the floats were knocked off and some hungry trout or salmon's breakfast was served. The roads in and out of town—there were a lot of them for such a small town, as Henry

Eden had said—were paved with toads. The power was out for the time being; free-falling toads had broken the power-lines in any number of places. Most of the gardens were ruined, but Willow wasn't much of a farming community, anyway. Several people kept fairly large dairy herds, but they had all been safely tucked away for the night. Dairy farmers in Willow knew all about rainy season and had no wish to lose their milkers to the hordes of leaping, carnivorous toads. What in the hell would you tell the insurance company?

As the light brightened over the Hempstead Place, it revealed drifts of dead toads on the roof, rain-gutters which had been splintered loose by dive-bombing toads, a dooryard that was alive with toads. They hopped in and out of the barn, they stuffed the chimneys, they hopped nonchalantly around the tires of John Graham's Ford and sat in croaking rows on the front seat like a church congregation waiting for the services to start. Heaps of toads, mostly dead, lay in drifts against the building. Some of these drifts were six feet deep.

At 6:05, the sun cleared the horizon, and as its rays struck them, the toads began to melt.

Their skins bleached, turned white, then appeared to become transparent. Soon a vapor which gave off a vaguely swampy smell began to trail up from the bodies and little bubbly rivulets of moisture began to course down them. Their eyes fell in or fell out, depending on their positions when the sun hit them. Their skins popped with an audible sound, and for perhaps ten minutes it sounded as if champagne corks were being drawn all over Willow.

They decomposed rapidly after that, melting into puddles of cloudy white *shmeg* that looked like human semen. This liquid ran down the pitches of the Hempstead Place's roof in little creeks and dripped from the eaves like pus.

The living toads died; the dead ones simply rotted to that white fluid. It bubbled briefly and then sank slowly into the ground. The earth sent up tiny ribands of steam, and for a little while every field in Willow looked like the site of a dying volcano.

By quarter of seven it was over, except for the repairs, and the residents were used to them.

It seemed a small price to pay for another seven years of quiet prosperity in this mostly forgotten Maine backwater.

• • •

At five past eight, Laura Stanton's beat-to-shit Volvo turned into the dooryard of the General Mercantile. When Laura got out, she looked paler and sicker than ever. She *was* sick, in fact; she still had the six-pack of Dawson's Ale in one hand, but now all the bottles were empty. She had a vicious hangover.

Henry Eden came out on the porch. His dog walked behind him.

"Get that mutt inside, or I'm gonna turn right around and go home," Laura said from the foot of the stairs.

"He can't help passing gas, Laura."

"That doesn't mean *I* have to be around when he lets rip," Laura said. "I mean it, now, Henry. My head hurts like a bastard, and the last thing I need this morning is listening to that dog play *Hail Columbia* out of its asshole."

"Go inside, Toby," Henry said, holding the door open.

Toby looked up at him with wet eyes, as if to say *Do I have to? Things were just getting interesting out here.*

"Go on, now," Henry said.

Toby walked back inside, and Henry shut the door. Laura waited until she heard the latch snick shut, and then she mounted the steps.

"Your sign fell over," she said, handing him the carton of empties.

"I got eyes, woman," Henry said. He was not in the best temper this morning, himself. Few people in Willow would be. Sleeping through a rain of toads was a goddam hard piece of work. Thank God it only came once every seven years, or a man would be apt to go shit out of his mind.

"You should have taken it in," she said.

Henry muttered something she didn't quite catch.

"What was that?"

"I said we should have tried harder," Henry said defiantly. "They was a nice young couple. We should have tried harder."

She felt a touch of compassion for the old man in spite of her thudding head, and laid a hand on his arm. "It's the ritual," she said.

"Well, sometimes I just feel like saying frig the ritual!"

"*Henry!*" She drew her hand back, shocked in spite of herself. But he wasn't getting any younger, she reminded herself. The wheels were getting a little

rusty upstairs, no doubt.

“I don’t care,” he said stubbornly. “They seemed like a real nice young couple. You said so, too, and don’t try to say you didn’t.”

“I *did* think they were nice,” she said. “But we can’t help that, Henry. Why, you said so yourself just last night.”

“I know,” he sighed.

“We don’t make them stay,” she said. “Just the opposite. We warn them out of town. They decide to stay themselves. They *always* decide to stay. They make their own decision. *That’s* part of the ritual, too.”

“I know,” he repeated. He drew a deep breath and grimaced. “I hate the smell afterward. Whole goddam town smells like clabbered milk.”

“It’ll be gone by noon. You know that.”

“Ayuh. But I just about hope I’m underground when it comes around again, Laura. And if I ain’t, I hope somebody else gets the job of meetin whoever comes just before rainy season. I like bein able to pay m’bills when they come due just as well as anybody else, but I tell you, a man gets tired of toads. Even if it is only once every seven years, a man can get damned tired of toads.”

“A woman, too,” she said softly.

“Well,” he said, looking around with a sigh, “I guess we might try puttin some of this damn mess right, don’t you?”

“Sure,” she said. “And, you know, Henry, we don’t make ritual, we only follow it.”

“I know, but—”

“And things could change. There’s no telling when or why, but they could. This might be the last time we have rainy season. Or next time no one from out of town might come—”

“Don’t say that,” he said fearfully. “If no one comes, the toads might not go away like they do when the sun hits em.”

“There, you see?” she asked. “You have come around to my side of it, after all.”

“Well,” he said, “it’s a long time. Ain’t it. Seven years is a long time.”

“Yes.”

“They *was* a nice young couple, weren’t they?”

“Yes,” she said again.

“Awful way to go,” Henry Eden said with a slight hitch in his voice, and this time she said nothing. After a moment, Henry asked her if she would help him set his sign up again. In spite of her nasty headache, Laura said she would—she didn’t like to see Henry so low, especially when he was feeling low over something he could control no more than he could control the tides or the phases of the moon.

By the time they’d finished, he seemed to feel a little better.

“Ayuh,” he said. “Seven years is a *hell* of a long time.”

*It is, she thought, but it always passes, and rainy season always comes around again, and the outsiders come with it, always two of them, always a man and a woman, and we always tell them exactly what is going to happen, and they don’t believe it, and what happens . . . happens.”*

“Come on, you old crock,” she said, “offer me a cup of coffee before my head splits wide open.”

He offered her a cup, and before they had finished, the sounds of hammers and saws had begun in town. Outside the window they could look down Main Street and see people folding back their shutters, talking and laughing.

The air was warm and dry, the sky overhead was a pale and hazy blue, and in Willow, rainy season was over.

## My Pretty Pony

The old man sat in the barn doorway in the smell of apples, rocking, wanting not to want to smoke not because of the doctor but because now his heart fluttered all the time. He watched that stupid son of a bitch Osgood do a fast count with his head against the tree and watched him turn and catch Clivey out and laugh, his mouth open wide enough so the old man could observe how his teeth were already rotting in his head and imagine how the kid's breath would smell: like the back part of a wet cellar. Although the whelp couldn't be more than eleven.

The old man watched Osgood laugh his gaspy hee-hawing laugh. The boy laughed so hard he finally had to lean over and put his hands on his knees, so hard the others came out of their hiding places to see what it was, and when they saw, they laughed, too. They all stood around in the morning sun and laughed at his grandson and the old man forgot how much he wanted a smoke. What he wanted now was to see if Clivey would cry. He found he was more curious on this subject than on any other which had engaged his attention over the last several months, including the subject of his own fast-approaching death.

"Caught im out!" the others chanted, laughing. "Caught im, caught im, caught im out!"

Clivey only stood there, stolid as a chunk of rock in a farmer's field, waiting for the razzing to be over so the game could go on with him as It and the embarrassment beginning to be behind him. After awhile the game did. Then it was noontime and the other boys went home. The old man watched to see how much lunch Clivey would eat. It turned out to be not much. Clivey just poked at his potatoes, made his corn and his peas change places, and fed little scraps of meat to the dog under the table. The old man watched it all, interested, answering when the others talked to him, but not much listening to their mouths or his own. His mind was on the boy.

When the pie was done he wanted what he couldn't have and so excused himself to take a nap and paused halfway up the stairs because now his heart felt like a fan with a playing card caught in it, and he stood there with his head down, waiting to see if this was the final one (there had been two before), and when it wasn't he went on up and took off all but his underdrawers and lay down on the crisp white coverlet. A rectangular label of sun lay across his scrawny chest; it was cut into three sections by dark strokes of shadow that were the window laths. He put his hands behind his head, drowsing and listening. After awhile he thought he heard the boy crying in his own room down the hall and he thought, *I ought to take care of that.*

He slept an hour, and when he got up the woman was asleep beside him in her slip, and so he took his clothes out into the hallway to dress before going down.

Clivey was outside, sitting on the steps and throwing a stick for the dog, who fetched with more will than the boy tossed. The dog (he had no name, he was just the dog) seemed puzzled.

The old man hailed the boy and told him to take a walk up to the orchard with him and so the boy did.

• • •

The old man's name was George Banning. He was the boy's grandfather, and it was from him that Clive Banning learned the importance of having a pretty pony in your life. You had to have one of those even if you were allergic to horses, because without a pretty pony you could have six clocks in every room and so many watches on each wrist you couldn't raise your arms and still you'd never know what time it was.

The instruction (George Banning didn't give advice, only instruction) had taken place on the day Clive got caught out by that idiot Alden Osgood while playing hide and seek. By that time Clive's Grandpa seemed older than God, which probably meant about seventy-two. The Banning homestead was in the town of Troy, New York, which in 1961 was just starting to learn how not to be the country.

The instruction took place in the West Orchard.

• • •

His grandfather was standing coatless in a blizzard that was not late snow but early apple blossoms in a high warm wind; Grandpa was wearing his biballs with a collared shirt beneath, a shirt that looked as if it had once been green but was now faded to a no-account olive by dozens or hundreds of washings, and beneath the collared shirt was the round top of a cotton undershirt (the kind with the straps, of course; in those days they made the other kind, but a man like Grandpa would be a strap-undershirt man to the end), and this shirt was clean but the color of old ivory instead of its original white because Gramma's motto, often spoken and stitched into a living-room sampler as well (presumably for those rare times when the woman herself was not there to dispense what wisdom needed dispensing), was this: *Use it, use it, never lose it! Break it in! Wear it out! Keep it safe or do without!* There were apple blossoms caught in Grandpa's long hair, still only half white, and the boy thought the old man was beautiful in the trees.

He had seen Grandpa watching them as they went about their game earlier that day. Watching *him*. Grandpa had been sitting in his rocker at the entrance to the barn. One of the boards squeaked every time Grandpa rocked, and there he sat, a book facedown in his lap, his hands folded atop it, there he sat rocking amid the dim sweet smells of hay and apples and cider. It was this game that caused his Grandpa to offer Clive Banning instruction on the subject of time, and how it was slippery, and how a man had to fight to hold it in his hands almost all the while; the pony was pretty but it had a wicked heart. If you didn't keep a close eye on that pretty pony, it would jump the fence and be out of sight and you'd have to take your rope bridle and go after it, a trip that was apt to tire you all the way to your bones even if it was short.

Grandpa began his instruction by saying that Alden Osgood had cheated. He was supposed to hide his eyes against the dead elm by the chopping block for a full minute, which he would time by counting to sixty. This would give Clivey (so Grandpa had always called him, and he hadn't minded, although he was thinking he would have to fight any boy or man who called him that once he was past the age of twelve) and the others a fair chance to hide. Clivey had still been looking for a place when Alden Osgood got to sixty, turned around,

and “caught him out” as he was trying to squirm—as a last resort—behind a pile of apple crates stacked haphazardly beside the press-shed, where the machine that squeezed the blems into cider bulked in the dimness like an engine of torture.

“It wasn’t fair,” Grandpa said. “You didn’t do no bitching about it and that was right, because a natural man *never* does no bitching—they call it bitching because it ain’t for men or even boys smart enough to know better and brave enough to do better. Just the same, it wasn’t fair. I can say that now because you didn’t say it then.”

Apple blossoms blowing in the old man’s hair. One caught in the dent below his Adam’s apple, caught there like a jewel that was pretty simply because some things *were* and couldn’t help it, but was *gorgeous* because it lacked duration: in a few seconds it would be brushed impatiently away and left on the ground where it would become perfectly anonymous among its fellows.

He told Grandpa that Alden *had* counted to sixty, just as the rules said he must, not knowing why he wanted to argue the side of the boy who had, after all, shamed him by not even having to find him but had simply “caught him out.” Alden—who sometimes slapped like a girl when he was mad—had needed only to turn, see him, then casually put his hand on the dead tree and chant the mystic and unquestioned formula of elimination: “I-see-Clive, my gool-one-two-three!”

Maybe he only argued Alden’s case so he and Grandpa wouldn’t have to go back yet, so he could watch Grandpa’s steel hair blow back in the blizzard of blossoms, so he could admire that transient jewel caught in the hollow at the base of the old man’s throat.

“Sure he did,” Grandpa said. “Sure he counted to sixty. Now looka this, Clivey! And let it mark your mind!”

There were real pockets in Grandpa’s overalls—five of them, counting the kangaroo-like pouch in the bib—but beside the hip pockets there were things that only *looked* like pockets. They were really slits, made so you could reach through to the pants you were wearing underneath (in those days the idea of *not* wearing pants underneath would not have seemed scandalous, only laughable—the behavior of someone who was A Little Soft in the Attic).

Grandpa was wearing the inevitable pair of blue-jeans beneath his overalls. “Jew-pants,” he called them matter-of-factly, a term that all the farmers Clive knew used. Levi’s were either “Jew-pants” or simply “Joozers.”

He reached through the right-hand slit in his overalls, fumbled at some length in the right-hand pocket of the denim trousers beneath, and at last brought out a tarnished silver pocket watch which he put in the boy’s unprepared hand. The weight of the watch was so sudden, the ticking beneath its metal skin so lively, that he came within an ace of dropping it.

He looked at Grandpa, his brown eyes wide.

“You ain’t gonna drop it,” said Grandpa, “and if you did you probably wouldn’t stop it—it’s been dropped before, even stepped on once in some damned beerjoint in Utica, and it never stopped yet. And if it did stop, it’d be your loss, not mine, because it’s yours now.”

“What?” He wanted to say he didn’t understand but couldn’t finish because he thought he did.

“I’m giving it to you,” Grandpa said. “Always meant to, but I’ll be damned if I’m gonna put it in my will. It’d cost more for the damn law-rights than that thing’s worth.”

“Grandpa . . . I . . . Jesus!”

Grandpa laughed until he started to cough. He doubled over, coughing and laughing, his face going a plum-purple color. Some of Clive’s joy and wonder were lost in concern. He remembered his mother telling him again and again on their way up here that he was not to tire Grandpa out because Grandpa was ill. When Clive had asked him two days before—cautiously—what had made him sick, George Banning had replied with a single mysterious word. It was only on the night after their talk in the orchard, as he was drifting off to sleep with the pocket watch curled warmly in his hand, that Clive realized the word Grandpa had spoken, “ticka,” referred not to some dangerous poison-bug but to Grandpa’s heart. The doctor had made him stop smoking and said if he tried anything too strenuous, like shovelling snow or trying to hoe the garden, he would end up playing a harp. The boy knew well enough what *that* meant.

“You ain’t gonna drop it, and if you did you probably wouldn’t stop it,” Grandpa had said, but the boy was old enough to know that it *would* stop someday, that people and watches both stopped someday.

He stood, waiting to see if Grandpa was going to stop, but at last his coughing and laughter eased off and he stood up straight again, wiping a runner of snot from his nose with his left hand and then flicking it casually away.

“You’re a goddam funny kid, Clivey,” he said. “I got sixteen grandchildren, and there’s only two of em that I think is gonna amount to duckshit, and you ain’t one of em—although you’re on the runner-up list—but you’re the only one that can make me laugh until my balls ache.”

“I didn’t mean to make your balls ache,” Clive said, and that sent Grandpa off again, although this time he was able to get his laughter under control before the coughing started.

“Loop the chain over your knuckles a time or two, if it’ll make you feel easier,” Grandpa said. “If you feel easier in your mind, maybe you’ll pay attention a little better.”

He did as Grandpa suggested and *did* feel better. He looked at the watch in his palm, mesmerized by the lively feel of its mechanism, by the sunstar on its crystal, by the second hand which turned in its own small circle. But it was still Grandpa’s pocket watch: of this he was quite sure. Then, as he had this thought, an apple blossom went skating across the crystal and was gone. This happened in less than a second, but it changed everything. After the blossom, it was true. It was his watch, forever. . . or at least until one of them stopped running and couldn’t be fixed and had to be thrown away.

“All right,” Grandpa said. “You see the second hand going around all by its ownself?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Keep your eye on it. When it gets up to the top, you holler ‘Go!’ at me. Understand?”

He nodded.

“Okay. When it gets there, you just let her go, Gallagher.”

Clive frowned down at the watch with the deep seriousness of a mathematician approaching the conclusion of a crucial equation. He already understood what Grandpa wanted to show him, and he was bright enough to understand that proof was only a formality. . . but one that must be shown just the same. It was a rite, like not being able to leave church until the minister

said the benediction, even though all the songs on the board had been sung and the sermon was finally, mercifully, over.

When the second hand stood straight up at twelve on its own separate little dial (*Mine*, he marvelled. *That's my second hand on my watch*), he hollered "Go!" at the top of his lungs, and Grandpa began to count with the greasy speed of an auctioneer selling dubious goods, trying to get rid of them at top prices before his hypnotized audience can wake up and realize it has not just been bilked but outraged.

"One-two-thre', fo'-fi'-six, sev'-ay-nine, ten-'leven," Grandpa chanted, the gnarly blotches on his cheeks and the big purple veins on his nose beginning to stand out again in his excitement. He finished in a triumphant hoarse shout: "*Fiffynine-sixxy!*" As he said this last, the second hand of the pocket watch was just crossing the seventh dark line, marking thirty-five seconds.

"How long?" Grandpa asked, panting and rubbing at his chest with his hand.

Clive told him, looking at Grandpa with undisguised admiration. "That was fast counting, Grandpa!"

Grandpa flapped the hand with which he had been rubbing his chest in a *get out!* gesture, but he smiled. "Didn't count half as fast as that Osgood brat," he said. "I heard that little sucker count twenty-seven, and the next thing I knew he was up somewhere around forty-one." Grandpa fixed him with his eyes, a dark autumnal blue utterly unlike Clive's Mediterranean brown ones. He put one of his gnarled hands on Clive's shoulder. It was knotted with arthritis, but the boy felt the live strength that still slumbered in there like wires in a machine that's turned off. "You remember one thing, Clivey. Time ain't got nothing to do with how fast you can *count*."

Clive nodded slowly. He didn't understand completely, but he thought he felt the *shadow* of understanding, like the shadow of a cloud passing slowly across a meadow.

Grandpa reached into the pouch pocket in the bib of his overalls and brought out a pack of unfiltered Kools. Apparently Grandpa hadn't stopped smoking after all, dicky heart or not. Still, it seemed to the boy as if maybe Grandpa had cut down drastically, because that pack of Kools looked as if it had done hard travelling; it had escaped the fate of most packs, torn open after

breakfast and tossed empty into the gutter at three, a crushed ball. Grandpa rummaged, brought out a cigarette almost as bent as the pack from which it had come. He stuck it in the corner of his mouth, replaced the pack in the bib, and brought out a wooden match which he snapped alight with one practiced flick of his old man's thick yellow thumbnail. Clive watched with the fascination of a child who watches a magician produce a fan of cards from an empty hand. The flick of the thumb was always interesting, but the amazing thing was that *the match did not go out*. In spite of the high wind which steadily combed this hilltop, Grandpa cupped the small flame with an assurance that could afford to be leisurely. He lit his smoke and then was actually *shaking the match*, as if he had negated the wind by simple will. Clive looked closely at the cigarette and saw no black scorch-marks trailing up the white paper from the glowing tip. His eyes had not deceived him, then; Grandpa had taken his light from a straight flame, like a man who takes a light from a candle in a closed room. It was sorcery, pure and simple.

Grandpa removed the cigarette from his mouth and put his thumb and forefinger in, looking for a moment like a man who means to whistle for his dog, or a taxi. Instead he brought them out again wet and pressed them against the match-head. The boy needed no explanation; the only thing Grandpa and his friends out here in the country feared more than sudden freezes was fire. Grandpa dropped the match and ground it under his boot. When he looked up and saw the boy staring at him, he misinterpreted the subject of his fascination.

“I know I ain't supposed to,” he said, “and I ain't gonna tell you to lie or even ask you to. If Gramma asks you right out—‘Was that old man smokin up there?’—you go on and tell her I was. I don't need a kid to lie for me.” He didn't smile, but his shrewd, side-slanted eyes made Clive feel part of a conspiracy that seemed amiable and sinless. “But then, if Gramma asks *me* right out if you took the Savior's name in vain when I gave you that watch, I'd look her right in the eye and say, ‘No'm. He said thanks as pretty as could be and that was *all* he done.’ ”

Now Clive was the one to burst out laughing, and the old man grinned, revealing his few remaining teeth.

“Course, if she don’t ask neither of us nothing, I guess we don’t have to *volunteer* nothing. . . do we, Clivey? Does that seem fair?”

“Yes,” Clive said. He wasn’t a good-looking boy and never became the sort of man women exactly consider handsome, but as he smiled in complete understanding of the old man’s rhetorical sleight-of-hand, he *was* beautiful, at least for a moment, and Grandpa ruffled his hair.

“You’re a good boy, Clivey.”

“Thank you, sir,”

His grandfather stood ruminating, his Kool burning with unnatural rapidity (the tobacco was dry, and although he puffed seldom, the greedy hilltop wind smoked the cigarette ceaselessly), and Clive thought the old man had said everything he had to say. He was sorry. He loved to hear Grandpa talk. The things Grandpa said continually amazed him because they almost always made sense. His mother, his father, Gramma, Uncle Don—they all said things he was supposed to take to heart, but they *rarely* made sense. Handsome is as handsome does, for instance—what did *that* mean?

He had a sister, Patty, who was six years older. He understood *her* but didn’t care because most of what she said out loud was stupid. The rest was communicated in vicious little pinches. The worst of these she called “Peter-Pinches.” She told him that, if he ever *told* about the Peter-Pinches, she’d murdalize him. Patty was always talking about people she was going to murdalize; she had a hit-list to rival Murder, Incorporated. It made you want to laugh . . . until you took a good look at her thin, grim face, that was. When you saw what was really there, you lost your desire to laugh. Clive did, anyway. And you had to be careful of her—she *sounded* stupid but was far from it.

“I don’t want dates,” she had announced at supper one night not long ago—around the time that boys traditionally invited girls to either the Spring Dance at the country club or to the prom at the high school, in fact. “I don’t care if I *never* have a date.” And she had looked at them with wide-eyed defiance from above her plate of steaming meat and vegetables.

Clive had looked at the still and somehow spooky face of his sister peering through the steam and remembered something that had happened two months before, when there had still been snow on the ground. He’d come along the upstairs hallway in his bare feet so she hadn’t heard him, and he had looked

into the bathroom because the door was open—he hadn't had the slightest idea old Pukey Patty was in there. What he saw had frozen him dead in his tracks. If she had turned her head even a little to the left, she would have seen him.

She didn't, though. She had been too preoccupied with her inspection of herself. She had been standing there as naked as one of the slinky babes in Foxy Brannigan's well-thumbed *Model Delights*, her bath towel lying puddled around her feet. She was no slinky babe, though—Clive knew it, and she knew it too, from the look of her. Tears were rolling down her pimply cheeks. They were big tears and there were a lot of them, but she never made a sound. At last Clive had regained enough of his sense of self-preservation to tiptoe away, and he had never said a word to anyone about the incident, least of all to Patty herself. He didn't know if she would have been mad about her kid brother seeing her bareass, but he had a good idea about how she'd react to the idea that he had seen her bawling (even that weird boohoo-less bawling she'd been doing); for that she would have murdalized him for sure.

"I think boys are dumb and most of them smell like gone-over cottage cheese," she had said on that spring night. She stuck a forkful of roast beef into her mouth. "If a boy ever asked me for a date, I'd laugh."

"You'll change your mind about that, Punkin," Dad said, chewing his roast beef and not looking up from the book beside his plate. Mom had given up trying to get him to stop reading at the table.

"No I *won't*," Patty said, and Clive knew she wouldn't. When Patty said things she most always meant them. That was something Clive understood about her that his parents didn't. He wasn't sure she meant it—you know, *really*—about murdalizing him if he tattled on her about the Peter-Pinches, but he wasn't going to take chances. Even if she didn't actually kill him, she would find some spectacular yet untraceable way to hurt him, that was for sure. Besides, sometimes the Peter-Pinches weren't really pinches at all; they were more like the way Patty sometimes stroked her little half-breed poodle, Brandy, and he knew she was doing it because he was bad, but he had a secret he certainly did not intend to tell her: these other Peter-Pinches, the stroking ones, actually felt sort of good.

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When Grandpa opened his mouth, Clive thought he would say *Time to go back t'the house, Clivey*, but instead he told the boy: "I'm going to tell you something, if you want to hear it. Won't take long. You want to hear it, Clivey?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You really do, don't you?" Grandpa said in a bemused voice.

"Yes, sir."

"Sometimes I think I ought to steal you from your folks and keep you around forever. Sometimes I think if I had you on hand most the time, I'd live forever, goddam bad heart or not."

He removed the Kool from his mouth, dropped it to the ground, and stamped it to death under one workboot, revolving the heel back and forth and then covering the butt with the dirt his heel had loosened just to be sure. When he looked up at Clive again, it was with eyes that gleamed.

"I stopped giving advice a long time ago," he said. "Thirty years or more, I guess. I stopped when I noticed only fools gave it and only fools took it. *Instruction*, now. . . instruction's a different thing. A smart man will give a little from time to time, and a smart man—or boy—will take a little from time to time."

Clive said nothing, only looked at his grandfather with close concentration.

"There are three kinds of time," Grandpa said, "and while all of them are real, only one is *really* real. You want to make sure you know them all and can always tell them apart. Do you understand that?"

"No, sir."

Grandpa nodded. "If you'd said 'Yes, sir,' I would have swatted the seat of your pants and taken you back to the farm."

Clive looked down at the smeared results of Grandpa's cigarette, face hot with blush, proud.

"When a fellow is only a sprat, like you, time is long. Take a for-instance. When May comes, you think school's never gonna let out, that mid-month June will just never come. Ain't that pretty much how it is?"

Clive thought of that last weight of drowsy, chalk-smelling schooldays and nodded.

“And when mid-month June finally *does* come and Teacher gives you your report card and lets you go free, it seems like school’s never gonna let back in. Ain’t that pretty much right, too?”

Clive thought of that highway of days and nodded so hard his neck actually popped. “Boy, it sure is! I mean, *sir*.” Those days. All those days, stretching away across the plains of June and July and over the unimaginable horizon of August. So many days, so many dawns, so many noon lunches of bologna sandwiches with mustard and raw chopped onion and giant glasses of milk while his mom sat silently in the living room with her bottomless glass of wine, watching the soap operas on the TV; so many depthless afternoons when sweat grew in the short hedge of your crewcut and then ran down your cheeks, afternoons when the moment you noticed that your blob of a shadow had grown a boy always came as a surprise, so many endless twilights with the sweat cooling away to nothing but a smell like aftershave on your cheeks and forearms while you played tag or red rover or capture the flag; sounds of bike chains, slots clicking neatly into oiled cogs, smells of honeysuckle and cooling asphalt and green leaves and cut grass, sounds of the slap of baseball cards being laid out on some kid’s front walk, solemn and portentous trades which changed the faces of both leagues, councils that went on in the slow shady axial tilt of a July evening until the call of “*Cliiiiive! Sup-per!*” put an end to that business; and that call was always as expected and yet as shocking as the noon blob that had, by three or so, become a black boy-shape running in the street beside him—and that boy stapled to his heels had actually become a man by five or so, albeit an extraordinarily skinny one; velvet evenings of television, the occasional rattle of pages as his father read one book after another (he never tired of them; words, words, words, his dad never tired of them, and Clive had meant once to ask him how that could be but lost his nerve), his mother getting up once in a while and going into the kitchen, followed only by his sister’s worried, angry eyes and his own simply curious ones; the soft clink as Mom replenished the glass which was never empty after eleven in the morning or so (and their father never looking up from his book, although Clive had an idea he heard it all and knew it all, although Patty had called him a stupid liar and had given him a Peter-Pinch that hurt all day long the one time he had dared to tell her that); the sound of mosquitoes whining against the screens,

always so much louder, it seemed, after the sun had gone down; the decree of bedtime, so unfair and unavoidable, all arguments lost before they were begun; his father's brusque kiss, smelling of tobacco, his mother's softer, both sugary and sour with the smell of wine; the sound of his sister telling Mom she ought to go to bed after Dad had gone down to the corner tavern to drink a couple of beers and watch the wrestling matches on the television over the bar; his mom telling Patty to mind her own p's and q's, a conversational pattern that was upsetting in its content but somehow soothing in its predictability; fireflies gleaming in the gloom; a car horn, distant, as he drifted into sleep's long, dark channel; then the next day, which seemed the same but wasn't, not quite. Summer. That was summer. And it did not just seem long; it was long.

Grandpa, watching him closely, seemed to read all this in the boy's brown eyes, to know all the words for all the things the boy never could have found a way to tell, things that could not escape him because his mouth could never articulate the language of his heart. And then Grandpa nodded, as if he wanted to confirm this very idea, and suddenly Clive was terrified that Grandpa would spoil everything by saying something soft and soothing and meaningless. Sure, he would say. I know all about it, Clivey—I was a boy once myself, you know.

But he didn't, and Clive understood he had been stupid to fear the possibility even for a moment. Worse, faithless. Because this was *Grandpa*, and Grandpa *never* talked meaningless shit like other grownups so often did. Instead of speaking softly and soothingly, he spoke with the dry finality of a judge pronouncing a harsh sentence for a capital crime.

"All that changes," he said.

Clive looked up at him, a little apprehensive at the idea but very much liking the wild way the old man's hair blew around his head. He thought Grandpa looked the way the church-preacher would if he really knew the truth about God instead of just guessing. "*Time* does? Are you sure?"

"Yes. When you get to a certain age—right around fourteen, I think, mostly when the two halves of the human race go on and make the mistake of discovering each other—time starts to be *real* time. The *real* real time. It ain't long like it was or short like it gets to be. It does, you know. But for most of your life it's mostly the *real* real time. You know what that is, Clivey?"

"No, sir."

“Then take instruction: *real* real time is your pretty pony. Say it: ‘My pretty pony.’ ”

Feeling dumb, wondering if Grandpa was having him on for some reason (“trying to get your goat,” as Uncle Don would have said), Clive said what he wanted him to say. He waited for the old man to laugh, to say, “Boy, I really got your goat that time, Clivey!” But Grandpa only nodded matter-of-factly, in a way that took all the dumb out of it.

“My pretty pony. Those are three words you’ll never forget if you’re as smart’s I think y’ might be. My pretty pony. That’s the truth of time.”

Grandpa took the battered package of cigarettes from his pocket, considered it briefly, then put it back.

“From the time you’re fourteen until, oh, I’m gonna say until you’re sixty or so, most time is my-pretty-pony time. There’s times when it goes back to being long like it was when you were a kid, but those ain’t good times anymore. You’d give your soul for some my-pretty-pony time then, let alone short time. If you was to tell Gramma what I’m gonna tell you now, Clivey, she’d call me a blasphemer and wouldn’t bring me no hot-water bottle for a week. Maybe two.”

Nevertheless, Grandpa’s lips twisted into a bitter and unregenerate jag.

“If I was to tell it to that Reverend Chadband the wife sets such a store by, *he’d* trot out the one about how we see through a glass darkly or that old chestnut about how God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, but I’ll tell you what *I* think, Clivey. I think God must be one mean old son of a bitch to make the only long times a grownup has the times when he is hurt bad, like with crushed ribs or stove-in guts or something like that. A God like that, why, He makes a kid who sticks pins in flies look like that saint who was so good the birds’d come and roost all over him. I think about how long them weeks were after the hayrick turned turtle on me, and I wonder why God wanted to make living, thinking creatures in the first place. If He needed something to piss on, why couldn’t He have just made Him some sumac bushes and left it at that? Or what about poor old Johnny Brinkmayer, who went so slow with the bone cancer last year.”

Clive hardly heard that last, although he remembered later, on their ride back to the city, that Johnny Brinkmayer, who had owned what his mother

and father called the grocery store and what Grandpa and Gramma still both called “the Mercantile,” was the only man Grandpa went to see of an evening. . . and the only man who came to see *Grandpa* of an evening. On the long ride back to town it came to Clive that Johnny Brinkmayer, whom he remembered only vaguely as a man with a very large wart on his forehead and a way of hitching at his crotch as he walked, must have been Grandpa’s only real friend. The fact that Gramma tended to turn up her nose when Brinkmayer’s name was mentioned—and often complained about the way the man had smelled—only reinforced the idea.

Such reflections could not have come now, anyway, because Clive was waiting breathlessly for God to strike Grandpa dead. Surely He would for such a blasphemy. No one could get away with calling *God the Father Almighty* a mean old son of a bitch, or suggest that the Being who made the universe was no better than a mean third-grader who got his kicks sticking pins into flies.

Clive took a nervous step away from the figure in the bib overalls, who had ceased being his Grandpa and had become instead a lightning rod. Any moment now a bolt would come out of the blue sky, sizzling his Grandpa dead as doggy-doo and turning the apple trees into torches that would signal the old man’s damnation to all and sundry. The apple blossoms blowing through the air would be turned into something like the bits of char that went floating up from the incinerator in their backyard when his father burned the week’s worth of newspapers on late Sunday afternoons.

Nothing happened.

Clive waited, his dreadful surety eroding, and when a robin twittered cheerily somewhere nearby (as if Grandpa had said nothing more awful than kiss-my-foot), he knew no lightning was going to come. And at the moment of that realization, a small but fundamental change took place in Clive Banning’s life. His Grandpa’s unpunished blasphemy would not make him a criminal or a bad boy, or even such a small thing as a “problem child” (a phrase that had only recently come into vogue). Yet the true north of belief shifted just a little in Clive’s mind, and the way he listened to his Grandpa changed at once. Before, he had *listened* to the old man. Now he *attended* him.

“Times when you’re hurt go on forever, seems like,” Grandpa was saying. “Believe me, Clivey—a week of being hurt makes the best summer vacation

you ever had when you was a kid seem like a weekend. Hell, makes it seem like a Sat'dy mornin! When I think of the seven months Johnny lay there with that. . . that *thing* that was inside him, inside him and eating on his *guts* . . . Jesus, I ain't got no business talkin this way to a kid. Your Gramma's right. I got the sense of a chicken."

Grandpa brooded down at his shoes for a moment. At last he looked up and shook his head, not darkly, but with brisk, almost humorous dismissiveness.

"Ain't a bit of that matters. I said I was gonna give you instruction, and instead I stand here howlin like a woe-dog. You know what a woe-dog is, Clivey?"

The boy shook his head.

"Never mind; that's for another day." Of course there had never been another, because the next time he saw Grandpa, Grandpa was in a box, and Clive supposed that was an important part of the instruction Grandpa had to give that day. The fact that the old man didn't know he was giving it made it no less important. "Old men are like old trains in a switchin yard, Clivey—too many damned tracks. So they loop the damned roundhouse five times before they ever get in."

"That's all right, Grandpa."

"What I mean is that every time I drive for the point, I go someplace else."

"I know, but those someplace elses are pretty interesting."

Grandpa smiled. "If you're a bullshit artist, Clivey, you are a damned good one."

Clive smiled back, and the darkness of Johnny Brinkmayer's memory seemed to lift from his Grandpa. When he spoke again, his voice was more businesslike.

"Anyway! Never mind that swill. Having long time in pain is just a little extra the Lord throws in. You know how a man will save up Raleigh coupons and trade em in for something like a brass barometer to hang in his den or a new set of steak knives, Clivey?"

Clive nodded.

"Well, that's what pain-time is like . . . only it's more of a *booby* prize than a real one, I guess you'd have to say. Main thing is, when you get old, regular

time—my-pretty-pony time—changes to *short* time. It's like when you were a kid, only turned around."

"Backwards."

"Yep."

The idea that time went *fast* when you got old was beyond the ability of the boy's emotions to grasp, but he was bright enough to admit the concept. He knew that if one end of a seesaw went up, the other had to go down. What Grandpa was talking about, he reasoned, must be the same idea: balance and counterbalance. *All right; it's a point of view*, Clive's own father might have said.

Grandpa took the packet of Kools from the kangaroo pouch again, and this time he carefully extracted a cigarette—not just the last one in the packet but the last one the boy would ever see him smoke. The old man crumpled the package and stowed it back in the place from which it had come. He lit this last cigarette as he had the other, with the same effortless ease. He did not ignore the hilltop wind; he seemed somehow to *negate* it.

"When does it happen, Grandpa?"

"I can't exactly tell you that, n it don't happen all at once," Grandpa said, wetting the match as he had its predecessor. "It kinda creeps up, like a cat stalking a squirrel. Finally you notice. And when you *do* notice, it ain't no more fair than the way the Osgood boy counted his numbers was fair."

"Well then, *what* happens? How do you notice?"

Grandpa tapped a roll of ash from his cigarette without taking it from his mouth. He did it with his thumb, knocking on the cigarette the way a man may rap a low knock on a table. The boy never forgot that small sound.

"I think what you notice first must be different for everyone," the old man said, "but for me it started when I was forty-something. I don't remember exactly how old I was, but you want to bet I remember *where* I was . . . in Davis Drug. You know it?"

Clive nodded. His father almost always took him and his sister in there for ice-cream sodas when they were visiting Grandpa and Gramma. His father called them the VanChockstraw Triplets because their orders never varied: their father always had vanilla, Patty chocolate, Clive strawberry. And his father would sit between them and read while they slowly ingested the cold sweet treats. Patty was right when she said you could get away with anything when

their father was reading, which was most of the time, but when he put his book away and looked around, you wanted to sit up and put on your prettiest manners, or you were apt to get clouted.

“Well, I was in there,” Grandpa resumed, his eyes far off, studying a cloud that looked like a soldier blowing on a bugle moving swiftly across the spring sky, “to get some medicine for your Gramma’s arthritis. We’d had rain for a week and it was hurting her like all get-out. And all at once I seen a new store display. Would have been hard to miss. Took up most of one whole aisle, it did. There were masks and cutout decorations of black cats and witches on brooms and things like that, and there were those cardboard punkins they used to sell. They came in a bag with an elastic inside. The idea was, a kid would punch the punkin out of the cardboard and then give his mom an afternoon of peace coloring it in and maybe playing the games on the back. When it was done you hung it on your door for a decoration, or, if the kid’s family was too poor to buy him a store mask or too dumb to help him make a costume out of what was around the house, why, you could staple that elastic onto the thing and the kid would wear it. Used to be a lot of kids walking around town with paper bags in their hands and those punkin masks from Davis Drug on their faces come Halloween night, Clivey! And, of course, he had his candy out. Was always that penny-candy counter up there by the soda fountain, you know the one I mean—”

Clive smiled. He knew, all right.

“—but this was different. This was penny candy by the job lot. All that truck like wax bottles and candy corn and root-beer barrels and licorice whips.

“And I thought that old man Davis—there really was a fella named Davis who ran the place back then, it was his father that opened her up right around 1910—had slipped a cog or two. Holy hell, I’m thinkin to myself, Frank Davis has got his trick-or-treat out before the goddam summer’s even over. It crossed my mind to go up to the prescription counter where he was n tell him just that, and then a part of me says, Whoa up a second, George—*you’re* the one who’s slipped a cog or two. And that wasn’t so far wrong, Clivey, because it *wasn’t* still summer, and I knew it just as well as I know we’re standin here. See, that’s what I want you to understand—*that I knew better.*”

“Wasn’t I already on the lookout for apple pickers from around town, and hadn’t I already put in an order for five hundred handbills to get put up over the border in Canada? And didn’t I already have my eye on this fella named Tim Warburton who’d come down from Schenectady lookin for work? He had a way about him, looked honest, and I thought he’d make a good foreman during picking time. Hadn’t I been meaning to ask him the very next day, and didn’t he *know* I was gonna ask because he’d let on he’d be getting his hair cut at such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time? I thought to myself, Suds n body, George, ain’t you a little young to be going senile? Yeah, old Frank’s got his Halloween candy out a little early, but *summer*? That’s gone by, me fine bucko.

“I knew that just fine, but for a second, Clivey—or maybe it was a whole row of seconds—it *seemed* like summer, or like it *had* to be summer, because it was just *being* summer. Get what I mean? It didn’t take me long to get September set down straight again in my head, but until I did I felt . . . you know, I felt. . .” He frowned, then reluctantly brought out a word he knew but would not have used in conversation with another farmer, lest he be accused (if only in the other fellow’s mind) of being high-flown. “I felt *dismayed*. That’s the only goddam way I know how to put it. Dismayed. And that’s how it was the first time.”

He looked at the boy, who only looked back at him, not even nodding, so deep in concentration was he. Grandpa nodded for both of them and knocked another roll of ash off his cigarette with the side of his thumb. The boy believed Grandpa was so lost in thought that the wind was smoking practically all of this one for him.

“It was like steppin up to the bathroom mirror meanin to do no more’n shave and seein that first gray hair in your head. You get that, Clivey?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. And after that first time, it started to happen with *all* the holidays. You’d think they was puttin the stuff out too early, and sometimes you’d even say so to someone, although you always stayed careful to make it sound like you thought the shopkeepers were greedy. That something was wrong with *them*, not *you*. You get *that*?”

“Yes.”

“Because,” Grandpa said, “a greedy shopkeeper was something a man could understand—and something some men even admired, although I was never one of them. ‘So-and-so keeps himself a sharp practice,’ they’d say, as if sharp practice, like that butcher fella Radwick that used to always stick his thumb on the scales when he could get away with it, like that was just a honey of a way to be. I never felt that way, but I could understand it. Saying something that made you sound like you had gone over funny in the head, though . . . that was a different kettle of beans. So you’d just say something like ‘By God, they’ll have the tinsel and the angel’s hair out before the hay’s in the barn next year,’ and whoever you said it to would say that was nothing but the Gospel truth, but it *wasn’t* the Gospel truth, and when I hunker right down and study her, Clivey, I know they are putting all those things out pretty near the same time every year.

“Then somethin else happened to me. This might have been five years later, might have been seven. I think I must’ve been right round fifty, one side or the other. Anyhow, I got called on jury duty. Damn pain in the ass, but I went. The bailiff swore me up, asked me if I’d do my duty so help me God, and I said I will, just as if I hadn’t spent all my life doin my duty about one thing n another so help me God. Then he got out his pen and asked for my address, and I gave it to him neat as you’d like. Then he asked how old I was, and I opened my mouth all primed to say thirty-seven.”

Grandpa threw back his head and laughed at the cloud that looked like a soldier. That cloud, the bugle part now grown as long as a trombone, had gotten itself halfway from one horizon to the other.

“Why did you want to say that, Grandpa?” Clive thought he had followed everything up to this pretty well, but here was a thicket.

“I wanted to say it because it was the first thing to come into my mind! Hell! Anyhow, I knew it was wrong and so I stopped for a second. I don’t think that bailiff or anyone else in the courtroom noticed—seemed like most of em was either asleep or on the doze—and, even if they’d been as wide awake as the fella who just got Widow Brown’s broomstick rammed up his buttsky, I don’t know as anyone would have made anything of it. Wasn’t no more than how, sometimes, a man trying to hit a tricky pitch will kinda take a double pump before he swings. But, shit! Askin a man how damn *old* he is ain’t like throwin

no spitball. I felt like an ijit. Seemed like for that one second I didn't know *how* old I was if I wasn't thirty-seven. Seemed for a second there like it could have been seven or seventeen or seventy-seven. Then I got it and I said forty-eight or fifty-one or whatever-the-frig. But to lose track of your age, even for a second . . . *shoo!*"

Grandpa dropped his cigarette, brought his heel down upon it, and began the ritual of first murdalizing and then burying it.

"But that's just the *beginning*, Clivey me son," he went on, and, although he spoke only in the Irish vernacular he sometimes affected, the boy thought, I wish I *was* your son. Yours instead of his. "After a bit, it lets go of first, hits second, and before you know it, time has got itself into high gear and you're cruising, the way folks do on the turnpike these days, goin so fast their cars blow the leaves right off'n the trees in the fall."

"What do you mean?"

"Way the seasons change is the worst," the old man said moodily, as if he hadn't heard the boy. "Different seasons stop *bein* different seasons. Seems like Mother has no more'n got the boots n mittens n scarves down from the attic before it's mud season, and you'd think a man'd be *glad* to see mud season gone—shit, *I* always was—but you ain't s'glad t'see it go when it seems like the mud's gone before you done pushed the tractor out of the first jellypot it got stuck in. Then it seems like you no more'n clapped your summer straw on for the first band concert of the year when the poplars start showing their chemises."

Grandpa looked at him then, an eyebrow raised ironically, as if expecting the boy to ask for an explanation, but Clive smiled, delighted by this—he knew what a chemise was, all right, because it was sometimes all that his mother wore until five in the afternoon or so, at least when his father was out on the road, selling appliances and kitchenware and a little insurance when he could. When his father went out on the road his mother got down to the serious drinking, and that was drinking sometimes too serious to allow her to get dressed until the sun was getting ready to go down. Then sometimes she went out, leaving him in Patty's care while she went to visit a sick friend. Once he said to Patty, "Ma's friends get sick more when Dad's on the road, d'ja

notice?” And Patty laughed until tears ran down her face and she said Oh yes, she *had* noticed, she most certainly *had*.

What Grandpa said reminded him of how, once the days finally began to slope down toward school again, the poplars changed somehow. When the wind blew, their undersides turned up exactly the color of his mother’s prettiest chemise, a silver color which was as surprisingly sad as it was lovely: a color that signified the end of what you had believed must be forever.

“Then,” Grandpa continued, “you start to lose track of things in your own mind. Not too much—it ain’t being senile, like old man Hayden down the road, thank God—but it’s still a suckardly thing, the way you *lose track*. It ain’t like *forgetting* things; that’d be one thing. No, you remember em but you get em in all the wrong places. Like how I was so sure I broke my arm just *after* our boy Billy got killed in that road accident in ’58. *That* was a suckardly thing, too. That’s one I could task that Reverend Chadband with. Billy, he was followin a gravel truck, doin no more than twenty mile an hour, when a chunk of stone no bigger’n the dial of that pocket watch I gave you fell off the back of the truck, hit the road, bounced up, and smashed the windshield of our Ford. Glass went in Billy’s eyes and the doc said he would have been blinded in one of em or maybe even in both if he’d lived, but he didn’t live—he went off the road and hit a ’lectric pole. It fell down atop the car and he got fried just the same as any mad dog killer that ever rode Old Sparky at Sing Sing. And him the worst thing he ever did in his life maybe playing sick to keep from hoeing beans when we still kep the garden.

“But I was saying how sure I was I broke my goddam arm *after*—I swore up n down I could remember goin to his funeral with that arm still in the sling! Sarah had to show me the family Bible first and the insurance papers on my arm second before I could believe she had it the right way around; it had been two whole months before, and by the time we buried Billy away, the sling was off. She called me an old fool and I felt like putting one up on the side of her head I was s’mad, but I was mad because I was *embarrassed*, and at least I had the sense to know that n leave her alone. She was only mad because she don’t like to think about Bill. He was the apple of her eye, he was.”

“Boy!” Clive said.

“It ain’t goin’ *soft*; it’s more like when you go down to New York City and there are these fellas on the street corners with nutshells and a beebie under one of em, and they bet you can’t tell which nutshell the beebie’s under, and you’re sure you can, but they shuffle em so goddarn fast they fool you every time. You just lose track. You can’t seem to help it.”

He sighed, looking around, as if to remember where exactly it was that they were. His face had a momentary look of utter helplessness that disgusted the boy as much as it frightened him. He didn’t want to feel that way, but couldn’t help it. It was as if Grandpa had pulled open a bandage to show the boy a sore which was a symptom of something awful. Something like leprosy.

“Seems like spring started last week,” Grandpa said, “but the blossoms’ll be gone tomorrow if the wind keeps up its head, and damn if it don’t look like it’s gonna. A man can’t keep his train of thought when things go as fast as that. A man can’t say, Whoa up a minute or two, old hoss, while I get my bearins! There’s no one to say it *to*. It’s like bein’ in a cart that’s got no driver, if you take my drift. So what do you make of it, Clivey?”

“Well,” the boy said, “you’re right about one thing, Grandpa—it sounds like an ijit of some kind must’ve made up the whole thing.”

He didn’t mean it to be funny, but Grandpa laughed until his face went that alarming shade of purple again, and this time he not only had to lean over and put his hands on the knees of his overalls but then had to sling an arm around the boy’s neck to keep from falling down. They both would have gone tumbling if Grandpa’s coughing and wheezing hadn’t eased just at the moment when the boy felt sure the blood must come bursting out of that face, which was swollen purple with hilarity.

“Ain’t you a jeezer!” Grandpa said, pulling back at last. “Ain’t you a *one!*”

“Grandpa? Are you all right? Maybe we ought to—”

“Shit, no, I ain’t all right. I’ve had me two heart attacks in the last two years, and if I live another two years no one’ll be any more surprised than me. But it ain’t no news to the human race, boy. All I ever set out to say was that old or young, fast time or slow time, you can walk a straight line if you remember that pony. Because when you count and say ‘my pretty pony’ between each number, time can’t be nothing but time. You do that, I’m telling you you got the sucker stabled. You can’t count *all* the time—that ain’t God’s plan. I’ll go

down the primrose lane with that little oily-faced pissant Chadband that far, anyway. But you got to remember that *you* don't own *time*; it's *time* that owns *you*. It goes along outside you at the same speed every second of every day. It don't care a piss-hole in the snow for you, but that don't matter if you got a pretty pony. If you got a pretty pony, Clivey, you got the bastard right where its dingle dangles and never mind all the Alden Osgoods in the world."

He bent toward Clive Banning.

"Do you understand that?"

"No, sir."

"I know you don't. Will you remember it?"

"Yes, sir."

Grandpa Banning's eyes studied him so long the boy became uncomfortable and fidgety. At last he nodded. "Yeah, I think you will. Goddam if I don't."

The boy said nothing. In truth, he could think of nothing to say.

"You have taken instruction," Grandpa said.

"I didn't take any instruction if I didn't *understand!*" Clive cried in a frustrated anger so real and so complete it startled him. "I *didn't!*"

"Fuck *understanding,*" the old man said calmly. He slung his arm around the boy's neck again and drew him close—drew him close for the last time before Gramma would find him dead as a stone in bed a month later. She just woke up and there was Grandpa and Grandpa's pony had kicked down Grandpa's fences and gone over all the hills of the world.

Wicked heart, wicked heart. Pretty, but with a wicked heart.

"Understanding and instruction are cousins that don't kiss," Grandpa said that day among the apple trees.

"Then what *is* instruction?"

"Remembrance," the old man said serenely. "Can you remember that pony?"

"Yes, sir."

"What name does it keep?"

The boy paused.

"Time. . . I guess."

"Good. And what color is it?"

The boy thought longer this time. He opened his mind like an iris in the dark. "I don't know," he said at last

"Me, neither," the old man said, releasing him. "I don't think it has one, and I don't think it matters. What matters is, will you know it?"

"Yes, sir," the boy said at once.

A glittering, feverish eye fastened the boy's mind and heart like a staple.

*"How?"*

"It'll be pretty," Clive Banning said with absolute certainty.

Grandpa smiled. "So!" he said. "Clivey has taken a bit of instruction, and that makes him wiser and me more blessed . . . or the other way around. D'you want a slice of peach pie, boy?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then what are we doin up here? Let's go get her!"

They did.

And Clive Banning never forgot the name, which was time, and the color, which was none, and the look, which was not ugly or beautiful. . . but only pretty. Nor did he ever forget her nature, which was wicked, or what his Grandpa said on the way down, words almost thrown away, lost in the wind: having a pony to ride was better than having no pony at all, no matter how the weather of its heart might lie.

# Sorry, Right Number

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Screenplay abbreviations are simple and exist, in this author's opinion, mostly to make those who write screenplays feel like lodge brothers. In any case, you should be aware that CU means *close-up*; ECU means *extreme close-up*; INT. means *interior*; EXT means *exterior*; B.G. means *background*; POV means *point of view*. Probably most of you knew all that stuff to begin with, right?

## Act I

FADE IN ON:

KATIE WEIDERMAN'S MOUTH, ECU

She's speaking into the telephone. Pretty mouth; in a few seconds we'll see that the rest of her is just as pretty.

KATIE

Bill? Oh, he says he doesn't feel very well, but he's always like that between books . . . can't sleep, thinks every headache is the first symptom of a brain tumor . . . once he gets going on something new, he'll be fine.

SOUND, B.G.: THE TELEVISION.

THE CAMERA DRAWS BACK. KATIE is sitting in the kitchen phone nook, having a good gab with her sister while she idles through some catalogues. We should notice one not-quite-ordinary thing about the phone she's on: it's the sort with two lines. There are LIGHTED BUTTONS to show which ones are engaged. Right now only one—KATIE'S—is. AS KATIE CONTINUES HER CONVERSATION, THE

CAMERA SWINGS AWAY FROM HER, TRACKS ACROSS THE KITCHEN, and through the arched doorway that leads into the family room.

KATIE (voice, fading)

Oh, I saw Janie Charlton today . . . yes! Big as a *house!* . . .

She fades. The TV gets louder. There are three kids: JEFF eight, CONNIE, ten, and DENNIS, thirteen. *Wheel of Fortune* is on, but they're not watching. Instead they're engaged in that great pastime, Fighting About What Comes On Later.

JEFF

Come *onnn!* It was his first *book!*

CONNIE

His first *gross* book.

DENNIS

We're gonna watch *Cheers* and *Wings*, just like we do every week, Jeff.

DENNIS speaks with the utter finality only a big brother can manage. "Wanna talk about it some more and see how much pain I can inflict on your scrawny body, Jeff?" his face says.

JEFF

Could we at least tape it?

CONNIE

We're taping CNN for Mom. She said she might be on the phone with Aunt Lois for quite awhile.

JEFF

How can you tape CNN, for God's sake? It *never stops!*

DENNIS

That's what she likes about it.

CONNIE

And don't say God's sake, Jeffie—you're not old enough to talk about God except in church.

JEFF

Then don't call me Jeffie.

CONNIE

Jeffie, Jeffie, Jeffie.

JEFF gets up, walks to the window, and looks out into the dark. He's really upset. DENNIS and CONNIE, in the grand tradition of older brothers and sisters, are delighted to see it.

DENNIS

Poor Jeffie.

CONNIE

I think he's gonna commit suicide.

JEFF (turns to them)

It was his *first* book! Don't you guys even *care*?

CONNIE

Rent it down at the Video Stop tomorrow, if you want to see it so bad.

JEFF

They don't rent R-rated pictures to little kids and you know it!

CONNIE (dreamily)

Shut up, it's Vanna! I *love* Vanna!

JEFF

Dennis—

DENNIS

Go ask Dad to tape it on the VCR in his office and quit being such a totally annoying little booger.

JEFF crosses the room, poking his tongue out at Vanna White as he goes. THE CAMERA FOLLOWS as he goes into the kitchen.

KATIE

. . . so when he asked me if *Polly* had tested strep positive, I had to remind him she's away at prep school . . . and God, Lois, I miss her . . .

JEFF is just passing through, on his way to the stairs.

KATIE

Will you kids *please* be quiet?

JEFF (glum)

They'll be quiet. *Now*.

He goes up the stairs, a little dejected. KATIE looks after him for a moment, loving and worried.

KATIE

They're squabbling again. Polly used to keep them in line, but now that she's away at school . . . I don't know . . . maybe sending her to Bolton wasn't such a hot idea. Sometimes when she calls home she sounds so *unhappy* . . .

INT. BELA LUGOSI AS DRACULA, CU

Drac's standing at the door of his Transylvanian castle. Someone has pasted a comic-balloon coming out of his mouth which reads: "Listen! My children of the night! What music they make!" The poster is on a door but we only see this as JEFF opens it and goes into his father's study.

INT. A PHOTOGRAPH OF KATIE, CU

THE CAMERA HOLDS, THEN PANS SLOWLY RIGHT. We pass another photo, this one of POLLY, the daughter away at school. She's a lovely girl of sixteen or so. Past POLLY is DENNIS . . . then CONNIE . . . then JEFF.

THE CAMERA CONTINUES TO PAN AND ALSO WIDENS OUT so we can see BILL WEIDERMAN, a man of about forty-four. He looks tired. He's peering into the word-processor on his desk, but his mental crystal ball must be taking the night off, because the screen is blank. On the walls we see framed book-covers. All of them are spooky. One of the titles is *Ghost Kiss*.

JEFF comes up quietly behind his dad. The carpet muffles his feet. BILL sighs and shuts off the word-cruncher. A moment later JEFF claps his hands on his father's shoulders.

JEFF

*BOOGA-BOOGA!*

BILL

Hi, Jeffie.

He turns in his chair to look at his son, who is disappointed.

JEFF

How come you didn't get scared?

BILL

Scaring is my business. I'm case-hardened. Something wrong?

JEFF

Daddy, can I watch the first hour of *Ghost Kiss* and you tape the rest? Dennis and Connie are hogging *everything*.

BILL swivels to look at the book-jacket, bemused.

BILL

You sure you want to watch *that*, champ? It's pretty—

JEFF

*Yes!*

INT. KATIE, IN THE PHONE NOOK

In this shot, we clearly see the stairs leading to her husband's study behind her.

KATIE

I *really* think Jeff needs the orthodontic work but you know Bill—

The other line rings. The other light stutters.

KATIE

That's just the other line, Bill will—

But now we see BILL and JEFF coming downstairs behind her.

BILL

Honey, where're the blank videotapes? I can't find any in the study and  
—

KATIE (to BILL)

*Wait!*

(to LOIS)

Gonna put you on hold a sec, Lo.

She does. Now both lines are blinking. She pushes the top one, where the new call has just come in.

KATIE

Hello, Weiderman residence.

SOUND: DESPERATE SOBBING.

SOBBING VOICE (filter)

Take. . . please take . . . t-t-

KATIE

Polly? Is that you? What's wrong?

SOUND: SOBBING. It's awful, heartbreaking.

SOBBING VOICE (filter)

*Please—quick—*

SOUND: SOBBING . . . Then, CLICK! A broken connection.

KATIE

Polly, calm down! Whatever it is can't be that b—

HUM OF AN OPEN LINE

JEFF has wandered toward the TV room, hoping to find a blank tape.

BILL

Who was that?

Without looking at her husband or answering him, KATIE slams the lower button in again.

KATIE

Lois? Listen, I'll call you back. That was Polly, and she sounded very upset. No . . . she hung up. Yes. I will. Thanks.

She hangs up.

BILL (concerned)

It was Polly?

KATIE

Crying her head off. It sounded like she was trying to say “Please take me home” . . . I knew that damn school was bumming her out . . . Why I ever let you talk me into it . . .

She’s rummaging frantically on her little phone desk. Catalogues go slithering to the floor around her stool.

KATIE

*Connie did you take my address book?*

CONNIE (voice)

No, Mom.

BILL pulls a battered book out of his back pocket and pages through it.

BILL

I got it. Except—

KATIE

I know, damn dorm phone is always busy. Give it to me.

BILL

Honey, calm down.

KATIE

I’ll calm down after I talk to her. She is sixteen, Bill.

Sixteen-year-old girls are prone to depressive interludes. Sometimes they even k . . . just give me the damn number!

BILL

617-555-8641.

As she punches the numbers, THE CAMERA SLIDES IN TO CU.

KATIE

Come on, come on . . . don't be busy . . . just this once. . .

SOUND: CLICKS. A pause. Then . . . the phone starts ringing.

KATIE (eyes closed)

Thank You, God.

VOICE (filter)

Hartshorn Hall, this is Frieda. If you want Christine the Sex Queen, she's still in the shower, Arnie.

KATIE

Could you call Polly to the phone? Polly Weiderman? This is Kate Weiderman. Her mother.

VOICE (filter)

Oh, jeez! Sorry. I thought—hang on, please, Mrs. Weiderman.

SOUND: THE PHONE CLUNKS DOWN.

VOICE (filter, and very faint)

Polly? Pol? . . . Phone call! . . . It's your mother!

INT. A WIDER ANGLE ON THE PHONE NOOK, WITH BILL.

BILL

Well?

KATIE

Somebody's getting her. I hope.

JEFF comes back in with a tape.

JEFF

I found one, Dad. Dennis hid em. As usual.

BILL

In a minute, Jeff. Go watch the tube.

JEFF

But—

BILL

I won't forget. Now go *on*.

JEFF goes.

KATIE

Come on, come on, come on . . .

BILL

Calm down, Katie.

KATIE (snaps)

If you'd heard her, you wouldn't tell me to calm down! She sounded—

POLLY (filter, cheery voice)

Hi, Mom!

KATIE

Pol? Honey? Are you all right?

POLLY (happy, bubbling voice)

Am I *all right*? I aced my bio exam, got a B on my French Conversational Essay, and Ronnie Hansen asked me to the Harvest Ball. I'm so all right that if one more good thing happens to me today, I'll probably blow up like the *Hindenburg*.

KATIE

You didn't just call me up, crying your head off?

We see by KATE'S face that she already knows the answer to this question.

POLLY (filter)

Heck no!

KATIE

I'm glad about your test and your date, honey. I guess it was someone else. I'll call you back, okay?

POLLY (filter)

'Kay. Say hi to Dad!

KATIE

I will.

INT. THE PHONE NOOK, WIDER

BILL

She okay?

KATIE

Fine. I could have *sworn* it was Polly, but . . . *she's* walking on air.

BILL

So it was a prank. Or someone who was crying so hard she dialed a wrong number . . . "through a shimmering film of tears," as we veteran hacks like to say.

KATIE

It was not a prank and it was not a wrong number! It was someone in *my family!*

BILL

Honey, you can't know that.

KATIE

No? If Jeffie called up, just crying, would you know it was him?

BILL (struck by this)

Yeah, maybe. I guess I might.

She's not listening. She's punching numbers, fast.

BILL

Who you calling?

She doesn't answer him. SOUND: PHONE RINGS TWICE. Then:

OLDER FEMALE VOICE (filter)

Hello?

KATIE

Mom? Are you . . . (She pauses) Did you call just a few seconds ago?

VOICE (filter)

No, dear . . . why?

KATIE

Oh. . . you know these phones. I was talking to Lois and I lost the other call.

VOICE (filter)

Well, it wasn't me. Kate, I saw the *prettiest* dress in La Boutique today, and—

KATIE

We'll talk about it later, Mom, okay?

VOICE (filter)

Kate, are you all right?

KATIE

I have . . . Mom, I think maybe I've got diarrhea. I have to go. 'Bye.

She hangs up. BILL hangs on until she does, then he bursts into wild donkey-brays of LAUGHTER.

BILL

Oh boy . . . diarrhea . . . I gotta remember that the next time my agent calls . . . oh Katie, that was so cool—

KATIE (almost screaming)

*This is not funny!*

BILL stops laughing.

INT. THE TV ROOM

JEFF and DENNIS have been tussling. They stop. All three kids look toward the kitchen.

INT. THE PHONE NOOK, WITH BILL AND KATIE

KATIE

*I tell you it was someone in my family and she sounded—oh, you don't understand. I knew that voice.*

BILL

But if Polly's okay and your mom's okay . . .

KATIE (positive)

It's Dawn.

BILL

Come on, hon, a minute ago you were sure it was Polly.

KATIE

It *had* to be Dawn. I was on the phone with Lois and Mom's okay so Dawn's the only other one it *could* have been. She's the youngest . . . I could have mistaken her for Polly . . . and she's out there in that farmhouse alone with the baby!

BILL (startled)

What do you mean, alone?

KATIE

Jerry's in Burlington! It's Dawn! *Something's happened to Dawn!*

CONNIE comes into the kitchen, worried.

CONNIE

Mom? Is Aunt Dawn okay?

BILL

So far as we know, she's fine. Take it easy, doll. Bad to buy trouble before you know it's on sale.

KATIE punches numbers and listens. SOUND: The DAH-DAH-DAH of a busy signal. KATIE hangs up. BILL looks a question at her with raised eyebrows.

KATIE

Busy.

BILL

Katie, are you sure—

KATIE

She's the only one left—it had to be her. Bill, I'm scared. Will you drive me out there?

BILL takes the phone from her.

BILL

What's her number?

KATIE

555-6169.

BILL dials. Gets a busy. Hangs up and punches 0.

OPERATOR (filter)

Operator.

BILL

I'm trying to reach my sister-in-law, operator. The line is busy. I suspect there may be a problem. Can you break into the call, please?

INT. THE DOOR TO THE TV ROOM

All three kids are standing there, silent and worried.

INT. THE PHONE NOOK, WITH BILL AND KATIE

OPERATOR (filter)

What is your name, sir?

BILL

William Weiderman. My number is—

OPERATOR (filter)

Not the William Weiderman that wrote *Spider Doom*?!

BILL

Yes, that was mine. If—

OPERATOR (filter)

Oh my God, I just *loved* that book! I love *all* your books! I—

BILL

I'm delighted you do. But right now my wife is very worried about her sister. If it's possible for you to—

OPERATOR (filter)

Yes, I can do that. Please give me your number, Mr. Weiderman, for the records. (She GIGGLES.) I *promise* not to give it out.

BILL

It's 555-4408.

OPERATOR (filter)

And the call number?

BILL (looks at KATIE)

Uh. . .

KATIE

555-6169.

BILL

555-6169.

OPERATOR (filter)

Just a moment, Mr. Weiderman . . . *Night of the Beast* was also great, by the way. Hold on.

SOUND: TELEPHONIC CLICKS AND CLACKS.

KATIE

Is she—

BILL

Yes. Just . . .

There's one final CLICK.

OPERATOR (filter)

I'm sorry, Mr. Weiderman, but that line is not busy. It's off the hook. I wonder if I sent you my copy of *Spider Doom*—

BILL hangs up the phone.

KATIE

Why did you hang up?

BILL

She can't break in. Phone's not busy. It's off the hook.

They stare at each other bleakly.

EXT. A LOW-SLUNG SPORTS CAR PASSES THE CAMERA NIGHT

INT. THE CAR, WITH KATIE AND BILL

KATIE'S scared. BILL, at the wheel, doesn't look exactly calm.

KATIE

Hey, Bill—tell me she's all right.

BILL

She's all right.

KATIE

Now tell me what you really think.

BILL

Jeff snuck up behind me tonight and put the old booga-booga on me. He was disappointed as hell when I didn't jump. I told him I was case-hardened. (Pause) I lied.

KATIE

Why did Jerry have to move out there when he's gone half the time? Just her and that little tiny baby? *Why?*

BILL

Shh, Kate. We're almost there.

KATIE

Go faster.

EXT. THE CAR

He does. That car is smokin.

INT. THE WEIDERMAN TV ROOM

The tube's still on and the kids are still there, but the horsing around has stopped.

CONNIE

Dennis, do you think Aunt Dawn's okay?

DENNIS (thinks she's dead, decapitated by a maniac)

Yeah. Sure she is.

INT. THE PHONE, POV FROM THE TV ROOM

Just sitting there on the wall in the phone nook, lights dark, looking like a snake ready to strike.

FADE OUT

## Act II

EXT. AN ISOLATED FARMHOUSE

A long driveway leads up to it. There's one light on in the living room. Car lights sweep up the driveway. The WEIDERMAN car pulls up close to the garage and stops.

INT. THE CAR, WITH BILL AND KATIE

KATIE

I'm scared.

BILL bends down, reaches under his seat, and brings out a pistol.

BILL (solemnly)

Booga-booga.

KATIE (total surprise)

How long have you had that?

BILL

Since last year. I didn't want to scare you or the kids. I've got a licence to carry. Come on.

EXT. BILL AND KATIE

They get out. KATIE stands by the front of the car while BILL goes to the garage and peers in.

BILL

Her car's here.

THE CAMERA TRACKS WITH THEM to the front door. Now we can hear the TV, PLAYING LOUD, BILL pushes the doorbell. We hear it inside. They wait. KATIE pushes it. Still no answer. She pushes it again and doesn't take her finger off. BILL looks down at:

EXT. THE LOCK, BILL'S POV

Big scratches on it.

EXT. BILL AND KATIE

BILL (low)

The lock's been tampered with.

KATIE looks, and whimpers. BILL tries the door. It opens. The TV is louder.

BILL

Stay behind me. Be ready to run if something happens. God, I wish I'd left you home, Kate.

He starts in. KATIE comes after him, terrified, near tears.

INT. DAWN AND JERRY'S LIVING ROOM

From this angle we see only a small section of the room. The TV is much louder. BILL enters the room, gun up. He looks to the right . . . and suddenly all the tension goes out of him. He lowers the gun.

KATIE (draws up beside him)

Bill . . . what . . .

He points.

INT. THE LIVING ROOM, WIDE, BILL AND KATIE'S POV

The place looks like a cyclone hit it . . . but it wasn't robbery and murder that caused this mess; only a healthy eighteen-month-old baby. After a strenuous day of trashing the living room, Baby got tired and Mommy got tired and they fell asleep on the couch together. The baby is in DAWN'S lap. There is a pair of Walkman earphones on her head. There are toys—tough plastic Sesame Street and PlaySkool stuff, for the most part—scattered hell to breakfast. The baby has also pulled most of the books out of the bookcase. Had a good munch on one of them, too, by the look. BILL goes over and picks it up. It is *Ghost Kiss*.

BILL

I've had people say they just eat my books up, but this is ridiculous.

He's amused. KATIE isn't. She walks over to her sister, ready to be mad. . . but she sees how really exhausted DAWN looks and softens.

INT. DAWN AND THE BABY, KATIE'S POV

Fast asleep and breathing easily, like a Raphael painting of Madonna and Child. THE CAMERA PANS DOWN TO: the Walkman. We can hear the faint strains of Huey Lewis and the News. THE CAMERA PANS A BIT FURTHER TO a Princess telephone on the table by the chair. It's off the cradle. Not much; just enough to break the connection and scare people to death.

INT. KATIE

She sighs, bends down, and replaces the phone. Then she pushes the stop button on the Walkman.

INT. DAWN, BILL, AND KATIE

DAWN wakes up when the music stops. Looks at BILL and KATIE, puzzled.

DAWN (fuzzed out)

Well . . . hi.

She realizes she's got the Walkman phones on and removes them.

BILL

Hi, Dawn.

DAWN (still half asleep)

Shoulda called, guys. Place is a mess.

She smiles. She's radiant when she smiles.

KATIE

*We tried.* The operator told Bill the phone was off the hook. I thought something was wrong. How can you sleep with that music blasting?

DAWN

It's restful.

(Sees the gnawed book BILL'S holding)

Oh my God, Bill, I'm sorry! Justin's teething and—

BILL

There are critics who'd say he picked just the right thing to teethe on. I don't want to scare you, beautiful, but somebody's been at your front door lock with a screwdriver or something. Whoever it was forced it.

DAWN

Gosh, no! That was Jerry, last week. I locked us out by mistake and he didn't have his key and the spare wasn't over the door like it's supposed to be. He was mad because he had to take a whiz real bad and so he took the screwdriver to it. It didn't work, either—that's one tough lock. (Pause) By the time I found my key he'd already gone in the bushes.

BILL

If it wasn't forced, how come I could just open the door and walk in?

DAWN (guiltily)

Well . . . sometimes I forget to lock it.

KATIE

You didn't call me tonight, Dawn?

DAWN

Gee, no! I didn't call *anyone!* I was too busy chasing Justin around! He kept wanting to eat the fabric softener! Then he got sleepy and I sat down here and thought I'd listen to some tunes while I waited for your movie to come on, Bill, and I fell asleep—

At the mention of the movie BILL starts visibly and looks at the book. Then he glances at his watch.

BILL

I promised to tape it for Jeff. Come on, Katie, we've got time to get back.

KATIE

Just a second.

She picks up the phone and dials.

DAWN

Gee, Bill, do you think Jeffie's old enough to watch something like that?

BILL

It's network. They take out the blood-bags.

DAWN (confused but amiable)

Oh. That's good.

INT. KATIE, CU

DENNIS (filter)

Hello?

KATIE

Just thought you'd like to know your Aunt Dawn's fine.

DENNIS (filter)

Oh! Cool. Thanks, Mom.

INT. THE PHONE NOOK, WITH DENNIS AND THE OTHERS

He looks *very* relieved.

DENNIS

Aunt Dawn's okay.

INT. THE CAR, WITH BILL AND KATIE

They drive in silence for awhile.

KATIE

You think I'm a hysterical idiot, don't you?

BILL (genuinely surprised)

No! I was scared, too.

KATIE

You sure you're not mad?

BILL

I'm too relieved. (Laughs) She's sort of a scatterbrain, old Dawn, but I love her.

KATIE (leans over and kisses him)

I love *you*. You're a sweet man.

BILL

I'm the *boogeyman!*

KATIE

I am not fooled, sweetheart.

EXT. THE CAR

PASSES THE CAMERA AND WE DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JEFF, IN BED

His room is dark. The covers are pulled up to his chin.

JEFF

You *promise* to tape the rest?

CAMERA WIDENS OUT so we can see BILL, sitting on the bed.

BILL

I promise.

JEFF

I especially liked the part where the dead guy ripped off the punk rocker's head.

BILL

Well . . . they *used* to take out all the blood-bags.

JEFF

What, Dad?

BILL

Nothing. I love you, Jeffie.

JEFF

I love you, too. So does Rambo.

JEFF holds up a stuffed dragon of decidedly unmilitant aspect. BILL kisses the dragon, then JEFF.

BILL

'Night.

JEFF

'Night. (As BILL reaches his door) Glad Aunt Dawn was okay.

BILL

Me too.

He goes out.

INT. TV, CU

A guy who looks like he died in a car crash about two weeks prior to filming (and has since been subjected to a lot of hot weather) is staggering out of a crypt. THE CAMERA WIDENS to show BILL, releasing the VCR PAUSE button.

KATIE (voice)

Booga-booga.

BILL looks around companionably. THE CAMERA WIDENS OUT MORE to show KATIE, wearing a sexy nightgown.

BILL

Same to you. I missed the first forty seconds or so after the break. I had to kiss Rambo.

KATIE

You sure you're not mad at me, Bill?

He goes to her and kisses her.

BILL

Not even a smidge.

KATIE

It's just that I could have sworn it was one of mine. You know what I mean? One of mine?

BILL

Yes.

KATIE

I can still hear those sobs. So lost . . . so heartbroken.

BILL

Kate, have you ever thought you recognized someone on the street, and called her, and when she finally turned around it was a total stranger?

KATIE

Yes, once. In Seattle. I was in a mall and I thought I saw my old roommate. I . . . oh. I see what you're saying.

BILL

Sure. There are sound-alikes as well as look-alikes.

KATIE

But. . . *you know your own*. At least I thought so until tonight.

She puts her cheek on his shoulder, looking troubled.

KATIE

I was so *positive* it was Polly . . .

BILL

Because you've been worried about her getting her feet under her at the new school . . . but judging from the stuff she told you tonight, I'd say she's doing just fine in that department. Wouldn't you?

KATIE

Yes. . . I guess I would.

BILL

Let it go, hon.

KATIE (looks at him closely)

I hate to see you looking so tired. Hurry up and have an idea, you.

BILL

Well, I'm trying.

KATIE

You coming to bed?

BILL

Soon as I finish taping this for Jeff.

KATIE (amused)

Bill, that machine was made by Japanese technicians who think of damned near everything. It'll run on its own.

BILL

Yeah, but it's been a long time since I've seen this one, and . . .

KATIE

Okay. Enjoy. I think I'll be awake for a little while. (Pause) I've got a few ideas of my own.

BILL (smiles)

Yeah?

KATIE

Yeah.

She starts out, showing a lot of leg, then turns in the doorway as something else strikes her.

KATIE

If they show that part where the punk's head gets—

BILL (guiltily)

I'll edit it.

KATIE

'Night. And thanks again. For everything.

She leaves. BILL sits in his chair.

INT. TV, CU

A couple is necking in a car. Suddenly the passenger door is ripped open by the dead guy and we DISSOLVE TO:

INT. KATIE, IN BED

It's dark. She's asleep. She wakes up . . . sort of.

KATIE (sleepy)

Hey, big guy—

She feels for him, but his side of the bed is empty, the coverlet still pulled up. She sits up. Looks at:

INT. A CLOCK ON THE NIGHT-TABLE, KATIE'S POV

It says 2:03 A.M. Then it flashes to 2:04.

INT. KATIE

Fully awake now. And concerned. She gets up, puts on her robe, and leaves the bedroom.

INT. THE TV SCREEN, CU

Snow.

KATIE (voice, approaching)

Bill? Honey? You okay? Bill? Bi—

INT. KATIE, IN BILL'S STUDY

She's frozen, wide-eyed with horror.

INT. BILL, IN HIS CHAIR

He's slumped to one side, eyes closed, hand inside his shirt. DAWN was sleeping. BILL is not.

EXT. A COFFIN, BEING LOWERED INTO A GRAVE

MINISTER (voice)

And so we commit the earthly remains of William Weiderman to the ground, confident of his spirit and soul. "Be ye not cast down, brethren . . ."

EXT. GRAVESIDE

All the WEIDERMANS are ranged here. KATIE and POLLY wear identical black dresses and veils. CONNIE wears a black skirt and white blouse. DENNIS and JEFF wear black suits. JEFF is crying. He has Rambo the Dragon under his arm for a little extra comfort.

CAMERA MOVES IN ON KATIE. Tears course slowly down her cheeks. She bends and gets a handful of earth. Tosses it into the grave.

KATIE

Love you, big guy.

EXT. JEFF

Weeping.

EXT. LOOKING DOWN INTO THE GRAVE

Scattered earth on top of the coffin.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE GRAVE

A GROUNDSKEEPER pats the last sod into place.

GROUNDSKEEPER

My wife says she wishes you'd written a couple more before you had your heart attack, mister. (Pause) I like Westerns, m'self.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER walks away, whistling.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A CHURCH DAY

TITLE CARD: FIVE YEARS LATER

THE WEDDING MARCH is playing. POLLY, older and radiant with joy, emerges into a pelting shower of rice. She's in a wedding gown, her new husband by her side.

Celebrants throwing rice line either side of the path. From behind the bride and groom come others. Among them are KATIE, DENNIS, CONNIE, and JEFF . . . all five years older. With KATIE is another man. This is HANK. In the interim, KATIE has also taken a husband.

POLLY turns and her mother is there.

POLLY

Thank you, Mom.

KATIE (crying)

Oh doll, you're so welcome.

They embrace. After a moment POLLY draws away and looks at HANK. There is a brief moment of tension, and then POLLY embraces HANK, too.

POLLY

Thank you too, Hank. I'm sorry I was such a creep for so long . . .

HANK (easily)

You were never a creep, Pol. A girl only has one father.

CONNIE

Throw it! Throw it!

After a moment, POLLY throws her bouquet.

EXT. THE BOUQUET, CU, SLOW MOTION

Turning and turning through the air.

DISSOLVES TO:

INT. THE STUDY, WITH KATIE NIGHT

The word-processor has been replaced by a wide lamp looming over a stack of blueprints. The book jackets have been replaced by photos of buildings. Ones that have first been built in HANK'S mind, presumably.

KATIE is looking at the desk, thoughtful and a little sad.

HANK (voice)

Coming to bed, Kate?

She turns and THE CAMERA WIDENS OUT to give us HANK. He's wearing a robe over pajamas. She comes to him and gives him a little hug, smiling. Maybe we notice a few streaks of gray in her hair; her pretty pony has done its fair share of running since BILL died.

KATIE

In a little while. A woman doesn't see her first one get married every day, you know.

HANK

I know.

THE CAMERA FOLLOWS as they walk from the work area of the study to the more informal area. This is much the same as it was in the old days, with a coffee table, stereo, TV, couch, and BILL'S old easy-chair. She looks at this.

HANK

You still miss him, don't you?

KATIE

Some days more than others. You didn't know, and Polly didn't remember.

HANK (gently)

Remember what, doll?

KATIE

Polly got married on the five-year anniversary of Bill's death.

HANK (hugs her)

Come on to bed, why don't you?

KATIE

In a little while.

HANK

Okay. Maybe I'll still be awake.

KATIE

Got a few ideas, do you?

HANK

I might.

KATIE

That's nice.

He kisses her, then leaves, closing the door behind him. KATIE sits in BILL'S old chair. Close by, on the coffee table, is a remote control for the TV and an extension phone. KATIE looks at the blank TV, and THE CAMERA MOVES IN on her face. One tear rims one eye, sparkling like a sapphire.

KATIE

I *do* still miss you, big guy. Lots and lots. Every day. And you know what? It hurts.

The tear falls. She picks up the TV remote and pushes the on button.

INT. TV, KATIE'S POV

An ad for Ginsu Knives comes to an end and is replaced by a STAR LOGO.

ANNOUNCER (voice)

Now back to Channel 63's Thursday night Star Time Movie. . . *Ghost Kiss*.

The logo DISSOLVES INTO a guy who looks like he died in a car crash about two weeks ago and has since been subjected to a lot of hot weather. He comes staggering out of the same old crypt.

INT. KATIE

Terribly startled—almost horrified. She hits the OFF button on the remote control. The TV blinks off.

KATIE'S face begins to work. She struggles against the impending emotional storm, but the coincidence of the movie is just one thing too many on what must have already been one of the most emotionally trying days of her life. The dam breaks and she begins to sob . . . terrible heartbroken sobs. She reaches out for the little table by the chair, meaning to put the remote control on it, and knocks the phone onto the floor.

SOUND: THE HUM OF AN OPEN LINE.

Her tear-stained face grows suddenly still as she looks at the telephone. Something begins to fill it . . . an idea? an intuition? Hard to tell. And maybe it doesn't matter.

INT. THE TELEPHONE, KATIE'S POV

THE CAMERA MOVES IN TO ECU . . . MOVES IN until the dots in the off-the-hook receiver look like chasms.

SOUND OF OPEN-LINE BUZZ UP TO LOUD.

WE GO INTO THE BLACK . . . and hear

BILL (voice)

Who are you calling? Who do you *want* to call? Who *would* you call, if it wasn't too late?

INT. KATIE

There is now a strange hypnotized look on her face. She reaches down, scoops the telephone up, and punches in numbers, seemingly at random.

SOUND: RINGING PHONE.

KATIE continues to look hypnotized. The look holds until the phone is answered. . . *and she hears herself* on the other end of the line.

KATIE (voice, filter)

Hello, Weiderman residence.

KATIE—our present-day KATIE with the streaks of gray in her hair—goes on sobbing, yet an expression of desperate hope is trying to be born on her face. On some level she understands that the depth of her grief has allowed a kind of telephonic time-travel. She's trying to talk, to force the words out.

KATIE (sobbing)

Take. . . please take . . . t-t-

INT. KATIE, IN THE PHONE NOOK, REPRISÉ

It's five years ago. BILL is standing beside her, looking concerned. JEFF is wandering off to look for a blank tape in the other room.

KATIE

Polly? What's wrong?

INT. KATIE IN THE STUDY

KATIE (sobbing)

*Please—quick—*

SOUND: CLICK OF A BROKEN CONNECTION

KATIE (screaming)

*Take him to the hospital! If you want him to live, take him to the hospital!  
He's going to have a heart attack! He—*

SOUND: HUM OF AN OPEN LINE

Slowly, very slowly, KATIE hangs up the telephone. Then, after a moment, she picks it up again. She speaks aloud with no self-consciousness whatever. Probably doesn't even know she's doing it.

KATIE

I dialed the old number. I dialed—

SLAM CUT TO:

INT. BILL, IN THE PHONE NOOK WITH KATIE BESIDE HIM

He's just taken the phone from KATIE and is speaking to the operator.

OPERATOR (filter, GIGGLES)

I *promise* not to give it out.

BILL

It's 555-

SLAM CUT TO:

INT. KATIE, IN BILL'S OLD CHAIR, CU

KATIE (finishes)

-4408.

INT. THE PHONE, CU

KATIE'S trembling finger carefully picks out the number, and we hear the corresponding tones: 555-4408.

INT. KATIE, IN BILL'S OLD CHAIR, CU

She closes her eyes as the PHONE BEGINS TO RING. Her face is filled with an agonizing mixture of hope and fear. If only she can have one more chance to pass the vital message on, it says. . . just one more chance.

KATIE (low)

Please . . . please . . .

RECORDED VOICE (filter)

You have reached a non-working number. Please hang up and dial again.  
If you need assistance—

KATIE hangs up again. Tears stream down her cheeks. THE CAMERA PANS AWAY AND DOWN to the telephone.

INT. THE PHONE NOOK, WITH KATIE AND BILL, REPRISE

BILL

So it was a prank. Or someone who was crying so hard she dialed a wrong number . . . “through a shimmering film of tears,” as we veteran hacks like to say.

KATIE

It was not a prank and it was not a wrong number! It was someone in *my family!*

INT. KATIE (PRESENT DAY) IN BILL'S STUDY

KATIE

Yes. Someone in my family. Someone very close. (Pause) *Me.*

She suddenly throws the phone across the room. Then she begins to SOB AGAIN and puts her hands over her face. THE CAMERA HOLDS on her for a moment, then DOLLIES ACROSS TO

INT. THE PHONE

It lies on the carpet, looking both bland and somehow ominous. CAMERA MOVES IN TO ECU—the holes in the receiver once more look like huge dark chasms. We HOLD, then

FADE TO BLACK.

# The Ten O'Clock People

## 1

Pearson tried to scream but shock robbed his voice and he was able to produce only a low, choked whuffling—the sound of a man moaning in his sleep. He drew in breath to try it again, but before he could get started, a hand seized his left arm just above the elbow in a strong pincers grip and squeezed.

“It’d be a mistake,” the voice that went with the hand said. It was pitched only half a step above a whisper, and it spoke directly into Pearson’s left ear. “A bad one. Believe me, it would.”

Pearson looked around. The thing which had occasioned his desire—no, his *need*—to scream had disappeared inside the bank now, amazingly unchallenged, and Pearson found he *could* look around. He had been grabbed by a good-looking young black man in a cream-colored suit. Pearson didn’t know him, but he recognized him; he sight-recognized most of the odd little sub-tribe he’d come to think of as the Ten O’Clock People. . . as, he supposed, they recognized him.

The good-looking young black man was watching him warily.

“Did you see it?” Pearson asked. The words came out in a high-pitched, nagging whine that was totally unlike his usual confident speaking voice.

The good-looking young black man had let go of Pearson’s arm when he became reasonably convinced that Pearson wasn’t going to shock the plaza in front of The First Mercantile Bank of Boston with a volley of wild screams; Pearson immediately reached out and gripped the young black man’s wrist. It was as if he were not yet capable of living without the comfort of the other man’s touch. The good-looking young black man made no effort to pull away, only glanced down at Pearson’s hand for a moment before looking back up into Pearson’s face.

“I mean, did you *see* it? Horrible! Even if it was make-up . . . or some kind of mask someone put on for a joke . . .”

But it hadn't been make-up and it hadn't been a mask. The thing in the dark-gray Andre Cyr suit and five-hundred-dollar shoes had passed very close to Pearson, almost close enough to touch (*God forbid*, his mind interjected with a helpless cringe of revulsion), and he knew it hadn't been make-up or a mask. Because the flesh on the huge protuberance Pearson supposed was its head had been *in motion*, different parts moving in different directions, like the bands of exotic gases surrounding some planetary giant.

“Friend,” the good-looking young black man in the cream-colored suit began, “you need—”

“What was it?” Pearson broke in. “I never saw anything like that in my *life!* It was like something you'd see in a, I don't know, a sideshow . . . or . . . or . . .”

His voice was no longer coming from its usual place inside his head. It seemed to be drifting down from someplace above him, instead—as if he'd fallen into a snare or a crack in the earth and that high-pitched, nagging voice belonged to somebody else, somebody who was speaking down to him.

“Listen, my friend—”

There was something else, too. When Pearson had stepped out through the revolving doors just a few minutes ago with an unlit Marlboro between his fingers, the day had been overcast—threatening rain, in fact. Now everything was not just bright but *over-bright*. The red skirt on the pretty blonde standing beside the building fifty feet or so farther down (she was smoking a cigarette and reading a paperback) screamed into the day like a firebell; the yellow of a passing delivery boy's shirt stung like the barb of a wasp. People's faces stood out like the faces in his daughter Jenny's beloved Pop-Up books.

And his lips . . . he couldn't feel his lips. They had gone numb, the way they sometimes did after a big shot of novocaine.

Pearson turned to the good-looking young man in the cream-colored suit and said, “This is ridiculous, but I think I'm going to faint.”

“No, you're not,” the young man said, and he spoke with such assurance that Pearson believed him, at least temporarily. The hand gripped his arm above the elbow again, but much more gently this time. “Come on over here—you need to sit down.”

There were circular marble islands about three feet high scattered around the broad plaza in front of the bank, each containing its own variety of late summer/early fall flowers. There were Ten O’Clock People sitting on the rims of most of these upscale flower tubs, some reading, some chatting, some looking out at the passing rivers of foot-traffic on the sidewalks of Commercial Street, but all of them also doing the thing that made them Ten O’clock People, the thing Pearson had come downstairs and outside to do himself. The marble island closest to Pearson and his new acquaintance contained asters, their purple miraculously brilliant to Pearson in his heightened state of awareness. Its circular rim was vacant, probably because it was going on for ten past the hour now, and people had begun to drift back inside.

“Sit down,” the young black man in the cream-colored suit invited, and although Pearson tried his best, what he ended up doing felt more like falling than sitting. At one moment he was standing beside the reddish-brown marble island, and then somebody pulled the pins in his knees and he landed on his ass. Hard.

“Bend over now,” the young man said, sitting down beside him. His face had remained pleasant throughout the entire encounter, but there was nothing pleasant about his eyes; they combed rapidly back and forth across the plaza.

“Why?”

“To get the blood back into your head,” the young black man said. “But don’t make it *look* like that. Make it look like you’re just smelling the flowers.”

“Look like to *who*?”

“Just do it, okay?” The smallest tinge of impatience had crept into the young man’s voice.

Pearson leaned his head over and took a deep breath. The flowers didn’t smell as good as they looked, he discovered—they had a weedy, faintly dog-pissy smell. Still, he thought his head might be clearing just a tiny bit.

“Start saying the states,” the black man ordered. He crossed his legs, shook out the fabric of his pants to preserve the crease, and brought a package of Winstons out of an inner pocket. Pearson realized his own cigarette was gone; he must have dropped it in that first shocked moment, when he had seen the monstrous thing in the expensive suit crossing the west side of the plaza.

“The states,” he said blankly.

The young black man nodded, produced a lighter that was probably quite a bit less expensive than it looked at first glance, and lit his cigarette. “Start with this one and work your way west,” he invited.

“Massachusetts . . . New York, I suppose . . . or Vermont if you start from upstate . . . New Jersey . . .” Now he straightened up a little and began to speak with greater confidence. “Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Illinois—”

The black man raised his eyebrows. “West Virginia, huh? You sure?”

Pearson smiled a little. “Pretty sure, yeah. I might have got Ohio and Illinois bass-ackwards, though.”

The black man shrugged to show it didn’t matter, and smiled. “You don’t feel like you’re going to faint anymore, though—I can see you don’t—and that’s the important part. Want a butt?”

“Thank you,” Pearson said gratefully. He did not just *want* a butt; he felt that he needed one. “I had one, but I lost it. What’s your name?”

The black man poked a fresh Winston between Pearson’s lips and snapped a light to it. “Dudley Rhinemann. You can call me Duke.”

Pearson dragged deeply on the cigarette and looked toward the revolving doors which gave ingress upon all the gloomy depths and cloudy heights of The First Mercantile. “That wasn’t just a hallucination, was it?” he asked. “What I saw . . . you saw it, too, right?”

Rhinemann nodded.

“You didn’t want him to know I saw him,” Pearson said. He spoke slowly, trying to put it together on his own. His voice was back in its usual spot again, and that alone was a big relief.

Rhinemann nodded again.

“But how could I *not* see him? And how could he not know it?”

“Did you see anyone else getting ready to holler themselves into a stroke like you were?” Rhinemann asked. “See anybody else even *looking* the way you were? Me, for instance?”

Pearson shook his head slowly. He now felt more than just frightened; he felt totally lost.

“I got between you and him the best I could, and I don’t think he saw you, but for a second or two there it was close. You looked like a man who just saw a mouse crawl out of his meatloaf. You’re in Collateral Loans, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes—Brandon Pearson. Sorry.”

“I’m in Computer Services, myself. And it’s okay. Seeing your first batman can do that to you.”

Duke Rhinemann stuck out his hand and Pearson shook it, but most of his mind was one turn back. *Seeing your first batman can do that to you*, the young man had said, and once Pearson had jettisoned his initial image of the Caped Crusader swinging his way between the art-deco spires of Gotham City, he discovered that wasn’t a bad term at all. He discovered something else, as well, or perhaps rediscovered it: it was good to have a name for something that had frightened you. It didn’t make the fright go away, but it went a long way toward rendering the fright manageable.

Now he deliberately replayed what he had seen, thinking *Batman, it was my first batman*, as he did.

• • •

He had come out through the revolving doors thinking of only one thing, the same thing he was always thinking about when he came down at ten—how good that first rush of nicotine was going to feel when it hit his brain. It was what made him a part of the tribe; it was his version of phylacteries or tattooed cheeks.

He had first registered the fact that the day had gotten even darker since he’d come in at eight-forty-five, and had thought: *We’ll be puffing our cancer-sticks in the pouring rain this afternoon, the whole damned bunch of us*. Not that a little rain would stop them, of course; the Ten O’Clock People were nothing if not persistent.

He remembered sweeping his eyes across the plaza, doing a quick attendance check—so quick it was really almost unconscious. He had seen the girl in the red skirt (and wondered again, as he always did, if anyone who looked that good would be any good in the sack), the young be-bop janitor from the third floor who wore his cap turned around while he was mopping the floors in the john and the snack-bar, the elderly man with the fine white hair and the purple blotches on his cheeks, the young woman with the thick glasses, narrow face, and long straight black hair. He had seen a number of

others he vaguely recognized, as well. One of them, of course, had been the good-looking young black man in the cream-colored suit.

If Timmy Flanders had been around, Pearson probably would have joined him, but he wasn't, and so Pearson had moved toward the center of the plaza instead, meaning to sit on one of the marble islands (the very one he was sitting on now, in fact). Once there he would have been in an excellent position to calculate the length and curves of Little Miss Red Skirt's legs—a cheap thrill, granted, but one made do with the materials at hand. He was a well-married man with a wife he loved and a daughter he adored, he'd never come even close to cheating, but as he approached forty, he had discovered certain imperatives surfacing in his blood like sea-monsters. And he didn't know how any man could help staring at a red skirt like that, wondering just a little if the woman was wearing matching underwear beneath.

He had barely gotten moving when the newcomer had turned the corner of the building and begun mounting the plaza steps. Pearson had caught movement in the corner of his eye, and under ordinary circumstances he would have dismissed it—it was the red skirt he had been concentrating on just then, short, tight, and as bright as the side of a fire engine. But he *had* looked, because, even seen from the corner of his eye and with other things on his mind, he had registered something *wrong* with the face and the head that went with the approaching figure. So he had turned and looked, cancelling sleep for God knew how many nights to come.

The shoes were all right; the dark-gray Andre Cyr suit, looking as solid and as dependable as the door of the bank vault in the basement, was even better; the red tie was predictable but not offensive. All of this was fine, typical top-echelon banker's attire for a Monday morning (and who but a top-echelon banker could come in at ten o'clock in the first place?). It wasn't until you got to the head that you realized that you had either gone crazy or were looking at something for which there was no entry in the *World Book Encyclopedia*.

*But why didn't they run?* Pearson wondered now, as a raindrop fell on the back of his hand and another fell on the clean white paper of his half-smoked cigarette. *They should have run screaming, the way the people run from the giant bugs in those fifties monster movies.* Then he thought, *But then . . . I didn't run, either.*

True enough, but it wasn't the same. He hadn't run because he'd been frozen in place. He *had* tried to scream, however; it was just that his new friend had stopped him before he could throw his vocal cords back into gear.

*Batman. Your first batman.*

Above the broad shoulders of this year's most Eminently Acceptable Business Suit and the knot in the red Sulka powertie had loomed a huge grayish-brown head, not round but as misshapen as a baseball that has taken a whole summer's worth of bashing. Black lines—veins, perhaps—pulsed just below the surface of the skull in meaningless roadmap squiggles, and the area that should have been its face but wasn't (not in any human sense, anyway) had been covered with lumps that bulged and quivered like tumors possessed of their own terrible semi-sentient life. Its features were rudimentary and pushed together—flat black eyes, perfectly round, that stared avidly from the middle of its face like the eyes of a shark or some bloated insect; malformed ears with no lobes or pinnae. It hadn't had a nose, at least none that Pearson could recognize, although two tusklie protuberances had jutted from the spiny tangle of hair that grew just below the eyes. Most of the thing's face had been mouth—a huge black crescent ringed with triangular teeth. To a creature with a mouth like that, Pearson had thought later, bolting one's food would be a sacrament.

His very first thought as he stared at this horrible apparition—an apparition carrying a slim Bally briefcase in one beautifully manicured hand—was *It's the Elephant Man*. But, he now realized, the creature had been nothing at all like the misshapen but essentially human creature in that old movie. Duke Rhinemann was closer to the mark; those black eyes and that drawn-up mouth were features he associated with furry, squeaking things that spent their nights eating flies and their days hanging head-down in dark places.

But none of that was what had caused him to try that first scream; that need had come when the creature in the Andre Cyr suit walked past him, its bright, buglike eyes already fixed on the revolving doors. It was at its closest in that second or two, and it was then that Pearson had seen its tumorous face somehow moving below the mottles of coarse hair which grew from it. He didn't know how such a thing could possibly be, but it *was*—he was watching it happen, observing the man's flesh crawling around the lumpy curves of its

skull and rippling along the thick canehead shape of its jaw in alternating bands. Between these he caught glimpses of some gruesome raw pink substance that he didn't even want to think about . . . yet now that he remembered, it seemed that he could not stop thinking about it.

• • •

More raindrops splattered on his hands and face. Next to him on the curved lip of marble, Rhinemann took a final drag on his cigarette, pitched it away, and stood up. "Come on," he said. "Starting to rain."

Pearson looked at him with wide eyes, then looked toward the bank. The blonde in the red skirt was just going in, her book now tucked under her arm. She was being closely followed (and closely observed) by the old party with the tycoon's shock of fine white hair.

Pearson flicked his eyes back to Rhinemann and said, "Go in there? Are you serious? That *thing* went in there!"

"I know."

"You want to hear something totally nuts?" Pearson asked, tossing his own cigarette away. He didn't know where he was going now, home, he supposed, but he knew one place he was most assuredly *not* going, and that was back inside The First Mercantile Bank of Boston.

"Sure," Rhinemann agreed. "Why not?"

"That thing looked quite a lot like our revered Chief Executive Officer, Douglas Keefer . . . until you got to the head, that is. Same taste in suits and briefcases."

"What a surprise," Duke Rhinemann said.

Pearson measured him with an uneasy eye. "What do you mean?"

"I think you already know, but you've had a tough morning and so I'll spell it out. That *was* Keefer."

Pearson smiled uncertainly. Rhinemann didn't smile back. He got to his feet, gripped Pearson's arms, and pulled the older man forward until their faces were only inches apart.

"I saved your life just now. Do you believe that, Mr. Pearson?"

Pearson thought about it and discovered that he did. That alien, batlike face with its black eyes and clustered bunches of teeth hung in his mind like a dark flare. “Yes. I guess I do.”

“Okay. Then do me the credit of listening carefully as I tell you three things—will you do that?”

“I . . . yes, sure.”

“First thing: that *was* Douglas Keefer, CEO of The First Mercantile Bank of Boston, close friend of the Mayor, and, incidentally, honorary chairman of the current Boston Children’s Hospital fund-drive. Second thing: there are at least three more bats working in the bank, one of them on your floor. Third thing: you *are* going back in there. If you want to go on living, that is.”

Pearson gaped at him, momentarily incapable of reply—if he’d tried, he would have produced only more of those fuzzy whuffling sounds.

Rhinemann took him by the elbow and pulled him toward the revolving doors. “Come on, buddy,” he said, and his voice was oddly gentle. “The rain’s really starting to come down. If we stay out here much longer we’ll attract attention, and people in our position can’t afford to do that.”

Pearson went along with Rhinemann at first, then thought of the way the black nests of lines on the thing’s head had pulsed and squiggled. The image brought him to a cold stop just outside the revolving doors. The smooth surface of the plaza was now wet enough to reveal another Brandon Pearson below him, a shimmery reflection that hung from his own heels like a bat of a different color. “I . . . I don’t think I can,” he said in a halting, humble voice.

“You can,” Rhinemann said. He glanced momentarily down at Pearson’s left hand. “Married, I see—with kids?”

“One. A daughter.” Pearson was looking into the bank’s lobby. The glass panels in the revolving door were polarized, making the big room beyond them look very dark. *Like a cave*, he thought. *A batcave filled with half-blind disease-carriers.*

“You want your wife and kid to read in the paper tomorrow that the cops dragged Da-Da out of Boston Harbor with his throat cut?”

Pearson looked at Rhinemann with wide eyes. Raindrops splattered against his cheeks, his forehead.

“They make it look like junkies did it,” Rhinemann said, “and it works. It *always* works. Because they’re smart, and because they’ve got friends in high places. Hell, high places is what they’re all about.”

“I don’t understand you,” Pearson said. “I don’t understand *any* of this.”

“I know you don’t,” Rhinemann returned. “This is a dangerous time for you, so just do what I tell you. What I’m telling you is to get back to your desk before you’re missed, and roll through the rest of the day with a smile on your face. Hold onto that smile, my friend—don’t let go of it no matter how greasy it gets.” He hesitated, then added: “If you screw up, it’s probably gonna get you killed.”

The rainwater made bright tracks down the young man’s smooth dark face, and Pearson suddenly saw what had been there all along, what he had missed only because of his own shock: this man was terrified, and he had risked a great deal to keep Pearson from stumbling into some awful trap.

“I really can’t stay out here any longer,” Rhinemann said. “It’s dangerous.”

“Okay,” Pearson said, a little astounded to hear his own voice coming out in normal, even measures. “Then let’s go back to work.”

Rhinemann looked relieved. “Good man. And whatever you see the rest of the day, *don’t show surprise*. You understand?”

“Yes,” Pearson said. He didn’t understand anything.

“Can you clear your desk early and leave around three?”

Pearson considered it, then nodded. “Yeah. I guess I could do that.”

“Good. Meet me around the corner on Milk Street.”

“All right.”

“You’re doin’ great, man,” Rhinemann said. “You’re going to be fine. See you at three.” He entered the revolving door and gave it a push. Pearson stepped into the segment behind him, feeling as though he had somehow left his mind out there in the plaza . . . all of it, that was, except for the part that already wanted another cigarette.

• • •

The day crawled, but everything was all right until he came back from lunch (and two cigarettes) with Tim Flanders. They stepped out of the elevator on

the third floor and the first thing Pearson saw was another batman . . . except this one was actually a batwoman wearing black patent-leather heels, black nylon hose, and a formidable silk tweed suit—Samuel Blue was Pearson’s guess. The perfect power outfit . . . until you got to the head nodding over it like a mutated sunflower, that was.

“Hullo, gents.” A sweet contralto voice spoke from somewhere behind the harelippled hole that was its mouth.

*It’s Suzanne Holding, Pearson thought. It can’t be, but it is.*

“Hello, Suzy darlin,” he heard himself say, and thought: *If she comes near me . . . tries to touch me . . . I’ll scream. I won’t be able to help it, no matter what the kid told me.*

“Are you all right Brand? You look pale.”

“A little touch of whatever’s going around, I guess,” he said, astounded all over again at the natural ease of his voice. “I think I’m getting on top of it, though.”

“Good,” Suzanne Holding’s voice said from behind the bat’s face and the strangely motile flesh. “No French kissing until you’re all better, though—in fact, don’t even breathe on me. I can’t afford to be sick with the Japanese coming in on Wednesday.”

*No problem, sweetheart—no problem, you better believe it.*

“I’ll try to restrain myself.”

“Thanks. Tim, will you come down to my office and look at a couple of spread-sheet summaries?”

Timmy Flanders slipped an arm around the waist of the sexily prim Samuel Blue suit, and before Pearson’s wide eyes, he bent and planted a little kiss on the side of the thing’s tumor-raddled, hairy face. *That’s where Timmy sees her cheek, Pearson thought, and he felt his sanity suddenly slip like greasy cable wound around the drum of a winch. Her smooth, perfumed cheek—that’s what he’s seeing, all right, and what he thinks he’s kissing. Oh my God. Oh my God.*

“There!” Timmy exclaimed, and gave the creature a small cavalier’s bow. “One kiss and I am your servant, dear lady!”

He tipped Pearson a wink and began walking the monster in the direction of her office. As they passed the drinking fountain, he dropped the arm he had hung about her waist. The short and meaningless little peacock/peahen

courting dance—a ritual that had somehow developed over the last ten years or so in business relationships where the boss was female and the aide was male—had now been performed, and they drew away from Pearson as sexual equals, talking nothing but dry numbers.

*Marvellous analysis, Brand,* Pearson thought distractedly as he turned away from them. *You should have been a sociologist.* And almost had been—it had been his college minor, after all.

As he entered his office he became aware that his whole body was running with a slow slime of sweat. Pearson forgot sociology and began rooting for three o'clock again.

• • •

At two-forty-five he steeled himself and poked his head into Suzanne Holding's office. The alien asteroid of her head was tilted toward the blue-gray screen of her computer, but she looked around when he said "Knock-knock," the flesh on her strange face sliding restlessly, her black eyes regarding him with the cold avidity of a shark studying a swimmer's leg.

"I gave Buzz Carstairs the Corporate Fours," Pearson said. "I'm going to take the Individual Form Nines home with me, if that's okay. I've got my backup discs there."

"Is this your coy way of saying you're going AWOL, my dear?" Suzanne asked. The black veins bulged unspeakably on top of her bald skull; the lumps which surrounded her features quivered, and Pearson realized one of them was leaking a thick pinkish substance that looked like bloodstained shaving cream.

He made himself smile. "You caught me."

"Well," Suzanne said, "we'll just have to have the four o'clock orgy without you today, I guess."

"Thanks, Suze." He turned away.

"Brand?"

He turned back, his fear and revulsion threatening to turn into a bright white freeze of panic, suddenly very sure that those avid black eyes had seen through him and that the thing masquerading as Suzanne Holding was going

to say, *Let's stop playing games, shall we? Come in and close the door. Let's see if you taste as good as you look.*

Rhinemann would wait awhile, then go on to wherever he was going by himself. *Probably*, Pearson thought, *he'll know what happened. Probably he's seen it before.*

"Yes?" he asked, trying to smile.

She looked at him appraisingly for a long moment without speaking, the grotesque slab of head looming above the sexy lady exec's body, and then she said, "You look a little better this afternoon." The mouth still gaped, the black eyes still stared with all the expression of a Raggedy Ann doll abandoned under a child's bed, but Pearson knew that anyone else would have seen only Suzanne Holding, smiling prettily at one of her junior executives and exhibiting just the right degree of Type A concern. Not exactly Mother Courage, but still caring and interested.

"Good," he said, and decided that was probably too limp. "Great!"

"Now if we could only get you to quit smoking."

"Well, I'm trying," he said, and laughed weakly. The greasy cable around that mental winch slipped again. *Let me go*, he thought. *Let me go, you horrible bitch, let me get out of here before I do something too nutso to be ignored.*

"You'd qualify for an automatic upgrade on your insurance, you know," the monster said. Now the surface of another of those tumors broke open with a rotten little *chup!* sound and more of that pink stuff began to ooze out.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "And I'll give it serious consideration, Suzanne. Really."

"You do that," she said, and swung back toward the glowing computer screen. For a moment he was stunned, unable to grasp his good fortune. The interview was over.

• • •

By the time Pearson left the building it was pouring, but the Ten O'Clock People—now they were the Three O'Clock People, of course, but there was no essential difference—were out just the same, huddled together like sheep, doing their thing. Little Miss Red Skirt and the janitor who liked to wear his

cap turned around backward were sheltering beneath the same sodden section of the *Boston Globe*. They looked uncomfortable and damp around the edges, but Pearson envied the janitor just the same. Little Miss Red Skirt wore Giorgio; he had smelled it in the elevator on several occasions. And she made little silky rustling noises when she moved, of course.

*What the hell are you thinking about?* he asked himself sternly, and replied in the same mental breath: *Keeping my sanity, thank you very much. Okay by you?*

Duke Rhinemann was standing under the awning of the flower shop just around the corner, his shoulders hunched, a cigarette in the corner of his own mouth. Pearson joined him, glanced at his watch, and decided he could wait a little longer. He poked his head forward a little bit just the same, to catch the tang of Rhinemann's cigarette. He did this without being aware of it.

"My boss is one of them," he told Duke. "Unless, of course, Douglas Keefer is the sort of monster who likes to cross-dress."

Rhinemann grinned ferociously and said nothing.

"You said there were three others. Who are the other two?"

"Donald Fine. You probably don't know him—he's in Securities. And Carl Grosbeck."

"Carl. . . the Chairman of the Board? Jesus!"

"I told you," Rhinemann said. "High places are what these guys're all about—*Hey, taxi!*"

He dashed out from beneath the awning, flagging the maroon-and-white cab he had spotted cruising miraculously empty through the rainy afternoon. It swerved toward them, spraying fans of standing water. Rhinemann dodged agilely, but Pearson's shoes and pantsuffs were soaked. In his current state, it didn't seem terribly important. He opened the door for Rhinemann, who slid in and scooted across the seat. Pearson followed and slammed the door.

"Gallagher's Pub," Rhinemann said. "It's directly across from—"

"I know where Gallagher's is," the driver said, "but we don't go anywhere until you dispose of the cancer-stick, my friend." He tapped the sign clipped to the taximeter. SMOKING IS NOT PERMITTED IN THIS LIVERY, it read.

The two men exchanged a glance. Rhinemann lifted his shoulders in the half-embarrassed, half-surly shrug that has been the principal tribal greeting of

the Ten O’Clock People since 1990 or so. Then, without a murmur of protest, he pitched his quarter-smoked Winston out into the driving rain.

• • •

Pearson began to tell Rhinemann how shocked he had been when the elevator doors had opened and he’d gotten his first good look at the essential Suzanne Holding, but Rhinemann frowned, gave his head a minute shake, and swivelled his thumb toward their driver. “We’ll talk later,” he said.

Pearson subsided into silence, contenting himself with watching the rain-streaked highrises of midtown Boston slip by. He found himself almost exquisitely attuned to the little street-life scenes going on outside the taxicab’s smeary window. He was especially interested in the little clusters of Ten O’Clock People he observed standing in front of every business building they passed. Where there was shelter, they took it; where there wasn’t, they took that, too—simply turned up their collars, hooded their hands protectively over their cigarettes, and smoked anyway. It occurred to Pearson that easily ninety per cent of the posh midtown highrises they were passing were now no-smoking zones, just like the one he and Rhinemann worked in. It occurred to him further (and this thought came with the force of a revelation) that the Ten O’Clock People were not really a new tribe at all but the raggedy-ass remnants of an old one, renegades running before a new broom that intended to sweep their bad old habit clean out the door of American life. Their unifying characteristic was their unwillingness or inability to quit killing themselves; they were junkies in a steadily shrinking twilight zone of acceptability. An exotic social group, he supposed, but not one that was apt to last very long. He guessed that by the year 2020, 2050 at the latest, the Ten O’Clock People would have gone the way of the dodo.

*Oh shit, wait a minute,* he thought. *We’re just the last of the world’s diehard optimists, that’s all—most of us don’t bother with our seatbelts, either, and we’d love to sit behind home plate at the ballpark if they’d just take down that silly fucking screen.*

“What’s so funny, Mr. Pearson?” Rhinemann asked him, and Pearson became aware he was wearing a broad grin.

“Nothing,” Pearson said. “Nothing important, at least.”

“Okay; just don’t freak out on me.”

“Would you consider it a freak-out if I asked you to call me Brandon?”

“I guess not,” Rhinemann said, and appeared to think it over. “As long as you call me Duke and we don’t get down to BeeBee or Buster or anything embarrassing like that.”

“I think you’re safe on that score. Want to know something?”

“Sure.”

“This has been the most amazing day of my life.”

Duke Rhinemann nodded without returning Pearson’s smile. “And it’s not over yet,” he said.

## 2

Pearson thought that Gallagher’s had been an inspired choice on Duke’s part—a clear Boston anomaly, more Gilley’s than Cheers, it was the perfect place for two bank employees to discuss matters which would have left their nearest and dearest with serious questions about their sanity. The longest bar Pearson had ever seen outside of a movie curved around a large square of shiny dance-floor on which three couples were currently dry-humping dreamily as Marty Stuart and Travis Tritt harmonized on “This One’s Gonna Hurt You.”

In a smaller place the bar proper would have been packed, but the patrons were so well spaced along this amazing length of mahogany-paved racetrack that brass-rail privacy was actually achievable; there was no need for them to search out a booth in the dim nether reaches of the room. Pearson was glad. It would be too easy to imagine one of the batpeople, maybe even a batcouple, sitting (or roosting) in the next booth and listening intently to their conversation.

*Isn’t that what they call a bunker mentality, old buddy?* he thought. *Certainly didn’t take you long to get there, did it?*

No, he supposed not, but for the time being he didn’t care. He was just grateful he would be able to see in all directions while they talked . . . or, he supposed, while Duke talked.

“Bar’s okay?” Duke asked, and Pearson nodded.

It looked like one bar, Pearson reflected as he followed Duke beneath the sign which read SMOKING PERMITTED THIS SECTION ONLY, but it was really two . . . the way that, back in the fifties, every lunch-counter below the Mason-Dixon had really been two: one for the white folks and one for the black. And now as then, you could see the difference. A Sony almost the size of a cineplex movie screen overlooked the center of the no-smoking section; in the nicotine ghetto there was only an elderly Zenith bolted to the wall (a sign beside it read: FEEL FREE TO ASK FOR CREDIT, WE WILL FEEL FREE TO TELL YOU TO F!K OFF). The surface of the bar itself was dirtier down here—Pearson thought at first that this must be just his imagination, but a second glance confirmed the dingy look of the wood and the faint overlapping rings that were the Ghosts of Schooners Past. And, of course, there was the sallow, yellowish odor of tobacco smoke. He swore it came puffing up from the bar-stool when he sat down, like popcorn farts out of an elderly movie-theater seat. The newscaster on their battered, smoke-bleared TV appeared to be dying of zinc poisoning; the same guy playing to the healthy folks farther down the bar looked ready to run the four-forty and then bench-press his weight in blondes.

*Welcome to the back of the bus*, Pearson thought, looking at his fellow Ten O’clock People with a species of exasperated amusement. *Oh well, mustn’t complain; in another ten years smokers won’t even be allowed on board.*

“Cigarette?” Duke asked, perhaps displaying certain rudimentary mind-reading skills.

Pearson glanced at his watch, then accepted the butt, along with another light from Duke’s *faux*-classy lighter. He drew deep, relishing the way the smoke slid into his pipes, even relishing the slight swimming in his head. Of *course* the habit was dangerous, potentially lethal; how could anything that got you off like this not be? It was the way of the world, that was all.

“What about you?” he asked as Duke slipped his cigarettes back into his pocket.

“I can wait a little longer,” Duke said, smiling. “I got a couple of puffs before we got in the cab. Also, I have to pay off the extra one I had at lunch.”

“You ration yourself, huh?”

“Yeah. I usually only allow myself one at lunch, but today I had two. You scared the shit out of me, you know.”

“I was pretty scared myself.”

The bartender came over, and Pearson found himself fascinated at the way the man avoided the thin ribbon of smoke rising from his cigarette. *I doubt if he even knows he's doing it. . . but if I blew some in his face, I bet he'd come over the top and clean my clock for me.*

“Help you gentlemen?”

Duke ordered Sam Adamses without consulting Pearson. When the bartender left to get them, Duke turned back and said, “Stretch it out. This'd be a bad time to get drunk. Bad time to even get tight.”

Pearson nodded and dropped a five-dollar bill on the counter when the bartender came back with the beers. He took a deep swallow, then dragged on his cigarette. There were people who thought a cigarette never tasted better than it did after a meal, but Pearson disagreed; he believed in his heart that it wasn't an apple that had gotten Eve in trouble but a beer and a cigarette.

“So what'd you use?” Duke asked him. “The patch? Hypnosis? Good old American willpower? Looking at you, I'd guess it was the patch.”

If it had been Duke's humorous effort at a curve-ball, it didn't work. Pearson had been thinking about smoking a lot this afternoon. “Yeah, the patch,” he said. “I wore it for two years, starting just after my daughter was born. I took one look at her through the nursery window and made up my mind to quit the habit. It seemed crazy to go on setting fire to forty or fifty cigarettes a day when I'd just taken on an eighteen-year commitment to a brand-new human being.” *With whom I had fallen instantly in love*, he could have added, but he had an idea Duke already knew that.

“Not to mention your life-long commitment to your wife.”

“Not to mention my wife,” Pearson agreed.

“Plus assorted brothers, sisters-in-law, debt-collectors, ratepayers, and friends of the court.”

Pearson burst out laughing and nodded. “Yeah, you got it.”

“Not as easy as it sounds, though, huh? When it's four in the morning and you can't sleep, all that nobility erodes fast.”

Pearson grimaced. “Or when you have to go upstairs and turn a few cartwheels for Grosbeck and Keefer and Fine and the rest of the boys in the boardroom. The first time I had to do that without grabbing a cigarette before I walked in . . . man, that was tough.”

“But you *did* stop completely for at least awhile.”

Pearson looked at Duke, only a trifle surprised at this prescience, and nodded. “For about six months. But I never quit in my *mind*, do you know what I mean?”

“Of course I know.”

“Finally I started chipping again. That was 1992, right around the time the news stories started coming out about how some people who smoked while they were still wearing the patch had heart attacks. Do you remember those?”

“Uh-huh,” Duke said, and tapped his forehead. “I got a complete file of smoking stories up here, my man, alphabetically arranged. Smoking and Alzheimer’s, smoking and blood-pressure, smoking and cataracts . . . you know.”

“So I had my choice,” Pearson said. He was smiling a small, puzzled smile—the smile of a man who knows he has behaved like a horse’s ass, is *still* behaving like a horse’s ass, but doesn’t really know why. “I could quit chipping or quit wearing the patch. So I—”

“*Quit wearing the patch!*” they finished together, and then burst into a gust of laughter that caused a smooth-browed patron in the no-smoking area to glance over at them for a moment, frowning, before returning his attention to the newscast on the tube.

“Life’s one fucked-up proposition, isn’t it?” Duke asked, still laughing, and started to reach inside his cream-colored jacket. He stopped when he saw Pearson holding out his pack of Marlboros with one cigarette popped up. They exchanged another glance, Duke’s surprised and Pearson’s knowing, and then burst into another mingled shout of laughter. The smoothbrowed guy glanced over again, his frown a little deeper this time. Neither man noticed. Duke took the offered cigarette and lit it. The whole thing took less than ten seconds, but it was long enough for the two men to become friends.

• • •

“I smoked like a chimney from the time I was fifteen right up until I got married back in ’91,” Duke said. “My mother didn’t like it, but she appreciated the fact that I wasn’t smoking rock or selling it, like half the other kids on my street—I’m talking Roxbury, you know—and so she didn’t say too much.

“Wendy and I went to Hawaii for a week on our honeymoon, and the day we got back, she gave me a present.” Duke dragged deep and then feathered twin jets of blue-gray smoke from his nose. “She found it in the Sharper Image catalogue, I think, or maybe it was one of the other ones. Had some fancy name, but I don’t remember what it was; I just called the goddamned thing Pavlov’s Thumbscrews. Still, I loved her like fire—still do, too, you better believe it—so I rared back and gave it my best shot. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be, either. You know the gadget I’m talking about?”

“You bet,” Pearson said. “The beeper. It makes you wait a little longer for each cigarette. Lisabeth—*my* wife—kept pointing them out to me while she was pregnant with Jenny. About as subtle as a wheelbarrow of cement falling off a scaffold, you know.”

Duke nodded, smiling, and when the bartender drifted by, he pointed at their glasses and told him to do it again. Then he turned back to Pearson. “Except for using Pavlov’s Thumbscrews instead of the patch, the rest of my story’s the same as yours. I got all the way to the place where the machine plays a shitty little version of the *Freedom Chorus*, or something, but the habit crept back. It’s harder to kill than a snake with two hearts.” The bartender brought the fresh beers. Duke paid this time, took a sip of his, and said, “I have to make a telephone call. Take about five minutes.”

“Okay,” Pearson said. He glanced around, saw the bartender had once more retreated to the relative safety of the no-smoking section (*The unions’ll have two bartenders in here by 2005*, he thought, *one for the smokers and one for the non-smokers*), and turned back to Duke again. When he spoke this time, he pitched his voice lower. “I thought we were going to talk about the batmen.”

Duke appraised him with his dark-brown eyes for a moment and then said, “We *have* been, my man. We *have* been.”

And before Pearson could say anything else, Duke had disappeared into the dim (but almost entirely smokeless) depths of Gallagher’s, bound for wherever the pay phones were hidden away.

• • •

He was gone closer to ten minutes than to five, and Pearson was wondering if maybe he should go back and check on him when his eye was drawn to the television, where the news anchor was talking about a furor that had been touched off by the Vice President of the United States. The Veep had suggested in a speech to the National Education Association that government-subsidized daycare centers should be re-evaluated and closed wherever possible.

The picture switched to videotape shot earlier that day at some Washington, D.C., convention center, and as the newsclip went from the wide establishing shot and lead-in narration to the close-up of the V.P. at his podium, Pearson gripped the edge of the bar with both hands, squeezing tightly enough to sink his fingers a little way into the padding. One of the things Duke had said that morning on the plaza came back to him: *They've got friends in high places. Hell, high places is what they're all about.*

“We have no grudge against America’s working mothers,” the misshapen bat-faced monster standing in front of the podium with the blue Vice Presidential seal on it was saying, “and no grudge against the deserving poor. We do feel, however—”

A hand dropped on Pearson’s shoulder, and he had to bite his lips together to keep the scream inside them. He looked around and saw Duke. A change had come over the young man—his eyes were sparkling brightly, and there were fine beads of sweat on his brow. Pearson thought he looked as if he’d just won the Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes.

“Don’t ever do that again,” Pearson said, and Duke froze in the act of climbing back onto his stool. “I think I just ate my heart.”

Duke looked surprised, then glanced up at the TV. Understanding dawned on his face. “Oh,” he said. “Jesus, I’m sorry, Brandon. Really. I keep forgetting that you came in on this movie in the middle.”

“What about the President?” Pearson asked. He strained to keep his voice level and almost made it. “I guess I can live with this asshole, but what about the President? Is he—”

“No,” Duke said. He hesitated, then added: “At least, not yet.”

Pearson leaned toward him, aware that the strange numbness was stealing back into his lips again. “What do you *mean*, not yet? What’s happening, Duke? What are they? Where do they come from? What do they do and what do they want?”

“I’ll tell you what I know,” Duke said, “but first I want to ask you if you can come to a little meeting with me this evening. Around six? You up for that?”

“Is it about this?”

“Of course it is.”

Pearson ruminated. “All right. I’ll have to call Lisabeth, though.”

Duke looked alarmed. “Don’t say anything about—”

“Of course not. I’ll tell her *La Belle Dame sans Merci* wants to go over her precious spread-sheets again before she shows them to the Japanese. She’ll buy that; she knows Holding’s all but fudging her frillies about the impending arrival of our friends from the Pacific Rim. Sound okay to you?”

“Yes.”

“It sounds okay to me, too, but it feels a little sleazy.”

“There’s nothing sleazy about wanting to keep as much space as possible between your wife and the bats. I mean, it’s not a massage-parlor I want to take you to, bro.”

“I suppose not. So talk.”

“All right. I guess I better start by telling you about your smoking habits.”

The juke, which had been silent for the last few minutes, now began to emit a tired-sounding version of Billy Ray Cyrus’s golden clunker, “Achy Breaky Heart.” Pearson stared at Duke Rhinemann with confused eyes and opened his mouth to ask what his smoking habits had to do with the price of coffee in San Diego. Only nothing came out. Nothing at all.

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“You quit . . . then you started chipping . . . but you were smart enough to know that if you weren’t careful, you’d be right back where you started in a month or two,” Duke said. “Right?”

“Yes, but I don’t see—”

“You will.” Duke took his handkerchief out and mopped his brow. Pearson’s first impression when the man had come back from using the phone had been that Duke was all but blowing his stack with excitement. He stood by that, but now he realized something else: he was also scared to death. “Just bear with me.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, you’ve worked out an accommodation with your habit. A whatdoyoucallit, *modus vivendi*. You can’t bring yourself to quit, but you’ve discovered that’s not the end of the world—it’s not like being a coke-addict who can’t let go of the rock or a boozehound who can’t stop chugging down the Night Train. Smoking’s a bastard of a habit, but there really *is* a middle ground between two or three packs a day and total abstinence.”

Pearson was looking at him, wide-eyed, and Duke smiled.

“I’m not reading your mind, if that’s what you think. I mean, we *know* each other, don’t we?”

“I suppose we do,” Pearson said thoughtfully. “I just forgot for a minute that we’re both Ten O’Clock People.”

“We’re *what*?”

So Pearson explained a little about the Ten O’Clock People and their tribal gestures (surly glances when confronted by NO SMOKING signs, surly shrugs of acquiescence when asked by some accredited authority to Please Put Your Cigarette Out, Sir), their tribal sacraments (gum, hard candies, toothpicks, and, of course, little Binaca push-button spray cans), and their tribal litanies (*I’m quitting for good next year* being the most common).

Duke listened, fascinated, and when Pearson had finished he said, “Jesus Christ, Brandon! You’ve found the Lost Tribe of Israel! Crazy fucks all wandered off following Joe Camel!”

Pearson burst out laughing, earning another annoyed, puzzled look from the smooth-faced fellow over in NoSmo.

“Anyway, it all fits in,” Duke told him. “Let me ask you something—do you smoke around your kid?”

“Christ, no!” Pearson exclaimed.

“Your wife?”

“Nope, not anymore.”

“When was the last time you had a butt in a restaurant?”

Pearson considered it and discovered a peculiar thing: he couldn't remember. Nowadays he asked to be seated in the no-smoking section even when he was alone, deferring his cigarette until after he'd finished, paid up, and left. And the days when he had actually smoked between courses were long in the past, of course.

“Ten O'Clock People,” Duke said in a marvelling voice. “Man, I love that—I love it that we have a name. And it really *is* like being part of a tribe. It—”

He broke off suddenly, looking out one of the windows. A Boston city cop was walking by, talking to a pretty young woman. She was looking up at him with a sweetly mingled expression of admiration and sex-appeal, totally unaware of the black, appraising eyes and glaring triangular teeth just above her.

“Jesus, would you look at that,” Pearson said in a low voice.

“Yeah,” Duke said. “It's becoming more common, too. More common every day.” He was quiet for a moment, looking into his half-empty beer schooner. Then he seemed to almost physically shake himself out of his reverie. “Whatever else we are,” he told Pearson, “we're the only people in the whole goddam world who see *them*.”

“What, just *smokers*?” Pearson asked incredulously. Of course he should have seen that Duke was leading him here, but still . . .

“No,” Duke said patiently. “*Smokers* don't see them. *Non-smokers* don't see them, either.” He measured Pearson with his eyes. “Only people like us see them, Brandon—people who are neither fish nor fowl.

“Only Ten O'Clock People like us.”

• • •

When they left Gallagher's fifteen minutes later (Pearson had first called his wife, told her his manufactured tale of woe, and promised to be home by ten), the rain had slackened to a fine drizzle and Duke proposed they walk awhile. Not all the way to Cambridge, which was where they would end up, but far enough for Duke to fill in the rest of the background. The streets were nearly

deserted, and they could finish their conversation without looking back over their shoulders.

“In a bizarre way, it’s sort of like your first orgasm,” Duke was saying as they walked through a gauzy groundmist in the direction of the Charles River. “Once that kicks into gear, becomes a part of your life, it’s just there for you. Same with this. One day the chemicals in your head balance just right and you *see* one. I’ve wondered, you know, how many people have just dropped dead of fright at that moment. A lot, I bet.”

Pearson looked at the bloody smear of a traffic-light reflection on the shiny black pavement of Boylston Street and remembered the shock of his first encounter. “They’re so awful. So hideous. The way their flesh seems to move around on their heads . . . there’s really no way to say it, is there?”

Duke was nodding. “They’re ugly motherfuckers, all right. I was on the Red Line, headed back home to Milton, when I saw my first one. He was standing on the downtown platform at Park Street Station. We went right by him. Good thing for me I was in the train and goin away, because I screamed.”

“What happened then?”

Duke’s smile had become, at least temporarily, a grimace of embarrassment. “People looked at me, then looked away real quick. You know how it is in the city; there’s a nut preachin about how Jesus loves Tupperware on every street corner.”

Pearson nodded. He knew how it was in the city, all right. Or thought he had, until today.

“This tall redheaded geek with about a trillion freckles on his face sat down in the seat beside me and grabbed my elbow just about the same way I grabbed yours this morning. His name is Robbie Delray. He’s a housepainter. You’ll meet him tonight at Kate’s.”

“What’s Kate’s?”

“Specialty bookstore in Cambridge. Mysteries. We meet there once or twice a week. It’s a good place. Good people, too, mostly. You’ll see. Anyway, Robbie grabbed my elbow and said, ‘You’re not crazy, I saw it too. It’s real—it’s a batman.’ That was all, and he could have been spoutin from the top end of some amphetamine high for all I knew . . . except I *had* seen it, and the relief . . .”

“Yes,” Pearson said, thinking back to that morning. They paused at Storrow Drive, waited for a tanker truck to go by, and then hurried across the puddly street. Pearson was momentarily transfixed by a fading spray-painted graffito on the back of a park bench which faced the river. THE ALIENS HAVE LANDED, it said. WE ATE 2 AT LEGAL SEAFOOD.

“Good thing for me you were there this morning,” Pearson said. “I was lucky.”

Duke nodded. “Yeah, man, you were. When the bats fuck with a dude, they *fuck* with him—the cops usually pick up the pieces in a basket after one of their little parties. You hear that?”

Pearson nodded.

“And nobody knows the victims all had one thing in common—they’d cut down their smoking to between five and ten cigarettes a day. I have an idea that sort of similarity’s a little too obscure even for the FBI.”

“But why kill us?” Pearson asked. “I mean, some guy goes running around saying his boss is a Martian, they don’t send out the National Guard; they put the guy in the boobyhatch!”

“Come on, man, get real,” Duke said. “You’ve *seen* these cuties.”

“They. . . like to?”

“Yeah, they like to. But that’s getting the cart before the horse. They’re like wolves, Brandon, invisible wolves that keep working their way back and forth through a herd of sheep. Now tell me—what do wolves want with sheep, aside from getting their jollies off every time they kill one?”

“They . . . what are you saying?” Pearson’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Are you saying that they *eat* us?”

“They eat some part of us,” Duke said. “That’s what Robbie Delray believed on the day I met him, and that’s what most of us still believe.”

“Who’s us, Duke?”

“The people I’m taking you to see. We won’t all be there, but this time most of us will be. Something’s come up. Something big.”

“What?”

To that Duke would only shake his head and ask, “You ready for a cab yet? Getting too mildewy?”

Pearson was mildewy, but not ready for a cab. The walk had invigorated him. . . but not just the walk. He didn't think he could tell Duke this—at least not yet—but there was a definite upside to this . . . a *romantic* upside. It was as if he had fallen into some weird but exciting boy's adventure story; he could almost imagine the N. C. Wyeth illustrations. He looked at the nimbuses of white light revolving slowly around the streetlamps which soldiered their way up Storrow Drive and smiled a little. *Something big has come up*, he thought. *Agent X-9 has slipped in with good news from our underground base. . . we've located the batpoison we've been looking for!*

"The excitement wears off, believe me," Duke said dryly.

Pearson turned his head, startled.

"Around the time they fish your second friend out of Boston Harbor with half his head gone, you realize Tom Swift isn't going to show up and help you whitewash the goddam fence."

"Tom Sawyer," Pearson muttered, and wiped rainwater out of his eyes. He could feel himself flushing.

"They eat something that our brains make, that's what Robbie thinks. Maybe an enzyme, he says, maybe some kind of special electrical wave. He says it might be the same thing that lets us—some of us, anyway—see them, and that to them we're like tomatoes in a farmer's garden, theirs to take whenever they decide we're ripe.

"Me, I was raised Baptist and I'm willing to cut right to the chase—none of that Farmer John crap. I think they're soulsuckers."

"Really? Are you putting me on, or do you really believe that?"

Duke laughed, shrugged, and looked defiant, all at the same time. "Shit, I don't know, man. These things came into my life about the same time I decided heaven was a fairytale and hell was other people. Now I'm all fucked up again. But that doesn't really matter. The important thing, the only thing you have to get straight and keep straight, is that they have *plenty* of reasons to kill us. First because they're afraid of us doing just what we're doing, getting together, organizing, trying to put a hurt on them . . ."

He paused, thought it over, shook his head. Now he looked and sounded like a man holding dialogue with himself, trying yet again to answer some question which has held him sleepless over too many nights.

“Afraid? I don’t know if that’s exactly true. But they’re not taking many chances, about that there’s no doubt. And something else there’s no doubt about, either—they hate the fact that some of us can see them. They fucking *hate* it. We caught one once and it was like catching a hurricane in a bottle. We —”

“*Caught* one!”

“Yes indeed,” Duke said, and offered him a hard, mirthless grin. “We bagged it at a rest area on I-95, up by Newburyport. There were half a dozen of us—my friend Robbie was in charge. We took it to a farmhouse, and when the boatload of dope we’d shot into it wore off—which it did much too fast—we tried to question it, to get better answers to some of the questions you’ve already asked me. We had it in handcuffs and leg-irons; we had so much nylon rope wrapped around it that it looked like a mummy. You know what I remember best?”

Pearson shook his head. His sense of living between the pages of a boy’s adventure story had quite departed.

“How it woke up,” Duke said. “There was no in-between. One second it was knocked-out-loaded and the next it was wide-awake, staring at us with those horrible eyes they have. Bat’s eyes. They *do* have eyes, you know—people don’t always realize that. That stuff about them being blind must have been the work of a good press-agent.

“It wouldn’t talk to us. Not a single word. I think it knew it wasn’t going to ever leave that barn, but there was no fear in it. Only hate. Jesus, the hate in its eyes!”

“What happened?”

“It snapped the handcuff-chain like it was tissue-paper. The leg-irons were tougher—and we had it in those special Long John boots you can nail right to the floor—but the nylon boat-rope . . . it started to bite through it where it crossed its shoulders. With those teeth—you’ve seen them—it was like watching a rat gnaw through twine. We all stood there like bumps on a log. Even Robbie. We couldn’t believe what we were seeing. . . or maybe it had us hypnotized. I’ve wondered about that a lot, you know, if that might not have been possible. Thank God for Lester Olson. We’d used a Ford Econoline van that Robbie and Moira stole, and Lester’d gotten paranoid that it might be

visible from the turnpike. He went out to check, and when he came back in and saw that thing almost free except for its feet, he shot it three times in the head. Just pop-pop-pop.”

Duke shook his head wonderingly.

“Killed him,” Pearson said. “Just pop-pop-pop.”

His voice seemed to have risen out of his head again, as it had on the plaza in front of the bank that morning, and a horrid yet persuasive idea suddenly came to him: that there *were* no batpeople. They were a group hallucination, that was all, not much different from the ones peyote users sometimes had during their drug-assisted circle jerks. This one, unique to the Ten O’Clock People, was brought on by just the wrong amount of tobacco. The folks Duke was taking him to meet had killed at least one innocent person while under the influence of this mad idea, and might kill more. Certainly *would* kill more, if given time. And if he didn’t get away from this crazed young banker soon, he might end up being a part of it. He had already seen two of the batpeople . . . no, three, counting the cop, and four counting the Vice President. And that just about tore it, the idea that *the Vice President of the United States*—

The look on Duke’s face led Pearson to believe that his mind was being read for the third record-breaking time. “You’re starting to wonder if maybe we’ve all gone Looney Tunes, you included,” Duke said. “Is that right?”

“Of course it is,” Pearson said, a little more sharply than he had intended.

“They disappear,” Duke said simply. “I *saw* the one in the barn disappear.”

“*What?*”

“Get transparent, turn to smoke, disappear. I know how crazy it sounds, but nothing I could ever say would make you understand how crazy it was to actually *be* there and watch it happen.

“At first you think it’s not real even though it’s going on right in front of you; you must be dreaming it, or maybe you stepped into a movie somehow, one full of killer special effects like in those old *Star Wars* movies. Then you smell something that’s like dust and piss and hot chili-peppers all mixed together. It stings your eyes, makes you want to puke. Lester *did* puke, and Janet sneezed for an hour afterward. She said ordinarily only ragweed or cat-dander does that to her. Anyway, I went up to the chair where he’d been. The

ropes were still there, and the handcuffs, and the clothes. The guy's shirt was still buttoned. The guy's tie was still knotted. I reached out and unzipped his pants—careful, like his pecker was gonna fly outta there and rip my nose off—but all I saw was his underwear inside his pants. Ordinary white Jockey shorts. That was all, but that was enough, because *they* were empty, too. Tell you something, my brother—you ain't seen weird until you've seen a guy's clothes all put together in layers like that with no guy left inside em."

"Turn to smoke and disappear," Pearson said. "Jesus Christ."

"Yeah. At the very end, he looked like that." He pointed to one of the streetlights with its bright revolving nimbus of moisture.

"And what happens to . . ." Pearson stopped, unsure for a moment how to express what he wanted to ask. "Are they reported missing? Are they . . ." Then he knew what it was he really wanted to know. "Duke, where's the *real* Douglas Keefer? And the real Suzanne Holding?"

Duke shook his head. "I don't know. Except that, in a way, it's the real Keefer you saw this morning, Brandon, and the real Suzanne Holding, too. We think that maybe the heads we see aren't really there, that our brains are translating what the bats *really* are—their hearts and their souls—into visual images."

"Spiritual telepathy?"

Duke grinned. "You got a way with words, bro—that'll do. You need to talk to Lester. When it comes to the batpeople, he's damn near a poet."

The name rang a clear bell, and after a moment's thought, Pearson thought he knew why.

"Is he an older guy with lots of white hair? Looks sort of like an aging tycoon on a soap opera?"

Duke burst out laughing. "Yeah, that's Les."

They walked on in silence for awhile. The river rippled mystically past on their right, and now they could see the lights of Cambridge on the other side. Pearson thought he had never seen Boston looking so beautiful.

"The batpeople come in, maybe no more than a germ you inhale. . . ." Pearson began again, feeling his way.

"Yeah, well, some folks go for the germ idea, but I'm not one of em. Because, dig: you never see a batman *janitor* or a batwoman *waitress*. They like

*power*, and they're moving into the power neighborhoods. Did you ever hear of a germ that just picked on rich people, Brandon?"

"No."

"Me either."

"These people we're going to meet . . . are they . . ." Pearson was a little amused to find he had to work to bring the next thing out. It wasn't exactly a return to the land of boys' books, but it was close. "Are they resistance fighters?"

Duke considered this, then both nodded and shrugged—a fascinating gesture, as if his body were saying yes and no at the same time. "Not yet," he said, "but maybe, after tonight, we will be."

Before Pearson could ask him what he meant by that, Duke had spotted another cab cruising empty, this one on the far side of Storrow Drive, and had stepped into the gutter to flag it. It made an illegal U-turn and swung over to the curb to pick them up.

• • •

In the cab they talked Hub sports—the maddening Red Sox, the depressing Patriots, the sagging Celtics—and left the bat-people alone, but when they got out in front of an isolated frame house on the Cambridge side of the river (KATE'S MYSTERY BOOKSHOP was written on a sign that showed a hissing black cat with an arched back), Pearson took Duke Rhinemann's arm and said, "I have a few more questions."

Duke glanced at his watch. "No time, Brandon—we walked a little too long, I guess."

"Just two, then."

"Jesus, you're like that guy on TV, the one in the old dirty raincoat. I doubt if I can answer them, anyway—I know a hell of a lot less about all this than you seem to think."

"When did it start?"

"See? That's what I mean. I don't know, and the thing we caught sure wasn't going to tell us—that little sweetheart wouldn't even give us its name, rank, and serial number. Robbie Delray, the guy I told you about, says he saw his

first one over five years ago, walking a Lhasa Apso on Boston Common. He says there have been more every year since. There still aren't many of them compared to us, but the number has been increasing. . . exponentially? . . . is that the word I want?"

"I hope not," Pearson said. "It's a scary word."

"What's your other question, Brandon? Hurry up."

"What about other cities? Are there more bats? And other people who see them? What do you hear?"

"We don't know. They could be all over the world, but we're pretty sure that America's the only country in the world where more than a handful of people can see them."

"Why?"

"Because this is the only country that's gone bonkers about cigarettes . . . probably because it's the only one where people believe—and down deep they really do—that if they just eat the right foods, take the right combination of vitamins, think enough of the right thoughts, and wipe their asses with the right kind of toilet-paper, they'll live forever and be sexually active the whole time. When it comes to smoking, the battle-lines are drawn, and the result has been this weird hybrid. Us, in other words."

"Ten O'Clock People," Pearson said, smiling.

"Yep—Ten O'Clock People." He looked past Pearson's shoulder. "Moira! Hi!"

Pearson was not exactly surprised to smell Giorgio. He looked around and saw Little Miss Red Skirt.

"Moira Richardson, Brandon Pearson."

"Hello," Pearson said, and took her outstretched hand. "Credit Assistance, isn't it?"

"That's like calling a garbage collector a sanitation technician," she said with a cheerful grin. It was a grin, Pearson thought, that a man could fall in love with, if he wasn't careful. "Credit checks are what I actually do. If you want to buy a new Porsche, I check the records to make sure you're really a Porsche kind of guy . . . in a financial sense, of course."

"Of course," Pearson said, and grinned back at her.

"Cam!" she called. "Come on over here!"

It was the janitor who liked to mop the john with his cap turned around backward. In his streetclothes he seemed to have gained about fifty IQ points and a rather amazing resemblance to Armand Assante. Pearson felt a small pang but no real surprise when he put an arm around Moira Richardson's delectable little waist and a casual kiss on the corner of her delectable little mouth. Then he offered Brandon his hand.

"Cameron Stevens."

"Brandon Pearson."

"I'm glad to see you here," Stevens said. "I thought you were gonna high-side it this morning for sure."

"How many of you were watching me?" Pearson asked. He tried to replay ten o'clock in the plaza and discovered he couldn't—it was lost in a white haze of shock, for the most part.

"Most of us from the bank who see them," Moira said quietly. "But it's okay, Mr. Pearson—"

"Brandon. Please."

She nodded. "We weren't doing anything but rooting for you, Brandon. Come on, Cam."

They hurried up the steps to the porch of the small frame building and slipped inside. Pearson caught just a glimpse of muted light before the door shut. Then he turned back to Duke.

"This is all real, isn't it?" he asked.

Duke looked at him sympathetically. "Unfortunately, yes." He paused, then added, "But there's one good thing about it."

"Oh? What's that?"

Duke's white teeth flashed in the drizzly dark. "You're about to attend your first smoking-allowed meeting in five years or so," he said. "Come on—let's go in."

### 3

The foyer and the bookstore beyond it were dark; the light—along with a murmur of voices—was filtering up the steep staircase to their left.

“Well,” Duke said, “this is the place. To quote the Dead, what a long strange trip it’s been, right?”

“You better believe it,” Pearson agreed. “Is Kate a Ten O’Clock Person?”

“The owner? Nope. I only met her twice, but I have an idea she’s a total non-smoker. This place was Robbie’s idea. As far as Kate knows, we’re The Boston Society of Hardboiled Yeggs.”

Pearson raised his eyebrows. “Say again?”

“A small group of loyal fans that meets every week or so to discuss the works of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald, people like that. If you haven’t read any of those guys, you probably ought to. It never hurts to be safe. It’s not that hard; some of them are actually pretty good.”

They descended with Duke in the lead—the staircase was too narrow for them to walk abreast—and passed through an open doorway into a well-lit, low-ceilinged basement room that probably ran the length of the converted frame house above. About thirty folding chairs had been set up, and an easel covered with a blue cloth had been placed before them. Beyond the easel were stacked shipping cartons from various publishers. Pearson was amused to see a framed picture on the left-hand wall, with a sign reading DASHIELL HAMMETT: ALL HAIL OUR FEARLESS LEADER beneath it.

“Duke?” a woman asked from Pearson’s left. “Thank God—I thought something had happened to you.”

She was someone else Pearson recognized: the serious-looking young woman with the thick glasses and long, straight black hair. Tonight she looked a lot less serious in a pair of tight faded jeans and a Georgetown University tee-shirt beneath which she was clearly braless. And Pearson had an idea that if Duke’s wife ever saw the way this young woman was looking at her husband, she would probably drag Duke out of the basement of Kate’s by the ear, and never mind all the batpeople in the world.

“I’m fine, darlin,” he said. “I was bringing along another convert to the Church of the Fucked-Up Bat, that’s all. Janet Brightwood, Brandon Pearson.”

Brandon shook her hand, thinking: *You’re the one who kept sneezing.*

“It’s very nice to meet you, Brandon,” she said, and then went back to smiling at Duke, who looked a little embarrassed at the intensity of her gaze. “Want to go for coffee after?” she asked him.

“Well. . . we’ll see, darlin. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said, and her smile said she’d wait three years to go out for coffee with Duke, if that was the way Duke wanted it.

*What am I doing here?* Pearson suddenly asked himself. *This is totally insane . . . like an A.A. meeting in a psycho ward.*

The members of the Church of the Fucked-Up Bat were taking ashtrays from a stack on one of the book cartons and lighting up with obvious relish as they took their seats. Pearson estimated that there were going to be few if any folding chairs left over when everyone had gotten settled.

“Got just about everyone,” Duke said, leading him to a pair of seats at the end of the back row, far from where Janet Brightwood was presiding over the coffeemaker. Pearson had no idea if this was coincidental or not. “That’s good . . . mind the window-pole, Brandon.”

The pole, with a hook on the end to open the high cellar windows, was leaning against one whitewashed brick wall. Pearson had inadvertently kicked it as he sat down. Duke grabbed it before it could fall and possibly gash someone, moved it to a marginally safer location, then slipped up the side aisle and snagged an ashtray.

“You *are* a mind-reader,” Pearson said gratefully, and lit up. It felt incredibly strange (but rather wonderful) to be doing this as a member of such a large group.

Duke lit his own cigarette, then pointed it at the skinny, freckle-splattered man now standing by the easel. Freckles was deep in conversation with Lester Olson, who had shot the batman, pop-pop-pop, in a Newburyport barn.

“The redhead is Robbie Delray,” Duke said, almost reverently. “You’d hardly pick him as The Savior of His Race if you were casting a miniseries, would you? But he might turn out to be just that.”

Delray nodded at Olson, clapped him on the back, and said something that made the white-haired man laugh. Then Olson returned to his seat—front row center—and Delray moved toward the covered easel.

By this time all the seats had been taken, and there were even a few people standing at the back of the room near the coffeemaker. Conversation, animated and jittery, zinged and caromed around Pearson’s head like pool-balls

after a hard break. A mat of blue-gray cigarette smoke had already gathered just below the ceiling.

*Jesus, they're cranked, he thought. Really cranked. I bet the bomb-shelters in London felt this way back in 1940, during the Blitz.*

He turned to Duke. "Who'd you talk to? Who told you something big was up tonight?"

"Janet," Duke said without looking at him. His expressive brown eyes were fixed on Robbie Delray, who had once saved his sanity on a Red Line train. Pearson thought he saw adoration as well as admiration in Duke's eyes.

"Duke? This is a *really* big meeting, isn't it?"

"For us, yeah. Biggest I've ever seen."

"Does it make you nervous? Having so many of your people in the same place?"

"No," Duke said simply. "Robbie can *smell* bats. He . . . shhhh, here we go."

Robbie Delray, smiling, raised his hands, and the babble quieted almost at once. Pearson saw Duke's look of adoration on many other faces. Nowhere did he see less than respect.

"Thanks for coming," Delray said quietly. "I think we've finally got what some of us have been waiting four or five years for."

This sparked spontaneous applause. Delray let it go on for a few moments, looking around the room, beaming. Finally he held his hands up for quiet. Pearson discovered a disconcerting thing as the applause (in which he had not participated) tapered off: he didn't like Duke's friend and mentor. He supposed he might be experiencing a touch of jealousy—now that Delray was doing his thing at the front of the room, Duke Rhinemann had clearly forgotten Pearson existed—but he didn't think that was all of it. There was something smug and self-congratulatory in that hands-up, be-quiet gesture; something that expressed a slick politician's almost unconscious contempt for his audience.

*Oh, get off it, Pearson told himself. You can't know anything like that.*

True, quite true, and Pearson tried to sweep the intuition out of his mind, to give Delray a chance, if only for Duke's sake.

"Before we begin," Delray went on, "I'd like to introduce you to a brand-new member of the group: Brandon Pearson, from deepest, darkest Medford.

Stand up for a second or two, Brandon, and let your new friends see what you look like.”

Pearson gave Duke a startled look. Duke grinned, shrugged, then pushed Pearson’s shoulder with the heel of his hand. “Go on, they won’t bite.”

Pearson was not so sure of that. Nevertheless he got up, face hot, all too aware of the people craning around to check him out. He was most particularly aware of the smile on Lester Olson’s face—like his hair, it was somehow too dazzling not to be suspect.

His fellow Ten O’Clock People began to applaud again, only this time it was him they were applauding: Brandon Pearson, middle-echelon banker and stubborn smoker. He found himself wondering again if he hadn’t somehow found his way into an A.A. meeting that was strictly for (not to mention run by) psychos. When he dropped back into his seat, his cheeks were bright red.

“I could have done without that very well, thanks,” he muttered to Duke.

“Relax,” Duke said, still grinning. “It’s the same for everybody. And you gotta love it, man, don’t you? I mean, shit, it’s so *nineties*.”

“It’s nineties, all right, but I don’t gotta love it,” Pearson said. His heart was pounding too hard and the flush in his cheeks wasn’t going away. It felt, in fact, as if it was deepening. *What is this?* he wondered. *A hot-flash? Male menopause? What?*

Robbie Delray bent over, spoke briefly to the bespectacled brunette woman sitting next to Olson, glanced at his watch, then stepped back to the covered easel and faced the group again. His freckled, open face made him look like a Sunday choirboy apt to get up to all sorts of harmless dickens—frogs down the backs of girls’ blouses, short-sheeting baby brother’s bed, that sort of thing—during the other six days of the week.

“Thanks, folks, and welcome to our place, Brandon,” he said.

Pearson muttered that he was glad to be here, but it wasn’t true—what if his fellow Ten O’Clock People turned out to be a bunch of raving New Age assholes? Suppose he ended up feeling about them as he did about most of the guests he saw on Oprah, or the well-dressed religious nuts who used to pop up on *The P.T.L. Club* at the drop of a hymn? *What then?*

*Oh, quit it,* he told himself. *You like Duke, don’t you?*

Yes, he *did* like Duke, and he thought he was probably going to like Moira Richardson, too . . . once he got past the sexy outer layer and was able to appreciate the person inside, that was. There would undoubtedly be others he'd end up liking as well; he wasn't that hard to please. And he had forgotten, at least temporarily, the underlying reason they were all here in this basement: the batpeople. Given the threat, he could put up with a few nerds and New Agers, couldn't he?

He supposed he could.

*Good! Great! Now just sit back, relax, and watch the parade.*

He sat back, but found he couldn't relax, at least not completely. Part of it was being the new boy. Part of it was his strong dislike for this sort of forced social interaction—as a rule, he viewed people who used his first name on short notice and without invitation as hijackers of a sort. And part of it. . .

*Oh, stop! Don't you get it yet? You have no choice in the matter!*

An unpleasant thought, but one it was hard to dispute. He had crossed a line that morning when he had casually turned his head and seen what was *really* living inside Douglas Keefer's clothes these days. He supposed he had known at least that much, but it wasn't until tonight that he had realized how final that line was, how small was the chance of his ever being able to cross back to the other side of it again. To the *safe* side.

No, he couldn't relax. At least not yet.

• • •

“Before we get down to business, I want to thank you all for coming on such short notice,” Robbie Delray said. “I know it's not always easy to break away without raising eyebrows, and sometimes it's downright dangerous. I don't think it'd be exaggerating to say that we've been through a lot of hell together. . . a lot of high water, too . . .”

A polite, murmured chuckle from the audience. Most of them seemed to be hanging on Delray's every word.

“. . . and no one knows any better than I do how difficult it is to be one of the few people who actually know the truth. Since I saw my first bat, five years ago . . .”

Pearson was already fidgeting, experiencing the one sensation he would not have expected tonight: boredom. For the day's strange passage to have ended as it was ending, with a bunch of people sitting in a bookstore basement and listening to a freckled housepainter give what sounded like a bad Rotary Club speech . . .

Yet the others seemed utterly enrapt; Pearson glanced around again to confirm this to himself. Duke's eyes shone with that look of total fascination—a look similar to the look Pearson's childhood dog, Buddy, had worn when Pearson got its food-dish out of the cupboard under the sink. Cameron Stevens and Moira Richardson sat with their arms around each other and gazed at Robbie Delray with starry absorption. Ditto Janet Brightwood. Ditto the rest of the little group around the Bunn-O-Matic.

*Ditto everyone, he thought, except Brand Pearson. Come on, sweetheart, try to get with the program.*

Except he couldn't, and in a weird way it was almost as if Robbie Delray couldn't, either. Pearson looked back from his scan of the audience just in time to see Delray snatch another quick glance at his watch. It was a gesture Pearson had grown very familiar with since he'd joined the Ten O'clock People. He guessed that the man was counting down the time to his next cigarette.

As Delray rambled on, some of his other listeners also began to fall out a little—Pearson heard muffled coughs and a few shuffling feet. Delray sailed on regardless, seemingly unaware that, loved resistance leader or no, he was now in danger of overstaying his welcome.

“. . . so we've managed the best we can,” he was saying, “and we've taken our losses as best we can, too, hiding our tears the way I guess those who fight in the secret wars have always had to, all the time holding onto our belief that a day will come when the secret is out, and we'll—”

—Boink, another quick peek at the old Casio—

“—be able to share our knowledge with all the men and women out there who look but do not see.”

*Savior of His Race?* Pearson thought. *Jesus please us. This guy sounds more like Jesse Helms during a filibuster.*

He glanced at Duke and was encouraged to see that, while Duke was still listening, he was shifting in his seat and showing signs of coming out of his

trance.

Pearson touched his face again and found it was still hot. He lowered the tips of his fingers to his carotid artery and felt his pulse—still racing. It wasn't the embarrassment at having to stand up and be looked over like a Miss America finalist now; the others had forgotten his existence, at least temporarily. No, it was something else. Not a good something else, either.

“. . . we've stuck with it and stuck to it, we've done the footwork even when the music wasn't to our taste . . .” Delray was droning.

*It's what you felt before, Brand Pearson told himself. It's the fear that you've stumbled into a group of people sharing the same lethal hallucination.*

“No, it's *not*,” he muttered. Duke turned toward him, eyebrows raised, and Pearson shook his head. Duke turned his attention back to the front of the room.

He was scared, all right, but not of having fallen in with some weird thrill-kill cult. Maybe the people in this room—some of them, at least—*had* killed, maybe that interlude in the Newburyport barn *had* happened, but the energy necessary for such desperate endeavors was not evident here tonight, in this roomful of yuppies being watched over by Dashiell Hammett. All he felt here was sleepy half-headedness, the sort of partial attention that enabled people to get through dull speeches like this without falling asleep or walking out.

“Robbie, get to the point!” some kindred spirit shouted from the back of the room, and there was nervous laughter.

Robbie Delray shot an irritated glance in the direction the voice had come from, then smiled and checked his watch again. “Yeah, okay,” he said. “I got rambling, I admit it. Lester, will you help me a sec?”

Lester got up. The two men went behind a stack of book cartons and came back carrying a large leather trunk by the straps. They set it down to the right of the easel.

“Thanks, Les,” Robbie said.

Lester nodded and sat back down.

“What's in the case?” Pearson murmured into Duke's ear.

Duke shook his head. He looked puzzled and suddenly a little uncomfortable . . . but maybe not as uncomfortable as Pearson felt.

“Okay, Mac’s got a point,” Delray said. “I guess I got carried away, but it feels like a historic occasion to me. On with the show.”

He paused for effect, then whipped aside the blue cloth on the easel. His audience sat forward on their folding chairs, prepared to be amazed, then sat back with a small collective whoosh of disappointment. It was a black-and-white photograph of what looked to be an abandoned warehouse. It had been enlarged enough so that the eye could easily sort through the litter of papers, condoms, and empty wine-bottles in the loading bays, and read the tangle of spray-painted wit and wisdom on the wall. The biggest of these said RIOT GRRRLS RULE.

A whispered babble of murmurs went through the room.

“Five weeks ago,” Delray said impressively, “Lester, Kendra, and I trailed two batmen to this abandoned warehouse in the Clark Bay section of Revere.”

The dark-haired woman in the round rimless glasses sitting next to Lester Olson looked around self-importantly . . . and then Pearson was damned if she didn’t glance down at *her* watch.

“They were met at this point”—Delray tapped one of the trash-littered loading bays—“by three more batmen and two batwomen. They went inside. Since then, six or seven of us have set up a rotating watch on this place. We have established—”

Pearson glanced around at Duke’s hurt, incredulous face. He might as well have had WHY WASN’T I PICKED? tattooed on his forehead.

“—that this is some sort of meeting ground for the bats in the Boston metro area—”

*The Boston Bats*, Pearson thought, *great name for a baseball team*. And then it came back again, the doubt: *Is this me, sitting here and listening to this craziness? Is it really?*

In the wake of this thought, as if the memory had somehow been triggered by his momentary doubt, he again heard Delray telling the assembled Fearless Bat Hunters that their newest recruit was Brandon Pearson, from deepest, darkest Medford.

He turned back to Duke and spoke quietly into his ear.

“When you spoke to Janet on the phone—back in Gallagher’s—you told her you were bringing me, right?”

Duke gave him an impatient I'm-trying-to-listen look in which there was still a trace of hurt. "Sure," he said.

"Did you tell her I was from Medford?"

"No," Duke said. "How would I know where you're from? Let me listen, Brand!" And he turned back.

"We have logged over thirty-five vehicles—luxury cars and limos, for the most part—visiting this abandoned warehouse in the middle of nowhere," Delray said. He paused to let this sink in, snatched another quick peek at his watch, and hurried on. "Many of these have visited the site ten or a dozen times. The bats have undoubtedly congratulated themselves on having picked such an out-of-the-way spot for their meeting-hall or social club or whatever it is, but I think they're going to find they've painted themselves into a corner instead. Because. . . pardon me just a sec, guys . . ."

He turned and began a quiet conversation with Lester Olson. The woman named Kendra joined them, her head going back and forth like someone watching a Ping-Pong match. The seated audience watched the whispered conference with expressions of bewilderment and perplexity.

Pearson knew how they felt. *Something big*, Duke had promised, and from the feel of the place when they'd come in, everyone else had been promised the same. "Something big" had turned out to be a single black-and-white photo showing nothing but an abandoned warehouse wallowing in a sea of trash, discarded underwear, and used rubbers. What the fuck is wrong with this picture?

*The big deal's got to be in the trunk, Pearson thought. And by the way, Freckles, how did you know I came from Medford? That's one I'm saving for the Q-and-A after the speech, believe me.*

That feeling—flushed face, pounding heart, above all else the desire for another cigarette—was stronger than ever. Like the anxiety attacks he'd sometimes had back in college. What *was* it? If it wasn't fear, what was it?

*Oh, it's fear, all right—it's just not fear of being the only sane man in the snake-pit. You know the bats are real; you're not crazy and neither is Duke and neither is Moira or Cam Stevens or Janet Brightwood. But something is wrong with this picture just the same . . . really wrong. And I think it's him. Robbie Delray, housepainter and Savior of His Race. He knew where I was from. Brightwood*

*called him and told him Duke was bringing someone from the First Merc, Brandon Pearson's his name, and Robbie checked on me. Why would he do that? And how did he do it?*

In his mind he suddenly heard Duke Rhinemann saying, *They're smart . . . they've got friends in high places. Hell, high places is what they're all about.*

If you had friends in high places, you could check on a fellow in a hurry, couldn't you? Yes. People in high places had access to all the right computer passwords, all the right records, all the numbers that made up all the right vital statistics . . .

Pearson jerked in his seat like a man waking from a terrible dream. He kicked his foot out involuntarily and it struck the base of the window-pole. It started to slide. Meanwhile, the whispering at the front of the room broke up with nods all around.

"Les?" Delray asked. "Would you and Kendra give me another little helping hand?"

Pearson reached to grab the window-pole before it could fall and brain someone—maybe even slice someone's scalp open with the wicked little hook on top. He caught it, started to place it back against the wall, and saw the goblin-face peering in the basement window. The black eyes, like the eyes of a Raggedy Ann doll abandoned under a bed, stared into Pearson's wide blue ones. Strips of flesh rotated like bands of atmosphere around one of the planets astronomers called gas giants. The black snakes of vein under the lumpy, naked skull pulsed. The teeth glimmered in its gaping mouth.

"Just help me with the snaps on this darned thing," Delray was saying from the other end of the galaxy. He gave a friendly little chuckle. "They're a little sticky, I guess."

For Brandon Pearson, it was as if time had doubled back on itself to that morning: once again he tried to scream and once again shock robbed his voice and he was able to produce only a low, choked whuffling—the sound of a man moaning in his sleep.

The rambling speech.

The meaningless photograph.

The constant little peeks at the wristwatch.

*Does it make you nervous? Having so many of your people in the same place?* he had asked, and Duke had replied, smiling: *No. Robbie can smell bats.*

This time there was no one to stop him, and this time Pearson's second effort was a total success.

*"IT'S A SET-UP!"* he screamed, leaping to his feet. *"IT'S A SET-UP, WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE!"*

Startled faces craned around to look at him . . . but there were three that didn't have to crane. These belonged to Delray, Olson, and the dark-haired woman named Kendra. They had just solved the latches and opened the trunk. Their faces were full of shock and guilt . . . but no surprise. That particular emotion was absent.

"Siddown, man!" Duke hissed. "Have you gone cra—"

Upstairs, the door crashed open. Bootheels clumped across the floor toward the stairwell.

"What's happening?" Janet Brightwood asked. She spoke directly to Duke. Her eyes were wide and frightened. "What's he *talking* about?"

*"GET OUT!"* Pearson roared. *"GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE! HE TOLD IT TO YOU BACKWARD! WE'RE THE ONES IN THE TRAP!"*

The door at the head of the narrow staircase leading to the basement crashed open, and from the shadows up there came the most appalling sounds Pearson had ever heard—it was like listening to a pack of pit-bulls baying over a live baby thrown into their midst.

*"Who's that?"* Janet screamed. *"Who's that up there?"* Yet there was no question on her face; her face knew perfectly well who was up there. *What* was up there.

*"Calm down!"* Robbie Delray shouted to the confused group of people, most of whom were still sitting on their folding chairs. *"They've promised amnesty! Do you hear me? Do you understand what I'm saying? They've given me their solemn—"*

At that moment the cellar window to the left of the one through which Pearson had seen the first batface shattered inward, spraying glass across the stunned men and women in the first row along the wall. An Armani-clad arm snaked through the jagged opening and seized Moira Richardson by the hair.

She screamed and beat at the hand holding her. . . which was not really a hand at all, but a bundle of talons tipped with long, chitinous nails.

Without thinking, Pearson seized the window-pole, darted forward, and launched the hook at the pulsing batlike face peering in through the broken window. The hook drove into one of the thing's eyes. A thick, faintly astringent ink pattered down on Pearson's upthrust hands. The batman uttered a baying, savage sound—it didn't sound like a scream of pain to Pearson, but he supposed he was allowed to hope—and then it fell backward, pulling the window-pole out of Pearson's hands and into the drizzly night. Before the creature disappeared from view entirely, Pearson saw white mist begin to drift off its tumorous skin, and smelled a whiff of

*(dust urine hot chili-peppers)*

something unpleasant.

Cam Stevens pulled Moira into his arms and looked at Pearson with shocked, disbelieving eyes. All around them were men and women wearing that same blank look, men and women frozen like a herd of deer in the headlights of an oncoming truck.

*They don't look much like resistance fighters to me, Pearson thought. They look like sheep caught in a shearing-pen. . . and the bastard of a judas goat who led them in is standing up there at the front of the room with his co-conspirators.*

The savage baying upstairs was getting closer, but not as fast as Pearson might have expected. Then he remembered how narrow the staircase was—too narrow for two men to walk abreast—and said a little prayer of thanks as he shoved forward. He grabbed Duke by the tie and hauled him to his feet. “Come on,” he said. “We're blowing this joint. Is there a back door?”

“I. . . don't know.” Duke was rubbing one temple slowly and forcefully, like a man who has a bad headache. “Robbie did this? *Robbie?* Can't be, man . . . can it?” He looked at Pearson with pitiful, stunned intensity.

“I'm afraid so, Duke. Come on.”

He got two steps toward the aisle, still holding onto Duke's tie, then stopped. Delray, Olson, and Kendra had been rooting in the trunk, and now they flashed pistol-sized automatic weapons equipped with ridiculous-looking long wire stocks. Pearson had never seen an Uzi outside of the movies and TV,

but he supposed that was what these were. Uzis or close relatives, and what the fuck did it matter, anyway? They were *guns*.

“Hold it,” Delray said. He appeared to be speaking to Duke and Pearson. He was trying to smile and producing something that looked like the grimace of a death row prisoner who has just been notified it’s still on. “Stay right where you are.”

Duke kept moving. He was in the aisle now, and Pearson was right beside him. Others were getting up, following their lead, pressing forward but looking nervously back over their shoulders at the doorway giving on the stairs. Their eyes said they didn’t like the guns, but they liked the snarling, baying sounds drifting down from the first floor even less.

“Why, man?” Duke asked, and Pearson saw he was on the verge of tears. He held out his hands, palms up. “Why would you sell us out?”

“Stop, Duke, I’m warning you,” Lester Olson said in a Scotch-mellowed voice.

“The rest of you stay back, too!” Kendra snapped. She did not sound mellow at all. Her eyes rolled back and forth in their sockets, trying to cover the whole room at once.

“We never had a chance,” Delray told Duke. He sounded as if he were pleading. “They were onto us, they could have taken us *anytime*, but they offered me a deal. Do you understand? I didn’t sell out; I *never* sold out. *They* came to *me*.” He spoke vehemently, as if this distinction actually meant something to him, but the shuttling blinks of his eyes signalled a different message. It was as if there were some other Robbie Delray inside, a better Robbie Delray, one who was trying frantically to dissociate himself from this shameful act of betrayal.

“*YOU’RE A FUCKING LIAR!*” Duke Rhinemann shrieked in a voice breaking with hurt betrayal and furious understanding. He leaped at the man who had saved his sanity and perhaps his life on a Red Line train . . . and then everything swooped down at once.

• • •

Pearson could not have seen it all, yet it seemed that somehow he did. He saw Robbie Delray hesitate, then turn his weapon sideways, as if he intended to club Duke with the barrel instead of shooting him. He saw Lester Olson, who had shot the batman in the Newburyport barn pop-pop-pop before losing his guts and deciding to try and cut a deal, lodge the wire stock of his own gun against the buckle of his belt and pull the trigger. He saw momentary blue licks of fire appear in the ventilation holes in the barrel, and heard a hoarse *hack!hack!hack!hack!* that Pearson supposed was the way automatic weapons sounded in the real world. He heard something invisible slice the air an inch in front of his face; it was like hearing a ghost gasp. And he saw Duke flung backward with blood spraying up from his white shirt and splattering on his cream-colored suit. He saw the man who had been standing directly behind Duke stumble to his knees, hands clapped over his eyes, bright blood oozing out from between the knuckles.

Someone—maybe Janet Brightwood—had shut the door between the staircase and this downstairs room before the meeting started; now it banged open and two batmen wearing the uniforms of the Boston Police squeezed in. Their small, pushed-together faces stared savagely out of their oversized, strangely restless heads.

*“Amnesty!”* Robbie Delray was screaming. The freckles on his face now stood out like brands; the skin upon which they had been printed was ashy-white. *“Amnesty! I’ve been promised amnesty if you’ll just stand where you are and put up your hands!”*

Several people—those who had been clustered around the coffeemaker, for the most part—*did* raise their hands, although they continued to back away from the uniformed batmen as they did it. One of the bats reached forward with a low grunt, seized a man by the front of his shirt, and yanked him toward it. Almost before Pearson realized it had happened, the thing had torn out the man’s eyes. The thing looked at the jellied remains resting on its strange, misshapen palm for a moment, then popped them into its mouth.

As two more bats lunged in through the door, looking around with their blackly gleaming little eyes, the other police-bat drew its service revolver and fired three times, seemingly at random, into the crowd.

*“No!”* Pearson heard Delray scream. *“No, you promised!”*

Janet Brightwood grabbed the Bunn, lifted it over her head, and threw it at one of the newcomers. It struck with a muted metallic bonging and spewed hot coffee all over the thing. This time there was no mistaking the pain in that shriek. One of the police-bats reached for her. Brightwood ducked, tried to run, was tripped. . . and suddenly she was gone, lost in a stampede toward the front of the room.

Now all the windows were breaking, and somewhere close by Pearson could hear approaching sirens. He saw the bats breaking into two groups and running down the sides of the room, clearly bent on driving the panic-stricken Ten O’Clock People into the storage area behind the easel, which had now been knocked over.

Olson threw down his weapon, grabbed Kendra’s hand, and bolted in that direction. A bat-arm snaked down through one of the cellar windows, grabbed a handful of his theatrical white hair, and hauled him upward, choking and gargling. Another hand appeared through the window, and a thumbnail three inches long opened his throat and let out a scarlet flood.

*Your days of popping off batmen in barns on the coast are all over, my friend,* Pearson thought sickly. He turned toward the front of the room again. Delray stood between the open trunk and the fallen easel, his gun now dangling from one hand, his eyes shocked nearly to vacancy. When Pearson pulled the wire stock from his fingers, the man made no attempt to resist.

“They promised us amnesty,” he told Pearson. “They *promised.*”

“Did you really think you could trust things that looked like *that?*” Pearson asked, and then drove the wire stock into the center of Delray’s face with all the force he could muster. He heard something break—probably Delray’s nose—and the thoughtless barbarian which had awakened within his banker’s soul cheered with rude savagery.

He started toward a passage zig-zagging between the stacked cartons—one that had been widened by the people who had already bolted their way through—then paused as gunfire erupted behind the building. Gunfire . . . screams . . . roars of triumph.

Pearson whirled and saw Cam Stevens and Moira Richardson standing at the head of the aisle between the folding chairs. They wore identical shocked expressions and were holding hands. Pearson had time to think, *That’s how*

*Hansel and Gretel must have looked after they finally got out of the candy-house.* Then he bent down, picked up Kendra's and Olson's weapons, and handed one to each.

Two more bats had come in through the rear door. They moved casually, as if all were going according to plan . . . which, Pearson supposed, it was. The action had moved to the rear of the house now—that was where the pen *really* was, not in here, and the bats were doing a lot more than just shearing.

"Come on," he said to Cam and Moira. "Let's get these fucks."

The batmen at the rear of the room were late in realizing that a few of the refugees had decided to turn and fight. One of them spun around, possibly to run, struck a new arrival, and slipped in the spilled coffee. They both went down. Pearson opened fire on the one remaining on its feet. The machine-pistol made its somehow unsatisfying *hack!hack!hack!* sound and the bat was driven backward, its alien face breaking open and letting out a cloud of stinking fog . . . it was as if, Pearson thought, they really *were* just illusions.

Cam and Moira got the idea and opened fire on the remaining bats, catching them in a withering field of fire that knocked them back against the wall and then sent them to the floor, already oozing out of their clothes in an insubstantial mist that to Pearson smelled quite a lot like the asters in the marble flower-islands outside The First Mercantile.

"Come on," Pearson said. "If we go now, we might have a chance."

"But—" Cameron began. He looked around, starting to come out of his daze. That was good; Pearson had an idea they'd all have to be wide-awake if they were going to have a chance of getting out of this.

"Never mind, Cam," Moira said. She had also looked around, and noted the fact that they were the only ones, human or bat, left in here. Everyone else had gone out the back. "Let's just go. I think maybe the door we came in through would be our best bet."

"Yes," Pearson said, "but not for long."

He spared one last look at Duke, who lay on the floor with his face frozen in an expression of pained disbelief. He wished there were time to close Duke's eyes, but there wasn't.

"Let's go," he said, and they went.

By the time they reached the door which gave on the porch—and Cambridge Avenue beyond it—the gunfire coming from the rear of the house had begun to taper off. *How many dead?* Pearson wondered, and the answer which first occurred—*all of them*—was horrible but too plausible to deny. He supposed one or two others might have slipped through, but surely no more. It had been a good trap, set quietly and neatly around them while Robbie Delray ran his gums, stalling for time and checking his watch . . . probably waiting to give some signal which Pearson had preempted.

*If I'd woken up a little earlier, Duke might still be alive,* he thought bitterly. Perhaps true, but if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. This wasn't the time for recriminations.

One police-bat had been left to stand sentry on the porch, but it was turned in the direction of the street, possibly watching for unwanted interference. Pearson leaned through the open door toward it and said, "Hey, you ugly ringmeat asshole—got a cigarette?"

The bat turned.

Pearson blew its face off.

#### 4

Shortly after one the next morning, three people—two men and a woman, wearing torn nylons and a dirty red skirt—ran beside a freight-train pulling out of the South Station shipping yards. The younger of the two men leaped easily into the square mouth of an empty boxcar, turned, and held out his hands to the woman.

She stumbled and cried out as one of her low heels broke. Pearson put an arm around her waist (he got a heartbreakingly faint whiff of Giorgio below the much fresher smell of her sweat and her fear), ran with her that way, then yelled for her to jump. As she did, he grabbed her hips and boosted her toward Cameron Stevens's reaching hands. She caught them and Pearson gave her a final rough shove to help Stevens haul her aboard.

Pearson had fallen behind in his effort to help her, and now he could see the fence which marked the edge of the trainyards not far ahead. The freight was

gliding through a hole in the chainlink, but there would be no room for both it and Pearson; if he didn't get aboard, and quickly, he would be left behind in the yard.

Cam glanced around the open boxcar door, saw the approaching fence, and held his hands out again. *"Come on!"* he shouted. *"You can do it!"*

Pearson couldn't have—not back in the old two-pack-a-day life, anyway. Now, however, he was able to find a little extra, both in his legs and in his lungs. He sprinted along the treacherous bed of trash-littered cinders beside the tracks, temporarily outrunning the lumbering train again, holding his hands out and up, stretching his fingers to touch the hands above him as the fence loomed. Now he could see the cruel interlacings of barbed wire weaving in and out of the chain-link diamonds.

The eye of his mind opened wide in that moment and he saw his wife sitting in her chair in the living room, her face puffy with crying and her eyes red. He saw her telling two uniformed policemen that her husband had gone missing. He even saw the stack of Jenny's Pop-Up books on the little table beside her. Was that really going on? Yes; in one form or another, he supposed it was. And Lisabeth, who had never smoked a single cigarette in her whole life, would not be aware of the black eyes and fanged mouths beneath the young faces of the policemen sitting across from her on the couch; she would not see the oozing tumors or the black, pulsing lines which crisscrossed their naked skulls.

Would not know. Would not see.

*God bless her blindness,* Pearson thought. *Let it last forever.*

He stumbled toward the dark behemoth that was a westbound Conrail freight, toward the orange fluff of sparks which spiraled up from beneath one slowly turning steel wheel.

*"Run!"* Moira shrieked, and leaned out of the boxcar door farther, her hands imploring. *"Please, Brandon—just a little more!"*

*"Hurry up, you gluefoot!"* Cam screamed. *"Watch out for the fucking fence!"*

*Can't,* Pearson thought. *Can't hurry up, can't watch out for the fence, can't do any more. Just want to lie down. Just want to sleep.*

Then he thought of Duke and managed to put on a little more speed after all. Duke hadn't been old enough to know that sometimes people lose their

guts and sell out, that sometimes even the ones you idolize do that, but he had been old enough to grab Brand Pearson's arm and keep him from killing himself with a scream. Duke wouldn't have wanted him to be left behind in this stupid trainyard.

He managed one last sprint toward their outstretched hands, watching the fence now seeming to *leap* toward him out of the corner of his eye, and seized Cam's fingers. He jumped, felt Moira's hand clamp firmly under his armpit, and then he was squirming aboard, pulling his right foot into the boxcar a split second before the fence would have torn it off, loafer and all.

"All aboard for Boy's Adventure," he gasped, "illustrations by N. C. Wyeth!"

"What?" Moira asked. "What did you say?"

He turned over and looked up at them through a matted tangle of hair, resting on his elbows and panting. "Never mind. Who's got a cigarette? I'm *dying* for one."

They gawped at him silently for several seconds, looked at each other, then burst into wild shouts of laughter at exactly the same moment. Pearson guessed that meant they were in love.

As they rolled over and over on the floor of the boxcar, clutching each other and howling, Pearson sat up and slowly began to investigate the inside pockets of his filthy, torn suitcoat.

"Ahhh," he said as his hand entered the second one and felt the familiar shape. He hauled out the battered pack and displayed it. "Here's to victory!"

• • •

The boxcar trundled west across Massachusetts with three small red embers glowing in the dark of the open doorway. A week later they were in Omaha, spending the midmorning hours of each day idling along the downtown streets, watching the people who take their coffee-breaks outside even in the pouring rain, looking for Ten O'Clock People, hunting for members of the Lost Tribe, the one that wandered off following Joe Camel.

By November there were twenty of them having meetings in the back room of an abandoned hardware store in La Vista.

They mounted their first raid early the following year, across the river in Council Bluffs, and killed thirty very surprised mid-western bat-bankers and bat-executives. It wasn't much, but Brand Pearson had learned that killing bats had at least one thing in common with cutting down on your cigarette intake: you had to start somewhere.

## Crouch End

By the time the woman had finally gone, it was nearly two-thirty in the morning. Outside the Crouch End police station, Tottenham Lane was a small dead river. London was asleep . . . but London never sleeps deeply, and its dreams are uneasy.

PC Vetter closed his notebook, which he'd almost filled as the American woman's strange, frenzied story poured out. He looked at the typewriter and the stack of blank forms on the shelf beside it. "This one'll look odd come morning light," he said.

PC Farnham was drinking a Coke. He didn't speak for a long time. "She was American, wasn't she?" he said finally, as if that might explain most or all of the story she had told.

"It'll go in the back file," Vetter agreed, and looked round for a cigarette. "But I wonder . . ."

Farnham laughed. "You don't mean you believe any part of it? Go on, sir! Pull the other one!"

"Didn't say that, did I? No. But you're new here."

Farnham sat a little straighter. He was twenty-seven, and it was hardly *his* fault that he had been posted here from Muswell Hill to the north, or that Vetter, who was nearly twice his age, had spent his entire uneventful career in the quiet London backwater of Crouch End.

"Perhaps so, sir," he said, "but—with respect, mind—I still think I know a swatch of the old whole cloth when I see one. . . or hear one."

"Give us a fag, mate," Vetter said, looking amused. "There! What a good boy you are." He lit it with a wooden match from a bright red railway box, shook it out, and tossed the match stub into Farnham's ashtray. He peered at the lad through a haze of drifting smoke. His own days of laddie good looks were long gone; Vetter's face was deeply lined and his nose was a map of broken veins. He liked his six of Harp a night, did PC Vetter. "You think Crouch End's a very quiet place, then, do you?"

Farnham shrugged. In truth he thought Crouch End was a big suburban yawn—what his younger brother would have been pleased to call “a fucking Bore-a-Torium.”

“Yes,” Vetter said, “I see you do. And you’re right. Goes to sleep by eleven most nights, it does. But I’ve seen a lot of strange things in Crouch End. If you’re here half as long as I’ve been, you’ll see your share, too. There are more strange things happen right here in this quiet six or eight blocks than anywhere else in London—that’s saying a lot, I know, but I believe it. It scares me. So I have my lager, and then I’m not so scared. You look at Sergeant Gordon sometime, Farnham, and ask yourself why his hair is dead white at forty. Or I’d say take a look at Petty, but you can’t very well, can you? Petty committed suicide in the summer of 1976. Our hot summer. It was . . .” Vetter seemed to consider his words. “It was quite bad that summer. Quite bad. There were a lot of us who were afraid they might break through.”

“Who might break through what?” Farnham asked. He felt a contemptuous smile turning up the corners of his mouth, knew it was far from politic, but was unable to stop it. In his way, Vetter was raving as badly as the American woman had. He had always been a bit queer. The booze, probably. Then he saw Vetter was smiling right back at him.

“You think I’m a dotty old prat, I suppose,” he said.

“Not at all, not at all,” Farnham protested, groaning inwardly.

“You’re a good boy,” Vetter said. “Won’t be riding a desk here in the station when you’re my age. Not if you stick on the force. Will you stick, d’you think? D’you fancy it?”

“Yes,” Farnham said. It was true; he *did* fancy it. He meant to stick even though Sheila wanted him off the police force and somewhere she could count on him. The Ford assembly line, perhaps. The thought of joining the wankers at Ford curdled his stomach.

“I thought so,” Vetter said, crushing his smoke. “Gets in your blood, doesn’t it? You could go far, too, and it wouldn’t be boring old Crouch End you’d finish up in, either. Still, you don’t know everything. Crouch End is strange. You ought to have a peek in the back file sometime, Farnham. Oh, a lot of it’s the usual . . . girls and boys run away from home to be hippies or punks or whatever it is they call themselves now . . . husbands gone missing (and when

you clap an eye to their wives you can most times understand why). . . unsolved arsons . . . purse-snatchings . . . all of that. But in between, there's enough stories to curdle your blood. And some to make you sick to your stomach."

"True word?"

Vetter nodded. "Some of em very like the one that poor American girl just told us. She'll not see her husband again—take my word for it." He looked at Farnham and shrugged. "Believe me, believe me not. It's all one, isn't it? The file's there. We call it the open file because it's more polite than the back file or the kiss-my-arse file. Study it up, Farnham. Study it up."

Farnham said nothing, but he actually did intend to "study it up." The idea that there might be a whole series of stories such as the one the American woman had told . . . that was disturbing.

"Sometimes," Vetter said, stealing another of Farnham's Silk Cuts, "I wonder about Dimensions."

"Dimensions?"

"Yes, my good old son—dimensions. Science fiction writers are always on about Dimensions, aren't they? Ever read science fiction, Farnham?"

"No," Farnham said. He had decided this was some sort of elaborate leg-pull.

"What about Lovecraft? Ever read anything by him?"

"Never heard of him," Farnham said. The last fiction he'd read for pleasure, in fact, had been a small Victorian Era pastiche called *Two Gentlemen in Silk Knickers*.

"Well, this fellow Lovecraft was always writing about Dimensions," Vetter said, producing his box of railway matches. "Dimensions close to ours. Full of these immortal monsters that would drive a man mad at one look. Frightful rubbish, of course. Except, whenever one of these people straggles in, I wonder if all of it *was* rubbish. I think to myself then—when it's quiet and late at night, like now—that our whole world, everything we think of as nice and normal and sane, might be like a big leather ball filled with air. Only in some places, the leather's scuffed almost down to nothing. Places where the barriers are thinner. Do you get me?"

“Yes,” Farnham said, and thought: *Maybe you ought to give me a kiss, Vetter—I always fancy a kiss when I’m getting my doodle pulled.*

“And then I think, ‘Crouch End’s one of those thin places.’ Silly, but I *do* have those thoughts. Too imaginative, I expect; my mother always said so, anyway.”

“Did she indeed?”

“Yes. Do you know what else I think?”

“No, sir—not a clue.”

“Highgate’s mostly all right, that’s what I think—it’s just as thick as you’d want between us and the Dimensions in Muswell Hill and Highgate. But now you take Archway and Finsbury Park. *They* border on Crouch End, too. I’ve got friends in both places, and they know of my interest in certain things that don’t seem to be any way rational. Certain crazy stories which have been told, we’ll say, by people with nothing to gain by making up crazy stories.

“Did it occur to you to wonder, Farnham, why the woman would have told us the things she did if they weren’t true?”

“Well. . .”

Vetter struck a match and looked at Farnham over it. “Pretty young woman, twenty-six, two kiddies back at her hotel, husband’s a young lawyer doing well in Milwaukee or someplace. What’s she to gain by coming in and spouting about the sort of things you only used to see in Hammer films?”

“I don’t know,” Farnham said stiffly. “But there may be an ex—”

“So I say to myself”—Vetter overrode him—“that if there are such things as ‘thin spots,’ this one would *begin* at Archway and Finsbury Park . . . but the very thinnest part is here at Crouch End. And I say to myself, wouldn’t it be a day if the last of the leather between us and what’s on the inside of that ball just . . . rubbed away? Wouldn’t it be a day if even half of what that woman told us was true?”

Farnham was silent. He had decided that PC Vetter probably also believed in palmistry and phrenology and the Rosicrucians.

“Read the back file,” Vetter said, getting up. There was a crackling sound as he put his hands in the small of his back and stretched. “I’m going out to get some fresh air.”

He strolled out. Farnham looked after him with a mixture of amusement and resentment. Vetter was dotty, all right. He was also a bloody fag-mooch. Fags didn't come cheap in this brave new world of the welfare state. He picked up Vetter's notebook and began leafing through the girl's story again.

And, yes, he would go through the back file.

He would do it for laughs.

• • •

The girl—or young woman, if you wanted to be politically correct (and all Americans did these days, it seemed)—had burst into the station at quarter past ten the previous evening, her hair in damp strings around her face, her eyes bulging. She was dragging her purse by the strap.

“Lonnie,” she said. “Please, you’ve got to find Lonnie.”

“Well, we’ll do our best, won’t we?” Vetter said. “But you’ve got to tell us who Lonnie is.”

“He’s dead,” the young woman said. “I know he is.” She began to cry. Then she began to laugh—to cackle, really. She dropped her purse in front of her. She was hysterical.

The station was fairly deserted at that hour on a weeknight. Sergeant Raymond was listening to a Pakistani woman tell, with almost unearthly calm, how her purse had been nicked on Hillfield Avenue by a yob with a lot of football tattoos and a great coxcomb of blue hair. Vetter saw Farnham come in from the anteroom, where he had been taking down old posters (HAVE YOU ROOM IN YOUR HEART FOR AN UNWANTED CHILD?) and putting up new ones (SIX RULES FOR SAFE NIGHT-CYCLING).

Vetter waved Farnham forward and Sergeant Raymond, who had looked round at once when he heard the American woman's semi-hysterical voice, back. Raymond, who liked breaking pickpockets' fingers like breadsticks (“Aw, c'mon, mate,” he'd say if asked to justify this extra-legal proceeding, “fifty million wogs can't be wrong”), was not the man for a hysterical woman.

“Lonnie!” she shrieked. “Oh, please, they've got Lonnie!”

The Pakistani woman turned toward the young American woman, studied her calmly for a moment, then turned back to Sergeant Raymond and

continued to tell him how her purse had been snatched.

“Miss—” PC Farnham began.

“What’s going *on* out there?” she whispered. Her breath was coming in quick pants. Farnham noticed there was a slight scratch on her left cheek. She was a pretty little hen with nice bubs—small but pert—and a great cloud of auburn hair. Her clothes were moderately expensive. The heel had come off one of her shoes.

“What’s going *on* out there?” she repeated. “Monsters—”

The Pakistani woman looked over again . . . and smiled. Her teeth were rotten. The smile was gone like a conjurer’s trick, and she took the Lost and Stolen Property form Raymond was holding out to her.

“Get the lady a cup of coffee and bring it down to Room Three,” Vetter said. “Could you do with a cup of coffee, mum?”

“Lonnie,” she whispered. “I know he’s dead.”

“Now, you just come along with old Ted Vetter and we’ll sort this out in a jiff,” he said, and helped her to her feet. She was still talking in a low moaning voice when he led her away with one arm snugged around her waist. She was rocking unsteadily because of the broken shoe.

Farnham got the coffee and brought it into Room Three, a plain white cubicle furnished with a scarred table, four chairs, and a water cooler in the corner. He put the coffee in front of her.

“Here, mum,” he said, “this’ll do you good. I’ve got some sugar if—”

“I can’t drink it,” she said. “I couldn’t—” And then she clutched the porcelain cup, someone’s long-forgotten souvenir of Blackpool, in her hands as if for warmth. Her hands were shaking quite badly, and Farnham wanted to tell her to put it down before she slopped the coffee and scalded herself.

“I couldn’t,” she said again. Then she drank, still holding the cup two-handed, the way a child will hold his cup of broth. And when she looked at them, it was a child’s look—simple, exhausted, appealing . . . and at bay, somehow. It was as if whatever had happened had somehow shocked her young; as if some invisible hand had swooped down from the sky and slapped the last twenty years out of her, leaving a child in grownup American clothes in this small white interrogation room in Crouch End.

“Lonnie,” she said. “The monsters,” she said. “Will you help me? Will you please help me? Maybe he isn’t dead. Maybe—

*“I’m an American citizen!”* she cried suddenly, and then, as if she had said something deeply shameful, she began to sob.

Vetter patted her shoulder. “There, mum. I think we can help find your Lonnie. Your husband, is he?”

Still sobbing, she nodded. “Danny and Norma are back at the hotel . . . with the sitter . . . they’ll be sleeping . . . expecting him to kiss them when we come in . . .”

“Now if you could just relax and tell us what happened—”

“And *where* it happened,” Farnham added. Vetter looked up at him swiftly, frowning.

“But that’s just it!” she cried. “I don’t *know* where it happened! I’m not even sure *what* happened, except that it was h-huh-*horrible!*”

Vetter had taken out his notebook. “What’s your name, mum?”

“Doris Freeman. My husband is Leonard Freeman. We’re staying at the Hotel Inter-Continental. We’re American citizens.” This time the statement of nationality actually seemed to steady her a little. She sipped her coffee and put the mug down. Farnham saw that the palms of her hands were quite red. *You’ll feel that later, dearie*, he thought.

Vetter was drudging it all down in his notebook. Now he looked momentarily at PC Farnham, just an unobtrusive flick of the eyes.

“Are you on holiday?” he asked.

“Yes . . . two weeks here and one in Spain. We were supposed to have a week in Barcelona . . . but this isn’t helping find Lonnie! Why are you asking me these stupid questions?”

“Just trying to get the background, Mrs. Freeman,” Farnham said. Without really thinking about it, both of them had adopted low, soothing voices. “Now you go ahead and tell us what happened. Tell it in your own words.”

“Why is it so hard to get a taxi in London?” she asked abruptly.

Farnham hardly knew what to say, but Vetter responded as if the question were utterly germane to the discussion.

“Hard to say, mum. Tourists, partly. Why? Did you have trouble getting someone who’d take you out here to Crouch End?”

“Yes,” she said. “We left the hotel at three and came down to Hatchard’s. Do you know it?”

“Yes, mum,” Vetter said. “Lovely big bookshop, isn’t it?”

“We had no trouble getting a cab from the Inter-Continental . . . they were lined up outside. But when we came out of Hatchard’s, there was nothing. Finally, when one *did* stop, the driver just laughed and shook his head when Lonnie said we wanted to go to Crouch End.”

“Aye, they can be right barstards about the suburbs, beggin your pardon, mum,” Farnham said.

“He even refused a pound tip,” Doris Freeman said, and a very American perplexity had crept into her tone. “We waited for almost half an hour before we got a driver who said he’d take us. It was five-thirty by then, maybe quarter of six. And that was when Lonnie discovered he’d lost the address . . .”

She clutched the mug again.

“Who were you going to see?” Vetter asked.

“A colleague of my husband’s. A lawyer named John Squales. My husband hadn’t met him, but their two firms were—” She gestured vaguely.

“Affiliated?”

“Yes, I suppose. When Mr. Squales found out we were going to be in London on vacation, he invited us to his home for dinner. Lonnie had always written him at his office, of course, but he had Mr. Squales’s home address on a slip of paper. After we got in the cab, he discovered he’d lost it. And all he could remember was that it was in Crouch End.”

She looked at them solemnly.

“Crouch End—I think that’s an ugly name.”

Vetter said, “So what did you do then?”

She began to talk. By the time she’d finished, her first cup of coffee and most of another were gone, and PC Vetter had filled up several pages of his notebook with his blocky, sprawling script.

• • •

Lonnie Freeman was a big man, and hunched forward in the roomy back seat of the black cab so he could talk to the driver, he looked to her amazingly as he

had when she'd first seen him at a college basketball game in their senior year—sitting on the bench, his knees somewhere up around his ears, his hands on their big wrists dangling between his legs. Only then he had been wearing basketball shorts and a towel slung around his neck, and now he was in a suit and tie. He had never gotten in many games, she remembered fondly, because he just wasn't that good. And he lost addresses.

The cabby listened indulgently to the tale of the lost address. He was an elderly man impeccably turned out in a gray summer-weight suit, the antithesis of the slouching New York cabdriver. Only the checked wool cap on the driver's head clashed, but it was an agreeable clash; it lent him a touch of rakish charm. Outside, the traffic flowed endlessly past on Haymarket; the theater nearby announced that *The Phantom of the Opera* was continuing its apparently endless run.

"Well, I tell you what, guv," the cabby said. "I'll take yer there to Crouch End, and we'll stop at a call box, and you check your governor's address, and off we go, right to the door."

"That's wonderful," Doris said, really meaning it. They had been in London six days now, and she could not recall ever having been in a place where the people were kinder or more civilized.

"Thanks," Lonnie said, and sat back. He put his arm around Doris and smiled. "See? No problem."

"No thanks to you," she mock-growled, and threw a light punch at his midsection.

"Right," the cabby said. "Heigh-ho for Crouch End."

It was late August, and a steady hot wind rattled the trash across the roads and whipped at the jackets and skirts of the men and women going home from work. The sun was settling, but when it shone between the buildings, Doris saw that it was beginning to take on the reddish cast of evening. The cabby hummed. She relaxed with Lonnie's arm around her—she had seen more of him in the last six days than she had all year, it seemed, and she was very pleased to discover that she liked it. She had never been out of America before, either, and she had to keep reminding herself that she was in England, she was going to *Barcelona*, thousands should be so lucky.

Then the sun disappeared behind a wall of buildings, and she lost her sense of direction almost immediately. Cab rides in London did that to you, she had discovered. The city was a great sprawling warren of Roads and Mews and Hills and Closes (even Inns), and she couldn't understand how anyone could get around. When she had mentioned it to Lonnie the day before, he had replied that they got around very carefully. . . hadn't she noticed that all the cabbies kept the *London Streetfinder* tucked cozily away beneath the dash?

This was the longest cab ride they had taken. The fashionable section of town dropped behind them (in spite of that perverse going-around-in-circles feeling). They passed through an area of monolithic housing developments that could have been utterly deserted for all the signs of life they showed (no, she corrected herself to Vetter and Farnham in the small white room; she had seen one small boy sitting on the curb, striking matches), then an area of small, rather tatty-looking shops and fruit stalls, and then—no wonder driving in London was so disorienting to out-of-towners—they seemed to have driven smack into the fashionable section again.

"There was even a McDonald's," she told Vetter and Farnham in a tone of voice usually reserved for references to the Sphinx and the Hanging Gardens.

"*Was* there?" Vetter replied, properly amazed and respectful—she had achieved a kind of total recall, and he wanted nothing to break the mood, at least until she had told them everything she could.

The fashionable section with the McDonald's as its centerpiece dropped away. They came briefly into the clear and now the sun was a solid orange ball sitting above the horizon, washing the streets with a strange light that made all the pedestrians look as if they were about to burst into flame.

"It was then that things began to change," she said. Her voice had dropped a little. Her hands were trembling again.

Vetter leaned forward, intent. "Change? How? How did things change, Mrs. Freeman?"

They had passed a newsagent's window, she said, and the signboard outside had read SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR.

• • •

“Lonnie, look at that!”

“What?” He craned around, but the newsagent’s was already behind them.

“It said, ‘Sixty Lost in Underground Horror.’ Isn’t that what they call the subway? The Underground?”

“Yes—that or the tube. Was it a crash?”

“I don’t know.” She leaned forward. “Driver, do you know what that was about? Was there a subway crash?”

“A collision, mum? Not that I know of.”

“Do you have a radio?”

“Not in the cab, mum.”

“Lonnie?”

“Hmmm?”

But she could see that Lonnie had lost interest. He was going through his pockets again (and because he was wearing his three-piece suit, there were a lot of them to go through), having another hunt for the scrap of paper with John Squales’s address written on it.

The message chalked on the board played over and over in her mind, SIXTY KILLED IN TUBE CRASH, it should have read. But. . . SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR. It made her uneasy. It didn’t say “killed,” it said “lost,” the way news reports in the old days had always referred to sailors who had been drowned at sea.

UNDERGROUND HORROR.

She didn’t like it. It made her think of graveyards, sewers, and flabby-pale, noisome things swarming suddenly out of the tubes themselves, wrapping their arms (tentacles, maybe) around the hapless commuters on the platforms, dragging them away to darkness. . . .

They turned right. Standing on the corner beside their parked motorcycles were three boys in leathers. They looked up at the cab and for a moment—the setting sun was almost full in her face from this angle—it seemed that the bikers did not have human heads at all. For that one moment she was nastily sure that the sleek heads of rats sat atop those black leather jackets, rats with black eyes staring at the cab. Then the light shifted just a tiny bit and she saw of course she had been mistaken; there were only three young men smoking cigarettes in front of the British version of the American candy store.

“Here we go,” Lonnie said, giving up the search and pointing out the window. They were passing a sign which read “Crouch Hill Road.” Elderly brick houses like sleepy dowagers had closed in, seeming to look down at the cab from their blank windows. A few kids passed back and forth, riding bikes or trikes. Two others were trying to ride a skateboard with no notable success. Fathers home from work sat together, smoking and talking and watching the children. It all looked reassuringly normal.

The cab drew up in front of a dismal-looking restaurant with a small spotted sign in the window reading FULLY LICENSED and a much larger one in the center which informed that within one could purchase curries to take away. On the inner ledge there slept a gigantic gray cat. Beside the restaurant was a call box.

“Here you are, guv,” the cabdriver said. “You find your friend’s address and I’ll track him down.”

“Fair enough,” Lonnie said, and got out.

Doris sat in the cab for a moment and then also emerged, deciding she felt like stretching her legs. The hot wind was still blowing. It whipped her skirt around her knees and then plastered an old ice-cream wrapper to her shin. She removed it with a grimace of disgust. When she looked up, she was staring directly through the plate-glass window at the big gray tom. It stared back at her, one-eyed and inscrutable. Half of its face had been all but clawed away in some long-ago battle. What remained was a twisted pinkish mass of scar tissue, one milky cataract, and a few tufts of fur.

It miaowed at her silently through the glass.

Feeling a surge of disgust, she went to the call box and peered in through one of the dirty panes. Lonnie made a circle at her with his thumb and forefinger and winked. Then he pushed ten-pence into the slot and talked with someone. He laughed—soundlessly through the glass. Like the cat. She looked over for it, but now the window was empty. In the dimness beyond she could see chairs up on tables and an old man pushing a broom. When she looked back, she saw that Lonnie was jotting something down. He put his pen away, held the paper in his hand—she could see an address was jotted on it—said one or two other things, then hung up and came out.

He wagged the address at her in triumph. “Okay, that’s th—” His eyes went past her shoulder and he frowned. “Where’s the stupid *cab* gone?”

She turned around. The taxi had vanished. Where it had stood there was only curbing and a few papers blowing lazily up the gutter. Across the street, two kids were clutching at each other and giggling. Doris noticed that one of them had a deformed hand—it looked more like a claw. She’d thought the National Health was supposed to take care of things like that. The children looked across the street, saw her observing them, and fell into each other’s arms, giggling again.

“I don’t know,” Doris said. She felt disoriented and a little stupid. The heat, the constant wind that seemed to blow with no gusts or drops, the almost painted quality of the light . . .

• • •

“What time was it then?” Farnham asked suddenly.

“I don’t know,” Doris Freeman said, startled out of her recital. “Six, I suppose. Maybe twenty past.”

“I see, go on,” Farnham said, knowing perfectly well that in August sunset would not have begun—even by the loosest standards—until well past seven.

• • •

“Well, what did he *do*?” Lonnie asked, still looking around. It was almost as if he expected his irritation to cause the cab to pop back into view. “Just pick up and leave?”

“Maybe when you put your hand up,” Doris said, raising her own hand and making the thumb-and-forefinger circle Lonnie had made in the call box, “maybe when you did that he thought you were waving him on.”

“I’d have to wave a long time to send him on with two-fifty on the meter,” Lonnie grunted, and walked over to the curb. On the other side of Crouch Hill Road, the two small children were still giggling. “Hey!” Lonnie called. “You kids!”

“You an American, sir?” the boy with the claw-hand called back.

“Yes,” Lonnie said, smiling. “Did you see the cab over here? Did you see where it went?”

The two children seemed to consider the question. The boy’s companion was a girl of about five with untidy brown braids sticking off in opposite directions. She stepped forward to the opposite curb, formed her hands into a megaphone, and still smiling—she screamed it through her megaphoned hands and her smile—she cried at them: “*Bugger off, Joe!*”

Lonnie’s mouth dropped open.

“*Sir! Sir! Sir!*” the boy screeched, saluting wildly with his deformed hand. Then the two of them took to their heels and fled around the corner and out of sight, leaving only their laughter to echo back.

Lonnie looked at Doris, dumbstruck.

“I guess some of the kids in Crouch End aren’t too crazy about Americans,” he said lamely.

She looked around nervously. The street now appeared deserted.

He slipped an arm around her. “Well, honey, looks like we hike.”

“I’m not sure I want to. Those two kids might’ve gone to get their big brothers.” She laughed to show it was a joke, but there was a shrill quality to the sound. The evening had taken on a surreal quality she didn’t much like. She wished they had stayed at the hotel.

“Not much else we can do,” he said. “The street’s not exactly overflowing with taxis, is it?”

“Lonnie, why would the cabdriver leave us here like that? He seemed so *nice*.”

“Don’t have the slightest idea. But John gave me good directions. He lives in a street called Brass End, which is a very minor dead-end street, and he said it wasn’t in the *Streetfinder*.” As he talked he was moving her away from the call box, from the restaurant that sold curries to take away, from the now-empty curb. They were walking up Crouch Hill Road again. “We take a right onto Hillfield Avenue, left halfway down, then our first right . . . or was it left? Anyway, onto Petrie Street. Second left is Brass End.”

“And you remember all that?”

“I’m a star witness,” he said bravely, and she just had to laugh. Lonnie had a way of making things seem better.

• • •

There was a map of the Crouch End area on the wall of the police station lobby, one considerably more detailed than the one in the *London Streetfinder*. Farnham approached it and studied it with his hands stuffed into his pockets. The station seemed very quiet now. Vetter was still outside—clearing some of the witchmoss from his brains, one hoped—and Raymond had long since finished with the woman who'd had her purse nicked.

Farnham put his finger on the spot where the cabby had most likely let them off (if anything about the woman's story was to be believed, that was). The route to their friend's house looked pretty straightforward. Crouch Hill Road to Hillfield Avenue, then a left onto Vickers Lane followed by a left onto Petrie Street. Brass End, which stuck off from Petrie Street like somebody's afterthought, was no more than six or eight houses long. About a mile, all told. Even Americans should have been able to walk that far without getting lost.

"Raymond!" he called. "You still here?"

Sergeant Raymond came in. He had changed into streets and was putting on a light poplin windcheater. "Only just, my beardless darling."

"Cut it," Farnham said, smiling all the same. Raymond frightened him a little. One look at the spooky sod was enough to tell you he was standing a little too close to the fence that ran between the yard of the good guys and that of the villains. There was a twisted white line of scar running like a fat string from the left corner of his mouth almost all the way to his Adam's apple. He claimed a pickpocket had once nearly cut his throat with a jagged bit of bottle. Claimed that's why he broke their fingers. Farnham thought that was the shit. He thought Raymond broke their fingers because he liked the sound they made, especially when they popped at the knuckles.

"Got a fag?" Raymond asked.

Farnham sighed and gave him one. As he lit it he asked, "Is there a curry shop on Crouch Hill Road?"

"Not to my knowledge, my dearest darling," Raymond said.

"That's what I thought."

"Got a problem, dear?"

“No,” Farnham said, a little too sharply, remembering Doris Freeman’s clotted hair and staring eyes.

• • •

Near the top of Crouch Hill Road, Doris and Lonnie Freeman turned onto Hillfield Avenue, which was lined with imposing and gracious-looking homes—nothing but shells, she thought, probably cut up with surgical precision into apartments and bed-sitters inside.

“So far so good,” Lonnie said.

“Yes, it’s—” she began, and that was when the low moaning arose.

They both stopped. The moaning was coming almost directly from their right, where a high hedge ran around a small yard. Lonnie started toward the sound, and she grasped his arm. “Lonnie, no!”

“What do you mean, no?” he asked. “Someone’s hurt.”

She stepped after him nervously. The hedge was high but thin. He was able to brush it aside and reveal a small square of lawn outlined with flowers. The lawn was very green. In the center of it was a black, smoking patch—or at least that was her first impression. When she peered around Lonnie’s shoulder again—his shoulder was too high for her to peer over it—she saw it was a hole, vaguely man-shaped. The tendrils of smoke were emanating from it.

*SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR*, she thought abruptly.

The moaning was coming from the hole, and Lonnie began to force himself through the hedge toward it.

“Lonnie,” she said, “please, don’t.”

“Someone’s hurt,” he repeated, and pushed himself the rest of the way through with a bristly tearing sound. She saw him going toward the hole, and then the hedge snapped back, leaving her nothing but a vague impression of his shape as he moved forward. She tried to push through after him and was scratched by the short, stiff branches of the hedge for her trouble. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse.

“Lonnie!” she called, suddenly very afraid. “Lonnie, come back!”

“Just a minute, hon!”

The house looked at her impassively over the top of the hedge.

The moaning sounds continued, but now they sounded lower—guttural, somehow gleeful. Couldn't Lonnie *hear* that?

"Hey, is somebody down there?" she heard Lonnie ask. "Is there—oh! Hey! *Jesus!*" And suddenly Lonnie screamed. She had never heard him scream before, and her legs seemed to turn to waterbags at the sound. She looked wildly for a break in the hedge, a path, and couldn't see one anywhere. Images swirled before her eyes—the bikers who had looked like rats for a moment, the cat with the pink chewed face, the boy with the claw-hand.

*Lonnie!* she tried to scream, but no words came out.

Now there were sounds of a struggle. The moaning had stopped. But there were wet, sloshing sounds from the other side of the hedge. Then, suddenly, Lonnie came flying back through the stiff dusty-green bristles as if he had been given a tremendous push. The left arm of his suit-coat was torn, and it was splattered with runnels of black stuff that seemed to be smoking, as the pit in the lawn had been smoking.

"Doris, run!"

"Lonnie, what—"

*Run!* His face pale as cheese.

Doris looked around wildly for a cop. For *anyone*. But Hillfield Avenue might have been a part of some great deserted city for all the life or movement she saw. Then she glanced back at the hedge and saw something else was moving behind there, something that was more than black; it seemed ebony, the antithesis of light.

And it was sloshing.

A moment later, the short, stiff branches of the hedge began to rustle. She stared, hypnotized. She might have stood there forever (so she told Vetter and Farnham) if Lonnie hadn't grabbed her arm roughly and shrieked at her—yes, Lonnie, who never even raised his voice at the kids, had *shrieked*—she might have been standing there yet. Standing there, or . . .

But they ran.

Where? Farnham had asked, but she didn't know. Lonnie was totally undone, in a hysteria of panic and revulsion—that was all she really knew. He clamped his fingers over her wrist like a handcuff and they ran from the house

looming over the hedge, and from the smoking hole in the lawn. She knew those things for sure; all the rest was only a chain of vague impressions.

At first it had been hard to run, and then it got easier because they were going downhill. They turned, then turned again. Gray houses with high stoops and drawn green shades seemed to stare at them like blind pensioners. She remembered Lonnie pulling off his jacket, which had been splattered with that black goo, and throwing it away. At last they came to a wider street.

“Stop,” she panted. “Stop, I can’t keep up!” Her free hand was pressed to her side, where a red-hot spike seemed to have been planted.

And he did stop. They had come out of the residential area and were standing at the corner of Crouch Lane and Norris Road. A sign on the far side of Norris Road proclaimed that they were but one mile from Slaughter Town.

Town? Vetter suggested.

No, Doris Freeman said. Slaughter *Towen*, with an “e.”

• • •

Raymond crushed out the cigarette he had cadged from Farnham. “I’m off,” he announced, and then looked more closely at Farnham. “My poppet should take better care of himself. He’s got big dark circles under his eyes. Any hair on your palms to go with it, my pet?” He laughed uproariously.

“Ever hear of a Crouch Lane?” Farnham asked.

“Crouch Hill Road, you mean.”

“No, I mean Crouch Lane.”

“Never heard of it.”

“What about Norris Road?”

“There’s the one cuts off from the high street in Basingstoke—”

“No, here.”

“No—*not* here, poppet.”

For some reason he couldn’t understand—the woman was obviously buzzed—Farnham persisted. “What about Slaughter Town?”

“Town, you said? Not Town?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Never heard of it, but if I do, I believe I’ll steer clear.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because in the old Druid lingo, a *touen* or *towen* was a place of ritual sacrifice—where they abstracted your liver and lights, in other words.” And zipping up his windcheater, Raymond glided out.

Farnham looked after him uneasily. *He made that last up*, he told himself. *What a hard copper like Sid Raymond knows about the Druids you could carve on the head of a pin and still have room for the Lord’s Prayer.*

Right. And even if he *had* picked up a piece of information like that, it didn’t change the fact that the woman was . . .

• • •

“Must be going crazy,” Lonnie said, and laughed shakily.

Doris had looked at her watch earlier and saw that somehow it had gotten to be quarter of eight. The light had changed; from a clear orange it had gone to a thick, murky red that glared off the windows of the shops in Norris Road and seemed to face a church steeple across the way in clotted blood. The sun was an oblate sphere on the horizon.

“What happened back there?” Doris asked. “What was it, Lonnie?”

“Lost my jacket, too. Hell of a note.”

“You didn’t lose it, you took it off. It was covered with—”

“Don’t be a fool!” he snapped at her. But his eyes were not snappish; they were soft, shocked, wandering. “I lost it, that’s all.”

“Lonnie, what happened when you went through the hedge?”

“Nothing. Let’s not talk about it. Where are we?”

“Lonnie—”

“I can’t remember,” he said more softly. “It’s all a blank. We were there . . . we heard a sound . . . then I was running. That’s all I can remember.” And then he added in a frighteningly childish voice: “Why would I throw my jacket away? I liked that one. It matched the pants.” He threw back his head, gave voice to a frightening loonlike laugh, and Doris suddenly realized that whatever he had seen beyond the hedge had at least partially unhinged him. She was not sure the same wouldn’t have happened to her . . . if she had seen.

It didn't matter. They had to get out of here. Get back to the hotel where the kids were.

"Let's get a cab. I want to go home."

"But John—" he began.

"*Never mind John!*" she cried. "It's wrong, everything here is wrong, *and I want to get a cab and go home!*"

"Yes, all right. Okay." Lonnie passed a shaking hand across his forehead. "I'm with you. The only problem is, there aren't any."

There was, in fact, no traffic at all on Norris Road, which was wide and cobbled. Directly down the center of it ran a set of old tram tracks. On the other side, in front of a flower shop, an ancient three-wheeled D-car was parked. Farther down on their own side, a Yamaha motorbike stood aslant on its kickstand. That was all. They could *hear* cats, but the sound was faraway, diffuse.

"Maybe the street's closed for repairs," Lonnie muttered, and then had done a strange thing . . . strange, at least, for him, who was ordinarily so easy and self-assured. He looked back over his shoulder as if afraid they had been followed.

"We'll walk," she said.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Away from Crouch End. We can get a taxi if we get away from here." She was suddenly positive of that, if of nothing else.

"All right." Now he seemed perfectly willing to entrust the leadership of the whole matter to her.

They began walking along Norris Road toward the setting sun. The faraway hum of the traffic remained constant, not seeming to diminish, not seeming to grow any, either. It was like the constant push of the wind. The desertion was beginning to nibble at her nerves. She felt they were being watched, tried to dismiss the feeling, and found that she couldn't. The sound of their footfalls

(SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR)

echoed back to them. The business at the hedge played on her mind more and more, and finally she had to ask again.

"Lonnie, what *was* it?"

He answered simply: "I don't remember. And I don't *want* to."

They passed a market that was closed—a pile of coconuts like shrunken heads seen back-to were piled against the window. They passed a launderette where white machines had been pulled from the washed-out pink plasterboard walls like square teeth from dying gums. They passed a soap-streaked show window with an old SHOP TO LEASE sign in the front. Something moved behind the soap streaks, and Doris saw, peering out at her, the pink and tufted battle-scarred face of a cat. The same gray tom.

She consulted her interior workings and tickings and discovered that she was in a state of slowly building terror. She felt as if her intestines had begun to crawl sluggishly around and around within her belly. Her mouth had a sharp unpleasant taste, almost as if she had dosed with a strong mouthwash. The cobbles of Norris Road bled fresh blood in the sunset.

They were approaching an underpass. And it was dark under there. *I can't*, her mind informed her matter-of-factly. *I can't go under there, anything might be under there, don't ask me because I can't.*

Another part of her mind asked if she could bear for them to retrace their steps, past the empty shop with the travelling cat in it (how had it gotten from the restaurant to here? best not to ask, or even wonder about it too deeply), past the weirdly oral shambles of the launderette, past The Market of the Shrunken Heads. She didn't think she could.

They had drawn closer to the underpass now. A strangely painted six-car train—it was bone-white—lunged over it with startling suddenness, a crazy steel bride rushing to meet her groom. The wheels kicked up bright spinners of sparks. They both leaped back involuntarily, but it was Lonnie who cried out. She looked at him and saw that in the last hour he had turned into someone she had never seen before, had never even suspected. His hair appeared somehow grayer, and while she told herself firmly—as firmly as she could—that it was just a trick of the light, it was the look of his hair that decided her. Lonnie was in no shape to go back. Therefore, the underpass.

“Come on,” she said, and took his hand. She took it brusquely so he would not feel her own trembling. “Soonest begun, soonest done.” She walked forward and he followed docilely.

They were almost out—it was a very short underpass, she thought with ridiculous relief—when the hand grasped her upper arm.

She didn't scream. Her lungs seemed to have collapsed like small crumpled paper sacks. Her mind wanted to leave her body behind and just . . . fly. Lonnie's hand parted from her own. He seemed unaware. He walked out on the other side—she saw him for just one moment silhouetted, tall and lanky, against the bloody, furious colors of the sunset, and then he was gone.

The hand grasping her upper arm was hairy, like an ape's hand. It turned her remorselessly toward a heavy slumped shape leaning against the sooty concrete wall. It hung there in the double shadow of two concrete supporting pillars, and the shape was all she could make out. . . the shape, and two luminous green eyes.

“Give us a fag, love,” a husky cockney voice said, and she smelled raw meat and deep-fat-fried chips and something sweet and awful, like the residue at the bottom of garbage cans.

Those green eyes were cat's eyes. And suddenly she became horribly sure that if the slumped shape stepped out of the shadows, she would see the milky cataract of eye, the pink ridges of scar tissue, the tufts of gray hair.

She tore free, backed up, and felt something skid through the air near her. A hand? Claws? A spitting, hissing sound—

Another train charged overhead. The roar was huge, brain-rattling. Soot sifted down like black snow. She fled in a blind panic, for the second time that evening not knowing where . . . or for how long.

What brought her back to herself was the realization that Lonnie was gone. She had half collapsed against a dirty brick wall, breathing in great tearing gasps. She was still in Morris Road (at least she believed herself to be, she told the two constables; the wide way was still cobbled, and the tram tracks still ran directly down the center), but the deserted, decaying shops had given way to deserted, decaying warehouses. DAW-GLISH & SONS read the soot-begrimed signboard on one. A second had the name ALHAZRED emblazoned in ancient green across the faded brickwork. Below the name was a series of Arabic pothooks and dashes.

“Lonnie!” she called. There was no echo, no carrying in spite of the silence (no, not complete silence, she told them; there was still the sound of traffic, and it might have been closer, but not much). The word that stood for her husband seemed to drop from her mouth and fall like a stone at her feet. The

blood of sunset had been replaced by the cool gray ashes of twilight. For the first time it occurred to her that night might fall upon her here in Crouch End—if she was still indeed *in* Crouch End—and that thought brought fresh terror.

She told Vetter and Farnham that there had been no reflection, no logical train of thought, on her part during the unknown length of time between their arrival at the call box and the final horror. She had simply reacted, like a frightened animal. And now she was alone. She wanted Lonnie, she was aware of that much but little else. Certainly it did not occur to her to wonder why this area, which must surely lie within five miles of Cambridge Circus, should be utterly deserted.

Doris Freeman set off walking, calling for her husband. Her voice did not echo, but her footfalls seemed to. The shadows began to fill Norris Road. Overhead, the sky was now purple. It might have been some distorting effect of the twilight, or her own exhaustion, but the warehouses seemed to lean hungrily over the road. The windows, caked with the dirt of decades—of centuries, perhaps—seemed to be staring at her. And the names on the signboards became progressively stranger, even lunatic, at the very least, unpronounceable. The vowels were in the wrong places, and consonants had been strung together in a way that would make it impossible for any human tongue to get around them. CTHULHU KRYON read one, with more of those Arabic pothooks beneath it. YOGSOGGOTH read another. R'YELEH said yet another. There was one that she remembered particularly: NRTESEN NYARLAHOTEP.

• • •

“How could you remember such gibberish?” Farnham asked her.

Doris Freeman shook her head, slowly and tiredly. “I don’t know. I really don’t. It’s like a nightmare you want to forget as soon as you wake up, but it won’t fade away like most dreams do; it just stays and stays and stays.”

• • •

Norris Road seemed to stretch on into infinity, cobbled, split by tram tracks. And although she continued to walk—she wouldn't have believed she could run, although later, she said, she did—she no longer called for Lonnie. She was in the grip of a terrible, bone-rattling fear, a fear so great she would not have believed a human being could endure it without going mad or dropping dead. It was impossible for her to articulate her fear except in one way, and even this, she said, only began to bridge the gulf which had opened within her mind and heart. She said it was as if she were no longer on earth but on a different planet, a place so alien that the human mind could not even begin to comprehend it. The *angles* seemed different, she said. The *colors* seemed different. The . . . but it was hopeless.

She could only walk under a gnarled-plum sky between the eldritch bulking buildings, and hope that it would end.

As it did.

She became aware of two figures standing on the sidewalk ahead of her—the children she and Lonnie had seen earlier. The boy was using his claw-hand to stroke the little girl's ratty braids.

"It's the American woman," the boy said.

"She's lost," said the girl.

"Lost her husband."

"Lost her way."

"Found the darker way."

"The road that leads into the funnel."

"Lost her hope."

"Found the Whistler from the Stars—"

"—Eater of Dimensions—"

"—the Blind Piper—"

Faster and faster their words came, a breathless litany, a flashing loom. Her head spun with them. The buildings leaned. The stars were out, but they were not *her* stars, the ones she had wished on as a girl or courted under as a young woman, these were crazed stars in lunatic constellations, and her hands went to her ears and her hands did not shut out the sounds and finally she screamed at them:

*"Where's my husband? Where's Lonnie? What have you done to him?"*

There was silence. And then the girl said: “He’s gone beneath.”

The boy: “Gone to the Goat with a Thousand Young.”

The girl smiled—a malicious smile full of evil innocence. “He couldn’t well not go, could he? The mark was on him. You’ll go, too.”

“Lonnie! *What have you done with—*”

The boy raised his hand and chanted in a high fluting language that she could not understand—but the sound of the words drove Doris Freeman nearly mad with fear.

“The street began to move then,” she told Vetter and Farnham. “The cobbles began to undulate like a carpet. They rose and fell, rose and fell. The tram tracks came loose and flew into the air—I remember that, I remember the starlight shining on them—and then the cobbles themselves began to come loose, one by one at first, and then in bunches. They just flew off into the darkness. There was a tearing sound when they came loose. A grinding, tearing sound . . . the way an earthquake must sound. And—something started to *come through—*”

“What?” Vetter asked. He was hunched forward, his eyes boring into her. “What did you see? What was it?”

“Tentacles,” she said, slowly and haltingly. “I think it was tentacles. But they were as thick as old banyan trees, as if each of them was made up of a thousand smaller ones . . . and there were pink things like suckers. . . except sometimes they looked like faces . . . one of them looked like Lonnie’s face . . . and all of them were in agony. Below them, in the darkness under the street—in the darkness *beneath*—there was something else. Something like *eyes* . . .”

At that point she had broken down, unable to go on for some time, and as it turned out, there was really no more to tell. The next thing she remembered with any clarity was cowering in the doorway of a closed newsagent’s shop. She might be there yet, she had told them, except that she had seen cars passing back and forth just up ahead, and the reassuring glow of arc-sodium streetlights. Two people had passed in front of her, and Doris had cringed farther back into the shadows, afraid of the two evil children. But these were not children, she saw; they were a teenage boy and girl walking hand in hand. The boy was saying something about the new Martin Scorsese film.

She'd come out onto the sidewalk warily, ready to dart back into the convenient bolthole of the newsagent's doorway at a moment's notice, but there was no need. Fifty yards up was a moderately busy intersection, with cars and lorries standing at a stop-and-go light. Across the way was a jeweler's shop with a large lighted clock in the show window. A steel accordion grille had been drawn across, but she could still make out the time. It was five minutes of ten.

She had walked up to the intersection then, and despite the streetlights and the comforting rumble of traffic, she had kept shooting terrified glances back over her shoulder. She ached all over. She was limping on one broken heel. She had pulled muscles in her belly and both legs—her right leg was particularly bad, as if she had strained something in it.

At the intersection she saw that somehow she had come around to Hillfield Avenue and Tottenham Road. Under a streetlamp a woman of about sixty with her graying hair escaping from the rag it was done up in was talking to a man of about the same age. They both looked at Doris as if she were some sort of dreadful apparition.

"Police," Doris Freeman croaked. "Where's the police station? I'm an American citizen . . . I've lost my husband . . . I need the police."

"What's happened, then, lovey?" the woman asked, not unkindly. "You look like you've been through the wringer, you do."

"Car accident?" her companion asked.

"No. Not . . . not . . . Please, is there a police station near here?"

"Right up Tottenham Road," the man said. He took a package of Players from his pocket. "Like a cig? You look like you c'd use one."

"Thank you," she said, and took the cigarette although she had quit nearly four years ago. The elderly man had to follow the jittering tip of it with his lighted match to get it going for her.

He glanced at the woman with her hair bound up in the rag. "I'll just take a little stroll up with her, Evvie. Make sure she gets there all right."

"I'll come along as well, then, won't I?" Evvie said, and put an arm around Doris's shoulders. "Now what is it, lovey? Did someone try to mug you?"

"No," Doris said. "It . . . I . . . I . . . the street . . . there was a cat with only one eye . . . the street opened up . . . I *saw* it. . . and they said something about

a Blind Piper . . . I've got to find Lonnie!"

She was aware that she was speaking incoherencies, but she seemed helpless to be any clearer. And at any rate, she told Vetter and Farnham, she hadn't been all *that* incoherent, because the man and woman had drawn away from her, as if, when Evvie asked what the matter was, Doris had told her it was bubonic plague.

The man said something then—"Happened again," Doris thought it was.

The woman pointed. "Station's right up there. Globes hanging in front. You'll see it." Moving very quickly, the two of them began to walk away. The woman glanced back over her shoulder once; Doris Freeman saw her wide, gleaming eyes. Doris took two steps after them, for what reason she did not know. "Don't ye come near!" Evvie called shrilly, and forked the sign of the evil eye at her. She simultaneously cringed against the man, who put an arm about her. "Don't you come near, if you've been to Crouch End Town!"

And with that, the two of them had disappeared into the night.

• • •

Now PC Farnham stood leaning in the doorway between the common room and the main filing room—although the back files Vetter had spoken of were certainly not kept here. Farnham had made himself a fresh cup of tea and was smoking the last cigarette in his pack—the woman had also helped herself to several.

She'd gone back to her hotel, in the company of the nurse Vetter had called—the nurse would be staying with her tonight, and would make a judgement in the morning as to whether the woman would need to go in hospital. The children would make that difficult, Farnham supposed, and the woman's being an American almost guaranteed a first-class cock-up. He wondered what she was going to tell the kiddies when they woke up tomorrow, assuming she was capable of telling them anything. Would she gather them round and tell them that the big bad monster of Crouch End Town

(Town)

had eaten up Daddy like an ogre in a fairy-story?

Farnham grimaced and put down his teacup. It wasn't his problem. For good or for ill, Mrs. Freeman had become sandwiched between the British constabulary and the American Embassy in the great waltz of governments. It was none of his affair; he was only a PC who wanted to forget the whole thing. And he intended to let Vetter write the report. Vetter could afford to put his name to such a bouquet of lunacy; he was an old man, used up. He would still be a PC on the night shift when he got his gold watch, his pension, and his council flat. Farnham, on the other hand, had ambitions of making sergeant soon, and that meant he had to watch every little posey.

And speaking of Vetter, where was he? He'd been taking the night air for quite awhile now.

Farnham crossed the common room and went out. He stood between the two lighted globes and stared across Tottenham Road. Vetter was nowhere in sight. It was past 3:00 A.M., and silence lay thick and even, like a shroud. What was that line from Wordsworth? "All that great heart lying still," or something like.

He went down the steps and stood on the sidewalk, feeling a trickle of unease now. It was silly, of course, and he was angry with himself for allowing the woman's mad story to gain even this much of a foothold in his head. Perhaps he *deserved* to be afraid of a hard copper like Sid Raymond.

Farnham walked slowly up to the corner, thinking he would meet Vetter coming back from his night stroll. But he would go no farther, if the station was left empty even for a few moments, there would be hell to pay if it was discovered. He reached the corner and looked around. It was funny, but all the arc-sodiums seemed to have gone out up here. The entire street looked different without them. Would it have to be reported, he wondered? And where was Vetter?

He would walk just a little farther, he decided, and see what was what. But not far. It simply wouldn't do to leave the station unattended for long.

Just a little way.

• • •

Vetter came in less than five minutes after Farnham had left. Farnham had gone in the opposite direction, and if Vetter had come along a minute earlier, he would have seen the young constable standing indecisively at the corner for a moment before turning it and disappearing forever.

“Farnham?”

No answer but the buzz of the clock on the wall.

“Farnham?” he called again, and then wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand.

• • •

Lonnie Freeman was never found. Eventually his wife (who had begun to gray around the temples) flew back to America with her children. They went on Concorde. A month later she attempted suicide. She spent ninety days in a rest home and came out much improved. Sometimes when she cannot sleep—this occurs most frequently on nights when the sun goes down in a ball of red and orange—she creeps into her closet, knee-walks under the hanging dresses all the way to the back, and there she writes *Beware the Goat with a Thousand Young* over and over with a soft pencil. It seems to ease her somehow to do this.

PC Robert Farnham left a wife and two-year-old twin girls. Sheila Farnham wrote a series of angry letters to her MP, insisting that something was going on, something was being covered up, that her Bob had been enticed into taking some dangerous sort of undercover assignment. He would have done anything to make sergeant, Mrs. Farnham repeatedly told the MP. Eventually that worthy stopped answering her letters, and at about the same time Doris Freeman was coming out of the rest home, her hair almost entirely white now, Mrs. Farnham moved back to Essex, where her parents lived. Eventually she married a man in a safer line of work—Frank Hobbs is a bumper inspector on the Ford assembly line. It had been necessary to get a divorce from her Bob on grounds of desertion, but that was easily managed.

Vetter took early retirement about four months after Doris Freeman had stumbled into the station in Tottenham Lane. He did indeed move into

council housing, a two-above-the-shops in Frimley. Six months later he was found dead of a heart attack, a can of Harp Lager in his hand.

And in Crouch End, which is really a quiet suburb of London, strange things still happen from time to time, and people have been known to lose their way. Some of them lose it forever.

## The House on Maple Street

Although she was only five, and the youngest of the Bradbury children, Melissa had very sharp eyes and it wasn't really surprising that she was the first to discover something strange had happened to the house on Maple Street while the Bradbury family was summering in England.

She ran and found her older brother, Brian, and told him something was wrong upstairs, on the third floor. She said she would show him, but not until he swore not to tell *anyone* what she had found. Brian swore, knowing it was their stepfather Lissa was afraid of; Daddy Lew didn't like it when any of the Bradbury children "got up to foolishness" (that was how he always put it), and he had decided that Melissa was the prime offender in that area. Lissa, who was stupid no more than she was blind, was aware of Lew's prejudices, and had become wary of them. In fact, all of the Bradbury children had become rather wary of their mother's second husband.

It would probably turn out to be nothing, anyway, but Brian was delighted to be back home and willing enough to humor his baby sister (Brian was two full years her senior), at least for awhile; he followed her down the third-floor hallway without so much as a murmur of argument, and he only pulled her braids—he called these braid-pulls "emergency stops"—once.

They had to tiptoe past Lew's study, which was the only finished-off room up here, because Lew was inside, unpacking his notebooks and papers and muttering in an ill-tempered way. Brian's thoughts had actually turned to what might be on TV tonight—he was looking forward to a pig-out on good old American cable after three months of BBC and ITV—when they reached the end of the hall.

What he saw beyond the tip of his little sister's pointing finger drove all thoughts of television from Brian Bradbury's mind.

"Now swear again!" Lissa whispered. "Never tell *anyone*, Daddy Lew or *anyone*, or hope to die!"

“Hope to die,” Brian agreed, still staring, and it *was* a half-hour before he told his big sister, Laurie, who was unpacking in her room. Laurie was possessive of her room as only an eleven-year-old girl can be, and she gave Brian the very dickens for coming in without knocking, even though she was completely dressed.

“Sorry,” Brian said, “but I gotta show you something. It’s *very* weird.”

“Where?” She went on putting clothes in her drawers as if she didn’t care, as if there was nothing any dopey little seven-year-old could tell her which would be of the *slightest* interest to her, but when it came to eyes, Brian’s weren’t exactly dull. He could tell when Laurie was interested, and she was interested now.

“Upstairs. Third floor. End of the hall past Daddy Lew’s study.”

Laurie’s nose wrinkled as it always did when Brian or Lissa called him that. She and Trent remembered their real father, and they didn’t like his replacement at all. They made it their business to call him Just Plain Lew. That Lewis Evans clearly did not like this—found it vaguely impertinent, in fact—simply added to Laurie and Trent’s unspoken but powerful conviction that it was the right way to address the man their mother (uck!) slept with these days.

“I don’t want to go up there,” Laurie said. “He’s been in a pissy mood ever since we got back. Trent says he’ll stay that way until school starts and he can settle back into his rut again.”

“His door’s shut. We can be quiet. Lissa n me went up and he didn’t even know we were there.”

“Lissa and I.”

“Yeah. Us. Anyway, it’s safe. The door’s shut and he’s talking to himself like he does when he’s really into something.”

“I hate it when he does that,” Laurie said darkly. “Our real father never talked to himself, and he didn’t use to lock himself in a room by himself, either.”

“Well, I don’t think he’s locked in,” Brian said, “but if you’re really worried about him coming out, take an empty suitcase. We’ll pretend like we’re putting it in the closet where we keep them, if he comes out.”

“What *is* this amazing thing?” Laurie demanded, putting her fists on her hips.

“I’ll show you,” Brian said earnestly, “but you have to swear on Mom’s name and hope to die if you tell anyone.” He paused, thinking, for a moment, and then added: “You specially can’t tell Lissa, because I swore to her.”

Laurie’s ears were finally all the way up. It was probably a big nothing, but she was tired of putting clothes away. It was really amazing how much junk a person could accumulate in just three months. “Okay, I swear.”

They took along *two* empty suitcases, one for each of them, but their precautions proved unnecessary; their stepfather never came out of his study. It was probably just as well; he had worked up a grand head of steam, from the sound. The two children could hear him stamping about, muttering, opening drawers, slamming them shut again. A familiar odor seeped out from under the door—to Laurie it smelled like smouldering athletic socks. Lew was smoking his pipe.

She stuck her tongue out, crossed her eyes, and twiddled her fingers in her ears as they tiptoed by.

But a moment later, when she looked at the place Lissa had pointed out to Brian and which Brian now pointed out to her, she forgot Lew just as completely as Brian had forgotten about all the wonderful things he could watch on TV that night.

“What *is* it?” she whispered to Brian. “My gosh, what does it *mean*?”

“I dunno,” Brian said, “but just remember, you swore on Mom’s name, Laurie.”

“Yeah, yeah, but—”

“Say it again!” Brian didn’t like the look in her eyes. It was a *telling* look, and he felt she really needed a little reinforcement.

“Yeah, yeah, on Mom’s name,” she said perfunctorily, “but, Brian, jeezly *crow*—”

“And hope to die, don’t forget that part.”

“Oh, Brian, you are such a *cheeser!*”

“Never mind, just say you hope to die!”

“Hope to die, hope to die, okay?” Laurie said. “Why do you have to be such a cheeser, Bri?”

“Dunno,” he said, smirking in that way she absolutely hated, “just lucky, I guess.”

She could have strangled him . . . but a promise *was* a promise, especially one given on the name of your one and only mother, so Laurie held on for over one full hour before getting Trent and showing him. She made him swear, too, and her confidence that Trent would keep *his* promise not to tell was perfectly justified. He was almost fourteen, and as the oldest, he had no one *to* tell . . . except a grownup. Since their mother had taken to her bed with a migraine, that left only Lew, and that was the same as no one at all.

The two oldest Bradbury children hadn't needed to bring up empty suitcases as camouflage this time; their stepfather was downstairs, watching some British fellow lecture on the Normans and Saxons (the Normans and Saxons were Lew's specialty at the college) on the VCR, and enjoying his favorite afternoon snack—a glass of milk and a ketchup sandwich.

Trent stood at the end of the hall, looking at what the other children had looked at before him. He stood there for a long time.

“What *is* it, Trent?” Laurie finally asked. It never crossed her mind that Trent wouldn't know. Trent knew *everything*. So she watched, almost incredulously, as he slowly shook his head.

“I don't know,” he said, peering into the crack. “Some kind of metal, I think. Wish I'd brought a flashlight.” He reached into the crack and tapped. Laurie felt a vague sense of disquiet at this, and was relieved when Trent pulled his finger back. “Yeah, it's metal.”

“Should it be in there?” Laurie asked. “I mean, *was* it? Before?”

“No,” Trent said. “I remember when they replastered. That was just after Mom married *him*. There wasn't anything in there then but laths.”

“What are they?”

“Narrow boards,” he said. “They go between the plaster and the outside wall of the house.” Trent reached into the crack in the wall and once again touched the metal which showed dull white in there. The crack was about four inches long and half an inch across at its widest point. “They put in insulation, too,” he said, frowning thoughtfully and then shoving his hands into the back pockets of his wash-faded jeans. “I remember. Pink, billowy stuff that looked like cotton candy.”

“Where is it, then? I don't see any pink stuff.”

“Me either,” Trent said. “But they *did* put it in. I remember.” His eyes traced the four-inch length of the crack. “That metal in the wall is something new. I wonder how much of it there is, and how far it goes. Is it just up here on the third floor, or . . .”

“Or what?” Laurie looked at him with big round eyes. She had begun to be a little frightened.

“Or is it all over the house,” Trent finished thoughtfully.

• • •

After school the next afternoon, Trent called a meeting of all four Bradbury children. It got off to a somewhat bumpy start, with Lissa accusing Brian of breaking what she called “your solemn swear” and Brian, who was deeply embarrassed, accusing Laurie of putting their mother’s soul in dire jeopardy by telling Trent. Although he wasn’t very clear on exactly what a soul was (the Bradburys were Unitarians), he seemed quite sure that Laurie had condemned Mother’s to hell.

“Well,” Laurie said, “you’ll have to take *some* of the blame, Brian. I mean, you were the one who brought Mother into it. You should have had me swear on Lew’s name. *He* could go to hell.”

Lissa, who was young enough and kind-hearted enough not to wish *anyone* in hell, was so distressed by this line of discourse that she began to cry.

“Hush, all of you,” Trent said, and hugged Lissa until she had regained most of her composure. “What’s done is done, and I happen to think it all worked out for the best.”

“You do?” Brian asked. If Trent said a thing was good, Brian would have died defending it, that went without saying, but Laurie had sworn on Mom’s *name*.

“Something this weird needs to be investigated, and if we waste a lot of time arguing over who was right or wrong to break their promise, we’ll never get it done.”

Trent glanced pointedly up at the clock on the wall of his room, where they had gathered. It was twenty after three. He really didn’t have to say any more. Their mother had been up this morning to get Lew his breakfast—two three-

minute eggs with whole-wheat toast and marmalade was one of his many daily requirements—but afterward she had gone back to bed, and there she had remained. She suffered from dreadful headaches, migraines that sometimes spent two or even three days snarling and clawing at her defenseless (and often bewildered) brain before decamping for a month or so.

She would not be apt to see them on the third floor and wonder what they were up to, but “Daddy Lew” was a different kettle of fish altogether. With his study just down the hall from the strange crack, they could count on avoiding his notice—and his curiosity—only if they conducted their investigations while he was away, and that was what Trent’s pointed glance at the clock had meant.

The family had returned to the States a full ten days before Lew was scheduled to begin teaching classes again, but he could no more stay away from the University once he was back within ten miles of it than a fish could live out of water. He had left shortly after noon, with a briefcase crammed full of papers he had collected at various spots of historical interest in England. He said he was going up to file these papers away. Trent thought that meant he’d cram them into one of his desk drawers, then lock his office and go down to the History Department’s Faculty Lounge. There he would drink coffee and gossip with his buddies . . . except, Trent had discovered, when you were a college teacher, people thought you were dumb if you had buddies. You were supposed to say they were your colleagues. So he was away, and that was good, but he might be back at any time between now and five, and that was bad. Still, they had *some* time, and Trent was determined they weren’t going to spend it squabbling about who swore what to who.

“Listen to me, you guys,” he said, and was gratified to see that they actually *were* listening, their differences and recriminations forgotten in the excitement of an *investigation*. They had also been caught by Trent’s inability to explain what Lissa had found. All three of them shared, at least to some extent, Brian’s simple faith in Trent—if Trent was puzzled by something, if Trent thought that something was strange and just possibly amazing, they all thought so.

Laurie spoke for all of them when she said: “Just tell us what to do, Trent—we’ll do it.”

“Okay,” Trent said. “We’ll need some things.” He took a deep breath and began explaining what they were.

• • •

Once they were convened around the crack at the end of the third-floor hallway, Trent held Lissa up so she could shine the beam of a small flashlight—it was the one their mother used to inspect their ears, eyes, and noses when they weren’t feeling well—into the crack. They could all see the metal; it wasn’t shiny enough to throw back a clear reflection of the beam, but it shone silkily just the same. Steel, was Trent’s opinion—steel, or some sort of alloy.

“What’s an alloy, Trent?” Brian asked.

Trent shook his head. He didn’t know exactly. He turned to Laurie and asked her to give him the drill.

Brian and Lissa exchanged an uneasy glance as Laurie passed it over. It had come from the basement workshop, and the basement was the one remaining place in the house which was their real father’s. Daddy Lew hadn’t been down there a dozen times since he had married Catherine Bradbury. The smaller children knew that as well as Trent and Laurie. They weren’t afraid Daddy Lew would notice someone had been using the drill; it was the holes in the wall outside his study they were worried about. Neither one of them said this out loud, but Trent read it on their troubled faces.

“Look,” Trent said, holding the drill out so they could get a good look. “This is what they call a needle-point drillbit. See how tiny it is? And since we’re only going to drill behind the pictures, I don’t think we have to worry.”

There were about a dozen framed prints along the third-floor hallway, half of them beyond the study door, on the way to the closet at the end where the suitcases were stored. Most of these were very old (and mostly uninteresting) views of Titusville, where the Bradburys lived.

“He doesn’t even look *at* them, let alone *behind* them,” Laurie agreed.

Brian touched the tip of the drill with one finger, then nodded. Lissa watched, then copied both the touch and the nod. If Laurie said something was okay, it probably was; if Trent said so, it almost certainly was; if they both said so, there could be no question.

Laurie took down the picture which hung closest to the small crack in the plaster and gave it to Brian. Trent drilled. They stood watching him in a tight little circle of three, like infielders encouraging their pitcher at a particularly tense moment of the game.

The drillbit went easily into the wall, and the hole it made was every bit as tiny as promised. The darker square of wallpaper which had been revealed when Laurie took the print off its hook was also encouraging. It suggested that no one had bothered taking the dark line engraving of the Titusville Public Library off its hook for a very long time.

After a dozen turns of the drill's handle, Trent stopped and reversed, pulling the bit free.

"Why'd you quit?" Brian asked.

"Hit something hard."

"More metal?" Lissa asked.

"I think so. Sure wasn't wood. Let's see." He shone the light in and cocked his head this way and that before shaking it decisively. "My head's too big. Let's boost Lissa."

Laurie and Trent lifted her up and Brian handed her the Pen Lite. Lissa squinted for a time, then said, "Just like in the crack I found."

"Okay," Trent said. "Next picture."

The drill hit metal behind the second, and the third, as well. Behind the fourth—by this time they were quite close to the door of Lew's study—it went all the way in before Trent pulled it out. This time when she was boosted up, Lissa told them she saw "the pink stuff."

"Yeah, the insulation I told you about," Trent said to Laurie. "Let's try the other side of the hall."

They had to drill behind four pictures on the east side of the corridor before they struck first wood-lath and then insulation behind the plaster . . . and as they were re-hanging the last picture, they heard the out-of-tune snarl of Lew's elderly Porsche turning into the driveway.

Brian, who had been in charge of hanging this picture—he could just reach the hook on tip-toe—dropped it. Laurie reached out and grabbed it by the frame on the way down. A moment later she found herself shaking so badly she had to hand the picture to Trent, or she would have dropped it herself.

“*You* hang it,” she said, turning a stricken face to her older brother. “I would have dropped it if I’d been thinking about what I was doing. I really would.”

Trent hung the picture, which showed horse-drawn carriages clopping through City Park, and saw it was hanging slightly askew. He reached out to adjust it, then pulled back just before his fingers touched the frame. His sisters and his brother thought he was something like a god; Trent himself was smart enough to know he was only a kid. But even a kid—assuming he was a kid with half a brain—knew that when things like this started to go bad, you ought to leave them alone. If he messed with it anymore, this picture would fall for sure, spraying the floor with broken glass, and somehow Trent knew it.

“Go!” he whispered. “Downstairs! TV room!”

The back door slammed downstairs as Lew came in.

“But it’s not *straight!*” Lissa protested. “Trent, it’s not—”

“Never *mind!*” Laurie said. “Do what Trent says!”

Trent and Laurie looked at each other, wide-eyed. If Lew went into the kitchen to fix himself a bite to tide himself over until supper, all still might be well. If he didn’t, he would meet Lissa and Brian on the stairs. One look at them and he’d know something was going on. The two younger Bradbury children were old enough to close their mouths, but not their faces.

Brian and Lissa went fast.

Trent and Laurie came behind, more slowly, listening. There was a moment of almost unbearable suspense when the only sounds were the little kids’ footsteps on the stairs, and then Lew bawled up at them from the kitchen:

“*KEEP IT DOWN, CAN’T YOU? YOUR MOTHER’S TAKING A NAP!*”

*And if that doesn’t wake her up, Laurie thought, nothing will.*

• • •

Late that night, as Trent was drowsing off to sleep, Laurie opened the door of his room, came in, and sat down beside him on the bed.

“You don’t like him, but that’s not all,” she said.

“Who-wha?” Trent asked, peeling a cautious eyelid.

“Lew,” she said quietly. “You know who I mean, Trent.”

“Yeah,” he said, giving up. “And you’re right. I don’t like him.”

“You’re scared of him, too, aren’t you?”

After a long, long moment, Trent said: “Yeah. A little.”

“Just a little?”

“Maybe a little more than a little,” Trent said. He winked at her, hoping for a smile, but Laurie only looked at him, and Trent gave up. She wasn’t going to be diverted, at least not tonight.

“Why? Do you think he might hurt us?”

Lew shouted at them a lot, but he had never put his hands on them. No, Laurie suddenly remembered, that wasn’t quite true. One time when Brian had walked into his study without knocking, Lew had given him a spanking. A hard one. Brian had tried not to cry, but in the end he had. And Mom had cried, too, although she hadn’t tried to stop the spanking. But she must have said something to him later on, because Laurie had heard Lew shouting at *her*.

Still, it had been a spanking, not child abuse, and Brian *could* be an insufferable cheese-dog when he put his mind to it.

Had he been putting his mind to it that night? Laurie wondered now. Or had Lew spanked her brother and made him cry over something which had only been an honest little kid’s mistake? She didn’t know, and had a sudden and unwelcome insight, the sort of thought that made her think Peter Pan had had the right idea about never wanting to grow up: she wasn’t sure she *wanted* to know. One thing she did know: who the *real* cheese-dog around here was.

She realized Trent hadn’t answered her question, and gave him a poke. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Just thinking,” he said. “It’s a toughie, you know?”

“Yes,” she said soberly. “I know.”

This time she let him think.

“Nah,” he said at last, and laced his hands together behind his head. “I don’t think so, Sprat.” She hated to be called that, but tonight she decided to let it go. She couldn’t remember Trent ever speaking to her this carefully and seriously. “I don’t think he *would* . . . but I think he *could*.” He got up on one elbow and looked at her even more seriously. “But I think he’s hurting Mom, and I think it gets a little worse for her every day.”

“She’s sorry, isn’t she?” Laurie asked. Suddenly she felt like crying. Why were adults so stupid sometimes about stuff kids could see right away? It made you want to kick them. “She never wanted to go to England in the first place . . . and there’s the way he shouts at her sometimes . . .”

“Don’t forget the headaches,” Trent said flatly. “The ones he says she talks herself into. Yeah, she’s sorry, all right.”

“Would she ever . . . you know . . .”

“Divorce him?”

“Yes,” Laurie said, relieved. She wasn’t sure she could have brought the word out herself, and had she realized how much she was her mother’s daughter in that regard, she could have answered her own question.

“No,” Trent said. “Not Mom.”

“Then there’s nothing we can do,” Laurie sighed.

Trent said in a voice so soft she almost couldn’t hear it: “Oh yeah?”

• • •

During the next week and a half, they drilled other small holes around the house when there was no one around to see them: holes behind posters in their various rooms, behind the refrigerator in the pantry (Brian was able to squeeze in and just had room to use the drill), in the downstairs closets. Trent even drilled one in a dining-room wall, high up in one corner where the shadows never quite left. He stood on top of the step-ladder while Laurie held it steady.

There was no metal anywhere. Just lath.

The children forgot for a little while.

• • •

One day about a month later, after Lew had gone back to teaching full-time, Brian came to Trent and told him there was another crack in the plaster on the third floor, and that he could see more metal behind it. Trent and Lissa came at once. Laurie was still in school, at band practice.

As on the occasion of the first crack, their mother was lying down with a headache. Lew’s temper had improved once he was back at school (as Trent and Laurie had been sure it would), but he’d had a crackerjack argument with

their mother the night before, about a party he wanted to have for fellow faculty members in the History Department. If there was anything the former Mrs. Bradbury hated and feared, it was playing hostess at faculty parties. Lew had insisted on this one, however, and she had finally given in. Now she was lying in the shadowy bedroom with a damp towel over her eyes and a bottle of Fiorinal on the night-table while Lew was presumably passing around invitations in the Faculty Lounge and clapping his colleagues on the back.

The new crack was on the west side of the hallway, between the study door and the stairwell.

“You sure you saw metal in there?” Trent asked. “We *checked* this side, Bri.”

“Look for yourself,” Brian said, and Trent did. There was no need of a flashlight; this crack was wider, and there was no question about the metal at the bottom of it.

After a long look, Trent told them he had to go to the hardware store, right away.

“Why?” Lissa asked.

“I want to get some plaster. I don’t want him to see that crack.” He hesitated, then added: “And I especially don’t want him to see the metal inside it.”

Lissa frowned at him. “Why not, Trent?”

But Trent didn’t exactly know. At least, not yet.

• • •

They started drilling again, and this time they found metal behind *all* the walls on the third floor, including Lew’s study. Trent snuck in there one afternoon with the drill while Lew was at the college and their mother was out shopping for the upcoming faculty party.

The former Mrs. Bradbury looked very pale and drawn these days—even Lissa had noticed—but when any of the children asked her if she was okay, she always flashed a troubling, over-bright smile and told them never better, in the pink, rolling in clover. Laurie, who could be blunt, told her she looked too thin. Oh no, her mother responded, Lew says I was turning into a blob over in

England—all those rich teas. She was just trying to get back into fighting trim, that was all.

Laurie knew better, but not even Laurie was blunt enough to call her mother a liar to her face. If all four of them had come to her at once—ganged up on her, so to speak—they might have gotten a different story. But not even Trent thought of doing that.

One of Lew's advanced degrees was hanging on the wall over his desk in a frame. While the other children clustered outside the door, nearly vomiting with terror, Trent removed the framed degree from its hook, laid it on the desk, and drilled a pinhole in the center of the square where it had been. Two inches in, the drill hit metal.

Trent carefully rehung the degree—making very sure *it* wasn't crooked—and came back out.

Lissa burst into tears of relief, and Brian quickly joined her; he looked disgusted but seemed unable to help himself. Laurie had to struggle very hard against her own tears.

They drilled holes at intervals along the stairs to the second floor and found metal behind these walls, too. It continued roughly halfway down the second-floor hallway as it proceeded toward the front of the house. There was metal behind the walls of Brian's room, but behind only one wall of Laurie's.

"It hasn't finished growing in here," Laurie said darkly.

Trent looked at her, surprised. "Huh?"

Before she could reply, Brian had a brainstorm.

"Try the floor, Trent!" he said. "See if it's there, too."

Trent thought it over, shrugged, and drilled into the floor of Laurie's room. The drill went in all the way with no resistance, but when he peeled back the rug at the foot of his own bed and tried there, he soon encountered solid steel . . . or solid whatever-it-was.

Then, at Lissa's insistence, he stood on a stool and drilled up into the ceiling, eyes slitted against the plaster-dust that sifted down into his face.

"Boink," he said after a few moments. "More metal. Let's quit for the day."

Laurie was the only one who saw how deeply troubled Trent looked.

• • •

That night after lights-out, it was Trent who came to Laurie's room, and Laurie didn't even pretend to be sleepy. The truth was, neither of them had been sleeping very well for the last couple of weeks.

"What did you mean?" Trent whispered, sitting down beside her.

"About what?" Laurie asked, getting up on one elbow.

"You said it hadn't finished growing in your room. What did you mean?"

"Come on, Trent—you're not dumb."

"No, I'm not," he agreed without conceit. "Maybe I just want to hear you say it, Sprat."

"If you call me that, you never will."

"Okay. Laurie, Laurie, Laurie. You satisfied?"

"Yes. That stuffs growing all over the house." She paused. "No, that's not right. It's growing *under* the house."

"That's not right, either."

Laurie thought about it, then sighed. "Okay," she said. "It's growing *in* the house. It's *stealing* the house. Is that good enough, Mr. Smarty?"

"Stealing the house . . ." Trent sat quietly beside her on the bed, looking at her poster of Chrissie Hynde and seeming to taste the phrase she had used. At last he nodded and flashed the smile she loved. "Yes—that's good enough."

"Whatever you call it, it acts like it's alive."

Trent nodded. He had already thought of this. He had no idea how metal *could* be alive, but he was damned if he saw any way around her conclusion, at least for the present.

"But that isn't the worst."

"What is?"

"It's *sneaking*." Her eyes, fixed solemnly on his, were big and frightened. "That's the part I really don't like. I don't know what started it or what it means, and I don't really care. But it's *sneaking*."

She ran her fingers into her heavy blonde hair and pushed it back from her temples. It was a fretful, unconscious gesture that reminded Trent achingly of his dad, whose hair had been that exact same shade.

"I feel like something's going to happen, Trent, only I don't know what, and it's like being in a nightmare you can't get all the way out of. Does it feel like that to you sometimes?"

“A little, yeah. But I *know* something’s going to happen. I might even know what.”

She bolted to a sitting position and grabbed his hands. “You *know*? What? What is it?”

“I can’t be sure,” Trent said, getting up. “I *think* I know, but I’m not ready to say what I think yet. I have to do some more looking.”

“If we drill many more holes, the house is apt to fall down!”

“I didn’t say *drilling*, I said *looking*.”

“Looking for *what*?”

“For something that isn’t here yet—that hasn’t grown yet. But when it does, I don’t think it will be able to hide.”

“*Tell* me, Trent!”

“Not yet,” he said, and planted a small, quick kiss on her cheek. “Besides—curiosity killed the Sprat.”

“I *hate* you!” she cried in a low voice, and flopped back down with the sheet over her head. But she felt better for having talked with Trent, and slept better than she had for a week.

• • •

Trent found what he was looking for two days before the big party. As the oldest, he perhaps should have noticed that his mother had begun to look alarmingly unhealthy, her skin drawn shiny over her cheekbones, her complexion so pale it had taken on an ugly yellow underlight. He should have noticed how often she was rubbing at her temples, although she denied—almost in a panic—that she had a migraine, or *had* had one for over a week.

He did not notice these things, however. He was too busy looking.

In the four or five days between his after-bedtime talk with Laurie and the day he found what he was looking for, he went through every closet in the big old house at least three times; through the crawlspace above Lew’s study five or six times; through the big old cellar half a dozen times.

It was in the cellar that he finally found it.

This was not to say he hadn’t found peculiar things in other places; he most certainly had. There was a knob of stainless steel poking out of the ceiling of a

second-floor closet. A curved metal armature of some kind had burst through the side of the luggage-closet on the third floor. It was a dim, polished gray . . . until he touched it. When he did that, it flushed a dusky rose color, and he heard a faint but powerful humming sound deep in the wall. He snatched his hand back as if the armature had been hot (and at first, when it turned a color he associated with the burners on the electric stove, he could have sworn it was). When he did that, the curved metal thing went gray again. The humming stopped at once.

The day before, in the attic, he had observed a cobweb of thin, interlaced cables growing in a low dark corner under the eave. Trent had been crawling around on his hands and knees, not doing anything but getting hot and dirty, when he had suddenly spied this amazing phenomenon. He froze in place, staring through a tangle of hair as the cables spun themselves out of nothing at all (or so it looked, anyway), met, wrapped around each other so tightly they seemed to merge, and then continued spreading until they reached the floor, where they drilled in and anchored themselves in dreamy little puffs of sawdust. They seemed to be creating some sort of limber bracework, and it looked as if it would be *very* strong, able to hold the house together through a lot of buffeting and hard knocks.

*What* buffeting, though?

*What* hard knocks?

Again, Trent thought he knew. It was hard to believe, but he thought he knew.

There was a little closet at the north end of the cellar, far beyond the workshop area and the furnace. Their real father had called this “the wine-cellar,” and although he’d put up only about two dozen bottles of plonk (this word had always made their mother giggle), they were all carefully stored in crisscrossing racks he had made himself.

Lew came in here even less frequently than he went into the workshop; he didn’t drink wine. And although their mother had often taken a glass or two with their dad, she no longer drank wine either. Trent remembered how sad her face had looked the one time Bri had asked her why she never had a glass of plonk in front of the fire anymore.

“Lew doesn’t approve of drinking,” she had told Brian. “He says it’s a crutch.”

There was a padlock on the wine-cellar door, but it was only there to make sure the door didn’t swing open and let in the heat from the furnace. The key hung right next to it, but Trent didn’t need it. He’d left the padlock undone after his first investigation, and no one had come along to press it shut since then. So far as he knew, no one came to this end of the cellar at all anymore.

He was not much surprised by the sour whiff of spilled wine that greeted him as he approached the door; it was just another proof of what he and Laurie already knew—the changes were winding themselves quietly all through the house. He opened the door, and although what he saw frightened him, it didn’t really surprise him.

Metal constructions had burst through two of the wine-cellar’s walls, tearing apart the racks with their diamond-shaped compartments and pushing the bottles of Bollinger and Mondavi and Battiglia onto the floor, where they had broken.

Like the cables in the attic crawlspace, whatever was forming here—growing, to use Laurie’s word—hadn’t finished yet. It spun itself into being in sheens of light that hurt Trent’s eyes and made him feel a little sick to his stomach.

No cables here, however, and no curved struts. What was growing in his real father’s forgotten wine-cellar looked like cabinets and consoles and instrument panels. And, as he looked, vague shapes humped themselves up in the metal like the heads of excited snakes, gained focus, became dials and levers and read-outs. There were a few blinking lights. Some of these actually began to blink as he looked at them.

A low sighing sound accompanied this act of creation.

Trent took one cautious step farther into the little room; an especially bright red light, or series of them, had caught his eye. He sneezed as he stepped forward—the machines and consoles pushing across the old concrete had stirred up a great deal of dust.

The lights which had snagged his attention were numbers. They were under a glass strip on a metal construct which was spinning its way out of a console. This new thing looked like some sort of chair, although no one sitting in it

would have been very comfortable. At least, no one with a *human* shape, Trent thought with a little shiver.

The glass strip was in one of the arms of this twisted chair—if it *was* a chair. And the numbers had perhaps caught his eye because they were moving.

72:34:18

became

72:34:17

and then

72:34:16.

Trent looked at his watch, which had a sweep second hand, and used it to confirm what his eyes had already told him. The chair might or might not really be a chair, but the numbers under the glass strip were a digital clock. It was running backward. Counting down, to be perfectly accurate. And what would happen when that read-out finally went from

00:00:01

to

00:00:00

some three days from this very afternoon?

He was pretty sure he knew. Every American boy knows one of two things happen when a backward-running clock finally reads zeros across the board: an explosion or a lift-off.

Trent thought there was too much equipment, too many gadgets, for it to be an explosion.

He thought something had gotten into the house while they were in England. Some sort of spore, perhaps, that had drifted through space for a billion years before being caught in the gravitational pull of the earth, spiraling down through the atmosphere like a bit of milkweed fluff caught in a mild breeze, and finally falling into the chimney of a house in Titusville, Indiana.

Into the *Bradburys'* house in Titusville, Indiana.

It might have been something else entirely, of course, but the spore idea *felt* right to Trent, and although he was the oldest of the Bradbury kids, he was still young enough to sleep well after eating a pepperoni pizza at 9:00 P.M., and to believe completely in his own perceptions and intuitions. And in the end, it didn't really matter, did it? What *mattered* was what had *happened*.

And, of course, what was *going* to happen.

When Trent left the wine-cellar this time, he not only snapped the padlock's arm closed, he took the key as well.

• • •

Something terrible happened at Lew's faculty party. It happened at quarter of nine, only forty-five minutes or so after the first guests arrived, and Trent and Laurie later heard Lew shouting at their mother that the only goddam consideration she had shown him was getting up to her foolishness early—if she'd waited until ten o'clock or so, there would have been fifty or more people circulating through the living room, dining room, kitchen, and back parlor.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Trent and Laurie heard him yelling at her, and when Trent felt Laurie's hand creep into his like a small cold mouse, he held it tightly. "Don't you know what people are going to say about this? Don't you know how people in the department *talk*? I mean, *really*, Catherine—it was like something out of the Three Stooges!"

Their mother's only reply was soft, helpless sobbing, and for just one moment Trent felt a horrible, unwilling burst of hate for her. Why had she married him in the first place? Didn't she deserve this for being such a fool?

Ashamed of himself, he pushed the thought away, made it gone, and turned to Laurie. He was appalled to see tears pouring down her cheeks, and the mute sorrow in her eyes went to his heart like a knife-blade.

"Great party, huh?" she whispered, scrubbing at her cheeks with the heels of her palms.

"Right, Sprat," he said, and hugged her so she could cry against his shoulder without being heard. "It'll make my top-ten list at the end of the year, no sweat."

• • •

It seemed that Catherine Evans (who had never wished more bitterly to be Catherine Bradbury again) had been lying to everyone. She had been in the grip of a screaming-blue migraine for not just a day or two days this time but for the last two weeks. During that time she had eaten next to nothing and lost

fifteen pounds. She had been serving canapés to Stephen Krutchmer, the head of the History Department, and his wife when the colors went out of everything and the world suddenly swam away from her. She had rolled bonelessly forward, spilling a whole tray of Chinese pork rolls onto the front of Mrs. Krutchmer's expensive Norma Kamali dress, which had been purchased for just this occasion.

Brian and Lissa had heard the commotion and had come creeping down the stairs in their pajamas to see what was going on, although both of them—all four children, for that matter—had been strictly forbidden by Daddy Lew to leave the upper floors of the house once the party began. “University people don't like to see children at faculty parties,” Lew had explained brusquely that afternoon. “It sends all sorts of mixed signals.”

When they saw their mother on the floor in a circle of kneeling, concerned faculty members (Mrs. Krutchmer was not there; she had run for the kitchen, wanting to get some cold water on the front of her dress before the sauce-stains could set) they had forgotten their stepfather's firm order and had run in, Lissa crying, Brian bellowing in excited dismay. Lissa managed to kick the head of Asian Studies in the left kidney. Brian, who was two years older and thirty pounds heavier, did even better: he knocked the fall semester's guest lecturer, a plump babe in a pink dress and curly-toed evening slippers, smack into the fireplace. She sat there, dazed, in a large puff of gray-black ashes.

“Mom! Mommy!” Brian cried, shaking the former Catherine Bradbury. “*Mommy!* Wake up!”

Mrs. Evans stirred and moaned.

“Get upstairs,” Lew said coldly. “Both of you.”

When they showed no signs of obeying, Lew put his hand on Lissa's shoulder and tightened it until she squeaked with pain. His eyes blazed at her out of a face which had gone dead pale except for red spots as bright as dime-store rouge in the center of each cheek.

“I'll take care of this,” he said through teeth so tightly clamped they refused to entirely unlock even to speak. “You and your brother go upstairs right n—”

“Take your hand off her, you son of a bitch,” Trent said clearly.

Lew—and all the party-goers who had arrived early enough to witness this entertaining sideshow—turned toward the archway between the living room

and the hallway. Trent and Laurie stood there, side by side. Trent was as pale as his stepfather, but his face was calm and set. There were people at the party—not many but a few—who had known Catherine Evans's first husband, and they agreed later that the resemblance between father and son was extraordinary. That it was, in fact, almost as though Bill Bradbury had come back from the dead to confront his ill-tempered replacement.

"I want you to go upstairs," Lew said. "All four of you. There's nothing here to concern you. Nothing to concern you at all."

Mrs. Krutchmer had come back into the room, the bosom of her Norma Kamali damp but reasonably free of stains.

"Get your hand off Lissa," Trent said.

"And get away from our mother," Laurie said.

Now Mrs. Evans was sitting up, her hands to her head, looking around dazedly. The headache had popped like a balloon, leaving her disoriented and weak but at last out of the agony she had endured for the last fourteen days. She knew she had done something terrible, embarrassed Lew, perhaps even *disgraced* him, but for the moment she was too grateful that the pain had stopped to care. The shame would come later. Now she only wanted to go upstairs—very slowly—and lie down.

"You'll be punished for this," Lew said, looking at his four stepchildren in the nearly perfect shocked silence of the living room. He didn't look at them all at once but one at a time, as if marking the nature and extent of each crime. When his gaze fell on Lissa, she began to cry. "I'm sorry for their misbehavior," he said to the room at large. "My wife is a bit lax with them, I'm afraid. What they need is a good English nanny—"

"Don't be a jackass, Lew," Mrs. Krutchmer said. Her voice was very loud but not very tuneful; she sounded a bit like a jackass in full bray herself. Brian jumped, clutched his sister, and also gave way to tears. "Your wife fainted. They were concerned, that's all."

"Quite right, too," the guest lecturer said, struggling to extract her considerable bulk from the fireplace. Her pink dress was now a splotchy gray and her face was streaked with soot. Only her shoes with their absurd but engaging curly tips seemed to have escaped, but she looked quite unperturbed

by the whole thing. "Children *should* care about their mothers. And husbands about their wives."

She looked pointedly at Lew Evans as she said this last, but Lew missed her gaze; he was marking Trent and Laurie's progress as they assisted their mother up the stairs. Lissa and Brian trailed along behind, like an honor guard.

The party went on. The incident was more or less papered over, as unpleasant incidents at faculty parties usually are. Mrs. Evans (who had slept three hours a night at most since her husband had announced his intention of throwing a party) was asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow, and the children heard Lew downstairs, booming out *bonhomie* without her. Trent suspected that he was even a little relieved not to have to contend with his scurrying, frightened mouse of a wife anymore.

He never once broke away to come up and check on her.

Not once. Not until the party was over.

After the last guest had been shown out, he walked heavily upstairs and told her to wake up . . . which she did, obedient in this as she had been in everything else since the day when she had made the mistake of telling the minister she did and Lew that she would.

Lew poked his head into Trent's room next and measured the children with his gaze.

"I knew you'd all be in here," he said with a satisfied little nod. "Conspiring. You're going to be punished, you know. Yes indeed. Tomorrow. Tonight I want you to go right to bed and think about it. Now go to your rooms. And no creeping around, either."

Neither Lissa nor Brian did any "creeping around," certainly; they were too exhausted and emotionally wrung out to do anything but go to bed and fall immediately asleep. But Laurie came back down to Trent's room in spite of "Daddy Lew," and the two of them listened in silent dismay as their stepfather upbraided their mother for daring to faint at *his* party. . . and as their mother wept and offered not a word of argument or even demurral.

"Oh, Trent, what are we going to do?" Laurie asked, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

Trent's face was extraordinarily pale and still. "Do?" he said. "Why, we're not going to do anything, Sprat."

“We *have* to! Trent, we *have* to! We have to help her!”

“No, we don’t,” Trent said. A small and somehow terrible smile played around his lips. “The house is going to do it for us.” He looked at his watch and calculated. “At around three-thirty-four tomorrow afternoon, the house is going to do it all.”

• • •

There were no punishments in the morning; Lew Evans was too preoccupied with his eight o’clock seminar on Consequences of the Norman Conquest. Neither Trent nor Laurie was very surprised at this, but both were extremely grateful. He told them he would see them in his study that night, one by one, and “mete a few fair strokes to each.” Once this threat in the form of an obscure quotation had been given, he marched out with his head up and his briefcase clasped firmly in his right hand. Their mother was still asleep when his Porsche snarled its way down the street.

The two younger kids were standing by the kitchen with their arms around each other, looking to Laurie like an illustration from a Grimm’s fairytale. Lissa was crying. Brian was keeping a stiff upper lip, at least so far, but he was pale and there were purple pouches under his eyes. “He’ll spank us,” Brian said to Trent. “And he spans *hard*, too.”

“Nope,” Trent said. They looked at him hopefully but dubiously. Lew had, after all, *promised* spankings; even Trent was not to be spared this painful indignity.

“But, Trent—” Lissa began.

“Listen to me,” Trent said, pulling a chair out from the table and sitting on it backward in front of the two little ones. “Listen carefully, and don’t you miss a single word. It’s important, and none of us can screw up.”

They stared at him silently with their big green-blue eyes.

“As soon as school is out, I want you two to come right home. . . but only as far as the corner. The corner of Maple and Walnut. Have you got that?”

“Ye-ess,” Lissa said hesitantly. “But why, Trent?”

“Never mind,” Trent said. His own eyes—also green-blue—were sparkling, but Laurie thought it wasn’t a good-humored sparkle; she thought, in fact, that

there was something dangerous about it. “Just be there. Stand by the mailbox. You have to be there by three o’clock, three-fifteen at the *latest*. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Brian said, speaking for both of them. “We got it.”

“Laurie and I will already be there, or we’ll be there right after you get there.”

“How are we going to do that, Trent?” Laurie asked. “We don’t even get out of school until three o’clock, and I have band practice, and the bus takes—”

“We’re not *going* to school today,” Trent said.

“No?” Laurie was nonplussed.

Lissa was horrified. “Trent!” she said. “You can’t do that! That’s . . . that’s . . . *hookey!*”

“And about time, too,” Trent said grimly. “Now you two get ready for school. Just remember, the corner of Maple and Walnut at three o’clock, three-fifteen at the absolute latest. And whatever you do, *don’t come all the way home.*” He stared at Brian and Lissa so fiercely that they looked back with frightened dismay, drawing together for mutual comfort once again. Even Laurie was frightened. “Wait for us, but don’t you *dare* come back into this house,” he said. “Not for *anything.*”

• • •

When the little kids were gone, Laurie seized his shirt and demanded to know what was going on.

“It has something to do with what’s growing in the house, I *know* it does, and if you want me to play hookey and help you, you better tell me what it is, Trent Bradbury!”

“Mellow out, I’ll tell you,” Trent said. He carefully removed his shirt from Laurie’s tight grip. “And quiet down. I don’t want you to wake up Mom. She’ll make us go to school, and that’s no good.”

“Well, what *is* it? Tell me!”

“Come on downstairs,” Trent said. “I want to show you something.”

He led her downstairs to the wine-cellar.

• • •

Trent wasn't completely sure Laurie would ride along with what he had in mind—it seemed awfully . . . well, *final* . . . even to him—but she did. If it had just been a matter of enduring a spanking from “Daddy Lew,” he didn't think she would have, but Laurie had been as deeply affected by the sight of her mother lying senseless on the living-room floor as Trent had been by his stepfather's unfeeling reaction to it.

“Yeah,” Laurie said bleakly. “I think we have to.” She was looking at the blinking numbers on the arm of the chair. They now read

07:49:21.

The wine-cellar was no longer a wine-cellar at all. It stank of wine, true enough, and there were the piles of shattered green glass on the floor amid the twisted ruins of their father's wine-racks, but it now looked like a madman's version of the control-bridge on the Starship *Enterprise*. Dials whirled. Digital read-outs flickered, changed, flickered again. Lights blinked and flashed.

“Yeah,” Trent said. “I think so, too. That son of a bitch, shouting at her like that!”

“Trent, don't.”

“He's a jerk! A bastard! A dickhead!”

But this was just a foul-mouthed version of whistling past the graveyard, and both of them knew it. Looking at the strange agglomeration of instruments and controls made Trent feel almost sick with doubt and unease. He was reminded of a book his dad had read him when he was a child, a Mercer Mayer story where a creature called a Stamp-Eating Trollusk had popped a little girl into an envelope and mailed her To Whom It May Concern. Wasn't that pretty much what he was proposing they do to Lew Evans?

“If we don't do something, he'll kill her,” Laurie said in a low voice.

“*Huh?*” Trent whipped his head around so fast it hurt his neck, but Laurie wasn't looking at him. She was looking at the red numbers of the countdown. They reflected backward off the lenses of the spectacles she wore on schooldays. She seemed almost hypnotized, unaware Trent was looking at her, perhaps even unaware that he was there.

“Not on purpose,” she said. “He might even be sad. For awhile, anyway. Because I think he *does* love her, sort of, and she loves him. You know—sort of.

But he'll make her worse and worse. She'll get sick all the time, and then . . . one day . . .”

She broke off and looked at him, and something in her face scared Trent worse than anything in their strange, changing, *sneaking* house had been able to do.

“Tell me, Trent,” she said. Her hand grasped his arm. It was very cold. “Tell me how we’re going to do it.”

• • •

They went up to Lew’s study together. Trent was prepared to ransack the place if that was what it took, but they found the key in the top drawer, tucked neatly into an envelope with the word STUDY printed on it in Lew’s small, neat, somehow hemorrhoidal printing. Trent pocketed it. They left the house together just as the shower on the second floor went on, meaning their mom was up.

They spent the day in the park. Although neither of them spoke of it, it was the longest day either of them had ever lived through. Twice they saw the beat-cop and hid in the public toilets until he was gone. This was no time to be caught playing truant and bundled off to school.

At two-thirty, Trent gave Laurie a quarter and walked her to the phone booth on the east side of the park.

“Do I have to?” she asked. “I hate to scare her, especially after last night.”

“Do you want her in the house when whatever happens, happens?” Trent asked. Laurie dropped the quarter into the telephone with no further protest.

It rang so many times that she became sure their mother had gone out. That might be good, but it might also be bad. It was certainly worrisome. If she was out it was entirely possible that she might come back before—

“Trent I don’t think she’s h—”

“Hello?” Mrs. Evans said in a sleepy voice.

“Oh, hi, Mom,” Laurie said. “I didn’t think you were there.”

“I went back to bed,” she said with an embarrassed little laugh. “I can’t seem to get enough sleep, all of a sudden. I suppose if I’m asleep I can’t think about how horrible I was last night—”

“Oh, Mom, you weren’t horrible. When a person faints, it isn’t because she *wants* to—”

“Laurie, why are you calling? Is everything okay?”

“Sure, Mom . . . well . . .”

Trent poked her in the ribs. Hard.

Laurie, who had been slumping (growing smaller, it almost seemed), straightened up in a hurry. “I hurt myself in gym. Just. . . you know, a little. It’s not bad.”

“What did you do? Jesus, you’re not calling from the hospital, are you?”

“Gosh, no,” Laurie said hastily. “It’s just a sprained knee. Mrs. Kitt asked if you could come and bring me home early. I don’t know if I can walk on it. It really hurts.”

“I’ll come right away. Try not to move it at all, honey. You could have torn a ligament. Is the nurse there?”

“Not right now. Don’t worry, Mom, I’ll be careful.”

“Will you be in the nurse’s office?”

“Yes,” Laurie said. Her face was as red as the side of Brian’s Radio Flyer wagon.

“I’ll be right there.”

“Thanks, Mom. Bye.”

She hung up and looked at Trent. She drew in a deep breath and then let it out in a long, trembly sigh.

“That was fun,” she said in a voice which was close to tears.

He hugged her tight. “You did great,” he said. “Lots better than I could have, Spr—Laurie. I’m not sure she would have believed me.”

“I wonder if she’ll ever believe *me* again?” Laurie asked bitterly.

“She will,” Trent said. “Come on.”

They went over to the west side of the park, where they could watch Walnut Street. The day had turned cold and dim. Thunderheads were forming overhead, and a chilly wind was blowing. They waited for five endless minutes and then their mother’s Subaru passed them, heading rapidly toward Greendowne Middle School, where Trent and Laurie went . . . *where we go when we’re not playing hookey, that is*, Laurie thought.

“She’s really humming,” Trent said. “I hope she doesn’t get into an accident, or something.”

“Too late to worry about that now. Come on.” Laurie had Trent’s hand and was pulling him back to the telephone kiosk again. “*You* get to call Lew, you lucky devil.”

He put in another quarter and punched the number of the History Department office, referring to a card he had taken from his wallet. He had barely slept a wink the night before, but now that things were set in motion, he found himself cool and calm. . . so cool, in fact, that he was almost refrigerated. He glanced at his watch. Quarter to three. Less than an hour to go. Thunder rumbled faintly in the west.

“History Department,” a woman’s voice said.

“Hi. This is Trent Bradbury. I need to speak with my stepfather, Lewis Evans, please.”

“Professor Evans is in class,” the secretary said, “but he’ll be out at—”

“I know, he’s got Modern British History until three-thirty. But you better get him, just the same. It’s an emergency. It concerns his wife.” A pointed, calculated pause, and then he added: “My mom.”

There was a long pause, and Trent felt a moment of faint alarm. It was as if she were thinking of refusing or dismissing him, emergency or no emergency, and that was most definitely not in the plan.

“He’s in Oglethorpe, right next door,” she said finally. “I’ll get him myself. I’ll have him call home as soon as—”

“No, I have to hold on,” Trent said.

“But—”

“Please, will you just stop goofing with me and go get him?” he asked, allowing a ragged, harried note into his voice. It wasn’t hard.

“All right,” the secretary said. It was impossible to tell if she was more disgruntled or worried. “If you could tell me the nature of the—”

“No,” Trent said.

There was an offended sniff, and then he was on hold.

“Well?” Laurie asked. She was dancing from foot to foot like someone who needs to go to the bathroom.

“I’m on hold. They’re getting him.”

“What if he doesn’t come?”

Trent shrugged. “Then we’re sunk. But he’ll come. You wait and see.” He wished he could be as confident as he sounded, but he *did* still believe this would work. It *had* to work.

“We left it until awful late.”

Trent nodded. They *had* left it until awful late, and Laurie knew why. The study door was solid oak, plenty strong, but neither of them knew anything about the lock. Trent wanted to make sure Lew had only the shortest time possible to test it.

“What if he sees Brian and Lissie on the corner when he comes home?”

“If he gets as hot under the collar as I think he will, he wouldn’t notice them if they were on stilts and wearing Day-Glo duncecaps,” Trent said.

“Why doesn’t he answer the darn *phone*?” Laurie asked, looking at her watch.

“He will,” Trent said, and then their stepfather did.

“Hello?”

“It’s Trent, Lew. Mom’s in your study. Her headache must have come back, because she fainted. I can’t wake her up. You better come home right away.”

Trent was not surprised at his stepfather’s first stated object of concern—it was, in fact, an integral part of his plan—but it still made him so angry his fingers turned white on the telephone.

“My study? My *study*? What the hell was she doing in there?”

In spite of his anger, Trent’s voice came out calmly. “Cleaning, I think.” And then tossed the ultimate bait to a man who cared a great deal more for work than wife: “There are papers all over the floor.”

“I’ll be right there,” Lew rapped, and then added: “If there are any windows open in there, shut them, for God’s sake. There’s a storm coming.” He hung up without saying goodbye.

“Well?” Laurie asked as Trent hung up.

“He’s on his way,” Trent said, and laughed grimly. “The son of a bitch was so stirred up he didn’t even ask what I was doing home from school. Come on.”

They ran back to the intersection of Maple and Walnut. The sky had grown very dark now, and the sound of thunder had become almost constant. As they

reached the blue U.S. mailbox on the corner, the streetlights along Maple Street began to come on two by two, marching away from them up the hill.

Lissa and Brian hadn't arrived yet.

"I want to come with you, Trent," Laurie said, but her face proclaimed her a liar. It was very pale, and her eyes were too large, swimming with unshed tears.

"No way," Trent said. "Wait here for Brian and Lissa."

At their names, Laurie turned and looked down Walnut Street. She saw two kids coming, hurrying along with lunchboxes bouncing in their hands. Although they were too far away to make out faces, she was pretty sure it was them, and she told Trent.

"Good. The three of you go behind Mrs. Redland's hedge there and wait for Lew to pass. Then you can come up the street, *but don't go in the house and don't let them, either.* Wait for me outside."

"I'm afraid, Trent." The tears had begun to spill down her cheeks now.

"Me too, Sprat," he said, and kissed her swiftly on the forehead. "But it'll all be over soon."

Before she could say anything else, Trent went running up the street toward the Bradburys' house on Maple Street. He glanced at his watch as he ran. It was twelve past three.

• • •

The house had a still, hot air that scared him. It was as if gunpowder had been spilled in every corner, and people he could not see were standing by to light unseen fuses. He imagined the clock in the wine-cellar ticking relentlessly away, now reading

00:19:06.

What if Lew *was* late?

No time to worry about that now.

Trent raced up to the third floor through the still, combustible air. He imagined he could feel the house stirring now, coming alive as the countdown neared its conclusion. He tried to tell himself that imagination was *all* it was, but part of him knew better.

He went into Lew's study, opened two or three file-cabinets and desk drawers at random, and threw the papers he found all over the floor. This took only a few moments, but he was just finishing when he heard the Porsche coming up the street. Its engine wasn't snarling today; Lew had wound it up to a scream.

Trent stepped out of the office and into the shadows of the third-floor hallway, where they had drilled the first holes what seemed like a century ago. He rammed his hand into his pocket for the key, and his pocket was empty except for an old, crumpled lunch-ticket.

*I must have lost it running up the street. It must have bounced right out of my pocket.*

He stood there, sweating and frozen, as the Porsche squealed into the driveway. Its engine cut out. The driver's door opened and slammed shut. Lew's footsteps ran for the back door. Thunder crumpled like an artillery shell in the sky, a stroke of bright lightning forked through the gloom, and, somewhere deep in the house, a powerful motor turned over, uttered a low, muffled bark, and then began to hum.

*Jesus, oh dear Jesus, what do I do? What CAN I do? He's bigger than me! If I try to hit him over the head, he'll—*

He had slipped his left hand into his other pocket, and his thoughts broke off as it touched the old-fashioned metal teeth of the key. At some point during the long afternoon in the park, he must have transferred it from one pocket to the other without even being aware of it.

Gasping, heart galloping in his stomach and throat as well as in his chest, Trent faded back down the hall to the luggage-closet, stepped inside, and pulled the accordion-style doors most of the way shut in front of him.

Lew was galumphing up the stairs, bawling his wife's name over and over at the top of his voice. Trent saw him appear, hair standing up in spikes (he must have been running a hand through it as he drove), his tie askew, big drops of sweat standing out on his broad, intelligent forehead, eyes squinted down to furious little slits.

*"Catherine!"* he bawled, and ran down the hall into the office.

Before he could even get all the way in, Trent was out of the luggage-closet and running soundlessly back down the hall. He would have just one chance.

If he missed the keyhole . . . if the tumblers failed to turn at the first twist of the key . . .

*If either of those things happens, I'll fight with him, he had time to think. If I can't send him alone, I'll make damn sure to take him with me.*

He grabbed the door and banged it shut so hard that a little film of dust shot out of the cracks between the hinges. He caught one glimpse of Lew's startled face. Then the key was in the lock. He twisted it, and the bolt shot across an instant before Lew struck the door.

"Hey!" Lew shouted. "Hey, you little bastard, what are you doing? Where's Catherine? Let me out of here!"

The knob twisted fruitlessly back and forth. Then it stopped, and Lew rained a fusillade of blows on the door.

*"Let me out of here right now Trent Bradbury before you get the worst beating of your goddamned life!"*

Trent backed slowly across the hall. When his shoulders struck the far wall, he gasped. The key to the study, which he had removed from the keyhole without even thinking about it, dropped from his fingers and thumped to the faded hall-runner between his feet. Now that it was done, reaction set in. The world began to look wavery, as if he were under water, and he had to fight to keep from fainting himself. Only now, with Lew locked in, his mother sent off on a wild-goose chase, and the other kids safely tucked away behind Mrs. Redland's overgrown yew hedge, did he realize that he had never really expected it would work at all. If "Daddy Lew" was surprised to find himself locked in, Trent Bradbury was absolutely amazed.

The doorknob of the study twisted back and forth in short sharp half-circles.

*"LET ME OUT, GODDAMMIT!"*

"I'll let you out at quarter of four, Lew," Trent said in an uneven, trembling voice, and then a little giggle escaped him. "If you're still *here* at quarter of four, that is."

Then, from downstairs: "Trent? Trent, are you all right?"

Dear God, that was Laurie.

"Are you, Trent?"

And Lissa!

“Hey, Trent! Y’okay?”

And Brian.

Trent looked at his watch and was horrified to see it was 3:31. . . going on 3:32. *And suppose his watch was slow?*

“*Get out!*” he screamed at them, plunging down the hallway toward the stairs. “*Get out of this house!*”

The third-floor hallway seemed to stretch out before him like taffy; the faster he ran, the farther it seemed to stretch ahead of him. Lew rained blows on the door and curses on the air; thunder boomed; and from deep within the house came the ever-more-urgent sound of machines waking to life.

He reached the stairwell at last and hurried down, his upper body so far out in front of his legs that he almost fell. Then he was whirling around the newel post and hurtling down the flight of stairs between the second floor and the first, toward where his brother and two sisters waited, looking up at him.

“*Out!*” he screamed, grabbing them, shoving them toward the open door and the stormy blackness outside. “*Quick!*”

“Trent, what’s happening?” Brian asked. “What’s happening to the *house*? It’s *shaking!*”

It was, too—a deep vibration that rose up through the floor and rattled Trent’s eyeballs in their sockets. Plaster-dust began to sift down into his hair.

“*No time! Out! Fast! Laurie, help me!*”

Trent swept Brian into his arms. Laurie grabbed Lissa under the arms of her dress and stumbled out the door with her.

Thunder bammed. Lightning twisted across the sky. The wind that had been gasping earlier now began to roar like a dragon.

Trent heard an earthquake building under the house. As he ran out through the door with Brian, he saw electric-blue light, so bright it left afterimages on his eyes for almost an hour (he reflected later he was lucky not to have been blinded), shoot out through the narrow cellar windows. It cut across the lawn in rays that looked almost solid. He heard the glass break. And, just as he passed through the door, he felt the house *rising* under his feet.

He jumped down the front steps and grabbed Laurie’s arm. They stumble-staggered down the walk to the street, which was now as black as night with the coming of the storm.

There they turned back and watched it happen.

The house on Maple Street seemed to gather itself. It no longer looked straight and solid; it seemed to jitter, like a comic-strip picture of a man on a pogo-stick. Huge cracks ran out from it, not only in the cement walk but in the earth surrounding it. The lawn pulled apart in huge pie-shaped curves of grass. Roots strained blackly upward below the green, and the whole front yard seemed to become bubble-shaped, as if it were straining to hold the house before which it had spread so long.

Trent cast his eyes up to the third floor, where the light in Lew's study still shone. Trent thought the sound of breaking glass had come—was *still* coming—from up there, then dismissed the idea as imagination—how could he hear *anything* in all that racket? It was only a year later that Laurie told him she was quite sure she had heard their stepfather screaming from up there.

The foundation of the house first crumbled, then cracked, then sundered with a croak of exploding mortar. Brilliant cold blue fire lanced out. The children covered their eyes and staggered back. The engines screamed. The earth pulled up and up in a last agonized holding action . . . and then let go. Suddenly the house was a foot above the ground, resting on a pad of bright blue fire.

It was a perfect lift-off.

Atop the center roofpeak, the weathervane spun madly.

The house rose slowly at first, then began to gather speed. It thundered upward on its flaring pad of blue fire, the front door clapping madly back and forth as it went.

“My toys!” Brian bleated, and Trent began to laugh wildly.

The house reached a height of thirty yards, seemed to poise itself for its great leap upward, then *blasted* into the rushing spate of night-black clouds.

It was gone.

Two shingles came floating down like large black leaves.

“Look out, Trent!” Laurie cried out a second or two later, and shoved him hard enough to knock him over. The rubber-backed WELCOME mat thwacked into the street where he had been standing.

Trent looked at Laurie. Laurie looked back.

“That would’ve smarted like big blue heck if it’d hit you on the head,” she told him, “so you just better not call me Sprat anymore, Trent.”

He looked at her solemnly for several seconds, then began to giggle. Laurie joined in. So did the little ones. Brian took one of Trent’s hands; Lissa took the other. They helped pull him to his feet, and then the four of them stood together, looking at the smoking cellar-hole in the middle of the shattered lawn. People were coming out of their houses now, but the Bradbury children ignored them. Or perhaps it would be truer to say the Bradbury children didn’t know they were there at all.

“Wow,” Brian said reverently. “Our house took off, Trent.”

“Yeah,” Trent said.

“Maybe wherever it’s going, there’ll be people who want to know about the Normans and the Sexies,” Lissa said.

Trent and Laurie put their arms around each other and began to shriek with mingled laughter and horror . . . and that was when the rain began to pelt down.

Mr. Slattery from across the street joined them. He didn’t have much hair, but what he did have was plastered to his gleaming skull in tight little bunches.

“*What happened?*” he screamed over the thunder, which was almost constant now. “*What happened here?*”

Trent let go of his sister and looked at Mr. Slattery. “True Space Adventures,” he said solemnly, and that set them all off again.

Mr. Slattery cast a doubtful, frightened look at the empty cellar-hole, decided discretion was the better part of valor, and retreated to his side of the street. Although it was still pouring buckets, he did not invite the Bradbury children to join him. Nor did they care. They sat down on the curb, Trent and Laurie in the middle, Brian and Lissa on the sides.

Laurie leaned toward Trent and whispered in his ear: “We’re free.”

“It’s better than that,” Trent said. “*She* is.”

Then he put his arms around all of them—by stretching, he could just manage—and they sat on the curb in the pouring rain and waited for their mother to come home.

## The Fifth Quarter

I parked the heap around the corner from Keenan's house, sat in the dark for a moment, then turned off the key and got out. When I slammed the door, I could hear rust flaking off the rocker panels and dropping onto the street. It wasn't going to be like that much longer.

The gun was in a bandolier holster and lay against my ribcage like a fist. It was Barney's .45, and I was glad of that. It lent the whole crazy business a touch of irony. Maybe even a sense of justice.

Keenan's house was an architectural monstrosity spread over a quarter-acre of land, all slanting angles and steep-sloped roofs behind an iron fence. He'd left the gate unlocked, as I'd hoped. Earlier I'd seen him calling someone from the living room, and a hunch too strong to deny told me it had been either Jagger or the Sarge. Probably the Sarge. The waiting was over; this was my night.

I walked to the driveway, staying close to the shrubbery and listening for any strange sound over the cutting whine of the January wind. There wasn't any. It was Friday night, and Keenan's sleep-in maid would be out having a jolly time at somebody's Tupperware party. Nobody home but that bastard Keenan. Waiting for the Sarge. Waiting—although he didn't know it yet—for me.

The carport was open and I slipped inside. The ebony shadow of Keenan's Impala loomed. I tried the back door. The car was also open. Keenan wasn't cut out to be a villain, I reflected; he was much too trusting. I got in the car, sat down, and waited.

Now I could hear the faint sound of jazz on the wind, very quiet, very good. Miles Davis, maybe. Keenan listening to Miles Davis and holding a gin fizz in one manicured hand. Nice for him.

It was a long wait. The hands on my watch crawled from eight-thirty to nine to ten. Time for a lot of thinking. I mostly thought about Barney, and that wasn't strictly a matter of choice. I thought about how he looked in that

small boat when I found him, staring up at me and making meaningless cawing noises. He'd been adrift for two days and looked like a boiled lobster. There was black blood encrusted across his midsection where he'd been shot.

He'd steered toward the cottage as best he could, but still it had been mostly luck. Lucky he'd gotten there, lucky he could still talk for a little while. I'd had a fistful of sleeping pills ready if he couldn't talk. I didn't want him to suffer. Not unless there was a reason for it, anyway. As it turned out, there was. He had a story to tell, a real whopper, and he told me almost all of it.

When he was dead, I went back to the boat and got his .45. It was hidden aft in a small compartment, wrapped in a waterproof pouch. Then I towed his boat out into deep water and sank it. If I could have put an epitaph over his head, it would have been the one about how there's a sucker born every minute. Most of them are pretty nice guys, too, I bet—just like Barney. Instead, I started trying to find the men who capped him. It had taken six months to find Keenan and to ascertain that Sarge was, at least, somewhere close by, but I'm a persistent little pup, and here I was.

At ten-twenty, headlights splashed up the curving driveway and I lay on the floor of the Impala. The newcomer drove into the carport, snuggling up close to Keenan's car. It sounded like one of the old Volkswagens. The little engine died and I could hear Sarge grunting softly as he fought his way out of the little car. The porch light went on, and the sound of the door clicking open came to me.

Keenan: "Sarge! You're late! Come on in and have a drink."

Sarge: "Scotch."

I'd unrolled the window before. Now I stuck Barney's .45 through it, holding the stock with both hands. "Stand still," I said.

The Sarge was halfway up the porch steps. Keenan, the perfect host, had come out and was looking down at him, waiting for him to come up so he could after-you him into the house. They were both perfect silhouettes in the light spilling through from inside. I doubted if they could see much of me in the dark, but they could see the gun. It was a big gun.

"Who the hell are you?" Keenan asked.

"Jerry Tarkanian," I said. "Move and I'll put a hole in you big enough to watch television through."

“You sound like a punk,” Sarge said. He didn’t move, though.

“Just don’t move. That’s all you’ve got to worry about.” I opened the Impala’s back door and got out carefully. The Sarge was staring at me over his shoulder and I could see the glitter of his little eyes. One hand was creeping up the lapel of his 1943-model double-breasted suit.

“Oh, please,” I said. “Get your fucking hands up, asshole.”

The Sarge put his hands up. Keenan’s already were.

“Come down to the foot of the steps. Both of you.”

They came down, and out of the direct glare of the light I could see their faces. Keenan looked scared, but the Sarge might have been listening to a lecture on Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance. He was probably the one who had jobbed Barney.

“Face the wall and lean on it. Both of you.”

Keenan: “If you’re after money . . .”

I laughed. “Well, I was going to start off by offering you a cut-rate deal on Tupperware, work my way up to the big stuff gradually, but you saw through me. Yeah, I’m after money. Four hundred and eighty thousand dollars, actually. Buried on a little island off Bar Harbor called Carmen’s Folly.”

Keenan jerked as if he’d been shot, but the Sarge’s dipped-in-concrete face never twitched. He turned around and put his hands on the wall, leaning his weight on them. Keenan reluctantly followed suit. I frisked him first and got a stupid little .32 with a three-inch barrel. A gun like that, you could put the muzzle against a guy’s head and still miss when you pulled the trigger. I threw it over my shoulder and heard it bounce off one of the cars. Sarge was clean—and it was a relief to step away from him.

“We’re going into the house. You first, Keenan, then Sarge, then me. Without incident, okay?”

We all trooped up the steps and into the kitchen. It was one of those germless chrome-and-tile jobs that looks like it was spit whole out of some mass-production womb in the Midwest somewhere, the work of hearty Methodist assholes who all look like Mr. Goodwrench and smell like Cherry Blend tobacco. I doubt if it ever needed anything so vulgar as cleaning; Keenan probably just closed the doors and turned on the hidden sprinklers once a week.

I paraded them through into the living room, another treat for the eyes. It had apparently been done by a pansy decorator who never got over his crush on Ernest Hemingway. There was a flagstone fireplace almost as big as an elevator car, a teak buffet table with a moosehead mounted above it, and a drinks cart stashed below a gunrack loaded with premium artillery. The stereo had turned itself off.

I waved the gun at the couch. "One on each end."

They sat, Keenan on the right, Sarge on the left. The Sarge looked even bigger sitting down. An ugly, dented scar twisted its way through his slightly overgrown crewcut. I put his weight at about two-thirty, and wondered why a man with the size and physical presence of Mike Tyson owned a Volkswagen.

I grabbed an easy chair and dragged it over Keenan's quicksand-colored rug until it was in front and between them. I sat down and let the .45 rest on my thigh. Keenan stared at it like a bird stares at a snake. The Sarge, on the other hand, was staring at me like he was the snake and I was the bird. "Now what?" he asked.

"Let's talk about maps and money," I said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sarge said. "All I know is that little boys shouldn't play with guns."

"How's Cappy MacFarland these days?" I asked casually.

It didn't get jack shit from the Sarge, but Keenan popped his cork. "He knows. He knows!" The words shot out of him like bullets.

"Shut up!" the Sarge told him. "Shut up your goddam trap!"

Keenan moaned a little. This was one part of the scenario he had never imagined. I smiled. "He's right, Sarge." I said. "I know. Almost all of it."

"Who are you?"

"No one you know. A friend of Barney's."

"Barney who?" Sarge asked indifferently. "Barney Google, with the goo-goo-googly eyes?"

"He wasn't dead, Sarge. Not quite dead."

Sarge turned a slow and murderous look on Keenan. Keenan shuddered and opened his mouth. "Don't talk," Sarge said to him. "Not one fucking word. I'll snap your neck like a chicken if you do."

Keenan's mouth shut with a snap.

Sarge looked at me again. “What does *almost* all of it mean?”

“Everything but the fine details. I know about the armored car. The island. Cappy MacFarland. How you and Keenan and some bastard named Jagger killed Barney. And the map. I know about that.”

“It wasn’t the way he told you,” Sarge said. “He was going to cross us.”

“He couldn’t cross the street,” I said. “He was just a patsy who could drive.”

He shrugged; it was like watching a minor earthquake. “Okay. Be as dumb as you look.”

“I knew Barney had something on as early as last March. I just didn’t know what. And then one night he had a gun. *This* gun. How did you connect with him, Sarge?”

“A mutual friend—someone who did time with him. We needed a driver who knew eastern Maine and the Bar Harbor area. Keenan and I went to see him and laid it out for him. He liked it.”

“I did time with him in the Shank,” I said. “I liked him. You couldn’t help but like him. He was dumb, but he was a good kid. He needed a keeper more than a partner.”

“George and Lennie,” Sarge sneered.

“Good to know you spent your own jail time improving what passes for your mind, sweetheart,” I said. “We were thinking about a bank in Lewiston. He couldn’t wait for me to finish doping it out. So now he’s underground.”

“Jeepers, this is really sad,” Sarge said. “I’m gettin, like, all soft and mushy inside.”

I picked up the gun and showed him the muzzle, and for a second or two he was the bird and it was the snake. “One more wisecrack and I’ll put a bullet in your belly. Do you believe that?”

His tongue flickered in and out with startling quickness, lapped across his lower lip, and disappeared again. He nodded. Keenan was frozen. He looked like he wanted to retch but didn’t quite dare.

“He told me it was big time, a big score,” I resumed. “That’s all I could get out of him. He took off on April third. Two days later four guys knock over the Portland-Bangor Federated truck just outside of Carmel. All three guards dead. The newspapers said the robbers ran two roadblocks in a souped-up ’78 Plymouth. Barney had a ’78 up on blocks, thinking about turning it into a

stocker. I'm betting Keenan put up the front money for him to turn it into something a little better and a lot faster."

I looked at him. Keenan's face was the color of cheese.

"On May sixth I get a card postmarked Bar Harbor, but that doesn't mean anything—there are dozens of little islands that channel their mail through there. A mailboat does the circuit, picks it up. The card says: 'Mom and family fine, store doing good. See you in July.' It was signed with Barney's middle name. I leased a cottage on the coast, because Barney knew that would be the deal. July comes and goes, no Barney."

"Musta had a terminal hard-on by then, kid, right?" Sarge said. I guess he wanted me to be sure I hadn't buffaloed him.

I looked at him remotely. "He showed up in early August. Courtesy of your buddy Keenan, Sarge. He forgot about the automatic bilge pump in the boat. You thought the chop would sink it quick enough, right, Keenan? But you thought he was dead, too. I had a yellow blanket spread out on Frenchman's Point every day. Visible for miles. Easy to spot. Still, he was lucky."

"*Too* lucky," Sarge almost spat.

"One thing I'm curious about—did he know before the job that the money was new, all the serial numbers recorded? That you couldn't even sell it to a currency-junker in the Bahamas for three or four years?"

"He knew," the Sarge rumbled, and I was surprised to find myself believing him. "And nobody was planning to junk the dough. He knew that, too, kid. I think he was counting on that Lewiston job you mentioned for ready cash, but whatever he was or wasn't counting on, he knew the score and said he could live with it. Christ, why not? Say we had to wait *ten* years to go back for that dough and split it up. What's ten years to a kid like Barney? Shit, he would have been all of thirty-five. I'd be sixty-one."

"What about Cappy MacFarland? Did Barney know about him, too?"

"Yes. Cappy came with the deal. A good man. A pro. He got cancer last year. Inoperable. And he owed me a favor."

"So the four of you went out to Cappy's island," I said. "A little nobody-on-it named Carmen's Folly. Cappy buried the money and made a map."

"That part was Jagger's idea," Sarge said. "We didn't want to split hot money—too tempting. But we didn't want to leave all the swag in one pair of hands,

either. Cappy MacFarland was the perfect solution.”

“Tell me about the map.”

“I thought we’d get to that,” Sarge said with a wintry smile.

“Don’t tell him!” Keenan cried out hoarsely.

Sarge turned to him and gave him a look that would have melted bar steel. “Shut up. I can’t lie and I can’t stonewall, thanks to you. You know what I hope, Keenan? I hope you weren’t really looking forward to seeing in the new century.”

“Your name’s in a letter,” Keenan said wildly. “If anything happens to me, your name’s in a letter!”

“Cappy made a good map,” the Sarge said, as if Keenan were not there at all. “He had some draftsman training in Joliet. He cut it into quarters. One for each of us. We were going to have a reunion on July fourth, five years later. Talk it over. Maybe decide to wait another five years, maybe decide to put the pieces together right then. But there was trouble.”

“Yes,” I said. “I guess that’s one way of putting it.”

“If it makes you feel any better, it was all Keenan’s play. I don’t know if Barney knew it or not, but that’s how it was. When Jagger and I took off in Cappy’s boat, Barney was fine.”

“You’re a goddam liar!” Keenan squealed.

“Who’s got two pieces of the map in his wall safe?” Sarge inquired. “Is it you, dear?”

He looked at me again.

“It was still all right. Half the map still wasn’t enough. And am I gonna sit here and say I would have preferred a four-way split to a three-way? I don’t think you’d believe it even if it was true. Then, guess what? Keenan calls. Tells me we ought to have a talk. I was expecting it. Looks like you were, too.”

I nodded. Keenan had been easier to find than the Sarge—he kept a higher profile. I could have tracked Sarge all the way down eventually, I suppose, but I’d been pretty sure that wouldn’t be necessary. Thieves of a feather flock together . . . and the feathers have a tendency to fly, too, when one of the birds is a vulture like Keenan.

“Of course,” Sarge went on, “he tells me not to get any lethal ideas. Says he’s taken out an insurance policy, my name in an open-in-event-of-my-death

letter he'd sent his lawyer. His idea was that the two of us could probably dope out where Cappy'd buried the money if we put three of the four pieces of the map together."

"And split the swag fifty-fifty," I said.

Sarge nodded. Keenan's face was like a moon drifting somewhere in a high stratosphere of terror.

"Where's the safe?" I asked him.

Keenan didn't say anything.

I had done some practicing with the .45. It was a good gun. I liked it. I held it in both hands and shot Keenan in the forearm, just below the elbow. The Sarge didn't even jump. Keenan fell off the couch and curled up in a ball, holding his arm and howling.

"The safe," I said.

Keenan continued to howl.

"I'll shoot you in the knee," I said. "I don't know from personal experience, but I've heard that hurts like a mad bastard."

"The print," he gasped. "The Van Gogh. Don't shoot me anymore, huh?" He looked at me, grinning fearfully.

I motioned to Sarge with the gun. "Stand facing the wall."

The Sarge got up and looked at the wall, arms dangling limply.

"Now you," I said to Keenan. "Go open the safe."

"I'm bleeding to death," Keenan moaned.

I went over and stroked the butt of the .45 up the side of his cheek, laying back skin. "*Now* you're bleeding," I told him. "Go open the safe or you'll bleed more."

Keenan got up, holding his arm and blubbering. He took the print off its hooks with his good hand, revealing an officegray wall safe. He threw a terrified glance at me and began to twiddle the dial. He made two false starts and had to go back. The third time he got it open. There were some documents and two wads of bills inside. He reached in, fumbled around, and came up with two squares of paper, about three inches on a side.

I swear I didn't mean to kill him. I planned to tie him up and leave him. He was harmless enough; the maid would find him when she got back from her lingerie party or wherever it was she'd gone in her little Dodge Colt, and

Keenan wouldn't dare poke his nose out of his house for a week. But it was like Sarge had said. He did have two. And one of them had blood on it.

I shot him again, this time not in the arm. He went down like an empty laundry bag.

Sarge didn't flinch. "I wasn't crapping you. Keenan jobbed your friend. They were both amateurs. Amateurs are stupid."

I didn't answer. I looked down at the squares and shoved them into my pocket. Neither one had an X-marks-the-spot on it.

"What now?" Sarge asked.

"We go to your place."

"What makes you think my piece of the map is there?"

"I don't know. Telepathy, maybe. Besides, if it isn't, we'll go where it is. I'm in no hurry."

"You've got all the answers, huh?"

"Let's go."

We went back out to the carport. I sat in the back of the VW, on the side away from him. His bulk and the size of the car made a surprise play on his part a joke; it would take him five minutes just to get turned around. Two minutes later we were on the road.

It was starting to snow, big, sloppy flakes that clung to the windshield and turned to instant slush when they struck the pavement. It was slippery going, but there wasn't much traffic.

After a half hour on Route 10, he turned off onto a secondary road. Fifteen minutes later we were on a rutted dirt track with snow-freighted pines staring at us on either side. Two miles along we turned into a short, trash-littered driveway.

In the limited sweep of the VW's headlights I could make out a rickety backwoods shack with a patched roof and a twisted TV aerial. There was a snow-covered old Ford in a gully to the left. Out in back was an outhouse and a pile of old tires. Hernando's Hideaway.

"Welcome to Bally's East," Sarge said, and killed the engine.

"If this is a con, I'll kill you."

He seemed to fill three-quarters of the tiny vehicle's front seat. "I know that," he said.

“Get out.”

Sarge led the way up to the front door. “Open it,” I said. “Then stand still.”

He opened the door and stood still. I stood still. We stood still for about three minutes, and nothing happened. The only moving thing was a fat gray squirrel that had ventured into the middle of the yard to curse us in *lingua rodenta*.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go in.”

Surprise, it was a dump. The one sixty-watt bulb cast a grungy glow over the whole room, leaving shadows like starved bats in the corners. Newspapers were scattered helter-skelter. Drying clothes were hung on a sagging rope. In one corner there was an ancient Zenith TV. In the opposite corner was a rickety sink and a stark, rust-stained bathtub on claw feet. A hunting rifle stood beside it. The predominant odors were feet, farts, and chili.

“It beats living raw,” Sarge said.

I could have argued the point, but didn’t. “Where’s your piece of the map?”

“In the bedroom.”

“Let’s go get it”

“Not yet.” He turned around slowly, his dipped-in-concrete face hard. “I want your word you ain’t going to kill me when you get it.”

“How you going to make me keep it?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. I guess I’m just gonna hope it was more than the money that got you cranked up. If it was Barney, too—wanting to clean Barney’s slate—you did it, it’s clean. Keenan capped him and now Keenan’s dead. If you want the bundle, too, okay. Maybe three-quarters *will* be enough, and you were right—my piece has got a great big X on it. But you don’t get it unless you promise I get something, too: my life.”

“How do I know you won’t come after me?”

“But I will, sonny,” the Sarge said softly.

I laughed. “All right. Throw in Jagger’s address and you’ve got your promise. I’ll keep it, too.”

The Sarge shook his head slowly. “You don’t want to play with Jagger, fella, Jagger will eat you up.”

I had dropped the .45 a little. Now I lifted it again.

“All right. He’s in Coleman, Massachusetts. A ski lodge. Is that good enough?”

“Yes. Let’s get your piece, Sarge.”

The Sarge looked me over once more, closely. Then he nodded. We went into the bedroom.

More Colonial charm. The stained mattress on the floor was littered with stroke-books and the walls were papered with photographs of women who appeared to be wearing nothing but a thin coating of Wesson Oil. One look at this place and Dr. Ruth’s head would have exploded.

The Sarge didn’t hesitate. He picked up the lamp on the night-table and pried the base off it. His quarter of the map was neatly rolled up inside; he held it out wordlessly.

“Throw it,” I invited.

The Sarge smiled thinly. “Cautious little pencil-neck, aren’t you?”

“I find it pays. Give it up, Sarge.”

He tossed it over to me. “Easy come, easy go,” he said.

“I’m going to keep my promise,” I said. “Consider yourself lucky. Out in the other room.”

Cold light flickered in his eyes. “What are you going to do?”

“See that you stay in one place for awhile. Move.”

We went out into the main room, a nifty little parade of two. The Sarge stood underneath the naked lightbulb, back to me, his shoulders hunched, anticipating the gunbarrel that was going to groove his head very shortly. I was just lifting the gun to clout him when the light blinked out.

The shack was suddenly pitch black.

I threw myself to the right; Sarge was already gone like a cool breeze. I could hear the thump and tumble of newspapers as he hit the floor in a flat dive. Then silence. Utter and complete.

I waited for my night vision, but when it came it was no help. The place was a mausoleum in which a thousand dim tombstones loomed. And the Sarge knew every one of them.

I knew about Sarge; material on him hadn’t been hard to spade up. He’d been a Green Beret in Vietnam, and no one even bothered with his real name anymore; he was just the Sarge, big and murderous and tough.

Somewhere in the dark he was moving in on me. He must have known the place like the back of his hand, because there wasn't a sound, not a squeaking board, not a foot scrape. But I could feel him getting closer and closer, flanking from the left or the right or maybe pulling a tricky one and coming in straight ahead.

The stock of the gun was very sweaty in my hand, and I had to control the urge to fire it wildly, randomly. I was very aware that I had three-quarters of the pie in my pocket. I didn't bother wondering why the lights had gone out. Not until the powerful flashlight stabbed in through the window, sweeping the floor in a wild, random pattern that just happened to catch the Sarge, frozen in a half-crouch seven feet to my left. His eyes glowed greenly in the bright cone of light, like cat's eyes.

He had a glinting razor blade in his right hand, and I suddenly remembered the way his hand had been spidering up his coat lapel in Keenan's carport.

The Sarge said one word into the flash beam. "Jagger?"

I don't know who got him first. A large-caliber pistol fired once behind the flashlight beam, and I pulled the trigger of Barney's .45 twice—pure reflex. The Sarge was thrown back against the wall with force enough to knock him out of one of his boots.

The flashlight snapped off.

I fired one shot at the window, but hit only glass. I lay on my side in the darkness and realized that I hadn't been the only one waiting around for Keenan's greed to resurface. Jagger had been waiting, too. And, although there were twelve rounds of ammunition back in my car, there was only one left in my gun.

*You don't want to play with Jagger, fella,* the Sarge had said, *Jagger will eat you up.*

I had a pretty good picture of the room in my head now. I got up in a crouch and ran, stepping over Sarge's sprawled legs and into the corner. I got into the bathtub and poked my eyes up over the edge. There was no sound, none at all. The bottom of the tub was gritty with flaked-off bathtub ring. I waited.

About five minutes went by. It seemed like five hours.

Then the light flicked on again, this time in the bedroom window. I ducked my head when it glared through the doorway. It probed briefly and clicked off.

Silence again. A long, loud silence. On the dirty surface of Sarge's porcelain bathtub I saw everything. Keenan, grinning desperately. Barney, with the clotted hole in his gut, due east of his navel. Sarge, standing frozen in the flashlight beam, holding the razor blade professionally between thumb and first finger. Jagger, the dark shadow with no face. And me. The fifth quarter.

Suddenly there was a voice, just outside the door. It was soft and cultured, almost womanish, but not effete. It sounded deadly and competent as hell.

"Hey, beautiful."

I kept quiet. He wasn't getting my number without dialing a little.

When the voice came again, it was by the window. "I'm going to kill you, beautiful. I came to kill them, but you'll do fine."

A pause while he shifted position once more. When the voice came again, it came from the window just over my head—the one above the bathtub. My guts crawled into my throat. If he flashed that light now . . .

"No fifth wheels need apply," Jagger said. "Sorry."

I could barely hear him moving to his next position. It turned out to be back to the doorway. "I've got my quarter with me. You want to come and take it?"

I felt an urge to cough and repressed it.

"Come and get it beautiful." His voice was mocking. "The whole pie. Come and take it away."

But I didn't have to, and I suppose he knew it. I was holding the chips. I could find the money now. With his single quarter, Jagger had no chance.

This time the silence really spun out. A half-hour, an hour, forever. Eternity squared. My body started to stiffen. Outside, the wind was tuning up, making it impossible to hear anything but rattling snow against the walls. It was very cold. The tips of my fingers were going numb.

Then, around one-thirty, a ghostly stirring sound like crawling rats in the darkness. I stopped breathing. Somehow Jagger had got in. He was right in the middle of the room . . .

Then I got it. *Rigor mortis*, hurried by the cold, was rearranging Sarge for the last time, that was all. I relaxed a little.

That was when the door rammed open and Jagger charged through, ghostly and visible in a mantle of white snow, tall and loose and gangling. I let him have it and the bullet punched a hole through the side of his head. And in the brief gunflash, I saw that what I had holed was a scarecrow with no face, dressed in some farmer's thrown-out pants and shirt. The burlap head fell off the broomstick neck as it hit the floor. Then Jagger was shooting at me.

He was holding a semi-automatic pistol, and the innards of the bathtub were like a great percussive hollow cymbal. Porcelain flew up, bounced off the wall, struck my face. Wood splinters and a single hot spent slug rained down on me.

Then he was charging, never letting up. He was going to shoot me in the tub like a fish in a barrel. I couldn't even put my head up.

It was Sarge who saved me. Jagger stumbled over one big dead foot, staggered, and pumped bullets into the floor instead of over my head. Then I was on my knees. I pretended I was Roger Clemens. I pegged Barney's big .45 at his head.

The gun hit him but didn't stop him. I stumbled over the rim of the tub getting out to tackle him, and Jagger put two groggy shots to my left.

The faint silhouette stepped back, trying to get a bead, one hand holding his ear where the gun had hit him. He shot me through the wrist, and his second shot ripped a groove in my neck. Then, incredibly, he stumbled over Sarge's feet again and fell backward. He brought the gun up again and put one through the roof. It was his last chance. I kicked the gun out of his hand, hearing the wet-wood sound of breaking bones. I kicked him in the groin, doubling him up. I kicked him again, this time in the back of the head, and his feet rattled a fast, unconscious tattoo on the floor. He was as good as dead then, but I kicked him again and again, kicked him until there was nothing but pulp and strawberry jam, nothing anyone could ever identify, not by teeth, not by anything. I kicked him until I couldn't swing my leg anymore, and my toes wouldn't move.

I suddenly realized I was screaming and there was no one to hear me but dead men.

I wiped my mouth and knelt over Jagger's body.

He had been lying about his quarter of the map, as it turned out. It didn't surprise me much. No, I take that back. It didn't surprise me at all.

• • •

My heap was just where I had left it, around the block from Keenan's house, but now it was just a ghostly hump of snow. I had left Sarge's VW a mile back. I hoped my heater was still working. I was numb all over. I got the door open and winced a little as I sat down inside. The crease in my neck had already clotted over, but my wrist hurt like hell.

The starter cranked for a long time, and the motor finally caught. The heater was working, and the one wiper cleared away most of the snow on the driver's side. Jagger had been lying about his quarter, and it hadn't been in the unobtrusive (and probably stolen) Honda Civic he'd come in. But his address had been in his wallet, and if I actually needed his quarter, I thought there was a pretty good chance I could find it. I didn't think I would; three pieces should be enough, especially since Sarge's quarter was the one with the X.

I pulled out carefully. I was going to be careful for a long time. The Sarge had been right about one thing: Barney had been a dope. The fact that he'd also been my friend didn't matter anymore. The debt had been paid.

In the meantime, I had a lot to be careful for.

## The Doctor's Case

I believe there was only one occasion upon which I actually solved a crime before my slightly fabulous friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. I say *believe* because my memory began to grow hazy about the edges as I entered my ninth decade; now, as I approach my centennial, the whole has become downright misty. There *may* have been another occasion, but if so I do not remember it.

I doubt that I shall ever forget this particular case no matter how murky my thoughts and memories may become, and I thought I might as well set it down before God caps my pen forever. It cannot humiliate Holmes now, God knows; he is forty years in his grave. That, I think, is long enough to leave the tale untold. Even Lestrade, who used Holmes upon occasion but never had any great liking for him, never broke his silence in the matter of Lord Hull—he hardly could have done so, considering the circumstances. Even if the circumstances had been different, I somehow doubt he would have. He and Holmes baited each other, and I believe that Holmes may have harbored actual hate in his heart for the policeman (although he never would have admitted to such a low emotion), but Lestrade had a queer respect for my friend.

It was a wet, dreary afternoon and the clock had just rung half past one. Holmes sat by the window, holding his violin but not playing it, looking silently out into the rain. There were times, especially once his cocaine days were behind him, when Holmes would grow moody to the point of surliness when the skies remained stubbornly gray for a week or more, and he had been doubly disappointed on this day, for the glass had been rising since late the night before and he had confidently predicted clearing skies by ten this morning at the latest. Instead, the mist which had been hanging in the air when I arose had thickened into a steady rain, and if there was anything which rendered Holmes moodier than long periods of rain, it was being wrong.

Suddenly he straightened up, tweaking a violin string with a fingernail, and smiled sardonically. "Watson! Here's a sight! The wettest bloodhound you ever saw!"

It was Lestrade, of course, seated in the back of an open wagon with water running into his close-set, fiercely inquisitive eyes. The wagon had no more than stopped before he was out, flinging the driver a coin, and striding toward 221B Baker Street. He moved so quickly that I thought he should run into our door like a battering ram.

I heard Mrs. Hudson remonstrating with him about his decidedly damp condition and the effect it might have on the rugs both downstairs and up, and then Holmes, who could make Lestrade look like a tortoise when the urge struck him, leaped across to the door and called down, "Let him up, Mrs. H.—I'll put a newspaper under his boots if he stays long, but I somehow think, yes, I really do think that . . ."

Then Lestrade was bounding up the stairs, leaving Mrs. Hudson to expostulate below. His color was high, his eyes burned, and his teeth—decidedly yellowed by tobacco—were bared in a wolfish grin.

"Inspector Lestrade!" Holmes cried jovially. "What brings you out on such a —"

No further did he get. Still panting from his climb, Lestrade said, "I've heard gypsies say the devil grants wishes. Now I believe it. Come at once if you'd have a try, Holmes; the corpse is still fresh and the suspects all in a row."

"You frighten me with your ardor, Lestrade!" Holmes cried, but with a sardonic little waggle of his eyebrows.

"Don't play the shrinking violet with me, man—I've come at the run to offer you the very thing for which you in your pride have wished a hundred times or more in my own hearing: the perfect locked-room mystery!"

Holmes had started into the corner, perhaps to get the awful gold-tipped cane which he was for some reason affecting that season. Now he whirled upon our damp visitor, his eyes wide. "Lestrade! Are you serious?"

"Would I have risked wet-lung croup riding here in an open wagon if I were not?" Lestrade countered.

Then, for the only time in my hearing (despite the countless times the phrase has been attributed to him), Holmes turned to me and cried: "Quick, Watson! The game's afoot!"

• • •

On our way, Lestrade commented sourly that Holmes also had the *luck* of the devil; although Lestrade had commanded the wagon-driver to wait, we had no more than emerged from our lodgings when that exquisite rarity clip-clopped down the street: an empty hackney in what had become a driving rain. We climbed in and were off in a trice. As always, Holmes sat on the left-hand side, his eyes darting restlessly about, cataloguing everything, although there was precious little to see on *that* day . . . or so it seemed, at least, to the likes of me. I've no doubt every empty street corner and rain-washed shop window spoke volumes to Holmes.

Lestrade directed the driver to an address in Savile Row, and then asked Holmes if he knew Lord Hull.

"I know *of* him," Holmes said, "but have never had the good fortune of meeting him. Now I suppose I never shall. Shipping, wasn't it?"

"Shipping," Lestrade agreed, "but the good fortune was yours. Lord Hull was, by all accounts (including those of his nearest and—ahem!—dearest), a thoroughly nasty fellow, and as dotty as a puzzle-picture in a child's novelty book. He's finished practicing both nastiness and dottiness for good, however; around eleven o'clock this morning, just"—he pulled out his turnip of a pocket watch and looked at it—"two hours and forty minutes ago, someone put a knife in his back as he sat in his study with his will on the blotter before him."

"So," Holmes said thoughtfully, lighting his pipe, "you believe the study of this unpleasant Lord Hull is the perfect locked room of my dreams, do you?" His eyes gleamed skeptically through a rising rafter of blue smoke.

"I believe," Lestrade said quietly, "that it is."

"Watson and I have dug such holes before and never struck water," Holmes remarked, and he glanced at me before returning to his ceaseless catalogue of the streets through which we passed. "Do you recall the 'Speckled Band,' Watson?"

I hardly needed to answer him. There had been a locked room in that business, true enough, but there had also been a ventilator, a poisonous snake, and a killer fiendish enough to introduce the latter into the former. It had been the work of a cruelly brilliant mind, but Holmes had seen to the bottom of the matter in almost no time at all.

“What are the facts, Inspector?” Holmes asked.

Lestrade began to lay them before us in the clipped tones of a trained policeman. Lord Albert Hull had been a tyrant in business and a despot at home. His wife had gone in fear of him, and had apparently been justified in doing so. The fact that she had borne him three sons seemed in no way to have moderated his savage approach toward their domestic affairs in general and toward her in particular. Lady Hull had been reluctant to speak of these matters, but her sons had no such reservations; their papa, they said, had missed no opportunity to dig at her, to criticize her, or to jest at her expense . . . all of this when they were in company. When they were alone, he virtually ignored her. Except, Lestrade added, when he felt moved to beat her, which was by no means an uncommon occurrence.

“William, the eldest, told me she always gave out the same story when she came to the breakfast table with a swollen eye or a mark on her cheek: that she had forgotten to put on her spectacles and had run into a door. ‘She ran into doors once and twice a week,’ William said. ‘I didn’t know we had that many doors in the house.’ ”

“Hmmm,” Holmes said. “A cheery fellow! The sons never put a stop to it?”

“She wouldn’t allow it,” Lestrade said.

“Insanity,” I returned. A man who would beat his wife is an abomination; a woman who would allow it an abomination and a perplexity.

“There was a method in her madness, though,” Lestrade said. “Method and what you might call ‘an informed patience.’ She was, after all, twenty years younger than her lord and master. Also, Hull was a heavy drinker and a champion diner. At age seventy, five years ago, he developed gout and angina.”

“Wait for the storm to end and then enjoy the sunshine,” Holmes remarked.

“Yes,” Lestrade said, “but it’s an idea which has led many a man and woman through the devil’s door, I’ll be bound. Hull made sure his family knew both his worth and the provisions of his will. They were little better than slaves.”

“With the will as their document of indenture,” Holmes murmured.

“Exactly so, old boy. At the time of his death, Hull’s worth was three hundred thousand pounds. He never asked them to take his word for this; he had his chief accountant to the house quarterly to detail the balance sheets of

Hull Shipping, although he kept the purse-strings firmly in his own hands and tightly closed.”

“Devilish!” I exclaimed, thinking of the cruel boys one sometimes sees in Eastcheap or Piccadilly, boys who will hold out a sweet to a starving dog to see it dance . . . and then gobble it themselves while the hungry animal watches. I was shortly to find this comparison even more apt than I would have thought possible.

“On his death, Lady Rebecca was to receive one hundred and fifty thousand pund’. William, the eldest, was to receive fifty thousand; Jory, the middler, forty; and Stephen, the youngest, thirty.”

“And the other thirty thousand?” I asked.

“Small bequests, Watson: to a cousin in Wales, an aunt in Brittany (not a cent for Lady Hull’s relatives, though), five thousand in assorted bequests to the servants. Oh, and—you’ll like this, Holmes—ten thousand pounds to Mrs. Hemphill’s Home for Abandoned Pussies.”

“You’re joking!” I cried, although if Lestrade expected a similar reaction from Holmes, he was disappointed. Holmes merely re-lighted his pipe and nodded as if he had expected this. . . this or something like it. “With babies dying of starvation in the East End and twelve-year-old children working fifty hours a week in the mills, this fellow left ten thousand pounds to a . . . a boarding-hotel for *cats*?”

“Exactly so,” Lestrade said pleasantly. “Furthermore, he should have left *twenty-seven times* that amount to Mrs. Hemphill’s Abandoned Pussies if not for whatever happened this morning—and whoever did the business.”

I could only gape at this, and try to multiply in my head. While I was coming to the conclusion that Lord Hull had intended to disinherit both wife and children in favor of a rest-home for felines, Holmes was looking sourly at Lestrade and saying something which sounded to me like a total *non sequitur*. “I am going to sneeze, am I not?”

Lestrade smiled. It was a smile of transcendent sweetness. “Yes, my dear Holmes! Often and profoundly, I fear.”

Holmes removed his pipe, which he had just gotten drawing to his satisfaction (I could tell by the way he settled back slightly in his seat), looked

at it for a moment, and then held it out into the rain. More dumbfounded than ever, I watched him knock out the damp and smouldering tobacco.

“How many?” Holmes asked.

“Ten,” Lestrade said with a fiendish grin.

“I suspected it was more than this famous locked room of yours that brought you out in the back of an open wagon on such a wet day,” Holmes said sourly.

“Suspect as you like,” Lestrade said gaily. “I’m afraid I must go on to the scene of the crime—duty calls, you know—but if you’d like, I could let you and the good doctor out here.”

“You are the only man I ever met,” Holmes said, “whose wit seems to be sharpened by foul weather. Does that perhaps say something about your character, I wonder? But never mind—that is, perhaps, a subject for another day. Tell me this, Lestrade: when did Lord Hull become sure that he was going to die?”

“*Die?*” I said. “My dear Holmes, whatever gives you the idea that the man believed—”

“It’s obvious, Watson,” Holmes said. “C.I.B., as I have told you at least a thousand times—character indexes behavior. It amused him to keep them in bondage by means of his will. . .” He looked an aside at Lestrade. “No trust arrangements, I take it? No entailments of any sort?”

Lestrade shook his head. “None whatever.”

“Extraordinary!” I said.

“Not at all, Watson; character indexes behavior, remember. He wanted them to soldier along in the belief that all would be theirs when he did them the courtesy of dying, but he never actually intended any such thing. Such behavior would, in fact, have run completely across the grain of his character. D’you agree, Lestrade?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Lestrade replied.

“Then we are very well to this point, Watson, are we not? All is clear? Lord Hull realizes he is dying. He waits . . . makes absolutely sure that this time it’s no mistake, no false alarm . . . and then he calls his beloved family together. When? This morning, Lestrade?”

Lestrade grunted an affirmative.

Holmes steepled his fingers beneath his chin. “He calls them together and tells them he’s made a new will, one which disinherits all of them. . . all, that is, save for the servants, his few distant relatives, and, of course, the pussies.”

I opened my mouth to speak, only to discover I was too outraged to say anything. The image which kept returning to my mind was that of those cruel boys, making the starving East End curs jump with a bit of pork or a crumb of crust from a meat pie. I must add it never occurred to me to ask whether such a will could be disputed before the bar. Today a man would have a deuce of a time slighting his closest relatives in favor of a cat-hotel, but in 1899, a man’s will was a man’s will, and unless many examples of insanity—not eccentricity but outright *insanity*—could be proved, a man’s will, like God’s, was done.

“This new will was properly witnessed?” Holmes asked.

“Indeed it was,” Lestrade replied. “Yesterday Lord Hull’s solicitor and one of his assistants appeared at the house and were shown into Hull’s study. There they remained for about fifteen minutes. Stephen Hull says the solicitor once raised his voice in protest about something—he could not tell what—and was silenced by Hull. Jory, the middle son, was upstairs, painting, and Lady Hull was calling on a friend. But both Stephen and William Hull saw these legal fellows enter, and leave a short time later. William said that they left with their heads down, and although William spoke, asking Mr. Barnes—the solicitor—if he was well, and making some social remark about the persistence of the rain, Barnes did not reply and the assistant seemed actually to cringe. It was as if they were ashamed, William said.”

Well, so much for *that* possible loophole, I thought.

“Since we are on the subject, tell me about the boys,” Holmes invited.

“As you like. It goes pretty much without saying that their hatred for the pater was exceeded only by the pater’s boundless contempt for them . . . although how he could hold Stephen in contempt is . . . well, never mind, I’ll keep things in their proper order.”

“Yes, please be so kind as to do that,” Holmes said dryly.

“William is thirty-six. If his father had given him any sort of allowance, I suppose he would be a bounder. As he had little or none, he has spent his days in various gymnasiums, involved in what I believe is called ‘physical culture’—he appears to be an extremely muscular fellow—and his nights in various

cheap coffee-houses, for the most part. If he did happen to have a bit of money in his pockets, he was apt to take himself off to a card-parlor, where he would lose it quickly enough. Not a pleasant man, Holmes. A man who has no purpose, no skill, no hobby, and no ambition (save to outlive his father) could hardly be a pleasant man. I had the queerest idea while talking to him that I was interrogating not a man but an empty vase upon which the face of Lord Hull had been lightly stamped.”

“A vase waiting to be filled up with pounds sterling,” Holmes commented.

“Jory is another matter,” Lestrade went on. “Lord Hull saved most of his contempt for him, calling him from his earliest childhood by such endearing pet-names as ‘Fish-Face’ and ‘Keg-Legs’ and ‘Stoat-Belly.’ It’s not hard to understand such names, unfortunately; Jory Hull stands no more than five feet tall, if that, is bow-legged, and of a remarkably ugly countenance. He looks a bit like that poet fellow. The pouf.”

“Oscar Wilde?” asked I.

Holmes turned a brief, amused glance upon me. “I think Lestrade means Algernon Swinburne,” he said. “Who, I believe, is no more a pouf than you are, Watson.”

“Jory Hull was born dead,” Lestrade said. “After he remained blue and still for an entire minute, the doctor pronounced him so and put a napkin over his misshapen body. Lady Hull, in her one moment of heroism, sat up, removed the napkin, and dipped the baby’s legs into the hot water which had been brought to be used at the birth. The baby began to squirm and squall.”

Lestrade grinned and lit a cigarillo with a flourish.

“Hull claimed this immersion had caused the boy’s bowed legs, and when he was in his cups, he taxed his wife with it. Told her she should have left well enough alone. Better Jory had been born dead than lived to be what he was, he sometimes said—a scuttling creature with the legs of a crab and the face of a cod.”

Holmes’s only reaction to this extraordinary (and to my physician’s mind rather suspect) story was to comment that Lestrade had gotten a remarkably large body of information in a remarkably short period of time.

“That points up one of the aspects of the case which I thought would appeal to you, my dear Holmes,” Lestrade said as we swept into Rotten Row with a

splash and a swirl. “They need no coercion to speak; coercion’s what it would take to shut em up. They’ve had to remain silent all too long. And then there’s the fact that the new will is gone. Relief loosens tongues beyond measure, I find.”

“*Gone!*” I exclaimed, but Holmes took no notice; his mind still ran upon Jory, the misshapen middle child.

“*Is he ugly, then?*” he asked Lestrade.

“Hardly handsome, but not as bad as some I’ve seen,” Lestrade replied comfortably. “I believe his father continually heaped vituperation on his head because—”

“—because he was the only one who had no need of his father’s money to make his way in the world,” Holmes finished for him.

Lestrade started. “The devil! How did you know that?”

“Because Lord Hull was reduced to carping at Jory’s physical faults. How it must have chafed the old devil to be faced with a potential target so well armored in other respects! Baiting a man for his looks or his posture may be fine for schoolboys or drunken louts, but a villain like Lord Hull had no doubt become used to higher sport. I would venture the opinion that he may have been rather afraid of his bow-legged middle son. What was Jory’s key to the cell door?”

“Haven’t I told you? He paints,” Lestrade said.

“Ah!”

Jory Hull was, as the canvases in the lower halls of Hull House later proved, a very good painter indeed. Not great; I do not mean that at all. But his renderings of his mother and brothers were faithful enough so that, years later, when I saw color photographs for the first time, my mind flashed back to that rainy November afternoon in 1899. And the one of his father perhaps *was* a work of greatness. Certainly it startled (almost intimidated) with the malevolence that seemed to waft out of the canvas like a breath of dank graveyard air. Perhaps it *was* Algernon Swinburne that Jory resembled, but his father’s likeness—at least as seen through the middle son’s hand and eye—reminded me of an Oscar Wilde character: that nearly immortal *roué*, Dorian Gray.

His canvases were long, slow processes, but he was able to quick-sketch with such nimble rapidity that he might come home from Hyde Park on a Saturday afternoon with as much as twenty pounds in his pockets.

“I’ll wager his father enjoyed *that*,” Holmes said. He reached automatically for his pipe, then put it back again. “The son of a Peer quick-sketching wealthy American tourists and their sweethearts like a French Bohemian.”

Lestrade laughed heartily. “He *raged* over it, as you may imagine. But Jory—good for him!—wouldn’t give over his selling stall in Hyde Park . . . not, at least, until his father agreed to an allowance of thirty-five pounds a week. He called it low blackmail.”

“My heart bleeds,” I said.

“As does mine, Watson,” Holmes said. “The third son, Les-trade, quickly—we’ve almost reached the house, I believe.”

As Lestrade had intimated, surely Stephen Hull had the greatest cause to hate his father. As his gout grew worse and his head more muddled, Lord Hull surrendered more and more of the company affairs to Stephen, who was only twenty-eight at the time of his father’s death. The responsibilities devolved upon Stephen, and the blame also devolved upon him if his least decision proved amiss. Yet no financial gain accrued to him should he decide well and his father’s affairs prosper.

Lord Hull should have looked with favor upon Stephen, as the only one of his children with an interest in and an aptitude for the business he had founded; Stephen was a perfect example of what the Bible calls “the good son.” Yet instead of displaying love and gratitude, Lord Hull repaid the young man’s largely successful efforts with scorn, suspicion, and jealousy. On many occasions during the last two years of his life, the old man had offered the charming opinion that Stephen “would steal the pennies from a dead man’s eyes.”

“The b——d!” I cried, unable to contain myself.

“Ignore the new will for a moment,” Holmes said, steepling his fingers again, “and return to the old one. Even under the conditions of that marginally more generous document, Stephen Hull would have had cause for resentment. In spite of all his labors, which had not only saved the family fortune but increased it, his reward was still to have been the youngest son’s share of the

spoils. What, by the way, was to have been the disposition of the shipping company under the provisions of what we might call the Pussy Will?”

I looked carefully at Holmes, but, as always, it was difficult to tell if he had attempted a small *bon mot*. Even after all the years I spent with him and all the adventures we shared, Sherlock Holmes’s sense of humor remains a largely undiscovered country, even to me.

“It was to be handed over to the Board of Directors, with no provision for Stephen,” Lestrade said, and pitched his cigarillo out the window as the hackney swept up the curving drive of a house which looked extraordinarily ugly to me just then, as it stood amid its brown lawns in the driving rain. “Yet with the father dead and the new will nowhere to be found, Stephen Hull has what the Americans call ‘leverage.’ The company will have him as managing director. They should have done anyway, but now it will be on Stephen Hull’s terms.”

“Yes,” Holmes said. “Leverage. A good word.” He leaned out into the rain. “Stop short, driver!” he cried. “We’ve not quite done!”

“As you say, guv’nor,” the driver returned, “but it’s devilish wet out here.”

“And you’ll go with enough in your pocket to make your innards as wet and devilish as your out’ards,” Holmes said. This seemed to satisfy the man, and he stopped thirty yards from the front door of the great house. I listened to the rain tip-tapping on the sides of the coach while Holmes cogitated and then said: “The old will—the one he teased them with—*that* document isn’t missing, is it?”

“Absolutely not. It was on his desk, near his body.”

“Four excellent suspects! Servants need not apply . . . or so it seems now. Finish quickly, Lestrade—the final circumstances, and the locked room.”

Lestrade complied, consulting his notes from time to time. A month previous, Lord Hull had observed a small black spot on his right leg, directly behind the knee. The family doctor was called. His diagnosis was gangrene, an unusual but far from rare result of gout and poor circulation. The doctor told him the leg would have to come off, and well above the site of the infection.

Lord Hull laughed until tears streamed down his cheeks. The doctor, who had expected any reaction but this, was struck speechless. “When they stick me

in my coffin, sawbones,” Hull said, “it will be with both legs still attached, thank you very much.”

The doctor told him that he sympathized with Lord Hull’s wish to keep his leg, but that without amputation he would be dead in six months, and he would spend the last two in exquisite pain. Lord Hull asked the doctor what his chances of survival should be if he were to undergo the operation. He was still laughing, Lestrade said, as though it were the best joke he had ever heard. After some hemming and hawing, the doctor said the odds were even.

“Bunk,” said I.

“Exactly what Lord Hull said,” Lestrade replied, “except he used a term more often used in dosses than in drawing-rooms.”

Hull told the doctor that he himself reckoned his chances at no better than one in five. “As to the pain, I don’t think it will come to that,” he went on, “as long as there’s laudanum and a spoon to stir it with in stumping distance.”

The next day, Hull finally sprang his nasty surprise—that he was thinking of changing his will. Just how he did not immediately say.

“Oh?” Holmes said, looking at Lestrade from those cool gray eyes that saw so much. “And who, pray, was surprised?”

“None of them, I should think. But you know human nature, Holmes; how people hope against hope.”

“And how some plan against disaster,” Holmes said dreamily.

This very morning Lord Hull had called his family into the parlor, and when all were settled, he performed an act few testators are granted, one which is usually performed by the wagging tongues of their solicitors after their own have been forever silenced. In short, he read them his new will, leaving the balance of his estate to Mrs. Hemphill’s wayward pussies. In the silence which followed he rose, not without difficulty, and favored them all with a death’s-head grin. And leaning over his cane, he made the following declaration, which I find as astoundingly vile now as I did when Lestrade recounted it to us in that hackney cab: “So! All is fine, is it not? Yes, very fine! You have served me quite faithfully, woman and boys, for some forty years. Now I intend, with the clearest and most serene conscience imaginable, to cast you hence. But take heart! Things could be worse! If there was time, the pharaohs had their favorite pets—cats, for the most part—killed before they died, so the pets might be

there to welcome them into the after-life, to be kicked or petted there, at their masters' whims, forever . . . and forever . . . and forever." Then he laughed at them. He leaned over his cane and laughed from his doughy, dying face, the new will—properly signed and properly witnessed, as all of them had seen—clutched in one claw of a hand.

William rose and said, "Sir, you may be my father and the author of my existence, but you are also the lowest creature to crawl upon the face of the earth since the serpent tempted Eve in the Garden."

"Not at all!" the old monster returned, still laughing. "I know four lower. Now, if you will pardon me, I have some important papers to put away in my safe . . . and some worthless ones to burn in the stove."

"He still had the old will when he confronted them?" Holmes asked. He seemed more interested than startled.

"Yes."

"He could have burned it as soon as the new one was signed and witnessed," Holmes mused. "He had all the previous afternoon and evening to do so. But he didn't, did he? Why not? How say you on that question, Lestrade?"

"He hadn't had enough of teasing them even then, I suppose. He was offering them a chance—a *temptation*—he believed all would refuse."

"Perhaps he believed one of them would not refuse," Holmes said. "Hasn't that idea at least crossed your mind?" He turned his head and searched my face with the momentary beam of his brilliant—and somehow chilling—regard. "*Either* of your minds? Isn't it possible that such a black creature might hold out such a temptation, knowing that if one of his family were to succumb to it and put him out of his misery—Stephen seems most likely from what you say—that one might be caught . . . and swing for the crime of patricide?"

I stared at Holmes in silent horror.

"Never mind," Holmes said. "Go on, Inspector—it's time for the locked room to make its appearance, I believe."

The four of them had sat in paralyzed silence as the old man made his long, slow way up the corridor to his study. There were no sounds but the thud of his cane, the labored rattle of his breathing, the plaintive *miaow* of a cat in the

kitchen, and the steady beat of the pendulum in the parlor clock. Then they heard the squeal of hinges as Hull opened his study door and stepped inside.

“Wait!” Holmes said sharply, sitting forward. “No one actually *saw* him go in, did they?”

“I’m afraid that’s not so, old chap,” Lestrade returned. “Mr. Oliver Stanley, Lord Hull’s valet, had heard Lord Hull’s progress down the hall. He came from Hull’s dressing chamber, went to the gallery railing, and called down to ask if all was well. Hull looked up—Stanley saw him as plainly as I see you right now, old fellow—and said all was absolutely tip-top. Then he rubbed the back of his head, went in, and locked the study door behind him.

“By the time his father had reached the door (the corridor is quite long and it may have taken him as much as two minutes to make his way up it unaided) Stephen had shaken off his stupor and had gone to the parlor door. He saw the exchange between his father and his father’s man. Of course Lord Hull was back-to, but Stephen heard his father’s voice and described the same characteristic gesture: Hull rubbing the back of his head.”

“Could Stephen Hull and this Stanley fellow have spoken before the police arrived?” I asked—shrewdly, I thought.

“Of course they could,” Lestrade said wearily. “They probably did. But there was no collusion.”

“You feel sure of that?” Holmes asked, but he sounded uninterested.

“Yes. Stephen Hull would lie very well, I think, but Stanley would do it very badly. Accept my professional opinion or not, just as you like, Holmes.”

“I accept it.”

So Lord Hull passed into his study, the famous locked room, and all heard the click of the lock as he turned the key—the only key there was to that *sanctum sanctorum*. This was followed by a more unusual sound: the bolt being drawn across.

Then, silence.

The four of them—Lady Hull and her sons, so shortly to be blue-blooded paupers—looked at one another in similar silence. The cat miaowed again from the kitchen and Lady Hull said in a distracted voice that if the housekeeper wouldn’t give that cat a bowl of milk, she supposed she must. She said the sound of it would drive her mad if she had to listen to it much longer.

She left the parlor. Moments later, without a word among them, the three sons also left. William went to his room upstairs, Stephen wandered into the music room, and Jory went to sit upon a bench beneath the stairs where, he had told Lestrade, he had gone since earliest childhood when he was sad or had matters of deep difficulty to think over.

Less than five minutes later a shriek arose from the study. Stephen ran out of the music room, where he had been plinking out isolated notes on the piano. Jory met him at the study door. William was already halfway downstairs and saw them breaking in when Stanley, the valet, came out of Lord Hull's dressing room and went to the gallery railing for the second time. Stanley has testified to seeing Stephen Hull burst into the study; to seeing William reach the foot of the stairs and almost fall on the marble; to seeing Lady Hull come from the dining-room doorway with a pitcher of milk still in one hand. Moments later the rest of the servants had gathered.

"Lord Hull was slumped over his writing-desk with the three brothers standing by. His eyes were open, and the look in them. . . I believe it was surprise. Again, you are free to accept or reject my opinion just as you like, but I tell you it looked very much like surprise to me. Clutched in his hands was his will . . . the old one. Of the new one there was no sign. And there was a dagger in his back."

With this, Lestrade rapped for the driver to go on.

We entered the house between two constables as stone-faced as Buckingham Palace sentinels. Here to begin with was a very long hall, floored in black and white marble tiles like a chessboard. They led to an open door at the end, where two more constables were posted: the entrance to the infamous study. To the left were the stairs, to the right two doors: the parlor and the music room, I guessed.

"The family is gathered in the parlor," Lestrade said.

"Good," Holmes said pleasantly. "But perhaps Watson and I might first have a look at the scene of the crime?"

"Shall I accompany you?"

"Perhaps not," Holmes said. "Has the body been removed?"

"It was still here when I left for your lodgings, but by now it almost certainly will be gone."

“Very good.”

Holmes started away. I followed. Lestrade called, “Holmes!”

Holmes turned, eyebrows raised.

“No secret panels, no secret doors. For the third time, take my word or not, as you like.”

“I believe I’ll wait until . . .” Holmes began and then his breath began to hitch. He scrambled in his pocket, found a napkin probably carried absently away from the eating-house where we had dined the previous evening, and sneezed mightily into it. I looked down and saw a large, scarred tomcat, as out of place here in this grand hall as would have been one of those urchins of whom I had been thinking earlier, twining about Holmes’s legs. One of its ears was laid back against its scarred skull. The other was gone, lost in some long-ago alley battle, I supposed.

Holmes sneezed repeatedly and kicked out at the cat. It went with a reproachful backward look rather than with the angry hiss one might have expected from such an old campaigner. Holmes looked at Lestrade over the napkin with reproachful, watery eyes. Lestrade, not in the least put out of countenance, thrust his head forward and grinned like a monkey. “Ten, Holmes,” he said. “*Ten*. House is full of felines. Hull loved em.” And with that he walked off.

“How long have you suffered this affliction, old fellow?” I asked. I was a bit alarmed.

“Always,” he said, and sneezed again. The word *allergy* was hardly known all those years ago, but that, of course, was his problem.

“Do you want to leave?” I asked. I had once seen a case of near asphyxiation as the result of such an aversion, this one to sheep but otherwise similar in all respects.

“He’d like that,” Holmes said. I did not need him to tell me whom he meant. Holmes sneezed once more (a large red welt was appearing on his normally pale forehead) and then we passed between the constables at the study door. Holmes closed it behind him.

The room was long and relatively narrow. It was at the end of something like a wing, the main house spreading to either side from an area roughly three-quarters of the way down the hall. There were windows on two sides of

the study and it was bright enough in spite of the gray, rainy day. The walls were dotted with colorful shipping charts in handsome teak frames, and among them was mounted an equally handsome set of weather instruments in a brass-bound, glass-fronted case. It contained an anemometer (Hull had the little whirling cups mounted on one of the roofpeaks, I supposed), two thermometers (one registering the outdoor temperature and the other that of the study), and a barometer much like the one which had fooled Holmes into believing the bad weather was about to break. I noticed the glass was still rising, then looked outside. The rain was falling harder than ever, rising glass or no rising glass. We believe we know a great lot, with our instruments and things, but I was old enough then to believe we don't know half as much as we think we do, and old enough now to believe we never will.

Holmes and I both turned to look at the door. The bolt was torn free, but leaning inward, as it should have been. The key was still in the study-side lock, and still turned.

Holmes's eyes, watering as they were, were everywhere at once, noting, cataloguing, storing.

"You are a little better," I said.

"Yes," he said, lowering the napkin and stuffing it indifferently back into his coat pocket. "He may have loved em, but he apparently didn't allow em in here. Not on a regular basis, anyway. What do you make of it, Watson?"

Although my eyes were slower than his, I was also looking around. The double windows were all locked with thumb-turns and small brass side-bolts. None of the panes had been broken. Most of the framed charts and the box of weather instruments were between these windows. The other two walls were filled with books. There was a small coal-stove but no fireplace; the murderer hadn't come down the chimney like Father Christmas, not unless he was narrow enough to fit through a stovepipe and clad in an asbestos suit, for the stove was still very warm.

The desk stood at one end of this long, narrow, well-lit room; the opposite end was a pleasantly bookish area, not quite a library, with two high-backed upholstered chairs and a coffee-table between them. On this table was a random stack of volumes. The floor was covered with a Turkish rug. If the murderer had come through a trap-door, I hadn't the slightest idea how he'd

gotten back under that rug without disarranging it . . . and it was *not* disarranged, not in the slightest: the shadows of the coffee-table legs lay across it without even a hint of a ripple.

“Did you believe it, Watson?” Holmes asked, snapping me out of what was almost a hypnotic trance. Something . . . something about that coffee-table . . .

“Believe what, Holmes?”

“That all four of them simply walked out of the parlor, in four different directions, four minutes before the murder?”

“I don’t know,” I said faintly.

“I don’t believe it; not for a mo—” He broke off. “Watson! Are you all right?”

“No,” I said in a voice I could hardly hear myself. I collapsed into one of the library chairs. My heart was beating too fast. I couldn’t seem to catch my breath. My head was pounding; my eyes seemed to have suddenly grown too large for their sockets. I could not take them from the shadows of the coffee-table legs upon the rug. “I am most . . . definitely not. . . all right.”

At that moment Lestrade appeared in the study doorway. “If you’ve looked your fill, H—” He broke off. “What the devil’s the matter with Watson?”

“I believe,” said Holmes in a calm, measured voice, “that Watson has solved the case. Have you, Watson?”

I nodded my head. Not the entire case, perhaps, but most of it. I knew who; I knew how.

“Is it this way with you, Holmes?” I asked. “When you . . . see?”

“Yes,” he said, “though I usually manage to keep my feet.”

“*Watson’s* solved the case?” Lestrade said impatiently. “Bah! *Watson’s* offered a thousand solutions to a hundred cases before this, Holmes, as you very well know, and all of them wrong. It’s his *bête noire*. Why, I remember just this last summer—”

“I know more about Watson than you ever shall,” Holmes said, “and this time he has hit upon it. I know the look.” He began to sneeze again; the cat with the missing ear had wandered into the room through the door which Lestrade had left open. It moved directly toward Holmes with an expression of what seemed to be affection on its ugly face.

“If this is how it is for you,” I said, “I’ll never envy you again, Holmes. My heart should burst.”

“One becomes inured even to insight,” Holmes said, with not the slightest trace of conceit in his voice. “Out with it, then. . . or shall we bring in the suspects, as in the last chapter of a detective novel?”

“No!” I cried in horror. I had seen none of them; I had no urge to. “Only I think I must *show* you how it was done. If you and Inspector Lestrade will only step out into the hall for a moment . . .”

The cat reached Holmes and jumped into his lap, purring like the most satisfied creature on earth.

Holmes exploded into a perfect fusillade of sneezes. The red patches on his face, which had begun to fade, burst out afresh. He pushed the cat away and stood up.

“Be quick, Watson, so we can leave this damned place,” he said in a muffled voice, and left the room with his shoulders in an uncharacteristic hunch, his head down, and with not a single look back. Believe me when I say that a little of my heart went with him.

Lestrade stood leaning against the door, his wet coat steaming slightly, his lips parted in a detestable grin. “Shall I take Holmes’s new admirer, Watson?”

“Leave it,” I said, “and close the door when you go out.”

“I’d lay a fiver you’re wasting our time, old man,” Lestrade said, but I saw something different in his eyes: if I’d offered to take him up on the wager, he would have found a way to squirm out of it.

“Close the door,” I repeated. “I shan’t be long.”

He closed the door. I was alone in Hull’s study . . . except for the cat, of course, which was now sitting in the middle of the rug, tail curled neatly about its paws, green eyes watching me.

I felt in my pockets and found my own souvenir from last night’s dinner—men on their own are rather untidy people, I fear, but there was a reason for the bread other than general slovenliness. I almost always kept a crust in one pocket or the other, for it amused me to feed the pigeons that landed outside the very window where Holmes had been sitting when Lestrade drove up.

“Pussy,” said I, and put the bread beneath the coffee-table—the coffee-table to which Lord Hull would have presented his back when he sat down with his

two wills, the wretched old one and the even more wretched new one. “Puss-puss-puss.”

The cat rose and walked languidly beneath the table to investigate the crust. I went to the door and opened it. “Holmes! Lestrade! Quickly!”

They came in.

“Step over here,” I said, and walked to the coffee-table.

Lestrade looked about and began to frown, seeing nothing; Holmes, of course, began to sneeze again. “Can’t we have that wretched thing out of here?” he managed from behind the table-napkin, which was now quite soggy.

“Of course,” said I. “*But where is the wretched thing, Holmes?*”

A startled expression filled his wet eyes. Lestrade whirled, walked toward Hull’s writing-desk, and peered behind it. Holmes knew his reaction should not have been so violent if the cat had been on the far side of the room. He bent and looked beneath the coffee-table, saw nothing but the rug and the bottom row of the two bookcases opposite, and straightened up again. If his eyes had not been spouting like fountains, he should have seen all then; he was, after all, right on top of it. But one must also give credit where credit is due, and the illusion was devilishly good. The empty space beneath his father’s coffee-table had been Jory Hull’s masterpiece.

“I don’t—” Holmes began, and then the cat, who found my friend much more to its liking than any stale crust of bread, strolled out from beneath the table and began once more to twine ecstatically about his ankles. Lestrade had returned, and his eyes grew so wide I thought they might actually fall out. Even having understood the trick, I myself was amazed. The scarred tomcat seemed to be materializing out of thin air; head, body, white-tipped tail last.

It rubbed against Holmes’s leg, purring as Holmes sneezed.

“That’s enough,” I said. “You’ve done your job and may leave.”

I picked it up, took it to the door (getting a good scratch for my pains), and tossed it unceremoniously into the hall. I shut the door behind it.

Holmes was sitting down. “My God,” he said in a nasal, clogged voice. Lestrade was incapable of any speech at all. His eyes never left the table and the faded Turkish rug beneath its legs: an empty space that had somehow given birth to a cat.

“I should have seen,” Holmes was muttering. “Yes . . . but you. . . how did you understand so *quickly*?” I detected the faintest hurt and pique in that voice, and forgave it at once.

“It was *those*,” I said, and pointed at the rug.

“Of course!” Holmes nearly groaned. He slapped his welted forehead. “Idiot! I’m a perfect *idiot!*”

“Nonsense,” I said tartly. “With a houseful of cats—and one who has apparently picked you out for a special friend—I suspect you were seeing ten of everything.”

“What about the rug?” Lestrade asked impatiently. “It’s very nice, I’ll grant, and probably expensive, but—”

“Not the *rug*,” I said. “The *shadows*.”

“Show him, Watson,” Holmes said wearily, lowering the napkin into his lap. So I bent and picked one of them off the floor.

Lestrade sat down in the other chair, hard, like a man who has been unexpectedly punched.

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“I kept looking at them, you see,” I said, speaking in a tone which could not help being apologetic. This seemed all wrong. It was Holmes’s job to explain the whos and hows at the end of the investigation. Yet while I saw that he now understood everything, I knew he would refuse to speak in this case. And I suppose a part of me—the part that knew I would probably never have another chance to do something like this—*wanted* to be the one to explain. And the cat was rather a nice touch, I must say. A magician could have done no better with a rabbit and a top-hat.

“I knew something was wrong, but it took a moment for it to sink in. This room is extremely bright, but today it’s pouring down rain. Look around and you’ll see that not a single object in this room casts a shadow . . . *except for these table-legs*.”

Lestrade uttered an oath.

“It’s rained for nearly a week,” I said, “but both Holmes’s barometer and the late Lord Hull’s”—I pointed to it—“said that we could expect sun today. In

fact, it seemed a sure thing. So he added the shadows as a final touch.”

“Who did?”

“Jory Hull,” Holmes said in that same weary tone. “Who else?”

I bent down and reached my hand beneath the right end of the coffee-table. It disappeared into thin air, just as the cat had appeared. Lestrade uttered another startled oath. I tapped the back of the canvas stretched tightly between the forward legs of the coffee-table. The books and the rug bulged and rippled, and the illusion, nearly perfect as it had been, was instantly dispelled.

Jory Hull had painted the nothing under his father’s coffee-table, had crouched behind the nothing as his father entered the room, locked the door, and sat at his desk with his two wills, and at last had rushed out from behind the nothing, dagger in hand.

“He was the only one who could execute such an extraordinary piece of realism,” I said, this time running my hand down the face of the canvas. We could all hear the low rasping sound it made, like the purr of a very old cat. “The only one who could execute it, and the only one who could hide behind it: Jory Hull, who was no more than five feet tall, bow-legged, slump-shouldered.

“As Holmes said, the surprise of the new will was no surprise. Even if the old man had been secretive about the possibility of cutting the relatives out of the will, which he wasn’t, only simpletons could have mistaken the import of the visit from the solicitor and, more important, the assistant. It takes two witnesses to make a will a valid document at Chancery. What Holmes said about some people preparing for disaster was very true. A canvas as perfect as this was not made overnight, or in a month. You may find he had it ready, should it need to be used, for as long as a year—”

“Or five,” Holmes interpolated.

“I suppose. At any rate, when Hull announced that he wanted to see his family in the parlor this morning, I imagine Jory knew the time had come. After his father had gone to bed last night, he would have come down here and mounted his canvas. I suppose he may have put down the *faux* shadows at the same time, but if I had been Jory I should have tip-toed in here for another peek at the glass this morning, before the previously announced parlor

gathering, just to make sure it was still rising. If the door was locked, I suppose he filched the key from his father's pocket and returned it later."

"Wasn't locked," Lestrade said laconically. "As a rule he kept the door shut to keep the cats out, but rarely locked it."

"As for the shadows, they are just strips of felt, as you now see. His eye was good, they are about where they would have been at eleven this morning . . . if the glass had been right."

"If he expected the sun to be shining, why did he put down shadows at all?" Lestrade grumped. "Sun puts em down as a matter of course, just in case you've never noticed your own, Watson."

Here I was at a loss. I looked at Holmes, who seemed grateful to have *any* part in the answer.

"Don't you see? That is the greatest irony of all! If the sun had shone as the glass suggested it would, the canvas would have *blocked* the shadows. Painted shadow-legs don't cast them, you know. He was caught by shadows on a day when there were none because he was afraid he would be caught by none on a day when his father's barometer said they would almost certainly be everywhere else in the room."

"I still don't understand how Jory got in here without Hull seeing him," Lestrade said.

"That puzzles me as well," Holmes said—dear old Holmes! I doubt that it puzzled him a bit, but that was what he said. "Watson?"

"The parlor where Lord Hull met with his wife and sons has a door which communicates with the music room, does it not?"

"Yes," Lestrade said, "and the music room has a door which communicates with Lady Hull's morning room, which is next in line as one goes toward the back of the house. But from the morning room one can only go back into the hall, Doctor Watson. If there had been *two* doors into Hull's study, I should hardly have come after Holmes on the run as I did."

He said this last in tones of faint self-justification.

"Oh, Jory went back into the hall, all right," I said, "but his father didn't see him."

"Rot!"

“I’ll demonstrate,” I said, and went to the writing-desk, where the dead man’s cane still leaned. I picked it up and turned toward them. “The very instant Lord Hull left the parlor, Jory was up and on the run.”

Lestrade shot a startled glance at Holmes; Holmes gave the inspector a cool, ironic look in return. I did not understand those looks then, nor give them much thought at all, if the whole truth be told. I did not fully understand the wider implications of the picture I was drawing for yet awhile. I was too wrapped up in my own re-creation, I suppose.

“He nipped through the first connecting door, ran across the music room, and entered Lady Hull’s morning room. He went to the hall door then and peeked out. If Lord Hull’s gout had gotten so bad as to have brought on gangrene, he would have progressed no more than a quarter of the way down the hall, and that is optimistic. Now mark me, Inspector Lestrade, and I will show you the price a man pays for a lifetime of rich food and strong drink. If you harbor any doubts when I’ve done, I shall parade a dozen gout sufferers before you, and each one will show the same ambulatory symptoms I now intend to demonstrate. Please notice above all how fixed my attention is . . . and *where*.”

With that I began to stump slowly across the room toward them, both hands clamped tightly on the ball of the cane. I would raise one foot quite high, bring it down, pause, and then draw the other leg along. Never did my eyes look up. Instead, they alternated between the cane and that forward foot.

“Yes,” Holmes said quietly. “The good doctor is exactly right, Inspector Lestrade. The gout comes first; then the loss of balance; then (if the sufferer lives long enough), the characteristic stoop brought on by always looking down.”

“Jory would have been very aware of how his father fixed his attention when he walked from place to place,” I said. “As a result, what happened this morning was diabolically simple. When Jory reached the morning room, he peeped out the door, saw his father studying his feet and the tip of his cane—just as always—and knew he was safe. He stepped out, *right in front of his unseeing father*, and simply nipped into the study. The door, Lestrade informs us, was unlocked, and really, how great would the risk have been? They were in

the hall together for no more than three seconds, and probably a little less.” I paused. “That hall floor is marble, isn’t it? He must have kicked off his shoes.”

“He was wearing slippers,” Lestrade said in a strangely calm tone of voice, and for the second time, his eyes met Holmes’s.

“Ah,” I said. “I see. Jory gained the study well ahead of his father and hid behind his cunning stage-flat. Then he withdrew the dagger and waited. His father reached the end of the hall. Jory heard Stanley call down to him, and heard his father call back that he was fine. Then Lord Hull entered his study for the last time . . . closed the door . . . and locked it.”

They were both looking at me intently, and I understood some of the godlike power Holmes must have felt at moments like these, telling others what only he could know. And yet, I must repeat that it is a feeling I should not have wanted to have too often. I believe the urge to repeat such a feeling would have corrupted most men—men with less iron in their souls than was possessed by my friend Sherlock Holmes.

“Old Keg-Legs would have made himself as small as possible before the locking-up happened, perhaps knowing (or only suspecting) that his father would have one good look round before turning the key and shooting the bolt. He may have been gouty and going a bit soft about the edges, but that doesn’t mean he was going blind.”

“Stanley says his eyes were top-hole,” Lestrade said. “One of the first things I asked.”

“So he looked round,” I said, and suddenly I could *see* it, and I suppose this was also the way it was with Holmes; this reconstruction which, while based only upon facts and deduction, seemed to be half a vision. “He saw nothing to alarm him; nothing but the study as it always was, empty save for himself. It is a remarkably open room—I see no closet door, and with the windows on both sides, there are no dark nooks and crannies even on such a day as this.

“Satisfied that he was alone, he closed the door, turned his key, and shot the bolt. Jory would have heard him stump his way across to the desk. He would have heard the heavy thump and wheeze of the chair cushion as his father landed on it—a man in whom gout is well-advanced does not sit so much as position himself over a soft spot and then drop onto it, seat-first—and then Jory would at last have risked a look out.”

I glanced at Holmes.

“Go on, old man,” he said warmly. “You are doing splendidly. Absolutely first rate.” I saw he meant it. Thousands would have called him cold, and they would not have been wrong, precisely, but he also had a large heart. Holmes simply protected it better than most men do.

“Thank you. Jory would have seen his father put his cane aside, and place the papers—the two packets of papers—on the blotter. He did not kill his father immediately, although he could have done; that’s what’s so gruesomely pathetic about this business, and that’s why I wouldn’t go into that parlor where they are for a thousand pounds. I wouldn’t go in unless you and your men dragged me.”

“How do you know he didn’t do it immediately?” Lestrade asked.

“The scream came several minutes after the key was turned and the bolt drawn; you said so yourself, and I assume you have enough testimony on that point not to doubt it. Yet it can only be a dozen long paces from door to desk. Even for a gouty man like Lord Hull, it would have taken half a minute, forty seconds at the outside, to cross to the chair and sit down. Add fifteen seconds for him to prop his cane where you found it, and put his wills on the blotter.

“What happened then? What happened during that last minute or two, a short time which must have seemed—to Jory Hull, at least—almost endless? I believe Lord Hull simply sat there, looking from one will to the other. Jory would have been able to tell the difference between the two easily enough; the differing colors of the parchment would have been all the clue he needed.

“He knew his father intended to throw *one* of them into the stove; I believe he waited to see which one it would be. There was, after all, a chance that the old devil was only having a cruel practical joke at his family’s expense. Perhaps he would burn the new will, and put the old one back in the safe. Then he could have left the room and told his family the new will was safely put away. Do you know where it is, Lestrade? The safe?”

“Five of the books in that case swing out,” Lestrade said briefly, pointing to a shelf in the library area.

“Both family and old man would have been satisfied then; the family would have known their earned inheritances were safe, and the old man would have gone to his grave believing he had perpetrated one of the cruellest practical

jokes of all time. . . but he would have gone as God's victim or his own, and not Jory Hull's."

Yet a third time that queer look, half-amused and half-revolved, passed between Holmes and Lestrade.

"Myself, I rather think the old man was only savoring the moment, as a man may savor the prospect of an after-dinner drink in the middle of the afternoon or a sweet after a long period of abstinence. At any rate, the minute passed, and Lord Hull began to rise . . . but with the darker parchment in his hand, and facing the stove rather than the safe. Whatever his hopes may have been, there was no hesitation on Jory's part when the moment came. He burst from hiding, crossed the distance between the coffee-table and the desk in an instant, and plunged the knife into his father's back before he was fully up.

"I suspect the post-mortem will show the thrust clipped through the heart's right ventricle and into the lung—that would explain the quantity of blood expelled onto the desktop. It also explains why Lord Hull was able to scream before he died, and that's what did for Mr. Jory Hull."

"How so?" Lestrade asked.

"A locked room is a bad business unless you intend to pass murder off as suicide," I said, looking at Holmes. He smiled and nodded at this maxim of his. "The last thing Jory would have wanted was for things to look as they did . . . the locked room, the locked windows, the man with a knife in him where the man himself never could have put it. I think he had never foreseen his father dying with such a squawl. His plan was to stab him, burn the new will, rifle the desk, unlock one of the windows, and escape that way. He would have entered the house by another door, resumed his seat under the stairs, and then, when the body was finally discovered, it would have looked like robbery."

"Not to Hull's solicitor," Lestrade said.

"He might well have kept his silence, however," Holmes mused, and then added brightly, "I'll bet our artistic friend intended to add a few tracks, too. I have found that the better class of murderer almost always likes to throw in a few mysterious tracks leading away from the scene of the crime." He uttered a brief, humorless sound that was more bark than laugh, then looked back from the window nearest the desk to Lestrade and me. "I think we all agree it would

have seemed a suspiciously convenient murder, under the circumstances, but even if the solicitor spoke up, nothing could have been *proved*.”

“By screaming, Lord Hull spoiled everything,” I said, “as he had been spoiling things all his life. The house was roused. Jory must have been in a total panic, frozen to the spot the way a deer is by a bright light. It was Stephen Hull who saved the day. . . or Jory’s alibi, at least, the one which had him sitting on the bench under the stairs when his father was murdered. Stephen rushed down the hall from the music room, smashed the door open, and must have hissed at Jory to get over to the desk with him, at once, so it would look as if they had broken in together—”

I broke off, thunderstruck. At last I understood the glances which had been flashing between Holmes and Lestrade. I understood what they must have seen from the moment I showed them the trick hiding place: *it could not have been done alone*. The killing, yes, but the rest . . .

“Stephen said he and Jory met at the study door,” I said slowly. “That he, Stephen, burst it in and they entered together, discovered the body together. He lied. He might have done it to protect his brother, but to lie so well when one doesn’t know what has happened seems . . . seems . . .”

“*Impossible*,” Holmes said, “is the word for which you are searching, Watson.”

“Then Jory and Stephen went in on it together,” I said. “They planned it together . . . and in the eyes of the law, both are guilty of their father’s murder! My God!”

“Not both of them, my dear Watson,” Holmes said in a tone of curious gentleness. “*All* of them.”

I could only gape.

He nodded. “You have shown remarkable insight this morning, Watson; you have, in fact, burned with a deductive heat I’ll wager you’ll never generate again. My cap is off to you, dear fellow, as it is to any man who is able to transcend his normal nature, no matter how briefly. But in one way you have remained the same dear chap you’ve always been: while you understand how good people can be, you have no understanding of how black they *may* be.”

I looked at him silently, almost humbly.

“Not that there was much blackness here, if half of what we’ve heard of Lord Hull was true,” Holmes said. He rose and began to pace irritably about the study. “Who testifies that Jory was with Stephen when the door was smashed in? Jory, naturally. Stephen, naturally. But there are two other faces in this family portrait. One belongs to William, the third brother. Do you concur, Lestrade?”

“Yes,” Lestrade said. “If this is the straight of the matter, William also had to be in on it. He said he was halfway down the stairs when he saw the two of them go in together, Jory a little ahead.”

“How interesting!” Holmes said, eyes gleaming. “*Stephen* breaks in the door—as the younger and stronger of course he must—and so one would expect simple forward momentum would have carried him into the room first. Yet William, halfway down the stairs, saw *Jory* enter first. Why was that Watson?”

I could only shake my head numbly.

“Ask yourself whose testimony, *and whose testimony alone*, we can trust here. The answer is the only witness who is not part of the family: Lord Hull’s man, Oliver Stanley. He approached the gallery railing in time to see Stephen enter the room, and that is just as it should have been, since Stephen was alone when he broke it in. It was *William*, with a better angle from his place on the stairs, who said he saw Jory precede Stephen into the study. William said so because he had seen Stanley and knew what he *must* say. It boils down to this, Watson: we know Jory was inside this room. Since both of his brothers testify he was *outside*, there was, at the very least collusion. But as you say, the smooth way they all pulled together suggests something far more serious.”

“Conspiracy,” I said.

“Yes. Do you recall my asking you, Watson, if you believed all four of them simply walked wordlessly out of that parlor in four different directions after they heard the study door locked?”

“Yes. Now I do.”

“The *four* of them.” He looked briefly at Lestrade, who nodded, and then back at me. “We know Jory had to have been up and off and about his business the moment the old man left the parlor in order to reach the study ahead of him, yet all four of the surviving family—including Lady Hull—say

they were in the parlor when Lord Hull locked his study door. The murder of Lord Hull was very much a family affair, Watson.”

I was too staggered to say anything. I looked at Lestrade and saw an expression on his face I had never seen there before nor ever did again; a kind of tired sickened gravity.

“What may they expect?” Holmes said, almost genially.

“Jory will certainly swing,” Lestrade said. “Stephen will go to jail for life. William Hull may get life, but will more likely get twenty years in Wormwood Scrubs, a kind of living death.”

Holmes bent and stroked the canvas stretched between the legs of the coffee-table. It made that odd hoarse purring noise.

“Lady Hull,” Lestrade went on, “may expect to spend the next five years of her life in Beechwood Manor, more commonly known to the inmates as Pox Palace . . . although, having met the lady, I rather suspect she will find another way out. Her husband’s laudanum would be my guess.”

“All because Jory Hull missed a clean strike,” Holmes remarked, and sighed. “If the old man had had the common decency to die silently, all would have been well. Jory would, as Watson says, have left by the window, taking his canvas with him, of course. . . not to mention his trumpery shadows. Instead, he raised the house. All the servants were in, exclaiming over the dead master. The family was in confusion. How shabby their luck was, Lestrade! How close was the constable when Stanley summoned him?”

“Closer than you would believe,” Lestrade said. “Hurrying up the drive to the door, as a matter of fact. He was passing on his regular rounds, and heard a scream from the house. Their luck *was* shabby.”

“Holmes,” I said, feeling much more comfortable in my old role, “how did you know a constable was so nearby?”

“Simplicity itself, Watson. If not, the family would have shooed the servants out long enough to hide the canvas and ‘shadows.’ ”

“Also to unlatch at least one window, I should think,” Lestrade added in a voice uncustomarily quiet.

“They *could* have taken the canvas and the shadows,” I said suddenly.

Holmes turned toward me. “Yes.”

Lestrade raised his eyebrows.

“It came down to a choice,” I said to him. “There was time enough to burn the new will or get rid of the huggermugger . . . this would have been just Stephen and Jory, of course, in the moments after Stephen burst in the door. They—or, if you’ve got the temperature of the characters right, and I suppose you do, *Stephen*—decided to burn the will and hope for the best. I suppose there was just enough time to chuck it into the stove.”

Lestrade turned, looked at it, then looked back. “Only a man as black as Hull would have found strength enough to scream at the end,” he said.

“Only a man as black as Hull would have required a son to kill him,” Holmes rejoined.

He and Lestrade looked at each other, and again something passed between them, some perfectly silent communication from which I myself was excluded.

“Have you ever done it?” Holmes asked, as if picking up on an old conversation.

Lestrade shook his head. “Once came damned close,” he said. “There was a girl involved, not her fault, not really. I came close. Yet . . . that was only one.”

“And here there are four,” Holmes returned, understanding him perfectly. “Four people ill-used by a villain who should have died within six months anyway.”

At last I understood what they were discussing.

Holmes turned his gray eyes on me. “What say you, Lestrade? Watson has solved this one, although he did not see all the ramifications. Shall we let Watson decide?”

“All right,” Lestrade said gruffly. “Just be quick. I want to get out of this damned room.”

Instead of answering, I bent down, picked up the felt shadows, rolled them into a ball, and put them in my coat pocket. I felt quite odd doing it: much as I had felt when in the grip of the fever which almost took my life in India.

“Capital fellow, Watson!” Holmes cried. “You’ve solved your first case, become an accessory to murder, and it’s not even tea-time! And here’s a souvenir for myself—an original Jory Hull. I doubt it’s signed, but one must be grateful for whatever the gods send us on rainy days.” He used his pen-knife to loosen the artist’s glue holding the canvas to the legs of the coffee-table. He

made quick work of it; less than a minute later he was slipping a narrow canvas tube into the inner pocket of his voluminous greatcoat.

“This is a dirty piece of work,” Lestrade said, but he crossed to one of the windows and, after a moment’s hesitation, released the locks which held it and opened it half an inch or so.

“Say it’s dirty work undone,” Holmes said in a tone of almost hectic gaiety. “Shall we go, gentlemen?”

We crossed to the door. Lestrade opened it. One of the constables asked him if there was any progress.

On another occasion Lestrade might have shown the man the rough side of his tongue. This time he said shortly, “Looks like attempted robbery gone to something worse. I saw it at once, of course; Holmes a moment later.”

“Too bad!” the other constable ventured.

“Yes,” Lestrade said, “but at least the old man’s scream sent the thief packing before he could steal anything. Carry on.”

We left. The parlor door was open, but I kept my head down as we passed it. Holmes looked, of course; there was no way he could not have done. It was just the way he was made. As for me, I never saw any of the family. I never wanted to.

Holmes was sneezing again. His friend was twining around his legs and miaowing blissfully. “Let me out of here,” he said, and bolted.

• • •

An hour later we were back at 221B Baker Street, in much the same positions we had occupied when Lestrade came driving up: Holmes in the window-seat, myself on the sofa.

“Well, Watson,” Holmes said presently, “how do you think you’ll sleep tonight?”

“Like a top,” I said. “And you?”

“Likewise, I’m sure,” he said. “I’m glad to be away from those damned cats, I can tell you that.”

“How will Lestrade sleep, d’you think?”

Holmes looked at me and smiled. “Poorly tonight. Poorly for a week, perhaps. But then he’ll be all right. Among his other talents, Lestrade has a great one for creative forgetting.”

That made me laugh.

“Look, Watson!” Holmes said. “Here’s a sight!” I got up and went to the window, somehow sure I would see Lestrade riding up in the wagon once more. Instead I saw the sun breaking through the clouds, bathing London in a glorious late-afternoon light.

“It came out after all,” Holmes said. “Marvellous, Watson! Makes one happy to be alive!” He picked up his violin and began to play, the sun strong on his face.

I looked at his barometer and saw it was falling. That made me laugh so hard I had to sit down. When Holmes asked—in tones of mild irritation—what the matter was, I could only shake my head. I am not, in truth, sure he would have understood, anyway. It was not the way his mind worked.

## Umney's Last Case

The rains are over. The hills are still green and in the valley across the Hollywood hills you can see snow on the high mountains. The fur stores are advertising their annual sales. The call houses that specialize in sixteen-year-old virgins are doing a land-office business. And in Beverly Hills the jacaranda trees are beginning to bloom.

—Raymond Chandler,  
*The Little Sister*

### I. The News from Peoria.

It was one of those spring mornings so L.A.-perfect you keep expecting to see that little trademark symbol—®—stamped on it somewhere. The exhaust of the vehicles passing on Sunset smelled faintly of oleander, the oleander was lightly perfumed with exhaust, and the sky overhead was as clear as a hardshell Baptist's conscience. Peoria Smith, the blind paperboy, was standing in his accustomed place on the corner of Sunset and Laurel, and if that didn't mean God was in His heaven and all was jake with the world, I didn't know what did.

Yet since I'd swung my feet out of bed that morning at the unaccustomed hour of 7:30 A.M., things had felt a little off-kilter, somehow; a tad woozy around the edges. It was only as I was shaving—or at least showing those pesky bristles the razor in an effort to scare them into submission—that I realized part of the reason why. Although I'd been up reading until at least two, I hadn't heard the Demmicks roll in, squiffed to the earlobes and trading those snappy one-liners that apparently form the basis of their marriage.

Nor had I heard Buster, and that was maybe even odder. Buster, the Demmicks' Welsh Corgi, has a high-pitched bark that goes through your head like slivers of glass, and he uses it as much as he can. Also, he's the jealous type.

He lets loose with one of his shrill barking squalls every time George and Gloria clinch, and when they aren't zinging each other like a couple of vaudeville comedians, George and Gloria usually *are* clinching. I've gone to sleep on more than one occasion listening to them giggle while that mutt prances around their feet going *yarkyyarkyyark* and wondering how difficult it would be to strangle a muscular, medium-sized dog with a length of piano-wire. Last night, however, the Demmicks' apartment had been as quiet as the grave. It was passing strange, but a long way from earth-shattering; the Demmicks weren't exactly your perfect life-on-a-timetable couple at the best of times.

Peoria Smith was all right, though—chipper as a chipmunk, just as always, and he'd recognized me by my walk even though it was at least an hour before my usual time. He was wearing a baggy CalTech sweatshirt that came down to his thighs and a pair of corduroy knickers that showed off his scabby knees. His hated white cane leaned casually against the side of the card-table he did business on.

“Say, Mr. Umney! Howza kid?”

Peoria's dark glasses glinted in the morning sunlight, and as he turned toward the sound of my step with my copy of the *L.A. Times* held up in front of him, I had a momentary unsettling thought: it was as if someone had drilled two big black holes into his face. I shivered the thought off my back, thinking that maybe the time had come to cut out the before-bedtime shot of rye. Either that or double the dose.

Hitler was on the front of the *Times*, as he so often was these days. This time it was something about Austria. I thought, and not for the first time, how at home that pale face and limp forelock would have looked on a post-office bulletin board.

“The kid is just about okay, Peoria,” I said. “In fact, the kid is as fine as fresh paint on an outhouse wall.”

I dropped a dime into the Corona box resting atop Peoria's stack of newspapers. The *Times* is a three-center, and overpriced at that, but I've been dropping that same chip into Peoria's change-box since time out of mind. He's a good kid, and making good grades in school—I took it on myself to check that last year, after he'd helped me out on the Weld case. If Peoria hadn't shown

up on Harris Brunner's houseboat when he did, I'd still be trying to swim with my feet cemented into a kerosene drum, somewhere off Malibu. To say I owe him a lot is an understatement.

In the course of that particular investigation (Peoria Smith, not Harris Brunner and Mavis Weld), I even found out the kid's real name, although wild horses wouldn't have dragged it out of me. Peoria's father took a permanent coffee-break out a ninth-floor office window on Black Friday, his mother's the only white frail working in that goofy Chinese laundry down on La Punta, and the kid's blind. With all that, does the world need to know they hung Francis on him when he was too young to fight back? The defense rests.

If anything really juicy happened the night before, you almost always find it on the front page of the *Times*, left side, just below the fold. I turned the newspaper over and saw that a bandleader of the Cuban persuasion had suffered a heart attack while dancing with his female vocalist at The Carousel in Burbank. He died an hour later at L.A. General. I had some sympathy for the maestro's widow, but none for the man himself. My opinion is that people who go dancing in Burbank deserve what they get.

I opened to the sports section to see how Brooklyn had done in their doubleheader with the Cards the day before. "How about you, Peoria? Everyone holding their own in your castle? Moats and battlements all in good repair?"

"I'll say, Mr. Umney! Oh, boy!"

Something in his voice caught my attention, and I lowered the paper to take a closer look at him. When I did, I saw what a gilt-edged shamus like me should have seen right away: the kid was all but busting with happiness.

"You look like somebody just gave you six tickets to the first game of the World Series," I said. "What's the buzz, Peoria?"

"My mom hit the lottery down in Tijuana!" he said. "Forty thousand bucks! We're rich, brother! *Rich!*"

I gave him a grin he couldn't see and ruffled his hair. It popped his cowlick up, but what the hell. "Whoa, hold the phone. How old are you, Peoria?"

"Twelve in May. *You* know that, Mr. Umney, you gave me a polo-shirt. But I don't see what that has to do with—"

“Twelve’s old enough to know that sometimes people get what they *want* to happen mixed up with what actually *does* happen. That’s all I meant.”

“If you’re talkin about daydreams, you’re right—I *do* know all about em,” Peoria said, running his hands over the back of his head in an effort to make his cowlick lie down again, “but this ain’t no daydream, Mr. Umney. It’s real! My Uncle Fred went down and picked up the cash yest’y afternoon. He brought it back in the saddlebag of his Vinnie! I smelled it! Hell, I *rolled* in it! It was spread all over my mom’s bed! Richest feeling I ever had, let me tell you—forty-froggin-thousand smackers!”

“Twelve may be old enough to know the difference between daydreams and what’s real, but it’s not old enough for that kind of talk,” I said. It sounded good—I’m sure the Legion of Decency would have approved two thousand per cent—but my mouth was running on automatic pilot, and I barely heard what was coming out of it. I was too busy trying to get my brain wrapped around what he’d just told me. Of one thing I was absolutely positive: he’d made a mistake. He *must* have made a mistake, because if it was true, then Peoria wouldn’t be standing here anymore when I came by on my way to my office in the Fulwider Building. And that just couldn’t be.

I found my mind returning to the Demmicks, who for the first time in recorded history hadn’t played any of their big-band records at full volume before retiring, and to Buster, who for the first time in recorded history hadn’t greeted the sound of George’s latchkey turning in the lock with a fusillade of barks. The thought that something was off-kilter returned, and it was stronger this time.

Meanwhile, Peoria was looking at me with an expression I’d never expected to see on his honest, open face: sulky irritation mixed with exasperated humor. It was the way a kid looks at a windbag uncle who’s told all his stories, even the boring ones, three or four times.

“Ain’t you picking up on this newsflash, Mr. Umney? We’re *rich*! My mom ain’t going to have to press shirts for that damned old Lee Ho anymore, and I ain’t going to have to sell papers on the corner anymore, shiverin when it rains in the winter and havin to suck up to those nutty old bags who work down at Bilder’s. I can quit actin like I died and went to heaven every time some blowhard leaves me a nickel tip.”

I started a little at that, but what the hell—I wasn't a nickel man. I left Peoria seven cents, day in and day out. Unless I was too broke to afford it, of course, but in my business an occasional stony stretch comes with the territory.

"Maybe we ought to go up to Blondie's and have a cup of Java," I said. "Talk this thing over."

"Can't. It's closed."

"*Blondie's?* The hell you say!"

But Peoria couldn't be bothered with such mundane stuff as the coffee shop up the street. "You ain't heard the best, Mr. Umney! My Uncle Fred knows a doctor up in Frisco—a specialist—who thinks he can do something about my eyes." He turned his face up to mine. Below the cheaters and his too-thin nose, his lips were trembling. "He says it might not be the optic nerves after all, and if it's not, there's an operation . . . I don't understand all the technical stuff, but I could see again, Mr. Umney!" He reached out for me blindly . . . well, of course he did. How else *could* he reach out? "*I could see again!*"

He clutched at me, and I gripped his hands and squeezed them briefly before pushing them gently away. There was ink on his fingers, and I'd been feeling so good when I got up that I'd put on my new chalk worsted. Hot for summer, of course, but the whole city is air-conditioned these days, and besides, I was feeling naturally cool.

I didn't feel so cool now. Peoria was looking up at me, his thin and somehow perfect newsboy's face troubled. A little breeze—scented with oleander and exhaust—ruffled his cowlick, and I realized that I could see it because he wasn't wearing his tweed cap. He looked somehow naked without it, and why not? *Every* newsboy should wear a tweed cap, just like every shoeshine boy should wear a beanie cocked way back on his head.

"What's the matter, Mr. Umney? I thought you'd be happy. Jeepers, I didn't *have* to come out here to this lousy corner today, you know, but I did—I even got here early, because I kinda had an idea *you'd* get here early. I thought you'd be happy, my mom hittin the lottery and me gettin a chance at an operation, but you ain't." Now his voice trembled with resentment. "You ain't!"

"Yes I am," I said, and I *wanted* to be happy—part of me did, anyway—but the bitch of it was that he was mostly right! Because it meant things would change, you see, and things weren't *supposed* to change. Peoria Smith was

supposed to be right here, year in and year out, with that perfect cap of his tilted back on hot days and pulled down low on rainy ones, so that the raindrops dripped off the bill. He was always supposed to be smiling, was never supposed to say “hell” or “frogging,” and most of all, he was supposed to be *blind*.

“You *ain’t!*” he said, and then, shockingly, he pushed his card-table over. It fell into the street, papers flapping everywhere. His white cane rolled into the gutter. Peoria heard it go and bent down to get it. I could see tears coming out from beneath his dark glasses and go rolling down his pale, thin cheeks. He started groping for the cane, but it had fallen near me and he was going the wrong way. I felt a sudden strong urge to haul off and kick him in his blind newsboy’s ass.

Instead, I bent over, got his stick, and tapped him lightly on the hip with it.

Peoria turned, quick as a snake, and snatched it. Out of the corner of my eye I could see pictures of Hitler and the recently deceased Cuban bandleader flapping all over Sunset Boulevard—a bus bound for Van Ness snored through a little drift of them, leaving a bitter tang of diesel fumes behind. I hated the way those newspapers looked, fluttering here and there. They looked messy. Worse, they looked *wrong*. Utterly and completely *wrong*. I fought another urge, as strong as the first one, to grab Peoria and shake him. To tell him he was going to spend the morning picking up those newspapers, and I wasn’t going to let him go home until he’d gotten every last one.

It occurred to me that less than ten minutes ago, I’d been thinking that this was the perfect L.A. morning—so perfect it deserved a trademark symbol. And it *had* been, dammit. So where had things gone wrong? And how had it happened so fast?

No answers came, only an irrational but powerful voice from inside, telling me that the kid’s mother *couldn’t* have won the lottery, that the kid *couldn’t* stop selling newspapers, and that, most of all, the kid couldn’t see. Peoria Smith was supposed to be blind for the rest of his life.

*Well, it’s got to be something experimental, I thought. Even if the doctor up in Frisco isn’t a quack, and he probably is, the operation’s bound to fail.*

And, bizarre as it sounds, the thought calmed me down.

“Listen,” I said, “we got off on the wrong foot this morning, that’s all. Let me make it up to you. We’ll go down to Blondie’s and I’ll buy you breakfast. What do you say, Peoria? You can dig into a plate of bacon and eggs and tell me all ab—”

“Fuck you!” he shouted, shocking me all the way down to my shoes. “Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, you cheap gumshoe! You think blind people can’t tell when people like you are lying through their teeth? Fuck you! And keep your hands off me from now on! I think you’re a faggot!”

That did it—no one calls me a faggot and gets away with it, not even a blind newsboy. I forgot all about how Peoria had saved my life during that Mavis Weld business; I reached for his cane, meaning to take it away from him and whack him across the keister with it a few times. Teach him some manners.

Before I could get it, though, he hauled off and slammed the cane’s tip into my lower belly—and I *do* mean lower. I doubled up in agony, but even while I was trying to keep from howling with pain, I was counting my blessings; two inches lower still and I could have quit peeping for a living and gotten a job singing soprano in the Palace of the Doges.

I made a quick, reflexive grab for him anyway, and he brought the cane down on the back of my neck. Hard. It didn’t break, but I heard it crack. I figured I could finish the job when I caught him and ran it into his right ear. I’d show him who was a faggot.

He backed away from me as if he’d caught my brainwave, and threw the cane into the street.

“Peoria,” I managed. Maybe it still wasn’t too late to catch sanity by the shirrtail. “Peoria, what the hell’s wrong with—”

*“And don’t call me that!”* he screamed. *“My name’s Francis! Frank! You’re the one who started calling me Peoria! You started it and now everyone calls me that and I hate it!”*

My watering eyes doubled him as he turned and fled across the street, heedless of traffic (of which there was currently none, luckily for him), hands held out in front of him. I thought he would trip over the far curb—was looking forward to it, in fact—but I guess blind people must keep a pretty good set of topographical survey maps in their heads. He jumped onto the

sidewalk as nimbly as a goat, then turned his dark glasses back in my direction. There was an expression of crazed triumph on his tear-streaked face, and the dark lenses looked more like holes than ever. Big ones, as if someone had hit him with two large-caliber shotgun rounds.

*“Blondie’s is gone, I toldja!”* he screamed. *“My mom says he upped and ran away with that redhead floozy he hired last month! You should be so lucky, you ugly prick!”*

He turned and went running up Sunset in that strange way of his, with his splayed fingers held out in front of him. People stood in little clusters on both sides of the street, looking at him, looking at the papers fluttering in the street, looking at me.

Mostly looking at me, it seemed.

This time Peoria—well, okay, Francis—made it as far as Derringer’s Bar before turning to deliver one final salvo.

*“Fuck you, Mr. Umney!”* he screamed, and ran on.

## II. Vernon’s Cough.

I managed to pull myself erect and make my way across the street. Peoria, aka Francis Smith, was long gone, but I wanted to put those blowing newspapers behind me, too. Looking at them was giving me a headache that was somehow worse than the ache in my groin.

On the far side of the street I stared into Felt’s Stationery as if the new Parker ball-point pen in the window was the most fascinating thing I’d ever seen in my life (or maybe it was those sexy imitation-leather appointment books). After five minutes or so—time enough to commit every item in the dusty show-window to memory—I felt capable of resuming my interrupted voyage up Sunset without listing too noticeably to port.

Questions circled in my mind the way mosquitoes circle your head at the drive-in in San Pedro when you forget to bring along an insect stick or two. I was able to ignore most of them, but a couple got through. First, what the hell had gotten into Peoria? Second, what the hell had gotten into me? I kept slapping at these uncomfortable queries until I got to Blondie’s City Eats,

Open 24 Hrs, Bagels Our Specialty, on the corner of Sunset and Travernia, and when I got that far, they were driven out in a single wallop. Blondie's had been on that corner for as long as I could remember—the sharpies and the hustlers and the hipsters and the hypes going in and going out, not to mention the debs, the dykes, and the dopes. A famous silent-movie star was once arrested for murder as he was coming out of Blondie's, and I myself had concluded a nasty piece of business there not so long ago, shooting a coked-up fashion-plate named Dunninger who had killed three hopheads in the aftermath of a Hollywood dope party. It was also the place where I'd said goodbye to the silver-haired, violet-eyed Ardis McGill. I'd spent the rest of that lost night walking in a rare Los Angeles fog which might have only been behind my eyes . . . and trickling down my cheeks, by the time the sun came up.

Blondie's closed? Blondie's gone? Impossible, you would have said—more likely that the Statue of Liberty should have disappeared from her barren lick of rock in New York Harbor.

Impossible but true. The window which had once held a mouthwatering selection of pies and cakes was soaped over, but the job had been done indifferently, and I could see a nearly empty room through the stripes. The lino looked filthy and barren. The grease-darkened blades of the overhead fans hung down like the propellers of crashed airplanes. There were a few tables left, and six or eight of the familiar red-upholstered chairs piled on them with the legs sticking up, but that was all . . . except for a couple of empty sugar-shakers tumbled in one corner.

I stood there trying to get it into my head, and it was like trying to get a big sofa up a narrow flight of stairs. All that life and excitement, all that late-night hustle and surprise—how could it be ended? It didn't seem like a mistake; it seemed like a blasphemy. For me Blondie's had summed up all the glittering contradictions that surround L.A.'s essentially dark and loveless heart; I had sometimes thought Blondie's *was* L.A. as I had known it over the last fifteen or twenty years, only drawn small. Where else could you see a mobster eating breakfast at 9:00 P.M. with a priest, or a diamond-decked glamorpuss sitting on a counter-stool next to a grease-monkey celebrating the end of his shift with a

hot cup of java? I suddenly found myself thinking of the Cuban bandleader and his heart attack again, this time with considerably more sympathy.

All that fabulous starry City of Lost Angels *life*—do you get it, chum? Are you picking up this newsflash?

The sign hung in the door read CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS, REOPENING SOON, but I didn't believe it. Empty sugar-shakers lying in the corner do not, in my experience, indicate renovations in progress. Peoria had been right: Blondie's was history. I turned away and went on up the street, but now I walked slowly and had to consciously order my head to stay up. As I approached the Fulwider Building, where I've kept an office for more years than I like to think about, an odd certainty gripped me. The handles of the big double doors would be wrapped up in a thick tow-chain and held with a padlock. The glass would be soaped over in indifferent stripes. And there would be a sign reading CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS, REOPENING SOON.

By the time I reached the building, this nutty idea had taken over my mind with the force of a compulsion, and not even the sight of Bill Tuggle, the rummy CPA from the third floor, going inside could quite dispel it. But seeing is believing, they say, and when I got to 2221, I saw no chain, no sign, and no soap on the glass. It was just the Fulwider, the same as ever. I went into the lobby, smelled the familiar odor—it reminds me of the pink cakes they put in the urinals of public men's rooms these days—and glanced around at the same ratty palm trees overhanging the same faded red tile floor.

Bill was standing next to Vernon Klein, world's oldest elevator operator, in Car 2. In his frayed red suit and ancient pillbox hat, Vernon looks like a cross between the Philip Morris bellboy and a rhesus monkey which has fallen into an industrial steam-cleaning machine. He looked up at me with his mournful basset-hound eyes, which were watering from the Camel pasted in the middle of his mouth. His peepers should have gotten used to the smoke years ago; I couldn't remember ever having seen him without a Camel parked in that same position.

Bill moved over a little, but not far enough. There wasn't room enough in the car for him to move far enough. I'm not sure there would have been room in Rhode Island for him to move far enough. Delaware, maybe. He smelled

like bologna which has spent a year or so marinating in cheap bourbon. And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, he belched.

"Sorry, Clyde."

"Well, you certainly ought to be," I said, waving the air in front of my face as Vern slid the gate across the front of the car and prepared to fly us to the moon . . . or at least to the seventh floor. "What drainpipe did you spend the night in, Bill?"

Yet there was something comforting about that smell—I'd be lying if I said there wasn't. Because it was a *familiar* smell. It was just Bill Tuggle, odoriferous, hung over, and standing with his knees slightly bent, as if someone had filled the crotch of his underpants with chicken salad and he'd just realized it. Not pleasant, nothing about that morning's elevator ride was pleasant, but it was at least *known*.

Bill gave me a sick smile as the elevator began to rattle upward but said nothing.

I swung my head in Vernon's direction, mostly to get away from the smell of overbaked accountant, but whatever small talk I'd been meaning to make died in my throat. The two pictures which had hung over Vern's stool since the beginning of time—one of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee while his boat-bound disciples gawped at him and the other of Vern's wife in a buckskin-fringed Sweetheart of the Rodeo outfit and a turn-of-the-century hairdo—were both gone. What had replaced them shouldn't have been shocking, especially in light of Vernon's age, but it hit me like a barge-load of bricks just the same.

It was a card, that's all—a simple card showing the silhouette of a man fishing on a lake at sunset. It was the sentiment printed below the canoe that floored me: HAPPY RETIREMENT!

You could have doubled the way I felt when Peoria told me he might see again and still have come up short. Memories flickered through my mind with the speed of cards being shuffled by a riverboat gambler. There was the time Vern broke into the office next to mine to call an ambulance when that nutty dame, Agnes Stemwood, first tore my phone out of the wall and then swallowed what she swore was drain-cleaner. The "drain-cleaner" turned out to be nothing but crystals of raw sugar, and the office Vern broke into turned out to be a high-class horse parlor. So far as I know, the guy who leased the place

and slapped MacKenzie Imports on the door is still receiving his annual Sears Roebuck catalogue in San Quentin. Then there was the guy Vern cold-conked with his stool just before he could ventilate my guts; that was the Mavis Weld business again, of course. Not to mention the time he brought his daughter to me—what a babe *she* was!—when she got involved with that dirty-picture racket.

Vern retiring?

It wasn't possible. It just wasn't.

"Vernon," I asked, "what kind of joke is this?"

"No joke, Mr. Umney," he said, and as he brought the elevator car to a stop on Three, he began to hack a deep cough I'd never heard in all the years I'd known him. It was like listening to marble bowling balls rolling down a stone alley. He took the Camel out of his mouth, and I was horrified to see the end of it was pink, and not with lipstick. He looked at it for a moment, grimaced, then replaced it and yanked back the accordion grille. "*Thuh-ree*, Mr. Tuggle."

"Thanks, Vern," Bill said.

"Remember the party on Friday," Vernon said. His words were muffled; he'd taken a handkerchief spotted with brown stains out of his back pocket and was wiping his lips with it. "I sure would admire for you to come." He glanced at me with his rheumy eyes, and what was in them scared the bejabbers out of me. Something was waiting for Vernon Klein just around the next bend in the road, and that look said Vernon knew all about it. "You too, Mr. Umney—we been through a lot together, and I'd be tickled to raise a glass with you."

"Wait a minute!" I shouted, grabbing Bill as he tried to step out of the elevator. "You wait just a God damned minute, both of you! *What* party? What's going on here?"

"Retirement," Bill said. "It usually happens at some point after your hair turns white, in case you've been too busy to notice. Vernon's party is going to be in the basement on Friday afternoon. Everybody in the building's going to be there, and I'm going to make my world-famous Dynamite Punch. What's the matter with you, Clyde? You've known for a month that Vern was finishing up on May thirtieth."

That made me angry all over again, the way I'd been when Peoria called me a faggot. I grabbed Bill by the padded shoulders of his double-breasted suit and

gave him a shake. “The hell you say!”

He gave me a small, pained smile. “The hell I don’t, Clyde. But if you don’t want to come, fine. Stay away. You’ve been acting *poco loco* for the last six months, anyhow.”

I shook him again. “What do you mean, *poco loco*?”

“Crazy as a loon, nutty as a fruitcake, two wheels off the road, out to lunch, playing without a full deck—any of those ring a bell? And before you answer, just let me inform you that if you shake me one more time, even a *little* shake, my guts are going to explode straight out through my chest, and not even dry-cleaning will get *that* mess off your suit.”

He pulled away before I could do it again even if I’d wanted to and started down the hall with the seat of his pants hanging somewhere down around the level of his knees, as per usual. He glanced back just once, while Vernon was sliding the brass gate across. “You need to take some time off, Clyde. Starting last week.”

“What’s gotten into you?” I shouted at him. “What’s gotten into *all* of you?” But by then the inner door was closed and we were headed up again—this time to Seven. My little slice of heaven. Vern dropped his cigarette butt into the bucket of sand that squats in the corner, and immediately stuck a fresh one in his kisser. He popped a wooden match alight with his thumbnail, set the fag on fire, and immediately started coughing again. Now I could see fine drops of blood misting out from between his cracked lips. It was a gruesome sight. His eyes had dropped; they stared vacantly into the far corner, seeing nothing, hoping for nothing. Bill Tuggle’s B.O. hung between us like the Ghost of Binges Past.

“Okay, Vern,” I said. “What is it and where are you going?”

Vernon had never been one to wear out the English language, and that at least hadn’t changed. “It’s Big C,” he said. “On Saturday I catch the Desert Blossom to Arizona. I’m going to live with my sister. I don’t expect to wear out my welcome, though. She might have to change the bed twice.” He brought the elevator to a stop and rattled the gate back. “*Seven*, Mr. Umney. Your little slice of heaven.” He smiled at that just as he always did, but this time it looked like the kind of smile you see on the candy skulls down in Tijuana, on the Day of the Dead.

Now that the elevator door was open, I smelled something up here in my little slice of heaven that was so out of place it took a moment for me to recognize it: fresh paint. Once it was noted, I filed it. I had other fish to fry.

“This isn’t right,” I said. “You know it isn’t, Vern.”

He turned his frightening vacant eyes on me. Death in them, a black shape flapping and beckoning just beyond the faded blue. “What isn’t right, Mr. Umney?”

“You’re supposed to be *here*, damn it! Right *here!* Sitting on your stool with Jesus and your wife over your head. Not *this!*” I reached up, grabbed the card with the picture of the man fishing on the lake, tore it in two, put the pieces together, tore it in four, and then gave them the toss. They fluttered to the faded red rug on the floor of the elevator car like confetti.

“S’posed to be right here,” he repeated, those terrible eyes of his never leaving mine. Beyond us, two men in paint-splattered coveralls had turned to look in our direction.

“That’s right.”

“For how long, Mr. Umney? Since you know everything else, you can probably tell me that, can’tcha? How long am I supposed to keep drivin this damned car?”

“Well . . . forever,” I said, and the word hung between us, another ghost in the cigarette-smokey elevator car. Given a choice of ghosts, I guess I would have picked Bill Tuggle’s B.O . . . . but I wasn’t given a choice. Instead, I said it again. “Forever, Vern.”

He dragged on his Camel, coughed out smoke and a fine spray of blood, and went on looking at me. “It ain’t my place to give the tenants advice, Mr. Umney, but I guess I’ll give you some, anyway—it being my last week and all. You might consider seeing a doctor. The kind that shows you ink-pitchers and you say what they look like.”

“You can’t retire, Vern.” My heart was beating harder than ever, but I managed to keep my voice level. “You just can’t.”

“No?” He took his cigarette out of his mouth—fresh blood was already soaking into the tip—and then looked back at me. His smile was ghastly. “The way it looks to me, I ain’t exactly got a choice, Mr. Umney.”

### III. Of Painters and Pesos.

The smell of fresh paint seared my nose, overpowering both the smell of Vernon's smoke and Bill Tuggle's armpits. The men in the coveralls were currently taking up space not far from my office door. They had put down a dropcloth, and the tools of their trade were spread out all along it—tins and brushes and turp. There were two step-ladders as well, flanking the painters like scrawny bookends. What I wanted to do was to run down the hall, kicking the whole works every whichway as I went. What right had they to paint these old dark walls that glaring, sacrilegious white?

Instead, I walked up to the one who looked as if it might take a two-digit number to express his IQ and politely asked what he and his fellow mug thought they were doing. He glanced around at me. "Hellzit look like? I'm givin Miss America a finger-frig and Chick there's puttin rouge on Betty Grable's nippy-nips."

I'd had enough. Enough of them, enough of everything. I reached out, grabbed the quiz-kid under the armpit, and used my fingertips to engage a particularly nasty nerve that hides up there. He screamed and dropped his brush. White paint splattered his shoes. His partner gave me a timid doe-eyed look and took a step backward.

"If you try taking off before I'm done with you," I snarled, "you're going to find the handle of your paint-brush so far up your ass you'll need a boathook to find the bristles. You want to try me and see if I'm lying?"

He stopped moving and just stood there on the edge of the dropcloth, eyes darting from side to side, looking for help. There was none to be had. I half-expected Candy to open my door and look out to see what the fracas was, but the door stayed firmly closed. I turned my attention back to the quiz-kid I was holding onto.

"The question was simple enough, bud—what the hell are you doing here? Can you answer it, or do I give you another blast?"

I twiddled my fingers in his armpit just to refresh his memory and he screamed again. "*Paintin the hall! Jeezis, can't you see?*"

I could see, all right, and even if I'd been blind, I could *smell*. I hated what both of those senses were telling me. The hallway wasn't *supposed* to be painted,

especially not this glaring, light-reflecting white. It was supposed to be dim and shadowy; it was supposed to smell like dust and old memories. Whatever had started with the Demmicks' unaccustomed silence was getting worse all the time. I was mad as hell, as this unfortunate fellow was discovering. I was also scared, but that was a feeling you get good at hiding when carrying a heater in a clamshell holster is part of the way you make your living.

"Who sent you two dubs down here?"

"Our *boss*," he said, looking at me as if I were crazy. "We work for Challis Custom Painters, on Van Nuys. The boss is Hap Corrigan. If you want to know who hired the cump'ny, you'll have to ask h—"

"It was the owner," the other painter said quietly. "The owner of this building. A guy named Samuel Landry."

I searched my memory, trying to put the name of Samuel Landry together with what I knew of the Fulwider Building and couldn't do it. In fact, I couldn't put the name of Samuel Landry together with anything . . . yet for all that it seemed almost to chime in my head, like a church-bell you can hear from miles away on a foggy morning.

"You're lying," I said, but with no real force. I said it simply because it was something to say.

"Call the boss," the other painter said. Appearances could be deceiving; he was apparently the brighter of the two, after all. He reached inside his grimy, paint-smearred coverall and brought out a little card.

I waved it away, suddenly tired. "Who in the name of Christ would want to paint this place, anyway?"

It wasn't them I was asking, but the painter who'd offered me the business card answered just the same. "Well, it brightens the place up," he said cautiously. "You gotta admit that."

"Son," I asked, taking a step toward him, "did your mother ever have any kids that lived, or did she just produce the occasional afterbirth like you?"

"Hey, whatever, whatever," he said, taking a step backward. I followed his worried gaze down to my own balled-up fists and forced them open again. He didn't look very relieved, and I actually didn't blame him very much. "You don't like it—you're coming through loud and clear on that score. But I gotta do what the boss tells me, don't I? I mean, hell, that's the American way."

He glanced at his partner, then back to me. It was a quick glance, really no more than a flick, but in my line of work I'd seen it more than once, and it's the kind of look you file away. *Don't bother this guy*, it said. *Don't bump him, don't rattle him. He's nitro.*

"I mean, I've got a wife and a little kid to take care of," he went on. "There's a Depression going on out there, you know."

Confusion came over me then, drowning my anger the way a downpour drowns a brushfire. *Was there a Depression going on out there? Was there?*

"I know," I said, not knowing anything. "Let's just forget it, what do you say?"

"Sure," the painters agreed, so eager they sounded like half of a barbershop quartet. The one I'd mistakenly tabbed as half-bright had his left-hand buried deep in his right armpit, trying to get that nerve to go back to sleep. I could have told him he had an hour's work ahead of him, maybe more, but I didn't want to talk to them anymore. I didn't want to talk to anyone or see anyone—not even the delectable Candy Kane, whose humid glances and smooth, subtropical curves have been known to send seasoned street-brawlers reeling to their knees. The only thing I wanted to do was to get across the outer office and into my inner sanctum. There was a bottle of Robb's Rye in the bottom lefthand drawer, and right now I needed a shot in the worst way.

I walked down toward the frosted-glass door marked CLYDE UMNEY PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR, restraining a renewed urge to see if I could drop-kick a can of Dutch Boy Oyster White through the window at the end of the hall and out onto the fire-escape. I was actually reaching for my doorknob when a thought struck me and I turned back to the painters . . . but slowly, so they wouldn't believe I was being gripped by some new seizure. Also, I had an idea that if I turned too fast, I'd see them grinning at each other and twirling their fingers around their ears—the looney-gesture we all learned in the schoolyard.

They weren't twirling their fingers, but they hadn't taken their eyes off me, either. The half-smart one seemed to be gauging the distance to the door marked STAIRWELL. Suddenly I wanted to tell them that I wasn't such a bad guy when you got to know me; that there were, in fact, a few clients and at least one ex-wife who thought me something of a hero. But that wasn't a thing you could say about yourself, especially not to a couple of bozos like these.

“Take it easy,” I said. “I’m not going to jump you. I just wanted to ask another question.”

They relaxed a little. A very little, actually.

“Ask it,” Painter Number Two said.

“Either of you ever played the numbers down in Tijuana?”

“*La lotería?*” Number One asked.

“Your knowledge of Spanish stuns me. Yeah. *La lotería.*”

Number One shook his head. “Mex numbers and Mex call houses are strictly for suckers.”

Why do you think I asked you? I thought but didn’t say.

“Besides,” he went on, “you win ten or twenty thousand pesos, big deal. What’s that in real money? Fifty bucks? Eighty?”

*My mom hit the lottery down in Tijuana, Peoria had said, and I had known something about it wasn’t right even then. Forty thousand bucks . . . My Uncle Fred went down and picked up the cash yest’r afternoon. He brought it back in the saddlebag of his Vinnie!*

“Yeah,” I said, “something like that, I guess. And they always pay off that way, don’t they? In pesos?”

He gave me that look again, as if I was crazy, then remembered I really was and readjusted his face. “Well, yeah. It *is* the Mexican lottery, you know. They couldn’t very well pay off in dollars.”

“How true,” I said, and in my mind I saw Peoria’s thin, eager face, heard him saying, *It was spread all over my mom’s bed! Forty-froggin-thousand smackers!*

Except how could a blind kid be sure of the exact amount . . . or even that it really was money he was rolling around in? The answer was simple: he couldn’t. But even a blind newsboy would know that *la lotería* paid off in pesos rather than in dollars, and even a blind newsboy had to know you couldn’t carry forty thousand dollars’ worth of Mexican lettuce in the saddlebag of a Vincent motorcycle. His uncle would have needed a City of Los Angeles dump truck to transport that much dough.

Confusion, confusion—nothing but dark clouds of confusion.

“Thanks,” I said, and headed for my office.

I’m sure that was a relief for all three of us.

## IV. Umney's Last Client.

"Candy, honey, I don't want to see anybody or take any ca—"

I broke off. The outer office was empty. Candy's desk in the corner was unnaturally bare, and after a moment I saw why: the IN/OUT tray had been dumped into the trash basket and her pictures of Errol Flynn and William Powell were both gone. So was her Philco. The little blue stenographer's stool, from which Candy had been wont to flash her gorgeous gams, was unoccupied.

My eyes returned to the IN/OUT tray sticking out of the trash can like the prow of a sinking ship, and for a moment my heart leaped. Perhaps someone had been in here, tossed the place, kidnapped Candy. Perhaps it was a case, in other words. At that moment I would have welcomed a case, even if it meant some mug was tying Candy up at this very moment . . . and adjusting the rope over the firm swell of her breasts with particular care. Any way out of the cobwebs that seemed to be falling around me sounded just peachy to me.

The trouble with the idea was simple: the room hadn't been tossed. The IN/OUT was in the trash, true enough, but that didn't indicate a struggle; in fact, it was more as if . . .

There was just one thing left on the desk, placed squarely in the center of the blotter. A white envelope. Just looking at it gave me a bad feeling. My feet carried me across the room just the same, however, and I picked it up. Seeing my name written across the front of the envelope in Candy's wide loops and swirls was no surprise; it was just another unpleasant part of this long, unpleasant morning.

I ripped it open and a single slip of note-paper fell out into my hand.

*Dear Clyde,*

*I have had all of the groping and sneering I'm going to take from you, and I am tired of your ridiculous and childish jokes about my name. Life is too short to be pawed by a middle-aged divorce detective with bad breath. You did have your good points Clyde but they are getting drowned out by the bad ones, especially since you started drinking all the time.*

*Do yourself a favor and grow up.*

*Yours truly,  
Arlene Cain*

*P.S.: I'm going back to my mother's in Idaho. Do not try to get in touch with me.*

I held the note a moment or two longer, looking at it unbelievably, then dropped it. One phrase from it recurred as I watched it seesaw lazily down toward the already occupied trash basket: *I am tired of your ridiculous and childish jokes about my name.* But had I ever known her name was anything other than Candy Kane? I searched my mind as the note continued its lazy—and seemingly endless—swoops back and forth, and the answer was an honest and resounding no. Her name had *always* been Candy Kane, we'd joked about it many a time, and if we'd had a few rounds of office slap-and-tickle, what of that? She'd always enjoyed it. We both had.

*Did she enjoy it?* a voice spoke up from somewhere deep inside me. *Did she really, or is that just another little fairytale you've been telling yourself all these years?*

I tried to shut that voice out, and after a moment or two I succeeded, but the one that replaced it was even worse. That voice belonged to none other than Peoria Smith. *I can quit actin like I died and went to heaven every time some blowhard leaves me a nickel tip,* he said. *Ain't you picking up on this newsflash, Mr. Umney?*

"Shut up, kid," I said to the empty room. "Gabriel Heater you ain't." I turned away from Candy's desk, and as I did, faces passed in front of my mind's eye like the faces of some lunatic marching band from hell: George and Gloria Demmick, Peoria Smith, Bill Tuggle, Vernon Klein, a million-dollar blonde who went under the two-bit name of Arlene Cain . . . even the two painters were there.

Confusion, confusion, nothing but confusion.

Head down, I trudged into my office, closed the door behind me, and sat at the desk. Dimly, through the closed window, I could hear the traffic out on Sunset. I had an idea that, for the right person, it was still a spring morning so L.A.-perfect you expected to see that little trademark symbol stamped on it

somewhere, but for me all the light had gone from the day . . . inside as well as out. I thought about the bottle of hooch in the bottom drawer, but all of a sudden even bending down to get it seemed like too much work. It seemed, in fact, a job akin to climbing Mount Everest in tennis shoes.

The smell of fresh paint had penetrated all the way into my inner sanctum. It was a smell I ordinarily liked, but not then. At that moment it was the smell of everything that had gone wrong since the Demmicks hadn't come into their Hollywood bungalow bouncing wisecracks off each other like rubber balls and playing their records at top volume and throwing their Corgi into conniptions with their endless billing and cooing. It occurred to me with perfect clarity and simplicity—the way I'd always imagined great truths must occur to the people they occur to—that if some doctor could cut out the cancer that was killing the Fulwider Building's elevator operator, it would be white. *Oyster* white. And it would smell just like fresh Dutch Boy paint.

This thought was so tiring that I had to put my head down with the heels of my palms pressed against my temples, holding it in place . . . or maybe just keeping what was inside from exploding out and making a mess on the walls. And when the door opened softly and footsteps entered the room, I didn't look up. It seemed like more of an effort than I was able to make at that particular moment.

Besides, I had the strange idea that I already *knew* who it was. I couldn't put a name to my knowledge, but the step was somehow familiar. So was the cologne, although I knew I wouldn't be able to name it even if someone had put a gun to my head, and for a very simple reason: I'd never smelled it before in my life. How could I recognize a scent I'd never smelled before, you ask? I can't answer that one, bud, but I did.

Nor was that the worst of it. The worst of it was this: I was scared nearly out of my mind. I've faced blazing guns in the hands of angry men, which is bad, and daggers in the hands of angry women, which is a thousand times worse; I was once tied to the wheel of a Packard automobile that had been parked on the tracks of a busy freight line; I have even been tossed out a third-story window. It's been an eventful life, all right, but nothing in it had ever scared me the way the smell of that cologne and that soft footstep scared me.

My head seemed to weigh at least six hundred pounds.

“Clyde,” a voice said. A voice I’d never heard before, a voice I nevertheless knew as well as my own. Just that one word and the weight of my head went up to an even ton.

“Get outta here, whoever you are,” I said without looking up. “Joint’s closed.” And something made me add, “For renovations.”

“Bad day, Clyde?”

Was there sympathy in that voice? I thought maybe there was, and somehow that made things worse. Whoever this mug was, I didn’t want his sympathy. Something told me that his sympathy would be more dangerous than his hate.

“Not so bad,” I said, supporting my heavy, aching head with the palms of my hands and looking down at my desk-blotter for all I was worth. Written in the upper left-hand corner was Mavis Weld’s number. I sent my eyes tracing over it again and again—BEverley 6-4214. Keeping my eyes on the blotter seemed like a good idea. I didn’t know who my visitor was, but I knew I didn’t want to see him. Right then it was the only thing I *did* know.

“I think maybe you’re being a little . . . disingenuous, shall we say?” the voice asked, and it was sympathy, all right; the sound of it made my stomach curl up into something that felt like a quivering fist soaked with acid. There was a creak as he dropped into the client’s chair.

“I don’t exactly know what that word means, but by all means, let’s say it,” I agreed. “And now that we have, why don’t you rise up righteous, Moggins, and shift on out of here. I’m thinking of taking a sick day. I can do that without much argument, you see, because I’m the boss. Neat, the way things work out sometimes, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so. Look at me, Clyde.”

My heart stuttered but my head stayed down and my eyes kept tracing over BEverley 6-4214. Part of me wondered if hell was hot enough for Mavis Weld. When I spoke, my voice came out steady. I was surprised but grateful. “In fact, I might take a whole year of sick days. In Carmel, maybe. Sit out on the deck with the *American Mercury* in my lap and watch the big ones come in from Hawaii.”

“Look at me.”

I didn't want to, but my head came up just the same. He was sitting in the client's chair where Mavis had once sat, and Ardis McGill, and Big Tom Hatfield. Even Vernon Klein had sat there once, when he got those pictures of his daughter wearing nothing but an opium grin and her birthday suit. Sitting there with the same patch of California sun slanting across his features—features I most certainly *had* seen before. The last time had been less than an hour ago, in my bathroom mirror. I'd been scraping a Gillette Blue Blade over them.

The expression of sympathy in his eyes—in *my* eyes—was the most hideous thing I'd ever seen, and when he held out his hand—held out *my* hand—I felt a sudden urge to wheel around in my swivel chair, get to my feet, and go running straight out my seventh-floor office window. I think I might even have done it, if I hadn't been so confused, so totally lost. I've read the word *unmanned* plenty of times—it's a favorite of the pulpsmiths and sob-sisters—but this was the first time I'd ever actually felt that way.

Suddenly the office darkened. The day had been perfectly clear, I would have sworn to that, but a cloud had crossed the sun just the same. The man on the other side of the desk was at least ten years older than I was, maybe fifteen, his hair almost completely white while mine was still almost all black, but that didn't change the simple fact—no matter what he was calling himself or how old he looked, he was me. Had I thought his voice sounded familiar? Sure. The way your own voice sounds familiar—although not quite the way it sounds inside your own head—when you hear it on a recording.

He picked my limp hand up off the desk, shook it with the briskness of a real-estate agent on the make, then dropped it again. It hit the desk-blotter with a plop, landing on Mavis Weld's telephone number. When I raised my fingers, I saw that Mavis's number was gone. In fact, *all* the numbers I'd scratched on the blotter over the years were gone. It was as clear as . . . well, as clear as a hardshell Baptist's conscience.

"Jesus," I croaked. "Jesus Christ."

"Not at all," the older version of me sitting in the client's chair on the other side of the desk said. "Landry. Samuel D. Landry. At your service."

## V. An Interview with God.

Even as rattled as I was, it only took me two or three seconds to place the name, probably because I'd heard it such a short time ago. According to Painter Number Two, Samuel Landry was the reason why the long dark hall leading to my office was soon going to be oyster white. Landry was the owner of the Fulwider Building.

A crazy idea suddenly occurred to me, but its patent craziness did nothing to dim the sudden blaze of hope which accompanied it. They—whoever *they* are—say that everyone on the face of the earth has a double. Maybe Landry was mine. Maybe we were identical twins, unrelated doubles who had somehow been born to different parents and ten or fifteen years out of step in time with each other. The idea did nothing to explain the rest of the day's high weirdness, but it was something to hang onto, damn it.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Landry?” I asked. I was trying like hell, but my voice was no longer quite steady. “If it's about the lease, you'll have to give me a day or two to get squared around. It seems my secretary just discovered she had pressing business back home in Armpit, Idaho.”

Landry paid absolutely no attention to this feeble effort on my part to shift the focus of the conversation. “Yes,” he said in a musing tone of voice, “I imagine it's been the granddaddy of bad days . . . and it's my fault. I'm sorry, Clyde—really. Meeting you in person has been . . . well, not what I expected. Not at all. For one thing, I like you quite a bit better than I expected to. But there's no going back now.” And he fetched a deep sigh. I didn't like the sound of it very much.

“What do you mean by that?” My voice was trembling worse than ever now, and the blaze of hope was dying. Lack of oxygen inside the cave-in site which had once been my brain seemed to be the cause.

He didn't answer right away. He leaned over instead, and grasped the handle of the slim leather case leaning against the front leg of the client's chair. The initials stamped on it were S.D.L., and I deduced that my weird visitor had brought it in with him. I didn't win the Shamus of the Year Award in 1934 and '35 for nothing, you know.

I had never seen a case quite like it in my life—it was too small and too slim to be a briefcase, and it was fastened not with buckles and straps but with a zipper. I'd never seen a zipper quite like this one, either, now that I thought about it. The teeth were extremely tiny, and they hardly looked like metal at all.

But the oddities only *began* with Landry's luggage. Even setting aside his uncanny older-brother resemblance to me, Landry looked like no businessman I'd ever seen in my life, and certainly not one prosperous enough to own the Fulwider Building. It's not the Ritz, granted, but it *is* in downtown L.A., and my client (if that was what he was) looked like an Okie on a good day, one which had included a bath and a shave.

He was wearing blue jeans pants, for one thing, and a pair of sneakers on his feet . . . except they didn't look like any sneakers I'd ever seen before. They were great big clumpy things. What they *really* looked like were the shoes Boris Karloff wears as part of his Frankenstein get-up, and if they were made of canvas, I'd eat my favorite Fedora. The word written up the sides in red script looked like the name of a dish on a Chinese carry-out menu: REEBOK.

I looked down at the blotter which had once been covered with a tangle of telephone numbers, and suddenly realized that I could no longer remember Mavis Weld's, although I must have called it a billion times only this past winter. That feeling of dread intensified.

"Mister," I said, "I wish you'd state your business and get out of here. Come to think of it, why don't you skip the talking and just go right to the getting-out part?"

He smiled . . . tiredly, I thought. That was the other thing. The face above the plain open-collared white shirt looked terribly tired. Terribly sad, as well. It said the man who owned it had been through things I couldn't even dream of. I felt some sympathy for my visitor, but what I mostly felt was fear. And anger. Because it was *my* face, too, and the bastard had apparently gone a long way toward wearing it out.

"Sorry, Clyde," he said. "No can do."

He put his hand on that tiny, cunning zipper, and all at once Landry opening that case was the last thing in the world I wanted. To stop him I said, "Do you always go visiting your tenants dressed like a guy who makes his

living following the cabbage crop? What are you, one of those eccentric millionaires?”

“I’m eccentric, all right,” he said. “And it won’t do you any good to draw this business out, Clyde.”

“What gave you that ide—”

Then he said the thing I’d been dreading, and put out the last tiny flicker of hope at the same time. “I know *all* your ideas, Clyde. After all, I’m *you*.”

I licked my lips and forced myself to speak; anything to keep him from yanking that zipper. Anything at all. My voice came out husky, but at least it *did* come out.

“Yeah, I noticed the resemblance. I’m not familiar with the cologne, though. I’m an Old Spice man, myself.”

His thumb and finger remained pinched on the zipper, but he didn’t pull it. At least not yet.

“But you like this,” he said with perfect assurance, “and you’d use it if you could get it down at the Rexall on the corner, wouldn’t you? Unfortunately, you can’t. It’s Aramis, and it won’t be invented for another forty years or so.” He glanced down at his weird, ugly basketball shoes. “Like my sneakers.”

“The devil you say.”

“Well, yes, I suppose the devil might come into it somewhere,” Landry said, and he didn’t smile.

“Where are you from?”

“I thought you knew.” Landry pulled the zipper, revealing a rectangular gadget made of some smooth plastic. It was the same color the seventh-floor hall was going to be by the time the sun went down. I’d never seen anything like it. There was no brand name on it, just something that must have been a serial number: T-1000. Landry lifted it out of its carrying case, thumbed the catches on the sides, and lifted the hinged top to reveal something that looked like the telescreen in a Buck Rogers movie. “I come from the future,” Landry said. “Just like in a pulp magazine story.”

“You come from Sunnyland Sanitarium, more like it,” I croaked.

“But not *exactly* like a pulp science-fiction story,” he went on, ignoring what I’d said. “No, not exactly.” He pushed a button on the side of the plastic case. There was a faint whining sound from inside the gadget, followed by a brief,

whistling beep. The thing sitting on his lap looked like some strange stenographer's machine . . . and I had an idea that that wasn't far from the truth.

He looked up at me and said, "What was your father's name, Clyde?"

I looked at him for a moment, resisting an urge to lick my lips again. The room was still dark, the sun still behind some cloud that hadn't even been in sight when I came in off the street. Landry's face seemed to float in the gloom like an old, shrivelled balloon.

"What's that got to do with the price of cucumbers in Monrovia?" I asked.

"You don't know, do you?"

"Of course I do," I said, and I did. I just couldn't come up with it, that was all—it was stuck there on the tip of my tongue, like Mavis Weld's phone number, which had been BAYshore something-or-other.

"How about your mother's?"

"Quit playing games with me!"

"Here's an easy one—what high school did you go to? Every red-blooded American man remembers what school he went to, right? Or the first girl he ever went all the way with. Or the town he grew up in. Was yours San Luis Obispo?"

I opened my mouth, but this time nothing came out.

"Carmel?"

That sounded right . . . and then felt all wrong. My head was whirling.

"Or maybe it was Dusty Bottom, New Mexico."

"Cut the crap!" I shouted.

"Do you know? *Do* you?"

"Yes! It was—"

He bent over. Rattled the keys of his strange steno machine.

"San Diego! Born and raised!"

He put the machine on my desk and turned it around so I could read the words floating in the window above the keyboard.

*"San Diego! Born and raised!"*

My eyes dropped from the window to the word stamped into the plastic frame surrounding it.

“What’s a Toshiba?” I asked. “Something that comes on the side when you order a Reebok dinner?”

“It’s a Japanese electronics company.”

I laughed dryly. “Who’re you kidding, mister? The Japs can’t even make wind-up toys without getting the springs in upside down.”

“Not now,” he agreed, “and speaking of now, Clyde, when *is* now? What year is it?”

“1938,” I said, then raised a half-numb hand to my face and rubbed my lips. “Wait a minute—1939.”

“It might even be 1940. Am I right?”

I said nothing, but I felt my face heating up.

“Don’t feel bad, Clyde; you don’t know because *I* don’t know. I always left it vague. The time-frame I was trying for was actually more of a *feel* . . . call it Chandler American Time, if you like. It worked like gangbusters for most of my readers, and it made things simpler from a copy-editing standpoint as well, because you can never exactly pinpoint the passage of time. Haven’t you ever noticed how often you say things like ‘for more years than I can remember’ or ‘longer ago than I like to think about’ or ‘since Hector was a pup?’”

“Nope—can’t say that I have.” But now that he mentioned it, I *did* notice. And that made me think of the *L.A. Times*. I read it every day, but exactly which days were they? You couldn’t tell from the paper itself, because there was never a date on the masthead, only that slogan which reads “America’s Fairest Newspaper in America’s Fairest City.”

“You say those things because time doesn’t really pass in this world. It is . . .” He paused, then smiled. It was a terrible thing to look at, that smile, full of yearning and strange greed. “It is one of its many charms,” he finished.

I was scared, but I’ve always been able to bite the bullet when I felt it really needed biting, and this was one of those times. “Tell me what the hell’s going on here.”

“All right . . . but you’re already beginning to know, Clyde. Aren’t you?”

“Maybe. I don’t know my dad’s name or my mom’s name or the name of the first girl I ever went to bed with because *you* don’t know them. Is that it?”

He nodded, smiling the way a teacher would smile at a pupil who's made a leap of logic and come up with the right answer against all odds. But his eyes were still full of that terrible sympathy.

"And when you wrote San Diego on your gadget there and it came into my head at the same time . . ."

He nodded, encouraging me.

"It isn't just the Fulwider Building you own, is it?" I swallowed, trying to get rid of a large blockage in my throat that had no intention of going anywhere. "You own everything."

But Landry was shaking his head. "Not *everything*. Just Los Angeles and a few surrounding areas. This version of Los Angeles, that is, complete with the occasional continuity glitch or made-up addition."

"Bull," I said, but I whispered the word.

"See the picture on the wall to the left of the door, Clyde?"

I glanced at it, but hardly had to; it was Washington crossing the Delaware, and it had been there since . . . well, since Hector was a pup.

Landry had taken his plastic Buck Rogers steno machine back onto his lap, and was bending over it.

"Don't do that!" I shouted, and tried to reach for him. I couldn't do it. My arms had no strength, it seemed, and I could summon no resolve. I felt lethargic, drained, as if I had lost about three pints of blood and was losing more all the time.

He rattled the keys again. Turned the machine toward me so I could read the words in the window. They read: *On the wall to the left of the door leading out to Candy-Land, Our Revered Leader hangs . . . but always slightly askew. That's my way of keeping him in perspective.*

I looked back at the picture. George Washington was gone, replaced by a photo of Franklin Roosevelt. F.D.R. had a grin on his face and his cigarette holder jutting upward at that angle his supporters think of as jaunty and his detractors as arrogant. The picture was hanging slightly askew.

"I don't need the laptop to do it," he said. He sounded a little embarrassed, as if I'd accused him of something. "I can do it just by concentrating—as you saw when the numbers disappeared from your blotter—but the laptop helps. Because I'm used to writing things down, I suppose. And then editing them. In

a way, editing and rewriting are the most fascinating parts of the job, because that's where the final changes—usually small but often crucial—take place and the picture really comes into focus.”

I looked back at Landry, and when I spoke, my voice was dead. “You made me up, didn't you?”

He nodded, looking strangely ashamed, as if what he had done was something dirty.

“When?” I uttered a strange, croaky little laugh. “Or is that the right question?”

“I don't know if it is or isn't,” he said, “and I imagine any writer would tell you about the same. It didn't happen all at once—that much I'm sure of. It's been an ongoing process. You first showed up in *Scarlet Town*, but I wrote that back in 1977 and you've changed a lot since then.”

1977, I thought. A Buck Rogers year for sure. I didn't want to believe this was happening, wanted to believe it was all a dream. Oddly enough, it was the smell of his cologne that kept me from being able to do that—that familiar smell I'd never smelled in my life. How could I have? It was Aramis, a brand as unfamiliar to me as Toshiba.

But he was going on.

“You've grown a lot more complex and interesting. You were pretty one-dimensional to start with.” He cleared his throat and smiled down at his hands for a moment.

“What a pisser for me.”

He winced a little at the anger in my voice, but made himself look up again, just the same. “Your last book was *How Like a Fallen Angel*. I started that one in 1990, but it took until 1993 to finish. I've had some problems in the interim. My life has been . . . interesting.” He gave the word an ugly, bitter twist. “Writers don't do their best work during interesting times, Clyde. Take my word for it.”

I glanced at the baggy way his hobo clothes hung on him and decided he might have a point there. “Maybe that's why you screwed up in such a big way on this one,” I said. “That stuff about the lottery and the forty thousand dollars was pure guff—they pay off in pesos south of the border.”

“I knew that,” he said mildly. “I’m not saying I don’t goof up from time to time—I may be a kind of God in this world, or *to* this world, but in my own I’m perfectly human—but when I *do* goof up, you and your fellow characters never know it, Clyde, because my mistakes and continuity lapses are part of your truth. No, Peoria was lying. I knew it, and I wanted *you* to know it.”

“Why?”

He shrugged, again looking uneasy and a little ashamed. “To prepare you for my coming a little, I suppose. That’s what all of it was for, starting with the Demmicks. I didn’t want to scare you any more than I had to.”

Any private eye worth his salt has a pretty good idea when the person in the client’s chair is lying and when he’s telling the truth; knowing when the client is telling the truth but purposely leaving gaps is a rarer talent, and I doubt if even the geniuses among us can tap it all the time. Maybe I was only tapping it now because my brainwaves and Landry’s were marching in lock-step, but I *was* tapping it. There was stuff he wasn’t telling me. The question was whether or not I should call him on it.

What stopped me was a sudden, horrible intuition that came waltzing out of nowhere, like a ghost oozing out of the wall of a haunted house. It had to do with the Demmicks. The reason they’d been so quiet last night was because dead people don’t engage in marital spats—it’s one of those rules, like the one that says crap rolls downhill, that you can pretty much count on through thick and thin. From almost the first moment I’d met him, I’d sensed there was a violent temper under George’s urbane top layer, and that there might be a sharp-clawed bitch lurking in the shadows behind Gloria Demmick’s pretty face and daffy demeanor. They were just a little too Cole Porter to be true, if you see what I mean. And now I was somehow sure that George had finally snapped and killed his wife . . . probably their yappy Welsh Corgi, as well. Gloria might be sitting propped up in the bathroom corner between the shower and the toilet right now, her face black, her eyes bulging like old dull marbles, her tongue protruding between her blue lips. The dog was lying with its head in her lap and a wire coathanger twisted around its neck, its shrill bark stilled forever. And George? Dead on the bed with Gloria’s bottle of Veronals—now empty—standing beside him on the night-table. No more parties, no more jitterbugging at Al Arif, no more frothy upper-class murder cases in Palm

Desert or Beverly Glen. They were cooling off now, drawing flies, growing pale under their fashionable poolside tans.

George and Gloria Demmick, who had died inside this man's machine. Who had died inside this man's *head*.

"You did one lousy job of not scaring me," I said, and immediately wondered if it would have been possible for him to do a good one. Ask yourself this: how do you get a person ready to meet God? I'll bet even Moses got a little hot under the robe when he saw that bush start to glow, and I'm nothing but a shamus who works for forty a day plus expenses.

"*How Like a Fallen Angel* was the Mavis Weld story. The name, Mavis Weld, is from a novel called *The Little Sister*. By Raymond Chandler." He looked at me with a kind of troubled uncertainty that had some small whiff of guilt in it. "It's an *hommage*." He said the first syllable so it rhymed with Rome.

"Bully for you," I said, "but the guy's name rings no bells."

"Of course not. In your world—which is my version of L.A., of course—Chandler never existed. Nevertheless, I've used all sorts of names from his books in mine. The Fulwider Building is where Chandler's detective, Philip Marlowe, had *his* office. Vernon Klein . . . Peoria Smith. . . and Clyde Umney, of course. That was the name of the lawyer in *Playback*."

"And you call those things *hommages*?"

"That's right."

"If you say so, but it sounds like a fancy word for plain old copying to me." But it made me feel funny, knowing that my name had been made up by a man I'd never heard of in a world I'd never dreamed of.

Landry had the good grace to flush, but his eyes didn't drop.

"All right; perhaps I *did* do a little pilfering. Certainly I adopted Chandler's style for my own, but I'm hardly the first; Ross Macdonald did the same thing in the fifties and sixties, Robert Parker did it in the seventies and eighties, and the critics decked them with laurel leaves for it. Besides, Chandler learned from Hammett and Hemingway, not to mention pulp-writers like—"

I held up my hand. "Let's skip the lit class and get down to the bottom line. This is crazy, but—" My eyes drifted to the picture of Roosevelt, from there they went to the eerily blank blotter, and from there they went back to the

haggard face on the other side of the desk. “—but let’s say I believe it. What are you doing here? What did you come for?”

Except I already knew. I detect for a living, but the answer to that one came from my heart, not my head.

“I came for *you*.”

“For me.”

“Sorry, yes. I’m afraid you’ll have to start thinking of your life in a new way, Clyde. As . . . well . . . a pair of shoes, let’s say. You’re stepping out and I’m stepping in. And once I’ve got the laces tied, I’m going to walk away.”

Of course. Of course he was. And I suddenly knew what I had to do . . . the only thing I *could* do.

Get rid of him.

I let a big smile spread across my face. A tell-me-more smile. At the same time I coiled my legs under me, getting them ready to launch me across the desk at him. Only one of us could leave this office, that much was clear. I intended to be the one.

“Oh, *really?*” I said. “How fascinating. And what happens to me, Sammy? What happens to the shoeless private eye? What happens to Clyde—”

*Umney*, the last word was supposed to be my last name, the last word this interloping, invading thief would ever hear in his life. The minute it was out of my mouth I intended to leap. The trouble was, that telepathy business seemed to work both ways. I saw an expression of alarm dawn in his eyes, and then they slipped shut and his mouth tightened with concentration. He didn’t bother with the Buck Rogers machine; I suppose he knew there was no time for it.

“ ‘His revelations hit me like some kind of debilitating drug,’ ” he said, speaking in the low but carrying tone of one who recites rather than simply speaking. “ ‘All the strength went out of my muscles, my legs felt like a couple of strands of *al dente* spaghetti, and all I could do was flop back in my chair and look at him.’ ”

I flopped back in my chair, my legs uncoiling beneath me, unable to do anything but look at him.

“Not very good,” he said apologetically, “but rapid composition has never been a strong point of mine.”

“You bastard,” I rasped weakly. “You son of a bitch.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I suppose I am.”

“Why are you doing this? Why are you stealing my life?”

His eyes flickered with anger at that. “*Your* life? You know better than that, Clyde, even if you don’t want to admit it. It isn’t your life at all. I made you up, starting on one rainy day in January of 1977 and continuing right up to the present time. I gave you your life, and it’s mine to take away.”

“Very noble,” I sneered, “but if God came down here right now and started yanking *your* life apart like bad stitches in a scarf, you might find it a little easier to appreciate my point of view.”

“All right,” he said, “I suppose you’ve got a point. But why argue it? Arguing with one’s self is like playing solitaire chess—a fair game results in a stalemate every time. Let’s just say I’m doing it because I can.”

I felt a little calmer, all of a sudden. I had been down this street before. When they got the drop on you, you had to get them talking and keep them talking. It had worked with Mavis Weld and it would work here. They said stuff like *Well, I suppose it won’t hurt you to know now* or *What harm can it do?*

Mavis’s version had been downright elegant: *I want you to know, Umney—I want you to take the truth to hell with you. You can pass it on to the devil over cake and coffee.* It really didn’t matter what they said, but if they were talking, they weren’t shooting.

Always keep em talking, that was the thing. Keep em talking and just hope the cavalry would show up from somewhere.

“The question is, why do you *want* to?” I asked. “It’s hardly the usual thing, is it? I mean, aren’t you writer types usually content to cash the checks when they come, and go about your business?”

“You’re trying to keep me talking, Clyde. Aren’t you?”

That hit me like a sucker-punch to the gut, but playing it down to the last card was the only choice I had. I grinned and shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, I really do want to know.” And there was no lie in that.

He looked unsure for a moment longer, bent over and touched the keys inside that strange plastic case (I felt cramps in my legs and gut and chest as he stroked them), then straightened up again.

“I suppose it won’t hurt you to know now,” he said finally. “After all, what harm can it do?”

“Not a bit.”

“You’re a clever boy, Clyde,” he said, “and you’re perfectly right—writers very rarely plunge all the way into the worlds they’ve created, and when they do I think they end up doing it strictly in their heads, while their bodies vegetate in some mental asylum. Most of us are content simply to be tourists in the country of our imaginations. Certainly that was the case with me. I’m not a fast writer—composition has always been torture for me, I think I told you that—but I managed five Clyde Umney books in ten years, each more successful than the last. In 1983 I left my job as regional manager for a big insurance company and started to write full-time. I had a wife I loved, a little boy that kicked the sun out of bed every morning and put it to bed every night—that’s how it seemed to me, anyway—and I didn’t think life could get any better.”

He shifted in the overstuffed client’s chair, moved his hand, and I saw the cigarette burn Ardis McGill had put in the overstuffed arm was also gone. He voiced a bitterly cold laugh.

“And I was right,” he said. “It couldn’t get any better, but it *could* get a whole hell of a lot worse. And did. About three months after I started *How Like a Fallen Angel*, Danny—our little boy—fell out of a swing in the park and bashed his head. Cold-conked himself, in your parlance.”

A brief smile, every bit as cold and bitter as the laugh had been, crossed his face. It came and went at the speed of grief.

“He bled a lot—you’ve seen enough head-wounds in your time to know how they are—and it scared the crap out of Linda, but the doctors were good and it *did* turn out to be only a concussion; they got him stabilized and gave him a pint of blood to make up for what he’d lost. Maybe they didn’t have to—and that haunts me—but they did. The real problem wasn’t with his head, you see; it was with that pint of blood. It was infected with AIDS.”

“Come again?”

“It’s something you can thank your God you don’t know about,” Landry said. “It doesn’t exist in your time, Clyde. It won’t show up until the mid-seventies. Like Aramis cologne.”

“What does it do?”

“Eats away at your immune system until the whole thing collapses like the wonderful one-hoss shay. Then every bug circling around out there, from cancer to chicken pox, rushes in and has a party.”

“Good Christ!”

His smile came and went like a cramp. “If you say so. AIDS is primarily a sexually transmitted disease, but every now and then it pops up in the blood supply. I suppose you could say my kid won big in a very unlucky version of *la lotería*.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and although I was scared to death of this thin man with the tired face, I meant it. Losing a kid to something like that . . . what could be worse? Probably something, yeah—there’s always something—but you’d have to sit down and think about it, wouldn’t you?

“Thanks,” he said. “Thanks, Clyde. It went fast for him, at least. He fell out of the swing in May. The first purple blotches—Kaposi’s sarcoma—showed up in time for his birthday in September. He died on March 18, 1991. And maybe he didn’t suffer as much as some of them do, but he suffered. Oh yes, he suffered.”

I didn’t have the slightest idea what Kaposi’s sarcoma was, either, and decided I didn’t want to ask. I knew more than I wanted to already.

“You can maybe understand why it slowed me down a little on your book,” he said. “Can’t you, Clyde?”

I nodded.

“I pushed on, though. Mostly because I think make-believe is a great healer. Maybe I *have* to believe that. I tried to get on with my life, too, but things kept going wrong with it—it was as if *How Like a Fallen Angel* was some kind of weird bad-luck charm that had turned me into Job. My wife went into a deep depression following Danny’s death, and I was so concerned with her that I hardly noticed the red patches that had started breaking out on my legs and stomach and chest. And the itching. I knew it wasn’t AIDS, and at first that was all I was concerned with. But as time went on and things got worse . . . have you ever had shingles, Clyde?”

Then he laughed and clapped the heel of his hand to his forehead in a what-a-dunce-I-am gesture before I could shake my head.

“Of course you haven’t—you’ve never had more than a hangover. Shingles, my shamus friend, is a funny name for a terrible, chronic ailment. There’s some pretty good medicine available to help alleviate the symptoms in my version of Los Angeles, but it wasn’t helping me much; by the end of 1991 I was in agony. Part of it was general depression over what had happened to Danny, of course, but most of it was the agony and the itching. That would make an interesting book title about a tortured writer, don’t you think? *The Agony and the Itching, or, Thomas Hardy Faces Puberty.*” He voiced a harsh, distracted little laugh.

“Whatever you say, Sam.”

“I say it was a season in hell. Of course it’s easy to make light of it now, but by Thanksgiving of that year it was no joke—I was getting three hours of sleep a night, tops, and I had days when it felt like my skin was trying to crawl right off my body and run away like The Gingerbread Man. And I suppose that’s why I didn’t see how bad it was getting with Linda.”

I didn’t know, *couldn’t* know . . . but I did. “She killed herself.”

He nodded. “In March of 1992, on the anniversary of Daniel’s death. Over two years ago now.”

A single tear tracked down his wrinkled, prematurely aged cheek, and I had an idea that he had gotten old in one hell of a hurry. It was sort of awful, realizing I had been made by such a bush-league version of God, but it also explained a lot. My shortcomings, mainly.

“That’s enough,” he said in a voice which was blurred with anger as well as tears. “Get to the point, you’d say. In my time we say cut to the chase, but it comes to the same. I finished the book. On the day I discovered Linda dead in bed—the way the police are going to find Gloria Demmick later today, Clyde—I had finished one hundred and ninety pages of manuscript. I was up to the part where you fish Mavis’s brother out of Lake Tahoe. I came home from the funeral three days later, fired up the word-processor, and got started right in on page one-ninety-one. Does that shock you?”

“No,” I said. I thought about asking him what a word-processor might be, then decided I didn’t have to. The thing in his lap was a word-processor, of course. Had to be.

“You’re in a decided minority,” Landry said. “It shocked what few friends I had left, shocked them plenty. Linda’s relatives thought I had all the emotion of a warthog. I didn’t have the energy to explain that I was trying to save myself. Frog them, as Peoria would say. I grabbed my book the way a drowning man would grab a life-ring. I grabbed *you*, Clyde. My case of the shingles was still bad, and that slowed me down—to some extent it kept me *out*, or I might have gotten here sooner—but it didn’t stop me. I started getting a little better—physically, at least—right around the time I finished the book. But when I *had* finished, I fell into what I suppose must have been my own state of depression. I went through the edited script in a kind of daze. I felt such a feeling of regret . . . of *loss* . . .” He looked directly at me and said, “Does any of this make any sense to you?”

“It makes sense,” I said. And it did. In a crazy sort of way.

“There were lots of pills left in the house,” he said. “Linda and I were like the Demmicks in a lot of ways, Clyde—we really did believe in living better chemically, and a couple of times I came very close to taking a couple of double handfuls. The way the thought always came to me wasn’t in terms of suicide, but in terms of wanting to catch up to Linda and Danny. To catch up while there was still time.”

I nodded. It was what I’d thought about Ardis McGill when, three days after we’d said toodle-oo to each other in Blondie’s, I’d found her in that stuffy attic room with a small blue hole in the center of her forehead. Except it had been Sam Landry who had really killed her, and who had accomplished the deed with a kind of flexible bullet to the brain. Of course it had been. In my world Sam Landry, this tired-looking man in the hobo’s pants, was responsible for *everything*. The idea should have seemed crazy, and it did . . . but it was getting saner all the time.

I found I had just energy enough to swivel my chair and look out my window. What I saw somehow did not surprise me in the least: Sunset Boulevard and all that surrounded it had frozen solid. Cars, buses, pedestrians, all stopped dead in their tracks. It was a Kodak snapshot world out there, and why not? Its creator could not be bothered with animating much of it, at least for the time being; he was still caught in the whirlpool of his own pain and grief. Hell, I was lucky to still be breathing myself.

“So what happened?” I asked. “How did you get here, Sam? Can I call you that? Do you mind?”

“No, I don’t mind. I can’t give you a very good answer, though, because I don’t exactly know. All I know for sure is that every time I thought of the pills, I thought of you. What I thought specifically was, ‘Clyde Umney would never do this, and he’d sneer at anyone who did. He’d call it the coward’s way out.’ ”

I considered that, found it fair enough, and nodded. For someone staring some horrible ailment in the face—Vernon’s cancer, or the misbegotten nightmare that had killed this man’s son—I might make an exception, but take the pipe just because you were depressed? That was for pansies.

“Then I thought, ‘But that’s Clyde Umney, and Clyde is make-believe. . . just a figment of your imagination.’ That idea wouldn’t live, though. It’s the dumbbells of the world—politicians and lawyers, for the most part—who sneer at imagination, and think a thing isn’t real unless they can smoke it or stroke it or feel it or fuck it. They think that way because they have no imagination themselves, and they have no idea of its power. I knew better. Hell, I ought to—my imagination has been buying my food and paying the mortgage for the last ten years or so.

“At the same time, I knew I couldn’t go on living in what I used to think of as ‘the real world,’ by which I suppose we all mean ‘the only world.’ That’s when I started to realize there was only one place left where I could go and feel welcome, and only one person I could be when I got there. The place was here—Los Angeles, in 1930-something. And the person was you.”

I heard that faint whirring sound coming from inside his gadget again, but I didn’t turn around.

Partly because I was afraid to.

And partly because I no longer knew if I could.

## VI. Umney’s Last Case.

On the street seven stories below, a man was frozen with his head half-turned to look at the woman on the corner, who was climbing up the step of the eight-fifty bus headed downtown. She had exposed a momentary length of

beautiful leg, and this was what the man was looking at. A little farther down the street a boy was holding out his battered old baseball glove to catch the ball frozen in mid-air just above his head. And, floating six feet above the street like a ghost called up by a third-rate swami at a carnival séance, was one of the newspapers from Peoria Smith's overturned table. Incredibly, I could see the two photographs on it from up here: Hitler above the fold, the recently deceased Cuban bandleader below it.

Landry's voice seemed to come from a long way off.

"At first I thought that meant I'd be spending the rest of my life in some nut-ward, thinking I was you, but that was all right, because it would only be my *physical* self locked up in the funny-farm, do you see? And then, gradually, I began to realize that it could be a lot more than that . . . that maybe there might be a way I could actually . . . well . . . slip all the way in. And do you know what the key was?"

"Yes," I said, not looking around. That whir came again as something in his gadget revolved, and suddenly the newspaper frozen in mid-air flapped off down the frozen Boulevard. A moment or two later an old DeSoto rolled jerkily through the intersection of Sunset and Fernando. It struck the boy wearing the baseball glove, and both he and the DeSoto sedan disappeared. Not the ball, though. It fell into the street, rolled halfway to the gutter, then froze solid again.

"You do?" He sounded surprised.

"Yeah. Peoria was the key."

"That's right." He laughed, then cleared his throat—nervous sounds, both of them. "I keep forgetting that you're me."

It was a luxury I didn't have.

"I was fooling around with a new book, and not getting anywhere. I'd tried Chapter One six different ways to Sunday before realizing a really interesting thing: Peoria Smith didn't like you."

That made me swing around in a hurry. "The hell you say!"

"I didn't think you'd believe it, but it's the truth, and I'd somehow known it all along. I don't want to convene the lit class again, Clyde, but I'll tell you one thing about my trade—writing stories in the first person is a funny, tricky business. It's as if everything the writer knows comes from his main character,

like a series of letters or dispatches from some far-off battle zone. It's very rare for the writer to have a secret, but in this case I did. It was as if your little part of Sunset Boulevard were the Garden of Eden—"

"I never heard it called *that* before," I remarked.

"—and there was a snake in it, one I saw and you didn't. A snake named Peoria Smith."

Outside, the frozen world that he'd called my Garden of Eden continued to darken, although the sky was cloudless. The Red Door, a nightclub reputedly owned by Lucky Luciano, disappeared. For a moment there was just a hole where it had been, and then a new building filled it—a restaurant called Petit Déjeuner with a window full of ferns. I glanced up the street and saw that other changes were going on—new buildings were replacing old ones with silent, spooky speed. They meant I was running out of time; I knew this. Unfortunately, I knew something else, as well—there was probably not going to be any nick in this bundle of time. When God walks into your office and tells you He's decided He likes your life better than His own, what the hell are your options?

"I junked all the various drafts of the novel I'd started two months after my wife's death," Landry said. "It was easy—poor crippled things that they were. And then I started a new one. I called it . . . can you guess, Clyde?"

"Sure," I said, and swung around. It took all my strength, but what I suppose this geek would call my "motivation" was good. Sunset Strip isn't exactly the Champs Elysées or Hyde Park, but it's my world. I didn't want to watch him tear it apart and rebuild it the way *he* wanted it. "I suppose you called it *Umney's Last Case*."

He looked faintly surprised. "You suppose right."

I waved my hand. It was an effort, but I managed. "I didn't win the Shamus of the Year Award in 1934 and '35 for nothing, you know."

He smiled at that. "Yes. I always *did* like that line."

Suddenly I hated him—hated him like poison. If I could have summoned the strength to lunge across the desk and choke the life out of him, I would have done it. He saw it, too. The smile faded.

"Forget it, Clyde—you wouldn't have a chance."

“Why don’t you get out of here?” I grated at him. “Just get out and let a working stiff alone?”

“Because I can’t. I couldn’t even if I wanted to . . . and I don’t.” He looked at me with an odd mixture of anger and pleading. “Try to look at it from my point of view, Clyde—”

“Do I have any choice? Have I ever?”

He ignored that. “Here’s a world where I’ll never get any older, a year where all the clocks are stopped at just about eighteen months before World War II, where the newspapers always cost three cents, where I can eat all the eggs and red meat I want and never have to worry about my cholesterol level.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

He leaned forward earnestly. “No, you don’t! And that’s exactly the point, Clyde! This is a world where I can *really* do the job I dreamed about doing when I was a little boy—I can be a private eye. I can go racketing around in a fast car at two in the morning, shoot it out with hoodlums—knowing they may die but I won’t—and wake up eight hours later next to a beautiful *chanteuse* with the birds twittering in the trees and the sun shining in my bedroom window. That clear, beautiful California sun.”

“My bedroom window faces west,” I said.

“Not anymore,” he replied calmly, and I felt my hands curl into strengthless fists on the arms of my chair. “Do you see how wonderful it is? How perfect? In this world, people don’t go half-mad with itching caused by a stupid, undignified disease called shingles. In this world, people don’t go gray, let alone bald.”

He looked at me levelly, and in his gaze I saw no hope for me. No hope at all.

“In this world, beloved sons never die of AIDS and beloved wives never take overdoses of sleeping pills. Besides, you were *always* the outsider here, not me, no matter how it might have felt to you. This is *my* world, born in my imagination and maintained by my effort and ambition. I loaned it to you for awhile, that’s all . . . and now I’m taking it back.”

“Finish telling me how you got in, will you do that much? I really want to hear.”

“It was easy. I tore it apart, starting with the Demmicks, who were never much more than a lousy imitation of Nick and Nora Charles, and rebuilt it in my own image. I took away all the beloved supporting characters, and now I’m removing all the old landmarks. I’m pulling the rug out from under you a strand at a time, in other words, and I’m not proud of it, but I *am* proud of the sustained effort of will it’s taken to pull it off.”

“What’s happened to you back in your own world?” I was still keeping him talking, but now it was nothing but habit, like an old milk-horse finding his way back to the barn on a snowy morning.

He shrugged. “Dead, maybe. Or maybe I really have left a physical self—a husk—sitting catatonic in some mental institution. I don’t think either of those things is really the case, though—all of this feels too real. No, I think I made it all the way, Clyde. I think that back home they’re looking for a missing writer. . . with no idea that he’s disappeared into the storage banks of his own word-processor. And the truth is I really don’t care.”

“And me? What happens to me?”

“Clyde,” he said, “I don’t care about that, either.”

He bent over his gadget again.

“Don’t!” I said sharply.

He looked up.

“I . . .” I heard the quiver in my voice, tried to control it, and found I couldn’t. “Mister, I’m afraid. Please leave me alone. I know it’s not really my world out there anymore—hell, in here, either—but it’s the only world I’ll ever come close to knowing. Let me have what’s left of it. Please.”

“Too late, Clyde.” Again I heard that merciless regret in his voice. “Close your eyes. I’ll make it as fast as I can.”

I tried to jump him—I tried as hard as I could. I didn’t move so much as an iota. And as far as closing my eyes went, I discovered I didn’t need to. All the light had gone out of the day, and the office was as dark as midnight in a coalsack.

I sensed rather than saw him lean over the desk toward me. I tried to draw back and discovered I couldn’t even do that. Something dry and rusty touched my hand and I screamed.

“Take it easy, Clyde.” His voice, coming out of the darkness. Coming not just from in front of me but from everywhere. *Of course*, I thought. *After all, I’m a figment of his imagination.* “It’s only a check.”

“A . . . check?”

“Yes. For five thousand dollars. You’ve sold me the business. The painters will scratch your name off the door and paint mine on before they leave tonight.” He sounded dreamy. “Samuel D. Landry, Private Detective. It’s got a great ring, doesn’t it?”

I tried to beg and found I couldn’t. Now even my voice had failed me.

“Get ready,” he said. “I don’t know exactly what’s coming, Clyde, but it’s coming now. I don’t think it’ll hurt.” *But I don’t really care if it does*—that was the part he didn’t say.

That faint whirring sound came out of the blackness. I felt my chair melt away beneath me, and suddenly I was falling. Landry’s voice fell with me, reciting along with the clicks and taps of his fabulous futuristic steno machine, reciting the last two sentences of a novel called *Umney’s Last Case*.

“ ‘So I left town, and as to where I finished up . . . well, mister, I think that’s my business. Don’t you?’ ”

There was a brilliant green light below me. I was falling toward it. Soon it would consume me, and the only feeling I had was one of relief.

“ ‘THE END,’ ” Landry’s voice boomed, and then I fell into the green light, it was shining through me, *in* me, and Clyde Umney was no more.

So long, shamus.

## VII. The Other Side of the Light.

All that was six months ago.

I came to on the floor of a gloomy room with a humming in my ears, pushed myself to my knees, shook my head to clear it, and looked up into the bright green glare I’d fallen through, like Alice through the looking glass. I saw a Buck Rogers machine that was the big brother of the one Landry had brought into my office. Green letters shone on it and I pushed myself to my

feet so I could read them, absently running my fingernails up and down over my lower arms as I did so:

*So I left town, and as to where I finished up . . . well, mister, I think that's my business. Don't you?*

And below that, capitalized and centered, two more words:

THE END.

I read it again, now running my fingers over my stomach. I was doing it because there was something wrong with my skin, something that wasn't exactly painful but *was* certainly bothersome. As soon as it rose to the fore in my mind, I realized that weird sensation was going on everywhere—the nape of my neck, the backs of my thighs, in my crotch.

*Shingles*, I thought suddenly. *I've got Landry's shingles. What I'm feeling is itching, and the reason I didn't recognize it right away is because—*

“Because I've never *had* an itch before,” I said, and then the rest of it clicked into place. The click was so sudden and so hard that I actually swayed on my feet. I walked slowly across to a mirror on the wall, trying not to scratch my weirdly crawling skin, knowing I was going to see an aged version of my face, a face cut with lines like old dry washes and topped with a shock of lackluster white hair.

Now I knew what happened when writers somehow took over the lives of the characters they had created. It wasn't exactly theft after all.

More of a swap.

I stood staring into Landry's face—*my* face, only aged fifteen hard years—and felt my skin tingling and buzzing. Hadn't he said his shingles had been getting better? If this was better, how had he endured worse without going completely insane?

I was in Landry's house, of course—my house, now—and in the bathroom off the study, I found the medication he took for his shingles. I took my first dose less than an hour after I came to on the floor below his desk and the humming machine on it, and it was as if I had swallowed his life instead of medicine.

As if I'd swallowed his whole life.

These days the shingles are a thing of the past, I'm happy to report. Maybe it just ran its course, but I like to think that the old Clyde Umney spirit had something to do with it—Clyde was never sick a day in his life, you know, and although I seem to always have the sniffles in this run-down Sam Landry body, I'll be damned if I'll give in to them . . . and since when did it hurt to turn on a little of that positive thinking? I think the correct answer to that one is "since never."

There have been some pretty bad days, though, the first one coming less than twenty-four hours after I showed up in the unbelievable year of 1994. I was looking through Landry's fridge for something to eat (I'd pigged out on his Black Horse Ale the night before and felt it couldn't hurt my hangover to eat something) when a sudden pain knifed into my guts. I thought I was dying. It got worse, and I *knew* I was dying. I fell to the kitchen floor, trying not to scream. A moment or two later, something happened, and the pain eased.

Most of my life I've been using the phrase "I don't give a shit." All that has changed, starting that morning. I cleaned myself up, then climbed the stairs, knowing what I'd find in the bedroom: wet sheets in Landry's bed.

My first week in Landry's world was spent mostly in toilet-training myself. In my world, of course, nobody ever went to the bathroom. Or to the dentist, for that matter, and my first trip to the one listed in Landry's Rolodex is something I don't even want to think about, let alone discuss.

But there's been an occasional rose in this nest of brambles. For one thing, there's been no need to go job-hunting in Landry's confusing, jet-propelled world; his books apparently continue to sell very well, and I have no problem cashing the checks that come in the mail. My signature and his are, of course, identical. As for any moral compunctions I might have about doing that, don't make me laugh. Those checks are for stories about *me*. Landry only wrote them; I lived them. Hell, I deserved fifty thou and a rabies shot just for getting within scratching distance of Mavis Weld's claws.

I expected to have problems with Landry's so-called friends, but I suppose a heavy-duty shamus like me should have known better—would a guy with any real friends want to disappear into a world he'd created on the soundstage of his own imagination? Not likely. Landry's friends were his son and his wife, and they were dead. There are acquaintances and neighbors, but they seem to

accept me as him. The woman across the street throws me puzzled glances from time to time, and her little girl cries when I come near even though I used to baby-sit for them every now and then (the woman *says* I did, anyway, and why would she lie?), but that's no big deal.

I have even spoken to Landry's agent, a guy from New York named Verrill. He wants to know when I'm going to start a new book.

Soon, I tell him. Soon.

Mostly I stay in. I have no urge to explore the world Landry pushed me into when he pushed me out of my own; I see more than I want to on my once-weekly trip to the bank and the grocery store, and I threw a bookend through his awful television machine less than two hours after I figured out how to use it. It doesn't surprise me that Landry wanted to leave this groaning world with its freight of disease and senseless violence—a world where naked women dance in nightclub windows, and sex with them can kill you.

No, I spend my time inside, mostly. I have re-read each of his novels, and each one is like leafing through the pages of a well-loved scrapbook. And I've taught myself to use his word-processing machine, of course. It's not like the television machine; the screen is similar, but on the word-processor, you can make whatever pictures *you* want to see, because they all come from inside your own head.

I like that.

I've been getting ready, you see—trying sentences and discarding them the way you try pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. And this morning I wrote a few that seem right . . . or *almost* right. Want to hear? Okay, here goes:

*When I looked toward the door, I saw a very chastened, very downcast Peoria Smith standing there. "I guess I treated you pretty bad the last time I saw you, Mr. Umney," he said. "I came to say I'm sorry." It had been over six months, but he looked the same as ever. And I do mean the same.*

*"You're still wearing your cheaters," I said.*

*"Yeah. We tried the operation, but it didn't work." He sighed, then grinned and shrugged. In that moment he looked like the Peoria I'd always known. "What the hey, Mr. Umney—bein blind ain't so bad."*

It isn't perfect; sure, I know that. I started out as a detective, not a writer. But I believe you can do just about anything, if you want to bad enough, and

when you get right down to where the cheese binds, this is a kind of keyhole-peeping, too. The size and shape of the word-processor keyhole are a little different, but it's still looking into other people's lives and then reporting back to the client on what you saw.

I'm teaching myself for one very simple reason: I don't want to be here. You can call it L.A. in 1994 if you want to; I call it hell. It's awful frozen dinners you cook in a box called a "microwave," it's sneakers that look like Frankenstein shoes, it's music that comes out of the radio sounding like crows being steamed alive in a pressure-cooker, it's—

Well, it's *everything*.

I want my life back, I want things the way they were, and I think I know how to make that happen.

You're one sad, thieving bastard, Sam—may I still call you that?—and I feel sorry for you . . . but sorry only stretches so far, because the operant word here is *thieving*. My original opinion on the subject hasn't changed at all, you see—I still don't believe that the ability to create conveys the right to steal.

What are you doing right this minute, you thief? Eating dinner at that Petit Déjeuner restaurant you made up? Sleeping beside some gorgeous honey with perfect no-sag breasts and murder up the sleeve of her negligee? Driving down to Malibu with carefree abandon? Or just kicking back in the old office chair, enjoying your painless, odorless, shitless life? What are you doing?

I've been teaching myself to write, that's what *I've* been doing, and now that I've found my way in, I think I'll get better in a hurry. Already I can almost see you.

Tomorrow morning, Clyde and Peoria are going to go down to Blondie's, which has re-opened for business. This time Peoria's going to take Clyde up on that breakfast offer. That will be step two.

Yes, I can almost see you, Sam, and pretty soon I will. But I don't think you'll see me. Not until I step out from behind my office door and wrap my hands around your throat.

This time nobody goes home.

## Head Down

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am breaking in here, Constant Reader, to make you aware that this is *not* a story but an essay—almost a diary. It originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in the spring of 1990.

S.K.

Head down! Keep your head *down!*”

It is far from the most difficult feat in sports, but anyone who has ever tried to do it will tell you that it's tough enough: using a round bat to hit a round ball squarely on the button. Tough enough so that the handful of men who do it well become rich, famous, and idolized: the Jose Cansecos, the Mike Greenwells, the Kevin Mitchells. For thousands of boys (and not a few girls), their faces, not the face of Axl Rose or Bobby Brown, are the ones that matter; their posters hold the positions of honor on bedroom walls and locker doors. Today Ron St. Pierre is teaching some of these boys—boys who will represent Bangor West Side in District 3 Little League tournament play—how to put the round bat on the round ball. Right now he's working with a kid named Fred Moore while my son, Owen, stands nearby, watching closely. He's due in St. Pierre's hot seat next. Owen is broad-shouldered and heavily built, like his old man; Fred looks almost painfully slim in his bright green jersey. And he is not making good contact.

“*Head down, Fred!*” St. Pierre shouts. He is halfway between the mound and home plate at one of the two Little League fields behind the Coke plant in Bangor; Fred is almost all the way to the backstop. The day is a hot one, but if the heat bothers either Fred or St. Pierre it does not show. They are intent on what they are doing.

“Keep it *down!*” St. Pierre shouts again, and unloads a fat pitch.

Fred chips under it. There is that chinky aluminum-on-cowhide sound—the sound of someone hitting a tin cup with a spoon. The ball hits the

backstop, rebounds, almost bonks him on the helmet. Both of them laugh, and then St. Pierre gets another ball from the red plastic bucket beside him.

“Get ready, Freddy!” he yells. “Head down!”

• • •

Maine’s District 3 is so large that it is split in two. The Penobscot County teams make up half the division; the teams from Aroostook and Washington counties make up the other half. All-Star kids are selected by merit and drawn from all existing district Little League teams. The dozen teams in District 3 play in simultaneous tournaments. Near the end of July, the two teams left will play off, best two out of three, to decide the district champ. That team represents District 3 in State Championship play, and it has been a long time—eighteen years—since a Bangor team made it into the state tourney.

This year, the State Championship games will be played in Old Town, where they make the canoes. Four of the five teams that play there will go back home. The fifth will go on to represent Maine in the Eastern Regional Tournament, this year to be held in Bristol, Connecticut. Beyond *that*, of course, is Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where the Little League World Series happens. The Bangor West players rarely seem to think of such dizzy heights; they will be happy just to beat Millinocket, their first-round opponent in the Penobscot County race. Coaches, however, are allowed to dream—are, in fact, almost *obligated* to dream.

• • •

This time Fred, who is the team joker, *does* get his head down. He hits a weak grounder on the wrong side of the first-base line, foul by about six feet.

“Look,” St Pierre says, taking another ball. He holds it up. It is scuffed, dirty, and grass-stained. It is nevertheless a baseball, and Fred eyes it respectfully. “I’m going to show you a trick. Where’s the ball?”

“In your hand,” Fred says.

Saint, as Dave Mansfield, the team’s head coach, calls him, drops it into his glove. “Now?”

“In your glove.”

Saint turns sideways; his pitching hand creeps into his glove. “Now?”

“In your hand. I think.”

“You’re right. So watch my hand. Watch my hand, Fred Moore, and wait for the ball to come out in it. You’re looking for the ball. Nothing else. Just the ball. I should just be a blur to you. Why would you want to see me, anyway? Do you care if I’m smiling? No. You’re waiting to see how I’ll come—sidearm or three-quarters or over the top. Are you waiting?”

Fred nods.

“Are you watching?”

Fred nods again.

“O.K.,” St. Pierre says, and goes into his short-arm batting-practice motion again.

This time Fred drives the ball with real authority: a hard sinking liner to right field.

“All *right!*” Saint cries. “That’s *all right*, Fred Moore!” He wipes sweat off his forehead. “Next batter!”

• • •

Dave Mansfield, a heavy, bearded man who comes to the park wearing aviator sunglasses and an open-neck College World Series shirt (it’s a good-luck charm), brings a paper sack to the Bangor West–Millinocket game. It contains sixteen pennants, in various colors. BANGOR, each one says, the word flanked by a lobster on one side and a pine tree on the other. As each Bangor West player is announced on loudspeakers that have been wired to the chain-link backstop, he takes a pennant from the bag Dave holds out, runs across the infield, and hands it to his opposite number.

Dave is a loud, restless man who happens to love baseball and the kids who play it at this level. He believes there are two purposes to All-Star Little League: to have fun and to win. Both are important, he says, but the most important thing is to keep them in the right order. The pennants are not a sly gambit to unnerve the opposition but just for fun. Dave knows that the boys on both teams will remember this game, and he wants each of the Millinocket kids to have a souvenir. It’s as simple as that.

The Millinocket players seem surprised by the gesture, and they don't know exactly what to do with the pennants as someone's tape player begins to warble out the Anita Bryant version of "The Star-Spangled Banner." The Millinocket catcher, almost buried beneath his gear, solves the problem in unique fashion: he holds his Bangor pennant over his heart.

With the amenities taken care of, Bangor West administers a brisk and thorough trouncing; the final score is Bangor West 18, Millinocket 7. The loss does not devalue the souvenirs, however; when Millinocket departs on the team bus, the visitors' dugout is empty save for a few Dixie cups and Popsicle sticks. The pennants—every single one of them—are gone.

• • •

"Cut *two!*" Neil Waterman, Bangor West's field coach, shouts. "Cut *two*, cut *two!*"

It's the day after the Millinocket game. Everyone on the team is still showing up for practice, but it's early yet. Attrition will set in. That is a given: parents are not always willing to give up summer plans so their kids can play Little League after the regular May–June season is over, and sometimes the kids themselves tire of the constant grind of practice. Some would rather be riding their bikes, trying to hang ten on their skateboards, or just hanging around the community pool and checking out the girls.

"Cut *two!*" Waterman yells. He is a small, compact man in khaki shorts and a Joe Coach crewcut. In real life he is a teacher and a college basketball coach, but this summer he is trying to teach these boys that baseball has more in common with chess than many would ever have believed. Know your play, he tells them over and over again. Know who it is you're backing up. Most important of all, know who your cut man is in every situation, and be able to hit him. He works patiently at showing them the truth that hides at the center of the game: that it is played more in the mind than with the body.

Ryan Iarrobino, Bangor West's center fielder, fires a bullet to Casey Kinney at second base. Casey tags an invisible runner, pivots, and throws another bullet to home, where J. J. Fiddler takes the throw and tosses the ball back to Waterman.

“Double-play ball!” Waterman shouts, and hits one to Matt Kinney (not related to Casey). Matt is playing shortstop at practice today. The ball takes a funny hop and appears to be on its way to left center. Matt knocks it down, picks it up, and feeds to Casey at second; Casey pivots and throws to Mike Arnold, who is on first. Mike feeds it home to J.J.

“All right!” Waterman shouts. “Good job, Matt Kinney! *Good job!* One-two-one! You’re covering, Mike Pelkey!” The two names. Always the two names, to avoid confusion. The team is lousy with Matts, Mikes, and guys named Kinney.

The throws are executed flawlessly. Mike Pelkey, Bangor West’s number two pitcher, is right where he’s supposed to be, covering first. It’s a move he doesn’t always remember to make, but this time he does. He grins and trots back to the mound as Neil Waterman gets ready to hit the next combination.

• • •

“This is the best Little League All-Star team I’ve seen in years,” Dave Mansfield says some days after Bangor West’s trouncing of Millinocket. He dumps a load of sunflower seeds into his mouth and begins to chew them. He spits hulls casually as he talks. “I don’t think they can be beaten—at least not in this division.”

He pauses and watches as Mike Arnold breaks toward the plate from first, grabs a practice bunt, and whirls toward the bag. He cocks his arm back—then holds the ball. Mike Pelkey is still on the mound; this time he has forgotten that it is his job to cover, and the bag is undefended. He flashes Dave a quick guilty glance. Then he breaks into a sunny grin and gets ready to do it again. Next time he’ll do it right, but will he remember to do it right during a game?

“Of course, we can beat ourselves,” Dave says. “That’s how it usually happens.” And, raising his voice, he bellows, “*Where were you, Mike Pelkey? You’re s’posed to be covering first!*”

Mike nods and trots over—better late than never.

“Brewer,” Dave says, and shakes his head. “Brewer at their field. That’ll be tough. Brewer’s *always* tough.”

• • •

Bangor West does not trounce Brewer, but they win their first “road game” without any real strain. Matt Kinney, the team’s number one pitcher, is in good form. He is far from overpowering, but his fastball has a sneaky, snaky little hop, and he also has a modest but effective breaking pitch. Ron St. Pierre is fond of saying that every Little League pitcher in America thinks he’s got a killer curveball. “What they think is a curve is usually this big lollipop change,” he says. “A batter with a little self-discipline can kill the poor thing.”

Matt Kinney’s curveball actually curves, however, and tonight he goes the distance and strikes out eight. Probably more important, he walks only four. Walks are the bane of a Little League coach’s existence. “They kill you,” Neil Waterman says. “The walks kill you every time. Absolutely no exceptions. Sixty per cent of batters walked score in Little League games.” Not in this game: two of the batters Kinney walks are forced at second; the other two are stranded. Only one Brewer batter gets a hit: Denise Hewes, the center fielder, singles with one out in the fifth, but she is forced at second.

After the game is safely in the bag, Matt Kinney, a solemn and almost eerily self-possessed boy, flashes Dave a rare smile, revealing a set of neat braces. “She could *hit!*” he says, almost reverently.

“Wait until you see Hampden,” Dave says dryly. “They *all* hit.”

• • •

When the Hampden squad shows up at Bangor West’s field, behind the Coke plant, on July 17th, they quickly prove Dave right. Mike Pelkey has pretty good stuff and better control than he had against Millinocket, but he isn’t much of a mystery to the Hampden boys. Mike Tardif, a compact kid with an amazingly fast bat, rips Pelkey’s third pitch over the left-field fence, two hundred feet away, for a home run in the first inning. Hampden adds two more runs in the second, and leads Bangor West 3–0.

In the third, however, Bangor West breaks loose. Hampden’s pitching is good, Hampden’s hitting is awesome, but Hampden’s fielding, particularly infielding, leaves something to be desired. Bangor West puts three hits together with five errors and two walks to score seven runs. This is how Little League is most often played, and seven runs should be enough, but they aren’t; the

opposition chips stubbornly away, getting two in its half of the third and two more in the fifth. When Hampden comes up in the bottom of the sixth, it is trailing by only three, 10–7.

Kyle King, a twelve-year-old who started for Hampden this evening and then went to catcher in the fifth, leads off the bottom of the sixth with a double. Then Mike Pelkey strikes out Mike Tardif. Mike Wentworth, the new Hampden pitcher, singles to deep short. King and Wentworth advance on a passed ball, but are forced to hold when Jeff Carson grounds back to the pitcher. This brings up Josh Jamieson, one of five Hampden home-run threats, with two on and two out. He represents the tying run. Mike, although clearly tired, finds a little extra and strikes him out on a one-two pitch. The game is over.

The kids line up and give each other the custom-ordained high fives, but it's clear that Mike isn't the only kid who is simply exhausted after the match; with their slumped shoulders and lowered heads, they all look like losers. Bangor West is now 3–0 in divisional play, but the win is a fluke, the kind of game that makes Little League such a nerve-racking experience for spectators, coaches, and the players themselves. Usually sure-handed in the field, Bangor West has tonight committed something like nine errors.

“I didn't sleep all night,” Dave mutters at practice the next day. “Damn, we were outplayed. We should have lost that game.”

Two nights later, he has something else to feel gloomy about. He and Ron St. Pierre make the six-mile trip to Hampden to watch Kyle King and his mates play Brewer. This is no scouting expedition; Bangor has played both clubs, and both men have copious notes. What they are really hoping to see, Dave admits, is Brewer getting lucky and putting Hampden out of the way. It doesn't happen; what they see isn't a baseball game but gunnery practice.

Josh Jamieson, who struck out in the clutch against Mike Pelkey, clouts a home run over everything and into the Hampden practice field. Nor is Jamieson alone. Carson hits one, Wentworth hits one, and Tardif hits a pair. The final score is Hampden 21, Brewer 9.

On the ride back to Bangor, Dave Mansfield chews a lot of sunflower seeds and says little. He rouses himself only once, as he wheels his old green Chevy into the rutted dirt parking lot beside the Coke plant. “We got lucky Tuesday

night, and they know it,” he says. “When we go down there Thursday, they’ll be waiting for us.”

• • •

The diamonds on which the teams of District 3 play out their six-inning dramas all have the same dimensions, give or take a foot here or an outfield gate there. The coaches all carry the rule book in their back pockets, and they put it to frequent use. Dave likes to say that it never hurts to make sure. The infield is sixty feet on each side, a square standing on the point that is home plate. The backstop, according to the rule book, must be at least twenty feet from home plate, giving both the catcher and a runner at third a fair chance on a passed ball. The fences are supposed to be 200 feet from the plate. At Bangor West’s field, it’s actually about 210 to dead center. And at Hampden, home of power hitters like Tardif and Jamieson, it’s more like 180.

The most inflexible measurement is also the most important: the distance between the pitcher’s rubber and the center of the plate. Forty-six feet—no more, no less. When it comes to this one, nobody ever says, “Aw, close enough for government work—let it go.” Most Little League teams live and die by what happens in the forty-six feet between those two points.

The fields of District 3 vary considerably in other ways, and a quick look is usually enough to tell you something about the feel any given community has for the game. The Bangor West field is in bad shape—a poor relation that the town regularly ignores in its recreation budget. The undersurface is a sterile clay that turns to soup when the weather is wet and to concrete when the weather is dry, as it has been this summer. Watering has kept most of the outfield reasonably green, but the infield is hopeless. Scruffy grass grows up the lines, but the area between the pitcher’s rubber and home plate is almost completely bald. The backstop is rusty; passed balls and wild pitches frequently squirt through a wide gap between the ground and the chain-link. Two large, hilly dunes run through short-right and center fields. These dunes have actually become a home-team advantage. Bangor West players learn to play the caroms off them, just as Red Sox left fielders learn to play caroms off the Green

Monster. Visiting fielders, on the other hand, often find themselves chasing their mistakes all the way to the fence.

Brewer's field, tucked behind the local IGA grocery and a Marden's Discount Store, has to compete for space with what may be the oldest, rustiest playground equipment in New England; little brothers and sisters watch the game upside down from the swings, their heads down and their feet in the sky.

Bob Beal Field in Machias, with its pebble-pocked-skin infield, is probably the worst of the fields Bangor West will visit this year; Hampden, with its manicured outfield and neat composition infield, is probably the best. With its picnic area beyond the center-field fence and a rest-room-equipped snack bar, Hampden's diamond, behind the local VFW hall, looks like a rich kids' field. But looks can be deceiving. This team is a combination of kids from Newburgh and Hampden, and Newburgh is still small-farm and dairy country. Many of these kids ride to the games in old cars with primer paint around the headlights and mufflers held in place by chicken wire; they wear sunburns they got doing chores, not while they were hanging out at the country-club swimming pool. Town kids and country kids. Once they're in uniform, it doesn't much matter which is which.

• • •

Dave is right: the Hampden-Newburgh fans are waiting. Bangor West last won the District 3 Little League title in 1971; Hampden has never won a title, and many local fans continue to hope that this will be the year, despite the earlier loss to Bangor West. For the first time, the Bangor team really feels it is on the road; it is faced with a large hometown rooting section.

Matt Kinney gets the start. Hampden counters with Kyle King, and the game quickly shapes up as that rarest and richest of Little League commodities, a genuine pitchers' duel. At the end of the third inning, the score is Hampden 0, Bangor West 0.

In the bottom of the fourth, Bangor scores two unearned runs when Hampden's infield comes unglued once more. Owen King, Bangor West's first baseman, comes to bat with two on and one out. The two Kings, Kyle on the Hampden team and Owen on the Bangor West team, are not related. You

don't need to be told; a single glance is enough. Kyle King is about five foot three. At six foot two, Owen King towers over him. Size differences are so extreme in Little League that it's easy to feel disoriented, the victim of hallucination.

Bangor's King raps a ground ball to short. It's a tailor-made double play, but the Hampden shortstop does not field it cleanly, and King, shucking his two hundred or so pounds down to first at top speed, beats the throw. Mike Pelkey and Mike Arnold scamper home.

Then, in the top of the fifth, Matt Kinney, who has been cruising, hits Chris Witcomb, number eight in Hampden's order. Brett Johnson, the number nine hitter, scorches one at Casey Kinney, Bangor West's second baseman. Again, it's a tailor-made double-play ball, but Casey gives up on it. His hands, which have been automatically dipping down, freeze about four inches off the ground, and Casey turns his face away to protect it from a possible bad hop. This is the most common of all Little League fielding errors, and the most easily understood; it is an act of naked self-preservation. The stricken look that Casey throws toward Dave and Neil as the ball squirts through into center field completes this part of the ballet.

"It's O.K., Casey! Next time!" Dave bawls in his gravelly, self-assured Yankee voice.

"New batter!" Neil shouts, ignoring Casey's look completely. "New batter! Know your play! We're still ahead! Get an out! Just concentrate on getting an out!"

Casey begins to relax, begins to get back into the game, and then, beyond the outfield fences, the Hampden Horns begin to blow. Some of them belong to late-model cars—Toyotas and Hondas and snappy little Dodge Colts with U.S. OUT OF CENTRAL AMERICA and SPLIT WOOD NOT ATOMS stickers on the bumpers. But most of the Hampden Horns reside within older cars and pick-up trucks. Many of the pick-ups have rusty doors, FM converters wired up beneath the dashboards, and Leer camper caps built over the truck beds. Who is inside these vehicles, blowing the horns? No one seems to know—not for sure. They are not parents or relatives of the Hampden players; the parents and relatives (plus a generous complement of ice-cream-smearred little brothers and sisters) are filling the bleachers and lining the fence on the third-base side of

the diamond, where the Hampden dugout is. They may be local guys just off work—guys who have stopped to watch some of the game before having a few brewskis at the VFW hall next door—or they may be the ghosts of Hampden Little Leaguers Past, hungry for that long-denied State Championship flag. It seems at least possible; there is something both eerie and inevitable about the Hampden Horns. They toot in harmony—high horns, low horns, a few foghorns powered by dying batteries. Several Bangor West players look uneasily back toward the sound.

Behind the backstop, a local TV crew is preparing to videotape a story for the sports final on the eleven o'clock news. This causes a stir among some of the spectators, but only a few of the players on the Hampden bench seem to notice it. Matt Kinney certainly doesn't. He is totally intent on the next Hampden batter, Matt Knaide, who taps one turf shoe with his aluminum Worth bat and then steps into the batter's box.

The Hampden Horns fall silent. Matt Kinney goes into his windup. Casey Kinney drops back into position just east of second, glove down. His face says it has no plans to turn away if the ball is hit to him again. The Hampden runners stand expectantly on first and second. (There is no leading away from the bag in Little League.) The spectators along the opposing arms of the diamond watch anxiously. Their conversations die out. Baseball at its best (and this is a very good game indeed, one you would pay money to see) is a game of restful pauses punctuated by short, sharp inhalations. The fans can now sense one of those inhalations coming. Matt Kinney winds and fires.

Knaide lines the first pitch over second for a base hit, and now the score is 2–1. Kyle King, Hampden's pitcher, steps to the plate and sends a low, screeching line drive straight back to the mound. It hits Matt Kinney on the right shin. He makes an instinctive effort to field the ball, which has already squiggled off toward the hole between third and short, before he realizes he is really hurt and folds up. Now the bases are loaded, but for the moment no one cares; the instant the umpire raises his hands, signalling time out, all the Bangor West players converge on Matt Kinney. Beyond center field, the Hampden Horns are blowing triumphantly.

Kinney is white-faced, clearly in pain. An ice pack is brought from the first-aid kit kept in the snack bar, and after a few minutes he is able to rise and limp

off the field with his arms around Dave and Neil. The spectators applaud loudly and sympathetically.

Owen King, the erstwhile first baseman, becomes Bangor West's new pitcher, and the first batter he must face is Mike Tardif. The Hampden Horns send up a brief, anticipatory blat as Tardif steps in. King's third pitch goes wild to the backstop. Brett Johnson heads home; King breaks toward the plate from the mound, as he has been taught to do. In the Bangor West dugout, Neil Waterman, his arm still around Matt Kinney's shoulders, chants, "*Cover-cover-COVER!*"

Joe Wilcox, Bangor West's starting catcher, is a foot shorter than King, but very quick. At the beginning of this All-Star season, he did not want to catch, and he still doesn't like it, but he has learned to live with it and to get tough in a position where very few small players survive for long; even in Little League, most catchers resemble human Toby jugs. Earlier in this game he made an amazing one-handed stab of a foul ball. Now he lunges toward the backstop, flinging his mask aside with his bare hand at the same instant he catches the rebounding wild pitch. He turns toward the plate and tosses to King as the Hampden Horns chorus a wild—and premature, as it turns out—bray of triumph.

Johnson has slowed down. On his face is an expression strikingly similar to that worn by Casey Kinney when Casey allowed Johnson's hard-hit grounder to shoot through the hole. It is a look of extreme anxiety and trepidation, the face of a boy who suddenly wishes he were someplace else. *Anyplace* else. The new pitcher is blocking the plate.

Johnson starts a halfhearted slide. King takes the toss from Wilcox, pivots with surprising, winsome grace, and tags the hapless Johnson out easily. He walks back toward the mound, wiping sweat from his forehead, and prepares to face Tardif once more. Behind him, the Hampden Horns have fallen silent again.

Tardif loops one toward third. Kevin Rochefort, Bangor's third baseman, takes a single step backward in response. It's an easy play, but there is an awful look of dismay on his face, and it is only then, as Rochefort starts to freeze up on what is an easy pop fly, that one can see how badly the whole team has been shaken by Matt's injury. The ball goes into Rochefort's glove, and then pops

out when Rochefort—dubbed Roach Clip first by Freddy Moore and then by the whole squad—fails to squeeze it. Knaide, who advanced to third while King and Wilcox were dealing with Johnson, has already broken for the plate. Rochefort could have doubled Knaide up easily if he had caught the ball, but here, as in the majors, baseball is a game of ifs and inches. Rochefort doesn't catch the ball. He throws wild to first instead. Mike Arnold has taken over there, and he is one of the best fielders on the team, but no one issued him stilts. Tardif, meanwhile, steams into second. The pitchers' duel has become a typical Little League game, and now the Hampden Horns are a cacophony of joy. The home team has their thumping shoes on, and the final score is Hampden 9, Bangor West 2. Still, there are two good things to go home on: Matt Kinney is not seriously hurt, and when Casey Kinney got another tough chance in the late innings he refused to choke, and made the play.

After the final out is recorded, the Bangor West players trudge into their dugout and sit on the bench. This is their first loss, and most of them are not coping with it very gracefully. Some toss their gloves disgustedly between their dirty sneakers. Some are crying, others look close to tears, and no one is talking. Even Freddy, Bangor's quipmaster general, has nothing to say on this muggy Thursday evening in Hampden. Beyond the center-field fence, a few of the Hampden Horns are still tooting happily away.

Neil Waterman is the first person to speak. He tells the boys to get their heads up and look at him. Three of them already are: Owen King, Ryan Iarrobino, and Matt Kinney. Now about half the squad manages to do as he's asked. Several others, however—including Josh Stevens, who made the final out—continue to seem vastly interested in their footgear.

"Get your *heads* up," Waterman says again. He speaks louder this time, but not unkindly, and now they all manage to look at him. "You played a pretty good game," he says softly. "You got a little rattled, and they ended up on top. It happens. It doesn't mean they're better, though—that's something we're going to find out on Saturday. Tonight all you lost was a baseball game. The sun will still come up tomorrow." They begin to stir around on the bench a little; this old homily has apparently not lost its power to comfort. "You gave what you had tonight, and that's all we want. I'm proud of you, and you can

be proud of yourselves. Nothing happened that you have to hang your heads about.”

He stands aside for Dave Mansfield, who surveys his team. When Dave speaks, his usually loud voice is even quieter than Waterman’s. “We knew when we came down here that they had to beat us, didn’t we?” he asks. He speaks reflectively, almost as if he were talking to himself. “If they didn’t, they’d be out. They’ll be coming to our field on Saturday. That’s when *we* have to beat *them*. Do you want to?”

They are all looking up now.

“I want you to remember what Neil told you,” Dave says in that reflective voice, so unlike his practice-field bellow. “You are a team. That means you love each other. You love each other—win or lose—because you are a team.”

The first time anyone suggested to these boys that they must come to love each other while they were on the field, they laughed uneasily at the idea. Now they don’t laugh. After enduring the Hampden Horns together, they seem to understand, at least a little.

Dave surveys them again, then nods. “O.K. Pick up the gear.”

They pick up bats, helmets, catching equipment, and stuff everything into canvas duffel bags. By the time they’ve got it over to Dave’s old green pick-up truck, some of them are laughing again.

Dave laughs with them, but he doesn’t do any laughing on the ride home. Tonight the ride seems long. “I don’t know if we can beat them on Saturday,” he says on the way back. He is speaking in that same reflective tone of voice. “I want to, and *they* want to, but I just don’t know. Hampden’s got mo on their side, now.”

Mo, of course, is momentum—that mythic force which shapes not only single games but whole seasons. Baseball players are quirky and superstitious at every level of play, and for some reason the Bangor West players have adopted a small plastic sandal—a castoff of some young fan’s baby doll—as their mascot. They have named this absurd talisman Mo. They stick it in the chain-link fence of the dugout at every game, and batters often touch it furtively before stepping into the on-deck circle. Nick Trzaskos, who ordinarily plays left field for Bangor West, has been entrusted with Mo between games. Tonight, for the first time, he forgot to bring the talisman.

“Nick better remember Mo on Saturday,” Dave says grimly. “But even if he remembers . . .” He shakes his head. “I just don’t know.”

• • •

There is no admission charge to Little League games; the charter expressly forbids it. Instead, a player takes around a hat during the fourth inning, soliciting donations for equipment and field maintenance. On Saturday, when Bangor West and Hampden square off in the year’s final Penobscot County Little League game, at Bangor, one can judge the growth of local interest in the team’s fortunes by a simple act of comparison. The collection taken up at the Bangor-Millinocket contest was \$15.45; when the hat finally comes back in the fifth inning of the Saturday-afternoon game against Hampden, it’s overflowing with change and crumpled dollar bills. The total take is \$94.25. The bleachers are full; the fences are lined; the parking lot is full. Little League has one thing in common with almost all American sports and business endeavors: nothing succeeds like success.

Things start off well for Bangor—they lead 7–3 at the end of three—and then everything falls apart. In the fourth inning, Hampden scores six runs, most of them honest. Bangor West doesn’t fold, as it did after Matt Kinney was hit in the game at Hampden—the players do not drop their heads, to use Neil Waterman’s phrase. But when they come to bat in the bottom of the sixth inning they are down by a score of 14–12. Elimination looks very close and very real. Mo is in its accustomed place, but Bangor West is still three outs away from the end of its season.

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One kid who did not need to be told to get his head up following Bangor West’s 9–2 loss was Ryan Iarrobino. He went two for three in that game, played well, and trotted off the field *knowing* he had played well. He is a tall kid, quiet, with broad shoulders and a shock of dark-brown hair. He is one of two natural athletes on the Bangor West team. Matt Kinney is the other. Although the two boys are physical opposites—Kinney slim and still fairly short, Iarrobino tall and well muscled—they share a quality that is uncommon

in boys their age: they trust their bodies. Most of the others on the Bangor West squad, no matter how talented, seem to regard feet, arms, and hands as spies and potential traitors.

Iarrobino is one of those boys who seem somehow more *there* when they are dressed for some sort of competition. He is one of the few lads on either team who can don batting helmets and not look like nerds wearing their mothers' stewpots. When Matt Kinney stands on the mound and throws a baseball, he seems perfect in his place and time. And when Ryan Iarrobino steps into the right-hand batter's box and points the head of his bat out toward the pitcher for an instant before raising it to the cocked position, at his right shoulder, he also seems to be exactly where he belongs. He looks dug in even before he settles himself for the first pitch: you could draw a perfectly straight line from the ball of his shoulder to the ball of his hip and on down to the ball of his ankle. Matt Kinney was built to throw baseballs; Ryan Iarrobino was built to hit them.

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Last call for Bangor West. Jeff Carson, whose fourth-inning home run is really the difference in this game, and who earlier replaced Mike Wentworth on the mound for Hampden, is now replaced by Mike Tardif. He faces Owen King first. King goes three and two (swinging wildly for the fences at one pitch in the dirt), then lays off a pitch just inside to work a walk. Roger Fisher follows him to the plate, pinch-hitting for the ever-gregarious Fred Moore. Roger is a small boy with Indian-dark eyes and hair. He looks like an easy out, but looks can be deceptive; Roger has good power. Today, however, he is overmatched. He strikes out.

In the field, the Hampden players shift around and look at each other. They are close, and they know it. The parking lot is too far away here for the Hampden Horns to be a factor; their fans settle for simply screaming encouragement. Two women wearing purple Hampden caps are standing behind the dugout, hugging each other joyfully. Several other fans look like track runners waiting for the starter's gun; it is clear they mean to rush onto

the field the moment their boys succeed in putting Bangor West away for good.

Joe Wilcox, who didn't want to be a catcher and ended up doing the job anyway, rams a one-out single up the middle and into left-center field. King stops at second. Up steps Arthur Dorr, the Bangor right fielder, who wears the world's oldest pair of high-top sneakers and has not had a hit all day. This time he rifles one, but right at the Hampden shortstop, who barely has to move. The shortstop whips the ball to second, hoping to catch King off the bag, but he's out of luck. Nevertheless, there are two out.

The Hampden fans scream further encouragement. The women behind the dugout are jumping up and down. Now there are a few Hampden Horns tootling away someplace, but they are a little early, and all one has to do to know it is to look at Mike Tardif's face as he wipes off his forehead and pounds the baseball into his glove.

Ryan Iarrobino steps into the right-hand batter's box. He has a fast, almost naturally perfect swing; even Ron St. Pierre will not fault him on it much.

Ryan swings through Tardif's first pitch, his hardest of the day—it makes a rifle-shot sound as it hits Kyle King's glove. Tardif then wastes one outside. King returns the ball; Tardif meditates briefly and then throws a low fastball. Ryan looks at it, and the umpire calls strike two. It has caught the outside corner—maybe. The ump says it did, anyway, and that's the end of it.

Now the fans on both sides have fallen quiet, and so have the coaches. They're all out of it. It's only Tardif and Iarrobino now, balanced on the last strike of the last out of the last game one of these teams will play. Forty-six feet between these two faces. Only, Iarrobino is not watching Tardif's *face*. He is watching Tardif's *glove*, and somewhere I can hear Ron St. Pierre telling Fred, *You're waiting to see how I'll come—sidearm, three-quarters, or over the top.*

Iarrobino is waiting to see how Tardif will come. As Tardif moves to the set position, you can faintly hear the *pock-pock, pock-pock* of tennis balls on a nearby court, but here there is only silence and the crisp black shadows of the players, lying on the dirt like silhouettes cut from black construction paper, and Iarrobino is waiting to see how Tardif will come.

He comes over the top. And suddenly Iarrobino is in motion, both knees and the left shoulder dipping slightly, the aluminum bat a blur in the sunlight.

That aluminum-on-cowhide sound—*chink*, like someone hitting a tin cup with a spoon—is different this time. A *lot* different. Not *chink* but *crunch* as Ryan connects, and then the ball is in the sky, tracking out to left field—a long shot that is clearly gone, high, wide, and handsome into the summer afternoon. The ball will later be recovered from beneath a car about 275 feet away from home plate.

The expression on twelve-year-old Mike Tardif's face is stunned, thunderstruck disbelief. He takes one quick look into his glove, as if hoping to find the ball still there and discover that Iarrobino's dramatic two-strike, two-out shot was only a hideous momentary dream. The two women behind the backstop look at each other in total amazement. At first, no one makes a sound. In that moment before everyone begins to scream and the Bangor West players rush out of their dugout to await Ryan at home plate and mob him when he arrives, only two people are entirely sure that it did really happen. One is Ryan himself. As he rounds first, he raises both hands to his shoulders in a brief but emphatic gesture of triumph. And, as Owen King crosses the plate with the first of the three runs that will end Hampden's All-Star season, Mike Tardif realizes. Standing on the pitcher's rubber for the last time as a Little Leaguer, he bursts into tears.

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"You gotta remember, they're only twelve," each of the three coaches says at one time or another, and each time one of them says it, the listener feels that he—Mansfield, Waterman, or St. Pierre—is really reminding himself.

"When you are on the field, we'll love you and you will love each other," Waterman tells the boys again and again, and in the wake of Bangor's eleventh-hour, 15–14 win over Hampden, when they all did love each other, the boys no longer laugh at this. He continues, "From now on, I'm going to be hard on you—very hard. When you're playing, you'll get nothing but unconditional love from me. But when we're practicing on our home field some of you are going to find out how loud I can yell. If you're goofing off, you're going to sit down. If I tell you to do something and you don't do it, you're going to sit

down. Recess is over, guys—everybody out of the pool. This is where the hard work starts.”

A few nights later, Waterman hits a shot to right during fielding practice. It almost amputates Arthur Dorr’s nose on the way by. Arthur has been busy making sure his fly is zipped. Or inspecting the laces of his Keds. Or some damn thing.

“*Arthur!*” Neil Waterman bellows, and Arthur flinches more at the sound of that voice than he did at the close passage of the baseball. “*Get in here! On the bench! Now!*”

“But—” Arthur begins.

“In here!” Neil yells back. “You’re on the pine!”

Arthur trots sullenly in, head down, and J. J. Fiddler takes his place. A few nights later, Nick Trzaskos loses his chance to hit away when he fails to bunt two pitches in five tries or so. He sits on the bench by himself, cheeks flaming.

Machias, the Aroostook County/Washington County winner, is next on the docket—a two-out-of-three series, and the winner will be District 3 champion. The first game is to be played at the Bangor field, behind the Coke plant, the second at Bob Beal Field in Machias. The last game, if needed, will be played on neutral ground between the two towns.

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As Neil Waterman has promised, the coaching staff is all encouragement once the national anthem has been played and the first game starts.

“That’s all right, no damage!” Dave Mansfield cries as Arthur Dorr misjudges a long shot to right and the ball lands behind him. “Get an out, now! Belly play! Let’s just get an out!” No one seems to know exactly what “belly play” is, but since it seems to involve winning ball games, the boys are all for it.

No third game against Machias is necessary. Bangor West gets a strong pitching performance from Matt Kinney in the first one and wins 17–5. Winning the second game is a little tougher only because the weather does not cooperate: a drenching summer downpour washes out the first try, and it is necessary for Bangor West to make the 168-mile round trip to Machias twice

in order to clinch the division. They finally get the game in, on the twenty-ninth of July. Mike Pelkey's family has spirited Bangor West's number two pitcher off to Disney World in Orlando, making Mike the third player to fade from the team, but Owen King steps quietly in and pitches a five-hitter, striking out eight before tiring and giving way to Mike Arnold in the sixth inning. Bangor West wins, 12–2, and becomes District 3 Little League champ.

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At moments like these, the pros retire to their air-conditioned locker rooms and pour champagne over each other's heads. The Bangor West team goes out to Helen's, the best (maybe the only) restaurant in Machias, to celebrate with hot dogs, hamburgers, gallons of Pepsi-Cola, and mountains of French fries. Looking at them as they laugh at each other, razz each other, and blow napkin pellets through their straws at each other, it is impossible not to be aware of how soon they will discover gaudier modes of celebration.

For now, however, this is perfectly O.K.—great, in fact. They are not overwhelmed by what they have done, but they seem tremendously pleased, tremendously content, and entirely *here*. If they have been touched with magic this summer, they do not know it, and no one has as yet been unkind enough to tell them that it may be so. For now they are allowed the deep-fried simplicities of Helen's, and those simplicities are quite enough. They have won their division; the State Championship Tournament, where bigger and better teams from the more heavily populated regions downstate will probably blow them out, is still a week away.

Ryan Iarrobino has changed back into his tank top. Arthur Dorr has a rakish smear of ketchup on one cheek. And Owen King, who struck terror into the hearts of the Machias batters by coming at them with a powerful sidearm fastball on 0–2 counts, is burbling happily into his glass of Pepsi. Nick Trzaskos, who can look unhappier than any boy on earth when things don't break his way, looks supremely happy tonight. And why not? Tonight they're twelve and they're winners.

Not that they don't remind you themselves from time to time. Halfway back from Machias after the first trip, the rainout, J. J. Fiddler begins to

wriggle around uneasily in the back seat of the car he is riding in. “I gotta go,” he says. He clutches at himself and adds ominously, “Man, I gotta go bad. I mean big time.”

“J.J.’s gonna do it!” Joe Wilcox cries gleefully. “Watch this! J.J.’s gonna flood the car!”

“Shut up, Joey,” J.J. says, and then begins to wriggle around again.

He has waited until the worst possible moment to make his announcement. The eighty-four-mile trip between Machias and Bangor is, for the most part, an exercise in emptiness. There isn’t even a decent stand of trees into which J.J. can disappear for a few moments along this stretch of road—only mile after mile of open hay fields, with Route 1A cutting a winding course through them.

Just as J.J.’s bladder is going to DEFCON-1, a providential gas station appears. The assistant coach swings in and tops up his tank while J.J. splits for the men’s room. “Boy!” he says, brushing his hair out of his eyes as he jogs back to the car. “That was close!”

“Got some on your pants, J.J.,” Joe Wilcox says casually, and everyone goes into spasms of wild laughter as J.J. checks.

On the trip back to Machias the next day, Matt Kinney reveals one of the chief attractions *People* magazine holds for boys of Little League age. “I’m sure there’s one in here someplace,” he says, leafing slowly through an issue he has found on the back seat. “There almost always is.”

“What? What are you looking for?” third baseman Kevin Rochefort asks, peering over Matt’s shoulder as Matt leafs past the week’s celebs, barely giving them a look.

“The breast-examination ad,” Matt explains. “You can’t see everything, but you can see quite a lot. Here it is!” He holds the magazine up triumphantly.

Four other heads, each wearing a red Bangor West baseball cap, immediately cluster around the magazine. For a few minutes, at least, baseball is the furthest thing from these boys’ minds.

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The 1989 Maine State Little League Championship Tournament begins on August 3, just over four weeks after All-Star play began for the teams involved. The state is divided into five districts, and all five send teams to Old Town, where this year's tourney is to be held. The participants are Yarmouth, Belfast, Lewiston, York, and Bangor West. All the teams but Belfast are bigger than the Bangor West All-Stars, and Belfast is supposed to have a secret weapon. Their number one pitcher is this year's tourney wunderkind.

The naming of the tourney wunderkind is a yearly ceremony, a small tumor that seems to defy all attempts to remove it. This boy, who is anointed Kid Baseball whether he wants the honor or not, finds himself in a heretofore unsuspected spotlight, the object of discussion, speculation, and, inevitably, wagering. He also finds himself in the unenviable position of having to live up to all sorts of pretournament hype. A Little League tournament is a pressure situation for any kid; when you get to Tourney Town and discover you have somehow become an instant legend as well, it's usually too much.

This year's object of myth and discussion is Belfast's southpaw Stanley Sturgis. In his two outings for Belfast he has chalked up thirty strikeouts—fourteen in his first game, sixteen in his second. Thirty K's in two games is an impressive statistic in any league, but to fully understand Sturgis's accomplishment one has to remember that Little League games consist of only six innings. That means that 83 per cent of the outs Belfast recorded with Sturgis on the hill came on strikeouts.

Then there is York. All the teams that come to the Knights of Columbus field in Old Town to compete in the tourney have excellent records, but York, which is undefeated, is the clear favorite to win a ticket to the Eastern Regionals. None of their players are giants, but several of them are over fifteen, and their best pitcher, Phil Tarbox, has a fastball that may top seventy miles an hour on some pitches—extravagant by Little League standards. Like Yarmouth and Belfast, the York players come dressed in special All-Star uniforms and matching turf shoes, which make them look like pros.

Only Bangor West and Lewiston come wearing mufti—which is to say, shirts of many colors bearing the names of their regular-season team sponsors. Owen King wears Elks orange, Ryan Iarrobino and Nick Trzaskos wear Bangor Hydro red, Roger Fisher and Fred Moore wear Lions green, and so on. The

Lewiston team is dressed in similar fashion, but they have at least been provided with matching shoes and stirrups. Compared with Lewiston, the Bangor team, dressed in a variety of baggy gray sweatpants and nondescript street sneakers, looks eccentric. Next to the other teams, however, they look like out-and-out ragamuffins. No one, with the possible exception of the Bangor West coaches and the players themselves, takes them very seriously. In its first article on the tourney the local newspaper gives more coverage to Sturgis, of Belfast, than it does to the entire Bangor West team.

Dave, Neil, and Saint, the odd but surprisingly effective brain trust that has brought the team this far, watch Belfast take infield and batting practice without saying much. The Belfast kids are resplendent in their new purple-and-white uniforms—uniforms that have not worn so much as a speck of infield dirt until today. At last, Dave says, “Well, we finally got here again. We did that much. Nobody can take that away from us.”

Bangor West comes from the district in which the tournament is being held this year, and the team will not have to play until two of the five teams have been eliminated. This is called a first-round bye, and right now it’s the biggest, perhaps the only, advantage this team has. In their own district, they looked like champions (except for that one awful game against Hampden), but Dave, Neil, and Saint have been around long enough to know that they are now looking at an entirely different level of baseball. Their silence as they stand by the fence watching Belfast work out acknowledges this eloquently.

In contrast, York has already ordered District 4 pins. Trading pins is a tradition at the regional tournaments, and the fact that York has already laid in a supply tells an interesting tale. The pins say York means to play with the best of the East Coast, in Bristol. The pins say they don’t think Yarmouth can stop them; or Belfast, with its wunderkind southpaw; or Lewiston, which clawed its way to the Division 2 championship through the losers’ bracket, after dropping their first game 15–12; or, least of all, fourteen badly dressed pipsqueaks from the west side of Bangor.

“At least we’ll get a chance to play,” Dave says, “and we’ll try to make them remember we were here.”

But first Belfast and Lewiston have *their* chance to play, and after the Boston Pops has steamed through a recorded version of the national anthem,

and a local writer of some repute has tossed out the obligatory first pitch (it sails all the way to the backstop), they have at it.

Area sports reporters have spilled a lot of ink on the subject of Stanley Sturgis, but reporters are not allowed on the field once the game starts (a situation caused by a mistake in the rules as they were originally laid out, some of them seem to feel). Once the umpire has commanded the teams to play ball, Sturgis finds himself on his own. The writers, the pundits, and the entire Belfast hot-stove league are now all on the other side of the fence.

Baseball is a team sport, but there is only one player with a ball at the center of each diamond and only one player with a bat at the diamond's lowest point. The man with the bat keeps changing, but the pitcher remains—unless he can no longer cut it, that is. Today is Stan Sturgis's day to discover the hard truth of tourney play: sooner or later, every wunderkind meets his match.

Sturgis struck out thirty men in his last pair of games, but that was District 2. The team Belfast is playing today, a tough bunch of scrappers out of Lewiston's Elliot Avenue League, is a different plate of beans altogether. They are not as big as the boys from York and don't field as smoothly as the boys from Yarmouth, but they are pesky and persistent. The first batter, Carlton Gagnon, personifies the gnawing, clawing spirit of the team. He singles up the middle, steals second, is sacrificed to third, then bolts home on a steal play sent in from the bench. In the third inning, with the score 1–0, Gagnon reaches base again, this time on a fielder's choice. Randy Gervais, who follows this pest in the lineup, strikes out, but before he does, Gagnon has gone to second on a passed ball and stolen third. He scores on a two-out base hit by Bill Paradis, the third baseman.

Belfast comes up with a run in the fourth, briefly making a game of it, but then Lewiston puts them, and Stanley Sturgis, away for good, scoring two in the fifth and four more in the sixth. The final tally is 9–1. Sturgis strikes out eleven, but he also gives up seven hits, while Carlton Gagnon, Lewiston's pitcher, strikes out eight and allows only three hits. When Sturgis leaves the field at the end of the game, he looks both depressed and relieved. For him the hype and hoopla are over. He can quit being a newspaper sidebar and go back to being a kid again. His face suggests that he sees certain advantages in that.

Later, in a battle of the giants, tourney favorite York knocks off Yarmouth. Then everybody goes home (or, in the case of the visiting players, back to their motels or to the homes of their host families). Tomorrow, Friday, it will be Bangor West's turn to play while York waits to meet the winner in the closer.

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Friday comes in hot, foggy, and cloudy. Rain threatens from first light, and an hour or so before Bangor West and Lewiston are scheduled to square off the rain comes—a deluge of rain. When this sort of weather struck in Machias, the game was quickly cancelled. Not here. This is a different field—one with a grass infield instead of dirt—but that isn't the only factor. The major one is TV. This year, for the first time, two stations have pooled their resources and will telecast the tournament final statewide on Saturday afternoon. If the semifinal between Bangor and Lewiston is postponed, it means trouble with the schedule, and even in Maine, even in this most amateur of amateur sports, the one thing you don't jiggle is the media's schedule.

So the Bangor West and Lewiston teams are not dismissed when they come to the field. Instead, they sit in cars or cluster in little groups beneath the candy-striped canvas of the central concession booth. Then they wait for a break in the weather. And wait. And wait. Restlessness sets in, of course. Many of these kids will play in bigger games before their athletic careers end, but this is the biggest to date for all of them; they are pumped to the max.

Someone eventually has a brainstorm. After a few quick phone calls, two Old Town schoolbuses, gleaming bright yellow in the drenching rain, pull up to the nearby Elks Club, and the players are whisked off on a tour of the Old Town Canoe Company factory and the local James River paper mill. (The James River Corporation is the prime buyer of ad time on the upcoming championship telecast.) None of the players look particularly happy as they climb aboard the buses; they don't look much happier when they arrive back. Each player is carrying a small canoe paddle, about the right size for a well-built elf. Freebies from the canoe factory. None of the boys seem to know just what they should do with the paddles, but when I check later they're all gone,

just like the Bangor pennants after that first game against Millinocket. Free souvenirs—good deal.

And there will be a game after all, it seems. At some point—perhaps while the Little Leaguers were watching the fellows at the James River mill turn trees into toilet paper—the rain stopped. The field has drained well, the pitcher’s mound and the batters’ boxes have been dusted with Quick-Dry, and now, at just past three in the afternoon, a watery sun takes its first peek through the clouds.

The Bangor West team has come back from the field trip flat and listless. No one has thrown a ball or swung a bat or run a single base so far today, but everybody already seems tired. The players walk toward the practice field without looking at each other; gloves dangle at the ends of arms. They walk like losers, and they talk like losers.

Instead of lecturing them, Dave lines them up and begins playing his version of pepper with them. Soon the Bangor players are razzing each other, catcalling, trying for circus catches, groaning and bitching when Dave calls an error and sends someone to the end of the line. Then, just before Dave is ready to call the workout off and take them over to Neil and Saint for batting practice, Roger Fisher steps out of the line and bends over with his glove against his belly. Dave goes to him at once, his smile becoming an expression of concern. He wants to know if Roger is all right.

“Yes,” Roger says. “I just wanted to get this.” He bends down a little farther, dark eyes intent, plucks something out of the grass, and hands it to Dave. It is a four-leaf clover.

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In Little League tournament games, the home team is always decided by a coin toss. Dave has been extremely lucky at winning these, but today he loses, and Bangor West is designated the visiting team. Sometimes even bad luck turns out to be good, though, and this is one of those days. Nick Trzaskos is the reason.

The skills of all the players have improved during their six-week season, but in some cases attitudes have improved as well. Nick started deep on the bench,

despite his proven skills as a defensive player and his potential as a hitter; his fear of failure made him unready to play. Little by little, he has begun to trust himself, and now Dave is ready to try starting him. “Nick finally figured out that the other guys weren’t going to give him a hard time if he dropped a ball or struck out,” St. Pierre says. “For a kid like Nick, that’s a big change.”

Today, Nick cranks the third pitch of the game to deep center field. It is a hard, rising line drive, over the fence and gone before the center fielder has a chance to turn and look, let alone cruise back and grab it. As Nick Trzaskos rounds second and slows down, breaking into the home-run trot all these boys know so well from TV, the fans behind the backstop are treated to a rare sight: Nick is grinning. As he crosses home plate and his surprised, happy teammates mob him, he actually begins to laugh. As he enters the dugout, Neil claps him on the back, and Dave Mansfield gives him a brief, hard hug.

Nick has also finished what Dave started with his game of pepper: the team is fully awake now, and ready to do some business. Matt Kinney gives up a lead-off single to Carl Gagnon, the pest who began the process of dismantling Stanley Sturgis. Gagnon goes to second on Ryan Stretton’s sacrifice, advances to third on a wild pitch, and scores on another wild pitch. It is an almost uncanny repetition of his first at bat against Belfast. Kinney’s control is not great this afternoon, but Gagnon’s is the only run the team from Lewiston can manage in the early going. This is unfortunate for them, because Bangor comes up hitting in the top of the second.

Owen King leads off with a deep single; Arthur Dorr follows with another; Mike Arnold reaches when Lewiston’s catcher, Jason Auger, picks up Arnold’s bunt and throws wild to first base. King scores on the error, putting Bangor West back on top, 2–1. Joe Wilcox, Bangor’s catcher, scratches out an infield hit to load the bases. Nick Trzaskos strikes out his second time up, and that brings Ryan Iarrobino to the plate. He struck out his first time up, but not now. He turns Matt Noyes’s first pitch into a grand-slam home run, and after an inning and a half the score is Bangor West 6, Lewiston 1.

Up to the sixth, it is an authentic four-leaf-clover day for Bangor West. When Lewiston comes to bat for what the Bangor fans hope will be the last time, they are down by a score of 9–1. The pest, Carlton Gagnon, leads off and reaches on an error. The next batter, Ryan Stretton, also reaches on an error.

The Bangor fans, who have been cheering wildly, begin to look a little uneasy. It's hard to choke when you're eight runs ahead, but not impossible. These northern New Englanders are Red Sox fans. They have seen it happen many times.

Bill Paradis makes the jitters worse by singling sharply up the middle. Both Gagnon and Stretton come home. The score is now 9–3, runner on first, nobody out. The Bangor fans shuffle and look at each other uneasily. *It can't really get away from us this late in the game, can it?* their looks ask. Their answer is, Of course, you bet it can. In Little League, anything can and often does happen.

But not this time. Lewiston scores one more time, and that's it. Noyes, who fanned three times against Sturgis, fans for the third time today, and there is finally one out. Auger, Lewiston's catcher, hits the first pitch hard to the shortstop, Roger Fisher. Roger booted Carl Gagnon's ball earlier in the inning to open the door, but he picks this one up easily and shovels it to Mike Arnold, who feeds it on to Owen King at first. Auger is slow, and King's reach is long. The result is a game-ending 6–4–3 double play. You don't often see around-the-horn d.p.s in the scaled-down world of Little League, where the base paths are only sixty feet long, but Roger found a four-leaf clover today. If you have to chalk it up to anything, it might as well be that. Whatever you chalk it up to, the boys from Bangor have won another one, 9–4.

Tomorrow, there are the giants from York.

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It is August 5, 1989, and in the state of Maine only twenty-nine boys are still playing Little League ball—fourteen on the Bangor West squad and fifteen on York's team. The day is an almost exact replica of the day before: hot, foggy, and threatening. The game is scheduled to begin promptly at 12:30, but the skies open once again, and by 11 it looks as though the game will be—must be—cancelled. The rain comes pouring down in buckets.

Dave, Neil, and Saint are taking no chances, however. None of them liked the flat mood the kids were in when they returned from their impromptu tour of the day before, and they have no intention of allowing a repeat. No one

wants to end up counting on a game of pepper or a four-leaf clover today. If there *is* a game—and TV is a powerful motivator, no matter how murky the weather—it will be for all the marbles. The winners go on to Bristol; the losers go home.

So a makeshift cavalcade of vans and station wagons driven by coaches and parents is assembled at the field behind the Coke plant, and the team is ferried the ten miles up to the University of Maine field house, a barnlike indoor facility where Neil and Saint rally them through their paces until the boys are soaked with sweat. Dave has arranged for the York team to use the field house, too, and as the Bangor team exits into the overcast the York team, dressed in their natty blue uniforms, troops in.

The rain is down to isolated dribbles by three o'clock, and the ground crew works frantically to return the field to playable shape. Five makeshift TV platforms have been constructed on steel frames around the field. In a nearby parking lot is a huge truck with MAINE BROADCASTING SYSTEM LIVE REMOTE painted on the side. Thick bundles of cable, held together with cinches of electrician's tape, lead from the cameras and the temporary announcer's booth back to this truck. One door stands open, and many TV monitors glimmer within.

York hasn't arrived from the field house yet. The Bangor West squad begins throwing outside the left-field fence, mostly to have something to do and keep the jitters at bay; they certainly don't need to warm up after the humid hour they just spent at the University. The camerapersons stand on their towers and watch the ground crew try to get rid of the water.

The outfield is in fair shape, and the skin parts of the infield have been raked and coated with Quick-Dry. The real problem is the area between home plate and the pitcher's mound. This section of the diamond was freshly resodded before the tournament began, and there has been no time for the roots to take hold and provide some natural drainage. The result is a swampy mess in front of home plate—a mess that slopes off toward the third-base line.

Someone has an idea—an inspiration, as it turns out—that involves actually removing a large section of the wounded infield. While this is being done, a truck arrives from Old Town High School and two industrial-size Rinsenvacs are off-loaded. Five minutes later, the ground crew is literally vacuuming the

subsurface of the infield. It works. By 3:25, the groundkeepers are replacing chunks of sod like pieces in a large green jigsaw puzzle. By 3:35, a local music teacher, accompanying herself on an acoustic guitar, is winging her way through a gorgeous rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” And at 3:37 Bangor West’s Roger Fisher, Dave’s dark-horse pick to start in place of the absent Mike Pelkey, is warming up. Did Roger’s find of the day before have anything to do with Dave’s decision to start him instead of King or Arnold? Dave only puts his finger on the side of his nose and smiles wisely.

At 3:40, the umpire steps in. “Send it down, catcher,” he says briskly. Joey does. Mike Arnold makes the sweep tag on the invisible runner, then sends the baseball on its quick journey around the infield. A TV audience that stretches from New Hampshire to the Maritime Provinces of Canada watches as Roger fusses nervously with the sleeves of his green jersey and the gray warm-up shirt he wears beneath it. Owen King tosses him the ball from first base. Fisher takes it and holds it against his hip.

“Let’s play ball,” the umpire invites—an invitation that umpires have been extending to Little League players for fifty years now—and Dan Bouchard, York’s catcher and leadoff hitter, steps into the box. Roger goes to the set position and prepares to throw the first pitch of the 1989 State Championship game.

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Five days earlier:

Dave and I take the Bangor West pitching staff up to Old Town. Dave wants them all to know how the mound feels when they come up here to play for real. With Mike Pelkey gone, the staff consists of Matt Kinney (his triumph over Lewiston still four days in the future), Owen King, Roger Fisher, and Mike Arnold. We get off to a late start, and as the four boys take turns throwing, Dave and I sit in the visitors’ dugout, watching the boys as the light slowly leaves the summer sky.

On the mound, Matt Kinney is throwing one hard curve after another to J. J. Fiddler. In the home dugout, across the diamond, the three other pitchers, their workouts finished, are sitting on the bench with a few teammates who

have come along for the ride. Although the talk comes to me only in snatches, I can tell it's mostly about school—a subject that comes up with greater and greater frequency during the last month of summer vacation. They talk about teachers past and teachers future, passing on the anecdotes that form an important part of their preadolescent mythology: the teacher who blew her cool during the last month of the school year because her oldest son was in a car accident; the crazy grammar-school coach (they make him sound like a lethal combination of Jason, Freddy, and Leatherface); the science teacher who supposedly once threw a kid against his locker so hard the kid was knocked out; the home-room teacher who will give you lunch money if you forget, or if you just say you forgot. It is junior high apocrypha, powerful stuff, and they tell it with great relish as twilight closes in.

Between the two dugouts, the baseball is a white streak as Matt throws it again and again. His rhythm is a kind of hypnosis: Set, wind, and fire. Set, wind, and fire. Set, wind, and fire. J.J.'s mitt cracks with each reception.

“What are they going to take with them?” I ask Dave. “When this is all over, what are they going to take with them? What difference does it make for them, do you think?”

The look on Dave's face is surprised and considering. Then he turns back to look at Matt and smiles. “They're going to take each other,” he says.

It is not the answer I have been expecting—far from it. There was an article about Little League in the paper today—one of those think pieces that usually run in the ad-littered wasteland between the obituaries and the horoscopes. This one summarized the findings of a sociologist who spent a season monitoring Little Leaguers, and then followed their progress for a short time thereafter. He wanted to find out if the game did what Little League boosters claim it does—that is, pass on such old-fashioned American values as fair play, hard work, and the virtue of team effort. The fellow who did the study reported that it did, sort of. But he also reported that Little League did little to change the *individual* lives of the players. School troublemakers were still school troublemakers when classes started again in September, good scholars were still good scholars; the class clown (read Fred Moore) who took June and July off to play some serious Little League ball was still the class clown after Labor Day. The sociologist found exceptions; exceptional play sometimes bred

exceptional changes. But in the main this fellow found that the boys were about the same coming out as they were going in.

I suppose my confusion at Dave's answer grows out of my knowledge of him—he is an almost fanatic booster of Little League. I'm sure he must have read the article, and I have been expecting him to refute the sociologist's conclusions, using the question as a springboard. Instead, he has delivered one of the hoariest chestnuts of the sports world.

On the mound, Matt continues to throw to J.J., harder than ever now. He has found that mystic place pitchers call "the groove," and even though this is only an informal practice session to familiarize the boys with the field, he is reluctant to quit.

I ask Dave if he can explain a little more fully, but I do so in a gingerly way, half expecting that I am on the verge of hitting a hitherto unsuspected jackpot of clichés: night owls never fly in the daytime; winners never quit and quitters never win; use it, don't lose it. Maybe even, God save us, a little Hummm, baby.

"Look at them," Dave says, still smiling. Something in that smile suggests he may be reading my mind. "Take a good look."

I do. There are perhaps half a dozen of them on the bench, still laughing and telling junior high school war stories. One of them breaks out of the discussion long enough to ask Matt Kinney to throw the curve, and Matt does—one with a particularly nasty break. The boys on the bench all laugh and cheer.

"Look at those two guys," Dave says, pointing. "One of them comes from a good home. The other one, not so good." He tosses some sunflower seeds into his mouth and then indicates another boy. "Or that one. He was born in one of the worst sections of Boston. Do you think he'd know a kid like Matt Kinney or Kevin Rochefort, if it wasn't for Little League? They won't be in the same classes at junior high, wouldn't talk to each other in the halls, wouldn't have the slightest idea the other one was alive."

Matt throws another curve, this one so nasty J.J. can't handle it. It rolls all the way to the backstop, and as J.J. gets up and trots after it the boys on the bench cheer again.

“But this changes all that,” Dave says. “These boys have played together and won their district together. Some come from families that are well-to-do, and there’s a couple from families as poor as used dishwater, but when they put on the uniform and cross the chalk they leave all that on the other side. Your school grades can’t help you between the chalk, or what your parents do, or what they don’t do. Between the chalk, what happens is the kids’ business. They tend it, too, as well as they can. All the rest—” Dave makes a shooing gesture with one hand. “All left behind. And they know it, too. Just look at them if you don’t believe me, because the proof is right there.”

I look across the field and see my own kid and one of the boys Dave has mentioned sitting side by side, heads together, talking something over seriously. They look at each other in amazement, then break out laughing.

“They played together,” Dave repeats. “They practiced together, day after day, and that’s probably even more important than the games. Now they’re going into the State Tournament. They’ve even got a chance to win it. I don’t think they will, but that doesn’t matter. They’re going to be there, and that’s enough. Even if Lewiston knocks them out in the first round, that’s enough. Because it’s something they did together between those chalk lines. They’re going to remember that. They’re going to remember how that felt.”

“Between the chalk,” I say, and all at once I get it—the penny drops. Dave Mansfield *believes* this old chestnut. Not only that, he can *afford* to believe it. Such clichés may be hollow in the big leagues, where some player or other tests positive for drugs every week or two and the free agent is God, but this is not the big leagues. This is where Anita Bryant sings the national anthem over battered PA speakers that have been wired to the chain-link behind the dugouts. This is where, instead of paying admission to watch the game, you put something in the hat when it comes around. If you want to, of course. None of these kids are going to spend the off-season playing fantasy baseball in Florida with overweight businessmen, or signing expensive baseball cards at memorabilia shows, or touring the chicken circuit at two thousand bucks a night. When it’s all free, Dave’s smile suggests, they have to give the clichés back and let you own them again, fair and square. You are once more allowed to believe in Red Barber, John Tunis, and the Kid from Tomkinsville. Dave Mansfield believes what he is saying about how the boys are equal between the

chalk, and he has a right to believe, because he and Neil and Saint have patiently led these kids to a point where *they* believe it. They do believe it; I can see it on their faces as they sit in the dugout on the far side of the diamond. It could be why Dave Mansfield and all the other Dave Mansfields across the country keep on doing this, year after year. It's a free pass. Not back into childhood—it doesn't work that way—but back into the dream.

Dave falls silent for a moment, thinking, bouncing a few sunflower seeds up and down in the palm of his hand.

"It's not about winning or losing," he says finally. "That comes later. It's about how they'll pass each other in the corridor this year, or even down the road in high school, and look at each other, and remember. In a way, they're going to be on the team that won the district in 1989 for a long time." Dave glances across into the shadowy first-base dugout, where Fred Moore is now laughing about something with Mike Arnold. Owen King glances from one to the other, grinning. "It's about knowing who your teammates are. The people you had to depend on, whether you wanted to or not."

He watches the boys as they laugh and joke four days before their tournament is scheduled to begin, then raises his voice and tells Matt to throw four or five more and knock off.

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Not all coaches who win the coin toss—as Dave Mansfield does on August 5, for the sixth time in nine postseason games—elect to be the home team. Some of them (the coach from Brewer, for instance) believe the so-called home-team advantage is a complete fiction, especially in a tournament game, where neither team is actually playing on its home field. The argument for being the visitors in a jackpot game runs like this: At the start of such a game, the kids on both teams are nervous. The way to take advantage of those nerves, the reasoning goes, is to bat first and let the defending team commit enough walks, balks, and errors to put you in the driver's seat. If you bat first and score four runs, these theorists conclude, you own the game before it's barely begun. QED. It's a theory Dave Mansfield has never subscribed to. "I want my lasties," he says, and for him that's the end of it.

Except today is a little different. It is not only a tournament game, it is a *championship* tournament game—a *televised* championship game, in fact. And as Roger Fisher winds and fires his first pitch past everything for ball one, Dave Mansfield's face is that of a man who is fervently hoping he hasn't made a mistake. Roger knows that he is a spot starter—that Mike Pelkey would be out here in his place if Pelkey weren't currently shaking hands with Goofy down in Disney World—but he manages his first-inning jitters as well as one could expect, maybe a little better. He backs off the mound following each return from the catcher, Joe Wilcox, studies the batter, fiddles with his shirtsleeves, and takes all the time he needs. Most important of all, he understands how necessary it is to keep the ball in the lowest quarter of the strike zone. The York lineup is packed with power from top to bottom. If Roger makes a mistake and gets one up in the batter's eyes—especially a batter like Tarbox, who hits as powerfully as he throws—it's going to get lost in a hurry.

He loses the first York batter nevertheless. Bouchard trots down to first, accompanied by the hysterical cheers of the York rooting section. The next batter is Philbrick, the shortstop. He bangs the first pitch back to Fisher. In one of those plays that sometimes decide ball games, Roger elects to go to second and try to force the lead runner. In most Little League games, this turns out to be a bad idea. Either the pitcher throws wild into center field, allowing the lead runner to get to third, or he discovers that his shortstop has not moved over to cover second and the bag is undefended. Today, however, it works. St. Pierre has drilled these boys well on their defensive positions. Matt Kinney, today's shortstop, is right where he's supposed to be. So is Roger's throw. Philbrick reaches first on a fielder's choice, but Bouchard is out. This time, it is the Bangor West fans who roar out their approval.

The play settles most of Bangor West's jitters and gives Roger Fisher some badly needed confidence. Phil Tarbox, York's most consistent hitter as well as their ace pitcher, strikes out on a pitch low and out of the strike zone. "Get him next time, Phil!" a York player calls from the bench. "You're just not used to pitching this slow!"

But speed is not the problem the York batters are having with Roger; it's location. Ron St. Pierre has preached the gospel of the low pitch all season long, and Roger Fisher—Fish, the boys call him—has been a quiet but

extremely attentive student during Saint's ball-yard seminars. Dave's decisions to pitch Roger and bat last look pretty good as Bangor comes in to bat in the bottom of the first. I see several of the boys touch Mo, the little plastic sandal, as they enter the dugout.

• • •

Confidence—of the team, of the fans, of the coaches—is a quality that can be measured in different ways, but whatever yardstick you choose, York comes out on the long side. The hometown cheering section has hung a sign on the lower posts of the score-board. YORK IS BRISTOL BOUND, this exuberant Fan-O-Gram reads. And there is the matter of those District 4 pins, all made up and ready for trading. But the clearest indicator of the deep confidence York's coach has in his players is revealed in his starting pitcher. All the other clubs, including Bangor West, pitched their number one starter in their first game, bearing an old playoff axiom in mind: if you don't get a date, you can't dance at the prom. If you can't win your prelim, you don't have to worry about the final. Only the coach from York ran counter to this wisdom, and pitched his number two starter, Ryan Fernald, in the first game, against Yarmouth. He got away with it—by a whisker—as his team outlasted Yarmouth, 9–8. That was a close shave, but today should be the payoff. He has saved Phil Tarbox for the final, and while Tarbox may not be technically as good as Stanley Sturgis, he's got something going for him that Sturgis did not. Phil Tarbox is *scary*.

Nolan Ryan, probably the greatest fastball pitcher ever to play the game of baseball, likes to tell a story about a Babe Ruth League tournament game he pitched in. He hit the opposing team's leadoff batter in the arm, breaking it. He hit the second batter in the head, splitting the boy's helmet in two and knocking him out for a few moments. While this second boy was being attended to, the number three batter, ashen-faced and trembling, went up to his coach and begged the man not to make him hit. "And I didn't blame him," Ryan adds.

Tarbox is no Nolan Ryan, but he throws hard and he is aware that intimidation is the pitcher's secret weapon. Sturgis also threw hard, but he kept the ball low and outside. Sturgis was polite. Tarbox likes to work high and

tight. Bangor West has got to where they are today by swinging the bat. If Tarbox can intimidate them, he will take the bats out of their hands, and if he does that Bangor is finished.

Nick Trzaskos doesn't come anywhere near a leadoff home run today. Tarbox strikes him out with an intimate fastball that has Nick ducking out of the box. Nick looks around unbelievably at the home-plate umpire and opens his mouth to protest. "Don't say a word, Nick!" Dave blares from the dugout. "Just hustle back in there!" Nick does, but his face has resumed its former narrow look. Once inside the dugout, he slings his batting helmet disgustedly under the bench.

Tarbox will try to work everyone but Ryan Iarrobino high and tight today. Word on Iarrobino has got around, and not even Phil Tarbox, confident as he appears to be, will challenge him. He works Ryan low and outside, finally walking him. He also walks Matt Kinney, who follows Ryan, but now he is high and tight again. Matt has superb reflexes, and he needs them to avoid being hit, and hit hard. By the time he is awarded first base, Iarrobino is already at second, courtesy of a wild pitch that came within inches of Matt's face. Then Tarbox settles down a little, striking out Kevin Rochefort and Roger Fisher to end the first inning.

Roger Fisher continues to work slowly and methodically, fiddling with his sleeves between pitches, glancing around at his infield, occasionally even checking the sky, possibly for UFOs. With two on and one out, Estes, who reached on a walk, breaks for third on a pitch that bounces out of Joe Wilcox's glove and lands at his feet. Joe recovers quickly and guns the ball down to Kevin Rochefort at third. The ball is waiting for Estes when he arrives, and he trots back to the dugout. Two out; Fernald has gone to second on the play.

Wyatt, York's number eight hitter, dribbles one up the right side of the infield. The ball's progress is slowed further by the soggy condition of the ground. Fisher goes for the ball. So does King, the first baseman. Roger grabs it, then slips on the wet grass and *crawls* for the bag, ball in hand. Wyatt beats him easily. Fernald comes all the way home on the play to score the first run of the game.

If Roger is going to crack, one would expect it to happen right here. He checks his infield, and examines the ball. He appears ready to pitch, and then

steps off the rubber. His sleeves, it seems, are not quite to his liking after all. He takes his time fixing them while Matt Francke, the York batter, grows old and mouldy in the batter's box. By the time Fisher finally gets around to throwing, he all but owns Francke, who hits an easy hopper to Kevin Rochefort at third. Rochefort throws on to Matt Kinney, forcing Wyatt. Still, York has drawn first blood and leads, 1–0, at the end of an inning and a half.

Bangor West doesn't put any runs on the board in the second inning, either, but they score against Phil Tarbox just the same. The rangy York pitcher trotted off the mound with his head up at the end of the first inning. Going in after pitching the second, he trudges with his head down, and some of his teammates glance at him uneasily.

Owen King, who bats first in Bangor's half of the second, isn't intimidated by Tarbox, but he is a big boy, much slower than Matt Kinney. After running the count full, Tarbox tries to jam him inside. The fastball runs up and in—too much of both. King is hit hard in the armpit. He falls to the ground, clutching the hurt place, too stunned to cry at first, but obviously in pain. Eventually, the tears do come—not a lot of them, but real tears, for all that. At six foot two and over two hundred pounds, he's as big as a man, but he's still only twelve and not used to being hit by seventy-mile-an-hour inside fastballs. Tarbox immediately rushes off the mound toward him, his face a mask of concern and contrition. The umpire, already bending over the downed player, waves him off impatiently. The on-duty paramedic who hurries out doesn't even give Tarbox a second look. The fans do, however. The fans are giving him all kinds of second looks.

“Take him out before he hits someone else!” one yells.

“Pull him before someone *really* gets hurt!” another adds, as if being hit in the ribcage by a fastball weren't really getting hurt.

“Warn im, ump!” a third voice chimes in. “That was a deliberate brushback! Warn im what happens if he does it again!”

Tarbox glances toward the fans, and for a moment this boy, who has formerly radiated a kind of serene confidence, looks very young and very uncertain. He looks, in fact, the way Stanley Sturgis did as the Belfast-Lewiston game neared its conclusion. As he goes back to the mound, he slams the ball into his glove in frustration.

King, meanwhile, has been helped to his feet. After making it clear to Neil Waterman, the paramedic, and the umpire that he wants to stay in the game and is capable of doing so, he trots down to first base. Both sets of fans give him a solid round of applause.

Phil Tarbox, who of course had no intention of hitting the lead-off batter in a one-run game, immediately shows how shaken he is by grooving one right down the middle to Arthur Dorr. Arthur, the second-smallest boy in Bangor West's starting lineup, accepts this unexpected but welcome gift by driving it deep to right center.

King is off at the crack of the bat. He rounds third, knowing he can't score but hoping to draw the throw that will assure Arthur of second base, and, as he does, the wet conditions become a factor. The third-base side of the diamond is still damp. When King tries to put on the brakes, his feet go out from under him and he lands on his ass. The relay has come in to Tarbox, and Tarbox will not risk a throw; he charges King, who is making feeble efforts to regain his feet. At the end, Bangor's biggest player just raises his arms in an eloquent, touching gesture: *I surrender*. Thanks to the slippery conditions, Tarbox now has a runner on second with one out instead of runners on second and third with none out. It is a big difference, and Tarbox displays his renewed confidence by striking out Mike Arnold.

Then, on his third pitch to Joe Wilcox, the next batter, he hits him smack in the elbow. This time, the cries of outrage from the Bangor West fans are louder, and tinged with threat. Several of them direct their ire at the home-plate umpire, demanding that Tarbox be taken out. The ump, who understands this situation completely, does not bother even to warn Tarbox. The stricken look on the boy's face as Wilcox jogs shakily down to first undoubtedly tells him it isn't necessary. But York's manager has to come out and settle the pitcher down, to point out the obvious: *You have two outs and first base was open anyway. There's no problem.*

But for Tarbox there *is* a problem. He has hit two boys this inning, hit both of them hard enough to make them cry. If that weren't a problem, he would need a mental examination.

York puts together three singles to score two runs in the top of the third, opening up a 3–0 lead. If these runs, both solidly earned, had come in the top

of the first, Bangor would have been in serious trouble, but when the players come in for their raps they look eager and excited. There is no feeling among them that the game is lost, no whiff of failure.

Ryan Iarrobino is Bangor's first batter in the bottom of the third, and Tarbox works him carefully—too carefully. He has begun to aim the ball, and the result is fairly predictable. With the count at 1–2, he plinks Iarrobino on the shoulder. Iarrobino turns and pounds his bat once on the ground—whether in pain, frustration, or anger is impossible to tell. Most probably it is all three. Reading the mood of the crowd is much easier. The Bangor fans are on their feet, yelling angrily at Tarbox and at the ump. On the York side, the fans are silent and bewildered; it is not the game they were expecting. As Ryan trots down to first, he glances over at Tarbox. It is brief, that glance, but it seems clear enough: *That's the third time, you. Make it the last time.*

Tarbox confers briefly with his coach, then faces Matt Kinney. His confidence is in shambles, and his first pitch to Matt, a wild one, suggests that he wants to continue pitching this game about as much as a cat wants a bubble bath. Iarrobino beats York catcher Dan Bouchard's throw to second easily. Tarbox walks Kinney. The next batter is Kevin Rochefort. After two failed bunt attempts, Roach settles back and allows Phil Tarbox the chance to dig his hole a little deeper. He does, walking Kevin after having him 1–1. Tarbox has now thrown more than sixty pitches in less than three innings.

Roger Fisher also goes 3–2 with Tarbox, who is now relying almost exclusively on soft breaking stuff; he seems to have decided that if he does hit another batter he will not hit him hard. There is no place to put Fish; the bases are jammed. Tarbox knows it and takes a calculated risk, grooving another one, believing Fish will lay off in the hope of a walk. Roger snaps hungrily at it instead, bouncing one between first and second for a base hit. Iarrobino trots home with Bangor's first run.

Owen King, the player who was at bat when Phil Tarbox started to self-destruct, is the next batter. The York coach, suspecting his ace will work even less successfully to King this time, has seen enough. Matt Francke comes in to relieve, and Tarbox becomes York's catcher. As he squats behind the plate to warm Francke up, he looks both resigned and relieved. Francke doesn't hit

anyone, but he is unable to stop the bleeding. At the end of three innings, Bangor West has only two hits, but they lead York, 5–3.

It is now the fifth inning. The air is full of gray moisture, and the YORK IS BRISTOL BOUND banner tacked to the Scoreboard uprights has begun to sag. The fans look a little saggy themselves, and increasingly uneasy. *Is York Bristol bound? Well, we're supposed to be, their faces say, but it's the fifth inning now, and we're still two runs behind. My God, how did it get so late so early?*

Roger Fisher continues to cruise, and in the bottom of the fifth Bangor West puts what appear to be the final nails in York's coffin. Mike Arnold leads off with a single. Joe Wilcox sacrifices pinch-runner Fred Moore to second, and Iarrobino doubles off Francke, scoring Moore. This brings Matt Kinney to the plate. After a passed ball advances Ryan to third, Kinney hits an easy grounder to short, but it squirts off the infielder's glove and Iarrobino trots home.

Bangor West takes the field jubilantly, owning a 7–3 lead and only needing three more outs.

When Roger Fisher takes the mound to face York in the top of the sixth, he has thrown ninety-seven pitches, and he's a tired boy. He shows it at once by walking pinch-hitter Tim Pollack on a full count. Dave and Neil have seen enough. Fisher goes to second base, and Mike Arnold, who has been warming up between innings, takes over on the mound. He is ordinarily a good reliever, but it's not his day. Tension, maybe, or maybe it's just that the damp dirt of the mound has caused a change in his normal motion. He gets Francke to fly out, but then Bouchard walks, Philbrick doubles, and Pollack, the runner charged to Fish, scores, and Bouchard is held up at third; by itself, Pollack's run means nothing. The important thing is that York now has runners on second and third, and the potential tying run is coming to the plate. The potential tying run is someone with a very personal interest in getting a hit, because he is the main reason York is only two outs away from extinction. The potential tying run is Phil Tarbox.

Mike works the count to 1–1, and then throws a fastball right down the middle of the plate. In the Bangor West dugout, Dave Mansfield winces and raises one hand toward his forehead in a warding-off gesture even as Tarbox begins his swing. There is the hard sound of Tarbox accomplishing that most

difficult of baseball feats: using the round bat to hit the round ball squarely on the button.

Ryan Larrobino takes off the instant Tarbox connects, but he runs out of room much too early. The ball clears the fence by twenty feet, bangs off a TV camera, and bounces back onto the field. Ryan looks at it disconsolately as the York fans go mad, and the entire York team boils out of the dugout to greet Tarbox, who has hit a three-run homer and redeemed himself in spectacular fashion. He does not step on home plate but *jumps* on it. His face wears an expression of near-beatific satisfaction. He is mobbed by his ecstatic teammates; on his way back to the dugout, his feet are barely allowed to touch the ground.

The Bangor fans sit in silence, utterly stunned by this awful reversal. Yesterday, against Lewiston, Bangor flirted with disaster; today they have swooned in its arms. Mo has changed sides again, and the fans are clearly afraid that this time it has changed for good. Mike Arnold confers with Dave and Neil. They are telling him to go on back and pitch hard, that the game is only tied, not lost, but Mike is clearly a dejected, unhappy boy.

The next batter, Hutchins, hits an easy two-hopper to Matt Kinney, but Arnold is not the only one who is shaken; the usually dependable Kinney boots the ball, and Hutchins is on. Andy Estes pops out to Rochefort at third, but Hutchins advances to second on a passed ball. King grabs Matt Hoyt's pop-up for the third out, and Bangor West is out of trouble.

The team has a chance to put it away in the bottom of the sixth, except that doesn't quite happen, either. They go one-two-three against Matt Francke, and all at once Bangor West is in its first extra-innings game of postseason play, tied 7-7 with York.

During the game against Lewiston, the muddy weather eventually unravelled. Not today. As Bangor West takes the field in the top of the seventh, the skies grow steadily darker. It's now approaching six o'clock, and even under these conditions the field should still be clear and fairly bright, but fog has begun to creep in. Watching a videotape of the game would make someone who wasn't there believe something was wrong with the TV cameras; everything looks listless, dull, underexposed. Shirtsleeve fans in the center-field

bleachers are becoming disembodied heads and hands; in the outfield, Trzaskos, Iarrobino, and Arthur Dorr are discernible chiefly by their shirts.

Just before Mike throws the first pitch of the seventh, Neil elbows Dave and points out to right field. Dave immediately calls time and trots out to see what's the matter with Arthur Dorr, who is standing bent over, with his head almost between his knees.

Arthur looks up at Dave with some surprise as he approaches. "I'm O.K.," he says in answer to the unspoken question.

"Then what in hell are you doing?" Dave asks.

"Looking for four-leaf clovers," Arthur responds.

Dave is too flabbergasted, or too amused, to lecture the boy. He simply tells Arthur it might be more appropriate to look for them after the game is over.

Arthur glances around at the creeping fog before looking back at Dave. "I think by then it's gonna be too dark," he says.

With Arthur set to rights, the game can continue, and Mike Arnold does a creditable job—possibly because he's facing the substitute-riddled bottom of York's order. York does not score, and Bangor comes up in the bottom of the seventh with another chance to win it.

They come close to doing just that. With the bases loaded and two out, Roger Fisher hits one hard up the first-base line. Matt Hoyt is right there to pounce on it, however, and the teams change sides again.

Philbrick flies out to Nick Trzaskos to open the eighth, and then Phil Tarbox steps in. Tarbox is not finished working Bangor West over yet. He has regained his confidence; his face is utterly serene as he takes Mike's first pitch for a called strike. He swings at the next one, a pretty decent changeup that bounces off Joe Wilcox's shin guard. He steps out of the box, squats with the bat between his knees, and concentrates. This is a Zen technique the York coach has taught these boys—Francke has done it several times on the mound while in tight spots—and it works for Tarbox this time, along with a little help from Mike Arnold.

Arnold's final pitch to Tarbox is a hanging curve up in the batter's eyes, exactly where Dave and Neil hoped no pitch would be today, and Tarbox creams it. It goes deep to left center, high over the fence. There is no camera stanchion to stop this one; it ends up in the woods, and the York fans are on

their feet again, chanting “Phil-Phil-Phil” as Tarbox circles third, comes down the line, and jumps high in the air. He doesn’t just jump on home plate; he *spikes* it.

Nor, it seems at first, will that be all. Hutchins bangs a single up the middle and gets second on an error. Estes follows this by hitting one to third, and Rochefort throws badly to second. Luckily, Roger Fisher is backed up by Arthur Dorr, saving a second run, but now York has guys at first and second with only one out.

Dave calls Owen King in to pitch, and Mike Arnold moves over to first. Following a wild pitch that moves the runners up to second and third, Matt Hoyt bangs one on the ground to Kevin Rochefort. In the game that Bangor West lost to Hampden, Casey Kinney was able to come back and make the play after committing an error. Rochefort does it today, and in spades. He comes up with the ball, then holds it for a moment, making sure Hutchins isn’t going to break for the plate. *Then* he throws across the diamond to Mike, getting the slow-running Matt Hoyt by two steps. Considering the wringer these boys have been through, it is an incredibly canny piece of baseball. Bangor West has recovered itself, and King works Ryan Fernald—who hit a three-run homer against Yarmouth—perfectly, nipping at the corners, using his weirdly effective sidearm delivery to supplement the over-the-top fastball. Fernald pops weakly to first and the inning is over. At the end of seven and a half, York leads Bangor, 8–7. Six of York’s RBIs belong to Philip Tarbox.

Matt Francke, York’s pitcher, is as tired as Fisher was when Dave finally elected to replace him with Mike Arnold. The difference is that Dave *had* a Mike Arnold and, behind Mike, an Owen King. The York coach has no one; he used Ryan Fernald against Yarmouth, making him ineligible to pitch today, and now it’s Francke forever.

He starts off the eighth well enough, striking out King. Arthur Dorr comes up next, one for four on the day (a double off Tarbox). Francke, obviously struggling now but just as obviously determined to finish this game, goes full with Arthur, then serves one up that’s way outside. Arthur trots down to first.

Mike Arnold comes up next. It wasn’t his day on the mound, but he does well this time at the plate, laying down a perfect bunt. The intent is not to sacrifice; Mike is bunting for the base hit, and almost gets it. But the ball will

not quite die in that soggy patch between home and the pitcher's mound. Francke snatches it, glances toward second, and then elects to go to first. Now there are two men out with a runner at second. Bangor West is an out away from the end.

Joe Wilcox, the catcher, is up next. With the count 2–1, he hits a chalk hugger up the first-base line. Matt Hoyt grabs it, but just an instant too late; he takes the ball less than half a foot into foul territory, and the first-base umpire is right there to call it. Hoyt, who has been ready to charge the mound and embrace Matt Francke, instead returns the ball.

Now the count on Joey is 2–2. Francke steps off the rubber, stares straight up into the sky, and concentrates. Then he steps back on and delivers one high and out of the strike zone. Joey goes for it anyway, not even looking, swinging in self-defense. The bat makes contact with the ball—pure luck—and it bounces foul. Francke does the concentration bit again, then throws—just outside. Ball three.

Now comes what may be the pitch of the game. It *appears* to be a high strike, a game-ending strike, but the umpire calls ball four. Joe Wilcox trots down to first base with a faint expression of disbelief on his face. It is only later, watching the slow-motion replay on the TV tape of the game, that one can see how right, and how good, the umpire's call was. Joe Wilcox, so anxious that he is pinwheeling the bat in his hands like a golf club right up to the moment of the pitch, rises on his tiptoes as the ball approaches, and this is the reason it appears to be letter-high to him as it crosses the plate. The umpire, who never moves, discounts all of Joe's nervous tics and makes a major league call. The rules say you cannot shrink the strike zone by crouching; by the same token, you cannot expand it by stretching. If Joe hadn't gone up on his toes, Francke's pitch would have been throat-high instead of letter-high. So, instead of becoming the third out and ending the game, Joe becomes another base runner.

One of the TV cameras was trained on York's Matt Francke as he made the pitch, and it caught a remarkable image. A video replay shows Francke light up as the ball breaks downward just a moment too late to earn the strike. His pitching hand comes up in a victorious fist salute. At this moment, he begins to move to his right, toward the York dugout, and the umpire blocks him out.

When he returns to view a second later, his expression has become one of unhappiness and incredulity. He does not argue with the call—these kids are taught not to do that in their regular seasons, and to never, never, *never* do it in a championship situation—but as he prepares to work the next batter Francke appears to be crying.

Bangor West is still alive, and as Nick Trzaskos approaches the plate they come to their feet and begin to yell. Nick is obviously hoping for a free ride, and he gets one. Francke walks him on five pitches. It is the eleventh walk given up by York pitching today. Nick trots down to first, loading the bases, and Ryan Iarrobino steps in. Again and again, it has been Ryan Iarrobino in these situations, and now it is Ryan once more. The Bangor West fans are on their feet, screaming. The Bangor players crowd the dugout, fingers hooked through the mesh, watching anxiously.

“I can’t believe it,” one of the TV commentators says. “I can’t believe the script of this game.”

His partner chips in, “Well, I’ll tell you what. Either way, this is how both teams would want the game to end.”

As he speaks, the camera offers its own ghastly counterpoint to the comment by focusing on the stricken face of Matt Francke. The image strongly suggests that this is the *last* thing the York lefty wanted. Why would he? Iarrobino has doubled twice, walked twice, and been hit by a pitch. York hasn’t retired him a single time. Francke throws high and outside, then low. These are his 135th and 136th pitches. The boy is exhausted. Chuck Bittner, the York manager, calls him over for a brief conference. Iarrobino waits for the conference to end, then steps in again.

Matt Francke concentrates, head back and eyes closed; he looks like a baby bird waiting to be fed. Then he winds up and throws the last pitch of the Maine Little League season.

Iarrobino has not been watching the concentration bit. His head is down; he is only watching to see how Francke will come, and his eyes never leave the ball. It is a fastball, low and tailing toward the outside corner of the plate. Ryan Iarrobino dips a little. The head of the bat whips around. He catches all of this one, really cranks it, and as the ball flies out of the park to deep right-center

field, his arms shoot up over his head and he begins to tap-dance deliriously down the first-base line.

On the mound, Matt Francke, who was twice within inches of winning his game, lowers his head, not wanting to look. And as Ryan rounds second and starts back toward home, he seems to finally understand what he has done, and at that point he begins to weep.

The fans are in hysterics; the sports commentators are in hysterics; even Dave and Neil seem close to hysterics as they block the plate, making room for Ryan to touch it. Rounding third, he passes the umpire there, who is still twirling one magisterial finger in the gray air, signalling home run.

Behind the plate, Phil Tarbox takes off his mask and walks away from the celebration. He stamps his foot once, his face clenched with deep frustration. He walks off-camera and out of Little League for good. He will play Babe Ruth ball next year, and probably he will play it well, but there will be no more games like this for Tarbox, or for any of these boys. This one is, as they say, in the books.

Ryan Iarrobino, laughing, crying, holding his helmet on his head with one hand and pointing straight up to the gray sky with the other, leaps high, comes down on home plate, and then leaps again, straight into the arms of his teammates, who bear him away in triumph. The game is over; Bangor West has won, 11–8. They are Maine's 1989 Little League Champions.

I look toward the fence on the first-base side and see a remarkable sight: a forest of waving hands. The parents of the players have crowded against the chain-link and are reaching across the top to touch their sons. Many of the parents are also in tears. The boys all wear identical expressions of happy disbelief, and all these hands—hundreds of them, it seems—wave toward them, wanting to touch, wanting to congratulate, wanting to hug, wanting to *feel*.

The boys ignore them. Later, there will be touches and hugs. First, however, there is business to take care of. They line up and slap hands with the boys from York, crossing at home plate in the ritual manner. Most of the boys on both teams are crying now, some so hard they can barely walk.

Then, in the instant before the Bangor boys go to the fence, where all those hands are still waving, they surround their coaches and pummel them and each

other in joyful triumph. They have held on to win their tournament—Ryan and Matt, Owen and Arthur, Mike and Roger Fisher, finder of four-leaf clovers. At this moment they are cheering each other, and everything else will just have to wait. Then they break for the fence, going toward their crying, cheering, laughing parents, and the world begins to turn in its ordinary course once again.

• • •

“How long are we gonna keep on playing, Coach?” J. J. Fiddler asked Neil Waterman after Bangor clinched the division against Machias.

“J.J.,” Neil replied, “we’re gonna play until someone makes us stop.”

The team that finally made Bangor West stop was Westfield, Massachusetts. Bangor West played them in the second round of the Eastern Regional Little League Championship, at Bristol, Connecticut, on August 15th, 1989. Matt Kinney pitched for Bangor West and threw the game of his life, striking out nine, walking five (one intentional), and giving up only three hits. Bangor West, however, got only one hit off Westfield pitcher Tim Laurita, and that one belonged, predictably enough, to Ryan Iarrobino. The final score was 2–1, Westfield. Credit Bangor’s one RBI in the game to King, on a bases-loaded walk. Credit the game-winning RBI to Laurita, also on a bases-loaded walk. It was a hell of a game, a purist’s game, but it couldn’t match the one against York.

In the pro world, it was a bad year for baseball. A future Hall of Famer was banned from the sport for life; a retired pitcher shot his wife and then took his own life; the commissioner suffered a fatal heart attack; the first World Series game to be played at Candlestick Park in over twenty years was postponed when an earthquake shook northern California. But the majors are only a small part of what baseball is about. In other places and in other leagues—Little League, for instance, where there are no free agents, no salaries, and no gate admissions—it was a pretty fine year. The Eastern Regional Tournament winner was Trumbull, Connecticut. On August 26, 1989, Trumbull beat Taiwan to win the Little League World Series. It was the first time an American team had won the Williamsport World Series since 1983, and the first time in

fourteen years that the winner had come from the region in which Bangor West plays.

In September, the Maine division of the United States Baseball Federation voted Dave Mansfield amateur coach of the year.

## Brooklyn August

(For Jim Bishop)

In Ebbets Field the crabgrass grows  
(where Alston managed)

row on row  
as the day's axle turns into twilight  
I still see them, with the green smell  
of just-mown infield grass heavy  
in the darkening end of the day:  
picked out by the right-field floods, just  
turned on and already assaulted by  
battalions of circling moths  
and bugs on the night shift;  
below, old men and off-duty taxi drivers  
are drinking big cups of Schlitz in the 75¢ seats,  
this Flatbush as real as velvet Harlem streets  
where jive packs the juke in the June of '56.

In Ebbets Field the infield's slow  
and seats are empty, row on row

Hodges is hulked over first, glove stretched  
to touch the throw from Robinson at third,  
the batters' boxes float in the ghost-glow  
of this sky-filled Friday evening  
(Musial homered early, Flatbush is down by 2).  
Newcombe trudged to an early shower through  
a shower of popcorn and newspaper headlines.  
Carl Erskine is in now and chucking hard but  
Johnny Podres and Clem Labine are heating  
in case he blows up late;  
he can, you know, they all can

In Ebbets Field they come and go  
and play their innings, blow by blow  
time's called in the dimness of the 5th  
someone chucked a beer at Sandy Amoros in right  
he spears the empty cup without a word  
and hands it to a groundkeeper chewing Mail Pouch  
while the faceless fans cry down juicy Brooklyn vowels,  
a plague on both their houses.  
Pee Wee Reese leans on his knees west of second  
Campanella gives the sign  
with my eyes closed I see it all  
smell steamed franks and 8 pm dirt  
can see those heavenly shades of evening  
they swim with angels above the stadium dish  
as Erskine winds and wheels and throws low-inside:

## Notes

Not long after I published *Skeleton Crew*, my previous book of short stories, I spoke to a reader who told me how much she had liked it. She had been able to ration the stories out, she said—one a night for about three weeks. “I skipped the notes at the end, though,” she said, keeping a close eye on me as she said it (I think she believed I might leap upon her in my anger at this terrible affront). “I’m one of those people who don’t want to know how the magician does his tricks.”

I simply nodded and told her that was her perfect right, not wanting to get into a long, involved discussion on the subject when I had errands to run, but I have no errands this morning, and I want to make two things perfectly clear, as our old pal from San Clemente used to say. First, I don’t care if you read the notes that follow or not. It’s your book, and you can wear it on your head in a horserace for all of me. Second, I am *not* a magician and these are *not* tricks.

That’s not to say there isn’t magic involved in writing; I happen to believe that there is, and that it twines around fiction with particular luxuriance. The paradox is this: magicians don’t have anything to do with magic, as most of them will readily admit. Their undeniable wonders—doves from handkerchiefs, coins from empty pitchers, silk scarves from empty hands—are achieved through exhaustive practice and well-tested misdirections and sleights of hand. Their talk of “ancient secrets of the Orient” and “the forgotten lore of Atlantis” is so much patter. I suspect that, by and large, stage-magicians would deeply identify with the old joke about the out-of-towner who asks the New York beatnik how to get to Carnegie Hall. “Practice, man, practice,” the beatnik replies.

All that goes for writers, too. After twenty years of writing popular fiction and being dismissed by the more intellectual critics as a hack (the intellectual’s definition of a hack seems to be “an artist whose work is appreciated by too many people”), I will gladly testify that craft is terribly important, that the often tiresome process of draft, redraft, and then draft again is necessary to

produce good work, and that hard work is the only acceptable practice for those of us who have some talent but little or no genius.

Still, there *is* magic in this job, and it comes most frequently at that instant when a story pops into a writer's head, usually as a fragment but sometimes as a complete thing (and having that happen is a little like being hit by a tactical nuke). The writer can later relate where he was when that happened, and what the elements were that combined to give him his idea, but the *idea itself* is a new thing, a sum greater than its parts, something that is created from nothing. It is, to paraphrase Marianne Moore, a real toad in an imaginary garden. So you need not fear to read the notes that follow on the grounds that I will spoil the magic by telling you how the tricks work. There are no tricks to real magic; when it comes to real magic, there is only history.

It *is* possible to spoil a story which hasn't been read yet, however, and so if you're one of those people (one of those *awful* people) who feel a compulsion to read the last thing in a book first, like a willful child who is determined to eat his or her chocolate pudding before touching the meatloaf, I'm going to invite you to get the hell out of here, lest you suffer what may be the worst of all curses: disenchantment. For the rest of you, here is a whirlwind tour of how some of the stories in *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* happened to happen.

**“Dolan's Cadillac”**—I'd guess the train of thought which led to this story is pretty obvious. I was idling my way through one of those seemingly endless road-repair sites where you breathe a lot of dust, tar, and exhaust and sit looking at the ass end of the same station wagon and the same I BRAKE FOR ANIMALS bumper sticker for what feels like about nine years . . . only the car in front of me that day was a big green Cadillac Sedan DeVille. As we inched our way past an excavation where huge cylinders of pipe were being laid, I remember thinking, *Even a car as big as that Cadillac would fit in there.* A moment later I had the idea of “Dolan's Cadillac” firmly in place, fully developed, and none of the narrative elements ever changed so much as an iota.

That is not to say the story was an easy birth; it most definitely was not. I have never been so daunted—so nearly overwhelmed, in fact—by technical details. Now I'll give you what the *Reader's Digest* likes to call A Personal

Glimpse: although I like to think of myself as a literary version of James Brown (the self-styled “Hardest-Working Man in Show Business”), I am an extremely lazy sod when it comes to research and technical details. I have been twigged again and again by readers and critics (most accurately and humiliatingly by Avram Davidson, who writes for the *Chicago Tribune* and *Fantasy and Science Fiction* magazine) for my lapses in these areas. When writing “Dolan’s Cadillac,” I came to realize that this time I could not simply fudge my way through, because the story’s entire underpinning depended on various scientific details, mathematical formulae, and the postulates of physics.

If I had discovered this unpalatable truth sooner—before I had roughly 15,000 words already invested in the story of Dolan, Elizabeth, and Elizabeth’s Poe-esque husband, that is—I undoubtedly would have consigned “Dolan’s Cadillac” to The Department of Unfinished Stories. But I *didn’t* discover it sooner, I *didn’t* want to stop, and so I did the only thing I could think of: I called my big brother and asked for help.

Dave King is what we New Englanders call “a piece of work,” a child prodigy with a tested IQ of over 150 (you will find reflections of Dave in Bow-wow Forno’s genius brother in “The End of the Whole Mess”) who went through school as if on a rocket-sled, finishing college at eighteen and going right to work as a high-school math teacher at Brunswick High. Many of his remedial algebra students were older than he was. Dave was the youngest man ever to be elected Town Selectman in the state of Maine, and was a Town Manager at the age of twenty-five or so. He is a genuine polymath, a man who knows something about just about everything.

I explained my problems to my brother over the telephone. A week later I received a manila envelope from him and opened it with a sinking heart. I was sure he’d sent me the information I needed, but I was equally sure it would do me no good; my brother’s handwriting is absolutely awful.

To my delight, I found a videocassette. When I plugged it in, I saw Dave sitting at a table piled high with dirt. Using several toy Matchbox cars, he explained everything I needed to know, including that wonderfully ominous stuff about the arc of descent. Dave also told me that my protagonist would have to use highway equipment in order to bury Dolan’s Cadillac (in the original story he did it by hand), and explained exactly how to jump-start the

big machines your local Highway Department is apt to leave around at various road-repair sites. This information was extremely good . . . a little *too* good, in fact. I changed just enough so that if anyone tries it according to the recipe in the story, nothing will happen.

One last point about this story: when it was finished, I hated it. Absolutely *loathed* it. It was never published in a magazine; it simply went into one of the cardboard boxes of Bad Old Stuff I keep in the hallway behind my office. A few years later, Herb Yellin, who publishes gorgeous limited editions in his function as head of Lord John Press, wrote and asked if he could do a limited edition of one of my short stories, preferably an unpublished one. Because I love his books, which are small, beautifully made, and often extremely eccentric, I went out into what I think of as the Hallway of Doom and hunted through my boxes to see if there was anything salvageable.

I came across “Dolan’s Cadillac,” and once again time had done its work—it read a lot better than I remembered, and when I sent it to Herb, he agreed enthusiastically. I made further revisions and it was published in a small Lord John Press edition of about five hundred copies. I have revised it again for its appearance here, and have changed my opinion of it enough to have put it in the lead-off position. If nothing else, it’s a kind of archetypal horror story, with its mad narrator and its account of a premature burial in the desert. But this particular story really isn’t mine anymore; it belongs to Dave King and Herb Yellin. Thanks, guys.

**“Suffer the Little Children”**—This story is from the same period as most of the stories in *Night Shift*, and was originally published in *Cavalier*, as were most of the stories in that 1978 collection. It was left out because my editor, Bill Thompson, felt the book was getting “unwieldy”—this is the way editors sometimes tell writers that they have to cut a little before the price of the book soars out of sight. I voted to cut a story called “Gray Matter” from *Night Shift*. Bill voted to cut “Suffer the Little Children.” I deferred to his judgement, and read the story over carefully before deciding to include it here. I like it quite a lot—it feels a little bit like the Bradbury of the late forties and early fifties to me, the fiendish Bradbury who revelled in killer babies, renegade undertakers, and tales only a Crypt-Keeper could love. Put another way, “Suffer the Little

Children” is a ghastly sick-joke with no redeeming social merit whatever. I like that in a story.

**“The Night Flier”**—Sometimes a supporting character in a novel catches a writer’s attention and refuses to go away, insisting he has more to say and do. Richard Dees, the protagonist of “The Night Flier,” is such a character. He originally appeared in *The Dead Zone* (1979), where he offers Johnny Smith, the doomed hero of that novel, a job as a psychic on his awful paper, the supermarket tabloid *Inside View*. Johnny throws him off the porch of his dad’s house, and that was supposed to be the end of him. Yet here he is again.

Like most of my stories, “The Night Flier” started off as nothing but a lark—a vampire with a private pilot’s license, how amusingly *modrun*—but it grew as Dees grew. I rarely *understand* my characters, any more than I understand the lives and hearts of the real people I meet every day, but I find that it’s sometimes possible to *plot* them, as a cartographer plots his or her maps. As I worked on “The Night Flier,” I began to glimpse a man of profound alienation, a man who seemed to somehow sum up some of the most terrible and confusing things about our supposedly open society in the last quarter of the century. Dees is the essential unbeliever, and his confrontation with the Night Flier at the end of the story recalls that George Seferis line I used in *Salem’s Lot*—the one about the column of truth having a hole in it. In these latter days of the twentieth century, that seems to be all too true, and “The Night Flier” is mostly about one man’s discovery of that hole.

**“Popsy”**—Is this little boy’s grandfather the same creature that demands Richard Dees open his camera and expose his film at the conclusion of “The Night Flier”? You know, I rather think he is.

**“It Grows On You”**—A version of this story was originally published in a University of Maine literary magazine called *Marshroots* back in the early seventies, but the version in this book is almost entirely different. As I read through the original story, I began to realize that these old men were actually the survivors of the debacle described in *Needful Things*. That novel is a black comedy about greed and obsession; this is a more serious story about secrets

and sickness. It seems a fitting epilogue to the novel. . . and it was great to glimpse some of my old Castle Rock friends one last time.

**“Dedication”**—For years, since I first met and was appalled by a now-dead famous writer, whom I will not name here, I have been troubled by the question of why some enormously talented people turn out to be such utter shits in person—woman-pawing sexists, racists, sneering elitists, or cruel practical jokers. I’m not saying that *most* talented or famous people are this way, but I have met enough who are—including that one undeniably great writer—to wonder why. This story was written as an effort to answer that question to my own satisfaction. The effort failed, but I was at least able to articulate my own unease, and in this case, that seemed enough.

It’s not a very politically correct story, and I think a lot of readers—the ones who want to be scared by the same comfy old bogies and funhouse demons—are going to be outraged by it. I hope so; I’ve been doing this job for quite awhile now, but I like to think I’m not quite ready for the old rocking chair yet. The stories in *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* are, for the most part, the sort that critics categorize (and then all too often dismiss, alas) as horror stories, and the horror story is supposed to be a kind of evil-tempered junkyard dog that will bite you if you get too close. This one bites, I think. Am I going to apologize for that? Do you think I should? Isn’t that—the risk of being bitten—one of the reasons you picked this book up in the first place? I think so. And if you get thinking of me as your kindly old Uncle Stevie, a sort of end-of-the-century Rod Serling, I will try even harder to bite you. To put it another way, I want you to be a little bit afraid every time you step into my parlor. I want you unsure about how far I’ll go, or what I may do next.

Now that I’ve said all that, just let me add that if I really thought “Dedication” needed to be defended, I never would have offered it for publication in the first place. A story that can’t serve as its own defense lawyer doesn’t *deserve* to be published. It’s Martha Rosewall, the humble maid, who wins this battle, not Peter Jefferies, the big-shot writer, and that should tell the reader all he or she needs to know about where my sympathies lie.

Oh, one other thing. It seems to me now that this story, originally published in 1985, was a trial cut for a novel called *Dolores Claiborne* (1992).

**“The Moving Finger”**—My favorite sort of short story has always been the kind where things happen just because they happen. In novels and movies (save for movies starring fellows like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger), you are supposed to explain *why* things happen. Let me tell you something, friends and neighbors: I *hate* explaining why things happen, and my efforts in that direction (such as the doctored LSD and resultant DNA changes which create Charlie McGee’s pyrokinetic talents in *Firestarter*) aren’t very good. But real life very rarely has what movie producers are this year calling “a motivation through-line”—have you noticed that? I don’t know about you, but nobody ever issued me an instruction manual; I’m just muddling along as best I can, knowing I’m never going to get out of it alive but trying not to fuck up too badly in the meantime.

In short stories, the author is sometimes still allowed to say, “This happened. Don’t ask me why.” The story of poor Howard Mitla is that sort of tale, and it seems to me that his efforts to deal with the finger that pokes out of his bathroom drain during a quiz-show form a perfectly valid metaphor for how we cope with the nasty surprises life holds in store for all of us: the tumors, the accidents, the occasional nightmarish coincidence. It is the unique province of the fantasy story to be able to answer the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” by replying, “Feh—don’t ask.” In a tale of fantasy, this gloomy answer actually seems to satisfy us. In the end, it may be the genre’s chief moral asset: at its best, it can open a window (or a confessional screen) on the existential aspects of our mortal lives. It ain’t perpetual motion . . . but it ain’t bad, either.

**“You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”**—There are at least two stories in this book about what the lead female character here thinks of as “the peculiar little town.” This is one; “Rainy Season” is the other. There will be readers who may think I’ve visited “the peculiar little town” once or twice too often, and some may note similarities between these two pieces and an earlier story of mine, “Children of the Corn.” There *are* similarities, but does that mean “Band” and “Season” are lapses into self-imitation? It’s a delicate question, and one each reader must answer for him- or herself, but my answer is no (*of course* it is, what else am I gonna say?).

There's a big difference, it seems to me, between working in traditional forms and self-imitation. Take the blues, for instance. There are really only two classic guitar chord-progressions for the blues, and those two progressions are essentially the same. Now, answer me this—just because John Lee Hooker plays almost everything he ever wrote in the key of E or the key of A, does that mean he's running on autopilot, doing the same thing over and over again? Plenty of John Lee Hooker fans (not to mention fans of Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, Furry Lewis, and all the other greats) would say it doesn't. It's not the key you *play* it in, these blues *aficionados* would say; it's the soul you *sing* it with.

Same thing here. There are certain horror-tale archetypes which stand out with the authority of mesas in the desert. The haunted-house story; the return-from-the-grave story; the peculiar-little-town story. It's not really about what it's about, if you can dig that; this is, by and large, the literature of the nerve-endings and the muscle-receptors, and as such, it's really about what you *feel*. What I felt here—the impetus for the story—was how authentically creepy it is that so many rockers have died young, or under nasty circumstances; it's an actuarial expert's nightmare. Many younger fans view the high mortality rate as romantic, but when you've boogied your way from The Platters to Ice T, as I have, you start to see a darker side, a crawling kingsnake side. That's what I've tried to express here, although I don't think the story really starts to move and groove and creep and crawl until the last six or eight pages.

**“Home Delivery”**—This is probably the only story in the book which was written to order. John Skipp and Craig Spector (*The Light at the End, The Bridge*, plus several other good horror splatterpunk-ish novels) came up with the idea of an anthology of stories exploring what things would be like if George Romero's zombies from his *Dead* trilogy (*Night of, Dawn of, Day of*) took over the world. The concept fired off in my imagination like a Roman candle, and this story, set off the coast of Maine, was the result.

**“My Pretty Pony”**—In the early eighties, Richard Bachman was struggling to write a novel called (naturally enough, I suppose) *My Pretty Pony*. The novel was about an independent hit-man named Clive Banning who is hired to put

together a string of like-minded psychopaths and kill a number of powerful crime figures at a wedding. Banning and his string succeed, turning the wedding into a bloodbath, and are then double-crossed by their employers, who begin picking them off, one by one. The novel was to chronicle Banning's efforts to escape the cataclysm he had induced.

The book was a bad piece of work, born in an unhappy time of my life when a lot of things which had been working pretty well for me up until then suddenly fell over with a resounding crash. Richard Bachman died during this period, leaving two fragments behind: an almost complete novel called *Machine's Way* under his pseudonym, George Stark, and six chapters of *My Pretty Pony*. As Richard's literary executor, I worked *Machine's Way* up into a novel called *The Dark Half* and published it under my own name (I did acknowledge Bachman, however). *My Pretty Pony* I junked . . . except for a brief flashback in which Banning, while waiting to begin his assault on the wedding party, remembers how his grandfather instructed him on the plastic nature of time. Finding that flashback—marvellously complete, almost a short story as it stood—was like finding a rose growing in a junkheap. I plucked it, and I did so with great gratitude. It turned out to be one of the few good things I wrote during an extremely bad year.

"My Pretty Pony" was originally published in an overpriced (and overdesigned, in my humble opinion) edition produced by the Whitney Museum. It was later issued in a slightly more accessible (but still overpriced and overdesigned, in my humble opinion) edition by Alfred A. Knopf. And here, I am pleased to see it, polished and slightly clarified, as it probably should have been in the first place—just another short story, a little better than some, not so good as others.

**"Sorry, Right Number"**—Remember how I started off, about a billion pages ago, talking about *Ripley's Believe It or Not?* Well, "Sorry, Right Number" almost belongs in it. The idea occurred to me as a "teleplaylet" one night on my way home from buying a pair of shoes. It came as a "visual," I suppose, because the telecast of a film plays such a central part. I wrote it, pretty much as it is presented here, in two sittings. My West Coast agent—the one who does film deals—had it by the end of the week. Early the following week,

Steven Spielberg read it for *Amazing Stories*, a TV series which he then had in production (but which had not yet begun to air).

Spielberg rejected it—they were looking for *Amazing Stories* that were a little more upbeat, he said—and so I took it to my long-time collaborator and good friend, Richard Rubinstein, who then had a series called *Tales from the Darkside* running in syndication. I won't say Richard blows his nose on happy endings—he likes a happily-ever-after as well as anyone, I think—but he's never shied away from a downer; he was the guy who got *Pet Sematary* made, after all (*Pet Sematary* and *Thelma and Louise* are, I think, the only major Hollywood films to end with the death of a major character or characters since the late 1970s).

Richard bought "Sorry" the day he read it, and had it in production a week or two later. A month after that, it was telecast . . . as a season premiere, if my recollection serves. It is still one of the fastest turns from in-the-head to on-the-screen that I've ever heard of. This version, by the way, is my first draft, which is a little longer and a little more textured than the final shooting script, which for budgetary reasons specified just two sets. It is included here as an example of another kind of story-telling . . . different, but as valid as any other.

**"The Ten O'Clock People"**—During the summer of 1992, I was walking around downtown Boston, looking for an address that kept eluding me. I eventually found the place I was looking for, but before I did, I found this story. My address-hunt took place around ten in the morning, and as I walked I began to notice groups of people clustered in front of every expensive highrise building, groups that made no sociological sense. There were carpenters hobnobbing with businessmen, janitors shooting the breeze with elegantly coiffed women in power clothes, messengers passing the time of day with executive secretaries.

After I'd puzzled over these groups—*granfalloon*s Kurt Vonnegut never imagined—for half an hour or so, the penny dropped: for a certain class of American city dweller, addiction has turned the coffee-break into the cigarette-break. The expensive buildings are now all no-smoking zones as the American people go calmly about one of the most amazing turnabouts of the twentieth century; we are purging ourselves of our bad old habit, we are doing it with

hardly any fanfare, and the result has been some very odd pockets of sociological behavior. Those who refuse to give up their bad old habit—the Ten O’Clock People of the title—constitute one of these. The story is intended as no more than a simple amusement, but I hope it says something interesting about a wave of change which has, temporarily, at least, re-created some aspects of the separate-but-equal facilities of the forties and fifties.

**“The House on Maple Street”**—Remember Richard Rubinstein, my producer friend? He was the guy who sent me my first copy of Chris Van Allsburg’s *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. Richard attached a note in his spiky handwriting: “You’ll like this” was all it said, and all it really *needed* to say. I *did* like it.

The book purports to be a series of drawings, titles, and captions by the eponymous Mr. Burdick—the stories themselves are not in evidence. Each combination of picture, title, and caption serves as a kind of Rorschach inkblot, perhaps offering more of an index to the reader/viewer’s mind than to Mr. Van Allsburg’s intentions. One of my favorites shows a man with a chair in his hand—he is obviously prepared to use it as a bludgeon if he needs to—looking at a strange and somehow *organic* bulge under the living-room carpet. “Two weeks passed and it happened again,” the caption reads.

Given my feelings about motivation, my attraction to this sort of thing should be clear. *What* happened again after two weeks? I don’t think it matters. In our worst nightmares, there are only pronouns for the things which chase us back to wakefulness, sweating and shuddering with horror and relief.

My wife, Tabitha, was also taken with *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, and it was she who suggested that each member of our family write a short story based on one of the pictures. She wrote one; so did our youngest son, Owen (then twelve). Tabby chose the first picture in the book; Owen chose one in the middle; I chose the last one. I have included my effort here, with the kind permission of Chris Van Allsburg. There’s no more to add, except that I’ve read a slightly bowdlerized version of the tale to fourth- and fifth-graders several times over the last three or four years, and they seem to like it a great deal. I have an idea that what they really get off on is the idea of sending the Wicked Stepfather off into the Great Beyond. *I* certainly got off on it. The story has never been published before, mostly because of its tangled antecedents, and I

am delighted to offer it here. I only wish I could offer my wife's and son's stories as well.

**“The Fifth Quarter”**—Bachman again. Or maybe George Stark.

**“Umney's Last Case”**—A *pastiche*—obviously—and paired with “The Doctor's Case” for that reason, but this one is a little more ambitious. I have loved Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald passionately since I discovered them in college (although I find it both instructive and a little scary to note that, while Chandler continues to be read and discussed, Macdonald's highly praised Lew Archer novels are now little-known artifacts outside the small circle of *livre noir* fans), and I think again it was the *language* of these novels which so fired my imagination; it opened a whole new way of seeing, one that appealed fiercely to the heart and mind of the lonely young man I was at that time.

It was also a style which was lethally easy to copy, as half a hundred novelists have discovered in the last twenty or thirty years. For a long time I steered clear of that Chandlerian voice, because I had nothing to use it for . . . nothing to say in the tones of Philip Marlowe that was *mine*.

Then one day I did. “Write what you know,” the Wise Old Dudes tell us poor cometary remnants of Sterne and Dickens and Defoe and Melville, and for me, that means teaching, writing, and playing the guitar. . . though not necessarily in that order. As far as my own career-within-a-career of writing about writing goes, I'm reminded of a line I heard Chet Atkins toss off on *Austin City Limits* one night. He looked up at the audience after a minute or two of fruitless guitar-tuning and said, “It took me about twenty-five years to find out I wasn't very good at this part of it, and by then I was too rich to quit.”

Same thing happened to me. I seem destined to keep going back to that peculiar little town—whether you call it Rock and Roll Heaven, Oregon; Gatlin, Nebraska; or Willow, Maine—and I also seem destined to keep going back to what I do. The question which haunts and nags and won't ever completely let go is this one: Who am I when I write? Who are *you*, for that matter? Exactly what is happening here, and why, and does it matter?

So, with these questions in mind, I pulled on my Sam Spade fedora, lit up a Lucky (metaphorically speaking, these days) and started to write. “Umney’s Last Case” was the result, and of all the stories in this volume, it’s the one I like the best. This is its first publication.

**“Head Down”**—My first writing for pay was sports writing (for awhile I was the entire sports department of the weekly *Lisbon Enterprise*), but that didn’t make this any easier. My proximity to the Bangor West All-Star team when it mounted its unlikely charge on the State Championship was either pure luck or pure fate, depending on where you stand in regard to the possible existence of a higher power. I tend toward the higher power thesis, but in either case, I was only there because my son was on the team. Nevertheless, I quickly realized—more quickly than Dave Mansfield, Ron St. Pierre, or Neil Waterman, I think—that something pretty extraordinary was either happening or trying to happen. I didn’t want to write about it, particularly, but something kept telling me I was *supposed* to write about it.

My method of working when I feel out of my depth is brutally simple: I lower my own head and run as fast as I can, as long as I can. That was what I did here, gathering documentation like a mad packrat and simply trying to keep up with the team. For a month or so it was like living inside one of those corny sports novels with which many of us guys have whiled away our duller afternoon study-halls: *Go Up for Glory*, *Power Forward*, and occasional bright standouts like John R. Tunis’s *The Kid from Tomkinsville*.

Hard or not, “Head Down” was the opportunity of a lifetime, and before I was done, Chip McGrath of *The New Yorker* had coaxed the best nonfiction writing of my life out of me. I thank him for that, but I owe the most thanks to Owen and his teammates, who first made the story happen and then gave me permission to publish my version of it.

**“Brooklyn August”**—It pairs with “Head Down,” of course, but there’s a better reason for putting it here, at what is almost the end of this long book: it has escaped the wearisome cage of its creator’s questionable reputation and lived its own placid life quite apart from him. It has been reprinted several times in various anthologies of baseball *curiosa*, and appears to have been

selected upon each occasion by editors who seem not to have the slightest idea of who I'm supposed to be or what it is I'm supposed to do. And I really like that.

Okay; stick it on the shelf and take care of yourself until we meet again. Read a few good books, and if one of your brothers or sisters falls down and you see it happen, pick him or her up. After all, next time *you* might be the one who needs a hand . . . or a little help getting that pesky finger out of the drain, for that matter.

Bangor, Maine  
September 16, 1992

## The Beggar and the Diamond

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This little story—a Hindu parable in its original form—was first told to me by Mr. Surendra Patel, of Scarsdale, New York. I have adapted it freely and apologize to those who know it in its true form, where Lord Shiva and his wife, Parvati, are the major characters.

One day the archangel Uriel came to God with a downcast face. “What troubles you?” God asked.

“I have seen something very sad,” Uriel replied, and then pointed between his feet. “Down there.”

“On earth?” God asked with a smile. “Oh! No shortage of sadness there! Well, let us see.”

They bent over together. Far below they saw a ragged figure trudging slowly along a country road on the outskirts of Chandrapur. He was very thin, this figure, and his legs and arms were covered with sores. Dogs frequently chased after him, barking, but the figure never turned to strike at them with his staff even when they nipped at his heels; he simply trudged onward, favoring his right leg as he walked. At one point a number of handsome, well-fed children with wicked smiling faces boiled out of a large house and threw stones at the ragged man when he held his empty begging bowl out to them.

“Go away, you nasty thing!” one of them cried. “Go away into the fields and die!”

At this, the archangel Uriel burst into tears.

“Now, now,” God said, clapping him on the shoulder. “I thought you were made of sterner stuff.”

“Yes, no doubt,” Uriel said, drying his eyes. “It’s just that the fellow down there seems to sum up everything which has ever gone wrong for all the sons and daughters of the earth.”

“Of course he does,” God replied. “That is Ramu, and that is his job. When he dies, another will hold it. It is an honorable job.”

“Perhaps,” Uriel said, covering his eyes with a shudder, “but I cannot bear to watch him do it. His sorrow fills my heart with darkness.”

“Darkness is not allowed here,” said God, “and therefore I must take steps to change what has brought it to you. Look here, my good archangel.”

Uriel looked and saw that God was holding a diamond as big as a peacock’s egg.

“A diamond of this size and quality will feed Ramu for the rest of his life, and keep his descendants unto the seventh generation,” God remarked. “It is, in fact, the finest on the earth. Now. . . let us see . . .” He leaned forward on His hands and knees, held the diamond out between two gauzy clouds, and let it drop. He and Uriel marked its fall closely, watching as it struck the center of the road upon which Ramu walked.

The diamond was so large and so heavy that Ramu would no doubt have heard it strike the earth had he been a younger man, but his hearing had failed quite severely in the last few years, along with his lungs and his back and his kidneys. Only his eyesight remained as keen as it had been when he was one-and-twenty.

As he struggled up a rise in the road, unaware of the huge diamond which lay gleaming and flashing on the far side in the hazy sunshine, Ramu sighed deeply . . . then stopped, bent over his staff, as his sigh turned into a fit of coughing. He held onto his staff with both hands, trying to weather the fit, and just as it was easing, the staff—old and dry and almost as worn-out as Ramu himself—snapped with a dry crack, pitching Ramu into the dust.

He lay there, looking up at the sky and wondering why God was so cruel. “I have outlived all those I loved the most,” he thought, “but not those I hate. I have grown so old and ugly that the dogs bark at me and the children throw stones at me. I have had nothing but scraps to eat these last three months, and no decent meal with family and friends for ten years or more. I am a wanderer on the face of the earth with no home to call my own; tonight I will sleep under a tree or a hedge with no roof to keep the rain off. I am covered with sores, my back aches, and when I pass water I see blood where no blood should be. My heart is as empty as my begging bowl.”

Ramu slowly got to his feet, unaware that less than sixty feet and a dry bulge of land hid his still-keen glance from the world’s largest diamond, and

looked up at the hazy blue sky. "God, I am unlucky," he said. "I do not hate You, but I fear You are not my friend, nor any man's friend."

Having said this, he felt a little better and resumed his trudge, pausing only to pick up the longer piece of his broken staff. As he walked, he began to reproach himself for his self-pity and for his ungrateful prayer.

"For I do have a few things to be grateful for," he reasoned. "The day is extraordinarily beautiful, for one thing, and although I have failed in many respects, my vision remains keen. Think how terrible it would be if I were blind!"

To prove this to himself, Ramu closed his eyes tightly and shuffled along with his broken staff stretched out in front of him, as a blind man uses his cane. The darkness was terrible, stifling, and disorienting. He soon had no idea if he was moving on as he had been, or if he was wandering off to one side of the road or the other, and might soon go tumbling into the ditch. The thought of what could happen to his old, brittle bones in such a fall frightened him, but he kept his eyes firmly shut and continued to forge ahead.

"This is just the thing to cure you of your ingratitude, old fellow!" he told himself. "You will spend the rest of the day remembering that you may be a beggar, but at least you are not a *blind* beggar, and you will be happy!"

Ramu did not walk into the ditch on either side, but he *did* begin to drift off to the right of the road as he topped the rise and started down the far side, and this was how he walked past the huge diamond which lay glowing in the dust; his left foot missed it by less than two inches.

Thirty yards or so farther on, Ramu opened his eyes. Bright summer sunshine flooded them, and seemed to flood his mind, as well. He looked with gladness at the dusty blue sky, the dusty yellow fields, the beaten-silver track of the road upon which he walked. He marked the passage of a bird from one tree to the next with laughter, and although he never turned once to see the huge diamond which lay close behind him, his sores and his aching back were forgotten.

"Thank God for sight!" he cried. "Thank God for that, at least! Perhaps I shall see something of value on the road—an old bottle worth money in the bazaar, or even a coin—but even if I do not, I shall look my fill. Thank God for sight! Thank God for God!"

And, well satisfied, he set off again, leaving the diamond behind. God then reached down and scooped it up, replacing it beneath the mountain in Africa from which He had taken it. Almost as an afterthought (if God can be said to have afterthoughts), He plucked up an ironwood branch from the veldt and dropped it onto the Chandrapur Road, as He had dropped the diamond.

“The difference is,” God told Uriel, “our friend Ramu will find the branch, and it will serve him as a staff for the rest of his days.”

Uriel looked at God (as nearly as anyone—even an archangel—can look at that burning face, at least) uncertainly. “Have You given me a lesson, Lord?”

“I don’t know,” God responded blandly. “Have I?”



**STEPHEN KING** is the author of more than fifty books, all of them worldwide bestsellers. Among his most recent are *Just After Sunset*, *Duma Key*, *Lisey's Story*, the Dark Tower novels, *Cell*, *From a Buick 8*, *Everything's Eventual*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, and *Bag of Bones*. In *Stephen King Goes to the Movies*, he reflects on the filming of five of his most popular short stories, including the making of *The Shawshank Redemption* and *1408*. His acclaimed nonfiction book, *On Writing*, was also a bestseller. He was the recipient of the 2003 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters and the 2007 Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.



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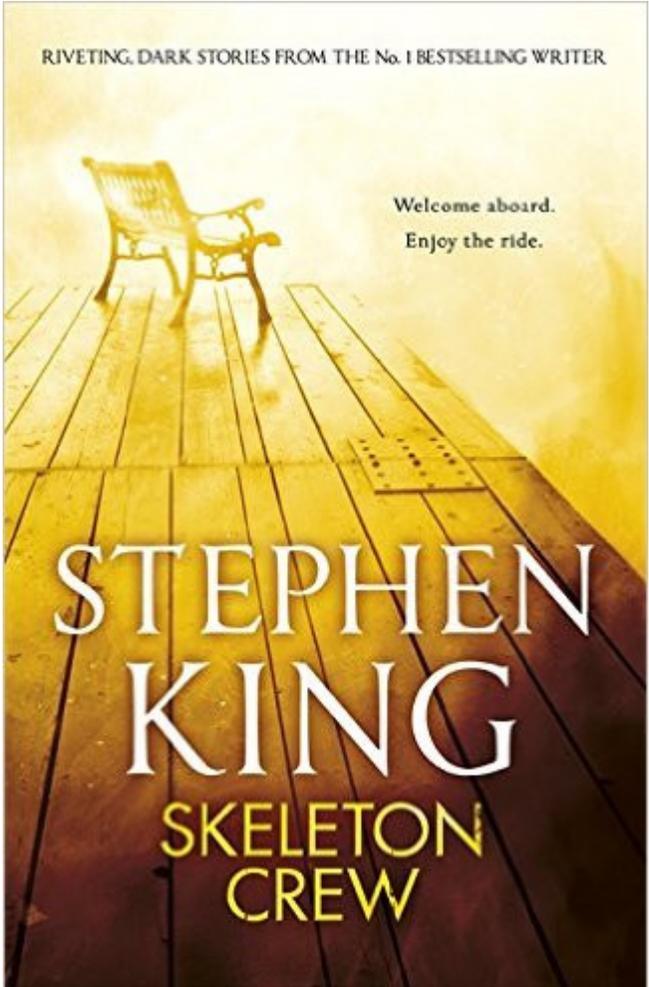
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*This book is for  
Arthur and Joyce Greene*

I'm your boogie man  
that's what I am  
and I'm here to do  
whatever I can . . .

—*K.C. and the Sunshine Band*

**Do you love?**

## Introduction

*Wait—just a few minutes. I want to talk to you . . . and then I am going to kiss you. Wait . . .*

### I

Here's some more short stories, if you want them. They span a long period of my life. The oldest, "The Reaper's Image," was written when I was eighteen, in the summer before I started college. I thought of the idea, as a matter of fact, when I was out in the back yard of our house in West Durham, Maine, shooting baskets with my brother, and reading it over again made me feel a little sad for those old times. The most recent, "The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet," was finished in November of 1983. That is a span of seventeen years, and does not count as much, I suppose, if put in comparison with such long and rich careers as those enjoyed by writers as diverse as Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, Mark Twain, and Eudora Welty, but it is a longer time than Stephen Crane had, and about the same length as the span of H. P. Lovecraft's career.

A friend of mine asked me a year or two ago why I still bother. My novels, he pointed out, were making very good money, while the short stories were actually losers.

"How do you figure that?" I asked.

He tapped the then-current issue of *Playboy*, which had occasioned this discussion. I had a story in it ("Word Processor of the Gods," which you'll find in here someplace), and had pointed it out to him with what I thought was justifiable pride.

"Well, I'll show you," he said, "if you don't mind telling me how much you got for the piece."

"I don't mind," I said. "I got two thousand dollars. Not exactly chicken-dirt, Wyatt."

(His name isn't really Wyatt, but I don't want to embarrass him, if you can dig that.) "No, you didn't get two thousand," Wyatt said.

"I didn't? Have you been looking at my bankbook?"

"Nope. But I know you got eighteen hundred dollars for it, because your agent gets ten percent."

"Damn right," I said. "He deserves it. He got me in *Playboy*. I've always wanted to have a story in *Playboy*. So it was eighteen hundred bucks instead of two thousand, big deal."

"No, you got \$1,710."

"*What?*"

"Well, didn't you tell me your business manager gets five percent of the net?"

"Well, okay—eighteen hundred less ninety bucks. I still think \$1,710 is not bad for—"

"Except it wasn't," this sadist pushed on. "It was *really* a measly \$855."

"*What?*"

"You want to tell me you're not in a fifty-percent tax bracket, Steve-O?"

I was silent. He knew I was.

"And," he said gently, "it was *really* just about \$769.50, wasn't it?"

I nodded reluctantly. Maine has an income tax which requires residents in my bracket to pay ten percent of their federal taxes to the state. Ten percent of \$855 is \$85.50.

"How long did it take you to write this story?" Wyatt persisted.

"About a week," I said ungraciously. It was really more like two, with a couple of rewrites added in, but I wasn't going to tell *Wyatt* that.

"So you made \$769.50 that week," he said. "You know how much a plumber makes per week in New York, Steve-O?"

"No," I said. I hate people who call me Steve-O. "And neither do you."

"Sure I do," he said. "About \$769.50, after taxes. And so, far as I can see, what you got there is a dead loss." He laughed like hell and

then asked if I had any more beer in the fridge. I said no.

I'm going to send goodbuddy Wyatt a copy of this book with a little note. The note will say: *I am not going to tell you how much I was paid for this book, but I'll tell you this, Wyatt: my total take on "Word Processor of the Gods"—net—is now just over twenty-three hundred dollars, not even counting the \$769.50 you hee-hawed so over at my house at the lake. I will sign the note Steve-O and add a PS: There really was more beer in the fridge, and I drank it myself after you were gone that day.*

That ought to fix him.

## I

Except it's not the money. I'll admit I was bowled over to be paid \$2,000 for "Word Processor of the Gods," but I was equally as bowled over to be paid \$40 for "The Reaper's Image" when it was published in *Startling Mystery Stories* or to be sent twelve contributor's copies when "Here There Be Tygers" was published in *Ubris*, the University of Maine college literary magazine (I am of a kindly nature and have always assumed that *Ubris* was a cockney way of spelling *Hubris*).

I mean, you're glad of the money; let us not descend into total fantasy here (or at least not yet). When I began to publish short fiction in men's magazines such as *Cavalier*, *Dude*, and *Adam* with some regularity, I was twenty-five and my wife was twenty-three. We had one child and another was on the way. I was working fifty or sixty hours a week in a laundry and making \$1.75 an hour. *Budget* is not exactly the word for whatever it was we were on; it was more like a modified version of the Bataan Death March. The checks for those stories (on publication, never on acceptance) always seemed to come just in time to buy antibiotics for the baby's ear infection or to keep the telephone in the apartment for another record-breaking month. Money is, let us face it, very handy and very heady. As Lily Cavanaugh says in *The Talisman* (and it was Peter Straub's line, not

mine), “You can never be too thin or too rich.” And if you don’t believe it, you were never really fat or really poor.

All the same, you don’t do it for money, or you’re a monkey. You don’t think of the bottom line, or you’re a monkey. You don’t think of it in terms of hourly wage, yearly wage, even lifetime wage, or you’re a monkey. In the end you don’t even do it for love, although it would be nice to think so. You do it because to not do it is suicide. And while that is tough, there are compensations I could never tell Wyatt about, because he is not that kind of guy.

Take “Word Processor of the Gods” as a for-instance. Not the best story I ever wrote; not one that’s ever going to win any prizes. But it’s not too bad, either. Sort of fun. I had just gotten my own word processor a month before (it’s a big Wang, and keep your smart comments to yourself, what do you say?) and I was still exploring what it could and couldn’t do. In particular I was fascinated with the INSERT and DELETE buttons, which make cross-outs and carets almost obsolete.

I caught myself a nasty little bug one day. What the hell, happens to the best of us. Everything inside me that wasn’t nailed down came out from one end or the other, most of it at roughly the speed of sound. By nightfall I felt very bad indeed—chills, fever, joints full of spun glass. Most of the muscles in my stomach were sprung, and my back ached.

I spent that night in the guest bedroom (which is only four running steps from the bathroom) and slept from nine until about two in the morning. I woke up knowing that was it for the night. I only stayed in bed because I was too sick to get up. So there I lay, and I got thinking about my word processor, and INSERT and DELETE. And I thought, “Wouldn’t it be funny if this guy wrote a sentence, and then, when he pushed DELETE, the subject of the sentence was deleted from the world?” That’s the way just about all of my stories start; “Wouldn’t it be funny if—?” And while many of them are scary, I never *told* one to people (as opposed to writing it down) that didn’t cause at least some laughter, no matter what I saw as the final *intent* of that story.

Anyway, I started imaging on DELETE to begin with, not exactly making up a story so much as seeing pictures in my head. I was watching this guy (who is always to me just the I-Guy until the story actually starts coming out in words, when you have to give him a name) delete pictures hanging on the wall, and chairs in the living room, and New York City, and the concept of war. Then I thought of having him *insert* things and having those things just pop into the world.

Then I thought, “So give him a wife that’s bad to the bone—he can delete her, maybe—and someone else who’s good to maybe insert.” And then I fell asleep, and the next morning I was pretty much okay again. The bug went away but the story didn’t. I wrote it, and you’ll see it didn’t turn out exactly as the foregoing might suggest, but then—they never do.

I don’t need to draw you a picture, do I? You don’t do it for money; you do it because it saves you from feeling bad. A man or woman able to turn his or her back on something like that is just a monkey, that’s all. The story paid me by letting me get back to sleep when I felt as if I couldn’t. I paid the story back by getting it concrete, which it wanted to be. The rest is just side effects.

### 3

I hope you’ll like this book, Constant Reader. I suspect you won’t like it as well as you would a novel, because most of you have forgotten the real pleasures of the short story. Reading a good long novel is in many ways like having a long and satisfying affair. I can remember commuting between Maine and Pittsburgh during the making of *Creepshow*, and going mostly by car because of my fear of flying coupled with the air traffic controllers’ strike and Mr. Reagan’s subsequent firing of the strikers (Reagan, it appears, is really only an ardent unionist if the unions in question are in Poland). I had a reading of *The Thorn Birds*, by Colleen McCullough, on eight cassette tapes, and for a space of about five weeks I wasn’t even

having an affair with that novel; I felt *married* to it (my favorite part was when the wicked old lady rotted and sprouted maggots in about sixteen hours).

A short story is a different thing altogether—a short story is like a quick kiss in the dark from a stranger. That is not, of course, the same thing as an affair or a marriage, but kisses can be sweet, and their very brevity forms their own attraction. Writing short stories hasn't gotten easier for me over the years; it's gotten harder. The time to do them has shrunk, for one thing. They keep wanting to bloat, for another (I have a real problem with bloat—I write like fat ladies diet). And it seems harder to find the voice for these tales—all too often the I-Guy just floats away.

The thing to do is to keep trying, I think. It's better to keep kissing and get your face slapped a few times than it is to give up altogether.

## 4

All right; that's just about it from this end. Can I thank a few people (you can skip this part if you want to)?

Thanks to Bill Thompson for getting this going. He and I put *Night Shift*, the first book of short stories, together, and it was his idea to do this one. He's moved on to Arbor House since, but I love him just as well there as anywhere else. If there really is a gentleman left in the gentleman's profession of book publishing, it's this guy. God bless yer Irish heart, Bill.

Thanks to Phyllis Grann at Putnam for taking up the slack.

Thanks to Kirby McCauley, my agent, another Irishman, who sold most of these, and who pulled the longest of them, "The Mist," out of me with a chain fall.

This is starting to sound like an Academy Awards acceptance speech, but fuck it.

Thanks are due to magazine editors, as well—Kathy Sagan at *Redbook*, Alice Turner at *Playboy*, Nye Willden at *Cavalier*, the folks at *Yankee*, to Ed Ferman—my man!—at *Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

I owe just about everybody, and I could name them, but I won't bore you with any more. Most thanks are to you, Constant Reader, just like always—because it all goes out to you in the end. Without you, it's a dead circuit. If any of these do it for you, take you away, get you over the boring lunch hour, the plane ride, or the hour in detention hall for throwing spitballs, that's the payback.

## 5

Okay—commercial's over. Grab onto my arm now. Hold tight. We are going into a number of dark places, but I think I know the way. Just don't let go of my arm. And if I should kiss you in the dark, it's no big deal; it's only because you are my love.

Now listen:

April 15th, 1984  
Bangor, Maine

# The Mist

## I. The Coming of the Storm

This is what happened. On the night that the worst heat wave in northern New England history finally broke—the night of July 19—the entire western Maine region was lashed with the most vicious thunderstorms I have ever seen.

We lived on Long Lake, and we saw the first of the storms beating its way across the water toward us just before dark. For an hour before, the air had been utterly still. The American flag that my father put up on our boathouse in 1936 lay limp against its pole. Not even its hem fluttered. The heat was like a solid thing, and it seemed as deep as sullen quarry-water. That afternoon the three of us had gone swimming, but the water was no relief unless you went out deep. Neither Steffy nor I wanted to go deep because Billy couldn't. Billy is five.

We ate a cold supper at five-thirty, picking listlessly at ham sandwiches and potato salad out on the deck that faces the lake. Nobody seemed to want anything but Pepsi, which was in a steel bucket of ice cubes.

After supper Billy went out back to play on his monkey bars for a while. Steff and I sat without talking much, smoking and looking across the sullen flat mirror of the lake to Harrison on the far side. A few powerboats droned back and forth. The evergreens over there looked dusty and beaten. In the west, great purple thunderheads were slowly building up, massing like an army. Lightning flashed inside them. Next door, Brent Norton's radio, tuned to that classical-music station that broadcasts from the top of Mount Washington, sent out a loud bray of static each time the lightning flashed. Norton was a lawyer from New Jersey and his place on Long Lake was only a summer cottage with no furnace or insulation. Two years before,

we had a boundary dispute that finally wound up in county court. I won. Norton claimed I won because he was an out-of-towner. There was no love lost between us.

Steff sighed and fanned the top of her breasts with the edge of her halter. I doubted if it cooled her off much but it improved the view a lot.

“I don’t want to scare you,” I said, “but there’s a bad storm on the way, I think.”

She looked at me doubtfully. “There were thunderheads last night and the night before, David. They just broke up.”

“They won’t do that tonight.”

“No?”

“If it gets bad enough, we’re going to go downstairs.”

“How bad do you think it can get?”

My dad was the first to build a year-round home on this side of the lake. When he was hardly more than a kid he and his brothers put up a summer place where the house now stood, and in 1938 a summer storm knocked it flat, stone walls and all. Only the boathouse escaped. A year later he started the big house. It’s the trees that do the damage in a bad blow. They get old, and the wind knocks them over. It’s mother nature’s way of cleaning house periodically.

“I don’t really know,” I said, truthfully enough. I had only heard stories about the great storm of thirty-eight. “But the wind can come off the lake like an express train.”

Billy came back a while later, complaining that the monkey bars were no fun because he was “all sweated up.” I ruffled his hair and gave him another Pepsi. More work for the dentist.

The thunderheads were getting closer, pushing away the blue. There was no doubt now that a storm was coming. Norton had turned off his radio. Billy sat between his mother and me, watching the sky, fascinated. Thunder boomed, rolling slowly across the lake and then echoing back again. The clouds twisted and rolled, now black, now purple, now veined, now black again. They gradually overspread the lake, and I could see a delicate caul of rain extending down from them. It was still a distance away. As we watched, it was probably raining on Bolster’s Mills, or maybe even Norway.

The air began to move, jerkily at first, lifting the flag and then dropping it again. It began to freshen and grew steady, first cooling the perspiration on our bodies and then seeming to freeze it.

That was when I saw the silver veil rolling across the lake. It blotted out Harrison in seconds and then came straight at us. The powerboats had vacated the scene.

Billy stood up from his chair, which was a miniature replica of our director's chairs, complete with his name printed on the back.

"Daddy! Look!"

"Let's go in," I said. I stood up and put my arm around his shoulders.

"But do you see it? Dad, what is it?"

"A water-cyclone. Let's go in."

Steff threw a quick, startled glance at my face and then said, "Come on, Billy. Do what your father says."

We went in through the sliding glass doors that give on the living room. I slid the door shut on its track and paused for another look out. The silver veil was three-quarters of the way across the lake. It had resolved itself into a crazily spinning teacup between the lowering black sky and the surface of the water, which had gone the color of lead streaked with white chrome. The lake had begun to look eerily like the ocean, with high waves rolling in and sending spume up from the docks and breakwaters. Out in the middle, big whitecaps were tossing their heads back and forth.

Watching the water-cyclone was hypnotic. It was nearly on top of us when lightning flashed so brightly that it printed everything on my eyes in negative for thirty seconds afterward. The telephone gave out a startled *ting!* and I turned to see my wife and son standing directly in front of the big picture window that gives us a panoramic view of the lake to the northwest.

One of those terrible visions came to me—I think they are reserved exclusively for husbands and fathers—of the picture window blowing in with a low hard coughing sound and sending jagged arrows of glass into my wife's bare stomach, into my boy's face and neck. The horrors of the Inquisition are nothing compared to the fates your mind can imagine for your loved ones.

I grabbed them both hard and jerked them away. “What the hell are you doing? Get away from there!”

Steff gave me a startled glance. Billy only looked at me as if he had been partially awakened from a deep dream. I led them into the kitchen and hit the light switch. The phone ting-a-linged again.

Then the wind came. It was as if the house had taken off like a 747. It was a high, breathless whistling, sometimes deepening to a bass roar before glissading up to a whooping scream.

“Go downstairs,” I told Steff, and now I had to shout to make myself heard. Directly over the house thunder whacked mammoth planks together and Billy shrank against my leg.

“You come too!” Steff yelled back.

I nodded and made shooing gestures. I had to pry Billy off my leg. “Go with your mother. I want to get some candles in case the lights go off.”

He went with her, and I started opening cabinets. Candles are funny things, you know. You lay them by every spring, knowing that a summer storm may knock out the power. And when the time comes, they hide.

I was pawing through the fourth cabinet, past the half-ounce of grass that Steff and I bought four years ago and had still not smoked much of, past Billy’s wind-up set of chattering teeth from the Auburn Novelty Shop, past the drifts of photos Steffy kept forgetting to glue in our album. I looked under a Sears catalogue and behind a Kewpie doll from Taiwan that I had won at the Fryeburg Fair knocking over wooden milk bottles with tennis balls.

I found the candles behind the Kewpie doll with its glazed dead man’s eyes. They were still wrapped in their cellophane. As my hand closed around them the lights went out and the only electricity was the stuff in the sky. The dining room was lit in a series of shutterflashes that were white and purple. Downstairs I heard Billy start to cry and the low murmur of Steff soothing him.

I had to have one more look at the storm.

The water-cyclone had either passed us or broken up when it reached the shoreline, but I still couldn’t see twenty yards out onto the lake. The water was in complete turmoil. I saw someone’s dock

—the Jassers', maybe—hurry by with its main supports alternately turned up to the sky and buried in the churning water.

I went downstairs. Billy ran to me and clung to my legs. I lifted him up and gave him a hug. Then I lit the candles. We sat in the guest room down the hall from my little studio and looked at each other's faces in the flickering yellow glow and listened to the storm roar and bash at our house. About twenty minutes later we heard a ripping, rending crash as one of the big pines went down nearby. Then there was a lull.

"Is it over?" Steff asked.

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe only for a while."

We went upstairs, each of us carrying a candle, like monks going to vespers. Billy carried his proudly and carefully. Carrying a candle, carrying the *fire*, was a very big deal for him. It helped him forget about being afraid.

It was too dark to see what damage had been done around the house. It was past Billy's bedtime, but neither of us suggested putting him in. We sat in the living room, listened to the wind, and looked at the lightning.

About an hour later it began to crank up again. For three weeks the temperature had been over ninety, and on six of those twenty-one days the National Weather Service station at the Portland Jetport had reported temperatures of over one hundred degrees. Queer weather. Coupled with the grueling winter we had come through and the late spring, some people had dragged out that old chestnut about the long-range results of the fifties A-bomb tests again. That, and of course, the end of the world. The oldest chestnut of them all.

The second squall wasn't so hard, but we heard the crash of several trees weakened by the first onslaught. As the wind began to die down again, one thudded heavily on the roof, like a fist dropped on a coffin lid. Billy jumped and looked apprehensively upward.

"It'll hold, champ," I said.

Billy smiled nervously.

Around ten o'clock the last squall came. It was bad. The wind howled almost as loudly as it had the first time, and lightning seemed

to be flashing all around us. More trees fell, and there was a splintering crash down by the water that made Steff utter a low cry. Billy had gone to sleep on her lap.

“David, what was that?”

“I think it was the boathouse.”

“Oh. Oh, Jesus.”

“Steffy, I want us to go downstairs again.” I took Billy in my arms and stood up with him. Steff’s eyes were big and frightened.

“David, are we going to be all right?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

We went downstairs. Ten minutes later, as the final squall peaked, there was a splintering crash from upstairs—the picture window. So maybe my vision earlier hadn’t been so crazy after all. Steff, who had been dozing, woke up with a little shriek, and Billy stirred uneasily in the guest bed.

“The rain will come in,” she said. “It’ll ruin the furniture.”

“If it does, it does. It’s insured.”

“That doesn’t make it any better,” she said in an upset, scolding voice. “Your mother’s dresser . . . our new sofa . . . the color TV . . .”

“Shhh,” I said. “Go to sleep.”

“I can’t,” she said, and five minutes later she had.

I stayed awake for another half hour with one lit candle for company, listening to the thunder walk and talk outside. I had a feeling that there were going to be a lot of people from the lakefront communities calling their insurance agents in the morning, a lot of chainsaws burring as cottage owners cut up the trees that had fallen on their roofs and battered through their windows, and a lot of orange CMP trucks on the road.

The storm was fading now, with no sign of a new squall coming in. I went back upstairs, leaving Steff and Billy on the bed, and looked into the living room. The sliding glass door had held. But where the picture window had been there was now a jagged hole stuffed with birch leaves. It was the top of the old tree that had stood by our outside basement access for as long as I could remember. Looking

at its top, now visiting in our living room, I could understand what Steff had meant by saying insurance didn't make it any better. I had loved that tree. It had been a hard campaigner of many winters, the one tree on the lakeside of the house that was exempt from my own chainsaw. Big chunks of glass on the rug reflected my candle-flame over and over. I reminded myself to warn Steff and Billy. They would want to wear their slippers in here. Both of them liked to slop around barefoot in the morning.

I went downstairs again. All three of us slept together in the guest bed, Billy between Steff and me. I had a dream that I saw God walking across Harrison on the far side of the lake, a God so gigantic that above the waist He was lost in a clear blue sky. In the dream I could hear the rending crack and splinter of breaking trees as God stamped the woods into the shape of His footsteps. He was circling the lake, coming toward the Bridgton side, toward us, and all the houses and cottages and summer places were bursting into purple-white flame like lightning, and soon the smoke covered everything. The smoke covered everything like a mist.

## **II. After the Storm. Norton. A Trip to Town.**

*"Jeee-pers,"* Billy said.

He was standing by the fence that separates our property from Norton's and looking down our driveway. The driveway runs a quarter of a mile to a camp road which, in its turn, runs about three-quarters of a mile to a stretch of two-lane blacktop, called Kansas Road. From Kansas Road you can go anywhere you want, as long as it's Bridgton.

I saw what Billy was looking at and my heart went cold.

"Don't go any closer, champ. Right there is close enough."

Billy didn't argue.

The morning was bright and as clear as a bell. The sky, which had been a mushy, hazy color during the heat wave, had regained a

deep, crisp blue that was nearly autumnal. There was a light breeze, making cheerful sun-dapples move back and forth in the driveway. Not far from where Billy was standing there was a steady hissing noise, and in the grass there was what you might at first have taken for a writhing bundle of snakes. The power lines leading to our house had fallen in an untidy tangle about twenty feet away and lay in a burned patch of grass. They were twisting lazily and spitting. If the trees and grass hadn't been so completely damped down by the torrential rains, the house might have gone up. As it was, there was only that black patch where the wires had touched directly.

"Could that lectercute a person, Daddy?"

"Yeah. It could."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"Nothing. Wait for the CMP."

"When will they come?"

"I don't know." Five-year-olds have as many questions as Hallmark has cards. "I imagine they're pretty busy this morning. Want to take a walk up to the end of the driveway with me?"

He started to come and then stopped, eyeing the wires nervously. One of them humped up and turned over lazily, as if beckoning.

"Daddy, can lectricity shoot through the ground?"

A fair question. "Yes, but don't worry. Electricity wants the ground, not you, Billy. You'll be all right if you stay away from the wires."

"Wants the ground," he muttered, and then came to me. We walked up the driveway holding hands.

It was worse than I had imagined. Trees had fallen across the drive in four different places, one of them small, two of them middling, and one old baby that must have been five feet through the middle. Moss was crusted onto it like a moldy corset.

Branches, some half-stripped of their leaves, lay everywhere in jackstraw profusion. Billy and I walked up to the camp road, tossing the smaller branches off into the woods on either side. It reminded me of a summer's day that had been maybe twenty-five years before; I couldn't have been much older than Billy was now. All my uncles had been here, and they had spent the day in the woods with axes and hatchets and Darcy poles, cutting brush. Later that

afternoon they had all sat down to the trestle picnic table my dad and mom used to have and there had been a monster meal of hot dogs and hamburgers and potato salad. The 'Gansett beer had flowed like water and my uncle Reuben took a dive into the lake with all his clothes on, even his deck-shoes. In those days there were still deer in these woods.

“Daddy, can I go down to the lake?”

He was tired of throwing branches, and the thing to do with a little boy when he's tired is to let him go do something else. “Sure.”

We walked back to the house together and then Billy cut right, going around the house and giving the downed wires a large berth. I went left, into the garage, to get my McCullough. As I had suspected, I could already hear the unpleasant song of the chainsaw up and down the lake.

I topped up the tank, took off my shirt, and was starting back up the driveway when Steff came out. She eyed the downed trees lying across the driveway nervously.

“How bad is it?”

“I can cut it up. How bad is it in there?”

“Well, I got the glass cleaned up, but you're going to have to do something about that tree, David. We can't have a tree in the living room.”

“No,” I said. “I guess we can't.”

We looked at each other in the morning sunlight and got giggling. I set the McCullough down on the cement areaway, and kissed her, holding her buttocks firmly.

“Don't,” she murmured. “Billy's—”

He came tearing around the corner of the house just then. “Dad! Daddy! Y'oughta see the—”

Steffy saw the live wires and screamed for him to watch out. Billy, who was a good distance away from them, pulled up short and stared at his mother as if she had gone mad.

“I'm okay, Mom,” he said in the careful tone of voice you use to placate the very old and senile. He walked toward us, showing us how all right he was, and Steff began to tremble in my arms.

“It's all right,” I said in her ear. “He knows about them.”

“Yes, but people get killed,” she said. “They have ads all the time on television about live wires, people get—Billy, I want you to come in the house right now!”

“Aw, come on, Mom! I wanna show Dad the boathouse!” He was almost bug-eyed with excitement and disappointment. He had gotten a taste of poststorm apocalypse and wanted to share it.

“You go in right now! Those wires are dangerous and—”

“Dad said they want the ground, not me—”

“Billy, don’t you argue with me!”

“I’ll come down and look, champ. Go on down yourself.” I could feel Steff tensing against me. “Go around the other side, kiddo.”

“Yeah! Okay!”

He tore past us, taking the stone steps that led around the west end of the house two by two. He disappeared with his shirttail flying, trailing back one word—“Wow!”—as he spotted some other piece of destruction.

“He knows about the wires, Steffy.” I took her gently by the shoulders. “He’s scared of them. That’s good. It makes him safe.”

One tear tracked down her cheek. “David, I’m scared.”

“Come on! It’s over.”

“Is it? Last winter . . . and the late spring . . . they called it a black spring in town . . . they said there hadn’t been one in these parts since 1888—”

“They” undoubtedly meant Mrs. Carmody, who kept the Bridgton Antiquary, a junk shop that Steff liked to rummage around in sometimes. Billy loved to go with her. In one of the shadowy, dusty back rooms, stuffed owls with gold-ringed eyes spread their wings forever as their feet endlessly grasped varnished logs; stuffed raccoons stood in a trio around a “stream” that was a long fragment of dusty mirror; and one moth-eaten wolf, which was foaming sawdust instead of saliva around his muzzle, snarled a creepy eternal snarl. Mrs. Carmody claimed the wolf was shot by her father as it came to drink from Stevens Brook one September afternoon in 1901.

The expeditions to Mrs. Carmody’s Antiquary shop worked well for my wife and son. She was into carnival glass and he was into death

in the name of taxidermy. But I thought that the old woman exercised a rather unpleasant hold over Steff's mind, which was in all other ways practical and hardheaded. She had found Steff's vulnerable spot, a mental Achilles' heel. Nor was Steff the only one in town who was fascinated by Mrs. Carmody's gothic pronouncements and folk remedies (which were always prescribed in God's name).

Stump-water would take off bruises if your husband was the sort who got a bit too free with his fists after three drinks. You could tell what kind of a winter was coming by counting the rings on the caterpillars in June or by measuring the thickness of August honeycomb. And now, good God protect and preserve us, THE BLACK SPRING OF 1888 (add your own exclamation points, as many as you think it deserves). I had also heard the story. It's one they like to pass around up here—if the spring is cold enough, the ice on the lakes will eventually turn as black as a rotted tooth. It's rare, but hardly a once-in-a-century occurrence. They like to pass it around, but I doubt that many could pass it around with as much conviction as Mrs. Carmody.

"We had a hard winter and a late spring," I said. "Now we're having a hot summer. And we had a storm but it's over. You're not acting like yourself, Stephanie."

"That wasn't an ordinary storm," she said in that same husky voice.

"No," I said. "I'll go along with you there."

I had heard the Black Spring story from Bill Giosti, who owned and operated—after a fashion—Giosti's Mobil in Casco Village. Bill ran the place with his three tosspot sons (with occasional help from his four tosspot grandsons . . . when they could take time off from tinkering with their snowmobiles and dirtbikes). Bill was seventy, looked eighty, and could still drink like twenty-three when the mood was on him. Billy and I had taken the Scout in for a fill-up the day after a surprise mid-May storm dropped nearly a foot of wet, heavy snow on the region, covering the new grass and flowers. Giosti had been in his cups for fair, and happy to pass along the Black Spring story, along with his own original twist. But we get snow in May sometimes; it comes and it's gone two days later. It's no big deal.

Steff was glancing doubtfully at the downed wires again. “When will the power company come?”

“Just as soon as they can. It won’t be long. I just don’t want you to worry about Billy. His head’s on pretty straight. He forgets to pick up his clothes, but he isn’t going to go and step on a bunch of live lines. He’s got a good, healthy dose of self-interest.” I touched a corner of her mouth and it obliged by turning up in the beginning of a smile. “Better?”

“You always make it seem better,” she said, and that made me feel good.

From the lakeside of the house Billy was yelling for us to come and see.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go look at the damage.”

She snorted ruefully. “If I want to look at damage, I can go sit in my living room.”

“Make a little kid happy, then.”

We walked down the stone steps hand in hand. We had just reached the first turn in them when Billy came from the other direction at speed, almost knocking us over.

“Take it easy,” Steff said, frowning a little. Maybe, in her mind, she was seeing him skidding into that deadly nest of live wires instead of the two of us.

“You gotta come see!” Billy panted. “The boathouse is all bashed! There’s a dock on the rocks . . . and trees in the boat cove . . . Jesus *Christ!*”

“Billy Drayton!” Steff thundered.

“Sorry, Ma—but you gotta—wow!” He was gone again.

“Having spoken, the doomsayer departs,” I said, and that made Steff giggle again. “Listen, after I cut up those trees across the driveway, I’ll go by the Central Maine Power office on Portland Road. Tell them what we got. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said gratefully. “When do you think you can go?”

Except for the big tree—the one with the moldy corset of moss—it would have been an hour’s work. With the big one added in, I didn’t think the job would be done until eleven or so.

“I’ll give you lunch here, then. But you’ll have to get some things at the market for me . . . we’re almost out of milk and butter. Also . . . well, I’ll have to make you a list.”

Give a woman a disaster and she turns squirrel. I gave her a hug and nodded. We went on around the house. It didn’t take more than a glance to understand why Billy had been a little overwhelmed.

“Lordy,” Steff said in a faint voice.

From where we stood we had enough elevation to be able to see almost a quarter of a mile of shoreline—the Bibber property to our left, our own, and Brent Norton’s to our right.

The huge old pine that had guarded our boat cove had been sheared off halfway up. What was left looked like a brutally sharpened pencil, and the inside of the tree seemed a glistening and defenseless white against the age-and-weather-darkened outer bark. A hundred feet of tree, the old pine’s top half, lay partly submerged in our shallow cove. It occurred to me that we were very lucky our little Star-Cruiser wasn’t sunk underneath it. The week before, it had developed engine trouble and it was still at the Naples marina, patiently waiting its turn.

On the other side of our little piece of shorefront, the boathouse my father had built—the boathouse that had once housed a sixty-foot Chris-Craft when the Drayton family fortunes had been at a higher mark than they were today—lay under another big tree. It was the one that had stood on Norton’s side of the property line, I saw. That raised the first flush of anger. The tree had been dead for five years and he should have long since had it taken down. Now it was three-quarters of the way down; our boathouse was propping it up. The roof had taken on a drunken, swaybacked look. The wind had swirled shingles from the hole the tree had made all over the point of land the boathouse stood on. Billy’s description, “bashed,” was as good as any.

“That’s Norton’s tree!” Steff said. And she said it with such hurt indignation that I had to smile in spite of the pain I felt. The flagpole was lying in the water and Old Glory floated soggily beside it in a tangle of lanyard. And I could imagine Norton’s response: Sue me.

Billy was on the rock breakwater, examining the dock that had washed up on the stones. It was painted in jaunty blue and yellow stripes. He looked back over his shoulder at us and yelled gleefully, "It's the Martinses', isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," I said. "Wade in and fish the flag out, would you, Big Bill?"

"Sure!"

To the right of the breakwater was a small sandy beach. In 1941, before Pearl Harbor paid off the Great Depression in blood, my dad hired a man to truck in that fine beach sand—six dumptrucks full—and to spread it out to a depth that is about nipple-high on me, say five feet. The workman charged eighty bucks for the job, and the sand has never moved. Just as well, you know, you can't put a sandy beach in on your land now. Now that the sewerage runoff from the booming cottage-building industry has killed most of the fish and made the rest of them unsafe to eat, the EPA has forbidden installing sand beaches. They might upset the ecology of the lake, you see, and it is presently against the law for anyone except land developers to do that.

Billy went for the flag—then stopped. At the same moment I felt Steff go rigid against me, and I saw it myself. The Harrison side of the lake was gone. It had been buried under a line of bright-white mist, like a fair-weather cloud fallen to earth.

My dream of the night before recurred, and when Steff asked me what it was, the word that nearly jumped first from my mouth was *God*.

"David?"

You couldn't see even a hint of the shoreline over there, but years of looking at Long Lake made me believe that the shoreline wasn't hidden by much; only yards, maybe. The edge of the mist was nearly ruler-straight.

"What is it, Dad?" Billy yelled. He was in the water up to his knees, groping for the soggy flag.

"Fogbank," I said.

"On the *lake*?" Steff asked doubtfully, and I could see Mrs. Carmody's influence in her eyes. Damn the woman. My own moment

of unease was passing. Dreams, after all, are insubstantial things, like mist itself.

“Sure. You’ve seen fog on the lake before.”

“Never like that. That looks more like a cloud.”

“It’s the brightness of the sun,” I said. “It’s the same way clouds look from an airplane when you fly over them.”

“What would do it? We only get fog in damp weather.”

“No, we’ve got it right now,” I said. “Harrison does, anyway. It’s a little leftover from the storm, that’s all. Two fronts meeting. Something along that line.”

“David, are you sure?”

I laughed and hauled my arm around her neck. “No, actually, I’m bullshitting like crazy. If I was sure, I’d be doing the weather on the six-o’clock news. Go on and make your shopping list.”

She gave me one more doubtful glance, looked at the fogbank for a moment or two with the flat of her hand held up to shade her eyes, and then shook her head. “Weird,” she said, and walked away.

For Billy, the mist had lost its novelty. He had fished the flag and a tangle of lanyard out of the water. We spread it on the lawn to dry.

“I heard it was wrong to ever let the flag touch the ground, Daddy,” he said in a businesslike, let’s-get-this-out-of-the-way tone.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Victor McAllister says they lectercute people for it.”

“Well, you tell Vic he’s full of what makes the grass grow green.”

“Horseshit, right?” Billy is a bright boy, but oddly humorless. To the champ, everything is serious business. I’m hoping that he’ll live long enough to learn that in this world that is a very dangerous attitude.

“Yeah, right, but don’t tell your mother I said so. When the flag’s dry, we’ll put it away. We’ll even fold it into a cocked hat, so we’ll be on safe ground there.”

“Daddy, will we fix the boathouse roof and get a new flagpole?” For the first time he looked anxious. He’d maybe had enough destruction for a while.

I clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re damn tooting.”

“Can I go over to the Bibbers’ and see what happened there?”

“Just for a couple of minutes. They’ll be cleaning up, too, and sometimes that makes people feel a little ugly.” The way I presently felt about Norton.

“Okay. Bye!” He was off.

“Stay out of their way, champ. And Billy?”

He glanced back.

“Remember about the live wires. If you see more, steer clear of them.”

“Sure, Dad.”

I stood there for a moment, first surveying the damage, then glancing out at the mist again. It seemed closer, but it was very hard to tell for sure. If it was closer, it was defying all the laws of nature, because the wind—a very gentle breeze—was against it. That, of course, was patently impossible. It was very, very white. The only thing I can compare it to would be fresh-fallen snow lying in dazzling contrast to the deep-blue brilliance of the winter sky. But snow reflects hundreds and hundreds of diamond points in the sun, and this peculiar fogbank, although bright and clean-looking, did not sparkle. In spite of what Steff had said, mist isn’t uncommon on clear days, but when there’s a lot of it, the suspended moisture almost always causes a rainbow. But there was no rainbow here.

The unease was back, tugging at me, but before it could deepen I heard a low mechanical sound—*whut-whut-whut!*—followed by a barely audible “Shit!” The mechanical sound was repeated, but this time there was no oath. The third time the chuffing sound was followed by “Mother-fuck!” in that same low I’m-all-by-myself-but-boy-am-I-pissed tone.

*Whut-whut-whut-whut—*

—Silence—

—then: “You cunt.”

I began to grin. Sound carries well out here, and all the buzzing chainsaws were fairly distant. Distant enough for me to recognize the not-so-dulcet tones of my next-door neighbor, the renowned lawyer and lakefront-property-owner, Brenton Norton.

I moved down a little closer to the water, pretending to stroll toward the dock beached on our breakwater. Now I could see

Norton. He was in the clearing beside his screened-in porch, standing on a carpet of old pine needles and dressed in paint-spotted jeans and a white strappy T-shirt. His forty-dollar haircut was in disarray and sweat poured down his face. He was down on one knee, laboring over his own chainsaw. It was much bigger and fancier than my little \$79.95 Value House job. It seemed to have everything, in fact, but a starter button. He was yanking a cord, producing the listless *whut-whut-whut* sounds and nothing more. I was gladdened in my heart to see that a yellow birch had fallen across his picnic table and smashed it in two.

Norton gave a tremendous yank on the starter cord.

*Whut-whut-whutwhutwhut-WHAT! WHAT! WHAT! . . . WHAT! . . . Whut.*

Almost had it there for a minute, fella.

Another Herculean tug.

*Whut-whut-whut.*

“Cocksucker,” Norton whispered fiercely, and bared his teeth at his fancy chainsaw.

I went back around the house, feeling really good for the first time since I got up. My own saw started on the first tug, and I went to work.

Around ten o'clock there was a tap on my shoulder. It was Billy with a can of beer in one hand and Steff's list in the other. I stuffed the list in the back pocket of my jeans and took the beer, which was not exactly frosty-cold but at least cool. I chugged almost half of it at once—rarely does a beer taste that good—and tipped the can in salute at Billy. “Thanks, champ.”

“Can I have some?”

I let him have a swallow. He grimaced and handed the can back. I offered the rest and just caught myself as I started to crunch it up in the middle. The deposit law on bottles and cans has been in effect for over three years, but old ways die hard.

“She wrote something across the bottom of the list, but I can't read her writing,” Billy said.

I took out the list again. “I can’t get WOXO on the radio,” Steff’s note read. “Do you think the storm knocked them off the air?”

WOXO is the local automated FM rock outlet. It broadcast from Norway, about twenty miles north, and was all that our old and feeble FM receiver would haul in.

“Tell her probably,” I said, after reading the question over to him. “Ask her if she can get Portland on the AM band.”

“Okay, Daddy, can I come when you go to town?”

“Sure. You and Mommy both, if you want.”

“Okay.” He ran back to the house with the empty can.

I had worked my way up to the big tree. I made my first cut, sawed through, then turned the saw off for a few moments to let it cool down—the tree was really too big for it, but I thought it would be all right if I didn’t rush it. I wondered if the dirt road leading up to Kansas Road was clear of falls, and just as I was wondering, an orange CMP truck lumbered past, probably on its way to the far end of our little road. So that was all right. The road was clear and the power guys would be here by noon to take care of the live lines.

I cut a big chunk off the tree, dragged it to the side of the driveway, and tumbled it over the edge. It rolled down the slope and into the underbrush that had crept back since the long-ago day when my dad and his brothers—all of them artists, we have always been an artistic family, the Draytons—had cleared it away.

I wiped sweat off my face with my arm and wished for another beer; one really only sets your mouth. I picked up the chainsaw and thought about WOXO being off the air. That was the direction that funny fogbank had come from. And it was the direction Shaymore (pronounced *Shammore* by the locals) lay in. Shaymore was where the Arrowhead Project was.

That was old Bill Giosti’s theory about the so-called Black Spring: the Arrowhead Project. In the western part of Shaymore, not far from where the town borders on Stoneham, there was a small government preserve surrounded with wire. There were sentries and closed-circuit television cameras and God knew what else. Or so I had heard; I’d never actually seen it, although the Old Shaymore

Road runs along the eastern side of the government land for a mile or so.

No one knew for sure where the name Arrowhead Project came from and no one could tell you for one hundred percent sure that that really was the name of the project—if there was a project. Bill Giosti said there was, but when you asked him how and where he came by his information, he got vague. His niece, he said, worked for the Continental Phone Company, and she had heard things. It got like that.

“Atomic things,” Bill said that day, leaning in the Scout’s window and blowing a healthy draught of Pabst into my face. “That’s what they’re fooling around with up there. Shooting atoms into the air and all that.”

“Mr. Giosti, the air’s full of atoms,” Billy had said. “That’s what Mrs. Neary says. Mrs. Neary says everything’s full of atoms.”

Bill Giosti gave my son Bill a long, bloodshot glance that finally deflated him. “These are *different* atoms, son.”

“Oh, yeah,” Billy muttered, giving in.

Dick Muehler, our insurance agent, said the Arrowhead Project was an agricultural station the government was running, no more or less. “Bigger tomatoes with a longer growing season,” Dick said sagely, and then went back to showing me how I could help my family most efficiently by dying young. Janine Lawless, our postlady, said it was a geological survey having something to do with shale oil. She knew for a fact, because her husband’s brother worked for a man who had—

Mrs. Carmody, now . . . she probably leaned more to Bill Giosti’s view of the matter. Not just atoms, but *different* atoms.

I cut two more chunks off the big tree and dropped them over the side before Billy came back with a fresh beer in one hand and a note from Steff in the other. If there’s anything Big Bill likes to do more than run messages, I don’t know what it could be.

“Thanks,” I said, taking them both.

“Can I have a swallow?”

“Just one. You took two last time. Can’t have you running around drunk at ten in the morning.”

“Quarter past,” he said, and smiled shyly over the top of the can. I smiled back—not that it was such a great joke, you know, but Billy makes them so rarely—and then read the note.

“Got JBQ on the radio,” Steffy had written. “Don’t get drunk before you go to town. You can have one more, but that’s it before lunch. Do you think you can get up our road okay?”

I handed him the note back and took my beer. “Tell her the road’s okay because a power truck just went by. They’ll be working their way up here.”

“Okay.”

“Champ?”

“What, Dad?”

“Tell her everything’s okay.”

He smiled again, maybe telling himself first. “Okay.”

He ran back and I watched him go, legs pumping, soles of his zori showing. I love him. It’s his face and sometimes the way his eyes turn up to mine that make me feel as if things are really okay. It’s a lie, of course—things are not okay and never have been—but my kid makes me believe the lie.

I drank some beer, set the can down carefully on a rock, and got the chainsaw going again. About twenty minutes later I felt a light tap on my shoulder and turned, expecting to see Billy again. Instead it was Brent Norton. I turned off the chainsaw.

He didn’t look the way Norton usually looks. He looked hot and tired and unhappy and a little bewildered.

“Hi, Brent,” I said. Our last words had been hard ones, and I was a little unsure how to proceed. I had a funny feeling that he had been standing behind me for the last five minutes or so, clearing his throat decorously under the chainsaw’s aggressive roar. I hadn’t gotten a really good look at him this summer. He had lost weight, but it didn’t look good. It should have, because he had been carrying around an extra twenty pounds, but it didn’t. His wife had died the previous November. Cancer. Aggie Bibber told Steffy that. Aggie was our resident necrologist. Every neighborhood has one. From the casual way Norton had of ragging his wife and belittling her (doing it with the contemptuous ease of a veteran matador inserting *banderillas* in an

old bull's lumbering body), I would have guessed he'd be glad to have her gone. If asked, I might even have speculated that he'd show up this summer with a girl twenty years younger than he was on his arm and a silly my-cock-has-died-and-gone-to-heaven grin on his face. But instead of the silly grin there was only a new batch of age lines, and the weight had come off in all the wrong places, leaving sags and folds and dewlaps that told their own story. For one passing moment I wanted only to lead Norton to a patch of sun and sit him beside one of the fallen trees with my can of beer in his hand, and do a charcoal sketch of him.

"Hi, Dave," he said, after a long moment of awkward silence—a silence that was made even louder by the absence of the chainsaw's racket and roar. He stopped, then blurted: "That tree. That damn tree. I'm sorry. You were right."

I shrugged.

He said, "Another tree fell on my car."

"I'm sorry to h—" I began, and then a horrid suspicion dawned. "It wasn't the T-Bird, was it?"

"Yeah. It was."

Norton had a 1960 Thunderbird in mint condition, only thirty thousand miles. It was a deep midnight blue inside and out. He drove it only summers, and then only rarely. He loved that Bird the way some men love electric trains or model ships or target-shooting pistols.

"That's a bitch," I said, and meant it.

He shook his head slowly. "I almost didn't bring it up. Almost brought the station wagon, you know. Then I said what the hell. I drove it up and a big old rotten pine fell on it. The roof of it's all bashed in. And I thought I'd cut it up . . . the tree, I mean . . . but I can't get my chainsaw to fire up . . . I paid two hundred dollars for that sucker . . . and . . . and . . ."

His throat began to emit little clicking sounds. His mouth worked as if he were toothless and chewing dates. For one helpless second I thought he was going to just stand there and bawl like a kid on a sandlot. Then he got himself under some halfway kind of control,

shrugged, and turned away as if to look at the chunks of wood I had cut up.

“Well, we can look at your saw,” I said. “Your T-Bird insured?”

“Yeah,” he said, “like your boathouse.”

I saw what he meant, and remembered again what Steff had said about insurance.

“Listen, Dave, I wondered if I could borrow your Saab and take a run up to town. I thought I’d get some bread and cold cuts and beer. A lot of beer.”

“Billy and I are going up in the Scout,” I said. “Come with us if you want. That is, if you’ll give me a hand dragging the rest of this tree off to one side.”

“Happy to.”

He grabbed one end but couldn’t quite lift it up. I had to do most of the work. Between the two of us we were able to tumble it into the underbrush. Norton was puffing and panting, his cheeks nearly purple. After all the yanking he had done on that chainsaw starter pull, I was a little worried about his ticker.

“Okay?” I asked, and he nodded, still breathing fast. “Come on back to the house, then. I can fix you up with a beer.”

“Thank you,” he said. “How is Stephanie?” He was regaining some of the old smooth pomposity that I disliked.

“Very well, thanks.”

“And your son?”

“He’s fine, too.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Steff came out, and a moment’s surprise passed over her face when she saw who was with me. Norton smiled and his eyes crawled over her tight T-shirt. He hadn’t changed that much after all.

“Hello, Brent,” she said cautiously. Billy poked his head out from under her arm.

“Hello, Stephanie. Hi, Billy.”

“Brent’s T-Bird took a pretty good rap in the storm,” I told her. “Stove in the roof, he says.”

“Oh, no!”

Norton told it again while he drank one of our beers. I was sipping a third, but I had no kind of buzz on; apparently I had sweat the beer out as rapidly as I drank it.

“He’s going to come to town with Billy and me.”

“Well, I won’t expect you for a while. You may have to go to the Shop-and-Save in Norway.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Well, if the power’s off in Bridgton—”

“Mom says all the cash registers and things run on electricity,” Billy supplied.

It was a good point.

“Have you still got the list?”

I patted my hip pocket.

Her eyes shifted to Norton. “I’m very sorry about Carla, Brent. We all were.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you very much.”

There was another moment of awkward silence which Billy broke. “Can we go now, Daddy?” He had changed to jeans and sneakers.

“Yeah, I guess so. You ready, Brent?”

“Give me another beer for the road and I will be.”

Steffy’s brow creased. She had never approved of the one-for-the-road philosophy, or of men who drive with a can of Bud leaning against their crotches. I gave her a bare nod and she shrugged. I didn’t want to reopen things with Norton now. She got him a beer.

“Thanks,” he said to Steffy, not really thanking her but only mouthing a word. It was the way you thank a waitress in a restaurant. He turned back to me. “Lead on, Macduff.”

“Be right with you,” I said, and went into the living room.

Norton followed, and exclaimed over the birch, but I wasn’t interested in that or in the cost of replacing the window just then. I was looking at the lake through the sliding glass panel that gave on our deck. The breeze had freshened a little and the day had warmed up five degrees or so while I was cutting wood. I thought the odd mist we’d noticed earlier would surely have broken up, but it hadn’t. It was closer, too. Halfway across the lake now.

"I noticed that earlier," Norton said, pontificating. "Some kind of temperature inversion, that's my guess."

I didn't like it. I felt very strongly that I had never seen a mist exactly like this one. Part of it was the unnerving straight edge of its leading front. Nothing in nature is that even; man is the inventor of straight edges. Part of it was that pure, dazzling whiteness, with no variation but also without the sparkle of moisture. It was only half a mile or so off now, and the contrast between it and the blues of the lake and sky was more striking than ever.

"Come on, Dad!" Billy was tugging at my pants.

We all went back to the kitchen. Brent Norton spared one final glance at the tree that had crashed into our living room.

"Too bad it wasn't an apple tree, huh?" Billy remarked brightly. "That's what my mom said. Pretty funny, don't you think?"

"Your mother's a real card, Billy," Norton said. He ruffled Billy's hair in a perfunctory way and his eyes went to the front of Steff's T-shirt again. No, he was not a man I was ever going to be able to really like.

"Listen, why don't you come with us, Steff?" I asked. For no concrete reason I suddenly wanted her to come along.

"No, I think I'll stay here and pull some weeds in the garden," she said. Her eyes shifted toward Norton and then back to me. "This morning it seems like I'm the only thing around here that doesn't run on electricity."

Norton laughed too heartily.

I was getting her message, but tried one more time. "You sure?"

"Sure," she said firmly. "The old bend-and-stretch will do me good."

"Well, don't get too much sun."

"I'll put on my straw hat. We'll have sandwiches when you get back."

"Good."

She turned her face up to be kissed. "Be careful. There might be blowdowns on Kansas Road too, you know."

"I'll be careful."

"You be careful, too," she told Billy, and kissed his cheek.

“Right, Mom.” He banged out of the door and the screen cracked shut behind him.

Norton and I walked out after him. “Why don’t we go over to your place and cut the tree off your Bird?” I asked him. All of a sudden I could think of lots of reasons to delay leaving for town.

“I don’t even want to look at it until after lunch and a few more of these,” Norton said, holding up his beer can. “The damage has been done, Dave old buddy.”

I didn’t like him calling me buddy, either.

We all got into the front seat of the Scout (in the far corner of the garage my scarred Fisher plow blade sat glimmering yellow, like the ghost of Christmas yet-to-come) and I backed out, crunching over a litter of storm-blown twigs. Steff was standing on the cement path which leads to the vegetable patch at the extreme west end of our property. She had a pair of clippers in one gloved hand and the weeding claw in the other. She had put on her old floppy sunhat, and it cast a band of shadow over her face. I tapped the horn twice, lightly, and she raised the hand holding the clippers in answer. We pulled out. I haven’t seen my wife since then.

We had to stop once on our way up to Kansas Road. Since the power truck had driven through, a pretty fair-sized pine had dropped across the road. Norton and I got out and moved it enough so I could inch the Scout by, getting our hands all pitchy in the process. Billy wanted to help but I waved him back. I was afraid he might get poked in the eye. Old trees have always reminded me of the Ents in Tolkien’s wonderful Rings saga, only Ents that have gone bad. Old trees want to hurt you. It doesn’t matter if you’re snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, or just taking a walk in the woods. Old trees want to hurt you, and I think they’d kill you if they could.

Kansas Road itself was clear, but in several places we saw more lines down. About a quarter-mile past the Vicki-Linn Campground there was a power pole lying full-length in the ditch, heavy wires snarled around its top like wild hair.

“That was some storm,” Norton said in his mellifluous, courtroom-trained voice; but he didn’t seem to be pontificating now, only solemn.

“Yeah, it was.”

“Look, Dad!”

He was pointing at the remains of the Ellitches’ barn. For twelve years it had been sagging tiredly in Tommy Ellitch’s back field, up to its hips in sunflowers, goldenrod, and Lolly-come-see-me. Every fall I would think it could not last through another winter. And every spring it would still be there. But it wasn’t anymore. All that remained was a splintered wreckage and a roof that had been mostly stripped of shingles. Its number had come up. And for some reason that echoed solemnly, even ominously, inside me. The storm had come and smashed it flat.

Norton drained his beer, crushed the can in one hand, and dropped it indifferently to the floor of the Scout. Billy opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again—good boy. Norton came from New Jersey, where there was no bottle-and-can law; I guess he could be forgiven for squashing my nickel when I could barely remember not to do it myself.

Billy started fooling with the radio, and I asked him to see if WOXO was back on the air. He dialed up to FM 92 and got nothing but a blank hum. He looked at me and shrugged. I thought for a moment. What other stations were on the far side of that peculiar fog front?

“Try WBLM,” I said.

He dialed down to the other end, passing WJBQ-FM and WIGY-FM on the way. They were there, doing business as usual . . . but WBLM, Maine’s premier progressive-rock station, was off the air.

“Funny,” I said.

“What’s that?” Norton asked.

“Nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

Billy had tuned back to the musical cereal on WJBQ. Pretty soon we got to town.

The Norge Washateria in the shopping center was closed, it being impossible to run a coin-op laundry without electricity, but both the Bridgton Pharmacy and the Federal Foods Supermarket were open.

The parking lot was pretty full, and as always in the middle of the summer, a lot of the cars had out-of-state plates. Little knots of people stood here and there in the sun, noodling about the storm, women with women, men with men.

I saw Mrs. Carmody, she of the stuffed animals and the stump-water lore. She sailed into the supermarket decked out in an amazing canary-yellow pantsuit. A purse that looked the size of a small Samsonite suitcase was slung over one forearm. Then an idiot on a Yamaha roared past me, missing my front bumper by a few scant inches. He wore a denim jacket, mirror sunglasses, and no helmet.

“Look at that stupid shit,” Norton growled.

I circled the parking lot once, looking for a good space. There were none. I was just resigning myself to a long walk from the far end of the lot when I got lucky. A lime-green Cadillac the size of a small cabin cruiser was easing out of a slot in the rank closest to the market’s doors. The moment it was gone, I slid into the space.

I gave Billy Steff’s shopping list. He was five, but he could read printing. “Get a cart and get started. I want to give your mother a jingle. Mr. Norton will help you. And I’ll be right along.”

We got out and Billy immediately grabbed Mr. Norton’s hand. He’d been taught not to cross the parking lot without holding an adult’s hand when he was younger and hadn’t yet lost the habit. Norton looked surprised for a moment, and then smiled a little. I could almost forgive him for feeling Steff up with his eyes. The two of them went into the market.

I strolled over to the pay phone, which was on the wall between the drugstore and the Norge. A sweltering woman in a purple sunsuit was jogging the cutoff switch up and down. I stood behind her with my hands in my pockets, wondering why I felt so uneasy about Steff, and why the unease should be all wrapped up with that line of white but unsparkling fog, the radio stations that were off the air . . . and the Arrowhead Project.

The woman in the purple sunsuit had a sunburn and freckles on her fat shoulders. She looked like a sweaty orange baby. She

slammed the phone back down in its cradle, turned toward the drugstore and saw me there.

“Save your dime,” she said. “Just dah-dah-dah.” She walked grumpily away.

I almost slapped my forehead. The phone lines were down someplace, of course. Some of them were underground, but nowhere near all of them. I tried the phone anyway. The pay phones in the area are what Steff calls Paranoid Pay Phones. Instead of putting your dime right in, you get a dial tone and make your call. When someone answers, there’s an automatic cutoff and you have to shove your dime in before your party hangs up. They’re irritating, but that day it did save me my dime. There was no dial tone. As the lady had said, it was just dah-dah-dah.

I hung up and walked slowly toward the market, just in time to see an amusing little incident. An elderly couple walked toward the IN door, chatting together. And still chatting, they walked right into it. They stopped talking in a jangle and the woman squawked her surprise. They stared at each other comically. Then they laughed, and the old guy pushed the door open for his wife with some effort—those electric-eye doors are heavy—and they went in. When the electricity goes off, it catches you in a hundred different ways.

I pushed the door open myself and noticed the lack of air conditioning first thing. Usually in the summer they have it cranked up high enough to give you frostbite if you stay in the market more than an hour at a stretch.

Like most modern markets, the Federal was constructed like a Skinner box—modern marketing techniques turn all customers into white rats. The stuff you really needed, staples, like bread, milk, meat, beer, and frozen dinners, was all on the far side of the store. To get there you had to walk past all the impulse items known to modern man—everything from Cricket lighters to rubber dog bones.

Beyond the IN door is the fruit-and-vegetable aisle. I looked up it, but there was no sign of Norton or my son. The old lady who had run into the door was examining the grapefruits. Her husband had produced a net sack to store purchases in.

I walked up the aisle and went left. I found them in the third aisle, Billy mulling over the ranks of Jello-O packages and instant puddings. Norton was standing directly behind him, peering at Steff's list. I had to grin a little at his nonplussed expression.

I threaded my way down to them, past half-loaded carriages (Steff hadn't been the only one struck by the squirreling impulse, apparently) and browsing shoppers. Norton took two cans of pie filling down from the top shelf and put them in the cart.

"How are you doing?" I asked, and Norton looked around with unmistakable relief.

"All right, aren't we, Billy?"

"Sure," Billy said, and couldn't resist adding in a rather smug tone: "But there's lots of stuff Mr. Norton can't read either, Dad."

"Let me see." I took the list.

Norton had made a neat, lawyerly check beside each of the items he and Billy had picked up—half a dozen or so, including the milk and a six-pack of Coke. There were maybe ten other things that she wanted.

"We ought to go back to the fruits and vegetables," I said. "She wants some tomatoes and cucumbers."

Billy started to turn the cart around and Norton said, "You ought to go have a look at the checkout, Dave."

I went and had a look. It was the sort of thing you sometimes see photos of in the paper on a slow newsday, with a humorous caption beneath. Only two lanes were open, and the double line of people waiting to check their purchases out stretched past the mostly denuded bread racks, then made a jig to the right and went out of sight along the frozen-food coolers. All of the new computerized NCRs were hooded. At each of the two open positions, a harried-looking girl was totting up purchases on a battery-powered pocket calculator. Standing with each girl was one of the Federal's two managers, Bud Brown and Ollie Weeks. I liked Ollie but didn't care much for Bud Brown, who seemed to fancy himself the Charles de Gaulle of the supermarket world.

As each girl finished checking her order, Bud or Ollie would paperclip a chit to the customer's cash or check and toss it into the

box he was using as a cash repository. They all looked hot and tired.

“Hope you brought a good book,” Norton said, joining me. “We’re going to be in line for a while.”

I thought of Steff again, at home alone, and had another flash of unease. “You go on and get your stuff,” I said. “Billy and I can handle the rest of this.”

“Want me to grab a few more beers for you too?”

I thought about it, but in spite of the rapprochement, I didn’t want to spend the afternoon with Brent Norton getting drunk. Not with the mess things were in around the house.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’ve got to take a raincheck, Brent.”

I thought his face stiffened a little. “Okay,” he said shortly, and walked off. I watched him go, and then Billy was tugging at my shirt.

“Did you talk to Mommy?”

“Nope. The phone wasn’t working. Those lines are down too, I guess.”

“Are you worried about her?”

“No,” I said, lying. I was worried, all right, but had no idea why I should be. “No, of course I’m not. Are you?”

“No-ooo . . .” But he was. His face had a pinched look. We should have gone back then. But even then it might have been too late.

### **III. The Coming of the Mist.**

We worked our way back to the fruits and vegetables like salmon fighting their way upstream. I saw some familiar faces—Mike Hatlen, one of our selectmen, Mrs. Reppler from the grammar school (she who had terrified generations of third-graders was currently sneering at the cantaloupes), Mrs. Turman, who sometimes sat Billy when Steff and I went out—but mostly they were summer people stocking up on no-cook items and joshing each other about “roughing it.” The cold cuts had been picked over as thoroughly as the dimebook tray at a rummage sale; there was nothing left but a few packages of

bologna, some macaroni loaf, and one lonely, phallic kielbasa sausage.

I got tomatoes, cukes, and a jar of mayonnaise. She wanted bacon, but all the bacon was gone. I picked up some of the pologna as a substitute, although I've never been able to eat the stuff with any real enthusiasm since the FDA reported that each package contained a small amount of insect filth—a little something extra for your money

“Look,” Billy said as we rounded the corner into the fourth aisle. “There’s some army guys.”

There were two of them, their dun uniforms standing out against the much brighter background of summer clothes and sportswear. We had gotten used to seeing a scattering of army personnel with the Arrowhead Project only thirty miles or so away. These two looked hardly old enough to shave yet.

I glanced back down at Steff’s list and saw that we had everything . . . no, almost but not quite. At the bottom, as an afterthought, she had scribbled: *Bottle of Lancers?* That sounded good to me. A couple of glasses of wine tonight after Billy had sacked out, then maybe a long slow bout of lovemaking before sleep.

I left the cart and worked my way down to the wine and got a bottle. As I walked back I passed the big double doors leading to the storage area and heard the steady roar of a good-sized generator.

I decided it was probably just big enough to keep the cold cases cold, but not large enough to power the doors and cash registers and all the other electrical equipment. It sounded like a motorcycle back there.

Norton appeared just as we got into line, balancing two six-packs of Schlitz Light, a loaf of bread, and the kielbasa I had spotted a few minutes earlier. He got in line with Billy and me. It seemed very warm in the market with the air conditioning off, and I wondered why none of the stockboys had at least chocked the doors open. I had seen Buddy Eagleton in his red apron two aisles back, doing nothing and piling it up. The generator roared monotonously. I had the beginnings of a headache.

“Put your stuff in here before you drop something,” I said.

“Thanks.”

The lines were up past the frozen food now; people had to cut through to get what they wanted and there was much excuse-me-ing and pardon-me-ing. “This is going to be a cunt,” Norton said morosely, and I frowned a little. That sort of language is rougher than I’d like Billy to hear.

The generator’s roar muted a little as the line shuffled forward. Norton and I made desultory conversation, skirting around the ugly property dispute that had landed us in district court and sticking with things like the Red Sox’s chances and the weather. At last we exhausted our little store of small talk and fell silent. Billy fidgeted beside me. The line crawled along. Now we had frozen dinners on our right and the more expensive wines and champagnes on our left. As the line progressed down to the cheaper wines, I toyed briefly with the idea of picking up a bottle of Ripple, the wine of my flaming youth. I didn’t do it. My youth never flamed that much anyway.

“Jeez, why can’t they hurry up, Dad?” Billy asked. That pinched look was still on his face, and suddenly, briefly, the mist of disquiet that had settled over me rifted, and something terrible peered through from the other side—the bright and metallic face of terror. Then it passed.

“Keep cool, champ,” I said.

We had made it up to the bread racks—to the point where the double line bent to the left. We could see the checkout lanes now, the two that were open and the other four, deserted, each with a little sign on the stationary conveyor belt, signs that read PLEASE CHOOSE ANOTHER LANE and WINSTON. Beyond the lanes was the big sectioned plate-glass window which gave a view of the parking lot and the intersection of Routes 117 and 302 beyond. The view was partially obscured by the white-paper backs of signs advertising current specials and the latest giveaway, which happened to be a set of books called *The Mother Nature Encyclopedia*. We were in the line that would eventually lead us to the checkout where Bud Brown was standing. There were still maybe thirty people in front of us. The easiest one to pick out was

Mrs. Carmody in her blazing-yellow pantsuit. She looked like an advertisement for yellow fever.

Suddenly a shrieking noise began in the distance. It quickly built up in volume and resolved itself into the crazy warble of a police siren. A horn blared at the intersection and there was a shriek of brakes and burning rubber. I couldn't see—the angle was all wrong—but the siren reached its loudest as it approached the market and then began to fade as the police car went past. A few people broke out of line to look, but not many. They had waited too long to chance losing their places.

Norton went; his stuff was tucked into my cart. After a few moments he came back and got into line again. "Local fuzz," he said.

Then the town fire whistle began to wail, slowly cranking up to a shriek of its own, falling off, then rising again. Billy grabbed my hand—clutched it. "What is it, Daddy?" he asked, and then, immediately: "Is Mommy all right?"

"Must be a fire on the Kansas Road," Norton said. "Those damned live lines from the storm. The fire trucks will go through in a minute."

That gave my disquiet something to crystallize on. There were live lines down in *our* yard.

Bud Brown said something to the checker he was supervising; she had been craning around to see what was happening. She flushed and began to run her calculator again.

I didn't want to be in this line. All of a sudden I very badly didn't want to be in it. But it was moving again, and it seemed foolish to leave now. We had gotten down by the cartons of cigarettes.

Someone pushed through the IN door, some teenager. I think it was the kid we almost hit coming in, the one on the Yamaha with no helmet. "The fog!" he yelled. "Y'oughta see the fog! It's rolling right up Kansas Road!" People looked around at him. He was panting, as if he had run a long distance. Nobody said anything. "Well, y'oughta see it," he repeated, sounding defensive this time. People eyed him and some of them shuffled, but no one wanted to lose his or her place in line. A few people who hadn't reached the lines yet left their carts and strolled through the empty checkout lanes to see if they could see what he was talking about. A big guy in a summer hat with

a paisley band (the kind of hat you almost never see except in beer commercials with backyard barbecues as their settings) yanked open the OUT door and several people—ten, maybe a dozen—went out with him. The kid went along.

“Don’t let out all the air conditioning,” one of the army kids cracked, and there were a few chuckles. I wasn’t chuckling. I had seen the mist coming across the lake.

“Billy, why don’t you go have a look?” Norton said.

“No,” I said at once, for no concrete reason.

The line moved forward again. People craned their necks, looking for the fog the kid had mentioned, but there was nothing on view except bright-blue sky. I heard someone say that the kid must have been joking. Someone else responded that he had seen a funny line of mist on Long Lake not an hour ago. The first whistle whooped and screamed. I didn’t like it. It sounded like big-league doom blowing that way.

More people went out. A few even left their places in line, which speeded up the proceedings a bit. Then grizzled old John Lee Frovin, who works as a mechanic at the Texaco station, came ducking in and yelled: “Hey! Anybody got a camera?” He looked around, then ducked back out again.

That caused something of a rush. If it was worth taking a picture of, it was worth seeing.

Suddenly Mrs. Carmody cried in her rusty but powerful old voice, “Don’t go out there!”

People turned around to look at her. The orderly shape of the lines had grown fuzzy as people left to get a look at the mist, or as they drew away from Mrs. Carmody, or as they milled around, seeking out their friends. A pretty young woman in a cranberry-colored sweatshirt and dark-green slacks was looking at Mrs. Carmody in a thoughtful, evaluating way. A few opportunists were taking advantage of whatever the situation was to move up a couple of places. The checker beside Bud Brown looked over her shoulder again, and Brown tapped her shoulder with a long finger. “Keep your mind on what you’re doing, Sally.”

“Don’t go out there!” Mrs. Carmody yelled. “It’s death! I feel that it’s death out there!”

Bud and Ollie Weeks, who both knew her, just looked impatient and irritated, but any summer people around her stepped smartly away, never minding their places in line. The bag-ladies in big cities seem to have the same effect on people, as if they were carriers of some contagious disease. Who knows? Maybe they are.

Things began to happen at an accelerating, confusing pace then. A man staggered into the market, shoving the IN door open. His nose was bleeding. “Something in the fog!” he screamed, and Billy shrank against me—whether because of the man’s bloody nose or what he was saying, I don’t know. “Something in the fog! Something in the fog took John Lee! Something—” He staggered back against a display of lawn food stacked by the window and sat down there.

*“Something in the fog took John Lee and I heard him screaming!”*

The situation changed. Made nervous by the storm, by the police siren and the fire whistle, by the subtle dislocation any power outage causes in the American psyche, and by the steadily mounting atmosphere of unease as things somehow . . . somehow *changed* (I don’t know how to put it any better than that), people began to move in a body.

They didn’t bolt. If I told you that, I would be giving you entirely the wrong impression. It wasn’t exactly a panic. They didn’t run—or at least, most of them didn’t. But they went. Some of them just went to the big show window on the far side of the checkout lanes to look out. Others went out the IN door, some still carrying their intended purchases. Bud Brown, harried and officious, began yelling: “Hey! You haven’t paid for that! Hey, you! Come back here with those hot-dog rolls!”

Someone laughed at him, a crazy, yodeling sound that made other people smile. Even as they smiled they looked bewildered, confused, and nervous. Then someone else laughed and Brown flushed. He grabbed a box of mushrooms away from a lady who was crowding past him to look out the window—the segments of glass were lined with people now, they were like the folks you see looking through loopholes into a building site—and the lady screamed, “Give me

back my mushies!” This bizarre term of affection caused two men standing nearby to break into crazy laughter—and there was something of the old English Bedlam about all of it, now. Mrs. Carmody trumpeted again not to go out there. The fire whistle whooped breathlessly, a strong old woman who had scared up a prowler in the house. And Billy burst into tears.

“Daddy, what’s that bloody man? Why is that bloody man?”

“It’s okay, Big Bill, it’s his nose, he’s okay.”

“What did he mean, something in the fog?” Norton asked. He was frowning ponderously, which was probably Norton’s way of looking confused.

“Daddy, I’m scared,” Billy said through his tears. “Can we please go home?”

Someone bumped past me roughly, jolting me off my feet, and I picked Billy up. I was getting scared, too. The confusion was mounting. Sally, the checker by Bud Brown, started away and he grabbed her back by the collar of her red smock. It ripped. She slap-clawed out at him, her face twisting. “*Get your fucking hands off me!*” she screamed.

“Oh, shut up, you little bitch,” Brown said, but he sounded totally astounded.

He reached for her again and Ollie Weeks said sharply: “Bud! Cool it!”

Someone else screamed. It hadn’t been a panic before—not quite—but it was getting to be one. People streamed out of both doors. There was a crash of breaking glass and Coke fizzed suddenly across the floor.

“What the Christ is this?” Norton exclaimed.

That was when it started getting dark . . . but no, that’s not exactly right. My thought at the time was not that it was getting dark but that the lights in the market had gone out. I looked up at the fluorescents in a quick reflex action, and I wasn’t alone. And at first, until I remembered the power failure, it seemed that was it, that was what had changed the quality of the light. Then I remembered they had been out all the time we had been in the market and things hadn’t

seemed dark before. Then I knew, even before the people at the window started to yell and point.

The mist was coming.

It came from the Kansas Road entrance to the parking lot, and even this close it looked no different than it had when we first noticed it on the far side of the lake. It was white and bright but nonreflecting. It was moving fast, and it had blotted out most of the sun. Where the sun had been there was now a silver coin in the sky, like a full moon in winter seen through a thin scud of cloud.

It came with lazy speed. Watching it reminded me somehow of last evening's waterspout. There are big forces in nature that you hardly ever see—earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes—I haven't seen them all but I've seen enough to guess that they all move with that lazy, hypnotizing speed. They hold you spellbound, the way Billy and Steffy had been in front of the picture window last night.

It rolled impartially across the two-lane blacktop and erased it from view. The McKeons' nice restored Dutch Colonial was swallowed whole. For a moment the second floor of the ramshackle apartment building next door jutted out of the whiteness, and then it went too. The KEEP RIGHT sign at the entrance and exit points to the Federal's parking lot disappeared, the black letters on the sign seeming to float for a moment in limbo after the sign's dirty-white background was gone. The cars in the parking lot began to disappear next.

"What the Christ *is* this?" Norton asked again, and there was a catch in his voice.

It came on, eating up the blue sky and the fresh black hottop with equal ease. Even twenty feet away the line of demarcation was perfectly clear. I had the nutty feeling that I was watching some extra-good piece of visual effects, something dreamed up by Willys O'Brian or Douglas Trumbull. It happened so quickly. The blue sky disappeared to a wide swipe, then to a stripe, then to a pencil line. Then it was gone. Blank white pressed against the glass of the wide show window. I could see as far as the litter barrel that stood maybe

four feet away, but not much farther. I could see the front bumper of my Scout, but that was all.

A woman screamed, very loud and long. Billy pressed himself more tightly against me. His body was trembling like a loose bundle of wires with high voltage running through them.

A man yelled and bolted through one of the deserted lanes toward the door. I think that was what finally started the stampede. People rushed pell-mell into the fog.

*“Hey!”* Brown roared. I don’t know if he was angry, scared, or both. His face was nearly purple. Veins stood out on his neck, looking almost as thick as battery cables. *“Hey you people, you can’t take that stuff. Get back here with that stuff, you’re shoplifting!”*

They kept going, but some of them tossed their stuff aside. Some were laughing and excited, but they were a minority. They poured out into the fog, and none of us who stayed ever saw them again. There was a faint, acrid smell drifting in through the open door. People began to jam up there. Some pushing and shoving started. I was getting an ache in my shoulders from holding Billy. He was good-sized; Steff sometimes called him her young heifer.

Norton started to wander off, his face preoccupied and rather bemused. He was heading for the door.

I switched Billy to the other arm so I could grab Norton’s arm before he drifted out of reach. “No, man, I wouldn’t,” I said.

He turned back. “What?”

“Better wait and see.”

“See what?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You don’t think—” he began, and a shriek came out of the fog.

Norton shut up. The tight jam at the OUT door loosened and then reversed itself. The babble of excited conversation, shouts and calls, subsided. The faces of the people by the door suddenly looked flat and pale and two dimensional.

The shriek went on and on, competing with the fire whistle. It seemed impossible that any human pair of lungs could have enough air in them to sustain such a shriek. Norton muttered, “Oh my God,” and ran his hands through his hair.

The shriek ended abruptly. It did not dwindle; it was cut off. One more man went outside, a beefy guy in chino workpants. I think he was set on rescuing the shrieker. For a moment he was out there, visible through the glass and the mist, like a figure seen through a milkscum on a tumbler. Then (and as far as I know, I was the only one to see this) something beyond him appeared to move, a gray shadow in all that white. And it seemed to me that instead of running into the fog, the man in the chino pants was *jerked* into it, his hands flailing upward as if in surprise.

For a moment there was total silence in the market.

A constellation of moons suddenly glowed into being outside. The parking-lot sodium lights, undoubtedly supplied by underground electrical cables, had just gone on.

“Don’t go out there,” Mrs. Carmody said in her best gore-crow voice. “It’s death to go out there.”

All at once, no one seemed disposed to argue or laugh.

Another scream came from outside, this one muffled and rather distant-sounding. Billy tensed against me again.

“David, what’s going on?” Ollie Weeks asked. He had left his position. There were big beads of sweat on his round, smooth face. “What is this?”

“I’ll be goddammed if I have any idea,” I said. Ollie looked badly scared. He was a bachelor who lived in a nice little house up by Highland Lake and who liked to drink in the bar at Pleasant Mountain. On the pudgy little finger of his left hand was a star-sapphire ring. The February before, he won some money in the state lottery. He bought the ring out of his winnings. I always had the idea that Ollie was a little afraid of girls.

“I don’t dig this,” he said.

“No. Billy, I have to put you down. I’ll hold your hand, but you’re breaking my arms, okay?”

“Mommy,” he whispered.

“She’s okay,” I told him. It was something to say.

The old geezer who runs the secondhand shop near Jon’s Restaurant walked past us, bundled into the old collegiate letter-sweater he wears year-round. He said loudly: “It’s one of those

pollution clouds. The mills at Rumford and South Paris. Chemicals.” With that, he made off up the Aisle 4, past the patent medicines and toilet paper.

“Let’s get out of here, David,” Norton said with no conviction at all. “What do you say we—”

There was a thud. An odd, twisting thud that I felt mostly in my feet, as if the entire building had suddenly dropped three feet. Several people cried out in fear and surprise. There was a musical jingle of bottles leaning off their shelves and destroying themselves upon the tile floor. A chunk of glass shaped like a pie wedge fell out of one of the segments of the wide front window, and I saw that the wooden frames banding the heavy sections of glass had buckled and splintered in some places.

The fire whistle stopped in mid-whoop.

The quiet that followed was the bated silence of people waiting for something else, something more. I was shocked and numb, and my mind made a strange cross-patch connection with the past. Back when Bridgton was little more than a crossroads, my dad would take me in with him and stand talking at the counter while I looked through the glass at the penny candy and two-cent chews. It was January thaw. No sound but the drip of meltwater falling from the galvanized tin gutters to the rain barrels on either side of the store. Me looking at the jawbreakers and buttons and pinwheels. The mystic yellow globes of light overhead showing up the monstrous, projected shadows of last summer’s battalion of dead flies. A little boy named David Drayton with his father, the famous artist Andrew Drayton, whose painting *Christine Standing Alone* hung in the White House. A little boy named David Drayton looking at the candy and the Davy Crockett bubble-gum cards and vaguely needing to go pee. And outside, the pressing, billowing yellow fog of January thaw.

The memory passed, but very slowly.

“You people!” Norton bellowed. “All you people, listen to me!”

They looked around. Norton was holding up both hands, the fingers splayed like a political candidate accepting accolades.

“It may be dangerous to go outside!” Norton yelled.

“Why?” a woman screamed back. “My kids’re at home! I got to get back to my kids!”

“It’s death to go out there!” Mrs. Carmody came back smartly. She was standing by the twenty-five-pound sacks of fertilizer stacked below the window, and her face seemed to bulge somehow, as if she were swelling.

A teenager gave her a sudden hard push and she sat down on the bags with a surprised grunt. “Stop saying that, you old bag! Stop rappin’ that crazy bullshit!”

“Please!” Norton yelled. “If we just wait a few moments until it blows over and we can see—”

A babble of conflicting shouts greeted this.

“He’s right,” I said, shouting to be heard over the noise. “Let’s just try to keep cool.”

“I think that was an earthquake,” a bespectacled man said. His voice was soft. In one hand he held a package of hamburger and a bag of buns. The other hand was holding the hand of a little girl, maybe a year younger than Billy. “I really think that was an earthquake.”

“They had one over in Naples four years ago,” a fat local man said.

“That was in Casco,” his wife contradicted immediately. She spoke in the unmistakable tones of a veteran contradictor.

“Naples,” the fat local man said, but with less assurance.

“Casco,” his wife said firmly, and he gave up.

Somewhere a can that had been jostled to the very edge of its shelf by the thump, earthquake, whatever it had been, fell off with a delayed clatter. Billy burst into tears. “I want to go *home!* I want my MOTHER!”

“Can’t you shut that kid up?” Bud Brown asked. His eyes were darting rapidly but aimlessly from place to place.

“Would you like a shot in the teeth, motormouth?” I asked him.

“Come on, Dave, that’s not helping,” Norton said distractedly.

“I’m sorry,” the woman who had screamed earlier said. “I’m sorry, but I can’t stay here. I’ve got to get home and see to my kids.”

She looked around at us, a blond woman with a tired, pretty face.

“Wanda’s looking after little Victor, you see. Wanda’s only eight and sometimes she forgets . . . forgets she’s supposed to be . . . well, watching him, you know. And little Victor . . . he likes to turn on the stove burners to see the little red light come on . . . he likes that light . . . and sometimes he pulls out the plugs . . . little Victor does . . . and Wanda gets . . . bored watching him after a while . . . she’s just eight . . .” She stopped talking and just looked at us. I imagine that we must have looked like nothing but a bank of merciless eyes to her right then, not human beings at all, just eyes. “*Isn’t* anyone going to help me?” she screamed. Her lips began to tremble. “Won’t . . . won’t anybody here see a lady home?”

No one replied. People shuffled their feet. She looked from face to face with her own broken face. The fat local man took a hesitant half-step forward and his wife jerked him back with one quick tug, her hand clapped over his wrist like a manacle. “You?” the blond woman asked Ollie. He shook his head. “You?” she said to Bud. He put his hand over the Texas Instruments calculator on the counter and made no reply. “You?” she said to Norton, and Norton began to say something in his big lawyer’s voice, something about how no one should go off half-cocked, and . . . and she dismissed him and Norton just trailed off.

“You?” she said to me, and I picked Billy up again and held him in my arms like a shield to ward off her terrible broken face.

“I hope you all rot in hell,” she said. She didn’t scream it. Her voice was dead tired. She went to the OUT door and pulled it open, using both hands. I wanted to say something to her, call her back, but my mouth was too dry.

“Aw, lady, listen—” the teenage kid who had shouted at Mrs. Carmody began. He held her arm. She looked down at his hand and he let her go, shamefaced. She slipped out into the fog. We watched her go and no one said anything. We watched the fog overlay her and make her insubstantial, not a human being anymore but a pencil-ink sketch of a human being done on the world’s whitest paper, and no one said anything. For a moment it was like the letters of the KEEP RIGHT sign that had seemed to float on nothingness; her arms and legs and pallid blond hair were all gone and only the

misty remnants of her red summer dress remained, seeming to dance in white limbo. Then her dress was gone, too, and no one said anything.

#### **IV. The Storage Area. Problems with the Generators. What Happened to the Bag-Boy.**

Billy began to act hysterical and tantrummy, screaming for his mother in a hoarse, demanding way through his tears, instantly regressing to the age of two. Snot was lathered on his upper lip. I led him away, walking down one of the middle aisles with my arm around his shoulders, trying to soothe him. I took him back by the long white meat cabinet that ran the length of the store at the back. Mr. McVey, the butcher, was still there. We nodded at each other, the best we could do under the circumstances.

I sat down on the floor and took Billy on my lap and held his face against my chest and rocked him and talked to him. I told him all the lies parents keep in reserve for bad situations, the ones that sound so damn plausible to a child, and I told them in a tone of perfect conviction.

“That’s not regular fog,” Billy said. He looked up at me, his eyes dark-circled and tear-streaked. “It isn’t, is it, Daddy?”

“No, I don’t think so.” I didn’t want to lie about that.

Kids don’t fight shock the way adults do; they go with it, maybe because kids are in a semipermanent state of shock until they’re thirteen or so. Billy started to doze off. I held him, thinking he might snap awake again, but his doze deepened into a real sleep. Maybe he had been awake part of the night before, when we had slept three-in-a-bed for the first time since Billy was an infant. And maybe—I felt a cold eddy slip through me at the thought—maybe he had sensed something coming.

When I was sure he was solidly out, I laid him on the floor and went looking for something to cover him up with. Most of the people

were still up front, looking out into the thick blanket of mist. Norton had gathered a little crowd of listeners, and was busy spellbinding—or trying to. Bud Brown stood rigidly at his post, but Ollie Weeks had left his.

There were a few people in the aisles, wandering like ghosts, their faces greasy with shock. I went into the storage area through the big double doors between the meat cabinet and the beer cooler.

The generator roared steadily behind its plywood partition, but something had gone wrong. I could smell diesel fumes, and they were much too strong. I walked toward the partition, taking shallow breaths. At last I unbuttoned my shirt and put part of it over my mouth and nose.

The storage area was long and narrow, feebly lit by two sets of emergency lights. Cartons were stacked everywhere—bleach on one side, cases of soft drinks on the far side of the partition, stacked cases of Beefaroni and catsup. One of those had fallen over and the cardboard carton appeared to be bleeding.

I unlatched the door in the generator partition and stepped through. The machine was obscured in drifting, oily clouds of blue smoke. The exhaust pipe ran out through a hole in the wall. Something must have blocked off the outside end of the pipe. There was a simple on/off switch and I flipped it. The generator hitched, belched, coughed, and died. Then it ran down in a diminishing series of popping sounds that reminded me of Norton's stubborn chainsaw.

The emergency lights faded out and I was left in darkness. I got scared very quickly, and I got disoriented. My breathing sounded like a low wind rattling in straw. I bumped my nose on the flimsy plywood door going out and my heart lurched. There were windows in the double doors, but for some reason they had been painted black, and the darkness was nearly total. I got off course and ran into a stack of the bleach cartons. They tumbled and fell. One came close enough to my head to make me step backward, and I tripped over another carton that had landed behind me. I fell down, thumping my head hard enough to see bright stars in the darkness. Good show.

I lay there cursing myself and rubbing my head, telling myself to just take it easy, just get up and get out of here, get back to Billy,

telling myself nothing soft and slimy was going to close over my ankle or slip into one groping hand. I told myself not to lose control, or I would end up blundering around back here in a panic, knocking things over and creating a mad obstacle course for myself.

I stood up carefully, looking for a pencil line of light between the double doors. I found it, a faint but unmistakable scratch on the darkness. I started toward it, and then stopped.

There was a sound. A soft sliding sound. It stopped, then started again with a stealthy little bump. Everything inside me went loose. I regressed magically to four years of age. That sound wasn't coming from the market. It was coming from behind me. From outside. Where the mist was. Something that was slipping and sliding and scraping over the cinderblocks. And, maybe, looking for a way in.

Or maybe it was already in, and it was looking for me. Maybe in a moment I would feel whatever was making that sound on my shoe. Or on my neck.

It came again. I was positive it was outside. But that didn't make it any better. I told my legs to go and they refused the order. Then the quality of the noise changed. Something *rasped* across the darkness and my heart leaped in my chest and I lunged at that thin vertical line of light. I hit the doors straight-arm and burst through into the market.

Three or four people were right outside the double doors—Ollie Weeks was one of them—and they all jumped back in surprise. Ollie grabbed at his chest. “David!” he said in a pinched voice. “Jesus Christ, you want to take ten years off my—” He saw my face. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Did you hear it?” I asked. My voice sounded strange in my own ears, high and squeaking. “Did any of you hear it?”

They hadn't heard anything, of course. They had come up to see why the generator had gone off. As Ollie told me that, one of the bag-boys bustled up with an armload of flashlights. He looked from Ollie to me curiously.

“I turned the generator off,” I said, and explained why.

“What did you hear?” one of the other men asked. He worked for the town road department; his name was Jim something.

“I don’t know. A scraping noise. Slithery. I don’t want to hear it again.”

“Nerves,” the other fellow with Ollie said.

No. It was not nerves.

“Did you hear it before the lights went out?”

“No, only after. But . . .” But nothing. I could see the way they were looking at me. They didn’t want any more bad news, anything else frightening or off-kilter. There was enough of that already. Only Ollie looked as if he believed me.

“Let’s go in and start her up again,” the bag-boy said, handing out the flashlights. Ollie took his doubtfully. The bag-boy offered me one, a slightly contemptuous shine in his eyes. He was maybe eighteen. After a moment’s thought, I took the light. I still needed something to cover Billy with.

Ollie opened the doors and chocked them, letting in some light. The bleach cartons lay scattered around the half-open door in the plywood partition.

The fellow named Jim sniffed and said, “Smells pretty rank, all right. Guess you was right to shut her down.”

The flashlight beams bobbed and danced across cartons of canned goods, toilet paper, dog food. The beams were smoky in the drifting fumes the blocked exhaust had turned back into the storage area. The bag-boy trained his light briefly on the wide loading door at the extreme right.

The two men and Ollie went inside the generator compartment. Their lights flashed uneasily back and forth, reminding me of something out of a boys’ adventure story—and I illustrated a series of them while I was still in college. Pirates burying their bloody gold at midnight, or maybe the mad doctor and his assistant snatching a body. Shadows, made twisted and monstrous by the shifting, conflicting flashlight beams, bobbed on the walls. The generator ticked irregularly as it cooled.

The bag-boy was walking toward the loading door, flashing his light ahead of him. “I wouldn’t go over there,” I said.

“No, I know *you* wouldn’t.”

“Try it now, Ollie,” one of the men said. The generator wheezed, then roared.

“Jesus! Shut her down! Holy crow, don’t that *stink!*”

The generator died again.

The bag-boy walked back from the loading door just as they came out. “Something’s plugged that exhaust, all right,” one of the men said.

“I’ll tell you what,” the bag-boy said. His eyes were shining in the glow of the flashlights, and there was a devil-may-care expression on his face that I had sketched too many times as part of the frontispieces for my boys’ adventure series. “Get it running long enough for me to raise the loading door back there. I’ll go around and clear away whatever it is.”

“Norm, I don’t think that’s a very good idea,” Ollie said doubtfully.

“Is it an electric door?” the one called Jim asked.

“Sure,” Ollie said. “But I just don’t think it would be wise for—”

“That’s okay,” the other guy said. He tipped his baseball cap back on his head. “I’ll do it.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Ollie began again. “I really don’t think anyone should—”

“Don’t worry,” he said indulgently to Ollie, dismissing him.

Norm, the bag-boy, was indignant. “Listen, it was my idea,” he said.

All at once, by some magic, they had gotten around to arguing about who was going to do it instead of whether or not it should be done at all. But of course, none of them had heard that nasty slithering sound. “Stop it!” I said loudly.

They looked around at me.

“You don’t seem to understand, or you’re trying as hard as you can *not* to understand. This is no ordinary fog. Nobody has come into the market since it hit. If you open that loading door and something comes in—”

“Something like what?” Norm said with perfect eighteen-year-old macho contempt.

“Whatever made the noise I heard.”

“Mr. Drayton,” Jim said. “Pardon me, but I’m not convinced you heard anything. I know you’re a big-shot artist with connections in New York and Hollywood and all, but that doesn’t make you any different from anyone else, in my book. Way I figure, you got in here in the dark and maybe you just . . . got a little confused.”

“Maybe I did,” I said. “And maybe if you want to start screwing around outside, you ought to start by making sure that lady got home safe to her kids.” His attitude—and that of his buddy and of Norm the bag-boy—was making me mad and scaring me more at the same time. They had the sort of light in their eyes that some men get when they go shooting rats at the town dump.

“Hey,” Jim’s buddy said. “When any of us here want your advice, we’ll ask for it.”

Hesitantly, Ollie said: “The generator really isn’t that important, you know. The food in the cold cases will keep for twelve hours or more with absolutely no—”

“Okay, kid, you’re it,” Jim said brusquely. “I’ll start the motor, you raise the door so that the place doesn’t stink up too bad. Me and Myron will be standing by the exhaust outflow. Give us a yell when it’s clear.”

“Sure,” Norm said, and hustled excitedly away.

“This is crazy,” I said. “You let that lady go by herself—”

“I didn’t notice you breaking your ass to escort her,” Jim’s buddy Myron said. A dull, brick-colored flush was creeping out of his collar.

“—but you’re going to let this kid risk his life over a generator that doesn’t even matter?”

“Why don’t you just shut the fuck up!” Norm yelled.

“Listen, Mr. Drayton,” Jim said, and smiled at me coldly. “I’ll tell you what. If you’ve got anything else to say, I think you better count your teeth first, because I’m tired of listening to your bullshit.”

Ollie looked at me, plainly frightened. I shrugged. They were crazy, that was all. Their sense of proportion was temporarily gone. Out there they had been confused and scared. In here was a straightforward mechanical problem: a balky generator. It was possible to solve this problem. Solving the problem would help make them feel less confused and helpless. Therefore they would solve it.

Jim and his friend Myron decided I knew when I was licked and went back into the generator compartment. “Ready, Norm?” Jim asked.

Norm nodded, then realized they couldn’t hear a nod. “Yeah,” he said.

“Norm,” I said. “Don’t be a fool.”

“It’s a mistake,” Ollie added.

He looked at us, and suddenly his face was much younger than eighteen. It was the face of a boy. His Adam’s apple bobbed convulsively, and I saw that he was scared green. He opened his mouth to say something—I think he was going to call it off—and then the generator roared into life again, and when it was running smoothly, Norm lunged at the button to the right of the door and it began to rattle upward on its dual steel tracks. The emergency lights had come back on when the generator started. Now they dimmed down as the motor which lifted the door sucked away the juice.

The shadows ran backward and melted. The storage area began to fill with the mellow white light of an overcast late-winter day. I noticed that odd, acrid smell again.

The loading door went up two feet, then four. Beyond I could see a square cement platform outlined around the edges with a yellow stripe. The yellow faded and washed out in just three feet. The fog was incredibly thick.

“*Ho up!*” Norm yelled.

Tendrils of mist, as white and fine as floating lace, eddied inside. The air was cold. It had been noticeably cool all morning long, especially after the sticky heat of the last three weeks, but it had been a summery coolness. This was *cold*. It was like March. I shivered. And I thought of Steff.

The generator died. Jim came out just as Norm ducked under the door. He saw it. So did I. So did Ollie.

A tentacle came over the far lip of the concrete loading platform and grabbed Norm around the calf. My mouth dropped wide open. Ollie made a very short glottal sound of surprise —*uk!* The tentacle tapered from a thickness of a foot—the size of a grass snake—at the point where it had wrapped itself around Norm’s lower leg to a

thickness of maybe four or five feet where it disappeared into the mist. It was slate gray on top, shading to a fleshy pink underneath. And there were rows of suckers on the underside. They were moving and writhing like hundreds of small, puckering mouths.

Norm looked down. He saw what had him. His eyes bulged. *“Get it off me! Hey, get it off me! Christ Jesus, get this frigging thing off me!”*

“Oh my God,” Jim whimpered.

Norm grabbed the bottom edge of the loading door and yanked himself back in. The tentacle seemed to bulge, the way your arm will when you flex it. Norm was yanked back against the corrugated steel door—his head clanged against it. The tentacle bulged more, and Norm’s legs and torso began to slip back out. The bottom edge of the loading door scraped the shirttail out of his pants. He yanked savagely and pulled himself back in like a man doing a chin-up.

“Help me,” he was sobbing. “Help me, you guys, please, please.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Myron said. He had come out of the generator compartment to see what was going on.

I was the closest, and I grabbed Norm around the waist and yanked as hard as I could, rocking back on my heels. For a moment we moved backward, but only for a moment. It was like stretching a rubber band or pulling taffy. The tentacle yielded but gave up its basic grip not at all. Then three more tentacles floated out of the mist toward us. One curled around Norm’s flapping red Federal apron and tore it away. It disappeared back into the mist with the red cloth curled in its grip and I thought of something my mother used to say when my brother and I would beg for something she didn’t want us to have—candy, a comic book, some toy. “You need that like a hen needs a flag,” she’d say. I thought of that, and I thought of that tentacle waving Norm’s red apron around, and I got laughing. I got laughing, except my laughter and Norm’s screams sounded about the same. Maybe no one even knew I was laughing except me.

The other two tentacles slithered aimlessly back and forth on the loading platform for a moment, making those low scraping sounds I had heard earlier. Then one of them slapped against Norm’s left hip and slipped around it. I felt it touch my arm. It was warm and pulsing and smooth. I think now that if it had gripped me with those suckers,

I would have gone out into the mist too. But it didn't. It grabbed Norm. And the third tentacle ringleted his other ankle.

Now he was being pulled away from me. "Help me!" I shouted. "Ollie! Someone! Give me a hand here!"

But they didn't come. I don't know what they were doing, but they didn't come.

I looked down and saw the tentacle around Norm's waist working into his skin. The suckers were *eating* him where his shirt had pulled out of his pants. Blood, as red as his missing apron, began to seep out of the trench the pulsing tentacle had made for itself.

I banged my head on the lower edge of the partly raised door.

Norm's legs were outside again. One of his loafers had fallen off. A new tentacle came out of the mist, wrapped its tip firmly around the shoe, and made off with it. Norm's fingers clutched at the door's lower edge. He had it in a death grip. His fingers were livid. He was not screaming anymore; he was beyond that. His head whipped back and forth in an endless gesture of negation, and his long black hair flew wildly.

I looked over his shoulder and saw more tentacles coming, dozens of them, a forest of them. Most were small but a few were gigantic, as thick as the moss-corseted tree that had been lying across our driveway that morning. The big ones had candy-pink suckers that seemed the size of manhole covers. One of these big ones struck the concrete loading platform with a loud and rolling *thrrrrap!* sound and moved sluggishly toward us like a great blind earthworm. I gave one gigantic tug, and the tentacle holding Norm's right calf slipped a little. That was all. But before it reestablished its grip, I saw that the thing was eating him away.

One of the tentacles brushed delicately past my cheek and then wavered in the air, as if debating. I thought of Billy then. Billy was lying asleep in the market by Mr. McVey's long white meat cooler. I had come in here to find something to cover him up with. If one of those things got hold of me, there would be no one to watch out for him—except maybe Norton.

So I let go of Norm and dropped to my hands and knees.

I was half in and half out, directly under the raised door. A tentacle passed by on my left, seeming to walk on its suckers. It attached itself to one of Norm's bulging upper arms, paused for a second, and then slid around it in coils.

Now Norm looked like something out of a madman's dream of snake charming. Tentacles twisted over him uneasily almost everywhere . . . and they were all around me, as well. I made a clumsy leapfrog jump back inside, landed on my shoulder, and rolled. Jim, Ollie and Myron were still there. They stood like a tableau of waxworks in Madame Tussaud's, their faces pale, their eyes too bright. Jim and Myron flanked the door to the generator compartment.

"Start the generator!" I yelled at them.

Neither moved. They were staring with a drugged, thanatotic avidity at the loading bay.

I groped on the floor, picked up the first thing that came to hand—a box of Snowy bleach—and chucked it at Jim. It hit him in the gut, just above the belt buckle. He grunted and grabbed at himself. His eyes flickered back into some semblance of normality.

"Go start that fucking generator!" I screamed so loudly it hurt my throat.

He didn't move; instead he began to defend himself, apparently having decided that, with Norm being eaten alive by some insane horror from the mist, the time had come for rebuttals.

"I'm sorry," he whined. "I didn't know, how the hell was I supposed to know? You said you heard something but I didn't know what you meant, you should have said what you meant better. I thought, I dunno, maybe a bird, or something—"

So then Ollie moved, bunting him aside with one thick shoulder and blundering into the generator room. Jim stumbled over one of the bleach cartons and fell down, just as I had done in the dark. "I'm sorry," he said again. His red hair had tumbled over his brow. His cheeks were cheesewhite. His eyes were those of a horrified little boy. Seconds later the generator coughed and rumbled into life.

I turned back to the loading door. Norm was almost gone, yet he clung grimly with one hand. His body boiled with tentacles, and blood

pattered serenely down on the concrete in dime-size droplets. His head whipped back and forth and his eyes bulged with terror as they stared off into the mist.

Other tentacles now crept and crawled over the floor inside. There were too many near the button that controlled the loading door to even think of approaching it. One of them closed around a half-liter bottle of Pepsi and carried it off. Another slipped around a cardboard carton and squeezed. The carton ruptured and rolls of toilet paper, two-packs of Delsey wrapped in cellophane, geysered upward, came down, and rolled everywhere. Tentacles seized them eagerly.

One of the big ones slipped in. Its tip rose from the floor and it seemed to sniff the air. It began to advance toward Myron and he stepped mincingly away from it, his eyes rolling madly in their sockets. A high-pitched little moan escaped his slack lips.

I looked around for something, anything at all long enough to reach over the questing tentacles and punch the SHUT button on the wall. I saw a janitor's push broom leaning against a stack-up of beer cases and grabbed it.

Norm's good hand was ripped loose. He thudded down onto the concrete loading platform and scrabbled madly for a grip with his one free hand. His eyes met mine for a moment. They were hellishly bright and aware. He knew what was happening to him. Then he was pulled, bumping and rolling, into the mist. There was another scream, choked off. Norm was gone.

I pushed the tip of the broom handle onto the button and the motor whined. The door began to slide back down. It touched the thickest of the tentacles first, the one that had been investigating in Myron's direction. It indented its hide—skin, whatever—and then pierced it. A black goo began to spurt from it. It writhed madly, whipping across the concrete storage-area floor like an obscene bullwhip, and then it seemed to flatten out. A moment later it was gone. The others began to withdraw.

One of them had a five-pound bag of Gaines dog food, and it wouldn't let go. The descending door cut it in two before thumping home in its grooved slot. The severed chunk of tentacle squeezed convulsively tighter, splitting the bag open and sending brown

nuggets of dog food everywhere. Then it began to flop on the floor like a fish out of water, curling and uncurling, but ever more slowly, until it lay still. I prodded it with the tip of the broom. The piece of tentacle, maybe three feet long, closed on it savagely for a moment, then loosened and lay limp again in the confused litter of toilet paper, dog food, and bleach cartons.

There was no sound except the roar of the generator and Ollie, crying inside the plywood compartment. I could see him sitting on a stool in there with his face clutched in his hands.

Then I became aware of another sound. The soft, slithery sound I had heard in the dark. Only now the sound was multiplied tenfold. It was the sound of tentacles squirming over the outside of the loading door, trying to find a way in.

Myron took a couple of steps toward me. “Look,” he said. “You got to understand—”

I looped a fist at his face. He was too surprised to even try to block it. It landed just below his nose and mashed his upper lip into his teeth. Blood flowed into his mouth.

“You got him killed!” I shouted. “Did you get a good look at it? Did you get a good look at what you did?”

I started to pummel him, throwing wild rights and lefts, not punching the way I had been taught in my college boxing classes but only hitting out. He stepped back, shaking some of them off, taking others with a numbness that seemed like a kind of resignation or penance. That made me angrier. I bloodied his nose. I raised a mouse under one of his eyes that was going to black just beautifully. I clipped him a hard one on the chin. After that one, his eyes went cloudy and semi-vacant.

“Look,” he kept saying, “look, look,” and then I punched him low in the stomach and the air went out of him and he didn’t say “look, look” anymore. I don’t know how long I would have gone on punching him, but someone grabbed my arms. I jerked free and turned around. I was hoping it was Jim. I wanted to punch Jim out, too.

But it wasn’t Jim. It was Ollie, his round face dead pale, except for the dark circles around his eyes—eyes that were still shiny from his

tears. “Don’t, David,” he said. “Don’t hit him anymore. It doesn’t solve anything.”

Jim was standing off to one side, his face a bewildered blank. I kicked a carton of something at him. It struck one of his Dingo boots and bounced away.

“You and your buddy are a couple of stupid assholes,” I said.

“Come on, David,” Ollie said unhappily. “Quit it.”

“You two assholes got that kid killed.”

Jim looked down at his Dingo boots. Myron sat on the floor and held his beer belly. I was breathing hard. The blood was roaring in my ears and I was trembling all over. I sat down on a couple of cartons and put my head down between my knees and gripped my legs hard just above the ankles. I sat that way for a while with my hair in my face, waiting to see if I was going to black out or puke or what.

After a bit the feeling began to pass and I looked up at Ollie. His pinky ring flashed subdued fire in the glow of the emergency lights.

“Okay,” I said dully. “I’m done.”

“Good,” Ollie said. “We’ve got to think what to do next.”

The storage area was beginning to stink of exhaust again. “Shut the generator down. That’s the first thing.”

“Yeah, let’s get out of here,” Myron said. His eyes appealed to me. “I’m sorry about the kid. But you got to understand—”

“I don’t got to understand anything. You and your buddy go back into the market, but you wait right there by the beer cooler. And don’t say a word to anybody. Not yet.”

They went willingly enough; huddling together as they passed through the swinging doors. Ollie killed the generator, and just as the lights started to fail, I saw a quilted rug—the sort of thing movers use to pad breakable things—flopped over a stack of returnable soda bottles. I reached up and grabbed it for Billy.

There was the shuffling, blundering sound of Ollie coming out of the generator compartment. Like a great many overweight men, his breathing had a slightly heavy wheezing sound.

“David?” His voice wavered a little. “You still here?”

“Right here, Ollie. You want to watch out for all those bleach cartons.”

“Yeah. ”

I guided him with my voice and in thirty seconds or so he reached out of the dark and gripped my shoulder. He gave a long, trembling sigh.

“Christ, let’s get out of here.” I could smell the Roloids he always chewed on his breath. “This dark is . . . is bad.”

“It is,” I said. “But hang tight a minute, Ollie. I wanted to talk to you and I didn’t want those other two fuckheads listening.”

“Dave . . . they didn’t twist Norm’s arm. You ought to remember that.”

“Norm was a kid, and they weren’t. But never mind, that’s over. We’ve got to tell them, Ollie. The people in the market.”

“If they panic—” Ollie’s voice was doubtful.

“Maybe they will and maybe they won’t. But it will make them think twice about going out, which is what most of them want to do. Why shouldn’t they? Most of them will have people they left at home. I do myself. We have to make them understand what they’re risking if they go out there.”

His hand was gripping my arm hard. “All right,” he said. “Yes, I just keep asking myself . . . all those tentacles . . . like a squid or something . . . David, what were they hooked to? *What were those tentacles hooked to?*”

“I don’t know. But I don’t want those two telling people on their own. That *would* start a panic. Let’s go.”

I looked around, and after a moment or two located the thin line of vertical light between the swing doors. We started to shuffle toward it, wary of scattered cartons, one of Ollie’s pudgy hands clamped over my forearm. It occurred to me that all of us had lost our flashlights.

As we reached the doors, Ollie said flatly: “What we saw . . . it’s impossible, David. You know that, don’t you? Even if a van from the Boston Seaquarium drove out back and dumped out one of those gigantic squids like in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, it would die. *It would just die.*”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s right.”

“So what happened? Huh? What happened? What is that damned mist?”

“Ollie, I don’t know.”

We went out.

## V. An Argument with Norton. A Discussion Near the Beer Cooler. Verification.

Jim and his good buddy Myron were just outside the doors, each with a Budweiser in his fist. I looked at Billy, saw he was still asleep, and covered him with the ruglike mover's pad. He moved a little, muttered something, and then lay still again. I looked at my watch. It was 12:15 P.M. That seemed utterly impossible; it felt as if at least five hours had passed since I had first gone in there to look for something to cover him with. But the whole thing, from first to last, had taken only about thirty-five minutes.

I went back to where Ollie stood with Jim and Myron. Ollie had taken a beer and he offered me one. I took it and gulped down half the can at once, as I had that morning cutting wood. It bucked me up a little.

Jim was Jim Grondin. Myron's last name was LaFleur—that had its comic side, all right. Myron the flower had drying blood on his lips, chin, and cheek. The eye with the mouse under it was already swelling up. The girl in the cranberry-colored sweatshirt walked by aimlessly and gave Myron a cautious look. I could have told her that Myron was only dangerous to teenage boys intent on proving their manhood, but saved my breath. After all, Ollie was right—they *had* only been doing what they thought was best, although in a blind, fearful way rather than in any real common interest. And now I needed them to do what *I* thought was best. I didn't think that would be a problem. They had both had the stuffing knocked out of them. Neither—especially Myron the flower—was going to be good for anything for some time to come. Something that had been in their eyes when they were fixing to send Norm out to unplug the exhaust vent had gone now. Their peckers were no longer up.

"We're going to have to tell these people something," I said.

Jim opened his mouth to protest.

“Ollie and I will leave out any part you and Myron had in sending Norm out there if you’ll back up what he and I say about . . . well, about what got him.”

“Sure,” Jim said, pitifully eager. “Sure, if we don’t tell, people might go out there . . . like that woman . . . that woman who . . .” He wiped his hand across his mouth and then drank more beer quickly. “Christ, what a mess.”

“David,” Ollie said. “What—” He stopped, then made himself go on. “What if they get in? The tentacles?”

“How could they?” Jim asked. “You guys shut the door.”

“Sure,” Ollie said. “But the whole front wall of this place is plate glass.”

An elevator shot my stomach down about twenty floors. I had known that, but had somehow been successfully ignoring it. I looked over at where Billy lay asleep. I thought of those tentacles swarming over Norm. I thought about that happening to Billy.

“Plate glass,” Myron LaFleur whispered. “Jesus Christ in a chariot-driven sidecar.”

I left the three of them standing by the cooler, each working a second can of beer, and went looking for Brent Norton. I found him in sober-sided conversation with Bud Brown at Register 2. The pair of them—Norton with his styled gray hair and his elderly-stud good looks, Brown with his dour New England phiz—looked like something out of a *New Yorker* cartoon.

As many as two dozen people milled restlessly in the space between the end of the checkout lanes and the long show window. A lot of them were lined up at the glass, looking out into the mist. I was again reminded of the people that congregate at a building site.

Mrs. Carmody was seated on the stationary conveyor belt of one of the checkout lanes, smoking a Parliament in a One Step at a Time filter. Her eyes measured me, found me wanting, and passed on. She looked as if she might be dreaming awake.

“Brent,” I said.

“David! Where did you get off to?”

“That’s what I’d like to talk to you about.”

“There are people back at the cooler drinking beer,” Brown said grimly. He sounded like a man announcing that X-rated movies had been shown at the deacons’ party. “I can see them in the security mirror. This has simply got to stop.”

“Brent?”

“Excuse me for a minute, would you, Mr. Brown?”

“Certainly.” He folded his arms across his chest and stared grimly up into the convex mirror. “It is going to stop, I can promise you that.”

Norton and I headed toward the beer cooler in the far corner of the store, walking past the housewares and notions. I glanced back over my shoulder, noticing uneasily how the wooden beams framing the tall, rectangular sections of glass had buckled and twisted and splintered. And one of the windows wasn’t even whole, I remembered. A pie-shaped chunk of glass had fallen out of the upper corner at the instant of that queer thump. Perhaps we could stuff it with cloth or something—maybe a bunch of those \$3.59 ladies’ tops I had noticed near the wine—

My thoughts broke off abruptly, and I had to put the back of my hand over my mouth, as if stifling a burp. What I was really stifling was the rancid flood of horrified giggles that wanted to escape me at the thought of stuffing a bunch of shirts into a hole to keep out those tentacles that had carried Norm away. I had seen one of those tentacles—a small one—squeeze a bag of dog food until it simply ruptured.

“David? Are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“Your face—you looked like you just had a good idea or a bloody awful one.”

Something hit me then. “Brent, what happened to that man who came in raving about something in the mist getting John Lee Frovin?”

“The guy with the nosebleed?”

“Yes, him.”

“He passed out and Mr. Brown brought him around with some smelling salts from the first-aid kit. Why?”

“Did he say anything else when he woke up?”

“He started in on that hallucination. Mr. Brown conducted him up to the office. He was frightening some of the women. He seemed happy enough to go. Something about the glass. When Mr. Brown said there was only one small window in the manager’s office, and that that one was reinforced with wire, he seemed happy enough to go. I presume he’s still there.”

“What he was talking about is no hallucination.”

“No, of course it isn’t.”

“And that thud we felt?”

“No, but, David—”

He’s scared, I kept reminding myself. Don’t blow up at him, you’ve treated yourself to one blowup this morning and that’s enough. Don’t blow up at him just because this is the way he was during that stupid property-line dispute . . . first patronizing, then sarcastic, and finally, when it became clear he was going to lose, ugly. Don’t blow up at him because you’re going to need him. He may not be able to start his own chainsaw, but he looks like the father figure of the Western world, and if he tells people not to panic, they won’t. So don’t blow up at him.

“You see those double doors up there beyond the beer cooler?”

He looked, frowning. “Isn’t one of those men drinking beer the other assistant manager? Weeks? If Brown sees that, I can promise you that man will be looking for a job very soon.”

“Brent, will you listen to me?”

He glanced back at me absently. “What were you saying, Dave? I’m sorry.”

Not as sorry as he was going to be. “Do you see those doors?”

“Yes, of course I do. What about them?”

“They give on the storage area that runs all the way along the west face of the building. Billy fell asleep and I went back there to see if I could find something to cover him up with . . .”

I told him everything, only leaving out the argument about whether or not Norm should have gone out at all. I told him what had come in . . . and finally, what had gone out, screaming. Brent Norton refused to believe it. No—he refused to even entertain it. I took him over to

Jim, Ollie, and Myron. All three of them verified the story, although Jim and Myron the flower were well on their way to getting drunk.

Again, Norton refused to believe or even to entertain it. He simply balked. “No,” he said. “No, no, no. Forgive me, gentlemen, but it’s completely ridiculous. Either you’re having me on”—he patronized us with his gleaming smile to show that he could take a joke as well as the next fellow—“or you’re suffering from some form of group hypnosis.”

My temper rose again, and I controlled it—with difficulty. I don’t think that I’m ordinarily a quick-tempered man, but these weren’t ordinary circumstances. I had Billy to think about, and what was happening—or what had already happened—to Stephanie. Those things were constantly gnawing at the back of my mind.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go back there. There’s a chunk of tentacle on the floor. The door cut it off when it came down. And you can *hear* them. They’re rustling all over that door. It sounds like the wind in ivy.”

“No,” he said calmly.

“What?” I really did believe I had misheard him. “What did you say?”

“I said no, I’m not going back there. The joke has gone far enough.”

“Brent, I swear to you it’s no joke.”

“Of course it is,” he snapped. His eyes ran over Jim, Myron, rested briefly on Ollie Weeks—who held his glance with calm impassivity—and at last came back to me. “It’s what you locals probably call ‘a real belly-buster.’ Right, David?”

“Brent . . . look—”

“No, you look!” His voice began to rise toward a courtroom shout. It carried very, very well, and several of the people who were wandering around, edgy and aimless, looked over to see what was going on. Norton jabbed his finger at me as he spoke. “It’s a joke. It’s a banana skin and I’m the guy that’s supposed to slip on it. None of you people are exactly crazy about out-of-towners, am I right? You all pretty much stick together. The way it happened when I hauled you into court to get what was rightfully mine. You won that one, all

right. Why not? Your father was the famous artist, and it's your town. I only pay my taxes and spend my money here!"

He was no longer performing, hectoring us with the trained courtroom shout; he was nearly screaming and on the verge of losing all control. Ollie Weeks turned and walked away, clutching his beer. Myron and his friend Jim were staring at Norton with frank amazement.

"Am I supposed to go back there and look at some ninety-eight-cent rubber-joke novelty while these two hicks stand around and laugh their asses off?"

"Hey, you want to watch who you're calling a hick," Myron said.

"I'm *glad* that tree fell on your boathouse, if you want to know the truth. *Glad.*" Norton was grinning savagely at me. "Stove it in pretty well, didn't it? Fantastic. Now get out of my way."

He tried to push past me. I grabbed him by the arm and threw him against the beer cooler. A woman cawed in surprise. Two six-packs of Bud fell over.

"You dig out your ears and listen, Brent. There are lives at stake here. My kid's is not the least of them. So you listen, or I swear I'll knock the shit out of you."

"Go ahead," Norton said, still grinning with a kind of insane palsied bravado. His eyes, bloodshot and wide, bulged from their sockets. "Show everyone how big and brave you are, beating up a man with a heart condition who is old enough to be your father."

"Sock him anyway!" Jim exclaimed. "Fuck his heart condition. I don't even think a cheap New York shyster like him has got a heart."

"You keep out of it," I said to Jim, and then put my face down to Norton's. I was kissing distance, if that had been what I had in mind. The cooler was off, but it was still radiating a chill. "Stop throwing up sand. You know damn well I'm telling the truth."

"I know . . . no . . . such thing," he panted.

"If it was another time and place, I'd let you get away with it. I don't care how scared you are, and I'm not keeping score. I'm scared, too. But I need you, goddammit! Does that get through? I need you!"

"Let me *go!*"

I grabbed him by the shirt and shook him. “Don’t you understand anything? People are going to start leaving and walk right into that thing out there! For Christ’s sake, don’t you understand?”

“Let me *go!*”

“Not until you come back there with me and see for yourself.”

“I told you, *no!* It’s all a trick, a joke, I’m not as stupid as you take me for—”

“Then I’ll haul you back there myself.”

I grabbed him by the shoulder and the scruff of his neck. The seam of his shirt under one arm tore with a soft purring sound. I dragged him toward the double doors. Norton let out a wretched scream. A knot of people, fifteen or eighteen, had gathered, but they kept their distance. None showed any signs of wanting to interfere.

“Help me!” Norton cried. His eyes bulged behind his glasses. His styled hair had gone awry again, sticking up in the same two little tufts behind his ears. People shuffled their feet and watched.

“What are you screaming for?” I said in his ear. “It’s just a joke, right? That’s why I took you to town when you asked to come and why I trusted you to cross Billy in the parking lot—because I had this handy fog all manufactured, I rented a fog machine from Hollywood, it cost me fifteen thousand dollars and another eight thousand dollars to ship it, all so I could play a joke on you. Stop bullshitting yourself and open your eyes!”

“*Let . . . me . . . go!*” Norton bawled. We were almost at the doors.

“Here, here! What is this? What are you doing?”

It was Brown. He hustled and elbowed his way through the crowd of watchers.

“Make him let me go,” Norton said hoarsely. “He’s crazy.”

“No. He’s not crazy. I wish he were, but he isn’t.” That was Ollie, and I could have blessed him. He came around the aisle behind us and stood there facing Brown.

Brown’s eyes dropped to the beer Ollie was holding. “You’re *drinking!*” he said, and his voice was surprised but not totally devoid of pleasure. “You’ll lose your job for this.”

“Come on, Bud,” I said, letting Norton go. “This is no ordinary situation.”

“Regulations don’t change,” Brown said smugly. “I’ll see that the company hears of it. That’s my responsibility.”

Norton, meanwhile, had skittered away and stood at some distance, trying to straighten his shirt and smooth back his hair. His eyes darted between Brown and me nervously.

“*Hey!*” Ollie cried suddenly, raising his voice and producing a bass thunder I never would have suspected from this large but soft and unassuming man. “*Hey! Everybody in the store! You want to come up back and hear this! It concerns all of you!*” He looked at me levelly, ignoring Brown altogether. “Am I doing all right?”

“Fine.”

People began to gather. The original knot of spectators to my argument with Norton doubled, then trebled.

“There’s something you all had better know—” Ollie began.

“You put that beer down right now,” Brown said.

“You shut up right now,” I said, and took a step toward him.

Brown took a compensatory step back. “I don’t know what some of you think you are doing,” he said, “but I can tell you it’s going to be reported to the Federal Foods Company! All of it! And I want you to understand—*there may be charges!*” His lips drew nervously back from his yellowed teeth, and I could feel sympathy for him. Just trying to cope; that was all he was doing. As Norton was by imposing a mental gag order on himself. Myron and Jim had tried by turning the whole thing into a macho charade—if the generator could be fixed, the mist would blow over. This was Brown’s way. He was . . .

Protecting the Store.

“Then you go ahead and take down the names,” I said. “But please don’t talk.”

“I’ll take down plenty of names,” he responded. “Yours will be head on the list, you . . . you *bohemian*.”

“Mr. David Drayton has got something to tell you,” Ollie said, “and I think you had better all listen up, in case you were planning on going home.”

So I told them what had happened, pretty much as I told Norton. There was some laughter at first, then a deepening uneasiness as I finished.

“It’s a lie, you know,” Norton said. His voice tried for hard emphasis and overshot into stridency. This was the man I’d told first, hoping to enlist his credibility. What a balls-up.

“Of course it’s a lie,” Brown agreed. “It’s lunacy. Where do you suppose those tentacles came from, Mr. Drayton?”

“I don’t know, and at this point, that’s not even a very important question. They’re here. There’s—”

“I suspect they came out of a few of those beer cans. That’s what I suspect.” This got some appreciative laughter. It was silenced by the strong, rusty-hinge voice of Mrs. Carmody.

“Death!” she cried, and those who had been laughing quickly sobered.

She marched into the center of the rough circle that had formed, her canary pants seeming to give off a light of their own, her huge purse swinging against one elephantine thigh. Her black eyes glanced arrogantly around, as sharp and balefully sparkling as a magpie’s. Two good-looking girls of about sixteen with CAMP WOODLANDS written on the back of their white rayon shirts shrank away from her.

“You listen but you don’t hear! You hear but you don’t believe! Which one of you wants to go outside and see for himself?” Her eyes swept them, and then fell on me. “And just what do you propose to do about it, Mr. David Drayton? What do you think you can do about it?”

She grinned, skull-like above her canary outfit.

“It’s the end, I tell you. The end of everything. It’s the Last Times. The moving finger has writ, not in fire, but in lines of mist. The earth has opened and spewed forth its abominations—”

“Can’t you make her shut up?” one of the teenage girls burst out. She was beginning to cry. “She’s scaring me!”

“Are you scared, dearie?” Mrs. Carmody asked, and turned on her. “You aren’t scared now, no. But when the foul creatures the Imp has loosed upon the face of the earth come for you—”

“That’s enough now, Mrs. Carmody,” Ollie said, taking her arm. “That’s just fine.”

“You let go of me! It’s the end, I tell you! It’s death! Death!”

“It’s a pile of shit,” a man in a fishing hat and glasses said disgustedly.

“No, sir,” Myron spoke up. “I know it sounds like something out of a dope-dream, but it’s the flat-out truth. I saw it myself.”

“I did, too,” Jim said.

“And me,” Ollie chipped in. He had succeeded in quieting Mrs. Carmody, at least for the time being. But she stood close by, clutching her big purse and grinning her crazy grin. No one wanted to stand too close to her—they muttered among themselves, not liking the corroboration. Several of them looked back at the big plate-glass windows in an uneasy, speculative way. I was glad to see it.

“Lies,” Norton said. “You people all lie each other up. That’s all.”

“What you’re suggesting is totally beyond belief,” Brown said.

“We don’t have to stand here chewing it over,” I told him. “Come back into the storage area with me. Take a look. And a listen.”

“Customers are not allowed in the—”

“Bud,” Ollie said, “go with him. Let’s settle this.”

“All right,” Brown said. “Mr. Drayton? Let’s get this foolishness over with.”

We pushed through the double doors into the darkness.

The sound was unpleasant—perhaps evil.

Brown felt it, too, for all his hardheaded Yankee manner; his hand clutched my arm immediately, his breath caught for a moment and then resumed more harshly.

It was a low whispering sound from the direction of the loading door—an almost caressing sound. I swept around gently with one foot and finally struck one of the flashlights. I bent down, got it, and turned it on. Brown’s face was tightly drawn, and he hadn’t even seen them—he was only hearing them. But I had seen, and I could imagine them twisting and climbing over the corrugated steel surface of the door like living vines.

“What do you think now? Totally beyond belief?”

Brown licked his lips and looked at the littered confusion of boxes and bags. “They did this?”

“Some of it. Most of it. Come over here.”

He came—reluctantly. I spotted the flashlight on the shriveled and curled section of tentacle, still lying by the push broom. Brown bent toward it.

“Don’t touch that,” I said. “It may still be alive.”

He straightened up quickly. I picked up the broom by the bristles and prodded the tentacle. The third or fourth poke caused it to unclench sluggishly and reveal two whole suckers and a ragged segment of a third. Then the fragment coiled again with muscular speed and lay still. Brown made a gagging, disgusted sound.

“Seen enough?”

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

We followed the bobbing light back to the double doors and pushed through them. All the faces turned toward us, and the hum of conversation died. Norton’s face was like old cheese. Mrs. Carmody’s black eyes glinted. Ollie was drinking beer; his face was still running with trickles of perspiration, although it had gotten rather chilly in the market. The two girls with CAMP WOODLANDS on their shirts were huddled together like young horses before a thunderstorm. Eyes. So many eyes. I could paint them, I thought with a chill. No faces, only eyes in the gloom. I could paint them but no one would believe they were real.

Bud Brown folded his long-fingered hands primly in front of him. “People,” he said. “It appears we have a problem of some magnitude here.”

## **VI. Further Discussion. Mrs. Carmody. Fortifications. What Happened to the Flat-Earth Society.**

The next four hours passed in a kind of dream. There was a long and semihysterical discussion following Brown’s confirmation, or maybe the discussion wasn’t as long as it seemed; maybe it was just the grim necessity of people chewing over the same information,

trying to see it from every possible point of view, working it the way a dog works a bone, trying to get at the marrow. It was a slow coming to belief. You can see the same thing at any New England town meeting in March.

There was the Flat-Earth Society, headed by Norton. They were a vocal minority of about ten who believed none of it. Norton pointed out over and over again that there were only four witnesses to the bag-boy being carried off by what he called the Tentacles from Planet X (it was good for a laugh the first time, but it wore thin quickly; Norton, in his increasing agitation, seemed not to notice). He added that he personally did not trust one of the four. He further pointed out that fifty percent of the witnesses were now hopelessly inebriated. That was unquestionably true. Jim and Myron LaFleur, with the entire beer cooler and wine rack at their disposal, were abysmally shitfaced. Considering what had happened to Norm, and their part in it, I didn't blame them. They would sober off all too soon.

Ollie continued to drink steadily, ignoring Brown's protests. After a while Brown gave up, contenting himself with an occasional baleful threat about the Company. He didn't seem to realize that Federal Foods, Inc., with its stores in Bridgton, North Windham, and Portland, might not even exist anymore. For all we knew, the Eastern Seaboard might no longer exist. Ollie drank steadily, but didn't get drunk. He was sweating it out as rapidly as he could put it in.

At last, as the discussion with the Flat-Earthers was becoming acrimonious, Ollie spoke up. "If you don't believe it, Mr. Norton, that's fine. I'll tell you what to do. You go on out that front door and walk around to the back. There's a great big pile of returnable beer and soda bottles there. Norm and Buddy and I put them out this morning. You bring back a couple of those bottles so we know you really went back there. You do that and I'll personally take my shirt off and eat it."

Norton began to bluster.

Ollie cut him off in that same soft, even voice. "I tell you, you're not doing anything but damage talking the way you are. There's people here that want to go home and make sure their families are okay. My sister and her year-old daughter are at home in Naples right now. I'd

like to check on them, sure. But if people start believing you and try to go home, what happened to Norm is going to happen to them.”

He didn't convince Norton, but he convinced some of the leaners and fence sitters—it wasn't what he said so much as it was his eyes, his haunted eyes. I think Norton's sanity hinged on not being convinced, or that he thought it did. But he didn't take Ollie up on his offer to bring back a sampling of returnables from out back. None of them did. They weren't ready to go out, at least not yet. He and his little group of Flat-Earthers (reduced by one or two now) went as far away from the rest of us as they could get, over by the prepared-meats case. One of them kicked my sleeping son in the leg as he went past, waking him up.

I went over, and Billy clung to my neck. When I tried to put him down, he clung tighter and said, “Don't do that, Daddy. Please.”

I found a shopping cart and put him in the baby seat. He looked very big in there. It would have been comical except for his pale face, the dark hair brushed across his forehead just above his eyebrows, his woeful eyes. He probably hadn't been up in the baby seat of the shopping cart for as long as two years. These little things slide by you, you don't realize at first, and when what has changed finally comes to you, it's always a nasty shock.

Meanwhile, with the Flat-Earthers having withdrawn, the argument had found another lightning rod—this time it was Mrs. Carmody, and understandably enough, she stood alone.

In the faded, dismal light she was witchlike in her blazing canary pants, her bright rayon blouse, her armloads of clacking junk jewelry—copper, tortoiseshell, adamantine—and her thyroidal purse. Her parchment face was grooved with strong vertical lines. Her frizzy gray hair was yanked flat with three horn combs and twisted in the back. Her mouth was a line of knotted rope.

“There is no defense against the will of God. This has been coming. I have seen the signs. There are those here that I have told, but there are none so blind as those who will not see.”

“Well, what are you saying? What are you proposing?” Mike Hatlen broke in impatiently. He was a town selectman, although he didn't look the part now, in his yachtsman's cap and saggy-seated

Bermudas. He was sipping at a beer; a great many men were doing it now. Bud Brown had given up protesting, but he was indeed taking names—keeping a rough tab on everyone he could.

“Proposing?” Mrs. Carmody echoed, wheeling toward Hatlen. “Proposing? Why, I am proposing that you prepare to meet your God, Michael Hatlen.” She gazed around at all of us. “Prepare to meet your God!”

“Prepare to meet shit,” Myron LaFleur said in a drunken snarl from the beer cooler. “Old woman, I believe your tongue must be hung in the middle so it can run on both ends.”

There was a rumble of agreement. Billy looked around nervously, and I slipped an arm around his shoulders.

“I’ll have my say!” she cried. Her upper lip curled back, revealing snaggle teeth that were yellow with nicotine. I thought of the dusty stuffed animals in her shop, drinking eternally at the mirror that served as their creek. “Doubters will doubt to the end! Yet a monstrosity did drag that poor boy away! Things in the mist! Every abomination out of a bad dream! Eyeless freaks! Pallid horrors! Do you doubt? Then go on out! Go on out and say howdy-do!”

“Mrs. Carmody, you’ll have to stop,” I said. “You’re scaring my boy.”

The man with the little girl echoed the sentiment. She, all plump legs and scabby knees, had hidden her face against her father’s stomach and put her hands over her ears. Big Bill wasn’t crying, but he was close.

“There’s only one chance,” Mrs. Carmody said.

“What’s that, ma’am?” Mike Hatlen asked politely.

“A sacrifice,” Mrs. Carmody said—she seemed to grin in the gloom. “A blood sacrifice.”

Blood *sacrifice*—the words hung there, slowly turning. Even now, when I know better, I tell myself that then what she meant was someone’s pet dog—there were a couple of them trotting around the market in spite of the regulations against them. Even now I tell myself that. She looked like some crazed remnant of New England Puritanism in the gloom . . . but I suspect that something deeper and

darker than mere Puritanism motivated her. Puritanism had its own dark grandfather, old Adam with bloody hands.

She opened her mouth to say something more, and a small, neat man in red pants and a natty sport shirt struck her openhanded across the face. His hair was parted with ruler evenness on the left. He wore glasses. He also wore the unmistakable look of the summer tourist.

“You shut up that bad talk,” he said softly and tonelessly.

Mrs. Carmody put her hand to her mouth and then held it out to us, a wordless accusation. There was blood on the palm. But her black eyes seemed to dance with mad glee.

“You had it coming!” a woman cried out. “I would have done it myself!”

“They’ll get hold of you,” Mrs. Carmody said, showing us her bloody palm. The trickle of blood was now running down one of the wrinkles from her mouth to her chin like a droplet of rain down a gutter. “Not today, maybe. Tonight. Tonight when the dark comes. They’ll come with the night and take someone else. With the night they’ll come. You’ll hear them coming, creeping and crawling. And when they come, you’ll beg for Mother Carmody to show you what to do.”

The man in the red pants raised his hand slowly.

“You come on and hit me,” she whispered, and grinned her bloody grin at him. His hand wavered. “Hit me if you dare.” His hand dropped. Mrs. Carmody walked away by herself. Then Billy did begin to cry, hiding his face against me as the little girl had done with her father.

“I want to go home,” he said. “I want to see my mommy.”

I comforted him as best I could. Which probably wasn’t very well.

The talk finally turned into less frightening and destructive channels. The plate-glass windows, the market’s obvious weak point, were mentioned. Mike Hatlen asked what other entrances there were, and Ollie and Brown quickly ticked them off—two loading doors in addition to the one Norm had opened. The main IN/OUT

doors. The window in the manager's office (thick, reinforced glass, securely locked).

Talking about these things had a paradoxical effect. It made the danger seem more real but at the same time made us feel better. Even Billy felt it. He asked if he could go get a candy bar. I told him it would be all right so long as he didn't go near the big windows.

When he was out of earshot, a man near Mike Hatlen said, "Okay, what are we going to do about those windows? The old lady may be as crazy as a bedbug, but she could be right about something moving in after dark."

"Maybe the fog will blow over by then," a woman said.

"Maybe," the man said. "And maybe not."

"Any ideas?" I asked Bud and Ollie.

"Hold on a sec," the man near Hatlen said. "I'm Dan Miller. From Lynn, Mass. You don't know me, no reason why you should, but I got a place on Highland Lake. Bought it just this year. Got held up for it, is more like it, but I had to have it." There were a few chuckles.

"Anyway, I saw a whole pile of fertilizer and lawn-food bags down there. Twenty-five-pound sacks, most of them. We could put them up like sandbags. Leave loopholes to look out through . . . ."

Now more people were nodding and talking excitedly. I almost said something, then held it back. Miller was right. Putting those bags up could do no harm, and might do some good. But my mind went back to that tentacle squeezing the dog-food bag. I thought that one of the bigger tentacles could probably do the same for a twenty-five-pound bag of Green Acres lawn food or Vigoro. But a sermon on that wouldn't get us out or improve anyone's mood.

People began to break up, talking about getting it done, and Miller yelled: "Hold it! Hold it! Let's thrash this out while we're all together!"

They came back, a loose congregation of fifty or sixty people in the corner formed by the beer cooler, the storage doors, and the left end of the meat case, where Mr. McVey always seems to put the things no one wants, like sweetbreads and Scotch eggs and sheep's brains and head cheese. Billy wove his way through them with a five-year-old's unconscious agility in a world of giants and held up a Hershey bar. "Want this, Daddy?"

“Thanks.” I took it. It tasted sweet and good.

“This is probably a stupid question,” Miller resumed, “but we ought to fill in the blanks. Anyone got any firearms?”

There was a pause. People looked around at each other and shrugged. An old man with grizzled white hair who introduced himself as Ambrose Cornell said he had a shotgun in the trunk of his car. “I’ll try for it, if you want.”

Ollie said, “Right now I don’t think that would be a good idea, Mr. Cornell.”

Cornell grunted. “Right now, neither do I, son. But I thought I ought to make the offer.”

“Well, I didn’t really think so,” Dan Miller said. “But I thought—”

“Wait, hold it a minute,” a woman said. It was the lady in the cranberry-colored sweatshirt and the dark-green slacks. She had sandy-blond hair and a good figure. A very pretty young woman. She opened her purse and from it she produced a medium-sized pistol. The crowd made an *ahhhh*-ing sound, as if they had just seen a magician do a particularly fine trick. The woman, who had been blushing, blushed that much the harder. She rooted in her purse again and brought out a box of Smith & Wesson ammunition.

“I’m Amanda Dumfries,” she said to Miller. “This gun . . . my husband’s idea. He thought I should have it for protection. I’ve carried it unloaded for two years.”

“Is your husband here, ma’am?”

“No, he’s in New York. On business. He’s gone on business a lot. That’s why he wanted me to carry the gun.”

“Well,” Miller said, “if you can use it, you ought to keep it. What is it, a thirty-eight?”

“Yes. And I’ve never fired it in my life except on a target range once.”

Miller took the gun, fumbled around, and got the cylinder to open after a few moments. He checked to make sure it was not loaded.

“Okay,” he said. “We got a gun. Who shoots good? I sure don’t.”

People glanced at each other. No one said anything at first. Then, reluctantly, Ollie said: “I target-shoot quite a lot. I have a Colt .45 and a Llama .25.”

“You?” Brown said. “Huh. You’ll be too drunk to see by dark.”

Ollie said very clearly, “Why don’t you just shut up and write down your names?”

Brown goggled at him. Opened his mouth. Then decided, wisely, I think, to shut it again.

“It’s yours,” Miller said, blinking a little at the exchange. He handed it over and Ollie checked it again, more professionally. He put the gun into his right-front pants pocket and slipped the cartridge box into his breast pocket, where it made a bulge like a pack of cigarettes. Then he leaned back against the cooler, round face still trickling sweat, and cracked a fresh beer. The sensation that I was seeing a totally unsuspected Ollie Weeks persisted.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dumfries,” Miller said.

“Don’t mention it,” she said, and I thought fleetingly that if I were her husband and proprietor of those green eyes and that full figure, I might not travel so much. Giving your wife a gun could be seen as a ludicrously symbolic act.

“This may be silly, too,” Miller said, turning back to Brown with his clipboard and Ollie with his beer, “but there aren’t anything like flamethrowers in the place, are there?”

“Ohhh, *shit*,” Buddy Eagleton said, and then went as red as Amanda Dumfries had done.

“What is it?” Mike Hatlen asked.

“Well . . . until last week we had a whole case of those little blowtorches. The kind you use around your house to solder leaky pipes or mend your exhaust systems or whatever. You remember those, Mr. Brown?”

Brown nodded, looking sour.

“Sold out?” Miller asked.

“No, they didn’t go at all. We only sold three or four and sent the rest of the case back. What a pisser. I mean . . . what a shame.” Blushing so deeply he was almost purple, Buddy Eagleton retired into the background again.

We had matches, of course, and salt (someone said vaguely that he had heard salt was the thing to put on bloodsuckers and things like that); and all kinds of O’Cedar mops and long-handled brooms.

Most of the people continued to look heartened, and Jim and Myron were too plotzo to sound a dissenting note, but I met Ollie's eyes and saw a calm hopelessness in them that was worse than fear. He and I had seen the tentacles. The idea of throwing salt on them or trying to fend them off with the handles of O'Cedar mops was funny, in a ghastly way.

"Mike," Miller said, "why don't you crew this little adventure? I want to talk to Ollie and Dave here for a minute. "

"Glad to." Hatlen clapped Dan Miller on the shoulder. "Somebody had to take charge, and you did it good. Welcome to town."

"Does this mean I get a kickback on my taxes?" Miller asked. He was a banty little guy with red hair that was receding. He looked like the sort of guy you can't help liking on short notice and—just maybe—the kind of guy you can't help not liking after he's been around for a while. The kind of guy who knows how to do everything better than you do.

"No way," Hatlen said, laughing.

Hatlen walked off. Miller glanced down at my son.

"Don't worry about Billy," I said.

"Man, I've never been so worried in my whole life," Miller said.

"No," Ollie agreed, and dropped an empty into the beer cooler. He got a fresh one and opened it. There was a soft hiss of escaping gas.

"I got a look at the way you two glanced at each other," Miller said.

I finished my Hershey bar and got a beer to wash it down with.

"Tell you what I think," Miller said. "We ought to get half a dozen people to wrap some of those mop handles with cloth and then tie them down with twine. Then I think we ought to get a couple of those cans of charcoal lighter fluid all ready. If we cut the tops right off the cans, we could have some torches pretty quick."

I nodded. That was good. Almost surely not good enough—not if you had seen Norm dragged out—but it was better than salt.

"That would give them something to think about, at least," Ollie said.

Miller's lips pressed together. "That bad, huh?" he said.

"That bad," Ollie agreed, and worked his beer.

By four-thirty that afternoon the sacks of fertilizer and lawn food were in place and the big windows were blocked off except for narrow loopholes. A watchman had been placed at each of these, and beside each watchman was a tin of charcoal lighter fluid with the top cut off and a supply of mop-handle torches. There were five loopholes, and Dan Miller had arranged a rotation of sentries for each one. When four-thirty came around, I was sitting on a pile of bags at one of the loopholes, Billy at my side. We were looking out into the mist.

Just beyond the window was a red bench where people sometimes waited for their rides with their groceries beside them. Beyond that was the parking lot. The mist swirled slowly, thick and heavy. There was moisture in it, but how dull it seemed, and gloomy. Just looking at it made me feel gutless and lost.

“Daddy, do you know what’s happening?” Billy asked.

“No, hon,” I said.

He fell silent for a bit, looking at his hands, which lay limply in the lap of his Tuffskin jeans. “Why doesn’t somebody come and rescue us?” he asked finally. “The State Police or the FBI or someone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think Mom’s okay?”

“Billy, I just don’t know,” I said, and put an arm around him.

“I want her awful bad,” Billy said, struggling with tears. “I’m sorry about the times I was bad to her.”

“Billy,” I said, and had to stop. I could taste salt in my throat, and my voice wanted to tremble.

“Will it be over?” Billy asked. “Daddy? Will it?”

“I don’t know,” I said, and he put his face in the hollow of my shoulder and I held the back of his head, felt the delicate curve of his skull just under the thick growth of his hair. I found myself remembering the evening of my wedding day. Watching Steff take off the simple brown dress she had changed into after the ceremony. She had had a big purple bruise on one hip from running into the side of a door the day before. I remembered looking at the bruise

and thinking, *When she got that, she was still Stephanie Stepanke*, and feeling something like wonder. Then we had made love, and outside it was spitting snow from a dull gray December sky.

Billy was crying.

“Shh, Billy, shh,” I said, rocking his head against me, but he went on crying. It was the sort of crying that only mothers know how to fix right.

Premature night came inside the Federal Foods. Miller and Hatlen and Bud Brown handed out flashlights, the whole stock, about twenty. Norton clamored loudly for them on behalf of his group, and received two. The lights bobbed here and there in the aisles like uneasy phantoms.

I held Billy against me and looked out through the loophole. The milky, translucent quality of the light out there hadn't changed much; it was putting up the bags that had made the market so dark. Several times I thought I saw something, but it was only jumpiness. One of the others raised a hesitant false alarm.

Billy saw Mrs. Turman again, and went to her eagerly, even though she hadn't been over to sit for him all summer. She had one of the flashlights and handed it over to him amiably enough. Soon he was trying to write his name in light on the blank glass faces of the frozen-food cases. She seemed as happy to see him as he was to see her, and in a little while they came over. Hattie Turman was a tall, thin woman with lovely red hair just beginning to streak gray. A pair of glasses hung from an ornamental chain—the sort, I believe, it is illegal for anyone except middle-aged women to wear—on her breast.

“Is Stephanie here, David?” she asked.

“No. At home.”

She nodded. “Alan, too. How long are you on watch here?”

“Until six.”

“Have you seen anything?”

“No. Just the mist.”

“I'll keep Billy until six, if you like.”

“Would you like that, Billy?”

“Yes, please,” he said, swinging the flashlight above his head in slow arcs and watching it play across the ceiling.

“God will keep your Steffy, and Alan, too,” Mrs. Turman said, and led Billy away by the hand. She spoke with serene sureness, but there was no conviction in her eyes.

Around five-thirty the sounds of excited argument rose near the back of the store. Someone jeered at something someone else had said, and someone—it was Buddy Eagleton, I think—shouted, “You’re crazy if you go out there!”

Several of the flashlight beams pooled together at the center of the controversy, and they moved toward the front of the store. Mrs. Carmody’s shrieking, derisive laugh split the gloom, as abrasive as fingers drawn down a slate blackboard.

Above the babble of voices came the boom of Norton’s courtroom tenor: “Let us pass, please! Let us pass!”

The man at the loophole next to mine left his place to see what the shouting was about. I decided to stay where I was. Whatever the concatenation was, it was coming my way.

“Please,” Mike Hatlen was saying. “Please, let’s talk this thing through.”

“There is nothing to talk about,” Norton proclaimed. Now his face swam out of the gloom. It was determined and haggard and wholly wretched. He was holding one of the two flashlights allocated to the Flat-Earthers. The corkscrewed tufts of hair still stuck up behind his ears like a cuckold’s horns. He was at the head of an extremely small procession—five of the original nine or ten. “We are going out,” he said.

“Don’t stick to this craziness,” Miller said. “Mike’s right. We can talk it over, can’t we? Mr. McVey is going to barbecue some chicken over the gas grill, we can all sit down and eat and just—”

He got in Norton’s way and Norton gave him a push. Miller didn’t like it. His face flushed and then set in a hard expression. “Do what you want, then,” he said. “But you’re as good as murdering these other people.”

With all the evenness of great resolve or unbreakable obsession, Norton said: “We’ll send help back for you.”

One of his followers murmured agreement, but another quietly slipped away. Now there was Norton and four others. Maybe that wasn’t so bad. Christ Himself could only find twelve.

“Listen,” Mike Hatlen said. “Mr. Norton—Brent—at least stay for the chicken. Get some hot food inside you.”

“And give you a chance to go on talking? I’ve been in too many courtrooms to fall for that. You’ve psyched out half a dozen of my people already.”

“Your people?” Hatlen almost groaned it. “*Your* people? Good Christ, what kind of talk is that? They’re people, that’s all. This is no game, and it’s surely not a courtroom. There are, for want of a better word, there are *things* out there, and what’s the sense of getting yourself killed?”

“Things, you say,” Norton said, sounding superficially amused. “Where? Your people have been on watch for a couple of hours now. Who’s seen one?”

“Well, out back. In the—”

“No, no, no,” Norton said, shaking his head. “That ground has been covered and covered. We’re going out—”

“No,” someone whispered, and it echoed and spread, sounding like the rustle of dead leaves at dusk of an October evening. *No, no, no . . .*

“Will you restrain us?” a shrill voice asked. This was one of Norton’s “people,” to use his word—an elderly lady wearing bifocals. “Will you restrain us?”

The soft babble of negatives died away.

“No,” Mike said. “No, I don’t think anyone will restrain you.”

I whispered in Billy’s ear. He looked at me, startled and questioning. “Go on, now.” I said. “Be quick.”

He went.

Norton ran his hands through his hair, a gesture as calculated as any ever made by a Broadway actor. I had liked him better pulling the cord of his chainsaw fruitlessly, cussing and thinking himself unobserved. I could not tell then and do not know any better now if

he believed in what he was doing or not. I think, down deep, that he knew what was going to happen. I think that the logic he had paid lip service to all his life turned on him at the end like a tiger that has gone bad and mean.

He looked around restlessly, seeming to wish that there was more to say. Then he led his four followers through one of the checkout lanes. In addition to the elderly woman, there was a chubby boy of about twenty, a young girl, and a man in blue jeans wearing a golf cap tipped back on his head.

Norton's eyes caught mine, widened a little, and then started to swing away.

"Brent, wait a minute," I said.

"I don't want to discuss it any further. Certainly not with you."

"I know you don't. I just want to ask a favor." I looked around and saw Billy coming back toward the checkouts at a run.

"What's that?" Norton asked suspiciously as Billy came up and handed me a package done up in cellophane.

"Clothesline," I said. I was vaguely aware that everyone in the market was watching us now, loosely strung out on the other side of the cash registers and checkout lanes. "It's the big package. Three hundred feet."

"So?"

"I wondered if you'd tie one end around your waist before you go out. I'll let it out. When you feel it come up tight, just tie it around something. It doesn't matter what. A car door handle would do."

"What in God's name for?"

"It will tell me you got at least three hundred feet," I said.

Something in his eyes flickered . . . but only momentarily. "No," he said.

I shrugged. "Okay. Good luck, anyhow."

Abruptly the man in the golf cap said, "I'll do it, mister. No reason not to."

Norton swung on him, as if to say something sharp, and the man in the golf cap studied him calmly. There was nothing flickering in *his* eyes. He had made his decision and there was simply no doubt in him. Norton saw it too and said nothing.

“Thanks,” I said.

I slit the wrapping with my pocketknife and the clothesline accordioned out in stiff loops. I found one loose end and tied it around Golf Cap’s waist in a loose granny. He immediately untied it and cinched it tighter with a good quick sheet-bend knot. There was not a sound in the market. Norton shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

“You want to take my knife?” I asked the man in the golf cap.

“I got one.” He looked at me with that same calm contempt. “You just see to paying out your line. If it binds up, I’ll chuck her.”

“Are we all ready?” Norton asked, too loud. The chubby boy jumped as if he had been goosed. Getting no response, Norton turned to go.

“Brent,” I said, and held out my hand. “Good luck, man.”

He studied my hand as if it were some dubious foreign object. “We’ll send back help,” he said finally, and pushed through the OUT door. That thin, acrid smell came in again. The others followed him out.

Mike Hatlen came down and stood beside me. Norton’s party of five stood in the milky, slow-moving fog. Norton said something and I should have heard it, but the mist seemed to have an odd damping effect. I heard nothing but the sound of his voice and two or three isolated syllables, like the voice on the radio heard from some distance. They moved off.

Hatlen held the door a little way open. I paid out the clothesline, keeping as much slack in it as I could, mindful of the man’s promise to chuck the rope if it bound him up. There was still not a sound. Billy stood beside me, motionless but seeming to thrum with his own inner current.

Again there was that weird feeling that the five of them did not so much disappear into the fog as become invisible. For a moment their clothes seemed to stand alone, and then they were gone. You were not really impressed with the unnatural density of the mist until you saw people swallowed up in a space of seconds.

I paid the line out. A quarter of it went, then a half. It stopped going out for a moment. It went from a live thing to a dead one in my hands. I held my breath. Then it started to go out again. I paid it

through my fingers, and suddenly remembered my father taking me to see the Gregory Peck film of *Moby Dick* at the Brookside. I think I smiled a little.

Three-quarters of the line was gone now. I could see the end of it lying beside one of Billy's feet. Then the rope stopped moving through my hands again. It lay motionless for perhaps five seconds, and then another five feet jerked out. Then it suddenly whipsawed violently to the left, twanging off the edge of the OUT door.

Twenty feet of rope suddenly paid out, making a thin heat across my left palm. And from out of the mist there came a high, wavering scream. It was impossible to tell the sex of the screamer.

The rope whipsawed in my hands again. And again. It skated across the space in the doorway to the right, then back to the left. A few more feet paid out, and then there was a ululating howl from out there that brought an answering moan from my son. Hatlen stood aghast. His eyes were huge. One corner of his mouth turned down, trembling.

The howl was abruptly cut off. There was no sound at all for what seemed to be forever. Then the old lady cried out—this time there could be no doubt about who it was. "*Git it offa me!*" she screamed. "*Oh my Lord my Lord get it—*"

Then her voice was cut off, too.

Almost all of the rope abruptly ran out through my loosely closed fist, giving me a hotter burn this time. Then it went completely slack, and a sound came out of the mist—a thick, loud grunt—that made all the spit in my mouth dry up.

It was like no sound I've ever heard, but the closest approximation might be a movie set in the African veld or a South American swamp. It was the sound of a big animal. It came again, low and tearing and savage. Once more . . . and then it subsided to a series of low mutterings. Then it was completely gone.

"Close the door," Amanda Dumfries said in a trembling voice. "Please."

"In a minute," I said, and began to yank the line back in.

It came out of the mist and piled up around my feet in untidy loops and snarls. About three feet from the end, the new white clothesline

went barn-red.

“Death!” Mrs. Carmody screamed. “Death to go out there! Now do you see?”

The end of the clothesline was a chewed and frayed tangle of fiber and little puffs of cotton. The little puffs were dewed with minute drops of blood.

No one contradicted Mrs. Carmody.

Mike Hatlen let the door swing shut.

## **VII. The First Night.**

Mr. McVey had worked in Bridgton cutting meat ever since I was twelve or thirteen, and I had no idea what his first name was or his age might be. He had set up a gas grill under one of the small exhaust fans—the fans were still now, but presumably they still gave some ventilation—and by 6:30 P.M. the smell of cooking chicken filled the market. Bud Brown didn’t object. It might have been shock, but more likely he had recognized the fact that his fresh meat and poultry wasn’t getting any fresher. The chicken smelled good, but not many people wanted to eat. Mr. McVey, small and spare and neat in his whites, cooked the chicken nevertheless and laid the pieces two by two on paper plates and lined them up cafeteria-style on top of the meat counter.

Mrs. Turman brought Billy and me each a plate, garnished with helpings of deli potato salad. I ate as best I could, but Billy would not even pick at his.

“You got to eat, big guy,” I said.

“I’m not hungry,” he said, putting the plate aside.

“You can’t get big and strong if you don’t—”

Mrs. Turman, sitting slightly behind Billy, shook her head at me.

“Okay,” I said. “Go get a peach and eat it, at least.’Kay?”

“What if Mr. Brown says something?”

“If he says something, you come back and tell me.”

“Okay, Dad.”

He walked away slowly. He seemed to have shrunk somehow. It hurt my heart to see him walk that way. Mr. McVey went on cooking chicken, apparently not minding that only a few people were eating it, happy in the act of cooking. As I think I have said, there are all ways of handling a thing like this. You wouldn't think it would be so, but it is. The mind is a monkey.

Mrs. Turman and I sat halfway up the patent-medicines aisle. People were sitting in little groups all over the store. No one except Mrs. Carmody was sitting alone; even Myron and his buddy Jim were together—they were both passed out by the beer cooler.

Six new men were watching the loopholes. One of them was Ollie, gnawing a leg of chicken and drinking a beer. The mop-handle torches leaned beside each of the watchposts, a can of charcoal lighter fluid next to each . . . but I don't think anyone really believed in the torches the way they had before. Not after that low and terribly vital grunting sound, not after the chewed and blood-soaked clothesline. If whatever was out there decided it wanted us, it was going to have us. It, or they.

“How bad will it be tonight?” Mrs. Turman asked. Her voice was calm, but her eyes were sick and scared.

“Hattie, I just don't know.”

“You let me keep Billy as much as you can. I'm . . . Davey, I think I'm in mortal terror.” She uttered a dry laugh. “Yes, I believe that's what it is. But if I have Billy, I'll be all right. I'll be all right for him.”

Her eyes were glistening. I leaned over and patted her shoulder.

“I'm so worried about Alan,” she said. “He's dead, Davey. In my heart, I'm sure he's dead.”

“No, Hattie. You don't know any such thing.”

“But I feel it's true. Don't you feel anything about Stephanie? Don't you at least have a . . . a feeling?”

“No,” I said, lying through my teeth.

A strangled sound came from her throat and she clapped a hand to her mouth. Her glasses reflected back the dim, murky light.

“Billy's coming back,” I murmured.

He was eating a peach. Hattie Turman patted the floor beside her and said that when he was done she would show him how to make a little man out of the peach pit and some thread. Billy smiled at her wanly, and Mrs. Turman smiled back.

At 8:00 P.M. six new men went on at the loopholes and Ollie came over to where I was sitting. "Where's Billy?"

"With Mrs. Turman, up back," I said. "They're doing crafts. They've run through peach-pit men and shopping-bag masks and apple dolls and now Mr. McVey is showing him how to make pipe-cleaner men."

Ollie took a long drink of beer and said, "Things are moving around out there."

I looked at him sharply. He looked back levelly.

"I'm not drunk," he said. "I've been trying but haven't been able to make it. I wish I could, David."

"What do you mean, things are moving around out there?"

"I can't say for sure. I asked Walter, and he said he had the same feeling, that parts of the mist would go darker for a minute—sometimes just a little smudge, sometimes a big dark place, like a bruise. Then it would fade back to gray. And the stuff is swirling around. Even Arnie Simms said he felt like something was going on out there, and Arnie's almost as blind as a bat."

"What about the others?"

"They're all out-of-staters, strangers to me," Ollie said. "I didn't ask any of them."

"How sure are you that you weren't just seeing things?"

"Sure," he said. He nodded toward Mrs. Carmody, who was sitting by herself at the end of the aisle. None of it had hurt her appetite any; there was a graveyard of chicken bones on her plate. She was drinking either blood or V-8 juice. "I think she was right about one thing," Ollie said. "We'll find out. When it gets dark, we'll find out."

But we didn't have to wait until dark. When it came, Billy saw very little of it, because Mrs. Turman kept him up back. Ollie was still sitting with me when one of the men up front gave out a shriek and

staggered back from his post, pinwheeling his arms. It was approaching eight-thirty; outside the pearl-white mist had darkened to the dull slaty color of a November twilight.

Something had landed on the glass outside one of the loopholes.

*“Oh my Jesus!”* the man who had been watching there screamed. *“Let me out! Let me out of this!”*

He tore around in a rambling circle, his eyes starting from his face, a thin lick of saliva at one corner of his mouth glimmering in the deepening shadows. Then he took off straight up the far aisle past the frozen-food cases.

There were answering cries. Some people ran toward the front to see what had happened. Many others retreated toward the back, not caring and not wanting to see whatever was crawling on the glass out there.

I started down toward the loophole, Ollie by my side. His hand was in the pocket that held Mrs. Dumfries’ gun. Now one of the other watchers let out a cry—not so much of fear as disgust.

Ollie and I slipped through one of the checkout lanes. Now I could see what had frightened the guy from his post. I couldn’t tell what it was, but I could see it. It looked like one of the minor creatures in a Bosch painting—one of his hellacious murals. There was something almost horribly comic about it, too, because it also looked a little like one of those strange creations of vinyl and plastic you can buy for \$1.89 to spring on your friends . . . in fact, exactly the sort of thing Norton had accused me of planting in the storage area.

It was maybe two feet long, segmented, the pinkish color of burned flesh that has healed over. Bulbous eyes peered in two different directions at once from the ends of short, limber stalks. It clung to the window on fat sucker-pads. From the opposite end there protruded something that was either a sexual organ or a stinger. And from its back there sprouted oversized, membranous wings, like the wings of a housefly. They were moving very slowly as Ollie and I approached the glass.

At the loophole to the left of us, where the man had made the disgusted cawing sound, three of the things were crawling on the glass. They moved sluggishly across it, leaving sticky snail trails

behind them. Their eyes—if that is what they were—joggled on the end of the finger-thick stalks. The biggest was maybe four feet long. At times they crawled right over each other.

“Look at those goddam things,” Tom Smalley said in a sickened voice. He was standing at the loophole on our right. I didn’t reply. The bugs were all over the loopholes now, which meant they were probably crawling all over the building . . . like maggots on a piece of meat. It wasn’t a pleasant image, and I could feel what chicken I had managed to eat now wanting to come up.

Someone was sobbing. Mrs. Carmody was screaming about abominations from within the earth. Someone told her gruffly that she’d shut up if she knew what was good for her. Same old shit.

Ollie took Mrs. Dumfries’ gun from his pocket and I grabbed his arm. “Don’t be crazy.”

He shook free. “I know what I’m doing,” he said.

He tapped the barrel of the gun on the window, his face set in a nearly masklike expression of distaste. The speed of the creatures’ wings increased until they were only a blur—if you hadn’t known, you might have believed they weren’t winged creatures at all. Then they simply flew away.

Some of the others saw what Ollie had done and got the idea. They used the mop handles to tap on the windows. The things flew away, but came right back. Apparently they had no more brains than your average housefly, either. The near-panic dissolved in a babble of conversation. I heard someone asking someone else what he thought those things would do if they landed on you. That was a question I had no interest in seeing answered.

The tapping on the windows began to die away. Ollie turned toward me and started to say something, but before he could do more than open his mouth, something came out of the fog and snatched one of the crawling things off the glass. I think I screamed. I’m not sure.

It was a flying thing. Beyond that I could not have said for sure. The fog appeared to darken in exactly the way Ollie had described, only the dark smutch didn’t fade away; it solidified into something with flapping, leathery wings, an albino-white body, and reddish

eyes. It thudded into the glass hard enough to make it shiver. Its beak opened. It scooped the pink thing in and was gone. The whole incident took no more than five seconds. I had a bare final impression of the pink thing wiggling and flapping as it went down the hatch, the way a small fish will wiggle and flap in the beak of a seagull.

Now there was another thud, and yet another. People began screaming again, and there was a stampede toward the back of the store. Then there was a more piercing scream, one of pain, and Ollie said, "Oh my God, that old lady fell down and they just ran over her."

He ran back through the checkout aisle. I turned to follow, and then I saw something that stopped me dead where I was standing.

High up and to my right, one of the lawn-food bags was sliding slowly backward. Tom Smalley was right under it, staring out into the mist through his loophole.

Another of the pink bugs landed on the thick plate glass of the loophole where Ollie and I had been standing. One of the flying things swooped down and grabbed it. The old woman who had been trampled went on screaming in a shrill, cracked voice.

That bag. That sliding bag.

"Smalley!" I shouted. "Look out! Heads up!"

In the general confusion, he never heard me. The bag teetered, then fell. It struck him squarely on the head. He went down hard, catching his jaw on the shelf that ran below the show window.

One of the albino flying things was squirming its way through the jagged hole in the glass. I could hear the soft scraping sound that it made, now that some of the screaming had stopped. Its red eyes glittered in its triangular head, which was slightly cocked to one side. A heavy, hooked beak opened and closed rapaciously. It looked a bit like the paintings of pterodactyls you may have seen in the dinosaur books, more like something out of a lunatic's nightmare.

I grabbed one of the torches and slam-dunked it into a can of charcoal lighter fluid, tipping it over and spilling a pool of the stuff across the floor.

The flying creature paused on top of the lawn-food bags, glaring around, shifting slowly and malignantly from one taloned foot to the

other. It was a stupid creature, I am quite sure of that. Twice it tried to spread its wings, which struck the walls and then folded themselves over its hunched back like the wings of a griffin. The third time it tried, it lost its balance and fell clumsily from its perch, still trying to spread its wings. It landed on Tom Smalley's back. One flex of its claws and Tom's shirt ripped wide open. Blood began to flow.

I was there, less than three feet away. My torch was dripping lighter fluid. I was emotionally pumped up to kill it if I could . . . and then realized I had no matches to light it with. I had used the last one lighting a cigar for Mr. McVey an hour ago.

The place was in pandemonium now. People had seen the thing roosting on Smalley's back, something no one in the world had seen before. It darted its head forward at a questing angle, and tore a chunk of meat from the back of Smalley's neck.

I was getting ready to use the torch as a bludgeon when the clothwrapped head of it suddenly blazed alight. Dan Miller was there, holding a Zippo lighter with a Marine emblem on it. His face was as harsh as a rock with horror and fury.

"Kill it," he said hoarsely. "Kill it if you can." Standing beside him was Ollie. He had Mrs. Dumfries' .38 in his hand, but he had no clear shot.

The thing spread its wings and flapped them once—apparently not to fly away but to secure a better hold on its prey—and then its leathery-white, membranous wings enfolded poor Smalley's entire upper body. Then the sounds came—mortal tearing sounds that I cannot bear to describe in any detail.

All of this happened in bare seconds. Then I thrust my torch at the thing. There was the sensation of striking something with no more real substance than a box kite. The next moment the entire creature was blazing. It made a screeching sound and its wings spread; its head jerked and its reddish eyes rolled with what I most sincerely hope was great agony. It took off with a sound like linen bedsheets flapping on a clothesline in a stiff spring breeze. It uttered that rusty shrieking sound again.

Heads turned up to follow its flaming, dying course. I think that nothing in the entire business stands in my memory so strongly as

that bird-thing blazing a zigzagging course above the aisles of the Federal Supermarket, dropping charred and smoking bits of itself here and there. It finally crashed into the spaghetti sauces, splattering Ragú and Prince and Prima Salsa everywhere like goutts of blood. It was little more than ash and bone. The smell of its burning was high and sickening. And underlying it like a counterpoint was the thin and acrid stench of the mist, eddying in through the broken place in the glass.

For a moment there was utter silence. We were united in the black wonder of that brightly flaming deathflight. Then someone howled. Others screamed. And from somewhere in the back I could hear my son crying.

A hand grabbed me. It was Bud Brown. His eyes were bulging from their sockets. His lips were drawn back from his false teeth in a snarl. "One of those other things," he said, and pointed.

One of the bugs had come in through the hole and it now perched on a lawn-food bag, housefly wings buzzing—you could hear them; it sounded like a cheap department-store electric fan—eyes bulging from their stalks. Its pink and noxiously plump body was aspirating rapidly.

I moved toward it. My torch was guttering but not yet out. But Mrs. Reppler, the third-grade teacher, beat me to it. She was maybe fifty-five, maybe sixty, rope-thin. Her body had a tough, dried-out look that always makes me think of beef jerky.

She had a can of Raid in each hand like some crazy gunslinger in an existential comedy. She uttered a snarl of anger that would have done credit to a caveman splitting the skull of an enemy. Holding the pressure cans out at the full length of each arm, she pressed the buttons. A thick spray of insect-killer coated the thing. It went into throes of agony, twisting and turning crazily and at last falling from the bags, bouncing off the body of Tom Smalley—who was dead beyond any doubt or question—and finally landing on the floor. Its wings buzzed madly, but they weren't taking it anywhere; they were too heavily coated with Raid. A few moments later the wings slowed, then stopped. It was dead.

You could hear people crying now. And moaning. The old lady who had been trampled was moaning. And you could hear laughter. The laughter of the damned. Mrs. Reppler stood over her kill, her thin chest rising and falling rapidly.

Hatlen and Miller had found one of those dollies that the stockboys use to trundle cases of things around the store, and together they heaved it atop the lawn-food bags, blocking off the wedge-shaped hole in the glass. As a temporary measure, it was a good one.

Amanda Dumfries came forward like a sleepwalker. In one hand she held a plastic floor bucket. In the other she held a whisk broom, still done up in its see-through wrapping. She bent, her eyes still wide and blank, and swept the dead pink thing—bug, slug, whatever it was—into the bucket. You could hear the crackle of the wrapping on the whisk broom as it brushed the floor. She walked over to the OUT door. There were none of the bugs on it. She opened it a little way and threw the bucket out. It landed on its side and rolled back and forth in ever-decreasing arcs. One of the pink things buzzed out of the night, landed on the floor pail, and began to crawl over it.

Amanda burst into tears. I walked over and put an arm around her shoulders.

At one-thirty the following morning I was sitting with my back against the white enamel side of the meat counter in a semidoze. Billy's head was in my lap. He was solidly asleep. Not far away Amanda Dumfries was sleeping with her head pillowed on someone's jacket.

Not long after the flaming death of the bird-thing, Ollie and I had gone back out to the storage area and had gathered up half a dozen of the pads such as the one I'd covered Billy with earlier. Several people were sleeping on these. We had also brought back several heavy crates of oranges and pears, and four of us working together had been able to swing them to the tops of the lawn-food bags in front of the hole in the glass. The bird-creatures would have a tough time shifting one of those crates; they weighed about ninety pounds each.

But the birds and the buglike things the birds ate weren't the only things out there. There was the tentacled thing that had taken Norm. There was the frayed clothesline to think about. There was the unseen thing that had uttered that low, guttural roar to think about. We had heard sounds like it since—sometimes quite distant—but how far was “distant” through the damping effect of the mist? And sometimes they were close enough to shake the building and make it seem as if the ventricles of your heart had suddenly been loaded up with ice water.

Billy started in my lap and moaned. I brushed his hair and he moaned more loudly. Then he seemed to find sleep's less dangerous waters again. My own doze was broken and I was staring wide awake again. Since dark, I had only managed to sleep about ninety minutes, and that had been dream-haunted. In one of the dream fragments it had been the night before again. Billy and Steffy were standing in front of the picture window, looking out at the black and slate-gray waters, out at the silver spinning waterspout that heralded the storm. I tried to get to them, knowing that a strong enough wind could break the window and throw deadly glass darts all the way across the living room. But no matter how I ran, I seemed to get no closer to them. And then a bird rose out of the waterspout, a gigantic scarlet *oiseau de mort* whose prehistoric wingspan darkened the entire lake from west to east. Its beak opened, revealing a maw the size of the Holland Tunnel. And as the bird came to gobble up my wife and son, a low, sinister voice began to whisper over and over again: *The Arrowhead Project . . . the Arrowhead Project . . . the Arrowhead Project . . .*

Not that Billy and I were the only ones sleeping poorly. Others screamed in their sleep, and some went on screaming after they woke up. The beer was disappearing from the cooler at a great rate. Buddy Eagleton had restocked it once from out back with no comment. Mike Hatlen told me the Sominex was gone. Not depleted but totally wiped out. He guessed that some people might have taken six or eight bottles.

“There's some Nytol left,” he said. “You want a bottle, David?” I shook my head and thanked him.

And in the last aisle down by Register 5, we had our winos. There were about seven of them, all out-of-staters except for Lou Tattinger, who ran the Pine Tree Car Wash. Lou didn't need any excuse to sniff the cork, as the saying was. The wino brigade was pretty well anesthetized.

Oh yes—there were also six or seven people who had gone crazy.

Crazy isn't the best word; perhaps I just can't think of the proper one. But there were these people who had lapsed into a complete stupor without benefit of beer, wine, or pills. They stared at you with blank and shiny doorknob eyes. The hard cement of reality had come apart in some unimaginable earthquake, and these poor devils had fallen through. In time, some of them might come back. If there was time.

The rest of us had made our own mental compromises, and in some cases I suppose they were fairly odd. Mrs. Reppler, for instance, was convinced the whole thing was a dream—or so she said. And she spoke with some conviction.

I looked over at Amanda. I was developing an uncomfortably strong feeling for her—uncomfortable but not exactly unpleasant. Her eyes were an incredible, brilliant green . . . for a while I had kept an eye on her to see if she was going to take out a pair of contact lenses, but apparently the color was true. I wanted to make love to her. My wife was at home, maybe alive, more probably dead, alone either way, and I loved her; I wanted to get Billy and me back to her more than anything, but I also wanted to screw this lady named Amanda Dumfries. I tried to tell myself it was just the situation we were in, and maybe it was, but that didn't change the wanting.

I dozed in and out, then jerked awake more fully around three. Amanda had shifted into a sort of fetal position, her knees pulled up toward her chest, hands clasped between her thighs. She seemed to be sleeping deeply. Her sweatshirt had pulled up slightly on one side, showing clean white skin. I looked at it and began to get an extremely useless and uncomfortable erection.

I tried to divert my mind to a new track and got thinking about how I had wanted to paint Brent Norton yesterday. No, nothing as important as a painting, but . . . just sit him on a log with my beer in

his hand and sketch his sweaty, tired face and the two wings of his carefully processed hair sticking up untidily in the back. It could have been a good picture. It took me twenty years of living with my father to accept the idea that being good could be good enough.

You know what talent is? The curse of expectation. As a kid you have to deal with that, beat it somehow. If you can write, you think God put you on earth to blow Shakespeare away. Of if you can paint, maybe you think—I did—that God put you on earth to blow your father away.

It turned out I wasn't as good as he was. I kept trying to be for longer than I should have, maybe. I had a show in New York and it did poorly—the art critics beat me over the head with my father. A year later I was supporting myself and Steff with the commercial stuff. She was pregnant and I sat down and talked to myself about it. The result of that conversation was a belief that serious art was always going to be a hobby for me, no more.

I did Golden Girl Shampoo ads—the one where the Girl is standing astride her bike, the one where she's playing Frisbee on the beach, the one where she's standing on the balcony of her apartment with a drink in her hand. I've done short-story illustrations for most of the big slicks, but I broke into that field doing fast illustrations for the stories in the sleazier men's magazines. I've done some movie posters. The money comes in. We keep our heads nicely above water.

I had one final show in Bridgton, just last summer. I showed nine canvases that I had painted in five years, and I sold six of them. The one I absolutely would not sell showed the Federal market, by some queer coincidence. The perspective was from the far end of the parking lot. In my picture, the parking lot was empty except for a line of Campbell's Beans and Franks cans, each one larger than the last as they marched toward the viewer's eye. The last one appeared to be about eight feet tall. The picture was titled *Beans and False Perspective*. A man from California who was a top exec in some company that makes tennis balls and rackets and who knows what other sports equipment seemed to want that picture very badly, and would not take no for an answer in spite of the NFS card tucked into

the bottom left-hand corner of the spare wooden frame. He began at six hundred dollars and worked his way up to four thousand. He said he wanted it for his study. I would not let him have it, and he went away sorely puzzled. Even so, he didn't quite give up; he left his card in case I changed my mind.

I could have used the money—that was the year we put the addition on the house and bought the four-wheel-drive—but I just couldn't sell it. I couldn't sell it because I felt it was the best painting I had ever done and I wanted it to look at after someone would ask me, with totally unconscious cruelty, when I was going to do something serious.

Then I happened to show it to Ollie Weeks one day last fall. He asked me if he could photograph it and run it as an ad one week, and that was the end of my own false perspective. Ollie had recognized my painting for what it was, and by doing so, he forced me to recognize it, too. A perfectly good piece of slick commercial art. No more. And, thank God, no less.

I let him do it, and then I called the exec at his home in San Luis Obispo and told him he could have the painting for twenty-five hundred if he still wanted it. He did, and I shipped it UPS to the coast. And since then that voice of disappointed expectation—that cheated child's voice that can never be satisfied with such a mild superlative as good—has fallen pretty much silent. And except for a few rumbles—like the sounds of those unseen creatures somewhere out in the foggy night—it has been pretty much silent ever since. Maybe you can tell me—why should the silencing of that childish, demanding voice seem so much like dying?

Around four o'clock Billy woke up—partially, at least—and looked around with bleary, uncomprehending eyes. "Are we still here?"

"Yeah, honey," I said. "We are."

He started to cry with a weak helplessness that was horrible. Amanda woke up and looked at us.

"Hey, kid," she said, and pulled him gently to her. "Everything is going to look a little better come morning."

“No,” Billy said. “No it won’t. It won’t. It won’t.”

“Shh,” she said. Her eyes met mine over his head. “Shh, it’s past your bedtime.”

“I want my *mother!*”

“Yeah, you do,” Amanda said. “Of course you do.”

Billy squirmed around in her lap until he could look at me. Which he did for some time. And then slept again.

“Thanks,” I said. “He needed you.”

“He doesn’t even know me.”

“That doesn’t change it.”

“So what do you think?” she asked. Her green eyes held mine steadily. “What do you really think?”

“Ask me in the morning.”

“I’m asking you now.”

I opened my mouth to answer and then Ollie Weeks materialized out of the gloom like something from a horror tale. He had a flashlight with one of the ladies’ blouses over the lens, and he was pointing it toward the ceiling. It made strange shadows on his haggard face. “David,” he whispered.

Amanda looked at him, first startled, then scared again.

“Ollie, what is it?” I asked.

“David,” he whispered again. Then: “Come on. Please.”

“I don’t want to leave Billy. He just went to sleep.”

“I’ll be with him,” Amanda said. “You better go.” Then, in a lower voice: “Jesus, this is never going to end.”

## **VIII. What Happened to the Soldiers. With Amanda. A Conversation with Dan Miller.**

I went with Ollie. He was headed for the storage area. As we passed the cooler, he grabbed a beer.

“Ollie, what is it?”

“I want you to see it.”

He pushed through the double doors. They slipped shut behind us with a little backwash of air. It was cold. I didn't like this place, not after what had happened to Norm. A part of my mind insisted on reminding me that there was still a small scrap of dead tentacle lying around someplace.

Ollie let the blouse drop from the lens of his light. He trained it overhead. At first I had an idea that someone had hung a couple of mannequins from one of the heating pipes below the ceiling. That they had hung them on piano wire or something, a kid's Halloween trick.

Then I noticed the feet, dangling about seven inches off the cement floor. There were two piles of kicked-over cartons. I looked up at the faces and a scream began to rise in my throat because they were not the faces of department-store dummies. Both heads were cocked to the side, as if appreciating some horribly funny joke, a joke that had made them laugh until they turned purple.

Their shadows. Their shadows thrown long on the wall behind them. Their tongues. Their protruding tongues.

They were both wearing uniforms. They were the kids I had noticed earlier and had lost track of along the way. The army brats from—

The scream. I could hear it starting in my throat as a moan, rising like a police siren, and then Ollie gripped my arm just above the elbow. "Don't scream, David. No one knows about this but you and me. And that's how I want to keep it."

Somehow I bit it back.

"Those army kids," I managed.

"From the Arrowhead Project," Ollie said. "Sure." Something cold was thrust into my hand. The beer can. "Drink this. You need it."

I drained the can completely dry.

Ollie said, "I came back to see if we had any extra cartridges for that gas grill Mr. McVey has been using. I saw these guys. The way I figure, they must have gotten the nooses ready and stood on top of those two piles of cartons. They must have tied their hands for each other and then balanced each other while they stepped through the length of rope between their wrists. So . . . so that their hands would

be behind them, you know. Then—this is the way I figure—they stuck their heads into the nooses and pulled them tight by jerking their heads to one side. Maybe one of them counted to three and they jumped together. I don't know."

"It couldn't be done," I said through a dry mouth. But their hands were tied behind them, all right. I couldn't seem to take my eyes away from that.

"It could. If they wanted to bad enough, David, they could."

"But why?"

"I think you know why. Not any of the tourists, the summer people—like that guy Miller—but there are people from around here who could make a pretty decent guess."

"The Arrowhead Project?"

Ollie said, "I stand by one of those registers all day long and I hear a lot. All this spring I've been hearing things about that damned Arrowhead thing, none of it good. The black ice on the lakes—"

I thought of Bill Giosti leaning in my window, blowing warm alcohol in my face. Not just atoms, but *different* atoms. Now these bodies hanging from that overhead pipe. The cocked heads. The dangling shoes. The tongues protruding like summer sausages.

I realized with fresh horror that new doors of perception were opening up inside. New? Not so. Old doors of perception. The perception of a child who has not yet learned to protect itself by developing the tunnel vision that keeps out ninety percent of the universe. Children see everything their eyes happen upon, hear everything in their ears' range. But if life is the rise of consciousness (as a crewel-work sampler my wife made in high school proclaims), then it is also the reduction of input.

Terror is the widening of perspective and perception. The horror was in knowing I was swimming down to a place most of us leave when we get out of diapers and into training pants. I could see it on Ollie's face, too. When rationality begins to break down, the circuits of the human brain can overload. Axons grow bright and feverish. Hallucinations turn real: the quicksilver puddle at the point where perspective makes parallel lines seem to intersect is really there; the dead walk and talk; a rose begins to sing.

“I’ve heard stuff from maybe two dozen people,” Ollie said. “Justine Robards. Nick Tochai. Ben Michaelson. You can’t keep secrets in small towns. Things get out. Sometimes it’s like a spring—it just bubbles up out of the earth and no one has an idea where it came from. You overhear something at the library and pass it on, or at the marina in Harrison, Christ knows where else, or why. But all spring and summer I’ve been hearing Arrowhead Project, Arrowhead Project.”

“But these two,” I said. “Christ, Ollie, they’re just kids.”

“There were kids in Nam who used to take ears. I was there. I saw it.”

“But . . . what would drive them to do this?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they knew something. Maybe they only suspected. They must have known people in here would start asking them questions eventually. If there is an eventually.”

“If you’re right,” I said, “it must be something really bad.”

“That storm,” Ollie said in his soft, level voice. “Maybe it knocked something loose up there. Maybe there was an accident. They could have been fooling around with anything. Some people claim they were messing with high-intensity lasers and masers. Sometimes I hear fusion power. And suppose . . . suppose they ripped a hole straight through into another dimension?”

“That’s hogwash,” I said.

“Are they?” Ollie asked, and pointed at the bodies.

“No. The question now is: What do we do?”

“I think we ought to cut them down and hide them,” he said promptly. “Put them under a pile of stuff people won’t want—dog food, dish detergent, stuff like that. If this gets out, it will only make things worse. That’s why I came to you, David. I felt you are the only one I could really trust.”

I muttered, “It’s like the Nazi war criminals killing themselves in their cells after the war was lost.”

“Yeah. I had that same thought.”

We fell silent, and suddenly those soft shuffling noises began outside the steel loading door again—the sound of the tentacles feeling softly across it. We drew together. My flesh was crawling.

“Okay,” I said.

“We’ll make it as quick as we can,” Ollie said. His sapphire ring glowed mutely as he moved his flashlight. “I want to get out of here fast.”

I looked up at the ropes. They had used the same sort of clothesline the man in the golf cap had allowed me to tie around his waist. The nooses had sunk into the puffed flesh of their necks, and I wondered again what it could have been to make both of them go through with it. I knew what Ollie meant by saying that if the news of the double suicide got out, it would make things worse. For me it already had—and I wouldn’t have believed that possible.

There was a snicking sound. Ollie had opened his knife, a good heavy job made for slitting open cartons. And, of course, cutting rope.

“You or me?” he asked.

I swallowed. “One each.”

We did it.

When I got back, Amanda was gone and Mrs. Turman was with Billy. They were both sleeping. I walked down one of the aisles and a voice said: “Mr. Drayton. David.” It was Amanda, standing by the stairs to the manager’s office, her eyes like emeralds. “What was it?”

“Nothing,” I said.

She came over to me. I could smell faint perfume. And oh how I wanted her. “You liar,” she said.

“It was nothing. A false alarm.”

“If that’s how you want it.” She took my hand. “I’ve just been up to the office. It’s empty and there’s a lock on the door.” Her face was perfectly calm, but her eyes were lambent, almost feral, and a pulse beat steadily in her throat.

“I don’t—”

“I saw the way you looked at me,” she said. “If we need to talk about it, it’s no good. The Turman woman is with your son.”

“Yes.” It came to me that this was a way—maybe not the best one, but a way, nevertheless—to take the curse off what Ollie and I had

just done. Not the best way, just the only way.

We went up the narrow flight of stairs and into the office. It was empty, as she had said. And there was a lock on the door. I turned it. In the darkness she was nothing but a shape. I put my arms out, touched her, and pulled her to me. She was trembling. We went down on the floor, first kneeling, kissing, and I cupped one firm breast and could feel the quick thudding of her heart through her sweatshirt. I thought of Steffy telling Billy not to touch the live wires. I thought of the bruise that had been on her hip when she took off the brown dress on our wedding night. I thought of the first time I had seen her, biking across the mall of the University of Maine at Orono, me bound for one of Vincent Hartgen's classes with my portfolio under my arm. And my erection was enormous.

We lay down then, and she said, "Love me, David. Make me warm." When she came, she dug into my back with her nails and called me by a name that wasn't mine. I didn't mind. It made us about even.

When we came down, some sort of creeping dawn had begun. The blackness outside the loopholes went reluctantly to dull gray, then to chrome, then to the bright, featureless, and unsparkling white of a drive-in movie screen. Mike Hatlen was asleep in a folding chair he had scrounged somewhere. Dan Miller sat on the floor a little distance away, eating a Hostess donut. The kind that's powdered with white sugar.

"Sit down, Mr. Drayton," he invited.

I looked around for Amanda, but she was already halfway up the aisle. She didn't look back. Our act of love in the dark already seemed something out of a fantasy, impossible to believe even in this weird daylight. I sat down.

"Have a donut." He held the box out.

I shook my head. "All that white sugar is death. Worse than cigarettes."

That made him laugh a little bit. "In that case, have two."

I was surprised to find a little laughter left inside me—he had surprised it out, and I liked him for it. I did take two of his donuts.

They tasted pretty good. I chased them with a cigarette, although it is not normally my habit to smoke in the mornings.

"I ought to get back to my kid," I said. "He'll be waking up."

Miller nodded. "Those pink bugs," he said. "They're all gone. So are the birds. Hank Vannerman said the last one hit the windows around four. Apparently the . . . the wildlife

. . . is a lot more active when it's dark."

"You don't want to tell Brent Norton that," I said. "Or Norm."

He nodded again and didn't say anything for a long time. Then he lit a cigarette of his own and looked at me. "We can't stay here, Drayton," he said.

"There's food. Plenty to drink."

"The supplies don't have anything to do with it, and you know it. What do we do if one of the big beasts out there decides to break in instead of just going bump in the night? Do we try to drive it off with broom handles and charcoal lighter fluid?"

Of course he was right. Perhaps the mist was protecting us in a way. Hiding us. But maybe it wouldn't hide us for long, and there was more to it than that. We had been in the Federal for eighteen hours, more or less, and I could feel a kind of lethargy spreading over me, not much different from the lethargy I've felt on one or two occasions when I've tried to swim too far. There was an urge to play it safe, to just stay put, to take care of Billy (*and maybe to bang Amanda Dumfries in the middle of the night*, a voice murmured), to see if the mist wouldn't just lift, leaving everything as it had been.

I could see it on the other faces as well, and it suddenly occurred to me that there were people now in the Federal who probably wouldn't leave under any circumstance. The very thought of going out the door after all that had happened would freeze them.

Miller had been watching these thoughts cross my face, maybe. He said, "There were about eighty people in here when that damn fog came. From that number you subtract the bag-boy, Norton, and the four people that went out with him, and that man Smalley. That leaves seventy-three."

And subtracting the two soldiers, now resting under a stack of Purina Puppy Chow bags, it made seventy-one.

“Then you subtract the people who have just opted out,” he went on. “There are ten or twelve of those. Say ten. That leaves about sixty-three. *But—*” He raised one sugar-powdered finger. “Of those sixty-three, we’ve got twenty or so that just won’t leave. You’d have to drag them out kicking and screaming. ”

“Which all goes to prove what?”

“That we’ve got to get out, that’s all. And I’m going. Around noon, I think. I’m planning to take as many people as will come. I’d like you and your boy to come along.”

“After what happened to Norton?”

“Norton went like a lamb to the slaughter. That doesn’t mean I have to, or the people who come with me.”

“How can you prevent it? We have exactly one gun.”

“And lucky to have that. But if we could make it across the intersection, maybe we could get down to the Sportsman’s Exchange on Main Street. They’ve got more guns there than you could shake a stick at.”

“That’s one ‘if’ and one ‘maybe’ too many.”

“Drayton,” he said, “it’s an iffy situation.”

That rolled very smoothly off his tongue, but he didn’t have a little boy to watch out for.

“Look, let it pass for now, okay? I didn’t get much sleep last night, but I got a chance to think over a few things. Want to hear them?”

“Sure.”

He stood up and stretched. “Take a walk over to the window with me.”

We went through the checkout lane nearest the bread racks and stood at one of the loopholes. The man who was keeping watch there said, “The bugs are gone. ”

Miller slapped him on the back. “Go get yourself a coffee-and, fella. I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

He walked away, and Miller and I stepped up to his loophole. “So tell me what you see out there,” he said.

I looked. The litter barrel had been knocked over in the night, probably by one of the swooping bird-things, spilling a trash of

papers, cans, and paper shake cups from the Dairy Queen down the road all over the hottop. Beyond that I could see the rank of cars closest to the market fading into whiteness. That was all I could see, and I told him so.

“That blue Chevy pickup is mine,” he said. He pointed and I could see just a hint of blue in the mist. “But if you think back to when you pulled in yesterday, you’ll remember that the parking lot was pretty jammed, right?”

I glanced back at my Scout and remembered I had only gotten the space close to the market because someone else had been pulling out. I nodded.

Miller said, “Now couple something else with that fact, Drayton. Norton and his four . . . what did you call them?”

“Flat-Earthers.”

“Yeah, that’s good. Just what they were. They go out, right? Almost the full length of that clothesline. Then we heard those roaring noises, like there was a goddam herd of elephants out there. Right?”

“It didn’t sound like elephants,” I said. “It sounded like—” *Like something from the primordial ooze* was the phrase that came to mind, but I didn’t want to say that to Miller, not after he had clapped that guy on the back and told him to go get a coffee-and like the coach jerking a player from the big game. I might have said it to Ollie, but not to Miller. “I don’t know what it sounded like,” I finished lamely.

“But it sounded big.”

“Yeah.” It had sounded pretty goddam big.

“So how come we didn’t hear cars getting bashed around? Screeching metal? Breaking glass?”

“Well, because—” I stopped. He had me. “I don’t know.”

Miller said, “No way they were out of the parking lot when whatever-it-was hit them. I’ll tell you what I think. I think we didn’t hear any cars getting around because a lot of them might be gone. Just . . . gone. Fallen into the earth, vaporized, you name it. Strong enough to splinter these beams and twist them out of shape and

knock stuff off the shelves. And the town whistle stopped at the same time.”

I was trying to visualize half the parking lot gone. Trying to visualize walking out there and just coming to a brand-new drop in the land where the hottop with its neat yellow-lined parking slots left off. A drop, a slope . . . or maybe an out-and-out precipice falling away into the featureless white mist . . .

After a couple of seconds I said, “If you’re right, how far do you think you’re going to get in your pickup?”

“I wasn’t thinking of my truck. I was thinking of your four-wheel-drive.”

That was something to chew over, but not now. “What else is on your mind?”

Miller was eager to go on. “The pharmacy next door, that’s on my mind. What about that?”

I opened my mouth to say I didn’t have the slightest idea what he was talking about, and then shut it with a snap. The Bridgton Pharmacy had been doing business when we drove in yesterday. Not the laundromat, but the drugstore had been wide open, the doors chocked with rubber doorstops to let in a little cool air—the power outage had killed their air conditioning, of course. The door to the pharmacy could be no more than twenty feet from the door of the Federal market. So why—

“Why haven’t any of those people turned up over here?” Miller asked for me. “It’s been eighteen hours. Aren’t they hungry? They’re sure not over there eating Dristan and Stayfree Mini-pads.”

“There’s food,” I said. “They’re always selling food items on special. Sometimes it’s animal crackers, sometimes it’s those toaster pastries, all sorts of things. Plus the candy rack. ”

“I just don’t believe they’d stick with stuff like that when there’s all kinds of stuff over here.”

“What are you getting at?”

“What I’m getting at is that I want to get out but I don’t want to be dinner for some refugee from a grade-B horror picture. Four or five of us could go next door and check out the situation in the drugstore. As sort of a trial balloon.”

“That’s everything?”

“No, there’s one other thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Her,” Miller said simply, and jerked his thumb toward one of the middle aisles. “That crazy cunt. That witch.”

It was Mrs. Carmody he had jerked his thumb at. She was no longer alone; two women had joined her. From their bright clothes I guessed they were probably tourists or summer people, ladies who had maybe left their families to “just run into town and get a few things” and were now eaten up with worry over their husbands and kids. Ladies eager to grasp at almost any straw. Maybe even the black comfort of a Mrs. Carmody.

Her pantsuit shone out with its same baleful resplendence. She was talking, gesturing, her face hard and grim. The two ladies in their bright clothes (but not as bright as Mrs. Carmody’s pantsuit, no, and her gigantic satchel of a purse was still tucked firmly under one doughy arm) were listening raptly.

“She’s another reason I want to get out, Drayton. By tonight she’ll have six people sitting with her. If those pink bugs and the birds come back tonight, she’ll have a whole congregation sitting with her by tomorrow morning. Then we can start worrying about who she’ll tell them to sacrifice to make it all better. Maybe me, or you, or that guy Hatlen. Maybe your kid.”

“That’s idiocy,” I said. But was it? The cold chill crawling up my back said not necessarily. Mrs. Carmody’s mouth moved and moved. The eyes of the tourist ladies were fixed on her wrinkled lips. Was it idiocy? I thought of the dusty stuffed animals drinking at their looking-glass stream. Mrs. Carmody had power. Even Steff, normally hardheaded and straight-from-the-shoulder, invoked the old lady’s name with unease.

*That crazy cunt*, Miller had called her. *That witch*.

“The people in this market are going through a section-eight experience for sure,” Miller said. He gestured at the red-painted beams framing the show-window segments . . . twisted and splintered and buckled out of shape. “Their minds probably feel like those beams look. Mine sure as shit does. I spent half of last night

thinking I must have flipped out of my gourd, that I was probably in a straitjacket in Danvers, raving my head off about bugs and dinosaur birds and tentacles and that it would all go away just as soon as the nice orderly came along and shot a wad of Thorazine into my arm.” His small face was strained and white. He looked at Mrs. Carmody and then back at me. “I tell you it might happen. As people get flakier, she’s going to look better and better to some of them. And I don’t want to be around if that happens. ”

Mrs. Carmody’s lips, moving and moving. Her tongue dancing around her old lady’s snaggle teeth. She did look like a witch. Put her in a pointy black hat and she would be perfect. What was she saying to her two captured birds in their bright summer plumage?

Arrowhead Project? Black Spring? Abominations from the cellars of the earth? Human sacrifice?

*Bullshit.*

All the same—

“So what do you say?”

“I’ll go this far,” I answered him. “We’ll try going over to the drug. You, me, Ollie if he wants to go, one or two others. Then we’ll talk it over again.” Even that gave me the feeling of walking out over an impossible drop on a narrow beam. I wasn’t going to help Billy by killing myself. On the other hand, I wasn’t going to help him by just sitting on my ass, either. Twenty feet to the drugstore. That wasn’t so bad.

“When?” he asked.

“Give me an hour.”

“Sure,” he said.

## **IX. The Expedition to the Pharmacy.**

I told Mrs. Turman, and I told Amanda, and then I told Billy. He seemed better this morning; he had eaten two donuts and a bowl of Special K for breakfast. Afterward I raced him up and down two of

the aisles and even got him giggling a little. Kids are so adaptable that they can scare the living shit right out of you. He was too pale, the flesh under his eyes was still puffed from the tears he had cried in the night, and his face had a horribly used look. In a way it had become like an old man's face, as if too much emotional voltage had been running behind it for too long. But he was still alive and still able to laugh . . . at least until he remembered where he was and what was happening.

After the windsprints we sat down with Amanda and Hattie Turman and drank Gatorade from paper cups and I told him I was going over to the drugstore with a few other people.

"I don't want you to," he said immediately, his face clouding.

"It'll be all right, Big Bill. I'll bring you a Spiderman comic book."

"I want you to stay *here*." Now his face was not just cloudy; it was thundery. I took his hand. He pulled it away. I took it again.

"Billy, we have to get out of here sooner or later. You see that, don't you?"

"When the fog goes away . . ." But he spoke with no conviction at all. He drank his Gatorade slowly and without relish.

"Billy, it's been almost one whole day now."

"I want Mommy."

"Well, maybe this is the first step on the way to getting back to her."

Mrs. Turman said, "Don't build the boy's hopes up, David."

"What the hell," I snapped at her, "the kid's got to hope for something."

She dropped her eyes. "Yes. I suppose he does."

Billy took no notice of this. "Daddy . . . Daddy, there are things out there. Things."

"Yes, we know that. But a lot of them—not all, but a lot—don't seem to come out until it's nighttime."

"They'll wait," he said. His eyes were huge, centered on mine. "They'll wait in the fog . . . and when you can't get back inside, they'll come to eat you up. Like in the fairy stories." He hugged me with fierce, panicky tightness. "Daddy, please don't go."

I pried his arms loose as gently as I could and told him that I had to. “But I’ll be back, Billy.”

“All right,” he said huskily, but he wouldn’t look at me anymore. He didn’t believe I would be back. It was on his face, which was no longer thundery but woeful and grieving. I wondered again if I could be doing the right thing, putting myself at risk. Then I happened to glance down the middle aisle and saw Mrs. Carmody there. She had gained a third listener, a man with a grizzled cheek and a mean and rolling bloodshot eye. His haggard brow and shaking hands almost screamed the word hangover. It was none other than your friend and his, Myron LaFleur. The fellow who had felt no compunction at all about sending a boy out to do a man’s job.

*That crazy cunt. That witch.*

I kissed Billy and hugged him hard. Then I walked down to the front of the store—but not down the housewares aisle. I didn’t want to fall under her eye.

Three-quarters of the way down, Amanda caught up with me. “Do you really have to do this?” she asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Forgive me if I say it sounds like so much macho bullshit to me.” There were spots of color high on her cheeks and her eyes were greener than ever. She was highly—no, royally—pissed.

I took her arm and recapped my discussion with Dan Miller. The riddle of the cars and the fact that no one from the pharmacy had joined us didn’t move her much. The business about Mrs. Carmody did.

“He could be right,” she said.

“Do you really believe that?”

“I don’t know. There’s a poisonous feel to that woman. And if people are frightened badly enough for long enough, they’ll turn to anyone that promises a solution.”

“But human sacrifice, Amanda?”

“The Aztecs were into it,” she said evenly. “Listen, David. You come back. If anything happens . . . anything

. . . you come back. Cut and run if you have to. Not for me, what happened last night was nice, but that was last night. Come back for

your boy.”

“Yes. I will.”

“I wonder,” she said, and now she looked like Billy, haggard and old. It occurred to me that most of us looked that way. But not Mrs. Carmody. Mrs. Carmody looked younger somehow, and more vital. As if she had come into her own. As if . . . as if she were thriving on it.

We didn’t get going until 9:30 A.M. Seven of us went: Ollie, Dan Miller, Mike Hatlen, Myron LaFleur’s erstwhile buddy Jim (also hungover, but seemingly determined to find some way to atone), Buddy Eagleton, myself. The seventh was Hilda Reppler. Miller and Hatlen tried halfheartedly to talk her out of coming. She would have none of it. I didn’t even try. I suspected she might be more competent than any of us, except maybe for Ollie. She was carrying a small canvas shopping basket, and it was loaded with an arsenal of Raid and Black Flag spray cans, all of them uncapped and ready for action. In her free hand she held a Spaulding Jimmy Connors tennis racket from a display of sporting goods in Aisle 2.

“What you gonna do with that, Mrs. Reppler?” Jim asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. She had a low, raspy, competent voice. “But it feels right in my hand.” She looked him over closely, and her eye was cold. “Jim Grondin, isn’t it? Didn’t I have you in school?”

Jim’s lips stretched in an uneasy egg-suck grin. “Yes’m. Me and my sister Pauline.”

“Too much to drink last night?”

Jim, who towered over her and probably outweighed her by one hundred pounds, blushed to the roots of his American Legion crewcut. “Aw, no—”

She turned away curtly, cutting him off. “I think we’re ready,” she said.

All of us had something, although you would have called it an odd assortment of weapons. Ollie had Amanda’s gun, Buddy Eagleton had a steel pinchbar from out back somewhere. I had a broom handle.

“Okay,” Dan Miller said, raising his voice a bit. “You folks want to listen up a minute?”

A dozen people had drifted down toward the OUT door to see what was going on. They were loosely knotted, and to their right stood Mrs. Carmody and her new friends.

“We’re going over to the drugstore to see what the situation is there. Hopefully, we’ll be able to bring something back to aid Mrs. Clapham.” She was the lady who had been trampled yesterday, when the bugs came. One of her legs had been broken and she was in a great deal of pain.

Miller looked us over. “We’re not going to take any chances,” he said. “At the first sign of anything threatening, we’re going to pop back into the market—”

“And bring all the fiends of hell down on our heads!” Mrs. Carmody cried.

“She’s right!” one of the summer ladies seconded. “You’ll make them notice us! You’ll make them come! Why can’t you just leave well enough alone?”

There was a murmur of agreement from some of the people who had gathered to watch us go.

I said, “Lady, is this what you call well enough?”

She dropped her eyes, confused.

Mrs. Carmody marched a step forward. Her eyes were blazing. “You’ll die out there, David Drayton! Do you want to make your son an orphan?” She raised her eyes and raked all of us with them. Buddy Eagleton dropped his eyes and simultaneously raised the pinchbar, as if to ward her off.

“All of you will die out there! Haven’t you realized that the end of the world has come? The Fiend has been let loose! Star Wormwood blazes and each one of you that steps out that door will be torn apart! And they’ll come for those of us who are left, just as this good woman said! Are you people going to let that happen?” She was appealing to the onlookers now, and a little mutter ran through them. “After what happened to the unbelievers yesterday? It’s death! *It’s death! It’s—*”

A can of peas flew across two of the checkout lanes suddenly and struck Mrs. Carmody on the right breast. She staggered backward with a startled squawk.

Amanda stood forward. “Shut up,” she said. “Shut up, you miserable buzzard.”

“She serves the Foul One!” Mrs. Carmody screamed. A jittery smile hung on her face. “Who did you sleep with last night, missus? Who did you lie down with last night? Mother Carmody sees, oh yes, Mother Carmody sees what others miss.”

But the moment’s spell she had created was broken, and Amanda’s eyes never wavered.

“Are we going or are we going to stand here all day?” Mrs. Reppler asked.

And we went. God help us, we went.

Dan Miller was in the lead. Ollie came second, I was last, with Mrs. Reppler in front of me. I was as scared as I’ve ever been, I think, and the hand wrapped around my broom handle was sweaty-slick.

There was that thin, acrid, and unnatural smell of the mist. By the time I got out the door, Miller and Ollie had already faded into it, and Hatlen, who was third, was nearly out of sight.

*Only twenty feet*, I kept telling myself. *Only twenty feet*.

Mrs. Reppler walked slowly and firmly ahead of me, her tennis racket swinging lightly from her right hand. To our left was a red cinderblock wall. To our right the first rank of cars, looming out of the mist like ghost ships. Another trash barrel materialized out of the whiteness, and beyond that was a bench where people sometimes sat to wait their turn at the pay phone. *Only twenty feet, Miller’s probably there by now, twenty feet is only ten or twelve paces, so—*

“Oh my God!” Miller screamed. “Oh dear sweet God, look at this!”

Miller had gotten there, all right.

Buddy Eagleton was ahead of Mrs. Reppler and he turned to run, his eyes wide and stary. She batted him lightly in the chest with her tennis racket. “Where do you think *you’re* going?” she asked in her tough, slightly raspy voice, and that was all the panic there was.

The rest of us drew up to Miller. I took one glance back over my shoulder and saw that the Federal had been swallowed by the mist. The red cinderblock wall faded to a thin wash pink and then

disappeared utterly, probably five feet on the Bridgton Pharmacy side of the OUT door. I felt more isolated, more simply alone, than ever in my life. It was as if I had lost the womb.

The pharmacy had been the scene of a slaughter.

Miller and I, of course, were very close to it—almost on top of it. All the things in the mist operated primarily by sense of smell. It stood to reason. Sight would have been almost completely useless to them. Hearing a little better, but as I've said, the mist had a way of screwing up the acoustics, making things that were close sound distant and—sometimes—things that were far away sound close. The things in the mist followed their truest sense. They followed their noses.

Those of us in the market had been saved by the power outage as much as by anything else. The electric-eye doors wouldn't operate. In a sense, the market had been sealed up when the mist came. But the pharmacy doors . . . they had been chocked open. The power failure had killed their air conditioning and they had opened the doors to let in the breeze. Only something else had come in as well.

A man in a maroon T-shirt lay facedown in the doorway. Or at first I thought his T-shirt was maroon; then I saw a few white patches at the bottom and understood that once it had been all white. The maroon was dried blood. And there was something else wrong with him. I puzzled it over in my mind. Even when Buddy Eagleton turned around and was noisily sick, it didn't come immediately. I guess when something that . . . that *final* happens to someone, your mind rejects it at first . . . unless maybe you're in a war.

His head was gone, that's what it was. His legs were splayed out inside the pharmacy doors, and his head should have been hanging over the low step. But his head just wasn't.

Jim Grondin had had enough. He turned away, his hands over his mouth, his bloodshot eyes gazing madly into mine. Then he stumbled-staggered back toward the market.

The others took no notice. Miller had stepped inside. Mike Hatlen followed. Mrs. Reppler stationed herself at one side of the double doors with her tennis racket. Ollie stood on the other side with Amanda's gun drawn and pointing at the pavement.

He said quietly, "I seem to be running out of hope, David."

Buddy Eagleton was leaning weakly against the pay-phone stall like someone who has just gotten bad news from home. His broad shoulders shook with the force of his sobs.

"Don't count us out yet," I said to Ollie. I stepped up to the door. I didn't want to go inside, but I had promised my son a comic book.

The Bridgton Pharmacy was a crazy shambles. Paperbacks and magazines were everywhere. There was a *Spiderman* comic and an *Incredible Hulk* almost at my feet, and without thinking, I picked them up and jammed them into my back pocket for Billy. Bottles and boxes lay in the aisles. A hand hung over one of the racks.

Unreality washed over me. The wreckage . . . the *carnage*—that was bad enough. But the place also looked like it had been the scene of some crazy party. It was hung and festooned with what I at first took to be streamers. But they weren't broad and flat; they were more like very thick strings or very thin cables. It struck me that they were almost the same bright white as the mist itself, and a cold chill sketched its way up my back like frost. Not crepe. What? Magazines and books hung dangling in the air from some of them.

Mike Hatlen was prodding a strange black thing with one foot. It was long and bristly. "What the fuck is this?" he asked no one in particular.

And suddenly I knew. I knew what had killed all those unlucky enough to be in the pharmacy when the mist came. The people who had been unlucky enough to get smelled out. *Out*—

"Out," I said. My throat was completely dry, and the word came out like a lint-covered bullet. "Get out of here."

Ollie looked at me. "David . . . ?"

"They're spiderwebs," I said. And then two screams came out of the mist. The first of fear, maybe. The second of pain. It was Jim. If there were dues to be paid, he was paying them.

"Get out!" I shouted at Mike and Dan Miller.

Then something looped out of the mist. It was impossible to see it against that white background, but I could hear it. It sounded like a bullwhip that had been halfheartedly flicked. And I could see it when it twisted around the thigh of Buddy Eagleton's jeans.

He screamed and grabbed for the first thing handy, which happened to be the telephone. The handset flew the length of its cord and then swung back and forth. "*Oh Jesus that HURTS!*" Buddy screamed.

Ollie grabbed for him, and I saw what was happening. At the same instant I understood why the head of the man in the doorway was missing. The thin white cable that had twisted around Buddy's leg like a silk rope *was sinking into his flesh*. That leg of his jeans had been neatly cut off and was sliding down his leg. A neat, circular incision in his flesh was brimming blood as the cable went deeper.

Ollie pulled him hard. There was a thin snapping sound and Buddy was free. His lips had gone blue with shock.

Mike and Dan were coming, but too slowly. Then Dan ran into several hanging threads and got stuck, exactly like a bug on flypaper. He freed himself with a tremendous jerk, leaving a flap of his shirt hanging from the webbing.

Suddenly the air was full of those languorous bullwhip cracks, and the thin white cables were drifting down all around us. They were coated with the same corrosive substance. I dodged two of them, more by luck than by skill. One landed at my feet and I could hear a faint hiss of bubbling hottop. Another floated out of the air and Mrs. Reppler calmly swung her tennis racket at it. The thread stuck fast, and I heard a high-pitched *twing! twing! twing!* as the corrosive ate through the racket's strings and snapped them. It sounded like someone rapidly plucking the strings of a violin. A moment later a thread wrapped around the upper handle of the racket and it was jerked into the mist.

"Get back!" Ollie screamed.

We got moving. Ollie had an arm around Buddy. Dan Miller and Mike Hatlen were on each side of Mrs. Reppler. The white strands of web continued to drift out of the fog, impossible to see unless your eye could pick them out against the red cinderblock background.

One of them wrapped around Mike Hatlen's left arm. Another whipped around his neck in a series of quick winding-up snaps. His jugular went in a jetting, jumping explosion and he was dragged

away, head lolling. One of his Bass loafers fell off and lay there on its side.

Buddy suddenly slumped forward, almost dragging Ollie to his knees. “He’s passed out, David. Help me.”

I grabbed Buddy around the waist and we pulled him along in a clumsy, stumbling fashion. Even in unconsciousness, Buddy kept his grip on his steel pinchbar. The leg that the strand of web had wrapped around hung away from his body at a terrible angle.

Mrs. Reppler had turned around. “Ware!” she screamed in her rusty voice. “Ware behind you!”

As I started to turn, one of the web-strands floated down on top of Dan Miller’s head. His hands beat at it, tore at it.

One of the spiders had come out of the mist from behind us. It was the size of a big dog. It was black with yellow piping. *Racing stripes*, I thought crazily. Its eyes were reddish-purple, like pomegranates. It strutted busily toward us on what might have been as many as twelve or fourteen many-jointed legs—it was no ordinary earthly spider blown up to horror-movie size; it was something totally different, perhaps not really a spider at all. Seeing it, Mike Hatlen would have understood what that bristly black thing he had been prodding at in the pharmacy really was.

It closed in on us, spinning its webbing from an ovalshaped orifice on its upper belly. The strands floated out toward us in what was nearly a fan shape. Looking at this nightmare, so like the death-black spiders brooding over their dead flies and bugs in the shadows of our boathouse, I felt my mind trying to tear completely loose from its moorings. I believe now that it was only the thought of Billy that allowed me to keep any semblance of sanity. I was making some sound. Laughing. Crying. Screaming. I don't know.

But Ollie Weeks was like a rock. He raised Amanda's pistol as calmly as a man on a target range and emptied it in spaced shots into the creature at point-blank range. Whatever hell it came from, it wasn't invulnerable. A black ichor splattered from its body and it made a terrible mewling sound, so low it was more felt than heard, like a bass note from a synthesizer. Then it scuttered back into the mist and was gone. It might have been a phantasm from a horrible drug-dream . . . except for the puddles of sticky black stuff it had left behind.

There was a clang as Buddy finally dropped his steel pinchbar.

"He's dead," Ollie said. "Let him go, David. The fucking thing got his femoral artery, he's dead. Let's get the Christ out of here." His face was once more running with sweat and his eyes bulged from his big round face. One of the web-strands floated easily down on the back of his hand and Ollie swung his arm, snapping it. The strand left a bloody weal.

Mrs. Reppler screamed "Ware!" again, and we turned toward her. Another of them had come out of the mist and had wrapped its legs around Dan Miller in a mad lover's embrace. He was striking at it with his fists. As I bent and picked up Buddy's pinchbar, the spider began to wrap Dan in its deadly thread, and his struggles became a grisly, jittering death dance.

Mrs. Reppler walked toward the spider with a can of Black Flag insect repellent held outstretched in one hand. The spider's legs reached for her. She depressed the button and a cloud of the stuff jetted into one of its sparkling, jewel-like eyes. That low-pitched mewling sound came again. The spider seemed to shudder all over and then it began to lurch backward, hairy legs scratching at the

pavement. It dragged Dan's body, bumping and rolling, behind it. Mrs. Reppler threw the can of bug spray at it. It bounced off the spider's body and clattered to the hottop. The spider struck the side of a small sports car hard enough to make it rock on its springs, and then it was gone.

I got to Mrs. Reppler, who was swaying on her feet and dead pale. I put an arm around her. "Thank you, young man," she said. "I feel a bit faint."

"That's okay," I said hoarsely.

"I would have saved him if I could."

"I know that."

Ollie joined us. We ran for the market doors, the threads falling all around us. One lit on Mrs. Reppler's marketing basket and sank into the canvas side. She tussled grimly for what was hers, dragging back on the strap with both hands, but she lost it. It went bumping off into the mist, end over end.

As we reached the IN door, a smaller spider, no bigger than a cocker spaniel puppy, raced out of the fog along the side of the building. It was producing no webbing; perhaps it wasn't mature enough to do so.

As Ollie leaned one beefy shoulder against the door so Mrs. Reppler could go through, I heaved the steel bar at the thing like a javelin and impaled it. It writhed madly, legs scratching at the air, and its red eyes seemed to find mine, and mark me . . .

"David!" Ollie was still holding the door.

I ran in. He followed me.

Pallid, frightened faces stared at us. Seven of us had gone out. Three of us had come back. Ollie leaned against the heavy glass door, barrel chest heaving. He began to reload Amanda's gun. His white assistant manager's shirt was plastered to his body, and large gray sweat-stains had crept out from under his arms.

"What?" someone asked in a low, hoarse voice.

"Spiders," Mrs. Reppler answered grimly. "The dirty bastards snatched my market basket."

Then Billy hurled his way into my arms, crying. I held on to him. Tight.

## X. The Spell of Mrs. Carmody. The Second Night in the Market. The Final Confrontation.

It was my turn to sleep, and for four hours I remember nothing at all. Amanda told me I talked a lot, and screamed once or twice, but I remember no dreams. When I woke up it was afternoon. I was terribly thirsty. Some of the milk had gone over, but some of it was still okay. I drank a quart.

Amanda came over to where Billy, Mrs. Turman, and I were. The old man who had offered to make a try for the shotgun in the trunk of his car was with her—Cornell, I remembered. Ambrose Cornell.

“How are you, son?” he asked.

“All right.” But I was still thirsty and my head ached. Most of all, I was scared. I slipped an arm around Billy and looked from Cornell to Amanda. “What’s up?”

Amanda said, “Mr. Cornell is worried about that Mrs. Carmody. So am I.”

“Billy why don’t you take a walk over here with me?” Hattie asked.

“I don’t want to,” Billy said.

“Go on, Big Bill,” I told him, and he went—reluctantly.

“Now what about Mrs. Carmody?” I asked.

“She’s stirrin things up,” Cornell said. He looked at me with an old man’s grimness. “I think we got to put a stop to it. Just about any way we can.”

Amanda said, “There are almost a dozen people with her now. It’s like some crazy kind of a church service.”

I remembered talking with a writer friend who lived in Otisfield and supported his wife and two kids by raising chickens and turning out one paperback original a year—spy stories. We had gotten talking about the bulge in popularity of books concerning themselves with the supernatural. Gault pointed out that in the forties *Weird Tales* had only been able to pay a pittance, and that in the fifties it went broke. When the machines fail, he had said (while his wife candled eggs and roosters crowed querulously outside), when the technologies

fail, when the conventional religious systems fail, people have got to have something. Even a zombie lurching through the night can seem pretty cheerful compared to the existential comedy/horror of the ozone layer dissolving under the combined assault of a million fluorocarbon spray cans of deodorant.

We had been trapped here for twenty-six hours and we hadn't been able to do diddlyshit. Our one expedition outside had resulted in fifty-seven percent losses. It wasn't so surprising that Mrs. Carmody had turned into a growth stock, maybe.

"Has she really got a dozen people?" I asked.

"Well, only eight," Cornell said. "But she never shuts up! It's like those ten-hour speeches Castro used to make. It's a goddam filibuster."

Eight people. Not that many, not even enough to fill up a jury box. But I understood the worry on their faces. It was enough to make them the single largest political force in the market, especially now that Dan and Mike were gone. The thought that the biggest single group in our closed system was listening to her rant on about the pits of hell and the seven vials being opened made me feel pretty damn claustrophobic.

"She's started talking about human sacrifice again," Amanda said. "Bud Brown came over and told her to stop talking that drivel in his store. And two of the men that are with her—one of them was that man Myron LaFleur—told him he was the one who better shut up because it was still a free country. He wouldn't shut up and there was a . . . well, a shoving match, I guess you'd say."

"Brown got a bloody nose," Cornell said. "They mean business."

I said, "Surely not to the point of actually killing someone."

Cornell said softly, "I don't know how far they'll go if that mist doesn't let up. But I don't want to find out. I intend to get out of here."

"Easier said than done." But something had begun to tick over in my mind. Scent. That was the key. We had been left pretty much alone in the market. The bugs might have been attracted to the light, as more ordinary bugs were. The birds had simply followed their food supply. But the bigger things had left us alone unless we unbuttoned for some reason. The slaughter in the Bridgton

Pharmacy had occurred because the doors had been left chocked open—I was sure of that. The thing or things that had gotten Norton and his party had sounded as big as a house, but it or they hadn't come near the market. And that meant that maybe . . .

Suddenly I wanted to talk to Ollie Weeks. I needed to talk to him.

"I intend to get out or die trying," Cornell said. "I got no plans to spend the rest of the summer in here."

"There have been four suicides," Amanda said suddenly.

"What?" The first thing to cross my mind, in a semiguilty flash, was that the bodies of the soldiers had been discovered.

"Pills," Cornell said shortly. "Me and two or three other guys carried the bodies out back."

I had to stifle a shrill laugh. We had a regular morgue going back there.

"It's thinning out," Cornell said. "I want to get gone."

"You won't make it to your car. Believe me."

"Not even to that first rank? That's closer than the drugstore."

I didn't answer him. Not then.

About an hour later I found Ollie holding up the beer cooler and drinking a Busch. His face was impassive but he also seemed to be watching Mrs. Carmody. She was tireless, apparently. And she was indeed discussing human sacrifice again, only now no one was telling her to shut up. Some of the people who had told her to shut up yesterday were either with her today or at least willing to listen—and the others were outnumbered.

"She could have them talked around to it by tomorrow morning," Ollie remarked. "Maybe not . . . but if she did, who do you think she'd single out for the honor?"

Bud Brown had crossed her. So had Amanda. There was the man who had struck her. And then, of course, there was me.

"Ollie," I said, "I think maybe half a dozen of us could get out of here. I don't know how far we'd get, but I think we could at least get out. "

"How?"

I laid it out for him. It was simple enough. If we dashed across to my Scout and piled in, they would get no human scent. At least not

with the windows rolled up.

“But suppose they’re attracted to some other scent?” Ollie asked. “Exhaust, for instance?”

“Then we’d be cooked,” I agreed.

“Motion,” he said. “The motion of a car through fog might also draw them, David.”

“I don’t think so. Not without the scent of prey. I really believe that’s the key to getting away.”

“But you don’t know.”

“No, not for sure.”

“Where would you want to go?”

“First? Home. To get my wife.”

“David—”

“All right. To check. To be *sure*.”

“The things out there could be everywhere, David. They could get you the minute you stepped out of your Scout into your dooryard.”

“If that happened, the Scout would be yours. All I’d ask would be that you take care of Billy as well as you could for as long as you could.”

Ollie finished his Busch and dropped the can back into the cooler, where it clattered among the empties. The butt of the gun Amanda’s husband had given her protruded from his pocket.

“South?” he asked, meeting my eyes.

“Yeah, I would,” I said. “Go south and try to get out of the mist. Try like hell.”

“How much gas you got?”

“Almost full.”

“Have you thought that it might be impossible to get out?”

I had. Suppose what they had been fooling with at the Arrowhead Project had pulled this entire region into another dimension as easily as you or I would turn a sock inside out? “It had crossed my mind,” I said, “but the alternative seems to be waiting around to see who Mrs. Carmody taps for the place of honor.”

“Were you thinking about today?”

“No, it’s afternoon already and those things get active at night. I was thinking about tomorrow, very early.”

“Who would you want to take?”

“Me and you and Billy. Hattie Turman. Amanda Dumfries. That old guy Cornell and Mrs. Reppler. Maybe Bud Brown, too. That’s eight, but Billy can sit on someone’s lap and we can all squash together.”

He thought it over. “All right,” he said finally. “We’ll try. Have you mentioned this to anyone else?”

“No, not yet. ”

“My advice would be not to, not until about four tomorrow morning. I’ll put a couple of bags of groceries under the checkout nearest the door. If we’re lucky we can squeak out before anyone knows what’s happening.” His eyes drifted to Mrs. Carmody again. “If she knew, she might try to stop us.”

“You think so?”

Ollie got another beer. “I think so,” he said.

That afternoon—yesterday afternoon—passed in a kind of slow motion. Darkness crept in, turning the fog to that dull chrome color again. What world was left outside slowly dissolved to black by eight-thirty.

The pink bugs returned, then the bird-things, swooping into the windows and scooping them up. Something roared occasionally from the dark, and once; shortly before midnight, there was a long, drawn-out *Aaaaa-rooooooo!* that caused people to turn toward the blackness with frightened, searching faces. It was the sort of sound you’d imagine a bull alligator might make in a swamp.

It went pretty much as Miller had predicted. By the small hours, Mrs. Carmody had gained another half a dozen souls. Mr. McVey the butcher was among them, standing with his arms folded, watching her.

She was totally wound up. She seemed to need no sleep. Her sermon, a steady stream of horrors out of Doré, Bosch, and Jonathan Edwards, went on and on, building toward some climax. Her group began to murmur with her, to rock back and forth unconsciously, like true believers at a tent revival. Their eyes were shiny and blank. They were under her spell.

Around 3:00 A.M. (the sermon went on relentlessly, and the people who were not interested had retreated to the back to try to get some sleep) I saw Ollie put a bag of groceries on a shelf under the checkout nearest the OUT door. Half an hour later he put another bag beside it. No one appeared to notice him but me. Billy, Amanda, and Mrs. Turman slept together by the denuded cold-cuts section. I joined them and fell into an uneasy doze.

At four-fifteen by my wristwatch, Ollie shook me awake. Cornell was with him, his eyes gleaming brightly from behind his spectacles.

"It's time, David," Ollie said.

A nervous cramp hit my belly and then passed. I shook Amanda awake. The question of what might happen with both Amanda and Stephanie in the car together passed into my mind, and then passed right out again. Today it would be best to take things just as they came.

Those remarkable green eyes opened and looked into mine.

"David?"

"We're going to take a stab at getting out of here. Do you want to come?"

"What are you talking about?"

I started to explain, then woke up Mrs. Turman so I would only have to go through it the once.

"Your theory about scent," Amanda said. "It's really only an educated guess at this point, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't matter to me," Hattie said. Her face was white and in spite of the sleep she'd gotten there were large discolored patches under her eyes. "I would do anything—take any chances—just to see the sun again."

*Just to see the sun again.* A little shiver coursed through me. She had put her finger on a spot that was very close to the center of my own fears, on the sense of almost foregone doom that had gripped me since I had seen Norm dragged out through the loading door. You could only see the sun through the mist as a little silver coin. It was like being on Venus.

It wasn't so much the monstrous creatures that lurked in the mist; my shot with the pinchbar had shown me they were no Lovecraftian horrors with immortal life but only organic creatures with their own vulnerabilities. It was the mist itself that sapped the strength and robbed the will. *Just to see the sun again.* She was right. That alone would be worth going through a lot of hell.

I smiled at Hattie and she smiled tentatively back.

"Yes," Amanda said. "Me too."

I began to shake Billy awake as gently as I could.

"I'm with you," Mrs. Reppler said briefly.

We were all together by the meat counter, all but Bud Brown. He had thanked us for the invitation and then declined it. He would not leave his place in the market, he said, but added in a remarkably gentle tone of voice that he didn't blame Ollie for doing so.

An unpleasant, sweetish aroma was beginning to drift up from the white enamel case now, a smell that reminded me of the time our freezer went on the fritz while we were spending a week on the Cape. Perhaps, I thought, it was the smell of spoiling meat that had driven Mr. McVey over to Mrs. Carmody's team.

*"—expiation! It's expiation we want to think about now! We have been scourged with whips and scorpions! We have been punished for delving into secrets forbidden by God of old! We have seen the lips of the earth open! We have seen the obscenities of nightmare! The rock will not hide them, the dead tree gives no shelter! And how will it end? What will stop it?"*

"Expiation!" shouted good old Myron LaFleur.

"Expiation . . . expiation . . ." They whispered it uncertainly.

"Let me hear *you* say it like *you* mean it!" Mrs. Carmody shouted. The veins stood out on her neck in bulging cords. Her voice was cracking and hoarse now, but still full of power. And it occurred to me that it was the mist that had given her that power—the power to cloud men's minds, to make a particularly apt pun—just as it had taken away the sun's power from the rest of us. Before, she had been nothing but a mildly eccentric old woman with an antiques store

in a town that was lousy with antiques stores. Nothing but an old woman with a few stuffed animals in the back room and a reputation for

(that *witch* . . . that cunt)

folk medicine. It was said she could find water with an applewood stick, that she could charm warts, and sell you a cream that would fade freckles to shadows of their former selves. I had even heard—was it from old Bill Giosti?—that Mrs. Carmody could be seen (in total confidence) about your love life; that if you were having the bedroom miseries, she could give you a drink that would put the ram back in your rod.

*“EXPIATION!”* they all cried together.

*“Expiation, that’s right!”* she shouted deliriously. *“It’s expiation gonna clear away this fog! Expiation gonna clear off these monsters and abominations! Expiation gonna drop the scales of mist from our eyes and let us see!”* Her voice dropped a notch. *“And what does the Bible say expiation is? What is the only cleanser for sin in the Eye and Mind of God?”*

*“Blood.”*

This time the chill shuddered up through my entire body, cresting at the nape of my neck and making the hairs there stiffen. Mr. McVey had spoken that word, Mr. McVey the butcher who had been cutting meat in Bridgton ever since I was a kid holding my father’s talented hand. Mr. McVey taking orders and cutting meat in his stained whites. Mr. McVey, whose acquaintanceship with the knife was long—yes, and with the saw and cleaver as well. Mr. McVey who would understand better than anyone else that the cleanser of the soul flows from the wounds of the body.

*“Blood . . .”* they whispered.

“Daddy, I’m scared,” Billy said. He was clutching my hand tightly, his small face strained and pale.

“Ollie,” I said, “why don’t we get out of this loony bin?”

“Right on,” he said. “Let’s go.”

We started down the second aisle in a loose group—Ollie, Amanda, Cornell, Mrs. Turman, Mrs. Reppler, Billy, and I. It was a

quarter to five in the morning and the mist was beginning to lighten again.

“You and Cornell take the grocery bags,” Ollie said to me.

“Okay.”

“I’ll go first. Your Scout is a four-door, is it?”

“Yeah. It is.”

“Okay, I’ll open the driver’s door and the back door on the same side. Mrs. Dumfries, can you carry Billy?”

She picked him up in her arms.

“Am I too heavy?” Billy asked.

“No, hon.”

“Good.”

“You and Billy get in front,” Ollie went on. “Shove way over. Mrs. Turman in front, in the middle. David, you behind the wheel. The rest of us will—”

“Where did you think you were going?”

It was Mrs. Carmody.

She stood at the head of the checkout line where Ollie had hidden the bags of groceries. Her pantsuit was a yellow scream in the gloom. Her hair frizzed out wildly in all directions, reminding me momentarily of Elsa Lanchester in *The Bride of Frankenstein*. Her eyes blazed. Ten or fifteen people stood behind her, blocking the IN and OUT doors. They had the look of people who had been in car accidents, or who had seen a UFO land, or who had seen a tree pull its roots up and walk.

Billy cringed against Amanda and buried his face against her neck.

“Going out now, Mrs. Carmody,” Ollie said. His voice was curiously gentle. “Stand away, please.”

“You can’t go out. That way is death. Don’t you know that by now?”

“No one has interfered with you,” I said. “All we want is the same privilege.”

She bent and found the bags of groceries unerringly. She must have known what we were planning all along. She pulled them out from the shelf where Ollie had placed them. One ripped open, spilling cans across the floor. She threw the other and it smashed

open with the sound of breaking glass. Soda ran fizzing every which way and sprayed off the chrome facing of the next checkout lane.

“These are the sort of people who brought it on!” she shouted. “People who will not bend to the will of the Almighty! Sinners in pride, haughty they are, and stiff-necked! It is from their number that the sacrifice must come! *From their number the blood of expiation!*”

A rising rumble of agreement spurred her on. She was in a frenzy now. Spittle flew from her lips as she screamed at the people crowding up behind her: “*It’s the boy we want! Grab him! Take him! It’s the boy we want!*”

They surged forward, Myron LaFleur in the lead, his eyes blankly joyous. Mr. McVey was directly behind him, his face blank and stolid.

Amanda faltered backward, holding Billy more tightly. His arms were wrapped around her neck. She looked at me, terrified. “David, what do I—”

“*Get them both!*” Mrs. Carmody screamed. “*Get his whore, too!*”

She was an apocalypse of yellow and dark joy. Her purse was still over her arm. She began to jump up and down. “*Get the boy, get the whore, get them both, get them all, get—*”

A single sharp report rang out.

Everything froze, as if we were a classroom full of unruly children and the teacher had just stepped back in and shut the door sharply. Myron LaFleur and Mr. McVey stopped where they were, about ten paces away. Myron looked back uncertainly at the butcher. He didn’t look back or even seem to realize that LaFleur was there. Mr. McVey had a look I had seen on too many other faces in the last two days. He had gone over. His mind had snapped.

Myron backed up, staring at Ollie Weeks with widening, fearful eyes. His backing-up became a run. He turned the corner of the aisle, skidded on a can, fell down, scrambled up again, and was gone.

Ollie stood in the classic target shooter’s position, Amanda’s gun clasped in both hands. Mrs. Carmody still stood at the head of the checkout lane. Both of her liver-spotted hands were clasped over her stomach. Blood poured out between her fingers and splashed her yellow slacks.

Her mouth opened and closed. Once. Twice. She was trying to talk. At last she made it.

*"You will all die out there,"* she said, and then she pitched slowly forward. Her purse slithered off her arm, struck the floor, and spilled its contents. A paper-wrapped tube rolled across the distance between us and struck one of my shoes. Without thinking, I bent over and picked it up. It was a half-used package of Roloids. I threw it down again. I didn't want to touch anything that belonged to her.

The "congregation" was backing away, spreading out, their focus broken. None of them took their eyes from the fallen figure and the dark blood spreading out from beneath her body. "You murdered her!" someone cried out in fear and anger. But no one pointed out that she had been planning something similar for my son.

Ollie was still frozen in his shooter's position, but now his mouth was trembling. I touched him gently. "Ollie, let's go. And thank you."

"I killed her," he said hoarsely. "Damn if I didn't kill her."

"Yes," I said. "That's why I thanked you. Now let's go."

We began to move again.

With no grocery bags to carry—thanks to Mrs. Carmody—I was able to take Billy. We paused for a moment at the door, and Ollie said in a low, strained voice, "I wouldn't have shot her, David. Not if there had been any other way."

"Yeah."

"You believe it?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Then let's go."

We went out.

## **XI. The End.**

Ollie moved fast, the pistol in his right hand. Before Billy and I were more than out the door he was at my Scout, an insubstantial Ollie, like a ghost in a television movie. He opened the driver's door.

Then the back door. Then something came out of the mist and cut him nearly in half.

I never got a good look at it, and for that I think I'm grateful. It appeared to be red, the angry color of a cooked lobster. It had claws. It was making a low grunting sound, not much different from the sound we had heard after Norton and his little band of Flat-Earthers went out.

Ollie got off one shot, and then the thing's claws scissored forward and Ollie's body seemed to unhinge in a terrible glut of blood. Amanda's gun fell out of his hand, struck the pavement, and discharged. I caught a nightmare glimpse of huge black lusterless eyes, the size of giant handfuls of sea grapes, and then the thing lurched back into the mist with what remained of Ollie Weeks in its grip. A long, multi-segmented scorpion's body dragged harshly on the paving.

There was an instant of choices. Maybe there always is, no matter how short. Half of me wanted to run back into the market with Billy hugged to my chest. The other half was racing for the Scout, throwing Billy inside, lunging after him. Then Amanda screamed. It was a high, rising sound that seemed to spiral up and up until it was nearly ultrasonic. Billy cringed against me, digging his face against my chest.

One of the spiders had Hattie Turman. It was big. It had knocked her down. Her dress had pulled up over her scrawny knees as it crouched over her, its bristly, spiny legs caressing her shoulders. It began to spin its web.

*Mrs. Carmody was right, I thought. We're going to die out here, we are really going to die out here.*

"Amanda!" I yelled.

No response. She was totally gone. The spider straddled what remained of Billy's babysitter, who had enjoyed jigsaw puzzles and those damned Double-Crostics that no normal person can do without going nuts. Its threads crisscrossed her body, the white strands already turning red as the acid coating sank into her.

Cornell was backing slowly toward the market, his eyes as big as dinner plates behind his specs. Abruptly he turned and ran. He

clawed the IN door open and ran inside.

The split in my mind closed as Mrs. Reppler stepped briskly forward and slapped Amanda, first forehand, then backhand. Amanda stopped screaming. I went to her, spun her around to face the Scout, and screamed "GO!" into her face.

She went. Mrs. Reppler brushed past me. She pushed Amanda into the Scout's back seat, got in after her, and slammed the door shut.

I yanked Billy loose and threw him in. As I climbed in myself, one of those spider threads drifted down and lit on my ankle. It burned the way a fishing line pulled rapidly through your closed fist will burn. And it was strong. I gave my foot a hard yank and it broke. I slipped in behind the wheel.

*"Shut it, oh shut the door, dear God!"* Amanda screamed.

I shut the door. A bare instant later, one of the spiders thumped softly against it. I was only inches from its red, viciously stupid eyes. Its legs, each as thick as my wrist, slipped back and forth across the square bonnet. Amanda screamed ceaselessly, like a firebell.

"Woman, shut your head," Mrs. Reppler told her.

The spider gave up. It could not smell us, ergo we were no longer there. It strutted back into the mist on its unsettling number of legs, became a phantasm, and then was gone.

I looked out the window to make sure it was gone and then opened the door.

*"What are you doing?"* Amanda screamed, but I knew what I was doing. I like to think Ollie would have done exactly the same thing. I half-stepped, half-leaned out, and got the gun. Something came rapidly toward me, but I never saw it. I pulled back in and slammed the door shut.

Amanda began to sob. Mrs. Reppler put an arm around her and comforted her briskly.

Billy said, "Are we going home, Daddy?"

"Big Bill, we're gonna try."

"Okay," he said quietly.

I checked the gun and then put it into the glove compartment. Ollie had reloaded it after the expedition to the drugstore. The rest of the

shells had disappeared with him, but that was all right. He had fired at Mrs. Carmody, he had fired once at the clawed thing, and the gun had discharged once when it hit the ground. There were four of us in the Scout, but if push came right down to shove, I'd find some other way out for myself.

I had a terrible moment when I couldn't find my key ring. I checked all my pockets, came up empty, and then checked them all again, forcing myself to go slowly and calmly. They were in my jeans pocket; they had gotten down under the coins, as keys sometimes will. The Scout started easily. At the confident roar of the engine, Amanda burst into fresh tears.

I sat there, letting it idle, waiting to see what was going to be drawn by the sound of the engine or the smell of the exhaust. Five minutes, the longest five of my life, drifted by. Nothing happened.

"Are we going to sit here or are we going to go?" Mrs. Reppler asked at last.

"Go," I said. I backed out of the slot and put on the low beams.

Some urge—probably a base one—made me cruise past the Federal market as close as I could get. The Scout's right bumper bunted the trash barrel to one side. It was impossible to see in except through the loopholes—all those fertilizer and lawn-food bags made the place look as if it were in the throes of some mad garden sale—but at each loophole there were two or three pale faces, staring out at us.

Then I swung to the left, and the mist closed impenetrably behind us. And what has become of those people I do not know.

I drove back down Kansas Road at five miles an hour, feeling my way. Even with the Scout's headlights and running lights on, it was impossible to see more than seven or ten feet ahead.

The earth had been through some terrible contortion; Miller had been right about that. In places the road was merely cracked, but in others the ground itself seemed to have caved in, tilting up great slabs of paving. I was able to get over with the help of the four-wheel drive. Thank God for that. But I was terribly afraid that we would

soon come to an obstacle that even the four-wheel drive couldn't get us over.

It took me forty minutes to make a drive that usually only took seven or eight. At last the sign that marked our private road loomed out of the mist. Billy, roused at a quarter of five, had fallen solidly asleep inside this car that he knew so well it must have seemed like home to him.

Amanda looked at the road nervously. "Are you really going down there?"

"I'm going to try," I said.

But it was impossible. The storm that had whipped through had loosened a lot of trees, and that weird, twisting drop had finished the job of tumbling them. I was able to crunch over the first two; they were fairly small. Then I came to a hoary old pine lying across the road like an outlaw's barricade. It was still almost a quarter of a mile to the house. Billy slept on beside me, and I put the Scout in Park, put my hands over my eyes, and tried to think what to do next.

Now, as I sit in the Howard Johnson's near Exit 3 of the Maine Turnpike, writing all of this down on HoJo stationery, I suspect that Mrs. Reppler, that tough and capable old broad, could have laid out the essential futility of the situation in a few quick strokes. But she had the kindness to let me think it through for myself.

I couldn't get out. I couldn't leave them. I couldn't even kid myself that all the horror-movie monsters were back at the Federal; when I cracked the window I could hear them in the woods, crashing and blundering around on the steep fall of land they call the Ledges around these parts. The moisture drip-drip-dripped from the overhanging leaves. Overhead the mist darkened momentarily as some nightmarish and half-seen living kite overflowed us.

I tried to tell myself—then and now—that if she was very quick, if she buttoned up the house with herself inside, that she had enough food for ten days to two weeks. It only works a little bit. What keeps getting in the way is my last memory of her, wearing her floppy

sunhat and gardening gloves, on her way to our little vegetable patch with the mist rolling inexorably across the lake behind her.

It is Billy I have to think about now. Billy, I tell myself. Big Bill, Big Bill . . . I should write it maybe a hundred times on this sheet of paper, like a child condemned to write *I will not throw spitballs in school* as the sunny three-o'clock stillness spills through the windows and the teacher corrects homework papers at her desk and the only sound is her pen, while somewhere, far away, kids pick up teams for scratch baseball.

Anyway, at last I did the only thing I could do. I reversed the Scout carefully back to Kansas Road. Then I cried.

Amanda touched my shoulder timidly. "David, I'm so sorry," she said.

"Yeah," I said, trying to stop the tears and not having much luck. "Yeah, so am I."

I drove to Route 302 and turned left, toward Portland. This road was also cracked and blasted in places, but was, on the whole, more passable than Kansas Road had been. I was worried about the bridges. The face of Maine is cut with running water, and there are bridges everywhere, big and small. But the Naples Causeway was intact, and from there it was plain—if slow—sailing all the way to Portland.

The mist held thick. Once I had to stop, thinking that trees were lying across the road. Then the trees began to move and undulate and I understood they were more tentacles. I stopped, and after a while they drew back. Once a great green thing with an iridescent green body and long transparent wings landed on the hood. It looked like a grossly misshapen dragonfly. It hovered there for a moment, then took wing again and was gone.

Billy woke up about two hours after we had left Kansas Road behind and asked if we had gotten Mommy yet. I told him I hadn't been able to get down our road because of fallen trees.

"Is she all right, Dad?"

"Billy, I don't know. But we'll come back and see."

He didn't cry. He dozed off again instead. I would have rather had his tears. He was sleeping too damn much and I didn't like it.

I began to get a tension headache. It was driving through the fog at a steady five or ten miles an hour that did it, the tension of knowing that anything might come out of it, anything at all—a washout, a landspill, or Ghidra the Three-headed Monster. I think I prayed. I prayed to God that Stephanie was alive and that He wouldn't take my adultery out on her. I prayed to God to let me get Billy to safety because he had been through so much.

Most people had pulled to the side of the road when the mist came, and by noon we were in North Windham. I tried the River Road, but about four miles down, a bridge spanning a small and noisy stream had fallen into the water. I had to reverse for nearly a mile before I found a spot wide enough to turn around. We went to Portland by Route 302 after all.

When we got there, I drove the cutoff to the turnpike. The neat line of tollbooths guarding the access had been turned into vacant-eyed skeletons of smashed Pola-Glas. All of them were empty. In the sliding glass doorway of one was a torn jacket with Maine Turnpike Authority patches on the sleeves. It was drenched with tacky, drying blood. We had not seen a single living person since leaving the Federal.

Mrs. Reppler said, "David, try your radio."

I slapped my forehead in frustration and anger at myself, wondering how I could have been stupid enough to forget the Scout's AM/FM for so long.

"Don't do that," Mrs. Reppler said curtly. "You can't think of everything. If you try, you will go mad and be of no use at all."

I got nothing but a shriek of static all the way across the AM band, and the FM yielded nothing but a smooth and ominous silence.

"Does that mean everything's off the air?" Amanda asked. I knew what she was thinking, maybe. We were far enough south now so that we should have been picking up a selection of strong Boston stations—WRKO, WBZ, WMEX. But if Boston had gone—

"It doesn't mean anything for sure," I said. "That static on the AM band is pure interference. The mist is having a damping effect on

radio signals, too.”

“Are you sure that’s all it is?”

“Yes,” I said, not sure at all.

We went south. The mileposts rolled past, counting down from about forty. When we reached Mile I, we would be at the New Hampshire border. Going on the turnpike was slower; a lot of the drivers hadn’t wanted to give up, and there had been rear-end collisions in several places. Several times I had to use the median strip.

At about twenty past one—I was beginning to feel hungry—Billy clutched my arm. “Daddy, what’s that? *What’s that!*”

A shadow loomed out of the mist, staining it dark. It was as tall as a cliff and coming right at us. I jammed on the brakes. Amanda, who had been catnapping, was thrown forward.

Something came; again, that is all I can say for sure. It may have been the fact that the mist only allowed us to glimpse things briefly, but I think it just as likely that there are certain things that your brain simply disallows. There are things of such darkness and horror—just, I suppose, as there are things of such great beauty—that they will not fit through the puny human doors of perception.

It was six-legged, I know that; its skin was slaty gray that mottled to dark brown in places. Those brown patches reminded me absurdly of the liver spots on Mrs. Carmody’s hands. Its skin was deeply wrinkled and grooved, and clinging to it were scores, hundreds, of those pinkish “bugs” with the stalk-eyes. I don’t know how big it actually was, but it passed directly over us. One of its gray, wrinkled legs smashed down right beside my window, and Mrs. Reppler said later she could not see the underside of its body, although she craned her neck up to look. She saw only two Cyclopean legs going up and up into the mist like living towers until they were lost to sight.

For the moment it was over the Scout I had an impression of something so big that it might have made a blue whale look the size of a trout—in other words, something so big that it defied the imagination. Then it was gone, sending a seismological series of thuds back. It left tracks in the cement of the Interstate, tracks so

deep I could not see the bottoms. Each single track was nearly big enough to drop the Scout into.

For a moment no one spoke. There was no sound but our breathing and the diminishing thud of that great Thing's passage.

Then Billy said, "Was it a dinosaur, Dad? Like the bird that got into the market?"

"I don't think so. I don't think there was ever an animal that big, Billy. At least not on earth."

I thought of the Arrowhead Project and wondered again what crazy damned thing they could have been doing up there.

"Can we go on?" Amanda asked timidly. "It might come back."

Yes, and there might be more up ahead. But there was no point in saying so. We had to go somewhere. I drove on, weaving in and out between those terrible tracks until they veered off the road.

That is what happened. Or nearly all—there is one final thing I'll get to in a moment. But you mustn't expect some neat conclusion. There is no *And they escaped from the mist into the good sunshine of a new day; or When we awoke the National Guard had finally arrived; or even that great old standby: It was all a dream.*

It is, I suppose, what my father always frowningly called "an Alfred Hitchcock ending," by which he meant a conclusion in ambiguity that allowed the reader or viewer to make up his own mind about how things ended. My father had nothing but contempt for such stories, saying they were "cheap shots."

We got to this Howard Johnson's near Exit 3 as dusk began to close in, making driving a suicidal risk. Before that, we took a chance on the bridge that spans the Saco River. It looked badly twisted out of shape, but in the mist it was impossible to tell if it was whole or not. That particular game we won.

But there's tomorrow to think of, isn't there?

As I write this, it is a quarter to one in the morning, July the twenty-third. The storm that seemed to signal the beginning of it all was only four days ago. Billy is sleeping in the lobby on a mattress that I dragged out for him. Amanda and Mrs. Reppler are close by. I am

writing by the light of a big Delco flashlight, and outside the pink bugs are ticking and thumping off the glass. Every now and then there is a louder thud as one of the birds takes one off.

The Scout has enough gas to take us maybe another ninety miles. The alternative is to try to gas up here; there is an Exxon out on the service island, and although the power is off, I believe I could siphon some up from the tank. But—

But it means being outside.

If we can get gas—here or further along—we'll keep going. I have a destination in mind now, you see. It's that last thing I wanted to tell you about.

I couldn't be sure. That is the thing, the damned thing. It might have been my imagination, nothing but wish fulfillment. And even if not, it is such a long chance. How many miles? How many bridges? How many things that would love to tear up my son and eat him even as he screamed in terror and agony?

The chances are so good that it was nothing but a daydream that I haven't told the others . . . at least, not yet.

In the manager's apartment I found a large battery-operated multiband radio. From the back of it, a flat antenna wire led out through the window. I turned it on, switched over to BAT., fiddled with the tuning dial, with the SQUELCH knob, and still got nothing but static or dead silence.

And then, at the far end of the AM band, just as I was reaching for the knob to turn it off, I thought I heard, or dreamed I heard, one single word.

There was no more. I listened for an hour, but there was no more. If there was that one word, it came through some minute shift in the damping mist, an infinitesimal break that immediately closed again.

One word.

I've got to get some sleep . . . if I can sleep and not be haunted until daybreak by the faces of Ollie Weeks and Mrs. Carmody and Norm the bag-boy . . . and by Steff's face, half-shadowed by the wide brim of her sunhat.

There is a restaurant here, a typical HoJo restaurant with a dining room and a long, horseshoe-shaped lunch counter. I am going to

leave these pages on the counter and perhaps someday someone will find them and read them.

One word.

If I only really heard it. If only.

I'm going to bed now. But first I'm going to kiss my son and whisper two words in his ear. Against the dreams that may come, you know.

Two words that sound a bit alike.

One of them is Hartford.

The other is hope.

## Here There Be Tygers

Charles needed to go to the bathroom very badly.

There was no longer any use in trying to fool himself that he could wait for recess. His bladder was screaming at him, and Miss Bird had caught him squirming.

There were three third-grade teachers in the Acorn Street Grammar School. Miss Kinney was young and blond and bouncy and had a boyfriend who picked her up after school in a blue Camaro. Mrs. Trask was shaped like a Moorish pillow and did her hair in braids and laughed booming. And there was Miss Bird.

Charles had known he would end up with Miss Bird. He had known that. It had been inevitable. Because Miss Bird obviously wanted to destroy him. She did not allow children to go to the basement. The basement, Miss Bird said, was where the boilers were kept, and well-groomed ladies and gentlemen would never go down *there*, because basements were nasty, sooty old things. Young ladies and gentlemen do not go to the basement, she said. They go to the *bathroom*.

Charles squirmed again.

Miss Bird cocked an eye at him. "Charles," she said clearly, still pointing her pointer at Bolivia, "do you need to go to the bathroom?"

Cathy Scott in the seat ahead of him giggled, wisely covering her mouth.

Kenny Griffen sniggered and kicked Charles under his desk.

Charles went bright red.

"Speak up, Charles," Miss Bird said brightly. "Do you need to—" (*urinate she'll say urinate she always does*)

"Yes, Miss Bird."

"Yes, what?"

"I have to go to the base—to the bathroom."

Miss Bird smiled. "Very well, Charles. You may go to the bathroom and urinate. Is that what you need to do? Urinate?"

Charles hung his head, convicted.

“Very well, Charles. You may do so. And next time kindly don’t wait to be asked.”

General giggles. Miss Bird rapped the board with her pointer.

Charles trudged up the row toward the door, thirty pairs of eyes boring into his back, and every one of those kids, including Cathy Scott, knew that he was going into the bathroom to urinate. The door was at least a football field’s length away. Miss Bird did not go on with the lesson but kept her silence until he had opened the door, entered the blessedly empty hall, and shut the door again.

He walked down toward the boys’ bathroom

*(basement basement basement IF I WANT)*

dragging his fingers along the cool tile of the wall, letting them bounce over the thumbtack-stippled bulletin board and slide lightly across the red

*(BREAK GLASS IN CASE OF EMERGENCY)*

fire-alarm box.

Miss Bird *liked* it. Miss Bird *liked* making him have a red face. In front of Cathy Scott—who *never* needed to go to the basement, was that fair?—and everybody else.

Old *b-i-t-c-h*, he thought. He spelled because he had decided last year God didn’t say it was a sin if you spelled.

He went into the boys’ bathroom.

It was very cool inside, with a faint, not unpleasant smell of chlorine hanging pungently in the air. Now, in the middle of the morning, it was clean and deserted, peaceful and quite pleasant, not at all like the smoky, stinky cubicle at the Star Theatre downtown.

The bathroom

*(!basement!)*

was built like an L, the short side lined with tiny square mirrors and white porcelain washbowls and a paper towel dispenser,

(NIBROC)

the longer side with two urinals and three toilet cubicles.

Charles went around the corner after glancing morosely at his thin, rather pallid face in one of the mirrors.

The tiger was lying down at the far end, just underneath the pebbly-white window. It was a large tiger, with tawny venetian blinds and dark stripes laid across its pelt. It looked up alertly at Charles, and its green eyes narrowed. A kind of silky, purring grunt issued from its mouth. Smooth muscles flexed, and the tiger got to its feet. Its tail switched, making little chinking sounds against the porcelain side of the last urinal.

The tiger looked quite hungry and very vicious.

Charles hurried back the way he had come. The door seemed to take forever to wheeze pneumatically closed behind him, but when it did, he considered himself safe. This door only swung in, and he could not remember ever reading or hearing that tigers are smart enough to open doors.

Charles wiped the back of his hand across his nose. His heart was thumping so hard he could hear it. He still needed to go to the basement, worse than ever.

He squirmed, winced, and pressed a hand against his belly. He really had to go to the basement. If he could only be sure no one would come, he could use the girls'. It was right across the hall. Charles looked at it longingly, knowing he would never dare, not in a million years. What if Cathy Scott should come? Or—black horror!—what if *Miss Bird* should come?

Perhaps he had imagined the tiger.

He opened the door wide enough for one eye and peeked in.

The tiger was peeking back from around the angle of the L, its eye a sparkling green. Charles fancied he could see a tiny blue fleck in that deep brilliance, as if the tiger's eye had eaten one of his own. As if—

A hand slid around his neck.

Charles gave a stifled cry and felt his heart and stomach cram up into his throat. For one terrible moment he thought he was going to wet himself.

It was Kenny Griffen, smiling complacently. "Miss Bird sent me after you 'cause you been gone six years. You're in trouble."

"Yeah, but I can't go to the basement," Charles said, feeling faint with the fright Kenny had given him.

“Yer constipated!” Kenny chortled gleefully. “Wait’ll I tell *Caaathy!*”

“You better not!” Charles said urgently. “Besides, I’m not. There’s a tiger in there.”

“What’s he doing?” Kenny asked. “Takin a piss?”

“I don’t know,” Charles said, turning his face to the wall. “I just wish he’d go away.” He began to weep.

“Hey,” Kenny said, bewildered and a little frightened. “Hey. ”

“What if I *have* to go? What if I can’t help it? Miss Bird’ll say—”

“Come on,” Kenny said, grabbing his arm in one hand and pushing the door open with the other. “You’re making it up.”

They were inside before Charles, terrified, could break free and cower back against the door.

“Tiger,” Kenny said disgustedly. “Boy, Miss Bird’s gonna *kill* you.”

“It’s around the other side.”

Kenny began to walk past the washbowls. “Kitty-kitty-kitty? Kitty?”

“Don’t!” Charles hissed.

Kenny disappeared around the corner. “Kitty-kitty? Kitty-kitty? Kit  
—”

Charles darted out the door again and pressed himself against the wall, waiting, his hands over his mouth and his eyes squinched shut, waiting, waiting for the scream.

There was no scream.

He had no idea how long he stood there, frozen, his bladder bursting. He looked at the door to the boys’ basement. It told him nothing. It was just a door.

He wouldn’t.

He *couldn’t*.

But at last he went in.

The washbowls and the mirrors were neat, and the faint smell of chlorine was unchanged. But there seemed to be a smell under it. A faint, unpleasant smell, like freshly sheared copper.

With groaning (but silent) trepidation, he went to the corner of the L and peeped around.

The tiger was sprawled on the floor, licking its large paws with a long pink tongue. It looked incuriously at Charles. There was a torn piece of shirt caught in one set of claws.

But his need was a white agony now, and he couldn't help it. He *had* to. Charles tiptoed back to the white porcelain basin closest the door.

Miss Bird slammed in just as he was zipping his pants.

"Why, you dirty, filthy little boy," she said almost reflectively.

Charles was keeping a weather eye on the corner. "I'm sorry, Miss Bird . . . the tiger . . . I'm going to clean the sink . . . I'll use soap . . . I swear I will . . ."

"Where's Kenneth?" Miss Bird asked calmly.

"I don't know."

He didn't, really.

"Is he back there?"

"*No!*" Charles cried.

Miss Bird stalked to the place where the room bent. "Come here, Kenneth. Right this moment."

"Miss Bird—"

But Miss Bird was already around the corner. She meant to pounce. Charles thought Miss Bird was about to find out what pouncing was really all about.

He went out the door again. He got a drink at the drinking fountain. He looked at the American flag hanging over the entrance to the gym. He looked at the bulletin board. Woodsy Owl said GIVE A HOOT, DON'T POLLUTE. Officer Friendly said NEVER RIDE WITH STRANGERS. Charles read everything twice.

Then he went back to the classroom, walked down his row to his seat with his eyes on the floor, and slid into his seat. It was a quarter to eleven. He took out *Roads to Everywhere* and began to read about Bill at the Rodeo.

## The Monkey

When Hal Shelburn saw it, when his son Dennis pulled it out of a mouldering Ralston-Purina carton that had been pushed far back under one attic eave, such a feeling of horror and dismay rose in him that for one moment he thought he would scream. He put one fist to his mouth, as if to cram it back . . . and then merely coughed into his fist. Neither Terry nor Dennis noticed, but Petey looked around, momentarily curious.

“Hey, neat,” Dennis said respectfully. It was a tone Hal rarely got from the boy anymore himself. Dennis was twelve.

“What is it?” Peter asked. He glanced at his father again before his eyes were dragged back to the thing his big brother had found.

“What is it, Daddy?”

“It’s a monkey, fartbrains,” Dennis said. “Haven’t you ever seen a monkey before?”

“Don’t call your brother fartbrains,” Terry said automatically, and began to examine a box of curtains. The curtains were slimy with mildew and she dropped them quickly. “Uck.”

“Can I have it, Daddy?” Petey asked. He was nine.

“What do you mean?” Dennis cried. “I found it!”

“Boys, please,” Terry said. “I’m getting a headache.”

Hal barely heard them. The monkey glimmered up at him from his older son’s hands, grinning its old familiar grin. The same grin that had haunted his nightmares as a kid, haunted them until he had—

Outside a cold gust of wind rose, and for a moment lips with no flesh blew a long note through the old, rusty gutter outside. Petey stepped closer to his father, eyes moving uneasily to the rough attic roof through which nailheads poked.

“What was that, Daddy?” he asked as the whistle died to a guttural buzz.

“Just the wind,” Hal said, still looking at the monkey. Its cymbals, crescents of brass rather than full circles in the weak light of the one

naked bulb, were moveless, perhaps a foot apart, and he added automatically, "Wind can whistle, but it can't carry a tune." Then he realized that was a saying of Uncle Will's, and a goose ran over his grave.

The note came again, the wind coming off Crystal Lake in a long, droning swoop and then wavering in the gutter. Half a dozen small drafts puffed cold October air into Hal's face—God, this place was so much like the back closet of the house in Hartford that they might all have been transported thirty years back in time.

*I won't think about that.*

But now of course it was all he *could* think about.

*In the back closet where I found that goddammed monkey in that same box.*

Terry had moved away to examine a wooden crate filled with knickknacks, duck-walking because the pitch of the eaves was so sharp.

"I don't like it," Petey said, and felt for Hal's hand. "Dennis c'n have it if he wants. Can we go, Daddy?"

"Worried about ghosts, chickenguts?" Dennis inquired.

"Dennis, you stop it," Terry said absently. She picked up a waferthin cup with a Chinese pattern. "This is nice. This—"

Hal saw that Dennis had found the wind-up key in the monkey's back. Terror flew through him on dark wings.

"Don't do that!"

It came out more sharply than he had intended, and he had snatched the monkey out of Dennis's hands before he was really aware he had done it. Dennis looked around at him, startled. Terry had also glanced back over her shoulder, and Petey looked up. For a moment they were all silent, and the wind whistled again, very low this time, like an unpleasant invitation.

"I mean, it's probably broken," Hal said.

*It used to be broken . . . except when it wanted not to be.*

"Well, you didn't have to *grab*," Dennis said.

"Dennis, shut up."

Dennis blinked and for a moment looked almost uneasy. Hal hadn't spoken to him so sharply in a long time. Not since he had lost

his job with National Aerodyne in California two years before and they had moved to Texas. Dennis decided not to push it . . . for now. He turned back to the Ralston-Purina carton and began to root through it again, but the other stuff was nothing but junk. Broken toys bleeding springs and stuffings.

The wind was louder now, hooting instead of whistling. The attic began to creak softly, making a noise like footsteps.

“Please, Daddy?” Petey asked, only loud enough for his father to hear.

“Yeah,” he said. “Terry, let’s go.”

“I’m not through with this—”

“I said let’s go.”

It was her turn to look startled.

They had taken two adjoining rooms in a motel. By ten that night the boys were asleep in their room and Terry was asleep in the adults’ room. She had taken two Valiums on the ride back from the home place in Casco. To keep her nerves from giving her a migraine. Just lately she took a lot of Valium. It had started around the time National Aerodyne had laid Hal off. For the last two years he had been working for Texas Instruments—it was \$4,000 less a year, but it was work. He told Terry they were lucky. She agreed. There were plenty of software architects drawing unemployment, he said. She agreed. The company housing in Arnette was every bit as good as the place in Fresno, he said. She agreed, but he thought her agreement to all of it was a lie.

And he was losing Dennis. He could feel the kid going, achieving a premature escape velocity, so long, Dennis, goodbye stranger, it was nice sharing this train with you. Terry said she thought the boy was smoking reefer. She smelled it sometimes. You have to talk to him, Hal. And he agreed, but so far he had not.

The boys were asleep. Terry was asleep. Hal went into the bathroom and locked the door and sat down on the closed lid of the john and looked at the monkey.

He hated the way it felt, that soft brown nappy fur, worn bald in spots. He hated its grin—*that monkey grins just like a nigger*, Uncle Will had said once, but it didn’t grin like a nigger or like anything

human. Its grin was all teeth, and if you wound up the key, the lips would move, the teeth would seem to get bigger, to become vampire teeth, the lips would writhe and the cymbals would bang, stupid monkey, stupid clockwork monkey, stupid, stupid—

He dropped it. His hands were shaking and he dropped it.

The key clicked on the bathroom tile as it struck the floor. The sound seemed very loud in the stillness. It grinned at him with its murky amber eyes, doll's eyes, filled with idiot glee, its brass cymbals poised as if to strike up a march for some band from hell. On the bottom the words MADE IN HONG KONG were stamped.

"You can't be here," he whispered. "I threw you down the well when I was nine."

The monkey grinned up at him.

Outside in the night, a black capful of wind shook the motel.

Hal's brother Bill and Bill's wife Collette met them at Uncle Will's and Aunt Ida's the next day. "Did it ever cross your mind that a death in the family is a really lousy way to renew the family connection?" Bill asked him with a bit of a grin. He had been named for Uncle Will. Will and Bill, champions of the rodayo, Uncle Will used to say, and ruffle Bill's hair. It was one of his sayings . . . like the wind can whistle but it can't carry a tune. Uncle Will had died six years before, and Aunt Ida had lived on here alone, until a stroke had taken her just the previous week. Very sudden, Bill had said when he called long distance to give Hal the news. As if he could know; as if anyone could know. She had died alone.

"Yeah," Hal said. "The thought crossed my mind."

They looked at the place together, the home place where they had finished growing up. Their father, a merchant mariner, had simply disappeared as if from the very face of the earth when they were young; Bill claimed to remember him vaguely, but Hal had no memories of him at all. Their mother had died when Bill was ten and Hal eight. Aunt Ida had brought them here on a Greyhound bus which left from Hartford, and they had been raised here, and gone to college from here. This had been the place they were homesick for.

Bill had stayed in Maine and now had a healthy law practice in Portland.

Hal saw that Petey had wandered off toward the blackberry tangles that lay on the eastern side of the house in a mad jumble. “Stay away from there, Petey,” he called.

Petey looked back, questioning. Hal felt simple love for the boy rush him . . . and he suddenly thought of the monkey again.

“Why, Dad?”

“The old well’s back there someplace,” Bill said. “But I’ll be damned if I remember just where. Your dad’s right, Petey—it’s a good place to stay away from. Thorns’ll do a job on you. Right, Hal?”

“Right,” Hal said automatically. Petey moved away, not looking back, and then started down the embankment toward the small shingle of beach where Dennis was skipping stones over the water. Hal felt something in his chest loosen a little.

Bill might have forgotten where the old well was, but late that afternoon Hal went to it unerringly, shouldering his way through the brambles that tore at his old flannel jacket and hunted for his eyes. He reached it and stood there, breathing hard, looking at the rotted, warped boards that covered it. After a moment’s debate, he knelt (his knees fired twin pistol shots) and moved two of the boards aside.

From the bottom of that wet, rock-lined throat a drowning face stared up at him, wide eyes, grimacing mouth. A moan escaped him. It was not loud, except in his heart. There it had been very loud.

It was his own face in the dark water.

*Not* the monkey’s. For a moment he had thought it was the monkey’s.

He was shaking. Shaking all over.

*I threw it down the well. I threw it down the well, please God don’t let me be crazy, I threw it down the well.*

The well had gone dry the summer Johnny McCabe died, the year after Bill and Hal came to stay with Uncle Will and Aunt Ida. Uncle Will had borrowed money from the bank to have an artesian well

sunk, and the blackberry tangles had grown up around the old dug well. The dry well.

Except the water had come back. Like the monkey.

This time the memory would not be denied. Hal sat there helplessly, letting it come, trying to go with it, to ride it like a surfer riding a monster wave that will crush him if he falls off his board, just trying to get through it so it would be gone again.

He had crept out here with the monkey late that summer, and the blackberries had been out, the smell of them thick and cloying. No one came in here to pick, although Aunt Ida would sometimes stand at the edge of the tangles and pick a cupful of berries into her apron. In here the blackberries had gone past ripe to overripe, some of them were rotting, sweating a thick white fluid like pus, and the crickets sang maddeningly in the high grass underfoot, their endless cry: *Reeeeeee*—

The thorns tore at him, brought dots of blood onto his cheeks and bare arms. He made no effort to avoid their sting. He had been blind with terror—so blind that he had come within inches of stumbling onto the rotten boards that covered the well, perhaps within inches of crashing thirty feet to the well's muddy bottom. He had pinwheeled his arms for balance, and more thorns had branded his forearms. It was that memory that had caused him to call Petey back sharply.

That was the day Johnny McCabe died—his best friend. Johnny had been climbing the rungs up to his treehouse in his backyard. The two of them had spent many hours up there that summer, playing pirate, seeing make-believe galleons out on the lake, unlimbering the cannons, reefing the stuns'l (whatever that was), preparing to board. Johnny had been climbing up to the treehouse as he had done a thousand times before, and the rung just below the trapdoor in the bottom of the treehouse had snapped off in his hands and Johnny had fallen thirty feet to the ground and had broken his neck and it was the monkey's fault, the monkey, the goddam hateful monkey. When the phone rang, when Aunt Ida's mouth dropped open and then formed an O of horror as her friend Milly from down

the road told her the news, when Aunt Ida said, “Come out on the porch, Hal, I have to tell you some bad news—” he had thought with sick horror, The monkey! *What’s the monkey done now?*

There had been no reflection of his face trapped at the bottom of the well the day he threw the monkey down, only stone cobbles and the stink of wet mud. He had looked at the monkey lying there on the wiry grass that grew between the blackberry tangles, its cymbals poised, its grinning teeth huge between its splayed lips, its fur rubbed away in balding, mangy patches here and there, its glazed eyes.

“I hate you,” he hissed at it. He wrapped his hand around its loathsome body, feeling the nappy fur crinkle. It grinned at him as he held it up in front of his face. “Go on!” he dared it, beginning to cry for the first time that day. He shook it. The poised cymbals trembled minutely. The monkey spoiled everything good. Everything. “Go on, clap them! Clap them!”

The monkey only grinned.

“Go on and clap them!” His voice rose hysterically. “*Fraidycat, afraidycat, go on and clap them! I dare you! DOUBLE DARE YOU!*” Its brownish-yellow eyes. Its huge gleeful teeth.

He threw it down the well then, mad with grief and terror. He saw it turn over once on its way down, a simian acrobat doing a trick, and the sun glinted one last time on those cymbals. It struck the bottom with a thud, and that must have joggled its clockwork, for suddenly the cymbals *did* begin to beat. Their steady, deliberate, and tinny banging rose to his ears, echoing and fey in the stone throat of the dead well: *jang-jang-jang-jang—*

Hal clapped his hands over his mouth, and for a moment he could see it down there, perhaps only in the eye of imagination . . . lying there in the mud, eyes glaring up at the small circle of his boy’s face peering over the lip of the well (as if marking that face forever), lips expanding and contracting around those grinning teeth, cymbals clapping, funny wind-up monkey.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang, who’s dead? Jang-jang-jang-jang, is it Johnny McCabe, falling with his eyes wide, doing his own acrobatic somersault as he falls through the bright summer vacation air with*

*the splintered rung still held in his hands to strike the ground with a single bitter snapping sound, with blood flying out of his nose and mouth and wide eyes? Is it Johnny, Hal? Or is it you?*

Moaning, Hal had shoved the boards across the hole, getting splinters in his hands, not caring, not even aware of them until later. And still he could hear it, even through the boards, muffled now and somehow all the worse for that: it was down there in stone-faced dark, clapping its cymbals and jerking its repulsive body, the sound coming up like sounds heard in a dream.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang, who's dead this time?*

He fought and battered his way back through the blackberry creepers. Thorns stitched fresh lines of welling blood briskly across his face and burdocks caught in the cuffs of his jeans, and he fell full-length once, his ears still jangling, as if it had followed him. Uncle Will found him later, sitting on an old tire in the garage and sobbing, and he had thought Hal was crying for his dead friend. So he had been; but he had also cried in the aftermath of terror.

He had thrown the monkey down the well in the afternoon. That evening, as twilight crept in through a shimmering mantle of ground-fog, a car moving too fast for the reduced visibility had run down Aunt Ida's Manx cat in the road and gone right on. There had been guts everywhere, Bill had thrown up, but Hal had only turned his face away, his pale, still face, hearing Aunt Ida's sobbing (this on top of the news about the McCabe boy had caused a fit of weeping that was almost hysterics, and it was almost two hours before Uncle Will could calm her completely) as if from miles away. In his heart there was a cold and exultant joy. It hadn't been his turn. It had been Aunt Ida's Manx, not him, not his brother Bill or his Uncle Will (just two champions of the rodayo). And now the monkey was gone, it was down the well, and one scruffy Manx cat with ear mites was not too great a price to pay. If the monkey wanted to clap its hellish cymbals now, let it. It could clap and clash them for the crawling bugs and beetles, the dark things that made their home in the well's stone gullet. It would rot down there. Its loathsome cogs and wheels and springs would rust down there. It would die down there. In the mud and the darkness. Spiders would spin it a shroud.

But . . . it had come back.

Slowly, Hal covered the well again, as he had on that day, and in his ears he heard the phantom echo of the monkey's cymbals: *Jang-jang-jang-jang, who's dead, Hal? Is it Terry? Dennis? Is it Petey, Hal? He's your favorite, isn't he? Is it him? Jang-jang-jang—*

"Put that *down!*"

Petey flinched and dropped the monkey, and for one nightmare moment Hal thought that would do it, that the jolt would jog its machinery and the cymbals would begin to beat and clash.

"Daddy, you scared me."

"I'm sorry. I just . . . I don't want you to play with that."

The others had gone to see a movie, and he had thought he would beat them back to the motel. But he had stayed at the home place longer than he would have guessed; the old, hateful memories seemed to move in their own eternal time zone.

Terry was sitting near Dennis, watching *The Beverly Hillbillies*. She watched the old, grainy print with a steady, bemused concentration that spoke of a recent Valium pop. Dennis was reading a rock magazine with Culture Club on the cover. Petey had been sitting cross-legged on the carpet goofing with the monkey.

"It doesn't work anyway," Petey said. *Which explains why Dennis let him have it*, Hal thought, and then felt ashamed and angry at himself. He felt this uncontrollable hostility toward Dennis more and more often, but in the aftermath he felt demeaned and tacky . . . helpless.

"No," he said. "It's old. I'm going to throw it away. Give it to me."

He held out his hand and Peter, looking troubled, handed it over.

Dennis said to his mother, "Pop's turning into a friggin schizophrenic."

Hal was across the room even before he knew he was going, the monkey in one hand, grinning as if in approbation. He hauled Dennis out of his chair by the shirt. There was a purring sound as a seam

came adrift somewhere. Dennis looked almost comically shocked. His copy of *Rock Wave* fell to the floor.

“Hey!”

“You come with me,” Hal said grimly, pulling his son toward the door to the connecting room.

“Hal!” Terry nearly screamed. Petey just goggled.

Hal pulled Dennis through. He slammed the door and then slammed Dennis against the door. Dennis was starting to look scared. “You’re getting a mouth problem,” Hal said.

“Let go of me! You tore my shirt, you—”

Hal slammed the boy against the door again. “Yes,” he said. “A real mouth problem. Did you learn that in school? Or back in the smoking area?”

Dennis flushed, his face momentarily ugly with guilt. “I wouldn’t be in that shitty school if you didn’t get canned!” he burst out.

Hal slammed Dennis against the door again. “I didn’t get canned, I got laid off, you know it, and I don’t need any of your shit about it. You have problems? Welcome to the world, Dennis. Just don’t lay all of them off on me. You’re eating. Your ass is covered. You are twelve years old, and at twelve, I don’t . . . need any . . . shit from you.” He punctuated each phrase by pulling the boy forward until their noses were almost touching and then slamming Dennis back into the door. It was not hard enough to hurt, but Dennis was scared—his father had not laid a hand on him since they moved to Texas—and now he began to cry with a young boy’s loud, braying, healthy sobs.

“Go ahead, beat me up!” he yelled at Hal, his face twisted and blotchy. “Beat me up if you want, I know how much you fucking hate me!”

“I don’t hate you. I love you a lot, Dennis. But I’m your dad and you’re going to show me respect or I’m going to bust you for it.”

Dennis tried to pull away. Hal pulled the boy to him and hugged him; Dennis fought for a moment and then put his face against Hal’s chest and wept as if exhausted. It was the sort of cry Hal hadn’t heard from either of his children in years. He closed his eyes, realizing that he felt exhausted himself.

Terry began to hammer on the other side of the door. "Stop it, Hal! Whatever you're doing to him, stop it!"

"I'm not killing him," Hal said. "Go away, Terry."

"Don't you—"

"It's all right, Mom," Dennis said, muffled against Hal's chest.

He could feel her perplexed silence for a moment, and then she went. Hal looked at his son again.

"I'm sorry I bad-mouthed you, Dad," Dennis said reluctantly.

"Okay. I accept that with thanks. When we get home next week, I'm going to wait two or three days and then I'm going to go through all your drawers, Dennis. If there's something in them you don't want me to see, you better get rid of it."

That flash of guilt again. Dennis lowered his eyes and wiped away snot with the back of his hand.

"Can I go now?" He sounded sullen once more.

"Sure," Hal said, and let him go. *Got to take him camping in the spring, just the two of us. Do some fishing, like Uncle Will used to do with Bill and me. Got to get close to him. Got to try.*

He sat down on the bed in the empty room, and looked at the monkey. *You'll never be close to him again, Hal, its grin seemed to say. Count on it. I am back to take care of business, just like you always knew I would be, someday.*

Hal laid the monkey aside and put a hand over his eyes.

That night Hal stood in the bathroom, brushing his teeth, and thought. *It was in the same box. How could it be in the same box?*

The toothbrush jabbed upward, hurting his gums. He winced.

He had been four, Bill six, the first time he saw the monkey. Their missing father had bought a house in Hartford, and it had been theirs, free and clear, before he died or fell into a hole in the middle of the world or whatever it had been. Their mother worked as a secretary at Holmes Aircraft, the helicopter plant out in Westville, and a series of sitters came in to stay with the boys, except by then it was just Hal that the sitters had to mind through the day—Bill was in first grade, big school. None of the babysitters stayed for long. They

got pregnant and married their boyfriends or got work at Holmes, or Mrs. Shelburn would discover they had been at the cooking sherry or her bottle of brandy which was kept in the sideboard for special occasions. Most were stupid girls who seemed only to want to eat or sleep. None of them wanted to read to Hal as his mother would do.

The sitter that long winter was a huge, sleek black girl named Beulah. She fawned over Hal when Hal's mother was around and sometimes pinched him when she wasn't. Still, Hal had some liking for Beulah, who once in a while would read him a lurid tale from one of her confession or true-detective magazines ("Death Came for the Voluptuous Redhead," Beulah would intone ominously in the dozy daytime silence of the living room, and pop another Reese's peanut butter cup into her mouth while Hal solemnly studied the grainy tabloid pictures and drank milk from his Wish-Cup). The liking made what happened worse.

He found the monkey on a cold, cloudy day in March. Sleet ticked sporadically off the windows, and Beulah was asleep on the couch, a copy of *My Story* tented open on her admirable bosom.

Hal had crept into the back closet to look at his father's things.

The back closet was a storage space that ran the length of the second floor on the left side, extra space that had never been finished off. You got into it by using a small door—a down-the-rabbit-hole sort of door—on Bill's side of the boys' bedroom. They both liked to go in there, even though it was chilly in winter and hot enough in summer to wring a bucketful of sweat out of your pores. Long and narrow and somehow snug, the back closet was full of fascinating junk. No matter how much stuff you looked at, you never seemed to be able to look at it all. He and Bill had spent whole Saturday afternoons up here, barely speaking to each other, taking things out of boxes, examining them, turning them over and over so their hands could absorb each unique reality, putting them back. Now Hal wondered if he and Bill hadn't been trying, as best they could, to somehow make contact with their vanished father.

He had been a merchant mariner with a navigator's certificate, and there were stacks of charts in the closet, some marked with neat circles (and the dimple of the compass's swing-point in the center of

each). There were twenty volumes of something called *Barron's Guide to Navigation*. A set of cockeyed binoculars that made your eyes feel hot and funny if you looked through them too long. There were touristy things from a dozen ports of call—rubber hula-hula dolls, a black cardboard bowler with a torn band that said YOU PICK A GIRL AND I'LL PICCADILLY, a glass globe with a tiny Eiffel Tower inside. There were envelopes with foreign stamps tucked carefully away inside, and foreign coins; there were rock samples from the Hawaiian island of Maui, a glassy black—heavy and somehow ominous—and funny records in foreign languages.

That day, with the sleet ticking hypnotically off the roof just above his head, Hal worked his way all the way down to the far end of the back closet, moved a box aside, and saw another box behind it—a Ralston-Purina box. Looking over the top was a pair of glassy hazel eyes. They gave him a start and he skittered back for a moment, heart thumping, as if he had discovered a deadly pygmy. Then he saw its silence, the glaze in those eyes, and realized it was some sort of toy. He moved forward again and lifted it carefully from the box.

It grinned its ageless, toothy grin in the yellow light, its cymbals held apart.

Delighted, Hal had turned it this way and that, feeling the crinkle of its nappy fur. Its funny grin pleased him. Yet hadn't there been something else? An almost instinctive feeling of disgust that had come and gone almost before he was aware of it? Perhaps it was so, but with an old, old memory like this one, you had to be careful not to believe too much. Old memories could lie. But . . . hadn't he seen that same expression on Petey's face, in the attic of the home place?

He had seen the key set into the small of its back, and turned it. It had turned far too easily; there were no winding-up clicks. Broken, then. Broken, but still neat.

He took it out to play with it.

"Whatchoo got, Hal?" Beulah asked, waking from her nap.

"Nothing," Hal said. "I found it."

He put it up on the shelf on his side of the bedroom. It stood atop his Lassie coloring books, grinning, staring into space, cymbals poised. It was broken, but it grinned nonetheless. That night Hal awakened from some uneasy dream, bladder full, and got up to use the bathroom in the hall. Bill was a breathing lump of covers across the room.

Hal came back, almost asleep again . . . and suddenly the monkey began to beat its cymbals together in the darkness.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang—*

He came fully awake, as if snapped in the face with a cold, wet towel. His heart gave a staggering leap of surprise, and a tiny, mouselike squeak escaped his throat. He stared at the monkey, eyes wide, lips trembling.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang—*

Its body rocked and humped on the shelf. Its lips spread and closed, spread and closed, hideously gleeful, revealing huge and carnivorous teeth.

“Stop,” Hal whispered.

His brother turned over and uttered a loud, single snore. All else was silent . . . except for the monkey. The cymbals clapped and clashed, and surely it would wake his brother, his mother, the world. It would wake the dead.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang—*

Hal moved toward it, meaning to stop it somehow, perhaps put his hand between its cymbals until it ran down, and then it stopped on its own. The cymbals came together one last time—*jang!*—and then spread slowly apart to their original position. The brass glimmered in the shadows. The monkey’s dirty yellowish teeth grinned.

The house was silent again. His mother turned over in her bed and echoed Bill’s single snore. Hal got back into his own bed and pulled the covers up, his heart beating fast, and he thought: *I’ll put it back in the closet again tomorrow. I don’t want it.*

But the next morning he forgot all about putting the monkey back because his mother didn’t go to work. Beulah was dead. Their mother wouldn’t tell them exactly what happened. “It was an accident, just a terrible accident,” was all she would say. But that

afternoon Bill bought a newspaper on his way home from school and smuggled page four up to their room under his shirt. Bill read the article haltingly to Hal while their mother cooked supper in the kitchen, but Hal could read the headline for himself—TWO KILLED IN APARTMENT SHOOT-OUT. Beulah McCaffery, 19, and Sally Tremont, 20, had been shot by Miss McCaffery's boyfriend, Leonard White, 25, following an argument over who was to go out and pick up an order of Chinese food. Miss Tremont had expired at Hartford Receiving. Beulah McCaffery had been pronounced dead at the scene.

It was like Beulah just disappeared into one of her own detective magazines, Hal Shelburn thought, and felt a cold chill race up his spine and then circle his heart. And then he realized the shootings had occurred about the same time the monkey—

“Hal?” It was Terry's voice, sleepy. “Coming to bed?”

He spat toothpaste into the sink and rinsed his mouth. “Yes,” he said.

He had put the monkey in his suitcase earlier, and locked it up. They were flying back to Texas in two or three days. But before they went, he would get rid of the damned thing for good.

Somehow.

“You were pretty rough on Dennis this afternoon,” Terry said in the dark.

“Dennis has needed somebody to start being rough on him for quite a while now, I think. He's been drifting. I just don't want him to start falling.”

“Psychologically, beating the boy isn't a very productive—”

“I didn't beat him, Terry—for Christ's sake!”

“—way to assert parental authority—”

“Oh, don't give me any of that encounter-group shit,” Hal said angrily.

“I can see you don't want to discuss this.” Her voice was cold.

“I told him to get the dope out of the house, too.”

“You did?” Now she sounded apprehensive. “How did he take it? What did he say?”

“Come on, Terry! What *could* he say? You’re fired?”

“Hal, what’s the *matter* with you? You’re not like this—what’s *wrong?*”

“Nothing,” he said, thinking of the monkey locked away in his Samsonite. Would he hear it if it began to clap its cymbals? Yes, he surely would. Muffled, but audible. Clapping doom for someone, as it had for Beulah, Johnny McCabe, Uncle Will’s dog Daisy. *Jang-jang-jang*, is it you, Hal? “I’ve just been under a strain.”

“I *hope* that’s all it is. Because I don’t like you this way.”

“No?” And the words escaped before he could stop them: he didn’t even want to stop them. “So pop a Valium and everything will look okay again.”

He heard her draw breath in and let it out shakily. She began to cry then. He could have comforted her (maybe), but there seemed to be no comfort in him. There was too much terror. It would be better when the monkey was gone again, gone for good. Please God, gone for good.

He lay wakeful until very late, until morning began to gray the air outside. But he thought he knew what to do.

\* \* \*

Bill had found the monkey the second time.

That was about a year and a half after Beulah McCaffery had been pronounced Dead at the Scene. It was summer. Hal had just finished kindergarten.

He came in from playing and his mother called, “Wash your hands, Senor, you are feelthy like a peeg.” She was on the porch, drinking an iced tea and reading a book. It was her vacation; she had two weeks.

Hal gave his hands a token pass under cold water and printed dirt on the hand towel. “Where’s Bill?”

“Upstairs. You tell him to clean his side of the room. It’s a mess.”

Hal, who enjoyed being the messenger of unpleasant news in such matters, rushed up. Bill was sitting on the floor. The small down-the-rabbit-hole door leading to the back closet was ajar. He had the monkey in his hands.

“That’s busted,” Hal said immediately.

He was apprehensive, although he barely remembered coming back from the bathroom that night and the monkey suddenly beginning to clap its cymbals. A week or so after that, he had had a bad dream about the monkey and Beulah—he couldn’t remember exactly what—and had awakened screaming, thinking for a moment that the soft weight on his chest was the monkey, that he would open his eyes and see it grinning down at him. But of course the soft weight had only been his pillow, clutched with panicky tightness. His mother came in to soothe him with a drink of water and two chalky-orange baby aspirin, those Valiums of childhood’s troubled times. She thought it was the fact of Beulah’s death that had caused the nightmare. So it was, but not in the way she thought.

He barely remembered any of this now, but the monkey still scared him, particularly its cymbals. And its teeth.

“I know that,” Bill said, and tossed the monkey aside. “It’s stupid.” It landed on Bill’s bed, staring up at the ceiling, cymbals poised. Hal did not like to see it there. “You want to go down to Teddy’s and get Popsicles?”

“I spent my allowance already,” Hal said. “Besides, Mom says you got to clean up your side of the room.”

“I can do that later,” Bill said. “And I’ll loan you a nickel, if you want.” Bill was not above giving Hal an Indian rope burn sometimes, and would occasionally trip him up or punch him for no particular reason, but mostly he was okay.

“Sure,” Hal said gratefully. “I’ll just put the busted monkey back in the closet first, okay?”

“Nah,” Bill said, getting up. “Let’s go-go-go.”

Hal went. Bill’s moods were changeable, and if he paused to put the monkey away, he might lose his Popsicle. They went down to Teddy’s and got them, and not just any Popsicles, either, but the rare

blueberry ones. Then they went down to the Rec where some kids were getting up a baseball game. Hal was too small to play, but he sat far out in foul territory, sucking his blueberry Popsicle and chasing what the big kids called “Chinese home runs.” They didn’t get home until almost dark, and their mother whacked Hal for getting the hand towel dirty and whacked Bill for not cleaning up his side of the room, and after supper there was TV, and by the time all of that happened, Hal had forgotten all about the monkey. It somehow found its way up onto Bill’s shelf, where it stood right next to Bill’s autographed picture of Bill Boyd. And there it stayed for nearly two years.

By the time Hal was seven, babysitters had become an extravagance, and Mrs. Shelburn’s parting shot each morning was, “Bill, look after your brother.”

That day, however, Bill had to stay after school and Hal came home alone, stopping at each corner until he could see absolutely no traffic coming in either direction, and then skittering across, shoulders hunched, like a doughboy crossing no-man’s-land. He let himself into the house with the key under the mat and went immediately to the refrigerator for a glass of milk. He got the bottle, and then it slipped through his fingers and crashed to smithereens on the floor, the pieces of glass flying everywhere.

*Jang-jang-jang-jang*, from upstairs, in their bedroom. *Jang-jang-jang, hi, Hal! Welcome home! And by the way, Hal, is it you? Is it you this time? Are they going to find you Dead at the Scene?*

He stood there, immobile, looking down at the broken glass and the puddle of milk, full of a terror he could not name or understand. It was simply there, seeming to ooze from his pores.

He turned and rushed upstairs to their room. The monkey stood on Bill’s shelf, seeming to stare at him. The monkey had knocked the autographed picture of Bill Boyd facedown onto Bill’s bed. The monkey rocked and grinned and beat its cymbals together. Hal approached it slowly, not wanting to, but not able to stay away. Its cymbals jerked apart and crashed together and jerked apart again. As he got closer, he could hear the clockwork running in the monkey’s guts.

Abruptly, uttering a cry of revulsion and terror, he swatted it from the shelf as one might swat a bug. It struck Bill's pillow and then fell on the floor, cymbals beating together, *jang-jang-jang*, lips flexing and closing as it lay there on its back in a patch of late April sunshine.

Hal kicked it with one Buster Brown, kicked it as hard as he could, and this time the cry that escaped him was one of fury. The clockwork monkey skittered across the floor, bounced off the wall and lay still. Hal stood staring at it, fists bunched, heart pounding. It grinned saucily back at him, the sun of a burning pinpoint in one glass eye. Kick me *all you want*, it seemed to tell him, *I'm nothing but cogs and clockwork and a worm gear or two, kick me all you feel like, I'm not real, just a funny clockwork monkey is all I am, and who's dead? There's been an explosion at the helicopter plant! What's that rising up into the sky like a big bloody bowling ball with eyes where the finger-holes should be? Is it your mother's head, Hal? Whee! What a ride your mother's head is having! Or down at Brook Street Corner! Looky-here, pard! The car was going too fast! The driver was drunk! There's one Bill less in the world! Could you hear the crunching sound when the wheels ran over his skull and his brains squirted out his ears? Yes? No? Maybe? Don't ask me, I don't know, I can't know, all I know how to do is beat these cymbals together jang-jang-jang, and who's Dead at the Scene, Hal? Your mother? Your brother? Or is it you, Hal? Is it you?*

He rushed at it again, meaning to stomp it, smash it, jump on it until cogs and gears flew and its horrible glass eyes rolled along the floor. But just as he reached it, its cymbals came together once more, very softly . . . (*jang*) . . . as a spring somewhere inside expanded one final, minute notch . . . and a sliver of ice seemed to whisper its way through the walls of his heart, impaling it, stilling its fury and leaving him sick with terror again. The monkey almost seemed to know—how gleeful its grin seemed!

He picked it up, tweezing one of its arms between the thumb and first finger of his right hand, mouth drawn down in a bow of loathing, as if it were a corpse he held. Its mangy fake fur seemed hot and fevered against his skin. He fumbled open the tiny door that led to

the back closet and turned on the bulb. The monkey grinned at him as he crawled down the length of the storage area between boxes piled on top of boxes, past the set of navigation books and the photograph albums with their fume of old chemicals and the souvenirs and the old clothes, and Hal thought: *If it begins to clap its cymbals together now and move in my hand, I'll scream, and if I scream, it'll do more than grin, it'll start to laugh, to laugh at me, and then I'll go crazy and they'll find me in here, drooling and laughing crazy, I'll be crazy, oh please dear God, please dear Jesus, don't let me go crazy—*

He reached the far end and clawed two boxes aside, spilling one of them, and jammed the monkey back into the Ralston-Purina box in the farthest corner. And it leaned in there, comfortably, as if home at last, cymbals poised, grinning its simian grin, as if the joke were still on Hal. Hal crawled backward, sweating, hot and cold, all fire and ice, waiting for the cymbals to begin, and when they began, the monkey would leap from its box and scurry beetlelike toward him, clockwork whirring, cymbals clashing madly, and—

—and none of that happened. He turned off the light and slammed the small down-the-rabbit-hole door and leaned on it, panting. At last he began to feel a little better. He went downstairs on rubbery legs, got an empty bag, and began carefully to pick up the jagged shards and splinters of the broken milk bottle, wondering if he was going to cut himself and bleed to death, if that was what the clapping cymbals had meant. But that didn't happen, either. He got a towel and wiped up the milk and then sat down to see if his mother and brother would come home.

His mother came first, asking, "Where's Bill?"

In a low, colorless voice, now sure that Bill must be Dead at some Scene, Hal started to explain about the school play meeting, knowing that, even given a very long meeting, Bill should have been home half an hour ago.

His mother looked at him curiously, started to ask what was wrong, and then the door opened and Bill came in—only it was not Bill at all, not really. This was a ghost-Bill, pale and silent.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Shelburn exclaimed. "Bill, what's wrong?"

Bill began to cry and they got the story through his tears. There had been a car, he said. He and his friend Charlie Silverman were walking home together after the meeting and the car came around Brook Street Corner too fast and Charlie had frozen, Bill had tugged Charlie's hand once but had lost his grip and the car—

Bill began to bray out loud, hysterical sobs, and his mother hugged him to her, rocking him, and Hal looked out on the porch and saw two policemen standing there. The squad car in which they had conveyed Bill home was standing at the curb. Then he began to cry himself . . . but his tears were tears of relief.

It was Bill's turn to have nightmares now—dreams in which Charlie Silverman died over and over again, knocked out of his Red Ryder cowboy boots and was flipped onto the hood of the rusty Hudson Hornet the drunk had been piloting. Charlie Silverman's head and the Hudson's windshield had met with explosive force. Both had shattered. The drunk driver, who owned a candy store in Milford, suffered a heart attack shortly after being taken into custody (perhaps it was the sight of Charlie Silverman's brains drying on his pants), and his lawyer was quite successful at the trial with his "this man has been punished enough" theme. The drunk was given sixty days (suspended) and lost his privilege to operate a motor vehicle in the state of Connecticut for five years . . . which was about as long as Bill Shelburn's nightmares lasted. The monkey was hidden away again in the back closet. Bill never noticed it was gone from his shelf . . . or if he did, he never said.

Hal felt safe for a while. He even began to forget about the monkey again, or to believe it had only been a bad dream. But when he came home from school on the afternoon his mother died, it was back on his shelf, cymbals poised, grinning down at him.

He approached it slowly, as if from outside himself—as if his own body had been turned into a wind-up toy at the sight of the monkey. He saw his hand reach out and take it down. He felt the nappy fur crinkle under his hand, but the feeling was muffled, mere pressure, as if someone had shot him full of Novocain. He could hear his breathing, quick and dry, like the rattle of wind through straw.

He turned it over and grasped the key and years later he would think that his drugged fascination was like that of a man who puts a six-shooter with one loaded chamber against a closed and jittering eyelid and pulls the trigger.

*No don't—let it alone throw it away don't touch it—*

He turned the key and in the silence he heard a perfect tiny series of winding-up clicks. When he let the key go, the monkey began to clap its cymbals together and he could feel its body jerking, bend-and-jerk, bend-and-jerk, as if it were alive, it was alive, writhing in his hand like some loathsome pygmy, and the vibration he felt through its balding brown fur was not that of turning cogs but the beating of its heart.

With a groan, Hal dropped the monkey and backed away, fingernails digging into the flesh under his eyes, palms pressed to his mouth. He stumbled over something and nearly lost his balance (then he would have been right down on the floor with it, his bulging blue eyes looking into its glassy hazel ones). He scrambled toward the door, backed through it, slammed it, and leaned against it. Suddenly he bolted for the bathroom and vomited.

It was Mrs. Stukey from the helicopter plant who brought the news and stayed with them those first two endless nights, until Aunt Ida got down from Maine. Their mother had died of a brain embolism in the middle of the afternoon. She had been standing at the water cooler with a cup of water in one hand and had crumpled as if shot, still holding the paper cup in one hand. With the other she had clawed at the water cooler and had pulled the great glass bottle of Poland water down with her. It had shattered . . . but the plant doctor, who came on the run, said later that he believed Mrs. Shelburn was dead before the water had soaked through her dress and her underclothes to wet her skin. The boys were never told any of this, but Hal knew anyway. He dreamed it again and again on the long nights following his mother's death. *You* still have trouble gettin to sleep, *little* brother? Bill had asked him, and Hal supposed Bill thought all the thrashing and bad dreams had to do with their mother dying so suddenly, and that was right . . . but only partly right. There was the guilt; the certain, deadly knowledge that he had killed his

mother by winding the monkey up on that sunny after-school afternoon.

When Hal finally fell asleep, his sleep must have been deep. When he awoke, it was nearly noon. Petey was sitting cross-legged in a chair across the room, methodically eating an orange section by section and watching a game show on TV.

Hal swung his legs out of bed, feeling as if someone had punched him down into sleep . . . and then punched him back out of it. His head throbbed. “Where’s your mom, Petey?”

Petey glanced around. “She and Dennis went shopping. I said I’d hang out here with you. Do you always talk in your sleep, Dad?”

Hal looked at his son cautiously. “No. What did I say?”

“I couldn’t make it out. It scared me, a little.”

“Well, here I am in my right mind again,” Hal said, and managed a small grin. Petey grinned back, and Hal felt simple love for the boy again, an emotion that was bright and strong and uncomplicated. He wondered why he had always been able to feel so good about Petey, to feel he understood Petey and could help him, and why Dennis seemed a window too dark to look through, a mystery in his ways and habits, the sort of boy he could not understand because he had never been that sort of boy. It was too easy to say that the move from California had changed Dennis, or that—

His thoughts froze. The monkey. The monkey was sitting on the windowsill, cymbals poised. Hal felt his heart stop dead in his chest and then suddenly begin to gallop. His vision wavered, and his throbbing head began to ache ferociously.

It had escaped from the suitcase and now stood on the windowsill, grinning at him. *Thought you got rid of me, didn’t you? But you’ve thought that before, haven’t you?*

Yes, he thought sickly. Yes, I have.

“Pete, did you take that monkey out of my suitcase?” he asked, knowing the answer already. He had locked the suitcase and had put the key in his overcoat pocket.

Petey glanced at the monkey, and something—Hal thought it was unease—passed over his face. “No,” he said. “Mom put it there.”

“Mom did?”

“Yeah. She took it from you. She laughed.”

“Took it from me? What are you talking about?”

“You had it in bed with you. I was brushing my teeth, but Dennis saw. He laughed, too. He said you looked like a baby with a teddy bear.”

Hal looked at the monkey. His mouth was too dry to swallow. He’d had it in *bed* with him? In bed? That loathsome fur against his cheek, maybe against his *mouth*, those glaring eyes staring into his sleeping face, those grinning teeth near his neck? *On* his neck? Dear *God*.

He turned abruptly and went to the closet. The Samsonite was there, still locked. The key was still in his overcoat pocket.

Behind him, the TV snapped off. He came out of the closet slowly. Peter was looking at him soberly. “Daddy, I don’t like that monkey,” he said, his voice almost too low to hear.

“Nor do I,” Hal said.

Petey looked at him closely, to see if he was joking, and saw that he was not. He came to his father and hugged him tight. Hal could feel him trembling.

Petey spoke into his ear then, very rapidly, as if afraid he might not have courage enough to say it again . . . or that the monkey might overhear.

“It’s like it looks at you. Like it looks at you no matter where you are in the room. And if you go into the other room, it’s like it’s looking through the wall at you. I kept feeling like it . . . like it wanted me for something.”

Petey shuddered. Hal held him tight.

“Like it wanted you to wind it up,” Hal said.

Pete nodded violently. “It isn’t really broken, is it, Dad?”

“Sometimes it is,” Hal said, looking over his son’s shoulder at the monkey. “But sometimes it still works.”

“I kept wanting to go over there and wind it up. It was so quiet, and I thought, I can’t, it’ll wake up Daddy, but I still wanted to, and I went over and I . . . I *touched* it and I hate the way it feels . . . but I liked it,

too . . . and it was like it was saying, Wind me up, Petey, we'll play, your father isn't going to wake up, he's never going to wake up at all, wind me up, wind me up . . ."

The boy suddenly burst into tears.

"It's bad, I know it is. There's something wrong with it. Can't we throw it out, Daddy? Please?"

The monkey grinned its endless grin at Hal. He could feel Petey's tears between them. Late-morning sun glinted off the monkey's brass cymbals—the light reflected upward and put sun streaks on the motel's plain white stucco ceiling.

"What time did your mother think she and Dennis would be back, Petey?"

"Around one." He swiped at his red eyes with his shirt sleeve, looking embarrassed at his tears. But he wouldn't look at the monkey. "I turned on the TV," he whispered. "And I turned it up loud."

"That was all right, Petey."

*How would it have happened? Hal wondered. Heart attack? An embolism, like my mother? What? It doesn't really matter, does it?*

*And on the heels of that, another, colder thought: Get rid of it, he says. Throw it out. But can it be gotten rid of? Ever?*

The monkey grinned mockingly at him, its cymbals held a foot apart. Did it suddenly come to life on the night Aunt Ida died? he wondered suddenly. Was that the last sound she heard, the muffled *jang-jang-jang* of the monkey beating its cymbals together up in the black attic while the wind whistled along the drainpipe?

"Maybe not so crazy," Hal said slowly to his son. "Go get your flight bag, Petey."

Petey looked at him uncertainly. "What are we going to do?"

*Maybe it can be got rid of. Maybe permanently, maybe just for a while . . . a long while or a short while. Maybe it's just going to come back and come back and that's all this is about . . . but maybe I—we—can say good-bye to it for a long time. It took twenty years to come back this time. It took twenty years to get out of the well . . .*

"We're going to go for a ride," Hal said. He felt fairly calm, but somehow too heavy inside his skin. Even his eyeballs seemed to have gained weight. "But first I want you to take your flight bag out

there by the edge of the parking lot and find three or four good-sized rocks. Put them inside the bag and bring it back to me. Got it?"

Understanding flickered in Petey's eyes. "All right, Daddy."

Hal glanced at his watch. It was nearly 12:15. "Hurry. I want to be gone before your mother gets back."

"Where are we going?"

"To Uncle Will's and Aunt Ida's," Hal said. "To the home place."

Hal went into the bathroom, looked behind the toilet, and got the bowl brush leaning there. He took it back to the window and stood there with it in his hand like a cut-rate magic wand. He looked out at Petey in his melton shirt-jacket, crossing the parking lot with his flight bag, DELTA showing clearly in white letters against a blue field. A fly bumbled in an upper corner of the window, slow and stupid with the end of the warm season. Hal knew how it felt.

He watched Petey hunt up three good-sized rocks and then start back across the parking lot. A car came around the corner of the motel, a car that was moving too fast, much too fast, and without thinking, reaching with the kind of reflex a good shortstop shows going to his right, the hand holding the brush flashed down, as if in a karate chop . . . and stopped.

The cymbals closed soundlessly on his intervening hand, and he felt something in the air. Something like rage.

The car's brakes screamed. Petey flinched back. The driver motioned to him, impatiently, as if what had almost happened was Petey's fault, and Petey ran across the parking lot with his collar flapping and into the motel's rear entrance.

Sweat was running down Hal's chest; he felt it on his forehead like a drizzle of oily rain. The cymbals pressed coldly against his hand, numbing it.

*Go on, he thought grimly. Go on, I can wait all day. Until hell freezes over, if that's what it takes.*

The cymbals drew apart and came to rest. Hal heard one faint *click!* from inside the monkey. He withdrew the brush and looked at it. Some of the white bristles had blackened, as if singed.

The fly bumbled and buzzed, trying to find the cold October sunshine that seemed so close.

Pete came bursting in, breathing quickly, cheeks rosy. “I got three good ones, Dad, I—” He broke off. “Are you all right, Daddy?”

“Fine,” Hal said. “Bring the bag over.”

Hal hooked the table by the sofa over to the window with his foot, so it stood below the sill, and put the flight bag on it. He spread its mouth open like lips. He could see the stones Petey had collected glimmering inside. He used the toilet-bowl brush to hook the monkey forward. It teetered for a moment and then fell into the bag. There was a faint jing! as one of its cymbals struck one of the rocks.

“Dad? Daddy?” Petey sounded frightened. Hal looked around at him. Something was different; something had changed. What was it?

Then he saw the direction of Petey’s gaze and he knew. The buzzing of the fly had stopped. It lay dead on the windowsill.

“Did the monkey do that?” Petey whispered.

“Come on,” Hal said, zipping the bag shut. “I’ll tell you while we ride out to the home place.”

“How can we go? Mom and Dennis took the car.”

“Don’t worry,” Hal said, and ruffled Petey’s hair.

He showed the desk clerk his driver’s license and a twenty-dollar bill. After taking Hal’s Texas Instruments digital watch as collateral, the clerk handed Hal the keys to his own car—a battered AMC Gremlin. As they drove east on Route 302 toward Casco, Hal began to talk, haltingly at first, then a little faster. He began by telling Petey that his father had probably brought the monkey home with him from overseas, as a gift for his sons. It wasn’t a particularly unique toy—there was nothing strange or valuable about it. There must have been hundreds of thousands of wind-up monkeys in the world, some made in Hong Kong, some in Taiwan, some in Korea. But somewhere along the line—perhaps even in the dark back closet of the house in Connecticut where the two boys had begun their growing up—something had happened to the monkey. Something bad. It might be, Hal said as he tried to coax the clerk’s Gremlin up

past forty, that some bad things—maybe even most bad things—weren't even really awake and aware of what they were. He left it there because that was probably as much as Petey could understand, but his mind continued on its own course. He thought that most evil might be very much like a monkey full of clockwork that you wind up; the clockwork turns, the cymbals begin to beat, the teeth grin, the stupid glass eyes laugh . . . or appear to laugh. . . .

He told Petey about finding the monkey, but little more—he did not want to terrify his already scared boy any more than he was already. The story thus became disjointed, not really clear, but Petey asked no questions; perhaps he was filling in the blanks for himself, Hal thought, in much the same way that he had dreamed his mother's death over and over, although he had not been there.

Uncle Will and Aunt Ida had both been there for the funeral. Afterward, Uncle Will had gone back to Maine—it was harvesttime—and Aunt Ida had stayed on for two weeks with the boys to neaten up her sister's affairs before bringing them back to Maine. But more than that, she spent the time making herself known to them—they were so stunned by their mother's sudden death that they were nearly comatose. When they couldn't sleep, she was there with warm milk; when Hal woke at three in the morning with nightmares (nightmares in which his mother approached the water cooler without seeing the monkey that floated and bobbed in its cool sapphire depths, grinning and clapping its cymbals, each converging pair of sweeps leaving trails of bubbles behind); she was there when Bill came down with first a fever and then a rash of painful mouth sores and then hives three days after the funeral; she was there. She made herself known to the boys, and before they rode the bus from Hartford to Portland with her, both Bill and Hal had come to her separately and wept on her lap while she held them and rocked them, and the bonding began.

The day before they left Connecticut for good to go “down Maine” (as it was called in those days), the rag-man came in his old rattly truck and picked up the huge pile of useless stuff that Bill and Hal had carried out to the sidewalk from the back closet. When all the junk had been set out by the curb for pickup, Aunt Ida had asked

them to go through the back closet again and pick out any souvenirs or remembrances they wanted specially to keep. We just don't have room for it all, boys, she told them, and Hal supposed Bill had taken her at her word and had gone through all those fascinating boxes their father had left behind one final time. Hal did not join his older brother. Hal had lost his taste for the back closet. A terrible idea had come to him during those first two weeks of mourning: perhaps his father hadn't just disappeared, or run away because he had an itchy foot and had discovered marriage wasn't for him.

Maybe the monkey had gotten him.

When he heard the rag-man's truck roaring and farting and backfiring its way down the block, Hal nerved himself, snatched the monkey from his shelf where it had been since the day his mother died (he had not dared to touch it until then, not even to throw it back into the closet), and ran downstairs with it. Neither Bill nor Aunt Ida saw him. Sitting on top of a barrel filled with broken souvenirs and moldy books was the Ralston-Purina carton, filled with similar junk. Hal had slammed the monkey back into the box it had originally come out of, hysterically daring it to begin clapping its cymbals (*go on, go on, I dare you, dare you, DOUBLE DARE YOU*), but the monkey only waited there, leaning back nonchalantly, as if expecting a bus, grinning its awful, knowing grin.

Hal stood by, a small boy in old corduroy pants and scuffed Buster Browns, as the rag-man, an Italian gent who wore a crucifix and whistled through the space in his teeth, began loading boxes and barrels into an ancient truck with wooden stake sides. Hal watched as he lifted both the barrel and the Ralston-Purina box balanced atop it; he watched the monkey disappear into the bed of the truck; he watched as the rag-man climbed back into the cab, blew his nose mightily into the palm of his hand, wiped his hand with a huge red handkerchief, and started the truck's engine with a roar and a blast of oily blue smoke; he watched the truck draw away. And a great weight had dropped away from his heart—he actually felt it go. He had jumped up and down twice, as high as he could jump, his arms spread, palms held out, and if any of the neighbors had seen him, they would have thought it odd almost to the point of blasphemy,

perhaps—*why is that boy jumping for joy* (for that was surely what it was; a jump for joy can hardly be disguised), they surely would have asked themselves, *with his mother not even a month in her grave?*

He was doing it because the monkey was gone, gone forever.

Or so he had thought.

Not three months later Aunt Ida had sent him up into the attic to get the boxes of Christmas decorations, and as he crawled around looking for them, getting the knees of his pants dusty, he had suddenly come face to face with it again, and his wonder and terror had been so great that he had to bite sharply into the side of his hand to keep from screaming . . . or fainting dead away. There it was, grinning its toothy grin, cymbals poised a foot apart and ready to clap, leaning nonchalantly back against one corner of a Ralston-Purina carton as if waiting for a bus, seeming to say: *Thought you got rid of me, didn't you? But I'm not that easy to get rid of, Hal. I like you, Hal. We were made for each other, just a boy and his pet monkey, a couple of good old buddies. And somewhere south of here there's a stupid old Italian rag-man lying in a claw-foot tub with his eyeballs bulging and his dentures half-popped out of his mouth, his screaming mouth, a ragman who smells like a burned-out Exide battery. He was saving me for his grandson, Hal, he put me on the bathroom shelf with his soap and his razor and his Burma-Shave and the Philco radio he listened to the Brooklyn Dodgers on, and I started to clap, and one of my cymbals hit that old radio and into the tub it went, and then I came to you, Hal, I worked my way along the country roads at night and the moonlight shone off my teeth at three in the morning and I left many people Dead at many Scenes. I came to you, Hal, I'm your Christmas present, so wind me up, who's dead? Is it Bill? Is it Uncle Will? Is it you, Hal? Is it you?*

Hal had backed away, grimacing madly, eyes rolling, and nearly fell going downstairs. He told Aunt Ida he hadn't been able to find the Christmas decorations—it was the first lie he had ever told her, and she had seen the lie on his face but had not asked him why he had told it, thank God—and later when Bill came in she asked *him* to look and he brought the Christmas decorations down. Later, when they were alone, Bill hissed at him that he was a dummy who couldn't find

his own ass with both hands and a flashlight. Hal said nothing. Hal was pale and silent, only picking at his supper. And that night he dreamed of the monkey again, one of its cymbals striking the Philco radio as it babbled out Dean Martin singing *Whenna da moon hitta you eye like a big pizza pie ats-a moray*, the radio tumbling into the bathtub as the monkey grinned and beat its cymbals together with a *JANG* and a *JANG* and a *JANG*; only it wasn't the Italian rag-man who was in the tub when the water turned electric.

It was him.

\* \* \*

Hal and his son scrambled down the embankment behind the home place to the boathouse that jutted out over the water on its old pilings. Hal had the flight bag in his right hand. His throat was dry, his ears were attuned to an unnaturally keen pitch. The bag was very heavy.

Hal set down the flight bag. "Don't touch that," he said. Hal felt in his pocket for the ring of keys Bill had given him and found one neatly labeled B'HOUSE on a scrap of adhesive tape.

The day was clear and cold, windy, the sky a brilliant blue. The leaves of the trees that crowded up to the verge of the lake had gone every bright fall shade from blood red to schoolbus yellow. They talked in the wind. Leaves swirled around Petey's sneakers as he stood anxiously by, and Hal could smell November just downwind, with winter crowding close behind it.

The key turned in the padlock and he pulled the swing doors open. Memory was strong; he didn't even have to look to kick down the wooden block that held the door open. The smell in here was all summer: canvas and bright wood, a lingering lusty warmth.

Uncle Will's rowboat was still here, the oars neatly shipped as if he had last loaded it with his fishing tackle and two six-packs of Black Label yesterday afternoon. Bill and Hal had both gone out fishing with Uncle Will many times, but never together. Uncle Will

maintained the boat was too small for three. The red trim, which Uncle Will had touched up each spring, was now faded and peeling, though, and spiders had spun silk in the boat's bow.

Hal laid hold of the boat and pulled it down the ramp to the little shingle of beach. The fishing trips had been one of the best parts of his childhood with Uncle Will and Aunt Ida. He had a feeling that Bill felt much the same. Uncle Will was ordinarily the most taciturn of men, but once he had the boat positioned to his liking, some sixty or seventy yards offshore, lines set and bobbers floating on the water, he would crack a beer for himself and one for Hal (who rarely drank more than half of the one can Uncle Will would allow, always with the ritual admonition from Uncle Will that Aunt Ida must never be told because "she'd shoot me for a stranger if she knew I was givin you boys beer, don't you know"), and wax expansive. He would tell stories, answer questions, rebait Hal's hook when it needed rebaiting; and the boat would drift where the wind and the mild current wanted it to be.

"How come you never go right out to the middle, Uncle Will?" Hal had asked once.

"Look overside there," Uncle Will had answered.

Hal did. He saw the blue water and his fish line going down into black.

"You're looking into the deepest part of Crystal Lake," Uncle Will said, crunching his empty beer can in one hand and selecting a fresh one with the other. "A hundred feet if she's an inch. Amos Culligan's old Studebaker is down there somewhere. Damn fool took it out on the lake one early December, before the ice was made. Lucky to get out of it alive, he was. They'll never get that Stud out, nor see it until Judgment Trump blows. Lake's one deep sonofawhore right here, it is. Big ones are right here, Hal. No need to go out no further. Let's see how your worm looks. Reel that sonofawhore right in."

Hal did, and while Uncle Will put a fresh crawler from the old Crisco tin that served as his bait box on his hook, he stared into the water, fascinated, trying to see Amos Culligan's old Studebaker, all rust and waterweed drifting out of the open driver's side window through which Amos had escaped at the absolute last moment,

waterweed festooning the steering wheel like a rotting necklace, waterweed dangling from the rearview mirror and drifting back and forth in the currents like some strange rosary. But he could see only blue shading to black, and there was the shape of Uncle Will's night crawler, the hook hidden inside its knots, hung up there in the middle of things, its own sun-shafted version of reality. Hal had a brief, dizzying vision of being suspended over a mighty gulf, and he had closed his eyes for a moment until the vertigo passed. That day, he seemed to recollect, he had drunk his entire can of beer.

*. . . the deepest part of Crystal Lake . . . a hundred feet if she's an inch.*

He paused a moment, panting, and looked up at Petey, still watching anxiously. "You want some help, Daddy?"

"In a minute."

He had his breath again, and now he pulled the rowboat across the narrow strip of sand to the water, leaving a groove. The paint had peeled, but the boat had been kept under cover and it looked sound.

When he and Uncle Will went out, Uncle Will would pull the boat down the ramp, and when the bow was afloat, he would clamber in, grab an oar to push with and say: "Push me off, Hal . . . this is where you earn your truss!"

"Hand that bag in, Petey, and then give me a push," he said. And, smiling a little, he added: "This is where you earn your truss."

Petey didn't smile back. "Am I coming, Daddy?"

"Not this time. Another time I'll take you out fishing, but . . . not this time."

Petey hesitated. The wind tumbled his brown hair and a few yellow leaves, crisp and dry, wheeled past his shoulders and landed at the edge of the water, bobbing like boats themselves.

"You should have stuffed 'em," he said, low.

"What?" But he thought he understood what Petey had meant.

"Put cotton over the cymbals. Taped it on. So it couldn't . . . make that noise."

Hal suddenly remembered Daisy coming toward him—not walking but lurching—and how, quite suddenly, blood had burst from both of Daisy’s eyes in a flood that soaked her ruff and pattered down on the floor of the barn, how she had collapsed on her forepaws . . . and on the still, rainy spring air of that day he had heard the sound, not muffled but curiously clear, coming from the attic of the house fifty feet away: *Jang-jang-jang-jang!*

He had begun to scream hysterically, dropping the armload of wood he had been getting for the fire. He ran for the kitchen to get Uncle Will, who was eating scrambled eggs and toast, his suspenders not even up over his shoulders yet.

*She was an old dog, Hal,* Uncle Will had said, his face haggard and unhappy—he looked old himself. *She was twelve, and that’s old for a dog. You mustn’t take on now—old Daisy wouldn’t like that.*

*Old,* the vet had echoed, but he had looked troubled all the same, because dogs don’t die of explosive brain hemorrhages, even at twelve (“Like as if someone had stuck a firecracker in her head,” Hal overheard the vet saying to Uncle Will as Uncle Will dug a hole in back of the barn not far from the place where he had buried Daisy’s mother in 1950; “I never seen the beat of it, Will”).

And later, terrified almost out of his mind but unable to help himself, Hal had crept up to the attic.

*Hello, Hal, how you doing?* The monkey grinned from its shadowy corner. Its cymbals were poised, a foot or so apart. The sofa cushion Hal had stood on end between them was now all the way across the attic. Something—some force—had thrown it hard enough to split its cover, and stuffing foamed out of it. *Don’t worry about Daisy,* the monkey whispered inside his head, its glassy hazel eyes fixed on Hal Shelburn’s wide blue ones. *Don’t worry about Daisy, she was old, Hal, even the vet said so, and by the way, did you see the blood coming out of her eyes, Hal? Wind me up, Hal. Wind me up, let’s play, and who’s dead, Hal? Is it you?*

And when he came back to himself he had been crawling toward the monkey as if hypnotized. One hand had been outstretched to grasp the key. He scrambled backward then, and almost fell down the attic stairs in his haste—probably would have if the stairwell had

not been so narrow. A little whining noise had been coming from his throat.

Now he sat in the boat, looking at Petey. “Muffling the cymbals doesn’t work,” he said. “I tried it once.”

Petey cast a nervous glance at the flight bag. “What happened, Daddy?”

“Nothing I want to talk about now,” Hal said, “and nothing you want to hear about. Come on and give me a push.”

Petey bent to it, and the stem of the boat grated along the sand. Hal dug in with an oar, and suddenly that feeling of being tied to the earth was gone and the boat was moving lightly, its own thing again after years in the dark boathouse, rocking on the light waves. Hal unshipped the other oar and clicked the oarlocks shut.

“Be careful, Daddy,” Petey said.

“This won’t take long,” Hal promised, but he looked at the flight bag and wondered.

He began to row, bending to the work. The old, familiar ache in the small of his back and between his shoulder blades began. The shore receded. Petey was magically eight again, six, a four-year-old standing at the edge of the water. He shaded his eyes with one infant hand.

Hal glanced casually at the shore but would not allow himself to actually study it. It had been nearly fifteen years, and if he studied the shoreline carefully, he would see the changes rather than the similarities and become lost. The sun beat on his neck, and he began to sweat. He looked at the flight bag, and for a moment he lost the bend-and-pull rhythm. The flight bag seemed . . . seemed to be bulging. He began to row faster.

The wind gusted, drying the sweat and cooling his skin. The boat rose and the bow slapped water to either side when it came down. Hadn’t the wind freshened, just in the last minute or so? And was Petey calling something? Yes. Hal couldn’t make out what it was over the wind. It didn’t matter. Getting rid of the monkey for another twenty years—or maybe

*(please God forever)*

forever—that was what mattered.

The boat reared and came down. He glanced left and saw baby whitecaps. He looked shoreward again and saw Hunter's Point and a collapsed wreck that must have been the Burdons' boathouse when he and Bill were kids. Almost there, then. Almost over the spot where Amos Culligan's famous Studebaker had plunged through the ice one long-ago December. Almost over the deepest part of the lake.

Petey was screaming something; screaming and pointing. Hal still couldn't hear. The rowboat rocked and rolled, flattening off clouds of thin spray to either side of its peeling bow. A tiny rainbow glowed in one, was pulled apart. Sunlight and shadow raced across the lake in shutters and the waves were not mild now; the whitecaps had grown up. His sweat had dried to gooseflesh, and spray had soaked the back of his jacket. He rowed grimly, eyes alternating between the shoreline and the flight bag. The boat rose again, this time so high that for a moment the left oar pawed at air instead of water.

Petey was pointing at the sky, his scream now only a faint, bright runner of sound.

Hal looked over his shoulder.

The lake was a frenzy of waves. It had gone a deadly dark shade of blue sewn with white seams. A shadow raced across the water toward the boat and something in its shape was familiar, so terribly familiar, that Hal looked up and then the scream was there, struggling in his tight throat.

The sun was behind the cloud, turning it into a hunched working shape with two gold-edged crescents held apart. Two holes were torn in one end of the cloud, and sunshine poured through in two shafts.

As the cloud crossed over the boat, the monkey's cymbals, barely muffled by the flight bag, began to beat. *Jang-jang-jang-jang, it's you, Hal, it's finally you, you're over the deepest part of the lake now and it's your turn, your turn, your turn—*

All the necessary shoreline elements had clicked into their places. The rotting bones of Amos Culligan's Studebaker lay somewhere below, this was where the big ones were, this was the place.

Hal shipped the oars to the locks in one quick jerk, leaned forward, unmindful of the wildly rocking boat, and snatched the flight bag. The

cymbals made their wild, pagan music; the bag's sides bellowed as if with tenebrous respiration.

*"Right here, you sonofawhore!"* Hal screamed. *"RIGHT HERE!"*

He threw the bag over the side.

It sank fast. For a moment he could see it going down, sides moving, and for that endless moment *he could still hear the cymbals beating*. And for a moment the black waters seemed to clear and he could see down into that terrible gulf of waters to where the big ones lay; there was Amos Culligan's Studebaker, and Hal's mother was behind its slimy wheel, a grinning skeleton with a lake bass staring coldly from one fleshless eye socket. Uncle Will and Aunt Ida lolled beside her, and Aunt Ida's gray hair trailed upward as the bag fell, turning over and over, a few silver bubbles trailing up: *jang-jang-jang-jang . . .*

Hal slammed the oars back into the water, scraping blood from his knuckles (*and ah God the back of Amos Culligan's Studebaker had been full of dead children! Charlie Silverman . . . Johnny McCabe . . .*), and began to bring the boat about.

There was a dry pistol-shot crack between his feet, and suddenly clear water was welling up between two boards. The boat was old; the wood had shrunk a bit, no doubt; it was just a small leak. But it hadn't been there when he rowed out. He would have sworn to it.

The shore and lake changed places in his view. Petey was at his back now. Overhead, that awful simian cloud was breaking up. Hal began to row. Twenty seconds was enough to convince him he was rowing for his life. He was only a so-so swimmer, and even a great one would have been put to the test in this suddenly angry water.

Two more boards suddenly shrank apart with that pistol-shot sound. More water poured into the boat, dousing his shoes. There were tiny metallic snapping sounds that he realized were nails breaking. One of the oarlocks snapped and flew off into the water—would the swivel itself go next?

The wind now came from his back, as if trying to slow him down or even drive him into the middle of the lake. He was terrified, but he felt a crazy kind of exhilaration through the terror. The monkey was gone for good this time. He knew it somehow. Whatever happened

to him, the monkey would not be back to draw a shadow over Dennis's life or Petey's. The monkey was gone, perhaps resting on the roof or the hood of Amos Culligan's Studebaker at the bottom of Crystal Lake. Gone for good.

He rowed, bending forward and rocking back. That cracking, crimping sound came again, and now the rusty Crisco can that had been lying in the bow of the boat was floating in three inches of water. Spray blew in Hal's face. There was a louder snapping sound, and the bow seat fell in two pieces and floated next to the bait box. A board tore off the left side of the boat, and then another, this one at the waterline, tore off at the right. Hal rowed. Breath rasped in his mouth, hot and dry, and then his throat swelled with the coppery taste of exhaustion. His sweaty hair flew.

Now a crack zipped directly up the bottom of the rowboat, zigzagged between his feet, and ran up to the bow. Water gushed in; he was in water up to his ankles, then to the swell of calf. He, rowed, but the boat's shoreward movement was sludgy now. He didn't dare look behind him to see how close he was getting.

Another board tore loose. The crack running up the center of the boat grew branches, like a tree. Water flooded in.

Hal began to make the oars sprint, breathing in great failing gasps. He pulled once . . . twice . . . and on the third pull both oar swivels snapped off. He lost one oar, held on to the other. He rose to his feet and began to flail at the water with it. The boat rocked, almost capsized, and spilled him back onto his seat with a thump.

Moments later more boards tore loose, the seat collapsed, and he was lying in the water which filled the bottom of the boat, astounded at its coldness. He tried to get on his knees, desperately thinking: *Petey must not see this, must not see his father drown right in front of his eyes, you're going to swim, dog-paddle if you have to, but do, do something—*

There was another splintering crack—almost a crash—and he was in the water, swimming for the shore as he never had swum in his life . . . and the shore was amazingly close. A minute later he was standing waist-deep in water, not five yards from the beach.

Petey splashed toward him, arms out, screaming and crying and laughing. Hal started toward him and floundered. Petey, chest-deep, floundered.

They caught each other.

Hal, breathing in great winded gasps, nevertheless hoisted the boy into his arms and carried him up to the beach, where both of them sprawled, panting.

“Daddy? Is it gone? That nastybad monkey?”

“Yes. I think it’s gone. For good this time.”

“The boat fell apart. It just . . . fell apart all around you.”

Hal looked at the boards floating loose on the water forty feet out. They bore no resemblance to the tight handmade rowboat he had pulled out of the boathouse.

“It’s all right now,” Hal said, leaning back on his elbows. He shut his eyes and let the sun warm his face.

“Did you see the cloud?” Petey whispered.

“Yes. But I don’t see it now . . . do you?”

They looked at the sky. There were scattered white puffs here and there, but no large dark cloud. It was gone, as he had said.

Hal pulled Petey to his feet. “There’ll be towels up at the house. Come on.” But he paused, looking at his son. “You were crazy, running out there like that.”

Petey looked at him solemnly. “You were brave, Daddy.”

“Was I?” The thought of bravery had never crossed his mind. Only his fear. The fear had been too big to see anything else. If anything else had indeed been there. “Come on, Pete. ”

“What are we going to tell Mom?”

Hal smiled. “I dunno, big guy. We’ll think of something.”

He paused a moment longer, looking at the boards floating on the water. The lake was calm again, sparkling with small wavelets. Suddenly Hal thought of summer people he didn’t even know—a man and his son, perhaps, fishing for the big one. *I’ve got something, Dad!* the boy screams. *Well reel it up and let’s see,* the father says, and coming up from the depths, weeds dragging from its cymbals, grinning its terrible, welcoming grin . . . the monkey.

He shuddered—but those were only things that might be.

“Come on,” he said to Petey again, and they walked up the path through the flaming October woods toward the home place.

*From The Bridgton News  
October 24, 1980*

MYSTERY OF THE DEAD FISH  
By Betsy Moriarty

HUNDREDS of dead fish were found floating belly-up on Crystal Lake in the neighboring township of Casco late last week. The largest numbers appeared to have died in the vicinity of Hunter’s Point, although the lake’s currents make this a bit difficult to determine. The dead fish included all types commonly found in these waters—bluegills, pickerel, sunnies, carp, hornpout, brown and rainbow trout, even one landlocked salmon. Fish and Game authorities say they are mystified . . .

## Cain Rose Up

Garrish walked out of the bright May sunshine and into the coolness of the dorm. It took his eyes a moment to adjust, and at first Harry the Beaver was just a bodiless voice from the shadows.

"It was a bitch, wasn't it?" the Beaver asked. "Wasn't that one a really truly bitch?"

"Yes," Garrish said. "It was tough."

Now his eyes pulled in the Beaver. He was rubbing a hand across the pimples on his forehead and sweating under his eyes. He was wearing sandals and a 69 T-shirt with a button on the front that said Howdy Doody was a pervert. The Beaver's huge buck teeth loomed in the gloom.

"I was gonna drop it in January," the Beaver said. "I kept telling myself to do it while there was still time. And then add-drop was over and it was either go for it or pick up an incomplete. I think I flunked it, Curt. Honest to God." The housemother stood in the corner by the mailboxes. She was an extremely tall woman who looked vaguely like Rudolph Valentino. She was trying to push a slip strap back under the sweaty armhole of her dress with one hand while she tacked up a dorm sign-out sheet with the other.

"Tough," Garrish repeated.

"I wanted to bag a few off you but I didn't dare, honest to God, that guy's got eyes like an eagle. You think you got your A all right?"

"I guess maybe I flunked," Garrish said.

The Beaver gaped. "You think you *flunked*? You think you—"

"I'm going to take a shower, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, Curt. Sure. Was that your last test?"

"Yes," Garrish said. "That was my last test."

Garrish crossed the lobby and pushed through the doors and began to climb. The stairwell smelled like an athletic supporter. Same old stairs. His room was on the fifth floor.

Quinn and that other idiot from three, the one with the hairy legs, piled by him, tossing a softball back and forth. A little fella wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a valiantly struggling goatee passed him between four and five, holding a calculus book to his chest like a Bible, his lips moving in a rosary of logarithms. His eyes were blank as blackboards.

Garrish paused and looked after him, wondering if he wouldn't be better off dead, but the little fella was now only a bobbing, disappearing shadow on the wall. It bobbed once more and was gone. Garrish climbed to five and walked down the hall to his room. Pig Pen had left two days ago. Four finals in three days, wham-bam and thank-ya-ma'am. Pig Pen knew how to arrange things. He had left only his pinups, two dirty mismatched sweatsocks, and a ceramic parody of Rodin's *Thinker* perched on a toilet seat.

Garrish put his key in the lock and turned it.

"Curt! Hey, Curt!"

Rollins, the asinine floor-counselor who had sent Jimmy Brody up to visit the Dean of Men for a drinking offense, was coming down the hall and waving at him. He was tall, well-built, crewcut, symmetrical. He looked varnished.

"You all done?" Rollins asked.

"Yeah. "

"Don't forget to sweep the floor of the room and fill out the damage report, okay?"

"Yeah."

"I slid a damage report under your door last Thursday, didn't I?"

"Yeah."

"If I'm not in my room, just slide the damage report and the key under the door."

"Okay."

Rollins seized his hand and shook it twice, fast, pumppump. Rollins's palm was dry, the skin grainy. Shaking hands with Rollins was like shaking hands with a fistful of salt.

"Have yourself a good summer, m'man."

"Right."

"Don't work too hard."

“No.”

“Use it, but don’t abuse it.”

“I will and I won’t.”

Rollins looked momentarily puzzled and then he laughed. “Take care, now.” He slapped Garrish’s shoulder and then walked back down the hall, pausing once to tell Ron Frane to turn down his stereo. Garrish could see Rollins lying dead in a ditch with maggots in his eyes. Rollins wouldn’t care. Neither would the maggots. You either ate the world or the world ate you and it was okay either way.

Garrish stood thoughtfully, watching until Rollins was out of sight, and then he let himself into his room.

With Pig Pen’s cyclonic clutter gone it looked barren and sterile. The swirled, heaped, drifted pile that had been Pig Pen’s bed was stripped down to the bare—if slightly comestained—mattress pad. Two *Playboy* gatefolds looked down at him with frozen two-dimensional come-ons.

Not much change in Garrish’s half of the room, which had always been barracks-neat. You could drop a quarter on the top blanket of Garrish’s bed and it would bounce. All that neat had gotten on Piggy’s nerves. He was an English major with a fine turn of phrase. He called Garrish a pigeonholer. The only thing on the wall above Garrish’s bed was a huge blow-up of Humphrey Bogart that he had gotten in the college bookstore. Bogie had an automatic pistol in each hand and he was wearing suspenders. Pig Pen said pistols and braces were impotency symbols. Garrish doubted if Bogie had been impotent, although he had never read anything about him.

He went to the closet door, unlocked it, and brought out the big walnut-stocked .352 Magnum that his father, a Methodist minister, had bought him for Christmas. He had bought the telescopic sight himself last March.

You weren’t supposed to have guns in your room, not even hunting rifles, but it hadn’t been hard. He had signed it out of the university gun storage room the day before with a forged withdrawal slip. He put it in its waterproof leather scabbard, and left it in the woods behind the football field. Then, this morning around three

A.M., he just went out and got it and brought it upstairs through the sleeping corridors.

He sat down on the bed with the gun across his knees and wept a little bit. The *Thinker* on the toilet seat was looking at him. Garrish put the gun on his bed, crossed the room, and slapped it off Piggy's table and onto the floor, where it shattered. There was a knock at the door.

Garrish put the rifle under his bed. "Come in."

It was Bailey, standing there in his skivvies. There was a puff of lint in his bellybutton. There was no future for Bailey. Bailey would marry a stupid girl and they would have stupid kids. Later on he would die of cancer or maybe renal failure.

"How was the chem final, Curt?"

"All right."

"I just wondered if I could borrow your notes. I've got it tomorrow. "

"I burned them with my trash this morning."

"Oh. Hey, Jesus! Did Piggy go and do that?" He pointed at the remains of the *Thinker*.

"I guess so."

"Why did he want to go and do that? I liked that thing. I was going to buy it off him." Bailey had sharp, ratty little features. His skivvies were thready and saggy-seated. Garrish could see exactly how he would look, dying of emphysema or something in an oxygen tent. How he would look yellow. I could help you, Garrish thought.

"You think he'd mind if I scooped up those pinups?"

"I guess not."

"Okay." Bailey crossed the room, stepping his bare feet gingerly over the pottery shards, and untacked the Playmates. "That picture of Bogart is really sharp, too. No tits, but, hey! You know?" Bailey peered at Garrish to see if Garrish would smile. When Garrish did not, he said, "I don't suppose you planned on throwing it away, or anything?"

"No. I was just getting ready to take a shower."

"Okay. Have a good summer if I don't see you again, Curt."

"Thanks."

Bailey went back to the door, the seat of his skivvies flapping. He paused at the door. "Another four-point this semester, Curt?"

"At least."

"Good deal. See you next year."

He went out and closed the door. Garrish sat on the bed for a little while, then took the gun out, stripped it, and cleaned it. He put the muzzle up to his eye and looked at the tiny circle of light at the far end. The barrel was clean. He reintegrated the gun.

In the third drawer of his bureau were three heavy boxes of Winchester ammunition. He laid these on the windowsill. He locked the room's door and went back to the window. He pulled the blinds up.

The mall was bright and green, peppered with strolling students. Quinn and his idiot friend had gotten up a raggle-taggle softball game. They scurried back and forth like crippled ants escaping a broken burrow.

"Let me tell you something," Garrish told Bogie. "God got mad at Cain because Cain had an idea God was a vegetarian. His brother knew better. God made the world in His image, and if you don't eat the world, the world eats you. So Cain says to his brother, 'Why didn't you tell me?' And his brother says, 'Why didn't you listen?' And Cain says, 'Okay, I'm listening now.' So he waxes his brother and says, 'Hey God! You want meat? Here it is! You want roast or ribs or Abelburgers or what?' And God told him to put on his boogie shoes. So . . . what do you think?"

No reply from Bogie.

Garrish put the window up and rested his elbows on the ledge, not letting the barrel of the .352 project out into the sunlight. He looked into the sight.

He was centered on Carlton Memorial women's dormitory across the mall. Carlton was more popularly known as the dog kennels. He put the crosshairs on a big Ford wagon. A blond coed in jeans and a blue shell top was talking to her mother while her father, red-faced and balding, loaded suitcases into the back.

Someone knocked on the door.

Garrish waited.

The knock came again.

“Curt? I’ll give you half a rock for the Bogart poster.”

Bailey.

Garrish said nothing. The girl and her mother were laughing at something, not knowing there were microbes in their intestines, feeding, dividing, multiplying. The girl’s father joined them and they stood in the sunlight together, a family portrait in the crosshairs.

“Damn it all,” Bailey said. His feet padded down the hall.

Garrish squeezed the trigger.

The gun kicked hard against his shoulder, the good, padded kick you get when you have seated the gun in exactly the right place. The smiling girl’s blond head sheared itself away.

Her mother went on smiling for a moment, and then her hand went to her mouth. She screamed through her hand. Garrish shot through it. Hand and head disappeared in a red spray. The man who had been loading the suitcases broke into a lumbering run.

Garrish tracked him and shot him in the back. He raised his head, looking out of the sight for a moment. Quinn was holding the softball and looking at the blond girl’s brains, which were splattered on the NO PARKING sign behind her prone body. Quinn didn’t move. All across the mall people stood frozen, like children engaged in a game of statues.

Somebody pounded on the door, then rattled the handle. Bailey again. “Curt? You all right, Curt? I think somebody’—”

“Good drink, good meat, good God, let’s eat!” Garrish exclaimed, and shot at Quinn. He pulled instead of squeezing and the shot went wide. Quinn was running. No problem. The second shot took Quinn in the neck and he flew maybe twenty feet.

“*Curt Garrish is killing himself!*” Bailey was screaming. “Rollins! Rollins! Come quick!”

His footsteps faded down the hall.

Now they were starting to run. Garrish could hear them screaming. Garrish could hear the faint smack-smack sound of their shoes on the walks.

He looked up at Bogie. Bogie held his two guns and looked beyond him. He looked at the shattered remnants of Piggy’s *Thinker*

and wondered what Piggy was doing today, if he was sleeping or watching TV or eating some great big wonderful meal. Eat the world, Piggy, Garrish thought. You gulp that sucker right down.

“Garrish!” It was Rollins now, pounding on the door. “Open up, Garrish!”

“It’s locked,” Bailey panted. “He looked lousy, he killed himself, I know it.”

Garrish pushed the muzzle out of the window again. A boy in a madras shirt was crouched down behind a bush, scanning the dormitory windows with desperate intensity. He wanted to run for it, Garrish saw, but his legs were frozen.

“Good God, let’s eat,” Garrish murmured, and began to pull the trigger again.

## Mrs. Todd's Shortcut

"There goes the Todd woman," I said.

Homer Buckland watched the little Jaguar go by and nodded. The woman raised her hand to Homer. Homer nodded his big, shaggy head to her but didn't raise his own hand in return. The Todd family had a big summer home on Castle Lake, and Homer had been their caretaker since time out of mind. I had an idea that he disliked Worth Todd's second wife every bit as much as he'd liked 'Phelia Todd, the first one.

This was just about two years ago and we were sitting on a bench in front of Bell's Market, me with an orange soda-pop, Homer with a glass of mineral water. It was October, which is a peaceful time in Castle Rock. Lots of the lake places still get used on the weekends, but the aggressive, boozy summer socializing is over by then and the hunters with their big guns and their expensive nonresident permits pinned to their orange caps haven't started to come into town yet. Crops have been mostly laid by. Nights are cool, good for sleeping, and old joints like mine haven't yet started to complain. In October the sky over the lake is passing fair, with those big white clouds that move so slow; I like how they seem so flat on the bottoms, and how they are a little gray there, like with a shadow of sundown foretold, and I can watch the sun sparkle on the water and not be bored for some space of minutes. It's in October, sitting on the bench in front of Bell's and watching the lake from afar off, that I still wish I was a smoking man.

"She don't drive as fast as 'Phelia," Homer said. "I swan I used to think what an old-fashion name she had for a woman that could put a car through its paces like she could."

Summer people like the Todds are nowhere near as interesting to the year-round residents of small Maine towns as they themselves believe. Year-round folk prefer their own love stories and hate stories and scandals and rumors of scandal. When that textile fellow from

Amesbury shot himself, Estonia Corbridge found that after a week or so she couldn't even get invited to lunch on her story of how she found him with the pistol still in one stiffening hand. But folks are still not done talking about Joe Camber, who got killed by his own dog.

Well, it don't matter. It's just that they are different racecourses we run on. Summer people are trotters; us others that don't put on ties to do our week's work are just pacers. Even so there was quite a lot of local interest when Ophelia Todd disappeared back in 1973. Ophelia was a genuinely nice woman, and she had done a lot of things in town. She worked to raise money for the Sloan Library, helped to refurbish the war memorial, and that sort of thing. But *all* the summer people like the idea of raising money. You mention raising money and their eyes light up and commence to gleam. You mention raising money and they can get a committee together and appoint a secretary and keep an agenda. They like that. But you mention *time* (beyond, that is, one big long wallop of a combined cocktail party and committee meeting) and you're out of luck. Time seems to be what summer people mostly set a store by. They lay it by, and if they could put it up in Ball jars like preserves, why, they would. But 'Phelia Todd seemed willing to *spend* time—to do desk duty in the library as well as to raise money for it. When it got down to using scouring pads and elbow grease on the war memorial, 'Phelia was right out there with town women who had lost sons in three different wars, wearing an overall with her hair done up in a kerchief. And when kids needed ferrying to a summer swim program, you'd be as apt to see her as anyone headed down Landing Road with the back of Worth Todd's big shiny pickup full of kids. A good woman. Not a town woman, but a good woman. And when she disappeared, there was concern. Not grieving, exactly, because a disappearance is not exactly like a death. It's not like chopping something off with a cleaver; more like something running down the sink so slow you don't know it's all gone until long after it is.

“ 'Twas a Mercedes she drove,” Homer said, answering the question I hadn't asked. “Two-seater sportster. Todd got it for her in sixty-four or sixty-five, I guess. You remember her taking the kids to the lake all those years they had Frogs and Tadpoles?”

“Ayuh.”

“She’d drive ’em no more than forty, mindful they was in the back. But it chafed her. That woman had lead in her foot and a ball bearing sommers in the back of her ankle.”

It used to be that Homer never talked about his summer people. But then his wife died. Five years ago it was. She was plowing a grade and the tractor tipped over on her and Homer was taken bad off about it. He grieved for two years or so and then seemed to feel better. But he was not the same. He seemed waiting for something to happen, waiting for the next thing. You’d pass his neat little house sometimes at dusk and he would be on the porch smoking a pipe with a glass of mineral water on the porch rail and the sunset would be in his eyes and pipe smoke around his head and you’d think—I did, anyway—*Homer is waiting for the next thing*. This bothered me over a wider range of my mind than I liked to admit, and at last I decided it was because if it had been me, I wouldn’t have been waiting for the next thing, like a groom who has put on his morning coat and finally has his tie right and is only sitting there on a bed in the upstairs of his house and looking first at himself in the mirror and then at the clock on the mantel and waiting for it to be eleven o’clock so he can get married. If it had been me, I would not have been waiting for the next thing; I would have been waiting for the last thing.

But in that waiting period—which ended when Homer went to Vermont a year later—he sometimes talked about those people. To me, to a few others.

“She never even drove fast with her husband, s’far as I know. But when I drove with her, she made that Mercedes strut.”

A fellow pulled in at the pumps and began to fill up his car. The car had a Massachusetts plate.

“It wasn’t one of these new sports cars that run on unleaded gasoline and hitch every time you step on it; it was one of the old ones, and the speedometer was calibrated all the way up to a hundred and sixty. It was a funny color of brown and I ast her one time what you called that color and she said it was Champagne. Ain’t

that *good*, I says, and she laughs fit to split. I like a woman who will laugh when you don't have to point her right at the joke, you know."

The man at the pumps had finished getting his gas.

"Afternoon, gentlemen," he says as he comes up the steps.

"A good day to you," I says, and he went inside.

"'Phelia was always lookin for a shortcut," Homer went on as if we had never been interrupted. "That woman was mad for a shortcut. I never saw the beat of it. She said if you can save enough distance, you'll save time as well. She said her father swore by that scripture. He was a salesman, always on the road, and she went with him when she could, and he was always lookin for the shortest way. So she got in the habit.

"I ast her one time if it wasn't kinda funny—here she was on the one hand, spendin her time rubbin up that old statue in the Square and takin the little ones to their swimmin lessons instead of playing tennis and swimming and getting boozed up like normal summer people, and on the other hand bein so damn set on savin fifteen minutes between here and Fryeburg that thinkin about it probably kep her up nights. It just seemed to me the two things went against each other's grain, if you see what I mean. She just looks at me and says, 'I like being helpful, Homer. I like driving, too—at least sometimes, when it's a challenge—but I don't like the *time* it takes. It's like mending clothes—sometimes you take tucks and sometimes you let things out. Do you see what I mean?'

"'I guess so, missus,' I says, kinda dubious.

"'If sitting behind the wheel of a car was my idea of a really good time *all* the time, I would look for long-cuts,' she says, and that tickled me s'much I had to laugh."

The Massachusetts fellow came out of the store with a six-pack in one hand and some lottery tickets in the other.

"You enjoy your weekend," Homer says.

"I always do," the Massachusetts fellow says. "I only wish I could afford to live here all year round."

"Well, we'll keep it all in good order for when you *can* come," Homer says, and the fellow laughs.

We watched him drive off toward someplace, that Massachusetts plate showing. It was a green one. My Marcy says those are the ones the Massachusetts Motor Registry gives to drivers who ain't had a accident in that strange, angry, fuming state for two years. If you have, she says, you got to have a red one so people know to watch out for you when they see you on the roll.

"They was in-state people, you know, the both of them," Homer said, as if the Massachusetts fellow had reminded him of the fact.

"I guess I did know that," I said.

"The Todds are just about the only birds we got that fly north in the winter. The new one, I don't think she likes flying north too much."

He sipped his mineral water and fell silent a moment, thinking.

"*She* didn't mind it, though," Homer said. "At least, I *judge* she didn't although she used to complain about it something fierce. The complaining was just a way to explain why she was always lookin for a shortcut."

"And you mean her husband didn't mind her traipsing down every wood-road in tarnation between here and Bangor just so she could see if it was nine-tenths of a mile shorter?"

"He didn't care piss-all," Homer said shortly, and got up, and went in the store. There now, Owens, I told myself, you know it ain't safe to ast him questions when he's yarning, and you went right ahead and ast one, and you have buggered a story that was starting to shape up promising.

I sat there and turned my face up into the sun and after about ten minutes he come out with a boiled egg and sat down. He ate her and I took care not to say nothing and the water on Castle Lake sparkled as blue as something as might be told of in a story about treasure. When Homer had finished his egg and had a sip of mineral water, he went on. I was surprised, but still said nothing. It wouldn't have been wise.

"They had two or three different chunks of rolling iron," he said. "There was the Cadillac, and his truck, and her little Mercedes go-devil. A couple of winters he left the truck, 'case they wanted to come down and do some skiin. Mostly when the summer was over he'd drive the Caddy back up and she'd take her go-devil."

I nodded but didn't speak. In truth, I was afraid to risk another comment. Later I thought it would have taken a lot of comments to shut Homer Buckland up that day. He had been wanting to tell the story of Mrs. Todd's shortcut for a long time.

"Her little go-devil had a special odometer in it that told you how many miles was in a trip, and every time she set off from Castle Lake to Bangor she'd set it to 000-point-0 and let her clock up to whatever. She had made a game of it, and she used to chafe me with it."

He paused, thinking that back over.

"No, that ain't right."

He paused more and faint lines showed up on his forehead like steps on a library ladder.

"She *made* like she made a game of it, but it was a serious business to her. Serious as anything else, anyway." He flapped a hand and I think he meant the husband. "The glovebox of the little go-devil was filled with maps, and there was a few more in the back where there would be a seat in a regular car. Some was gas station maps, and some was pages that had been pulled from the Rand-McNally Road Atlas; she had some maps from Appalachian Trail guidebooks and a whole mess of topographical survey-squares, too. It wasn't her having those maps that made me think it wa'n't a game; it was how she'd drawed lines on all of them, showing routes she'd taken or at least tried to take.

"She'd been stuck a few times, too, and had to get a pull from some farmer with a tractor and chain.

"I was there one day laying tile in the bathroom, sitting there with grout squittering out of every damn crack you could see—I dreamed of nothing but squares and cracks that was bleeding grout that night—and she come stood in the doorway and talked to me about it for quite a while. I used to chafe her about it, but I was also sort of interested, and not just because my brother Franklin used to live down-Bangor and I'd traveled most of the roads she was telling me of. I was interested just because a man like me is always uncommon interested in knowing the shortest way, even if he don't always want to take it. You that way too?"

“Ayuh,” I said. There’s something powerful about knowing the shortest way, even if you take the longer way because you know your mother-in-law is sitting home. Getting there quick is often for the birds, although no one holding a Massachusetts driver’s license seems to know it. But *knowing* how to get there quick—or even knowing how to get there a way that the person sitting beside you don’t know . . . that has power.

“Well, she had them roads like a Boy Scout has his knots,” Homer said, and smiled his large, sunny grin. “She says, ‘Wait a minute, wait a minute,’ like a little girl, and I hear her through the wall rummaging through her desk, and then she comes back with a little notebook that looked like she’d had it a good long time. Cover was all rumped, don’t you know, and some of the pages had pulled loose from those little wire rings on one side.

“ ‘The way Worth goes—the way *most* people go—is Route 97 to Mechanic Falls, then Route 11 to Lewiston, and then the Interstate to Bangor. 156.4 miles.’ ”

I nodded.

“ ‘If you want to skip the turnpike—and save some distance—you’d go to Mechanic Falls, Route 11 to Lewiston, Route 202 to Augusta, then up Route 9 through China Lake and Unity and Haven to Bangor. That’s 144.9 miles.’ ”

“ ‘You won’t save no time that way, missus,’ I says, ‘not going through Lewiston *and* Augusta. Although I will admit that drive up the Old Derry Road to Bangor is real pretty.’ ”

“ ‘Save enough miles and soon enough you’ll save time,’ she says. ‘And I didn’t say that’s the way I’d go, although I have a good many times; I’m just running down the routes most people use. Do you want me to go on?’ ”

“ ‘No,’ I says, ‘just leave me in this cussed bathroom all by myself starin at all these cussed cracks until I start to rave.’ ”

“ ‘There are four major routes in all,’ she says. ‘The one by Route 2 is 163.4 miles. I only tried it once. Too long.’ ”

“ ‘That’s the one I’d hosey if my wife called and told me it was leftovers,’ I says, kinda low.

“ ‘What was that?’ she says.

“ ‘Nothin,’ I says. ‘Talkin to the grout.’

“ ‘Oh. Well, the fourth—and there aren’t too many who know about it, although they are all good roads—paved, anyway—is across Speckled Bird Mountain on 219 to 202 *beyond* Lewiston. Then, if you take Route 19, you can get around Augusta. Then you take the Old Derry Road. That way is just 129.2.’

“I didn’t say nothing for a little while and p’raps she thought I was doubting her because she says, a little pert, ‘I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s so.’

“I said I guessed that was about right, and I thought—looking back—it probably was. Because that’s the way I’d usually go when I went down to Bangor to see Franklin when he was still alive. I hadn’t been that way in years, though. Do you think a man could just—well—forget a road, Dave?”

I allowed it was. The turnpike is easy to think of. After a while it almost fills a man’s mind, and you think not how could I get from here to there but how can I get from here to the turnpike ramp that’s *closest* to there. And that made me think that maybe there are lots of roads all over that are just going begging; roads with rock walls beside them, real roads with blackberry bushes growing alongside them but nobody to eat the berries but the birds and gravel pits with old rusted chains hanging down in low curves in front of their entryways, the pits themselves as forgotten as a child’s old toys with scumgrass growing up their deserted unremembered sides. Roads that have just been forgot except by the people who live on them and think of the quickest way to get off them and onto the turnpike where you can pass on a hill and not fret over it. We like to joke in Maine that you can’t get there from here, but maybe the joke is on us. The truth is there’s about a damn thousand ways to do it and man doesn’t bother.

Homer continued: “I grouted tile all afternoon in that hot little bathroom and she stood there in the doorway all that time, one foot crossed behind the other, bare-legged, wearin loafers and a khaki-colored skirt and a sweater that was some darker. Hair was drawed back in a hosstail. She must have been thirty-four or -five then, but

her face was lit up with what she was tellin me and I swan she looked like a sorority girl home from school on vacation.

“After a while she musta got an idea of how long she’d been there cuttin the air around her mouth because she says, ‘I must be boring the hell out of you, Homer.’

“ ‘Yes’m,’ I says, ‘you are. I druther you went away and left me to talk to this damn grout.’

“ ‘Don’t be sma’at, Homer,’ she says.

“ ‘No, missus, you ain’t borin me,’ I says.

“So she smiles and then goes back to it, pagin through her little notebook like a salesman checkin his orders. She had those four main ways—well, really three because she gave up on Route 2 right away—but she must have had forty different other ways that were play-offs on those. Roads with state numbers, roads without, roads with names, roads without. My head fair spun with ‘em. And finally she says to me, ‘You ready for the blue-ribbon winner, Homer?’

“ ‘I guess so,’ I says.

“ ‘Act least it’s the blue-ribbon winner *so far*,’ she says. ‘Do you know, Homer, that a man wrote an article in *Science Today* in 1923 proving that no man could run a mile in under four minutes? He *proved* it, with all sorts of calculations based on the maximum length of the male thigh-muscles, maximum length of stride, maximum lung capacity, maximum heart-rate, and a whole lot more. I was *taken* with that article! I was so taken that I gave it to Worth and asked him to give it to Professor Murray in the math department at the University of Maine. I wanted those figures checked because I was sure they must have been based on the wrong postulates, or something. Worth probably thought I was being silly—“Ophelia’s got a bee in her bonnet” is what he says—but he took them. Well, Professor Murray checked through the man’s figures quite carefully . . . and do you know *what*, Homer?’

“ ‘No, missus.’

“ ‘Those figures were *right*. The man’s criteria were *solid*. He proved, back in 1923, that a man couldn’t run a mile in under four minutes. He *proved* that. But people do it all the time, and do you know what that means?’

“ ‘No, missus,’ I said, although I had a glimmer.

“ ‘It means that no blue ribbon is forever,’ she says. ‘Someday—if the world doesn’t explode itself in the mean-time—someone will run a *two-minute* mile in the Olympics. It may take a hundred years or a thousand, but it will happen. Because there is no ultimate blue ribbon. There is zero, and there is eternity, and there is mortality, but there is no *ultimate*.’

“And there she stood, her face clean and scrubbed and shinin, that darkish hair of hers pulled back from her brow, as if to say ‘Just you go ahead and disagree if you can.’ But I couldn’t. Because I believe something like that. It is much like what the minister means, I think, when he talks about grace.

“ ‘You ready for the blue-ribbon winner *for now?*’ she says.

“ ‘Ayuh,’ I says, and I even stopped groutin for the time bein. I’d reached the tub anyway and there wasn’t nothing left but a lot of those frikkin squirrelly little corners. She drewed a deep breath and then spieled it out at me as fast as that auctioneer goes over in Gates Falls when he has been putting the whiskey to himself, and I can’t remember it all, but it went something like this.”

Homer Buckland shut his eyes for a moment, his big hands lying perfectly still on his long thighs, his face turned up toward the sun. Then he opened his eyes again and for a moment I swan he *looked* like her, yes he did, a seventy-year-old man looking like a woman of thirty-four who was at that moment in her time looking like a college girl of twenty, and I can’t remember exactly what *he* said any more than *he* could remember exactly what *she* said, not just because it was complex but because I was so fetched by how he looked sayin it, but it went close enough like this:

“ ‘You set out Route 97 and then cut up Denton Street to the Old Townhouse Road and that way you get around Castle Rock downtown but back to 97. Nine miles up you can go an old logger’s road a mile and a half to Town Road #6, which takes you to Big Anderson Road by Sites’ Cider Mill. There’s a cut-road the old-timers call Bear Road, and that gets you to 219. Once you’re on the far side of Speckled Bird Mountain you grab the Stanhouse Road, turn left onto the Bull Pine Road—there’s a swampy patch there but you can

spang right through it if you get up enough speed on the gravel—and so you come out on Route 106. 106 cuts through Alton's Plantation to the Old Derry Road—and there's two or three woods roads there that you follow and so come out on Route 3 just beyond Derry Hospital. From there it's only four miles to Route 2 in Etna, and so into Bangor.'

"She paused to get her breath back, then looked at me. 'Do you know how long that is, all told?'

" 'No'm,' I says, thinking it sounds like about a hundred and ninety miles and four bust springs.

" 'It's 116.4 miles,' she says."

I laughed. The laugh was out of me before I thought I wasn't doing myself any favor if I wanted to hear this story to the end. But Homer grinned himself and nodded.

"I know. And *you* know I don't like to argue with anyone, Dave. But there's a difference between having your leg pulled and getting it shook like a damn apple tree.

" 'You don't believe me,' she says.

" 'Well, it's *hard* to believe, missus,' I said.

" 'Leave that grout to dry and I'll show you,' she says. 'You can finish behind the tub tomorrow. Come on, Homer. I'll leave a note for Worth—he may not be back tonight anyway—and you can call your wife! We'll be sitting down to dinner in the Pilot's Grille in'—she looks at her watch—'two hours and forty-five minutes from right now. And if it's a minute longer, I'll buy you a bottle of Irish Mist to take home with you. You see, my dad was right. Save enough miles and you'll save time, even if you have to go through every damn bog and sump in Kennebec County to do it. Now what do you say?'

"She was lookin at me with her brown eyes just like lamps, there was a devilish look in them that said turn your cap around back'rds, Homer, and climb aboard this hoss, I be first and you be second and let the devil take the hindmost, and there was a grin on her face that said the exact same thing, and I tell you, Dave, I wanted to *go*. I didn't even want to top that damn can of grout. And I *certain* sure didn't want to drive that go-devil of hers. I wanted just to sit in it on

the shotgun side and watch her get in, see her skirt come up a little, see her pull it down over her knees or not, watch her hair shine.”

He trailed off and suddenly let off a sarcastic, choked laugh. That laugh of his sounded like a shotgun loaded with rock salt.

“Just call up Megan and say, ‘You know ’Phelia Todd, that woman you’re halfway to being so jealous of now you can’t see straight and can’t ever find a good word to say about her? Well, her and me is going to make this speed-run down to Bangor in that little champagne-colored go-devil Mercedes of hers, so don’t wait dinner.’

“Just call her up and say that. Oh yes. Oh *ayuh*.”

And he laughed again with his hands lying there on his legs just as natural as ever was and I seen something in his face that was almost hateful and after a minute he took his glass of mineral water from the railing there and got outside some of it.

“You didn’t go,” I said.

“Not *then*.”

He laughed, and this laugh was gentler.

“She must have seen something in my face, because it as like she found herself again. She stopped looking like a sorority girl and just looked like ’Phelia Todd again. She looked down at the notebook like she didn’t know what it was she had been holding and put it down by her side, almost behind her skirt.

“I says, ‘I’d like to do just that thing, missus, but I got to finish up here, and my wife has got a roast on for dinner.’

“She says, ‘I understand, Homer—I just got a little carried away. I do that a lot. All the time, Worth says.’ Then she kinda straightened up and says, ‘But the offer holds, any time you want to go. You can even throw your shoulder to the back end if we get stuck somewhere. Might save me five dollars.’ And she laughed.

“ ‘I’ll take you up on it, missus,’ I says, and she seen that I meant what I said and wasn’t just being polite.

“ ‘And before you just go believing that a hundred and sixteen miles to Bangor is out of the question, get out your own map and see how many miles it would be as the crow flies.’

“I finished the tiles and went home and ate leftovers—there wa’n’t no roast, and I think ’Phelia Todd knew it—and after Megan was in

bed, I got out my yardstick and a pen and my Mobil map of the state, and I did what she had told me . . . because it had laid hold of my mind a bit, you see. I drew a straight line and did out the calculations accordin to the scale of miles. I was some surprised. Because if you went from Castle Rock up there to Bangor like one of those little Piper Cubs could fly on a clear day—if you didn't have to mind lakes, or stretches of lumber company woods that was chained off, or bogs, or crossing rivers where there wasn't no bridges, why, it would just be seventy-nine miles, give or take."

I jumped a little.

"Measure it yourself, if you don't believe me," Homer said. "I never knew Maine was so small until I seen that."

He had himself a drink and then looked around at me.

"There come a time the next spring when Megan was away in New Hampshire visiting with her brother. I had to go down to the Todds' house to take off the storm doors and put on the screens, and her little Mercedes go-devil was there. She was down by herself.

"She come to the door and says: 'Homer! Have you come to put on the screen doors?'

"And right off I says: 'No, missus, I come to see if you want to give me a ride down to Bangor the short way.'

"Well, she looked at me with no expression on her face at all, and I thought she had forgotten all about it. I felt my face gettin red, the way it will when you feel you just pulled one hell of a boner. Then, just when I was getting ready to'pologize, her face busts into that grin again and she says, 'You just stand right there while I get my keys. And don't change your mind, Homer!'

"She come back a minute later with 'em in her hand. 'If we get stuck, you'll see mosquitoes just about the size of dragonflies.'

" 'I've seen 'em as big as English sparrows up in Rangely, missus,' I said, 'and I guess we're both a spot too heavy to be carried off.'

"She laughs. 'Well, I warned you, anyway. Come on, Homer.'

" 'And if we ain't there in two hours and forty-five minutes,' I says, kinda sly, 'you was gonna buy me a bottle of Irish Mist.'

"She looks at me kinda surprised, the driver's door of the go-devil open and one foot inside. 'Hell, Homer,' she says, 'I told you that was

the Blue Ribbon for *then*. I've found a way up there that's *shorter*. We'll be there in two and a half hours. Get in here, Homer. We are going to roll.' ”

He paused again, hands lying calm on his thighs, his eyes dulling, perhaps seeing that champagne-colored two-seater heading up the Todds' steep driveway.

“She stood the car still at the end of it and says, ‘You sure?’

“ ‘Let her rip,’ I says. The ball bearing in her ankle rolled and that heavy foot come down. I can't tell you nothing much about what all happened after that. Except after a while I couldn't hardly take my eyes off her. There was somethin wild that crep into her face, Dave—something *wild* and something *free*, and it frightened my heart. She was beautiful, and I was took with love *for* her, anyone would have been, any man, anyway, and maybe any woman too, but I was scairt *of* her too, because she looked like she could kill you if her eye left the road and fell on you and she decided to love you back. She was wearin blue jeans and a old white shirt with the sleeves rolled up—I had a idea she was maybe fixin to paint somethin on the back deck when I came by—but after we had been goin for a while seemed like she was dressed in nothin but all this white billowy stuff like a pitcher in one of those old gods-and-goddesses books.”

He thought, looking out across the lake, his face very somber.

“Like the huntress that was supposed to drive the moon across the sky.”

“Diana?”

“Ayuh. Moon was her go-devil. 'Phelia looked like that to me and I just tell you fair out that I was stricken in love for her and never would have made a move, even though I was some younger then than I am now. I would not have made a move even had I been twenty, although I suppose I might of at sixteen, and been killed for it—killed if she looked at me was the way it felt.

“She was like that woman drivin the moon across the sky, halfway up over the splashboard with her gossamer stoles all flyin out behind her in silver cobwebs and her hair streamin back to show the dark little hollows of her temples, lashin those horses and tellin me to get

along faster and never mind how they blowed, just faster, faster, *faster*.

“We went down a lot of woods roads—the first two or three I knew, and after that I didn’t know none of them. We must have been a sight to those trees that had never seen nothing with a motor in it before but big old pulp-trucks and snowmobiles; that little go-devil that would most likely have looked more at home on the Sunset Boulevard than shooting through those woods, spitting and bulling its way up one hill and then slamming down the next through those dusty green bars of afternoon sunlight—she had the top down and I could smell everything in those woods, and you know what an old fine smell that is, like something which has been mostly left alone and is not much troubled. We went on across corduroy which had been laid over some of the boggiest parts, and black mud squelched up between some of those cut logs and she laughed like a kid. Some of the logs was old and rotted, because there hadn’t been nobody down a couple of those roads—except for her, that is—in I’m going to say five or ten years. We was *alone*, except for the birds and whatever animals seen us. The sound of that go-devil’s engine, first buzzin along and then windin up high and fierce when she punched in the clutch and shifted down . . . that was the only motor-sound I could hear. And although I knew we had to be close to *someplace* all the time—I mean, these days you always are—I started to feel like we had gone back in time, and there wasn’t *nothing*. That if we stopped and I climbed a high tree, I wouldn’t see nothing in any direction but woods and woods and more woods. And all the time she’s just *hammering* that thing along, her hair all out behind her, smilin, her eyes flashin. So we come out on the Speckled Bird Mountain Road and for a while I known where we were again, and then she turned off and for just a little bit I *thought* I knew, and then I didn’t even bother to kid myself no more. We went cut-slam down another woods road, and then we come out—I swear it—on a nice paved road with a sign that said MOTORWAY B. You ever heard of a road in the state of Maine that was called MOTORWAY B?”

“No,” I says. “Sounds English.”

“Ayuh. *Looked* English. These trees like willows overhung the road. ‘Now watch out here, Homer,’ she says, ‘one of those nearly grabbed me a month ago and gave me an Indian burn.’

“I didn’t know what she was talkin about and started to say so, and then I seen that even though there was no wind, the branches of those trees was dippin down—they was *waverin* down. They looked black and wet inside the fuzz of green on them. I couldn’t believe what I was seein. Then one of em snatched off my cap and I knew I wasn’t asleep. ‘Hi!’ I shouts. ‘Give that back!’

“ ‘Too late now, Homer,’ she says, and laughs. ‘There’s daylight, just up ahead . . . we’re okay.’

“Then another one of em comes down, on her side this time, and snatches at her—I swear it did. She ducked, and it caught in her hair and pulled a lock of it out. ‘Ouch, dammit that *hurts!*’ she yells, but she was laughin, too. The car swerved a little when she ducked and I got a look into the woods and holy God, Dave! *Everythin* in there was movin. There was grasses wavin and plants that was all knotted together so it seemed like they made faces, and I seen somethin sittin in a squat on top of a stump, and it looked like a tree-toad, only it was as big as a full-growed cat.

“Then we come out of the shade to the top of a hill and she says, ‘There! That was exciting, wasn’t it?’ as if she was talkin about no more than a walk through the Haunted House at the Fryeburg Fair.

“About five minutes later we swung onto another of her woods roads. I didn’t want no more woods right then—I can tell you that for sure—but these were just plain old woods. Half an hour after that, we was pulling into the parking lot of the Pilot’s Grille in Bangor. She points to that little odometer for trips and says, ‘Take a gander, Homer.’ I did, and it said 111.6. ‘What do you think now? Do you believe in my shortcut?’

“That wild look had mostly faded out of her, and she was just ‘Phelia Todd again. But that other look wasn’t entirely gone. It was like she was two women, ‘Phelia and Diana, and the part of her that was Diana was so much in control when she was driving the back roads that the part that was ‘Phelia didn’t have no idea that her

shortcut was taking her through places . . . places that ain't on any map of Maine, not even on those survey-squares.

"She says again, 'What do you think of my shortcut, Homer?'

"And I says the first thing to come into my mind, which ain't something you'd usually say to a lady like 'Phelia Todd. 'It's a real piss-cutter, missus,' I says.

"She laughs, just as pleased as punch, and I seen it then, just as clear as glass: She didn't remember none of the funny stuff. Not the willow-branches—except they weren't willows, not at all, not really anything like em, or anything else—that grabbed off m'hat, not that MOTORWAY B sign, or that awfullookin toad-thing. *She didn't remember none of that funny stuff!* Either I had dreamed it was there or she had dreamed it wasn't. All I knew for sure, Dave, was that we had rolled only a hundred and eleven miles and gotten to Bangor, and that wasn't no daydream; it was right there on the little go-devil's odometer, in black and white.

" 'Well, it is,' she says. 'It *is* a piss-cutter. I only wish I could get Worth to give it a go sometime . . . but he'll never get out of his rut unless someone blasts him out of it, and it would probably take a Titan II missile to do that, because I believe he has built himself a fallout shelter at the bottom of that rut. Come on in, Homer, and let's dump some dinner into you.'

"And she bought me one hell of a dinner, Dave, but I couldn't eat very much of it. I kep thinkin about what the ride back might be like, now that it was drawing down dark. Then, about halfway through the meal, she excused herself and made a telephone call. When she came back she ast me if I would mind drivin the go-devil back to Castle Rock for her. She said she had talked to some woman who was on the same school committee as her, and the woman said they had some kind of problem about somethin or other. She said she'd grab herself a Hertz car if Worth couldn't see her back down. 'Do you mind awfully driving back in the dark?' she ast me.

"She looked at me, kinda smilin, and I knew she remembered *some* of it all right—Christ knows how much, but she remembered enough to know I wouldn't want to try her way after dark, if ever at all

. . . although I seen by the light in her eyes that it wouldn't have bothered her a bit.

"So I said it wouldn't bother me, and I finished my meal better than when I started it. It was drawin down dark by the time we was done, and she run us over to the house of the woman she'd called. And when she gets out she looks at me with that same light in her eyes and says, 'Now, you're *sure* you don't want to wait, Homer? I saw a couple of side roads just today, and although I can't find them on my maps, I think they might chop a few miles.'

"I says, 'Well, missus, I would, but at my age the best bed to sleep in is my own, I've found. I'll take your car back and never put a ding in her . . . although I guess I'll probably put on some more miles than you did.'

"Then she laughed, kind of soft, and she give me a kiss. That was the best kiss I ever had in my whole life, Dave. It was just on the cheek, and it was the chaste kiss of a married woman, but it was as ripe as a peach, or like those flowers that open in the dark, and when her lips touched my skin I felt like . . . I don't know exactly what I felt like, because a man can't easily hold on to those things that happened to him with a girl who was ripe when the world was young or how those things felt—I'm talking around what I mean, but I think you understand. Those things all get a red cast to them in your memory and you cannot see through it at all.

" 'You're a sweet man, Homer, and I love you for listening to me and riding with me,' she says. 'Drive safe.'

"Then in she went, to that woman's house. Me, I drove home."

"How did you go?" I asked.

He laughed softly. "By the turnpike, you damned fool," he said, and I never seen so many wrinkles in his face before as I did then.

He sat there, looking into the sky.

"Came the summer she disappeared. I didn't see much of her . . . that was the summer we had the fire, you'll remember, and then the big storm that knocked down all the trees. A busy time for caretakers. Oh, I *thought* about her from time to time, and about that day, and about that kiss, and it started to seem like a dream to me. Like one time, when I was about sixteen and couldn't think about

nothing but girls. I was out plowing George Bascomb's west field, the one that looks across the lake at the mountains, dreamin about what teenage boys dream of. And I pulled up this rock with the harrow blades, and it split open, and it *bled*. At least, it looked to me like it bled. Red stuff come runnin out of the cleft in the rock and soaked into the soil. And I never told no one but my mother, and I never told her what it meant to me, or what happened to me, although she washed my drawers and maybe she knew. Anyway, she suggested I ought to pray on it. Which I did, but I never got no enlightenment, and after a while something started to suggest to my mind that it had been a dream. It's that way, sometimes. There is holes in the *middle*, Dave. Do you know that?"

"Yes," I says, thinking of one night when I'd seen something. That was in '59, a bad year for us, but my kids didn't know it was a bad year; all they knew was that they wanted to eat just like always. I'd seen a bunch of whitetail in Henry Brugger's back field, and I was out there after dark with a jacklight in August. You can shoot two when they're summerfat; the second'll come back and sniff at the first as if to say *What the hell? Is it fall already?* and you can pop him like a bowlin pin. You can hack off enough meat to feed yowwens for six weeks and bury what's left. Those are two whitetails the hunters who come in November don't get a shot at, but kids have to eat. Like the man from Massachusetts said, *he'd* like to be able to afford to live here the year around, and all I can say is sometimes you pay for the privilege after dark. So there I was, and I seen this big orange light in the sky; it come down and down, and I stood and watched it with my mouth hung on down to my breastbone and when it hit the lake the whole of it was lit up for a minute a purple-orange that-seemed to go right up to the sky in rays. Wasn't nobody ever said nothing to me about that light, and I never said nothing to nobody myself, partly because I was afraid they'd laugh, but also because they'd wonder what the hell I'd been doing out there after dark to start with. And after a while it was like Homer said—it seemed like a dream I had once had, and it didn't signify to me because I couldn't make nothing of it which would turn under my hand. It was like a moonbeam. It didn't have no handle and it didn't have no blade. I

couldn't make it work so I left it alone, like a man does when he knows the day is going to come up nevertheless.

"There are *holes* in the middle of things," Homer said, and he sat up straighter, like he was mad. "Right in the damn *middle* of things, not even to the left or right where your p'riph'ral vision is and you could say 'Well, but hell—' They are there and you go around them like you'd go around a pothole in the road that would break an axle. You know? And you forget it. Or like if you are plowin, you can plow a dip. But if there's somethin like a *break* in the earth, where you see darkness, like a cave might be there, you say 'Go around, old hoss. Leave that alone! I got a good shot over here to the left'ards.' Because it wasn't a cave you was lookin for, or some kind of college excitement, but good plowin.

"*Holes* in the *middle* of things."

He fell still a long time then and I let him be still. Didn't have no urge to move him. And at last he says:

"She disappeared in August. I seen her for the first time in early July, and she looked . . ." Homer turned to me and spoke each word with careful, spaced emphasis. "Dave Owens, she looked *gorgeous!* Gorgeous and wild and almost untamed. The little wrinkles I'd started to notice around her eyes all seemed to be gone. Worth Todd, he was at some conference or something in Boston. And she stands there at the edge of the deck—I was out in the middle with my shirt off—and she says, 'Homer, you'll never believe it.'

" 'No, missus, but I'll try,' I says.

" 'I found two new roads,' she says, 'and I got up to Bangor this last time in just sixty-seven miles.'

"I remembered what she said before and I says, 'That's not possible, missus. Beggin your pardon, but I did the mileage on the map myself, and seventy-nine is tops . . . as the crow flies.'

"She laughed, and she looked prettier than ever. Like a goddess in the sun, on one of those hills in a story where there's nothing but green grass and fountains and no puckies to tear at a man's forearms at all. 'That's right,' she says, 'and you can't run a mile in under four minutes. It's been mathematically *proved*.'

" 'It ain't the same,' I says.

“ ‘It’s the same,’ she says. ‘Fold the map and see how many miles it is then, Homer. It can be a little less than a straight line if you fold it a little, or it can be a lot less if you fold it a lot.’

“I remembered our ride then, the way you remember a dream, and I says, ‘Missus, you can fold a map on paper but you can’t fold *land*. Or at least you shouldn’t ought to try. You want to leave it alone.’

“ ‘No sir,’ she says. ‘It’s the one thing right now in my life that I won’t leave alone, because it’s *there*, and it’s *mine*.’

“Three weeks later—this would be about two weeks before she disappeared—she give me a call from Bangor. She says, ‘Worth has gone to New York, and I am coming down. I’ve misplaced my damn key, Homer. I’d like you to open the house so I can get in.’

“Well, that call come at eight o’clock, just when it was starting to come down dark. I had a sanwidge and a beer before leaving—about twenty minutes. Then I took a ride down there. All in all, I’d say I was forty-five minutes. When I got down there to the Todds’, I seen there was a light on in the pantry I didn’t leave on while I was comin down the driveway. I was lookin at that, and I almost run right into her little go-devil. It was parked kind of on a slant, the way a drunk would park it, and it was splashed with muck all the way up to the windows, and there was this stuff stuck in that mud along the body that looked like seaweed . . . only when my lights hit it, it seemed to be *movin*. I parked behind it and got out of my truck. That stuff wasn’t seaweed, but it *was* weeds, and it *was* movin . . . kinda slow and sluggish, like it was dyin. I touched a piece of it, and it tried to wrap itself around my hand. It felt nasty and awful. I drug my hand away and wiped it on my pants. I went around to the front of the car. It looked like it had come through about ninety miles of splash and low country. Looked *tired*, it did. Bugs was splashed all over the windshield—only they didn’t look like no kind of bugs / ever seen before. There was a moth that was about the size of a sparrow, its wings still flappin a little, feeble and dyin. There was things like mosquitoes, only they had real eyes that you could see—and they seemed to be seein *me*. I could hear those weeds scrapin against the body of the go-devil, dyin, tryin to get a hold on somethin. And all I could think was Where in the hell has she been? And how did she

get here in only three-quarters of an hour? Then I seen somethin else. There was some kind of a animal half-smashed onto the radiator grille, just under where that Mercedes ornament is—the one that looks kinda like a star looped up into a circle? Now most small animals you kill on the road is bore right under the car, because they are crouching when it hits them, hoping it'll just go over and leave them with their hide still attached to their meat. But every now and then one will jump, not away, but right at the damn car, as if to get in one good bite of whatever the buggardly thing is that's going to kill it—I have known that to happen. This thing had maybe done that. And it looked mean enough to jump a Sherman tank. It looked like something which come of a mating between a woodchuck and a weasel, but there was other stuff thrown in that a body didn't even want to look at. It hurt your eyes, Dave; worse'n that, it hurt your *mind*. Its pelt was matted with blood, and there was claws sprung out of the pads on its feet like a cat's claws, only longer. It had big yellowy eyes, only they was glazed. When I was a kid I had a porcelain marble—a croaker—that looked like that. And teeth. Long thin needle teeth that looked almost like darning needles, stickin out of its mouth. Some of them was sunk right into that steel grillwork. That's why it was still hanging on; it had hung its *own* self on by the teeth. I looked at it and knowed it had a headful of poison just like a rattlesnake, and it jumped at that go-devil when it saw it was about to be run down, tryin to bite it to death. And I wouldn't be the one to try and yonk it offa there because I had cuts on my hands—hay-cuts—and I thought it would kill me as dead as a stone parker if some of that poison seeped into the cuts.

“I went around to the driver's door and opened it. The inside light come on, and I looked at that special odometer that she set for trips . . . and what I seen there was 31.6.

“I looked at that for a bit, and then I went to the back door. She'd forced the screen and broke the glass by the lock so she could get her hand through and let herself in. There was a note that said: 'Dear Homer—got here a little sooner than I thought I would. Found a shortcut, and it is a dilly! You hadn't come yet so I let myself in like a burglar. Worth is coming day after tomorrow. Can you get the screen

fixed and the door reglazed by then? Hope so. Things like that always bother him. If I don't come out to say hello, you'll know I'm asleep. The drive was very tiring, but I was here in no time! Ophelia.'

"*Tirin!* I took another look at that bogey-thing hangin offa the grille of her car, and I thought Yessir, it *must* have been tiring. By God, yes."

He paused again, and cracked a restless knuckle.

"I seen her only once more. About a week later. Worth was there, but he was swimmin out in the lake, back and forth, back and forth, like he was sawin wood or signin papers. More like he was signin papers, I guess.

" 'Missus,' I says, 'this ain't my business, but you ought to leave well enough alone. That night you come back and broke the glass of the door to come in, I seen somethin hangin off the front of your car —'

" 'Oh, the chuck! I took care of that,' she says.

" 'Christ!' I says. 'I hope you took some care!'

" 'I wore Worth's gardening gloves,' she said. 'It wasn't anything anyway, Homer, but a jumped-up woodchuck with a little poison in it.'

" 'But missus,' I says, 'where there's woodchucks there's bears. And if that's what the woodchucks look like along your shortcut, what's going to happen to you if a bear shows up?'

"She looked at me, and I seen that other woman in her—that Diana-woman. She says, 'If things are different along those roads, Homer, maybe I am different, too. Look at this.'

"Her hair was done up in a clip at the back, looked sort of like a butterfly and had a stick through it. She let it down. It was the kind of hair that would make a man wonder what it would look like spread out over a pillow. She says, 'It was coming in gray, Homer. Do you see any gray?' And she spread it with her fingers so the sun could shine on it.

" 'No'm,' I says.

"She looks at me, her eyes all a-sparkle, and she says, 'Your wife is a good woman, Homer Buckland, but she has seen me in the store and in the post office, and we've passed the odd word or two, and I have seen her looking at my hair in a kind of satisfied way that

only women know. I know what she says, and what she tells her friends . . . that Ophelia Todd has started dyeing her hair. But I have not. I have lost my way looking for a shortcut more than once . . . lost my way . . . and lost my gray.' And she laughed, not like a college girl but like a girl in high school. I admired her and longed for her beauty, but I seen that other beauty in her face as well just then . . . and I felt afraid again. Afraid *for* her, and afraid *of* her.

" 'Missus,' I says, 'you stand to lose more than a little sta'ch in your hair.'

" 'No,' she says. 'I tell you I am different over there . . . I am *all myself* over there. When I am going along that road in my little car I am not Ophelia Todd, Worth Todd's wife who could never carry a child to term, or that woman who tried to write poetry and failed at it, or the woman who sits and takes notes in committee meetings, or anything or anyone else. When I am on that road I am in the heart of myself, and I feel like—'

" '*Diana*,' I said.

"She looked at me kind of funny and kind of surprised, and then she laughed. 'O like some goddess, I suppose,' she said. 'She will do better than most because I am a night person—I love to stay up until my book is done or until the National Anthem comes on the TV, and because I am very pale, like the moon—Worth is always saying I need a tonic, or blood tests or some sort of similar bosh. But in her heart what every woman wants to be is some kind of goddess, I think—men pick up a ruined echo of that thought and try to put them on pedestals (a woman, who will pee down her own leg if she does not squat! it's funny when you stop to think of it)—but what a man senses is not what a woman wants. A woman wants to be in the clear, is all. To stand if she will, or walk . . .' Her eyes turned toward that little go-devil in the driveway, and narrowed. Then she smiled. 'Or to *drive*, Homer. A man will not see that. He thinks a goddess wants to loll on a slope somewhere on the foothills of Olympus and eat fruit, but there is no god or goddess in that. All a woman wants is what a man wants—a woman wants to *drive*.'

" 'Be careful where you drive, missus, is all,' I says, and she laughs and give me a kiss spang in the middle of the forehead.

“She says, ‘I will, Homer,’ but it didn’t mean nothing, and I know it, because she said it like a man who says he’ll be careful to his wife or his girl when he knows he won’t . . . can’t.

“I went back to my truck and waved to her once, and it was a week later that Worth reported her missing. Her and that go-devil both. Todd waited seven years and had her declared legally dead, and then he waited another year for good measure—I’ll give the sucker that much—and then he married the second Missus Todd, the one that just went by. And I don’t expect you’ll believe a single damn word of the whole yarn.”

In the sky one of those big flat-bottomed clouds moved enough to disclose the ghost of the moon—half-full and pale as milk. And something in my heart leaped up at the sight, half in fright, half in love.

“I do though,” I said. “Every frigging damned word. And even if it ain’t true, Homer, it ought to be.”

He give me a hug around the neck with his forearm, which is all men can do since the world don’t let them kiss but only women, and laughed, and got up.

“Even if it *shouldn’t* ought to be, it is,” he said. He got his watch out of his pants and looked at it. “I got to go down the road and check on the Scott place. You want to come?”

“I believe I’ll sit here for a while,” I said, “and think.”

He went to the steps, then turned back and looked at me, half-smiling. “I believe she was right,” he said. “She was different along those roads she found . . . wasn’t nothing that would dare touch her. You or me, maybe, but not her.

“And I believe she’s young.”

Then he got in his truck and set off to check the Scott place.

That was two years ago, and Homer has since gone to Vermont, as I think I told you. One night he come over to see me. His hair was combed, he had a shave, and he smelled of some nice lotion. His face was clear and his eyes were alive. That night he looked sixty instead of seventy, and I was glad for him and I envied him and I

hated him a little, too. Arthritis is one buggardly great old fisherman, and that night Homer didn't look like arthritis had any fishhooks sunk into his hands the way they were sunk into mine.

"I'm going," he said.

"Ayuh?"

"Ayuh."

"All right; did you see to forwarding your mail?"

"Don't want none forwarded," he said. "My bills are paid. I am going to make a clean break."

"Well, give me your address. I'll drop you a line from one time to the another, old hoss." Already I could feel loneliness settling over me like a cloak . . . and looking at him, I knew that things were not quite what they seemed.

"Don't have none yet," he said.

"All right," I said. "Is it Vermont, Homer?"

"Well," he said, "it'll do for people who want to know."

I almost didn't say it and then I did. "What does she look like now?"

"Like Diana," he said. "But she is kinder."

"I envy you, Homer," I said, and I did.

I stood at the door. It was twilight in that deep part of summer when the fields fill with perfume and Queen Anne's Lace. A full moon was beating a silver track across the lake. He went across my porch and down the steps. A car was standing on the soft shoulder of the road, its engine idling heavy, the way the old ones do that still run full bore straight ahead and damn the torpedoes. Now that I think of it, that car *looked* like a torpedo. It looked beat up some, but as if it could go the ton without breathin hard. He stopped at the foot of my steps and picked something up—it was his gas can, the big one that holds ten gallons. He went down my walk to the passenger side of the car. She leaned over and opened the door. The inside light came on and just for a moment I saw her, long red hair around her face, her forehead shining like a lamp. Shining like the *moon*. He got in and she drove away. I stood out on my porch and watched the taillights of her little go-devil twinkling red in the dark . . . getting

smaller and smaller. They were like embers, then they were like flickerflies, and then they were gone.

Vermont, I tell the folks from town, and Vermont they believe, because it's as far as most of them can see inside their heads. Sometimes I almost believe it myself, mostly when I'm tired and done up. Other times I think about them, though—all this October I have done so, it seems, because October is the time when men think mostly about far places and the roads which might get them there. I sit on the bench in front of Bell's Market and think about Homer Buckland and about the beautiful girl who leaned over to open his door when he come down that path with the full red gasoline can in his right hand—she looked like a girl of no more than sixteen, a girl on her learner's permit, and her beauty was terrible, but I believe it would no longer kill the man it turned itself on; for a moment her eyes lit on me, I was not killed, although part of me died at her feet.

Olympus must be a glory to the eyes and the heart, and there are those who crave it and those who find a clear way to it, mayhap, but I know Castle Rock like the back of my hand and I could never leave it for no shortcuts where the roads may go; in October the sky over the lake is no glory but it is passing fair, with those big white clouds that move so slow; I sit here on the bench, and think about 'Phelia Todd and Homer Buckland, and I don't necessarily wish I was where they are . . . but I still wish I was a smoking man.

## The Jaunt

“This is the last call for Jaunt-701,” the pleasant female voice echoed through the Blue Concourse of New York’s Port Authority Terminal. The PAT had not changed much in the last three hundred years or so—it was still grungy and a little frightening. The automated female voice was probably the most pleasant thing about it. “This is Jaunt Service to Whitehead City, Mars,” the voice continued. “All ticketed passengers should now be in the Blue Concourse sleep lounge. Make sure your validation papers are in order. Thank you.”

The upstairs sleep lounge was not at all grungy. It was wall-to-wall carpeted in oyster gray. The walls were an eggshell white and hung with pleasant nonrepresentational prints. A steady, soothing progression of colors met and swirled on the ceiling. There were one hundred couches in the large room, neatly spaced in rows of ten. Five Jaunt attendants circulated, speaking in low, cheery voices and offering glasses of milk. At one side of the room was the entranceway, flanked by armed guards and another Jaunt attendant who was checking the validation papers of a latecomer, a harried-looking businessman with the *New York World-Times* folded under one arm. Directly opposite, the floor dropped away in a trough about five feet wide and perhaps ten feet long; it passed through a doorless opening and looked a bit like a child’s slide.

The Oates family lay side by side on four Jaunt couches near the far end of the room. Mark Oates and his wife, Marilys, flanked the two children.

“Daddy, will you tell me about the Jaunt now?” Ricky asked. “You promised.”

“Yeah, Dad, you promised,” Patricia added, and giggled shrilly for no good reason.

A businessman with a build like a bull glanced over at them and then went back to the folder of papers he was examining as he lay

on his back, his spit-shined shoes neatly together. From everywhere came the low murmur of conversation and the rustle of passengers settling down on the Jaunt couches.

Mark glanced over at Marilys Oates and winked. She winked back, but she was almost as nervous as Patty sounded. *Why not?* Mark thought. First Jaunt for all three of them. He and Marilys had discussed the advantages and drawbacks of moving the whole family for the last six months—since he'd gotten notification from Texaco Water that he was being transferred to Whitehead City. Finally they had decided that all of them would go for the two years Mark would be stationed on Mars. He wondered now, looking at Marilys's pale face, if she was regretting the decision.

He glanced at his watch and saw it was still almost half an hour to Jaunt-time. That was enough time to tell the story . . . and he supposed it would take the kids' minds off their nervousness. Who knew, maybe it would even cool Marilys out a little.

"All right," he said. Ricky and Pat were watching him seriously, his son twelve, his daughter nine. He told himself again that Ricky would be deep in the swamp of puberty and his daughter would likely be developing breasts by the time they got back to earth, and again found it difficult to believe. The kids would be going to the tiny Whitehead Combined School with the hundred-odd engineering and oil-company brats that were there; his son might well be going on a geology field trip to Phobos not so many months distant. It was difficult to believe . . . but true.

*Who knows?* he thought wryly. *Maybe it'll do something about my Jaunt-jumps, too.*

"So far as we know," he began, "the Jaunt was invented about three hundred and twenty years ago, around the year 1987, by a fellow named Victor Carune. He did it as part of a private research project that was funded by some government money . . . and eventually the government took it over, of course. In the end it came down to either the government or the oil companies. The reason we don't know the exact date is because Carune was something of an eccentric—"

"You mean he was crazy, Dad?" Ricky asked.

“Eccentric means a little bit crazy, dear,” Marilyns said, and smiled across the children at Mark. She looked a little less nervous now, he thought.

“Oh.”

“Anyway, he’d been experimenting with the process for quite some time before he informed the government of what he had,” Mark went on, “and he only told them because he was running out of money and they weren’t going to re-fund him.”

“Your money cheerfully refunded,” Pat said, and giggled shrilly again.

“That’s right, honey,” Mark said, and ruffled her hair gently. At the far end of the room he saw a door slide noiselessly open and two more attendants came out, dressed in the bright red jumpers of the Jaunt Service, pushing a rolling table. On it was a stainless-steel nozzle attached to a rubber hose; beneath the table’s skirts, tastefully hidden, Mark knew there were two bottles of gas; in the net bag hooked to the side were one hundred disposable masks. Mark went on talking, not wanting his people to see the representatives of Lethe until they had to. And, if he was given enough time to tell the whole story, they would welcome the gaspassers with open arms.

Considering the alternative.

“Of course, you know that the Jaunt is teleportation, no more or less,” he said. “Sometimes in college chemistry and physics they call it the Carune Process, but it’s really teleportation, and it was Carune himself—if you can believe the stories—who named it ‘the Jaunt.’ He was a science-fiction reader, and there’s a story by a man named Alfred Bester, *The Stars My Destination* it’s called, and this fellow Bester made up the word ‘jaunte’ for teleportation in it. Except in his book, you could Jaunt just by thinking about it, and we can’t really do that.”

The attendants were fixing a mask to the steel nozzle and handing it to an elderly woman at the far end of the room. She took it, inhaled once, and fell quiet and limp on her couch. Her skirt had pulled up a little, revealing one slack thigh road-mapped with varicose veins. An attendant considerately readjusted it for her while the other pulled off the used mask and affixed a fresh one. It was a process that made

Mark think of the plastic glasses in motel rooms. He wished to God that Patty would cool out a little bit; he had seen children who had to be held down, and sometimes they screamed as the rubber mask covered their faces. It was not an abnormal reaction in a child, he supposed, but it was nasty to watch and he didn't want to see it happen to Patty. About Rick he felt more confident.

"I guess you could say the Jaunt came along at the last possible moment," he resumed. He spoke toward Ricky, but reached across and took his daughter's hand. Her fingers closed over his with an immediate panicky tightness. Her palm was cool and sweating lightly. "The world was running out of oil, and most of what was left belonged to the middle-eastern desert peoples, who were committed to using it as a political weapon. They had formed an oil cartel they called OPEC—"

"What's a cartel, Daddy?" Patty asked.

"Well, a monopoly," Mark said.

"Like a club, honey," Marilys said. "And you could only be in that club if you had lots of oil."

"Oh."

"I don't have time to sketch the whole mess in for you," Mark said. "You'll study some of it in school, but it was a mess—let's let it go at that. If you owned a car, you could only drive it two days a week, and gasoline cost fifteen oldbucks a gallon—"

"Gosh," Ricky said, "it only costs four cents or so a gallon now, doesn't it, Dad?"

Mark smiled. "That's why we're going where we're going, Rick. There's enough oil on Mars to last almost eight thousand years, and enough on Venus to last another twenty thousand . . . but oil isn't even that important, anymore. Now what we need most of all is—"

"*Water!*" Patty cried, and the businessman looked up from his papers and smiled at her for a moment.

"That's right," Mark said. "Because in the years between 1960 and 2030, we poisoned most of ours. The first waterlift from the Martian ice-caps was called—"

"Operation Straw." That was Ricky.

“Yes. 2045 or thereabouts. But long before that, the Jaunt was being used to find sources of clean water here on earth. And now water is our major Martian export . . . the oil’s strictly a sideline. But it was important then.”

The kids nodded.

“The point is, those things were always there, but we were only able to get it because of the Jaunt. When Carune invented his process, the world was slipping into a new dark age. The winter before, over ten thousand people had frozen to death in the United States alone because there wasn’t enough energy to heat them.”

“Oh, yuck,” Patty said matter-of-factly.

Mark glanced to his right and saw the attendants talking to a timid-looking man, persuading him. At last he took the mask and seemed to fall dead on his couch seconds later. *First-timer*, Mark thought. *You can always tell.*

“For Carune, it started with a pencil . . . some keys . . . a wristwatch . . . then some mice. The mice showed him there was a problem . . .”

Victor Carune came back to his laboratory in a stumbling fever of excitement. He thought he knew now how Morse had felt, and Alexander Graham Bell, and Edison . . . but this was bigger than all of them, and twice he had almost wrecked the truck on the way back from the pet shop in New Paltz, where he had spent his last twenty dollars on nine white mice. What he had left in the world was the ninety-three cents in his right front pocket and the eighteen dollars in his savings account . . . but this did not occur to him. And if it had, it certainly would not have bothered him.

The lab was in a renovated barn at the end of a mile-long dirt road off Route 26. It was making the turn onto this road where he had just missed cracking up his Brat pickup truck for the second time. The gas tank was almost empty and there would be no more for ten days to two weeks, but this did not concern him, either. His mind was in a delirious whirl.

What had happened was not totally unexpected, no. One of the reasons the government had funded him even to the paltry tune of twenty thousand a year was because the unrealized possibility had always been there in the field of particle transmission.

But to have it happen like this . . . suddenly . . . with no warning . . . and powered by less electricity than was needed to run a color TV . . . God! *Christ!*

He brought the Brat to a screech-halt in the dirt of the dooryard, grabbed the box on the dirty seat beside him by its grab-handles (on the box were dogs and cats and hamsters and goldfish and the legend I CAME FROM STACKPOLE'S HOUSE OF PETS) and *ran* for the big double doors. From inside the box came the scurry and whisk of his test subjects.

He tried to push one of the big doors open along its track, and when it wouldn't budge, he remembered that he had locked it. Carune uttered a loud "Shit!" and fumbled for his keys. The government commanded that the lab be locked at all times—it was one of the strings they put on their money—but Carune kept forgetting.

He brought his keys out and for a moment simply stared at them, mesmerized, running the ball of his thumb over the notches in the Brat's ignition key. He thought again: *God! Christ!* Then he scrabbled through the keys on the ring for the Yale key that unlocked the barn door.

As the first telephone had been used inadvertently—Bell crying into it, "Watson, come here!" when he spilled some acid on his papers and himself—so the first act of teleportation had occurred by accident. Victor Carune had teleported the first two fingers of his left hand across the fifty-yard width of the barn.

Carune had set up two portals at opposite sides of the barn. On his end was a simple ion gun, available from any electronics supply warehouse for under five hundred dollars. On the other end, standing just beyond the far portal—both of them rectangular and the size of a paperback book—was a cloud chamber. Between them was

what appeared to be an opaque shower curtain, except that shower curtains are not made of lead. The idea was to shoot the ions through Portal One and then walk around and watch them streaming across the cloud chamber standing just beyond Portal Two, with the lead shield between to prove they really were being transmitted. Except that, for the last two years, the process had only worked twice, and Carune didn't have the slightest idea why.

As he was setting the ion gun in place, his fingers had slipped through the portal—ordinarily no problem, but this morning his hip had also brushed the toggle switch on the control panel at the left of the portal. He was not aware of what had happened—the machinery gave off only the lowest audible hum—until he felt a tingling sensation in his fingers.

“It was not like an electric shock,” Carune wrote in his one and only article on the subject before the government shut him up. The article was published, of all places, in *Popular Mechanics*. He had sold it to them for seven hundred and fifty dollars in a last-ditch effort to keep the Jaunt a matter of private enterprise. “There was none of that unpleasant tingle that one gets if one grasps a frayed lamp cord, for instance. It was more like the sensation one gets if one puts one's hand on the casing of some small machine that is working very hard. The vibration is so fast and light that it is, literally, a tingling sensation.

“Then I looked down at the portal and saw that my index finger was gone on a diagonal slant through the middle knuckle, and my second finger was gone slightly above that. In addition, the nail portion of my third finger had disappeared.”

Carune had jerked his hand back instinctively, crying out. He so much expected to see blood, he wrote later, that he actually hallucinated blood for a moment or two. His elbow struck the ion gun and knocked it off the table.

He stood there with his fingers in his mouth, verifying that they were still there, and whole. The thought that he had been working too hard crossed his mind. And then the other thought crossed his mind: the thought that the last set of modifications might have . . . might have done something.

He did not push his fingers back in; in fact, Carune only Jaunted once more in his entire life.

At first, he did nothing. He took a long, aimless walk around the barn, running his hands through his hair, wondering if he should call Carson in New Jersey or perhaps Buffington in Charlotte. Carson wouldn't accept a collect phone call, the cheap ass-kissing bastard, but Buffington probably would. Then an idea struck and he ran across to Portal Two, thinking that if his fingers had actually crossed the barn, there might be some sign of it.

There was not, of course. Portal Two stood atop three stacked Pomona orange crates, looking like nothing so much as one of those toy guillotines missing the blade. On one side of its stainless-steel frame was a plug-in jack, from which a cord ran back to the transmission terminal, which was little more than a particle transformer hooked into a computer feed-line.

Which reminded him—

Carune glanced at his watch and saw it was quarter past eleven. His deal with the government consisted of short money, plus computer time, which was infinitely valuable. His computer tie-in lasted until three o'clock this afternoon, and then it was good-bye until Monday. He had to get moving, had to do something—

"I glanced at the pile of crates again," Carune writes in his *Popular Mechanics* article, "and then I looked at the pads of my fingers. And sure enough, the proof was there. It would not, I thought then, convince anyone but myself; but in the beginning, of course, it is only one's self that one has to convince."

"What was it, Dad?" Ricky asked.

"Yeah!" Patty added. "What?"

Mark grinned a little. They were all hooked now, even Marilys. They had nearly forgotten where they were. From the corner of his eye he could see the Jaunt attendants whisper-wheeling their cart slowly among the Jaunters, putting them to sleep. It was never as rapid a process in the civilian sector as it was in the military, he had discovered; civilians got nervous and wanted to talk it over. The

nozzle and the rubber mask were too reminiscent of hospital operating rooms, where the surgeon with his knives lurked somewhere behind the anesthetist with her selection of gases in stainless-steel canisters. Sometimes there was panic, hysteria; and always there were a few who simply lost their nerve. Mark had observed two of these as he spoke to the children: two men who had simply arisen from their couches, walked across to the entryway with no fanfare at all, unpinned the validation papers that had been affixed to their lapels, turned them in, and exited without looking back. Jaunt attendants were under strict instructions not to argue with those who left; there were always standbys, sometimes as many as forty or fifty of them, hoping against hope, As those who simply couldn't take it left, standbys were let in with their own validations pinned to their shirts.

"Carune found two splinters in his index finger," he told the children. "He took them out and put them aside. One was lost, but you can see the other one in the Smithsonian Annex in Washington. It's in a hermetically sealed glass case near the moon rocks the first space travelers brought back from the moon—"

"Our moon, Dad, or one of Mars's?" Ricky asked.

"Ours," Mark said, smiling a little. "Only one manned rocket flight has ever landed on Mars, Ricky, and that was a French expedition somewhere about 2030. Anyway, that's why there happens to be a plain old splinter from an orange crate in the Smithsonian Institution. Because it's the first object that we have that was actually teleported—jaunted—across space."

"What happened then?" Patty asked.

"Well, according to the story, Carune ran . . ."

Carune ran back to Portal One and stood there for a moment, heart thudding, out of breath. *Got to calm down*, he told himself. *Got to think about this. You can't maximize your time if you go off half-cocked.*

Deliberately disregarding the forefront of his mind, which was screaming at him to hurry up and do *something*, he dug his nail-

clippers out of his pocket and used the point of the file to dig the splinters out of his index finger. He dropped them onto the white inner sleeve of a Hershey bar he had eaten while tinkering with the transformer and trying to widen its afferent capability (he had apparently succeeded in that beyond his wildest dreams). One rolled off the wrapper and was lost; the other ended up in the Smithsonian Institution, locked in a glass case that was cordoned off with thick velvet ropes and watched vigilantly and eternally by a computer-monitored closed-circuit TV camera.

The splinter extraction finished, Carune felt a little calmer. A pencil. That was as good as anything. He took one from beside the clipboard on the shelf above him and ran it gently into Portal One. It disappeared smoothly, inch by inch, like something in an optical illusion or in a very good magician's trick. The pencil had said EBERHARD FABER NO. 2 on one of its sides, black letters stamped on yellow-painted wood. When he had pushed the pencil in until all but EBERH had disappeared, Carune walked around to the other side of Portal One. He looked in.

He saw the pencil in cut-off view, as if a knife had chopped smoothly through it. Carune felt with his fingers where the rest of the pencil should have been, and of course there was nothing. He ran across the barn to Portal Two, and there was the missing part of the pencil, lying on the top crate. Heart thumping so hard that it seemed to shake his entire chest, Carune grasped the sharpened point of his pencil and pulled it the rest of the way through.

He held it up; he looked at it. Suddenly he took it and wrote rr WORKS! on a piece of barn-board. He wrote it so hard that the lead snapped on the last letter. Carune began to laugh shrilly in the empty barn; to laugh so hard that he startled the sleeping swallows into flight among the high rafters.

*"Works!"* he shouted, and ran back to Portal One. He was waving his arms, the broken pencil knotted up in one fist. *"Works! Works! Do you hear me, Carson, you prick? It works AND I DID IT!"*

“Mark, watch what you say to the children,” Marilys reproached him.

Mark shrugged. “It’s what he’s supposed to have said.”

“Well, can’t you do a little selective editing?”

“Dad?” Patty asked. “Is that pencil in the museum, too?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” Mark said, and then clapped one hand over his mouth. Both children giggled wildly—but that shrill note was gone from Patty’s voice, Mark was glad to hear—and after a moment of trying to look serious, Marilys began to giggle too.

The keys went through next; Carune simply tossed them through the portal. He was beginning to think on track again now, and it seemed to him that the first thing that needed finding out was if the process produced things on the other end exactly as they had been, or if they were in any way changed by the trip.

He saw the keys go through and disappear; at exactly the same moment he heard them jingle on the crate across the barn. He ran across—really only trotting now—and on the way he paused to shove the lead shower curtain back on its track. He didn’t need either it or the ion gun now. Just as well, since the ion gun was smashed beyond repair.

He grabbed the keys, went to the lock the government had forced him to put on the door, and tried the Yale key. It worked perfectly. He tried the house key. It also worked. So did the keys which opened his file cabinets and the one which started the Brat pickup.

Carune pocketed the keys and took off his watch. It was a Seiko quartz LC with a built-in calculator below the digital face—twenty-four tiny buttons that would allow him to do everything from addition to subtraction to square roots. A delicate piece of machinery—and just as important, a chronometer. Carune put it down in front of Portal One and pushed it through with a pencil.

He ran across and grabbed it up. When he put it through, the watch had said 11:31:07. It now said 11:31:49. Very good. Right on the money, only he should have had an assistant over there to peg the fact that there had been no time gain once and forever. Well, no

matter. Soon enough the government would have him wading hip-deep in assistants.

He tried the calculator. Two and two still made four, eight divided by four was still two; the square root of eleven was still 3.3166247 . . . and so on.

That was when he decided it was mouse-time.

“What happened with the mice, Dad?” Ricky asked.

Mark hesitated briefly. There would have to be some caution here, if he didn't want to scare his children (not to mention his wife) into hysteria minutes away from their first Jaunt. The major thing was to leave them with the knowledge that everything was all right now, that the problem had been licked.

“As I said, there was a slight problem . . .”

*Yes. Horror, lunacy, and death. How's that for a slight problem, kids?*

Carune set the box which read I CAME FROM STACKPOLE'S HOUSE OF PETS down on the shelf and glanced at his watch. Damned if he hadn't put the thing on upside down. He turned it around and saw that it was a quarter of two. He had only an hour and a quarter of computer time left. *How the time flies when you're having fun*, he thought, and giggled wildly.

He opened the box, reached in, and pulled out a squeaking white mouse by the tail. He put it down in front of Portal One and said, “Go on, mouse.” The mouse promptly ran down the side of the orange crate on which the portal stood and scuttered across the floor.

Cursing, Carune chased it, and managed to actually get one hand on it before it squirmed through a crack between two boards and was gone.

“*SHIT!*” Carune screamed, and ran back to the box of mice. He was just in time to knock two potential escapees back into the box. He got a second mouse, holding this one around the body (he was by trade a physicist, and the ways of white mice were foreign to him), and slammed the lid of the box back down.

This one he gave the old heave-ho. It clutched at Canine's palm, but to no avail; it went head over ratty little paws through Portal One. Carune heard it immediately land on the crates across the barn.

This time he sprinted, remembering how easily the first mouse had eluded him. He need not have worried. The white mouse merely crouched on the crate, its eyes dull, its sides aspirating weakly. Carune slowed down and approached it carefully; he was not a man used to fooling with mice, but you didn't have to be a forty-year veteran to see something was terribly wrong here.

("The mouse didn't feel so good after it went through," Mark Oates told his children with a wide smile that was only noticeably false to his wife.)

Carune touched the mouse. It was like touching something inert—packed straw or sawdust, perhaps—except for the aspirating sides. The mouse did not look around at Carune; it stared straight ahead. He had thrown in a squirming, very frisky and alive little animal; here was something that seemed to be a living waxwork likeness of a mouse.

Then Carune snapped his fingers in front of the mouse's small pink eyes. It blinked . . . and fell dead on its side.

"So Carune decided to try another mouse," Mark said.

"What happened to the first mouse?" Ricky asked.

Mark produced that wide smile again. "It was retired with full honors," he said.

Carune found a paper bag and put the mouse into it. He would take it to Mosconi, the vet, that evening. Mosconi could dissect it and tell him if its inner works had been rearranged. The government would disapprove his bringing a private citizen into a project which would be classified triple top secret as soon as they knew about it. Tough titty, as the kitty was reputed to have said to the babes who complained about the warmth of the milk. Carune was determined that the Great White Father in Washington would know about this as

late in the game as possible. For all the scant help the Great White Father had given him, he could wait. Tough titty.

Then he remembered that Mosconi lived way the hell and gone on the other side of New Paltz, and that there wasn't enough gas in the Brat to get even halfway across town . . . let alone back.

But it was 2:03—he had less than an hour of computer time left. He would worry about the goddam dissection later.

Carune constructed a makeshift chute leading to the entrance of Portal One (really the first Jaunt-Slide, Mark told the children, and Patty found the idea of a Jaunt-Slide for mice deliciously funny) and dropped a fresh white mouse into it. He blocked the end with a large book, and after a few moments of aimless pattering and sniffing, the mouse went through the portal and disappeared.

Carune ran back across the barn.

The mouse was DOA.

There was no blood, no bodily swellings to indicate that a radical change in pressure had ruptured something inside. Carune supposed that oxygen starvation might—

He shook his head impatiently. It took the white mouse only nanoseconds to go through; his own watch had confirmed that time remained a constant in the process, or damn close to it.

The second white mouse joined the first in the paper sack. Carune got a third out (a fourth, if you counted the fortunate mouse that had escaped through the crack), wondering for the first time which would end first—his computer time or his supply of mice.

He held this one firmly around the body and forced its haunches through the portal. Across the room he saw the haunches reappear . . . just the haunches. The disembodied little feet were digging frantically at the rough wood of the crate.

Carune pulled the mouse back. No catatonia here; it bit the webbing between his thumb and forefinger hard enough to bring blood. Carune dropped the mouse hurriedly back into the I CAME FROM STACKPOLE'S HOUSE OF PETS box and used the small bottle of hydrogen peroxide in his lab first-aid kit to disinfect the bite.

He put a Band-Aid over it, then rummaged around until he found a pair of heavy work-gloves. He could feel the time running out,

running out, running out. It was 2:11 now.

He got another mouse out and pushed it through backward—all the way. He hurried across to Portal Two. This mouse lived for almost two minutes; it even walked a little, after a fashion. It staggered across the Pomona orange crate, fell on its side, struggled weakly to its feet, and then only squatted there. Carune snapped his fingers near its head and it lurched perhaps four steps further before falling on its side again. The aspiration of its sides slowed . . . slowed . . . stopped. It was dead.

Carune felt a chill.

He went back, got another mouse, and pushed it halfway through headfirst. He saw it reappear at the other end, just the head . . . then the neck and chest. Cautiously, Carune relaxed his grip on the mouse's body, ready to grab if it got frisky. It didn't. The mouse only stood there, half of it on one side of the barn, half on the other.

Carune jogged back to Portal Two.

The mouse was alive, but its pink eyes were glazed and dull. Its whiskers didn't move. Going around to the back of the portal, Carune saw an amazing sight; as he had seen the pencil in cutaway, so now he saw the mouse. He saw the vertebrae of its tiny spine ending abruptly in round white circles; he saw its blood moving through the vessels; he saw the tissue moving gently with the tide of life around its minuscule gullet. If nothing else, he thought (and wrote later in his *Popular Mechanics* article), it would make a wonderful diagnostic tool.

Then he noticed that the tidal movement of the tissues had ceased. The mouse had died.

Carune pulled the mouse out by the snout, not liking the feel of it, and dropped it into the paper sack with its companions. *Enough with the white mice*, he decided. *The mice die. They die if you put them through all the way, and they die if you put them through halfway headfirst. Put them through halfway butt-first, they stay frisky.*

*What the hell is in there?*

*Sensory input*, he thought almost randomly. *When they go through they see something—hear something—touch something—God, maybe even smell something—that literally kills them. What?*

He had no idea—but he meant to find out.

Carune still had almost forty minutes before COMLINK pulled the data base out from under him. He unscrewed the thermometer from the wall beside his kitchen door, trotted back to the barn with it, and put it through the portals. The thermometer went in at 83 degrees F; it came out at 83 degrees F. He rummaged through the spare room where he kept a few toys to amuse his grandchildren with; among them he found a packet of balloons. He blew one of them up, tied it off, and batted it through the portal. It came out intact and unharmed—a start down the road toward answering his question about a sudden change in pressure somehow caused by what he was already thinking of as the Jaunting process.

With five minutes to go before the witching hour, he ran into his house, snatched up his goldfish bowl (inside, Percy and Patrick swished their tails and darted about in agitation) and ran back with it. He shoved the goldfish bowl through Portal One.

He hurried across to Portal Two, where his goldfish bowl sat on the crate. Patrick was floating belly-up; Percy swam slowly around near the bottom of the bowl, as if dazed. A moment later he also floated belly-up. Carune was reaching for the goldfish bowl when Percy gave a weak flick of his tail and resumed his lackadaisical swimming. Slowly, he seemed to throw off whatever the effect had been, and by the time Carune got back from Mosconi's Veterinary Clinic that night at nine o'clock, Percy seemed as perky as ever.

Patrick was dead.

Carune fed Percy a double ration of fish food and gave Patrick a hero's burial in the garden.

After the computer had cut him out for the day, Carune decided to hitch a ride over to Mosconi's. Accordingly, he was standing on the shoulder of Route 26 at a quarter of four that afternoon, dressed in jeans and a loud plaid sport coat, his thumb out, a paper bag in his other hand.

Finally, a kid driving a Chevette not much bigger than a sardine can pulled over, and Carune got in. "What you got in the bag, my man?"

“Bunch of dead mice,” Carune said. Eventually another car stopped. When the farmer behind the wheel asked about the bag, Carune told him it was a couple of sandwiches.

Mosconi dissected one of the mice on the spot, and agreed to dissect the others later and call Carune on the telephone with the results. The initial result was not very encouraging; so far as Mosconi could tell, the mouse he had opened up was perfectly healthy except for the fact that it was dead.

Depressing.

“Victor Carune was eccentric, but he was no fool,” Mark said. The Jaunt attendants were getting close now, and he supposed he would have to hurry up . . . or he would be finishing this in the Wake-Up Room in Whitehead City. “Hitching a ride back home that night—and he had to walk most of the way, so the story goes—he realized that he had maybe solved a third of the energy crisis at one single stroke. All the goods that had to go by train and truck and boat and plane before that day could be Jaunted. You could write a letter to your friend in London or Rome or Senegal, and he could have it the very next day—without an ounce of oil needing to be burned. We take it for granted, but it was a big thing to Carune, believe me. And to everyone else, as well.”

“But what happened to the mice, Daddy?” Rick asked.

“That’s what Carune kept asking himself,” Mark said, “because he also realized that if *people* could use the Jaunt, that would solve almost *all* of the energy crisis. And that we might be able to conquer space. In his *Popular Mechanics* article he said that even the stars could finally be ours. And the metaphor he used was crossing a shallow stream without getting your shoes wet. You’d just get a big rock, and throw it in the stream, then get another rock, stand on the first rock, and throw *that* into the stream, go back and get a third rock, go back to the second rock, throw the third rock into the stream, and keep up like that until you’d made a path of stepping-stones all the way across the stream . . . or in this case, the solar system, or maybe even the galaxy.”

"I don't get that at *all*," Patty said.

"That's because you got turkey-turds for brains," Ricky said smugly.

"I do *not!* Daddy, Ricky said—"

"Children, don't," Marilyns said gently.

"Carune pretty much foresaw what has happened," Mark said.

"Drone rocket ships programmed to land, first on the moon, then on Mars, then on Venus and the outer moons of Jupiter . . . drones really only programmed to do one thing after they landed—"

"Set up a Jaunt station for astronauts," Ricky said.

Mark nodded. "And now there are scientific outposts all over the solar system, and maybe someday, long after we're gone, there will even be another planet for us. There are Jaunt-ships on their way to four different star systems with solar systems of their own . . . but it'll be a long, long time before they get there."

"I want to know what happened to the *mice*," Patty said impatiently.

"Well, eventually the government got into it," Mark said. "Carune kept them out as long as he could, but finally they got wind of it and landed on him with both feet. Carune was nominal head of the Jaunt project until he died ten years later, but he was never really in charge of it again."

"Jeez, the poor guy!" Rick said.

"But he got to be a hero," Patricia said. "He's in *all* the history books, just like President Lincoln and President Hart."

*I'm sure that's a great comfort to him . . . wherever he is*, Mark thought, and then went on, carefully glossing over the rough parts.

The government, which had been pushed to the wall by the escalating energy crisis, did indeed come in with both feet. They wanted the Jaunt on a paying basis as soon as possible—like yesterday. Faced with economic chaos and the increasingly probable picture of anarchy and mass starvation in the 1990's, only last-ditch pleading made them put off announcement of the Jaunt before an exhaustive spectrographic analysis of Jaunted articles could be

completed. When the analyses were complete—and showed no changes in the makeup of Jaunted artifacts—the existence of the Jaunt was announced with international hoopla. Showing intelligence for once (necessity is, after all, the mother of invention), the U.S. government put Young and Rubicam in charge of the pr.

That was where the myth-making around Victor Carune, an elderly, rather peculiar man who showered perhaps twice a week and changed his clothes only when he thought of it, began. Young and Rubicam and the agencies which followed them turned Carune into a combination of Thomas Edison, Eli Whitney, Pecos Bill, and Flash Gordon. The blackly funny part of all this (and Mark Oates did not pass this on to his family) was that Victor Carune might even then have been dead or insane; art imitates life, they say, and Carune would have been familiar with the Robert Heinlein novel about the doubles who stand in for figures in the public eye.

Victor Carune was a problem; a nagging problem that wouldn't go away. He was a loudmouthed foot-dragger, a holdover from the Ecological Sixties—a time when there was still enough energy floating around to allow foot-dragging as a luxury. These, on the other hand, were the Nasty Eighties, with coal clouds befouling the sky and a long section of the California coastline expected to be uninhabitable for perhaps sixty years due to a nuclear “excursion.”

Victor Carune remained a problem until about 1991—and then he became a rubber stamp, smiling, quiet, grandfatherly; a figure seen waving from podiums in newsfilms. In 1993, three years before he officially died, he rode in the pace-car at the Tournament of Roses Parade.

Puzzling. And a little ominous.

The results of the announcement of the Jaunt—of working teleportation—on October 19th, 1988, was a hammerstroke of worldwide excitement and economic upheaval. On the world money markets, the battered old American dollar suddenly skyrocketed through the roof. People who had bought gold at eight hundred and six dollars an ounce suddenly found that a pound of gold would bring something less than twelve hundred dollars. In the year between the announcement of the Jaunt and the first working Jaunt-Stations in

New York and L.A., the stock market climbed a little over a thousand points. The price of oil dropped only seventy cents a barrel, but by 1994, with Jaunt-Stations crisscrossing the U.S. at the pressure-points of seventy major cities, OPEC had ceased to exist, and the price of oil began to tumble. By 1998, with Stations in most free-world cities and goods routinely Jaunted between Tokyo and Paris, Paris and London, London and New York, New York and Berlin, oil had dropped to fourteen dollars a barrel. By 2006, when people at last began to use the Jaunt on a regular basis, the stock market had leveled off five thousand points above its 1987 levels, oil was selling for six dollars a barrel, and the oil companies had begun to change their names. Texaco became Texaco Oil/Water, and Mobil had become Mobil Hydro-2-Ox.

By 2045, water-prospecting became the big game and oil had become what it had been in 1906: a toy.

“What about the *mice*, Daddy?” Patty asked impatiently. “What happened to the *mice*?”

Mark decided it might be okay now, and he drew the attention of his children to the Jaunt attendants, who were passing gas out only three aisles from them. Rick only nodded, but Patty looked troubled as a lady with a fashionably shaved-and-painted head took a whiff from the rubber mask and fell unconscious.

“Can’t Jaunt when you’re awake, can you, Dad?” Ricky said.

Mark nodded and smiled reassuringly at Patricia. “Carune understood even before the government got into it,” he said.

“How *did* the government get into it, Mark?” Marilys asked.

Mark smiled. “Computer time,” he said. “The data base. That was the only thing that Carune couldn’t beg, borrow, or steal. The computer handled the actual particulate transmission—billions of pieces of information. It’s still the computer, you know, that makes sure you don’t come through with your head somewhere in the middle of your stomach.”

Marilys shuddered.

“Don’t be frightened,” he said. “There’s never been a screw-up like that, Mare. *Never.*”

“There’s always a first time,” she muttered.

Mark looked at Ricky. “How did he know?” he asked his son. “How did Carune know you had to be asleep, Rick?”

“When he put the mice in backwards,” Rick said slowly, “they were all right. At least as long as he didn’t put them *all* in. They were only—well, messed up—when he put them in headfirst. Right?”

“Right,” Mark said. The Jaunt attendants were moving in now, wheeling their silent cart of oblivion. He wasn’t going to have time to finish after all; perhaps it was just as well. “It didn’t take many experiments to clarify what was happening, of course. The Jaunt killed the entire trucking business, kids, but at least it took the pressure off the experimenters—”

Yes. Foot-dragging had become a luxury again, and the tests had gone on for better than twenty years, although Carune’s first tests with drugged mice had convinced him that unconscious animals were not subject to what was known forever after as the Organic Effect or, more simply, the Jaunt Effect.

He and Mosconi had drugged several mice, put them through Portal One, retrieved them at the other side, and had waited anxiously for their test subjects to reawaken . . . or to die. They had reawakened, and after a brief recovery period they had taken up their mouse-lives—eating, fucking, playing, and shitting—with no ill effects whatsoever. Those mice became the first of several generations which were studied with great interest. They showed no long-term ill effects; they did not die sooner, their pups were not born with two heads or green fur and neither did these pups show any other long-term effects.

“When did they start with people, Dad?” Rick asked, although he had certainly read this in school. “Tell that part!”

“I wanna know what happened to the *mice!*” Patty said again.

Although the Jaunt attendants had now reached the head of their aisle (they themselves were near the foot), Mark Oates paused a moment to reflect. His daughter, who knew less, had nevertheless

listened to her heart and asked the right question. Therefore, it was his son's question he chose to answer.

The first human Jaunters had not been astronauts or test pilots; they were convict volunteers who had not even been screened with any particular interest in their psychological stability. In fact, it was the view of the scientists now in charge (Carune was not one of them; he had become what is commonly called a titular head) that the freakier they were, the better; if a mental spaz could go through and come out all right—or at least, no worse than he or she had been going in—then the process was probably safe for the executives, politicians, and fashion models of the world.

Half a dozen of these volunteers were brought to Province, Vermont (a site which had since become every bit as famous as Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, had once been), gassed, and fed through the portals exactly two hand-miles apart, one by one.

Mark told his children this, because of course all six of the volunteers came back just fine and feeling perky, thank you. He did not tell them about the purported *seventh* volunteer. This figure, who might have been real, or myth, or (most probably) a combination of the two, even had a name: Rudy Foggia. Foggia was supposed to have been a convicted murderer, sentenced to death in the state of Florida for the murders of four old people at a Sarasota bridge party. According to the apocrypha, the combined forces of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Effa Bee Eye had come to Foggia with a unique, one-time, take-it-or-leave-it, absolutely-not-to-be-repeated offer. Take the Jaunt wide awake. Come through okay and we put your pardon, signed by Governor Thurgood, in your hand. Out you walk, free to follow the One True Cross or to off a few more old folks playing bridge in their yellow pants and white shoes. Come through dead or insane, tough titty. As the kitty was purported to have said. What do you say?

Foggia, who understood that Florida was one state that really meant business about the death penalty and whose lawyer had told

him that he was in all probability the next to ride Old Sparky, said okay.

Enough scientists to fill a jury box (with four or five left over as alternates) were present on the Great Day in the summer of 2007, but if the Foggia story was true—and Mark Oates believed it probably was—he doubted if it had been any of the scientists who talked. More likely it had been one of the guards who had flown with Foggia from Raiford to Montpelier and then escorted him from Montpelier to Province in an armored truck.

“If I come through this alive,” Foggia is reported to have said, “I want a chicken dinner before I blow this joint.” He then stepped through Portal One and reappeared at Portal Two immediately.

He came through alive, but Rudy Foggia was in no condition to eat his chicken dinner. In the space it took to Jaunt across the two miles (pegged at 0.000000000067 of a second by computer), Foggia’s hair had turned snow white. His face had not changed in any physical way—it was not lined or jowly or wasted—but it gave the impression of great, almost incredible age. Foggia shuffled out of the portal, his eyes bulging blankly, his mouth twitching, his hands splayed out in front of him. Presently he began to drool. The scientists who had gathered around drew away from him and no, Mark really doubted if any of them had talked; they knew about the rats, after all, and the guinea pigs, and the hamsters; any animal, in fact, with more brains than your average flatworm. They must have felt a bit like those German scientists who tried to impregnate Jewish women with the sperm of German shepherds.

“*What happened?*” one of the scientists shouted (is reputed to have shouted). It was the only question Foggia had a chance to answer.

“It’s eternity in there,” he said, and dropped dead of what was diagnosed as a massive heart attack.

The scientists foregathered there were left with his corpse (which was neatly taken care of by the CIA and the Effa Bee Eye) and that strange and awful dying declaration: *It’s eternity in there.*

“Daddy, I want to know what happened to the *mice*,” Patty repeated. The only reason she had a chance to ask again was because the man in the expensive suit and the Eterna-Shine shoes had developed into something of a problem for the Jaunt attendants. He didn’t really want to take the gas, and was disguising it with a lot of bluff, bully-boy talk. The attendants were doing their job as well as they could—smiling, cajoling, persuading—but it had slowed them down.

Mark sighed. He had opened the subject—only as a way of distracting his children from the pre-Jaunt festivities, it was true, but he *had* opened it—and now he supposed he would have to close it as truthfully as he could without alarming them or upsetting them.

He would not tell them, for instance, about C. K. Summers’s book, *The Politics of the Jaunt*, which contained one section called “The Jaunt Under the Rose,” a compendium of the more believable rumors about the Jaunt. The story of Rudy Foggia, he of the bridgeclub murders and the uneaten chicken dinner, was in there. There were also case histories of some other thirty (or more . . . or less . . . or who knows) volunteers, scapegoats, or madmen who had Jaunted wide awake over the last three hundred years. Most of them arrived at the other end dead. The rest were hopelessly insane. In some cases, the act of reemerging had actually seemed to shock them to death.

Summers’s section of Jaunt rumors and apocrypha contained other unsettling intelligence as well: the Jaunt had apparently been used several times as a murder weapon. In the most famous (and only documented) case, which had occurred a mere thirty years ago, a Jaunt researcher named Lester Michaelson had tied up his wife with their daughter’s plexiplast Dreamropes and pushed her, screaming, through the Jaunt portal at Silver City, Nevada. But before doing it, Michaelson had pushed the Nil button on his Jaunt board, erasing each and every one of the hundreds of thousands of possible portals through which Mrs. Michaelson might have emerged—anywhere from neighboring Reno to the experimental Jaunt-Station on Io, one of the Jovian moons. So there was Mrs. Michaelson, Jaunting forever somewhere out there in the ozone.

Michaelson's lawyer, after Michaelson had been held sane and able to stand trial for what he had done (within the narrow limits of the law, perhaps he was sane, but in any practical sense, Lester Michaelson was just as mad as a hatter), had offered a novel defense: his client could not be tried for murder because no one could prove conclusively that Mrs. Michaelson was dead.

This had raised the terrible specter of the woman, discorporeal but somehow still sentient, screaming in limbo . . . forever. Michaelson was convicted and executed.

In addition, Summers suggested, the Jaunt had been used by various tinpot dictators to get rid of political dissidents and political adversaries; some thought that the Mafia had their own illegal Jaunt-Stations, tied into the central Jaunt computer through their CIA connections. It was suggested that the Mafia used the Jaunt's Nil capability to get rid of bodies which, unlike that of the unfortunate Mrs. Michaelson, were already dead. Seen in that light, the Jaunt became the ultimate Jimmy Hoffa machine, ever so much better than the local gravel pit or quarry.

All of this had led to Summers's conclusions and theories about the Jaunt; and that, of course, led back to Patty's persistent question about the mice.

"Well," Mark said slowly, as his wife signaled with her eyes for him to be careful, "even now no one really knows, Patty. But all the experiments with animals—including the mice—seemed to lead to the conclusion that while the Jaunt is almost instantaneous *physically*, it takes a long, *long* time mentally."

"I don't get it," Patty said glumly. "I knew I wouldn't."

But Ricky was looking at his father thoughtfully. "They went on thinking," he said. "The test animals. And so would we, if we didn't get knocked out."

"Yes," Mark said. "That's what we believe now."

Something was dawning in Ricky's eyes. Fright? Excitement? "It isn't just teleportation, is it, Dad? It's some kind of time-warp."

*It's eternity in there*, Mark thought.

"In a way," he said. "But that's a comic-book phrase—it sounds good but doesn't really mean anything, Rick. It seems to revolve

around the idea of consciousness, and the fact that consciousness doesn't particulate—it remains whole and constant. It also retains some screwy sense of time. But we don't know how pure consciousness would measure time, or even if that concept has any meaning to pure mind. We can't even conceive what pure mind might be. ”

Mark fell silent, troubled by his son's eyes, which were suddenly so sharp and curious. *He understands but he doesn't understand*, Mark thought. Your mind can be your best friend; it can keep you amused even when there's nothing to read, nothing to do. But it can turn on you when it's left with no input for too long. It can turn on you, which means that it turns on itself, savages itself, perhaps consumes itself in an unthinkable act of auto-cannibalism. How long in there, in terms of years? 0.00000000067 seconds for the body to Jaunt, but how long for the unarticulated consciousness? A hundred years? A thousand? A million? A billion? How long alone with your thoughts in an endless field of white? And then, when a billion eternities have passed, the crashing return of light and form and body. Who wouldn't go insane?

“Ricky—” he began, but the Jaunt attendants had arrived with their cart.

“Are you ready?” one asked.

Mark nodded.

“Daddy, I'm scared,” Patty said in a thin voice. “Will it hurt?”

“No, honey, of course it won't hurt,” Mark said, and his voice was calm enough, but his heart was beating a little fast—it always did, although this would be something like his twenty-fifth Jaunt. “I'll go first and you'll see how easy it is.”

The Jaunt attendant looked at him questioningly. Mark nodded and made a smile. The mask descended. Mark took it in his own hands and breathed deep of the dark.

The first thing he became aware of was the hard black Martian sky as seen through the top of the dome which surrounded Whitehead

City. It was night here, and the stars sprawled with a fiery brilliance undreamed of on earth.

The second thing he became aware of was some sort of disturbance in the recovery room—mutters, then shouts, then a shrill scream. *Oh dear God, that's Marilys!* he thought, and struggled up from his Jaunt couch, fighting the waves of dizziness.

There was another scream, and he saw Jaunt attendants running toward their couches, their bright red jumpers flying around their knees. Marilys staggered toward him, pointing. She screamed again and then collapsed on the floor, sending an unoccupied Jaunt couch rolling slowly down the aisle with one weakly clutching hand.

But Mark had already followed the direction of her pointing finger. He had seen. It hadn't been fright in Ricky's eyes; it had been excitement. He should have known, because he knew Ricky—Ricky, who had fallen out of the highest crotch of the tree in their backyard in Schenectady when he was only seven, who had broken his arm (and was lucky that had been all he'd broken); Ricky who dared to go faster and further on his Slideboard than any other kid in the neighborhood; Ricky who was first to take any dare. Ricky and fear were not well acquainted.

Until now.

Beside Ricky, his sister still mercifully slept. The thing that had been his son bounced and writhed on its Jaunt couch, a twelve-year-old boy with a snow-white fall of hair and eyes which were incredibly ancient, the corneas gone a sickly yellow. Here was a creature older than time masquerading as a boy; and yet it bounced and writhed with a kind of horrid, obscene glee, and at its choked, lunatic cackles the Jaunt attendants drew back in terror. Some of them fled, although they had been trained to cope with just such an unthinkable eventuality.

The old-young legs twitched and quivered. Claw hands beat and twisted and danced on the air; abruptly they descended and the thing that had been his son began to claw at its face.

“Longer than you think, Dad!” it cackled. “Longer than you think! Held my breath when they gave me the gas! Wanted to see! I saw! I saw! Longer than you think!”

Cackling and screeching, the thing on the Jaunt couch suddenly clawed its own eyes out. Blood gouted. The recovery room was an aviary of screaming voices now.

“Longer than you think, Dad! I saw! I saw! Long Jaunt! Longer than you think—”

It said other things before the Jaunt attendants were finally able to bear it away, rolling its couch swiftly away as it screamed and clawed at the eyes that had seen the unseeable forever and ever; it said other things, and then it began to scream, but Mark Oates didn't hear it because by then he was screaming himself.

## The Wedding Gig

In the year 1927 we were playing jazz in a speakeasy just south of Morgan, Illinois, a town seventy miles from Chicago. It was real hick country, not another big town for twenty miles in any direction. But there were a lot of farmboys with a hankering for something stronger than Moxie after a hot day in the field, and a lot of would-be jazz-babies out stepping with their drugstore-cowboy boyfriends. There were also some married men (you always know them, friend; they might as well be wearing signs) coming far out of their way to be where no one would recognize them while they cut a rug with their not-quite-legit lassies.

That was when jazz was jazz, not noise. We had a five-man combination—drums, comet, trombone, piano, trumpet—and we were pretty good. That was still three years before we made our first record and four years before talkies.

We were playing “Bamboo Bay” when this big fellow walked in, wearing a white suit and smoking a pipe with more squiggles in it than a French horn. The whole band was a little tight by that time but everyone in the crowd was absolutely blind and really ramping the joint. They were in a good mood, though; there hadn’t been a single fight all night. All of us guys were sweating rivers and Tommy Englander, the guy who ran the place, kept sending up rye as smooth as a varnished plank. Englander was a good joe to work for, and he liked our sound. Of course that made him aces in my book.

The guy in the white suit sat down at the bar and I forgot him. We finished up the set with “Aunt Hagar’s Blues,” which was a tune that passed for racy out in the boondocks back then, and got a good round of applause. Manny had a big grin on his face when he put his trumpet down, and I clapped him on the back as we left the bandstand. There was a lonely-looking girl in a green evening gown who had been giving me the eye all night. She was a redhead, and I’ve always been partial to those. I got a signal from her eyes and the

tilt of her head, so I started weaving through the crowd to see if she wanted a drink.

I was halfway there when the man in the white suit stepped in front of me. Up close he looked like a pretty tough egg. His hair was bristling up in the back in spite of what smelled like a whole bottle of Wildroot Creme Oil and he had the flat, oddly shiny eyes that some deep-sea fish have.

“Want to talk to you outside,” he said.

The redhead looked away with a small pout.

“It can wait,” I said. “Let me by.”

“My name is Scollay. Mike Scollay.”

I knew the name. Mike Scollay was a small-time racketeer from Shytown who paid for his beer and skittles by running booze in from Canada. The high-tension stuff that started out where the men wear skirts and play bagpipes. When they aren’t tending the vats, that is. His picture had been in the paper a few times. The last time had been when some other dancehall Dan tried to gun him down.

“You’re pretty far from Chicago, my friend,” I said.

“I brought some chaperones,” he said, “don’t worry. Outside.”

The redhead took another look. I pointed at Scollay and shrugged. She sniffed and turned her back.

“There,” I said. “You queered that.”

“Bimbos like that are a penny a bushel in Chi,” he said.

“I didn’t *want* a bushel.”

“Outside.”

I followed him out. The air was cool on my skin after the smoky atmosphere of the club, sweet with fresh-cut alfalfa. The stars were out, soft and flickering. The hoods were out, too, but they didn’t look soft, and the only things flickering were their cigarettes.

“I got a job for you,” Scollay said.

“Is that so.”

“Pays two C’s. Split it with the band or hold back a hundred for yourself.”

“What is it?”

“A gig, what else? My sis is tying the knot. I want you to play for the reception. She likes Dixieland. Two of my boys say you play

good Dixieland.”

I told you Englander was good to work for. He was paying us eighty bucks a week. This guy was offering over twice that for one gig.

“It’s from five to eight, next Friday,” Scollay said. “At the Sons of Erin Hall on Grover Street.”

“It’s too much,” I said. “How come?”

“There’s two reasons,” Scollay said. He puffed on his pipe. It looked out of place in the middle of that yegg’s face. He should have had a Lucky Strike Green dangling from that mouth, or maybe a Sweet Caporal. The Cigarette of Bums. With the pipe he didn’t look like a bum. The pipe made him look sad and funny.

“Two reasons,” he repeated. “Maybe you heard the Greek tried to rub me out.”

“I saw your picture in the paper,” I said. “You were the guy trying to crawl into the sidewalk.”

“Smart guy,” he growled, but with no real force. “I’m getting too big for him. The Greek is getting old. He thinks small. He ought to be back in the old country, drinking olive oil and looking at the Pacific.”

“I think it’s the Aegean,” I said.

“I don’t give a tin shit if it’s Lake Huron,” he said. “Point is, he don’t want to be old. He still wants to get me. He don’t know the coming thing when he sees it.”

“That’s you.”

“You’re fucking-A.”

“In other words, you’re paying two C’s because our last number might be arranged for Enfield rifle accompaniment.”

Anger flashed in his face, but there was something else there, as well. I didn’t know what it was then, but I think I do now. I think it was sorrow. “Buddy Gee, I got the best protection money can buy. If anyone funny sticks his nose in, he won’t get a chance to sniff twice.”

“What’s the other thing?”

He spoke softly. “My sister’s marrying an Italian.”

“A good Catholic like you,” I sneered softly.

The anger flashed again, white-hot, and for a minute I thought I’d pushed him too far. “A good *mick!* A good old shanty-Irish mick,

sonny, and you better not forget it!" To that he added, almost too low to be heard, "Even if I did lose most of my hair, it was red."

I started to say something, but he didn't give me the chance. He swung me around and pressed his face down until our noses almost touched. I have never seen such anger and humiliation and rage and determination in a man's face. You never see that look on a white face these days, how it is to be hurt and made to feel small. All that love and hate. But I saw it on his face that night and knew I could crack wise a few more times and get my ass killed.

"She's fat," he half-whispered, and I could smell checkerberry mints on his breath. "A lot of people have been laughing at me while my back was turned. They don't do it when I can see them, though, I'll tell you that, Mr. Comet Player. Because maybe this dago was all she could get. But you're not gonna laugh at me or her or the dago. And nobody else is, either. Because you're gonna play too loud. No one is going to laugh at my sis."

"We never laugh when we play our gigs. Makes it too hard to pucker."

That relieved the tension. He laughed—a short, barking laugh. "You be there, ready to play at five. The Sons of Erin on Grover Street. I'll pay your expenses both ways, too."

He wasn't asking. I felt railroaded into the decision, but he wasn't giving me time to talk it over. He was already striding away, and one of his chaperones was holding open the back door of a Packard coupé.

They drove away. I stayed out awhile longer and had a smoke. The evening was soft and fine and Scollay seemed more and more like something I might have dreamed. I was just wishing we could bring the bandstand out to the parking lot and play when Biff tapped me on the shoulder.

"Time," he said.

"Okay."

We went back in. The redhead had picked up some salt-and-pepper sailor who looked twice her age. I don't know what a member of the U.S. Navy was doing in Illinois, but as far as I was concerned, she could have him if her taste was that bad. I didn't feel so good.

The rye had gone to my head, and Scollay seemed a lot more real in here, where the fumes of what he and his kind sold were strong enough to float on.

“We had a request for ‘Camptown Races,’ ” Charlie said.

“Forget it,” I said curtly. “We don’t play that nigger stuff till after midnight.”

I could see Billy-Boy stiffen as he was sitting down to the piano, and then his face was smooth again. I could have kicked myself around the block, but, goddammit, a man can’t shift gears on his mouth overnight, or in a year, or maybe even in ten. In those days nigger was a word I hated and kept saying.

I went over to him. “I’m sorry, Bill—I haven’t been myself tonight.”

“Sure,” he said, but his eyes looked over my shoulder and I knew my apology wasn’t accepted. That was bad, but I’ll tell you what was worse—knowing he was disappointed in me.

I told them about the gig during our next break, being square with them about the money and how Scollay was a hoodlum (although I didn’t tell them about the other hood who was out to get him). I also told them that Scollay’s sister was fat and Scollay was sensitive about it. Anyone who cracked any jokes about inland barges might wind up with a third breather-hole, somewhat above the other two.

I kept looking at Billy-Boy Williams while I talked, but you could read nothing on the cat’s face. It would be easier trying to figure out what a walnut was thinking by reading the wrinkles on the shell. Billy-Boy was the best piano player we ever had, and we were all sorry about the little ways it got taken out on him as we traveled from one place to another. In the south was the worst, of course—Jim Crow car, nigger heaven at the movies, stuff like that—but it wasn’t that great in the north, either. But what could I do? Huh? You go on and tell me. In those days you lived with those differences.

\* \* \*

We turned up at the Sons of Erin Hall on Friday at four o'clock, an hour before. We drove up in the special Ford truck Biff and Manny and me put together. The back end was all enclosed with canvas, and there were two cots bolted on the floor. We even had an electric hotplate that ran off the battery, and the band's name was painted on the outside.

The day was just right—a ham-and-egger if you ever saw one, with little white summer clouds casting shadows on the fields. But once we got into the city it was hot and kind of grim, full of the hustle and bustle you got out of touch with in a place like Morgan. By the time we got to the hall my clothes were sticking to me and I needed to visit the comfort station. I could have used a shot of Tommy Englander's rye, too.

The Sons of Erin was a big wooden building, affiliated with the church where Scollay's sis was getting married. You know the sort of place I mean if you ever took the Wafer, I guess—CYO meetings on Tuesdays, bingo on Wednesdays, and a sociable for the kids on Saturday nights.

We trooped up the walk, each of us carrying his instrument in one hand and some part of Biff's drum-kit in the other. A thin lady with no breastworks to speak of was directing traffic inside. Two sweating men were hanging crepe paper. There was a bandstand at the front of the hall, and over it was a banner and a couple of big pink paper wedding bells. The tinsel lettering on the banner said BEST ALWAYS MAUREEN AND RICO.

Maureen and Rico. Damned if I couldn't see why Scollay was so wound up. Maureen and Rico. Stone the crows.

The thin lady swooped down on us. She looked like she had a lot to say so I beat her to punch. "We're the band," I said.

"The band?" She blinked at our instruments distrustfully. "Oh. I was hoping you were the caterers."

I smiled as if caterers always carried snare drums and trombone cases.

"You can—" she began, but just then a ruff-tuff-creampuff of about nineteen strolled over. A cigarette was dangling from the corner of

his mouth, but so far as I could see it wasn't doing a thing for his image except making his left eye water.

"Open that shit up," he said.

Charlie and Biff looked at me. I shrugged. We opened our cases and he looked at the horns. Seeing nothing that looked like you could load it and fire it, he wandered back to his corner and sat down on a folding chair.

"You can set your things up right away," the thin lady went on, as if she had never been interrupted. "There's a piano in the other room. I'll have my men wheel it in when we're done putting up our decorations."

Biff was already lugging his drum-kit up on to the little stage.

"I thought you were the caterers," she repeated in a distraught way. "Mr. Scollay ordered a wedding cake and there are hors d'oeuvres and roasts of beef and—"

"They'll be here, ma'am," I said. "They get payment on delivery."

"—two roasts of pork and a capon and Mr. Scollay will be just *furious* if—" She saw one of her men pausing to light a cigarette just below a dangling streamer of crepe and shrieked, "*HENRY!*" The man jumped as if he had been shot. I escaped to the bandstand.

We were all set up by a quarter of five. Charlie, the trombone player, was wah-wahing away into a mute and Biff was loosening up his wrists. The caterers had arrived at 4:20 and Miss Gibson (that was the thin lady's name; she made a business out of such affairs) almost threw herself on them.

Four long tables had been set up and covered with white linen, and four black women in caps and aprons were setting places. The cake had been wheeled into the middle of the room for everyone to gasp over. It was six layers high, with a little bride and groom standing on top.

I walked outside to grab a fag and just about halfway through it I heard them coming—tooting away and raising a racket. I stayed where I was until I saw the lead car coming around the corner of the block below the church, then I snubbed my smoke and went inside.

“They’re coming,” I told Miss Gibson.

She went white and actually swayed on her heels. There was a lady that should have taken up a different profession—interior decoration, maybe, or library science. “The tomato juice!” she screamed. “Bring in the tomato juice!”

I went back to the bandstand and we got ready. We had played gigs like this before—what combo hasn’t?—and when the doors opened, we swung into a ragtime version of “The Wedding March” that I had arranged myself. If you think that sounds sort of like a lemonade cocktail I have to agree with you, but most receptions we played for just ate it up, and this one was no different. Everybody clapped and yelled and whistled, then started gassing amongst themselves. But I could tell by the way some of them were tapping their feet while they talked that we were getting through. We were on—I thought it was going to be a good gig. I know everything they say about the Irish, and most of it’s true, but, hot damn! they can’t not have a good time once they are set up for it.

All the same, I have to admit I almost blew the whole number when the groom and the blushing bride walked in. Scollay, dressed in a morning coat and striped trousers, shot me a hard look, and don’t think I didn’t see it. I managed to keep a poker face, and the rest of the band did, too—no one so much as missed a note. Lucky for us. The wedding party, which looked as if it were made up almost entirely of Scollay’s goons and their molls, were wise already. They had to be, if they’d been at the church. But I’d only heard faint rumblings, you might say.

You’ve heard about Jack Sprat and his wife. Well, this was a hundred times worse. Scollay’s sister had the red hair he was losing, and it was long and curly. But not that pretty auburn shade you may be imagining. No, this was County Cork red—bright as a carrot and kinky as a bedspring. Her natural complexion was curd-white but she was wearing almost too many freckles to tell. And had Scollay said she was fat? Brother, that was like saying you could buy a few things in Macy’s. She was a human dinosaur—three hundred and fifty pounds if she was one. It had all gone to her bosom and hips and butt and thighs, like it usually does on fat girls, making what should

be sexy grotesque and sort of frightening instead. Some fat girls have pathetically pretty faces, but Scollay's sis didn't even have that. Her eyes were too close together, her mouth was too big, and she had jug-ears. Then there were the freckles. Even thin she would have been ugly enough to stop a clock—hell, a whole show-window of them.

That alone wouldn't have made anybody laugh, unless they were stupid or just poison-mean. It was when you added the groom, Rico, to the picture that you wanted to laugh until you cried. He could have put on a top hat and still stood in the top half of her shadow. He looked like he might have weighed ninety pounds or so, soaking wet. He was skinny as a rail, his complexion darkly olive. When he grinned around nervously, his teeth looked like a picket fence in a slum neighborhood.

We kept right on playing.

Scollay roared: "The bride and the groom! God give 'em every happiness!" *And if God don't*, his thundering brow proclaimed, *you folks here better—at least today*.

Everyone shouted their approval and applauded. We finished our number with a flourish, and that brought another round. Scollay's sister Maureen smiled. God, her mouth was big. Rico simpered.

For a while everyone just walked around, eating cheese and cold cuts on crackers and drinking Scollay's best bootleg Scotch. I had three shots myself between numbers, and it put Tommy Englander's rye in the shade.

Scollay began to look happier, too—a little, anyway.

He cruised by the bandstand once and said, "You guys play pretty good." Coming from a music lover like him, I reckoned that was a real compliment.

Just before everyone sat down to the meal, Maureen came up herself. She was even uglier up close, and her white gown (there must have been enough white satin wrapped around that mama to cover three beds) wasn't helping her at all. She asked us if we could play "Roses of Picardy" like Red Nichols and His Five Pennies, because, she said, it was her very favorite song. Fat and ugly she was, but hoity-toity she was not—unlike some of the two-bitters

who'd been dropping by to make requests. We played it, but not very well. Still, she gave us a sweet smile that was almost enough to make her pretty, and she applauded when it was done.

They sat down to dinner around 6:15, and Miss Gibson's hired help rolled the chow to them. They fell to like a bunch of animals, which was not entirely surprising, and kept knocking back that high-tension booze the whole time. I couldn't help watching the way Maureen was eating. I tried to look away, but my eye kept wandering back, as if to make sure it was seeing what it *thought* it was seeing. The rest of them were packing it in, but she made them look like old ladies in a tearoom. She had no more time for sweet smiles or listening to "Roses of Picardy"; you could have stuck a sign in front of her that said WOMAN WORKING. That lady didn't need a knife and fork; she needed a steam shovel and a conveyor belt. It was sad to watch her. And Rico (you could just see his chin over the table where the bride was sitting, and a pair of brown eyes as shy as a deer's) kept handing her things, never changing that nervous simper.

We took a twenty-minute break while the cake-cutting ceremony was going on, and Miss Gibson herself fed us in the kitchen. It was hot as blazes with the cookstove on, and none of us was too hungry. The gig had started out feeling right and now it felt wrong. I could see it on my band's faces . . . on Miss Gibson's, too, for that matter.

By the time we returned to the bandstand, the drinking had begun in earnest. Tough-looking guys staggered around with silly grins on their mugs or stood in corners haggling over racing forms. Some couples wanted to Charleston, so we played "Aunt Hagar's Blues" (those goons ate it up) and "I'm Gonna Charleston Back to Charleston" and some other numbers like that. Jazz-baby stuff. The debs rocked around the floor, flashing their rolled hose and shaking their fingers beside their faces and yelling *voe-doe-dee-oh-doe*, a phrase that makes me feel like sicking up my supper to this very day. It was getting dark out. The screens had fallen off some of the windows and moths came in and flitted around the light fixtures in clouds. And, as the song says, the band played on. The bride and groom stood on the sidelines—neither of them seemed interested in

slipping away early—almost completely neglected. Even Scollay seemed to have forgotten about them. He was pretty drunk.

It was almost 8:00 when the little fellow crept in. I spotted him immediately because he was sober and he looked scared; scared as a nearsighted cat in a dog pound. He walked up to Scollay, who was talking with some floozie right by the bandstand, and tapped him on the shoulder. Scollay wheeled around, and I heard every word they said. Believe me, I wish I hadn't.

“Who the hell are you?” Scollay asked rudely.

“My name is Demetrius,” the fellow said. “Demetrius Katzenos. I come from the Greek.”

Motion on the floor came to a dead stop. Jacket buttons were freed, and hands stole out of sight under lapels. I saw Manny looking nervous. Hell, I didn't feel so calm myself. We kept on playing though, you bet.

“Is that right,” Scollay said quietly, almost reflectively.

The guy burst out, “I didn't want to come, Mr. Scollay! The Greek, he has my wife. He say he kill her if I doan give you his message!”

“What message?” Scollay growled. The thunderclouds were back on his forehead.

“He say—” The guy paused with an agonized expression. His throat worked as if the words were physical things, caught in there and choking him. “He say to tell you your sister is one fat pig. He say . . . he say . . .” His eyes rolled wildly at Scollay's still expression. I shot a look at Maureen. She looked as if she had been slapped. “He say she got an itch. He say if a fat woman got an itch on her back, she buy a back-scratcher. He say if a woman got an itch in her parts, she buy a man. ”

Maureen gave a great strangled cry and ran out, weeping. The floor shook. Rico pattered after her, his face bewildered. He was wringing his hands.

Scollay had grown so red his cheeks were actually purple. I half-expected—maybe more than half-expected—his brains to just blow out his ears. I saw that same look of mad agony I had seen in the dark outside Englander's. Maybe he was just a cheap hood, but I felt sorry for him. You would have, too.

When he spoke his voice was very quiet—almost mild.

“Is there more?”

The little Greek man quailed. His voice was splintery with anguish. “Please doan kill me, Mr. Scollay! My wife—the Greek, he got my wife! I doan *want* to say these thing! He got my wife, my woman—”

“I ain’t going to hurt you,” Scollay said, quieter still. “Just tell me the rest.”

“He say the whole town laughing at you.”

We had stopped playing and there was dead silence for a second. Then Scollay turned his eyes to the ceiling. Both of his hands were shaking and held out clenched in front of him. He was holding them in fists so tight that it seemed I could see his hamstrings standing out right through his shirt.

“*ALL RIGHT!*” he screamed. “*ALL RIGHT!*”

He broke for the door. Two of his men tried to stop him, tried to tell him it was suicide, just what the Greek wanted, but Scollay was like a crazy man. He knocked them down and rushed out into the black summer night.

In the dead quiet that followed, all I could hear was the messenger’s tortured breathing and somewhere out back, the soft sobbing of the bride.

Just about then the young kid who had braced us when we came in uttered a curse and made for the door. He was the only one.

Before he could even get under the big paper shamrock hung in the foyer, automobile tires screeched on the pavement and engines revved up—a lot of engines. It sounded like Memorial Day at the Brickyard out there.

“Oh dear-to-Jaysus!” the kid screamed from the doorway. “It’s a fucking caravan! *Get down, boss! Get down! Get down—*”

The night exploded with gunfire. It was like World War I out there for maybe a minute, maybe two. Bullets stitched across the open door of the hall, and one of the hanging light-globes overhead exploded. Outside the night was bright with Winchester fireworks. Then the cars howled away. One of the molls was brushing broken glass out of her bobbed hair.

Now that the danger was over, the rest of the goons rushed out. The door to the kitchen banged open and Maureen ran through again. Everything she had was jiggling. Her face was more puffy than ever. Rico came in her wake like a bewildered valet. They went out the door.

Miss Gibson appeared in the empty hall, her eyes wide and shocked. The little man who had started all the trouble with his singing telegram had powdered.

"It was shooting," Miss Gibson murmured. "What happened?"

"I think the Greek just cooled the paymaster," Biff said.

She looked at me, bewildered, but before I could translate Billy-Boy said in his soft, polite voice: "He means that Mr. Scollay just got rubbed out, Miz Gibson."

Miss Gibson stared at him, her eyes getting wider and wider, and then she fainted dead away. I felt a little like fainting myself.

Just then, from outside, came the most anguished scream I have ever heard, then or since. That unholy caterwauling just went on and on. You didn't have to peek out the door to know who was tearing her heart out in the street, keening over her dead brother even while the cops and newshawks were on their way.

"Let's blow," I muttered. "Quick."

We had it packed in before five minutes had passed. Some of the goons came back inside, but they were too drunk and too scared to notice the likes of us.

We went out the back, each of us carrying part of Biffs drum-kit. Quite a parade we must have made, walking up the street, for anyone who saw us. I led the way with my horn case tucked under my arm and a cymbal in each hand. The boys stood on the corner at the end of the block while I went back for the truck. The cops hadn't shown yet. The big girl was still crouched over the body of her brother in the middle of the street, wailing like a banshee while her tiny groom ran around her like a moon orbiting a big planet.

I drove down to the corner and the boys threw everything in the back, willy-nilly. Then we hauled ass out of there. We averaged forty-five miles an hour all the way back to Morgan, back roads or not, and

either Scollay's goons must never have bothered to tip the cops to us, or else the cops didn't care, because we never heard from them.

We never got the two hundred bucks, either.

She came into Tommy Englander's about ten days later, a fat Irish girl in a black mourning dress. The black didn't look any better than the white satin.

Englander must have known who she was (her picture had been in the Chicago papers, next to Scollay's) because he showed her to a table himself and shushed a couple of drunks at the bar who had been snickering at her.

I felt badly for her, like I feel for Billy-Boy sometimes. It's tough to be on the outside. You don't have to be out there to know, although I'd have to agree that you can't know just what it's like. And she had been very sweet, the little I had talked to her.

When the break came, I went over to her table.

"I'm sorry about your brother," I said awkwardly. "I know he really cared for you, and—"

"I might as well have fired those guns myself," she said. She was looking down at her hands, and now that I noticed them I saw that they were really her best feature, small and comely. "Everything that little man said was true."

"Oh, say now," I replied—a *non sequitur* if ever there was one, but what else was there to say? I was sorry I'd come over, she talked so strangely. As if she was all alone, and crazy.

"I'm not going to divorce him, though," she went on. "I'd kill myself first, and damn my soul to hell."

"Don't talk that way," I said.

"Haven't you ever wanted to kill yourself?" she asked, looking at me passionately. "Doesn't it make you feel like that when people use you badly and then laugh at you? Or did no one ever do it to you? You may say so, but you'll pardon me if I don't believe it. Do you know what it feels like to eat and eat and hate yourself for it and then eat more? Do you know what it feels like to kill your own brother because you are *fat*?"

People were turning to look, and the drunks were sniggering again.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

I wanted to tell her I was sorry, too. I wanted to tell her . . . oh, anything at all, I reckon, that would make her feel better. Holler down to where she was, inside all that flab. But I couldn’t think of a single thing.

So I just said, “I have to go. We have to play another set.”

“Of course,” she said softly. “Of course you must . . . or they’ll start to laugh at *you*. But why I came was—will you play ‘Roses of Picardy’? I thought you played it very nicely at the reception. Will you do that?”

“Sure,” I said. “Be glad to.”

And we did. But she left halfway through the number, and since it was sort of schmaltzy for a place like Englander’s, we dropped it and swung into a ragtime version of “The Varsity Drag.” That one always tore them up. I drank too much the rest of the evening and by closing I had forgotten all about her. Well, almost.

Leaving for the night, it came to me. What I should have told her. Life goes on—that’s what I should have said. That’s what you say to people when a loved one dies. But, thinking it over, I was glad I didn’t. Because maybe that was what she was afraid of.

\* \* \*

Of course now everyone knows about Maureen Romano and her husband Rico, who survives her as the taxpayers’ guest in the Illinois State Penitentiary. How she took over Scollay’s two-bit organization and turned it into a Prohibition empire that rivaled Capone’s. How she wiped out two other North Side gang leaders and swallowed their operations. How she had the Greek brought before her and supposedly killed him by sticking a piece of piano wire through his left eye and into his brain as he knelt in front of her, blubbering and

pleading for his life. Rico, the bewildered valet, became her first lieutenant, and was responsible for a dozen gangland hits himself.

I followed Maureen's exploits from the West Coast, where we were making some pretty successful records. Without Billy-Boy, though. He formed a band of his own not long after we left Englander's, an all-black combination that played Dixieland and ragtime. They did real well down south, and I was glad for them. It was just as well. Lots of places wouldn't even audition us with a Negro in the group.

But I was telling you about Maureen. She made great news copy, and not just because she was a kind of Ma Barker with brains, although that was part of it. She was *awful* big and she was *awful* bad, and Americans from coast to coast felt a strange sort of affection for her. When she died of a heart attack in 1933, some of the papers said she weighed five hundred pounds. I doubt it, though. No one gets that big, do they?

Anyway, *her* funeral made the front pages. It was more than you could say for her brother, who never got past page four in his whole miserable career. It took ten pallbearers to carry her coffin. There was a picture of them toting it in one of the tabloids. It was a horrible picture to look at. Her coffin was the size of a meat locker—which, in a way, I suppose it was.

Rico wasn't bright enough to hold things together by himself, and he fell for assault with intent to kill the very next year.

I've never been able to get her out of my mind, or the agonized, hangdog way Scollay had looked that first night when he talked about her. But I cannot feel too sorry for her, looking back. Fat people can always stop eating. Guys like Billy-Boy Williams can only stop breathing. I still don't see any way I could have helped either of them, but I *do* feel sort of bad every now and then. Probably just because I've gotten a lot older and don't sleep as well as I did when I was a kid. That's all it is, isn't it?

Isn't it?

## Paranoid: A Chant

I can't go out no more.  
There's a man by the door  
in a raincoat  
smoking a cigarette.

But

I've put him in my diary.  
and the mailers are all lined up  
on the bed, bloody in the glow  
of the bar sign next door.

He knows that if I die  
(or even drop out of sight)  
the diary goes and everyone knows  
the CIA's in Virginia.

500 mailers bought from  
500 drug counters each one different  
and 500 notebooks  
with 500 pages in every one.

I am prepared.

\* \* \*

I can see him from up here.  
His cigarette winks from just

above his trenchcoat collar  
and somewhere there's a man on a subway  
sitting under a Black Velvet ad thinking my name.  
Men have discussed me in back rooms.  
If the phone rings there's only dead breath.  
In the bar across the street a snubnose  
revolver has changed hands in the men's room.  
Each bullet has my name on it.  
My name is written in back files  
and looked up in newspaper morgues.

My mother's been investigated;  
thank God she's dead.

They have writing samples  
and examine the back loops of pees  
and the crosses of tees.

My brother's with them, did I tell you?  
His wife is Russian and he  
keeps asking me to fill out forms.  
I have it in my diary.  
Listen—  
listen  
do listen:  
you must listen.

In the rain, at the bus stop,  
black crows with black umbrellas  
pretend to look at their watches, but  
it's not raining. Their eyes are silver dollars.  
Some are scholars in the pay of the FBI  
most are the foreigners who pour through  
our streets. I fooled them

got off the bus at 25th and Lex  
where a cabby watched me over his newspaper.

In the room above me an old woman  
has put an electric suction cup on her floor.  
It sends out rays through my light fixture  
and now I write in the dark  
by the bar sign's glow.  
I tell you I *know*.

They sent me a dog with brown spots  
and a radio cobweb in its nose.  
I drowned it in the sink and wrote it up  
in folder GAMMA.

I don't look in the mailbox anymore.  
The greeting cards are letter-bombs.

(Step away! Goddam you!  
Step away, I know tall people!  
I tell you I know *very* tall people!)

The luncheonette is laid with talking floors  
and the waitress says it was salt but I know arsenic  
when it's put before me. And the yellow taste of mustard  
to mask the bitter odor of almonds.

I have seen strange lights in the sky.  
Last night a dark man with no face crawled through nine miles  
of sewer to surface in my toilet, listening  
for phone calls through the cheap wood with  
chrome ears.  
I tell you, man, I *hear*.

I saw his muddy handprints  
on the porcelain.

I don't answer the phone now,  
have I told you that?

They are planning to flood the earth with sludge.  
They are planning break-ins.

They have got physicians  
advocating weird sex positions.  
They are making addictive laxatives  
and suppositories that burn.  
They know how to put out the sun  
with blowguns.

I pack myself in ice—have I told you that?  
It obviates their infrascopes.  
I know chants and I wear charms.  
You may think you have me but I could destroy you  
any second now.

Any second now.

Any second now.

Would you like some coffee, my love?

Did I tell you I can't go out no more?  
There's a man by the door  
in a raincoat.

## The Raft

It was forty miles from Horlicks University in Pittsburgh to Cascade Lake, and although dark comes early to that part of the world in October and although they didn't get going until six o'clock, there was still a little light in the sky when they got there. They had come in Deke's Camaro. Deke didn't waste any time when he was sober. After a couple of beers, he made that Camaro walk and talk.

He had hardly brought the car to a stop at the pole fence between the parking lot and the beach before he was out and pulling off his shirt. His eyes were scanning the water for the raft. Randy got out of the shotgun seat, a little reluctantly. This had been his idea, true enough, but he had never expected Deke to take it seriously. The girls were moving around in the back seat, getting ready to get out.

Deke's eyes scanned the water restlessly, side to side (*sniper's eyes*, Randy thought uncomfortably), and then fixed on a point.

"It's there!" he shouted, slapping the hood of the Camaro. "Just like you said, Randy! Hot damn! Last one in's a rotten egg!"

"Deke—" Randy began, resetting his glasses on his nose, but that was all he bothered with, because Deke was vaulting the fence and running down the beach, not looking back at Randy or Rachel or LaVerne, only looking out at the raft, which was anchored about fifty yards out on the lake.

Randy looked around, as if to apologize to the girls for getting them into this, but they were looking at Deke—Rachel looking at him was all right, Rachel was Deke's girl, but LaVerne was looking at him too and Randy felt a hot momentary spark of jealousy that got him moving. He peeled off his own sweatshirt, dropped it beside Deke's, and hopped the fence.

"Randy!" LaVerne called, and he only pulled his arm forward through the gray twilit October air in a come-on gesture, hating himself a little for doing it—she was unsure now, perhaps ready to cry it off. The idea of an October swim in the deserted lake wasn't

just part of a comfortable, well-lighted bull-session in the apartment he and Deke shared anymore. He liked her, but Deke was stronger. And damned if she didn't have the hots for Deke, and damned if it wasn't irritating.

Deke unbuckled his jeans, still running, and pushed them off his lean hips. He somehow got out of them all the way without stopping, a feat Randy could not have duplicated in a thousand years. Deke ran on, now only wearing bikini briefs, the muscles in his back and buttocks working gorgeously. Randy was more than aware of his own skinny shanks as he dropped his Levi's and clumsily shook them free of his feet—with Deke it was ballet, with him burlesque.

Deke hit the water and bellowed, "Cold! Mother of Jesus!"

Randy hesitated, but only in his mind, where things took longer—*that water's forty-five degrees, fifty at most*, his mind told him. *Your heart could stop*. He was pre-med, he knew that was true . . . but in the physical world he didn't hesitate at all. He leaped it, and for a moment his heart *did* stop, or seemed to; his breath clogged in his throat and he had to force a gasp of air into his lungs as all his submerged skin went numb. *This is crazy*, he thought, and then: *But it was your idea, Pancho*. He began to stroke after Deke.

The two girls looked at each other for a moment. LaVerne shrugged and grinned. "If they can, we can," she said, stripping off her Lacoste shirt to reveal an almost transparent bra. "Aren't girls supposed to have an extra layer of fat?"

Then she was over the fence and running for the water, unbuttoning her cords. After a moment Rachel followed her, much as Randy had followed Deke.

\* \* \*

The girls had come over to the apartment at midafternoon —on Tuesdays a one-o'clock was the latest class any of them had. Deke's monthly allotment had come in—one of the football-mad alums (the players called them "angels") saw that he got two hundred a month

in cash—and there was a case of beer in the fridge and a new Night Ranger album on Randy’s battered stereo. The four of them set about getting pleasantly oiled. After a while the talk had turned to the end of the long Indian summer they had been enjoying. The radio was predicting flurries for Wednesday. LaVerne had advanced the opinion that weathermen predicting snow flurries in October should be shot, and no one had disagreed.

Rachel said that summers had seemed to last forever when she was a girl, but now that she was an adult (“a doddering senile nineteen,” Deke joked, and she kicked his ankle), they got shorter every year. “It seemed like I spent my life out at Cascade Lake,” she said, crossing the decayed kitchen linoleum to the icebox. She peered in, found an Iron City Light hiding behind a stack of blue Tupperware storage boxes (the one in the middle contained some nearly prehistoric chili which was now thickly festooned with mold—Randy was a good student and Deke was a good football player, but neither of them was worth a fart in a noisemaker when it came to housekeeping), and appropriated it. “I can still remember the first time I managed to swim all the way out to the raft. I stayed there for damn near two hours, scared to swim back.”

She sat down next to Deke, who put an arm around her. She smiled, remembering, and Randy suddenly thought she looked like someone famous or semi-famous. He couldn’t quite place the resemblance. It would come to him later, under less pleasant circumstances.

“Finally my brother had to swim out and tow me back on an inner tube. God, he was mad. And I had a sunburn like you wouldn’t believe.”

“The raft’s still out there,” Randy said, mostly to say something. He was aware that LaVerne had been looking at Deke again; just lately it seemed like she looked at Deke a lot.

But now she looked at him. “It’s almost *Halloween*, Randy. Cascade Beach has been closed since Labor Day.”

“Raft’s probably still out there, though,” Randy said. “We were on the other side of the lake on a geology field trip about three weeks ago and I saw it then. It looked like . . .” He shrugged. “. . . a little bit

of summer that somebody forgot to clean up and put away in the closet until next year.”

He thought they would laugh at that, but no one did—not even Deke.

“Just because it was there last year doesn’t mean it’s still there,” LaVerne said.

“I mentioned it to a guy,” Randy said, finishing his own beer. “Billy DeLois, do you remember him, Deke?”

Deke nodded. “Played second string until he got hurt.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, he comes from out that way, and he said the guys who own the beach never take it in until the lake’s almost ready to freeze. Just lazy—at least, that’s what he said. He said that some year they’d wait too long and it would get ice-locked.”

He fell silent, remembering how the raft had looked, anchored out there on the lake—a square of bright white wood in all that bright blue autumn water. He remembered how the sound of the barrels under it—that buoyant *clunk-clunk* sound—had drifted up to them. The sound was soft, but sounds carried well on the still air around the lake. There had been that sound and the sound of crows squabbling over the remnants of some farmer’s harvested garden.

“Snow tomorrow,” Rachel said, getting up as Deke’s hand wandered almost absently down to the upper swell of her breast. She went to the window and looked out. “What a bummer. ”

“I’ll tell you what,” Randy said, “let’s go on out to Cascade Lake. We’ll swim out to the raft, say good-bye to summer, and then swim back.”

If he hadn’t been half-loaded he never would have made the suggestion, and he certainly didn’t expect anyone to take it seriously. But Deke jumped on it.

“All right! Awesome, Pancho! Fooking *awesome!*” LaVerne jumped and spilled her beer. But she smiled—the smile made Randy a little uneasy. “Let’s do it!”

“Deke, you’re crazy,” Rachel said, also smiling—but her smile looked a little tentative, a little worried.

“No, I’m going to do it,” Deke said, going for his coat, and with a mixture of dismay and excitement, Randy noted Deke’s grin—

reckless and a little crazy. The two of them had been rooming together for three years now—the Jock and the Brain, Cisco and Pancho, Batman and Robin—and Randy recognized that grin. Deke wasn't kidding; he meant to do it. In his head he was already halfway there.

*Forget it, Cisco—not me.* The words rose to his lips, but before he could say them LaVerne was on her feet, the same cheerful, loony look in her own eyes (or maybe it was just too much beer). “I'm up for it!”

“Then let's go!” Deke looked at Randy. “Whatchoo say, Pancho?”

He had looked at Rachel for a moment then, and saw something almost frantic in her eyes—as far as he himself was concerned, Deke and LaVerne could go out to Cascade Lake together and plow the back forty all night; he would not be delighted with the knowledge that they were boffing each other's brains out, yet neither would he be surprised. But that look in the other girl's eyes, that haunted look

—  
“Ohhh, *Ceesco!*” Randy cried.

“Ohhhh, *Pancho!*” Deke cried back, delighted.

They slapped palms.

Randy was halfway to the raft when he saw the black patch on the water. It was beyond the raft and to the left of it, more out toward the middle of the lake. Five minutes later the light would have failed too much for him to tell it was anything more than a shadow . . . if he had seen it at all. *Oil slick?* he thought, still pulling hard through the water, faintly aware of the girls splashing behind him. But what would an oil slick be doing on an October-deserted lake? And it was oddly circular, small, surely no more than five feet in diameter—

“*Whoooo!*” Deke shouted again, and Randy looked toward him. Deke was climbing the ladder on the side of the raft, shaking off water like a dog. “Howya doon, Pancho?”

“Okay!” he called back, pulling harder. It really wasn't as bad as he had thought it might be, not once you got in and got moving. His body tingled with warmth and now his motor was in overdrive. He

could feel his heart putting out good revs, heating him from the inside out. His folks had a place on Cape Cod, and the water there was worse than this in mid-July.

“You think it’s bad now, Pancho, wait’ll you get out!” Deke yelled gleefully. He was hopping up and down, making the raft rock, rubbing his body.

Randy forgot about the oil slick until his hands actually grasped the rough, white-painted wood of the ladder on the shore side. Then he saw it again. It was a little closer. A round dark patch on the water, like a big mole, rising and falling on the mild waves. When he had first seen it the patch had been maybe forty yards from the raft. Now it was only half that distance.

*How can that be? How—*

Then he came out of the water and the cold air bit his skin, bit it even harder than the water had when he first dived in. “Ohhhhhh, *shit!*” He yelled, laughing, shivering in his Jockey shorts.

“Pancho, you ees some kine of beeg asshole,” Deke said happily. He pulled Randy up. “Cold enough for you? You sober yet?”

“I’m sober! I’m sober!” He began to jump around as Deke had done, clapping his arms across his chest and stomach in an X. They turned to look at the girls.

Rachel had pulled ahead of LaVerne, who was doing something that looked like a dog paddle performed by a dog with bad instincts.

“You ladies okay?” Deke bellowed.

“Go to hell, Macho City!” LaVerne called, and Deke broke up again.

Randy glanced to the side and saw that odd dark circular patch was even closer—ten yards now, and still coming. It floated on the water, round and regular, like the top of a large steel drum, but the limber way it rode the swells made it clear that it was not the surface of a solid object. Fear, directionless but powerful, suddenly seized him.

“*Swim!*” he shouted at the girls, and bent down to grasp Rachel’s hand as she reached the ladder. He hauled her up. She bumped her knee hard—he heard the thud clearly.

“Ow! *Hey! What—*”

LaVerne was still ten feet away. Randy glanced to the side again and saw the round thing nuzzle the offside of the raft. The thing was as dark as oil, but he was sure it wasn't oil—too dark, too thick, too *even*.

“Randy, that *hurt!* What are you doing, being fun—”

“LaVerne! *Swim!*” Now it wasn't just fear; now it was terror.

LaVerne looked up, maybe not hearing the terror but at least hearing the urgency. She looked puzzled but she dog-paddled faster, closing the distance to the ladder.

“Randy, what's wrong with you?” Deke asked.

Randy looked to the side again and saw the thing fold itself around the raft's square corner. For a moment it looked like a Pac-Man image with its mouth open to eat electronic cookies. Then it slipped all the way around the corner and began to slide along the raft, one of its edges now straight.

“Help me get her up!” Randy grunted to Deke, and reached for her hand. “Quick!”

Deke shrugged good-naturedly and reached for LaVerne's other hand. They pulled her up and onto the raft's board surface bare seconds before the black thing slid by the ladder, its sides dimpling as it slipped past the ladder's uprights.

“Randy, have you gone crazy?” LaVerne was out of breath, a little frightened. Her nipples were clearly visible through the bra. They stood out in cold hard points.

“That thing,” Randy said, pointing. “Deke? What is it?”

Deke spotted it. It had reached the left-hand corner of the raft. It drifted off a little to one side, reassuming its round shape. It simply floated there. The four of them looked at it.

“Oil slick, I guess,” Deke said.

“You really racked my knee,” Rachel said, glancing at the dark thing on the water and then back at Randy. “You—”

“It's not an oil slick,” Randy said. “Did you ever see a round oil slick? That thing looks like a checker.”

“I never saw an oil slick at all,” Deke replied. He was talking to Randy but he was looking at LaVerne. LaVerne's panties were almost as transparent as her bra, the delta of her sex sculpted neatly

in silk, each buttock a taut crescent. “I don’t even believe in them. I’m from Missouri.”

“I’m going to bruise,” Rachel said, but the anger had gone out of her voice. She had seen Deke looking at LaVerne.

“God, I’m cold,” LaVerne said. She shivered prettily.

“It went for the girls,” Randy said.

“Come on, Pancho. I thought you said you got sober.”

“It went for the girls,” he repeated stubbornly, and thought: *No one knows we’re here. No one at all.*

“Have you ever seen an oil slick, Pancho?” He had put his arm around LaVerne’s bare shoulders in the same almost-absent way that he had touched Rachel’s breast earlier that day. He wasn’t touching LaVerne’s breast—not yet, anyway— but his hand was close. Randy found he didn’t care much, one way or another. That black, circular patch on the water. He cared about that.

“I saw one on the Cape, four years ago,” he said. “We all pulled birds out of the surf and tried to clean them off—”

“Ecological, Pancho,” Deke said approvingly. “Mucho ecological, I theenk.”

Randy said, “It was just this big, sticky mess all over the water. In streaks and big smears. It didn’t look like that. It wasn’t, you know, *compact.*”

*It looked like an accident,* he wanted to say. *That thing doesn’t look like an accident; it looks like it’s on purpose.*

“I want to go back now,” Rachel said. She was still looking at Deke and LaVerne. Randy saw dull hurt in her face. He doubted if she knew it showed.

“So go,” LaVerne said. There was a look on her face—*the clarity of absolute triumph*, Randy thought, and if the thought seemed pretentious, it also seemed exactly right. The expression was not aimed precisely at Rachel . . . but neither was LaVerne trying to hide it from the other girl.

She moved a step closer to Deke; a step was all there was. Now their hips touched lightly. For one brief moment Randy’s attention passed from the thing floating on the water. and focused on LaVerne with an almost exquisite hate. Although he had never hit a girl, in that

one moment he could have hit her with real pleasure. Not because he loved her (he had been a little infatuated with her, yes, and more than a little horny for her, yes, and a lot jealous when she had begun to come on to Deke back at the apartment, oh yes, but he wouldn't have brought a girl he actually *loved* within fifteen miles of Deke in the first place), but because he knew that expression on Rachel's face—how that expression felt inside.

"I'm afraid," Rachel said.

"Of an *oil slick*?" LaVerne asked incredulously, and then laughed. The urge to hit her swept over Randy again—to just swing a big roundhouse open-handed blow through the air, to wipe that look of half-assed hauteur from her face and leave a mark on her cheek that would bruise in the shape of a hand.

"Let's see you swim back, then," Randy said.

LaVerne smiled indulgently at him. "I'm not ready to go," she said, as if explaining to a child. She looked up at the sky, then at Deke. "I want to watch the stars come out."

Rachel was a short girl, pretty, but in a gamine, slightly insecure way that made Randy think of New York girls—you saw them hurrying to work in the morning, wearing their smartly tailored skirts with slits in the front or up one side, wearing that same look of slightly neurotic prettiness. Rachel's eyes always sparkled, but it was hard to tell if it was good cheer that lent them that lively look or just free-floating anxiety.

Deke's tastes usually ran more to tall girls with dark hair and sleepy sloe eyes, and Randy saw it was now over between Deke and Rachel—whatever there had been, something simple and maybe a little boring on his part, something deep and complicated and probably painful on hers. It was over, so cleanly and suddenly that Randy almost heard the snap: a sound like dry kindling broken over a knee.

He was a shy boy, but he moved to Rachel now and put an arm around her. She glanced up at him briefly, her face unhappy but grateful for his gesture, and he was glad he had improved the situation for her a little. That similarity bobbed into his mind again. Something in her face, her looks—

He first associated it with TV game shows, then with commercials for crackers or wafers or some damn thing. It came to him then—she looked like Sandy Duncan, the actress who had played in the revival of *Peter Pan* on Broadway.

“What is that thing?” she asked. “Randy? What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

He glanced at Deke and saw Deke looking at him with that familiar smile that was more loving familiarity than contempt . . . but the contempt was there, too. Maybe Deke didn’t even know it, but it was. The expression said *Here goes ole worry-wart Randy, pissing in his didies again*. It was supposed to make Randy mumble an addition—*It’s probably nothing, Don’t worry about it, It’ll go away*. Something like that. He didn’t. Let Deke smile. The black patch on the water scared him. That was the truth.

Rachel stepped away from Randy and knelt prettily on the corner of the raft closest to the thing, and for a moment she triggered an even clearer memory-association: the girl on the White Rock labels. *Sandy Duncan on the White Rock labels*, his mind amended. Her hair, a close-cropped, slightly coarse blond, lay wetly against her finely shaped skull. He could see goosebumps on her shoulder blades above the white band of her bra.

“Don’t fall in, Rache,” LaVerne said with bright malice.

“Quit it, LaVerne,” Deke said, still smiling.

Randy looked from them, standing in the middle of the raft with their arms loosely around each other’s waists, hips touching lightly, and back at Rachel. Alarm raced down his spine and out through his nerves like fire. The black patch had halved the distance between it and the corner of the raft where Rachel was kneeling and looking at it. It had been six or eight feet away before. Now the distance was three feet or less. And he saw a strange look in her eyes, a round blankness that seemed queerly like the round blankness of the thing in the water.

*Now it’s Sandy Duncan sitting on a White Rock label and pretending to be hypnotized by the rich delicious flavor of Nabisco Honey Grahams*, he thought idiotically, feeling his heart speed up as it had in the water, and he called out, “Get away from there, Rachel!”

Then everything happened very fast—things happened with the rapidity of fireworks going off. And yet he saw and heard each thing with perfect, hellish clarity. Each thing seemed caught in its own little capsule.

LaVerne laughed—on the quad in a bright afternoon hour it might have sounded like any college girl’s laugh, but out here in the growing dark it sounded like the arid cackle of a witch making magic in a pot.

“Rachel, maybe you better get b—” Deke said, but she interrupted him, almost surely for the first time in her life, and indubitably for the last.

“It has colors!” she cried in a voice of utter, trembling wonder. Her eyes stared at the black patch on the water with blank rapture, and for just a moment Randy thought he saw what she was talking about—colors, yeah, colors, swirling in rich, inward-turning spirals. Then they were gone, and there was only dull, lusterless black again.

“Such beautiful colors!”

*“Rachel!”*

She reached for it—out and down—her white arm, marbled with gooseflesh, her hand, held out to it, meaning to touch; he saw she had bitten her nails ragged.

*“Ra—”*

He sensed the raft tilt in the water as Deke moved toward them. He reached for Rachel at the same time, meaning to pull her back, dimly aware that he didn’t want Deke to be the one to do it.

Then Rachel’s hand touched the water—her forefinger only, sending out one delicate ripple in a ring—and the black patch surged over it. Randy heard her gasp in air, and suddenly the blankness left her eyes. What replaced it was agony.

The black, viscous substance ran up her arm like mud . . . and under it, Randy saw her skin dissolving. She opened her mouth and screamed. At the same moment she began to tilt outward. She waved her other hand blindly at Randy and he grabbed for it. Their fingers brushed. Her eyes met his, and she still looked hellishly like Sandy Duncan. Then she fell outward and splashed into the water.

The black thing flowed over the spot where she had landed.

*“What happened?”* LaVerne was screaming behind them. *“What happened? Did she fall in? What happened to her?”*

Randy made as if to dive in after her and Deke pushed him backwards with casual force. “No,” he said in a frightened voice that was utterly unlike Deke.

All three of them saw her flail to the surface. Her arms came up, waving—no, not arms. One arm. The other was covered with a black membrane that hung in flaps and folds from something red and knitted with tendons, something that looked a little like a rolled roast of beef.

*“Help!”* Rachel screamed. Her eyes glared at them, away from them, at them, away—her eyes were like lanterns being waved aimlessly in the dark. She beat the water into a froth. *“Help it hurts please help it hurts IT HURTS IT HURRRRR—”*

Randy had fallen when Deke pushed him. Now he got up from the boards of the raft and stumbled forward again, unable to ignore that voice. He tried to jump in and Deke grabbed him, wrapping his big arms around Randy’s thin chest.

“No, she’s dead,” he whispered harshly. “Christ, can’t you see that? She’s *dead*, Pancho.”

Thick blackness suddenly poured across Rachel’s face like a drape, and her screams were first muffled and then cut off entirely. Now the black stuff seemed to bind her in crisscrossing ropes. Randy could see it sinking into her like acid, and when her jugular vein gave way in a dark, pumping jet, he saw the thing send out a pseudopod after the escaping blood. He could not believe what he was seeing, could not understand it . . . but there was no doubt, no sensation of losing his mind, no belief that he was dreaming or hallucinating.

LaVerne was screaming. Randy turned to look at her just in time to see her slap a hand melodramatically over her eyes like a silent movie heroine. He thought he would laugh and tell her this, but found he could not make a sound.

He looked back at Rachel. Rachel was almost not there anymore.

Her struggles had weakened to the point where they were really no more than spasms. The blackness oozed over her—*bigger now*,

Randy thought, *it's bigger, no question about it*—with mute, muscular power. He saw her hand beat at it; saw the hand become stuck, as if in molasses or on flypaper; saw it consumed. Now there was a sense of her form only, not in the water but in the black thing, not turning but being turned, the form becoming less recognizable, a white flash—*bone*, he thought sickly, and turned away, vomiting helplessly over the side of the raft.

LaVerne was still screaming. Then there was a dull *whap!* and she stopped screaming and began to snivel.

*He hit her*, Randy thought. *I was going to do that, remember?*

He stepped back, wiping his mouth, feeling weak and ill. And scared. So scared he could think with only one tiny wedge of his mind. Soon he would begin to scream himself. Then Deke would have to slap him, Deke wouldn't panic, oh no, Deke was hero material for sure. *You gotta be a football hero . . . to get along with the beautiful girls*, his mind sang cheerfully. Then he could hear Deke talking to him, and he looked up at the sky, trying to clear his head, trying desperately to put away the vision of Rachel's form becoming blobbish and inhuman as that black thing ate her, not wanting Deke to slap him the way he had slapped LaVerne.

He looked up at the sky and saw the first stars shining up there—the shape of the Dipper already clear as the last white light faded out of the west. It was nearly seven-thirty.

"Oh Ceeesco," he managed. "We are in beeg trouble thees time, I theenk."

"What is it?" His hand fell on Randy's shoulder, gripping and twisting painfully. "It ate her, did you see that? It *ate* her, it fucking *ate her up!* What is it?"

"I don't know. Didn't you hear me before?"

"You're *supposed* to know, you're a fucking brain-ball, you take all the fucking science courses!" Now Deke was almost screaming himself, and that helped Randy get a little more control.

"There's nothing like that in any science book I ever read," Randy told him. "The last time I saw anything like that was the Halloween Shock-Show down at the Rialto when I was twelve."

The thing had regained its round shape now. It floated on the water ten feet from the raft.

"It's bigger," LaVerne moaned.

When Randy had first seen it, he had guessed its diameter at about five feet. Now it had to be at least eight feet across.

"*It's bigger because it ate Rachel!*" LaVerne cried, and began to scream again.

"Stop that or I'm going to break your jaw," Deke said, and she stopped—not all at once, but winding down the way a record does when somebody turns off the juice without taking the needle off the disc. Her eyes were huge things.

Deke looked back at Randy. "You all right, Pancho?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"My man." Deke tried to smile, and Randy saw with some alarm that he was succeeding—was some part of Deke enjoying this? "You don't have any idea at all what it might be?"

Randy shook his head. Maybe it was an oil slick, after all . . . or had been, until something had happened to it. Maybe cosmic rays had hit it in a certain way. Or maybe Arthur Godfrey had pissed atomic Bisquick all over it, who knew? *Who could* know?

"Can we swim past it, do you think?" Deke persisted, shaking Randy's shoulder.

"*No!*" LaVerne shrieked.

"Stop it or I'm gonna smoke you, LaVerne," Deke said, raising his voice again. "I'm not kidding."

"You saw how fast it took Rachel," Randy said.

"Maybe it was hungry then," Deke answered. "But maybe now it's full."

Randy thought of Rachel kneeling there on the corner of the raft, so still and pretty in her bra and panties, and felt his gorge rise again.

"You try it," he said to Deke.

Deke grinned humorlessly. "Oh Pancho."

"Oh Ceesco. "

"I want to go home," LaVerne said in a furtive whisper. "Okay?"

Neither of them replied.

“So we wait for it to go away,” Deke said. “It came, it’ll go away.”

“Maybe,” Randy said.

Deke looked at him, his face full of a fierce concentration in the gloom. “Maybe? What’s this maybe shit?”

“We came, and it came. I saw it come—like it smelled us. If it’s full, like you say, it’ll go. I guess. If it still wants chow—” He shrugged.

Deke stood thoughtfully, head bent. His short hair was still dripping a little.

“We wait,” he said. “Let it eat fish.”

Fifteen minutes passed. They didn’t talk. It got colder. It was maybe fifty degrees and all three of them were in their underwear. After the first ten minutes, Randy could hear the brisk, intermittent clickety-click of his teeth. LaVerne had tried to move next to Deke, but he pushed her away—gently but firmly enough.

“Let me be for now,” he said.

So she sat down, arms crossed over her breasts, hands cupping her elbows, shivering. She looked at Randy, her eyes telling him he could come back, put his arm around her, it was okay now.

He looked away instead, back at the dark circle on the water. It just floated there, not coming any closer, but not going away, either. He looked toward the shore and there was the beach, a ghostly white crescent that seemed to float. The trees behind it made a dark, bulking horizon line. He thought he could see Deke’s Camaro, but he wasn’t sure.

“We just picked up and went,” Deke said.

“That’s right,” Randy said.

“Didn’t tell anyone.”

“No.”

“So no one knows we’re here.”

“No.”

“Stop it!” LaVerne shouted. “Stop it, you’re scaring me!”

“Shut your pie-hole,” Deke said absently, and Randy laughed in spite of himself—no matter how many times Deke said that, it always slew him. “If we have to spend the night out here, we do.”

Somebody'll hear us yelling tomorrow. We're hardly in the middle of the Australian Outback, are we, Randy?"

Randy said nothing.

"Are we?"

"You know where we are," Randy said. "You know as well as I do. We turned off Route 41, we came up eight miles of back road—"

"Cottages every fifty feet—"

"*Summer* cottages. This is October. They're empty, the whole bucking funch of them. We got here and you had to drive around the damn gate, NO TRESPASSING signs every fifty feet—"

"So? A caretaker—" Deke was sounding a little pissed now, a little off-balance. A little scared? For the first time tonight, for the first time this month, this year, maybe for the first time in his whole life? Now there was an awesome thought—Deke loses his fear-cherry. Randy was not sure it was happening, but he thought maybe it was . . . and he took a perverse pleasure in it.

"Nothing to steal, nothing to vandalize," he said. "If there's a caretaker, he probably pops by here on a bimonthly basis."

"Hunters—"

"Next month, yeah," Randy said, and shut his mouth with a snap. He had also succeeded in scaring himself.

"Maybe it'll leave us alone," LaVerne said. Her lips made a pathetic, loose little smile. "Maybe it'll just . . . you know . . . leave us alone."

Deke said, "Maybe pigs will—"

"It's moving," Randy said.

LaVerne leaped to her feet. Deke came to where Randy was and for a moment the raft tilted, scaring Randy's heart into a gallop and making LaVerne scream again. Then Deke stepped back a little and the raft stabilized, with the left front corner (as they faced the shoreline) dipped down slightly more than the rest of the raft.

It came with an oily, frightening speed, and as it did, Randy saw the colors Rachel had seen—fantastic reds and yellows and blues spiraling across an ebony surface like limp plastic or dark, lithe Naugahyde. It rose and fell with the waves and that changed the

colors, made them swirl and blend. Randy realized he was going to fall over, fall right into it, he could feel himself tilting out—

With the last of his strength he brought his right fist up into his own nose—the gesture of a man stifling a cough, only a little high and a lot hard. His nose flared with pain, he felt blood run warmly down his face, and then he was able to step back, crying out: “Don’t look at it! Deke! Don’t look right at it, the colors make you loopy!”

“It’s trying to get under the raft,” Deke said grimly. “What’s this shit, Pancho?”

Randy looked—he looked very carefully. He saw the thing nuzzling the side of the raft, flattening to a shape like half a pizza. For a moment it seemed to be piling up there, thickening, and he had an alarming vision of it piling up enough to run onto the surface of the raft.

Then it squeezed under. He thought he heard a noise for a moment—a rough noise, like a roll of canvas being pulled through a narrow window—but that might have only been nerves.

“Did it go under?” LaVerne said, and there was something oddly nonchalant about her tone, as if she were trying with all her might to be conversational, but she was screaming, too. “Did it go under the raft? Is it under us?”

“Yes,” Deke said. He looked at Randy. “I’m going to swim for it right now,” he said. “If it’s under there I’ve got a good chance.”

“No!” LaVerne screamed. “No, don’t leave us here, don’t—”

“I’m fast,” Deke said, looking at Randy, ignoring LaVerne completely. “But I’ve got to go while it’s under there.”

Randy’s mind felt as if it was whizzing along at Mach two—in a greasy, nauseating way it was exhilarating, like the last few seconds before you puke into the slipstream of a cheap carnival ride. There was time to hear the barrels under the raft clunking hollowly together, time to hear the leaves on the trees beyond the beach rattling dryly in a little puff of wind, time to wonder why it had gone under the raft.

“Yes,” he said to Deke. “But I don’t think you’ll make it.”

“I’ll make it,” Deke said, and started toward the edge of the raft. He got two steps and then stopped.

His breath had been speeding up, his brain getting his heart and lungs ready to swim the fastest fifty yards of his life and now his breath stopped like the rest of him, simply stopped in the middle of an inhale. He turned his head, and Randy saw the cords in his neck stand out.

“Panch—” he said in an amazed, choked voice, and then he began to scream.

He screamed with amazing force, great baritone bellows that splintered up toward wild soprano levels. They were loud enough to echo back from the shore in ghostly half-notes. At first Randy thought he was just screaming, and then he realized it was a word—no, two words, the same two words over and over: *“My foot!”* Deke was screaming. *“My foot! My foot! My foot!”*

Randy looked down. Deke’s foot had taken on an odd sunken look. The reason was obvious, but Randy’s mind refused to accept it at first—it was too impossible, too insanely grotesque. As he watched, Deke’s foot was being pulled down between two of the boards that made up the surface of the raft.

Then he saw the dark shine of the black thing beyond the heel and the toes, dark shine alive with swirling, malevolent colors.

The thing had his foot (*“My foot!”* Deke screamed, as if to confirm this elementary deduction. *“My foot, oh my foot, my FOOOOOOT!”*). He had stepped on one of the cracks between the boards (*step on a crack, break yer mother’s back*, Randy’s mind gibbered), and the thing had been down there. The thing had—

*“Pull!”* he screamed back suddenly. *“Pull, Deke, goddammit, PULL!”*

“What’s happening?” LaVerne hollered, and Randy realized dimly that she wasn’t just shaking his shoulder; she had sunk her spade-shaped fingernails into him like claws. She was going to be absolutely no help at all. He drove an elbow into her stomach. She made a barking, coughing noise and sat down on her fanny. He leaped to Deke and grabbed one of Deke’s arms.

It was as hard as Carrara marble, every muscle standing out like the rib of a sculpted dinosaur skeleton. Pulling Deke was like trying to pull a big tree out of the ground by the roots. Deke’s eyes were

turned up toward the royal purple of the post-dusk sky, glazed and unbelieving, and still he screamed, screamed, screamed.

Randy looked down and saw that Deke's foot had now disappeared into the crack between the boards up to the ankle. That crack was perhaps only a quarter of an inch wide, surely no more than half an inch, but his foot had gone into it. Blood ran across the white boards in thick dark tendrils. Black stuff like heated plastic pulsed up and down in the crack, up and down, like a heart beating.

*Got to get him out. Got to get him out quick or we're never gonna get him out at all . . . hold on, Cisco, please hold on . . .*

LaVerne got to her feet and backed away from the gnarled, screaming Deke-tree in the center of the raft which floated at anchor under the October stars on Cascade Lake. She was shaking her head numbly, her arms crossed over her belly where Randy's elbow had gotten her.

Deke leaned hard against him, arms groping stupidly. Randy looked down and saw blood gushing from Deke's shin, which now tapered the way a sharpened pencil tapers to a point—only the point here was white, not black, the point was a bone, barely visible.

The black stuff surged up again, sucking, eating.

Deke wailed.

*Never going to play football on that foot again, WHAT foot, ha-ha,* and he pulled Deke with all his might and it was still like pulling at a rooted tree.

Deke lurched again and now he uttered a long, drilling shriek that made Randy fall back, shrieking himself, hands covering his ears. Blood burst from the pores of Deke's calf and shin; his kneecap had taken on a purple, bulging look as it tried to absorb the tremendous pressure being put on it as the black thing hauled Deke's leg down through the narrow crack inch by inch.

*Can't help him. How strong it must be! Can't help him now, I'm sorry, Deke, so sorry—*

"Hold me, Randy," LaVerne screamed, clutching at him everywhere, digging her face into his chest. Her face was so hot it seemed to sizzle. "Hold me, please, won't you hold me—"

This time, he did.

It was only later that a terrible realization came to Randy: the two of them could almost surely have swum ashore while the black thing was busy with Deke—and if LaVerne refused to try it, he could have done it himself. The keys to the Camaro were in Deke's jeans, lying on the beach. He could have done it . . . but the realization that he could have never came to him until too late.

Deke died just as his thigh began to disappear into the narrow crack between the boards. He had stopped shrieking minutes before. Since then he had uttered only thick, syrupy grunts. Then those stopped, too. When he fainted, falling forward, Randy heard whatever remained of the femur in his right leg splinter in a greenstick fracture.

A moment later Deke raised his head, looked around groggily, and opened his mouth. Randy thought he meant to scream again. Instead, he voided a great jet of blood, so thick it was almost solid. Both Randy and LaVerne were splattered with its warmth and she began to scream again, hoarsely now.

"Oooog!" she cried, her face twisted in half-mad revulsion. "Oooog! Blood! Ooooog, blood! *Blood!*" She rubbed at herself and only succeeded in smearing it around.

Blood was pouring from Deke's eyes, coming with such force that they had bugged out almost comically with the force of the hemorrhage. Randy thought: *Talk about vitality! Christ, LOOK at that! He's like a goddammed human fire hydrant! God! God! God!*

Blood streamed from both of Deke's ears. His face was a hideous purple turnip, swelled shapeless with the hydrostatic pressure of some unbelievable reversal; it was the face of a man being clutched in a bear hug of monstrous and unknowable force.

And then, mercifully, it was over.

Deke collapsed forward again, his hair hanging down on the raft's bloody boards, and Randy saw with sickish amazement that even Deke's scalp had bled.

Sounds from under the raft. Sucking sounds.

That was when it occurred to his tottering, overloaded mind that he could swim for it and stand a good chance of making it. But LaVerne had gotten heavy in his arms, ominously heavy; he looked at her

slack face, rolled back an eyelid to disclose only white, and knew that she had not fainted but fallen into a state of shock-unconsciousness.

Randy looked at the surface of the raft. He could lay her down, of course, but the boards were only a foot across. There was a diving board platform attached to the raft in the summertime, but that, at least, had been taken down and stored somewhere. Nothing left but the surface of the raft itself, fourteen boards, each a foot wide and twenty feet long. No way to put her down without laying her unconscious body across any number of those cracks.

*Step on a crack, break your mother's back.*

*Shut up.*

And then, tenebrously, his mind whispered: *Do it anyway. Put her down and swim for it.*

But he did not, could not. An awful guilt rose in him at the thought. He held her, feeling the soft, steady drag on his arms and back. She was a big girl.

Deke went down.

Randy held LaVerne in his aching arms and watched it happen. He did not want to, and for long seconds that might even have been minutes he turned his face away entirely; but his eyes always wandered back.

With Deke dead, it seemed to go faster.

The rest of his right leg disappeared, his left leg stretching out further and further until Deke looked like a one-legged ballet dancer doing an impossible split. There was the wishbone crack of his pelvis, and then, as Deke's stomach began to swell ominously with new pressure, Randy looked away for a long time, trying not to hear the wet sounds, trying to concentrate on the pain in his arms. He could maybe bring her around, he thought, but for the time being it was better to have the throbbing pain in his arms and shoulders. It gave him something to think about.

From behind him came a sound like strong teeth crunching up a mouthful of candy jawbreakers. When he looked back, Deke's ribs were collapsing into the crack. His arms were up and out, and he looked like an obscene parody of Richard Nixon giving the V-for-

victory sign that had driven demonstrators wild in the sixties and seventies.

His eyes were open. His tongue had popped out at Randy.

Randy looked away again, out across the lake. *Look for lights*, he told himself. He knew there were no lights over there, but he told himself that anyway. *Look for lights over there, somebody's got to be staying the week in his place, fall foliage, shouldn't miss it, bring your Nikon, folks back home are going to love the slides.*

When he looked back, Deke's arms were straight up. He wasn't Nixon anymore; now he was a football ref signaling that the extra point had been good.

Deke's head appeared to be sitting on the boards.

His eyes were still open.

His tongue was still sticking out.

"Oh Ceesco," Randy muttered, and looked away again. His arms and shoulders were shrieking now, but still he held her in his arms. He looked at the far side of the lake. The far side of the lake was dark. Stars unrolled across the black sky, a spill of cold milk somehow suspended high in the air.

Minutes passed. *He'll be gone now. You can look now. Okay, yeah, all right. But don't look. Just to be safe, don't look. Agreed? Agreed. Most definitely. So say we all and so say all of us.*

So he looked anyway and was just in time to see Deke's fingers being pulled down. They were moving—probably the motion of the water under the raft was being transmitted to the unknowable thing which had caught Deke, and that motion was then being transmitted to Deke's fingers. Probably, probably. But it looked to Randy as if Deke was waving to him. The Cisco Kid was waving adiós. For the first time he felt his mind give a sickening wrench—it seemed to cant the way the raft itself had canted when all four of them had stood on the same side. It righted itself, but Randy suddenly understood that madness—real lunacy—was perhaps not far away at all.

Deke's football ring—All—Conference, 1981—slid slowly up the third finger of his right hand. The starlight rimmed the gold and played in the minute gutters between the engraved numbers, 19 on one side of the reddish stone, 81 on the other. The ring slid off his

finger. The ring was a little too big to fit down through the crack, and of course it wouldn't squeeze.

It lay there. It was all that was left of Deke now. Deke was gone. No more dark-haired girls with sloe eyes, no more flicking Randy's bare rump with a wet towel when Randy came out of the shower, no more breakaway runs from midfield with fans rising to their feet in the bleachers and cheerleaders turning hysterical cartwheels along the sidelines. No more fast rides after dark in the Camaro with Thin Lizzy blaring "The Boys Are Back in Town" out of the tape deck. No more Cisco Kid.

There was that faint rasping noise again—a roll of canvas being pulled slowly through a slit of a window.

Randy was standing with his bare feet on the boards. He looked down and saw the cracks on either side of both feet suddenly filled with slick darkness. His eyes bulged. He thought of the way the blood had come spraying from Deke's mouth in an almost solid rope, the way Deke's eyes had bugged out as if on springs as hemorrhages caused by hydrostatic pressure pulped his brain.

*It smells me. It knows I'm here. Can it come up? Can it get up through the cracks? Can it? Can it?*

He stared down, unaware of LaVerne's limp weight now, fascinated by the enormity of the question, wondering what the stuff would feel like when it flowed over his feet, when it hooked into him.

The black shininess humped up almost to the edge of the cracks (Randy rose on tiptoes without being at all aware he was doing it), and then it went down. That canvasy slithering resumed. And suddenly Randy saw it on the water again, a great dark mole, now perhaps fifteen feet across. It rose and fell with the mild wavelets, rose and fell, rose and fell, and when Randy began to see the colors pulsing evenly across it, he tore his eyes away.

He put LaVerne down, and as soon as his muscles unlocked, his arms began to shake wildly. He let them shake. He knelt beside her, her hair spread across the white boards in an irregular dark fan. He knelt and watched that dark mole on the water, ready to yank her up again if it showed any signs of moving.

He began to slap her lightly, first one cheek and then the other, back and forth, like a second trying to bring a fighter around. LaVerne didn't want to come around. LaVerne did not want to pass Go and collect two hundred dollars or take a ride on the Reading. LaVerne had seen enough. But Randy couldn't guard her all night, lifting her like a canvas sack every time that thing moved (and you couldn't look at the thing too long; that was another thing). He had learned a trick, though. He hadn't learned it in college. He had learned it from a friend of his older brother's. This friend had been a paramedic in Nam, and he knew all sorts of tricks—how to catch head lice off a human scalp and make them race in a matchbox, how to cut cocaine with baby laxative, how to sew up deep cuts with ordinary needle and thread. One day they had been talking about ways to bring abysmally drunken folks around so these abysmally drunken people wouldn't puke down their own throats and die, as Bon Scott, the lead singer of AC/DC, had done.

“You want to bring someone around in a hurry?” the friend with the catalogue of interesting tricks had said. “Try this.” And he told Randy the trick which Randy now used.

He leaned over and bit LaVerne's earlobe as hard as he could.

Hot, bitter blood squirted into his mouth. LaVerne's eyelids flew up like windowshades. She screamed in a hoarse, growling voice and struck out at him. Randy looked up and saw the far side of the thing only; the rest of it was already under the raft. It had moved with eerie, horrible, silent speed.

He jerked LaVerne up again, his muscles screaming protest, trying to knot into charley horses. She was beating at his face. One of her hands struck his sensitive nose and he saw red stars.

“Quit it!” he shouted, shuffling his feet onto the boards. “Quit it, you bitch, it's under us again, quit it or I'll fucking drop you, I swear to God I will!”

Her arms immediately stopped flailing at him and closed quietly around his neck in a drowner's grip. Her eyes looked white in the swimming starlight.

“Stop it!” She didn't. “Stop it, LaVerne, you're choking me!”

Tighter. Panic flared in his mind. The hollow clunk of the barrels had taken on a duller, muffled note—it was the thing underneath, he supposed.

“I can’t breathe!”

The hold loosened a little.

“Now listen. I’m going to put you down. It’s all right if you—”

But *put you down* was all she had heard. Her arms tightened in that deadly grip again. His right hand was on her back. He hooked it into a claw and raked at her. She kicked her legs, mewling harshly, and for a moment he almost lost his balance. She felt it. Fright rather than pain made her stop struggling.

“Stand on the boards.”

“No!” Her air puffed a hot desert wind against his cheek.

“It can’t get you if you stand on the boards.”

“No, don’t put me down, it’ll get me, I know it will, I know—”

He raked at her back again. She screamed in anger and pain and fear. “You get down or I’ll drop you, LaVerne.”

He lowered her slowly and carefully, both of them breathing in sharp little whines—oboe and flute. Her feet touched the boards. She jerked her legs up as if the boards were hot.

“Put them *down!*” He hissed at her. “I’m not Deke, I can’t hold you all night!”

“Deke—”

“Dead.”

Her feet touched the boards. Little by little he let go of her. They faced each other like dancers. He could see her waiting for its first touch. Her mouth gaped like the mouth of a goldfish.

“Randy,” she whispered. “Where is it?”

“Under. Look down.”

She did. He did. They saw the blackness stuffing the cracks, stuffing them almost all the way across the raft now. Randy sensed its eagerness, and thought she did, too.

“Randy, please—”

“Shhhh.”

They stood there.

Randy had forgotten to strip off his watch when he ran into the water, and now he marked off fifteen minutes. At a quarter past eight, the black thing slid out from under the raft again. It drew about fifteen feet off and then stopped as it had before.

“I’m going to sit down,” he said.

“No!”

“I’m tired,” he said. “I’m going to sit down and you’re going to watch it. Just remember to keep looking away. Then I’ll get up and you sit down. We go like that. Here.” He gave her his watch. “Fifteen-minute shifts.”

“It ate Deke,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m cold.”

“Me too.”

“Hold me, then.”

“I’ve held you enough.”

She subsided.

Sitting down was heaven; not having to watch the thing was bliss. He watched LaVerne instead, making sure that her eyes kept shifting away from the thing on the water.

“What are we going to do, Randy?”

He thought.

“Wait,” he said.

At the end of fifteen minutes he stood up and let her first sit and then lie down for half an hour. Then he got her on her feet again and she stood for fifteen minutes. They went back and forth. At a quarter of ten, a cold rind of moon rose and beat a path across the water. At ten-thirty, a shrill, lonely cry rose, echoing across the water, and LaVerne shrieked.

“Shut up,” he said. “It’s just a loon.”

“I’m freezing, Randy—I’m numb all over.”

“I can’t do anything about it.”

“Hold me,” she said. “You’ve got to. We’ll hold each other. We can both sit down and watch it together.”

He debated, but the cold sinking into his own flesh was now bone-deep, and that decided him. “Okay.”

They sat together, arms wrapped around each other, and something happened—natural or perverse, it happened. He felt himself stiffening. One of his hands found her breast, cupped in damp nylon, and squeezed. She made a sighing noise, and her hand stole to the crotch of his underpants.

He slid his other hand down and found a place where there was some heat. He pushed her down on her back.

“No,” she said, but the hand in his crotch began to move faster.

“I can see it,” he said. His heartbeat had sped up again, pushing blood faster, pushing warmth toward the surface of his chilled bare skin. “I can watch it.”

She murmured something, and he felt elastic slide down his hips to his upper thighs. He watched it. He slid upward, forward, into her. Warmth. God, she was warm there, at least. She made a guttural noise and her fingers grabbed at his cold, clenched buttocks.

He watched it. It wasn't moving. He watched it. He watched it closely. The tactile sensations were incredible, fantastic. He was not experienced, but neither was he a virgin; he had made love with three girls and it had never been like this. She moaned and began to lift her hips. The raft rocked gently, like the world's hardest waterbed. The barrels underneath murmured hollowly.

He watched it. The colors began to swirl—slowly now, sensuously, not threatening; he watched it and he watched the colors. His eyes were wide. The colors were in his eyes. He wasn't cold now; he was hot now, hot the way you got your first day back on the beach in early June, when you could feel the sun tightening your winter-white skin, reddening it, giving it some

*(colors)*

color, some tint. First day at the beach, first day of summer, drag out the Beach Boys oldies, drag out the Ramones. The Ramones were telling you that Sheena is a punk rocker, the Ramones were telling you that you can hitch a ride to Rockaway Beach, the sand, the beach, the colors

*(moving it's starting to move)*

and the feel of summer, the texture; Gary U.S. Bonds, school is out and I can root for the Yankees from the bleachers, girls in bikinis on the beach, the beach, the beach, oh do you love do you love

*(love)*

the beach do you love

*(love I love)*

firm breasts fragrant with Coppertone oil, and if the bottom of the bikini was small enough you might see some

*(hair her hair HER HAIR IS IN THE OH GOD IN THE WATER  
HER HAIR)*

He pulled back suddenly, trying to pull her up, but the thing moved with oily speed and tangled itself in her hair like a webbing of thick black glue and when he pulled her up she was already screaming and she was heavy with it; it came out of the water in a twisting, gruesome membrane that rolled with flaring nuclear colors—scarlet-vermilion, flaring emerald, sullen ocher.

It flowed down over LaVerne's face in a tide, obliterating it.

Her feet kicked and drummed. The thing twisted and moved where her face had been. Blood ran down her neck in streams. Screaming, not hearing himself scream, Randy ran at her, put his foot against her hip, and shoved. She went flopping and tumbling over the side, her legs like alabaster in the moonlight. For a few endless moments the water frothed and splashed against the side of the raft, as if someone had hooked the world's largest bass in there and it was fighting like hell.

Randy screamed. He screamed. And then, for variety, he screamed some more.

Some half an hour later, long after the frantic splashing and struggling had ended, the loons began to scream back.

That night was forever.

The sky began to lighten in the east around a quarter to five, and he felt a sluggish rise in his spirit. It was momentary; as false as the dawn. He stood on the boards, his eyes half closed, his chin on his

chest. He had been sitting on the boards until an hour ago, and had been suddenly awakened—without even knowing until then that he had fallen asleep, that was the scary part—by that unspeakable hissing-canvas sound. He leaped to his feet bare seconds before the blackness began to suck eagerly for him between the boards. His breath whined in and out; he bit at his lip, making it bleed.

*Asleep, you were asleep, you asshole!*

The thing had oozed out from under again half an hour later, but he hadn't sat down again. He was afraid to sit down, afraid he would go to sleep and that this time his mind wouldn't trip him awake in time.

His feet were still planted squarely on the boards as a stronger light, real dawn this time, filled the east and the first morning birds began to sing. The sun came up, and by six o'clock the day was bright enough for him to be able to see the beach. Deke's Camaro, bright yellow, was right where Deke had parked it, nose in to the pole fence. A bright litter of shirts and sweaters and four pairs of jeans were twisted into little shapes along the beach. The sight of them filled him with fresh horror when he thought his capacity for horror must surely be exhausted. He could see *his* jeans, one leg pulled inside out, the pocket showing. His jeans looked so *safe* lying there on the sand; just waiting for him to come along and pull the inside-out leg back through so it was right, grasping the pocket as he did so the change wouldn't fall out. He could almost feel them whispering up his legs, could feel himself buttoning the brass button above the fly—

*(do you love yes I love)*

He looked left and there it was, black, round as a checker, floating lightly. Colors began to swirl across its hide and he looked away quickly.

"Go home," he croaked. "Go home or go to California and find a Roger Corman movie to audition for."

A plane droned somewhere far away, and he fell into a dozing fantasy: *We are reported missing, the four of us. The search spreads outward from Horlicks. A farmer remembers being passed by a yellow Camaro "going like a bat out of hell." The search centers in*

*the Cascade Lake area. Private pilots volunteer to do a quick aerial search, and one guy, buzzing the lake in his Beechcraft Twin Bonanza, sees a kid standing naked on the raft, one kid, one survivor, one—*

He caught himself on the edge of toppling over and brought his fist into his nose again, screaming at the pain.

The black thing arrowed at the raft immediately and squeezed underneath—it could hear, perhaps, or sense . . . or *something*.

Randy waited.

This time it was forty-five minutes before it came out.

His mind slowly orbited in the growing light.

*(do you love yes I love rooting for the Yankees and Catfish do you love the Catfish yes I love the*

*(Route 66 remember the Corvette George Maharis in the Corvette Martin Milner in the Corvette do you love the Corvette*

*(yes I love the Corvette*

*(I love do you love*

*(so hot the sun is like a burning glass it was in her hair and it's the light I remember best the light the summer light*

*(the summer light of)*

afternoon.

Randy was crying.

He was crying because something new had been added now—every time he tried to sit down, the thing slid under the raft. It wasn't entirely stupid, then; it had either sensed or figured out that it could get at him while he was sitting down.

"Go away," Randy wept at the great black mole floating on the water. Fifty yards away, mockingly close, a squirrel was scampering back and forth on the hood of Deke's Camaro. "Go away, please, go anywhere, but leave me alone. I don't love you."

The thing didn't move. Colors began to swirl across its visible surface.

*(you do you do love me)*

Randy tore his eyes away and looked at the beach, looked for rescue, but there was no one there, no one at all. His jeans still lay there, one leg inside out, the white lining of one pocket showing. They no longer looked to him as if someone was going to pick them up. They looked like relics.

He thought: *If I had a gun, I would kill myself now.*

He stood on the raft.

The sun went down.

Three hours later, the moon came up.

Not long after that, the loons began to scream.

Not long after *that*, Randy turned and looked at the black thing on the water. He could not kill himself, but perhaps the thing could fix it so there was no pain; perhaps that was what the colors were for.

*(do you do you do you love)*

He looked for it and it was there, floating, riding the waves.

“Sing with me,” Randy croaked. “I can root for the Yankees from the bleachers . . . I don’t have to worry ’bout teachers . . . I’m so glad that school is out . . . I am gonna . . . sing and shout.”

The colors began to form and twist. This time Randy did not look away.

He whispered, “Do you love?”

Somewhere, far across the empty lake, a loon screamed.

## Word Processor of the Gods

At first glance it looked like a Wang word processor—it had a Wang keyboard and a Wang casing. It was only on second glance that Richard Hagstrom saw that the casing had been split open (and not gently, either; it looked to him as if the job had been done with a hacksaw blade) to admit a slightly larger IBM cathode tube. The archive discs which had come with this odd mongrel were not floppy at all; they were as hard as the 45's Richard had listened to as a kid.

“What in the name of *God* is that?” Lina asked as he and Mr. Nordhoff lugged it over to his study piece by piece. Mr. Nordhoff had lived next door to Richard Hagstrom's brother's family . . . Roger, Belinda, and their boy, Jonathan.

“Something Jon built,” Richard said. “Meant for me to have it, Mr. Nordhoff says. It looks like a word processor.”

“Oh yeah,” Nordhoff said. He would not see his sixties again and he was badly out of breath. “That's what he said it was, the poor kid . . . think we could set it down for a minute, Mr. Hagstrom? I'm pooped.”

“You bet,” Richard said, and then called to his son, Seth, who was tooling odd, atonal chords out of his Fender guitar downstairs—the room Richard had envisioned as a “family room” when he had first paneled it had become his son's “rehearsal hall” instead.

“Seth!” he yelled. “Come give us a hand!”

Downstairs, Seth just went on warping chords out of the Fender. Richard looked at Mr. Nordhoff and shrugged, ashamed and unable to hide it. Nordhoff shrugged back as if to say *Kids! Who expects anything better from them these days?* Except they both knew that Jon—poor doomed Jon Hagstrom, his crazy brother's son—had been better.

“You were good to help me with this,” Richard said.

Nordhoff shrugged. “What else has an old man got to do with his time? And I guess it was the least I could do for Jonny. He used to

cut my lawn gratis, do you know that? I wanted to pay him, but the kid wouldn't take it. He was quite a boy." Nordhoff was still out of breath. "Do you think I could have a glass of water, Mr. Hagstrom?"

"You bet." He got it himself when his wife didn't move from the kitchen table, where she was reading a bodice-ripper paperback and eating a Twinkie. "Seth!" he yelled again. "Come on up here and help us, okay?"

But Seth just went on playing muffled and rather sour bar chords on the Fender for which Richard was still paying.

He invited Nordhoff to stay for supper, but Nordhoff refused politely. Richard nodded, embarrassed again but perhaps hiding it a little better this time. *What's a nice guy like you doing with a family like that?* his friend Bernie Epstein had asked him once, and Richard had only been able to shake his head, feeling the same dull embarrassment he was feeling now. He *was* a nice guy. And yet somehow this was what he had come out with—an overweight, sullen wife who felt cheated out of the good things in life, who felt that she had backed the losing horse (but who would never come right out and say so), and an uncommunicative fifteen-year-old son who was doing marginal work in the same school where Richard taught . . . a son who played weird chords on the guitar morning, noon and night (mostly night) and who seemed to think that would somehow be enough to get him through.

"Well, what about a beer?" Richard asked. He was reluctant to let Nordhoff go—he wanted to hear more about Jon.

"A beer would taste awful good," Nordhoff said, and Richard nodded gratefully.

"Fine," he said, and went back to get them a couple of Buds.

\* \* \*

His study was in a small shedlike building that stood apart from the house—like the family room, he had fixed it up himself. But unlike

the family room, this was a place he thought of as his own—a place where he could shut out the stranger he had married and the stranger she had given birth to.

Lina did not, of course, approve of him having his own place, but she had not been able to stop it—it was one of the few little victories he had managed over her. He supposed that in a way she *had* backed a losing horse—when they had gotten married sixteen years before, they had both believed he would write wonderful, lucrative novels and they would both soon be driving around in Mercedes-Benzes. But the one novel he had published had not been lucrative, and the critics had been quick to point out that it wasn't very wonderful, either. Lina had seen things the critics' way, and that had been the beginning of their drifting apart.

So the high school teaching job which both of them had seen as only a stepping-stone on their way to fame, glory, and riches, had now been their major source of income for the last fifteen years—one helluva long stepping-stone, he sometimes thought. But he had never quite let go of his dream. He wrote short stories and the occasional article. He was a member in good standing of the Authors Guild. He brought in about \$5,000 in additional income with his typewriter each year, and no matter how much Lina might grouse about it, that rated him his own study . . . especially since she refused to work.

"You've got a nice place here," Nordhoff said, looking around the small room with the mixture of old-fashioned prints on the walls. The mongrel word processor sat on the desk with the CPU tucked underneath. Richard's old Olivetti electric had been put aside for the time being on top of one of the filing cabinets.

"It serves the purpose," Richard said. He nodded at the word processor. "You don't suppose that thing really works, do you? Jon was only fourteen."

"Looks funny, doesn't it?"

"It sure does," Richard agreed.

Nordhoff laughed. "You don't know the half of it," he said. "I peeked down into the back of the video unit. Some of the wires are stamped IBM, and some are stamped Radio Shack. There's most of

a Western Electric telephone in there. And believe it or not, there's a small motor from an Erector Set." He sipped his beer and said in a kind of afterthought: "Fifteen. He just turned fifteen. A couple of days before the accident." He paused and said it again, looking down at his bottle of beer. "Fifteen." He didn't say it loudly.

"*Erector Set?*" Richard blinked at the old man.

"That's right. Erector Set puts out an electric model kit. Jon had one of them, since he was . . . oh, maybe six. I gave it to him for Christmas one year. He was crazy for gadgets even then. Any kind of gadget would do him, and did that little box of Erector Set motors tickle him? I guess it did. He kept it for almost ten years. Not many kids do that, Mr. Hagstrom."

"No," Richard said, thinking of the boxes of Seth's toys he had lugged out over the years—discarded, forgotten, or wantonly broken. He glanced at the word processor. "It doesn't work, then."

"I wouldn't bet on that until you try it," Nordhoff said. "The kid was damn near an electrical genius."

"That's sort of pushing it, I think. I know he was good with gadgets, and he won the State Science Fair when he was in the sixth grade —"

"Competing against kids who were much older—high school seniors some of them," Nordhoff said. "Or that's what his mother said."

"It's true. We were all very proud of him." Which wasn't exactly true. Richard had been proud, and Jon's mother had been proud; the boy's father didn't give a shit at all. "But Science Fair projects and building your very own hybrid word-cruncher—" He shrugged.

Nordhoff set his beer down. "There was a kid back in the fifties," he said, "who made an atom smasher out of two soup cans and about five dollars' worth of electrical equipment. Jon told me about that. And he said there was a kid out in some hick town in New Mexico who discovered tachyons—negative particles that are supposed to travel backwards through time—in 1954. A kid in Waterbury, Connecticut—eleven years old—who made a pipe-bomb out of the celluloid he scraped off the backs of a deck of playing cards. He blew up an empty doghouse with it. Kids're funny

sometimes. The supersmart ones in particular. You might be surprised.”

“Maybe. Maybe I will be. ”

“He was a fine boy, regardless.”

“You loved him a little, didn’t you?”

“Mr. Hagstrom,” Nordhoff said, “I loved him a lot. He was a genuinely all-right kid.”

And Richard thought how strange it was—his brother, who had been an utter shit since the age of six, had gotten a fine woman and a fine bright son. He himself, who had always tried to be gentle and good (whatever “good” meant in this crazy world), had married Lina, who had developed into a silent, piggy woman, and had gotten Seth by her. Looking at Nordhoff’s honest, tired face, he found himself wondering exactly how that had happened and how much of it had been his own fault, a natural result of his own quiet weakness.

“Yes,” Richard said. “He was, wasn’t he?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me if it worked,” Nordhoff said. “Wouldn’t surprise me at all.”

After Nordhoff had gone, Richard Hagstrom plugged the word processor in and turned it on. There was a hum, and he waited to see if the letters IBM would come up on the face of the screen. They did not. Instead, eerily, like a voice from the grave, these words swam up, green ghosts, from the darkness:

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UNCLE RICHARD! JON.

“Christ,” Richard whispered, sitting down hard. The accident that had killed his brother, his wife, and their son had happened two weeks before—they had been coming back from some sort of day trip and Roger had been drunk. Being drunk was a perfectly ordinary occurrence in the life of Roger Hagstrom. But this time his luck had simply run out and he had driven his dusty old van off the edge of a ninety-foot drop. It had crashed and burned. *Jon was fourteen—no, fifteen. Just turned fifteen a couple of days before the accident, the old man said. Another three years and he would have gotten free of that hulking, stupid bear. His birthday . . . and mine coming up soon.*

A week from today. The word processor had been Jon's birthday present for him.

That made it worse, somehow. Richard could not have said precisely how, or why, but it did. He reached out to turn off the screen and then withdrew his hand.

*Some kid made an atom smasher out of two soup cans and five dollars' worth of auto electrical parts.*

*Yeah, and the New York City sewer system is full of alligators and the U.S. Air Force has the body of an alien on ice somewhere in Nebraska. Tell me a few more. It's bullshit. But maybe that's something I don't want to know for sure.*

He got up, went around to the back of the VDT, and looked through the slots. Yes, it was as Nordhoff had said. Wires stamped RADIO SHACK MADE IN TAIWAN. Wires stamped WESTERN ELECTRIC and WESTREX and ERECTOR SET, with the little circled trademark r. And he saw something else, something Nordhoff had either missed or hadn't wanted to mention. There was a Lionel Train transformer in there, wired up like the Bride of Frankenstein.

"Christ," he said, laughing but suddenly near tears. "Christ, Jonny, what did you think you were doing?"

But he knew that, too. He had dreamed and talked about owning a word processor for years, and when Lina's laughter became too sarcastic to bear, he had talked about it to Jon. "I could write faster, rewrite faster, and submit more," he remembered telling Jon last summer—the boy had looked at him seriously, his light blue eyes, intelligent but always so carefully wary, magnified behind his glasses. "It would be great . . . really great."

"Then why don't you get one, Uncle Rich?"

"They don't exactly give them away," Richard had said, smiling. "The Radio Shack model starts at around three grand. From there you can work yourself up into the eighteen-thousand-dollar range."

"Well, maybe I'll build you one sometime," Jon had said.

"Maybe you just will," Richard had said, clapping him on the back. And until Nordhoff had called, he had thought no more about it.

Wires from hobby-shop electrical models.

A Lionel Train transformer.

Christ.

He went around to the front again, meaning to turn it off, as if to actually try to write something on it and fail would somehow defile what his earnest, fragile

(doomed)

nephew had intended.

Instead, he pushed the EXECUTE button on the board. A funny little chill scraped across his spine as he did it—EXECUTE was a funny word to use, when you thought of it. It wasn't a word he associated with writing; it was a word he associated with gas chambers and electric chairs . . . and, perhaps, with dusty old vans plunging off the sides of roads.

EXECUTE.

The CPU was humming louder than any he had ever heard on the occasions when he had window-shopped word processors; it was, in fact, almost roaring. *What's in the memory-box, Jon?* he wondered. *Bed springs? Train transformers all in a row? Soup cans?* He thought again of Jon's eyes, of his still and delicate face. Was it strange, maybe even sick, to be jealous of another man's son?

*But he should have been mine. I knew it . . . and I think he knew it, too.* And then there was Belinda, Roger's wife. Belinda who wore sunglasses too often on cloudy days. The big ones, because those bruises around the eyes have a nasty way of spreading. But he looked at her sometimes, sitting there still and watchful in the loud umbrella of Roger's laughter, and he thought almost the exact same thing: *She should have been mine.*

It was a terrifying thought, because they had both known Belinda in high school and had both dated her. He and Roger had been two years apart in age and Belinda had been perfectly between them, a year older than Richard and a year younger than Roger. Richard had actually been the first to date the girl who would grow up to become Jon's mother. Then Roger had stepped in, Roger who was older and bigger, Roger who always got what he wanted, Roger who would hurt you if you tried to stand in his way.

*I got scared. I got scared and I let her get away. Was it as simple as that? Dear God help me, I think it was. I'd like to have it a different*

*way, but perhaps it's best not to lie to yourself about such things as cowardice. And shame.*

And if those things were true—if Lina and Seth had somehow belonged with his no-good of a brother and if Belinda and Jon had somehow belonged with him, what did that prove? And exactly how was a thinking person supposed to deal with such an absurdly balanced screw-up? Did you laugh? Did you scream? Did you shoot yourself for a yellow dog?

*Wouldn't surprise me if it worked. Wouldn't surprise me at all.*

EXECUTE.

His fingers moved swiftly over the keys. He looked at the screen and saw these letters floating green on the surface of the screen:

MY BROTHER WAS A WORTHLESS DRUNK.

They floated there and Richard suddenly thought of a toy he had had when he was a kid. It was called a Magic Eight-Ball. You asked it a question that could be answered yes or no and then you turned the Magic Eight-Ball over to see what it had to say on the subject—its phony yet somehow entrancingly mysterious responses included such things as IT IS ALMOST CERTAIN, I WOULD NOT PLAN ON IT, and ASK AGAIN LATER.

Roger had been jealous of that toy, and finally, after bullying Richard into giving it to him one day, Roger had thrown it onto the sidewalk as hard as he could, breaking it. Then he had laughed. Sitting here now, listening to the strangely choppy roar from the CPU cabinet Jon had jury-rigged, Richard remembered how he had collapsed to the sidewalk, weeping, unable to believe his brother had done such a thing.

*"Bawl-baby, bawl-baby, look at the baby bawl,"* Roger had taunted him. *"It wasn't nothing but a cheap, shitty toy anyway, Richie. Lookit there, nothing in it but a bunch of little signs and a lot of water."*

*"I'M TELLING!"* Richard had shrieked at the top of his lungs. His head felt hot. His sinuses were stuffed shut with tears of outrage. *"I'M TELLING ON YOU, ROGER! I'M TELLING MOM!"*

"You tell and I'll break your arm," Roger said, and in his chilling grin Richard had seen he meant it. He had not told.

MY BROTHER WAS A WORTHLESS DRUNK.

Well, weirdly put together or not, it screen-printed. Whether it would store information in the CPU still remained to be seen, but Jon's mating of a Wang board to an IBM screen had actually worked. Just coincidentally it called up some pretty crappy memories, but he didn't suppose that was Jon's fault.

He looked around his office, and his eyes happened to fix on the one picture in here that he hadn't picked and didn't like. It was a studio portrait of Lina, her Christmas present to him two years ago. *I want you to hang it in your study*, she'd said, and so of course he had done just that. It was, he supposed, her way of keeping an eye on him even when she wasn't here. *Don't forget me, Richard. I'm here. Maybe I backed the wrong horse, but I'm still here. And you better remember it.*

The studio portrait with its unnatural tints went oddly with the amiable mixture of prints by Whistler, Homer, and N. C. Wyeth. Lina's eyes were half-lidded, the heavy Cupid's bow of her mouth composed in something that was not quite a smile. *Still here, Richard*, her mouth said to him. *And don't you forget it.*

He typed:

MY WIFE'S PHOTOGRAPH HANGS ON THE WEST WALL OF MY STUDY.

He looked at the words and liked them no more than he liked the picture itself. He punched the DELETE button. The words vanished. Now there was nothing at all on the screen but the steadily pulsing cursor.

He looked up at the wall and saw that his wife's picture had also vanished.

He sat there for a very long time—it felt that way, at least—looking at the wall where the picture had been. What finally brought him out of his daze of utter unbelieving shock was the smell from the CPU—a smell he remembered from his childhood as clearly as he remembered the Magic Eight-Ball Roger had broken because it wasn't his. The smell was essence of electric train transformer.

When you smelled that you were supposed to turn the thing off so it could cool down.

And so he would.

In a minute.

He got up and walked over to the wall on legs which felt numb. He ran his fingers over the Armstrong paneling. The picture had been here, yes, *right here*. But it was gone now, and the hook it had hung on was gone, and there was no hole where he had screwed the hook into the paneling.

Gone.

The world abruptly went gray and he staggered backwards, thinking dimly that he was going to faint. He held on grimly until the world swam back into focus.

He looked from the blank place on the wall where Lina's picture had been to the word processor his dead nephew had cobbled together.

*You might be surprised, he heard Nordhoff saying in his mind. You might be surprised, you might be surprised, oh yes, if some kid in the fifties could discover particles that travel backwards through time, you might be surprised what your genius of a nephew could do with a bunch of discarded word processor elements and some wires and electrical components. You might be so surprised that you'll feel as if you're going insane.*

The transformer smell was richer, stronger now, and he could see wisps of smoke rising from the vents in the screen housing. The noise from the CPU was louder, too. It was time to turn it off—smart as Jon had been, he apparently hadn't had time to work out all the bugs in the crazy thing.

But had he known it would do this?

Feeling like a figment of his own imagination, Richard sat down in front of the screen again and typed:

MY WIFE'S PICTURE IS ON THE WALL.

He looked at this for a moment, looked back at the keyboard, and then hit the EXECUTE key.

He looked at the wall.

Lina's picture was back, right where it had always been.

“Jesus,” he whispered. “Jesus Christ.”

He rubbed a hand up his cheek, looked at the keyboard (blank again now except for the cursor), and then typed:

MY FLOOR IS BARE.

He then touched the INSERT button and typed:

EXCEPT FOR TWELVE TWENTY-DOLLAR GOLD PIECES IN A SMALL COTTON SACK.

He pressed EXECUTE.

He looked at the floor, where there was now a small white cotton sack with a drawstring top. WELLS FARGO was stenciled on the bag in faded black ink.

“Dear Jesus,” he heard himself saying in a voice that wasn’t his. “Dear Jesus, dear good Jesus—”

He might have gone on invoking the Savior’s name for minutes or hours if the word processor had not started beeping at him steadily. Flashing across the top of the screen was the word OVERLOAD.

Richard turned off everything in a hurry and left his study as if all the devils of hell were after him.

But before he went he scooped up the small drawstring sack and put it in his pants pocket.

\* - \* \*

When he called Nordhoff that evening, a cold November wind was playing tuneless bagpipes in the trees outside. Seth’s group was downstairs, murdering a Bob Seger tune. Lina was out at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows, playing bingo.

“Does the machine work?” Nordhoff asked.

“It works, all right,” Richard said. He reached into his pocket and brought out a coin. It was heavy—heavier than a Rolex watch. An eagle’s stern profile was embossed on one side, along with the date 1871. “It works in ways you wouldn’t believe.”

“I might,” Nordhoff said evenly. “He was a very bright boy, and he loved you very much, Mr. Hagstrom. But be careful. A boy is only a

boy, bright or otherwise, and love can be misdirected. Do you take my meaning?"

Richard didn't take his meaning at all. He felt hot and feverish. That day's paper had listed the current market price of gold at \$514 an ounce. The coins had weighed out at an average of 4.5 ounces each on his postal scale. At the current market rate that added up to \$27,756. And he guessed that was perhaps only a quarter of what he could realize for those coins if he sold them as coins.

"Mr. Nordhoff, could you come over here? Now? Tonight?"

"No," Nordhoff said. "No, I don't think I want to do that, Mr. Hagstrom. I think this ought to stay between you and Jon."

"But—"

"Just remember what I said. For Christ's sake, be careful." There was a small click and Nordhoff was gone.

He found himself out in his study again half an hour later, looking at the word processor. He touched the ON/OFF key but didn't turn it on just yet. The second time Nordhoff said it, Richard had heard it. *For Christ's sake, be careful.* Yes. He would have to be careful. A machine that could do such a thing—

How *could* a machine do such a thing?

He had no idea . . . but in a way, that made the whole crazy thing easier to accept. He was an English teacher and sometime writer, not a technician, and he had a long history of not understanding how things worked: phonographs, gasoline engines, telephones, televisions, the flushing mechanism in his toilet. His life had been a history of understanding operations rather than principles. Was there any difference here, except in degree?

He turned the machine on. As before it said: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UNCLE RICHARD! JON. He pushed EXECUTE and the message from his nephew disappeared.

*This machine is not going to work for long,* he thought suddenly. He felt sure that Jon must have still been working on it when he died, confident that there was time, Uncle Richard's birthday wasn't for three weeks, after all—

But time had run out for Jon, and so this totally amazing word processor, which could apparently insert new things or delete old things from the real world, smelled like a frying train transformer and started to smoke after a few minutes. Jon hadn't had a chance to perfect it. He had been—

*Confident that there was time?*

But that was wrong. That was *all* wrong. Richard knew it. Jon's still, watchful face, the sober eyes behind the thick spectacles . . . there was no confidence there, no belief in the comforts of time.

What was the word that had occurred to him earlier that day?

*Doomed*. It wasn't just a *good* word for Jon; it was the *right* word.

That sense of doom had hung about the boy so palpably that there had been times when Richard had wanted to hug him, to tell him to lighten up a little bit, that sometimes there were happy endings and the good didn't always die young.

Then he thought of Roger throwing his Magic Eight-Ball at the sidewalk, throwing it just as hard as he could; he heard the plastic splinter and saw the Eight-Ball's magic fluid—just water after all—running down the sidewalk. And this picture merged with a picture of Roger's mongrel van, HAGSTROM'S WHOLESALE DELIVERIES written on the side, plunging over the edge of some dusty, crumbling cliff out in the country, hitting dead squat on its nose with a noise that was, like Roger himself, no big deal. He saw—although he didn't want to—the face of his brother's wife disintegrate into blood and bone. He saw Jon burning in the wreck, screaming, turning black.

No confidence, no real hope. He had always exuded a sense of time running out. And in the end he had turned out to be right.

"What does that mean?" Richard muttered, looking at the blank screen.

How would the Magic Eight-Ball have answered that? ASK AGAIN LATER? OUTCOME IS MURKY? Or perhaps IT IS CERTAINLY SO?

The noise coming from the CPU was getting louder again, and more quickly than this afternoon. Already he could smell the train transformer Jon had lodged in the machinery behind the screen getting hot.

Magic dream machine.

Word processor of the gods.

Was that what it was? Was that what Jon had intended to give his uncle for his birthday? The space-age equivalent of a magic lamp or a wishing well?

He heard the back door of the house bang open and then the voices of Seth and the other members of Seth's band. The voices were too loud, too raucous. They had either been drinking or smoking dope.

"Where's your old man, Seth?" he heard one of them ask.

"Goofing off in his study, like usual, I guess," Seth said. "I think he—" The wind rose again then, blurring the rest, but not blurring their vicious tribal laughter.

Richard sat listening to them, his head cocked a little to one side, and suddenly he typed:

MY SON IS SETH ROBERT HAGSTROM.

His finger hovered over the DELETE button.

*What are you doing?* his mind screamed at him. *Can you be serious? Do you intend to murder your own son?*

"He must do somethin in there," one of the others said.

"He's a goddam dimwit," Seth answered. "You ask my mother sometime. She'll tell you. He—"

*I'm not going to murder him. I'm going to . . . to DELETE him.*

His finger stabbed down on the button.

"—ain't never done nothing but—"

The words MY SON IS SETH ROBERT HAGSTROM vanished from the screen.

Outside, Seth's words vanished with them.

There was no sound out there now but the cold November wind, blowing grim advertisements for winter.

Richard turned off the word processor and went outside. The driveway was empty. The group's lead guitarist, Norm somebody, drove a monstrous and somehow sinister old LTD station wagon in which the group carried their equipment to their infrequent gigs. It was not parked in the driveway now. Perhaps it was somewhere in the world, tooling down some highway or parked in the parking lot of some greasy hamburger hangout, and Norm was also somewhere in

the world, as was Davey, the bassist, whose eyes were frighteningly blank and who wore a safety pin dangling from one earlobe, as was the drummer, who had no front teeth. They were somewhere in the world, somewhere, but not here, because Seth wasn't here, Seth had never been here.

Seth had been DELETED.

"I have no son," Richard muttered. How many times had he read that melodramatic phrase in bad novels? A hundred? Two hundred? It had never rung true to him. But here it was true. Now it was true. Oh yes.

The wind gusted, and Richard was suddenly seized by a vicious stomach cramp that doubled him over, gasping. He passed explosive wind.

When the cramps passed, he walked into the house.

The first thing he noticed was that Seth's ratty tennis shoes—he had four pairs of them and refused to throw any of them out—were gone from the front hall. He went to the stairway banister and ran his thumb over a section of it. At age ten (old enough to know better, but Lina had refused to allow Richard to lay a hand on the boy in spite of that), Seth had carved his initials deeply into the wood of that banister, wood which Richard had labored over for almost one whole summer. He had sanded and filled and revarnished, but the ghost of those initials had remained.

They were gone now.

Upstairs. Seth's room. It was neat and clean and un-lived-in, dry and devoid of personality. It might as well have had a sign on the doorknob reading GUEST ROOM.

Downstairs. And it was here that Richard lingered the longest. The snarls of wire were gone; the amplifiers and microphones were gone; the litter of tape recorder parts that Seth was always going to "fix up" were gone (he did not have Jon's hands or concentration). Instead the room bore the deep (if not particularly pleasant) stamp of Lina's personality—heavy, florid furniture and saccharin velvet tapestries (one depicting a Last Supper at which Christ looked like Wayne

Newton, another showing deer against a sunset Alaskan skyline), a glaring rug as bright as arterial blood. There was no longer the faintest sense that a boy named Seth Hagstrom had once inhabited this room. This room, or any of the other rooms in the house.

Richard was still standing at the foot of the stairs and looking around when he heard a car pull into the driveway.

*Lina*, he thought, and felt a surge of almost frantic guilt. *It's Lina, back from bingo, and what's she going to say when she sees that Seth is gone? What . . . what . . .*

*Murderer!* he heard her screaming. *You murdered my boy!*

But he hadn't murdered Seth.

"I DELETED him," he muttered, and went upstairs to meet her in the kitchen.

Lina was fatter.

He had sent a woman off to bingo who weighed a hundred and eighty pounds or so. The woman who came back in weighed at least three hundred, perhaps more; she had to twist slightly sideways to get in through the back door. Elephantine hips and thighs rippled in tidal motions beneath polyester slacks the color of overripe green olives. Her skin, merely sallow three hours ago, was now sickly and pale. Although he was no doctor, Richard thought he could read serious liver damage or incipient heart disease in that skin. Her heavy-lidded eyes regarded Richard with a steady, even contempt.

She was carrying the frozen corpse of a huge turkey in one of her flabby hands. It twisted and turned within its cellophane wrapper like the body of a bizarre suicide.

"What are you staring at, Richard?" she asked.

*You, Lina. I'm staring at you. Because this is how you turned out in a world where we had no children. This is how you turned out in a world where there was no object for your love—poisoned as your love might be. This is how Lina looks in a world where everything comes in and nothing at all goes out. You, Lina. That's what I'm staring at. You.*

“That bird, Lina,” he managed finally. “That’s one of the biggest damn turkeys I’ve ever seen.”

“Well don’t just stand there looking at it, idiot! Help me with it!”

He took the turkey and put it on the counter, feeling its waves of cheerless cold. It sounded like a block of wood.

“Not *there!*” she cried impatiently, and gestured toward the pantry. “It’s not going to fit in there! Put it in the freezer!”

“Sorry,” he murmured. They had never had a freezer before. Never in the world where there had been a Seth.

He took the turkey into the pantry, where a long Amana freezer sat under cold white fluorescent tubes like a cold white coffin. He put it inside along with the cryogenically preserved corpses of other birds and beasts and then went back into the kitchen. Lina had taken the jar of Reese’s peanut butter cups from the cupboard and was eating them methodically, one after the other.

“It was the Thanksgiving bingo,” she said. “We had it this week instead of next because next week Father Phillips has to go in hospital and have his gall-bladder out. I won the coverall.” She smiled. A brown mixture of chocolate and peanut butter dripped and ran from her teeth.

“Lina,” he said, “are you ever sorry we never had children?”

She looked at him as if he had gone utterly crazy. “What in the name of God would I want a rug-monkey for?” she asked. She shoved the jar of peanut butter cups, now reduced by half, back into the cupboard. “I’m going to bed. Are you coming, or are you going back out there and moon over your typewriter some more?”

“I’ll go out for a little while more, I think,” he said. His voice was surprisingly steady. “I won’t be long.”

“Does that gadget work?”

“What—” Then he understood and he felt another flash of guilt. She knew about the word processor, of course she did. Seth’s DELETION had not affected Roger and the track that Roger’s family had been on. “Oh. Oh, no. It doesn’t do anything. ”

She nodded, satisfied. “That nephew of yours. Head always in the clouds. Just like you, Richard. If you weren’t such a mouse, I’d wonder if maybe you’d been putting it where you hadn’t ought to

have been putting it about fifteen years ago.” She laughed a coarse, surprisingly powerful laugh—the laugh of an aging, cynical bawd—and for a moment he almost leaped at her. Then he felt a smile surface on his own lips—a smile as thin and white and cold as the Amana freezer that had replaced Seth on this new track.

“I won’t be long,” he said. “I just want to note down a few things.”

“Why don’t you write a Nobel Prize-winning short story, or something?” she asked indifferently. The hall floorboards creaked and muttered as she swayed her huge way toward the stairs. “We still owe the optometrist for my reading glasses and we’re a payment behind on the Betamax. Why don’t you make us some damn money?”

“Well,” Richard said, “I don’t know, Lina. But I’ve got some good ideas tonight. I really do.”

She turned to look at him, seemed about to say something sarcastic—something about how none of his good ideas had put them on easy street but she had stuck with him anyway—and then didn’t. Perhaps something about his smile deterred her. She went upstairs. Richard stood below, listening to her thundering tread. He could feel sweat on his forehead. He felt simultaneously sick and exhilarated.

He turned and went back out to his study.

This time when he turned the unit on, the CPU did not hum or roar; it began to make an uneven howling noise. That hot train transformer smell came almost immediately from the housing behind the screen, and as soon as he pushed the EXECUTE button, erasing the HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UNCLE RICHARD! message, the unit began to smoke.

*Not much time, he thought. No . . . that’s not right. No time at all. Jon knew it, and now I know it, too.*

The choices came down to two: Bring Seth back with the INSERT button (he was sure he could do it; it would be as easy as creating the Spanish doubloons had been) or finish the job.

The smell was getting thicker, more urgent. In a few moments, surely no more, the screen would start blinking its OVERLOAD message.

He typed:

MY WIFE IS ADELINA MABEL WARREN HAGSTROM.

He punched the DELETE button.

He typed:

I AM A MAN WHO LIVES ALONE.

Now the word began to blink steadily in the upper right-hand corner of the screen: OVERLOAD OVERLOAD OVERLOAD.

*Please. Please let me finish. Please, please, please . . .*

The smoke coming from the vents in the video cabinet was thicker and grayer now. He looked down at the screaming CPU and saw that smoke was also coming from its vents . . . and down in that smoke he could see a sullen red spark of fire.

*Magic Eight-Ball, will I be healthy, wealthy, or wise? Or will I live alone and perhaps kill myself in sorrow? Is there time enough?*

CANNOT SEE NOW. TRY AGAIN LATER.

Except there was no later.

He struck the INSERT button and the screen went dark, except for the constant OVERLOAD message, which was now blinking at a frantic, stuttery rate.

He typed:

EXCEPT FOR MY WIFE, BELINDA, AND MY SON, JONATHAN.

*Please. Please.*

He hit the EXECUTE button.

The screen went blank. For what seemed like ages it remained blank, except for OVERLOAD, which was now blinking so fast that, except for a faint shadow, it seemed to remain constant, like a computer executing a closed loop of command. Something inside the CPU popped and sizzled, and Richard groaned.

Then green letters appeared on the screen, floating mystically on the black:

I AM A MAN WHO LIVES ALONE EXCEPT FOR MY WIFE, BELINDA, AND MY SON, JONATHAN.

He hit the EXECUTE button twice.

*Now, he thought. Now I will type: ALL THE BUGS IN THIS WORD PROCESSOR WERE FULLY WORKED OUT BEFORE MR. NORDHOFF BROUGHT IT OVER HERE. Or I'll type: I HAVE IDEAS FOR AT LEAST TWENTY BEST-SELLING NOVELS. Or I'll type: MY FAMILY AND I ARE GOING TO LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER. Or I'll type—*

But he typed nothing. His fingers hovered stupidly over the keys as he felt—literally *felt*—all the circuits in his brain jam up like cars grid-locked into the worst Manhattan traffic jam in the history of internal combustion.

The screen suddenly filled up with the word:

LOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOAD

There was another pop, and then an explosion from the CPU. Flames belched out of the cabinet and then died away. Richard leaned back in his chair, shielding his face in case the screen should implode. It didn't. It only went dark.

He sat there, looking at the darkness of the screen.

CANNOT TELL FOR SURE. ASK AGAIN LATER.

“Dad?”

He swiveled around in his chair, heart pounding so hard he felt that it might actually tear itself out of his chest.

Jon stood there, Jon Hagstrom, and his face was the same but somehow different—the difference was subtle but noticeable. Perhaps, Richard thought, the difference was the difference in paternity between two brothers. Or perhaps it was simply that that wary, watching expression was gone from the eyes, slightly overmagnified by thick spectacles (wire-rims now, he noticed, not the ugly industrial horn-rims that Roger had always gotten the boy because they were fifteen bucks cheaper).

Maybe it was something even simpler: that look of doom was gone from the boy's eyes.

“Jon?” he said hoarsely, wondering if he had actually wanted something more than this. Had he? It seemed ridiculous, but he supposed he had. He supposed people always did. “Jon, it's you, isn't it?”

“Who else would it be?” He nodded toward the word processor. “You didn’t hurt yourself when that baby went to data heaven, did you?”

Richard smiled. “No. I’m fine.”

Jon nodded. “I’m sorry it didn’t work. I don’t know what ever possessed me to use all those cruddy parts.” He shook his head. “Honest to God I don’t. It’s like I *had* to. Kid’s stuff.”

“Well,” Richard said, joining his son and putting an arm around his shoulders, “you’ll do better next time, maybe.”

“Maybe. Or I might try something else.”

“That might be just as well.”

“Mom said she had cocoa for you, if you wanted it.”

“I do,” Richard said, and the two of them walked together from the study to a house into which no frozen turkey won in a bingo coverall game had ever come. “A cup of cocoa would go down just fine right now.”

“I’ll cannibalize anything worth cannibalizing out of that thing tomorrow and then take it to the dump,” Jon said.

Richard nodded. “Delete it from our lives,” he said, and they went into the house and the smell of hot cocoa, laughing together.

## The Man Who Would Not Shake Hands

Stevens served drinks, and soon after eight o'clock on that bitter winter night, most of us retired with them to the library. For a time no one said anything; the only sounds were the crackle of the fire in the hearth, the dim click of billiard balls, and, from outside, the shriek of the wind. Yet it was warm enough in here, at 249B East 35th.

I remember that David Adley was on my right that night, and Emlyn McCarron, who had once given us a frightening story about a woman who had given birth under unusual circumstances, was on my left. Beyond him was Johanssen, with his *Wall Street Journal* folded in his lap.

Stevens came in with a small white packet and handed it to George Gregson without so much as a pause. Stevens is the perfect butler in spite of his faint Brooklyn accent (or maybe *because* of it), but his greatest attribute, so far as I am concerned, is that he always knows to whom the packet must go if no one asks for it.

George took it without protest and sat for a moment in his high wing chair, looking into the fireplace, which is big enough to broil a good-sized ox. I saw his eyes flick momentarily to the inscription chiseled into the keystone: IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

He tore the packet open with his old, trembling fingers and tossed the contents into the fire. For a moment the flames turned into a rainbow, and there was murmured laughter. I turned and saw Stevens standing far back in the shadows by the foyer door. His hands were crossed behind his back. His face was carefully blank.

I suppose we all jumped a little when his scratchy, almost querulous voice broke the silence; I know that I did.

"I once saw a man murdered right in this room," George Gregson said, "although no juror would have convicted the killer. Yet, at the end of the business, he convicted himself—and served as his own executioner!"

There was a pause while he lit his pipe. Smoke drifted around his seamed face in a blue raft, and he shook the wooden match out with the slow, declamatory gestures of a man whose joints hurt him badly. He threw the stick into the fireplace, where it landed on the ashy remains of the packet. He watched the flames char the wood. His sharp blue eyes brooded beneath their bushy salt-and-pepper brows. His nose was large and hooked, his lips thin and firm, his shoulders hunched almost to the back of his skull.

“Don’t tease us, George!” growled Peter Andrews. “Bring it on!”

“No fear. Be patient.” And we all had to wait until he had his pipe fired to his complete satisfaction. When a fine bed of coals had been laid in the large briar bowl, George folded his large, slightly palsied hands over one knee and said:

“Very well, then. I’m eighty-five and what I’m going to tell you occurred when I was twenty or thereabouts. It was 1919, at any rate, and I was just back from the Great War. My fiancée had died five months earlier, of influenza. She was only nineteen, and I fear I drank and played cards a great deal more than I should. She had been waiting for two years, you understand, and during that period I received a letter faithfully each week. Perhaps you may understand why I indulged myself so heavily. I had no religious beliefs, finding the general tenets and theories of Christianity rather comic in the trenches, and I had no family to support me. And so I can say with truth that the good friends who saw me through my time of trial rarely left me. There were fifty-three of them (more than most people have!): fifty-two cards and a bottle of Cutty Sark whiskey. I had taken up residence in the very rooms I inhabit now, on Brennan Street. But they were much cheaper then, and there were considerably fewer medicine bottles and pills and nostrums cluttering the shelves. Yet I spent most of my time here, at 249B, for there was almost always a poker game to be found.”

David Adley interrupted, and although he was smiling, I don’t think he was joking at all. “And was Stevens here back then, George?”

George looked around at the butler. “Was it you, Stevens, or was it your father?”

Stevens allowed himself the merest ghost of a smile. "As 1919 was over sixty-five years ago, sir, it was my grandfather, I must allow."

"Yours is a post that runs in the family, we must take it," Adley mused.

"As you take it, sir," Stevens replied gently.

"Now that I think back on it," George said, "there is a remarkable resemblance between you and your . . . did you say grandfather, Stevens?"

"Yes, sir, so I said."

"If you and he were put side by side, I'd be hard put to tell which was which . . . but that's neither here nor there, is it?"

"No, sir."

"I was in the game room—right through that same little door over there—playing patience the first and only time I met Henry Brower. There were four of us who were ready to sit down and play poker; we only wanted a fifth to make the evening go. When Jason Davidson told me that George Oxley, our usual fifth, had broken his leg and was laid up in bed with a cast at the end of a damned pulley contraption, it seemed that we should have no game that night. I was contemplating the prospect of finishing the evening with nothing to take my mind off my own thoughts but patience and a mind-blotting quantity of whiskey when the fellow across the room said in a calm and pleasant voice, 'If you gentlemen have been speaking of poker, I would very much enjoy picking up a hand, if you have no particular objections.'

"He had been buried behind a copy of the *New York World* until then, so that when I looked over I was seeing him for the first time. He was a young man with an old face, if you take my meaning. Some of the marks I saw on his face I had begun to see stamped on my own since the death of Rosalie. Some—but not all. Although the fellow could have been no older than twenty-eight from his hair and hands and manner of walking, his face seemed marked with experience and his eyes, which were very dark, seemed more than sad; they seemed almost haunted. He was quite good-looking, with a short, clipped mustache and darkish blond hair. He wore a good-

looking brown suit and his top collar button had been loosened. ‘My name is Henry Brower,’ he said.

“Davidson immediately rushed across the room to shake hands; in fact, he acted as though he might actually snatch Brower’s hand out of Brower’s lap. An odd thing happened: Brower dropped his paper and held both hands up and out of reach. The expression on his face was one of horror.

“Davidson halted, quite confused, more bewildered than angry. He was only twenty-two himself—God, how young we all were in those days—and a bit of a puppy.

“ ‘Excuse me,’ Brower said with complete gravity, ‘but I never shake hands!’

“Davidson blinked. ‘Never?’ he said. ‘How very peculiar. Why in the world not?’ Well, I’ve told you that he was a bit of a puppy. Brower took it in the best possible way, with an open (yet rather troubled) smile.

“ ‘I’ve just come back from Bombay,’ he said. ‘It’s a strange, crowded, filthy place, full of disease and pestilence. The vultures strut and preen on the very city walls by the thousands. I was there on a trade mission for two years, and I seem to have picked up a horror of our Western custom of handshaking. I know I’m foolish and impolite, and yet I cannot seem to bring myself to it. So if you would be so very good as to let me off with no hard feelings . . .’

“ ‘Only on one condition,’ Davidson said with a smile.

“ ‘What would that be?’

“ ‘Only that you draw up to the table and share a tumbler of George’s whiskey while I go for Baker and French and Jack Wilden.’

“Brower smiled at him, nodded, and put his paper away. Davidson made a brash circled thumb-and-finger, and chased away to get the others. Brower and I drew up to the greenfelted table, and when I offered him a drink he declined with thanks and ordered his own bottle. I suspected it might have something to do with his odd fetish and said nothing. I have known men whose horror of germs and disease stretched that far and even further . . . and so may many of you.”

There were nods of agreement.

“ ‘It’s good to be here,’ Brower told me reflectively. ‘I’ve shunned any kind of companionship since I returned from my post. It’s not good for a man to be alone, you know. I think that, even for the most self-sufficient of men, being isolated from the flow of humanity must be the worst form of torture!’ He said this with a queer kind of emphasis, and I nodded. I had experienced such loneliness in the trenches, usually at night. I experienced it again, more keenly, after learning of Rosalie’s death. I found myself warming to him in spite of his self-professed eccentricity.

“ ‘Bombay must have been a fascinating place,’ I said.

“ ‘Fascinating . . . and terrible! There are things over there which are undreamed of in our philosophy. Their reaction to motorcars is amusing: the children shrink from them as they go by and then follow them for blocks. They find the airplane terrifying and incomprehensible. Of course, we Americans view these contraptions with complete equanimity—even complacency!—but I assure you that my reaction was exactly the same as theirs when I first observed a street-corner beggar swallow an entire packet of steel needles and then pull them, one by one, from the open sores at the end of his fingers. Yet here is something that natives of that part of the world take utterly for granted.

“ ‘Perhaps,’ he added somberly, ‘the two cultures were never intended to mix, but to keep their separate wonders to themselves. For an American such as you or I to swallow a packet of needles would result in a slow, horrible death. And as for the motorcar . . . ’ He trailed off, and a bleak, shadowed expression came to his face.

“I was about to speak when Stevens the Elder appeared with Brower’s bottle of Scotch, and directly following him, Davidson and the others.

“Davidson prefaced the introductions by saying, ‘I’ve told them all of your little fetish, Henry, so you needn’t fear for a thing. This is Darrel Baker, the fearsome-looking fellow with the beard is Andrew French, and last but not least, Jack Wilden. George Gregson you already know.’

“Brower smiled and nodded at all of them in lieu of shaking hands. Poker chips and three fresh decks of cards were produced, money

was changed for markers, and the game began.

“We played for better than six hours, and I won perhaps two hundred dollars. Darrel Baker, who was not a particularly good player, lost about eight hundred (not that *he* would ever feel the pinch; his father owned three of the largest shoe factories in New England), and the rest had split Baker’s losses with me about evenly. Davidson was a few dollars up and Brower a few down; yet for Brower to be near even was no mean feat, for he had had astoundingly bad cards for most of the evening. He was adroit at both the traditional five-card draw and the newer seven-card-stud variety of the game, and I thought that several times he had won money on cool bluffs that I myself would have hesitated to try.

“I did notice one thing: although he drank quite heavily—by the time French prepared to deal the last hand, he had polished off almost an entire bottle of Scotch—his speech did not slur at all, his card-playing skill never faltered, and his odd fixation about the touching of hands never flagged. When he won a pot, he never touched it if someone had markers or change or if someone had ‘gone light’ and still had chips to contribute. Once, when Davidson placed his glass rather close to his elbow, Brower flinched back abruptly, almost spilling his own drink. Baker looked surprised, but Davidson passed it off with a remark.

“Jack Wilden had commented a few moments earlier that he had a drive to Albany staring him in the face later that morning, and once more around the table would do for him. So the deal came to French, and he called seven-card stud.

“I can remember that final hand as clearly as my own name, although I should be pressed to describe what I had for lunch yesterday or whom I ate it with. The mysteries of age, I suppose, and yet I think that if any of you other fellows had been there you might remember it as well.

“I was dealt two hearts down and one up. I can’t speak for Wilden or French, but young Davidson had the ace of hearts and Brower the ten of spades. Davidson bet two dollars—five was our limit—and the cards went round again. I drew a heart to make four, Brower drew a jack of spades to go with his ten. Davidson had caught a trey which

did not seem to improve his hand, yet he threw three dollars into the pot. ‘Last hand,’ he said merrily. ‘Drop it in, boys! There’s a lady who would like to go out on the town with me tomorrow night!’

“I don’t suppose I would have believed a fortune-teller if he had told me how often that remark would come back to haunt me at odd moments, right down to this day.

“French dealt our third round of up cards. I got no help with my flush, but Baker, who was the big loser, paired up something—kings, I think. Brower had gotten a deuce of diamonds that did not seem to help anything. Baker bet the limit on his pair, and Davidson promptly raised him five. Everyone stayed in the game, and our last up card came around the table. I drew the king of hearts to fill up my flush, Baker drew a third to his pair, and Davidson got a second ace that fairly made his eyes sparkle. Brower got a queen of clubs, and for the life of me I couldn’t see why he remained in. His cards looked as bad as any he had folded that night.

“The bettings began to get a little steep. Baker bet five, Davidson raised five, Brower called. Jack Wilden said, ‘Somehow I don’t think my pair is quite good enough,’ and threw in his hand. I called the ten and raised another five. Baker called and raised again.

“Well, I needn’t bore you with a raise-by-raise description. I’ll only say that there was a three-raise limit per man, and Baker, Davidson, and I each took three raises of five dollars. Brower merely called each bet and raise, being careful to wait until all hands were clear of the pot before throwing his money in. And there was a lot of money in there—slightly better than two hundred dollars—as French dealt us our last card facedown.

“There was a pause as we all looked, although it meant nothing to me; I had my hand, and from what I could see on the table it was good. Baker threw in five, Davidson raised, and we waited to see what Brower would do. His face was slightly flushed with alcohol, he had removed his tie and unbuttoned a second shirt button, but he seemed quite calm. ‘I call . . . and raise five,’ he said.

“I blinked a little, for I had fully expected him to fold. Still, the cards I held told me I must play to win, and so I raised five. We played with no limit to the number of raises a player could make on the last card,

and so the pot grew marvelously. I stopped first, being content simply to call in view of the full house I had become more and more sure someone must be holding. Baker stopped next, blinking warily from Davidson's pair of aces to Brower's mystifying junk hand. Baker was not the best of card players, but he was good enough to sense something in the wind.

"Between them, Davidson and Brower raised at least ten more times, perhaps more. Baker and I were carried along, unwilling to cast away our large investments. The four of us had run out of chips, and greenbacks now lay in a drift over the huge sprawl of markers.

" 'Well,' Davidson said, following Brower's latest raise, 'I believe I'll simply call. If you've been running a bluff, Henry, it's been a fine one. But I have you beaten and Jack's got a long trip ahead of him tomorrow.' And with that he put a five-dollar bill on top of the pile and said, 'I call.'

"I don't know about the others, but I felt a distinct sense of relief that had little to do with the large sum of money I had put into the pot. The game had been becoming cutthroat, and while Baker and I could afford to lose, if it came to that, Jase Davidson could not. He was currently at loose ends, living on a trust fund—not a large one—left him by his aunt. And Brower—how well could he stand the loss? Remember, gentlemen, that by this time there was better than a thousand dollars on the table."

George paused here. His pipe had gone out.

"Well, what happened?" Adley leaned forward. "Don't tease us, George. You've got us all on the edge of our chairs. Push us off or settle us back in."

"Be patient," George said, unperturbed. He produced another match, scratched it on the sole of his shoe, and puffed at his pipe. We waited intently, without speaking. Outside, the wind screeched and hooted around the eaves.

When the pipe was aglow and things seemed set to rights, George continued:

"As you know, the rules of poker state that the man who has been called should show first. But Baker was too anxious to end the

tension; he pulled out one of his three down cards and turned it over to show four kings.

“ ‘That does me,’ I said. ‘A flush.’

“ ‘I have you,’ Davidson said to Baker, and showed two of his down cards. Two aces, to make four. ‘Damn well played.’ And he began to pull in the huge pot.

“ ‘Wait!’ Brower said. He did not reach out and touch Davidson’s hand as most would have done, but his voice was enough. Davidson paused to look and his mouth fell—actually *fell* open as if all the muscles there had turned to water. Brower had turned over *all three* of his down cards, to reveal a straight flush, from the eight to the queen. ‘I believe this beats your aces?’ Brower said politely.

“Davidson went red, then white. ‘Yes,’ he said slowly, as if discovering the fact for the first time. ‘Yes, it does.’

“I would give a great deal to know Davidson’s motivation for what came next. He knew of Brower’s extreme aversion to being touched; the man had showed it in a hundred different ways that night. It may have been that Davidson simply forgot it in his desire to show Brower (and all of us) that he could cut his losses and take even such a grave reversal in a sportsmanlike way. I’ve told you that he was something of a puppy, and such a gesture would probably have been in his character. But puppies can also nip when they are provoked. They aren’t killers—a puppy won’t go for the throat; but many a man has had his fingers stitched to pay for teasing a little dog too long with a slipper or a rubber bone. That would also be a part of Davidson’s character, as I remember him.

“I would, as I can say, give a great deal to know . . . but the results are all that matter, I suppose.

“When Davidson took his hands away from the pot, Brower reached over to rake it in. At that instant, Davidson’s face lit up with a kind of ruddy good fellowship, and he plucked Brower’s hand from the table and wrung it firmly. ‘Brilliant playing, Henry, simply brilliant. I don’t believe I ever—’

“Brower cut him off with a high, womanish scream that was frightful in the deserted silence of the game room, and jerked away.

Chips and currency cascaded every which way as the table tottered and nearly fell over.

“We were all immobilized with the sudden turn of events, and quite unable to move. Brower staggered away from the table, holding his hand out in front of him like a masculine version of Lady Macbeth. He was as white as a corpse, and the stark terror on his face is beyond my powers of description. I felt a bolt of horror go through me such as I had never experienced before or since, not even when they brought me the telegram with the news of Rosalie’s death.

“Then he began to moan. It was a hollow, awful sound, cryptlike. I remember thinking, *Why, the man’s quite insane*; and then he said the queerest thing: ‘The switch . . . I’ve left the switch on in the motorcar . . . O God, I am so sorry!’ And he fled up the stairs toward the main lobby.

“I was the first to come out of it. I lurched out of my chair and chased after him, leaving Baker and Wilden and Davidson sitting around the huge pot of money Brower had won. They looked like graven Inca statues guarding a tribal treasure.

“The front door was still swinging to and fro, and when I dashed out into the street I saw Brower at once, standing on the edge of the sidewalk and looking vainly for a taxi. When he saw me he cringed so miserably that I could not help feeling pity intermixed with wonder.

“ ‘Here,’ I said, ‘wait! I’m sorry for what Davidson did and I’m sure he didn’t mean it; all the same, if you must go because of it, you must. But you’ve left a great deal of money behind and you shall have it.’

“ ‘I should never have come,’ he groaned. ‘But I was so desperate for any kind of human fellowship that I . . . I . . .’ Without thinking, I reached out to touch him—the most elemental gesture of one human being to another when he is grief-stricken—but Brower shrank away from me and cried, ‘Don’t touch me! Isn’t one enough? O God, why don’t I just die?’

“His eye suddenly lit feverishly on a stray dog with slat-thin sides and mangy, chewed fur that was making its way up the other side of the deserted, early-morning street. The cur’s tongue hung out and it

walked with a wary, three-legged limp. It was looking, I suppose, for garbage cans to tip over and forage in.

“ ‘That could be me over there,’ he said reflectively, as if to himself. ‘Shunned by everyone, forced to walk alone and venture out only after every other living thing is safe behind locked doors. Pariah dog!’

“ ‘Come now,’ I said, a little sternly, for such talk smacked more than a little of the melodramatic. ‘You’ve had some kind of nasty shock and obviously something has happened to put your nerves in a bad state, but in the War I saw a thousand things which—’

“ ‘You don’t believe me, do you?’ he asked. ‘You think I’m in the grip of some sort of hysteria, don’t you?’

“ ‘Old man, I really don’t know what you might be gripping or what might be gripping you, but I *do* know that if we continue to stand out here in the damp night air, we’ll both *catch* the grippe. Now if you’d care to step back inside with me—only as far as the foyer, if you’d like—I’ll ask Stevens to—’

“His eyes were wild enough to make me acutely uneasy. There was no light of sanity left in them, and he reminded me of nothing so much as the battle-fatigued psychotics I had seen carried away in carts from the front lines: husks of men with awful, blank eyes like potholes to hell, mumbling and gibbering.

“ ‘Would you care to see how one outcast responds to another?’ he asked me, taking no notice of what I had been saying at all. ‘Watch, then, and see what I’ve learned in strange ports of call!’

“And he suddenly raised his voice and said imperiously, ‘Dog!’

“The dog raised his head, looked at him with wary, rolling eyes (one glittered with rabid wildness; the other was filmed by a cataract), and suddenly changed direction and came limpingly, reluctantly, across the street to where Brower stood.

“It did not want to come; that much was obvious. It whined and growled and tucked its mangy rope of a tail between its legs; but it was drawn to him nonetheless. It came right up to Brower’s feet, and then lay upon its belly, whining and crouching and shuddering. Its emaciated sides went in and out like a bellows, and its good eye rolled horribly in its socket.

“Brower uttered a hideous, despairing laugh that I still hear in my dreams, and squatted by it. ‘There,’ he said. ‘You see? It knows me as one of its kind . . . and knows what I bring it!’ He reached for the dog and the cur uttered a snarling, lugubrious howl. It bared its teeth.

“ ‘Don’t!’ I cried sharply. ‘He’ll bite!’

“Brower took no notice. In the glow of the streetlight his face was livid, hideous, the eyes black holes burnt in parchment. ‘Nonsense,’ he crooned. ‘Nonsense. I only want to shake hands with him . . . as your friend shook with me!’ And suddenly he seized the dog’s paw and shook it. The dog made a horrible howling noise, but made no move to bite him.

“Suddenly Brower stood up. His eyes seemed to have cleared somewhat, and except for his excessive pallor, he might have again been the man who had offered courteously to pick up a hand with us earlier the night before.

“ ‘I’m leaving now,’ he said quietly. ‘Please apologize to your friends and tell them I’m sorry to have acted like such a fool. Perhaps I’ll have a chance to . . . redeem myself another time.’

“ ‘It’s we who owe you the apology,’ I said. ‘And have you forgotten the money? It’s better than a thousand dollars.’

“ ‘O yes! The money!’ And his mouth curved in one of the bitterest smiles I have ever seen.

“ ‘Never mind coming into the lobby,’ I said. ‘If you will promise to wait right here, I’ll bring it. Will you do that?’

“ ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘If you wish, I’ll do that.’ And he looked reflectively down at the dog whining at his feet. ‘Perhaps he would like to come to my lodgings with me and have a square meal for once in his miserable life.’ And the bitter smile reappeared.

“I left him then, before he could reconsider, and went downstairs. Someone—probably Jack Wilden; he always had an orderly mind—had changed all the markers for greenbacks and had stacked the money neatly in the center of the green felt. None of them spoke to me as I gathered it up. Baker and Jack Wilden were smoking wordlessly; Jason Davidson was hanging his head and looking at his feet. His face was a picture of misery and shame. I touched him on

the shoulder as I went back to the stairs and he looked at me gratefully.

“When I reached the street again, it was utterly deserted. Brower had gone. I stood there with a wad of greenbacks in each hand, looking vainly either way, but nothing moved. I called once, tentatively, in case he should be standing in the shadows someplace near, but there was no response. Then I happened to look down. The stray dog was still there, but his days of foraging in trash cans were over. He was quite dead. The fleas and ticks were leaving his body in marching columns. I stepped back, revolted and yet also filled with a species of odd, dreamy terror. I had a premonition that I was not yet through with Henry Brower, and so I wasn’t; but I never saw him again.”

The fire in the grate had died to guttering flames and cold had begun to creep out of the shadows, but no one moved or spoke while George lit his pipe again. He sighed and recrossed his legs, making the old joints crackle, and resumed.

“Needless to say, the others who had taken part in the game were unanimous in opinion: we must find Brower and give him his money. I suppose some would think we were insane to feel so, but that was a more honorable age. Davidson was in an awful funk when he left; I tried to draw him aside and offer him a good word or two, but he only shook his head and shuffled out. I let him go. Things would look different to him after a night’s sleep, and we could go looking for Brower together. Wilden was going out of town, and Baker had ‘social rounds’ to make. It would be a good way for Davidson to gain back a little self-respect, I thought.

“But when I went round to his apartment the next morning, I found him not yet up. I might have awakened him, but he was a young fellow and I decided to let him sleep the morning away while I spaded up a few elementary facts.

“I called here first, and talked to Stevens’s—” He turned toward Stevens and raised an eyebrow.

“Grandfather, sir,” Stevens said.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sir, I’m sure.”

“I talked to Stevens’s grandfather. I spoke to him in the very spot where Stevens himself now stands, in fact. He said that Raymond Greer, a fellow I knew slightly, had spoken for Brower. Greer was with the city trade commission, and I immediately went to his office in the Flatiron Building. I found him in, and he spoke to me immediately.

“When I told him what had happened the night before, his face became filled with a confusion of pity, gloom, and fear.

“ ‘Poor old Henry!’ he exclaimed. ‘I knew it was coming to this, but I never suspected it would arrive so quickly.’

“ ‘What?’ I asked.

“ ‘His breakdown,’ Greer said. ‘It stems from his year in Bombay, and I suppose no one but Henry will ever know the whole story. But I’ll tell you what I can.’

“The story that Greer unfolded to me in his office that day increased both my sympathy and understanding. Henry Brower, it appeared, had been unluckily involved in a real tragedy. And, as in all classic tragedies of the stage, it had stemmed from a fatal flaw—in Brower’s case, forgetfulness.

“As a member of the trade-commission group in Bombay, he had enjoyed the use of a motorcar, a relative rarity there. Greer said that Brower took an almost childish pleasure in driving it through the narrow streets and byways of the city, scaring up chickens in great, gabbling flocks and making the women and men fall on their knees to their heathen gods. He drove it everywhere, attracting great attention and huge crowds of ragged children that followed him about but always hung back when he offered them a ride in the marvelous device, which he constantly did. The auto was a Model-A Ford with a truck body, and one of the earliest cars able to start not only by a crank but by the touch of a button. I ask you to remember that.

“One day Brower took the auto far across the city to visit one of the high poobahs of that place concerning possible consignments of jute rope. He attracted his usual notice as the Ford machine growled and backfired through the streets, sounding like an artillery barrage in progress—and, of course, the children followed.

“Brower was to take dinner with the jute manufacturer, an affair of great ceremony and formality, and they were only halfway through the second course, seated on an open-air terrace above the teeming street below, when the familiar racketing, coughing roar of the car began below them, accompanied by screams and shrieks.

“One of the more adventurous boys—and the son of an obscure holy man—had crept into the cab of the auto, convinced that whatever dragon there was under the iron hood could not be roused without the white man behind the wheel. And Brower, intent upon the coming negotiations, had left the switch on and the spark retarded.

“One can imagine the boy growing more daring before the eyes of his peers as he touched the mirror, waggled the wheel, and made mock tooting noises. Each time he thumbed his nose at the dragon under the hood, the awe in the faces of the others must have grown.

“His foot must have been pressed down on the clutch, perhaps for support, when he pushed the starter button. The engine was hot; it caught fire immediately. The boy, in his extreme terror, would have reacted by removing his foot from the clutch immediately, preparatory to jumping out. Had the car been older or in poorer condition, it would have stalled. But Brower cared for it scrupulously, and it leaped forward in a series of bucking, roaring jerks. Brower was just in time to see this as he rushed from the jute manufacturer’s house.

“The boy’s fatal mistake must have been little more than an accident. Perhaps, in his flailings to get out, an elbow accidentally struck the throttle. Perhaps he pulled it with the panicky hope that this was how the white man choked the dragon back into sleep. However it happened . . . it happened. The auto gained suicidal speed and charged down the crowded, roiling street, bumping over bundles and bales, crushing the wicker cages of the animal vendor, smashing a flower cart to splinters. It roared straight downhill toward the street’s turning, leaped over the curb, crashed into a stone wall and exploded in a ball of flame.”

George switched his briar from one side of his mouth to the other.

“This was all Greer could tell me, because it was all Brower had told him that made any sense. The rest was a kind of deranged

harangue on the folly of two such disparate cultures ever mixing. The dead boy's father evidently confronted Brower before he was recalled and flung a slaughtered chicken at him. There was a curse. At this point, Greer gave me a smile which said that we were both men of the world, lit a cigarette, and remarked, 'There's always a curse when a thing of this sort happens. The miserable heathens must keep up appearances at all costs. It's their bread and butter.'

" 'What was the curse?' I wondered.

" 'I should have thought you would have guessed,' said Greer. 'The wallah told him that a man who would practice sorcery on a small child should become a pariah, an outcast. Then he told Brower that any living thing he touched with his hands would die. Forever and forever, amen.' Greer chuckled.

" 'Brower believed it?'

" 'Greer believed he did. 'You must remember that the man had suffered a dreadful shock. And now, from what you tell me, his obsession is worsening rather than curing itself.'

" 'Can you tell me his address?'

" 'Greer hunted through his files, and finally came up with a listing. 'I don't guarantee that you'll find him there,' he said. 'People have been naturally reluctant to hire him, and I understand he hasn't a great deal of money.'

" 'I felt a pang of guilt at this, but said nothing. Greer struck me as a little too pompous, a little too smug, to deserve what little information I had on Henry Brower. But as I rose, something prompted me to say, 'I saw Brower shake hands with a mangy street cur last night. Fifteen minutes later the dog was dead.'

" 'Really? How interesting.' He raised his eyebrows as if the remark had no bearing on anything we had been discussing.

" 'I rose to take my leave and was about to shake Greer's hand when the secretary opened his office door. 'Pardon me, but you are Mr. Gregson?'

" 'I told her I was.

" 'A man named Baker has just called. He's asked you to come to twenty-three Nineteenth Street immediately.'

“It gave me quite a nasty start, because I had already been there once that day—it was Jason Davidson’s address. When I left Greer’s office, he was just settling back with his pipe and *The Wall Street Journal*. I never saw him again, and don’t count it any great loss. I was filled with a very specific dread—the kind that will nevertheless not quite crystallize into an actual fear with a fixed object, because it is too awful, too unbelievable to actually be considered.”

Here I interrupted his narrative. “Good God, George! You’re not going to tell us he was dead?”

“Quite dead,” George agreed. “I arrived almost simultaneously with the coroner. His death was listed as a coronary thrombosis. He was short of his twenty-third birthday by sixteen days.

“In the days that followed, I tried to tell myself that it was all a nasty coincidence, best forgotten. I did not sleep well, even with the help of my good friend Mr. Cutty Sark. I told myself that the thing to do was divide that night’s last pot between the three of us and forget that Henry Brower had ever stepped into our lives. But I could not. I drew a cashier’s check for the sum instead, and went to the address that Greer had given me, which was in Harlem.

“He was not there. His forwarding address was a place on the East Side, a slightly less-well-off neighborhood of nonetheless respectable brownstones. He had left those lodgings a full month before the poker game, and the new address was in the East Village, an area of ramshackle tenements.

“The building superintendent, a scrawny man with a huge black mastiff snarling at his knee, told me that Brower had moved out on April third—the day after our game. I asked for a forwarding address and he threw back his head and emitted a screaming gobble that apparently served him in the place of laughter.

“ ‘The only forradin’ address they gives when they leave here is Hell, boss. But sometimes they stops in the Bowery on their way there.’

“The Bowery was then what it is only believed to be by out-of-towners now: the home of the homeless, the last stop for the faceless men who only care for another bottle of cheap wine or another shot of the white powder that brings long dreams. I went

there. In those days there were dozens of flophouses, a few benevolent missions that took drunks in for the night, and hundreds of alleys where a man might hide an old, louse-ridden mattress. I saw scores of men, all of them little more than shells, eaten by drink and drugs. No names were known or used. When a man has sunk to a final basement level, his liver rotted by wood alcohol, his nose an open, festering sore from the constant sniffing of cocaine and potash, his fingers destroyed by frostbite, his teeth rotted to black stubs—a man no longer has a use for a name. But I described Henry Brower to every man I saw, with no response. Bartenders shook their heads and shrugged. The others just looked at the ground and kept walking.

“I didn’t find him that day, or the next, or the next. Two weeks went by, and then I talked to a man who said a fellow like that had been in Devarney’s Rooms three nights before.

“I walked there; it was only two blocks from the area I had been covering. The man at the desk was a scabrous ancient with a peeling bald skull and rheumy, glittering eyes. Rooms were advertised in the flyspecked window facing the street at a dime a night. I went through my description of Brower, the old fellow nodding all the way through it. When I had finished, he said:

“ ‘I know him, young meester. Know him well. But I can’t quite recall . . . I think ever s’much better with a dollar in front of me.’

“I produced a dollar and he made it disappear neat as a button, arthritis notwithstanding.

“ ‘He was here, young meester, but he’s gone.’

“ ‘Do you know where?’

“ ‘I can’t quite recall,’ the desk clerk said. ‘I might, howsomever, with a dollar in front of me.’

“I produced a second bill, which he made disappear as neatly as he had the first. At this, something seemed to strike him as being deliciously funny, and a rasping, tubercular cough came out of his chest.

“ ‘You’ve had your amusement,’ I said, ‘and been well paid for it as well. Now, do you know where this man is?’

“The old man laughed gleefully again. ‘Yes—Potter’s Field is his new residence; eternity’s the length of his lease; and he’s got the Devil for a roommate. How do you like *them* apples, young meester? He must’ve died sometime yesterday morning, for when I found him at noon he was still warm and toasty. Sitting bolt upright by the winder, he was. I’d gone up to either have his dime against the dark or show him the door. As it turned out, the city showed him six feet of earth.’ This caused another unpleasant outburst of senile glee.

“ ‘Was there anything unusual?’ I asked, not quite daring to examine the import of my own question. ‘Anything out of the ordinary?’

“ ‘I seem to recall somethin’ . . . Let me see . . . ’

“I produced a dollar to aid his memory, but this time it did not produce laughter, although it disappeared with the same speed.

“ ‘Yes, there was something passin odd about it,’ the old man said. ‘I’ve called the city hack for enough of them to know. Bleedin Jesus, ain’t !! I’ve found ’em hangin from the hook on the door, found ‘em dead in bed, found ’em out on the fire escape in January with a bottle between their knees frozen just as blue as the Atlantic. I even found one fella that drowned in the washstand, although that was over thirty years ago. But this fella—sittin bolt upright in his brown suit, just like some swell from uptown, with his hair all combed. Had hold of his right wrist with his left hand, he did. I’ve seen all kinds, but he’s the only one I ever seen that died shakin his own hand.’

“I left and walked all the way to the docks, and the old man’s last words seemed to play over and over again in my brain like a phonograph record that has gotten stuck in one groove. *He’s the only one I ever seen that died shakin his own hand.*

“I walked down to the end of one of the piers, out to where the dirty gray water lapped the encrusted pilings. And then I ripped that cashier’s check into a thousand pieces and threw it into the water.”

George Gregson shifted and cleared his throat. The fire had burned down to reluctant embers, and cold was creeping into the deserted game room. The tables and chairs seemed spectral and unreal, like furnishings glimpsed in a dream where past and present

merge. The flames rimmed the letters cut into the fireplace keystone with dull orange light: IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

“I only saw him once, and once was enough; I’ve never forgotten. But it did serve to bring me out of my own time of mourning, for any man who can walk among his fellows is not wholly alone.

“If you’ll bring me my coat, Stevens, I believe I’ll toddle along home—I’ve stayed far past my usual bedtime.”

And when Stevens had brought it, George smiled and pointed at a small mole just below the left corner of Stevens’s mouth. “The resemblance really is remarkable, you know—your grandfather had a mole in that exact same place.”

Stevens smiled but made no reply. George left, and the rest of us slipped out soon after.

## Beachworld

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

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

Dunes.

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

Dunes. But no ocean.

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

“Fuck,” Shapiro said.

“Bend over,” Rand said.

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

“Too bad about Grimes,” Shapiro said.

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

It was too bad about Grimes. Grimes was dead. Grimes was now nothing but large chunks and small chunks in the aft storage compartment. Shapiro had looked in and thought: *It looks like God decided to eat Grimes, found out he didn't taste good, and sicked*

*him up again.* That had been too much for Shapiro's own stomach. That, and the sight of Grimes's teeth scattered across the floor of the storage compartment.

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

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

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

"What are you talking about?"

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

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

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

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

Rand looked at him briefly. "What?"

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

"What?" Rand asked again.

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

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

“But what’ll we do for water?”

“Nothing we can do.”

“The ship . . . it’s beyond repair!”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe it can be fixed,” Shapiro called back over his shoulder. As he ducked through the hatchway he felt better in spite of the smells—fried wiring and a bitter whiff of Freon gas. He told himself he felt better because he had thought of the beacon. No matter how paltry, the beacon offered some hope. But it wasn’t the thought of the beacon that had lifted his spirits; if Rand said it was broken, it was probably most righteously broken. But he could no longer see the dunes—could no longer see that big, never-ending beach.

*That was what made him feel better.*

When he got to the top of the first dune again, struggling and panting, his temples pounding with the dry heat, Rand was still there, still staring and staring and staring. An hour had gone by. The sun stood directly above them. Rand’s face was wet with perspiration. Jewels of it nestled in his eyebrows. Droplets ran down his cheeks like tears. More droplets ran down the cords of his neck and into the neck of his EP suit like drops of colorless oil running into the guts of a pretty good android.

*Dronehead I called him, Shapiro thought with a little shudder. Christ, that’s what he looks like—not an android but a dronehead who just took a neck-shot with a very big needle.*

And Rand had been wrong after all.

“Rand?”

No answer.

“The beacon wasn’t broken.” There was a flicker in Rand’s eyes. Then they went blank again, staring out at the mountains of sand. Frozen, Shapiro had first thought them, but he supposed they moved. The wind was constant. They would move. Over a period of decades and centuries, they would

. . . well, would *walk*. Wasn't that what they called dunes on a beach? Walking dunes? He seemed to remember that from his childhood. Or school. Or someplace, and what in the hell did it matter?

Now he saw a delicate rill of sand slip down the flank of one of them. As if it heard

*(heard what I was thinking)*

Fresh sweat on the back of his neck. All right, he was getting a touch of the whim-whams. Who wouldn't? This was a tight place they were in, very tight. And Rand seemed not to know it . . . or not to care.

"It had some sand in it, and the warbler was cracked, but there must have been sixty of those in Grimes's odds-and-ends box."

*Is he even hearing me?*

"I don't know how the sand got in it—it was right where it was supposed to be, in the storage compartment behind the bunk, three closed hatches between it and the outside, but—"

"Oh, sand spreads. Gets into everything. Remember going to the beach when you were a kid, Bill? You'd come home and your mother would yell at you because there was sand everywhere? Sand in the couch, sand on the kitchen table, sand down the foot of your bed? Beach sand is very . . ." He gestured vaguely, and then that dreamy, unsettling smile resurfaced. ". . . ubiquitous."

"—but it didn't hurt it any," Shapiro continued. "The emergency power output system is ticking over and I plugged the beacon into it. I put on the earphones for a minute and asked for an equivalency reading at fifty parsecs. Sounds like a power saw. It's better than we could have hoped."

"No one's going to come. Not even the Beach Boys. The Beach Boys have all been dead for eight thousand years. Welcome to Surf City, Bill. Surf City *sans* surf."

Shapiro stared out at the dunes. He wondered how long the sand had been here. A trillion years? A quintillion? Had there been life here once? Maybe even something with intelligence? Rivers? Green places? Oceans to make it a real beach instead of a desert?

Shapiro stood next to Rand and thought about it. The steady wind ruffled his hair. And quite suddenly he was sure all those things had been, and he could picture how they must have ended.

The slow retreat of the cities as their waterways and outlying areas were first speckled, then dusted, finally drifted and choked by the creeping sand.

He could see the shiny brown alluvial fans of mud, sleek as sealskins at first but growing duller and duller in color as they spread further and further out from the mouths of the rivers— out and out until they met each other. He could see sleek sealskin mud becoming reed-infested swamp, then gray, gritty till, finally shifting white sand.

He could see mountains shortening like sharpened pencils, their snow melting as the rising sand brought warm thermal updrafts against them; he could see the last few crags pointing at the sky like the fingertips of men buried alive; he could see them covered and immediately forgotten by the profoundly idiotic dunes.

What had Rand called them?

Ubiquitous.

*If you just had a vision, Billy-boy, it was a pretty goddam dreadful one.*

Oh, but no, it wasn't. It wasn't dreadful; it was peaceful. It was as quiet as a nap on a Sunday afternoon. What was more peaceful than the beach?

He shook these thoughts away. It helped to look back toward the ship.

"There isn't going to be any cavalry," Rand said. "The sand will cover us and after a while we'll be the sand and the sand will be us. Surf City with no surf—can you catch that wave, Bill?"

And Shapiro was scared because he *could* catch it. You couldn't see all those dunes without getting it.

"Fucking dronehead asshole," he said. He went back to the ship. And hid from the beach.

Sunset finally came. The time when, at the beach—any *real* beach—you were supposed to put away the volleyball and put on your sweats and get out the weenies and the beer. Not time to start necking yet, but almost. Time to look *forward* to the necking.

Weenies and beer had not been a part of ASN/29's stores.

Shapiro spent the afternoon carefully bottling all of the ship's water. He used a porta-vac to suck up that which had run out of the ruptured veins in the ship's supply system and puddled on the floor. He got the small bit left in the bottom of the shattered hydraulic system's water tank. He did not overlook even the small cylinder in the guts of the air-purification system which circulated air in the storage areas.

Finally, he went into Grimes's cabin.

Grimes had kept goldfish in a circular tank constructed especially for weightless conditions. The tank was built of impact-resistant clear-polymer plastic, and had survived the crash easily. The goldfish—like their owner—had not been impact-resistant. They floated in a dull orange clump at the top of the ball, which had come to rest under Grimes's bunk, along with three pairs of very dirty underwear and half a dozen porno holograph-cubes.

He held the globe aquarium for a moment, looking fixedly into it. "Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well," he said suddenly, and laughed a screaming, distracted laugh. Then he got the net Grimes kept in his lockbin and dipped it into the tank. He removed the fish and then wondered what to do with them. After a moment he took them to Grimes's bed and raised his pillow.

There was sand underneath.

He put the fish there regardless, then carefully poured the water into the jerrican he was using as a catcher. It would all have to be purified, but even if the purifiers hadn't been working, he thought that in another couple of days he wouldn't balk at drinking aquarium water just because it might have a few loose scales and a little goldfish shit in it.

He purified the water, divided it, and took Rand's share back up the side of the dune. Rand was right where he had been, as if he had never moved.

“Rand. I brought you your share of the water.” He unzipped the pouch on the front of Rand’s EP suit and slipped the flat plastic flask inside. He was about to press the zip-strip closed with his thumbnail when Rand brushed his hand away. He took the flask out. Stenciled on the front was ASN/CLASS SHIP’S SUPPLIES STORAGE FLASK CL. #23196755 STERILE WHEN SEAL IS UNBROKEN. The seal was broken now, of course; Shapiro had had to fill the bottle up.

“I purified—”

Rand opened his fingers. The flask fell into the sand with a soft plop. “Don’t want it.”

“Don’t . . . Rand, what’s wrong with you? Jesus Christ, will you *stop* it?”

Rand did not reply.

Shapiro bent over and picked up storage flask #23196755. He brushed off the grains of sand clinging to the sides as if they were huge, swollen germs.

“What’s *wrong* with you?” Shapiro repeated. “Is it shock? Do you think that’s what it is? Because I can give you a pill

. . . or a shot. But it’s getting to me, I don’t mind telling you. You just standing out here looking at the next forty miles of nothing! It’s *sand!* Just *sand!*”

“It’s a beach,” Rand said dreamily. “Want to make a sand castle?”

“Okay, good,” Shapiro said. “I’m going to go get a needle and an amp of Yellowjack. If you want to act like a goddam dronehead, I’ll treat you like one.”

“If you try to inject me with something, you better be quiet when you sneak up behind me,” Rand said mildly. “Otherwise, I’ll break your arm.”

He could do it, too. Shapiro, the astrogator, weighed a hundred and forty pounds and stood five-five. Physical combat was not his specialty. He grunted an oath and turned away, back to the ship, holding Rand’s flask.

“I think it’s alive,” Rand said. “I’m actually pretty sure of it.”

Shapiro looked back at him and then out at the dunes. The sunset had given them a gold filigree at their smooth, sweeping caps, a filigree that shaded delicately down to the blackest ebony in the

troughs; on the next dune, ebony shaded back to gold. Gold to black. Black to gold. Gold to black and black to gold and gold to—

Shapiro blinked his eyes rapidly, and rubbed a hand over them.

“I have several times felt this particular dune move under my feet,” Rand told Shapiro. “It moves very gracefully. It is like feeling the tide. I can smell its smell on the air, and the smell is like salt.”

“You’re crazy,” Shapiro said. He was so terrified that he felt as if his brains had turned to glass.

Rand did not reply. Rand’s eyes searched the dunes, which went from gold to black to gold to black in the sunset.

Shapiro went back to the ship.

Rand stayed on the dune all night, and all the next day.

Shapiro looked out and saw him. Rand had taken off his EP suit, and the sand had almost covered it. Only one sleeve stuck out, forlorn and supplicating. The sand above and below it reminded Shapiro of a pair of lips sucking with a toothless greed at a tender morsel. Shapiro felt a crazy desire to pelt up the side of the dune and rescue Rand’s EP suit.

He did not.

He sat in his cabin and waited for the rescue ship. The smell of Freon had dissipated. It was replaced by the even less desirable smell of Grimes decaying.

The rescue ship did not come that day or that night or on the third day.

Sand somehow appeared in Shapiro’s cabin, although the hatchway was closed and the seal still appeared perfectly tight. He sucked the little puddles of sand up with the porta-vac as he had sucked up puddles of spilled water on that first day.

He was very thirsty all the time. His flask was nearly empty already.

He thought he had begun to smell salt on the air; in his sleep he heard the sound of gulls.

And he could hear the sand.

The steady wind was moving the first dune closer to the ship. His cabin was still okay—thanks to the porta-vac—but the sand was already taking over the rest. Mini-dunes had reached through the blown locks and laid hold of ASN/29. It sifted in tendrils and membranes through the vents. There was a drift in one of the blown tanks.

Shapiro's face grew gaunt and pebbly with beard shadow.

Near sunset of the third day, he climbed up the dune to check on Rand. He thought about taking a hypodermic, then rejected it. It was a lot more than shock; he knew that now. Rand was insane. It would be best if he died quickly. And it looked as if that was exactly what was going to happen.

Shapiro was gaunt; Rand was emaciated. His body was a scrawny stick. His legs, formerly rich and thick with iron-pumper's muscle, were now slack and droopy. The skin hung on them like loose socks that keep falling down. He was wearing only his undershorts, and they were red nylon, and they looked absurdly like a ball-hugger bathing suit. A light beard had begun to grow on his face, fuzzing his hollow cheeks and chin. His beard was the color of beach sand. His hair, formerly a listless brown shade, had bleached out to a near blond. It hung over his forehead. Only his eyes, peering through the fringe of his hair with bright blue intensity, still lived fully. They studied the beach

*(the dunes goddammit the DUNES)*  
relentlessly.

Now Shapiro saw a bad thing. It was a very bad thing indeed. He saw that Rand's face was turning into a sand dune. His beard and his hair were choking his skin.

"You," Shapiro said, "are going to die. If you don't come down to the ship and drink, you are going to die."

Rand said nothing.

"Is that what you *want*?"

Nothing. There was the vacuous snuffle of the wind, but no more. Shapiro observed that the creases of Rand's neck were filling up with sand.

“The only thing I *want*,” Rand said in a faint, faraway voice like the wind, “is my Beach Boys tapes. They’re in my cabin.”

“Fuck you!” Shapiro said furiously. “But do you know what I hope? I hope a ship comes before you die. I want to see you holler and scream when they pull you away from your precious goddam beach. I want to see what happens then!”

“Beach’ll get you, too,” Rand said. His voice was empty and rattling, like wind inside a split gourd—a gourd which has been left in a field at the end of October’s last harvest. “Take a listen, Bill. Listen to the wave.”

Rand cocked his head. His mouth, half-open, revealed his tongue. It was as shriveled as a dry sponge.

Shapiro heard something.

He heard the dunes. They sang songs of Sunday afternoon at the beach—naps on the beach with no dreams. Long naps. Mindless peace. The sound of crying gulls. Shifting, thoughtless particles. Walking dunes. He heard . . . and was drawn. Drawn toward the dunes.

“You hear it,” Rand said.

Shapiro reached into his nose and dug with two fingers until it bled. Then he could close his eyes; his thoughts came slowly and clumsily together. His heart was racing.

*I was almost like Rand. Jesus! . . . it almost had me!*

He opened his eyes again and saw that Rand had become a conch shell on a long deserted beach, straining forward toward all the mysteries of an undead sea, staring out at the dunes and the dunes and the dunes.

*No more*, Shapiro moaned inside himself.

*Oh, but listen to this wave*, the dunes whispered back.

Against his better judgment, Shapiro listened.

Then his better judgment ceased to exist.

Shapiro thought: *I could hear better if I sat down*.

He sat down at Rand’s feet and put his heels on his thighs like a Yaqui Indian and listened.

He heard the Beach Boys and the Beach Boys were singing about fun, fun, fun. He heard them singing that the girls on the beach were

all within reach. He heard—

—a hollow sighing of the wind, not in his ear but in the canyon between right brain and left brain—he heard that sighing somewhere in the blackness which is spanned only by the suspension bridge of the corpus callosum, which connects conscious thought to the infinite. He felt no hunger, no thirst, no heat, no fear. He heard only the voice in the emptiness.

And a ship came.

It came swooping out of the sky, afterburners scratching a long orange track from right to left. Thunder belted the delta-wave topography, and several dunes collapsed like bulletpath brain damage. The thunder *ripped* Billy Shapiro's head open and for a moment he was torn both ways, ripped, torn down the middle—

Then he was up on his feet.

*“Ship!”* he screamed. *“Holy fuck! Ship! Ship! SHIP!”*

It was a belt trader, dirty and bugged by five hundred—or five thousand—years of clan service. It surfed through the air, banged crudely upright, skidded. The captain blew jets and fused sand into black glass. Shapiro cheered the wound.

Rand looked around like a man awaking from a deep dream.

“Tell it to go away, Billy.”

“You don't understand.” Shapiro was shambling around, shaking his fists in the air. “You'll be all right—”

He broke toward the dirty trader in big, leaping strides, like a kangaroo running from a ground fire. The sand clutched at him. Shapiro kicked it away. Fuck you, sand. I got a honey back in Hansonville. Sand never had no honey. Beach never had no hard-on.

The trader's hull split. A gangplank popped out like a tongue. A man strode down it behind three sampler androids and a guy built into treads that was surely the captain. He wore a beret with a clan symbol on it, anyway.

One of the androids waved a sampler wand at him. Shapiro batted it away. He fell on his knees in front of the captain and embraced the treads which had replaced the captain's dead legs.

“The dunes . . . Rand . . . no water . . . alive . . . hypnotized him . . . dronehead world . . . I . . . thank God . . . ”

A steel tentacle whipped around Shapiro and yanked him away on his gut. Dry sand whispered underneath him like laughter.

“It’s okay,” the captain said. *“Bey-at shel! Me! Me! Gat!”*

The android dropped Shapiro and backed away, clittering distractedly to itself.

“All this way for a fucking Fed!” the captain exclaimed bitterly.

Shapiro wept. It hurt, not just in his head, but in his liver.

“Dud! *Gee-yat! Gat!* Water-for-him-Cry!”

The man who had been in the lead tossed him a nipples low-grav bottle. Shapiro upended it and sucked greedily, spilling crystal-cold water into his mouth, down his chin, in dribbles that darkened his tunic, which had bleached to the color of bone. He choked, vomited, then drank again.

Dud and the captain watched him closely. The androids clittered.

At last Shapiro wiped his mouth and sat up. He felt both sick and well.

“You Shapiro?” the captain asked.

Shapiro nodded.

“Clan affiliation?”

“None.”

“ASN number?”

“29.”

“Crew?”

“Three. One dead. The other—Rand—up there.” He pointed but did not look.

The captain’s face did not change. Dud’s face did.

“The beach got him,” Shapiro said. He saw their questioning, veiled looks. “Shock . . . maybe. He seems hypnotized. He keeps talking about the . . . the Beach Boys . . . never mind, you wouldn’t know. He wouldn’t drink or eat. He’s bad off.”

“Dud. Take one of the andies and get him down from there.” He shook his head. “Fed ship, Christ. No salvage.”

Dud nodded. A few moments later he was scrambling up the side of the dune with one of the andies. The andy looked like a twenty-

year-old surfer who might make dope money on the side servicing bored widows, but his stride gave him away even more than the segmented tentacles which grew from his armpits. The stride, common to all androids, was the slow, reflective, almost painful stride of an aging English butler with hemorrhoids.

There was a buzz from the captain's dashboard.

"I'm here."

"This is Gomez, Cap. We got a situation here. Compscan and surface telemetry show us a very unstable surface. There's no bedrock that we can targ. We're resting on our own burn, and right now that may be the hardest thing on the whole planet. Trouble is, the burn itself is starting to settle."

"Recommendation?"

"We ought to get out."

"When?"

"Five minutes ago."

"You're a laugh riot, Gomez."

The captain punched a button and the communicator went out.

Shapiro's eyes were rolling. "Look, never mind Rand. He's had it."

"I'm taking you both back," the captain said. "I got no salvage, but the Federation ought to pay something for the two of you . . . not that either of you are worth much, as far as I can see. He's crazy and you're chickenshit."

"No . . . you don't understand. You—"

The captain's cunning yellow eyes gleamed.

"You got any contra?" he asked.

"Captain . . . look . . . please—"

"Because if you do, there's no sense just leaving it here. Tell me what it is and where it is. I'll split seventy-thirty. Standard salvor's fee. Couldn't do any better than that, hey? You—"

The burn suddenly tilted beneath them. Quite noticeably tilted. A horn somewhere inside the trader began to blat with muffled regularity. The communicator on the captain's dashboard went off again.

*"There!"* Shapiro screamed. *"There, do you see what you're up against? You want to talk about contraband now? WE HAVE GOT*

TO GET THE FUCK OUT OF *HERE!*”

“Shut up, handsome, or I’ll have one of these guys sedate you,” the captain said. His voice was serene but his eyes had changed. He thumbed the communicator.

“Cap, I got ten degrees of tilt and we’re getting more. The elevator’s going down, but it’s going on an angle. We’ve still got time, but not much. The ship’s going to fall over.”

“The struts will hold her.”

“No, sir. Begging the captain’s pardon, they won’t.”

“Start firing sequences, Gomez.”

“Thank you, sir.” The relief in Gomez’s voice was unmistakable.

Dud and the android were coming back down the flank of the dune. Rand wasn’t with them. The andy fell further and further behind. And now a strange thing happened. The andy fell over on its face. The captain frowned. It did not fall as an andy is supposed to fall—which is to say, like a human being, more or less. It was as if someone had pushed over a mannequin in a department store. It fell over like that. Thump, and a little tan cloud of sand puffed up from around it.

Dud went back and knelt by it. The andy’s legs were still moving as if it dreamed, in the 1.5 million Freon-cooled micro-circuits that made up its mind, that it still walked. But the leg movements were slow and cracking. They stopped. Smoke began to come out of its pores and its tentacles shivered in the sand. It was gruesomely like watching a human die. A deep grinding came from inside it:

*Graaaagggg!*

“Full of sand,” Shapiro whispered. “It’s got Beach Boys religion.”

The captain glanced at him impatiently. “Don’t be ridiculous, man. That thing could walk through a sandstorm and not get a grain inside it.”

“Not on this world.”

The burn settled again. The trader was now clearly canted. There was a low groan as the struts took more weight.

“Leave it!” the captain bawled at Dud. “Leave it, leave it! *Gee-yat! Come-me-for-Cry!*”

Dud came, leaving the andy to walk face-down in the sand.

“What a balls-up,” the captain muttered.

He and Dud engaged in a conversation spoken entirely in a rapid pidgin dialect which Shapiro was able to follow to some degree. Dud told the captain that Rand had refused to come. The andy had tried to grab Rand, but with no force. Even then it was moving jerkily, and strange grating sounds were coming from inside it. Also, it had begun to recite a combination of galactic strip-mining coordinates and a catalogue of the captain’s folk-music tapes. Dud himself had then closed with Rand. They had struggled briefly. The captain told Dud that if Dud had allowed a man who had been standing three days in the hot sun to get the better of him, that maybe he ought to get another First.

Dud’s face darkened with embarrassment, but his grave, concerned look never faltered. He slowly turned his head, revealing four deep furrows in his cheek. They were welling slowly.

“*Him-gat big indicis,*” Dud said. “*Strong-for-Cry. Him-gat for umby.*”

“*Umby-him for-Cry?*” The captain was looking at Dud sternly.

Dud nodded. “*Umby. Beyat-shel. Umby-for-Cry.*”

Shapiro had been frowning, conning his tired, frightened mind for that word. Now it came. *Umby*. It meant crazy. *He’s strong, for Christ’s sake. Strong because he’s crazy. He’s got big ways, big force.* Because he’s crazy.

Big ways . . . or maybe it meant big waves. He wasn’t sure. Either way it came to the same.

*Umby.*

The ground shifted underneath them again, and sand blew across Shapiro’s boots.

From behind them came the hollow *ka-thud, ka-thud, ka-thud* of the breather-tubes opening. Shapiro thought it one of the most lovely sounds he had ever heard in his life.

The captain sat deep in thought, a weird centaur whose lower half was treads and plates instead of horse. Then he looked up and thumbed the communicator.

“Gomez, send Excellent Montoya down here with a tranquilizer gun.”

“Acknowledged.”

The captain looked at Shapiro. “Now, on top of everything else, I’ve lost an android worth your salary for the next ten years. I’m pissed off. I mean to have your buddy.”

“Captain.” Shapiro could not help licking his lips. He knew this was a very ill-chosen thing to do. He did not want to appear mad, hysterical, or craven, and the captain had apparently decided he was all three. Licking his lips like that would only add to the impression . . . but he simply couldn’t help himself. “Captain, I cannot impress on you too strongly the need to get off this world as soon as poss—”

“Can it, dronehead,” the captain said, not unkindly.

A thin scream rose from the top of the nearest dune.

*“Don’t touch me! Don’t come near me! Leave me alone! All of you!”*

“*Big indic’s gat umby,*” Dud said gravely.

“*Ma-him, yeah-mon,*” the captain returned, and then turned to Shapiro. “He really is bad off, isn’t he?”

Shapiro shuddered. “You don’t know. You just—”

The burn settled again. The struts were groaning louder than ever. The communicator crackled. Gomez’s voice was thin, a little unsteady.

“We have to get out of here right now, Cap!”

“All right.” A brown man appeared on the gangway. He held a long pistol in one gloved hand. The captain pointed at Rand. “*Ma-him, for-Cry. Can?*”

Excellent Montoya, Unperturbed by the tilting earth that was not earth but only sand fused to glass (and there were deep cracks running through it now, Shapiro saw), unbothered by the groaning struts or the eerie sight of an android that now appeared to be digging its own grave with its feet, studied Rand’s thin figure for a moment.

“*Can,*” he said.

“*Gat! Gat-for-Cry!*” The captain spat to one side. “Shoot his pecker off, I don’t care,” he said. “Just as long as he’s still breathing when

we ship.”

Excellent Montoya raised the pistol. The gesture was apparently two-thirds casual and one-third careless, but Shapiro, even in his state of near-panic, noted the way Montoya’s head tilted to one side as he lined the barrel up. Like many in the clans, the gun would be nearly a part of him, like pointing his own finger.

There was a hollow *fooh!* as he squeezed the trigger and the tranquilizer dart blew out of the barrel.

A hand reached out of the dune and clawed it down.

It was a large brown hand, wavery, made of sand. It simply reached up, in defiance of the wind, and smothered the momentary glitter of the dart. Then the sand fell back with a heavy *thrrrrap*. No hand. Impossible to believe there had been. But they had all seen it.

“*Giddy-hump,*” the captain said in an almost conversational voice.

Excellent Montoya fell on his knees. “*Aidy-May-for-Cry,* bit-gat come! *Saw-hoh* got *belly-gat for-Cry!*—”

Numbly, Shapiro realized Montoya was saying a rosary in pidgin.

Up on the dune, Rand was jumping up and down, shaking his fists at the sky, screeching thinly in triumph.

*A hand. It was a HAND. He’s right; it’s alive, alive, alive—*

“*Indic!*” the captain said sharply to Montoya. “*Cannit! Gat!*”

Montoya shut up. His eyes touched on the capering figure of Rand and then he looked away. His face was full of superstitious horror nearly medieval in quality.

“Okay,” the captain said. “I’ve had enough. I quit. We’re going.”

He shoved two buttons on his dashboard. The motor that should have swiveled him neatly around so he faced up the gangplank again did not hum; it squealed and grated. The captain cursed. The burn shifted again.

“Captain!” Gomez. In a panic.

The captain slammed in another button and the treads began to move backward up the gangplank.

“Guide me,” the captain said to Shapiro. “I got no fucking rearview mirror. It was a hand, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I want to get out of here,” the captain said. “It’s been fourteen years since I had a cock, but right now I feel like I’m pissing myself.”

*Thrrap!* A dune suddenly collapsed over the gangway. Only it wasn’t a dune; it was an arm.

“Fuck, oh fuck,” the captain said.

On his dune, Rand capered and screeched.

Now the threads of the captain’s lower half began to grind. The mini-tank of which the captain’s head and shoulders were the turret now began to judder backward.

“What—”

The treads locked. Sand splurged out from between them.

*“Pick me up!”* the captain bawled to the two remaining androids.

*“Now! RIGHT NOW!”*

Their tentacles curled around the tread sprockets as they picked him up—he looked ridiculously like a faculty member about to be tossed in a blanket by a bunch of roughhousing fraternity boys. He was thumbing the communicator.

“Gomez! Final firing sequence! Now! Now!”

The dune at the foot of the gangplank shifted. Became a hand. A large brown hand that began to scabble up the incline.

Shrieking, Shapiro bolted from that hand.

Cursing, the captain was carried away from it.

The gangplank was pulled up. The hand fell off and became sand again. The hatchway irised closed. The engines howled. No time for a couch; no time for anything like that. Shapiro dropped into a crash-fold position on the bulkhead and was promptly smashed flat by the acceleration. Before unconsciousness washed over him, it seemed he could feel sand grasping at the trader with muscular brown arms, straining to hold them down—

Then they were up and away.

Rand watched them go. He was sitting down. When the track of the trader’s jets was at last gone from the sky, he turned his eyes out to the placid endlessness of the dunes.

“We got a '34 wagon and we call it a woody,” he croaked to the empty, moving sand. “It ain’t very cherry; it’s an oldy but a goody.”

Slowly, reflectively, he began to cram handful after handful of sand into his mouth. He swallowed . . . swallowed . . . swallowed. Soon his belly was a swollen barrel and sand began to drift over his legs.

## The Reaper's Image

“We moved it last year, and quite an operation it was, too,” Mr. Carlin said as they mounted the stairs. “Had to move it by hand, of course. No other way. We insured it against accident with Lloyd’s before we even took it out of the case in the drawing room. Only firm that would insure for the sum we had in mind.”

Spangler said nothing. The man was a fool. Johnson Spangler had learned a long time ago that the only way to talk to a fool was to ignore him.

“Insured it for a quarter of a million dollars,” Mr. Carlin resumed when they reached the second-floor landing. His mouth quirked in a half-bitter, half-humorous line. “And a pretty penny it cost, too.” He was a little man, not quite fat, with rimless glasses and a tanned bald head that shone like a varnished volleyball. A suit of armor, guarding the mahogany shadows of the second-floor corridor, stared at them impassively.

It was a long corridor, and Spangler eyed the walls and hangings with a cool professional eye. Samuel Claggert had bought in copious quantities, but he had not bought well. Like so many of the self-made industry emperors of the late 1800’s, he had been little more than a pawnshop rooter masquerading in collector’s clothing, a connoisseur of canvas monstrosities, trashy novels and poetry collections in expensive cowhide bindings, and atrocious pieces of sculpture, all of which he considered Art.

Up here the walls were hung—festooned was perhaps a better word—with imitation Moroccan drapes, numberless (and, no doubt, anonymous) madonnas holding numberless haloed babes while numberless angels flitted hither and thither in the background, grotesque scrolled candelabra, and one monstrous and obscenely ornate chandelier surmounted by a salaciously grinning nymphet.

Of course the old pirate had come up with a few interesting items; the law of averages demanded it. And if the Samuel Claggert

Memorial Private Museum (Guided Tours on the Hour—Admission \$1.00 Adults, \$.50 Children—nauseating) was 98 percent blatant junk, there was always that other two percent, things like the Coombs long rifle over the hearth in the kitchen, the strange little *camera obscura* in the parlor, and of course the—

“The Delver looking-glass was removed from downstairs after a rather unfortunate . . . incident,” Mr. Carlin said abruptly, motivated apparently by a ghastly glaring portrait of no one in particular at the base of the next staircase. “There had been others—harsh words, wild statements—but this was an attempt to actually *destroy* the mirror. The woman, a Miss Sandra Bates, came in with a rock in her pocket. Fortunately her aim was bad and she only cracked a corner of the case. The mirror was unharmed. The Bates girl had a brother —”

“No need to give me the dollar tour,” Spangler said quietly. “I’m conversant with the history of the Delver glass.”

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” Carlin cast him an odd, oblique look. “There was that English duchess in 1709 . . . and the Pennsylvania rug merchant in 1746 . . . not to mention—”

“I’m conversant with the history,” Spangler repeated quietly. “It’s the workmanship I’m interested in. And then, of course, there’s the question of authenticity—”

“Authenticity!” Mr. Carlin chuckled, a dry sound, as if bones had stirred in a cupboard below the stairs. “It’s been examined by experts, Mr. Spangler.”

“So was the Lemlier Stradivarius.”

“So true,” Mr. Carlin said with a sigh. “But no Stradivarius ever had quite the . . . the unsettling effect of the Delver glass.”

“Yes, quite,” Spangler said in his softly contemptuous voice. He understood now that there would be no stopping Carlin; he had a mind which was perfectly in tune with the age. “Quite.”

They climbed the third and fourth flights in silence. As they drew closer to the roof of the rambling structure, it became oppressively hot in the dark upper galleries. With the heat came a creeping stench that Spangler knew well, for he had spent all his adult life working in it—a smell of long-dead flies in shadowy corners, of wet rot and

creeping wood lice behind the plaster. The smell of age. It was a smell common only to museums and mausoleums. He imagined much the same smell might arise from the grave of a virginal young girl, forty years dead.

Up here the relics were piled helter-skelter in true junk-shop profusion; Mr. Carlin led Spangler through a maze of statuary, frame-splintered portraits, pompous gold-plated birdcages, the dismembered skeleton of an ancient tandem bicycle. He led him to the far wall where a stepladder had been set up beneath a trapdoor in the ceiling. A dusty padlock hung from the trap.

Off to the left, an imitation Adonis stared at them pitilessly with blank pupilless eyes. One arm was outstretched, and a yellow sign hung on the wrist which read: ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE.

Mr. Carlin produced a key ring from his jacket pocket, selected a key, and mounted the stepladder. He paused on the third rung, his bald head gleaming faintly in the shadows. "I don't like that mirror," he said. "I never did. I'm afraid to look into it. I'm afraid I might look into it one day and see

. . . what the rest of them saw."

"They saw nothing but themselves," Spangler said.

Mr. Carlin began to speak, stopped, shook his head, and fumbled above him, craning his neck to fit the key properly into the lock. "Should be replaced," he muttered. "It's—damn!" The lock sprung suddenly and swung out of the hasp. Mr. Carlin made a fumbling grab for it and almost fell off the ladder. Spangler caught it deftly and looked up at him. He was clinging shakily to the top of the stepladder, face white in the brown semidarkness.

"You *are* nervous about it, aren't you?" Spangler said in a mildly wondering tone.

Mr. Carlin said nothing. He seemed paralyzed.

"Come down," Spangler said. "Please. Before you fall." Carlin descended the ladder slowly, clinging to each rung like a man tottering over a bottomless chasm. When his feet touched the floor he began to babble, as if the floor contained some current that had turned him on, like an electric light.

“A quarter of a million,” he said. “A quarter of a million dollars’ worth of insurance to take that . . . *thing* from down there to up here. That goddam *thing*. They had to rig a special block and tackle to get it into the gable storeroom up there. And I was hoping—almost praying—that someone’s fingers would be slippery . . . that the rope would be the wrong test

. . . that the thing would fall and be shattered into a million pieces —”

“Facts,” Spangler said. “Facts, Carlin. Not cheap paperback novels, not cheap tabloid stories or equally cheap horror movies. *Facts*. Number one: John Delver was an English craftsman of Norman descent who made mirrors in what we call the Elizabethan period of England’s history. He lived and died uneventfully. No pentacles scrawled on the floor for the housekeeper to rub out, no sulfur-smelling documents with a splotch of blood on the dotted line. Number two: His mirrors have become collector’s items due principally to fine craftsmanship and to the fact that a form of crystal was used that has a mildly magnifying and distorting effect upon the eye of the beholder—a rather distinctive trademark. Number three: Only five Delvers remain in existence to our present knowledge—two of them in America. They are priceless. Number four: This Delver and one other that was destroyed in the London Blitz have gained a rather spurious reputation due largely to falsehood, exaggeration, and coincidence—” “Fact number five,” Mr. Carlin said. “You’re a supercilious bastard, aren’t you?”

Spangler looked with mild detestation at the blind-eyed Adonis.

“I was guiding the tour that Sandra Bates’s brother was a part of when he got his look into your precious Delver mirror, Spangler. He was perhaps sixteen, part of a high-school group. I was going through the history of the glass and had just got to the part *you* would appreciate—extolling the flawless craftsmanship, the perfection of the glass itself—when the boy raised his hand. ‘But what about that black splotch in the upper left-hand corner?’ he asked. ‘That looks like a mistake.’

“And one of his friends asked him what he meant, so the Bates boy started to tell him, then stopped. He looked at the mirror very

closely, pushing right up to the red velvet guardrope around the case—*then he looked behind him as if what he had seen had been the reflection of someone—of someone in black—standing at his shoulder.* ‘It looked like a man,’ he said. ‘But I couldn’t see the face. It’s gone now.’ And that was all.”

“Go on,” Spangler said. “You’re itching to tell me it was the Reaper—I believe that is the common explanation, isn’t it? That occasional chosen people see the Reaper’s image in the glass? Get it out of your system, man. The *National Enquirer* would love it! Tell me about the horrific consequences and defy me to explain it. Was he later hit by a car? Did he jump out of a window? What?”

Mr. Carlin chuckled a forlorn little chuckle. “You should know better, Spangler. Haven’t you told me twice that you are . . . ah . . . conversant with the history of the Delver glass. There *were* no horrific consequences. There never have been. That’s why the Delver glass isn’t Sunday-supplementized like the Koh-i-noor Diamond or the curse on King Tut’s tomb. It’s mundane compared to those. You think I’m a fool, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Spangler said. “Can we go up now?”

“Certainly,” Mr. Carlin said passionately. He climbed the ladder and pushed the trapdoor. There was a clickety-clackety-bump as it was drawn up into the shadows by a counterweight, and then Mr. Carlin disappeared into the shadows. Spangler followed. The blind Adonis stared unknowingly after them.

The gable room was explosively hot, lit only by one cobwebby, many-angled window that filtered the hard outside light into a dirty milky glow. The looking-glass was propped at an angle to the light, catching most of it and reflecting a pearly patch onto the far wall. It had been bolted securely into a wooden frame. Mr. Carlin was not looking at it. Quite studiously not looking at it.

“You haven’t even put a dustcloth over it,” Spangler said, visibly angered for the first time.

“I think of it as an eye,” Mr. Carlin said. His voice was still drained, perfectly empty. “If it’s left open, always open, perhaps it will go blind.

”

Spangler paid no attention. He took off his jacket, folded the buttons carefully in, and with infinite gentleness he wiped the dust from the convex surface of the glass itself. Then he stood back and looked at it.

It was genuine. There was no doubt about it, never had been, really. It was a perfect example of Delver’s particular genius. The cluttered room behind him, his own reflection, Carlin’s half-turned figure—they were all clear, sharp, almost three-dimensional. The faint magnifying effect of the glass gave everything a slightly curved effect that added an almost fourth-dimensional distortion. It was—

His thought broke off, and he felt another wave of anger.

“Carlin.”

Carlin said nothing.

“Carlin, you damned fool, I thought you said that girl didn’t harm the mirror!”

No answer.

Spangler stared at him icily in the glass. “There is a piece of friction tape in the upper left-hand corner. Did she crack it? For God’s sake, man, speak up!”

“You’re seeing the Reaper,” Carlin said. His voice was deadly and without passion. “There’s no friction tape on the mirror. Put your hand over it . . . dear God.”

Spangler wrapped the upper sleeve of his coat carefully around his hand, reached out, and pressed it gently against the mirror. “You see? Nothing supernatural. It’s gone. My hand covers it.”

“Covers it? Can you feel the tape? Why don’t you pull it off?”

Spangler took his hand away carefully and looked into the glass. Everything in it seemed a little more distorted; the room’s odd angles seemed to yaw crazily as if on the verge of sliding off into some unseen eternity. There was no dark spot in the mirror. It was flawless. He felt a sudden unhealthy dread rise in him and despised himself for feeling it.

“It looked like him, didn’t it?” Mr. Carlin asked. His face was very pale, and he was looking directly at the floor. A muscle twitched

spasmodically in his neck. “Admit it, Spangler. It looked like a hooded figure standing behind you, didn’t it?”

“It looked like friction tape masking a short crack,” Spangler said very firmly. “Nothing more, nothing less—”

“The Bates boy was very husky,” Carlin said rapidly. His words seemed to drop into the hot, still atmosphere like stones into dark water. “Like a football player. He was wearing a letter sweater and dark green chinos. We were halfway to the upper-half exhibits when —”

“The heat is making me feel ill,” Spangler said a little unsteadily. He had taken out a handkerchief and was wiping his neck. His eyes searched the convex surface of the mirror in small, jerky movements.

“When he said he wanted a drink of water . . . a drink of water, for God’s sake!”

Carlin turned and stared wildly at Spangler. “How was I to know? How was I to know?”

“Is there a lavatory? I think I’m going to—”

“His sweater . . . I just caught a glimpse of his sweater going down the stairs . . . then . . .”

“—be sick.”

Carlin shook his head, as if to clear it, and looked at the floor again. “Of course. Third door on your left, second floor, as you go toward the stairs.” He looked up appealingly. “How was I to *know*?”

But Spangler had already stepped down onto the ladder. It rocked under his weight and for a moment Carlin thought—hoped—that he would fall. He didn’t. Through the open square in the floor Carlin watched him descend, holding his mouth lightly with one hand.

“Spangler—?”

But he was gone.

Carlin listened to his footfalls fade to echoes, then die away. When they were gone, he shivered violently. He tried to move his own feet to the trapdoor, but they were frozen. Just that last, hurried glimpse of the boy’s sweater . . . God! . . .

It was as if huge invisible hands were pulling his head, forcing it up. Not wanting to look, Carlin stared into the glimmering depths of the Delver looking-glass.

There was nothing there.

The room was reflected back to him faithfully, its dusty confines transmuted into glimmering infinity. A snatch of a half-remembered Tennyson poem occurred to him, and he muttered it aloud: “ ‘ “I am half-sick of shadows,” said the Lady of Shalott . . . ’ ”

And still he could not look away, and the breathing stillness held him. From around one corner of the mirror a moth-eaten buffalo head peered at him with flat obsidian eyes.

The boy had wanted a drink of water and the fountain was in the first-floor lobby. He had gone downstairs and—

And had never come back.

Ever.

Anywhere.

Like the duchess who had paused after primping before her glass for a *soirée* and decided to go back into the sitting room for her pearls. Like the rug-merchant who had gone for a carriage ride and had left behind him only an empty carriage and two closemouthed horses.

And the Delver glass had been in New York from 1897 until 1920, had been there when Judge Crater—

Carlin stared as if hypnotized into the shallow depths of the mirror. Below, the blind-eyed Adonis kept watch.

He waited for Spangler much like the Bates family must have waited for their son, much like the duchess's husband must have waited for his wife to return from the sitting room. He stared into the mirror and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

## Nona

*Do you love?*

I hear her voice saying this—sometimes I still hear it. In my dreams.

*Do you love?*

Yes, I answer. *Yes—and true love will never die.*

Then I wake up screaming.

I don't know how to explain it, even now. I can't tell you why I did those things. I couldn't do it at the trial, either. And there are a lot of people here who ask me about it. There's a psychiatrist who does. But I am silent. My lips are sealed. Except here in my cell. Here I am not silent. I wake up screaming.

In the dream I see her walking toward me. She is wearing a white gown, almost transparent, and her expression is one of mingled desire and triumph. She comes to me across a dark room with a stone floor and I smell dry October roses. Her arms are held open and I go to her with mine out to enfold her.

I feel dread, revulsion, unutterable longing. Dread and revulsion because I know what this place is, longing because I love her. I will always love her. There are times when I wish there were still a death penalty in this state. A short walk down a dim corridor, a straightbacked chair fitted with a steel skullcap, clamps . . . then one quick jolt and I would be with her.

As we come together in the dream my fear grows, but it is impossible for me to draw back from her. My hands press against the smooth plane of her back, her skin near under silk. She smiles with those deep, black eyes. Her head tilts up to mine and her lips part, ready to be kissed.

That's when she changes, shrivels. Her hair grows coarse and matted, melting from black to an ugly brown that spills down over the creamy whiteness of her cheeks. The eyes shrink and go beady. The

whites disappear and she is glaring at me with tiny eyes like two polished pieces of jet. The mouth becomes a maw through which crooked yellow teeth protrude.

I try to scream. I try to wake up.

I can't. I'm caught again. I'll always be caught.

I am in the grip of a huge, noisome graveyard rat. Lights sway in front of my eyes. October roses. Somewhere a dead bell is chanting.

"Do you love?" this thing whispers. "Do you love?" The smell of roses is its breath as it swoops toward me, dead flowers in a charnel house.

"Yes," I tell the rat-thing. "Yes—and true love will never die." Then I do scream, and I am awake.

They think what we did together drove me crazy. But my mind is still working in some way or other, and I've never stopped looking for the answers. I still want to know how it was, and what it was.

They've let me have paper and a pen with a felt tip. I'm going to write everything down. Maybe I'll answer some of their questions and maybe while I'm doing that I can answer some of my own. And when I'm done, there's something else. Something they *don't* know I have. Something I took. It's here under my mattress. A knife from the prison dining hall.

I'll have to start by telling you about Augusta.

As I write this it is night, a fine August night poked through with blazing stars. I can see them through the mesh of my window, which overlooks the exercise yard and a slice of sky I can block out with two fingers. It's hot, and I'm naked except for my shorts. I can hear the soft summer sound of frogs and crickets. But I can bring back winter just by closing my eyes. The bitter cold of that night, the bleakness, the hard, unfriendly lights of a city that was not my city. It was the fourteenth of February.

See, I remember everything.

And look at my arms—covered with sweat, they've pulled into gooseflesh.

Augusta . . .

When I got to Augusta I was more dead than alive, it was that cold. I had picked a fine day to say good-bye to the college scene and hitchhike west; it looked like I might freeze to death before I got out of the state.

A cop had kicked me off the interstate ramp and threatened to bust me if he caught me thumbing there again. I was almost tempted to wisemouth him and let him do it. The flat, four-lane stretch of highway had been like an airport landing strip, the wind whooping and pushing membranes of powdery snow skirling along the concrete. And to the anonymous Them behind their Saf-T-Glas windshields, everyone standing in the breakdown lane on a dark night is either a rapist or a murderer, and if he's got long hair you can throw in child molester and faggot on top.

I tried it awhile on the access road, but it was no good. And along about a quarter of eight I realized that if I didn't get someplace warm quick, I was going to pass out.

I walked a mile and a half before I found a combination diner and diesel stop on 202 just inside the city limits. JOE'S GOOD EATS, the neon said. There were three big rigs parked in the crushed-stone parking lot, and one new sedan. There was a wilted Christmas wreath on the door that nobody had bothered to take down, and next to it a thermometer showing just five degrees of mercury above big zero. I had nothing to cover my ears but my hair, and my rawhide gloves were falling apart. The tips of my fingers felt like pieces of furniture.

I opened the door and went in.

The heat was the first thing that struck me, warm and good. Next a hillbilly song on the juke, the unmistakable voice of Merle Haggard: "We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy, like the hippies out in San Francisco do."

The third thing that struck me was The Eye. You know about The Eye once you let your hair get down below the lobes of your ears. Right then people know you don't belong to the Lions, Elks, or the VFW. You know about The Eye, but you never get used to it.

Right now the people giving me The Eye were four truckers in one booth, two more at the counter, a pair of old ladies wearing cheap fur

coats and blue rinses, the short-order cook, and a gawky kid with soapsuds on his hands. There was a girl sitting at the far end of the counter, but all she was looking at was the bottom of her coffee cup.

She was the fourth thing that struck me.

I'm old enough to know there's no such thing as love at first sight. It's just something Rodgers and Hammerstein thought up one day to rhyme with moon and June. It's for kids holding hands at the Prom, right?

But looking at her made me feel something. You can laugh, but you wouldn't have if you'd seen her. She was almost unbearably beautiful. I knew without a doubt that everybody else in Joe's knew that the same as me. Just like I knew she had been getting *The Eye* before I came in. She had coal-colored hair, so black that it seemed nearly blue under the fluorescents. It fell freely over the shoulders of her scuffed tan coat. Her skin was cream-white, with just the faintest blooded touch lingering beneath the skin—the cold she had brought in with her. Dark, sooty lashes. Solemn eyes that slanted up the tiniest bit at the corners. A full and mobile mouth below a straight, patrician nose. I couldn't tell what her body looked like. I didn't care. You wouldn't, either. All she needed was that face, that hair, that *look*. She was exquisite. That's the only word we have for her in English.

Nona.

I sat two stools down from her, and the short-order cook came over and looked at me. "What?"

"Black coffee, please."

He went to get it. From behind me someone said: "Well I guess Christ came back, just like my mamma always said He would."

The gawky dishwasher laughed, a quick yuk-yuk sound. The truckers at the counter joined in.

The short-order cook brought me my coffee back, jarred it down on the counter and spilled some on the thawing meat of my hand. I jerked it back.

"Sorry," he said indifferently.

"He's gonna heal it hisself," one of the truckers in the booth called over.

The blue-rinse twins paid their checks and hurried out. One of the knights of the road sauntered over to the juke and put another dime in. Johnny Cash began to sing “A Boy Named Sue.” I blew on my coffee.

Someone tugged at my sleeve. I turned my head and there she was—she’d moved over to the empty stool. Looking at that face close up was almost blinding. I spilled some more of my coffee.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was low, almost atonal.

“My fault. I can’t feel what I’m doing yet.”

“I”

She stopped, seemingly at a loss. I suddenly realized that she was scared. I felt my first reaction to her swim over me again—to protect her and take care of her, make her not afraid. “I need a ride,” she finished in a rush. “I didn’t dare ask any of them.” She made a barely perceptible gesture toward the truckers in the booth.

How can I make you understand that I would have given anything—*anything*—to be able to tell her, *Sure, finish your coffee, I’m parked right outside*. It sounds crazy to say I felt that way after half a dozen words out of her mouth, and the same number out of mine, but I did. Looking at her was like looking at the Mona Lisa or the Venus de Milo come to breathing life. And there was another feeling. It was as if a sudden, powerful light had been turned on in the confused darkness of my mind. It would make it easier if I could say she was a pickup and I was a fast man with the ladies, quick with a funny line and lots of patter, but she wasn’t and I wasn’t. All I knew was I didn’t have what she needed and it tore me up.

“I’m thumbing,” I told her. “A cop kicked me off the interstate and I only came here to get out of the cold. I’m sorry.”

“Are you from the university?”

“I was. I quit before they could fire me.”

“Are you going home?”

“No home to go to. I was a state ward. I got to school on a scholarship. I blew it. Now I don’t know where I’m going.” My life story in five sentences. I guess it made me feel depressed.

She laughed—the sound made me run hot and cold. “We’re cats out of the same bag, I guess.”

I *thought* she said cats. I *thought* so. Then. But I've had time to think, in here, and more and more it seems to me that she might have said rats. *Rats* out of the same bag. Yes. And they are not the same, are they?

I was about to make my best conversational shot—something witty like “Is that so?”—when a hand came down on my shoulder.

I turned around. It was one of the truckers from the booth. He had blond stubble on his chin and there was a wooden kitchen match poking out of his mouth. He smelled of engine oil and looked like something out of a Steve Ditko drawing.

“I think you're done with that coffee,” he said. His lips parted around the match in a grin. He had a lot of very white teeth.

“What?”

“You stinking the place up, fella. You *are* a fella, aren't you? Kind of hard to tell.”

“You aren't any rose yourself,” I said. “What's that after-shave, handsome? *Eau de Crankcase?*”

He gave me a hard shot across the side of the face with his open hand. I saw little black dots.

“Don't fight in here,” the short-order cook said. “If you're going to scramble him, do it outside.”

“Come on, you goddammed commie,” the trucker said.

This is the spot where the girl is supposed to say something like “Unhand him” or “You brute.” She wasn't saying anything. She was watching both of us with feverish intensity. It was scary. I think it was the first time I'd noticed how huge her eyes really were.

“Do I have to sock you again?”

“No. Come on, shitheels.”

I don't know how that jumped out of me. I don't like to fight. I'm not a good fighter. I'm an even worse name-caller. But I was angry, just then. It came up on me all at once that I wanted to kill him.

Maybe he got a mental whiff of it. For just a second a shade of uncertainty flicked over his face, an unconscious wondering if maybe he hadn't picked the wrong hippie. Then it was gone. He wasn't going to back off from some long-haired elitist effeminate snob who

used the flag to Wipe his ass with—at least not in front of his buddies. Not a big ole truck-driving son-of-a-gun like him.

The anger pounded over me again. *Faggot? Faggot?* I felt out of control, and it was good to feel that way. My tongue was thick in my mouth. My stomach was a slab.

We walked across to the door, and my buddy's buddies almost broke their backs getting up to watch the fun.

Nona? I thought of her, but only in an absent, back-of-my-mind way. I knew Nona would be there. Nona would take care of me. I knew it the same way I knew it would be cold outside. It was strange to know that about a girl I had only met five minutes before. Strange, but I didn't think about that until later. My mind was taken up—no, almost blotted out—by the heavy cloud of rage. I felt homicidal.

The cold was so clear and so clean that it felt as if we were cutting it with our bodies like knives. The frosted gravel of the parking lot gritted harshly under his heavy boots and under my shoes. The moon, full and bloated, looked down on us with a vapid eye. It was faintly ringed, suggesting bad weather on the way. The sky was as black as a night in hell. We left tiny dwarfed shadows behind our feet in the monochrome glare of a single sodium light set high on a pole beyond the parked rigs. Our breath plumed the air in short bursts. The trucker turned to me, his gloved fists balled.

“Okay, you son-of-a-bitch,” he said.

I seemed to be swelling—my whole body seemed to be swelling. Somehow, numbly, I knew that my intellect was about to be eclipsed by an invisible something that I had never suspected might be in me. It was terrifying—but at the same time I welcomed it, desired it, lusted for it. In that last instant of coherent thought it seemed that my body had become a stone pyramid or a cyclone that could sweep everything in front of it like colored pick-up sticks. The trucker seemed small, puny, insignificant. I laughed at him. I laughed, and the sound was as black and as bleak as that moonstruck sky overhead.

He came at me swinging his fists. I batted down his right, took his left on the side of my face without feeling it, and then kicked him in

the guts. The air barfed out of him in a white cloud. He tried to back away, holding himself and coughing.

I ran around in back of him, still laughing like some farmer's dog barking at the moon, and I had pounded him three times before he could make even a quarter turn—the neck, the shoulder, one red ear.

He made a yowling noise, and one of his flailing hands brushed my nose. The fury that had taken me over mushroomed and I kicked him again, bringing my foot up high and hard, like a punter. He screamed into the night and I heard a rib snap. He folded up and I jumped him.

At the trial one of the other truck drivers testified I was like a wild animal. And I was. I can't remember much of it, but I can remember that, snarling and growling at him like a wild dog.

I straddled him, grabbed double handfuls of his greasy hair, and began to rub his face into the gravel. In the flat glare of the sodium light his blood seemed black, like beetle's blood.

"Jesus, stop it!" somebody yelled.

Hands grabbed my shoulders and pulled me off. I saw whirling faces and I struck at them.

The trucker was trying to creep away. His face was a staring mask of blood from which his dazed eyes peered. I began to kick him, dodging away from the others, grunting with satisfaction each time I connected on him.

He was beyond fighting back. All he knew was to try to get away. Each time I kicked him his eyes would squeeze closed, like the eyes of a tortoise, and he would halt. Then he would start to crawl again. He looked stupid. I decided I was going to kill him. I was going to kick him to death. Then I would kill the rest of them—all but Nona.

I kicked him again and he flopped over on his back and looked up at me dazedly.

"Uncle," he croaked. "I cry Uncle. Please. Please—"

I knelt down beside him, feeling the gravel bite into my knees through my thin jeans.

"Here you are, handsome," I whispered. "Here's your uncle."

I hooked my hands onto his throat.

Three of them jumped me all at once and knocked me off him. I got up, still grinning, and started toward them. They backed away, three big men, all of them scared green.

And it clicked off.

Just like that it clicked off and it was just me, standing in the parking lot of Joe's Good Eats, breathing hard and feeling sick and horrified.

I turned and looked back toward the diner. The girl was there; her beautiful features were lit with triumph. She raised one fist to shoulder height in salute like the one those black guys gave at the Olympics that time.

I turned back to the man on the ground. He was still trying to crawl away, and when I approached him his eyeballs rolled fearfully.

"Don't you touch him!" one of his friends cried.

I looked at them, confused. "I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to . . . to hurt him so bad. Let me help—"

"You get out of here, that's what you do," the short-order cook said. He was standing in front of Nona at the foot of the steps, clutching a greasy spatula in one hand. "I'm calling the cops."

"Hey, man, he was the guy who started it! He—"

"Don't give me any of your lip, you lousy queer," he said, backing up. "All I know is you just about killed that guy. I'm calling the cops!" He dashed back inside.

"Okay," I said to nobody in particular. "Okay, that's good, okay."

I had left my rawhide gloves inside, but it didn't seem like a good idea to go back in and get them. I put my hands in my pockets and started to walk back to the interstate access road. I figured my chances of hitching a ride before the cops picked me up were about one in ten. My ears were freezing and I felt sick to my stomach. Some purty night.

"Wait! Hey, wait!"

I turned around. It was her, running to catch up with me, her hair flying out behind her.

"You were wonderful!" she said. "Wonderful!"

"I hurt him bad," I said dully. "I never did anything like that before."

"I wish you'd killed him!"

I blinked at her in the frosty light.

“You should have heard the things they were saying about me before you came in. Laughing in that big, brave, dirty way—haw, haw, lookit the little girl out so long after dark. Where you going, honey? Need a lift? I’ll give you a ride if you’ll give me a ride. *Damn!*”

She glared back over her shoulder as if she could strike them dead with a sudden bolt from her dark eyes. Then she turned them on me, and again it seemed like that searchlight had been turned on in my mind. “My name’s Nona. I’m coming with you.”

“Where? To jail?” I tugged at my hair with both hands. “With this, the first guy who gives us a ride is apt to be a state cop. That cook meant what he said about calling them.”

“I’ll hitch. You stand behind me. They’ll stop for me. They stop for a girl, if she’s pretty.”

I couldn’t argue with her about that and didn’t want to. Love at first sight? Maybe not. But it was something. Can you get that wave?

“Here,” she said, “you forgot these.” She held out my gloves.

She hadn’t gone back inside, and that meant she’d had them all along. She’d known she was coming with me. It gave me an eerie feeling. I put on my gloves and we walked up the access road to the turnpike ramp.

She was right about the ride. We got one with the first car that swung onto the ramp.

We didn’t say anything else while we waited, but it seemed as if we did. I won’t give you a load of bull about ESP and that stuff; you know what I’m talking about. You’ve felt it yourself if you’ve ever been with someone you were really close to, or if you’ve taken one of those drugs with initials for a name. You don’t have to talk. Communication seems to shift over to some high-frequency emotional band. A twist of the hand does it all. We were strangers. I only knew her first name and now that I think back I don’t believe I ever told her mine at all. But we were doing it. It wasn’t love. I hate to keep repeating that, but I feel I have to. I wouldn’t dirty that word with

whatever we had—not after what we did, not after Castle Rock, not after the dreams.

A high, wailing shriek filled the cold silence of the night, rising and falling.

“That’s an ambulance I think,” I said.

“Yes.”

Silence again. The moon’s light was fading behind a thickening membrane of cloud. I thought the ring around the moon hadn’t lied; we would have snow before the night was over.

Lights poked over the hill.

I stood behind her without having to be told. She brushed her hair back and raised that beautiful face. As I watched the car signal for the entrance ramp I was swept with a feeling of unreality—it was unreal that this beautiful girl had elected to come with me, it was unreal that I had beaten a man to the point where an ambulance had to be called for him, it was unreal to think I might be in jail by morning. Unreal. I felt caught in a spiderweb. But who was the spider?

Nona put out her thumb. The car, a Chevrolet sedan, went by us and I thought it was going to keep right on going. Then the taillights flashed and Nona grabbed my hand. “Come on, we got a ride!” She grinned at me with childish delight and I grinned back at her.

The guy was reaching enthusiastically across the seat to open the door for her. When the dome light flashed on I could see him—a fairly big man in an expensive camel’s hair coat, graying around the edges of his hat, prosperous features softened by years of good meals. A businessman or a salesman. Alone. When he saw me he did a double take, but it was a second or two too late to put the car back in gear and haul ass. And it was easier for him this way. Later he could fib himself into believing he had seen both of us, that he was a truly good-hearted soul giving a young couple a break.

“Cold night,” he said as Nona slid in beside him and I got in beside her.

“It certainly is,” Nona said sweetly. “Thank you!”

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” And we were off, leaving sirens, busted-up truckers, and Joe’s Good Eats behind us.

I had gotten kicked off the interstate at seven-thirty. It was only eight-thirty then. It’s amazing how much you can do in a short time, or how much can be done to you.

We were approaching the yellow flashing lights that signal the Augusta toll station.

“How far are you going?” the driver asked.

That was a stumper. I had been hoping to make it as far as Kittery and crash with an acquaintance who was teaching school there. It still seemed as good an answer as any and I was opening my mouth to give it when Nona said:

“We’re going to Castle Rock. It’s a small town just south and west of Lewiston-Auburn.”

Castle Rock. That made me feel strange. Once upon a time I had been on pretty good terms with Castle Rock. But that was before Ace Merrill messed me up.

The guy brought his car to a stop, took a toll ticket, and then we were on our way again.

“I’m only going as far as Gardiner, myself,” he said, lying smoothly. “One exit up. But that’s a start for you.”

“It sure is,” Nona said, just as sweetly as before. “It was nice of you to stop on such a cold night.” And while she was saying it I was getting her anger on that high emotional wavelength, naked and full of venom. It scared me, the way ticking from a wrapped package might scare me.

“My name’s Blanchette,” he said. “Norman Blanchette.” He waved his hand in our direction to be shaken.

“Cheryl Craig,” Nona said, taking it daintily.

I took her cue and gave him a false name. “Pleasure,” I mumbled.

His hand was soft and flabby. It felt like a hot-water bottle in the shape of a hand. The thought sickened me. It sickened me that we had been forced to beg a ride with this patronizing man who thought he had seen a chance to pick up a pretty girl hitching all by herself, a girl who might or might not agree to an hour spent in a motel room in return for enough cash to buy a bus ticket. It sickened me to know

that if I had been alone this man who had just offered me his flabby, hot hand would have zipped by without a second look. It sickened me to know he would drop us at the Gardiner exit, cross over, and then dart right back on the interstate, bypassing us on the southbound ramp without a look, congratulating himself on how smoothly he had solved an annoying situation. Everything about him sickened me. The porky droop of his jowls, the slicked-back wigs of his hair, the smell of his cologne.

And what right did he have? What right?

The sickness curdled, and the flowers of rage began to bloom again. The headlights of his prosperous Impala sedan cut the night with smooth ease, and my rage wanted to reach out and strangle everything that he was set in among—the kind of music I knew he would listen to as he lay back in his La-Z-Boy recliner with the evening paper in his hot-water-bottle hands, the rinse his wife would use in her hair, the Underalls I knew she would wear, the kids always sent off to the movies or off to school or off to camp—as long as they were off somewhere—his snobbish friends and the drunken parties they would attend with them.

But his cologne—that was the worst. It filled the car with sweet, sickish scent. It smelled like the perfumed disinfectant they use in a slaughterhouse at the end of each shift.

The car ripped through the night with Norman Blanchette holding the wheel with his bloated hands. His manicured nails gleamed softly in the lights from the instrument panel. I wanted to crack a wing window and get away from that cloying smell. No, more—I wanted to crank the whole window down and stick my head out into the cold air, wallow in chilled freshness—but I was frozen, frozen in the dumb maw of my wordless, inexpressible hate.

That was when Nona put the nail file into my hand.

When I was three I got a bad case of the flu and had to go to the hospital. While I was there, my dad fell asleep smoking in bed and the house burned down with my folks and my older brother Drake in it. I have their pictures. They look like actors in an old 1958 American

International horror movie, faces you don't know like those of the big stars, more like Elisha Cook, Jr. , and Mara Corday and some child actor you can't quite remember—Brandon de Wilde, maybe.

I had no relatives to go to and so I was sent to a home in Portland for five years. Then I became a state ward. That means a family takes you in and the state pays them thirty dollars a month for your keep. I don't think there was ever a state ward who acquired a taste for lobster. Usually a couple will take two or three wards—not because the milk of human kindness flows in their veins but as a business investment. They feed you. They take the thirty the state gives them and they feed you. If a kid is fed up he can earn his keep doing chores around the place. That thirty turns into forty, fifty, maybe sixty-five bucks. Capitalism as it applies to the unhomed. Greatest country in the world, right? .

My “folks” were named Hollis and they lived in Harlow, across the river from Castle Rock. They had a three-story farmhouse with fourteen rooms. There was coal heat in the kitchen that got upstairs any way it could. In January you went to bed with three quilts over you and still weren't sure if your feet were on when you woke in the morning. You had to put them on the floor where you could look at them to be sure. Mrs. Hollis was fat. Mr. Hollis was skimpy and rarely spoke. He wore a red-and-black hunting cap all year round. The house was a helter-skelter mess of white-elephant furniture, rummage-sale stuff, moldy mattresses, dogs, cats, and automotive parts laid on newspaper. I had three “brothers,” all of them wards. We had a nodding acquaintance, like co-travelers on a three-day bus trip.

I made good grades in school and went out for spring baseball when I was a high-school sophomore. Hollis was yapping after me to quit, but I stuck with it until the thing with Ace Merrill happened. Then I didn't want to go anymore, not with my face all puffed out and cut, not with the stories Betsy Malenfant was telling around. So I quit the team, and Hollis got me a job jerking sodas in the local drugstore.

In February of my junior year I took the College Boards, paying for them with the twelve bucks I had socked away in my mattress. I got accepted at the university with a small scholarship and a good work-

study job in the library. The expression on the Hollises' faces when I showed them the financial-aid papers is the best memory of my life.

One of my "brothers," Curt, ran away. I couldn't have done that. I was too passive to take a step like that. I would have been back after two hours on the road. School was the only way out for me, and I took it.

The last thing Mrs. Hollis said when I left was, "You send us something when you can." I never saw either of them again. I made good grades my freshman year and got a job that summer working full-time in the library. I sent them a Christmas card that first year, but that was the only one.

In the first semester of my sophomore year I fell in love. It was the biggest thing that had ever happened to me. Pretty? She would have knocked you back two steps. To this day I have no idea what she saw in me. I don't even know if she loved me or not. I think she did at first. After that I was just a habit that's hard to break, like smoking or driving with your elbow poked out the window. She held me for a while, maybe not wanting to break the habit. Maybe she held me for wonder, or maybe it was just her vanity. Good boy, roll over, sit up, fetch the paper. Here's a kiss good night. It doesn't matter. For a while it was love, then it was like love, then it was over.

I slept with her twice, both times after other things had taken over for love. That fed the habit for a little while. Then she came back from the Thanksgiving break and said she was in love with a Delta Tau Delta who came from her hometown. I tried to get her back and almost made it once, but she had something she hadn't had before—perspective.

Whatever I had been building up all those years since the fire wiped out the B-movie actors who had once been my family, that broke it down. That guy's pin on her blouse.

After that, I was on-again-off-again with three or four girls who were willing to sleep with me. I could blame it on my childhood, say I never had good sexual models, but that wasn't it. I'd never had any trouble with the girl. Only now that the girl was gone.

I started being afraid of girls, a little. And it wasn't so much the ones I was impotent with as the ones I wasn't, the ones I could make

it with. They made me uneasy. I kept asking myself where they were hiding whatever axes they liked to grind and when they were going to let me have it. I'm not so strange at that. You show me a married man or a man with a steady woman, and I'll show you someone who is asking himself (maybe only in the early hours of the morning or on Friday afternoon when she's off buying groceries), *What is she doing when I'm not around? What does she really think of me?* And maybe most of all, *How much of me has she got? How much is left?* Once I started thinking about those things, I thought about them all the time.

I started to drink and my grades took a nose dive. During semester break I got a letter saying that if they didn't improve in six weeks, my second-semester scholarship check would be withheld. I and some guys I hung around with got drunk and stayed drunk for the whole holiday. On the last day we went to a whorehouse and I operated just fine. It was too dark to see faces.

My grades stayed about the same. I called the girl once and cried over the telephone. She cried too, and in a way I think that pleased her. I didn't hate her then and I don't now. But she scared me. She scared me plenty.

On February 9 I got a letter from the dean of Arts and Sciences saying I was flunking two or three courses in my major field. On February 13 I got a hesitant sort of letter from the girl. She wanted everything to be all right between us. She was planning to marry the guy from Delta Tau Delta in July or August, and I could be invited if I wanted to be. That was almost funny. What could I give her for a wedding gift?. My heart with a red ribbon tied around it? My head? My cock?

On the fourteenth, Valentine's Day, I decided it was time for a change of scene. Nona came next, but you know about that.

You have to understand how she was to me if this is to do any good at all. She was more beautiful than the girl, but that wasn't it. Good looks are cheap in a wealthy country. It was the her inside. She was sexy, but the sexiness that came from her was somehow plantlike—blind sex, a kind of clinging, not-to-be-denied sex that is not so important because it is as instinctual as photosynthesis. Not like an animal but like a plant. You get that wave? I knew we would

make love, that we would make it as men and women do, but that our joining would be as blunt and remote and meaningless as ivy clinging its way up a trellis in the August sun.

The sex was important only because it was unimportant.

I think—no, I'm sure—that violence was the real motive force. The violence was real and not just a dream. It was as big and as fast and as hard as Ace Merrill's '52 Ford. The violence of Joe's Good Eats, the violence of Norman Blanchette. And there was even something blind and vegetative about that. Maybe she was only a clinging vine after all, because the Venus flytrap is a species of vine, but that plant is carnivorous and will make animal motion when a fly or a bit of raw meat is placed in its jaws. And it was all real. The sporulating vine may only dream that it fornicates, but I am sure the Venus flytrap tastes that fly, relishes its diminishing struggle as its jaws close around it.

The last part was my own passivity. I could not fill up the hole in my life. Not the hole left by the girl when she said good-bye—I don't want to lay this at her door—but the hole that had always been there, the dark, confused swirling that never stopped down in the middle of me. Nona filled that hole. She made me move and act.

She made me noble.

Now maybe you understand a little of it. Why I dream of her. Why the fascination remains in spite of the remorse and the revulsion. Why I hate her. Why I fear her. And why even now I still love her.

It was eight miles from the Augusta ramp to Gardiner and we did it in a few short minutes. I grasped the nail file woodenly at my side and watched the green reflectorized sign—KEEP RIGHT FOR EXIT 14—twinkle up out of the night. The moon was gone and it had begun to spit snow.

"Wish I were going farther," Blanchette said.

"That's all right," Nona said warmly, and I could feel her fury buzzing and burrowing into the meat under my skull like a drill bit. "Just drop us at the top of the ramp."

He drove up, observing the ramp speed of thirty miles an hour. I knew what I was going to do. It felt as if my legs had turned to warm lead.

The top of the ramp was lit by one overhead light. To the left I could see the lights of Gardiner against the thickening cloud cover. To the right, nothing but blackness. There was no traffic coming either way along the access road.

I got out. Nona slid across the seat, giving Norman Blanchette a final smile. I wasn't worried. She was quarterbacking the play.

Blanchette was smiling an infuriating porky smile, relieved at being rid of us. "Well, good ni—"

"Oh my purse! Don't drive off with my purse!"

"I'll get it," I told her. I leaned back into the car. Blanchette saw what I had in my hand, and the porky smile on his face froze solid.

Now lights showed on the hill, but it was too late to stop. Nothing could have stopped me. I picked up Nona's purse with my left hand. With my right I plunged the steel nail file into Blanchette's throat. He bleated once.

I got out of the car. Nona was waving the oncoming vehicle down. I couldn't see what it was in the dark and snow; all I could make out were the two bright circles of its headlamps. I crouched behind Blanchette's car, peeking through the back windows.

The voices were almost lost in the filling throat of the wind.

". . . trouble, lady?"

". . . father . . . wind . . . had a heart attack! Will you . . ."

I scurried around the trunk of Norman Blanchette's Impala, bent over. I could see them now. Nona's slender silhouette and a taller form. They appeared to be standing by a pickup truck. They turned and approached the driver's-side window of the Chevy, where Norman Blanchette was slumped over the wheel with Nona's file in his throat. The driver of the pickup was a young kid in what looked like an Air Force parka. He leaned inside. I came up behind him.

"Jesus, lady!" he said. "There's blood on this guy! What—"

I hooked my right elbow around his throat and grabbed my right wrist with my left hand. I pulled him up hard. His head connected

with the top of the door and made a hollow *thock!* He went limp in my arms.

I could have stopped then. He hadn't gotten a good look at Nona, hadn't seen me at all. I could have stopped. But he was a busybody, a meddler, somebody else in our way, trying to hurt us. I was tired of being hurt. I strangled him.

When it was done I looked up and saw Nona spotlighted in the conflicting lights of the car and the truck, her face a grotesque rictus of hate, love, triumph, and joy. She held her arms out to me and I went into them. We kissed. Her mouth was cold but her tongue was warm. I plunged both hands into the secret hollows of her hair, and the wind screamed around us.

"Now fix it," she said. "Before someone else comes."

I fixed it. It was a slipshod job, but I knew that was all we needed. A little more time. After that it wouldn't matter. We would be safe.

The kid's body was light. I picked him up in both arms, carried him across the road, and threw him into the gully beyond the guardrails. His body tumbled loosely all the way to the bottom, head over heels, like the ragbag man Mr. Hollis had me put out in the cornfield every July. I went back to get Blanchette.

He was heavier, and bleeding like a stuck pig. I tried to pick him up, staggered three steps backward, and then he slipped out of my arms and fell onto the road. I turned him over. The new snow had stuck to his face, turning it into a skier's mask.

I bent over, grabbed him under the arms, and dragged him to the gully. His feet left trailing grooves behind him. I threw him over and watched him slide down the embankment on his back, his arms up over his head. His eyes were wide open, staring raptly at the snowflakes falling into them. If the snow kept coming, they would both be just two vague humps by the time the plows came by.

I went back across the road. Nona had already climbed into the pickup truck without having to be told which vehicle we would use. I could see the pallid smear of her face, the dark holes of her eyes, but that was all. I got into Blanchette's car, sitting in the streaks of his

blood that had gathered on the nubby vinyl seat cover, and drove it onto the shoulder. I turned off the headlights, put on the four-way flashers, and got out. To anyone passing by, it would look like a motorist who had engine trouble and then walked into town to find a garage. I was very pleased with my improvisation. It was as if I had been murdering people all my life. I trotted back to the idling truck, got in behind the wheel, and pointed it toward the turnpike entrance ramp.

She sat next to me, not touching but close. When she moved I could sometimes feel a strand of her hair on my neck. It was like being touched with a tiny electrode. Once I had to put my hand out and feel her leg, to make sure she was real. She laughed quietly. It was all real. The wind howled around the windows, driving snow in great, flapping gusts.

We ran south.

Just across the bridge from Harlow as you go up 126 toward Castle Heights, you come up on a huge renovated farm that goes under the laughable title of the Castle Rock Youth League. They have twelve lanes of candlepin bowling with cranky automatic pinsetters that usually take the last three days of the week off, a few ancient pinball machines, a juke featuring the greatest hits of 1957, three Brunswick pool tables, and a Coke-and-chips counter where you also rent bowling shoes that look like they might have just come off the feet of dead winos. The name of the place is laughable because most of the Castle Rock youth head up to the drive-in at Jay Hill at night or go to the stock-car races at Oxford Plains. The people who do hang out there are mostly toughies from Gretna, Harlow, and the Rock itself. The average is one fight per evening in the parking lot.

I started hanging out there when I was a high-school sophomore. One of my acquaintances, Bill Kennedy, was working there three nights a week and if there was nobody waiting for a table he'd let me shoot some pool for free. It wasn't much, but it was better than going back to the Hollises' house.

That's where I met Ace Merrill. Nobody much doubted that he was the toughest guy in three towns. He drove a chopped and channeled '52 Ford, and it was rumored that he could push it all the way to 130 if he had to. He'd come in like a king, his hair greased back and glistening in a perfect duck's-ass pompadour, shoot a few games of double-bank for a dime a ball (Was he good? You guess.), buy Betsy a Coke when she came in, and then they'd leave. You could almost hear a reluctant sigh of relief from those present when the scarred front door wheezed shut. Nobody ever went out in the parking lot with Ace Merrill.

Nobody, that is, but me.

Betsy Malenfant was his girl, the prettiest girl in Castle Rock, I guess. I don't think she was terrifically bright, but that didn't matter when you got a look at her. She had the most flawless complexion I had ever seen, and it didn't come out of a cosmetic bottle, either. Hair as black as coal, dark eyes, generous mouth, a body that just wouldn't quit—and she didn't mind showing it off. Who was going to drag her out back and try to stoke her locomotive while Ace was around? Nobody sane, that's who.

I fell hard for her. Not like the girl and not like Nona, even though Betsy did look like a younger version of her, but it was just as desperate and just as serious in its way. If you've ever had the worst case of puppy love going around, you know how I felt. She was seventeen, two years older than I.

I started going down there more and more often, even nights when Billy wasn't on, just to catch a glimpse of her. I felt like a birdwatcher, except it was a desperate kind of game for me. I'd go back home, lie to the Hollises about where I'd been, and climb up to my room. I'd write long, passionate letters to her, telling her everything I'd like to do to her, and then tear them up. Study halls at school I'd dream about asking her to marry me so we could run away to Mexico together.

She must have tumbled to what was happening, and it must have flattered her a little, because she was nice to me when Ace wasn't around. She'd come over and talk to me, let me buy her a Coke, sit on a stool, and kind of rub her leg against mine. It drove me crazy.

One night in early November I was just mooning around, shooting a little pool with Bill, waiting for her to come in. The place was deserted because it wasn't even eight o'clock yet, and a lonesome wind was snuffling around outside, threatening winter.

"You better lay off," Bill said, shooting the nine straight into the corner.

"Lay off what?"

"You know."

"No I don't." I scratched and Billy added a ball to the table. He ran six and while he was running them I went over to put a dime in the juke.

"Betsy Malenfant." He lined up the one carefully and sent it walking up the rail. "Charlie Hogan was telling Ace about the way you been sniffing around her. Charlie thought it was really funny, her being older and all, but Ace wasn't laughing. "

"She's nothing to me," I said through paper lips.

"She better not be," Bill said, and then a couple of guys came in and he went over to the counter and gave them a cue ball.

Ace came in around nine and he was alone. He'd never taken any notice of me before, and I'd just about forgotten what Billy said. When you're invisible you get to thinking you're invulnerable. I was playing pinball and I was pretty involved. I didn't even notice the place get quiet as people stopped bowling or shooting pool. The next thing I knew, somebody had thrown me right across the pinball machine. I landed on the floor in a heap. I got up feeling scared and sick. He had tilted the machine, wiping out my three replays. He was standing there and looking at me with not a strand of hair out of place, his garrison jacket half unzipped.

"You stop messing around," he said softly, "or I'm going to change your face."

He went out. Everybody was looking at me and I wanted to sink right down through the floor until I saw there was a kind of grudging admiration on most of their faces. So I brushed myself off, unconcerned, and put another dime in the pinball machine. The TILT light went out. A couple of guys came over and clapped me on the back before they went out, not saying anything.

At eleven, when the place closed, Billy offered me a ride home. "You're going to take a fall if you don't watch out."

"Don't worry about me," I said.

He didn't answer.

Two or three nights later Betsy came in by herself around seven. There was one other kid there, this weird little four-eyes named Vern Tessio, who flunked out of school a couple of years before. I hardly noticed him. He was even more invisible than I was.

She came right over to where I was shooting, close enough so I could smell the clean-soap smell on her skin. It made me feel dizzy.

"I heard about what Ace did to you," she said. "I'm not supposed to talk to you anymore and I'm not going to, but I've got something to make it all better." She kissed me. Then she went out, before I could even get my tongue down from the roof of my mouth. I went back to my game in a daze. I didn't even see Tessio when he went out to spread the word. I couldn't see anything but her dark, dark eyes.

So later that night I ended up in the parking lot with Ace Merrill, and he beat the living Jesus out of me. It was cold, bitterly cold, and at the end I began to sob, not caring who was watching or listening, which by then was everybody. The single sodium arc lamp looked down on all of it mercilessly. I didn't even land a punch on him.

"Okay," he said, squatting down next to me. He wasn't even breathing hard. He took a switchblade out of his pocket and pressed the chrome button. Seven inches of moon-drenched silver sprang into the world. "This is what you get next time. I'll carve my name on your balls." Then he got up, gave me one last kick, and left. I just lay there for maybe ten minutes, shivering on the hard-packed dirt. No one came to help me up or pat me on the back, not even Bill. Betsy didn't show up to make it all better.

Finally I got up by myself and hitchhiked home. I told Mrs. Hollis I'd hitched a ride with a drunk and he drove off the road. I never went back to the bowling alley again.

I understand that Ace dropped Betsy not long after, and from then on she went downhill at a rapidly increasing rate of speed—like a pulp truck with no brakes. She picked up a case of the clap on the way. Billy said he saw her one night in the Manoir up in Lewiston,

hustling guys for drinks. She had lost most of her teeth, and her nose had been broken somewhere along the line, he said. He said I would never recognize her. By then I didn't much care one way or the other.

The pickup had no snow tires, and before we got to the Lewiston exit I had begun to skid around in the new powder. It took us over forty-five minutes to make the twenty-two miles.

The man at the Lewiston exit point took my toll card and my sixty cents. "Slippery traveling?"

Neither of us answered him. We were getting close to where we wanted to go now. If I hadn't had that odd kind of wordless contact with her, I would have been able to tell just by the way she sat on the dusty seat of the pickup, her hands folded tightly over her purse, those eyes fixed straight ahead on the road with fierce intensity. I felt a shudder work through me.

We took Route 136. There weren't many cars on the road; the wind was freshening and the snow was coming down harder than ever. On the other side of Harlow Village we passed a big Buick Riviera that had slewed around sideways and climbed the curb. Its fourway flashers were going and I had a ghostly double image of Norman Blanchette's Impala. It would be drifted in with snow now, nothing but a ghostly lump in the darkness.

The Buick's driver tried to flag me down but I went by him without slowing, spraying him with slush. My wipers were clogging with snow and I reached out and snapped at the one on my side. Some of the snow loosened and I could see a little better.

Harlow was a ghost town, everything dark and closed. I signaled right to go over the bridge into Castle Rock. The rear wheels wanted to slide out from under me, but I handled the skid. Up ahead and across the river I could see the dark shadow that was the Castle Rock Youth League building. It looked shut up and lonely. I felt suddenly sorry, sorry that there had been so much pain. And death. That was when Nona spoke for the first time since the Gardiner exit.

"There's a policeman behind you."

"Is he—?"

“No. His flasher is off.”

But it made me nervous and maybe that’s why it happened. Route 136 makes a ninety-degree turn on the Harlow side of the river and then it’s straight across the bridge into Castle Rock. I made the first turn, but there was ice on the Rock side.

“*Damn—*”

The rear end of the truck flirted around and before I could steer clear, it had smashed into one of the heavy steel bridge stanchions. We went sliding all the way around like kids on a Flexible Flyer, and the next thing I saw was the bright headlights of the police car behind us. He put on his brakes—I could see the red reflections in the falling snow—but the ice got him, too. He plowed right into us. There was a grinding, jarring shock as we went into the supporting girders again. I was jolted into Nona’s lap, and even in that confused split second I had time to relish the smooth firmness of her thigh. Then everything stopped. *Now* the cop had his flasher on. It sent blue, revolving shadows chasing across the hood of the truck and the snowy steel crosswork of the Harlow-Castle Rock bridge. The dome light inside the cruiser came on as the cop got out.

If he hadn’t been behind us it wouldn’t have happened. That thought was playing over and over in my mind, like a phonograph needle stuck in a single flawed groove. I was grinning a strained, frozen grin into the dark as I groped on the floor of the truck’s cab for something to hit him with.

There was an open toolbox. I came up with a socket wrench and laid it on the seat between Nona and me. The cop leaned in the window, his face changing like a devil’s in the light from his flasher.

“Traveling a little fast for the conditions, weren’t you, guy?”

“Following a little close, weren’t you?” I asked. “For the conditions?”

He might have flushed. It was hard to tell in the flickering light.

“Are you lipping off to me, son?”

“I am if you’re trying to pin the dents in your cruiser on me.”

“Let’s see your driver’s license and your registration.”

I got out my wallet and handed him my license.

“Registration?”

“It’s my brother’s truck. He carries the registration in his wallet.”

“That right?” He looked at me hard, trying to stare me down. When he saw it would take a while, he looked past me at Nona. I could have ripped his eyes out for what I saw in them. “What’s your name?”

“Cheryl Craig, sir.”

“What are you doing riding around in his brother’s pickup in the middle of a snowstorm, Cheryl?”

“We’re going to see my uncle.”

“In the Rock.”

“That’s right, yes.”

“I don’t know any Craigs in Castle Rock.”

“His name is Emonds. On Bowen Hill.”

“That right?” He walked around to the back of the truck to look at the plate. I opened the door and leaned out. He was writing it down. He came back while I was still leaning out, spotlighted from the waist up in the glare of his headlights. “I’m going to . . . What’s that all over you, boy?”

I didn’t have to look down to know what was all over me. I used to think that leaning out like that was just absentmindedness, but writing all of this has changed my mind. I don’t think it was absentminded at all. I think I wanted him to see it. I held on to the socket wrench.

“What do you mean?”

He came two steps closer. “You’re hurt—cut yourself, looks like. Better—”

I swung at him. His hat had been knocked off in the crash and his head was bare. I hit him dead on, just above the forehead. I’ve never forgotten the sound that made, like a pound of butter falling onto a hard floor.

“Hurry,” Nona said. She put a calm hand on my neck. It was very cool, like air in a root cellar. My foster mother had a root cellar.

Funny I should remember that. She sent me down there for vegetables in the winter. She canned them herself. Not in real cans,

of course, but in thick Mason jars with those rubber sealers that go under the lid.

I went down there one day to get a jar of waxed beans for our supper. The preserves were all in boxes, neatly marked in Mrs. Hollis's hand. I remember that she always misspelled raspberry, and that used to fill me with a secret superiority.

On this day I went past the boxes marked "razberry" and into the corner where she kept the beans. It was cool and dark. The walls were plain dark earth and in wet weather they exuded moisture in trickling, crooked streams. The smell was a secret, dark effluvium composed of living things and earth and stored vegetables, a smell remarkably like that of a woman's private parts. There was an old, shattered printing press in one corner that had been there ever since I came, and sometimes I used to play with it and pretend I could get it going again. I loved the root cellar. In those days—I was nine or ten—the root cellar was my favorite place. Mrs. Hollis refused to set foot in it, and it was against her husband's dignity to go down and fetch up vegetables. So I went there and smelled that peculiar secret earthy smell and enjoyed the privacy of its womblike confinement. It was lit by one cobwebby bulb that Mr. Hollis had strung, probably before the Boer War. Sometimes I wiggled my hands and made huge, elongated rabbits on the wall.

I got the beans and was about to go back when I heard a rustling movement under one of the old boxes. I went over and lifted it up.

There was a brown rat beneath it, lying on its side. It rolled its head up at me and stared. Its sides were heaving violently and it bared its teeth. It was the biggest rat I had ever seen, and I leaned closer. It was in the act of giving birth. Two of its young, hairless and blind, were already nursing at its belly. Another was halfway into the world.

The mother glared at me helplessly, ready to bite. I wanted to kill it, kill all of them, squash them, but I couldn't. It was the most horrible thing I'd ever seen. As I watched, a small brown spider—a daddy longlegs, I think—crawled rapidly across the floor. The mother snatched it up and ate it.

I fled. Halfway up the stairs I fell and broke the jar of beans. Mrs. Hollis thrashed me, and I never went into the root cellar again unless I had to.

I stood looking down at the cop, remembering.

“Hurry,” Nona said again.

He was much lighter than Norman Blanchette had been, or perhaps my adrenaline was just flowing more freely. I gathered him up in both arms and carried him over to the edge of the bridge. I could barely make out the falls downstream, and upstream the GS&WM railroad trestle was only a gaunt shadow, like a scaffold. The night wind whooped and screamed, and the snow beat against my face. For a moment I held the cop against my chest like a sleeping newborn child, and then I remembered what he really was and threw him over the side and down into the darkness.

We went back to the truck and got in, but it wouldn't start. I cranked the engine until I could smell the sweetish aroma of gas from the flooded carb, and then stopped.

“Come on,” I said.

We went to the cruiser. The front seat was littered with violation tags, forms, two clipboards. The shortwave under the dash crackled and sputtered.

“Unit Four, come in, Four. Do you copy?”

I reached under and turned it off, banging my knuckles on something as I searched for the right toggle switch. It was a shotgun, pump action. Probably the cop's personal property. I unclipped it and handed it to Nona. She put it on her lap. I backed the cruiser up. It was dented but otherwise not hurt. It had snow tires and they bit nicely once we got over the ice that had done the damage.

Then we were in Castle Rock. The houses, except for an occasional shanty trailer set back from the road, had disappeared. The road itself hadn't been plowed yet and there were no tracks except the ones we were leaving behind us. Monolithic fir trees, weighted with snow, towered all around us, and they made me feel

tiny and insignificant, just some tiny morsel caught in the throat of this night. It was now after ten o'clock.

I didn't see much of college social life during my freshman year at the university. I studied hard and worked in the library shelving books and repairing bindings and learning how to catalogue. In the spring there was JV baseball.

Near the end of the academic year, just before finals, there was a dance at the gym. I was at loose ends, studied up for my first two tests, and I wandered down. I had the buck admission, so I went in.

It was dark and crowded and sweaty and frantic as only a college social before the ax of finals can be. There was sex in the air. You didn't have to smell it; you could almost reach out and grab it in both hands, like a wet piece of heavy cloth. You knew that love was going to be made later on, or what passes for love. People were going to make it under bleachers and in the steam plant parking lot and in apartments and dormitory rooms. It was going to be made by desperate man/boys with the draft one step behind them and by pretty coeds who were going to drop out this year and go home and start a family. It would be made with tears and laughter, drunk and sober, stiffly and with no inhibition. But mostly it would be made quickly.

There were a few stags, but not many. It wasn't a night you needed to go anyplace stag. I drifted down by the raised bandstand. As I got closer to the sound, the beat, the music got to be a palpable thing. The group had a half circle of five-foot amplifiers behind them, and you could feel your eardrums flapping in and out with the bass signature.

I leaned up against the wall and watched. The dancers moved in prescribed patterns (as if they were trios instead of couples, the third invisible but between, being humped from the front and back), feet moving through the sawdust that had been sprinkled over the varnished floor. I didn't see anybody I knew and I began to feel lonely, but pleasantly so. I was at that stage of the evening where

you fantasize that everyone is looking at you, the romantic stranger, out of the corners of their eyes.

About a half hour later I went out and got a Coke in the lobby. When I went back in somebody had started a circle dance and I was pulled in, my arms around the shoulders of two girls I had never seen before. We went around and around. There were maybe two hundred people in the circle and it covered half the gym floor. Then part of it collapsed and twenty or thirty people formed another circle in the middle of the first and started to go around the other way. It made me feel dizzy. I saw a girl who looked like Betsy Malenfant, but I knew that was a fantasy. When I looked for her again I couldn't see her or anyone who looked like her.

When the thing finally broke up I felt weak and not at all well. I made my way back over to the bleachers and sat down. The music was too loud, the air too greasy. My mind kept pitching and yawing. I could hear my heartbeat in my head, the way you do after you throw the biggest drunk of your life.

I used to think what happened next happened because I was tired and a little nauseated from going around and around, but as I said before, all this writing has brought everything into sharper focus. I can't believe that anymore.

I looked up at them again, all the beautiful, hurrying people in the semidarkness. It seemed to me that all the men looked terrified, their faces elongated into grotesque, slow-motion masks. It was understandable. The women—coeds in their sweaters, short skirts, their bell-bottoms—were all turning into rats. At first it didn't frighten me. I even chuckled. I knew what I was seeing was some kind of hallucination, and for a while I could watch it almost clinically.

Then some girl stood on tiptoe to kiss her fellow, and that was too much. Hairy, twisted face with black buckshot eyes reaching up, mouth spreading to reveal teeth . . .

I left.

I stood in the lobby for a moment, half distracted. There was a bathroom down the hall, but I went past it and up the stairs.

The locker room was on the third floor and I had to run the last flight. I pulled the door open and ran for one of the bathroom stalls. I

threw up amid the mixed smells of liniment, sweaty uniforms, oiled leather. The music was far away down there, the silence up here virginal. I felt comforted.

We had to come to a stop sign at Southwest Bend. The memory of the dance had left me excited for a reason I didn't understand. I began to shake.

She looked at me, smiling with her dark eyes. "Now?"

I couldn't answer her. I was shaking too badly for that. She nodded slowly, for me.

I drove onto a spur of Route 7 that must have been a logging road in the summertime. I didn't drive in too deeply because I was afraid of getting stuck. I popped off the headlights and flecks of snow began to gather silently on the windshield.

"Do you love?" she asked, almost kindly.

Some kind of sound kept escaping me, being dragged out of me. I think it must have been a close oral counterpart to the thoughts of a rabbit caught in a snare.

"Here," she said. "Right here."

It was ecstasy.

\* \* \*

We almost didn't get back onto the main road. The snowplow had gone by, orange lights winking and flashing in the night, throwing up a huge wall of snow in our way.

There was a shovel in the trunk of the police car. It took me half an hour to dig out, and by then it was almost midnight. She turned on the police radio while I was doing it, and it told us what we had to know. The bodies of Blanchette and the kid from the pickup truck had been found. They suspected that we had taken the cruiser. The cop's name had been Essegian, and that's a funny name. There used to be a major-league ballplayer named Essegian—I think he played for the Dodgers. Maybe I had killed one of his relatives. It

didn't bother me to know the cop's name. He had been following too close and he had gotten in our way.

We drove back onto the main road.

I could feel her excitement, high and hot and burning. I stopped long enough to clear the windshield with my arm and then we were going again.

We went through west Castle Rock and I knew without having to be told where to turn. A snow-crueted sign said it was Stackpole Road.

The plow had not been here, but one vehicle had been through before us. The tracks of its tires were still freshly cut in the blowing, restless snow.

A mile, then less than a mile. Her fierce eagerness, her need, came to me and I began to feel jumpy again. We came around a curve and there was the power truck, bright orange body and warning flashers pulsing the color of blood. It was blocking the road.

You can't imagine her rage—our rage, really—because now, after what happened, we were really one. You can't imagine the sweeping feeling of intense paranoia, the conviction that every hand was now turned against us.

There were two of them. One was a bending shadow in the darkness ahead. The other was holding a flashlight. He came toward us, his light bobbing like a lurid eye. And there was more than hate. There was fear—fear that it was all going to be snatched away from us at the last moment.

He was yelling, and I cranked down my window.

“You can't get through here! Go on back by the Bowen Road! We got a live line down here! You can't—”

I got out of the car, lifted the shotgun, and gave him both barrels. He was flung back against the orange truck and I staggered back against the cruiser. He slipped down an inch at a time, staring at me incredulously, and then he fell into the snow.

“Are there more shells?” I asked Nona.

“Yes.” She gave them to me. I broke the shotgun, ejected the spent cartridges, and put in new ones.

The guy's buddy had straightened up and was watching incredulously. He shouted something at me that was lost in the wind. It sounded like a question but it didn't matter. I was going to kill him. I walked toward him and he just stood there, looking at me. He didn't move, even when I raised the shotgun. I don't think he had any conception of what was happening. I think he thought it was a dream.

I fired one barrel and was low. A great flurry of snow exploded up, coating him. Then he bellowed a great terrified scream and ran, taking one gigantic bound over the fallen power cable in the road. I fired the other barrel and missed again. Then he was gone into the dark and I could forget him. He wasn't in our way anymore. I went back to the cruiser.

"We'll have to walk," I said.

We walked past the fallen body, stepped over the spitting power line, and walked up the road, following the widely spaced tracks of the fleeing man. Some of the drifts were almost up to her knees, but she was always a little ahead of me. We were both panting.

We came over a hill and descended into a narrow dip. On one side was a leaning, deserted shed with glassless windows. She stopped and gripped my arm.

"There," she said, and pointed across to the other side. Her grip was strong and painful even through my coat. Her face was set in a glaring, triumphant rictus. "There. There."

It was a graveyard.

We slipped and stumbled up the banking and clambered over a snow-covered stone wall. I had been here too, of course. My real mother had come from Castle Rock, and although she and my father had never lived there, this was where the family plot had been. It was a gift to my mother from her parents, who had lived and died in Castle Rock. During the thing with Betsy I had come here often to read the poems of John Keats and Percy Shelley. I suppose you think that was a silly, sophomoric thing to do, but I don't. Not even

now. I felt close to them, comforted. After Ace Merrill beat me up I never went there again. Not until Nona led me there.

I slipped and fell in the loose powder, twisting my ankle. I got up and walked on it, using the shotgun as a crutch. The silence was infinite and unbelievable. The snow fell in soft, straight lines, mounding atop the leaning stones and crosses, burying all but the tips of the corroded flagholders that would only hold flags on Memorial Day and Veterans Day. The silence was unholy in its immensity, and for the first time I felt terror.

She led me toward a stone building set into the rise of the hill at the back of the cemetery. A vault. A snow-whited sepulcher. She had a key. I knew she would have a key, and she did.

She blew the snow away from the door's flange and found the keyhole. The sound of the turning tumblers seemed to scratch across the darkness. She leaned on the door and it swung inward.

The odor that came out at us was as cool as autumn, as cool as the air in the Hollis root cellar. I could see in only a little way. There were dead leaves on the stone floor. She entered, paused, looked back over her shoulder at me.

"No," I said.

"Do you *love*?" she asked, and laughed at me.

I stood in the darkness, feeling everything begin to run together—past, present, future. I wanted to run, run screaming, run fast enough to take back everything I had done.

Nona stood there looking at me, the most beautiful girl in the world, the only thing that had ever been mine. She made a gesture with her hands on her body. I'm not going to tell you what it was. You would know it if you saw it.

I went in. She closed the door.

It was dark but I could see perfectly well. The place was alight with a slowly running green fire. It ran over the walls and snaked across the leaf-littered floor in tongues. There was a bier in the center of the vault, but it was empty. Withered rose petals were scattered across it like an ancient bridal offering. She beckoned to me, then pointed to the small door at the rear. Small, unmarked door. I dreaded it. I think

I knew then. She had used me and laughed at me. Now she would destroy me.

But I couldn't stop. I went to that door because I had to. The mental telegraph was still working at what I felt was glee—a terrible, insane glee—and triumph. My hand trembled toward the door. It was coated with green fire.

I opened the door and saw what was there.

It was the girl, my girl. Dead. Her eyes stared vacantly into that October vault, into my own eyes. She smelled of stolen kisses. She was naked and she had been ripped open from throat to crotch, her whole body turned into a womb. And something lived in there. The rats. I could not see them but I could hear them, rustling inside her. I knew that in a moment her dry mouth would open and she would ask me if I loved. I backed away, my whole body numb, my brain floating on a dark cloud.

I turned to Nona. She was laughing, holding her arms out to me. And with a sudden blaze of understanding I knew, I knew, I knew. The last test. The last final. I had passed it and / was free!

I turned back to the doorway and of course it was nothing but an empty stone closet with dead leaves on the floor.

I went to Nona. I went to my life.

Her arms reached around my neck and I pulled her against me. That was when she began to change, to ripple and run like wax. The great dark eyes became small and beady. The hair coarsened, went brown. The nose shortened, the nostrils dilated. Her body lumped and hunched against me.

I was being embraced by a rat.

“Do you love?” it squealed. “Do you love, do you love?”

Her lipless mouth stretched upward for mine.

I didn't scream. There were no screams left. I doubt if I will ever scream again.

It's so hot in here.

I don't mind the heat, not really. I like to sweat if I can shower. I've always thought of sweat as a good thing, a *masculine* thing, but

sometimes, in the heat, there are bugs that bite—spiders, for instance. Did you know that the female spiders sting and eat their mates? They do, right after copulation.

Also, I've heard scurrings in the walls. I don't like that.

I've given myself writer's cramp, and the felt tip of the pen is all soft and mushy. But I'm done now. And things look different. It doesn't seem the same anymore at all.

Do you realize that for a while they almost had me believing that I did all those horrible things myself? Those men from the truck stop, the guy from the power truck who got away. They said I was alone. I was alone when they found me, almost frozen to death in that graveyard by the stones that mark my father, my mother, my brother Drake. But that only means she left, you can see that. Any fool could. But I'm glad she got away. Truly I am. But you must realize she was with me all the time, every step of the way.

I'm going to kill myself now. It will be much better. I'm tired of all the guilt and agony and bad dreams, and also I don't like the noises in the walls. Anybody could be in there. Or anything.

I'm not crazy. I know that and trust that you do, too. If you say you *aren't* crazy that's supposed to mean you are, but I am beyond all those little games. She was with me, she was real. I love her. True love will never die. That's how I signed all my letters to Betsy, the ones I tore up.

But Nona was the only one I ever really loved.

It's so hot in here. And I don't like the sounds in the walls.

*Do you love?*

Yes, I love.

And true love will never die.

## For Owen

Walking to school you ask me  
what other schools have grades.

I get as far as Fruit Street and your eyes go away.

As we walk under these yellow trees  
you have your army lunch box under one arm and your  
short legs, dressed in combat fatigues,  
make your shadow into a scissors  
that cuts nothing on the sidewalk.

You tell me suddenly that all the students there are fruits.

Everyone picks on the blueberries because they are so small.  
The bananas, you say, are patrol boys.  
In your eyes I see homerooms of oranges,  
assemblies of apples.

All, you say, have arms and legs

and the watermelons are often tardy.  
They waddle, and they are fat.  
“Like me,” you say.

\* \* \*

I could tell you things but better not.

That watermelon children cannot tie their own shoes;  
the plums do it for them.  
Or how I steal your face—  
steal it, steal it, and wear it for my own.  
It wears out fast on my face.

It's the stretching that does it.  
I could tell you that dying's an art  
and I am learning fast.  
In that school I think you have already  
picked up your own pencil  
and begun to write your name.

Between now and then I suppose we could  
someday play you truant and drive over to Fruit Street  
and I could park in a rain of these October leaves  
and we could watch a banana escort the last tardy watermelon  
through those tall doors.

## Survivor Type

*Sooner or later the question comes up in every medical student's career. How much shock-trauma can the patient stand? Different instructors answer the question in different ways, but cut to its base level, the answer is always another question: How badly does the patient want to survive?*

*January 26*

Two days since the storm washed me up. I paced the island off just this morning. Some island! It is 190 paces wide at its thickest point, and 267 paces long from tip to tip.

So far as I can tell, there is nothing on it to eat.

My name is Richard Pine. This is my diary. If I'm found (*when*), I can destroy this easily enough. There is no shortage of matches. Matches and heroin. Plenty of both. Neither of them worth doodlysquat here, ha-ha. So I will write. It will pass the time, anyway.

If I'm to tell the whole truth—and why not? I sure have the time!—I'll have to start by saying I was born Richard Pinzetti, in New York's Little Italy. My father was an Old World guinea. I wanted to be a surgeon. My father would laugh, call me crazy, and tell me to get him another glass of wine. He died of cancer when he was forty-six. I was glad.

I played football in high school. I was the best damn football player my school ever produced. Quarterback. I made All-City my last two years. I hated football. But if you're a poor wop from the projects and you want to go to college, sports are your only ticket. So I played, and I got my athletic scholarship.

In college I only played ball until my grades were good enough to get a full academic scholarship. Pre-med. My father died six weeks before graduation. Good deal. Do you think I wanted to walk across that stage and get my diploma and look down and see that fat greaseball sitting there? Does a hen want a flag? I got into a

fraternity, too. It wasn't one of the good ones, not with a name like Pinzetti, but a fraternity all the same.

Why am I writing this? It's almost funny. No, I take that back. It is funny. The great Dr. Pine, sitting on a rock in his pajama bottoms and a T-shirt, sitting on an island almost small enough to spit across, writing his life story. Am I hungry! Never mind, I'll write my goddam life story if I want to. At least it keeps my mind off my stomach. Sort of.

I changed my name to Pine before I started med school. My mother said I was breaking her heart. What heart? The day after my old man was in the ground, she was out hustling that Jew grocer down at the end of the block. For someone who loved the name so much, she was in one hell of a hurry to change her copy of it to Steinbrunner.

Surgery was all I ever wanted. Ever since high school. Even then I was wrapping my hands before every game and soaking them afterward. If you want to be a surgeon, you have to take care of your hands. Some of the kids used to rag me about it, call me chickenshit. I never fought them. Playing football was risk enough. But there were ways. The one that got on my case the most was Howie Plotsky, a big dumb bohunk with zits all over his face. I had a paper route, and I was selling the numbers along with the papers. I had a little coming in lots of ways. You get to know people, you listen, you make connections. You have to, when you're hustling the street. Any asshole knows how to die. The thing to learn is how to survive, you know what I mean? So I paid the biggest kid in school, Ricky Brazzi, ten bucks to make Howie Plotsky's mouth disappear. Make it disappear, I said. I will pay you a dollar for every tooth you bring me. Rico brought me three teeth wrapped up in a paper towel. He dislocated two of his knuckles doing the job, so you see the kind of trouble I could have got into.

In med school while the other suckers were running themselves ragged trying to bone up—no pun intended, ha-ha—between waiting tables or selling neckties or buffing floors, I kept the rackets going. Football pools, basketball pools, a little policy. I stayed on good terms with the old neighborhood. And I got through school just fine.

I didn't get into pushing until I was doing my residency. I was working in one of the biggest hospitals in New York City. At first it was just prescription blanks. I'd sell a tablet of a hundred blanks to some guy from the neighborhood, and he'd forge the names of forty or fifty different doctors on them, using writing samples I'd also sell him. The guy would turn around and peddle the blanks on the street for ten or twenty dollars apiece. The speed freaks and the nodders loved it.

And after a while I found out just how much of a balls-up the hospital drug room was in. Nobody knew what was coming in or going out. There were people lugging the goodies out by the double handfuls. Not me. I was always careful. I never got into trouble until I got careless—and unlucky. But I'm going to land on my feet. I always do.

Can't write any more now. My wrist's tired and the pencil's dull. I don't know why I'm bothering, anyway. Somebody'll probably pick me up soon.

*January 27*

The boat drifted away last night and sank in about ten feet of water off the north side of the island. Who gives a rip? The bottom was like Swiss cheese after coming over the reef anyway. I'd already taken off anything that was worth taking. Four gallons of water. A sewing kit. A first-aid kit. This book I'm writing in, which is supposed to be a lifeboat inspection log. That's a laugh. Whoever heard of a lifeboat with no FOOD on it? The last report written in here is August 8, 1970. Oh, yes, two knives, one dull and one fairly sharp, one combination fork and spoon. I'll use them when I eat my supper tonight. Roast rock. Ha-ha. Well, I did get my pencil sharpened.

When I get off this pile of guano-splattered rock, I'm going to sue the bloody hell out of Paradise Lines, Inc. That alone is worth living for. And I am going to live. I'm going to get out of this. Make no mistake about it. I am going to get out of this.

*(later)*

When I was making my inventory, I forgot one thing: two kilos of pure heroin, worth about \$350,000, New York street value. Here it's worth el zilcho. Sort of funny, isn't it? Ha-ha!

### *January 28*

Well, I've eaten—if you want to call that eating. There was a gull perched on one of the rocks at the center of the island. The rocks are all jumbled up into a kind of mini-mountain there—all covered with birdshit, too. I got a chunk of stone that just fitted into my hand and climbed up as close to it as I dared. It just stood there on its rock, watching me with its bright black eyes. I'm surprised that the rumbling of my stomach didn't scare it off.

I threw the rock as hard as I could and hit it broadside. It let out a loud squawk and tried to fly away, but I'd broken its right wing. I scrambled up after it and it hopped away. I could see the blood trickling over its white feathers. The son of a bitch led me a merry chase; once, on the other side of the central rockpile, I got my foot caught in a hole between two rocks and nearly fractured my ankle.

It began to tire at last, and I finally caught it on the east side of the island. It was actually trying to get into the water and paddle away. I caught a handful of its tailfeathers and it turned around and pecked me. Then I had one hand around its feet. I got my other hand on its miserable neck and broke it. The sound gave me great satisfaction. Lunch is served, you know? Ha! Ha!

I carried it back to my "camp," but even before I plucked and gutted it, I used iodine to swab the laceration its beak had made. Birds carry all sorts of germs, and the last thing I need now is an infection.

The operation on the gull went quite smoothly. I could not cook it, alas. Absolutely no vegetation or driftwood on the island and the boat has sunk. So I ate it raw. My stomach wanted to regurgitate it immediately. I sympathized but could not allow it. I counted backward until the nausea passed. It almost always works.

Can you imagine that bird, almost breaking my ankle and then pecking me? If I catch another one tomorrow, I'll torture it. I let this

one off too easily. Even as I write, I am able to glance down at its severed head on the sand. Its black eyes, even with the death-glaze on them, seem to be mocking me.

Do gulls have brains in any quantity?

Are they edible?

### *January 29*

No chow today. One gull landed near the top of the rockpile but flew off before I could get close enough to “throw it a forward pass,” ha-ha! I’ve started a beard. Itches like hell. If the gull comes back and I get it, I’m going to cut its eyes out before I kill it.

I was one hell of a surgeon, as I believe I may have said. They drummed me out. It’s a laugh, really; they all do it, and they’re so bloody sanctimonious when someone gets caught at it. Screw you, Jack, I got mine. The Second Oath of Hippocrates and Hypocrites.

I had enough socked away from my adventures as an intern and a resident (that’s supposed to be like an officer and a gentleman according to the Oath of Hypocrites, but don’t you believe it) to set myself up in practice on Park Avenue. A good thing for me, too; I had no rich daddy or established patron, as so many of my “colleagues” did. By the time my shingle was out, my father was nine years in his pauper’s grave. My mother died the year before my license to practice was revoked.

It was a kickback thing. I had a deal going with half a dozen East Side pharmacists, with two drug supply houses, and with at least twenty other doctors. Patients were sent to me and I sent patients. I performed operations and prescribed the correct post-op drugs. Not all the operations were necessary, but I never performed one against a patient’s will. And I never had a patient look down at what was written on the prescrip blank and say, “I don’t want this.” Listen: they’d have a hysterectomy in 1965 or a partial thyroid in 1970, and still be taking painkillers five or ten years later, if you’d let them. Sometimes I did. I wasn’t the only one, you know. They could afford the habit. And sometimes a patient would have trouble sleeping after minor surgery. Or trouble getting diet pills. Or Librium. It could all be

arranged. Ha! Yes! If they hadn't gotten it from me, they would have gotten it from someone else.

Then the tax people got to Lowenthal. That sheep. They waved five years in his face and he coughed up half a dozen names. One of them was mine. They watched me for a while, and by the time they landed, I was worth a lot more than five years. There were a few other deals, including the prescription blanks, which -I hadn't given up entirely. It's funny, I didn't really need that stuff anymore, but it was a habit. Hard to give up that extra sugar.

Well, I knew some people. I pulled some strings. And I threw a couple of people to the wolves. Nobody I liked, though. Everyone I gave to the feds was a real son of a bitch.

Christ, I'm hungry.

### *January 30*

No gulls today. Reminds me of the signs you'd sometimes see on the pushcarts back in the neighborhood. NO TOMATOES TODAY. I walked out into the water up to my waist with the sharp knife in my hand. I stood completely still in that one place with the sun beating down on me for four hours. Twice I thought I was going to faint, but I counted backward until it passed. I didn't see one fish. Not one.

### *January 31*

Killed another gull, the same way I did the first. I was too hungry to torture it the way I had been promising myself. I gutted and ate it. Squeezed the tripe and then ate them, too. It's strange how you can feel your vitality surge back. I was beginning to get scared there, for a while. Lying in the shade of the big central rockpile, I'd think I was hearing voices. My father. My mother. My ex-wife. And worst of all the big Chink who sold me the heroin in Saigon. He had a lisp, possibly from a partially cleft palate.

"Go ahead," his voice came out of nowhere. "Go ahead and thnort a little. You won't notith how hungry you are then. It'h beautiful . . ." But I've never done dope, not even sleeping pills.

Lowenthal killed himself, did I tell you that? That sheep. He hanged himself in what used to be his office. The way I look at it, he did the world a favor.

I wanted my shingle back. Some of the people I talked to said it could be done—but it would cost big money. More grease than I'd ever dreamed of. I had \$40,000 in a safe-deposit box. I decided I'd have to take a chance and try to turn it over. Double or triple it.

So I went to see Ronnie Hanelli. Ronnie and I played football together in college, and when his kid brother decided on internal med, I helped him get a residency. Ronnie himself was in pre-law, how's that for funny? On the block when we were growing up we called him Ronnie the Enforcer because he umped all the stickball games and reffed the hockey. If you didn't like his calls, you had your choice—you could keep your mouth shut or you could eat knuckles. The Puerto Ricans called him *Ronniewop*. All one word like that. *Ronniewop*. Used to tickle him. And that guy went to college, and then to law school, and he breezed through his bar exam the first time he took it, and then he set up shop in the old neighborhood, right over the Fish Bowl Bar. I close my eyes and I can still see him cruising down the block in that white Continental of his. The biggest fucking loan shark in the city.

I knew Ronnie would have something for me. "It's dangerous," he said. "But you could always take care of yourself. And if you can get the stuff back in, I'll introduce you to a couple of fellows. One of them is a state representative."

He gave me two names over there. One of them was the big Chink, Henry Li-Tsu. The other was a Vietnamese named Solom Ngo. A chemist. For a fee he would test the Chink's product. The Chink was known to play "jokes" from time to time. The "jokes" were plastic bags filled with talcum powder, with drain cleaner, with cornstarch. Ronnie said that one day Li-Tsu's little jokes would get him killed.

*February 1*

There was a plane. It flew right across the island. I tried to climb to the top of the rockpile and wave to it. My foot went into a hole. The same damn hole I got it stuck in the day I killed the first bird, I think. I've fractured my ankle, compound fracture. It went like a gunshot. The pain was unbelievable. I screamed and lost my balance, pinwheeling my arms like a madman, but I went down and hit my head and everything went black. I didn't wake up until dusk. I lost some blood where I hit my head. My ankle had swelled up like a tire, and I'd got myself a very nasty sunburn. I think if there had been another hour of sun, it would have blistered.

Dragged myself back here and spent last night shivering and crying with frustration. I disinfected the head wound, which is just above the right temporal lobe, and bandaged it as well as I could. Just a superficial scalp wound plus minor concussion, I think, but my ankle . . . it's a bad break, involved in two places, possibly three.

How will I chase the birds now?

It had to be a plane looking for survivors from the *Callas*. In the dark and the storm, the lifeboat must have carried miles from where it sank. They may not be back this way.

God, my ankle hurts so bad.

## *February 2*

I made a sign on the small white shingle of a beach on the island's south side, where the lifeboat grounded. It took me all day, with pauses to rest in the shade. Even so, I fainted twice. At a guess, I'd say I've lost 25 lbs, mostly from dehydration. But now, from where I sit, I can see the four letters it took me all day to spell out; dark rocks against the white sand, they say HELP in characters four feet high. Another plane won't miss me.

If there is another plane.

My foot throbs constantly. There is swelling still and ominous discoloration around the double break. Discoloration seems to have advanced. Binding it tightly with my shirt alleviates the worst of the pain, but it's still bad enough so that I faint rather than sleep.

I have begun to think I may have to amputate.

### *February 3*

Swelling and discoloration worse still. I'll wait until tomorrow. If the operation does become necessary, I believe I can carry it through. I have matches for sterilizing the sharp knife, I have needle and thread from the sewing kit. My shirt for a bandage.

I even have two kilos of "painkiller," although hardly of the type I used to prescribe. But they would have taken it if they could have gotten it. You bet. Those old blue-haired ladies would have snorted Glade air freshener if they thought it would have gotten them high. Believe it!

### *February 4*

I've decided to amputate my foot. No food four days now. If I wait any longer, I run the risk of fainting from combined shock and hunger in the middle of the operation and bleeding to death. And as wretched as I am, I still want to live. I remember what Mockridge used to say in Basic Anatomy. Old Mockie, we used to call him. Sooner or later, he'd say, the question comes up in every medical student's career: How much shock-trauma can the patient stand? And he'd whack his pointer at his chart of the human body, hitting the liver, the kidneys, the heart, the spleen, the intestines. Cut to its base level, gentlemen, he'd say, the answer is always another question: How badly does the patient want to survive?

I think I can bring it off.

I really do.

I suppose I'm writing to put off the inevitable, but it did occur to me that I haven't finished the story of how I came to be here. Perhaps I should tie up that loose end in case the operation does go badly. It will only take a few minutes, and I'm sure there will be enough daylight left for the operation, for, according to my Pulsar, it's only nine past nine in the morning. Ha!

I flew to Saigon as a tourist. Does that sound strange? It shouldn't. There are still thousands of people who visit there every year in spite

of Nixon's war. There are people who go to see car wrecks and cockfights, too.

My Chinese friend had the merchandise. I took it to Ngo, who pronounced it very high-grade stuff. He told me that Li-Tsu had played one of his jokes four months ago and that his wife had been blown up when she turned on the ignition of her Opel. Since then there had been no more jokes.

I stayed in Saigon for three weeks; I had booked passage back to San Francisco on a cruise ship, the *Callas*. First cabin. Getting on board with the merchandise was no trouble; for a fee Ngo arranged for two customs officials to simply wave me on after running through my suitcases. The merchandise was in an airline flight bag, which they never even looked at.

"Getting through U.S. customs will be much more difficult," Ngo told me. "That, however, is your problem."

I had no intention of taking the merchandise through U.S. customs. Ronnie Hanelli had arranged for a skin diver who would do a certain rather tricky job for \$3,000. I was to meet him (two days ago, now that I think of it) in a San Francisco flophouse called the St. Regis Hotel. The plan was to put the merchandise in a waterproof can. Attached to the top was a timer and a packet of red dye. Just before we docked, the canister was to be thrown overboard—but not by me, of course.

I was still looking for a cook or a steward who could use a little extra cash and who was smart enough—or stupid enough—to keep his mouth closed afterward, when the *Callas* sank.

I don't know how or why. It was storming, but the ship seemed to be handling that well enough. Around eight o'clock on the evening of the 23rd, there was an explosion somewhere belowdecks. I was in the lounge at the time, and the *Callas* began to list almost immediately. To the left . . . do they call that "port" or "starboard"?

People were screaming and running in every direction. Bottles were falling off the backbar and shattering on the floor. A man staggered up from one of the lower levels, his shirt burned off, his skin barbecued. The loudspeaker started telling people to go to the lifeboat stations they had been assigned during the drill at the

beginning of the cruise. The passengers went right on running hither and yon. Very few of them had bothered to show up during the lifeboat drill. I not only showed up, I came early—I wanted to be in the front row, you see, so I would have an unobstructed view of everything. I always pay close attention when the matter concerns my own skin.

I went down to my stateroom, got the heroin bags, and put one in each of my front pockets. Then I went to Lifeboat Station 8. As I went up the stairwell to the main deck there were two more explosions and the boat began to list even more severely.

Topside, everything was confusion. I saw a screeching woman with a baby in her arms run past me, gaining speed as she sprinted down the slippery, canting deck. She hit the rail with her thighs, and flipped outward. I saw her do two midair somersaults and part of a third before I lost sight of her. There was a middle-aged man sitting in the center of the shuffleboard court and pulling his hair. Another man in cook's whites, horribly burned about his face and hands, was stumbling from place to place and screaming, "HELP ME! CAN'T SEE! HELP ME! CAN'T SEE!"

The panic was almost total: it had run from the passengers to the crew like a disease. You must remember that the time elapsed from the first explosion to the actual sinking of the *Callas* was only about twenty minutes. Some of the lifeboat stations were clogged with screaming passengers, while others were absolutely empty. Mine, on the listing side of the ship, was almost deserted. There was no one there but myself and a common sailor with a pimply, pallid face.

"Let's get this buckety-bottomed old whore in the water," he said, his eyes rolling crazily in their sockets. "This bloody tub is going straight to the bottom."

The lifeboat gear is simple enough to operate, but in his fumbling nervousness, he got his side of the block and tackle tangled. The boat dropped six feet and then hung up, the bow two feet lower than the stem.

I was coming around to help him when he began to scream. He'd succeeded in untangling the snarl and had gotten his hand caught at

the same time. The whizzing rope smoked over his open palm, flaying off skin, and he was jerked over the side.

I tossed the rope ladder overboard, hurried down it, and unclipped the lifeboat from the lowering ropes. Then I rowed, something I had occasionally done for pleasure on trips to my friends' summer houses, something I was now doing for my life. I knew that if I didn't get far enough away from the dying *Callas* before she sank, she would pull me down with her.

Just five minutes later she went. I hadn't escaped the suction entirely; I had to row madly just to stay in the same place. She went under very quickly. There were still people clinging to the rail of her bow and screaming. They looked like a bunch of monkeys.

The storm worsened. I lost one oar but managed to keep the other. I spent that whole night in a kind of dream, first bailing, then grabbing the oar and paddling wildly to get the boat's prow into the next bulking wave.

Sometime before dawn on the 24th, the waves began to strengthen behind me. The boat rushed forward. It was terrifying but at the same time exhilarating. Suddenly most of the planking was ripped out from under my feet, but before the lifeboat could sink it was dumped on this godforsaken pile of rocks. I don't even know where I am; have no idea at all. Navigation not my strong point, ha-ha.

But I know what I have to do. This may be the last entry, but somehow I think I'll make it. Haven't I always? And they are really doing marvelous things with prosthetics these days. I can get along with one foot quite nicely.

It's time to see if I'm as good as I think I am. Luck.

### *February 5*

Did it.

The pain was the part I was most worried about. I can stand pain, but I thought that in my weakened condition, a combination of hunger and agony might force unconsciousness before I could finish.

But the heroin solved that quite nicely.

I opened one of the bags and sniffed two healthy pinches from the surface of a flat rock—first the right nostril, then the left. It was like sniffing up some beautifully numbing ice that spread through the brain from the bottom up. I aspirated the heroin as soon as I finished writing in this diary yesterday—that was at 9:45. The next time I checked my watch the shadows had moved, leaving me partially in the sun, and the time was 12:41. I had nodded off. I had never dreamed that it could be so beautiful, and I can't understand why I was so scornful before. The pain, the terror, the misery . . . they all disappear, leaving only a calm euphoria.

It was in this state that I operated.

There was, indeed, a great deal of pain, most of it in the early part of the operation. But the pain seemed disconnected from me, like somebody else's pain. It bothered me, but it was also quite interesting. Can you understand that? If you've used a strong morphine-based drug yourself, perhaps you can. It does more than dull pain. It induces a state of mind. A serenity. I can understand why people get hooked on it, although "hooked" seems an awfully strong word, used most commonly, of course, by those who have never tried it.

About halfway through, the pain started to become a more personal thing. Waves of faintness washed over me. I looked longingly at the open bag of white powder, but forced myself to look away. If I went on the nod again, I'd bleed to death as surely as if I'd fainted. I counted backward from a hundred instead.

Loss of blood was the most critical factor. As a surgeon, I was vitally aware of that. Not a drop could be spilled unnecessarily. If a patient hemorrhages during an operation in a hospital, you can give him blood. I had no such supplies. What was lost—and by the time I had finished, the sand beneath my leg was dark with it—was lost until my own internal factory could resupply. I had no clamps, no hemostats, no surgical thread.

I began the operation at exactly 12:45. I finished at 1:50, and immediately dosed myself with heroin, a bigger dose than before. I nodded into a gray, painless world and remained there until nearly five o'clock. When I came out of it, the sun was nearing the western

horizon, beating a track of gold across the blue Pacific toward me. I've never seen anything so beautiful . . . all the pain was paid for in that one instant. An hour later I snorted a bit more, so as to fully enjoy and appreciate the sunset.

Shortly after dark I—

I—

Wait. Haven't I told you I'd had nothing to eat for four days? And that the only help I could look to in the matter of replenishing my sapped vitality was my own body? Above all, haven't I told you, over and over, that survival is a business of the mind? The superior mind? I won't justify myself by saying you would have done the same thing. First of all, you're probably not a surgeon. Even if you knew the mechanics of amputation, you might have botched the job so badly you would have bled to death anyway. And even if you had lived through the operation and the shock-trauma, the thought might never have entered your preconditioned head. Never mind. No one has to know. My last act before leaving the island will be to destroy this book.

I was very careful.

I washed it thoroughly before I ate it.

### *February 7*

Pain from the stump has been bad—excruciating from time to time. But I think the deep-seated itch as the healing process begins has been worse. I've been thinking this afternoon of all the patients that have babbled to me that they couldn't stand the horrible, unscratchable itch of mending flesh. And I would smile and tell them they would feel better tomorrow, privately thinking what whiners they were, what jellyfish, what ungrateful babies. Now I understand. Several times I've come close to ripping the shirt bandage off the stump and scratching at it, digging my fingers into the soft raw flesh, pulling out the rough stitches, letting the blood gout onto the sand, anything, anything, to be rid of that maddening horrible itch.

At those times I count backward from one hundred. And snort heroin.

I have no idea how much I've taken into my system, but I do know I've been "stoned" almost continually since the operation. It depresses hunger, you know. I'm hardly aware of being hungry at all. There is a faint, faraway gnawing in my belly, and that's all. It could easily be ignored. I can't do that, though. Heroin has no measurable caloric value. I've been testing myself, crawling from place to place, measuring my energy. It's ebbing.

Dear God, I hope not, but . . . another operation may be necessary.

*(later)*

Another plane flew over. Too high to do me any good; all I could see was the contrail etching itself across the sky. I waved anyway. Waved and screamed at it. When it was gone I wept.

Getting too dark to see now. Food. I've been thinking about all kinds of food. My mother's lasagna. Garlic bread. Escargots. Lobster. Prime ribs. Peach melba. London broil. The huge slice of pound cake and the scoop of homemade vanilla ice cream they give you for dessert in Mother Crunch on First Avenue. Hot pretzels baked salmon baked Alaska baked ham with pineapple rings. Onion rings. Onion dip with potato chips cold iced tea in long long sips french fries make you smack your lips.

100, 99, 98, 97, 96, 95, 94

God God God

### *February 8*

Another gull landed on the rockpile this morning. A huge fat one. I was sitting in the shade of my rock, what I think of as my camp, my bandaged stump propped up. I began to salivate as soon as the gull landed. Just like one of Pavlov's dogs. Drooling helplessly, like a baby. Like a baby.

I picked up a chunk of stone large enough to fit my hand nicely and began to crawl toward it. Fourth quarter. We're down by three. Third and long yardage. Pinzetti drops back to pass (Pine, I mean, *Pine*). I didn't have much hope. I was sure it would fly off. But I had to try. If I could get it, a bird as plump and insolent as that one, I

could postpone a second operation indefinitely. I crawled toward it, my stump hitting a rock from time to time and sending stars of pain through my whole body, and waited for it to fly off.

It didn't. It just strutted back and forth, its meaty breast thrown out like some avian general reviewing troops. Every now and then it would look at me with its small, nasty black eyes and I would freeze like a stone and count backward from one hundred until it began to pace back and forth again. Every time it fluttered its wings, my stomach filled up with ice. I continued to drool. I couldn't help it. I was drooling like a baby.

I don't know how long I stalked it. An hour? Two? And the closer I got, the harder my heart pounded and the tastier that gull looked. It almost seemed to be teasing me, and I began to believe that as soon as I got in throwing range it would fly off. My arms and legs were beginning to tremble. My mouth was dry. The stump was twanging viciously. I think now that I must have been having withdrawal pains. But so soon? I've been using the stuff less than a week!

Never mind. I need it. There's plenty left, plenty. If I have to take the cure later on when I get back to the States, I'll check into the best clinic in California and do it with a smile. That's not the problem right now, is it?

When I did get in range, I didn't want to throw the rock. I became insanely sure that I would miss, probably by feet. I had to get closer. So I continued to crawl up the rockpile, my head thrown back, the sweat pouring off my wasted, scarecrow body. My teeth have begun to rot, did I tell you that? If I were a superstitious man, I'd say it was because I ate—

Ha! We know better, don't we?

I stopped again. I was much closer to it than I had been to either of the other gulls. I still couldn't bring myself to commit. I clutched the rock until my fingers ached and still I couldn't throw it. Because I knew exactly what it would mean if I missed.

I don't care if I use all the merchandise! I'll sue the ass off them! I'll be in clover for the rest of my life! *My long long life!*

I think I would have crawled right up to it without throwing if it hadn't finally taken wing. I would have crept up and strangled it. But it spread its wings and took off. I screamed at it and reared up on my knees and threw my rock with all my strength. And I hit it!

The bird gave a strangled squawk and fell back on the other side of the rockpile. Gibbering and laughing, unmindful now of striking the stump or opening the wound, I crawled over the top and to the other side. I lost my balance and banged my head. I didn't even notice it, not then, although it has raised a pretty nasty lump. All I could think of was the bird and how I had hit it, fantastic luck, even on the wing I had hit it!

It was flopping down toward the beach on the other side, one wing broken, its underbody red with blood. I crawled as fast as I could, but it crawled faster yet. Race of the cripples! Ha! Ha! I might have gotten it—I was closing the distance—except for my hands. I have to take good care of my hands. I may need them again. In spite of my care, the palms were scraped by the time we reached the narrow shingle of beach, and I'd shattered the face of my Pulsar watch against a rough spine of rock.

The gull flopped into the water, squawking noisomely, and I clutched at it. I got a handful of tailfeathers, which came off in my fist. Then I fell in, inhaling water, snorting and choking.

I crawled in further. I even tried to swim after it. The bandage came off my stump. I began to go under. I just managed to get back to the beach, shaking with exhaustion, racked with pain, weeping and screaming, cursing the gull. It floated there for a long time, always further and further out. I seem to remember begging it to come back at one point. But when it went out over the reef, I think it was dead.

It isn't fair.

It took me almost an hour to crawl back around to my camp. I've snorted a large amount of heroin, but even so I'm bitterly angry at the gull. If I wasn't going to get it, why did it have to tease me so? Why didn't it just fly off?

### *February 9*

I've amputated my left foot and have bandaged it with my pants. Strange. All through the operation I was drooling. Droooling. Just like when I saw the gull. Drooling helplessly. But I made myself wait until after dark. I just counted backward from one hundred . . . twenty or thirty times! Ha! Ha!

Then . . .

I kept telling myself: Cold roast beef. Cold roast beef. Cold roast beef.

### *February 11 (?)*

Rain the last two days. And high winds. I managed to move some rocks from the central pile, enough to make a hole I could crawl into. Found one small spider. Pinched it between my fingers before he could get away and ate him up. Very nice. Juicy. Thought to myself that the rocks over me might fall and bury me alive. Didn't care.

Spent the whole storm stoned. Maybe it rained three days instead of two. Or only one. But I think it got dark twice. I love to nod off. No pain or itching then. I know I'm going to survive this. It can't be a person can go through something like this for nothing.

There was a priest at Holy Family when I was a kid, a little runty guy, and he used to love to talk about hell and mortal sins. He had a real hobbyhorse on them. You can't get back from a mortal sin, that was his view. I dreamed about him last night, Father Hailley in his black bathrobe, and his whiskey nose, shaking his finger at me and saying, "Shame on you, Richard Pinzetti . . . a mortal sin . . . damt to hell, boy . . . damt to hell . . ."

I laughed at him. If this place isn't hell, what is? And the only mortal sin is giving up.

Half of the time I'm delirious; the rest of the time my stumps itch and the dampness makes them ache horribly.

But I won't give up. I swear. Not for nothing. Not all this for nothing.

### *February 12*

Sun is out again, a beautiful day. I hope they're freezing their asses off in the neighborhood.

It's been a good day for me, as good as any day gets on this island. The fever I had while it was storming seems to have dropped. I was weak and shivering when I crawled out of my burrow, but after lying on the hot sand in the sunshine for two or three hours, I began to feel almost human again.

Crawled around to the south side and found several pieces of driftwood cast up by the storm, including several boards from my lifeboat. There was kelp and seaweed on some of the boards. I ate it. Tasted awful. Like eating a vinyl shower curtain. But I felt so much stronger this afternoon.

I pulled the wood up as far as I could so it would dry. I've still got a whole tube of waterproof matches. The wood will make a signal fire if someone comes soon. A cooking fire if not. I'm going to snort up now.

### *February 13*

Found a crab. Killed it and roasted it over a small fire. Tonight I could almost believe in God again.

### *Feb 14*

I just noticed this morning that the storm washed away most of the rocks in my HELP sign. But the storm ended . . . three days ago? Have I really been that stoned? I'll have to watch it, cut down the dosage. What if a ship went by while I was nodding?

I made the letters again, but it took me most of the day and now I'm exhausted. Looked for a crab where I found the other, but nothing. Cut my hands on several of the rocks I used for the sign, but disinfected them promptly with iodine in spite of my weariness. Have to take care of my hands. No matter what.

### *Feb 15*

A gull landed on the tip of the rockpile today. Flew away before I could get in range. I wished it into hell, where it could peck out

Father Hailley's bloodshot little eyes through eternity.

Ha! Ha!

Ha! Ha!

Ha

*Feb 17(?)*

Took off my right leg at the knee, but lost a lot of blood. Pain excruciating in spite of heroin. Shock-trauma would have killed a lesser man. Let me answer with a question: How badly does the patient want to survive? *How badly does the patient want to live?*

Hands trembling. If they are betraying me, I'm through. They have no right to betray me. No right at all. I've taken care of them all their lives. Pampered them. They better not. Or they'll be sorry.

At least I'm not hungry.

One of the boards from the lifeboat had split down the middle. One end came to a point. I used that. I was drooling but I made myself wait. And then I got thinking of . . . oh, barbecues we used to have. That place Will Hammersmith had on Long Island, with a barbecue pit big enough to roast a whole pig in. We'd be sitting on the porch in the dusk with big drinks in our hands, talking about surgical techniques or golf scores or something. And the breeze would pick up and drift the sweet smell of roasting pork over to us. Judas Iscariot, the sweet smell of roasting pork.

*Feb?*

Took the other leg at the knee. Sleepy all day. "Doctor was this operation necessary?" Haha. Shaky hands, like an old man. Hate them. Blood under the fingernails. Scabs. Remember that model in med school with the glass belly? I feel like that. Only I don't want to look. No way no how. I remember Dom used to say that. Waltz up to you on the street corner in his Hiway Outlaws club jacket. You'd say Dom how'd you make out with her? And Dom would say no way no how. Shee. Old Dom. I wish I'd stayed right in the neighborhood. This sucks so bad as Dom would say. haha.

But I understand, you know, that with the proper therapy, and prosthetics, I could be as good as new. I could come back here and tell people "This. Is where it. Happened."

Hahaha!

*February 23 (?)*

Found a dead fish. Rotten and stinking. Ate it anyway. Wanted to puke, wouldn't let myself. *I will survive*. So lovely stoned, the sunsets.

*February*

Don't dare but have to. But how can I tie off the femoral artery that high up? It's as big as a fucking turnpike up there.

Must, somehow. I've marked across the top of the thigh, the part that is still meaty. I made the mark with this pencil.

I wish I could stop drooling.

*Fe*

You . . . deserve . . . a break today . . . sooo . . . get up and get away . . . to McDonald's . . . two all-beef patties . . . special sauce . . . lettuce . . . pickles . . . onions . . . on a . . . sesame seed bun . . .

Dee . . . deedee . . . dundadee . . .

*Febba*

Looked at my face in the water today. Nothing but a skin-covered skull. Am I insane yet? I must be. I'm a monster now, a freak.

Nothing left below the groin. Just a freak. A head attached to a torso dragging itself along the sand by the elbows. A crab. A *stoned* crab. Isn't that what they call themselves now? Hey man I'm just a poor stoned crab can you spare me a dime.

Hahahaha

They say you are what you eat and if so I HAVEN'T CHANGED A BIT! Dear God shock-trauma shock-trauma THERE is NO SUCH THING AS SHOCK-TRAUMA

HA

*Fel40?*

Dreaming about my father. When he was drunk he lost all his English. Not that he had anything worth saying anyway. Fucking dipstick. I was so glad to get out of your house Daddy you fucking greaseball dipstick nothing cipher zilcho zero. I knew I'd made it. I walked away from you, didn't I? I walked on my hands.

But there's nothing left for them to cut off. Yesterday I took my earlobes

left hand washes the right don't let your left hand know what your right hands doing one potato two potato three potato four we got a refrigerator with a store-more door hahaha.

Who cares, this hand or that. good food good meat good God let's eat.

lady fingers they taste just like lady fingers

## Uncle Otto's Truck

It's a great relief to write this down.

I haven't slept well since I found my Uncle Otto dead and there have been times when I have really wondered if I have gone insane—or if I will. In a way it would all have been more merciful if I did not have the actual object here in my study, where I can look at it, or pick it up and heft it if I should want to. I don't want to do that; I don't want to touch that thing. But sometimes I do.

If I hadn't taken it away from his little one-room house when I fled from it, I could begin persuading myself it was all only an hallucination—a figment of an overworked and overstimulated brain. But it is there. It has weight. It can be hefted in the hand.

It all happened, you see.

Most of you reading this memoir will not believe that, not unless something like it has happened to you. I find that the matter of your belief and my relief are mutually exclusive, however, and so I will gladly tell the tale anyway. Believe what you want.

Any tale of grue should have a provenance or a secret. Mine has both. Let me begin with the provenance—by telling you how my Uncle Otto, who was rich by the standards of Castle County, happened to spend the last twenty years of his life in a one-room house with no plumbing on a back road in a small town.

Otto was born in 1905, the eldest of the five Schenck children. My father, born in 1920, was the youngest. I was the youngest of my father's children, born in 1955, and so Uncle Otto always seemed very old to me.

Like many industrious Germans, my grandfather and grandmother came to America with some money. My grandfather settled in Derry because of the lumber industry, which he knew something about. He did well, and his children were born into comfortable circumstances.

My grandfather died in 1925. Uncle Otto, then twenty, was the only child to receive a full inheritance. He moved to Castle Rock and began to speculate in real estate. In the next five years he made a lot of money dealing in wood and in land. He bought a large house on Castle Hill, had servants, and enjoyed his status as a young, relatively handsome (the qualifier “relatively” because he wore spectacles), extremely eligible bachelor. No one thought him odd. That came later.

He was hurt in the crash of '29—not as badly as some, but hurt is hurt. He held on to his big Castle Hill house until 1933, then sold it because a great tract of woodland had come on the market at a distress sale price and he wanted it desperately. The land belonged to the New England Paper Company.

New England Paper still exists today, and if you wanted to purchase shares in it, I would tell you to go right ahead. But in 1933 the company was offering huge chunks of land at fire-sale prices in a last-ditch effort to stay afloat.

How much land in the tract my uncle was after? That original, fabulous deed has been lost, and accounts differ . . . but by *all* accounts, it was better than four thousand acres. Most of it was in Castle Rock, but it sprawled into Waterford and Harlow, as well. When the deal was broken down, New England Paper was offering it for about two dollars and fifty cents an acre . . . *if* the purchaser would take it all.

That was a total price of about ten thousand dollars. Uncle Otto couldn't swing it, and so he took a partner—a Yankee named George McCutcheon. You probably know the names Schenck and McCutcheon if you live in New England; the company was bought out long ago, but there are still Schenck and McCutcheon hardware stores in forty New England cities, and Schenck and McCutcheon lumberyards from Central Falls to Derry.

McCutcheon was a burly man with a great black beard. Like my Uncle Otto, he wore spectacles. Also like Uncle Otto, he had inherited a sum of money. It must have been a fairish sum, because

he and Uncle Otto together swung the purchase of that tract with no further trouble. Both of them were pirates under the skin and they got on well enough together. Their partnership lasted for twenty-two years—until the year I was born, in fact—and prosperity was all they knew.

But it all began with the purchase of those four thousand acres, and they explored them in McCutcheon's truck, cruising the woods roads and the pulper's tracks, grinding along in first gear for the most part, shuddering over washboards and splashing through washouts, McCutcheon at the wheel part of the time, my Uncle Otto at the wheel the rest of the time, two young men who had become New England land barons in the dark depths of the big Depression.

I don't know where McCutcheon came by that truck. It was a Cresswell, if it matters—a breed which no longer exists. It had a huge cab, painted bright red, wide running boards, and an electric starter, but if the starter ever failed, it could be cranked—although the crank could just as easily kick back and break your shoulder, if the man cranking wasn't careful. The bed was twenty feet long with stake sides, but what I remember best about that truck was its snout. Like the cab, it was red as blood. To get at the engine, you had to lift out two steel panels, one on either side. The radiator was as high as a grown man's chest. It was an ugly, monstrous thing.

McCutcheon's truck broke down and was repaired, broke down again and was repaired again. When the Cresswell finally gave up, it gave up in spectacular fashion. It went like the wonderful one-hoss shay in the Holmes poem.

McCutcheon and Uncle Otto were coming up the Black Henry Road one day in 1953, and by Uncle Otto's own admission both of them were "shithouse drunk." Uncle Otto downshifted to first in order to get up Trinity Hill. *That* went fine, but, drunk as he was, he never thought to shift up again coming down the far side. The Cresswell's tired old engine overheated. Neither Uncle Otto nor McCutcheon saw the needle go over the red mark by the letter H on the right side of the dial. At the bottom of the hill, there was an explosion that blew

the engine-compartment's folding sides out like red dragon's wings. The radiator cap rocketed into the summer sky. Steam plumed up like Old Faithful. Oil went in a gusher, drenching the windshield. Uncle Otto cramped down on the brake pedal but the Cresswell had developed a bad habit of shooting brake fluid over the last year or so and the pedal just sank to the mat. He couldn't see where he was driving and he ran off the road, first into a ditch and then out of it. If the Cresswell had stalled, all still might have been well. But the engine continued to run and it blew first one piston and then two more, like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. One of them, Uncle Otto said, zinged right through his door, which had flopped open. The hole was big enough to put a fist through. They came to rest in a field full of August goldenrod. They would have had a fine view of the White Mountains if the windshield hadn't been covered with Diamond Gem Oil.

That was the last roundup for McCutcheon's Cresswell; it never moved from that field again. Not that there was any squawk from the landlord; the two of them owned it, of course. Considerably sobered by the experience, the two men got out to examine the damage. Neither was a mechanic, but you didn't have to be to see that the wound was mortal. Uncle Otto was stricken—or so he told my father—and offered to pay for the truck. George McCutcheon told him not to be a fool. McCutcheon was, in fact, in a kind of ecstasy. He had taken one look at the field, at the view of the mountains, and had decided this was the place where he would build his retirement home. He told Uncle Otto just that, in tones one usually saves for a religious conversion. They walked back to the road together and hooked a ride into Castle Rock with the Cushman Bakery truck, which happened to be passing. McCutcheon told my father that it had been God's hand at work—he had been looking for just the perfect place, and there it had been all the time, in that field they passed three and four times a week, with never a spared glance. The hand of God, he reiterated, never knowing that he would die in

that field two years later, crushed under the front end of his own truck—the truck which became Uncle Otto’s truck when he died.

McCutcheon had Billy Dodd hook his wrecker up to the Cresswell and drag it around so it faced the road. So he could look at it, he said, every time he went by, and know that when Dodd hooked up to it again and dragged it away for good, it would be so that the construction men could come and dig him a cellar-hole. He was something of a sentimentalist, but he was not a man to let sentiment stand in the way of making a dollar. When a pulper named Baker came by a year later and offered to buy the Cresswell’s wheels, tires and all, because they were the right size to fit his rig, McCutcheon took the man’s twenty dollars like a flash. This was a man, remember, who was then worth a million dollars. He also told Baker to block the truck up aright smart. He said he didn’t want to go past it and see it sitting in the field hip-deep in hay and timothy and goldenrod, like some old derelict. Baker did it. A year later the Cresswell rolled off the blocks and crushed McCutcheon to death. The old-timers told the story with relish, always ending by saying that they hoped old Georgie McCutcheon had enjoyed the twenty dollars he got for those wheels.

I grew up in Castle Rock. By the time I was born my father had worked for Schenck and McCutcheon almost ten years, and the truck, which had become Uncle Otto’s along with everything else McCutcheon owned, was a landmark in my life. My mother shopped at Warren’s in Bridgton, and the Black Henry Road was the way you got there. So every time we went, there was the truck, standing in that field with the White Mountains behind it. It was no longer blocked up—Uncle Otto said that one accident was enough—but just the thought of what had happened was enough to give a small boy in knee-pants a shiver.

It was there in the summer; in the fall with oak and elm trees blazing on the three edges of the field like torches; in the winter with drifts sometimes all the way up and over its bug-eyed headlights, so

that it looked like a mastodon struggling in white quicksand; in the spring, when the field was a quagmire of March-mud and you wondered that it just didn't sink into the earth. If not for the underlying backbone of good Maine rock, it might well have done just that. Through all the seasons and years, it was there.

I was even in it, once. My father pulled over to the side of the road one day when we were on our way to the Fryeburg Fair, took me by the hand and led me out to the field. That would have been 1960 or 1961, I suppose. I was frightened of the truck. I had heard the stories of how it had slithered forward and crushed my uncle's partner. I had heard these tales in the barbershop, sitting quiet as a mouse behind a *Life* magazine I couldn't read, listening to the men talk about how he had been crushed, and about how they hoped old Georgie had enjoyed his twenty dollars for those wheels. One of them—it might have been Billy Dodd, crazy Frank's father—said McCutcheon had looked like “a pumpkin that got squot by a tractor wheel.” That haunted my thoughts for months . . . but my father, of course, had no idea of that.

My father just thought I might like to sit in the cab of that old truck; he had seen the way I looked at it every time we passed, mistaking my dread for admiration, I suppose.

I remember the goldenrod, its bright yellow dulled by the October chill. I remember the gray taste of the air, a little bitter, a little sharp, and the silvery look of the dead grass. I remember the *whissht-whissht* of our footfalls. But what I remember best is the truck looming up, getting bigger and bigger—the toothy snarl of its radiator, the bloody red of its paint, the bleary gaze of the windshield. I remember fear sweeping over me in a wave colder and grayer than the taste of the air as my father put his hands in my armpits and lifted me into the cab, saying, “Drive her to Portland, Quentin . . . go to her!” I remember the air sweeping past my face as I went up and up, and then its clean taste was replaced by the smells of ancient Diamond Gem Oil, cracked leather, mousedroppings, and . . . I swear it . . . blood. I remember trying not to cry as my father stood grinning up at me, convinced he was giving me one hell of a thrill (and so he was, but not the way he thought). It came to me with

perfect certainty that he would walk away then, or at least turn his back, and that the truck would just eat me—eat me alive. And what it spat out would look chewed and broken and . . . and sort of exploded. Like a pumpkin that got squot by a tractor wheel.

I began to cry and my father, who was the best of men, took me down and soothed me and carried me back to the car.

He carried me up in his arms, over his shoulder, and I looked at the receding truck, standing there in the field, its huge radiator looming, the dark round hole where the crank was supposed to go looking like a horridly misplaced eye socket, and I wanted to tell him I had smelled blood, and that's why I had cried. I couldn't think of a way to do it. I suppose he wouldn't have believed me anyway.

As a five-year-old who still believed in Santy Claus and the Tooth Fairy and the Allamagoosalum, I also believed that the bad, scary feelings which swamped me when my father boosted me into the cab of the truck *came* from the truck. It took twenty-two years for me to decide it wasn't the Cresswell that had murdered George McCutcheon; my Uncle Otto had done that.

The Cresswell was a landmark in my life, but it belonged to the whole area's consciousness, as well. If you were giving someone directions on how to get from Bridgton to Castle Rock, you told them they'd know they were going right if they saw a big old red truck sitting off to the left in a hayfield three miles or so after the turn from 11. You often saw tourists parked on the soft shoulder (and sometimes they got stuck there, which was always good for a laugh), taking pictures of the White Mountains with Uncle Otto's truck in the foreground for picturesque perspective—for a long time my father called the Cresswell "the Trinity Hill Memorial Tourist Truck," but after a while he stopped. By then Uncle Otto's obsession with it had gotten too strong for it to be funny.

So much for the provenance. Now for the secret.

That he killed McCutcheon is the one thing of which I am absolutely sure. "Squot him like a pumpkin," the barbershop sages

said. One of them added: “I bet he was down in front o’ that truck, prayin like one o’ them greaseball Ay-rabs prayin to Arlah. I can just pitcher him that way. They was tetched, y’know, t’both of them. Just lookit the way Otto Schenck ended up, if you don’t believe me. Right across the road in that little house he thought the town was gonna take for a school, and just as crazy as a shithouse rat.”

This was greeted with nods and wise looks, because by *then* they thought Uncle Otto was odd, all right—oh, ayuh! —but there wasn’t a one of the barbershop sages who considered that image—McCutcheon down on his knees in front of the truck “like one o’ them greaseball Ay-rabs prayin to Arlah”—suspicious as well as eccentric.

Gossip is always a hot item in a small town; people are condemned as thieves, adulterers, poachers, and cheats on the flimsiest evidence and the wildest deductions. Often, I think, the talk gets started out of no more than boredom. I think what keeps this from being actually nasty—which is how most novelists have depicted small towns, from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Grace Metalious—is that most party-line, grocery-store, and barbershop gossip is oddly naive—it is as if these people expect meanness and shallowness, will even invent it if it is not there, but that real and conscious evil may be beyond their conception, even when it floats right before their faces like a magic carpet from one o’ those greaseball Ay-rab fairy tales.

How do I know he did it? you ask. Simply because he was with McCutcheon that day? No. Because of the truck. The Cresswell. When his obsession began to overtake him, he went to live across from it in that tiny house . . . even though, in the last few years of his life, he was deathly afraid of the truck beached across the road.

I think Uncle Otto got McCutcheon out into the field where the Cresswell was blocked up by getting McCutcheon to talk about his house plans. McCutcheon was always eager to talk about his house and his approaching retirement. The partners had been made a good offer by a much larger company—I won’t mention the name, but if I did you would know it—and McCutcheon wanted to take it. Uncle Otto didn’t. There had been a quiet struggle going on between

them over the offer since the spring. I think that disagreement was the reason Uncle Otto decided to get rid of his partner.

I think that my uncle might have prepared for the moment by doing two things: first, undermining the blocks holding the truck up, and second, planting something on the ground or perhaps in it, directly in front of the truck, where McCutcheon would see it.

What sort of thing? I don't know. Something bright. A diamond? Nothing more than a chunk of broken glass? It doesn't matter. It winks and flashes in the sun. Maybe McCutcheon sees it. If not, you can be sure Uncle Otto points it out. *What's that?* he asks, pointing. *Dunno*, McCutcheon says, and hurries over to take a look-see.

McCutcheon falls on his knees in front of the Cresswell, just like one o' them greaseball Ay-rabs prayin to Arlah, trying to work the object out of the ground, while my uncle strolls casually around to the back of the truck. One good shove and down it came, crushing McCutcheon flat. Squotting him like a pumpkin.

I suspect there may have been too much pirate in him to have died easily. In my imagination I see him lying pinned beneath the Cresswell's tilted snout, blood streaming from his nose and mouth and ears, his face paper-white, his eyes dark, pleading with my uncle to get help, to get help fast. Pleading . . . then begging . . . and finally cursing my uncle, promising him he would get him, kill him, finish him . . . and my uncle standing there, watching, hands in his pockets, until it was over.

It wasn't long after McCutcheon's death that my uncle began to do things that were first described by the barbershop sages as odd . . . then as queer . . . then as "damn peculiar." The things which finally caused him to be deemed, in the pungent barbershop argot, "as crazy as a shithouse rat" came in the fullness of time—but there seemed little doubt in anyone's mind that his peculiarities began right around the time George McCutcheon died.

In 1965, Uncle Otto had a small one-room house built across from the truck. There was a lot of talk about what old Otto Schenck might be up to out there on the Black Henry by Trinity Hill, but the surprise

was total when Uncle Otto finished the little building off by having Chuckie Barger slap on a coat of bright red paint and then announcing it was a gift to the town—a fine new schoolhouse, he said, and all he asked was that they name it after his late partner.

Castle Rock's selectmen were flabbergasted. So was everyone else. Most everyone in the Rock had gone to such a one-room school (or thought they had, which comes down to almost the same thing). But all of the one-room schools were gone from Castle Rock by 1965. The very last of them, the Castle Ridge School, had closed the year before. It's now Steve's Pizzaville out on Route 117. By then the town had a glass-and-cinderblock grammar school on the far side of the common and a fine new high school on Carbine Street. As a result of his eccentric offer, Uncle Otto made it all the way from "odd" to "damn peculiar" in one jump.

The selectmen sent him a letter (not one of them quite dared to go see him in person) thanking him kindly, and hoping he would remember the town in the future, but declining the little schoolhouse on the grounds that the educational needs of the town's children were already well provided for. Uncle Otto flew into a towering rage. Remember the town in the future? he stormed to my father. He would remember them, all right, but not the way they wanted. *He* hadn't fallen off a hay truck yesterday. *He* knew a hawk from a handsaw. And if they wanted to get into a pissing contest with him, he said, they were going to find he could piss like a polecat that had just drunk a keg of beer.

"So what now?" my father asked him. They were sitting at the kitchen table in our house. My mother had taken her sewing upstairs. She said she didn't like Uncle Otto; she said he smelled like a man who took a bath once a month, whether he needed one or not—"and him a rich man," she would always add with a sniff. I think his smell really did offend her but I also think she was frightened of him. By 1965, Uncle Otto had begun to *look* damn peculiar as well as act that way. He went around dressed in green workman's pants held up by suspenders, a thermal underwear shirt, and big yellow workshoes. His eyes had begun to roll in strange directions as he spoke.

"Huh?"

“What are you going to do with the place now?”

“Live in the son of a bitch,” Uncle Otto snapped, and that’s what he did.

The story of his later years doesn’t need much telling. He suffered the dreary sort of madness that one often sees written up in cheap tabloid newspapers. *Millionaire Dies of Malnutrition in Tenement Apartment. Bag Lady Was Rich, Bank Records Reveal. Forgotten Bank Tycoon Dies in Seclusion.*

He moved into the little red house—in later years it faded to a dull, washed-out pink—the very next week. Nothing my father said could talk him out of it. A year afterward, he sold the business I believe he had murdered to keep. His eccentricities had multiplied, but his business sense had not deserted him, and he realized a handsome profit—*staggering* might actually be a better word.

So there was my Uncle Otto, worth perhaps as much as seven millions of dollars, living in that tiny little house on the Black Henry Road. His town house was locked up and shuttered. He had by then progressed beyond “damned peculiar” to “crazy as a shithouse rat.” The next progression is expressed in a flatter, less colorful, but more ominous phrase: “dangerous, maybe.” That one is often followed by committal.

In his own way, Uncle Otto became as much a fixture as the truck across the road, although I doubt if any tourists ever wanted to take *his* picture. He had grown a beard, which came more yellow than white, as if infected by the nicotine of his cigarettes. He had gotten very fat. His jowls sagged down into wrinkly dewlaps creased with dirt. Folks often saw him standing in the doorway of his peculiar little house, just standing there motionlessly, looking out at the road, and across it.

Looking at the truck—*his* truck.

When Uncle Otto stopped coming to town, it was my father who made sure that he didn’t starve to death. He brought him groceries every week, and paid for them out of his own pocket, because Uncle

Otto never paid him back—never thought of it, I suppose. Dad died two years before Uncle Otto, whose money ended up going to the University of Maine Forestry Department. I understand they were delighted. Considering the amount, they should have been.

After I got my driver's license in 1972, I often took the weekly groceries out. At first Uncle Otto regarded me with narrow suspicion, but after a while he began to thaw. It was three years later, in 1975, when he told me for the first time that the truck was creeping toward the house.

I was attending the University of Maine myself by then, but I was home for the summer and had fallen into my old habit of taking Uncle Otto his weekly groceries. He sat at his table, smoking, watching me put the canned goods away and listening to me chatter. I thought he might have forgotten who I was; sometimes he did that . . . or pretended to. And once he had turned my blood cold by calling "That you, George?" out the window as I walked up to the house.

On that particular day in July of 1975, he broke into whatever trivial conversation I was making to ask with harsh abruptness: "What do you make of yonder truck, Quentin?"

That abruptness startled an honest answer out of me: "I wet my pants in the cab of that truck when I was five," I said. "I think if I got up in it now I'd wet them again."

Uncle Otto laughed long and loud. I turned and gazed at him with wonder. I could not remember ever hearing him laugh before. It ended in a long coughing fit that turned his cheeks a bright red. Then he looked at me, his eyes glittering.

"Gettin closer, Quent," he said.

"What, Uncle Otto?" I asked. I thought he had made one of his puzzling leaps from one subject to another—maybe he meant Christmas was getting closer, or the Millennium, or the return of Christ the King.

"That buggardly truck," he said, looking at me in a still, narrow, confidential way that I didn't much like. "Gettin closer every year."

"It is?" I asked cautiously, thinking that here was a new and particularly unpleasant idea. I glanced out at the Cresswell, standing across the road with hay all around it and the White Mountains

behind it . . . and for one crazy minute it actually *did* seem closer. Then I blinked and the illusion went away. The truck was right where it had always been, of course.

“Oh, ayuh,” he said. “Gets a little closer every year.”

“Gee, maybe you need glasses. I can’t see any difference at all, Uncle Otto.”

“ ‘Course you can’t!” he snapped. “Can’t see the hour hand move on your wristwatch, either, can you? Buggardly thing moves too slow to see . . . unless you watch it all the time. Just the way I watch that truck.” He winked at me, and I shivered.

“Why would it move?” I asked.

“It wants me, that’s why,” he said. “Got me in mind all the while, that truck does. One day it’ll bust right in here, and that’ll be the end. It’ll run me down just like it did Mac, and that’ll be the end.”

This scared me quite badly—his reasonable tone was what scared me the most, I think. And the way the young commonly respond to fright is to crack wise or become flippant. “Ought to move back to your house in town if it bothers you, Uncle Otto,” I said, and you never would have known from my tone that my back was ridged with gooseflesh.

He looked at me . . . and then at the truck across the road. “Can’t, Quentin,” he said. “Sometimes a man just has to stay in one place and wait for it to come to him.”

“Wait for what, Uncle Otto?” I asked, although I thought he must mean the truck.

“Fate,” he said, and winked again . . . but he looked frightened.

My father fell ill in 1979 with the kidney disease which seemed to be improving just days before it finally killed him. Over a number of hospital visits in the fall of that year, my father and I talked about Uncle Otto. My dad had some suspicions about what might really have happened in 1955—mild ones that became the foundation of my more serious ones. My father had no idea how serious or how deep Uncle Otto’s obsession with the truck had become. I did. He

stood in his doorway almost all day long, looking at it. Looking at it like a man watching his watch to see the hour hand move.

By 1981 Uncle Otto had lost his few remaining marbles. A poorer man would have been put away years before, but millions in the bank can forgive a lot of craziness in a small town—particularly if enough people think there might be something in the crazy fellow's will for the municipality. Even so, by 1981 people had begun talking seriously about having Uncle Otto put away for his own good. That flat, deadly phrase, “dangerous, maybe,” had begun to supersede “crazy as a shithouse rat.” He had taken to wandering out to urinate by the side of the road instead of walking back into the woods where his privy was. Sometimes he shook his fist at the Cresswell while he relieved himself, and more than one person passing in his or her car thought Uncle Otto was shaking his fist at *them*.

The truck with the scenic White Mountains in the background was one thing; Uncle Otto pissing by the side of the road with his suspenders hanging down by his knees was something else entirely. *That* was no tourist attraction.

I was by then wearing a business suit more often than the blue jeans that had seen me through college when I took Uncle Otto his weekly groceries—but I still took them. I also tried to persuade him that he had to stop doing his duty by the side of the road, at least in the summertime, when anyone from Michigan, Missouri, or Florida who just happened to be happening by could see him.

I never got through to him. He couldn't be concerned with such minor things when he had the truck to worry about. His concern with the Cresswell had become a mania. He now claimed it was on his side of the road—right in his yard, as a matter of fact.

“I woke up last night around three and there it was, right outside the window, Quentin,” he said. “I seen it there, moonlight shinin off the windshield, not six feet from where I was layin, and my heart almost stopped. It almost *stopped*, Quentin.”

I took him outside and pointed out that the Cresswell was right where it had always been, across the road in the field where

McCutcheon had planned to build. It did no good.

“That’s just what you see, boy,” he said with a wild and infinite contempt, a cigarette shaking in one hand, his eyeballs rolling.

“That’s just what you see.”

“Uncle Otto,” I said, attempting a witticism, “what you see is what you get.”

It was as if he hadn’t heard.

“Bugger almost got me,” he whispered. I felt a chill. He didn’t *look* crazy. Miserable, yes, and terrified, certainly . . . but not crazy. For a moment I remembered my father boosting me into the cab of that truck. I remembered smelling oil and leather . . . and blood. “It almost got me,” he repeated.

And three weeks later, it did.

I was the one who found him. It was Wednesday night, and I had gone out with two bags of groceries in the back seat, as I did almost every Wednesday night. It was a hot, muggy evening. Every now and then thunder rumbled distantly. I remember feeling nervous as I rolled up the Black Henry Road in my Pontiac, somehow sure something was going to happen, but trying to convince myself it was just low barometric pressure.

I came around the last corner, and just as my uncle’s little house came into view, I had the oddest hallucination—for a moment I thought that damned truck really *was* in his dooryard, big and hulking with its red paint and its rotten stake sides. I went for the brake pedal, but before my foot ever came down on it I blinked and the illusion was gone. But I knew that Uncle Otto was dead. No trumpets, no flashing lights; just that simple knowledge, like knowing where the furniture is in a familiar room.

I pulled into his dooryard in a hurry and got out, heading for the house without bothering to get the groceries.

The door was open—he never locked it. I asked him about that once and he explained to me, patiently, the way you would explain a patently obvious fact to a simpleton, that locking the door would not keep the Cresswell out.

He was lying on his bed, which was to the left of the one room—his kitchen area being to the right. He lay there in his green pants and his thermal underwear shirt, his eyes open and glassy. I don't believe he had been dead more than two hours. There were no flies and no smell, although it had been a brutally hot day.

"Uncle Otto?" I spoke quietly, not expecting an answer—you don't lie on your bed with your eyes open and bugging out like that just for the hell of it. If I felt anything, it was relief. It was over.

"Uncle Otto?" I approached him. "Uncle—"

I stopped, seeing for the first time how strangely misshapen his lower face looked—how swelled and twisted. Seeing for the first time how his eyes were not just staring but actually *glaring* from their sockets. But they were not looking toward the doorway or at the ceiling. They were twisted toward the little window above his bed.

*I woke up last night around three and there it was, right outside my window, Quentin. It almost got me.*

*Squot him like a pumpkin,* I heard one of the barbershop sages saying as I sat pretending to read a *Life* magazine and smelling the aromas of Vitalis and Wildroot Creme Oil.

*Almost got me, Quentin.*

There was a smell in here—not barbershop, and not just the stink of a dirty old man.

It smelled oily, like a garage.

"Uncle Otto?" I whispered, and as I walked toward the bed where he lay I seemed to feel myself shrinking, not just in size but in years . . . becoming twenty again, fifteen, ten, eight, six . . . and finally five. I saw my trembling small hand stretch out toward his swelled face. As my hand touched him, cupping his face, I looked up, and the window was filled with the glaring windshield of the Cresswell—and although it was only for a moment, I would swear on a Bible *that* was no hallucination. The Cresswell was there, in the window, less than six feet from me.

I had placed my fingers on one of Uncle Otto's cheeks, my thumb on the other, wanting to investigate that strange swelling, I suppose. When I first saw the truck in the window, my hand tried to tighten into

a fist, forgetting that it was cupped loosely around the corpse's lower face.

In that instant the truck disappeared from the window like smoke—or like the ghost I suppose it was. In the same instant I heard an awful *squirting* noise. Hot liquid filled my hand. I looked down, feeling not just yielding flesh and wetness but something hard and angled. I looked down, and saw, and that was when I began to scream. Oil was pouring out of Uncle Otto's mouth and nose. Oil was leaking from the corners of his eyes like tears. Diamond Gem Oil—the recycled stuff you can buy in a five-gallon plastic container, the stuff McCutcheon had always run in the Cresswell.

But it wasn't *just* oil; there was something sticking out of his mouth.

I kept screaming but for a while I was unable to move, unable to take my oily hand from his face, unable to take my eyes from that big greasy thing sticking out of his mouth—the thing that had so distorted the shape of his face.

At last my paralysis broke and I fled from the house, still screaming. I ran across the dooryard to my Pontiac, flung myself in, and screamed out of there. The groceries meant for Uncle Otto tumbled off the back seat and onto the floor. The eggs broke.

It was something of a wonder that I didn't kill myself in the first two miles—I looked down at the speedometer and saw I was doing better than seventy. I pulled over and took deep breaths until I had myself under some kind of control. I began to realize that I simply could not leave Uncle Otto as I had found him; it would raise too many questions. I would have to go back.

And, I must admit, a certain hellish curiosity had come over me. I wish now that it hadn't, or that I had withstood it; in fact, I wish now I had let them go ahead and ask their questions. But I *did* go back. I stood outside his door for some five minutes—I stood in about the same place and in much the same position where he had stood so often and so long, looking at that truck. I stood there and came to this conclusion: the truck across the road had shifted position, ever so slightly.

Then I went inside.

The first few flies were circling and buzzing around his face. I could see oily prints on his cheeks: thumb on his left, three fingers on his right. I looked nervously at the window where I had seen the Cresswell looming . . . and then I walked over to his bed. I took out my handkerchief and wiped my fingerprints away. Then I reached forward and opened Uncle Otto's mouth.

What fell out was a Champion spark plug—one of the old Maxi-Duty kind, nearly as big as a circus strongman's fist.

I took it with me. Now I wish I hadn't done that, but of course I was in shock. It would all have been more merciful if I didn't have the actual object here in my study where I can look at it, or pick it up and heft it if I should want to—the 1920's-vintage spark plug that fell out of Uncle Otto's mouth.

If it wasn't there, if I hadn't taken it away from his little one-room house when I fled from it the second time, I could perhaps begin the business of persuading myself that all of it—not just coming around the turn and seeing the Cresswell pressed against the side of the little house like a huge red hound, but *all* of it—was only an hallucination. But it is there; it catches the light. It is real. It has weight. *The truck is getting closer every year*, he said, and it seems now that he was right . . . but even Uncle Otto had no idea how close the Cresswell could get.

The town verdict was that Uncle Otto had killed himself by swallowing oil, and it was a nine days' wonder in Castle Rock. Carl Durkin, the town undertaker and not the most closemouthed of men, said that when the docs opened him up to do the autopsy, they found more than three quarts of oil in him . . . and not just in his stomach, either. It had suffused his whole system. What everyone in town wanted to know was: what had he done with the plastic jug? For none was ever found.

As I said, most of you reading this memoir won't believe it . . . at least, not unless something like it has happened to you. But the truck is still out there in its field . . . and for whatever it is worth, it all *happened*.

## Morning Deliveries (Milkman #1)

The dawn washed slowly down Culver Street.

To anyone awake inside, the night was still black, but dawn had actually been tiptoeing around for almost half an hour. In the big maple on the corner of Culver and Balfour Avenue, a red squirrel blinked and turned its insomniac's stare on the sleeping houses. Halfway down the block a sparrow alighted in the Mackenzies' birdbath and fluttered pearly drops about itself. An ant bumbled along the gutter and happened upon a tiny crumb of chocolate in a discarded candy wrapper.

The night breeze that had rustled leaves and billowed curtains now packed up. The maple on the corner gave a last rustly shiver and was still, waiting for the full overture that would follow this quiet prologue.

A band of faint light tinged the eastern sky. The darksome whippoorwill went off duty and the chickadees came to tentative life, still hesitant, as if afraid to greet the day on their own.

The squirrel disappeared into a puckered hole in the fork of the maple.

The sparrow fluttered to the lip of the birdbath and paused.

The ant also paused over his treasure like a librarian ruminating over a folio edition.

Culver Street trembled silently on the sunlit edge of the planet—that moving straightedge astronomers call the terminator.

A sound grew quietly out of the silence, swelling unobtrusively until it seemed it had always been there, hidden under the greater noises of the night so lately passed. It grew, took on clarity, and became the decorously muffled motor of a milk truck.

It turned from Balfour onto Culver. It was a fine, beigecolored truck with red lettering on the sides. The squirrel popped out of the puckered mouth of its hole like a tongue, checked on the truck, and then spied a likely-looking bit of nest fodder. It hurried down the trunk

headfirst after it. The sparrow took wing. The ant took what chocolate it could manage and headed for its hill.

The chickadees began to sing more loudly.

On the next block, a dog barked.

The letters on the sides of the milk truck read: CRAMER'S DAIRY. There was a picture of a bottle of milk, and below that: MORNING DELIVERIES OUR SPECIALTY!

The milkman wore a blue-gray uniform and a cocked hat. Written over the pocket in gold thread was a name: SPIKE. He was whistling over the comfortable rattle of bottles in ice behind him.

He pulled the truck in to the curb at the Mackenzies' house, took his milk case from the floor beside him, and swung out onto the sidewalk. He paused for a moment to sniff the air, fresh and new and infinitely mysterious, and then he strode strongly up the walk to the door.

A small square of white paper was held to the mailbox by a magnet that looked like a tomato. Spike read what was written there closely and slowly, as one might read a message he had found in an old bottle crusted with salt.

1 qt. milk  
1 econ cream  
1 ornge jce  
Thanks

Nella M.

Spike the milkman looked at his hand case thoughtfully, set it down, and from it produced the milk and cream. He inspected the sheet again, lifted the tomato-magnet to make sure he had not missed a period, comma, or dash which would change the complexion of things, nodded, replaced the magnet, picked up his case, and went back to the truck.

The back of the milk truck was damp and black and cool. There was a sunken, buggy smell in its air. It mixed uneasily with the smell of dairy products. The orange juice was behind the deadly nightshade. He pulled a carton out of the ice, nodded again, and

went back up the walk. He put the carton of juice down with the milk and cream and went back to his truck.

Not too far away, the five-o'clock whistle blew at the industrial laundry where Spike's old friend Rocky worked. He thought of Rocky starting up his laundry wheels in the steamy, gasping heat, and smiled. Perhaps he would see Rocky later. Perhaps tonight . . . when deliveries were done.

Spike started the truck and drove on. A little transistor radio hung on an imitation leather strap from a bloodstained meathook which curved down from the cab's ceiling. He turned it on and quiet music counterpointed his engine as he drove up to the McCarthy house.

Mrs. McCarthy's note was where it always was, wedged into the letter slot. It was brief and to the point:

#### Chocolate

Spike took out his pen, scrawled *Delivery Made* across it, and pushed it through the letter slot. Then he went back to the truck. The chocolate milk was stacked in two coolers at the very back, handy to the rear doors, because it was a very big seller in June. The milkman glanced at the coolers, then reached over them and took one of the empty chocolate milk cartons he kept in the far corner. The carton was of course brown, and a happy youngster cavorted above printed matter which informed the consumer that this was CRAMER'S DAIRY DRINK WHOLESOME AND DELICIOUS SERVE HOT OR COLD KIDS LOVE IT!

He set the empty carton on top of a case of milk. Then he brushed aside ice-chips until he could see the mayonnaise jar. He grabbed it and looked inside. The tarantula moved, but sluggishly. The cold had doped it. Spike unscrewed the lid of the jar and tipped it over the opened carton. The tarantula made a feeble effort to scramble back up the slick glass side of the jar, and succeeded not at all. It fell into the empty chocolate milk carton with a fat plop. The milkman carefully reclosed the carton, put it in his carrier, and dashed up the McCarthys' walk. Spiders were his favorite, and spiders were his best, even if he did say so himself. A day when he could deliver a spider was a happy day for Spike.

As he made his way slowly up Culver, the symphony of the dawn continued. The pearly band in the east gave way to a deepening flush of pink, first barely discernible, then rapidly brightening to a scarlet which began almost immediately to fade toward summer blue. The first rays of sunlight, pretty as a drawing in a child's Sunday-school workbook, now waited in the wings.

At the Webbers' house Spike left a bottle of all-purpose cream filled with an acid gel. At the Jenners' he left five quarts of milk. Growing boys there. He had never seen them, but there was a treehouse out back, and sometimes there were bikes and ball bats left in the yard. At the Collinses' two quarts of milk and a carton of yogurt. At Miss Ordway's a carton of eggnog that had been spiked with belladonna.

Down the block a door slammed. Mr. Webber, who had to go all the way into the city, opened the slatted carport door and went inside, swinging his briefcase. The milkman waited for the waspy sound of his little Saab starting up and smiled when he heard it. *Variety is the spice of life*, Spike's mother—God rest her soul!—had been fond of saying, *but we are Irish, and the Irish prefer to take their 'taters plain. Be regular in all ways, Spike, and you will be happy.* And it was just as true as could be, he had found as he rolled down the road of life in his neat beige milk truck.

Only three houses left now.

At the Kincaids' he found a note which read "Nothing today, thanks" and left a capped milk bottle which *looked* empty but contained a deadly cyanide gas. At the Walkers' he left two quarts of milk and a pint of whipping cream.

By the time he reached the Mertons' at the end of the block, rays of sunlight were shining through the trees and dappling the faded hopscotch grid on the sidewalk which passed the Mertons' yard.

Spike bent, picked up what looked like a pretty damned good hopscotching rock—flat on one side—and tossed it. The pebble landed on a line. He shook his head, grinned, and went up the walk, whistling.

The light breeze brought him the smell of industrial laundry soap, making him think again of Rocky. He was surer all the time that he

would be seeing Rocky. Tonight.

Here the note was pinned in the Mertons' newspaper holder:

Cancel

Spike opened the door and went in.

The house was crypt-cold and without furniture. Barren it was, stripped to the walls. Even the stove in the kitchen was gone; there was a brighter square of linoleum where it had stood.

In the living room, every scrap of wallpaper had been removed from the walls. The globe was gone from the overhead light. The bulb had been fused black. A huge splotch of drying blood covered part of one wall. It looked like a psychiatrist's inkblot. In the center of it a crater had been gouged deeply into the plaster. There was a matted clump of hair in this crater, and a few splinters of bone.

The milkman nodded, went back out, and stood on the porch for a moment. It would be a fine day. The sky was already bluer than a baby's eye, and patched with guileless little fair-weather clouds . . . the ones baseball players call "angels."

He pulled the note from the newspaper holder and crumpled it into a ball. He put it in the left front pocket of his white milkman's pants.

He went back to his truck, kicking the stone from the hopscotch grid into the gutter. The milk truck rattled around the corner and was gone.

The day brightened.

A boy banged out of a house, grinned up at the sky, and brought in the milk.

## Big Wheels: A Tale of The Laundry Game (Milkman #2)

Rocky and Leo, both drunk as the last lords of creation, cruised slowly down Culver Street and then out along Balfour Avenue toward Crescent. They were ensconced in Rocky's 1957 Chrysler. Between them, balanced with drunken care on the monstrous hump of the Chrysler's driveshaft, sat a case of Iron City beer. It was their second case of the evening—the evening had actually begun at four in the afternoon, which was punch-out time at the laundry.

"Shit on a shingle!" Rocky said, stopping at the red blinker-light above the intersection of Balfour Avenue and Highway 99. He did not look for traffic in either direction, but did cast a sly glance behind them. A half-full can of I.C., emblazoned with a colorful picture of Terry Bradshaw, rested against his crotch. He took a swig and then turned left on 99. The universal joint made a thick grunting sound as they started chuggingly off in second gear. The Chrysler had lost its first gear some two months ago.

"Gimme a shingle and I'll shit on it," Leo said obligingly.

"What time is it?"

Leo held his watch up until it was almost touching the tip of his cigarette and then puffed madly until he could get a reading. "Almost eight."

"Shit on a shingle!" They passed a sign which read PITTSBURGH 44.

"Nobody is going to inspect this here Detroit honey," Leo said.

"Nobody in his right mind, at least."

Rocky fetched third gear. The universal moaned to itself, and the Chrysler began to have the automotive equivalent of a *petit mal* epileptic seizure. The spasm eventually passed, and the speedometer climbed tiredly to forty. It hung there precariously.

When they reached the intersection of Highway 99 and Devon Stream Road (Devon Stream formed the border between the

townships of Crescent and Devon for some eight miles), Rocky turned onto the latter almost upon a whim—although perhaps even then some memory of ole Stiff Socks had begun to stir deep down in what passed for Rocky's subconscious.

He and Leo had been driving more or less at random since leaving work. It was the last day of June, and the inspection sticker on Rocky's Chrysler would become invalid at exactly 12:01 A.M. tomorrow. Four hours from right now. *Less* than four hours from right now. Rocky found this eventuality almost too painful to contemplate, and Leo didn't care. It was not his car. Also, he had drunk enough Iron City beer to reach a state of deep cerebral paralysis.

Devon Road wound through the only heavily wooded area of Crescent. Great bunches of elms and oaks crowded in on both sides, lush and alive and full of moving shadows as night began to close over southwestern Pennsylvania. The area was known, in fact, as The Devon Woods. It had attained capital-letter status after the torture-murder of a young girl and her boyfriend in 1968. The couple had been parking out here and were found in the boyfriend's 1959 Mercury. The Merc had real leather seats and a large chrome hood ornament. The occupants had been found in the back seat. Also in the front seat, the trunk, and the glove compartment. The killer had never been found.

"Jughumper better not stall out here," Rocky said. "We're ninety miles from noplac."

"Bunk." This interesting word had risen lately to the top forty of Leo's vocabulary. "There's town, right over there."

Rocky sighed and sipped from his can of beer. The glow was not really town, but the kid was close enough to make argument worthless. It was the new shopping center. Those high-intensity arc sodium lights really threw a glare. While looking in that direction, Rocky drove the car over to the left side of the road, looped back, almost went into the right-hand ditch, and finally got back in his lane again.

"Whoops," he said.

Leo burped and gurgled.

They had been working together at the New Adams Laundry since September, when Leo had been hired as Rocky's washroom helper. Leo was a rodent-featured young man of twenty-two who looked as if he might have quite a lot of jail-time in his future. He claimed he was saving twenty dollars a week from his pay to buy a used Kawasaki motorcycle. He said he was going west on this bike when cold weather came. Leo had held a grand total of twelve jobs since he and the world of academics had parted company at the minimum age of sixteen. He liked the laundry fine. Rocky was teaching him the various wash cycles, and Leo believed he was finally Learning a Skill which would come in handy when he reached Flagstaff.

Rocky, an older hand, had been at New Adams for fourteen years. His hands, ghostlike and bleached as he handled the steering wheel, proved it. He had done a four-month bit for carrying a concealed weapon in 1970. His wife, then puffily pregnant with their third child, announced 1) that it was not his, Rocky's, child but the milkman's child; and 2) that she wanted a divorce, on grounds of mental cruelty.

Two things about this situation had driven Rocky to carry a concealed weapon: 1) he had been cuckolded; and 2) he had been cuckolded by the fa chrissakes *milkman*, a trout-eyed long-haired piece of work named Spike Milligan. Spike drove for Cramer's Dairy.

The milkman, for God's sweet sake! The *milkman*, and could you die? Could you just fucking flop down into the gutter and *die*? Even to Rocky, who had never progressed much beyond reading the Fleeer's Funnies that came wrapped around the bubble gum he chewed indefatigably at work, the situation had sonorous classical overtones.

As a result, he had duly informed his wife of two facts: 1) no divorce; and 2) he was going to let a large amount of daylight into Spike Milligan. He had purchased a .32-caliber pistol some ten years ago, which he used occasionally to shoot at bottles, tin cans, and small dogs. He left his house on Oak Street that morning and headed for the dairy, hoping to catch Spike when he finished his morning deliveries.

Rocky stopped at the Four Corners Tavern on the way to have a few beers—six, eight, maybe twenty. It was hard to remember. While

he was drinking, his wife called the cops. They were waiting for him on the corner of Oak and Balfour. Rocky was searched, and one of the cops plucked the .32 from his waistband.

“I think you are going away for a while, my friend,” the cop who found the gun told him, and that was just what Rocky did. He spent the next four months washing sheets and pillowcases for the State of Pennsylvania. During this period his wife got a Nevada divorce, and when Rocky got out of the slam she was living with Spike Milligan in a Dakin Street apartment house with a pink flamingo on the front lawn. In addition to his two older children (Rocky still more or less assumed they were his), the couple were now possessed of an infant who was every bit as trout-eyed as his daddy. They were also possessed of fifteen dollars a week in alimony.

“Rocky, I think I’m gettin carsick,” Leo said. “Couldn’t we just pull over and drink?”

“I gotta get a sticker on my wheels,” Rocky said. “This is important. A man’s no good without his wheels.”

“Nobody in his right mind is gonna inspect this—I told you that. It ain’t got no turn signals.”

“They blink if I step on the brake at the same time, and anybody who don’t step on his brakes when he’s makin a turn is lookin to do a rollover.”

“Window on this side’s cracked.”

“I’ll roll it down.”

“What if the inspectionist asks you to roll it up so he can check it?”

“I’ll burn that bridge when I come to it,” Rocky said coolly. He tossed his beer can out and got a refill. This new one had Franco Harris on it. Apparently the Iron City company was playing the Steelers’ Greatest Hits this summer. He popped the top. Beer splurged.

“Wish I had a woman,” Leo said, looking into the dark. He smiled strangely.

“If you had a woman, you’d never get out west. What a woman does is keep a man from getting any further west. That’s how they operate. That is their mission. Dint you tell me you wanted to go out west?”

“Yeah, and I’m going, too.”

“You’ll *never* go,” Rocky said. “Pretty soon you’ll have a woman. Next you’ll have abalone. *Alimony*. You know. Women always lead up to alimony. Cars are better. Stick to cars.”

“Pretty hard to screw a car.”

“You’d be surprised,” Rocky said, and giggled.

The woods had begun to straggle away into new dwellings. Lights twinkled up on the left and Rocky suddenly slammed on the brakes. The brake lights and turn signals both went on at once; it was a home wiring job. Leo lurched forward, spilling beer on the seat. “What? What?”

“Look,” Rocky said. “I think I know that fella.”

There was a tumorous, ramshackle garage and Citgo filling station on the left side of the road. The sign in front said:

BOB’S GAS & SERVICE  
BOB DRISCOLL, PROP.  
FRONT END ALIGNMENT OUR SPECIALTY  
DEFEND YOUR GOD-GIVEN RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS!

And, at the very bottom:

STATE INSPECTION STATION #72

“Nobody in his right mind—” Leo began again.

“It’s Bobby Driscoll!” Rocky cried. “Me an Bobby Driscoll went to school together! We got it knocked! Bet your fur!”

He pulled in unevenly, headlights illuminating the open door of the garage bay. He popped the clutch and roared toward it. A stoop-shouldered man in a green coverall ran out, making frantic stopping gestures.

“Thass Bob!” Rocky yelled exultantly. “*Heyyy, Stiff Socks!*”

They ran into the side of the garage. The Chrysler had another seizure, *grand mal* this time. A small yellow flame appeared at the end of the sagging tailpipe, followed by a puff of blue smoke. The car stalled gratefully. Leo lurched forward, spilling more beer. Rocky keyed the engine and backed off for another try.

Bob Driscoll ran over, profanity spilling out of his mouth in colorful streamers. He was waving his arms. “—*the hell you think you’re doing, you goddam sonofa—*”

“Bobby!” Rocky yelled, his delight nearly orgasmic. “Hey Stiff Socks! Whatchoo say, buddy?”

Bob peered in through Rocky’s window. He had a twisted, tired face that was mostly hidden in the shadow thrown by the bill of his cap. “Who called me Stiff Socks?”

“*Me!*” Rocky fairly screamed. “It’s *me*, you ole finger-diddler! It’s your old buddy!”

“Who in the hell—”

“Johnny Rockwell! You gone blind as well as foolish?”

Cautiously: “Rocky?”

“Yeah, you sombitch!”

“Christ Jesus.” Slow, unwilling pleasure seeped across Bob’s face. “I ain’t seen you since . . . well . . . since the Catamounts game, anyway—”

“Shoosh! Wa’n’t that some hot ticket?” Rocky slapped his thigh, sending up a gusher of Iron City. Leo burped.

“Sure it was. Only time we ever won our class. Even then we couldn’t seem to win the championship. Say, you beat hell out of the side of my garage, Rocky. You—”

“Yeah, same ole Stiff Socks. Same old guy. You ain’t changed even a hair.” Rocky belatedly peeked as far under the visor of the baseball cap as he could see, hoping this was true. It appeared, however, that ole Stiff Socks had gone either partially or completely bald. “Jesus! Ain’t it somethin, runnin into you like this! Did you finally marry Marcy Drew?”

“Hell, yeah. Back in ’70. Where were you?”

“Jail, most probably. Lissen, muhfuh, can you inspect this baby?”

Caution again: “You mean your car?”

Rocky cackled. “No—my ole hogleg! *Sure*, my car! Canya?”

Bob opened his mouth to say no.

“This here’s an old friend of mine. Leo Edwards. Leo, wantcha to meet the only basketball player from Crescent High who dint change his sweatsocks for four years.”

“Pleesdameetcha,” Leo said, doing his duty just as his mother had instructed on one of the occasions when that lady was sober.

Rocky cackled. “Want a beer, Stiffy?”

Bob opened his mouth to say no.

“*Here’s* the little crab-catcher!” Rocky exclaimed. He popped the top. The beer, crazied up by the headlong run into the side of Bob Driscoll’s garage, boiled over the top and down Rocky’s wrist. Rocky shoved it into Bob’s hand. Bob sipped quickly, to keep his own hand from being flooded.

“Rocky, we close at—”

“Just a second, just a second, lemme back up. I got somethin crazy here.”

Rocky dragged the gearshift lever up into reverse, popped the clutch, skinned a gas pump, and then drove the Chrysler jerkily inside. He was out in a minute, shaking Bob’s free hand like a politician. Bob looked dazed. Leo sat in the car, tipping a fresh beer. He was also farting. A lot of beer always made him fart.

“Hey!” Rocky said, staggering around a pile of rusty hubcaps. “You member Diana Rucklehouse?”

“Sure do,” Bob said. An unwilling grin came to his mouth. “She was the one with the—” He cupped his hands in front of his chest.

Rocky howled. “Thass *her!* You *got* it, muhfuh! She still in town?”

“I think she moved to—”

“Figures,” Rocky said. “The ones who don’t stay always move. You can put a sticker on this pig, cantcha?”

“Well, my wife said she’d wait supper and we close at—”

“Jesus, it’d sure put a help on me if you could. I’d sure preciate it. I could do some personal laundry for your wife. Thass what I do. Wash. At New Adams.”

“And I am learning,” Leo said, and farted again.

“Wash her dainties, whatever you want. Whatchoo say, Bobby?”

“Well, I s’pose I could look her over.”

“Sure,” Rocky said, clapping Bob on the back and winking at Leo. “Same ole Stiff Socks. What a guy!”

“Yeah,” Bob said, sighing. He pulled on his beer, his oily fingers mostly obscuring Mean Joe Green’s face. “You beat hell out of your

bumper, Rocky.”

“Give it some class. Goddam car *needs* some class. But it’s one big motherfuckin set of wheels, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I guess—”

“Hey! Wantcha to meet the guy I work with! Leo, this is the only basketball player from—”

“You introduced us already,” Bob said with a soft, despairing smile.

“Howdy doody,” Leo said. He fumbled for another can of Iron City. Silvery lines like railroad tracks glimpsed at high noon on a hot clear day were beginning to trace their way across his field of vision.

“—Crescent High who dint change his—”

“Want to show me your headlights, Rocky?” Bob asked.

“Sure. Great lights. Halogen or nitrogen or some fucking gen. They got class. Pop those little crab-catchers right the fuck on, Leo.”

Leo turned on the windshield wipers.

“That’s good,” Bob said patiently. He took a big swallow of beer.

“Now how about the lights?”

Leo popped on the headlights.

“High beam?”

Leo tapped for the dimmer switch with his left foot. He was pretty sure it was down there someplace, and finally he happened upon it. The high beams threw Rocky and Bob into sharp relief, like exhibits in a police lineup.

“Fucking nitrogen headlights, what’d I tell you?” Rocky cried, and then cackled. “Goddam, Bobby! Seein you is better than gettin a check in the mail!”

“How about the turn signals?” Bob asked.

Leo smiled vaguely at Bob and did nothing.

“Better let me do it,” Rocky said. He bumped his head a good one as he got in behind the wheel. “The kid don’t feel too good, I don’t think.” He cramped down on the brake at the same time he flicked up the turn-blinker.

“Okay,” Bob said, “but does it work without the brake?”

“Does it say anyplace in the motor-vehicle-inspection manual that it *hasta*?” Rocky asked craftily.

Bob sighed. His wife was waiting dinner. His wife had large floppy breasts and blond hair that was black at the roots. His wife was partial to Donuts by the Dozen, a product sold at the local Giant Eagle store. When his wife came to the garage on Thursday nights for her bingo money her hair was usually done up in large green rollers under a green chiffon scarf. This made her head look like a futuristic AM/FM radio. Once, near three in the morning, he had wakened and looked at her slack paper face in the soulless graveyard glare of the streetlight outside their bedroom window. He had thought how easy it could be—just jackknife over on top of her, just drive a knee into her gut so she would lose her air and be unable to scream, just screw both hands around her neck. Then just put her in the tub and whack her into prime cuts and mail her away someplace to Robert Driscoll, c/o General Delivery. Any old place. Lima, Indiana. North Pole, New Hampshire. Intercourse, Pennsylvania. Kunkle, Iowa. Any old place. It could be done. God knew it had been done in the past.

“No,” he told Rocky, “I guess it doesn’t say anyplace in the regs that they have to work on their own. Exactly. In so many words.” He upended the can and the rest of the beer gurgled down his throat. It was warm in the garage and he had had no supper. He could feel the beer rise immediately into his mind.

“Hey, Stiff Socks just came up empty!” Rocky said. “Hand up a brew, Leo.”

“No, Rocky, I really . . .”

Leo, who was seeing none too well, finally happened on a can. “Want a wide receiver?” he asked, and passed the can to Rocky. Rocky handed it to Bob, whose demurrals petered out as he held the can’s cold actuality in his hand. It bore the smiling face of Lynn Swann. He opened it. Leo farted homily to close the transaction.

All of them drank from football-player cans for a moment.

“Horn work?” Bob finally asked, breaking the silence apologetically.

“Sure.” Rocky hit the ring with his elbow. It emitted a feeble squeak. “Battery’s a little low, though.”

They drank in silence.

“That goddam rat was as big as a cocker spaniel!” Leo exclaimed.

“Kid’s carrying quite a load,” Rocky explained.

Bob thought about it. “Yuh,” he said.

This struck Rocky’s funnybone and he cackled through a mouthful of beer. A little trickled out of his nose, and this made Bob laugh. It did Rocky good to hear him, because Bob had looked like one sad sack when they had rolled in.

They drank in silence awhile more.

“Diana Rucklehouse,” Bob said meditatively.

Rocky sniggered.

Bob chuckled and held his hands out in front of his chest.

Rocky laughed and held his own out even further.

Bob guffawed. “You member that picture of Ursula Andress that Tinker Johnson pasted on ole lady Freemantle’s bulletin board?”

Rocky howled. “And he drew on those two big old jahoobies—”

“—and she just about had a heart-attack—”

“You two can laugh,” Leo said morosely, and farted.

Bob blinked at him. “Huh?”

“Laugh,” Leo said. “I said *you* two can *laugh*. Neither of you has got a *hole* in your back.”

“Don’t lissen to him,” Rocky said (a trifle uneasily). “Kid’s got a skinful.”

“You got a hole in your back?” Bob asked Leo.

“The laundry,” Leo said, smiling. “We got these big washers, see? Only we call ‘em wheels. They’re laundry wheels. That’s *why* we call ‘em wheels. I load ‘em, I pull ‘em, I load ‘em again. Put the shit in dirty, take the shit out clean. That’s what I do, and I do it with class.” He looked at Bob with insane confidence. “Got a hole in my back from doing it, though.”

“Yeah?” Bob was looking at Leo with fascination. Rocky shifted uneasily.

“There’s a hole in the *roof*,” Leo said. “Right over the third wheel. They’re round, see, so we call ‘em wheels. When it rains, the water comes down. Drop drop drop. Each drop hits me—whap!—in the back. Now I got a hole there. Like this.” He made a shallow curve with one hand. “Wanna see?”

“He don’t want to see any such *deformity!*” Rocky shouted. “We’re talkin about old times here and there ain’t no effing hole in your back *anyway!*”

“I wanna see it,” Bob said.

“They’re round so we call it the laundry,” Leo said.

Rocky smiled and clapped Leo on the shoulder. “No more of this talk or you could be walking home, my good little buddy. Now why don’t you hand me up my namesake if there’s one left?”

Leo peered down into the carton of beer, and after a while he handed up a can with Rocky Blier on it.

“Atta way to go!” Rocky said, cheerful again.

The entire case was gone an hour later, and Rocky sent Leo stumbling up the road to Pauline’s Superette for more. Leo’s eyes were ferret-red by this time, and his shirt had come untucked. He was trying with myopic concentration to get his Camels out of his rolled-up shirt sleeve. Bob was in the bathroom, urinating and singing the school song.

“Doan wanna walk up there,” Leo muttered.

“Yeah, but you’re too fucking drunk to drive.”

Leo walked in a drunken semicircle, still trying to coax his cigarettes out of his shirt sleeve. “ ’Z dark. And cold.”

“You wanna get a sticker on that car or not?” Rocky hissed at him. He had begun to see weird things at the edges of his vision. The most persistent was a huge bug wrapped in spider-silk in the far corner.

Leo looked at him with his scarlet eyes. “Ain’t my car,” he said with bogus cunning.

“And you’ll never ride in it again, neither, if you don’t go and get that beer,” Rocky said. He glanced fearfully at the dead bug in the corner. “You just try me and see if I’m kidding.”

“Okay,” Leo whined. “Okay, you don’t have to get pissy about it.”

He walked off the road twice on his way up to the corner and once on the way back. When he finally achieved the warmth and light of the garage again, both of them were singing the school song. Bob

had managed, by hook or by crook, to get the Chrysler up on the lift. He was wandering around underneath it, peering at the rusty exhaust system.

“There’s some holes in your stray’ pipe,” he said.

“Ain no stray pipes under there,” Rocky said. They both found this spit-sprayingly funny.

“Beer’s here!” Leo announced, put the case down, sat on a wheel rim, and fell immediately into a half-doze. He had swallowed three himself on the way back to lighten the load.

Rocky handed Bob a beer and held one himself.

“Race? Just like ole times?”

“Sure,” Bob said. He smiled tightly. In his mind’s eye he could see himself in the cockpit of a low-to-the-ground, streamlined Formula One racer, one hand resting cockily on the wheel as he waited for the drop of the flag, the other touching his lucky piece—the hood ornament from a ’59 Mercury. He had forgotten Rocky’s straight pipe and his blowsy wife with her transistorized hair curlers.

They opened their beers and chugged them. It was a dead heat; both dropped their cans to the cracked concrete and raised their middle fingers at the same time. Their belches echoed off the walls like rifle shots.

“Just like ole times,” Bob said, sounding forlorn. “*Nothing’s* just like ole times, Rocky.”

“I know it,” Rocky agreed. He struggled for a deep, luminous thought and found it. “We’re gettin older by the day, Stiffy.”

Bob sighed and belched again. Leo farted in the corner and began to hum “Get Off My Cloud.”

“Try again?” Rocky asked, handing Bob another beer.

“Mi’ as well,” Bob said; “mi’ jus’ as well, Rocky m’boy”.

The case Leo had brought back was gone by midnight, and the new inspection was affixed on the left side of Rocky’s windshield at a slightly crazy angle. Rocky had made out the pertinent information himself before slapping the sticker on, working carefully to copy over the numbers from the tattered and greasy registration he had finally

found in the glove compartment. He *had* to work carefully, because he was seeing triple. Bob sat cross-legged on the floor like a yoga master, a half-empty can of I.C. in front of him. He was staring fixedly at nothing.

“Well, you sure saved my life, Bob,” Rocky said. He kicked Leo in the ribs to wake him up. Leo grunted and whoofed. His lids flickered briefly, closed, then flew open wide when Rocky footed him again.

“We home yet, Rocky? We—”

“You just shake her easy, Bobby,” Rocky cried cheerfully. He hooked his fingers into Leo’s armpit and yanked. Leo came to his feet, screaming. Rocky half-carried him around the Chrysler and shoved him into the passenger seat. “We’ll stop back and do her again sometime.”

“Those were the days,” Bob said. He had grown wet-eyed. “Since then everything just gets worse and worse, you know it?”

“I know it,” Rocky said. “Everything has been refitted and beshitted. But you just keep your thumb on it, and don’t do anything I wouldn’t d—”

“My wife ain’t laid me in a year and a half,” Bob said, but the words were blanketed by the coughing misfire of Rocky’s engine. Bob got to his feet and watched the Chrysler back out of the bay, taking a little wood from the left side of the door.

Leo hung out the window, smiling like an idiot saint. “Come by the laundry sometime, skinner. I’ll show you the hole in my back. I’ll show you my wheels! I’ll show y—” Rocky’s arm suddenly shot out like a vaudeville hook and pulled him into the dimness.

“Bye, fella!” Rocky yelled.

The Chrysler did a drunken slalom around the three gaspump islands and bucketed off into the night. Bob watched until the taillights were only flickerflies and then walked carefully back inside the garage. On his cluttered workbench was a chrome ornament from some old car. He began to play with it, and soon he was crying cheap tears for the old days. Later, some time after three in the morning, he strangled his wife and then burned down the house to make it look like an accident.

“Jesus,” Rocky said to Leo as Bob’s garage shrank to a point of white light behind them. “How about that? Ole Stiffy.” Rocky had reached that stage of drunkenness where every part of himself seemed gone except for a tiny, glowing coal of sobriety somewhere deep in the middle of his mind.

Leo did not reply. In the pale green light thrown by the dashboard instruments, he looked like the dormouse at Alice’s tea party.

“He was really bombarded,” Rocky went on. He drove on the left side of the road for a while and then the Chrysler wandered back. “Good thing for you—he prob’ly won’t remember what you tole him. Another time it could be different. How many times do I have to tell you? You got to shut up about this idea that you got a fucking hole in your back.”

“You *know* I got a hole in my back.”

“Well, so what?”

“It’s *my* hole, that’s so what. And I’ll talk about *my* hole whenever I \_\_\_”

He looked around suddenly.

“Truck behind us. Just pulled out of that side road. No lights.”

Rocky looked up into the rearview mirror. Yes, the truck was there, and its shape was distinctive. It was a milk truck. He didn’t have to read CRAMER’S DAIRY on the side to know whose it was, either.

“It’s Spike,” Rocky said fearfully. “It’s Spike Milligan! Jesus, I thought he only made *morning* deliveries!”

“Who?”

Rocky didn’t answer. A tight, drunk grin spread over his lower face. It did not touch his eyes, which were now huge and red, like spirit lamps.

He suddenly floored the Chrysler, which belched blue oil smoke and reluctantly creaked its way up to sixty.

“Hey! You’re too drunk to go this fast! You’re . . .” Leo paused vaguely, seeming to lose track of his message. The trees and houses raced by them, vague blurs in the graveyard of twelve-fifteen. They blew by a stop sign and flew over a large bump, leaving

the road for a moment afterwards. When they came down, the low-hung muffler struck a spark on the asphalt. In the back, cans clinked and rattled. The faces of Pittsburgh Steeler players rolled back and forth, sometimes in the light, sometimes in shadow.

“I was *fooling!*” Leo said wildly. “There ain’t no truck!”

“It’s him and he kills people!” Rocky screamed. “I seen his bug back in the garage! God *damn!*”

They roared up Southern Hill on the wrong side of the road. A station wagon coming in the other direction skidded crazily over the gravel shoulder and down into the ditch getting out of their way. Leo looked behind him. The road was empty.

“Rocky—”

“*Come and get me, Spike!*” Rocky screamed. “*You just come on and get me!*”

The Chrysler had reached eighty, a speed which Rocky in a more sober frame of mind would not have believed possible. They came around the turn which leads onto the Johnson Flat Road, smoke spurting up from Rocky’s bald tires. The Chrysler screamed into the night like a ghost, lights searching the empty road ahead.

Suddenly a 1959 Mercury roared at them out of the dark, straddling the center line. Rocky screamed and threw his hands up in front of his face. Leo had just time to see the Mercury was missing its hood ornament before the crash came.

Half a mile behind, lights flickered on at a side crossing, and a milk truck with CRAMER’S DAIRY written on the side pulled out and began to move toward the pillar of flame and the twisted blackening hulks in the center of the road. It moved at a sedate speed. The transistor dangling by its strap from the meathook played rhythm and blues.

“That’s it,” Spike said. “Now we’re going over to Bob Driscoll’s house. He thinks he’s got gasoline out in his garage, but I’m not sure he does. This has been one very long day, wouldn’t you agree?” But when he turned around, the back of the truck was empty. Even the bug was gone.

## Gramma

George's mother went to the door, hesitated there, came back, and tousled George's hair. "I don't want you to worry," she said. "You'll be all right. Gramma, too."

"Sure, I'll be okay. Tell Buddy to lay chilly."

"Pardon me?"

George smiled. "To stay cool."

"Oh. Very funny." She smiled back at him, a distracted, going-in-six-directions-at-once smile. "George, are you sure—"

"I'll be *fine*."

*Are you sure what? Are you sure you're not scared to be alone with Gramma? Was that what she was going to ask?*

If it was, the answer is no. After all, it wasn't like he was six anymore, when they had first come here to Maine to take care of Gramma, and he had cried with terror whenever Gramma held out her heavy arms toward him from her white vinyl chair that always smelled of the poached eggs she ate and the sweet bland powder George's mom rubbed into her flabby, wrinkled skin; she held out her white-elephant arms, wanting him to come to her and be hugged to that huge and heavy old white-elephant body: Buddy had gone to her, had been enfolded in Gramma's blind embrace, and Buddy had come out alive . . . but Buddy was two years older.

Now Buddy had broken his leg and was at the CMG Hospital in Lewiston.

"You've got the doctor's number if something *should* go wrong. Which it won't. Right?"

"Sure," he said, and swallowed something dry in his throat. He smiled. Did the smile look okay? Sure. Sure it did. He wasn't scared of Gramma anymore. After all, he wasn't six anymore. Mom was going up to the hospital to see Buddy and he was just going to stay here and lay chilly. Hang out with Gramma awhile. No problem.

Mom went to the door again, hesitated again, and came back again, smiling that distracted, going-six-ways-at-once smile. “If she wakes up and calls for her tea—”

“I know,” George said, seeing how scared and worried she was underneath that distracted smile. She was worried about Buddy, Buddy and his dumb *Pony League*, the coach had called and said Buddy had been hurt in a play at the plate, and the first George had known of it (he was just home from school and sitting at the table eating some cookies and having a glass of Nestlé’s Quik) was when his mother gave a funny little gasp and said, *Hurt? Buddy? How bad?*

“I know *all* that stuff, Mom. I got it knocked. Negative perspiration. Go on, now.”

“You’re a good boy, George. Don’t be scared. You’re not scared of Gramma anymore, are you?”

“Huh-uh,” George said. He smiled. The smile felt pretty good; the smile of a fellow who was laying chilly with negative perspiration on his brow, the smile of a fellow who Had It Knocked, the smile of a fellow who was most definitely not six anymore. He swallowed. It was a great smile, but beyond it, down in the darkness behind his smile, was one very dry throat. It felt as if his throat was lined with mitten-wool. “Tell Buddy I’m sorry he broke his leg.”

“I will,” she said, and went to the door again. Four o’clock sunshine slanted in through the window. “Thank God we took the sports insurance, Georgie. I don’t know what we’d do if we didn’t have it.”

“Tell him I hope he tagged the sucker out.”

She smiled her distracted smile, a woman of just past fifty with two late sons, one thirteen, one eleven, and no man. This time she opened the door, and a cool whisper of October came in through the sheds.

“And remember, Dr. Arlinder—”

“Sure,” he said. “You better go or his leg’ll be fixed by the time you get there.”

“She’ll probably sleep the whole time,” Mom said. “I love you, Georgie. You’re a good son.” She closed the door on that.

George went to the window and watched her hurry to the old '69 Dodge that burned too much gas and oil, digging the keys from her purse. Now that she was out of the house and didn't know George was looking at her, the distracted smile fell away and she only looked distracted—distracted and sick with worry about Buddy. George felt bad for her. He didn't waste any similar feelings on Buddy, who liked to get him down and sit on top of him with a knee on each of George's shoulders and tap a spoon in the middle of George's forehead until he just about went crazy (Buddy called it the Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chinee and laughed like a madman and sometimes went on doing it until George cried), Buddy who sometimes gave him the Indian Rope Burn so hard that little drops of blood would appear on George's forearm, sitting on top of the pores like dew on blades of grass at dawn, Buddy who had listened so sympathetically when George had one night whispered in the dark of their bedroom that he liked Heather MacArdle and who the next morning ran across the schoolyard screaming *GEORGE AND HEATHER UP IN A TREE, KAY-EYE-ESS-ESS-EYE-EN-GEE! FIRSE COMES LOVE AN THEN COMES MARRITCH! HERE COMES HEATHER WITH A BABY CARRITCH!* like a runaway fire engine. Broken legs did not keep older brothers like Buddy down for long, but George was rather looking forward to the quiet as long as this one did. *Let's see you give me the Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chinee with your leg in a cast, Buddy. Sure, kid—EVERY day.*

The Dodge backed out of the driveway and paused while his mother looked both ways, although nothing would be coming; nothing ever was. His mother would have a two-mile ride over washboards and ruts before she even got to tar, and it was nineteen miles to Lewiston after that.

She backed all the way out and drove away. For a moment dust hung in the bright October afternoon air, and then it began to settle.

He was alone in the house.

With Gramma.

He swallowed.

*Hey! Negative perspiration! Just lay chilly, right?*

“Right,” George said in a low voice, and walked across the small, sunwashed kitchen. He was a towheaded, good-looking boy with a spray of freckles across his nose and cheeks and a look of good humor in his darkish gray eyes.

Buddy’s accident had occurred while he had been playing in the Pony League championship game this October 5th. George’s Pee Wee League team, the Tigers, had been knocked out of their tournament on the first day, two Saturdays ago (*What a bunch of babies!* Buddy had exulted as George walked tearfully off the field. *What a bunch of PUSSIES!*) . . . and now Buddy had broken his leg. If Mom wasn’t so worried and scared, George would have been almost happy.

There was a phone on the wall, and next to it was a note-minder board with a grease pencil hanging beside it. In the upper corner of the board was a cheerful country Gramma, her cheeks rosy, her white hair done up in a bun; a cartoon Gramma who was pointing at the board. There was a comic-strip balloon coming out of the cheerful country Gramma’s mouth and she was saying, “REMEMBER *THIS*, SONNY!” Written on the board in his mother’s sprawling hand was Dr. *Arlinder*, 681-4330. Mom hadn’t written the number there just today, because she had to go to Buddy; it had been there almost three weeks now, because Gramma was having her “bad spells” again.

George picked up the phone and listened.

“—so I told her, I said, ‘Mabel, if he treats you like that—’ ”

He put it down again. Henrietta Dodd. Henrietta was always on the phone, and if it was in the afternoon you could always hear the soap opera stories going on in the background. One night after she had a glass of wine with Gramma (since she started having the “bad spells” again, Dr. *Arlinder* said Gramma couldn’t have the wine with her supper, so Mom didn’t either—George was sorry, because the wine made Mom sort of giggly and she would tell stories about her girlhood), Mom had said that every time Henrietta Dodd opened her mouth, all her guts fell out. Buddy and George laughed wildly, and Mom put a hand to her mouth and said *Don’t you EVER tell anyone I said that*, and then *she* began to laugh too, all three of them sitting at

the supper table laughing, and at last the racket had awakened Gramma, who slept more and more, and she began to cry *Ruth! Ruth! ROO-OOOTH!* in that high, querulous voice of hers, and Mom had stopped laughing and went into her room.

Today Henrietta Dodd could talk all she wanted, as far as George was concerned. He just wanted to make sure the phone was working. Two weeks ago there had been a bad storm, and since then it went out sometimes.

He found himself looking at the cheery cartoon Gramma again, and wondered what it would be like to have a Gramma like that. *His* Gramma was huge and fat and blind; the hypertension had made her senile as well. Sometimes, when she had her “bad spells,” she would (as Mom put it) “act out the Tartar,” calling for people who weren’t there, holding conversations with total emptiness, mumbling strange words that made no sense. On one occasion when she was doing this last, Mom had turned white and had gone in and told her to shut up, shut up, *shut up!* George remembered that occasion very well, not only because it was the only time Mom had ever actually *yelled* at Gramma, but because it was the next day that someone discovered that the Birches cemetery out on the Maple Sugar Road had been vandalized—gravestones knocked over, the old nineteenth-century gates pulled down, and one or two of the graves actually dug up—or something. *Desecrated* was the word Mr. Burdon, the principal, had used the next day when he convened all eight grades for Assembly and lectured the whole school on Malicious Mischief and how some things Just Weren’t Funny. Going home that night, George had asked Buddy what *desecrated* meant, and Buddy said it meant digging up graves and pissing on the coffins, but George didn’t believe that . . . unless it was late. And dark.

Gramma was noisy when she had her “bad spells,” but mostly she just lay in the bed she had taken to three years before, a fat slug wearing rubber pants and diapers under her flannel nightgown, her face runneled with cracks and wrinkles, her eyes empty and Mind—faded blue irises floating atop yellowed corneas.

At first Gramma hadn't been totally blind. But she had been *going* blind, and she had to have a person at each elbow to help her totter from her white vinyl egg-and-baby-powder-smelling chair to her bed or the bathroom. In those days, five years ago, Gramma had weighed well over two hundred pounds.

She had held out her arms and Buddy, then eight, had gone to her. George had hung back. And cried.

*But I'm not scared now*, he told himself, moving across the kitchen in his Keds. *Not a bit. She's just an old lady who has "bad spells" sometimes.*

He filled the teakettle with water and put it on a cold burner. He got a teacup and put one of Gramma's special herb tea bags into it. In case she should wake up and want a cup. He hoped like mad that she wouldn't, because then he would have to crank up the hospital bed and sit next to her and give her the tea a sip at a time, watching the toothless mouth fold itself over the rim of the cup, and listen to the slurping sounds as she took the tea into her dank, dying guts. Sometimes she slipped sideways on the bed and you had to pull her back over and her flesh was *soft*, kind of *jiggly*, as if it was filled with hot water, and her blind eyes would look at you . . .

George licked his lips and walked toward the kitchen table again. His last cookie and half a glass of Quik still stood there, but he didn't want them anymore. He looked at his schoolbooks, covered with Castle Rock Cougars bookcovers, without enthusiasm.

He ought to go in and check on her.

He didn't want to.

He swallowed and his throat still felt as if it was lined with mittenwool.

*I'm not afraid of Gramma, he thought. If she held out her arms I'd go right to her and let her hug me because she's just an old lady. She's senile and that's why she has "bad spells." That's all. Let her hug me and not cry. Just like Buddy.*

He crossed the short entryway to Gramma's room, face set as if for bad medicine, lips pressed together so tightly they were white. He looked in, and there lay Gramma, her yellow-white hair spread around her in a corona, sleeping, her toothless mouth hung open,

chest rising under the coverlet so slowly you almost couldn't see it, so slowly that you had to look at her for a while just to make sure she wasn't dead.

*Oh God, what if she dies on me while Mom's up to the hospital?*

*She won't. She won't.*

*Yeah, but what if she does?*

*She won't, so stop being a pussy.*

One of Gramma's yellow, melted-looking hands moved slowly on the coverlet: her long nails dragged across the sheet and made a minute scratching sound. George drew back quickly, his heart pounding.

*Cool as a moose, numbhead, see? Laying chilly.*

He went back into the kitchen to see if his mother had been gone only an hour, or perhaps an hour and a half—if the latter, he could start reasonably waiting for her to come back. He looked at the clock and was astounded to see that not even twenty minutes had passed. Mom wouldn't even be *into* the city yet, let alone on her way back out of it! He stood still, listening to the silence. Faintly, he could hear the hum of the refrigerator and the electric clock. The snuffle of the afternoon breeze around the corners of the little house. And then—at the very edge of audibility—the faint, rasping susurrus of skin over cloth . . . Gramma's wrinkled, tallowy hand moving on the coverlet.

He prayed in a single gust of mental breath:

*Please God don't let her wake up until Mom comes home for Jesus' - sake Amen.*

He sat down and finished his cookie, drank his Quik. He thought of turning on the TV and watching something, but he was afraid the sound would wake up Gramma and that high, querulous, not-to-be-denied voice would begin calling *Roo-OOTH! RUTH! BRING ME M'TEA! TEA! ROOO-OOOOOTH!*

He slicked his dry tongue over his drier lips and told himself not to be such a pussy. She was an old lady stuck in bed, it wasn't as if she could get up and hurt him, and she was eighty-three years old, she wasn't going to die this afternoon.

George walked over and picked up the phone again.

“—that same day! And she even *knew* he was married! Gorry, I hate these cheap little corner-walkers that think they’re so smart! So at Grange I said—”

George guessed that Henrietta was on the phone with Cora Simard. Henrietta hung on the phone most afternoons from one until six with first *Ryan’s Hope* and then *One Life to Live* and then *All My Children* and then *As the World Turns* and then *Search for Tomorrow* and then God knew what other ones playing in the background, and Cora Simard was one of her most faithful telephone correspondents, and a lot of what they talked about was 1) who was going to be having a Tupperware party or an Amway party and what the refreshments were apt to be, 2) cheap little corner-walkers, and 3) what they had said to various people at 3-a) the Grange, 3-b) the monthly church fair, or 3-c) K of P Hall Beano.

“—that if I ever saw her up that way again, I guess I could be a good citizen and call—”

He put the phone back in its cradle. He and Buddy made fun of Cora when they went past her house just like all the other kids—she was fat and sloppy and gossipy and they would chant, *Cora-Cora from Bora-Bora, ate a dog turd and wanted more-a!* and Mom would have killed them *both* if she had known that, but now George was glad she and Henrietta Dodd were on the phone. They could talk all afternoon, for all George cared. He didn’t mind Cora, anyway. Once he had fallen down in front of her house and scraped his knee—Buddy had been chasing him—and Cora had put a Band-Aid on the scrape and gave them each a cookie, talking all the time. George had felt ashamed for all the times he had said the rhyme about the dog turd and the rest of it.

George crossed to the sideboard and took down his reading book. He held it for a moment, then put it back. He had read all the stories in it already, although school had only been going a month. He read better than Buddy, although Buddy was better at sports. *Won’t be better for a while*, he thought with momentary good cheer, *not with a broken leg*.

He took down his history book, sat down at the kitchen table, and began to read about how Cornwallis had surrendered up his sword

at Yorktown. His thoughts wouldn't stay on it. He got up, went through the entryway again. The yellow hand was still. Gramma slept, her face a gray, sagging circle against the pillow, a dying sun surrounded by the wild yellowish-white corona of her hair. To George she didn't look anything like people who were old and getting ready to die were supposed to look. She didn't look peaceful, like a sunset. She looked crazy, and . . .

*(and dangerous)*

. . . yes, okay, and *dangerous*—like an ancient she-bear that might have one more good swipe left in her claws.

George remembered well enough how they had come to Castle Rock to take care of Gramma when Granpa died. Until then Mom had been working in the Stratford Laundry in Stratford, Connecticut. Granpa was three or four years younger than Gramma, a carpenter by trade, and he had worked right up until the day of his death. It had been a heart attack.

Even then Gramma had been getting senile, having her “bad spells.” She had always been a trial to her family, Gramma had. She was a volcanic woman who had taught school for fifteen years, between having babies and getting in fights with the Congregational Church she and Granpa and their nine children went to. Mom said that Granpa and Gramma quit the Congregational Church in Scarborough at the same time Gramma decided to quit teaching, but once, about a year ago, when Aunt Flo was up for a visit from her home in Salt Lake City, George and Buddy, listening at the register as Mom and her sister sat up late, talking, heard quite a different story. Granpa and Gramma had been kicked out of the church and Gramma had been fired off her job because she did something wrong. It was something about books. Why or how someone could get fired from their job and kicked out of the church just because of books, George didn't understand, and when he and Buddy crawled back into their twin beds under the eave, George asked.

*There's all kinds of books, Senior El-Stupido,* Buddy whispered.

*Yeah, but what kind?*

*How should I know? Go to sleep!*

Silence. George thought it through.

*Buddy?*

*What!* An irritated hiss.

*Why did Mom tell us Gramma quit the church and her job?*

*Because it's a skeleton in the closet, that's why! Now go to sleep!*

But he hadn't gone to sleep, not for a long time. His eyes kept straying to the closet door, dimly outlined in moonlight, and he kept wondering what he would do if the door swung open, revealing a skeleton inside, all grinning tombstone teeth and cistern eye sockets and parrot-cage ribs; white moonlight skating delirious and almost blue on whiter bone. Would he scream? What had Buddy meant, *a skeleton in the closet*? What did skeletons have to do with books? At last he had slipped into sleep without even knowing it and had dreamed he was six again, and Gramma was holding out her arms, her blind eyes searching for him; Gramma's reedy, querulous voice was saying, *Where's the little one, Ruth? Why's he crying? I only want to put him in the closet . . . with the skeleton.*

George had puzzled over these matters long and long, and finally, about a month after Aunt Flo had departed, he went to his mother and told her he had heard her and Aunt Flo talking. He knew what a skeleton in the closet meant by then, because he had asked Mrs. Redenbacher at school. She said it meant having a scandal in the family, and a scandal was something that made people talk a lot. *Like Cora Simard talks a lot?* George had asked Mrs. Redenbacher, and Mrs. Redenbacher's face had worked strangely and her lips had quivered and she had said, *That's not nice, George, but . . . yes, something like that.*

When he asked Mom, her face had gotten very still, and her hands had paused over the solitaire clockface of cards she had been laying out.

*Do you think that's a good thing for you to be doing, Georgie? Do you and your brother make a habit of eavesdropping over the register?*

George, then only nine, had hung his head.

*We like Aunt Flo, Mom. We wanted to listen to her a little longer.*

This was the truth.

*Was it Buddy's idea?*

It had been, but George wasn't going to tell her *that*. He didn't want to go walking around with his head on backwards, which might happen if Buddy found out he had tattled.

*No, mine.*

Mom had sat silent for a long time, and then she slowly began laying her cards out again. *Maybe it's time you did know*, she had said. *Lying's worse than eavesdropping, I guess, and we all lie to our children about Gramma. And we lie to ourselves too, I guess. Most of the time, we do.* And then she spoke with a sudden, vicious bitterness that was like acid squirting out between her front teeth—he felt that her words were so hot they would have burned his face if he hadn't recoiled. *Except for me. I have to live with her, and I can no longer afford the luxury of lies.*

So his Mom told him that after Granpa and Gramma had gotten married, they had had a baby that was born dead, and a year later they had another baby, and *that* was born dead too, and the doctor told Gramma she would never be able to carry a child to term and all she could do was keep on having babies that were dead or babies that died as soon as they sucked air. That would go on, he said, until one of them died inside her too long before her body could shove it out and it would rot in there and kill her, too.

The doctor told her that.

Not long after, the *books* began.

*Books about how to have babies?*

But Mom didn't—or wouldn't—say what kind of books they were, or where Gramma got them, or how she *knew* to get them. Gramma got pregnant again, and this time the baby wasn't born dead and the baby didn't die after a breath or two; this time the baby was fine, and that was George's Uncle Larson. And after that, Gramma kept getting pregnant and having babies. Once, Mom said, Granpa had tried to make her get rid of the books to see if they could do it without them (or even if they couldn't, maybe Granpa figured they had enough yowwens by then so it wouldn't matter) and Gramma wouldn't. George asked his mother why and she said: "I think that by then having the books was as important to her as having the babies."

"I don't get it," George said.

“Well,” George’s mother said, “I’m not sure I do, either . . . I was very small, remember. All I know for sure is that those books got a hold over her. She said there would be no more talk about it and there wasn’t, either. Because Gramma wore the pants in our family.”

George closed his history book with a snap. He looked at the clock and saw that it was nearly five o’clock. His stomach was grumbling softly. He realized suddenly, and with something very like horror, that if Mom wasn’t home by six or so, Gramma would wake up and start hollering for her supper. Mom had forgotten to give him instructions about that, probably because she was so upset about Buddy’s leg. He supposed he could make Gramma one of her special frozen dinners. They were special because Gramma was on a saltfree diet. She also had about a thousand different kinds of pills.

As for himself, he could heat up what was left of last night’s macaroni and cheese. If he poured a lot of catsup on it, it would be pretty good.

He got the macaroni and cheese out of the fridge, spooned it into a pan, and put the pan on the burner next to the teakettle, which was still waiting in case Gramma woke up and wanted what she sometimes called “a cuppa cheer.” George started to get himself a glass of milk, paused, and picked up the telephone again.

“—and I couldn’t even believe my eyes when . . .” Henrietta Dodd’s voice broke off and then rose shrilly: “Who keeps listening in on this line, I’d like to know!”

George put the phone back on the hook in a hurry, his face burning.

*She doesn’t know it’s you, stupe. There’s six parties on the line!*

All the same, it was wrong to eavesdrop, even if it was just to hear another voice when you were alone in the house, alone except for Gramma, the fat thing sleeping in the hospital bed in the other room; even when it seemed almost necessary to hear another human voice because your Mom was in Lewiston and it was going to be dark soon and Gramma was in the other room and Gramma looked like

*(yes oh yes she did)*

a she-bear that might have just one more murderous swipe left in her old clotted claws.

George went and got the milk.

Mom herself had been born in 1930, followed by Aunt Flo in 1932, and then Uncle Franklin in 1934. Uncle Franklin had died in 1948, of a burst appendix, and Mom sometimes still got teary about that, and carried his picture. She had liked Frank the best of all her brothers and sisters, and she said there was no need for him to die that way, of peritonitis. She said that God had played dirty when He took Frank.

George looked out the window over the sink. The light was more golden now, low over the hill. The shadow of their back shed stretched all the way across the lawn. If Buddy hadn't broken his dumb *leg*, Mom would be here now, making chili or something (plus Gramma's salt-free dinner), and they would all be talking and laughing and maybe they'd play some gin rummy later on.

George flicked on the kitchen light, even though it really wasn't dark enough for it yet. Then he turned on LO HEAT under his macaroni. His thoughts kept returning to Gramma, sitting in her white vinyl chair like a big fat worm in a dress, her corona of hair every crazy whichway on the shoulders of her pink rayon robe, holding out her arms for him to come, him shrinking back against his Mom, bawling.

*Send him to me, Ruth. I want to hug him.*

*He's a little frightened, Momma. He'll come in time. But* his mother sounded frightened, too.

*Frightened? Mom?*

George stopped, thinking. Was that true? Buddy said your memory could play tricks on you. Had she really sounded frightened?

Yes. She had.

Gramma's voice rising peremptorily: *Don't coddle the boy, Ruth! Send him over here; I want to give him a hug.*

*No. He's crying.*

And as Gramma lowered her heavy arms from which the flesh hung in great, doughlike gobbets, a sly, senile smile had overspread her face and she had said: *Does he really look like Franklin, Ruth? I remember you saying he favored Frank.*

Slowly, George stirred the macaroni and cheese and catsup. He hadn't remembered the incident so clearly before. Maybe it was the silence that had made him remember. The silence, and being alone with Gramma.

So Gramma had her babies and taught school, and the doctors were properly dumbfounded, and Granpa carpentered and generally got more and more prosperous, finding work even in the depths of the Depression, and at last people began to talk, Mom said.

*What did they say?* George asked.

*Nothing important,* Mom said, but she suddenly swept her cards together. *They said your Gramma and Granpa were too lucky for ordinary folks, that's all.* And it was just after that that the books had been found. Mom wouldn't say more than that, except that the school board had found some and that a hired man had found some more. There had been a big scandal. Granpa and Gramma had moved to Buxton and that was the end of it.

The children had grown up and had children of their own, making aunts and uncles of each other; Mom had gotten married and moved to New York with Dad (who George could not even remember). Buddy had been born, and then they had moved to Stratford and in 1969 George had been born, and in 1971 Dad had been hit and killed by a car driven by the Drunk Man Who Had to Go to Jail.

When Granpa had his heart attack there had been a great many letters back and forth among the aunts and uncles. They didn't want to put the old lady in a nursing home. And she didn't want to go to a home. If Gramma didn't want to do a thing like that, it might be better to accede to her wishes. The old lady wanted to go to one of them and live out the rest of her years with that child. But they were all married, and none of them had spouses who felt like sharing their

home with a senile and often unpleasant old woman. All were married, that was, except Ruth.

The letters flew back and forth, and at last George's Mom had given in. She quit her job and came to Maine to take care of the old lady. The others had chipped together to buy a small house in outer Castle View, where property values were low. Each month they would send her a check, so she could "do" for the old lady and for her boys.

*What's happened is my brothers and sisters have turned me into a sharecropper,* George could remember her saying once, and he didn't know for sure what that meant, but she had sounded bitter when she said it, like it was a joke that didn't come out smooth in a laugh but instead stuck in her throat like a bone. George knew (because Buddy had told him) that Mom had finally given in because everyone in the big, far-flung family had assured her that Gramma couldn't possibly last long. She had too many things wrong with her—high blood pressure, uremic poisoning, obesity, heart palpitations—to last long. It would be eight months, Aunt Flo and Aunt Stephanie and Uncle George (after whom George had been named) all said; a year at the most. But now it had been five years, and George called that lasting pretty long.

She had lasted pretty long, all right. Like a she-bear in hibernation, waiting for . . . what?

*(you know how to deal with her best Ruth you know how to shut her up)*

George, on his way to the fridge to check the directions on one of Gramma's special salt-free dinners, stopped. Stopped cold. Where had that come from? That voice speaking inside his head?

Suddenly his belly and chest broke out in gooseflesh. He reached inside his shirt and touched one of his nipples. It was like a little pebble, and he took his finger away in a hurry.

Uncle George. His "namesake uncle," who worked for Sperry-Rand in New York. It had been his voice. He had said that when he and his family came up for Christmas two—no, three—years ago.

*She's more dangerous now that she's senile.  
George, be quiet. The boys are around somewhere.*

George stood by the refrigerator, one hand on the cold chrome handle, thinking, remembering, looking out into the growing dark. Buddy *hadn't* been around that day. Buddy was already outside, because Buddy had wanted the good sled, that was why; they were going sliding on Joe Camber's hill and the other sled had a buckled runner. So Buddy was outside and here was George, hunting through the boot-and-sock box in the entryway, looking for a pair of heavy socks that matched, and was it *his* fault his mother and Uncle George were talking in the kitchen? George didn't think so. Was it George's fault that God hadn't struck him deaf, or, lacking the extremity of that measure, at least located the conversation elsewhere in the house? George didn't believe that, either. As his mother had pointed out on more than one occasion (usually after a glass of wine or two), God sometimes played dirty.

*You know what I mean, Uncle George said.*

His wife and his three girls had gone over to Gates Falls to do some last-minute Christmas shopping, and Uncle George was pretty much in the bag, just like the Drunk Man Who Had to Go to Jail. George could tell by the way his uncle slurred his words.

*You remember what happened to Franklin when he crossed her.*

*George, be quiet, or I'll pour the rest of your beer right down the sink!*

*Well, she didn't really mean to do it. Her tongue just got away from her. Peritonitis—*

*George, shut up!*

*Maybe, George remembered thinking vaguely, God isn't the only one who plays dirty.*

Now he broke the hold of these old memories and looked in the freezer and took out one of Gramma's dinners. Veal. With peas on the side. You had to preheat the oven and then bake it for forty

minutes at 300 degrees. Easy. He was all set. The tea was ready on the stove if Gramma wanted that. He could make tea, or he could make dinner in short order if Gramma woke up and yelled for it. Tea or dinner, he was a regular two-gun Sam. Dr. Arlinder's number was on the board, in case of an emergency. Everything was cool. So what was he worried about?

He had never been left alone with Gramma, that was what he was worried, about.

*Send the boy to me, Ruth. Send him over here.*

*No. He's crying.*

*She's more dangerous now . . . you know what I mean.*

*We all lie to our children about Gramma.*

Neither he nor Buddy. Neither of them had ever been left alone with Gramma. Until now.

Suddenly George's mouth went dry. He went to the sink and got a drink of water. He felt . . . funny. These thoughts. These memories. Why was his brain dragging them all up now?

He felt as if someone had dumped all the pieces to a puzzle in front of him and that he couldn't quite put them together. And maybe it was *good* he couldn't put them together, because the finished picture might be, well, sort of boogery. It might—

From the other room, where Gramma lived all her days and nights, a choking, rattling, gargling noise suddenly arose.

A whistling gasp was sucked into George as he pulled breath. He turned toward Gramma's room and discovered his shoes were tightly nailed to the linoleum floor. His heart was spike-iron in his chest. His eyes were wide and bulging. *Go now*, his brain told his feet, and his feet saluted and said *Not at all, sir!*

Gramma had never made a noise like that before.

Gramma had *never* made a noise like that before.

It arose again, a choking sound, low and then descending lower, becoming an insectile buzz before it died out altogether. George was able to move at last. He walked toward the entryway that separated the kitchen from Gramma's room. He crossed it and looked into her room, his heart slamming. Now his throat was *choked* with wool mittens; it would be impossible to swallow past them.

Gramma was still sleeping and it was all right, that was his first thought; it had only been some weird *sound*, after all; maybe she made it all the time when he and Buddy were in school. Just a snore. Gramma was fine. Sleeping.

That was his first thought. Then he noticed that the yellow hand that had been on the coverlet was now dangling limply over the side of the bed, the long nails almost but not quite touching the floor. And her mouth was open, as wrinkled and caved-in as an orifice dug into a rotten piece of fruit.

Timidly, hesitantly, George approached her.

He stood by her side for a long time, looking down at her, not daring to touch her. The imperceptible rise and fall of the coverlet appeared to have ceased.

*Appeared.*

That was the key word. *Appeared.*

*But that's just because you are spooked, Georgie. You're just being Senor El-Stupido, like Buddy says—it's a game. Your brain's playing tricks on your eyes, she's breathing just fine, she's—*

“Gramma?” he said, and all that came out was a whisper. He cleared his throat and jumped back, frightened of the sound. But his voice was a little louder. “Gramma? You want your tea now? Gramma?”

Nothing.

The eyes were closed.

The mouth was open.

The hand hung.

Outside, the setting sun shone golden-red through the trees.

He saw her in a positive fullness then; saw her with that childish and brilliantly unhoused eye of unformed immature reflection, not here, not now, not in bed, but sitting in the white vinyl chair, holding out her arms, her face at the same time stupid and triumphant. He found himself remembering one of the “bad spells” when Gramma began to shout, as if in a foreign language—*Gyaagin! Gyaagin! Hastur degryon Yos-soth-oth!*—and Mom had sent them outside, had screamed “*Just GO!*” at Buddy when Buddy stopped at the box in the entry to hunt for his gloves, and Buddy had looked back over his

shoulder, so scared he was walleyed with it because their mom *never* shouted, and they had both gone out and stood in the driveway, not talking, their hands stuffed in their pockets for warmth, wondering what was happening.

Later, Mom had called them in for supper as if nothing had happened.

*(you know how to deal with her best Ruth you know how to shut her up)*

George had not thought of that particular “bad spell” from that day to this. Except now, looking at Gramma, who was sleeping so strangely in her crank-up hospital bed, it occurred to him with dawning horror that it was the next day they had learned that Mrs. Harham, who lived up the road and sometimes visited Gramma, had died in her sleep that night.

Gramma’s “bad spells.”

Spells.

*Witches* were supposed to be able to cast spells. That’s what made them witches, wasn’t it? Poisoned apples. Princes into toads. Gingerbread houses. Abracadabra. Presto-chango. *Spells*.

Spilled-out pieces of an unknown puzzle flying together in George’s mind, as if by magic.

*Magic*, George thought, and groaned.

What was the picture? It was Gramma, of course, Gramma and her *books*, Gramma who had been driven out of town, Gramma who hadn’t been able to have babies and then had been able to, Gramma who had been driven out of the *church* as well as out of town. The picture was Gramma, yellow and fat and wrinkled and sluglike, her toothless mouth curved into a sunken grin, her faded, blind eyes somehow sly and cunning; and on her head was a black, conical hat sprinkled with silver stars and glittering Babylonian crescents; at her feet were slinking black cats with eyes as yellow as urine, and the smells were pork and blindness, pork and burning, ancient stars and candles as dark as the earth in which coffins lay; he heard words spoken from ancient books, and each word was like a stone and each sentence like a crypt reared in some stinking boneyard and every paragraph like a nightmare caravan of the plague-dead taken

to a place of burning; his eye was the eye of a child and in that moment it opened wide in startled understanding on blackness.

Gramma had been a witch, just like the Wicked Witch in the *Wizard of Oz*. And now she was dead. That gargling sound, George thought with increasing horror. That gargling, snoring sound had been a . . . a . . . a “*death rattle*.”

“Gramma?” he whispered, and crazily he thought: *Dingdong, the wicked witch is dead.*

No response. He held his cupped hand in front of Gramma’s mouth. There was no breeze stirring around inside Gramma. It was dead calm and slack sails and no wake widening behind the keel. Some of his fright began to recede now, and George tried to think. He remembered Uncle Fred showing him how to wet a finger and test the wind, and now he licked his entire palm and held it in front of Gramma’s mouth.

Still nothing.

He started for the phone to call Dr. Arlinder, and then stopped. Suppose he called the doctor and she really wasn’t dead at all? He’d be in dutch for sure.

*Take her pulse.*

He stopped in the doorway, looking doubtfully back at that dangling hand. The sleeve of Gramma’s nightie had pulled up, exposing her wrist. But that was no good. Once, after a visit to the doctor when the nurse had pressed her finger to his wrist to take his pulse, George had tried it and hadn’t been able to find anything. As far as his own unskilled fingers could tell, he was dead.

Besides, he didn’t really want to . . . well . . . to *touch* Gramma. Even if she was dead. *Especially* if she was dead.

George stood in the entryway, looking from Gramma’s still, bedridden form to the phone on the wall beside Dr. Arlinder’s number, and back to Gramma again. He would just have to call. He would—

—*get a mirror!*

Sure! When you breathed on a mirror, it got cloudy. He had seen a doctor check an unconscious person that way once in a movie. There was a bathroom connecting with Gramma’s room and now

George hurried in and got Gramma's vanity mirror. One side of it was regular, the other side magnified, so you could see to pluck out hairs and do stuff like that.

George took it back to Gramma's bed and held one side of the mirror until it was almost touching Gramma's open, gaping mouth. He held it there while he counted to sixty, watching Gramma the whole time. Nothing changed. He was sure she was dead even before he took the mirror away from her mouth and observed its surface, which was perfectly clear and unclouded.

Gramma was dead.

George realized with relief and some surprise that he could feel sorry for her now. Maybe she had been a witch. Maybe not. Maybe she had only *thought* she was a witch. However it had been, she was gone now. He realized with an adult's comprehension that questions of concrete reality became not unimportant but less *vital* when they were examined in the mute bland face of mortal remains. He realized this with an adult's comprehension and accepted with an adult's relief. This was a passing footprint, the shape of a shoe, in his mind. So are all the child's adult impressions; it is only in later years that the child realizes that he was being *made; formed;* shaped by random experiences; all that remains *in the instant* beyond the footprint is that bitter gunpowder smell which is the ignition of an idea beyond a child's given years.

He returned the mirror to the bathroom, then went back through her room, glancing at the body on his way by. The setting sun had painted the old dead face with barbaric, orange-red colors, and George looked away quickly.

He went through the entry and crossed the kitchen to the telephone, determined to do everything right. Already in his mind he saw a certain advantage over Buddy; whenever Buddy started to tease him, he would simply say: *I was all by myself in the house when Gramma died, and I did everything right.*

Call Dr. Arlinder, that was first. Call him and say, "My Gramma just died. Can you tell me what I should do? Cover her up or something?"

No.

"I *think* my Gramma just died."

Yes. Yes, that was better. Nobody thought a little kid knew anything anyway, so that was better.

Or how about:

"*I'm pretty sure my Gramma just died—*"

Sure! That was best of all.

And tell about the mirror and the death rattle and all. And the doctor would come right away, and when he was done examining Gramma he would say, "*I pronounce you dead, Gramma,*" and then say to George, "*You laid extremely chilly in a tough situation, George. I want to congratulate you.*" And George would say something appropriately modest.

George looked at Dr. Arlinder's number and took a couple of slow deep breaths before grabbing the phone. His heart was beating fast, but that painful spike-iron thud was gone now. Gramma had died. The worst had happened, and somehow it wasn't as bad as waiting for her to start bellowing for Mom to bring her tea.

The phone was dead.

He listened to the blankness, his mouth still formed around the words *I'm sorry, Missus Dodd, but this is George Bruckner and I have to call the doctor for my Gramma.* No voices. No dial tone. Just dead blankness. Like the dead blankness in the bed in there.

*Gramma is—*

*—is—*

*(oh she is)*

*Gramma is laying chilly.*

Gooseflesh again, painful and marbling. His eyes fixed on the Pyrex teakettle on the stove, the cup on the counter with the herbal tea bag in it. No more tea for Gramma. Not ever.

*(laying so chilly)*

George shuddered.

He stuttered his finger up and down on the Princess phone's cutoff button, but the phone was dead. Just as dead as—

*(just as chilly as)*

He slammed the handset down hard and the bell tinged faintly inside and he picked it up in a hurry to see if that meant it had magically gone right again. But there was nothing, and this time he put it back slowly.

His heart was thudding harder again.

*I'm alone in this house with her dead body.*

He crossed the kitchen slowly, stood by the table for a minute, and then turned on the light. It was getting dark in the house. Soon the sun would be gone; night would be here.

*Wait. That's all I got to do. Just wait until Mom gets back. This is better, really. If the phone went out, it's better that she just died instead of maybe having a fit or something, foaming at the mouth, maybe falling out of bed—*

Ah, that was bad. He could have done very nicely without *that* horse-pucky.

*Like being alone in the dark and thinking of dead things that were still lively—seeing shapes in the shadows on the walls and thinking of death, thinking of the dead, those things, the way they would stink and the way they would move toward you in the black: thinking this: thinking that: thinking of bugs turning in flesh: burrowing in flesh: eyes that moved in the dark. Yeah. That most of all. Thinking of eyes that moved in the dark and the creak of floorboards as something came across the room through the zebra-stripes of shadows from the light outside. Yeah.*

In the dark your thoughts had a perfect circularity, and no matter what you tried to think of—flowers or Jesus or baseball or winning the gold in the 440 at the Olympics—it somehow led back to the form in the shadows with the claws and the unblinking eyes.

“*Shittabrick!*” he hissed, and suddenly slapped his own face. And hard. He was giving himself the whimwhams, it was time to stop it. He wasn't six anymore. She was dead, that was all, dead. There was no more thought inside her now than there was in a marble or a floorboard or a doorknob or a radio dial or—

And a strong alien unprepared-for voice, perhaps only the unforgiving unbidden voice of simple survival, inside him cried: *Shut*

*up Georgie and get about your goddam business!*

*Yeah, okay. Okay, but—*

He went back to the door of her bedroom to make sure.

There lay Gramma, one hand out of bed and touching the floor, her mouth hinged agape. Gramma was part of the furniture now. You could put her hand back in bed or pull her hair or pop a water glass into her mouth or put earphones on her head and play Chuck Berry into them full-tilt boogie and it would be all the same to her. Gramma was, as Buddy sometimes said, out of it. Gramma had had the course.

A sudden low and rhythmic thudding noise began, not far to George's left, and he started, a little yipping cry escaping him. It was the storm door, which Buddy had put on just last week. Just the storm door, unlatched and thudding back and forth in the freshening breeze.

George opened the inside door, leaned out, and caught the storm door as it swung back. The wind—it wasn't a breeze but a wind—caught his hair and riffled it. He latched the door firmly and wondered where the wind had come from all of a sudden. When Mom left it had been almost dead calm. But when Mom had left it had been bright daylight and now it was dusk.

George glanced in at Gramma again and then went back and tried the phone again. Still dead. He sat down, got up, and began to walk back and forth through the kitchen, pacing, trying to think.

An hour later it was full dark.

The phone was still out. George supposed the wind, which had now risen to a near-gale, had knocked down some of the lines, probably out by the Beaver Bog, where the trees grew everywhere in a helter-skelter of deadfalls and swampwater. The phone dinged occasionally, ghostly and far, but the line remained blank. Outside the wind moaned along the eaves of the small house and George reckoned he would have a story to tell at the next Boy Scout Camporee, all right . . . just sitting in the house alone with his dead Gramma and the phone out and the wind pushing rafts of clouds fast across the sky, clouds that were black on top and the color of dead tallow, the color of Gramma's claw-hands, underneath.

It was, as Buddy also sometimes said, a Classic.

He wished he was telling it now, with the actuality of the thing safely behind him. He sat at the kitchen table, his history book open in front of him, jumping at every sound . . . and now that the wind was up, there were a lot of sounds as the house creaked in all its unopened secret forgotten joints.

*She'll be home pretty quick. She'll be home and then everything will be okay. Everything*

*(you never covered her)*

*will be all r*

*(never covered her face)*

George jerked as if someone had spoken aloud and stared wide-eyed across the kitchen at the useless telephone. You were supposed to pull the sheet up over the dead person's face. It was in all the movies.

*Hell with that! I'm not going in there!*

No! And no reason why he should! *Mom* could cover her face when she got home! Or *Dr. Arlinder* when he came! Or the *undertaker!*

Someone, anyone, but him.

No reason why he should.

It was nothing to him, and nothing to Gramma.

Buddy's voice in his head:

*If you weren't scared, how come you didn't dare to cover her face?*

*It was nothing to me.*

*Fraidycat!*

*Nothing to Gramma, either.*

*CHICKEN-GUTS fraidycat!*

Sitting at the table in front of his unread history book, considering it, George began to see that if he *didn't* pull the counterpane up over Gramma's face, he couldn't claim to have done everything right, and thus Buddy would have a leg (no matter how shaky) to stand on.

Now he saw himself telling the spooky story of Gramma's death at the Camporee fire before taps, just getting to the comforting conclusion where Mom's headlights swept into the driveway—the reappearance of the grown-up, both reestablishing and reconfirming

the concept of Order—and suddenly, from the shadows, a dark figure arises, and a pine-knot in the fire explodes and George can see it's Buddy there in the shadows, saying: *If you was so brave, chickenguts, how come you didn't dare to cover up HER FACE?*

George stood up, reminding himself that Gramma was *out of it*, that Gramma was *wasted*, that Gramma was *laying chilly*. He could put her hand back in bed, stuff a tea bag up her nose, put on earphones playing Chuck Berry full blast, etc., etc., and none of it would put a buzz under Gramma, because that was what being dead was *about*, nobody could put a buzz under a dead person, a dead person was the ultimate laid-back cool, and the rest of it was just dreams, ineluctable and apocalyptic and feverish dreams about closet doors swinging open in the dead mouth of midnight, just dreams about moonlight skating a delirious blue on the bones of disinterred skeletons, just—

He whispered, “Stop it, can't you? Stop being so—”

(*gross*)

He steeled himself. He was going to go in there and pull the coverlet up over her face, and take away Buddy's last leg to stand on. He would administer the few simple rituals of Gramma's death perfectly. He would cover her face and then—his face lit at the symbolism of this—he would put away her unused tea bag and her unused cup. Yes.

He went in, each step a conscious act. Gramma's room was dark, her body a vague hump in the bed, and he fumbled madly for the light switch, not finding it for what seemed to be an eternity. At last it clicked up, flooding the room with low yellow light from the cut-glass fixture overhead.

Gramma lay there, hand dangling, mouth open. George regarded her, dimly aware that little pearls of sweat now clung to his forehead, and wondered if his responsibility in the matter could possibly extend to picking up that cooling hand and putting it back in bed with the rest of Gramma. He decided it did not. Her hand could have fallen out of bed any old time. That was too much. He couldn't touch her. Everything else, but not that.

Slowly, as if moving through some thick fluid instead of air, George approached Gramma. He stood over her, looking down. Gramma was yellow. Part of it was the light, filtered through the old fixture, but not all.

Breathing through his mouth, his breath rasping audibly, George grasped the coverlet and pulled it up over Gramma's face. He let go of it and it slipped just a little, revealing her hairline and the yellow creased parchment of her brow. Steeling himself, he grasped it again, keeping his hands far to one side and the other of her head so he wouldn't have to touch her, even through the cloth, and pulled it up again. This time it stayed. It was satisfactory. Some of the fear went out of George. He had *buried* her. Yes, that was why you covered the dead person up, and why it was right: it was like *burying* them. It was a statement.

He looked at the hand dangling down, unburied, and discovered now that he could touch it, he could tuck it under and bury it with the rest of Gramma.

He bent, grasped the cool hand, and lifted it.

The hand twisted in his and clutched his wrist.

George screamed. He staggered backward, screaming in the empty house, screaming against the sound of the wind reaving the eaves, screaming against the sound of the house's creaking joints. He backed away, pulling Gramma's body askew under the coverlet, and the hand thudded back down, twisting, turning, snatching at the air . . . and then relaxing to limpness again.

*I'm all right, it was nothing, it was nothing but a reflex.*

George nodded in perfect understanding, and then he remembered again how her hand had turned, clutching his, and he shrieked. His eyes bulged in their sockets. His hair stood out, perfectly on end, in a cone. His heart was a runaway stamping-press in his chest. The world tilted crazily, came back to the level, and then just went on moving until it was tilted the other way. Every time rational thought started to come back, panic goosed him again. He whirled, wanting only to get out of the room to some other room—or even three or four miles down the road, if that was what it took—

where he could get all of this under control. So he whirled and ran full tilt into the wall, missing the open doorway by a good two feet.

He rebounded and fell to the floor, his head singing with a sharp, cutting pain that sliced keenly through the panic. He touched his nose and his hand came back bloody. Fresh drops spotted his shirt. He scrambled to his feet and looked around wildly.

The hand dangled against the floor as it had before, but Gramma's body was not askew; it also was as it had been.

He had imagined the whole thing. He had come into the room, and all the rest of it had been no more than a mind-movie.

*No.*

But the pain had cleared his head. Dead people didn't grab your wrist. Dead was dead. When you were dead they could use you for a hat rack or stuff you in a tractor tire and roll you downhill or et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. When you were dead you might be acted *upon* (by, say, little boys trying to put dead dangling hands back into bed), but your days of *acting* upon—so to speak—were over.

*Unless you're a witch. Unless you pick your time to die when no one's around but one little kid, because it's best that way, you can . . . can . . .*

*Can what?*

Nothing. It was stupid. He had imagined the whole thing because he had been scared and that was all there was to it. He wiped his nose with his forearm and winced at the pain. There was a bloody smear on the skin of his inner forearm.

He wasn't going to go near her again, that was all. Reality or hallucination, he wasn't going to mess with Gramma. The bright flare of panic was gone, but he was still miserably scared, near tears, shaky at the sight of his own blood, only wanting his mother to come home and take charge.

George backed out of the room, through the entry, and into the kitchen. He drew a long, shuddery breath and let it out. He wanted a wet rag for his nose, and suddenly he felt like he was going to vomit. He went over to the sink and ran cold water. He bent and got a rag from the basin under the sink—a piece of one of Gramma's old diapers—and ran it under the cold tap, snuffling up blood as he did

so. He soaked the old soft cotton diaper-square until his hand was numb, then turned off the tap and wrung it out.

He was putting it to his nose when her voice spoke from the other room.

“Come here, boy,” Gramma called in a dead buzzing voice. “Come in here—*Gramma wants to hug you.*”

George tried to scream and no sound came out. No sound at all. But there were sounds in the other room. Sounds that he heard when Mom was in there, giving Gramma her bedbath, lifting her bulk, dropping it, turning it, dropping it again.

Only those sounds now seemed to have a slightly different and yet utterly specific meaning—it sounded as though Gramma was trying to . . . to get out of bed.

*“Boy! Come in here, boy! Right NOW! Step to it!”*

With horror he saw that his feet were answering that command. He told them to stop and they just went on, left foot, right foot, hay foot, straw foot, over the linoleum; his brain was a terrified prisoner inside his body—a hostage in a tower.

*She IS a witch, she’s a witch and she’s having one of her “bad spells,” oh yeah, it’s a “spell” all right, and it’s bad, it’s REALLY bad, oh God oh Jesus help me help me help me—*

George walked across the kitchen and through the entryway and into Gramma’s room and yes, she hadn’t just *tried* to get out of bed, she *was* out, she was sitting in the white vinyl chair where she hadn’t sat for four years, since she got too heavy to walk and too senile to know where she was, anyway.

But Gramma didn’t look senile now.

Her face was sagging and doughy, but the senility was gone—if it had ever really been there at all, and not just a mask she wore to lull small boys and tired husbandless women. Now Gramma’s face gleamed with fell intelligence—it gleamed like an old, stinking wax candle. Her eyes drooped in her face, lackluster and dead. Her chest was not moving. Her nightie had pulled up, exposing elephantine thighs. The coverlet of her deathbed was thrown back.

Gramma held her huge arms out to him.

*“I want to hug you, Georgie,”* that flat and buzzing deadvoice said. *“Don’t be a scared old crybaby. Let your Gramma hug you.”*

George cringed back, trying to resist that almost insurmountable pull. Outside, the wind shrieked and roared. George’s face was long and twisted with the extremity of his fright; the face of a woodcut caught and shut up in an ancient book.

George began to walk toward her. He couldn’t help himself. Step by dragging step toward those outstretched arms. *He would show Buddy that he wasn’t scared of Gramma, either. He would go to Gramma and be hugged because he wasn’t a crybaby fraidycat. He would go to Gramma now.*

He was almost within the circle of her arms when the window to his left crashed inward and suddenly a wind-blown branch was in the room with them, autumn leaves still clinging to it. The river of wind flooded the room, blowing over Gramma’s pictures, whipping her nightgown and her hair.

Now George could scream. He stumbled backward out of her grip and Gramma made a cheated hissing sound, her lips pulling back over smooth old gums; her thick, wrinkled hands clapped uselessly together on moving air.

George’s feet tangled together and he fell down. Gramma began to rise from the white vinyl chair, a tottering pile of flesh; she began to stagger toward him. George found he couldn’t get up; the strength had deserted his legs. He began to crawl backward, whimpering. Gramma came on, slowly but relentlessly, dead and yet alive, and suddenly George understood what the hug would mean; the puzzle was complete in his mind and somehow he found his feet just as Gramma’s hand closed on his shirt. It ripped up the side, and for one moment he felt her cold flesh against his skin before fleeing into the kitchen again.

He would run into the night. Anything other than being hugged by the witch, his Gramma. Because when his mother came back she would find Gramma dead and George alive, oh yes . . . but George would have developed a sudden taste for herbal tea.

He looked back over his shoulder and saw Gramma’s grotesque, misshapen shadow rising on the wall as she came through the

entryway.

And at that moment the telephone rang, shrilly and stridently.

George seized it without even thinking and screamed into it; screamed for someone to come, to please come. He screamed these things silently; not a sound escaped his locked throat.

Gramma tottered into the kitchen in her pink nightie. Her whitish-yellow hair blew wildly around her face, and one of her horn combs hung askew against her wrinkled neck.

Gramma was grinning.

“Ruth?” It was Aunt Flo’s voice, almost lost in the whistling windtunnel of a bad long-distance connection. “Ruth, are you there?” It was Aunt Flo in Minnesota, over two thousand miles away.

“*Help me!*” George screamed into the phone, and what came out was a tiny, hissing whistle, as if he had blown into a harmonica full of dead reeds.

Gramma tottered across the linoleum, holding her arms out for him. Her hands snapped shut and then open and then shut again. Gramma wanted her hug; she had been waiting for that hug for five years.

“Ruth, can you hear me? It’s been storming here, it just started, and I . . . I got scared. Ruth, I can’t hear you—”

“Gramma,” George moaned into the telephone. Now she was almost upon him.

“George?” Aunt Flo’s voice suddenly sharpened; became almost a shriek. “George, is that *you?*”

He began to back away from Gramma, and suddenly realized that he had stupidly backed away from the door and into the corner formed by the kitchen cabinets and the sink. The horror was complete. As her shadow fell over him, the paralysis broke and he screamed into the phone, screamed it over and over again:

“*Gramma! Gramma! Gramma!*”

Gramma’s cold hands touched his throat. Her muddy, ancient eyes locked on his, draining his will.

Faintly, dimly, as if across many years as well as many miles, he heard Aunt Flo say: “Tell her to lie down, George, tell her to lie down and be still. Tell her she must do it in your name and the name of her

father. The name of her taken father is *Hastur*. His name is power in her ear, George—tell her *Lie down in the Name of Hastur—tell her —*”

The old, wrinkled hand tore the telephone from George’s nerveless grip. There was a taut pop as the cord pulled out of the phone. George collapsed in the corner and Gramma bent down, a huge heap of flesh above him, blotting out the light.

George screamed: “*Lie down! Be still! Hastur’s name! Hastur! Lie down! Be still!*”

Her hands closed around his neck—

“You gotta do it! Aunt Flo said you did! In my name! In your *Father’s* name! Lie down! Be sti—”

—and squeezed.

When the lights finally splashed into the driveway an hour later, George was sitting at the table in front of his unread history book. He got up and walked to the back door and opened it. To his left, the Princess phone hung in its cradle, its useless cord looped around it.

His mother came in, a leaf clinging to the collar of her coat. “Such a wind,” she said. “Was everything all—George? *George, what happened?*”

The blood fell from Mom’s face in a single, shocked rush, turning her a horrible clown-white.

“Gramma,” he said. “Gramma died. Gramma died, Mommy.” And he began to cry.

She swept him into her arms and then staggered back against the wall, as if this act of hugging had robbed the last of her strength. “Did . . . did anything happen?” she asked. “*George, did anything else happen?*”

“The wind knocked a tree branch through her window,” George said.

She pushed him away, looked at his shocked, slack face for a moment, and then stumbled into Gramma’s room. She was in there for perhaps four minutes. When she came back, she was holding a red tatter of cloth. It was a bit of George’s shirt.

“I took this out of her hand,” Mom whispered.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” George said. “Call Aunt Flo, if you want. I’m tired. I want to go to bed.”

She made as if to stop him, but didn’t. He went up to the room he shared with Buddy and opened the hot-air register so he could hear what his mother did next. She wasn’t going to talk to Aunt Flo, not tonight, because the telephone cord had pulled out; not tomorrow, because shortly before Mom had come home, George had spoken a short series of words, some of them bastardized Latin, some only pre-Druidic grunts, and over two thousand miles away Aunt Flo had dropped dead of a massive brain hemorrhage. It was amazing how those words came back. How *everything* came back.

George undressed and lay down naked on his bed. He put his hands behind his head and looked up into the darkness. Slowly, slowly, a sunken and rather horrible grin surfaced on his face.

Things were going to be different around here from now on.

*Very* different.

Buddy, for instance. George could hardly wait until Buddy came home from the hospital and started in with the Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chineese or an Indian Rope Burn or something like that. George supposed he would have to let Buddy get away with it—at least in the daytime, when people could see—but when night came and they were alone in this room, in the dark, with the door closed . .

George began to laugh soundlessly.

As Buddy always said, it was going to be a Classic.

## The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet

The barbecue was over. It had been a good one; drinks, charcoaled T-bones, rare, a green salad and Meg's special dressing. They had started at five. Now it was eight-thirty and almost dusk—the time when a big party is just starting to get rowdy. But they weren't a big party. There were just the five of them: the agent and his wife, the celebrated young writer and *his* wife, and the magazine editor, who was in his early sixties and looked older. The editor stuck to Fresca. The agent had told the young writer before the editor arrived that there had once been a drinking problem there. It was gone now, and so was the editor's wife . . . which was why they were five instead of six.

Instead of getting rowdy, an introspective mood fell over them as it started to get dark in the young writer's backyard, which fronted the lake. The young writer's first novel had been well reviewed and had sold a lot of copies. He was a lucky young man, and to his credit he knew it.

The conversation had turned with playful gruesomeness from the young writer's early success to other writers who had made their marks early and had then committed suicide. Ross Lockridge was touched upon, and Tom Hagen. The agent's wife mentioned Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and the young writer said that he didn't think Plath qualified as a *successful* writer. She had not committed suicide because of success, he said; she had gained success because she had committed suicide. The agent smiled.

"Please, couldn't we talk about something else?" the young writer's wife asked, a little nervously.

Ignoring her, the agent said, "And madness. There have been those who have gone mad because of success." The agent had the mild but nonetheless rolling tones of an actor offstage.

The writer's wife was about to protest again—she knew that her husband not only liked to talk about these things so he could joke

about them, and he wanted to joke about them because he thought about them too much—when the magazine editor spoke up. What he said was so odd she forgot to protest.

“Madness is a flexible bullet.”

The agent’s wife looked startled. The young writer leaned forward quizzically. He said, “That sounds familiar—”

“Sure,” the editor said. “That phrase, the image, ‘flexible bullet,’ is Marianne Moore’s. She used it to describe some car or other. I’ve always thought it described the condition of madness very well. Madness is a kind of mental suicide. Don’t the doctors say now that the only way to truly measure death is by the death of the mind? Madness is a kind of flexible bullet to the brain.”

The young writer’s wife hopped up. “Anybody want another drink?” She had no takers.

“Well, I do, if we’re going to talk about this,” she said, and went off to make herself one.

The editor said: “I had a story submitted to me once, when I was working over at *Logan’s*. Of course it’s gone the way of *Collier’s* and *The Saturday Evening Post* now, but we outlasted both of them.” He said this with a trace of pride. “We published thirty-six short stories a year, or more, and every year four or five of them would be in somebody’s collection of the year’s best. And people *read* them. Anyway, the name of this story was ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,’ and it was written by a man named Reg Thorpe. A young man about this young man’s age, and about as successful. ”

“He wrote *Underworld Figures*, didn’t he?” the agent’s wife asked.

“Yes. Amazing track record for a first novel. Great reviews, lovely sales in hardcover and paperback, Literary Guild, everything. Even the movie was pretty good, although not as good as the book. Nowhere near.”

“I loved that book,” the author’s wife said, lured back into the conversation against her better judgment. She had the surprised, pleased look of someone who has just recalled something which has been out of mind for too long. “Has he written anything since then? I read *Underworld Figures* back in college and that was . . . well, too long ago to think about.”

“You haven’t aged a day since then,” the agent’s wife said warmly, although privately she thought the young writer’s wife was wearing a too-small halter and a too-tight pair of shorts.

“No, he hasn’t written anything since then,” the editor said. “Except for this one short story I was telling you about. He killed himself. Went crazy and killed himself.”

“Oh,” the young writer’s wife said limply. Back to *that*.

“Was the short story published?” the young writer asked.

“No, but not because the author went crazy and killed himself. It never got into print because the *editor* went crazy and *almost* killed himself.”

The agent suddenly got up to freshen his own drink, which hardly need freshening. He knew that the editor had had a nervous breakdown in the summer of 1969, not long before *Logan’s* had drowned in a sea of red ink.

“I was the editor,” the editor informed the rest of them. “In a sense we went crazy together, Reg Thorpe and I, even though I was in New York, he was out in Omaha, and we never even met. His book had been out about six months and he had moved out there ‘to get his head together,’ as the phrase was then. And I happen to know this side of the story because I see his wife occasionally when she’s in New York. She paints, and quite well. She’s a lucky girl. He almost took her with him.”

The agent came back and sat down. “I’m starting to remember some of this now,” he said. “It wasn’t just his wife, was it? He shot a couple of other people, one of them a kid.”

“That’s right,” the editor said. “It was the kid that finally set him off.”

“The *kid* set him off?” the agent’s wife asked. “What do you mean?”

But the editor’s face said he would not be drawn; he would talk, but not be questioned.

“I know my side of the story because I lived it,” the magazine editor said. “I’m lucky, too. Damned lucky. It’s an interesting thing about those who try to kill themselves by pointing a gun at their heads and pulling the trigger. You’d think it would be the foolproof method, better than pills or slashing the wrists, but it isn’t. When you

shoot yourself in the head, you just can't tell what's going to happen. The slug may ricochet off the skull and kill someone else. It may follow the skull's curve all the way around and come out on the other side. It may lodge in the brain and blind you and leave you alive. One man may shoot himself in the forehead with a .38 and wake up in the hospital. Another may shoot himself in the forehead with a .22 and wake up in hell . . . if there is such a place. I tend to believe it's here on earth, possibly in New Jersey."

The writer's wife laughed rather shrilly.

"The only foolproof suicide method is to step off a very high building, and that's a way out that only the extraordinarily dedicated ever take. So damned messy, isn't it?"

"But my point is simply this: When you shoot yourself with a flexible bullet, you really don't know what the outcome is going to be. In my case, I went off a bridge and woke up on a trash-littered embankment with a trucker whapping me on the back and pumping my arms up and down like he had only twenty-four hours to get in shape and he had mistaken me for a rowing machine. For Reg, the bullet was lethal. He . . . But I'm telling you a story I have no idea if you want to hear."

He looked around at them questioningly in the gathering gloom. The agent and the agent's wife glanced at each other uncertainly, and the writer's wife was about to say she thought they'd had enough gloomy talk when her husband said, "I'd like to hear it. If you don't mind telling it for personal reasons, I mean."

"I never have told it," the editor said, "but not for personal reasons. Perhaps I never had the correct listeners."

"Then tell away," the writer said.

"Paul—" His wife put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't you think—"

"Not now, Meg."

The editor said:

"The story came in over the transom, and at that time *Logan's* no longer read unsolicited scripts. When they came in, a girl would just put them into return envelopes with a note that said 'Due to increasing costs and the increasing inability of the editorial staff to cope with a steadily increasing number of submissions, *Logan's* no

longer reads unsolicited manuscripts. We wish you the best of luck in placing your work elsewhere.' Isn't that a lovely bunch of gobbledegook? It's not easy to use the word 'increasing' three times in one sentence, but they did it."

"And if there was no return postage, the story went into the wastebasket," the writer said. "Right?"

"Oh, absolutely. No pity in the naked city."

An odd expression of unease flitted across the writer's face. It was the expression of a man who is in a tiger pit where dozens of better men have been clawed to pieces. So far this man hasn't seen a single tiger. But he has a feeling that they are there, and that their claws are still sharp.

"Anyway," the editor said, taking out his cigarette case, "this story came in, and the girl in the mailroom took it out, paper-clipped the form rejection to the first page, and was getting ready to put it in the return envelope when she glanced at the author's name. Well, she had read *Underworld Figures*. That fall, everybody had read it, or was reading it, or was on the library waiting list, or checking the drugstore racks for the paperback. "

The writer's wife, who had seen the momentary unease on her husband's face, took his hand. He smiled at her. The editor snapped a gold Ronson to his cigarette, and in the growing dark they could all see how haggard his face was—the loose, crocodile-skinned pouches under the eyes, the runneled cheeks, the old man's jut of chin emerging out of that late-middle-aged face like the prow of a ship. That ship, the writer thought, is called old age. No one particularly wants to cruise on it, but the staterooms are full. The gangholds too, for that matter.

The lighter winked out, and the editor puffed his cigarette meditatively.

"The girl in the mailroom who read that story and passed it on instead of sending it back is now a full editor at G. P. Putnam's Sons. Her name doesn't matter; what matters is that on the great graph of life, this girl's vector crossed Reg Thorpe's in the mailroom of *Logan's* magazine. Hers was going up and his was going down. She sent the story to her boss and her boss sent it to me. I read it and

loved it. It was really too long, but I could see where he could pare five hundred words off it with no sweat. And that would be plenty.”

“What was it about?” the writer asked.

“You shouldn’t even have to ask,” the editor said. “It fits so beautifully into the total context.”

“About going crazy?”

“Yes, indeed. What’s the first thing they teach you in your first college creative-writing course? Write about what you know. Reg Thorpe knew about going crazy, because he was engaged in going there. The story probably appealed to me because I was also going there. Now you could say—if you were an editor—that the one thing the American reading public doesn’t need foisted on them is another story about Going Mad Stylishly in America, subtopic A, Nobody Talks to Each Other Anymore. A popular theme in twentieth-century literature. All the greats have taken a hack at it and all the hacks have taken an ax to it. But this story was funny. I mean, it was really hilarious.

“I hadn’t read anything like it before and I haven’t since. The closest would be some of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s stories . . . and *Gatsby*. The fellow in Thorpe’s story was going crazy, but he was doing it in a very funny way. You kept grinning, and there were a couple of places in this story—the place where the hero dumps the lime Jell-O on the fat girl’s head is the best—where you laugh right out loud. But they’re jittery laughs, you know. You laugh and then you want to look over your shoulder to see what heard you. The opposing lines of tension in that story were really extraordinary. The more you laughed, the more nervous you got. And the more nervous you got, the more you laughed . . . right up to the point where the hero goes home from the party given in his honor and kills his wife and baby daughter.” “What’s the plot?” the agent asked.

“No,” the editor said, “that doesn’t matter. It was just a story about a young man gradually losing his struggle to cope with success. It’s better left vague. A detailed plot synopsis would only be boring. They always are.

“Anyway, I wrote him a letter. It said this: ‘Dear Reg Thorpe, I’ve just read “The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet” and I think it’s great. I’d

like to publish it in *Logan's* early next year, if that fits. Does \$800 sound okay? Payment on acceptance. More or less.' New paragraph."

The editor indented the evening air with his cigarette.

" 'The story runs a little long, and I'd like you to shorten it by about five hundred words, if you could. I would settle for a two-hundred-word cut, if it comes to that. We can always drop a cartoon.'

Paragraph. 'Call, if you want.' My signature. And off the letter went, to Omaha."

"And you remember it, word for word like that?" the writer's wife asked.

"I kept all the correspondence in a special file," the editor said. "His letters, carbons of mine back. There was quite a stack of it by the end, including three or four pieces of correspondence from Jane Thorpe, his wife. I've read the file over quite often. No good, of course. Trying to understand the flexible bullet is like trying to understand how a Möbius strip can have only one side. That's just the way things are in this best-of-all-possible worlds. Yes, I know it all word for word, or almost. Some people have the Declaration of Independence by heart."

"Bet he called you the next day," the agent said, grinning. "Collect."

"No, he didn't call. Shortly after *Underworld Figures*, Thorpe stopped using the telephone altogether. His wife told me that. When they moved to Omaha from New York, they didn't even have a phone put in the new house. He had decided, you see, that the telephone system didn't really run on electricity but on radium. He thought it was one of the two or three best-kept secrets in the history of the modern world. He claimed—to his wife—that all the radium was responsible for the growing cancer rate, not cigarettes or automobile emissions or industrial pollution. Each telephone had a small radium crystal in the handset, and every time you used the phone, you shot your head full of radiation."

"Yuh, he was crazy," the writer said, and they all laughed.

"He wrote instead," the editor said, flicking his cigarette in the direction of the lake. "His letter said this: 'Dear Henry Wilson (or just

Henry, if I may), Your letter was both exciting and gratifying. My wife was, if anything, more pleased than I. The money is fine . . . although in all honesty I must say that the idea of being published in *Logan's* at all seems like more than adequate compensation (but I'll take it, I'll take it). I've looked over your cuts, and they seem fine. I think they'll improve the story as well as clear space for those cartoons. All best wishes, Reg Thorpe."

"Under his signature was a funny little drawing . . . more like a doodle. An eye in a pyramid, like the one on the back of the dollar bill. But instead of *Novus Ordo Seclorum* on the banner beneath, there were these words: Fornit Some Fornus."

"Either Latin or Groucho Marx," the agent's wife said.

"Just part of Reg Thorpe's growing eccentricity," the editor said. "His wife told me that Reg had come to believe in 'little people,' sort of like elves or fairies. The Fornits. They were luck-elves, and he thought one of them lived in his typewriter. "

"Oh my Lord," the writer's wife said.

"According to Thorpe, each Fornit has a small device, like a flitgun, full of . . . good-luck dust, I guess you'd call it. And the good-luck dust—"

"—is called fornus," the writer finished. He was grinning broadly.

"Yes. And his wife thought it quite funny, too. At first. In fact, she thought at first—Thorpe had conceived the Fornits two years before, while he was drafting *Underworld Figures*—that it was just Reg, having her on. And maybe at first he was. It seems to have progressed from a whimsey to a superstition to an outright belief. It was . . . a flexible fantasy. But hard in the end. Very hard."

They were all silent. The grins had faded.

"The Fornits had their funny side," the editor said. "Thorpe's typewriter started going to the shop a lot near the end of their stay in New York, and it was even a more frequent thing when they moved to Omaha. He had a loaner while it was being fixed for the first time out there. The dealership manager called a few days after Reg got his own machine back to tell him he was going to send a bill for cleaning the loaner as well as Thorpe's own machine."

"What was the trouble?" the agent's wife asked.

“I think I know,” the writer’s wife said.

“It was full of food,” the editor said. “Tiny bits of cake and cookies. There was peanut butter smeared on the platens of the keys themselves. Reg was feeding the Fornit in his typewriter. He also ‘fed’ the loaner, on the off chance that the Fornit had made the switch.”

“Boy,” the writer said.

“I knew none of these things then, you understand. For the nonce, I wrote back to him and told him how pleased I was. My secretary typed the letter and brought it in for my signature, and then she had to go out for something. I signed it and she wasn’t back. And then—for no real reason at all—I put the same doodle below my name. Pyramid. Eye. And ‘Fomit Some Fornus.’ Crazy. The secretary saw it and asked me if I wanted it sent out that way. I shrugged and told her to go ahead.

“Two days later Jane Thorpe called me. She told me that my letter had excited Reg a great deal. Reg thought he had found a kindred soul . . . someone else who knew about the Fornits. You see what a crazy situation it was getting to be? As far as I knew at that point, a Fornit could have been anything from a lefthanded monkey wrench to a Polish steak knife. Ditto fornus. I explained to Jane that I had merely copied Reg’s own design. She wanted to know why. I slipped the question, although the answer would have been because I was very drunk when I signed the letter.”

He paused, and an uncomfortable silence fell on the back lawn area. People looked at the sky, the lake, the trees, although they were no more interesting now than they had been a minute or two before.

“I had been drinking all my adult life, and it’s impossible for me to say when it began to get out of control. In the professional sense I was on top of the bottle until nearly the very end. I would begin drinking at lunch and come back to the office *el blotto*. I functioned perfectly well there, however. It was the drinks after work—first on the train, then at home—that pushed me over the functional point.

“My wife and I had been having problems that were unrelated to the drinking, but the drinking made the other problems worse. For a

long time she had been preparing to leave, and a week before the Reg Thorpe story came in, she did it.

“I was trying to deal with that when the Thorpe story came in. I was drinking too much. And to top it all off, I was having—well, I guess now it’s fashionable to call it a mid-life crisis. All I knew at the time was that I was as depressed about my professional life as I was about my personal one. I was coming to grips—or trying to—with a growing feeling that editing mass-market stories that would end up being read by nervous dental patients, housewives at lunchtime, and an occasional bored college student was not exactly a noble occupation. I was coming to grips—again, trying to, all of us at *Logan’s* were at that time—with the idea that in another six months, or ten, or fourteen, there might not be any Logan’s.

“Into this dull autumnal landscape of middle-aged angst comes a very good story by a very good writer, a funny, energetic look at the mechanics of going crazy. It was like a bright ray of sun. I know it sounds strange to say that about a story that ends with the protagonist killing his wife and infant child, but you ask any editor what real joy is, and he’ll tell you it’s the great story or novel you didn’t expect, landing on your desk like a big Christmas present. Look, you all know that Shirley Jackson story, ‘The Lottery.’ It ends on one of the most downbeat notes you can imagine. I mean, they take a nice lady out and stone her to death. Her son and daughter participate in her murder, for Christ’s sake. But it was a great piece of storytelling . . . and I bet the editor at the *New Yorker* who read the story first went home that night whistling.

“What I’m trying to say is the Thorpe story was the best thing in my life right then. The one good thing. And from what his wife told me on the phone that day, my acceptance of that story was the one good thing that had happened to him lately. The author-editor relationship is always mutual parasitism, but in the case of Reg and me, that parasitism was heightened to an unnatural degree.”

“Let’s go back to Jane Thorpe,” the writer’s wife said.

“Yes, I did sort of leave her on a side-track, didn’t I? She was angry about the Fornit business. At first. I told her I had simply

doodled that eye-and-pyramid symbol under my signature, with no knowledge of what it might be, and apologized for whatever I'd done.

"She got over her anger and spilled everything to me. She'd been getting more and more anxious, and she had no one at all to talk to. Her folks were dead, and all her friends were back in New York. Reg wouldn't allow anyone at all in the house. They were tax people, he said, or FBI, or CIA. Not long after they moved to Omaha, a little girl came to the door selling Girl Scout cookies. Reg yelled at her, told her to get the hell out, he knew why she was there, and so on. Jane tried to reason with him. She pointed out that the girl had only been ten years old. Reg told her that the tax people had no souls, no consciences. And besides, he said, the little girl might have been an android. Androids wouldn't be subject to the child-labor laws. He wouldn't put it past the tax people to send an android Girl Scout full of radium crystals to find out if he was keeping any secrets . . . and to shoot him full of cancer rays in the meantime."

"Good Lord," the agent's wife said.

"She'd been waiting for a friendly voice and mine was the first. I got the Girl Scout story, I found out about the care and feeding of Fornits, about fornus, about how Reg refused to use a telephone. She was talking to me from a pay booth in a drugstore five blocks over. She told me that she was afraid it wasn't really tax men or FBI or CIA Reg was worried about. She thought he was really afraid that *They*—some hulking, anonymous group that hated Reg, was jealous of Reg, would stop at nothing to get Reg—had found out about his Fornit and wanted to kill it. If the Fornit was dead, there would be no more novels, no more short stories, nothing. You see? The essence of insanity. *They* were out to get him. In the end, not even the IRS, which had given him the very devil of a time over the income *Underworld Figures* generated, would serve as the boogeyman. In the end it was just *They*. The perfect paranoid fantasy. *They* wanted to kill his Fornit."

"My God, what did you say to her?" the agent asked.

"I tried to reassure her," the editor said. "There I was, freshly returned from a five-martini lunch, talking to this terrified woman who was standing in a drugstore phone booth in Omaha, trying to tell her

it was all right, not to worry that her husband believed that the phones were full of radium crystals, that a bunch of anonymous people were sending android Girl Scouts to get the goods on him, not to worry that her husband had disconnected his talent from his mentality to such a degree that he could believe there was an elf living in his typewriter.

“I don’t believe I was very convincing.

“She asked me—no, begged me—to work with Reg on his story, to see that it got published. She did everything but come out and say that ‘The Flexible Bullet’ was Reg’s last contact to what we laughingly call reality.

“I asked her what I should do if Reg mentioned Fornits again. ‘Humor him,’ she said. Her exact words—humor him. And then she hung up.

“There was a letter in the mail from Reg the next day—five pages, typed, single-spaced. The first paragraph was about the story. The second draft was getting on well, he said. He thought he would be able to shave seven hundred words from the original ten thousand five hundred, bringing the final down to a tight nine thousand eight.

“The rest of the letter was about Fornits and fornus. His own observations, and questions . . . dozens of questions.”

“Observations?” The writer leaned forward. “He was actually seeing them, then?”

“No,” the editor said. “Not seeing them in an actual sense, but in another way . . . I suppose he was. You know, astronomers knew Pluto was there long before they had a telescope powerful enough to see it. They knew all about it by studying the planet Neptune’s orbit. Reg was observing the Fornits in that way. They liked to eat at night, he said, had I noticed that? He fed them at all hours of the day, but he noticed that most of it disappeared after eight P.M.”

“Hallucination?” the writer asked.

“No,” the editor said. “His wife simply cleared as much of the food out of the typewriter as she could when Reg went out for his evening walk. And he went out every evening at nine o’clock.”

“I’d say she had quite a nerve getting after you,” the agent grunted. He shifted his large bulk in the lawn chair. “She was feeding

the man's fantasy herself."

"You don't understand why she called and why she was so upset," the editor said quietly. He looked at the writer's wife. "But I'll bet you do, Meg."

"Maybe," she said, and gave her husband an uncomfortable sideways look. "She wasn't mad because you were feeding his fantasy. She was afraid you might upset it."

"Bravo." The editor lit a fresh cigarette. "And she removed the food for the same reason. If the food continued to accumulate in the typewriter, Reg would make the logical assumption, proceeding directly from his own decidedly illogical premise. Namely, that his Fornit had either died or left. Hence, no more fornus. Hence, no more writing. Hence . . ."

The editor let the word drift away on cigarette smoke and then resumed:

"He thought that Fornits were probably nocturnal. They didn't like loud noises—he had noticed that he hadn't been able to write on mornings after noisy parties—they hated the TV, they hated free electricity, they hated radium. Reg had sold their TV to Goodwill for twenty dollars, he said, and his wristwatch with the radium dial was long gone. Then the questions. How did I know about Fornits? Was it possible that I had one in residence? If so, what did I think about this, this, and that? I don't need to be more specific, I think. If you've ever gotten a dog of a particular breed and can recollect the questions you asked about its care and feeding, you'll know most of the questions Reg asked me. One little doodle below my signature was all it took to open Pandora's box."

"What did you write back?" the agent asked.

The editor said slowly, "That's where the trouble really began. For both of us. Jane had said, 'Humor him,' so that's what I did. Unfortunately, I rather overdid it. I answered his letter at home, and I was very drunk. The apartment seemed much too empty. It had a stale smell—cigarette smoke, not enough airing. Things were going to seed with Sandra gone. The dropcloth on the couch all wrinkled. Dirty dishes in the sink, that sort of thing. The middle-aged man unprepared for domesticity.

“I sat there with a sheet of my personal stationery rolled into the typewriter and I thought: *I need a Fornit. In fact, I need a dozen of them to dust this damn lonely house with fornus from end to end.* In that instant I was drunk enough to envy Reg Thorpe his delusion.

“I said I had a Fornit, of course. I told Reg that mine was remarkably similar to his in its characteristics. Nocturnal. Hated loud noises, but seemed to enjoy Bach and Brahms . . . I often did my best work after an evening of listening to them, I said. I had found my Fornit had a decided taste for Kirschner’s bologna . . . had Reg ever tried it? I simply left little scraps of it near the Scripto I always carried—my editorial blue pencil, if you like—and it was almost always gone in the morning. Unless, as Reg said, it had been noisy the night before. I told him I was glad to know about radium, even though I didn’t have a glow-in-the-dark wristwatch. I told him my Fornit had been with me since college. I got so carried away with my own invention that I wrote nearly six pages. At the end I added a paragraph about the story, a very perfunctory thing, and signed it.” “And below your signature—?” the agent’s wife asked.

“Sure. Fornit Some Fornus.” He paused. “You can’t see it in the dark, but I’m blushing. I was so goddammed drunk, so goddammed *smug* . . . I might have had second thoughts in the cold light of dawn, but by then it was too late.”

“You’d mailed it the night before?” the writer murmured.

“So I did. And then, for a week and a half, I held my breath and waited. One day the manuscript came in, addressed to me, no covering letter. The cuts were as we had discussed them, and I thought that the story was letter-perfect, but the manuscript was . . . well, I put it in my briefcase, took it home, and retyped it myself. It was covered with weird yellow stains. I thought . . .”

“Urine?” the agent’s wife asked.

“Yes, that’s what I thought. But it wasn’t. And when I got home, there was a letter in my mailbox from Reg. Ten pages this time. In the course of the letter the yellow stains were accounted for. He hadn’t been able to find Kirschner’s bologna, so had tried Jordan’s.

“He said they loved it. Especially with mustard.

“I had been quite sober that day. But his letter combined with those pitiful mustard stains ground right into the pages of his manuscript sent me directly to the liquor cabinet. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. Go directly to drunk. ”

“What else did the letter say?” the agent’s wife asked. She had grown more and more fascinated with the tale, and was now leaning over her not inconsiderable belly in a posture that reminded the writer’s wife of Snoopy standing on his doghouse and pretending to be a vulture.

“Only two lines about the story this time. All credit thrown to the Fornit . . . and to me. The bologna had really been a fantastic idea. Rackne loved it, and as a consequence—”

“Rackne?” the author asked.

“That was the Fornit’s name,” the editor said. “Rackne. As a consequence of the bologna, Rackne had really gotten behind in the rewrite. The rest of the letter was a paranoid chant. You have never seen such stuff in your life.”

“Reg and Rackne . . . a marriage made in heaven,” the writer’s wife said, and giggled nervously.

“Oh, not at all,” the editor said. “Theirs was a working relationship. And Rackne was male.”

“Well, tell us about the letter.”

“That’s one I don’t have by heart. It’s just as well for you that I don’t. Even abnormality grows tiresome after a while. The mailman was CIA. The paperboy was FBI; Reg had seen a silenced revolver in his sack of papers. The people next door were spies of some sort; they had surveillance equipment in their van. He no longer dared to go down to the corner store for supplies because the proprietor was an android. He had suspected it before, he said, but now he was sure. He had seen the wires crisscrossing under the man’s scalp, where he was beginning to go bald. And the radium count in his house was way up; at night he could see a dull, greenish glow in the rooms.

“His letter finished this way: ‘I hope you’ll write back and apprise me of your own situation (and that of your Fornit) as regards *enemies*, Henry. I believe that reaching you has been an occurrence

that transcends coincidence. I would call it a life-ring from (God? Providence? Fate? supply your own term) at the last possible instant.

“ ‘It is not possible for a man to stand alone for long against a thousand *enemies*. And to discover, at last, that one is *not* alone . . . is it too much to say that the commonality of our experience stands between myself and total destruction? Perhaps not. I must know: are the *enemies* after your Fornit as they are after Rackne? If so, how are you coping? If not, do you have any idea *why not*? I repeat, *I must know.*’

“The letter was signed with the Fornit Some Fornus doodle beneath, and then a P.S. Just one sentence. But lethal. The P.S. said: ‘Sometimes I wonder about my wife.’

“I read the letter through three times. In the process, I killed an entire bottle of Black Velvet. I began to consider options on how to answer his letter. It was a cry for help from a drowning man, that was pretty obvious. The story had held him together for a while, but now the story was done. Now he was depending on me to hold him together. Which was perfectly reasonable, since I’d brought the whole thing on myself.

“I walked up and down the house, through all the empty rooms. And I started to unplug things. I was very drunk, remember, and heavy drinking opens unexpected avenues of suggestibility. Which is why editors and lawyers are willing to spring for three drinks before talking contract at lunch.”

The agent brayed laughter, but the mood remained tight and tense and uncomfortable.

“And please keep in mind that Reg Thorpe was one hell of a writer. He was absolutely convinced of the things he was saying. FBI. CIA. IRS. They. *The enemies*. Some writers possess a very rare gift for cooling their prose the more passionately they feel their subject. Steinbeck had it, so did Hemingway, and Reg Thorpe had that same talent. When you entered his world, everything began to seem very logical. You began to think it very likely, once you accepted the basic Fornit premise, that the paperboy *did* have a silenced .38 in his bag of papers. That the college kids next door with the van might indeed

be KGB agents with death-capsules in wax molars, on a do-or-die mission to kill or capture Rackne.

“Of course, I didn’t accept the basic premise. But it seemed so hard to think. And I unplugged things. First the color TV, because everybody knows that they really do give off radiation. At *Logan’s* we had published an article by a perfectly reputable scientist suggesting that the radiation given off by the household color television was interrupting human brainwaves just enough to alter them minutely but permanently. This scientist suggested that it might be the reason for declining college-board scores, literacy tests, and grammar-school development of arithmetical skills. After all, who sits closer to the TV than a little kid?

“So I unplugged the TV, and it really did seem to clarify my thoughts. In fact, it made it so much better that I unplugged the radio, the toaster, the washing machine, the dryer. Then I remembered the microwave oven, and I unplugged that. I felt a real sense of relief when that fucking thing’s teeth were pulled. It was one of the early ones, about the size of a house, and it probably really *was* dangerous. Shielding on them’s better these days.

“It occurred to me just how many things we have in any ordinary middle-class house that plug into the wall. An image occurred to me of this nasty electrical octopus, its tentacles consisting of electrical cables, all snaking into the walls, all connected with wires outside, and all the wires leading to power stations run by the government.

“There was a curious doubling in my mind as I did those things,” the editor went on, after pausing for a sip of his Fresca. “Essentially, I was responding to a superstitious impulse. There are plenty of people who won’t walk under ladders or open an umbrella in the house. There are basketball players who cross themselves before taking foul shots and baseball players who change their socks when they’re in a slump. I think it’s the rational mind playing a bad stereo accompaniment with the irrational subconscious. Forced to define ‘irrational subconscious,’ I would say that it is a small padded room inside all of us, where the only furnishing is a small card table, and the only thing on the card table is a revolver loaded with flexible bullets.

“When you change course on the sidewalk to avoid the ladder or step out of your apartment into the rain with your furled umbrella, part of your integrated self peels off and steps into that room and picks the gun up off the table. You may be aware of two conflicting thoughts: *Walking under a ladder is harmless, and Not walking under a ladder is also harmless.* But as soon as the ladder is behind you—or as soon as the umbrella is open—you’re back together again.”

The writer said, “That’s very interesting. Take it a step further for me, if you don’t mind. When does that irrational part actually stop fooling with the gun and put it up to its temple?”

The editor said, “When the person in question starts writing letters to the op-ed page of the paper demanding that all the ladders be taken down because walking under them is dangerous. ”

There was a laugh.

“Having taken it that far, I suppose we ought to finish. The irrational self has actually fired the flexible bullet into the brain when the person begins tearing around town, knocking ladders over and maybe injuring the people that were working on them. It is not certifiable behavior to walk around ladders rather than under them. It is not certifiable behavior to write letters to the paper saying that New York City went broke because of all the people callously walking under workmen’s ladders. But it is certifiable to start knocking over ladders.”

“Because it’s overt,” the writer muttered.

The agent said, “You know, you’ve got something there, Henry. I’ve got this thing about not lighting three cigarettes on a match. I don’t know how I got it, but I did. Then I read somewhere that it came from the trench warfare in World War I. It seems that the German sharpshooters would wait for the Tommies to start lighting each other’s cigarettes. On the first light, you got the range. On the second one, you got the windage. And on the third one, you blew the guy’s head off. But knowing all that didn’t make any difference. I still can’t light three on a match. One part of me says it doesn’t matter if I light a dozen cigarettes on one match. But the other part—this very ominous voice, like an interior Boris Karloff—says ‘*Ohhhh, if you dooo . . .*’ ”

“But all madness isn’t superstitious, is it?” the writer’s wife asked timidly.

“Isn’t it?” the editor replied. “Jeanne d’Arc heard voices from heaven. Some people think they are possessed by demons. Others see gremlins . . . or devils . . . or Fornits. The terms we use for madness suggest superstition in some form or other. Mania . . . abnormality . . . irrationality . . . lunacy . . . insanity. For the mad person, reality has skewed. The whole person begins to reintegrate in that small room where the pistol is.

“But the rational part of me was still very much there. Bloody, bruised, indignant, and rather frightened, but still on the job. Saying: ‘Oh, that’s all right. Tomorrow when you sober up, you can plug everything back in, thank God. Play your games if you have to. But no more than this. No further than this.’

“That rational voice was right to be frightened. There’s something in us that is very much attracted to madness. Everyone who looks off the edge of a tall building has felt at least a faint, morbid urge to jump. And anyone who has ever put a loaded pistol up to his head . . .”

“Ugh, don’t,” the writer’s wife said. “Please.”

“All right,” the editor said. “My point is just this: even the most well-adjusted person is holding on to his or her sanity by a greased rope. I really believe that. The rationality circuits are shoddily built into the human animal.

“With the plugs pulled, I went into my study, wrote Reg Thorpe a letter, put it in an envelope, stamped it, took it out and mailed it. I don’t actually remember doing any of these things. I was too drunk. But I deduce that I did them because when I got up the next morning, the carbon was still by my typewriter, along with the stamps and the box of envelopes. The letter was about what you’d expect from a drunk. What it boiled down to was this: the enemies were drawn by electricity as well as by the Fornits themselves. Get rid of the electricity and you got rid of the enemies. At the bottom I had written, ‘The electricity is fucking up your thinking about these things, Reg. Interference with brainwaves. Does your wife have a blender?’”

“In effect, you had started writing letters to the paper,” the writer said.

“Yes. I wrote that letter on a Friday night. On Saturday morning I got up around eleven, hung over and only blurrily aware of what sort of mischief I’d been up to the night before. Great pangs of shame as I plugged everything back in. Greater pangs of shame—and fear—when I saw what I’d written to Reg. I looked all over the house for the original to that letter, hoping like hell I hadn’t mailed it. But I had. And the way I got through that day was by making a resolution to take my lumps like a man and go on the wagon. Sure I was.

“The following Wednesday there was a letter from Reg. One page, handwritten. Fornit Some Fornus doodles all over it. In the center, just this: ‘You were right. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Reg. You were right. Everything is fine now. Reg. Thanks a lot. Reg. Fornit is fine. Reg. Thanks. Reg.’ ”

“Oh, my,” the writer’s wife said.

“Bet his wife was mad,” the agent’s wife said.

“But she wasn’t. Because it worked.”

“Worked?” the agent said.

“He got my letter in the Monday-morning post. Monday afternoon he went down to the local power-company office and told them to cut his power off. Jane Thorpe, of course, was hysterical. Her range ran on electricity, she did indeed have a blender, a sewing machine, a washer-dryer combination . . . well, you understand. On Monday evening I’m sure she was ready to have my head on a plate.

“But it was Reg’s behavior that made her decide I was a miracle worker instead of a lunatic. He sat her down in the living room and talked to her quite rationally. He said that he knew he’d been acting in a peculiar fashion. He knew that she’d been worried. He told her that he felt much better with the power off, and that he would be glad to help her through any inconvenience that it caused. And then he suggested that they go next door and say hello.”

“Not to the KGB agents with the radium in their van?” the writer asked.

“Yes, to them. Jane was totally floored. She agreed to go over with him but she told me that she was girding herself up for a really nasty

scene. Accusations, threats, hysteria. She had begun to consider leaving Reg if he wouldn't get help for his problem. She told me that Wednesday morning on the phone that she had made herself a promise: the power was the next-to-the-last straw. One more thing, and she was going to leave for New York. She was becoming afraid, you see. The thing had worsened by such degrees as to be nearly imperceptible, and she loved him, but even for her it had gotten as far as it could go. She had decided that if Reg said one strange word to the students next door, she was going to break up housekeeping. I found out much later that she had already asked some very circumspect questions about the procedure in Nebraska to effect an involuntary committal."

"The poor woman," the writer's wife murmured.

"But the evening was a smashing success," the editor said. "Reg was at his most charming . . . and according to Jane, that was very charming indeed. She hadn't seen him so much on in three years. The sullenness, the secretiveness, they were gone. The nervous tics. The involuntary jump and look over his shoulder whenever a door opened. He had a beer and talked about all the topics that were current back in those dim dead days: the war, the possibilities of a volunteer army, the riots in the cities, the pot laws.

"The fact that he had written *Underworld Figures* came up, and they were . . . 'author-struck' was the way Jane put it. Three of the four had read it, and you can bet the odd one wasn't going to linger any on his way to the library."

The writer laughed and nodded. He knew about that bit.

"So," the editor said, "we leave Reg Thorpe and his wife for just a little while, without electrical power but happier than they've been in a good long time—"

"Good thing he didn't have an IBM typewriter," the agent said.

"—and return to Ye Editor. Two weeks have gone by. Summer is ending. Ye Editor has, of course, fallen off the wagon any number of times, but has managed on the whole to remain pretty respectable. The days have gone their appointed rounds. At Cape Kennedy, they are getting ready to put a man on the moon. The new issue of *Logan's*, with John Lindsay on the cover, is out on the stands, and

selling miserably, as usual. I had put in a purchase order for a short story called 'The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,' by Reg Thorpe, first serial rights, proposed publication January 1970, proposed purchase price \$800, which was standard then for a *Logan's* lead story.

"I got a buzz from my superior, Jim Dohegan. Could I come up and see him? I trotted into his office at ten in the morning, looking and feeling my very best. It didn't occur to me until later that Janey Morrison, his secretary, looked like a wake in progress.

"I sat down and asked Jim what I could do for him, or vice versa. I won't say the Reg Thorpe name hadn't entered my mind; having the story was a tremendous coup for *Logan's*, and I suspected a few congratulations were in order. So you can imagine how dumbfounded I was when he slid two purchase orders across the desk at me. The Thorpe story, and a John Updike novella we had scheduled as the February fiction lead. RETURN stamped across both.

"I looked at the revoked purchase orders. I looked at Jimmy. I couldn't make any of it out. I really couldn't get my brains to work over what it meant. There was a block in there. I looked around and I saw his hot plate. Janey brought it in for him every morning when she came to work and plugged it in so he could have fresh coffee when he wanted it. That had been the drill at *Logan's* for three years or more. And that morning all I could think of was, *if that thing was unplugged, I could think. I know if that thing was unplugged, I could put this together.*

"I said, 'What is this, Jim?'

" 'I'm sorry as hell to have to be the one to tell you this, Henry,' he said. '*Logan's* isn't going to be publishing any more fiction as of January 1970.' "

The editor paused to get a cigarette, but his pack was empty. "Does anyone have a cigarette?"

The writer's wife gave him a Salem.

"Thank you, Meg."

He lit it, shook out the match, and dragged deep. The coal glowed mellowly in the dark.

“Well,” he said, “I’m sure Jim thought I was crazy. I said, ‘Do you mind?’ and leaned over and pulled the plug on his hot plate.

“His mouth dropped open and he said, ‘What the hell, Henry?’

“ ‘It’s hard for me to think with things like that going,’ I said. ‘Interference.’ And it really seemed to be true, because with the plug pulled, I was able to see the situation a great deal more clearly. ‘Does this mean I’m pinked?’ I asked him.

“ ‘ don’t know,’ he said. ‘That’s up to Sam and the board. I just don’t know, Henry.’

“There were a lot of things I could have said. I guess what Jimmy was expecting was a passionate plea for my job. You know that saying, ‘He had his ass out to the wind’? . . . I maintain that you don’t understand the meaning of that phrase until you’re the head of a suddenly nonexistent department.

“But I didn’t plead my cause or the cause of fiction at *Logan’s*. I pleaded for Reg Thorpe’s story. First I said that we could move it up over the deadline—put it in the December issue.

“Jimmy said, ‘Come on, Henry, the December ish is locked up. You know that. And we’re talking ten thousand words here.’

“ ‘Nine-thousand-eight,’ I said.

“ ‘And a full-page illo,’ he said. ‘Forget it.’

“ ‘Well, we’ll scrap the art,’ I said. ‘Listen, Jimmy, it’s a great story, maybe the best fiction we’ve had in the last five years.’

“Jimmy said, ‘I read it, Henry. I know it’s a great story. But we just can’t do it. Not in December. It’s Christmas, for God’s sake, and you want to put a story about a guy who kills his wife and kid under the Christmas trees of America? You must be—’ He stopped right there, but I saw him glance over at his hot plate. He might as well have said it out loud, you know?”

The writer nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving the dark shadow that was the editor’s face.

“I started to get a headache. A very small headache at first. It was getting hard to think again. I remembered that Janey Morrison had an electric pencil sharpener on her desk. There were all those fluorescents in Jim’s office. The heaters. The vending machines in the concession down the hall. When you stopped to think of it, the

whole fucking building ran on electricity; it was a wonder that anyone could get anything done. That was when the idea began to creep in, I think. The idea that *Logan's* was going broke because no one could think straight. And the reason no one could think straight was because we were all cooped up in this highrise building that ran on electricity. Our brainwaves were completely messed up. I remember thinking that if you could have gotten a doctor in there with one of those EEG machines, they'd get some awfully weird graphs. Full of those big, spiky alpha waves that characterize malignant tumors in the forebrain.

"Just thinking about those things made my headache worse. But I gave it one more try. I asked him if he would at least ask Sam Vadar, the editor-in-chief, to let the story stand in the January issue. As *Logan's* fiction valedictory, if necessary. The final *Logan's* short story.

"Jimmy was fiddling with a pencil and nodding. He said, 'I'll bring it up, but you know it's not going to fly. We've got a story by a one-shot novelist and we've got a story by John Updike that's just as good . . . maybe better . . . and—'

"*'The Updike story is not better!'* I said.

"Well, Jesus, Henry, you don't have to shout—'

"*'I am not shouting!'* I shouted.

"He looked at me for a long time. My headache was quite bad by then. I could hear the fluorescents buzzing away. They sounded like a bunch of flies caught in a bottle. It was a really hateful sound. And I thought I could hear Janey running her electric pencil sharpener. *They're doing it on purpose, I thought. They want to mess me up. They know I can't think of the right things to say while those things are running, so . . . so . . .*

"Jim was saying something about bringing it up at the next editorial meeting, suggesting that instead of an arbitrary cutoff date they publish all the stories which I had verbally contracted for . . . although . . .

"I got up, went across the room, and shut off the lights.

"What did you do that for?' Jimmy asked.

"You know why I did it,' I said. 'You ought to get out of here, Jimmy, before there's nothing left of you.'

“He got up and came over to me. ‘I think you ought to take the rest of the day off, Henry,’ he said. ‘Go home. Rest. I know you’ve been under a strain lately. I want you to know I’ll do the best I can on this. I feel as strongly as you do . . . well, almost as strongly. But you ought to just go home and put your feet up and watch some TV.’

“ ‘TV,’ I said, and laughed. It was the funniest thing I’d ever heard. ‘Jimmy,’ I said. ‘You tell Sam Vadar something else for me.’

“ ‘What’s that, Henry?’

“ ‘Tell him he needs a Fornit. This whole outfit. One Fornit? A dozen of them.’

“ ‘A Fornit,’ he said, nodding. ‘Okay, Henry. I’ll be sure to tell him that.’

“My headache was very bad. I could hardly even see. Somewhere in the back of my mind I was already wondering how I was going to tell Reg and wondering how Reg was going to take it.

“ ‘I’ll put in the purchase order myself, if I can find out who to send it to,’ I said. ‘Reg might have some ideas. A dozen Fornits. Get them to dust this place with fornus from end to end. Shut off the fucking power, all of it.’ I was walking around his office and Jimmy was staring at me with his mouth open. ‘Shut off all the power, Jimmy, you tell them that. Tell Sam that. No one can think with all that electrical interference, am I right?’

“ ‘You’re right, Henry, one hundred percent. You just go on home and get some rest, okay? Take a nap or something.’

“ ‘And Fornits. They don’t like all that interference. Radium, electricity, it’s all the same thing. Feed them bologna. Cake. Peanut butter. Can we get requisitions for that stuff?’ My headache was this black ball of pain behind my eyes. I was seeing two of Jimmy, two of everything. All of a sudden I needed a drink. If there was no fornus, and the rational side of my mind assured me there was not, then a drink was the only thing in the world that would get me right.

“ ‘Sure, we can get the requisitions,’ he said.

“ ‘You don’t believe any of this, do you, Jimmy?’ I asked.

“ ‘Sure I do. It’s okay. You just want to go home and rest a little while.’

“ ‘You don’t believe it now,’ I said, ‘but maybe you will when this rag goes into bankruptcy. How in the name of God can you believe you’re making rational decisions when you’re sitting less than fifteen yards from a bunch of Coke machines and candy machines and sandwich machines?’ Then I really had a terrible thought. ‘*And a microwave oven!*’ I screamed at him. ‘*They got a microwave oven to heat the sandwiches up in!*’

“He started to say something, but I didn’t pay any attention. I ran out. Thinking of that microwave oven explained everything. I had to get away from it. That was what made the headache so bad. I remember seeing Janey and Kate Younger from the ad department and Mert Strong from publicity in the outer office, all of them staring at me. They must have heard me shouting.

“My office was on the floor just below. I took the stairs. I went into my office, turned off all the lights, and got my briefcase. I took the elevator down to the lobby, but I put my briefcase between my feet and poked my fingers in my ears. I also remember the other three or four people in the elevator looking at me rather strangely.” The editor uttered a dry chuckle. “They were scared. So to speak. Cooped up in a little moving box with an obvious madman, you would have been scared, too.”

“Oh, surely, *that’s* a little strong,” the agent’s wife said.

“Not at all. Madness has to start *somewhere*. If this story’s *about* anything—if events in one’s own life can ever be said to be *about* anything—then this is a story about the genesis of insanity. Madness has to start somewhere, and it has to go somewhere. Like a road. Or a bullet from the barrel of a gun. I was still miles behind Reg Thorpe, but I was over the line. You bet.

“I had to go somewhere, so I went to Four Fathers, a bar on Forty-ninth. I remember picking that bar specifically because there was no juke and no color TV and not many lights. I remember ordering the first drink. After that I don’t remember anything until I woke up the next day in my bed at home. There was puke on the floor and a very large cigarette burn in the sheet over me. In my stupor I had apparently escaped dying in one of two extremely nasty ways—choking or burning. Not that I probably would have felt either.”

“Jesus,” the agent said, almost respectfully.

“It was a blackout,” the editor said. “The first real bona fide blackout of my life—but they’re always a sign of the end, and you never have very many. One way or the other, you never have very many. But any alcoholic will tell you that a blackout isn’t the same as *passing* out. It would save a lot of trouble if it was. No, when an alky blacks out, he keeps *doing* things. An alky in a blackout is a busy little devil. Sort of like a malign Fornit. He’ll call up his ex-wife and abuse her over the phone, or drive his car the wrong way on the turnpike and wipe out a carload of kids. He’ll quit his job, rob a market, give away his wedding ring. Busy little devils.

“What *I* had done, apparently, was to come home and write a letter. Only this one wasn’t to Reg. It was to me. And *I* didn’t write it—at least, according to the *letter* I didn’t.”

“Who did?” the writer’s wife asked.

“Bellis.”

“Who’s Bellis?”

“His Fornit,” the writer said almost absently. His eyes were shadowy and faraway.

“Yes, that’s right,” the editor said, not looking a bit surprised. He made the letter in the sweet night air for them again, indenting at the proper points with his finger.

“ ‘Hello from Bellis. I am sorry for your problems, my friend, but would like to point out at the start that you are not the only one with problems. This is no easy job for me. I can dust your damned machine with fornus from now unto forever, but moving the KEYS is supposed to be your job. That’s what God made big people FOR. So I sympathize, but that’s all of the sympathy you get.

“ ‘I understand your worry about Reg Thorpe. I worry not about Thorpe but my brother, Rackne. Thorpe worries about what will happen to him if Rackne leaves, but only because he is selfish. The curse of serving writers is that they are *all* selfish. He worries not about what will happen to Rackne if THORPE leaves. Or goes *e/ bonzo seco*. Those things have apparently never crossed his oh-so-sensitive mind. But, luckily for us, all our unfortunate problems have the same short-term solution, and so I strain my arms and my tiny

body to give it to you, my drunken friend. YOU may wonder about long-term solutions; I assure you there are none. All wounds are mortal. Take what's given. You sometimes get a little slack in the rope but the rope always has an end. So what. Bless the slack and don't waste breath cursing the drop. A grateful heart knows that in the end we all swing.

“ ‘You must pay him for the story yourself. But not with a personal check. Thorpe's mental problems are severe and perhaps dangerous but this in no way indicates stupidity.’ ”

The editor stopped here and spelled: *S-t-u-p-i-d-d-i-t-y*. Then he went on. “ ‘If you give him a personal check he'll crack wise in about nine seconds.

“ ‘Withdraw eight hundred and some few-odd dollars from your personal account and have your bank open a new account for you in the name Arvin Publishing, Inc. Make sure they understand you want checks that look businesslike—nothing with cute dogs or canyon vistas on them. Find a friend, someone you can trust, and list him as co-drawer. When the checks arrive, make one for eight hundred dollars and have the co-drawer sign the check. Send the check to Reg Thorpe. That will cover your ass for the time being.

“ ‘Over and out.’ It was signed ‘Bellis.’ Not in holograph. In type.”

“Whew,” the writer said again.

“When I got up the first thing I noticed was the typewriter. It looked like somebody had made it up as a ghost-typewriter in a cheap movie. The day before it was an old black office Underwood. When I got up—with a head that felt about the size of North Dakota—it was a sort of gray. The last few sentences of the letter were clumped up and faded. I took one look and figured my faithful old Underwood was probably finished. I took a taste and went out into the kitchen. There was an open bag of confectioner's sugar on the counter with a scoop in it. There was confectioner's sugar everywhere between the kitchen and the little den where I did my work in those days.”

“Feeding your Fornit,” the writer said. “Bellis had a sweet tooth. You thought so, anyway.”

“Yes. But even as sick and hung over as I was, I knew perfectly well who the Fornit was.”

He ticked off the points on his fingers.

“First, Bellis was my mother’s maiden name.

“Second, that phrase *el bonzo seco*. It was a private phrase my brother and I used to use to mean crazy. Back when we were kids.

“Third, and in a way most damning, was that spelling of the word ‘stupidity.’ It’s one of those words I habitually misspell. I had an almost screamingly literate writer once who used to spell ‘refrigerator’ with a d—‘refridgerator’—no matter how many times the copy editors blooped it. And for this guy, who had a doctoral degree from Princeton, ‘ugly’ was always going to be ‘ughly.’ ”

The writer’s wife uttered a sudden laugh—it was both embarrassed and cheerful. “I do that.”

“All I’m saying is that a man’s misspellings—or a woman’s—are his literary fingerprints. Ask any copy editor who has done the same writer a few times.

“No, Bellis was me and I was Bellis. Yet the advice was damned good advice. In fact, I thought it was *great* advice. But here’s something else—the subconscious leaves its fingerprints, but there’s a stranger down there, too. A hell of a weird guy who knows a hell of a lot. I’d never seen that phrase ‘co-drawer’ in my life, to the best of my knowledge . . . but there it was, and it was a good one, and I found out some time later that banks actually use it.

“I picked up the phone to call a friend of mine, and this bolt of pain—incredible!—went through my head. I thought of Reg Thorpe and his radium and put the phone down in a hurry. I went to see the friend in person after I’d taken a shower and gotten a shave and had checked myself about nine times in the mirror to make sure my appearance approximated how a rational human being is supposed to look. Even so, he asked me a lot of questions and looked me over pretty closely. So I guess there must have been a few signs that a shower, a shave, and a good dose of Listerine couldn’t hide. He wasn’t in the biz, and that was a help. News has a way of traveling, you know. In the biz. So to speak. Also, if he’d been in the biz, he would have known Arvin Publishing, Inc., was responsible for *Logan’s* and would have wondered just what sort of scam I was trying to pull. But he wasn’t, he didn’t, and I was able to tell him it

was a self-publishing venture I was interested in since *Logan's* had apparently decided to eighty-six the fiction department.”

“Did he ask you why you were calling it Arvin Publishing?” the writer asked.

“Yes.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him,” the editor said, smiling a wintry smile, “that Arvin was my mother’s maiden name.”

There was a little pause, and then the editor resumed; he spoke almost uninterrupted to the end.

“So I began waiting for the printed checks, of which I wanted exactly one. I exercised to pass the time. You know—pick up the glass, flex the elbow, empty the glass, flex the elbow again. Until all that exercise wears you out and you just sort of fall forward with your head on the table. Other things happened, but those were the ones that really occupied my mind—the waiting and the flexing. As I remember. I have to reiterate that, because I was drunk a lot of the time, and for every single thing I remember, there are probably fifty or sixty I don’t.

“I quit my job—that caused a sigh of relief all around, I’m sure. From them because they didn’t have to perform the existential task of firing me for craziness from a department that was no longer in existence, me because I didn’t think I could ever face that building again—the elevator, the fluorescents, the phones, the thought of all that waiting electricity.

“I wrote Reg Thorpe and his wife a couple of letters each during that three-week period. I remember doing hers, but not his—like the letter from Bellis, I wrote those letters in blackout periods. But I hewed to my old work habits when I was blotto, just as I hewed to my old misspellings. I never failed to use a carbon . . . and when I came to the next morning, the carbons were lying around. It was like reading letters from a stranger.

“Not that the letters were crazy. Not at all. The one where I finished up with the P.S. about the blender was a lot worse. These letters seemed . . . almost reasonable.”

He stopped and shook his head, slowly and wearily.

“Poor Jane Thorpe. Not that things *appeared* to be all that bad at their end. It must have seemed to her that her husband’s editor was doing a very skillful—and humane—job of humoring him out of his deepening depression. The question of whether or not it’s a good idea to humor a person who has been entertaining all sorts of paranoid fantasies—fantasies which almost led in one case to an actual assault on a little girl—probably occurred to her; if so, she chose to ignore the negative aspects, because she was humoring him, too. Nor have I ever blamed her for it—he wasn’t just a meal ticket, some nag that was to be worked and humored, humored and worked until he was ready for the knacker’s shop; she loved the guy. In her own special way, Jane Thorpe was a great lady. And after living with Reg from the Early Times to the High Times and finally to the Crazy Times, I think she would have agreed with Bellis about blessing the slack and not wasting your breath cursing the drop. Of course, the more slack you get, the harder you snap when you finally fetch up at the end . . . but even that quick snap can be a blessing, I reckon—who wants to strangle?”

“I had return letters from both of them in that short period—remarkably sunny letters . . . although there was a strange, almost final quality to that sunlight. It seemed as if . . . well, never mind the cheap philosophy. If I can think of what I mean, I’ll say it. Let it go for now.”

“He was playing hearts with the kids next door every night, and by the time the leaves started to fall, they thought Reg Thorpe was just about God come down to earth. When they weren’t playing cards or tossing a Frisbee they were talking literature, with Reg gently rallying them through their paces. He’d gotten a puppy from the local animal shelter and walked it every morning and night, meeting other people on the block the way you do when you walk your mutt. People who’d decided the Thorpes were really very peculiar people now began to change their minds. When Jane suggested that, without electrical appliances, she could really use a little house help, Reg agreed at once. She was flabbergasted by his cheery acceptance of the idea. It wasn’t a question of money—after *Underworld Figures* they were rolling in dough—it was a question, Jane figured, of *they*. *They* were

everywhere, that was Reg's scripture, and what better agent for *they* than a cleaning woman that went everywhere in your house, looked under beds and in closets and probably in desk drawers as well, if they weren't locked and then nailed shut for good measure.

"But he told her to go right ahead, told her he felt like an insensitive clod not to've thought of it earlier, even though—she made a point of telling me this—he was doing most of the heavy chores, such as the hand-washing, himself. He only made one small request: that the woman not be allowed to come into his study.

"Best of all, most encouraging of all from Jane's standpoint, was the fact that Reg had gone back to work, this time on a new novel. She had read the first three chapters and thought they were marvelous. All of this, she said, had begun when I had accepted 'The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet' for *Logan's*—the period before that had been dead low ebb. And she blessed me for it.

"I am sure she really meant that last, but her blessing seemed to have no great warmth, and the sunniness of her letter was marred somehow—here we are, back to *that*. The sunshine in her letter was like sunshine on a day when you see those mackerel-scale clouds that mean it's going to rain like hell soon.

"All this good news—hearts and dog and cleaning woman and new novel—and yet she was too intelligent to really believe he was getting well again . . . or so I believed, even in my own fog. Reg had been exhibiting symptoms of psychosis. Psychosis is like lung cancer in one way—neither one of them clears up on its own, although both cancer patients and lunatics may have their good days.

"May I borrow another cigarette, dear?"

The writer's wife gave him one.

"After all," he resumed, bringing out the Ronson, "the signs of his *idée fixe* were all around her. No phone; no electricity. He'd put Reynolds Wrap over all of the switchplates. He was putting food in his typewriter as regularly as he put it into the new puppy's dish. The students next door thought he was a great guy, but the students next door didn't see Reg putting on rubber gloves to pick up the newspaper off the front stoop in the morning because of his radiation

fears. They didn't hear him moaning in his sleep, or have to soothe him when he woke up screaming with dreadful nightmares he couldn't remember.

"You, my dear"—he turned toward the writer's wife—"have been wondering why she stuck with him. Although you haven't said as much, it's been on your mind. Am I right?"

She nodded.

"Yes. And I'm not going to offer a long motivational thesis—the convenient thing about stories that are true is that you only need to say *this is what happened* and let people worry for themselves about the why. Generally, nobody ever knows why things happen anyway . . . particularly the ones who say they do.

"But in terms of Jane Thorpe's own selective perception, things *had* gotten one hell of a lot better. She interviewed a middle-aged black woman about the cleaning job, and brought herself to speak as frankly as she could about her husband's idiosyncrasies. The woman, Gertrude Rulin by name, laughed and said she'd done for people who were a whole lot stranger. Jane spent the first week of the Rulin woman's employ pretty much the way she'd spent that first visit with the young people next door—waiting for some crazy outburst. But Reg charmed her as completely as he'd charmed the kids, talking to her about her church work, her husband, and her youngest son, Jimmy, who, according to Gertrude, made Dennis the Menace look like the biggest bore in the first grade. She'd had eleven children in all, but there was a nine-year gap between Jimmy and his next oldest sib. He made things hard on her.

"Reg seemed to be getting well . . . at least, if you looked at things a certain way he did. But he was just as crazy as ever, of course, and so was I. Madness may well be a sort of flexible bullet, but any ballistics expert worth his salt will tell you no two bullets are exactly the same. Reg's one letter to me talked a little bit about his new novel, and then passed directly to Fornits. Fornits in general, Rackne in particular. He speculated on whether *they* actually wanted to kill Fornits, or—he thought this more likely—capture them alive and study them. He closed by saying, 'Both my appetite and my outlook on life have improved immeasurably since we began our

correspondence, Henry. Appreciate it all. Affectionately yours, Reg.’ And a P.S. below inquiring casually if an illustrator had been assigned to do his story. That caused a guilty pang or two and a quick trip to the liquor cabinet on my part.

“Reg was into Fornits; I was into wires.

“My answering letter mentioned Fornits only in passing—by then I really *was* humoring the man, at least on that subject; an elf with my mother’s maiden name and my own bad spelling habits didn’t interest me a whole hell of a lot.

“What had come to interest me more and more was the subject of electricity, and microwaves, and RF waves, and RF interference from small appliances, and low-level radiation, and Christ knows what else. I went to the library and took out books on the subject; I bought books on the subject. There was a lot of scary stuff in them . . . and of course that was just the sort of stuff I was looking for.

“I had my phone taken out and my electricity turned off. It helped for a while, but one night when I was staggering in the door drunk with a bottle of Black Velvet in my hand and another one in my topcoat pocket, I saw this little red eye peeping down at me from the ceiling. God, for a minute I thought I was going to have a heart attack. It looked like a bug up there at first . . . a great big dark bug with one glowing eye.

“I had a Coleman gas lantern and I lit it. Saw what it was at once. Only instead of relieving me, it made me feel worse. As soon as I got a good look at it, it seemed I could feel large, clear bursts of pain going through my head—like radio waves. For a moment it was as if my eyes had rotated in their sockets and I could look into my own brain and see cells in there smoking, going black, dying. It was a smoke detector—a gadget which was even newer than microwave ovens back in 1969.

“I bolted out of the apartment and went downstairs—I was on the fifth floor but by then I was always taking the stairs—and hammered on the super’s door. I told him I wanted that thing out of there, wanted it out of there *right away*, wanted it out of there *tonight*, wanted it out of there *within the hour*. He looked at me as though I had gone completely—you should pardon the expression—*bonzo*

*seco*, and I can understand that now. That smoke detector was supposed to make me feel *good*, it was supposed to make me *safe*. Now, of course, they're the law, but back then it was a Great Leap Forward, paid for by the building tenants' association.

"He removed it—it didn't take long—but the look in his eyes was not lost upon me, and I could, in some limited way, understand his feelings. I needed a shave, I stank of whiskey, my hair was sticking up all over my head, my topcoat was dirty. He would know I no longer went to work; that I'd had my television taken away; that my phone and electrical service had been voluntarily interrupted. He thought I was crazy.

"I may have been crazy but—like Reg—I was not stupid. I turned on the charm. Editors have got to have a certain amount, you know. And I greased the skids with a ten-dollar bill. Finally I was able to smooth things over, but I knew from the way people were looking at me in the next couple of weeks—my last two weeks in the building, as things turned out—that the story had traveled. The fact that no members of the tenants' association approached me to make wounded noises about my ingratitude was particularly telling. I suppose they thought I might take after them with a steak knife.

"All of that was very secondary in my thoughts that evening, however. I sat in the glow of the Coleman lantern, the only light in the three rooms except for all the electricity in Manhattan that came through the windows. I sat with a bottle in one hand, a cigarette in the other, looking at the plate in the ceiling where the smoke detector with its single red eye—an eye which was so unobtrusive in the daytime that I had never even noticed it—had been. I thought of the undeniable fact that, although I'd had all the electricity turned off in my place, there had been that one live item . . . and where there was one, there might be more.

"Even if there wasn't, the whole building was rotten with wires—it was filled with wires the way a man dying of cancer is filled with evil cells and rotting organs. Closing my eyes I could see all those wires in the darkness of their conduits, glowing with a sort of green nether light. And beyond them, the entire city. One wire, almost harmless in itself, running to a switchplate . . . the wire behind the switchplate a

little thicker, leading down through a conduit to the basement where it joined a still thicker wire . . . that one leading down under the street to a whole *bundle* of wires, only those wires so thick that they were really cables.

“When I got Jane Thorpe’s letter mentioning the tinfoil, part of my mind recognized that she saw it as a sign of Reg’s craziness, and that part knew I would have to respond as if my whole mind thought she was right. The other part of my mind—by far the largest part now—thought: ‘What a marvelous idea!’ and I covered my own switchplates in identical fashion the very next day. I was the man, remember, that was supposed to be helping Reg Thorpe. In a desperate sort of way it’s actually quite funny.

“I determined that night to leave Manhattan. There was an old family place in the Adirondacks I could go to, and that sounded fine to me. The one thing keeping me in the city was Reg Thorpe’s story. If ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet’ was Reg’s life-ring in a sea of madness, it was mine, too—I wanted to place it in a good magazine. With that done, I could get the hell out.

“So that’s where the not-so-famous Wilson-Thorpe correspondence stood just before the shit hit the fan. We were like a couple of dying drug addicts comparing the relative merits of heroin and ’ludes. Reg had Fornits in his typewriter, I had Fornits in the walls, and both of us had Fornits in our heads.

“And there was *they*. Don’t forget *they*. I hadn’t been flogging the story around for long before deciding *they* included every magazine fiction editor in New York—not that there were many by the fall of 1969. If you’d grouped them together, you could have killed the whole bunch of them with one shotgun shell, and before long I started to feel that was a damned good idea.

“It took about five years before I could see it from their perspective. I’d upset the super, and he was just a guy who saw me when the heat was screwed up and when it was time for his Christmas tip. These other guys . . . well, the irony was just that a lot of them really *were* my friends. Jared Baker was the assistant fiction editor at *Esquire* in those days, and Jared and I were in the same rifle company during World War II, for instance. These guys weren’t

just uneasy after sampling the new improved Henry Wilson. They were appalled. If I'd just sent the story around with a pleasant covering letter explaining the situation—my version of it, anyway—I probably would have sold the Thorpe story almost right away. But oh no, that wasn't good enough. Not for this story. I was going to see that this story got the *personal treatment*. So I went from door to door with it, a stinking, grizzled ex-editor with shaking hands and red eyes and a big old bruise on his left cheekbone from where he ran into the bathroom door on the way to the can in the dark two nights before. I might as well have been wearing a sign reading BELLEVUE-BOUND.

“Nor did I want to talk to these guys in their offices. In fact, I could not. The time had long since passed when I could get into an elevator and ride it up forty floors. So I met them like pushers meet junkies—in parks, on steps, or in the case of Jared Baker, in a Burger Heaven on Forty-ninth Street. Jared at least would have been delighted to buy me a decent meal, but the time had passed, you understand, when any self-respecting *maitre d'* would have let me in a restaurant where they serve business people.”

The agent winced.

“I got perfunctory promises to read the story, followed by concerned questions about how I was, how much I was drinking. I remember—hazily—trying to tell a couple of them about how electricity and radiation leaks were fucking up everyone's thinking, and when Andy Rivers, who edited fiction for *American Crossings*, suggested I ought to get some help, I told him he was the one who ought to get some help.

“‘You see those people out there on the street?’ I said. We were standing in Washington Square Park. ‘Half of them, maybe even three-quarters of them, have got brain tumors. I wouldn't sell you Thorpe's story on a bet, Andy. Hell, you couldn't understand it in this city. Your brain's in the electric chair and you don't even know it.’

“I had a copy of the story in my hand, rolled up like a newspaper. I whacked him on the nose with it, the way you'd whack a dog for piddling in the corner. Then I walked off. I remember him yelling for me to come back, something about having a cup of coffee and

talking it over some more, and then I passed a discount record store with loudspeakers blasting heavy metal onto the sidewalk and banks of snowy-cold fluorescent lights inside, and I lost his voice in a kind of deep buzzing sound inside my head. I remember thinking two things—I had to get out of the city soon, very soon, or I would be nursing a brain tumor of my own, and I had to get a drink right away.

“That night when I got back to my apartment I found a note under the door. It said ‘*We want you out of here, you crazy-bird.*’ I threw it away without so much as a second thought. We veteran crazy-birds have more important things to worry about than anonymous notes from fellow tenants.

“I was thinking over what I’d said to Andy Rivers about Reg’s story. The more I thought about it—and the more drinks I had—the more sense it made. ‘Flexible Bullet’ was funny, and on the surface it was easy to follow . . . but below that surface level it was surprisingly complex. Did I really think another editor in the city could grasp the story on all levels? Maybe once, but did I still think so now that my eyes had been opened? Did I really think there was room for appreciation and understanding in a place that was wired up like a terrorist’s bomb? God, loose volts were leaking out everywhere.

“I read the paper while there was still enough daylight to do so, trying to forget the whole wretched business for a while, and there on page one of the *Times* there was a story about how radioactive material from nuclear-power plants kept disappearing—the article went on to theorize that enough of that stuff in the right hands could quite easily be used to make a very dirty nuclear weapon.

“I sat there at the kitchen table as the sun went down, and in my mind’s eye I could see *them* panning for plutonium dust like 1849 miners panning for gold. Only *they* didn’t want to blow up the city with it, oh no. *They* just wanted to sprinkle it around and fuck up everyone’s minds. They were the bad Fornits, and all that radioactive dust was bad-luck fornus. The worst bad-luck fornus of all time.

“I decided I didn’t want to sell Reg’s story after all—at least, not in New York. I’d get out of the city just as soon as the checks I’d ordered arrived. When I was upstate, I could start sending it around to the out-of-town literary magazines. *Sewanee Review* would be a

good place to start, I reckoned, or maybe *Iowa Review*. I could explain to Reg later. Reg would understand. That seemed to solve the whole problem, so I took a drink to celebrate. And then the drink took a drink. And then the drink took the man. So to speak. I blacked out. I only had one more blackout left in me, as it happened.

“The next day my Arvin Company checks came. I typed one of them up and went to see my friend, the ‘co-drawer.’ There was another one of those tiresome cross-examinations, but this time I kept my temper. I wanted that signature. Finally, I got it. I went to a business supply store and had them make up an Arvin Company letter-stamp while I waited. I stamped a return address on a business envelope, typed Reg’s address (the confectioner’s sugar was out of my machine but the keys still had a tendency to stick), and added a brief personal note, saying that no check to an author had ever given me more personal pleasure . . . and that was true. Still is. It was almost an hour before I could bring myself to mail it—I just couldn’t get over how *official* it looked. You never would have known that a smelly drunk who hadn’t changed his underwear in about ten days had put *that* one together. ”

He paused, crushed out his cigarette, looked at his watch. Then, oddly like a conductor announcing a train’s arrival in some city of importance, he said, “We have reached the inexplicable.

“This is the point in my story which most interested the two psychiatrists and various mental caseworkers with whom I was associated over the next thirty months of my life. It was the only part of it they really wanted me to recant, as a sign that I was getting well again. As one of them put it, ‘This is the only part of your story which cannot be explicated as faulty induction . . . once, that is, your sense of logic has been mended.’ Finally I *did* recant, because I knew—even if they didn’t—that I *was* getting well, and I was damned anxious to get out of the sanitarium. I thought if I didn’t get out fairly soon, I’d go crazy all over again. So I recanted—Galileo did, too, when they held his feet to the fire—but I have never recanted in my own mind. I don’t say that what I’m about to tell you really happened; I only say I still *believe* it happened. That’s a small qualification, but to me it’s crucial.

“So, my friends, the inexplicable:

“I spent the next two days preparing to move upstate. The idea of driving the car didn’t disturb me at all, by the way. I had read as a kid that the inside of a car is one of the safest places to be during an electrical storm, because the rubber tires serve as near-perfect insulators. I was actually looking forward to getting in my old Chevrolet, cranking up all the windows, and driving out of the city, which I had begun to see as a sink of lightning. Nevertheless, part of my preparations included removing the bulb in the dome light, taping over the socket, and turning the headlight knob all the way to the left to kill the dashlights.

“When I came in on the last night I meant to spend in the apartment, the place was empty except for the kitchen table, the bed, and my typewriter in the den. The typewriter was sitting on the floor. I had no intention of taking it with me—it had too many bad associations, and besides, the keys were going to stick forever. Let the next tenant have it, I thought—it, and Bellis, too.

“It was just sunset, and the place was a funny color. I was pretty drunk, and I had another bottle in my topcoat pocket against the watches of the night. I started across the den, meaning to go into the bedroom, I suppose. There I would sit on the bed and think about wires and electricity and free radiation and drink until I was drunk enough to go to sleep.

“What I called the den was really the living room. I made it my workplace because it had the nicest light in the whole apartment—a big westward-facing window that looked all the way to the horizon. That’s something close to the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes in a fifth-floor Manhattan apartment, but the line of sight was there. I didn’t question it; I just enjoyed it. That room was filled with a clear, lovely light even on rainy days.

“But the quality of the light that evening was eerie. The sunset had filled the room with a red glow. Furnace light. Empty, the room seemed too big. My heels made flat echoes on the hardwood floor.

“The typewriter sat in the middle of the floor, and I was just going around it when I saw there was a ragged scrap of paper stuck under the roller—that gave me a start, because I knew there had been no

paper in the machine when I went out for the last time to get the fresh bottle.

“I looked around, wondering if there was someone—some intruder—in the place with me. Except it wasn’t really intruders, or burglars, or junkies, I was thinking of . . . it was ghosts.

“I saw a ragged blank place on the wall to the left of the bedroom door. I at least understood where the paper in the typewriter had come from. Someone had simply torn off a ragged piece of the old wallpaper.

“I was still looking at this when I heard a single small clear noise—*clack!*—from behind me. I jumped and whirled around with my heart knocking in my throat. I was terrified, but I knew what that sound was just the same—there was no question at all. You work with words all your life and you know the sound of a typewriter platen hitting paper, even in a deserted room at dusk, where there is no one to strike the key.”

They looked at him in the dark, their faces blurred white circles, saying nothing, slightly huddled together now. The writer’s wife was holding one of the writer’s hands tightly in both of her own.

“I felt . . . outside myself. Unreal. Perhaps this is always the way one feels when one arrives at the point of the inexplicable. I walked slowly over to the typewriter. My heart was pounding madly up there in my throat, but I felt mentally calm . . . icy, even.

“*Clack!* Another platen popped up. I saw it this time—the key was in the third row from the top, on the left.

“I got down on my knees very slowly, and then all the muscles in my legs seemed to go slack and I half-swooned the rest of the way down until I was sitting there in front of the typewriter with my dirty London Fog topcoat spread around me like the skirt of a girl who has made her very deepest curtsy. The typewriter clacked twice more, fast, paused, then clacked again. Each *clack* made the same kind of flat echo my footfalls had made on the floor.

“The wallpaper had been rolled into the machine so that the side with the dried glue on it was facing out. The letters were ripply and bumpy, but I could read them: *rackn*, it said. Then it clacked again and the word was *rackne*.

“Then—” He cleared his throat and grinned a little. “Even all these years later this is hard to tell . . . to just say right out. Okay. The simple fact, with no icing on it, is this. I saw a hand come out of the typewriter. An incredibly tiny hand. It came out from between the keys B and N in the bottom row, curled itself into a fist, and hammered down on the space bar. The machine jumped a space—very fast, like a hiccough—and the hand drew back down inside.”

The agent’s wife giggled shrilly.

“Can it, Marsha,” the agent said softly, and she did.

“The clacks began to come a little faster,” the editor went on, “and after a while I fancied I could hear the creature that was shoving the key arms up gasping, the way anyone will gasp when he is working hard, coming closer and closer to his physical limit. After a while the machine was hardly printing at all, and most of the keys were filled with that old gluey stuff, but I could read the impressions. It got out *rackne is d* and then the y key stuck to the glue. I looked at it for a moment and then I reached out one finger and freed it. I don’t know if it—Bellis—could have freed it himself. I think not. But I didn’t want to see it . . . him . . . try. Just the fist was enough to have me tottering on the brink. If I saw the elf entire, so to speak, I think I really would have gone crazy. And there was no question of getting up to run. All the strength had gone out of my legs.

“*Clack-clack-clack*, those tiny grunts and sobs of effort, and after every word that pallid ink- and dirt-streaked fist would come out between the B and the N and hammer down on the space bar. I don’t know exactly how long it went on. Seven minutes, maybe. Maybe ten. Or maybe forever.

“Finally the clacks stopped, and I realized I couldn’t hear him breathing anymore. Maybe he fainted . . . maybe he just gave up and went away . . . or maybe he died. Had a heart attack or something. All I really know for sure is that the message was not finished. It read, completely in lowercase: *rackne is dying its the little boy jimmy thorpe doesn’t know tell thorpe rackne is dying the little boy jimmy is killing rackne bel* . . . and that was all.

“I found the strength to get to my feet then, and I left the room. I walked in great big tippy-toe steps, as if I thought it had gone to

sleep and if I made any of those flat echoey noises on the bare wood it would wake up and the typing would start again . . . and I thought if it did, the first *clack* would start me screaming. And then I would just go on until my heart or my head burst.

“My Chevy was in the parking lot down the street, all gassed and loaded and ready to go. I got in behind the wheel and remembered the bottle in my topcoat pocket. My hands were shaking so badly that I dropped it, but it landed on the seat and didn’t break.

“I remembered the blackouts, and, my friends, right then a blackout was exactly what I wanted, and exactly what I got. I remember taking the first drink from the neck of the bottle, and the second. I remember turning the key over to accessory and getting Frank Sinatra on the radio singing ‘That Old Black Magic,’ which seemed fitting enough. Under the circumstances. So to speak. I remember singing along, and having a few more drinks. I was in the back row of the lot, and I could see the traffic light on the corner going through its paces. I kept thinking of those flat clacking sounds in the empty room, and the fading red light in the den. I kept thinking of those puffing sounds, as if some body-building elf had hung fishing sinkers on the ends of a Q-Tip and was doing bench presses inside my old typewriter. I kept seeing the pebbly surface on the back side of that torn scrap of wallpaper. My mind kept wanting to examine what must have gone on before I came back to the apartment . . . kept wanting to see it—him—Bellis—jumping up, grabbing the loose edge of the wallpaper by the door to the bedroom because it was the only thing left in the room approximating paper—hanging on—finally tearing it loose and carrying it back to the typewriter on its—on *his*—head like the leaf of a nipa palm. I kept trying to imagine how he—it—could ever have run it into the typewriter. And none of that was blacking out so I kept drinking and Frank Sinatra stopped and there was an ad for Crazy Eddie’s and then Sarah Vaughan came on singing ‘I’m Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter’ and that was something *else* I could relate to since I’d done just that recently or at least I’d *thought* I had up until tonight when something happened to give me cause to rethink my position on that matter so to speak and I sang along with good old

Sarah Soul and right about then I must have achieved escape velocity because in the middle of the second chorus with no lag at all I was puking my guts out while somebody first thumped my back with his palms and then lifted my elbows behind me and put them down and then thumped my back with his palms again. That was the trucker. Every time he thumped I'd feel a great clot of liquid rise up in my throat and get ready to go back down except then he'd lift my elbows and every time he lifted my elbows I'd puke again, and most of it wasn't even Black Velvet but river water. When I was able to lift my head enough to look around it was six o'clock in the evening three days later and I was lying on the bank of the Jackson River in western Pennsylvania, about sixty miles north of Pittsburgh. My Chevy was sticking out of the river, rear end up. I could still read the McCarthy sticker on the bumper.

"Is there another Fresca, love? My throat's dry as hell."

The writer's wife fetched him one silently, and when she handed it to him she impulsively bent and kissed his wrinkled, alligator-hide cheek. He smiled, and his eyes sparkled in the dim light. She was, however, a good and kindly woman, and the sparkle did not in any way fool her. It was never merriness which made eyes sparkle that way.

"Thank you, Meg."

He drank deeply, coughed, waved away the offer of a cigarette.

"I've had enough of those for the evening. I'm going to quit them entirely. In my next incarnation. So to speak.

"The rest of my own tale really needs no telling. It would have against it the only sin that any tale can ever really be guilty of—it's predictable. They fished something like forty bottles of Black Velvet out of my car, a good many of them empty. I was babbling about elves, and electricity, and Fornits, and plutonium miners, and fornus, and I seemed utterly insane to them, and that of course is exactly what I was.

"Now here's what happened in Omaha while I was driving around—according to the gas credit slips in the Chevy's glove compartment—five northeastern states. All of this, you understand, was information I obtained from Jane Thorpe over a long and painful period of

correspondence, which culminated in a face-to-face meeting in New Haven, where she now lives, shortly after I was dismissed from the sanitarium as a reward for finally recanting. At the end of that meeting we wept in each other's arms, and that was when I began to believe that there could be a real life for me—perhaps even happiness—again.

“That day, around three o'clock in the afternoon, there was a knock at the door of the Thorpe home. It was a telegraph boy. The telegram was from me—the last item of our unfortunate correspondence. It read: REG HAVE-RELIABLE INFORMATION THAT RACKNE IS DYING IT'S THE LITTLE BOY ACCORDING TO BELLIS BELLIS SAYS THE BOY'S NAME IS JIMMY FORNIT SOME FORNUS HENRY.

“In case that marvelous Howard Baker question of *What did he know and when did he know it?* has gone through your mind, I can tell you that I knew Jane had hired a cleaning woman; I didn't know—except through Bellis—that she had a li'l-devil son named Jimmy. I suppose you'll have to take my word for that, although in all fairness I have to add that the shrinks who worked on my case over the next two and a half years never did.

“When the telegram came, Jane was at the grocery store. She found it, after Reg was dead, in one of his back pockets. The time of transmission and delivery were both noted on it, along with the added line *No telephone/Deliver original*. Jane said that although the telegram was only a day old, it had been so much handled that it looked as if he'd had it for a month.

“In a way, that telegram, those twenty-six words, was the real flexible bullet, and I fired it directly into Reg Thorpe's brain all the way from Paterson, New Jersey, and I was so fucking drunk I don't even remember doing it.

“During the last two weeks of his life, Reg had fallen into a pattern that seemed normality itself. He got up at six, made breakfast for himself and his wife, then wrote for an hour. Around eight o'clock he would lock his study and take the dog for a long, leisurely walk around the neighborhood. He was very forthcoming on these walks, stopping to chat with anyone who wanted to chat with him, tying the

pooch outside a nearby café to have a midmorning cup of coffee, then rambling on again. He rarely got back to the house before noon. On many days it was twelve-thirty or one o'clock. Part of this was an effort to escape the garrulous Gertrude Rulin, Jane believed, because his pattern hadn't really begun to solidify until a couple of days after she started working for them.

"He would eat a light lunch, lie down for an hour or so, then get up and write for two or three hours. In the evenings he would sometimes go next door to visit with the young people, either with Jane or alone; sometimes he and Jane took in a movie, or just sat in the living room and read. They turned in early, Reg usually a while before Jane. She wrote there was very little sex, and what there was of it was unsuccessful for both of them. 'But sex isn't as important for most women,' she said, 'and Reg was working full-out again, and that was a reasonable substitute for him. I would say that, under the circumstances, those last two weeks were the happiest in the last five years.' I damn near cried when I read that.

"I didn't know anything about Jimmy, but Reg did. Reg knew everything except for the most important fact—that Jimmy had started coming to work with his mother.

"How furious he must have been when he got my telegram and began to realize! Here *they* were, after all. And apparently his own wife was one of *them*, because *she* was in the house when Gertrude and Jimmy were there, and she had never said a thing to Reg about Jimmy. What was it he had written to me in that earlier letter? 'Sometimes I wonder about my wife.'

"When she arrived home on that day the telegram came, she found Reg gone. There was a note on the kitchen table which said, 'Love—I've gone down to the bookstore. Back by suppertime.' This seemed perfectly fine to Jane . . . but if Jane had known about my telegram, the very normality of that note would have scared the hell out of her, I think. She would have understood that Reg believed she had changed sides.

"Reg didn't go near any bookstore. He went to Littlejohn's Gun Emporium downtown. He bought a .45 automatic and two thousand rounds of ammunition. He would have bought an AK-70 if Littlejohn's

had been allowed to sell them. He meant to protect his Fornit, you see. From Jimmy, from Gertrude, from Jane. From *them*.

“Everything went according to established routine the next morning. She remembered thinking he was wearing an awfully heavy sweater for such a warm fall day, but that was all. The sweater, of course, was because of the gun. He went out to walk the dog with the .45 stuffed into the waistband of his chinos.

“Except the restaurant where he usually got his morning coffee was as far as he went, and he went directly there, with no lingering or conversation along the way. He took the pup around to the loading area, tied its leash to a railing, and then went back toward his house by way of backyards.

“He knew the schedule of the young people next door very well; knew they would all be out. He knew where they kept their spare key. He let himself in, went upstairs, and watched his own house.

“At eight-forty he saw Gertrude Rulin arrive. And Gertrude wasn’t alone. There was indeed a small boy with her. Jimmy Rulin’s boisterous first-grade behavior convinced the teacher and the school guidance counselor almost at once that everyone (except maybe Jimmy’s mother, who could have used a rest from Jimmy) would be better off if he waited another year. Jimmy was stuck with repeating kindergarten, and he had afternoon sessions for the first half of the year. The two day-care centers in her area were full, and she couldn’t change to afternoons for the Thorpes because she had another cleaning job on the other side of town from two to four.

“The upshot of everything was Jane’s reluctant agreement that Gertrude could bring Jimmy with her until she was able to make other arrangements. Or until Reg found out, as he was sure to do.

“She thought Reg *might* not mind—he had been so sweetly reasonable about everything lately. On the other hand, he might have a fit. If that happened, other arrangements would *have* to be made. Gertrude said she understood. And for heaven’s sake, Jane added, the boy was not to touch any of Reg’s things. Gertrude said for sure not; the mister’s study door was locked and would stay locked.

“Thorpe must have crossed between the two yards like a sniper crossing no-man’s-land. He saw Gertrude and Jane washing bed linen in the kitchen. He didn’t see the boy. He moved along the side of the house. No one in the dining room. No one in the bedroom. And then, in the study, where Reg had morbidly expected to see him, there Jimmy was. The kid’s face was hot with excitement, and Reg surely must have believed that here was a bona fide agent of *they* at last.

“The boy was holding some sort of death-ray in his hand, it was pointed at the desk . . . and from inside his typewriter, Reg could hear Rackne screaming.

“You may think I’m attributing subjective data to a man who’s now dead—or, to be more blunt, making stuff up. But I’m not. In the kitchen, both Jane and Gertrude heard the distinctive warbling sound of Jimmy’s plastic space blaster . . . he’d been shooting it around the house ever since he started coming with his mother, and Jane hoped daily that its batteries would go dead. There was no mistaking the sound. No mistaking the place it was coming from, either—Reg’s study.

“The kid really *was* Dennis the Menace material, you know—if there was a room in the house where he wasn’t supposed to go, that was the one place he *had* to go, or die of curiosity. It didn’t take him long to discover that Jane kept a key to Reg’s study on the dining-room mantel, either. Had he been in there before? I think so. Jane said she remembered giving the boy an orange three or four days before, and later, when she was clearing out the house, she found orange peels under the little studio sofa in that room. Reg didn’t eat oranges—claimed he was allergic to them.

“Jane dropped the sheet she was washing back into the sink and rushed into the bedroom. She heard the loud *wah-wah-wah* of the space blaster, and she heard Jimmy, yelling: *‘I’ll getcha! You can’t run! I can seeya through the GLASS!’* And . . . she said . . . she said that she heard something screaming. A high, despairing sound, she said, so full of pain it was almost insupportable.

“‘When I heard that,’ she said, ‘I knew that I would have to leave Reg no matter *what* happened, because all the old wives’ tales were

true . . . madness was catching. Because it was Rackne I was hearing; somehow that rotten little kid was shooting Rackne, killing it with a two-dollar space-gun from Kresge's.

“ ‘The study door was standing open, the key in it. Later on that day I saw one of the dining-room chairs standing by the mantel, with Jimmy's sneaker prints all over the seat. He was bent over Reg's typewriter table. He—Reg—had an old office model with glass inserts in the sides. Jimmy had the muzzle of his blaster pressed against one of those and was shooting it into the typewriter. *Wah-wah-wah-wah*, and purple pulses of light shooting out of the typewriter, and suddenly I could understand everything Reg had ever said about electricity, because although that thing ran on nothing more than harmless old C or D cells, it really did feel as if there were waves of poison coming out of that gun and rolling through my head and frying my brains.

“ ‘ “*I seeya in there!*” Jimmy was screaming, and his face was filled with a small boy's glee—it was both beautiful and somehow gruesome. “*You can't run away from Captain Future! You're dead, alien!*” And that screaming . . . getting weaker . . . smaller . . .

“ ‘ “*Jimmy, you stop it!*” I yelled.

“ ‘He jumped. I'd startled him. He turned around . . . looked at me . . . stuck out his tongue . . . and then pushed the blaster against the glass panel and started shooting again. *Wah-wah-wah*, and that rotten purple light.

“ ‘Gertrude was coming down the hall, yelling for him to stop, to get out of there, that he was going to get the whipping of his life . . . and then the front door burst open and Reg came up the hall, bellowing. I got one good look at him and understood that he was insane. The gun was in his hand.

“ ‘ “*Don't you shoot my baby!*” Gertrude screamed when she saw him, and reached out to grapple with him. Reg simply clubbed her aside.

“ ‘Jimmy didn't even seem to realize any of this was going on—he just went on shooting the space blaster into the typewriter. I could see that purple light pulsing in the blackness between the keys, and it looked like one of those electrical arcs they tell you not to look at

without a pair of special goggles because otherwise it might boil your retinas and make you blind.

“ ‘Reg came in, shoving past me, knocking me over.

“ ‘ “RACKNE!” he screamed. “YOU’RE KILLING RACKNE!”

“ ‘And even as Reg was rushing across the room, apparently planning to kill that child,’ Jane told me, ‘I had time to wonder just how many times he *had* been in that room, shooting that gun into the typewriter when his mother and I were maybe upstairs changing beds or in the backyard hanging clothes where we couldn’t hear the *wah-wah-wah* . . . where we couldn’t hear that thing . . . the Fornit . . . inside, screaming.

“ ‘Jimmy didn’t stop even when Reg came bursting in—just kept shooting into the typewriter as if he knew it was his last chance, and since then I have wondered if perhaps Reg wasn’t right about *they*, too—only maybe *they* just sort of float around, and every now and then they dive into a person’s head like someone doing a double-gainer into a swimming pool and *they* get that somebody to do the dirty work and then check out again, and the guy *they* were in says, “Huh? Me? Did *what*?”

“ ‘And in the second before Reg got there, the screaming from inside the typewriter turned into a brief, drilling shriek—and I saw blood splatter all over the inside of that glass insert, as if whatever was in there had finally just exploded, the way they say a live animal will explode if you put it in a microwave oven. I know how crazy it sounds, but I saw that blood—it hit the glass in a blot and then started to run.

“ ‘ “Got it,” Jimmy said, highly satisfied. “Got—”

“ ‘Then Reg threw him all the way across the room. He hit the wall. The gun was jarred out of his hand, hit the floor, and broke. It was nothing but plastic and Eveready batteries, of course.

“ ‘Reg looked into the typewriter, and he screamed. Not a scream of pain or fury, although there was fury in it—mostly it was a scream of grief. He turned toward the boy then. Jimmy had fallen to the floor and whatever he *had* been—if he ever *was* anything more than just a mischievous little boy—now he was just a six-year-old in terror. Reg pointed the gun at him, and that’s all I remember.’ ”

The editor finished his soda and put the can carefully aside.

“Gertrude Rulin and Jimmy Rulin remember enough to make up for the lack,” he said. “Jane called out, ‘Reg, NO!’ and when he looked around at her, she got to her feet and grappled with him. He shot her, shattering her left elbow, but she didn’t let go. As she continued to grapple with him, Gertrude called to her son, and Jimmy ran to her.

“Reg pushed Jane away and shot her again. This bullet tore along the left side of her skull. Even an eighth of an inch to the right and he would have killed her. There is little doubt of that, and none at all that, if not for Jane Thorpe’s intervention, he would have surely killed Jimmy Rulin and quite possibly the boy’s mother as well.

“He *did* shoot the boy—as Jimmy ran into his mother’s arms just outside the door. The bullet entered Jimmy’s left buttock on a downward course. It exited from his upper-left thigh, missing the bone, and passed through Gertrude Rulin’s shin. There was a lot of blood, but no major damage done to either.

“Gertrude slammed the study door and carried her screaming, bleeding son down the hallway and out the front door.”

The editor paused again, thoughtfully.

“Jane was either unconscious by that time or she has deliberately chosen to forget what happened next. Reg sat down in his office chair and put the muzzle of the .45 against the center of his forehead. He pulled the trigger. The bullet did not pass through his brain and leave him a living vegetable, nor did it travel in a semicircle around his skull and exit harmlessly on the far side. The fantasy was flexible, but the final bullet was as hard as it could be. He fell forward across the typewriter, dead.

“When the police broke in, they found him that way; Jane was sitting in a far corner, semiconscious.

“The typewriter was covered with blood, presumably filled with blood as well; head wounds are very, very messy.

“All of the blood was Type O.

“Reg Thorpe’s type.

“And that, ladies and gentlemen, is my story; I can tell no more.”  
Indeed, the editor’s voice had been reduced to little more than a

husky whisper.

There was none of the usual post-party chatter, or even the awkwardly bright conversation people sometimes use to cover a cocktail-party indiscretion of some moment, or to at least disguise the fact that things had at some point become much more serious than a dinner-party situation usually warranted.

But as the writer saw the editor to his car, he was unable to forbear one final question. “The story,” he said. “What happened to the story?”

“You mean Reg’s—”

“ ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,’ that’s right. The story that caused it all. *That* was the real flexible bullet—for you, if not for him. What in the hell happened to this story that was so goddam great?”

The editor opened the door of his car; it was a small blue Chevette with a sticker on the back bumper which read FRIENDS DON’T LET FRIENDS DRIVE DRUNK. “No, it was never published. If Reg had a carbon copy, he destroyed it following my receipt and acceptance of the tale—considering his paranoid feelings about *they*, that would have been very much in character.

“I had his original plus three photocopies with me when I went into the Jackson River. All four in a cardboard carton. If I’d put that carton in the trunk, I would have the story now, because the rear end of my car never went under—even if it had, the pages could have been dried out. But I wanted it close to me, so I put it in the front, on the driver’s side. The windows were open when I went into the water. The pages . . . I assume they just floated away and were carried out to sea. I’d rather believe that than believe they rotted along with the rest of the trash at the bottom of that river, or were eaten by catfish, or something even less aesthetically pleasing. To believe they were carried out to sea is more romantic, and slightly more unlikely, but in matters of what I choose to believe, I find I can still be flexible.

“So to speak.”

The editor got into his small car and drove away. The writer stood and watched until the taillights had winked out, and then turned around. Meg was there, standing at the head of their walk in the

darkness, smiling a little tentatively at him. Her arms were crossed tightly across her bosom, although the night was warm.

“We’re the last two,” she said. “Want to go in?”

“Sure.”

Halfway up the walk she stopped and said: “There are no Fornits in your typewriter, are there, Paul?”

And the writer, who had sometimes—often—wondered exactly where the words *did* come from, said bravely: “Absolutely not.”

They went inside arm in arm and closed the door against the night.

## The Reach

*“The Reach was wider in those days,” Stella Flanders told her great-grandchildren in the last summer of her life, the summer before she began to see ghosts. The children looked at her with wide, silent eyes, and her son, Alden, turned from his seat on the porch where he was whittling. It was Sunday, and Alden wouldn’t take his boat out on Sundays no matter how high the price of lobster was.*

*“What do you mean, Gram?” Tommy asked, but the old woman did not answer. She only sat in her rocker by the cold stove, her slippers bumping placidly on the floor.*

*Tommy asked his mother: “What does she mean?”*

*Lois only shook her head, smiled, and sent them out with pots to pick berries.*

*Stella thought: She’s forgot. Or did she ever know?*

*The Reach had been wider in those days. If anyone knew it was so, that person was Stella Flanders. She had been born in 1884, she was the oldest resident of Goat Island, and she had never once in her life been to the mainland.*

*Do you love?* This question had begun to plague her, and she did not even know what it meant.

Fall set in, a cold fall without the necessary rain to bring a really fine color to the trees, either on Goat or on Raccoon Head across the Reach. The wind blew long, cold notes that fall, and Stella felt each note resonate in her heart.

On November 19, when the first flurries came swirling down out of a sky the color of white chrome, Stella celebrated her birthday. Most of the village turned out. Hattie Stoddard came, whose mother had died of pleurisy in 1954 and whose father had been lost with the *Dancer* in 1941. Richard and Mary Dodge came, Richard moving

slowly up the path on his cane, his arthritis riding him like an invisible passenger. Sarah Havelock came, of course; Sarah's mother Annabelle had been Stella's best friend. They had gone to the island school together, grades one to eight, and Annabelle had married Tommy Frane, who had pulled her hair in the fifth grade and made her cry, just as Stella had married Bill Flanders, who had once knocked all of her schoolbooks out of her arms and into the mud (but she had managed not to cry). Now both Annabelle and Tommy were gone and Sarah was the only one of their seven children still on the island. *Her* husband, George Havelock, who had been known to everyone as Big George, had died a nasty death over on the mainland in 1967, the year there was no fishing. An ax had slipped in Big George's hand, there had been blood—too much of it!—and an island funeral three days later. And when Sarah came in to Stella's party and cried, "Happy birthday, Gram!" Stella hugged her tight and closed her eyes

*(do you do you love?)*  
but she did not cry.

There was a tremendous birthday cake. Hattie had made it with her best friend, Vera Spruce. The assembled company bellowed out "Happy Birthday to You" in a combined voice that was loud enough to drown out the wind . . . for a little while, anyway. Even Alden sang, who in the normal course of events would sing only "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and the doxology in church and would mouth the words of all the rest with his head hunched and his big old jug ears just as red as tomatoes. There were ninety-five candles on Stella's cake, and even over the singing she heard the wind, although her hearing was not what it once had been.

She thought the wind was calling her name.

*"I was not the only one," she would have told Lois's children if she could. "In my day there were many that lived and died on the island. There was no mail boat in those days; Bull Symes used to bring the mail when there was mail. There was no ferry, either. If you had business on the Head, your man took you in the lobster boat. So far*

*as I know, there wasn't a flushing toilet on the island until 1946. 'Twas Bull's boy Harold that put in the first one the year after the heart attack carried Bull off while he was out dragging traps. I remember seeing them bring Bull home. I remember that they brought him up wrapped in a tarpaulin, and how one of his green boots poked out. I remember . . . "*

*And they would say: "What, Gram? What do you remember?"  
How would she answer them? Was there more?*

On the first day of winter, a month or so after the birthday party, Stella opened the back door to get stovewood and discovered a dead sparrow on the back stoop. She bent down carefully, picked it up by one foot, and looked at it.

"Frozen," she announced, and something inside her spoke another word. It had been forty years since she had seen a frozen bird—1938. The year the Reach had frozen.

Shuddering, pulling her coat closer, she threw the dead sparrow in the old rusty incinerator as she went by it. The day was cold. The sky was a clear, deep blue. On the night of her birthday four inches of snow had fallen, had melted, and no more had come since then. "Got to come soon," Larry McKeen down at the Goat Island Store said sagely, as if daring winter to stay away.

Stella got to the woodpile, picked herself an armload and carried it back to the house. Her shadow, crisp and clean, followed her.

As she reached the back door, where the sparrow had fallen, Bill spoke to her—but the cancer had taken Bill twelve years before. "Stella," Bill said, and she saw his shadow fall beside her, longer but just as clear-cut, the shadow-bill of his shadow-cap twisted jauntily off to one side just as he had always worn it. Stella felt a scream lodged in her throat. It was too large to touch her lips.

"Stella," he said again, "when you comin cross to the mainland? We'll get Norm Jolley's old Ford and go down to Bean's in Freeport just for a lark. What do you say?"

She wheeled, almost dropping her wood, and there was no one there. Just the dooryard sloping down to the hill, then the wild white

grass, and beyond all, at the edge of everything, clear-cut and somehow magnified, the Reach . . . and the mainland beyond it.

*“Gram, what’s the Reach?” Lona might have asked . . . although she never had. And she would have given them the answer any fisherman knew by rote: a Reach is a body of water between two bodies of land, a body of water which is open at either end. The old lobsterman’s joke went like this: know how to read y’compass when the fog comes, boys; between Jonesport and London there’s a mighty long Reach.*

*“Reach is the water between the island and the mainland,” she might have amplified, giving them molasses cookies and hot tea laced with sugar. “I know that much. I know it as well as my husband’s name . . . and how he used to wear his hat.”*

*“Gram?” Lona would say. “How come you never been across the Reach?”*

*“Honey,” she would say, “I never saw any reason to go.”*

In January, two months after the birthday party, the Reach froze for the first time since 1938. The radio warned islanders and mainlanders alike not to trust the ice, but Stewie McClelland and Russell Bowie took Stewie’s Bombardier Skiddoo out anyway after a long afternoon spent drinking Apple Zapple wine, and sure enough, the skiddoo went into the Reach. Stewie managed to crawl out (although he lost one foot to frostbite). The Reach took Russell Bowie and carried him away.

That January 25 there was a memorial service for Russell. Stella went on her son Alden’s arm, and he mouthed the words to the hymns and boomed out the doxology in his great tuneless voice before the benediction. Stella sat afterward with Sarah Havelock and Hattie Stoddard and Vera Spruce in the glow of the wood fire in the town-hall basement. A going-away party for Russell was being held, complete with Za-Rex punch and nice little cream-cheese sandwiches cut into triangles. The men, of course, kept wandering

out back for a nip of something a bit stronger than Za-Rex. Russell Bowie's new widow sat red-eyed and stunned beside Ewell McCracken, the minister. She was seven months big with child—it would be her fifth—and Stella, half-dozing in the heat of the woodstove, thought: *She'll be crossing the Reach soon enough, I guess. She'll move to Freeport or Lewiston and go for a waitress, I guess.*

She looked around at Vera and Hattie, to see what the discussion was.

"No, I didn't hear," Hattie said. "What *did* Freddy say?"

They were talking about Freddy Dinsmore, the oldest man on the island (two years younger'n me, though, Stella thought with some satisfaction), who had sold out his store to Larry McKeen in 1960 and now lived on his retirement.

"Said he'd never seen such a winter," Vera said, taking out her knitting. "He says it is going to make people sick."

Sarah Havelock looked at Stella, and asked if Stella had ever seen such a winter. There had been no snow since that first little bit; the ground lay crisp and bare and brown. The day before, Stella had walked thirty paces into the back field, holding her right hand level at the height of her thigh, and the grass there had snapped in a neat row with a sound like breaking glass.

"No," Stella said. "The Reach froze in '38, but there was snow that year. Do you remember Bull Symes, Hattie?"

Hattie laughed. "I think I still have the black-and-blue he gave me on my sit-upon at the New Year's party in '53. He pinched me *that* hard. What about him?"

"Bull and my own man walked across to the mainland that year," Stella said. "That February of 1938. Strapped on snowshoes, walked across to Dorrit's Tavern on the Head, had them each a shot of whiskey, and walked back. They asked me to come along. They were like two little boys off to the sliding with a toboggan between them."

They were looking at her, touched by the wonder of it. Even Vera was looking at her wide-eyed, and Vera had surely heard the tale before. If you believed the stories, Bull and Vera had once played

some house together, although it was hard, looking at Vera now, to believe she had ever been so young.

“And you didn’t go?” Sarah asked, perhaps seeing the reach of the Reach in her mind’s eye, so white it was almost blue in the heatless winter sunshine, the sparkle of the snow crystals, the mainland drawing closer, walking across, yes, walking across the ocean just like Jesus-out-of-the-boat, leaving the island for the one and only time in your life on *foot*—

“No,” Stella said. Suddenly she wished she had brought her own knitting. “I didn’t go with them.”

“Why *not*?” Hattie asked, almost indignantly.

“It was washday,” Stella almost snapped, and then Missy Bowie, Russell’s widow, broke into loud, braying sobs. Stella looked over and there sat Bill Flanders in his red-and-black-checked jacket, hat cocked to one side, smoking a Herbert Tareyton with another tucked behind his ear for later. She felt her heart leap into her chest and choke between beats.

She made a noise, but just then a knot popped like a rifle shot in the stove, and neither of the other ladies heard.

“Poor *thing*,” Sarah nearly cooed.

“Well shut of that good-for-nothing,” Hattie grunted. She searched for the grim depth of the truth concerning the departed Russell Bowie and found it: “Little more than a tramp for pay, that man. She’s well out of *that* two-hoss trace.”

Stella barely heard these things. There sat Bill, close enough to the Reverend McCracken to have tweaked his nose if he so had a mind; he looked no more than forty, his eyes barely marked by the crow’s-feet that had later sunk so deep, wearing his flannel pants and his gum-rubber boots with the gray wool socks folded neatly down over the tops.

“We’re waitin on you, Stel,” he said. “You come on across and see the mainland. You won’t need no snowshoes this year.”

There he sat in the town-hall basement, big as Billy-be-damned, and then another knot exploded in the stove and he was gone. And the Reverend McCracken went on comforting Missy Bowie as if nothing had happened.

That night Vera called up Annie Phillips on the phone, and in the course of the conversation mentioned to Annie that Stella Flanders didn't look well, not at all well.

"Alden would have a scratch of a job getting her off-island if she took sick," Annie said. Annie liked Alden because her own son Toby had told her Alden would take nothing stronger than beer. Annie was strictly temperance, herself.

"Wouldn't get her off 'tall unless she was in a coma," Vera said, pronouncing the word in the downeast fashion: *corner*. "When Stella says 'Frog,' Alden jumps. Alden ain't but half-bright, you know. Stella pretty much runs him."

"Oh, ayuh?" Annie said.

Just then there was a metallic crackling sound on the line. Vera could hear Annie Phillips for a moment longer—not the words, just the sound of her voice going on behind the crackling—and then there was nothing. The wind had gusted up high and the phone lines had gone down, maybe into Godlin's Pond or maybe down by Borrow's Cove, where they went into the Reach sheathed in rubber. It was possible that they had gone down on the other side, on the Head . . . and some might even have said (only half-joking) that Russell Bowie had reached up a cold hand to snap the cable, just for the hell of it.

Not 700 feet away Stella Flanders lay under her puzzle-quilt and listened to the dubious music of Alden's snores in the other room. She listened to Alden so she wouldn't have to listen to the wind . . . but she heard the wind anyway, oh yes, coming across the frozen expanse of the Reach, a mile and a half of water that was now overlaid with ice, ice with lobsters down below, and groupers, and perhaps the twisting, dancing body of Russell Bowie, who used to come each April with his old Rogers rototiller and turn her garden.

*Who'll turn the earth this April?* she wondered as she lay cold and curled under her puzzle-quilt. And as a dream in a dream, her voice answered her voice: *Do you love?* The wind gusted, rattling the

storm window. It seemed that the storm window was talking to her, but she turned her face away from its words. And did not cry.

*“But Gram,” Lona would press (she never gave up, not that one, she was like her mom, and her grandmother before her), “you still haven’t told why you never went across.”*

*“Why, child, I have always had everything I wanted right here on Goat.”*

*“But it’s so small. We live in Portland. There’s buses, Gram!”*

*“I see enough of what goes on in cities on the TV. I guess I’ll stay where I am.”*

*Hal was younger, but somehow more intuitive; he would not press her as his sister might, but his question would go closer to the heart of things: “You never wanted to go across, Gram? Never?”*

*And she would lean toward him, and take his small hands, and tell him how her mother and father had come to the island shortly after they were married, and how Bull Symes’s grandfather had taken Stella’s father as a ’prentice on his boat. She would tell him how her mother had conceived four times but one of her babies had miscarried and another had died a week after birth—she would have left the island if they could have saved it at the mainland hospital, but of course it was over before that was even thought of.*

*She would tell them that Bill had delivered Jane, their grandmother, but not that when it was over he had gone into the bathroom and first puked and then wept like a hysterical woman who had her monthlies p’ticularly bad. Jane, of course, had left the island at fourteen to go to high school; girls didn’t get married at fourteen anymore, and when Stella saw her go off in the boat with Bradley Maxwell, whose job it had been to ferry the kids back and forth that month, she knew in her heart that Jane was gone for good, although she would come back for a while. She would tell them that Alden had come along ten years later, after they had given up, and as if to make up for his tardiness, here was Alden still, a lifelong bachelor, and in some ways Stella was grateful for that because Alden was not terribly bright and there are plenty of women willing to take*

*advantage of a man with a slow brain and a good heart (although she would not tell the children that last, either).*

*She would say: "Louis and Margaret Godlin begat Stella Godlin, who became Stella Flanders; Bill and Stella Flanders begat Jane and Alden Flanders and Jane Flanders became Jane Wakefield; Richard and Jane Wakefield begat Lois Wakefield, who became Lois Perrault; David and Lois Perrault begat Lona and Hal. Those are your names, children: you are Godlin-Flanders-Wakefield-Perrault. Your blood is in the stones of this island, and I stay here because the mainland is too far to reach. Yes, I love; I have loved, anyway, or at least tried to love, but memory is so wide and so deep, and I cannot cross. Godlin-Flanders-Wakefield-Perrault . . ."*

That was the coldest February since the National Weather Service began keeping records, and by the middle of the month the ice covering the Reach was safe. Snowmobiles buzzed and whined and sometimes turned over when they climbed the ice-heaves wrong. Children tried to skate, found the ice too bumpy to be any fun, and went back to Godlin's Pond on the far side of the hill, but not before little Justin McCracken, the minister's son, caught his skate in a fissure and broke his ankle. They took him over to the hospital on the mainland where a doctor who owned a Corvette told him, "Son, it's going to be as good as new."

Freddy Dinsmore died very suddenly just three days after Justin McCracken broke his ankle. He caught the flu late in January, would not have the doctor, told everyone it was "Just a cold from goin out to get the mail without m'scarf," took to his bed, and died before anyone could take him across to the mainland and hook him up to all those machines they have waiting for guys like Freddy. His son George, a tosspot of the first water even at the advanced age (for tosspots, anyway) of sixty-eight, found Freddy with a copy of the *Bangor Daily News* in one hand and his Remington, unloaded, near the other. Apparently he had been thinking of cleaning it just before he died. George Dinsmore went on a three-week toot, said toot financed by someone who knew that George would have his old

dad's insurance money coming. Hattie Stoddard went around telling anyone who would listen that old George Dinsmore was a sin and a disgrace, no better than a tramp for pay.

There was a lot of flu around. The school closed for two weeks that February instead of the usual one because so many pupils were out sick. "No snow breeds germs," Sarah Havelock said.

Near the end of the month, just as people were beginning to look forward to the false comfort of March, Alden Flanders caught the flu himself. He walked around with it for nearly a week and then took to his bed with a fever of a hundred and one. Like Freddy, he refused to have the doctor, and Stella stewed and fretted and worried. Alden was not as old as Freddy, but that May he would turn sixty.

The snow came at last. Six inches on Valentine's Day, another six on the twentieth, and a foot in a good old norther on the leap, February 29. The snow lay white and strange between the cove and the mainland, like a sheep's meadow where there had been only gray and surging water at this time of year since time out of mind. Several people walked across to the mainland and back. No snowshoes were necessary this year because the snow had frozen to a firm, glittery crust. They might take a knock of whiskey, too, Stella thought, but they would not take it at Dorrit's. Dorrit's had burned down in 1958.

And she saw Bill all four times. Once he told her: "Y'ought to come soon, Stella. We'll go steppin. What do you say?"

She could say nothing. Her fist was crammed deep into her mouth.

*"Everything I ever wanted or needed was here," she would tell them. "We had the radio and now we have the television, and that's all I want of the world beyond the Reach. I had my garden year in and year out. And lobster? Why, we always used to have a pot of lobster stew on the back of the stove and we used to take it off and put it behind the door in the pantry when the minister came calling so he wouldn't see we were eating 'poor man's soup.'*

*"I have seen good weather and bad, and if there were times when I wondered what it might be like to actually be in the Sears store*

*instead of ordering from the catalogue, or to go into one of those Shaw's markets I see on TV instead of buying at the store here or sending Alden across for something special like a Christmas capon or an Easter ham . . . or if I ever wanted, just once, to stand on Congress Street in Portland and watch all the people in their cars and on the sidewalks, more people in a single look than there are on the whole island these days . . . if I ever wanted those things, then I wanted this more. I am not strange. I am not peculiar, or even very eccentric for a woman of my years. My mother sometimes used to say, 'All the difference in the world is between work and want,' and I believe that to my very soul. I believe it is better to plow deep than wide.*

*"This is my place, and I love it."*

One day in middle March, with the sky as white and lowering as a loss of memory, Stella Flanders sat in her kitchen for the last time, laced up her boots over her skinny calves for the last time, and wrapped her bright red woolen scarf (a Christmas present from Hattie three Christmases past) around her neck for the last time. She wore a suit of Alden's long underwear under her dress. The waist of the drawers came up to just below the limp vestiges of her breasts, the shirt almost down to her knees.

Outside, the wind was picking up again, and the radio said there would be snow by afternoon. She put on her coat and her gloves. After a moment of debate, she put a pair of Alden's gloves on over her own. Alden had recovered from the flu, and this morning he and Harley Blood were over rehanging a storm door for Missy Bowie, who had had a girl. Stella had seen it, and the unfortunate little mite looked just like her father.

She stood at the window for a moment, looking out at the Reach, and Bill was there as she had suspected he might be, standing about halfway between the island and the Head, standing on the Reach just like Jesus-out-of-the-boat, beckoning to her, seeming to tell her by gesture that the time was late if she ever intended to step a foot on the mainland in this life.

“If it’s what you want, Bill,” she fretted in the silence. “God knows I don’t.”

But the wind spoke other words. She did want to. She wanted to have this adventure. It had been a painful winter for her—the arthritis which came and went irregularly was back with a vengeance, flaring the joints of her fingers and knees with red fire and blue ice. One of her eyes had gotten dim and blurry (and just the other day Sarah had mentioned—with some unease—that the firespot that had been there since Stella was sixty or so now seemed to be growing by leaps and bounds). Worst of all, the deep, griping pain in her stomach had returned, and two mornings before she had gotten up at five o’clock, worked her way along the exquisitely cold floor into the bathroom, and had spat a great wad of bright red blood into the toilet bowl. This morning there had been some more of it, foul-tasting stuff, coppery and shuddersome.

The stomach pain had come and gone over the last five years, sometimes better, sometimes worse, and she had known almost from the beginning that it must be cancer. It had taken her mother and father and her mother’s father as well. None of them had lived past seventy, and so she supposed she had beat the tables those insurance fellows kept by a carpenter’s yard.

“You eat like a horse,” Alden told her, grinning, not long after the pains had begun and she had first observed the blood in her morning stool. “Don’t you know that old fogies like you are supposed to be peckish?”

“Get on or I’ll swat ye!” Stella had answered, raising a hand to her gray-haired son, who ducked, mock-criinged, and cried: “Don’t, Ma! I take it back!”

Yes, she had eaten hearty, not because she wanted to, but because she believed (as many of her generation did), that if you fed the cancer it would leave you alone. And perhaps it worked, at least for a while; the blood in her stools came and went, and there were long periods when it wasn’t there at all. Alden got used to her taking second helpings (and thirds, when the pain was particularly bad), but she never gained a pound.

Now it seemed the cancer had finally gotten around to what the froggies called the *pièce de résistance*.

She started out the door and saw Alden's hat, the one with the fur-lined ear flaps, hanging on one of the pegs in the entry. She put it on—the bill came all the way down to her shaggy salt-and-pepper eyebrows—and then looked around one last time to see if she had forgotten anything. The stove was low, and Alden had left the draw open too much again—she told him and told him, but that was one thing he was just never going to get straight.

“Alden, you'll burn an extra quarter-cord a winter when I'm gone,” she muttered, and opened the stove. She looked in and a tight, dismayed gasp escaped her. She slammed the door shut and adjusted the draw with trembling fingers. For a moment—just a moment—she had seen her old friend Annabelle Frane in the coals. It was her face to the life, even down to the mole on her cheek.

And had Annabelle winked at her?

She thought of leaving Alden a note to explain where she had gone, but she thought perhaps Alden would understand, in his own slow way.

Still writing notes in her head—*Since the first day of winter I have been seeing your father and he says dying isn't so bad; at least I think that's it*—Stella stepped out into the white day.

The wind shook her and she had to reset Alden's cap on her head before the wind could steal it for a joke and cartwheel it away. The cold seemed to find every chink in her clothing and twist into her; damp March cold with wet snow on its mind.

She set off down the hill toward the cove, being careful to walk on the cinders and clinkers that George Dinsmore had spread. Once George had gotten a job driving plow for the town of Raccoon Head, but during the big blow of '77 he had gotten smashed on rye whiskey and had driven the plow smack through not one, not two, but three power poles. There had been no lights over the Head for five days. Stella remembered now how strange it had been, looking across the Reach and seeing only blackness. A body got used to seeing that brave little nestle of lights. Now George worked on the island, and since there was no plow, he didn't get into much hurt.

As she passed Russell Bowie's house, she saw Missy, pale as milk, looking out at her. Stella waved. Missy waved back.

*She would tell them this:*

*"On the island we always watched out for our own. When Gerd Henreid broke the blood vessel in his chest that time, we had covered-dish suppers one whole summer to pay for his operation in Boston—and Gerd came back alive, thank God. When George Dinsmore ran down those power poles and the Hydro slapped a lien on his home, it was seen to that the Hydro had their money and George had enough of a job to keep him in cigarettes and booze . . . why not? He was good for nothing else when his workday was done, although when he was on the clock he would work like a dray-horse. That one time he got into trouble was because it was at night, and night was always George's drinking time. His father kept him fed, at least. Now Missy Bowie's alone with another baby. Maybe she'll stay here and take her welfare and ADC money here, and most likely it won't be enough, but she'll get the help she needs. Probably she'll go, but if she stays she'll not starve . . . and listen, Lona and Hal: if she stays, she may be able to keep something of this small world with the little Reach on one side and the big Reach on the other, something it would be too easy to lose hustling hash in Lewiston or donuts in Portland or drinks at the Nashville North in Bangor. And I am old enough not to beat around the bush about what that something might be: a way of being and a way of living—a feeling."*

*They had watched out for their own in other ways as well, but she would not tell them that. The children would not understand, nor would Lois and David, although Jane had known the truth. There was Norman and Ettie Wilson's baby that was born a mongoloid, its poor dear little feet turned in, its bald skull lumpy and cratered, its fingers webbed together as if it had dreamed too long and too deep while swimming that interior Reach; Reverend McCracken had come and baptized the baby, and a day later Mary Dodge came, who even at that time had midwived over a hundred babies, and Norman took Ettie down the hill to see Frank Child's new boat and although she could barely walk, Ettie went with no complaint, although she had stopped in the door to look back at Mary Dodge, who was sitting*

calmly by the idiot baby's crib and knitting. Mary had looked up at her and when their eyes met, Ettie burst into tears. "Come on," Norman had said, upset. "Come on, Ettie, come on." And when they came back an hour later the baby was dead, one of those crib-deaths, wasn't it merciful he didn't suffer. And many years before that, before the war, during the Depression, three little girls had been molested coming home from school, not badly molested, at least not where you could see the scar of the hurt, and they all told about a man who offered to show them a deck of cards he had with a different kind of dog on each one. He would show them this wonderful deck of cards, the man said, if the little girls would come into the bushes with him, and once in the bushes this man said, "But you have to touch this first." One of the little girls was Gert Symes, who would go on to be voted Maine's Teacher of the Year in 1978, for her work at Brunswick High. And Gert, then only five years old, told her father that the man had some fingers gone on one hand. One of the other little girls agreed that this was so. The third remembered nothing. Stella remembered Alden going out one thundery day that summer without telling her where he was going, although she asked. Watching from the window, she had seen Alden meet Bull Symes at the bottom of the path, and then Freddy Dinsmore had joined them and down at the cove she saw her own husband, whom she had sent out that morning just as usual. with his dinner pail under his arm. More men joined them, and when they finally moved off she counted just one under a dozen. The Reverend McCracken's predecessor had been among them. And that evening a fellow named Daniels was found at the foot of Slyder's Point, where the rocks poke out of the surf like the fangs of a dragon that drowned with its mouth open. This Daniels was a fellow Big George Havelock had hired to help him put new sills under his house and a new engine in his Model A truck. From New Hampshire he was, and he was a sweet-talker who had found other odd jobs to do when the work at the Havelocks' was done . . . and in church, he could carry a tune! Apparently, they said, Daniels had been walking up on top of Slyder's Point and had slipped, tumbling all the way to the bottom. His neck was broken and his head was bashed in. As he had no

*people that anyone knew of, he was buried on the island, and the Reverend McCracken's predecessor gave the graveyard eulogy, saying as how this Daniels had been a hard worker and a good help even though he was two fingers shy on his right hand. Then he read the benediction and the graveside group had gone back to the town-hall basement where they drank Za-Rex punch and ate cream-cheese sandwiches, and Stella never asked her men where they had gone on the day Daniels fell from the top of Slyder's Point.*

*"Children," she would tell them, "we always watched out for our own. We had to, for the Reach was wider in those days and when the wind roared and the surf pounded and the dark came early, why, we felt very small—no more than dust motes in the mind of God. So it was natural for us to join hands, one with the other.*

*"We joined hands, children, and if there were times when we wondered what it was all for, or if there was any such a thing as love at all, it was only because we had heard the wind and the waters on long winter nights, and we were afraid.*

*"No, I've never felt I needed to leave the island. My life was here. The Reach was wider in those days."*

Stella reached the cove. She looked right and left, the wind blowing her dress out behind her like a flag. If anyone had been there she would have walked further down and taken her chance on the tumbled rocks, although they were glazed with ice. But no one was there and she walked out along the pier, past the old Symes boathouse. She reached the end and stood there for a moment, head held up, the wind blowing past the padded flaps of Alden's hat in a muffled flood.

Bill was out there, beckoning. Beyond him, beyond the Reach, she could see the Congo Church over there on the Head, its spire almost invisible against the white sky.

Grunting, she sat down on the end of the pier and then stepped onto the snow crust below. Her boots sank a little; not much. She set Alden's cap again—how the wind wanted to tear it off!—and began

to walk toward Bill. She thought once that she would look back, but she did not. She didn't believe her heart could stand that.

She walked, her boots crunching into the crust, and listened to the faint thud and give of the ice. There was Bill, further back now but still beckoning. She coughed, spat blood onto the white snow that covered the ice. Now the Reach spread wide on either side and she could, for the first time in her life, read the "Stanton's Bait and Boat" sign over there without Alden's binoculars. She could see the cars passing to and fro on the Head's main street and thought with real wonder: *They can go as far as they want . . . Portland . . . Boston . . . New York City. Imagine!* And she could almost do it, could almost imagine a road that simply rolled on and on, the boundaries of the world knocked wide.

A snowflake skirled past her eyes. Another. A third. Soon it was snowing lightly and she walked through a pleasant world of shifting bright white; she saw Raccoon Head through a gauzy curtain that sometimes almost cleared. She reached up to set Alden's cap again and snow puffed off the bill into her eyes. The wind twisted fresh snow up in filmy shapes, and in one of them she saw Carl Abersham, who had gone down with Hattie Stoddard's husband on the *Dancer*.

Soon, however, the brightness began to dull as the snow came harder. The Head's main street dimmed, dimmed, and at last was gone. For a time longer she could make out the cross atop the church, and then that faded out too, like a false dream. Last to go was that bright yellow-and-black sign reading "Stanton's Bait and Boat," where you could also get engine oil, flypaper, Italian sandwiches, and Budweiser to go.

Then Stella walked in a world that was totally without color, a gray-white dream of snow. *Just like Jesus-out-of-the-boat*, she thought, and at last she looked back but now the island was gone, too. She could see her tracks going back, losing definition until only the faint half-circles of her heels could be seen . . . and then nothing. Nothing at all.

She thought: *It's a whiteout. You got to be careful, Stella, or you'll never get to the mainland. You'll just walk around in a big circle until*

*you're worn out and then you'll freeze to death out here.*

She remembered Bill telling her once that when you were lost in the woods, you had to pretend that the leg which was on the same side of your body as your smart hand was lame. Otherwise that smart leg would begin to lead you and you'd walk in a circle and not even realize it until you came around to your backtrail again. Stella didn't believe she could afford to have that happen to her. Snow today, tonight, and tomorrow, the radio had said, and in a whiteout such as this, she would not even know if she came around to her backtrail, for the wind and the fresh snow would erase it long before she could return to it.

Her hands were leaving her in spite of the two pairs of gloves she wore, and her feet had been gone for some time. In a way, this was almost a relief. The numbness at least shut the mouth of her clamoring arthritis.

Stella began to limp now, making her left leg work harder. The arthritis in her knees had not gone to sleep, and soon they were screaming at her. Her white hair flew out behind her. Her lips had drawn back from her teeth (she still had her own, all save four) and she looked straight ahead, waiting for that yellow-and-black sign to materialize out of the flying whiteness.

It did not happen.

Sometime later, she noticed that the day's bright whiteness had begun to dull to a more uniform gray. The snow fell heavier and thicker than ever. Her feet were still planted on the crust but now she was walking through five inches of fresh snow. She looked at her watch, but it had stopped. Stella realized she must have forgotten to wind it that morning for the first time in twenty or thirty years. Or had it just stopped for good? It had been her mother's and she had sent it with Alden twice to the Head, where Mr. Dostie had first marveled over it and then cleaned it. Her watch, at least, had been to the mainland.

She fell down for the first time some fifteen minutes after she began to notice the day's growing grayness. For a moment she remained on her hands and knees, thinking it would be so easy just to stay here, to curl up and listen to the wind, and then the

determination that had brought her through so much reasserted itself and she got up, grimacing. She stood in the wind, looking straight ahead, willing her eyes to see . . . but they saw nothing.

*Be dark soon.*

Well, she had gone wrong. She had slipped off to one side or the other. Otherwise she would have reached the mainland by now. Yet she didn't believe she had gone so far wrong that she was walking parallel to the mainland or even back in the direction of Goat. An interior navigator in her head whispered that she had overcompensated and slipped off to the left. She believed she was still approaching the mainland but was now on a costly diagonal.

That navigator wanted her to turn right, but she would not do that. Instead, she moved straight on again, but stopped the artificial limp. A spasm of coughing shook her, and she spat bright red into the snow.

Ten minutes later (the gray was now deep indeed, and she found herself in the weird twilight of a heavy snowstorm) she fell again, tried to get up, failed at first, and finally managed to gain her feet. She stood swaying in the snow, barely able to remain upright in the wind, waves of faintness rushing through her head, making her feel alternately heavy and light.

Perhaps not all the roaring she heard in her ears was the wind, but it surely was the wind that finally succeeded in prying Alden's hat from her head. She made a grab for it, but the wind danced it easily out of her reach and she saw it only for a moment, flipping gaily over and over into the darkening gray, a bright spot of orange. It struck the snow, rolled, rose again, was gone. Now her hair flew around her head freely.

"It's all right, Stella," Bill said. "You can wear mine."

She gasped and looked around in the white. Her gloved hands had gone instinctively to her bosom, and she felt sharp fingernails scratch at her heart.

She saw nothing but shifting membranes of snow—and then, moving out of that evening's gray throat, the wind screaming through it like the voice of a devil in a snowy tunnel, came her husband. He was at first only moving colors in the snow: red, black, dark green,

lighter green; then these colors resolved themselves into a flannel jacket with a flapping collar, flannel pants, and green boots. He was holding his hat out to her in a gesture that appeared almost absurdly courtly, and his face was Bill's face, unmarked by the cancer that had taken him (had that been all she was afraid of? that a wasted shadow of her husband would come to her, a scrawny concentration-camp figure with the skin pulled taut and shiny over the cheekbones and the eyes sunken deep in the sockets?) and she felt a surge of relief.

"Bill? Is that really you?"

"Course."

"Bill," she said again, and took a glad step toward him. Her legs betrayed her and she thought she would fall, fall right through him—he was, after all, a ghost—but he caught her in arms as strong and as competent as those that had carried her over the threshold of the house that she had shared only with Alden in these latter years. He supported her, and a moment later she felt the cap pulled firmly onto her head.

"Is it really you?" she asked again, looking up into his face, at the crow's-feet around his eyes which hadn't sunk deep yet, at the spill of snow on the shoulders of his checked hunting jacket, at his lively brown hair.

"It's me," he said. "It's all of us."

He half-turned with her and she saw the others coming out of the snow that the wind drove across the Reach in the gathering darkness. A cry, half joy, half fear, came from her mouth as she saw Madeline Stoddard, Hattie's mother, in a blue dress that swung in the wind like a bell, and holding her hand was Hattie's dad, not a mouldering skeleton somewhere on the bottom with the *Dancer*, but whole and young. And there, behind those two—

"Annabelle!" she cried. "Annabelle Frane, is it you?"

It was Annabelle; even in this snowy gloom Stella recognized the yellow dress Annabelle had worn to Stella's own wedding, and as she struggled toward her dead friend, holding Bill's arm, she thought that she could smell roses.

*"Annabelle!"*

“We’re almost there now, dear,” Annabelle said, taking her other arm. The yellow dress, which had been considered Daring in its day (but, to Annabelle’s credit and to everyone else’s relief, not quite a Scandal), left her shoulders bare, but Annabelle did not seem to feel the cold. Her hair, a soft, dark auburn, blew long in the wind. “Only a little further.”

She took Stella’s other arm and they moved forward again. Other figures came out of the snowy night (for it was night now). Stella recognized many of them, but not all. Tommy Frane had joined Annabelle; Big George Havelock, who had died a dog’s death in the woods, walked behind Bill; there was the fellow who had kept the lighthouse on the Head for most of twenty years and who used to come over to the island during the cribbage tournament Freddy Dinsmore held every February—Stella could almost but not quite remember his name. And there was Freddy himself! Walking off to one side of Freddy, by himself and looking bewildered, was Russell Bowie.

“Look, Stella,” Bill said, and she saw black rising out of the gloom like the splintered prows of many ships. It was not ships, it was split and fissured rock. They had reached the Head. They had crossed the Reach.

She heard voices, but was not sure they actually spoke:

*Take my hand, Stella—*

*(do you)*

*Take my hand, Bill—*

*(oh do you do you)*

*Annabelle . . . Freddy . . . Russell . . . John . . . Ettie*

*. . . Frank . . . take my hand, take my hand . . . my hand . . .*

*(do you love)*

“Will you take my hand, Stella?” a new voice asked.

She looked around and there was Bull Symes. He was smiling kindly at her and yet she felt a kind of terror in her at what was in his eyes and for a moment she drew away, clutching Bill’s hand on her other side the tighter.

“Is it—”

“Time?” Bull asked. “Oh, ayuh, Stella, I guess so. But it don’t hurt. At least, I never heard so. All that’s before.”

She burst into tears suddenly—all the tears she had never wept—and put her hand in Bull’s hand. “Yes,” she said, “yes I will, yes I did, yes I do.”

They stood in a circle in the storm, the dead of Goat Island, and the wind screamed around them, driving its packet of snow, and some kind of song burst from her. It went up into the wind and the wind carried it away. They all sang then, as children will sing in their high, sweet voices as a summer evening draws down to summer night. They sang, and Stella felt herself going to them and with them, finally across the Reach. There was a bit of pain, but not much; losing her maidenhead had been worse. They stood in a circle in the night. The snow blew around them and they sang. They sang, and—

*—and Alden could not tell David and Lois, but in the summer after Stella died, when the children came out for their annual two weeks, he told Lona and Hal. He told them that during the great storms of winter the wind seems to sing with almost human voices, and that sometimes it seemed to him he could almost make out the words: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow/Praise Him, ye creatures here below . . .”*

*But he did not tell them (imagine slow, unimaginative Alden Flanders saying such things aloud, even to the children!) that sometimes he would hear that sound and feel cold even by the stove; that he would put his whittling aside, or the trap he had meant to mend, thinking that the wind sang in all the voices of those who were dead and gone . . . that they stood somewhere out on the Reach and sang as children do. He seemed to hear their voices and on these nights he sometimes slept and dreamed that he was singing the doxology, unseen and unheard, at his own funeral.*

*found Stella frozen to death on the mainland a day after the storm had blown itself out. She was sitting on a natural chair of rock about one hundred yards south of the Raccoon Head town limits, frozen just as neat as you please. The doctor who owned the Corvette said that he was frankly amazed. It would have been a walk of over four miles, and the autopsy required by law in the case of an unattended,*

*unusual death had shown an advanced cancerous condition—in truth, the old woman had been riddled with it. Was Alden to tell David and Lois that the cap on her head had not been his? Larry McKeen had recognized that cap. So had John Bensohn. He had seen it in their eyes, and he supposed they had seen it in his. He had not lived long enough to forget his dead father's cap, the look of its bill or the places where the visor had been broken.*

*“These are things made for thinking on slowly,” he would have told the children if he had known how. “Things to be thought on at length, while the hands do their work and the coffee sits in a solid china mug nearby. They are questions of Reach, maybe: do the dead sing? And do they love the living?”*

*On the nights after Lona and Hal had gone back with their parents to the mainland in Al Curry's boat, the children standing astern and waving good-bye, Alden considered that question, and others, and the matter of his father's cap.*

*Do the dead sing? Do they love?*

*On those long nights alone, with his mother Stella Flanders at long last in her grave, it often seemed to Alden that they did both.*

## Notes

Not everyone is interested in where short stories come from, and that is perfectly proper—you don't have to understand the internal-combustion engine to drive a car, and you don't need to know the circumstances which surrounded the making of a story to get a bit of pleasure from it. Engines interest mechanics; the creation of stories interests academics, fans, and snoops (the first and the last are almost synonymous, but never mind). I've included a few notes here on a few of the stories—such things as I thought might interest the casual reader. But if you're even more casual than that, I assure you that you can close the book without a qualm—you won't be missing much.

“The Mist”—This was written in the summer of 1976, for an anthology of new stories being put together by my agent, Kirby McCauley. McCauley had created another book of this sort, called *Frights*, two or three years previous. That book was a paperback. This one was to be a hardcover and much more ambitious in scope. It was called *Dark Forces*. Kirby wanted a story from me, and he pursued that story with doggedness, determination . . . and a kind of gentle diplomacy that is, I think, the hallmark of a really good agent.

I couldn't think of a thing. The harder I thought, the more easily nothing came. I began to think that maybe the short-story machine in my head was temporarily or permanently broken. Then came the storm, which was much as described in this story. At the height of it there was indeed a waterspout on Long Lake in Bridgton, where we were living at the time, and I did insist that my family come downstairs with me for a while (although my wife's name is Tabitha—Stephanie is her sister's name). The trip to the market the next day was also much as described in the story, although I was spared the company of such an odious creature as Norton—in the real world,

the people living in Norton's summer cottage were a very pleasant doctor, Ralph Drews, and his wife.

In the market, my muse suddenly shat on my head—this happened as it always does, suddenly, with no warning. I was halfway down the middle aisle, looking for hot-dog buns, when I imagined a big prehistoric bird flapping its way toward the meat counter at the back, knocking over cans of pineapple chunks and bottles of tomato sauce. By the time my son Joe and I were in the checkout lane, I was amusing myself with a story about all these people trapped in a supermarket surrounded by prehistoric animals. I thought it was wildly funny—what *The Alamo* would have been like if directed by Bert I. Gordon. I wrote half the story that night and the rest the following week.

It got a little long, but Kirby thought it was good and it went into the book. I never liked it that much until the rewrite—I particularly didn't like David Drayton sleeping with Amanda and then never finding out what happened to his wife. That seemed cowardly to me. But in the rewrite, I discovered a rhythm of language that I liked—and keeping that rhythm in mind, I was able to peel the story down to its basics more successfully than with some of my other long stories (“Apt Pupil” in *Different Seasons* is a particularly good example of this disease I have—literary elephantiasis).

The real key to this rhythm lay in the deliberate use of the story's first line, which I simply stole from Douglas Fairbairn's brilliant novel *Shoot*. The line is, for me, the essence of all story, a kind of Zen incantation.

I must tell you that I also liked the metaphor implied in David Drayton's discovery of his own limitations, and I liked the story's cheery cheesiness—you're supposed to see this one in black-and-white, with your arm around your girl's shoulders (or your guy's), and a big speaker stuck in the window. *You* make up the second feature.

“Here There Be Tygers”—My first-grade teacher in Stratford, Connecticut, was Mrs. Van Buren. She was pretty scary. I guess if a

tiger had come along and eaten her up, I could have gotten behind that. You know how kids are.

“The Monkey”—I was in New York City on business about four years ago. I was walking back to my hotel after visiting my people at New American Library when I saw a guy selling wind-up monkeys on the street. There was a platoon of them standing on a gray blanket he’d spread on the sidewalk at the corner of Fifth and Forty-fourth, all bending and grinning and clapping their cymbals. They looked really scary to me, and I spent the rest of my walk back to the hotel wondering why. I decided it was because they reminded me of the lady with the shears . . . the one who cuts everyone’s thread one day. So keeping that idea in mind, I wrote the story, mostly longhand, in a hotel room.

“Mrs. Todd’s Shortcut”—My wife is the real Mrs. Todd; the woman really is mad for a shortcut, and much of the one in the story actually exists. She found it, too. And Tabby really *does* seem to be getting younger sometimes, although I hope I am not like Worth Todd. I try not to be.

I like this story a lot; it tickles me. And the old guy’s voice is soothing. Every now and then you write something that brings back the old days, when *everything* you wrote seemed fresh and full of invention. “Mrs. Todd” felt that way to me when I was writing it.

One final note on it—three women’s magazines turned it down, two because of that line about how a woman will pee down her own leg if she doesn’t squat. They apparently felt that either women don’t pee or don’t want to be reminded of the fact. The third magazine to reject it, *Cosmopolitan*, did so because they felt the main character was too old to interest their target audience.

No comment—except to add that *Redbook* finally took it. God bless ’em.

“The Jaunt”—This was originally for *Omni*, which quite rightly rejected it because the science is so wonky. It was Ben Bova’s idea

to have the colonists in the story mining for water, and I have incorporated that in this version.

“The Raft”—I wrote this story in the year 1968 as “The Float.” In late 1969 I sold it to *Adam* magazine, which—like most of the girlie magazines—paid not on acceptance but only on publication. The amount promised was two hundred and fifty dollars.

In the spring of 1970, while creeping home in my white Ford station wagon from the University Motor Inn at 12:30 in the morning, I ran over a number of traffic cones which were guarding a crosswalk that had been painted that day. The paint had dried, but no one had bothered to take the cones in when it got dark. One of them bounced up and knocked my muffler loose from the rotted remains of my tailpipe. I was immediately suffused with the sort of towering, righteous rage which only drunk undergraduates can feel. I decided to circle the town of Orono, picking up traffic cones. I would leave them all in front of the police station the next morning, with a note saying that I had saved numerous mufflers and exhaust systems from extinction, and ought to get a medal.

I got about a hundred and fifty before blue lights started to swirl around in the rearview mirror.

I will never forget the Orono cop turning to me after a long, long look into the back of my station wagon and asking: “Son, are those traffic cones yours?”

The cones were confiscated and so was I; that night I was a guest of the town of Orono, that crossword-puzzle favorite. A month or so later, I was brought to trial in Bangor District Court on a charge of petty larceny. I was my own attorney and did indeed have a fool for a client. I was fined two hundred and fifty dollars, which I of course did not have. I was given seven days to come up with it, or do thirty *more* days as a guest of Penobscot County. I probably could have borrowed it from my mother, but the circumstances were not easy to understand (unless you had a skinful of booze, that was).

Although one is now not supposed to *ever* use a *deus ex machina* in his or her fiction because these gods from the machine are not

believable, I notice that they arrive all the time in real life. Mine came three days after the judge levied my fine and arrived in the form of a check from *Adam* magazine for two hundred and fifty dollars. It was for my *story* “The Float.” It was like having someone send you a real Get Out of Jail Free card. I cashed the check immediately and paid my fine. I determined to go straight and give all traffic cones a wide berth thereafter. Straight I have not exactly gone, but believe me when I tell you I’m quits with the cones.

But here’s the thing: *Adam* paid only on *publication*, dammit, and since I got the money, the story must have come out. But no copy was ever sent to me, and I never saw one on the stands, although I checked regularly—I would simply push my way in between the dirty old men checking out such literary pinnacles as *Boobs and Buns and Spanking Lesbians* and thumb through every magazine the Knight Publishing Company put out. I never saw that story in any of them.

Somewhere along the way I lost the original manuscript, too. I got to thinking about the story again in 1981, some thirteen years later. I was in Pittsburgh, where the final *Creepshow* editing was going on, and I was bored. So I decided to have a go at re-creating that story, and the result was “The Raft. It is the same as the original in terms of event, but I believe it is far more gruesome in its specifics.

Anyway, if anyone out there *has* ever seen “The Float,” or even if someone has a *copy*, could you send me a Xerox copy or something? Even a postcard confirming the fact that I’m not crazy? It would have been in *Adam*, or *Adam Quarterly*, or (most likely) *Adam Bedside Reader* (not much of a name, I know, I know, but in those days I only had two pairs of pants and three pairs of underwear, and beggars can’t be choosers, and it was a lot better than *Spanking Lesbians*, let me tell you). I’d just like to make sure it was published someplace other than the Dead Zone.

“Survivor Type”—I got to thinking about cannibalism one day—because that’s the sort of thing guys like me sometimes think about—and my muse once more evacuated its magic bowels on my head. I know how gross that sounds, but it’s the best metaphor I know,

inelegant or not, and believe me when I tell you I'd give that little Fornit Ex-Lax if he wanted it. Anyway, I started to wonder if a person could eat *himself*, and if so, how much he could eat before the inevitable happened. This idea was so utterly and perfectly revolting that I was too overawed with delight to do more than think about it for days—I was reluctant to write it down because I thought I could only fuck it up. Finally, when my wife asked me what I was laughing at one day when we were eating hamburgers on the back deck, I decided I ought to at least take it for a testdrive.

We were living in Bridgton at the time, and I spent an hour or so talking with Ralph Drews, the retired doctor next door. Although he looked doubtful at first (the year before, in pursuit of another story, I had asked him if he thought it was possible for a man to swallow a cat), he finally agreed that a guy could subsist on himself for quite a while—like everything else which is material, he pointed out, the human body is just stored energy. Ah, I asked him, but what about the repeated shock of the amputations? The answer he gave me is, with very few changes, the first paragraph of the story.

I guess Faulkner never would have written anything like this, huh? Oh, well.

“Uncle Otto’s Truck”—The truck is real, and so is the house; I made up the story that goes around them one day in my head on a long drive to pass the time. I liked it and so I took a few days to write it down.

“The Reach”—Tabby’s youngest brother, Tommy, used to be in the Coast Guard. He was stationed downeast, in the Jonesport-Beals area of the long and knotty Maine coast, where the Guard’s main chores are changing the batteries in the big buoys and saving idiot drug smugglers who get lost in the fog or run on the rocks.

There are lots of islands out there, and lots of tightly knit island communities. He told me of a real-life counterpart of Stella Flanders, who lived and died on her island. Was it Pig Island? Cow Island? I can’t remember. *Some* animal, anyway.

I could hardly believe it. “She didn’t ever *want* to come across to the mainland?” I asked.

“No, she said she didn’t want to cross the Reach until she died,” Tommy said.

The term Reach was unfamiliar to me, and Tommy explained it. He also told me the lobstermen’s joke about how it’s a mighty long Reach between Jonesport and London, and I put it in the story. It was originally published in *Yankee* as “Do the Dead Sing?”, a nice enough title, but after some thought I have gone back to the original title here.

Well, that’s it. I don’t know about you, but every time I come to the end, it’s like waking up. It’s a little sad to lose the dream, but everything all around—the real stuff—looks damned good, just the same. Thanks for coming along with me; I enjoyed it. I always do. I hope you arrived safe, and that you’ll come again—because as that funny butler says in that odd New York club, there are always more tales.

STEPHEN KING  
*Bangor, Maine*

# WORKS BY STEPHEN KING

## NOVELS

Carrie

'Salem's Lot

The Shining

The Stand

The Dead Zone

Firestarter

Cujo

THE DARK TOWER I:

*The Gunslinger*

Christine

Pet Sematary

Cycle of the Werewolf

The Talisman

(with Peter Straub)

It

The Eyes of the Dragon

Misery

The Tommyknockers

THE DARK TOWER II:

*The Drawing*

*of the Three*

THE DARK TOWER III:

*The Waste Lands*

The Dark Half

Needful Things

Gerald's Game

Dolores Claiborne

Insomnia

Rose Madder  
Desperation  
The Green Mile  
THE DARK TOWER IV;  
*Wizard and Glass*  
Bag of Bones  
The Girl Who Loved Tom  
Gordon  
Dreamcatcher  
Black House  
(with Peter Straub)  
From a Buick 8  
THE DARK TOWER V:  
*Wolves of the Calla*  
THE DARK TOWER VI:  
*Song of Susannah*  
THE DARK TOWER VII:  
*The Dark Tower*

AS RICHARD BACHMAN

Rage  
The Long Walk  
Roadwork  
The Running Man  
Thinner  
The Regulators

COLLECTIONS

Night Shift  
Different Seasons  
Skeleton Crew  
Four Past Midnight  
Nightmares and  
Dreamscapes  
Hearts in Atlantis  
Everything's Eventual

NONFICTION

Danse Macabre

On Writing

SCREENPLAYS

Creepshow

Cat's Eye

Silver Bullet

Maximum Overdrive

Pet Sematary

Golden Years

Sleepwalkers

The Stand

The Shining

Rose Red

Storm of the Century

STEPHEN  
KING



FULL DARK,  
NO STARS



#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# STEPHEN KING

JUST  
AFTER  
SUNSET

STORIES



#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

# STEPHEN KING

## Nightmares & Dreamscapes



STORIES FROM THE DARKEST PLACES . . .

